



Destiny's Way: Star Wars Legends (The New Jedi Order) (Star Wars: The New Jedi Order Book 14)

By Walter Jon Williams

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Yet even as opposing squadrons face off in the depths of space, intrigue runs rampant: in the heated political race for Chief of State . . . in the shadows where Yuuzhan Vong spies plot assassinations . . . and in the inscrutable creature Vergere, a Jedi Knight whose allegiance is impossible to predict. And as Luke Skywalker sets about reestablishing the Jedi Council, the growing faction opposed to the ways of the Force unveil a terrifying weapon designed to annihilate the Yuuzhan Vong species. But in doing so, they may be dooming the New Republic to becoming the very thing it has sworn to fight against—and unleashing the power of the dark side.

Features a bonus section following the novel that includes a primer on the *Star*

Wars expanded universe, and over half a dozen excerpts from some of the most popular *Star Wars* books of the last thirty years!

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Editorial Review

From the Inside Flap

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"From the Hardcover edition.

About the Author

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DESTINY'S WAY Chapter One

As she sat in the chair that was hers by right of death, she raised her eyes to the cold faraway stars. Checklists buzzed distantly in her mind and her hands moved over the controls, but her thoughts flew elsewhere, amid the chill infinitude. Searching . . .

Nothing.

Her gaze fell and there she saw, on the controls at the adjacent pilot's seat, her husband's hands. She drew comfort from the sight, from the sureness and power she knew was there, in those strong hands.

Her heart leapt. Something, somewhere in all those stars, had touched her.

She thought: Jacen!

Her husband's hands touched controls and the stars streamed away, turned to bleeding smears of light as if seen through beaten rain, and the distant touch vanished.

"Jacen," she said, and then, at her husband's startled look, at the surprise and pain in his brown eyes, "Jacen."

"And you're sure?" Han Solo said. "You're sure it was Jacen?"

"Yes. Reaching out to me. I felt him. It could have been no one else."

"And he's alive."

"Yes."

Leia Organa Solo could read him so well. She knew that Han believed their son dead, but that he tried, for her sake, to pretend otherwise. She knew that, fierce with grief and with guilt for having withdrawn from his family, he would support her in anything now, even if he believed it was delusional. And she knew the strength it took for him to suppress his own pain and doubt.

She could read all that in him, in the flicker of his eye, the twitch of his cheek. She could read him, read the bravery and the uncertainty, and she loved him for both.

"It was Jacen," she said. She put as much confidence in her tone as she could, all her assurance. "He was reaching out to me through the Force. I felt him. He wanted to tell me he was alive and with friends." She reached over and took his hand. "There's no doubt, now. Not at all."

Han's fingers tightened on hers, and she sensed the struggle in him, desire for hope warring with his own bitter experience.

His brown eyes softened. "Yes," he said. "Of course. I believe you."

There was a hint of reserve there, of caution, but that was reflex, the result of a long and uncertain life that had taught him to believe nothing until he'd seen it with his own eyes.

Leia reached for him, embraced him awkwardly from the copilot's seat. His arms went around her. She felt the bristle of his cheek against hers, inhaled the scent of his body, his hair.

A bubble of happiness grew in her, burst into speech. "Yes, Han," she said. "Our son is alive. And so are we. Be joyful. Be at peace. Everything changes from now on."

*** The idyll lasted until Han and Leia walked hand in hand into the Millennium Falcon's main hold. Through the touch, Leia felt the slight tension of Han's muscles as he came in sight of their guest--an Imperial commander in immaculate dress grays.

Han, Leia knew, had hoped that this mission would provide a chance for the two of them to be alone. Through the many months since the war with the Yuuzhan Vong had begun, they had either been apart or dealing with a bewildering succession of crises. Even though their current mission was no less urgent than the others, they would have treasured this time alone in hyperspace.

They had even left Leia's Noghri bodyguards behind. Neither of them had wanted any passengers at all, let alone an Imperial officer. Thus far Han had managed to be civil about it, but only just.

The commander rose politely to her feet. "An exceptionally smooth transition into hyperspace, General Solo," she said. "For a ship with such--such heterogeneous components, such a transition speaks well of the ship's captain and his skills."

"Thanks," Han said.

"The Myomar shields are superb, are they not?" she said. "One of our finer designs."

The problem with Commander Vana Dorja, Leia thought, was that she was simply too observant. She was a woman of about thirty, the daughter of the captain of a Star Destroyer, with bobbed dark hair tucked neatly into her uniform cap, and the bland, pleasant face of a professional diplomat. She had been on Coruscant during its fall, allegedly negotiating some kind of commercial treaty, purchasing Ulban droid brains for use in Imperial hydroponics farms. The negotiations were complicated by the fact that the droid brains in question could equally well be used for military purposes.

The negotiations regarding the brains' end-use certificates had gone nowhere in particular, but perhaps they had been intended to go nowhere. What Commander Dorja's extended stay on Coruscant had done was to make her a close observer in the Yuuzhan Vong assault that had resulted in the planet's fall.

Vana Dorja had gotten off Coruscant somehow--Leia had no doubt that her escape had been planned long in advance--and she had then turned up at Mon Calamari, the new provisional capital, blandly asking for help in returning to Imperial space just at the moment at which Leia had been assigned a diplomatic mission to that selfsame Empire.

Of course it wasn't a coincidence. Dorja was clearly a spy operating under commercial cover. But what could Leia do? The New Republic might need the help of the Empire, and the Empire might be offended if its commercial representative were needlessly delayed in her return.

What Leia could do was establish some ground rules concerning where on the Falcon Commander Dorja could go, and where was strictly off limits. Dorja had agreed immediately to the restrictions, and agreed as well to be scanned for any technological or other secrets she might be smuggling out.

Nothing had turned up on the scan. Of course. If Vana Dorja was carrying any vital secrets to her masters in the Empire, she was carrying them locked in her all-too-inquisitive brain.

"Please sit down," Leia said.

"Your Highness is kind," Dorja said, and lowered her stocky body into a chair. Leia sat across the table from her, and observed the half-empty glass of juri juice set before the commander.

"Threepio is providing sufficient refreshment?" Leia asked.

"Yes. He is very efficient, though a trifle talkative."

Talkative? Leia thought. What's Threepio been telling the woman?

Blast it anyway. Dorja was all too skilled at creating these unsettling moments.

"Shall we dine?" Leia asked. Dorja nodded, bland as always. "As Your Highness wishes." But then she proved useful in the galley, assisting Han and Leia as they transferred to plates the meal that had been cooking in the Falcon's automatic ovens. As Han sat down with his plates, C-3PO contemplated the table.

"Sir," he said. "A Princess and former Chief of State takes precedence, of course, over both a general and an Imperial commander. But a commander--forgive me--does not take precedence over a New Republic general, even one on the inactive list. General Solo, if you would be so kind as to sit above Commander Dorja?"

Han gave C-3PO a baleful look. "I like it fine where I am," he said. Which was, of course, as far away from the Imperial commander as the small table permitted.

C-3PO looked as distressed as it was possible for a droid with an immobile face to look. "But sir--the rules of precedence--" "I like it where I am," Han said, more firmly.

"But sir--"

Leia slid into her accustomed role as Han's interpreter to the world. "We'll dine informally, Threepio," she told the droid.

C-3PO's tone allowed his disappointment to show. "Very well, Your Highness," he said.

Poor 3PO, Leia thought. Here he was designed for working out rules of protocol for state banquets involving dozens of species and hundreds of governments, interpreting and smoothing disputes, and instead she persisted in getting him into situations where he kept getting shot at. And now the galaxy was being invaded by beings who had marked for extermination every droid in existence--and they were winning. Whatever C-3PO had for nerves must be shot.

Lots of formal dinner parties when this is over, Leia decided. Nice, soothing dinner parties, without assassins, quarrels, or light-saber fights.

"I thank you again for your offer of transit to the Empire," Dorja said later, after the soup course. "It was fortunate that you have business there."

"Very fortunate," Leia agreed.

"Your mission to the Empire must be critical," Dorja probed, "to take you from the government at such a crucial time."

"I'm doing what I do best."

"But you were Chief of State--surely you must be considering a return to power."

Leia shook her head. "I served my term."

"To voluntarily relinquish power--I confess I don't understand it." Dorja shook her head. "In the Empire, we are taught not to decline responsibility once it is given

to us."

Leia sensed Han's head lifting as he prepared to speak. She knew him well enough to anticipate the sense of any remarks. No, he would say, Imperial leaders generally stay in their seats of power until they're blasted out by laser cannons. Before Han could speak, she phrased a more diplomatic answer.

"Wisdom is knowing when you've given all you can," she said, and turned her attention to her dinner, a fragrant breast of hibbas with a sauce of bofa fruit. Dorja picked up her fork, held it over her plate. "But surely--with the government in chaos, and driven into exile--a strong hand is needed."

"We have constitutional means for choosing a new leader," Leia reassured. And thought, Not that they're working so far, with Pwoe proclaiming himself Chief of State with the Senate deadlocked on Mon Calamari.

"I wish you a smooth transition," Commander Dorja said. "Let's hope the hesitation and chaos with which the New Republic has met its current crisis was the fault of Borsk Fey'lya's government, and not symptomatic of the New Republic as a whole."

"I'll drink to that," Han proclaimed, and drained his glass.

"I can't help but wonder how the old Empire would have handled the crisis," Dorja continued. "I hope you will forgive my partisan attitude, but it seems to me that the Emperor would have mobilized his entire armament at the first threat, and dealt with the Yuuzhan Vong in an efficient and expeditious manner, through the use of overwhelming force. Certainly better than Borsk Fey'lya's policy--if I understood it correctly as a policy--of negotiating with the invaders at the same time as he was fighting them, sending signals of weakness to a ruthless enemy who used negotiation only as a cover for further conquests."

It was growing very hard, Leia thought, to maintain the diplomatic smile on her face. "The Emperor," she said, "was always alert to any threat to his power."

Leia sensed Han about to speak, and this time was too late to stop his words.

"That's not what the Empire would have done, Commander," Han said. "What the Empire would have done was build a super-colossal Yuuzhan Vong-killing battle machine. They would have called it the Nova Colossus or the Galaxy Destructor or the Nostril of Palpatine or something equally grandiose. They would have spent billions of credits, employed thousands of contractors and subcontractors, and equipped it with the latest in death-dealing technology. And you know what would have happened? It wouldn't have worked. They'd forget to bolt down a metal plate over an access hatch leading to the main reactors, or some other mistake, and a hotshot enemy pilot would drop a bomb down there and blow the whole thing up. Now that's what the Empire would have done."

Leia, striving to contain her laughter, detected what might have been amusement in Vana Dorja's brown eyes.

"Perhaps you're right," Dorja conceded.

"You're right I'm right, Commander," Han said, and poured himself another glass of water.

His brief triumph was interrupted by a sudden shriek from the Falcon's hyperdrive units. The ship shuddered. Proximity alarms wailed.

Leia, her heart beating in synchrony to the blaring alarms, stared into Han's startled brown eyes. Han turned to Commander Dorja.

"Sorry to interrupt dinner just as it was getting interesting," he said, "but I'm afraid we've got to blow some bad guys into small pieces."

The first thing Han Solo did when he scrambled into the pilot's seat was to shut off the blaring alarms that were rattling his brain around inside his skull. Then he looked out the cockpit windows. The stars, he saw, had returned to their normal configuration--the Millennium Falcon had been yanked out of hyperspace. And Han had a good idea why, an idea that a glance at the sensor displays served only to confirm. He turned to Leia as she scrambled into the copilot's chair.

"Either a black hole has materialized in this sector, or we've hit a Yuuzhan Vong mine." A dovin basal to be precise, an organic gravitic-anomaly generator that the Yuuzhan Vong used for both propelling their vessels and warping space around them.

The Yuuzhan Vong had been seeding dovin basal mines along New Republic trade routes in order to drag unsuspecting transports out of hyperspace and into an ambush. But their mining efforts hadn't extended this far along the Hydian Way, at least not until now.

And there, Han saw in the displays, were the ambushers. Two flights of six coralskippers each, one positioned on either side of the dovin basal in order to intercept any unsuspecting transport.

He reached for the controls, then hesitated, wondering if Leia should pilot while he ran for the turbolaser turret. No, he thought, he knew the Millennium Falcon, her capabilities, and her crotchets better than anyone, and good piloting was going to get them out of this trouble more than good shooting.

"I'd better fly this one," he said. "You take one of the quad lasers." Regretting, as he spoke, that he wouldn't get to blow things up, something always good for taking his mind off his troubles.

Leia bent to give him a quick kiss on the cheek. "Good luck, Slick," she whispered, then squeezed his shoulder and slid silently out of the cockpit.

"Good luck yourself," Han said. "And find out if our guest is qualified to take the other turret."

His eyes were already scanning the displays as he automatically donned the comlink headset that would allow him to communicate with Leia on the turbolasers. Coralskippers weren't hyperspace capable, so some larger craft had to have dropped them here. Was that ship still around, or had it moved on to lay another mine somewhere else?

It had gone, apparently. There was no sign of it on the displays.

The Yuuzhan Vong craft were just now beginning to react to his arrival--so much for the hope that the Millennium Falcon's stealth capabilities would have kept her from being detected.

But what, he considered, had the enemy seen? A Corellian Engineering YT-1300 freighter, similar to hundreds of other small freighters they must have encountered. The Yuuzhan Vong wouldn't have seen the Falcon's armament, her advanced shields, or the modifications to her sublight drives that could give even the swift coralskippers a run for their money.

So the Millennium Falcon should continue, as far as the Yuuzhan Vong were concerned, to look like an innocent freighter.

While he watched the Yuuzhan Vong maneuver, Han broad-cast to the enemy a series of queries and demands for information of the sort that might come from a nervous civilian pilot. He conducted a series of basic maneuvers designed to keep the coralskippers at a distance, maneuvers as sluggish and hesitant as if he were a fat, nervous freighter loaded with cargo. The nearest flight of coralskippers set on a basic intercept course, not even bothering to deploy into military formation. The farthest flight, on the other side of the dovin basal mine, began a slow loop toward the Falcon, to support the others.

Now that was interesting. In a short while they would have the dovin basal singularity between themselves and the Falcon, with the mine's gravity-warping capabilities making it very difficult for them to see the Falcon or to detect any changes in her course.

"General Solo?" A voice on the comlink intruded on his thoughts. "This is Commander Dorja. I'm readying the weapons in the dorsal turret."

"Try not to blow off the sensor dish," Han told her.

He looked at the displays, saw the far-side squadron nearing eclipse behind the space-time-distorting gravity mine. His hands closed on the controls, and he altered course directly for the dovin basal just as he gave full power to the sublight drives.

The gravity mine was now between the Millennium Falcon and the far-side flight of coralskippers. The space-time warp surrounding the dovin basal would make it nearly impossible to detect the Falcon's change of course.

"We have about three standard minutes to contact with the enemy," he said into the comlink headset. "Fire dead ahead, on my mark."

"Dead ahead?" came Dorja's bland voice. "How unorthodox . . . have you considered maneuver?"

"Don't second-guess the pilot!" Leia's voice snapped like a whip. "Keep this channel clear unless you have something of value to say!"

"Apologies," Dorja murmured.

Han bit back his own annoyance. He glanced at the empty copilot's chair--Chewbacca's place, now Leia's--and found himself wishing that he was in the second turbolaser cockpit, with Chewbacca in the pilot's seat. But Chewie was gone, the first of the deaths that had struck him to the heart. Chewbacca dead, his younger son Anakin killed, his older son Jacen missing, presumed dead by everyone except Leia . . . Death had been haunting his footsteps, on the verge of claiming everyone around him.

That was why he hadn't accepted Waroo's offer to assume Chewbacca's life debt. He simply hadn't wanted to be responsible for the death of another friend.

But now Leia believed that Jacen was alive. This wasn't a vague hope based on a mother's desire to see her son again, as Han had earlier suspected, but a sending through the Force, a message aimed at Leia herself.

Han had no direct experience of the Force himself, but he knew he could trust Leia not to misread it. His son was alive.

So maybe Death wasn't following him so closely after all. Or maybe Han had just outrun him.

Stay alert, he told himself. Stay strong. You may not have to die today.

Cold determination filled him.

Make the Yuuzhan Vong pay instead, he thought.

He made a last scan of the displays. The near-side flight had turned to pursue, dividing into two V formations of three coralskippers each. They hadn't reacted very quickly to his abrupt change of course, so Han figured he wasn't dealing with a genius commander here, which was good.

It was impossible to see the far-side flight on the other side of the gravity-distorting mine, but he had a good read on their trajectory, and there hadn't been any reason for them to change it.

The dovin basal swept closer. The Falcon's spars moaned as they felt the tug of its gravity.

"Ten seconds," Han told Leia and Dorja, and reached for the triggers to the concussion missile tubes.

Anticipation drew a metallic streak down his tongue. He felt a prickle of sweat on his scalp.

"Five." He triggered the first pair of concussion missiles, knowing that, unlike the laser cannon, they did not strike at the speed of light.

"Two." Han triggered another pair of missiles. The Millennium Falcon's engines howled as they fought the pull of the dovin basal's gravity.

"Fire." The dovin basal swept past, and suddenly the display lit with the six approaching coralskippers. The combined power of the eight turbolasers fired straight at them.

The six coralskippers had also split into two Vs of three craft each, the formations on slightly diverging courses, but both formations were running into the Falcon and her armament at a combined velocity of better than 90 percent of the speed of light. None of them had shifted their dovin basals to warp space defensively ahead of them, and the pilots had only an instant to perceive the doom staring them in the face, and no time to react. The first vic ran right into the first pair of missiles and the turbolaser fire, and all three erupted in fire as their coral hulls shattered into fragments.

The second formation, diverging, was not so suitably placed. One coralskipper was hit by a missile and pinwheeled off into the darkness, trailing flame. Another ran into a burst of turbolaser fire and exploded. The third raced on, looping around the gravity mine where Han's detectors could no longer see it.

Exultation sang through Han's heart. Four kills, one probable. Not a bad start at evening the odds.

The Millennium Falcon shuddered to the gravitic pull of the dovin basal. Han frowned as he checked the sublight engine read-outs. He had hoped to whip around the space mine and exit with enough velocity to escape the dovin basal's gravity and get into hyperspace before the other flight of coralskippers could

overtake him. But the dovin basal was more powerful than he'd expected, or possibly the Yuuzhan Vong commander was actually ordering it to increase its gravitational attraction--there was a lot the Republic didn't know about how the Yuuzhan Vong equipment worked, that was at least possible.

In any case, the Falcon hadn't picked up enough speed to be sure of a getaway. Which meant he had to think of something else brilliant to do.

The other flight of six coralskippers was following him into the gravity well of the dovin basal, intent on following him. The one intact survivor of the second flight was in the act of whipping around the dovin basal, and wouldn't enter into his calculations for the present.

Well, he thought, if it worked once ...

"Hang on, ladies," he called on the comlink. "We're going around again!"

Savage pleasure filled him as he swung Millennium Falcon around for another dive toward the dovin basal. Attack my galaxy, will you? he thought.

They had doubtless seen the beginnings of his maneuver, so he altered his trajectory slightly to put the space mine directly between himself and the oncoming fighters. Then he altered his trajectory a second time, just to be safe. If the enemy commander had any sense, he'd be doing the same.

Both sides were now blind. The problem was that the Yuuzhan Vong were alert to his tactics. They wouldn't just run blindly toward him: they would have their dovin basal propulsor units shifted to repel any attack, and they'd come in shooting.

"Be alert, people," Han said. "We're not going to be so lucky this time, and I can't tell precisely where your targets are going to be. So be ready for them to be anywhere, right?"

"Right," Leia said.

"Understood," Dorja said.

"Commander Dorja," Leia said. "You'll see that your four lasers are aimed so as to fire on slightly diverging paths."

"Yes."

"Don't readjust. There's a reason for it."

"I presumed so. I won't change the settings."

A pang of sorrow touched Han's heart. It was his son Anakin who had discovered that if he fired three shots into a Yuuzhan Vong vessel at slightly diverging courses, at least one shot would curve around the gravity-warping dovin basal shields and hit the target. The quad lasers had been set to accomplish this automatically, without Anakin's eye and fast reflexes.

Anakin, who died at Myrkr.

"Twenty seconds," Han said, to cover both his own rising tension and the grief that flooded him.

He triggered another pair of missiles at ten seconds, just in case he was lucky again and the enemy flight appeared right in front of him. And then, because he had no choice but to trust his luck, he fired another pair five seconds later.

You are not keeping me from seeing Jacen again, he told the enemy.

The next thing he knew plasma cannon projectiles of molten rock were cracking against Falcon's shields, and there was a blinding flash dead ahead as the first pair of concussion missiles found a target. Han's heart throbbed as coral debris pounded on the deflectors, bounded off like multicolored sparks. There was a flicker on the displays as another coralskipper flashed past at a converging speed somewhere close to that of light, too fast for Han's eye to track it.

If he hadn't blown up the first coralskipper, he might have actually collided with it and been vaporized along with the enemy.

Han tried to calm his startled nerves as he kept his eyes on the displays, searching for more enemy craft around and behind the dovin basal. In a moment he understood the enemy's tactic. The two Vs of three had split into three pairs and curved around the dovin basal on separate paths, in the apparent hope that at least one pair would be in a position to splash the Falcon as they flew past each other. It hadn't worked, but by sheer chance one of them had almost taken out the Millennium Falcon through ramming. What, Han wondered, were the odds on that?

The comm board began a rhythmic bleating, and Han shut it off. From the display he gathered that the Falcon had just lost her hyperspace comm antenna.

Oh well. They hadn't been planning to talk to anyone long distance, anyway.

Feeling cheered by the thought that he'd win the battle in jig time if he could go on killing at least one coralskipper with each pass, he prepared to swing the ship around and dive toward the dovin basal yet again. And then his displays lit up at the appearance of an enemy fighter, the one intact survivor from the flight of six he'd splashed with his opening salvo. It was curving toward him, its plasma cannons spitting out a stream of molten projectiles.

It was placed just so as to keep him from swinging around on the ideal trajectory for passing the dovin basal again. He suppressed the curses that were ringing around the inside of his skull and instead warned his two gunners.

"Enemy skip on the port side, ladies."

He maneuvered so as to put the target in the money lane, where the fields of fire of both sets of turbolasers overlapped, and he heard the quads begin to chunder. Coherent light flashed around the enemy craft, curving weirdly as the dovin basal's singularity-curved space to safeguard the target. Enemy fire spattered off the Falcon's shields. Then flame sprayed from the coralskipper as one of the turbolaser lances struck home. The craft seemed to stagger in its course. And then a second laser blast turned the coralskipper into a spray of flaming shards that shone briefly, like a falling fire-work, and was gone.

"Nice shooting, Commander!"

Leia's voice, complimenting Dorja on the kill. Han realized to his pleasure that Vana Dorja apparently was qualified on the turbolasers.

Six down, one damaged, five to go.

Han hauled the Millennium Falcon around for another pass at the dovin basal, but he knew that the last coralskipper had delayed his maneuver to the point where it might be the enemy pouncing on the Falcon this time, not the other way around.

A glance at the displays showed the five intact coralskippers had swept around again, with each two-skip unit--plus the singleton survivor of the third pair--on widely diverging courses. They would be sweeping past the dovin basal at different times, approaching from different angles. This meant that no matter what Han did, he wouldn't be able to place the gravity-distorting singularity between himself and all the enemy at once. Those who could see him could communicate his position to those who couldn't.

The advantage he'd made for himself was gone. Someone on the other side must have had a brainstorm.

But, Han realized, the fact that the enemy flights had separated meant he wouldn't have to fight more than two at a time. That was something he could use.

He looped around toward the dovin basal, letting its gravity draw him in.

"How are we doing, Han?" Leia called.

"Plenty left in the old bag of tricks!" Han called back.

But which trick? That was a puzzler, all right.

His mind sawed at the problem as he dived for the singularity. It was clear that the first pair of enemy skips would arrive at the singularity before he did, and the single fighter at about the same time as the Falcon, with the other pair arriving afterward. The only way he'd be able to repeat the head-on attack that had worked the first time was if he did it on the third group of Yuuzhan Vong, and that meant running the gauntlet of the three other coralskippers. If he attacked the first pair, the others would arc around the dovin basal and be on his tail fast.

The Yuuzhan Vong were prepared for any eventuality. Unless, of course, he simply didn't do what they expected. If he didn't dive into the dovin basal as their tactics clearly assumed . . .

Han cut power to the sublight engines and hit the braking thrusters. The Millennium Falcon slowed as if she'd hit a patch of mud.

"Skips crossing the bow port to starboard!" he called. A volley of plasma cannon projectiles preceded the lead pair of fighters that arced from behind the blind spot of the dovin basal, bright glowing projectiles that curved strangely in the mine's weird gravity well. The projectiles crossed the Falcon's bows at a comfortable distance, followed an instant later by the fighters themselves, both moving too fast to alter their trajectory once they saw the Falcon's position. Turbolaser fire pulsed around them, but Han didn't see any hits. He was already

pouring power to the sublight engines, letting the space mine's gravity well take the Falcon into its embrace.

He nearly missed his timing: the plasma cannon volley that pre-ceeded the single fighter's appearance from around the singularity almost clipped his tail. The fighter itself crossed his stern at a blistering pace. Han wrenched the controls and altered course, heading not toward the dovin basal, but away from it.

He was now counting on the fact that the enemy were communicating, but there was also an inevitable lag between their peron of the Falcon's position, their transmission describing the position to comrades rendered blind on the far side of the dovin basal, and their comrades' ability to act on that knowledge. He had dived for the dovin basal until the first pair of fighters were committed to their attack, then braked: the fighters had crossed ahead of him. Then, once the single fighter had been told the Falcon had slowed and altered its own course to intercept, Han had accelerated, and the fighter passed astern. That left the last two, who had been told that the Millennium Falcon had first slowed, then accelerated. If they appeared where Han thought they would, they were dead meat.

"Fighters crossing starboard to port: lay down interdicting fire dead ahead," Han ordered, sawing the Falcon around again, toward the singularity. It was easier to aim his ship at the enemy than to describe to his gunners where he thought the bad guys would appear.

His heart gave a leap as the two coralskippers arced into sight right where he thought they'd be, between the Falcon and the dovin basal, the two fighters flying wingtip to wingtip and preceded by a volley of molten projectiles that curved in the mine's hyper-gravity. The turbolasers lay down a blistering fire right in their path and caught both ships broadside. One flamed and broke up, and the other soared off into the night, trailing fire.

Seven down, two damaged! A nice total, and the day had hardly begun.

Adrenaline drew a grin across Han's face. He dived for the singularity again, not because he knew what he was going to do next but because he wanted to hide: the three remaining fighters were curving around and about to drop onto his tail. But this time he didn't use the dovin basal to slingshot himself around onto a new trajectory: instead he worked the controls to go into orbit around the singularity, the Falcon's spars moaning from gravitational stress as she crabbed sideways through the dovin basal's gravity well.

Ahead, through space warped by gravity, he saw what might be an enemy fighter. "Open fire dead ahead!" he called again, and he saw laserfire streak outward, the bolts curving in the singularity's gravity like a fiery rainbow.

"Keep firing!" he urged, and brought the Falcon's nose up just a touch. The curving laser blasts climbed up the fighter's tail and blew it to shreds.

There was wild cheering from the gun turrets: even the restrained Commander Dorja was yelling her head off. "Fire dead aft!" Han shouted over the noise as he fed power to the sublight engines: with the gravity well's distortion affecting his perceptions, he had no idea where the remaining enemy were, and he was afraid they were behind him, ready to wax his tail just as he'd waxed the single enemy fighter.

Relief poured through him as scans showed his precautions were unnecessary: they'd pulled away from the dovin basal on a completely different trajectory and were well out of range. Han held his course to see if the enemy had had enough--but no, they were coming around again, ready for more punishment.

And two more fighters were heading for him, the two he'd wounded, each coming in on its own trajectory.

Han rolled the Millennium Falcon around, heading for one of the two single fighters, figuring he could knock out one of the damaged craft before taking on the pair of uninjured craft.

And then proximity alarms blared, and Han's display lit up with twenty-four fighters coming out of hyperspace right on his tail.

Thwarted rage boiled through him. "We've got company!" he shouted, and pounded the instrument panel with a fist. "I've gotta say this is really unfair--!" Then he recognized the new ships' configuration, and he punched on the intership comm unit.

"Unknown freighter," came a voice on one of the New Republic channels, "alter course forty degrees to port!"

Han obeyed, and a section of four craft came roaring in right past his cockpit. His nerves gave a leap as he recognized the dagged silhouettes of Chiss clawcraft, Sienar TIE ball cockpits and engines matched to forward-jutting Chiss weapons pylons, the design the result of their fruitful collaboration with the Empire under the Chiss Grand Admiral Thrawn.

Once upon a time, Han thought, TIE fighters on his tail would have been a bad thing.

"Commander Dorja," Han said, "we've got some of your friends here." Another two sections of clawcraft came roaring past, followed by three sections of New Republic E-wings. Directly in front of the Millennium Falcon the formation came apart in a starburst, one section of four heading for each of the remaining coralskippers while two others remained in reserve.

Han hit the TRANSMIT button. "Thanks, you guys," he said, "but I was doing fine on my own."

"Unknown freighter, stand clear." The voice had a slightly pompous ring, and Han thought he recognized it. "We'll handle it from here."

"Whatever you say, sport," Han replied, and then watched as four fighters ganged up on each of the coralskippers. The enemy craft couldn't jump to hyperspace, and they couldn't flee the fighters because they had been chasing the Millennium Falcon at near lightspeed and couldn't alter course in time.

The newly arrived fighters took no chances, just professionally hunted down each of the coralskippers and blew it to smithereens, taking no casualties in return. Then the allied squadron turned on the dovin basal mine and very carefully destroyed it with a calculated barrage of torpedoes and laser bursts.

"Nice work, people," Han congratulated them.

"Please stay off this channel, sir," the fighter commander said, "unless you have an urgent message."

Han grinned. "Not so urgent, Colonel Fel," he said. "I'd just like to invite you to a meeting here aboard the Millennium Falcon, with General Solo of the New Republic, Princess Leia Organa Solo, and Commander Vana Dorja of the Imperial Navy."

There was a long, lonely silence on the comm.

"Yes, General Solo," Jagged Fel said. "We would be honored, I'm sure."

"Come right aboard," Han said. "We'll extend the docking arm."

And then, over the comlink, he called C-3PO and told the droid there would be guests for dinner.

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