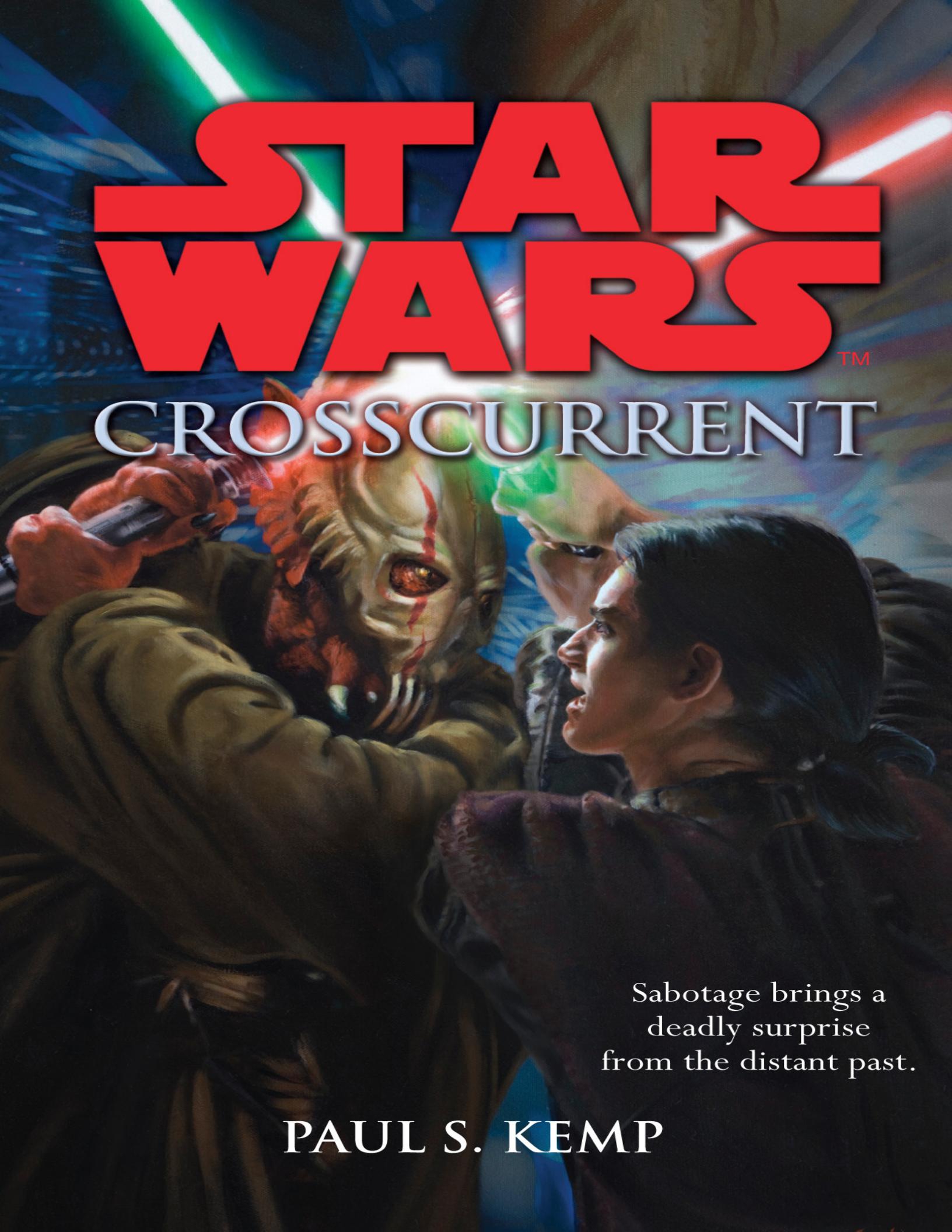


STAR WARSTM

CROSSCURRENT



Sabotage brings a
deadly surprise
from the distant past.

PAUL S. KEMP

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About the Book

Thousands of years before the *Legacy of the Force* series, two Sith ships were sabotaged, resulting in the crash of one on a distant, isolated planet, and the loss of the other in a hyperspace anomaly. The survivors of the crashed ship evolved into the Lost Tribe of Sith introduced in our new *Fate of the Jedi* series. But the other ship was lost in a kind of time warp, finally exiting hyperspace far, far in the future - the time of the *Legacy of the Force* series, a very different galaxy from the one they left behind in what seems to be almost no time at all. Now Jedi Knight Jaden Korr - who will be introduced as a new Star Wars character in *Fate of the Jedi: Abyss* - must find a way to prevent these time-traveling Sith from asserting their horrific ambitions over a galaxy already reeling from the depredations of the control-hungry Jacen Solo.

About the Author

Paul S. Kemp is the author of nine *Forgotten Realms* fantasy novels.

Also by Paul S. Kemp

THE EREVIS CALE TRILOGY

Twilight Falling

Dawn of Night

Midnight's Mask

THE TWILIGHT WAR

Shadowbred

Shadowstorm

Shadowrealm

STAR WARS[®]

CROSSCURRENT

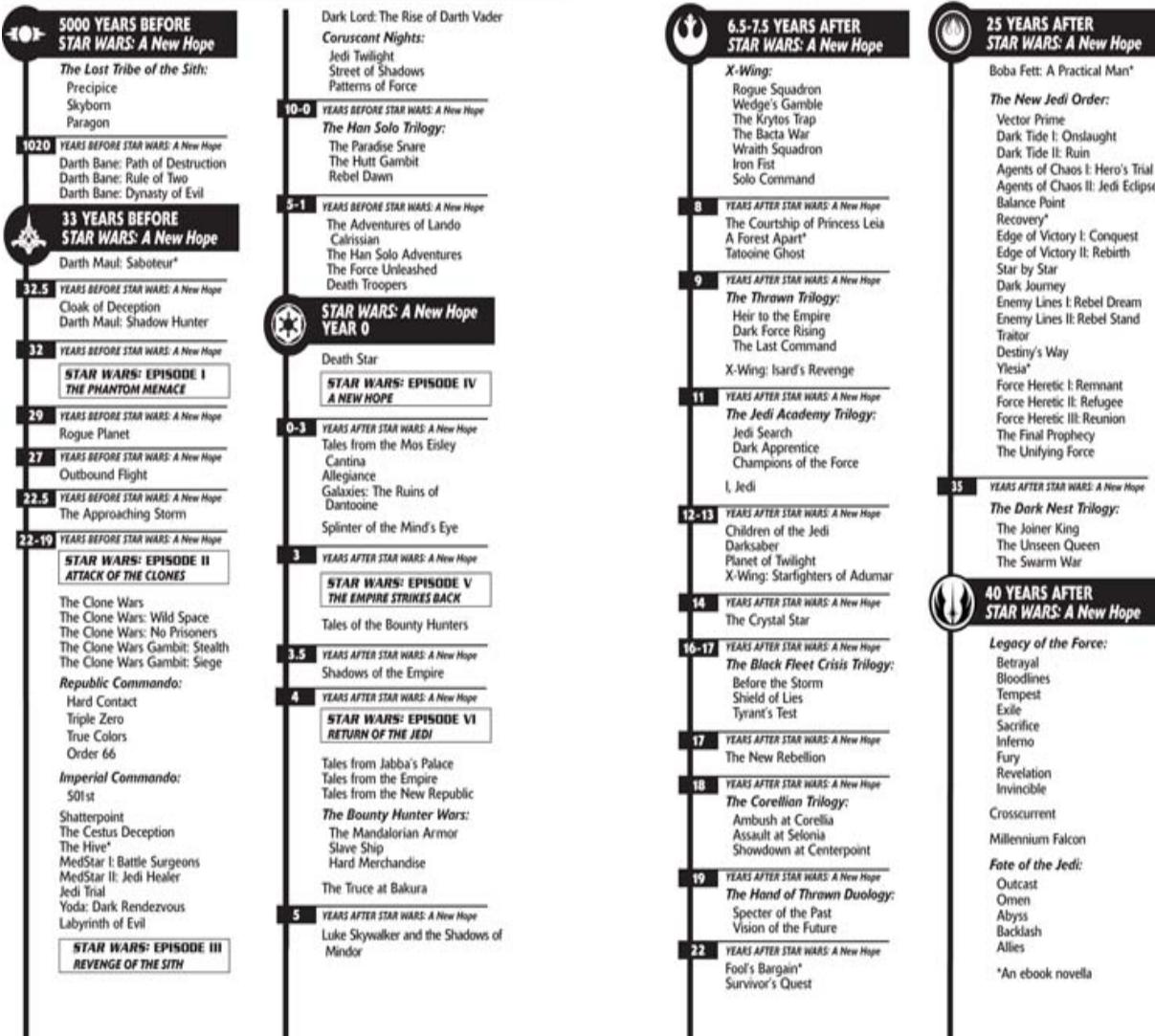
PAUL S. KEMP



arrow books

For my two little Padawans,
Roarke and Riordan

THE STAR WARS NOVELS TIMELINE



dramatis personae

rev Hassin; Jedi Padawan (Askajian male)

eden Korr; Jedi Knight (human male)

ell Douro; assassin/spy (Anzat male)

hedrynn Faal; captain, *Junker* (human male)

Iarr Idi-Shael; first mate, *Junker* (Cerean male)

elin Druur; Jedi Master (human male)

aes Rrogan; Sith Lord; captain, *Harbinger* (Kaleesh male)

A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away ...

chapter one

THE PAST:
5,000 YEARS BEFORE THE BATTLE OF YAVIN

THE CRUST OF Phaegon III's largest moon burned, buckled, and crumbled under the onslaught. Sixty-four specially equipped cruisers—little more than planetary-bombardment weapons systems with a bit of starship wrapped around them—flew in a suborbital, longitudinal formation. The sleek silver cruisers, their underbellies aglow in reflected destruction, struck Saes as unexpectedly beautiful. How strange that they could unleash annihilation in such warm, glorious colors.

Plasma beams shrieked from the bow of each cruiser and slammed into the arboreal surface of the moon, shimmering green umbilicals that wrote words of ruin across the surface and saturated the world in fire and pain. Dust and a swirl of thick black smoke churned in the atmosphere as the cruisers methodically vaporized large swaths of the moon's surface.

The bright light and black smoke of destruction filled *Harbinger*'s viewscreen, drowning out the orange light of the system's star. Except for the occasional beep of a droid or a murmured word, the bridge crew sat in silence, their eyes fixed alternately on their instruments and the viewscreen. Background chatter on the many comm channels droned over the various speakers, a serene counterpoint to the chaos of the moon's death. Saes's keen

olfactory sense caught a whiff of his human crew's sweat, spiced with the tang of adrenaline.

Watching the cruisers work, watching the moon die, Saes was reminded of the daelfruits he'd enjoyed in his youth. He had spent many afternoons under the sun of his homeworld, peeling away the daelfruit's coarse, brown rind to get at the core of sweet, pale flesh.

Now he was peeling not a fruit but an entire moon.

The flesh under the rind of the moon's crust—the Lignan they were mining—would ensure a Sith victory in the battle for Kirrek and improve Saes's place in the Sith hierarchy. He would not challenge Shar Dakhon immediately, of course. He was still too new to the Sith Order for that. But he would not wait overlong.

Evil roots in unbridled ambition, Relin had told him once.

Saes smiled. What a fool his onetime Master had been. Naga Sadow rewarded ambition.

"Status?" he queried his science droid, 8K6.

The fires in the viewscreen danced on the anthropomorphic droid's reflective silver surface as it turned from its instrument console to address him.

"Thirty-seven percent of the moon's crust is destroyed."

Wirelessly connected to the console's readout, the droid did not need to glance back for an update on the information as the cruisers continued their work.

"Thirty-eight percent. Thirty-nine."

Saes nodded, turned his attention back to the viewscreen. The droid fell silent.

Despite *Harbinger*'s distance from the surface, the Force carried back to Saes the terror of the pre-sentient primates that populated the moon's surface. Saes imagined the small creatures fleeing through the trees, screeching, relentlessly pursued by, and inevitably consumed in, fire. They numbered in the hundreds of thousands. Their fear

caressed his mind, as faint, fleeting, and pleasing as morning fog.

His fellow Sith on *Harbinger* and *Omen* would be feeling the same thing as the genocide progressed to its inexorable conclusion. Perhaps even the Massassi aboard each ship would, in their dim way, perceive the ripples in the Force.

Long ago, when Saes had been a Jedi, before he had come to understand the dark side, such wholesale destruction of life might have struck him as wrong. He knew better now. There was no absolute right and wrong. There was only power. And those who wielded it defined right and wrong for themselves. That realization was the freedom offered by the dark side and the reason the Jedi would fall, first at Kirrek, then at Coruscant, then all over the galaxy.

“Temperature in the wake?” he asked.

The science droid consulted the sensor data on its compscreen. “Within the tolerance of the harvester droids.”

Saes watched the cruisers slide through the atmosphere and light the moon on fire. He turned in his command chair to face his second in command, Los Dor. Dor’s mottled, deep red skin looked nearly black in the dim light of the bridge. His yellow eyes mirrored the moon’s fires. He never seemed to look up into Saes’s eyes, instead focusing his gaze on the twin horns that jutted from the sides of Saes’s jaw.

Saes knew Dor was as much a spy for Naga Sadow as he was an ostensible aide to himself. Among other things, Dor was there to ensure that Saes returned the Lignan—all of the Lignan—to Sadow’s forces at Primus Goluud.

The tentacles on Dor’s face quivered, and the cartilaginous ridges over his eyes rose in a question.

“Give the order to launch the harvester droids, Colonel,” Saes said to him. “*Harbinger’s* and *Omen’s*.”

“Yes, Captain,” Dor responded. He turned to his console and transmitted the order to both ships.

The honorific *Captain* still struck Saes's hearing oddly. He was accustomed to leading hunting parties as a First, not ships as a Captain.

In moments hundreds of cylindrical pods streaked out of *Harbinger*'s launching bay, and hundreds more flew from her sister ship, *Omen*, all of them streaking across the viewscreen. They hit the atmosphere and spat lines of fire as they descended. The sight reminded Saes of a pyrotechnic display.

"Harvester droids away," 8K6 intoned.

"Stay with the droids and magnify," Saes said.

"Copy," answered Dor, and nodded at the young human helmsman who controlled the viewscreen.

The harvester droids' trajectories placed them tens of kilometers behind the destruction wrought by the mining cruisers. Most of them were lost to sight in the smoke, but the helmsman kept the viewscreen's perspective on a dozen or so that descended through a clear spot in the sky.

"Attrition among the droids upon entry is negligible," said 8K6. "Point zero three percent."

The helmsman further magnified the viewscreen again, then again.

Five kilos above the surface, the droids arrested their descent with thrusters, unfolded into their insectoid forms, and gently dropped to the charred, superheated surface. Anti-grav servos and platform pads on their six legs allowed them to walk on the smoking ruin without harm.

"Give me a view from one of the droids."

"Copy, sir," said Dor.

The helm worked his console, and half the viewscreen changed to a perspective of a droid's-eye view of the moon. A murmur ran through the bridge crew, an exhalation of awe. Even 8K6 looked up from the instrumentation.

The voice of Captain Korsin, commander of *Harbinger*'s sister ship, *Omen*, broke through the comm chatter and boomed over the bridge speakers.

“That is a sight.”

“It is,” Saes answered.

Smoke rose in wisps from the exposed subcrust. The heat of the plasma beams had turned the charred surface as hard and brittle as glass. Thick cracks and chasms lined the subcrust, veins through which only smoke and ash flowed. Waves of heat rose from the surface, distorting visibility and giving the moon an otherworldly, dream-like feel.

Hundreds of harvester droids dotted the surface, metal flies clinging to the moon’s seared corpse. Walking in their awkward, insectoid manner, they arranged themselves into orderly rows, their high-pitched droidspeak mere chatter in the background.

“Sensors activating,” intoned 8K6.

As one, long metal proboscises extended from each of the droids’ faces. They ambled along in the wake of the destruction, waving their proboscises over the surface like dowsing rods, fishing the subsurface for the telltale molecular signature of Lignan.

Thinking of the Lignan, Saes licked his lips, tasted a faint flavor of phosphorous. He had handled a small Lignan crystal years before and still remembered the charge he had felt while holding it. His connection with that crystal had been the first sign of his affinity for the dark side.

The unusual molecular structure of Lignan attuned it to the dark side and enhanced a Sith’s power when using the Force. The Sith had not been able to locate any significant deposits of the crystals in recent decades—until now, until just before the battle for Kirrek. And it was Saes who had done it.

A few standard months ago, Naga Sadow had charged Saes with locating some deposits of the rare crystal for use in the war. It was a test, Saes knew. And Los Dor, his ostensible aide, was grading him. The Force had given Saes his answer, had brought him eventually, and at the last

possible moment before the conflict began, to Phaegon III. The Force had used him as a tool to ensure Sith victory.

The realization warmed him. His scaled skin creaked as he adjusted his weight in his chair.

He would harvest enough Lignan from Phaegon III's moon to equip almost every Sith Lord and Massassi warrior preparing for the assault on Kirrek. If he'd had more time, he could have mined the moon in a more methodical, less destructive fashion. But he did not have time, and Sadow would not tolerate delay.

So Saes had created his own right and wrong, and the primates and other life-forms on Phaegon III's moon had died for it.

He tapped his forefinger on his lightsaber hilt—its curved form reminiscent of a claw—impatient to see the results of the droids' sensor scans. He leaned forward in his chair when an excited beep announced the first discovery of a Lignan signature. Another joined it. Another. He shared a look with Dor and could not tell from the fix of Dor's mouth, partially masked as it was by a beard of tentacles, if his colonel was pleased or displeased.

"There it is, Saes," said Korsin from *Omen*. "We've done it."

In truth, Saes had done it. Korsin had been simply following his lead. "Yes."

"It appears to be a large deposit," said 8K6.

More and more of the harvester droids chirped news of their discovery over the comm channel.

"Perhaps more than we have time to acquire," said Dor. "Shall I recall the mining cruisers, Captain? Further destruction seems ... unwarranted."

Saes heard the question behind the question and shook his head. Dor would find no pity in Saes. "No. Incinerate the entire surface. What we cannot take before the battle at Kirrek, we will return for after our victory there."

Dor nodded, and a faint smile disturbed the tentacles. "Yes, Sir."

Saes fixed his colonel with his eyes, and Dor's gaze fell to Saes's jaw horns. "And when you report back to Lord Sadow, you tell him all that you saw here."

Dor looked up, held Saes's eyes only for a moment before his tentacles twitched and he turned away.

Saes allowed himself a moment's satisfaction as drill-probes extended from the droids' abdomens and began pulling the rare crystal from the burning corpse of the moon. The Force continued to carry the terror of the primates to Saes's consciousness, but with less impact. There were fewer left. He could not help but smile.

"Use the shuttles to collect the ore," he said to Dor. "Omen's, too. We take as much as we can as quickly as we can."

"Copy."

Several standard hours later, Phaegon III's smoking moon and all its inhabitants were dead. The mining cruisers, having finished their work, had jumped out of the system. A steady stream of transport shuttles traveled between the moon and *Omen* and *Harbinger*'s cargo holds, filling both ships with unrefined Lignan ore. The presence of so many crystals so near caused Saes to feel giddy, almost inebriated. Dor and the other Force-sensitives aboard *Harbinger* and *Omen* would be feeling much the same way.

"Extra discipline with the Massassi," Saes said to Dor. The Lignan would agitate them. He wanted to head off outbreaks of violence. Or at least he wanted the violence appropriately directed.

"I will inform the security teams," Dor said. "Do you ... feel that, Captain?"

Saes nodded, drunk on the dark side. The air in the ship was alive with its potential. His skin felt warm, his head light.

With an effort of will, he regained his focus. He had little time before he would rendezvous with Naga Sadow and the rest of the Sith force moving against Kirrek. He opened a comm channel with *Omen*.

“An hour more, Korsin,” he said.

“Agreed,” Korsin answered, and Saes felt the human’s glee through the connection. “Do you feel the power around us, Saes? Kirrek will *burn*.”

Saes stared at the incinerated moon in his viewscreen, spinning dark and dead through the void of space.

“It will,” he said, and cut off the connection.

Relin stared out of the large, transparisteel bubble window that fronted the cockpit of his starfighter. Beside him, his Padawan, Drev, tapped hyperspace formulae into the navigation computer. Drev’s body challenged the seat with its girth. His flight suit pinched adipose tissue at neck and wrist, giving his head and hands the look of tied-off sausages. Still, Drev was almost thin by the standards of Askajians. And Relin had never before met an Askajian in whom the Force was so strong.

Their Infiltrator hung in the orange-and-red cloud of the Remmon Nebula. The small ship—with its minimal, deliberately erratic emission signature, sleek profile, and sensor baffles—would be invisible to scans outside the swirl.

Lines of yellow and orange light veined the superheated gas around them, like terrestrial lightning frozen in time. Relin watched the cloud slowly churn in the magnetic winds. He had been across half the galaxy since joining the Jedi, and the beauty it hid in its darkest corners amazed him still. He saw in that beauty the Force made manifest, a physical representation of the otherwise invisible power that served as the scaffolding of the universe.

But the scaffolding was under threat. Sadow and the Sith would corrupt it. Relin had seen the consequence of

that corruption firsthand, when he had lost Saes to the dark side.

He pushed the memory from his mind, the pain still too acute.

The conflict between Jedi and Sith had reached a turning point. Kirrek would be a fulcrum, tilting the war toward one side or the other. Relin knew the Jedi under Memit Nadill and Odan-Urr had fortified the planet well, but he knew, too, that Sadow's fleets would come in overwhelming force. He suspected they would also strike Coruscant, and had so notified Nadill.

Still typing in coordinates, Drev asked, "We will be able to pick up the beacon's pulse once we enter hyperspace?"

"Yes," Relin said.

At least that was the theory. If they were right about the hyperspace lane *Harbinger* and *Omen* had taken; if Saes had not diverted his ship to another hyperspace lane; and if *Harbinger* and *Omen* remained near enough the hyperspace lane for the beacon's signal to reach them.

"And if the agents did not place the hyperspace beacon? Or if Saes located it and disabled it?"

Relin stared out at the nebula. "Peace, Drev. There are many *ifs*. Things are what they are."

Matters had moved so rapidly of late that Relin had not had time to report back to his superiors as regularly as he should, just the occasional missive sent in a subspace burst as time and conditions allowed.

He had picked up Saes's trail near Primus Goluud. There, he'd seen the armada of Sith forces marshaling for an assault; he'd seen Saes's ship leave the armada with a sister ship, *Omen*, falling in behind.

After sending a short, subspace report back to the Order on Coruscant and Kirrek, Relin had received orders to follow Saes and try to determine the Sith's purpose. He had learned little as *Harbinger* and *Omen* moved rapidly from

one backrocket system to another, dispatching recon droids, scanning, then moving on.

"He is searching for something," Relin said, more to himself than Drev.

Drev chuckled, and his double chin shook. "Saes? His conscience, no doubt. He seems to have misplaced it somewhere."

Relin did not smile. The loss of Saes cut too sharply for jest.

"I worry over your casual attitude toward matters of import. Many will die in this war."

Drev bowed his head, his shoulders drooping, trying to look contrite under his mass of thick brown hair. "Forgive me, Master. But I ..." He paused, though his round face showed him struggling with a thought.

"What is it?" Relin asked.

Drev did not look at him as he said, "I sometimes think you laugh too little. Among my people, the shamans of the Moon Lady teach that tragedy is the best time for mirth. Laugh even when you die, they say. There is joy to be found in almost everything."

"And there is also pain," Relin said, thinking of Saes. "Are the coordinates ready?"

Drev stiffened in his chair and in his tone. "Ready, Master."

"Then let us find out what it is that Saes is looking for."

Relin maneuvered the Infiltrator out of the nebula and checked it against Drev's coordinates. Stars dotted the viewscreen.

"We go," Relin said.

Drev touched a button on his console, and the transparisteel cockpit window dimmed to spare them the hypnotic blue swirl of a hyperspace tunnel. Relin engaged the hyperdrive. Points of light turned to infinite lines.

THE PRESENT:
41.5 YEARS AFTER THE BATTLE OF YAVIN

Darkness plagued Jaden, the lightless ink of a singularity. He was falling, falling forever. His stomach crawled up his throat, crowding out whatever scream he might have uttered.

He still felt the Force around him, within him, but only thickly, only attenuated, as if his sensitivity were numbed.

He hit unseen ground with a grunt and fell to all fours. Snow crunched under his palms and boots. Gusts of freezing wind rifled his robes to stab at his skin. Ice borne by the wind peppered his face and rimed his beard. He still could see nothing in the pitch. He stood, shaky, shaking, freezing.

"Where is this place?" he called. The darkness was so deep he could not see his frozen breath. His voice sounded small in the void. "Arsix?"

No response.

"Arsix?"

Odd, he thought, that the first thing he called for in an uncertain situation was his droid rather than a fellow Jedi.

He reached for the familiar heft of his primary lightsaber, found its belt clip empty. He reached around to the small of his back for his secondary lightsaber—the crude but effective weapon he had built as a boy on Coruscant without any training in the Force—and found it gone, too. His blaster was not in his thigh holster. No glow rod in his utility pocket.

He was cold, alone, unequipped, blind in the darkness.

What had happened? He remembered nothing.

Drawing his robes tightly about him to ward off the cold, he focused his hearing, but heard nothing over the wind except the gong of his heartbeat in his ears. With difficulty, he reached out with his Force sense through the fog of his benighted sensitivity, trying to feel the world around him

indirectly. Through the dull operation of his expanded consciousness he sensed something ...

There were others there with him, out in the darkness.

Several others.

He sharpened his concentration and the tang of the dark side teased his perception—Sith.

But not quite Sith, not entirely: the dark side adulterated.

He tried to ignore the familiar caress of the dark side's touch. He knew the line between light and dark was as narrow as a vibroblade-edge. His Master, Kyle Katarn, had taught him as much. Every Jedi walked that edge. Some understood the precipice under their feet, and some did not. And it was the latter who so often fell. But it was the former who so often suffered. Jaden frequently wished he had remained in ignorance, had stayed the boy on Coruscant for whom the Force had been magic.

Summoned from the past, his Master's words bounced around his brain: *The Force is a tool, Jaden. Sometimes a weapon, sometimes a salve. Dark side, light side, these are distinctions of insignificant difference. Do not fall into the trap of classification. Sentience curses us with a desire to categorize and draw lines, to fear that after this be dragons. But that is illusion. After this is not dragons but more knowledge, deeper understanding. Be at peace with that.*

But Jaden never had been at peace with that. He feared he never would. Worse, he feared he never *should*. After completing his training, Jaden had done some research into unorthodox theories about the Force. He had come to think—and fear—that his Master had been right.

“Show yourselves,” he called into the darkness, and the howling wind devoured his words. He knew the Sith would have sensed his presence, the same as he had sensed theirs.

They were all around him, closing fast. He felt vulnerable, with nothing at his back, unable to see. He sank into the Force and denied his fear.

Finding his calm, he stood in a half crouch, eyes closed, mind focused, his entire body a coiled spring. Even without his lightsaber, a dark side user would find him a formidable foe.

“Jaden,” whispered a voice in his ear, a voice he’d heard before only on vidscreen surveillance.

He spun, whirled, the power of the Force gathered in his hands for a telekinetic blast, and saw ... only darkness.

Lumiya.

It had been Lumiya’s voice. Hadn’t it? But Lumiya was long dead.

A hand clutched at his robe.

“Jaden,” said another voice. Lassin’s voice.

He used the Force to augment a backward leap, flipping in midair, and landed on his feet three meters behind Lassin, a fellow Jedi Knight who should have been dead, who had died soon after the Ragnos crisis. Lassin’s voice unmoored him from his calm, and Force lightning, blue and baleful, came unbidden and crackled on his fingertips ...

He saw nothing.

The hairs on Jaden’s neck rose. He stared at his hand, the blue discharge of his fingertips. With an effort of will, he quelled it.

“Jaden Korr,” said a voice to his left, Master Kam Solusar’s voice, but Jaden felt not the comforting presence of another light-side user, only the ominous energy of the dark side.

He spun, but saw only darkness.

“What you seek can be found in the black hole on Fhost, Jaden,” said Mara Jade Skywalker, and still Jaden saw nothing, no one.

Mara Jade Skywalker was dead.

"Who are you?" he called, and the wind answered with ice and screams. "Where am I?"

He reached out again with his Force sense, trying to locate Lumiya, Lassin, Solusar, and Skywalker, but found them gone.

Again, he was alone in the darkness. He was always alone in darkness.

It registered with him then. He was dreaming. The Force was speaking to him. He should have realized it sooner.

The revelation stilled the world. The wind fell silent and the air cleared of ice.

Jaden stood ready, tense.

A distant, sourceless cry sounded, repeated itself, the rhythm regular, the tone mechanical. It could have been coming from the other side of the planet.

"Help us. Help us. Help us. Help us ..."

He turned a circle, fists clenched. "Where are you?"

The darkness around him diminished. Pinpoints of light formed in the black vault over him. Stars. He scanned the sky, searching for something familiar. There. He recognized only enough to place the sky somewhere in a Rimward sector of the Unknown Regions. The dim blue glow of a distant gas giant burned in the black of the sky, its light peeking diffidently through the swirl. Thick rings composed of particles of ice and rock belted the gas giant.

He was on one of the gas giant's moons.

His eyes adjusted more fully to the dimness and he saw that he stood on a desolate, wind-racked plain of ice that extended as far as he could see. Snowdrifts as tall as buildings gave the terrain the appearance of a storm-racked ocean frozen in time. Cracks veined the exposed ice, the circulatory system of a stalled world. Chasms dotted the surface here and there like hungry mouths. Glaciers groaned in the distance, the rumbles of an angry world. He saw no sign of Lumiya or Lassin or any of the other Sith imitators he had sensed. He saw no sign of life anywhere.

His breath formed clouds before his face. His left fist clenched and unclenched reflexively over the void in his palm where his lightsaber should have been.

Without warning, the sky exploded above him with a thunderous boom. A cloud of fire tore through the atmosphere, smearing the sky in smoke and flame. A shriek like stressed metal rolled over Jaden. Ice cracked and groaned on the surface.

Jaden squinted up at the sky, still lit with the afterglow of the destruction, and watched a rain of glowing particulates fall, showering the moon in a hypnotic pattern of falling sparks.

His Force sense perceived them for what they were—the dark side reified. He disengaged his perception too slowly, and the impact of so much evil hit him like a punch in the face. He vomited down the front of his robes, fell to the frozen ground, and balled up on the frozen surface of the moon as the full weight of the dark side coated him in its essence.

There was nowhere to hide, no shelter; it fell all around him, on him, saturated him ...

He woke, sweating and light-headed, to the sound of speeder and swoop traffic outside his Coruscant apartment. The thump of his heartbeat rattled the bars of his rib cage. In his mind's eye, he still saw the shower of falling sparks, the rain of evil. He cleared his throat, and the sensors in the room, detecting his wakefulness, turned on dim room lights.

“Arsix?” he said.

No response. He sat up, alarmed.

“Arsix?”

The sound of shouts and screams outside his window caused him to leap from his bed. With a minor exercise of will, he pulled his primary lightsaber to his hand from the side table near his bed and activated it. The green blade pierced the dimness of his room.

The black ball of Korriban filled Kell's viewscreen. Clouds seethed in its atmosphere, an angry churn.

He settled *Predator*, a CloakShape fighter modified with a hyperspace sled and sensor-evading technology copied from a stolen StealthX, into low orbit. The roiling cloak of dark energy that shrouded the planet buffeted *Predator*, and the ship's metal creaked in the strain. Kell attuned his vision to Fate and saw the hundreds of *daen nosi*—fate lines, a Coruscanti academic had once translated the Anzati term—that intersected at Korriban, the planet like a bulbous black spider in a web of glowing potentialities. The past, present, and future lines of the galaxy's fate passed through the Sith tomb-world's inhabitants, threads of glowing green, orange, red, and blue that cut it into pieces.

Space-time was pregnant with the possible, and the richness of the soup swelled Kell's hunger. He had first seen the *daen nosi* in childhood, after his first kill, and had followed them since. He thought himself unique among the Anzati, special, called, but he could not be certain.

Thinking of his first kill turned his mind to the food he kept in the cargo hold of *Predator*, but he quelled his body's impulse with a thought.

His own *daen nosi* stretched out before him, the veins of his own fate a network of silver lines reaching down through the transparisteel of the cockpit and into the dark swirl, down to the tombs of the Sith, to the secret places where the One Sith lurked. He had business with them, and they with him. The lines of their fates were intertwined.

He punched the coded coordinates of his destination into the navicomp and engaged the autopilot. As *Predator* began its descent through the black atmosphere, he left the cockpit and went below decks to the cargo hold. He had half a standard hour before he would reach his destination, so he freed his body to feel hunger. Growing anticipation sharpened his appetite.

Five stasis freezers stood against one wall of the hold like coffins. Kell had given them their own clear space in the hold, separated from the equipment and vehicles that otherwise cluttered the compartment. A humanoid slept in stasis in each freezer, three humans and two Rodians. He examined the freezers' readouts, checking vital signs. All remained in good health.

Staring at their still features, Kell wondered what happened behind their closed eyes, in the quiet of their dreams. He imagined the zest of their soup and hunger squirmed in his gut. None were so-called Force-sensitives, who had the richest soup, but they would suffice.

He glided from one freezer to the next, brushing his fingertips on the cool glass that separated him from his prey. His captives' *daen nosi* extended from their freezers to him, his to them. He stopped before the middle-aged human male he had taken on Corellia.

"You," he said, and watched his silver lines intertwine with the green lines of the Corellian.

He activated the freezer's thaw cycle. The hiss of escaping gas screamed the human's end. Kell watched as the freezer's readout indicated a rising temperature, watched as color returned to the human's flesh. His hunger grew, and the feeders nesting in the sacs of his cheeks twitched. He needed his prey conscious, otherwise he could not transcend.

He reached through the *daen nosi* that connected him to his meal.

Awaken, he softly projected.

The human's eyes snapped open, pupils dilated, lids wide. Fear traveled through the mental connection and Kell savored it. The freezer's readout showed a spiking heart rate, increasing respiration. The human opened his mouth to speak but his motor functions, still sluggish from stasis, could produce only a muffled, groggy croak.

Kell pressed the release button, and the freezer's cover slid open. *Be calm*, he projected, and his command wormed its way into the human's mind, a prophylactic for the fear.

But growing terror overpowered Kell's casual psychic hold. The human struggled against his mental bonds, finally found his voice.

"Please. I have done nothing."

Kell leaned forward, took the human's doughy face in his hands. The human shook his head but was no match for Kell's strength.

"Please," the Corellian said. "Why are you doing this? Who are you? *What* are you?"

Kell watched all of the human's *daen nosi*, all of his potential futures, coalesce into a single green line that intersected Kell's silver one, where it ... stopped.

"I am a ghost," Kell answered, and opened the slits in his face. His feeders squirmed free of their sacs, wire-thin appendages that fed on the soup of the sentient.

The human screamed, struggled, but Kell held him fast.

Be calm, Kell projected again, this time with force, and the human fell silent.

The feeders wormed their way into the warm, moist tunnels of the Corellian's nostrils, and rooted upward. Anticipation caused Kell to drool. He stared into the human's wide, bloodshot eyes as the feeders penetrated tissue, pierced membranes, entered the skull cavity, and sank into the rich gray stew in the human's skull. A spasm racked the human's body. Tears pooled in his wide eyes and fell, glistening, down his cheeks. Blood dripped in thin lines from his nose.

Kell grunted with satisfaction as he devoured potential futures, as the human's lines ended and Kell's continued. Kell's eyes rolled back in his head as his *daen nosi* lengthened and he temporarily became one with the soup of Fate. His consciousness deepened, expanded to the size of the galaxy, and he mentally sampled its potential. Time

compressed. The arrangement of *daen nosi* across the universe looked less chaotic. He saw a hint of order. Revelation seemed just at the edge of his understanding, and he experienced a tingling shudder with each beat of his hearts.

Show me, he thought. Let me see.

The moment passed as the human expired and Kell let him drop to the floor of the bay.

Revelation retreated and he backed away from the corpse, gasping. He came back to himself, mere flesh, mere limited comprehension.

He looked down at the cooling body at his feet, understanding that only in murder did he transcend.

He retracted his feeders, slick with blood, mucus, and brains, and they sat quiescent in their sacs.

Sighing, he collected the human's corpse, bore it to the air lock, and set the controls to eject it. Through the centuries, he had left such litter on hundreds of planets.

As he watched the automated ejection sequence vacate the air lock, he consoled himself with the knowledge that one day he would feed on stronger soup that would reveal to him the whole truth of Fate.

Reasonably sated, he returned to the cockpit of *Predator* and linked his comm receiver to the navicomp, as he had been instructed. In moments the autopilot indicator winked out—reminding Kell of the way the Corellian's eyes had winked out, how the human had transformed from sentience to meat in the span of a moment—and another force took control of *Predator*. Kell settled into his chair as the ship sped through the malaise of Korriban's atmosphere toward the dark side of the planet.

A short time later *Predator* set down in the midst of ancient structures. Lightning illuminated weathered pyramids, towers of pitted stone, crystalline domes, all of them the temples and tombs of the Sith, all of them the

geometry of the dark side. Black clouds roiled and jagged runs of lightning formed a glowing net in the sky.

Kell rose, slid into his mimetic suit, checked the twin cortosis-coated vibroblades sheathed at his belt, and headed for *Predator*'s landing ramp. Before lowering it, he took a blaster and holster from a small-arms locker and strapped them to his thigh. He considered blasters inelegant weapons, but preferred to be overarmed rather than under.

He pressed the release button on the ramp. Hydraulics hummed and the door lowered. Wind and rain hissed into *Predator*. Korriban's air, pungent with the reek of past ages, filled his nostrils. Thunder boomed.

Kell stared out into the darkness, noted the clustered pinpoints of red light that floated in the pitch. He shifted on his feet as the lights drew closer—a silver protocol droid. He attuned his vision to Fate, saw no *daen nosi*. Droids were programming, nothing more. They made no real choices and so had no lines. The false sentience of the droid unnerved Kell and he cut off the perception.

The anthropomorphic droid strode through the wind and rain to the base of the landing ramp and bowed its head in a hum of servos.

"Master Anzat," the droid said in Basic. "I am Deefourfive. Please follow me. The Master awaits you."

The droid's words rooted Kell to the deck. Despite himself, Kell's twin hearts doubled their beating rate. Adrenaline flowed into his blood. The feeders in his cheeks spasmed. He inhaled, focused for a moment, and returned his body to calmness, his hormone level to normal.

"*The Master? Krayt himself?*"

"Please follow," the droid said, turned, and began walking.

Kell pulled up the hood of his suit but did not lower the mask; he strode down the ramp and stepped into the storm. Korriban drenched him. With a minor effort of will, he