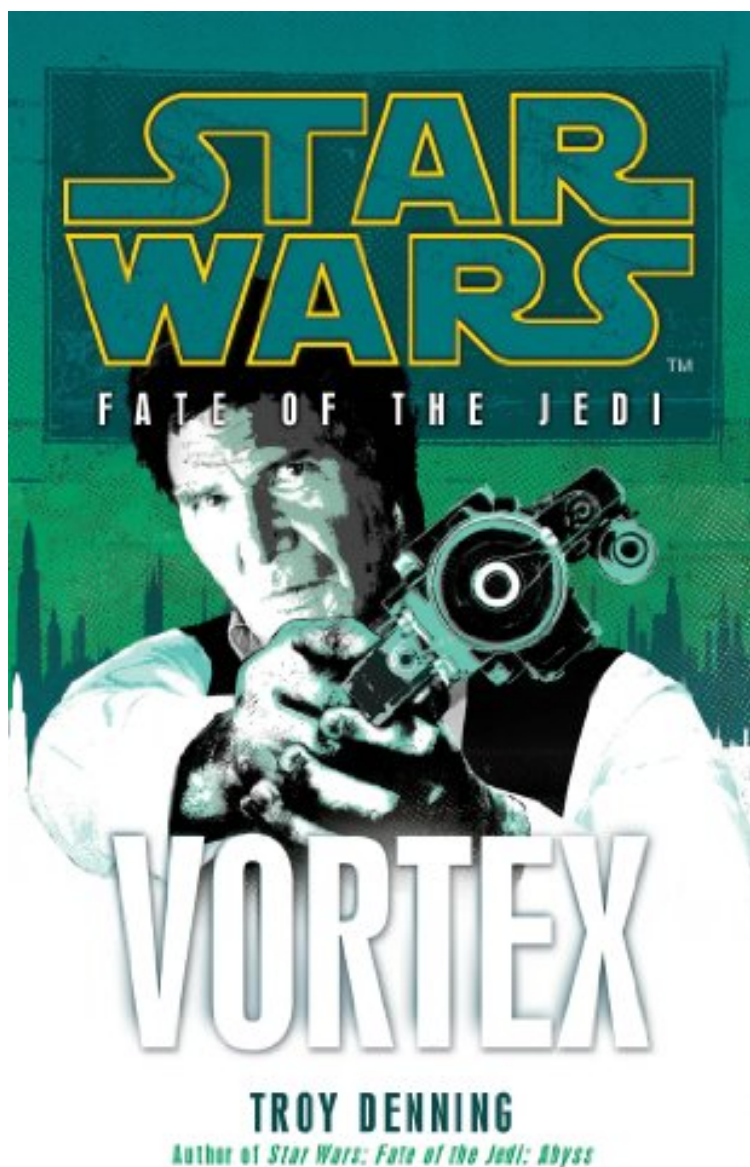


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Star Wars: Fate of the Jedi - Vortex



Par Troy Denning

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[FREE] Star Wars: Fate of the Jedi - Vortex

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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIn Book Six of the bestselling nine-book Star Wars Fate of the Jedi series, the suspense crescendoes as the Skywalkers and their treacherous Sith allies race against time to discover the origins of the mysterious Force-entity known as Abeloth. When they begin to uncover secrets better kept hidden from mortal minds, no one is surprised to see the uneasy partnership erupt into violence. But they are surprised at where the investigation leads: to the home of the reclusive Fallanassi, who may hold in their hands the future of the Jedi Order itself.ExtraitChapter OneBeyond the forward viewport hung the gossamer veil of Ashteri's Cloud, a vast drift of ionized tuderium gas floating along one edge of the Kessel sector. Speckled with the

blue haloes of a thousand distant stars, its milky filaments were a sure sign that the Rockhound had finally escaped the sunless gloom of the Deep Maw. And after the jaw-clenching horror of jumping blind through a labyrinth of uncharted hyperspace lanes and hungry black holes, even that pale light was a welcome relief to Jaina Solo. Or rather, it would have been, had the cloud been in the right place. The Rockhound was bound for Coruscant, not Kessel, and that meant Ashteri's Cloud should have been forty degrees to port as they exited the Maw. It should have been a barely discernible smudge of light, shifted so far into the red that it looked like no more than a tiny flicker of flame, and Jaina could not quite grasp how they had gone astray. She glanced over at the pilot's station--a mobile levchair surrounded by brass control panels and drop-down display screens--but found no answers in Lando Calrissian's furrowed brow. Dressed immaculately in a white shimmersilk tunic, lavender trousers, and a hip cape, he was perched on the edge of his huge nerf-leather seat, with his chin propped on his knuckles and his gaze fixed on the alabaster radiance outside. In the three decades Jaina had known Lando, it was one of the rare moments when his life of long-odds gambles and all-or-nothing stakes actually seemed to have taken a toll on his con-artist good looks. It was also a testament to the strain and fear of the past few days--and, perhaps, to the hectic pace. Lando was as impeccably groomed as always, but even he had not found time to touch up the dye that kept his mustache and curly hair their usual deep, rich black. After a few moments, he finally sighed and leaned back into his chair. "Go ahead, say it." "Say what?" Jaina asked, wondering exactly what Lando expected her to say. After all, he was the one who had made the bad jump. "It's not my fault?" A glimmer of irritation shot through Lando's weary eyes, but then he seemed to realize Jaina was only trying to lighten the mood. He chuckled and flashed her one of his nova-bright grins. "You're as bad as your old man. Can't you see this is no time to joke?" Jaina cocked a brow. "So you didn't decide to swing past Kessel to say hello to the wife and son?" "Good idea," Lando said, shaking his head. "But . . . no." "Well, then . . ." Jaina activated the auxiliary pilot's station and waited as the long-range sensors spooled up. An old asteroid tug designed to be controlled by a single operator and a huge robotic crew, the Rockhound had no true co-pilot's station, and that meant the wait was going to be longer than Jaina would have liked. "What are we doing here?" Lando's expression grew serious. "Good question." He turned toward the back of the Rockhound's spacious flight deck, where the vessel's ancient bridge droid stood in front of an equally ancient nav computer. A Cybot Galactica model RN8, the droid had a transparent head-globe, currently filled with the floating twinkles of a central processing unit running at high speed. Also inside the globe were three sapphire-blue photoreceptors, spaced at even intervals to give her full-perimeter vision. Her bronze body casing was etched with constellations, comets, and other celestial artwork. "I know I told Ornate to set a course for Coruscant." RN8's head-globe spun just enough to fix one of her photoreceptors on Lando's face. "Yes, you did." Her voice was silky, deep, and chiding. "And then you countermanded that order with one directing us to our current destination." Lando scowled. "You need to do a better job maintaining your auditory systems," he said. "You're hearing things." The twinkles inside RN8's head-globe dimmed as she redirected power to her diagnostic systems. Jaina turned her own attention back to the auxiliary display and saw that the long-range sensors had finally come online. Unfortunately, they were no help. The only thing that had changed inside its bronze frame was the color of the screen and a single symbol denoting the Rockhound's own location in the exact center. RN8's silky voice sounded from the back of the flight deck. "My auditory sensors are in optimum condition, Captain--as are my data storage and retrieval systems." Her words began to roll across the deck in a very familiar male baritone. "Redirect to destination Ashteri's Cloud, arrival time seventeen hours fifteen, Galactic Standard." Lando's jaw dropped, and he sputtered, "Tha . . . that's not me!" "Not quite," Jaina agreed. The emphasis was placed on the wrong syllable in several words; otherwise, the voice was identical. "But it's close enough to fool a droid." Lando's eyes clouded with confusion. "Are you telling me what I think you're telling me?" "Yes," Jaina said, glancing at her blank sensor display. "I don't quite know how, but someone impersonated you." "Through the Force?" Jaina shrugged and shot a meaningful glance toward a dark corner. While she knew of half a dozen Force powers that could have been used to defeat RN8's voice-recognition software, not one of those techniques had a range measured in light-years. She carefully began to expand her Force awareness, concentrating on the remote corners of the huge ship, and thirty standard seconds later was astonished to find nothing unusual. There were no lurking beings, no blank zones that might suggest an artificial void in the Force, not even any small vermin that might be a Force-wielder disguising his presence. After a moment, she turned back to Lando. "They must be using the Force. There's no one aboard but us and the droids." "I was afraid you'd say that." Lando paused for a moment, then asked, "Luke's friends?" "I hate to jump to conclusions, but . . . who else?" Jaina replied. "First, Lost Tribe or

not, they're Sith. Second, they already tried to double-cross us once." "Which makes them as crazy as a rancor on the dancing deck," Lando said. "Abeloth was locked in a black-hole prison for twenty-five thousand years. What kind of maniacs would think it was a good idea to bust her out?" "They're Sith," Jaina reminded him. "All that matters to them is power, and Abeloth had power like a nova has light--until Luke killed her." Lando frowned in thought. "And if they're crazy enough to think they could take Abeloth home with them, they're probably crazy enough to think they could take the guy who killed her." "Exactly," Jaina said. "Until a few weeks ago, no one even knew the Lost Tribe existed. That's changed, but they'll still want to keep what they can secret." "So they'll try to take out Luke and Ben," Lando agreed. "And us, too. Contain the leak." "That's my guess," Jaina said. "Sith like secrecy, and secrecy means stopping us now. Once we're out of the Maw, they'll expect us to access the HoloNet and report." Lando looked up and exhaled in frustration. "I told Luke he couldn't trust anyone who puts High Lord before his name." He had been even more forceful than Jaina in trying to argue Luke out of a second bargain with the Lost Tribe--a bargain that had left the Skywalkers and three Sith behind to explore Abeloth's savage homeworld together. "Maybe we should go back." Jaina thought for only an instant, then shook her head. "No, Luke knew the bargain wouldn't last when he agreed to it," she said. "Sarasu Taalon has already betrayed his word once." Lando scowled. "That doesn't mean Luke and Ben are safe." "No," Jaina agreed. "But it does mean he's risking their lives to increase our chances of reporting to the Jedi Council. That's our mission." "Technically, Luke doesn't get to assign missions right now," Lando pressed. "You wouldn't be violating orders if we--" "Luke Skywalker is still the most powerful Jedi in the galaxy. I think we should assume he has a plan," Jaina said. A sudden tingle of danger sense raced down her spine, prompting her to hit the quick-release on her crash harness. "Besides, we need to start worrying about saving our own skins." Lando began to look worried. "What are you saying?" he asked. "That you're sensing something?" Jaina shook her head. "Not yet." She rose. "But I will be. Why do you suppose they sent us someplace easy to find?" Lando scowled. "Oh . . ." He glanced up at a display, tapped some keys--no doubt trying to call up a tactical report--then slammed his fist against the edge of the brass console. "Are they jamming us?" "That's difficult to know with the ship's sensor systems offline for degaussing," RN8 replied. "Offline?" Lando shrieked. "Who authorized that?" "You did, ninety-seven seconds ago," RN8 replied. "Would you like me to play it back?" "No! Countermand it and bring all systems back up." Lando turned to Jaina and asked, "Any feel for how long we have until the shooting starts?" Jaina closed her eyes and opened herself to the Force. She felt a mass of belligerent presences approaching from the direction of the Maw. She turned to RN8. "How long until the sensor systems reboot?" "Approximately three minutes and fifty-seven seconds," the droid reported. "I'm afraid Captain Calrissian also ordered a complete data consolidation." Jaina winced and turned back to Lando. "In that case, I'd say we have less than three minutes and fifty-two seconds. There's someone hostile coming up behind us." She started toward the hatchway at the back of the cavernous bridge, her boots ringing on the old durasteel deck. "Why don't you see if you can put a stop to those false orders?" "Sure, I'll just tell my crew to stop listening to me." Lando's voice was sarcastic. "Being droids, they'll know what I mean." "You might try activating their standard verification routines," Jaina suggested. "I might, if droid crews this old had standard verification routines." Lando turned and scowled at Jaina as she continued across the deck. "And you're going where?" "You know where," Jaina said. "To your StealthX?" Lando replied. "The one with only three engines? The one that lost its targeting array?" "Yeah, that one," Jaina confirmed. "We need a set of eyes out there--and someone to fly cover." "No way," Lando said. "If I let you go out to fight Sith in that thing, your dad will be feeding pieces of me to Amelia's nexu for the next ten years." Jaina stopped and turned toward him, propping one hand on her hip. "Lando, did you just say let? Did you really say no way to me?" Lando rolled his eyes, unintimidated. "You know I didn't mean it like that. But have you gone spacesick? With only three engines, that starfighter is going to be about as maneuverable as an escape pod!" "Maybe, but it still beats sitting around like a blind bantha in this thing. Thanks for worrying, though." She shot Lando a sour smile. "It's so sweet when you old guys do that." "Old?" Lando cried. After a moment, he seemed to recognize the mocking tone in Jaina's voice, and his chin dropped. "I deserved that, didn't I?" "You think?" Jaina laughed to show there were no hard feelings, then added, "And you know what Tendra would do to me if I came back without Chance's father. So let's both be careful." "Okay, deal." Lando waved her toward the hatchway. "Go. Blow things up. Have fun." "Thanks." Jaina's tone grew more serious, and she added, "And I mean for everything, Lando. You didn't have to be here, and I'm grateful for the risks you're taking to help us. It means a lot to me--and to the whole Order." Lando's Force aura grew cold, and he looked away in sudden discomfort. "Jaina, is there something you're not telling me?" "About this situation?" Jaina asked,

frowning at his strange reaction. "I don't think so. Why?" Lando exhaled in relief. "Jaina, my dear, perhaps no one has mentioned this to you before . . ." His voice grew more solemn. "But when a Jedi starts talking about how much you mean to her, the future begins to look very scary." "Oh . . . sorry." Jaina's cheeks warmed with embarrassment. "I didn't mean anything like that. Really. I was just trying to--" "It's okay." Lando's voice was still a little shaky. "And if you did mean something--" "I didn't," Jaina interrupted. "I know," Lando said, raising a hand to stop her. "But if things start to go bad out there, just get back to Coruscant and report. I can take care of myself. Understand?" "Sure, Lando, I understand." Jaina started toward the hatchway, silently adding, "But no way am I leaving you behind." "Good--and try to stick close. We won't be hanging around long." A low whir sounded from Lando's chair as he turned it to face RN8. "Ornate, prepare an emergency jump to our last coordinates." "I'm afraid that's impossible, Captain Calrissian," the droid replied. "You gave standing orders to empty the nav computer's memory after each jump." "What?" Lando's anger was edging toward panic now. "How many other orders--no, forget it. Just countermand my previous commands." "All of them?" "Yes!" Lando snapped. "No, wait . . ." Jaina reached the hatchway and, not waiting to hear the rest of Lando's order, raced down the rivet-studded corridor beyond. She still had no idea what the Sith were planning, but she was going to stop them--and not only because the Jedi Council needed to know everything she and Lando could tell them about the Lost Tribe of the Sith. Over the years, Lando had been as loyal a friend to the Jedi Order as he had to her parents, time after time risking his life, fortune, and freedom to help them resolve whatever crisis happened to be threatening the peace of the galaxy at the moment. He always claimed he was just repaying a favor, or protecting an investment, or maintaining a good business environment, but Jaina knew better. He was looking out for his friends, doing everything he could to help them survive--no matter what mess they had gotten themselves into. Jaina reached the forward hangar bay. As the hatch opened in front of her, she was surprised to find a bank of floodlights already illuminating her battered StealthX. At first, she assumed Lando had ordered the hangar droid to ready the Rockhound's fighter complement for launch. Then she saw what was missing from her starfighter. There were no weapons barrels extending from the wingtips. In fact--on the side facing her, at least--the cannons themselves were gone. She was so shocked that she found herself waiting for the rest of the hangar lights to activate, having forgotten for the moment that the Rockhound did not have automatic illumination. The whir of a pneumatic wrench sounded from the far side of the StealthX, and beneath the starfighter's belly she noticed a cluster of telescoping droid legs straddling the actuator housing of a Taim Bak KX12 laser cannon. From the Hardcover edition. *Revue de presse* "Awesome, poignant and extremely action-packed. 8/10" (Emotionally Fourteen) "Die-hard fans will lap this up, and it's a good and enjoyable addition to the series" (Civilian Reader)