

STAR YOUNG JEDI KNIGHTS WARS

TROUBLE ON CLOUD CITY



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Trouble on Cloud City

Book 13 of Young Jedi Knights

By: Kevin J. Anderson and Rebecca Moesta

This one is for Dave Dorman whose brilliant cover art has made the Young Jedi Knights series shine

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Jaina Solo, daughter of the legendary pilot and smuggler Han Solo, ran through the dense jungles of Yavin 4 as if her life depended upon it.

Crashing sounds in the nearby underbrush bore testament to the fact that she was not alone.

Her mother, former princess of Alderaan and the New Republic's current Chief of State, would have been aghast at Jaina's disheveled appearance. Her straight brown hair dripped with sweat. Leaves, branches, and trailing vines whipped at her face, though she hardly seemed to notice.

She let the Force guide her footsteps. The rich spicy scent of jungle foliage filled her lungs. Jaina ran headlong through the alternating light and shadows of late afternoon, out of breath.

The crashing sounds came not from pursuing enemies, however, but from her companions: the gingerfurred Wookiee Lowbacca, and Tenel Ka, princess of the Hapes system and warrior from Dathomir.

Still, Jaina fled-not from her friends or from the Jedi academy where she trained, but from a feeling that she couldn't shake, a sense that something was not right. The feeling hounded her like a nek battle dog snapping at her heels. From far behind, Lowie bellowed a suggestion, and Jaina veered off onto a narrow path that would lead them to a clearing near the river.

"Got it! Almost there," she yelled without slowing down. The unpleasant feeling still followed her like some vicious beast ready to pounce. She hurdled a Massassi tree that had fallen across the path.

Tenel Ka and Lowie converged behind her and leapt over the fallen tree.

Jaina and her friends burst through the dense foliage and into the clearing by the broad, slow-moving river.

Near the water stood a boy, about Jaina's age, with a round face and spiky blond hair. Beside him was a centaurifoffn young woman whose rich cinnamon hair matched the color of her glossy flanks. Her long mane flowed down her bare back. The two had been skipping stones on the water, but at Jaina's approach, the blond-haired young man looked up.

"Well, well, well. Glad you could make it," he said.

"Hi, Raynar, Lusa," Jaina said, coming to a stop and panting hard.

"Are you all right?" Raynar asked.

"The opportunity to exercise was most welcome," Tenel Ka said.

Lowie and the Wookiee's miniaturized translating droid, Em Teedee, added their greetings. Lowie combed his long fingers through the dark streak in his windblown fur.

Lusa gave them a measuring look. "Is anything wrong?"

Jaina shrugged uncomfortably, still unable to pinpoint the source of her disturbing feelings. Avoiding her friends' gaze, she took off her flightsuit and removed her boots.

Raynar glanced around. "Where are Jacen and Zekk? Didn't they come with you?"

Jaina sighed and waded into the river. Once in the shallows, she dug her toes into the mud and pondered. This, of course, was the heart of the problem.

"Our friends Jacen and Zekk opted to assist Anja Gallandro with her lightsaber training," Tenel Ka explained. "She already owns a weapon, but wishes to become more proficient in its use."

Raynar looked disappointed. "Couldn't they have done that later?"

"It was their choice," Tenel Ka said simply. Removing her lizardhide boots and armor, she plunged into the river water without the slightest hesitation.

"They could have invited Anja along to go swimming with us," Raynar said. "It might have made her feel welcome, more at home."

At last Jaina said what was on her mind. "Anja's been at the Jedi academy for weeks now, and I don't think she'll ever feel at home. I'm not even sure she wants to. I've tried to be friendly and show her around, but most of the time she just ignores me-except when she wants to complain about something. Like the weather: she hates the humidity.

Or the food: it's not prepared properly. And our lessons: it's stupid to, sit around thinking at rocks all day." Not to mention the entertainment: there's nothing to do on Yavin 4."

Lowie rumbled a comment. "Indeed," Em Teedee translated.

"Master Lowbacca has also made every effort to befriend Anja Gailandro, but to no avail."

Tenel Ka surfaced and shook back her redgold warrior braids. "I, too, have been rebuffed."

"She has not spoken five words to me," Lusa said.

Jaina sighed again. "She seems perfectly happy to spend time with Jacen... and Zekk."

"And they with her," Tenel Ka pointed out. Jaina couldn't tell whether or not she detected a note of jealousy in the warrior girl's comment.

Raynar opened his mouth as if he were about to ask something, then seemed to think better of it. He simply said, "Oh." The blond haired boy looked curiously from Jaina to Tenel Ka for a moment, then added, "Well, I hope they know what they're doing." He flushed slightly. "I... I mean, lightsaber practice with someone who isn't really trained in the Force can be pretty dangerous."

Jaina looked up and flashed him one of the lopsided grins for which the Solos were so famous. "Zekk assured me he was just going to coach.

And I don't think we need to worry about my brother. He's fought some of the most ferocious creatures alive with his lightsaber."

She chuckled. "Including Tenel Ka."

"This is a fact," Tenel Ka said, raising her single hand as if it held the rancor-tooth lightsaber hilt that normally hung at her waist. The warrior girl's other arm had been cut off above the elbow in a lightsaber training accident.

“Now,” Jaina continued, “why don’t we all swim. That is why we came, isn’t it? Anyway, Zekk and Jacen are Jedi. I’m sure they won’t let anyone get hurt.”

“Ow!” Jacen yelped, pulling back with the hand that held his emerald green lightsaber. “You singed the hair off my arm!”

A bland smile was fixed on Anja Gallandro’s face, a smile that did not reach her large, sad eyes. She seemed not the least bit perturbed.

“Then I guess you should have moved a bit faster, huh?”

Zekk approached the two combatants. His intense green eyes flashed an emerald fire as cutting as that of Jacen’s lightsaber. “That was a foolish risk, Ania,” he said. “This practice is to learn about control with the weapon.”

Anja shook back the silky hair that fell to her waist. Her dark hair, highlighted with streaks of honey gold, was held out of her eyes only by a strip of leather bound about her forehead. She gave Zekk a haughty look. “You’re just angry because I don’t need to control my fighting, and it makes you real Jedi look bad.”

“No. That move was unnecessarily risky,” Zekk said in a stern voice that Jacen had rarely heard him use before. “Not only did Jacen almost lose a chunk of his arm, but if he had been trying to hurt you, you left him the perfect opening to sweep back with his lightsaber like this”-he demonstrated with a stun stick he was holding-“slice through your ribs, and cut you into two neat pieces.”

Anja glared at Zekk for a long moment. He endured her gaze without flinching, casually set down his stun stick, and reached back to retie the narrow theng that kept his own hair in place at the nape of his neck.

A symbolic gesture, Jacen guessed.

Zekk's hair was as dark as his past, yet he had learned to control it, to put it behind him. Anja, on the other hand, often spoke with anger about the life she had led; she barely kept her impulses in check, just as her headband barely kept her hair from flowing wild. Jacen glanced back and forth as the tension built between his two friends.

Finally Anja looked away and shrugged one shoulder. "You said yourself this was a lesson in control. I knew Jacen wouldn't take advantage of the opening."

Jacen's mouth fell open in astonishment. But before he could speak, he saw Master Luke Skywalker emerge from the base of the Great Temple and gesture for him to come over.

"I have to go talk to Uncle Luke," he said warily. "Can you two keep working for a few minutes without me?" He offered his lightsaber to Zekk and gave a tentative grin. "Without killing each other, I mean?"

"I can manage that," Zekk said.

"Anja," Jacen warned, "just remember that you can't afford to make mistakes like that one against a real enemy. He won't give you a second chance."

She smiled her imperturbable smile. "Don't be so sure."

Jacen shook his head. Running a hand through his disheveled brown curls, he trotted off to where the Jedi Master stood in the shadow of the rebuilt pyramid.

"How's the training going?" Luke Skywalker asked, his eyes on Anja and Zekk as they began to spar again. Anja's acid-yellow blade swept out in a wild and furious attack, but Zekk parried her blows easily.

"She, urn... has her own way of doing things," Jacen said.

"Kinda stubborn, you know?"

“So I’ve noticed,” Luke said. “I’ve spent several training sessions with her myself and-in spite of the talents you see in her-I haven’t been able to sense any Jedi potential at all. She doesn’t seem to make any connection with the Force.”

“Hey, that doesn’t mean it’s not there,” Jacen said. “Give her some time. She’s had a tough life. Maybe it’s just hidden somehow.”

Luke pursed his lips. “Perhaps. But if it weren’t for the fact that your father asked me to keep her here at the academy as a special favor, I’m not sure I’d allow her to stay. She has a deep shadow inside her.”

“Well, thanks for giving her a chance,” Jacen said. “I’m sure you won’t be disappointed.”

For the third time that morning, Tenel Ka replaced a cyberfuzze on the Rock Dragon that did not need replacing. Beside her, Jaina hunched over the navigational console of the Hapan passenger cruiser, biting her lower lip. She used Em Teedee to run an unnecessary calibration check, while Lowbacca conditioned the already-clean outer hull with lubricants.

The three of them had felt inexplicably downcast, Tenel Ka thought, since the previous afternoon when Jacen and Zekk had chosen not to accompany them to the jungle. Today, the warrior girl had risen at first light from an unsatisfactory sleep and performed the most rigorous calisthenic routine she had ever devised for herself. She had hoped to purge any lingering resentment from her mind... but it hadn’t worked.

After that, she had scaled the outside of the huge Massassi pyramid, single-armed, wearing her briefest lizardhide and using only her grappling hook and fibercord to assist her. This exertion had proved stimulating enough-

and distracting enough-that she decided to go for a ten-kilometer run as well.

Jaina, having just finished a long Jedi meditation, had trotted up to join her. Although Jaina was fresh, she was not as strong a runner as Tenel Ka, and the warrior girl enjoyed the feeling that she could outdistance her friend at any time-although she chose not to.

As the two friends swung back toward the Great Temple on the last kilometer of their run, a third young woman joined them. Anja, looking rested and relaxed, had clearly not been out doing calisthenics this morning. But that did not make the situation any less irritating when the tanned older girl broke into a sprint and raced ahead of Tenel Ka and Jaina back to the Great Temple.

It didn't help matters, either, when Tenel Ka noticed Jacen watching Anja with amused approval from his vantage point at the base of the Great Temple. She knew she shouldn't have allowed the situation to disturb her, but she had retreated immediately, making some excuse about the Rock Dragon's needing repairs. Jaina and Lowie had followed her. Jacen, Zekk, and Anja had not.

Jaina had moved the Rock Dragon out onto the open landing field, and for the next few hours the companions had worked in a heavy silence.

Unfortunately, the activities they normally found so soothing had brought no comfort today. Tenel Ka grimaced and replaced another cyberfuze that was in perfect condition.

To make matters worse, her own normally well-controlled emotions were playing strange tricks on her. For the past several days she'd had a profound feeling of missing Jacen... and Zekk, of course. It didn't make sense. It wasn't as if the

two young men were gone, as Lowie had been when he'd accompanied his friend Raaba to visit the Diversity Alliance.

No, Tenel Ka saw Jacen-and Zekk-every day. Yet somehow, each time she saw the smuggler girl Anja laughing with the two young men, most likely at some joke Jacen had told, Tenel Ka felt an ache that was almost physical.

Perhaps a change of scenery was the answer. If Tenel Ka could get away from Yavin 4 for a while, it might clear her mind-and she might be able to escape the constant reminders that Jacen no longer spent most of his free time with her. She found the pain as haunting and indefinable as the phantom pangs she sometimes felt from her severed arm.

Scowling, Tenel Ka touched a probe to a circuit, overloaded it to 10, 20, 30 percent more than its capacity. The cyberfuze finally failed in a tiny puff of white smoke. Tenel Ka nodded with satisfaction. As she began to replace the component, a loud Wookiee bellow drifted in from outside.

"Visitors?" Em Teedee said. "Why, whatever could he mean? We weren't expecting anyone, were we?"

"I do not believe so," Tenel Ka said to the little droid. The whine of sublight engines filled the air around the Rock Dragon. "Perhaps we should investigate."

Jaina yanked the little silver droid's leads free from the navigational console. "Well, then, what are we waiting for?"

"It's Lando!" Jaina cried. Her spirits lifted even as the Lady Luck touched down on the stubby grass of the landing field not far from the Rock Dragon. The sight of Lando Calrissian's space yacht kindled a sense of excitement in her that had been missing for weeks. His visits always meant something interesting.

As usual, her father's old smuggling buddy made a dashing entrance.

With a burgundy cape fluttering behind him, he seemed to glide down the Lady Luck's ramp, his dark handsome features lit by a dazzling smile.

By the time he reached the bottom of the ramp and greeted Jaina and Tenel Ka with a kiss each on the hand, and Lowbacca with a friendly slap between his furry shoulders, Zekk and Jacen were running across the landing field toward them. Master Luke Skywalker followed at a more leisurely pace.

"Hey, what are you doing here?" Jacen asked.

"Are we going to GemDiver Station?" Zekk added. "I've never seen the place, but Jaina and Jacen told me all about it."

Lando laughed. "No, not quite. I'm glad you kids are all here, though, because I have an invitation for you. A business proposal, really."

Jaina exchanged an intrigued glance with Tenel Ka. "We are prepared to assist you," Tenel Ka said. Lowie rumbled his agreement.

Lando grinned. "As it turns out, I already talked to all of your parents and got permission."

"Hey, that's great," Jacen said.

"What is it you need from us?" Zekk asked.

"Some professional assistance. From professional young people like yourselves. But it's not on GemDiver Station. I've got the coruscagem mining operation running pretty well by itself. Right now, I'm on my way to Cloud City."

"Bespin?" Jaina said. "You still own property there?"

Lando smiled. "At the moment, quite a lot. You know how I am always looking for some new way to make credits. I decided I needed to diversify my holdings a bit more, so I talked to one of my old smuggler buddies who lives on Cloud City and we came up with the perfect investment." Tenel Ka's eyebrows rose as Lando spoke.

"Old smuggler buddy?" Jaina asked.

"Oh, don't worry, he's completely legit now," Lando said. "He has a wife, two little girls, and all his investments are strictly on the up-and-up."

"What do you need us for?" Zekk asked again.

Lando went on. "Cojahn and I are starting a line of high-tech family entertainment and amusement centers. We're putting the first one right in Cloud City. We're calling it SkyCenter Galleria. Cloud City won't be just for gambling anymore. This place is gonna have rides, restaurants, shopping, the neatest and slickest holomazes, experience chambers... every kind of thrill you can think of.

"I've been interested in this sort of thing for a long time. See, before you kids were even born, I looked into getting a place called Hologram Funworld as an investment. It didn't work out, but that place was nothing compared to what we're building now. SkyCenter Galleria will have something for people of all ages, something for every human or alien in the galaxy."

Luke Skywalker, who had quietly joined them during Lando's description, smiled. "That sounds like one of your best ideas yet, Lando.

Do you have some thrill rides that only Jedi can test?" There was a twinkle of amusement in the Jedi Master's eyes.

Lando chuckled. "Not exactly, but close. I was hoping to borrow this fine crew of young people to visit the place with

me before I open it to the public. Give me their ideas and opinions, maybe even doublecheck things to make sure there aren't any potential hazards our engineers have overlooked.

"See, my buddy Cojahn has two daughters, a twelve-year-old and a five-year-old, but I need someone a little older to let me know what works for them and what doesn't. Your young Jedi Knights here could think of it as a vacation, and it'll help me out as well." He winked at Luke. "I promise not to let anyone get kidnapped this time."

The Jedi Master narrowed his eyes thoughtfully and then nodded.

"Yes. I think these students could benefit from an opportunity like that. " Lowie gave an exultant bellow.

"Good. We'd love to!" Jaina said.

"We would be honored to assist." Tenel Ka nodded; her redgold warrior braids swung around her serious face. "It will be... fun."

"Oh, indeed, Master Lando! I should be most gratified if you'd accept my services as well."

Lando gave a small bow. "You bet, Em Teedee. You can never have enough competent droids around on a project like this. I wouldn't think of leaving you behind."

"Hey, speaking of being left behind," Jacen said, "we've got a new friend staying here with us at the Jedi academy. Would you mind if she came along? She's only been here for a few weeks-she's a former smuggler-but she's having kind of a rough time and I think she could use a change of scenery."

"A former smuggler? Sure, bring her along," Lando said with a bright smile. "She sounds like my kind of young lady."

Anja Gallandro finished packing for the trip to Bespin in less than five minutes. Slinging her satchel of belongings over one shoulder-including the few special items she wanted no one to know about-she headed down the temple's ancient stone corridor toward the adjoining quarters occupied by the Solo twins.

She reached up to tighten the leather headband that held her flowing hair in check, though just barely enough to keep it out of her face.

Anja sighed as she thought of Jacen and Jaina. Everyone in the Solo family seemed to have an effect on her life, and she found it both irritating and unnerving.

First, Han Solo had murdered her father; then, when Anja had confronted him after a lifetime of planning the moment, he had denied it, and somehow thwarted all of her attempts to get revenge. Finally, telling herself it would be the easiest way to hurt Han Solo, she had followed his children to Yavin 4, pretending to be their friend. She had believed that as she got to know the twins better, their true characters would emerge, and she would find ample reason (and opportunity) to inflict some sort of punishment on them. But that hadn't turned out as she'd expected either.

Instead of proving heartless, self-centered, and prideful as she had believed they would be, Jacen, Jaina, and their friends at the Jedi academy had shown themselves to be helpful, patient, and honorable-even in the face of her most withering sarcasm. To make matters worse, Jacen had turned out to have an endearing love for animals and a quirky, silly sense of humor that Anja had come to find more and more pleasant as the days passed.

She stamped her foot in annoyance outside the door to Jacen's chambers.

How could this be happening? She wanted to hate these young Jedi Knights, wanted to find them despicable in every way. Their talk about trusting in the Force was a bunch of nonsense. They were trying to change her with their talk of control and inner calm. So why didn't she despise them?

Anja couldn't allow herself to become fond of these "friends," she reminded herself. She needed to get revenge for the death of her father, the great Gallandro. She could never allow herself to trust a... a Solo.

They would probably show their true colors sometime soon.

Perhaps if she tried goading them a bit more...

Squaring her shoulders, Anja raised one fist to knock on Jace's door.

But before she could do so, Jaina emerged from the next room over.

"All ready for Cloud City, I see," Jaina observed. "Me too." She patted the small duffel she carried. "How about Jacen?"

"I was about to check," Anja replied in as cold a voice as she could muster. "Isn't it obvious?"

Jaina's brandybrown eyes blinked at Anja's rudeness, but then she shrugged it off and gave a hesitant smile. "Guess I should have figured that out, huh?" Then she stepped forward, tapped once lightly on the door, and poked her head in without waiting for an answer.

Anja could see past Jaina into the room to where the tousle-haired young man stood in front of a wall filled with cages and aquariums. A ball of bright blue fluff sat on his shoulder.

He turned around and waved his sister and Anja inside. His face lit with a quick smile. "Hey, I'm almost done here. I

was just setting the timers on those new feeding and exercise monitors you designed, Jaina.

Raynar said he'd look in on my menagerie, just in case, and Uncle Luke even offered to take care of Nicta," he said, pointing to the feathery blue ball perched on his shoulder.

"We shouldn't keep Calrissian waiting," Anja said gruffly, impatiently, though she wasn't the least bit eager to go.

A rich chuckle came from the doorway. "No, it doesn't pay to keep me waiting-unless, of course, you're a beautiful young lady."

Anja turned to look at the speaker and saw in the arched doorway a dashing handsome man with dark features and a dazzling white smile.

"Well, hello.... What have we here?" the man said, striding into the room. "Two beautiful young ladies?" He took Anja's hand, bowed, and kissed it lightly. "It's a pleasure to meet you." He held her hand in his and favored her with a brilliant smile.

She sucked in a quick breath. This man was too smooth and handsome for his own good. And she wasn't at all pleased that she felt a slight flush of pleasure to be the center of his attention. From the corner of her eye she saw Jaina clap a hand over her mouth to suppress a giggle.

"Ummm, Lando Calrissian, this is Anja Gallandro," Jacen said, flushing as well. "Anja, meet Lando Calrissian, one of my father's oldest and best friends. Lando used to be a pretty big gambler, and he's a former smuggler, too."

At these words Anja stiffened and snatched her hand from Calrissian's grasp. Her gaze turned frosty, and her lip curled back in an involuntary sneer. "What a shame. I kind of like smugglers. But I've always found people who call themselves tonner smugglers to be sort of... self-righteous."

Rather than being offended, as Anja had hoped, Lando Calrissian raised his eyebrows as if he'd found her statement interesting. "Well, we'll just have to see if we can't correct that impression," he said. "I'll wait for you three down at the Lady Luck. The others are already there."

He gave an enigmatic nod and left the room with a swirl of his cape.

As Anja turned back toward the twins, she saw disapproval in Jaina's brandybrown eyes.

"That was pretty rude."

Anja blinked at her with feigned innocence. "Oh, really? Was it?"

Tension crackled in the air between them until Jacen intervened.

"Lando has been like an uncle to us since we were born. He's risked his life more than once for every member of our family. I know it's hard for you to trust people, Anja, but Lando's one of the best. Give him a chance."

Jaina pointed out, "After all, he was nice enough to invite you along to Bespin, even though he doesn't know you."

Anja nodded and the tension broke. "Sure. I'll give him a chance."

"Just try to relax-and try not to insult anyone," Jacen added.

Jaina grinned the lopsided grin that made her look like her father, Han Solo. "Fortunately for you, Lando Calrissian doesn't insult too easily."

Jaina nodded to Lando from the copilot's position in the Lady Luck.

"Ready for jump to hyperspace."

“Hang on, everybody,” Lando said. He flipped a few switches and the twinkling lights outside the front viewport stretched into brilliant starlines around them.

“Too bad we couldn’t have brought the Rock Dragon,” Jaina said.

“Or the Lightning Rod,” Zekk spoke up from behind her in the crew cabin.

Lowie gave a noncommittal rumble.

“Come on, now,” Lando said, “we didn’t need to bring a whole fleet! “

“It was unnecessary,” Tenel Ka agreed.

“Indeed, and the Lady Luck is certainly quite a fine ship,” Em Teedee said.

“And she’s big enough for a crew twice this size. Anyhow, I promised your families and Luke that I’d keep an eye on all of you. You know, not let anything happen. How could I do that if you were off in some other ship?” Lando turned his most charming smile on Jaina.

“Besides, don’t tell me it’s a hardship to practice your copilot skills in the Lady Luck.”

Jaina laughed. “No, I enjoy flying more than I could possibly enjoy any ride in your new amusement park, and you know it.”

Lando’s face shone with childish excitement. “I don’t know about that.

SkyCenter Galleria is fantastic. I can’t wait to show it to you. My friend Cojahn and I are sparing no expense in making it the best entertainment complex in the galaxy. If you can’t find something to enjoy in our galleria, you’re probably dead. Cojahn’s putting everything into it.

He spends every waking hour there. He takes his wife and daughters with him at least once a week just to show them the progress."

"You said he's another former smuggler?" Anja asked from the back of the cockpit. "I suppose that means he's respectable, too?"

"He had a pretty tough time of it up until the past few years, but things have really turned around for him. This is his biggest break.

I tell you, since we started working on this new project I've never seen him so happy." He grinned over his shoulder. "You'll like him.

He's a nice guy... like me."

The white metropolis was like an island in the sky, with towers and turrets and transparisteel windows that gleamed in the light from Bespin's brilliant sun. All around them the soup of clouds swirled in a rainbow of pinks and oranges from airborne micro-algae and plankton that lived on the winds. A flurry of tiny ships circled like moths around the lights of the docking bays.

"Dazzling," Zekk said.

"I never get tired of looking at her," Lando said quietly.

Lowie gave an enthusiastic rumble as the Lady Luck touched down on a landing platform on the outskirts of Cloud City. "Goodness, yes!"

Em Teedee agreed. "It is rather high, isn't it?"

Cloud City's altitude suited Lowie just fine. Being so high reminded him of the great wroshyr trees on his home planet of Kashyyyk. It gave him a feeling of home and safety. He was always most comfortable when he was up high, and the young Wookiee couldn't wait to get out and explore, maybe

climb some of the highest towers or just hang out on some of the external hover-scaffolding.

With Em Teedee clipped firmly to his syrenfiber belt, Lowie was the first to bound down the Lady Luck's landing ramp. Eager to see the view, Lowie strode to the edge of the landing platform to get a better look at the layered clouds below.

Aside from the floating cities, Tibanna gas refineries, and storage tanks that drifted in Bespin's atmosphere, the planet had no habitable landmasses. The view was exhilarating, and Lowie gave a contented sigh. It was so high up! His friends from the Jedi academy joined him.

"Ah," Tenel Ka said. "Aha. An interesting sensation."

Zekk said, "Whoa-and I thought the trees you liked to climb were high!"

He gave Lowie an admiring look and stepped back from the edge of the platform. "I sure wouldn't want to fall."

"Hey, they've got some neat indigenous animals," Jacen said, pointing at a flock of small creatures flying below them in the clouds.

"Bespin has life-forms different from any place else in the galaxy."

Anja seemed completely at ease with the height and moved up close beside Lowie at the edge of the platform, standing with one hand cocked on her hip. "Nice view," she commented.

As Lando and Jaina emerged after shutting down the Lady Luck's systems, a small and somber group of Exex, the city officials, marched across the docking platform toward the space yacht. At first Lowie thought it might be a small committee to welcome home the former Baron Administrator

of Cloud City-but he could sense immediately that something was wrong.

Lando raised a hand in greeting. "Good to be back. How ya doing?" He looked at them, perplexed. "This is all the fanfare you could manage?"

But the tiny group of officials converged around Lando and all began speaking at once in hushed voices.

"What? Wait a minute, now! One at a time." Lowie, hearing Lando's voice rise in alarm, moved closer so he could hear. His sensitive Wookiee ears picked up the words, and he froze as one of the female officials spoke in a low firm voice.

"It's true, sir. I saw him fall myself. The Wing Guard has ruled it a suicide. Your partner Cojahn is dead."

When the young Jedi Knights accompanied Lando into the sprawling construction site of his high-tech entertainment complex, Jaina looked around in amazement.

Once completed, the amusement park would be an imaginary city within the floating city, with rides, games, food booths, themed "shopping environments," and live-action shows. SkyCenter Galleria would be a fabulous vacation spot for sentient creatures of all ages. There was no doubt that the high-altitude entertainment center offered fun for everyone.

But the sad news about Cojahn had not left Lando and the young Jedi Knights much in the mood for fun.

Lando held a small datapad that projected a holographic model of the SkyCenter Galleria plans, but he rarely consulted the schematics as he walked along through the bustling, confusing construction site. Since learning about the death of his friend and partner, Cloud City's former

Baron Administrator seemed to lack enthusiasm for the promising investment.

Lando used his passcard to enter the site's work areas, and his guests followed him, curious but also wary around the sparking laser welders and the groaning repulser-cranes. Temporary fabric walls and force-field windows protected the structures and circuitry from the elements.

"Pretty different from when the New Republic engineers rebuilt the Great Temple at the Jedi academy," Jaina said.

"This is just a bit more modern than a four-thousand-year-old pyramid in the jungles," Lando pointed out.

Tenel Ka peered upward at the girders and levitating scaffolds that Ugnaught construction workers were using to build the upper gondolas and sweeping tracks of amusement rides. "Impressive," she said.

"D'you think we could have fun here?" Jacen asked her. "When it's all done, I mean."

"It seems designed to be most amusing," Tenel Ka observed in a deadpan voice.

As they walked along, Lando squinted up at the uniformed workers.

A gray-tufted Ugnaught shift supervisor chattered at him, then squeaked what must have been an announcement for all the construction workers to take a brief break. The shift supervisor descended from the top of a tall hovercoaster section, swinging down arm over arm from a lattice of support structures until he landed in front of Lando.

He chattered along in a lengthy speech, waving his arms and gesticulating as he made some sort of explanation. From Lowie's side Em Teedee piped up, "I believe I speak Ugnaught rather well, Master Calrissian. Would you like me to translate?"

"Not necessary, Em Teedee," he said. "I spent plenty of years on Cloud City. I wouldn't have been much good as a BaronAdministrator if I couldn't speak Ugnaught, now would I?"

Lando chattered something back in the alien-sounding language.

The Ugnaught shift boss nodded, then leapt to a crossbrace on the hovercoaster track and clambered up, yelling for the crew to get back to their duties. The other Ugnaughts returned to work, attaching crossbraces to the high-speed levitating hovercoaster.

"The new shift supervisor says everything's on schedule," Lando told them.

"What happened to the previous supervisor?" Zekk asked, narrowing his eyes against the flickering play of shadows, dazzling laser light, and high-spectrum glowpanels.

"Cojahn fired him a few days before he fell from the balcony. Kind of a feisty Ugnaught. He was always arguing with Cojahn about something.

Distinctive-looking guy, I guess. According to the records, a patch of fur got burned off his head in an accident, because he refused to use appropriate safety procedures." Lando frowned suspiciously.

"Apparently Cojahn disagreed with the former supervisor's methods. His replacement, though, assures me that Cojahn was a good boss, very attentive, insisting that all work be done to exacting standards. He accepted slower progress just so they could add more safety features."

Lando shook his head.

Jaina stepped closer to him. "If Cojahn was so concerned with safety, it doesn't seem likely he'd be careless enough

to slip and fall off a dangerous outer balcony.”

“Not on your life,” Lando said vehemently. “Cojahn was so careful, so protective of other people and his own safety he wouldn’t even let his daughters sit in their repulsorswings without being strapped in.

He’d never have just fallen off a balcony.”

“He could have jumped though,” Anja suggested in her usual sour tone.

She tossed her long mane of hair behind her shoulders and straightened the headband. “Couldn’t take the pressure or the responsibility, maybe? You never can tell about some people.”

“I can,” Lando said. “And I can tell you that Cojahn would never have taken a swan dive-and certainly not at this time in his life.

Everything was going right for him. This was gonna be our big break.”

Together, they continued walking through a narrow, oddly angled corridor. The trapezoidal walls and upwardly sloping ramps seemed designed to disorient and confuse any visitors. Moving mirrors added to the confusion, and Jaina found it difficult to keep her footing.

As they stepped past a set of hidden sensors that triggered a new display, glimmering images of slaving holographic monsters suddenly appeared in the air. Scaled and clawed beasts lunged out of darkened alcoves with ferocious synthesized roars.

Zekk yelled. Lowie snarled. Tenel Ka leapt into a battle stance, yanking the rancor-tooth lightsaber loose from her belt. But Jacen just laughed, making a face at the hideous images. “Those simulated creatures are ridiculous, Lando,”

he said. "Who could believe anything that ugly would exist in this universe?"

Anja just snorted. "I've seen plenty of ugly things."

"Okay, but the feel is all wrong. If these are supposed to be landbound predators, they need some sort of camouflage coloring, not glowpanel yellow or repulsodet blue. They wouldn't all come from the same direction, either. You could add some high ledges or branches.

And it wouldn't be hard to program your holobeasts to respond to visitors' movements."

Lando glanced appraisingly at the illusionary monsters, which still roared and slashed ineffectively at them. He waved his hands in front of the nearest image; the projected beast didn't react. "Maybe you're right, Jacen. We should make the holothreats a bit more interesting at that." Next they passed an enormous antigravity playchamber-currently nonfunctional. The spherical room had padded walls and strange formed-foam obstacles protruding from the sides. As Jaina peered through one of the observation ports, she could see that the chamber must have been tested at least once, judging by the discarded, dented paint containers and the splatters that had all fallen in an impact pattern around the curved walls.

Lando punched a command into his datapad and reoriented his holographic model. As the others drew closer to look at the tiny rendering of the amusement park, he pointed out the various rides and experience chambers he and Cojahn had planned in their grand scheme for SkyCenter Galleria.

"Some of this was going to be in Phase II." He shook his head.

He kept his voice flat as he struggled to control his emotions, though Jaina could tell that Lando remained

deeply disturbed. "We'd intended this place to be a long-term investment, our greatest success. We had a ten-year plan for expanding, bringing in new people."

He stared upward at the catwalks, support braces, and colorful backdrops of cloth. "That's why it was so important for me to have you kids here as 'test consultants.'" We wanted to get everything rightthe look, the details, the thrills. Now I don't know how I'm gonna do half of this by myself."

"Can't you find other investors?" Jacen asked. "This place is a great idea." Tenel Ka looked at him, and Lowie grumbled a comment.

Lando nodded sincerely. "Probably, in a pinch-but it won't be the same. Half of SkyCenter Galleria was Cojahn's idea." They arrived at the top of a vortex tunnel. "This one was my idea, though."

Bright red-and-white barricades blocked off the dangerous-looking pit... but the barricades looked like props, part of the scenery.

Stepping closer, Jaina looked down into the ominous shaft, where mist and colored lights swirled, increasing the mystery.

"Come on, it's about time we had a little fun," Lando said. "Follow me, everybody."

He grabbed Jaina's arm and the two of them jumped into the hole.

Instinctively she cried out. Before she knew it, Jacen and Tenel Ka had jumped in after them. Anja fought unsuccessfully when Zekk pushed the older girl into the pit, then jumped in with Lowie close behind.

As Jaina dropped, she could hear the miniaturized translating droid scolding as they all dropped down,

down..... Oh my! Master Lowbacca, are you absolutely certain that this is safe? It may not have been tested yet. We could be doomed.....

Jaina clamped her mouth shut and let herself fall, drifting down, confident that Lando would never have led them into danger, though she realized his stunned grief might have caused him to be more impetuous than he normally would have been.

One by one they dropped. First they descended through a blast of supercold mist that froze into frost on the tiny hairs on Jaina's arms.

Next they dropped through a warm, tropical steam. They kept falling, swirling, spinning around as cyclonic winds tugged them from level to level. Loud rushing sounds roared in their ears as they plunged past speakers embedded in the walls, no doubt intended to increase the sensation of speed and "danger" in their fall.

Finally, after they'd passed through a raft of semisolid bubbles that slowed their descent, a blasting air cushion rocketed up from below.

Suddenly buoyant, they drifted gently down to land on a thick pad at the bottom.

With a carefree laugh, Jaina reached up to catch her brother, while the big hairy mass of Lowbacca nearly bowled Lando over on the mat.

They staggered off the padded landing platform into the holding area.

"Did you kids enjoy that?" Lando said, checking a bank of controls and overrides. All the lights registered green.

"We loved it," Jaina said.

: "Can we do it again?" Jacen asked.

“Dear me, no! Please feel free to enjoy the experience without me next time,” Em Teedee huffed.

“It was quite stimulating,” Tenel Ka agreed.

Without a word, Anja smoothed back her hair and adjusted her garments.

She glared daggers at Zekk, but he didn’t seem to care.

“I’d call that a successful test run,” Lando said, then sighed.

“Maybe this will work out after all.”

“I sure hope so,” Jaina said.

As he walked along between utility sheds and piles of supply crates, listening to the construction sounds and the movement of materials from the Port Town docks and the other levels on Cloud City, Lando placed his hands on his hips. He had begun to recover from his shock and now replaced it with a grim determination.

“The SkyCenter construction’s on track,” he said. “Cojahn took care of that much, at least, but I’ve still got about a thousand administrative details to take care of. That was my end of the bargain.”

He heaved a heavy sigh and muttered to himself. “I sure could’ve used your help right now, old buddy. Whatever made you stumble off the edge of a city in the clouds?” He shook his head.

Jaina bit her lip and said out loud what she knew must have been on everyone else’s minds. “Maybe he didn’t. What if he was pushed?”

Lando looked at her sharply, his big brown eyes narrowing. “I’ve considered that.”

An. a crossed her arms over her chest and let out a snort. “Yeah, right,” she said. “Always look for something sinister.”

“It makes a whole lot more sense than to think that he jumped on his own free will,” Lando said, his nostrils flaring.

“We’ll never know unless we investigate,” Zekk said.

Lowie gave a Wookiee grumble, and the little droid translated.

“Master Lowbacca says there can be no doubt that something very much out of the ordinary is going on here. Cloud City does not... smell right.”

Jacen clapped one hand on his sister’s shoulder and one on Tenel Ka’s.

“And we’ll do our best to help you look into it, Lando. We’re Jedi Knights, after all. This is part of our job.”

“This is a fact,” Tenel Ka agreed.

“Well then, what’re we waiting for?” Jaina asked. Lowie took up the challenge with a roar.

Lando looked gratefully at the companions. “You know, kids, one of the things I’ve learned in my life is never to turn down a sincere offer of help-especially if the offer comes from a Jedi Knight.”

With a swirl of his colorful cape, Lando Calrissian went off to file a formal complaint and request an official investigation into Cojahn’s death from Cloud City Security. He still had a network of friends and political connections from his days as Baron Administrator.

Meanwhile, the young Jedi Knights found their way to a high observation platform, an open atmospheric patio on the upper ring of Kerros Tower.

Here at the top of the immense metropolis in the sky, they were buffeted by winds. The temperatures varied: cool and warm breezes swirled as updrafts caught around the

structure, carrying snatches of vapors from the cloud depths below.

Off at a distance in the clouds, they could see steaming Tibanna gas refineries and drifting storage cylinders. Anja lounged back on a chair, propped up one knee, and studiously ignored both the sights and the glitz.

The Tourism Board of Cloud City had issued restrictions and setback limitations for the chemical processing and industrial facilities.

Since rich patrons frequently came from halfway across the galaxy to relax and spend their vacations on Bespin, the Board required that all smelly and noisy activities remain far enough away so as not to spoil the view.

The sun stole below the far horizon as the planet's rotation carried them toward nightfall. Far beneath the patio platform the soup of clouds turned pink and orange with the sheen of phosphorescent microorganisms.

Bespin spun so fast on its axis that each day was only twelve standard hours long. Jacen estimated that he would need to sleep only every other night, and a small part of the day. Visitors to Cloud City found that such a schedule kept the place bustling, frantic, and awake at all hours.

Jacen pointed down to the colorful clouds, nudging Tenel Ka beside him.

"Those colors are caused by microspheres of airborne algae," he said.

"They live on the little droplets of water vapor and other trace chemicals that boil up from below. It's like a forest of sky plankton down there."

"Ah. Aha," she said, but made no other comment.

“I thought you wanted to talk about this supposed foul play in Cojahn’s death,” Anja said. “As if we have any chance of solving it.”

“With such a negative attitude, why even start?” Zekk frowned at her.

“I’m surprised you have so little faith in your own abilities, Anja.”

She scowled back at the dark-haired boy. “It’s not my abilities I doubt.” She turned away and stared off into the clouds.

Suddenly, light burst from all sides of Cloud City, colorful beacons that swirled and played out across the sky. Distant music hummed from speakers set into the hover-scaffolding at the edges of the metropolis.

“What’s going on?” Jaina asked.

“A show, I think,” Jacen said. Tenel Ka leaned forward to watch.

To the sounds of muffled cheers from all up and down the sides of the huge levitating city, a group of creatures arrowed out of one of the broad docking bays with a flutter of wings. The snub-nosed, bullet shaped creatures flapped their broad wings like giant fish swimming gracefully under thick water. They had no feathers, only gray leathery skin, like sails stretched tight over flexible cartilage and a network of thin bones. Except for the rushing of air, the beasts made no sound in their flight.

“Hey, those are thrantas!” Jacen cried. He turned to Jaina. “We’ve seen holos of them. Remember some of the images Mom has? Thrantas were actually native to Alderaan, but someone brought them here many years ago to use as beasts of burden at the gas refineries and for constructing the floating cities.” He nodded toward the

cluster of swooping batlike creatures that circled, dove, and flew in formation.

“Since Alderaan was destroyed, those are probably the last ones in existence,” Jaina pointed out.

“Only because Alderaan never made any attempt to defend itself,” Anja muttered. “Your Luke Skywalker proved that the Death Star wasn’t quite as unconquerable as the Empire thought.”

The thrantas circled back toward the dazzling lights of Cloud City, diving through the brightly colored hewns as if they tonned a glowing waterfall. As the thrantas looped around, preparing to head back out to the open sky, many small figures dropped off a launching ramp from the sides of the white metropolis.

Lowie growled in surprise. “People are jumping!” Jaina cried.

“Out into open air!”

“Wait. They seem to know what they’re doing,” Zekk pointed out.

“Watch. I think it’s part of the show.”

Jacen’s eyes gleamed. “They’re thranta riders!”

Smooth-skinned lanky humanoids dove from their precarious perches, somersaulting into the open sky without a care. Jacen could see that their exposed skin was painted with whorls of color, in black and red, yellow and green. The humanoids fell and tumbled without fear... and each thranta nosed out and dove toward a particular rider, moving in a beautifully choreographed dance.

Flapping sail-like wings, the thrantas swooped beneath the tumbling, dropping humanoids. The thranta riders completed their aerial acrobatics and each one of them

landed perfectly in position on a small harness on a thranta's back. With a resonant sound muffled by distance and the vastness of the giant floating city, spectators applauded and cheered the show.

"They must be training for their sky rodeo," Jacen said. "I've read about them. Once a month they perform here on Cloud City in what has to be the most terrific exhibition in this spiral arm. Amazing creatures-and the riders, too. "

Several of the thranta riders now stood on the slippery backs of their beasts, holding their hands up. The squadron of thrantas swooped around each other in figure eights and swirled about like a swarm of maddened insects. In a silent, perfectly executed motion, the standing thranta riders leapt off the backs of their own creatures and landed on other ones. The riders switched mounts without a single mistake, without so much as a slip. Every movement was beautiful and precise, like patterns in a kaleidoscope.

"If this is practice," Jaina said, "can you imagine what the real show is like?"

"Maybe Cojahn was hoping to become a thranta rider," Anja suggested sarcastically. "He jumped off... but missed. Should've practiced more in the simulation chambers, I guess."

"That is an interesting hypothesis," Tenel Ka replied, surprising Anja.

Zekk nodded. "Maybe we should at least talk to some of those thranta riders, find out if they saw something....."

Jaina sat up as cool dusk wind blew her straight brown hair around her face. "Ought to talk to the people at the SkyCenter construction site, too. Maybe the Ugnaught shift boss who got fired, if we can find him, and anyone else Cojahn had contact with."

Zekk nodded. "We've got a lot of leads to follow, but at least Cloud City isn't as big as a planet. How many places can there be to look?"

Anja stood up in disgust, putting her hands on her hips. Her piranha beetle tattoo stood out on her upper right arm. "We'll never find anything even if we look. The explanation is pretty clear; it's right in front of us. Lando just doesn't want to admit that it could have been a suicide or even a simple accident."

"And maybe it wasn't," Jacen said. "It's up to us to find out." He gave her a wry grin. "And believe me, we've solved greater puzzles than this before."

"Right," Jaina said. "So what are we waiting for?" Iaina gasped in amazement as she walked into the Cloud Dance restaurant, where they had agreed to meet Lando for a morning meal though with Bespin's short daily cycle, any meal could have been a morning, midday, or evening meal.

The eating establishment was at one of the upper levels of the floating city, extending in a ring from a tall cylindrical tower.

Transparisteel windowports gave a 360-degree view of the clouds, the sunrise, the passing cloud-car traffic, and a portion of the cluttered SkyCenter building site, which was covered by temporary screens and awnings.

With the exception of an opaque walkway around the perimeter of the circular room, the floor and ceiling were transparent as well. At the center of the room, a bubble of transparisteel rose from the floor.

Inside it, clouds swirled and danced in ever-changing patterns, lit from above by multicolored glowpanels.

Lowie bounded past Jaina into the room with a triumphant woof, as if claiming the restaurant for himself.

Jaina chuckled. "Thought you'd like it. It's your kind of place."

: "This is a fact," said Tenel Ka, entering behind her.

"Hey, I'm starved," Jacen said, rubbing a hand sleepily through his tousled brown curls.

Jaina gave her brother a playful punch in the arm. "You'll get your food soon enough. What do you think of the view?"

Jacen took two steps forward. Jaina watched in amusement as the full impact of the view hit him and he looked around for something to hold on to.

Lowie crouched on the opaque walkway, staring down into the cloudy depths, barking enthusiastic comments. "Master Lowbacca wishes to assure you that-even if the food turns out to be dreadful this is the finest establishment he has ever had the pleasure of dining in," Em Teedee translated unnecessarily.

Lando entered, flashing a weary grin. "I can assure you, Lowbacca, that you'll find the food here more than adequate. Glad you could all join me." He glanced around at the assembled young Jedi. "At least most of you, that is."

With a flash of imitation Jaina noted that Anja hadn't bothered to show up on time. Neither had Zekk. Because of the sad-eyed young woman's hard life, Jaina tried to make allowances for Anja's brusque nature, but she found it difficult to understand the fascination she seemed to hold for Jacen and Zekk.

As quickly as the negative thoughts arose, Jaina squelched them, firmly forcing her mind to more pleasant thoughts. She noticed that a slight frown had creased her brother's brow. "I'm sure they'll both be here soon," Jaina said.

Lando selected the table with the best view in the restaurant, and they all settled onto transparent repulsorbenches.

“Here’s Zekk now!” Jacen said, waving his friend over. “And Anja’s probably just out exploring. She gets up early most mornings, you know. She has an awful lot of energy.”

Lando’s brown eyes narrowed thoughtfully and he gave a slow nod.

“I can well imagine.” He paused, carefully considering his words. “I know it looks tempting to have all that instant energy, but don’t let her talk you into trying any andris, all right? Spice can do a lot of damage in the long run, and once you’re hooked, well... I’ve known a couple people who tried to quit and didn’t make it.”

Jaina, Jacen, and the others exchanged confused glances. “What are you talking about?” Jacen asked. “Who said anything about spice?”

“Ah. Aha,” Tenel Ka said. “You believe Anja Gallandro is addicted to spice?”

Jaina bit her lower lip, stared at Lando in shock. Looking at the circle of serious faces around him, Lando spread his hands wide in apology. “I... I thought you knew. Believe me, I’ve run into this enough times that I recognize the symptoms: wide eyes with huge dilated pupils, excess energy, restlessness, large appetite but never seeming to gain any weight. Not to mention always looking for chances to get off alone and then coming back with a fresh burst of energy, and the pale, almost translucent skin, quick temper..

Jaina sighed. “Sounds like Anja, all right.”

“That’s impossible,” Jacen said. “I would have known.”

Zekk said nothing, although he suddenly looked as if he were reviewing recent events in his mind.

Jaina shrugged. She usually believed that the straightforward approach was best. "Why don't we just ask her? There she is now."

Anja stood impatiently in the doorway of the restaurant. Spying the group, she trotted over to the table. Her glance flitted around Cloud Dance on the way to the table, noting her surroundings but showing little reaction to them.

"Uh, hi," Jacen said uncertainly as she slid into a seat between him and Zekk.

No one else spoke. Anja ignored the silence and began studying the holomenu that appeared on the table in front of her as soon as she sat down. She seemed to build an invisible wall around her, separating herself from any companionship.

Lowie nudged Jaina in the ribs, encouraging her to speak. She looked over at Lando, who raised his eyebrows, obviously waiting.

Jaina cleared her throat. "Before we start eating, I have a question for you, Anja. It's... about andris spice."

Anja's reaction was immediate and defensive. She jerked upright and pushed back from the table. "It's not mine. I'm just keeping it for a friend. And besides, who are you to go rummaging through my things and-" Jacen's mouth fell open. He stared at her as if this was the last thing he'd expected to hear. "So you do have spice?"

Anja's face flushed, and her words were filled with heat. "Well, obviously Jaina must have found it. Otherwise, why would she-"

"Wait," Jaina said. "Nobody found anything. And we haven't been going through your stuff. But there were, urn..."

you just seem to... she faltered, "... to be showing signs of spice addiction."

Anja rounded on her. "I am not addicted. Not that it's any of your business, but yes, I do take andris. Sometimes. Andris does have legal uses, you know. I use spice when I want to, because I like it.

It's not a problem. And I can quit anytime I want to."

Anja stood, her face stormy. "Anyway, none of you has any right to question me. Who do you think you are, my father?" She glared at Jaina, then Jacen. Her voice became even colder. "I don't have a father.

Han Solo killed him, remember?"

With that, she stormed out of the restaurant.

Anja shook with fury as she stalked down one corridor after another.

Images and emotions seethed in her mind, twisted her stomach. How dare they confront her like that... imply that she was addicted to spice!

She slapped a hand impatiently against one leg as she walked.

She had started to think of some of the young Jedi Knights as her friends. But what gave them the right to ask about her private life?

It was none of their business whether she took spice or not. Their business here was to visit SkyCenter Galleria and give Lando their opinion of it.

They had all come to Cloud City to enjoy themselves and- until now Anja had been enjoying herself, in spite of the somber news about Cojahn's death. It certainly wasn't her fault that the clumsy guy had taken a cloud dive.

Anja drew in a deep breath. Of course, she did have an inkling whose fault it might be. In all likelihood, Cojahn's death had not been an accident. Anja was observant and had already seen a few signs that Black Sun was involved here in some way. She had long known that Czethros held an interest in several of the gambling casinos on Cloud City. It was entirely possible that Calrissian's friend had gotten in the way and Czethros had been forced to have his people remove him. It was not a pleasant thought, but not shocking either.

She did feel edgy, though, out of control. How she wished she could take a dose of andris right now. She didn't need it, of course, she assured herself But it would make her feel so much better....

The urge was almost overwhelming, yet she had little enough of the precious spice. Czethros was so stingy with what he gave her, even after all she had done for him. Perhaps if she gave him some information he might be grateful enough to...

Her footsteps quickened, and in less than five minutes she found herself at the doorway to a private comm center. She paid her credits and slipped into a soundproof booth. She knew the transmission codes by heart, and within moments an image tonned on the screen in front of her. The man had close-cropped moss-green hair and an eye visor that circled the base of his skull like a ring around an oddly shaped planet.

"This had better be important," Czethros said, dispensing with any pretense at civilities.

Anja recognized the room behind him as his office on Ord Mantell.

She nodded and got to the point. "It's business, of course-what else?

I'm on Cloud City, staying at the Yerith Bespin."

She explained how she and the young Jedi Knights had learned of Cojahn's death and the suspicious circumstances surrounding it, and how very intent her companions were on discovering Cojahn's real killer.

The moving red light on Czethros's visor hiccuped in agitation as she relayed her story, and she knew he understood her silent implication: if he was at all involved, he'd better cover his tracks quickly.

"I hoped this information might be... worth something to you?" she said, trying to keep the desperate tone out of her voice.

Czethros's scarred face betrayed no expression. "You were right to tell me, my little velser," he said. "You'll be suitably rewarded.

I'll contact you." With that, he abruptly terminated the communications link.

Anja smiled. That had gone well, she thought. Since more would be coming any time, perhaps she would reward herself with just a small dose of spice.

As the morning wore on, Tenel Ka found herself growing more and more impressed with Lando Calrissian. She had never gotten to know the man very well, never spent as much time with him as Jacen, Jaina, or even Lowbacca had. But as the former smuggler led them on a tour of yet another portion of his enormous, not-quite-finished amusement complex, it became increasingly clear that the man was intelligent and quick-witted, a loyal friend and a shrewd businessman.

Even as Lando explained each new attraction to the interested young Jedi Knights, she could tell he kept his eyes open for any clues to what really lay behind Cojahn's death.

He had asked them to use the Force to sense any hidden dangers at the construction site: workers with malicious thoughts, sabotaged assemblies, or substandard materials.

As they did this, Lando reviewed the SkyCenter's work logs and message boards; he interviewed with subtlety, probing questions any crew members they encountered. But the senses of the young Jedi revealed nothing more unusual in the work crew than sadness, curiosity, or indifference on the subject of their former boss's demise.

Lando led them down one of twenty transparent corridors that spoked out from a central domed hub. "We call this area our Climatoria, where visitors can choose from over a dozen different climates. In each zone," he said, pointing down to the pie-shaped spaces between the transparent walkways, "people will be able to visit a holographic zoo that displays creatures living in that sort of climate, go on some rides, listen to music, visit informational exhibits, and eat food associated with that particular climate on various planets. For example, we have a rain forest climate, a low desert climate, an ocean climate, swamps and marshes-" Tenel Ka had always thought that the rigorous training Master Skywalker had undergone on Dagobah sounded interesting and challenging.

"May we visit this swamp climate?" she asked.

"Sure." Lando beamed. "After all, that's what you're here for. My professional test cases. We used a few areas on Dagobah as models, as well as the Bith homeworld and a planet in the Hapes cluster. I can't remember them all." His voice grew wistful. "This project was Cojahn's baby. He always got so excited when he talked about the different kinds of entertainment he was going to bring in here."

Lando led them around the edge of the central hub until he came to a door marked SwAmp, MARSH, BOG, BAYOU.

They stepped through the doorway and found themselves in a small antechamber.

“Here, put these on.” Lando handed each of them a gauzy jumpsuit of transparalon. “Best way to protect your clothes while we’re visiting this attraction. It... gets a little messy.”

They slipped the jumpsuits on over their boots and clothing, and crimped any excess material so that the transparalon formed a temporary seam, allowing each person to adjust the suit for its most comfortable fit.

Before the Wookiee donned his suit, Em Teedee detached himself from Lowie’s syrenfiber belt and the little droid hovered to and fro, “supervising” the process and making helpful suggestions.

Tenel Ka prepared to seal off the empty suit sleeve below the stump of her severed arm, but before she could reach over with her good arm, Jacen was already there doing it for her. It was the most attention he had paid her in days, and she was touched by his helpfulness. “Thank you Jacen, my friend.”

Lando rubbed his hands together. “Everyone ready? Let’s get into some mud.”

As they entered the swamps, Tenel Ka reached out with her Jedi senses to detect anything amiss. A tide of sounds and smells and tastes washed over them. The odors of mildew, algae, and decaying plant matter assailed her nostrils, yet she did not find them offensive. The air was warm and humid, though not uncomfortable. Chirrup, gurgles, croaks, buzzes, twitters, and growls chorused from every tree and muddy pool around them.

Occasionally, Tenel Ka noticed construction workers adding finishing touches to the exhibit—a bit more hanging moss here, another holographic swamp creature there—but

otherwise, the impression of an unexplored swampland was surprisingly convincing.

She found a long vine dangling across their path and, on the assumption that this was also part of the entertainment, she wrapped her arm around it, tested her weight. It held. Then, grasping the vine a little farther up, she swung out halfway over a murky brownish-green pool and let go. She splashed down with satisfying force and found herself waist deep in muddy, lukewarm water.

Lando grinned. "Glad to see you're getting into the spirit of this.

That water's perfectly clean, by the way. It's been artificially 'muddied' with purified sand and food colorings."

Tenel Ka watched with great interest as her transparalon suit repelled the "dirty" water. Inside the suit she was comfortably clean and dry.

"But whatever is the point of all this?" Em Teedee asked.

Lowie chuffed with laughter. Jaina and Jacen giggled. "It's fun, Em Teedee," Jacen said. "Loosen up a little and get into it."

"I shall do my utmost, Master Jacen. Provided I don't damage any of my circuits. It's certainly a comfort that Mistress Jaina saw fit to waterproof my casing last year."

Lando reached out and helped haul Tenel Ka back out of the mud.

"I can show you some even better pools if you all want to go for a swim after midday meal." He led them around a dense clump of trees and bushes. "This is where we're going to eat."

He gestured to an open area that hadn't been visible from the trail.

“We call this the Bayou Buffet.” He spread his arms and indicated a serving area fifty meters long. The tables were made to look like fallen and rotting logs whose tops just happened to be perfectly flat.

A small Ugnought construction worker tinkered with something under one of the tables.

“And over here is the stage,” Lando said, walking to a raised platform at the center of the open area. “How you doin’?” he greeted a scrawny young man with a wispy beard who was busily connecting pieces of a sound system to speakers embedded at the base of the stage.

The young man nodded, but continued working.

Lando turned back to the young Jedi Knights. “Cojahn was planning on booking bands that could play real swamp music, maybe some Bith musicians. The band will provide entertainment while people sit and eat authentic meals from various swamp climates.”

“Sounds like fun,” Jaina said.

“Yeah, well,” Lando said wistfully, “I guess he never got around to booking a band before-”

“Excuse me, sir,” the scrawny young man on the stage interrupted.

Tenel Ka sensed tension in the wispy-bearded boy.

“Yes?” Lando gave the boy his full attention.

“Begging your pardon, but Master Cojahn did book a band for this stage.”

Lando’s eyebrows went up. He looked relieved that one major detail had already been taken care of “Oh? Which band? When do they start?”

The young man glanced around, as if to make sure no one was watching or listening, then lowered his voice and

leaned toward Lando.

“Call themselves Figrin D’an and the Modal Nodes. And they already started.” He glanced furtively around again, nodded several times, and then said, “But they stopped.”

“Figrin D’an? Great band. Used to bump into them here and there in my smuggling days. But how could they have finished their gig already?”

Lando mused. “We haven’t even opened yet.”

“Master Cojahn had them doing promotional appearances at casinos on Cloud City, to get some advance interest for SkyCenter here.”

“So where are they now?” Lando asked.

“Exactly,” the boy whispered, nodding as if Lando had discovered some deep truth. “They’re gone, disappeared, run off in the night. They were supposed to be here all the way through the grand opening, but the same day Master Cojahn went over that balcony-the whole band packed up and left Bespin. No explanation at all. Didn’t even bother to collect the credits they were owed for the gig they did that day.” He nodded again.

“Didn’t collect their credits? That doesn’t sound like Figrin at all!”

Now it was Lando’s turn to glance around to see if anyone was watching or listening. “Thank you,” he said in a low voice. “You’ve been a big help.”

“It sounds to me like they must have seen something or learned something,” Zekk said. “Leaving like that is a sign that someone’s afraid and on the run.”

“It’s not much of a connection,” Jaina observed quietly.

“No,” Lando said, “but it’s the best lead we’ve got so far. I’d say that the band’s disappearing on the same day

Cojahn died is a bit too much of a coincidence. One way or another, I've got to find out what they know."

"They are gone," Tenel Ka pointed out. "How will you find them?"

Lando squared his shoulders and gave them all a determined look.

"I'll have to check the passenger records for that day, but I'd be willing to bet they went to ground in the safest place they could think of-on the Bith homeworld. And if I have to, I'll follow them there to find out what happened."

Ord Mantell had been his home, his base of operations... his lair, for many years, but Czethros knew well enough never to get too attached to any one place.

The true mastery and skill of running an important part of the ultrasecret Black Sun organization meant that he had to be flexible-as flexible as an Umgullian blob. He had two completely separate lives: one as a well-respected and influential businessman on Ord Mantell, and one as a powerful lieutenant of the insidious criminal organization that had infiltrated many important industries and businesses in the New Republic. He was a mixture of light and darkness, a man no one truly knew. He lived in the shadows.

Czethros sat at his cluttered desk in a high warehouse tower on Ord Mantell. Outside in the anteroom, computer screens and robotic receptionists diverted the common business activities, aboveboard correspondence, and trivial conversations that allowed Czethros to run one of the most successful shipping and packaging companies on the entire planet.

Everything had been set up for him through Black Sun.

But these legitimate activities were a mere cover-up, the tiniest fraction of the income he contributed to the hidden coffers of the underground criminal group. After all this time, he found it somewhat bothersome to keep such a clean public face for inconsequential people like Han Solo and the other nosy officials of the New Republic. In a way, however, the pretense amused him, and he would keep it up for now.

Soon though, once his plans were completed, his arm of Black Sun would be so solid and so influential that no one in the New Republic would dare question anything he did.

Czethros had been a lieutenant in the once-powerful Black Sun, a henchman, a hired killer, a bounty hunter-an expediter for the plans of powerful leaders such as Prince Xizor and Durga the Hutt. He had learned how to be ruthless, how to kill, how to take care of difficult situations before they became real problems.

Yet numerous crackdowns and disasters had forced Black Sun to go underground, into hiding. Some thought the criminal organization had been mortally weakened. But now Czethros and a few other lieutenants were working to build a newer, more powerful organization.

This new Black Sun would become dominant, because Czethros knew how to work both sides of the law, the dark and the light.

Keeping track of the many ongoing threads of his master plan put him under constant pressure.

He sat back at his desk, touched a hidden control under the front drawer, and his flat image screen flipped over to reveal a secret terminal.

Tweaking a volume control, he turned up the dissonant Sullustan opera that had been playing in the background. The squeaky, overlapping tones gave most people instant headaches-at the very least, the noise kept strangers out of

his office. Coincidentally, Sullustan opera had the added benefit of being particularly effective at jamming all known histening devices.

Czethros focused his cyber-eye on the secondary screen and scratched at the moss-green hair that covered his scarred head. Then he adjusted the visor over his eyes, tuning the reception spectrum deeper into the infrared. He nodded with satisfaction as a formerly invisible series of letters and words suddenly appeared on the screen. Human eyes could not read them, but with his visor Czethros could pick up every letter as perfectly as if it were written in fire.

He knew he would not be disturbed. In the reception area outside, his two beautifully polished female-form receptionist droids handled the incoming calls and correspondence with their protocol programming.

Dimly, he could hear their sultry voices repeating the familiar phrases: “Master Czethros is in a meeting,”

“Master Czethros is unavailable,”

“You’ll find that Master Czethros has already attended to that matter.”

Meanwhile, he sat back and called up the encrypted files that showed summaries of the most important Black Sun activities. This was how he got his real work done.

His weapons-running business had shown a great profit over the past few years, especially with the dragged-out civil war on Anobis. But sales of destructive devices had taken a recent downturn there, thanks to the cursed peacemaking efforts of that meddling Han Solo and the young Jedi Knights.

Czethros had tried to have Anja take care of the meddlers, but since he’d been forced to keep his involvement in Anobis gun-running activities a secret-

especially from her-he could hardly explain to Anja why it was important to him. Anja was so volatile, such a loose cannon, that she might even turn against him, if she ever found out he had kept the war going on her home planet to increase his profits.

Czethros sighed. It was merely a temporary setback in the overall picture. He was certain Black Sun operatives would be able to start wars and revolutions on several other planets. It usually wasn't hard.

Scapegoats could be found everywhere-an unattributed comment here, an anonymous bomb planted there-and before long, two uneasy factions would be at each other's throats (or whatever other breathing mechanisms their species used). His stockpile of weapons would soon be back in demand.

He fine-tuned his plans for digging Black Sun's claws into the gambling and entertainment activities on various planets such as Bespin and Borgo Prime. Everything was proceeding quite satisfactorily. Now that he had gotten rid of the main opposition on Cloud City, Czethros knew the way was clear for him. Black Sun operatives would soon be raking in profits from all those establishments, as well as infiltrating the floating gambling casinos and resorts on the oceans of Mon Calamari.

On the spectrum-shifted screen a star map displayed bright points that represented Black Sun strongholds; the galaxy looked very bright indeed. After such a long buildup, his operatives were in place preparing for the great revolt. It would not be long before Czethros could give the signal. But first he had to cement the rest of his plans.

The illicit spice-running market continued to grow. His pirates and smugglers hijacked shipments of glitterstim, andris, and ryll spice, selling the contraband substances at

greatly inflated prices to waiting customers. Shortly before the brief battle and its utterly assured victory, Czethros would place himself in control of the famed spice mines of Kessel.

From that point on-within days, if everything worked out rightthe rest of the galaxy would be in his hands. His financial and political power would be firmly established. The banner of Black Sun would fly proudly beside the flag of the New Republic.

Czethros switched off the spectrum-shifted terminal, hid it beneath the normal innocuous screen again, and stood. Taking two quick strides toward the wide window, he gazed across the equatorial band of metropolis that girdled Ord Mantell. So much out there, so many possibilities.

But he dared not let his involvement be exposed yet. The timing was too delicate. If the wrong people learned that Black Sun activities were being controlled in part by the respected businessman Czethros, he might lose everything. His laser eye flashed from right to left in his visor, burning red.

Within weeks, though, when he sent his signal, and the battle cry went out to all their infiltrators, the grand coup would establish Black Sun's power in countless places at once. The victory would be so sudden, simultaneous, and far-reaching that the New Republic could never extricate the criminal organization, short of declaring outright war on its own worlds.

Unfortunately, the news Anja had just sent him from Cloud City meant that the young Jedi Knights would not rest until they had meddled in all of his affairs. He knew he'd have to take care of the situation quickly and cleanly. His choice was clear, and his conscience-if he still possessed one-would not trouble him. Besides, Czethros already had

plenty of blood on his hands. A little more would make no difference.

Without a second thought, he dispatched orders that would neatly dispose of Han Solo's twins and their companions. He had scores of operatives already in place on Bespin who would be eager for the extra assignment, the overtime pay.

Rubbing his hands together, Czethros moved on to the next challenge.

He fixed a smile on his face and signaled his receptionist droids that it was safe to begin admitting regular visitors. Czethros and his shipping company were now open for business.

He had a skill for presenting a polite and friendly facade to prospective customers, but it remained quite an ordeal for him. He hated to smile.

Soon, Czethros hoped he would never have to feign a smile again.

Lando, Jaina, and Zekk worked on the Lady Luck, preparing it for a quick journey to the Bith homeworld of Clak'dor VII. Though Jacen, Lowie, and Tenel Ka would remain on Cloud City to continue the local investigation, they helped with the flight preparations. Anja, however, kept to herself and was nowhere to be found.

"Sorry I can't take you all with me," Lando said, wiping a smudge of lubricant off his burgundy cape. "But it's a long shot tracking down that band. They definitely went to Clak'dor VII, but they're on the run, and I don't want to waste precious time in case-" Jacen said, "Don't worry about us here, Lando. We've got plenty of investigating to do on Cloud City."

“Can’t wait to compare notes when we get back,” Jaina said.

“Hey, Em Teedee,” Zekk called, tying back his long, dark hair, “did you go over our route to the Bith homeworld? We don’t want to get lost on our way there.”

“Why certainly, Master Zekk,” the little droid said. “I checked and doublechecked all of the coordinates and ran an algorithm to ensure that the navicomputer had chosen the proper course, free of any serious natural hazards. The Lady Luck and I are on very cordial terms.”

“Clak’dor VII isn’t a place many people go by choice,” Lando said.

“I’ve been to more planets in this galaxy than I can name, but I don’t ever remember setting foot on that world.”

“The musical prowess of Bith band members is renowned throughout the New Republic,” Tenel Ka said. “They travel widely, taking their entertainment talents to numerous venues. There is little reason to travel to Clak’dor VII to hear Bith music, since their bands are easily found in many fine establishments.”

“Not to mention some pretty seedy ones,” Zekk pointed out, remembering the Mos Eisley cantina.

“Well, I think it’s mighty suspicious that they packed up in such a hurry and left Cloud City right after Cojahn vanished. We need to track down Figrin D’an and the Modal Nodes and see what they can tell us.”

Wisps of high-flying clouds mixed with pink and tan vapors swirled around the open dock. Holding on to an ornate side strut on the Lady Luck, Jaina gazed out at the broad empty landscape of clouds and sunlight and sky.

Hearing someone approach, she turned around with surprise when her brother said, "Hey, it's Anja!"

They all glanced up to see the tall, muscular girl lounging against the docking bay door. "Yeah, I wanted to see you before you guys left."

She shrugged her tattooed shoulder. "I didn't want you all to think I was hot-tempered or anything."

Recalling the girl's outburst, Jaina raised her eyebrows. To Jaina's now-alert eye, the young woman seemed cheerful and energized, her enormous eyes bright, the pupils wide. Lando absorbed all these details with a slight nod, as if it confirmed his suspicions about Anja's use of andris spice. But he made no comment.

Lowie growled something and Em Teedee translated, completely missing the Wookiee's sarcasm. "Master Lowbacca wonders whatever could have given us that idea, Mistress Anja."

"Sometimes my... enthusiasm gets the best of me," Anja said.

"I think she's apologizing," Zekk said in a stage whisper.

Jaina shot a teasing glance at her dark-haired friend. "Let's not get carried away, now."

"Don't push it, kids," Lando warned. "She's apologized... in her own way. "

Anja narrowed her huge eyes. "All right. I'm sorry. Is that clear enough? " She crossed her arms over her chest and stood with forced relaxation, though Jaina could see her tensed muscles. A sheen of sweat sparkled on her forehead, darkening the leather headband. Her skin was flushed as if she were overheating, bursting with energy, but Anja kept herself under tight control.

Lando banged on the outer hull of his space yacht.
“Ready to head out.

Let’s see what we can learn from that Bith band.” He bowed low and gestured up the boarding ramp for Jaina. “My lady Jaina, Master Zekk, if you’d be so kind as to board our conveyance?” He flashed a bright grin at the companions remaining behind. “Next stop, Clak’dor.”

As Jaina climbed the steep ramp she turned to Zekk. “Hope you brought your swamp boots along.”

Zekk grinned back at her. “And my bug repellent.”

Lando followed them up and cast a glance over his shoulder to Jacen, Tenel Ka, Lowie, and Anja. “See? The Bith live in a marvelous place.

Don’t you guys wish you were coming along?”

“Gracious no! I can assure you that we will do our utmost to put our time here to valuable use,” Em Teedee answered quickly.

“Sure, but I do kind of like Bith music,” Jacen said.

Anja waved a dismissive hand and looked bored. “I prefer Ishi Tib.

Besides, you’ve heard one swamp band you’ve heard ‘em all.”

Jacen looked up at the clean white trappings of Cloud City, the ornate embellishments even on the docking bay balcony; he thought of the fine towers, the culture, and the beautiful sky rodeo rehearsal they had seen the night before.

“I guess we’ll just have to rough it here,” he said with a feigned sigh.

Clak’dor VII had once been a paradise, perfectly suited for organic carbon-based life and thriving with countless

species. But centuries of ecological damage and intercultural warfare among factions of the Bith race had ruined the world.

“Looks like a muddled mess,” Zekk said, looking out the Lady Luck’s front windowport as they approached.

“A long time ago there was a pretty nasty conflict here,” Lando said.

“Two rival groups disagreed on the decision of a private arbitrator—that’s the way the Bith solve problems—and both factions unleashed biochemical weapons, strange viruses, and mutation gases that all but ruined this world’s ecosystem. The planet has settled down some, but it’ll be thousands of years more before it completely recovers.”

“I read in the database that most Bith cities are enclosed in sealed domes and the people stay inside,” Jaina said.

“Is that where you think we’ll find Figrin D’an and the band?”

Zekk asked. “Inside a dome?”

“Not a chance,” Lando answered. “It wouldn’t be that easy. My sources tell me they’re in complete isolation, outside the protective domes.

I’ve already sent tracers out. Remember, the Modal Nodes are scared and on the run. Fortunately for us, they’re not overly bright about hiding their tracks.”

“Huh. I thought Biths were intelligent,” Jaina said, thinking of their enlarged pink heads and their highly developed craniums.

“It varies,” Lando said. “That Figrin D’an is a die-hard sabace player. I should know, since I’ve played against him quite a few times and so has your father, Han. Figrin recently spent a bunch of hot credits, registered some property, and

bought wilderness supplies. It seems he and the rest of the band have gone into hiding on one of the dense bayous."

"Good thing we brought our swamp boots, huh?" Jaina said with a sidelong glance at Zekk.

"I've got the coordinates of where they've gone," Lando said as he arrowed toward the swirling mud-green landmass to the south.

"If they're so scared and so anxious to hide," Zekk asked, "how'd you track them down so easily?"

Sitting in the Lady Luck's padded andornately carved captain's chair, Lando smiled. "I happen to know a lot of Figrin's gambling buddies... and they know me. I called in a few favors."

"Then it shouldn't be too hard for someone else to find him and the band, either," Jaina said with alarm.

"We'd better hurry," Lando agreed. He brought the ship down low, cruising over a cluster of transparisteel domes protruding like giant bubbles from the middle of a steaming swamp. The domed city was surrounded by covered watercourses and an open-air spaceport. Vines and moss had grown over the bases of some of the hemispheres, and Jaina could see tiny figures and small dwellings stacked in hivelike structures under the protective glass.

"We're not going there," Lando said. "I just needed a starting point, to orient my land coordinate system."

The Lady Luck cruised over the encased Bith city without stopping and then headed southward, deeper into the mangled wilderness areas that had long ago been devastated.

On a screen in front of him, Lando called up a detailed topographical map of the swamps and waterways. Jaina, as copilot, watched the progress of their flight, comparing the

diagram with the sinuous creeks and rivers that sliced through the overgrown wasteland.

Warm brownish water moved sluggishly around knobby tree roots and vine-draped spreading trees. Clumps of phosphorescent plankton drifted about on the broad open watery areas, their light flickering like a floating thunderstorm.

“Welcome to the garden spot of Clak’dor VII,” Zekk said.

“We’re close,” Lando stated, scrutinizing the diagram and the numerical coordinates on his controls. He scowled at the unwelcoming vista of steamy marshes. “Now to find a place to land.”

Jaina and Zekk also scanned the area in search of a dry patch or a clearing. “Not quite enough docking bays on this planet,” Zekk grumbled.

In the middle of one broad pond, a wide area of sand rose up like a beached sea beast. The place looked damp, but solid enough to support the weight of the small space yacht. “There. Try that sandbar,” Jaina said.

Lando studied the clear area skeptically, using his own scanners. “I might get the sidewalls dirty... but you’re right. I don’t see a better place.” With a burst of repulsorjets the Lady Luck settled down onto the wet sand, showering clumps of mucky debris into the air and out over the placid surface of the pond.

Lured by the tiny splashes, sinuous eel-like creatures swarmed up, snatched the tasteless morsels, and spat them back out. The eel creatures raised their heads up out of the murky water-though the “heads” were little more than jagged sucking mouths surrounded by circular rings of black eyes-and stared at the space yacht as it settled hard on the sandbar and then sat silent.

“Looks like we’ll have to walk the rest of the way,” Lando said as he extended the boarding ramp. “Are you both wearing those transparalon suits I gave you?”

Jaina looked in dismay out at the dripping, humid marshland.

“Sure,” she said. “But I doubt it’ll handle all this.”

“Sometimes you’ve got to get a little dirty to be a real Jedi Knight.”

Zekk tromped down the ramp and stepped onto the sandbar, looking for the shallowest way to solid ground in this swamp-but none of the ground looked particularly solid.

“I hope they didn’t see us fly in,” Jaina said, following him. “What if they decide to disappear even from their little shacks?”

“We came in low and quiet,” Lando said. “I doubt they saw anything.

It’s hard to see very far if you’re at the water level.”

Together they splashed across the knee-deep water as glowing plankton clumps swirled around their boottops. The air smelled like garbage and overripe fruit. Unlike the air in the sanitized Climateria swamp at SkyCenter Galleria, the odors here were not at all pleasant.

Jaina stepped on some round-shelled creatures that tried to scuttle out of the way under the mud. She grabbed on to Zekk to keep her balance, and he held her shoulder. The two of them sloshed along together until they reached a bank covered with tufted blue and yellow grasses.

Three colorful insects the size of small birds flapped around, hissing and spitting tiny globs of a sticky fluid at them, which Jaina brushed aside. Between her fingers the fluid felt like molten spiderwebs. The butterfly-like things

swirled in the air and flew off into the treetops; a large creature with a reptilian head and brightly feathered wings swooped down and gobbled two of the insects in a single dive.

“Jacen would really like it here,” Jaina said. “He’d have fun watching all this bayou life.”

“Your brother’s welcome to all of it he can handle,” Zekk said.

“For me it’s just noisy and distracting.”

They trudged onward as Lando consulted his electronic map. Off to their left they saw several haystack-sized mounds of mud and straw and branches. Small mammals with broad, rounded ears poked their heads out of the mounds, blinking their large glistening eyes at the intruders.

Lando paid no attention, but kept walking, shoving dangling wet moss out of his face and ducking under spine-covered branches.

“I’ve heard of popular musicians needing to hide from their fans,” Zekk said, “but this is ridiculous.”

“Obviously there’s more to it than that,” Lando agreed. “It’s a good sign.”

Dripping green and slimy swamp residue, their faces scratched by branches and stung by insects, the three sloshed deeper into the bayou, trusting Lando’s sense of direction and his presumably reliable information on the location of Figrin D’an and the Modal Nodes.

At last, parting head-high tufts of bluish marsh grass and pushing the blades aside, Jaina looked into a clearing surrounded by knotted low-hanging water trees. Lando and Zekk crept closer on either side of her.

In the middle of the wet, flat area stood three ramshackle houses on stilts, teetering like weary swamp birds on unsteady legs. Their windows were small, the walls made of woven marsh grass and patched with thick wads of the resinous moss that hung from every tree.

Buzzing firegnats, butterfly creatures, and fist-sized beetles flew all around, droning into the hot, humid air.

Jaina heard quiet mournful notes of music drifting up from the shacks, as if morose band members were passing the time by rehearsing a few old favorite tunes.

“Sounds like the Biths we’re looking for,” Zekk said.

Lando nodded. He pushed forward into the clearing, with the two young Jedi beside him. “Hello! Is anybody inside there? I’m looking for Figrin D’an and the Modal Nodes.”

The music suddenly stopped with a loud squawk. They heard clatters, thuds, and bumping noises, as if people were scurrying about in a panic inside the tiny huts. One polished pink head popped up, just barely visible through a tiny window opening, and Jaina recognized the familiar alien form of a Bith musician.

Then the creature ducked down. Clanking and dissonant notes rang out from musical instruments as they were tossed aside.

“Go away! Leave us alone!” shouted one saucy-voiced Bith inside the huts. His Basic was heavily accented, high-pitched with alarm.

“Sounds like Figrin himself,” Lando said. “Figrin! Wait, it’s me!”

Jaina’s eyes went wide when she saw an ominous-looking tube appear through the window opening, a thick-walled cylinder sawed from an iron-cane stalk. The black hole in the tube looked very much like the mouth of a weapon.

“Look out!” she cried, just as a rumbling blast erupted from the tube with a puff of smoke. Zekk and Jaina both dove to one side, tumbling face-first into the marsh. Lando staggered backward to get out of the way. A hurtling mass of brown crashed into the trees behind them.

“Hey!” Lando shouted. “There’s no cause for-”, A second tube emerged from another window. This time the blast caught Lando squarely in the center of his chest.

“No!” Jaina shouted.

Lando staggered as the amorphous brown shape slammed into him, splattering in all directions, hurling him into a tree trunk. He looked down in horror at his chest, as if expecting to see blood and bones.

Instead, he encountered only torn transparalon and sticky, dripping muck-the same muck they’d been slogging through for hours, dredged up from the bottom of the swamp.

“It’s just mud!” he said, aghast. “They’re shooting mud bombs at us.”

Then he stormed forward, sloshing toward the houses on stilts.

“That does it. You’ve gone too far this time, Figrin! You’ve ruined my shirt! You’ll pay for this out of your sabace winnings!”

Jaina and Zekk hurried up behind him. Jaina wondered if she should draw her lightsaber. A single swipe at the stilts would topple any one of those houses into the marshy pond.

“Hey, man. Who’s out there?” said the original Bith voice.

“It’s Lando Calrissian,” Lando said. “And if you don’t stop firing mud at me, I’ve got two Jedi Knights here who’ll do more than get your shirts dirty.”

“Lando, my man!” A Bith raised up his pink cranium and poked his smooth head out the window. Jaina couldn’t tell if the alien was smiling or not. His huge black eyes glittered in the hazy bayou light.

He raised a nimble hand whose fingers had the dexterity to play just about any musical instrument in the universe. “Why didn’t you say so?”

We thought you were some of those Black Sun people trying to rub us out.”

“Black Sun?” Jaina said in alarm.

Lando sloshed closer to the huts and Figrin D’an lowered a rickety wooden ladder. “Come on up! We’d love to jam!” the handleader said.

“Maybe even play a little round of sabace or two.”

Other Bith band members stood up in the adjoining shacks to look with huge black eyes at the new arrivals. A few dissonant musical notes rang out as they gathered up their jumbled instruments.

“Next time you should check out who’s at your door before you open fire,” Lando said, wiping another smear of mud off the chest of his filthy shirt.

“Hey, couldn’t take the chance,” Figrin said. “You know how it is, man. We got a price on our heads.”

Lando hauled himself up the ladder, then reached down with his muck-encrusted grip to help Jaina climb off the ladder and into the hut.

“Well, if we really were thugs out to kill you,” Lando said, “that little mud-cannon of yours wouldn’t have done much other than annoy us.

Then you’d have been facing a really unpleasant interrogation session.”

Two of the Bith band members groaned. One picked up his jazz stick and blew a wailing strident note.

Zekk climbed up to join Jaina and Lando in the central one-roomed hut.

The place smelled of mildew and damp wood as well as strange spicy stew that had obviously been bubbling for a long time on a thermal stove set on a stone plate in the center of the room.

A pair of the band members retrieved their instruments and set about plugging in powerpacks and tuning up. Disconnected musical notes waited through the air like clouds of ortellian whisper bats.

Lando made the introductions. "These two are my associates, Zekk"-the dark-haired young man nodded-"and Jaina Solo. You remember her father."

Figrin sat back and twiddled his big-knuckled fingers. "Solo? As in Han Solo's daughter? Yeah, Han and I spent many an hour at the sabace table." With all of the fleshy folds around the Bith's mouth, Jaina still couldn't tell whether he was smiling. "How 'bout a game this afternoon, Lando? Just like old times."

"Not yet. We need some information," Lando said. "There's been some trouble on Cloud City and I'm pretty sure you know something about it."

"You've got to tell us whatever you can. What happened to my friend Cojahn?"

Figrin sighed and a few of his band members struck up a low, mournful tune. "Man, that's a sad song," he replied. "A real tearjerker. We don't usually have stuff like that in our repertoire. Cojahn... that story has good guys, bad guys, treachery and tragedy. You know, all the stuff that makes for a surefire hit."

“So you’ll tell us everything?” Jaina said. “All the details?”

Figrin sat back against the rickety wall of the hut. The other band members adjusted their instruments, ready to play.

“Why not?” the Bith handler said. “We got plenty of time... and it’s been too long since we had a really attentive audience.” In the rain forest sector of the Climateria, Lowie hung upside down from an artificial tree branch, admiring the view. Em Teedee hovered right-side-up half a meter beneath the Wookiee. Anja, who paced back and forth on a limb adjacent to Lowie’s, seemed as edgy and impatient as ever. Two meters lower down, Tenel Ka straddled a branch and practiced Jedi relaxation techniques while Jacen searched in vain for tiny creatures on the bark of the synthetic tree.

“Remind me exactly what it is we’re supposed to be pretending to look for while Calrissian and the others are off joyriding,” Anja said with an exaggerated sigh.

Lowie rumbled a reply and, since Anja did not understand the growling language, Em Teedee obligingly translated. “Master Lowbacca points out that we are not pretending to look for anything. We are pretending to enjoy ourselves whilst actually searching for any indication that someone might have wanted Master Cojahn... disposed of.”

“We’re not really sure what we’re looking for,” Jacen explained helpfully. “But while Lando, Jaina, and Zekk are poking around on the Bith homeworld, it’s our job to keep an eye out for anything suspicious here. Any sort of shady dealings Cojahn might have learned about, maybe some sort of espionage, drug dealing, embezzling-who knows?”

“We must remain watchful and follow any leads,” Tenel Ka said.

Anja snorted. "Well, this watchfulness is about as interesting as watching all of you contemplate the Force or think at rocks back on Yavin 4."

She gave an experimental bounce on the tree branch fifty meters above the ground, took another step and bounced again, then again.

Step-bounce, step-bounce. A dangerous game. Lowie gave a cautionary woof, but she seemed utterly confident and tensed like a predatory animal ready to spring. The thought of falling did not seem to worry Anja; in fact, Lowie wondered if it had even occurred to her. Then again, he mused, maybe it had and she found the thought exhilarating.

Jacen, apparently giving up on finding any interesting creatures in the artificial tree, stood up and began pacing and bouncing just as Anja was doing. Lowie growled a warning at him as well. Jacen stopped, inhaled deeply, let his eyes fall halfway shut. His entire body seemed to relax, and he walked with a smooth effortless grace to the far end of the limb he was on, then headed back toward Tenel Ka, who was seated closer to the trunk, drawing in slow, deep breaths.

Anja snorted and continued bouncing along her branch. "And exactly what sort of clues do you expect to find at the top of a tree?"

Jacen glanced up at the young woman-and in that moment she missed her footing. "Oh, Mistress Anja, look out!" Em Teedee cried.

Anja tried to regain her balance, but to no avail. Lowie watched her tumble from the branch as if in slow motion.

Before Em Teedee had finished speaking, both Jacen and Tenel Ka were completely alert. Lowie's furry arm shot out, and he managed to slow Anja's descent, but he could not

get a grip on her. Jacen and Tenel Ka, however, each succeeded in grasping one of her limbs and pulled Anja to safety on their branch.

"Thanks." Anja's voice carried an uncharacteristic quaver, and her face was paler than usual, her eyes brighter, with an unaccustomed startled look in them. "I must not have been paying close enough attention. I guess I owe you one."

"Hey, don't worry about it. That's what friends are for," Jacen said.

"To be there. All of us young Jedi Knights have saved each other's hides more than once."

"This is a fact," Tenel Ka said, then changed the subject. "And I believe Anja was correct: this treetop will not aid us in our investigation.

We should continue our search in a place more likely to yield clues."

Anja smiled at the warrior girl-a genuine smile. The expression was not a common one for her, especially when addressing either Jaina or Tenel Ka.

"Okay, where do we go then? I'm open to suggestions," Jacen said.

"Someplace with more people, to start with?" Anja said, making a shaky attempt at humor.

"An area with more construction perhaps?" Tenel Ka offered.

Jacen waggled his eyebrows. "I guess maybe we should get back to our roots, then."

Tenel Ka nodded. Anja smiled.

"It's too bad... just when I was starting to branch out," Jacen went on.

Lowie groaned.

"All right, all right." Jacen shot him a mischievous grin. "I know it goes against the grain, but maybe we should all leaf now."

Lowie grumbled a halfhearted protest, reluctantly swung off his branch, and began clambering back down the tree.

"Yes," Tenel Ka said slowly. "I would advise climbing down immediately."

"Great," Anja said, "I think that's a vine idea."

Tenel Ka stared at her in surprise. Lowie gave a curious growl.

Jacen's mouth fell open.

"It's certainly more advisable than risking life and limb," Em Teedee added unexpectedly, shocking them all into amazed laughter.

Anja was glad to be on the move again as she and the others trekked through the amusement complex, keeping up their pretense of having fun.

All of them seemed to find the physical activity relaxing.

Anja certainly welcomed the relaxation. She'd become increasingly tense as her suspicions had mounted, and she'd begun to believe that Calrissian was right and Cojahn's death had not been an accident after all. It was even more uncomfortable to know - since she had been enlisted in the search for clues-that Czethros had interests here on Bespin. She had little doubt that if Cojahn had gotten in his way, Czethros would not have hesitated to have the man "removed." What if Anja found out that Czethros did have Cojahn murdered? Would she be forced to cover up her boss's actions?

Anja shivered. She couldn't believe how strongly she had reacted to her minor slip on the tree branch, how grateful she had been for her friends' help. Jacen and Tenel Ka had saved her. Would Czethros ever have done something so noble for her?

"Get a grip," she scolded herself quietly as they entered a chilly, dazzling white polar environment chamber.

Jacen Solo was the son of her worst enemy. She could have taken the opportunity in the treetops to throw him off balance; the fall would have looked like an accident. After all, hadn't she come to Yavin 4 and now to Bespin to find a way to hurt Han Solo through his children?

Objectively speaking, what could have been more fortunate than if Jacen had fallen to injury or death?

But even as the thought entered her mind, Anja's stomach clenched.

How could she be so ungrateful-he had been there for her when she needed him. As she looked around at the bleak whiteness of the polar environment chamber, resentment welled up in her. Who had asked Jacen to be so nice to her? His selfless actions just muddled her thoughts and confused her plans.

I do want to hurt Han Solo, she insisted silently to herself. It's the only way to make him Pay for my father's death. In frustration, she reached down, packed some snow together into a ball, and threw it directly at Jacen's chest. He laughed as it broke apart into thousands of fluffy white chunks. He retaliated immediately.

A fast and furious snowball fight ensued, and by the time she, Jacen, Tenel Ka, and Lowie stepped back into the central hub ten minutes later, Anja had pushed all thoughts of weakness from her mind.

“Dear me. What was that?” Em Teedee asked, bobbing along above Lowie’s shoulder, a light dusting of snow melting on his silvery casing.

Lowie gave a questioning growl.

“Over there,” Em Teedee said. “It scurried up the access corridor. “

“)1/2at did?” Jacen said.

“Someone-or something,” Em Teedee replied. “An Ugnaught, I believe.

He was carrying some sort of case with a handle on it. Come to think of it, I do believe that creature was lurking about earlier whilst we were building our fortress in the sand in the seashore environmenthe had the same odd patch of missing fur on his head.”

Anja had an unsettled feeling in her stomach as Jacen trotted over to the corridor that the translating droid had indicated.

“I saw him,” Jacen said. “He just disappeared through a trapdoor in the corridor. Let’s find out what he’s up to.”

“What for?” Anja asked in alarm.

“Because he’s acting suspicious,” Jacen replied, as if the answer were obvious. “If Em Teedee is right about his patchy fur, he may be the same Ugnaught foreman who got fired a few days before Cojahn’s death.

That’s suspicious, isn’t it? What would he be doing here? He shouldn’t be at the construction site at all.”

Anja’s tension returned with full force, and she had a sudden overwhelming urge to go back to her quarters, where she could think, where she could be alone, where she had stored her spice.

"I don't find his lurking or his disappearance the least bit suspicious. Maybe the guy just left some tools behind," she said. "He came, he got his tools, he left. I think you're all just a bit too desperate to find something to investigate."

Tenel Ka shook back her redgold warrior braids and looked directly at Anja. "But I sensed something through the Force: danger."

"Me too," Jacen said.

Lowie rumbled his agreement.

"The sentiment appears to be unanimous, Mistress Anja," Em Teedee said.

"Well, you can count me out," Anja said. "I've had my share of bad experiences with Ugnaughts, and I don't really want to repeat them.

Besides, dark tunnels tend to remind me of explosions-just like in the booby-trapped mines on Anobis." She shuddered at the thought of the decades-long civil war between the miners of her mountain village and the farmers in the valleys. "Go ahead without me, if you want. I'm heading back to my room. I'll see you all at evening meal."

"Okay," Jacen said doubtfully. "I'm sure we won't be long. We'll see you later."

With that, he, Tenel Ka, Lowie, and Em Teedee hurried up the corridor to the trapdoor the Ugnaught had used. In less than a minute they had disappeared into the floor, following him.

Anja breathed a sigh of relief when they were gone. Why was it that being among these young Jedi brought up such conflicting emotions within her? She walked down another hallway in the direction of her room as fast as her legs would go.

She felt an overwhelming urge to take some andris. She needed it.

She had assured her friends that she wasn't addicted to the spice, but she knew without a doubt that her need for it right now could not be ignored.

????? he stepped into a turbolift and slumped against its rounded wall.

The door slid shut behind her and she noticed that her hands were shaking. Was she addicted? she wondered. As the turbolift shot upward, she shrugged off the idea.

No, it was only natural, given the circumstances, the tension, her near fall from the tree, that she might need a small extra boost. A light sweat broke out on her forehead and her vision blurred for a moment, then cleared. The instant the turbolift door opened, she dashed down the hallway toward her quarters, burst through the door, and scrambled over to the satchel that held her belongings.

Not wanting to waste time searching, she dumped the contents unceremoniously onto the sleeping pad and grabbed for the little black box that held her precious andris. Her trembling fingers fumbled with the catch and she withdrew one of the insulation-wrapped packets. She ripped away the covering that kept the vial chilled and in the process dropped the container into her pile of clothes.

She was panting now and close to tears. She recited half a dozen choice curses that she had never spoken in front of the young Jedi Knights as she rummaged again for the small vial among her belongings.

There. There it was.

Anja had no memory of the intervening few minutes in which she opened the vial and took the spice. The next thing she knew, she felt energy coursing through her body.

Her vision was clear and acute, her mind alert, her doubts gone.

Yes, now she could think clearly. She didn't have to have andris.

She could give it up anytime she wanted, of course.

But she didn't want to. It made her feel so much better.

"Wow. I had no idea all these tunnels were even down here," Jacen said, gazing at the maze of passages that stretched in all directions beneath the entertainment complex. He kept his voice low in case the Ugnaught they were following was somehow still within hearing range.

The warrens were dimly lit, and just barely tall enough for Jacen to stand up in. Lowie, however, had to stoop to move around.

"Em Teedee, would you please give us a little extra light?" Jacen murmured. "But not too much-we don't want to be seen."

"Certainly, Master Jacen," Em Teedee said in a loud whisper. "I should be delighted to be of service." He bobbed up to the top of the tunnel and directed the light from his optical sensors down toward the floor of the passage. "But however are you going to locate that Ugnaught now?"

"We must use the Force," Tenel Ka said. "He cannot have gone far."

As if to prove her point, Lowie suddenly woofed and pointed to a side corridor about ten meters away.

"Right. I sense it too," Jacen said, thinking of the seedier areas deep within Cloud City. "He must be heading to lower levels, probably Port Town. Let's go."

Em Teedee stopped. "Just a moment, Master Jacen. Dear me! Although I realize I'm not endowed with the Force, I was

attempting to reach out with all my sensors, and I believe I've just intercepted a comm transmission originating from somewhere extremely close by. The words were in Ugnaught dialogue-with which I am of course quite familiar, being fluent in over sixteen forms of communication-" Lowie growled and tapped the floating droid with one finger, as if to remind him that they were in a hurry.

"Ah. Aha. What did the communication say?" Tenel Ka asked.

"Yes, of course, I was coming to that. It was something to this effect: Retrieved the spice. Deal is back on. Meet outside tunnel 83, section 11. Bring hard credits only."

Jacen, Tenel Ka, and Lowie exchanged concerned glances. Jacen gave a low whistle. "A drug deal, then. For hard cash?"

Tenel Ka quirked an eyebrow at him. "So it would appear."

Lowie gave a thoughtful growl.

"Right," Jacen said. "If that's not suspicious, I don't know what is."

"I sense him moving away," Tenel Ka warned.

"Let's stay with the Ugnaught then," Jacen said, moving up the tunnel and toward the side passageway. "I've got a stronger feeling than ever that this guy knows something about Cojahn's death."

As they followed the Ugnaught through convoluted catacombs to the lower, darker levels of Cloud City, Jacen wondered if the creature had any idea where he was going.

"I think this guy's lost," he muttered quietly to Tenel Ka.

Lowie groaned softly, and Em Teedee translated as the little droid bobbed in front of them on his microrepulsorjets. "We must be quiet.

Stealth is of utmost importance.”

After passing through the cluttered, seedier levels of Port Townthe “bad part” of Cloud City-Jacen and his friends needed to use their Jedi skills to the fullest just to keep track of their quarry. They hurried through dimly lit sectors, ducked around junked equipment and debris that had been waiting for centuries to be hauled away and sorted into one of the scrap incinerators.

Each time they thought they had lost the Ugnought, they managed to glimpse his patchy-furred head once again, just as they were about to give up hope. If the former foreman knew he was being followed, he certainly made no attempt to elude or avoid them.

After they hurried past a group of Ishi Tibs huddled in a corner placing bets on some sort of combat insects, they saw the small apelike creature turn sharply to the left.

“Where did he go?” Jacen asked.

Lowie grunted, extending a tufted arm to point at a small chute opening. Without hesitation, Tenel Ka sprinted ahead and scrambled into the chute. Jacen and Lowbacca followed. “Oh, my!” Em Teedee said. “Are you certain these passages are safe enough to use for transportation?”

“The Ugnoughts use them,” Tenel Ka said. “They live in these tunnel warrens.”

As they proceeded, the light around them grew red and warm. Lowie sniffed, using his Wookiee nose to follow the scent. They ducked low and took shortcuts through passageways that seemed no larger than air shafts. Em Teedee hovered next to the big gingerfurred Wookiee, who had considerable difficulty fitting into the cramped spaces while remaining quiet and secretive. Somehow, they managed to stay on the Ugnought’s trail as he led them deeper and deeper into Cloud City’s interior.

Jacen mentally reviewed what he knew about the Ugnaughts and their culture, how they had come here as slave creatures for a rich and eccentric developer named Ecclessis Figg. Lord Figg had promised them their freedom if they would help him to complete his impossible dream of building a city in the clouds.

Now, Ugnaughts were among the most respected inhabitants of the huge metropolis in Bespin's skies. The creatures filled important positions in all strata of society, from city politicians and bureaucrats to salvage engineers on the hot conveyor lines.

This Ugnaught had been an engineer, the chief construction foreman on SkyCenter Galleria, before Cojahn had fired him for "certain irregularities." So what had he been doing back at the amusement facility?

And where was he going now?

The Ugnaught scuttled along without a backward glance, seemingly without noticing the young Jedi Knights following him. In the cramped tunnels and halls they heard few other creatures moving around, just the throbbing sounds of machinery and equipment deep in the Tibanna gas processing levels of the giant city.

A tingle of fear skittered up and down Jacen's spine. Tenel Ka touched his arm and he could feel the tension rippling through her as well.

"Something is not right," she said.

"I know it," he answered, frowning. He knew they had been quiet, using their Jedi skills, but in such an uninhabited area, he found it hard to believe that the Ugnaught ahead didn't suspect their presence.

The furry creature popped down another dropshaft, and Jacen, Tenel Ka, and Lowie hurried so they wouldn't lose

sight of him. "I wish I knew where he was going," Jacen muttered. "This is like a scaredmynock chase."

At the bottom of the shaft they emerged into a large storage area, and Jacen immediately sensed the danger. The large chamber was silent, muffled with shadows; they saw no sign of their quarry whatsoever, though he had dropped into this room only seconds ago.

The three companions stood together, stock still in the shadows.

Jacen glanced around, his Jedi senses at the peak of alertness. He saw no movement. A shroud of deathly quiet hung around them. It was too quiet.

Lowie snuffled, trying to detect scents in the musty air. Each breath echoed in the enclosed storage room. Em Teedee's golden optical sensors glowed in the dimness as he floated above them, unconsciously marking their position.

Tenel Ka pressed closer to Jacen, her back against his. The contact sent a tingle through his senses, though he would have enjoyed it more had they not been in such a tense situation.

Lowie growled deep in his throat. The Wookiee formed no actual words, but the miniaturized translating droid relayed the meaning anyway.

"Master Lowbacca believes the Ugnaught has led us into a trap."

Just as Jacen's hand twitched toward the lightsaber at his waist, all the room's glowpanels flashed on, dazzling their eyes with the burst of light. Blinking furiously in an attempt to focus, Jacen saw only blocky shadows, stacked crates, and hunks of decommissioned machinery wrapped in transparent sheeting.

A moment later seven burly, murderous-looking creatures stepped forward, a mix of races: some human, some craggy-faced brutes. One glistening alien dripped blue slime in tiny puddles onto the floor plates.

The seven were armed with blasters, grenade launchers, and various long-distance weapons-and each of them looked mean and scarred and intent on mayhem.

An icicle of dread slid down Jacen's back. Even three Jedi Knights would not be able to resist a combined attack from these hired killers.

"Don't move," snarled the slimedripping alien. Weapons came up and took aim, holding them at bay.

A broad-shouldered human with a hairy face from eyebrows to chin growled in a wet, phlegmy voice, "Are these the ones?" One side of his face appeared to have been eaten away by acid.

The seven thugs pulled out images printed on evaporating flimiplast.

The patchy-furred Ugnaught scurried out from his hiding place behind a rusty disconnected pumping generator. He chittered and squealed, pointing vigorously at them.

“Yeah, I know they were following you. Good job,” the hairyfaced man gargled. “But this is only half the number we’re supposed to kill.

Where are the rest-the Lando guy and the other kids?”

The Ugnaught squealed something. Em Teedee said, “Shall I translate what the Ugnaught has just explained?”

“No,” Tenel Ka said quickly.

The Wookiee roared, and Jacen nodded. “I agree, Lowie-if we can’t fight them, we’d better turn around and run!”

The thugs shouted in surprise and fired off scattered blaster shots as Jacen, Lowie, and Tenel Ka bolted toward the nearest exit door. Their feet clanging on the metal decks of the lower levels in Port Town, the young Jedi Knights dashed out of the room, sprinting ahead as fast as they could go. Jacen swung around metal-walled corners, his sweaty hands squeaking on grimy durasteel plates as he grabbed them for balance.. Lowie banged his head on the low ceiling and yowled in pain, but kept charging ahead. Em Teedee sputtered along, doing his best to keep up.

“Wait for me!”

The suspicious Ugnaught had led them into a trap. They had blundered into it in spite of sensing warnings through the Force. But what chilled Jacen most was knowing that he and his friends had already been marked as targets. These assassins, carrying images of Lando and the young Jedi Knights, apparently had orders to kill all of them. He had

seen a glimpse of his own face on the printed flimiplast, a contract for their deaths.

The surly bunch behind them bellowed, firing their blasters recklessly.

Apparently they had no training in teamwork, though. The scaring energy bolts bounced off the reflective walls, skittering like molten cannonballs down the passageways.

Ahead, Jacen saw an opening in the floor that dropped into a wide air shaft. He leapt down it and the others followed, bouncing and jolting against the slick metal walls until they shot out into an open bay where cold steam hissed upward. Tubes dangled like tentacles from overhead supports. They landed on a rickety catwalk, and Jacen grabbed the railing to reassert his balance. Amber light burned from mini-glows hidden in pipes, conduits, and pressure-release valves.

Beside Jacen, Lowbacca reached out to grab a horizontal dangling chain overhead. Using his powerful Wookiee muscles, he hauled himself across it hand-overhand until he reached a lower platform on a solid catwalk, then swung a chain back down to his friends so that Tenel Ka and Jacen could each swing over to him. Em Teedee flew across by himself.

The lift-shaft door opened with a hiss. A blocky, gray-skinned man and the slimedripping alien lunged into the industrial chamber, immediately spotting their prey. More blaster fire rang out. One bolt breached a lubricant-containment vessel, cracking open its outer shell.

Slick greenish-blue liquid spilled onto the floor, turned smoky, and slowly began to burn. The two hitmen growled and coughed, waving the curling, noxious smoke away from their faces. More blue slime dripped from the messy alien.

“This is no place to camp out,” Jacen said. “How about we try somewhere else?”

They ran along the catwalk and scrambled down a set of metal ladders rung by rung until they reached an even lower level, then scurried across a dirt-stained floor.

“Where is everybody?” Jacen said. “Is this section of Cloud City off-limits, or what?”

“Perhaps today it is.” Tenel Ka, barely even breathing hard, stopped next to him. “I believe they moved all workers out of this area.

They wished to keep the field clear for their hunt.”

“You mean they planned this that much ahead?” Jacen said.

Lowie chuffed and nodded in agreement. “Oh, no! We’re doomed!” Em Teedee wailed.

They ducked under a half-open shipping bay door and entered an inventory sector where canisters of spin-sealed Tibanna gas stood behind guard fields. Since Tibanna gas was used for hyperdrive cores as well as blaster powerpacks, hazardous-material signs marked every door and each separate shipment.

Still running, they dropped down two more levels. With each new room or corridor intersection, they hoped to encounter crowds again.

That way they could disappear among other sentient beings and find protection... but it appeared as if these hidden levels of Port Town had been entirely evacuated.

“We are close to the bottom of Cloud City,” Tenel Ka said after climbing down three more ladders. Jacen could see her arm beginning to shake from the effort. “Perhaps there is an express lift tube that would return us to the upper levels.”

“Not down here,” Jacen said. “They try to keep these levels separate from the tourists and credit-paying customers.”

Tenel Ka flicked her redgold braids away, and he saw a sheen of sweat on her face. He wondered if it was from exertion or from fear.

He decided it must be from exertion.

All around them the room became too quiet again. The three of them moved toward a heavy door that led out into the dim passageways of living quarters. Lowie sniffed. They could hear noises, conversations, sounds of the city’s other inhabitants, and Jacen guessed these must be the warrens filled with Ugnaught families tucked into cramped tubes and small dwelling areas.

Tenel Ka drew her lightsaber and switched it on. The turquoise blade hummed and flickered in the shadowy room. “Still quiet,” she said.

“But we are now close to other people.”

Jacen, trusting his friend’s instincts, removed his own lightsaber.

Lowie did the same. But before they could switch on their weapons, a side door whisked open and three of the deadly hunters charged out, bellowing and opening fire without even taking aim.

Tenel Ka deflected one of the blaster bolts with her blade. The shot left a smoking hole in the metal wall mere centimeters from the head of the man who had fired it. More blaster fire erupted, ricocheting off walls and blasting equipment into ruined shreds.

Jacen ducked to avoid the blizzard of powerful shots. “I don’t think this is a good place either,” he panted. They backed up.

Lowie grabbed Tenel Ka and Jacen, hauling them after him as he charged back through the door, sprinted toward another access shaft, and jumped down to a final level. Tenel Ka held her glowin - lightsaber far away from her friends as they all scrambled backward onto a metal grid floor covered with strange circular markings, ribs, and hatches that led to other shafts. The corridor glowpanels pulsed, too bright and harsh for Jacen's eyes to adjust quickly. Twirling alarm signals overhead warned them of some impending hazard, but gave no indication as to what it might be.

Jacen looked around, his tangled hair damp with sweat. His lungs burned from the long run. "Do you think we've gotten away from them?" he said.

"Too easy," Tenel Ka answered with an emphatic shake of her head. Her lightsaber still hummed and vibrated in her hand.

Up ahead they spotted a ladder that would lead to a higher level.

"We must climb again," Tenel Ka said. She switched off her lightsaber and clipped it back to her belt so she could use her single hand for climbing.

"It's a long way back up," Jacen gasped. He struggled to force air back into his lungs, then sighed. "So I guess we'd better get started."

But as they rushed toward the beckoning escape ladder, a trio of their pursuers scrambled out of another side shaft and came to a halt, leering at the three young Jedi clustered together. A scaly-skinned, skullfaced bandit snarled, preparing to fire; the hairy man brought up his heavy blaster rifle. Beside them the little Ugnaught panted.

Raising a gnarled, furry hand, the creature chittered and squealed in triumph.

Em Teedee said, “Oh no! He says he’s going to-” The Ugnaught slapped a button set into the wall, and suddenly the floor dropped out from under Jacen’s feet. He, Tenel Ka, and the gingerfurred Wookiee all tumbled down into a bottomless shaft. They fell and rolled, slamming against the walls with bruising force-nothing at all like their enjoyable experience in the vortex tunnel at the SkyCenter Galleria.

Dropping first, Lowie bounced and jolted down the curves of the steep tube, with Tenel Ka close behind. In the rear, Jacen tried to grab Tenel Ka’s leg or foot, anything to slow them down, but the shaft walls were far too slick, and gravity did its work. They picked up speed.

Twenty meters below them, a wide hatch opened up, a round circle that let in a breeze and raw daylight. Jacen realized with horror that this was a garbage chute or an exhaust tube-something that led out into Bespin’s open sky.

With a yowl of dismay, Lowbacca shot down through the hatch, falling, tumbling, dropping into empty space.

He reached out with his long Wookiee arms and managed to grab on to a dangling transmission antenna. With a sudden severe jerk, he hung still, holding on with his powerful grip, his legs dangling over the sea of infinite clouds.

He roared and extended his other arm as Tenel Ka dropped beside him.

With lightning reflexes he snatched at her. Just in time the warrior girl reacted, flailed backward with her single arm-and grasped his powerful furred grip like a Karduran acrobat.

A split second later, Jacen came tumbling down, yelling at the top of his lungs, flailing his arms and legs, trying to grab on to something.

Lowie hung in the notch of the antenna with one arm and grasped the dangling Tenel Ka with the other. He roared, but he had no free arm.

Tenel Ka had only one hand, and that was grasped tightly in Lowbacca's.

Thinking fast, she swung her body, arched her back, and reached out with her legs.

Jacen managed to grab her calf but then slid down, clutching at her lizardhide boot for just a moment. His sweat-slick fingers gripped her ankle; then slipped....

"Jacen!" Tenel Ka cried.

Jacen looked up at her for one last fleeting instant as she tried to reach out to him. Lowie yowled in despair.

Jacen's fingers slid from Tenel Ka's boot, and he dropped....

Dropped far away from Cloud City... plummeting into the bottomless sea of sky, where he vanished like a speck of dust.

Surrounded by the bayou sounds of hoots and hums and squawks that seeped from the dense marsh through the ragged walls of the shack, Jaina sat back to listen to the band's tale.

The fame of Figrin D'an and his crew had risen and fallen over the years, and "Fiery Figrin" himself never understood what they were doing right or wrong. All through old Imperial days, the time of Rebellion, and then the formation of the New Republic, the Modal Nodes had played their own music, sometimes to great fanfare, sometimes to few-if any-appreciative ears.

But they played and they traveled. That's what the Bith &d. They were members in good standing of the

Intergalactic Musicians' Guild and generally made a good living, although Figrin had a long-standing tradition of losing their earnings at the sabace table. He never could resist a good high-stakes game, and more than once had lost his own instruments and those of his fellow band members, only to win them back again in his next all-too-brief streak of luck.

For a time they had been Jabba the Hutt's favorite band. Then they had reluctantly agreed to play at the disastrous wedding of the Lady Valarian in Mos Eisley, at which point they had been stuck performing as a mere bar band in the cantina, lucky to emerge with their lives.

Since then, they had moved on from planet to planet, playing in any paying venue, from prestigious resorts to drained-dry fanning communities. They had gone to Borgo Prime, where they'd been the hit of Shanko's Hive for five months running before a bad gambling debt had forced Figrin and his band members to leave discreetly in the night on the first cargo ship they could stow away on.

They'd also done a stint in the floating casinos on Mon Calamari, but the gambling tables proved too tempting for Figrin, and his own musicians had finally dragged him away and taken a booking on Cloud City. Lando's business partner, Cojahn, had promised them that their new gig to publicize SkyCenter Galleria would be a renaissance for them, a real comeback tour.

Now, though, that had fallen to pieces as well.

"But that doesn't explain it, Figrin," Lando said. "Cojahn was my friend. You've got to tell me what really went down."

Behind him, the band members continued their accompaniment on the Fizzz, the fanfar, and the ommni box. The eerie music added depth to the story, making Figrin's words richer, more ominous.

“It’s all about Black Sun,” Figrin said. “They’ve gone underground for many years, but they’ve got a cover story now. Black Sun lieutenants act respectable, but when nobody’s looking, they set up their old criminal connections, just like Prince Xizor used to do, and Durga the Hutt, and all the other deposed kingpins. Black Sun has its clutches on weapons runners, illegal spice trade, and now the gambling and entertainment industries.”

Figrin swiped a hand across his high, smooth cranium, knocking away tiny droplets of sweat that had collected there. “That’s why they were trying to get their toehold on Cloud City-especially your new establishment, Lando. Black Sun wanted a cut of SkyCenter Galleria....

In fact, they wanted to run the place. In absentia, of course.”

Lando just shook his head. “Cojahn would never have allowed that to happen to our entertainment center-which is a perfectly legitimate place, I might add. A real family amusement center with no shady dealings whatsoever, despite what you may have heard about me in the past.”

“Believe me, Lando, compared to Black Sun, you’re just an Ewok that got happy on juri juice.”

“Thanks... I think,” Lando said.

“But you’re right,” Figrin said. “Cojahn wasn’t easily pushed around.”

The musicians kept playing from the corners of the hut as if they had practiced this number over and over again and knew exactly what to do.

Jaina wondered if they had considered writing a song about their ordeal on Bespin. Maybe it would even be a hit.

Zekk nodded and rested his chin in his hands. “If you’re running a business like Cojahn was, you’d have to be ready

to stand up to hoodlums and all sorts of people trying to push you around.”

“Yeah, you get that a lot,” Lando said. “But most of them are cowards anyway.”

“Cojahn did his best, man, but Black Sun infiltrators popped up everywhere. You never knew who they were, or when they might come after you in a dark corridor down in Port Town. Got so you had to have a Wing Guard escort to take you to the gambling tables and back again.

Those bullies could stick your head in a carbon-freezing tube, or drop you out an exhaust shaft. They meant business.”

Lando nodded grimly. “But Cojahn didn’t give in to them?”

“He should have,” Figrin said. “He reported Black Sun’s threats to a couple high-level Exex on Cloud City, but they lost the complaint or it was misfiled. He tried again, but nothing was ever done. Finally, Cojahn fired his Ugnaught crew boss when he figured out the guy was in thick with Black Sun.”

Figrin shook his domed head. “Not long after that, Cojahn took his little dive off a high balcony. Man, that guy’s probably still falling.”

One of the musicians made a high, thin, squawking note on his instrument. “You know, there’s no end to the clouds on Bespin.”

“So why’d you run, Figrin?” Lando asked. “Were they after you, too?”

“Black Sun’s trying to get its hands into the Intergalactic Musicians’ Guild. They wanted us to pay triple membership dues just so they could take their cut-and man, Cojahn hadn’t paid us much. We’d only done a few gigs for him. I

mean, SkyCenter Galleria isn't even open yet! We got a few tips when we played the bars in the Yerith Bepin, but not enough for that kind of extortion." He shook his huge smooth head. "I hate gangsters that don't have budget payment plans!"

He continued. "Once Cojahn died, we knew Black Sun would tighten its hold on us, apply more pressure. One time they put stinger eels inside the mouthpieces of all our instruments."

Zekk made a grimace of distaste.

"Oh, we caught the critters soon enough. Fed 'em to one of the bar's customers, and even got a big tip-but we didn't dare stick around Cloud City. Too dangerous there."

"Yeah," Zekk said, rolling his eyes. "You needed to come back to a nice safe, pleasant place like this war-ravaged wasteland of Clak'dor "Hey, home is home," Figrin said with a shrug.

Jaina felt sickened. "So Cojahn stood up for his morals and ethics... and paid for it with his life."

"That about sums it up, young lady," Figrin agreed.

"At least now we know what happened," Zekk said. Sweat stained his clothing beneath the transparalon suit.

Lando stared grimly across the dim hut, gazing through the proppedopen window. "Yeah, but we don't know who killed him or who ordered his death." He swallowed hard. "And believe me, someone's going to pay for my friend's death. Someone in Black Sun will have to answer for it."

"Guess it's time to get back to Cloud City, then," Jaina said.

Perspiration trickled down her neck and her back.

The band members stood up, bustled around the hut, and propped the rest of the windows, letting a heavy sluggish breeze drift in. The hazy light on Clak'dor VII grew richer in color as the sun set toward the swamp trees in the west. Outside they could hear the burning sounds of millions of insects stirring in the twilight.

"At least sit outside with us for a few minutes before you go," Figrin said. "This is our nightly jam session. It'd be, nice to have people listening for a change."

The band members dropped through trapdoors to emerge outside the stilted hut. They tuned up on ramshackle stoops, ladders, and balconies, tossing off riffs and snatches of melody.

Outside, sitting on a rock, a violet puffer turtle swelled its bladders, straining the limits of its shell's flexibility, and then exhaled on a low bassoon note. Heavy beetles crawled up trees and clicked their rear legs together in a rattling rhythm.

"It's the music of the swamp," Figrin said. "The symphony of Clak'dor VII. The Bith evolved with music like this! Since my people hide under their domes all the time, they don't get to hear the natural music. Come on, join in." He picked up his battered old long-reed jazz, thrust it into his mouth folds, and began to play.

The other band members added their own inspirations and embellishments, joining in with the mood synthesizer and humming clak beepbox. As they slid into tune with the natural sounds and music, a hoot-bat flapped overhead, emitting short blasts of sound that the musicians incorporated as a counterpoint to their piece.

Jaina listened, enjoying the exotic tune. She had never heard music like this in her life, and she knew it was an

experience she wouldn't forget. She winked at Zekk. "This is almost better than dry clothes," she said.

Zekk flashed a grin back at her. "Not quite," he said. "But it's interesting."

When it was finally time to go, Lando and the two young Jedi took their leave of the forlorn Biths sitting in their run-down huts, hiding out in the middle of the swamp.

"You'll have an audience soon enough, Figrin," Lando said softly.

"Once we take care of Black Sun, you can come back and play to your heart's content. I'll even double your wages for the first week."

Figrin raised a big-knuckled hand. "Just make sure you have an open sabacc table for me, Calrissian." The band kept playing as their unexpected visitors turned to leave.

"What, you want to lose all your wages again?" Lando said over his shoulder.

"I always win 'em back," Figrin answered, waving goodbye.

The band's melody turned sour and skeptical at these words, and Jaina sensed that Figrin's companions didn't have much confidence in their leader's gambling prowess.

Tenel Ka's normally alert mind went numb with shock as Jacen plummeted out of reach. She hung precariously, still dangling in the Wookiee's strong grasp. She could have fallen at any instant. But for a full hundred heartbeats she could only stare down into the sea of clouds that had swallowed her friend Jacen.

Jacen...

At his side she had fought Dark Jedi, vicious beasts, bounty hunters, assassins, and misguided patriots. But

never, even in her wildest nightmares, had she imagined that he could be taken from her like this-lost in an instant to gravity and some nebulous foe against whom she'd never even had the opportunity to fight.

The sharp pain in her arm did not come close to matching the wrenching pain in her heart, but it did bring her back to reality. Lowie groaned in weariness and despair. Tenel Ka's booted feet flailed in the air.

The only thing that kept her from sharing Jacen's fate was Lowbacca's strong grip on her one good arm.

But that couldn't last forever...

????? or a split second, she considered letting go, plunging after Jacen into the clouds. At least that would save Lowbacca, and she wouldn't have to live with the guilt of knowing this had all indirectly been her fault.

A long time ago, if she hadn't been trying so hard to impress Jacen when they'd first built their lightsabers, her pride would not have led her to fight him with a substandard weapon... would not have led to the accident in which her arm had been lost-an arm that would have been there to save Jacen from his fall, had it not been for her own foolishness.

She should have been there to catch him. Tenel Ka had failed Jacen.

Why had she simply not told him how much his friendship meant to her?

Tenel Ka's sweaty hand slipped in Lowie's grasp. With a harsh bark of warning, Lowbacca extended his razor-sharp Wookiee claws and dug them deep into her arm. He would not let her fall.

She winced, distracted from her torturous thoughts, and welcomed the pain that brought her mind back to sharp

reality. The warrior girl looked up into Lowie's golden eyes and saw there a reflection of her own anguish... and something more: determination.

Determination to stay alive. Determination not to lose another friend. Determination to warn Jaina, Zekk, and Lando that their lives were in danger too. Determination to find whoever had done this and bring them to justice.

Blood trickled from the deep wounds where Lowie's talons dug fiercely into her skin. Through the Force she felt his resolve flow into her, like the warm blood that poured down her arm. The wind made her redgold braids whip wildly around her and caught at the droplets of blood, spattering them across her face.

The braids of a warrior. The blood of a princess.

Tenel Ka gritted her teeth. She would not fall, and she would not allow Jacen's murderers to go free. Her eyes still locked with Lowbacca's, she used the Force to steady herself. "I'm ready."

The Wookiee, who still had one arm wrapped around the sturdy antenna that protruded from the bottom of the city's structure, pulled himself upward with that arm until he was able to wrap his strong legs around a crossbar. With both hands freed, he pulled her up by one arm and grasped her around the waist with the other. Then, shaking from the strain, he curled upward toward the antenna, as if sitting up and lifting weights simultaneously, until Tenel Ka could grasp the center bar of the antenna herself.

When he withdrew his claws from her arm the gush of blood made the antenna slippery and harder to hold on to, though Tenel Ka hardly noticed. She quickly hooked a leg over the crossbar and helped Lowbacca pull himself upright. For several long moments they clung to the antenna, shuddering from their efforts.

Finally Tenel Ka drew a deep breath. "Thank you, Lowbacca, my friend.

Let us continue."

Lowie roared and pointed up toward the chute through which they had fallen. Tenel Ka looked and saw with despair that the hatch had closed behind them! "You are correct, my friend. We seem to be stranded."

A split second later the hatch mysteriously slid open of its own accord. Lowie gave a triumphant bellow. They would still need to find a way to climb inside the sheer tube, but the first hurdle had been overcome. As the two young Jedi struggled to a standing position on the antenna crossbar, a familiar silver ovoid hovered down through the open disposal chute.

"Oh, thank the Maker! Master Lowbacca, Mistress Tenel Ka!

You're alive! Do make haste-I'm not certain how long I can keep this access hatch open."

Tenel Ka fumbled with the pouch clipped at her waist and removed her grappling hook and fibercord.

"Oh, excellent idea!" Em Teedee said. "There is a ledge exactly three point seven meters above you where an air vent feeds into this disposal tube." Tenel Ka felt a strange light-headed sensation as she attempted to swing the grappling hook for her throw. Her fingers were bloody and the hook slipped from her grasp as she made the toss.

Lowbacca's hand shot out and snatched the cord before the hook could fall. Tenel Ka saw this as if from a great distance. The Wookiee then secured one arm around her waist and the antenna while he used his other hand to draw in the grappling hook, swing, and make the throw.

The hook caught and held firm.

“Excellent shot, Master Lowbacca!” Em Teedee said. “I say, wherever could Master Jacen be?”

An angry Wookiee bellow exploded beside Tenel Ka’s ear, but it didn’t matter. A curtain of soft darkness descended upon her mind and she remembered nothing more.

Anja had everything back under control. She had reminded herself of her priorities and her goals, of who she was and who her enemies were.

She felt refreshed, invigorated, ready to take on anyone or anything.

She was once again convinced that she had not befriended Jacen, Jaina, and their associates. She was merely using them to get to Han Solo.

Well, perhaps she had slipped a bit and begun to think that their silly belief in the Force might actually give them some advantage, some power that she didn’t possess. But the sentiment had been short-lived.

Everything seemed so much clearer to her now. She was completely self-sufficient. Anja Gallandro needed nothing and no one except Anja Gallandro. She had her wits, her intuition, her reflexes. And that made her every bit as good as a Jedi Knight.

As these comforting thoughts filled her mind, a heavy knock sounded on the door to her quarters. She hurriedly swept all of her private belongings off the sleeping pad and back into the satchel from which they had come hours earlier, including the empty spice vial. She stepped to the refresher unit and stuffed the satchel into a corner before answering the knock.

She waved her hand over the OPEN switch, and the door slid aside with a hiss. Lowbacca, Tenel Ka, and Em Teedee practically fell into the room. Em Teedee’s casing had been

badly scratched, Tenel Ka's arm seeped blood from several deep wounds, and Lowie's ginger fur stuck out wildly in all directions.

Startling as it was to see them in this bedraggled condition, Anja was determined not to lose her composure again. She raised her eyebrows and tried for some humor. "I see you've come to appreciate my opinion of Ugnaughts."

"You were right not to come with us," Tenel Ka said in a weak voice.

Her eyelids drooped, and Anja could now see that the Wookiee was supporting most of the warrior girl's weight. Blood dripped from Tenel Ka's wounds to the floor.

"It was a trap," Em Teedee cried. "Curse my foolish circuits, I should have seen it earlier."

Lowie growled. "Oh, yes!" Em Teedee translated. "And Mistress Tenel Ka requires immediate medical assistance-immediate!"

"Trap," Tenel Ka echoed. Her face was pale, her breathing ragged.

Lowie picked up the warrior girl and gently deposited her on the sleeping pallet.

Anja pushed a button on the comm unit beside the door. "Emergency medical team to room 0914."

"Request acknowledged," a droid voice replied. "Estimated arrival: two point four minutes."

Anja nodded and turned back toward the two Jedi. "So where's Jacen?" she asked. "Torturing the Ugnaughts by telling them jokes?"

Lowie leaned back against the wall and crooned a strange note that Anja had never before heard from a Wookiee. Tenel Ka did not reply, but tears appeared from

beneath, her eyelids. Anja guessed that her pain must be terrible, because she had never seen the warrior girl betray any emotion whatsoever.

The Wookiee crooning grew louder. The miniaturized translating droid spoke in an oddly hushed voice. "If Master Lowbacca were capable of making any reply, he would regretfully inform you that Master Jacen... is dead." With that, the little droid fell silent and hovered fretfully between the Wookiee and the warrior girl, as if trying to comfort them.

Ridiculous! Anja thought. Jacen could not be dead. She had seen him only a few hours ago. This had to be somebody's idea of a joke.

But Lowie's eerie crooning and Tenel Ka's tears convinced her that something terrible had indeed occurred—more surely than any words could have.

In subdued tones, the translating droid explained what had taken place.

Anja was not prepared for the storm of conflicting emotions that swept through her. Anger, guilt, hopelessness, loss, despair. Jacen had not deserved to die. He had befriended Anja, amused her, taught her, defended her, learned from her, saved her life. He had been there for Anja. That's what friends are for, he had said.

But she had not been there for him.

An even worse thought now occurred to her: she might actually have caused Jacen's death... just as she had always told Czethros she would do someday, given the chance. It had been a lie. She hadn't meant to.

Not really.

But Anja herself had told Czethros of the young Jedi Knights' arrival on Cloud City and what they were

investigating. Now Lowie and Tenel Ka were wounded. And Jacen was dead. If Anja knew Czethros and she thought she did-these events were not unrelated. That meant Czethros did have something to do with Cojahn's death and that Anja's friends had come too close to finding out about it.

She had no one to blame but herself. Her chest began heaving, and deep, wordless sobs wrenched from her throat.

She had lied. She had lied to Czethros. She had lied to herself.

Jacen had been her friend. Why should he be dead now?

An icy knife of anguish plunged deep into Anja's heart. Hot tears spilled down her cheeks. She stumbled backward into the refresher unit and shut the door tightly behind her. Racking sobs shook her as she scrambled in the corner for what she needed-what she had to have.

There was no choice.... The spice would help her.

A minute later, when the emergency medical team arrived at the door to her quarters, Anja came out of the refresher unit and let them in. She was controlled now, full of energy.

But nothing, nothing, could dull the pain....

Jacen fell.

And he kept on falling.

As he plunged down from Cloud City, the giant hanging metropolis seemed to shoot up and away from him like a spacecraft rocketing toward orbit.

In the first several seconds he let out a panicked cry for help. But he kept dropping... dropping, with no bottom in sight. A cold wind rushed past his face, roaring in his ears, rippling his clothes, making it hard for him even to draw a

breath. He quickly realized that screaming only wasted his precious energy.

Jacen concentrated, trying to use what Jedi powers he possessed to help him stop his endless fall. He had to think of a way. With the Force he could make himself lighter, perhaps slow his descent... for all the good that would do him-it would only prolong the inevitable.

He felt as if he were floating and envisioned the Force as an invisible hand cradling him, lifting him up... but he knew that was only an illusion. No matter how hard he concentrated, how much he tried to use his Jedi skills, he could not push himself back up to the now-distant Cloud City.

Worse, Beshpin was a gas giant, a huge ball of atmospheric mixes, with no true surface, only a superdense liquid core hidden under thousands of kilometers of clouds. Jacen would keep falling into denser and denser gases, but he would be crushed long before he ever reached the central sphere. He would just fall forever into the gas giant, until the pressure squashed him flat.

The clouds swirled below, streaming in spirals like a whirlpool far, far beneath him. With each instant he fell closer and closer to oblivion.

In his mind he tried to call out to his sister Jaina or to Tenel Ka, but he couldn't seem to make contact. In any case, there was nothing they could do... at least, not in time.

He did use his Jedi training to keep himself calm, remembering the techniques that Master Skywalker had taught him. Great, he thought with a flash of grim humor, at least I'll die calm.

But he was not ready to give up yet. He lay back and continued to fall and fall and fall, sending out a silent cry for help... though he didn't know where to direct it.

The wind and gases burned his eyes. He let them drift halfway shut.

Even so, the sunlight dazzled him, creating tiny rainbows through the ice crystals high in Bespin's atmosphere, and the colors of the pink and orange airborne algae seemed painfully bright.

Then, curving out at the edge of his vision, he saw a flicker of dark wings swoop through a nest of clouds and streak away. He blinked and spun around in the air. The gusting winds caught at his clothes.

He saw the shape again. It flitted by, closer this time. Suddenly, with a burst of speed, the flying creature cruised closer still to examine him like some giant curious hawkbat with a smooth bullet-shaped body and fleshy wings.

A thranta! "Help!" Jacen shouted. The colorfully painted rider on the creature's back gently tweaked the harness, directing the thranta.

Jacen continued to drop, and the flying creature swooped down as well, effortlessly sweeping the air aside with its broad wings. Jacen heard the flapping sounds and a faint squeal that might have been a high-pitched subsonic call. As they streaked downward together the thranta rider met Jacen's eyes, nodded, and brought the creature under him, matching the speed of the young man's descent. Then he nudged upward so that Jacen dropped gently onto the creature's broad back, as if caught in a safety net.

The rider tossed Jacen the loose end of a sturdy rope that he had tied about his own waist. Jacen clutched the rope, trembling as the realization that he had almost died caught up with him. He gasped, but for a long moment could say nothing more than "Thank you."

Seeing Jacen secured on the back of his mount, the rider gave the harness a light snap and nudged the thranta with

his knees. The creature took off with glee, soaring toward a white cloud bank far from the gleaming technological island of Cloud City, which was now only a silvery sparkle in the distant sky.

As he sweated and shuddered, just trying to catch his breath, Jacen pulled himself forward and held on to the skinny thranta rider by the waist. He was a young male, earless, with smooth skin that was painted or tattooed in swirling colors and patterns that made the thranta rider himself look like an optical illusion. The rider glanced over his bony shoulder at his unexpected passenger, smiling and flashing ebony teeth like polished gems.

"That's not a very good acrobatic routine you have, my friend," the thranta rider said. "You really shouldn't jump unless you know your mount will be there to catch you." The rider's voice was high-pitched and musical, in contrast with the roaring air around them.

"I... I didn't mean to jump," Jacen admitted, then heaved a huge sigh of relief. His entire body shuddered. "We were ambushed by assassins."

My two friends managed to catch themselves on an antenna beneath Cloud City, but I couldn't hang on."

"Ambushed and fell," the thranta rider said. He nodded, his face pinched and sorrowful. "Yep. I've seen that before." He flew on without further explanation.

Jacen held on tightly, gradually regaining his composure, and finally he introduced himself "I suppose I should tell you whose life you saved. I'm Jacen. Jacen Solo."

The thranta rider said, "My name is M'kim. I practice with the sky rodeo troupe, but I'm not a full-fledged member of the performing team... yet."

The boy snapped the reins of the thranta, and it dove like a meteor, then pulled up into a sharp loop in the air. Jacen was afraid he'd fall, but the thranta circled, somersaulted, and became level again.

At any other time, he might have enjoyed the brief rush of exhilaration, but he'd already had enough thrills for one day.

"So most days I come out with my friend here." M'kim patted the solid fleshy side of the flying creature, and the thranta ducked and bobbed in the air, showing off. "Just to practice."

"Hey, I'm certainly impressed," Jacen said. He held on, and found he was actually enjoying himself as the thranta soared and danced. Life seemed so sweet and exhilarating after his long fall and near brush with death.

Suddenly he realized with a sick jolt that if Lowie and Tenel Ka had managed to rescue themselves under Cloud City, they would believe he had fallen to his death. He couldn't let his friends live with such grief a moment longer.

"I've got to get back," he said, shouting into M'kim's ear hole. "I need to let my friends know that I'm alive."

But the thranta rider set his face in a grim expression and flew on, arrowing deeper into the clouds below, and away from Cloud City.

"If I take you back too soon," M'kim said, "those who tried to kill you might still be waiting. Better for now to let them think you're dead."

"But that means everybody else thinks I'm dead too," Jacen said.

"And my friends may need my help."

The thranta soared through a layer of mist that slapped Jacen in the face; he spluttered in the cold moisture and smelled a strong chemical tang of gases that drifted up from the deep cloud-deck layers below.

“We’ll go here first.” M’kim released the harness and gestured ahead in the direction of the thranta’s flight.

Behind an obscuring veil of white mist, a heavy green-brown cloud floated like a mat above the other layers of vapor. The dark island in the sky seemed solid enough, and as the thranta brought them closer, Jacen saw that the sludgy raft-cloud was actually a huge cluster of algae nodules. The airborne sacs of gas-filled plant life drifted at an equilibrium level in the clouds and photosynthesized by soaking up sunlight, water vapor, and chemicals from the clouds.

“Amazing!” Jacen said. “It’s like a living island.”

The thranta flapped its sail-like wings and drove them closer to the spinning, bobbling raft in the sky. “This is a place of solitude,” M’kim said. “We can talk here and rest without fear of being discovered.

There’s no hurry. You’re not at risk with me.”

Jacen nodded. He was still deeply concerned about his friends, though, and worried about what else might be happening to them while he wasn’t there to help. He didn’t even know for certain that the two Jedi Knights had managed to rescue themselves from their precarious perch beneath Cloud City, but he believed his friends were resourceful enough to get themselves out of a fix like that.

The thranta hovered over the floating algae island. Uncertain, Jacen looked down at the squishy surface. But M’kim deftly danced off the back of his flying creature and landed on the soft clusters of algae sacs, bouncing on the

surface of the green-brown nodules as if he were swimming.

The thranta rider lay back, gesturing for Jacen to join him. "Come on.

We can watch the clouds go by and talk about what's really happening over there in Cloud City." His face turned grave. "I have a feeling you need to know this."

Still holding the harness, Jacen stood up on wobbly legs and balanced on the back of the thranta. Then he jumped.

Jacen fell for the second time that day, but this time he landed on the soft, squishy mat of tangled algae clusters. It was like a damp organic mattress that floated aimlessly, carried by the winds. The bumpy green masses made a soft, uneven surface, like a cluster of lighter-than-air pillows.

Watching him, M'kim lay back laughing as Jacen stumbled, then fell on his face into the wet algae nodules. The greenish clusters shifted like a living mass of solid bubbles. One greenish-brown bubble popped with a splat in front of him, spraying Jacen with the strong, earthy smell of compost.

He struggled to wipe away the sticky juice, but finally lounged back and forced himself to relax. He could change his clothes later, and he desperately needed a rest.

Rootlike tendrils dangled from the bottom of the algae island to soak up moisture droplets and nourishing chemicals. Jacen listened to the breeze rustling the tendrils. He heard the little fluttering noises of small flying creatures darting in and around the tangled organic mat.

He spotted tiny insects and colored plantlike things that made up the island complex, forming an entire ecosystem.

"I'm surprised there's so much life around here," Jacen said. "I thought Bespin was just... just an empty gas giant."

“Nothing in the universe is really empty,” M’kim said. “Our troupe has traveled all over, and I’ve found very few places that are truly dead.

Life is... tenacious.”

“Yeah, I sure didn’t expect to still be alive after that fall.”

Bespin had many different levels where life clung, whether in artificial cities, gas-storage refineries, or - temperate-layer algae islands.

Thunderheads gathered in the vast sky overhead.

Jacen crawled to the edge of the squishy algae platform and looked over the edge toward the soup of clouds far below. He saw flashes of lightning and deep glows that skittered beneath the surface. Large storms rose up as deep heat currents in the lower layers of the gas giant stirred and shifted. It still looked impossibly far down.

Jacen gulped. If M’kim hadn’t rescued him on his thranta, he would still be falling....

Free of its rider, the thranta swooped above and below them, circling the algae island, nibbling at the tender ends of the dangling root threads and playing in the sky. Watching the exuberant creature, M’kim laughed.

Jacen turned to the thranta rider. “What did you mean when you said that other people were ambushed and fell off Cloud City? Someone we know recently vanished off a balcony. The official report said he jumped to his death.” He shuddered, thinking of Cojahn and the long, long terror he must have endured during his drop through the clouds.

M’kim looked nervous and sad. “When was this? When did it happen?”

Jacen counted back. “It would have been... six standard days ago, I guess.”

M'kim nodded, pursing his lips. "Twelve Bepin days. Yes, that's what I thought."

"You know something about it?" Jacen jerked and tried to sit upright too quickly; the algae nodules shifted under him, and he had to squirm to regain his balance. "Please, tell me."

M'kim looked away. His thranta swooped overhead again, giving its near-silent high-pitched call. "I saw it with my own eyes," the thranta rider admitted.

Jacen scrambled closer to the thin, painted boy. "What happened to Cojahn? We need to know."

The thranta rider stared off into the distant skies. The sunlight filtering through layers of mists dappled the tattoos on his face and skin.

M'kim said, "I can tell you this much. Your friend didn't jump of his own free will."

"What happened to Cojahn?" Jacen pressed again.

"We were out practicing, flying around on the other side of Cloud City.

We'd gone to the top to do loops around Kerros Tower. I was behind the rest of the group, because I'm not part of the actual act yet, even though I practice with the team. I saw a man on one of the outer balconies, but he wasn't alone."

"Who? Who was with him?" Jacen said.

"One big, angry man who looked like he was in charge, and a couple of thugs. I was surprised that the two thugs didn't do the dirty work for the angry man."

"What did the man look like?" Jacen said.

"Pretty strange. He had some sort of visor across his face, a red optical sensor, and short green hair the color of

this algae you're sitting on. He was quite unmistakable."

Jacen swallowed hard as he recognized the description: Czethros!

But the former bounty hunter and smuggler who had once promised to take revenge against Han Solo was now a respectable businessman on Ord Mantell-wasn't he?

"I know who you're talking about," Jacen said, "but what would Czethros be doing on Cloud City?"

"That man shows up every once in a while," M'kim said. "Things go on in Port Town and in some of the casinos that the Cloud City Gambling Authority intentionally ignores. I've heard rumors that a powerful criminal organization is trying to take over the gambling, entertainment, music... everything that happens on Bespin-and probably other planets as well. Nobody pays much attention to us thranta riders, but we see things...."

Jacen thought of the sky-rodeo performers darting past windows, looking in. Nobody would think to watch for a spy from the outside on a city in the clouds.

"That man with the green hair-Czethros, was it? - he comes here, supposedly on legitimate business. He meets with some of the important Exex." M'kim shook his head. "But something strange is going on."

"What happened to Cojahn on the balcony? Was he pushed?"

"They were having an argument," M'kim said. "The man with the green hair seemed very sure of himself, but when Cojahn didn't agree, the two thugs came forward to threaten him. Czethros waved them away. He just picked your friend up by the collar, yelled something at him, and tossed him off the balcony. Just... threw him over like a piece of garbage. The man fell."

Sickened, Jacen imagined Lando's friend reaching out for help and dropping, dropping.... "You couldn't help him? You couldn't catch him like you caught me?"

M'kim shook his head. Tears glistened in his eyes. "We were pretty high above Cloud City. I swooped down, but the winds were too strong.

Thunder clouds were rising, and the sky was so dark that the man just vanished into the black clouds. We couldn't find him."

Jacen drew a deep breath. "So why didn't you report this?"

"We don't know who we can trust." M'kim shook his head vigorously.

"Do you know how easy it would be for someone to sabotage one of our harnesses or drug one of the thrantas before a show? We've already received warnings and threats-nothing specific... but enough to make us worried." He drew a deep breath.

"Cloud City has a reputation as a clean place. If you gamble here, you know everything's fair. But someone's trying to change that. We do our sky rodeo, and our performances are well-attended. We've always been paid well; we risk our lives. But now"-he cleared his throat-"other factors are making life... uncomfortable." Jacen felt decidedly uneasy. "I need to get back to Cloud City," he said. "I have to tell my friends."

M'kim hung his head. "I know. We can go now. My people will be worried about me too, I suppose." He placed his long fingers to his lips and blew a loud shrill whistle, startling Jacen. Instantly, the thranta flapped up above the edge of the island, hovered overhead, and bobbed about playfully.

“Climb up,” M’kim said as the thranta dipped one of its broad, sturdy wings. Jacen scrambled onto the smooth back. The thranta rider leapt into place, grasped the harness with one hand, and snapped it lightly to set the flying creature in motion.

As they flapped away from the algae island, Jacen looked down to watch the matted mass disappear in the mists below. The thranta swept its wings gracefully in broad powerful strokes that carried them higher and higher into the sky.

Thick clouds had gathered, knotted conglomerations of mist and gas, turning the sky dark. Jacen couldn’t tell in which direction Cloud City lay, but he hoped they would get back before the storm.

“Hey, how do you know where we’re going?” he said close to M’kim’s ear.

The thranta rider shrugged. “We know.”

The thranta flew onward and upward as a thunderhead nearly the size of an asteroid rose in front of them. The thranta circled around, keeping a good distance between them and the storm cloud. Lightning crackled inside the huge cloud like tiny explosions.

Jacen spotted several black shapes circling the outer surface of the great storm. M’kim seemed more uneasy now, and the thranta gave the thunderhead an even wider berth.

“Are those more thrantas?” Jacen said, pointing, to the other large flying creatures that seemed drawn by the discharges from the storm.

“No. We have to stay clear,” M’kim said. “Those are velsers.”

Jacen watched with a mixture of dread and fascination. He'd heard of the sleek, fast-flying predators on Bespin that could swoop in and rip apart their prey with rows upon rows of jagged teeth.

"If those velsers see our thranta," M'kim said, "we're done for."

"But why are they so close to the storm?" Jacen asked. "Isn't it dangerous for them?"

"Velsers are always attracted by storms. I think the lightning discharges give them some kind of energy." With a nervous chuckle, M'kim shrugged again. "All I know is that I don't want to get close enough to one to find out." Though Jacen would have loved to see such a spectacular creature up close, he realized that would be foolish. He had already come too near to death for one day.

They climbed higher and swept past the thunderhead. The velsers didn't notice them, and Jacen could sense M'kim relaxing. Jacen patted the side of the thranta. "Good work," he whispered, though he had no idea if the creature could hear him.

Finally, he spotted the gleaming metropolis of Cloud City up ahead.

Lights spangled the sides of its hemispherical dome. The thranta drove toward it, and Jacen drew a deep breath. He couldn't remember ever seeing such a beautiful sight in his life.

He'd survived his ordeal-and he fervently hoped that Lowie and Tenel Ka had survived theirs as well.

Flanked by a stoic Lowbacca and a disturbed but aloof-looking Anja, Tenel Ka waited for the Lady Luck to cruise back into the docking port on Cloud City. Feeling her

stomach muscles knot, she closed her burning eyes and tried to face down the fear inside.

The prospect of doing this, of telling Jaina Solo that her brother had been killed, was more frightening than any battle or other ordeal Tenel Ka's Jedi training had put her through.

The warrior girl's throat was tight. Though she and Lowie had almost died in the same assassination attempt, she still felt there must have been something more she could have done to keep her friend Jacen alive.

She was a Jedi! But she had failed him.

Another more subtle failure haunted her as well. Tenel Ka had always believed that the connection between her and Jacen was so close, so strong, that she would be able to sense if any harm came to him.

She should have felt it through the Force the instant he died-but she hadn't. Instead, her emotions had betrayed her, taunted her with the hope that Jacen had survived somehow. She even imagined she'd heard his voice calling out to her in her mind. But she had been delirious at the time, in shock from loss of blood. The Cloud City medics had been able to heal the wounds on her arm, but not the ones in her soul.

Fleeting thoughts tormented her even now, daring her to believe that Jacen was still alive.

Lowbacca fidgeted beside her, his dark lips drawn down in a frown.

Em Teedee, silent for once, had dimmed his optical sensors in a gesture of respect. Anja's pale face looked pinched and she avoided eye contact with the others. Tenel Ka could sense tendrils of pain and sorrow floating like a

tangible mist all around them. It was so difficult to face this truth.

Jacen was gone.

Lando's polished space yacht followed floor guidance lights as it landed on the platform. Tenel Ka's cool gray eyes filled with tears and she took one step forward to face the ship. Lowbacca put a strong, hairy hand on Tenel Ka's bare shoulder. Anja moved back to stand alone behind them. Em Teedee hung silent and unmoving on Lowie's syrenfiber belt.

The Lady Luck settled in and landing clamps locked it down. Tenel Ka steeled herself for the fresh grief her news would bring. But just moments after the space yacht's landing ramp descended, a door on the other side of the docking bay whooshed opened. Tenel Ka turned, unable to believe what she saw with her own granite-gray eyes.

Jacen himself entered the bay, looking bedraggled and dirty, but perfectly healthy. He grinned a weary, lopsided grin.

"Jacen Solo!" Tenel Ka cried. "Jacen, my friend!" She bounded toward him, moving even faster than the Wookiee's long legs could carry him.

When Tenel Ka fairly tackled Jacen, throwing her arm around him in a joyous embrace, he was nearly as astonished as the warrior girl.

He hugged her back, laughing. "Wow! That was almost worth falling for."

Lowbacca swept both of them together into a massive Wookiee hug.

Jacen spat ginger fur out of his mouth. "Okay, okay! I'm all right, you big walking carpet! At least I was fine until I got into this pileup here."

“But how, Jacen, my friend? What happened? How are you alive?”

How did you get back here?” Tenel Ka asked in a rush.

Lowie roared his own barrage of questions, and Em Teedee added in a scolding tone, “Master Jacen, you gave us all such a fright. It was really terribly inconsiderate of you.”

“Thanks, Em Teedee. I’m glad to see you, too,” Jacen said. “I’ll try not to do it again.”

Lando, Jaina, and Zekk emerged from the Lady Luck, blinking in surprise as the other young Jedi Knights remained clustered around Jacen instead of greeting them upon their return from Clak’dor VII.

“Hey, did I miss something here?” Lando said.

Em Teedee answered for them all, speaking loudly in his tinny voice.

“You certainly did, Master Calrissian. And you don’t know the half of it. “

Anja came up to Jacen, trembling. He could see the relief in her eyes, which she tried to cover up with a bland imperturbable smile.

“Now, this is one story I’ve got to hear,” she said. “Don’t tell me Jedi Knights can fly now?”

Jaina and Zekk ran to join their friends as Lando sealed his space yacht behind them. “Wild trip. We got a lot of information,” Jaina said.

“Found out what’s going on here in Cloud City.”

“Ah, we found out a few more things, too,” Jacen said. “And I discovered exactly what happened to Cojahn on that balcony.”

Tenel Ka couldn't cover her gasp of surprise. Lowie growled.

Lando's interest was obviously piqued. "Looks like we've all got some talking to do."

Anja seemed unaccountably disturbed. She crossed her arms over her chest and gave Jacen a shaky smile. "You're just full of surprises, aren't you?"

"Hey, never underestimate a Jedi," he said.

As they sat together sipping hot broth drinks in a quiet cantina that overlooked the thranta practice for the upcoming sky rodeo, they all shared their separate stories.

Lando, Jaina, and Zekk recounted what they had learned from Figrin D'an and his band about how Black Sun was trying to infiltrate the workings of Cloud City. Tenel Ka, with additions from Lowie, told of the assassin attack after they had followed the fired Ugnaught construction boss, while Jacen described his rescue by M'kim the thranta rider, and how M'kim had seen a visored man with algae-green hair murder Cojahn... an angry, ruthless man who was almost certainly Czethros himself.

"But you can't prove it's Czethros," Anja said. "It's a big galaxy.

There are plenty of other people with moss-green hair."

"And the laser visor?" Jaina asked skeptically.

"Certainly not enough evidence to convict anyone," Anja said firmly.

"I prefer solid proof myself, instead of hearsay from an 'eyewitness' who was flying around with the setting sun in his eyes. If M'kim was so close that he could make out the facial features of the person who allegedly boosted Cojahn

over the side of the balcony, how come he wasn't close enough to catch the man as he fell?"

"I already explained that," Jacen said. "There were storms-" Lando raised a hand for peace. "It's easy enough to determine whether or not Czethros was here. I still have my old BaronAdministrator access codes. Let's just find a nice quiet business area, and we can check Cloud City's central computer banks. Lowie, I think you might help me with that."

The young Wookiee chuffed in agreement and nodded his shaggy head.

"We can check the records. Everyone coming in or out of Cloud City has to leave some sort of passport information. Docking records, passenger manifests, tariff documents. It'll be quite a search.....

"Czethros is kind of hard to miss," Zekk said.

Lowie stood up from the table, his ginger fur bristling, the dark streak prominent on his forehead. Em Teedee said, "If I can be of any help, I would most gladly offer the assistance of my circuits."

"Thanks, Em Teedee," Lando said. "Let's see what Lowbacca can find first. "

As the other young Jedi Knights gathered around the computer terminals, Lowie bounced through the public records databases, scanning for the name Czethros. The search ultimately turned up nothing.

"See, he never came here," Anja said. "Your thranta rider made a mistake. "

"I thought you told us we were gullible," Zekk answered. "Any man who's got that many connections and is involved in illegal activities would know how to hide his tracks."

Next, Lowie looked through docking records, credit receipts, list of purchases made and transmissions sent. It was a monumental task and required all of the Wookiee's concentration as well as the full access given to him by Lando's high-level security codes.

"Sure glad you were Baron Administrator," Jaina said. "We would've hit a dead end right away if you hadn't opened some of those passworded files."

"We may still hit a dead end," Lando said. "Just a lot farther along the way."

Anja watched, arms crossed over her chest, still skeptical. She had so obviously been relieved, even overjoyed, to see that Jacen still lived.... Now, perhaps out of embarrassment, she hid behind a haughty mask.

Lowie's golden eyes narrowed in suspicion as he stared at the images that flickered by from docking bay holocams. He plugged Em Teedee in to help him monitor the data. Some of the video snapshots stuttered and wavered. Em Teedee suddenly blurted in a shrill voice, "Oh dear, these images have been tampered with! I'm detecting skillful erasures and fine video cuts. Most sophisticated. "

Lando watched as Lowie worked furiously, his long fingers tapping the controls. He growled something, and Em Teedee said, "Master Lowbacca is attempting to move beyond the obvious. If someone has assisted in covering up the arrival of Czethros, they most likely have sanitized recordings from the docking bay... but they may have overlooked other holocams....."

Images flowed by in a rapid blur. Jaina peered over Lowie's shoulder.

Everyone intently studied the screen. Finally, Lowie growled in triumph.

"There! I see it, too!" Jaina said an instant later.

"That's him," Jacen agreed. "Good old respectable Czethros."

An external holocams from one of the Port Town gambling casinos had managed to catch the image of a tall man with moss-green hair and a narrow silver laser visor; the man emerged from a docking port and ducked into the shadows between buildings, trying to lose himself in the crowd.

"He couldn't clean up everything," Lando said.

Lowie froze the image and enlarged it.

"Now do you have any doubts?" Zekk asked Anja. She avoided his gaze as he continued. "Any man who intentionally removes all record of his presence here has got something to hide."

"It doesn't mean he murdered anybody," Anja said.

Jacen looked at her in surprise. "Maybe not. But he was here at exactly the right time, in secret, and tried to erase all evidence of his presence from Cloud City records. We know that a criminal organization has been blackmailing and threatening professionals here on Bespina criminal organization that has ties to Ord Mantell, where Czethros lives. And we also have an eyewitness who says he saw Czethros throw Cojahn off the balcony. How much more proof do you want?"

Tenel Ka nodded grimly. "Do you believe Czethros is involved with Black Sun criminal activities?"

Lando frowned. "More than that, I'm afraid. From his background and from what I've seen here, I think Czethros may well be one of the key figures behind Black Sun. Worse yet," he added, "the fact that all these records and images have been doctored tells me that he must have some pretty

important people in Cloud City's administration under his thumb."

"Figrin said Cojahn had tried to report the danger to the authorities, but they never did anything about it," Zekk pointed out.

"We've got to report this," Jaina said in a determined voice. "But this time to someone who'll take it seriously. If Black Sun is on the prowl again, we've got to do something before they get too powerful to stop."

Nobody noticed how Anja jumped when she heard Jaina's words.

With the doorlock cyber-sealed, Anja retrieved the meager luggage she had brought from the Jedi academy. She rummaged in the bottom of her case, popped out the false bottom, and removed the high-power small transmitter screen that she used only in emergencies. When the screen wasn't switched on, it looked like a portable mirror. But it was much more.

Moving her fingers along the edges of the frame, she depressed buttons, entering a code and sending her signal. She tossed her long, honey-streaked hair behind her, feeling sweat prickle her scalp.

Oh, how she needed a dose of spice right now. She had to have one... but the need wasn't any greater than it had been all day. Anja just didn't know how long she could tolerate this pressure. Her personal supply was nearly gone, and she didn't know what she would do unless Czethros came through for her. She hated to depend on him.

The secret crime lord followed his own paths, busy setting up his own game. In the past, though, he had spent an incredible amount of time with her on Ord Mantell, taking her under his wing, training her in the ways of making a profit at the expense of less-vigilant people.

Anja had connected with him in the first place because of a shared hatred for Han Solo. Czethros had helped her arrange the fateful meeting with him and the attempted ambushes on Anobis, but Han Solo had survived it all. Then, Solo's own children had adopted her as their friend.

At first she had gone along, pretending. Anja had been most eager to do whatever she could to hurt Han Solo for his despicable crime for shooting her father Gallandro in the back. Even though Han Solo denied it, Anja knew the truth. Czethros had told her what had really happened.

After an interminable silence and a transmission delay, the mirror finally clouded, and the face of Czethros appeared. The laser-red dot of his optical sensor beamed through the visor that covered his face.

His moss-green hair seemed distorted, discolored by the numerous scrambling and descrambling routines buried in his signal.

"Ahh, my little velsers" he said. "You must still be on Cloud City.

By now I'm sure you've learned of the tragedy that has befallen your young Jedi friends."

"Tragedy?" Ania said with a frown of distaste. "So, you did set that up."

"Of course," Czethros said. He looked down at his fingertips, then back up again, smiling at her.

"Well, they're not dead," she said in a flat voice. "None of them."

Alarmed, Czethros drew back. "But I've already had a report from my operatives. At least three of those meddling kids were thrown down an exhaust chute and dumped out into the open skies of Bespin."

“Is that the best you could do?” Anja chided. “I’ve told you before, they’re resourceful and strong,” She was amused by his obvious surprise. “They’ve been trained by the Jedi Master Luke Skywalker himself, and they’ve been through a lot worse than falling down a hole.”

Czethros snarled. Anja took a new tack, scowling back at him.

“How could you send a bunch of hired assassins to kill a few teenagers?

Even for you, isn’t that a bit”-she searched for the right word-“cowardly?”

Czethros raised his eyebrows above the visor, and the red laser eye flashed back and forth in agitation. “Do I detect compassion for the Solos in your voice, Anja Gallandro? I must not have trained you well enough. You were a predator, as ruthless as the velsers on Bespin.

And now you’re feeling sorry for the children of the man who killed your father?” He laughed out loud. “Do you realize how ridiculous that is?”

Anja bit back a reply, not sure exactly how she felt. Jacen had been so friendly toward her. Jaina had accepted her. And even their friends considered her part of the group. She’d never felt this way before. She’d always been bitter about her life, holding on by her fingernails, fighting for every little advantage she managed to get.

Never before had Anja felt the slightest bit sentimental.

Czethros leaned closer, his face growing larger on the mirror-screen.

“Have you changed your mind? Don’t you want Solo’s children killed?

Perhaps you'd like me to send some flowers to Han Solo himself.?"

Anja felt torn. After what Solo had done to her father, she'd spent her life trying to get even with him. He deserved to be hurt. But when she had believed Jacen Solo was dead, it had twisted her insides.

The pain had been unbearable.

"It doesn't matter anyway," Czethros said. "Even if you did change your mind I doubt I could stop my plans now. Everything is set.

Soon I will send my signal, and Black Sun will appear everywhere, simultaneously taking over key installations and assuming key positions.

Then the galaxy will run smoothly for us.

"My operatives are in place. They received orders days ago to eliminate Jacen and Jaina Solo and their friends, as well as Lando Calrissian. I can't afford to let anyone find out too much about how we've been working our way through the bureaucratic levels of Cloud City.

Bespin will be ours, as will Kessel, Mon Calamari, Ord Mantell, Borgo Prime, and every other important installation. Even Coruscant will feel our strength." Anja swallowed hard and forced herself to change the subject.

"I'm... almost out of spice," she said. "You promised me more, and I've done everything you asked."

"Yes, yes," he said, brushing aside her comment. "I'll get it to you as soon as I can."

"When?" she said. Her lips trembled. Her eyes stung. She hated to beg.

Czethros looked at her and smiled faintly. "It's on my schedule.

Don't worry your pretty head, my little velser. Now get back to your work. I have details to attend to. My killers are professionals, who always carry out their orders. Just stay clear of Lando Calrissian and the Solo kids, and you'll be safe."

Czethros switched off the flat screen from his end, and it became a mirror again in Anja's hands. She stared at the polished surface for a long time, seeing only her own reflection... and Anja did not like what she saw there.

When Lando went straight to the Wing Guard on Cloud City and demanded a high-level investigation into the assassination attempt on Jacen, Tenel Ka, and Lowie, he held back his suspicions about Black Sun... for now.

When the appropriate Exex and Wing Guard commanders responded, they summoned the three "alleged victims" to a private debriefing at an unfamiliar address high in Cloud City.

Lando, Jaina, Zekk, and Anja intended to accompany the others to add their observations on the story, but as they prepared to leave their V.I.P rooms in the extravagant Yerith Bepin, Lando received an urgent message. He read the screen, then turned away from the comm system, frowning.

"We've got trouble at the construction site," he said. "There's something strange going on, and I have to attend to it." He looked over at Jacen. "Do you three think you can handle the interview alone?"

"Hey, no problem," Jacen said. "Blaster bolts, if we lived through the incident itself, I guess we can handle talking about it."

"All right," Lando said, grabbing his burgundy cape and preparing to deal with whatever troubles he might encounter down at SkyCenter Galleria.

“We’ll come with you, Lando,” Jaina said. “You might need some...

Jedi backup.”

“I know better than to turn down help. Sounds like this is some kind of labor dispute.”

Anja looked from one group to the other, and offered to join Jaina, Zekk, and Lando. The four of them ran to a lift tube as Jacen, Tenel Ka, and Lowbacca headed off to their own meeting.

After dropping down several levels, then transiting to the outer walls of the city, Lando took his group to the site of the soon-to-be-completed SkyCenter Galleria. Using his passwords, he escorted them into the barricaded construction area. Jaina stood next to Zekk, looking around.

Anja fidgeted, feeling very out of place. The four of them stayed close together as the sheer silence and oppressive tension in the air struck them.

“What’s going on?” Lando said. “There was supposed to be a riot happening here.”

“Looks like everybody went home early,” Zekk said.

Anja snorted. “False alarm, then.”

They moved farther inside, under the tall, skeletal structure of the primary hovercoaster. Bright glowpanels dangled from exposed wires high in the girders and catwalks overhead. The temporary fabric walls blocked most of the high breezes, but still let drafts whistle in.

There were no other sounds. The shadows were thick.

“Hello!” Lando called out. “Uh, what seems to be the problem here?”

His words echoed from the equipment and construction shacks, but no one answered.

“Where is everyone? We’ve got a completion schedule to meet,” he said with a huff, toming to Zekk, Anja, and Jaina. “I promised myself that I wouldn’t let Cojahn’s work go to waste. We’ll open this galleria on time.”

Zekk frowned. “Not if all your workers are gone.”

“There must be some explanation for this,” Lando said. They ventured deeper in. Doors of construction shacks hung open, loose. Computer terminals glowed with inventory records, unattended.

“It’s like they all got up and ran away,” Jaina said.

“Yeah, maybe somebody sounded an evacuation alarm,” Anja suggested.

As the four continued into the construction site, exploring and passing under overhangs, Jaina mumbled, “I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

Suddenly, from under some debris hidden behind stacks of crates, a small brown Ugnaught dashed out. Ducking past the startled Jaina and Lando, he ran, squealing and chittering.

“Hey, wait!” Jaina said.

Zekk leapt to intercept the small creature, but the Ugnaught shrieked in terror, split to one side, and dove headfirst down an open airventilation duct. He disappeared with a thud of tumbling limbs.

Zekk peered into the darkened shaft. “He certainly was in a hurry to leave.”

“Maybe he knows something we don’t,” Jaina said, looking around with wy apprehension. Cautiously she drew her lightsaber and ignited it. The blaze of violet rippled and flickered against the naked structural metal of the tall entertainment machinery. “Just to be safe,” she explained,

though she knew its brilliant glow might draw attention to their hiding place. Anja made no move to draw her own antique Jedi weapon.

Suddenly all the garish glowpanels overhead winked out, plunging the enclosed construction area into deep shadows that were alleviated only by the glow of Jaina's weapon and by scores of tiny emergency lights that reminded her of the phosfleas the Wookiees used in their forest cities on Kashyyyk.

"Great," Zekk said. "Now I've got a bad feeling about this, too."

Two doors opened up on either side of the construction area and in the blaze of light from the exterior corridors, Jaina could see burly silhouettes of heavily armed men wearing padded bodysuits. The ominous figures stepped forward.

Lando heaved a sigh of relief. "Ah, those are uniformed Wing Guards," he said. "Man, are we glad to see you!"

Then, in unison, the guards opened fire-directly at them.

"Look out!" Jaina tackled Lando to the ground, while Zekk moved fast enough of his own accord, dropping and rolling under a low girder.

Anja staggered back and fumbled for her lightsaber. Deadly blaster bolts ricocheted and sponged from girders, sending out sparks with every impact.

"Get down," Jaina warned the older girl, deflecting one of the bolts with her weapon.

"Seal the other exits!" one of the traitorous Wing Guards said.

"Hey, you're supposed to be the good guys!" Lando bellowed.

“What are you doing?” More blaster fire cut off further discussion.

“It was a setup,” Zekk said through gritted teeth. “We were lured here. These must be hit men, paid off by Black Sun.”

Lando grumbled, “There’s something rotten in Cloud City.”

They ducked into the shadows, taking shelter behind crates. “At least we’ve got plenty of places to hide,” Jaina said.

“They didn’t think very well before they planned this ambush,” Anja said, crouching beside her.

Lando shook his head and frowned. “Maybe not, but if they’ve got the exits covered, we have no place else to go. They can take their time.”

They heard the marching of booted feet as more turncoat security forces entered the construction area and barricaded the doors. Jaina wiped perspiration from her hand and gripped her lightsaber more securely, ready for hand-to-hand battle.

“Maybe we could climb up,” Zekk suggested, “find some way out the top to a higher level.”

Jaina looked up toward the nest of girders and hover-scaffolding, trying to scout out an escape hatch-but she suddenly realized that the thick building frames were moving, as if alive. She saw the flickering shadow of a humanoid shape as something scuttled down, crawling like an insect.

“More of those chameleon creatures!” Jaina said, remembering the murderous henchmen that had attacked them in the docking bay on Ord Mantell. Though foiled in their assassination attempt, the chameleon creatures had

stolen the evidence of the space mines that had nearly destroyed the Millennium Falcon. Jaina drew a deep breath as it hit her: even that must have been part of a complicated Black Sun plot.

“Now I know what Jacen, Tenel Ka, and Lowie felt like when the assassins cornered them down in Port Town,” Jaina said. “This time we get all the excitement while they attend their little meeting.”

“Well,” Lando said. “With these traitorous Wing Guards here, I don’t believe anything is as it seems. I hope they’re safe.”

Another volley of blaster bolts erupted, and Lando ducked as sparks flew overhead. The deadly chameleon creatures scrambled closer, surrounding their prey, closing the trap.

“Right now, let’s just worry about ourselves,” he said.

When Jacen arrived with Tenel Ka and Lowie at the address for the supposed debriefing facility, they found only an empty hangar dock filled with old-model cloud cars and other small sky vehicles waiting for repair.

“There’s nobody here,” Jacen said.

Tenel Ka looked around. “Are you certain this is the correct location?”

Jacen checked again. “This is where they told us to come.”

“Indeed, I can verify that,” Em Teedee added, though no one had asked him.

Lowie sniffed the air. His black Wookiee nose wrinkled, and he let out a low, uneasy groan.

“Something is not right here,” Tenel Ka said.

“Hey-this is a fact,” Jacen agreed with forced humor. Tenel Ka and Lowie unconsciously moved closer to him, as if preparing for battle.

The outer bay doors were open wide, and clouds stretched out in a vast empty skyscape, tall gray thunderheads rising above the white ritists far below. Judging from the weather patterns, Jacen suspected that heavy storms would strike the floating city before the day was out.

The three went deeper into the docking bay, looking around, growing more uncertain by the moment. “We’d better check with someone,” Jacen said.

Lowie stopped by two of the cloud cars, bent over, and touched their control panels. One was painted a rich blue, the other a bright scarlet. Both were typical recreational vehicles, cloud cars that had been souped up and probably used for races or sky patrols.

Lowie grumbled something, and Em Teedee scolded him. “Master Lowbacca, these are not our vehicles. It’s of no concern to us that they are still functional. We’re going to be late for our debriefing.”

“We are here,” Tenel Ka pointed out. “The others are not.”

Jacen glanced at Lowie. “Hey, maybe you and Jaina could tinker with some of those things later. Lando could probably get them for us cheap, if they’re just sitting here, decommissioned.”

Tenel Ka, her reflexes coiled like an overwound spring, suddenly whirled about. In the only entrance to the cloud-car bay were the hairyfaced bounty hunter and the slimedripping alien from the first attempt on their lives. Beside them stood two Wing Guard security policemen.

“Hey, you caught them,” Jacen said to the Wing Guards, thinking that this was part of the debriefing: identifying two of the hit men who had attacked them. “Those are the ones who tried to kill us.”

“I say! If those men have been arrested, why are they all carrying their own weapons?” Em Teedee said, as the Wing Guards and the two hit men hauled out their blaster rifles.

Lowie roared in outrage.

“We have been betrayed,” Tenel Ka said.

Jacen backed up, holding his hands in front of him to prove he had no weapons. Only a few meters behind them stretched the open entrance to the cloud-car bay and another immense drop.

“Just keep backing up until you’re over the edge,” the slimedripping killer said with a chuckle. “Save us some energy in our blaster packs.”

“Not again,” Jacen said with a groan. Lowie snarled. Tenel Ka reached for her lightsaber.

“Don’t make us shoot you down right where you stand,” said one of the Wing Guards. “That would leave us with quite a mess to clean up.”

Thinking quickly, Lowbacca swept out with one gingerfurred arm and knocked Jacen into the nearest cloud car. He roared and pointed for Tenel Ka to leap into the scarlet vessel beside Jacen, while the Wookiee scrambled into the blue cloud car.

“Duck!” Jacen called, squirming to right himself inside the cramped pile; t seat. Tenel Ka bent down and fired up the engines as she wriggled into her own seat beside him. Lowie roared his blue vehicle into motion while the surprised security men cried out and rushed into the room after them.

Blaster bolts rang out, one sizzling and ricocheting off the scarlet paint near Jacen's head. He fumbled with the cloud-car controls and adjusted the dials to their maximum output.

"Punch it, Lowie!" he called to his Wookiee friend as the four killers ran toward them, howling and firing indiscriminately.

With a lurch, Jacen's cloud car blasted out into the open sky and spun in a full circle. He and Tenel Ka nearly tumbled out of their seats, but they managed to bring the car under control and fasten their crash restraints in time.

With a bestial roar, Lowie careened out of the hangar bay in the second cloud car, a blue streak across the sky. Jacen wrestled with the controls and soared onward at full speed. He breathed a great sigh of relief.

"I guess they didn't count on our alternatives," Jacen said.

Tenel Ka twisted around to look behind her at the gleaming white metropolis in the clouds. "It does not appear that we are safe just yet, Jacen, my friend," she said.

Not far behind them, they could see that the thugs had helped themselves to a pair of cloud cars, newer and brighter than the ones the young Jedi Knights had found. The killers raced after them in hot pursuit.

Surrounded by the clutter of girders and construction debris, Jaina gripped her extinguished lightsaber, wishing she dared turn it on again to light their way. But for now the tangled darkness offered them places to hide from the turncoat security guards who still hunted the four companions in the abandoned amusement park site. Overhead, however, chameleon creatures scrambled along catwalks and crossbeams, keeping an eye on them as they fled.

Luckily, the chameleon creatures carried neither blaster pistols nor stunners. Instead, they brandished wicked-looking transparent knives with blades fashioned from crystal shards.

Since the creatures were nearly invisible, Jaina had a difficult time counting the camouflaged enemies, but she caught glimpses of the smooth forms as colors and shadows shifted across their bodies. Their cruel lipless mouths grinned as they approached their prey.

“Oh, why didn’t I carry my own hold-out blaster?” Lando muttered.

“Ever since I became respectable, I stopped packing weapons.”

Zekk commiserated with him. “Right now I wish I had a lightsaber, too... even my old one from the Shadow Academy.”

“We’ll just play hide-and-seek as long as we can.” Anja seemed more angry than afraid at the prospect of the creatures’ attack.

Jaina gritted her teeth as they hurried along. “Looks like we women’ll have to defend you men.”

“We’ll do our best to help out,” Zekk said, flashing her a grim smile.

“Somehow or other.”

The pack of chameleon assassins made soft thumping sounds as they swarmed along the girders above. Lando and his three companions dashed under the twisted superstructure of the enormous looping hovercoaster.

????? it was the most massive part of the amusement park; the heavy beams and bent durasteel framework

loomed high above them like a fossilized prehistoric creature.

“We can’t hide under here,” Anja said, ducking as a brilliant bolt zinged past her face. She fired up her acid-yellow blade.

“I don’t know where else to go,” Lando replied. More blaster fire rang out from the shadows as security guards marched into the enclosed space, targeting Anja’s bright lightsaber now. “If you have any suggestions, I’m all ears.”

Jaina gazed up at the chameleon creatures slinking along the hovercoaster above them. Their sharp crystal blades twinkled, reflecting the dim emergency lights. Skins rippled and flickered, adjusting their camouflage, as the creatures gathered their forces overhead. Although viciously armed, the chameleons seemed to be relative cowards, unwilling to attack until they had massed for a single strike.

Jaina intended to use that to her advantage. “Everybody stand back,” she said. “And dive for cover.” She stood up, switched on her blazing violet lightsaber, and held it high.

“Wait!” Lando called. “What are you going to-” The Wing Guards shouted and ran toward them.

“What are you waiting for?” Zekk said. Jaina slashed sideways.

Her dazzling lightsaber blade sliced through the main pillar that supported the central section of the hovercoaster. The energy-blade severed the heavy durasteel brace as easily as if it were a hot knife slicing through Ithorian sap gelatin. She stood back to look at the smoking, sizzling ends of the huge support beam. As if in slow motion, she saw the metal begin to slide. The hovercoaster tilted.

“Look out!” she cried, and dove for a pile of heavy crates.

Anja and Zekk had already scrambled backward. Lando stared in horror.

“My hovercoaster!” he clustered chameleon creatures skittered about, scrambling for balance. Suddenly the entire framework toppled beneath them, groaning, bending, twisting.

Jaina looked up, shielding her eyes against any debris that might fall in their direction. The smooth-skinned creatures tumbled downward, shaken loose from their precarious perches. Their skin color shifted as they tried to match the color of the air through which they fell.

Girders groaned and crumpled. With a resounding crash, the central section of the hovercoaster slammed down onto the deckplates.

“That’s just great,” Lando said, astounded. “Now I’m even more behind schedule.”

Showing no consideration whatsoever in response to his financial plight, the traitorous Cloud City security troops opened fire again, running toward the scene of the crash.

“We’ve got them now,” bellowed one deep voice.

As Lowbacca roared across the sky in his commandeered blue cloud car, he hooked sharply off to the left, intentionally veering far away from Jacen and Tenel Ka. Separating and causing their pursuers to split up seemed their best chance of escape.

“Master Lowbacca, what do you think you’re doing?” Em Teedee said shrilly.

Lowie jerked the controls and accelerated even more, spinning around in a sideways loop as the pursuing hit men fired their weapons.

The bolts sizzled through the air, and Lowie's sensitive nose could smell the ionization drifting up, a taint of ozone and other burned gases from Bespin's atmosphere. The blue cloud car lurched from one side to another, letting the bolts pass harmlessly beneath the hull.

"You realize, of course, that you're not licensed to pilot this craft," Em Teedee continued. "You have no training. We're all doomed!"

Lowie barked a warning.

"How do you expect me to be quiet? This is an emergency!" the little droid wailed, but when Lowie growled that every small distraction would increase their likelihood of crashing, Em Teedee promptly fell silent and blinked his optical sensors with internal misery.

As Lowie soared along, though, his sensitive ears detected a flutter in the cloud car's engine. The craft may well have been unused for months or even years, and it was severely out of tune. With one glance he confirmed that he had very little fuel as well.

He looked behind at the single predatory craft that still followed.

Inside it, the slimedripping alien and one Wing Guard pushed closer, firing their weapons. Unfortunately, their vehicle did not appear to have the least bit of engine trouble.

Lowie ducked and looped, then finally spun around and headed back toward Cloud City. Maybe someone would see the dogfight. Maybe he could get some help there.... Of course, since some important members of Cloud City's own infrastructure were out to kill the young Jedi Knights, he wasn't sure he could trust any offer of assistance.

In the clouds and rising tendrils of mists he saw no place to hide.

Lowie's cloud-car engine popped and sputtered again. He wrestled for control as the vehicle suddenly began losing altitude. The engine picked up again and he climbed... but during the brief interval he had lost most of his lead. His pursuers came right behind him. The roar of their engines filled his ears.

He ducked his head as a blast streaked directly above him, so close that it singed his ginger fur. Lowie did what he could, accelerating, punching all the controls in an attempt to find some kind of emergency override. Then, with a disheartening pop, the hum of the turbines dropped to a lower pitch. The engines barely managed to keep the cloud car moving along. Lowie growled in despair.

Suddenly the hunters were right beside him.

Lowie searched for some kind of weapon, but the vehicle he had commandeered was no more than a pleasure craft, a skyskimmer used for racing among the clouds-and even as a racer, this cloud car wasn't much good. He hoped he had at least bought enough time for Jacen and Tenel Ka to escape in their own cloud car.

Beside him, the slimy assassin and the treacherous guard leveled their handheld blasters at Lowie. He knew that they had no intention of letting him survive.

With his cloud car failing and unable to outrun them, with no other weapon, Lowie let loose a huge Wookiee roar at them. He flashed his fangs and snarled loudly enough that even his uncle Chewbacca would have been proud.

Just then, shadows passed overhead. Great wings flapped as creatures swooped and ducked. The slimedripping alien looked up and instinctively fired his blaster, though the bolt

went wide. Within moments, seven great thrantas circled the pursuing cloud car, sweeping down.

The painted riders on the thrantas called to each other in a strange high-pitched language, shouting orders to set up a routine, as if it were mere practice for their sky rodeo. The thrantas flitted under the pursuing cloud car now. One of the flying creatures bumped against it, sending it into a spin.

The Wing Guard pilot cried out while the slimedripping alien waved his blaster pistol, but the riders were much too fast for them.

They continued their sky ballet, swirling, looping. Finally, one thranta swooped down just above the pursuing vehicle, so that its rider could drop a slender lasso artfully around the pilot's chest and anns.

Cinching the noose tight, the rider yanked the pilot up out of his seat in the cloud car.

He kicked and struggled, thrashing his head from side to side, but his arms were pinned to his ribs. His weapon dropped from his gloved hand and fell tumbling far down into the soup of clouds below.

The slimy alien assassin, now the only occupant of the cloud car, looked around wildly, trying to avert the flying creatures' attack. He wrestled to keep the vehicle under control, but as he reached toward the navigation console, another cloud rider skimmed by, close enough to lasso him around the shoulders of his slime-stained uniform. The alien clawed at the rope and pulled himself free just as the thranta rider jerked him out of the cloud car. Still dripping slime, he tumbled over the side of the vehicle to fall, screaming and flailing his anus.

Then two thrantas dove even faster than Bespin's gravity could pull the would-be assassin downward. The thranta riders snatched the alien in midair, looped a rope around

him, and tossed him onto the back - I one of their thrantas. When the alien began to struggle, the cloud rider grinned and easily tossed the slimy captive off his thranta, so that his partner could spin around to catch him on the second thranta's smooth back.

The second thranta now flapped up to join the cluster of other sky performers and the entire troupe made a show of tossing their two helpless captives from one thranta to another as if they were balls in a juggling contest.

Unpiloted now, the pursuing cloud car spun out of control, its rudder sending it into a dive until the craft zoomed at full speed down into the deep layers of impenetrable clouds.

Lowie brought his own puttering vehicle closer to Cloud City. Under the watchful eye of the thranta rider, he used every trick he could think of to increase his altitude and keep the cloud car afloat.

Finally he reached an open-rigged set of free-form hover-scaffolding that clung to the underside of Cloud City's hull.

As he brought the craft in, the thranta riders flew off with their captives. Lowie wondered what the colorful aliens would do with them when they returned to their berths on Cloud City.

"Ah, it is a fine thing to have friends in high places," Em Teedee said.

Lowie barked his agreement. He held on tightly as the cloud car bumped and skidded onto an open platform on the hover-scaffolding.

Sparks flew from scraped metal. Although the engine had completely died, he managed to spin the craft around so that it came to a rest with a loud thump on the unoccupied ledge right near an emergency exit into Cloud City.

Groaning, the Wookiee turned to look at the vast sky behind him, thick with bulging clouds. He saw no sign whatsoever of Jacen or Tenel Ka.

Running deeper into the maze of the amusement park, leaving the hovercoaster wreckage behind them, Lando cast about for inspiration.

He looked with fresh eyes at the shadowy attractions, the stations that he hoped would one day be rides and entertainment stands enjoyed by millions of beings young and old.

Lando stopped as an idea occurred to him. "Wait a minute! We've got an advantage that I'm willing to bet these guards don't have."

"I'll be glad to hear it," Anja growled.

Lando smiled. "I know this place. I know what it can do, and everything that's already functional." Jaina remembered from their initial tour what lay ahead, and she instantly understood what Lando intended.

Zekk's emerald eyes gleamed; he saw it, too. "Then let's show them a few of the attractions."

The Wing Guards approached from separate sides, trying to box them in.

When their victims dashed forward, the guards shouted and opened fire again, running at full tilt. Jaina intentionally slowed down just enough to give them an enticement. Closer now... closer...

Suddenly she and Lando ducked left as they passed a triggering sensor.

Zekk yanked Anja along behind him.

Huge slavering monsters leaped out of nothingness, the most hideous creatures that holographic artists could

devise. The monsters lunged with inhuman roars and howls.

The pursuing guards screamed, firing their blasters at the illusionary threats. With nervous chuckles at the success of their plan, the companions dove farther along, trying to escape.

One of the guards bellowed, "Those are just projections, you idiots!

" Some of the guards looked askance at the holocreatures who continued to snarl and sweep their harmless claws through the air. Then they ran after Jaina, Lando, Anja, and Zekk. The four stretched out their lead, but continued to lure the guards forward.

"You thinking what I'm thinking?" Jaina said.

"You can bet on it," Lando said. "Too bad the antigray chamber isn't working yet, though."

They sprinted toward the vortex shaft, the experience-filled pit they had tumbled through on their first trip into the amusement center.

"Over here!" Jaina shouted, taunting the guards.

"Hey, you forgot to cover this escape hatch," Lando called.

"We're home free now," Zekk added, and dove down the swirling hole to be swallowed up in the flashing lights. Jaina and Lando jumped after him, and Anja followed with only the slightest reluctance.

The guards bellowed and careened forward in pursuit.

"Don't let them get away now!" a Wing Guard captain ordered.

Moments later, the five pursuing guards jumped down the chute.

Jaina held her arms over her head, straightening her body to reduce her air resistance. They dropped faster and faster through the hot mists and the cold steam, falling through the tangled bubbles as they plunged down to the mat below. Zekk struck bottom and bounced, rolling off the platform so that Lando, Anja, and Jaina would have room to land.

They all leapt to their feet, their knees trembling. The three younger companions stood guard for Lando as he worked the control panel.

“Safety systems,” he said, wiping sweat from his forehead. “You’ve got to have security overrides. And I’ve got the codes.” He pressed buttons and flicked switches to deactivate the access to the vortex chute.

A restrictive force-field clamped down on the top and bottom of the chute.

Alarm lights winked on and Lando laughed up at the shadowy silhouettes of the guards as they swirled around inside the shaft. “The repulsors in there will keep that group going up and down, up and down.

They won’t be able to get out until I use my private password to release them.”

Jaina went over to a comm unit on the wall. “Do you think if we summon enough of Cloud City security, we’ll get some who aren’t tainted by Black Sun? ” Anja shifted uncomfortably, but made no suggestions.

“I think if we called them all here, we’d be able to wrap things up nicely,” Lando said.

They stood together, panting, and resting for a moment. After Lando sent his signal again using his Baron-Administrator’s emergency codes, they waited for the

authorities to arrive and take care of the would-be assassins.

Lando couldn't wait until they began to debrief the turncoat Beshin Wing Guards. "This should be very interesting," he said out loud.

Beshin's incredible ocean of sky provided an infinite expanse through which Jacen and Tenel Ka could run. Unfortunately, it offered no place to hide.

The isolated metal island of Cloud City fell behind them as Jacen pushed the cloud skimmer's engines. The turbines whined as the cloud car soared away from the trap the traitors had set for them.

Behind them-and rapidly gaining ground-came a sleek black cloud car with a pair of sharp-angled bows. Cradling his weapon, the hairyfaced thug leaned forward to take a carefully aimed shot while an armored Wing Guard drove the patrol vessel at its highest possible speed.

Jacen jiggled from left to right, diving down and then swooping back up again, but in the open emptiness of the sky, the evasive maneuvers did little good. The bearded hit man shot twice. Jacen dodged and twirled. Even so, one of the powerful bolts ricocheted off the bottom of their cloud car, leaving a long dark scorch mark across the bright scarlet plating.

Tenel Ka sat beside him, grim-faced. She fingered the rancor-tooth lightsaber at her waist. "I prefer a direct fight," she said. "These men are cowards."

"Yeah? They're traitors, too," Jacen said. "But who's keeping track?" Then he perked up as an idea struck him. He wrestled with the controls, dodging another blaster bolt that skimmed close beside them.

“You could still use your lightsaber, Tenel Ka. Block those blaster shots from hitting our repulsor-engines.”

“Excellent idea, Jacen, my friend.” She drew her lightsaber, switched on its pulsating turquoise blade, then turned to kneel on the seat, precariously balanced on her muscular legs. Tenel Ka slashed from side to side with her blade as the pursuers continued to fire. She leaned far out to deflect the attack, and Jacen worried that the one-armed warrior girl might lose her balance and tumble into the clouds, as he had done.

The skies grew darker. They flew neck and neck with their enemies now.

Black thunderheads rose all around them like craggy islands in the sky.

Long fingernails of lightning scratched against the thunderheads as storm systems clashed together. Other glows flickered deep within the clouds.

Jacen narrowed his eyes to stare at the ominous weather patterns... and had another idea. “Tenel Ka, get back in and strap down. I think we’re in for a bumpy ride.”

Hearing the tone in his voice, she did as he advised without questioning. Then Jacen set his course on a straight line for the largest, nearest bank of thunderheads. The wind whipped the warrior girl’s redgold braids around her face. Her expression became stern.

“You are not actually flying into a storm system, are you?”

Jacen flashed her a lopsided grin. “They’d be crazy to follow us, wouldn’t they?”

The tumbling wall of gray mist grew larger, but slowly. Jacen realized that the distance to the storm was greater than he had expected.

And the storm itself was much, much larger. He searched in vain for the tiny black specks he had hoped to find. Lightning screeched across the cloud surface, leaping from one thunderhead to another.

"Hang on," Jacen said, and dove toward the roiling dark mass.

Behind them, the assassins tried to put on more speed, firing indiscriminately now. The Wing Guard pilot had trouble aiming his vehicle's built-in laser cannons, but the hairyfaced assassin scored a direct hit on Tenel Ka's side of the scarlet cloud car. Its impact was much too close to her for Jacen's comfort.

An explosion of thunder slammed through the air with a sound like two Star Destroyers colliding. Jacen's ears rang with the reverberations; the cloud car's front windowplate and side panels rattled and vibrated as if they'd been hit by a physical blow.

A lightning bolt roared behind them. The gigantic blast of discharged energy boomed in a rippling cord across the open space. Jacen's skin crawled, his hairs prickled, and tiny flecks of color sparkled in front of his eyes. He didn't think even a Star Destroyer's turbolaser could have been much more powerful than that immense blast.

Jacen kept looking for any hint of movement, any dark forms around the cloud-but he noticed nothing.

"What do you seek, Jacen, my friend?" Teriel Ka said.

"You'll see if I find it."

After the lightning blast, the patrol car behind them spun out of control, losing ground for several moments until the pilot managed to get back on course. In frustration, the Wing Guard fired his laser cannons five more times, but all

of the shots went wide and disappeared harmlessly into the dark depths of the cloud.

Heavy winds jounced them from side to side as if invisible hands were playing a drumbeat against their cloud skimmer. Suddenly, Jacen hit a pressure differential, and their scarlet cloud car plummeted like a stone until another air current buoyed them up.

Jacen gripped the controls, feeling the blood drain from his face, Tenel Ka sat stoically through it all.

With a surge of engine power the sleek black patrol craft careened in behind them, weapons blazing once more. Jacen took a chance-an extraordinary chance-hooking left to are around the gigantic storm system. He plunged into an outcropping of dark mist and dove into a knot of thunder clouds, hoping to lose himself in them.

Opaque mist flew in his face, acrid-smelling from the gaseous chemicals deep in Bespin's cloud layers. Unable to see, he was glad at least to know there were probably no obstacles with which he could collide in the open sky.

Thunder rumbled deep in the main mass of the cloud like boulders cracking together-but behind it, he could hear the hum and roar of the high-powered pursuit craft.

"They are still following us," Tenel Ka said.

"Maybe we can lose them with some fancy flying," Jacen said, but he knew that was a slim hope. The attackers charged in, following the engine noise of the scarlet cloud car.

As he drove farther through the fringe of the thunderstorm, the mists parted in front of him, and he burst into open sky on the far side of the thunderhead.

Right into the middle of a pack of predatory velsers.

Startled, the chevron-shaped flying creatures soared about, wheeling like razor-winged hawkbats, darting along the edge of the powerful storm as if they fed on lightning discharges.

The creatures were huge, sleek, and affnored, like living attack craft.

When Jacen's cloud car burst in among them, they swirled around like angry piranha beetles. Within moments, they had formed into a squadron intent on attacking the intruder.

Tenel Ka unbuckled her seat restraint and whipped out her lightsaber again. The velsers were black, their skin tough and layered with tiny scales. Jacen saw no eyes, only sleek skinplates, smooth heads at the apex of sharp wings. But as the cloud car dove underneath the outer edge of velsers, Jacen saw that their underbodies consisted of rows and rows of jagged mouths, lampreylike teeth with suckers to anchor themselves, and grinding jaws that could rip any prey to shreds.

"This was your intention, Jacen?" Tenel Ka said, alarmed.

"I was hoping they'd be nicer." He spun the craft about to fly between two ferocious velsers. The creatures collided in the air, then began attacking each other.

Tenel Ka reached up with her lightsaber, using the blazing tip of her turquoise blade to slash the side of one velser that dove toward their cloud car. Its skin ripped open and volatile gases spilled out, sparking and flashing in the flame of the lightsaber. Unable to keep flying, the velser spun out of control; the other creatures fell upon it.

Tenel Ka parried again, ripping open the mouth-filled belly of a second attacking creature. For an instant the velsers drew back, intimidated.

But only for an instant.

Another creature dive-bombed toward them, rows of mouths clacking, teeth gnashing, ready to shred either the scarlet metal of the cloud car or the soft flesh of the young Jedi Knights.

Jacen concentrated with his Jedi powers as he flew, trying to use his affinity for animals to get these beasts to back off and pursue other prey. He had calmed a ronto and any number of large deadly creatures, but these velsers had few thoughts in their minds-except to attack and destroy.

Maybe at least Jacen could change their focus.

Behind them, the black patrol car burst out of the thunderhead knot and into the angry pack of velsers. In utter panic, the Wing Guard pilot swooped up and around.

With the sudden flurry to distract the furious flying creatures behind them, Jacen applied full speed, roaring away from the dangerous flock.

He used his thoughts to focus the velsers' attention on the black craft, their pursuers.

"Better prey," he said, mumbling aloud. "A better target. Ignore us."

Jacen could think of no other way for them to escape.

The velsers swirled and turned to concentrate their vicious attack on the black cloud car. The pilot swerved, trying to flee, but the velsers were much too fast, much too intent on destruction.

As Jacen flew farther and farther from the roiling thunderhead, he saw the velsers attack. His craft damaged, the traitorous Wing Guard pilot spun out of control and dropped down toward the deep gray soup of the storm. Lightning flashed all around.

The velsers swirled in a frenzy and renewed their attack. The black cloud car plunged out of sight, and the velsers flew after it. All of them vanished deep into the stormy grayness.

Another chorus of loud thunder shook the sky. Jacen spun the vehicle about and began the long journey back to Cloud City.

Together again on Cloud City, the young Jedi Knights, Anja, and Lando, though exhausted and ragged from their ordeals, waited for the big show to begin. They sat on a set of open-air scaffoldings, now converted into spectator seats. The gentle winds ruffled Jaina's straight brown hair and she blinked into the bright rising sun as Bespin's twelvehour day began again.

They had found prime observation spots on the hover-scaffolding that had originally been erected for polishing and replating parts of the city's external hull. Lowie had climbed to the highest level and dangled his hairy feet down as he held on with one lanky arm. He seemed not the least bit bothered by his precarious position, high above nothing.

"Master Lowbacca, do be careful," Em Teedee scolded, but the Wookiee paid him little heed.

Lando reached over and tousled Jacen's curly hair. "Why is it that every time I try to take a simple vacation with you kids, something disastrous happens?"

"I have a feeling we just draw adventure to ourselves," Jacen replied.

"A genuine vacation would be nice one of these days," Jaina said.

"But since we're trying to be real Jedi Knights, I don't suppose there'll ever be a time when the New Republic doesn't need us."

Anja sat off to one side, withdrawn and quiet, threading her fingers through her honey-streaked hair. Something was obviously bothering her... but then again, Jaina had rarely seen the older girl be anything other than bothered. She wondered if Anja was more shaken by their recent adventures than she dared to admit.

"I'm proud of all of you, you know," Lando said. "None of what we did can bring Cojahn back to me or his family, but I do know that' we've all done a good thing. I told his wife about what really happened to him and she seemed comforted to know we found out the truth.

We've exposed a dangerous criminal element. Black Sun is on the move again."

"Yes," Jaina said, frowning. "We'll have to call Mom and give her all the information we have."

"I'm sure the Chief of State of the New Republic can set a few law enforcement wheels in motion," Zekk agreed.

Tenel Ka nodded firmly. "We must be certain they are not traitorous security forces, like some of the Wing Guard here on Cloud City."

"This would never have happened when I was BaronAdministrator.

I guess you just can't find good help these days." Lando shook his head.

"Meantime, I'll just have to be content with helping to expose some of the tainted Exex and Wing Guard members, and a few key people in the Merchants Guild and other politicians. This conspiracy runs deep."

With what they had learned from the thranta rider and Figrin D'an, and everything Lowie had pulled from Cloud City computer archives, they had a fair idea of just how far-reaching the plans of Czethros were.

He had influence on many types of gambling, smuggling, and strongarm operations.

Jaina suspected, though, that they had only begun to uncover the depths of the insidious schemes of Black Sun. They had sent out an alert, and New Republic forces planned to apprehend Czethros immediately-but Jaina knew that the supposedly respectable businessman from Ord Mantell must have spies and information sources everywhere,, - ,nd realized that Czethros might already be gone... one step ahead of them.

As morning sunlight spilled across the lower cloud banks, painting them with a golden glow, Jaina heard a loud musical fanfare from the outwardly directed speakers mounted on the scaffolding and on launching platforms.

“It’s starting!” Jacen said, scooting closer to Tenel Ka.

“I look forward to the performance with great enthusiasm,” Tenel Ka said in a neutral voice. The barest hint of a smile quirked one corner of her mouth.

With silent, flapping wings, a swarm of thrantas burst out, streaked away from Cloud City, and circled in the clouds. The skirling music rose and fell in a hauntingly beautiful melody. The thrantas looped about, dancing a sky ballet in time to the notes. The tattoos and body paintings on the cloud riders were so bright, they dazzled like rainbows as the thrantas whirled through the air.

Two of the performers unfurled a brilliant fluttering ribbon, tossing it from one rider to another, hurling the fabric ever higher to weave a colorful pattern like a cat’s cradle in the sky. All the thrantas continued to fly in perfect formation, the cloud riders holding on to their corners of the long ribbon.

Then a second troupe of thrantas launched themselves from their docks on Cloud City, flitting ahead of and around

the colorful ribbon structure in the sky. They swarmed through openings and loops in the fabric-mesh, flying so close that their wing tips almost, almost touched the fluttering banner. But Jaina saw no mistakes, no slipups.

Then, at an unspoken signal, the cloud riders exchanged positions, shifting the pattern of the woven ribbon, reshaping it like a bright laserlight design in the sky.

Jacen stood up, hooting, applauding, and yelling at the top of his lungs. The second squadron of cloud riders broke free and darted back toward Cloud City. Jaina watched in amazement as one of them stripped out of formation and buzzed past the hover-scaffolding where they all sat. A thin young rider waved a broad hand and grinned from the back of his thranta.

“That’s M’kim!” Jacen shouted, waving.

Directly in front of them, the barefooted rider did a backward somersault in the air and landed effortlessly on the flying creature’s back. The thranta streaked off to rejoin the rest of the performing group.

“It looks like they’re letting him be an official part of the troupe at last,” Jacen said. “He’s finished his training.”

Tenel Ka nodded, a contented look on her serious face. “Training must end eventually, and then the real work begins.”

“That doesn’t mean you can’t always learn something new,” Zekk added.

Lando, still watching the sky rodeo, turned back to the young Jedi Knights. “Speaking of which, it’s about time I got you all back to Yavin 4.”

With the oppressive sounds and smells of the jungle moon around her once again, Anja did not know what she was going to do. She sat alone on a high stone ledge of the

Jedi academy's Great Temple. The chipped, weathered stone, covered with moss, felt cold and uncomfortable. But she didn't care.

Anja stared out above the tangled forest to where the orange pastel ball of the gas giant planet Yavin dominated the sky. She felt trapped on this humid, overgrown moon-helpless. She hated to feel helpless.

No one knew her secret, though she wasn't sure how much it mattered now. She was at her wits' end, torn between incompatible loyalties.

Yes, Anja had pretended to show surprise at the news that had so interested the young Jedi Knights, but in her heart she had greeted it only with a kind of stoic dread. As they had feared, Czethros had disappeared completely, draining all readily available credits from his accounts and shutting down his respectable warehouse and shipping business on Ord Mantell.

He had gone underground, vanished without a trace. New Republic troops had confiscated everything that remained in his stripped offices, while investigators searched for clues to his whereabouts... but Anja knew Czethros well enough. She was certain that the Black Sun lieutenant had left no loose ends, no evidence, no information through which he could be traced.

Czethros was gone. She had no way to contact him.

And her last precious supply of andris spice was almost gone!

What could she do when it ran out? She had no idea where she might obtain another supply. It wasn't fair. She'd worked so hard, done all of the devious things Czethros had demanded of her. They'd had a partnership of a sort: he had requested small tasks of her, in return for which he had

set her up with Han Solo and his children and given her the opportunity for her ultimate revenge.

But now, the moment the tide turned against him, Czethros had abandoned her. He had run, leaving her to fend for herself. Anja was certainly good enough at that. She'd taken care of herself all her life, since her father had died when she was an infant-shot by Han Solo.

Or had that truly happened? Anja was no longer certain. She had never wanted to believe that the great Gallandro, her father, might have been responsible for his own situation. She had wanted to find a scapegoat, someone to blame for his murder... and Han Solo had fit the bill perfectly. What better revenge could Anja take than to go after his children?

Czethros had been true to his word there, at least, but now she felt as if she'd been set adrift, abandoned....

Laughing, Jacen bounded out of the temple shadows and ran across the stone platform on the roof of the rebuilt Massassi temple. He skidded to a halt in surprise when he saw her sitting there alone, deep in hought.

"Hey, Anja!" Jacen said. "Zekk and Jaina and Lowie and Tenel Ka and I are going out into the jungles, do a little exploring. You want to come along? There's plenty to see out there-the strangest plants and insects you've ever imagined. I'll even show you a piranha beetle if you want. - They look just like your tattoo."

"No thanks," she said automatically, without even thinking about her response.

With a beep and a twitter, Artoo-Detoo trundled out behind Jacen.

The astromech droid flashed his sensor light, assessing the situation.

Jacen shrugged. "Okay, but remember, we want you to feel like you can participate in stuff that we're doing. I know Uncle Luke doesn't believe you have real Jedi potential, but that doesn't matter. You can still learn. You can still improve yourself-your reactions, your abilities."

"I know all that, Jacen," she said snappishly. "I'll make up my own mind, okay? No need to treat me like a baby."

Jacen stepped back, startled. "Hey, I wasn't treating you like a baby," he said. "I was treating you like a friend."

Then he turned and followed Artoo-Detoo back into the temple.

The small droid twittered and gave a mournful whistle, as if scolding Anja. She just glared at the polished domed head as Artoo rolled back inside.

She stared out at the jungle again, her thoughts in turmoil.

Everything had been so clear until she'd gotten to know the Solo twins better. She hadn't had any doubts in the beginning. Her resolve had been inn. Why was it so difficult now?

And did she really want Jacen and Jaina to be harmed in retaliation for something that had happened long ago to Gallandro, a man whoshe had to face it-she'd never really met?

Czethros, her supposed mentor, might never show his face in open sunlight again. He would be too easily recognized. He was a hunted man now.

And that left her here, to continue the charade. Anja didn't know what she could do in this place. She certainly didn't want to be a Jedi!

She reached down, picked up a pebble, and tossed it off the edge of the ziggurat toward the jungle. She watched as it fell into the underbrush below.

She already felt the hunger and the deep need for another dose of spice, but she would tolerate it for now. She could be strong. Anja had always been strong.

But she didn't know how long she could last.

The simmering jungle sounds grew louder as she listened to them.

The verdant jungle moon and Luke Skywalker's Jedi academy seemed far, far away from anything else she had ever known.

"She's not coming," Jacen said, joining the other young Jedi Knights at the base of the Great Temple.

Jaina must have heard the note of dejection in his voice, because she put a comforting hand on his arm and said, "Anja probably wouldn't enjoy exploring with us right now, anyway. She could probably use the time alone."

"She seems kind of edgy since we got back," Zekk agreed. "I'm sure it's nothing personal."

Lowie rumbled a suggestion.

"Indeed!" Em Teedee exclaimed. "I daresay we shall have an excellent time together if we make the attempt."

"Ah. Aha." Tenel Ka cleared her throat, then paused as if considering a very important topic. Her cool grey eyes met Jacen's brandybrown gaze. "Did you ever hear the story about the Jawa who mistook a rancor for a ronto?"

Jacen grinned and took her hand in his. "Yeah, I think so. But it's a good one. Why don't you tell it to us?"

Together, the friends walked toward the jungle.