

STAR WARS®

CLONE WARS GAMBIT

SIEGE

KAREN MILLER

Author of *Star Wars: The Clone Wars: Wild Space*

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CLONE WARS GAMBIT SIEGE



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*An eBook novella

**Forthcoming

DRAMATIS PERSONAE



Ahsoka Tano; Jedi Padawan (Togruta female) Anakin Skywalker; Jedi Knight (human male) Bail Organa; Senator from Alderaan (human male) Bant'ena Fhernan; scientist first level (human female) Greti; child (Lanteeban female)

Jaklin; teacher (Lanteeban female)

Lok Durd; Separatist general (Neimoidian male) Obi-Wan Kenobi; Jedi Knight (human male) Padmé Amidala; Senator from Naboo (human female) Palpatine; Supreme Chancellor of the Republic (human male) Rikkard; head miner (Lanteeban male) Taria Damsin; Jedi Master (human female) Tryn Netzl; biochemist (human male) Yoda; Grand Master of the Jedi Order (nonhuman male)

ONE



ANAKIN COULDN'T BELIEVE IT.

More than three standard hours—really, closer to four—since their desperate escape from Lok Durd's droid army and they were still flying instead of falling. What a shame Obi-Wan wasn't awake—he was in the mood for a little not-undeserved boasting. But despite putting up a strong fight Obi-Wan had succumbed to sleep nearly two hours earlier. In the groundcar's dim console light his mentor looked washed out. Burned out, or close enough. Their last-stand battle in the Sep compound had taken him to the edge of endurance and then pushed him right over.

Good thing I'm the Chosen One or we might be in trouble.

Well. More trouble. Another glance at their stolen vehicle's power-cell readout sent his spirits into a swift downward spiral. If they were lucky—ha—they had roughly one more hour of propulsion remaining. And after that ...

The Lanteeb night continued thick and dark around them. To conserve their precious power—and remain hidden from prying eyes—he hadn't turned on the rigged groundcar's headlights, trusting instead to his instincts and the Force. And so far so good. Neither had steered him wrong. It was Obi-Wan's decision to get them as far away from the city as possible before ditching their makeshift speeder, and since he didn't disagree with that strategy it was exactly what they'd done. With the city falling farther and farther behind them, together they'd stretched their overstretched senses, trying to determine the best direction to take. To find safety, or

what might pass for it, on what had without warning become the most hostile of worlds.

Bant'ena.

The kidnapped scientist's betrayal was just one more pain, burning in chorus with the others. At least, that was what he tried to tell himself. But really, it was a lie. That particular pain burned brighter than all the others combined.

Bant'ena, how could you do it? I trusted you. I tried to save you.

Slumped beside him in the passenger seat, Obi-Wan stirred. "Don't," he said, his voice slurry. "What's done is done, Anakin. Let it go. Now—how are your engine modifications holding up?"

"We're still flying."

"True," Obi-Wan conceded. "And for that I sincerely thank you. But it seems to me there's a rough note sounding in the primary coolant valve."

Stang. Trust Obi-Wan to notice. "It's fine. It'll hold."

"If you say so." With a stifled curse, Obi-Wan sat up. "Anyway. Where are we?"

Anakin sighed. "You're kidding, right?"

"No, not really," Obi-Wan said, then smothered a yawn. "How long have I been sleeping?"

"Oh, you know," he said vaguely. "Not that long."

"Anakin." Obi-Wan glared. "I am *not* a decrepit relic."

Oooh. Sticky ground. "I didn't say you were. But Rex says a smart soldier eats and sleeps every chance he gets. You want to argue with someone, argue with him. I'm just following his advice."

"Well, now you can follow *my* advice," Obi-Wan snapped. "That's twice on this mission you've conspired to stay awake while I slept. Do it a third time and there *will* be repercussions."

Repercussions or not, he'd do it as many times as he had to—but that was a fight for another time and place. To keep the peace here and now, he nodded. "Whatever you say."

And that earned him another sharp look—but sharp looks he could live with.

Obi-Wan raked his fingers through his hair. "How many more villages have we bypassed?"

"Since you fell asleep? Two. They didn't feel right, so I kept going."

"Good," said Obi-Wan. "Let your feelings guide you, Anakin, and you won't go far wrong." He muffled another yawn. "But even so, I think circumstances are going to force our hand soon enough. No pun intended."

"You're right," he said, and tapped a finger to the power cell's readout. "We're just about flying on fumes. How much longer do you want to keep pushing our luck?"

"Until we hear it scream for mercy," said Obi-Wan, frowning. "I know we've already traveled a good distance from Lantibba City but right now there's no such thing as too far."

Actually, I'm starting to wonder about that. "I don't know. We've got a long hike back to the ship as it is. Assuming it's still there, and some spaceport official hasn't impounded it. Maybe we should be thinking about—"

"I am thinking about it," said Obi-Wan, testy. "Now hush a moment. I'd like to get a sense of who and what's ahead."

Even tired to the bone, Obi-Wan used the Force the way a surgeon used a laser scalpel, neatly and cleanly cleaving his way through the night.

"There," he murmured, eventually. "Can you feel that?"

Anakin nodded. "That's the largest village we've sensed so far, I think."

“And there’s safety in numbers,” said Obi-Wan, opening his eyes. “I don’t feel any immediate danger surrounding the place, do you?”

He was already angling the groundcar in the distant village’s direction. “No.”

Ominously, the controls were feeling sluggishly heavy now, less responsive than ever. Without warning the vehicle lurched, then dropped. Cursing, he wrestled it back under control.

“Blast,” said Obi-Wan, checking the power-cell indicator. “Are you sure this gauge is accurate, Anakin?”

Teeth gritted, arms aching, he fought the groundcar against another precipitate plunge. “Depends what you mean by *accurate*. And *sure*.”

A third lurching drop, then a stomach-churning sideways twist as their makeshift speeder tried to fishtail its way through the night. Obi-Wan grabbed the passenger-door handle. “So is *this* the point where we start falling instead of flying?”

He hated to admit it, but—“Yeah. I think it is.”

“Wonderful,” Obi-Wan muttered. And then he sighed. “Well, at least turn on the headlights. It seems a pity not to *see* death rushing to meet us.”

“Pessimist,” Anakin said, fiercely grinning, and flooded the endless dark with light. “Now hold on, Master Kenobi. Things are about to get a little bit interesting.”

ANAKIN WAS A BRILLIANT PILOT, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t use some help. Ignoring his leaden exhaustion, the warning ache in his bones, and the drag in his blood, for the second time that night Obi-Wan discarded prudent self-preservation and abandoned himself without reservation to the Force. Its power howled through him, setting his nerves alight. And howling with the power was the starkest of warnings: *Danger ahead, Jedi. Danger all around.*

Sweating and swearing, Anakin fought the crippled, dying groundcar. They were down to the dregs of its power cell now, encased in a shell of unresponsive metal. The headlights were fading fast and with them any hope of making some kind of informed landing. Darkness poised to swallow them. Death, too, if they didn't find a way to control their out-of-control descent.

I may be a pessimist but it's not without cause.

And then the groundcar's shielding gave out in a defiant spray of sparks, like fireworks.

There. You see? Wonderful.

"Sorry," said Anakin, his fingers bloodless on the stricken vehicle's control yoke. "I thought we had a bit more juice left than this."

Obi-Wan managed an encouraging smile. "Never mind. You're doing fine. Just—"

With an ominous grumbling of stressed metal joints the groundcar's nose dropped, sending them into a sharp dive. On a desperate gasp he wrapped the Force around them, swaddling the groundcar as once he'd swaddled Bail's starship coming in powerless to a space station dock. Except this time was different. It might've handled like a flying brick but at least Bail's small ship had been in a controlled glide. Their improbably rigged-up groundcar was *falling* like a brick. And when bricks hit the ground from a great height they had the disconcerting habit of smashing to splinters and shards.

"Okay!" Anakin panted. "You've got it. Hold it there, Obi-Wan. If you can just hold the barve *right there* I can—"

"Forget it, Anakin. This thing is past flying. All we can do now is cushion the blow."

"No—no—I've still got it. I can do this. Just hold on to it, Obi-Wan—don't let go of the blasted thing, whatever you do!"

If it had been anyone other than Anakin ... but it *was* Anakin, so Obi-Wan poured his will into cradling the machine as his former apprentice bullied it into cooperating. The console lighting failed next—and then last of all the headlights. In the moment they winked out he caught a final glimpse of the on-rushing tree-scattered ground. Heard a curdling scrape of high branches along the groundcar's belly.

And then the groundcar's power cell died.

"Anakin?" He tore his gaze from the unshielded windscreen. "We're out of time."

No need to talk about it. In perfect, familiar unison they flung themselves into an active trance, imposing the Force upon the unresponsive groundcar and flattening their lethally steep trajectory. Amid loud crashing and splintering the groundcar blundered through the pitch-dark countryside's clustered tree-tops, then struck one broad trunk hard and slewed wildly sideways. Blood swirling, their vision blotched and smeared, they used up what was left of their meager strength, keeping the Force wrapped close around the groundcar. It was the only thing standing between themselves and a bloody death.

And then they struck Lanteeban soil, skipping over the open ground like a stone across a flat pond. The noise was ferocious. Metal sheared and screamed and buckled and tore. They hit something unyielding, a rock or a felled tree, maybe the lip of a culvert, that flipped them into a crazy sideways roll. With the power cell drained dry, the expensive groundcar's auto restraints couldn't engage. Pebbles in a bottle, they rattled around and around and around.

At last, with one final roll and a rending shriek of stressed durasteel, their pulverized vehicle slammed right-side up and rocked to a halt. Stunned, his head still spinning, Obi-Wan sat in silence and breathed, just breathed, and waited for his pounding heartbeat to subside.

We're alive. Who'd believe it? We must be better than I thought.

His ears were ringing. He could taste blood in his mouth and feel it on his face and arms and legs. On his sweaty skin he felt the caress of fresh night air, flowing in through the ragged tears in the groundcar's metal shell. It smelled cold and clean. No taint of habitation, sentient or otherwise. He couldn't see a thing through the cracked windscreen but wherever they were, the village he and Anakin had felt through the Force was clicks and clicks away. Wonderful. Because there was nothing he liked better than tramping through an unknown wilderness in the dark. All that was missing now was a Sith Holocron.

I swear, the next time Bail Organa says he's got intelligence for me to look at I really will throw him out of his speeder.

Equally stunned, Anakin slumped in the driver's seat. And then he laughed, sounding almost giddy with relief.

"So—Obi-Wan—what is it with you and crash landings, anyway?"

"Aren't you the one who said every man should have a hobby?"

"Me? No," said Anakin. "Sorry. Must've been one of your other former Padawans." Another giddy laugh. "Seriously, Obi-Wan. So far you've accounted for a speeder bike, a starship, and now a groundcar. If you're not careful you're going to get a reputation."

Since he was hurting too much to even contemplate moving, and they were in no danger of bursting into flames, Obi-Wan let his aching head rest against the back of the crumpled passenger seat and gave himself permission to indulge.

"I reject your hypothesis," he said, deliberately prim. "I did not wreck the speeder bike, it was blown up by a bomb. And the Sith crashed Bail's starship, not me. As for this groundcar, well, technically speaking I'm merely a passenger. So clearly I bear no responsibility at all."

Anakin's amusement flared brighter. "Admit it. You're a common denominator, Master Kenobi."

“Alas. That is sad but true,” he agreed. “Perhaps I should smuggle myself onto Grievous’s flagship. After all, what’s the point in having the mystical power to crash flying machines if one isn’t prepared to use it in a good cause?”

“Now that’s a plan,” said Anakin. “I’ll remind you to suggest it to the Council when we get home.”

When we get home. Amusement fading, Obi-Wan closed his eyes. Yes. Getting home. Having survived Lok Durd’s ambush, that was their next challenge—which they wouldn’t conquer by sitting around in the dark.

Step one: exit the groundcar.

Warily, holding his breath, he shifted a little in his battered seat. There was pain, but no grinding of bones. No sudden gush of blood. Thank the Force for minor miracles.

“We need to get out of here. Are you still in one piece?”

“I think so,” said Anakin. “You?”

“Apparently.”

A soft snort. “In that case maybe we should go find ourselves a casino.”

“I’ll settle for a humble cottage and some friendly native faces.” Still moving cautiously, he tested the passenger door. “I’m trapped on this side. Can you get out on yours?”

A rustling of clothes and a muttered curse as Anakin tried his own door. “No,” he said, giving up. “Hold on.”

The darkness disappeared in a flash of blue light as Anakin activated his lightsaber.

Obi-Wan flattened himself against the passenger door. “Watch out! You’ll be cutting me in half with that thing if you’re not careful!”

Anakin tut-tutted. “Now, would I do that? Shield your eyes. There’s going to be dripping metal any second.”

Slowly, carefully, cursing their groundcar’s cramped interior and the droplets of slagged durasteel he didn’t manage to avoid, Anakin cut through the buckled roof, then used the Force to peel back the scarlet-edged sheet of metal.

His own skin stinging from a scattering of pinprick burns, Obi-Wan nodded. “Good. Now let’s get out of this tin coffin, shall we? I’ll go first.”

For once, Anakin didn’t argue.

Clambering clear of the groundcar woke every last bruise and scrape and blaster-bolt burn on his body. Letting the sharp discomfort ride him unopposed, standing free and clear of the smashed vehicle, Obi-Wan tipped his face to the moonless night and breathed out his shuddering relief. Then he sought for any immediate danger in the Force—and felt nothing. But was that because there *was* nothing, or because his reserves of strength were too depleted for him to tell?

On a slow surge of Force propulsion Anakin leapt from the groundcar to land unsteadily beside him. “I think we’re safe for now, Obi-Wan.”

He shook his head. “Hardly. The Separatists’ disarray won’t have lasted very long. There’ll be droids on our tail soon, if they’re not hunting us already. And you don’t need a casino to bet on that.”

“Sure, they’ll send droids after us,” said Anakin, unconvinced. “Without the first idea of what direction we took. They’re flying blind, Obi-Wan. The odds of them finding us straightaway—or at all—are—”

“And if Durd turns to Dooku for help?”

“Durd’s not going to tell Dooku about us,” said Anakin, scoffing. “He’s going to keep this quiet. If he doesn’t, he risks getting his head handed to him.”

“Possibly, but we can’t assume that,” Obi-Wan retorted. “We can’t assume *anything*. Mind yourself. In our situation overconfidence could easily prove fatal.”

Anakin’s impatient irritation seethed through the Force. “Maybe. But second-guessing ourselves could get us killed just as fast. So could a lack of conviction and being timid instead of—”

“Timid? Who said anything about being *timid*?” He took a deep, painful breath. *Stay calm. You know what he’s like.* “I’m saying we should be *prudent*, Anakin. There is a time for bold action and a time for reasoned caution and under the circumstances I think caution is called for.”

Silence. And then Anakin sighed softly. “Yes. It is. So what do you want to do?”

“Well ...” He scratched his beard, considering their tediously limited options. “You’re not wrong about the odds being in our favor, at least for the moment. I say we lengthen them by hiding the groundcar, then getting to that village we were aiming for.”

“On foot?” Anakin heaved another sigh. “Yeah. Great. Because I was only just thinking that what I really need right now is blisters.”

Oh, Anakin. “Cheer up. Things could always be worse.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Anakin. “Weren’t you listening? *Blisters.*”

Truly, their situation was anything but funny, but still—he had to laugh. Anakin’s irrepressibly irreverent humor was one of his most endearing traits.

“Come on,” he said. “That groundcar isn’t going to hide itself.”

Once more working in wordless tandem they used the Force to lift and shift and drop and lift and shift and drop the mangled vehicle back to the straggle of trees they’d crashed through on their descent. The task proved brutally hard. They were both so tired and knocked about, and even Anakin’s intimidating powers weren’t limitless. But they had no choice.

Done at last, bent over with his hands braced on his knees, his breathing harsh and fast, Anakin glanced up. “I don’t know if this is good enough. Wrecked or not, the kriffing thing still looks like a groundcar and there’s not enough cover here to hide it from a passing spy droid.”

Obi-Wan leaned against a handy tree trunk. There wasn’t a finger’s-width of flesh and bone in his body that didn’t hurt. “I know.”

Gingerly, Anakin straightened. “We’ll have to cut it up. Small pieces. Then we’ll need to scatter them. Spread dirt over them afterward so they don’t catch the light.”

Anakin’s endless resourcefulness never ceased to impress him. “Good idea. And speaking of light ...”

At the far edge of the horizon a thin bright line was spreading like spilled plasma. Dawn. If they were going to do this they’d have to hurry. There was no telling how many spy droids were out looking for them, or how long it would take one to stumble on to their crash site. So they took out their lightsabers and dismembered the groundcar, hacking and slicing it into piles of scrap metal. After that they used the Force to scatter and camouflage the pieces.

And after *that*, spy droids or no spy droids, they both collapsed to the inhospitable ground.

“Wake me up this time next year,” Anakin muttered, sprawled full length, eyes closed in his filthy, blood-smeared face.

Slumped cross-legged on leaf litter and small stones, Obi-Wan pressed his fingers to his aching temples. “I wish I could. But we can’t stay here, Anakin.”

“I know.” Anakin sighed. The growing light showed a deep cut on his forehead and a blackish purple bruise on his cheek. His humble Lanteeban work clothes were badly stained and torn, and he looked to be favoring his right shoulder. There was a scorch mark along his

side where he'd been clipped by a blaster bolt. "Just—" He cracked open one eyelid. "Let me catch my breath."

Anakin *never* admitted exhaustion. Concerned, Obi-Wan stared at him. *I don't think he's been this pushed since Maridun.* "Yes. All right. A few minutes. But then we *must* go."

A Jedi was taught from earliest childhood that the Force was to be used but never abused. And that used judiciously it would grant a feeling of well-being. Of buoyant energy. That it would replenish and nourish and gently nurture.

Of course, the key word is judiciously. Anakin and I, on the other hand ...

He felt like he was ripping apart, in slow motion. The Force was never meant to be used the way they'd been using it these past few days. These past months. Ever since the war began, in fact.

Bail's right. We're flesh and blood, not machines. We can't keep doing this. One day the price will be simply too high to pay.

"Hey," said Anakin. "You all right?"

Obi-Wan straightened his spine, wincing. "Truthfully? I've been better. Anakin ..."

"Yeah, I know," said Anakin, resigned. "We've got to go." He pulled up his knees. "*Stang*. My bruises have bruises."

"As have mine," Obi-Wan said, allowing sympathy to show. "But we'll feel better once we're moving again."

"Yeah ..." Anakin looked at him. "So who was it exactly nicknamed you the Negotiator? Because from where I'm lying you couldn't sell water to a man dying of thirst."

He smiled. "Ouch."

"Sorry," Anakin muttered. "But right now the only thing that would make me feel better is—"

"What?"

“Lok Durd’s head on a plate.”

Was it his imagination or had Anakin meant to say something different? It was hard to tell; he’d covered his eyes with his forearm.

“We will get him, Anakin,” he said quietly. “General Durd’s days are numbered.”

“Everyone’s days are numbered, Obi-Wan,” Anakin retorted. “Not even Yoda’s going to live forever. The point is, we blew it. *I* blew it. I trusted Bant’ena—I pushed you into trusting her, too—and now look where we are.” Sitting up, he rubbed his hand over his face. “We should’ve taken out the lab while we had the chance. Blown that blasted bioweapon to smoke and debris.”

It hurt to hear him this disillusioned and full of self-blame. “Don’t be so hard on yourself, Anakin. You followed your feelings. You argued for what you thought was best. That’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“No?” Anakin’s eyes were bloodshot with weariness and strain. “Obi-Wan, trusting that woman nearly got us killed. You were right. She reminded me of my mother and I let that blind me. I’m sorry.”

Anakin was a proud young man who hated to admit fault. But the point was he *did* admit it. Maybe not straightaway—*often* not straightaway—but still ...

Late is always better than never.

He shrugged. “It doesn’t matter now. What matters is that this mission isn’t over. If we act swiftly, I believe we can still thwart Durd before he can use that weapon. There’s even a chance we can recapture him.”

Eyebrows raised, Anakin looked around them. They really were in the middle of nowhere. No birdsong. No speeders. No groundcars. No sense of even the most rudimentary, partially sentient life nearby. The silence was absolute. Only on the farthest edge of awareness, a whispered hint of the village they’d been trying to reach. They had no food, no water, no communications, no

transport. No weapons, beside their lightsabers. No allies. No backup of any kind.

“Yes. Well,” he added. “I didn’t say it would be *easy*.”

Anakin pulled a face. “No kidding.” Then he fumbled to his feet and looked down. “Obi-Wan, we’re in so much trouble.”

“I know.”

“But a solution is bound to present itself? Maybe. Except one of these days that’s just not going to happen.” Anakin held out his hand. “You do know that, right?”

Obi-Wan wrapped his skinned fingers around Anakin’s wrist and levered himself off the ground. “Yes. But it won’t be today.”

For the briefest moment Anakin wasn’t General Skywalker, the Chosen One, scourge of the Separatists and hero of the Republic. He was instead the small boy who’d looked for reassurance from a stranger on the night of Qui-Gon’s funeral.

“Promise?”

Obi-Wan patted his former apprentice’s undamaged shoulder. “Promise. Now let’s go.”

KEEPING UP A STEADY PACE, eventually they came to the end of barren, uncultivated countryside and discovered a ferrocrete road, narrow but well maintained. No traffic in either direction. The Force prompted them to turn left, so they turned left and kept walking. The almost treeless landscape was sere, its sparse vegetation crinkled brown and thirsty. The intel provided by Special Ops Brigade Agent Varrak had mentioned drought, and here was the proof. Once these had been crop fields, but no crops grew here now. Scatterings of bleached bones and strips of desiccated hide suggested farm animals long since perished. Hinted at a prosperity lost, perhaps forever. Especially if Lanteeb could not be freed from Dooku. From the Sith.

An hour passed. Another. And another. The sun crawled higher in the pale and cloudless sky, and the flat land around them gradually began to fall and rise in frozen ripples. Unnervingly aware of their ongoing danger, they told and retold their false life stories and quizzed each other on them until their recitations were flawless. They had to be. Weary as they were, they might have misread the Force. There could be a Separatist presence in the village, and if that was the case their first mistake would likely be their last.

“All right,” Obi-Wan said eventually. “Enough. I doubt we’ll forget our new histories in a hurry.”

“No,” Anakin agreed. “I’m pretty sure I’ll be dreaming about Teeb Markl when I’m ninety.”

Let me reach ninety and I’ll happily dream about him, too. “That’s the general idea.”

Skirting the small beginnings of a pothole in the ferrocrete road, Anakin squinted into the middle distance. “*Stang*. I thought that might be a mirage, but it’s not, is it?”

Obi-Wan looked. “No. Those are hills.”

One hand clutched behind his head, Anakin jiggled in frustration. “Great. We’ve been walking for hours and what—now we have to go *mountain climbing*?”

“Pimple climbing’s more like it,” he said, staring at him. “D’you know, I’m pleased we left Ahsoka behind. All this complaining is not what *I’d* call setting a good example. And if Rex could hear you ...”

Disgruntled, Anakin shut up and they kept on walking. Cultivating blisters. Ignoring their thirst and hunger and pain. Sliding in and out of the Force, they remained exhaustedly alert for the first signs of danger. The road they traveled remained empty of traffic, and so far they’d seen no sign of droid activity. No trundle carts, no mobile security cams, and certainly no battle units. But that could change at any moment, especially if the village they headed toward held some value for the Separatists. An unarmed civilian population

could be effectively controlled by only a handful of armed droids. They'd seen that on Naboo, and on more than a dozen even larger planets since the outbreak of war.

After a while Anakin slowed to a halt. "You feel that? I think the village is just on the other side of your pimple."

Halted beside him, Obi-Wan nodded. The village was only a few clicks distant now. Through the Force he could read its busy, sentient life. No stark fear or misery, no overwhelming sense of immediate danger or dread, just a dull, muffling sadness shot through with brighter threads of anxiety.

"Doesn't mean we're out of trouble, though," Anakin added, glancing sideways. "With our luck the place'll be lousy with Sep droids. If it is, how do you want to handle them?"

"Carefully," he replied. "But I'm sure if we stick to our story, they'll have no reason to suspect anything."

"Unless they've been beamed a security alert."

And you call me a pessimist? He wiped his torn and filthy sleeve over his sweaty face. "Unlikely. You said it yourself, Anakin—the last thing Durd wants is for Dooku to find out we evaded capture."

Sighing, Anakin pressed his fists into the small of his back. "Let's hope so, because neither of us is in any shape for another fight."

"If we keep our wits about us there'll be no need for fighting," he retorted. "We're humble laborers returned to our home planet after three long years in the galactic wilderness, remember? With the emphasis on *humble*."

"Yeah, yeah," Anakin muttered. Then he looked at the empty, undulating countryside surrounding them. "It doesn't make sense. Why would anyone build a village way out here? You'd find more life in the Jundland Wastes. At least the wastes have got herds of wild banthas. But there's nothing out here except dead trees and dead grass."

“I don’t know,” Obi-Wan said wearily.

Anakin flicked him an irritated look. “You’re not curious?”

Oh, for pity’s sake ... “Yes, Anakin, of course I’m curious, but I don’t have the energy to worry about it now. So I’m not *going* to worry about it now—if that’s all right with you, of course!”

After that, they walked in silence.

Some three clicks later they reached the foot of the hills. Resigned, they put their heads down and started for the top, breathing labored, sweat trickling, their bruised muscles shrieking, every cut and scrape and blaster burn awake. Drawing on the Force to help them, feeling it flow like fire through their veins, they pushed through the pain and didn’t stop walking until they reached the blunt peak.

Below them, men and women toiled beneath the unclouded sun—and the village’s purpose became apparent.

“That’s a damotite mine,” Anakin said, pointing to a heavily shielded shaft-and-sinkhole arrangement on its far right outskirts. “Isn’t it?”

It was, if the intel Bant’ena Fhernan had collected was accurate. Which would explain the village’s isolation. Unrefined damotite’s toxicity virtually demanded that no other settlements be established within poisoning range.

Obi-Wan sighed. “I’ve been very slow. I should’ve realized we’d find a mine out here.”

“Yeah, right,” said Anakin. “You’re a simpleton, Obi-Wan. I’ve always thought that. I just didn’t want to say.”

Ha ha. Shading his eyes, he stared down at the village. No Separatists that he could see, at least not in the open. A few old groundcars, some of them traveling to and from the mine. A handful of antigrav floaters. A huddle of cottages on the far left side of the settlement. What looked like a small factory placed between the rest

of the village and the mine. Pale smoke drifted from a series of flat chimneys. Was that where they refined the raw damotite before transport? Probably. Beside the factory stood some kind of warehouse. There was a small, unsophisticated power plant and an irrigation system. Some crops; the two planted fields splashed bright greens and yellows and reds against the drab brown of everywhere else. A few domestic animals grazed another splash of green. Other buildings lined three sides of what looked like a central communal gathering area. There were even some children, playing with a ball. And unless he was mistaken, no battle droids ...

“Is it safe?” said Anakin, suddenly uncertain. “I think it’s safe. Does it feel safe to you?”

“Yes. Now come on. We need to get out of the open.”

So tired by this time they were close to staggering, they picked their way down the back side of the hill, making sure to stay close to the narrow road’s crumbling edge, just in case a vehicle caught them from behind. Stinging eyes fixed on the village, on salvation, they used every Jedi trick they knew to stay on their feet.

They were well beyond the village’s boundary, unchallenged, past the mine and the refinery and nearing the village’s heart, when the playing children saw them and ran shouting for a grown-up. Soon after that an antigrav floater came toward them along the main street, guided by a tall, thin woman in a baggy brown tunic and trousers and synthafibe boots. Most of her gray hair was covered in a faded red scarf. She halted the floater in front of them, blocking the way.

Watchful, suspicious, a length of old pipe in one hand, she slowly looked them up and down. “What do you want?”

Obi-Wan took a deep breath. *Humble, humble. Don’t alarm her.* “Help,” he said, pitching his voice a little high. “Please, Teeba? My cousin and I need your help.”

TWO



COUNT DOOKU STIRRED OUT OF UNEASY SLEEP, ONE DARK thought reverberating in his mind, in his bones, and through his gently surging blood.

Something is wrong.

He sat up. The shielded window in his cruiser's stateroom was uncurtained. Starlight leavened the shadows and picked out the flecks of gold thread in his sumptuous bedcover. Holding out his hand, he admired the silvery wash across his skin. Such a simple, elegant beauty.

Then he commed the bridge. "Why are we at sublight?"

"My lord Count, an irregularity was detected in the hyperdrive conversion chamber. It is being addressed now."

"Address it quickly," he said, smiling at the subtle play of light and dark between his fingers. "Or I will be displeased."

"Yes, my lord Count."

The bridge officer's fear warmed him. Complacency in one's servants was anathema. And then, disconnecting from the comm board, he frowned. So was it this trouble with the hyperdrive that had stirred him from sleep? Or was some other mischief brewing? He closed his eyes to the starlight and let his superbly honed senses unfurl.

Power hummed subliminally through the cruiser's durasteel skeleton as it sailed the astral winds of the galaxy's Mid Rim Territories. Touched with melancholy, he sighed. This was his life

now: no permanent home, no civilized planet to call his own. Coruscant denied him. Well, at least for now. Until the pustuled boil that was the Jedi Order had been lanced and drained and the Republic once and for all set free of the hypocritical tyranny that Yoda and his minions represented ... and perpetuated.

Only the clarity of the Sith can save us.

But until that clarity prevailed he was perforce a vagabond, cruelly destined to wander the stars. Chained to the likes of General Grievous and Nute Gunray and the other stunted slime of the Separatist Alliance, every last one of them venal and greedy and corrupt to the core. Breathing the same air as such creatures made him ill. Only because Lord Sidious commanded it could he stomach the task. Only his dreams of the day he would see them slaughtered eased the pain of dealing with them.

“Fret not,” his exacting Master had told him. “They serve a purpose, and must live until that purpose is served. You may trust me implicitly, Tyranus—when they are no longer useful I shall see them cut down.”

Cold comfort, perhaps, but comfort nonetheless. Still, even so—

Something is wrong.

Wrong, and elusive. Dooku withdrew himself from the Force and opened his eyes. The chrono on his nightstand glowed dim blue. A breath past midnight, ship time. He hadn't been asleep for long. Clad luxuriously in silk, he slid from the bed and crossed to the shielded window. Where were they, exactly? He read the starry void beyond the transparisteel with careless ease, his knowledge of the Republic intimate and instant. Ah, yes. Currently his cruiser was skirting Kothlis, where the natives scrambled like desperate ants to prepare themselves in case of another Separatist attack.

Sad though it was that Grievous had failed to take the Bothan colony and its spynet facility, still ... Palpatine had yet again turned the edge of defeat into a thin blade of victory. A brilliant stroke indeed, to ensure that vital Republic resources were diverted to the planet's protection. Played out properly the tactic would see the

faltering Republic's Grand Army sorely weakened in the ongoing Outer Rim Sieges. And with Mace Windu captive to both Kothlis and Bothawui panic, even the Jedi Council had been weakened. Yoda was weakened, for he relied upon Windu's advice and staunch presence. And a weakened Yoda was a very good thing.

So why then am I certain that something is wrong?

Letting his eyes drift closed again, he sought afresh within the Force for a clue to his disquiet. Within the true Force, the Force of power and majesty. The Jedi called it *the dark side*, like frightened children cowering under their beds, but of course it was no such thing.

They are merely blinded by the power. Too weak to wield it, or even comprehend.

And so to this brewing mischief. Was it connected to his current mission? His star cruiser *Vanquisher* was on its way to Umgul, in the Darglum system. With the costs of war escalating daily, Palpatine had just announced a new raft of tax increases to help defray ruinous military expenses. Umgul, with its high tourist turnover, was ripe for plucking—and the pleasure planet's government was not amused. Was so unamused, in fact, that it had reached out to Count Dooku, the political firebrand, the champion of systems' rights, the lambaster of Republic greed, and requested an urgent meeting.

Darth Tyranus had been only too happy to oblige.

But did his disquiet mean the Umgul Cabinet was now wavering in its intent to abandon the Republic and side with the Separatist Alliance? He sincerely hoped not. For the loss of hedonistic Umgul, with its famous racetracks and casinos and pleasure palaces and luxury resorts and decadent spas, would deeply distress the Republic's idle wealthy ... and many other citizens who scraped and saved and bartered their way to a once-in-a-lifetime encounter with unbridled luxury. And their distress would echo in the Senate chamber, rousing more protests, more disarray, more discord.

HoloNet News and Entertainment would faithfully report the unrest, and its ripples would spread ... and spread ... and spread.

If Umgul is indeed wavering ...

He waited for the Force to show him if that was the case, uneasily aware that he must tread lightly and not accept what he was shown on blind faith alone. With so much turmoil in the galaxy, even this far out in the Mid Rim, the Force's eddies were not always reliable. Not even his vast skill and experience could guarantee a clear answer. It was the price he and Sidious paid for stirring the galaxy to war.

But no, the source of his disquiet wasn't Umgul. Could it be Grievous? His loathsome general was slaughtering clones above Eriadu. The recent reports stated it was going quite nicely. No, the trouble wasn't Grievous. Where else could there be mischief, then? What other little projects did he have on the boil?

Lanteeb.

Of course. Lanteeb ... and General Lok Durd. The Neimoidian scientist set his teeth on edge and his skin to crawling. All Neimoidians did, of course, but Durd was the worst. More repellent even than Gunray, and that was quite a feat. At their last meeting, some three days ago, Durd had sworn to him on bended knees that the bioweapon was nearly ready. One last small irregularity to be ironed out. "*A week, a week at most, my lord Count, and I promise you will have it. One week.*" He'd sensed no deception in Durd's desperate promise. Could he have been mistaken? Could he have been deceived?

The thought sent a shiver through him. His Master wanted that weapon completed. Further delay would displease him. And no man in his right mind displeased the Sith Lord Darth Sidious.

Durd, if you have lied to me I shall with my own hands peel you in thin strips and force you to feast on your own slimy hide.

So he bent his thoughts toward Lanteeb, toward Lok Durd and the Corellian scientist, Dr. Fhernan, the Neimoidian's unwilling accomplice. Pushed hard through the roiling Force so he might discover the truth.

And there—there—yes—lay the source of his unease. Lanteeb and Lok Durd. The fear was faint but unmistakable. A different note, a different *taste*, than the ambient fear of the nothing little planet's irrelevant populace.

Something is wrong.

Lok Durd's bioweapon was the lynchpin in an important tactical dance. If the Neimoidian had somehow bungled his crucial task ...

In addition to *Vanquisher's* standard comm equipment, he of course had his own private holo unit for discreet conversations. Tight with ruthlessly restrained anger, Dooku fetched the unit out of hiding, placed it on his stateroom's table, and commed the Neimoidian.

Durd took too long to answer.

"My lord Count!" the scum cried, at last. *"An honor. Such an honor. How can I be of service today?"*

The Neimoidian wasn't easy to read. Not only because of the vast distance separating them, or because reading anyone via hologram was a distinct challenge in itself, but because his duplicitous species as a whole was a slippery challenge—even for a Sith.

"What progress have you made with the Project, General? By my reckoning you should be four days closer to success. Are you?"

Durd's nictitating membranes flicked across his ugly eyes. *"Closer, my lord Count? Yes, we are certainly closer. Yes, indeed, my lord. Success is within our grasp."*

Dooku smiled, being sure to display all his teeth. *"And how many fingers would you say you have laid firmly upon it, General?"*

“Fingers, my lord Count? I’m not sure I—that’s to say—human idioms, my lord, not always easy to—”

“General Durd!” He let the dark side flare around him. “I give you fair warning—I am not to be trifled with. You are being handsomely paid for the privilege of serving the Separatist Alliance. And even though you have failed us once we have forgiven you. Are you under the impression that a second failure will meet with an equivalent leniency? For if you are ...” He shook his head. “Alas. You labor under a serious misapprehension. Do you understand me, General? Or do my idioms continue to confuse?”

“No, my lord Count,” said the Neimoidian faintly. *“I understand perfectly.”*

“Excellent. Then I can expect to hear from you no later than four days hence, with good news about the completion of your Project?”

“Yes, my lord Count,” said Durd. He was close to choking. *“Four days, my lord. I will comm you in four days.”*

A distinct stench of fear bubbled through the dark side. Dooku smoothed his beard, eyes narrowed. “What aren’t you telling me, Durd? *The truth.* Or I swear you will feel *my* fingers closing hard upon the back of your neck.”

The Neimoidian wrung his plump, clammy hands. *“It’s—it’s nothing, my lord Count. I swear. The woman was being troublesome. The scientist. Doctor Fhernan. I had to punish her. Not so that she cannot work, of course not, but severely enough so she mended her ways.”*

Without the scientist his plan was ruined. If Durd had misjudged the situation ... “Punish her how, General?”

“I took action against a hostage, my lord. She understands now, and is perfectly obedient.”

Took action meant “killed.” Grudgingly Dooku appreciated the gesture. “You’re quite certain she will give you no further trouble?”

“Absolutely, my lord Count,” said Durd, eagerly nodding. “She is as penitent as can be. You will have your weapon, sir. The Separatist Alliance will prevail.”

He could still sense Durd’s fear, but pride and arrogance and truth mingled with it. The Neimoidian believed his own claim, that much was clear.

“And the other hostages? They remain secure?”

“They are secure, my lord Count. Doctor Fhernan is bound tight to my will.”

“Then I am satisfied,” he said. “For now. Return to your work, General. I look forward to your final report.”

He broke the transmission in the midst of Durd’s incoherently blathered promises. And as he disconnected the signal he felt a leap in *Vanquisher’s* engines. A heartbeat later the stars beyond his stateroom’s window shivered and streaked as the cruiser made its jump to hyperspace.

Disquiet allayed, Dooku returned to his bed. Sleep claimed him swiftly. As the warmth of the dark side closed over his head, he felt himself smile.

Ah, sweet victory. Close enough now to kiss.

SCANT SECONDS AFTER Count Dooku’s flickering image vanished from the holopad, Lok Durd vomited down the front of his tunic.

I lied to Count Dooku. I lied to Count Dooku. Hive Mother protect me, I lied to—

He vomited again. Praise to all good things in the hive that he was alone. He’d lied to the leader of the Separatist Alliance, a man who—by all accounts both confirmed and rumored only—could kill with a look, or the snap of his fingers. Possibly by merely raising an eyebrow.

I lied to Count Dooku. And ... I think he believed me.

Horror and relief coursed through his veins. If he'd been human, surely a river of sweat would be pouring down his skin. How he'd managed to dupe Dooku he didn't know, but he wasn't inclined to question the miracle. No. He'd accept it and build on it, to salvage the ruins of his life.

The Jedi escaped. Every hostage but one rescued. All I have left is that barve of a woman. And if she so much as suspects that the rest of her precious family and friends are safe ...

There was no one he could trust with this. Barev, Colonel Argat's replacement, was typical human scum. And as if that weren't bad enough, the liaison officer answered to the nondroid wing of the Separatist military machine, not to him. Barev and the others called him *General* Durd, but he wasn't really one of them. That was a courtesy title, a show of respect he'd had to fight for. Humans were such bigots. Count Dooku was a bigot, though no sentient who wanted to live was fool enough to say so to the man's face.

Durd whimpered. Mired to his armpits in trouble, staring at calamity everywhere he turned, there was only one creature he could trust. And it wasn't even a creature, it was a droid. Built to his most careful specifications, and equipped with unique sensor and infrared programming that made it impossible for anyone to give the machine orders in his stead.

KD-77 was the closest thing he had to a friend.

His office in his now compromised compound was equipped with a small refresher. Durd washed his face and rinsed his mouth, forcing the panic of the last few hours to subside. True, his droid army had failed to kill or capture the Jedi-aiding Dr. Fhernan—but hope was not entirely lost. There were only two of them, after all. The groundcar they'd managed to escape in wouldn't get them far. And beyond Lantibba City's barely civilized limits lay nothing but open countryside and scattered villages. No spaceworthy craft. No comm equipment. The villagers of Lanteeb were little better than

their meat animals. Even with the groundcar's transponder disabled it was only a matter of time before the Jedi were found.

Found and killed, their involvement here obscured forever. They defeated me once. They will never defeat me again.

A day at the most, surely, it would take him to eliminate his fleeing enemies. Count Dooku would never know how close the Project had come to disaster. He had everything under control ...

"Droid!" he said, coming out of the refresher. "Droid, I have orders for you."

KD-77 stood patiently in the corner. At the sound of Durd's voice, its photoreceptors lit up. "Sir."

"This is a priority task," he said, dabbing a dampened hand-cloth at the sticky, half-dried vomit down the front of his tunic. "Doctor Fhernan must believe that the hostages are still hostages. I want credible holoimagery created to convince her. Several weeks' worth. Understood?"

"Sir," said the droid. "Consider it done."

What else? What else? Oh, yes. Of course. Barev. The trouble was that he hardly knew the man. Argat he'd had time to psychologically dissect and learn how to manipulate. But Colonel Barev had only just arrived. They'd barely been introduced.

But he is human, and humans are greedy and driven by fear. They want to live for as long as they can. I can use that.

He sent for Colonel Argat's replacement.

"A BAD BUSINESS, this, General," said Barev.

He was short even for a human. Though not yet middle-aged, most of his reddish hair was gone. What remained had been shaved close to his pitifully vulnerable skull. His eyes were blue and small. His crooked teeth stuck out. His skin was sickeningly pale and covered in—what did the humans call them? Oh, yes. *Freckles*. At

least his voice was pleasantly deep. Too many humans squeaked, like rodents.

“Bad?” Durd nodded. “Yes. Very bad. Your men at the spaceport have failed me, Colonel.”

Colonel Barev’s eyes narrowed almost shut. *Ha*. “I’m sorry, General? Failed you?”

Yes. Yes. Bluster. Humans did not do well with bluster. And they did not like it when their safety was threatened.

“Are you deaf, Colonel?” he demanded. “Yes. *Failed me*. Did the Jedi appear out of thin air? No. They came here in a ship. They passed preliminary security checks and docked at the spaceport. And then your men gave them clearance into the city. Your men endangered my vital Project, Colonel Barev.”

“Strictly speaking,” said Barev slowly, “prior to my arrival Colonel Argat was responsible for any security lapses.” A small muscle beside his right eye spasmed. “The fault is his.”

With a small effort Durd smothered his delight. *Yes, yes, Barev, I have you now*. Self-preservation was a great motivator.

“A mere technicality, Colonel. Argat is dead. I executed him myself, with Count Dooku’s blessing. *You* are in charge now. Therefore *you* are responsible.”

“Dead?” Barev’s throat convulsed in a swallow. “It was my understanding Argat had been recalled.”

Now he let himself smile. “Yes. That’s right. Recalled to his deity— isn’t that how you humans put it?”

Instead of answering, Barev turned and walked to the office window. Beyond it the secured compound enclosure was crowded with vigilantly patrolling battle droids.

“Things could be worse,” said Barev, his hands loosely clasped behind his narrow back. “Doctor Fhernan is uncompromised. The

Project is secure. As for the Jedi ... well, really, General Durd—how much damage can two men do?”

He felt his lips thin in a snarl. “You are a fool if you underestimate them, Colonel. I want them found, is that clear? I cannot have my Project further disrupted. Count Dooku is waiting, and he is not a patient man.”

Colonel Barev’s shoulders tightened. “You needn’t concern yourself, General—or involve Count Dooku. The Jedi are on borrowed time.”

“How do you intend to find them?”

Barev turned away from the window. “Scout droids are already deployed. As soon as the Jedi are sighted and their exact location is calibrated they will be overwhelmed by our forces.”

It seemed a sound enough plan. “Don’t send humans against them,” Durd said, raising a warning finger. “Droids only. Jedi can’t sense droids. You must exploit their weaknesses. They don’t have many, so you can’t afford to miss even one.”

Barev’s mouth pinched at the corners. “General, I am an experienced soldier. Your advice is—appreciated—but unnecessary, I assure you.”

A strong sense of self-preservation *and* pride. This Barev would be easy to control. “You’re offended, Colonel?” he said, feigning regret. “I’m sorry. That wasn’t my intent. I’m merely trying to save you from Count Dooku’s wrath. If he ordered me to kill you, I’d be obliged to obey. And after Colonel Argat ...” He pretended to shiver. “Well. It would be a great pity.”

Eyes watchful and frightened, Colonel Barev snapped to attention. “Do not concern yourself about the Jedi, General Durd. They are dealt with. Now, is there anything else I can do for you?”

“Indeed there is, Colonel,” he said, lacing his fingers over his middle. “Thanks to—” He smiled. “—Colonel Argat, this facility is fatally compromised. For all I know the Jedi are lying low

somewhere close by, intending to return and sabotage my work. And should they elude your forces they might well succeed. I want the stage-two facility prepared for immediate occupation. Doctor Fhernan and I must be able to move in there no later than midday tomorrow.”

“Midday,” said Barev, his voice tight. “Yes, General.”

“And Colonel?” he added, just as Barev reached the office door. “I meant it when I said I didn’t want to be faced with the task of—recalling you. So for both our sakes I think that what has happened on Lanteeb should be kept quiet. We can contain this situation without distressing Count Dooku. Agreed?”

Colonel Barev stared at him in silence. Droid patrols challenging one another’s identities was the only sound for quite some time. And then the human nodded. “Agreed.”

As soon as he was alone again, Durd made his way upstairs to Dr. Fhernan’s criminally generous accommodation. He nearly fell over six droid patrols on the way. Another ten droids guarded the corridor outside the doctor’s room. Five more were stationed inside it.

The woman got off her chair and looked at him with dull hatred as he closed the door behind him. “I want to see the rest of my family and friends,” she said flatly. “I want to know they’re all right.”

If she hated him it was *nothing* to what he felt for her. Striking his prisoner to her knees, Durd heard her sharp grunt of pain and felt warm pleasure blossom.

“Don’t test me, Doctor,” he said, standing over her. “Not after what you’ve done.”

Red human blood trickled from the corner of her mouth. Weak tears filled her eyes. “What happens now?”

He bared his gums at her. “Now we finish our Project. But not here. We leave this facility tomorrow. Pack up the lab.”

“Where are we going?”

“Why should you care?” he said, and kicked her in the ribs. Carefully. Bruises, not breakage. That was the goal. “All you need to know is that the Jedi will never find you. They’ll be dead soon. And if you don’t do exactly what I say, when I say it, they won’t be the only ones.” He nodded at the holodisplay on the table, which was playing a continuous loop of her friend Samsam’s execution. The droids guarding her were under orders to make sure she didn’t touch it, or walk away, or close her eyes. “You understand?”

Her gaze shifted to the little figure in yellow as it plummeted into the lake. “Yes.”

Bending, he captured her ugly human face between his fingers and pressed and pressed until the bones beneath her flesh threatened to give way.

“Good.”

STRUCK SPEECHLESS, Bail Organa stared at the man he’d called his friend for nearly fifteen years.

I must be hearing things. He cannot have said what I think he just said. Because Tryn Netzl might be the walking, talking embodiment of an absentminded professor, but he’s not an idiot.

“I’m sorry,” he said at last. “You’ve done *what?*”

Swathed throat to mid-thigh in his stained and patched lucky blue lab coat, his pale hair pulled back from his predatory face in a braid, Tryn didn’t look up from carefully tipping a small capful of dark blue crystals into a glass beaker.

“Hmm? Oh. I’ve successfully created a sample of the bioweapon.” He nodded at the lab’s glass-fronted safe hutch, a stone’s throw distant at the other end of his bench. “It’s in there.”

And indeed, through the hutch’s security-shielded transparisteel door Bail could see a lidded container three-quarters full of some

greenish, noxious-looking substance. Before he could stop himself he'd taken an alarmed sideways step.

"Tryn—"

Surprised, Tryn finally looked at him. "What?"

Am I slipping? Did I not make myself clear? "You *created* the filthy stuff? I thought you were supposed to be finding a way to *kill* it!"

Tryn shrugged. "Can't kill what I don't have, Bail."

Funny. He'd forgotten how pragmatically indifferent his friend could be. *He's a scientist, remember? He worships at the altar of objectivity.* "I know that, but—"

"But what? Bail ..." Tryn put down the glass beaker. "Look. How's this for an idea? I'll refrain from telling you how to get legislation passed in the Senate and you can hold off telling me how to be a biochemist. Sound fair?"

Nothing about this current crisis was *fair*. Prickling with unease, Bail started to pace around the impressive Jedi Temple laboratory Yoda had offered to his friend for as long as it was needed.

"Shelve the flippancy, Doctor Netzl," he snapped. "I'm not in the mood. I've just spent half a day cooped up with the most self-interested, self-righteous, self-*everythinged* senators it has ever been my misfortune to know. I'm hungry, I'm tired, and if I have to hear *one more piece* of bad news I'm going to—"

"This isn't bad news, Bail," said Tryn, watching him closely. "It's good news. The toxin's formula is proven. I've got a solid place to start from now."

"Proven?" Halting on the far side of the lab, Bail felt his belly turn over in a queasy roll. "You mean you've tested it? Here?" *What was he thinking?* "Tryn, we already know the filthy stuff works!"

"No, we were *told* it works. Now we have firsthand proof. There's a difference."

“You *tested* it.” Pacing again, he fought the furious urge to smash something. “Tryn, this is the *Jedi Temple*. Up there—” He jabbed a pointed finger at the ceiling. “—is the Jedi Council. You *cannot* endanger them by—”

“Hey!” Now it was Tryn’s turn to snap with temper. “Don’t tell me what I can and can’t do in my own lab. This place is the best facility I’ve ever worked in. Trust me, I’m the only sentient at risk.”

Which was simply one more reason for him to feel sick. “I don’t care how secure this lab is, what you’re doing is too dangerous.”

Tryn stared at him. “That’s not your call.”

“Excuse me, but I think it is. As head of the Republic’s Security Committee I—”

“Bail, all due respect, but you don’t know what you’re talking about,” Tryn said. “I did what I had to do, with Master Yoda’s full knowledge and approval. And now that I know this bioweapon inside out I can get to work on creating an antidote. Something broad enough to cross the species barrier and bind up the active toxins while they’re still in a victim’s bloodstream.”

That brought Bail up short. “You mean that?” he said, his heart pounding his ribs. “You can really do this?”

“Well—I’m not making any promises,” Tryn said, pulling a face. “But I wouldn’t have left my students halfway through the semester if I didn’t think I could help.”

“Of course you wouldn’t. I’m not suggesting—you’re brilliant, I didn’t mean to—” Tangled, Bail stopped talking and started pacing again. A tension headache was brewing behind his tired eyes. “Sorry. Like I said, it’s been a long day and it’s not over yet.”

Tryn came around to the front of his bench and hitched himself onto it. His bright orange trousers rode up his skinny ankles, revealing mismatched socks of fluorescent green and pink. His lab clogs were crimson. So were his eyes. Well. Today they were

crimson. Yesterday they'd been violet. Tomorrow, who knew? Tryn was a man of changeable disposition.

"Bail?" he said, gentle now, his temper abandoned. "I've never heard you sound this scared. What aren't you telling me? What's happened now?"

Nothing had happened, and that was the problem. There'd been no word from Obi-Wan or Anakin since they alerted Yoda that they were going back to Lok Durd's compound. And in this situation no news was *not* good news. No news was very *bad*.

"You don't have to say," Tryn added. "But as it stands, I'm the next best thing you've got to a captive audience."

Bail hesitated. Tryn Netzl had been Witness at his marriage. Had put him and Breha with the best fertility doctor in the Republic and matched him drink for drink after every one of Breha's five miscarriages. Tryn had let him weep without saying a word when their last hope for a child was exhausted. There was nothing he could not entrust to this man.

But I need him focused. So pull yourself together, Organa. If he's worried about you, he can't do his job. And if he can't do his job ...

"You're right, I am worried about something," he said, because he would never lie to Tryn. "But it'll keep. What can you tell me about this bioweapon?"

Tryn frowned. "It makes me ashamed I was ever proud to call Bant'ena Fhernan a colleague."

There was a second bench in the lab, piled high with flimsies and hard-copy biochemistry texts and at least a score of datareaders. Bail leaned one hip against it and folded his arms.

"She's under duress, Tryn."

"I don't care. What she's created is a perversion of science. She's betrayed herself and her calling."

“There are those who say every weapon created is a perversion of science,” he pointed out. “And that using those weapons is a betrayal of life. I seem to recall *you* making a few heated points in favor of that argument, once or twice.”

Tryn scowled. “I don’t like war. I don’t like killing.”

“I don’t either,” he said, after a moment. “But since we last sat down face-to-face, my friend, I’ve killed. It was in self-defense, and in defense of others, but even so ...” Remembering the desperate battle on that secret space station, a confrontation he often relived in his dreams, Bail shook his head. “I can’t even tell you how many. There wasn’t time to stop and count. And while I’m coming clean, I suppose I should also confess that I voted for the creation of the Republic’s clone army—now, that’s science taken to extraordinary lengths—and two days ago I approved the diversion of funds from a refugee crisis program to the discretionary account used to make up the shortfall in payments for clone replacements.”

“I don’t—I can’t see—” Tryn wrapped his long braid around his fingers and pulled hard, a familiar nervous habit. “*Stang*, Bail. Why would you tell me that?”

“I guess because ...” He sighed. “How do we know what we’d do if we were forced to watch someone we loved *die* because we didn’t do as we were told?”

Tryn stared at the floor, uncomfortable. “I’d like to think I’d have the guts to stay strong, no matter the pressure—or the punishment.”

“Yes, well, we’d all like to think that,” he said drily. “But in these past months I’ve learned a *lot* of things, Tryn. Most of them unpleasant.”

“Yeah, I’m getting that,” Tryn said, his dark red eyes somber. He looked around the magnificently equipped lab. “I mean, you and the Jedi? Brand-new best friends? Have to tell you, Bail, I didn’t see that coming.”

“Neither did I,” he admitted. “Oh, and I was right, by the way. The Jedi aren’t always comfortable but you can trust them. And I promise you that without them our Republic would be in tatters by now. As it is, even *with* them—” Abruptly overwhelmed, Bail dragged a hand down his face. “Things are bad, Tryn. With no way of knowing where or when the Seps will strike, if we don’t have a reliable antidote to this bioweapon then they’ll win. And that means the end of the Republic. So I need you to make this happen.”

“No, Bail!” Tryn protested. “I *told* you, I can’t promise you anything. I might despise Bant’ena Fhernan for a gutless coward but she’s still a genius. This—this *thing* she’s invented—this monstrosity of a weapon—”

His friend’s abrupt distress was worrying. “Tryn, you can do this. You’re the best biochemist I know.”

Tryn glowered at him. “You’re a *nidziga*, Organa. I’m the only biochemist you know.”

Bail tried to smile but failed, abysmally. “Tryn. Seriously. Whatever you need, no matter what it costs. Tell me and I’ll get it for you. No questions asked.”

“You’ve changed,” Tryn said after a taut silence. “I can see it now.”

As if I didn’t know that. “Not for the worse, I hope.”

Tryn bit the end of his braid: another old, familiar habit. The one he turned to when he was particularly upset. “I hope so, too.”

“I have to go,” Bail said, glancing at his wrist chrono. “There’s a late Senate session tonight that I need to prepare for.”

“Look,” Tryn said, hunched inside his lucky blue lab coat. “I’ll do my best for you, Bail. If the work needs fresh blood, I’ll even open my own veins. But you need to tell the little green guy and whoever else you answer to—this might not happen. You have to understand that. You have to prepare.”

For what? Annihilation? Sickened, Bail nodded. “I will. But I believe in you, Tryn. I believe you can *make* it happen.”

Tryn rapped his knuckles on the bench once, and got back to work.

THREE



DESPITE THE LATE HOUR AND HIS CONTINUING OBLIGATIONS, Bail didn't leave the Temple for the Senate straightaway. Instead he made the long and convoluted journey from its lowest levels up to the giddy heights of the Jedi Council Chamber, where Yoda had arranged to meet with him.

"I take it there's still no word, Master?"

Standing before the panoramic window, watching a distant, impressive Republic Cruiser heading for the GAR docks, Yoda shook his head. "Correct you are, Senator."

"And what does that mean?"

Yoda glanced over his shoulder. "Delayed they have been. Dead they are not."

Not dead ... not dead ... Bail swallowed. "You're sure?"

"Clouded is the Force with dark side menace, but know that much I do. Obi-Wan and Anakin live."

It was odd, how relief could be as sickening as fear. "And when you say delayed?"

Supported by his spindly gimer stick, Yoda turned from the window and began an aimless wandering of his Council aerie. "The answers that you seek, Senator, give you I cannot." The gimer stick rapped the Chamber's beautifully parqueted floor once, with sharp emphasis. "Against Obi-Wan and Anakin going to Lanteeb I was. Spies and agents the Jedi are not. A task for your people this mission was."

He was being rebuked—and didn't much care for it. "Then why did you approve their involvement?"

"Know why you do," said Yoda, ears low, eyes hooded.

Because I asked a friend for help. And that friend asked you to let him help me.

But he wasn't about to let guilt cripple him. There was way too much at stake for that. "We can point fingers later, Master Yoda. Right now we've got another crisis to avert. If Obi-Wan and Anakin are in trouble—"

"Hmmpf," said Yoda, and kept on pacing. "*If?* A Jedi you need not be, Senator, to know that trouble Obi-Wan Kenobi and young Skywalker have likely found."

Clasping his hands behind his back, Bail braced his shoulders. "In that case, Master Yoda, what do you intend to do about it?"

Yoda stopped his slow pacing. Planting his gimer stick before him, both hands braced, he pulled his chin to his chest. "Nothing."

"Nothing?" Even though he'd been half expecting the answer, still it shocked him. "Master Yoda, we can't abandon them. Forget the fact that we have a personal stake in what happens—for all we know Obi-Wan and Anakin hold the key to defeating Durd and his bioweapon. We *can't*—"

Another emphatic rap of the gimer stick. "We can and we must, Senator. No clue is there to what is happening on Lanteeb. Rush to help them we could, yes, and make things worse. Patient we must be. Trust in Obi-Wan and his former Padawan we must have."

Trust wasn't the issue. This was a matter of honor and obligation. *I got them mixed up in this. I can't leave them twisting alone.* "But—Master Yoda—"

"Senator Organa—" Abruptly, Yoda's severe expression eased. "For your friend fearful you are. Understand that I do. But a survivor Obi-Wan Kenobi is. Know that better than anyone *you* do.

The Force is with him. Your own battles now you should fight. Enemies our Republic has both inside and out. The Senate your arena is. The Jedi you must leave to me.”

He could argue, of course, but there’d be little point. In this place Yoda was the supreme authority. And to rail at him for being a Jedi would only threaten their new and in many ways tentative partnership.

“Of course, Master Yoda,” he said, bowing. “But if the time comes when I can be of assistance—”

“Call upon you I shall, Senator Organa,” said Yoda. “Doubt that do not. A loyal friend to the Jedi you are.”

And as a friend he had to admit his own part in their current dilemma. “I’m very sorry, Master Yoda, that my actions have once again put Obi-Wan in harm’s way. And that this time Anakin’s at risk, too.”

Sighing, his gaze downcast, Yoda traced a small circle on the floor with the tip of his gimer stick. “No. Done that the war has, Senator. If not trouble on Lanteeb then trouble elsewhere would they have found. In these dark times finding trouble every Jedi is.” He looked up. “Your scientist friend. Doctor Netzl. Progress has he made in defeating Lok Durd’s weapon?”

Bail hesitated, then shook his head. “Not yet. But he’s committed to finding an answer.”

“And believe, does he, that an answer can be found?”

I really don’t want to answer that. But he had to. “Master Yoda, he’s hopeful.”

“Hmmm.” Turning, Yoda again stared out across never-sleeping Coruscant. “Hope we must all have. But win a war hope will not. Save lives hope will not. Defeat the Sith hope will not.”

He’d never imagined he’d hear Yoda sounding discouraged. “The Jedi defeated the Sith once. You can do it again.”

“But defeat them we did not, Senator,” Yoda retorted. “Only into hiding did we drive them.”

“And you’ll drive them out again. Out of hiding and to their destruction. They can’t prevail, Master Yoda. Two Sith against so many Jedi? It’s just not possible.”

“Yes. Yes,” said Yoda. He sounded so weary. “Hope that we must.”

Tendrils of fog were creeping through the city’s forest of buildings. Illuminated holo-billboards and beacons and the headlights of passing speeders and other vehicles glowed luminous and strange, rainbow colors muting and smearing. Fog turned Coruscant from brash and beautiful to mysterious.

It’s a wonder it doesn’t collapse under the weight of all the secrets it’s hiding.

He should be getting back to the Senate. He’d arranged to meet Padmé there before the evening’s scheduled preliminary vote regarding a trade dispute between Devaron and Kelada. The rival planets’ spat was threatening to disrupt the Corellian Trade Spine, and the Corellians were in turn threatening punitive action.

Because of course what the Republic really needs right now is more fighting.

He and Padmé had agreed to share their research on the situation. She’d be waiting for him by now. Only ...

“If a question you have, Senator, then ask it you should,” said Yoda. Now he sounded faintly amused. “And answer it I will, if able I am.”

Once, in idle conversation, Obi-Wan had called this ancient Jedi *the most intimidating person I’ve ever known*. He wasn’t wrong. And it wasn’t even deliberate. Yoda simply exuded the kind of innate authority that turned everyone around him into a subordinate. Partly it was the weight of his long life, but mostly it was because he’d accrued not just centuries, but centuries of wisdom. The Jedi

Master hadn't let a minute of his nine-hundred-odd years go to waste.

And though I'm little more than a child compared to him, he seeks out my opinion and sometimes follows my advice.

Every so often, remembering that, Bail found it hard to breathe.

"Yes, Master, I do have a question," he said. "When do you intend to tell the Supreme Chancellor about the bioweapon and the mission to Lanteeb? When are you going to tell him that Obi-Wan and Anakin are in trouble?"

Slowly, Yoda turned. "Your investigation into leaked classified information, Senator. Concluded, is it?"

The Jedi Master knew perfectly well that it wasn't. So far every discreetly pursued avenue of inquiry had run into a dead end. Weeks after beginning the investigation they were no closer to learning who was behind the worrying security breaches in divisions up to and including the Republic's executive branch.

It was but one of the things that kept him from sleeping well at night.

"I appreciate the sensitivity of the situation, Master Yoda, but we can't leave Palpatine in the dark much longer," Bail said. "For one thing I'm answerable to him—and if he learns from another source what's going on he's going to want to know why I didn't brief him."

"If told he is that I requested your silence, no action against you will the Supreme Chancellor take," Yoda said firmly. "Understand he does that precedence the Jedi have in matters like this."

"Your support is always welcome, Master Yoda, I hope you know that—but in this case I'm not certain it would help. Palpatine has to believe he can trust me. The moment I lose his trust I'll lose my position, and at the risk of sounding arrogant, I think it's vital that I stay where I am, doing my job."

“Arrogant you are not, Senator,” said Yoda, with another rap of his gimer stick on the parquetry floor. “Without doubt you are needed.” Sighing heavily, he rubbed his chin. “When heard from Obi-Wan we have—and when told us Doctor Netzl has whether or not an antidote for Durd’s bioweapon he can create—then to Supreme Chancellor Palpatine we will go.”

“And when he demands an explanation for why we didn’t tell him any of this sooner?”

“Remind him we will that closely is he watched by our Republic’s enemies,” said Yoda, his eyes narrowed. “Sense hidden truths, they can, therefore silent we remained on this new threat.”

As explanations went, it sounded plausible. Now if only he thought Palpatine would buy it.

“Even if he does accept our reasoning, he’ll be furious. You do know that?”

Yoda shrugged, supremely indifferent. “Care for his anger, should I, when countless lives we seek to save?”

“No, Master. Of course not.”

“Then care will I not, Senator.” The merest glimmer of a smile. “And neither should you.”

Mostly reassured, Bail took his leave of Yoda and returned to the Senate. Three floors of the enormous complex were given over to courtesy offices for visiting government officials. That was where he found Padmé, and joined her to compare facts and figures for the pre-vote debate.

“Except I’ll be voting by proxy,” she said, passing him her preliminary assessment and taking his to read in return. “Queen Jamillia’s asked me to mediate a dispute between Naboo’s Artisans’ Guild and the Bonadan Silver Sand Consortium. They’ve raised their prices again, and the glassblowers are about ready to declare war.”

Tapping his fingers on her datapad, Bail frowned. “You know, I’m starting to think belligerence is contagious.”

Padmé gave him a brief, halfhearted smile. “And I’m starting to agree with you.”

She was looking tired. The severity of her midnight-blue gown and sleeked-back hair only accentuated her pallor. Shadows darkened the delicate skin beneath her eyes and the hollows of her cheeks. She was fretting herself to an unhealthy slenderness, and there was nothing he could do to help.

Moments after starting to scroll through his datapad of notes she hesitated, then hit the ‘pad’s pause function. “There’s no news?”

“No. I’d have told you if there was.”

“Of course you would,” she said, recoiling. “I’m sorry.”

Instantly contrite, Bail touched his fingers to her arm. “No, *I’m* sorry.”

“They’ll be fine,” she said, all her vulnerability ruthlessly repressed. “They’re gifted, experienced Jedi. They’ll be fine.”

Oh, Padmé. From your lips to the ears of any god or goddess who might be listening. From your lips to their mysterious Force ...

Not long after that she left her proxy vote with him and went to wrestle with the artisans and the Silver Sand Consortium. With his own mind made up, Bail snatched a hasty meal in the busy Senatorial dining room—where he was joined by Mon Mothma, the quietly elegant co-representative for the Bormea sector. Beneath her habitual cool poise she seemed almost agitated.

“Forgive me for disturbing you, Bail. Do you have a moment?”

He didn’t know her well, but what he did know he liked very much. “Of course, Mon. Please, sit.”

She slid into the other chair at his table and folded her slender hands before her. “Umgul,” she said, keeping her voice low. “A whisper’s just reached me that its ruling council is being wooed by

Count Dooku. Now, I realize that strategically the planet has little value, but—”

But as a morale booster for the war-weary? And a potential lightning rod for the increasing unrest over Palpatine’s recent tax hikes? Umgul was way more valuable than he wanted to think about right now.

He pushed his plate aside. “How reliable is your whisper?”

“Reliable enough,” Mon Mothma said somberly. “Look. I don’t mean to tell you your business, Bail. You’re the security expert, not me. Only I’m thinking—”

“What I’m thinking,” he said. “But I can’t see the Chancellor repealing the new taxes. War is expensive, and we need the money. To be honest, I don’t—” A gentle chiming sounded through the dining room: the first of three warnings that the next Senate session was due to begin. “Look—perhaps we can talk about this later? After the vote?”

“I think we should,” Mon Mothma said as she slid out of her chair. “I think if we don’t find a way to keep Umgul from joining the Separatists we’re going to see some very ugly bloodletting.”

Pushing back his own chair, Bail stood. “I agree.”

He and Mon Mothma joined the trickle of colleagues leaving the dining room. “And I’ve got some ideas,” Mon Mothma replied, almost smiling. “But in the meantime, about this ridiculous brawl we’re about to vote on ...”

TIRED OF MOPING around the Temple getting nowhere trying to read the Force, and even more tired of thinking up believable answers to questions she couldn’t answer truthfully, Ahsoka registered an absence with the central database and took herself off to the GAR clone barracks where she was shocked and delighted to find Captain Rex and Sergeant Coric, returned only an hour before from the Kaliida Shoals Medcenter.

“Nobody told me you’d been discharged,” she said, beaming. “Why didn’t anyone tell me you were being discharged?”

Sprawled in Torrent Company’s homebase barracks rec room, wearing black fatigues and a satisfied smile, Rex shrugged one shoulder. “Don’t look at me, little’un. I just go where they point me and start shooting when I see the glow of their photo-receptors.”

On the long low couch beside him, Sergeant Coric snickered. “You got that right.”

The rec room buzzed with a score of comfortable conversations. Over in one corner the 501st’s newest recruit Checkers played turbo-darts with Fireball and Zap from Gold Squadron. Laughter sounded as Checkers overshot the dartboard and buried his turbo-dart up to its fins in the wall.

Rex shook his head. “You know they’ll dock you for the repairs?” he said, lifting his voice above the raucous amusement. “Better give up while you’re ahead.”

“I never give up, sir,” Checkers retorted, turning. There was a new scar on his face, the pink line puckered across his chin, keeping company with the old wound under his eye; either Kaliida Shoal’s bacta didn’t take or he hadn’t been treated in time. His scalp gleamed intermittently bald under the rec room’s bright lights. Since Kothlis he’d shaved it in racing stripes and dyed what was left an eye-searing green. Seeing Ahsoka, he flicked his fingers to his forehead and grinned. “Ma’am.”

She grinned back. “Not ma’am. Ahsoka.”

“Right, right.” He dug in his fatigues’ pocket and pulled out another turbo-dart. “Fancy a round, Ahsoka?”

“In a minute,” she said. “Keep the darts warm for me.”

“So,” said Rex, his gaze lazily intent as she turned her attention back to him. “What’s our General up to?”

It was such a simple question, and yet she couldn't answer it. Not only because of security, but because her throat was suddenly closed tight with fear.

Rex leaned forward. "Little'un?"

"I'm sorry," she said, gulping. "I can't tell you."

He exchanged glances with Coric. "But he's in trouble?"

Mute, she nodded, then realized her hands were clutched tight and sweaty in her lap. Any second now she was going to cry. *Stang.*

"He's been in trouble before," said Coric, trying to sound a lot more confident than he felt. "He'll get out of it. He always does."

"He always *has*," she corrected him. "But this time ..."

"You know where he is?" said Rex, fiercely frowning.

She nodded.

"And you—we—can't go in after him?"

She shook her head.

"*Ever?*" said Coric, taken aback. "Or just not yet?"

"I—I don't know," she whispered. "Please, you can't say anything to anyone. This has to stay between us."

"Don't worry," said Rex, and dragged a hand down his face. "*Stang.*"

Torrent Company was so *cheerful*. It broke her heart to see them laughing, teasing, roughhousing, as though they didn't have a care in the world. Because if they knew what she knew ...

Rex sat back, pretending he wasn't upset. "What have you seen, Ahsoka? What's the Force shown you?"

She was under strict instructions never to discuss how the Force was getting harder and harder to read. She mustn't mention it even to Rex and Coric, whom she trusted with her life. Of course, this

once she didn't have to lie. She hadn't seen anything, though she'd nearly passed out trying.

"All I get is a feeling," she said, keeping her voice low, though there was so much noise in the room. "Like I'm about to be sick, all the time."

"I know that feeling," said Coric, trying to joke. "D'you reckon I could be a Jedi, too?"

Rex stuck an elbow into his ribs. "Some Jedi you'd make. You'd give the other Padawans nightmares."

"Now look what you've done, Captain," said Coric, miming heartstruck sorrow. "You've gone and hurt my tender feelings."

They were trying to cheer her up. Distract her. Distract themselves, too. For all they were hard men, seasoned soldiers, not given to softness or sentimentality of any kind, they adored their general.

Because she couldn't tell them any more, and because she was so very tired of thinking about it, of worrying about Skyguy, Ahsoka changed the subject.

"So are you boys on furlough?"

Rex nodded. "Don't know for how long. Nobody's told us." And they knew better than to ask. "We'll take another day or two of R and R, then we'll get back to training while we wait for the next deployment. But if General Skywalker's not back by then ..."

Ahsoka felt her guts tighten. "I don't know. Nobody tells me anything, either." She nearly added, *And it's not fair*, but caught herself just in time. She had no business whining about *not fair* to these clones.

"Ah well, little'un," said Rex, with his most sardonic grin. "This is the life, isn't it? This is what we signed up for. Hurry up and wait. Long stretches of boredom punctuated by moments of sheer terror."

Leaning forward again, he patted her on the knee. “So I say we play darts. What d’you reckon?”

And there was her heart, breaking all over again for love of him. Such a decent man, he was. She bounced to her feet, determined not to disappoint him.

“I reckon I can take you, Captain Rex.”

“Yeah, well, we’ll see about that,” Rex retorted, a twinkle in his eyes. And then it faded and he was the serious clone captain again. “But little’un—when the time comes? When you and the general need us?” He jerked his thumb at Coric, equally somber by his side. “Just say the word and we’ll be there.”

She had to wait a moment, swallowing hard. “I know you will. And so does he.” She leapt up. “Now come along and get thrashed at darts.”

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING Jedi Master Taria Damsin tracked Ahsoka down in the Temple arboretum, where the grass was cool and moist and the tumbling waterfall filled the warm air with spray and bright sound.

Discreetly inspecting the Jedi Master, Ahsoka thought she seemed perfectly recovered from their wild mission on Corellia. Either Taria was an excellent actress, or her Boratavi syndrome was back under control.

My guess is it’s a bit of both.

“Ahsoka,” said Taria, as cheerful as ever. “I’ve been thinking.”

Unfolding from her final meditation pose—a *flower stem bends and does not break in the wind*—Ahsoka treated the older woman to a grin.

“Thinking? That’s dangerous. Should I be afraid?”

“Cheeky brat,” said Taria. “Now listen. I know you hate that you’re stuck here, waiting for word from Masters Kenobi and Skywalker. There’s nothing worse than being left behind when your

Master's off on a mission that doesn't require a Padawan's presence. And the Force knows that after Corellia my appetite's been whetted for something a little less sedate than research in the library. So what do you say we get a nice little competition going? Something to challenge the senior Padawans that'll challenge us at the same time."

"That sounds intriguing," Ahsoka admitted. "What kind of competition?"

Taria's tawny eyes were alight with mischief. "A race through the new training dojo. Two teams—we lead one each. First team to light the beacon at the top of the mini city's central tower wins."

"Wins what?"

"Bragging rights, of course," said Taria, grinning. "What else?"

The new training dojo, completed a few days before the mission to Kothlis, took up all of the Temple's massive sublevel nineteen. Tricked out with artificial atmospherics and randomly generated zero-g pockets, terraformed into marshy quagmire, thick foliage, a ravine, a cliff, a stretch of wide-open quake-ground, a very small and self-contained river, *and* four large blocks of streets complete with buildings and towers, it was also populated by a panoply of actual Sep battle droids—salvaged from real battles—which had been modified to shoot stingers instead of blaster bolts. In short, it was the ultimate in urban and natural habitat warfare training terrains. The poor little Padawans were going to get their butts *kicked*.

But better they were kicked in the safety of the Temple than out there in the real war, where second chances were rare and dead really meant dead.

"So," said Taria, teasingly taunting. "Are you game? Say yes. This could be the start of a Temple tournament."

"It sounds like fun," Ahsoka said slowly. "But—a tournament means winning and losing, doesn't it? The Jedi philosophy

discourages pride.”

“True,” said Taria, her amusement fading. “But this isn’t about pride, Ahsoka. It’s about finding a way to train without dwelling on what we’re training for. War. Padawans learn better when they aren’t afraid. When they’re actually enjoying themselves? That’s when the lessons stick.”

And that was true, too. *As for me, this might be the perfect thing to take my mind off Skyguy.* “Then what are we waiting for? Let’s go get our teams!”

TWENTY MINUTES LATER Ahsoka stood outside the dojo with eleven eager senior Padawans. They were the Green team. Taria had won the toss, so her Blue team had twelve. The Blues were now their enemy—at least for the next hour or so. Given that this was these Padawans’ first time in a war zone, all were wielding training lightsabers designed to stun instead of kill. They wore colored bibs to identify one another, too, although the fluctuating light levels and sudden bursts of storming rain would make it tricky to see anything clearly.

Green team entered the dojo first, its consolation prize for losing the toss. Ahsoka’s Padawans were entirely trusting and alarmingly impressed because she was Anakin Skywalker’s apprentice and knew the best clone soldiers by nickname and had crossed lightsabers with the likes of Asajj Ventress—and lived to tell the tale.

Hey, Skyguy. Don’t let me mess this up.

“Right,” she said, raising her voice over the dojo’s first computer-generated cracks of lightning and howls of wind. “Focus on the objective, people: reaching the tallest tower in the center of the mini city and lighting its beacon. That means you keep your eyes peeled, and if you get into trouble then you rely on the Force ... and each other. Understood?”

“Understood!” the Padawans shouted.

The rules only gave them a three-minute head start on the Blues. Since the opening terrain was the dreaded quake-ground, it was time to get cracking. First of all, though, she had to inspire her team. Captain Rex's Hints for Leaders #4: *If they think you're having fun, they might forget to be terrified.*

Spinning to face her Padawans, walking backward without missing a stride, Ahsoka smiled at the youngsters closest to her. Chivas and Tabrugni smiled back, two small peas in a Kuatipod, the glow of their ignited training lightsabers reflecting in their wide, excited eyes.

"There's an old Hutt saying," she told her Green team, as beneath their feet the treacherous quake-ground woke and shivered a warning. "And it goes like this: *Ungdaliki-aigoto-aigoto-grutaaaaah!*"

A moment's startled silence, and then the Green team shouted back. "*Ungdaliki-aigoto-aigoto-grutaaaaah!*"

Then the game began, and Ahsoka forgot that none of this was real. Long since blooded in battle, she couldn't think that way anymore.

Christophsis. Teth. Maridun. Kaliida Shoals. Bothawui. Kothlis.

Memories of each encounter rose to drown her, and instead of fighting them she let herself sink beneath their hot red surface. What she'd learned in the real war could help her now, could help these Padawans. It might even make the difference between life and death for them one day. And she owed it to Anakin to train them as well as he trained her.

With Taria's Blue team coming close on their heels, the most important thing was to find cover before they ran into any Sep droids. The Green team staggered and fell and rolled across the heaving quake-ground, then pounded into the dojo's thick foliage as a hard, driving rain began to fall. That was where the first wave of mosquito droids found them. Relentlessly they harried the Padawans, whose excitement swiftly turned to uncertainty and confusion as the rain flogged them and the quake-ground

unbalanced them and more mosquito droids came in hard and blasting.

Fiercely focused, remembering Kothlis, Ahsoka led the attack, shouting encouragement and instructions to her stunned, faltering team. They rallied quickly. Amazingly, she lost only one. Crushed with disappointment, downed Laksh'atz waved them a forlorn good-bye as the Greens zapped the last mosquito droid and pushed on to the river.

A detachment of battle droids waited for them on its far bank. Proudly Ahsoka watched three Padawans take the initiative by felling a tree and rolling it into the water. Instinctly responsive, the rest of Green team formed up to give them cover. The dojo's damp air spat and sizzled as volley after volley of stinger bolts were deflected, knocking all but three of the battle droids out of the game. They lost T'boor in that engagement, but the rest of the Greens stayed safe using the tree trunk for cover as they half waded, half swam across. When they reached the river's other side, Ahsoka took out one of the remaining droids and Chivas the other two.

"Good job, Greens!" she said, grinning, and waved her team on toward the ravine. Feeling a familiar stirring in the Force she looked around and saw Taria, leading the Blues toward them in a furious charge. "Whoops!" she said, and chased after her team.

After that they lost sight of their opponents, but they could hear distant blaster shots and the buzzing whine of lightsabers even though the atmospheric program was enthusiastically deluging them with another storm. Somebody was keeping the Blue team busy. And then they forgot about everything but their own survival, because STAP-riding battle droids were swooping in for an attack as they stumbled across a treacherous pocket of zero-g—which shut off when they were some five meters above the ground.

Avoiding the droids *and* riding the Force to a safe landing got a bit messy. They lost the Mon Cal Padawan Baggro in that engagement.

Using the Force and the strength of their newly forged bond, the Green team Padawans fought their way down the dojo's steep ravine and up the other side through another cloud of mosquito droids, and then faced the daunting cliff. More droids on STAPS threatened them there. Breathless, determined, Ahsoka drew on every lesson Anakin had ever taught her to lead her team. Too busy now to be scared for him, instead she leaned on him even though he was so far away.

See, Skyguy? I was paying attention.

But even so, by the time they reached the first re-created city street Green team's numbers had dwindled from eleven to four, not counting herself.

"Come on," she told the remaining Padawans, remembering Rex's Hint #6: *The worse things get, the more confident you need to look.* "This is the last stretch. We can do this. We can win."

What was left of the exhausted Green team rewarded her with straightened spines and renewed determination. She smiled at them. *This must be what it feels like to be Anakin.* And then the narrow street was full of droidekas and battle droids and they were desperately scrambling to survive.

Sprinting through puddles, leaping crumpled groundcars and artfully scattered piles of rubble, diving through open windows and rolling across splintered floors to dive back outside again, deflecting blaster bolts left and right—they gave themselves over to the madness of urban battle.

The Greens lost another two team members to droids in the last desperate push to reach the tower and its beacon ahead of the Blues. Taria's team had taken its own route into the city and was racing to take the prize at its center.

The teams reached the tower at the same time. "*Go on!*" Ahsoka shouted to Chivas and Veneka, her last two Padawans. "That beacon isn't going to light itself!"

Breathing hard, aware of sore muscles and scrapes and bruises, she watched the Padawans scale the tower's external wall. Taria had three Blue team members still standing. They took off after the Greens, leaving Taria to cheer them on.

Ahsoka looked the older Jedi over. Slushed with muck from the quagmire the Greens had managed to avoid, Taria was scraped and bruised, too, with several rips in her sedate dark gray bodysuit. After what had happened rescuing the scientist's mother, probably she shouldn't be taking part in this game. But Master Damsin was a stubborn law unto herself.

"I'm fine, Ahsoka," Taria said, not shifting her gaze from the race up the tower. "So you can stop looking at me like—oh. Stang."

One of the Blues had misjudged a handhold and was tumbling not very tidily to the street below. Her command of the Force to cushion the fall proved far from perfect.

"Sorry, Michka," said Taria to the winded Padawan. "I think that has to count as dead."

The Padawan groaned and let her yellow-scaled head thud to the ground.

Ahsoka stared again at the tower where two Greens and two Blues were scrambling to the top with a lot more enthusiasm than finesse. She couldn't help smiling.

"You were right, Taria. This is an excellent way for Padawans to learn."

"And what have you learned?"

"Me?" she said, surprised. *Oh. Right. I'm still a Padawan, too.* She thought of Anakin. "That nothing's ever as easy as it looks."

Taria smiled. "Don't worry, Ahsoka. No matter who wins this, you haven't let your Master down."

The lurking unease she'd managed to outrun came surging back. "Taria ..." She felt her breathing hitch. *Say it, say it. You know you*

have to say it. “I’ve got a bad feeling. About Master Skywalker.”

Taria’s greenish-blue hair, stuck through with twigs and unraveling from its long braid, caught the flickering streetlights and shone like living ice. For the first time since they’d entered the dojo, Ahsoka saw a hint of discomfort in her eyes as her terrible illness made itself felt. Atop the tower the Padawans reached the competition beacon together, and ignited it together with loud triumphant hollering. A tie.

Applauding their effort, Taria slid her tawny, topaz gaze sideways. “I’ve got one, too. About Master Kenobi.”

“Oh.” Ahsoka swallowed. “Really? And what does that mean?”

Taria snorted. “You’re too smart for a question like that, Ahsoka. You know as well as I do what it means.”

She did. Oh, she did.

Skyguy ... where are you? What’s going on?

FOUR



ANAKIN SAT UP, SHIFTING BETWEEN HEARTBEATS FROM DEEP sleep to waking. Even as he looked around his unfamiliar surroundings—a storeroom, its walls lined with prefab durasteel shelves not even a quarter filled with cans and boxes—he could feel his senses unfurl and test the cool, dry air for danger. Nothing. At least, nothing immediate. Only the same clouding anxiety and tension he and Obi-Wan had felt as they approached the village. And he sensed Teeba Jaklin, the woman who'd warily given them permission to enter the village, brought them back here to her home, and offered them tea and soup and rough beds on her floor. Vaguely, he remembered drinking something bitter, swallowing some kind of gritty gruel, then afterward falling facedown on this thin mattress. And then lights out.

So. Look on the bright side, General Skywalker. And don't forget that things can always be worse.

Obi-Wan sprawled in a sleeping heap next to him, his breathing soft and regular. No cause for concern there, even though dried blood discolored his beard and his face was marred by cuts, scrapes, and bruises. Slivers of shadow striped him where light from the new day slid between the warped shutters covering the storeroom's single small window.

The new day. Going by Lanteeban time, that meant they'd slept without stirring for nearly twenty local hours. The good news was he definitely felt refreshed. The bad news—there always had to be bad news—was that his empty belly was rumbling like a rockslide. With luck there'd be breakfast.

But we can't stay here after that. We have to get back in the fight. So the question is, what's next?

Obi-Wan opened his eyes. "Well? How are your bruised bruises this morning?"

"Surly," Anakin said. "Yours?"

"I'll live."

And so would he, but not comfortably. Everything hurt. And in the unfortunate absence of pain meds ... "Hey. Don't suppose you could—"

"Sorry," said Obi-Wan, sounding genuinely regretful. "Miraculous overnight healing is likely to raise eyebrows." Wincing, he threw back his blanket and rolled untidily to his feet. "Never mind. We'll manage. Now, what are your impressions of this village?"

Anakin watched Obi-Wan tug the window's shutter aside and stare through the scratched and warped transparisteel at the dwellings beyond. They were even more dilapidated than Gardulla the Hutt's Mos Espa slave quarter, where he and his mother had lived before being sold to Watto. Small, featureless boxes with flat roofs and shuttered windows. No grass to soften the hard ground, or flowers to give even the illusion of cheer. What a sad place this was. But despite its sunken, sunbaked sorrow—

"I think we're fine," he said. "At least for the moment. Obi-Wan, we have to get a message to the Temple."

"You're reading my mind," said Obi-Wan nodding. "With the mine active and supplying damotite, the village must possess some kind of comm center. The question is—"

"Will they let us use it?" He shrugged. "Probably not. So I say we don't even bother asking. We can just—"

Prompted by muffled footsteps outside the storeroom door, Obi-Wan turned. "It appears our hostess is up and about. I suggest we go and make friends. We'll need her support while we're here."

“And if we don’t get it?” said Anakin, slowly getting up off his mattress. His scrapes and bruises really were surly. “What then? You try a little gentle persuasion?”

“I’m not certain that would work,” Obi-Wan said at last. “This Teeba has a very *definite* personality. If she’s unprepared to offer further hospitality, we’ll have to see if someone else will take us in. And if that doesn’t work, then we’ll simply have to find another settlement where the natives are friendlier.”

“Except we’re in the middle of nowhere already and I can’t sense another village anywhere close by. Can you?”

Obi-Wan grimaced. “Right now I can’t sense much beyond the need for a ‘fresher.’”

Good point. His own unhappy body was making urgent demands, too. With elaborate courtesy he opened the storeroom door and stood back. “After you, Cousin Yavid.”

They found Teeba Jaklin in her small kitchen, slicing a rough loaf of mixed-grain bread. Putting the knife down, she considered them with her wary, pale blue gaze. “So. There you are. I was beginning to wonder if you’d died.”

Her demeanor was odd. Not hostile, but not exactly friendly, either. More than anything, Anakin sensed a resigned resentment in the woman. As though their arrival on her doorstep was just one more burden in a long and disappointing lifetime of burdens.

Undaunted, Obi-Wan pressed his hand to his heart and offered her his most polite bow. “We certainly slept like the dead, Teeba. Again, you have our most humble thanks. I think my cousin and I were ready to lie down in the road.”

From the look on her face the Teeba wasn’t sure whether to believe him. She sniffed. “I think you were too, Teeb. But likely you’d have been safe enough. There’s no convoy due for a few days yet. Still ...” She wrapped the remaining uncut bread in a cloth and dropped it into a bin on the bench. “Better safe than sorry.”

“Indeed,” said Obi-Wan. “Ah—Teeba—”

She pointed through the kitchen’s other door. “The ’fresher’s down the corridor there. Can’t offer you the tub today. No body bathing till tomorrow.”

Anakin swallowed a groan. His skin was tacky with dried sweat and blood and grime. *We might as well be back on Tatooine.* “Your water’s rationed?”

“That’s right,” she said, indifferent to his dismay. “First, second, and third priority’s the mine. Then beasts and crops and drinking. Washing bodies and clothes comes a long way last.”

“That’s quite all right, Teeba Jaklin,” Obi-Wan said quickly. “You’ve given us shelter and sustenance. We don’t expect you to launder us as well.”

Teeba Jaklin stared at Obi-Wan, steadfastly refusing to be softened by his charm. “You get a splash of wet in the bottom of the ’fresher basin for the worst of the stink. No more than a splash, mind. I’ll know otherwise. There’s a gauge.”

“A splash,” said Obi-Wan. “Yes, of course.”

She frowned at his cuts and bruises. “Not brawling each other, were you? We don’t hold with brawling here.”

“No, Teeba,” said Obi-Wan. “As we said last night, there was an accident. We’re not trouble, my word on it.”

“In that case there’s a pot of salve in the cupboard over the basin. Use what you need of it. I make it myself.”

Obi-Wan bowed again. “That’s very generous. Thank you. Markl—you go first. But don’t dawdle.”

“I won’t, Yavid,” Anakin murmured, the obedient younger cousin, and left Obi-Wan to his closer reading of the Teeba and their current predicament.

Like the dingy, cramped kitchen, the cottage’s refresher was run-down and hardly big enough to turn around in. As he washed his

flesh-and-bone hand and his face at the tiny basin, using no more than the requisite miserly splash, he stared at his wobbly reflection in the cracked mirror. Could be worse. A thin cut along his hairline. Bruising along his left cheekbone and under his eye. A scrape on his chin. Tugging his shirt open, he counted more bruises. His right collarbone ached viciously, as did two of his ribs and both knees. Perhaps it was for the best that the tub was denied him. He had the feeling he was a patchwork of purple and green bruises and red blaster blisters, which would make for a depressing sight.

Still. If looking awful makes us seem less threatening ... more vulnerable ... that's all to the good.

He daubed himself liberally with Teeba Jaklin's stinking, sticky green salve. It stung like fire. Then he returned to the kitchen. Upon his arrival Obi-Wan withdrew, leaving him alone with their hostess.

Obi-Wan's right. Her mind's about as pliable as durasteel. Whatever we need from her we'll have to get with old-fashioned cajolery.

And hadn't his mother always told him he could coax the stars down from the sky if he put himself to the trouble? Didn't Padmé say the same, not always so admiringly?

He offered the plain, tough woman his most winsome, winning smile. "Thank you, Teeba Jaklin. It's very good of you to help us like this. If we hadn't come across your village when we did, or if you'd turned us away as vagabonds, I'm not sure how we would've survived."

With an unimpressed glance the Teeba fired up her kitchen's clunky old stove. "We keep ourselves to ourselves in Torbel, young Teeb, but that don't make us cruel. I took you in for it was the right thing to do."

"And the right thing for us to do is be grateful for it," he replied, meaning it. "Kindness isn't found everywhere, Teeba Jaklin."

She hesitated, then shook her head. "No. It's not."

"Have you lived here all your life?"

“No,” she said, fiddling with the stove’s knobs. “Twenty-one seasons. Came here with my man. He died a miner. I stayed. Took to teaching.”

Behind her laconic reply Anakin sensed an aching well of memory—and was sharply reminded of Bant’ena Fhernan. This was turning into a mission overrun by sad women.

Or maybe it’s just that nobody anywhere can truly call themselves happy.

“Twenty-one seasons in the same place,” he said, to fill the silence. “Hard to imagine. It’s almost longer than I’ve been alive.”

She sniffed again. “Practically a boy, you are.”

He watched her place two slices of bread on the compact cooktop grill. Beneath her reserve and her sorrow she remained wary, watching him from the corner of her eye as she toasted the bread.

This isn’t going to work if we can’t get her to trust us.

“Can I do something to help, Teeba?”

“Eggs in the cupboard there,” she said over her shoulder. “Know how to whip eggs, do you?”

The question woke memories. Sharing kitchen time and laughter and dreams with his mother: fetching pots, measuring agra-flour, slicing dried ottith when he was old enough for her to trust with a knife. *Family*. Real family, not the oddly separate togetherness of the Temple.

“Yes, Teeba. How many?”

“All you find in the bowl. Fork’s in the drawer. Cracked shells go in the ’cyclor.”

After emptying the raw eggs into the bowl and disposing of the shells, he started beating the pink yolks and whites together. “Teeba, is this right?”

Another disparaging sniff. “Thought you said you knew whipping eggs.” But she looked into the bowl and gave him a small, approving nod. “Right enough.”

The toasting bread smelled good. His stomach rumbled again, loudly. “Sorry,” he said, seeing the woman’s eyebrows lift. “Good appetite.”

“That’s enough with the eggs,” she said, exchanging toasted bread for fresh. “You can set them aside and put plates on the table. Four. There’s someone coming.”

Laying places at the table, Anakin looked around the kitchen. The only splash of color was a handful of flowers on the windowsill. Otherwise he got no sense of the woman who lived here. As a rule he never had any trouble reading people, but this Teeba Jaklin? Wary and sad. That was it.

And that’s not very much when we’re risking our lives.

As he finished setting knives and forks to go with the plates on the battered old table, Obi-Wan returned with his hair slicked wet and no dried blood in his beard. A tiny nod as their eyes met, and a casual flick of his fingers: Obi-Wan code for *Nothing untoward in the rest of the house*. He’d done his own dawdling to make sure of their safety. Nobody did “cautious” like Master Kenobi.

Teeba Jaklin turned off the grill and fired up the stove’s two small hotplates. “You. Teeb Yavid,” she said briskly. “Pull the butter and nutpaste from the cool box and put the crisped bread on the table.”

“Of course,” said Obi-Wan. “Anything else?”

Their hostess wore the same brown tunic, trousers, and boots, but her gray hair was caught in a blue scarf this morning. Jaklin tucked a loosened wisp back into confinement and shook her head. “No. Not a man born can make tea or cook eggs in any proper fashion.”

Swallowing a smile, Obi-Wan did as he was told. “There’s an extra place set, Teeba.”

“Good to know you’re not blind,” she said, setting a kettle of water to boil. “Two of us oversee Torbel village. Me and Teeb Rikkard, the head miner. He’s a need to assay you, Teebs. It’s true you’ve not murdered me under my own roof but these are sideways-looking times. You’ll not complain.”

Anakin exchanged another look with Obi-Wan. *No, I’m pretty sure we won’t.* “How many live here in Torbel, Teeba Jaklin?”

She had a pan on the stove now, with oil poured into it and starting to spit. Holding the bowl of frothy pinkish eggs ready to pour, Teeba Jaklin flicked him a glance. “Four hundred and thirty-seven. There was twice that and more in the old damotite days. With production stepped up again we might see us grow a bit. New times are here on Lanteeb. But what they’ve brung us ...” She shrugged, then poured the eggs into the hot pan. “We’ll see.”

What they’ve brung you, Teeba, is more misery. In fact, if he and Obi-Wan were successful here, they’d be leaving this woman to a cruel and uncertain future. But he couldn’t tell her that. Indeed, after the disaster that was Bant’ena he wasn’t even tempted. Obi-Wan was right. Getting caught up in these transitory people’s lives was a mistake.

We’re Jedi. We need to take a longer view. Focus on the big picture and not get lost in the small details.

He felt a stir in the Force and a moment later heard banging on the cottage’s front door. Danger? No. They were still safe.

“That’ll be Rikkard,” said Teeba Jaklin. “You’ll mind your manners, Teebs. He’s a good man and a brave one and his word in Torbel is weighty.” She slid the eggs off the stove and left the kitchen.

Anakin rolled his eyes. “She makes Master Yoda look cuddly, but I don’t sense she’s a threat,” he murmured. “I just wish I could tell how far she’ll go to help us. Can you?”

“No,” said Obi-Wan. “All I can say for certain is that events are in flux. Perhaps that’s why—”

Teeba Jaklin returned with a lanky man in tow. Dressed like their hostess, his close-cropped head was roped and crisscrossed with livid scars. His right eye drooped half closed, and more scar tissue marred his hookish nose.

“This is Teeb Rikkard,” she announced. “Rikkard, here’s these men I spoke of. The beard is Teeb Yavid, the youth is Teeb Markl. Cousins from distant Voteb.”

Teeb Rikkard looked to be somewhere in his middle years. “A groundcar accident brings you here, says Jaklin,” he remarked. He had a deep voice, almost lazy, but his brown eyes were sharp. “For sure, Teebs, you look to be sore and sorry. We’ve no fancy doctoring in Torbel. Are you fetching to die?”

“Not if we can help it, Teeb Rikkard,” said Obi-Wan, smiling, easing his innate aura of authority so that this man, a village leader, would not feel threatened. “We’ve already put you to trouble enough. Haven’t we, Markl?”

Anakin bobbed his head. *Humble, humble, keep it humble.* “Yes, we have, Yavid. We’re very lucky.”

“You can talk sitting just like standing,” said Teeba Jaklin. “There’s tea to brew, then I’ll dish the eggs.”

At the first mouthful of fried egg Anakin nearly gagged, then flinched as Obi-Wan kicked his shin. Courageously taking his second swallow, he thought longingly of the last meal he’d sat down to outside a Temple dining hall. Not only had Padmé been there, his best beloved, but Bail Organa could actually *cook*.

Don’t be sick. They won’t let you use the comm if you vomit.

“Your speech has lost the touch of Lanteeb,” said Teeb Rikkard, spooning down the dreadful eggs as though this were a Senate banquet. “And Teeban men aren’t for beards.”

If Obi-Wan was struggling with their breakfast, it didn't show. Swallowing another mouthful, he nodded. "We've been away these three years gone, Teeb. Away to Alderaan for to make our fortune."

And just like that, he had a proper Lanteeban cadence. Anakin washed down his envy with a scouring mouthful of hot tea. Sometimes he thought his former Master was part Clawdite, a changeling who could become anything or anyone just by wishing.

"Alderaan," said Teeb Rikkard, his ropy scars shining in the light through the window. "They let aliens roam free there, I've heard tell. All manner of creatures, pretending to be proper men."

Anakin gave up on the eggs and took a slice of dry toast instead. Left it dry, deciding not to risk the butter or nutpaste. "We kept ourselves to ourselves, Teeb."

Teeba Jaklin sat back in her chair, brooding over her mug of tea. "Doing what? I've never met a Lanteeb youth wanted to rub clean skin with slimy alien hide."

He felt his blood leap. *Don't. They've lived their whole lives here. This is all they know.* "Lumber. It was good money. We lost our farm to the Plough Comet drought."

"Aaaah," said Rikkard, and his careful gaze warmed a little with sympathy. "The Plough Comet brought misery hanging on its tail, for sure. A trickle of bad for Lanteeb turned to gushing, thanks to the Plough."

"That's true," said Obi-Wan, his voice artfully close to breaking. "It dried up Voteb and all its farms like salt. So you see, Teeba Jaklin, for me and Markl it was Alderaan or starve. And we had no want to starve." Lightly, he punched a fist to his chest. "Don't give us a harsh eye. We're home again now, which is where we belong."

As Jaklin closed her lips tight, Rikkard scratched the scar on his nose. "Home after three years. You'll see a change."

"They said to us in the spaceport Lanteeb's joined the Confederacy," said Obi-Wan, his eyes wide as though he found such

a notion impossible to understand. “And how the Republic’s our enemy.”

“That’s politics,” said Teeba Jaklin. “Not for my kitchen. Teeb Markl, you’ve done with those eggs? You’ve not eaten half. You had an appetite. What happened to it?”

“Ah—yes,” Anakin said, after a moment. “Sorry. The groundcar tumble we took. Seems I’m a bit addled, Teeba Jaklin.”

“You’re a lummoX to be addled,” she said, and took the plate for herself. “Food’s rationed here like the water. You come up hungry an hour from now you’ll not be moaning to me.”

“Of course not,” he mumbled.

This time Obi-Wan trod on his foot, his message perfectly clear. *Shut up, for pity’s sake, before you shove us out in the street.* “It’s a fine breakfast, Teeba Jaklin. We’re sitting here most grateful.”

“Where did you tumble your groundcar, Teeb Yavid?” said Rikkard, his own plate empty. “We’ve good men and better tools in Torbel. Fixing machines is a thing we do here.”

Obi-Wan shook his head, regretful. “The groundcar’s not for fixing, Teeb. Bought sloppy, we did. Young Markl here acted without thought. The engine ran wild on us in the dark, took us over bad ground and off a cliff. Broken to pieces it is, klicks and klicks from here, and nearly us with it.”

“Then lucky it is you’ve a seat at this table eating Jaklin’s eggs,” said Rikkard. He was smiling, but his gaze was wary again. “Though if you’re on to Voteb, this is a strange place to find you.”

“Oh, we’re not going back to Voteb,” Anakin said. “Our farm’s dust and bones. Me and Yavid thought to wander until we found a new home.”

Smoothly taking his cue, Obi-Wan smiled. “Would there be a welcome for us here, Teeb Rikkard? Teeba Jaklin? We have money saved and want only to build a good life.”

“Yes,” Anakin said earnestly. “And truly Yavid will shave off the beard.”

Teeba Jaklin glanced at Teeb Rikkard. “It’s not ours to say entirely,” she said, guarded. “We’ve not so many here that you Teebs wouldn’t shift the ground if you stayed. So it’s a village thing to talk on.” Another glance at her fellow leader. “Best you sleep under this roof another night or so before you dream more of stopping. Give us time to get a good look at you.”

“That’s fair,” said Obi-Wan. “But we’d not put you to trouble.”

“You’re no trouble on the storeroom floor,” said Teeba Jaklin, shrugging.

Anakin swallowed a groan. The floor? *Great*. “Thank you, Teeba.”

“There’ll be thinking you need to do,” said Rikkard. “We’re miners in Torbel. Damotite. Tricky stuff. Men die. But there’s no other work.”

“Work is work,” said Obi-Wan, smoothing his beard. “My cousin’s young but he knows how to sweat a full day. I’m not young but I work hard, too. We could learn damotite. Only—” He frowned. “When Markl and I left Lanteeb there were rumors about it.”

“Not rumors. Truth.” Rikkard rubbed his scarred nose again. “Demand for damotite started disappearing three, four seasons ago. A lot of mines closed—but not ours. Torbel’s damotite is the best and what little need there is for it, we mostly supply. And now the government wants it, too, as much as we can pull out of the ground and make safe for transport. Every week they send a droid convoy from the city to take what we produce.”

“A droid convoy?” said Anakin. “No regular men?”

Rikkard shook his head. “It’s not safe for men to ride the shipment so far. For the government we take out only base impurities. Good as raw our damotite is, for them.”

“Raw?” said Obi-Wan, pretending surprise. “There’s a use for it raw in the Confederacy?”

“They don’t say why they want it and we don’t ask,” said Teeb Rikkard, brows lowered. “It’s the government. We send them damotite, they send us food and leave us alone to mine. To live. More, more, more. That’s all they say.”

Anakin felt his belly heave, protesting the implications as well as Teeba Jaklin’s eggs. *More, more, more* meant Dooku and Durd planned to produce huge quantities of the bioweapon—and that meant the entire Republic was in danger. He imagined Padmé writhing and dying like Bant’ena’s lab rodent and came close a second time to losing what little breakfast he’d eaten.

“You’ve never asked why they suddenly want so much?” He knew he sounded critical, accusing, but he couldn’t help it. Bad things happened because questions weren’t asked. Because people preferred to close their eyes and turn away. “You’ve never wondered what they’re going to do with—”

Rikkard’s fist thumped the kitchen table. “I don’t care about that, Teeb Markl. This village was *dying*. No future. No hope. All we have is damotite. All we know is mining. But the Republic didn’t care about that. The Republic didn’t care about *us*. Every day Teeba Jaklin and me, we watched the children’s faces growing thinner and thinner and we knew we couldn’t help them. We couldn’t help ourselves. Almost nobody wanted our damotite anymore. We were facing the *end*.”

“And then came word from Lantibba City,” said Teeba Jaklin. “From the government. They offered to help us. Food for damotite. We said yes.”

Teeb Rikkard was still frowning. “This is how we live now, in Torbel. Almost every hour mining and cleaning damotite. The government says when it has money again we’ll have money. Until then we have food. I won’t take food from a hungry child’s mouth. If

you're the kind of man who could do that, Teeb Markl, then Torbel is not the village for you. You and your cousin can find another—"

"No, no," said Obi-Wan hastily. "Teeb Rikkard, you mustn't have a care for Markl. His tongue rattles. Of course you're mining the damotite. Your people must eat. We have no quarrel with that. We have no quarrel with you." He turned. "For shame, cousin, when these good people gave us shelter."

Blinking, Anakin stared at him. "I'm sorry, Yavid, I—"

Obi-Wan cuffed the back of his head. "Don't apologize to me, Markl. Apologize to the Teeb and Teeba and then hope we are still welcome in Torbel."

Anakin dropped his gaze to the table. "I'm very sorry. I was wrong. Please don't send us away."

"Rikkard—" Teeba Jaklin took a light hold of the man's arm. "Let them stay. Let them earn their keep. Bohle's sick and Dahm's overgreen, remember, and Brinnie with his wrenched ankle's no use, either. We're behind in the mining and the convoy's only three days away. The government won't be pleased if the delivery is underweight. They might not send food next time, to punish us."

"You're shorthanded?" said Obi-Wan, before Rikkard could answer. "Then please, let us help. You took us in though we are strangers and times are hard. Let us work in the mine to earn our keep while we're here."

"Rikkard, this is a sensible plan," said Teeba Jaklin. "You know it is. A man shows his true face while he's sweating. We'll feed and water and shelter these cousins and they'll prove themselves in the mine and then, after the convoy has come and gone, taking the right weight of mineral back to Lantibba, then we'll decide if they can remain in Torbel."

Teeb Rikkard tapped his fingertips over the scars on his scalp, thinking. "It's a good argument," he said at last. "If they're telling the truth. If they can learn fast and work hard."

“We are,” said Obi-Wan. “And we can.”

“I think they’re truthful, Rikkard,” said Teeba Jaklin, ignoring him. “But you’re the head miner. You’ll know within an hour if they’ve lied. And if they’ve lied we’ll run them out.”

Anakin glanced at Obi-Wan, feeling his tension, his concern.

We can’t afford to get bogged down here. But at least if we stay another day or so we can catch our breath, contact Yoda, maybe even come up with a plan to stop Durd before he launches his first attack ... or if we can’t do that, get off this dusty ball of dirt, come back with reinforcements and end him.

The thought of seeing Lok Durd dead gave him an almost physical pleasure. Next to Grievous and Dooku and, of course, the unknown Sith Lord behind all their troubles, Durd was his most hated enemy.

I’m coming for you, General. That cold shiver you feel is my breath on the back of your stinking neck.

He felt Obi-Wan’s foot nudge him again. It was a warning—and an offering of comfort, which meant he was forgiven his rash display of temper.

Teeba Jaklin and Teeb Rikkard, who’d been staring at each other in a kind of communal silence, nodded. “Yes,” said Rikkard. “I agree. You’re sure you can keep them here?”

“As I said, in the storeroom,” said the Teeba. “Safest that way, I think.”

Teeb Rikkard raised a sparse eyebrow. “If we’re thinking of *safest*, Jaklin ...” His hand covered hers. “They’ll be mining.”

“They’ll be mining a few days at most,” said Jaklin, frowning. “I don’t see that it’s needful. There’s such a thing as being too trusting, Rikkard.”

“Every man is different under the ground,” said Teeb Rikkard. “No man sickens the same. You know that. It would be wrong not

to. Gone three years from Lanteeb, Jaklin. Gone soft, they'll be. I won't have them on my conscience."

"But Rikkard, it's *secret*," she protested. "It's *ours*."

"And if they're living with us it has to be theirs, too," he said gently. "No man or woman or child of Torbel remains in Torbel without it. This is our village rule."

"They are not of our village!"

Sighing, Teeb Rikkard took hold of the Teeba's shoulder. "They are until they leave, Jaklin. I'm the head miner. It's my final word."

And apparently Teeba Jaklin took that argument seriously, because she closed her eyes, and sighed, and nodded. "You are the head miner," she muttered, unhappy but acquiescent. "They'll have it."

Judging it safe to speak, Obi-Wan cleared his throat. "I'm sorry? My cousin and I will have what?"

Casting him a dark look, Teeba Jaklin got up from the table, went to one of the kitchen cupboards and from it withdrew a stoppered clay pot.

"This is a secret, Teeb Yavid," she said, returning. "It has been a secret for untold generations. It's not only mineral quality that brings the government to us first, and has it rewarding us with extra food and leaving us alone."

She unstopped the pot, carefully tipped two large yellowish brown pills onto the palm of one hand and held them out.

"It's because we work and we work and we don't hardly get greensick. No other mining village in Lanteeb can claim that. They don't know our secret. Not Chukba, not Endvo, not Dee-bin, not even Trahn. It has *always* been for Torbel and no one else. If ever you speak of this to anyone not from our village, you will ruin us. There are desperate miners who'd kill for our secret. Do you understand that?"

“Teeba Jaklin ...”

Obi-Wan stood. Anakin, watching him, wondered how the two Lanteebans could have no idea that a Jedi, one of the greatest ever born, was standing right in front of them.

“Your trust won’t be misplaced.” Obi-Wan’s voice was quiet and thrumming with absolute sincerity. “Turned away from your village, Markl and I might have perished. I promise your secret is safe with us.”

Anakin pushed his own chair back. “My cousin Yavid is the most honorable man I know. Never have I seen him do wrong, or harm. Your secret is safe.”

Teeba Jaklin turned to Teeb Rikkard. “I just hope you’re right and there’ll be no regretting, and no way to take it back.”

Obi-Wan rolled the pill she handed him between his thumb and forefinger. “What’s in this?”

“You don’t need to know,” said Rikkard. “Swallow it and mine. Don’t swallow it and leave. The choice is yours, Teebs. But choose quickly. We’ve a quota to fill.”

Staring at his own pill, Anakin reached into the Force. He could sense no deception in either villager. It was highly unlikely this was an elaborate plot to poison them. He glanced at Obi-Wan. Raised an eyebrow. The look Obi-Wan gave him was as loud as a shout.

Me first.

He wanted to argue. *One of these days you’ll have to stop protecting me.* But he let it go, just this once. Watched Obi-Wan swallow the pill. When nothing happened, he swallowed his own. It tasted worse than the eggs.

Teeb Rikkard stood. “Come with me then, Teebs, since you’ve made your choice. The morning’s getting away from us. It’s time to start work.”

FIVE



FOLLOWING TEEB RIKKARD OUT OF TEEBA JAKLIN'S COTTAGE and into the empty street, Obi-Wan sank himself a little more deeply into the Force and reached out to touch the man's worried, vulnerable mind. Mired in the difficulties of keeping a dying village alive, of smiling and smiling while his heart cracked with despair, Rikkard never noticed the stranger rummaging through his private emotions.

"Teeb Rikkard, you've a fine village here," he said quietly. "You and Teeba Jaklin are to be admired for your stewardship of it. My cousin and I would like to wander through Torbel's streets before we bury ourselves underground in the mine. I think you can give us an hour or so to do that, can't you?"

Teeb Rikkard slowed, then stopped. "Well—yes. Yes, I can," he said, uncertain. "I can show you around myself if—"

"No, no. That's quite all right." Keenly aware that they were standing in the middle of an open street, that at any moment they could be joined by other villagers, he pushed Rikkard harder. "It's our own way we'll be finding, Teeb."

"No need for *Teeb*," Rikkard said. "You're one of us now, Yavid." The faintest cloud of confusion shadowed his eyes. "An hour and more to wander. I'm not sure I can—"

Stang. The man's sense of responsibility was proving a real stumbling block. With no time for finesse Obi-Wan clamped tight his hold on Rikkard's mind. "No, you're quite sure. You're more than happy for us to look around. And we have your express permission to take as long as we need and see anything we wish."

Rikkard shook his head, feeling the compulsion, unsettled by it, but unable to resist. “Yes. Yes. Of course, Yavid. Anything.”

“We’d very much like to see your comm hub, Rikkard,” Anakin added, stepping closer. “Where would we find it?”

“The comm hub? That’s in the charter house.” Turning, Rikkard pointed down the street toward the small village’s center. “On the square.” Another puzzled head shake. “It’s where we decide village things. Why do you—”

Obi-Wan clasped the man’s arm, reinforcing his control. “Thank you, Rikkard. You’re a good fellow. Now please, don’t let us delay you any further.”

“I’ll be on my way,” Rikkard murmured. “Come to the mine when you’re ready, Yavid. You and your cousin will be expected.”

“Think that’ll hold?” said Anakin, as they watched Rikkard walk away down the narrow, baked-dirt street with its patches of worn-away ferrocrete. As he passed the other cottages, doors opened and he was joined by villagers heading out to spend the day hewing raw damotite from deep underground. They stared at the two strangers, but whatever Rikkard told the men and women seemed enough to satisfy, at least for now.

“If it doesn’t hold, things could get a bit awkward,” Obi-Wan said, frowning. Rikkard was a genuinely good man, undeserving of such interference. *But I don’t have the luxury of being squeamish.* “So we must hope for the best. Now let’s get to that comm hub. The sooner Yoda knows what’s going on, the sooner we can stop Durd.”

They collected more curious, not entirely friendly looks as they made their way to the village square. Every instinct screamed *run*, but they couldn’t. They couldn’t even walk fast. It was vital they do nothing to arouse the villagers’ suspicions. Instead they sauntered, not a care in the world, nodding and smiling at the faces staring at them from unshuttered windows and open front doors. As they caught up to, then passed, more miners on their way to work they greeted the men and women with expansive geniality. Startled, the

miners exchanged glances but returned the greeting cordially enough. Though their ages ranged from middle teens to middle life, the look in every villager's eyes was the same: a sad, bone-deep weariness.

"Stang," Anakin muttered, once it was safe to speak. "I haven't felt a place this beaten down since Tatooine."

Wonderful, Obi-Wan thought. The last thing he needed was Anakin brooding on his miserable, Force-forsaken childhood home. "It's true these people are faced with a bleak future, but there's nothing we can do to save them right now. Tell me, those pills Jaklin gave us. What do you think, genuine or placebo?"

Anakin pulled a face. "I think they taste worse than her eggs."

"The eggs weren't so bad," he said. "Trust me, I've had worse."

"Really?" said Anakin, skeptical. "Anyway. I think placebo. This isn't the only working mine on Lanteeb, and it would be if you needed those pills to handle raw damotite safely. And there wasn't anything about them in Agent Varrak's briefing notes, or Fhernan's data, either."

"Perhaps," Obi-Wan said, after a moment. "But even if Jaklin's claims are exaggerated, we should keep taking her pills. We can't afford to offend these people. Not while we need to shelter here."

"Which hopefully won't be for long," Anakin muttered. "I want back in the fight. We've been stuck on the sidelines too long."

He couldn't argue with that, but even so ... "Patience, cousin. We must proceed with caution. One misstep and Rikkard or Jaklin could report us to the authorities."

"I know, I know." Anakin poked at his right collarbone, wincing. "Don't worry. I'll be careful."

Sparking through the Force, sharp flashes of pain. With every appearance of casual, cousinly affection Obi-Wan let his hand drop

to Anakin's shoulder and waited for the Force to show him the problem.

Stang. "You've cracked it," he said. "Best leave it alone."

Anakin gave him an amused look. "Obi-Wan Kenobi: Master Jedi by day, secret healer by night. Mysterious, elusive, a shadow who —"

"Very funny," he said, and tightened his fingers just a *little* bit. "Cousin Markl."

"Ow, ow, ow, okay," said Anakin, sliding away. "Point taken, *Yavid.*"

He certainly hoped so. Anakin's fierce desire to defeat Durd might be admirable, but it could easily get them in trouble. For all his years of training, his recent war experience, and his newfound maturity, Anakin was still impetuous. Too often ruled by emotion.

Ahead of them stretched a line of long, low buildings. No windows in the back, just blank prefab walls and flat roofing. But before they could reach out with the Force to test for trouble they heard a low grumbling growl. Halting, they turned to look along the nearby cross street.

It was an old, dented groundcar running on buckled wheel rims—not a passenger vehicle but a working machine, cabin and broad, flat carry-tray combined. Its finish was dull and pitted, its windscreen missing entirely. Seeing two strangers, the woman driving it started in surprise, then slowed to a stop beside them.

"Who are you?" she demanded. She looked to be about Padmé's age, maybe a year or two older, but far more weathered. One hand came off the groundcar's control yoke and slipped down beside her, as though she were reaching for a weapon.

Obi-Wan stepped forward and bowed. "I am Yavid, once of Voteb. My young cousin Markl, this is. We're staying with Teeba Jaklin a few days."

“Oh,” said the woman. Her reaching hand returned to the control yoke and her gaze, running up and down Anakin, warmed in the way that often happened when they met up with females of quite a few persuasions. “Jaklin’s hosting you?”

“She is,” said Anakin. “And we’re to work in the mine later. All nodded at by Teeb Rikkard. You can ask.”

The woman’s dull brown hair was fastened in tiny knots, so it stood up on her skull like a husliki’s bumpy hide and left her face open to scrutiny. She smiled, revealing stubby little teeth. “No need, Teeb. Who comes here to Torbel to cause mischief? Nobody I know. I’m Devi. I mostly work the power plant. I’ll see you both around and about, most like.”

“Devi—” said Obi-Wan, as the woman prepared to drive on. “The charter house. Which way is it?”

“You want the charter house?” She was frowning again. “Why?”

“Teeb Rikkard directed us there,” Anakin said smoothly, treating Devi to his most dazzling smile. “If you could tell us how to—”

“I’ll do better,” she said, melting anew. “I’ll take you.” She jerked her thumb over her shoulder. “Climb on.”

So they clambered onto the back of the groundcar and the woman Devi kicked the vehicle back into motion. Obi-Wan took advantage of their unexpected ride to slip once more beneath the surface of the Force, reaching out to feel for danger or a hint of what the future might hold. Beside him, Anakin followed suit. Good. Though his former apprentice’s future-sensing tended toward the erratic—an ongoing frustration—his ability to read the moment was formidable. And these days, with the dark side clouding the Force everywhere they turned, oftentimes *the moment* was all the warning they had.

“No alarm bells ringing,” Anakin murmured under the groundcar’s grumble. “You?”

“No, none.” He gave a pleased nod. “So far, so good.”

As far as he could tell, theirs was the only groundcar on the move. Devi slowed and turned left down the wide street that led, eventually, out of the village. They passed more men and a few women on foot, heading in the mine's direction. There were called greetings, lots of waving hands. Next Devi turned right and there was the square: more beaten soil, no precious water wasted on greenery or grass, and lining one side of it a row of tiredly important buildings.

"The charter house," said Devi, pointing. "Here's where I'll put you down, Teebs. It's testy Rikkard gets when the power plant's unattended for long. Temperamental it is, I'm sorry to say."

The groundcar rolled to a stop, and they eased themselves back to the street. "Thank you, Devi," said Anakin, smiling. "You've been a great help."

She shrugged, feigning indifference. "There'll be no one in the charter house this early, mind. You'll have to wait for Teeba Brandeh to start her day and let you in."

"We don't mind," said Anakin. "Being new here, we can look around until she comes. You have a fine village in Torbel."

"We do," said Devi, dimpling. "Thinking to make it your home, are you?"

"You've guessed it," said Obi-Wan. "If it turns out we suit each other. Devi, thank you. Please don't let us make you late to the plant."

"We'll see you again soon, I hope," Anakin added, with all his charm.

"You will," she said, and with a jaunty wave and a delighted little smile of her own left them beside the open square.

"Come on," said Obi-Wan, ignoring Anakin's grin. "We don't have all day."

The charter house's once ornate but now shabby double doors were locked. Peering inside through one of the two front windows, Anakin nodded.

"The comm hub's there. We need to get inside."

"Well, then, what are you wai—"

Footsteps warned them that more villagers were approaching. In perfect unison they blurred themselves within the Force.

"Right," said Anakin, once it was safe to speak. "One break and enter, coming up."

Watching Anakin manipulate the doors' tumble locks, Obi-Wan smothered a smile. Sometimes he thought his former apprentice would never outgrow his childish delight at playing with the Force. Using it to juggle fruit, pluck a comrade's lightsaber from her belt, float his precious little astromech droid upside down around a hangar bay—or, in this case, unlock a door. Hardly the proper use of Jedi powers, but he'd long since given up protesting. Anakin would have his fun, regardless ... and besides, in these trying times it felt churlish to deny him a fleeting moment of levity.

The locked doors yielded, they slipped inside and found a modest room with a table and chairs ranged around it, shelves stacked with folders of flimsies, and more faded flimsies pinned to a notice board on the right-hand wall. The comm equipment, ranged against the back wall, appeared ominously old-fashioned.

Anakin scowled. "I have a bad feeling about this."

"Now who's the pessimist?" he said, raising an eyebrow. "Come on. Let's take a closer look."

"It's no good," Anakin said at last, frustrated. "This thing's useless. Junk. No way does it have enough juice to punch a signal straight through to Coruscant. I'd say it practically fries its innards trying to reach the city." His fist struck the wall. "*Stang*."

Arms folded, Obi-Wan sighed. “Now, now, Anakin, let’s not admit defeat quite so quickly. Surely we can do what we did before, and piggyback our signal onto an outgoing Separatist comm. I realize it won’t be easy given our distance from Lantibba, but it is doable.”

Anakin thought about it, then shook his head. “Even if we managed to find the right signal to piggyback, I don’t think this antique’s got the power to maintain the connection all the way home. And if I boost its output I’ll probably blow the hub. Besides, I don’t fancy pulling my lightsaber apart. Not when it’s the only weapon I’ve got.”

Obi-Wan tugged at his beard. “Do we know for certain that hooking a diatium power cell into the hub will burn out the equipment?”

“Obi-Wan, come on,” Anakin retorted. “*Look* at it. This hub gives antiques a bad name. There’s a better-than-even chance it won’t survive a diatium boost. Are you willing to risk it?”

No, he wasn’t willing. Not only because they might need the comm hub later on, but because the loss of such vital equipment on the heels of two strangers appearing on their doorstep would inevitably raise the villagers’ suspicions.

“We’ll have to stow ourselves on board the damotite convoy,” he said, not at all pleased by the prospect. “Let it take us back to the city. With luck we can hole up in our previous palatial residence and contact Yoda from there.”

Anakin groaned. “Except that means three more days stuck here. Obi-Wan, in three days Durd could be ready to launch his first attack.”

He gave Anakin his steadiest look. “I’m aware of that. But even if we were to head back to Lantibba right now, on foot it would take us longer than three days to get there. And with no food or water or hope of scrounging enough supplies—”

“Then we can steal a groundcar!”

“Anakin, *think*,” he said exasperated. “Torbel’s groundcars are one pothole away from disintegration. Not to mention the fact that Jaklin and Rikkard would raise the alarm five minutes after we’d made our getaway.”

Anakin was scowling again. “Not if we smashed this comm hub they wouldn’t.”

“Anakin, you’re still not *thinking*! All that would do is delay the inevitable. They’d tell the droid in charge of the convoy and *it* would raise the alarm. Now, do take a deep breath and *steady* yourself. You’re acting like a wet-behind-the-ears Padawan instead of a—”

“Well, *excuse me* for not having ice water in my veins!” Anakin retorted. “I’m not like you, Obi-Wan. I can’t snap my fingers and turn myself to stone!”

Astonished, Obi-Wan stared at him.

“If we don’t get out of here soon, people are going to die,” said Anakin, furiously pacing. “While we’re twiddling our thumbs in sunny Torbel, Dooku’s going to order a strike using that bioweapon and hundreds, maybe thousands, of innocent people are going to *die*!”

And if there was one thing Anakin found utterly intolerable it was the thought that a single soul might perish because he reached them too late. Did too little to save them, and not soon enough. He’d always been obsessed about that, but ever since Shmi ...

“You don’t know that,” he said gently. “Not for certain.”

“I know it’s possible, Obi-Wan,” said Anakin. “Even probable.”

“Perhaps,” he admitted. “But Anakin, our options are severely limited. We *can’t* risk getting caught. Our best chance of stopping Dooku and Durd is biding our time here until the convoy comes.”

“Three days,” said Anakin, turning away. “You know as well as I do how much can go wrong in three days.”

“And *you* know the price that’s paid for acting too soon. For rushing in without a thought for the consequences. *You know the price, Anakin.* Better than anyone.”

Time spun backward for both of them. A racing gunship. Enemy blasterfire exploding indiscriminately. Terror and fury and grief burning through the Force.

I can’t take Dooku alone. I need you. If we catch him we can stop this war right now.

But Anakin hadn’t listened. Heedless, intemperate passion getting the best of him, he’d rushed to challenge Dooku. And where had that left them? With not just an arm lost, but the chance to avoid years of bloodshed and destruction ruined.

“What?” Anakin, shocked, sounding so young, took a step backward. Bumped into the hub equipment, jarring his hurt shoulder, and flinched. “Obi-Wan—”

What he’d said was a savage truth, one he’d never thrown in Anakin’s face ... until now.

“I’m sorry,” he said swiftly. “But Anakin, I was right then and I’m right now. No matter how hard it is, no matter our feelings, we must wait. *I need you to wait.*”

Anakin stared at him. And then, after a long pause, he nodded. “I know.”

Obi-Wan folded his arms, relieved. “Good.”

A flash of temper, like a fire’s dying sparks. “No, it’s not good. It’s *necessary*. They aren’t the same thing.”

“You’re right. They’re not.” He unfolded his arms. “And now we should go before we’re discovered here. But first—let me see to your shoulder.”

It was equal parts peace offering and practicality. Anakin needed full mobility, but *he* needed to make things right between them. Not

just because they were in serious trouble and couldn't afford the tension, but because—

Because I hurt him. And while it was needful, I am truly sorry.

Anakin looked at him, suspicious, his resentment lingering. “Thought you said we had to stay bruised?”

“Bruised is one thing. But should that bone break we'll be at a distinct disadvantage.”

“Fine,” Anakin muttered. “Then fix it.”

The crack in Anakin's collarbone was just tricky enough that mending it cost him something, which was good. Penance that came easily was no penance at all.

“Thanks,” said Anakin when it was done, and swung his arm in wide, experimental circles. And then came a tentative smile, temper forgotten. “I appreciate it.”

So mercurial.... “You're welcome,” Obi-Wan said, very proper and reserved. “Just be careful. No sudden movements or lifting anything heavy until tomorrow.”

Anakin nodded. “I can do that.”

“Well, yes, I know you *can*. The question *is*, Will you?”

“Nag, nag, nag,” said Anakin with a flashing grin. “Stop fussing. I'll be fine.”

Obi-Wan gave up. “Before we track down Teeb Rikkard I'd like to continue looking around the village. I'm not comfortable with disappearing underground until I know what's on top of it.”

“Agreed,” said Anakin. “Although I'm still not picking up any immediate danger.”

“Neither am I. But let's not get complacent. There's no fancy groundcar for you to tinker with this time.”

Anakin gave him a look. “You really don't get tired of being right, do you?”

“No, I really don’t,” he said. “Now shall we go? Our brand-new career awaits.”

EVERY TIME BANT’ENA turned around she almost fell over a battle droid. Thanks to Lok Durd and his near-hysterical paranoia her new laboratory was crowded with the clankers, skinny and silent and armed with blasters that would reduce her to splintered bone and splattered blood in a heartbeat. She couldn’t even take a meal without them.

They never called her by name. They never said: *Doctor Fhernan, turn left* or *Doctor Fhernan, turn right* or *Doctor Fhernan, put your hands behind your head* before they searched her body each morning and night with a variety of scanners and sensors. They never called her anything but *you*. That was Durd’s doing, too, she was sure of it. She knew enough about droids to know they could be programmed with any amount of personal information about a human. Calling her *you* was a deliberate ploy on the Neimoidian’s part to keep her craven and docile.

What an idiot he is. If I weren’t Bant’ena Fhernan he’d have no bioweapon out of me.

But since she *was* Bant’ena Fhernan, and all her friends and family but one were relying on her to keep them alive, then of course he’d get the precious, monstrous bioweapon he was forcing her to make. Just as soon as she worked out how to stop the toxin breaking down when more than half a beakerful was manufactured.

Telling General Durd she’d found a glitch in the process had nearly gotten *her* killed, not to mention her loved ones. A day later and she was still limping, the side of her face still sore and swollen where his fist had smashed indiscriminately into her cheek.

Without warning the lab door hissed open and there he was, back again, agitation roiling off him like stink off a marsh. It was barely the crack of dawn and he couldn’t leave her alone.

“Well? Well? Is there progress? Have you found your mistake, Doctor?”

He wasn't looking good. She'd spent enough time with Durd by now to recognize the signs of a Neimoidian in distress. His skin was pale and clammy, his hands cracked and trembling and his eyes fervid, with widely dilated pupils.

The Jedi still elude him. And if Dooku finds out about his lies, not even his precious Project will save his bloated hide. Dooku will skin him alive and give the job to someone else.

Warily, she put down her isothermogenic probe and stepped back from her lab bench. Movement skewered pain through her bruised left hip, but it was a point of honor not to show him that he'd hurt her. Probably he knew it was a charade, but even so it was almost more important than she could bear, that she keep up the act and deny him any pleasure.

"General," she said, respectfully bowing, because lives depended upon her submission. "I believe I'm making progress."

His mouth dropped open, obscenely. "Progress? That's all you can say? *Progress?*" With a garbled cry of fury he turned to the nearest battle droid, snatched its blaster from its metal grasp and started firing. Carefully programmed never to point a weapon at him, the battle droids made no attempt to save themselves.

When he was done, and the ten droids were reduced to half-melted slag, he threw the blaster aside and snatched a comlink from his tunic.

"I want more droids in the lab!" he shrieked. "Ten! Send me ten droids! Send them now! And a cleanup crew!"

She'd stopped breathing. Her heart was pounding, her lungs no more than flaccid balloons in her chest. The blood in her veins was screaming for air. But she'd frozen solid, and couldn't breathe.

He's going to kill someone. He's going to kill my nephews next. No, no, no, no ...

She showed him her pain, cried it aloud as she dropped to her knees on the lab's ferrocrete floor. "General! Please, General, let me

finish! I have isolated the unstable molecular chain. I can fix it. *I can fix it.* Please, I'm *begging* you, let me fix it!"

Was he even listening? He was flailing about the lab grunting horribly, stumbling over the destroyed battle droids, on the teetering edge of a breakdown. His rage was so elemental she wanted to be sick.

And then it was over. Eerily calm, he turned and looked at her, his odd, flat face devoid of emotion.

"Yes, Doctor," he said pleasantly. "Fix it. You have one more day. If the problem is not rectified by then, we will have to make other arrangements."

Other arrangements? What did that mean? "General—"

As though he hadn't heard her, as though she hadn't spoken, he turned and headed for the door. It hissed open before he reached it, and ten new battle droids marched in.

The lead droid snapped off a sharp salute. "Roger, roger, reporting for duty."

Durd ignored them, too, and swished his ponderous way out of the lab. Moments later two maintenance droids with a large wheeled trolley arrived and began collecting bits and pieces of blasted droid.

The new lead battle droid fixed its glowing round photo-receptors on her and gestured with its lethal blaster. "Get back to work."

Roger, roger. Trembling, hurting so badly her eyes were stinging with unshed tears, Bant'ena levered herself to her feet and got back to work.

"GENERAL DURD. You wanted to see me?"

That was Barev. Even if the human hadn't opened its mouth he'd have known it, because humans stank in many different and horrible ways. Their stink was as unique as their fingerprints, and their retinas.

They disgust me. All of them. Even Count Dooku.

His internal balance bladder shuddered, so that he rocked on his heels. *Dooku*. More than human. Much more. Much more than a Jedi. Dooku was the breathing embodiment of nightmare.

Durd turned. "You said you could find the Jedi, Colonel. You haven't. They are still here, and they are plotting my downfall. I want to know what you're doing about that."

Something of his earlier, obliterating rage must have shown in his eyes because Colonel Barev swallowed and took half a step back. "General. I am searching."

"Not very well, if you haven't found them yet."

Barev's little blue eyes widened. "Lanteeb is a large planet, General, and they are *Jedi*. They have tricks up their sleeves."

Just like that, his rage was back. "I don't care! I don't care!" he shouted, pumping his fists up and down, wishing he could pummel Barev until the human's pale skin was running with blood. "I want you to find them! I want you to find them and kill them and bring their mangled bodies to me!"

"General, that is my intention," said Barev, watching him carefully. "I am as disappointed as you are, sir."

With an effort that burst blood vessels behind his eyes, splotching his vision yellow, Durd wrestled his temper under control. "Whatever you're doing to find them, Barev, it's not working. You have to change tactics. You have to do something *different*."

Barev bowed again. "General, you and I have reached the same conclusion. Because we are hunting Jedi I feel we must look to unconventional methods. My only concern is that unconventional methods are rarely ... inexpensive."

Oh, yes? Oh, yes? He knew what *that* meant. "If I find you've cheated me, Barev, do you know what I'll do?" he said, half closing his eyes. "I'll give you to Doctor Fhernan. You can be a test subject."

And the last thing you'll hear will be me laughing as the flesh bubbles off your bones."

Barev's already pale skin drained dead white. "My word as an officer, General. There won't be any cheating."

Durd reached into his tunic pocket, pulled out a cloth and dabbed sour spittle from the corners of his mouth. "Who will you give my money to, Barev? Who is going to find my Jedi?"

"There is a ... man," Barev said slowly. "For want of a better term. A bounty hunter. He's a psychic seeker. Once he catches their scent they'll be as good as dead. Nobody escapes him, General. *Nobody*. Not ever."

A psychic seeker. That sounded promising. That sounded as if it might actually work. And if it worked then no matter how much he had to pay, the price would be worth it.

I want those Jedi scum dead.

He wiped his mouth again, then tucked the cloth away. "Very well, Barev. Send for him. Your *psychic seeker*. And for your sake, let's hope he's as good as you say."

SIX



BEHIND THE MASK HE WORE AS SUPREME CHANCELLOR PALPATINE, the Sith Lord Darth Sidious felt every exquisitely honed instinct stir. Yoda was worried. *Deeply* worried. Not merely about the war, which went badly for the Republic, but about something more personal. As the most skilled and experienced Jedi Master in the Temple, Yoda could hide those inconvenient feelings from everyone who knew him, but they were there.

And I can feel them. Try as you might, Yoda, you cannot hide from me.

Alas, he dared not risk an obvious question like: *Master Yoda, is everything all right?* Because to any other observer Yoda was his usual, emotionally uninvolved self. Not even the wonderfully sympathetic and intuitive Chancellor Palpatine could avoid arousing the Jedi's suspicions with a question like that.

He and the ancient Jedi Master were sharing tea in his stately executive suite. Just the two of them. An informal, private meeting where they could discuss the progress of the Republic's battle against the Separatists without the need for diplomatic phrasing and carefully couched assessments. Without an audience of senators and lesser-ranked Jedi and the bureaucrats whose job it was to insist upon a data trail for every decision. One day soon he would rule the galaxy in such a fashion and longingly looked forward to that time, coming ever closer now. Close enough to touch, to taste, to dream about in brief sleep.

Beyond the transparisteel windows of Palpatine's office, Coruscant sank slowly and inevitably into dusk. He loved twilight—such a

symbolic time of day. He loved to watch this sprawling, garish city-planet descend into darkness. For only in darkness could the light of the Sith truly shine.

And as Coruscant sinks ... so sinks this puling, pathetic, crumbling Republic.

Yoda was droning on about the shipboard communications crisis. Progress on purging the corruption from the GAR Fleet was slow but steady. The culprits responsible hadn't been found yet but they would be, he could assure the Supreme Chancellor of that. Experienced Jedi truth-readers were even now interviewing key shipyard and related GAR personnel. They would uncover the facts of this calamitous conspiracy and then the newly invigorated GAR would undo the damage of sabotage, thus winning back the ground lost to the Separatists.

Sagely, Sidious nodded. "Yes, yes, Master Yoda. I have no doubt of that. My confidence in your ability to overcome this regrettable reversal in our fortunes is unshaken, I do assure you."

The investigation was doomed to failure, of course—as was the purging of the GAR comm systems. The handful of Separatist operatives responsible for planting the various computer viruses in those strategic shipyards were long gone. The sabotage had been planned and executed months ago and the viruses designed with a time-release feature so that nobody involved in their creation or deployment would be found.

Better yet, there were other, dormant comm viruses yet to be revealed. Yoda and his precious Jedi and the GAR had no idea what awaited them.

"Truly, Master Yoda," he added, refilling both their cups with fragrant tea. "While I appreciate how concerned you are about this unfortunate communications situation, my office's support for the Jedi remains undiminished—as I insisted only today, when asked by HoloNet News for my opinion of the war effort."

Yoda's ears dipped, the tiniest fraction, and his stubby fingers tightened around the handle of his cup.

Sidious hid a smile. "I do avoid making public statements to them whenever I can. Generally speaking I find these journalists strident and confrontational—but Mas Amedda assures me that I must, from time to time, relax my standards. Would that it were not necessary, Master Yoda. But I feel confident that today, at least, I've managed to shore up any wavering public support for the Jedi."

"Appreciate that I do, Supreme Chancellor," said Yoda, after a brief hesitation. "Patience the public must have as the defeat of Count Dooku's Separatists we pursue."

"That's very true," Sidious said gravely. "I know I have *great* faith in the efficacy of patience. Although I fear it is fast becoming a lost art. Now, was there anything else you wished to tell me, Master Yoda?"

Yoda put down his cup. "To Master Windu did I speak earlier, Supreme Chancellor. Almost restored the Kothlis spynet facility is. Significantly upgraded has its security been."

Yes, so he'd heard. The news did not please him. He'd been hoping for a few accidents. A little useful friction. "Excellent, Master Yoda. I knew we could count on Master Windu for that. Although ..."

"A concern you have, Supreme Chancellor?"

"I'm afraid I do," he said. "I'm not at all sure that the compromise proposed by Senator Organa is going to work out long-term. In light of that monster Grievous's attack, Kothlis's new government is understandably nervous. They've begun expressing certain ... reservations ... about the notion of us removing experienced ships and personnel from patrolling their system and handing over their protection to less seasoned GAR troops."

Yoda looked like he wanted to spit. "Told I am, by Master Windu, that exceeded expectations the younger clones and their GAR

officers have. Fearful for its future Kothlis need not be. And needed elsewhere Master Windu and the experienced GAR personnel are.”

“Oh, I know,” he said, raising a placating hand. “Master Yoda, you don’t need to convince *me*. But my friend, herein lies the heart of our dilemma. By your own admission we are heavily reliant upon the intelligence gathered by Kothlis and its sister facilities on Bothawui.” He leaned forward. “Now, if it should come to pass that these shortsighted bureaucrats lose faith in our ability to protect them, well, as far as I can tell there is nothing stopping them from reconsidering their loyalties. Do you see what I’m saying?”

“To the Separatists you think they might turn?” Yoda’s ears flattened and his lips pinched tight. “No sense of that do I feel in the Force, Supreme Chancellor.”

Delicately he cleared his throat. “Haven’t you said, Master Yoda, that the dark side clouds the future? I’m afraid, if that’s the case, that I can’t help wondering if you’re absolutely certain you can rely on what you feel.”

And there again, sharply, he noticed that flare of unbridled anxiety in the little green troll.

“Confident I am that abide by its agreement with us Kothlis will,” said Yoda, his emotions under control again. “Trust me on this you must.”

“Of course, of course,” Sidious said, exhibiting the proper amount of hasty assurance. “I’m so sorry, Master Yoda. I had no intention of suggesting that you are anything but in total control of the situation.”

Yoda nodded. “Know that I do, Supreme Chancellor. And appreciate your support the Jedi do. The Jedi’s staunchest ally in this war you are.”

He was hard put not to laugh out loud. “Indeed I am, Master Yoda. Indeed I am. But still—I must insist that Master Windu remain on Kothlis for the time being. Until its government is less skittish.”

“Supreme Chancellor—”

“Please, Master Yoda,” he said, pretending distress. “Do not make me take a tone we’ll both regret. In this instance, I’m afraid politics must trump strategy.”

“Very well, Supreme Chancellor,” Yoda said after a moment. “For the time being.”

“Excellent.” He looked at the chrono glowing on his desk. “Now, I should let you get back to the fight. Only—before you go—if I might beg an indulgence of you and ask for word of young Anakin? I had thought to invite him to speak about the Jedi life with a delegation from the Rantofaran Conglomerate but I can’t seem to find him.”

Yoda went so completely still he came close to vanishing within the Force ... and then his simmering anxiety leapt again, like a supernova. Leapt so high and so hot that it actually threatened to escape his formidable control.

“Young Skywalker?” said Yoda, the faintest thread of tension in his voice. “On Coruscant he is not at present, Supreme Chancellor.”

Yes, you old fool. That much I had ascertained for myself. “He’s on a mission, then?”

And oh, how it galled Yoda to admit even that much. “Yes, Supreme Chancellor. With Master Kenobi has he gone. To see you I will send him when he returns.”

Sidious waited a moment, in case Yoda decided to supply even a crumb of information about Anakin’s latest assignment. When it became clear that the Jedi had no intention of confiding details—and knowing that to push would achieve nothing but a stirring of Yoda’s suspicions—he accepted the temporary defeat and smiled.

“Well, Master Yoda, whatever my young friend is doing I’m sure it will end in yet more brilliant success,” he said. “And I thank you for giving up your precious time to me this evening. I know how tired you must be, working so diligently for our Republic’s victory. But unless there’s anything urgent I should know, I’m afraid I must ask

you to excuse me. I have some rather tricky negotiations to conclude with the Shahmistra of J'doytzin Three. One of those awkward conversations that sadly cannot be trusted to the Diplomatic Bureau."

"Of course, Supreme Chancellor," said Yoda, and slid from his chair to the floor. "Apprised will I keep you of matters regarding Kothlis. And if further whispers of dissatisfaction from its government you should hear ..."

"Then I shall tell you immediately," Sidious said. "On that you have my word."

Yoda nodded, the closest he ever came to a properly respectful obeisance, summoned his gimer stick to his hand and made his doddering, ancient way out of the office.

Darth Sidious watched the doors hiss shut behind his enemy, then indulged in a single, silent snarl of fury. How unfortunate that Palpatine did indeed have a meeting with the tedious Shahmistra. But when that business was concluded and the night belonged to him alone, then would he investigate this matter of Anakin.

For I am uneasy. I sense that something is wrong.

VAGUELY DISQUIETED, Yoda returned to the Temple in a Senate speeder, so deeply lost in thought that for once the beauty of the Coruscant night failed to touch him.

There was nothing specific he could point to, but of late he found himself uneasy in Palpatine's presence. He couldn't explain it. He knew only that something felt ... off-kilter. But so much was off-kilter these days that he'd kept his feelings of unease to himself, not even confiding them to Mace Windu.

Was it Palpatine's continued meddling with Anakin Skywalker? Never in the administration's history had a Chancellor been so personally involved with the Jedi. Or was it Palpatine's slow and steady march toward absolute control in the Senate? It didn't matter that not once had he requested these expansions of his jurisdiction,

these amendments to the Republic Constitution that allowed him such far-reaching influence over so many lives. Nor did it matter that the more power Palpatine was given, the more reluctant it seemed he was to use it, stepping in to resolve a dispute or create legislation only when the Senate begged him to act. And of course he was never anything but fulsome in his praise and steadfast in his support of the Jedi.

Even so, by this politician troubled I am. Trust him more I would if his ambition could I clearly see.

And that thought had him shaking his head. Surely a politician motivated purely by service to the Republic, with no thought for his own success or personal power, was precisely the kind of leader these dark times required? Wasn't that Bail Organa's brand of politics, and did he not trust and admire the senator from Alderaan? Yes. He did. Which must mean his concern over Palpatine was misplaced. After all, Senator Amidala had complete faith in him. And as he trusted Bail Organa so did he trust Naboo's former queen.

But trust them more than my own feelings, do I?

That was indeed the question. And if he had learned one thing during his long, eventful life, it was that any being who did not permit self-doubt would certainly, at some point, make a grave error in judgment. Nine hundred years had granted him many advantages, but infallibility wasn't one of them.

Weary am I. Worry for Obi-Wan and Anakin do I feel. Distort perceptions this can. Clear my mind I must and seek for answers in the Force.

And he would, just as soon as he'd taken care of two last pressing concerns. The first thing he did upon his return to the Temple was make his way to the quietly bustling communications center, where Master Ban-yaro waited.

"I'm sorry, Master Yoda, but there's still no word," Ban-yaro said, as though the silence were his fault. His dark face was slack with weariness, his violet eyes shadowed. "I'm monitoring every possible

frequency, I've diverted as much power as I can to the tracking station, and I've tasked the central unit to a triple-redundancy voiceprint search with a plus or minus variation of fifty. If Obi-Wan and Anakin are trying to reach us, I'll hear them. If their signal's been diverted or degraded, I'll find it. But if you want my absolutely honest opinion—"

"Always, Ban-yaro," he said, frowning.

"I think they've gone dark. And I think we need to trust that they will find a way to communicate with us as soon as they can. Unless —" Ban-yaro shook his head. "But you don't think they're dead, do you?"

It was a statement, not a question. As befitted a communications expert, Ban-yaro was a highly attuned, highly sensitive Jedi. "No. In trouble only," Yoda replied.

Ban-yaro's lips pinched. "And that's bad enough. Have no fear, Master Yoda. This will stay between us. I'm using a dedicated private console for my search."

"Your discretion I trust completely, Ban-yaro. And agree with your plan of action I do. Alert me you will when contact our missing Jedi make, even if with the Supreme Chancellor I am."

Hands folded before him, Ban-yaro nodded. "Yes, Master."

From the communications center Yoda made his way down to the lowest levels of the Temple, where the Alderaanian biochemist labored to find a defense against Dooku's bioweapon. A good man, Tryn Netzl. Of course that was to be expected; he was Organa's friend, after all.

So engrossed was the scientist in his work, he didn't notice at first that he was no longer alone. And when he did finally realize, he nearly tripped over himself with surprise.

"Master Yoda! How long have—when did you—" Netzl tossed datapad and stylus to his bench and dragged his forearm across his face. This evening his shirt was striped black and white, his trousers

were electric purple, his socks vibrant pink, and his clogs sun yellow. His long pale hair had mostly escaped its braiding, and his eyes—eerily emerald now—blazed in a hawkish face grown thinner in alarmingly little time.

“Doctor Netzl. Come, I have, to see how you progress.”

Half laughing, Netzl flattened his hands to his face. “Oh. You know.” His shaking voice was muffled. “Slowly.”

Besides Netzl, Bant’ena Fhernan had recommended three other scientists who possessed the skills for this daunting task. If what he sensed from Organa’s friend was no exaggeration, perhaps it was time to consider an alternative approach.

“Doctor Netzl,” he said sternly, and rapped his gimer stick to the laboratory floor. “A question I will ask you and answer honestly you must.”

Netzl lowered his hands, blinking. “Sorry? What?”

“Assistance do you require to complete your work here?”

“Assistants?” Netzl shook his head. “No. I don’t like working with lab assistants. I spend half of my time explaining what I’m doing and—oh. Wait. That’s not what you meant, is it?”

“No. It is not.”

Netzl dug his knuckles into his eyes and pressed hard. “Sorry, Master Yoda. I’m a bit tired.” He let his hands drop by his sides, then shoved them into the frayed pockets of his lab coat. “No. Thank you. I appreciate the offer but I don’t need any outside help.”

“Sure are you, Doctor, that out of misplaced pride you do not speak?”

Tryn Netzl’s pointed chin lifted. “Quite sure. Because all *I* care about is saving lives. And no matter how technically proficient those other scientists Fhernan named might be, they have different priorities. But you know that already, Master Yoda.”

He did. The Force had told him quite plainly that this odd human was the man they needed to defeat Dooku and his henchman Durd. But even so ...

“Close to an antidote are you at this moment, Doctor Netzl?”

His pale face flushed, Netzl turned away. “I don’t know how to answer that. It always feels like you’re a million parsecs from success, right up to the instant when everything falls into place.”

Yoda rapped his gimer stick on the floor again. “Answer me precisely, you should. On your success countless innocent lives depend.”

“Goddess below, Master Yoda,” Netzl said raggedly. “You think I don’t *know* that? But I can only tell you what I told Bail: I’ll do my best, but I can’t promise you a *thing*.” Breathing hard, he leaned a fist against his lab bench and let it take his body’s full, sagging weight. “This toxin’s formula is a tricky beast. It has a branched, quadruple-helixed molecular matrix that’s specifically designed to resist any kind of disruptive agent. Yes, there are individual components that I can neutralize. That I *have* neutralized. It’s just—” Netzl’s other fist thumped the bench. “I’m missing something. If I can just work out what it is, see what I’m *not* seeing, then—”

“And convinced you are that no other eyes but yours should look?”

Netzl hunched over the lab bench. “I know it seems like I’m being stubborn and territorial ...” He turned his head, far enough to reveal one wide, tormented green eye. “But yes. I’m convinced. All I need is a little more time.”

Sighing again, feeling the weight of his years keenly, Yoda rested his chin on his chest. “The gift of time mine to give you is not, Doctor. In enemy hands does that gift lie.”

“I know,” Netzl said. “But don’t worry. I’ll get it. Every problem has a solution. All you have to do is look at it in exactly the right way.”

And that declaration was a kind of promise, born of fear and a quiet desperation. This was a good man. A man to trust and leave alone to his difficult work. Only—

“No use to us or anyone will you be, Doctor Netzl, if collapsed you are from lack of rest and food,” Yoda said sternly. “Trust you, can I, to take care of yourself? Or like a child must I treat you and send over a nurse?”

Netzl pushed away from the lab bench and, bemused, stared down at him. “You sound like my grandmother.”

For the third time Yoda struck the floor with his gimer stick. “Then a wise woman she is. And both of us you will heed.”

“Master,” said Netzl, and clasped his hands to bow, “I’m fine. But thank you. I truly do appreciate your concern.”

He nodded. “And appreciate do I your good heart and hard work. Our senior healer will I send to you. Ease your body and mind Vokara Che will.”

And without giving the scientist a chance to argue further, he turned and left the lab.

BECAUSE HE WAS YODA, his float chair was stopped over and over again as he made his way to the upper levels of the Temple. Padawans and younglings and Jedi Knights all knew they could approach him for advice and he would listen.

Though scores of Jedi had been lost on Geonosis, and scores more now served in the theater of war, the lives of those residing in the Temple, or visiting, continued. There were younglings to cherish and teach, older students to challenge and assess. There were the ill and wounded to care for and healers to train. And of course there were still countless civilian disputes to settle, as well as research to conduct and knowledge to accumulate and safeguard.

Sometimes—particularly when he was the only Council member resident in the Temple—the sheer weight of his calling threatened

to flatten him. That was why he wanted Mace Windu released from his current assignment. He keenly felt his friend's absence.

With a dozen questions answered and a dozen more small problems solved, he at last reached his austere private chamber. Blessedly alone, he activated his personal holoimager and initiated a comm signal.

"I can't say I'm surprised," Mace said, upon hearing of Palpatine's desire that he stay indefinitely on Kothlis. *"The interim government's very nervous. This attack coming after the attempt on Bothawui—the ruling council's convinced Grievous will come back to finish what he started."*

"Hmmm." Seated on his meditation pad, Yoda rubbed his chin. "Sense that as a probability, do you?"

Mace didn't answer for quite some time. *"It disturbs me to admit this, but I'm having trouble sensing anything right now,"* he said at last, his face somber. *"Partly that's because of the general unease and upheaval in the local population—"*

"—and partly because the dark side keeps the future hidden," Yoda finished for him, sighing. "Your concerns I share. Similar difficulties am I experiencing myself."

"Yet you still don't think it's time to warn the Senate?"

"No. No," he said, as close to alarm as he ever permitted himself to come. "More important than ever it is that the Senate does not know. Not until we have unmasked the identity of the Sith Lord can we reveal the extent of the dark side's interference."

Slowly, Mace nodded. *"I'll be guided by you on that. But regarding my situation—you did make it clear to Palpatine that my continued presence on Kothlis isn't helping with the greater war effort?"*

"Told him I did. Agree to deny the Kothlis government's request to keep you there he would not. Insist on your return I will—but not yet."

Because the last thing he needed right now was a conflict with Palpatine. Once the crisis on Lanteeb was resolved—then would he fight the Supreme Chancellor for Mace’s return. Fight ... and win.

“And everything else is all right? You seem a little—distracted.”

More than anything he wanted to confide his fears for Obi-Wan and Anakin to his friend. But some deep instinct warned him to keep the news to himself for now. Not because he couldn’t trust Mace, but because he was so aware of the dark side’s increasing menace. Some things were simply best kept secret.

“No,” he said. “All is well, Master Windu.”

The look on Mace’s face was skeptical, but he didn’t push. And then something out of holocam range caught his attention. He looked away, nodded, and looked back again.

“Yoda, I’m needed elsewhere. But you know where to find me if I can be of help.”

“Indeed I do,” Yoda said, and disconnected the comm. Then, before he could think about organizing a light supper, his apartment door chimed.

It was Taria Damsin.

His spirits sank, seeing her. “Master Damsin—”

“I’m sorry, Master Yoda,” she said, not sounding sorry at all: defiant as only the dying could be. “But I need to talk to you. A few minutes. Please.”

He could deny her. Perhaps he should. But he couldn’t bring himself to disappoint her.

“Very well,” he said. “A few minutes I have to spare.”

She sat comfortably cross-legged on the second meditation pad in his room; the disease had yet to turn her bones to chalk. Her beautiful hair, tamed in a tidy braid, lay over her shoulder. Discarding his gimer stick he sat opposite her, just as comfortable, and lifted his hand slightly so she knew she might speak.

“Obi-Wan’s in trouble,” she said baldly. “Something’s gone very wrong. And if I can feel it, then I know you can, too. Send me to Lanteeb, Master. I know I can help.”

He shook his head. “Impossible that is, Taria. More than likely the Separatists on Lanteeb on high alert have been placed. Doubtful it is that their security you could breach.”

“Master Yoda—” Leaning forward, her topaz eyes hot with intent, she pressed her fists to her knees. “We both know I’m one of the best shadows in the Temple. I can find him. I can find *them*. And whatever trouble they’re in, I can help get them out of it. Please. We can’t just *leave* them there.”

“Taria ...” Profoundly troubled, Yoda considered her with a half-lidded gaze. “One of the Temple’s best shadows you were. No longer is that true.”

Nothing showed outwardly, but he felt her wounded flinch through the Force. “You’re right,” she said, her voice taut. “But I’m good enough. There are some things you don’t forget, Master Yoda. Shadowplay is one of them. Please let me do this. Or are you going to pretend that we can afford to lose him?”

“Value does every Jedi have, Taria. To place one above the rest is not the Jedi way.”

A flash of derision in her glowing eyes. “I’m not talking about accolades and empty praise. I’m talking about—well, you know what I’m talking about. Obi-Wan’s not an ordinary Jedi.” Her eyebrows lifted. “Or did you think I meant Anakin Skywalker?”

Very interesting. “Explain what you mean I think you must, Master Damsin.”

She had the knack of sitting perfectly still and letting the Force flow through her like blood. He remembered her as a small child, almost too old to begin Jedi training. But the Force had glowed so brightly within her that she’d been accepted. And her service to the Order had been just as bright until she was blighted. Now her light

was growing dim. Unexpected grief struck him. He had outlived so many Jedi. He should be used to this. And yet ...

“I honestly don’t remember when I first realized, or understood,” she said, her voice soft, her sharp face soft, too. “Maybe I always did. Maybe I was born knowing it. But even when it seemed he’d completely lost his way—made those dreadful mistakes over Melida/Daan—I knew Obi-Wan would come back to us, Master Yoda. I knew his fate lay with the Jedi. And I know that somehow *all* our fates are in his hands.”

How easy it would be to wave aside her words as the fancies of a desperately ill woman. But above all things he held truth to be sacred, so he had no choice but to nod.

“Fated Obi-Wan is, Taria,” he said quietly. “Fated, too, is Anakin. Entwined their lives were destined to be. Brought together by the Force they were. Protected by the Force they *are*. To safety will it bring them when the time is right.”

And now Taria trembled. “Is that true?” she whispered. “Have you seen it, Master Yoda?”

He didn’t discuss his Force visions with any Jedi outside the Council. And he certainly wasn’t about to mention his ongoing struggle with the dark side. “My permission to leave the Temple you have sought, Master Damsin. My permission to leave the Temple you have not received. Accept my decision you must.”

A breath caught in her throat, and she blinked hard. Then she bowed her head. “Thank you for seeing me, Master Yoda.”

He nodded without comment, and that was her dismissal.

But at his door she hesitated, then turned. “You might as well know that Ahsoka’s felt trouble, too. She’s got enormous potential, Master. If her precious Skyguy’s not back soon, Padawan or not, she’s going to kick up a fuss.”

Ah, yes. Ahsoka. Another soul destined to temper Anakin’s steel. But Padawan Tano, like Taria Damsin, would have to content herself

with trust. As for himself ... alone again he closed his eyes and opened his weary mind to the Force.

Show me Anakin. Show me Obi-Wan. Safe from harm I would see them.

But what he saw, at long last, only filled him with dismay.

* * *

IT TOOK PALPATINE half an hour to woo the Shahmistra of J'doytzin III, and by the end of it he thought his face would crack from smiling. As a small personal reward he promised himself that His Illustriousness would be among the first to experience retribution from the forces of a galaxy united under the Sith.

The meeting concluded, able at last to cast the Supreme Chancellor aside, Sidious stood on the balcony of his sumptuous apartment, soothing his temper with the Coruscant night. Day by day he could feel the darkness building, feel the light side's pitiful, mewling retreat. No wonder Yoda could no longer read the future: he had nurtured the dark side here until the light side's overthrow was almost complete.

Free now to ponder the vexing question of Anakin, he opened his mind to the dark side's vortex.

Where are you, my young friend? My apprentice-in-waiting? Where has Yoda sent you ... and why is the little troll afraid?

He searched and searched, but Anakin was elusive. Merely a shadow on the far edge of sight. Try as he might, he could not bring the boy any closer. Then he sought for Kenobi, but Qui-Gon's inconvenient apprentice was equally hard to find. What he *did* sense, cold and clear and unequivocal, was trouble surrounding Dooku.

The Count knew better than to keep his Master waiting. He answered his comm after three chimes, his holoimage staticky with distance and the vagaries of space.

“My lord Sidious,” Dooku said, more than usually deferential. “How may I serve you?”

“By confessing your failure, Tyranus,” he snapped. “And explaining how you intend to rectify your mistake.”

Dooku gasped. *“Lord Sidious, there is no failure. At least—it is true the government of Umgul has weakened in its resolve to join us, but—”*

“What?” It had been a long and irritating day, so he surrendered himself to the luxury of rage. “Weakened? Tyranus, you assured me you had them eating out of your hand!”

Dooku dropped to one knee, his silver head bent low. *“My lord, I do not know—yet—what has happened. But I have an appointment tomorrow with Protector Chanso-ba. I will be able to read him then, and learn who has dared to interfere with our plans.”*

“See you that do,” Sidious said. “Umgul’s revolt is required so that other systems are emboldened to join them and further weaken the Senate.” With a deep, shuddering breath he leashed his temper. “And what of the Project? Is Durd’s scientist on track?”

“She is, my lord,” said Dooku. *“The weapon will soon be ready to deploy.”*

A tickle in the back of his mind made him pause. “You’re sure of that?”

“Yes, my lord. Durd promises that’s the case and he would not dare lie to me. He knows the punishment if he does.”

There was no question Dooku believed it—so he would need to be content with the belief, for the moment.

But I am counting the days until the old fool is but a memory ... and I have a worthier apprentice to stand by my side.

He gave Dooku a sharp nod. “Very well. You will inform me the moment the weapon is completed. And you will make sure the Umgul Cabinet votes to join the Separatists. Do I make myself clear, Lord Tyranus?”

Durd wasn't the only one who understood the price of failure. Now Dooku's forehead was resting on his bended knee. *"My lord Sidious, I hear you and I shall obey."*

"Good," he said, then severed the connection.

And after that stood long in the sweet night, drinking in the dark.

SEVEN



IT TOOK OBI-WAN AND ANAKIN NEARLY TWO HOURS TO THOROUGHLY explore Torbel, mainly because they were the object of much interest and surprise. Though harsh times had bruised its inhabitants' spirits, they still challenged the strangers wandering their streets, the animal pastures, the central artesian well, the common food store and mostly empty poultry barn, the schoolroom, the machinery workshop, the antiquated power plant, the storm-shield generators, the locked buildings whose purpose wasn't immediately apparent, and the junkyard where dead groundcars and antigrav floaters were laid to rest and rust. Interestingly, there was no human graveyard. It could be these people cremated their dead.

They told only four villagers the sad tale of Yavid and Markl's drought-ruined farm, their flight to the beast-infested Core, and how they hoped for a better life now they'd returned to Lanteeb. After that the story spread of its own accord and soon they found themselves confirming their history instead of explaining it.

"Just like Mos Espa's slave quarter," Anakin said under his breath. "Everybody knows everybody else and nothing much stays secret."

Obi-Wan nudged him with an elbow. *Not now.*

They'd accumulated a gaggle of children, who seemingly had nothing better to do than tag along in the newcomers' wake, giggling and whispering and kicking a soggily inflated synthafibe ball. Their ringleader was a girl of perhaps eleven or twelve seasons; skinny in a patched shift dress, barefoot, with brown eyes that were older than Teeba Jaklin's. She wore a red braided bracelet about her bony left wrist, and her sun-streaked dark hair had been hacked

raggedly to chin length. She didn't play with the ball like the other children, only watched from the sidelines and growled when things got too rough. And when she wasn't watching her little tribe she was watching Torbel's newcomers from beneath lowered eyelashes, her lips pursed in a thoughtful way that made them both think of Yoda.

Having worked their way around the village, finding nothing to wake their uneasily sleeping sense of alarm, Obi-Wan and Anakin returned to the beaten-dirt square and the charter house. Its doors were open now and a woman who had to be Teeba Brandeh stood on the broad step, hands on her narrow hips, watching the children scatter across the square to play a proper game of kickball.

Grinning, without bothering to ask if he might, or if it were wise, or if they had the time to spare, so independent these days, Anakin jogged to join them. After a moment's amazed hesitation the children welcomed him with squeals of delight, rough-and-tumbled him into their midst and made him one of their own.

Obi-Wan shook his head.

"He's nice," said the girl with the bracelet and the ragged hair, wandering over to stand beside him. "Don't be cross with him, Teeb Yavid."

He glanced down at her. "You know my name?"

"I've got ears."

"Yes. I see that. Two of them. And what makes you think I'm cross?"

That earned him a derisive look. "I'm not a blind one neither. You can smile all you like, Teeb. Underneath it you're cross."

Well, well, well. Idly, Obi-Wan stretched out his senses and straightaway felt the potential in this child. What a pity she was half grown and could never be a Jedi.

"I'm Greti," she said. "I don't have sibbers or a da. My mam's Bohle. She hurt her hand."

Bohle. One of the miners he and Anakin were replacing. "I'm sorry to hear that, Greti. How did she hurt it?"

"In the refinery," said the girl, her brows pulled tight. "If you work in there you got to have a care for your hands, Teeb. And if you work in the mine you got to have a care for all. Even your toes, boots or no boots. Teeb Jyml lost his toes, once, and he was wearing boots. But he's dead now. The years got him."

Her matter-of-factness moved him. "Will your mother's hand be all right?"

Greti shrugged. "Don't think so, Teeb. I think it's set to go poison on her."

"But—" Gathering his thoughts, disciplining himself, he watched Anakin scoop up one small excited boy, too young to kick the ball, and zoom him overhead like a fighter chasing a vulture droid. The boy nearly sickened himself with laughing. "Greti, are you saying—"

"Could be the convoy might take us to 'tibba, when it comes. There's a medcenter there, I heard once," the girl said. "Only if we have to pay, that could be a trouble."

Obi-Wan frowned. He and Anakin had money kept safe in their shirts' shielded pockets. They wouldn't miss it.

Or I could try to heal Bohle myself.

Except that would jeopardize his cover, wouldn't it? Of course, there was a chance he might be able to hide his tracks. Not heal the girl's mother completely, only nudge her body in the right direction

But no. It was simply too dangerous. And how could he in good conscience take Anakin to task for his impetuositities in one breath, and in the next indulge one of his own? Even in a good cause?

“I’m very sorry, Greti,” he said, feeling a twist beneath his ribs. “I hope your mother gets better.”

Greti stared at him, curious, and touched her sun-browned hand to his dirty sleeve. “You are sorry, aren’t you? You’re a nice man, too.”

On the steps of the charter house, Teeba Brandeh clapped her hands. “You children, you get along now!” she bellowed, her deep voice carrying like a marketplace spruiker. “You’re wanted for chores and schooling!”

Greti sighed. “I hope you like mining, Teeb Yavid. I hope you think to stay.”

He had to force a smile. “Nothing’s writ in stone, Greti. We’ll see.”

Without looking back at him the girl skipped across the bare dirt to gather her tribe and chivvy them to where they were meant to be. They wandered off, reluctant, waving good-bye to their new Teeb friend, little faces alight with their few moments of pleasure.

“What?” said Anakin, coming back. “What’s that look for?”

He glowered. “You know perfectly well.”

“Relax, Obi-Wan,” Anakin said. “Trust me, the fastest way to these people’s hearts is through their children. Get the children on our side and the adults will welcome us.”

“So that was merely a cynical exercise in the manipulation of a local populace?”

“Oh, no,” said Anakin, grinning. “It was fun too.”

May the Force give me strength. “And that business with the boy? Because when I said no heavy lifting I—”

Anakin’s amusement vanished. “He wasn’t heavy. These younglings are skin and bone. I look at them and—” He clenched his jaw. “Anyway. We’ve poked around and found nothing to worry us *and* we’ve broken the ice. So probably we should report to Rikkard.”

Heading to the mine, where they could see a bustle of activity, feeling the sun's heat build as it climbed higher in the milky blue sky, they passed a pitted, banged-up piece of electronics equipment wired to a tip-tilted metal pole.

"It's a theta monitor," Obi-Wan said, stopping to look. "In working order, despite appearances."

"Needle's in the green," said Anakin. "Good. One less thing to worry about." He tapped the gauge once, just to be sure. "You ever ride out a theta storm?"

Obi-Wan shook his head. "No."

"Me, neither," said Anakin. "And that suits me just fine."

"Qui-Gon survived one, his first year as a Jedi Knight," he said as they moved on. "He was lucky. Three others with him didn't get to shelter in time. They took days to die, in excruciating agony."

Anakin looked at him. "You know, sooner or later you're going to tell me a happy story, I just know you are."

Before he could defend himself, a warning siren blared from the mine. A moment later they felt the ground vibrate, faint shudders whispering through the planet far below.

"Huh," said Anakin. "How deep was that, do you think?"

"Deep," he said, touched by foreboding. "It feels like they're hollowing the planet."

A second siren sounded, and moments later a line of laden antigrav floaters emerged from the mine, heading for the refinery. Windowless, its tall, cylindrical ventilation shafts belched dirty greenish gray smoke.

Anakin coughed as an errant breeze blew the acrid discharge into their faces. "Stang, that's filthy stuff," he said, rasping. "I hope Jaklin's right about her pills or we'll be—" And then he slowed, his sudden unease surging through the Force. "Obi-Wan ..." He shook his head, coughing again. "That's a lot of damotite."

Each heavily burdened antigrav floater was being guided to the refinery by a villager wrapped head-to-toe in stifling protective gear. Frowning, Obi-Wan counted six. Yes indeed, that *was* a lot of damotite. And it was only a fraction of the quota required for the next shipment to Lantibba.

“Look,” Anakin said. “I know we need to lay low until the convoy gets here, which means blending in with the locals, but—Obi-Wan, we can’t help Durd make his bioweapon. We just can’t.”

Anakin’s distress was a thin, sour note in the Force. “What are you suggesting?” Obi-Wan said gently. “That we sabotage the mine?”

“And the refinery,” said Anakin. “That way we can be certain Durd won’t get his hands on any more damotite for his weapon.”

“Anakin—” He ran a hand down his face. *I knew we’d be having this argument sooner or later.* “Were you not listening to Teeba Jaklin? If this village fails to meet the government-mandated quota it will have its food supply cut short. You saw how empty the common storehouse is. And with their crops unripe these villagers are already living from hand to mouth. I’d have thought that you of all people would appreciate the gravity of their situation.”

Anakin’s lips thinned. “Of course I appreciate it. But we can’t—”

“Yes, Anakin, we *can*,” he said, watching a groundcar approach them from the mine. “And we must. What we do here will change nothing. Durd’s already in possession of enough damotite to mass-produce his toxin. I know the idea of providing him with more is distasteful, but you’ll have to grit your teeth and bear it. Remember it won’t be for long.”

“Yes, but—”

“Anakin, *no*,” he said. “If we do anything to arouse Rikkard’s suspicions our mission will fail, which will help Durd a great deal more than us hacking a few bucketloads of damotite out of the ground. And what I don’t understand is why I have to *explain* that to you!”

Anakin turned away, his gloved prosthetic fingers flexing and unflexing as though he desperately wanted something to hit. The Force trembled with his anger and frustration, chaotic emotions he should have long since learned how to control.

That I thought he did control. This mission has him quite disordered.

"I know," Anakin said, resentful. "You're right. I just—blast it."

The approaching groundcar was so close now, Obi-Wan could see who was driving. *Stang*. "I do understand how you feel, Anakin. But we have to be smart about this."

Anakin's anger gave way to rueful affection. "You never give up, do you?"

"On you?" He allowed himself a small, answering smile. "No. Never."

"Teeb Yavid! Teeb Markl!"

That was Rikkard, shouting from the groundcar. From the look on his face, it seemed he wasn't happy at all. They exchanged resigned glances and hurried to meet it.

"Teeb Rikkard, you have a wonderful village!" Obi-Wan said, hunching a little and letting his hands flutter in an innocent excitement. "It's so friendly, so well organized. Little treasures, the children."

Scowling behind the wheel of his idling machine, Rikkard ignored the fulsome praise. "Are you suntouched, Teebs? Do you know how long you've dawdled up here while there's work and more work waiting down in the mine? You say you want to live in Torbel, you say you want to prove your worth. All you prove is *I'm* suntouched to hear you!"

"The fault's mine, Teeb," said Anakin quickly. "I got to gagging with your young ones. My cousin was just rousting me for it. We'll work every hour that's left in the day. Don't be thinking twice about us, Teeb. Please."

Rikkard gnawed at his lower lip, his scars livid in the sunshine. Then he jerked his chin. "Climb in back. You'll get today to prove I shouldn't pack you out of this place."

"Thank you," said Obi-Wan, giving Anakin a little push. "You're a good man, Teeb."

Angrily silent, Rikkard drove them to the mine, then led them through its elaborately shielded entrance and down a flight of enclosed stairs to the first underground level. There he rummaged in a huge locker, pulled out two bulkily protective outerwear suits, and waited impatiently as they fastened themselves inside. The suits stank of other men's and women's labor, so heavy they woke every quiescent cut and bruise. Then he gave them synthafibe overboots, gloves and stout, battered helmets, and they put those on, too.

"You don't take them off," Rikkard said sternly, leading them to a metal cage on a pulley that was poised above the entrance to a narrow, plunging shaft. Faint but definite sounds of miners and machinery floated out of it, and through the soles of their boots they could feel a steady, distant thrum. "Especially not now, for we loosened a new chamber and there's chunk damotite enough to crush your skulls."

"Is that what happened to you?" said Anakin as they climbed inside the cage's insubstantial metal fretwork.

Rikkard's ungloved fingers tapped over his scars. "It did."

"You're not helmeted now."

"I'm back to the refinery when you're settled," said Rikkard, clanging closed the cage door. "I'll not be down here for long."

"I thought you were shorthanded."

"Shorthanded or not, someone still must take the lead," said Rikkard, staring. "Teeb, you talk a great deal. Men learn best by listening."

"Sorry," Anakin muttered. "Just wondering, I was."

Hitting the cage's pulley switch, Rikkard stared harder. "Wonder on your own time. You belong to me until you don't."

"Teeb," Obi-Wan said swiftly, before Anakin reacted to *belong*. "Up above I met Greti. Bohle's daughter."

With a growling grind of metal pulley teeth against metal cable, the cage began its slow, swinging descent of the rough-hewn shaft. Strung lights glowed within grubby plastiseal housings, reflecting yellow against streaks of raw damotite in the walls. The sounds of mining grew nearer and louder. All around them the ground pressed close.

"Greti?" Rikkard raised an eyebrow. "What of her?"

"Worried, she seemed, for her mother's hurt hand."

"Worried she should be," said Rikkard. "Bohle made a fool mistake and she's paying a steep price for it."

Life in Torbel was brutal, so the miner's harshness wasn't surprising, but even so ... "There's nothing you can do for her?"

"What we can do, we've done," said Rikkard, one shoulder lifting in a fatalistic shrug. "Mining's no soft business, Teeb. You'll learn that today, along with how to swing a vibro-pick." His teeth bared in a smile. "Mind now—there'll be bumping to throw you." He yanked a lever beside the pulley switch. "Keep your feet."

They were passing the next level down, where suited figures were transferring chunks of raw damotite from trolley trucks into a huge metal bucket suspended on bulky chains in another shaft.

"Keep your feet!" Rikkard said again, louder this time, as their metal cage shuddered and swung and banged against the wall.

Obi-Wan glanced at Anakin and shook his head in a small, swift warning. Yes, they could ride the Force and be as easy and unperturbed as Rikkard—but Rikkard knew them for farmers. If they weren't awkward and clumsy, they'd arouse his suspicions.

The metal cage bounced harder on its pulley ropes and they let themselves stagger, then tumble clumsily against each other. Anakin went farther, letting himself drop halfway to the cage floor. Amused, as hard men were often amused by a green one, Rikkard laughed.

“Keep your feet, I told you,” he said, hauling Anakin upright. “Ah well. You’ll get your cage legs one of these days—if you stay.”

They rode down four more levels, making sure to stagger at each rough transition. On every level suit-shrouded villagers pulled raw damotite out of the soil. So much green mineral—planets and planets and planets of death, thanks to Lok Durd and Bant’ena Fhernan. The air grew heavier and warmer, even though there was some kind of filtration system working. The shaft lighting flickered, throwing shadows that turned them into men of nightmare and deception. Inside their own protective suiting the sweat poured and pooled. Obi-Wan felt it stinging the blaster-bolt grazes he’d earned in Durd’s compound. Compressed against his rib cage, his lightsaber felt like a weapon from another life. Almost a dream.

And then the cage bumped to a halt, and Rikkard swung its door wide. “Bottomed out, we are,” he said, waving them ahead. “Here’s where we loosened the new chamber. Here’s where you’ll get your first true taste of Torbel.”

Obi-Wan looked at the suited figures toiling in the three cramped corridors leading away from the cage platform. Through the Force he could feel the miners’ grim, oppressive thoughts and fears.

“Arrad!” called Rikkard, waving at a helmeted-and-suited figure coming toward them from the middle tunnel. “Arrad, to me!”

Reaching them, the figure pulled off its helmet. This Arrad was a young man, roughly Anakin’s age, with broad shoulders made broader by his heavy protective gear.

“Arrad is my son,” said Rikkard, one proud hand lightly touching the young man’s arm. “To be head miner after me, most like. He

feels the damotite better than I do, does Arrad. When he cuts himself I think he'll bleed green. Arrad—"

Unembarrassed by his father's praise, Arrad stared at the newcomers with narrow-eyed suspicion. "Father?"

"We've Teeb Yavid and Teeb Markl here, come back to Lanteeb after some years in the Core. They're staying to see if Torbel could be a home. Put them to work, but be careful. They'll get their legs if you don't rush them."

Arrad nodded, not terribly impressed. "Yes, Father."

"Teeb Yavid—" Rikkard was scowling again. "Arrad will give me tales of you, so mind. And mind this, too—not a finger you lay to the damotite without your gloves on. Hole your gloves and you whip quick smart topside and fetch new ones. With your gloves on you don't touch your bare face. You're safe in the suits, and you're better safe with what Jaklin gave you. But you don't tease the damotite, for it'll win." His stern gaze shifted to Anakin. "You hear me, Teeb Markl?"

Anakin nodded. "I hear you, Teeb."

"You listen to my son. He'll keep you alive on your first day with the damotite. Arrad—"

"Father?"

"Best you stay with them till you can be sure they'll not kill a soul."

"Yes, Father," said Arrad, and pulled his helmet back on.

"I'll see you Teebs hours from now," said Rikkard. "And then we'll know if you were born to be miners."

They watched him climb back into the metal cage and swing up the shaft and out of sight. When his father was gone Arrad turned and looked at them, resigned to his unwanted duty.

"You ever been so deep in a world, Teebs?"

He was strong, this young man. A solid presence in the Force. “No, Teeb Arrad,” Obi-Wan said, gentling himself until he close to disappeared. He hoped Anakin was paying attention. *You see this, Anakin? You see what I’m doing?* “Farmers, we were. On the ground, not under it.”

“Farmers,” said Rikkard’s son, his voice laced with disgust. “You never used a vibro-pick?”

“Used a vibro-ax on Alderaan,” said Anakin. Almost humble. Almost meek. *Almost* would have to be good enough today. “Used other bits of machinery when we had our farm.”

“Huh.” Arrad looked up at the rocky ceiling, close to their helmeted heads. “That’s as high as the sky gets, down here. You can breathe through that? How bad are you sweating?”

“It’s warm,” said Obi-Wan. “I’m sweating.”

“Huh.” Arrad’s deep-set eyes reflected doubt and impatience. “You feel panic coming, you tell me. There’s been miners die of a sudden for want of wide blue. They choke on the close green.” He thumped his fist against the nearby rock wall. “Your heart needs to pump damotite to live in Torbel.”

“Until the drought came our hearts pumped growing grain,” said Obi-Wan. “Could be they can learn to pump damotite instead.”

“We’ll see,” said Arrad, turning. “Follow me. Do what I say.”

As their new master stamped off toward the nearest rock tunnel, Anakin rolled his eyes. They were pretty much all that could be seen of his face, between the low-sitting helmet and his suit’s high-reaching collar.

“Come, come,” Obi-Wan murmured. “A Jedi embraces new experiences, remember?”

What Anakin suggested he could do with this new experience was ... improbable.

“*Teebs!*” Rikkard’s son shouted over his shoulder.

And so they hurried to catch up, committed to a long day of hard labor without help from the Force.

THE WORK WAS RELENTLESS. Driven by the fear of not meeting their quota, Torbel's miners attacked the newly blasted seams of damotite as though they were a mortal enemy. Verbal communication was minimal. Hand signals and the ease of familiarity combined kept the dance flowing without misstep.

Sweating and aching, prising raw damotite from blasted chunks of plain rock with his vibro-pick, Obi-Wan found himself thinking: *Well, I can't imagine Durd stumbling across us down here. I suppose I should be grateful for that, at least.*

Without warning a cold, prescient shudder rippled through him, leaving an icy nausea in its wake. He let the vibro-pick drop.

"What?" said Anakin, leaning close. "What's the matter?"

Arrad-the-Overseer was elsewhere, joined with two other miners in wrestling a new section of chamber free of blasted rock. For the moment at least it was safe for them to talk.

"You didn't feel that?"

"I felt *you*. What happened?"

Closing his eyes, Obi-Wan tried to recapture the elusive sensation. *Danger. Evil. A merciless, relentless mind.* But it was gone now. Just a memory. Perhaps ... his imagination?

No. It was real. Something—someone—is out there.

"We need to be very careful," he said, retrieving his vibro-pick. "I think—"

"What?" said Anakin, when Obi-Wan didn't continue.

This is going to sound ridiculous. "I think—we're being hunted."

A loud smashing crash, as part of a weakened tunnel wall collapsed. Shouting, as the miners made sure everyone was unharmed. Anger surged through the Force as Arrad rushed to see

what kind of a delay they were facing. Always, always, the pressure of time.

Keeping an eye on Rikkard's son, not wanting to draw his ire, Anakin shifted to the next section of their own cut. "Not exactly a news flash. We knew Durd would—"

Recalibrating his vibro-pick, Obi-Wan shook his head. "This wasn't Durd. It was something else. Unfamiliar. I've never felt a touch like it before."

"Great," Anakin muttered, and plunged his own pick into a tiny crack in the green-seamed wall. "Just what we need. Another problem."

Rattle, rattle, bang, rattle went the next damotite-laden bucket up the shaft toward the surface. More poison for Durd and Bant'ena Fhernan to play with.

Obi-Wan eased his aching back with a groan. "How's your shoulder holding up?"

"I'm fine," Anakin grunted. "Look. What are we going to do about —"

"Nothing. There's nothing we can do. In fact—" The tunnel slip dealt with, Arrad was heading in their direction. "We need to vanish. No Force-use at all, not even to sense for possible rock slides. We can't afford to make so much as a ripple."

Air hissed between Anakin's teeth. "But—"

"Are you working?" Arrad demanded, rejoining them. "Keep working. No slowing down. You want to be a miner in Torbel, this is it. Make up your minds, Teebs—work, or go somewhere else."

With a warning glance at Anakin, Obi-Wan jammed his vibro-pick into the wall. Felt the shock of it run up his arm, buzz through his bones and every offended scrape, burn, and bruise. Anakin hissed again, then followed suit.

And in the heat and the close air, beneath the rock ceiling pressing down, deeply buried in Lanteeb's core, Obi-Wan felt another cold shiver—and knew for certain that however deep they were ... it might not be deep enough.

LOK DURD EYED Barev's miracle psychic seeker with distaste. So, this was a *Drivok*. Native to Faket, some obscure Wild Space world he'd never heard of. Humanoid, but not human. That at least was a blessing—the stink of humans turned both of his stomachs. Curiously, this creature had no natural smell at all. But that was the only attractive thing about it. Small, emaciated and hairless, naked and apparently sexless, the Drivok had milky eyes and moist mauve skin stretched tight over its knobby skeleton. It stood before the imager in his new and secret compound's office communing with the captured holoimagery of the Jedi as they fought off his droids.

Durd glanced at Barev, who stood beside him stinking with fear. "This had better work, Colonel," he murmured. "You know what's at stake, and that thing's been standing there for nearly two hours now."

Barev was sweating. "I told you, General. As a hunter the Drivok is unequalled."

The creature passed one thin hand through the holoimage, then swung around. Its mouth was small and crowded with sharp teeth. "I have Jedi."

Durd felt a sizzle of relief flash across his skin. "You're sure?"

"Sure," said the Drivok. All those tiny sharp teeth cut the word to slushy ribbons. "Taste one in my mind."

"One? But there are two of them, bounty hunter."

"Taste one. Sense two."

All thanks to the hive. "Where are they? Where have they hidden themselves?"

The Drivok's feeble shoulders lifted in a shrug. "Map."

He slapped Barev across the chest. “Well? Well? What are you waiting for? Fetch your psychic seeker a map!”

Barev’s expression tightened. “General.”

He returned to the office some minutes later, bearing a map cube. After slotting it into the holoimager and activating it he stood back, giving the Drivok room to work.

More silence as the Drivok walked its slow way around and around the three-dimensional holoimage of the planet.

“There!” the seeker declared, stopping, its crooked finger stabbing through the holoimage. “Jedi mind there.”

Durd lurched forward to get a closer look. “And where is *there*? Show me!” He peered at the holoimage, fuming. “I can’t tell. This map is *useless*, Barev.”

“Leave it to me, General,” said Barev, his voice hoarse. “I promise you I’ll have an exact location by morning.”

He shot the man a furious glare. “See that you do,” he spat, then left Barev to it. He hadn’t checked up on Dr. Fhernan for hours ... and if he didn’t ride that woman closely he knew—he *knew*—she’d do her best to thwart him.

But I won’t be thwarted. Not by her and not by Jedi scum. I will be triumphant, and Count Dooku will praise my name.

TEN BONE-CRUSHING HOURS after burying himself alive below the surface of Torbel, Anakin stripped off his protective suit and gloves and let them fall to the rocky floor. His clothing was wringing wet with sweat, his soaked hair dripped, his eyes stung with salt, and every hurt was singing a chorus of complaint. So preoccupied was he with these simple, physical miseries that it took a moment for him to notice the disturbance in the Force.

Beside him, Obi-Wan jerked straight. “Stang. Have we been found?”

They were alone in the equipment room, but voices and heavy footsteps were approaching—more miners finishing up for the night. “Don’t know,” Anakin whispered, and waited for his mine-dulled senses to sharpen. “Don’t think so. I think it’s something else.”

“What?”

He couldn’t tell. All he knew was he felt danger, rising on a cold dark wind just out of sight. “It’s not what you felt earlier?”

“No,” said Obi-Wan, after a pause. “But I can’t put my finger on it, either.”

And that wasn’t like Obi-Wan. It wasn’t like *him*.

“Never mind,” Obi-Wan muttered. “Let’s get back to Jaklin’s cottage. We can meditate on this question there, in private. Whatever the trouble is, it’s a little way off yet. We have some breathing room.”

Danger shivered through Anakin. “Not much.”

“No. But enough.”

Barely. Except Anakin didn’t say so, because Obi-Wan wasn’t in the mood for contradictions. With their protective equipment neatly stowed and the sweat drying on their skin, they made their way out of the mine and into the gloriously fresh night air. Beautifully far away, so perfectly high overhead, the scattered stars twinkled, whispering promises of home.

Coruscant was out there. Padmé was out there. There was a heart in his chest, beating, but it was only an echo. She was his true heart. She was his home.

“Anakin?”

He glanced at Obi-Wan, whose face in the mine’s sputtering floodlights looked bleached to the bone with fatigue. “You can’t do another ten hours tomorrow,” he said, not caring in the least how such a pronouncement sounded.

“I’ll do what I must,” said Obi-Wan. “I swear, the way you talk you’d think I had one foot in my grave.”

Their fellow miners were streaming into the night. They couldn’t argue for long, which was probably a good thing. “No, I don’t think that,” he said, while he still could. “But—”

“Don’t,” Obi-Wan warned. “Besides, you’re imagining things.”

No, he wasn’t. He knew from Yoda, and from what he felt every day, that something in Obi-Wan had changed, thanks to Zigoola.

You can pretend all you like, Master. But we both know it’s true.

A groundcar’s tooting horn made them turn.

“I came out of the refinery and saw you,” Devi said, slowing her vehicle to an idling halt beside them. “It’s only now you’ve finished?”

Anakin nodded. Odd, when everybody else was walking home, that she’d choose to drive. “You’re working late, too—and after a day in the power plant? Don’t you get to rest?”

“It’s long hours we’re all working.” She sighed. “So much damotite they want in the city.”

“Do you know why?”

Somebody called out a good night. Devi waved back, smiling. “No. I don’t even think Rikkard knows. Can I take you Teebs to Jaklin’s? You’re staying under her roof tonight, aren’t you?”

“We are,” said Obi-Wan. “And we thank you. But we’ll walk, Teeba. After so long underground the fresh air is a relief.”

She laughed. “Bed is a relief. But walk if you like.”

They watched her drive away, threading a path between the wandering groups of miners. Footsteps behind them had them looking around. It was Arrad. Stripped of his smothering protective gear, even in the fitful light it was clear he was his father’s son.

“You’ll be back tomorrow,” he said, passing them. “Two days till the convoy and there’s more damotite needed yet.”

Anakin grimaced. “I can’t wait. Because there’s nothing I like better than smelling like a week-old bantha corpse.”

“Yes,” said Obi-Wan, his lips twitching. “It is a rather unfortunate aroma.”

“I hate to break it to you, cousin, but I’m not the only one with a problem.”

“I know,” Obi-Wan said, heaving a sigh. “And no bath until tomorrow. Truly, this is a most uncivilized life.”

Anakin threw up his hands. “*Now* he notices.”

“Come along,” said Obi-Wan, and clapped him on the shoulder. “I’m hungry, I’m stinking, and right now that pitiful mattress on the floor of Jaklin’s storeroom looks to me like the height of luxury.”

They could have joined some of the other villagers leaving the mine. There were nods, smiles, half-issued invitations. But by tacit consent they made their excuses, claiming the fatigue of a first day, and kept on walking, stretching their senses to the breaking point. Only they couldn’t put a name to the creeping dread they felt. All they knew was that fresh trouble stalked them ... and there was nowhere to run.

EIGHT



BACK AT THE COTTAGE, TEEBA JAKLIN GAVE THEM A MEASURED once-over and grudging approval.

“I’ve had good reports,” she said. “Though Rikkard wasn’t pleased it took you so long to reach the mine.”

Obi-Wan pretended anxiety. “We were sorry to vex him, Teeba. He did say we could take a small wander around the village, get our bearings and lay eyes on the place. It’s true we poked our noses into most corners.”

“And kicked a ball around the square with a gaggle of grubby young’uns,” Jaklin added. “So Brandeh tells it.”

“Don’t look at me, Teeba. That was Markl.”

Jaklin’s severe expression eased. “It’s a good heart that likes a young’un. And you were a sweet one to Greti, Yavid. A wild child, she is. No fault of her own.”

“I was sorry to hear her mother is so ill,” he said quietly. “Greti’s young to have that kind of fear.”

“You think fear respects age, Teeb?” Jaklin snorted. “Maybe you’re a fool after all. I’ve got stew for you but no clean clothes. There’s one or two thinking they could spare you a shirt each but they’ll not look till tomorrow. You’re filthy in what you’re wearing but what you’re in will need to do you another day.”

“We’ll manage,” Obi-Wan said. “Thank you.”

She nodded. “Go splash yourselves, then. I’ll get the stew on the table.”

So tired that they were almost dropping face-first into their plates, they gratefully ate the hot, tasteless stew and staggered back to the storeroom.

“See, what did I tell you?” said Anakin, his voice slurring into sleep. “Make friends with the younglings and everyone thinks you’re fine.”

Obi-Wan pulled his blanket over his head.

THEY JERKED AWAKE before dawn to screaming sirens and a howling in the Force.

Even as they fumbled out from under their blankets, Teeba Jaklin pounded her fist on the storeroom door and flung it open.

“Theta storm, Teebs,” she said, turning on the light. “It’s bad.”

One look at her face and Obi-Wan knew that the trouble he and Anakin had sensed was upon them. “How can we help?” he said, reaching for his boots.

Jaklin was thrumming with an ill-concealed fear. “You said you know machines. That’s true? Not fast talk to sweeten us on you?”

“No, it’s true,” said Anakin, dragging on his own boots. “What do you need, Teeba?”

Torbel’s storm sirens were still wailing, a horrible shrill sound like a sand panther’s claws on durasteel. Jaklin pressed a hand to her forehead, as though the shrill sound pained her. “You remember what a theta storm is, Teeb Yavid?”

Obi-Wan nodded. “Sunspot activity agitates radioactive theta particles that have been trapped in a planet’s atmosphere. A storm can last for minutes or hours, depending on the strength of the coronal flare and the concentration of theta particles in any given location.”

Eyes narrowed, Jaklin stepped back. “That’s no plainspoke farmer’s answer.”

Stang. Weary and hammered by the Force's loud alarm, he'd forgotten for a moment who he was meant to be.

"I read it once," he said, pretending bewilderment. "Some fancy book-smart fellow's ramblings. Happened to stick in my mind, that's all. No harm meant, Teeba."

"He does that, Teeba," said Anakin. "He reads things, Cousin Yavid does, and spouts them off after like he knows more than the rest of us. Doesn't make him many friends. But he's my family so I have to live with it."

She looked torn, wanting to believe them, afraid that if she did it might go against her later.

"Teeba, we really do know machines," said Anakin. "What's there to be done that we can help with?"

"The storm shields," she said, rubbing the back of her hand across her eyes. "They drag a lot of power, but so does the mine and the mine can't close down. Not the refinery, either."

Because they're behind on their quota and the convoy is coming. "So you need eyes in the power plant," said Obi-Wan. "In case of overload. What else?"

"The shield generators need checking, too," she said. "If we lose one we'll have folk theta-poisoned, or worse. We do our best to keep the machines working, but—"

"There's been no money for a long time. You've had to patch and make do," said Anakin. "And hope things don't fall apart."

Jaklin stared at him, uncertain. "Yes. It's hard. Always hard."

"I know," said Anakin, his voice softening. "I've lived it."

And because that was true, and she could see it was true, Jaklin abandoned her suspicion. "Your help's sore needed. Most of our men are down the mine."

Puzzled, Obi-Wan looked up from tightening his bootlaces. "What about the village's women?"

“Some know machines. Most don’t,” said Jaklin. “I’m trying to change it, but change comes slow. It’s sure you are that you know machines? I can trust you?”

“Don’t worry, Teeba,” said Anakin, confidently smiling. “We won’t let you down.”

“He’s right, we won’t,” said Obi-Wan, as Teeba Jaklin snorted. “Who do we report to?”

“Well, it should be Rikkard,” Jaklin said, uncertain. “But likely he’s gone down the mine again. Arrad’s his second, but Arrad’s back to working the refinery.” Her breathing caught. “We’ve so far to catch up yet.”

Obi-Wan exchanged a glance with Anakin. “So does that mean if Rikkard and Arrad are busy, there’s nobody in charge at the plant?”

Because that’s what it sounds like and if that’s the case, then may the Force be with all of us.

“No, no,” said Jaklin. “If Rikkard’s not aboveground, it’s Devi you want. She got herself crippled in a mine-fall. Can’t properly walk. So to make herself useful she studied up on the machines. She’ll be doing her best to keep the plant and shields operating sound.”

He exchanged another glance with Anakin. *That’s something, at least.*

“You’ve got to keep the power plant working, Teebs,” said Jaklin, her fear rippling through the Force. “If the storm shield fails we’ll all be dead within a week. There are portable glow lamps on the kitchen table. There’s no village lighting, to save power. Whoever you find, Rikkard or Devi, tell them you’ve got my leave to do what’s needed. Now I’m off to the charter house. Come storm time it’s where people send for help if there’s trouble.”

“If there’s trouble?” said Anakin, once Jaklin had left. “Obi-Wan —”

“I know. I know. Trouble’s already here and it’s brought reinforcements.” He took a moment to taste the wild night, feeling the Force’s writhing. So much *danger*. “But we’ll manage. Now, I think we’ll achieve more if we split up. I’ll take the power plant. You keep those shield generators going. But however you do it, *don’t* let it slip you’re a Jedi. Not just for the villagers’ sake, but because I don’t want us to stand out in the Force.”

Anakin stared. “You still think we’re being hunted?”

Since that awful, sharp stab of awareness in the mine he’d felt no further touch by the presence behind it. But while they slept, his restless dreams had told him they weren’t alone.

“I do,” he said. “Now let’s go.”

They retrieved the glow lamps, left the cottage in darkness and went outside. Torbel’s storm shields arced overhead in an enormous bluish dome. Beyond that pale barrier the theta storm raged, a writhing soup of supercharged, reddish orange poison.

“It almost seems alive,” Anakin murmured, fascinated. “Like it’s trying to get in.”

Obi-Wan gave him a look. “Less imagination and more focus, Anakin.”

“Sorry.”

They went their separate ways, Anakin heading for the nearest storm-shield generator while he continued down the narrow street, the thin beam from his glow lamp bouncing with every stride. The power plant was on the far side of the village, distant from the mine and the refinery and anything else that could be damaged if there was an accident. Jogging across the square, Obi-Wan resisted the urge to Force-sprint. The streets might be empty now but that could change at any moment. He looked over at the charter house. The front windows were dimly lit with glow lamps, and he could sense the presence of some four—no, five—worried people.

Overhead, beyond the storm shield, the theta particles thrashed and swirled. Lanteeb's atmosphere must be soaked in the stuff, bloated with it. What a way to live; every day waiting for this madness to erupt. Frantically hoping that the warning system worked, that the storm shields would hold, that the worst of nature's impersonal cruelty would pass them by. Lanteeb might be a backworld but in its own way it, too, was living through a war.

When this is over, I'll ask Bail to use his influence to make a difference here. These people deserve better.

He found Devi alone in the small, antiquated power plant's monitoring station. Strapped into an antigravity support harness, she awkwardly prowled the banks of circuitry and gauges, her worried gaze reading off every tiny fluctuation in core temp, energy flow, and backfill status.

"Teeb Yavid?" she said, surprised. "What are you doing here?"

"I have some experience with machinery," he said, letting his senses touch the power plant's atmosphere. Not using the Force, not precisely ... just letting it whisper in his ear. "Teeba Jaklin thought you might like a helping hand."

Devi glared at the ceiling. "Blasted theta storms. On top of everything else. Yavid, when you say you've machine experience ..."

Something wasn't right with the generator's central flux capacitor. A rough note, a hum of warning. Something out of place. Alerted, Obi-Wan began to wander down the bank of monitors, reaching out with his senses to pinpoint the problem.

I have a bad feeling.

"Markl and I didn't just work lumber on Alderaan," he said, "we worked for nearly a whole season in a power generation plant. It was Alderaan so their equipment was much more sophisticated than yours—ours—but—" He glanced back at her. "I picked up a few tricks. So if I can be of use to you—"

“All the help you can give me I’ll take,” Devi said fervently. “Now, what are you looking for?”

He trailed his fingertips above the surface of the monitors. Not here ... not here ... not here ...

Yes. Here.

Putting aside his glow lamp, he took a closer look at the monitor’s flickering gauges. Intrigued, Devi joined him, the servomotors in her antigrav harness grinding. It didn’t fit her properly; he could sense the dull pain in her damaged back and legs.

“What’s this do?” he said, tapping the bank of equipment.

“That’s the readout for the conversion chamber mix valve,” she said, alarmed. “It’s the feed valve for the liquid damotite.”

Obi-Wan stared at her. *Damotite? Nobody mentioned damotite is being used as fuel.* Surely that wasn’t a good idea.

Devi was rapping her knuckles to her forehead, as though trying to encourage rapid thought. “Conversion chamber—conversion chamber,” she muttered. “What can cause a problem with the con —”

“Impurities in the prime fuel source?” he said, feeling the Force’s warning sharpen. “If they’ve clogged one or more of the feed valves —”

“Stang,” she said softly. “Yavid, you’re right. How did I not—*stang.*”

Turning so fast that she almost overbalanced, she clumped her way across the monitoring station to a bank of equipment heavily featuring levers, manual valves, and dials.

“I need to do a system flush,” she said. “Look at the readout again would you, Yavid? Which specific valves are affected?”

He looked. Eighteen valves in total, red warning lights flashing on four. “Numbers two, eight, eleven, and seventeen.”

Her face screwed tight in concentration, Devi slammed down levers in the order he'd called. Then she activated the valve flush and stood back, eyes narrowed, as the dim, almost subliminal sound of the nearly obsolete hydraulic system kicked into play.

"Come on—come on—" she murmured, singsong. "Yavid, what's the board reading now?"

He looked again. "No change, I'm—no, no, strike that. Seventeen is green."

"Oh come *on*—" Devi implored. "*Pathetic* it is, one out of four!"

"Two is green," he said, as another red light morphed into a cooler, kinder color. "And so is eleven."

Her head snapped around to stare, her eyes intent. "Not eight?"

One last stubborn red light flashed. Flashed faster. Stopped flashing altogether and became a single glaring red eye. Obi-Wan felt a tremor of alarm. "I believe eight has gone critical."

"*Stang!*" Devi shouted, and hit the valve flush again. "You blasted—I'm going to *smash* Arrad, the arrogant little barve, I *told* him—" With an effort she got herself back under control. "Yavid, is it working?"

A shrill alarm buzzer answered for him.

"Devi, can the valve be flushed manually?"

"Yes, yes, it can, but—"

She looked down at herself, at the bulky, ungainly antigrav support harness that kept her on her feet but made her slow and clumsy. On the monitoring station's opposite wall a status board started to light up.

Obi-Wan followed her anguished stare. "That's not good, is it?"

"No, Yavid," she whispered. "It's very, very bad."

"The system's overloading?"

She nodded, her pale face sweaty with fear.

He pointed to the closed door at the back of the monitoring station. “The plant proper’s through there?”

“Yes,” she said, breathless. “Yavid, have you ever done a manual forced—”

“No.” He managed a quick smile. “But there’s a first time for everything. And I’m a quick learner.”

Devi tried, but she couldn’t answer his smile. “You’re sure? It’s not easy, and it’s dangerous.”

“Do we have a choice?”

“Not really.” Taking a deep breath, she steadied herself. “Through the door, turn right, ten ranks over, then six bays down. It’s number eight valve, right? Then you’re looking for the bank of green equipment. There’s a spigot wheel and two levers. Pull down the left-hand lever. Open the spigot as wide as it’ll go. Pull down the right-hand lever. Wait for the all-clear bell. Yank both levers back up at the same time, then close the spigot. You got that?”

He was already heading for the door. “Yes. I’ve got it.”

“Wait, Yavid!” she called after him. “You need a hazard suit. You’ll find them in—”

“There’s no time,” he said over his shoulder. “Don’t worry. I’ll manage.”

“All right,” she said. “I’ll keep monitoring things out here. Good luck.”

More alarms blared as he grabbed the door’s handle, and turned it.

I’ll need more than luck. May the Force be with me.

THE RAGING THETA STORM had turned night into nightmare.

Though Anakin could sense the lives in this forsaken village, huddled in their homes, slaving deep beneath his feet and in the

ever-hungry refinery, he felt like the only man alive in the world. Working his way around the perimeter of the storm shield, he didn't need his glow lamp to see or the Force to guide him. The storm shield generated its own ghostly light, and the glare of the storm was like a dying sun melting out of the sky.

Though it was frightening, he found the purity of its ferocity compelling. Alluring. It called to something deep inside him. But Obi-Wan was right. Less imagination, more focus. He had a job to do and lives to protect.

There were fifteen shield generators in total, placed at intervals around the village. Each created a section of antigrav plasma that bled into and bonded with the next, forming a seamless, impenetrable whole. He reached the third generator to find another villager already there, checking its power cell and circuitry.

"You'd be Teeb Markl?" the man said, shining a glow lamp into his face. In his late middle years, he had an old scar running right across both sunken cheeks. "I'm Tarnik. Jaklin warned you and your cousin were out to help."

Warned? That sounded ominous. "We've a bit of machine work up our sleeves, Tarnik," Anakin said, projecting guileless concern. "With the village shorthanded and the mine swallowing men, Yavid and I thought—"

"No need to explain," said Tarnik. Storm shadows flickered over him, hiding his eyes. "I'm glad of it." He nudged the generator. "This one's holding up. I'm thinking, since it don't take two men to look at one generator, could be you and I need to work in opposite directions."

"You want me to cross the village? Start from the other side?"

Tarnik lowered his glow lamp. Despite their trouble he was smiling, his wry expression twisting the scar across his face. "If you don't mind running. Your legs are a few seasons younger than mine."

“I can do that,” Anakin said. “The two generators behind me don’t show any faults.”

“Glad to hear it,” said Tarnik. “And the village, it’ll be glad to hear you and your cousin aren’t afraid to put your shoulders to the wheel. Torbel can always use good men of your stamp.”

Maybe. But it could use a fleet of Republic Cruisers, the Seps kicked out, and some serious hardship assistance even more.

“That’s good to know, Teeb,” he said. “I’ll get looking at those other generators. Meet up with you somewhere around the shield.”

He waited until the murky half darkness claimed him, then broke out of his jog into a proper Force-sprint. Only to the other side of the village. Not for long enough to make Obi-Wan frown. Not long enough, he was certain, to attract any malicious notice. And that there was notice to attract? That was yet another problem on their crowded plate.

I wish I knew what it was Obi-Wan felt down in the mine. I wish I knew why I didn’t feel it, too.

All he could feel in this moment, speeding to the next generator, was what the storm would do to this vulnerable village if he and Obi-Wan didn’t prevent it.

His mother’s voice echoed in the caverns of memory:

He can help you. He was meant to help you.

As he reached the next generator he dropped out of Forcesprint, his heart thudding hard in his chest and his breathing ragged, muscles burning for want of proper fuel. His lightsaber, still safe in its shielded pocket, felt heavy. Almost burdensome. They needed some decent food. Gritty gruel and anemic stew wouldn’t keep them going for much longer.

Ignoring the glow lamp, he let the Force show him the inner workings of the generator. Old and overworked, yes, but reliable—at least for now.

One more down, lots more to go.

He forged on to the next generator.

EARDRUMS BATTERED, skin scorching even beneath his filthy, sweat-stained clothes, Obi-Wan made his way through the ferocious heat and noise of Torbel's long-outdated, struggling power plant.

Ten ranks over, then six bays down. Look for the green section.

He tried to feel Anakin through the Force, make sure he was all right, but his senses were overwhelmed by the sheer enormity of the storm. Its impersonal malevolence drowned every other thought and feeling, the danger it posed to every life in the village obliterating the other danger he knew was out there somewhere. Stalking them.

... rank six ... rank seven ... rank eight ...

The air shimmered. It was like being back on Tatooine, feeling the menace of that extraordinary heat, watching the dry air shiver in the furnace between sand and sky. So many worlds he'd visited in his life, but not one came close to that stark and endless desert, a crucible for forging many strange and wonderful things.

Not the least of which is Anakin.

Ten ranks over and six bays down. The sense of dread increased, his awareness of urgency growing. The laboring power plant's struggle shuddered through him.

... rank nine ... rank ten!

Now count to six and look for the green. Count to six and look for the—

There.

As he confronted the bank of levers and valves, the Force shrieked a warning. Red lights flashed, a strident alarm sounded. He could feel the valve structure's imminent explosion. No time to think or worry or prepare. He dragged off his shirt and used the filthy material to protect his hands.

Pull down the left-hand lever. Open the spigot as wide as it'll go. Pull down the right-hand lever. Wait for the all-clear bell. Yank both levers back up at the same time, then close the spigot.

The levers and spigot were jammed by heat and imperfect maintenance, by wear and tear and the passing of time. Torbel's decrepit machinery was falling apart piece by piece.

He had no choice. He used the Force, knowing even as its transcendent power helped him shift the levers and turn the spigot that the enemy seeking him would see him like a flare in the night sky.

Here I am. Come and get me.

Panting, his hands searing, his nose and mouth tainted with the stink of overworked hydraulics and overheated wiring and circuits and the peculiar stink of cooked damotite, Obi-Wan dragged his shirt on again and stood back. The hysterically leaping gauges slowed ... and slowed ... and slowed some more. Closing his eyes, he sank his awareness into the valve system itself, became a part of the agitated, liquefied mineral. Such a dangerously unstable fuel. How desperate must these people be even to contemplate using it. And then he felt the seething surge settle as the blocked valve washed clean and the fuel flowed once again through the plant's arteries.

He permitted himself a very small smile.

"Are you all right, Yavid?" Devi demanded, breathless, as he returned to the monitoring station. "I can't believe you did it. I can't believe you're not fried. That *we're* not fried, or blown into a million pieces. Yavid, are you *sure* you're all right?"

"Yes," Obi-Wan said, and was shocked to hear his croaky voice. He felt crisped head-to-toe, and the relative silence of the monitoring station made him dizzy all of a sudden.

"Oh, *Teeb!*" said Devi. "What a mercy you were here!"

To his surprise she threw her arms around him and held him tight. Not wanting to hurt her feelings he returned the gesture—and almost immediately she let go of him and retreated a step.

“Sorry. I don’t usually do that. Fling myself on strange men,” she said, flustered.

“That’s quite all right.” He grinned at her. “I’ve experienced far less pleasant embraces.”

She stared, uncertain. And then she laughed, in the midst of chaos and fear a delightfully uproarious sound. “Oh, I do hope you stay in Torbel, Teeb Yavid. We could do a lot worse than you.”

It hurt him to lie. “I hope I can stay, too, Devi. My cousin and I—”

And then he was spinning to face the monitoring station’s outer door, the rest of his lie abandoned.

Anakin. Oh, no.

* * *

THE NEXT STORM-shield generator overloaded just as Anakin reached it. He had a split second’s warning, one hammer blow from the Force. The storm seemed to hold its breath—

—and then exhaled in renewed fury as the generator erupted in a burning light show of sparks. With a scream like a wounded animal the shield directly overhead collapsed and a maelstrom of theta particles poured through the gap.

He acted on instinct—and out of sheer bloody-minded terror. Throwing up his hands he used the Force to hold back the stream of theta particles, and with a shout of rage became one with the storm shield. Rejected the storm. He thought he could feel his blood bubbling. He was losing himself, disappearing within the scarlet vortex of the Force as it consumed him and transformed him into fire.

And there was his mother, whispering again.

He can help you. He was meant to help you.

Furious, Anakin stood alone against the storm.

... ON CORUSCANT, in the Temple, Taria Damsin and Ahsoka shadowdance with their lightsabers. Shadowdance within the Force. Open and trusting they swim its light tides—and as one are swept up in a tidal wave of fear. Shock twists them and they stumble, fingers loosening. Lightsabers fall. Shocked younglings whisper and wonder what to do ...

... as Yoda, in meditation, is shocked out of his communing by a sense of danger sharp as pain. Hand pressed to his head he seeks for understanding, seeks to see what has happened. But the dark side is a jealous shroud. It keeps its secrets close. Yoda grits his teeth and fights it ...

... as the Drivok psychic seeker lifts its head and scents the air and keens with triumph because above all things it is a hunter and no hunter likes to be eluded. But now it can see the missing Jedi so clearly, lighting up its mind, and on the map it can pinpoint them exactly ...

... and Lok Durd laughs and laughs and laughs ...

EVERY ALARM in the monitoring station was sounding. Devi pushed her antigrav harness to its limits as she flung herself from station to station.

“No, no, don’t do that!” she shouted, slamming switches, hitting buttons. “Don’t you dare!”

“Devi!” Obi-Wan yelled. “Tell me what I can do to—”

She flung out an arm, pointing toward the generator and storm-shield status board. “Glue your eyes to those gauges. We’ve got one shield generator down. If another goes it’s over. We’re all dead. I don’t even know how the rest of the shield’s still holding but I don’t care. It’s holding and that’s all that matters!”

I know how. It’s Anakin. May the Force protect him.

Sick with fear for him, Obi-Wan crossed to the status board and read off the gauges, even as his stomach churned and the bile rose in his throat.

Hold on, Anakin. I'll be there as soon as I can.

Because surely not even the Chosen One could hold back a theta storm on his own.

"It was the most awful thing I've ever seen," Qui-Gon had told him, so many years ago. "Theta storms kill in two ways, you see. If you're contaminated from a distance, well, it takes a long time to die. But if you are in the storm's path it will rip you to pieces and then melt your bones. I've seen it kill both ways, and both ways are cruel. Better to be swallowed alive by a sarlacc."

"Well?" Devi demanded. "Are they holding? The other generators? The shield? Yavid?"

Obi-Wan wrenched his mind from the past and checked the status board again. "Yes. So far, so good."

Devi was sweating, fat drops rolling down her fierce and unremarkable face. But instead of capitulating to the fear, she fought it.

"This is crazy, Yavid. *Crazy*," she said, and banged her fist on another gauge. "If these readings are right this is a Class Four storm. I never thought I'd live to see one this bad."

"So I should feel honored? Look on it as a—a kind of welcome-home celebration?"

She snorted. "Ha! Some welcome." And then even that tiny moment of humor was obliterated as yet another alarm began to sound. "Oh, have mercy," she whispered. "No. Please, no."

"What is it? What's happening?"

She staggered to another bank of monitors then turned, her face grayish white. "We've got a power surge building," she said, her voice catching in her throat. "And I can't stop it. Not without shutting down the entire second sector and that means collapsing the storm shield. Yavid—"

Her terror was almost overwhelming. “Devi, are you sure we can’t stop it? Short-circuit it somehow? Where will the surge hit? *Devi!*”

Startled, she shook her head hard to regain focus and turned back to her monitors. One trembling finger traced the stuttering liquid-crystal display readout of Torbel’s underground power grid.

“It’ll blow the irrigation system for sure,” she said, almost in tears. “It might take out the artesian pump. Probably not the storm shield. And then—stang, the mine. Will it hit the mine? No. No, no, not the mine, the *refinery*.” Spinning around, she nearly fell over. “Unless there’s a miracle it’ll ground in the refinery. Yavid—”

“Devi, try to stop that surge,” he ordered, already heading for the station’s outer door. “There has to be a way to divert it or decompress it. Something. Anything. Please, you must *try*. Raise Arrad in the refinery and Rikkard at the mine. Tell them to evacuate everyone to a safe distance.”

The moment he set foot outside the power plant he turned toward Anakin—and felt his heart thud as he saw the gaping hole in the storm shield. Felt the furious concentration of power, of the Force, in that one small place as Anakin held back the storm’s might.

And then he felt the gathered villagers, their numbers growing, their fear and astonishment mounting, as they watched the stranger from Voteb do a thing that should not be humanly possible.

Hold on, Anakin. Hold on.

He turned and Force-sprinted for the endangered refinery.

NINE



THE REFINERY WAS LIKE A WAR ZONE.

Oblivious to their imminent danger, the villagers of Torbel worked furiously to satisfy the needs of a government that used them as slaves. Every station was in operation—sorting barrels, compression chambers, screening units, conveyor belts, tumblers, graders, laser-emulsifiers, sonic scrubbers and packing bays, with trolleys waiting at the end to be loaded with damotite, then hauled out to the warehouse for collection.

Death for a thousand, thousand worlds.

Everything was stink and noise. Thumping, thudding, banging, ringing, screeching, grinding: Obi-Wan felt the cacophony like percussion on his skin. His bones were tuning forks driving spikes of sound through his brain and his nose and mouth sucked dry with the heat and acrid fumes. Raw damotite was poisonous and he wore no protection. How long before he'd be affected? He had no idea and it didn't matter anyway. There wasn't time to pull on a suit.

Long rows of strip lighting sputtered and surged, echoing the instability of the village's threatened power supply. Not a single safety-suited villager seemed to have noticed. They were consumed by desperation, by the obliterating need to meet their impossible quota. If Devi had managed to get a call through here, no one had listened.

He took hold of the nearest villager and spun her around. As she gaped at him through her eye shield, he gave her a hard shake. "You're in terrible danger, Teeba. Get out, now. *Run.*"

The villagers close enough to hear him stopped working. Letting go of the woman, he turned on them next.

“All of you, get out of here! There’s a power surge building!”

They didn’t know him. They didn’t trust him. Foolishly, understandably, they hesitated. Recklessly desperate, he used the Force to push them.

“Get out!”

The villagers dropped their tools and ran for the door, clumsy and slow in their heavy protective clothing.

He could feel the air swirling, reacting to the unstable power grid. The lights overhead were flickering faster now. And then the conveyor belts shuddered and groaned. Added to the refinery’s rough symphony, a counterpoint of startled voices.

“Get out, get out!” he shouted, running along the aisles, between the workstations. “Spread the word! Get out! This sector of the power grid is about to blow!”

He couldn’t see Arrad. Perhaps Rikkard’s son didn’t know there was trouble. Because if Devi had called here and he’d ignored her—

The trickle of fleeing villagers was building to a flood as his frantic warning leapt from station to station. Static discharges began a brilliant, lethal dance over the refinery’s battered old equipment, arcing and spitting and sizzling with sparks.

An angry shout cut through the noise trapped beneath the refinery’s roof. Obi-Wan spun around. It was Arrad, slamming back into the main work area.

“What are you doing?” The young man snatched at the nearest villagers squeezing past him, heading for safety. “You can’t go, we’re not finished!”

“He says there’s a power surge!” one of the villagers shouted, pulling free. “The grid’s going to blow. Get out yourself, Arrad!”

“What?” Arrad was shaking his head. “What are you—Rontl, get back here! Harba! You can’t go! My father’s relying on us to—”

But Rontl and Harba weren’t listening.

“Arrad!” Obi-Wan leapt for him. “You must get everyone out of here, there’s a—”

Arrad shoved him away. “There’s still time. We’ve nearly made quota. We have to protect this last batch of damotite, Yavid! You don’t understand what—”

“No, you fool, *you* don’t understand!” he retorted. “Look around you! Look at the static discharge! Devi says the power surge is going to ground itself right here!”

The last villagers were making their escape. Arrad stared after them in furious despair, then waved a dismissive hand and turned his back. Heedless of the danger, he rushed to the nearest juddering conveyor belt and slammed a lever down, halting its progress before the chunks of raw damotite it carried could tumble to the pitted ferrocrete floor.

Somewhere in the refinery a warning klaxon began to shriek.

“*Arrad!*” Obi-Wan followed the younger man as he slid between workstations to the nearest sonic scrubber. “Do you hear that? Your subgenerator’s starting to overload! You have to come with me, *now!*”

“If you want to run, then run,” Arrad spat, keying rapid-fire instructions into the scrubber’s command center. He’d discarded his protective head gear, revealing straw-colored hair curled with sweat. “But my father’s trusting me to keep this shipment—”

Is the young fool mad? “Your father doesn’t want you to die for it! For pity’s sake, Arrad—”

Snarling, Arrad snatched a wrench from his sagging tool belt and raised it. “I only need a few more minutes, Yavid! If you aren’t going to help me than get out of my way!”

Battered by noise and by the Force's insistent push that he *get out get out get out*, Obi-Wan lunged for Rikkard's son. Taking hold of the young man's wrist, he poured every last bit of compulsion he possessed into his eyes, his voice.

"Arrad, come with me!"

Arrad snapped his wrist free. "I can't!" he shouted, almost drowned out by the blaring klaxon and the snapping, sparking sizzle of static discharge. "If we shortchange the shipment's weight they'll cut our food or worse, give the contract to another village. We won't survive that! We're barely surviving now! If you want to make Torbel your home, Yavid, then *help me!*"

Obi-Wan stared at him. *If I force him out of here at the tip of my lightsaber, that will be that. He'll turn us in out of sheer spite. I can't convince him and I can't leave him here.*

He had only one other choice.

"All right, all right," he said. "I'll help."

"Shut down that bank of laser-emulsifiers!" Arrad ordered. "Hurry! And then we'll—"

"I'm sorry," he said, closing his fingers around the back of the younger man's broad neck. "But we're out of time."

This was no simple mind push—he blanked Arrad's resistance with a blast of the Force. The young man's anger wilted and his muscles softened. Above their heads the strip lighting flared sun-bright once and died, plunging the refinery into a darkness leavened only by the eerie blue flashes of static discharge.

Trusting their lives to the Force, Obi-Wan slid his hand down to Arrad's shoulder, gripped the foolish young man's shirt, pulled ... then ran.

But they'd left too late.

With a deafening roar the power grid overloaded and they were tossed with casual violence through the stinking, burning air.

* * *

ANAKIN FELT THE EXPLOSION heartbeats before it happened. Sweating and trembling with the effort of holding back the theta storm, ignoring the villagers who'd come to see what was going on, he tried to send Obi-Wan a warning—but his mind was so bludgeoned by the quicksilver torment of keeping the raging storm at bay that he couldn't feel his former Master's presence.

And then the refinery went up like Coruscant fireworks on Republic Day.

Screams and shouts sounded as panic surged through the Force, bright and white and stunning. Vision smearing and blurring, Anakin sought in the crowd for Teeba Jaklin. She'd come from the charter house to see what the fuss was about and remained because she couldn't believe her own eyes.

"Jaklin! Teeba Jaklin!"

She pushed and shoved and swore her way to him through the jostling villagers who pointed and gasped and were beginning to break for the refinery.

"Yes, Markl?" She scowled. "If that's even your name."

"It's my name at the moment," he said, his teeth gritted against the relentless pain of the storm. "Teeba Jaklin, please. Find Yavid for me. Make sure he's all right."

The explosion's echoes rolled around the village, trapped beneath the barely holding shield. The red stormglow beyond it was matched by the red glow of leaping flames. The refinery was burning. He and Jaklin stared at each other as the rest of Torbel's people ran to help, shadows in the glare of the storm. Some headed for the artesian well, for water. Others made straight for the burning building full of raw damotite.

A chilling thought struck him. Was the mineral itself flammable? That smoke—was it a toxic cloud poised to poison every last man, woman, and child beneath the storm shield?

“Teeba Jaklin! Is there danger from the—”

Her eyes were full of fear. “Yes. Not drop-dead-on-the-spot trouble but even with our secret protection we’ll all of us be sickly in the next few days.” She looked up at the thrashing theta storm over their heads. “Unless that clears quick soon and we can down the shields so the smoke gets to blow clean away.”

“Which—” He had to pause, to rebalance himself. The effort of fighting the storm was threatening to drive him to his knees. He’d started to breathe in harsh gasping pants. “Which is—worse? The theta particles—or the damotite—smoke?”

The question made her laugh grimly. “The storm—unless it don’t clear and we’re left breathing smoke for hours on end. Then we’ll be likely done for whichever way you slice the bread.”

Of course they would be. The universe had a stinking sense of humor.

“You need—to find Yavid,” he gasped. “If he’s—not hurt he—can help you.”

The look on her face said she thought they were all beyond help. “I’ll look for him. How much longer before you fail, Teeb?”

He didn’t know. He didn’t want to think about that. “I’m—all right. Go. Please.” Another deep, shuddering breath. “Find Yavid.”

They were alone now, save for the men working on the shield generator. Jaklin turned away from him. “Guyne! How soon before that generator’s fixed?”

The oldest of the four feverishly tinkering men spared her a glance. “Going as fast as we can, Jaklin. Half the circuits are burned out.”

Anakin tightened his hold on the Force, feeling the seethe and surge of the storm like living fire. “I can—hold on, Teeba. Don’t—worry—about me. Just go. *Go!*”

Half step by half step, Jaklin retreated. In the garish light her eyes were narrowed. A muscle worked along her jaw. “I know what you are, young Teeb. You’re—”

“*Not—now,*” he said, almost groaning. “Please. Find Yavid. Tell him—I’ll get there—soon as—I can.”

Instead of answering, she turned to look at Guyne one last time. “Could be our lives are with you now, old Teeb,” she said, her voice cracking. “Don’t you be letting us down.”

His teeth showed briefly in his thin, seamed face. “Not planning to, old Teeba. Get on now. Rikkard’ll have need of you.”

Anakin took another rib-cracking breath. “Teeba—”

“I know,” she snapped, retreating. “Yavid. I said I’d look, and I will. *I’m* an honest one—even if you aren’t.”

She broke into a flat-footed run. He watched her for a few short, uneven strides, feeling Guyne’s measured stare.

Don’t look at me, old man. Fix that generator, would you?

Anakin hurt so much now it would be easy just to ... give in. Give up. Let go. But he couldn’t do that. Hundreds of lives were depending on him. He had to stand here and take it until the generator was fixed—or his heart gave out. So he closed his eyes. Whether it made sense or not he always found it easier to focus his will when cocooned in darkness.

With sight denied him all his other senses leapt to keener life. The stink of the shield generator’s scorched circuitry. The stink of burning damotite from the exploded refinery. The stink of his own sweat. He heard—felt—three more explosions. Smaller this time, in swift succession. There were shouts, sirens. Sounds and echoes drumming. The worst of the Force’s insistent warning had faded, leaving him scoured hollow and stunned. Now all he felt in the Force was confusion, fear and pain. Everything he usually felt, no matter where he was. It was terrible and yet, in the strangest way, also comforting. He knew how to deal with that.

It was the unknown that made him nervous.

How long had he been standing here, holding back the storm? Probably less than an hour. It felt like days. Years. He didn't have much time before the choice of whether to let go or endure would be out of his hands. Even the Chosen One had limits.

He remembered himself as a small boy, boasting to Qui-Gon at his mother's rough table.

Has anyone ever seen a Podrace? I'm the only human who can do it.

And now he was probably the only Jedi who could turn himself into a living storm shield.

It isn't boasting. It's the truth. I've got a knack for beating the odds.

Now all he had to do was beat these odds for just a little bit longer ...

Sweat pouring, heart pounding, dimly aware that he was burning himself out, Anakin clung to the Force like a child to its mother's hand. Time passed. He passed with it, in silence.

"All right," said Guyne at last. "I think that's got it. Teeb Markl—"

Stirring, he opened his eyes. "Teeb?"

"We're going to try the generator. Get ready."

He managed to nod.

The other three men stepped back from the generator as Guyne, sore and sorry and tired, took a deep breath and reconnected the power supply. He flipped a series of switches, waited—waited—then activated the shield.

With a sizzling hum the storm shield came back online. Guyne and his three friends cheered, tiredly ecstatic ... and Anakin slumped, falling boneless and graceless to the hard, dry ground.

He could feel himself shaking. Teeth chattering, lungs aching for air, he rolled on to his side and curled into a ball. His lightsaber, undiscovered, banged against his ribs as Torbel swung and spun

around him. Vaguely he was aware of agitated voices calling his name and concerned hands poking and prodding to see if he was still in one piece. He couldn't say. He couldn't answer their anxious, shouted questions. He couldn't even tell if he was still hurting or if what he felt now was just the memory of pain. Only once before had he ever felt anything close to this, and that was on Geonosis, in the cave, after Dooku's savage Force lightning had come close to killing him. After a while ... eons ... the worst of the shuddering passed. He opened his eyes, uncurled his spine and looked up. Yes, Torbel had a storm shield—and it wasn't him. On the other side of the plasma the theta storm continued to spit radioactive rage.

Spit away. I don't care. You're not getting in.

He rolled onto his hands and knees and then levered himself upright. Reaching hands helped him, and he was grateful for that. Red and black spots danced before his eyes. He had to blink and blink to clear his vision.

"Steady there, young Teeb," said Guyne, holding tight to his elbow. "Went down hard, you did. Just you catch your breath."

"I'm all right," he said, and was startled to hear how raw his voice sounded. Staggering, he turned to look across the darkened village toward the refinery. The flames were dying down, and the smoke. But the air was still tainted and thick. He tried not to think about the poison he was sucking into his lungs.

He looked back at Guyne. "Stay here and keep an eye on that generator, Teeb. And if it looks like blowing again send for me. I'll come back."

In the shifting light the old villager's salt-gray eyebrows lifted. "Mighty sure of yourself you are, for a young Teeb," he said, very dry. "Never knew a Lanteeban farmer with your knack of taking charge. Never knew any farmer could hold back a theta storm, neither. Not with the power of his mind."

Behind him, his friends nodded agreement, a small knot of suspicion even though they were grateful.

Anakin sighed. “Teeb Guyne, we both know I’m not a farmer. Will you stay here?”

“We’ll stay,” said Guyne, nodding. “And if we’re needful of a Jedi we’ll know where to look.”

Wonderful. Obi-Wan’s going to kill me.

He had no hope of Force-sprinting his way to the ruined refinery. The vicious edge of his pain had dulled, but every bone and muscle and sinew still ached. His sense of the Force was fiercely dimmed ... and how long it would take for his numb shock to subside he couldn’t begin to guess. He’d never exhausted himself like this before.

There’s a first time for everything, I suppose. I just really wish that this wasn’t it.

Gagging at the stench of burned damotite, he pushed himself into a stumbling run, left the villagers behind him and went in search of Obi-Wan.

IT WAS THE ANGUISHED SOBBING that shocked him awake.

Dazed, Obi-Wan opened his eyes. Then he sat up, coughing, and grimaced as old and new bruises alike complained. The taste of thick smoke, burned wiring, and scorched earth was foul. Looking around, he realized he’d been laid out on the ground a good distance beyond the entrance to the refinery—much farther than the explosion would have thrown him, surely. Which meant someone must have dragged him out of the way and then left him.

The refinery was ripped apart, flames flickering in the debris. Some villagers had formed a bucket chain and were steadily passing containers of water from the artesian well and throwing them on the fire. Did they have no chemical suppressants? And then he saw a scattering of discarded canisters. Which meant they’d had them, used them, and were now making do.

Even with the portable arc lights there was barely enough illumination to see clearly. Everything was ghostly in the haze of

stinking, greenish gray smoke. Damotite smoke. So they were all breathing poison?

Oh, wonderful. Because things have been going so well up till now.

Nearby, someone was sobbing.

He cast about for the source of the awful sound. There. Not even a stone's throw distant, half concealed in shadow—a huddled collection of villagers. It was a young woman weeping, collapsed against someone older. Someone he recognized.

"Teeba Jaklin!"

She broke off her murmuring to the crying girl and turned her suspicious gaze on him. "Teeb Yavid—if that's even your name."

"It'll do," he said warily, getting to his feet. "Where's—my cousin? Have you seen him?"

Jaklin stared through the eddying smoke toward the section of storm shield that had failed. "Yes. He says to tell you he'll come when he can."

What? Anakin was *still* standing between the theta storm and the village? It was hard to believe that even he could endure such stress for so long. "You—know what he's doing?"

"And what he is," she said, nodding. "What you both are, Teeb."

Obi-Wan felt his lips twist in a wry smile. "Trouble?"

"I suppose that's yet to be seen."

Since she knew, since she'd guessed, he took a moment to reach out through the Force and make sure Anakin was all right. What he felt made his heart thump hard.

Anakin, hold on.

And then he looked again at Jaklin. "I am sorry, Teeba. It wasn't meant to turn out this way."

“No,” she said, as quiet as he was, and let her cheek rest against the softly weeping girl’s head. “A lot of things weren’t.”

The worst of the fire was extinguished now, the bucket chain winding down. Relieved, he couldn’t sense the kind of panic or alarm that meant a similar disaster was brewing elsewhere in the village.

“The power plant? The mine? Devi? Rikkard? They’re all unscathed? What about the artesian well? Devi said—”

“The irrigation system was blown out by the power surge,” said Jaklin, her voice thin with exhaustion and shock. “We’ll need to wait for the storm to pass, and daylight, to get a proper look. The mine and the power plant stand. Devi’s working herself into a collapse, but she’ll not give way.” She shook her head. “She’s a good woman. We’d be in trouble without her.”

“What about casualties? I tried to clear the refinery. Did everyone —” The look on her face silenced him. Suddenly apprehensive, he looked around again. “Teeba? Where’s Arrad? Is he—”

“We’ve a sick house,” said Jaklin, and gestured in the direction of the square. “Arrad’s there, with the others badly hurt.”

His mouth dried. “How many others? How badly hurt?”

“Nine, Teeb Yavid.” Jaklin’s eyes were shadowed with misery. “But Arrad’s the worst. Rikkard’s left him there with Teeba Sufi and Teeba Brandeh. They see to our most poorly between them. Sufi worked as a hospitaler once, off in Lantibba.”

Stang. *Stang*. “And when you say he’s the worst ...”

She heaved a deep sigh. “I’m told you did your best to save him, Yav—” A sharp head shake. “What’s your real name, Teeb? It’s a lie to call you Yavid and this is no night for untruths.”

“Obi-Wan,” he said. “Jaklin, is he dying?”

Jaklin shrugged. “He could be, Obi-Wan,” she said, close to defeat. Then she looked up. “We all could be, if this storm don’t

ease so we can lower the shields and lose this smoke.”

So. They were breathing in poison. “I thought those pills you gave me and Mar—Anakin—”

“They’ll not do you the same good as the rest of us,” she said. “We’ve been taking them all our days here. But not even our secret will keep us from sickening if we breathe in much more of this filth.” Her chin jerked at the drifting smoke. “Could be you and *Anakin* won’t do too badly, though. Seeing as you’re not regular people.”

She was bitter, and he couldn’t blame her for it. “Teeba, I need to see Arrad. There might be something I can do to help him. If I leave you here—”

“Yes, leave me.” Jaklin frowned at the twisted tumble of overheated, smoking rubble before them and the villagers who still remained with their buckets and hope. “It seems we’re truly done here, with the refinery in ruins and our future with it. I’ll see you at the sick house by and by. Now you’re up and sound I’ll need to get to my duties.”

“And where is Rikkard, if he’s not at the sick house? Do you know?”

“Last I saw he was to the power plant,” she said. “It’s got to take first place, if we’re to have any chance there won’t be another surge along the grid.” Fear shivered through her. “Another surge will kill us, Teeb. Can you do anything about that?”

Obi-Wan felt his belly twist. “I don’t know. We’ll try.”

“You try and we’ll be grateful.”

And what was that—blackmail? Or simply the voice of desperation? “Jaklin, we’ll try.”

Leaving her to her duty he made his way to the sick house. The villagers he passed scarcely paid him attention, too caught up in the disaster to care for a farmer from Voteb. Jaklin clearly hadn’t told

anyone what she'd learned about him and Anakin. If she had they'd be stopping him, disaster or no.

He felt his breath catch. *Arrad*. He should've drawn his lightsaber on the young man after all, because the truth was out now, regardless.

I might have saved his life instead of—

And then, reaching the edge of the empty village square, seeing lights in the charter house and what had to be the sick house, two doors farther down, the despair lifted. He felt a stirring in the Force—a bruised and battered and wonderfully familiar presence.

“Obi-Wan!”

He and Anakin met in the middle of the deserted street. During their years as Master and Padawan he'd done his best to break Anakin's childish dependence on demonstrations of affection. He'd failed. And now, full of relief, he found himself reaching out to clasp his former student's shoulder. The fitful illumination from the square's plasma lights showed him Anakin's face, and the price he'd paid for keeping the theta storm at bay.

It was a moment before he could trust his voice.

“There you are! I was beginning to think you'd gone off somewhere for a nap.”

Sunken-eyed, Anakin dredged up a smile. “Ha-ha. You all right?”

“I'm fine, but Arrad's not,” he said. “We were caught when the refinery blew.”

Anakin raised an eyebrow. “So if it's not crashing vehicles it's exploding factories? Obi-Wan—”

“I know, I know. I'm incorrigible. And quite possibly a bad-luck charm.” Greenish-gray smoke eddied around the plasma lights. “Anakin—the burned damotite—”

“It's toxic, I know,” said Anakin. His ghastly smile returned, just for a moment. “And I thought we were in trouble before.”

He didn't want to say it, or even think it, but he had to. "I'm not sure how soon, but things are going to get worse. Whatever's hunting us? It felt you."

Anakin's face went still. "I didn't have a choice, Master. The shield collapsed and the storm—I couldn't let it—"

Master. "I know you couldn't. I'm not angry. If anything, I'm astonished. Anakin, what you managed—" Obi-Wan shook his head. "I'm not certain that Yoda himself could've held this wretched storm back the way you did, for as long as you did. You saved the village."

"Yeah," said Anakin, scowling now. "Just in time for everyone to drop dead from damotite poisoning. Obi-Wan, this thing hunting us —"

"I don't know. But as soon as this storm clears we've got to get out of here."

"And go where?"

"I don't know that, either," he said, fighting the soft touch of a dangerous fear. "Any suggestions?"

"Obi-Wan ..." Anakin dragged his forearm across his filthy, sweaty face. "We're going to have to invent a new word for the kind of trouble we're in."

"Perhaps we can have a small competition."

"And the winner gets to live? That sounds like a plan."

Despite everything, Obi-Wan felt himself smile. *Things could always be worse. I could be stuck here on my own.* "Anakin, I must get to Arrad. There's a chance I can save his life."

"Then go," said Anakin. "It's not like we have to be secret Jedi anymore."

"Can you go to the power plant? Jaklin says Rikkard and Devi are there, trying to make sure we don't have another grid surge. They could use your expertise."

Swaying on his feet, Anakin nodded. "Sure. Does Rikkard know his son's injured?"

"Jaklin says he does."

"Do you want me to tell him you're—"

"No. Don't say anything," he said. "I don't want to get his hopes up. I might not be able to help Arrad at all."

"If anyone can, you can," said Anakin. And because he was Anakin, and so tired, and had only ever pretended to learn that lesson of distance, gave him a swift embrace. "We'll get through this, Obi-Wan. It's what we do, remember? We survive catastrophe, even if it's by the skin of our teeth."

Yes, we do. I just wish we didn't get quite so much practice at it.

Refusing to worry, he made his way across the village square to the sick house as Anakin headed for the power plant. There he found Teeba Brandeh and another woman, short and broad and busy with bandages. She had to be Teeba Sufi, who'd once worked in a hantibba medcenter.

Thank the Force for small mercies.

Sufi turned, hearing his boot heels on the wooden floor. "What do you want, Teeb? Are you hurt? If you're not bad you'll have to wait. It's only bad cases we're treating here."

He could see that. There was Arrad, a motionless heap on one cot. And sitting by another was the little girl Greti. That must be her mother, then. Bohle. The woman was long and thin and fever-restless beneath her blanket. He counted another eight injured villagers in the room, which smelled of antiseptic and urine and fresh blood and fear.

Greti sat a little straighter. "That's Teeb Yavid. He's my friend."

"I've come to offer my assistance, Teeba Sufi," he said, closing the door behind him. "Jaklin told me Arrad was sore hurt in the explosion."

“You tried to get him out, I’m told,” said Teeba Sufi, raking him head-to-toe with a fierce look that reminded him piercingly of Vokara Che. “Got most everyone else out, too. That was well done, Teeb Yavid.”

Obi-Wan crossed the floor to Arrad’s cot and stared down at the unconscious young man. Both arms and his right leg were roughly splinted. A red-soaked bandage was wrapped around his head. Bruising blotched the right side of his face and his bare chest was punctured in a score of places, scraped and bruised to a raw, weeping mess.

Stang. This is bad.

Dropping to a crouch, he laid fingers lightly on Arrad’s wrist. The boy’s pulse was racing, trying to outrun death. “Actually, Teeba Sufi—it’s not Yavid,” he said, very softly. “My name is Obi-Wan Kenobi.”

Teeba Sufi’s surprise rippled through the Force. “And you’re a doctor?” she said, uncertain.

He turned to look at the women and saw little Greti staring, her old eyes so wide. “No. I’m a Jedi. And I believe I can help this man ... if you’ll let me.”

TEN



“*JEDI?*” TEEBA SUFI STEPPED BACK, HER FACE ABRUPTLY STIFF with fear. “Greti—go. Get out. Find Teeba Jaklin and—”

“Teeba Jaklin knows!” Obi-Wan said quickly. “Please—I’m not here to hurt Arrad or anyone else. I truly want to help, if I can.”

Teeba Brandeh, just as surprised, touched her companion’s arm. “He ran into the refinery to get people out, Sufi. He tried to save Arrad.”

Sufi turned on her. “He’s *Jedi*, Brandeh! You know what they are, you know what they’re capable of. They enslave minds. They turn free men and women into beasts for the Republic! *Look* at him! Hardly a mark on him, and Arrad broken to pieces!”

Teeba Brandeh hesitated.

The child Greti stood. “I don’t know anything about Jedi, but I think Teeb Yav—Teeb Kenobi—is a good man.” She thumped her chest with one small fist. “I think that in here. Where I feel things.” She hesitated, then took a small step toward him. “Teeb Kenobi ...”

He found a smile for her. “Obi-Wan.”

“Obi-Wan.” Her answering smile was shy and trembling with hope. “Can you heal my mother?”

“*Greti!*” Teeba Sufi rounded on the girl. “Hold your foolish tongue, child. Bohle is my business, I’ll not have her meddled with by—”

Greti lifted her chin. “No, Teeba, Bohle is *my* business. She’s my blood and I’m hers and we’re all there is.” She pointed. “Chance be

he might heal her. Can *you* do that? You haven't so far."

"Listen to us, Greti," Teeba Sufi said, cajoling. "You love your mother. We know. But this man's not to be trusted. He lied to us. Came among us calling himself Yavid, calling himself Lanteeban. Him and that cousin." She whipped around. "Are you that much not a liar? Do Jedi have cousins?"

"As Jedi count such things, Teeba, then Anakin is family," Obi-Wan said carefully. "We did not come here to harm you. We did not come here on purpose at all, and when the storm clears we'll leave you. But until then I ask you, please, *let me help*."

Ignoring Sufi and Brandeh, Greti came forward and took his hand. "Help me," she whispered. "I don't want Bohle to die."

"Greti—"

"No, Teeba Sufi," the child said, tugging. "I speak for her. I want this. And if he heals her, no harm done, then he can help Arrad."

Letting Greti pull him to her mother's unquiet side, Obi-Wan looked back at Sufi and Brandeh. "I am sworn to oppose evil and protect the innocent. You have my word, Teeba Sufi, I'll not harm your patient."

"Your word?" Sufi spat on the dirt-smudged floor. "What's the word of a proven liar worth? You claim you can help Bohle? Help her and I'll think twice on you. But if you can't, then Jedi or no Jedi, Torbel will have its revenge."

He nodded, accepting her challenge, then dropped to the stool beside the sick woman's cot. "Greti ..."

He held the child's hand a little more tightly. "You know I can't promise anything."

The child's fear-shadowed eyes appraised him. "You'll do your best, Teeb?"

"My very best. I swear it."

"I believe you," she whispered, then let go of his hand and sat cross-legged on the floor. "I do."

The child had powerful Jedi instincts. “You could help her, Greti. Let her know you’re here. Let her know you love her.”

Tears tipped onto her sunken cheeks. Nodding, she wrapped her small fingers around her mother’s unhurt hand and raised it to her lips for a kiss. The simple gesture was such a profound declaration of love Obi-Wan had to busy himself with unwrapping the bandage covering Bohle’s injury.

It was fearful. Swollen to nearly three times its normal size, Bohle’s left hand was garish green and livid purple around a deep, putrescent laceration. The wound’s primitive stitches had burst, and it wept stinking pus. Fever had turned her blood to fire, scorching her skin and drying out her too-thin body. Poisonous infection streaked up her forearm and past her elbow, heading unchecked toward her shoulder. There were ghastly greenish tracings, damotite’s fingerprints in her flesh.

Obi-Wan felt a surge of misgiving. He had no formal training, no healing crystal to call on. All he had was desperation and a certain affinity for this work.

Oh, Vokara Che. How I wish you were here.

There was no use thinking of how tired he was already, no point in dwelling on all the things he didn’t have or know. This woman was dying. She was Greti’s only kin.

And if I can help her, they’ll let me help all the others. What better way is there to show them the truth about the Jedi?

Fingertips resting on Bohle’s fever-heated arm, he closed his eyes and let the Force take him under. The Force in Greti quivered in response. He breathed in. Breathed out. Found his precarious center.

“Greti,” he whispered. “Think of your mother’s hand unharmed. Can you do that for me? Can you see it in your mind? The way it was before the accident?”

“Yes,” she said, her voice small. “I can see it.”

“Hold that image, Greti. Relax your body. Release your fears. Feel yourself floating in a warm, safe place. See your mother’s hand. See her smiling instead of suffering.”

Restless, breathing harshly, Bohle tossed her head on the pillow, her pain like a wildfire. Obi-Wan pressed his palm against her cheek and gently, inexorably, imposed his will upon her.

Hush, Bohle. Be at peace. Don’t fight me. Feel your daughter beside you. Feel her love. Let go of your terror. Let me in ... let me in ...

With a familiar, warm rush he felt himself plunge deeper into the Force, felt its power flood through him. Never knowing exactly how he did what he did, he made himself a conduit and let its mysterious strength soak into the sick woman’s body. Dimly he heard Greti gasp as the Force stirred ever more strongly within her, instinct guiding her fledgling powers.

A slow, deep shudder racked Bohle head to toe.

Somewhere a woman shouted in protest. “No. Stop. What are you doing? You’re going to kill her. Stop!”

“Have no fear,” he answered dreamily. “No harm is being done.”

He could feel the Force working through Bohle’s sick body, grappling with the rampant infection. And then he was gasping as an echo of her sickness sounded through him, as he became a conduit for her pain. Heat scorched his blood. A vise closed around his skull. His hand burst into a bright and blinding anguish. He heard—felt—Greti whimper.

I’m sorry, Greti, but she needs you. Hold on.

This was a fight as vicious as any battlefield encounter. The infection was his enemy, Bohle’s recovery his goal. Caught up in the struggle, he didn’t care what it cost him, didn’t care that it hurt him. He cared only to win.

Fight with me, Bohle. Don’t give up.

If only he were a true healer. To have that power now, to know he could undo this awful infection as effortlessly as he could deflect a volley of blaster bolts ...

Come on, Kenobi. Make her better.

And then he felt it—the shift, the change in Bohle’s blood. It wasn’t a cure, not completely—but it was change enough to give her a fighting chance. Pulling himself free of the Force, he saw that Bohle lay still now, her chest rising and falling slowly and steadily. Then Greti, tears drenching her face, moaned and collapsed across her mother.

Teeba Sufi, with Brandeh beside her, pushed him aside. “Get out of the way, Jedi. I want to know you’ve not harmed her.”

He half tumbled, half slid off the stool and backed away. His left hand still hurt. Bohle’s fever lingered in his blood. Teeba Brandeh scooped Greti into her strong arms and held the child close, letting the little one weep against her shoulder.

On her knees beside the cot, Teeba Sufi felt Bohle’s cool forehead. Then she stared at the partly healed wound in the woman’s hand and the clean, firm flesh of her arm. No trace of that greenish streaking poison remained. The village healer looked up, her brown eyes narrowed.

“She’s mostly mended.”

Obi-Wan nodded. “I know.”

Sufi shifted her gaze to Greti. “What did the child have to do with it?”

“She ... loves her mother,” he said, circumspect. “Love can be a powerful force for good, Teeba.”

“Hmmp.” Sufi looked down at Bohle. “You can do this again?”

Oh, may the Force give me strength. “I will do it as often as I need to, Teeba.”

“You’re leaving, you said.”

“You’ll be safer if we go. But in between now and then?” Obi-Wan stared around the sick house, at the cots burdened with the injured. “What skills I have are yours to use.”

Teeba Brandeh snorted, sounding like Yoda. “Then apply them to Arrad, Jedi. He’s in need of your help.”

Yes, Arrad was. He had broken bones and split, spoiled muscle and some kind of growing pressure on his brain. Seated beside the young man’s cot, Obi-Wan felt his courage falter. *Oh, Vokara Che. Inspire me, Master.* And then, reaching for his dwindling reserves of strength, he plunged himself deeply into the Force.

WATCHING OBI-WAN DRAG HIMSELF back to awareness, Anakin felt a rising fear. Only trained healers were supposed to work on injuries like Arrad’s, and they were meant to use special crystals so they could safely contain and focus their energy. Two experienced healers on the war’s front line had crippled themselves doing what his mentor was trying to do now.

What were you thinking, Obi-Wan? This isn’t your job.

Beside him, Teeb Rikkard hugged his ribs in silent distress. On his other side Teeba Jaklin rocked on her heels.

At long last, Obi-Wan opened his eyes.

“My son,” said Rikkard, pushing forward. “How is my son? Will he live? Have you healed him?”

Obi-Wan dragged a shaking hand down his face and nodded. “Yes, Teeb. He’ll live. He’s not mended entirely—his broken bones are still knitting. But the wound in his head is dealt with, and the bleeding in his belly.” He took a deep breath and let it out hard. “He must stay quiet with Teeba Sufi awhile yet.”

The Teeba came forward with scissors and fresh bandages. “I’ll see he does—Teeb Kenobi.”

Obi-Wan stood, not quite steady. “Is there anyone else here you think is in danger?”

Anakin opened his mouth to protest, but Obi-Wan raised a silencing hand. Teeba Sufi's frowning gaze traveled over the other occupied cots.

"No," she said. "There's pain and little rest, but no death due the others. Not that I can see." She looked Obi-Wan up and down. "You've done enough. It's rest *you* need."

"Soon," said Obi-Wan. "Teeb Rikkard—"

Rikkard was hovering over Arrad. "What?"

"I must ask you to step outside for a moment, with myself and Anakin and Teeba Jaklin."

"No. This is my boy," Rikkard protested. In the sick house's dull lighting his face was drawn so tight it looked close to tearing. All his knotted scars shone with oil and dirt and sweat. "I'll not leave him."

"I'm sorry, Teeb, you must," said Obi-Wan. Even exhausted, his voice snapped with authority. "It's village business and you're the head miner."

Sufi patted Rikkard's bowed shoulder. "I'll sit with him, Teeb. If he stirs I'll call you."

"Please, Rikkard," Teeba Jaklin said. "I can't decide for Torbel on my own. That's not right."

Resentful, Rikkard shrugged Sufi away. "Don't keep me from him long, Teeb Yavid. Or whatever you call yourself."

Anakin stared at him. "Teeb Rikkard, you could keep a civil tongue. Master Kenobi just saved your son's life."

"Anakin," Obi-Wan murmured. "Don't. His tone doesn't matter."

It did, but he could argue the point later. Leaving the sick to the care of Teeba Sufi and Teeba Brandeh, they withdrew to the street outside the sick house. Torbel had quieted a lot in the past hour. Flickering lights in the distance spoke of families sheltering in their homes. The mine was emptied. No one walked or drove through the village. The low-throated hum of the generators was the only

constant sound. Beyond the plasma shield the theta storm continued to lash them, an odd light building behind its reddish orange glow. Dawn. The air trapped inside the shield was still tainted with smoke. Still poisoned. Coughing, Anakin tried not to think about that.

“What d’you want to say, Jedi?” Rikkard demanded. “Spit the words out and leave us be.”

Obi-Wan didn’t answer him. “Anakin. The power plant? It’s stable? And the generators—you’re confident no more will blow?”

Confident? Now, that was a bold word. He’d spent the last hour with Rikkard and Devi working like a crazy man to shore up every circuit, every relay, every diode interface and every plasma conduit and junction. Torbel’s power plant made Mos Espa’s look sophisticated. How these people managed to survive out here had become a constant source of amazement to him.

“Devi and Teeb Rikkard say the plant’s holding steady enough,” he said cautiously. “I agree. I don’t think we’ll have another power surge. And we couldn’t find another faulty shield generator. Provided the storm doesn’t last much longer—”

“There’s no knowing when it’ll stop,” said Jaklin. “It’ll pass when it passes. Could be hours. Could be days.”

Great. “Don’t worry. We’ll keep the plant running somehow.”

“So,” said Rikkard, rubbing his eyes. “You’re Jedi. And what does that mean for Torbel? Can you save us from the government when it learns we can’t supply it with enough damotite?”

“No,” said Obi-Wan. “And we can’t be found here when the convoy comes. But before we leave, we need to send a message to the Jedi Temple on Coruscant.”

Rikkard and Jaklin stared at them. “Our comm hub isn’t strong enough to punch a signal that far,” Jaklin said, hostile. “It’s not even strong enough to reach the nearest HoloNet relay.”

“That’s all right,” said Obi-Wan. “We have the means to boost the signal. But—we’ll probably blow your hub doing it.”

“Are you mad?” Rikkard demanded. “Cut us off from Lantibba? From help, if we need it?”

Jaklin was shaking her head. “You can’t expect us to say yes to that.”

“It’s said the Jedi are arrogant,” Rikkard growled. “Seems to me that’s a reputation well deserved.”

“Excuse us a moment, would you?” said Anakin, and tugged Obi-Wan aside.

“Anakin—”

He lowered his voice. “We have to tell them about the damotite. About what it’s being used for.”

“No,” said Obi-Wan. “It’s too dangerous.”

“Obi-Wan, we *have* to. It’s the only way to get them on our side.” He glanced at Rikkard and Jaklin. She had her hand on his arm, close to shaking him, and his worry for Arrad shouted in the Force. “Do you think we can’t trust them?”

“I think they don’t need to know,” said Obi-Wan. “They have burdens enough.”

“Maybe, but we don’t have the luxury of sparing them,” he retorted. “Chances are our only hope of stopping Durd is with an all-out assault on this planet before the barve can ship his bioweapon offworld. Are you really going to put these people’s feelings ahead of that?”

Gray-faced with fatigue, Obi-Wan closed his eyes. Then he sighed, and turned back to Rikkard and Jaklin. “Your damotite’s being used to manufacture a bioweapon. A toxic gas so lethal it will wipe out entire cities within minutes. Anakin and I tried to stop its production in Lantibba and failed. Now we need to use—most likely

destroy—your communications hub if we're to save many thousands of lives."

"That's the truth?" Rikkard whispered. "No lie? That's why the government wants our damotite good as raw?"

"That's why," said Anakin. "Will you help us, Rikkard?"

"Why ask?" Jaklin said roughly. "Why not bend our minds? That's what Jedi do, isn't it?"

Obi-Wan hesitated. "If we have to. But we'd rather not. Jaklin, please. We aren't your enemy. Anakin could have died tonight, holding back the storm. Is that the act of a monster?"

Arms folded, Jaklin stared at the ground. Anger and fear muddled her presence in the Force. Anakin turned to Rikkard. "Teeb—Obi-Wan healed your son. He risked his life *twice*, first in the power plant and again when he got everyone out of the refinery. He's no more a threat to you than I am."

"I don't—" Rikkard rubbed his scarred scalp. "I don't know."

"Rikkard, we *have* to trust each other," Anakin said, stepping closer. "Together we can stop the Separatists from committing an act of mass slaughter. And afterward we'll make sure Lanteeb's freed from their tyranny and that all of you are—"

"Anakin," Obi-Wan said sharply. "Don't make promises that aren't yours to keep."

"This *will* be mine to keep," he insisted. "If it's the last thing I do, I'm going to make sure Lanteeb's looked after. And if the Senate won't act, I'll appeal to the Supreme Chancellor directly."

Jaklin's eyes widened. "You know the leader of the Republic?"

"Since I was a boy, Teeba," he said. "Trust me—if I ask him to help you, he will help you."

Jaklin and Rikkard looked at each other, their faces in the sputtering plasma light etched with indecision. Then Rikkard nodded.

“All right. Use the hub. We can always tell the government it blew out because of the storm.”

Obi-Wan offered him a shallow, unsteady bow. “Thank you, Teeb. We’re very grateful.”

“No. Thank you.” Rikkard swallowed, hard. “You saved my boy.”

“You should return to him, Rikkard,” Obi-Wan said gently. “He’ll want to know you’re close by. And if we can ask you for one last favor?”

“Keep our mouths shut?” said Jaklin, snorting. “Think we came down with the last spatter of rain, do you?”

And on that trenchant note she and Rikkard walked back into the sick house.

Anakin looked at Obi-Wan. “I can do this. You should—”

“I’m fine,” said Obi-Wan, and headed for the charter house.

Stang. Frustrated, Anakin stared after him. Fine? You stubborn barve, you’re almost out on your feet. How crazy are you, healing people who are three-quarters dead? That’s something I’d do. You’re supposed to be the sensible one, remember?

With a resigned shake of his head, he jogged to catch up.

“I suspect we’ll need to dismantle both our lightsabers for this to work,” said Obi-Wan as they entered the empty building. “There’s a chance the theta storm will interfere with all outgoing comm signals.”

“A chance?” he scoffed. “The way our luck’s running you can bet on it, Obi-Wan.”

Obi-Wan smiled briefly. “Yes. Well. Under the circumstances I think I’d rather save my credits.”

But their luck wasn’t all bad—the difficulties with the power grid hadn’t affected the lights or the hub. After checking that the equipment was still operational they got to work, stripping the

diatium cells from their lightsabers, then wiring them up to the hub's existing, inadequate power supply. With that done, and facing no immediate circuitry meltdown, Anakin connected the scrambler chip and Obi-Wan kicked the hub into life.

"Well," he said after a tense moment. "It didn't explode. So far so good."

Anakin grinned. "Hold that thought. How's the signal strength looking?"

"Still weak," said Obi-Wan, slipping the hub back to standby mode and reading off the gauge. "The storm and the shield really aren't helping." He pinched the bridge of his nose hard, eyes screwed shut. "I don't know, Anakin. This is a very long shot."

Was that Obi-Wan sounding defeated? He *never* sounded defeated. He never gave up. No matter how bad things got he stuck by his golden rule: *A solution to the problem will always present itself.*

Anakin shrugged. "Better than no shot at all," he said, deliberately indifferent. *Come on, Obi-Wan. Snap out of it.* "Master Ban-yaro will have the Temple listening for us. If anyone can pick up a signal, he can."

"True." Cross-legged on the floor, Obi-Wan shook himself. "All right then. Here goes nothing. May the Force be with us."

He switched the hub from standby to active. It buzzed loudly, vibrations thrumming it as the power boost from the diatium cells surged through its rejiggered circuitry. Something sizzled, and the air turned briefly acrid. One by one, reluctantly, the comm signal board lit green.

"Now, Obi-Wan," Anakin said. "I don't know how much longer this is going to hold."

Obi-Wan keyed in the coded Temple frequency, waited for the scrambler chip to come online, then toggled the transmit switch and waited again for the hub to confirm connection to the HoloNet comm relay network.

Nothing.

Anakin felt the first beads of sweat start to trickle down his spine. Stang, the hub unit was so *slow*. Must be twenty years out of date, at least.

Come on, come on, come on, come on ...

The last indicator light turned green. They heard a buzzing hum and a crackle of static. Obi-Wan closed his eyes and ran a hand over his face. And then he leaned close to the hub mike, his expression intent and urgent.

“This is Obi-Wan Kenobi for Master Yoda. Repeat, this is Obi-Wan Kenobi for Master Yoda. Priority Alpha. Can you respond?”

THE SECURITY COMM’S BEEPING dragged Bail Organa out of his shallow, toss-and-turn sleep. Barely rested, his head still aching despite the blocker he’d taken before falling into bed what felt like only five minutes ago, he opened his eyes.

“Lights.”

Slowly the chamber lifted out of shadow. The security comm beeped steadily, its red warning light flashing on the nightstand beside him.

Stang. This had better be good.

“Organa.”

“This is Master Ban-yaro at the Jedi Temple, Senator. Master Yoda requests your immediate presence in the communications center.”

Bail sat up, his heart racing. “I’m on my way.”

Some thirty standard minutes later he was crowded into a secure comms booth with Yoda and the Temple’s impressive communications chief, listening to an almost inaudible message from Obi-Wan.

“I didn’t catch all of that,” he said, once the recording had run its course. “Can I hear it again?”

Yoda nodded at Ban-yaro, the Jedi tapped a switch on the comm deck, and a moment later the faint, static-scratched message replayed.

“—both still alive. We’re trapped by a theta storm in an outlying village. Master Yoda, we were unable to extract Doctor Fhernan. Production of the weapon continues on a major scale. Recommend you launch an immediate assault to take the planet. When the storm breaks, we’ll return to the city and make another attempt to stop Durd. If we can, we’ll—”

And there the message ended, swallowed by static. Bail sat back in his chair. “Thank you.” Looking at Yoda, he wondered if the ancient Jedi felt as sick with relief as he did himself. “So what now?”

“We wait,” said Yoda, standing, supported by his gimer stick.

“For how long?” he demanded. “I think it’s fair to say the Republic’s in graver danger now than it was the day Obi-Wan and Anakin left for Lanteeb. We have to rethink our strategy, Master Yoda. Obi-Wan’s right—we need to get control of that planet.”

Yoda’s ears flattened. “Still working to create an antidote your scientist friend is, Senator,” he pointed out. “Until a countermeasure against this bioweapon we have, public knowledge of the Separatists’ plans we must avoid. Panic will that cause. Great devastation.”

“I agree,” he said. “The public can’t know. But since when do we brief the public on our fleet deployments? Nobody needs to know where the battle group’s going.”

Yoda just looked at him. “A secret you think this business will remain, once GAR Fleet Command is told?”

With Separatist spies still in their midst? *No. He’s right. But* —“Then we have to take this to Palpatine. If Durd really is stockpiling the bioweapon, it seems likely an attack on the Republic

is imminent. As head of the Security Committee I can no longer support keeping the Supreme Chancellor in the dark.”

“Hmmp.” Yoda’s ears flattened further. “Agree with you I do, Senator. Reluctantly. To Palpatine we will go.”

“You mean now?”

“Yes, now,” said Yoda. “Master Ban-yaro, every Temple resource you will direct to listening for Master Kenobi’s next message.”

“Yes, Master,” said the communications chief, bowing.

Yoda held out his hand. “A secure comlink, if you please.”

Ban-yaro handed him one and Yoda placed a comm to Palpatine’s private residence, arranging for an immediate meeting. Then he handed back the comlink and turned. “Senator?”

Standing, Bail offered the comm chief a nod. “My thanks, Master Ban-yaro. Without your expertise and diligence we might be in even worse straits.”

It wasn’t until he and Yoda were in his speeder, racing along a priority traffic lane with the Temple a distance behind them that the ancient Jedi Master spoke again.

“Ask you I must, Senator, to let me direct this conversation with the Supreme Chancellor.”

Bail gave Yoda a sidelong look. “Any particular reason why? Given I’m one of Palpatine’s most trusted security advisors he’s going to want to hear from me. And if I might be blunt, I can’t afford to have my priorities questioned. It might be convenient to some that I enjoy a good relationship with the Jedi, but I must be seen as a senator, serving the Republic first and foremost.”

“Know that I do,” said Yoda, slumped and brooding in the speeder’s front passenger seat. “Yet ask for your reticence I must. A delicate situation this is.”

“Please, Master Yoda, continue,” Bail said, as Yoda frowned at Coruscant’s scintillating nighttime light show. “Whatever you tell

me won't be repeated."

Yoda's lips twitched. "Not even to Obi-Wan?"

"Not if you tell me to forget what I hear."

"Senator ..." Yoda looked at him, his eyes grim. "Forget what you hear."

Oh, mercy. "Done."

"A keen interest does Palpatine take in Jedi business, Senator," Yoda said. "Deflect his questions I can. Reveal more than you intend or I might like, you could, if freely you speak with him."

"I see," he said slowly.

Obi-Wan's never hidden his disdain for politics and politicians. But I never realized the attitude went so high in the Order. Or that they regarded Palpatine so warily.

"Angry Palpatine will be when learn of the Lanteeb mission he does," Yoda added. "Better it is that his anger toward me is directed. Impervious to it I am. Harmed by his temper I cannot be."

"Whereas I serve at the Supreme Chancellor's pleasure."

"A good man you are, Bail Organa," Yoda said quietly. "A great debt do we owe you. A poor friend would I be if damage to your career I allowed because of choices I made."

Bail had to clear his throat. "Master Yoda—you owe me nothing."

Sighing, Yoda shook his head. "Wrong about that you are, Senator. Obi-Wan's life do I owe you."

Obi-Wan. *My own life's not so cluttered with friends that I can afford to lose one.* "Will he and Anakin be all right, Master? Will we get them back?"

"Know that I do not," said Yoda, as though the words were deeply painful. "Pray for them you could, if prayer your custom is."

Well, it was honored more in the breach than the practice, but ... “I’ll say every prayer I know, Master. I’ll even make up a few if that’ll help.”

Yoda nodded. “It would.”

Bail shifted them out of their government priority traffic lane into the slipstream that would take them to the ultra-high-security residential sector housing Palpatine’s apartment. Then he considered Yoda again.

“You know what you’ll be risking, if you delay an assault on Lanteeb.”

Another nod. “Yes, Senator. I know.”

“And if the worst happens?”

Yoda didn’t answer—and Bail didn’t push.

Stang.

They’d almost reached their destination. Even though he was Bail Organa, with Master Yoda as his passenger, even though his speeder was equipped with security clearance beacons, tags, markers and chips, still they were escorted the remainder of their journey by four heavily armed and armored Senate Personal Guard speeders. Once docked inside the fortified private residence’s secure lockup facility, they were ordered from their own speeder, triple-scanned, retina-checked, then taken by a team of Senate Commandos to a dedicated armored swift-tube that whisked them to the penthouse suite, where Palpatine was waiting.

Clad head to toe in plain, unrelieved black—odd to see after his ceremonial Senate garb—the Republic’s Supreme Chancellor dismissed their escort.

“Well,” he said, once they were alone. “Why do I have the feeling you’re not bringing me good news?”

Bail took a step forward. “I hope you’ll forgive the intrusion, Supreme Chancellor. Unfortunately, it was necessary. There are

developments of which you must be made aware, that couldn't wait till morning."

Palpatine's hair glowed silver in his foyer's warm and welcoming light. "Yes," he drawled. "I'd gathered that much. Very well then, Senator. Master Yoda. If the galaxy as we know it is about to end, I fail to see why we can't discuss the matter in comfort. Come this way."

As Palpatine turned to lead them into his apartment proper, Bail glanced down at Yoda. *Over to you.* Yoda nodded, his eyes bleak, and together they followed in the Supreme Chancellor's chilly wake.

ELEVEN



ONLY HIS BRUTALLY RIGOROUS SELF-DISCIPLINE, THE DISCIPLINE of the greatest Sith Lord ever to live, saved Sidious from revealing the depth of his fury as Yoda explained the mission to Lanteeb.

Dooku, you have failed me again.

“Master Yoda,” he said, ruthlessly unemotional, “I must confess to feeling perturbed. Why did you not tell me of this bioweapon when you first learned of the threat?” He shifted his gaze to the man standing beside his implacable enemy. “And you, Senator Organa? As one of my most trusted security advisors, how could you not—”

“Upon me the blame falls for this, Supreme Chancellor,” said Yoda. “Persuaded by me Senator Organa was to keep this matter secret. Defer to my judgment as a Jedi he did.”

Sidious pushed to his feet and indulged himself in a temper-driven pacing back and forth before the vista window in his apartment’s lounge.

“Master Yoda, you must know in what esteem I hold both you and your Order, therefore you must also know that what I say to you now I do not say lightly.” He whirled, stabbing the hated Jedi with his most steely stare. “*How dare you?* I am the Supreme Chancellor of this Republic, responsible for the welfare of its quadrillions of citizens. Who anointed you the gatekeeper of knowledge? Who appointed you my guardian, that you would decide what I should and should not be told of what goes on within our borders? I am the people’s elected representative. Not you. How could you betray my trust in this fashion?”

Slumped over his gimer stick, Yoda bowed his head. “Unknown at first was the extent of this problem.” Then he looked up. “And inform you of every Jedi mission I do not, Supreme Chancellor.”

Sidious stopped pacing and clasped his hands behind his back. “Then perhaps you should,” he said coldly. “But we can discuss that later. What I will say *now* is that when the extent of the problem was revealed you should have informed me.”

Because then I could have had Dooku take steps. And now it's too late. Now I must find a way to salvage this situation.

Organa, that meddler, cleared his throat. “Master Yoda thought—and I agreed—that if we could deal with the threat quickly and discreetly we’d avoid yet another blow to the public’s confidence. It was never about usurping your authority, Supreme Chancellor.”

Perhaps. Perhaps not. But usurp it you did, you insignificant little princeling. And there will be a reckoning for that.

He kept his voice cold. “Even so, Senator ...”

Chastened, Organa bowed his head.

Yoda, not chastened at all, the loathsome troll, met his hostile stare without flinching. “Hopeful I was that Master Kenobi and young Skywalker successful would be in thwarting Lok Durd’s plan. Hopeful I am that succeed they still might.”

Anakin. He felt an uneasy ripple in the Force. His apprentice-in-waiting was threatened. He could feel it. The future he had foreseen remained unaltered—the time was swift approaching when Anakin would become his strong right hand—but that did not mean the boy could never come to harm. His encounter with Dooku had made that quite plain.

Be strong, Anakin. Be bold and resolute. I cannot openly aid you yet—but from the shadows I shall protect you as best I can.

“I will make no bones about it,” he said austerely. “You have both disappointed me, and shown a distressing lack of judgment. I expect

much better, from both of you.”

Giving them a moment to ponder that rebuke, he resumed his seat. Left them standing, like petitioners, like subjects.

“I have no doubt you believed you were acting in my best interests, and the best interests of our Republic,” he said. “That much at least does you credit. But let me make myself abundantly clear: *I am in no need of your protection.* Is that understood?”

“Supreme Chancellor,” Organa murmured, his gaze still downcast.

“Understood it is,” said Yoda, outwardly meek. The Jedi’s true feelings were unreadable. “Supreme Chancellor.”

“Then we shall not speak of this again,” he said, grandly magnanimous. “Instead, Master Yoda, tell me how you suggest we proceed. You say Master Kenobi requests an all-out assault on this planet, Lanteeb. Do you concur with his assessment? I was under the impression that our deployment capabilities remain woefully compromised.”

And now Yoda could not so perfectly contain his emotions. They colored the Force with delectable doubt. “True it is that trouble the communications sabotage still causes our fleet.”

“Not to mention those cruisers still in dry dock undergoing repairs from your encounter at Kothlis,” he added. “So my question remains—is a full-scale attempt to retake Lanteeb even feasible?”

“We may have no choice,” said Organa. “Durd’s bioweapon has the potential to turn the tide of this war.”

Yes, I know. That was the whole point.

“What of Master Kenobi and young Anakin? Can they thwart this appalling Neimoidian before we’re forced to launch a planetary assault?” Sidious shook his head. “You say you’re hopeful, Master Yoda. Can you give me more hope than that?”

“No,” said Yoda. “In flux this situation is, Supreme Chancellor. Further meditate upon it I must.”

“I see. Senator Organa?”

Organa could hide nothing from him. He felt the man’s sickening doubt, his growing alarm, the fear for his Jedi friend. There was also guilt for having held his tongue so long. Such a maelstrom of emotion was highly entertaining—and useful in keeping the senator off balance and less effective in his work.

Twice now Organa’s instincts have interfered with my plans. I shall have to keep a closer eye on this man.

“Delaying an assault on Lanteeb is risky,” Organa said slowly. “If we’re caught off guard and Dooku launches a bioweapon attack? I don’t want to think about the consequences, Supreme Chancellor.”

He pretended to ponder that deeply. “I agree, Senator. Any delay in apprehending this criminal Lok Durd and dismantling his weapons production facility could lead to a catastrophic Separatist attack. But—and herein lies our dilemma—there is also significant risk in acting. Should word of this terrible new weapon get out, countless systems would be thrown into panic. It’s possible we’d see mass defections from the Republic to the Separatists in an effort to appease Count Dooku and his thuggish allies. And what of our current military engagements? If we redeploy the few functional cruisers we have, then we abandon helpless civilians to Separatist predations. And won’t that damage faith in the Jedi and this government at a time when that faith is being sorely tested?”

“How then do you suggest we proceed, Supreme Chancellor?” said Yoda. “Which risk is least risky, do you say?”

“Both choices are unpalatable, Master Yoda,” he replied. Again, he pretended to consider their options. “If we were not talking of Master Kenobi and young Anakin, I believe I would authorize an immediate assault on Lanteeb. But we *are* talking of those two particular Jedi ... and the three of us know what they’re capable of, especially when their backs are pressed hard to the wall.”

Organa stared at him. “Are you sure? They’re just two men, trapped on a hostile planet with no backup, no reliable

communications, and only a lightsaber each, and they're facing unlimited firepower from a droid army."

"Not two *men*, Senator," he said gently. "Two Jedi. *Those* two Jedi. And yes, that's the gamble I wish to take. I have absolute faith in them. I'd give my life into their keeping without a second thought. Wouldn't you?"

"Of course I would," said Organa. "But we're not risking ourselves, we're risking the lives of those entrusted to our care. Supreme Chancellor—"

Sidious stood. "Your point is taken, Senator. Alas, no matter what choice we make, countless thousands of lives are in danger."

"True that is," said Yoda heavily. "And agree with your caution I do, Supreme Chancellor."

"So you share my faith in Master Kenobi and Anakin?" he said. "You believe they can save us? Again?"

Yoda remained silent for some time, his eyes half lidded. "Believe I do that more time they should be given," he said at last. "Unclear to us the situation on Lanteeb is."

"But Master Yoda, it's not unclear to them," Organa protested. "And they've asked that we act."

Sidious raised a warning hand. "And act we will, Senator. But first I believe we should give our Jedi friends the chance to complete their mission. If we can somehow succeed in thwarting this Separatist plot without further alarming the public or redeploying our already overtaxed GAR forces, then I would consider ourselves triply blessed."

Swallowing emotion, Organa nodded. "Obviously, Supreme Chancellor, the final decision is yours."

"I fear it must be," he said. "I wish I could put this matter before the entire Senate, my friends. I wish I could lift some of this burden from your shoulders. But if this terrible war has taught me nothing

else, it has taught me that above all things circumspection is paramount. There are wheels within wheels, endlessly spinning. To win we must, as the saying goes, play our cards very close to our chests. *But—*” Again he lifted his hand, and let a whisper of censure creep back into his voice. “—*never* so close that I cannot see them. I trust I won’t need to remind you of that again.”

“No, Supreme Chancellor,” said Organa, so pleasingly contrite. “You won’t. Thank you.”

“Master Yoda?”

“Tell you I will, Chancellor, the moment contact we again make with Kenobi and Skywalker,” said the old Jedi fool. “If successful they are, no action will we need to take. But if fail to stop Lok Durd they should, then an attack upon Lanteeb we must launch.”

“Agreed,” Sidious said. “And in the meantime—what can be done to aid the work of this scientist?”

“Nothing, Supreme Chancellor,” said Organa. “Doctor Netzl has everything he requires. And he’s a genius. He will come up with an answer to the bioweapon.”

“I hope you’re right, Senator,” he said, frowning. “For all our sakes. Keep me apprised of *every* development, no matter how trivial.”

And that was their dismissal. As soon as they’d been escorted from his apartment he tried to make contact with his apprentice, but Dooku did not answer the summons. Even as he raged, he realized it was likely not an insolent defiance. It just felt like one, coming on the heels of these most recent revelations. He left his signature on his apprentice’s comm station and withdrew to meditate upon Anakin and his current plight. Dooku would return the comm as soon as he saw his Master’s mark.

At which time he will feel my wrath. For I have not labored these many long years to have my plans disrupted by a weak corruptible like him.

* * *

THE FIRST TINGES of dawn were touching Coruscant's night sky as Bail navigated his speeder back to the Jedi Temple. He waited for Yoda to say something, but the Jedi Master remained silent, almost withdrawn. Finally, with the Temple looming large before them, he cleared his throat.

"I think Palpatine had a right to be angry, Master Yoda. Ultimately, the safety of the Republic is his responsibility."

Yoda glanced at him. "No, Senator. In all our hands does the safety of this Republic lie. To give away personal responsibility is to make freedom a hostage. Protect the Republic we *all* must, with every decision we make." A longer, sideways measuring look. "When began this did, agree not to tell Palpatine of your suspicions *you* did."

Trust Yoda to bring that up. "Yes, because that's all they were then. Suspicions. And with our ongoing security issues I felt that such extreme caution was warranted. But we've gone way past suspicions, Master Yoda." He eased back on the speeder's control yoke, preparing to slip into the dedicated Temple traffic lane. "If I might ask—were you ever intending to tell him?"

"I was," said Yoda, as they smoothly switched slipstreams. "When successfully completed the mission was."

"He has so much faith in them. Obi-Wan and Anakin." Bail shook his head. "I think it scares me a little. Not because I don't believe they're brilliant. I do. It's just—"

"The Jedi are not creatures of myth and magic," said Yoda. He almost sounded sad. "They are flesh and blood. They bleed. They break. Too much you fear we ask of Obi-Wan Kenobi and Anakin Skywalker."

"Yes. I do." He looked at Yoda. "Don't you?"

Yoda answered with silence.

Well, that's reassuring.

After returning the Jedi Master to the Temple, Bail made his way to Padmé's apartment. He desperately wanted to see Tryn, find out how close his sequestered friend was to a breakthrough on the antidote, but it was too early. Really it was too early to see Padmé, but she'd never forgive him for holding back his news of Obi-Wan and Anakin. Well—of Anakin in particular. He was almost convinced now that if her interest lay anywhere, it was with the younger man.

And if that doesn't stir up a nest of gundarks, I don't know what will. Oh, Padmé.

To his surprise he found her already awake, dressed in a forest-green bodysuit and throwing clothes into a suitcase. She was distinctly unamused.

"I'm sorry, Bail," she said, as he halted in her bedroom doorway. "I'm abandoning you with the most awful schedule of meetings, I know. But the Queen has made it abundantly clear that if I don't fix this mess with the Artisans' Guild there are going to be interplanetary repercussions."

"What?" He crossed the chamber's threshold and stood at the foot of the bed. "I thought you said you'd resolved that dispute."

"I *did* resolve that dispute!" she retorted, snatching a pair of shoes from her wardrobe. "But now it's back to being unresolved." She threw the shoes into her suitcase. "I swear, the next barve who tells me he's got an artistic temperament and can't be expected to observe the civilities is going to find himself—"

With an enormous effort she discarded the rest of the threat, exhaled a deep breath, and dropped to the edge of the bed. Even at this early hour, and so angry, she looked immaculately beautiful as usual. Casting him a rueful glance, she shook her head.

"I'm sorry. You've caught me in a very bad moment."

“No need to apologize,” he said, trying to smile. “Sometimes being a senator is like being nibbled to death by Tartarian mice.”

“True,” she said. “In fact I—” And then she seemed to register that he was standing in her bedroom. “Bail? It’s the crack of dawn. What are you—”

Then she realized what it had to be.

“They’re in trouble. How bad is it? Have they been—are they—”

“Not dead,” he said quickly. “Not hurt. I don’t think, anyway. Just trapped.”

“On Lanteeb?”

He nodded. “They’re still trying to stop Durd.”

“And then what?” Her voice was faint, all her passionate energy smothered by fear. “How are they going to get off that planet?”

“I don’t know.”

“The Jedi won’t rescue them?”

“Padmé, I don’t know.”

Leaping up, she began an agitated pacing. “They rode to the rescue on Geonosis. They *have* to—they *can’t* just—” Her face hardened. “Well, if the Jedi Council won’t help them, *I* will. Because I am not going to leave them stranded there.” She whirled around, her gaze hot on him. “And you’ll help. Because you got them into this, Bail. You sent them on this wild bantha chase to Lanteeb and just because it turns out you were right and there was trouble brewing there, that is *no* excuse for you to—”

“Padmé, Padmé, cool your thrusters!” he said, holding out both hands. “You can’t go charging in like a random blaster bolt. The situation is unbelievably volatile. One wrong move and we could get them killed! Is that what you want?”

“Of course not,” she snapped. “What I want is them home again, on Coruscant, safe and sound. What I *want* is—”

She turned her back to him, her shoulders shaking, as though she were weeping, or trying very hard not to.

Stang. “Padmé,” he said carefully. “Talk to me. Whatever’s wrong, if it’s a secret it’ll stay that way. Please. Let me help.”

He didn’t dare say anything more. The truth had to come from her. No matter what he suspected, she had to be the one to cross that line.

For the longest time she didn’t speak. Then, at last, she turned. Her eyes were dry, her face composed and self-contained. She wasn’t smiling, but there was a warmth in the steady look she gave him.

“You are so sweet to care, Bail. Thank you,” she said, her voice low and steady. “And I hate to be churlish—but I need to finish packing and be on my way to the spaceport. Given everything our poor Republic’s enduring at the moment I realize the temperamental tantrums of a bunch of glassblowers must sound trivial—even petty. But Naboo prizes its artisans, and Queen Jamillia is relying on me to resolve what is—to them—a genuine crisis.”

In other words, Bail, mind your own business. He nodded. “Where is it you’re going?”

“Bonadan,” she said, turning back to the suitcase. “The Queen’s sure we can break the current deadlock if I can convince the Silver Sand Consortium board members to sit down with me and discuss the glassblowers’ concerns.”

He had to grin. “I take it the glassblowers themselves haven’t been invited to the meeting?”

“I’m told,” said Padmé, very restrained, “that thanks to their last temper tantrum, if even *one* glassblower is found within fifty parsecs of Bonadan Four, the Silver Sand Consortium will pass legislation banning all sales of silica to Naboo—in perpetuity.”

“That must have been some tantrum.”

“Queen Jamillia is surprised we didn’t hear it in the Senate chamber.” With a sigh, Padmé closed the suitcase and clicked shut its latches. Then her lips tightened, and she stepped back from the bed. “I’ll have my secured private comlink with me, of course,” she added, not looking at him. “If you get word—I don’t care what time it is—would you—”

“You know I will,” he said. “Whatever I hear, whenever I hear it, I’ll comm you straightaway, I promise.”

“Thank you. I—” Her lips tightened again and suddenly it seemed she was once more on the verge of tears.

If he took a step toward her, if he touched her or offered any kind of sympathy, she’d break. And she wouldn’t like him for it.

“I’ll be on my way then,” he said, with a kind of forced cheer that made him feel slightly ill. “If the nibbling gets too much and you need to have a temper tantrum of your own, you know where to find me.”

“Yes, I do,” she said softly. “Thank you, Bail.”

Padmé’s fussy protocol droid insisted on seeing him to the apartment’s front door. As it activated the latch and stood back, perfectly deferential, he went to leave—then hesitated. Turning, he stared into its glowing photoreceptors, feeling foolish. The thing was a droid. It wasn’t alive. And yet ...

“If you think she’s in trouble, See-Threepio, you comm me,” he said, keeping his voice down. “Day or night. You understand?”

The droid stared at him blankly. But was it also judging him? Measuring him? Deciding if it could trust him? *Stang. It’s a droid.*

At last the machine nodded. “Senator.”

So was that a yes or a no? He couldn’t tell and he wasn’t about to ask. He’d just have to wait and see. But as he navigated the traffic streams to his own apartment, only vaguely aware of yet another glorious Coruscant sunrise, he found himself praying hard it was a

yes—and praying even harder that somehow the two impossible friends he and Padmé had in common would manage to find a way out of their latest predicament. Because he did not want to think about having to give her bad news.

Oh, Padmé. Dear Padmé. It's such a big galaxy. Was there nobody else you could fall in love with?

* * *

IT TOOK DOOKU nearly two hours to make contact from Umgul. Waiting for him, Sidious ordered Mas Amedda to rearrange Palpatine's schedule. As a rule he was in his Senate executive suite no later than 0730 every morning—an example of diligence too few senators could bring themselves to emulate. They thought he didn't notice.

Of course, they thought wrong.

While he waited for Dooku's comm he sank himself deep within the ebb and flow of the dark side to explore its possibilities and search for the most advantageous way to exploit what had happened. Setbacks were inevitable. What counted was how one dealt with them.

Over the years he'd become an expert in transforming defeat into victory, in turning a retreat into an advance—from a different direction. He had no doubt he could turn Dooku's failure with Lanteeb into some kind of advantage. In the long view, of course, it would make no difference. He was destined to rule an empire, and no Jedi could change that.

But I must have a care for Anakin, which means that far from being trapped on that insignificant planet, he must be afforded every chance to escape. The question is ... how best can I achieve that?

Sinking deeper again, he invited the dark side to show him.

When Dooku's comm finally came through he had his plan, and knew with a fat and scintillating satisfaction that yet again events would dance to his tune. Clad in his Sith robes, he activated the

holoimager in his penthouse apartment's secure, soundproofed study.

"You failed to persuade the Umgul government to join your Alliance," he said, ignoring Dooku's cautious greeting. "I find that disappointing, Lord Tyranus."

So far away, and he could still sense Dooku's stabbing fright.

"You know? But I have only just returned from—"

He cracked the dark side like a whip. "Did you think I would *not* know?"

Dooku dropped to one elderly knee. "Lord Sidious, they were not amenable to persuasion."

"You should have *made* them amenable!"

"My lord, I did not dare. Our meeting was live-recorded, tightbeaming to a number of different locations. There were numerous witnesses. Under the circumstances I felt it better to admit defeat."

"I don't recall teaching you that the Sith admit defeat, Lord Tyranus."

"Only temporarily, my lord," Dooku said, shuddering. *"I thought to let the Umgul government believe it was free to make its own choice and then, once our enemies believe they have no more to fear, I will ... arrange matters ... so that Umgul comes to us begging for protection."*

Ah. So there was life in the old man yet. "That might be an acceptable alternative, Lord Tyranus," he said, after stretching his silence almost to Dooku's breaking point. "Provided it can be brought to pass."

Dooku bowed low. *"My lord, you have my word it will be."*

"See that you keep that promise, Tyranus," he said coldly. "My generous forgiveness is not without limits." He waved a dismissive hand. "And so much for Umgul. Now what of Lanteeb?"

“My lord?” Dooku lifted his head. “I have no news to report of that matter.”

“Because you have failed me there, too, Tyranus!” he snarled. “The Jedi know all. Kenobi and Skywalker even now are on the planet, seeking to destroy Lok Durd and his weapon. They have been assisted by the scientist our Neimoidian pawn took for his purposes. The Jedi have rescued the hostages Durd was holding against her, and one of the greatest scientific minds in the Republic is now working on an antidote against the weapon. It seems, Lord Tyranus, that the situation on Lanteeb has entirely escaped your control. Must I forgive you *again*, my apprentice?”

Dooku’s horrified shock was genuine. So at least, unlike Yoda, he hadn’t been keeping unfortunate secrets.

“Lord Sidious ...” The tremble in the old man’s voice was pure fear. *“I have no excuse to give you.”*

“No, you do not,” he replied, silky with menace. “And wise it is of you, Tyranus, to attempt no self-defense. But I *will* forgive this lapse, provided you can snatch me a victory from this imminent defeat. I *strongly* suggest that you take the Neimoidian to task.”

“Do you wish him to survive, my lord?”

“Yes,” he said. “But he need not know his life is not forfeit. Not at first. General Durd needs a sharp reminder of his place. A defining encounter with fear.”

“My lord, he shall have it,” said Dooku—and the dark side trembled. *“But what of Kenobi and Skywalker? Surely we must capture them—or better yet, kill them.”*

And here was the sticking point. For while he had to protect Anakin, Dooku could never suspect that he himself was merely a placeholder. A useful lackey and nothing more.

“If I could afford to dispatch you to Lanteeb, Tyranus, I would. But I am relying upon you to keep the other Separatist leaders in line. I am particularly perturbed by those scum in the Banking Clan.

Grubby merchants, the lot of them, and not to be trusted out of your sight. My instincts tell me they are about to attempt a secret deal with the Trade Federation. You must see *that* poisonous bloom nipped in the bud, Tyranus. Have no fear. The dark side shall account for Kenobi and Skywalker in due course.”

“*My lord.*” Dooku’s chin tucked tight to his chest. “*You are far more magnanimous than I deserve. You will not be disappointed again, I swear it.*”

Time to sweeten the old man with a tiny drop of honey. Dooku had his pride, after all. And though his bones were soaked in the dark side, still—no need to tempt fate. “Tyranus, much is asked of you in this great endeavor. Your burdens are heavy, my expectations high. I trust you will redeem yourself.”

Dooku’s relief was as resounding as his fear. “*My lord, I will. Your trust is not misplaced, I swear it.*”

Pleased, Sidious dismissed his apprentice. Then he returned his black robe to its rightful place, donned Palpatine’s richly sober garb and became, once again, the Republic’s revered and humble Supreme Chancellor.

And smiled all the way to the Senate.

LOK DURD PROWLED his new compound’s production facility, so gleeful he could almost forget his recent fears and trepidations. The scientist was performing well past his expectations. With the last kink in her formula taken care of, the first shipments of raw damotite delivered, tested and approved, and his droid workforce slaving without pause to convert the damotite-and-rondium mixture to pure poison, he was at last able to bask in the glow of a job well done.

Especially since, within a matter of hours, those meddlesome Jedi would finally be dead—and with them the chance of his near-disastrous mistake being discovered.

Smiling, he watched the droids as they sealed another batch of bioweapon into small, secure canisters. Each dose was enough to wipe out a three-square-klick section of city. On some planets that would mean the entire city. On others, like Coruscant, Corellia, Alderaan, and the like, multiple strikes would be required to wipe out a population—or at least enough of a population to guarantee a recalcitrant government’s attention.

Really, I am so very good at what I do.

By his estimation he needed two more standard weeks of production and one more shipment of the raw damotite, which was due shortly. Then he could contact Count Dooku with the good news that their next devastating offensive against the Republic could begin. And *this* time there would be no Jedi interference. *This* time the Jedi would be forced to stand impotently by as millions were slaughtered.

I wonder if I can convince the Count to target the Jedi Temple itself? Wouldn’t that be a glorious retribution?

His personal comlink buzzed. Irritated, he pulled it from his tunic pocket. “What?”

“You have a priority incoming call, General.”

And that was Barev, the kriffing barve. Ever since his precious Drivok sniffer had found the Jedi he’d been insupportable. Overbearing, smug, arrogant—and presumptuous. It was time to discredit and discard him.

When I tell Dooku that the bioweapon is ready for deployment I shall be in a position to demand certain recognitions for my service. Losing Barev will be but the first—but none that come after will taste as sweet.

Durd glared at the comlink. “Yes? And?”

“It’s the Count,” said Barev. *“He seems—unhappy.”*

And just like that, his triumphant mood collapsed.

“What do you mean unhappy?” he demanded. “What have you told him, Colonel? Have you been speaking out of turn?”

“To what good purpose, General?” said Barev. “Our fates are tied, are they not? If one of us stumbles, we both stumble. I’ve no idea what he wants.”

“I’m coming now,” he snapped. “Tell the Count I shall join him in a few moments.”

Durd took the communication in his office, with the door firmly shut. Making sure his demeanor was suitably restrained, he flicked on his holodisplay unit and waited for Dooku’s holoimage to appear. When it did, the Count’s expression was discouraging.

“Do I strike you as a fool, General Durd?”

“A fool? No, no, my lord. You are the wisest man of my acquaintance.”

“Then it is you who are the fool!” Dooku retorted. *“Did you think I would not learn the truth?”*

Durd felt his stomachs roll. “The truth, my lord?”

“About the Jedi! About the hostages! Have you told me nothing but lies?”

The shock was so great he nearly fell to the floor. “My lord Count—my lord Count—”

“Hold your flapping Neimoidian tongue or I swear I will have it ripped out!”

Durd nodded mutely as greasy sweat slicked the skin beneath his suddenly overthick tunic.

“Have you lied about the weapon, Durd?”

“No! No! My lord, I have not! I have the weapon. I’ve just come from inspecting it. Our stockpile is growing by the hour, I swear it!” He was babbling, he could hear himself babbling, but he couldn’t

stop. Dooku's eyes—he's going to kill me. As soon as I'm useless to him, I'll be dead. "I will send you some. Shall I send you some?"

Dooku ignored him. *"There is a scientist on Coruscant even now creating an antidote for the weapon."*

"My lord Count, you must be misinformed," he said faintly. "No antidote is possible. If you believe nothing else I say, I beg you to believe that."

Silence, as Dooku's terrible eyes bored into him. *"I do. As for the rest—there will be a reckoning, Durd. Soon. For now you will concentrate on producing my weapon. And you'll hold yourself in readiness for my retribution."* Dooku's holoimage vanished as the link was cut.

Durd stood behind his desk and gasped for air.

No, no, no. This cannot be. I will not let this be.

He bellowed for Barev. Moments later the office door flew open.

"General?" The colonel stared about, blaster drawn. "Are you under attack?"

The fool. The stinking human fool. "You have to stop the droid army heading for Torbel. It must be reprogrammed. I want the Jedi taken alive."

Slowly Barev lowered the blaster. "Alive?"

"Yes, you incompetent moron! *Alive!*" he shouted. "Dooku knows. Do you hear me? *He knows.* And we will be dead unless we can appease his wrath. I want the Jedi alive, to give him as a gift. The droids must be programmed with the Jedi's holoimages so they know who not to kill. And I want—I want—" He beat his fists against his chest as though that could force the words from his body. "I want to show Count Dooku my value. I want to prove my weapon to him."

"You want to test it now?" said Barev, surprised. "Are you sure? Do you have permission?"

“This is *my* Project!” he spat. “I do not *need* permission. I will choose a target in the heart of the Republic and *you* will see that our demonstration is executed perfectly. Everything is in place to launch an attack, isn’t it? Or have I been deceived in that, too?”

Barev wasn’t really a moron. He knew perfectly well his own life was on the line. “No, General, you’re not deceived. Give the word and an attack will be launched.”

“Then why are you still standing there?” Durd demanded, close to screaming. “First the droids and then the attack. Get out. *Get out!* There’s no time to lose!”

TWELVE



“OBI-WAN ...”

Anakin’s voice, and a touch to his shoulder, brought him from meditation into full awareness. Obi-Wan opened his eyes and looked up. “Another problem?”

“On the contrary,” said Anakin. Though clearly tired, he was smiling. “Rikkard says the theta emissions are falling at last. The storm’s passing.”

An oddly watery daylight poured in through the charter house’s open doors and unshuttered windows. The cool air still reeked of smoke and scorched metals, but it smelled of freshly cooked food, too. And there were voices, blended into an indistinct hubbub. In the Force he sensed lingering anxiety, but no more overwhelming fear.

“That is good news.” Cross-legged on the floor, his back braced against the wall, Obi-Wan eased his shoulders and looked at the burned-out communications hub. “Any luck?”

Anakin’s smile vanished. “No. It’s fried. There’s no chance of getting it operational again.”

“And our scrambler chip?”

“Is completely scrambled.” Anakin fished in his filthy trouser pocket and pulled out a sad little lump of circuitry that had melted, then hardened. He held it out. “Which is going to make things interesting.”

Inspecting the ruined chip, he pulled a face. “More interesting, you mean.”

Anakin shrugged. “Everyone knows a quiet life is a boring life. Our only consolation is the diatium cells weren’t damaged.” He patted his shirt’s shielded pocket. “I’ve put my lightsaber back together.”

Nodding, he tossed the ruined chip aside. “Good. I’ll get on to mine in a moment.”

“No need,” said Anakin, pleased with himself. “Here you go.”

Obi-Wan plucked his lightsaber from the air. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Oh—and if you’re hungry?” Anakin jerked a thumb behind him. “There’s a kind of communal breakfast happening out on the square.”

He was famished, but—“I’ll eat once I’ve looked in on Teeba Sufi’s patients. Have you had something?”

“Yeah. It wasn’t too bad.” Another swift smile. “Mind you, I made sure to steer clear of Teeba Jaklin’s eggs.”

He really wasn’t in the mood for jokes. “And the villagers? How are they?”

“Subdued,” said Anakin, sobering. “They know how close they came to destruction last night. And now, with the refinery blown to bits—they know they’re still in trouble.” His lips tightened. “I meant what I said, Obi-Wan. About getting them help.”

“I know you did,” he said, gently, because they were both tired. “And we will. But for now we must remain focused on the mission.”

“Speaking of the mission,” said Anakin, “when do you want to tell Jaklin we’re leaving?”

He hesitated. “Oh. Yes. About that ...”

“What?” Anakin stared. “You want to wait for the convoy after all? Obi-Wan—”

“I know,” he said, as Anakin turned away in frustration. “But the fact is, nothing’s changed about the challenges we face in returning to Lantibba. Traveling out in the open, in broad daylight, unprotected, with our false ID chips useless—” He shook his head. “We’d be asking to get caught. Better that we’re delayed than we fall into Durd’s hands.”

“And whatever it is that’s hunting us?”

“I can’t feel it now,” he said. “I’ve been trying for more than an hour but I get no sense of its presence anywhere in the Force.”

“Meaning what?” said Anakin, unconvinced. “It’s lost us? It’s given up?”

“Possibly.”

“Obi-Wan, that’s a big gamble. What if you’re wrong? What if waiting here gives it a chance to find us?”

He’d been asking himself the same difficult question for the past half hour. “You’re right. It’s a risk. But I still believe not waiting for the convoy is the greater danger.”

“I’m not saying you don’t have a point,” Anakin said, shoving his hands into his pockets. “It’s just—it means being stuck here for another day, Obi-Wan. And that gives Durd more time to launch his first attack.”

He pushed to his feet, feeling his muscles drag subtly, reminding him that he was far from his best. “For all we know he’s launched it already. Our escape could easily have panicked him into making a move. But we don’t know for certain—and we can’t let our fears panic us into a bad choice.”

Anakin considered him. “Are you saying you were feeling panicked last night?”

“I’m saying that important decisions should be made in a calm state of mind,” he retorted. “Raging theta storms, failing power

grids and exploding refineries are not, in my estimation, conducive to tranquillity.”

“No kidding,” said Anakin, drily amused. Then he shook his head. “I guess it all comes down to timing. Maybe it doesn’t matter if we’re here another day. If the Republic can get a battle group together fast enough, launch an all-out assault on Lanteeb—”

“We can hope for that, certainly,” he said carefully. “But Anakin —”

“Yeah,” said Anakin, scowling again. “Since we never made real-time voice contact with the Temple, there’s no way of knowing if they even got our message. In which case, Obi-Wan, don’t you think we should—”

“What I think,” he said, slipping his lightsaber back into his shirt’s shielded pocket, “is that we can’t go anywhere until the storm shield’s down. So I’m going to look in at the sick house, then swallow some breakfast. What about you?”

“I’ve said I’ll help sift through what’s left of the refinery,” said Anakin, after a moment. He still wasn’t convinced. “See if I can repair any equipment the blast didn’t destroy. Rikkard won’t give up on the idea they can make that quota. He’s going back down the mine and taking as many villagers as he can with him. I’ve told him he’s crazy, but he won’t listen.”

Of course he wouldn’t. Rikkard was driven by duty and desperation. “He’s trying to save his village, Anakin. You can’t blame him for that.”

“I don’t,” said Anakin. He sounded unbearably sad. “But it’s a fool’s errand and he knows it. From the minute that storm closed in, these people never stood a chance.”

“If it wasn’t for you, these people would all be dead and dying now. How are you feeling this morning?”

Anakin dragged his fingers through his dirty hair. The light filtering through the storm shield glinted on faintly golden stubble,

picking out bruised shadows beneath his eyes and in the subtle hollows of his cheeks.

"I've been better," he said, shrugging. "And worse. You?"

"I have a headache," Obi-Wan admitted. "Which meditation hasn't banished. Also a nasty aftertaste in the back of my throat."

"So do I," Anakin said slowly. "You don't think—"

"I think we've been breathing toxic smoke for hours," he retorted. "But I doubt we're going to drop dead from damotite poisoning. We're Jedi—we can ameliorate the worst of the smoke's effects. But still—be careful poking around that refinery. No heroics. Be sure to wear protective clothing."

"Says the man who diced with death in an unstable power plant," said Anakin. "Devi told me all about it. Obi-Wan, you're lucky you didn't go up in a ball of burning plasma."

"Lucky?" He pretended offense. "Luck had nothing to do with it! Now off you go. I'll join you as soon as I can."

Many of Torbel's women and children still mingled on the square outside, eating and gossiping and gaining strength from community. A few men stood with them, but it seemed most had already returned to the mine with Rikkard, or were sorting through what was left of the refinery. Obi-Wan looked for Greti but couldn't see her. He saw Teeba Jaklin, though, standing with Sufi and Brandeh. They didn't notice him, paused on the charter house step, welcoming the daylight on his face. And that was fine. They'd only bombard him with questions he wasn't feeling up to answering yet.

He made his way to the sick house—and found Greti there, silent and hopeful by her sleeping mother's side. She was the only one in the room who was not a patient. Seeing him she stood, fingers twisting in her fraying, patched tunic.

"Teeb Kenobi!"

“Obi-Wan,” he said, joining her. “How are you, Greti? How’s your mother?”

Greti stepped aside. “You tell that to me.”

He dropped to a crouch beside the cot and laid his palm against Bohle’s thin face. Her color was better. Her breathing, too. And he could barely feel any pain inside her. Gently he inspected her injured hand. The wound looked clean, as did her arm. She didn’t stir at his touch.

“Teeba Sufi’s given her brew to keep her sleeping,” said Greti. “She says folk get better right fast if they’re let sleep without care.”

Just as gently Obi-Wan laid Bohle’s arm back to the blanket. “That’s very true.” He smiled. “Your mother’s going to be fine, Greti. You don’t have to worry anymore.”

The child’s chin lifted. In her eyes there were questions, and courage, and hope touched with fear. “I did some of it, didn’t I? I helped make her better. How did I do that?”

He could lie. He *should* lie. This little girl didn’t need to know she could have been a Jedi—possibly a great one—and likely would have been, if life weren’t so unfair.

“Teeb? Obi-Wan?” she persisted. “Did you do something to me?”

“No,” he said quickly. “No, I promise. All I did was show your mind how it could think in a different way.”

Greti’s fingers twisted in her tunic again. “I felt strange,” she whispered. “Warm and strong. I felt like I wasn’t inside my own skin, like I was on the outside watching.”

“And did that frighten you?”

She hesitated, then nodded. “Yes.” And then she shook her head. “But no. I mean—I liked it. I want to do it again.”

“And maybe one day you will,” he said, after a moment. “Who can tell?”

“You’re a Jedi,” she said. “Can’t you?”

He let her see how sorry he was. She deserved so much better than this poor village on Lanteeb. “I wish I could, Greti.”

She went very still, and her eyes filled with shadows. Then she nodded. “You’d best look in on Arrad, Teeb. His father was here before, he sat with him all night, but he’s back down the mine now.” Her face twisted. “I hate the mine.”

“I’m sure you do, Greti,” he said, aching, and did as he was told.

Teeba Sufi returned while he was checking Arrad’s progress. “I saw you come in here, Teeb Kenobi. Think you can’t trust me with your handiwork?”

There was a teasing note in her voice that belied the sharp words. Obi-Wan looked up from Arrad’s splinted arms. “He seems well enough. Has he spoken yet?”

“Opened his eyes a few minutes,” she replied. “He knew his name. Knew his father. That’s enough to be going on with.”

Nodding, he glanced at the other cots. “I see you have three fewer patients, Teeba.”

“On their feet and gone home, yes,” she said, well satisfied. “Not dead, which is a mercy. And these five I’ll keep asleep another day and then they’ll be shifting, too.” Moving close enough to take his chin in her fingers and tilt his face up, she pursed her lips. “Headache’s bothering you, is it? Mouth tastes like fowl splodge?”

He blinked. “I’m fine, Teeba.”

“Ha.” She let go of his chin and stepped back, scornful. “Like to think anyone who’s not you is a fool, is that it? I’d heard Jedi were haughty.”

Haughty? “Teeba Sufi—”

“Born and raised in damotite country and you think I can’t see a man touched green?” She glared. “If that’s not haughty you tell me what is. Sit where you are.”

So he sat, feeling like a scolded youngling, and watched Teeba Sufi rummage in the supply cupboard and return to him with a stoppered bottle and a measuring cup.

“You’re going to feel worse before you feel better, Teeb,” she said bluntly, pouring a measure of thick brownish liquid into the cup. “And you won’t be the only one.”

“The toxic smoke,” he said, feeling his nerves tighten. “How bad will it get?”

“Hard to say,” she said. “Your belly’s empty?”

He took the measuring cup she held out to him. “I haven’t eaten yet, no.”

“Good. It’ll work faster that way.”

“Teeba ...” Suddenly her forthright gaze was elusive. “*Sufi*. How bad will it get?”

She looked at Greti, holding her mother’s hand and pretending not to listen to them. “Bad enough. I’ll not pretend—I’m worried. For the children most. That storm—” Her plain face pinched with fear. “We’ve all breathed too much smoke, Teeb. Trapped inside our storm shield with it for hours? That’s never happened before.” With a deep breath she calmed herself. “Drink your mix, Teeb. And you’ll need to send your young friend to me for his dose. Sooner, not later.”

Sourly he eyed the viscous concoction. “Does it taste as bad as it looks?”

“Worse,” she said, with a swift, grim smile. “But you’ll thank me.”

Since he had no choice, he swallowed the disgusting liquid. Coughed and spluttered as it burned its slow way down to his protesting belly. Eyes streaming, he stared at Teeba Sufi.

“Thank you? I doubt it!” he wheezed. “What is in that appalling stuff?”

“This and that,” said Sufi. “Now, you’ll need more purging than one dose, Teeb Kenobi. The smoke’s soaked you, it has. Jedi or not, you’ll feel it awhile. And Torbel’s children will feel it. We need the storm shield down and good fresh air in our lungs.” She frowned. “And I’ll need to brew more purgative. I only hope I’ve enough fixings. I never thought to be dosing the whole village.”

Nauseous, Obi-Wan pushed up from the cot-side stool and gave sleeping Arrad a last look. He could feel no danger to Rikkard’s son. The healing he’d managed for him had taken. All the young man needed now was rest and time. He was aware of a brief, silent pleasure. He’d have to remember to thank Vokara Che—all her lectures had finally paid off.

“If you need help with your brewing, Teeba, you must ask,” he said. “Anakin and I will be leaving Torbel in a day or so, but until then—whatever we can do to help.”

She looked him up and down. “Never thought in all my life to meet me a Jedi. Not a toe I’ve stepped off Lanteeb. Never wanted to. Never will. But even we hear things. Or we did.” She rested her hand on his arm. “You’re not what we’re told. Or—not all that we’re told.”

Smiling, he handed her his emptied medicine cup. “Is anyone, Teeba Sufi?”

Leaving her to stare after him, he took himself outside to the village square, where Jaklin and some other women were tidying up the remains of the community breakfast while a few of the children kicked their synthafibe ball around. Jaklin saw him and beckoned him over.

“You’ve not eaten,” she said accusingly, and handed him a plate with bread and egg and meat on it. “It’s cold now, I can’t help that. Eat. And then there’s tea in a pot. I’ll pour it when you’re ready.”

His belly still churned from his dose of purgative, but he needed the nourishment. Staring at the hazily swirling storm shield, at the

bluish sky beyond it and the drab surrounding landscape, he ate the cold food.

“The storm’s almost passed,” said Jaklin, content it seemed to hold her cleaning cloth and let the other women carry on alone for the moment. “We should be breathing fresh air soon.”

Obi-Wan glanced at her. “You’ve spoken to Teeba Sufi?”

“Yes. I know the dangers,” Jaklin said, curt. “We’ll ride them, Teeb Kenobi. That’s what life in Torbel is. Problem after problem and us riding them. Trying not to fall off and be trampled underfoot.”

Her pain was a bloodred surge in the Force. “I wish there were something I could do about that, Jaklin.”

She turned on him, fiercely. “Torbel’s not yours to fix. Torbel’s ours and we’ll take care of it. You do what you came here to do, you and that young man. They’re making us murderers and I won’t have it. D’you hear?”

He couldn’t eat any more. Putting his half-emptied plate on a nearby trestle, he nodded. “I hear, Teeba. Anakin and I will do our best.” He looked around. “Am I needed here? If not, I’ll see if there’s anything more to be done in the power plant.”

“If Devi has no need of you,” said Jaklin, “I know we’ve men trying to get the artesian pump back working. That power surge did some fearful damage.”

He stared. “The village is without water?”

“There’s water in the holding tanks,” she said. “Enough to last till the pump’s fixed.” Then she sighed. “It’ll likely need parts. That’ll mean sending to the city and spending money we can’t spare. And with this damotite shipment short ...” Shoulders slumping, Jaklin turned away. “I should be telling Rikkard to stop mining. How can we send them our damotite when—” A shuddering breath. “But that damotite means food in our children’s bellies.”

There were no simple answers. Nothing about this was fair, or easy. “Send them your damotite, Jaklin,” he said. “Whatever they take this time will never be used to harm anyone.”

She turned back to him, her eyes terrible. “You can promise me that, Jedi?”

“I can,” he said, so confident, and had no idea if it was the truth or not. The Force couldn’t—or wouldn’t—tell him. But she needed to believe it. “You know where I’ll be, and Anakin’s helping at the refinery. If you need either one of us, don’t hesitate. Thank you for breakfast.”

Leaving Jaklin to finish her tasks, Obi-Wan made his way to the power plant. Devi’s face lit up, seeing him.

“You!” she said, crossing the monitor station to meet him halfway. “A Jedi, Teeb *Obi-Wan*?”

She was smiling, and teasing, but beneath that she was in pain. The servomotors of her antigrav harness were grinding more harshly than ever after her overnight exertions.

“I came to see if you needed my assistance,” he said. “Though it does seem as though you have everything under control.”

“I do, thanks to Anakin,” she said. “I’ve never seen anyone work with machinery the way he does. No offense intended. You were a great help, too, last night. Only—”

“Believe me, there’s no need to apologize or explain,” he said quickly. “Compared with my young friend I’m little more than a rank amateur. Tell me, Devi—how close are you to lowering the storm shield?”

Devi glanced at the bank of monitors she’d been checking. “Theta levels are near to safe now. Won’t be too long. Doesn’t do to be overeager, you know. After everything we’ve survived, Obi-Wan, I’d hate to see us taken down by a last few stubborn particles of theta radiation.”

And so would he. “Then while we wait, might I take a closer look at your harness? I might not be Anakin, but there should be something I can do to make it work more efficiently.”

Devi hesitated, then nodded. “Yes. Thank you. I do my best with it but—” She shrugged. “The only manual I’ve got is years out of date. There’s a toolbox under that bank of monitors there.”

He fetched the toolbox, then eased her out of the awkward and misaligned contraption, helping her to sit on the floor. But instead of turning his attention to the equipment he took her hand in his and cradled his other hand to the back of her head.

“What are you doing?” she said, startled.

Sufi’s foul concoction had eased his headache considerably. He could feel the Force more clearly, sense where Devi was hurting and how he could help.

“I’d like to make you a little more comfortable,” he said. “Do I have your permission?”

“I—well—yes, I suppose so,” she said, then laughed, sounding nervous. “How did you—how could you—”

“Jedi feel things.”

“Like other people’s pain? Oh. I didn’t know that.”

He tightened his fingers around hers. “There’s no need to be afraid. I’ve been healed a few times myself. It’s quite a simple thing, really.”

“Maybe for you,” said Devi. “I know you helped Bohle and Arrad. I’d be grateful if you could help me. Sometimes—” Her breath caught. “I don’t like to complain. It doesn’t change anything. Only sometimes—”

“I know,” he said gently. “Sometimes it feels as though you’ll never feel anything else. As though the rest of your life will feel like this.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “I can’t afford medicine from Lantibba. Sufi does what she can with her herbs but—” She smeared a hand across her eyes. “I don’t suppose—is there any chance you could—”

Regret cut keenly, like a blade. “I’m so sorry, Devi. I’m not a dedicated healer. Besides, the original injury happened some time ago, didn’t it? Even if I were trained, I’m not certain it could be fixed.”

She closed her eyes. “I see.”

“But I will make you more comfortable,” he promised. “Now. Breathe slowly and deeply for me. Yes. That’s it.”

It was a relief to help her, to sink himself into the Force and use it in such a good cause. Knowing that countless innocents would suffer and die if he and Anakin failed to stop Lok Durd and Count Dooku, this one small act, this brief, transitory kindness, took on a grave and greatly personal significance. In healing Greti’s mother and Rikkard’s son, in easing this courageous woman’s pain, he was making a difference. Anything he could do to leave these people better than he found them was a balm to his weary, fretful mind.

When he was finished, and Devi’s pain was near to banished, he left her to stir awake and turned his attention to the antigrav harness. It was indeed a sorry piece of equipment, broken and mended and tricked up and falling apart. He’d do what he could, but doubtless Anakin could do better. He’d ask him to look at it before they returned to the city.

Feeling eyes on him, he glanced up. Devi was smiling.

“I don’t hurt,” she said, wondering. “I can’t remember the last time that something, somewhere, didn’t hurt. Obi-Wan—”

“You’re very welcome,” he said. “Now, let’s see if I can make a difference to this harness, shall we?”

His repair job wasn’t perfect, not by a long shot, but there was a definite improvement. Once he’d finished, and helped Devi strap

herself back into it, she threw her arms around him and held on tight.

“Thank you. I don’t know why you’re on Lanteeb and I don’t care. I don’t care what anyone has to say about the Jedi. *Thank you.*” And then she let go and practically danced to the monitors. After checking the theta-level readout she pumped her fist in the air. “Yes! We can lower the shield.” Grinning, she turned to him. “Would you like to do the honors?” She pointed. “It’s that panel there. The red toggles to lower the shield, and the green switch to sound the all-clear.”

And so, with great solemnity, he deactivated the storm shield that had kept them alive through the long, wild night.

“Come on,” said Devi, heading for the door. “Let’s go breathe some fresh air, shall we?”

The all-clear siren sounded through the village, a lighter, more cheerful wailing than the strident blaring of danger. Emerging into the unfiltered sunshine, Obi-Wan saw that he and Devi weren’t the only people rushing outside to celebrate. Everyone aboveground that he could see had downed tools, was hugging and laughing as the trapped smoke from the burned refinery began to dissipate, shredded by a lively breeze. He felt a familiar shiver in the Force. Yes. There was Anakin, over at the ruined building, his height and his light hair making him stand out in the crowd. Anakin, sensing him in turn, raised a hand above his head and waved. He waved back, an unexpected rush of optimism lifting his dull, beleaguered spirits.

Perhaps we can win this one after all.

And then somebody shouted. “Look! *Droids!*”

Freezing apprehension swamped him. By his side, Devi shifted around, staring. “What’s Teiki on about? Is the convoy here early? Rikkard’s going to *explode.*”

Obi-Wan saw sunlight on durasteel, wickedly glinting, heard a faint *thud thud thud* of heavy metal feet on hard, dry ground. Then came a high, buzzing drone, a familiar metallic whining—and a swarm of mosquito droids flowed over a rise and began to spit blaster bolts at the unprotected village.

A villager screamed and fell and abruptly stopped screaming.

Obi-Wan spun around, sending a frantic mental call to Anakin.

They've found us. Get everyone inside!

Without waiting for an answer he sprinted to the power plant. Reaching it, he threw himself inside, leapt for the storm-shield monitor, and slammed the switches on again. He had no idea how long it took for the generators to engage, if the shield could repel blaster bolts, or how long it would hold out against a concerted attack. The only thing he *did* know was that the shield might be their only hope.

They were waiting for us. It was always too late.

“Obi-Wan! Obi-Wan? What’s going on, what are you—”

He turned. “It’s not the convoy, Devi. Stay in here. Do not go outside. Divert all the power you can to the shields and contact Rikkard in the mine. Tell him to keep everyone underground. Right now it’s the safest place to be.”

Shocked, her eyes wide, Devi moved into position. He could feel her terror like a living thing. Cutting himself off from it, he reached inside his shirt, pulled out his lightsaber and flicked its switch. The burning blue blade hummed into life.

She gasped. “You’re going to fight them?”

“Yes,” he said, moving for the door. “All the power you can spare, Devi. Nothing else matters.”

Outside again he looked up, counted ten—twelve—sixteen mosquito droids. Looking around he saw more dead or wounded villagers and closed his mind to their plight. Anakin, still shouting at

people to run, was drawing the droids' fire and deflecting their lethal blaster bolts with his own lightsaber, its blade a blur.

The storm shield still hadn't engaged. And there were more droids coming, dazzling bright in the sunshine. Durd had sent an army after them. Battle droids, ranks of them. They were close enough to count.

How could I have been so wrong? How did I not sense this? These people—these poor people ...

"Obi-Wan!"

He leapt into the fray, putting himself between the last straggling villagers and a hunting pack of droids, and took out three of them in swift succession even as he fought his way to Anakin.

"Where's the shield?" Anakin shouted above the searing shriek of the droid attack. "You turned it on, right?"

"No, Anakin, I disabled it!" he shouted back as he destroyed another mosquito. "Of *course* I turned it on!"

"Then why hasn't it—"

With a humming rush of power the stormshield reengaged—but not fast enough to prevent the first marching battle droids from entering the village.

"Obi-Wan—"

He almost never got angry, but now he felt sick with fury. *You fool, Kenobi. You arrogant fool.* "I know. I've got them, Anakin. You take care of these mosquitoes."

And without giving Anakin a chance to argue he sprinted to the road leading out of the village, where the battle droids were marching toward him in perfect lock step. How many? Twenty. Maybe more. They saw him and aimed their blasters. Running headlong to meet them he raised his lightsaber. Raised his other hand ready to Force-push—

“Hold your fire! Hold your fire!” the droid commander blared. “Target acquired! Capture, not kill!”

What? But before he could consider the implications of the order the droids were flipping switches on their blasters and the next thing he knew they were firing stun charges at him.

Still running, he summoned the Force and vaulted over their heads. Their blasters tracked him, firing without pause. One stun charge clipped his shoulder in passing. Dizzy, his vision crimson around the edges, he hit the ground and stumbled. Spinning around, off kilter, he Force-pushed the droids nearest to him. They flew backward, stun charges harmlessly stitching the air. Three of them collected another four as they tumbled. Good. Still dizzy, he tried for another Force-push. Not as effective this time, only two droids went flying. And the other droids were swiftly closing in, starting to flank him, surround him. He shook his head hard, trying to clear it. The damotite headache was back, fiercer than ever. Or maybe that was the stun charge. He was going to be sick.

“Obi-Wan! Break left!”

“Careful!” Obi-Wan managed to croak as he staggered in more or less the right direction. “Stun charges. They want to take us alive.”

“I know!” Anakin shouted, and passed him at a run.

And then he thought perhaps he really was unconscious and having a wild dream, because Anakin *threw* his lightsaber, sent it spinning into the midst of the droids, dismembering them into scrap metal, using the Force to control his weapon’s speed and trajectory.

Swaying like a drunk in Coruscant’s seediest nightclub, he watched Anakin obliterate the remaining battle droids. If he hadn’t felt so ill he’d have laughed or cheered.

Good boy. Oh, good boy. You show the barves.

With effortless, arrogant ease, Anakin summoned his lightsaber back to his hand, nodded once at the destroyed droids, grimly satisfied, then turned. “You all right?”

He couldn't answer. Not only because he was still shaking from the stun charge's nimbus, but because—

“Hey!” Anakin said sharply. “Obi-Wan. This isn't your fault. They didn't teleport here from Lantibba. They must've been traveling for hours. They left the city sometime after we were trapped here by the theta storm. We were never going to get away. You know that, right?”

Slowly, the worst of the nausea subsided. Standing a little straighter, he deactivated his lightsaber. “Perhaps. But that's hardly consolation for these people. They took us in—and look what their act of mercy has brought them.”

Anakin was staring down the road that led out of the village. On the other side of the storm shield, gently distorted by the shimmering plasma, more battle droids and mosquitoes gathered. Frowning, Anakin summoned one of the dismembered droid's blasters to his hand, switched it back to lethal mode, then aimed it at the storm shield and fired. The blaster bolt splashed against it, energy dissipated. The shield shivered but held.

“Well,” said Anakin, and tossed the blaster aside. “That's one question answered.”

Obi-Wan rubbed his temple, fighting to control the vicious pain. “That's a single blaster bolt,” he said. “What if they fire a hundred? What if they fire worse? This is a storm shield, not a siege barrier.”

Anakin shrugged. “It isn't right now. But if you give me a few hours ...”

“Are you serious? Anakin, are you saying you can convert a theta shield to a siege barrier?” Another shrug. “I can try.”

Heart thudding, Obi-Wan stared at the scattered bodies of the men and women who'd died. *I'm sorry. So sorry.* Then he turned back and stared again at Durd's army.

“Yes, I'm sure you can, Anakin,” he murmured. “Just as I'm sure that you would succeed. So the question becomes not *can* you ... but

should you?”

THIRTEEN



“*SURRENDER?*” EXHAUSTED AND FILTHY, RIKKARD STARED AT them. “Are you saying you want to hand yourselves over to those droids?”

“Want to?” Obi-Wan shook his head. “Of course not. But your village cannot withstand a protracted siege, Teeb. Your supplies are inadequate and there’s no guarantee the storm shield will hold until sunset, let alone for days. Or weeks. Besides, you have nine dead and seventeen wounded already. Anakin and I cannot ask you to add to that tally by protecting us.”

“You think it will take *weeks* for the Republic to come?” said Teeba Jaklin, frowning.

“Not weeks, no,” said Anakin. “They should be—”

“The problem is,” said Obi-Wan, with a quelling look, “we can’t promise you that help *is* on its way. In fact, I think we must assume we’re on our own.”

“Oh,” Teeba Jaklin said, her voice faint. She pressed her fingers to her lips, swamped by grief and bewilderment. Rikkard, just as shaken, rested a hand on her shoulder.

The four of them stood on the charter house step. Feeling the village leaders’ fear echo through the Force, and sharply aware of Obi-Wan’s mood, Anakin looked across the square. Nearly half an hour had passed since the droid attack. Torbel’s people were still in shock, mourning their dead and trying to comfort the wounded.

A handful of villagers had defied Jaklin and Rikkard and drifted to the end of the main street to stare through the storm shield at the

massed battle droids on its other side. Not including the buzzing flock of mosquitoes, at a rough head count there were three hundred of them, heavily armed. By some miracle they hadn't fired a shot for nearly ten minutes. Since most droids lacked initiative, probably they were waiting for further instructions. At least the storm shield had been down long enough for the air to clear, which meant no more breathing toxic smoke. But aside from that ...

Every time I think we can't get ourselves into worse trouble, we do. Obi-Wan can't believe our best bet is to surrender. He just can't.

Except, glancing at Obi-Wan's severely self-contained face, he was pretty sure his former Master was deadly serious.

Which means we have another problem.

"You're sure there's no chance you can fix our communications hub?" Teeba Jaklin said at last. "If we could find out when the help you asked for is coming—"

"I'm sorry," Anakin said. "The entire central processing relay is burned out. You don't have the right replacement parts, and what parts you do have I can't get to work."

Her accusing glare scorched him. "But you've fixed everything else! Devi says you're some kind of genius. You *have* to fix the hub. It's our only link to the rest of Lanteeb."

"I'm sorry," he said again, feeling helpless. He didn't know what else to say.

Rikkard lightly shook the woman's shoulder. "Jaklin, don't hunt the boy. He's done his best for us. They both have."

"Done their best?" said Jaklin, incredulous, and knocked his hand away. "Rikkard, they've *brought* this on us! If not for them we'd have no children weeping over their lost mothers and fathers, would we? Sufi wouldn't be bloodied to the elbows with wounded and Brandeh—dear Brandeh—" Her voice broke. "*She* wouldn't be dead."

“I know we’re in a bad way, Jaklin, but be fair!” Rikkard snapped. “We’re alive thanks to these men. I’m still a father because of them. And you want us to throw them to those droids like raw meat to spika-wolves? For shame, woman. I thought much better of you.”

Teeba Jaklin paled beneath the dirt and sweat smearing her face. “Yes, they did us a good turn, Rikkard—but they were saving themselves, too. That’s not noble. It’s pragmatics, that is. And you heard the Jedi clear as I did. The storm shield *won’t hold*. Not against an army of droids.”

Anakin opened his mouth to argue that, but Obi-Wan elbowed him silent. He shot his former Master a quick, frustrated look.

Obi-Wan, listen to me. You’re making a mistake.

But Obi-Wan, feeling guilty, his mind made up, refused to yield ... or even acknowledge that he’d heard the plea.

“What will happen if we give you to the droids?” said Rikkard to Obi-Wan. “Will they kill you?”

“No,” Obi-Wan replied. “They want us alive. They’ll take us back to Lantibba and hand us over either to the Separatist-controlled government or to Lok Durd, who’s already tried to capture us once.”

“And *then* you’ll be killed?”

“It’s possible,” Obi-Wan admitted, after a moment. “Or they could attempt to use us to extort concessions from the Republic.”

Rikkard thought about that. “Would they torture information out of you?”

“They might try,” said Anakin. “But they’d fail.”

“Still ...” Rikkard hunched his shoulders. “If you went with them—could you escape between here and Lantibba? I mean, you’re Jedi. You can do things the rest of us can’t imagine.”

“Of course that would be our aim,” Obi-Wan said carefully. “But given that we’ve escaped them once, I doubt they’ll be taking any chances.”

“But—you’re *Jedi*,” Rikkard said, disbelieving, as though they were supposed to be invulnerable.

“Ordinarily that would make the difference,” Obi-Wan said, with a faint smile. “But Count Dooku, the Separatists’ leader, was once a Jedi. He has certain ... insights. Tricks to keep us under control.”

Teeba Jaklin snorted. “Sounds to me like you’re trying to talk us into leaving our shield up. Not very heroic. You want us to keep on sheltering you? Then ask. Straight out.”

“*Jaklin*,” said Rikkard. “You can’t—”

“What, Rikkard?” she demanded. “What can’t I? I’ll tell you. I can’t stand by and see these *Jedi* bring ruin on our heads.”

“Who says it’s up to you?” Rikkard said, offended. “There’s two of us chosen to speak for Torbel.”

Jaklin looked like she wanted to shake him. Or slap him. Or cry. “Are you stupid, man? *I let them in*. I offered them shelter. It’s *my* doing we’re trapped inside this bubble with dead and dying in the sick house and no hope of escape.” Her dirty fist struck her chest. “Every drop of bloodshed is blood shed by me.”

Rikkard pulled her close. Despite their mutual exasperation and fear, even though there was aggravation on both sides, there was deep affection, too. Rikkard was hurting, feeling Jaklin’s pain along with his own.

“I’ll say it once more and this time you’ll hear me,” he said. “We survived one storm because of them. And Jaklin, with their help we’ll survive the storm they brought with them, not meaning to.”

She wrenched free of him, then turned her burning gaze on Obi-Wan. “If you go with those droids, what happens to us? Do they leave Torbel alone or do they punish us for sheltering you? If we tell them we had no idea you were Jedi, will they believe us?”

“They’re droids, Teeba Jaklin,” Anakin said, before Obi-Wan could answer. “Believing humans isn’t a high priority in their

programming.”

“So whatever we do makes no matter? The damage is done? For helping you we’re punished?” Stifling fresh grief, Jaklin stared at the straggle of frightened children on the village square. “How is that right?”

“It’s not,” he said, fighting to keep her pain at a distance. “Teeba, I’m sorry.”

“You mustn’t lose hope,” said Obi-Wan. “Don’t forget, they need Torbel’s damotite.”

“But do they need us to mine it?” she retorted, still staring at the children. “They could kill us all and bring in miners from other villages.”

“They could,” Obi-Wan agreed, reluctant. “But that would likely stir up trouble, which is the last thing they want. Besides, what you’re suggesting would take time—and time is one thing the Seps don’t have in abundance.”

Sighing, Rikkard rubbed his hand across his scarred head. “If we give the word to lower our shield, can you promise me those droids won’t open fire and kill every one in Torbel that’s not a Jedi?”

“No, I can’t promise you that,” Obi-Wan said tightly. “But we’d do everything in our power to prevent it.”

“Then can you promise me, if we do hand you over without getting ourselves killed, that you and Anakin won’t be put to death?”

A heavy silence, then Obi-Wan shook his head. “No, Rikkard. I can’t promise that either, but—”

“A moment. Tell me this, Teeb.” Rikkard’s eyes were fierce. “What do you want?”

Taken by surprise, Obi-Wan stared at him. “What do I—Rikkard, I want you and your people safe. I want to stop Lok Durd and his bioweapon.”

“And you want to live,” said Jaklin. “Don’t—”

“What if you can’t have everything you want?” said Rikkard, a hand on Jaklin’s arm holding her to silence. “Who do you save, Teeb Kenobi? Yourself and Anakin? Us? Or the rest of the galaxy?”

Obi-Wan didn’t answer.

Rikkard turned. “And you, Anakin? What do you want?”

Anakin looked at the ground. He knew what Obi-Wan wanted him to say.

But we don’t agree, Obi-Wan. I think giving ourselves to the droids should be our last choice, not our first.

“Rikkard, I can modify your storm shield,” he said, keeping his voice flat and unemotional, ignoring Obi-Wan’s dismay. “I can strengthen it and modulate its pulse frequency so the droids’ weapons won’t penetrate it. And with those modifications I believe we can hold them off until help gets here. At least, we can if you’ve got enough stored fuel.”

Rikkard rubbed his scar-knotted scalp again. “That depends on what you mean by *enough*,” he said slowly. “We have some liquid damotite stockpiled.”

“How much?”

“It should last us maybe a month. We can’t store huge amounts, it’s too volatile.”

Stang. There was no way they’d last a month with the modified storm shield running without respite. “Can you make more if we need it?”

“No,” said Jaklin, bitter with fear. “Not unless you can wave your fancy weapon over what’s left of the refinery and undestroy it. Can you do that, Jedi?”

“I wish I could.” Anakin blew out a sharp breath. “You want to know what I want? I want surrender to be a last resort. I’m confident our message reached the Temple and help is on its way. I

think we can hold out until it gets here, if we're careful. Rikkard, I want us all to survive. And I believe we can."

Rikkard looked at him in silence for a long time, hope and doubt warring behind the shadows in his eyes. "But you don't *know*."

"No," said Obi-Wan. "He doesn't."

The coldness beneath Obi-Wan's politely detached voice almost made him flinch. *Now I'm in trouble.*

"Rikkard, if it turns out I'm wrong we can still surrender," he added, not looking at Obi-Wan. "If we reach the breaking point and no help arrives, we'll make it look like we were holding Torbel hostage and you managed to overpower us. Please—I know it's a risk, but I think it's one worth taking."

Teeba Jaklin looked at Obi-Wan. "You don't agree."

"Oh, I agree it's a risk," said Obi-Wan, blandly furious.

"Is he lying about the storm shield? Can he do what he says?"

No matter how angry he was, Obi-Wan was always fair. "Yes, he can."

Jaklin eyes narrowed. "Are you afraid, Jedi?"

Her belligerence made Obi-Wan blink. "Teeba, we Jedi are taught that fear is dangerous. It can lead us down dark pathways, to ends we would not wish for ourselves or others."

"But you're a *man*, aren't you?" she demanded. "You have a heart? You have feelings?"

Looking at Obi-Wan, recognizing his withdrawn expression, Anakin bit his lip.

Come on, Obi-Wan. Give a little. She needs to know you're more than a mysterious Jedi, that you know what it's like to feel alone and afraid. She won't ask her people to risk themselves for us if she thinks we're no better than droids ourselves.

“I know what you want from me, Teeba,” Obi-Wan said at last. “And I know why. But I won’t claim to be something I’m not simply to placate you. That would be an insult. I understand your fear and I will do everything in my power to see that what you fear does not come to pass.”

“There, Jaklin,” said Rikkard. “You can’t ask for more than that.”

Looking at Jaklin, Anakin thought she could, and wanted to, but Rikkard’s glower changed her mind. “Our poor village,” she whispered. “Will the bad times never end?”

“Yes, they will,” said Rikkard, his voice unsteady. “They have to. Nothing bad lasts forever.”

Anakin felt a little catch, underneath his ribs.

No. It just feels that way sometimes.

Rikkard and Jaklin stared at each other, lost in a private, wordless conversation.

Aware of Obi-Wan’s simmering displeasure, Anakin considered the storm shield pulsing above their heads. The design dynamics assured them of an osmotic oxygen supply. Was it possible for the droids to somehow tamper with that? Was there a way to seal the shield from the outside so they could suffocate Torbel into submission?

Maybe. But they’d have to think of it first. Droids aren’t big on thinking.

Right. So, what else could go wrong?

Aside from us running out of liquid damotite, another crisis in the power plant, more generators fusing, using up all our water and food and our message not getting through to the Temple ... or if it did, help not getting here soon enough. Or not getting here at all.

He was starting to tire of discovering new and more interesting kinds of trouble.

Stirring out of silence, Jaklin folded her arms. “Even if we thought the same on this, Rikkard—and we don’t—it’s not a choice you and I can make for the village.”

“I agree,” said Obi-Wan. “Call a meeting, Rikkard. Give your friends and neighbors all the facts and let them decide what’s to be done.”

“And you’ll abide by our choice?” said Jaklin, belligerent again. “No fancy Jedi tricks to get your own way?”

Anakin watched Obi-Wan recoil, almost imperceptibly. Despite their efforts to help Torbel, despite the lives they’d saved, Jaklin was still so *angry*. Terrified of the danger they’d brought to her village, offended they’d come to her under false pretenses, and mortified that she’d let herself be deceived. He understood how she felt. He could *feel* how she felt. So could Obi-Wan. Sometimes that was the problem with being a Jedi.

Obi-Wan exhaled slowly. “Of course not, Teeba. Whatever you decide will be binding upon us. Now, if you’ll excuse me, while you and your people are debating the problem I’ll return to the sick house. Send for me when a decision has been reached.”

With a shallow bow, he turned and walked away. Watching him, knowing that a confrontation between them was only postponed, not avoided, Anakin breathed out a sigh of his own.

“You’ve displeased him,” said Rikkard. “He wanted you to follow his lead.”

Obi-Wan entered the sick house and closed its door behind him.

Glancing at Rikkard, Anakin nodded. “I was his student for many years. He taught me almost everything I know about being a Jedi. Yes. He wanted me to follow his lead.”

“But you didn’t,” said Jaklin. “Some would call that disrespectful. Arrogant, even. For all you’re tall and have a way with machinery and a few clever Jedi tricks stuffed into your pockets, you’re a boy

still. Who are you to ignore what he thinks? Anyone can see he's a man of experience."

"Yes, he is," Anakin agreed. "He's a great man, Teeba Jaklin. And it may turn out that he's right and I'm wrong and we do have to surrender to those battle droids. But like I said—that's not my first choice."

Rikkard dragged a hand down his scarred face. "He's trying to protect us."

"I know." *And that's the trouble.* "So am I."

"Anakin ..." Rikkard stared as though he could see inside him to some hidden, unspoken truth. "Are *you* afraid?"

"Yes," he said simply. "I'm afraid that because we came here, more of your people will get hurt, or worse. I'm afraid that while we're stuck behind the shield something will go wrong that I can't fix. I'm afraid that in disagreeing with Obi-Wan I've hurt him, and our friendship." *I'm afraid that I'll die on your horrible planet and never see Padmé again.* "I'm a man, Rikkard. I feel fear. But I choose not to let it rule me."

Some of the tension in Rikkard's tired eyes eased. "The honesty's appreciated, young Teeb. If we can't speak our hearts to each other, we'll not survive. That's what you learn in the mining life. What a man like you learns in yours? Most of it I'm not about to understand. But I'll tell you what I do know, for you and Arrad are of an age and I know a bit of what you're feeling—and what *he's* feeling, too."

He nodded toward the sick house.

"Sort yourself to a comfortable place, then find your common ground with him and stand on it. You and him, you need each other. And Torbel needs you standing shoulder to shoulder if we're going to survive this."

"Rikkard's right," said Teeba Jaklin roughly. "So here's a question I want answered, young Jedi. Can you untangle what's tangled

between you and your friend so the people of this village pay with no more of their blood?”

“Yes,” he said, and hoped he was telling the truth.

Jaklin sniffed. “Then best you get to untangling, while Rikkard and I call our village meeting.”

TEEBA Sufi WORKED alone in the sick house, struggling to settle the last of the wounded onto their cots. The small main ward was crammed with patients, most of them sleeping or unconscious. Anakin stared at them, appalled. Even he, with his conspicuous lack of talent for healing, could feel their discordant pain in the Force. Their breathing was slow and heavy, ragged exhalations on the borderline of moans. The air smelled thickly of stale blood and fresh poultices. He was abruptly, unpleasantly, reminded of the aftermath on Kothlis, of the countless triage staging areas he’d faced since the start of the war. Pain and loss and terror, everywhere he turned. The cruel difference was that those casualties of war, be they civilian or Republic troops, had access to the very best in medical expertise.

And what have these poor people got? Some bandages, some ointments, a scattering of third-rate pills, and Obi-Wan, who’s exhausted and doesn’t really know what he’s doing.

Obi-Wan, who hadn’t looked around when the sick house door opened. Who was ignoring him as though he didn’t exist.

Stang.

Caught drifting dangerously close to despair, Anakin throttled any further dark thoughts and instead counted the occupied cots. There were twenty-three casualties—a handful from the refinery explosion and the rest from the droid attack. Oh, and Bohle, that little girl’s mother, whose life Obi-Wan had managed to save. The girl—Greti—wasn’t here. She was an odd child, strong with the Force, and wasted in Torbel. It was a pity. Obi-Wan should keep her out of the sick house. It was no place for a young girl. Greti wasn’t Ahsoka.

Seated on a stool beside a laden cot, holding the hand of a villager caught in the open by one of Durd's mosquito droids, Obi-Wan was doing his best to give the woman strength to overcome her agony. Anakin could feel his struggle in the Force. When it came to medicine Torbel was practically *primitive*. There was a good chance people here would die of shock and pain, from wounds that a med droid could easily fix.

Mom and I and the other slaves got better medical treatment on Tatooine. But then that was a matter of protecting investments. These people aren't anyone's investments. Nobody cares about them except them. And me, now.

And Obi-Wan.

For all his frustration, and his fear that Obi-Wan would *never* see him as an equal no matter what he did or how many battles he won, he was moved by the depth of compassion he could feel in his former Master.

Why do I keep forgetting that he was raised a Jedi? That he'll never understand what it is to feel any strong emotion without feeling guilty about it straight after? Everything I was taught to rely on, he was taught to repress or deny. I keep forgetting that.

Looking up from a patient, Teeba Sufi saw him and frowned. "Are you hurt, young Jedi?"

"No, Teeba. But you're wanted on the square for a village meeting."

"Don't be a fool," she said, fisting her hands on her hips. "We can't—"

"You should go, Sufi," Obi-Wan said quietly. "I'll care for your people."

"Fine," Sufi said, reluctant. "But for a few minutes, Obi-Wan, no longer. And while I'm gone you should dose your friend. He's greensick too, though he probably won't admit it."

As the front door closed behind her, Obi-Wan eased out of his healing trance. Then he released his patient's hand and glanced up. "If you've come to say sorry merely to smooth things over, don't."

Deep breath, deep breath. "I haven't."

"Our presence in Torbel poses a clear and present danger to these people, Anakin."

"I know. And I don't like it any more than you do," he retorted. "But leaving aside the real chance of them being slaughtered if we lower the shield, consider this. If us holding out against those droids for even a few days gives our side a chance of getting here with a battle group, then how can we not do it? In my opinion, the harm is in giving Durd two pawns to use against the Republic."

Obi-Wan smoothed the sleeping woman's hair back from her forehead and stood. "In your opinion."

"That's right. I do have opinions, Obi-Wan. And every so often they're not going to be the same as yours."

"Yes, Anakin," said Obi-Wan, giving him the kind of look that had shriveled him when he was still a boy. "You've made that abundantly clear."

So much for finding common ground. At the rate he was letting his temper get the better of him they'd soon be standing on opposite sides of a canyon. With a wrenching effort he pushed emotion aside.

"What's greensickness?"

"Damotite poisoning," said Obi-Wan, and pointed to a cupboard against the back wall, beside the sink. "You'll find a bottle of medicine and a dosing cup in there. Top shelf on the right. Help yourself."

Anakin did as he was told, gagging as the vile concoction slid down his throat. Ignoring him, Obi-Wan moved to Arrad's cot, dropped into a crouch and rested his hand against the young man's forehead. Arrad looked peaceful enough—but was it the calm of

healing or the dreaded sloth of impending death? Obi-Wan's expression, remote and withdrawn, gave nothing away as he focused his energy inward.

Which I'm pretty sure means he's done talking to me right now.

And that meant the finding of common ground would have to wait. Perhaps the whole question would soon be irrelevant anyway. The villagers might vote to expel them.

Except I want to ask him if he's sensed anything in the Force. Does he have one of his bad feelings? Can he see how this madness is going to unfold?

Apparently he'd have to wait for answers.

He rinsed the dosing cup in the sick house's basin, then returned it and the bottle to their rightful place. "For what it's worth I am sorry, Obi-Wan. I never meant to disrespect you. I just—I need to honor my own truths."

Obi-Wan looked up. The light shafting through the window fell full across his face, bleaching him sand-pale. "I know you do, Anakin. And I know you want to save these people. But the truth is not everyone can be saved."

Anakin shook his head. "I don't believe that."

"I know that, too." Obi-Wan frowned, very faintly. "It's your greatest weakness ... and your greatest strength."

And just like that he was ambushed by regret. *I can't leave it like this. I can't.* "I don't want you angry with me, Obi-Wan. We won't get through this if you—if we—"

"I'm not angry. I don't get angry. Anger is a counterproductive emotion."

Yeah. Right. "Disappointed then," he said, because there was no use arguing. "Displeased. Whatever word you like."

"Anakin." Obi-Wan rubbed his temple. He had another headache brewing, bright sparkles of pain dancing in the Force. "As you say,

we had a difference of opinion. And now the matter is out of our hands. Why don't you go and get started on your shield modifications, just in case? When I'm finished here I'll join you."

He was right, they both had work to do. Only ... "I really do think our message got through, Obi-Wan. I think Yoda's going to send help."

Not looking at him, Obi-Wan nodded. "I hope so."

The village square was crowded with people, arms waving and voices raised as they argued over what to do about the Jedi. Pausing on the sick house step, Anakin watched as Rikkard and Jaklin moved among them, soothing, nodding, trying to be the calm voices of reason. Then he headed for the power plant. The Force was bright with the villagers' emotions—anger and fright, uncertainty and resentment. And these were the people who would in the next short while decide his and Obi-Wan's fate, either granting them a reprieve or sending them to face imprisonment and probable death.

His life in the hands of strangers was bad enough. But worse was the ominously silent and motionless pack of droids on the other side of the shield. They didn't show any sign of firing. Oddly, he'd have been happier if they started shooting again.

To his surprise he found Devi still in the plant's monitoring station. After the long night and the terrible morning, she looked fragile with weariness. Only her rickety antigrav harness was keeping her upright.

"I thought you'd be out there with the others," he said. "Debating what to do with me and Obi-Wan."

She shrugged, one hand balancing her slight, ungainly body against a bank of monitors. "Rikkard knows what I think."

Reading her was easy: fear and fury and gratitude in equal measure. She was smiling. He smiled back. "Thank you, Devi. I wish I could promise nothing bad will happen to Torbel if we do stay, but —" His turn to shrug. "I can't."

“Something bad will happen everywhere else if you don’t, won’t it?” she said. “Something bad *is* happening everywhere else, with the war.”

He was sick of painful truths. “It is.”

Sighing, Devi smoothed her hand over the ranks of lights and switches that told her the story of Torbel’s tenuous lifeline. “People say it doesn’t matter, what’s happening out there. They say it’s got nothing to do with us on Lanteeb. Would you hate me if I said I used to say the same thing?”

“No. Of course not.”

“Well, I did,” she said softly, shame in her voice. “And then I met you and Obi-Wan. Now things are so *complicated*.”

So was that how it worked? Was that how history was altered? A chance meeting ... a sudden crisis ... two men in the wrong place at the right time, following their consciences and changing minds ...

Is it as easy as that, to change the fate of a galaxy?

“Nothing’s ever as simple as it looks on the surface, Devi,” he said. “If I’ve learned nothing else as a Jedi, I’ve learned that.”

“Anakin—” She hesitated. “What’s it like, being a Jedi?”

“Wonderful,” he said. “Terrifying. Overwhelming.”

“Oppressive?”

The question startled him. “Why would you say that?”

“I don’t know. Just—” She blushed. “Sometimes I feel oppressed, knowing everyone relies on me to keep this power plant running. I thought maybe sometimes you felt like that, too. Everyone in the Republic expects you to save them, don’t they?”

Her awkward, unexpected sympathy touched him. “I’m fine, Devi. Don’t go losing sleep over me.” He tapped the nearest bank of monitors. “I’ve thought of some tricks to strengthen the storm shield. I’d like to get started, if it’s all right with you.”

She smiled again, tired but willing. “Sure. I’ll give you a hand.”

Nearly an hour later, Obi-Wan found them in the plant’s substation, reconfiguring the liquid damotite’s flow pattern. Feeling his approach, catching a swift sense of his habitually disciplined emotions—*worry, guilt, uncertainty, determination*—Anakin turned. The look on Obi-Wan’s face said it all.

“We can stay?”

“Yes,” said Obi-Wan, subdued. “Now it’s our job to see that the villagers don’t regret their decision.”

“We won’t,” said Devi. “We—” And then she gasped. “Oh, no ...”

The droids were firing again.

Anakin turned to her. “We’re safe, Devi. They can’t get in.”

“For now,” she muttered. Then she straightened. “All right. Let’s get back to work.”

EVENTUALLY THEY STOPPED listening to the relentless, crumping *thud-thud-thud* of blaster bolts hitting the shield.

After several hours of checking the primary power conduits for short circuits and replacing the most suspect wiring, Obi-Wan returned to his self-imposed duties in the sick house. Three hours after that, Anakin sent Devi off to get some rest.

“We can’t afford you collapsing,” he said, when she protested. “Now do as you’re told. Please.”

It was the kind of high-handedness Padmé deplored. Had she been here, she’d have scolded—but Devi gave in.

“Fine. I’ll take a couple of hours,” she said. “And then I’ll be back!”

Welcoming the solitude, keeping one eye on the monitors, he started the tedious task of cleaning yellow section’s corroded secondary fuel-injection valves. As far as he could tell, they hadn’t seen an oil bath in months. But even though the task was important,

more than anything he wanted to seek for Padmé in the Force, to make sure she was all right. He didn't dare. Not with Obi-Wan so close. Her absence was an ache in his chest. Sometimes, missing her, he found it hard to breathe. And the thought of dying here, of leaving her alone in a dangerous galaxy, frightened him so much, his fingers fumbled the dirty valves. Eyes closed, he conjured her beautiful face and the feel of her skin warm against his.

Be safe, my love. Stay out of trouble.

Devi made good on her threat and returned two hours later. "They've stopped firing, Anakin. Did you realize? What a relief. Now get some rest—and eat. I'll manage without you."

He found a tired smile for her. "Yes, Teeba."

Outside, the night air nipped at his face. Thin and cool, it reminded him of Tatooine after sunset. He looked up at the distant stars, widely scattered in this part of the galaxy. And then, anger stirring, he looked at the battle droids massed beyond the storm shield. Had they run out of ammunition? Or did they now think their presence alone was enough to frighten Torbel into surrender?

Prowling toward the shield perimeter, Anakin raised his fist.

I wonder ... I wonder ...

"Don't," said Obi-Wan, emerging from the shadows. "Not even you can destroy an entire army. And it's best we leave them unprovoked."

Regretful, he relaxed his fingers. "I know. I just wish I could—"

"So do I," said Obi-Wan, and smiled at him. "Obi-Wan—"

Another smile. "Yes, Anakin. We're fine. Now come and eat, then get some rest."

They turned their backs on Durd's army and walked away.

FOURTEEN



BAIL WAS BOGGED DOWN IN A FINANCE SUBCOMMITTEE MEETING when word blasted across the HoloNet News network.

Chandрила's Hanna City suffers devastating bioweapon attack.

The machinery of the Senate came to a shuddering halt. Senators and their aides and their staff and their staff's staff milled in circles, dazed by the ferocity of the unexpected assault. In stunned silence they gathered in front of the sprawling Senate Building's enormous flatscreens and holoimagers and watched in horror as the HNE droidcams faithfully recorded and tight-beamed around the Republic images of suffering that made the service's war footage look like a romp in the park.

Standing with his senatorial colleagues in one of the open meeting areas near his office, Bail could feel nothing but a deep and freezing grief. The Separatist bioweapon was a monstrosity he was having difficulty comprehending, even as he witnessed its results—sentients of at least seven different species, of all ages, reduced to bloody slime and gritty froth. Beside him, his personal assistant began to weep.

Heedless of protocol, he slid his arm around Minala's shoulders. In all the years he'd known her, during all the crises they'd shared, she had never shed a tear in front of him. But this attack was unprecedented.

And then his comlink sounded. Answering it, he heard the blandly autocratic voice of Mas Amedda, summoning him to the Supreme Chancellor's office.

“Minala,” he said softly. “I have to go. And there are things I need you to do for me.”

She pulled herself together, breath by breath becoming the woman he relied on every day: rigorously efficient and self-contained Minala Lodilyn.

“Of course, Senator.”

He and Minala returned to his offices. With the door closed and his privacy screens engaged, he turned to her. Stunned grief was fast surrendering to rage.

“Eyes only to Agent Varrak,” he said. “I want her on a needle job. I want to know how this happened before sundown today. Then contact Nathe at the Special Operations Brigade. I want the securecam footage from both of Chandrila’s public spaceports and all of its private docking bays—I don’t care who owns them—as well as the footage of every street in a five-klick radius of the dead zone, deconstructed frame by frame.”

Minala nodded. “What about any incidental HoloNet News footage?”

“That, too,” he said. “By executive order. Don’t let them give you any static about it, Minala. I don’t want to play dirty with this but I will if I have to.” He took a deep breath, trying to slow his racing thoughts. “Tell Nathe I need his best breakdown team on the vid material. I need them to extract every last detail, no matter how insignificant it might seem. Tell him and Agent Varrak to coordinate through Chandrila’s Security Bureau on a need-to-know basis. The bureau is to extend its full cooperation to the Senate Security Council and any of its designated agencies or representatives, by order of the Supreme Chancellor’s office.”

Minala’s perfectly sculptured eyebrows lifted.

“I’ll get executive authorization,” he added. “Don’t worry about it. Oh—and tell Varrak she might well hear from the Jedi Temple. That conversation goes *nowhere* but to me.”

“Senator,” she said, with another crisp nod.

Bail managed to find a small, tight smile for her. “And once you’ve sorted things with Agent Varrak and Nathe, and I’ve finished with the Supreme Chancellor, the Security Committee will need to meet. Organize that, too, would you? Let’s say three hours from now. I’ll let you know if the timing has to change.”

“Sir,” said Minala. She had a mind like a permanently recording data crystal. If he asked, she’d be able to repeat his rapid-fire orders back to him verbatim.

If ever she decides to quit politics, I’ll be sunk.

What else? His mind was still spinning, haunted by those dreadful holoinages.

Think, Organa. Think.

“Right. And when that’s done,” he said, “I need you to alert Gold and Green Task Forces. I want every informant grapevine plucked until they’re stripped bare. The success of this infiltration is going to make somebody very, very bold. They’ll try again. And next time we need to be ready for them.”

“Gold and Green,” said Minala. “Yes, sir. Senator—does Doctor Netzl know what’s happened?”

Oh, mercy. “I don’t know. Master Yoda might’ve told him. Otherwise ... probably not. He doesn’t set foot outside that lab. I’ll have to tell him.” He felt his belly churn. *Tryn is going to blame himself.* “So—delay that Security Committee meeting by half an hour.”

“Of course, sir,” said Minala. And then her cool professionalism wavered again. “Senator, does this mean Master Kenobi is dead?”

It better not. “I don’t know that, either. And I don’t want to jump to any unpleasant conclusions.”

Her lips trembled. “But it doesn’t look good, does it? I mean, if he and young Skywalker could’ve stopped this terrible attack, they

would have.”

He couldn’t meet her eyes. “I know. But the fact that they didn’t doesn’t mean they’re dead.”

She knew him too well. As well as Breha did, and Padmé. “Of course not. I’m sorry. I’ll start making those calls now.”

“You run into any trouble, any resistance, get tough,” he said, heading for the door. “I am not in the mood for diplomacy today.”

Once he arrived at Palpatine’s executive suite Bail was ordered by Mas Amedda to wait in the antechamber, where a flurry of droids and sentients came and went. Now that the first shock was wearing off, he felt so sick he was dizzy.

Is this my fault?

He couldn’t sit. He had to stand, had to fight the urge to pace. His secured Senate comlink buzzed sharply. It was Padmé, still mired in negotiations on Bonadan.

“The news has just broken here. Are you all right?”

How like her, to think first of his feelings. He’d already spoken briefly to Breha. She’d asked the same thing. He gave Padmé the same answer.

“Not really.”

“I’m coming back,” Padmé said, her voice tight with concern. *“There’s nothing more I can do here. Bail, no matter what anyone says, even if it’s Palpatine himself—this wasn’t your fault.”*

Breha had told him the same thing. His wife and his friend, such extraordinary women. Sometimes he wondered what he’d done to deserve them.

“It’s not feeling like that just now,” he said, which wasn’t what he’d told Breha.

“Your friend. Has he made any progress?”

“Not enough,” he admitted. “But he’ll get there, I know he will. Padmé—”

He turned as the antechamber doors slid open to admit Mon Mothma, her tall, slender frame clad in dark gray synthsilk. On the surface she looked unchanged by the attack on her homeworld, but he could see in her blank stare the depth of her shock.

“Sorry, Padmé, I’ve got to go,” he said. “Find me as soon as you’re back on Coruscant. I don’t care what time it is.”

“I’m leaving now,” she said. “Bail, we’ll get through this. I’ll see you soon.”

Tucking the comlink back into his tunic pocket, he threaded his way through Palpatine’s crowding staff to Chandrila’s senator. Seeing him, her eyes widened and one hand lifted in what was close to an appeal.

“Mon Mothma,” he said, reaching her. “I’m so, so sorry. Are you here alone? Where are your co-Senators?”

“Offworld,” she said, her voice low. “They’re heading back to Chandrila now. I’ll be leaving myself as soon as I’ve spoken with Palpatine—provided he doesn’t need me to stay.”

Beneath her composure thrummed the most appalling pain. “This attack. Are you personally affected? I’m sorry. What I mean is, was anyone *you* know—”

She was shaking her head. “I’m not aware of any family members or friends who’ve been directly affected. But Ran Harva’s wife—”

She didn’t need to finish the sentence. Senator Harva was the younger of her two co-Senators. A brusque man, rarely sympathetic—and now in mourning. Bail took a deep breath. Would he ever get used to life’s sheer capriciousness? Last night he and Mon Mothma had celebrated over dinner their discreet and circuitous success in keeping Umgul safely within the Republic family. And now that pleasure was torn to tatters.

When she learns of my involvement in this she's not going to forgive me. How could I have been so wrong?

How could Yoda have been so wrong?

And as if the thought were a conjuring trick, the antechamber's doors opened again and the Jedi Temple's most ancient and revered Master entered the room, leaning heavily on his gimer stick, nothing remotely readable in his wrinkled, watchful face.

Conversations died. Hurried, frantic movement stopped. Doubt shivered through the crowded room, and a shared, searing cry.

How did you Jedi not see this? Why weren't we warned?

If Yoda felt the scrutiny and the silent accusations, nothing in his demeanor revealed dismay or concern. "Senators," he said, joining them. "Our condolences to you on this terrible day, Senator Mothma. Join with you in mourning your lost the Jedi do."

A little wary, rigidly self-controlled, Mon Mothma inclined her head. "Thank you, Master Yoda."

Feeling Yoda's gaze on him, Bail looked down, aware of many seething emotions: grief, anger, disappointment, dismay.

We did this, Yoda. You and I. We allowed this to happen. Now what are we going to do about it?

Yoda met his stricken gaze calmly. It was still impossible to tell if the Jedi felt anything at all about what had happened on Chandrila. His self-mastery was complete.

Mas Amedda looked up from his wide desk, with its bank of busy comm units, each one flashing coded lights and buzzing shrilly for attention. "You can go in now, Senators, Master Yoda."

The doors to Palpatine's inner sanctum opened. Hanging back, Bail and Mon Mothma waited for Yoda to lead the way.

Palpatine stood before his office's wall-sized transparisteel window, contemplating the ever-changing, never-changing Coruscant cityscape. Clad in a discreetly luxurious deep purple robe,

his hands clasped tightly behind his back, in the midday light his profile was an austere etching of sorrow.

The suite's doors closed behind them and they waited for him to speak. At last Palpatine turned from the window and considered them, his sorrow transmuted from spare etching to lush portrait.

"First of all," he said, his voice low and tightly disciplined, "Senator Mothma, allow me to offer you this office's most sincere condolences. The suffering of the Chandrilan people is almost too great to bear. What *you* must be feeling I can only imagine. Of course I extend to you every assistance. You have but to ask and whatever you require or desire will be given to you, without question."

Mon Mothma nodded. "Supreme Chancellor, Chandrila thanks you."

Palpatine pressed a hand to his heart. "Even as we speak, Senator, an emergency session of the Senate is being convened," he said gravely. "I shall address it, naturally, in hope of quelling the panic engendered by this wicked and cowardly attack. I wondered, though, if you might also like to address our colleagues? I understand you must wish to depart for Chandrila without delay, and naturally there is no obligation, but as the only Chandrilan representative currently on Coruscant I thought it would do your people good to see you accepting the Senate's formal condolences—and for the Republic to hear you give voice to Chandrila's grief."

Mon Mothma hesitated, then nodded again. "Thank you, Supreme Chancellor. Indeed I had thought to return home immediately, but perhaps a slight delay might prove to our benefit. My people will take great comfort in knowing the Republic stands with them at this terrible time."

Palpatine's gaze warmed, just a little. "Of that I have no doubt. Your people will be heartened, just as the people of Naboo were heartened when we suffered unprovoked violence and Queen Amidala spoke for us."

“Supreme Chancellor, do you know if the Separatists are behind this atrocity?”

Bail felt himself flinch as Palpatine’s gaze cooled and shifted to him, settled for a moment, then shifted to Yoda, and finally back to Mon Mothma.

“Alas, Senator, while it does seem likely, I’m afraid at this time there is no hard evidence to support that theory,” he replied. “And as I’m sure you’re aware, no group has stepped forward to claim responsibility. But I have no doubt that the Republic’s security services are even now hot on the trail of the truth—and the perpetrators. Is that not so, Senator Organa?”

Bail cleared his throat. “Yes, Supreme Chancellor. I’ve put all the relevant departments on high alert, and I’ll be meeting with their senior staff and the Security Committee later today. I can assure you, sir, that the apprehension of those responsible for this attack is our highest priority.”

“Yes,” said Palpatine. His eyes were cold and hard. “I was certain you would say that. Senator Mothma—doubtless you’d appreciate a few moments to collect your thoughts before speaking to the Senate. If you’d like to step back to the antechamber, Mas Amedda will show you to my private retreat. I’ll join you there momentarily. There is a small matter I must first attend to with Senator Organa and Master Yoda.”

“Of course, Supreme Chancellor,” Mon Mothma murmured. “Senator. Master Yoda.”

Once the door had closed behind her, Palpatine turned back to the panoramic window. Bail exchanged a look with Yoda, who pursed his lips and shook his head, ever so slightly. And so once again they waited for Palpatine to speak.

“I’m told the death toll will surpass ten thousand,” he said at last, still staring through the window. “I’ve seen the news recordings. I’m sure you have too.” He swung around, and this time his face was etched with anger. “I’m not a naïve man. I’ve seen brutality. Cruelty.

But I have *never*—” He took a deep breath. “This cannot—this *must* not—happen again. Your security agents, Senator Organa, and your Jedi, Master Yoda, *cannot* let this happen again. You should not have let it happen at all.”

Bail opened his mouth to answer, to apologize, but Yoda’s raised hand stopped him.

“Supreme Chancellor, a tragedy this is,” the ancient Jedi agreed. “Great sorrow do we all feel for the loss of innocent life. But it is a war we are fighting, that choose to fight we did not. Without compassion or compunction is our enemy. Blamed for their cruelty we cannot be.”

“No,” said Palpatine. “But blamed for your silence you can and *will* be. If you had told me as soon as you learned of it that this dreadful weapon was being developed—”

“Prevent its use how, would you, Supreme Chancellor?” said Yoda.

Stunned, Bail looked at him. What was he thinking? *Nobody* interrupted Palpatine. He waited for the Supreme Chancellor’s angry response—but it didn’t come. Instead Palpatine pinched his lips tight.

Yoda sighed. “Know the answer we both do. Send for me you would have. Request of the Jedi this weapon’s destruction you would have. Attempt to prevent this tragedy we would have. Attempt to prevent it we *did*.”

“And you *failed*, Master Yoda!” Palpatine retorted. “You failed and now thousands of Chandrilans and other Republic citizens lie dead in the streets, their bodies so horrifically mutilated they might never be identified. And the damage this will do to Republic morale—the fear that will run like wildfire from world to world—I’m not sure you understand, Master Yoda. Fear can be a plague, and *I* fear a veritable pandemic. Now you tell me—what are you going to do about that?”

Yoda stood straighter, and lifted his chin. “Trust I will that complete their mission Master Kenobi and young Skywalker can.”

Palpatine stared. “You believe they’re still alive?”

“Know it I do, Supreme Chancellor,” said Yoda. “Their deaths would I feel. Believe that you must.”

“Then that is surely the only good news to come out of this sorry business,” Palpatine murmured. “And bearing that in mind—from now on I’m going to take an active interest in this affair. While I had hoped that Anakin and Master Kenobi could thwart Lok Durd’s ambitions, clearly my optimism was misplaced. As much as it pains me to admit it—and while I am in no way questioning Anakin’s valor, or Master Kenobi’s, either—I have no choice but to accept that this time the task of saving the situation is beyond them. Therefore we must intervene. I want Lanteeb liberated from Separatist control, immediately. Only the warships protecting Kothlis are exempt from redeployment. That situation remains too volatile to jeopardize.”

Bail folded his hands before him, making sure to present a respectful demeanor. “Supreme Chancellor, we all want to avoid a repeat of what’s happened on Chandrila. But I’m not sure how quickly we can redeploy the fleet, especially given the ongoing comms—”

“I have no interest in your excuses, Senator!” said Palpatine. “Can it be that you don’t grasp the severity of our predicament? You knew this weapon was ready to be used and you could not prevent Lok Durd from deploying it. Stars above, you couldn’t even keep him safely in *custody*. And *because* you could do neither of those things I am now tasked with calming a Republic that has just watched thousands of its citizens perish in unspeakable agony. Worse, I have to face them in the Senate and *lie*. I have to tell them they have nothing to fear because I have complete confidence that the Jedi will hunt down and apprehend the perpetrators of this monstrous crime.”

“Apprehend them we will, Supreme Chancellor,” said Yoda, emotionless. “A lie that is not.”

“I’m sure you’ll try,” said Palpatine, sounding anything but convinced. “But unless you can tell me you’ve seen a successful outcome in the Force, I must proceed upon the assumption that your continued failure is as likely, if not more likely, than your success. *Can you guarantee me success, Master Yoda?*”

Bail dropped his gaze to the carpet. Never had he heard Palpatine upbraid Yoda like this. How distraught must he be to chastise his most important and valuable ally in their desperate fight for the Republic’s survival? How shaken was his confidence in the Jedi?

How shaken is his confidence in me?

Yoda resettled his grasp on his gimer stick. “Seen in the Force the outcome of these events I have not, Supreme Chancellor. But faith in our ability to prevail I have.”

“Faith is all very well, Master Yoda,” said Palpatine, unyielding, “but I can’t wave it in front of the HoloNet droidcams. Nor can I display it to the Senate as proof that we are doing our jobs. Therefore my decision stands. I want that planet out of Separatist hands by any and all means necessary. Do I make myself clear?”

Yoda nodded. “You do, Supreme Chancellor.”

“And you, Senator Organa,” Palpatine snapped. “Can I trust you’ll ensure no other world suffers the same fate as Chandrila?”

“You can, Supreme Chancellor,” he said. “We won’t rest until Lok Durd is back in Republic custody and every last drop of that bioweapon is accounted for—then destroyed.”

Palpatine’s lips thinned. “I shall hold you to that oath, Senator. Now what of your scientist friend? Doctor Netzl? Surely by now he’s concocted a defense against Durd’s weapon?”

“I’m afraid not yet, Supreme Chancellor.”

“Not yet,” Palpatine echoed. “Then perhaps your faith in him is misplaced. There are many, many scientists in our grand Republic, Senator Organa. Perhaps the time has come for—”

“Forgive me, Supreme Chancellor, but no,” Bail said flatly. “Tryn Netzl is our best choice. He’s very close now. All he needs is one last breakthrough.”

Palpatine stared at him, unblinking. “Do you concur with the Senator, Master Yoda?”

“Concur I do,” said Yoda, nodding. “In Doctor Netzl do I sense great integrity and dedication. No mercy will he show himself until the answer he has found.”

Almost imperceptibly, Palpatine softened. “You like him.”

“Irrelevant my feelings are,” said Yoda. “Relevant only is what I know.”

“Truly, Supreme Chancellor, Doctor Netzl is the right scientist for this task,” Bail added. “He knows billions of lives are counting on him to succeed.”

“I am counting on him to succeed, Senator,” said Palpatine. “Tell him that when next you see him.”

“I will, sir.”

In silence Palpatine considered him and Yoda, so much wearier now than on the day of his election. Wearier, sadder, grimmer. The war was taking an unkind toll.

“You think I’ve been harsh,” he said at last. “You think I don’t understand how hard you both work to protect our precious Republic. You’re very wrong. But you misjudged this situation from the outset and now Chandrila has paid the price. I very much doubt any of us can afford another misjudgment.

“Master Yoda?” said Palpatine, shifting his gaze.

Slumped over his gimer stick, looking even older than his nine hundred years, Yoda sighed. “Put right this will be. On that you

have my word as a Jedi.”

“And I accept your word,” said Palpatine. “I don’t deny you’ve disappointed me, Master Yoda—but I am not a man to hold a grudge. We must put this unfortunate misstep behind us and go forward to victory. For I do believe victory is closer to hand than we might think. Indeed, I have every faith that the future I am working so hard to bring about *will* come to pass.”

“Sadden me it does to know that disappointed you I have, Supreme Chancellor,” said Yoda, lowering his head.

“I know,” Palpatine said. “And I have no fear you’ll disappoint me again. In truth, I fear only one thing. Tell me, Master Yoda—can you bring Anakin safely home? I confess the thought of losing him is more than I can bear.”

“The Force is with him, and with Obi-Wan,” Yoda said after a long silence. “If to Coruscant they are meant to return, then return they will.”

Palpatine sat at his vast, polished desk. “And that, I suppose, is the best I can hope for.” Briefly he pressed a hand to his eyes. “Now, don’t let me detain you any longer. You have much work to do, as have I.”

Returning Yoda to the Temple, guiding his speeder along Coruscant’s clogged slipstreams of traffic, Bail risked a personal question. “Are you all right, Master?”

“This attack on Chandrila,” Yoda said softly, rubbing his head. “Created a great disturbance in the Force it has. Much fear and pain and sorrow do I feel.”

He wasn’t the only one. “I knew Palpatine would be upset, but—I wasn’t expecting him to be so aggressive. Were you?”

“The hope of billions has he become,” said Yoda. “Now look to him billions will and wonder if misplaced their hope is.”

Such was the inevitable risk of being a popular leader. “You didn’t challenge him when he blamed us for his decision to rely on Obi-Wan and Anakin.”

Yoda snorted. “Neither did you.”

“Politics?”

“Politics,” Yoda agreed. And then he snorted again. “Fond of politics I am not.”

And on days like this, Master Yoda, neither am I.

Bail hesitated. “I haven’t told Tryn about the attack. Have you?”

“No,” said Yoda, after a moment. “But tell him I can, if see him now you cannot.”

“No, I can see him,” he said, feeling ill. “I’ve made the time. I owe him that much.”

Small in the passenger seat beside him, Yoda pursed his lips. “Responsible for this calamity you are not, Senator. Your best you have done at every turn. Ask more than that no one can. Not Palpatine, not I, not Obi-Wan Kenobi. Expect more of yourself than your best you should not.”

It was wise advice. He wished it made him feel better about the decisions he’d made, but it didn’t. On close approach to the Jedi Temple now, he throttled back and slid them into the almost empty Priority Alpha lane. Security chips beeped as the sensors recorded their positional shift.

“You know,” he said, almost to himself, “not once growing up did I think there’d come a day when I’d hold men’s lives in the palm of my hand. When I could tell a Jedi, *Go risk your life there*, and he’d go because he trusted me. We were at peace for so long. War was *unthinkable*. And now it’s all I ever think about, Master Yoda. I’ve seen things—done things—that have changed me forever. I’m no longer the man my wife married. The man who walked into our

Senate Building for his first session.” He had to clear his throat. “I’m afraid.”

“Of what?” said Yoda, so gently, as they were swallowed by the shadows of the soaring Jedi Temple.

“Of forgetting the man I used to be. Of becoming someone who won’t know how not to think of war.”

Yoda shook his head. “Fear that you should not, Senator. Lost that man has not been. Put aside, yes, while dark the times are. But lost? No. Love you and know you do your wife and your friends. Let that man fall by the wayside they will not.” And then Yoda smiled. “Let him fall by the wayside *I* will not. For value that Bail Organa I do.”

Stunned to grateful silence, Bail guided the speeder up and up until he reached Yoda’s private landing platform. Then he and the Jedi Master made their way into the Temple.

“Informed I will keep you, Senator, regarding our assault on the planet,” said Yoda.

“I’d appreciate it, Master,” he said, bowing. “And of course whatever intel my investigations uncover will be passed to you straightaway.”

Yoda withdrew to take care of his pressing business, and Bail made his way to Tryn’s underground lab.

* * *

“*BAIL!*”

Tryn practically danced across the lab floor. The scientist was dressed in fluorescent green today, his lucky lab coat slung over a stool. His long hair was messily confined with a length of string and his eyes were their natural color, a washed-out shade of blue. Clearly he hadn’t shaved in several days, and from the jittery wildness in him Bail guessed his friend’s diet consisted of not much more than very strong caf. When he’d last slept was anyone’s guess.

“Bail, this is perfect timing,” Tryn said, his voice raspy with fatigue. “Because I’m there. Well, I’m almost there. I’ve identified the missing molecular sequence and I’ve tagged the essential properties required to complete the antidote. Now all I need to do is identify a source for those properties and—” He stepped back. The fervent light in his eyes faded, and with it his excitement. “Bail, what’s wrong?”

“Tryn—” He didn’t want to revisit the horror or destroy his friend’s fragile, fleeting triumph. He didn’t want to be the man who brought Tryn’s world crashing down.

But I am that man. That’s what I do now. To make my omelets I break other people’s eggs.

“Durd’s used the bioweapon on Chandrila. Maybe ten thousand are dead.”

“Oh,” said Tryn blankly. “Oh.”

This was the part where he was supposed to say something encouraging, something comforting. *You can’t blame yourself, Tryn. You’re doing your best. Keep up the good work. We’ll win in the end.* But the tired old platitudes stuck in his throat. And while he didn’t blame Tryn for not having the answer already, still ...

In an unexpected explosion of rage, Tryn snatched up a data-pad from the bench beside him and threw it across the lab.

“Why did you *tell* me that, Bail?” he demanded. “After days of ignoring me, why did you come all the way down here just to tell me ten thousand people are *dead*? What—did you think I needed more incentive? Did you think I wasn’t taking this *seriously* enough? Did you think you might catch me with my feet up, drinking a cocktail and smoking a cigarra and planning my next wild holiday on Umgul?”

The heavy datapad had struck the wall, shattered, and now lay in bits on the ferrocrete floor. Shocked, Bail looked from the wreckage to his friend.

“Tryn—no—of course I didn’t, that’s not why I—”

“I didn’t need to know about any attack on Chandrila!” Tryn raged, and began a furious stamping around his lab. “*Stang*, Bail, what you asked me to do is hard enough without you putting me under any *more* pressure!” He spun around, his breathing ragged. “How am I supposed to keep working, huh? How am I supposed to go on being the scientist, accepting science’s limitations, its trial-and-error approach to finding the truth, when now every time I *don’t* make that final, crucial connection I’ll hear you telling me *ten thousand people are dead!*”

He could feel his heart beating through every bone beneath his skin. “I never meant to do that, Tryn.”

“Then why did you tell me?” Tryn demanded. “*Why?*”

“Because—because I thought you’d want to know.”

“Well, guess what, Organa!” Tryn shouted. “*You thought wrong!*”

“Tryn, I’m sorry,” he said. “What can I do to make this right? How can I—”

“You can’t,” Tryn spat, fetching up against a lab bench crowded with a bewildering collection of pipes and beakers and test tubes and monitors. “There’s nothing you can do, Bail—except go away. So why don’t you do that? And don’t comm me. I’ll comm you.”

Bail swallowed. “All right. Only—there is one more thing.”

Tryn looked up, resentful and hostile. “*What?*”

“We’re launching an assault on Lanteeb. We’re taking the planet away from the Separatists.”

“Really? That’s nice. Although it’s a pity you didn’t think of doing that before ten thousand people died, isn’t it?”

And what was he supposed to say to that? There was *nothing* he could say to that. So he left Tryn to his test tubes, making sure to close the lab door softly behind him.

FIFTEEN



AFTER HIS PASSIONATE AND PITCH-PERFECT ADDRESS TO THE Senate and the Republic at large—after coolly elegant Mon Mothma responded to his inspirational words and brought every gullible fool in the echoing Senate chamber to his or her or its feet, Palpatine retired to his private retreat on the pretext of needing solitude in which to meditate upon these grave matters of state.

There he donned his Sith robes and contacted Dooku.

“My lord,” said the old man, bowing. *“How can I be of service?”*

Sidious let a hiss escape him. “Did you order the attack on Chandrila, Lord Tyranus?”

Dooku’s head snapped up. *“Attack? What attack?”*

“Are you telling me, Tyranus, that you are unaware of what has happened?”

“Lord Sidious, my ship has only just emerged from a communications dead spot,” said Dooku. *“Not all of our comm systems have come back online.”*

Sidious felt rage scald through his veins. *There are no dead spots in the Force. At least not for a Sith.* How could something so momentous be unknown to his most important pawn?

“The bioweapon has been used on Hanna City.”

“Durd has acted without authorization,” said Dooku, his eyes wide with shock. *“I will take care of him at once. There are plenty of scientists in the—”*

“No, Tyranus,” he said. “The Force tells me Durd still has a part to play. Besides, without realizing it the Neimoidian has done us a small service. Not only is the Senate in an uproar and the Republic with it, a battle group will leave shortly to liberate Lanteeb. Send Grievous to intercept it. I want the planet under full blockade—but I don’t want the Republic Cruisers destroyed too quickly. What I want is a siege, so that as many GAR ships and troops as possible are dragged into the fray. Such an engagement will take a heavy toll.”

“Yes, my lord,” said Dooku, obedient. “*And Durd?*”

“Let him continue unhindered. When the time is right you will discreetly facilitate our little general’s escape from Lanteeb,” he replied. “Be sure to hide him somewhere inaccessible.”

Dooku nodded. “*My lord.*” Then his face tightened. “*There is still the matter of Kenobi and Skywalker.*”

Indeed there was. “They will be taken care of. They are not your concern.”

“*My lord,*” said Dooku, bowing again. Then he straightened. “*But Durd cannot go unpunished. He acted without permission. In launching his attack on Chandrila he—*”

“Did what we were always going to do, Tyranus,” Sidious said firmly. “Do not allow your pricked pride to blind you. Though there is but one destination, more than one road can lead us to it. Trust in the dark side—and follow my instructions. The rest you can leave to me.”

Dooku wanted to argue, but wisely refrained. Instead he bowed a third time, lower than ever. “*Yes, Lord Sidious.*”

“Tyranus,” he added, letting his voice snap a little. “You have caught me in a generous mood. Were I you, I would not rely upon that in the future.”

And on that ominous note, he cut their hololink.

Trust in the dark side.

Darth Sidious did, of course. The dark side was everything, heat and light and food and wine, his promise of greatness and his only true home. What it showed him came to pass without exception. He could trust it absolutely, for it had never let him down.

Show me Anakin, my true apprentice. Show me the son of my heart.

Easily, triumphantly, the dark side showed him. And so, being shown, he stopped worrying about Anakin. How the boy escaped from Lanteeb wasn't important. What mattered was that he would indeed escape. What mattered was his future, which would in due course come to pass.

Suitably somber, Supreme Chancellor Palpatine went back to work.

PADMÉ HURRIED straight from the spaceport to Bail's Senate office, where Minala Lodilyn greeted her with a strained, apologetic smile.

"I'm so sorry, Senator Amidala, but he's not here," she said, as her desk's comm console flashed with six—no, seven—incoming comms. "He was pulled back to Strategic Ops for another holoconference."

Padmé felt her breath hitch. "New intel?"

"Yes, I think so," said Minala, guarded. "I'm sorry, I'm not trying to be difficult, but—"

"You're not cleared to say. It's all right. I understand." Frustrated, she tugged on the end of her braid. "Look. I appreciate how busy you are, but do you mind if I wait? I need to see him, and I need to catch up on what's happened, and I don't want to waste his time or mine playing tag." She patted her workcase. "I've got my portable workstation with me, I won't need to touch his. I just need a quiet place to sit and get myself sorted out."

"Of course, Senator," Minala said, standing. "I'll take you through. Can I get you anything while you work? A caf? Something to eat?"

Bail's personal assistant was a treasure. "A pot of strong caf would be enormously appreciated, Minala. And after that I'll leave you

alone.” She nodded at the comm console. “Clearly you don’t need anything else to worry about right now.”

Settled at Bail’s tidy desk, Padmé buried herself in answering the flood of messages texted to her workstation, and returning the voice comms left on her comlink. As Naboo’s Republic representative she was required to draft an official response to the Chandrila atrocity for Queen Jamillia’s approval, so she did that first. Next she put her own personal assistant Sovi on to coordinating with the Chandrilan senatorial offices regarding Naboo’s participation in the relief effort; thanks to her special relationship with Chandrila’s Sisterhood of Ta’fan-jirah, Naboo enjoyed a range of special considerations. Now it was time to repay the favor.

And then, of course, there were the security issues.

Stuck on Bonadan, she’d missed the first round of security briefings. She’d be playing catch-up now for as long as this crisis lasted—and the handful of colleagues who resented her prominence, who thought Palpatine played favorites with her, who thought a woman from a nothing little planet like Naboo had no place in the senatorial spotlight, well, they’d be doing their best to see she was *kept* offstage.

Egotist glassblowers and their artistic temperaments. I’m going to throw a fancy vase at the next one I see. And as for my charming colleagues ...

Well, they could try to keep her sidelined—but they’d fail.

By the time she’d finished wading through the messages and comms, setting more than a few people straight on their facts and reaching out to a couple of her own very private contacts to confirm or deny the first trickles of intel from Hanna City, nearly three hours had passed and she’d brewed herself a headache bigger than the Kaliida Nebula. Not even a fresh pot of caf and a blocker could kill it.

Then Bail returned to his office, pale with temper and stress and his own enormous headache.

“Padmé,” he said, finding a smile for her. “Sorry. Minala pinged me on the comlink to let me know you were here but I couldn’t comm you and I couldn’t leave the briefing and they wouldn’t halt it so you could join us. Things were moving too fast.”

“Don’t worry about it,” she said. “I’ve been getting caught up. How’s Mon Mothma? I’ve tried to reach her a few times but her comlink is diverted.”

“She’s ... strong,” Bail said, after a moment. “She’ll see her people through this.” He glanced at his office chrono. “She should be back on Chandrila by now.”

Chandrila. Feeling suddenly helpless, Padmé stared at him. “This last briefing—are we any closer to working out how Dooku managed to pull this off?”

“A not-very-pretty picture is starting to emerge, yes,” he said. “It appears the weapon was incorporated into some mobile security cams. Of course nobody looked twice at them—the blasted things are everywhere these days.”

“Security cams?” she echoed. “Supplied by whom?”

“Shield Securities.”

“*Shield*? But—Bail, they’ve got contracts with nearly every Core Worlds government, not to mention—”

“Alderaan.” He grimaced. “I know.”

“And Coruscant!” Feeling ill, caf churning in her stomach, Padmé took a deep breath. “They cover almost half of the major residential annexes, six retail precincts, and the Bonchaka, Neldiz, and F’tu manufacturing districts. And aren’t they bidding on the GAR docks complex?”

“They were,” said Bail. “The entire bidding process has been suspended, pending review.”

The ramifications were almost overwhelming. “So—are we saying Shield itself has been compromised? At the highest levels? Or is this

a case of Separatist infiltration into a couple of key company areas?”

Bail shrugged. “Nobody knows—but that’s where the investigation’s focused now. Shield is eagerly helping us with our inquiries.”

“It’s a double strike, isn’t it?” Padmé murmured, torn between revulsion and a grudging admiration for the Separatists’ tactics. “We’re hit by this filthy bioweapon *and* by having to investigate not only Shield, but every last mobile spycam in operation. Because if the Seps have infiltrated Shield, then who else have they compromised? And that’s not something we’ll be able to keep quiet. Which means there’ll be more fear, more unrest, more erosion of trust in our ability to keep people safe.” She flattened her hands to her face for a moment, then lowered them to stare at Bail. “*Stang*.”

“I know it looks bad,” said Bail, dropping into his own visitor’s chair. “It *is* bad. But I can’t help wondering if Dooku hasn’t miscalculated. He had to have known we’d work out the weapon’s delivery system and take steps. So why waste the element of surprise on only one attack? Why not launch a simultaneous series of assaults on every Core World where Shield has a presence? If our good Count really wanted to bring the Republic to its knees, then that’s what he should’ve done.”

Padmé sat back in her chair. “I don’t know whether I should be impressed or terrified by how you think, Senator Organa. You’re right. This attack is a pinprick compared with the kind of grandiose plans of annihilation we’ve caught Dooku hatching before. So maybe it wasn’t Dooku. Maybe our old friend Lok Durd has an itchy trigger finger.”

Frowning, Bail considered that. “You think he might be trying to prove himself to his master?”

“I think it’s a possibility,” she said slowly. “I mean, thanks to Anakin and Obi-Wan there’s every chance he knows we’ve found out what he’s been planning. Letting two Jedi get so close to him—he has to be desperate to make up for that blunder.”

Anakin.

She felt a familiar, unwelcome twist in her belly. “By the way ... Bail ... have you heard—”

“Sorry,” Bail said. “No. But the Temple’s listening for them. If they so much as hiccup in our direction the Jedi will hear it—and they’ll tell us.”

He knew her so well. *Too* well. He’d figured it out, her terrible secret. And yet she wasn’t frightened by that. He’d never betray her. She could come right out and tell him and he’d never say a word. Not that she would. Telling him would be unfair. Besides, Anakin would never agree to it.

Bail was drumming his fingers on the arm of his chair, thinking. “You know, if you’re right about this, then maybe it’ll play to our advantage.”

“With the battle group?” she said. “Yes. Maybe. If Durd and his people on Lanteeb are panicked, they’re more likely to have further lapses in judgment. And speaking of the battle group—how big will it be? And who’s in command?”

“Admiral Yularen. He’s the most seasoned commander we have available right now. The repairs on *Indomitable* are being fast-tracked, and as soon as she’s declared spaceworthy she’ll be joined by *Pioneer* and *Coruscant Sky* and they’ll head best speed for Lanteeb.”

Dismayed, Padmé stared. “Only three ships? To retake an entire planet? Bail, even if Durd and his people are in disarray that’s not —”

“You think I don’t know that?” he said, shoving out of his chair to pace. One hand kneaded the back of his neck. “Trust me, I know it—but we’re trying to cover too many hot spots in the Mid and Outer Rims as it is. That’s why we have to wait for *Indomitable* and the rest of Yularen’s battle group. Pulling ships from any one of our other

engagements will almost guarantee us a new defeat. We can't afford it."

"But what about—"

"Oh, I argued myself blue in the face to get Master Windu and *Dagger* redeployed," Bail said grimly, "but Palpatine won't hear of them leaving Kothlis, even though the situation there is well under control. It's hoped the element of surprise will be on our side. Provided Yularen ships out in the next couple of days there's a good chance his people will reach Lanteeb before the Seps have a chance to get organized against us."

"And if that doesn't work?" she said, her heart hammering.

Bail halted before his office window and glared at the endless Coruscant traffic. "Then we pull *Dominator* away from patrolling near Kalarba and keep our fingers crossed we don't lose the planet to Dooku."

"Four ships still won't be enough," she protested. "We'll need more firepower than that. We'll need—"

"What we *need*," he snapped, turning, "is a solution to this debilitating comms crisis but the last time I checked my pockets, they were empty. How about yours?"

Oh, the communications crisis. Half of her banked-up messages had been about the perpetually unrolling series of viruses crippling the GAR fleet. Just as they unraveled one, another popped up to take its place. Whoever had designed the offensive was a genius.

Padmé braced her elbows on Bail's desk. "This is *ridiculous*. We're letting Dooku and his minions dictate the terms of our response. So the GAR Fleet's hamstrung because of this virus problem? Fine. Then it's hamstrung—and we look for another way."

"What other way?" said Bail, scowling. "There isn't one. We can't snap our fingers and produce virus-free ships out of thin air!"

She smiled at him, slowly, as a small flame of an idea flickered deep in her mind. “Not out of thin air, no. But that doesn’t mean we can’t produce them from somewhere else.”

“*What?* What are you—” And then he saw, as he so frequently did, what she was thinking. “Padmé ...” he breathed. “You can’t be serious.”

“Of course I’m serious,” she said. “It might not work. We might not even need to do it, if you’re right and Yularen can liberate Lanteeb with three ships. But if he can’t then I say we have to try.”

Bail was shaking his head. “Padmé, you’re crazy. Raise our own fleet?”

“Why not? It isn’t illegal.”

“No, but it’s highly unorthodox!” he retorted. “Besides, it’ll never work. The sheer time it’d take to get a special Senate session convened—to get consensus and waivers and—”

“Who said anything about going through official channels?” she asked. “That would bog us down in a bureaucratic morass. No. We’ll have to work back-channels on this one, Bail. We’ll have to pull every last string we can lay our hands on. Call in all our favors and put ourselves deeply into debt. But after Chandrila? I can’t believe we won’t find a few people to help us. Out of self-preservation, if nothing else.”

Bail slumped against the transparisteel window. “What about Palpatine?”

“He stays in the dark,” she said promptly. “Even mentioning the idea to him would ruin any hope for plausible deniability and it’d put him in an untenable position. No. We leave the Supreme Chancellor out of it. And we don’t approach anyone as senators or as members of the Security Committee, either. At least, not unless we absolutely have to.”

He was almost laughing. “Then how do you expect to convince a single government to supply us with so much as *one* armed ship to

help liberate Lanteeb?”

“I’m not only thinking of governments,” she said. “Off the top of my head I can name five private corporations with their own fleets of armed escort ships. Five companies that stand to lose millions if the threat of this bioweapon isn’t eliminated. You think they won’t agree if it means saving that kind of money?”

“Well—probably they would, yes, but—” Bail raked his fingers through his short hair. “Padmé, what kind of a message will that send? We can say we’re not acting as senators but unless we resign we *are* senators and—”

“I honestly couldn’t care less about political messages,” she snapped. “Not when billions of lives are on the line. But if we *have* to have a message, then how about this? It’s past time we stopped looking to the Senate to solve all our problems. We’re in this mess partly because we’ve surrendered our consciences and our independence to an endless parade of self-serving government committees. We need action, not more talking. And we have a duty—a moral obligation—to keep one another safe. To look out for the weakest and most helpless among us. This Republic belongs to everyone and we all have to do what we can to preserve it.”

“Stang, Padmé.” Bail sighed. “Look. I’m not saying you’re wrong. But I’m not sure you grasp the enormity of what you’re suggesting.”

“Believe me, I do,” she said. “But I’m not going to let it intimidate me. This is too important. Bail Organa, next to me you’re the most persuasive person I know. You’re high profile, you’re respected and you know people who know people who know people, from the highest to the lowest levels of government *and* private enterprise on every planet that matters in the Republic. And I’ve made a few interesting connections myself in the last few years. Between us we can *do* this. We can put together a civilian fleet to back up Yularen’s battle group if they need it.”

Shaking his head again, Bail returned to his chair. “I must be coming down with something, because I’m starting to believe you.

Are you quite certain you're not a Jedi playing mind tricks?"

She laughed. "Don't be silly. I'm just a woman who doesn't like taking *no* for an answer."

"All right." He thought for a moment. "Let's say for the sake of argument I agree with this mad plan. When do you suggest we start making overtures?"

According to the chrono on his desk it was nearly midnight. He was exhausted and so was she. "As soon as possible," she said. "In and around whatever meetings and briefings and Senate sessions that get called. Be at my apartment no later than oh-seven-hundred tomorrow and over breakfast we can draw up a preliminary list of preferred first-round contacts. Once that's done we'll split the names and get started."

"You're serious, aren't you?" he said, wondering. "You really think we can do this."

Abruptly her adrenaline rush faded, leaving her shaky and all too aware of the stakes. "I think we have to try," she said, and heard the break in her voice. "For the people who died today. For the people who'll die if we don't stop Lok Durd. For Anakin and Obi-Wan. Because we have to get them back, Bail. We can't leave them to rot on that planet."

Somber, he looked at her. "No. We can't." And then he smiled, rueful and resigned and warmly affectionate. "So it's Padmé to the rescue again. I'm starting to think this Republic will fall apart without you."

There was an electropen on his desk. She threw it at him. "Ha. Now let's get out of here, shall we? We've got an early start and a lot of work to do."

AHSOKA STARED AT MASTER YODA, her heart thudding. "Just me, Master? But—what about Tar—I mean, Master Damsin? I've got some experience now, but I'm still only a Padawan."

Master Yoda tapped his gimer stick to the Jedi Council Chamber floor. It seemed extra large and echoey with only the two of them in it. “Duties elsewhere does Master Damsin have, Padawan. With her fate concerned you should not be. Your business her doings are not.”

He probably meant Taria wasn’t well enough to join the battle group. She should’ve realized that. Chastened, she dropped her gaze. “Yes, Master. Sorry.”

“Alone to Lanteeb with the battle group you will travel, Padawan,” said Yoda. “Join you there at least one Jedi Master will. Together you will lead the clones, if foolish the Separatists are and refuse to surrender control of the planet they do.”

Ahsoka nodded. “Yes, Master. Master, do you know who—”

“Decided yet that is not,” said Yoda. “Matter to you it should not, Padawan.”

Blast, nothing she said was coming out the way she meant it. Or could it be that Yoda was worried? She didn’t dare try to read him. But just looking at him, hearing the thread of tension in his voice ...

He is worried. I know he is. There’s so much at stake. And Skyguy and Master Kenobi are still missing.

“Padawan,” said Yoda, his voice gentler. “Good reports of you have I had. Your leadership in the new dojo team challenges—impressive that is. Ready you are for greater responsibilities.”

He knew about that? She and Taria had held another eight team challenges since the first one, that they’d held on a whim. Now there was a waiting list of younglings who wanted to take part. They’d had to go on rotation. She’d even held a couple of training sessions by herself, passing on what she’d learned the hard way on the war’s front line. And Master Yoda *knew*?

Well, of course he knows. Master Yoda knows everything.

“Master, I’m honored you think I’m doing good work, but—do you really think I’m ready?”

“Commendable your humility is, Padawan,” said Yoda, his fathomless eyes warm. “Asked to do more than you can do, you will not be. To the GAR barracks you should go now. A troop carrier to *Indomitable* soon will take you and Torrent Company. To Admiral Yularen you will listen, Padawan, until join you a Jedi Master does.”

Ahsoka nodded vigorously. “Yes, Master Yoda. Thank you, Master. I won’t let you down.”

“Know that I do, Padawan. Dismissed, you are.”

So she was going to Lanteeb, to liberate the planet and thwart Lok Durd and rescue Skyguy and Master Kenobi.

All in a day’s work. Maybe a day-and-a-half.

She couldn’t leave the Temple without bidding Taria a swift farewell. She found the Jedi Master in the arboretum, working through some meditation-in-movement exercises.

“Ahsoka,” said Taria, without opening her eyes. She was dressed in one of her customary dark bodysuits, and for once her long hair was unbraided, spreading in a bluish-green shimmer down her back. She stood poised on her left leg, the right pulled up behind her with both hands wrapped around her ankle, the flat of her foot resting softly against her head. Her breathing was deep and slow, no strain in her at all. “You’re leaving.”

One of these days I’ll be able to read the Force that easily. “Yes. For Lanteeb.”

Taria opened her eyes. A golden glow shone in their tawny depths. “Not alone, though.”

“With a battle group. It’s—it’s not common knowledge, Taria.”

“In other words,” said Taria, grinning, “I should keep my mouth shut?” She released her right ankle, then bent herself in half, palms pressed flat to the grass. Her hair pooled and puddled before her like a summer lake. “Don’t worry. I won’t breathe a word.”

“I’m sorry to leave you with the team challenge unfinished.”

Taria wrapped her arms around her calves and pressed her hidden face to her knees. “No, you’re not. You’re going to rescue your Skyguy and Obi-Wan. You’re thrilled, Ahsoka Tano. Don’t try to deny it.”

Yes, she was thrilled. But she felt guilty too, because Taria cared as much as she did. “I wish you were coming,” she said. “They’re sending a Master to join me. I don’t know who. But I wish it was you.”

Supple as growing green tapi-wheat, Taria straightened. “So do I, Ahsoka. But my feet tread a different path. Go to Lanteeb. Pluck our friends from danger. And perhaps we’ll continue our team challenges when you return. I want to give you the chance to draw even.”

When I return, Skyguy and I will be sent back to the war. And you’ll still be stuck here.

But she didn’t say that aloud. There wasn’t any point.

“I’d like that very much,” she said. “Taria, I’m sorry, I have to go. Be well, won’t you?”

“I’ll do my best,” said Taria. “And you stay safe.”

“Always,” she said, and managed a small, trembling smile. “May the Force be with you, Master Damsin.”

“And with you, Padawan Tano.” Taria wiggled her fingers. “Now shoo.”

It hurt to leave her. In such a short time, Taria Damsin had become a good friend. But so was Anakin her friend, and right now he needed her.

“Little’un,” Rex greeted her, at the 501st’s GAR complex barracks. “Word’s come down. We’re shipping out. Are you coming with us, or waving us good-bye?”

“I’m coming with,” she said, and gave the crowded mess hall a hard look. “What’s the mood, Captain?”

He quirked an eyebrow at her. “You can’t tell?”

“Ha-ha,” she muttered. “I’m comparing notes, all right?”

Side by side they took in the huge room, crowded with clones, the buzzing conversations, the undercurrent of excitement, trepidation, and endurance as they grabbed a quick meal. The 501st was ready. They were always ready.

Rex nodded, pleased with his men. “You got a destination for me?”

“Command didn’t tell you?”

“No,” said Rex. “Word came down we’re shipping out. That’s all. Is it a secret mission?”

“Not exactly. But it’s sensitive. Rex—” Ahsoka looked up at him. “This is for your ears only. We’re going after Skyguy and Master Kenobi.”

Rex’s scarred face went very still, just one muscle leaping along his tightly held jaw. “Right.”

“They’re in trouble, Rex. Trapped behind enemy lines.”

“Right,” he said again, that muscle still leaping. “This anything to do with what happened on Chandrila yesterday?”

He was a smart, smart man. “Everything,” she said, her voice nearly a whisper. “They were trying to stop that attack, but—”

“Best not say anything more, little’un,” Rex told her, his voice just as low. “But don’t you worry. We won’t be leaving them behind enemy lines.” He nodded at the crowded, noisy room. “The boys and me? We’ll fight to the last man to get them home again.”

His hand on her shoulder was warm and hard. Comforting. “Rex, the troop carrier’s going to be here soon. Ten minutes—then they gear up.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, letting his hand drop away. “Ten minutes. Excuse me.”

She watched him cross to Sergeant Coric, who was sitting with Checkers and Dandy and Flash. Checkers turned, hearing Rex's approach, and nodded, seeing her. One finger touched his forehead in a small, genuine salute. She smiled at him and tried not to dwell on his chin's fresh scar.

They're too easily hurt, all of them. And if this mission turns into a pitched battle, they won't all come home.

So she drank in their faces and their laughter, the jokes and the teasing and their wild, reckless courage. Because this could be the last time for some of them ... and she never wanted to forget.

ONE BY ONE, Yoda looked at the holoimages of his fellow Councilors. He'd never felt so alone in this place he loved, this Council Chamber that was a home within his larger home of the Jedi Temple. The war had swallowed his colleagues completely. At no other time in his memory had the Council been this scattered, its cohesiveness this endangered. It wasn't simply a question of companionship. In weighty matters the Council functioned best when its members shared the same space, the same moment. When the Force could weave its way effortlessly among them and their separate strengths and talents combined to become something greater and more powerful than each of them alone. That was impossible when they were separated by light-years, represented only by a coalescence of shallow particles.

But even with those limitations, he knew that in this matter they felt with one heart.

"Then agreed we are," he said. "Insist we must that leave Kothlis Mace Windu should to assist with freeing Lanteeb from Count Dooku."

"Indeed," said Ki-Adi-Mundi. "And I am at a loss to understand why Palpatine is so intransigent on the matter. Why will he not be guided by us in this? After Chandrila it is plain that Lanteeb has the higher priority."

“So you would think,” he said. “But always a politician Palpatine is.”

“You’re concerned he seeks to protect his own dignity and entitlements at the expense of innocent life?” said Adi Gallia from her ship in the depths of the Aostai region. *“That doesn’t seem like him, Yoda.”*

“Concerned he is that Kothlis and Bothawui offended will be by our withdrawal of protection,” he said. “To Dooku he thinks they might turn if abandoned by us they consider themselves.”

“He’s worrying for no reason,” Mace Windu said flatly. *“Kothlis and Bothawui will never leave the Republic. Yoda, he’s going to have to accept the Council’s decision. I’ll leave enough clones here to satisfy the Ruling Council’s need for security. Tell Yularen that Dagger and I will rendezvous with him at the battle group’s pre-approach coordinates.”*

Soberly the other Councilors nodded their support, then disconnected from the holoconference. In the end only Mace remained, his image gently flickering.

“You’re not happy about this,” he said. *“Do you know something I don’t?”*

Yoda let his chin sink to his chest. “Usurped Palpatine will feel, when told of our decision he is.”

“That’s too bad,” said Mace, shrugging. *“Palpatine’s wrong. Durd’s our greatest danger now. It’s not enough for us to hope that Obi-Wan and young Skywalker can pull off a miracle on Lanteeb. They need our help—or Chandrila will only be the beginning.”*

Yoda sighed. “This I know. But this also I know—a wedge between the Jedi and the Supreme Chancellor will this unfortunate business drive.”

“Politicians don’t tell the Jedi what to do, Master Yoda. And smart politicians take our advice even if they don’t always understand our reasons. That’s how it’s worked for a thousand years and for a thousand years it’s worked just fine.” Mace snorted. *“Palpatine should be more*

worried about offending us than Kothlis. We're the ones keeping the Republic together."

And that was true, too, though he wouldn't phrase it quite that way to the Supreme Chancellor. "Go to see him now, I will. Contact me when approaching your rendezvous with the battle group you are."

"Shall do," said Mace, and disconnected their link.

Filled with a weary unease, Yoda stared at the cityscape for a moment, then withdrew from the Council Chamber so he could make his preparations to meet with the Republic's Supreme Chancellor.

And may the Force be with me, for pleased by this news he will not be.

SIXTEEN



THE LATEST DROID BOMBARDMENT HAD STARTED JUST AFTER dawn, and nearly ten hours later it showed no sign of stopping.

Covered in hydraulic fluids and scattered singe marks, smeared with sweat and dirt and blood, Anakin stood before Torbel's laboring storm shield, raised his fists at Durd's relentless army and vented fear and fury in one long, soundless scream.

You stinking barves! You can keep on firing until Lanteeb's sun goes supernova! We are never going to let you in!

Panting, he turned away from the merciless machines and struggled to recover his precarious balance.

It was nearly five days since he'd had a decent stretch of sleep, or a full meal, or anything approaching enough water to drink. The village was on strict rationing, every single mouthful accounted for. Rikkard and Jaklin had even discussed the slaughter of their poultry and milk cows. It hadn't come to that yet, but it would if help didn't reach them soon. And there'd been no word from the Jedi Temple. No hint of any kind that this wasn't a battle they were fighting on their own.

Every time he looked up, it seemed, another shipment of ammunition was arriving for the droids to pour against Torbel's flimsy shield. Since the start of the siege, their number had swelled from three hundred units to more than four hundred. There were no sentient soldiers in this army. Durd wasn't risking a single man. The barve didn't have to. He could sit in his compound and watch his

assault via holoremove, surrounded by luxury, convinced the victory was already his.

Light-headed with weariness, Anakin shoved his microspanner back into his tool belt.

And maybe it is. Was I wrong to push us into this? Have I condemned every last one of us to a swift and brutal slaughter? Or will we die of starvation and sickness first?

He'd never felt so afraid in his life.

Every waking moment was spent slaving over the power plant and the storm-shield generators, checking and rechecking the shield's perimeter, patching and tinkering and pulling miracles out of thin air to keep the old and overworked equipment from disintegrating into smoking slag. His modifications had worked, but the price was ferocious. They were burning through the stockpiled liquid damotite so quickly, burning through circuitry and wiring and stripped-out spare parts just as fast. And everyone was looking to him for the answers, expecting him to keep the miracle going.

I don't know how much longer I can keep on doing this.

The day was dying, the last of the light draining out of the sky. But that didn't matter. The constant barrage of plasma and blasterfire hitting the shield turned night to day. It was as bright here after sundown as it was on Coruscant.

The thought of home pierced his guts, a sharp shiv of memory. By now Padmé had to know that he and Obi-Wan were trapped on this mess of a planet. Yoda would've told Bail Organa and Organa would certainly tell her—or she'd rip the news out of him. She had to be sick with terror for him. A couple of times he'd risked trying to feel her in the Force, tried to see where she was, how she was, but he was simply too tired. All his strength was being poured into keeping Torbel and its people alive. He had nothing left. Nothing to give her.

Oh, my dearest love. Can you forgive me for putting you through this? I'll make it up to you, I promise. When I come home.

Blat ... blat ... boom ... blat ... boom ... boom ... boom ...

The storm shield couldn't muffle all the bombardment's noise. The constant dull impacts hammered at everyone trapped in the village, keeping headaches simmering just below the surface. Tempers were short, fights erupting at the least provocation. Rikkard and Jaklin had confiscated every last weapon and anything that could be used as a weapon if it wasn't needed to keep them alive. Teeba Sufi didn't need any more casualties. She had enough on her plate, with the sick house full and the charter house turned into a second ward.

His jaw clenched tight, Anakin watched the blooms and blossoms of superheated blaster plasma drip down the storm shield. Surely the Seps had to run out of ammunition soon.

A crackle in his pocket, then Devi's faint voice sounded over his comlink. "*Anakin? Do you copy?*"

He pulled out the comlink and thumbed the transmit switch. "What's up?"

"Where are you?"

He was so tired he had to think about it. "I've just checked Generator Ten. Why?"

"I need help here."

"Can't you ask Rikkard? I've still got—"

"Rikkard's dropped. He's greensick. I'm on my own and I've got a blocked fuel valve. I'll have a red needle in minutes."

Stang. She sounded desperate. And if he lost Devi ... "Fine," he said, eyes closed, head pounding. "I'll be right there." With a final look at the droids, he started back toward the plant. "Devi, can you comm Tarnik? Get him to check the other generators? They should be holding but—"

"I've tried. I can't raise him."

"Then try again! Devi, the generators have to be kept under constant surveillance. If even one fails—"

“I know!” Devi shouted back. “I’ll try. You just get here. Hurry!”

Shoving the comlink into his pocket he broke into a shuffling jog, which was the closest he could come to running right now. The light was fading faster, Lanteeb’s sun lost behind the hills that stood between the village and the open country. If the droids would only stop firing, he’d be able to see the night sky’s first, faint stars.

I don’t care if I never see stars again as long as I live. Please, please, let that shield hold.

He jogged past the silenced mine and the burned-out hulk of the refinery, still stinking, past the groundcar graveyard and on to the plant. There he unstuck the blocked fuel valve, coaxed another eight valves into running a little more smoothly, answered a spate of questions from Tarnik, who’d been grumpily roused from sleep, helped Devi recalibrate the four main shield monitors, and then, last of all, double-checked the plant’s fuel gauge for accuracy.

“So I’m not imagining things,” said Devi, seeing his dismay. “Our usage has gone up another two percent.”

He tried hard to sound confident. “They have to start running low on ammunition soon. It’ll get better. Don’t worry.”

“If you say so,” she said wearily. “Anakin ...”

He knew what she was going to ask. The same question was in the eyes of every villager he came across. “Soon, Devi. I don’t know exactly, but they’ll be here soon.”

“I can’t tell if you believe that,” she said, after a moment. “Or if you only want to believe it. Or if you’re lying because you don’t know what else to say.”

“I’m not lying!” he snapped. “Help is coming. We just have to hold on a little longer, that’s all.”

She turned away, the servos on her antigrav harness grinding like broken bones. In silence they listened to the monotonous thud of blasterfire against the shield.

“I am holding on, Anakin,” she said at last. “As hard as I can. We all are. But ...”

“I know,” he said, almost whispering. “I’m sorry. Devi, let me look at your harness. The servos have slipped.”

“Fine,” she said, listless. “If you want to. I don’t care.”

So he fixed her harness, knowing that by morning the servos would have slipped again, worse than ever.

“Will you be all right here on your own for a while longer?” he said, tossing the mini hydrosponder back into the plant tool kit. “I want to check on Obi-Wan, make sure he’s not overdoing things.”

She shrugged. “Sure. I’ll comm you if there’s another crisis.”

When there was another crisis. The problem was that aside from him and Obi-Wan there wasn’t anyone to relieve her. Not now, with Rikkard dropped greensick. Anakin pressed his flesh-and-blood hand to her shoulder.

“I’ll come back as soon as I can.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “Anakin, you need to rest. Take an hour. Take two. If you go down greensick—if you go down for *any* reason—then it’s over for us. You do understand that, don’t you? Without you we *die*.”

Struck dumb, he stared at her. *Without you we die*. She was right, he knew she was right, but he’d never wanted to hear it said aloud.

“I’m sorry,” she said, and stood on unsteady tiptoe to kiss his cheek. No hint of flirting from her anymore, just a warm, sisterly affection. “I didn’t mean to make things harder. I’ll see you later. Don’t forget to eat.”

On his way to the village center he met up with Tarnik, and they compared notes. So far so good, still. The generators were holding. The old man promised to keep on doing rounds awhile longer.

“Get a bite and some shuteye, boy,” he said. “We need you.”

And if one more person reminded him ...

He didn't need to use the Force to find Obi-Wan. When his former Master wasn't in the power plant he was in the sick house, trying to ease the load on Teeba Sufi. Thanks to the toxic smoke from the burned refinery, more than half the people of Torbel were suffering greensickness even though they'd had a lifetime of swallowing their secret pill. Thanks to the Force, he and Obi-Wan were managing to avoid the malady. He didn't know whether to feel grateful or guilty for that.

Standing unnoticed in the sick house's open doorway, he took one look at Obi-Wan's face and cursed under his breath.

You fool. What are you doing?

Teeba Sufi glanced up from straightening one patient's blanket, saw him, and frowned. Then she looked over at Obi-Wan, who was seated beside a burdened cot oblivious to everything save the suffering man he was trying to help. Lips pursed, Sufi picked her way between the other cots to the door.

"Anakin," she said, pressing one hand to his forehead. It was her habit to test him for fever every time they met. He was used to it now. "Take your friend out of here. Get him into what passes for fresh air in Torbel these days. I don't want to see him again till morning, but since I know that won't happen, keep him away for at least an hour."

Nodding, Anakin looked again at the score of sickened villagers. "I'll do my best, Teeba. Is Rikkard here?"

"You heard?" With a sigh Sufi gestured to the crowded room's far corner. "I've put him with Arrad. Thanks to Obi-Wan, the boy's making progress. I think it does Rikkard good to hear his son's voice. If he can hear anything. He's gone down hard."

"How soon before you run out of your home remedy?"

"A day or two," she said heavily. "I stripped the herb field bare this afternoon. The last of it's brewing now, out back. I'm diluting it,

and portioning it into half measures. If I have to I'll drop that to quarter doses but what good it'll do us then, who can say?" Frowning again, she nodded at Obi-Wan. "I think he's doing us more good than the potion, but he's not going to last much longer than my herbs. Not even with Greti helping him—though I've put a stop to her for now. So you talk some sense into that man, Anakin. He'll not listen to me."

"I can't guarantee he'll listen to me, either," he said. "He's pretty stubborn, Sufi."

Thin arms folded, she pulled a wry face. "I'd noticed. Must be something they look for when they're choosing Jedi." And then she hesitated. Her smock-dress was baggy on her, draped in wrinkles and folds. She'd lost weight since the first time he saw her. "Anakin —"

And here we go again. He touched her hand, seeking to comfort. "Sufi, I've been fighting on the front lines since the war began. And if I've learned anything, it's that a battle can turn from lost to won in a heartbeat. But if you give up before the end? If you accept defeat as inevitable? You'll never live to see victory."

She sucked in her cheeks, staring at all her sick friends and neighbors. "I hope you're right. Now go away—and take your friend with you."

"Yes, Teeba," he said, and left her to brood.

So exhausted was Obi-Wan, coming out of his healing trance, that he didn't even realize a Jedi was standing practically on top of him. Anakin waited a minute, then risked taking hold of his shoulder.

"Obi-Wan. *Obi-Wan*. Come on. Let's go."

Startled, Obi-Wan looked up. "Anakin. The power plant? The shield generators?"

He dropped to a crouch. "They're holding. Don't worry. Come on. Sufi wants you out of here for a while."

“Anakin ...” Obi-Wan frowned. “You look dreadful.”

“You think so? Then do yourself a favor, Obi-Wan. Don’t go near a mirror.”

“Me? I’m fine,” Obi-Wan said vaguely. “But you should get some rest. And when was the last time you ate?”

Hooking a hand under Obi-Wan’s elbow, Anakin got them both on their feet. “Don’t remember. But if you want to nag me about it, you’ll have to do it outside.”

“In a minute,” said Obi-Wan, and looked down at his green-sick patient. “I just need to—”

“No, you don’t,” he insisted. “You’re relieved of duty, Master Kenobi. And that’s an order from General Sufi.”

On the other side of the sick room, as though she’d heard her name mentioned, Sufi turned, caught Obi-Wan’s eye and pointed silently at the open door. Her severe expression was like a shouted command.

“Oh,” said Obi-Wan. “Right. I see.”

Outside the sick house the fast-falling night was strobed with brilliant flashes of blasterfire, and the cool air shivered from the constant concussions. Standing on the front step, Obi-Wan stared across the village to the distant shield, still holding. Still protecting them.

“How long before it fails?” he asked, very quietly, so the villagers gathered on the square nearby wouldn’t hear him.

“I don’t know.” Anakin shoved his hands into his pockets. “You going to say *I told you so?*”

“I’m too tired,” said Obi-Wan. “Come on. Let’s eat.”

With the village’s food and water supplies so perilously low, Jaklin and Rikkard had declared that all meals would be cooked and served from a central location. A makeshift kitchen had been set up on the square, and teams of people cooked and cleaned there from

dawn till dusk each day. Tables and chairs had been hauled out of the cottages and arranged in a large outside dining area. With nearly all of Torbel's power being diverted to the shields, the food was cooked over open pits and the dining section lit with burning torches. Under different circumstances it might have felt festive.

This early, most of the diners were children. A few adults sat with them, helping the youngest and keeping order among the rest. Gazes lifted from plates, watching the Jedi make their way to the serving area. Anakin felt fear, bewilderment, uncertainty, hope—a tangle of raw emotion in each unblinking stare.

He could easily have staggered beneath the weight of their regard. *Should I have sided with Obi-Wan, and surrendered? Have I condemned all these younglings to death?* There was no point in having second thoughts, because there was no going back. Still, he couldn't help it. Every frightened face, every caught breath and tear reproached him.

There was still no sign of the droids' bombardment easing. *Blat ... blat ... boom ... blat ... boom ... boom ... boom ...*

"Don't listen to it," said Obi-Wan as they reached the serving area. "Don't think about it. We are where we are, Anakin. Best to focus on what we can do next, not what we've already done and can't change."

"That's easy for you to say," he muttered. "But I—"

"Teebs," Jaklin greeted them, looking up from her meager scramble of eggs. Like everyone in the village she was dirty and tired. "You want feeding?"

"Jaklin," said Obi-Wan, and reached across the bench to take her wrist between his fingers. "How are you? Any sign of greensickness?"

She pulled her wrist from his grasp. "No. Any sign of the help you promised?"

So bitter, she was. Having been overruled by her fellow villagers, by Rikkard's blind faith and his sense of obligation, she resented

every sacrifice Torbel was making because they hadn't given themselves up. Resented them for the nine funeral cremations the day after the droids' attack. Resented them most of all for Brandeh, her murdered friend.

"Not yet, but soon, I hope," said Obi-Wan, refusing to be baited. "Jaklin, you must come to the sick house if you start to feel unwell."

"I'm fine," she snapped, slopping eggs and a miserly portion of wilted greenstuff on a plate. "How's Rikkard?"

Obi-Wan took the plate she shoved at him, and then a chipped cup with its mean ration of water. "Like Arrad, he's holding his own."

"Not dying?" She partly filled a second plate, her chin trembling. "Word was he'd likely not make it to sunrise."

Anakin took his plate from her. "Don't let yourself get caught up in rumor, Teeba. If Obi-Wan says Arrad's not dying, then he's not."

She shoved her serving spoon back into the sloppy mess of scrambled eggs, poured him some water and thrust the cup in his face. "And why should I believe one word out of your mouths? With us trapped here like beetles, waiting to be squashed."

The other two women working service with her slowed their cleaning to listen. Anakin opened his mouth to answer hotly, tired of her hostility, but Obi-Wan nudged him silent.

"We understand your anger, Jaklin," he said, his voice cracked with weariness and strain. "Nothing has worked out the way we wanted it to."

Her eyes were dulled by too much fear and not enough sleep. "How much longer?" Her voice was a fierce whisper. "You said if it came to it, you'd hand yourselves over. How much longer must we suffer before you do the right thing?"

"Jaklin—"

“I’m the only leader now. With Rikkard greensick the weight bears down on me. And I give you Jedi fair warning—if the help you promised isn’t here within a day then I’ll see you’ll make good on your word. You’ll give yourselves up.”

“Teeba,” said Obi-Wan. “We hear you.”

As they retreated to eat their insufficient meal, Anakin looked at him. “How soon before you can get Rikkard back on his feet? Because she wasn’t joking, Obi-Wan. She’ll throw us to those droids, and then what?”

“Rikkard’s very ill,” said Obi-Wan, heading slantways across the square, away from the dining area and back to the street. “It might be days before he’s well enough to think about us.”

“Obi-Wan, you heard her! We don’t have days!”

Obi-Wan shrugged. “Anakin, we don’t have days regardless of what Jaklin decides.”

It was true. Though every mouthful was rationed, Torbel’s food supplies were rapidly dwindling. The water pump had been damaged so badly not even he could repair it. The sick and wounded were barely holding their own. And they were burning through the stockpiled liquid damotite so fast he almost didn’t dare look at the capacity gauges.

It’s a miracle the villagers have remained this calm. But I don’t think it’ll be long before they start to panic. And when they do ...

“You think we should give up?”

“Not yet,” said Obi-Wan, after a moment.

“Then what do you want to do?”

For safety’s sake two battery-powered lights marked the street corner. Obi-Wan stopped, then lowered himself onto the front step of the nearest dark, empty building.

“Let’s just eat, shall we? The food’s marginally better when it’s not stone-cold.”

Which might be true, but it wasn't saying much. Nothing short of a miracle was going to make Jaklin's dreadful eggs palatable. Anakin eyed the scrambled mess with acute dislike, then forked up a mouthful and swallowed it, gagging.

"You know, I'd almost be willing to give myself up right now if it meant never having to eat this *ootlish* again."

Obi-Wan chuckled. "Trust me, Anakin. You haven't suffered until you've eaten raw gundark."

"You *never* ate raw gundark!"

"Are you calling me a liar?"

"Well—no, of course not, but—Obi-Wan, *nobody* eats raw gundark."

"Not twice, at any rate," said Obi-Wan, sardonic. "And it wasn't by choice the first time, I promise you." He laughed outright, the memory easing the shadowed tension in his face—but then he started coughing. Even after drinking his water ration, it was a long time before he stopped.

Anakin offered his own water, but the cup was waved away. "Look," he said, after a moment. "You can't keep on like this, Obi-Wan. What you're doing? Spending hours helping Devi at the power plant and then more hours in the sick house? Even with that little girl helping, it's killing you."

"I do what I must," said Obi-Wan, and forced down another mouthful of food. "These people are sick and I can help them and that's the end of it."

"No, it isn't," he retorted. "Obi-Wan, *why* are you—" And then he realized. *Stang*. "This isn't your fault. It's mine. I pushed to stay in Torbel. I made promises I couldn't keep. You have to stop punishing yourself for my decisions."

"Punishing myself," Obi-Wan muttered, looking away. "What nonsense, Anakin."

He put his almost-emptied plate to one side on the step. “Then what is going on? You’re the one who’s always telling me to slow down, be sensible, conserve my strength for the long haul in a mission. And *look* at you. Your hands are shaking. Your pulse is racing. I’m not a healer and I can feel your headache!”

Obi-Wan turned on him. “Are you saying I should let these people die simply to spare myself some trifling discomfort? I am a Jedi. I have the power to help them and so I *must* help them. I cannot—I *will* not—stand by and watch them suffer. I won’t prove our critics right!”

“Critics?” Anakin said, baffled. “What critics? What are you talking about?”

For a long time Obi-Wan sat in silence. The *boom boom blat* of the droids’ bombardment continued. Permanently tuned to the vagaries of the vulnerable shield, Anakin listened for a change in its subliminal hum, a sign that one or more of the generators was struggling. But no, his frantic patchwork repairs still held. And they would keep on holding. They *had* to.

At last Obi-Wan sighed, and put down his own plate. “It’s something Bail said once. On the way to Zigoola. He was angry because I’d been so perfectly healed after that terrorist blast, when others who were injured languished in medcenters, many of them maimed. He wanted to know why the Jedi healed themselves first and left others to linger.”

“So this is Organa’s fault?” he said, incredulous. “Obi-Wan, come on. Don’t fall for that. He didn’t even *know* you then. He didn’t know anything about the Jedi. He still doesn’t, not really. And now you’re going to—”

Obi-Wan lightly slapped his knee. “Peace, Anakin. He had a point. This war has taught me that we Jedi have allowed ourselves to become too detached. Too distant from the Republic we’re sworn to serve. Look at how suspicious these people of Torbel were of us.

And still are. You've said it yourself, more than once. We've lost the common touch."

"Yeah, well, it can stay lost if it means you don't try to kill yourself healing people," he retorted. "And I'm telling you, it has to stop. Tonight. Because we both know you can't take any more."

"Anakin—" Obi-Wan shook his head. "I will take as much as I need to take. I have to, if for no other reason than to get your ally Rikkard back on his feet."

There was the merest hint of acid in that remark. Anakin rubbed his hands over his face, feeling the thickened stubble, the dried sweat, the gritty dirt. With his eyes covered, the bombardment's *boom boom blat* sounded louder than ever. And even with them covered he could still see the bright flashes of plasma impacting the shield.

This is my doing. I've been wrong every step of the way. And now it's too late to make up for any of it.

"So," he said, when he could trust his voice. "I guess you were right after all. I guess I *am* dangerous."

"Dangerous?" said Obi-Wan blankly. "What are you talking about?"

"You don't remember?" He shrugged. "Well. It was a long time ago."

Coruscant at night, awash with brilliant color. A landing platform crowded with the Queen of Naboo's starship, busy with staff and droids, humming with tension. Young and alone, he was missing his mother so badly, was so *angry* because the Jedi Council had smashed his dreams to dust. His only hope was Qui-Gon, tall and strong and somehow elemental—a shield and a shelter and a newfound friend. Not like Obi-Wan. He'd been young, then. Impatient, sharp-tongued, and just as angry—because Qui-Gon had said he wanted to train one small, strange boy.

"The boy is dangerous. They all sense it. Why can't you?"

Anakin shivered, remembering. And then the puzzlement in Obi-Wan's face faded, replaced with a dawning realization as he remembered too. "Oh," he said. "Oh, Anakin ..."

There was shame in Obi-Wan's voice. Regret. And shock, to think his fleeting anger, his thoughtless words, could have left such an indelible impression.

But they did, Master Kenobi. They really did. And now I can't help wondering ... were you right, after all?

"Anakin," said Obi-Wan intently. "Listen to me. *I was wrong*. In that moment I was hurt, I was angry." He swallowed. "Anakin, I was jealous."

Some part of him had always known that. Even as a child, abandoned to the care of an astromech droid on that landing platform, he'd felt those hot, roiling emotions in Qui-Gon's quicksilver apprentice. Even when he'd been too young to understand everything, he'd always understood how other people were feeling. That was just another part of being a Jedi. The Chosen One. The boy who grew up as something more than a boy.

And now, years later, stranded on a planet staring death—or worse—in the face, that boy was a man and the quicksilver apprentice was the man's former Master. His friend. His brother. His comrade-in-arms.

Strange times.

Anakin shook his head. "Forget it. I never should've brought it up."

"But you did bring it up," said Obi-Wan. "Anakin, you are *not* dangerous and you are *not* responsible for the trouble we're in now. If there's a finger to be pointed, let it be pointed at me. I'm older than you, I'm more experienced, and at any given moment I could've pulled the plug on this mission. But I didn't."

Anakin, you are not dangerous. It warmed him, to hear the words, to hear the sincerity in Obi-Wan's tired voice, and see it in his tired

face.

But if he knew about Tatooine, and what really happened with my mother. About Padmé. About how I feel sometimes when the Force turns scarlet and bursts through me like hot blood. If he knew all that, what would he say?

He didn't know. He never wanted to find out.

Burying those thoughts before Obi-Wan could sense them, he cleared his throat. "So why didn't you pull the plug?"

"Because I wanted you to be right," Obi-Wan said after a long silence. "I wanted to give you the chance to prove me wrong, for once." He ran a hand down his face. "We call you the Chosen One but we don't often give you the chance to prove it, do we?"

"Yeah, well ..." He had to clear his throat, and blink hard to unblur his vision. "I haven't exactly proven it this time."

Blat ... blat ... boom ... blat ... boom ... boom ... boom ... and the night sky beyond the fragile shield burned like a dying sun.

"Oh, I don't know," said Obi-Wan, very gently. "We're not dead yet, Anakin. And that means—"

The Force's spurring was blunted, but they both felt it. Something was wrong. Something was—

"There!" said Obi-Wan, pointing across the square. His hand was unsteady. "What shield sector is that? Four? Five?"

Anakin squinted through the shadows. "Four. *Stang*. I thought I'd fixed it. I thought—"

"Never mind what you thought," said Obi-Wan, pushing to his feet. "Come on. There's not much time."

None of the villagers had noticed the tiny flutter in the shield that meant its particle beam was losing integrity. And Durd's droids hadn't noticed, either; they were still merrily blasting away. But they would see it, any moment now, and then they'd bring all their blasterfire to bear on that one vulnerable section.

It didn't matter that running hurt, that they were gasping as much as breathing. Matching Obi-Wan stride for stride, Anakin heard his comlink crackle and dragged it out of his pocket.

"Anakin! Generator Four, it's—"

"I know, Devi!" he said, stumbling in the dark and the dirt, pounding the pitted ferrocrete as he and Obi-Wan raced down the road. "We're on it. Nurse the power feed to that generator. Whatever you do, don't let it surge!"

"I'll try," she said, her voice frightened. *"Anakin, hurry. It'll go offline any minute!"*

Every footstep drove a spear of pain through his spine. He felt his own pain, he felt Obi-Wan's. It couldn't matter. They had no hope of Force-sprinting, all they could do was run. So they ran, panting and desperate.

Reaching the generator, they staggered to a halt and clutched at each other to stop themselves from falling. To save time in an emergency, every shield generator had its own hastily rigged tool kit. While Anakin wrenched open the shield's housing, Obi-Wan opened the kit and upended it onto the grass. Overhead, the faltering section of shield began to hum a discordant tune, loud enough for the nearest droids to hear it.

"Oh, *stang*," Anakin said, the air rasping raw in his throat. "Stay back, you barves. There's nothing to see here."

Too late. Programmed with their holoimages, with orders to capture, not kill, the droids had seen their quarry and the sparking agitation in the shield.

He stared at Obi-Wan, and Obi-Wan stared back.

"Master, do you trust me?"

Speechless, Obi-Wan nodded.

"Then do exactly what I tell you, when I tell you, no questions. On three. One—two—*three*—"

There was no time for explanations. There was barely time to breathe. Plunged into that otherplace where a machine was a living thing and it spoke to him in whispers, Anakin sank himself into the generator's mechanical heart and let it tell him what was wrong. What to do. Faster than thought, faster than feeling, fueled by the Force, he surrendered himself and became one with the machine. He felt his lips move, barking orders that Obi-Wan immediately obeyed, but he couldn't hear what he was saying. He couldn't see what he was doing. He was somebody—something—else. A fusion of man and machine.

On the other side of the faltering shield Durd's droids were firing without pause. He could feel the blooming plasma like lava in his veins, scalding him and scorching him and melting his bones. It didn't matter. He wasn't flesh anymore, so he couldn't burn.

A shower of sparks. A surge of power. A shuddering in the Force. And then the generator stopped flickering and the storm shield firmed.

Thwarted, Durd's droids lowered their blasters.

Someone was sobbing. After a moment, Anakin realized *Oh. That's me*. And then his knees were buckling and he was heading for the ground.

Obi-Wan caught him. "It's all right. I've got you."

He let Obi-Wan take his full weight because he was too tired not to. Everything hurt, even his stub of an arm.

And then he cried out, and Obi-Wan cried out, because between labored heartbeats they felt a fresh surge through the Force.

There were Jedi high above them. Help had come, at last.

SEVENTEEN



STANDING ON *INDOMITABLE'S* *bridge*, MACE WINDU SPAT A string of curses, not one in a language Ahsoka could recognize or understand. But that didn't matter—their meaning was perfectly clear. And if she'd been alone, or belowdecks with Rex and the others, and could still see what she was seeing, well ... *I'd be cursing, too.*

Lanteeb was blockaded, the entire planet belted by Separatist warships. And the buckle on that belt? General Grievous's massive cruiser.

Admiral Yularen, hands clasped behind his back, frowned through his bridge's transparisteel viewport. "Well. I certainly wasn't expecting that."

"No," said Master Windu, his voice very tight. "Neither was I."

Yularen's stare slid sideways. "They knew we were coming. Which means—"

"I know what it means," said Master Windu. "I need a priority scrambled channel back to the Jedi Temple."

"Lieutenant Avrey," said the admiral, over his shoulder.

"You heard Master Windu."

"Coming right up, sir," she replied.

Tearing her gaze from the gut-punching sight of all those Sep warships just sitting there, waiting for them, Ahsoka looked around the bridge. This was such a fine crew—not one of their faces betrayed an inappropriate emotion. But she could feel their frustration and their alarm, shrill in the Force.

And who can blame them? We've got four ships in this battle group and we're looking at more than twenty-five against us.

She turned back to the viewport and tried to see past the blockade to the planet Grievous and his massive battle group were defending. Lanteeb. It was a nothing place, drab and brown and devoid of interest. Well, almost devoid.

I can feel him. I can. It's not my imagination.

Master Windu glanced down at her. "Padawan?"

He made her nervous in a way no other Jedi did, not even Master Yoda. His presence in the Force was breathtaking. Standing beside him was like being buffeted by a gale—and he wasn't even trying. He was just breathing, just being himself. What it felt like to be near Mace Windu when he *exerted* himself? That was something she wasn't sure she ever wanted to experience.

"Master—" Her mouth was dry. She swallowed, trying to calm her thudding heart. "He's down there. Master Skywalker. I can feel him. Not strongly. It's just a whisper. But he's there."

"I know," said Master Windu. With his first blinding flash of fury controlled he was quiet again, completely self-contained. "They're both there. Somewhere. And they're in trouble."

Oh. She'd been hoping she *had* imagined that.

"Master Windu?" said Lieutenant Avrey, behind them. "I have the Jedi Temple on priority scramble for you."

"Thank you," said Master Windu, and crossed to the communication console. Taking the patched-in comlink from her, he raised it to his lips and looked back at the blockade. "This is Mace Windu. Get me Master Yoda. Now."

As Master Windu explained the situation, Ahsoka closed her eyes and sank more deeply into the Force. If she tried hard enough maybe, just maybe, she could make contact with Skyguy. Mind-touch over this kind of distance was practically unheard of, but she

had felt his presence. That had to mean something. And they had a special connection, she and her Master. So if she focused harder and tighter than she ever had before, if she imagined herself a laser and sent her mind searing through space toward him ...

Master. Skyguy. Anakin. I'm here.

She heard her heartbeat, thundering. Felt sweat break on her brow. Her skin started to crawl with the effort of reaching him, and pain built to a crescendo behind her closed eyes.

Master, it's me. Ahsoka. Please, let me know you're all right.

There was no answer, only that faintest of faint whispers. A teasing tickle that told her *Yes. He's alive.*

Gasping, abruptly unsteady on her own two feet, she broke free of the Force. Master Windu was still talking to Yoda.

“—right. Then unless we're directly engaged we'll hold fire until I hear from you. But don't make us wait too long. And if they try to get past us with more of that bioweapon—then I won't hold back. Windu out.”

Lieutenant Avrey closed down the scrambled channel, then turned to Admiral Yularen. “Good news, sir. They tried to jam our signal four times, but our countermeasure upgrade stopped them.”

“Excellent,” said Yularen, permitting himself a small, satisfied smile. “Let *Pioneer* and *Coruscant Sky* know. But they'll keep on trying, so stay on your toes.”

Master Windu turned. “I want ship-to-ship. I think a warning shot across Grievous's bow wouldn't go astray.”

“You're sure?” said the admiral. “Why not let him sweat awhile? Push him into making the first move.”

“Right now we're outnumbered more than five starships to one,” said Master Windu. “I doubt he's sweating much, Admiral.” He showed his teeth in a fierce smile. “But he might get a little uneasy

once he realizes who he's up against. At the very least I'll give him something to think about, and that'll buy us a little time."

"For what?" Yularen asked quietly. "Do you really think Strategic Command's going to send us more ships? With seven major battlefronts actively engaged and eleven cruisers still disabled with this comm virus?"

Master Windu's expression was grim. "They might not want to, but they don't have a choice. Not if they want to avoid more Chandrilas. Besides—that's Grievous standing in our way. Our highest priority is taking him out. Lanteeb's as good a place as any to get the job done."

"Master Windu, far be it for me to dictate to a Jedi of your experience, but truly—" The admiral stepped closer. "I think it would be best to hold our fire a while longer. Get him thinking. Throw him off balance, if only a little bit. We can't make threats we're not in a position to carry out. I strongly suggest we wait until we know what kind of reinforcements we can expect. Any way you look at it, this is going to be one dirty, brutal fight—but I'd prefer to know exactly *how* dirty and brutal before I poke a stick in this Bizikian hornets' nest."

Master Windu thought for a moment, then nodded. "I'll split the difference with you, Admiral. One standard hour. Master Yoda will have an answer for us within that time." His eyes narrowed. "And then we'll get down to a little stick poking."

Ahsoka stood a little straighter. "Master Windu?"

"Padawan?"

"I'd like to tell Captain Rex what's going on."

For a moment she thought he'd deny her permission—but then he nodded. "Very well. You can brief the Five Hundred First. Leave the other companies to me."

"And after that, Master, I—I'd like to meditate."

His eyebrows lifted. “Meditate?”

There was no fooling this man. Not that she’d even try, of course. Uncomfortably aware that Yularen and the other bridge officers were within earshot, she clasped her hands behind her back. Not defiant. Never that. Just ... determined.

“Master, I know it’s a long shot, but I want to see if I can reach Master Skywalker.”

“You’re right,” said Master Windu. “That is a very long shot, Padawan. But I won’t tell you not to try. Stranger things have happened—and we’ve got an hour to sit here with nothing better to do.”

She did try to keep the excitement from her face and voice, but she wasn’t sure she succeeded. Still—nothing in Master Windu’s expression suggested he was displeased.

“Thank you, Master. Once I’ve spoken with Rex I’ll be in my quarters, if you need me for anything.”

He nodded, dismissing her, and she left the bridge to go belowdecks, where Rex and the rest of the 501st were geared up and ready for a fight.

Don’t worry, Anakin. We’re here and we’re not going anywhere. Not until we’ve got you and Master Kenobi off that planet.

LOK DURD SAT behind his office desk, bloated with a malignant satisfaction. On the desk sat a compact holoimager, running a selection of HoloNet News reports on the aftermath of Chandrila. With wet, shining eyes he watched the unspeakable images, the uproar in the Senate, the Supreme Chancellor’s pleas for patience and courage. Every now and then he chortled, and bounced a little in his chair.

“You see, Doctor? You see? I was right!” he gloated. “With one small blow I have struck terror into the rotten heart of the Republic. One more blow and I’ll have it on its knees. Yet again I prove myself indispensable to Count Dooku. Single-handedly I will win this war

for him and he will shower me with riches the likes of which have never been seen!”

Staring at the flickering holorecording, Bant’ena couldn’t tell if her heart was beating or if the dry office air moved in and out of her lungs. She felt disconnected from the world around her. Inhuman. As though someone had transformed her from woman to droid.

I did this. Look at all the people I killed.

Master Kenobi was right. She’d put the lives of her family, her friends, before everything—before her conscience and her ethics, before the oath she’d sworn as a scientist. Now thousands of lives were destroyed as a result and the Republic teetered on the brink of chaos.

I did this. It’s my fault.

“I’m sorry, General,” she said abruptly, standing. “I require the fresher. Might I be excused?”

He barely glanced up from enjoying the horror show she’d helped him create. “Be quick. We have things to discuss. I want to refine the weapon’s formula. There won’t be time to use the new mix on Bespin, but—”

His office tip-tilted around her. “Bespin? You’re attacking Bespin next?”

He chortled again, so *pleased* with himself. “Within the next few days. As soon as the Republic starts to relax. Ingenious, aren’t I? The Republic’s scrambling to protect the rest of the Core Worlds. It’s the perfect opportunity to disrupt the Tibanna gas market. When Count Dooku sees how much I’ve hurt the Republic my position will be unassailable.” Pleasure vanishing, he scowled. “No more doubting my judgment. No more questioning my expertise.”

Bant’ena’s belly heaved. “I’m sorry. Please excuse me.”

“Don’t be long,” Durd snapped. “Kay-Dee Seventy-seven, go with her.”

Forced to keep pace with his hated personal droid, which daily tormented her with holoimages of her family, she barely made it to the refresher before her stomach turned itself inside out. On her knees and running with sweat, she emptied herself of food and bile, then slumped shivering to the cold, tiled floor.

At least she had only KD-77 as a witness. Durd had dispensed with her battle droid escort; he'd needed the machines to send after the Jedi. In fact he'd stripped the compound of battle droids—but it hadn't done him any good. Wherever Anakin and Master Kenobi were now, somehow they were managing to hold Durd's forces at bay. She'd heard the Neimoidian screaming at Colonel Barev, demanding to know why the Jedi were still at large. Barev had said something about not alerting the wrong people to the fact there was a siege, that they couldn't ship in more droids and heavier weapons for fear of awkward questions being asked. He'd told Durd to be patient, promising that the village couldn't hold out much longer.

But she refused to believe it. If anyone could beat Durd, it was Anakin and Master Kenobi.

For one moment she'd thought the withdrawal of the compound's battle droid contingent might give her a chance to escape this new compound—but no. Durd fitted her with a slave collar. The blasted thing was the wrong size—her neck was chafed, her skin rubbed bloody over her collarbones. Durd didn't care. He had more important things to worry about, like orchestrating another mass murder.

The filthy device was plugged into her spinal cord. If she crossed the compound's boundary, or tried to take the collar off, it would drop her to the ground, paralyzed. He'd demonstrated that once, and she'd been left drooling for two hours.

To make things worse, it also had a punishment component. If she said the wrong thing, if she was too slow or didn't grovel enough or displeased Durd in any way, he pressed a remote device and the collar surged pain through her body. Not enough to cripple her; she

was still too useful. But it made her weep, and he enjoyed that. Denying him pleasure was the only act of rebellion she had left.

Durd's droid buzzed a warning. "Time's up."

Feeling faint, Bant'ena struggled to her feet. With her face washed and her mouth rinsed, hollow and despairing, she returned to Durd's office. The Neimoidian had dispensed with the news footage from Chandrila and was now gazing raptly at a holoid image of the bioweapon's molecular structure. A fresh wave of nausea struck her as she stared at its elegant, lethal simplicity.

It was her greatest work. Her finest achievement. And the only thing she hated more than her creation was herself, for creating it.

I was wrong. I should've let them all die, even my mother. How many mothers are dead now, because of me?

Durd glanced at her. "Well, Doctor, don't just stand there. Sit down."

She sat, mechanically, as the droid retreated to its customary place in the corner.

"We know from Chandrila," Durd said, tapping the holoimager, "that the weapon's dispersal rate is too slow. Its gaseous form is too heavy. Now, that won't matter on Bespin because it's a sealed environment. But it is important for our next outdoor target. So, Doctor, we need to reduce the weapon's weight so that even the slightest breeze can—"

Interrupted by a comm signal, he cursed and answered it.

"What, Barev? I'm busy!"

Though it was only a voice comm, Barev's alarm was unmistakable. "*The Republic's sent cruisers to break Grievous's blockade! Lanteeb's under siege, Durd.*"

Lok Durd leapt to his feet. "What? What? How is that possible?"

"Your missing Jedi must've called to the Republic for help!"

“How could they, you idiot? They’re in the middle of nowhere!” Durd slammed his fist to the desk. “Barev, this is your doing! That psychic seeker of yours—I told you we should’ve kept it here under guard until this was over. But no, you insisted we let it leave. That Drivok’s talked—sold us out to the Republic for more money! You never should’ve—”

“Don’t blame this on me, you fat fool! This disaster is entirely your doing!”

“Fat fool? *Fat fool?*” Gasping, Durd thumped his fist to the desk. “How *dare* you?”

“No, *General*, how dare you—”

“Enough!” Durd shouted. “This disaster you’ve created must be dealt with at once. My entire bioweapon strategy hangs in the balance! Where are you?”

“Where do you think? In the spaceport security complex.”

“Then stay there. I want to see this blockade for myself. I want to speak with General Grievous. I must make him understand his duty to protect me. *Stay there*, Barev. I’m coming to you now.”

With enormous effort Bant’ena kept her face blank. If Durd so much as caught a *hint* of the elation coursing through her, he’d lose himself to fury and kill her on the spot.

Spittled with rage, he turned on her. “You’re as much to blame as Barev for this calamity! When the emergency’s over and those Republic ships are scrap metal in the sky I am going to punish you, Doctor. I am going to kill those nephews of yours!”

Snatching up the collar’s remote, he stabbed at its control button. Bant’ena cried out and fell from her chair to the floor, flailing and grunting.

“You want to save the puling little bloodsacs?” Durd demanded, and threw the remote onto his desk. “Then get back to your lab and

find me a way to improve the weapon's dispersal rate! Do it in the next hour and I *might* spare their lives!"

She'd bitten her tongue. Head spinning with pain, her mouth full of iron and salt, she dragged herself to her feet. "Yes, General."

Durd thrashed his way out from behind his desk, flung open his office door, then seized her arm and shoved her into the deserted corridor beyond.

"What are you waiting for? *Go!* Kay-Dee Seventy-seven? With me!"

Unsteady, she started down the corridor, listening to him rampage away in the opposite direction, toward the compound's main entrance. The droid clanked along behind him. Her body still hummed with pain, and fresh blood trickled from the raw wounds on her collarbone. Everything inside her was chaos.

The Republic's here. That means the Jedi are here. So if I can stall Durd, maybe I can buy us all some time. Except there's Bepin—they need to know it's the next target. Think, woman, think. There's got to be a way to let them know.

Stopping, she looked back down the corridor. It was still empty. And Durd ... in his anger the Neimoidian had left his office door wide open, which meant his comm console was free for the using. The careless barve never bothered to secure it.

Oh, but I can't. I can't. If I'm caught he'll kill everyone I love.

Moaning, she turned her face to the corridor wall. Behind her closed eyes she saw Samsam's limp body plummeting out of the sky. Imagined her nephews, murdered.

And then she straightened.

Fhernan, you're a fool. He'll probably kill them anyway. And if he doesn't kill them, he'll kill thousands of other children. Thousands more children. Master Kenobi was right—and you cannot make the same mistake twice.

Trembling, she returned to Durd's office.

His unsecured comm console had three separate comlink channels, each one with enough power to punch all the way through to the Republic. She wasn't a communications expert, but a lifetime of fieldwork had made her handy enough. She set the unit to auto signal-wipe, nonrecording mode, engaged its scrambler and coded in her mother's private comlink frequency.

Come on, Mother. Answer me. Whatever you're doing—sleeping or eating or bathing or shopping—stop it and answer me. For once in my life I want to hear the sound of your voice.

Nothing. She felt sick again.

"Mata Fhernan."

Bant'ena collapsed across Durd's desk, bones and muscle turned to water. "Mother? Mother, it's me."

"Benti? Benti, the goddess be praised?"

Oh, it was her mother. Not dead but rescued. Her mother, a woman she loved but sometimes found so hard to like. Garrulous and querulous and overdramatic, never satisfied, always pushing.

"Mother, listen," she said, trying to keep her voice steady. "Is it true the Jedi saved you?"

"Yes. Benti—"

She felt a rush of shamed relief. *I should've had more faith.* "Mother, be quiet! And record me. I don't have time to say this twice."

"All right," her mother said. She sounded weak with shock, too. *"I'm recording."*

"Tell the Jedi that Bespin is the next target. Tell them Anakin and Obi-Wan are still alive and need their help. Tell them the weapon is at the coordinates I'm calling from. They have to destroy the compound. Mother, I'm—"

“Benti, everyone’s safe!” her mother said, close to shouting. “The Jedi rescued all of us. Well, except for Samsam. I’m so sorry. Benti, are you there? Benti—”

And now she was neither woman nor droid, but a vast, aching emptiness. A universe of nothing.

They’re safe? So those holoimages Durd’s droid shows me—they’re not true. It’s all a lie. I’ve been controlled by a lie. Anakin, forgive me.

“Mother, I have to go,” she said faintly. “Tell everyone I’m sorry and I love them. Mother, I love you.”

“Benti—Benti—”

She disconnected the comlink. Took a moment, just a moment, to press her hands flat to her face and hold back the dreadful wail of grief building in her throat. And then, when she could trust herself, she double-checked Durd’s comm unit, making sure there was no trace of her outbound comm.

They’re safe. They’re all safe. And that means I’m free.

The corridor outside Durd’s office remained empty. She looked both ways once more, then ran for her lab as though a droid army was chasing her.

“BESPIN?” SAID PALPATINE, his holoimage gently shimmering. He was on his private yacht, on his way to Chandrila in an effort to shore up plunging Core World morale. “Master Yoda, are you sure?”

Seated in his Council Chamber chair, Yoda nodded. “Quite sure I am, Supreme Chancellor. Impeccable is the source of this intelligence.”

“I see,” said Palpatine, then clasped his hands on his desk. “Then I’m afraid I have no choice but to disappoint you, Master Yoda, Senators. Any ships we have to spare must be sent to Bespin, not Lanteeb. A disruption to the Tibanna gas supply would be utterly catastrophic for the Republic.”

Standing to one side, Bail Organa exchanged a worried glance with Padmé. “Supreme Chancellor, I’m sorry, but I can’t agree. From what we’ve been able to ascertain so far from the Chandrila investigation, if Beshin is the next target for a bioweapon attack then not even Republic Cruisers will be able to stop it. A team of agents and bioweapon experts will prove far more effective than—”

“By all means, Senator, send in your people,” said Palpatine, his voice edged like a vibroblade. *“We must take every step possible to prevent a second attack. But I also want a battle group deployed to that region.”*

“Supreme Chancellor, please—” Padmé began, but fell silent as Palpatine unclasped his hands and raised them, sharply.

“Enough!” he snapped. *“Must I remind you all how badly destabilized the Republic is at this moment? Because of your failure to prevent the tragedy on Chandrila, confidence in this administration has never been so low—and thanks to your secretive and high-handed handling of the situation my confidence in you has been sorely tested. So I beg you, do not disappoint me further by arguing against my decision!”*

Bail bowed. “Of course not, Supreme Chancellor. We’ll inform Fleet of your request, and I’ll dispatch our best teams as well. We’ll do everything in our power to protect Beshin. Although—” He hesitated. “It might be in the community’s best interests if we order an evacuation.”

“And send a signal to the Republic and the Separatists that we’re unable to keep our citizens safe?” Palpatine demanded, incredulous. *“I hardly think so, Senator Organa.”*

“I agree,” said Padmé. “We need to reassure people, not alarm them. But Supreme Chancellor, what about Lanteeb? It has to be wrested from Separatist control. Not only is it the source of this bioweapon, but the Jedi to whom you and I owe so much remain trapped there. We can’t abandon them.”

“My dear Senator, they are not abandoned,” Palpatine retorted. *“Indeed, with Master Windu’s unauthorized addition to Admiral*

Yularen's battle group, their welfare has been rated more important than the entire Bothan and Kothlis spynet operation. If that's not an indication of my regard for them, I'm not sure how I could go about convincing you."

Yoda caught Padmé's eye and lifted a cautioning hand. She nodded, and stepped back. "Supreme Chancellor," he said, "accept your decision in this matter we do. Intend to usurp your authority we do not."

"Really?" Palpatine frowned. *"I must say, Master Yoda, you and your fellow Councilors have an odd way of showing it."*

He didn't need the Force to show him the depth of Palpatine's displeasure. But it couldn't be helped. Mace Windu was right: no politician could be allowed to interfere with the Order's ability to protect its own people. Not even in wartime.

"Supreme Chancellor," said Bail. "There may be another way to support the Lanteeb battle group. One that doesn't involve compromising Bepin. Will you trust me to explore it?"

Sighing, Palpatine lowered his gaze to his desk. *"Bail, Bail, Bail ..."* He looked up again. *"Yes. Of course I'll trust you. That bioweapon must be eliminated. And of course I want Anakin and Master Kenobi rescued. I fear dreadfully for their safety. On that score you have my unwavering support."*

"But no more star cruisers," Bail muttered once the hololink was severed. "I can't fathom his reasoning. Surely a swift resolution to the standoff at Lanteeb is in everyone's best interests."

"Don't be so hard on him, Bail," said Padmé. "Every government in the Republic is looking to him for solace, waiting for him to promise that their planet won't be the next Chandrila. It's our job to support him, not criticize and second-guess him."

Watching the two friends glare at each other, Yoda cleared his throat. "Senators—mistaken am I that news for me you have? Something to do with Lanteeb, I think?"

“Sorry, Master Yoda,” said Bail. “Yes. Padmé and I have come up with a plan we think could work.”

He listened in silence as the two Senators explained their idea of forming an emergency civilian fleet to augment the Republic’s Lanteeb battle group.

“The only problem,” said Padmé, frowning, “is that while we’ve got in-principle support from several governments and corporations, nobody’s willing to commit even one ship. They’re all terrified of provoking a reprisal bioweapon attack on their own planets and people.”

“From what Master Windu’s reported,” Bail added, “it’s clear we can’t break Grievous’s blockade without more ships. And we can’t get more ships without being able to promise those who send them that they’ll be safe.”

“Can you help, Master Yoda?” said Padmé. “Bail says Doctor Netzl can’t find the missing link to create a workable antidote, and that means there’ll be no civilian aid for the battle group. And with the Supreme Chancellor so adamantly against redeploying any more Republic cruisers ...” Her breath caught. “I don’t see how we’re going to get Anakin and Obi-Wan off that planet. Or stop Durd and Dooku from launching any more attacks. Can you think of a way to break our deadlock?”

Yoda stroked his chin. It was interesting that she placed the safety of her Jedi friends before the welfare of the entire Republic. It wasn’t what he expected from her. When it came to Obi-Wan and young Skywalker it was clear that Senator Amidala’s emotions remained very much engaged.

A pity that is. pain only can it cause her.

“Solve Doctor Netzl’s dilemma I cannot,” he said slowly. “Promise these civilian interests that safe it is to help you I cannot. But an answer to Lanteeb? Hmm. Possess that I might. Senator Organa, your assistance would I need.”

Bail nodded. "It's yours."

Though he was weary and burdened with grave doubts, Yoda permitted himself a small smile. "But discreet we must be, Senator. If to succeed my plan is, its secrecy paramount must be. Access do you have to a captured Separatist ship?"

"I do, actually," Bail said, surprised. "An undercover operation near Kessel just netted us one of the Seps' older Techno Union ships. It's battered but flyable, and equipped with full Sep security pass codes."

"What do you have in mind, Master Yoda?" said Padmé. "Can you tell us?"

Sliding out of his chair, he began to pace the Council Chamber. The rapping of his gimer stick was loud in the silence. "Agree that with only four cruisers, break Grievous's blockade Master Windu and his troops cannot. But slide through it one small ship could, if Grievous believes an ally it is."

"You want to send another Jedi to Lanteeb?" said Bail. "Master Yoda—forgive my skepticism, but—"

"Changed the circumstances have," Yoda said, silencing him with a look. "Thanks to Doctor Fhernan, know the location of the bioweapon facility we do. Possible it is now to infiltrate and destroy Durd's compound."

"I'm sorry," said Padmé. "If we know where the facility is, then why aren't we launching a full-scale assault? Surely that was always the idea? I know it would mean civilian casualties, which we're trying to avoid, but if we don't destroy this weapon we'll have more civilian casualties than the Republic's seen in a thousand years. We should go back to Palpatine, *tell* him this, and—"

"An assault the plan was, when the element of surprise we had," Yoda said. "That advantage we have lost, Senator."

"He's right, Padmé," said Bail, turning to her. "In the time it would take the battle group to get past Grievous, you can bet Durd

would shift his location. Maybe even escape Lanteeb entirely, with enough stockpiled bioweapon to slaughter half the Republic. Our best hope now is a stealth job.”

“Anakin and Obi-Wan were meant to be a stealth job, and look how well *that* turned out!” she retorted. “Master Yoda, are you seriously suggesting we should trust this Bant’ena Fhernan? She’s already betrayed us once. What makes you think she won’t betray us again?”

Her concern was reasonable, but ... “Risk her life to tell us of Bepin she did, Senator. Need to do that she did not. Tell us that Obi-Wan and young Skywalker still live she did, and asked us to help them. Treacherous does that sound to you, hmm? Also, know now she does that saved by the Jedi were her family and friends. A reason to trust us she has, to repay that debt, wouldn’t you say?”

“I suppose so,” she muttered. “But what you’re proposing—it’s terribly risky.”

“Risky it is, yes,” he said gravely. “But our only chance it might be, to avert widespread disaster and save our two missing Jedi.”

Padmé exchanged looks with Bail, then nodded. “All right. Not that you need my permission, but all right. So Bail, while you’re working with Master Yoda on this new plan, I’ll keep pushing forward with the negotiations for a civilian fleet. Because if your friend Tryn has an epiphany in the next few hours we’re going to want those extra ships standing by just in case.”

Still slowly pacing, Yoda smiled at the floor. Did they know how the Force worked within them, these two brave Senators? Could they feel even a hint of it, as he felt it in full flood? He thought not.

“Agreed,” said Bail. “Only—” He was frowning again. “Master Yoda, are you going to tell Palpatine what we’re doing?”

Yoda stopped pacing. “Think that I should, do you?”

“I want to say yes,” said Bail. “But honestly ...”

“Need to know he does not, Senator,” he said firmly. “Jedi business this is. Jedi business also the liberation of Lanteeb is. Problems enough with Chandrila and the Senate does our Supreme Chancellor have. Pleased he will be when resolved this crisis is. Care not, that bothered with details he was not.” He smiled again, a little wickedly. “Besides—permission he gave you to pursue other solutions, did he not? Hmm?”

Bail almost smiled back. “Well. Yes. I suppose he did.” Then he looked to Padmé, worried that she would object. But if she had any reservations, she kept them to herself.

After escorting the Senators to Bail’s waiting speeder, Yoda went in search of Taria Damsin. He found her in an empty dojo, lightsaber training with a remote.

“A mission?” Her tawny eyes glowed like banked fires. “We’re going to rescue Obi-Wan and Anakin? Master Yoda, of course I’m in. You don’t even have to ask.”

“Rescue your primary objective will not be,” he said sternly. “Destruction of the bioweapon facility on Lanteeb your most important task is.”

“Oh,” she said. “Yes, Master. I understand.”

He searched her face. Searched the Force for any sense that she was the wrong person for this crucial undertaking. Sensing that, she dropped to her knees before him.

“Master Yoda, I swear on my oath as a Jedi. I can do this. I won’t let you down.”

A sudden flash of Force insight. Yes. She was the right person—a brilliant shadow. One of the best the Temple had ever known. She could do this, and she would not let him down. But the price she would pay ... the terrible price ...

“It doesn’t matter,” she said, seeing her future in his face. “Nothing matters but making a difference. Please, Master Yoda. Don’t change your mind. Not now.”

Sighing deeply, he closed his eyes and bowed his head. What did the Force want? How did it guide him? He waited, and waited ... and his answer came.

“Walk with me, Taria,” he said, full of grief to come. “And explain I will the details of your mission.”

EIGHTEEN



“*LIAR!*” SHOUTED TEEBA JAKLIN. “YOU’RE A LIAR, KENOBI! YOU and your friend. You mind-tricked us into believing we’d be safe and now look where we are—trapped and starving. And you expect us to trust you *again?*”

Returned with Anakin to the square, no matter where Obi-Wan looked he saw frightened, unfriendly faces. The handful of villagers who hadn’t fallen victim to greensickness crowded close around him and Anakin, their courage defeated by hunger and terror. Durd’s droid army was quiescent for the moment—but the strain of waiting for the bombardment to start again was almost as bad as enduring hour after hour of blasterfire.

Jaklin’s bloodshot eyes were full of tears. Shame and rage consumed her. She was shouting at him, but she blamed herself for every ill that had befallen her village, and nothing he could say or do would change that.

Nevertheless, he had to try.

“Jaklin, we’re not lying,” he said, willing her to believe him. “The help we hoped for *has* arrived. All we have to do is hold on a little longer. Our people will come.”

“*When?*” she demanded, as the other villagers shifted and jostled and muttered their disbelief. “And where are they?” Jeeringly she stabbed a pointed finger toward the ceiling of the storm shield. “Up there? In space? They can’t help us in *space*, Jedi. They can’t help us at all.”

“Jaklin, they can,” said Anakin. “I promise. Don’t give up hope now. We’re so close.”

“Yes, close to our deaths!” she spat. “Because Rikkard is a sentimental fool and I was a fool to let him sway me.”

Obi-Wan took a step toward her, his hands raised. “Teeba, please. Remember why we’re doing this—we want to stop Lok Durd. We want to prevent him from using his bioweapon against innocent people.”

“We’re innocent people,” she said, her glare savage. “When are you going to start caring about *us*?”

“He does care!” Anakin said angrily. “Would he be killing himself in your sick house, trying to heal the wounded and ill, if he didn’t? We *both* care, Jaklin. But giving up when we’re so close to winning? That’s crazy. That’s your fear talking, Teeba. You need to shut it up before it gets everyone killed.”

Obi-Wan heard more furious muttering from the crowd of villagers, felt a sharper edge of danger in the air. He touched Anakin’s arm, drawing him aside. “Don’t,” he said softly. “The ice is very thin. We tread lightly or we fall.”

Frustrated, Anakin nodded. “Fine. But if you’re going to negotiate us out of this, you’d better do it fast. I need to get back to the shield generators.”

The shield generators ... the power plant ... the ailing villagers in the sick house ... no matter where they turned there was a crisis demanding their attention.

Obi-Wan looked again at Jaklin. *Hear me. Please, you have to hear me.* “Teeba, I can’t tell you precisely what’s happening above Lanteeb right now. The Force hasn’t shown me. But I can tell you what I feel—what I *know*—to be true. There are Jedi trying to help us, but the Separatists are blocking them. That’s why they’re not here yet.”

“Then what *good* are they?” cried Jaklin, rousing her fellow villagers to loud agreement. “They might as well have stayed at home!”

“Jaklin—” Gently, he took her by the shoulders. “I have been fighting this war since before it officially began. In these past months I have watched more friends die than I thought was possible and I have seen atrocities you can’t even imagine. For every life I’ve saved, I’ve failed to save another. We’re trapped in a nightmare and there are days, so many days, when I think I’ll never wake. But—”

She shook free of him, trembling. “Torbel’s nightmare is of *your* making, Jedi. You came here. You brought this terror to us. And now—”

“And now Anakin and I are doing our best to save you from it,” he said. “But we can’t do it alone. Jaklin, I’m not lying.” Looking at the close-pressed circle of frightened villagers surrounding them, he raised his voice. “I swear to you, on my life: *I am not lying*. Help has come to Lanteeb and it will come to Torbel just as soon as it can.”

“And if it’s not soon enough?” said Jaklin, lifting her own voice above the murmurs and soft sobs in the crowd. Despair was a muffling shroud, threatening to smother them all. Her finger jabbed upward again. “Any moment, Jedi, *any* moment, that shield could fail.”

“No, it won’t,” said Anakin. “I’m not going to let it. The shield will hold, Jaklin, and so will the power plant. If I have to pour *blood* into them, *they will hold*.”

And still she didn’t want to believe them. Her eyes were cold and unforgiving. “Or we could end this siege here and now. We could give you to the droids so they’ll leave, and leave Torbel alone.”

“*No!*” cried a child’s voice. “No, we can’t do that!” It was Greti. Pushing her way through the crowd, she halted before Jaklin and glared up at her. “Teeba, it’s not right to—”

“Hold your tongue, Greti,” said Jaklin, impatient. “This business is for the adults to meet on and decide. You should go sit with your mam.”

“Bohle’s good without me, she is,” Greti retorted. “Thanks to Teeb Kenobi. She’d be planted if he’d not saved her. So would Arrad. So would lots of us. He’s helped Rikkard and poor Brandeh’s daughter Moyjn and—and—oh, *everyone!* I know, I’ve been helping him. He hardly sleeps or eats, Teeba Jaklin. He’s so tired he *cries* but he doesn’t stop.”

Obi-Wan swallowed a curse. *One moment of weakness.* One moment where he let the enormity of the task overwhelm him. He’d thought the child was asleep. Feeling Anakin’s accusing stare, he shook his head in warning. *Not now.*

Small fists on her skinny hips, an echo of Sufi, Greti trembled with anger. “How can you talk of throwing him to the droids, Teeba? That’s bad, that is. That’s a shameful thing.”

“I agree,” said another voice, soft with its own weariness. A familiar broken, grinding sound, and then the crowd was parting to let Devi through in her rickety antigrav harness. Every awkward step clearly pained her, but she gritted her teeth and kept coming.

“Devi—” said Anakin, startled. “What are you—”

“Don’t fret,” she said, finding a shaky smile for him. “Poolin’s watching the monitors. She knows to comm me if she sees a red needle. It’s the red needle here *I* want to fix.” Like Greti, she turned and glared at Jaklin. “A short memory you’ve got, Teeba. Anakin nearly killed himself saving us from the theta storm.”

“And you think we should repay that debt by laying down *our* lives?” Jaklin shook her head. “If you’re greensick for the young one, Devi, that problem’s yours. Don’t go making it ours.”

Devi’s cheeks flushed. “I’m greensick for no one. Jaklin, the Jedi didn’t steal Lanteeb. The Seps did that. The Seps plan on using our damotite to murder innocents. Anakin and Obi-Wan are just trying

to stop them. You saw that before. You can't not see it now." Turning, she stared at her gathered friends and neighbors. "It's easy to stand for what's right when there's no cost but hot air and brave words. So is that the kind of people we are? People who'll let wrong be done to save ourselves a little pain?" She turned back to Jaklin, then spat in the dirt. "And you call yourself a teacher."

It was Jaklin's turn to flush. "Devi—"

Obi-Wan held his breath, feeling Anakin tense beside him. At a touch on his hand he looked down to see Greti, who would have made such a magnificent Jedi. Solemnly she curled her fingers around his, her too-old eyes bright.

If I'm wrong, she'll die. If I'm wrong, they'll all die. I can't bear it.

"Hey," said Anakin under his breath. "Don't give up now."

"I say we stand firm," said Devi, when Jaklin didn't speak again. "I say we hold on."

"For how long?" said Jaklin ... but the fight had gone out of her. Now she looked old and tired and sad.

"Until help gets here," said Devi. "And it will get here. I can't prove it but I believe it. I believe *them*."

Jaklin stared at her, saying nothing. And then she walked away. Uncertain, the crowd of villagers watched her retreat, babbling in consternation and confusion.

But Devi wasn't giving up, or walking away. "Listen to me, everyone!" she shouted. "We've come too far to turn back. Yes, we're on our knees, but we're not beaten yet. Not unless we surrender. And then we'll have beaten ourselves."

Silence. Then someone in the crowd called out: "You promise this is nearly over, Jedi? You promise we won't have sheltered you for *nothing*?"

Feeling the sea change in the villagers' volatile emotions, Obi-Wan took a deep breath. "You have our promise that we'll defend

you to the death. And yes, this is nearly over.”

Another groundswell of muttered comments—and then, to his surprise, the people of Torbel began drifting away from the square, heading back to their homes and their children to wait out the siege.

Anakin smiled. “And the Negotiator strikes again.”

He breathed hard for a moment. “No. We owe our reprieve to Greti and Devi.”

“Well, yeah,” said Anakin. “Them, too. Devi—” She slapped Anakin’s chest, her face crumpled into a pretend-scowl. “You can thank me by taking another look at Bay Six’s main feed line. Whatever you did to it last night, it’s not holding.”

Anakin’s amusement vanished. “All right. Just—give me a minute, would you?”

“One,” Devi said, then jerked her thumb toward the street. “I’ll meet you at my groundcar.”

As she headed for her vehicle, each step a challenge, Obi-Wan looked down at Greti. “Time for you to go home and get some sleep. Your mam will be wondering where you are.”

“Bohle knows where I am, Teeb,” said Greti, shrugging. “She knows I can help you in the sick house. Wants me to, she does.”

Oh, but she was a glorious soul. Her strength had saved him, and so many others. He did not want to leave her behind when they left. If they left.

“You’ve helped me enough for now. Greti, you must rest. How will I manage if you make yourself sick?”

Her urchin face dimpled. “You won’t.”

“No. I won’t. So off you go.” He brushed his fingers over her dirty, ragged hair. “And thank you, Greti.”

The child retreated, unwilling but obedient, leaving him and Anakin alone on the village square. In silence they looked at each

other.

“Stang,” Anakin said at last. “That was close.” Obi-Wan nodded. “Very.”

Nearly fourteen hours had passed since they first felt the stirring in the Force that heralded the arrival of more Jedi. Fourteen hours of nursing sick people and balky shield generators and the power plant in its slow, inevitable decline. Fourteen hours that had culminated in this desperate confrontation with Torbel’s villagers.

“I’ve tried to see what’s happening out there,” said Anakin. “But I can’t. I can’t even be certain who’s come. I think it’s Ahsoka but—” He rubbed his eyes. “I’m too tired to be sure. I never knew I could feel this tired.”

Neither did I, before Zigoola. “Don’t worry. They will get to us soon.”

“Do you really believe that?” said Anakin. His expression was bleak.

“Yes,” Obi-Wan said simply. “I have to.”

Anakin looked up, as though he could see through the storm shield, through the hovering cloud of mosquito droids, through the layers of Lanteeb’s atmosphere and out into the cold dark void of space.

“I think it’s Grievous,” he said, his voice low and full of hate. “I think he’s the one standing between our people and this planet.”

“Even if you’re right, Anakin, it doesn’t matter,” he said. “Whoever it is, our people will prevail. They haven’t come all this way to be beaten on Lanteeb’s doorstep.”

Anakin glanced at him. “Can you tell who’s here?”

“For certain?” He shook his head. “No. But I want to say Mace Windu.”

“Master Windu and Ahsoka? Now there’s an interesting team. If it is them, Grievous had better start running. He—”

Out in the street, Devi sounded her groundcar's horn.

Anakin waved at her. "Sorry, I'd better go. And once I'm done at the plant I need to take another look at that hinky generator from last night. Obi-Wan ..."

"If you tell me I look terrible and need to sleep, I shall smack you," he said, very mildly. "I'm no better or worse off than anyone else here."

"Obi-Wan—"

"Anakin, are you really going to make me say it?"

Frustrated, Anakin shook his head. "Don't bother. I'll say it for you. You'll do what you must."

"Yes, I will," he said, still mild. How could he scold, when Anakin's fear for him was as loud as a shout? "And so will you." He clasped Anakin's shoulder, briefly. "I'm glad you're here. I wouldn't want to go through this with anyone but you."

For once, Anakin had no witty retort. "Likewise," he said at last. "And if I need help checking the other generators?"

"You know where I'll be."

Obi-Wan watched him lope across the square and climb into the groundcar beside Devi. As they drove toward the power plant the mosquito droids hovering overhead buzzed into life and opened fire again. A breath later, the mass of battle droids followed suit. He looked up.

Stang. Mace, if that is you out there, hurry. Torbel can't hold on much longer.

DESPITE ANAKIN'S PERSISTENT NAGGING, Obi-Wan had not intended to sleep, not with nineteen villagers still in need of constant care—but his brutally weary body overruled him. He woke on the floor nearly two hours later to find Greti crouched beside one of her stuporous playmates, sponging the sweat of greensickness from the little girl's skin. Hearing him stir, she looked up.

“Oh—did I cozzle you?” she said, anxious. “I never meant to.”

Obi-Wan sat up, his spine cracking. “It’s all right.” For a moment he was puzzled, and then he realized what was wrong. “When did the bombardment stop?”

“Half an hour ago, about.” Greti grinned. “Good, isn’t it?”

He looked around the hushed room. “It certainly is. Where’s Teeba Sufi?”

“Gone next door to put her head down, she has,” Greti said, dropping the sponge cloth into her bowl of water. “It’s just us.”

“Well, it shouldn’t be just us. Greti—” He had to smother a yawn. “I told you to go home.”

“I know what you told me, Teeb. And I did go home. But I couldn’t settle, so I came back.”

Exasperated, he shook his head at her. *She’s as stubborn as Anakin ever was.* “You’ll have your mam so cross with me.”

“Bohle understands.” Gently, Greti covered her sick playmate with a blanket. “You do, too, Teeb.”

Yes. He did. The urge to heal was blinding within her. “How are our other patients faring?”

With a shrug, Greti carried her bowl of mucky water to the sink. “No one’s died, not even Ryfus. That’s good.”

Ryfus had been shot to pieces by a mosquito droid. He might not be dead yet, but he would be soon if he didn’t get to a medcenter. “Yes. That is good. Greti, when was the last time you swallowed your dose of greensick medicine?”

She busied herself rinsing the sponge cloth.

“Greti.” Swallowing a pained grunt, Obi-Wan clambered to his feet. “I won’t have you here if you don’t take your dose.”

“It’s horrible,” she muttered, as he took the bottle and cup from the cupboard and poured her some. The bottle was perilously close

to empty. "You don't take it."

He held out the cup. "I can manage without it. You can't. *Drink.*"

She drank Sufi's bitter medicine, glowering, then wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

"Good girl."

But instead of smiling at his praise, like she usually did, Greti stared out of the small window above the sink. With the bombardment ceased, no bright flashes lighting the night sky, her young, thin face was almost lost in shadows.

"Did you mean what you said, Obi-Wan? About help coming soon?"

"Of course I meant it. I'd never lie about something like that."

She glanced at him. "Then why are you still scared?"

Still scared? And here I thought I was doing such a fine job of hiding from her. "I'm tired, Greti. It's easy to get discouraged when you're tired. But you mustn't think it means I've lost faith in my friends. I haven't."

Lips pursed, she rinsed the medicine cup and set it to drain. Then she flicked him a glance. "Have I really been a help to you, Teeb?"

"Yes. An enormous help."

"Is that because—" She caught her bottom lip between her teeth. "Obi-Wan, I'm different, aren't I?"

The Force give me strength. "We're all different, Greti." And that made her scowl. "You know what I mean." If only he didn't. "Greti ..."

"Bohle tells me all the time I shouldn't feel things so hard," she said, drying her hands on the front of her grubby tunic. "But I can't help it. Born this way, I was."

Obi-Wan swallowed. "I know."

She looked at him, so hopeful. “Teeb—when you go, can you take me with you? Somewhere I can learn about being different?”

He should have seen this coming. He should have prepared himself for it. “Greti, I can’t,” he said, his throat painfully tight. “There are—ways of doing things, where I come from. Rules.”

“Oh.” She jerked her chin up. “I’m not good enough?”

He made himself meet her glittering, wide-eyed stare. “It’s too late.”

“Oh.” Her lips trembled. “But—I’m good enough.”

Waifs and strays. *Qui-Gon*. “Greti, you’re better than good enough. It’s been an honor, teaching you what little I know.”

“Then why can’t you—” The child bit her lip. “Rules.”

Aching, he shook his head. “I’m sorry.”

In the lamplit gloom behind him, a woman shifted on her cot and moaned. Greti’s stare shifted. “That’s Teeba Yancy, that is,” she said. “I didn’t think she felt right, before.”

Obi-Wan turned. It might not be admirable, but the distraction was a relief. “Then we’d best get her right, hadn’t we?”

Together, using the Force, they brought down the woman’s spiking fever. Then they checked each patient, cot by cot easing discomfort, changing bandages, and applying Sufi’s dwindling ointments and salves. Obi-Wan spent the longest time with Rikkard, struggling to ease the man free of his damotite poisoning. With Jaklin refusing to leave her cottage, Torbel desperately needed its other leader.

But the toxic smoke had soaked deep into Rikkard’s flesh and bones. Wanting to spare Greti, Obi-Wan pushed himself so hard he came close to collapse, but he couldn’t break the damotite’s vicious hold.

Greti patted his arm. “Teeb, Teeb, it’s hurting yourself, you are. Don’t. We need you.”

Biting back a groan, he pulled himself free of Rikkard's suffering. And then, breathing hard, he saw that Arrad was awake and watching him from the next cot.

"It's all right, Arrad," he croaked. "Your father will be fine."

Arrad's sunken eyes closed, hiding his fear and doubt.

"Obi-Wan," said Greti, tugging his sleeve. "Come and sit."

Too tired to argue, feeling ill and shivery, he let the child chivvy him back to his empty spot on the floor and settle him there with his shoulders pressed to the wall. Then she fetched him half a cup of water and stood over him until he drank it.

He handed the empty cup back to her. "You're very bossy."

"That's because you won't listen."

"Said the girl who fights tooth and nail against taking her medicine!"

With a swift, sly grin Greti dropped to the floor beside him and slid her arm through his. Letting her head fall against his shoulder, she sighed.

"It tastes bad."

"True. But that's no excuse." Greti giggled. "Now who's bossy?"

"I'm the grown-up. It's my job."

She scoffed at that, but then fell silent. After a while she sighed again. "Obi-Wan ... if it's too late for me, that's not your fault. I do understand. Rules are rules."

It almost broke him, that she'd try to ease his guilt when he'd condemned her to this barren exile.

"Yes, Greti. They are."

But we disregarded them for Anakin. Why can't I do the same for her, when she's a natural-born healer and we're in desperate need of her skills?

“Obi-Wan,” she said. “Maybe I could—”

But then the droids started firing again, blaster bolts booming, and her thought was lost in a wave of barely suppressed fear.

Obi-Wan took her hand. “It’s all right, Greti. Anakin won’t let the shield fail. And help will come. Believe me. It will come.”

She was so frightened. He could hear the whimper, trapped in her throat. But like a Jedi, she refused to give in to her fear. “I believe you, Obi-Wan.”

Stang. What a waste. “Good girl,” he said. “Now close your eyes and meditate, just like I showed you.”

Trusting him, she closed her eyes. When he was satisfied that he could leave her for a little while, Obi-Wan let himself sink into the Force.

Show me what’s out there. Show me what’s to come.

But the future remained elusive. All he had left was his faith—and his faith was starting to wear horribly thin.

DRY-MOUTHED WITH TENSION, Ahsoka stood on *Indomitable*’s bridge and watched Gold and Arrow squadrons engage the enemy. The pilots’ fierce joy resounded through the Force, waking echoes of joy in her. More than anything she wanted to be out there with them, only she wasn’t a good enough combat pilot. Not yet. But Master Windu had promised her she’d see plenty of action once the blockade was broken and they could hit Lanteeb soil, and that eased her disappointment.

If the blockade is broken, that is. If we get to touch dirt.

Master Windu and Admiral Yularen were in the Battle Operations Room, coordinating the attack via holotracking. So far Grievous still hadn’t found a way to jam them again, which meant there were full communications between *Indomitable* and the pilots. She’d have been welcome to observe with them, but she wanted to watch this fight live, in realspace, just as she’d watched the previous two

skirmishes. Master Windu didn't mind. He'd quizzed her on both engagements afterward, testing her grasp of tactics and strategy, looking for weaknesses in her assessments that might cause trouble later.

She'd impressed him. She wasn't supposed to notice or care, but she did. Impressing Mace Windu meant something. It was almost as rewarding as impressing Anakin.

So far there'd been no all-out, no-holds-barred clash with Grievous's battle group—just a couple of short, sharp jabs in his flank to keep him occupied, to stop him from thinking about why the enemy was simply ... hanging around. It was all part of the plan. Thinking about that, Ahsoka felt her pulse race. *Taria*. It was crazy. *Crazy*. The crazy woman was going to get herself killed.

The void beyond the bridge's viewport filled and flashed with fire as an Arrow Squadron pilot knocked down two vulture droids with a single shot. One of the crew, watching, let out a restrained but heartfelt “Yes!”

Grinning, Ahsoka kept most of her attention on the fighters from Gold Squadron. Anakin's boys. *Her* boys. She and Anakin shared them. And then more vulture droids spewed out of one of Grievous's battleships, hornets from a malevolent nest. A moment later she heard a buzz from the communications console behind her.

“Okay, here she comes,” Lieutenant Avrey announced, and toggled a switch on her board. “Master Windu? Admiral? We have a green light.”

“*Thank you, Lieutenant,*” said Master Windu calmly over the comm, as though the lieutenant had just made a passing note of the time. “*Alert Pioneer and Coruscant Sky.*”

And that explained why there were more vulture droids on the offensive. They'd spotted Taria in the captured Techno Union ship, closing in. She must have alerted the Seps, let them know she was coming in hot. And they must believe she was one of theirs—which meant Master Yoda's audacious plan was working. Ahsoka wished

she could reach out through the Force, touch her new friend's mind and let her know she wasn't alone. But she didn't. She couldn't. There might be a Force-sensitive on one of Grievous's ships. It was too dangerous to take the chance.

A stirring in her mind, a rush of recognition, and then she saw the sleek, swift Sep ship with Taria at the controls flashing past *Indomitable's* port flank. Master Windu had chosen Fireball to lead the fake attack against their fake enemy. Ahsoka held her breath, watching Taria's desperate attempt to avoid interception. Stang, she was a great pilot. She was really making this look good. So was Fib. More Gold Squadron ships poured after him. They were all making this look so good, no way would Grievous ever suspect it was a lie. Vulture droids swarmed to protect the Sep ship. Half of Arrow Squadron broke off to engage them. And then—yes yes yes—there were the Hammers, zipping out of *Pioneer*, and it was a full-on four-way engagement, the void above Lanteeb bursting into furious action.

Fingers clenched to fists, every sense extended, Ahsoka did her best to follow each individual engagement at once and keep track of Taria, being chased by Fib and three other Gold ships. She nearly cried out when one of Fib's boys—who was it? Could she sense it? Sandcat? Was that him?—caught a clip from a vulture and spun madly out of control. But he was all right, he was safe and limping for home.

And then someone else wasn't so lucky. A Gold boy was blown clear out of the sky. Groans sounded around the bridge as grief tightened her throat.

That was Bammer. He liked nerf stew and opera. Stang. I just felt Bammer die.

Fireball had to be hurting, but his course stayed true. He and his wingman hunted after Taria, leaving the rest of Gold Squadron and the boys from Hammer and Arrow to keep the surviving vulture droids busy.

They're making it look so real. If I didn't know better I'd think they were trying to kill her.

Grievous was still fooled. He sent out more vultures to help her. And then, just like Master Yoda planned it, with perfect precision Fireball clipped Taria's starboard fin. As the Sep ship went into an impressive, swirling roll Taria blew the fake charge they'd rigged in the left-hand engine pod. The vulture droids let her pass through, streaming smoke, and then closed ranks to charge Fireball and Can, his wingman, their plasma cannons blazing.

Break now, Fib! Break now!

Ahsoka wanted to scream the words out loud. She wanted to pound her fists on the transparisteel viewport, then race belowdecks to the hangar and grab a fighter and join him. She *hated* this watching. Watching was for *droids*.

But Fireball didn't need her help. Next to Anakin he was Gold Squadron's best pilot. He and Can tore up the sky, shattering droid after droid into slivers of hot metal.

Taria was nothing but a fast-dwindling light in the distance now, safely on her way to a staged crash landing on Lanteeb. Ahsoka laughed, giddy with relief, but that didn't last long. There was still a real firefight to win. Not only would Grievous suspect trouble if the Republic ships suddenly withdrew—the rest of his vulture ships needed turning into slag.

Closing her eyes, she sent a message winging after Taria.

May the Force be with you, Master Damsin. Don't do anything stupid. Bring yourself back alive. And please bring Anakin and Master Kenobi back with you.

AS CRASH LANDINGS WENT, she'd lived through worse.

"Still," Taria remarked, just to hear the sound of her own voice, "I'm pretty sure I can die happy without living through any more."

The Techno Union ship's buckled cockpit was rapidly filling with smoke, sparks and little flames dancing over the main console and above her head. She coughed, the taste of burned circuits and melting plastoid acrid on her tongue.

Time to go.

The body Senator Organa had supplied for this ruse was strapped into the copilot's seat. It was a Special Ops and that was all she knew. Working fast, closing her mind to the implications, Taria unstrapped the dead woman and shifted her across to the pilot's seat. Briefly, she rested a hand on the dark, lolling head.

Thank you. I don't know how you really died, but your sacrifice is appreciated and won't be forgotten. At least not by me.

This close to Lantibba City and Durd's Separatist troops, it wasn't safe to use the Force. All it would take was one dark side sensitive and the plan would be blown. And even though she was about to destroy the ship she wasn't prepared to use her lightsaber, either. The mark of its blade was simply too distinctive. That meant using brute strength to open the damaged hatch—and she had quite a lot less of that, these days.

Spurred on by the growing cockpit fire, she kicked and shoved and bashed her way to relative safety.

"Stang!"

Folded onto her hands and knees, bruised, and bleeding from scrapes on her left cheek and the back of her right hand, she took a few precious seconds to catch her breath. There was dirt and grass beneath her, empty sky overhead. In the distance she could just make out the first, faint wailings of an emergency response vehicle.

"Right," she muttered. "Now it's *really* time to go."

Staggering to her feet, she tightened the strap of the satchel slung over her chest and looked around. There—northeast—there was the city, right where her personal nav beacon said it would be. The spaceport's lights gleamed and glittered in the darkness, almost

pretty. By her best guess it was some fifteen klicks away—a nice, brisk jog. Breathing deeply again, clearing her disease-damaged lungs of smoke, she patted her lightsaber once, a little ritual of reassurance, then unzipped the security pocket on the thigh of her bodysuit and pulled out a remote detonator.

The wailing siren was much closer now.

Swiftly backing away from the crashed ship, Taria thumbed the remote. A warning tremor rippled through the Force as its signal triggered the untraceable explosive charges designed to complete the crash landing's artistic effect.

Light and sound erupted together as the two mini bombs exploded. She felt heat caress her stinging face, felt the released energy snap through her flesh and bones. The ground shuddered. The air roared. The Techno Union ship leapt, then broke apart.

She nodded approvingly, and put the remote back in its pocket. "Nice work, Senator. Very nice indeed."

Flirting with danger, she waited a moment longer and watched the flashing lights of the approaching emergency responder. Only one vehicle?

Now that's just lazy.

But it made her life easier, so she wasn't about to complain. Just before the crash team arrived on the scene she retreated farther into the night's shadows, melted into the Force and used its light to show her the fastest, safest way to the city. The temptation to touch Obi-Wan's mind was a torment, but she resisted. Without knowing exactly where he was, or what kind of trouble he'd landed himself in, she could easily do more harm than good.

"But don't worry, *eskaba*," she promised him, lightly running. "I'm here now—all you have to do is hold on."

NINETEEN



“I’M SO SORRY, MISTRESS PADMÉ, BUT THE DIRECTOR OF BAGRILA Industries is unable to take your comm.”

Sighing, Padmé pinched the bridge of her nose. *Another one. And now I’m running out of names and favors.* “All right, Threepio. Who’s next on the list?”

“The Yylti Corporation, Mistress,” said See-Threepio. “But it’s half a standard hour before they can be contacted.”

“Fine. While I’m waiting, you can bring me another caf.”

“Oh,” said the droid. “Mistress Padmé, are you sure that’s wise?”

Right now there was more caf than blood running through her veins. She should change her mind, but—“Just bring it, Threepio.”

As the droid withdrew, she turned back to the living room’s picture window to watch the rain falling in sheets upon the city. Lacy tatters of light gray cloud drifted between the buildings. This high above street level it was easy to believe there *was* no street level, that she floated in a luxurious balloon free of all ties to common ground—or reality.

I wonder if it’s raining on Lanteeb.

Fear for Anakin stabbed through her. The latest comm from Yoda wasn’t encouraging. *Unbroken the blockade remains, Senator.* Even as she called in every favor owed to her, she’d begged Palpatine to relent and authorize more GAR ships to help Admiral Yularen and Master Windu.

But Palpatine remained obdurate. The situation was delicate, he claimed. There were wheels within wheels, precariously spinning. For the first time in her life she was angry with him. Disappointed. For the first time in their long friendship she thought he'd let her down.

We owe Anakin and Obi-Wan our homeworld. What does it say about us if we refuse to repay that debt?

Though they still had no antidote to the bioweapon, Queen Jamillia had courageously promised two squadrons of pilots. It was the best she could do, given that Naboo wasn't a militarized society. But Palpatine was Supreme Chancellor, the ultimate commander of the GAR.

He can't be putting politics above our friends' lives. He just can't.

But what else was she supposed to think?

"Here," said Bail, walking up behind her. To save time and minimize complications they were both working out of her apartment. "Your caf—which by rights I should tip down the sink. How many mugs does this make since lunch? Four?"

"Five," Padmé admitted with a rueful smile, and faced him. "But who's counting?"

He handed her the steaming mug. "Your protocol droid. It's in the kitchen ready to blow a circuit relay fretting over you."

"I'm fine."

Bail gave her a sharp look. "No, you're not." *No, I'm not.* But there was no use dwelling on it. "So, where are we up to?"

Because he knew her so well, he didn't bother arguing. "I'm waiting on two return comms," he said, retreating to the arm of the nearest chair. "But I'm not hopeful about either."

"What about Brentaal?"

"Brentaal's promised us three heavy-armored Dreadnaughts—if we can guarantee them protection against the bioweapon." Bail

scowled. “Brentaal, Anaxes, the Ch’zimi-kho Conglomerate—everyone’s singing the same song, Padmé. *Of course we’ll help—once there’s an antidote.*”

“We can’t really blame them, Bail,” she said, and took a sip of caf to hide her distress. “After Chandrila, everyone’s terrified of a reprisal attack.”

“Which of course was the point.” Bail perched on the arm of the nearest chair. “I just spoke to Tryn.”

“How’s he holding up?”

He shook his head. “He’s not. He says he’s at a total dead end. I’ve never seen him so upset, Padmé. I wish—”

“You had no choice,” she said gently. “He’s one of the best in his field and the only man you could trust. You had to get him involved.”

“I know,” he said, and ran a hand down his tired face. “But this is hurting him. Badly.”

He was so despondent. It wasn’t like him. “You can’t think about that, Bail. We have to focus on coordinating the civilian fleet.”

“Well, that sounds fine in theory,” he retorted, glaring, “except that without an antidote there won’t *be* one! Thirty Naboo starfighters is an escort, not a fleet!”

“I know,” she said, after a moment. “I’m sorry. Please, let’s not fight. I’ve still got people to comm. Have you?”

Sliding off the chair, Bail nodded. “Don’t worry. I’m not giving up.”

“Of course you’re not. And neither am I. Bail, we’re going to make this happen.”

He wanted to believe her. *Stang, I want to believe me.* But after nine straight hours of prevarications and outright refusals, belief was in ever-diminishing supply.

“Go on,” she said. “Get back to your list, and let me get back to mine.”

Alone again, she turned to stare at the rain.

I’m doing my best, Anakin. Don’t give up hope yet.

* * *

BANT’ENA STOOD BEHIND her lab bench, trying not to feel the burning pain in her face where Durd had struck her three times because he didn’t like what she’d said. There was blood in her mouth, warm and metallic. He’d loosened some teeth, too. It didn’t matter. All she cared about now was getting in his way. Tripping him up and making him fail.

Diverted from beating her further by Colonel Barev, the Neimoidian was lurching around the lab in a rage, comlink clutched in one fat, sweating hand.

“What do you mean *crash-landed*? What do you mean there’s nothing left but a charred body? You told me this agent had urgent information for me and was safely past the GAR battle group! And now you’re saying the agent’s *dead* and I can’t have the message? *Barev—*”

Whatever the colonel was saying, it did nothing to soothe Durd’s escalating fury. He was being denied what he wanted, the one thing he could not tolerate.

“Barev, shut up!” he shouted. “I’m not interested in your excuses! Tell me about the Jedi! Is that village siege broken yet? Are they on their way here to me?”

More buzzing from Barev provoked an incoherent shriek from Durd.

“I don’t care anymore, you stupid human! This madness has gone on long enough. Empty every last ammunition store on the planet and send it to that village along with every droid you have left, even

the SBDs. I want those Jedi in my compound within a day! Do you hear me, Barev? Do what I tell you or I'll tear you limb from limb!"

Bant'ena wanted to weep. Anakin and Master Kenobi were still safe and Grievous hadn't defeated the Jedi fleet.

All I have to do is play for more time—and ruin Durd's precious bioweapon, just in case the Jedi fail.

Durd threw his comlink down on another bench and turned back to her, menacing. "Well?"

It wasn't hard to look scared. She was scared, even though he no longer had the power to truly hurt her. She stopped fighting the tears, because they pleased him, and let her hands tremble as she picked up her datapad.

"General, I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm trying. But what you're asking me to do—virtually remake the formula—it's *difficult*. You know how long it took to perfect it in the first place. Now you want me to start over. It means rebalancing the central matrix, it means —"

He struck her again, so hard this time that she nearly blacked out. "*I don't care!*" he bellowed. "Do what I ask or I'll bring those puling little bloodsacs here and peel them while you watch!"

He had to believe the threat terrified her. He couldn't suspect she knew her nephews were safe. So she groveled at his feet, sobbing, and begged for their lives.

He kicked her. "Get up, *get up*, your promises mean *nothing*. I want *results*. I want to test my new formula *tonight*."

Tonight was too soon. She was nowhere near close to reworking the weapon so it would kill on initial release—and then render itself inert after three minutes' contact with oxygen. It had to be three minutes, even though a lot of people could die in that short space of time. She couldn't risk him discovering her duplicity.

Wincing, letting Durd see and hear her pain, Bant'ena clawed to her feet. "General, I will do what you want, I *swear* I will. But by tonight? I don't think—"

He thrust his flat, moist face into hers. "I don't care what you think. I want my new formula and I'm locking you in here until I get it." He stepped back. "Since I can't trust Barev out of my sight, I'm returning to the spaceport. You've got until morning, Doctor. If you don't have something for me then ..."

"You can't leave." she said. "What if there's a problem? What if I need you to—"

He shoved her. "The only thing you need is a miracle. I suggest you start working on one. Don't forget—those little pink bloodsacs' lives are depending on you."

The door closed and locked behind him. Spitting out blood, smearing her mouth clean on her sleeve, Bant'ena stared at it. Then she banished the pain and got back to work.

HOURS PASSED. Day dragged into night. Durd didn't return—which was fine by her. She'd only protested to fool him. It was easier to concentrate when he wasn't pacing and bellowing and knocking her around. No food was brought to her, but that didn't matter. There wasn't time to eat. She needed every minute, every *second*, to sabotage her own creation.

When she heard the clunking in the air vent over her head, for a moment she thought she was dreaming. And then the vent's grille kicked out, landing with a clatter on the lab's floor, and a lithely muscular human woman in a dust-smeared black bodysuit landed lightly on the balls of her feet beside it.

"Bant'ena Fhernan? I'm Taria Damsin."

A silver-hilted lightsaber was belted at the woman's hip. Bant'ena backed up till her legs bumped her lab stool, then sat. "You're a Jedi."

“That’s right,” said the woman, flicking her long, blue-green braid off her shoulder. “Doctor, I know this is a surprise but I need you to focus.”

But that was easier said than done. “How did you *find* me? How did you get *in* here?”

“Like you said, I’m a Jedi.” The woman grinned. There was dried blood on her cheek and one hand. “We’re sneaky.”

“Please, don’t—”

“Fine. The *very* short explanation is that your mother made sure we got your message, and thanks to the embedded code in the recording we were able to pinpoint your exact location. Because of my ... previous experience ... I was chosen to infiltrate the planet and this facility.”

Dazed, Bant’ena shook her head. “Oh. I see.”

“I like your mother, by the way,” the woman added, brushing dust from her bodysuit. “She’s feisty.”

Really? And then some instinct pricked her. “You’re the Jedi who rescued her.”

Another grin. “There were two of us, actually.”

Bant’ena couldn’t breathe for a moment. “Thank you,” she said at last, her voice rough. “But—you’re not here to rescue me. Are you?”

“Oh, I’m more than happy to rescue you, Doctor,” said the Jedi. “But first I need to blow up this compound and every last particle of that weapon you invented.”

“You’re serious?” she said blankly.

“After Chandrila?” said the Jedi, her face twisting. “Absolutely.”

Oh, Chandrila. “I’m sorry for that,” she whispered. “So sorry.”

Taria Damsin looked at her in silence, her tawny-golden eyes very cool. “Are you? Then what say you prove it by answering my questions. Where is the bioweapon stockpiled? How many droids

and Sep officers do I have to go through to get there? Where's our dear friend Lok Durd? And last—but not least—where are Obi-Wan and Anakin? I thought I'd rescue them, too, since I'm here."

Heart thumping, Bant'ena stared at the exotic woman in front of her. "You mean that? You can rescue them?"

"I never say what I don't mean, Doctor," said the Jedi, and glanced at the lab's ceiling. "Quite a way above our heads there's a Republic battle group waiting for my signal. Once I've done what I came here to do they'll mop up the Seps while I go after Masters Kenobi and Skywalker. From what I can gather they're in a bit of hot water."

Anakin. So solemn and trusting, so compassionate. Life had made him older than his years. Suffering, too. She'd seen that in him. Felt it. And she'd betrayed him—to his death, if Durd had his way.

"How are you going to blow up the compound?"

The Jedi patted the small satchel slung across her chest. "I have explosives here that will do the trick nicely. I've already seeded most of the air vents. Now I just need to take care of your lab and wherever the bioweapon's stored."

Just like that? How ... efficient. "I see," she said, her mouth dry. "But look—about Anakin and Master Kenobi? They've been hiding in a mining village called Torbel. It's somewhere southwest of Lantibba. Hours away. But Durd found them and now they're out of time. He's sending more droids and ammunition to break through their defenses. Master Damsin, he's determined to hand them over to Count Dooku."

"Really?" said Taria Damsin, her voice soft. "Well. We'll see about that."

Bant'ena looked at her. Like Anakin, like Master Kenobi, this woman was surrounded by an aura of *otherness*, a quality that set her apart from normal beings. There was power in her, a great coiled spring of it. The lab's chemical-tainted air seemed to vibrate

in her presence. And like Anakin, and Master Kenobi, she inspired an instinctive trust.

If she says she can rescue them, then I believe her. But right now she has to leave.

“Master Damsin.” *What am I doing? What am I doing?* “You must know my life is over. I created a weapon that killed thousands of innocent beings. I’m a mass murderer.”

“Yes—from a certain point of view you are,” Taria said slowly. “But not by choice.”

Bant’ena shook her head. “That’s not true. That’s a story people like me tell ourselves so we’re not the villain. I *did* have a choice, and I chose the lives of my family and friends over the lives of strangers.”

Something softened in Taria’s gaze. “Most people would.”

“I can’t speak for most people,” she said. “I can only answer for myself.” Her heart was pounding. She felt cold and ill. *But I have to. I have to.* “Leave the explosives with me. I’ll prime this lab and the bioweapon production and storage units, I swear. I’ll see this compound reduced to a smoking crater. You find Anakin and Master Kenobi. Get them off this forsaken planet. And please, tell them I’m sorry.”

“Bant’ena—” Taria frowned. “No. We can both get out of here once the explosives are set.”

“No. We can’t.” She touched the collar around her neck. “If I cross the compound’s perimeter this will kill me.”

“Then I’ll get it off you.”

Bant’ena smiled. “There’s no time. Besides—how often do we get the chance to put right our worst mistake?”

A long silence, then Taria tugged the satchel over her head, opened it, and pulled out a small black sphere.

“Each charge is self-contained, with a polybond grip,” she said briskly. Her bruised face was a mask, all emotion locked behind it. “They’ll stick to anything. Use two in here, the rest on the bioweapons. The charge will vaporize the toxin.” She unzipped a pocket in her bodysuit and pulled out a remote. “This is the detonator. See the toggle here? Press it once, then press it again and hold it down. Detonation occurs five seconds later.” The mask slipped, then, and she caught her breath. “Bant’ena—”

She held out her hand—and saw with pride it was perfectly steady. “That sounds quite straightforward, Master Damsin. I’m sure I’ll manage.”

Taria dropped the charge back into the satchel, then handed it and the detonator to her. “Is Durd in the compound?”

The satchel was quite heavy, the detonator surprisingly light. “No. He’s gone to harass Colonel Barev—the Separatist liaison officer. They’ve been quite at odds, lately, what with one thing and another.”

Taria grimaced. “Stang. I was hoping—”

“It’s for the best,” she said. “His absence will make it much easier for me to do this. Without him here the facility is practically deserted. He took his personal droid with him and sent the compound’s remaining battle droids after Anakin and Master Kenobi.”

“All right,” said Taria. Her tawny eyes had gone dark. “Is there anything else I need to know?”

“You won’t reach Torbel in time without a fast groundcar. You’ll find one parked around the right side of the building. If you wait until this place explodes, you should be able to steal it without attracting attention.”

Taria smiled. “Seems feisty is the Fhernan women’s trademark.”

Mother. “Taria—”

“Don’t worry,” the Jedi said, her voice shaking. “Mata Fhernan will know what kind of daughter she had.”

Tears blurred Bant’ena’s vision, but only briefly. “I need one last thing from you. Durd’s locked me in here. Can you—”

“Sure I can,” said Taria, and with a wave of her hand opened the lab door. “There you are.”

Bant’ena clasped her arm. “Thank you. Now go and save Anakin and Master Kenobi.”

With a nod, and a half smile, Taria leapt up to the air vent. Wriggled her way in through the open grille and was gone.

Bant’ena placed two charges in the lab, then tipped the rest down her shirt, buttoned her lab coat to hide the bulge and slipped the detonator into her pocket. Then she let herself out of the lab and hurried along the empty corridor toward the weapon’s production complex and the storage unit.

For the first time in a long time she felt ... utterly free.

LOK DURD LEANED FORWARD, reached over the driver’s seat backrest, and slapped at KD-77’s metal arm. “What are you dawdling for, you stupid machine? Drive faster! I want to see where that woman’s up to with my weapon.”

The droid turned its head, revealing a flare of orange photoreceptors. “I am driving at the permitted speed limit, General.”

“Do I look like I care about speed limits? Do you think speed limits apply to *me*?” If he didn’t need the droid he’d rip its insolent head off. “*Drive faster!*”

“General,” said KD-77, and increased the groundcar’s speed.

Slumping in his seat, Durd folded his hands over his belly. *Stupid droid*. Feeling rankled and hard done-by, he brooded through the groundcar’s armored side window at Lantibba’s dark, empty streets. Stupid droid, stupid Barev, stupid everything.

I am too important to be suffering like this.

“I cannot believe that barve of a colonel tried to argue with me about sending the rest of his super battle droids to Torbel,” he said. “I cannot *believe* he stood in that spaceport and told me *to my face* that his security needs supersede mine. *What* security needs? The spaceport’s in no danger—General Grievous is seeing to that. No, *I’m* the one in danger, with those two Jedi still on the loose. I tell you, Kay-Dee Seventy-seven, he wants them to escape Torbel. He wants them to *kill* me. Don’t you think so?”

“It is a plausible scenario, General,” said the droid.

This time he rapped his knuckles on the back of KD-77’s head. “It’s not plausible, you idiot. It’s a fact. Colonel Barev is plotting to destroy me. But he’ll fail. They always fail. Because *I* am Lok Durd.” He pressed his nose to the window beside him. “I can’t see a thing out there. How far to the compound?”

“Eight hundred and forty-two me—”

But the rest of the droid’s answer was lost in a brilliant red-and-white explosion that lit up Lantibba’s night sky in a false and burning dawn.

KD-77 slammed the groundcar to a halt.

“What was that?” Durd said. His voice was squeaking like a grub’s, but he didn’t care. *It wasn’t the compound. It can’t have been the compound.* “Get out! Get out and tell me what that was!”

KD-77 idled the groundcar to stationary hover and got out. It was so obedient. If only Barev would follow orders with the same mindless alacrity.

After a moment, Durd activated the window and stuck his head out. “Well, droid? Don’t just stand there!” Then he coughed, because the cold night air was full of smoke and stink. “What’s going on?”

The groundcar’s headlights bleached KD-77 from dark red almost to white. It turned, its photoreceptors eerie, its metal body backlit by plumes of smoke and leaping flames.

“General, the compound has been destroyed.”

Hive Mother protect me. The Jedi.

“Kay-Dee Seventy-seven, get back here!” he shrieked as bile rose choking into his throat. “Drive me back to the spaceport! Hurry! Hurry!”

They passed two emergency response vehicles on their return journey. Durd stared at them, his stomachs churning. Only two? Was that how little Barev counted his safety?

I could be dead right now. A matter of minutes and I’d have been in the compound when it blew. I could be scattered across Lantibba in pieces. And would Barev care? I’ll lay short odds he wouldn’t.

He felt sick enough to vomit. This was a disaster. His compound—his weapon—his captive scientist: all gone. When Count Dooku heard the news he’d be furious, he’d—but no. No. He had to stay calm. Panic wasn’t the answer. He had to *think*. There was a way out of this. There was always a way out.

The weapon’s not all destroyed. I can delay the attack on Bespin and retrieve a sample. I can kidnap another scientist to rework the formula. I can recover from this. I will recover from this. Barev, on the other hand ...

Ignoring the human Separatists in the spaceport security complex, Durd ordered KD-77 to kick in Barev’s office door.

“Barev!” he snarled, marching into the room. “Explain to me how you let this happen!”

Jaw dropped, the human stared. “Durd! You’re alive!”

Idiot. “Obviously. Disappointed, Colonel?”

“What? You’re blaming me?” Barev leapt up from the chair behind his desk. “You think *I* had something to do with your compound’s destruction?”

He sneered. “Not directly. You don’t have the guts. No, the Jedi did this—but since you’ve failed to capture them then yes, I *do* hold

you responsible!”

“The *Jedi*?” said Barev, incredulous. “The Jedi are still trapped in Torbel, you fool. This is *your* doing, Durd! Through ignorance or incompetence—probably both—you ignored safety protocols and jeopardized an entire city sector. Believe me, I’ll be making a full report to Count Dooku and telling him what a useless *joke* you are, and—”

Fingers fastened tight around Barev’s convulsing throat, laughing aloud at the terror in his ashen face, Durd dragged the human across the desk until their foreheads were almost touching.

“Barev,” he said softly, “I’m afraid you won’t be telling Count Dooku *anything*.”

Watching the life drain out of Barev’s pale, ugly eyes was a visceral pleasure.

Letting the body drop, Durd snatched up a comlink from the office’s console and tossed it to KD-77. “Make sure that’s secure, then raise General Grievous for me.”

The droid was a communications genius. Moments later it gave the comlink back to Durd.

“Grievous, this is General Lok Durd,” he said, staring at the stinking pile of flesh and bone that had been Colonel Barev. “My safety cannot be guaranteed on Lanteeb. I am coming to you, with urgent information for Count Dooku. I believe he’s ordered you to cooperate with me fully? Good. Then stand by to receive my ship.”

Without giving the disgusting creature a chance to reply, he disconnected the comlink and looked at his droid.

“And I think that’s that.”

KD-77’s photoreceptors flared. “What about the Jedi, General?”

He smiled. “What about them? They’re not going anywhere. I’ll send Grievous to collect them once those Republic ships are taken care of.”

“An excellent idea, General,” said KD-77. “But I would be remiss not to point out that Grievous has been known to fail.”

True. Durd felt his face twist with revulsion. “Then I’ll give the order to kill them. Either way, droid—the Jedi are dead.”

OBI-WAN WAS TRYING TO SNATCH a few minutes of sleep when he was jolted upright by a familiar but totally unexpected presence.

Taria.

“Obi-Wan,” said Greti, and stopped rolling the bandage she held. “Are you greensick?”

He’d given up trying to send the child home. “No. I’m fine. Greti, put the bandages away and get some sleep.”

“You look funny,” she said. “Are you sure it’s not greensick, you are?”

He clambered to his feet, every muscle and bone protesting. “I said I’m fine. Now do as you’re told.”

“But—” Pouting, she slumped on her cot. “Where are you going?”

“Not far. Just into the street. I need some fresh air. Come and get me if a patient wakes.”

Nights were long on Lanteeb. Plasma blasts splattering against Anakin’s shield lit up the persistent darkness in fits and bursts. The bombardment’s *boom* and *blat* shuddered through his bones, but he hardly noticed it. After all this time he’d grown numb to the angry sound.

Taria? Are you there?

He felt the Force stir, sluggish.

Taria. So it hadn’t been a dream. *Taria.* But something was wrong. At least, more wrong. She felt drained, and full of pain. Worried for him.

I’m still breathing. Taria—

He felt what she wanted to do: Force-sprint her way through the massed droids and into the village. It was precisely the kind of mad plan Taria would dream up. And it just might work, but he'd need Anakin's help.

Seeking him in the Force, flinching at the physical cost of even so small a use of it, he found his former apprentice on the other side of the village, replacing a length of wiring in Shield Generator Three.

One look at him and Anakin was scowling, furious. "Obi-Wan? What are you *doing*? You *swore* you'd—"

"Be quiet," he snapped. "Taria's here and she needs to get in. If you power down Generator Seven, just for a moment, I'll hold off the droids."

Anakin stared at him, his face thin enough now to be the face of a stranger. "You're not kidding. Right. Guess I'll come back to this."

They pushed themselves into a jog and followed the shield perimeter to Generator Seven. For the first time in days, Obi-Wan looked at the droids on its other side. Thirty of them in this section, steadily blasting away. He felt a hot rage rise.

Anakin glanced at him. "I know." Then he peered through the shield and past the droids. "I can't see her, Obi-Wan. Or feel her. Are you sure Master Damsin's—"

"Quite sure. Stand by the generator."

"Yes, Master," Anakin murmured, and did as he was told.

Centering himself, Obi-Wan pulled his lightsaber from the inside pocket of his filthy, tattered shirt and ignited the blade. Clean blue light sliced through the bombardment's red glow.

Taria? Here.

He felt her energy burst through the Force, heard Anakin's swiftly indrawn breath as he felt it, too. And then there was a chatter of mechanical alarm and battle droids were flying pell-mell into the air, Force-pushed like so many unwanted dolls.

Now, Obi-Wan! Now!

“Now, Anakin,” he said, and braced himself, lightsaber lifted.

Anakin cut the generator. First came a whining growl; then a section of plasma barrier collapsed. The scattered droids regrouped and opened fire.

“Obi-Wan!” said Anakin. “Let me—”

“No,” he said, knocking blaster bolts aside to left and right. “Stand by that shield!”

He felt Taria Force-sprinting toward him, but he still couldn’t see her. She must’ve been way behind the lines. Another eruption of droids. She was pushing and sprinting, the crazy woman.

Hurry, Taria, hurry. I can’t hold them much longer.

His lightsaber felt so heavy. He’d used up nearly all his strength in the sick house, poured it into the bodies of the men and women and children he didn’t want to die. Vision smearing, he heard Anakin curse, felt a sting of pain in him.

“It’s nothing, it only singed me! Obi-Wan—”

“I know, I know,” he gasped, struggling to stay on his feet, fighting to deflect the barrage of laser bolts. “She’s nearly here—nearly—”

Then he saw her, stumbling out of her Force sprint into ordinary running, all her strength used up, just like him. Full of desperate intensity, just like him. Taria, who shouldn’t be here ... and somehow was.

As she crossed the shield perimeter a blaster bolt caught her high in the back. She cried out and went down hard, skidding face-first across the dirt and grass.

“*Taria!*” He dropped his lightsaber and lunged for her. “Anakin, get the shield up!”

But Anakin didn't need telling. Generator Seven was already humming back to life, a fresh flow of plasma particles resealing them inside the village. Then at the last moment a cloud of mosquito droids slipped through the swiftly closing gap and descended on them in a swarm.

"I've got them!" shouted Anakin. "You look after Taria!"

On his knees beside her, Obi-Wan watched as Anakin snatched up his dropped lightsaber with one hand and ignited his own weapon with the other. The twelve mosquitoes attacked—and within heartbeats he'd slashed them all to scrap metal.

Obi-Wan turned back to Taria, so still on the cold, hard ground—and his relief surrendered to a raw and shocking grief.

No, no, not like this. It's too soon. Taria—

"Hold on," he begged her. "I'm with you. Don't go."

He felt Anakin close behind him. "Obi-Wan, is she—"

His fingers were pressed to the pulse in her throat. He felt her blood, moving. Felt his eyes sting. "No. She's alive."

Groaning, Taria half rolled over. "Don't worry," she wheezed. "You can't get rid of me that easily. The bodysuit's a present from Senator Organa. Experimental. New energy-dispersal fabric. I'm a little singed, but not perforated." Another groan. "Help me sit up."

Obi-Wan slid his arm beneath her and lifted. When she was upright she let out a long sigh, then smiled at him. "Why, hello there, handsome. What's a nice boy like you doing on a backworld like this?"

Pent-up rage and terror exploded through him. "*Taria—*"

"Don't shout at me, I'm slightly wounded," she said, then smiled past him at Anakin. "Greetings, Master Skywalker. Or can I call you Skyguy?"

Anakin dropped to one knee, still holding both deactivated lightsabers. "Call me anything you like, Master Damsin, provided

you tell us what's going on."

The air boomed and echoed as the thwarted droids emptied their blasters against the plasma barrier. Eyebrows raised, Taria stared at them.

"Tell me that shield's going to hold, first."

Obi-Wan looked at Anakin. "It'll hold." He took back his lightsaber and tucked it into his shirt. "Taria, please. What are you *doing* here?"

"The very short version?" She winced, easing her right shoulder. "Durd's compound's destroyed. His stockpiles of bioweapon are gone with it, blown to smithereens."

"What about Durd?" said Anakin.

"The barve's still in one piece," she said. "He wasn't there."

Anakin's disappointment was palpable. "Then where is he? And where's his pet scientist Doctor Fhernan?"

Obi-Wan tried to check the blaster-hit in Taria's back, but she pushed his hand away, impatient. "Durd's somewhere on Lanteeb. As for Bant'ena Fhernan—I'm sorry. She's dead."

"Dead?" Anakin stared at her. "You blew her up with the compound?"

Taria's face was full of sorrow. "No, she blew herself up. Anakin, all she cared about was making sure you and Obi-Wan were safe. And—she wanted to make amends."

Obi-Wan exchanged glances with Anakin, then sighed. "So, you left the explosives with her and came after us? Taria—"

"It was her choice, Obi-Wan. I honored it."

Of course you did. Taking her hand, he checked the thready pulse in her wrist. "We'll talk about it later. What else is—"

"There are more droids on the way," Taria said grimly. "With a lot of ammunition. My guess is they're right behind me."

“Stang,” said Anakin, and pressed fingertips to his eyes. “Master Damsin, you picked the wrong time to make a house call.”

Still holding Taria’s hand, Obi-Wan could feel the bright hot pain of the blaster hit. And there was something beneath it, something darker and deeper ... ruthlessly devouring her.

Oh, no.

“Obi-Wan,” she said, her voice soft. “It’s all right.”

No, it wasn’t. But his grief and anger would have to wait. “Tell us the rest.”

He and Anakin listened in growing alarm as she filled them in: Chandrila and the widespread panic following the attack, how Mace Windu’s battle group was hopelessly outnumbered, and how one of the greatest scientists in the Republic couldn’t create an antidote to Durd’s bioweapon.

“There’s some kind of missing biosequence,” she said. “That’s what Yoda said, anyway. Something to do with neutralizing the raw damotite. I don’t really understand it. All I know for certain is that Doctor Netzl is stuck. We’re all stuck and—” The look on Anakin’s face stopped her. “What?”

Anakin’s eyes were fierce. “Obi-Wan—are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

TWENTY



OBI-WAN NODDED, THE FIRST HOPE HE'D FELT IN DAYS STIRRING to life. "Sufi's herbs. It's possible. At the very least it has to be helpful, surely. Anakin—"

Anakin turned to Taria. "Did you bring a comlink?"

"Of course," she said, frowning. "And we need to contact Master Windu on *Indomitable*, tell him—"

"What kind of comlink?" Anakin demanded. "Can it transmit bio-info?"

Taria fished in her bodysuit pocket. "I think so. According to Banyaro it can practically fly a ship on its own."

Obi-Wan took the comlink from her, and inspected it. "We must get to the sick house. Not just for you, Taria. There's something Bail's scientist friend needs to know."

"You're not making any sense," she said, puzzled. "Did you get hit by a blaster bolt?"

"No. Come on. Can you stand?"

"Of course I can," she snapped, pushing him aside. "I'm not—oh."

Ravaged with disease, her strength depleted, she couldn't get up. And there was no way he could carry her, not even using the Force. Neither could Anakin. They were both simply too tired.

"Wait here," said Anakin, shoving his lightsaber into his shirt pocket. "I'll go find an antigrav sled."

As he vanished into the darkness, Taria looked at the droids on the other side of the shield. They were still firing their blasters. “Don’t they ever give up?”

Obi-Wan shook his head. “Sadly, no.”

“That’s aggravating. No wonder you’re tetchy.” She patted his knee. “Hey. Sorry to be such a bother.”

A *bother*? He tucked a wisp of hair behind her ear. “Don’t be silly. Taria, let me see that blaster burn.”

She took his hand between both of hers. “In a moment.” Reading him, her eyes widened. “*Obi-Wan*.”

Even if he’d wanted to hide from her, he couldn’t. His self-control was too far eroded, his carefully constructed inner barriers smashed flat. And she was ... who she was. She could feel every pain in him, sense every overstretched nerve and sinew.

He made himself meet her shocked gaze. “Don’t scold. I had no choice.”

Letting go of his hand, she stroked her fingers down the side of his face, tracing every hollow and sharp thrust of bone. “I could smack you.”

“And I could smack you right back. Taria, why did you come?”

“Somebody had to.” She tried to smile at him, and failed. “Obi-Wan ...”

The pain in her was growing fiercer. What it had *cost* her, to make this journey. “How did you fool the Separatists?” he said, to distract her. “Get through Grievous’s blockade and into the city?”

The question provoked an unexpected snuffle of amusement. “That was all Master Yoda’s doing. He’s awfully sneaky, you know. With a little help from your friend Senator Organa and some Five Hundred First pilots, I staged a daring gauntlet run of our Republic battle group in a genuine Sep ship, appeared to sustain serious

damage, then staged a crash landing not far from Durd's compound. Tragically, I didn't survive."

Now it was his turn to stare. "You stashed a *body* in the ship?"

"Yes." She frowned. "D'you know, if he wasn't so charming I think I might find Senator Organa a bit ... creepy."

Bail had arranged it? *My friend, I am sorry.* "Taria, I wish Yoda had sent someone else."

"There was no one else," she said. "Things are bad out there, Obi-Wan." Then she pulled a face. "Mind you, they aren't looking too cheerful in here."

"That's because they're not," he said—and to his shame, he heard his voice break.

"Stang." She sighed. Her arms went around him, pulling him close. "What a mess."

"Don't," he protested. "I'm all right. And we must contact Master Windu and—"

She tightened her hold. "Master Windu can wait till we've something definite to tell him. Hush now. Hush. You're so tired. Hush."

He felt something deep inside him break. Hiding his face against her, he let himself go.

STUNNED, ANAKIN STOOD IN the shadows and watched Taria Damsin comfort Obi-Wan. Watched how she held him, how she stroked his hair and rubbed his back, her hands moving, her voice a soft, ceaseless murmur. He saw how Obi-Wan surrendered to her voice and her touch, how unguarded he was within her embrace.

They're lovers. Or they were. He never told me. I never guessed.

Lost in each other, they were oblivious to the droids—and to him.

All those lectures about not needing anyone, about the importance of staying emotionally detached? And look at him. Look at him. He's

drowning *in her*. *He loves her*.

And what did it mean? That everything Obi-Wan had said was a lie? That he was *living* a lie, denying his feelings, enforcing the Order's ban on love not because he believed in it, but because he wasn't strong enough to defy it?

It felt like a betrayal. It *was* a betrayal.

Padmé.

Saying something, his low voice indistinct, Obi-Wan eased himself free of Taria Damsin's arms. Then he cupped her face with his hand, and kissed her lightly on the lips.

Cold to his core, Anakin kicked the antigrav sled into motion and with a whining of servos pushed it forward. "Sorry to take so long," he said, crossing into the pale pool of light cast by the plasma shield and the generator. "You know how it is. Couldn't find a sled I liked."

Obi-Wan stood, his face carefully blank. "Anakin."

"We should get moving," he said, guiding the sled closer. "I have to get back to checking the generators—and Devi's going to need a break soon."

Obi-Wan slid Master Damsin's comlink inside his shirt. "Yes. Of course."

Between them they helped her onto the sled and returned to the sick house, where Teeba Sufi stared at them, astonished.

"A new patient?" she said, unable to hide her dismay. And then she saw the lightsaber at Taria's hip. "Another *Jedi*? Where did she —"

"I'll explain everything later, Sufi," said Obi-Wan, easing Master Damsin onto a cot. "Is there still some greensickness medicine left? All I need is a drop. A smear will do. It's very important."

Teeba Sufi's lips pinched tight. "Why do you want it? There's not enough to waste, Teeb."

“Sufi, I promise—this won’t be a waste,” said Obi-Wan. “Please.”

“All right,” Teeba Sufi said grudgingly, and withdrew to the cupboard at the back of the room.

Obi-Wan pulled out Master Damsin’s comlink. “It’s secure?” he asked her.

Deathly pale, she nodded. “And priority coded for Master Windu.” As Obi-Wan flipped the comlink open, she shifted her gaze. “Anakin? Are you all right?”

This wasn’t the time or place to talk of love and lies. “I’m fine. Just tired.”

He hadn’t fooled her. “Yes,” she murmured. “I can see that.”

The comlink crackled, a secure channel established.

“Indomitable, this is Kenobi,” said Obi-Wan. “Do you copy?”

“Obi-Wan, this is Mace Windu. What’s your status?”

Anakin closed his eyes. For once it was good to hear Master Windu’s deep voice.

“We’re holding on, but our grip is fast slipping,” said Obi-Wan. “Durd’s droid army will break through our defenses very soon. Master, Taria Damsin’s reached us and has explained the situation. We might have an answer to Doctor Netzl’s dilemma. Stand by for a biotransmission.”

“Standing by,” said Master Windu. Not even distance and decades of severe Jedi training could keep the suppressed excitement from his voice.

Turning, Obi-Wan looked at Teeb Sufi, who was hovering behind them with an almost empty bottle of herbal muck in her hand.

“Thank you, Sufi. Anakin—”

He took the bottle from her, unstoppered it, and with enormous care dripped a little of the foul stuff onto the fancy comlink’s

bioscan plate. The comlink hummed, then beeped. Obi-Wan hit the transmit switch.

“Got it,” said Master Windu. “Patching it through to the Temple now.”

“Tell Doctor Netzl that whatever the active ingredients are, they’ve proven effective in counteracting damotite poisoning.”

“Will do,” said Master Windu. “Obi-Wan, I won’t mince words—we’re getting pounded up here. Without more ships we won’t break Grievous’s blockade. I don’t know if we’ll get to you before Durd’s droids do.”

“Understood,” said Obi-Wan. “Durd’s weapon is destroyed. That’s what matters.”

“We’re not pulling out yet, Obi-Wan,” Master Windu retorted. “So sit tight. And let me speak to Master Damsin.”

Taking the comlink, Taria Damsin cleared her throat. “Master Windu.”

“I ordered you to lay low until we could arrange an extraction.”

“Yes, Master, you did.”

“Now I’ve got three potential Jedi hostages in play.”

“Master Windu, none of us will let it come to that.”

“Taria—”

“Mace, I’m sorry,” she said. “But did you really think I was going to turn my back on them?”

Anakin felt his eyebrows lift. *Mace?* He looked at Obi-Wan, who shrugged. His face and eyes were guarded. He knew, oh yes, he knew, that his former apprentice was displeased.

“Master Windu,” Master Damsin added. “We’re all right. You focus on Grievous. And when this is over you can shout at me in person.”

“Bet on it,” said Master Windu. *“Indomitable out.”*

Anakin looked again at Obi-Wan. “I’ve got to go.”

“I know,” said Obi-Wan. “Taria, give me a moment. Sufi?”

Frightened, Teeba Sufi swallowed. “Obi-Wan?”

“Where’s Greti? Did you send her home?”

“I tried,” said Teeba Sufi. “She wouldn’t go. She’s sleeping next door.”

“Then I’m sorry, but can you wake her? Master Damsin’s hurt.”

“She’s just a *child*, Obi-Wan, and she’s worn out,” the Teeba protested. “She’s helped you enough. I can see to your friend. Young Greti needs—”

Obi-Wan touched Teeba Sufi’s arm. “Please. It’s important. And Greti would want to help.”

“Obi-Wan—” Master Damsin tried to sit up. “Maybe—”

“Be quiet,” Obi-Wan snapped, glaring down at her. “Lie still. I’ll be back in a moment.”

Anakin led the way outside. On the sick house step Obi-Wan caught his arm. “Anakin ...”

He pulled away. *“Don’t.”*

Obi-Wan’s dimly lit face was full of understanding, and sorrow. “Anakin—it was a long time go. It ended a long time ago.”

His sleeping anger woke. *Really? It didn’t look like that to me.* “You love her.”

“She’s my friend.”

He felt his fingers fist. *Don’t you lie. Not about this. Don’t you dare.* “You love her.”

Monotonous blasterfire filled the silence between them. Then Obi-Wan nodded. “Yes, Anakin, I love her. But I was never in love. For a

short while Taria and I needed each other. And when we no longer needed each other, we parted—and remained friends.”

So that was how it worked, was it? Stay aloof, stay detached, never let yourself feel too much, too deeply, and the Order didn’t care?

So if Padmé and I pretended we weren’t in love ...

“Anakin,” Obi-Wan said sharply. “Don’t. Are you going to tell me that if you crossed that line with Padmé you could cross back again? That you would *ever* be satisfied with only being her friend?”

The thought was unbearable. *Never*. “Are you saying *you’re* satisfied?”

Obi-Wan met his gaze without flinching. “Yes.” It was the truth. Baffled, his anger dying, Anakin folded his arms.

“I don’t understand you, Obi-Wan.”

Obi-Wan almost smiled. “I know.”

And something tells me I never will. Not when it comes to this, anyway.

“I have to go,” he said. “The fuel lines need checking and Devi can’t do it alone.”

“I’ll join you soon,” said Obi-Wan. “I just want to see Taria settled.” A muscle leapt along his jaw. “See if there’s anything I can do to—”

The Force shivered a grim warning. “She’s in trouble, isn’t she?”

“She’s out of remission,” Obi-Wan said, his voice oddly flat. “Aggressively.”

Anakin felt a surge of pity—not just for Master Damsin, but for Obi-Wan, too. No amount of Jedi training could buffer this kind of grief. Didn’t he know that from bitter personal experience?

But I had Padmé to soften the blow. And I was willing to let her help me. He won’t let anyone help. He still thinks he has to face everything

alone.

“Can’t she go back into remission?”

Staring across the shadowed village square, Obi-Wan shook his head. “I don’t think so. Not this time. She’s pushed herself too hard, too far.”

For you. But he couldn’t say that. Not with Obi-Wan’s pain scorching in the Force. “I’m sorry. I really am.”

A long silence. Then Obi-Wan released a shuddering breath. “I know,” he said, glancing at him. “So am I.”

“Obi-Wan ...” He had to say this. “Taria’s not the only one in trouble.”

“I know that, too.”

“So what do you think? Wait for the droid reinforcements to get here and roll the dice on one last big stand?”

“I think ...” Obi-Wan dragged both hands down his face. “I think it’s a shame about Doctor Fhernan.”

Anakin looked down. *Bant’ena.* Flawed, misguided, and ultimately heroic. There was pain for her, somewhere, but he couldn’t afford to feel it. Not now.

“She had her chance. I’ll see you at the plant.”

“YOU KNOW,” said Tryn, edgy with irritation, “this would go a lot faster if you three stopped *hovering*.”

“Sorry,” said Bail. “But we’ve got some anxious people who’ll only believe an eyewitness account.”

Tryn set down his datapad. “Fine. But you can witness from over there.” He pointed to the other side of the lab. “*Seriously*, Bail. You are cramping my style.”

“Our apologies, Doctor Netzl,” said Yoda. “Space to work we will give you.”

“Yes, sorry,” Padmé added. “We’ll get out of your way.”

They shifted to the other side of the lab and watched in silence as Tryn ran a series of complicated biosimulations using the data Obi-Wan had provided.

“I still can’t believe this,” Padmé muttered. “How many more last-minute reprieves are we going to get?”

Bail frowned. “We’re not reprieved yet.”

“Oh, I think we are,” she said. “I have a feeling. Don’t you, Master Yoda?”

Resting on his gimer stick, Yoda sighed. “Hopeful I am, Senator. Say more than that I will not.”

“Can you say if we’ll get Obi-Wan and Anakin back?” Bail asked. “And Master Damsin?”

Padmé tensed. “Yes, we will. We have to.”

Bail rested his hand on her shoulder. It was a warning, the closest he could come to telling her *Be careful. You keep it secret for a reason.*

On the other side of the lab, Tryn’s scientific gadgets started beeping. Then a series of holoidimages appeared, complicated multibranched coded-sequence matrixes, slowly rotating above each gadget’s small imaging pad. Red. Red. Red. Red.

“Stang,” said Padmé. “Red’s bad, isn’t it?”

Bail watched exhausted Tryn’s face fall. “Yeah. Red’s bad.”

And then a fifth holoidimage coalesced, slowly rotating. Instead of red, it was a rainbow of colors—and Tryn was smiling. He was *laughing*. He pounded his lab bench with both fists.

“That’s it!” he cried. “That’s the sequence. That’s the missing link and it *works*.”

Bail crossed the lab in a few swift strides. “You’re sure? Tryn—*are you sure?*”

“I’ll synthesize a sample and test it,” said Tryn, grinning, “but yes. I’m sure. We’ve got ourselves an antidote. The key was in those three active bioingredients. All naturally occurring, all easily synthesized. It was just a matter of getting the balance right.”

“How soon before you’ve got live test results?”

“Give me an hour.”

And after that it was simply a matter of high-speed bulk manufacture. But that was under control, thanks to the cooperation of a Corellian medchem company with facilities in Coruscant’s high-end Abroganto scientific research precinct. They had an entire production complex on standby, waiting for his word.

“Doctor Netzl, you are *good*,” Bail said, shaking his head. “So. We get the antidote into production by this afternoon—ship enough doses for every citizen on Bepin, just in case our team can’t stop Durd in time—and the rest we stockpile for insurance.” He turned. “Padmé—”

She held up her comlink, her dark eyes alight with triumph. “I’m on hold for Brentaal’s Prime Minister now. Master Yoda, we’ve got our civilian fleet.”

Master Yoda rapped his gimer stick on the floor. “Then leave you to your business I will. Make contact with the Lanteeb battle group I must. Inform me you must when ready to depart your civilian fleet is.”

“Of course, Master Yoda,” Bail said. “I’ll keep you informed every step of the way.” With Yoda departed, and Padmé still on her comlink, he looked again at Tryn. “I don’t know what to say. What we asked you to do ... it was impossible. And you did it.”

Tryn dragged chemical-stained fingers through his lank, unraveled hair. “I did some of it. But without that missing link—without your Jedi friend—” He laughed. “I can’t believe how it worked out. That they’d end up in the one place that could give us

the answer? How does that happen? It's crazy. It's impossible. It's—it's *unscientific*."

And that made Bail smile. "The Force isn't science, Tryn. The Force just ... nudges things along."

Tryn's eyes widened. "The Force? Since when did you put your faith in mystical powers?"

"Since they saved my life," he said simply. "It's a long story. I'll tell you some of it when this is over."

"In that case you'd better let me get back to work," said Tryn. But then he hesitated. "Bail, this friend of yours. This Jedi. He's not safe yet, is he."

A cold shiver of dread. "No," he said. "He's not."

"I'm sorry."

"Comm me when you've got your live test results and I'll start the ball rolling on the next step."

"Bail?" said Padmé, calling across the lab. "Brentaal's confirmed. We need to coordinate with everyone else, then set up a holoconference for the fleet's captains and commanders. Let's go."

Bail gave Tryn a crushing hug, startling them both. "The Republic's in your debt, Tryn," he said, stepping back. "I'm in your debt. Whatever you want. Ask and it's yours."

Tryn let his gaze flick to Padmé, waiting impatiently at the laboratory door. "I wouldn't mind a candlelit dinner with your other friend, over there."

"I'm sorry," he said, "but I think she's spoken for." He grinned. "How about a candlelit dinner with me?"

Tryn kicked them both out so he could get back to work.

"This is important, Bail. This *means* something. I can feel it," said Padmé as he flew them back to her apartment. "Despite the difficulties and in the face of real danger, the people of the Republic

have come together. Not for profits, not for power or prestige or anything ordinary. But because it's the right thing to do. Because it's a chance to spit evil in the eye."

He loved her confidence, her unrelenting dedication to any cause she took up. But as he slid his speeder out of the main traffic flow and into the priority lane that was the fastest way to her apartment, he glanced at her and saw the churning fear in her eyes.

"We'll get them back, Padmé," he said, and took her hand in his. "We're not leaving them on Lanteeb."

"I know," she said. "I know. Our boys are coming home."

She looked strong. She sounded strong. But her fingers in his were cold, and holding him so tightly he was hard-pressed not to wince.

He flew the rest of the way one-handed ... and tried hard not to think about all the ways the Lanteeb rescue could go wrong.

AFTER NEARLY FOUR HOURS of unrelenting effort, finally Obi-Wan had to accept he'd done as much as he could for Taria, at least for the time being. The droids and ammunition she'd warned them of had arrived a short while ago, but despite the renewed, ferocious bombardment, she slept. Still each exhaled breath was edged with a rasping hint of pain. Beneath her tranquil face there was pain. From now on, because she was so brave and so stubborn, pain would dominate every remaining day of her life.

"All right," he said, and tugged the light blanket over her shoulder. "That's enough for now."

"But she's not better," said Greti, drooping on a stool beside him. The child was exhausted. He'd had no right to ask again for her help, but it was *Taria*. And they needed her in this fight.

"She's better than she was," he said. "Thanks to you, Greti. The strength you lent me made the difference. Now you should get some rest, too."

“Teeb Kenobi’s right,” said Sufi, drying her hands at the sink. “It’s more than enough you’ve done, child.”

Obi-Wan glanced at her. She was still furious with him for waking Greti, for asking the girl to pit herself against Taria’s disease.

He nudged Greti with his knee. “You should listen to Teeba Sufi.”

“But—”

“*Greti.*”

With a huffing sigh, Greti gave in.

“You both need rest,” said Sufi, picking her way through her other patients to join him. “Go next door and sleep, Teeb. I’ll wake you if your friend stirs.”

Stifling his own pain, Obi-Wan stood. “I can’t. I’m long overdue at the plant. Please, make sure that Greti either goes home or sleeps here.”

She didn’t bother trying to argue with him. “Do what you like, you will.”

“Obi-Wan ...”

Surprised, he turned. “Rikkard?”

Torbel’s head miner shoved his blanket aside, sat up and swung his feet to the floor. “If you’re going to the plant then I’m going with you.”

“You’re not,” said Sufi. “You’re—”

Rikkard stood, unsteady but resolute. “I am.”

Obi-Wan looked at him. Days of illness had left the miner haggard, but he wasn’t dying. “All right.”

“Teeb Kenobi—”

“Sufi,” Obi-Wan said, hand raised. “We’ve decisions to make. Rikkard’s your speaker. It’s his right to be there.”

“If it’s a speaker you need, fetch Jaklin! She can—”

“We both know Jaklin’s—not well,” he said. “Please. We must go.” He tapped his fingers on Greti’s hair. “And you? Mind Teeba Sufi.”

Rikkard paused to kiss his sleeping son’s forehead, then they left the sick house. Dawn was breaking. Beyond the plasma shield the new light bounced and sparkled on the mass of battle droids, ceaselessly firing at the shield. Rikkard stared at them.

“Your sick friend, Teeb. Is she the only help that’s coming?”

There was no point pretending. “Perhaps. I hope not.”

“Two of us, that makes,” Rikkard muttered.

If there was news, Master Windu would have commed. They’d spoken once more since their first comm. *Status unchanged*. It wasn’t what he’d wanted to hear.

“Come on,” Obi-Wan said, thrusting doubt aside. “Anakin’s waiting.”

FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, they stood with Anakin and Devi in the power plant’s substation, surveying Torbel’s depleted supply of liquid damotite.

“That’s it?” said Rikkard, shocked. “That’s all we’ve got left? But—that’s a good month’s supply gone in days.”

“There wasn’t a choice, Rikkard,” said Devi. “Keeping the shield running and strong—that’s thirsty work. Especially for our old plant.”

“I know,” said Rikkard, sighing. “I’m not blaming you, Dev.”

Obi-Wan exchanged glances with Anakin. “Blame us,” he said. “We brought this on you.”

“I’d like to, believe me,” said Rikkard, glowering. “But then I look at my son—and I think of that filthy damotite weapon—” He shook

his head. “What good does blame do anyway? Won’t save lives, will it? But with all those new droids out there ...”

“Don’t worry about them,” said Anakin. “I can reconfigure the shields again.”

Rikkard looked at him. “And run through what’s left of our fuel in twice the time?”

“Sorry. That’s the trade-off.”

Rikkard rasped a hand over his stubbled chin. “And if I agree, you buy us how long? A day?”

“Maybe two,” said Anakin. “It should be enough, if the reinforcements arrive for our battle group—if they can break through Grievous’s blockade and—”

“If,” said Rikkard, scornful. “It’s all hope and guesswork, isn’t it? For all you know the Republic’s ready to cut its losses. Admit it, boy. We’re facing death.”

“That might be true, Rikkard,” Obi-Wan said quietly, “but this much I can promise: It won’t be because the Republic deserted us.”

“Rikkard.” Unsteady in her broken-down antigrav harness, Devi took hold of his arm. “We’ve trusted them this far.”

Aged years by his illness, beaten down with pain and grief, Rikkard nodded and turned away. “Do what you like. It makes no difference.”

“*Rikkard*—” Devi bit her lip, watching him stamp out of the fuel store. “I’ll go after him. Anakin, reconfigure the shields. Obi-Wan, you’ll need to recheck every feed valve in Bays Three through Twelve. I’ll come help you when I can.”

Alone again, Obi-Wan looked at Anakin. “You’re sure about this? What you’re planning—the shield generators can stand it? The power plant can stand it?”

Anakin grimaced. “Not for long, they can’t. But maybe for long enough, if we’re lucky. And I know—you don’t believe in luck.” He

shrugged. "But I say it can't hurt to cross our fingers, just this once."

With a small, tired smile, he nodded. "Just this once." Anakin was looking haggard, too, after another long night without sleep. "How's Master Damsin?"

"She's sleeping."

"Obi-Wan—"

Sympathy, however well meant, would undo him. "Come on," he said. "We've got work to do."

BY THE TIME THE SUN was halfway to noon, the shields were reconfigured, the power plant's decrepit feed valves had been cleaned of accumulated impurities and six sections of shorting circuitry were replaced. With everything done that could be done, for the moment, the four of them met up in the monitoring station.

"And that's it?" said Rikkard. He looked ready to drop. "What about the Republic? Teeb Kenobi—"

"They'll comm when things change," Obi-Wan said. "It would be a mistake to chivvy them. In the meantime, we do what we can."

"I've been thinking about that," said Anakin. "If the shield fails before help reaches us, we'll be fighting hand to hand. Thanks to those droids, we've got some blasters. We've got vibro-picks and other mining tools. And we've got what we need to improvise grenades."

Feeling sick, Obi-Wan closed his eyes. *These are villagers, not soldiers. It'll be a slaughter.* Then he nodded. "Agreed."

"You want us to fight?" said Rikkard. "Teebs, we'll fight. But there's not a man or woman here who's ever fired a blaster."

"Or made a grenade," added Devi.

"Don't worry," said Anakin. "We'll show you how."

Rikkard rubbed the ropy scars on his head. "You'll have to."

“But you both must rest first,” said Devi. “You’ve bought us a little time, Teebs. Now use it wisely.”

Obi-Wan looked at Anakin. “She’s right. We can afford an hour.”

“You can afford two,” Devi snapped. “Better yet, three. You’re as much a resource to Torbel as our liquid damotite. Don’t squander yourselves. We can’t afford it.”

“You heard the Teeba,” said Rikkard. “Three hours. We can mind the power plant and the shield without you that long. Now go. That’s my ruling, as village speaker.”

Too tired to argue, they went.

TARIA WOKE to Obi-Wan’s pain as he tried yet again to heal her.

“Obi-Wan, stop,” she whispered. “You’re not helping me and you’re only hurting yourself.”

He shook his head. “No. I can do this. I just need to—I haven’t quite got the knack of—” His fist hit the side of her cot. “I’m not *trained*, that’s the problem. But I can—”

“*Obi-Wan!*” She caught his wrist. “I said no. I don’t want you to do this.”

Filthy and unkempt, he stared at her. “Taria, I can’t sit here and do nothing.”

“Of course you can,” she said gently. “Because there’s nothing you can do.”

As the *boom* and *blat* of blasterfire rattled the sick house’s window and its open doors, Taria looked around the room. Anakin was asleep in a nearby cot, Sufi was outside in the street, and there was no sign of the little girl, Greti. With her fellow patients lulled to silence by herbs and sickness, she and Obi-Wan were as good as alone.

“You shouldn’t have come,” he said, staring at his hands.

She released his wrist. "Don't talk nonsense. That bioweapon had to be destroyed."

"You shouldn't have come *here*," he snapped. "You're a fool."

"I know," she said, and pressed her palm to his cheek. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

Jerkily he pushed himself off his stool. "No. No. Don't mind me, Taria. I'm just tired."

Tired? She couldn't think of a word to describe what he was. Empty, perhaps? Having poured so much of himself into healing these people, into keeping them alive? Yes. He was empty.

Or he was. But now here I am, filling him with grief.

"Obi-Wan ..."

He kept his back to her. He was so *thin*. He and Anakin were worn down to skin and bones, living on the Force. *And he calls me crazy?* "Obi-Wan," she said again. "Please."

Slowly, he turned. His face was naked, every guarded feeling laid bare. If they'd been in love once, it was only for a moment, in the breathless, fresh excitement of discovery, in that first annihilating shock of pleasure. But it had passed, which was a good thing, and in passing had transmuted to something deep and sure and true.

"Obi-Wan, you have to listen to me," she said. "Really listen. And believe every word."

Step by step he came back to her, and sat down again.

"I've been a dead woman walking ever since Pamina Prime," she said, keeping her voice low. Willing him to *hear* her, and believe. "We both know that. So it wasn't ever about living longer, but what I got to do with the life that was left to me. What I'm doing here?" She waved her hand, feeling the bite in bone and muscle. "Stopping Durd, helping to save you and Skyguy and this village? It's important. So even if it hastens what must come to pass, Obi-Wan,

how can I not rejoice? And how can you love me yet not rejoice for me?"

He shrugged. "I'm selfish, Taria. I don't want to lose you."

Though it woke the sharpest hurt in her, she sat up. "I made my peace with this dying business long ago. Don't poison what little time we have left."

For a moment she watched him struggle with that. Then she leaned forward and cradled his face between her hands.

"I'm going to tell you this now because I might not get a chance later," she whispered. "They call Anakin the Chosen One but you have a destiny, too. You have a long road to walk and it won't always be easy. I wish I could walk it with you, but that's not meant to be. So you remember what I'm telling you, Obi-Wan. Everything happens for a reason. *Everything*. The good, the bad, the indifferent. They all have a purpose. Never forget who you are. Never forget what you serve. And no matter what happens, keep your face turned to the light."

She watched her words sink through his skin and beneath the surface of his luminous eyes. She watched the grief rise in him, and the rage, and the despair. She watched his courage drown all of them.

She watched him ... let go.

Beside them, Anakin stirred awake as Teeba Sufi bustled back into the sick house. Taria dropped her hands to her lap.

She smiled. "All right?"

"What's all right?" said Anakin, groggy. "What's going on?"

"Nothing yet," said Obi-Wan, and slapped him on the back. "On your feet, Anakin. We've slept long enough."

TWENTY-ONE



STARING FROM ADMIRAL YULAREN TO MASTER WINDU AND back again, Ashoka felt every predator instinct stir.

Oh, no. This isn't good.

"Master Windu," said the admiral, his voice clipped, "while I appreciate the difficulty of your position I *must* think of my troops. You know as well as I that the acceleration of clone production has not succeeded as Fleet anticipated. Given the slowdown of numbers leaving the Kaminoan facility I *cannot* agree to prolonging this mission. Hammer and Arrow squadrons have lost almost one-quarter of their pilots each and Gold Squadron isn't far behind.

"It's time to return home."

Ahsoka, standing far to one side and forgotten, sucked in a sharp breath. She could feel Master Windu's coldness in the Force, and his ruthless self-mastery as he controlled it. More than anything she wanted to shout *Stop it! The enemy's out there, not here in Battle Ops*. But she couldn't say a word. She was a Padawan, a nobody, compared with these men.

If Skyguy was here he'd say something. He'd speak up.

And the problem was, she was pretty sure what he'd say. *Admiral Yularen's right. I don't want anyone dying for me*. And if she heard him say that, well, then she'd be the one arguing.

I'm with Master Windu. We can't leave them behind.

Then came a great shudder in the Force as Master Windu released all emotion. "Admiral, help is coming. We only need a little longer.

If we play felinx-and-rodus with Grievous, if we abandon this position and instead spread out the battle group, give him four scattered targets instead of—”

“No,” said the admiral. “Master Windu, I’m sorry, but I ask you not to do that. For the sake of your crew, for the sake of—”

“Admiral?” It was Lieutenant Avrey, on comm. *“I have a Priority Alpha signal coming through from the Jedi Temple. It’s Master Yoda. He’s asking for you.”*

Admiral Yularen hit the comm switch. “Patch it through, Lieutenant.”

Master Yoda wanted the admiral? Ahsoka, caught staring, felt herself blush as Master Windu fixed her with a cold look.

“Well, Padawan? What do you think?”

She lifted her chin. “Master, I think we don’t leave them behind unless we have to. And I don’t think we have to. Not yet.”

His nodded, his eyes suddenly warm. “Good answer.”

And then Master Yoda’s voice, slightly distorted by distance, came through the comm. *“Agreement we have reached with an auxiliary civilian fleet, Admiral. On its way to you now it is. Agreed to accept your temporary authority, the ship’s captains have. Remain at Lanteeb, can you, until arrive they do?”*

Admiral Yularen clasped his hands behind his back. “Master Yoda, our position is precarious. We’ve already sustained significant casualties. Grievous is holding fire for the moment, but that could change and we do not have the means to overcome him.”

“Have it you will soon, Admiral.”

“How soon, Master Yoda?”

“Within hours.”

“Master Yoda—what is the Supreme Chancellor’s position on this?”

“Asked us, has Supreme Chancellor Palpatine, to rescue the trapped Jedi.”

A long silence. Then Yularen nodded. “Very well, Master Yoda. We’ll wait until this ... fleet ... arrives.”

“My thanks you have, Admiral. Good hunting.”

Master Windu turned. “Padawan Tano—go belowdecks. Inform the Five Hundred First that they’ll be seeing action in the next few hours. Once the skies are clear, ground troops will be going in.”

“Yes, Master Windu,” she said, and came close to running out of the room.

The minute Rex saw her face, he held up a fist and silenced the entire mess, where everyone from the 501st, ground troops and pilots alike, were gathered to remember the dead and wait for action.

The weight of the clones’ stares was a fearsome thing.

“We’re going in,” she said to the room at large. “As soon as our reinforcements arrive we’re going to smash through that blockade to save Master Skywalker and Master Kenobi—and Master Damsin, too.”

The 501st let out a cheer. In the noisy aftermath, Rex came to stand with her. “You all right, little’un?”

It wasn’t until he asked her that she realized how not right she was. Stuck up here, above Lanteeb, away from Anakin, knowing how much trouble he was in, catching only fleeting snatches of him in the Force, not being able to fight by his side. Dreading that with every minute they’d get word of his death ... or even worse, that she’d feel it.

“I’m fine,” she told Rex, daring him to contradict her. “Just looking forward to getting my boots on the ground, y’know?”

His eyes told her he could see the truth, but he smiled. “I know, Ahsoka. Never mind. It won’t be long. And then we’ll be downstairs

kicking some tinnie clanker butt—and dragging our favorite Jedi to safety by the scruff of his neck.”

She grinned. “I’ll tell him you said that, Rex.”

“Little’un,” he retorted. “I’m counting on it.”

* * *

“TEEBBA, I don’t think you should be doing this,” said Sufi. “I don’t think Teeb Kenobi would approve.”

Feeling the sluggish flow of her blood, Taria unfolded from her stretch. “Sufi, I know he wouldn’t. So isn’t it a good thing I don’t answer to him?”

“He’ll be cross,” said the little girl, Greti, whose startling presence in the Force shouted to be noticed. “Prickly he is, when he’s cross.”

Prickly. Taria grinned. “He can prickle at me all he likes. Won’t make a blind bit of difference.”

Teeba Sufi and the child exchanged looks.

“Truly,” she added, and slipped the activated comlink into her bodysuit’s thigh pocket. “There’s no need to fret. I’ve known Obi-Wan my whole life, almost. If he’s cross with me, well, it won’t be the first time.”

Greti looked ready to argue. Then she changed her mind, and instead turned suddenly shy. “Teeba ...”

Taria dropped to a crouch before her. “Yes, Greti?”

“Your hair,” said the girl. “It’s—pretty, it is.”

Xenophobic, Senator Organa had called the people of Lanteeb. Rigidly prejudiced against anyone different.

“I expect it takes a little getting used to, doesn’t it?” Taria said softly, and with a glance included Teeba Sufi. “I don’t suppose you’ve ever seen hair this color before.”

Teeba Sufi’s face was stiff. “No.”

“It’s just hair. Underneath it, I’m the same as you.”

“No, you’re not,” said Greti, shaking her head. “Underneath it, you’re a Jedi.”

There was a deep, aching regret in the child’s voice. Looking at her, Taria realized Greti understood she was trapped here. For a moment she was furious with Obi-Wan, for waking the girl’s potential when he *knew* he’d have to leave her behind. And then she sighed.

He did what he had to. I can’t blame him for that.

Standing, she looked at Sufi. “I have to go. Stay inside. No matter what you hear—don’t leave this sick house. Not unless there’s an order.”

Sufi reached for the child and pulled her close. “We won’t.”

“What about Bohle?” Greti protested.

“Her mam,” said Sufi. “I’ll send for her, Greti. Let the Teeba be about her business now.”

With a smile and a touch to Greti’s cheek, Taria left them. Outside, the square was alive with some thirty of the healthiest villagers learning the rudiments of blaster firing and how to throw what looked like homemade grenades. Their courage was admirable ... and heartbreaking. They didn’t stand a chance against that horde of droids on the other side of the shield. She watched for a while as Obi-Wan and Anakin moved from group to group, trying to impart years of training and months of frontline experience in minutes. A fool’s errand, some would call it—but what else could they do? Tell everyone to sit on the ground and wait for the droids to break through the shield and kill them like nerfs?

No. And neither can I.

Seeing her approach, Obi-Wan broke off his demonstration and walked to meet her. “*Taria—*”

She raised an eyebrow at him. “You’re surprised? Really?”

“No,” he said, and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“I see you’ve been busy making bombs.”

“Among other things,” he said wearily. “We’re as armed as we can be.”

“But not as trained. Where do you want me?”

Heroically, he restrained himself. “Over there,” he said, pointing. “That group’s still waiting for basic blaster instruction.”

“Excellent,” she said, and got to work.

An hour later, they stopped to rest. After answering a spate of last-minute questions Taria left the villagers to pester Obi-Wan. Refusing to admit her pain and fatigue, she joined Anakin in the middle of the road leading out of Torbel, where he stood contemplating the droid army. The shield buzzed and flickered with every blaster-bolt impact.

“Here,” said Anakin, handing her his quarter-filled cup of water. “And don’t argue.”

Amused, grateful, she sipped and stared at the droids. “Have they stopped firing at all yet, today?”

“Only to reload,” he said, morose. He’d seen her comforting Obi-Wan at the shield, the night she arrived. For some reason their closeness had angered him, and that had distressed Obi-Wan. She had no intention of causing strife between them.

“Anakin, I need to ask you a favor.”

He glanced at her. “What?”

“Promise me you’ll always have Obi-Wan’s back. And be there for him, when I die.”

After a long silence, he nodded. “All right.”

She swallowed the last mouthful of water. “He’d die for you. You do know that?”

Another nod. "I know."

His tone was faintly hostile, as though she'd broken some unspoken rule. And maybe she had. She smiled. "Just checking."

When she didn't say anything else, he raised an eyebrow. "What—you're not going to ask if I'd die for him?"

And that made her laugh. "Just how stupid do you think I am?"

He was still trying to decide exactly what she meant by that when Obi-Wan joined them, and nodded at the ranks of droids beyond the shield.

"Have you noticed what's skulking at the back of the line?"

"Of course," said Anakin. "Super battle droids."

"The Seps must have emptied the city of droids by now," said Obi-Wan. "It's only a matter of time before they ramp up their bombardment. Anakin—are we ready for it?"

Anakin shrugged. "As ready as we'll ever be. I can't make the shield any stronger, not without overloading the generators or the power plant."

"And you're sure we can't spare any more liquid damotite? We could use some extra grenades."

From the look on Anakin's face, it wasn't the first time Obi-Wan had asked the question. "Not if you want to keep the shield running, no."

"Liquid damotite?" said Taria, surprised. "That's your fuel source? Isn't it a bit—"

"Volatile?" Anakin managed a tight smile. "Yes. Good, isn't it? If the shields fail we should be able to reduce quite a few droids to scrap metal with our homemade grenades."

He was trying to make light of the notion, but it frightened him, she could tell. As well it should. The homemade grenades were jars and bottles and tins filled with fuel, the detonators a strip of cloth

soaked in lamp oil. As bombs went, they were simple, brutal and most likely ineffective. The risk to the villagers was enormous.

But this is war, and in war there is no safe.

She looked at Obi-Wan. “Well, perhaps there’s something else we can—”

And then her comlink sounded. Retrieving it from her bodysuit pocket, she thumbed it to transmit.

“Damsin.”

“This is Mace Windu. We’ve got reinforcements and we’re engaging Grievous full-strength, attempting to breach the blockade and get ground troops to your location. We should—”

A high-pitched, electronic squeal drowned his voice—and then the comlink went dead.

“Ah,” said Obi-Wan. “I think Grievous has worked out how to jam our comms again. How inconsiderate.”

“Yeah, that’s probably why I don’t like him,” said Anakin. “He’s got no manners.”

Watching them smile at each other, Taria felt their kinship and the complicated love. They were such an odd pairing on the face of it: Obi-Wan so self-contained, Anakin so reckless. But they’d found their balance, and now they were two halves of a whole. Anakin had been the making of Obi-Wan ... and Obi-Wan had shown Anakin what it meant to be a good man.

I’m glad, I’m so glad, that I got to see it.

“Obi-Wan! Obi-Wan!”

Turning, Taria saw a scarred, middle-aged man hurrying down the road toward them.

“Rikkard,” said Obi-Wan, under his breath. “He’s the head miner and village speaker.”

“Obi-Wan,” said Rikkard, reaching them. Out of breath, close to limping, sweat slicked his stubbled face. “Folk want to know what to do next. I thought maybe the strongest men could start blocking the streets with groundcars, like you suggested.”

“Yes, Rikkard, good idea,” said Obi-Wan. “And everyone else should stay calm. Have you put the evacuation plan in place?”

“There’s some not too happy about it,” said Rikkard, scowling. “But yes. It’s all set.”

“Rikkard—” Obi-Wan grasped the man’s bony shoulder. “I thought we’d agreed the mine would be the safest place for people to hide.”

“We know you’re worried about the raw damotite,” Anakin added. “There aren’t enough protective suits, you’ve run out of herbal pills, and people are already weakened from the toxic smoke. But Rikkard—you have to trust us. All of that is nothing compared with a full droid assault.”

“Which we won’t have to face if your shield jiggy holds,” said Rikkard, still scowling. “Will we?”

Anakin folded his arms. “It’ll hold. The mine is a fallback, that’s all. But when we give the signal—if we give the signal—then you have to send *everyone* but the commando teams down there. No exceptions. Understood?”

“Understood,” Rikkard muttered.

Taria watched his limping retreat for a moment, then looked at Obi-Wan and Anakin.

“Commando teams?”

“A little morale booster,” said Obi-Wan, shrugging. “An exaggeration, perhaps, but if it helps ...”

He had a point. “You didn’t tell him about Windu’s ground assault.”

“I didn’t want to get his hopes up. Let it be a nice surprise.”

Yes, indeed. Let it be a nice surprise for all of us.

Anakin tipped his head back to look through the plasma-shield ceiling and into the blue sky beyond. "I can't tell what's happening up there. Can you?"

"No," said Obi-Wan. "Taria?"

She shook her head. "Sorry."

They were all too tired to sense so far. She just hoped they weren't too tired to fight.

"Obi-Wan, I'm going to get my generator team together," said Anakin. "Make sure they're clear on what warning signs they need to look for. You're all right?"

"Of course," said Obi-Wan, faintly smiling. "You?"

"Never better," said Anakin, and pulled him into a swift, hard embrace. "Take care."

"He's so terribly demonstrative," Obi-Wan complained, watching Anakin half walk, half jog toward the power plant. "Has been from the first. And nothing I say seems to break him of the habit."

Taria smothered a smile. "Yes. It's very un-Jedi of him. What a crushing disappointment he must be to you."

Obi-Wan gave her a look. "Tell me—what will it take to get you down the mine?"

"A kidnapping."

"Ha!" He shook his head. "Don't tempt me."

"I mean it, Obi-Wan," she said, her smile fading. "We both know you need another lightsaber in this fight."

"What I *need* is not to—"

They both felt it, a shock of warning through the Force. A moment later the spindly battle droids lowered their blasters and parted ranks—and the hulking super battle droids advanced, their

arms extended, the mouths of their inbuilt laser cannons glowing crimson. A heartbeat of silence—and then they opened fire.

Bam. Bam. Bam. The heavy-duty laser bolts slammed against the shield. The plasma shivered and shimmered, turning bloodred on impact, the color fading too slowly. Under the noise of the escalated bombardment they heard a high-pitched, mechanical whine.

Obi-Wan turned. “That’s Generator Six. We’d better look at it, in case Anakin can’t get there in time.”

Another hollow *boom*. Another shiver through the shield. And then, as though Durd’s army had only been clearing its throat until now, every battle droid and swarming mosquito opened fire with the SBDs—and the afternoon’s daylight turned scarlet.

“Well,” said Taria. “I guess they finally got the message the Republic means business.”

Obi-Wan nodded. “I guess they did.”

He grabbed her hand, and they ran.

AT SOME POINT Anakin stopped hearing the noise of the attack. He could feel the blaster concussions against his skin, feel them violently humming through his muscles and bones and his prosthetic arm and hand, but he ignored them. He had more important things to worry about. How long since the SBDs had opened fire? Two hours? Three? He had no idea. He’d lost track of time.

As far as he knew, Obi-Wan was still at the power plant with Devi, making sure the creaky machinery didn’t fall apart. Taria was working the fuel supply line, keeping the liquid damotite coming, keeping the power plant and the shield alive. And he was running the shield’s groaning perimeter, around and around and around each generator without stopping, because the moment the shield failed the village was dead. Sure, he had a handful of helpers, Tarnik and Guyne and their friends, doing what they could to keep

the generators going, but they were ordinary men and women. Machines didn't speak to them, didn't whisper in their blood.

He'd forgotten what it felt like to breathe without pain, run without pain, use the Force without pain. His whole world was pain ... and he couldn't imagine a world without it.

The rest of Torbel's people were gathered on the square under Rikkard's stern eye. The commando teams, with their few blasters and their dangerous homemade grenades and their vibro-picks and axes and crowbars and rigged-up blasting caps, huddled together and waited for the worst to happen—for the shield to fail, and the droids to advance. Everyone else—the mothers, the fathers, and the children—waited for the order to flee underground. Sufi's patients were loaded onto stretchers and antigrav sleds, ready for a swift evacuation.

Their fear was oppressive. Fighting it, Anakin gritted his teeth.

We've done everything we can for them. We couldn't have done more.

As he reached Generator Eight for the fifteenth time, or the twentieth, who knew anymore, he saw a villager on her knees with its housing sprung free, frantically pulling out its wiry entrails. There were sparks and spits of smoke, and the bleeding edge of the shield was starting to melt ...

"Get out of the way!" he said, and half dragged, half Force-pushed the woman aside. Plunging his hands into the generator's innards he let that strange instinct guide him, let it show his fingers where to go, what to heal.

And then the villager—Chiba, that was her name—screamed and pointed and he looked, and saw the same melting along the edges of sections ten and twelve.

Oh, stang. This is it.

"Chiba!" he shouted, so she'd hear him over the endless booming blasts. "Run to the power plant and tell Obi-Wan the shield's failing.

And then tell Rikkard it's time to get down the mine, as deep as you can go."

Chiba was young and terrified. "But—but—"

"Go!" he howled, and used the Force to make his point. Chiba ran.

Dizzy, he could hear the escalating sound of wrongness in the shield, in the generators. He took a deep breath, banished all thought and fear of what this was going to cost him ... and plunged himself into the Force to buy them more time.

AS HE FINISHED UNBLOCKING yet another fuel line, Obi-Wan heard Devi screaming his name. He slammed the levers back into position and ran to the monitoring station.

"Chiba was here!" said Devi, sweat pouring down her face. "Anakin says the shield's failing."

He shoved his way outside. The noise of the bombardment was overwhelming, beating and battering and echoing in his skull. The sky was bloodred with plasma fire and the shield—well, it was holding, but he could see an ominous sparking across its surface and suspicious ripples in the plasma.

They had minutes, that was all.

Villagers were streaming toward the mine entrance, the oldest and the infirm being carried on stretchers or pushed on antigrav sleds. No groundcars; they'd all been driven into the streets and flipped onto their sides. Obstacles for the droids, hopefully, and maybe some shelter for the village commandos. Pitiful, to be sure, but it was better than nothing.

He ran back into the power plant. "All right, Devi. That's it. Put the plant on auto-run and get yourself down the mine."

She shook her head, weeping. "No, Obi-Wan, I'm staying. I can't leave you to face them alone."

"Devi!" he said, and grabbed hold of her shoulders. "No. You said when the time came, you'd go. You *promised*."

“I know, but I can’t,” she sobbed. “How can I run away? What kind of a person does that make me?”

“A person who keeps her word,” he said, and hugged her. “*Please*, Devi. Rikkard will need you.”

Still weeping, she switched the plant’s machinery to autorun then turned back to him, ready to argue some more. Mindful of her broken-down antigrav harness, he summoned a smile and gave her a little push.

“Go on. I’ll be fine.”

Her plain face tear-streaked and tight with grief, she shook her head. “Liar,” she said, and left.

He took a moment, just a moment, to listen to the power plant. It was rough, but it was running. It was the most he could hope for. Leaving it to run or die, he went in search of Taria.

TARIA SLOTTED the last four fuel containers into their feed lines and opened the spigots. When she was sure the fresh fuel was flowing unhindered, she took a moment to ease her aching back and stepped outside the stinking, fume-laden fuel house to snatch some fresh air before going in search of Obi-Wan.

As she took her first breath, the Force slapped her with a stunning sense of danger. She looked up and saw the shield overhead sparking and sputtering and oddly crawling, as though the plasma were alive and trying to shed its own skin.

Oh. I’ve got a bad feeling about this.

And then she registered the stream of villagers heading for the mine. Someone had signaled the evacuation. Good. But there was nobody to rally the village commandos—they were milling in the street looking uncertain and confused.

She ran for them.

“All right, all right, settle down!” she shouted. “Into your teams, people. No talking. Come on!”

It was like herding Padawans before a tournament in the large dojo. *There you go, Ahsoka. I knew our little competition would come in handy.* When the villagers were split into their ten teams of three, silent and staring at her, she gave them her best no-nonsense Jedi stare.

“I know you’re frightened, but I also know you can do this,” she said, raising her voice above the droids’ constant bombardment. “This is your home you’re defending. It’s your friends and your mothers and your husbands and your children. So everyone take a deep breath, get focused, and we’ll run through the drills one more time.”

Trying so hard to control their fear, Torbel’s commandos stumbled through the range of offensive drills they’d been taught. When they were done, she smiled at them.

“Excellent work, people. You’ll do fine, I know you will. Just remember—keep your heads. Don’t get carried away and waste a bomb or a shot on a single droid. Not unless you absolutely have to. Aim for them in groups—you’ll take out more of them that way. Don’t use your vibro-weapons until you’re sure your target’s down and disarmed. And *do* remember to pick up their blasters if you can. Throw them out of reach if you’re not able to use them yourselves. And—”

“*Taria!*”

Holding up her hand, she turned. It was Obi-Wan, coming toward her at a shuffling run. One look at his face and she knew. *This is it.* Turning back to the men and women who’d volunteered to be the front line against Durd’s droid army, she nodded.

“It’s time. Gear up, people, then take your positions. And may the Force be with you.”

Solemnly silent, the villagers loaded themselves with their assorted weaponry and headed out. Blinking back tears, Taria watched them go. But when Obi-Wan reached her she spun around and showed him nothing but a smile.

“Master Kenobi! Guess what? I think we’re about to host a little war.” She skimmed a hand down her grimy black bodysuit. “Is this suitable for the occasion, or should I find myself a dress?”

Speechless, he looked at her. And then he began to laugh.

“Come on,” she said, taking his arm. “Let’s go kick some clanker butt.”

IN THE END it was Generator Four that brought the shield crashing down. Anakin felt the collapse before it happened, felt the spark and flame of its heart as it died. And because of the way he’d reconfigured the shield matrix, because he couldn’t do it any other way, it took every other generator down with it.

Incredibly, as the shield began to collapse, the droid army ceased firing. As if it couldn’t believe what was happening right in front of it. As if this were some devious Jedi trick.

I wish.

The droids’ immobility gave him time to drag out his lightsaber and ignite it, time to reach painfully into the Force and feel for Obi-Wan and Taria. And there they were, not far from the ruined refinery. Then he felt them separate, taking up their positions.

He watched the shield fade, feeling strangely calm. The sky was empty. Mace Windu’s attempt to reach them in time had failed.

A single thought. One last regret.

I’m sorry, Padmé. Please forgive me.

And then Durd’s army opened fire.

“HOLD ON, LITTLE’UN!” Rex bellowed, his voice tinny through his helmet’s vocoder. “Because we are coming in hotter than hot!”

Hotter than hot didn’t begin to describe it. Their gunship was screaming toward Anakin’s location so fast Ahsoka expected the air to ignite. She was still getting used to the idea she wasn’t dead. She couldn’t believe they’d finally broken Grievous’s blockade. But they had. Facing Dreadnaughts and battleships and armored freighters

and starpounders and eleven squadrons of fighters *and* four of the best GAR cruisers, the cowardly barve had lost his nerve. He'd turned tail and run, the move so surprising he'd made it to hyperspace before they could stop him.

Admiral Yularen had turned the bridge's air bright blue, swearing. And then he'd set his sights on Lanteeb.

Leaving Yularen and his enhanced battle group to take care of liberating the planet, she and Master Windu were taking the 501st and the 95th to Torbel, to save Anakin and Master Kenobi and Taria from the droids.

Please, please, don't let us be too late.

"Smoke!" shouted their pilot, pointing. "That's Torbel up ahead."

Smoke? Precarious, Ahsoka leaned out of the open side of the larty, and saw Master Windu do the same thing on his gunship, flying beside them. The ground was whipping fast beneath them, the air cold and whistling.

Hurry, hurry. Go faster, Jinx. Come on.

They flew up and over a range of low hills and there was the village, crawling with droids and engulfed in flames. She saw a scattered handful of people running, panicked, saw the droids mow them down and keep on marching. Desperate, she reached for Anakin in the Force but all she could feel was chaos and terror.

With a roaring of engines the hunting pack of thirty gunships screamed into Torbel. Some of the droids turned and started firing. The 501st and the 95th laughed and began firing back. And then the larties were dirtside, white-armored clones spilling onto hard ground, and the clanking tinnies never knew what hit them.

Ahsoka Force-leapt from her gunship, lightsaber sizzling. She sensed Rex and Sergeant Coric and Checkers, wading into the fight. *May the Force be with you, boys. Don't you dare get killed.* Dimly she felt Master Windu engage the enemy, slicing and Force-pushing droids to scrap. He didn't need her. She bolted into the fray.

Three fast strides and she was one with the Force. She breathed it, it breathed her, she danced in its storm. Droids fell before her, but she was untouched. The air was rank with smoke and blood. More people had died here.

Not Anakin. Please.

And then she saw the bodies, but he wasn't among them. She had to stay focused. She'd have felt it if he'd died. And she'd feel it if Master Kenobi died, surely. Some of the slaughtered were women, but none had blue-green hair. She could see that much as she leapt and somersaulted and slashed droids to pieces.

Anakin, I'm here. Anakin, where are you?

But she couldn't sense him. She started to despair—and then heard his voice in her memory, deep and measured. *Don't be afraid, Ahsoka. Fear just gets in the way.*

So instead of straining to find him, she gave herself to the moment and let the Force move her as it willed. Her lightsaber flashed and dazzled and swung, faster and faster, though she felt quite slow and calm—as though this were a dojo and she couldn't actually die.

Every droid that challenged her fell to her blade.

She was aware of Master Windu, fighting. She could feel the clones of the 501st and the 95th as they hunted the length and breadth of the small, burning village. The droids she couldn't feel, but through the stinking, gusting smoke she could see the clone troops cutting them to pieces. And she felt herself drift past abandoned groundcars and gutted buildings, down ferrocrete alleys and across open ground, leaping through heat and flames, slicing apart any tinnie stupid enough to get in her way. The droids were vastly outnumbered now. They were walking scrap metal.

She realized it had been a while since she'd come across a dead body.

Shouldn't there be more villagers? Where did they go?

And then she forgot about the people, because there he was, beside a ruined shield generator. *Anakin*. Bloody, sweaty, and still alive. He was fighting back-to-back with Master Kenobi and Taria, and stamped in their faces was a grim, desperate determination and a shared extremity of pain. A ring of droids surrounded them, moving in for the kill.

Ahsoka felt her lips peel back in a snarl.

I don't think so, you clanking barves. Not today. Not ever.

Then came a rush in the Force and Master Windu was beside her. She glanced at him and he glanced at her and that was all they needed. They knew what to do.

The look on Anakin's face, when he saw her, was the only reward she'd ever need.

EPILOGUE



JUST OVER AN HOUR LATER, AHSOKA STOOD IN A SMALL PATCH of silence on Torbel's charred village square, as Master Windu coordinated the various mopping-up phases of the mission. Since Lantibba City's Seps had surrendered almost immediately, the most complicated task was arranging for a total evacuation of Torbel's surviving villagers, all three hundred and something of them, because the place had been reduced to a smoking ruin.

The sun was going down fast, so Rex had arranged the gunships to be positioned around the square. Their floodlights turned the dusk to noon. It was a typically efficient and thoughtful *Rex* action, and it made her love him more than ever.

Now he and the rest of the troops—and while some were wounded none had died—were methodically going through what remained of the village, collecting undamaged personal items and communal equipment and stacking it neatly in one of the streets bordering the square.

Sad to say, there wasn't much.

Lined up in the road on the other side of the square were twenty-eight body bags. Sergeant Coric and Checkers had been in charge of that sad duty. The dead were being kept company by some of the weeping villagers who'd emerged from Torbel's mine when the fighting was over. Their grief filled the Force.

Anakin, Master Kenobi and Taria sat together in the square's designated triage area. They weren't alone. About forty villagers had been separated from the others and were being given emergency

medical treatment, too. The twilight air was full of smoke and the soft sounds of suffering.

One woman—Master Kenobi called her Sufi—insisted on shadowing the clone medics and double-checking every pill and hypo and ointment they administered. Master Kenobi had tried telling her not to worry, she could trust them, but this Sufi woman was having none of it. And she was trailed by a scrawny girl child called Greti, who had a strange Force presence and kept running back to Master Kenobi to make sure he was all right. Ahsoka thought that was quite odd.

But I can't really blame her. He looks terrible. They all do.

They looked so bad—cut and bruised and seared in many places by blasterfire—that every time her gaze fell on them she felt her heart bump, and her breathing hitch. It brought back memories of how scared she'd been on Maridun, when Skyguy was injured, and how afraid he'd been after Master Kenobi's never-explained mission to Zigoola. She had to keep reminding herself that the past was the past, she must focus her mind on the present.

In the present, Torbel's villagers were scared of her.

Before she'd been hustled away by three medics, all to herself, Taria had pulled her aside. "You're going to make them uncomfortable, Ahsoka. Don't take it personally. These people are culturally—unsophisticated."

No kidding. They're looking at me like I might try and eat them, or something.

She was doing her best, but it was a *little* hard not to take it personally. Especially since she'd just helped save their lives.

"Ahsoka!"

Startled, she looked up. "Yes, Master Kenobi?"

He crooked a finger at her. "A moment?"

“Master?” she said, joining him, and flicked a smile at Skyguy and Taria. Even though they were hurt and exhausted they both smiled back, then looked at Master Kenobi. So did she.

The medics had given him so many chems his eyes had gone blurry. “Padawan Tano, there’s someone I’d like you to meet.” He turned. “Greti!”

The skinny girl was sitting beside one of the sick villagers. Hearing her name, she leapt up and came running. “Teeb?”

“Greti, this is Ahsoka,” Master Kenobi said. “She’s one of the people who saved Torbel from the droids.”

“Saved?” The girl pulled a face. “It’s burned down, Torbel is.”

“*Greti.*” Master Kenobi flicked the end of her nose with his fingertip. “Manners. If not for Ahsoka you’d likely be dead.”

The skinny village girl looked her up and down in silence. Then she put her hands on her hips and tipped her head to one side. “You don’t have any hair.”

“That’s right,” Ahsoka said warily. “I’m a Togruta.”

“Your skin’s a funny color, too.”

“Not where I come from.”

Now Greti twisted her fingers in her frayed tunic pockets. “Is that far away?”

Ahsoka nodded. “Very far.”

“Oh,” said Greti, and thought about that. “Can I go there?”

“Well—I suppose so,” she said. “If you want.”

“Does anyone have hair where you come from, Ahsoka?”

Skyguy and Taria were trying not to laugh. She shot them a look, then frowned at the skinny girl. “Y’know, Greti, not everybody wants hair. Not everybody needs hair. Not everybody *likes* hair. I don’t—”

“Obi-Wan,” said Master Windu, appearing without warning. “I’ve just—” And then he stopped, because even Master Kenobi was laughing. “What?”

Greti stared up at him. “Are you from Togruta, too?”

“No,” said Master Windu blankly. “Who does this child belong to? She needs to be kept with her family.”

Master Kenobi sobered. “My apologies, Master. Greti, go find your mam. I’ll see you again later.”

“Promise?” said the skinny girl, and threw her arms around him.

Surprised, Ahsoka watched Master Kenobi pat the girl’s back, gently. “I promise.”

As the girl scuttled away, taking her strange Force presence with her, Master Windu fixed Anakin, Master Kenobi, and Taria with his dark, intense gaze. He’d been so busy being in charge, and they’d been pounced on by the medics so fast, this was the first time he’d spoken to them since the end of the brief, intense firefight.

“I’ve just been in communication with Senator Amidala,” he said. “She’s been talking with Queen Jamillia, and they have offered refugee status to the people of Torbel.”

Anakin sat up. “They have?”

“If the villagers agree, the Supreme Chancellor has authorized *Coruscant Sky* to take them from here directly to Naboo. So—who do I speak to?”

Master Kenobi took a deep breath and pushed to his feet. “That would be Rikkard, Master. Excuse me.”

Ahsoka frowned as Master Kenobi walked slowly to the group of sick and injured villagers. Anakin and Taria were frowning, too. It wasn’t right, Master Kenobi without his customary, confident swagger.

“Master Windu,” said Master Kenobi, returning with another man who was streaked head to toe with dirt. “This is Teeb Rikkard, head

miner and one of Torbel's village speakers. Rikkard, this is Master Windu of the Jedi Council. He has a proposition for you, one I think you should strongly consider. Jaklin, too, if she's feeling better."

Master Windu nodded gravely. "Teeb Rikkard."

"Master Windu," said the man Rikkard. There were tears in his eyes, and his voice was unsteady. "Torbel thanks you for what you've done."

"I'm sorry it was necessary," said Master Windu. "I'm sorry you've lost your home. But we might have found you a new one. Please, Rikkard. Walk with me."

Once Master Windu was out of earshot, Master Kenobi looked at Anakin. "Interesting. By any chance did you—"

"No," Anakin said quickly. "I don't have a comlink. But I think it's the perfect solution. Don't you?"

Master Kenobi stared at the ruined village, and then at the groups of uninjured villagers at the far end of the square. "It could be, yes," he said at last. "I hope it is." Then he sighed. "I wonder how much longer we'll be stuck here. There's very little I wouldn't give right now for a hot shower and a bed."

But Ahsoka could tell it wasn't himself he was worried about, it was Taria. And he was right to be worried. Even full of painkillers, Master Damsin felt ... wrong.

"Ahsoka," said Anakin, his tired eyes shadowed with concern. "Since we're grounded, why don't you go and find out?"

She nodded. "Yes, Master. Love to."

Because the sooner we're off this rock, the happier we'll all be.

And they did get off it, eventually, once all the farewells were done with. The skinny girl Greti clung to Master Kenobi, trying hard not to weep. Her mother did weep, thanking him for saving her hand, and her life. The bossy woman Sufi hugged him, nearly hard enough to break his ribs, and another woman, in an ancient antigrav

harness, hugged Anakin as hard, and Master Kenobi, too. The village speaker Rikkard was sad to see them go. They were all polite to Taria, but it wasn't the same.

Watching, Ahsoka realized that Anakin and Master Kenobi must have done amazing things in Torbel, that they were loved by these odd, unsophisticated villagers.

I hope this time Skyguy tells me properly what happened.

Leaving Master Windu and the villagers behind to their discussions and decisions, they flew to *Indomitable* with Captain Rex and a clone medic for escort. Master Kenobi sat on a portable soft-seat, with Taria dozing against his shoulder. Standing beside Anakin, Ahsoka stared out of the gunship's rear viewport at Lanteeb, falling fast behind them. Lifting his hand, Anakin wriggled his fingers.

"Good-bye, and good riddance," he murmured.

Which pretty much said it all.

TWELVE HOURS AFTER BOARDING *Indomitable*, having bathed and slept and eaten a decent meal in the first time since, well, it felt like forever, Obi-Wan reported to the Battle Operations Room for a holoconference with Palpatine. Anakin and Taria went with him, Master Windu returned from Lanteeb to attend, and of course Yularen was there. Not Ahsoka, though. She'd gone back to Lanteeb with Rex. There was still a deal of work planetside to be done.

Catching himself worrying about Greti, again, Obi-Wan pulled his focus back where it belonged. *Waifs and strays*. He was getting as bad as Qui-Gon.

"—disappointing that Lok Durd managed to reach General Grievous and escape," the Supreme Chancellor was saying, "but all in all, I think it's best we count our blessings. Master Kenobi—"

Obi-Wan bowed. "Supreme Chancellor."

“As the senior Jedi on this mission, you are to be congratulated on its success. And you have my most heartfelt personal gratitude, for managing to keep young Anakin in one piece.”

He bowed again, acutely aware of Anakin beside him. “It was my pleasure, Supreme Chancellor. Though this entire mission was very much a joint effort.”

“It certainly was,” said Palpatine. “And I have expressed my appreciation to the captains of the ships who joined you in your hour of need, Admiral Yularen. Senators Organa and Amidala are certainly to be commended for their ingenuity. But I must say, I am concerned that what they’ve done here sets a precedent that might in the future represent a threat to the security of the Republic. We do have a Grand Army—and of course, our splendid Jedi. So I think it’s fair to say that this mission was one for the books, and not to be repeated.”

“I’m pleased to hear you say so, Supreme Chancellor,” said Admiral Yularen. “I couldn’t agree more about the danger it implies.”

“We’ll discuss that further at a later date, Admiral,” said Palpatine. “For now, let us just appreciate the results of a job well done, shall we? Master Windu?”

Master Windu’s face went still. “Supreme Chancellor.”

“I’d appreciate your immediate return to Kothlis,” said Palpatine. “The Ruling Council has been most understanding, but I prefer not to impose on their good graces any longer.”

Obi-Wan felt the Jedi Master’s irritation. “I’ll do that, Supreme Chancellor,” Windu said. “But with Admiral Yularen’s battle group still mopping up on Lanteeb, perhaps you’d permit me a slight detour via Coruscant?”

“To bring our triumphant Jedi home? Of course,” said Palpatine, broadly smiling. “In fact, Master Windu, I believe I insist. Anakin—”

“Supreme Chancellor,” Anakin said, almost wary.

But Palpatine had himself in hand. *“My dear boy—what can I say but well done, and thank the Force you’re all right.”*

“Thank you, Supreme Chancellor.”

“Now,” said Palpatine, “before we conclude, I have someone with me who’d like a quick word.”

A pause, and then Padmé’s image appeared on the holodisplay. Feeling Anakin’s swift interest, Obi-Wan flicked him a glance. *Settle down.*

Padmé was smiling. Radiant. *“Master Kenobi, it’s so good to see you. I understand the people of Torbel have accepted Queen Jamillia’s offer to resettle on Naboo?”*

“They have, Senator. And I thank you for arranging it.”

“It was the least I could do, after what they did for you and—and Anakin. I look forward to hearing the full story upon your return. So does Senator Organa. He asked me to compliment you on yet another remarkable escape.”

Obi-Wan nodded. *I’ll bet he did.* *“Thank you, Senator. And we look forward to telling you all about the mission—when time permits.”*

Which wouldn’t be soon, if he had his way. The less time she and Anakin spent together, the better ... for all their sakes.

Padmé was a phenomenally intelligent woman. She knew what he meant. *“Yes,”* she said, after a moment. *“Of course.”*

And on that note, the holoconference ended.

“Anakin,” said Master Windu. *“Yoda wants you back in the Temple, but I’d like to leave your Padawan down on Lanteeb to keep an eye on the Five Hundred First. I think you’ll agree she can handle herself.”*

Obi-Wan waited for Anakin to object, but instead he nodded. *“Yes, Master Windu. I trust her implicitly.”*

“As you should,” said Windu, briskly pleased. “Now, I need to sort out a few things with the admiral. Don’t go far.”

As Master Windu took Yularen aside, Obi-Wan turned to Taria. “Still got your comlink?”

Pumped full of chemicals by *Indomitable*’s med droids, she looked almost healthy again. It was a terrible lie. Dressed like him, in drab gray Fleet overalls, her fabulous hair clean and shining and strictly contained, not a soul looking at her would guess she had only weeks to live.

But I’m not going to spoil this. I’m not.

“My comlink?” she said, raising an eyebrow. “Yes. Why?”

“Anakin needs to give Ahsoka the good news.”

She gave Anakin her comlink. “Tell her well done from me. Go Green team. She’ll understand.”

“Will do,” said Anakin, and withdrew to comm Ahsoka.

“So, Obi-Wan,” Taria said softly, and rested her hand on his arm. “Are you all right?”

He was far from all right. And of course Taria knew that, which was why she’d asked. But there’d be time for debriefings back at the Temple. Time to think of the fallen, and mourn them, and find ways to honor those who’d made mistakes—and paid a terrible price to undo them. Time to come to terms with the loss of his friend. It was a journey he’d started in Torbel’s sick house, but he still had a long way to go.

I’m not even sure it’s a journey I can finish.

Knowing she’d let him, just this once, he lied. “Yes. I’m fine.”

She lifted an eyebrow. “You need more rest.”

“After the war. Taria—” Palpatine hadn’t acknowledged what she’d done. What she’d sacrificed. It made him angry. “You saved so many lives. And now—”

“No regrets,” she said, under her breath. Her fingers tightened on his arm, and she tried to smile. “How can there be? Obi-Wan—”

Then Master Windu returned, and the moment was lost.

“Right,” Windu said, as Yularen toggled the bridge and told them he was on his way. “I think we’re done here. Anakin!”

Anakin joined them. “Master.”

“You’ve spoken to your Padawan?”

“Yes, Master.”

“Good.” Master Windu smiled, fiercely. “Then let’s go. We’ll hop a gunship over to *Dagger* and make best speed for home.”

Turning, he headed for the hatch, Taria falling into step beside him. One warm, affectionate glance over her shoulder, and she was gone.

“*Home*,” said Anakin. “That’s got a nice ring to it.” He was smiling broadly, a hint of mischief in his eyes and a sense of excitement, quickly tamped down. And then the smile faded. “So, Obi-Wan. We survived another one.”

Not all of us.

But that wasn’t Anakin’s problem. With a wrenching effort, he pulled his mind from the pain and loss that were crouched ahead in the shadows, waiting. Inescapable.

“Yes, we did, Anakin,” he agreed. “By the skin of our teeth.”

“Yeah ...” Anakin shook his head. “Y’know, I’m starting to think we need a new hobby.”

He was tired, he was sad, but still—“*Trust* me, Anakin,” he said lightly, “on that score, you’ll get no argument from me.”

And then they grinned at each other. No need to say more.

“Kenobi!” Master Windu shouted from the corridor. “Have you forgotten what *best speed* means?”

“Oops,” said Anakin, and extended his hand with a flourish.
“After you, Master Kenobi.”

“No, no, Master Skywalker,” he replied. “I insist. After *you*.”

Side by side, they walked out of the room.