

TRIPLE ZERO

KAREN TRAVISS

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Sergeant KAL SKIRATA, mercenary (male Mandalorian)

Sergeant WALON VAU, mercenary (male Mandalorian)

Null ARC Trooper Captain N-11 ORDO

Null ARC Trooper Lieutenant N-7 MEREEL

Republic Commandos:

Omega Squad:

RC-1309 NINER

RC-1136 DARMAN

RC-8015 FI

RC-3222 ATIN

Delta Squad:

RC-1138 BOSS

RC-1162 SCORCH

RC-1140 FIXER

RC-1107 SEV

Clone Trooper CT-5108/8843 CORR

General BARDAN JUSIK, Jedi Knight (male human)

Captain JALLER OBRIM, Senate Guard, seconded to Coruscant Security Force
Anti-Terrorism Unit (male human)

General ETAIN TUR-MUKAN, Jedi Knight (female human)

General ARLIGAN ZEY, Jedi Master (male human)

ENACCA, associate of Skirata (female Wookiee)

QIBBU, entrepreneur (male Hutt)

LASEEMA, employee of Qibbu (female Twi'lek)

BESANY WENNEN, a GAR logistics employee (female human)

PROLOGUE

Republic Commando covert insertion on Fest, Atrivis sector, Outer Rim, ten months after Geonosis

Private journal of RC-8015, "Fi"

You have to see the funny side of things in the army. I think they have a real sense of humor in Defense Procurement, too.

"So," I ask. "How long ago did you put in a request for black stealth armor?"

"Seven standard months," says Darman, staring out the gunship's crew bay onto an unbroken plain of snow. White snow. The freezing wind is whipping flurries of it into the open bay. "When we got back from Qiilura."

"And now they issue it to us? To do a raid on Fest? The whole planet's covered in snow from pole to pole."

I can hear the gunship pilot laughing over the comlink circuit. He can't resist it. "Want to borrow my armor? It's nice and white."

Yes, they've deployed us in black Katarn armor. It'll take a direct hit from laser cannon to put a dent in us, but it would be nice to have the comfort of camouflage when we hit the ground.

Even Atin's laughing. But Niner, who tries to take the place of Sergeant Kal and reassure us it's all going to be okay, is not. He's worried that we've run out of luck for this mission.

And so am I. Republic Commando losses in the first year of the war are running at 50 percent. Today we have to infiltrate a Separatist factory developing some new supermetal called phrik—whatever that is—and carry out a little asset denial, known in the trade as blowing stuff up. It's not a complicated mission: avoid droids, get in, lay charges in the processing plant and the foundry, avoid droids, get out. And then press the detonator.

One of Captain Ordo's Null ARC trooper brothers found this place: Clone Intelligence Units, they call them. I must write to thank the di'kut sometime.

So I try to keep the squad laughing, because it takes our minds off calculating the odds.

"Okay," I say. "What do we all want most right now?"

"Roba steak," says the pilot.

"White-clad camo," says Niner.

"A really thick slice of uj cake," says Atin.

Darman pauses for a moment. "To see an old friend again."

Me? I'd like to go back to Arca Company Barracks on Coruscant. I want to see Coruscant before I die, and so far I've seen next to nothing of the place. Someone promised to buy me a beer there once.

The pilot is skimming a couple of meters above the snow, taking us through a narrow pass to avoid detection. It's all mountains and ravines now. And snow.

"I've got visual on the factory," the pilot says. "And you're not going to like it."

"Why?" Niner asks.

"Because there're an awful lot of battle droids out there." "Are they made of phrik?"

"I don't think so."

"No problem, then," says Niner. "Let's spoil their entire day."

The gunship slows enough for us to jump clear, and we scramble through knee-deep snow to take up a position in the lee of an outcrop. There's nothing like a quick hello from 'a Plex rocket launcher to show droids who's boss. No, they're definitely not made from phrik.

I reload the Plex and keep turning the droids into shrapnel while Darman and Atin make their way to higher ground to reach the factory.

Yeah, a nice beer on Coruscant, on Triple Zero. Dreams like that keep you going.

Find Skirata. He's the only one who can talk these men down. And no, I'm not going to obliterate a whole barracks block just to neutralize six ARCs. So get me Skirata: he can't have traveled very far.

—General Iri Camas, Director of Special Forces, to Coruscant Security Force, from Siege Incident Control, Special Operations Brigade HQ Barracks, Coruscant, five days after the Battle of Geonosis

Tipoca City, Kamino, eight years before Geonosis

Kal Skirata had committed the biggest mistake of his life, and he'd made some pretty big ones in his time.

Kamino was damp. And damp didn't help his shattered ankle one little bit. No, it was more than damp: it was nothing but storm-whipped sea from pole to pole, and he wished that he'd worked that out before he responded to Jango Fets offer of a lucrative long-term deployment in a location that his old comrade hadn't exactly specified.

But that was the least of his worries now.

The air smelled more like a hospital than a military base. The place didn't look like barracks, either. Skirata leaned on the polished rail that was all that separated him from a forty-meter fall into a chamber large enough to swallow a battle cruiser and lose it.

Above him, the vaulted illuminated ceiling stretched as far as the abyss did below. The prospect of the fall didn't worry him half as much as not understanding what he was now seeing.

The cavern—surgically clean, polished durasteel and permaglass—was filled with structures that seemed almost like fractals. At first glance they looked like giant toroids stacked on pillars; then, as he stared, the toroids resolved into smaller rings of permaglass containers, with containers within them, and inside those

No, this wasn't happening.

Inside the transparent tubes there was fluid, and within it there was movement.

It took him several minutes of staring and refocusing on one of the tubes to realize there was a body in there, and it was alive. In fact, there was a body in every tube: row upon row of tiny bodies, children's bodies. Babies.

"Fierfek," he said aloud.

He thought he'd come to this Force-forsaken hole to train commandos. Now he knew he'd stepped into a nightmare. He heard boots behind him on the walkway of the gantry and turned sharply to see Jango coming slowly toward him, chin lowered as if in reproach.

"If you're thinking of leaving, Kal, you knew the deal," said Jango, and leaned on the rail beside him.

"You said—"

"I said you'd be training special forces troops, and you will be. They just happen to be growing them:'

"What?"

"Clones."

"How the fierfek did you ever get involved with that?"

"A straight five million and a few extras for donating my genes. And don't look shocked. You'd have done the same."

The pieces fell into place for Skirata and he let himself be shocked anyway. War was one thing. Weird science was an -other issue entirely.

"Well, I'm keeping my end of the deal?" Skirata adjusted the fifteen-centimeter, three-sided blade that he always kept sheathed in his jacket sleeve. Two Kaminoan technicians walked serenely across the floor of the facility beneath him.

Nobody had searched him and he felt better for having a few weapons located for easy use, including the small hold-outblaster tucked in the cuff of his boot.

And all those little kids in tanks . . .

The Kaminoans disappeared from sight. "What do those things want with an army anyway?"

"They don't. And you don't need to know all this right now." Jango beckoned him to follow. "Besides, you're al-ready dead, remember?"

"Feels like it," said Skirata. He was the Cuy'val Dar—literally, "those who no longer exist," a hundred expert soldiers with a dozen specialties who'd answered Jango's se-cret summons in exchange for a lot of credits . . . as long as they were prepared to disappear from the galaxy completely.

He trailed Jango down corridors of unbroken white duraplast, passing the occasional Kaminoan with its long gray neck and snake-like head. He'd been here for four standard days now, staring out the window of his quarters onto the endless ocean and catching an occasional glimpse of the aiwhas soaring up out of the waves and flapping into the air. The thunder was totally silenced by the soundproofing, but the lightning had become an annoyingly irregular pulse in the corner of his eye.

Skirata knew from day one that he wouldn't like Kaminoans.

Their cold yellow eyes troubled him, and he didn't care for their arrogance, either. They stared at his limping gait and asked if he minded being defective.

The window-lined corridor seemed to run the length of the city. Outside, it was hard to see where the horizon ended and the rain clouds began.

Jango looked back to see if he was keeping up. "Don't worry, Kal. I'm told it's clear weather in the summer—for a few days."

Right. The dreariest planet in the galaxy, and he was stuck on it. And his ankle was playing up. He really should have invested in getting it fixed surgically. When—if—he got out of here, he'd have the assets to get the best surgeon that credits could buy.

Jango slowed down tactfully. "So, Ilippi threw you out?"

"Yeah." His wife wasn't Mandalorian. He'd hoped she would embrace the culture, but she didn't: she always hated seeing her old man go off to someone else's war. The fight began when he wanted to take their two sons into battle with him. They were eight years old, old enough to start learning their trade; but she refused, and soon Ilippi and the boys and his daughter were no longer waiting when he returned from the latest war. Ilippi divorced him the Mando way, same as they'd married, on a brief, solemn, private vow. A contract was a contract, written or not. "Just as well I've got another assignment to occupy me."

"You should have married a Mando girl. Aru tiise don't understand a mercenary's life." Jango paused as if waiting for argument, but Kal wasn't giving him one. "Don't your sons talk to you any longer?"

"Not often." "So I failed as a father. Don't rub it in. "Obviously they don't share the Mando outlook on life any more than their mother does." -

"Well, they won't be speaking to you at all now. Not here. Ever."

Nobody seemed to care if he had disappeared anyway. Yes, he was as good as dead. Jango said nothing more, and they walked in silence until they reached a large circular lobby with rooms leading off it like the spokes of a wheel.

"Ko Sai said something wasn't quite right with the first test batch of clones," said Jango, ushering Skirata ahead of him into another room. "They've tested them and they don't think these are going to make the grade. I told Orun Wa that we'd give him the benefit of our military experience and take a look."

Skirata was used to evaluating fighting men—and women, come to that. He knew what it took to make a soldier. He was good at it; soldiering was his life, as it was for all Mando'ade, all sons and daughters of Mandalore. At least there'd be some familiarity to cling to in this ocean wilderness.

It was just a matter of staying as far from the Kaminoans as he could.

"Gentlemen," said Orun Wa in his soothing monotone. He welcomed them into his office with a graceful tilt of the head, and Skirata noted that he had a prominent bony fin running across the top of his skull from front to back. Maybe that meant Orun Wa was older, or dominant, or something; he didn't look like the other examples of aiwha-bait that Skirata had seen so far. "I always believe in being honest about setbacks in a program. We value the Jedi Council as a customer."

"I have nothing to do with the Jedi," said Jango. "I'm only a consultant on military matters."

Oh, Skirata thought. Jedi. Great.

"I would still be happier if you confirmed that the first batch of units is below the acceptable standard."

"Bring them in, then."

Skirata shoved his hands in his jacket pockets and wondered what he was going to see: poor marksmanship, poor endurance, lack of aggression? Not if these were Jango's clones. He was curious to see how the Kaminoans could have fouled up producing fighting men based on that template.

The storm raged against the transparent steel window, rain pounding in surges and then easing again. Orun Wa stood back with a graceful sweep of his arms like a dancer. And the doors opened.

Six identical little boys—four, maybe five years old—walked into the room.

Skirata was not a man who easily fell prey to sentimentality. But this did the job just fine.

They were children: not soldiers, not droids, and not units. Just little kids. They had curly black hair and were all dressed in identical dark blue tunics and pants. He was expecting grown men. And that would have been bad enough.

He heard Jango inhale sharply.

The boys huddled together, and it ripped at Skirata's heart in a way he wasn't expecting. Two of the kids clutched each other, looking up at him with huge, dark, unblinking eyes; another moved slowly to the front of the tight pack as if barring Orun Wa's path and shielding the others.

Oh, he was. He was defending his brothers. Skirata was devastated.

"These units are defective, and I admit that we perhaps made an error in attempting to enhance the genetic template," Orun Wa said, utterly unmoved by their vulnerability.

Skirata had worked out fast that Kaminoans despised everything that didn't fit their intolerant,

arrogant society's ideal of perfection. So . . . they thought Jango's genome wasn't the perfect model for a soldier without a little adjustment, then. Maybe it was his solitary nature; he'd make a rotten infantry soldier. Jango wasn't a team player.

And maybe they didn't know that it was often imperfection that gave humans an edge.

The kids' gaze darted between Skirata and Jango, and the doorway, and all around the room, as if they were checking for an escape or appealing for help.

"Chief Scientist Ko Sai apologizes, as do I," said Orun Wa. "Six units did not survive incubation, but these developed normally and appeared to meet specifications, so they have undergone some flash-instruction and trials. Unfortunately, psychological testing indicates that they are simply too unreliable and fail to meet the personality profile required!"

"Which is?" said Jango.

"That they can carry out orders," Orun Wa blinked rapidly; he seemed embarrassed by error. "I can assure you that we will address these problems in the current Alpha production run. These units will be reconditioned, of course. Is there anything you wish to ask?"

"Yeah," said Skirata. "What do you mean by reconditioned?"

"In this case, terminated."

There was a long silence in the bland, peaceful, white-walled room. Evil was supposed to be black, jet black; and it wasn't supposed to be soft-spoken. Then Skirata registered terminated and his instinct reacted before his brain.

His clenched fist was pressed against Orun Wa's chest in a second and the vile unfeeling thing jerked his head back-ward.

"You touch one of those kids, you gray freak, and I'll skin you alive and feed you to the aiwhas—"

"Steady," Jango said. He grabbed Skirata's arm.

Orun Wa stood blinking at Skirata with those awful reptilian yellow eyes. "This is uncalled for. We care only about our customers' satisfaction."

Skirata could hear his pulse pounding in his head and all he could care about was ripping Orun Wa apart. Killing someone in combat was one thing, but there was no honor in destroying unarmed kids. He yanked his arm out of Jango's grip and stepped back in front of the children. They were utterly silent. He dared not look at them. He fixed on Orun Wa.

Jango gripped his shoulder and squeezed hard enough to hurt. Don't. Leave this to me. It was his warning gesture. But Skirata was too angry and disgusted to fear Jango's wrath.

"We could do with a few wild cards," Jango said carefully, moving between Skirata and the Kaminoan. "It's good to have some surprises up your sleeve for the enemy. What are these kids really like? And how old are they?"

"Nearly two standard years' growth. Highly intelligent, deviant, disturbed—and uncommandable."

"Could be ideal for intel work." It was pure bluff: Skirata could see the little twitch of muscle in Jango's jaw. He was shocked, too. The bounty hunter couldn't hide that from his old associate. "I say we keep 'em?"

Two? The boys looked older. Skirata half turned to check on them, and their gazes were locked on him: it was almost an accusation. He glanced away, but took a step backward and put his hand discreetly behind him to place his palm on the head of the boy defending his brothers, just as a helpless gesture of comfort.

But a small hand closed tightly around his fingers instead. Skirata swallowed hard. Two years old.

"I can train them," he said. "What are their names?"

"These units are numbered. And I must emphasize that they're unresponsive to command." Orun Wa persisted as if talking to a particularly stupid Weequay. "Our quality control designated them Null class and wishes to start—"

"Null? As in no di'kutla use?"

Jango took a discreet but audible breath. "Leave this to me, Kal."

"No, they're not units." The little hand was grasping his for dear life. He reached back with his other hand and another boy pressed up against his leg, clinging to him. It was pitiful. "And I can train them."

"Unwise," said Orun Wa.

The Kaminoan took a gliding step forward. They were such graceful creatures, but they were loathsome at a level that Skirata could simply not comprehend.

And then the little lad grasping his leg suddenly snatched the hold-out blaster from Skirata's boot. Before he could react the kid had tossed it to the one who'd been clinging to his hand in apparent terror.

The boy caught it cleanly and aimed it two-handed at Orun Wa's chest.

"Fierfek." Jango sighed. "Put it down, kid."

But the lad wasn't about to stand down. He stood right in front of Skirata, utterly calm, blaster raised at the perfect angle, fingers placed just so with the left hand steadying the right, totally focused. And deadly serious.

Skirata felt his jaw drop a good centimeter. Jango froze, then chuckled.

"I reckon that proves my point," he said, but he still had his eyes fixed on the tiny assassin.

The kid clicked the safety catch. He seemed to be checking it was off

"It's okay, son," Skirata said, as gently as he could. He didn't much care if the boy fried the Kaminoan, but he cared about the consequences for the kid. And he was instantly and totally proud of him—of all of them. "You don't need to shoot. I'm not going to let him touch any of you. Just give me back the blaster."

The child didn't budge; the blaster didn't waver. He should have been more concerned about cuddly toys than a clean shot at this stage in his young life. Skirata squatted down slowly behind him, trying not to spook him into firing.

But if the boy had his back to him . . . then he trusted him, didn't he?

"Come on . . . just put it down, there's a good lad. Now give me the blaster." He kept his voice as soft and level as he could, when he was actually torn between cheering and doing the job himself. "You're safe, I promise you."

The boy paused, eyes and aim still both fixed on Orun Wa. "Yes sir." Then he lowered the weapon to his side. Skirata put his hand on the boy's shoulder and pulled him back carefully.

"Good lad." Skirata took the blaster from his little fingers and scooped him up in his arms. He dropped his voice to a whisper. "Nicely done, too."

The Kaminoan showed no anger whatsoever, simply blink-ing, yellow, detached disappointment. "If that does not demonstrate their instability, then—"

"They're coming with me."

"This is not your decision."

"No, it's mine," Jango interrupted. "And they've got the right stuff. Kal, get them out of here and I'll settle this with Orun Wa."

Skirata limped toward the door, still making sure he was between the Kaminoan and the kids. He was halfway down the corridor with his bizarre escort of tiny deviants before the boy he was carrying wriggled uncomfortably in his arms.

"I can walk, sir," he said.

He was perfectly articulate, fluent—a little soldier way beyond his years.

"Okay, son."

Skirata lowered him to the floor and the kids fell in behind him, oddly quiet and disciplined. They didn't strike him as dangerous or deviant, unless you counted stealing a weapon, pulling a feint, and almost shooting a Kaminoan as deviant. Skirata didn't.

The kids were just trying to survive, like any soldier had a duty to do.

And they looked four or five years old, but Orun Wa had definitely said they were two. Skirata suddenly wanted to ask them how long they'd spent in those awful suffocating transparisteel vats, cold hard tanks that were nothing like the dark comfort of a womb. It must have been like drowning. Could they see each other as they floated? Had they understood what was happening to them?

Skirata reached the doors of his stark quarters and ushered them in, trying not to dwell on those

thoughts.

The boys lined up against the wall automatically, hands clasped behind their backs, and waited without being told to.

I brought up two sons. How hard can it be to mind six kids for a few days?

Skirata waited for them to react but they simply stared back at him as if expecting orders. He had none. Rain lashed the window that ran the whole width of the wall. Lightning flared. They all flinched.

But they still stood in silence.

"Tell you what," Skirata said, bewildered. He pointed to the couch. "You sit down over there and I'll get you some-thing to eat. Okay?"

They paused and then scrambled onto the couch, huddling together again. He found them so utterly disarming that he had to make a rapid exit to the kitchen area to gather his thoughts while he slapped up cake onto a plate and sliced it roughly into six pieces. If this was how it was going to be for—for years

You're stuck, chum.

You took the credits.

And this is your whole world for the foreseeable future... and maybe forever.

It never stopped raining. And he was holed up with a species he loathed on sight, and who thought it was okay to dispose of units who happened to be living, talking, walking children. He raked his fingers through his hair and despaired, eyes closed, until he was suddenly aware of someone staring up at him.

"Sir?" the boy said. It was the courageous little marksman. He might have been identical to his brothers, but his mannerisms were distinctive. He had a habit of balling one fist at his side while the other hand was relaxed. "May we use the 'freshers'?"

Skirata squatted down, face level with the kid's. " 'Course you can." It was quite pathetic: they were nothing like his own lively, boisterous sons had once been. "And I'm not sir. I'm not an officer. I'm a sergeant. You can call me Sergeant if you like, or you can call me Kal. Everyone else does."

"Yes . . . Kal."

"It's over there. Can you manage on your own?"

"Yes, Kal."

"I know you don't have a name, but I really think you should have one."

"I'm Null Eleven. En-one-one."

"How'd you like to be called Ordo? He was a Mandalorian warrior."

"Are we Mandalorian warriors?"

"You bet." The kid was a natural fighter. "In every sense of the word."

"I like that name." Little Ordo considered the white-tiled floor for a moment, as if assessing it for risk. "What's Man-dalorian?"

For some reason that hurt most of all. If these kids didn't know their culture and what made someone a Mando, then they had no purpose, no pride, and nothing to hold them and their clan together when home wasn't a piece of land. If you were a nomad, your nation traveled in your heart. And without the Mando heart, you had nothing—not even your soul—in whatever new conquest followed death. Skirata knew at that moment what he had to do. He had to stop these boys from being dar'manda, eternal Dead Men, men without a Mando soul.

"I can see I need to teach you a lot." Yes, this was his duty. "I'm Mandalorian, too. We're soldiers, nomads. You know what those words mean?"

"Yes."

"Clever lad. Okay, you go and sort yourselves out in the 'freshers, and I want you all sitting back on the couch in ten minutes. Then we'll sort out names for everyone. Got it?"

"Yes, Kal."

So Kal Skirata—mercenary, assassin, and failed father—spent a stormy evening on Kamino sharing uj cake with six dangerously clever small boys who could already handle firearms and talk like adults, teaching them that they came from a warrior tradition, and that they had a language and a culture, and much to be proud of.

And he explained that there was no Mandalorian word for "hero." It was only not being one that had its own word: Hut 'uun.

There were an awful lot of hut'uune in the galaxy, and Skirata certainly counted the Kaminoans among them.

The kids—now trying to get used to being Ordo, A'den, Kom'rk, Prudii, Mereel, and Jaing—sat devouring both their newfound heritage and the sticky sweet cake, eyes fixed on Skirata as he recited lists of Mandalorian words and they re-peated them back to him.

He worked through the most common words, struggling. He had no idea how to teach a

language to kids who could already speak fluent Basic. So he simply listed everything he could recall that seemed useful, and the little Null ARCs listened, grim-faced, flinching in unison at every blaze of lightning. After an hour Skirata felt that he was simply confusing some very frightened, very lonely children. They just stared at him.

"Okay, time to recap," he said, exhausted by a bad day and the realization that there was an unknowable number of days like this stretching ahead. He pinched the bridge of his nose in an effort to focus. "Can you count from one to ten for me?"

Prudii—N-5—parted his lips to take a quick breath and suddenly all six spoke at once.

"Solus, tad, ehn, cuir, rayshe'a, resol, e'tad, sh'ehn, she'cu, ta'raysh."

Skirata's gut flipped briefly and he sat stunned. These kids absorbed information like a sponge. I only counted out the numbers for them once. Just once! Their recall was perfect and absolute. He decided to be careful what he said to them in the future.

"Now that's clever," he said. "You're very special lads, aren't you?"

"Orun Wa said we couldn't be measured," Mereel said, totally without pride, and perched on the edge of the couch, swinging his legs almost like a normal four-year-old. They might have all looked identical, but their individual characters seemed distinct and . . . obvious. Skirata wasn't sure how he managed it, but he could now look at them and see that they were different, distinguished by small variations in facial expressions, gestures, frowns, and even tone of voice. Appearance wasn't everything.

"You mean you scored too high for him to count?"

Mereel nodded gravely. Thunder slapped the platform city: Skirata felt it without hearing it. Mereel drew up his legs again and huddled tight up against his brothers in an instant.

No, Skirata didn't need a hut'uunla Kaminoan to tell him that these were extraordinary children. They could already handle a blaster, learn everything he threw at them, and understand the Kaminoans' intentions all too well: no wonder the aiwha-bait was scared of them.

And they would be truly phenomenal soldiers—if only they could follow a few orders. He'd work on that.

"Want some more uj?" he said.

They all nodded enthusiastically in unison. It was a relief. At least that gave him a few minutes' respite from their unre-lenting, silent attention. They ate, still miniature adults. There was no chattering or high spirits.

And they flinched at every bolt of lightning.

"Are you scared?" asked Skirata.

"Yes, Kal," said Ordo. "Is that wrong?"

"No, son. Not at all." It was as good a time to teach them as any. No lesson would ever be wasted on them. "Being afraid is okay. It's your body's way of getting you ready to defend yourself, and all you have to do is use it and not let it use you. Do you understand that?"

"No," Ordo said.

"Okay, think about being scared. What's it like?"

Ordo defocused slightly as if he were looking at some -thing on a HUD he didn't have. "Cold."

"Cold?"

A'den and Kom'rk chimed in. "And spiky."

"Okay . . . okay." Skirata tried to imagine what they meant. Ah. They were describing the feeling of adrenaline flooding their bodies. "That's fine. You just have to remember that it's your alarm system, and you need to take notice of it." They were the same age as city kids on Coruscant who struggled to scrawl crude letters on flimsi. And here he was, teaching them battle psychology. His mouth felt oddly dry. "So you tell yourself, okay, I can handle this. My body's now ready to run faster and fight harder, and I'll be seeing and hearing only the most important things I need to know to stay alive."

Ordo went from his wide-eyed dark stare to slight defocus again for a moment and nodded. Skirata glanced at the others. They had that same disturbing concentration. They had also stacked their plates neatly on the low side table. He hadn't even noticed them doing it.

"Try thinking about your fear next time there's lightning," Kal said. "Use it."

He went back to the kitchen area and rummaged through the cupboards for some other snack to keep them going, because they seemed ravenous. As he stepped back into the main room with a white tray of sliced food-board that looked even less appetizing than the tray itself, someone buzzed at the door.

The Nulls immediately went into a defensive pattern. Ordo and Jaing flanked the door, backs hard against the wall, and the other four took cover behind the sparse furniture. Skirata wondered for a second what flash-learning program had taught them that—or at least he hoped it was flash-taught. He waved them away from the door. They hesitated for a moment until he took out his Verpine shatter gun; then they appeared satisfied that he had the situation under some sort of control.

"You scare me," Skirata said softly. "Now stand back. If anyone's after you, they've got to come through me first, and I'm not about to let that happen."

Even so, their reaction prompted him to stand to one side as he hit the panel to open the doors. Jango Fett was standing in the corridor outside, a small sleepy child in his arms. The boy's curly head rested on his shoulder. He looked younger than the Nulls, but it was the same face, the same hair, the same little hand clutching the fabric of Jango's tunic.

"Another one?" Skirata said.

Jango glanced at the Verp. "You're getting edgy, aren't you?"

"Kaminoans don't improve my mood. Want me to take him?"

He shoved the shatter gun in his belt and held out his arms to take the boy. Jango frowned slightly.

"This is my son, Boba," he said. He pulled his head back to gaze fondly at the dozing child's face. This wasn't the Jango that Skirata knew of old; he was pure paternal indulgence now. "Just trying to settle him down. Are you sorted now? I've told Orun Wa to stay away from you."

"We're fine," Skirata said. He wondered how he was going to ask the question, and decided blurting it out was probably as good a way as any. "Boba looks just like them."

"He would. He's been cloned from me, too."

"Oh. Oh."

"He was my price. Worth more to me than the credits." Boba stirred, and Jango carefully adjusted his hold on the kid. "I'll be back in a month. Orun Wa says he'll have some commando candidates ready for us to take a look at as well as the rest of the Alpha batch. But he says he's made them a bit more . . . reliable."

Skirata had more questions than seemed prudent under the circumstances. It was natural for a Mando'ad to want an heir above all else, and adoption was common, so cloning was ... not that much different. But he had to ask one thing.

"Why do these kids look older?"

Jango compressed his lips into a thin line of disapproval. "They accelerate the aging process."

"Oh, fierfek ."

"You'll have a company of a hundred and four comman-dos eventually, and they should be less trouble than the Nulls."

"Fine." Did he get help? Were there Kaminoan minders to tackle the routine jobs, like feeding them? And how would the non-Mandalorian training sergeants deal with them? His stomach churned. He put on a brave face. "I can handle that."

"Yeah, and I'll be doing my bit, too. I have to train a hun-dred." Jango glanced at the Nulls, now watching warily from the couch, and began walking away. "I just hope they aren't like I was at that age."

Skirata pushed the controls, and the door sighed shut. "Okay, lads, bedtime," he said. He dragged the cushions off the couch and laid them out on the floor, covering them with an assortment of blankets. The boys gave him a hand, with a grim sense of adult purpose that he knew would haunt him for the rest of his days. "We'll get you sorted out with decent quarters tomorrow, okay? Real beds."

He had the feeling they would have slept outside on the rain-lashed landing pad if he'd asked them to. They didn't seem at all unmanageable. He sat down in the chair and put his feet up on a stool. The Kaminoans had done their best to provide human-suitable furniture, something that struck him as a rare concession given their general xenophobic arrogance. He left the lights on, dimmed, to soothe the Nulls' fears.

They settled down, pulling the blankets over their heads completely. Skirata watched until they appeared to be asleep, laid his Verpine on the shelf beside the chair, and then closed his eyes to let the dreams overwhelm him. He woke with an explosive jerk of muscles a couple of times, a sure sign that he was past the point of tiredness and into exhaustion, and then he fell into an unending black well.

He slept, or so he thought.

A warm weight pressed against him. His eyes jerked open and he remembered he was stranded on a perpetually over-cast planet that didn't even seem to be on the star charts, where the local species thought killing human kids was merely quality control.

Ordo's stricken little face looked up into his.

"Kal..."

"You scared, son?"

"Yes."

"Come on, then." Skirata shifted position and Ordo scrambled up onto his lap, burying his face in his tunic as if he had never been held or comforted before. He hadn't, of course.

The storm was getting worse. "The lightning can't hurt you here."

"I know, Kal." Ordo's voice was muffled. He wouldn't look up. "But it's just like the bombs going off."

Skirata was going to ask him what he meant, but he knew in an instant that it would make him angry enough to do something stupid if he heard the answer. He hugged Ordo to him and felt the boy's heart pounding in terror.

Ordo was doing pretty well for a four-year-old soldier.

They could learn to be heroes tomorrow. Tonight they needed to be children, reassured that the storm was not a battlefield, and so was nothing to fear.

The lightning illuminated the room in brief, fierce white light: Ordo flinched again. Skirata laid his hand on the boy's head and ruffled his hair.

"It's okay, Ord'ika," he said softly. "I'm here, son. I'm here."

Eight years later: Special Forces SO Brigade HQ Barracks, Coruscant, five days after the Battle of Geonosis

Skirata had been detained by Coruscant Security Force officers and for once in his life he hadn't put up a fight.

Technically, he'd been arrested. And now he was the most relieved man in the galaxy, as well as the happiest. He jumped out of the police patrol speeder and winced at the sharp pain in his ankle as he hit the ground. He'd get that sorted out sooner or later, but now wasn't the time.

"Wow, take a look at that," the pilot said. "They're hold-ing off special ops squads there. You sure there's only six of 'em?"

"Yeah, six is overkill," Skirata said, discreetly patting his pockets and sleeves to make sure the assorted tools of his trade were in place and ready for use. It was just habit. "But they're probably scared."

"They're scared?" The pilot snorted. "Hey, you know Fett's dead? Windu topped him."

"I know," Skirata said, fighting the urge to ask if he also knew what had happened to little Boba. If the kid was still alive, he needed a dad. "Let's hope the Jedi don't have a problem with all of us Mando 'ade."

The pilot closed the hatch, and Skirata limped across the barracks landing pad. Jedi general Iri Camas, hands on hips with his brown robes flapping in the breeze, watched in a way that Skirata could only describe as suspicious. Two clone troopers waited with him. Skirata thought the Jedi should get his long white hair cut: it wasn't practical or becoming for a soldier to wear his hair to his shoulders.

"Thank you for responding, Sergeant," Camas said. "And I apologize for the manner of your return. I realize your contract is completed now, so you owe us nothing."

"Anytime," Skirata said.

He noted the blasterproof assault shields erected across the main entrance: four squads of Republic Commandos stood behind them, DC-17 rifles ready. He glanced up at the roof, and there were two commando sniper teams spread out along the parapet as well. Yes, if a bunch of Null-class Advance Recon Commandos didn't want to cooperate, then it would take a lot of equally hard men to persuade them otherwise. And he knew that none of the commandos would be happy about being ordered in to do the persuading. They were brothers, even if the ARCs were rather different men at heart.

Skirata shoved his hands in his jacket pockets and focused on the doors. "So what started all this, then?"

Camas shook his head. "They're scheduled to be chilled down now that they're back from Geonosis, because nobody can command them."

"I can."

"I know. Please, get them to stand down."

"They're even more of a handful than the regular Alpha-batch ARCs, aren't they?"

"I know that, Sergeant."

"So you wanted the hardest troops you could buy to take on the enemy, and then you got cold feet when they turned out to be too hard."

"Sergeant—"

"I'm a civilian at the moment, actually."

Camas took a silent breath. "Can you get them to surrender? They've shut down the whole barracks!"

"I can." Skirata wondered if the clone troopers were looking sideways at him, or in the direction they appeared to be facing. You could never tell with their helmets on. "But I won't."

"I really don't want any casualties. Are you holding out for an increased fee?"

Skirata was a mercenary, but the suggestion insulted him. Camas couldn't be expected to know how he felt about his men, though. He made an effort not to be annoyed. "Enlist me in the Grand Army of the Republic and give me back my lads. Then we'll see."

"What?"

"They're terrified of a chill-down, that's all. You have to understand what happened to them as kids." Camas gave him an odd look. "And don't even think about mind influence, General."

Skirata didn't give a damn about pay. Eight years spent on Kamino training special forces for the Republic's clone army had made him wealthy, and if they wanted to press more credits on him, that was fine; he'd have a good use for them. But what he wanted most right then, and what had made him happy to return with the CSF officers instead of showing them just how handy he was with a fighting knife, was not being safe in a soft civilian life when his men were fighting a desperate, bloody war.

And he needed to be back with them. He hadn't even had the chance to say good-bye when they

suddenly shipped out to Geonosis. He'd lasted five miserable days without them, days without purpose, days without family.

"Very well," Camas said. "Special adviser status. I can authorize that, I suppose."

Skirata couldn't see the commandos' faces behind their visors, but he knew they'd be watching him carefully. He recognized some of the paint schemes on their Katarn armor: Jez from Aiwaha-3 Squad, and Stoker from Gamma, and Ram from Bravo up on the roof. Incomplete squads: high casualties on Geonosis, then. His heart sank.

He began walking forward. He got to the blaster shields, and Jez touched his glove to his helmet. "Nice to see you back so soon, Sarge."

"Couldn't stay away," Skirata said. "You okay?"

"It's a laugh a minute, this job."

Camas called out, "Sergeant? Sergeant! What if they open fire—"

"Then they open fire!" Skirata reached the doors and turned his back on them for a few moments, unafraid. "Do we have a deal? Or do you want me holed up in there with them? Because I won't be coming out unless you guarantee them no disciplinary action."

It struck Skirata that Camas might be the one to fire on him right then. He wondered if his commandos would obey that order if it were given. He wouldn't have minded if they had. He'd taught them to do their job, regardless of their own feelings.

"You have my word," Camas said. "Consider yourself in the Grand Army. We'll discuss how we're going to deploy you and your men later. But first let's get everyone back to normal, shall we, please?"

"I'll hold you to every last word, General."

He waited at the doors for a few moments. The two sheets of reinforced durasteel parted slowly. He walked in, relieved, and home again at last.

No, Camas really needed to understand what had happened to these men as young boys. He had to, if he was going to cope with the war that had now been unleashed.

It wouldn't just be fought on someone else's planet. It would be fought in every corner of the galaxy, in every city, in every home. It was a war not just of territories, but of ideologies.

And it was wholly outside Skirata's Mandalorian philosophy: but it was his war regardless, because his men were its instrument whether they liked it or not.

One day, he would give them back something the Kaminoans and the Republic had stolen from them. He swore it.

"Ord'ika!" he called. "Ordo? You've been a naughty boy again, haven't you? Come here..."

2

Yes, I know I should be directing the battle from the ship. Yes, I know we could reduce the surface of Dinlo to molten slag from orbit. But we can extract more than a thousand

men, and that's worth doing. I asked for volunteers and I got the whole ship's crew and every man in Improcco Company, and not from blind obedience. Let me try.

—General Tur-Mukan, in a signal to General Iri Camas, Battle Group Command, Coruscant, copied to General Vaas Ga, Commanding Officer, Sarlacc Battalions,

Forty-first Elite Infantry, Dinlo

Republic assault ship Fearless, approaching Dinlo, Expansion–Bothan Border, 367 days after Geonosis

General Etain Tur-Mukan watched the HNE news feed with mixed feelings. On one hand the events at home saddened her: on the other, they reminded her what the war was about.

"Fifteen soldiers and twelve civilian support staff are re-reported dead after today's second bomb blast, this time at a GAR logistics base. No group has yet claimed responsibility for the attack, but a security forces spokesman said today that the proximity to tomorrow's first anniversary of the Battle of Geonosis was significant. It brings the total number of deaths in apparent Separatist terror attacks this year to three thousand and forty. The Senate has pledged to smash their networks . . ."

Clone Commander Gett stood at her side, hands clasped behind his back as they waited on the repulsor platform that shunted ammo boxes from the magazine to the hangar deck.

"No way to die," he said.

Etain turned to look at the troops around them. "Neither is this."

They were set to go. Fearless was half an hour out from Dinlo and the gunship pilots were making their way down the passage from the flight briefing to carry out their pre-sortie checks, yellow-trimmed helmets tucked under one arm. They all held the helmets exactly the same way, no doubt the result of thorough drill. General Etain Tur-Mukan noted that.

She stood back from the hatch to let them through and got a salute from each as he passed. One glanced at the somewhat unconventional weapon slung across her shoulder and grinned. He indicated the huge LJ-50 concussion rifle that almost dwarfed her.

"Does that thing light up blue, General?"

"Only if you're on the receiving end, trooper," she said, and gave him her most reassuring smile.

She knew they were afraid, because a commando called Darman had taught her that only idiots didn't fear combat. Fear was an asset, an incentive, a tool. She knew how to use it now, even if she didn't embrace it.

Today she needed to tell Improcco Company that. They knew it already, but this was her first mission with them, and she had learned that a little openness with the troops went a long way. And she wanted them to know that she saw them for the human beings they were. Meeting Republic com-mandos on Qiilura for the first time had been a painful revelation for her.

"Are you okay with that, General?" Gett seemed to be able to guess what she was thinking almost all the time, and she wondered briefly if telepathy was in their genetic mix. Then she reminded herself that men who all looked the same learned to be very, very sensitive to tiny behavioral cues. "We've got a DC-15 if you prefer. Nice piece of kit."

The LJ-50 was exhaustingly heavy. She'd developed her arm muscles in the last year, but it still took some handling. "Some very competent gentlemen taught me to use a conc rifle," she said. "They persuaded me to keep my lightsaber for close-combat. Besides, the LJ's got a four-meter spread at a thirty-meter range. I'm a great believer in efficiency over style."

Gett smiled. He knew the stories about the Qiilura mission. They all did, it seemed. Gossip traveled at light speed in a closed community, and it'd had months to make the rounds. "I understand Omega are okay and on TIOPS in the Outer Rim right now."

"It's kind of you to check for me, Commander." She had to ask. "What's TIOPS?"

"Captain Ordo makes a point of giving your signals priority." He lowered his voice. "Traffic interdiction operations. Boarding the bad guys' vessels."

"Thank you. I've never met Ordo, but he does seem to take care of me very well."

"One of Kal Skirata's Null ARCs."

"Oh, Kal again . . ."

"You've never met him, have you?"

"No, but I hope I do. I feel as if he's been walking behind me for a long time." She looked around the hangar and noted there was one platoon still missing. She'd wait. She needed them all to hear this. "I envy his ability to inspire people."

Gett said nothing. Tact, perhaps, or merely nothing to add; Etain feared that she still projected her own doubts onto others. She was a Jedi Knight now. She had passed her trials on Qiilura with Master Arligan Zey, working under deep cover with him to mobilize the colonists against the remnants of the Neimoidian and Trandoshan occupation. It was silent, grim, secret work, and even though a Republic garrison had now been established on the planet, she still felt that the dwindling population of native Gurlanins and the human farmers were set on a collision course. The Republic had promised the Gurlanins that they would remove the human colony from their world.

So far, they hadn't.

It would have been a simple case of broken promises—like many others in the galaxy's history—had the Gurlanins not been a race of shapeshifting predators, working as spies for the Republic. This was their bargain: they would provide their unique espionage skills if the farmers stopped driving away the prey on which Gurlanins depended. As far as the Gurlanins were concerned, that meant the removal of the human settlements on Qiilura.

Etain knew Gurlanins made bad enemies. They were more than capable of killing farmers, as they'd proved when they exacted revenge on informers on Qiilura. But the war came first, and diplomacy had to take a backseat.

"All present and correct now, General," Gett said. He flicked the controls of the repulsor

platform and it lifted them about a meter above the deck, so that the assembled company of 144 clone troopers could see and hear her clearly. There was no noise apart from the occasional clack of armor plates as one soldier brushed too close to another, or the quiet clearing of throats. They didn't chat.

Gett still defaulted to drill. "Company—a . . . ten . . . shun!"

The chunkkk of armor and rifles being slapped hard against chest plates was one synchronous noise. Etain waited a few moments and concentrated on projecting her voice across the cavern of the hangar. She hadn't been trained as an officer. It didn't come naturally.

They needed her to be one, though, just as Darman had when he had expected all Jedi to be competent commanders. She inhaled slowly and felt her voice lift from her stomach through her chest.

"Stand easy," she said. "And buckets off."

The clack and hiss of helmets being removed was a little more ragged than the snap to attention. They weren't expect-ing that. She stared down into identical faces, reaching out into the Force to get some sense of who they might be and their state of mind, much as she had with Omega. It was a complex tapestry, and yes, there was fear; there was an in-tense sense of belonging and focus, too. And there was not a trace of the hopeful child that had once so confused her when she felt Darman long before she saw him for the first time.

Clones grew fast and learned even faster. A year at war—real war, not just fatally realistic training—had made them a lot more worldly-wise and less idealistic.

"We have two battalions pinned down on Dinlo," she said. "You've seen the op order. We open up that exit route for them by cutting through droid lines so they can reach the ex-traction point. You'll have air support, but we'll be relying predominantly on your infantry skills." She paused. They lis-tened politely. Whatever focus they had appeared to come not from her but from something inside them. "I'm not going to shoot you any line about glory, because this is about sur-vival. That's my first rule as a Jedi, you know that? Survive. And so should it be yours. I don't want any wild sacrifices. I want to come out of this with as many of you and the Forty-first alive as possible—not because you're assets we need to use again, but because I don't want you to die."

She felt the silence change, not in quality but in the reali-zation that shivered almost imperceptibly

through the Force. This wasn't how they were used to seeing themselves.

"We weren't exactly queuing up for it ourselves, ma'am," said a pilot, one boot on the step to his cockpit. There was a ripple of laughter, and Etain laughed, too.

"I'll try to keep my arc of fire under control, then," said Etain, and patted the Stouker. She glanced at Gett's forearm; he tilted it so that she could see his chrono readout. "Ramps down in twenty-four minutes. Dismissed."

The men broke up, replacing their helmets and falling into platoons and squads to make an orderly path to their as-signed craft. The squadron of LAAT/c gunships had been stripped out to create troop space on their cargo decks. Gett inspected the interior of his helmet, holding it in both gloved hands.

"Aren't you supposed to wish that the Force be with them, General?"

Etain liked Gett. He didn't treat her as an omniscient mili-tary genius but as just another being stuck in a hard place without a lot of choices. She could hear a faint sound com-ing from his helmet's audio feed; when she concentrated, she could hear singing, and so held out her hand for the helmet. She'd tried on Atin's once and been stunned by the welter of data it flung at the wearer. Helmet held close to her head, she could make out strong male voices, a choir of them, singing an anthem she had heard snatches of but rarely had the chance to listen to: "Vode An."

They were singing, in the privacy of their own helmet comlinks, retreating into their world, like Omega Squad did from time to time. She could hear nothing outside the hel-mets, of course, and she felt oddly excluded. But they were not her brothers all, however much she wished to be part of something greater than herself, even more than the Jedi Order. They were gearing up for battle.

Bal kote, darasuum kote, Jorso 'ran kando a tome . . .

It sounded less martial and more of a lament to her ears right then.

She'd have to ask General Jusik for a translation. He was very much the Mando 'a speaker these

days.

She handed Gett his helmet back and gave him a nod of thanks. "It's not just the Force we need with us today, Com-mander," she said. "It's reliable kit and accurate intel."

"Always is, General," he said. "Always is."

He slipped his helmet back on and sealed the collar.

She knew without asking that he had started singing, completely silent to her, but one voice with his brothers.

Special Operations Brigade HQ, Coruscant, twenty minutes after the explosion at Depot Bravo Five, 367 days after Geonosis

Captain Ordo needed General Bardan Jusik, and he needed him fast.

He wasn't answering his comlink. That irked Ordo because an officer was supposed to be contactable at all times. And this was precisely the kind of emergency that proved the point.

Ordo settled the two-seater Aratech speeder bike outside the main doors—far enough to one side not to obstruct them, as safety precautions dictated—and strode down the main passage that led to the briefing and ops rooms.

"Location for General Jusik, please," he said to the admin droid that was operating the comlink relays in the lobby area.

"Meeting with General Arligan Zey and ARC Trooper Captain Maze in the CO's office, sir, discussing the inconti-nent ordnance situation—"

"Thank you," said Ordo. Just say bomb, will you? "That's why I'm here, too."

"You can't—"

But he could; and he did. "Noted."

The red light above the office doors told Ordo that the gen -eral didn't want to be interrupted. He expected the Jedi's Force sensitivity to detect him coming and open those doors, but they remained closed, so Ordo simply made use of the list of five thousand security codes that he had memorized for an eventuality like this. He would never trust them to a datapad alone. Skirata had taught him that sometimes you could only take your own brain and body into battle.

Ordo took off his helmet first, a courtesy Skirata had also taught him, and tapped in the code on the side panel.

The doors parted and he walked up to the meeting table, a pool of dark blue polished stone where Zey, Jusik, and Zey's frankly surprised ARC captain sat staring at him.

"Morning, sir," said Ordo. "My apologies for interrupting, but I need General Jusik now."

Jusik's thin pale face with its straggly blond beard was the picture of horrified embarrassment. Ordo thought all Jedi could sense him coming, but that never seemed to buffer their surprise when he arrived on urgent business.

Jusik didn't move fast enough. Ordo made a gesture toward the door.

"Captain, it's not customary to interrupt emergency meet-ings," Zey said carefully. "General Jusik is our ordnance spe-cialist and—"

"That's why I need him now, sir. Sergeant Skirata sends his compliments, but he would like the general to join him at the incident scene, seeing as he's the explosives expert and his skills would be best spent on practical matters rather than discussion."

"I think your sergeant should be leaving all that to Coruscant Security," said Captain Maze, who clearly didn't understand the situation well enough.

Typical ordinary ARC. Typical stubborn ARC.

"No," Ordo said. "Not possible. If I could hurry you a little, General Jusik, I have a speeder right outside. And please remember to leave your comlink active in the future. You must be contactable at all times."

Maze looked at Zey, and Zey shook his head discreetly. Ordo caught Jusik by his elbow and hurried him down the passage.

"Sorry about reprimanding you in front of Zey, sir," Ordo said, scattering droids and the occasional clone trooper as they hurried back up the passageway. "But Sergeant Skirata is livid."

"I know, I should have left it on—"

"Like to pilot, sir? I know you enjoy it."

"Yes please—"

It was the rapid thud of boots behind him that made Ordo stop and turn just as Captain Maze put his hand out to tap him on the shoulder. He deflected the ARC's arm and brushed it aside.

Maze squared up. "Look, Null, I don't know who your sergeant thinks he is, but you obey a general when he—"

"I don't have time for this." Ordo brought his fist up hard and without warning right under Maze's chin, knocking him against the wall. The man swore and didn't go down, so Ordo hit him again, this time in the nose—always demoralizing enough to stop someone dead, but nothing seriously damaging, nothing to cause lasting pain. He would never harm a brother if he could help it. "And I only take orders from Kal Skirata."

Jusik and Ordo sprinted the rest of the way to the speeder to make up lost time.

"Ordo ."

"Yes?"

"Ordo, you just flattened an ARC trooper."

"He was delaying us."

"But you hit him. Twice."

"No permanent harm done," Ordo said, lifting his kama to slide over the pillion seat behind Jusik. He sealed his helmet. "You can't convince Alpha ARCs of anything by rational argument. They're every bit as obtuse and impulsive as Fett, believe me."

Jusik looked perplexed as he started up the drive. He took the speeder bike into a straight vertical lift and spun it around at the top of the climb. His hair, tied back in a bunch, whipped across Ordo's visor on the slipstream, and the ARC brushed it aside in irritated silence. It was high time the boy braided it or got it cut short.

"Where to, Ordo?"

"Manarai."

"Brief me," Jusik said.

"CSF is struggling with this. If you get in right now and use the Force while the incident scene is fresh, we might get a break."

Jusik banked right to avoid a slim spire and chewed his lower lip. He seemed to be able to fly without thinking. "I've been over the data six or seven times and I can't see any consistent pattern in any of the devices. Not the materials, not the method of construction, nothing. Just that they're all very complex devices, and hard to set."

Ordo blinked to switch his helmet audio to filter out the wind noise. Next time, he'd commandeer an airspeeder with a canopy. "Always explosives."

"Say again?"

Ordo adjusted his volume. "I said always explosives."

"Chemical and biological ordnance has limited use on a planet with more than a thousand different species. Things that go bang, though, are guaranteed to hurt every race."

"I'd buy that if these devices were being used randomly. They're not. It's all Grand Army targets. Humans."

"Are you sure it's me you need for this?" Jusik asked. "I'm not as adept with the living Force as others."

"You want to go back and have a nice meeting?"

"No." Jusik looked back over his shoulder with a big grin. Ordo had learned not to tell him to keep his eyes straight ahead, but it was still unnerving to watch a Jedi navigate a craft by his Force-senses alone. "I've never seen anyone walk over Zey like that."

"I simply had to get the job done, sir. No offense."

"Do you mind my asking you something, Ordo?"

"Go ahead."

"Why do you tolerate me? You don't take the slightest notice of Zey. Or Camas. Or anyone else, for that matter."

"Skirata respects you. I trust his judgment."

"Oh." Jusik didn't seem to be expecting that answer. "I—I have a very great regard for our sergeant, too."

Ordo noted the word *our*. And that was what made Jusik different, as far as Kal'buir, Papa Kal, was concerned: he had thrown in his lot with his men. But, as Kal'buir said privately, you could stick a Weequay officer in front of the clone army and they would still fight well. An army of three million men with very few Jedi officers had to be self-directing.

Ordo was well used to directing himself.

Jusik never asked if Ordo thought of him as his commanding officer, though. He probably knew, and didn't need to be reminded that Ordo answered only to the one man who had stepped physically between him and death once, twice, more times than was decent to count: Kal Skirata. And while Ordo knew intellectually that a detached, unsentimental officer was the kind who won wars and

saved the most lives, his heart said that a sergeant who was ready to die to protect his men got the very last drop of sweat and blood from them, and given gladly.

"I think you might really be in trouble with Zey this time, Ordo."

"And what do you think he's going to do about it?"

"Aren't you afraid?"

"Not since Kamino."

If Jusik understood that, it didn't show. "Is it true that your brother Mereel hijacked a transport to Kamino?"

"It's known as hardening targets, General. Challenging security to improve it. We do that."

It was a lie, but not entirely: the Nulls tried not to remove GAR assets from the battlefield unless it was absolutely necessary, but in this case Kal'buir had said it was. The Jedi command turned a blind eye to the irregularities if they detected them because the Null squad produced unparalleled results. No, Zey wouldn't touch him. If he was foolish enough to try, he would learn a hard lesson.

"General, do you remember being taken from your parents?"

Jusik glanced to his left and a few moments later a CSF patrol appeared on their flank, dipped a wing in acknowledgment, and dropped away below them again.

"They're just pinging us to be sure we are who they think we are," the Jedi said, evading the question. "Can't trust anything to be what it seems these days."

"Indeed."

"I hope CSF aren't offended by our intervention."

Ordo tightened his grip. "It's not their fault they can't handle this."

"They're very competent."

"They're competent at defense. They're not used to attack-ing. We can think like an enemy better than they can." "You can. I fear I never will."

"I was trained to kill and destroy by any means possible. I suspect you were trained to obey some rules."

"I do actually."

"What? Obey rules?"

"No, I remember being taken from my family. Just being taken. Not my family, though."

"And what makes you so attached to us?" Ordo chose his words precisely, knowing what attachment meant to a Jedi. He knew the answer anyway. "And doesn't that worry you?"

Jusik paused for a moment and then turned with an anx-ious smile. Jedi weren't supposed to feel powerful emotions like vengeance or love or hate. Ordo could now see that con-flict on the boy's face daily.

And Jusik was a boy: Ordo was the same physical age as the general—twenty-two—but he felt a generation older, de-spite being born only eleven years ago. And the Jedi drew strength from the things

that tore up his heart, just as Kal Skirata did.

He and Jusik were opposites in so many ways and yet so very similar in others.

"You have such a passionate sense of belonging," Jusik said at last. "And you never complain about the way you're used."

"Save your sympathy for the troopers," Ordo said. "No-body uses us. And a clear sense of purpose is a strength."

The southern side of the logistics depot was a wasteland of shattered metal and rubble. From the air, it looked like an abandoned construction site with a brightly colored perimeter fence. As Jusik dropped lower, the perimeter resolved into crowds held back by a CSF cordon. The GAR supplies base was right on the boundary of a civilian area, separated only by a strip of landing platforms, with levels of warehousing operated by droids below it.

It had obviously been a big device. Had the same bomb exploded in the civilian heart of Coruscant, the casualties would have run to thousands.

"Whatever do they find to look at?" Jusik asked. He had trouble finding a space to set down and had to land outside the security cordon. He was clearly offended by the sight-seers and didn't wait for Ordo to clear a path through the crowd for him. For a quietly spoken man, Jusik could certainly make himself heard. "Citizens, unless you have contributions to make here, can I suggest you clear the area in case there's a second device still set to detonate?"

Ordo was impressed at the speed with which most of the crowd melted away. The resistantly curious hung around in small groups.

"You don't want to see this," Jusik said.

They paused, and then walked away. A CSF incident support vessel skimmed across the strip and hovered for a moment beside Jusik. The pilot leaned a little way out of the hatch. "Never seen mind influence in action before, sir. Thank you."

"I wasn't using the Force," Jusik said.

Ordo found a new reason to like this Jedi every day. He took the war as personally as Kal 'buir did.

A thickset man in gray tunic waved to them from the inner cordon, where a large group of civilians and hovercams waited. Captain Jailer Obrim wasn't wearing his Senate Guard finery any longer. Ordo knew him well: since they'd worked together with Omega Squad on the spaceport siege, Obrim's time had been increasingly taken up with counter-terrorism duties. He was seconded to CSF now, but they still didn't seem able to persuade him to wear the blue uniform.

"Can you influence the media to go away, General?" Ordo said. "Or shall I do it manually?"

The CSF forensics investigation team was still picking a slow and careful path through the debris of the entrance to Bravo Eight when Ordo and Jusik reached the cordon. Set back ten meters from the inner cordon was a screen of white plastoid sheet with the CSF badge repeated across its surface: the worst debris had been screened from the cams and prying eyes.

It was grim work for civilian police. Ordo knew that they had neither the expertise nor the numbers to handle what was happening lately. And how did they cope with the things they saw if they hadn't been trained to deal with them from childhood, as he had? For a moment he felt pity.

But there was work to do. Ordo flicked on the voice projection of his helmet with a quick eye movement. "Mind your backs, please."

An HNE crew and a dozen other media representatives—some wets, as Skirata called organic life-forms, some tinnies, or droids—formed a cautious audience for the grisly aftermath of the explosion. They parted instantly, even before they looked around and saw Ordo striding toward them. Then they gave him an even wider berth. An ARC trooper cut an imposing figure, and a captain—marked in the brilliant scarlet that subconsciously said danger to many humanoid species—cleared a big path.

Obrim deactivated a section of the cordon to let Jusik and Ordo pass.

"This is General Bardan Jusik," Ordo said. "He's one of us. Can he wander around and assess the site?"

Obrim looked Jusik up and down with the air of a man who believed more in hard data than the Force. "Of course he can. Mind the evidence markers, sir."

"I'll be cautious," Jusik said, meshing his fingers in front of him to do that little Jedi bow that Ordo found fascinating. Sometimes Jusik was one of the boys, and sometimes he was ancient, wisely sober, another creature entirely. "I won't con-taminate evidence."

Obrim waited for him to walk away and turned to Ordo. "Not that it'd matter. The forensic is getting us nowhere. Maybe we need the Mystic Mob to give us a break. How are you, anyway?"

"Focused. Very focused."

"Yes, your boss is pretty focused, too. He can curse the slime off a Hutt, that man."

"He takes all casualties personally, I'm afraid."

"I know what you mean. I'm sorry about your boys, by the way. They catch it coming and going, don't they?"

Skirata was bent deep in conversation with a CSF officer, their heads almost touching, talking in low and agitated voices. He swung around as Ordo approached. His face was gray with suppressed anger.

"Fifteen dead." Skirata clearly didn't care about civilian casualties, traffic disruption, or structural damage. He gestured toward a large fragment of white leg armor in the rubble of what had been a security post. "I'm going to rip some chakaar's guts out for this."

"When we find them, I'll make sure you're first in line," Ogrim said.

There wasn't a lot any of them could do at that moment except to allow the largely Sullustan scenes-of-crime team to do their work. Skirata, chewing vigorously on that bitter-sweet ruik root that he'd recently taken a liking to, stood with his fists in his jacket pockets, watching Jusik stepping delicately between chunks of debris. The Jedi occasionally stopped to close his eyes and stand completely motionless.

Skirata's expression was one of cold appraisal. "He's a good kid."

Ordo nodded. "Do you want me to look after him?"

"Yes, but not at the expense of your own safety."

After a few minutes Jusik made his way back to the cordon, arms folded.

"You didn't pick up anything?" Skirata said, 'as if he expected Jusik to bay like a hunting strill latching on to a scent.

"A great deal." Jusik shut his eyes for a second. "I can still feel the disturbance in the Force. I can sense the destruction and pain and fear. Like a battlefield, in fact."

"So?"

"It's what I can't sense that bothers me."

"Which is?"

"Malevolence. The enemy is absent. The enemy was never here, in fact."

Republic Fleet Protection Group traffic interdiction vessel (TIV) Z590/1, standing off Corellian–Perlemian hyperspace intersection, 367 days after Geonosis

Fi really didn't like zero-g ops.

He took off his helmet with slow care and put one hand on the webbing restraints that stopped him from drifting away from the bulkhead of the anonymous utility vessel that had been customized for armed boarding parties. If he moved a little too quickly, he drifted.

Drifting made him . . . queasy.

Darman, Niner, and Atin didn't seem bothered by it at all; neither did the pilot, who, for reasons Fi hadn't yet worked out, was called Sicko.

Sicko had shut down the drives. The unmilitary, unmarked, apparently unimpressive little TIV—a "plain wrap-per," as the pilots tagged it—hung with drives idling near an exit point of the hyperspace route, cockpit panels flickering with a dozen weapons displays.

Externally, it looked like a battered utility shuttle. Under the rust, though, it was a compact assault platform that could muscle its way onto any vessel. Fi thought that traffic interdiction operations was a lovely euphemism for "heavy-duty military hijack."

"I do like a noncompliant boarding to start the day," Sicko said. "You okay, Fi?"

"I'm sorted," Fi lied.

"You're not going to throw up, are you? I just cleaned this crate."

"If I can keep field rations down, I can handle anything."

"Tell you what, chum, put your bucket back on and keep it to yourself."

"I can aim straight."

Fi had learned the skills of maneuvering in zero-g late in life—just before he turned eight and sixteen, not all that long before Geonosis—and it didn't come as naturally to him as those troopers trained specifically for deep-space duties. He wondered why the others had come through the same training with more tolerance of it.

Niner, apparently impervious to every hardship except seeing his squad improperly dressed, stared at the palm of his glove as if willing the wrist-mounted hololink from HQ to activate.

The squad now wore the matte-black stealth version of the Katarn armor that made them even more visibly different from the rest of the Republic Commando squads. Niner said it was "sensible" even if it made them pretty conspicuous targets on snow-covered Fest. Fi suspected he liked it better because it also made them look seriously menacing. Droids didn't care, but it certainly put the wind up wets—organic targets—when they saw it.

If they saw it, of course. They usually didn't get the chance.

An occasional click of his teeth indicated Niner was annoyed. It was Skirata's habit, too.

"Ordo's always on time," Fi said, trying to take his mind off his churning stomach. "Don't fret, Sarge."

"Your buddy ... ," Darman teased.

"Rather have him for a friend than an enemy."

"Ooh, he likes you. Hobnobbing with ARC officers from the Bonkers Squad, eh?"

"We have an understanding," Fi said. "I don't laugh at his skirt, and he doesn't rip my head off."

Yes, Ordo had taken a shine to him. Fi hadn't fully understood it until Skirata had taken him to one side and explained just what had happened to Ordo and his batch on Kamino as kids. So when Fi had thrown himself on a grenade during an anti-terrorist op to smother the detonation, Ordo had marked him out as someone who'd take an awfully big risk to save comrades. Null ARCs were psychotic—bonkers, as Skirata put it—but they were unshakably loyal when the mood struck them.

And when the mood failed to strike them, they were instant death on legs.

Fi suspected that Ordo was bored out of his brain, stuck in HQ on Coruscant for most of the last year with nothing to

So Fi stared at Niner's glove, too, willing his stomach to stay put. At precisely 0900 hours Triple Zero time, right on cue, Niner's palm burst into blue light.

"RC-one-three-zero-nine receiving, sir," Niner said.

The encrypted link was crystal clear. Ordo shimmered in a blue holoimage, apparently sitting in the cockpit of a police vessel, helmet beside him on the adjoining seat. But he didn't look bored. He was clenching and unclenching one fist.

"Su'cuy, Omega. How's it going?"

"Ready to roll, sir."

"Sergeant, latest intel we have is that the suspect vessel left Cularin bound for Denon and is headed for your position. The bad news is that it appears to be traveling with a couple of legit vessels as a smokescreen. Commercial freight is getting very edgy about piracy so they're forming up into convoys now."

"We can weed out the target," said Niner.

"It would be very awkward if you decompressed a civilian freighter at the moment. It'll be the Gizer L-six."

"Understood."

"And we need the di'kute alive. No slotting, no disintegration, no accidents."

"Not even a good slap?" asked Fi.

"Use the PEP laser and keep it nonlethal if you can. Somebody's very keen to have a frank chat with them." Ordo paused, head tilted down for a second. "Vau's back."

Fi couldn't stop himself from glancing at Atin and noted that Darman had done the same. Atin had his chin tucked into the padded rim of his chest plate and was idly scratching the scar that ran from just under his right eye and across his mouth to the left side of his jaw. It was a thin white line now, a faint memory of the raw red welt it had been when Fi first saw him: and Fi suddenly realized something he hadn't worked out before.

I think I know how he got that.

Atin was from Sergeant Walon Vau's training company, not Skirata's. And over the months, as

casualties mounted and more partial squads were regrouped with men from other companies, they all swapped stories. The Vau stories didn't get a laugh at all.

"You okay, ner vod?"

"Fine," Atin said. He looked up, jaw set. "So how many bandits are we going to not slot, disintegrate, or speak harshly to, then, Captain?"

"Five, best intel says," said Ordo.

"We'll assume ten then," said Niner.

Ordo paused for a moment as if he thought Niner might be resorting to sarcasm. Fi could see it in the way his shoulders braced. He was a knife-edge kind of man, Ordo. But Niner was simply in literal mode, as he tended to be when things were getting intense. He always wanted to err on the side of caution.

Ordo obviously knew that: he didn't bite. "By the way, General Tur-Mukan is operating around the Bothan sector, and appears to be coping, according to Commander Gett," he said. "And she's still packing the cone rifle, so your lesson wasn't wasted."

"Beats swinging the shiny stick," Fi said, winking at Dar-man. "It'd be fun to see her again, eh, Dar?"

Darman smiled enigmatically. Atin was staring in slight defocus at the bulkhead, jaw clenched. Fi thought it was high time the bad guys dropped out of hyperspace and took their minds off the individual things that were troubling them, which included his stomach.

"Ordo out," the blue holo said, and Niner's glove held nothing but air again.

Darman prepped his helmet, resetting the HUD with a prod of his finger. "Poor Ord'ika." He

called him by the affectionate nickname Skirata used in private, a kid's name, Little Ordo. In public, it was strictly Captain and Sergeant. And you could call your brother vod'ika in the Mandalorian way, but nobody else could, and never in front of strangers.

"Who'd want to be doing the filing when the rest of your batch are off saving the galaxy?"

"Well, I hear Kom'rk is out at Utapau, and Jaing's cannoned up and gone hiking with extreme prejudice in the Bakura sector," said Fi.

"Fierfek."

"Knowing him, he's doing it for the fun of it. And as for Mereel--well, why has Kal sent him out to Kamino?"

Niner clicked irritably again. "Anyone else you want to discuss classified intel with, Fi'?"

"Sorry, Sarge."

The cabin was silent once more. Fi slid his helmet back on, sealed the collar, and concentrated on the artificial horizon of his HUD to convince his stomach which way was up. The Mark III Katarn armor now had more enhancements and was rated blaster-resistant up to light cannon rounds. Every op was full of new surprises from GAR Procurement—like a birthday, according to Skirata, although Fi, like all his brothers, had never celebrated one.

Now they even had a nonlethal pulsed energy projectile, or PEP, for the DC-17 that didn't exactly kill the targets, but certainly made their eyes water. It was police riot control kit, a deuterium fluoride laser: it would probably just annoy a Wookiee, but it sorted out humanoids in short order.

Fi focused on the icons in the frame of his HUD and blinked one into action, sending chilled air across his face. That soothed his nausea. Then he isolated his audio channel and accessed a particularly thumping piece of glimmik music.

Niner cut in on the comm channel override. "Now what are you listening to?"

"Mon Cal opera," Fi said. "I'm improving my mind."

"Liar. I can see you nodding to the beat."

Relax, Sarge. Please. "Want to listen in?"

"I'm psyched up enough, thanks," Niner said.

Darman shook his head. Atin looked up. "Later, Fi."

Sicko glanced over his shoulder, excluded from the squad's conversation by their secure helmet-to-helmet comlink. But he could obviously see the body language that indicated they were chatting. Fi flicked to his frequency with a couple of blinks directed at the sensor inside his visor.

"How about you, ner vod? Want some music?"

"No thanks." Sicko had much the same neutral accent as most of the infantry trooper clones. They'd learned Basic from flash-instruction and had rarely been exposed to out-siders with interesting accents. "But it's decent of you to offer."

Commandos owed their lives to the guts of these pilots—Omega had been extracted under heavy fire by their astonishing skill a number of times—and the TIV pilots were the most daring of the lot. Any gulfs among clone trooper, specialist, and the elite commando units had now been swept away by shared hardship and they were an vode now—all brothers. Fi was happy to indulge them.

He killed the music feed and switched over to the open squad comlink again. The waiting was eating at him now. If --

"Got trade," said Sicko. "They should be jumping out of hyperspace anytime now. Three contacts." He flicked the tracking display from his console into a holoprojection so they could see the pulses of color that represented the ships—no outlines or shapes, just a flickering array of numbers and codes to one side, awaiting a ship to tag. "Intercept in two minutes. They should all be less than a minute apart."

"Bring us in starboard-side-to, please," said Niner.

"There you go . . . the L-six is coming out first." Sicko pressed a pad on the console and Fi heard the grapple arms extend and retract like an athlete flexing muscles before an event. The display picked up the ship, then another. "But the second profile looks like an L-six, too . . ."

"Intel said—"

"Intel has occasionally been known to be less than one hundred percent accurate, apparently ..."

Atin sighed a fift of contempt. "You reckon?" Fi could see that he was checking ships' configuration data via his HUD. "I'm glad I'm shockproofed."

"But we like intel," said Fi. No, not again. Let it be right this time. "Sergeant Kal never read us bedtime stories, so intel satisfies our innate boyish need for heroic fantasy."

"Is he always like this?" Sicko asked.

"No, he's pretty quiet today." Darman clutched a magnetic frame charge to his chest plate—his hatch persuader, as he liked to call it. "So are we going to jump the first crate or what?"

"Play it by ear," said Niner, who always seemed to resort to Skirata's voice under pressure. He hit the release on his restraints. "Let's see how it reacts when we approach. Pressure up helmets, gentlemen, and we're in business."

"Coming about," said Sicko. "And if I can't disable its drive, blow the navigation power conduit. The access ought to be outside the engineering compartment, but it's some-times inside the port-side bulkhead, three meters from the hatch. So knock the rotten thing out, will you? Or they'll bolt and drag us across ten star systems."

Then the pilot punched the TIV into a ninety-degree roll and the apparently fixed constellations Fi had been watching tilted before his eyes. He understood instantly why they called the man Sicko.

Fi grabbed a restraint instinctively and his backpack hit the bulkhead.

"Oh fierfek—"

"Whoaaa!"

"Uhhh."

Fi could see through the cockpit screen as he steadied himself alongside the hatch. A box-like freighter—yes, a Gizer L-6—loomed out of black nothing.

"Interdict that," Niner said.

Fi reached for his jet-pack controls, hanging right beside Darman in free fall.

Sicko powered the TIV into a slow head-on approach and corkscrewed slowly to line it up and bring the deckhead hatch against the port side of the freighter, landing lights on.

The freighter slowed, too. Darman stood ready, fingers flex-ing over the jet-pack controls on his belt. He'd be first out, blowing the hatch controls when the blastproof coaming sealed against the target's hull, pulling aside to let the others storm in. As the TIV moved sedately along the freighter's flank, the

landing lights picked out the bright orange livery of VOSHAN CONTAINERS.

"Oops," said Sicko. "Looks like the legit one."

"Back off, then," Niner said. "If the other ship sees this, we've lost—"

A flash caught Fi's eye at the same time it did everyone else's. The second vessel was heading their way.

"Another L-six," Sicko said. "Please don't let there be three of them."

The first L-6 suddenly altered course with a rapid burn. It had probably picked up the wrong idea about a scruffy little ship in an area of space that was frequently populated by pi-rates. One of its spars wheeled ninety degrees almost in-stantly, looming in the TIV's viewscreen on collision course.

"Abort abort abort!" Sicko yelled. "Brace brace brace—"

He was cut short by a screech of tearing alloy that shud-dered through the TIV, and suddenly it wasn't the tight gut-exhilaration of a boarding but the desperate scramble to survive. The impact spun the TIV off and the last thing Fi saw as he somersaulted involuntarily was Sicko pulling on the yoke and punching a stabilizing burn to stop the spin.

There was nothing Fi or the squad could do. It was all down to the pilot. Fi hated that moment of helpless realiza-tion every time. The display in his HUD shuddered like a cheap bootleg holovid as he hit the bulkhead harder than he thought possible in zero-g.

"Incoming! Returning fire."

And then there was light: brilliant blue-white light. The instant hot rain of fragments peppered and pecked on the hull. Sicko had neutralized the incoming missile. The second L-6 powered up and punched back into hyperspace in a flare of light.

"Chew on that," Sicko said, and slapped his fist hard on the console. "Foam deployed ... hull breach secure."

"What's that?" Fi said, suddenly ice-cold and focused, and not nauseous at all.

"BRB."

"What?"

"Big Red Button. Emergency hull seal."

The remains of the freighter's missile cartwheeled slowly into the distance, trailing vapor. It was the kind of self-defense many freighters felt the need to carry these days: wars created useful opportunity for the criminal community.

Niner sighed. "Oh, fierfek, everyone knows we're here now . . ."

"Anyone get his license number?" Fi said. "Maniac."

"Yeah, and more maniacs along shortly, too." Sicko turned his head toward the scanner readout. "Next one's due in sixty seconds . . . and the next one two minutes later, I reckon. I hope he doesn't call for assistance, or we're going to have to bang out of here really fast."

"Tell me they're not going to notice that little fracas."

"They're not going to notice that little fracas."

"Vor'e, brother."

"You're welcome." The pilot didn't take his eyes off the scanner. "Happy to lie to a comrade anytime, if it makes him feel better—there you go . . ."

The next freighter fell out of hyperspace fifteen hundred meters from their port bow, and its pilot definitely noticed. Fi knew that because the immediate bright arc of laser can-non shaved the elint mast mounted on the TIV's nose just as Sicko let loose a sustained volley into the freighter's under-slung drive. It was still showering debris as Sicko brought the TIV about and swung back under the freighter to loop over its casing from its starboard quarter and bring the TIV, totally inverted, to rest hatch-to-hatch with the target.

And there was nothing the crippled freighter could do about it. Sicko was too close in, too far inside the minimum range of its cannon, and now riding a very angry Ralltiiri tiger.

"This is where you get off." Sicko's voice was just a little shaky. "End of the line."

"Stand to!" Niner said. The skirt of coaming shot out of the TIV's hatch housing and sealed tight against the freighter's hull while the grapple arms held it secure. The pressure equalization light flashed red and the TIV's blastproof inner hatch opened, then the outer one. "Dar, take it!"

Dar slapped the frame charges on the freighter's hatch, the inner hatch snapped shut again, and a muffled whump vi-brated through the TIV.

How Sicko had managed to bring the TIV alongside the port hatch without ramming the vessel—or ripping the deck-head out of the TIV—Fi would never understand, but that was what trooper pilots did, and he was in awe of them. The inner hatch opened again. Darman bowled in two flash-bangs blinding, deafening stun grenades—and Niner was first through the hatch.

"Go go go—"

Fi, buoyed up on a wave of adrenaline, plunged through after him, DC-17 set to blaster mode.

The TIV and Sicko were swept from his mind from that moment as time dis-obeyed all the rules and he was caught in an infinite, slow-motion split second while the squad burst through the hatch and the L-6's artificial gravity smacked him down hard on the deck. The impact ran up through the soles of his boots. He was running for seconds before his proprioception caught up with the gravity and his body said I remember this.

But there weren't many places to run on an L-6 freighter. It was a cockpit and a couple of cabins bolted to a durasteel box of nothing. Atin moved ahead and simply opened up with the Deece's new PEP laser, knocking two men flat in a massive shock wave of sound and light as they came out of the starboard cabin firing blasters.

Fi's anti-flash visor darkened instantly. Even with armor, he felt the shock of the PEP'S unleashed energy. They all did.

Fi ran on over Atin as he dropped to one knee to cuff and search the men, wrists to ankles, as they lay struggling for breath, whimpering. A PEP round was like being flash- banged and hit in the chest by several plastoid rounds at once.

It was usually nonlethal. Usually.

Two down, three—maybe—to go.

The cockpit doors didn't open when Niner stood back and hit the controls. Atin caught up with Fi again and they stood catching their breath.

Niner motioned Darman into position at the cockpit doors. "Shame that PEP doesn't work through bulkheads."

"Confirmed, three still inside," Darman said, running the infrared sensor sweep in his gauntlet up and down the seam of the doors. "Nothing in the port cabin."

Intel had it right for once: there were five bandits on board.

"Encourage them to step outside, Dar," Niner said, check-ing his Deece's PEP setting. He peered at the power readout. "This thing actually scares me."

Darman unrolled a ribbon of adhesive thermal charge and pressed it around the doors' weak points. Then he pushed the det into the soft material and cocked his head to one side as if calculating. "All that fuss getting in and now we just walk over them. Anticlimactic, I think the word is . ."

There was a dull echoing thud and screech of metal that vibrated through the deck. For a second Fi thought the det had gone off prematurely and that it was all a trick of his adrenaline-distorted perception, and that he was dead but didn't know it yet.

But it wasn't the det.

Fi looked at Niner, and Niner looked at Atin, and Fi saw in Darman's viewpoint icon that he was staring at a fragment of flimsi that whipped past him as if snatched by a sudden wind.

It was being carried on a stream of air. Escaping air. Fi felt it grab him and they all reached instinctively for a secure point to anchor them.

" Hull breach," Fi said, arms tight around a stanchion. "Check suit seals."

They went into an automatic and long-drilled check of their suit systems. Katarn armor was vacuumproofed. Fi's glove sensor confirmed his suit was still airtight and the thumbs-up from the rest of the squad indicated that their suit integrity was holding up too. The temporary gale of escaping air was abating.

"Sicko, you receiving?" said Niner.

Fi had the same thought, and judging by the rapid breath-ing on the shared comlink, so had Atin and Darman. The de-compression was via the hatch. And that meant the seal formed by the TIV had been breached.

On their comlink there was only faint static and the sound of their own breathing and swallowing.

"Fierfek," Atin said. "Whatever it is, he's gone."

Niner motioned Darman to stay by the cockpit hatch and beckoned Fi to follow him. "Let's see if it's fixable. You two stay there."

"Well, we've probably lost two prisoners now," Darman said. "Better make sure we haven't lost the rest."

There was no telling what had dislodged the TIV and whether they were going to meet someone boarding to deal with them. They made their way back up the passage to the entry hatch, DC-17s raised, and there was no sign of the two prisoners they'd left cuffed, nor anybody else.

And the hatch—about two meters by two—was wide open, star-speckled void visible beyond.

Fi gripped the rail on one side of it and leaned out a little. It was a good way to get your head blown off but he decided that the urgency of the situation warranted it.

There was no sign of the TIV. There was no sign of any-thing. He pulled himself back inboard. At least the gravity was still functioning.

Niner checked the environment sensors on his forearm plate. "Atmosphere's fully vented now."

"They have to have a foam system in these things."

"Yeah, but if you had us running around your vessel, would you seal the hull and help us out?"

"Is the cockpit airtight?" Fi asked.

"We won't know for sure until they go cold and we can't pick them up in the infrared." Niner switched on his tactical spot-lamp and began searching the bulkhead for panels. "And by that time we'll be ice cubes ourselves."

Katarn armor—even the Mark III version—was only good against vacuum for twenty minutes without a backup air sup-ply. And they hadn't counted on being exposed that long.

For some reason Fi was distracted by Sicko's fate. It was a strange thing to discover when you were on borrowed time yourself. But Sicko had said the power conduits were routed via a panel three meters from ..

... here.

Fi ejected the vibroblade from his knuckle plate and pried open the panel. Niner stood behind him and directed his spot-lamp into the recessed mass of cabling, pipes, and wires.

"That one's labeled ISOLATION BULKHEAD," Niner said. "Yeah, but where does that come down?"

They looked up at the deckhead for shutter housings. There were at least three back down the passage that they could see.

"Let's play safe and withdraw to the one nearest the cock-pit," Niner said.

"We could blow the whole panel here and shut everything down." Including the gravity. Lovely. "Usually triggers emer-gency containment."

Niner put his glove to the side of his helmet. It was a nervous habit of his, just like the way he grew increasingly irritable with Fi as his stress levels peaked. "Dar, are you get-ting this?"

"Halfway there already," said Darman's voice.

Fi's chrono said they had fifteen minutes left to make this work. "Okay, if Dar blows this remotely and it activates the emergency bulkhead, then we'll be stuck between that and the cockpit hatch."

"And if there's atmosphere in there, we can open it and cozy up to the other three huruune."

"Or," Fi said, "we find it's hard vacuum, too, and then we'll be completely stuffed."

"Stuffed if we don't," said Darman, appearing at Fi's shoulder with a ribbon of thermal detonator tape. "Go on. Get back there and wait for me while I set the timer."

"We ought to call in a Red Zero."

"Let's wait until we know if there'll be anything left of us to make it worth rescuing," Niner said, trotting back down the passage. Fi watched him go, shrugged at Darman, and then patted the wide-open cover of the control panel.

"Thanks, Sicko," he said.

—Much Regret Unable, signal relayed from CO, RAS Fearless, on receipt of request to withdraw to Skuumaa and abort extraction of Sarlacc Battalions

The windchill factor in the open troop bay of a LAAT/c gun-ship flying at five hundred kph was sobering, but then so was the deafening roar of air and the swoops and dips of the flight path as the pilot jinked to stop ground-based AA fire from getting a lock.

Etain realized why the troopers' sealed armor and body -suit was a good idea. She had only her Jedi robes and the sensible precaution of upper-body armor plates, which did little to insulate on their own. She summoned the Force to help her withstand the icy blast and made sure her safety line was hooked securely to the bulkhead rail.

"You're going to be in the dwang when you get back to HQ, General," the clone trooper sergeant said with a grin. He slipped on his helmet and sealed it. His nickname was Clanky. She'd made a point of asking.

"I really did not see the signal," she said carefully. "Or at least I looked at it a little too late."

His voice emerged now from the projection unit of the anonymous helmet. "It was very funny, signaling MRU."

"Funny? Oh . . ."

There was a frozen pause. "It's how you decline a social invitation, an RPC. Request the Pleasure of your Company? Much Regret Unable."

Yes, she was in the dwang indeed, as he put it. She wasn't fully up to speed with the mass of acronyms and slang that had erupted in the last year. She could hardly keep up with the clone troopers' inventiveness: their extraordinary capac-ity to appropriate language and habits and shape them to their

needs had spawned subcultures of clone identity every-where. She almost felt she needed a protocol droid.

But she knew what a larty was. Darman had said the LAAT/i—or in this case, the bigger cargo variant—was the most beautiful vessel imaginable when you needed an urgent lift out of trouble. It certainly felt like it now.

MRU indeed. How could I be so stupid? So the troopers thought she was a smart-mouth like Fi, flourishing a little bravado. Instead, she was simply ignorant of the rapidly evolving and idiosyncratic jargon and used it carelessly. "I'm sure they'll forgive me if you pull this off, Sergeant."

Her voice was drowned by the roar, and falling note of V-19 Torrent drives as two of the fighters streaked past them and disappeared into the distance. They were heading off to soften the droid positions that stood between the heavily forested terrain where both Sarlacc Battalions were pinned down and there was a narrow ribbon of delta shoreline where pilots could land. Droids, as Darman had once pointed out, were rubbish in dense forests.

Etain hoped so.

The gunship dropped suddenly, now level with the tree canopy, and the streaked image of green foliage showed her just how fast they were flying. Another larty came up on their port side. There were thirty-four gunships somewhere near, strung out in a loose formation, heading for the extrac-tion zone.

"Three minutes, General," the pilot's cockpit intercom said. There was a crack and flare of something exploding off to their starboard side. "Getting some attention from the tin-nies' triple-A, so we'll drop a little more. Hold tight."

It hardly made her flinch now. She had reached the saturation level of adrenaline where she was vividly aware of every hazard but running on some primeval automatic level of painless cold reason—too scared to panic, as one of the clone troopers had described it.

Three minutes became three hours became three seconds.

Red blasterfire from droids lit up the tree line as the larty banked to come around in a spiral descent. Etain didn't think, and she didn't feel, and she simply jumped the last ten meters from the open deck over the fast-roping four-man squad of clone troopers and the green-trimmed sergeant. Force skills came in very useful at the most unlikely times. She landed in front of the squad and brought the conc rifle up level—one hand on the stock, the other on the barrel grip—to sweep the forest edge in front of her.

She felt other gunships landing all around them, whipping up soil and leaves, but she saw only what was in front—about two platoons of Sarlacc men exchanging fire with super battle droids on the edge of the clearing—and her squad to either side of her.

A spread of ten EMP grenades from the squad and a vol-ley from her conc brought half the super battle droids to a halt. It was at times like this that she longed for the comlink convenience of a helmet instead of one strapped to her arm in just the wrong place: the Force was short on specifics like SBD strength one hundred units, closing up at green twenty. And there was so much chaos and pain in the Force right then that she couldn't harness it to focus.

So she did what she had been drilled to do without think-ing since she was four years old. She fought.

She ran, the squad matching her pace and firing a blue stream into the droid line in odd silence until Clanky acti-vated his voice projector and she heard him say, "—they're closing up all along the shoreline. Sorry, General! Big holes now in the droid lines."

"No link," she said, superfluous words stripped from her mind. The concussion rifle was getting heavy and running out of charge: the power indicator was edging back down to zero. Two more volleys knocked three SBDs flat and a small tree with them. "How many more?"

"Forward Air Control says two hundred SBDs and tanks bearing twenty degrees with four Torrents on their case--"

More V-19s screamed low overhead and a yellow-fringed ball of white fire backlit the forest, suddenly throwing sil-houetted trees and running men into sharp contrast. Fear-less's air group commander certainly had a grip on the reality of the situation. No wonder everybody loved pilots.

Clanky dropped flat and began firing prone at the stream of SBDs that had turned toward the

gunship landing area. Etain followed him without thinking. He was listening to data in his helmet, judging by his occasional emphatic nod.

"Sarlace's breaking out all along the shoreline, General, and Fearless is directing the rest of the larties north."

"Any word on General Vaas Ga ?"

Clanky went silent for a moment, to her at least. "One klick north with Commander Gree, calling in air strikes."

Two gunships moved in close enough to catch Etain's pe-ripheral vision and knots of men broke from the trees, some carrying wounded comrades between them. Etain hoped the single IM-6 medical droid on each larty could handle the triage of dozens of men at once. One gunship set down again at right angles to the tree line, its starboard hatch shut tight and taking droid fire that scattered sparks while it trained composite beam lasers on the SBDs.

The starboard gunner—horribly exposed in the transpari-steel bubble set in the wing—was hosing the droids at waist height. Etain saw movement and white-armored shapes race behind the vessel and disappear, presumably into the port side of the troop bay. The torrent of comp beam laser was like a freeze-frame in its unbroken, steady stream.

For a slow-motion moment Etain reasoned: using the forward cannon and deploying the heavier and nastier armaments—radiation burst missiles—would cause heavy trooper casualties in this position. Her mouth was dry, her heart pounding so fast that she could hardly distinguish between beats, and yet she could stop the chrono to think these odd things.

She resumed firing. She held her fingers tight on the trigger until the conc died in her hands.

"Whoa, tinnies breaking this way—"

Her focus narrowed. She no longer saw the five men around her except as white blurs and vortices of raw energy in the Force. The lead battle droid overran their position and she simply swung the

dead rifle in a Force-driven arc right up into the thing's chest, smashing the alloy and sending the droid's sunken head assembly flying into the air.

She was suddenly aware of blue energy behind the next droid like a continuous backdrop, although it had to be interrupted bursts of DC-15 fire. She let the cone rifle drop and drew her lightsaber because she had nothing else left.

The blade of blue light sprang into life and she didn't re-call touching the control at all. She swept her arm around in a clean arc that brought the mountain of metal down without its legs, tipping like a felled tree to one side of her, falling flat on its firing arm and shuddering as its own discharging weapon tore it apart. Hot shrapnel sizzled on her robes and skin but she felt nothing.

And she was on her feet now, lightsaber gripped in both hands, point-blank with the next droid. She saw two of her squad blasting away from a prone position while Clanky scrambled to one knee to fire a grenade into the advancing rank of a dozen SBDs.

Droids kept advancing. So did clone troopers. And so did she.

We're all the same. None of us is thinking. We're just react-ing.

She fended off a barrage of red fire, whirling and flicking the lightsaber without conscious decision. Each snazzz of colliding energy was the first and last: she went on, and on, and on, blocking each shot as if it would never end. And the next droid was upon her. She slashed. Cables and alloy fragments showered her. A white-gauntleted fist grabbed her shoulder and pulled her bodily out of the way.

"Bang out, General, the larty's ready to lift" Clanky almost had to drag her off the pile of

shattered droids and shove her into a run toward the gunship. "We've done all we can here and the bay's full. Go! Run!"

She grabbed the cone rifle as she ran back, retracing their line of advance, blind on adrenaline. But at the gunship's platform she still stopped dead, one foot on the edge of the rail, to look back and count men passing her. One—two—three—four troopers, and Clanky. All accounted for. She sprang up just as an armored hand gripped hers and yanked her inboard. She had no idea who the trooper was. But he was one of hers now.

The gunship lifted in a straight vertical so fast that her stomach plummeted back to ground level.

The forest and fertile delta plain of Dinlo shrank beneath the ship and grew dark. The bay hatches slid forward and slammed shut. Then she was standing in a warehouse of scorched, filthy armor and the stench of blood and seared flesh. Her primeval survival mechanisms yielded to shaking anticlimax.

Clanky pulled off his helmet and their eyes met, an odd moment that was almost a glance in a mirror: she knew that the unblinking wide-eyed shock on his face was exactly what he was seeing on hers. Instinctively, they both reached out to clasp forearms and their grips locked for a second or two. Clanky was also shaking.

Then they parted and turned away. It was synchronous.

Yes, Etain thought. We're just the same, all of us.

It was very, very quiet once she blocked out the thrum of the gunship's drive as it made 660 kph—off the dial—back to Fearless.

And no, the IM-6 droid could not deal with forty men crammed into a modified bay better suited to thirty, not if a quarter of them were injured.

Then, when Etain listened more carefully and her adrenaline had ebbed, she realized the bay wasn't as quiet as she had thought. There was ragged breathing and stifled yelps of pain and—the worst,

this—incoherent whimpering that peaked to a crescendo of a single stifled scream and trailed off again.

She picked her way across the bay, stepping over men who were crouching or kneeling. Propped against the bulkhead, a clone trooper was being held in a sitting position by a brother. His helmet and chest plate were removed and Etain needed no med droid to provide a prognosis for a chest wound that was producing blood on his lips.

"Medic?" She whipped around. "Medic! Get this man some help, now!"

The med droid appeared as if from nowhere, jerking bolt upright from a knot of troopers where it was obviously work-ing. Its twin photoreceptors trained on her.

"General!"

"Why is this man not being attended to?"

"Triage X," the droid said, dropping down into the unbroke-n carpet of troopers again to resume its first aid.

Etain should have known. The red X symbol glowed on his shoulder. She hoped the man hadn't heard, but he probably knew anyway, because that was the unsentimental way the Kaminoans had presented their training to the clones. Triage code X: too badly injured. Not expected to survive despite intervention. Concentrate resources on code 3, then code 5.

She took a breath and reminded herself that she was a Jedi, and there was more to being a Jedi than wielding a lightsaber. She knelt down beside him and grabbed his hand. The grip he returned was surprisingly strong for a dying man.

"It's okay," she said.

She reached out in the Force to get some sense of the injury, to shape it in her mind, hoping to

slow the hemorrhage and hold shattered tissue together until the larty docked. But she knew as soon as she formed the scale of the damage in her mind that it wouldn't save him.

She had vowed never again to use mind influence on clones without their consent: she had eased Atin's grief, and given Niner confidence when he most needed it, both unasked for, but since then she had avoided it. Clones weren't weak-minded anyway, whatever people thought. But this man was dying, and he needed help.

"I'm Etain," she said. She concentrated on his eyes, seeing behind them somehow into a swirl of no color at all, and vi-sualized calm. She held out her hand to the trooper support-ing his shoulders and mouthed medpacs at him. She knew they carried single-use syringes of powerful painkiller: Dar-man had used them in front of her more than once. "There's nothing to be afraid of. What's your nickname?"

"Fi," he said, and it shocked her briefly, but there were many men called Fi in an army with numbers for names. His brother said no silently and held up spent syringes: they'd al-ready pumped him full of what little they had. "Thank you, ma'am."

If she could influence thought, she could influence endor-phin systems. She put every scrap of her will into it. "The pain's going. The drug's working. Can you feel it?" If the Force had any validity, it had to come to her aid now. She studied his face, and his jaw muscles were relaxing a little. "How's that?"

"Better, thanks, ma'am."

"You hang on. You might feel a bit sleepy."

His grip was still tight. She squeezed back. She wondered if he knew she was lying and just chose to believe the lie for his own comfort. He didn't say anything else, but he didn't scream again, and his face looked peaceful.

She rested his head on her shoulder, one hand between his head and the bulkhead, the other still clutching his, and held that position for ten minutes, concentrating on an image of a cool pale void. Then he started a choking cough. His brother took his other hand, and Fi—a painful reminder of a friend she hadn't seen for months and might never see again—said, "I'm fine." His grip went slack.

"Oh, ma'am," said his brother.

Etain was aware in a detached way of spending the next twenty minutes talking to every single trooper in that bay, asking their names, asking who had been lost, and wondering why they stared first at her chest and then at her face, apparently bewildered.

She put her hand to her cheek. It stung. She brushed it and a fragment of alloy came away on her hand with fresh, bright blood. She hadn't felt the shrapnel until then. She aimed her-self towards a familiar patch of green in the forest of grimy white armor.

"Clanky," she said, numb. "Clanky, I never asked. Where do we bury our men? Or do we cremate them, like Jedi?"

"Neither, usually, General," said Clanky. "Don't you worry about that now."

She looked down at her beige robe and noticed that it was way beyond filthy: it was peppered with burns, as if she'd been welding carelessly, and there was a ragged oval patch of deep red blood from her right shoulder down to her belt, already drying into stiff blackness.

"Master Camas is going to fry me," she said.

"He can fry us, too, then," Clanky said.

Etain knew she'd think about the deftly evaded answer to her question sometime, but right then her mind was else-where. She thought of Darman, suddenly conscious that something was wrong: but something was always wrong for commandos on missions, and the Force was clear that Dar-man was still alive.

But the other Fi—the trooper—wasn't. Etain felt ashamed of her personal fears and went in search of men she could still help.

Bravo Eight Depot crime scene, Manarai, Coruscant, 367 days after Geonosis

Skirata took every clone casualty as a personal affront. His frustration wasn't aimed at Ogrim: the two men re-spected each other in the way of time-served professionals, and Ordo knew that. He just hoped Ogrim knew that Kal'buir didn't always mean the sharp things he said.

"So when are your people going to get off their shebse and tell us how the device got in here?" Skirata said.

"Soon," Ogrim said. "The security holocam was taken out in the blast. We're waiting on a backup image from the satel-lite. Won't be as clear, but at least we have it."

"Sorry, Jailer," Skirata said, still chewing, eyes fixed on the rubble. "No offense."

"I know, comrade. None taken."

It was another reason why Ordo adored his sergeant: he was the archetypal Mando 'ad. A Mandalorian man's ideal was to be the firm but loving father, the respectful son learn-ing from every hard experience, the warrior loyal to constant personal principles rather than ever-changing governments and flags.

He also knew when to apologize.

And he looked exhausted. Ordo wondered when he would understand that nobody expected him to keep up with young soldiers. "You could leave this to me."

"You're a good lad, Ord'ika, but I have to do this."

Ordo put one hand square on Skirata's back and one on Ogrim's to steer them both a little farther from the scene of destruction, anxious not to make it obvious in front of the aruetiise—the non-Mandalorians, the foreigners, sometimes even the traitors—that his sergeant needed comforting. Wait-ing was the worst thing for Kal'buir's mood.

Ogrim's comlink chirped. "Here we go," he said. "They're relaying the image. Let's play it out to Ordo's link."

The images emerged as a grainy blue aerial holo rising from the palm of Ordo's gauntlet, and they replayed it a few times. A delivery transport came up to the barrier and was waved in to land on the strip. Then the scene erupted in a ball of light followed by billows of smoke and raining debris.

The explosion blew out the transparisteel-and-granite walls of the Bravo Eight supply depot fifteen times before Ordo had seen enough.

"Looks like the device came in on that delivery trans -port," Ogrim said. Some of the recognizable debris scattered around the blast site confirmed that there had been a transport caught up in the explosion. "Nobody running away. So the pilot was inside, and . ." He stopped to look down at data loading into his own 'pad. "I'm getting confirmation that it was a routine delivery and the pilot was a regular civilian driver. Nothing to suggest that it was a suicide mission, though. Just a routine run with some extra unwanted sup-plies."

"Can we go back over the recordings from previous days?" Ordo said. "Just to see if anyone was doing a recce of vessels and movements in the run-up to this?"

"Archived for ten days. Won't be any better in terms of angle and clarity than this."

"I'll still take it."

Ordo looked to Skirata, who was silent and visibly angry, but clearly thinking hard. Ordo knew that calculating defo-cus all too well.

"Okay, the best lead we have right now is to track back the other way down the line—from confirmed explosives supply chains," Kal said.

"Omega's on a TIOPS run checking that right now," Ordo said. "They might come back with some suspects for Vau to work on."

"I'm turning a blind eye to that, right?" said Ogrim, a man who left the impression he would have given a lot to be back in the front line instead of supervising others. "Because suspects are my part of ship to deal with. But I do have this an-noying eyesight problem lately."

"Long-term condition?" Skirata asked, moving Ordo out of his way with a gentle pat on the forearm.

"As permanent as you want it to be, Kal."

"Make it incurable for the time being, then."

Skirata picked his way past the forensics team, who were still setting marker holotags at various points in the rubble: red holos for body parts, blue for inorganic evidence. Ordo wondered if the civilians who'd been gawking from behind the barrier would see anything about that on the HNE bulletin.

Skirata paused and leaned over a Sullustan technician who was sensor-scanning the rubble on hands and knees. "Can I have the armor tallies when you find them?"

"Tallies?" The Sullustan sat back on her heels and looked up at him with round black liquid eyes. "Explain."

"The little sensor tags that identify the soldier. On the chest plates." Skirata held finger and thumb a little apart to indicate the size. "There'll be fifteen around here some-where."

"We can sort the admin for you, Kal," Ogrim said. "Don't worry about all that."

"No, it's not to account for them. I want a piece of their armor. To pay our respects, the Mando way."

Ordo noted Ogrim's puzzled expression. "Bodies are ir-relevant to us. Which is just as well, really."

Ogrim nodded gravely and ushered them behind another plastoid screen where the SOCO team was assembling and logging fragments of alloy and other barely identifiable materials on a trestle table. "You can take over all this if you want."

Skirata motioned Ordo across to the trestle. "It's Ordo's area, but I'm happy for your people to process it. I've got faith in Sullustan diligence."

Maybe it was just Skirata indulging in harmless hearts-and-minds work. But it seemed to do the job for the SOCO personnel.

One of them looked up. "It's good to know that military intelligence respects CSF."

"I've never been called military intelligence before," Skirata said, as if he hadn't realized that was what he had been doing every waking moment since five days after Geonosis.

Ordo held out one hand to the nearest scenes-of-crime officer and crooked a finger to gesture for their datapad. "You'll need this," he said, and linked it to his own 'pad. "Here's our latest IED data."

Yes, the CSF's anti-terrorism unit and Skirata's tight-knit team had become very close indeed in the last year. Going through official Republic security clearance channels just wasted time, and there was always the chance its civil servants would behave like petty fools across the galaxy and mark data as top secret for their own dreary little career reasons. Ordo didn't have time for that.

He was checking that the data had transferred cleanly when the hololink on the inner side of his forearm plate activated again and his hand was filled with a small scene of blue chaos.

For a split second he thought it was an image in his HUD, but it was external, and it was Omega Squad.

"Omega—Red Zero, Red Zero, Red Zero, over."

The holoimage showed the four commandos pressed against a bulkhead with an occasional fragment of debris floating into view. They were all alive, anyway.

Skirata whipped around at the sound of Niner's voice and the code they all dreaded: Red Zero, request for immediate extraction.

Ordo switched instantly and without conscious thought into emergency procedure, capturing coordinates from the message and holding up his datapad so that Skirata could see the numbers and open a comlink to Fleet. Their language changed: their voices became monotone and quiet, and they slipped into minimal, direct speech. The SOCO team froze to watch.

"Sitrep, Omega."

"Target's boarded. Unplanned decompression, and our pilot and the TIV are missing. No power, but no squad casualties."

"Fleet, Skirata here, we have a Red Zero. Fast extraction please—on these coordinates. Pilot down, too, no firm location."

"Stand by, Omega. We're scrambling Fleet assistance now. Time to critical?"

"Ten- minutes if we don't get the hatch on this side of us open, maybe three hours if we do."

Skirata stopped, comlink still held to his mouth. Ogrim was staring at the little blue hologrammic figures with the expression of a man realizing something terrible.

We could be watching them as they die.

"Go on," Ordo said.

"Three suspects the other side of that hatch, and they can't open it now even if they wanted to. Dar's got to blow it."

"In a confined space?"

"We've got the armor."

Well, that was true: Fi had withstood a contact blast from a grenade in Mark II armor. "You don't have any choice, do you?"

"We've had worse days," Fi said cheerfully.

Ordo knew he meant it. He could feel the other part of him, the Ord'ika who wanted to cry for his brothers, but he was very distant, as if in another life: there was just absolute cold detachment in the physical shell where his mind was situated now.

"Do it," he said.

"The Red Zero's been transmitted to all GAR ships in striking distance," Skirata said. Ordo didn't want him to watch the hololink in case things didn't go as planned, and turned his back to him. But Skirata turned him around by his arm and stepped into the holo pickup's field of view so the squad could see him. "I'm here, lads. You're coming home, okay? Sit tight."

There was a certainty about Skirata regardless of how im-possible that assurance sounded in cold reality. But Ordo could feel his utter helplessness, and shared it: Omega was light-years from the Coruscant system, far beyond the sergeant's ability to step into the firing line in person. The two soldiers turned together to shield the holoimage, and then Ogrim moved in close, diplomatically blocking the view of his own team.

"Your lad Fi," he said, "—my boys still want to buy him that drink."

It was Ogrim's men Fi had saved from the grenade. And that was probably as openly sentimental as Jailer Ogrim would ever be.

"In five," Darman said. "Four . ."

Like a HoloNet drama whose budget hadn't run to a de-cent set, the image in Ordo's cupped hand showed the squad curling themselves against the far bulkhead, grasping conduit to anchor themselves in zero-g, heads tucked to their chests and hunkering down.

The image disappeared as Niner—whose gauntlet obviously carried the holofeed—buried his head, too.

"Three, two, go!"

The picture flared into a ball of blue light and the silent explosion looked even more like a poor-quality holovid whose audio track had failed.

The holoimage dimmed for a moment and then the squad's jet packs ignited and they surged forward in free fall, rifles raised, and the video feed broke up into wildly random movement with two more blinding flashes.

"Okay, three bandits down, not slotted, not fragmented, but not very happy either," said Fi's

voice, clearly relieved. "And oxygen."

"Nice one, Omega." Skirata had his eyes shut for a moment. He pinched the bridge of his nose hard enough to leave a temporary white mark. "Now take it easy until we get to you, okay?"

Obrim's face was ashen. "I wish the public realized what those boys do," he said. "I hate kriffing secrecy sometimes."

"Shabu 'droten," Skirata muttered, and walked away. No, he didn't care much for the public at all.

"What's that mean?" Obrim asked.

"You don't want to know," said Ordo, mulling over Jusik's tenuous analysis of the Force around the blast scene. The enemy was never here.

So . . . maybe there was nobody watching.

There was nobody waiting for precisely the most damaging moment to detonate the device from nearby.

Remote detonation of a moving device required one of two things: either a very good view of the target, or, if the target wasn't visible, a precise timetable so the terrorist would know exactly where the device might be at any given time.

And that meant either a very good knowledge of GAR logistics, or—if the terrorist wanted to see the whole area, not just the immediate base—access to security holo networks.

Ordo felt a sudden cool clarity settle in his stomach, a satisfying sense of having learned something new and valuable.

"Gentlemen," he said. "I think we have a mole."

RAS Fearless: hangar deck

Clanky kept a tight grip on Etain's upper arm until she felt the drag of deceleration and the thud through the soles of her boots as the gunship docked in Fearless's hangar.

By the time she teetered on the edge of the troop bay, somehow more wary of jumping down one meter than ten, Gett was waiting, expression carefully blank.

"The general's got a taste for making shrapnel," Clanky said approvingly. "You're instant droid death, aren't you, ma'am?"

Helmet off, he lowered his voice as he bent his head close to Gett's, but she still heard him. She heard the words rough time.

"We'd better get you cleaned up," Gett said. "I fear it's the proverbial interview without caf when we get back to Fleet."

Commander Gree limped past them with General Vaas Ga, both looking smoke-streaked and exhausted. "Oh, I don't think so," Vaas Ga said. "Well done. Thank you, Fear-less."

"Let me walk this off a little, please, Commander." Etain looked around the hangar deck, now crowded with gunships disgorging men. Medical teams moved in. The smell of burned paint and lube oil distracted her. "Anyone want to give me the numbers?"

Gett glanced down at the panel on his left forearm. "Improcco Company—four KIA, fifteen

wounded, total returned—one hundred and forty out of one hundred and forty-four. Sarlacc A and B Battalions, one thousand and fifty-eight extracted—ninety-four KIA, two hundred and fifteen injured. No MIA. Twenty Torrents deployed and returned.

That's seven point five percent losses, and most of those were during the Dinlo engagement itself. So I'd call that a result, General."

It sounded like a lot of deaths to Etain. It was. But most had made it. She had to be content with that.

"Back to Triple Zero, then." She'd called it Zero Zero Zero originally—the street slang—but the troopers had told her that was confusing, and that over a comlink it wouldn't be clear if she meant Coruscant or was simply using the standard military triple repeat of important data. She decided she liked Triple Zero better anyway. It made her feel part of their culture. "And not before time."

"Very good, General," Gett said. "Let me know when you want to refresh yourself and I'll call a steward."

Etain didn't want to be back in her cabin on her own, not right now. There was a mirror on the bulkhead above the tiny basin, and she didn't like the idea of looking herself in the eye yet. She wandered around the crowded hangar.

The bacta tanks were going to be fully occupied on the journey home.

And the clone troopers of the Forty-first Elite who were trying to find somewhere to get a few hours' sleep seemed a different breed from the four almost-boys who had been her rough-and-ready introduction to unwanted command on Qiilura.

Men changed in a year, and these soldiers around her were men. Whatever naïve purity of purpose—this kote, this glory—fueled them when they left Kamino for the last time, it had been overwritten by bitter experience. They had seen, and they had lived, and they had lost brothers, and they had talked and compared notes. And they were not the same any longer.

They joked, and gossiped, and evolved small subcultures, and mourned. But they would never have a life beyond battle. And that felt wrong.

Etain could feel it and taste it as she wandered across the hanger deck, looking for more troopers she might be able to help. The sense of child that had so disoriented her when she first met Darman on Qiilura was totally absent. There were two shades of existence that tinted the Force in that vast hangar: resignation, and an overwhelming simultaneous sense of both self and community.

Etain felt irrelevant. The clones didn't need her. They were confident of their own abilities, very centered in whatever identity had evolved despite the Kaminoan belief that they were predictable and standardized units, and they were bonded irrevocably with each other.

She could hear the quiet conversations. There was the occasional word of Mando 'a, which few ordinary troopers had ever been taught, but had somehow flowed through their ranks from sources like Skirata and Vau. They clung to it. Knowing what she knew about Mandalorians, it made perfect sense.

It was the only rationale that could make sense when you were fighting for a cause in which you had absolutely no stake. It was the self-respect of a mercenary; internal, unsalable, and based on skill and comradeship.

But mercenaries got paid, and eventually went home, wherever that might be.

One trooper was waiting patiently for the medic. He had a triage flash stuck on his shoulder plate: the number "5," walking wounded. There was blood streaked across his armor from a shrapnel wound to his head, and he was holding his helmet in his lap, trying to clean it with a scrap of rag. Etain squatted down and patted his arm.

"General?" he said.

She had so ceased to notice their appearance that it took her a few seconds to see Darman's face in his. They were identical, of course, except for the thousand and one little details that made them all utterly unique.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes ma'am."

"What's your name, and not your number, okay?"

"Nye."

"Well, Nye, here you go." She handed him her water bottle. Apart from two lightsabers—her own and her dead Master's—her concussion rifle, and her comlink, it was the only item she was carrying. "I have nothing else I can give you. I can't pay you, I can't promote you, I can't give you a few days' R and R, and I can't even decorate you for valor. I'm truly sorry that I can't. And I'm sorry that you're being used like this and I wish I could put an end to it and change your lives for the better. But I can't. All I can do is ask your forgiveness."

Nye seemed stunned. He looked at the bottle and then took a long swig from it, his expression suddenly one of blissful relief. "It's . . . okay, General. Thank you."

She was suddenly aware that the hangar deck had fallen completely silent—no mean feat given the vast space and the numbers of men packed in it—and everyone was listening.

The unexpected audience actually made her face burn, and then a little ripple of applause went through the ranks. She wasn't sure if that meant they agreed, or that they were just being supportive of an officer who—now that she had some embarrassing clarity of mind—looked like a walking nightmare and was clearly having trouble dealing with the aftermath of battle.

"Caf and a change of clothes, General," Gett said, looming over her from nowhere. "You'll feel a lot better after a few hours' sleep."

Gett was a gracious commander and a perfectly competent naval officer. He ran the ship. He was, to all intents and purposes, the commanding officer. She wasn't. And had he been born to a family on Coruscant or Corellia or Alderaan, he would have had a glittering career. But he'd been hatched in a tank on Kamino, and so his artificially shortened life would be very different because of that.

When she got back, she would seek out Kal Skirata and beg him to help her make sense of it all. She would find Omega Squad and tell them face-to-face how much she cared about them before it was too late. She would tell Dar-man that most of all. She never stopped thinking of him.

"You meant what you said, General," Gett said, steering her back toward her cabin.

"Oh yes. I did."

"I'm glad. However powerless you feel, solidarity means a great deal to us."

She suddenly wanted to see Gett go home to a house full of family and friends, and wondered if she wanted it for him or for herself.

"I was once taught to see while blindfolded," she said. "It was a far more important lesson than I ever imagined. At the time I thought it was just a way of teaching me to strike with my lightsaber using the Force alone. Now I know what purpose the Force had. I look beyond faces."

"But you won't change anything by blaming yourself."

"No. You're right. But I won't change anything by pretending I have no responsibility, either."

At that point she knew as surely as she had ever known anything that the Force had lifted her from one existence, turned her around, and dropped her on another path. She could change things. She wouldn't change them immediately, and she couldn't change them for any of the men here, but she would somehow change the future for men like this.

"If it's any comfort, General, I'm not sure what we'd do if we weren't doing this," Gett said. "And you do get to hear an awful lot of good jokes."

He touched his fingers to his brow and left her at her cabin.

They actually found things to laugh about even surrounded by pain and death. Gett had that understated, inventive, and irreverent humor, that seemed common to anyone in uniform: if you couldn't take a joke, apparently, you shouldn't have joined. She'd heard Omega quote that Skirata line more than once. You had to be able to laugh or else the tears would ambush you.

Etain stared at the dried blood on her robes and, while the memory appalled her, she couldn't bring herself to obliterate it by rinsing it away. She shoved the garment under the mattress of her bunk, shut her eyes, and then didn't even recall lying down.

She woke with a start.

She woke, and then the ship changed course and picked up speed: she felt it. That hadn't woken her. Some disturbance in the Force had.

Darman.

She could feel the very slight vibration that told her Fear-less's drives were straining flat out.

She sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bunk, rubbing a painful cramp from her calves. A clean set of robes was hanging on a peg behind the hatch door of her cabin. She had no idea where the crew had acquired them, but she washed her face in the basin, and looked up at last at the small mirror to see the scratched, ashen, rapidly aging face of a stranger.

But at least she could meet her own eyes now.

She pulled on the clean robes and was pocketing both her own lightsaber and Master Kast Fulier's—which she always carried out of sheer sentimentality and pragmatic caution—when there was the sound of boots padding down the passage outside. Someone rapped on the hatch. She eased it open using the Force. It was reassuring to know she wasn't too beaten to do that.

"General?" Gett said. He handed her a mug of caf, re-markably relaxed for a man whose ship was clearly driven by new urgency. "Sorry to disturb you so soon."

"That's very kind of you, Commander." She took the caf and saw her hands shaking. "I felt something. What's wrong?"

"I took a liberty, General. I hope you won't be offended, but I overrode your orders."

She couldn't imagine that ever bothering her. She'd once ordered Darman to do that if he ever felt she was screw-ing up. The clones knew their trade far better than she ever would.

"Gett, you know I trust you implicitly?"

He had a disarming grin, not unlike Fi, but with less of a sense of desperately trying to jolly everyone along. "I've di-verted the ship to the Tynna sector. We received a Red Zero call and I thought you'd really want to respond. An extra day or so isn't going to make any difference to the survival rate of casualties now."

Red Zero. An emergency command for all vessels to re-pond to a disaster of some kind, something very serious indeed. Even extracting the Forty-first hadn't been a Red Zero signal.

"I'd always give a Red Zero top priority, too. Good call, Gett."

"Thought you might." He watched her drain the cup and held out his hand to take it. "Especially because this one's from Omega Squad. They're in very deep dwang, General."

Darman, she thought. The Force always made sure she got the most important intel after all. Dar

DELTA SQUAD TO FLEET OPS. RESPONDING TO RED ZERO. POSITION: CHAYKIN SECTOR, ETA: 1 STANDARD HOUR 40. CAN ASSIST: MEDICAL AND OXYGEN. PLEASE NOTE: DEPLOYING IN REQUISITIONED NEIMOIDIAN VESSEL. NO DEFENSIVE CAPACITY. REPEAT: NEGATIVE ARMAMENT. STRONGLY ADVISE ANY GAR VESSELS TO PING TRANSPONDER BEFORE OPENING FIRE. BE AWARE THAT SEPARATIST TRAFFIC IN SECTOR HAS INCREASED IN LAST 20 MINUTES IN RESPONSE TO FLEET MOVEMENTS. PREP FOR UNWANTED COMPANY.

—Signal received at Fleet Ops. Passed to MILINT N-11 Captain Ordo and acknowledged. Vessels responding now: Fearless, Majestic, and impounded enemy shuttle. Advised to assume extraction may be opposed.

367 days after Geonosis

It was cold and pitch-black in the cockpit, but it certainly beat being dead.

Fi kept his suit temperature at the bare minimum to conserve power. He flicked on his spot-lamp briefly and checked the trussed and shivering suspects who were lying against the deck: a human, and—disturbingly—two Nikto. Fi had only seen Nikto in obscure databases devoted to identifying the best part of their anatomy to aim at to stop them dead. They were tough. Intel said they could defeat Jedi. They were even rumored to have a weapon that could deflect and destroy a lightsaber blade. Maybe Jedi needed to tool up with PEP lasers, then.

And all the prisoners had tested positive for explosives residue when Darman had run his sensor over them. With the intel and the heavily encrypted data on their 'pads, the three looked like being dead to rights, as Skirata would say. But it was a long way from being satisfied that they'd snatched the right people to actually extracting useful information from them.

Fi took his thermal plastifoil survival blanket from his backpack and folded it carefully over the human, who seemed to be more affected by cold than the Nikto. Losing a suspect to hypothermia after going to all this trouble to grab them wasn't an option. Wrapping a body wasn't an easy maneuver in zero-g, but at least he'd stopped feeling sick.

The ultralight plastifoil kept drilling away every time the man shuddered. Fi sighed and took out his universal solution to any problem, a roll of thick adhesive tape, and hooked his leg around a handrail to stop himself floating while he tore off lengths. He taped the blanket to the suspect. Then he se-cured the trussed suspects to the deck with more of the tape. It was amazing how handy tape could be.

"And don't ask me to tuck you in and read you a story." The human just stared balefully at him. He had a lovely black eye now from resisting Darman a little too vigorously. "They never have happy endings."

The man's ID said Farr Orjul but nobody took that too se-riously. He was about thirty: fine blond hair, sharp features, very pale blue eyes. The Nikto claimed to be M'truli and Gysk, or at least their mining licenses did, because none of the suspects was talking.

SOPs—standard operating procedures—said they had to stop prisoners from talking to each other before processing. But SOPs hadn't allowed for the little complication of run-ning out of air before an interrogator could be found.

Niner turned his head slightly to Orjul. "You can talk to us. Or you can wait until Sergeant Vau sits you down with a nice cup of caf and asks you to tell him your life story. He's a good listener. And you'll really want to talk to him."

There was no response. Apart from the brief curses and grunts of pain they'd emitted when Omega stormed the cock-pit and subdued them—Fi loved military understatement— none of the suspects had said a single word, not even name, rank, or serial number. And, of course, the two who were dry-frozen somewhere in the vacuum of space weren't going to provide many answers of their own free will, either.

"Look, shall I try to get some information out of these gentlemen just in case the taxi doesn't get here before our air runs out?" Fi asked.

"We're not trained to interrogate prisoners," said Niner.

Fi maneuvered himself above the human. He didn't know what Nikto felt or feared, and suspected that it wasn't much, but he knew plenty about his own species' vulnerabilities. "I could improvise."

"No, you'll bounce off the bulkheads, expend too much oxygen, and then we'll have to slot them to preserve the sup-ply for us. It can wait. Vau isn't going anywhere, and neither are they."

Niner was reclining in the pilot's chair, restraining belt buckled and staring straight ahead. The blue-lit T of his visor was reflected in the transparisteel viewscreen, making him look wonderfully droid-like. Fi wasn't sure if Niner was simply saying coldly brutal things to intimidate the prisoners or not. Fi wasn't entirely sure whether he was really joking some of the time.

War was nothing personal. But somehow Fi felt differently about people who didn't carry a rifle and who didn't kill in honest combat. They were an invisible enemy. Fierfek, even droids stood up where you could see them.

He put it out of his mind with a conscious effort, and not only because Ordo had insisted on undamaged prisoners. He knew how to kill, and he knew how to resist pain, but he wasn't sure how to inflict it deliberately.

But he was pretty sure that Vau did. He'd leave the job to him.

Darman had positioned himself against the bulkhead with his legs stretched out. He looked asleep. Arms folded, head lowered, his point-of-view icon in Fi's HUD showed only an image of his belt and lap. Dar could sleep anywhere, anytime. At one point he flinched, as if someone had said something to him, but there was nothing audible on the comlink.

Atin, belted in to the copilot's seat, worked on the assortment of datapads, datasticks, and sheets of flimsi that he'd taken from the suspects—dead and alive—and prodded probes into dataports, doing what he seemed to enjoy best: slicing, hacking, and generally dismantling things. Niner occasionally reached out to grab any of his prizes that floated free.

Fi propelled himself forward with a gentle push against the deck and offered his roll of tape. Atin managed a smile and trapped the wayward components on the sticky side, se-curing the other end on Niner's left forearm plate.

"Fi, you know I don't mean it, don't you?" Niner said sud-denly. "When I get on your back about stuff. I'm just venting steam."

It took Fi aback. "Sarge, I think the first thing you ever did was to tear me off a strip, and we're still brothers, aren't we? You're just like Sergeant Kal. He never meant any of it, ei-ther."

"Did you see the state of him on the hololink?"

"He looked pretty exhausted."

"Poor Buir He never stops worrying."

Fi paused. It was the first time he'd ever heard Niner use the word buir openly: father. Fi preferred to see everyone burying their fears in wisecracks. This was all too raw.

We could be dead in two hours. Well, we've been there a few times before .. .

He shrugged, desperately seeking the other part of him that always had the smart answer ready. "I don't know about you, vode, but I'm planning on getting back to base because Ogrim still owes me a drink."

"And your free warra nuts." So Darman wasn't asleep, then. "Fierfek, I keep getting this weird feeling like some-one's here next to me."

"It's me, Dar. But don't ask me to hold you hand."

“Di’kut.” He unfolded his arms slowly and turned to Atin. “At’ika, if you can’t decrypt that data, why not just try to send the whole memory back down the hololink as is?”

“That’s what I’m doing,” Atin said without looking up. The only light in the compartment now was the blue glow from their helmets. Fi noted that Atin had his night-vision filter in place to see the small ports on the datapads. “You’re right. I can’t crack the encryption here, but I can dump the data down the link now and let Ordo play with it if I can override the anti-tampering. Otherwise it’ll just delete everything on here. Ten minutes, maybe? I’m not letting this beat me.”

Niner eased himself out of the seat and gave Atin a pat on the shoulder as he floated past him. “I’m going to keep the hololink open. Time to update Fleet on our rate of drift anyway.”

They had nothing to say at the moment. And the link was a power drain that they might regret later if things didn’t pan out quite as they were hoping.

But Fi understood. Kal Skirata would be going crazy not being able to keep an eye on them at a time like this. It was what he always, always said when things got tough: I’m here, son. He felt he had to be there for them. And he always had been.

Buir was exactly the right word. Fi had no idea how he had managed to keep faith with more than a hundred commandos.

The link flared into blue light again. Ordo appeared, in full armor and looking away from the cam. He must have been at Fleet HQ, then, to be working with his helmet on like that, and the holo unit must have been placed in his desk.

“Omega here,” Niner said. “Captain, mind if we keep the link open until further notice?”

Ordo looked around, and Skirata’s voice cut in from outside the video pickup’s field: “I’d kick your shebs if you didn’t, ad’ike. You okay?”

"Bored, Sarge," Said Fi.

"Well, you won't be bored much longer. Majestic and Fearless are on their way, ETA under two hours—"

"Good old ma'am," Niner said.

"—but you'll probably have help sooner, because Delta Squad are in transit."

"Oh, we'll never hear the last of this . . ."

"You haven't met them yet, son."

"Heard enough."

"Rough, rude boys," Fi said. "And rather full of them-selves."

"Yes, but they have oxygen, a functioning drive, and they're just gagging to get to you first. So play nicely with them." Skirata moved into the hololink's visual range and sat down on Ordo's desk, swinging one leg, his injured one. He looked the way he always looked on training exercises: grim, focused, and constantly chewing something. "Oh, and don't open fire. They're driving a Sep ship."

"How did they get hold of that? Not that the cannon on this crate is working now anyway."

"Well, I don't think the Sep pilot was keen to part with it, but maybe they promised that they'd bring it back when they were finished."

Fi cut in again. "Anyone looking for Sicko, Sarge? Our TIV pilot?"

"Yes. We'll keep you posted." Skirata glanced at Ordo as if he'd said something. "Atin, son, you know Vau's back, don't you?"

Atin paused for a second and then carried on tapping a probe on the entrails of a dismantled datapad. He nodded to himself. "Yes, Sarge. I noted that."

"You're coming back to Brigade HQ when we get you out of there, but you steer clear of him, okay? You hear me?"

Fi was riveted. Atin had never said a word about Vau, other than that he was hard, but his reactions were telling.

He didn't even look toward the holoimage. "I promise, Sarge. Don't worry."

"I'll be around to make sure, too."

Atin inhaled audibly, a sign that usually meant he was either exasperated or burying his anger. Fi thought better of asking which.

Niner detached the holo emitter and pickup from his fore-arm plate, unlatched the small disc from inside the wrist section and stuck it on the flat shelf that ran along the freighter's console with a rolled-up piece of tape. The holoimage of Ordo and Skirata was silent, as was Omega. There was nothing more to discuss. Just having that visual link was enough to comfort everyone.

It was a long, silent half hour. Maybe Darman slept and maybe he didn't, but Fi suspected he was just thinking. Atin's ten-minute estimate had stretched somewhat but he plowed on, head down, completely focused. Atin was exactly what he was. Not "stubborn," as Basic translated the word, a negative refusal to change; but atin in the Mando 'a sense—courageously persistent, tenacious, the hallmark of a man who would never give up or give in.

Eventually he let out a breath. "Sorted." He leaned forward to connect the dataport to the

hololink. "Downloading now. Plus Dar's explosives profiling and some images of the prisoners. Sorry we didn't get pictures of the dead ones, but they wouldn't look too cute now anyway. All yours, Captain."

"That's my boy," Skirata said.

Well, he was now. He wasn't Vau's batch any longer. They all settled back and relaxed as best they could. Fi could hear it in his helmet. They were breathing in unison now, slow and shallow.

Ordo disappeared from the holoimage, no doubt to take the prized data somewhere else to crack it. Skirata simply stayed where he was, occasionally turning to check a screen behind him.

After an hour he spoke again. "Update position and in-tended movement, Omega. Fearless on station in forty-three minutes, Majestic fifty-nine . . . Delta thirty-five."

"They're so competitive and macho," Fi said. "We're going to have to teach them how to relax."

There was a brief snort of amusement from Darman's audio and then everyone was silent again. The three prisoners shifted from time to time: the human Farr Orjul was shuddering uncontrollably in the cold despite being wrapped like a roasting joint of nerf in all four of the squad's emer-gency plastifoil blankets. Condensation was forming on the bulkhead next to Fi and he ran his gloved fingertip across it, making the moisture bead and run.

It was just as well that the vessel's electrical power was down. It would be shorting out by now.

And just when things were going so well—all things con-sidered—Skirata jumped upright from the desk and rushed out of camshot. When he came back seconds later it was clear something had gone osik'la, as he always put it—badly wrong.

"Omega, you've got company. There's a Sep vessel on an intercept course with you, unidentified but armed and going fast. Have you any power at all you can divert to cannon? Are you certain it's offline?"

Niner swallowed hard. The problem with a shared helmet comlink was that you heard your brother's every reaction, even the ones you really didn't want to. It was one reason why they checked each other's biosign readouts only when they had to.

"We blew all the power relays to trigger the emergency bulkheads, Sarge. It's dead."

Skirata paused for a heartbeat. "Their ETA at that speed is thirty-five minutes. Ad'ike, I'm sorry—"

"It's okay, Sarge," Niner said. He sounded flat calm now. "Just tell Delta not to stop for caf, okay?"

Fi's adrenaline flooded his mouth with a familiar tingling sensation, and a great cold wash of ice flowed into his leg muscles.

You couldn't defend yourself against cannon with a DC-17, not in a sealed and crippled section of a slowly drifting ship. Fi hadn't found himself helpless for a long time. He knew he wasn't going to handle it well.

Darman looked up suddenly. He hadn't reacted at all to the grim news until then. He turned to face Fi, just a ghostly blue T-shaped light on the other side of the cockpit.

"I don't want to throw any more cold water on this party," he said. "But has anyone thought through the logical se-quence of this extraction? Because I bet Delta has . . ."

RAS Fearless, time to target: twenty minutes

Commander Gett leaned over the ops room trooper, the one he called Peewo.

It had taken Etain a while to realize that he called all the men who took watches at that console Peewo; it was simply an acronym for "principal weapons officer." The man's name was actually Tenn.

Tenn's face was blank with total concentration, thrown into sharp relief by the yellow light from the screens in front of him.

"There it is," he said.

The Separatist ship—appearing on the tracking screen as a visibly shifting red pulse—was now within their scanning range. Omega's wasn't, although Tenn had programmed in a blue marker that corresponded with their last position and projected drift

"How many minutes are we still behind them?" Etain asked.

If Tenn didn't like having a commander and a general breathing down his neck, he showed no sign of it. Etain admired his ability to ignore distractions, even without a little Force help from her. He didn't seem to need it. "Five, maybe four if the velocities hold constant."

"Now, what's that?" Gett said.

A smaller target had appeared on the screen, first red, then blue, then flashing red with a cursor saying UNCONFIRMED.

"Sep drive profile, but the scan is probably detecting a GAR encrypted transponder," Tenn said. "I think we can guess who's in the driver's seat there."

"Wasn't Delta carrying out a rummage of Prosecutor?" Gett asked.

"I gather they had expected visitors."

"Doesn't Delta file full contact reports?" Etain interrupted.

"No more detail than they have to, I understand," Gett said. "Silent ops. I think they get out of the habit of talking to the regular forces side of things. Perhaps General Jusik might have a word with them."

Delta, like Omega, was part of Jusik's battalion, Zero Five Commando, which was one of ten in the Special Operations Brigade commanded by Etain's former Master, Arligan Zey. A year before, there had been two brigades; casualties had slashed their strength in half.

And like all the commando squads, Delta was utterly self-reliant and operated largely without command, merely receiving intelligence support and a broad objective. It was the kind of command that was ideal for a very smart but inexperienced general. And there was no other way for one Jedi to run five hundred special forces men: clones led clones, as they did in the regular GAR. So Delta did more or less as they pleased within the overall battle plan. Fortunately, it seemed to please them to be blisteringly efficient, a quality Etain noted and respected in every clone soldier she met.

"Get me a link to them, Commander," she said. "I need to talk to them. As do you, I have no idea how they're going to play this."

Gett just raised his eyebrows and turned to the signals officer to request a secure link via Fleet. It took thirty seconds. They were eighteen minutes to target. Time was running out. Tenn moved his seat a little so Gett could place the hololink transmitter on the console where they could see both the link and the tracking screen.

"Delta, this is General Tur-Mukan, Fearless."

The image that shimmered before her showed one man in a familiar suit of Katarn armor, squatting with a DC-17 across his thighs. The blue light distorted natural color, but the dark patches on his armor suggested red or orange identity markings.

"RC-one-one-three-eight, General, receiving."

It was time for names. "You're Boss."

"Yes, General, Boss. Our ETA is fourteen to fifteen min-utes."

"You don't have any armament, do you?"

"No, and we're aware that there's another Sep ship right up our shebs that does." Boss appeared to check himself. "Apologies for the language, General. But you're the ones carrying the cannon."

"Boss, how do you plan to execute this?"

"Get there first, get them out fast, and bug out even faster. That usually works pretty well."

She bristled, but she knew that wasn't fair to him. "Could you be more specific?"

"Okay, we get alongside, access the cockpit, seal against vacuum, and extract personnel."

"Access means a big bang, yes?"

"No. Scorch would usually love that, but this is a cutting job if you want those prisoners alive because that'll mean an instant decompression. If you don't want them alive, then that's easier. Omega has enough air, so their suits are still good for another twenty minutes in vacuum. In that case we just blow the cockpit viewscreen and haul them out."

Boss had his helmet cocked slightly to one side as if he was asking her to make a command decision. He was.

It was the mission objective versus Omega's safety.

And that's what command is all about. Etain suspected this was where she finally stopped playing at being a general.

Omega didn't have to survive, but a few terrorists who might hold the key to a wider terror network did. Accessing the cockpit carefully with cutting equipment would take more time, time that might mean the Sep ship arrived before Omega was safe and clear.

Her personal choice was immediate. But she wavered over the professional one. She was aware of Gett glancing at her and then looking down at something of overwhelming interest on the deck.

Boss showed unusual diplomacy for a squad that had a name for being unsubtle. He wasn't blind. He could see her as well as she could see him, and he probably saw a child out of her depth.

"General, I've spoken to Niner," he said. "He's clear. They're all clear. This is as close as we've come to grabbing some key players for a long, long time, and it probably cost their pilot his life as well. We have to make prisoner retrieval the priority. We all know the game by now. It's a risk for us, too. We might all get vaped."

"I know you're correct," Etain said. "But none of you is expendable as far as I'm concerned. And I know you'll do everything you can to get them out alive."

"General, is that an order, and if so, what is it? Extract Omega and abandon the prisoners? Or what?"

She felt her stomach fall. It was relatively easy to be the commander who held a trooper as he was dying. It was much, much harder to stand there and say Yes, rescue three terrorists and let my friends die—let Darman die—if that's what it takes.

Had they asked Skirata? What did he say?

Gett touched her arm and indicated the tracking screen. He held up three fingers. Three minutes behind the Sep ves-sel now. They were gaining on them.

"Extract the prisoners," Etain said. It was out of her mouth before she could think further. "And we'll be right behind you."

Unnamed commercial freighter, drifting three thousand klicks Core-side of Perlemian node: Red Zero first responder ETA six minutes

Fi studied his datapad and considered his brief and busy one-year career as an elite commando.

He'd fought at Geonosis. He'd taken out a Sep research base, nearly slotted his beloved Sergeant Kal, and ended the careers of eighty-five assorted Seps and more droids than he bothered to count. And he'd denied the CIS an awful lot of assets, from replenishment depots to a capital ship and a fighter squadron that didn't even have the chance to fly its first sortie.

Some of it had been fun, most of it had been a grim hard slog, and all of it had been frightening. And now the cheerful euphemism was over; he was probably going to die. And he didn't want Skirata to witness that.

He looked up from the expired op orders on his datapad and saw that the holoimage of Skirata was still much as it had been for the best part of two hours. Sergeant Kal waited. He wouldn't leave.

Niner continued to stare out the viewscreen.

Then he sat bolt upright, prevented from shooting forward by the restraining belt. Fi checked his viewpoint icon and saw he had activated his electrobinocular visor.

"Visual contact," Niner said quietly. "Fierfek, it really is a Sep crate. Neimoidian."

The whole squad maneuvered so they could see what he was looking at.

"About time," Niner said. Fi listened in. "Delta, Niner here. You been sightseeing?"

"Boss receiving. Sorry, we had to stop and ask for directions." He had a voice very like Atin's but with a stronger accent. "My boys are now going to show you how to do an extraction properly, so take notes because you might blink and miss it. There's a Sep ship with missiles up the spout about three minutes behind us."

"Can we bring some friends?"

"The more the merrier. We're going to align with your cockpit, slap an isolation seal on the viewport, and Scorch will cut through. Then you shift it fast, and we RV with Fearless for caf, cakes, and hero worship. Got it?"

"Copy that."

"I love emotional reunions," Fi said. "And hero worship."

"Boss, that Sep's getting awfully close." Another voice: Fi couldn't identify any of them yet. "This might have to beat the galactic record."

"How close? Close enough to make me mad?"

"They could launch a missile in two minutes and it'd singe your shebs overtaking us."

"Okay. Close. Omega, you heard the man." Boss sounded unperturbed. "Powder your noses and get ready to party."

Fierfek, Fi thought. He rolled carefully to peel Orjul off the deck and haul him upright for a hasty exit with jet-pack assist.

The human prisoner looked straight at him. And he spoke. "You're really not very good at this, are you?"

"Now you decide to get chatty."

"We'll all be charcoal in a few minutes, and that gives me some satisfaction."

"Okay, I'm now really motivated to introduce you to Sergeant Vau."

"Whoa, cut it out," Darman said. One of the Nikto tried to gore him with its short horns as he lifted it ready for escape. "Ungrateful di'kut." He brought his helmet hard down in its face in a perfect head-butt; only the pilot's seat stopped them from being catapulted by the inertia of the impact. Darman looked around at the other Nikto. "Want some?"

"Udesii, boys, udesii." Niner raised his Deece. "Push comes to shove, we only need one of them alive, so next one to look like a safety risk isn't going home. Okay?"

The small Neimoidian assault vessel now filled their field of vision as it came to nestle partly across the freighter's viewscreen. Fi watched, mesmerized. A hatch opened and something distressingly reminiscent of a wide mouthed worm emerged and sucked against the transparisteel. A familiar blue light loomed from the darkness of its maw. Through the plate, Fi saw a helmet very like his and an exaggerated thumbs-up gesture.

"Stand back and watch a pro at work," said a disembodied voice on the comlink.

For a second Fi thought Scorch was attaching a frame charge. Yeah, that's clever, I don't think. But the large ring of alloy pipe sat snugly on the plate and began to glow white-hot. Scorch's thumbs-up became a jerked move away gesture.

"Scorch, sooner rather than later, okay?" Boss's voice said.

"One minute, tops."

"We haven't got a minute—"

"What d'you want me to do, chew through it?"

The transparisteel plate was distorting as the hot frame burned through from the outside. Niner gathered up the hololink and snapped it back on his forearm plate. Atin shoved datapads and tools in his belt.

"Tell you what, shall we just float here and panic incoherently while we're waiting?" Fi said.

"Good idea," Scorch said, unmoved.

"Very good idea, panicking," Boss said. "Guess what I just eyeballed from the port-side screen .

RAS Fearless, ops room, ETA to target: two minutes

The assault ship had to decelerate to drop from hyper-space and open fire. It cost critical time. Etain watched while Tenn made rapid calculations to see if they could find that single critical firing solution that balanced losing speed with firing missiles and would not only make up those seconds, but also take

out the Sep ship before it had a chance to target Omega.

The ops room was crowded with white armor and yet utterly silent as Fearless's crew watched the tracking screen re-peater on the bulkhead. It mirrored what Tenn, Gett, and Etain could see in smaller format at the PWO's station.

Tenn didn't seem to have blinked in the last three minutes.

"Firing solution, General." His hand rested on the firing key, his gaze welded to the screen. "Target acquired. Best solution we're going to get and our window is ten seconds or we'll take out Omega and Delta, too. Now, General?"

Etain glanced at Gett, her mind partly sensing the ripples in the Force. And the Force agreed with Tenn, to the very second.

"Take it, Tenn. "

"Yes, ma'am." The key made a small snipping noise as he depressed it. "Fire one, fire two. Missiles away—" Two huge trails of savage energy sped away from the decelerating assault ship and into the void. Etain could feel too much imminent disaster in the Force: she didn't want to watch it as well. She cupped her hands over her nose and shut her eyes for a second, and then made herself look back at the screen.

The tracking screen followed the missiles as steady white lines. They looked as if they had overlapped the pulsing red point of light that was the Separatist fighter. All the traces winked out of existence at the same time.

"Splash one," said a trooper at another station. "Visual confirmation. Target destroyed."

"And who else?" Commander Gett asked.

"Whoaaaa .. !"

Fi wasn't certain if it was his own cry of shock or Scorch's voice in his comlink, but he saw the ball of white-and-gold flame expanding toward them, silhouetting the section of Neimie ship that partly obscured the shield, and he ducked instinctively.

A hailstorm of debris rained on the screen. Something large and metallic skidded along the casing of the freighter with a long dull screech. Fi straightened up as the hammer-ing faded to the occasional rattle, like stones being tossed onto a roof. Then it stopped completely.

"Fierfek," Scorch said. "Now, if they'd only added a spot of maranium to the warhead, it would have burned a really pretty purple."

"Fearless Fearless Fearless calling Delta. Are you clear, repeat, are you clear, respond."

A large rectangle of hot softened glass peeled slowly away from the screen, helped by Scorch's fist, and drifted off serenely into a silent, slow-motion collision with the head-rest of the pilot's seat.

"Delta here, Fearless. Just extracting Omega and cargo now."

Fi fought to stop himself from sounding breathless and shaky. It would let the squad down. "I'm glad the navy's here," he said. "Because if it had been down to you, Greased Lightning, we'd be an asteroid belt by now."

Scorch's visor poked through the aperture at last, followed by his arm, and he made an unmistakable gesture of displea-sure.

Fi felt his mouth take over, fueled by shock. "My hero! You finally made it!"

"You want to walk back to base?"

Niner lifted the plastifoil-wrapped Orjul with one hand and lined him up with the opening. "Fi's going to give his mouth a nice rest now and help me cross-deck the garbage."

"Gift-wrapped? Aww, you shouldn't have." Scorch hauled himself a little farther down the access tube and hung motionless at 135 degrees, assessing the three bound prisoners. "Feet first, please. Then if the di'kut tries to kick out I can break his legs. Don't want this tubing breached."

It proved harder than expected. But by the time the second Nikto had been rammed up into the connecting tube like a torpedo, the warm air from the hijacked Neimoidian vessel had worked its way into the freighter cockpit and made Fi feel a lot more comfortable. He stood back to let Atin then Darman make their way up the tube.

Scorch hauled Darman inboard by his webbing. Fi waited for his boots to disappear and then rolled to peer up the aperture into a circle of dim light.

"Next!"

Fi lined up and then pushed off with one boot. As he passed through the open hatch at the other end, he felt artificial gravity seize him, and he rolled onto the deck with a clatter of armor plates. It took him a few seconds to get to his feet. Niner collided with him from behind. It wasn't a very big ship.

Boss—his armor daubed with chipped and peeling orange paint—slammed the hatch behind Niner and sealed it. Niner stared at him as if he wasn't sure what should happen next and then the two men simply shook hands and slapped each other on the back.

"Like what we've done with the place?" Boss said, taking off his helmet. The flight deck looked as if someone had been dismantling it the hard way: panels had been ripped out, wires hung from the deckhead, and there were empty slots in the console where units had either been removed or not installed in the first place. "Okay, perhaps it's a little basic, but we call it home."

"You nicked this?"

"No, they let us take it on a test drive." Boss gestured at the rest of his brightly painted squad. "Fixer, Sev, and you al-ready know Scorch. Say hello to the boys in boring black."

"Thanks, vode," Fi said. He wondered why Atin wasn't joining in; he had turned away and seemed to be taking a technical interest in a run of conduit. "Any word on Sicko?"

"If that's your pilot, Majestic's been diverted now. They picked up his beacon and that's all we know." Boss looked down at the three prisoners, lined up on the deck like corpses. He gave each of them a nudge with his boot. "You'd better be worth everyone's effort."

Fi eased off his helmet and inhaled almost fresh air. Ex-cept for Scorch, they had all taken off their helmets. Delta was one of fewer than a dozen squads that had survived in-tact since decanting, a true pod as the Kaminoans had called it, and they seemed to think that made them an elite within an elite. They had been raised and trained together, and they had never fought with anyone but their brothers. It was a lux-ury few squads now enjoyed.

Fi suspected it meant they didn't play well with others. He remembered only too well how ferociously competitive and inward looking his own pod had been, and how badly his confidence had been dented when he lost his brothers at Geonosis and was then dumped in Niner's care.

"You do okay for a mongrel squad," Sev said, and Fi chose not to react. He knew he was on autopilot now and that he should shut up. Niner's glance helped him decide. "I don't suppose you did a rummage on that ship, did you?"

"Not with a rapid decompression on our hands, no," said Niner. "Word was that it was carrying explosives."

"Okay, we're going to be coated in Seps anytime now, so let's get this crate into Fearless's hangar and then they can blow the freighter. If there's anything useful in it, at least the Seps don't get it."

Darman slid down a bulkhead onto the deck, and Niner sat down beside him. They were nearly back aboard Fearless, and that meant they were nearly home, and home meant Arca Company Barracks and—at last—a good night's sleep after two months on patrol. Fi never got enough. None of them ever did. And fatigue could make you dangerously careless.

"So, Atin . . .," Sev said. He wandered up behind Atin and stood close enough to be annoying. Atin didn't turn around. "Sargent Vau asked to see you again, vod 'ika."

"I'm not your little brother," Atin said quietly. He kept his back to Sev. "I just work with you."

Ah, so there was some history between those two. Fi bris-tled: he rallied to his adopted brother. He could see that the prospect of actually meeting Vau again was stoking some-thing inside that wasn't typically Atin.

Sev didn't let up. "I don't forget, you know."

This time Atin did wheel around, face-to-face with Sev, so close that Fi thought his placid brother was actually going to lose it for once. He prepared to intervene.

"It's my business," Atin said. "Stay out of it."

Sev stared into his face. "And disagreements stay inside the company."

Atin hooked his fingers in the neck of his bodysuit and yanked it down to the left as far as the edge of the armor, ex-posing his collarbone. He had a lot of raised white scars. No-body took much notice of them because injuries in training and combat were so common that they rarely drew comment. "You got worse than that, did you? You spent a week in bacta, did you?"

Atin looked about to snap, and Fi stepped forward to inter-vene. Then Niner was across the cabin in three strides and slammed in between the two men. He had to break them up by putting his arms between them and knocking them apart with his arm plates. But Sev's unblinking gaze was still fixed on Atin as if Niner weren't there.

"I think we all need to reach a comradely understanding," Niner said, blocking Sev with his body. "Back at the bar-racks, if that's okay with you, ner vod."

Sev looked murderous. His eyes were still fixed on Atin's. "Anytime, vod'ika."

"Okay, you two can shut it now. And you, Fi. Stand down. We've all had a bad day, so let's throttle back on the testos-terone and play nicely."

Sev held his hands away from his sides in a gesture of reluctant submission and went to sit beside Scorch in the cockpit. Boss didn't say a word, but Niner grabbed Fi and Atin by their shoulders and shoved them farther away.

"You're going to tell me what that's all about."

"No, I'm not, Sarge. It's personal."

"There's no personal where this squad is concerned. Later, okay? I'm not having you brawling like a pair of civvies. If there's a needle match between you two, we all sort it together. Got it?"

"Yes, Sarge."

Niner emphasized his warning with a prod in Atin's chest and moved back to stand with Boss while Scorch brought the vessel alongside Fearless and began negotiating with the flight deck controller on how they might make space in the hangar for it. Fi waited with Atin in case he decided to re-sume his little chat with Sev. He had never seen Atin flare up even under the most extreme pressure, but he seemed ready to swing at anyone now. And even a brain-dead Weequay could have spotted that it had something to do with Vau.

"At'ika, you want to tell me about it sometime?"

"Not really." Atin patted Fi on the shoulder. "I have to deal with it myself sooner or later."

Fi glanced at Sev and got a blank stare that wasn't even hostility, just an absence of anything comradely. It wasn't going to be a bundle of laughs if they ever had to work to-gether again.

Fi hadn't thought he would get on with Niner on first meeting, either. But there had never been anything about Niner that had made Fi want to punch him in the face and get it over with, just to save time.

It was going to happen, sooner or later. Fi knew it.

He'd never had a disagreement, let alone a fight, with a brother before. It made him uneasy. He distracted himself with dreams of a hot shower, hot food, and the luxury of five hours' unbroken sleep.

5

To: Officer Commanding SO BCE, HQ Coruscant: CO Fleet Protection Group.

From: CO Majestic, off Kelarea: 367 days after Geonosis.

I regret to inform you that we have recovered the wreckage of TIV Z590/1 and the body of pilot CT-1127/549. Perlemian Traffic Control reports that Republic civilian freighter Nova Crystal logged that it fired on a vessel it described as a "pirate" attacking its convoy to dis-lodge it from the hull. I also regret that due to security restrictions, I am unable to tell PTC that-the freighter killed a special forces pilot on active service, and so PTC regard Nova Crystal 's skipper to be some-thing of a hero.

Fleet Ops HQ, Coruscant, 0600, 368 days after Geonosis: the first anniversary of the battle

Skirata walked out of the Fleet Ops lobby and into a cool, moist morning that he wasn't expecting to welcome.

It was over, for the time being. Omega had survived, and they were coming home. They needed a break from continuous deployment in the badlands and he was certain they were needed here. CSF couldn't handle a big terror operation in the capital system, not even with Obrim around.

The question was how to work that past Arligan Zey. The Jedi was reluctant to commit men to what he saw as security work at a time like this.

But it was what Ordo and the Nulls were ideally suited for—if they had a few commandos to deploy as well.

Skirata stood on the steps for a few minutes inhaling fresh air, eyes stinging from fatigue, and raked his fingers through his crew cut. He could sleep now. Omega was safe; Ordo was here with him; and his five brothers were accounted for, safe and well.

Mereel was on Kamino. If Zey was heard to mutter that the Nulls were Skirata's private army, he wasn't entirely wrong.

There were still ninety of the men Skirata had trained from small boys on active service, and he worried about them, too. But Omega had become as much his closest family now as the Null ARCs. He would move the galaxy for them if he had to.

The gold-veined marble fountain in the center of the plaza beckoned to him. He stopped as he walked past it and simply leaned over and plunged his head in the icy water, holding it there for a few painfully refreshing moments before jerking upright and shaking the water off like a mott.

A couple of early-morning pedestrians stared at him and he returned the stare until they looked

away. It was rare for anyone to even notice him: he made a habit of being incon-spicious. But today he didn't care. Did they have any idea what was going on around the galaxy on hundreds of battle-fields? He resisted the urge to grab them, shake them, and make them listen to what was happening in their name.

It was the first anniversary of Geonosis. Nobody seemed to be marking that.

Ordo walked up behind him. "You should get some rest, Kal 'buir"

"I'll sleep when you sleep."

"I have more good news."

"I could do with that."

"Darman's explosives profile. The reading from the pris-oners matches up with the manufacturing characteristics of at least a quarter of the devices detonated so far. We got a break."

"Good work. And good old Dar." He smiled at Ordo, re-minded again of how well his boys had turned out. "Tell you what, Ord 'ika, fancy some breakfast while the system gets on with unpacking that data? They do a disgustingly greasy fry-up in the Kragget. It's not the Skysitter, but it sets you up for the day."

Ordo shrugged and tilted his head in a conspicuously self-conscious glance down at his spotless white armor. "I don't think we're the Skysitter's type of clientele, anyway."

Skirata couldn't see the expression behind the visor, but he knew Ordo was amused. It was good that a man who'd had an unimaginable nightmare of a childhood could find anything funny. "They have napkins. And I'll try not to splash sauce over you. Deal? Just to celebrate the fact that we're both still here a year on."

Ordo started walking. "What were you doing a year ago today?"

"Wondering where all my boys had gone."

"Sorry, Kal'buir. It was a very rapid deployment. I should have woken you."

"You did fine. I should have shaped up and realized you had a job to do."

"We certainly accounted for a number of enemy posi -tions," Ordo said.

"I never said good-bye to the lads who didn't come back, that's all. I lost nine out of my batch."

"But the last time you saw them, you left them feeling confident, respected, and loved. That's enough for any buir to achieve."

"Thanks, son." How did he ever grow up this normal? "Let's enjoy ourselves for a change, shall we?"

For a few brief hours Skirata and Ordo did what normal civilians did and took an Easy Ride to the city's lower levels to have a dangerously unhealthy but comforting breakfast.

Skirata had never used public transport with Ordo in tow before, and the reactions of other passengers fascinated him. They sneaked sideways glances. Ordo's custom holster with its twin blasters probably focused them somewhat. The ARC trooper armor was spectacular even in a city jaded by the everyday presence of a thousand exotic species.

Skirata regularly forgot how few of the capital's civilians had ever seen a clone soldier face-to-face. Apart from the heavily publicized display of massed GAR battalions board-ing assault ships at the military staging area a year ago, the vast majority of Coruscanti had no contact with them what-soever.

And never without their helmets.

"Ord 'ika," he whispered. "Do me a favor. Take off your bucket, will you?"

Ordo paused for a moment and then popped the seal on his collar and lifted off his helmet. Skirata kept an eye on the other passengers' reactions. It was a revelation. Some looked blankly surprised. Others went a little farther.

"Oh no, they're human!" one man whispered. "And they're so young!"

Did anyone know how young? He hated using Ordo like this, but it had to be done. Skirata, tired and permanently ir-ritable, bit back his retort and became a diplomat for a few moments.

"No sir, the war isn't droids fighting droids," he said. "May I introduce Captain Ordo?"

Ordo nodded politely at the man in the seat across the aisle and extended his hand; Skirata had taught his little Nulls to act like nice boys when they needed to. The man hesitated and then reached across to shake Ordo's hand, surrendering soft pale civilian fingers to a black gauntlet. The look on his face said clearly that he hadn't expected to find flesh and blood inside the droid-like shell, or to retrieve his hand un-crushed afterward.

"My pleasure, sir," Ordo said.

It was unusually quiet in the EasyRide after that. At least the reality had registered on them. Skirata nudged Ordo to get off when they reached the Kragget level, and the ARC re-placed his helmet.

"You like to shock," said Ordo.

"I like to educate," said Skirata. "Sorry, son."

Strolling around Coruscant with a fully armored ARC captain was hardly blending in, but it got him a good table in the Kragget, which meant one that the service droid actually wiped clean before they sat down. A couple of CFS officers acknowledged them. Police and security officers liked eating here because it was right on the edge of their "manor," as some of them called the rough territory where they plied their trade, handy for a quick response to a call but far enough away to be a haven.

Ordo took his helmet off again to tuck into the plate of fried smoked nerf slices. The eggs were from something Skirata couldn't identify and knew he didn't want to. He concentrated on the seductively unctuous sensation of hot fat and salty yolk in his mouth and washed it down with several cups of caf.

"We can't leave this to the boys in blue any longer," Skirata said. They both knew what this was without being specific in a public place. "They're hampered by having to do stuff by the book, and we don't know if they're all playing for our team anyway. This is one for us. I'm going to make Zey see sense about it. Once everyone's back in town, it'll be a lot harder for him to say no."

"If the cryptography droid extracts some relevant data from Atin's little haul, it might be even harder."

"Which reminds me. I haven't paid my respects to Vau."

"Promise me you won't pull your knife on him again."

"I'll behave."

The server droid seemed to have been replaced by a fe-male Twi'lek waitress, who looked past prime dancing age but who still distracted Skirata for a second or two. She put another plate of nerf strips in front of Ordo, who—like every clone soldier Skirata had ever known—would eat anything and everything put in front of him.

She smiled and lingered. Ordo froze and returned the smile in the nervous way of a small boy, then busied himself with his breakfast and the waitress moved away.

Skirata reflected on the careless power of youth and looks, and how incomplete a teacher he had been of social skills. "Somehow I don't think she's mistaken you for a droid." Ordo looked uncharacteristically flustered for a moment.

"Er . . . I've been assessing our requirements." He cleared his plate again, and Skirata slid his unwanted eggs onto the man's plate and watched them disappear. "Kit is an issue. We need to discuss this before you see Zey. This is going to take some serious resources—vehicles, safe houses, special sur-veillance equipment, and ordnance?"

Skirata had been doing the calculations at the same time Ordo had.

They'd need two squads, at least, and a couple of Nulls. But two squads of Republic Commandos in their distinctively bulky, bad-boy Katarn Mark III kit and Ordo and Mereel in their spectacular red and blue would be noticeable as unusual activity.

They might need to wear that armor sooner or later, even if they could be deployed in civilian clothing the rest of the time.

Skirata chewed the last overdone piece of smoked nerf - he saved the delectable crunchy bits for last—and a solution blossomed as his jaw worked.

Hide in plain sight.

He was good at that. He could become so mundane—unkempt hair, scruffy clothing—that he was almost invisible. And so could his lads, by being the opposite.

All they had to do was be one of a number of clone personnel wandering around Coruscant in full armor. And if occasionally they took off that armor and went about in fatigues, then who would really recognize them as individuals?

They all looked the same to most people, other than a few Jedi who cared about them as men, and their own brothers.

Skirata considered it a very productive working breakfast.

He opened his comlink and keyed a meeting request to General Zey. Then he leaned across the table, seized Ordo two-handed by his shoulder pauldron, and gave him a noisy and exaggerated paternal kiss on the top of his head.

"Sorted!" he said. "Plain sight!"

The Twi'lek waitress watched, fascinated. "Hey, can I try that, too?"

"He's just a boy," Skirata said, and left her a very generous tip. Ordo got up to follow him, pocketing a couple of meal-bread sticks for later. "My son."

RAS Fearless hangar deck

"Good grief, here comes the armored division," said Com-mander Gett. He strode toward the Neimoidian vessel. Its casing was streaked and pocked with scorch marks. "RCs look like tanks, don't they?"

Republic Commandos did look fearsomely bulky along-side the clone troopers. The first four to clamber out of the seized Trade Federation craft were a riot of color, their battered armor daubed with green, yellow, red, and orange markings.

The second squad was armored in matte black, utterly featureless and grim. But Etain knew instantly who they were and which man was which. She needed no battle livery to distinguish them: their forms in the Force were almost like trails of phosphorescence in a tropical ocean, and they were instantly familiar, instantly old friends.

I was only with them for a few days and I haven't seen or talked to them for months. But it's as if we were never apart.

Fi—oh yes, she knew it was Fi even before he spoke—saluted, lifted his helmet, and winked.

"Ma'am, you look like the back end of a bantha," he said sympathetically. "Are they looking after you properly here?"

"Fi!" She knew she was supposed to remain dignified and aloof, and she'd felt comradeship with many clone troopers in the intervening months, but her first reluctant command with Omega had utterly changed her. "Fi, I've really missed you. What happened to the gray armor?"

"You know how much Dar griped about being too visible on Qiilura. Anyway, he's brought you a present." He gestured over his shoulder. Darman was helping a group of troopers haul the prisoners out of the Neimoidian landing craft while

Gett examined it. "They're all in one piece, too. We've been really good boys this time."

Delta Squad had simply disappeared. When Etain looked around, she saw they had settled in a tight knot in a corner of the hangar deck, helmets on, obviously talking intently. She knew the body language now. They didn't feel like Omega in the Force at all. They were a concentrated well, a bottomless pool of something unyielding, and totally enmeshed with each other. The general impression they made on the Force was one of triumphant high spirits.

Niner and Atin approached and clasped hands with her. It didn't feel at all inappropriate. They looked tired and anxious, and she wanted very badly to make things right for them. They were her friends.

"I bet you'd like something to eat," she said.

"Any chance of a hot shower and a few hours' sleep first, please, General?" Niner looked

apologetic and shoved Fi gently in the back. "Me first. I'm pulling rank."

"He's not really a sergeant, General," said Fi. "He just helps them out when they're busy."

"Any news on our pilot?" Niner asked.

"Yes. I'm so sorry."

It was never easy. She tapped her datapad to bring up the copy of the signal that Majestic had sent to Fleet and handed the 'pad to him. Niner glanced at it, blinked, and passed it to Fi. Fi parted his lips briefly as if to say something, and then his slight frown almost crumpled into grief. He composed himself and just looked down at the deck.

"He's not the first," Fi said, suddenly grim, and Etain had never seen that aspect of him surface visibly before. "And he won't be the last."

Etain watched them disappear through a hatch on the aft bulkhead, trailing after a trooper. Fearless shivered slightly under the soles of her boots, making top speed back to Cor-uscant, and she waited while Darman spent what seemed like an interminable time fussing about with the prisoner hand-over. She wondered if he was reluctant to talk after choosing not to remain on Qiilura with her. Perhaps he was just concerned that nothing else went wrong.

She gave up waiting and walked carefully between the troopers still trying to catch some sleep on the hangar deck, curled up wherever they could find a relatively comfortable space.

"Well done," she said, hoping that some were awake to hear her.

Darman had changed.

He bent his head to ease off his helmet, popping the seal, and then shook his hair and smoothed it flat with one glove. And although he smiled, he wasn't the Darman she had been through hell with.

He looked older.

Clones aged faster than normal men. He was eleven going on twenty-two going on—fifty. When she had first sensed him as a child in the Force, his square, high-cheekboned face had been both man and boy, at the stage of life when—had she been able to manipulate time—the slightest push back-ward would have revealed the child he had so recently been. But now he was a man, quite solidly, and with no hint of the boy about him.

It wasn't simply that he had aged two years in one. The look in his eyes said he was much, much older, as old as the battle-field, maybe as old as war itself. She had seen it in the face of every clone trooper and commando and ARC she had com-manded. She knew that she had that same look, too.

But Darman smiled anyway, and the smile broadened into a grin that made the rest of the ship—even the galaxy—utterly irrelevant to her.

"You always cut it fine, don't you, ma'am?"

"It's good to see you, Dar. Whatever happened to Etain?"

"She turned into a general and we're on the hangar deck." "You're right. I'm sorry."

"Is it definitely confirmed that we're going back to base?"

"Unless you want to argue with the officer of the watch, I believe so."

"Good. We need a break. Just a day or two, maybe."

He never did ask for much. None of them did: she won-dered if they didn't know what the world

had to offer them or if they were just honed down to basic needs, too over-whelmed to think beyond recovering enough to do the job over again the next day.

She patted his armored shoulder and held her hand there for a few seconds. He looked as if he suddenly remembered something and was embarrassed by it in a way he quite enjoyed.

"It must be nice to be able to reach out to someone through the Force," he said.

So he'd felt it. She was glad.

"Get yourself off to the 'freshers," she said. "Come and find me afterward if you're not too tired, and I'll show you over the ship."

"Have you met Sergeant Kal yet?"

"No." Kal was always there for Darman, somewhere, even at times like this when she wanted to say so much to him. "When we dock, perhaps you could introduce me."

Darman beamed, clearly delighted. "Oh, you'll like him, General. You'll really like him."

Etain certainly hoped so. And if she didn't, then she'd try, for Darman's sake.

SO Brigade HQ, Coruscant, 369 days after Geonosis

The smell hit Ordo long before he reached the meeting room. It was a familiar blend of wet wool, mold, and a pun-gent oily musk.

Skirata reacted visibly. He straightened his right arm by his side out of old, old habit and let the blade slide into his hand, fall a fraction until the handle touched his palm, and then snatched it.

"Kal 'buir, it would be better if I shot it," Ordo said. He put a restraining hand on Skirata's arm. "I won't let it near you."

"I've often wondered if you're telepathic, son."

"I can smell the strill, you have your knife ready, and we're meeting Sergeant Vau. Telepathy isn't required to work that one out."

Ordo would have been quite content to shoot the strill without a second thought because it upset Kal'buir. But it wasn't the strill's fault that it stank, or that it had a master who cherished cruelty, or that it had become savage itself. It had been selected by nature and then trained by people to hunt for pleasure rather than for food, and nothing else had ever been allowed to cross its mind.

He felt some pity for it. But he would still kill it without a moment's hesitation.

The doors slid back. Ordo placed his right hand discreetly on the grip of one of his repeating blasters. His attention went instinctively to Vau, then to the strill lying on his lap, and then to the fact that he had a clear shot at both. It took less than a second to process the information and then to subdue the impulse.

Behind Vau's head, the walls of General Zey's meeting room were a beautiful soothing shade of aquamarine, but they weren't working. Skirata wasn't soothed.

And Captain Maze was sitting at the table beside Zey, arms folded across his chest and looking none too im-pressed, either. There was an ugly purple bruise at the point of his chin, more discoloration around one eye, and a cut on the bridge of his nose.

I didn't think I hit him that hard, Ordo thought. Unfortu-nate.

Zey motioned Skirata to enter just after the man strode in of his own accord, and indicated chairs at the lapiz-topped table. Bardan Jusik sat beside him, hands clasped on the tabletop in an attempt at serenity.

"Well," Skirata said, and sat down. He ran his hand across the luxurious polished surface. "This is nice. I hope I never hear anyone complaining about the GAR's expenditure on armor and weapons."

"Kal," Vau said politely. "It's good to see you again."

Vau was settled in one of the deeply upholstered hide chairs with the strill draped across his lap on its back, all six of its legs flopping in an undignified sprawl while he scratched its belly. Its huge fanged mouth was slack, tongue lolling, and a long skein of drool hung almost to the floor. Its body was a meter long, lengthened by a whip of a tail covered in more loose skin.

The strill was still prettier than Vau, though. The man had a long square jawed face that was all bone and frown lines, and graying dark hair cut brutally short. Faces rarely lied about the soul within.

"Walon," Skirata said, nodding.

Zey gestured to Ordo to sit but he remained standing and simply removed his helmet. He transferred the bead-sized comlink connector to his ear, noting Zey's expression without looking directly at him.

Skirata looked up. "Take a seat, Captain."

Ordo obeyed only one man's orders, and that man was Kal'buir

Zey was visibly thrown—again. No doubt all other ARCs and commandos jumped when he said so, but he should have known Ordo by now. Maze certainly did. He was staring at his brother ARC as if one snap of Zey's fingers would give him permission to jump up and return that punch.

"Maze, perhaps you'd like to go and have a break;" Zey said. "This is just going to be a tedious administrative mat-ter."

Maze paused for one beat, his eyes never leaving Ordo's. "Yes sir." He grabbed his helmet from the table and left.

Zey waited for the doors to close behind him. "Let's hear your plan, Sergeant."

"I want to deploy Delta and Omega on Coruscant to iden-tify and neutralize the Sep network here, because it is here," said Skirata. "It has to be in order to strike us so easily. And CSF doesn't have the expertise or personnel to deal with this, and there might even be someone inside the CSF passing intel to the terrorists."

Zey's eyes were locked on him. "Commandos are a mili-tary asset. Not an intelligence one. Nor police. We have the-aters of war across—"

"I wasn't planning to arrest anybody. This is a shoot-to kill policy."

"I wasn't aware we had one."

"You haven't, so you'd better get one fast."

"I can't ask the Senate to authorize use of special forces against Coruscant residents."

"Don't ask them." Skirata became pure ice at times like this: Ordo watched him carefully, anxious to learn more nu-ances of the part of soldiering that required no weapons beyond nerve and psychology. "Is the Jedi Council squeamish about that sort of thing, too?"

"Sergeant . . ."

"Then don't ask them, either. In fact, we never had this conversation. All you've done is tell me you can't ask the Senate to give its blessing to a change in the GAR'S terms of reference."

"But I know what you're suggesting," Zey said.

Skirata was fidgeting with his blade. Ordo could see it: it was a tiny movement, but he could detect the flex of his fore-arm muscles through his jacket. Skirata had the point of the blade resting on his curled middle finger and was pressing it ever so slightly up and down, a preparation for dropping and catching the grip.

"The Jedi Council is pretty adept at turning blind eyes," Skirata said. "For an organization that knew it was taking on an army with an assassination capability, you do send out conflicting signals to simple soldiers like me."

Vau was watching the exchange like a man being mildly amused by a holovid. The strill yawned with a thin, high-pitched whine.

"The difference the Senate will see," Zey said, "is that this is Coruscant."

"General, the days when wars were fought elsewhere while the home fires were kept burning are long gone."

"I know. But there are armies, and there are . . . bounty hunters and assassins. And the Senate will be wary of cross-ing that line on home ground."

"Well, that's what tends to happen when you let a bunch of . . . bounty hunters and assassins train your army."

"We didn't know we even had an army until a year ago."

"Maybe, but the fact that you're sitting here now with a general's rank means you've accepted responsibility for it. You could have objected, collectively or individually. You could have asked questions. But no. You picked up the blaster you found on the floor and you just fired it to defend yourself. Expedience ambushes you in the end."

"You know what the alternative was."

"Look, General, I need to clarify a few things, being just a simple assassin and all that. Answer a few questions for me."

Zey should have been furious that a mere sergeant was treating him as if he were an annoyingly pedantic clerk rather than a battle-hardened general. To his credit, he seemed more intent on a solution. Ordo wondered where expedience ended and pragmatism began.

"Very well," said Zey.

"Do you want to stop attacks on vulnerable targets that are starting to compromise the ability of the GAR to deploy and are destroying public confidence in the Senate's ability to defend the capital?"

"Yes."

"Do you think it's a good idea for some of our hard -pressed special forces lads to have an unprecedented break on Coruscant after months in the field?"

Zey paused, just a breath. "Yes."

"Do you need to ask anyone else to authorize that purely administrative matter?"

"No. General Jusik is responsible for personnel welfare."

Ordo kept his face utterly blank. Leave? There was never any leave for the GAR, or their Jedi command in the front line. Neither would have known what to do with free time anyway.

Jusik looked pinned down. "I do believe some R and R would be a good idea, actually." Skirata smiled at him with genuine warmth. Jusik was all right, one of the boys, all desperate courage and desire to belong. It was hard to tell if he was now playing the game or just being a decent officer. "I'll look into it."

"And sir," Skirata said, "is it true that you knew all along that I was a complete chakaar who could never follow orders, who kept you in the dark, who treated his squads like his own private army, and was generally a Mando lowlife just like Jango and the rest of that mongrel scum?"

Zey leaned back in his seat and pinched the end of his nose briefly, staring hard at the blue stone table.

"I do believe I might realize that at some time in the future, Sergeant." The corners of his eyes crinkled for the merest fraction of a second, but Ordo spotted it. "I have my suspicions. Proving them is hard, though."

Zey was all right, too, then.

Vau had been watching the exchange with mild interest, and Ordo had been watching him, because he knew the man all too well.

"Sergeant Vau, do you have any view on this . . . ah . . . leave situation?" said Ordo.

"Oh no, I'm just a civilian now," Vau said. The strill rum-bled. Vau, apparently distracted, fondled its ghastly, stinking head, his slightly narrowed eyes revealing a doting affection that he never seemed to spare for any other living creature. "I'm just hanging around. When those detainees are re-released, I'll offer them a room for a while, and I'll have a conversation with them. Nothing to do with the GAR or the Senate at all. Merely a private citizen doing what he can to welcome visitors to

Coruscant."

Jusik was watching the exchange with an expression that suggested he was both excited and aware that the stakes had just been raised. They were subverting democracy in one sense, but they were also saving their political masters from a decision they could never be seen to take, yet had to.

"That's the worst thing about having chakaare like us around," Skirata said. "We just wander off, find someplace that you don't know about, and hole up in it and get into all sorts of mischief that you also know nothing about. And then we bill you for it. Dreadful."

"Dreadful," Zey echoed. "Is this the kind of thing that CSF might notice?"

"Were we to get a little out of hand, I imagine very senior officers in CSF might need to be reassured, but not by you."

"Dreadful," Zey said. "Hypothetically, anyway."

Language was a wonderful thing, Ordo thought. Skirata had just told Zey that he was about to go bandit, as he called it, running an unauthorized shoot-to-kill operation in a ci-vilian location and simply sending Zey the bill. Vau planned to interrogate the prisoners. CSF senior command would be placated by Skirata should anything go wrong, without any need for Zey to be involved. And yet Zey had authorized it all.

And the subject had still not been discussed.

"I wonder if anyone will notice our commandos on leave here," Jusik said, apparently catching on.

"Probably," said Skirata. "And wouldn't it be nice if we also extended that home deployment to honest ordinary clone troopers, lots of them? That'd be good for morale."

"And reassuring for the public to see soldiers in armor around the capital."

"I wonder how I can persuade the Senate officers that it's a good idea?"

Zey cut in. "Have you met Mar Rugeyan, the Senate's head of public affairs? Just asking."

Skirata nodded. "I do believe I've had some contact with him, yes."

"Excellent," Zey said. "I know you two will get along very well."

And the conversation that had never taken place was over.

Skirata stood to leave, and Vau gave the strill a gentle shove to persuade it to drop to the floor. It complained in a gravelly rumble but settled at his feet, looking up at Skirata with red-rimmed gold eyes. Skirata's hand was still cupped, arm at his side, in that way Ordo knew often preceded a fight.

"Kal, I hear Atin's returning," Vau said.

Skirata walked out of the room, head down, Ordo right behind him. Jusik followed.

"You stay clear," Skirata said quietly. "I'm meeting them all straight off Fearless. That includes Delta. And they're not yours to run anymore, remember? You just sit tight at the barracks and wait for me to give you a location."

Ordo wasn't fooled by Vau's restrained politeness. Seven years ago Vau had loomed over him as a figure of authority in his black Mando armor for the first time, the strill at his heels. Its name was Lord Mirdalan. Ordo, like all the Nulls, had perfect recall; he sometimes wished he hadn't. But at least it gave him clarity, and he knew the source of all his fears and anxieties. Lord Mirdalan—Mird—had lunged at him at Vau's command, snapping.

Ordo had drawn the little hold-out blaster that Skirata had let him keep and would have killed the animal had Kal'buir not yelled, "Check!" and brought him to a frozen halt as his blaster aim came to rest between Mird's eyes. Vau, Ordo re-called, had laughed: he said that Ordo was ge 'verd—almost a warrior. And Skirata had aimed a kick at Mird to drive it off, saying there was no "almost" about it.

Ordo watched the strill carefully. The creature trotted ahead of them, sniffing noisily in crevices and leaving be-hind a waft of pungent scent and a trail of drool.

"If that thing's going to accompany you on jobs," said Ski rata, "you'd better keep it under control, or find a use for a strill pelt."

He drew up his arm and flicked his wrist before even Ordo could react. The three-sided blade shaved past Mird and thudded into the polished pleekwood floor a pace ahead of it. The knife vibrated to a standstill.

Mird squealed, leaping sideways. Ordo stepped between Vau and Skirata ready to defend Kal'buir in yet another con-frontation with the man he loathed.

But Skirata just turned to fix Vau with a stare that said he wasn't joking. Vau stared back, his long hard face suddenly a killer's again.

"It's not the strill's fault," Skirata said. He walked a few paces forward and pulled the knife from the floor. The strill backed away from him, lip curled back to reveal its fangs.

"But you have your warning, both of you. We need to get this job done, and that's the only reason I haven't gutted both of you already. Understood?"

"I've moved on," said Vau. "And it's time you did, before I end up having to kill you."

Ordo really didn't like that. He ejected the custom vibro-blade in his gauntlet, a better weapon at close quarters than his blasters.

Skirata gave him the palm-down gesture: Leave it. "Stay useful, Walon." He beckoned Jusik and Ordo to follow him. "And I hope that Atin's moved on too, because I won't stand in his way now."

"How far is too far, Kal? Can you answer that? How far did you go?" Vau called after him. "I made that boy a war-rior. Without me, he wouldn't be alive today."

With him, Ordo thought, Atin very nearly wasn't.

"Why didn't you mention to Zey that we might also have a leak within the Grand Army?" Ordo asked.

"Because," Skirata said, "I can't assume I know who it isn't. The leak might not even know that they're the one, ei-ther. Until then, only the strike team will know we're look-ing."

"What about Ogrim? He's an ally."

"I hope so. But in the end, who are the only people we can really trust?"

"Ourselves, Kal'buir"

"So we make sure we know who's watching our back -kar 'tayli ad meg hukaat'kama."

It was good advice to live by. Ordo knew who always watched his.

"I really should make a holo of this," Commander Gett said. He reached into the assortment of pouches clipped to his belt and took out a small recorder. "It doesn't happen that often."

Etain and the commander of the assault ship stood on the gantry that ran around the upper hangar bulkhead and watched the extraordinary spectacle beneath them on the deck. She had heard of this thing, but never seen it. It was the Dha Werda Verda—a Mandalorian ritual battle chant.

Men from the Forty-first Elite and some of the ship's company—about fifty in all, helmets off—were learning to perform it with some instruction from Fi and Scorch. Sev- easy to spot by the blood-red streaks daubed on his helmet, sat on an ammunition crate nearby, cleaning his sniper attachment and looking as if he wasn't interested in joining in.

He was, of course. Etain could sense it, and she wasn't even properly attuned to Sev's presence in the Force.

The Dha Werda looked fearsome. General Bardan Jusik- a young man who barely came up to a clone commando's shoulder—said he loved to see it, and drew so much courage from it that he learned to perform it with his men. It was Kal Skirata's legacy; Jusik explained that the veteran sergeant wanted his men to know their heritage and taught them the rite along with Mandalorian language and culture.

Taung—sa—rang—bro-ka! Je—tii—se-ka—'rta!

The commandos were layering rhythm upon rhythm, hammering first on their own armor and then turning to beat the complex tempo on the plates of the man next to them. Timed precisely, it was spectacular: timed wrong, a soldier could break the next man's jaw.

Dha—Wer-da—Ver-da— aden —tratu! Cor—u—scan—to— kan —dosii—adu!
Duum—mo—tir—ca— 'tra—nau—tracinya! Gra— 'tua—cuun—hett—su—dralshy' a!

It was irresistible, ancient, and hypnotic.

The chant rose from the hangar deck in one solid communal voice. She recognized words like Coruscanta and jettiise:

Coruscant, Jedi. That couldn't have been in the original Mandalorian chant. Even their heritage had been remolded to serve a state in which they had no stake. It was, Etain recalled, something to do with being shadow warriors and forcing traitors to kneel before them.

They were supremely fit warriors displaying their discipline and reflexes: any flesh-and-blood enemy would have been adequately warned of the power of the forces that awaited them.

But droids didn't have the sense to be scared. That was a pity, really.

Etain winced. The blows looked real. They were putting all their weight behind every one.

Astonishingly, none of the initiates had yet timed the movements badly enough to receive an accidental blow in the face. Fi and Scorch demonstrated another sequence. Armor clashed. Sev abandoned his feigned disinterest, took off his helmet and joined in. Then Darman appeared and they formed a line of four in the front.

It was strange to watch Darman actually enjoying himself, oblivious to his surroundings: she had no idea that he had' such a powerful voice or that he could—for want of a better word—dance.

"Jusik always talks about this," said Etain.

"I've seen a few squads do it," Gett said. "It came via Skirata, I hear."

"Yes." Etain was wondering how she would ever measure up to that man. Halfway would have been enough. "He taught all the commandos to live up to their Mandalorian heritage. You know—customs, language, ideals." She was mesmerized by the unconscious precision of men who were all exactly the same height. "It's very weird. It's like they have a compulsion to do it."

"Yes, we do," Gett said. "It's very stirring."

"I'm sorry. That was rude of me."

"No problem, General. It certainly wasn't part of our trooper training on Kamino. It gets passed on from man to man now." He looked restless. She knew what he was thinking. "General—"

"Give me the recorder," she said, and smiled. "Go ahead."

Gett touched his glove to his brow and shot off down the ladder to the deck, sliding the last three meters on the handrails. It was delightful to see the mix of armor—yellow-striped commanders and pilots, plain white troopers, and the motley mix of commando colors—drawn together in one ancient Mandalorian ritual, every face the same.

Etain felt adrift, excluded.

She had never truly felt this degree of bond with her Jedi clan. The connection in the Force was there, yes, but . . . no, the real strength here was attachment, passion, identity, meaning.

She thought of Master Fulier, the man who insisted she have a second chance as a Padawan and not be consigned to build refugee camps because she lacked control. The man who was also passionate and prone to taking on causes: the Jedi who lost his life because he couldn't stay out of a fight when Ghez Hokan's militia roughed up the locals on Qiilura.

Etain thought that wasn't such a bad sort of Jedi to be. Not textbook, but centered on fair play and justice. The clone soldiers were worth that, too.

She was suddenly aware of Darman looking up at her, grinning, and if it hadn't been for his armor and surroundings he could have been any young man showing off his prowess to a woman. She smiled back.

She still envied him his focus and discipline, especially as he had somehow managed not to lose it after being exposed to a galaxy that didn't quite resemble the ideal he had probably been taught about on Kamino.

But Kal Skirata had largely been responsible for his training. She didn't know Skirata yet, but one thing she was certain of was that he was—just like a Jedi—a pragmatic man who dealt in reality.

The Dha Werda went on for verse after repeated verse. Then the klaxon sounded and the pipe came over the address system.

"Port duties men close up. Damage and fire control parties to stations. Prepare to dock."

Commander Gett broke out of the ranks and came bounding back up the ladder, wiping sweat from his face with a neatly folded piece of cloth.

"General, will you come to the bridge to see the ship alongside?"

"I won't be much help, but I'd like that, yes."

It was as if she were leaving a ship after a long association, a retiring captain. She was only a temporary officer, but still Gett treated her as if she actually had some importance to the crew, and she found that touching. She stood at the command console and watched as the docking grapples and platforms slipped past the viewscreen and the crew maneuvered Fearless on instruments. Gett had the con. "Stop reactor."

"Stop reactor, Commander . . . reactor stopped."

Fearless's secondary propulsion shivered into silence. The vessel slipped gradually into dock on the power of tugs bringing her alongside port-side-to, as Etain had now learned to call it. She walked slowly across the bridge to watch the dockside team getting a brow in place to disembark those members of the crew being transferred and to allow maintenance and replenishment teams to board.

There was the slightest of jarring sensations as the ship came to rest against huge dock fenders. Fearless was back safely in her home port—for the time being.

Etain held out her hand to Gett. "Gloves off, my friend."

He shrugged, smiling, and slipped off the entire gauntlet. They shook hands as equals. Then she pressed a key on the console, opening the public address system that reached every cabin and flat and hangar and mess deck in the huge warship.

"Gentlemen," she said. "It's been an honor."

6

In five millennia, the Mandalorians fought with and against a thousand armies on a thousand worlds. They learned to speak as many languages and absorbed weapons technology and tactics from every war: And yet, despite the overwhelming influence of alien cultures, and the absence of a true homeworld and even species, their own language not only survived but changed little, their way of life and their philosophy remained untouched, and their ideals and

sense of family of identity, of nation, were only strengthened. Armor does not make a Mandalorian. The armor is simply a manifestation of an impenetrable, unassailable heart.

—Mandalorians: Identity and Language, published by the Galactic Institute of Anthropology

RAS Fearless, upper dock, Fleet Support Depot, Coruscant, 370 days after Geonosis

The ramp went down, and for once the scene that greeted Fi wasn't hostile droid-infested territory and red blasterfire.

But Coruscant—impossibly high towers and deep canyons of sky lanes—was every bit as alien as Geonosis. Fi had seen it once before, all too briefly, on the way to break a siege at the spaceport. It had been an exotic, exciting lightscape at night, but in daylight it was breathtaking in a totally different way.

"Can we have a run ashore?"

Niner stood with his hands clasped behind him, with his Deece slung across his back. "Not my call. I'm not the sergeant now."

Boss and the rest of Delta had formed up behind Omega in a neat line, presenting a more orderly rank. They were on the same comlink. Niner said it was ungrateful to block them out, seeing as they'd ridden to the rescue. But Omega would never hear the end of it, Fi was sure of that.

The Forty-first Elite were disembarked first.

Scorch leaned a little closer to Fi. He was right behind him. The nice thing about Katarn helmet comlinks was that you could switch between circuits and have totally private exchanges without any external sign that you were talking—or even having a stand-up fight, come to that. "So you want a run ashore?"

"What's that?" Sev said.

Fi enjoyed Skirata's wide-ranging and often bizarre language. No other squads talked quite like Sergeant Kal's. "A night out on the town. Dinner at a fine restaurant, perhaps take in a Mon Cal ballet ..."

"Yeah. Right."

"Don't, Fi," Niner said. "You're just being cruel to the Weequay team here."

"Okay, ale and warra nuts. No ballet."

"And maybe a little shopping with your spook squad buddy?" Scorch said. "New kama, maybe?"

Ah, news did travel, then. "Don't let Ordo hear you say that," Fi said. "He'll rip your leg off and hit you with the soggy end."

"Yeah? ARCs are all mouth and kamas."

"Ooh, hard man, eh?"

"I've seen Twi'lek dancing girls tougher than you," said Scorch. "How many times are we going to have to save your shebs, then?"

"Probably as many times as we have to clean up your osik," said Niner. "Can't you two talk about blowing stuff up and play nicely?"

"Where's the general?" Fi said.

Darman interrupted. "Saying good-bye to Gett." He seemed to be taking a keen interest in Etain's whereabouts. "Can you see Sergeant Kal yet? She said he was meeting us."

"So . . . you've been ordered around by a geriatric and a child, have you?"

Darman's voice frosted over. "Scorch, do you like med-center food?"

"Touchy, touchy . . ."

There was a faint click on the helmet comlink.

"Delta! This is the geriatric. Get down and give me .fifty, now!"

"Fierfek," Sev Sighed.

Omega parted ranks to give Delta the room to perform fifty press-ups in full armor, with backpacks. Fi watched ap-preciatively. He didn't care for Sev at all.

But he was also scanning the landing platform for Skirata, desperate to see his real sergeant again: when Skirata was around, Niner ceased to play the senior NCO. Generals tended not to get much of a look in, either. Skirata was his own command chain.

"That was forty, not fifty," Skirata said from somewhere behind them. "I hate innumeracy almost as much as I hate cracks about my personal state of disrepair."

Skirata just had a knack for sliding around unnoticed. There had been times when Fi had wondered if he was a Force-user, because only Jedi were supposed to be able to pull those kinds of stunts. But Kal 'buir was adamant that he was simply good at his job, because he'd been doing it since he was seven years old.

That made him a late starter—by clone standards.

He appeared suddenly from between a knot of Forty-first men and ambled over to Omega, not limping quite as badly as usual and looking rather dapper in a smart leather jacket. In rough working clothes, he could disappear, but the jacket changed him utterly. Yet there was always something about the man that inspired relief and confidence. Fi felt instantly ready for anything, just as he had when Skirata had been the highest authority in his limited world on Kamino.

Skirata paused for a moment in front of him. He didn't seem worried whether Delta had cranked out the extra ten press-ups or not. He just clutched Fi's arm, and hugged Dar-man, and slapped Niner across the shoulders, and grabbed Atin's hand. He never seemed to have the slightest trouble now in showing how much he cared about them. Over the years he'd changed from shielding his emotions behind a veneer of good-natured abuse to abandoning the pretense altogether.

Nobody had ever been fooled by it anyway.

"Don't scare me like that again, ad'ike." He turned to Delta, easing themselves up from the floor. "And you bunch of di'kute, too. I'd better keep a tighter rein on you." He watched the last of the Forty-first men disappearing into transfer vessels, presumably for return to barracks, and something appeared to amuse him. "Scorch, if you're not a good boy then I'm going to make you wear a kama."

"Sorry, Sergeant. Is it true that Sergeant Vau's back?"

"He's back, but he's not a sergeant. I'm your sergeant now, 'Scorch."

"And General Jusik?"

"He's not your sergeant, either." Skirata looked past Scorch and seemed suddenly startled. Fi turned and saw what he was staring at: Etain Tur-Mukan walked across the huge landing platform hauling the LJ-50 as if it were putting up a fight. "That has to be General Tur-Mukan, yes?"

"That's her," Darman said. "She's very keen to meet you."

Fi was distracted by a blip of movement in his HUD. A scruffy civilian air taxi had risen over the parapet of the landing platform. And it shouldn't have been able to do that.

His unconscious brain said danger and reacted a split second before his ingrained training reminded him that unidentified civilian vessels shouldn't penetrate the Fleet base cordon. He was on one

knee with his Deece charged and aimed before he even noticed from his HUD that Omega and Delta had both formed up into a single front contact formation.

The taxi stopped dead in midair.

"Check!" Skirata stepped in front of them. Fi froze but Delta aimed around the sergeant. "Stand down!" One fist held up clenched to hold off the squads, Skirata signaled vigorously to the taxi with his other hand held flat, slapping down on the air. Drop.

The taxi settled slowly on the platform.

Omega stopped dead at the check command; Delta took a second longer. Maybe it hadn't been drilled into them as it had Skirata's batch. But all of them still had their rifles trained. Fi's heart pounded. They were all wound tight and still alert to any threat, alert enough to let hard-trained reactions take over. It was what kept you alive. You could never switch it off. Your muscles learned to do things and then stopped asking your brain's permission.

"I'm sorry, lads." Skirata spun around to face them. "Ude-sii, udesii . . . relax. It's ours."

"I'm glad you pointed that out, Sarge," Niner muttered. He lowered his Deece. Fi followed his lead, and glanced behind him.

Etain was still lying prone with her concussion rifle aimed in the right direction, no easy task with a weapon that size, but her arc of fire left something to be desired. He hoped that her Jedi sense of right place and right time would have stopped her from blowing them all to pieces if she had opened fire.

Fi gestured to her to stand down, and then gave up and just shook his head at her. No. She gestured back, palm up, and jumped to her feet. He wondered if anyone had thought to teach her basic hand signals.

Skirata was still apologizing. "I should have warned you I had transport coming. That was sloppy of me." The taxi's hatch opened and a Wookiee—not a big one, just over a couple of meters tall—unfolded itself from the taxi and clambered out, throwing its head back and yawling in complaint.

"Okay, my fault," Skirata said. He held both hands up in admission to the mountain of glossy brown fur. "They're just jumpy, that's all. We'll load now."

"All of us, in that?" Niner asked. It wasn't a very big taxi. "With the Wookiee, too?"

"No, the prisoners. Just load 'em in."

"Where are they going?"

"That's all you need to know right now."

Niner paused, then shrugged and beckoned Boss, Fixer, and Atin to follow him back on board Fearless.

Etain had moved forward by now and walked up to Skirata, rifle slung across her back; she was so small that she looked more like a bolt-on accessory to the weapon. Darman reacted and stepped in to get Skirata's attention. It wasn't that he needed to, of course. Skirata was watching Etain, and he seemed to have one eye on Fearless's ramp, and he was placating the clearly irritated Wookiee, somehow juggling situations as skillfully as he had ever done.

"General," he said. He paused to nod formally to Etain, which—given Skirata's general contempt for anyone not in armor—seemed quite an encouraging start, Fi decided. "We've got a nice new job, and that includes you."

"Sergeant," she said, and bowed her head. "You're not what I expected."

Skirata raised an eyebrow. "Nor are you, General." He shoved the Wookiee back a few meters, apparently untroubled by the fact that the creature could have used him for a cleaning rag. He rounded on it. "No, just put them on the back seat and drive. Let Vau do the rest."

The mention of Vau gave Fi a hint of what he couldn't grasp from the Shyriiwook words. So the Wookiee was delivering the prisoners to Walon Vau. It seemed to have volunteered to do something that Skirata preferred to leave to Old Psycho, then. The Wookiee obviously wasn't asking if they wanted to stop for lunch.

"What's happening here?" Etain asked. "What's happening to the prisoners?"

"Civilian matter, General," Skirata said, and stood back as Niner and Boss jogged past steering a medbay repulsor with what looked like three large rolls of blanket on it. They bundled each into the back of the taxi with a little grunting and cursing, then slammed one hatch closed. "Don't you worry about it."

"But I am worrying about it."

The Wookiee barked once and folded itself back into the taxi. The vessel lifted off and swung back over the parapet, dropping below their view into one of the artificial canyons that seemed to reach down into Coruscant's core. Fi fought the urge to peer after it, then lost and walked a few paces to gaze over the edge.

It was a long, long way down. He was thrilled by the sheer scale and variety of it: polished stone, sparkling glass, a blur of vessels in the sky lanes, hazy sunlight. Alien, utterly alien.

Skirata blew out a breath and rocked his head slightly as if easing tense neck muscles. "General," he said. "You and I need to talk. Omega, Delta—a transport will be taking you back to barracks." He paused to check his chrono. "You just relax until fifteen-hundred hours and then you report to the briefing room at HQ Main Admin Building."

"Yes, Sarge," said Niner and Boss, absolutely synchronized.

But Etain wasn't giving up. Fi rather liked that about her, but she could be a pain in the shebs when she persisted. She stepped a little closer to Skirata.

"I don't like being left in the dark, Sergeant."

"Then this galaxy is going to be a constant source of dis-appointment to you, General." For a second Skirata had that edge in his voice that made Fi stiffen. But it softened as soon as it had hit its target. "Things change. You can say no to this, and I'm rather hoping you won't, but if you do, then Omega, Delta, and my Null boys will do it without you."

Etain lapsed into silence. Skirata could motivate a brick if he put his mind to it. She wanted to stick with the squad and everyone knew it.

She looked at him as if she was listening to other voices. "If Omega can't say no, then neither can I."

"Good," said Skirata. He peeled back the collar of his jacket and muttered into a tiny comlink. It looked as if Gen-eral Jusik still had a taste for supplying unusual kit. "Stand-ing by."

Fi peered back over the dock platform parapet, gripping the safety rail to lean out a little more and get a better look.

It was the kind of view the very wealthy paid a fortune to see from their window, but you could get it for free in the Grand Army, as long as you didn't mind getting your head shot off to qualify for the privilege.

Skirata leaned against the parapet beside him.

"I'd like to fast-rope down there," Fi said. He'd always en-joyed that in training on Kamino. He preferred endless vistas to cramped spaces, as did many of his brothers. They said it was the legacy of being gestated in glass vats; Ordo claimed he could even remember it. "How long have we got here, Sarge? Can we see some of the city? Please?"

"Yeah, I promised you all a night out, didn't I? How long ago?"

"Eight months." Fi remembered, all right: straight after the spaceport siege, the promise of a drink from Captain Obrim for a job well done—and then Ordo hauled them straight off for another mission. "I'd love to see it once before I—" He paused. "I'd just like to explore a bit."

Skirata's brow creased briefly and he put his hand on Fi's back. "Don't talk like that, son. You'll see plenty of this, I promise."

"Now?" Far below, something that might have been a bird leapt suddenly into the yawning crevasse of buildings and plummeted at high speed with wings folded back until Fi lost sight of it. The platform was at least five thousand meters high. "That'd be a nice change."

"So you like the new battlefield, then."

Fi dragged himself away from the apparently limitless view. "So we get a spell in a stone frigate?"

"What?"

"Just something I picked up from the lads on board Fear-less." So he'd taught Sergeant Kal some new slang: that was something. "A shore-based job. Filing flimsi and answering the comlinks. Lots of caf breaks."

"Try threat resolution. Interdiction."

"Oh."

"Welcome to the world of euphemism, Fi. We're going to be fighting in the hardest terrain of all. Right in the middle of billions of civvies. Slotting bad guys on Coruscant."

"Good," said Fi. "I hate commuting."

Arca Company Barracks, SO Brigade HQ, Coruscant

Etain trailed Skirata down the long passage that ran from the main doors of the Arca barrack wing and felt like she was following a gdan.

Omega Squad's description had made her think of him as a kindly old uncle, a veteran soldier with a facade of tough talk who had sweated blood to give a generation of boys the benefit of his wisdom. But what she experienced in the Force was very different, just as his appearance was unlike her mental image of him.

He was a whirlpool of balanced conflict—truly cold black violence shot through with deep red passionate loves and ha-treds. It marked him out as a complex man who had built a warrior elite. If she looked at him another way, though, he was very much the dark side—everything she had been taught to shun.

Yes, he reminded her of a gdan, the nasty little carnivores that hunted in packs on Qiilura and would take on any prey; small by comparison with his strapping troops, but ferociously, tenaciously aggressive.

And he wasn't quite the elderly man the squad had first described, either. To twenty-year-old boys, he must have seemed ancient. But he was about sixty standard years—just middle-aged—and obviously fit except for his tendency to drag his left leg.

And he looked armored.

He was only wearing a civilian jacket—polished tan ban-tha leather with a high black collar—and plain brown pants, but he had that same presence that all the commandos had. He was ready for something. Given that he was a head shorter than his squad, had a pronounced limp, and yet still

looked like trouble, Etain decided he must have once been a formidable soldier. She realized he still was.

"In here, ma'am." He could make ma'am sound like girl somehow; he could do the same with General. But as a Jedi she had no right to feel affronted by lack of deference. She realized that she simply wished he would like her. "Just a lit-tle chat and then you can find General Jusik and catch up on events."

Yes, Skirata gave the orders.

He ushered her into a side room that turned out to be a cabin with a table, a chair, and narrow bed with a half-packed carryall sitting on it. There was a neat pile of clothing, military-grade fabric equipment cases with unidentifiable lumpy items in them, and a set of sand-gold, battle-scarred Mandalorian armor.

The Force told her this was a tidy room filled with the wretched chaos of broken lives, pain, and misery. She won-dered if it was entirely his, but she stopped herself from probing further in case he felt it and reacted. He was a dan-gerously perceptive man. She had no sense at all of any ani-mosity directed at her.

"That's a fine helmet," she said. It had detailed crimson and gold sigils, and the alloy section that formed the eye-piece T of the visor was jet black. There were telltale scrapes and gouges as if some huge creature had clawed at it. "Does Fi still have Hoka's armor?"

Skirata nodded. "Certainly has. Niner said he could have it, and he keeps it stashed in his locker."

Etain thought of Ghez Hoka, and how she had first mis-taken Darman for Qiilura's brutal enforcer simply because of that sinister helmet with its T-shaped slit. Fi had the helmet now. And that was because Etain had taken Hoka's head off with her lightsaber, nearly a year and a lifetime ago when she was still not used to killing.

It was red armor with a distinctive gray trim. She recalled that vividly.

Mandalorian helmets didn't look half so fearsome now. The shape was familiar: it was even welcome. But she had somehow forgotten that Skirata, and most of the training sergeants who had been recruited to forge boys like Darman into elite commandos, had been Mandalorian mercenaries handpicked by Jango Fett.

She wondered if she would have seen Skirata the same way nine months earlier, had he been her enemy on Qiilura. "Packing or unpacking?"

"Packing." He lifted the fabric bags carefully and they made a metallic clunk: weapons. "We can't operate out of here. Officially we're off duty and on indefinite leave." He laid the armor plates in the bag and layered the clothing between them, then slid in the fabric-cased weapons. It occurred to her that this was probably all he owned, the no-madic mercenary ready to move on to the next war. "Are you squeamish, General? I mean ethically squeamish."

"I'm a Jedi, Sergeant."

"Well, that answers a lot of questions I didn't ask."

"Ask me a specific question."

"Do you know what black ops means?"

"Oh yes . . ."

"I thought you might. I had no idea you would be coming back with Omega right now, but you spent four months with Zey on Qiilura turning the locals into guerrillas to fight the Seps, right? And before that you survived when Master Fulier didn't. So I reckon you're pretty handy in a scrap."

"I know my weaknesses."

Skirata paused and looked up from his packing. "Best knowledge of all."

"Just tell me what's at stake," Etain said.

"Now, there's an interesting request from a Jedi." He put his hand carefully in the side of the carryall and withdrew a small cloth-wrapped package. When he unwrapped it and held it out in his palm, she could see it held small scan bars mounted on fragments of white plastoid alloy. "For me, stop-ping more of these. For the Republic, stopping activity that limits the ability of the Grand Army to deploy. For the Sen-ate, showing the Seps that they can't strike here at will. Take your pick!"

She knew what the objects were now: she'd seen them on hundreds of chest plates.—They were armor tallies, the identi-fication devices all clone soldiers wore.

"I'll take the first option." She thought of the other Fi, the one who was no longer alive to be boyishly excited like his namesake at the prospect of seeing the Coruscant that lay be-yond the barracks. "You believe I'll be of some use?"

"In urban operations, a woman is always useful, Jedi or not. Another aid to invisibility—old di'kute like me and fe-males like you."

Skirata smiled and rewrapped the armor tallies. Etain reached into her bag and realized that she had even fewer possessions than this nomad. "And General Jusik is part of this operation? What about Master Zey?"

"General Zey is not officially aware of this."

"If we're not operating out of here, then where?"

"Oh, somewhere interesting. Give me a couple of days and then we can relocate. Besides, the boys need some rest."

So he wasn't going to tell her. Fine. "Delta seem a little . . . different from Omega. I take it you have confidence in them?"

"Oh, they're good lads." He fumbled in his jacket pockets and pulled out credit chips, scraps of flimsi, and a nasty-looking metal device crested with a row of short, savage spikes and that appeared to have holes for four fingers. She stared. He placed it on the table. "The hormone that makes them hard fighters is the same one that makes them a bit of a handful, too." The contents of Skirata's jacket continued to pile up on the table. A coil of thin wire, a fifteen-centimeter knife with a tapering three-sided blade, a stubby custom blaster, and a length of heavy, sharp-edged chain joined the cache. "Not that the poor ad'ike are ever off duty, of course. But when you say the word, they're on the case like that." He snapped his fingers to make the point of immediacy. Yes, she'd seen that.

Skirata took off his jacket, revealing surprisingly broad shoulders and an underarm holster holding what looked like a modified Verpine shatter gun. He hung the garment over the back of a chair. Etain estimated he was still exceptionally fit in the wiry way of small men and continued to revise her view of him as a man who could only train others to fight.

And she had never seen so many instruments devoted to injury and destruction in one man's possession—not even a Republic commando. She indicated the weapons with a cocked head and waited for a hint of why he was carrying them.

Skirata paused, one hand raking his short gray hair. "What?" he said, looking bemused.

"The . . . kit." He was a walking armory. "The weapons."

"Oh, don't worry." He clearly didn't understand. "I don't carry many tools when I'm in civilian areas. Don't want to be too conspicuous. Ordo looks after the rest of it. We'll be properly cannoned up when we deploy. Guess what? Got six Verpine sniper rifles. Custom-made and EMP-hardened. Ex-quisite. Not really rifles, 'cos they don't have rifled barrels, but . . ." He grinned suddenly, apparently distracted by a thought, and she had a brief and vivid vision of another man entirely. "You haven't met Ordo yet, have you? He's a fine lad. Pride of my heart, really he is. Him and his brothers."

Etain was totally disarmed by his candor, which seemed both incongruous and yet in keeping with a man who had gone to such extraordinary lengths to equip his young charges to survive.

She knew he was a killer. She knew his people had a long history of killing Jedi, even fighting for the Sith. She knew exactly what he was, but she couldn't help liking him and knowing that he would be very, very important to her for the rest of her life.

Her certainty was in the Force. And she knew what was coming in the days and months ahead would take her beyond her limits, and would bring her no sense of peace or understanding as a Jedi. But the Force would show her what it intended her destiny to be.

7

I think it's significant that the casualty rate among commando squads trained by Mandalorians is lower than those trained by other races. Somehow, Mandalorians

imbue their charges with a sense of purpose, self-confidence, and almost obsessive sense of clan—of family—that gives them a genuine survival advantage. Let us be thankful they're on our side this time.

—General Master Arligan Zey, Director of Special Forces, officer commanding SO BDE, addressing the Jedi Council

SO Brigade HQ Coruscant, briefing room 8, 1500 hours, 370 days after Geonosis

"I thought we'd have a chat," said Skirata. He turned a chair around and swung his legs astride it, folding his arms on the chair back and resting his chin on them. "Just us Mando boys. No aruetiise present."

Delta Squad had settled in seats on one side of the briefing room and Omega on the other, with

the table between them. Skirata could have sliced through the atmosphere between Atin and Sev with a vibroblade: how could they think he hadn't noticed? He knew how to read every nuance of cloned men like a book, even if they weren't the ones he knew intimately. In fact, he could read most species now. So they either thought he was stupid, or they were so at ease in his company that they felt no need to disguise their feelings.

And the Delta boys—like Omega—were painfully loyal to their sergeants. They sat around in dark red fatigues, looking disturbingly young without their armor and weapons.

"You don't see Tur-Mukan or Jusik as traitors; do you?" Darman said.

"I was using aruetiise in the general sense of non-Mandalorian." Oh, Darman was fond of Etain, wasn't he? He'd have to keep an eye on that. "What I've got to say is just squad business, not the officers'." Skirata dropped his knife from his sleeve and fidgeted with the blade, running his fingertip carefully along the honed edge. "I hope you're listening to this, Delta."

"Yes, Sarge." Boss was watching him intently.

"And you, Sev."

Sev glanced at Atin for the merest fraction of a second, but enough to confirm Skirata's hunch. "Yes, Sergeant."

"Okay, number one—any bad blood between me and Vau is our business, not yours. If any of you want to fight about it, I'll personally make you regret it. Save it for the bad guys."

The silence was almost solid. Atin stared ahead of him, unblinking; Sev compressed his lips as if choking back protest and flicked a glance at Niner. Darman and Fi simply looked baffled.

"No, Sev," Skirata said. "Niner didn't say a word to me, but I've got eyes in my backside and a very good memory. You do not have a grudge against Atin, do you understand me? If you want to argue the toss about my little altercation with Vau, then you have it out with me."

"Understood, Sergeant."

"Good. Prove it."

"Sorry?"

"You two." Skirata motioned to Atin and Sev with the point of his blade. "Get up and shake hands."

Neither Atin nor Sev moved for a moment.

"I said get up and shake hands. Now."

Skirata wondered if he'd lost them, but then Atin stood just a heartbeat before Sev did. They leaned across the table that separated them and shook hands as ordered.

"Now do it again and mean it," Skirata said quietly. "You have to be one team now, one big squad, and when I tell you what we're up against you'll understand why. Boss, I expect you to keep your boys in line."

Boss leaned forward and shoved Sev in the back. "You heard the sergeant."

Atin held his hand out again. Sev took it and shrugged.

"Good," Skirata said. "Because we're off the charts now. What we're about to do has no official authorization from the Senate or the generals, so if we screw up, we're on our own."

"Ah," said Scorch. "So Jusik and Tur-Mukan don't know about this."

"Oh yes, they do."

"Then who's we?"

"You, our young generals, Ordo, Vau, and me."

Scorch raised his eyebrows. "You're operational again?"

It was time for a little theater. "Yes." Skirata hurled his knife with the exquisite accuracy born of decades of surviving by it. It embedded itself in the wooden paneling behind Sev, half a meter to his right. "Bet you can't do that with a vibroblade, son."

"He can if I pick him up and throw him," said Fi.

They all laughed. Skirata wondered if they'd still be laugh -ing in a few minutes. Ordo was due back soon. With any luck, he and Vau would have beaten some information out of Orjul; the Nikto were probably too tough even for Vau to crack in that time.

In the end it might not matter. He had his team ready to deploy on Coruscant now—his team, not the Republic's—and they could do things that CSF either wouldn't or couldn't. Obrim had his hands tied by laws and procedures, and maybe he even had a mole among his own comrades.

But this strike team had no laws at all: it didn't even exist. On Triple Zero, it was . . . zero.

Skirata hadn't asked Zey what would happen to them if they got it wrong. They could end up dead, all of them. It was an academic detail.

Scorch got up, pulled the knife from the wall, and handed it back to Skirata with a grin. Fixer applauded.

"Remember all that dirty black ops stuff that me and Vau taught you way back?" Skirata slid the blade back up his sleeve again. My dad 's knife. All I have of him. I took it off his body. "Or did you file it with the boring stuff on contingency orders and emergency procedures?"

"I think we recall it, Sarge."

Skirata remembered it, and didn't want to. It was training that had to be done. It broke his heart, but it was going to be all that stood between those boys and death sooner or later. They had to be able to face the unimaginable, and—yes, there were even worse things than charging a line of droids with your comrades.

There were the things you might have to face alone, in a locked room, with no hope of rescue.

Maybe Vau was right. Perhaps trainees needed to be bru-talized beyond the point where they were just brave, pushed into a state of existence where they became animals intent only on survival. That was how Vau had nearly killed Atin. It was why Skirata had then gone after Vau and nearly killed him.

"I'm not proud of what I did to you," Skirata said.

"You crawled through the nerf guts first, Sarge. It looked like so much fun that we followed you in." Fi roared with laughter and leaned back in his seat. "And then you threw up."

The Sickener, they called it. One more endurance test to make sure they could face conditions that would break and kill lesser men, crawling through a ditch filled with rotting nerf guts.

But there were more tests to come. A night out in Fest-like temperatures; no sleep for three days, maybe more; scant water, a full sixty-kilo pack, and blistering heat; and a lot of pain. Pain, pitiless verbal abuse, and humiliation. A captured commando could expect brutal interrogation. They had to be able to cope without breaking, and it took some imagination to test that to the limit.

How far is too far, Kal?

Vau was much more detached about handing out all that punishment than Skirata could ever be. It was very hard to hurt your sons, even if it helped them survive the unsurvivable.

"Well," Skirata said, mortified that Fi could take it in such good spirits. "The nerf guts were the fun part. It all goes downhill after that."

Sev seemed quite animated. "Do we get to do assassinations?"

"If we do, they never happened. You imagined them."

"Whoops. My trigger finger just slipped, Sarge. Honest."

"You catch on fast about the fascinating world of politics in which we now find ourselves, young man."

"Is it okay if I say politicians are gutless chakaare?" Scorch asked.

"Call 'em what you like, son. You still haven't got a vote." Skirata felt the thud of boots striding down the passage outside. The vibration carried; their voices didn't. "Wars are legal violence. Everything else is just crime. Fortunately we're Mandalorian, so we're a lot less prissy about that fine distinction."

"Just point us at the bad guys and say go."

"That's the awkward bit."

"What is?" Scorch asked.

"You've got to find them first."

"Well, we found quite a few so far . ."

Delta laughed like one man, even Sev, and Omega joined in. The coded entry system blipped and the doors slid open. Ordo strode through them, probably aware of the kind of entrance he could make.

Delta had never worked with a Null ARC before. Maybe they thought it would be no different from working with Alpha or any of the other Jango-trained ARC troopers. Skirata watched with interest. Ordo would certainly break some more ice.

"Sir!" Delta said sharply, all at once. Niner and the rest of Omega just touched their brows casually.

"Sorry I'm late, Sergeant." Ordo took off his helmet, tucked it under one arm, and handed Skirata a datapad and a rather heavy flimsi-wrapped package about the size of a small blaster case. "Not much information, but Vau is still working on the problem. And General Jusik sends his com-pliments."

"Thanks, Captain." Skirata glanced at it and then un-wrapped the parcel. But it wasn't a weapon; it was a box of candied vweliu nuts. Jusik was a very thoughtful officer in-deed. Skirata broke the seal and got up to place it on the table within the reach of both squads. "Fill yer boots, lads."

Fi had his usual silly grin on his face, the faintest hint that he might be planning to do something at Ordo's expense.

"Ooh, nice new skirt!" said Fi. "You went to all that trou-ble just for us? What happened to the old kama ? Did it shrink in the wash?"

He got up and stood a pace or two in front of Ordo, still grinning and clearly expecting some backslapping or some other show of delight at reunion after several months.

" 'Scuse me, Sergeant," Ordo said calmly, and smacked Fi down on the floor with a none-too-playful body press. Fi yelped. Being hit by someone in armor when you weren't wearing your own hurt.

Boss's expression was a study in shock. The Delta boys jerked upright in their seats and stared as if they were debat-ing whether to step in and break it up. Ordo looked like cold death; even Skirata had times when he wasn't quite sure which way Ordo would jump.

"Your big mouth is going to get you into a lot of trouble one day," the ARC hissed. Fi, eyes locked on Ordo's, neck tensed, looked ready to fight back. "So you better hope I'm there when that happens." Then Ordo burst out laughing and got to his feet in one move. He hauled Fi upright by his arm, slapping his back enthusiastically. "The old firm back to-gether again, eh? Good stuff!"

Boss glanced at Skirata, who smiled enigmatically, or so he hoped. Nulls were either your best friend or your worst imaginable enemy. Fi, luckily, had a devoted friend. He still looked shaken by the nature of the reunion, though.

"Okay, you can thin out now and we'll resume tomorrow morning with our little generals for a full intel briefing at oh- eight-hundred," Skirata said. "Now that we all understand each other."

Ordo took a handful of candied nuts and stepped outside with Skirata. The two men stood in the corridor, giving the squads a chance to chat now that Delta had been suitably un-nerved. And maybe they thought he couldn't hear them, but Skirata wasn't as hard of hearing as they imagined, years of exposure to deafening fire or not.

And it wasn't what he expected to hear.

"Fierfek, I remember thinking he was just bent over breathless, but he was actually crying and throwing up. And it wasn't the nerf guts."

"He never liked knocking us around."

"And he always apologized and made sure we were okay afterward."

"Top man." That was Niner talking. "Jatne 'buir."

The best father. Well, that was a joke. His own kids had formally disowned him and declared him dar'buir instead—no longer a father. It was a very rare and shameful thing for a Mando father to be formally shunned by his sons.

But he couldn't have left Kamino, or even told them where he was and that he hadn't completely abandoned them. Not even Ordo knew about the declaration of dar'buir.

You put your clones first, before your own flesh and blood, didn't you?

"Are you all right?"

And I don't regret doing that, not a second of it.

"I'm fine, Ord'ika. Vau must be losing his touch, then. Nothing useful from our friends?"

"There might be nothing to get out of them, of course. But it's not a quick process, interrogating experienced suspects without killing them."

"What about getting one of our jettiise to help out? They're good at persuasion."

"Possibly too squeamish. Jusik is always anxious to please, though."

"He's much more use in the field. Brave lad, handy with tech, and a good pilot. But the girl's got an edge to her. Let's see if she'll put pragmatism above principle."

"Do you dislike them, Kal'buir?"

"It's not a matter of liking them or not. It's whether they're reliable. Look, Zey will waste you and every last clone—and me—if he thinks it'll win the war and save civilians. But Jusik hero-worships you. And I don't know which of those two extremes is the more dangerous."

"This is your opportunity to help them become the sol -diers you made of us, then."

Ouch. "Why do I always get the feeling that you were more of a man at four years old than I would ever be?" Ordo gave him a playful shove. He was clearly in a good mood today. "Let me ask General Tur-Mukan to interrogate the prisoners. If she finds that morally unacceptable, then her view of you won't be tainted by it."

Skirata had to bite his lip. Ordo often shamed him with unexpected compassion and diplomacy. "Yeah, I reckon she'll find it easier to do the heroic infantry stuff than get dirty along with us. But leave her to me."

"Very well," Ordo said. "Have you decided where we need to base the operation?"

"I've got a few people who owe me favors. Where would you hide soldiers?"

"Hide hide or conceal hide?" "Not-taking-much-notice-of-activity hide."

"Somewhere with a bar. Somewhere you'd get a lot of off -duty traffic."

"You don't drink. Never seen a clone drink much at all." Skirata was suddenly ambushed again by Ordo's agile brain. For a man who knew little of life beyond warfare, his ability to learn and

extrapolate from the smallest scrap of information was breathtaking. "And you never get off duty."

"You said, Kal'buir, that you might disguise the presence of some hulking big boys in armor by having a lot more of them around. You were going to see Mar Rugeyan about a smokescreen."

"Sorry?"

"Remember Mar Rugeyan? The man who can talk out of all three corners of his mouth at the same time? The man you grabbed by the—"

Kal remembered, all right. "Yeah, if I'd known then that I'd need him I'd have been a little more careful."

"I think I can propose an idea he might find attractive."

"Would that involve leaving bruises?"

"I wasn't planning to injure him. Just point out that if troopers were actually allowed leave in considerable numbers, it would reassure the public, too. Eventually we become invisible." Ordo pondered, that tell tale little frown creasing his brow. Sometimes his staggering intellect and perfect recall didn't help him process the real world one bit, at least not where Skirata was concerned. "Let me try, Karbuir. I promise I'll be more diplomatic."

"It was a joke, Ord'ika. I think you'd probably stand as much chance of charming him as I would right now."

"Have I ever let you down?"

It wasn't a rhetorical question. Skirata was mortified. It was all too easy to swagger out of the meeting full of aggressive confidence and forget that Ordo—muscular, lethal, the ultimate soldier—was vulnerable to the approval of one person alone: him. It was as if Ordo became that literal, trusting child

again, the one who had decided that the only person in the galaxy who would ever look out for him and his brothers was a down-on-his-luck mercenary who didn't much like Kaminoans.

"I didn't mean it literally." Skirata reached up and ruffled his hair just like he'd done when Ordo was a scared little kid, terrified by the lightning on Kamino, except he hadn't had to reach quite so far in those days. "You're my pride and joy. You couldn't be smarter or better or braver, any of you."

Ordo looked blank for a moment and then managed a smile, but it was the placatory gesture of a child under threat. "I know I have gaps in my knowledge."

"Oh, son . . . I'm going to change that. For all of you."

"I know, Kal'buir" His trust was transparent and absolute.

"You're our protector and we'll always serve you."

Skirata winced. Faith was devastating if you weren't up to being a god.

But I don't regret it. No, not a second of it.

Logistics center, Grand Army of the Republic, Coruscant Command HQ, 370 days after Geonosis

"You're not on the authorized personnel list for this cen-ter," said the security droid at the doors.

Ordo reached past it and tapped a memorized code into the door panel. The sentry was a solid block with four arms, a head shorter than he was. "Well done. You're right to chal-lenge me."

"Sir—"

Ordo reached into his belt and took out a stylus probe. The droid was fast, but not fast enough to avoid the probe Ordo slipped silently into the command port in its chest. There was a chack-chack-chack of memory drives and motors stalling for a moment, and then the droid seemed placated.

"You appear to be on the authorized personnel list," it said. "You have access to all areas including those restricted to staff officers, without on-site security tracking."

"Excellent," Ordo said, walking through the doors into the polished white marble lobby. "I'm a very private person."

And it was easy to be private when you were in armor. No -body took much notice of a clone inside the GAR complex, not even one wearing an ARC trooper captain's livery.

It was simply a matter of looking as if you had every right to be going about your business. And the Null squad's proper business was anything Kal Skirata deemed it to be. Right now that meant identifying a method of inserting covert sur-veillance into Logistics, the most likely place for a mole who could relay very precise information on transport and con-tractor movements to the Separatists.

Ordo took out his datapad and consulted it frequently as if he were here for a routine visit. Without the possibility of eye contact, none of the civilian staff seemed even to register his presence. The white armor here was usually clone troopers who were physically unfit for front-line service, Engineer Corps, or ARC troopers carrying out occasional inspections for their generals.

After striding into a few offices, startling the droids and getting an occasional glance from civilian technicians, Ordo walked into the operations room at the heart of the logistics wing, and struck gold.

It was a large circular room with walls that were covered in live holocharts of troop and materiel movements. It danced with brilliant light and color, a HUD on a grand scale. At the room's heart was a large multistation desk staffed by two droids, four humans, six Sullustans, three Nimbanese, and . . .

. . . one clone trooper, minus his helmet.

"Excellent," Ordo said aloud.

The clone trooper jumped to his feet and saluted, even though it was technically a poor example of protocol to do so without his helmet in place. Ordo returned the salute any-way.

"Problem with your helmet, trooper?"

The man lowered his voice. "It makes the civilians edgy, sir. They prefer to see my eyes."

Ordo bristled. He would never defer to civilians' whims. "I'm carrying out a routine survey for General Camas." He didn't give the man his designation. Alpha ARCs rarely bothered to identify themselves to the lower ranks. He glanced at the civilians: one of the Nimbanese and a human female looked up at him. The pale reptilian Nimbanel was interesting as a detail, but the human female was enough to make him stop, stare, and note her as suspicious. She smiled at him. He still had his helmet on, but she smiled at him, and she was shockingly beautiful; both those facts were, worrying in an administrative department. She looked down at her data console, lost in her work again, and flicked long pale blond hair over one shoulder.

"Trooper," Ordo said. He beckoned the man to him. "I'd like you to brief me on the operation of this unit."

They walked outside the main doors, and Ordo removed his helmet to look a brother in the eye and give him due respect. His glove's tally scanner told him the man was CT-5108/8843, an EOD operative: a bomb disposal expert, the kind of man who disarmed booby traps and UXBs so that other troopers could advance, the kind of man who could do work that even droids could not.

The explosives connection wasn't lost on Ordo for one moment.

"What's your name?"

The trooper hesitated. "Corr, sir," he said quietly. "And what brings you here?"

Corr paused and then pulled off his gauntlets.

He had no hands.

They had been replaced by two simple prosthetics, so basic that they didn't have a synthflesh coating, just the bare dura-steel mechanism. Ordo didn't even have to ask how he had acquired them. Somehow losing both hands was shocking in a way that losing one was not. Hands defined humanity.

"There's a parts shortage, sir, what with there being so many men injured and needing prosthetics," Corr said apologetically. "And these aren't good enough for me to do my job in the front line. As soon as the parts come through, I'll be back, though."

Ordo knew what Kaibuir would have said then, and he was moved to do the same, but this wasn't the time or the place. He held back. "Do they treat you properly here?"

Corr shrugged. "Fine. Actually, sir, the civilians tend not to speak to me that much, except for Supervisor Wennen. She's very kind to me indeed."

Ordo could see it coming. "Wennen would be the blond woman, yes?"

Corr nodded, his expression noticeably softened. "Besany Wennen. She doesn't approve of the fighting, sir, but she doesn't let it affect her work and she's looking after me very well."

Poor naïve trooper. "How well?"

"We have lunch together and she's taken me to visit the Galactic Museum."

Fascinating. Ordo had learned the wisdom of mistrust at a very early age. Glamorous woman, EOD expert, logistics hub: he could work it out. Not starting his observation here would have been stupid, but there was little to be gained from crashing in yet.

"How many shifts?"

"Three per daily roster, sir."

"I might need to ask you to do something for me, Corr."

"Certainly, sir."

"But when I do, it will be classified and you're to discuss it with nobody, not even your supervisor. It will be part of a routine fraud audit, that's all, and that's why I need your silence." Did it matter if he told him his name? Only the special forces inner circle knew who he was anyway. "My name is . . . Ordo. Mention that to nobody."

"Yes sir. Understood."

Ordo wanted to tell him that he understood his loneliness among strangers and his need to be back with his brothers at the front, doing real work. But he could tell him nothing. He ushered him back into the operations room, noted the lovely and apparently genuine smile that Supervisor Wennen gave him, and paused on his way out to break into the automated comlink relay and place a monitoring device.

Poor Corr. Ordo patted the sentry droid on the head and strode to his parked speeder.

Yes, I know how the Kaminoans did it. They used our genes against us, the ones that make us bond with our brothers, make us loyal, make us respect and obey our fathers—that's what they manipulated to make us more likely to obey orders. They had to remove what made Jango a selfish loner, because that makes a bad infantry soldier, and you can tell from the Alpha ARCS that the Kaminoans weren't wrong. But there's one thing I don't know yet—and that's how they controlled the aging process. That's the key. They robbed us of a full life span. But we will not be defeated by time, ner vod.

—ARC Trooper Lieutenant N-7—Mereel—in an encrypted transmission to N-11, Ordo

Republic Administration, Senate Head of Public Affairs Office, floor 391, Support Services Center, 370 days after Geonosis

Mar Rugeyan's office was very near the top floor of the administration building and had a view that some Senators would have killed for. Ordo wondered how Rugeyan did his killing—metaphorically, anyway—because he had the air of a man who would terminate anyone in his way without a second thought.

It was a long way down. Ordo tucked his helmet under his arm and admired the steady stream of speeders in the sky-lanes below.

"It's been a while," Rugeyan said, perfectly pleasant. "I never imagined I might be in a position to be any help to you."

The subtle threat wasn't lost on Skirata, at least if his blink rate was anything to go by. "I appreciated your assistance during the siege. You remember my captain, don't you? Cap-tain Ordo? Sir, can Mr. Rugeyan offer you anything to drink?"

"A glass of juice would be very welcome, thank you." Skirata was indeed inferior in rank, but it

always made Ordo uncomfortable to hear Karbuir call him sir "We were wondering if you might be able to advise us."

Rugeyan betrayed no discomfort whatsoever at talking to a clone. "Happy to help, Captain." He tapped something on his desk. "Refreshments, please, Jayl. Juice and some cakes." He smiled. "But what could I advise you upon? You seem to have your public image pretty well honed. Smart, efficient, and noble. You can't buy an image like that."

"We feel that our troops should have a little more comfort in life and we're aware how much weight your advice carries with key members of the Defense Department," said Ordo.

"Ah." Rugeyan's eyes narrowed ever so slightly. "Quite right, too. What do you want out of this, then?"

"Leave."

"More of it?"

"Any of it. They don't get leave. Any downtime is spent in barracks or in training."

"Oh."

"You didn't know that?"

"No, frankly, I didn't. I never asked." Rugeyan actually seemed surprised, or at least he was feigning it very well. "But that's a command decision. They won't bend easily to public servants like me."

Ordo took a glass of brilliant emerald juice handed to him by Rugeyan's young female assistant, who simply stared, eyes scanning him. Kal'buir was right: Civilians never saw clone soldiers face-to-face.

It almost threw him off track. "In strategic terms, the temporary withdrawal of a few thousand troops from the front line makes very little difference," he said. "But I'm sure you know that warfare isn't all about big bangs. There's another front, and that's here." Ordo tapped his temple. "Visible troops around Coruscant. Good for public confidence right now, with the constant threat of terror attacks. And good for our men."

Rugeyan toyed with a cake studded with chunks of glistening red and purple fruit. "I admit that the Senate would like some positive results on the terror attacks. It's making the administration look helpless. Much as I respect our colleagues in the CSF, they're not making much progress, are they?"

Skirata cut in. "But if they did, it would be very timely, wouldn't it? And I'm sure that you'd be told about it right away."

This was the interesting thing about Skirata. He could speak around corners. He was an articulate self-educated man, and that always came as a surprise to outsiders. Jusik fell for the rough-diamond act all too often, but Vau wasn't the only Mando with a razor-sharp mind and a fine line in rhetoric. Skirata could switch from Mando hard man to politician without a visible change of gear.

Ordo found every conversation an education.

"I always appreciate information," Rugeyan said. "Especially when I know it'll serve some real purpose."

"So," Ordo said, and drained his glass. The assistant popped in again as if she'd been staking out the office and re-filled it. "We have two battalions of the Forty-first Elite back in barracks and an assault ship's crew waiting on a refit. If someone could come up with the idea of an extended leave with the men allowed and encouraged to go off base, I think everyone would benefit. And maybe some credits to spend, because they don't get paid. A nice feel good story for the media."

Rugeyan's expression flickered briefly from professional neutrality to surprise and then back again. "Never even thought of that, you know. So is this going to involve your men? The RCs?"

Rugeyan pronounced it Arr-Sees, like a soldier would. It was internal jargon and not for outsiders. Skirata blinked for a second, and then shifted down a gear into Mando mercenary again,

albeit it one in a better mood than usual.

"They're not RCs. Arr-See sounds like a droid to the public. My boys are men. So please refer to them as Republic Commandos, not just commandos, and the other forces as troopers, or by their rank." He slurped his caf enthusiastically. "Words like RCs, cannon fodder, grunts, gropes, squad-dies, pongoes, meat cans, white jobs, or even shiny boys create the wrong impression. Terminology is everything, I find."

Rugeyan was actually making notes on a sheet of flimsi. He took no offense at all, not visibly anyway.

"Very useful," he said. "Leave this to me."

"And I'm sure Captain Obrim has your comlink code at the very top of his list, should there be any good news for you."

Skirata smiled and looked as if he meant it. Ordo nursed his glass, leaving a little juice at the bottom to fend off more instant attention from Rugeyan's assistant.

"An inevitable fact of life is that some of us are doomed to do the dirty thankless work in the shadows while someone else gets the headlines," Rugeyan said.

"Headlines can be overrated," said Skirata. "The captain has another meeting to attend, but thank you for your time."

It was all very civilized: another coded conversation where the unspeakable had somehow been spoken. And it was all a far cry from the sweaty, anxious hours at the Galactic City spaceport a few months before, when Rugeyan had been no more than a severe irritant and Skirata had taken a rather physical dislike to him. Now the man seemed to have a clear and almost uncanny grasp of exactly what he was being asked to do, and although he must have had questions, he never asked them. It almost made him a soldier.

The descent in the turbolift felt like a rapid insert via gun-ship as they plunged down a hundred

levels.

Skirata began laughing quietly and pinched the bridge of his nose, eyes shut. "I wish I'd realized that Rugeyan would respond to a simple request. Then I'd never have—well, you know."

"If you hadn't captured his attention in such an assertive way at the siege, perhaps he wouldn't have been so accom-modating today. That man might even make a useful member of an intelligence bureau one day."

"He just needed me to show some understanding of his own position. Sometimes I think people want more from me than they actually do. So where does this leave us, Ord'ika?"

Ordo counted off on the fingers of his glove. "Smoke-screen in progress. Team on standby, split into watches. Ob-servation points and potential operational houses collated and identified. Armory and logistics in place. Confirmed link between devices and prisoners."

"But?"

"All dressed up and nowhere to go. Still a large gap in the intel."

"What did the droid crack out of the download from Atin?" Skirata asked.

"A lot of data that needs combing by hand when we have other intel to put alongside it. It's just lists of businesses like any transport company would keep. Nothing leaps out. Sometimes I wish we had to deal with Weequays. They'd label things TOP SECRET and give us a clue."

"Why is this proving so hard? Fierfek, son, Kom'rk and Jaing can track a flitnat across the galaxy and we can't find a gang in our own backyard."

"I'm sorry, Kal'buir." I should be able to crack this. I'm letting him down. "This is a double line of surveillance, I'm afraid—the terror network itself and whoever is providing their recce intelligence—and

that could be inside our own organization, or in the CSF, and the latter is going to be harder to identify."

"I'm not blaming you. It's just an expression."

"And my brothers do know the identities of the flitnats they're looking for, of course."

"Only one option left, then. Explore every line and dot, and hope for a lucky break while we're doing it to speed things up."

"Unless Vau gets lucky."

"Time to break out the emergency Jedi, I think, son."

"Oh-eight-hundred tomorrow," said Ordo.

"Still got time to do some more preparation, then. Let's go and see a Hutt who owes me one. Well, a lot more than one, actually. And let's pick up Sev and Scorch so they can see how it's done."

There were things Skirata could do that not even a com-mando or an ARC could, and one of those was to work his contacts.

Ordo committed it all to memory. Tonight would be highly educational.

Qibbu's Hut, entertainment district, Coruscant; Delta recce troop in attendance

Garish green light framed the pulsing orange sign above the entrance. Qibbu opened late: it was already dark, and Skirata thought it was high time the bar welcomed new customers.

"I'm only a simple trained killer," Sev said, "but some -thing tells me never to eat in a restaurant with a bad pun over the door."

"You haven't tried the food yet," Skirata said. "That'll leave no room for doubt."

"Or dessert," Scorch said. "And did I mention I feel naked?"

"About a dozen times since we left HQ. Get used to it. You can't wear armor all the time."

Ordo drew one blaster. Scorch raised his eyebrows. "I'm being low-key," Ordo said. "Or I'd draw both."

"I really didn't notice you in that shiny white rig at all, sir . . ."

"Listen up, lads." Skirata slid one hand into his pocket to feel for a reassuring meter of durasteel chain and held his right arm straight at his side. He hadn't seen the Hutt in a long time, years before Kamino, and it was bound to be a nasty shock for the old slug.

"Qibbu might be surprised to see me, especially as he still owes me a fee. So no heroics. I can handle him." Skirata gestured for the two commandos to stand back in the open lobby. "Look casual and read the menu. And don't throw up."

The sprawling maze of rooms passed for a restaurant, bar, and hotel, but only if the Coruscant food hygiene inspectors were looking the other way. It was perfect in every way if you wanted not to be bothered. There was a certain anonymity in the rough end of the entertainment district.

It was just the kind of place where an awful lot of clone soldiers could pass in and out without drawing comment, at least after the novelty wore off. Skirata leaned on the inter-com.

Qibbu the Hutt was at home. He just knew it. It was the skinny Duros suddenly standing in the doorway with a blaster that gave the game away.

"We're closed," the Duros said.

"And I'm Kal Skirata."

The Duros' gray fist closed on the blaster. "And I said we're closed."

Ordo swung around the door and leveled his blaster in the Duros' flat face. "No, I do believe you're open, and we'd like to see tonight's special, please."

The Duros paused long enough to gape, which was proba-bly what saved his life. If he'd lifted the blaster, Ordo would have killed him. Ordo grabbed his wrist anyway and twisted it almost as a side effect of wresting the blaster from his grip, and there was the unmistakable snick of cracking bone. The Duros squealed.

"I think that means come right in," Skirata said, and made sure he had his blaster in his waistband. Qibbu might have shelled out some credits for competent help after all. He wandered into the deserted restaurant and noted that the car-pet didn't quite stick to his boots as much as it used to. He wandered behind the bar, as much to check that nobody was lurking there to give him a Very Unhappy Hour as to see if the glasses were clean.

Ordo's blaster whirred faintly as he raised it. When Skirata looked up, Sev and Scorch were covering one door each. Good lads. They'd all do fine out in the big bad world.

"Ka-a-al .. ." Qibbu inched out of the kitchens, a waft of exotic spice and burned fat escaping as the Hutt eased him-self into the bar area. "So you come for your bounty at last. I thought you would never come. And you have staff and a nice jacket now . . . must be doing better business, yes?"

"Colleagues," Skirata said. "I'll take hard currency, but if you haven't got that, we can negotiate."

Qibbu was unattractive even by Hutt standards. His tongue flicked across his slit of a mouth, and he edged to the bar to slither onto his dais and pour a couple of drinks.

"Your boys want ale?" Qibbu indicated a jar of pickled gorg on the bar. "Snacks?"

"No thanks." Sev and Scorch were a chorus, eyes fixed on the jar of very dead amphibians. "Couldn't manage another thing."

"Okay, you and I talk, then, Ka-a-al."

"I take it you haven't got ready currency?"

"Not that much. Give me time, and—"

"Let me make it easy for both of us." Skirata pulled up a stool and sat down to bring himself level with the Hutt's eyes. "I'm a tourist. Can my boys take a look at your rooms? If we like what we see, we'll stay for a while."

Skirata indicated the turbolift. Sev and Scorch drew their blasters and disappeared for a recce. Ordo locked the main doors again and paced slowly around the bar, probably committing the layout and every detail to memory. A right little holorecorder, Ordo: another superb advantage of perfect re-call.

"So . . . you have a project in hand, Ka-a-al?"

"I might have."

"Does it involve . . . dead people?"

"Not this time. I just need a place where my colleagues and I can relax and not be bothered for a while."

Qibbu's yellow slit-pupiled eyes followed Ordo around the bar. Skirata could never see yellow eyes now without think-ing of Kaminoans.

"Your colleagues are soldiers."

"Yes. They like to make the most of their leave. They don't get much."

"So they do little . . . jobs for you," Qibbu said.

"Yes, and none of those jobs need inconvenience you. You won't get any visits from CSF, because my boys behave themselves."

"You just want . . . peace and quiet for them to do those lit-tle jobs for you."

You have no idea how much, Slug-Breath. "Yes."

"In exchange, you write off that small sum I owe you?"

"I might." It was five hundred thousand credits plus inter-est. He didn't need it now. There was a time when he would have risked his life and that of anyone who got in the way to pick up a fee like that. He'd been a successful debt enforcer for a brief time, but it wasn't proper soldiering. "I might also bring some trade your way, because there could be a lot of troopers in town who want to visit somewhere relaxing."

"You offer me more than I owe you. There is a catch."

"The catch," Skirata said, feeling the negotiation slipping away from him, "is that you'll guarantee no trouble here. And my definition of trouble is quite exacting."

"No unwanted attention."

"And no nonsense from your usual low-life clientele. No taking advantage of my soldier boys. As much food as they want—fresh and properly cooked, please—and clean rooms. They don't drink much but they do tend to like a lot of caf and sweet beverages."

Qibbu blinked slowly, still apparently distracted by Ordo, who was taking an interest in the kitchen.

"Mind if I do a food hygiene inspection?" Ordo said, and disappeared into the kitchens without waiting for a reply.

Qibbu's gaze slid toward the kitchen and then back to Skirata. "You ask for a lot for your shiny boys."

Skirata closed his hand around the end of the chain in his pocket. The slug needed to learn who had the upper hand in this negotiation. "That's because they deserve a lot, you owe me a lot, and if you mess me about you'll have a lot more trouble than you could possibly imagine—"

Skirata's buildup to giving Qibbu a serious smacking was suddenly interrupted by a stifled shriek from the kitchens. A young Twi'lek female came rushing out the doors. He realized Ordo must have startled her. It might have been the twin blasters.

"And only respectable females allowed in the bar," Skirata added. But the Twi'lek looked terrified in a way that said she was used to being that way, and he didn't like that at all. He knew Qibbu only too well. "She doesn't look like your usual . . . kitchen staff."

The girl huddled against the far wall, staring at Ordo, who merely walked out and holstered his blaster with an exaggerated gesture. He didn't do reassuring very well at the best of times, let alone with women. It was time to teach him more social graces when carrying firearms.

The Hutt gurgled a laugh. "Females . . . you know how they are—"

Enough. Skirata pulled his durasteel chain out in one movement and whipped it around Qibbu's neck, twisting it in his fist as he wrenched the quivering bulk toward him. The metal cut into the creature's soft fat, leaving a white margin where the blood could no longer circulate.

"Listen, shag," Skirata said, feeling his anger tightening his throat muscles. There was no worse insult for a Hutt than slave. "I like Twi'lek females. Honest ones, the sort that don't thief, or worse. So no mistreating the staff or I might discover what a trade union activist I can be. Just look after any of my boys who pass this way. Eniki? You step out of line and there'll be a new batch of fresh blubber products at the market first thing in the morning." He twisted the chain a little tighter. "J'hagwa na yoka, Fatboy. No trouble."

Qibbu's third eyelid flicked across his reptilian eye like a windscreen wiper. "Your pretty shiny boys die anyway, sooner or later."

That was it. Skirata jerked the Hutt's head down and brought his knee up in Qibbu's face as hard as he could with a wet thwack. He didn't need this thing to remind him of that and mock their sacrifice. Qibbu spluttered ammonia-scented saliva, moaning.

"Are we going to get good service at your establishment?" Skirata said, ignoring the pain in his kneecap. "Or would you prefer to pay me half a million creds plus nine years' interest right now?"

"Tagwa, lorda."

"That's more like it." He loosened his choke hold a little. "A bit of customer focus is good for business."

Qibbu balked visibly. "I lose profit."

"You'll lose a lot more than that if you mess around with me. I've always wanted to see if Hutts really can regenerate body parts." Skirata tightened the chain again. "Ke nu jurIcadir sha Mando 'ade ."

Don't mess with Mandalorians. It wasn't bad advice.

Qibbu was no linguist but Skirata knew tone could convey a great deal even to an animal, and maybe even to a Hutt. He hoped the lack of circulation in Qibbu's neck was translating for him.

"Tagwa . . . Sergeant," Qibbu said, and let out a long wet gasp as Skirata released the chain.

Sev and Scorch emerged from the turbolift again and gave Skirata the thumbs-up.

"Ideal for a relaxing break, Sarge," Scorch said. "Lovely clear views, platform to park a speeder or six, and lots of room to stretch our legs. A whole floor of rooms at the top, in fact."

Good defensive visibility, easy access and escape, and the right layout for moving around and storing kit and ordnance. Excellent.

"If it's good enough for my colleagues, it'll be good enough for me," Skirata said. "You want to take a look just to make sure, Ordo?"

Ordo shook his head, still seeming wary of the Twi'lek fe-male. "I'll go with the majority."

"So, long-stay rates?" Skirata asked.

"As . . . discussed," Qibbu said.

Skirata slid off the stool and wiped the chain clean of Qibbu's slime before coiling it and putting it in his pocket again. He was concerned about the Twi'lek, though. Civil-ians were hardly his prime concern on this operation, but it didn't cost anything to be courteous.

He walked over to her. She was still cowering. He squatted down almost instinctively: he saw six scared little boys wait-ing to be reconditioned. "I'm Kal, ma'am," he said. "What's your name?"

She didn't meet his eyes. She had that way of looking off slightly to one side that he thought he'd seen too many times before. "Laseema."

"Well, Laseema, if your boss isn't treating you well, you let me know. And I'll have a word with him." He smiled as best he could. "And none of my boys will give you any prob-lems, either, okay?"

"Okay," she said shakily. Her lekku were moving slightly, but Skirata couldn't understand the unspoken language they conveyed. She might just have been twitching out of fear. "Okay."

Skirata gave her as reassuring a smile as he could manage and moved to the doors. "We'll be back tomorrow to move some stuff in. Have the top floor ready for us, will you? Nice and clean."

"And fresh flowers," Scorch said.

They ambled back to the speeder and set off for Arca Bar -racks, settling into an automated skylane and merging into the stream of glittering taillights. Coruscant was lovely at night, just as Fi said. Skirata had never thought about it much before.

He nudged Sev. "Good operational house, then."

"Tailor-made. It'll take us a day to move the kit in discreet amounts, but we can access via the landing platform when it's dark again."

"Does our host get nervous about storing ordnance?" Ordo said.

"He's a Hutt," said Skirata. "He's stored a lot worse. And what he doesn't know won't keep him awake at night."

Scorch seemed impressed. "You really were a bit of a bad boy in your past, weren't you, Sarge?"

"What d'you mean, past?" Sev said.

And they laughed. They were perfect special forces troops, very bad boys in their own right, but they had never dealt with the criminal underworld—and crime was an in-evitable partner of terrorism. It was one reason why Skirata didn't feel one scrap of misgiving about going bandit him-self.

Fierfek, he'd impressed them. The Delta boys were emerg-ing from their closed, tight-knit exclusivity and settling into the larger team. That was one problem solved.

There was still the operation itself, of course.

And keeping an eye on Atin, Vau, and Sev.

And introducing Etain to an element of war that wasn't re-motely noble.

And making sure that everyone came out of it alive. Skirata reached over the back of the seat and gave Sev and Scorch a playful swat, then nudged Ordo beside him.

"I promised you all a night out," he said. "When we get this cleaned up, Zey's going to get a really big mess bill from the officers' club."

"Maybe we shouldn't wait until then," Scorch said. "You never know what's around the corner."

No. You didn't. You never did.

9

When the enemy is a droid or a wet with a weapon, then killing them is easy. But in this game you're operating among civvies, on your home ground. You could be working

right next door to the enemy. They might even be people you know and like. But they're still the enemy and you'll have to slot them just the same. There's no Mandalorian word for "hero," and that's just as well, because however many lives you save in black ops, you will never, ever be a hero. Deal with it.

—Sergeant Kal Skirata, teaching counterterrorist tactics to Republic Commando companies Alpha through Epsilon, Kamino, three years before Geonosis

Arca Company Barracks parade ground, 0730 hours, 371 days after Geonosis

The missile skimmed the top of Etain's head and bounced off the Force-shield she had instinctively thrown up to protect her face.

Jusik skidded to a halt in front of her, sweat dripping off the end of his nose, a flattened alloy rod clutched in one hand. There was a smear of blood across his cheek, and she wasn't sure if it was his.

"Sorry!" He looked elated. "Look, why don't you sit over there? It's safer."

Etain indicated the blood. "And why don't you use your Force powers?" she said. "This is a dangerous sport."

"That's cheating," Jusik said, lobbing the small plastoid sphere back into the knot of commandos. They pounced on the object like a hunting pack and jostled each other ferociously to whack the thing with rods, trying to drive it hard against the barrack wall.

Etain had no idea what the game was called, if it had a name at all. Nor did it seem to have any rules: the ball, such as it was, was being hit, kicked, and thrown as the whim took the players.

And the teams were Niner, Scorch, Fixer, and Darman against Fi, Atin, Sev, and Boss. Skirata insisted that they played in mixed teams.

Several other commandos had paused while crossing the parade ground to watch. The battle was conducted in grim silence except for the clash of rods, gasping breath, and occasional approving shouts of "Nar dralshy'a!"—Put your back into it! —and "Kandosii!"—which, Jusik had explained, had been appropriated colloquially to mean "classy" rather than "noble."

They had all become much more ferociously Mando since she had first met them. It was a phenomenon that made sense given the specific nature of their duties, but it still left her feeling that they were becoming strangers again. Working so closely with Skirata appeared to have focused their minds on a people who seemed to have the ultimate freedom.

Even Darman had fallen happily into it. He was utterly engrossed in the game, shoulder-charging Boss out of the way and knocking Jusik flat. There was a shout of "Kandosii!" as the ball thudded against the wall, two meters above the ground.

Then Skirata emerged from the doorway. Etain didn't have to take any hints from the Force as to his state of mind.

'Armor!' he yelled. His voice could fill a parade ground. The commandos froze as one. He did not look amused. "I said wear some armor! No injuries! You hear me?"

He strode across to Jusik with surprising speed for a man with a damaged leg and came to a halt with his face centimeters from the Jedi's. He dropped his voice, but not by much.

"Sir, I regret to have to tell you that you're a dik'ut."

"Sorry, Sergeant." Jusik was a contrite scrap of bloody robes and sweaty hair. "My fault. Won't happen again."

"No injuries. Not now. Okay, sir?"

"Understood, Sergeant."

Skirata nodded and then grinned, ruffling Jusik's hair just as he did his troops'. "You're definitely ori'atin, Bard'ika. Just don't get yourself killed."

Jusik beamed, clearly delighted. Skirata had not only told him that he was exceptionally tough, but he had used the most affectionate form of his name: now he was "Little Bar-dan," and thus one of Skirata's clan. He jogged off after the commandos and disappeared inside the building.

Skirata ambled across to Etain and sat down next to her on the bench. "He's a gutsy little di'kut, isn't he?"

So it wasn't only a term of abuse, then. "If there wasn't a war on, I suspect that Master Zey would have had a serious word with him by now. Bardan's become very attached."

"Being a loner might make a warrior, but it won't make a soldier."

"Where were you educated?"

Skirata was looking straight ahead rather than at her, and his eyes creased at the corners for a brief moment. "On the street, on the battlefield, and by a bunch of very smart little boys."

Etain smiled. "I wasn't being rude. Just curious."

"Fair enough. I had to analyze and explain everything I taught my Nulls for eight years. It wasn't enough for me to show them the right way to fight. They wanted me to ratio-nalize it. They shredded me with questions. Then they'd feed it all back to me in a way I'd never seen it before. Amazing."

"Do we get to meet them all? Are they all like Ordo?"

"Maybe," Skirata said. "They're deployed in various loca-tions." It was his noncommittal answer: Don't ask. "And they're all of the same caliber, yes."

"So out of a strike team of twelve, you have eleven tough men—atin, yes?—and me. I can't help feeling I'm not going to be much use."

Skirata took out a chunk of something brown and woody and popped it into his mouth. He chewed like a gdan, as if he were gnawing off someone's arm. 'Atin'ade," he corrected. "Oh, you'll be plenty of use. I suspect you'll have the hard-est job of all."

"Whatever it takes."

"I know."

"Sergeant, is this going to become clear at the briefing?"

"It's not a secret. I just want everyone to have the full pic ture at the same time. Then we ship out and disappear."

"I hear you've done that before."

"Cuy 'val Dar. Yes, I've been 'those who no longer exist' before. You get used to it. It has its plus points."

He got up and walked toward the barracks, Etain follow-ing. His limp was far less obvious today.

"How did you hurt your leg?" she asked.

"I didn't follow orders. I ended up with a Verpine shatter gun round through my ankle. Sometimes you need to learn the hard way."

"Never got it fixed?"

"I'll get around to it one day. Come on, breakfast before briefing. Some things sound better on a full stomach."

When the briefing started at 0800, Jusik looked freshly scrubbed, but he was developing a fine black eye. He also seemed delighted. Etain envied him his capacity for finding joy in the most unlikely places, just like Darman did. Omega and Delta appeared to have broken up as squads completely. They took their seats, lounging around in their black body-suits, but they no longer sat in their own tight groups. Atin and Sev still exuded a sense of distance, but Skirata's crash course in being buddies appeared to be working.

There was also the small matter of the Wookiee who had walked in. Skirata directed the creature to a bigger chair and locked the doors. It was the one who'd piloted the taxi. "Ordo, have you swept the room for bugs?"

"Yes, Sergeant."

"Okay, ladies and gentlemen, this is strictly for those in this room. If anyone wants out, now's the time to say."

"Observe the complete lack of movement, Sarge," Scorch said. "Nobody's passing on this one."

"I didn't think so. From now on, there's no General or sir or Sergeant or designation codes, and no Jedi robes. There is no rank. There is no chain of command beyond me. If I'm otherwise engaged or dead then you answer to Ordo. Got it?" The Wookiee threw him two bundles of clothing and he lobbed one each to Etain and Jusik. She caught hers and stared at it, "Plainclothes, kids. You clone lads are just soldiers on leave, and us mongrels are . . . well, Etain can pass for my daughter and Bard 'ika is a useful deadbeat I picked up on my travels. A go fer"

The Wookiee emitted a long and contented trill. "This is Enacca, by the way." Skirata indicated the Wookiee with a polite flourish. "She's our quartermaster and mobility troop—she'll secure supplies and transport for us. You ever worked with Wookiees?"

The commandos shook their heads, wide-eyed.

"Well, everything you've heard is true." He gestured to Ordo, and a holoprojection streamed from the ARC'S glove onto the wall. It was a chart with arrows and labels on it. "So here's what we have so far. One, we have a point of origin for the explosives. Two, we think we have someone in GAR logistics or support, or in the CSF, who is either passing information or being careless with it. Now, what we don't have is a link in the chain between the following terror cells: materials to bomb manufacture; bomb manufacture to placement cell; and placement cell to recce and surveillance cell—in other words, the ones who tell them where to place the device and when to detonate it."

Ordo had his projection arm resting on his chair. "And Vau is trying to extract at least one link from the cell Omega lifted."

"But they might not even know what that link is," Skirata said. "It's common to use the equivalent of a dead letter drop to deliver stuff. The prisoners tested positive for explosives, so they might be the manufacturers, but I'd assume the devices are made on Coruscant because it's simpler to ship bulk explosives than complete bombs, given that you can't pretend bombs are for mining use, although neither is easy. So our best guess is that they're the procurement cell that buys the raw material."

Jusik had his head cocked on one side. "I take it that if we don't know this after a day, then Vau is not having much suc-cess with his interrogation. May I volunteer to help him? Jedi have some persuasive powers as well as ways of uncov-ering facts."

"I know," Skirata said. "That's why Etain's going to do it. I need you out and about at the moment."

Etain's stomach somersaulted. Is this a test? Jusik was watching her cautiously: he could definitely sense her dis-comfort. Perhaps he had tried to do the decent thing and save her from the duty. Or perhaps he was so caught up in being one of the boys that he really wanted to have a crack at a pris-oner. Jusik had his own wary relationship with the dark side, it seemed.

"Okay," Etain said. You've killed. You've killed hand-to-hand, and you've killed by unleashing missiles. On Qilura, under deep cover, you stabbed and crushed and cut, and taught the local guerrillas to do the same. And now you worry about manipulating minds? "I'll do whatever I can."

"Good," Skirata said, and moved on as if she had simply volunteered to cook dinner. "Now, the data Atin sliced is just a list of thirty-five thousand companies using the freight service that Vau's guests were apparently hitching a ride with. That means a lot of physical checking we can't do ourselves. So Obrim's running it through his database—his personal, special one—to see if any of them have form in customs irregularities, shady dealings, or even a speeding ticket. While he does that, we ship out. Jusik, Enacca is going to turn you into the galaxy's scruffiest taxi pilot, and the rest of you can draw your extra kit—by which I mean dis-creet body armor, plainclothes rig, and civilian weapons."

"Aww, Sarge . . ."

"Fi, you'll love it. You might even get to wear Hoka's hel-met."

"Just for you, then, Sarge."

"Good boy. Okay, we all RV back here at twenty-one-hundred hours when it's nice and dark." Skirata gestured to Ordo to kill the holoprojection and then beckoned to Etain. "General, Ordo—with

me."

He led them into the passage and, instead of taking her into a quiet alcove to discuss matters, simply hurried her down the length of the corridor and out onto the parade ground, where yet another battered speeder with darkened transparisteel windscreens was waiting.

"Are you starting up a used-speeder dealership with Enacca?" Jokes always seemed to work for Fi, but Etain found they offered her no comfort at all. "They don't draw attention, though, I'll admit that."

"Get in. Time to go to work."

Like the clone army, she had become very good at follow -ing orders. Ordo took the speeder at a sedate pace into the main sky lanes and dropped it into a gap in a route heading south.

"This is where it gets difficult, Etain," Skirata said.

In a way, she knew what was coming. "Yes."

"This is harder than taking on a column of battle droids and playing the hero." Skirata was still chewing the ruiik. She could smell it on his breath, sweet and floral. "I won't insult your intelligence. I want you to torture a man. It's the first in-telligence break we've had in months and we need to make the most of it. Men died making sure we got those prison-ers."

She wasn't sure if it was a test of her loyalty or not. It was certainly something that Skirata knew would be the ultimate line for a Jedi to cross. But Jedi crossed the lines of decency all the time, and it was supposed to be fine as long as you didn't commit violence out of anger, or dare to love.

She was finding it harder to follow her path than ever before, and yet she was now clearer about her own convictions than she had ever been in her life.

She was aware of Ordo, too.

He appeared perfectly calm in the pilot's seat, but the ed-dies and deep dark pools in the Force around him spoke of a man who was not at ease with himself or the world. Great peaks of fear and pain and helpless trust and desolation and . . . and . . . sheer overwhelming speed and complexity hit Etain like a spray of cold water. He felt as foreign as a Hutt or a Weequay or a Twi'lek.

He was a man in frequent agony. His mind was racing at full throttle, and it felt as if it never stopped.

She must have been staring at him. "Are you all right, ma'am?" he asked, still veneered in calm.

"I'm fine," she said, swallowing hard. "What . . . what can I possibly do that Walon Vau can't?"

"Are you ready to hear some unpleasant things?" Skirata said.

"I have to be."

He rubbed his forehead slowly. "You can train people to resist interrogation. That's a fancy phrase for torture, and I don't like using it. I know, because I've done it, and hard-line terrorists get trained much like soldiers do. But they don't get trained to resist Jedi. And that gives you a psychological advantage as well as a real one."

"Nikto are supposed to be tough."

"Humans can be tough, too."

He seemed distressed. It was severe enough for her to feel the Force around him become that dark vortex again. "Kal, who's finding this more unpleasant, you or me?"

"Me."

"I thought so."

"It comes back to you at times like this."

"So who . . . trained Omega?" She felt the faintest shimmer of distress in Ordo now.

"Me," said Skirata.

"Oh."

"Would you have let anyone else do it if you were me?"

"No." She knew immediately; she didn't even have to think about it. It would have been an act of abandonment, letting someone else do the dirty work to salve your own conscience, with the same outcome. "No, I wouldn't."

"Well . . ." He shut his eyes for a moment. "If I can train my boys, then you should have no trouble doing what Vau can't."

"Tell me what's at stake."

"For who? The Republic?" Kal asked. "I think it's marginal, to be honest. In real terms, terrorism doesn't even dent it. Casualties in the thousands, that's all. It's fear of it that does the damage."

"So why are you in so deep?"

"Who's getting hit hardest? Clone troopers."

"But thousands of troops are dying in the front line every day. Numerically—"

"Yeah, I can't do much about the war. I trained quite a few men to stay alive. But all that's left for me is to do what I can, where I can."

"Personal war, isn't it?" Etain said.

"You think so? I don't care if the Republic falls or not. I'm a mercenary. Everyone's my potential employer."

"So where does the anger come from? I know anger, you see. As Jedi we guard against it all the time."

"You won't like the answer."

"I don't like a lot of things lately, but I still have to deal with them."

"Okay. Day by day, I get more bitter when I see Mandalorian men—and that's what they are, whether you like it or not—used and discarded in a war in which they have no stake." Skirata, sitting right behind Ordo, put his hand gently on the captain's armored shoulder. "But not on my watch."

Etain had no answer to that. She hadn't articulated it in racial terms, and she knew that Mandalorians weren't a race as such. But there hadn't been one day since she had parted from Omega Squad on Qiilura nine months ago that she hadn't agonized over the use of soldiers who had no choice, no rights, and no future in the Republic that they gave their lives to defend.

It was wrong.

There was a point somewhere at which the means did not justify the ends, no matter what the numbers argued. Like this violent, passionate little man beside her, Etain didn't refuse her role in the war out of principle, because that would have been no more than shutting her eyes to it.

Men would still die.

And if the Jedi Council could accept the need to let that happen to save the Republic, then she could sink to a level she had never believed possible to save soldiers she knew as people.

"I'll try not to let you down," she said.

"You mean me?" said Skirata.

And you, she thought.

Safe house, Brewery zone, Coruscant Quadrant J-47, 1000 hours, 371 days after Geonosis

Skirata had been expecting the safe house to be in another seedy part of the city where unusual activity was part of the landscape.

But Enacca had surpassed herself this time. The property was a small apartment in a refurbished quarter known as the Brewery; the construction droids were still working on some of the buildings, facing them with tasteful durasteel wrought-work. Zey was going to have a fit when he saw the bill for this one land on his desk.

"I think that's what our brothers might call kandosii," Ordo said, bringing the speeder up to the landing platform. It had a discreet awning to shield it from view, although Coruscant was so

traffic-packed that enemy surveillance from tall buildings—Skirata's dread—was less of a threat than usual here. Lines of sight were frequently obscured. "I'll be back later. Errands to run, Kal'buir."

When the lobby doors closed behind them, the constant throb and hum of Coruscant was completely silenced. Ah. Top-range soundproofing. Enacca was a very smart Woo-kiee. Vau's job could be noisy. There was no point upsetting the neighbors in cheaper parts of town that had less efficient soundproofing.

And it was the last place Orjul's colleagues would come looking for him.

Etain had her arms folded tightly across her chest, her light brown wavy hair scraped back in a braid except for the wiry bits that had escaped and sprung into coils. Even her new civilian clothes already looked as if she had slept in them. She had a veil of freckles and an awkward gait; just a schoolgirl armed with a lightsaber, nothing more.

"You up to this, ad 'ika?" Little one: Skirata slipped acci-dentally into being the reassuring father. But he reserved judgment. Like him, she might just have made a point of looking a lot less trouble than she actually was. "If not, walk away now" And if she did, what would he have to do? She al-ready knew dangerous numbers of people and places.

"No. I'm not backing out now."

He thought she might suddenly reveal a powerful charisma or sweetness that would explain why this scrap of skin, bone, and unkempt hair had so riveted Darman. But she was just a kid, a Jedi kid with a lot of responsibility that showed in her young face and old eyes.

Skirata pressed on the entry buzzer into the main apart-ment, and after a moment the doors whispered apart. The strong smell that hit him on the moist air reminded him of walking into a barn full of frightened animals. It was so dis-tinctive that he almost didn't notice the scent of the strill. But Mird was nowhere to be seen.

Vau, sitting at the table, looked tired. He still seemed like a professor who wasn't very happy with his class, but the physical effort showed in deeper lines from nose to mouth and the way he was drumming his fingers on the table in front of him. It was his trick for staying awake.

The man who had his head resting on the same table in front of him didn't look awake at all. Vau leaned forward and lifted the man's head by his hair, peered into his face, and set him down carefully again.

"You're the relief watch, then, Jedi?" Vau got up and stretched extravagantly, joints clicking, and indicated the empty chair. "All yours."

Etain looked surprised. Skirata had expected her to register horror at the blood spatter on the otherwise pristine cream walls, but she just looked at Vau as if she was expecting to see someone else.

"Where are the other two?" Skirata asked.

"Nikto number one is M'truli, and he's secured in the small bedroom." Vau was perfectly polite: this was just business after all, and even Skirata felt too centered on the task at hand to resume their feud where it had left off. "Nikto number two is Gysk, and he's in the study."

"Your tunic could do with a wash."

"It's the little horns. You can't punch a Nikto. Had to use something else."

Etain sat down in Vau's seat and placed her hands flat on the table, still looking puzzled. Skirata leaned against the wall. Vau wandered into the 'fresher: water tinkled into a basin.

"You want to tell me what you know," Etain said soothingly. "You want to give me the names of the people you operate with."

Orjul twitched. He raised his head from the table with some difficulty and stared into her face for a second. Then he spat in it.

Etain jerked back, visibly shocked, and wiped away the pink-stained spittle with one hand. Then she composed her-self again.

"Keep your stinking mind tricks to yourself, Jedi," Orjul hissed.

Skirata didn't expect her to break at that point. And she didn't: she simply sat there, although he knew it wasn't blank inactivity. She had been trained from childhood just like the clone army, except the first weapon she seized would be her control of the Force and her ability to read it like clamoring comlink signals.

Darman had told him. She could tell us apart right away by how we felt and thought, Sarge. Wouldn't that be a handy trick to have?

"Can I see the Nikto?" she asked suddenly.

Vau came out of the 'fresher, wiping his face on a fluffy white towel. "Help yourself." He gave Skirata a you-know best look and unlocked the doors for her. "They're securely trussed. You know we keep them from talking to each other, don't you?"

"I worked that out," Etain said.

She disappeared into one room for a minute and then came out and went into the other. When she emerged again, she walked up to Skirata and Vau and lowered her head.

"I'm pretty sure those Nikto have no information, and know they don't have it," she said quietly.

"People have useful information all the time and don't know it," Skirata said. "We piece the apparently useless stuff together and come up with connections."

"What I mean is that they have this distinct sense that they're just afraid of dying."

Vau shrugged. "So much for Nikto grit, eh?"

"Every creature avoids death. The difference is that Orjul is afraid of breaking. It feels different to me. It's not animal dread. It's not as deep in the Force." Etain had her fingers meshed in that Jedi way that made her look as if she were wringing her hands. "I might as well concentrate on him. He has information he's afraid to reveal."

They watched her walk the few meters back to the main room and settle down at the table opposite Orjul again and stare at him.

Vau shrugged. "Oh well. At least I can have a nap while she's minding the shop. Then I can get back to work with more tangible methods."

There was a sharp gasp from Orjul and Vau looked around. Whatever Etain was doing, she wasn't even touching him. Just staring.

"Kal, those people scare me more than Orjul does," Vau said. "I'm just going to get my head down for a couple of hours. Wake me if she gets anywhere—or kills him, of course."

It was about 1030 in the morning, when people were going about mundane business in the city. It felt like an odd time of day to be conducting an interrogation. Skirata some-how felt they were always carried out in some permanent night.

And Etain showed every sign of being up to the task.

From time to time, she would lower her head as if to try to get a better view of Orjul's expression while he sat facedown at the table, fingers knotted in his pale hair as if he had a blinding headache. Skirata wanted to ask her what she was doing to him but he was worried it would break her concentration.

And she was fixed completely on the task in hand. Her blink rate had slowed so much that she

appeared to be frozen, except for the pulse in her throat. Orjul would occasionally pant and squeal, writhing as if he were attempting to crawl into the very surface of the table.

Skirata walked away and went to stare at the Nikto for a while. When he came back into the room, Orjul was making little hiccupping sobs. Etain, face level with his, was talking quietly to him.

"Can you see it, Orjul? Can you see what happens?" Skirata watched.

"Orjul ..."

The man whined exactly like a strill, a thin animal noise. "I can't . . ."

"Fear of being wrong is worse than pain, isn't it? It just eats you and you can't shut it off. Are you right? Or are you as bad as the Republic you hate? Are we really the enemy, or are you? Look at the helpless pawns you kill."

So that was what she was doing. Skirata had wondered if she was using her Force powers to cause real physical pain. But she had cut to the chase and re-created the stuff that pain did to you anyway: it made you fear for your sanity long before your life.

He had to hand it to her. It was nonlethal and not that far beyond the usual mind influence. Maybe she was struggling to find an ethical limit in her own mind. Maybe it was her own nightmare, the worst thing she could conceive.

She kept it up for an hour. He had no idea whether she was suggesting terrible images and consequences in his mind, or if she was simply flooding him with adrenaline against his wishes, but whatever it was it was exhausting him and her with it. Eventually Orjul broke down sobbing, and Etain shuddered and looked disoriented as if coming out of a trance.

Skirata grabbed Vau's shoulder and shook him awake. "Get in there. She's broken him down enough for you to finish the job."

Vau looked at his chrono. "Not bad. What's up? Don't want to let her face the real consequences?"

"Just do it, will you?"

Vau swung his legs off the bed and stalked into the main room to usher Etain from the chair and steer her and Skirata toward the doors. "Go and have some fizzadc, Jedi." He turned to Orjul, who was staring after Etain with wide-set eyes. "She's just stepping out for some refreshment. She'll be back later."

Skirata caught Etain's elbow. He wasn't used to grabbing small people: his lads were solid muscle, bigger and stronger than Etain. He felt as if he were clutching a kid's arm. He sat her down on the little bench at the back of the landing plat-form and took out his comlink to call for transport.

"No, I'm going back in," said Etain.

"Only if Vau calls us back."

"Kal ..."

"Only if he really needs you. Okay?"

They were still waiting for Ordo to collect them when Etain flinched and then looked back at the lobby doors.

They opened and Vau wandered out, rubbing his eyes. There was a distinctive tang of ozone clinging to him, like a discharged blaster.

"Retail zone, Quadrant B-Eighty-five," said Vau simply. He held out his datapad with coordinates. "But he hasn't given me a date, if he knows one. He was supposed to drop the explosives off in the warehouse, and someone would be along to collect it. He never knew who."

Skirata sniffed the ozonic scent again and switched to Mando 'a, although he was sure Etain had flinched because she had sensed what had happened.

"Gar ru kyrattut kaysh, di'kut: tion'tneh kaysh rujehaati?" You killed him, you moron: what if he was lying?

Vau made an irritated pfft sound. "Ni ru kyratnu Niktose. Meh Orjul jehaati, kaysh kar'tayli me 'ni yen kyannt kaysh." I killed the Nikto. If Orjul's lying, he knows I'll kill him.

Orjul would be dead sooner or later anyway. No prisoners: not on this run. It was amazing how many people overlooked the inevitable while hoping for a way out.

Etain said nothing. She almost bolted for the speeder when Ordo settled it down on the platform. Skirata settled beside her. She simply seemed subdued.

"Result?" Ordo said calmly, helmet on the seat beside him, eyes straight ahead.

"Potential drop-off location," said Skirata. "Someone might be expecting to collect a stash of explosives. So we'd better have something ready for them to collect."

"Intel doesn't suggest they've noticed the loss of the con-signment yet."

"Well, if the cells are as isolated for security reasons as we think, then there's nobody to notice for a while, is there?"

"There's the small matter of getting hold of a cache of ex-plosives, but we could make this work for us."

"I can hear the cogs working, son." Skirata patted Etain's hand. "And you did fine, ad'ika." Ordo glanced over his shoulder and then appeared to realize that Skirata meant Etain, not him, this time. There was no gender in Mando 'a. "It's never easy."

She accepted his touch without reaction, and then seized to his hand so tightly that he thought she was going to burst into tears or protest. But she maintained the facade of calm, except for that desperate grip on his hand. He had always been a soft touch for a desperate child's grasp.

"Sowing doubt is a very corrosive thing when you're deal-ing with people who believe in causes," said Etain.

Skirata decided he'd have no trouble treating her as his daughter. He forgot his real, estranged daughter all too often.

He'd enjoyed returning to little Ruusaan's excited welcome, but each time he came home from a war, wherever home happened to be, she was unrecognizably older and less ex-cited to see him, as if she didn't know him at all.

But I have sons.

"That's why I stick to causes nobody can take from me," Skirata said.

A Mandalorian's identity and soul depended only on what lived within him. And he relied only on his brother warriors—or his sons.

Clone troopers are well disciplined. Even the Alpha-batch ARC troopers—surly though they are—are predictable, in the sense that Fett gave them precise orders that they continue to obey. But the

commando batches are almost as unpredictable as the Nulls, and the Nulls are as good as being Skirata private army. That 's the problem with having intelligent clones trained by a ragbag of undisciplined thugs—they've turned out at best idiosyncratic, at worst disobedient. But they'll probably win the war for us. Tolerate them.

—Assessment of Republic Commando cadre by Director of Special Forces general Arligan Zey, explaining discrepancies in stores and armory inventory to General Iri Camas

Qibbu's Hut, entertainment sector—strike team operational house—early evening, 371 days after Geonosis

"This is plain unnatural," Boss said. He stood in front of the mirror. "I can't help noticing what this body armor doesn't cover."

"It covers your torso and thighs, and that's where your major blood vessels and organs are." Atin tugged at his tunic. They had all defaulted to GAR-issue fatigues, the standard red tunic and pants. Outside the barracks, the casual rig made Fi feel ludicrously naked. "That's all you need. See? Doesn't show under fabric."

"You can live without an arm," Fi said. "They can always bolt on a new one."

"What about my head?"

"Like I said, they can always replace nonessential parts."

Boss didn't even look up from the inspection of his tunic. "I love this guy. He'll make such great target practice."

He had a point: they were fighting without helmets. That was going to be tough. Everyone from

clone trooper to ARC captain lived by his bucket. The buy'ce was a command and control center in itself.

Fi picked up a coil of razor-sharp wire and stretched it out between his hands. Skirata had taught him to use this: a gar-rote, flicked around the neck—if your target had a neck—and pulled tight to slice or choke. There were all kinds of interesting devices and techniques that Skirata recommended. Other instructors had their own favorites, according to their commando training batches, but Kars were clearly close-range, personal ones. What was it he used to say? You need to be able to fight if you're cornered in just your underpants, son. Nature gave you teeth and fists.

Sergeant Kal sounded as if he knew exactly how that felt. He certainly knew his techniques.

The main room at the top of the seedy hotel—hastily soundproofed with a micro-anechoic coating over the walls and windows—was filling with jostling bodies. Jusik bounced in, clearly pleased with himself, and laid out a row of small beads and devices on the scratched black duraplast table. Atin wandered over and peered at the haul.

"Where'd you get all that, Bardan?"

Jusik trapped one of the beads on his fingertip and held it out to Atin. Fi moved in. Whatever it was, he wanted one, too. "ARC trooper aural stand-alone comlink. One each. No need for your buy'cese or anything too obvious—just stick it in your ear. Plus . . ." The Jedi took out a small transparent sac of what looked like powdered permaglass. "Tracking marker."

"Never seen it before."

"Brand new from the labs. It's called Dust. Microscopic transmitters. Scattered on a battlefield for pretty much invis-ible monitoring. You never know when you might need it."

"You liberated all that from stores?" asked Fi.

"And Procurement Development. It all ended up in my pockets somehow."

"Captain Maze is going to go spare."

"That's okay. Ordo can explain the necessity to him later. He listens to Ordo."

"Where's Skirata?" Sev asked. "Maybe they're having trouble cracking the prisoners."

"Not Vau." Fixer pocketed a comlink bead.

"Why did he need Etain, then?"

"Maybe to show her how it's done."

Fi watched Darman bristle. He waited for his brother to say something, but Dar swallowed whatever retort was form-ing and went on fussing with the fit of the armor plates under his tunic. It wasn't exactly a secret that he had a soft spot for Etain, but nobody teased him about it, either. It was one of those aspects of life that Skirata had taught them about, but that none of them entertained much hope of pursuing.

It was easy back on Kamino, where the real world had never intruded—not beyond the risk of getting killed in training, of course. But the last nine months' exposure to people outside the tight fraternity had made ordinary life feel much more dangerous than combat itself.

Because other people's lives were not ordinary at all.

Fi went to the window, now obscured by a fine film of anti -surveillance gauze, and watched the promenade of tourists and locals along the walkways facing Qibbu's Hut. He didn't envy them their day-to-day existence: Skirata had told his commando batch just how grim and dreary it could be to earn a living, and how much cleaner it was to have a clear purpose in life.

But he hadn't told them how it might feel to watch couples and families of all species. Skirata stuck to the basics. I've been kicked out by so many females that I can't tell you any-thing useful about relationships, so just avoid them if you can. Again, it struck the class as something he said and didn't mean—like the way he called them Wet Droids and said they were here to fight, not socialize. It just meant it was a painful topic for him to face.

He also called them Dead Men. But they were not Dead Men any longer. They had learned to be Mandalorian, and that, Kal said, meant they had a soul and a place in the Mando eternity. Fi thought that was probably worth having.

The doors opened and all eight commandos spun around to train a motley collection of modified civilian blasters on the opening. Security code or not, you could never be too careful. Skirata entered with Ordo and Etain at his heels. The squads lowered their weapons.

"Been shopping," Skirata said cheerfully. And he meant it. Fi expected it to be his usual euphemism for acquiring illicit weapons—or worse—but it seemed he really had been buy-ing things. He tipped a bag of assorted fruit, candies, ices, nuts, and other delicacies that Fi couldn't identify onto the table next to Jusik's haul. "Go on. Fill yer boots."

Delta hung back. Omega didn't. Then Delta appeared to remember that fill yer boots meant "eat your fill." Fi peeled bright green wrapping from something that smelled of sour fruits and found it to be frozen and covered in something ap-petizingly crunchy.

But Etain looked tired. Jusik was watching her warily as if something unspoken was going on between them. Jedi could do that kind of thing, just like soldiers on helmet comlinks, silent to the outside world. Then Etain muttered something about having a hot soak in the 'freshers and disappeared into the next room.

"We have a drop location," Skirata said. "And a few thou-sand or so clone troopers on leave for a few weeks thanks to our totally unexpected friend Mar Rugeyan."

"Mmm, crushed nuts," Fi said, identifying the topping on the ice. "That was very helpful of him."

They all stopped in midcrunch. Fi noted Jusik wasn't eat-ing, just watching the sergeant with a rapt expression. The young general had a very bad dose of the Skiratas. As dis-eases went, it was one of

the best to catch.

"So do we get to drop them, or do we have to do the bor-ing thing and let them stroll off?" Boss asked. Niner gave him one of his funny looks, the kind that said he thought a bit of quiet contemplation was called for. Niner and Boss didn't see their newly reduced roles in quite the same way: Niner liked to lead by being certain, and Boss seemed to like being first. "This is a tracking job, right?"

"Vau made you into very impatient boys," Skirata said. "Yes, this is where it gets boring. And you know what? You won't be any less dead if you get it wrong." He picked up some shuura fruits and lobbed one each to the Delta team. "And I really hope Vau schooled you well in this, because I'll be pretty hacked off if you get trigger-happy and blow this op."

Boss looked hurt. Fi didn't think Delta ran to such delicate emotions. "We're pros, Sarge. We know how to do this."

"What did I tell you?"

"Sorry. Kal. It's just that we haven't even seen the enemy yet."

"Welcome to anti-terror ops, hotshot. They aren't droids. They don't line up and march at you. Didn't you listen to any of my lectures?"

"Well—"

"They can kill you and not even be on the planet when it happens. But you can track and kill them the same way. This is about patience and attention to detail."

"Delta's really good at that, so I hear," Fi said. Sev gave him that blank cold stare. It simply provoked Fi all the more. "That's why they do their op planning with finger paints."

Skirata lobbed a rolled-up ball of flimsi at Fi and it hit him in the ear—hard. "Okay, Ordo is

going to score some credible explosives over the next few days, because that's going to be handy if we need to infiltrate the cells. And we'll start surveillance of the drop point now because we don't have a time window when the explosives were due to be picked up. Four shifts—Fi and Sev as Red Watch, relieved by Dar and Boss as Blue Watch, relieved by Niner and Scorch as Green Watch."

Fi noted Atin's process of elimination. He looked as if he'd been doused in cold water. Fi suspected he'd wanted to be paired with Sev, and for all the wrong reasons.

"That leaves you and Fixer as White Watch, so you stay focused," Skirata said, giving Atin a friendly prod in the chest. He'd spotted it, too. But then, Skirata spotted everything. "One watch on observation, one on intel collation, and two stood down."

"What about everyone else?"

"Ordo's going undercover to find our mole, and Bardan and Etain will join the normal shift rotations until we need to break into a new phase. If needed, Vau and Enacca will turn to as well, and give us a hand."

Jusik—looking convincingly unsavory in ordinary clothing and with his hair unbound—checked his snazzy S-5 blaster. Yes, Zey would go nuts when he saw the bill for this op. "Can we use the Force, Kal?"

"Course you can, Bard'ika. As long as nobody notices. Or as long as you don't leave witnesses, anyway. Same goes for lightsabers. No witnesses. Might look a bit obvious."

"When do we start?" Boss asked.

Skirata looked at his chrono. "Three hours. Time to eat, I think."

Sev elbowed Fi, a little too hard to be friendly but not hard enough to start a fight. "So, you and me. The brains and the mouth. Don't get me killed."

"I'm slumming it. I usually work with ARC captains." Watching normal people leading normal lives? I'd rather charge a droid line. What happened to my certainty? Do the others feel like this? "But there's a war on, so sacrifices have to be made."

"Can you do the dumb-trooper act?"

"You mean you're not doing it now?"

"I hope you're as good as you talk, ner vod."

"Count on it," Fi said, and noted that Darman had wandered off in the direction of Etain's exit. "Sometimes I'm not very funny at all."

Etain felt she had held out pretty well, all things considered.

It was only when she closed the refresher door that she let herself vomit uncontrollably until tears spilled down her face and into her mouth. She ran water into the basin to cover the sound, and choked on her sobs.

She'd been so convinced she could handle it. And she couldn't.

Ripping into Orjul's soul had been even harder than out-right physical violence. She had stolen his conviction from him, which was no great evil until set in the context of the fact that he would, she knew, die very soon without even the comfort of his beliefs, broken and abandoned and alone.

Why am I doing this? Because men are dying.

When do the ends cease to justify the means?

She vomited until she was convulsed by dry heaves. Then she filled the basin with cold water and plunged her head into it. When she straightened up and her vision cleared, she looked into a face she recognized. But it wasn't hers: it was the hard, long face of Walon Vau.

Everything I've been taught is wrong.

Vau was all brutality and expedience, as clear an example of the dark side for a Jedi as any she could imagine. And yet there was a total absence of conscious malice in him. She should have sensed anger and murderous intent, but Vau was just filled with . . . nothing. No, not nothing: he was actually calm and benign. He thought he was doing good work. And she saw her supposed Jedi ideal in him—motivated not by anger or fear, but by what she thought was right. She now questioned everything she'd been taught.

Dark and light are simply the perpetrator's. perception. How can that be right?

How can Vau 's passionless expedience be morally supe-rior to Ski rata's anger and love?

Etain had struggled for years with her own anger and re-sentment. The choices were to be a good Jedi or a failed Jedi, with the assumption—sometimes unspoken, sometimes not—that failure meant the dark side awaited.

But there was a third path: to leave the Order.

She wiped her face on the towel and faced a hard realiza-tion. She remained a Jedi because she knew no other life. She pitied Orjul not because she had tortured him, but be-cause he had been robbed of the one thing that held him to-gether, his convictions, without which he had no direction. The truth was that she pitied herself—devoid of direction—and projected it onto her victim by way of denial.

The only selfless thing I have ever done that was not cen-tered on my own need to be a good, passionless, detached Jedi was to care about these cloned men and ask what we're doing to them.

And that was her direction.

It was so very clear; but she was still raw and aching within. Revelation didn't heal. She sat on the edge of the tub with her head resting on her knees.

"Ma'am, what's wrong?" It was Darman's voice. It should have been the same as every other clone's, but it wasn't. They all had their distinct nuances in accent, pitch, and tone. And he was Dar

She could sense Darman across star systems now. She'd wanted to reach out to him in the Force many times, but feared it might distract him from his duty and endanger him, or—if he knew it was her and didn't welcome it—annoy him.

After all, he'd had the choice of staying on Qiilura with her. And he had opted to stay with his squad. What she felt for him now, the longing that had developed only after they parted, might not be mutual.

He called out again. "Are you okay?"

She opened the doors, and Darman peered in.

"I don't want to be ma'am right now, Dar."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt—"

"Don't go."

He moved a couple of steps into the room as if it were booby-trapped. She had been here before; she had been utterly dependent on his military skills when her life was at stake. He had been so

focused, so reassuring, so competent. Where she had doubts, he had certainties.

"So you still don't find it any easier, then," said Darman.

"What?"

"Giving in to anger. You know. Violence."

"Oh, any Jedi Master would have been proud of me. I did it all without anger. Anger makes it the dark side. Being serene makes it okay."

"I know it must have been hard. I know how Sergeant Kal reacted when he had to—"

"No. I was harming a stranger. No personal dilemma at all."

"It doesn't make you a bad person. It has to be done. Is that what's upsetting you?"

"That, maybe. And having doubts."

She didn't want to be alone with all that in her head. She could have meditated. She had the strength of will and the ancient skills to pass through this turmoil and do what Jedi had done for millennia—detach from the moment. But she didn't want to.

She wanted to risk living with those terrible feelings. The danger suddenly seemed to lie in denying them, just as she tried unsuccessfully to deny what she felt for Darman.

"Dar, do you ever have doubts? You always said you were certain of your role. I always felt you were."

"You really want to know?"

"Yes."

"I have doubts all the time."

"What kind?"

"Before we left Kamino, I was so sure what I had to do. Now . . . well, the more I see of the galaxy ... the more I see of other people, the more I wonder, why me? How did I end up here, and not like the people I see around me in Coruscant? When we win the war, what will happen to me and my brothers?"

They weren't stupid. They were highly intelligent: bred for it, in fact, and if you bred people to be intelligent and resourceful and resilient and aggressive, then sooner or later they would notice that their world wasn't fair, and begin to resent it.

"I ask that, too," Etain said.

"It makes me feel disloyal."

"It's not disloyal to question things."

"It's dangerous, though," Darman said.

"For the status quo?"

"Sometimes you can't argue with everything. Like orders. You don't have the full picture of the battle, and the order you ignore might just be the one that should have saved your life."

"Well, I'm glad you have doubts. And I'm glad I do, too." Darman leaned against the wall, all concern. "Do you want something to eat? We're going to risk Qibbu's nerf in glockaw sauce. Scorch reckons it's probably armored rat."

"I'm not sure I can face crowds right now."

"You might be overestimating the popularity of Qibbu's cuisine." He shrugged. "I could probably get the cook to stun the thing with my Deece and send it up by room service."

That was Darman all over: he had a relentlessly positive nature. It was her job to inspire him, but he'd been the one on Qiilura who had made her get up and fight time after time. He'd changed her forever. She wondered if he had any idea how much he was still changing her life now.

"Okay," she said. "But only if you keep me company."

"Yeah, eating armored rat alone is probably asking for trouble." He grinned suddenly, and she felt illuminated by it. "You might need first aid."

Niner's voice interrupted from down the passage. "Dar, you coming with us or what? Fi and Sev are supposed to be on watch."

"No, I'll get something sent up. They can head on down with you. We'll do the duty." Darman cocked his head as if to listen for some rebuke. "That okay?"

This time it was Skirata's voice. "Two steaks?"

"Please."

"Not something safe, like eggs?"

"Steaks. We fear nothing."

Suddenly Etain felt an urge to laugh. Fi might have been the comedian, but Dar was genuinely uplifting. He wasn't trying to suppress pain.

She also found him distractingly handsome, even though he looked identical to his brothers. She adored them as friends, but they were not Darman, and somehow they didn't even look like him. Nobody else ever would be that precious to her, she knew that.

"Well, what shall we do now?" he asked.

"Not lightsaber training, for a start."

"You really whacked me with that branch."

"You told me I had to."

"So you take orders from clones, do you, General?"

"You kept me alive."

"Ah, you'd have done fine without me .

"Actually, no," said Etain. "Actually, I wouldn't have done fine at all."

She looked him in the eye for a few moments, hoping that Darman the man would react to her, but he simply stared back, a bewildered boy again. "I'd never been that close to a human female before. Did you know that?"

"I guessed as much?"

"I wasn't even sure if Jedi were . . . real flesh and blood."

"I wonder sometimes, too."

"I wasn't scared of dying." He put his hands to his head for a moment and then raked his fingers through his hair, that gesture she'd seen in Skirata. "I was afraid because I didn't know what I was feeling and—"

The service droid buzzed to be let in.

"Fierfek." Darman's shoulders sagged a little. He got up and took the tray from the droid, looking pink-faced and an-noyed. He peeled back the lids and inspected the contents as if they were unstable explosives, and she felt the moment was now lost.

"Is it dead?" Etain asked.

"If it isn't, it's not getting up again anytime soon."

She chewed a test-mouthful thoughtfully. "Could be worse."

"Ration cubes . . ."

"Oh, that brings back memories."

"Now you know why we'll eat anything."

"I remember the bread, too. Ugh."

He prodded something in the container with his fork, looking concerned. "You did reach out to me in the Force, didn't you? I wasn't imagining that."

"Yes, I did."

"Why?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

"How would I know? I'm not sure if I know that much about you."

"I think you do, Dar."

Darman suddenly took exceptional interest in the remains of the steak, which might have been nerf after all. "I don't think anyone believed females would matter to us, given our life expectancy. And it wasn't relevant to combat."

That was freshly agonizing. Of all the injustices piled on these clones who had never been given choices, that was the worst: the denial of any individual future, of hope itself. If they beat the odds of battle, they were still doomed to lose the war against time. Darman would probably be dead in thirty years, and she wouldn't even be halfway through her life by then.

"I bet Kal thought it was important."

Darman chewed his lip and averted his gaze. She wasn't sure if he was embarrassed or if he simply didn't know what she was really asking.

"He never mentioned what to do about generals," he said quietly.

"My Master never specifically mentioned soldiers, either."

"I hear you ignore orders anyway."

"I was afraid I'd never see you again, Dar. But you're here now, and that's all that matters."

She held her hand out to him. He hesitated for a moment and then reached across the table and took it.

"We could be dead tomorrow, both of us," she said. "Or the next day, or next week. That's war." She thought of the other Fi, whose life had ebbed away in her arms. "And I don't want to die without telling you that I missed you every day since you left, and that I love you, and that I don't believe what I was taught about attachment any more than you should believe that you were bred only to die for the Republic."

This was breaking all the rules.

But the war had broken all the rules of peacekeeping Jedi and a civilized Republic anyway. The Force wouldn't be thrown into turmoil if a mediocre Jedi and a cloned soldier who had no rights broke just one more.

"I never stopped thinking about you, either," said Darman. "Not for a moment."

"So . . . how long does it take two squads to finish their meals in the bar?"

"Long enough, I think," said Darman.

11

I'd rather have little Jedi like Barden and Etain working with us than the likes of Zey. They're sharp, no preconceptions, no agenda. And they're more concerned with pulling their weight in the team than all this philosophical osik about the dark side. Zey might be a seasoned man, but he seems to want respect from me just because he can open jars of caf with his mind.

--Kal Skirata, having a quiet drink with Captain Jailer Obrim, well away from prying eyes

Retail sector, Quadrant B-85, nine days later, observation vehicle in position overlooking warehouse space, 1145 hours, 380 days after Geonosis

Jusik was enjoying himself.

"So," he said, and let the trendy dark visor slide down his nose so he could look over the top. "Do I look like a low-life taxi pilot?"

"Pretty convincing," Fi said. He wondered if Jusik ever had the sense to be scared. "Do I look like a fare?"

Sev, sitting beside Jusik in the taxi's front seat, had a de-tached DC-17 scope balanced on the vessel's console and patched into a datapad by a thin yellow wire. He was ping-ing, as Skirata called it. Each time a delivery transport or other craft passed through the dead-end canyon of ware-houses that lay beneath the retail levels above, Sev checked the registration transponder against CSF's database. He also checked the cargo with the scope's sensor scan.

Fi was impressed by the ease with which Fixer and Atin had set up the remote link without CSF spotting it. They hadn't even had to call in Ordo to sort it out. Ordo had melted into the city again two days ago, no mean feat for an ARC trooper captain.

Fi tried not to wonder where he might be. It was bad enough thinking about Sicko.

"Okay, that one was routine. Garment delivery." Sev made a low rumble in his throat, almost like an animal. "What do we look like from the outside now?"

"At the moment, one Rodian taxi driver reading a holozine while he's parked and waiting."

Fi could see out, but nobody could see in—or at least they could see something that wasn't actually in the taxi, thanks to the thin film of photoactive micro-emitters coating the interior. "Clever stuff, this gauze."

"Thank you," Jusik said. "It took me a long time to work out how to program moving images into it."

"Are you bored?" Sev said, looking around at Fi. He still seemed wary of directing any of his comments at Jedi, even if all rank had been swept aside. "Cos I'm not. And your constant yakking is getting to me somewhat, ner vod."

Jusik cut in. "Sorry, Sev. My fault."

Sev looked embarrassed for a moment. "If you're interested, fifty-one of the seventy crates I've clocked on this watch show up on the CSF database tagged as criminal. Theft is a bigger industry than legit business here."

Jusik raised an eyebrow. "Isn't that the sort of thing Ogrim's people might like to know?"

"Isn't it the sort of stuff that would bring the boys in blue crashing in here and blowing our op?"

"Point taken."

"No offense . . . Bardan."

Delta hadn't worked with Jedi much, at least not the junior ones. Fi savored a moment of delight at seeing Sev's stone-cold pretense reduced to embarrassed deference. All Jedi were supposed to be humble, but Jusik actually was. He seemed to see himself as nothing special, just a man with some accidental skills that didn't make him any more important than the next person, only different.

So they waited.

And that was a lot harder than it looked.

"Whoa," Sev said. "Look at this one . . ." Fi and Jusik followed the angle of Sev's scope. "CSF database has this tagged as RESTRICTED."

"Could mean it's of interest to us, or could mean organized crime."

Jusik's visor had slipped to the end of his nose. "Or both."

It was a medium-sized delivery transport with dull green livery caked with dust. The identity transponder was evidently fake, because when the crate aligned itself with the platform at the doors to Warehouse 58, and the hatches sprang open, there were just a few boxes inside. The warehouse doors eased open far enough to let a repulsor cart edge out, and two droids began loading the small containers

onto the repulsor's flatbed.

"Small but heavy load by the look of it," Fi said.

"And we've got company." Sev realigned the scope, and the datapad hummed into recording mode. "Second trans-port backing up to it."

Another delivery vehicle hovered, edging astern until it was level with the other side of the landing platform. The boxes were transferred to it. They didn't go into the ware-house at all.

"That's irregular," Sev said. "And we don't like irregular, do we? ID transponder says a legit rental vessel."

A female human in coveralls—white skin, wavy ginger hair to the shoulders, medium build, short—stepped out of the green transport onto the platform to be met by a male Falleen who'd jumped out of the rental. He was young, as far as Fi could tell, with light green skin, and his mundane pilot's rig was a little too long in the leg for him. All details were worth noting.

The two turned their backs to the skylane and appeared to be talking.

"Well, that's a rare sight, and I bet he's not on the CSF database," Sev said, checking the 'pad. Images flicked across the screen at a blinding speed while the system sought a match from the image the scope had grabbed. After a few moments the screen read: NO MATCH. "Falleen don't venture offworld very often, and he certainly isn't here to check out the tourist sights. Let's try the woman."

Fi watched. There was a match indeed, and one that came up rapidly.

"Fierfek," Sev said. "Her name's Vinna Jiss. And she's a government employee."

"I'm not going to like this, am I?"

"Not when you hear she works in GAR logistics, no."

"Chakaar," Fi said. "She could be on legit business, of course, but then I'm such a trusting soul."

"Falleen male and GAR clerk? Hello? Do I have to draw you a picture?" Sev sighed to himself. "They certainly put those Falleen pheromones to good use. I bet she'd do him any favor he asked. Getting security information out of her would be even easier."

The two transports closed their hatches, leaving the woman and the Falleen on the platform, and lifted back into the skylane. It looked like any other delivery—except that it was a transfer of cargo, which was not usual, and the two waiting on the platform oozed bad guys from every pore and scale.

The two targets looked at their datapads just like ware-house staff checking a consignment. Then the Falleen turned and began walking up a pedestrian ramp to the retail level, and Vinna Jiss hung around.

"I'm naturally curious," Sev said. "Fi, you up for a dis -creet trail of those two?"

Fi's heart was pounding. Training and instinct took over. He was back on Kamino again, stalking an armed target in the simulated urban training terrain in Tipoca City . It was just the town that was simulated: the ammunition was real, deadly real. "Ready."

"Bardan, back up behind that pillar, will you?"

"We can't abandon this position until the next watch arrives, Sev. Let me call for backup. What if they've pinged us and it's a decoy?"

"Okay, you let us out on foot, and call in Niner and Scorch to relieve you. Then you stand by via the comlink just in case."

"That's not standard operating procedure."

"This isn't standard operating terrain, either." Sev almost said sir Fi heard the beginning of a hissed s. Delta's self-appointed hard man poked his finger hard in his right ear as if he was afraid the bead-sized link would fall out. "There goes Jiss. Up the ramp, too. Come on, Fi. Move it."

They slipped out of the taxi's twin hatches and activated Fi's holochart of the sector to check where the ramp led and where the exits were. They stared at the meshed blue and red lines on the holochart, courtesy of the fire department's data-base. Fi hoped it was up to date.

"That takes them straight up to the retail plaza."

Fi's immediate thoughts were of civilians, obstructed arcs of fire, and his own limited senses being a poor substitute for his Katarn helmet's gadgetry. But I'm more than my armor. Sergeant Kal said so.

He edged along the wall, staying out of sight. Can't deploy tracking remotes, not here, not in public. "I might do a little shopping myself."

"Just keep that dumb-grunt expression on your face, Mon -grel Boy. It suits you."

Sev took out his datapad and switched the screen to reflective mode, turning his back and holding the device a little out to his right. "She's just going over the top of the ramp ... yeah, she's peeled off on the first level. She's following Lounge Lizard so far. Come on. Let's go around the bridge route and pick them up here."

"You have as bad an attitude toward ethnic diversity as you have toward the regular army," Fi said quietly, relaxing his shoulders with every intention of just being a soldier on leave in his dark red fatigues—with a blaster on his belt, like any sensible Coruscanti.

The next hour was unplanned, unexpected, but not un-trained for

Fi hoped he'd make it through alive.

Coruscant Security Force Staff and Social Club, 1300 hours, private booth, senior officers' bar

Kal Skirata had his peripheral vision and half an ear trained on the general murmur at the bar. He felt bad about applying caution to these men: they had much the same thankless task as his boys. But there was a possibility that the leak was within their ranks. He couldn't let comradeship cloud his judgment.

He hoped Obrim wasn't offended by the distortion field he'd set up. The little emitter sat discreetly on the table between the glasses like a rolled-up pellet of flimsi, ready to bounce any bugging signals.

"If it's one of mine, I'll personally put a round through him," Obrim said.

Skirata didn't doubt it. "You could put a fake lure in the system and see who goes for it."

"But even if it's one of us, then they'd still need data from the GAR to complete the loop. It's one thing having the holo-cam images of military targets and movements. It's another knowing where they'll be to start with."

"Okay, then. I have to put someone inside GAR logistics." There was only one choice: Ordo. "If we find a link to your people, though, I have to cut you loose. I'm sorry."

"I'm not exactly being kept in the loop on all this anyway, am I?"

"If I told you where my squads were operating, and they happened to get into a bit of trouble that attracted the attention of your people, you might have to call them off. Then everyone would know we

had a strike team deployed."

"I know. I'm just worried that your personnel will attract the attention of some of my overzealous colleagues, and one of us will be sending wreaths to next of kin."

"My boys don't have next of kin. Only me."

"Kal . . ."

"I can't. I just can't. This has to be deniable." He liked Ogrim. He was a kindred spirit, a pragmatic man who didn't trust easily. "But if something looks like it's going to get out of hand, and I can warn you off, I will."

Ogrim swirled the dregs of his ale in the glass. "Okay. Sure you don't want one of these?"

"I only have one at night to help me sleep. Habit from Kamino. Sleep got pretty hard to come by."

"You'll have to tell me about that one day. I bet they didn't have any crime in Tipoca City ."

"Oh, there was crime, all right." The worst kind: if he ever met another Kaminoan, he knew what he'd do. "Nothing you could have arrested anyone for, though."

"When's your boy Fi going to stop by for a drink? We owe him one from the siege. Brave kid."

"Yeah. He throws himself instinctively on a grenade, and he's a hero. If he fires instinctively and slots a civilian, though, he's a monster."

"And don't we know it, pal. Happens to us, too."

"Anyway, Fi's on a routine patrol at the moment." Skirata checked his chrono. Green Watch was due to relieve Red in two hours. "I'll bring him down here, don't worry. He's probably bored out of his skull at the moment. Anti-terror ops can be tedious."

"Sitting around, more sitting around, even more sitting around, then scramble, sheer panic, and bang."

"Yeah, I think that sums it up." Skirata drained his glass of juice. "I just hope we get to the bang part in time."

Level 4 retail plaza, Quadrant B-85, Coruscant, 1310 hours; Red Watch observing targets on foot

They should have called it in and let one of the other teams pick it up. But sometimes you had to run with it.

Fi was now on autopilot, reacting to training he hadn't re-alized he'd absorbed so thoroughly, and Sev was matching him pace for pace.

The shopping plaza was a mass of color, random people, and even more bewildering smells and sounds. This was life in the field without a helmet, and Fi didn't like it. Just ahead, Vinna Jiss wandered casually, moving along one diagonal line then another, and then pausing to stare into transparisteel windows full of things Fi had no idea that people bought—or wore.

Sev glanced at him. He didn't even have to say it.

She looks in an awful lot of shop windows. She doesn't follow a straight path. She thinks she knows how to avoid a tail, but she's learned it from the holovids. Amateur Weak link.

"Bardan . . .," Sev said quietly.

The Jedi's voice was a whisper in Fi's ear. "I know where you are. Don't worry."

"Not worried." Sev glanced away from the target and Fi turned around casually toward her, looking past her but keeping her in his peripheral vision. "Can't see the Falleen now . . ."

"Moving on," Fi said.

They let Jiss walk on until she was almost lost in the crowd, and then started moving again. A well-planned sur-veillance operation would have positioned mobile and fixed teams in the area to simply watch and hand off the target to the next team along the route. But they were on their own. And they had never planned to follow a suspect.

"This is what Kal said we should never do," said Fi.

"You got a better idea?"

"Reckon she's seen us?"

"If she has, she hasn't reacted."

"Why would she? If she's what we think she is, then we're just targets to her"

The plaza was busy. There was a restaurant on the left-hand side with tables and chairs in the open air. Jiss sat down. Sev and Fi walked on past her, and if Fi looked like an overwhelmed clone who'd spent his life cloistered in military environments, then he wasn't acting. Even Qibbu's Hut felt more familiar than this.

It wasn't the urban environment. It was the sheer mass of civilians.

They had no choice. They walked on farther.

"Fierfek," Sev said. "She'll have doubled back or disappeared by the time we can turn around safely."

Fi was looking straight ahead. He could see splashes of dark red between the multicolored shoulders of the dozens of species strolling around the plaza.

"Here comes the Forty-first," he said. "You can always rely on the infantry . . ."

A dozen or so brothers were ambling along, gazing around them and being gazed at by shoppers who had clearly never seen clones before. No matter how many times Fi saw that reaction, he always found himself wondering what they found so strange about it, and then had to see his own world as the rest of the galaxy saw it.

The Forty-first were level with them now.

Fi smiled fraternally and got a bewildered nod or two in return. They don't recognize me! That felt strange. All his commando brothers knew him. And he could tell infantry from ship's crew by the way they walked. He walked between the men of the Forty-first with Sev like a marching band merging, and spun around at the back of the group to walk back toward the target.

She was still sitting there. But she was looking the other way.

She was staring at another group of clone troopers heading toward her from the other direction.

"I love being a familiar face," Fi said. His anxiety gave way to a sense of heightened awareness,

the thrill of the hunt. The woman's spine straightened as if she was going to jump up, but she sat tense for a few seconds until the clones drew level with her and met the group coming from the other di-rection. They stopped to chat. Fi and Sev melted into the group at the rear.

"I'm heading around the back of the plaza," said Jusik's voice in their ears. "Niner's on station now. I'll give you some aerial recon."

"Gotcha," Fi said quietly.

It's bad personal security to cluster like this. But that didn't matter right then. The woman dithered, trying not to look at the group and failing miserably: Fi, like any clone, was exceptionally attuned to small gestures. Then she got up to walk briskly into the nearest shop.

"Maybe she owed Jango credits." Fi shrugged and noted with a sinking heart that the shop looked to be exclusively for females. The garments on display were truly bizarre. "Or we're just not her type."

"So, smart-mouth, you going to follow her in there?"

"I could."

"What, tell them you're looking for a present for your girl -friend?"

"Don't push your luck. Is there a back way out?"

Sev stepped into a doorway and shielded Fi while he took a quick look at the holochart and snapped off the image quickly.

"No, but there's a landing platform for deliveries."

Sev dropped to a whisper. "Bardan, you with us yet?"

Jusik's voice was almost a chuckle. "Fascinating," he said. "I'm waiting at the delivery platform. A taxi is just what she needs right now." Sev and Fi looked at each other. They could hear Jusik, but the taxi wasn't visible even when they stood back and glanced up discreetly at the roofline. Then they heard his voice, utterly level, utterly calm—utterly wor-rying. "Yeah? Yeah, I am, lady . . . where d'you want to go? I've got a booking, but . . ."

"Sev, tell me he isn't doing what I think he is."

"He's doing it."

"He's nuts."

Sev lowered his voice to a whisper in the comlink. "Bar-dan, if we lift her now, we'll blow this op. Don't overplay it."

"Okay, lady, but the spaceport isn't my regular run, so that'll be extra."

There was the sound of someone getting into the taxi and a woman's voice. "Yes, just drop me off at the domestic ter-minal, please."

Fi wondered for a moment if ordinary people had shared thoughts like the one he knew Sev was sharing with him. They'd been trained to think the same way, the soldier's way. Where was Jusik going with this? If he dropped her off like a normal taxi, they'd lose her in the terminal anyway. He couldn't follow her in there and check where she went with-out blowing his cover. And if he didn't drop her off . . .

Sev was staring past Fi. "Lizard on your six," he said qui-etly.

Fi turned very, very slowly and stopped when he caught the Falleen male in his peripheral vision at the point where the plaza funneled into a spiral ramp down to another level. He was searching. So the woman hadn't caught up with him when he expected, and he was looking for her. And that meant she had no comlink, or she'd have used it.

"Now he's going to be bad news. He's carrying some serious cannon. Look at the line of his jacket."

Jusik's voice was a quiet descant to Fi's pulse pounding in his head. "Oh, fierfek. That's great. Being rerouted again . . . this is going to cost, lady . . . another detour . . ."

"He's way too smart for his own good." Sev looked exasperated. "Bardan, are you doing what I think you're doing? Are you heading back our way?"

"I pay good license money not to have to use automated lanes," said Jusik's voice in their ears. He really didn't sound at all like a nice Jedi Temple boy now. And then I still get diverted. What do we pay our taxes for?"

"I'll take that as a yes."

The Falleen moved off, pausing occasionally to look around, and ambled slowly down the ramp. Fi and Sev leaned on the edge of the parapet like any tourist might to take in the view below.

Fi dropped his voice. "He's calling someone." The Falleen had the back of his hand raised to his mouth. Oh, for a helmet comlink. Fi might have been able to pick up the frequency. "Is it her? Or backup?"

"We could call this in and get Niner and Scorch to pick him up."

"And then we drag another team off station. No, let's see this through."

Sev sat down on a bench, looking suitably disoriented. "Bardan, where are you?"

"Let me try this shortcut, lady . . . hey, who you calling? You making a complaint about fares already?"

"I bet she's calling Lounge Lizard. Great."

"Yeah, and now that our driver's got a very dodgy passenger, has he thought what we're going to do with her?"

"Same as we did with Orjul and the Nikto," Sev said, getting up to walk across to the taxi platform at the end of the plaza. They had to get in fast when Jusik appeared and opened that hatch. Fi had visions of the potential grief that would be unleashed if a passenger was screaming her head off when the taxi hatch opened in a very public place.

"Land at ninety degrees, Bardan. Sev will access via the port hatch and I'll go in the other, and we'll pin her down."

"Yeah, I think Fi can manage to subdue a civilian," Sev said.

"Remind me to show you my unfunny side later, ner vod."

"Skirata's going to kill us for this—"

"Better get it right then," Fi said.

"Here he comes . . ."

"Steady, Bardan."

"Too fast."

"He's a Jedi. There's no such thing as too fast."

The battered taxi, its anti-surveillance gauze now showing a human driver that wasn't Jusik, dropped onto the platform scattering dust and grit. The two commandos ran to their respective sides.

Jusik's voice filled their heads now. "Hatches in three .. . two . . . one!"

They threw themselves in. The hatches snapped shut so fast that Fi felt his pant leg snag in the seal but he was flat on top of a squealing, struggling woman and then she went quiet because Sev clamped his hand over her mouth.

"You waiting for a tip?" said Fi.

The taxi lifted in a straight vertical and nearly shaved the paintwork off another cab trying to drop off passengers. It was just as well that Enacca had done something creative about the identity transponder.

"Fi, I don't suppose you brought any restraints?"

"No, but this usually works." Fi freed his right arm and put his blaster to Jiss's head. "Ma'am, shut up and stop strug-gling. I have no problem shooting women."

No, he didn't. Enemies were enemies. Females were soldiers, too.

Jusik took the taxi high into what appeared to be a com-muter lane and shot off in a complex loop that first took them away from Qibbu's and relative safety, and then dropped down between lanes

where the layers of traffic overhead gave some protection against visual surveillance.

"We've been tagged," Jusik said. He shut his eyes, far too long for Fi's comfort. It was the first time he'd seen the Jedi fly with his eyes closed, and the fact that the good ones could do that didn't reassure the simple animal part of him that said it shouldn't be possible. "Yes, we're being followed."

Fi wanted to ask how he knew but Jiss had no reason to know Jusik was a Jedi, and the less she knew, the easier it would be to process her, as Skirata put it.

"You can evade them, right?"

"About as well as anyone can."

"Any idea who they are?"

"None, other than they're very persistent, and if it's CSF, it's an unmarked vessel."

"You can sense all that information?"

He opened his eyes again. "Yes, because they're only two or three speeders behind us and I can see them in the mirror."

Sev looked at Fi with the unspoken count of one, two, three. Sev released his grip on Jiss as Fi clamped his arm tight around her neck, blaster pressed so hard into her temple that the muzzle was ringed with a little patch of white blood-less skin. He could feel her heart pounding through her back against his chest even through the thin sheet of body armor

under his tunic. He wondered for a moment if it was his own frantic heartbeat.

Sev reached under the rear seat for his DC-17 and took out the grenade attachment. "Okay, it lacks finesse, but we're late for lunch. And if they track us, we're finished."

"Here? In daylight, in traffic?" Jusik said.

"Not yet." Sev tried to aim his Deece and snapped on the grenade launcher. "Open the rear screen a crack. Can you hold steady?"

"You wanted me to outrun them—"

"Can't. We've got to drop them."

Jusik looked in the rearview. "In a skylane? You haven't got a clear shot and the debris will—"

"Me sniper, you pilot. Understand the difference?"

Jusik's grip on the steering vane tightened. "Too many vessels and too much debris. Let's head for somewhere less crowded."

"Maybe Qiilura?" Fi said.

"Hold on tight."

Jusik dropped the taxi like a stone and plummeted ten, then fifteen, then twenty levels to the lower sky lanes, slip-ping in between two transports and then jumping between horizontal lanes.

"Still there," said Sev. "Three vehicles behind."

"Have they alerted anyone?"

"I can't sense anything." Jusik kept shaking his head as if trying to clear it. "They might not want to risk using comlinks."

"Who the fierfek are they?"

"I don't know! I'm not a mind-reader and if you'd just shut up because I'm trying to concentrate on flying and listening and—" His voice trailed off. "Just aim."

Fi pressed his blaster harder into the woman's head. She flinched and shut her eyes tight. He could feel no emotion whatsoever, just the cold clarity of his life and his comrades' against her existence, and it seemed an easy equation.

"Move and you're dead, ma'am, okay?" Move? Even Fi wasn't sure he could make an escape from a speeder moving

"They're not ours . . . ," Sev said. "And they're in pursuit. So they're a target."

Fi dug the blaster into the woman's skin. "Are they your people, ma'am?"

"I don't know! I don't know!"

"If they are, it's too bad," Sev said. "We can't let them track us back."

Jusik speeded up. "Stand by."

Fi noticed that he had his eyes shut again.

"Fierfek."

"Fire!" Jusik said, and the taxi suddenly flipped up ninety degrees and climbed in an agonizing vertical. Fi braced for impact.

They had to be dead.

But the taxi was still climbing.

They were in a vertical shaft and a ball of blue-white flame roared beneath them. Fi was thrown against Sev but he locked his arm tight around the woman's neck, and all three of them hit the partly open rear screen as the sound of rico-cheting debris faded behind them in the service duct.

The light dimmed fast beneath them and suddenly disappeared as Jusik slammed the taxi into another right angle and they were flying horizontally along a channel again.

"Target down." Sev shut his eyes.

"That better not be CSF," Fi said. "That's going to be very messy."

Suddenly they were bathed in hazy sunlight. Jusik brought them out into passenger traffic and slipped into the auto-mated lanes of private speeders again.

"What do we look like from the outside now?" Sev asked.

Jusik wiped his forehead with his palm and looked as breathless and battered as he ever had

after performing the Dha Werda. Fi could have sworn he looked just as elated, too.

"Family of Garqian tourists with a Gran driver," the Jedi said. "Now let's try to explain this to you-know-who without getting our heads ripped off." He opened his comlink. "Re-turning with a prisoner, Kal ."

Sev grumbled in his throat. "Never use real names."

"Least of our worries now," Fi said.

So Jusik was scared of Skirata, too. It was supposed to be a quiet ohs job, as he'd put it, observation duty; it had turned into kidnapping and blowing up unidentified vessels. Scared wasn't the right word, though.

He'll be disappointed with us. We let him down.

Fi, like anyone who came into Skirata's circle, desperately wanted Kal'buir to be proud of him. It was more effective motivation than fear any day.

"Remember he even shoves Wookiees around," said Fi. He adjusted his grip on the woman's neck to stop the tingling in his fingers. "And they take it."

The taxi was silent except for the occasional whimpering gulp from Jiss and the rumble of the vessel's hard-pressed drive. Eventually Jusik came to a shuddering halt on the plat-form at the top level of Qibbu's Hut. Sev called on his comlink for a hand with the woman, and Atin came running out with Fixer.

"What have you been playing at? Skirata's going nuts in there." Atin slid into the taxi and put cuffs on Jiss. "Get out and we'll take her to the safe house. You've got some ex-plaining to do."

Safe house for them, maybe. Safe for her? No. But then she had picked the wrong side. She

wasn't a helpless victim.

So much for whining that we never get to see the enemy.

The taxi lifted off, leaving Fi, Sev, and Jusik standing on the platform, exhausted by adrenaline.

"Thank you for flying Jedi Air." Jusik grinned, and shook their hands. "Have a nice afternoon."

"You're all insane," said Sev, and stalked off.

12

Definitely not one of our speeders, Kal. Look, I know why you think I don't need to know what your boys are getting up to. But someone's going to notice you blew up their

people. And so is CSE What do you want me to tell them?

—Captain Jailer Obrim, to Kal Skirata

Operational house, Qibbu's Hut, 1600 hours, 380 days after Geonosis

You're sure nobody followed you?" Skirata said quietly.

The strike team, minus Ordo, was assembled in the main room, sitting where they could. For a moment Skirata was distracted by the way Darman and Etain were positioned. It told him something, but he had more pressing issues right now.

He'd calmed down, too. Red Watch was back safely. Jusik, predictably, was taking his roasting like a man.

"I'm sure, Kal. I felt it."

"Don't go mystic on me. Did you go through the procedures? Give me tangibles."

"I didn't return via a direct route. I looped back on myself several times. Nothing."

There was no point yelling at them. Skirata knew he probably would have done the same. It was all very well to talk about painstaking surveillance and meticulous planning before resolving a threat, but when a truly ripe target walked in front of your scope—no, he would have done the same.

And he was simply relieved that they'd made it back in one piece.

"Okay, surveillance is off for the day. We change vehicles again, and we'll start defense watches, just in case the Force has deceived Bard'ika and we've got a load of bad guys on our case now. Enacca is identifying a second location we can pull back to if this place is compromised."

Jusik looked crushed. "I'm sorry, Kal."

"You weren't in command. I should have made sure you were ready for this." Skirata turned to Fi and Sev. Fi looked crestfallen; Sev was complete blank insolence. "And what have you two got to say for yourselves?"

"It won't happen again, Kal." Fi looked at Jusik. "And it was me and Sev who decided to go for it. If Bardan hadn't done some clever flying, we'd all be dead now and the op would be over."

"And you, Sev?"

Sev turned his head with slow deliberation. "What he said."

"Son, I know you think you're a hard case because you survived Walon Vau, and you probably are. But anti-terrorist ops are more about this." Skirata walked over to him and rapped his head so hard with his knuckles that the thunk of bone was audible. Sev blinked but didn't move a muscle. "If you'd thought about it for two minutes, you could have re-layed that identification back here and we could have planned some intelligent surveillance. But now we've got another prisoner plus a bunch of dead guys, and we have to explain why a GAR employee isn't going back to the office anytime soon. Because if she wasn't working alone, then some di'kut is going to notice she's absent. Have I missed anything?"

Niner, arms folded, looked up. "Yes, who's helping Vau now? He must have his hands full."

"Enacca. Wookiees are good at looking like a crowd."

Boss had been remarkably quiet for the last ten days. He'd worked his watches without complaint and had shown none of the swaggering confidence that the Delta boys were known for. Now he was pacing up and down the length of the window, slow and deliberate, and glancing occasionally at Niner. Skirata wondered if it was the displacement from the sergeant role that was getting to him.

Might as well lance the boil. "You want to say something, Boss?"

"With respect, Kal, we have different approaches, don't we?"

"Spit it out."

"Delta does rapid neutralization. Omega does the more considered stuff. Why not split our tasking that way?"

For once, rock-solid Niner took the bait. "Yeah, you blow up everything without checking and we think first. I certainly agree with your analysis, ner vod."

"And we have the unbroken track record of successful missions."

"Like we don't."

"You said it."

Skirata wasn't quite fast enough crossing the room and Niner had slammed Boss hard against the wall without a moment's warning. If Skirata hadn't yelled "Check!" Niner would have smashed his drawn-back fist into Boss's face. The two men stood almost nose-to-nose, locked in a frozen standoff.

"This stops right now," Skirata barked. "You hear me? Stand down!"

He'd never seen Niner react like that. Soldiers got into scraps all the time; it was an inevitable part of being encouraged to fight. Sometimes they took a swing at each other, but it was rarely serious, no more than a bit of bravado. But not his boys—and certainly not Niner.

There was a switch in all men somewhere, no matter how deeply buried, that could be thrown.

"You have never lost brothers." Niner took one grudging step back from Boss. "Never. You have no idea."

"Ever wondered why?" said Boss.

"Enough." Skirata put an arm between them. "Next one to open his mouth gets a thump from me, okay?"

This was the brief moment where the fight would erupt or vanish, and Skirata was secretly uncertain if he had what it took to separate two bigger, younger, fitter men. But Niner muttered, "Yes, Sarge," and sat down in a chair on the far side of the room, face white with anger. Boss paused, then followed him to hold out a placatory hand.

"Apologies, ner vod."

Niner just looked up at him, unblinking. Then he took Boss's hand and shook it, but his mind was clearly else-where, and Skirata knew exactly where. Some things didn't go away with time. Niner had lost another Sev, plus DD and 0-Four, at Geonosis; and during training he'd lost Two-Eight, Republic Commandos never forgot the brothers they grew up with in that tight pod from the time they were de-canted.

But Delta still had their pod intact. The world was differ-ent for them. They thought they were invincible; death only happened to others.

"I think we need to take a step back," Skirata said, bleed-ing for Niner. He'd thought the squad was as close as a true pod, but they still nursed their loss. "Delta, you break off and get a meal downstairs and report back at nineteen-hundred. Omega, you break when they get back. Maybe we'll all feel better on a full stomach."

There was no point turning this into a contest between the squads. But mixing them hadn't helped that much. Skirata watched Delta troop out toward the turbolift. It was going to take more than food to distract them, although it usually did the trick.

"Are we all okay?"

Atin looked up from a datapad he was cannibalizing. Dis-mantling things seemed to keep him happy. "We're okay, Sarge. Sorry. I just don't feel happy calling you Kal Except in public, of course."

"That's okay, son."

Skirata made a point of sitting down where he could see Darman and make a discreet assessment. There was some-thing about the way he was turned slightly toward Etain in his seat, and she made a lot more eye contact with him than she had earlier. Skirata wondered why he hadn't spotted it earlier, and also when it had happened.

If he was right ...

It was bad for discipline to let an officer and an enlisted man have a relationship. But Etain wasn't an officer, and Darman had never chosen to enlist. The risk lay more in how Darman would handle it, and how left behind his brothers might feel now that they were out in a world where everyone who wasn't wearing armor was free to love.

Skirata stood up and limped across to Etain. "Come and explain some Jedi stuff to me," he said quietly. "I'd ask Dard'ika, but he's still in disgrace at the moment." He winked at Jusik to indicate he was joking: the kid took his ribbing far too seriously sometimes. "Outside."

It wasn't subtle, but Darman obviously didn't think anyone else had noticed what was going on between them. He proba-bly thought Skirata wanted to discuss the unsavory side of interrogation with her.

Skirata sat down next to Etain on the rickety bench against the landing platform wall. It was late afternoon and the air smelled of hot speeder drives and the powdery sweet scent of a solitary mayla vine that had taken root in a crack in the per-macrete. Etain folded her hands in the lap of her pale blue tunic. Without the dull brown robes she didn't look like a Jedi at all.

"You and Darman," Skirata said carefully.

She closed her eyes for a second. "He told you, then. I suppose he tells you everything."

"Not a word. But I'm not stupid." It was amazing how eas-ily people told you things when you didn't even ask a ques-tion. Perhaps she actually wanted people to know. But it seemed Darman didn't, and he had a right to keep what little privacy he had. "I heard the squad's comments after Qiilura."

"Are you telling me to stop?"

"No, I'm asking where this is heading."

"Are you going to tell him to stop?"

"Not if you make him happy." Skirata trod carefully, but he knew where he drew the line and whose interests he would put first, war or not. "See, I know that much about Jedi. You can't love."

"We're not supposed to. But we sometimes do. I do."

"You're serious about him, then."

"I never stopped thinking about him after Qiilura."

"Have you really worked this out?"

"That I'll outlive him? Women outlive their men all the time. That I might be thrown out of the Jedi Order? As prices go, that's worth paying."

"Etain, he's more vulnerable than you think. He's a grown man and he's a killing machine, but he's a kid, too. Crying over girlfriends can be dangerously distracting for him and the whole squad."

"I know that."

"I'd hate to see him used. If you're going to carry on with this, you'd better mean it." He paused to make sure she understood what he was saying. "You know I'll protect him come what may, don't you?"

Etain's lips parted slightly and her cheeks looked suddenly pink. Her gaze flickered slightly. "I want him to be happy, Kal. I'd never use him."

"I'm glad we agree," he said.

Threatening a Jedi general was probably a court-martial offense. Skirata didn't care. Darman and his last remaining sons came before everything, before the needs of a likable young Jedi, before even his own life—and certainly before the interests of the Republic's politics.

It was a matter of honor, and love.

But Etain would give Darman a little comfort and tender-ness in his life that would tide him through the dark and in-evitable days ahead, days that for him and his brothers were already destined to be limited.

Skirata would just have to keep an eye on the situation. "Make him happy, then, ad'ika," he said. "Just make him happy."

Qibbu's Hut, 2100

The sign above the 'freshers read PATRONS PLEASE OBSERVE THE NO WEAPONS RULE. But although it was written in five languages as well as Basic, most of the patrons appeared not to understand it.

Ordo slipped among the motley assortment of drinkers and gamblers, now diluted considerably by a sea of dark red GAR fatigues, and hoped none of the species here were scent-followers. That was the trouble with some explosives. They had a distinctive smell. He'd scrubbed himself as thoroughly as he could and changed into the ubiquitous red fatigues as well.

Laseema, the Twi'lek female who had fled from the kitchens when he found her cowering behind a table, smiled nervously at him across the bar. By the time he reached it, she had his favorite muja juice waiting for him without the prompt of his distinctive armor.

"How do you know I'm me?" he said, puzzled. "I could be any clone."

"The way you hold yourself." She had a very soft voice, and he had to strain to hear her in the noisy bar. "You stand as if you're still wearing that skirt."

"Kama," he said patiently. "Belt-spat. It's based on a traditional Mandalorian hunting kama. It was designed to protect your legs." Yes, the pauldron and kama did tend to make him stand more upright out of habit, his back a little arched. He'd have to watch that if he wanted to pass for an ordinary clone trooper. "But it's just for show now."

"Ah," she said. "It's certainly very showy."

Ordo was getting used to the attention of Twi'lek females, and he rather liked it. "Is Qibbu treating you properly?"

"Yes. Thank you." Laseema sounded as if she really was grateful. She leaned forward a little. He was still taken aback by the vivid blue of her skin, but he was willing to get used to it. She had a little scar on the point of her chin that was turquoise and more decorative than disfiguring. "Is your friend a captain?"

She glanced sideways and Ordo followed her gaze to Omega Squad and Skirata, who were eating something unidentifiable and occasionally lifting a lump of it on a fork to inspect it communally with worried frowns. "The one with the scar. He's nice."

"That's Atin," Ordo said, crushed. Oh. "He's . . . not a captain. He's a private." The vast majority of the army was made up of privates: it wasn't restricted information. Atin glanced up with that unerring soldier's sense of knowing when some-one was targeting you. He managed a shy smile. "Yes, he's very reliable."

"He's got a lot of scars. Has he been in many battles?"

Oh, she really had been studying Atin carefully: apart from the thin diagonal scar across his face, the rest were harder to spot, just a couple on his hands and one telltale line that was visible above the neckline of his red tunic.

"Yes," Ordo said. "They've all been in quite a few battles."

"Poor Atin," she said, looking smitten. "I'll bring your meal over in a moment."

He forced a smile as Kal'buir had taught him, picked up his glass, and went to join Omega's table.

"What d'you reckon this is, Ordo?" Darman said. He held his fork so that Ordo could inspect the object skewered on it. "A tube of some sort."

"That's what we were afraid of."

"It's all protein." Ordo stared at Atin. "Laseema has taken a fancy to you, ner vod."

There was no jeering or barracking as Ordo had seen ordinary males do at the mention of females. The squad simply sat in silence for a moment and then resumed their debate on the anatomical content of Qibbu's dish of the day. Skirata got up and moved along the bench to sit next to him.

"Successful shopping trip?"

"I have everything on the list now. Sorry for the delay. And I have a few extras."

"How extra?"

"Surprising extras. Very noisy, too."

Laseema glided up to the table and placed a dish in front of Ordo. She smiled at Atin before making her way back to the bar. Ordo picked up his fork to eat, and the squad studied his plate intently.

"But that's all vegetables," Niner said accusingly.

"Of course it is," Ordo said. "My intelligence score is at least thirty-five percent higher than yours."

It happened to be true. Skirata laughed. Ordo cleared his plate as fast as he could and then indicated the turbolift. Skirata followed him up to their rooms, where Delta Squad sat cleaning their DC-17s.

"Just dusting," Fixer said, subtle as a bantha.

"Dust away," Skirata said. "They'll see action soon enough. So, Ordo, what did you get?"

"A hundred kilos of thermal plastoid plus five thousand detonators."

Even Scorch looked up from his dismantled rifle at the mention of that. "That's a lot of ordnance to make disappear without anyone noticing, let alone store it."

"I liberated it in stages from different sources."

Skirata tapped him on the arm. "Now explain the extra surprise."

"The delay was because I enriched it all—minus a pack or two."

"How?"

"A little chemical refinement that'll make it unstable if anyone attempts to use it in devices."

"How unstable, exactly?" Skirata asked.

"If they don't work a stabilizer compound into the plas -toid, it'll blow their workshop into orbit as soon as they at-tach a det to it."

Scorch sniggered appreciatively.

"Just a precaution," Ordo said. "If we end up using it for a sting operation and by some chance it goes wrong, then we'll at least remove a few huruune in the process."

"And half of Galactic City ." Sev grunted to himself and peered through his scope to calibrate it against the view from the window. "You spook boys overdo it sometimes."

Skirata patted Ordo's arm. "Nice job, son. Now tell me where you've stored it."

"Half at the safe house and half under Fixer's bed." Scorch guffawed. Boss smacked his ear but it didn't stop him from laughing. "I'm sharing Fixer's room, di'kut." "Well, you won't even wake up if that blows."

Ordo accepted it was a risk, but risks were relative. And Skirata hadn't expressed interest at his advanced ordnance skills, so he could still keep Mereel's return as a surprise.

He was going to be pleased with Mereel's news on Ko Sai, too.

"So all we have to do now is work out how we get them to take the bait," said Skirata. "Maybe Vau is getting some-where with our GAR colleague."

Boss looked up. "You more interested in using the stuff to kill them, track them, or make them think everything's going fine on the terror front?"

"I'll take all three."

"Does it usually take this long to get anywhere?"

Skirata laughed. "Long? Son, it normally takes years to shut down a network. This is lightning speed. It might still take years, and it's just a fraction of the trouble out there."

"Makes you wonder why we bother."

"Because we can't not bother," Skirata said. "And because it's for us." He sat back in the chair in the corner and put his boots up on the low table, shutting his eyes and folding his arms on his chest. "Vau's calling in shortly. If I don't hear the comlink, somebody wake me up."

Ordo had rarely known Skirata to sleep before his men did. And he had seldom seen him use a bed. He always slept in a chair if he had the choice, and while it might have been a mercenary's need to be ready to wake and fight immediately, Ordo suspected it had a lot to do with that first night on Kamino. His normal life had ceased, and would remain suspended until that elusive normality had been achieved for his troops. He always seemed to be waiting for the Kaminoans to come through the door.

His breathing changed to the shallow, slow rhythm of a man asleep.

Scorch started whistling, distracted by his task. Ordo walked up behind him and clamped his hand hard over his mouth. Quiet. Quiet for Kal'buir.

Scorch took the hint.

Ordo waited, memorizing Mereel's download from his datapad with a single glance at each screen.

Then Skirata's wrist comlink chirped. He opened his eyes and lifted his hand nearer his mouth.

"Walon . . ."

"Try Jailer," a weary voice said.

Skirata sat bolt upright. Delta Squad froze.

"Where are you?" said Skirata.

"Sweeping up a pile of dead guys with colleagues from the Organized Crime Unit."

"Sorry?"

"I think your boys just kicked off a gang war. Can I bor-row a Jedi, please?"

Ten members of a criminal gang have been killed in what's thought to be a gang feud in the lower levels. Sources close Coruscant Security Force suggest the crimelords' battle broke out in a row over gun-running territories.

—HNE late bulletin

Forensics Unit morgue, CSF Divisional HQ, Quadrant A-89, 2345 hours, 380 days after Geonosis

There's your lizard," Ogrim said, pulling back the sheet. "Paxaz Izhiq."

Fi and Skirata looked at the elegant green-scaled face, or at least the half that was still intact. Blasterfire was cleaner than ballistic damage but it still did nothing for your looks.

"Not very attractive to the ladies now, is he?" said Fi.

The morgue was cool and quiet. Fi had never seen one before and he was both fascinated and disturbed, not because it was full of dead things but because he now wondered what would happen to his own body.

Left on a battlefield. Does it matter? Mandalorians don't care about remains. We have our soul. My brothers can retrieve some of my armor; and that'll be enough.

The pale green room with its polished durasteel doors also had an antiseptic smell that reminded him of Kamino. He wasn't comfortable here.

"You okay?" Ogrim said.

"Just interested." Fi stared. "Yes, that's him. You can match him with the images Sev grabbed, too. Is he impor-tant?"

"Not on our files, but Falleen don't visit Coruscant to get nice jobs in the clerical service. Best guess is Black Sun or an offshoot."

"So," Skirata said. "Purely hypothetically, if we picked up a woman friend of his who had access to GAR weapons ship-ments . . ."

"Purely hypothetically, because you don't exist . . . imag-ine she's diverting a few weapons for his business, but you snatch her and so he refuses to complete the deal because he thinks you're the customer trying to intimidate him." Fi lis-tened, riveted. Ogrim's mental gymnastics were hard to fol-low. "But the real customer thinks the Falleen just made an excuse to run out on their agreement. So they come after you, thinking you're his foot soldiers. And you waste them. So their buddies come back to settle a few scores with young Scale-Face's colleagues." Ogrim took one final look at the Falleen's face and covered it up again. "And if they were all waiting on a shipment of explosives anyway—the one you intercepted—then you have a very jumpy assortment of bad guys around town."

"You're going to have to spell out why this is good news," Skirata said.

"Well, we're minus some criminal scum, and we've found more we didn't even know about. Plus we now have some good forensics. The SOCO team has been all over his apart-ment like a rash."

"And?"

"Solid gold for the Organized Crime Unit."

"Whoopee for them, but was he or was he not handling explosives?" Skirata was getting agitated, chewing that ruik root again. "I'm not interested in gangsters stealing Republic weapons for their own purposes. Is his gang supplying ex-plosives to anyone?"

"Yes, we found traces everywhere. Your Jedi colleagues seem to be finding the disturbance in the Force useful—whatever that means."

"Does this mean that your Organized Crime Unit is going to be getting in our way now?"

"Share operational details with me and they won't."

"You know the rules of this game."

"Kal, your boys are coming awfully close to being tar -geted by CSF themselves. It could easily have been you and them in a shooting match. I don't want any friendly-fire inci-dents if we can avoid them."

Fi watched Kal's jaw muscles working as he chewed. This wasn't warfare. It had crossed over into armed politics. Skirata and Ogrim seemed to be conducting a private war by their own rules, and Fi didn't envy them.

"You know that we're not taking prisoners," Skirata said. "And I can't see your people turning a blind eye to that once they know what we're up to."

"But I've got something you need," Ogrim said.

Skirata switched instantly from lovable rogue to a creature of pure ice. "Don't ever, ever try to bargain with me about this."

"Are we on the same side or not?"

Skirata was ashen. "We'll go it alone then." Fi had rarely seen him truly angry, but when he had been pushed too far he went white and quiet and dangerous. "Come on, son. We've got work to do."

He took Fi's elbow and steered him to the doors. It didn't bode well. Fi looked back over his shoulder at Ogrim—a man equally white, equally tense—and the captain shook his head.

"Okay, Kal, I'll give it to you anyway, but may the Force save your sorry backside if this goes wrong."

Skirata turned. He seemed genuinely surprised: he hadn't been bluffing. He really had been storming off and cutting Ogrim out of the loop. "What happens if it does go wrong, Jailer? You get into trouble with your bosses. But my boys die."

"Yeah, and so might mine if they get in the way by acci-dent."

"Then don't get in the way."

"Okay, what time did your people grab the woman?" Ogrim asked.

"Midafternoon."

"Well, there was someone trying to get hold of our irre-sistible friend here via a government comlink shortly before CSF went to his home an hour ago."

"You mean there's someone else in the GAR working with him?"

"Yes, and if we could pin down the transmission source, I'd have given it to you."

Skirata's shoulders sagged. "Thank you, my friend."

"Don't mention it. Just try to give me a warning before you start another war here, okay?"

"That was a nice smokescreen line to the media, by the way. Gang war indeed."

"It's very nearly true. But thank your oily friend Mar Rugeyan for that. You'll owe him one, I'm sure."

Skirata rolled his eyes. Fi continued to be surprised by the machinations of political life in Coruscant. He was grateful—and not for the first time—that all he had to do was shoot or be shot. There was no time to worry or plan: either you did a better, faster job than the enemy at that particular moment or you died.

"Rugeyan wants good news," Skirata said. "Let's see if we can find some for him."

Obrim smiled ruefully at Fi and made a gesture of tipping back a glass of ale. "Don't forget that drink, will you?"

They left Obrim in the morgue and took the service turbo-lift to disappear into the late-night crowds around the CSF complex and emerge at a taxi platform to wait for Jusik to collect them. Skirata simply glanced at three innocent Cor-uscanti citizens waiting there, too, and they decided they had urgent business elsewhere. Kal'buir could look anything but paternal when he felt like it.

Fi pulled his collar up, still feeling horribly exposed with-out his armor. Skirata rummaged in his pocket, took out a bar of candied fruit, and broke it in two. He handed Fi the bigger piece.

"What now?" Fi said.

"It's the only solid lead we've got," Skirata said. "And it's a mess, but I'm reluctant to let it go and start over."

"I bet the Seps are looking for another source of supply for their explosives now. If this were Qiilura or any other mining planet, they could do it easily. On an urban world like this . . . well, scoring a few blasters is easy, but shopping for explo-sives is going to attract attention. Maybe this is where we use Ordo's little cache of stuff that goes bang."

Skirata stopped chewing. "I'm never sure if we have the same ideas because they're common sense, or because I trained you and now you're as crazy as I am, son."

"Well, they know their original consignment didn't arrive, so now you might as well use the stuff as bait."

"And there's Qibbu."

"Now, that's dangerous."

"No, that's when Hutts come in useful. They're like one big scum want-ad service. Seeing as he thinks we're doing a bit of private business without the GAR'S consent anyway, why disappoint him? He can put the word out that Kal has something to sell."

"But then we've pinpointed our operational base for them."

"You think Qibbu will want to advertise that we're in his precious hotel, with the possibility of unpleasantness and lots of damage following him home, too? He won't discuss locations. He likes being alive."

"But you're going to tell Ogrim, right?"

"Only the location when we have a delivery set up with our new customers," Skirata said. "And then only to warn off CSF."

He lapsed into silence. Around them—keeping a sensible distance, because Skirata looked

remarkably gangsterish himself right then—ordinary citizens and tourists from dozens of species were making their way in and out of brightly lit clubs, restaurants, and shops. They were dressed in exotic, colorful clothes, chattering and enjoying them-selves: they were arm in arm with friends, or holding hands with lovers, or accompanied by gaping children who had never seen a city-planet like this at night.

Fi knew how those kids felt. It was still as much a spectacle of miraculous delight to him as it had been when he first saw it from the crew bay of a police cruiser. But it was also now something alien to him, something he had no stake in and could never fully understand.

The civilians around him could have no idea of what was happening right in the middle of their safe daily lives. A few meters from them, a mercenary and a soldier who had no official orders were planning to unload enough explosives on the black market to destroy whole quadrants.

But it was a fair trade. Because Fi had no idea of what their lives were about, either.

We live in parallel worlds. We can see each other, but we never meet.

At least Darman seemed to have found a bridge to a normal life, if you could call a Jedi normal. Fi wondered if his brother realized that everyone knew what was going on with him and the general.

If he were Darman, he wouldn't care.

Operational house, Qibbu's Hut, 0056 hours, 381 days after Geonosis

Ordo placed the tight-wrapped packs of five-hundred grade thermal plastoid explosive on the table and stacked them in piles of ten. Darman picked one up and fondled it with the fascinated expression of a connoisseur of explosives.

It was interesting, Etain thought, to note what made Darman feel relaxed and confident, because

sitting on fifty kilos of ultrahigh explosives didn't reassure her at all.

"Dar, cut it out," Niner said. "We'd like the hotel to still be here when Vau arrives. Reckon you can avoid blowing the place up for the next hour?"

"This stuff is perfectly safe unless you stick something metallic in it and trigger an electrolytic reaction," Darman said. He smiled at Etain before lobbing a hand-sized pack at Niner. "Udesii, ner vod."

Niner caught it and swore. Then he threw it back.

Etain could hear the shower running in the 'fresher. She could also see Atin wandering around, eyes fixed in defocus on the grubby carpet as if he was rehearsing a speech in his head, and he was trailing a disturbance in the Force that felt like the aftermath of a battle. She'd felt Atin's raw grief on Qiilura, the pain at losing his original brothers at Geonosis, and she could taste the dark depths in him all too easily.

Fi, even without the ability to use the Force, seemed to be able to do the same. From time to time he got up and gripped his brother by his upper arm, talking very quietly and earnestly to him.

Much of the conversation was in Mandalorian, which she didn't understand well enough, but she certainly picked up one word that needed no translation: Vau.

Boss, Jusik, and Scorch had gone back down to the bar. Sev and Fixer were out on the landing platform—now look-ing like a normal hotel roof covered with assorted transport from speeder bikes and airspeeders to a couple of taxis—providing a discreet perimeter defense in case someone had tracked the strike team back to Qibbu's. The whole place simmered with tension and—yes, it was there, very subtly, but it was there—fear.

"If Vau's bringing the rest of the thermal, who's minding the prisoners?" Darman said.

"I don't imagine they'll take much minding now," Ordo said. "But Enacca's around."

"So who's going to help him haul fifty kilos of dead-weight?"

Ordo looked faintly irritated. He still felt to Etain like a disjointed turmoil of emotions held in place by a ferociously intelligent logic. She had classified him as dangerous with-out really knowing why.

"Vau," he said carefully, "is still a fit man. A soldier since childhood, just like you and like Kal'buir. He can carry fifty kilos on his own almost as well as you can." Ordo adjusted the pile of sealed packs so they lined up perfectly, as if that mattered very much to him. "And if Enacca doesn't need to guard prisoners, she'll help him carry the ordnance. Either way, stop worrying."

"Yeah, that's my job," Niner said.

Etain had a very good idea what doesn't need to guard prisoners meant. If they had ceased to be useful, then they were a liability here, just as they were on Qiilura. And they would be shot.

Darman killed Separatists when he couldn't take them prisoner. She'd watched him do it: clean, quick, passionless. And—was this the dark side finally pulling her over the edge?—even if she would hesitate to do it herself, she was no longer appalled that he or his comrades did.

He looked up from the packets and gave her a broad smile. There was never even a hint of darkness in him.

"It's perfectly safe," he said. She realized she was frown-ing at him and that he had taken it to be a comment on the pile of instant destruction on the table. "Don't you trust me?"

She smiled back instinctively. "Of course I trust you." Yes, I do: you're my friend, my lover:

Skirata emerged from the 'fresher toweling his hair and wearing a change of clothes with his Verpine in its light gray holster. He leaned over Niner to look at the holozine he was reading.

"Don't you ever watch the holonews?" he asked, pointing at the darkened screen on the wall.

"Too much to take in." Niner resumed reading. "Other people's complicated lives."

Atin had settled in the corner with his DC-17 on his lap. They all kept the rifle close to them when they weren't in public. It was too obviously a commando weapon in the street, and had to be replaced by a discreet blaster. But back here, they lavished affection on the Deece again. It was the weapon they had been raised with and now lived by.

Fi had his slung over his shoulder, and he was looking out the window onto the catwalk opposite, the one that linked another level of seedy bars with the concourse below. He was invisible to the Coruscant beyond the transparisteel, but clearly it was painfully visible to him. Etain could feel his longing.

Fi had changed since Qiilura. Etain had first sensed him in the Force as good-natured and calm. A year later his facade was as unfailingly cheerful, but the undertow was darker, more desperate. He'd seen too much of the war. And he had glimpsed something even more painful and guaranteed to trouble him: ordinary people on Coruscant, leading normal lives of the kind he would never have.

She didn't need the Force to help her taste that. She could see the constant question on his face when he glanced at couples and families, of all species. Why not me? Why is this life not for me?

It was what Darman had asked.

Family and clan—family and fatherhood—seemed of overwhelming importance to Mandalorian men. They certainly drove Skirata.

Then Etain knew exactly what the Force had in mind for her, and it was not the path of a Jedi any longer. It was to ensure that at least one cloned man was given back the future that had been taken away from him at birth, or whatever cold distant process served for birth in those Kaminoan laboratories.

Etain would make him a father one day. She would give Darman a son.

But neither of them had the luxury of a normal life in this war. Her dream would be a secret—even from him for the time being.

Then Etain put the thought from her mind and closed her eyes to meditate, unselfconscious because she was among true friends.

She drifted in formless calm, hearing only the slowed pace of her own heartbeat, until the door buzzed.

She snapped alert again. So did Omega and Skirata.

Etain saw the squad individually as clearly as she did any other beings, and not just because the Force tinted them with their unique shades of character. She had ceased to see their identical faces or their armor, and experienced instead only their distinct personalities and habits.

And yet when they moved—when they switched to their soldier state of being—they were like a single perfect predator.

The buzz made them all look up together, not like ordinary men responding by staggered milliseconds one after the other, but in one movement, absolutely synchronized, and their expressions and the angle of their heads and their frozen alertness were one. Then, with another perfect single movement, they split like a fist opening into fingers and snapped to positions around the room, rifles trained on the door.

Not a word: not one hand signal from Niner. They hadn't even had time to put on their helmets and activate the shared comlink. Whatever told them to move there, do this, watch that, was so thoroughly ingrained in them from drilling that they seemed almost to be operating on instinct.

Their dark, high-cheekboned, exotic faces were expressionless. Except for the rapid blinking, they were completely and utterly still. Etain suddenly saw them as that single exquisite predator again, and it scared her.

Their DC-17 rifles all blipped once in unison as each weapon charged up to fire.

"Vau's not due yet. And Delta's on perimeter." Skirata had his Verpine shatter gun trained this time, not his small blaster—an indication of how much higher he felt the stakes were. "Etain, you feel anything?"

"Nothing." She was certain she would have perceived a threat by now. She was suddenly aware that she had drawn her lightsaber. She hadn't even felt herself move. "Nothing at all."

"Okay . . . on three . . . one . . . two . . . th—"

And the door opened. Etain flinched involuntarily, grasp-ing her lightsaber two-handed. A scent hit her, a foul damp musk.

"Fierfek," Skirata said. "You di'kut. We could have blown your head off."

Niner, Ordo, Darman, and Fi made annoyed clicks and sighs and lowered their Deeces. Atin didn't.

Vau walked in with two straining carryalls and a six -legged, loose-skinned shambles of pale gold short fur am-bling behind him. So that was the strill. And the absence of malice and tension had been . . . ice-cold, calm, utterly de-tached Walon Vau.

"At'ika, lower your Deece," Skirata said softly.

"If you say so, Sarge." And although Atin obeyed, his steady stare at Vau was an eloquent loaded weapon.

"Come on in," said Fi. "Ain't nobody here but us clones."

"You could have called ahead," Skirata said.

Vau lowered the carryalls to the floor, and Ordo pounced on them. "Just challenging your security, like I ought to."

"Well, either Delta and Jusik got instantly stupid or they let pass someone they knew, so don't get too cocky. Anything you want to tell us?"

"I've shut down the safe house and Enacca has cleaned up."

Etain listened intently to the language, spoken in the code of euphemism out of long habit. Cleaning up certainly meant removing bloodstains, because she'd seen them, but she had the feeling it was more than that.

"No further business with our two friends?" Skirata said.

"That's the trouble with Coruscant," Vau said. "High balconies are safety risks. At least that confirms our two guests weren't Jedi, eh?" Vau found a seat, and the strill scrambled onto his lap: it took Etain a moment to work out what he meant, and the realization shocked her. "The other fortunate thing is that I was able to talk to Vinna Jiss's supervisor at GAR logistics as her . . . landlord and complain that she had skipped owing me rent. The supervisor was sympathetic and said she was an unreliable employee."

"So?" said Skirata. Omega had disappeared back to the rooms that led off the main one. Except Atin: Atin waited, a block of black hatred, and Ordo stacked the explosives.

"So at least we don't have to worry about her being missed too badly." Vau glanced at Atin, almost as if he was seeking a greeting, but got no reaction. "And she confirmed that there was one other person in logistics that she had to leave information for in an agreed place, a dead letter drop inside the GAR complex, whenever she could manage it. In a locker in the female 'freshers.'"

"What? You're kidding me."

"I know. We spend millions on the latest ships but we're stuffed by a simple security leak that wouldn't baffle a Ki-tonak grocer."

Etain felt Skirata generate a little dark vortex of rage. His face drained of color. "Why are they so shabla clueless?"

"Because they're a bureaucracy, and they're not the ones in the front line. Anyway, none of the traffic information is impossible to dig out by other routes. It's just quick and easy—all wrapped up in one chip. Worth having because it saves them a lot of time, which means they don't have many personnel. Small and opportunistic network, I reckon."

Skirata was rubbing his face slowly with both hands, exasperated and weary. "So she didn't know who collected the data, other than that they could use the female 'freshers with-out attracting attention? Or what their schedule was?"

"If she had known, I can guarantee she would have told me."

"I'll bet."

"So we need someone in there to flush that person out."

"That's me," Ordo said, and went on making the thermal plastoid into neat piles. Etain had counted two hundred small rectangular packets so far. "All I have to do is withdraw the trooper who's seconded to the transport division and step in."

"And what happens to him?" Vau said.

"He stays here until I'm finished," Ordo said. "You can make a commando of him in the meantime, Kal'buir"

"Well, this is going to be very cozy." Vau rubbed the still's back, and it shuddered with visible delight. "Because you have to find room for me, too."

"Then the strill sleeps on the landing platform," Skirata said.

"Then I do, too," said Vau.

Fi emerged from the room he shared with Atin and stared at the animal. "We could always leave it downstairs in the bar as an air freshener."

"One day, RC-eight-oh-one-five," Vau said, smiling with unusual sincerity, "you might be very glad of Mird's natural talents."

Etain suspected they were not dissimilar to its master's.

Qibbu's private rooms, Qibbu's Hut, 1150 hours, 381 days after Geonosis

"So this is why you write off my debt," Qibbu said. He swallowed a pickled gorg whole and sighed. "You use my fine establishment as a base so that trouble does not follow you home."

Too right, Skirata thought.

"My little girl needs to start up her own business," he said, beaming convincingly at Etain. "So she can look after her old dad in his dotage."

Etain looked suitably sullen. She continued to surprise him with her capacity to do whatever was needed. She could act brave, and she could act calm, and now she could act the wayward and spoiled daughter of an overprotective merce-nary.

"She is too skinny to make a living as a bounty hunter," Qibbu said, and shook with laughter. "Mando females are supposed to be big and tough."

"Her mother, the chakaar, was a Corellian and she left me to bring the girl up," said Skirata. "What Etain lacks in muscle she makes up for in business acumen."

"Ah, I thought your fondness for the Republic's army would prove to have a financial motive. You care nothing for your ... boys."

Kal bit the inside of his cheek. "No. You ever met a Man-do 'ad who cared about the Republic?"

"No. So what is for sale?"

"Something armies have a great deal of."

"Ah . . . you follow the news closely."

Skirata made a silent vow to be very, very kind to Mar Rugeyan in future. That turf war cover story had worked all too well and the man probably didn't even know it. "There does seem to be a sudden gap in the arms market, yes."

"You made that gap, yes?"

His stomach somersaulted. He managed a grin. "I'm not that big a player."

Qibbu swallowed the hint whole like a gorg. "So what can you obtain?"

"Blasters, assault rifles, thermal plastoid, ammunition. Anything larger than that I'll treat as a special order and it might take longer. Don't ask for any warships, though."

Qibbu laughed. "I put out the word and we see if it attracts customers."

"I'm sure I can rely on your discretion. You like this place, don't you?"

"I want no trouble finding its way back here. But I will expect . . . commission. Twenty percent."

"That's my dowry," Etain said sourly. "Papa, are you going to let this chakaar steal from me?"

Fierfek, she was getting good, this kid. " 'Course not, ad'ika." Skirata leaned toward Qibbu and jangled his length of chain in his pocket as a little reminder. "Five percent, and I'll see that your lovely establishment here remains in one piece and unvisited by the riffraff of this world."

Qibbu gurgled. "If this partnership is successful, we rene-gotiate terms later."

"You get the business and we'll see."

Skirata stood up as calmly as he could and led Etain out onto the walkway to get some fresh air. The smell of frying, stale ale, and strill was getting to him.

"I thought chakaar was a nice touch," he said.

"I pick up the odd word."

"You okay?"

"Actually, that was hard. I envy your nerve."

"You reckon?" Skirata held out his hand, fingers spread, palm down. It was shaking. She needed to know that in case she thought he was invincible, and her misplaced faith got her killed. "I'm just a soldier. A commando, you'd call it. I'm groping my way through all this."

"But Qibbu's scared of you."

"I don't have any problems with killing people. That's all." The reality of his situation had become starkly clear now: edging farther and farther out on that limb, either to safety or to plummet into the torrent rushing beneath, with a breath between one extreme and the other. And no way of stepping back onto the riverbank. "If anything happens to me, I need to know someone will look out for my boys."

"You're asking me?"

"There's only you and Bard'ika to ask."

"Nothing is going to happen to you."

"The Force is telling you that, is it?"

"Yes."

"What else does the Force tell you?"

"What I have to do."

"If and when we meet these scum face-to-face, are you up for it? Can't have my boys visible. Too obvious."

"Not Bardan?"

"I don't have to ask Bard'ika. He'll want to be there any-way. I'm asking you."

"I'll do whatever you command. You have seniority here." Skirata was hoping for an expression of confidence rather than obedience.

But it would have to do.

14

Word from our undercover team and their informants is that someone is offering explosives and arms on the black market. It's amazing how fast this scum flows in to fill the gaps. Time for us to move in. And only one warning before you open fire, okay? Let's see how much we can clean up once and for all.

—Organized Crime Unit squad briefing, CSF HQ, 383 days after Geonosis

Logistics center, Grand Army of the Republic, Coruscant Command HQ, 1000 hours, 383 days after

Ordo walked through the center's doors unchallenged this time.

"Good morning, sir," the sentry droid said.

Ordo shoved his stylus probe in the droid's dataport again and downloaded its latest recognized-personnel file. "Carry on," he said.

Before he reached the operations room of the logistics wing, he stepped into the male fresher and ran the down-loaded images of all the center's organic staff through his helmet's HUD to memorize every face. About 5 percent had changed since his last visit. Civilian staff moved on. Super-visor Wennen, he noted, was still there.

Then he copied all the data stored in his helmet to his datapad and wiped the HUD's memory. His armor was completely clean now, with no trace of who or what he was other than a classified ARC trooper tally ID. His sole connection to the special forces world would be the tiny bead comlink in his ear. His final task was to slide a wide-angle strip cam into the ventilation grille that passed between the male 'freshers and the female ones.

Then he replaced his helmet and walked into the operations room. There was no sign of Besany Wennen; the third-shift supervisor, a Nimbanel, was on duty.

"Morning, sir," Corr said.

"Just observing today, trooper," Ordo said. He stood back as if watching the array of live traffic holocharts that covered the circular wall of the ops room, making it feel like the inside of an illuminated drum. In fact, his gaze was on Corr as he worked and occasionally moved around the room. Ordo was taking a crash course in how the trooper moved so that he could mimic him. He already had the measure of his voice with its faint flash-learned accent.

And the civilians always seemed to think he was looking in the direction that his helmet was facing. The basic trooper helmet's specification was available to anyone working in logistics, but they

seemed to be unaware of its visual range. Who cared what a trooper could and could not see?

They ignore so much data, these civilians.

"Corr, I need you to show me something," Ordo said. The civilians also seemed to ignore conversations between clones. "Come with me."

Corr picked up his helmet, put the security code lock on his workstation with his gauntlet tally—good man, follows the regulations—and followed Ordo out of the room. They walked back down the corridor and Ordo gestured him into the 'freshers, marching him into the far end where the lock-ers were.

"This is where you have to follow my orders to the letter," Ordo said.

Corr looked suddenly wary. "Yes sir."

"Armor off. We're swapping suits."

"Sir?"

"Remove your armor. I need it."

Corr began unfastening the gription panels without argument and stacked the plates on the floor. Ordo did the same. They both stood there in black bodysuits, suddenly without visible rank, and Ordo was reminded of the price Corr had paid. He looked at the trooper's artificial hands.

"Was it very painful?" asked Ordo, who had never been that badly injured.

"I don't remember a thing, sir, but it hurt when I woke up in the bacta tank." He pushed back his

sleeves: he had lost both arms from just above the elbow. "I manage okay."

Ordo had no idea what to say. "You should be invalidated out. You shouldn't be going back to the front."

"What about my brothers? What am I without them?"

He had no answer to that, either. He snapped Corr's plates onto his own suit. It was a tight fit: he had always known that the experimental genotype that had so disappointed Kami-noan quality control had made the Nulls slightly heavier in build than the clone trooper and clone commando batches. His armor would be a little loose on Corr.

"At least you get to play captain, then. Enjoy it."

Corr attached the plates and had some trouble snapping the kama into place. Ordo adjusted it and put the pauldron on his shoulders, then handed him the helmet.

"Wow, this feels different," Corr said, looking down at himself. The ARC trooper armor was built to a higher spec. "It's heavier than I thought."

"Get those shoulders back a bit farther and let the kama and the holsters hang like that." Ordo placed the helmet on Corr's head and was suddenly surprised to be staring back at himself: so that was how he looked to the world. "Take this datapad and walk out of the front doors. You'll be met by a taxi piloted by a Wookiee. Do not stop and do not talk to any-one. Just walk out as if you were me, and you'll be taken to a place where you'll be among brothers."

"Very good, sir. How long?"

Ordo tried on Corr's helmet. It felt foreign. It smelled of a stranger: different food, different soap. "I don't know. Just savor the break and I'll see you later. What do you call the civilians?"

"I address them by their last name, except for the supervi-sors, whom I call ma'am or sir"

"Even Wennen?"

Corr paused. "We use first names when not in the center itself."

Ordo tucked Corr's helmet under his arm. "Good. Off you go."

They left the 'freshers a few seconds apart, and Ordo watched Corr disappear up the corridor. The weight of the kama and blasters gave him an authentic swagger. Ordo found it quite touching and turned back to the operations room to get used to being a simple meat can, a clone trooper that nobody—except the enemy, of course—dreaded or feared or avoided.

He had at least one shift to settle in before the biggest risk to his cover turned up. Besany Wennen seemed to be the one taking the most interest in Corr. He would have to be careful to get past her scrutiny. But he had a few hours to practice.

He unlocked the workstation and became compliant, con-scientious CT-51 08/8843, invisible to the world. The job of checking that supplies had reached the correct battalion in the field and that contractors' schedules hadn't slipped was a simple one, and he occupied himself thinking of ways to make the system more efficient. He resisted the urge to up-grade the system there and then.

And he watched those around him.

"Sorry I'm late," said a woman's voice behind him, a level, mellow voice with an undertone of warmth that sounded as if she were permanently smiling, the higher frequencies betraying a shortened vocal tract. "I'll work an extra hour for you tomorrow. Thanks for holding the fort."

Ordo had no time to perfect his simple-trooper act. He glanced over his shoulder as he imagined Corr might, and gave Besany Wennen a slight nod that felt like it came a lit-tle too easily to him.

She smiled back. Ordo suspected she too was a consum-mate actor. But something in him greatly enjoyed that smile.

Operational house, Qibbu's Hut, 2015 hours, 383 days after Geonosis

"Name your time for a discussion about the goods," the stranger's voice said over the comlink. "And we'll name the place."

Skirata didn't like the sound of that. Nor did Vau, evi-dently. He was listening to the comlink, too, scanner in one hand, and shaking his head slowly, tapping out a random pat-tern in the air with a forefinger. Can't trace the transmission point. Multiple relay. Just like us.

Ordo grabbed his gauntlet from the table and activated a holochart, holding it where Skirata could see it. The whole strike team was waiting on the conversation, including the clone trooper called Corr whose life had suddenly taken a turn for the bizarre that day.

"I'm going to need a little more reassurance than that," Skirata said.

"I'm an intermediary," the voice said. Coruscanti accent. No clue at all. "What reassurance would you like?"

"A very public place. If we both like what we see, and we trust each other, we meet somewhere more private to iron things out."

"And you bring a sample."

"Assault rifles? In public?" This was the test question, the one that would sort the gangsters from the Separatists. Weapons were instantly useful to criminals: raw explosives weren't, not unless you wanted to resell them. "Don't takis me, di'kut. My father didn't raise a stupid son."

"My clients suggested you could obtain military-grade explosives."

"I can. So you want a sample of that?"

Silence. Vau listened, head cocked.

"We do. What are you offering?"

"Top military-spec five-hundred-grade thermal plastoid." Pause. "I think that fits the bill."

There was a forest of enthusiastically raised thumbs in the hushed room. For some reason Skirata found himself focused on the anxious face of clone trooper Corr, perched on the edge of a chair with one of Dar's custom dets dismantled in his prosthetic hands.

"Noon tomorrow," Skirata said. He winked at Jusik. "And I'll have my nephew with me, just in case."

"On the south side of the Bank of the Core Plaza ."

"You'll spot me easily enough. I have a strill."

Vau's face was a study in shock, but—like the professional soldier he was—he said nothing.

"What's a strill?" the disembodied voice said.

"A disgustingly ugly, smelly Mandalorian hunting animal. You can't mistake it for any other

species, not even in this menagerie of a city."

"Noon, then."

The link went dead.

"Nobody but Seps would want five-hundred-grade thermal," Vau said. "Too exotic for the average criminal. They certainly bit on the bait fast. Should that worry us?"

"They've lost their usual supplier, and this is far better stuff." Skirata watched Delta descend on the holochart and begin planning sniper positions around the banking plaza. "This is purely surveillance unless they start shooting, okay, lads? Killing them there won't help us trace their nests. Least of all in broad daylight."

"Understood, Sarge."

Sev managed a smile. "As long as we get to use lethal rounds later. We like dead. Dead is very us."

"I added some Dust to the unenriched thermal," Jusik said. "You want some made into Verpine projectiles, so you can tag anyone you spot and track them, too?" Jusik was a ferociously clever lad and Skirata prized intelligence very much, as much as loyalty and courage. "I thought I'd make sure we didn't have to follow a suspect the hard way again. Am I forgiven for my lapse of judgment the other day?"

"Bard'ika, if you ever want a father, then you have one in me," Skirata said.

It was the highest compliment he could pay him: he was fit to be his son. Jusik might not have fully understood Mandalorian culture yet, but he certainly grasped the sentiment if his embarrassed glance down at the floor and the broad grin were any guide.

Boss gave Skirata a cautious glance. "Does that mean we get to use your Verp rifles?"

"You're such a pushover for fancy kit," Skirata said.

"They're the business, Sarge . . . kandosii!"

"But you bend them, and I'll bend you. They cost me a for-tune, and they do not bounce."

"How you going to get the caliber of those marker pellets right, though, Bardan?" Sev said.

"Multicaliber magazine and bore," Skirata said. "You could load these Verps with stones if you needed to. That's what cost the money. That and the full-spectrum range of fil-ters, variable velocity, and anti-reflective device."

"Kandosii," Sev said, almost sighing. "Shame you didn't pay a bit extra to make them more robust."

"Cheeky di'kut . okay, I reckon you're good enough to use them. Take a look."

Skirata went to the cupboard and slid out one of the pre-cious rifles, disassembled into three discrete parts: thirty-centimeter barrels, matte drab green, silent, horribly accurate, and Jaing's weapon of choice for going hiking with extreme prejudice, as he described it. Sheer ballistic beauty. An as-sassin's tool: a craftsman's tool.

He hadn't seen Jaing in months. He missed him. He missed all the Nulls badly when they were on long, distant missions.

Boss and Sev fondled the rifles and beamed. Even Fixer looked happy. The Delta boys didn't respond to food treats and pats on the head, then, but they loved new toys and praise. Skirata noted that.

"I need accurate ranges from your recce," Jusik said. "I've got to pack the Dust into a medium that'll stay together until it's right at the target, or the stuff will disperse too soon. This has to splatter them close to the face so they inhale it, or it'll just sit on their clothing. If they dump their jackets, we'll lose them."

"Fun," Sev said, and obviously meant it.

Vau got up and wandered out toward the landing platform, no doubt to fuss over Lord Mirdalan before the slobbering thing did a real job for once in its life. When he was out of earshot, Boss turned to Skirata.

"Sargeant Vau loves that animal. Don't let anything hap-pen to it. Please."

"I won't. It knows I carry a knife."

Corr, who had been the subject of much fussing and atten -tion since Jusik had brought him back to Qibbu's, watched cautiously. Skirata ruffled his hair. He flinched. "Sorry about all this, son. Learning a lot?"

"Yes, Sargeant."

"Want to be useful? I mean even more useful than you are now?"

"Yes. Please."

Poor little di'kut. Skirata fought the urge to collect another damaged young boy, another stray in need of belonging, and lost immediately. He had been that orphan, and a soldier had rescued him.

"Dar, give him a crash course in using a DC-17, will you?"

Boss and Sev slid the discreet body armor plates under their tunics and checked their hand blasters. "Just off for a recce of the location, then," Boss said. "Back in two hours, and then I suggest we insert as soon as possible so we're there before the bad guys."

"What makes you think they won't be doing the same right now?" Etain said.

"Because it looks like a very hard location to lay up in for any length of time, and we're pros, and they're not," said Boss. "So they'll probably go in closer to the rendezvous time."

Skirata made a point of looking around the group so that he could see the reaction of the two Jedi. Both of them were very capable warriors but assassination—killing someone who was not about to kill you—was psychologically very different from using a lightsaber or blaster in combat.

The silent excitement that had gripped the room was palpable.

"Gentlemen—ma'am—this is a shoot-to-kill operation," he said. "Not arrest. We want as many hut'uune identified, located, and dead by any means possible at the end of this deployment. Nothing else. We're cutting out a big chunk of this network in one slice. Are we all clear that's what we're doing?"

"Yes Sarge!"

It was one voice. And Jusik and Etain were part of it. That was good. Anyone who hesitated would get the rest of the strike team killed, or worse.

"Okay, recce team, move out," Skirata said. "And don't you dare drop my Verps."

Mandalorians are surprisingly unconcerned with biological lineage. Their definition of offspring or parent is more by relationship than birth: adoption is extremely common, and it's not unusual for soldiers to take war orphans as their sons or daughters if they impress them with their aggression and tenacity. They also seem tolerant of marital infidelity during long separations, as long as any child resulting from it is raised by them. Mandalorians define themselves by culture and behavior alone. It is an affinity with key expressions of this culture—loyalty, strong self identity, emphasis on physical endurance and discipline-- that causes some ethnic groups such as those of Concord Dawn in particular to gravitate toward Mandalorian communities, thereby reinforcing a common set of genes derived from a wide range of populations. The instinct to be a protective parent is especially dominant. They have accidentally bred a family-oriented warrior population, and continue to reinforce it by absorbing

like-minded individuals and groups.

—Mandalorians: Identity and Its Influence on Genome, published by the Galactic Institute of Anthropology

Logistics center, Grand Army of the Republic, Coruscant Command HQ, 0815 hours, 384 days after Geonosis

This was no place for a fighting man to be when his brothers were out in the field, but Ordo reasoned that the faster he identified and neutralized the informant, the sooner he could leave this office job.

"Clone," the Nimbanel voice said. The creature was riding him today. It was a bad idea—normally. "Clone! Have you input the overnight batch of data yet?"

I know at least ten ways to kill you without a weapon, lizard. I'd like to try them all.

"Yes, Gurus," Ordo said, being nice, compliant Corr. "I have."

"Then you should have told me immediately."

Ordo heard Skirata's constant admonishment in his head and kept his temper: Udesii, udesii, ad 'ika—easy, easy, son. This clerk wasn't fit to clean Corr's boots. He certainly wasn't fit to clean his.

"My apologies," Ordo said, acting the calm man that he definitely wasn't right then. "It won't happen again."

Besany Wennen raised her head from her screen very slowly. She was distressingly pretty. The symmetry of her features made him uncomfortable because he wanted to stare, and his male instinct said pursue, but his brain said suspect.

"Gurus, if you have a concern about data management, may I suggest you raise it with me first?" The warmth in her voice had disappeared completely. The frequency dropped as her lips compressed. Ordo could see her in his peripheral vision: she had a way of switching off that vivid smile and just freezing for a few moments. This was someone used to obedience in those around her. "Trooper Corr is doing what I asked of him."

Ordo had no idea if that was true or if she was saving him embarrassment. He managed a placatory smile anyway. Watching Corr last night had honed his act a little more.

As he worked, inputting vessel pennant codes and supply routes into the program that fed the wall display, he pondered on the one solid piece of information he had. The advance schedule for movements of men and materiel was stripped out to provide confirmation messages. One internal stream went to GAR logistics battalions and Fleet Ops, and one external stream was relayed to the thousands of civilian contractors who provided supplies and transport. The two sets of data were different.

So this had to be the data that was left on a chip at the drop point within the complex—the one that Vinna Jiss had helpfully described to Vau whether she wanted to or not. The bomb attacks had been spread throughout the contractor and military supply networks; whoever executed the attacks had both sets of data.

And copying data showed no audit trail. Relaying data from the system did. And that was what routine security watched. Old tech beat state-of-the-art with depressing frequency.

All Ordo had to do now was watch the surveillance im-ages of the drop point at the female 'freshers. So far it had picked up nothing. He had no idea how frequently the Sepa-ratist contact—and he had to assume it was one—checked the locker, but nobody had shown up. Maybe they hadn't missed Jiss yet.

It was nearly noon when Supervisor Wennen got up and left the operations room. On a whim, Ordo laid his helmet on its side on the desk next to him at an angle where he could discreetly view the feed from the 'freshers playing out on his HUD.

Wennen was not the kind of woman who belonged here. Some uneasiness told him so. Kal'buir had told him that a strong hunch was usually based on subconscious observa-tion of hard facts, and was to be treated with respect.

The grainy blue image showed Wennen entering the 'freshers. She didn't glance around. She paused at the lock-ers, scanned along them with her head moving visibly, tucked a strand of pale hair behind one ear, and bent to open several unlocked doors until she appeared to tire of it and left again. She reappeared in the ops room a minute later and gave him a regretful smile that appeared utterly sincere.

Something had irked her.

Ah, Ordo thought, disappointed.

Then he wondered why he felt that disappointment, and realized it was due to impulses unconnected to the business in hand. And business, of course, had just taken a turn for the better.

His shift finished when hers did, at 1600.

He would spend the next few hours working out exactly how to remove her without alerting any other Separatist con-tacts that might be in her cell. He wanted them all.

1100 hours, 384 days after Geonosis, commercial zone, Quadrant N-09: agreed meeting point to open negotiations with interested parties

"Lazy chakaare," Fi said, glancing at his chrono. "What time do they call this?"

"Well, if they got here before us and we can't see 'em . . . we're probably dead meat."

Darman was somewhere on the opposite side of the Bank of the Core Plaza, three floors above the pedestrian area in a storeroom he had infiltrated. Fi couldn't see him, but his voice was clearly audible in his head: the bead comlink was so sensitive that it picked up subvocalization via the eustachian tube.

They'd been here since 2330 last night. They had observed and noted every cleaning droid, automated walkway sweeper, late worker, early-morning commuter, shopper, drunk, CSF foot patrol, delivery repulsor, unlicensed caf vendor, and tru-ant schoolkid that had passed in and out of the plaza from any direction. They had also swept the cliff walls of office buildings and—to Fi's great interest—noted that some em-ployees did not catch up with the filing after hours if they had colleagues of the opposite sex with them.

And every couple of hours, Etain Tur-Mukan had walked briskly across the plaza as if she had business somewhere, sweeping the area with whatever extra sense Jedi had that en-abled them to detect concealed people. Etain was said to be good at that. She could place the squad to within a meter. Each time she passed, Fi heard Darman move or swallow, and he wasn't sure if it was because he could see her or be-cause she was reaching out to him in the Force.

Fi suddenly wanted the uncomplicated focus of a totally military life on Kamino.

You're getting distracted. Think of the job in hand. Maybe they'd let him keep the bead comlink after this op. They'd never miss a few back at HQ. Surely

"I want my HUD back," Darman said. "I want my en -hanced view."

"But you get to wear face camo instead. Makes you feel wild and dangerous."

"I'm wild," Sev's voice said. Sev was behind a roof balustrade under a pile of discarded plastoid sheeting. "And then I get dangerous. Shut up."

"Copy that," Fi said cheerfully, and clicked his back teeth twice to exit Sev's open comlink channel. It was far too noisy an environment for their quiet conversation to be heard any-way. "Miserable di'kut."

"Don't mind him." Scorch was at walkway level about fifty meters west of the meeting point, lying prone in a dis-used horizontal access shaft. "He'll be fine once he's killed something."

Darman had a Verpine rifle with live rounds, as did Sev. Fi and Scorch had the nonlethal tracking projectiles, twelve rounds each. The Verp was truly lovely. Fi had always wondered just how many credits Sergeant Kal had made over the years. His growing collection of expensive, exotic weapons and the modest extravagance of his bantha jacket were the only visible signs that it might have been a lot.

"Dar—"

"Possible contact, first walkway level, my left of the bank entrance . . ."

Fi adjusted his scope and tracked right. It was a boy he'd seen before: human, very short scrubby light hair, gangly. He was still hanging around the plaza. If he was a Sep, he was a disgracefully amateurish one. They watched for a few minutes, and then a young girl in a bright yellow tunic raced up to the boy and flung her arms around him. They kissed enthusiastically, drawing glances from passersby.

"I think he knows her," Fi said. He felt his face burn. It bothered him and he looked away.

"Well, that's just you and Niner left on the shelf now that your brothers are spoken for," Scorch said.

There was a pause. Darman cut in. "You got a point to make, ner vod?"

"I think it's kind of encouraging." Scorch chuckled. "Atin gets a cute Twi'lek, Dar gets his very own general—"

"—and Scorch gets a thick ear if he doesn't shut it right now"

The comlink was suddenly silent except for the occasional sound of swallowing. Darman wasn't in a joking mood when it came to Etain. He never had been, not even on Qiilura, when there hadn't been anything going on between them.

Why is this hurting so much? Why do I feel I've been cheated?

Kal'buir, why didn't you prepare me for this?

It was too distracting. Fi shut his eyes for a few moments and went into the sequence he had learned to center himself when the battlefield pressed in on him: controlled breathing, concentrating on nothing except the next inhalation, ignoring everything that wasn't of the next moment. It took a while. He shut out the world.

Then he found that he had his eyes open without even re-aling and he was simply following movement on the plaza below through the breathtakingly accurate scope of the Ver-pine rifle.

"Now, do we get the best kit or what?" he said, becoming the confident man he wanted to be again. "Name me another army where you get handcrafted Verps to play with."

"The Verpine army," Scorch said.

"Do they have an army?"

"Do they need one?"

Silence descended again. At 1150 Sev cut into the comlink circuit. "Stand by. Kal's moving into position." Skirata wandered into the plaza from the direction of the Senate with Jusik one on side and an excited Lord Mirdalan straining on a leash on the other. He was doing a credible job of looking as if the strill were his constant companion. The animal seemed remarkably content with him, given the number of times Skirata had driven it off or thrown his knife at it over the years. Maybe the riot of strange new scents had thrilled the strill enough that it didn't much care that the man who usually shouted at it was holding the leash. Fi watched as they took up a position near the door, sitting down on an ornate durasteel seat shaped like a bow.

Skirata's voice came over the comlink circuit.

"How's my boys?"

"Cramp, Sarge," Darman said. "And Fi's dribbling over your Verpine."

"He can clean it, then. Ready?"

"Ready."

At 1159 a human male in his forties—green casual tunic, brown pants, collar-length brown hair, beard, tall, lean build—walked toward Skirata and Jusik in a purposeful line. Fi tracked him.

"Got him, Fi," Darman said. If anything went wrong, the man would be dead in a fraction of a second from a silent high-kinetic round in his back.

"Escort," Sev said. "Looks like three . . . no, four. Three male, one female, all human . . . one male twenty meters south of Darman. Spread out but all moving toward Skirata."

"Got him."

"Got the female," Scorch said.

"You sure they're with the Beard?"

"Yeah, check their eyeline, Fi. They're watching him, nothing else. They're pretty cool about it but they're obviously not professionals. They shouldn't even be looking his way."

Etain's voice cut in. "There's another female approaching slowly on the Senate side of the bench. I'm moving in behind her so you can spot her."

Sev cut in. "Any more?"

"I can only sense four others plus the man approaching Kal."

"Aww, look. They've taken up positions to block the main pedestrian routes off the plaza. Thank you! I love a target that identifies itself."

"I hope this doesn't turn into a shooting match," Scorch said. "Too many civvies."

"I can get a clear shot," Sev said. "And I can take at least three out from here. Relax. You just worry about tagging 'em."

Tagging. Would they feel it?

Fi dropped in an EM filter with a touch on the optics housing. He focused the scope on the

woman now standing al-most under Darman's position by the walkway heading toward Quadrant N-10: shoulder-length red hair, blue business suit, tan leather document bag. The filter detected electromag-netic emissions, which made it not only handy for locating someone operating a comlink but also just perfect for seeing if Dust had hit its target. It cast a pinkish brown tinge across the image.

He checked for indications of wind speed. The woman's hair was moving slightly in the breeze: a flimsi cup discarded near the caf vendor rolled a little way along the paving. Fi adjusted his scope and checked the air temperature, which had crept up a fraction in the last twenty minutes. He ad-justed the Verp's settings again and settled the weapon on his forearm.

Relax. Power coil set to medium. Don't want her to feel the projectile hit her. Don't want to spray the Dust over the whole plaza, either .. .

The crosshairs settled.

"So that's a strill." The man's voice was a little fuzzy but Fi could hear the accent, even if he didn't recognize it. "Charming. Call me Perrive."

"And you can call me Kal."

Fi closed his eyes for a second and slowed his breathing. When he opened them, the aim was still dead center of the woman's chest.

"So let's see the goods."

Fi exhaled slowly and held his breath.

"Here. Take it and have it tested."

Fi's finger tightened on the end of the trigger. The Verp was so finely constructed that all he felt was a sudden lack of resistance under his finger and the rifle fired—silent and without recoil.

"How much stuff in all?"

"Hundred kilos. More if you need it."

A smoke-like white puff billowed in Fi's filter. The projectile had burst on contact, showering the woman with micro-scopic tracking powder, each tiny fragment capable of relaying its location back to the base receiver at Qibbu's—or even to a HUD. She glanced down as if an insect had landed on her and then simply brushed the end of her nose as if she'd inhaled pollen.

"Five hundred grade?"

"All of it," said Kal.

"Dets?"

"How many?"

"Three or four thousand."

"Five-hundred-grade—I have it. Dets—just a matter of acquiring them discreetly. A day maybe."

"Confirm—female target in blue, marked." Fi tracked the rifle ninety degrees to his left.
"Targeting the male farthest from Kal. Black jacket."

Breathe easy. Relax. He aimed and adjusted the scope again, held his breath at the comfortable point of exhalation, and fired for a second time. Again, the man reacted and looked for something on his chest, then carried on watching Skirata as if nothing had happened.

"Male, black jacket—target marked. So they can feel it strike, then."

"Don't hog them all," Scorch said. "I want a go."

"All yours, ner vod."

"Targeting the male right of Skirata, gray robe . . ."

Fi lined up his EM scope on Scorch's target to observe.

Scorch's breathing paused, and then Fi saw a puff of white smoke bloom on the gray robe. He didn't react at all.

"Now the other male, red vest, left of Skirata by the caf vendor . . . no, keep still, you di'kut ... that's better." Scorch was silent again. Fi watched through the EM filter. The projectile burst neatly on the man's shoulder and he brushed his nose without noticing, just like the first woman. Maybe it was a combination of seeing absolutely nothing as the pellet's binding agent vaporized, and being hyped up on adrena-line during a mission. They weren't tuned in to much beyond seeing and not being seen.

"Okay, who's taking Beard Guy? Perrive."

"Me," Fi said. "If I make it three for three, do I get to keep him? Y'know, stuffed and mounted?"

"He'd make a nice stand for your Hoka armor."

Perrive—Beard Guy—stood at a slight angle, moving a little as he spoke to Skirata. He held the small pack of thermal plastoid in his hand, about a hundred grams of it, and was squeezing it between his fingers while glancing at the wrapping. It looked for all the world like a spice deal, and Fi wondered for a moment if they were all blind to how obvious that might appear.

Worry about that later. Tag him.

"Turn around, chakaar. I don't want to hit your back."

Fi had settled into a rhythm now. He watched through the scope as Perrive slipped the plastoid into his pocket and stood with one hand on his belt, turning idly back and forth, presenting a good expanse of back and then a narrow angle of shoulder.

Fi relaxed, aimed and went for the shoulder, anticipating the turn.

Whuff.

The tracker projectile struck home and got no reaction.

"Okay we'll take a look at this and get back to you tomorrow at noon," Perrive said. "If we like it, we meet somewhere private. If we don't, you never hear from me again."

"Suits me," said Skirata.

"What about the second woman?" Fi said. "Etain, where are you?"

"About three meters to her left."

"Can you edge her clear of the civvies?"

"Okay . ."

Fi listened. Skirata could hear all this on his comlink bead, too. It took some skill to carry on talking with someone hav-ing a five-way conversation in your ear.

"Excuse me," Etain said. "I'm hopelessly lost. Can you show me how I get to Quadrant N-Ten?"

Fi watched as the woman simply paused, looked at Etain with surprise, and then began pointing out the connecting walkway. Etain moved. The woman stepped out farther, pointing again.

"Thank you," Etain said, and walked on.

Whuff. The projectile plumed light on the woman's shoul-der. And she brushed her nose.

"All six tagged," Fi said. He changed channels with an ex -aggerated click of his molars. "Niner, you receiving?"

"Got 'em all," said Niner's voice, several quadrants away in Qibbu's. "Nice vivid traces on the holochart."

"Okay." Fi let his head drop to ease his neck muscles. "You can wind up now, Sarge."

"The old di'kut's good at it, isn't he?" Scorch betrayed a grudging fondness. Skirata could hear the conversation and Scorch knew it. "I'd love to know where he learned to do all that."

Skirata's face didn't even twitch. Nor did Jusik's. Jusik was just looking around as a gangster's errand boy was sup-posed to, appearing alert but not too bright.

"My intermediary says you have lots of army friends," Perrive said.

"Contacts," Skirata said. "Not friends."

"Don't like our army, then?"

"Just useful. Just clones."

"Not worried what happens to them?"

"You're not some di'kutla liberal, trying to recruit me, are you, son? No, I don't give a mott's backside about clones. I'm in this for me and my family."

"Just curious. We'll be in touch, if we like the goods."

Skirata simply sat with his hands thrust into his pockets, apparently watching the strill, which had stretched out in an ungainly pile of loose skin with its head under the bench, trailing drool. Jusik chewed vacantly, also staring ahead. Fi and the sniper team watched Perrive and the five targets disperse into walkways and down-ramps.

They waited.

"Anyone else spot a Jabiimi accent there?" Jusik asked.

Skirata leaned over and appeared to be about to pat Mird. "I reckon so." Fi waited for it to sink its teeth in him, but he stopped short of touching it and the animal simply rolled over to watch his hand with malevolently curious eyes.

Fi remembered the strill from Kamino. It seemed smaller now that he was a grown man. Once, it was bigger than he was.

Eventually there was a long sigh of relief. "I sense they're all gone," Jusik said. "Niner, are they clear of the plaza area?"

Niner grunted. "Confirmed. You can move now."

"Stand down, lads," Skirata said at last. "Well done."

"Nice job, Etain," said Darman's voice.

"Yeah, okay, well done the Mystic Mob, too." Skirata tugged on Mird's leash; the pile of fur scrambled onto all six legs and shook itself. "Let's thin out carefully, and don't forget to wipe off the face camo before you move. We'll RV back at Qibbu's by thirteen-fifteen. Then get some rest."

"Sounds good," Fi said. It was only when the tension had passed that he realized how stiff his joints felt and how much parts of him hurt from twelve hours and more lying prone on the makeshift padding of his jacket. "Hot bath, hot meal, and sleep,"

Skirata cut in. "You know I didn't mean that, don't you?"

"What?"

"About clones. Qibbu obviously mentioned you to his scum associates."

"Of course we know, Sarge," Scorch said. "You said you were in this for your family, didn't you?"

Logistics center, Grand Army of the Republic, Coruscant Command HQ, 1615 hours, 384 days after Geonosis

Ordo listened to his concealed comlink with a practiced expression of blank disinterest while he keyed in traffic movements. The holochart that covered every centimeter of wall space shifted and pulsed as consignments turned from red to green—now laden, cross-checked, and en route—and requests for replenishment stacked up in a panel of blue horizontal bars.

The holochart gave no numbers of troops, but a little common sense would have told anyone who wanted to spend the time thinking through the obvious that they were thinly stretched. There were, Ordo knew, at least a million troops now in the field spread over hundreds of worlds: small forces on some, multiple battalions on others. It meant long supply chains, and those were inherently vulnerable. So . . . why didn't the Separatist terror networks target them offworld? No ability. No suitable vessels or skills. Or . . . maybe the point was to intimidate the seat of galactic government after all.

Motive mattered. Motive gave you the capacity to think like the enemy, want what they wanted, and then snatch it from them.

And killing clone troopers—mainly troopers, if you didn't count the unfortunate civilians who were also in the way—made the point that the Seps could come and go as they pleased.

Ordo took it personally. He drew on the memory of sharp, cold fear and focused hatred that he had learned on Kamino before a total stranger had stepped in front of him and saved his life.

We can trust nobody but our brothers and Kal'buir.

Over the comlink, he could still hear Niner's exclamations of satisfaction. The six men and women tagged by Fi and Sev were dispersing all over Galactic City, leaving routes and stopping points that Niner and Boss were logging on a holo-chart that showed every skylane, quadrant, and building on Coruscant. Judging by their occasional descent into the rich Mandalorian invective that Kal 'buir considered an important part of their continuing education, they were learning more than anyone had bargained for.

Ordo would evaluate it all when he returned, but the number of locations that the tagging had

registered had now reached twenty; it was growing into something larger than a fourteen-man team might be able to handle.

Ordo wanted to tell them to concentrate on the clusters, the areas of most traffic, but it would have to wait. The strip cam had yielded nothing, except the fact that females of all species employed in the center seemed to spend a lot of time in the 'freshers rearranging their appearance. Whoever had been used to collecting the data probably knew Vinna Jiss was gone now and was no doubt trying another route. He kept a careful eye on Supervisor Wennen because she seemed to be getting increasingly agitated as the day wore on. He could hear it in her voice. She didn't like Guris. She was checking something: when he went to the 'freshers, she was still on the same screen when he returned, scrolling up and down an inventory.

She was checking rifle shipments going back two or three months. If it's you, Wennen, what is your motive?

He didn't have to stop to read the screen over her shoulder. He could simply glance at it, focus, and walk back to his workstation to close his eyes discreetly and recall what he had seen.

Whatever errors the Kaminoans had made in their attempt to improve Jango Fett's genome, the efforts had not been wasted.

Wennen looked up toward the doors. Her fine-boned face, while still aesthetically pleasing, suddenly froze into genu-ine anger and lost its prettiness.

"Jiss," she said sourly. "You'd better have a good excuse this time."

Ordo fought every instinct to jerk around and stare. He simply turned his head casually to focus on a sheet of flimsi to his right, and there she was: Vinna Jiss.

You're dead.

"I've been unwell, Supervisor."

But you're dead. So who are you?

"Heard of comlinks? I even had your landlord calling me, complaining you'd skipped without paying rent."

I know you're dead because you fell a few thousand meters from a balcony after a chat with Walon Vau.

"Sorry, Supervisor."

Wennen was all acid, lips compressed. "See me first thing in the morning. I'm off shift now."

She shut down her workstation, grabbed her jacket, and made a move toward the doors. Then she paused and turned to Ordo.

"Corr, it's sixteen-thirty," she said. "Come on. Time to go. Nobody will thank you for sitting there all night. Want me to drop you off at the barracks?"

Jiss, either you're dead or you're an imposter. So who did Vau kill?

"Thank you, Supervisor." Ordo logged off and replaced his helmet, suddenly glad of the chance to hide behind an anonymous white plastoid visor and stare horrified at the face of a dead woman who seemed to be doing pretty well for a corpse. "I'm . . . I'm going to meet some comrades from the Forty-first. Could you drop me off at the first taxi platform in the entertainment sector, please?"

"I'm glad you're taking the opportunity to relax, Corr." She seemed genuinely pleased. "You deserve it."

Ordo took one last look at the woman who appeared to be Jiss, memorizing every pore and line,

and followed Wennen outside to the speeder bays. He slid into the passenger's seat with a hundred questions that had, for once in his life, yielded no fast answers.

Wennen powered up her speeder and sat still for a moment, staring at the console.

"Honestly," she snorted, all exasperation. "That's the most unreliable employee I have ever known. Sometimes I could just kill that woman."

Operational house, Qibbu's Hut, 1630 hours, 384 days after Geonosis

"There they go . . .," Niner said.

Beads of red light were now dotted throughout the blue holochart of grids and lines that had expanded to fill a space a meter high and two meters long. The tracking Dust was transmitting the movements of the six Separatists they had tagged a few hours earlier.

Etain walked around the 3-D chart, studying tracks that were strung like necklaces with occasional solitary beads placed at intervals. The virtual representation of a section of Galactic City spanned the table. Some of the threads crossed and merged. Niner and Boss were still taking data from it and listing each location while Vau watched with Jusik.

"They do get around," Vau said. "Jusik, my boy, has any-one ever told you you're a genius?"

Jusik shrugged. "And my friends are excellent shots. Good team, aren't we?"

Friends was an unusual way for a Jedi to describe clone troops who were technically his to command and use as he thought fit. But Jusik simply didn't see the world that way. Etain found it deeply touching.

"Yes, excellent team," Vau said. Boss glanced up, evidently pleased. "It's wonderful to watch a job done well."

That wasn't quite the Walon Vau that Etain had sensed and found to be sheer passionless brutality. He was no less complex and contradictory than Skirata. Atin, reading from his datapad, ignored him completely; Vau sometimes glanced at his former trainee but got no reaction.

Atin loathes him. He wants revenge of some kind. Etain found it hard to reconcile that with the methodical, considerate, and courageous man she knew, the one who had felt he had no right to survive Geonosis when his brothers had died.

While the locations were collated, another frustrating hiatus had forced the squads into rest and recovery. They seemed to need to be busy fighting, especially Delta. Etain could taste their collective impatience. Maybe it was youth; but maybe it was that they didn't enjoy having time to think.

Fi, Sev, Fixer, and Scorch had gone down to the restaurant to eat with Corr, but Darman was asleep in his room. Etain went to check on him and watched him for a while. He lay on his stomach, head turned to one side, cheek resting on folded arms, and twitched occasionally as if dreaming.

They grabbed every small moment together that they could find. And it wasn't enough. Etain kissed his temple and left him to sleep. Skirata, wandering around with his hands deep in his pockets, gave her a conspiratorial wink.

"Looks like we've got three clusters in residential areas," Boss said. "And now about twenty-five other places they've at least stopped for a while, including shops."

Skirata stood looking at the mesh of colored light. "We can't cover them all," he said. "The clusters are the priority."

"Probably their safe houses or bomb factories." Boss indicated a static point of red light that hadn't moved in an hour. "I think that's our marked pack of thermal plastoid."

"Could well be. Got a list now?"

"It gets longer by the hour. How long did you say that Dust can transmit?"

Jusik cocked his head, calculating. "Four, perhaps five weeks."

"Well, I say we recce the cluster points for a day or so, confirm the activity, and then decide which are the priority targets and leave the rest to CSF." Niner jabbed his finger into the holochart again to indicate another thread growing as the tagged suspect moved to a new location. "This tar-get is trailing the other. No idea why. Maybe providing tail cover."

"Okay, you draw up a surveillance roster for the next twenty-four hours and be prepared to pull people off it if I get the call from Perrive, or whatever his real name is."

"Okay, Sarge."

Skirata finally allowed himself a little satisfied grin, which put Etain more in mind of a gdan than ever. He gave both Boss and Niner ferocious pats on the back; Boss flinched while Niner turned and smiled, pleased with life. "Nice job. You two go and get something to eat."

Etain fought an urge to walk across to Skirata and hug him. She had finally worked out what was happening. Omega—and Ordo—were clearly used to genuine affection from him: they touched all the time, from roughhousing and crushing hugs to hair ruffling. Delta didn't. They were uncomfortable with it. Whatever relationship they had with Vau was much more distant, more competitive, more a desperate quest for his approval. Skirata played the good father even now, dispensing treats, unashamedly pleased and proud of every-thing his boys achieved. Vau looked as if he played the master, and being judged good enough was rare.

It made her wonder more than ever about Atin. She would have seized the moment and taken him aside to ask, because it troubled her, but she was interrupted by the return of Fi and Sev. Fi strode up to Atin and grabbed the datapad from his hand.

"A strange blue woman with no taste in men wants to see you," he said. "Go on. Laseema's complaining you haven't said hello to her today."

Fi had a knack for teetering on the edge of offense. He also did a very good job of pretending that Atin's good for-tune with Laseema didn't bother him one bit. The aching little void at the core of him, so plainly detectable in the Force, said otherwise.

Jusik caught Etain's eye: he spotted it, too. Then he looked past her toward the doors, and she felt something as well—anxiety and distress, very clearly emanating from a presence that could only be Ordo.

He strode into the room and began unfastening his armor, jaw clenched. Skirata just waited.

"So, did you have a good day at the office, dear?" said Fi.

"She's not dead," Ordo said. "Vinna Jiss is not dead."

"Start again, son," Skirata said.

"A woman my supervisor identified as Vinna Jiss walked back into the logistics center at sixteen-fifteen today." He stacked the plates and sat down on the edge of a chair, completely calm except for the telltale gesture of one fist clenched on his knee. He looked up at Vau. "And it was her, or at least she looked the image of the woman Jusik picked up. In one piece. Are you sure you killed her?"

Vau raised an eyebrow. "Oddly enough, yes. Humans don't bounce. I would have spotted that, I think."

"Then who was that at work today?"

"You couldn't be mistaken?"

Ordo didn't even blink. "I remember everything I see in complete detail. I have eidetic memory. What I saw was the identical image of the woman we detained and who you took for interrogation. Of that much I am absolutely certain."

"Fierfek," Skirata said. "Options?"

"One, she's a twin or a clone." Ordo counted off on his fin-gers. "Two, she's some kind of droid designed to mimic her. Three? A Clawdite. Shapeshifting is a useful skill for a terror group to recruit. But why would they want to mimic a dead colleague?"

"How about that supervisor?"

"I've logged her going into the 'freshers and searching lockers, but now I have no idea if she's working alone or with this Jiss woman. She was genuinely angry when she saw her, though."

"Because the other Jiss fouled up, maybe."

"We need to do some surveillance on this resurrected Jiss. She's supposed to be on the evening shift, so I'm going back to the center just before midnight and I'll follow her when she leaves."

Jusik's lips parted but Etain was faster off the mark. "I'll come with you," she said. "I'll be able to tell you whether she's a droid, at least."

"I can do that with sensors," said Ordo.

"I'll come with you anyway."

Ordo turned to Skirata. "I don't like mysteries." He was clearly embarrassed. "I'm sorry, Kai' bait: I'm not resolving this as fast as I should."

"Son, this is never a fast game. We're making good progress. Take it easy."

But Ordo wasn't the type to take it easy. He joined the contemplation of the holochart and picked up Niner's datapad. "I'll take a clip of those Dust rounds, please, Bard'ika," he said. "Just in case."

Skirata drew his stubby Verpine handgun from his holster. "Better use this, then. More compact than the rifle."

"Thank you."

Etain stood with Vau, watching the erratic progress of the markers around the chart. A hard decision lay within it: at what stage would Skirata feel it was safe to bring CSF in on the surveillance? When would he share information with them? Etain understood his anxiety, but the simple mathematics of the situation was that CSF would be needed sooner or later.

Ordo began logging more locations into the datapad. His jaw muscles were working visibly. It must have been hard for a man used to being smarter than anyone else except his five brothers to handle the ordinary mortals' world of being dumbfounded a lot of the time.

"Oh," Vau said suddenly.

"What?"

"Tell me what this building is."

Jusik interrogated the database in the holochart emitter. "CSF Divisional Headquarters."

"Well, well," said Vau. "How illuminating. Why is one of our tagged bad guys going in there?"

16

Mhi solus tome

Mhi solus dar'totne

Mhi me dinui an

Mhi bajuri verde

We are one when together.

We are one when parted.

We will share all.

We will raise warriors.

—Traditional Mandalorian marriage contract and ceremony, in its entirety

Logistics center, Grand Army of the Republic, Coruscant Command HQ, 2340 hours, 384 days after Geonosis

There was a lot to be said for having a matte-black army-issue bodysuit.

It provided a reasonable amount of protection against blaster and projectile weapons, and it was low visibility at night, unlike ARC trooper armor. Ordo felt in the pockets of the knee-length dark gray jacket that Vau had lent him and felt compelled to inhale the unfamiliar scent of its wearer: antiseptic soap, weapon-lubricating oil, and a maleness that was not his. But it disguised the skintight suit. That was all it had to do.

It also disguised the Verpine shatter gun in his holster. "What makes you think she's going to stick to her shift hours?" Etain said, looking slightly past him, head almost touching his. They sat in the closed cockpit of a speeder parked a hundred meters from the logistics center, where they could watch the doors. To anyone watching, they were just a young couple in a parked speeder late at night, like a thousand others at that moment.

"The fact she bothered to return to work at all. That means she wants her pattern to appear normal again."

Etain just nodded. She seemed to be finding it hard to keep up a conversation. Ordo could smell Darman on her, which fascinated him: Darman seemed able to step beyond the community of brothers and not feel adrift, just as his Nullbrothers could. But Ordo found it distressing, and Fi seemed to as well.

Ordo wasn't sure if he would ever trust a female, not after Chief Scientist Ko Sai first towered above him, gray and cold and unfeeling. He wondered if having a human mother would have made it easier.

Etain shut her eyes again. She shuddered.

"It's not cold," Ordo said.

"Are there Jedi working here?"

"Of course. Jedi make great clerks."

"I'll take that as a no."

"It's a definite no. Why do you ask?"

"I felt someone in the Force, very faintly."

Fierfek. Zey? Jusik being helpful? "Close?"

"Gone now."

She went back to silent contemplation of something beyond him.

"Is your PEP laser fully charged?"

"Yes, Ordo."

"Very noisy and visible. Last resort."

"As is a Verpine round."

"I have the chamber loaded two and one," Ordo said. "What?"

"Two marker projectiles between each live round, and one live round already up the spout, as Kal'buir so aptly puts it." "And you can—"

"Count? I do believe so."

"I seem to offend you without meaning to. I realize you have an astonishing intellect."

It wasn't that his mind was so remarkable that seemed worth comment, but that hers and others' were not. He felt the need to explain.

"In an emergency, it's better that I'm able to fire a killing shot without needing to discharge two nonlethal rounds first." He stared into her eyes: they were light green, flecked with amber. Except for Skirata's, the only eyes so unlike his own that he had ever studied at that range were alien, and shortly before he killed their owner. "Anyway, I can execute a triple tap with a Verpine. So it's academic."

"Triple tap? I've heard Dar talk about double—"

"Three rounds in quick succession. Some species need a little more stopping power."

"Oh."

"The PEP laser will stun most humanoids."

"And if it doesn't?"

Ordo simply tapped the Verpine under his jacket.

They waited. Maybe they really did look like a couple having a private moment. Randomly created people did strange things.

Staff in groups, ones, and twos began entering the building for the night shift.

Soon . . .

Movement behind the transparisteel doors made him focus and check his chrono: 1155. Staff sloping off early. "Stand by," he said quietly.

Etain turned very slowly away from him in her seat, ready to open the speeder's hatch and slide out.

Ten or eleven workers emerged. Ordo and Etain slipped from the speeder and feigned ambling around in conversation. There was still frequent pedestrian traffic around the center.

By 0005 the trickle of staff in and out had slowed, and there was still no sign of Vinna Jiss.

"She has to come out that entrance."

"You're sure—oh, okay, Ordo."

They waited. He wondered how long the two of them would look inconspicuous.

And then he spotted the ginger wavy hair and the beige tunic he'd seen earlier. Jiss. He watched her turn along the path and walk down the ramp toward the walkways that connected the complex to the business district around it; then he made his move.

Etain walked briskly at his side and grabbed his hand. "For goodness' sake, Ordo, try to look like a couple."

Ordo didn't much like that, but the mission came first.

They kept twenty meters behind Jiss, hampered by the lack of crowds of office workers to hide among at this time of night. Maybe they should have waited until daylight. But nobody knew how much time they might have to act. It was a case of now

Etain did that side-to-side head movement as if she was straining to hear something. "Okay ... people behind us, but they seem to have their minds on matters other than us . . ."

"How do you know that?"

"No feeling of focus on me, or you."

"Handy," Ordo said, but he hitched back his jacket and hooked his thumb in his belt to be ready to grab the Verp.

They had followed Jiss for about half a click along the shrub-lined office walkways when the few pedestrians be-came none and they had no cover between her and them. Jiss turned right into a side alley and Ordo picked up speed, drawing his weapon and holding it as discreetly as he could against his chest.

"Where's she gone?"

"The alley," Ordo hissed. "Are you blind?"

"No, I mean she's gone. Gone. I can't feel anybody there."

Ordo cocked the Verp and checked the status indicator. He might need that live round after all. He slowed at the corner and froze for a second before stepping into the opening with the gun raised, two-handed.

He was looking at a man's back about fifty meters ahead. No sign of Jiss. Maybe that really is a Clawdite.

"Oh my . . .," Etain said.

Ordo was about to discharge the lethal round into the containers of shrubbery and try for a tag pellet but the man appeared to crouch into a low run. There was a reflection, a split-second gleam that said metal, alloy—weapon.

He fired instinctively.

The silent shot hit something with a wet sssputt and who-ever or whatever he had hit rolled, stumbled, and raced off to the left down another passage. Ordo broke into a sprint, Etain pounding after him. He reached the point of impact and saw fluid—dark, oily—before discharging both tag pellets into the shrubs and lining up the next lethal round. This had gone wrong. He had got it wrong. But he couldn't turn back now: this had to be resolved. He swung left and there was someone lying on the paving, writhing, and he aimed the Verpine:

"Check!" Etain yelled. "Check!"

And in the fraction of a second that he froze on the safety command she had heard Skirata use, a shock wave of air and heat flared past him and hit the figure on the ground in a blinding, deafening flash. Without his visor he was stunned for a second, too. But he dropped on the body, holding the Verp clear, and grabbed an arm.

Its limb melted away in his grip.

That second became endless, a layered image.

I'm going to throttle that Jedi.

What the fierfek have I grabbed?

It's a Clawdite.

He looked up at Etain but she raised her blaster again and spun around. There was a second deafening, blinding crack of a PEP laser discharging.

Ordo had a tight grip of something very heavy and black and sleekly furred that had stopped moving. And that was an odd thing for a wounded Clawdite—a humanoid when not shapeshifting—to become.

A few meters from Etain, a human female lay crumpled on the paving, gasping for breath. It was Supervisor Wennen, not Jiss. Ordo defaulted to training and opened his comlink.

"Bard'ika? We need extraction urgently. Two prisoners, both injured. Now!"

His instinct told him to find some cover fast. The PEP laser would bring someone running before long. He dragged whatever creature he had shot into an alcove and motioned furiously at Etain to do the same with Wennen. It was amaz-ing how heavy a weight a little Jedi could haul.

But he wanted to hit her, and hard.

"You di'kut," he hissed. "I could have been killed. Never use that command. Do you hear me? Never! If you try that again, I'll shoot you."

Etain's wide-eyed stare was either fury or shock. He didn't care.

"I thought you were going to finish it off!" She knelt over the black creature at his side and put her hands on it. "It's alive. I have to keep it alive. You shouldn't have fired."

"That's my call to make."

"You shot a Gurlanin—"

There aren't any Gurlanins currently on Coruscant, so Zey says. "Spare me your hindsight lecture." Gurlanin. Shape-shifter. Qiiluran. Spy. Never seen one before. "Jusik, can you hear me? Can Vau handle shapeshifter first aid?"

Jusik's voice was breathless. "With you in ten minutes, Ordo, hang on. Where's your speeder?"

"Not here. Just move it, please."

Etain had her fingers spread on the creature's black coat, her eyes shut tight. "I can use the Force to control the bleed-ing."

"Okay, you do that, Jedi." He squatted over Wennen and checked her breathing with the Verp held to her head. "So, Supervisor, why were you following us?"

Wennen looked in bad shape. Her eyes were streaming and she curled up into a ball, clutching her chest. Etain had fired the PEP laser at close range. "Republic . . . Audit . . . you shoot me, chum . . . and you're in big trouble . . ."

"What?"

"Treasury officer?"

"Show me, or you're the one in trouble, ma'am."

She let out an anguished gasp and fumbled for her pocket. Ordo decided to play safe and extract the contents for her. Yes, it was an identichip: Republic Treasury Audit Division.

"You've nearly fouled up a GAR operation," he said.

"I was following Jiss."

"Why?"

"Supplies going missing. So did she. Who are you?" She pulled back her head a little to focus on his bare hand grip-ping the Verp. "Well, that tells me you're not Trooper Corr."

"Obviously."

"Are you the captain who came in the other day? Because you certainly recognize me .

So much for deniability: this would be all over the Trea-sury in hours if he let her get up and walk away—not that she seemed able to. "We need to have a little chat."

"And what's that?" Wennen tilted her head to look at the Gurlanin, lying inert while Etain struggled to stabilize its wound.

Etain opened her eyes a little.

"This," she said, "used to be one of our allies."

Operational house, Qibbu's Hut, 0045 hours, 385 days after Geonosis

Skirata assembled a makeshift deployment tote board from three large sheets of flimsi and stuck them to the wall.

It was old technology, real words on real flimsi, not shift-ing lights and code. He needed its solid reassurance right now. Things were turning osikla.

Corr—assigned to the team on Skirata's whim—stood be-side him, dutifully listing target locations by numbers of vis-its and tagged suspects on one sheet while Skirata kept a tally of which commando was deployed, and where they all were for the next twelve standard hours. Without his armor and bodysuit, Corr was just a very young man with durasteel mechanisms where he should have had real hands, and it broke Skirata's heart.

Droid. They're making you into what they always thought you were, son.

Skirata shook himself out of it and concentrated on the flimsi. He hated holocharts. He liked solid things that he could grab hold of, even if they had their limitations. It also kept his hands occupied when he was reaching the limits of his confidence. He had to stand firm. His men needed to see him in control, reassuring, believing in them.

Believing in them was easy. He had doubts about himself. He glanced over his shoulder. "Is that thing dead yet?"

"Kal'buir, I'm sorry I got this wrong," Ordo said. Some-where, no matter how much reassurance Skirata gave him, he still seemed to fear that not being good enough meant a death sentence. Skirata hated Kaminoans with renewed pas-sion. "I should have known what the creature was. I knew they

existed."

"Son, none of us knew any of them were on Coruscant." But they were. And that changed everything.

Etain and Jusik were kneeling on either side of the Gurlanin, hands flat on its flanks in some kind of Jedi heal-ing process. Vau watched with interest. He was the anatomy expert, although he was more skilled at taking bodies apart than repairing them. Darman and Niner seemed unwilling to go back to sleep and joined the audience.

They'd become close to a Gurlanin on Qiilura. It must have been very hard to think of them now as possible agents for the Separatists.

It was a black-furred carnivore about a meter high at the shoulder, with long legs, four double-tipped fangs, and hard, unforgiving orange eyes. It now looked exactly what it was: a shapeshifting predator.

"It's recovering," Jusik said.

"Good," Vau said. "Because we want a chat with it."

Etain looked up with that pinched expression she tended to adopt when she was angry in her rather righteous kind of way. "I lived alongside them. We promised we'd give them back their planet and so far all we've done is move in a garrison and train the human colonists to look after them-selves."

Vau stared slightly past her, straight-faced. "I believe that was you personally, General. You and Zey. And you were only following orders. That's it, isn't it? Following orders."

"Knock it off," Skirata said. He didn't want Darman pitch -ing in to defend Etain. Everyone's nerves were raw: tired, stressed people were dangerous, and they needed to be dangerous to the enemy, not each other. "Ordo, what are we going to do with Supervisor Wennen?"

Besany Wennen was propped in a chair, arms folded gin-gerly across what must have been a very painful bruise to her whole chest. She was lucky that Etain's close-range PEP round hadn't killed her, but now the woman was just an extra complication they didn't need. Ordo was looking her over as if she was a new species.

And she was. There was a comfortable zone of attractive-ness in females, and then there was a point beyond which it became too much. The very beautiful were intimidating and unwelcome. Wennen had passed that threshold, and Skirata was ambushed by his own unexpected hostility toward her.

"You've probably guessed what we're doing, ma'am," Ordo said.

"Anti-terrorist operations?"

"Correct."

"I'm sorry. I had no idea." But there was no screaming outrage or threats that her boss would rip the guts out of their boss, the usual response of bureaucrats. She just indicated the unconscious Gurlanin with a shaky hand. "Where does the Gurlanin fit into all this?"

"Other than mimicking Jiss, we have no idea."

Wennen seemed to be taking refuge in investigation, con-tinuing to do her job even though she knew she was in a se-rious situation. Skirata respected that. "So if you two are Jedi, why didn't you spot the creature?"

"Gurlanins can hide in the Force and shut us out," Etain said. "When I first encountered them I even thought they were Jedi. They're telepathic, we can't detect them, we don't know how many there are, and they appear to be able to mimic any species up to tall humanoid size."

"Perfect spies," Jusik said. "And perfect predators."

"And we didn't honor our pledge to help them, so I suspect they've run out of patience."

"Look, no disrespect to our Treasury colleague, boys and girls, but can we refrain from discussing classified intelligence in front of Agent Wennen?" Skirata said. "I need to talk to CSF. Corr, you call up the recce teams and see how far they've got on the main locations."

Skirata wandered out onto the landing platform and breathed in cool night air. The strill was curled up under the bench where, true to his word, Vau had slept each night. He probably thought it proved the point that he was a hard case, but there was no doubt that he worshiped that stinking animal and it loved him.

Atin's going to take a knife to him when this is over. I know it. Well, worry about that when it happens...

He raised his wrist comlink to his lips. "Jailer?"

There was a pause and the sound of a woman grumbling and sheets rustling. Of course: Ogrim had a wife and kids. Skirata often forgot that other people had lives beyond their jobs. "You know what time it is, Kal?"

"To the second. Look, which of your people was on surveillance in the Bank of the Core Plaza?"

There was a long, sleepy, irritable pause. "What, today? None of my people, I guarantee it."

"Organized Crime Unit?"

"I could ask, but they play these things close to their chests . . . getting to be an epidemic, this secrecy, isn't it?"

"Tell you what," Skirata said, dropping his voice. "Pay your OCU buddies a visit and tell them that anyone we see in our scopes who isn't us gets slotted as a matter of course, okay? You think they'll understand that?"

"I can but try."

"Try hard, then. I don't want them crashing in like the di'kutla Treasury did tonight."

"Really?"

"Yeah. An audit officer was sent in to monitor GAR staff siphoning off supplies. But that isn't my biggest problem right now." Don't mention the shapeshifter yet. "Okay, here's my offer. I now have forty-three individual locations that we believe the Separatists are using or visiting in Galactic City. We have to concentrate on the high-value targets, and you really don't want to know what we'll be doing there, so what if we give you a list of the others to pick off as you see fit?"

"When?"

"When we've recce'd the high-value ones and have an op order planned out—you know, precise timings. That way we don't fall over each other."

Obrim had gone rather quiet. "I can authorize that. But I've got no control over the OCU."

"Then find someone who does. I mean it, Jailer. We're not playing by rules of evidence."

"You've really gone bandit, haven't you?"

"Do you really want to hear the answer to that?"

"Fierfek ... my eyesight problem has now affected my hearing, too."

"I thought it might. I'm waiting on a meeting right now and after that, I'll have a list for you, a reliable one. Just re-member that if there's any talk of explosives sales being of interest to CSF, tell them to steer clear until further notice?"

"I'll just say military intelligence and leave it at that."

"Good."

"You go careful, friend. And those rather hasty boys of yours. Especially Fi."

Skirata closed the link and went back into the main room. The Gurlanin was breathing more steadily, although its eyes were still closed and the two Jedi were still leaning over it. It was just as well they could stop the bleeding. There wasn't a medic on Coruscant who knew a thing about the physiology of a shapeshifter like this one.

And Wennen was watching the whole scene suspiciously. Okay, so she had a Treasury identichip. Skirata didn't trust anybody, because this leak of information was still very much an inside job. Until he knew otherwise, everyone ex-cept his assortment of clone soldiers—and the two Jedi, he conceded—was a potential risk.

"Ma'am," he said. "I hear you don't approve of the war." Civilians did odd things in the name of peace. "How much don't you approve of it? And why?"

Wennen chewed over the question visibly, and both Jusik and Etain flinched at something Skirata couldn't see. Wennen's expression changed to anguish. She stood up with some difficulty, and Skirata noted that Ordo's hand went un-consciously to his blaster.

"This," she said quietly, "is why I don't like the war." She went up to Corr, who was still conscientiously collating data and writing it on the flimsi with an expression of intense frowning concentration. "Corr, show me your hands. Please?"

The trooper put his stylus aside and held them out, metal-lic palms up. Cor placed her hands underneath so that his rested on hers for a moment and looked him straight in the eye. Single prosthetic hands—efficient, unnoticeable—were common; but to lose both hands seemed to pass beyond a threshold of what was flesh and blood.

"It's not right," she said. "It's not right that Corr and men like him should end up like this. I'm wondering what kind of government I'm working for. One with a slave army, that's what. You know how that makes me feel? Disgusted. Be-trayed. Angry."

Skirata knew that feeling only too well. He just hadn't expected to hear it from someone who did an office job and could switch off HNE with its heroic and sanitized images of the war anytime she liked. Jusik caught his eye and nodded discreetly: She really means it, she's upset.

Skirata acknowledged Jusik with a slow blink. "You said it, ma'am." Got her. We have an ally. She'll come in useful one day. "Believe me when I say that what we're doing here is aimed at stopping things like that happening to more lads like Corr."

Wennen seemed satisfied, if someone that upset could reach that state of mind. She made her way back to the chair and handed Skirata her datapad. "Go on."

"What?"

"I don't know what data might be of use to you, and you're not going to discuss detail with me. So take the datapad and copy what you like."

"You're very trusting. You're sure we're who we say we are?"

Wennen laughed and stopped abruptly. That had to hurt her ribs. "Look, I know what I'm seeing. Now, if I'm out of contact for more than forty-eight hours, the Treasury will notice. So think about what you're going to do with me."

Skirata hefted the little 'pad in his hands. Treasury data, codes, encryption algorithms. Oh, my Null boys will love slicing this. "And who else is going to notice you're gone?"

"Nobody. Absolutely nobody."

Skirata pondered on that revelation for a while as he watched the unconscious Gurlanin. Jusik and Etain knelt back on their heels and looked as if they'd run a very tiring race.

"It'll be regaining consciousness soon," Etain said. "And I still have no idea how you restrain a shapeshifter."

Ordo picked up one of the Verpine rifles, checked the charge level, and stood over the inert black body.

"This does the job," he said.

Recce team observation point, residential area, business zone 6, 0110 hours, 385 days after Geonosis

"I wish I hadn't eaten that hot sauce," Sev said.

"Told you so." Fi held out his hand for the infrared scope.

"My turn."

They had found a spot to hide between two top-floor apartments facing the building they were watching, a six-floor tower of a house with closed blinds at every window. A climate-conditioning access space nearly at the top of their vantage point gave them an uninterrupted view below of a very quiet, very

private group of homes away from the sky-lanes in a dead end.

The upper floors arched into a fashionable overhang only seven meters from the facing building. No passing traffic could enter from the front to bother them here, not even a taxi, and the rear access was nonexistent, which left only the roof for access by a small green speeder. It was private and a good place to defend—or get trapped. Fi rather liked the idea of the latter.

The access space felt like being in a drawer. They could just about crawl through it on all fours. Fi knew he wouldn't have enjoyed serving in a tank company at all.

"Roll on your back for a while," Fi said helpfully.

Sev hesitated then surrendered to the suggestion with a groan. "How many?"

Fi tracked from right to left with the scope. "Well, I think we've got ten bodies in there, judging by the GPR image, and they've been in there for an hour now, and they're not moving around much. I call that an operational base. Agreed?"

"Okay. Let's set up the remote holocam and get out of here."

"Given the layout of that place, it's going to be a bit busy slotting them all when we go in."

"I like busy," Sev said.

"Have Scorch and Fixer reported in yet?"

Sev held his datapad level with his eyes. "Now, that sounds like fun."

"What does?"

"Scorch says they've confirmed the third cluster is a small commercial docking area. CoruFresh fruit and vegetable dis-tributors. Loads of spacegoing vessels of all sizes."

"Yes, that's my idea of fun, too."

"If we could get them all to meet up for a nice ride . . ."

"Dream on. But we could certainly stop them from leav-ing in a hurry."

Fi backed out of the space, pushing himself on his elbows with his DC-17 crooked in both arms, collecting more dust and dead insects on his bodysuit. He turned sideways on to a narrow shaft that opened into the building's plant maintenance room and dropped his left leg into the gap, searching for a foothold with his boot before finding the ledge and scrambling down to the floor. Sev simply rolled off and landed with a thud beside him.

"Okay, where next?"

Fi cocked his head. "Want to wander over and take a closer look at the roof? Evaluate it for rapid entry?"

"You know how to engage my enthusiasm."

Fi projected the fire safety holoplans of the building, which had proved to be Ordo's best illicit data slice of the mission. There was no point asking the fire department to provide them; it just invited awkward questions about why lads in white armor wanted detailed floor plans of most of the planet's buildings. "I hope they update these. Okay, go left along the passage; the roof access is the set of doors at the end."

"I love the fire department."

"They're so helpful. Nice uniforms, too."

They crawled across the flat roof along the side of the climate-conditioning machinery room, over lengths of dura-steel ladder laid flat on the waterproofing. Some buildings still had them to provide access to maintenance spaces. There were also the remains of a barbecue. They flattened them-selves behind the parapet to peer through the breaks in the punched durasteel at the roof opposite.

"Ooh, a Flash speeder:" Fi whispered.

"Don't even think about it."

"I meant that we could bolt on a few surprises, not wander off with it."

"Look, what does the word recce mean, ner vod?"

"It almost sounds like wreck .

"You scare me," Sev said. "And that's saying something."

"It's an opportunity we might not get again."

"So you fly, do you? Going to do a Jango?"

"You've got no style." Fi genuinely wanted to place a ther-mal detonator on the speeder. It could be set off remotely, giving them a relatively easy extra option for striking at the Seps that they might need soon. But he was also itching to smack Sev down a little. The man thought he was the galaxy's gift to adventure. So if he wanted adventure, Fi would show it to him, Omega-style.

It also just happened to be the safest way to cross the six-meter gap to the other roof—safer than asking the Seps across the way if they minded two commandos taking a look at their roof, anyway.

Fi edged backward and began placing the sections of ladder end-to-end. They slotted together neatly. Then he crawled back to the parapet and gave the chasm an apprais-ing glance.

He peered across, then down six floors. "That'll reach."

"I reckon." Sev leaned over next to him. "So you're going to crawl across."

Fi took the end of the ladder and began to move it care-fully to avoid loud scraping sounds. Sev took the other end and they balanced it lengthways on the parapet.

"No, I'm going to run."

"Fi, they say someone spiked my vat. But I reckon some-one really spiked yours."

"Lost your nerve?"

"Di'kut."

"If I plummet heroically to my doom, then you can crawl across. Deal?"

"I hate it when you try to provoke me into showing you how it's done."

"Like this?"

Fi had seconds. They needed to be across the gap and gone before anyone spotted them. He leaned down hard on one end of the ladder, lifting it enough to swing it out horizon-tally and drop the other end on the facing parapet.

Thirty meters below, death waited. And if it wasn't death, it was paralysis.

He stepped up on the parapet, tested the first rung with his boot, and then focused straight ahead on the other side. Then he sprinted.

He still had no idea how his body calculated the gaps but he hit every rung and landed on the far side, dropping flat. When he knelt upright, Sev was staring at him.

Fi beckoned. Come on.

Sev ran for it. Fi broke his landing as he jumped off the parapet. He noted Sev's clenched jaw with satisfaction. "Easy," Fi mouthed.

Sev gave him a hand signal, one of his especially eloquent gestures of disapproval.

The roof had a few steps down to doors that the holoplans showed as access to the top floor of the living area and the turbolift shaft. They didn't look that substantial in the flesh, but the plans appeared to be accurate: they didn't always get up-dated after renovations. A quick application of thermal tape on the doors and it would be easy to lob a few grenades down the hole to soften up the residents before going in. Fi gave Sev a thumbs-up and took a magnetic det out of his belt. It slid into place in the speeder's air intake with a faint thack.

Back, Fi gestured.

He teetered on the parapet and then ran across the dura-steel rungs again, feeling them flex and spring back under his boots. When he looked back, Sev was lining up for the sprint, too. Fi beckoned encouragingly. Sev went for it.

He was two-thirds of the way across when he slipped. He grabbed for a rung and hung motionless from his right hand. Fi's gut somersaulted.

If anyone looks up here now

Most people screamed when they fell. Sev, to his credit, was utterly silent. But his eyes were wide and scared. He tried to reach up with his left arm but for some reason didn't seem able to do it. Fi scrambled across the ladder on his belly and reached down to grab Sev's arm and haul him up. It was a potentially lethal maneuver on a narrow ladder, but Fi managed to get a grip on Sev's belt and pull him across the ladder crosswise.

Sev was using his right arm. It was only when Fi gripped his left shoulder to pull him in line with the ladder that he heard his sharp gasp and understood why he wasn't using that arm, and why he hadn't been able to lunge up to get a grip with his other hand. He'd hurt himself badly.

"Udesii," Fi whispered. "Take it easy."

There was pain, and there was whatever had happened to Sev. Fi dragged him back across the ladder a few centimeters at a time and rolled him onto the safety of the roof before hauling the ladder back in. When he dropped flat again, Sev was kneeling in a ball, clutching his left shoulder.

Fierfek, this is my fault for goading him.

"Can you walk?" Fi whispered.

"Course I can walk, you di'kut. It's my arm."

"I'll let you drop next time, you ungrateful chakaar" Fi hauled him upright and decided to risk taking the service tur-bolift down to the ground level. By the time they reached the end of the walkway it was clear that Sev had dislocated his shoulder and had to hold the arm against his chest to tolerate the pain at all. He said nothing but it had made his eyes water. Fi had long used that phrase to indicate

extreme pain but it was the first time he'd seen it up close, and it wasn't funny.

"If I miss this mission, I'm going to show you a really in-teresting trick with a vibroblade."

"Sev, take it easy." Fi always kept his medpac on his belt. He fumbled for the single-use sharp of painkiller and stabbed it into Sev's triceps. "We'll slap some bacta on it back at base."

"Yeah, and maybe that'll work when I rip your head off, too."

"It was an accident."

"It was a stupid stunt. I never had accidents with Delta."

"Well, you're just Vau's perfect little soldier boys, then, aren't you? We screw up. And then we get up and go on."

"I have to complete this mission?"

"Not if you're a liability you don't. Look, injuries happen. Stay at base and monitor the comlinks."

"You don't understand."

"Really?" Fi racked his brains for first-aid training.

"Funny, I thought we did the same job. Look, get in here and let me have a look."

They slipped into the sheltered lobby of an office block and hid behind a pillar. Fi detached Sev's

bodysuit sleeve from the shoulder seam and took a look in the dim security lights.

The line of the shoulder looked unnaturally square where the ball of the humerus had shifted out of the socket and was pushing the deltoid muscle up and out of shape. This was going to hurt.

"Okay, on the count of four:" Fi said. He took Sev's wrist in his right hand, stretching out the arm, and braced his left hand against the man's chest. Then he paused and looked him in the eye in his most reassuring I-know-what-I'm-doing way. "See, when you get a dislocation like this, you have to do what they call reducing it by—four"

Sev yelped. The joint made a wet shhhlick sound as it slipped back into the socket.

"Sorry, ner vod." Fi folded Sev's arm back against his chest and held it there while he struggled to get the sleeve section reattached. He could almost feel the torn ligaments and muscle fibers screaming. Sev's face was white, his lips compressed. "Nothing worse than bracing for it, though."

"For a moron, you're not a bad medic!"

"Kal said that if we could take a body apart, we ought to learn a bit more about putting it back together again if we needed to."

"Fi, I have to be fit to fight."

"Okay, okay. Bacta and ice packs. Right as rain in no time."

"Vau'll kill me."

"Look, what is this thing with Vau?" Fi pulled Sev out into the walkway again, and they jogged back to the speeder they'd left a block away. "I know he had a reputation for beat-ing the stuffing out of trainees, but why are you ready to gut Atin?"

"Atin's sworn he'll kill Vau."

Fi almost stopped dead. "Atin? Old
don't-interrupt-me--I'm-working-on-a-really-interesting-circuit? Our At'ika?"

"Seriously?" Sev asked.

"Yeah, sometimes I get serious. It happens?"

"Okay. Atin's pod was the only one that ever lost men!"

"Geonosis. Ruined Vau's clean record?"

"It's not that simple. Atin was doing that survivor guilt thing when he got back, and Vau just focused him a bit."

Odd: Skirata hadn't been around when Fi returned from Geonosis. But he'd worry about that later. "That explains the scar on his face."

"You got it."

"Doesn't explain the rest of the scars he was showing you."

"You ask him about that."

Sev was as near to scared as Fi had seen him. He couldn't imagine being afraid of Skirata. The man might have sworn himself to a standstill when he was angry, but nobody in Skirata's company ever

felt they had to fear him. He was Kal'buir: he lavished ferocious care on his commandos to the exclusion of all else.

But Sev didn't want Vau to know that he'd injured himself doing something reckless. Whatever the reason, Fi owed his brother some support.

"Okay, we don't mention the shoulder?" Fi started up the speeder. "We'll get it sorted ourselves. Bard'ika cando that Force healing if the bacta doesn't do the trick. But Vau needn't know?"

For the first time since he'd met the man, Sev softened visibly.

"Thanks, ner vod," he said. "I owe you."

17

So you want a knife, a nice sharp knife. You hone that blade to its limits. It even cuts through stone when you want it to. It saves your life. And then you're outraged when it cuts you accidentally. You see, knives don't switch off And neither do people, not when you hone them to a fine edge.

—Sergeant Kal Skirata to General Arligan Zey, on the nature of training

Operational house, Qibbu's Hut, 0115 hours, 385 days after Geonosis

The Gurlanin opened its eyes, panting.

Etain couldn't tell one Gurlanin from another unless they allowed her to. They could shut out her Force-senses just as easily as they could reach out to her. She could detect nothing from the creature: no sense of identity, no emotion, and no purpose.

And then the air around her came to life with a shuddering sense of past, of long memory, and of betrayal.

"Girl," it said in a familiar liquid voice. "Can you do nothing right?"

"I . . . I know you," Etain said.

"Several of you know me." The creature lifted its head and tried to rise, but sank back down again. "Darman, is Atin well?"

"Fierfek." Darman edged forward and knelt down by the head of someone who had carried out vital intelligence work for the squad on Qiilura. Etain could see the pain on his face.

Niner caught her eye and simply looked resigned, as if he expected everyone to betray them in the end. "Jinart?"

"Yes. I expect we all look the same to clones."

Darman almost grinned but appeared to stop himself. "Atin's fine."

Ordo cut in. "Just explain why you think killing my brothers is going to help Qiilura."

Jinart focused wild orange eyes on Etain and struggled into a sitting position, flanks heaving. Etain could sense her fully now, bitter and determined, calling out to the void with her mind: she was probably reaching telepathically to her consort Valaqil, once General Zey's agent both on Coruscant and Qiilura.

Skirata had his right arm across his body, almost but not completely casual, clearly ready to reach for his Ver-pine and take a shot if Jinart moved.

"You think I am giving the Separatists information."

Ordo stepped in and Darman got out of his way. "I'm in-clined to think that anyone who bothers to shapeshift into Vinna Jiss might do that, yes."

"She disappeared, like she often did. I simply adopted her form to move around unnoticed."

"I noticed. We'd already executed her."

"Then I made an error in taking her form."

"Too right you did. Now, what's your problem with the Grand Army? Why not target politicians? You could walk in anywhere—even the Senate chamber itself."

"You assume too much. Are you one of the renegade clones that Zey so dreads?"

"That's me," Ordo said.

"I am not the one leaking information to the Separatists. And I am not targeting anyone."

"Are you still working for General Zey?" Etain asked. "No. My people no longer serve the Republic—if we ever served you at all. We had an agreement. You broke it."

"But—"

"We had an agreement, Jedi. You said you would give us back our world and stop the farmers from destroying us."

"In the middle of a war?"

"We served you in the middle of a war! When my people were dying of starvation, when our prey was being driven away by the colonists, we kept our bargain. And all you did—you, Jedi, you and Zey—was make them better able to fight and hold their land."

Etain didn't look at Darman. She didn't want to provoke him into defending her or—more probably—catch a hint that he might agree with Jinart.

She thought that all she had done was to ensure the farm-ers were a guerrilla force able to resist the Separatists, but the native Gurlanins didn't see it that way.

"We'll root out the informants sooner or later," Ordo said. "You can cooperate or not, but I might as well execute you now if you're not going to be useful. We can't handle any more prisoners."

It was always hard to tell if Ordo was playing the interrogation game or simply stating his intentions. Judging by Skirata's quick glance at him, it was the latter. He motioned Etain to stand clear and charged up the Verpine.

"I can identify the informants for you," Jinart said calmly.

Ordo simply held the muzzle to Jinart's head. Etain looked to Jusik, and then to Darman and Niner and Vau, but they were all simply watching impassively. Corr was engrossed in the holochart, still logging movements. Wennen sat in the chair, her hand to her brow as if shielding her eyes, but no-body was making any attempt to intervene. Etain's gut said it was wrong.

But she did nothing.

"You're bargaining," Ordo said. "I'll kill you anyway."

"You're the one who needs to bargain. This isn't about my life."

"Game's over." Ordo held the Verpine steady. Etain waited, torn by indecision. She could stop Ordo for a fraction of a second

"Remove your forces and the colonists from my world and I will identify the Separatists for you."

Ordo—unblinking, passionless—lined the muzzle up about level where a normal animal's ear might be. "You haven't told me why you were mimicking Jiss. That actually interests me more."

"Ordo, I'll deal," Skirata said. "Stand down."

Ordo simply raised the Verp and held it back against his shoulder without hesitation. Etain imagined he would need to be coaxed into withdrawing: she'd seen the potential violence swirling within him constantly. But he obeyed Skirata without murmur.

The sergeant prodded Jinart with his boot. "You tell me, then, shapeshifter."

"I observe," Jinart said. "I watch to see when you move troops to and from Qiilura and how much you send to the farmers by way of aid to keep them loyal. All the things you never tell us, but that show your true intentions. I spy on you."

"Let me explain something," Skirata said. "I'm not the Republic. The work I do for them is actually for my own people—these lads here. So if you're not helping me keep my people alive, I'll make certain that Qiilura gets reduced to molten slag. And that's a promise. I'm not a Jedi and I'm not a politician, so I can do pretty well what I like. Your whole species is expendable. Understand?"

Jinart managed to get to her feet, or at least raise herself on her front legs.

"I will identify the people you want. But the Republic must agree to withdraw from Qiilura and remove the colonists within a year."

"Okay, let's get hold of Zey now," Skirata said. "If he doesn't agree, we move on and I'm not letting you melt back into the city."

"Do you know how many of us there are, or where we are?"

"I don't care. Zey might."

"My people are here, on Coruscant itself. You'll never track us down and we can be far more damaging than bombs."

"Look, the logistics leaks are a sideshow right now. Save it for Zey." Skirata opened his comlink. If the general was sleeping, then someone could go and wake him. War didn't keep office hours. "Supervisor Wennen, why don't you make us all some caf?"

He expected some complaint, but none came. She stood up, still clutching her ribs, and made her way unsteadily to the kitchen area.

"It's Besany, Sergeant," she said.

Yes, she's on our side. Result. "Okay, I'm Kal."

"Who likes it sweetened?"

"All of us," Skirata said. "Two big spoonfuls. It's going to be a long night."

Operational house, Qibbu's Hut, 0200 hours. 385 days after Geonosis

Darman sat cross-legged on the floor next to Jinart, hands clasped in his lap, as if he was watching her. Jinart watched him in return, orange eyes closing occasionally, her legs tucked under her.

Etain sometimes had to look closely to see if Darman was just thinking or actually asleep, because the impression he was making in the Force was so ambiguous. When she knelt beside him to check, though, his eyes were closed. For a brief moment she wondered if Jinart could make telepathic contact with him.

His eyes opened. He glanced behind Etain and then brushed his lips against her cheek.

"No word from Zey yet?"

Etain shook her head. There was nothing to hide any longer and she rested her forehead against his, not caring what anyone else thought: it was impossible to hide their relationship in a tight-knit group of soldiers living in one another's pockets. "He's got to consult people. Even Zey can't make those decisions on his own."

"You should have been a healer, you know. You're good at it."

"Well, let's see if I'm any good at healing rifts. I need to clear something up with Kal."

"Problem?"

"Nothing to worry about."

Etain knelt back on her heels and stood up in one move-ment. Skirata was talking to Niner and Ordo by the flimsi sheets on the wall, cleaning his beloved Verpine gun with slow care while they discussed the concentration of Sepa-ratists in various locations on the brightly colored 3-D grid of the holochart.

She caught Skirata's eye and beckoned him to follow her. He inclined his head in mute agreement and laid the disman-tled Verpine parts on the table beside him, where they sat wrapped in distorted lines of colored light from the holo-chart projection.

They walked onto the landing platform. The strill was asleep on its stomach, all six legs spread out like an ill-shaped furry insect.

"I did something very foolish," Etain said.

"Again?"

"Ordo."

Skirata looked stunned then balanced on the brink of anger. "Ordo?"

"No, nothing like that . . . I used a command that I heard you use. It upset him. I called check to stop him from killing Jinart outright. He told me why I should never use it."

Skirata blew out a long breath. "And you understand now?"

"Yes. I'm sorry. He . . . he said he'd shoot me if I ever did it again."

"He would. Don't ever doubt it."

"I believe you!"

"I never taught the Nulls that Jedi were their betters, you see, and I never taught them to obey the Republic, and no Kaminoan engineered them to be more cooperative than Jango. But they obey me for some reason, and even then I encourage them to question everything."

"Is he programmed?"

Skirata looked at her with sudden disgust. Then he simply swung his fist at her without warning, a savage punch, a street brawler's punch. She leapt back and drew her light-saber in one movement, but his fist went past her head. De-liberately. She could see the calculation on his face. She held her breath, waiting for him to lash out again.

"So are you programmed?" he said.

The blue blade of energy thrummed as she brought the Lightsaber down from a raised position and then thumbed it off, feeling stupid and ashamed.

She was also shocked at Skirata's reflexes: he could have landed that punch, and he clearly wasn't afraid of her light-saber skills. She would never take him for granted again.

"No. I'm sorry?"

"You should know better than anyone. You've been drilled in weapons handling from the same age that those boys were. Do you think? Or are you so well trained that your body just reacts"—he snapped his fingers—"like that?"

She had reacted all right. Her muscles remembered years of light-saber practice. Her Masters taught her to rely on in-stinct, on the Force, and not to think.

"I said I'm sorry."

"And so you should be. I taught all my boys that command from the very start. I drilled them over and over and over until they'd stop whatever they were doing instantly. And I did it for them, for times when it was needed to save them from something."

"I swear I'll never do it again."

"Ordo will never trust you now."

"But it only stopped him for a—"

"—a fraction of a second that could get him killed. You just used him. Like all the aruetiise do."

Skirata was furious: even in the dim light on the platform she could see that the skin of his neck was flushed, that telltale sign of strong reaction. In the last few weeks Etain sometimes felt that he saw her as the personification of the Republic, using his men for their own agenda, and that she was a handy target on which to vent his spleen. He didn't seem to view Jusik the same way, though.

Exploitation was a raw nerve in Skirata. Etain desperately wanted him to like her and make her feel like family, the way he did everyone else.

"I'll apologize to Ordo."

"Yeah, it really is him you need to make your peace with." She wondered why she hadn't realized that to start with. Do I really see them as men? Do I regret angering Ordo, or do I just want to be Skirata's little girl? She turned on her heel and decided to confront it.

Ordo was having a tense conversation via his bead comlink, forefinger pressed to his ear. Jusik fiddled with some piece of circuitry, glancing up at him from time to time. The side of the conversation

that Etain could hear suggested that someone on Zey's staff wasn't moving as fast as Ordo wished.

Jusik mouthed Captain Maze at her.

She waited. Ordo grunted. "I'll stand by." He shook his head and turned to her. "What's wrong?"

"Ordo, I owe you an apology. I was wrong to use the check command and you're right to be angry with me."

He just nodded. It still surprised her that a man who was physically identical to Darman could somehow look so different.

"I realize you had a bad deal, Ordo."

"On Kamino?"

"Even now, I think."

Ordo blinked a couple of times as if she wasn't making sense. She had no idea where his mind ranged in those split seconds other than that he felt like a flurry of activity in the Force.

"I didn't have a mother or a father, but a stranger willingly chose me to be his son. You had a mother and father, and they let strangers take you. No, General, don't pity me. You're the one who's had the worse deal."

It was shocking and it was true. The extraordinary clarity of his assessment hit her so hard that she almost gasped. It told her things she didn't want to know about herself. None of them changed her intentions. But she knew her motives better now, uncomfortable as they were.

She wondered if her real parents ever thought of her.

She would never know.

18

Withdraw from Qiilura? If that's what it takes to keep the Gurlanins from turning on us, it's a price we were going to pay anyway. We're too thinly stretched to maintain the garrison, and the Senate has no interest on continuing to support a mere two hundred thousand farmers on a backworld. Let me talk to Jinart and reassure her. The damage her people can do is enormous—far beyond the scope of one anti-terror operation. And we need them on our side.

—General Arligan Zey, to General Iri Camas and the chair of the Senate Committee on Refugees

The Kragget all-day restaurant, lower levels, Coruscant, 0755 hours, 385 days after Geonosis

Jinartthe Gurlanin had kept her word and provided the information she had promised—and no more. Zey appeared to have kept his. The sleek black predator had slipped out into the Coruscant night and vanished.

But Skirata would always feel that she was standing right next to him in some guise or another. Like the Jedi, her hypernatural abilities—especially telepathy—made him wary and suspicious.

But she could only sense the thoughts of her own kind, they said. Like that's some kind of comfort.

Skirata finished his eggs, rubbed his hand across his chin, and realized he needed to shave again. But things that had seemed crushingly impossible in the early hours of the morning looked a lot more encouraging on a full stomach in broad daylight.

"Gurlanins on the loose?" Jailer Ogrim's voice was almost a groan. "That's all we need."

"Yeah, that'll be one of the best-kept secrets of the war, I reckon."

"You believe them?"

"That they might be everywhere? You have to, Jailer. And I can't lose any sleep over a few Qiiluran farmers."

They sat side by side, looking out toward the walkway through the Kragget's grimy transparisteel front. Neither of them were men who wanted to sit with their backs to any door. Ogrim leaned in a little toward him.

"So do you want us to pick up the suspects the Gurlanin identified?"

"No thanks."

"Is this where my eyesight and hearing fail again?"

"Right now, you can't even see me, let alone hear me," said Skirata.

"Okay. Organized Crime Unit isn't happy, but they understand the words armed special forces really well."

"It was OCU in the plaza, then?"

"I gather so."

"How did they end up there?"

"Your friend Qibbu uses well-worn channels of communication in the scum strata of society. OCU isn't stupid and it isn't deaf."

"Ah." There is no monopoly of information. Skirata's happily full stomach chilled a little. Ogrim showed no signs of being smug. But he was almost certainly aware that Skirata was planning a sting operation involving explosives. "So they knew who the Seps were and didn't bother to—"

"No. That wasn't the route."

"What, then?"

"They were carrying out surveillance on a known criminal and that criminal happened to meet up with one of the group that you were watching. Message boy, one chance encounter." Ogrim picked a chunk of smoked nerf from Skirata's plate and crunched on it thoughtfully "You just be careful. I hate finding friends on the slab in the morgue."

Apart from Jusik, Ogrim was one of the few nonclones Skirata felt he might be able to trust completely one day. He was still undecided on Etain. While he didn't doubt her sincerity, she had an emotional, impulsive streak of the kind that got people killed.

Like you. You're a fine one to talk.

"Your boys okay?"

"Tired, edgy, but giving it all they've got. One of 'em has sworn to gut Vau, another is having a love affair with a woman he shouldn't even look at, I'm collecting waifs and strays like an animal shelter, and we nearly killed a Treasury agent. But if I told you the really bad stuff, you'd think I had problems."

Obrim laughed raucously. "And people think they're good little droids "

"Discipline apart, they're still lads."

The Twi'lek waitress topped up their caf and smiled allur-ingly "Where's your son today?"

"At the office, sweetheart," Skirata said. "Won't I do in stead?"

Her lekku coiled ever so slightly but he didn't have a clue what it meant. She glided away, glancing back to smile again. Obrim sniggered. "I see Ordo made an impression."

"They all have this naive streak about them. It's fatally charming, apparently. Youth, muscle, heavy weapons, and a trusting expression. Maybe I should try it."

"Forty years too late."

"Yeah."

And then Skirata's communicator chirped. He lifted his wrist as close to his mouth as he could. Even in a restaurant full of police officers, he took few chances.

"We like what we see," said a voice with a Jabiimi accent.

It was interesting how accents were more noticeable over a comlink. Skirata, still looking toward

the walkway, scanned his field of view without moving his head. He was sure he hadn't been followed—but this was a bad place to be spotted if he had. "It's not noon yet."

"I know, Kal. We're keen."

"What next?"

"Can you get to the bank plaza again in half an hour? I can't locate your comlink signal. But then I can understand why you're a very cautious man."

Too right, you chakaar. Bard'ika went to a lot of trouble to make me invisible. Skirata was ten minutes by speeder bike from the plaza. "I can just about make it if I hurry."

"This is just for a conversation. Be there, and don't bring anyone else."

The comlink went dead. Ogrim chewed, silent, but his look said it all.

Skirata reached in his pocket and put some credits on the table to cover the bill. "You're deaf and blind, remember?"

Ogrim pushed the credits back at him. "You pick up the tab next timer"

It was his good-luck ritual. Ogrim seemed to hope that by saying it, he'd ensure there was a next time.

Skirata had every intention of making sure there would be.

Lower level, skylane 348, 0820 hours, 385 days after Geonosis

Skirata kept the speeder at a steady pace and looped back on himself a couple of times. There was no reason to expect anyone to be following him, but he assumed it anyway. The maneuver also padded out the ten-minute journey to a credible half hour.

No point being too early.

His ankle was agony today.

"Bard'ika, how are you doing?"

Jusik's voice came over the comlink. "We've tracked a target moving to the plaza from the house that Fi and Sev recced. I think that confirms it's Perrive."

"But he won't come alone."

"So that means he'll probably have minders nearby that we haven't tagged. New ones."

"Fine."

"Vau's on his way," Jusik said. "They won't recognize him."

"And you?"

"I'm already there."

"Fierfek. He knows you. Wait for orders—"

"Trust me, he won't see me at all."

"Stand down. Get out of there."

"Okay."

"I mean it. And I'm going off the comlink now, unless I hit real problems."

He shut the link, exasperated. But it was his own fault. You couldn't delegate that much to a kid and then expect him to read your mind and work out when he was supposed to wait for specific orders again.

And he was a Jedi, after all. He could take care of himself. Skirata pushed a bead comlink into his ear and brought the speeder down in the public parking area. Enacca said she was fed up collecting abandoned speeders from around the city, and wanted to know why they couldn't bring their vessels and vehicles back with them every time. The logistics of operations like this depended on a lot of grim drudgery. He'd have to sweeten her up somehow when all this was over.

Out in the plaza, by the bench where he had awaited the Separatists the day before, stood Perrive.

He was busy looking like an executive waiting for a colleague: suit, document case, polished shoes. Skirata walked up to the man as briskly as he could with a complaining ankle.

"Okay, what's the deal?" Skirata said. He tried to focus on Perrive and not look over his shoulder for possible threats or—to be precise—Walon Vau. "I can get you the dets in twenty-four hours."

"Let's discuss this somewhere less crowded."

Those were often the worst words to hear at times like this. "Where?"

"Follow me."

Fierfek. He hoped Vau was watching him or Jusik was monitoring the conversation carefully. If Perrive moved too far out of the comlink's limited mike range, he'd have to make stupidly obvious comments to clue them in. Perrive didn't strike him as quite that naive, even if his surveillance team was some way short of professional.

If Vau was here, Skirata couldn't see him.

But that was the point, and Vau was a very skilled opera-tor.

Skirata followed Perrive across the plaza and back to the speeder parking area, a few moments that made him glad that he had a limp. It gave Vau, he hoped, a little more time to work out what was happening. Perrive stood looking around, and a shiny new green speeder with a closed cabin rose from below the level of the parking platform and ma-neuvered sideways to set down.

Ah well, Skirata thought. I'd have done the same. But Perrives lungs are coated with marker Dust, and Jusik can track this crate all the way.

"Off you go:" Perrive said.

"You're not coming, too?" Oh no, no, no. Why didn't I dose myself with some of that di'kutla Dust? "Forgive me if I get nervous about the quality of your associates' driving."

"Don't worry. All they'll do is blindfold you. Keep what-ever weapons I'm sure you're carrying. I'll see you at our destination."

Skirata had no choice but to get in. Two human males—both about thirty, one shaven-headed, one with thin blond hair scraped back in a tail, neither of them the hired help they had tagged yesterday—sat in the front seat, and the bald one leaned over to place a black fabric bag over his head in total silence. Skirata folded his arms to feel the comfort of his as-sorted hardware in his sleeve, holster, and belt.

"Well, this is fun," he said, hoping for a display of verbal stupidity that might help Jusik locate him.

But neither man responded. He didn't expect them to. Concentrate on the movement. Work out the direction.

Skirata tried to count the number of times they seemed to swing right or left to get some idea of the route. They were in an automated skylane, so he could count the seconds and try to calculate the distance between turns, but it was a massive task. Ordo, with his faultless memory, would have had the skylane network memorized and calculated the times and distances at the same time. But Skirata was not a Null ARC trooper, just a smart and experienced soldier whose natural intelligence had been sharpened by having to cope with six hyperintelligent small boys.

He had no idea where he was. The speeder continued toward either a nerve-racking deal that would take them a step closer to striking at the heart of this Separatist network, or a lonely death.

Service tunnel beneath skylane 348, 0855 hours, 385 days after Geonosis

"Bard 'ika, you'll never need to shave again when Kal catches you," Fi said.

"You seriously think I'm not going to follow him?" Jusik raced Ordo's Aratech speeder bike along the service tunnel that ran parallel to the skylane serving the southern edge of the plaza. Fi decided that Ordo had no sense of danger if he was happy to ride pillion with the Jedi at speeds approaching five hundred kph. But then the man was nuts anyway. Fi held on to the handgrip behind him for grim death. "Vau, can you still hear me?"

The comlink was breaking up, but audible. "I'm a few vehicles behind Perrive. He's transmitting like a Fleet beacon." "Where's he heading?"

"Looks like Quadrant N-Oh-Nine."

"What's there besides offices and residential?"

"That's about it. Stand by."

Jusik made an irritated grunt that he seemed to have picked up from Sev and accelerated. At times like this Fi had passed beyond the first flush of adrenaline and into a cold and rational world where everything made sense to his body if not to his brain. He found an instinctive sense of effortless balance as Jusik wove through the ducts, clearing some of the transverse durasteel joists by a breath. Speed no longer felt like conscious fun, as it had in training, but he was beyond fear for himself at that moment.

All he could think of was Sergeant Kal.

"He can take care of himself," Jusik said. "He's packing more weapons than the Galactic Marines."

"Are you telepathic?" The thought disturbed Fi, because his mind was the only private retreat he had. "I was just—"

"If you're not as worried for him as I am, then I've read you all wrong, my friend."

"Bard'ika ."

"Yes? Too fast? Look—"

"Even if you didn't have your Force powers, you'd still be a terrific soldier. And a good man."

Fi couldn't see the Jedi's expression. For once, Jusik didn't scare the living daylights out of Fi and look back over his shoulder with a silly grin when they were hurtling toward a wall, only to bank sharply at the last moment. Jusik dropped his head for a second and then raised it again. His slip-streamed hair slapped Fi in the face.

"I'll try to live up to that."

"Yeah, but you still need to get your shabla hair cut." Jusik didn't laugh. Fi wasn't sure if he was moved or offended. And it seemed impossible to offend Jusik.

"Hang on."

Whatever element of the Force was guiding the Jedi, it was completely instinctive. He could find Skirata.

The speeder swung hard left and Fi feared for the Verpine rifle under his jacket, its folded stock wedged in his armpit. He was used to wearing the scruffy assortment of dull civilian clothing that Enacca had sent over with Vau. He wondered how he'd cope with his all-encompassing Katarn armor after being out of it for two weeks.

Jusik's head jerked around as if someone had summoned him. "He's heading for business zone six."

"Been there. Recce'd that place last night. Stuck a remote holocam opposite the house, in fact."

"Maybe the Force is giving us a break."

"That's got to be their hub."

"Let's try that." Jusik banked right to shoot up a vertical channel. Fi decided zero-g had its appeal. "At least we'll be able to see Kal if that's where they're heading. I bet that's reassuring."

"It would be."

"But?"

"But if they're using the speeder that was parked in their roof space last night, I clamped a remote thermal detonator in its air intake."

"Just remote? Not timed?"

"Yeah."

"That's okay then."

If—when—they got Skirata back in one piece, Fi would tell him. He had a sense of humor.

"There's somebody following him," Jusik said.

"Yeah. You, me, Vau ."

"No, not us."

"Escort for the speeder?"

"No, nothing like that at all. Someone else. I don't get any sense of malice. But it's not the strike team."

"What's that feel like?"

"Like someone standing behind me." He took one hand off the steering and tapped the back of his head behind his ear. The speeder swerved. "Right there."

"Both hands, Bard'ika . . ."

"Sorry. Whoever it is, they're focused on Kal."

"Should we be worried?"

"No."

Jusik twisted the handlebars and the speeder accelerated as if it had been fired from a Verpine. Fi bit his lip and couldn't stop his knees from pressing harder into the speeder bike's fuselage.

If he dropped the precious sniper rifle, Skirata would be heartbroken.

"That's all right, then," Fi said. "I won't worry at all."

Residential area, business zone 6, 0930 hours, 385 days after Geonosis

The airspeeder settled, hot alloy clicking as its drive cooled, and someone pulled the black hood off Skirata's head.

"This way," said the shaven-headed man. "Mind the steps!"

Skirata walked down from a rooftop parking area through doors to a tastefully decorated room with a large, grainless pale wood table and thick deep gray carpet. They weren't short of credits, then. Some terrorism was the war of the dis-possessed, and some was the handiwork of the rich who felt secondhand outrage. Either way, it was an expensive sport.

He was a mercenary. He knew the price of everything.

He sat down in the chair offered, elbows braced on the table, and tried to take in as much useful detail of his surroundings as he could. Two visible escape routes: back out those doors, or down the turbolift. After ten minutes, a middle-aged human male entered with a woman of similar age: there was nothing remarkable about either of them. They simply nodded to Skirata and sat down facing him. Four more men followed, one of them about Jusik's age, and Skirata found himself surrounded at the table by six people.

Then Perrive walked in.

"You'll excuse us for not introducing ourselves, Kal," he said. "I know you and you know me, and that's probably all you need to know?"

"Apart from the bank details, yes."

Perrive stood by the chair opposite Skirata and glanced pointedly at the man sitting in it, who then moved to another chair. You're definitely the boss, then. And the others around the table—who were obviously assessing him as a supplier didn't look like junior minions. This was either the terror cabinet or a rare gathering of cell leaders. It had to be. Perrive handed the man next to him the small sample pack that Skirata had supplied the day before, and he examined it care-fully before passing it

around the table.

Yes, they'll be the ones distributing this. I should blow this place now. But that's not sensible. Just satisfying.

"We'd like all hundred kilos of your goods and four thousand detonators?"

Skirata did a quick calculation. About twenty-five grams of five-hundred-grade thermal per device, then: a Bravo Eight Depot incident took the equivalent of two of those. Enough bomb-making kit for that level of carnage every day for five years, or a lower body count and mutilation for more than ten. A very economical war.

"How much?"

"Two million credits?"

Skirata didn't even pause to think. "Five."

"Two."

"Five."

"Three."

"Five, or I need to go and talk to my other customers."

"You don't have any others who want this kind of explosive."

"If you think that, then you're new in this galaxy, son."

"Three million credits. Take it or leave it."

Skirata got up and really did intend to walk. He had to look as if he meant it. He skirted the table as far as Perrive and then the man turned and put his hand on Skirata's right arm. Skirata jerked it back, and he wasn't acting the jumpy mercenary. It was his knife arm. Perrive noticed, eyebrows raised for a fraction of a second.

"Four million," Perrive said.

Skirata paused and chewed the inside of his cheek. "Four, credits to be deposited and confirmed as being in my account before I release the goods, and I want the deal done in the next forty-eight hours."

"That requires trust."

"If I don't have any other customers, then why would I want a hundred kilos of explosives hanging around my premises until Mustafar freezes over?"

Perrive paused and then almost smiled. "Agreed."

Skirata reached in his pocket and handed him a datachip, stripped of all information except a numbered account that would exist only from noon for forty-eight hours. He had a constant stream of accounts like that. All the Nulls could slice like top pros, but Jaing was an artist among data de-ceivers. My clever lad. "Time and place, then."

"All in one delivery."

"Okay. But it stays wrapped in quarter-kilo packs bagged in tens, because I'm not going to unwrap every di'kutla bar and get covered in forensic evidence." He paused, trying to look as if he was

thinking of another reason. "And that's two and a half kilos a bag, which is going to be easier for you to move."

"What makes you think we're going to move it?"

Smart, eh? "If you're keeping that all in one place, you're insane. I'm used to handling the stuff and even I don't like it around me. You do know what five-hundred-grade does, don't you?"

"Of course I do," Perrive said. "It's my business. Let's say midnight tomorrow. Here."

"If I knew where here was, I might agree."

"We'll let you walk out and then you'll see."

"I can land speeders on your roof, can I?"

"Up to Metrocab size."

"I'll probably bring two small speeders. I'll call you half an hour before."

"I haven't given you my number."

"Better do that, then, or you won't get your goods. I don't want any further contact until then—and I don't want anyone following me when I leave here. Okay?"

Perrive nodded. "Agreed."

And it was that simple. It never ceased to amaze Skirata how much simpler it was to buy and sell death than it was to pay taxes. "Show me to the front door, then."

Shaven-Head took him down in the polished durasteel turbolift—it always reminded him of Kamino, that brutally clinical finish—and walked him through a ground floor that was just one square room with no rear exit and one door at the front.

Easier to defend—if you were confident you could escape via the roof.

The doors parted. Kal Skirata stepped out onto a secluded walkway and found himself in affluent Coruscanti suburbia. He checked the position of the sun and began walking in the direction of the main sky lanes. If he kept walking east, he'd come to the office sector sooner or later. Besides, the holo-cam that Fi and Sev placed a few hours earlier was watching him right now from the building opposite.

There were a lot of pedestrians about.

Skirata clicked his back teeth and opened the comlink channel. He didn't like the bead comlink any better than he liked wearing a hearing enhancer.

"Listen up, ad 'ike," he said as quietly as he could. "Game on. Game on!"

Logistics center, Grand Army of the Republic, Coruscant Command HQ, 0940 hours, 385 days after Geonosis

"Do I look as if I've been flattened by a . . . PIP laser?" Besany Wennen asked.

"PEP laser." Ordo, posing as Corr again, helmet tucked under his left arm, let her pass through the logistics center's doors ahead of him as Kal'buir had told him. It was the po-lite thing to do. "And no.

You just look tired."

"I can't say it's been a typical day's duty for me."

"I respect your willingness to accept this without wanting to complain to your superiors."

"If I did, I'd compromise your mission, wouldn't I?"

"Possibly."

"Then it's just a bad bruise and an interesting evening. No more."

She was as tall as he was and looked him straight in the eye: her dark eyes made her light blond hair seem exotic in contrast. She's different. She's special. He made a conscious effort to concentrate.

"I'll make sure you have acceptable records for your bosses to show that the investigation was completed," Ordo said.

"And that the suspects . . . let's say that I learned they were of interest to military intelligence, so I withdrew from further involvement?"

"Well, I can guarantee they won't be troubling you any longer."

Ordo was still waiting for her to ask exactly what Vau had done to the real Vinna Jiss, and what Ordo was going to do to the employees leaking information—Jinart had identified two—and a thousand other questions. He would have wanted to know everything, but Wennen just stuck to what she needed to know to close down her part of the surveillance. He didn't understand that reaction at all.

"What happens to you now?" he asked.

"I go back to my own department in the morning and pick up the next file. Probably corporate tax evasion." She slowed him down with a careful hand on his arm. He let that touch thrill him now. He was still uneasy, but he was less disturbed by the attraction. "What about you?"

"Reducing payroll numbers. Fi suggested we call it staff turnover, in the spirit of military euphemism."

It seemed to take her a couple of moments to work out what he meant. She frowned slightly. "Won't whoever they're reporting to notice they're missing?"

"Jinart says they only call in every four or five days. That gives us a time window to work within."

"Aren't you ever afraid?"

"When the shooting starts, frequently." It struck him that she probably found the idea of assassination uncomfortable, but she didn't say so. "But not as afraid as I would be if I were operating without weapons. Your superiors really should arm you."

They reached the doors to the operations room. She stopped dead.

"I know this has nothing to do with me any longer, but will you do something for me?"

"If I can."

"I want to know when you make it through this." She seemed to lose some composure. "And your brothers, and your ferocious little sergeant, of course. I rather like him. Will you call me? I don't need details. Just a word to let me know that it went okay, whatever it is."

"I think we can manage that," Ordo said.

This was where he turned left to go to Accounts, to find Hela Madiry, a woman clerk nearing retirement age—just an ordinary woman who happened to have distant cousins on Jabiiim. Then he would pay a visit to Transport Maintenance, and look up a young man who had no family allegiance or ideology in this war but who liked the credits that the Sepa-ratists paid him. Their motives made no difference: they would both die very soon.

"Be careful . . . Trooper Corr," Besany said.

Ordo touched gloved fingers to his forehead in an informal salute.

"You too, ma'am. You too."

Business zone 6, walkway 10 at the junction of skylane 348, 0950 hours, 385 days after Geonosis

Fi braced for a verbal barrage as Jusik brought the speeder to a stop at the end of the walkway and settled it on the edge of the taxi platform. Skirata walked up to them straight-faced through the scattering of pedestrians and stood with his hands thrust in the pockets of his leather jacket.

"You're leading Fi astray, Bard'ika."

"I'm sorry, but you told me that you should never enter an enemy stronghold without backup if you could help it."

"I hate it when people take notice of me. Fi, what's wrong?"

Fi was still looking around, trying to cover three dimensions that might conceal a threat. Jusik had said that whoever was following Skirata had no malicious intention, but Fi reasoned that not everyone who was going to kill you had a sense of malice. He'd killed plenty of people without any ill feeling whatsoever. While the Force was fascinating, Fi liked to see things through the scope of his Deece, preferably with the red target acquisition icon pulsing.

He put his hand under his jacket to slide the rifle from under his arm. This was when the unusually short barrel and folding stock came into their own. You could still use the weapon at short range. "Bard'ika thinks there's someone following you."

"I normally notice!"

"But you're deaf."

"Partially, you cheeky dildcut." Skirata resorted to his reflex of straightening his right arm to have his knife ready. "Well, maybe we'd better move on before they catch up?"

"Nobody with ill intent," Jusik said. He slid his hand to the opening of his jacket, suddenly edgy. Fi took his cue and swung off the speeder to stand in front of Skirata. "And they're very, very close."

"Steady, son. Public place, people around. No lightsaber, okay?"

"Very close." Jusik looked past Skirata.

A young man with short white-blond hair was striding toward them through the sparse crowd, arms held a little away from his sides, a large bag over one shoulder. His knee-length dark blue coat was wide open. But that didn't mean he wasn't carrying an armory under there somewhere. Fi unfolded the Verp's stock one-handed under his jacket and prepared to draw it and fire.

The man then held both hands up at shoulder level and grinned.

"Fierfek," Skirata breathed. "Udesii, lads. It's okay."

The blond man—Fi's height, very athletic—walked straight up to Skirata and crushed him in an enthusiastic hug.

"Su'cuy, Buir!"

Father. Fi knew the voice.

"Suc'uy, ad'ika. Tion vaii gar ru'cuyi?"

"N'oya'kari gihaal, Buir" The man looked almost tear -ful: his pale blue eyes were brimming. He wiped them with the heel of his hand. "If I'm not careful I'll wash out this iris dye."

"That hair doesn't suit you, either."

"I can change that, too. I've got lots of different colors. Did you like what I added to the five-hundred-grade ther-mal?"

"Ah. I did wonder."

"I'm still a better chemist than Ord'ika, Kal'buir"

Fi finally saw the face in front of him as a negative image, and suddenly imagined dark hair and eyes, and realized why the man was familiar. He wasn't one of Skirata's own sons. He was a clone, just like Fi: or, to be precise, just like Ordo. It was astonishing how much difference pigmentation alone made to someone's appearance: a simple but effective dis-guise, for casual use anyway.

Skirata beamed at him with evident pride. "Lads, this is ARC Trooper Lieutenant N-7," he said.

"My boy Mereel."

So this was Mereel. And even though Fi's Mando'a wasn't perfect, he understood that Skirata had asked him where he'd been, and that the ARC trooper had said that he'd been hunt-ing fish-meal.

Fi was fascinated. But he kept his fascination to himself.

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I had no mother and no father. I was four years old when they first put a weapon in my hands. I was taught to suppress my feelings, and to respect and obey my Masters. I was encouraged to be obsessive about perfection. It wasn't the life I would have chosen, but the one ordained because of my genes—just like the men I'm expected to command. But now I have something wonderful, something I have chosen. And I will never let anyone take the child I'm carrying.

—General Etain Tur-Mukan, private journal

GAR logistics center, 1230 hours, 385 days after Geonosis

It was lunchtime.

The biggest decision most people made at that time of day in the logistics center was whether to eat in the cafeteria or find a spot in the public courtyard nearby to enjoy an open-air snack.

Ordo's decision was whether to use the Verpine, or walk up to the traitor Hela Madiry, maneuver her into a shadowy alcove, and then garrote her or cut her throat.

Verpine. Best choice. Fast and silent, as long as the projec -tile didn't pass through her and hit something that made a noise.

Madiry sat in the shadow of a planter filled with vivid yel -low shrubs, eating a mealbread stick and reading a holozine, oblivious to her life expectancy. Ordo sat in the shade of a manicured tree with his datapad on his lap, calculating her remaining life in minutes.

There was nobody within ten meters of her, but there was a security holocam.

A man sat down on the bench beside him. "Well, our young friend in Transport Maintenance just had an unfortu-nate accident with a repulsorlift platform. Thanks for the use of your security codes."

"And he didn't turn into a Gurlanin, I hope."

Mereel looked utterly alien with light hair and eyes. Even his skin was tinted two shades paler. It didn't suit him. "No, vod 'ika, he turned into a dead human. Skulls and repulsor-lifts don't mix. Trust me."

"Just checking."

"You haven't told Kal'huir about Ko Sai yet, have you?" Mereel asked.

"I thought he might be less distracted if we wait until this mission is completed."

"He's a true verd, a warrior. He's never distracted when the shooting starts."

"There's no rush," Ordo said.

Mereel shrugged. Out of armor and kama, he slouched in a convincingly civilian manner. "So, shall I wander off?"

Ordo was watching the security holocam that covered the area between the woman and the public refreshers twenty meters beyond. "Can you disrupt that holocam circuit for me on my mark?"

Mereel felt in his coat for something and pulled out a slim stylus. It was an EMP disruptor. "I can do it without leaving my seat, ner vod."

"Okay, I'll give you a reminder to kill the cam when I'm five meters from her."

Mereel tapped his ear. "Comlink on."

Ordo took a few slows breaths. He had removed the fold-ing stock from the Verpine rifle; it was now short enough to conceal under a document holder. He looked like any other anonymous, helmeted, convalescing clone trooper playing office boy and carting archived flimsi around.

"Go," Ordo said, and stood up.

He walked toward the refreshers, which took him on a path past the Madiry woman.

"Mereel, kill the cam."

He had a few moments now before a security console spotted the outage and tried to fix it. He took five fast strides and bent over Madiry as if to ask her a question.

She looked up as if an old friend had startled her. "Hello, trooper."

"Hello, aruetii," Ordo said. He drew the Verp and put two rounds point-blank through her forehead and a third down at an angle through her upper chest. One round thudded through into the planter of soil behind her. Ordo had no idea where the other two went, but the informant was now dead and she simply slumped, head down as if still reading, a pool of her bright blood on the holozine's screen.

Ordo slipped the Verp back under the document folder and walked away. It had taken less than ten seconds from cuing Mereel to walking away.

Nobody even looked at him as he strode calmly toward the GAR complex, passed it, and met Mereel on the other side of the speeder parking bays. They disappeared into the sea of vehicles and mounted the Aratech speeder bike to head back to base.

Kal'buir had always told the Nulls they were instant death on legs. Ordo liked to live up to that assessment. His thoughts were on Besany Wennen as he rode off, and how it was good that he hadn't had to kill her, too.

Operational house, Qibbu's Hut, 1330 hours, 385 days after Geonosis

The more the tagged targets moved around Coruscant, the clearer the strike team's task became.

"That," Fi said admiringly, "gets better every time I look at it, Bard'ilca."

Jusik stared at the Coruscant holochart with a big grin and basked in the approval. The telltale red traces of the marked ter-rorists as they moved around the city were forming a pattern that firsthand surveillance would have struggled to build up.

"It was obvious, really," he said. "You'd have come up with it yourselves sooner or later."

Vau put down a bowl of milk in front of the strill. It lapped noisily, showering droplets across the carpet. "I vote that Dust-tagging becomes standard surveillance procedure. It's a matter for your sergeant, of course."

The police interloper's trace had been removed. Jailer Ogrim had given her a painless and unnoticeable EMP sweep to kill transmissions from the marker powder she had inhaled. Now just five marked targets moved around the grids of blue light, building an accurate picture of where they went and where they stayed. The division between the two was now very much easier to see. Four locations—the house in banking sector 9, the landing strip used by the fresh farm produce importers, and two apartments in the retail sector—were clearly the most visited.

"But we probably only tagged Perrive's hired help," Fi said. "We want the bigger guys."

"The bigger guys," Vau said, "need the hired help by their side. All this activity is connected to the fact that they're about to receive explosives they badly need. Now, we know they used dead letter drops, for want of a better phrase, to avoid direct contact between the various terror cells in the network. It's how they ensure there's no way of tracing them back. So what does this tell you?"

Fi studied the hypnotic blue and red light in front of him. "They're moving back and forth between locations over and over."

"And therefore?"

"Therefore . . . they're either one cell . . . or they're several cells who have abandoned security precautions and are mak-ing direct contact with each other."

"Well done, Fi."

Fi didn't care for Vau but he enjoyed praise. He savored the moment. "So what do you think we've got here?"

"Given that this centered on the explosives, I think we're looking at the manufacturing cell—the people who make the bombs. Possibly also the ones who place them. Setting a complex device in a location or on a vessel can be a fiddly business, and I reckon this lot would do it themselves. They need to be mobile to get to different target locations, too, hence the need for a busy landing strip—nobody notices more traffic movement there. Now, Fi, that's a group of people worth taking out. Those are hard skills to replace in a hurry."

Jusik gave Fi a playful punch on the shoulder, elated. "Re -sult!" He seemed to see it as a big puzzle to be taken apart. If Fi hadn't seen Jusik use a lightsaber, he would have taken him for a boy who just liked playing with complicated kit. "Time to make their eyes water, eh, Fi?"

"You got it."

"Delta has recce'd the landing strip. You've recce'd the house in the banking sector. That just leaves the two apartments, and Ordo and Mereel have stopped off to recce those now."

The strill had finished its milk, most of which had ended up on the carpet. Vau—a sergeant who believed in thrashing courage into his men, a sergeant who had scarred Atin badly—grabbed a cloth from the kitchen area and mopped up the damp patches. Then he took a clean rag, soaked it, and wiped the strill's mouth and jowls as if it were a baby. The animal accepted the indignity and rumbled with happiness.

Fi wasn't sure he would ever know what went on in the heads of nonclones.

Delta and Omega assembled in the main room, finding seats where they could, and spent the next hour planning three house assaults and a raid on an airstrip. They were basic maneuvers they had drilled for time and again on Kamino; they'd done it for real more than once, too. They had fairly recent plans of the buildings—not to be relied upon absolutely, of course—and covert holocam surveillance. Apart from the fact that the squads were used to operating alone, it was as near a done deal as an operation could be.

Planning. It was all about planning.

But there was always a surprise, always one more factor you hadn't allowed for or didn't see.

Fi planned for that, too. They all did, deep down.

Operational house, Qibbu's Hut, 1530 hours, 385 days after Geonosis

Etain knew.

She had known it would happen in time, but it had hap-pened now, into two brief, wonderful weeks. The Force land-scape that surrounded her had changed subtly and she felt strangeness and purpose within her, purpose that was some-one else's.

It was said that Force-sensitive females could often detect the moment that they conceived. And it was true.

Etain stood on the landing platform for a while, searching for the fear she always imagined might come with taking that irrevocable step and not knowing its full consequences. But there was no fear. There was simply a pleasant sensation of certainty, almost like hands pressing on her shoulders.

And a clear vision, in the part of her brain that saw the uni -verse without images, showed a new path through trails of webbed, colored light. In her prosaic way, it reminded her of a holochart, but it was less solid, its threads and lines shift-ing.

The new path that was marked through the tangle of col-ored threads was pale, silver, and thick, and from it sprouted silver tendrils that snaked into the tangles of the rest of the image. This new life she carried would be significant, and it would touch many others. The Force was clear if you listened carefully to it: and this time it said This is not wrong.

On Qiilura, I envied Jinart her certainty. I envied Master Fuller that quality, too. And now I have it at last.

It was almost blissful. She savored the warm sun on her face, eyes closed for a few moments, and then walked back into the main room. It seemed oddly empty: Delta and Omega were catching up on sleep, doors shut. Ordo had disappeared with Mereel, and Corr had left a datapad running to log movements of suspects on the holochart while he went for a meal.

Vau stretched out in one chair with the strill on his lap while Skirata sat opposite him, boots up on the low table, eyes closed, hands clasped on his chest. Etain watched him, knowing that she might need to tell him even before she told Darman: she would need Skirata's help, his list of contacts and places to disappear.

Darman would be overwhelmed by it all when he needed to keep his mind on fighting. But Skirata was a man of the world, never fazed by anything; he would understand what she was giving Darman, and want to help.

Not yet, though.

While she watched Skirata, Niner wandered out of his room in his red fatigues, scratching his head with both hands. He poured a glass of water and walked across the room in slow silence to stand contemplating the sleeping Skirata with a slight frown. Then he went back to his room. He emerged a few moments later with a blanket and eased it over his sergeant, tucking it around him carefully. For once the man didn't stir.

Niner stood over him for a while, simply looking down at his face, lost in thought.

"He's okay," Etain whispered.

"Just checking," Niner said quietly, and returned to his room.

Etain defocused for a few moments and sought Darman in the Force: as ever, he was a well of calm and certainty, even while sleeping. When she focused on the room again, she realized Skirata had opened his eyes.

"You okay, ad'ika?" he said. "Was that Niner just now?"

"I'm fine." He was in a better mood now. Perhaps he re-garded the matter between her and Ordo as closed. "Yes. He was checking on you."

"He's a good lad. But he ought to be getting some sleep." He raked his hair with his fingers, yawning. "Fatigue affects your judgment."

"But not yours," Vau said quietly.

Skirata was alert in a heartbeat and swung his legs off the table onto the floor. Vau could wind him up as surely as a me-chanical toy. "If I don't move fast enough when the shooting starts, that's my problem. I'm used to it."

"Yes, we all know." Vau turned to Etain. "This is normally where he starts lecturing me on his ghastly childhood as a starving war orphan living feral on some bomb site, and how I just ran away to become a mercenary because I was bored with my idle, rich family."

"Well, that saved me some time," Skirata said irritably. "What he said."

"You have a family, Vau?" Etain was suddenly mesmer-ized by people who had lives and parents. "Are you in con-tact with them?"

"No. They cut me off when I declined to choose the career they wanted for me."

"Wife? Children?"

"Dear girl, we're Cuy'val Dar. People who have to disap-pear for eight years or more aren't the family kind. Except Kal, of course. But your family didn't wait for you, did they? That's all right, though. You've got a lot more sons now."

If Etain had known nothing of Skirata, or even Vau, it was the kind of jibe guaranteed to start a fight. Skirata was ab-solutely and instantly white with anger. One thing she knew about Mandalorians was that clan was a matter of honor. Skirata walked up to Vau very slowly and the strill woke, whin-ing.

Etain checked that Skirata's jacket with its lethal array of blades was still hanging over the back of the chair.

Skirata shook his head, slow and deliberate. Vau was much taller and a few kilos heavier but Skirata never seemed to worry about that kind of detail.

"But that's the good thing about being Mando. If you don't get the family you want, you can go and choose one yourself." He looked suddenly older and very sad, small, crushed by time. "You going to tell her? Okay, Etain, my sons disowned me. In Mandalorian law, children can legally disown a parent who's shamed them, but it's rare. My sons left with their mother when we split up, and when I disap-peared to Kamino and they couldn't locate me, they declared me dar. 'buir. No longer a father."

"Oh my. Oh, I'm sorry." Etain knew how serious that would be for a Mando 'ad. "You found that out when you left Kamino?"

"No. Jango brought the news back that they were looking for me about . . . oh, four years in? Three maybe? I forget. Two sons and a daughter. Tor, Ijaat, and Ruusaan."

"Why were they looking for you?"

"My ex-wife died. They wanted me to know."

"Oh . . ."

"Yeah."

"But you could have told them where you were at the time. Jango could have talked to them."

"And?"

"You could have made your peace with them."

"And?"

"Kal, you could have explained to them somehow and stopped it."

"And reveal we had an army in training? And compromise my lads' safety? Never. And not a word to any of the boys, you hear? It's the only thing I ever kept from them."

He'd sacrificed his good name and the last possibility of his family's love and forgiveness for the men he was training. It hit Etain hard in the chest like a blow.

She turned to Vau. "Do you see your men as your sons?"

"Of course I do. I have no others. It's why I made them into survivors. Don't think I don't love them just because I don't spoil them like kids."

"Here we go," Skirata said, all contempt. "He's going to tell you that his father beat the osik out of him and it made a man of him. Never did him any harm, no sir."

"I've lost just three men out of my batch, Kal. That tells me a lot about my methods."

"So I lost fourteen. You making a point?"

"You made yours soft. They don't have that killer edge."

"No, I didn't brutalize mine like you did yours, you hut 'uun."

Etain stepped between them, arms held out, pieces of old conversations falling into place with awful clarity. The strill began rumbling in its throat and dropped to the floor to pace protectively in front of Vau.

It was just as well the bedroom doors were shut.

"Please, stop this. We don't want the men to hear you fighting right now, do we? Like Niner says—save it for the enemy."

Skirata turned his head with that sudden total focus that left Etain tasting a ripple in the Force. But it wasn't the angry reaction of a man who had been stung by painful observation. It was genuine anguish. He glanced down at Mird as if considering giving it a good kick, then limped off to the landing platform.

"Don't do this to him," she said to Vau. "Please. Don't."

Vau simply shrugged and picked up the huge strill in his arms as if it were a pup. It licked his face adoringly. "You can fight ice-cold or you can fight red-hot. Kal fights hot. It's his weakness."

"You sound just like an old Master of mine," Etain said, and went out to the platform after Skirata.

Coruscant's sky lanes stretched above and below them, giving an illusion of infinity. Etain leaned on the safety rail with her head level with Skirata's as they gazed down. She searched his face.

"Kal, if you'd like me to do something about Vau--"

He shook his head quickly, eyes still downcast. "Thanks, ad 'ika, but I can handle that heap of osik."

"Never let a bully manipulate you."

Skirata's jaw worked silently. "I'm to blame."

"For what?"

"Sending boys to their deaths."

"Kal, don't do this to yourself."

"I took the credits, didn't I? Jango whistled and I came running. I trained them from boys. Little boys. Eight, nine years of nothing but training and fighting. No past, no child-hood, no future."

"Kal . . ."

"They don't go out. They don't get drunk. They don't chase women. We drill them and medicate them and shunt them from battle to battle without a day off, no rest, no fun, and then we scrape them off the battlefield and send what's left standing back to the front."

"And you alongside them. You gave them a heritage, and a family."

"I'm as bad as Vau."

"If you hadn't been there, your place would have been taken by another like him. You gave your men respect and affection."

Skirata let out a long breath and folded his hands, elbows still braced on the rail of the balcony. A speeder horn blared far below them. "You know something? Live-fire exercises. They started five years into their development. That means I sent ten-year-old boys to die. And eleven, and twelve, and right on up to the time they were men. I lost four of my batch in training accidents, and—some of those were even down to me, my rifle, my realism. Think about that."

"I hear that happens in any army."

"So ask me the question, then. Why didn't I ever say, Whoa, enough? I've had some unkind thoughts about you, ad'ika, why your kind never refused to lead an army of slaves. And then I thought, Kal, you hut 'tam, you're just the same as her. You never stood up against it."

"Your soldiers worship you."

Skirata closed his eyes then screwed them tight shut for a moment. "You think that makes me feel better? That stinking strill loves Vau. Monsters get loved irrationally all the time."

Etain wondered whether to soothe him by judiciously influencing his mind that he would not feel guilty. But Skirata was his own man, tough-minded enough to spot her mind influence and shrug her manipulation aside. If she asked him for his cooperation . . . no, Skirata would never take the easy path. She had no comfort to offer him that wouldn't make matters worse.

That was part of his unique and appealing courage. Her first impression was that he would be a man whose bluff exterior was simply embarrassed machismo. But Skirata wasn't embarrassed about his emotions at all. He had the guts to wear his heart on his sleeve. It was probably what made him even more effective at killing: he could love as hard as he could punch.

Force, stop reminding me. Duality. I know I know you can't have light without dark.

Her spiritual struggles were irrelevant now. She was carrying Darman's child. She longed to tell him and knew she had to wait.

"You love them, Kal, and love is never wrong."

"Yes, I do." His hard, lined face was an icon of passionate sincerity. "All of them. I started with one hundred and four trainees, plus my Null lads, and now I've got ninety commandos left. They say parents should never have to outlive their kid. But I'm outliving them all, and I suppose that punishment serves me right. I was a rotten father."

"But—"

"No." He held up his hand to stop her, and she paused. Skirata was benign but absolute authority. "It's not what you think. I'm not using these lads to salve my conscience. They deserve better than that. I'm just using what I've learned—for them."

"Does it matter, as long as they're loved?"

"Yes, it does. I have to know that I care about them for who they are, or I've consigned them to being things again. We're Mandalorian. A Mandalorian isn't just a warrior, you see. He's a father, and he's a son, and your family matters. Those boys deserve a father. They deserve sons and daughters, too, but that isn't going to happen. But they can be sons, and the two things you have a duty to teach your sons are self-reliance, and that you'd give your life for them." Skirata leaned on folded arms and gazed down into the hazy abyss again. "And I would, Etain. I would. And I should have had that degree of conviction when I started this sorry mess back on Kamino."

"And walked out? And left them to it? Because it wouldn't have shifted the clone program one bit, even if it made you feel like you'd taken a brave stand."

"Is that how you feel?"

"That stalking out and refusing to lead them is more for my comfort than theirs?"

He lowered his head on his folded arms for a moment. "Well, that answers my question."

As a Jedi, Etain had never known a real father any more than a clone had, but in that moment she knew exactly who she wanted him to be. She moved closer to Skirata to let her arm drape on his shoulder and rested her head against his. A tear welled up in the wrinkled corner of his eye then spilled down his cheek, and she wiped it away with her sleeve. He managed a smile even though he kept his gaze fixed on the traffic far below.

"You're a good man and a good father," she said. "You should never doubt that for a moment. Your men don't, and neither do I."

"Well, I wasn't a good father until they made one out of me."

But now he would also be a grandfather, too; and she knew it would delight him. She had given Darman back his future. She closed her eyes and savored the new life within her, strong and strange and wonderful.

Qibbu's Hut, main bar, 1800 hours, 385 days after Geonosis

Ordo shouldered a space for himself at the bar table between Niner and Boss and helped himself to the container of juice.

Corr was showing Scorch a dangerous trick with a vibro-blade that required lightning reflexes to withdraw his hand before the blade thudded into the surface of the table. Scorch seemed wary.

"But your hand's metal, you cheating di'kut," he said. "I bleed."

"Yaaah, jealous!" Corr jeered. His blade shaved Scorch's finger and went thunnkk in the table to cheers from Jusik and Darman. "You shiny boys always did envy us meat cans."

The two squads seemed in good spirits, good enough to be telling long and elaborate jokes without the usual competi-tive edge of bravado between Sev and Fi. They had a task to complete in thirty hours and it seemed to have focused them completely, erasing all squad boundaries. It was what Ordo had expected. They were professionals; professionals put the job first. Anything less got you killed.

But now they were having fun. Ordo suspected it was the first time they'd ever let their hair down in an environment like this, because it was certainly a first for him. Skirata looked as happy as he had ever seen him. And Jusik sat among them, wearing of all things a chest plate of Mandalorian armor under his jacket.

"We presented it to Bard 'ika as a souvenir," Skirata said, rapping his knuckles on the plate. "In case we don't manage to have that fancy dinner."

In case some of us are dead by the end of tomorrow.

That was what he meant, and everyone knew it. They lived with it. It just seemed the more poignant now for knowing that a rare bond had been formed between unlikely comrades: two Jedi who openly admitted they struggled with the disciplines of attachment—and Ordo was sure now that he understood that—and a very mixed bag of clone soldiers from captain to trooper who had abandoned rank to answer to a sergeant who didn't answer to anyone.

Fi, with his uncanny talent for spotting a mood, raised his glass. "Here's to Sicko."

The mention of the pilot's name brought instant reverence to the noisy table.

"To Sicko," they chorused.

There was no point grieving: settling a score with Separatists was a far more productive use of their energy. Jusik winked at Ordo, clearly happy in a way that reached beyond noisy laughter in a

crowded bar. Whatever moat of serenity and separateness surrounded men like Zey, Jusik's had vanished—if he had ever had it. He was daring to feel part of a tight-knit group of men. Whatever brotherhood was like within the Jedi Order, it didn't appear to be like this.

Mereel, his hair rinsed clean to its natural black, was now holding court and reciting an astonishing list of obscenities in forty different languages. So far he hadn't repeated him-self once. Fi was bent double over the table, roaring with laughter.

Even Niner was enjoying it, contributing the odd word of Huttese. "It's nice to know that your advanced linguistic skills were devoted to something useful."

"Urpghurit," Mereel said, deadpan.

"Disgusting," said Fi.

"Baay shfat"

"What does that mean?"

Mereel whispered a translation in Fi's ear and his face fell slightly. Mereel frowned. "Don't tell me you've never heard that one."

"We were raised to be polite boys," Fi said, clearly aghast. "Can Hutts really do that?"

"You better believe it."

"I'm not sure I like civilian society," Fi said. "I think I felt safer under fire."

Coming from Fi, it would usually have been a joke. But like all his jokes, bitter reality lay not far

beneath. Fi hadn't adjusted gracefully to the outside world. There was a moment of silence as reality intruded on all of them.

"I'll shoot you and cheer you up, then," Sev said suddenly.

Everyone laughed again. Darman drained his glass and got up to go. Scorch flicked a warra nut at him with impressive accuracy, and it bounced off his head. "Where you going, Dar?"

"I'm off to calibrate my Deece."

There was more raucous laughter. Darman didn't look amused. He shrugged and walked off in the direction of the turbolift through a crowd of men from the Forty-first Elite who were shipping out in a few days. At least they'd had something few troopers ever would: two weeks without fighting. They didn't appear to be enjoying it, though. Kal 'buir said that was what happened when you let someone out of prison after a long sentence. They didn't fit in and they didn't know how to live outside a cell or without a familiar routine.

I know, though. And Fi wants to know

"Don't wind him up about Etain, son," said Skirata. Scorch looked wary. "He's not breaking any regulation, is he?"

"I don't think so, but she is."

The best thing was not to think.

"What happens to us when the war's over?" Corr asked.

Mereel smiled. "You'll have the thanks of a grateful Re-public. Now, who can guess what this Ubese word means?"

Ordo glanced at Skirata, who raised his glass. Atin came to take Darman's place at the table with the Twi'lek Laseema on his arm: the man obviously wasn't as shy as he seemed. Except for Vau and Etain, the entire strike team had gathered here, and there was some sense of an important bond having been accomplished. It also felt very final.

"You and Mereel are up to something," Skirata said. "I can tell."

"He has news, Kal'buir," Ordo said.

"Oh."

Should he tell him now? He'd thought it might distract him too much. But he didn't need to provide detail. It would give Kal'buir heart for what was to come.

"He's traced where our mutual friend fled immediately after the battle."

There was no need to say that the friend was Kaminoan scientist Ko Sai, the head of the cloning program, or that she had gone missing after the Battle of Kamino. The hunt—and it was a private matter, not Republic business, although the Grand Army footed the bill—was often reduced to just two words: Any news?

And if any of his other brothers—Prudii, A'den, Kom'rk, Jaing—found anything as well, Skirata would be told. They might have been carrying out intelligence missions for the Republic, but their true focus was finding elements of Kaminoan cloning technology that only Ko Sai had access to.

Skirata's face became luminous. It seemed to erase every crease and scar for a few moments.

"This is what I want to hear," he said softly. "You will have a future, all of you. I swear it."

Jusik was watching him with interest. There was no point trying to conceal anything of an emotional nature from Jedi as sensitive to the living Force as Jusik and Etain, but it was unlikely that Skirata had shared that secret with him. He hadn't even told his commando squads. It was too fragile a mission; it was safer for them all not to know for the time being.

Jusik raised his glass. It was just juice. Nobody would drink before a mission if they had any sense. Alcohol had proved not to be a major preoccupation with commandos anyway: and, whatever had been rumored, Kal'buir's only concession to alcohol was one glass of fiery colorless tihaar at night to try to get to sleep. He found sleep increasingly elusive as the years of training progressed on Kamino and his conscience tore him apart piece by piece.

He'd sleep well without it tonight, even if it was in a chair.

"This is very, very good news," Skirata said, a changed man for the moment. "I'd dare to say it bodes well."

They drank and joked and argued about Hutt curses. And then Skirata's comlink chirped, and he answered it discreetly, head lowered. Ordo simply heard him say, "Now? Are you serious?"

"What is it?" Ordo said. Mereel paused in midcurse, too, and the table fell silent.

"It's our customer," Skirata said, jaw tense again. "They've hit a small snag. They need to move tonight. There's no preparation, ad'ike—we have to roll in three hours."

You know that thing that sergeants are always supposed to yell at new recruits? "I am your mother! I am your father!" Well, what do you do when that's actually true? Kal Skirata

was all they had. And the troopers didn't have anyone. How can you expect those boys to grow up normal?

—Captain Jailer Ogrim, to his wife over dinner

Operational house, Qibbu's Hut, 1935 hours, 385 days after Geonosis: whole strike team ready to deploy

"So what's your shabla problem, then, Perrive?" Skirata conducted the conversation with his wrist comlink propped on the table while he strapped on his Mando armor. Ordo stood out of range of the comlink's mike, holding Ogrim on the line via his own link. "Cold feet? Can't get the finance in place? What, exactly?"

Skirata didn't need to act angry. He was. Everyone in the team was used to working on the fly, but all the planning—the careful positioning to take out the maximum number of bodies —now teetered on the brink of disaster. Around him, Delta and Omega were armoring up in full fighting order: Katarn rig with DC-17s, grenades, rappelling lines, rapid entry ordnance, and a Plex rocket launcher per squad.

For a moment he was unsettled to see Omega and Vau both in black armor. But they're mine. They're my squad. He re-newed his concentration on Perrive's voice.

"One of our colleagues has been picked up by the police."

Perrive's Jabiimi accent was very noticeable now. It was an indication of stress. And that was encouraging at an animal level for a mercenary. Skirata gestured frantically to Ordo but his head was already lowered, chin tucked into his chest as he relayed the information to Ogrim. "We need to move our operation."

"And you want me to drop by with the groceries when you've got CSF crawling all over you? I'm still wanted for seven contract killings in town."

Ordo gave a standing by signal: hand at shoulder level, fingers spread.

Perrive swallowed audibly. "They're not crawling all over us, as you put it. One man was arrested. He might be a weak link."

Cross-check this with Obrim. "Where? This better not be in my backyard."

"Industrial sector, pulled over for an illegal cannon up-grade to his speeder."

Ordo nodded once and then gave a thumbs-up. Confirmed. Skirata felt his shoulders relax immediately. "Call me suspi-cious, but last time somebody did this to me they didn't plan on paying. You're not sticking to our timetable."

"I'm afraid it's just a good old-fashioned screwup."

"I'll be at your location at twenty-two-hundred hours, then. But you won't mind if I bring a couple of my colleagues just to be on the safe side."

"Not there. We have transport issues."

"What does that mean?"

"I mean we need to move our vessels somewhere safe. Bring the consignment to us at our landing strip and load it straight on."

Scorch stepped in front of Skirata with as near to an ex-expression of boyish delight as the man was ever going to man-age. He mouthed CoruFresh at him. Any good mercenary could lip-read, because if he wasn't already deafened by long exposure to gunfire, he couldn't hear a word in battle anyway.

"I need a location."

"We have a few vessels laid up in the commercial sector in Quadrant F-Seventy-six."

Skirata watched Scorch clench both fists and pull his el-bows hard into his sides in a gesture of silent, total triumph. They were heading for at least one site at which they'd done a thorough recce.

"I need coordinates and I need to know exactly what I can expect to see when I show up—so I know I'm not walking into a CSF welcoming committee."

"You really do have a record, don't you?" said Perrive.

"Isn't that why you're doing business with me?"

"Very well. Six speeder trucks with CoruFresh livery and four passenger airspeeders—two Koros, two custom J-twelves."

"For a hundred kilos of thermal? I can carry that with my nephew in two shopping bags, chakaar"

"You're not our only supplier of equipment, Mando. And I have personnel to move. I know you'll spit on this, but we're soldiers, and we have a code of honor. We want the goods for the price we agreed. No trap."

Skirata paused for effect. "So I'll meet you there."

"No, it'll be my deputy. The woman you saw at our meet-ing earlier. I'm moving via another route."

"Transmit the coordinates now and we'll start packing our bags."

"Your credits will be in the account you specified at twenty-one-fifty."

"Pleasure doing business. But the minute I see CSF-issue blasters or even a hint of blue uniform, we're banging out."

Skirata closed the link and for a moment there was absolute silence in a room full of fifteen hot, anxious, adrenaline-laden bodies. Then there was a loud collective whoop of satisfaction. Even Etain joined in, and Skirata hadn't reckoned her for wild displays of enthusiasm.

"So all was not lost after all, vode," Vau said. Lord Mirdalan was frantic, bouncing on its front legs while the other four scrabbled for purchase on the tattered carpet.

Adrenaline excited strills and made them eager to hunt. "Plan B. Disable the vessels and slot the occupants."

"Disable ... ," Scorch said.

"Minimum force required to do the job. We're in a city, re-member."

"Holochart," Ordo said. "I've still got Ogrim on this link. Quick sitrep, people."

They clustered around Corr, who was collating the moving red lines and points of light with quiet enthusiasm. Methodical, calm lad. He'd need to be that in bomb disposal. "They've been going all shades of crazy here and here." He zoomed into the holomap and indicated two tangled masses of red lines like loose balls of thread, both in the re-tail sector of Quadrant B-85, where Fi had carried out the surveillance of Vinna Jiss. It suggested that tagged suspects had done an awful lot of repeated movement. "I'd say they're shifting kit by hand. Plenty of it, in two locations. But the two apartments Captain Ordo recce'd have been totally dead for hours. They've left."

Skirata knew what he'd do in their position. He'd assemble what kit he had, move it discreetly to a central point, and then ship out. He wouldn't send a big, conspicuous repulsor truck to pick up from a dozen locations.

"It's all going out via the crates on that landing strip," he said.

"Agreed." Ordo and Mereel nodded.

Scorch just grinned.

A red point of light suddenly moved from the location of the house in the banking sector where Skirata had met Perrive. They watched it moving fast: someone had left the house in a speeder. "Holocam," Skirata said.

Ordo played out the remote image from his glove emitter. A speeder had taken off from the roof.

"I'd bet that was Perrive leaving," said Vau.

Skirata knew they'd lose some of the key players, but this was about making as big a dent in the Sep terror ranks as possible. "Pity. Maybe we can catch up with him later."

Fi held out his palm with a remote detonator on it. "If he's flying that green speeder .

"The one they took me in?"

"Yes."

"Fi . . ."

"You can blow it anytime you like, Sarge." The comman-dos had slipped back into calling him Sarge. It seemed to happen when they put their armor on again. "I stuck a nice big surprise in his air intake last night."

"I was in that speeder."

"I know. Clever, wasn't it?"

Skirata took the det and checked that it was disabled be-fore slipping it in his pocket.

"Ord'ika, let me talk to Jailer." He held his hand out for the comlink to Ogrim. "Can your people cover the locations we gave you?"

Ogrim's voice was tight with tension. "We're pulling peo -ple back off shifts now. We're synchronizing this for twenty- two-hundred, are we?"

"Correct. I'll patch you into my comlink for the duration, but don't talk to me unless it's critical. Other than that, stay away from the area coordinates we're going to transmit to you, and pretend we never existed."

"Sorry about the arrest—not my team. A routine firearms control stop, I'm afraid."

"At least it made them bolt. They're vulnerable when they bolt."

"I'll talk to you in twelve hours if all goes smoothly, then. Next breakfast's on you, remember?"

"You take care, too, friend."

The tangle of possibilities and risks in Skirata's mind had become crystal clear. Two key parts of the operation were now as pinned down as they could be: the synchronized raid on the lower-priority terrorist targets by CSF, and the inter-ception of an unspecified number of key players at the land-ing strip, along with their vessels.

"Remember, vode. No prisoners." Skirata took out his medpac and prepared a one-use painkiller syringe. Then he rolled down the soft leather of his left boot and stabbed the needle deep into his ankle. The pain made his muscles shake but he clenched his teeth and let it pass. This was not the night to be slowed down by a limp. "Shoot to kill."

Fourteen men and one woman to kill maybe twenty terror-ists. Very expensive use of manpower compared to droid kill rates. But worth it.

There were a few more targets still wandering around out there, ones they hadn't even tagged. But when it came to de-stroying a small organization like a group of terror cells, tak-ing out a cell like this one would have enormous impact. It slowed them down. It set them back while they recruited and reorganized and retrained.

Even a few months made all the difference in this war. "Walon," he said. "Take one of my Verpine rifles tonight. Might come in handy."

"I'm grateful, Kal."

"Okay, vode. This is now Captain Ordo's command as ranking officer—even if we have no ranks right now."

Skirata swung his arms through the full range of move-ment to check the fit of his armor, the sand-gold suit that his adoptive father Munin had given him. He put his knife—the knife he had retrieved from his real father's dead body—up his right sleeve, handle uppermost. He could barely remem-ber his parents or even his original name, but Munin Skirata was as vivid as life and still with him every day, one of the precious departed whose names he recited each night.

He hit his gauntlets against his chest plate to snap himself out of memories. Both squads jumped.

Lord Mirdalan, jowls flapping, threw its head back and let out a long, low, moaning howl. The preparations had worked the strill into a hunting frenzy. It could see its master in full Mandalorian armor, and it smelled and heard men who were tense and ready to fight. All its instincts and training said hunt, hunt, hunt.

And Vau held his gloved hand out to Atin. Astonishingly, Atin took it. There was nothing but the battle in mind now. They were all saving it for the enemy.

Skirata felt the visceral thrill tighten his throat and stom-ach. It had been many years since he'd put on this armor to fight.

"Buy'eese!" he said. Helmets on!

It was, he knew, a sight few would believe—Walon Vau and a Jedi Knight both in full Mandalorian armor, and Re-public Commandos, ARC troopers, and a clone trooper in fighting order so closely modeled on that armor he wore himself that they looked like one united army. He pulled on his own helmet before anyone noticed the tears in his eyes.

"I ought to get a holo of this," Corr said.

Etain stood among them, incongruously fragile.

"I could have lent you my Hokan armor, General," Fi said. "Only one careless owner."

Etain lifted her tunic to reveal plates of body armor. "I'm not stupid." Then she pulled out two lightsabers. Skirata winced. "Mine, and Master Fuller's. He'd have relished a fight like this."

She was not herself tonight, if her usual self was that worried, awkward, but tenacious soul who found it so hard to be a Jedi. She was utterly alive. Darman seemed to be able to strike sparks off her. Skirata hoped she did the same for him.

Vau flung out his arm to signal the strill to race ahead. "Oya! Oya!" Let's go hunting! "Oya, Mird!"

The strill bayed at the top of its voice and shot out the doors to the landing platform.

Ordo turned to the strike team. "Oya! Oya, vode!"

It was electric. It had never happened before, and it would probably never happen again.

And they went hunting.

21

Buy'ce gal, buy'ce tal

Vebor'ad ures aliit

Mhi draar baat meg'paijii'se Kote lo 'shebs 'ul narit

A pint of ale, a pint of blood

Buys men without a name

We never care who wins the war

So you can keep your fame

—Popular drinking chant of Mandalorian mercenaries—approximate translation, edited for strong language

Landing area, CoruFresh Farm Produce distribution division, Quadrant F-76, 2035 hours, 385 days after Geonosis

The produce distribution depot was as familiar as Arca Bar-racks now. Everything was as the holochart and holocam im-ages had modeled it, although some of the vessels had been moved in the last hour. Ordo took a small risk and flew the airspeeder over the CoruFresh landing strip at a cautious height just for reassurance. The depot was a lake of harsh white light dotted with loader droids, trucks, and an assort-ment of speeders. There were more vessels parked there than Perrive had said. They were probably legitimate transports shipping nothing more deadly than fruit.

"I think CoruFresh might be annoyed about the damage to their fleet in the morning," Ordo said.

"That's their problem for not being too choosy about the company they keep." Sev secured one of the Verpine rifles to his webbing. He seemed to take Skirata's warning about bending anyone who bent his kit quite literally. "They must be bankrolled by crime gangs themselves."

"We'll be doing CSF a favor, then."

It was always a challenge to insert teams into a busy loca-tion. Air traffic data said the strip clocked an average of 120 trucks and cargo lifters passing through the strip every twenty-four hours;

2000 to 2300 hours seemed to be the pe-riod when it almost shut down completely. That was proba-bly why the Separatists had picked the 2200 time slot for Skirata to deliver the explosives. They'd be loaded and gone by the time the overnight deliveries started again at 2300.

If the teams had gone in early, they would have needed to avoid an awful lot of people and droids.

"You ever carried out an assault on an urban objective be -fore?" Sev said.

"Yes. N'dian. Heard of it?"

Sev paused to check his HUD database. Ordo could see the icon flash up on his own HUD over the shared link. He heard Sev swallow.

"I meant one where you had to leave the place pretty well intact, sir."

"In that case, Sev, no. It'll be a first."

"Me, too."

"Glad we could share this moment, then."

Ordo parked the airspeeder next to the small substation that routed utilities to the industrial area where the CoruFresh depot was located. A meter-wide conduit carrying pipes and cables stretched out twenty meters from the substation to span a gap that was five hundred meters deep. That was their route in.

"All tooled up?" Ordo shouldered two Plex missile launchers against his pauldron, one on each side.

"Yes sir."

"Shoulder okay?"

"Fi has a big mouth."

"Fi knows that I need to know if any of my team is com-promised by injury."

"I'm fine, sir."

Ordo nudged him. "Oya, ner vod."

Ordo led the way across the conduit, checking Sev's progress in his HUD. A man who'd nearly fallen to his death could get a little nervous at heights like this. But Sev ad-vanced as if he were on solid ground, and they slipped into the cover of crates and containers at the rear wall of the ware-house.

"Omega, are you in position?"

Niner's voice crackled slightly in Ordo's comlink. "We're one hundred fifty meters from the perimeter, sir. Southeast of the strip at the waste , processing depot."

"Any activity in the vessels parked on the eastern edge of the strip?"

"All quiet except for maintenance droids. Dar sent up a surveillance remote and all the wets are clustered at the warehouse entrance moving boxes. They've backed up two of the trucks against the loading bay."

"We're going to position ourselves on the roof, then."

The warehouse was a single-story building with an unfor-giving flat roof that meant anyone in the two repulsor trucks on the far side of the landing area would notice troops mov-ing around. It was the only high vantage point overlooking the floodlit landing area to direct fire as well as pick off a few targets for themselves. Ordo had decided it was asking for trouble to take up a position in the residential towers nearly a thousand meters away. If they wound up on the receiving end of returned fire, there would be a lot of dead civilians to ex-plain.

"Up you go," said Ordo.

Sev fired his rappelling line over the roof and tugged on it to ensure it was secure. The small winch in his belt took most of his weight but he pushed off with his boots, looking al-most as if he were walking up the vertical surface. Ordo waited as Sev rolled flat over the edge of the roof, Verpine rifle in his right hand.

"Roof clear, sir."

Ordo fired his own line and let the winch lift him until he could reach the roof with his hand. He handed Sev the Plex launchers and hauled himself over the top to crawl flat on el-bows and knees until he was near the front edge of the roof.

They both flipped down the scopes in their visors at the same time. Ordo saw the same image repeated in Sev's view-point icon on the margin of his HUD.

"In an ideal world, we could have left a timed charge on that utility conduit and paralyzed this whole sector before we went in," Sev said.

"And that just advertises the fact that the Grand Army was here. We don't exist, remember? We've gone bandit."

"Just fantasizing."

The textbook approach was to knock out the two illumigrids and then move in. But timing was critical. Skirata and Jusik needed to make the delivery of explosives and then get clear before the party started.

"Omega, we're in position."

"Copy that." This time it was Mereel's voice.

"On my mark, we'll knock out both lights and then provide covering fire while you advance from the south side. Delta, what's your location?"

"Boss here, sir. We'll be in position behind the warehouse in two minutes. Atin and Fixer will enter from the front. Scorch and I will cover the north side of the strip."

Atin seemed to have slipped easily into the temporary gap left by Sev. There wasn't the slightest hint in their voices that their former brother wasn't welcome. Ordo supposed that once you were one of Vau's trainees, you could merge back into the batch without comment when there was a job to be done.

"Okay, vode. Now we watch and wait."

Mereel, Fi, Niner, Darman, and Corr crouched in the cover of a conveyor belt of bins outside the waste depot, where droids collected the contents for compaction and disposal.

Fi sniffed dubiously. There was the distinct sulfurous tang of rotting vegetables: harmless, or his helmet's filter would never have let the aroma through, but nauseating nonetheless. On Niner's signal, they sprinted from the bins and dropped down by a pillar at the end of the walkway that led across to the CoruFresh depot.

"You're very shiny, you two," Niner said, jerking his thumb at Corr and Mereel, who were almost glowing in the light from the red flashing sign of a seedy caf bar. "Why don't you just write SHOOT ME HERE On that di'kutla white armor?"

"You rely on that black stuff way too much," Mereel said. "It's all about a stealthy approach, you see," He heaved a massive Merr-Sonn Reciprocating Quad Blaster onto his hip and powered up the microrepulsorlift to take some of its weight. Four huge double-barreled blaster muzzles loomed from the weapon's body. It was close on eighty centimeters long and looked more like a cruiser's close-in defense can-non. "Stealth, and a nice big Cip-Quad, of course."

Fi patted Corr's conspicuously white shoulder. "His men will follow him anywhere, ner vod. But only out of curios ty?,

"Okay, get curious, then." Mereel indicated the direction of the landing strip. "They've moved some of the vessels, so we're going to have to cover a little extra open ground. At least most of the cockpits are facing the same way so we might have a blind spot to take advantage of."

Darman, Verpine rifle slung across his back, was still ex-aminig the other impressive item of Merr-Sonn firepower excess that was balanced across his thighs, the Z-6 Rotary Blaster. It was almost as big as the Cip-Quad. He looked wary of it and passed it to Corr. "We really did say no pris-oners, didn't we, sir?"

"Not exactly a sniper weapon, I know."

"Etain would like that," Fi said. "Bit classier than her Trannie LJ-50."

Mereel snorted. "The general can get her own rotary. That's my baby."

"Beats a bunch of flowers, Dar . . ."

"Has she called in yet, by the way?"

Ordo's voice cut in. There was no privacy on this frequency. "She and Vau followed Perrive's trace to an apartment in zone three, Quadrant A-Four. They're watching him now."

"Isn't that a diplomatic quarter?" asked Mereel, whose capacity for memorizing data seemed as unlimited as his brother's.

"'Fraid so," said Ordo. "That could get interesting. If we go in there, we're into a whole new level of deniability."

Fi watched Darman's head drop for a moment, but there wasn't so much as a breath or a click of teeth. He snapped back to his alert position. Fi wasn't sure if he was afraid for Etain's safety or of what she might do, and he didn't plan to ask. "Vau doesn't need that strill when he's got a Jedi with him."

"He takes Mird everywhere," Mereel said. "Like Mando fathers take their sons into battle."

"If I didn't know Old Psycho was a head case, I'd say that was cute. What is it going to do?"

"You've never seen a strill hunt, have you?"

Mereel didn't say another word. He signaled advance to Niner with a sweep of his hand and the squad sprinted for the perimeter of the landing strip.

Diplomatic sector, Quadrant A-4, 2145 hours, 385 days after Geonosis

Etain stood on the ledge of a soaring office tower facing the elegant apartment block and realized exactly what black ops truly meant.

Vau stood beside her. The ledge was about 150 centime-ters wide, and the breeze at this height was noticeable even on climate-controlled Coruscant.

"What's the matter?" Vau said, his parade-ground voice slightly softened by his Mando helmet. "Didn't know how dirty politics could be? That diplomats aren't all nice honest people? That they keep unpleasant company?"

"I think I worked that out already." She felt the strill brush past her legs, padding impatiently up and down the narrow ledge. It had no fear of heights, it seemed. "But the consequences of pursuing Perrive into that building reach far be-yond assassinating a terrorist."

"We'll have to get him to come out, then."

"He could lie low there for weeks."

"If he's hiding, yes."

"I find you hard to follow sometimes, Vau."

"He might be collecting something or somebody. He was in a mad rush to leave."

"I sense he's alone. He isn't picking up a colleague."

Vau leveled the scope of the Verpine, angled down about thirty degrees. The strill teetered on the edge of the ledge.

"I can see Perrive. Yes, he's alone. He's in front of the doors to the balcony—now that's arrogant, my friend. Think nobody can see you, eh? Etain, want to take a look?"

Vau handed her the Verpine. She took it nervously, hearing Skirata's constant admonition to take care of the weapon, and was surprised how light and harmless it felt. She peered down the scope and felt Vau reach out and flick something on the optic. A different image appeared in the eyepiece, slightly pink-tinted, of a man rummaging through a desk and sticking datachips into his 'pad, activating them, and then extracting and discarding them. A pale blob of light shimmered from his chest and then from his back as he turned.

"What can you see?"

"He's loading data," Etain said.

"He's shredding someone's files. Told you so."

"What's the white light? The EM emissions from the Dust?"

"Correct."

Etain handed back the rifle. "That datapad is going to contain some interesting material. How do we get hold of it?"

"The old-fashioned way." Vau sounded as if he'd smiled. It was hard to tell under the helmet. "Let's get him to come to the balcony."

"I'm not sure I can influence his mind at this range . . . or at all."

"No need, my dear." Vau folded a cloth one-handed and placed it under the stock of the Verpine at the point where it touched his armored shoulder. "I hate a standing shot with-out something to lean against, but I'm not as sure-footed as Mird so I'm not going to attempt to kneel." He leaned back slightly against the wall at his back. "But this Verpine is beautiful." He rested his firing hand on his raised forearm. "It's almost a handgun."

"Just tell me what you're going to do."

"Make a noise on his balcony so he steps outside."

"What if he doesn't?"

"Then we'll have to go in and get him the hard way."

"But if you—"

"Let's get him outside if we can." Vau paused to let an air-speeder pass. The narrow skylane was almost deserted. "Most armies I ended up serving had no notion of advance planning. I got to be very good at unorthodox solutions."

Etain couldn't help but feel the patterns in the Force right then. Being pregnant seemed to have enhanced her sensitivity to the living Force by an order of magnitude. Vau felt like a pool of utter cold calm, almost a Jedi Master's footprint in the Force. The strill felt . . . alien. It had an unfathomable glittering intelligence and a wild, joyful heart swirling within it. Had it not been for Vau's rifle and the krill's savage teeth, the pair might have felt like a peaceful man and his happy child.

She felt something else, as she did constantly now: the vivid, complex pattern of her unborn child.

It's a boy.

I'm standing on a ledge with thousands of meters of nothing below me. And I am not afraid.

She stopped herself from reaching out to Darman in the Force. It might distract him at a critical moment. She simply felt that he was safe and confident, and that was enough.

"Could you choke him using the Force?" Vau said quietly.

"What?"

"Just asking. Very handy."

"I was never trained to do that."

"Pity. All those fine combat skills wasted."

Vau exhaled audibly and paused. There was the slightest of movements in her peripheral vision as he squeezed the trigger, and a small snakkk echoed as a puff of vaporized stone billowed briefly off the corner of the apartment wall.

"Ahh ... ," Vau said. The rifle's scope was still pressed to the eye slit in his black helmet. He looked like the very image of death. Much as Etain had grown to find that armor reassuring, it made it no less intimidating. "Now, this is not a man used to avoiding professional assassins. Watch carefully and tell me what you feel."

Perrive paused at the transparisteel doors leading onto the balcony and shoved the datapad inside his tunic. Then he took out his blaster. He opened the doors by a meter, no more, and stood looking around, blaster raised, one foot still inside the apartment, one on the balcony itself.

Etain heard Vau exhale and then Perrive's head jerked backward with a brief plume of dark blood as if he had been punched by an invisible fist. He fell, arms thrown wide.

Dead. Gone. Whatever had been Perrive was now gone from the Force: no pain, no surprise, and suddenly not there.

Mird the strill was staring up at its master, unblinking, tail thrashing the ledge in enthusiasm. It

began making little whimpering noises deep in its throat.

"I must treat myself to one of these," Vau said, still all complete calm and satisfaction, gazing at the Verpine rifle. "Outstanding craftspeople, those little insectoids."

"He's dead."

"I should think so. The hydrostatic shock generated by a Verpine projectile is substantial. A clean head shot is instan-taneous kyr'am."

"But the datapad is still in his tunic."

"Good!" He turned to the strill and put his finger to his lips. "Udesii, Mird . . . silence! K'uur!"

The strill stared up into his face, gold eyes fixed on his, head drawn back a little into its cowl-like folds of loose skin. Its whimpering stopped abruptly. Vau crouched down and held out his arm as if pointing, and closed his fingers into a fist. "Oya . . .," he whispered. "Find the aruetii! Find the traitor!"

Mird spun around and stabbed its claws into the stonework. Etain watched, stunned, as it climbed the wall and made its way to the next ledge above. The strill appeared to under-stand what was said to it, even hand signals. But she had no idea what it was doing.

"Oya, Mird!"

The strill balanced on its four rear legs and then sprang into the abyss.

"Oh my—"

And then Etain suddenly realized why the strill looked so bizarre. It spread all six legs, and the

loose, ugly skin that made it appear such a shambling mess was stretched taut by the air pressure beneath it. It glided effortlessly down in a perfect stoop onto the balcony opposite.

Vau took off his helmet and wiped his brow. His face was a study in complete admiration and ... yes, love.

"Clever Mird," he murmured. "Clever baby!"

"It's a glider!"

"Extraordinary animals, strills,"

"It's going to fetch the .datapad?"

Vau paused. Etain could see a smile forming on his lips. "Yes."

"Is it male or female?"

"Both," Vau said. "Mird has been with me since I joined the Mandalorians. Strills live far longer than humans. Who'll care for it when I'm dead?"

"I'm sure someone will value it greatly."

"I want it to be cared for, not valued."

Vau replaced his helmet. They waited. Etain strained to see when the animal emerged from the apartment with, she imagined, the datapad clamped in its teeth. Or maybe it had more surprises in store, like a pouch, as Jinart the Gurlanin had.

She stared, aghast.

Mird had dragged Perrive's body out onto the balcony and was worrying at it. She believed the animal was trying to tear out the datapad right up to the moment that it got a good grip with its massive jaws on the corpse's shoulder and hauled it up onto the safety rail.

"What's it doing?"

Vau laughed. Mird balanced the body on the rail like a sack of stones, wobbled a little, and then launched itself into the air. Etain was stunned by its ability to move a man weighing at least eighty kilos, but not half as stunned as when she saw its free fall turn into a vertical climb as it struck out and its parachute of skin became wing membranes.

Mird soared like a raptor, carrying its prey.

Mird flew

"Fierfek ... ," Etain said. There was no other word for it.

"Language!" Vau said, clearly amused. Mird thudded onto the ledge and hauled Perrive up behind it. Vau crouched as best he could on the narrow strip of stone and felt inside the tunic for the datapad. "Got it. Let's go. Good Mird! Clever Mird! Mirdala Mird 'ika!" He opened his comlink. "Kal, Per-rive's no longer a problem, and we have a useful datapad. See you shortly."

Mird was ecstatic, whimpering and slobbering in delight as Vau rubbed its head. As retrievers went, it could have no equal.

"What about the body?" Etain said, still stunned. "Are we just leaving it here? On an office window ledge?"

"It'll give CSF's forensics team a fascinating project to keep them occupied," Vau said. "And we didn't even have to enter a diplomatic compound, did we?"

Etain, now used to death and assassination, couldn't help herself. She reached over and rubbed the still's head, too, al-though it stank and could probably kill her in a single vast bite. It was still miraculous.

"Clever Mird!" she said. "Clever!"

Somewhere near CoruFresh Farm Produce distribution division, Quadrant F-76, 2150 hours, 385 days after Geonosis

"That armor suits you, Bard 'ika."

Skirata sat astride the speeder's pillion seat, datapad and chrono at the ready. The operation was under way. Perrive was dead. Now it was time for Skirata to check that the credit transfer had been made.

He watched the screen that showed the status of the tem-porary bank account that would vanish without trace or audit trail in just over a day.

"I suspect the Jedi Council wouldn't agree." Jusik adjusted the bags on the bike's cargo straps. "Not even if General Kenobi himself wears armor."

"You don't worry much about that," said Skirata. "I haven't thought that far ahead."

"A Mando mercenary has to plan for the future these days, son, even if there turns out to be no future at all. And so should you."

Jusik laughed. "I thought you Mando 'ade lived only for the day. You even have trouble using anything but the present tense."

Skirata's eyes never left the datapad's screen. Then it re-loaded, and suddenly an anonymous numbered account in a bank on Aargau was four million credits in the black. Skirata hit VERIFY and the credits were there.

Yes, this was real. He had the credits.

He felt one tension evaporate from his chest and another —familiar, comfortable, an old friend—take its place. He was ready to fight. He opened the comlink to the whole strike team.

"Stand by, vode, stand by. The credits have cleared. We're moving in to make the drop now."

"Ordo here, copy that."

"Delta here, copy that."

"Mereel here, copy that."

"Do we get ten percent?" Fi muttered.

Jusik powered up the speeder bike. "You'd be amazed what you might get out of this, Fi." The speeder shot up into the air and spun ninety degrees before Jusik aimed it at the CoruFresh depot. "Preferably not a broken neck, though."

"Sorry, Kal," said Jusik.

Skirata checked his chrono: 2155.

A good rousing chant of Dha Werda might have psyched him up better, but this was a different battlefield.

"Bard 'ika, those explosive packs are well wrapped, aren't they?"

"Thoroughly. They're really affecting the handling of this speeder, too."

"We've got a few minutes. Take it easy."

"Ude'sli ." Jusik grinned. "If things get a little hairy out there, I can use my Force powers, can't I?"

"No witnesses. Go ahead."

Jusik took the speeder high over the landing strip, and Skirata noted Ordo and Sev flat on the roof of the warehouse as they spiraled down to land. The two soldiers didn't move. Omega and Delta were nowhere to be seen. That reassured him enormously. It had been a joy to train commandos who became better soldiers than he could ever be.

Tonight would test them, though. There were enough ex-plosives in the area now to take out a quadrant and well be-yond. Fine on a battlefield—but not in a city.

Careful. Go careful.

The speeder settled and hung at rest just above the ground. A group of five men and the middle-aged woman he'd seen at the meeting earlier were the welcoming committee, and they all had blasters visible on belts or held loosely at their sides. They directed Jusik to a spot between two trucks,

shel-tered from anyone who might pass by.

Skirata and Jusik got off the speeder bike and stood with their arms at their sides, calm and business-like. Skirata re-moved his helmet. Jusik kept his buy'ce on.

"The credits cleared fine," Skirata said.

The woman inspected the speeder, which was laden like a Tatooine bantha with anonymous bags of rough sacking. "This is all the five-hundred-grade?"

"Four hundred quarter-kilo packs, bagged in tens. I sug-gest you split the load for safety."

The woman shrugged. "We know how to handle explo-sives." She reached out to unfasten one bag and squatted down to slide the ten bundled packets onto the ground. She squinted at the thick packaging and took out a knife from her pocket..

Skirata didn't need to see Jusik's face to know that the blood had drained from it.

Don't stick anything metallic into it. The electrolytic reac-tion will set it off

Mereel's little chemical enhancement to thwart the bomb makers in the event of their getting away with any of the ex-plosives was about to kill them all.

"Whoa!" Skirata sighed irritably and hoped to the Force that he didn't sound the terrified man he was right then. "Don't shove a knife in that, woman! Unwrap it properly. Here, let me do it. Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

There was a collective involuntary gasp in his comlink ear -piece, a very restrained one. He heard Ordo mutter, "Osik ."

"You insolent little Mandalorian thug," she sneered, but she stood back to let him take over. And she held her blaster to his head.

Skirata ripped the bundle open with nervous hands and broke out one packet, tearing the flexiwrap with his teeth to expose the soft light brown contents. It tasted . . . oddly sweet.

"Here. Believe me?"

The woman scowled at him and squeezed the explosive between her fingers. "I'm checking that this isn't just dyed detonite."

"Tell you what," Skirata said, wondering if Jusik might try a spot of mind influence right then, "pick as many packs as you like at random and I'll unwrap them, and then you can prove to yourself that they're not booby-trapped, either."

He heard Ordo's voice in his ear. "Kal'buil; you're scaring us . . ."

"Okay." The woman pointed to another bag on the speeder bike. "That one. Empty it in front of me."

Skirata obeyed. He unwrapped the bundle and waited for her to choose a pack at random. He tore it open and let her inspect it. She repeated the process three times.

Skirata stood up, hands on hips, and sighed theatrically. "I've got all night, sweetheart. Have you?"

The woman looked into his face as if she liked the idea of killing him anyway. "Bag it up and get out of here."

He glanced at his chrono: 2220. Obrim would be getting jumpy now, with squads of CSF

officers waiting throughout Galactic City to raid the long list of suspect addresses he'd given them.

"You heard the lady." He shoved Jusik in the back. "Get on with it."

The last few seconds before a hasty exit were always the most terrifying. A hairbreadth lay between victory and de-feat, life and death. Jusik secured the last of the bags and dumped the rest from the speeder in a pile between the trucks.

"Now get lost," she said.

"I take it I can't count you as a repeat customer, then?"

She raised the blaster eloquently. Skirata replaced his helmet and swung onto the speeder bike behind Jusik. They lifted into the air and climbed above the warehouse.

"Fierfek," said Darman's voice in his ear. "I hate it when you improvise, Sarge."

"Like you don't."

"Standing by."

Ordo cut in. "The woman's loading all the explosives except a single bag into one truck. The one with the green livery nearest the loading bay. I repeat, negative the green truck. Do not target the green truck or it's good-bye to half of Coruscant."

"Females never listen to a thing I say, thankfully," Skirata said. He knew she'd react like that. "So that means there's only one vessel we can't blow up."

"Priority is to isolate the green truck and ground it before engaging other targets."

"Copy that, sir," a chorus said.

Jusik set the speeder down three hundred meters behind the warehouse in a cluster of shuttered wholesalers' units. Skirata sat breathing deeply for a moment to steady himself before opening his comlink again with a double click of his back teeth.

"Obrim, this is Skirata."

"Got you, Kal."

"You can roll now, my friend. Talk to you later."

"Copy that." Obrim's channel snapped into silence. "Omega, Delta, all units, this is Kal. We're clear. All yours, Captain."

"Copy that, Sargeant." Ordo began counting down. "Five; four, three, two . . . go go go! Oya!"

A bitter little war with far-reaching consequences was un-leashed in downtown Galactic City.

We will watch you, I promise. You will not see us or hear us or even know we stand beside you. How does that feel, Jedi? How does it feel to be at the mercy of a species with powers even you don't have? Now you know how others regard you. Keep your promises, General, or you will see how hard a small, invisible army can strike.

—Jinart the Gurlanin, to General Arligan Zey, on the pledge to relocate all human colonists from Qiilura within eighteen months

CoruFresh depot, 2225—H Hour

At 2225 hours Triple Zero time, Fi and Mereel broke from behind the low wall at the southern edge of the landing strip and positioned themselves between the parked repulsor trucks at the far side facing the warehouse.

Fi focused the infrared scope of his DC-17 on the green truck and saw a bright patch of heat on the fuselage. He tilted up and saw the dim patchwork indicating the varying temperatures of a human's upper body, a pilot waiting to depart.

"I've got a target in the pilot's seat of the green truck, and his drive's showing up warm on the infrared scope. Is the explosive loaded? Can anyone confirm?"

"I can see the rear of the truck. They've closed the hatch with two targets inside as well as the pilot." Ordo paused. "The green truck is now confirmed as laden. We have to keep that vessel grounded, vode. We can't detonate it, not here."

"Dar, you got a clear shot at the pilot?"

There was the sound of fast breathing and a grunt as some -one dropped next to him. Fi looked left and saw Darman kneeling on one leg with his Verpine rifle raised, elbow braced on his knee. A Verp slug was guaranteed to punch a hole in the truck's viewscreen and kill the pilot without triggering the five-hundred-grade. "Got him lined up. Standing by."

Fi swung his Deece to locate Ordo on the roof. He couldn't see Sev, but Ordo's helmet range finder was just visible as he turned his head.

"Delta," Ordo said, "stand by to take the rear of the green truck when we kill the illumigrids. Omega, target all walking targets on the landing strip."

Kal's voice cut in. "Ord 'ika—we're at the rear of the ware-house blocking the back doors. Force is estimating twenty-four live targets in all, I'm told."

Fi refocused his scope on the interior of the warehouse. He could see at least nine men and women scurrying around inside, and two more visible via infrared, ripping open crates and bundling small boxes and blasters into bags. "I've got a minimum of eleven contacts around and inside the ware-house and it looks like they've got a small arsenal in there. Good news is that it's just one big empty space with parti-tioned offices down one wall."

"Once the lights go out, they'll batten down . . ."

Sev cut in. "I've got two loading what looks like DC-15 rifle cases into the small red airspeeder on the northern perimeter fence."

"Six of the trucks look warm and ticking over in my in-frared," Mereel said. "Can't see any activity in the rest of the speeders. There ought to be four ready to fly."

"Hit them all, then, just to be certain," Ordo said. "Hit everything except the green truck."

"I'm on night vision now," Darman said. "Ready when you are, Captain Ordo."

Corr sprinted into position to Fi's right, sliding behind a truck, with the rotary blaster braced against his belt and his left hand tight on the top grip. From his stance he looked like a man who felt pretty good about his chances. He wasn't even meant to be a commando; he'd just risen to the challenge.

Fi hoped Skirata would find a way of permanently absorb -ing him into Arca Company. He

switched to his night scope and aligned the target icon on a man and a woman carrying a flat crate between them toward one of the trucks.

Fi's finger rested on the trigger.

"Lights!" Ordo hissed.

He and Sev fired their Plex rocket launchers, and both il-lumigrids were swallowed simultaneously by two balls of yellow flame.

The roar killed any chances of him hearing the shattering transparisteel viewscreen of the green truck. But he heard Darman an instant later.

"Truck pilot, clear!"

"We've lost one!" Jusik said.

"Say again?"

"One target's made a run for it, over in the northeast corner. I felt him go."

There was a split second of frozen time before blue blasterfire sprayed from Fi's position, cutting down the two people moving a crate. Two of the trucks exploded in balls of fire, accounting for six more targets. The landing strip was now a dark void lit by the dying flames of two smashed trucks and sporadic bolts of Deece fire. From the far end of the depot the distinctive blue staccato attack of the rotary blaster hosed every vehicle on that side of the strip. Corr was definitely getting stuck in, as Kal'buir put it. He sprinted to Ordo's left, firing as he ran, taking out the last gray-and-silver airspeeder in a ball of white light.

"Jusik?" Ordo debated whether to worry about the one es-capee. "Jusik, get Vau and Etain onto the one who's bolted."

Beneath Ordo, Boss, Fixer, and Scorch raced to the rear of the green truck, Atin coming in from the other side. Boss fired a stream of bolts from his Deece at a shallow angle, slicing off half the truck's repulsor drive housing. It dropped flat on the ground with a massive crash of crumpling alloy. It definitely wasn't going anywhere now.

Scorch concentrated his fire into the warehouse. Ordo swung over the edge of the roof to rappel down into the melee, firing one of his twin blasters as he dropped. The shots sparked and smoked off closing doors. There were probably nine or ten terrorists now shut inside with a good supply of weapons. And right now they weren't Ordo's worst problem.

Sev thudded to the ground beside him and rewound his rappelling line. "Two Verp kills. That's all."

"Two still alive inside the truck," Boss said. "If you had a hundred kilos of thermal explosive, a lot of dets, and no es-cape, what would you do?"

"Take as many of the enemy out with me as I could," Ordo said. "Storm that dik'utla truck now before they put us into orbit."

Two minutes into the engagement felt like seconds. Fi sprinted down to the green truck on Mereel's heels with Corr, Darman, and Niner close behind.

"I make it ten bodies on the landing strip," Niner said.

"One dead pilot and two live targets in this truck." Ordo motioned Niner and Scorch to the front of the truck. "You stand by to distract them when Fixer and Boss go in the rear hatch."

Ordo stood back with both blasters drawn as Fixer and Boss stacked either side of the hatch. He fired at the frame mountings and it buckled and burst open. There was a loud pee-eww pee-eww of ricocheting fragments from the front of the vessel and Fixer and Boss burst in with their gauntlet vibroblades drawn.

White lights flared and hissed: hand blasters. Ordo had a split second of thinking This is it, it's going to blow, we're dead, it's over—and then silence fell again. Battles seemed to him a mass of deafening noise interspersed with brief, dead silence.

"Fierfek, they didn't even get the dets lined up," Scorch said. "Amateurs." He scrambled out of the shattered truck, his armor blackened by blasterfire. Boss jumped out behind him and shook blood off his vibroblade before sheathing it again.

Ordo took a breath. "Kal 'buir?"

"We're still at the rear doors. It's gone a little quiet in there. Bard'ika says eleven inside."

"Confirmed eleven on the infrared scope, too," said Niner, who always needed to be certain.

"They've locked themselves in. We're just clearing the ex-plosives out of the truck." Ordo motioned to Corr, Niner, and Boss to go. "Mereel and I are going in the front doors. Dar and Fi, open up a hole in the south-side wall."

"Want us to go in from the back, son?" Skirata said. "I'm pumping adrenaline and I'd like to get in on some action. For old times' sake."

"Remember you don't have Katarn armor," Ordo said, instantly more worried for Kal'buir than anyone alive.

Skirata snorted. "Remember you're not wearing Mandalorian iron."

Ordo gestured to Mereel. His brother brushed a dusting of debris off his blue lieutenant's pauldron and reached over his shoulders with both hands to draw the massive Cip-Quad blaster strapped across his back.

"In three ... ," Ordo said.

"What happened to in five?"

"I just ran out of patience."

Skirata held up his Verpine in his left hand, knife in his right, listening as Jusik drew his lightsaber, a Jedi Knight in a Mando helmet.

Bard'ika, I'll take that image to my grave.

He checked the infrared targeting beam, more out of nervous habit than anything, and hoped the hut 'uune didn't have night vision.

The deafening double trip-hammer of Mereel's quad blaster shattered the brief calm and the rear doors were blown open. There was an explosion and a pounding rain of debris from the side of the warehouse. For a moment Skirata thought the doors had been blown out by the blast but Jusik punched the air as if it was a rather clever touch.

Fierfek. So that's the Force, is it?

There was no light spilling out of the doorway. Then someone inside the warehouse ran for the

doors and a grainy figure shot through his night vision display.

Skirata reacted instantly, without thinking, charging at him and smashing into his face with an armored elbow, then bringing his knife up hard under his ribs before he could even fall backward. It was only when he aimed the Verp in his next breath and concentrated on the face in his HUD for a second, that he realized it was the woman who had called him a Mandalorian thug. He fired the gun before he had even thought of a suitable retort. War was like that. You rarely thought of something satisfying to say until days later, if you had anything to say at all.

"Ten on the infrared," Niner said.

Infrared told you who was still warm. Infrared couldn't tell you who was alive. Skirata preferred to track movement alone.

"Grenade! Cover!" Atin yelled.

The shock wave lifted Skirata and left his ears ringing. He was sure he was outside the doors but he was now inside, and Jusik hauled him cleanly to his feet with one arm. He couldn't hear the comlink clearly now.

The rapid hammering of a rotary blaster started up and then stopped abruptly. For a man trained in the delicate art of bomb disposal, Corr had seized on the crude technique of spraying six barrels with some enthusiasm.

"Grenade—"

Another explosion shook the warehouse. "Man down!" Someone was cursing—Sev? Scorch?—and Ordo yelled, "Pull back! Clear the building!"

Skirata sprinted after Jusik, following the green glow of his lightsaber. As they cleared the doors, a massive wh000mp punched Skirata simultaneously under the soles of his feet and in his back. He almost lost his balance.

Silence descended. Skirata strained to listen.

"Lots of scattered patches of infrared." That sounded like Niner. "And no idea what's alive and what's just . . . warm."

"Scorch, you okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah. Really. Just shook me up."

"That's it," Jusik said. "I'm coming back in, Ordo." He spun around and ran back into the warehouse. Skirata followed him. "I can find the live ones. Leave it to me."

The warehouse was now almost in darkness and silent except for the ticking, creaking, and crumbling sounds of settling debris and cooling alloy. The air stank of ozone from discharged blasters and from the animal scent of shattered bodies. Nothing moved.

This was taking hours, Skirata was sure. No, this was minutes. His brain had slipped into the unreal time frame of combat.

Jusik's green lightsaber left an eerie trail. He didn't seem afraid of drawing fire: he'd just bat it away like an annoying insect, Skirata was sure. "I can feel three lives."

Well, they'll know the Jedi are on the case now.

Skirata imagined lying on that floor in the dark silent chaos, probably deafened, certainly injured, catching glimpses of movement as soldiers stalked the room. The commandos had killed their visor lights, and Fi, Atin, and Darman were nearly invisible in their black armor even to him.

It must have been terrifying. He'd hidden from soldiers, six years old and scared enough to wet

his pants.

Now you know what it's like, hut'uune.

Someone made a sound, a little half word, and it sounded like please. Skirata swung his Verpine in the direction of the noise. He saw a man kneeling with hands raised: fierfek, he didn't want to take prisoners. That was the last thing they needed. He heard Jusik swallow hard.

"Get over by the wall," Jusik hissed. He was gesturing at the person who seemed to be surrendering. Could the hut'uun even see the Jedi? "Get over by the wall!"

Then Darman's voice cut in. "Sarge! Down! Flame—"

Skirata swung around and dropped to his knees just as Jusik ducked a sheet of white-hot, roaring liquid flame that lit up the shattered warehouse and overwhelmed his night vision for a split second. It pumped out in shallow arcs and Darman took it full on. Commandos and troopers leaped back instinctively and Skirata felt the heat even through a layer of ancient Mandalorian iron. Darman was illuminated like a jet black statue, rifle still raised, enveloped in blazing liquid. He didn't even scream.

"Dar!" Skirata found his body responding without inter-vention from his brain as he pumped Verpine rounds in the direction of the flamethrower. Someone fell. The stream of fire stopped. The thunk of a power cell being slapped onto a blaster diverted him from the terrible spectacle of Darman burning like a torch as someone—Fi? Niner?—rushed to roll their brother on the ground in a bid to smother the flames. Skirata caught the faint light of a charge indicator in his pe-ripheral vision and swung the Verpine in its direction, but Jusik waded in instantly, swinging his lightsaber in a blur of light. Skirata could now see that the kneeling man—the ap-parently surrendering man—had drawn a blaster. It was still clutched in his limp hand. For some reason that feint angered Skirata more than anything.

"All clear!" Jusik yelled. "Dar!" He looked up at the ceil-ing. "Hang on, Dar."

Katarn armor could withstand high temperatures but the burning chemical had coated Darman's plates. It was resist-ing attempts by Niner and Sev to smother it with bundles of sacking they had grabbed. Skirata went to throw his jacket over him. Suddenly a fine sticky rain filled the air.

The fire control system had kicked in.

"I'm glad that worked," Jusik muttered.

A white cloud of hissing gas enveloped Darman and the warehouse plunged back into darkness. The blaze was out; fire retardant rained from the ceiling.

Skirata squatted over Darman, edging Niner and Ordo out of the way. His armor was still radiating heat.

"Son! Are you okay?"

"Sarge—"

"Are you hurt?"

"Not really . . . made me blink a bit, though. That liquid's nasty stuff" Darman's plates were hissing audibly as they cooled. His voice was shaky. "Thanks."

"Is this your handiwork, Bard 'ika?" Skirata helped Darman to his feet. His plates were hot to the touch. "Did you activate the fire system?"

"I'm not just good for blowing stuff up." Jusik picked his way through the rubble and shattered durasteel, boots crunching, then stopped dead. "That's it," he said quietly. "Definitely nobody left alive."

The kid seemed remarkably calm about it, or at least his voice was under control. Darman dusted himself down and Ordo handed him his Deece. Eight helmet spotlamps flared into life and swept the interior, highlighting a scene of smok-ing wallboard and things Skirata had seen far too much of on too many battlefields. One beam jerked up toward the roof.

"We blew the shabla roof half off," Boss said.

"Last time I rely on infrared . . ."

"Kandosii, Bard 'ika! He's better than a scope any day."

"Is this it?" That was Fixer's voice. "All that, and still we don't get to see them? At least you can see droids. They come at you. These scum—"

"You want to look, ner vod?"

"They're just so . . . ordinary."

"And now they're so dead," said Sev.

Ordo cut in. "We're done here, vode. Time to go." He put his gloved hand on Skirata's shoulder. "Nine minutes, Kal'buir. Could have been faster, but it's done. Let's go."

Skirata caught Darman's arm and followed Jusik. I can still fight: I'm still pretty good. But he wasn't as good as young men at the peak of their abilities, and he needed to do something about that if he wasn't going to be a liability to them one day.

He'd worry about that later, like his ankle. Now they had to wait on Vati and Etain, who were still out hunting.

Quadrant F-76, somewhere north of the CoruFresh depot, 2305 hours, 385 days after Geonosis

The strill was a little bright light of pure joy as it raced along the walkway ahead of Etain and Vau. There were still a few pedestrians around, leaving factories and workshops for the night, and Vau had taken off his helmet. A dull black ar-mored chest plate didn't attract attention, it seemed, but this wasn't a neighborhood where a distinctive Mandalorian visor would pass unnoticed.

The strill had the man's scent. He had a head start on them but Mird was not to be shaken off, and Etain could follow the trail of panic and fear almost as well as the animal could. She could locate the area: Mird could track by scent once she had narrowed down a search zone for it.

This is a strange thing for a pregnant woman to be doing. Can my son sense whats happening around him yet? I hope not.

Vau kept close behind her, jogging at a steady pace.

"I'm very impressed," he panted. "You and the strill work very well together. I do wish Kal could see this."

Etain imagined this was how Vau hunted with Mird, silent and persistent, covering the ground hour after hour until they had cornered their prey or run it down. The man who had managed to flee the attack on the landing strip had led them into a maze of run-down apartment towers on the edge of the industrial zone.

After a while Etain caught up with Mird and found it crouched impatiently by a set of doors leading into a shabby residential building. A couple of unpleasant-looking youths lounging on the corner of the walkway began ambling toward her, leering, but then Mird opened its huge maw and let out a warning rumble. Vau appeared around the corner, the Ver-pine rifle raised in one hand.

The youths fled.

"And they say young people today have no intelligence," Vau said. He took a hand disrupter out of his belt and thrust it into the door panel. The doors parted. "In you go."

Mird raced ahead and skidded to a halt at the turbolift, turning its head to gaze pleadingly at its master. Vau put a finger to his lips and pointed up. They got in the turbolift and the strill pressed its nose to the small gap between the doors as the car ascended. As they passed the 134th and 135th floors, it grew frantic and its tail thrashed the floor, but it didn't make a sound. Vau stopped the lift at the 136th floor and they got out. There was an emergency staircase between floors. Etain broke the seal with a Force-assisted push and started down the stairs.

"Oya, Mird! Hunt!"

Mird shot past her. She could feel the disturbance in the Force, and their respective instincts took them both to the 134th floor. Mird snuffled along the passage and came to a halt outside an apartment door, settled on its haunches, and stared intently at the door panel.

Vau put a restraining hand on her arm. "I know a Man-dalorian regards a female warrior as his equal, my dear, but I feel I should offer to do this job myself."

"I'll do it," she said. She had to.

Vau disrupted the lock. The strill ran into the hallway, al-most flat to the floor, and Etain followed it, drawing both lightsabers.

It occurred to her that she might have stumbled upon a family here, and then been presented with a dilemma: a Jedi with two drawn lightsabers, a room full of witnesses, and a cowering terrorist. What would I do? What will I do? But she sensed that would not be the case. It was just another fear of how far she might be prepared to go.

She burst open each door with the Force, moving at a slight crouch, looking inside.

A stream of blasterfire spat out of one door and caught the strill on its quarters. Etain heard Vau gasp. Mird shrieked and spun around, one leg dragging, and then made to go in after its assailant, but she held out one arm and it stopped dead.

"Leave, Mird!" she whispered.

Etain took a breath then stepped into the room to meet another hail of blasterfire. She crossed the blue blades of energy and batted the bolts aside with a parting motion of her arms. I didn't know I could do that. It was pure instinct, drawn from deep within her and many years in the past.

She lunged forward for the kill. As always, she saw little and felt nothing tangible, no shock up her arms, no resistance as she swept the blades, but she felt the Force change. A brief light blazed and died.

She thumbed off Master Fuller's lightsaber and slid it into her tunic one-handed while keeping her own drawn just in case. She sensed nobody else. Mird limped into the room after her and she knew it was looking up into her face even though there was only the scattered light through the window from a city that was never completely dark.

"Oya," she whispered, not knowing quite what the command might mean in this case.

But Mird rumbled quietly and sprang onto the body of the man she had killed. She shut down her lightsaber and walked out of the apartment, and Mird limped out a few moments later, crunching happily. She didn't look too closely at what it had in its jaws. It swallowed noisily.

"Poor Mird." Vau sighed. "Here, baby, come here." He scooped the strill up in both arms and carried it to the turbo-lift. One of its legs had been seared raw by the blaster.

Etain opened her comlink. "Kal, everyone is accounted for."

"Good work," Kars voice said. He sounded tired. "See you at the RV point."

Mird let Etain place her hands on its leg to heal it as the lift made its way down to the ground floor. Vau carried it all the way back to the speeder. It was a big, heavy animal, but he refused to let it walk. Etain took it on her lap and eased its pain as Vau started the speeder and they headed for the RV

point.

There seemed to be nothing Vau wouldn't do for Mird. He loved that animal.

RV point, two kilometers from CoruFresh depot, 2320 hours, 385 days after Geonosis

The strike team rendezvoused at a droid-operated construction site to the north of the depot. The droids needed no light to work by and the presence of a few strangely dressed humanoids in the near darkness would draw no attention.

Skirata counted the six speeders back in, gut churning until the last of the speeders arrived with Mereel and Corr astride. Corr was clutching the rotary blaster like a long-lost friend.

Good lad. I'll shift Coruscant and all its rotten moons to hang on to him, Zey. We can always train more troopers as commandos. Just watch me.

"All thermal plastoid accounted for?"

"Yes, Sarge." Boss leaned against the bodywork of a speeder. "Want to check?"

"I trust you to count. Ordo can slip that back into stores to -morrow after it's been neutralized."

"What's the final score?" Fi said.

Niner eased off his helmet. Even with the environment control inside his sealed suit, he looked as if he'd sweated out an ocean. He rubbed his face slowly with the palm of his glove. "Er . . . I think we took out twenty-six bad guys."

"Twenty-four at the site," Mereel said. "We swept the site and did a tally. It was a bit hard to tell in some places but we logged the blasters that had been fired by their EM traces. So I say twenty-four."

"Plus Perrive and our friend in the apartment block," Etain said.

"Definitely twenty-six." Jusik was subdued. "I felt them."

"Okay, Shiny Boys twenty-six, Hut'uune nil," Corr said. He was picking up Mando' a fast. "I call that a home win."

Jusik stood staring into the inside of his helmet as he held it in his hands. "No witnesses left standing. Just a nasty ar-gument between crime gangs."

"You'll never get any public praise for this," Skirata said. "But let me tell you now that every last one of you made me a proud man." He looked down at the strill, limping on one of its six legs as it circled Vau, grumbling deep in its throat. "Even you, Mird, you stinking heap of drool."

The strill looked up at Etain and made a musical warbling sound. She'd wrapped one arm around Darman's waist, head resting on his chest plate with her eyes closed, but she opened them and watched Mird.

"Mird likes you," Vau said. "You took care of it and let it have its kill."

Fi gave Darman a weary slap on the back. "She has a way with dumb animals, ner vod."

An exhausted silence settled on the team. The droids la-bored around them, carrying girders, stacking duraplast sheets, oblivious. If anyone thought wild celebrations fol-lowed operations like this, they were wrong. The instant ela-tion of seeing a vessel go up in flames or an enemy drop from a well-placed shot was very short-lived. The hyperalertness of adrenaline lingered for a while, and then was swallowed up quickly by fatigue and a sense of . . . of void, of odd pur-poselessness, of looking for

the next task.

The adrenaline had to drain away. They'd be back to nor-mal after some rest. Skirata was determined they'd get some.

"Let's get back to base," he said. "We can clear out of Qibbu's in the morning."

He got no response.

"Anyone hungry? Maybe an ale or two?"

"Freshers," Niner said. "Shower."

"Who's on watch roster tonight?"

"Me," Vau said before Skirata could open his mouth. "Go on, Bardan. You head back with Etain and Mird. I'll take Kal."

Skirata hauled himself onto Vau's speeder. The painkiller was wearing off and the ache had started gnawing his ankle again. He opened his comlink and called Jailer Ogrim.

"Kal here. How's it going?"

Ogrim sounded as if he was in the middle of a riot. There was a lot of shouting in the background and then a loud muf-fled whump. Commandos weren't the only ones who laid charges for a spot of rapid entry, then.

"Busy," said the CSF captain. "We've pulled in around sixty suspects so far. Pretty low on the food chain, but they lead to all kinds of other people CSF has an interest in, and they're off the streets for

a while." He paused as another loud whuntp interrupted. "I don't know where we're going to put them all, though. The lockup is filling fast."

"Never had that problem. Our targets don't get out on pa-role, either."

"I'll bet. You all okay?"

"No serious injury. Everyone's walking. Quite a mess for you to clear up, though."

"My pleasure. CSF Staff and Social Club, all of you. End of the week. I will not take no for an answer and neither will CSF. Be there."

"Count on it."

Skirata closed the link and let his head drop so that his chin rested on his chest plate.

Vau squeezed into the seat in front of him and powered up the speeder. He reached behind him and passed Skirata a datapad. "Perrive's pad. Enjoy its contents at your leisure, net. vod. So, a drink or a fight? What's it to be?"

"Walon, you're very lucky I'm too tired." Skirata pocketed the datapad, another little treasure trove for his Null boys to play with. "I'd just slap you."

"I need to make my peace with Atin."

"He'll still kill you after he's had a good night's sleep."

"The brief unity of triumph, and then back to the fray. Crushing, isn't it? The victories seem so insignificant com-pared with the size of the war."

"Doesn't mean we shouldn't try," Skirata said. "It's only what individuals do that adds up to history."

"We've written ours, then."

It was one of the few times that Skirata found himself staring at Vau's back without feeling the urge to reach for his knife. "Tell you what," he said. He took out the disabled remote det from his pocket. "Why don't we swing by the diplomatic quarter and pick up that nice green speeder? Perrive's not going to need it now. Can you still hotwire a speeder?"

"You bet," said Vau.

23

When you can no longer know what your nation or your government stands for, or even where it is, you need a set of beliefs you can carry with you and cling to. You need a core in your heart that will never change. I think that's why I feel more at home in the barracks than I do in the Jedi Temple.

—General Bardan Jusik, Jedi Knight

Operational house, Qibbu's Hutt, 0015 hours, 386 days after Geonosis

The suite of rooms on the top floor of Qibbu's hotel looked like inventory day in the GAR equipment stores.

Fi stepped over stacked piles of armor and packs of five hundred-grade plastoid explosive and flopped into the first chair he found.

"You going to sleep in that bucket?" Mereel said.

Fi took the hint and popped his helmet seal, inhaling warm air scented with sweat, stale carpet, caf, and strill. There were times when the buy'ce was a comfort and a quiet haven, insulating him from the world, and he felt in need of that now for reasons he didn't understand or want to think about.

Mereel sat at the scratched, battered table unwrapping packs of thermal plastoid and working a colorless liquid into them. Fi wanted to get up and look but he was simply too tired. He could see Mereel pressing a hollow into the cakes of brown plastoid with his thumb, pouring in a few drops of the liquid from a small bottle, and then kneading it in with a steady folding motion.

"Ah," Fi said, remembering.

"Got to add the stabilizer compound before we put it back into stores or else this is going to kill a lot more vode than the bad guys ever could."

"Want a hand?"

"No. Get some sleep."

"Where's Sergeant Kal?" Fi had quite enjoyed calling him Kal'buir. But he donned old habits along with his armor. "I hope he hasn't knifed Vau."

"They're liberating a speeder on behalf of the Skirata Re-tirement Fund."

"Come on, he'll never retire."

"He still wants the speeder. Merc habits die hard."

Fi found it hard to think of his sergeant as having any in-terest in a life beyond the army. He spent a while wondering what the man might really want, and apart from a wife to look after him, Fi had problems imagining what that might be. It was the same problem he had with his own dreams. They were intrusive and insistent—but they were limited. He only knew there was something missing, and when he looked at Darman and Etain, he knew what it was; he also wondered how it could work out even if he got it. He wasn't stupid. He could count and calculate odds of survival.

"Good night, ner vod." He left Mereel to his task and wandered around, unclipping his armor plates as he went and stacking them in a pile by the bedroom door. Black bodysuits and briefs hung drying on every peg and rail. However ex-hausted they were, the squads still washed their kit conscientiously.

Fi glanced into some of the rooms to check who might be awake and willing to chat, but the Delta boys were all out cold, not even snoring. Niner and Corr slumped in chairs in one of the alcoves with a plate of half-eaten cookies sitting on the small table between them. Darman was stretched out on his bed in the room he shared with Fi, apparently none the worse for his ordeal, and Ordo was curled up in the next room with a blanket pulled over his head. Odd: he always seemed to do that, as if he wanted total darkness.

There was no sign of Jusik or Etain. Farther along the pas-sage, Fi struck lucky. Atin was sitting in the chair in his room, cleaning his armor.

"I'm on watch until Skirata gets back," he said, without waiting for Fi's question.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"I'm sure Laseema will wait for you."

"It's not about Laseema."

"So it's something."

"You never give up, do you?" Atin had always been the private type, even though he'd settled into a very different squad culture from the one he'd been raised in. There was always something new to learn about a brother who'd been trained in another batch. "Okay, now that the job's done, I've got matters to address with Sergeant Vau."

"He's not a sergeant any longer."

"I'm still going to kill him."

It was just talk. Men said things like that. Fi closed the doors and sat down on the bed opposite.

"I'm supposed to be on watch," Atin said.

"I made Sev tell me how you got the wound to your face."

"So now you know. Vau gave me a good hiding for being whiny about surviving Geonosis when my brothers didn't."

"It's even more than that. You know it. You wouldn't be the first commando to get in a fistfight with his sergeant."

"You know, I like you better when you're being mindless and funny."

"We need to know."

"Usen'ye." It was the crudest way to tell someone to go away in Mando 'a. "It's none of your business."

"It is if you pick a fight with Vau, and he kills you and we have to get a replacement."

Atin laid the back plate he was cleaning on the floor and rubbed his eyes. "You want to know? Really? Look." He hooked his fingers inside the neck of his bodysuit and jerked down the front panel. The gription seams yielded. It was nothing Fi hadn't seen before in the refreshers: Atin's shoulders and arms were laced with long white streaks of scar tissue. It was common in the GAR. Men got injured in training and in the field, armor or not. But Atin seemed to have acquired more spectacular ones than average.

Scars happened, especially if you didn't get bacta on a wound fast enough.

"Vau gave you those, too, didn't he?"

"Vau nearly killed me, so when I finally got out of the bacta tank, I said I'd kill him one day. Fair enough, yes?"

No wonder Corr said he found commandos a little "re-laxed." They must have seemed dangerously chaotic to a clone trooper raised and trained by sober Kaminoan flash-instruction and simulation.

"Kill is a bit strong," Fi said. "Break his nose, maybe."

"Skirata did that already. Look, if Vau felt you lacked the killer edge, he'd crank it up a little. He'd make you fight your brother. We had a choice. We could fight each other until one was too badly hurt to stand up, or we could fight him."

Fi thought of Kal Skirata, as hard and ruthless as anyone he had ever known, making sure his squads were fed and well rested, finding illicit treats for them, teaching them, encouraging them, telling them how proud they made him. It seemed to work pretty well.

"And?" said Fi.

"I opted to take on Vau. He had a real Mando iron saber, and I was unarmed. I just went at him. I never wanted to kill so badly in my life and he just cut me up. And Skirata beat the osik out of Vau when he found out. They never did get on, those two."

"So . . . the thing with Sev. You told Skirata."

"No, Skirata just found out. I didn't even know he knew me until we met at the spaceport siege." Atin picked up his plate and started cleaning it again. "So now you know."

Fi thought that a quick swing at Vau might purge Atin's ha-tred. Then it occurred to him that his brother was absolutely literal.

"At'ika, ever thought what's going to happen to you if you do kill him?"

"I've killed people outside my legitimate rules of engagement tonight. One more won't make a difference. And I'll die soon enough anyway."

"Yeah, but there's Laseema."

Atin paused, cloth gripped in one hand. "Yes, there is."

"And how are you going to kill Vau anyway?"

"With a blade." He picked up his right gauntlet and ejected the blade with a loud shunk. "The Mando way."

This isn't bravado. Fi struggled for a moment, wondering what the right thing to do might be. He's really going to do it.

Fi decided he'd wait near the doors to the landing platform, ready for the moment that Vau walked through them.

Etain found sleep impossible. She sat out on the landing platform With Jusik, meditating. For all the violence of the day she had put behind her, she found a serene core within her that had never been there before, the inner calm she had sought so many years through study and struggle.

All I had to do was have a life beside my own to care for. That is the true detachment we ought to seek, putting another person above ourselves—not denying our emotions. The attachment to self is the path to the dark side.

The intricate silver threads of her child in the Force were more complex now, more interconnected. She sensed purpose and clarity and passion. He would be an extraordinary person. She could hardly wait to get to know him.

And when it was the right time, she would explain what she sensed to Darman. She imagined the joy on his face.

She brought herself out of the trance and Jusik was standing a few meters away, looking out over the ravine of towers in the direction of the Senate.

"Bardan, I have a question I can only ask of you."

He turned and smiled. "I'll answer if I can."

"How do I tell Darman in Mandalorian that I love him?" She waited for Jusik to express some shock or disap-proval. He blinked a few times, focusing on a nonexistent spot a few meters ahead. "I don't think he's completely fluent in Mando 'a. The Nulls are, though."

"I don't want to declare my love for Ordo, thanks."

"Okay. Try . . . ni kar'tayli gar darasuum."

She repeated it under her breath a few times. "Got it."

"It's the same word as 'to know,' 'to hold in the heart,' kar'taylir. But you add darasuum, forever, and it becomes something rather different."

"That tells me a great deal about the Mandalorian view of relationships."

"They believe that complete knowledge of someone is the key to loving them. They don't like surprises and hidden facets. Warriors tend not to."

"Pragmatic people."

"A pity we Jedi weren't better friends with them, then. We could enjoy being pragmatic together."

"You haven't lectured me on attachment. Thank you."

Jusik turned to her with a broad smile that could only have come from being at complete peace with himself. He indi-cated his body with a flourish of his hands: dull green Man-dalorian armor in the

form of body plates and greaves. The matching helmet with its sinister T-shaped slit in the visor stood on the floor beside him.

"You think," he said, "that I'll be walking back into the Jedi Temple wearing this? You think this isn't attachment?"

He really did find it funny. He laughed. The two of them were everything the Jedi Order wouldn't approve of. "Zey would throw a fit."

"Kenobi wears trooper armor."

"General Kenobi does not speak Mandalorian." She found Jusik's laughter infectious, and tinged with the exhaustion and frightened relief that was often so evident in Fi. "And his soldiers don't address him as Little Obi-Wan."

Jusik became sober again. "Our code was written when we were peacekeepers. We've never fought a war, not like this, not using others. And that changes everything. So I shall remain attached, because my heart tells me it's right. If remaining a Jedi means that is incompatible, then I know the choice I'll make."

"You've made it," Etain said.

"And so have you." He made a vague gesture in the direction of her belly. "I can sense as much. I know you too well now."

"Don't."

"This is going to be very difficult for both of you, Etain."

"Darman doesn't know yet. You're not to mention it to anyone. Promise me."

"Of course I won't. I owe Darman a great deal. All of the men, in fact."

"You're going to kill yourself trying to live up to them."