



Star Wars: Legacy of the Force #3: Tempest

By Troy Denning

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Yet the Solos' selfless determination to save the queen cannot dispel the inescapable consequences of their actions, that will pit mother against son and brother against sister in the battles ahead. For as Jacen Solo's dark powers grow stronger under the Dark Jedi Lumiya, and his influence over Ben Skywalker becomes more insidious, Luke's concern for his nephew forces him into a life-and-death struggle against his fiercest foe, and Han and Leia Solo find themselves at the mercy of their deadliest enemy . . . their son.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Troy Denning is the New York Times bestselling author of Star Wars: Tatooine Ghost, Star Wars: The New Jedi Order: Star by Star, the Star Wars: Dark Nest Trilogy: The Joiner King, The Unseen Queen, and The Swarm War, as well as 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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Chapter One

The air aboard the Thrackan Sal-Solo was filled with new-vessel smells-the acrid bite of ventilation fans burning off packing grease, the sweetness of escaped actuating gas, the ozone tinge of fresh-air exchangers. As Han and Leia Solo passed through hatchway after hatchway, Han still found himself touching the durasteel bulkheads to be sure he wasn't dreaming.

The Sal-Solo was the flagship of a secret assault fleet that the Corellian government had put into construction nearly ten standard years before, under the leadership of Han's recently deceased cousin, Thrackan Sal-Solo. Nobody would say what Sal-Solo and his cohorts had been planning for the mysterious armada, and Han didn't care. The fleet was ready to deploy and large enough to shatter the Alliance blockade, and that was all that mattered. The blockade had been extended to all five planets in the Corellian System, choking their economics and threatening their off-world facilities.

When the Solos reached the Command Center, Han did not need to be a Jedi to feel the excitement in the air. The door guards inspected everyone's passes with more than the usual cursory nod, and they even ran a security scan on C-3PO. Inside, the support officers had forsaken the caf dispenser and were actually at their duty carrels, studying data displays and coding orders. The only individuals who did not seem busy were half a dozen civilian security agents waiting on steel benches outside the Tactical Planning Salon, and even they sat in tense silence.

Han leaned close to Leia and asked in a whisper, "Will you be okay with this?"

Leia looked up and arched a brow. The lines at the corners of her dark eyes only made her gaze that much more penetrating . . . and, well, wise.

"Okay with what, Han?"

"Being married to a Corellian admiral." Han smirked and ran his fingers over his chin, clean-shaven now that there was no longer a need to hide his identity from his cousin's assassins. "Look around. Wedge is getting ready to bust the blockade, and he's going to need me to take one of the Dreadnaughts."

Leia surveyed the busy cabin, allowing her gaze to rest on the security agents outside the planning salon. "I don't think we need to worry about that, Han."

Han frowned. "You think I'm too old for a line command?"

"Hardly. You're not even seventy yet." Leia lowered her voice, then added, "I just have a feeling."

"Oh dear," C-3PO said. "It's never good when Mistress Leia has a feeling."

They reached the door to the planning salon and had to end the conversation. Instead of admitting them immediately as he had the previous day, the door guard—a square-jawed petty officer in a blue duty uniform—blocked their way.

"The admiral will be with you as soon as he can, Captain Solo."

"As soon as he can?" Han was starting to think Leia's feeling might be right. "He called us."

"Yes, sir, I'm aware of that." The door guard studied Han with the weary smirk that Corellians reserved for grandstanders and blowhards. "Admiral Antilles is a very busy man."

"Yeah?" Han was growing embarrassed by his earlier confidence—and nothing made him testier than embarrassing himself in front of Leia. "Well, so am I."

Before Han could turn to leave, Leia caught him by the arm. "Tell Admiral Antilles to take his time," she said to the guard. "We understand how busy he must be right now."

Han did not resist as she pulled him to one side of the door. Wedge Antilles had been appointed Supreme Commander of the Corellian forces some ten standard days earlier—the day after Thrackan Sal-Solo's assassination—and Han knew as well as anyone how hectic his schedule had to be right now.

That was why the Solos had been so surprised to receive a message asking them to rendezvous with Antilles in the Kiris Asteroid Cluster. The Kirises were so far out on the fringes of the system that they were almost free floating, and so obscure that even Han had been forced to ask for coordinates. The Solos had spent the better part of the trip—made even longer by the necessity of evading the Galactic Alliance blockade—debating what the blazes Corellia's new Supreme Commander was doing so far from the war.

All their questions had been answered when they rounded Kiris 6 and saw the Sal-Solo floating in her hidden dock. The Dreadnaught was a typical Corellian design—innovative, austere, and configured for vicious, close-in combat, with turbolaser turrets and missile tubes arrayed heavily and uniformly over a blue, egg-shaped hull. Han had known the moment he saw her that the ship was exactly what Corellia needed, a vessel capable of plunging into the core of the Alliance blockade and tearing it apart from the inside.

But Han's pulse had not quickened until a couple of hours later, when Antilles had informed them that the Sal-Solo had two sister ships and an entire support fleet hidden in the Kiris Cluster's other shipyards. Given the obvious element of surprise, Antilles felt sure the fleet would be powerful enough to smash the blockade and convince the Alliance to reconsider its war plans. What he had wanted to know from Han was whether he and Leia considered an early end to the war a strong enough possibility to serve in the Corellian military.

Han and Leia had spent the night agonizing over Antilles's question, worrying about whether Han would eventually find himself in battle against his own children. Jaina was now serving with the Jedi instead of the military, and Jacen was supposedly back on Coruscant torturing Corellians, but war had a way of bringing about the unforeseen. If Han ended up killing one of his own children, he would shatter into more pieces than there were stars in the galaxy.

The question posed a dilemma for Leia, as well. Four years ago, when her Master, Saba Sebatyne, had proclaimed her a Jedi Knight, she had sworn to obey the Jedi Council even when she disagreed with it, and

the Council was supporting the Galactic Alliance. So far, Saba and the other Masters had been tolerating her insubordination out of respect for who she was. But that would certainly change if Han openly took arms against the Alliance. The Council would have no choice except to demand that she choose between Han and the Jedi.

Still, the only other alternative was to stand by and watch the war blossom without them, and the Solos had never been the type to do nothing. In the end, they had decided the best course of action was to put Coruscant in a more reasonable frame of mind by helping Antilles prove that a war would be as costly for the Galactic Alliance as it was for Corellia. After the blockade was smashed, the new administration would be in a position to negotiate from strength, and Leia would secure the peace by volunteering to act as an envoy.

That was why Han had been so disappointed to be denied admittance to the planning salon. He and Leia had made up their minds to risk everything to help Antilles end this war quickly. Now it looked as though their help was no longer wanted.

The wait was shorter than Han had expected. He had barely started to consider a trip to the caf dispenser when Wedge Antilles arrived in his white admiral's uniform. His tapered face was creased with wrinkles and worry lines, and his neatly trimmed hair was now more gray than brown.

"Han, Leia-I'm sorry for the delay," Antilles said. As the door slid shut behind him, Han glimpsed the back of a civilian head nodding vigorously as someone else spoke in sharp tones. "Have you decided?"

"Yeah." Han began to feel a little more optimistic; perhaps Antilles was just having a difficult meeting with a couple of civilian bigwigs. "I was kind of thinking of signing on."

"Glad to hear it!" Antilles smiled and stuck out his hand, but there was more apprehension in his face than warmth. "We have an important job for you."

Han clasped the offered hand, but Leia continued to study Antilles with an expression of reserve. "We're looking forward to hearing about it," she said, "so we can make a final decision."

Antilles did his best to look disappointed, but made the mistake of quietly letting his breath out through his nose. It was an old sabacc tell, and one that Han knew always meant relief. Whatever was going on here, it was beginning to smell like a Hutt's belly.

"That's right," Han said. "Why don't you tell us what you have in mind?"

"Fair enough." Antilles drew them away from the door guard and lowered his voice. "We need you to negotiate a coalition."

"Negotiate?" Han scowled. "I thought you wanted me in the military."

"Maybe later." Antilles did not sound too serious. "Right now, this is more important."

"I must say, trusting Captain Solo to negotiate anything other than an asteroid belt seems foolish," C-3PO said. "His temperament is poorly suited to diplomacy."

"Han is a man of hidden talents." Antilles kept his gaze fixed on Han. "There's no one else I would trust with this mission."

Han pondered the compliment only a moment before deciding his friend was feeding him a load of bantha poodoo. "This is about Jacen, isn't it?"

Antilles frowned. "Jacen?" He shook his head. "Han, we both have kids fighting on the other side of this thing."

"Syal isn't torturing Corellians on Coruscant," Han countered. As angry and ashamed as he was about what Jacen had become, he wasn't going to hide from it. "Look, I don't like what Jacen is doing any more than you do, but he's still my kid, and I'm not going to disown him. I'll understand if you've got a problem with that."

"Han, I don't," Antilles replied. "Jacen has lost his way, but it's only because he believes in what he's fighting for. Sooner or later, he's going to remember that you and Leia taught him right from wrong, and he's going to find his way back."

Leia reached out and squeezed Antilles's hand. "Thank you, Wedge," she said. "I know that's true, but it feels good to hear someone else say it."

"Yeah, it makes you think maybe you're not crazy after all." Han turned away so he could blink a tear out of his eye, then looked back to Antilles. "So what do you really want me for?"

"I told you," Antilles said. "To negotiate a coalition."

As he spoke, the admiral's eyes shifted toward Leia, and Han realized the truth was he wanted Leia to negotiate the coalition.

Han shook his head. "For once, Threepio is right-you don't want to ask me to negotiate any kind of coalition. I might start a war or something."

Antilles gave a theatrical sigh. "Come on, Han." He briefly shifted his gaze to Leia again. "You understand what I'm asking."

"Then ask," Han said. "You know how I hate games."

"Very well." Antilles turned to Leia, and his eyes began to blink more rapidly-another old sabacc tell that usually meant your opponent was trying to pull a fast one. "You understand this can't be an official request-"

"Why not?" Han interrupted.

"Because I'm not Corellian," Leia said. "And I'm a Jedi Knight. It would look suspicious for me to conduct negotiations."

"So you want me to be the front man?" Han continued to look at Antilles.

Antilles nodded. "Exactly."

"Not interested," Han said, not even pretending to consider the request. He could not ask Leia to negotiate on behalf of a cause that even he knew she supported only partially, especially when Antilles himself so clearly had reservations about what he was asking. Besides, Han had a sneaking suspicion that his old friend was deliberately trying to discourage the Solos from accepting the assignment. "Call me when you need someone

to do some fighting."

He turned to leave, but Leia caught him by the arm. "Han, shouldn't we hear Admiral Antilles out?"

"What for?"

"For Corellia." Leia fixed him with a stern-eyed gaze that worked better on him than any Jedi Force suggestion. "You're always talking about the importance of preserving Corellia's independent spirit. Is sitting at a negotiating table really so much to ask?"

Han's jaw dropped. Leia had renounced her role as a senior diplomat during the war with the Yuuzhan Vong, when it had grown apparent that the political process was only undermining the New Republic's ability to win the war. That she would volunteer to resume the role now-on Corellia's behalf-seemed very suspicious.

He scowled. "You want to do this?"

"I'm willing to consider it." Leia turned back to Antilles. "But we're not making a decision before we hear the details-all the details."

"No one expects that." Antilles smiled, but the note of disappointment in his voice was unmistakable-at least to someone who had known him for forty years. "My orders were simply to find out if you'd be willing to consider it. Prime Minister Gejjen will brief you on the rest."

Han's brow rose. Dur Gejjen had risen to power by helping Han and Boba Fett assassinate Han's megalomaniac cousin, Thrackan Sal-Solo. Afterward, Gejjen had abolished the office of President of Five Worlds, which Sal-Solo had created for the sole purpose of exerting his personal dominion over the entire Corellian system. Had Gejjen stopped there, Han would have admired his integrity and wisdom. But Gejjen had proved to be just as bad as Sal-Solo, establishing his own hold by arranging to have himself named both Chief of State of the planet Corellia and Five Worlds Prime Minister.

"Gejjen is here?" Han asked. "You have got to be kidding."

"I'm afraid not."

Antilles led the way into the planning salon, a spacious cabin lined with the latest battle-coordination technology: half-wall display screens, a ceiling-mounted tactical holoprojector, automatic caf dispensers in each corner. Dur Gejjen and two others sat talking at a large oval conference table with a combination data/comm station at every seat.

As soon as Han and Leia entered the room, Gejjen ended the conversation and extended his hand. "Captain Solo, welcome." He was young and good looking, with dark skin and black hair worn in a short military-style cut. "I'm so pleased you agreed to accept this assignment."

"Yeah, well, don't be too pleased," Han said. "I haven't accepted anything yet."

He gave Gejjen's hand a single pump, then looked past him to the others. They were older-the first a sandy-haired man with a blocky jaw and graying mustache, the second a middle-aged woman with a round face and cold gray eyes. Han wasn't familiar enough with the new government to recognize them by sight, but he was guessing by Antilles's displeasure and the number of security agents waiting outside that they were Gavele Lemora and Rorf Willems. Along with Gejjen, Lemora and Willems were the heart of the Five Worlds

government, with Lemora serving as minister of intelligence and Willems as the minister of defense.

Gejjen frowned in Antilles's direction. "I thought you weren't to bring them in here unless-"

"Admiral Antilles's request was necessarily rather vague," Leia interrupted. "Han will need to know a few more details before he can agree to serve as your emissary."

"Ah-of course." Gejjen glanced over his shoulder at the cold-eyed woman-Lemora-and looked relieved. "We'll be happy to give him a basic briefing."

"After the droid leaves," Lemora added, staring at C-3PO.

"I can't leave!" C-3PO objected. "I won't be able to record the briefing."

"That's the point, chiphead," Willems said. He had a gravelly voice and a thuggish demeanor. "We don't want it recorded."

"Are you certain?" C-3PO inquired. "Captain Solo's memory circuits have been showing signs of fatigue lately. Just the other day, he told Princess Leia that with her new short haircut, she didn't look a day over thirty-five."

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