

STAR WARS: UNDER A BLACK SUN TRILOGY

by

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To Angela M. Kato, whose hard work and charming personality helped us
to find more time to write

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The tree stood in the middle of a small jungle clearing, its gnarled, woody tentacles wrathing through the air in search of prey.

As Zekk approached, the tentacles twitched, sensing his movement.

The sinuous vines were ewnouflaged, deceptively lush and green. He took another step forward. The ground around the tree's warty trunk was littered with bones-broken grayish-white remnants of previous victims, stripped of flesh, now decaying in the humid air of Yavin 4: Zekk moved even closer, and the hungry tree trembled in anticipation.

He told himself he had nothing to fear. Of course he would have been much more comfortable had he been carrying a lightsaber, a Jedi weapon that could counter any attack from this plant-thing-but that would have been too easy. Much too easy.

Zekk wasn't interested in a simple end to this exercise.

Instead, he conied only a plain staff. He had found the length of dried wood in the jungle and stripped off its bark. It was all the weapon he would allow himself to use in this important test.

He stepped forward, faced the wrathing tentacle tree, and prepared to do battle. "I will let the Force guide me," he murmured to himself, "allow it to direct my Jedi reflexes to respond to any tricks the enemy may devise."

The carnivorous tentacle tree reached toward him, its deadly branches whispering together in a leafy sigh.

"Most of all," he went on in a hushed voice, "I must not let myself be tempted by the easy power I can unleash through the dark side."

Zekk had already traveled the dark paths of the Force when he trained at the Shadow Academy. Now he was a new student learning to use the light side-but at the same time, he was an old student ... with many scars on his conscience.

He raised his stick. The tree's tentacles quivered as it prepared for this easy prey.

"The Force is with me," Zekk said, and stepped in among the dangling branches, his staff held high.

Three of the whipping vines thrashed at him, making the stick their primary target. Zekk snapped his wrist downward. A loud crack rang out as the staff beat back two of the tentacles.

Another serpentine appendage crackled and wrapped itself around Zekk's right wrist. Without hesitation, he tossed the staff to his left hand, swung it up, and battered the offending tentacle as he yanked his hand free.

His skin burned and tingled as the clutching vine tore away from his wrist. He realized then that this plant-thing exuded some kind of irritating acid through its tiny spines. His hand began to swell, but Zekk turned his concentration back to the vines that still lashed at him. He could deal with the pain later.

He struck left and right, knocking the thrashing vines away. His hand turned red and throbbed; he could barely bend his fingers. A forest of tentacles now whipped and clawed at him. He could have severed them all with a single sweep of a lightsaber blade, but Zekk drove them back one-handed, using only his staff.

Simple victories were not worth fighting for. Without a challenge, victory was meaningless. He had come here to learn a new lesson-and unlearn an old one.

To begin Zekk's training in the light side of the Force, Master Skywalker had told him to start with simple exercises to test his most basic skills. Somehow, Zekk didn't think that venturing out into the

jungles to battle this carnivorous tree was quite what the Jedi teacher had in mind. Perspiration trickled down Zekk's face and neck. His long dark hair clung in damp strands around his emerald-green eyes.

Zekk smiled.

He gritted his teeth and drove inward. He had fought many times before. The Dark Jedi Brakiss had trained Zekk to become the Second Imperium's darkest knight. Together, they-along with many other followers of the Emperor's ways-had battled Luke Skywalker's students at the Jedi academy.

But Zekk and the other Dark Jedi had been soundly defeated, and Brakiss killed. Broken, Zekk had turned away from the dark side. Even though he had formerly been a close friend of the Solo twins, Jacen and Jaina, Zekk could not easily grant himself forgiveness. He couldn't just join his friends and begin training as a Jedi of the light side as if nothing had happened.

Instead, Zekk had gone off on his own to search for meaning in his life. He trained to become a bounty hunter and used his Jedi prowess to hunt down difficult bounties that no one else could capture. But in those months Zekk had learned something important about himself: although he had the skills, he didn't have the mind-set that would allow him to find any quarry for whatever reason and simply turn the victim over to anyone who happened to pay the price.

When Nola Tarkona, head of a subversive political group called the Diversity Alliance, had set an open bounty on the merchant Boman Thul, Zekk had at first gone on the search, hoping to prove himself to Boba Fett and all the other bounty hunters. But Zekk had realized in time that the information Nola Tarkona wanted from the human merchant concerned a deadly human-killing plague-and that if he succeeded in his task, the entire human race might become extinct.

Such consequences had forced him to change his mind and join forces with the young Jedi Knights after all. After they defeated the Diversity Alliance and the Emperor's plague was destroyed, Zekk had decided to start all over again, to become a true Jedi Knight. This time he would do his training in the right way.

If only this tree would let him.

Shorter, spikier tentacles emerged from the hole of the tree, thrashing, grasping at him, but again Zekk drove them back with his staff. He could have pulled back at any time, but instead he pushed closer. Then, although the irritant chemical in his swollen right hand bothered him, he gripped the stick with both hands again. He would not let the pain slow him down.

Zekk didn't have any clear idea of how he would define "victory."

He did not intend to kill the tree, but as his battle fever picked up, he fought more furiously, pounding the tentacles with his hard staff.

Another whiplike vine snapped sharply and struck him in the forehead just above his eye, drawing a trickle of blood. He reeled backward, blinking his eyes against the stinging tears and red droplets.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, two of the vines wrapped themselves around his stick, twisted hard, and yanked it from Zekk's hand, tearing the flesh on his palms. Then, as if sensing victory, the relentless tentacles also grabbed at his arms and legs. Zekk stood trapped in a blizzard of grasping strands.

A black static of anger overpowered his fear. Zekk used the Force to reach out and locate his stolen staff. He jerked the stick back toward him-so furiously that two vines ripped away from the central mass of the tree and began oozing clear sap.

With the dying tentacles still dangling from his staff, Zekk swung around, using it as a flail against the others. He used the Force again to tie several of the strands into knots and laughed out loud at how easy this battle was becoming.

Then, in a flash of comprehension, Zekk realized that he was not truly succeeding; he had unleashed his anger and tapped the dark side as a

conduit to his Jedi skills.

"No!" he said through gritted teeth. He refused to win against the plant-thing in this way. Zekk threw the retrieved staff aside and stood unarmed as the stinging tentacles drew back, then poised themselves to attack with renewed force.

But Zekk kept his mind clear, his thoughts calm. "I am not your prey," he murmured.

The tree had no intelligence, just a rudimentary mass of vascular plant fiber with reflexes that responded like muscles. Hungry tentacles lashed at him-only to slide harmlessly away, as if his entire body were coated with some invisible super lubricant.

"I wn not your prey," Zekk repeated.

The ineffective vines reached toward him, but they could not touch his skin. Sinuous appendages danced in frustration around his amns, his head, his back.

Zekk turned away from the tree and walked slowly beyond the reach of the grasping tentacles. He knew he had temporarily let down his guard, a failure of sorts. But he had seen the dark side, recognized it, and rejected it! He would put it behind him now. He felt as if he had

emerged from a raging storm with only a few drops of water clinging to him. The storm was past. A sense of warmth and peace came over him.

At the edge of the clearing, standing beside the thick bushes, he saw Master Luke Skywalker watching him with a quiet smile on his face.

"I'm proud of you, Zekk," he said. "It took courage to turn away from your old instincts. Sometimes it's harder to unlearn bad teaching than it is to learn new skills. It will be hard to forget what Brakiss taught you."

"Yes," Zekk said. "I've got to learn it the right way now. I feel like a kid learning to walk again-and I thought I already knew how."

"It's ... intimidating." He said the word in a small voice, as if reluctant to admit it. "All the tests and exercises here remind me of what I learned at the Shadow Academy. I'm afraid to do things the same way. I mean, what if I do them wrong again?"

"There's no single way to become a Jedi," Luke Skywalker said.

"If it makes you more comfortable, we'll find a different path. Try a new assignment. Take something you're already good at-somethirg you enjoy-and use the Force, little by little, to enhance your abilities."

It doesn't have to be fighting with a staff, or levitating rocks, or

sensing danger. The Force is in all things. Find a task that feels right. Enjoy it, but let the Force guide you. You need to learn to accept your Jedi abilities, not fear them."

"I can try anything?" Zekk said. "Anything I enjoy?"

"I'm sure you can think of something, Zekk," Luke said.

The dark-haired young man just smiled.

Jedi trainees dragged a few more dried branches and pieces of dead wood from the surrounding jungle and piled it high in the courtyard.

Master Luke Skywalker readied a bonfire while his students gathered to hear him speak.

Jacen Solo ran a hand through his tousled hair, scratched an itch on his scalp, and settled down on the ledge beside his friend Tenel Ka.

They had found seats on one of the stone blocks of the rebuilt pyramid's lower levels; from there they would have a good view of the fire and Jacen's uncle Luke.

Jacen's twin sister Jaina, who loved to tinker with machines, had spent the afternoon with their Wookiee friend Lowbacca and his miniaturized

translating droid, Em Teedee. They had worked beneath the Hapan passenger cruiser's navigational consoles, upgrading its starmaps and position-finding capabilities. As Princess of Hapes, the warrior girl Tenel Ka actually owned the Rock Dragon, but she preferred to let Jaina and Lowie pilot it.

Now the two tinkerers and the tiny, silver droid hurried up to sit beside Jacen and Tenel Ka as four new students prepared to light the bonfire.

Jaina still had a few smudges of grease on her cheeks and chin.

Lowie's ginger-colored fur was ruffled, but they both looked satisfied.

"So, the ship's up and working again?" Jacen asked. "There's no telling when we might need to grab it and go rescue somebody. We're Jedi Knights now, you know."

Jaina gave an unladylike snort, as if insulted at the suggestion that she might not have left the ship in perfect working order. "Of course it's working. Rock Dragon's ready whenever we are."

"Oh, my," Em Teedee said. "I do hope you aren't planning any emergencies. In future, I suggest that we avoid any adventures that might involve emergencies. Far too dangerous, if you ask me."

"Come on, Em Teedee," Jacen said. "We've upgraded your capabilities.

Don't you want to test your limits?"

"Indeed not," the little droid said from his place at Lowbacca's belt.

The Wookiee chuffed and patted the droid good-naturedly.

Tenel Ka's face remained solemn during this exchange-then again, she usually was serious, Jacen thought, even though he constantly tried to make her laugh. "I am ready for whatever circumstances dictate," she said. "We are now required to look at the fire and listen to Master Skywalker."

"This is a fact," Jacen said with a chuckle, repeating Tenel Ka's own oft-used phrase.

Earlier that afternoon, a ship had come in bearing a pair of Jedi Knights who had been trainees when Luke Skywalker founded his Jedi academy here. The two Jedi visitors, exhausted from a dangerous mission they had just completed, had gone quickly into the temple to refresh themselves. Not long afterward, Luke had announced a celebration for that evening. Jacen wondered eagerly what his uncle

intended to talk about.

Now the fire blazed high. Orange flames crackled through the pile of dead wood; spicy-smelling smoke wafted upward from the burning lichens and mosses that clung to the underbrush. While the last few Jedi trainees made their way to their seats, Jacen played with a small bluishgreen frill lizard he had found making a nest out of a mound of dry leaves in a crevice between the Great Temple's stone blocks.

The lizard appeared content to sit on Jacen's left fist, but seemed much less comfortable with Jacen's opposite hand. Every time he brought his right forefinger close to the lizard's nose, the creature flared out an intimidating scarlet frill around its neck and flapped its scales in self-defense. When Jacen pulled his finger away, the frill went back down. He moved his finger close again; the frill reappeared, and the lizard's eyes opened wide.

Tenel Ka watched with interest. The lizard-skin armor she wore clung to her body and glittered in the firelight. Though the night would be cool, the warrior girl never seemed to require any more warmth than the supple armor provided.

As a hush fell over the crowd gathered by the ancient pyramid, Master Skywalker stepped in front of the bonfire. The flames blazed higher behind him. He stood silhouetted in warm light, just a normal-sized man, despite the fact that he had changed the fate of the entire

galaxy.

"We're all here because we are-or want to be-Jedi Knights," Luke said.

"Except for me, of course," Em Teedee said primly, and Lowie shushed him with a growl.

"Jedi Knights protected the Republic ... but it is important for us to think about whether being protected is always, good." He paused to let that sink in. Tenel Ka frowned, and Jacen tried to think of a circumstance where protection might not be desired.

"We learn from our mistakes," Luke continued. "And sometimes, if we shelter people from all the bad things that can happen, they don't learn to protect themselves ... and even greater tragedies may occur."

During this speech, Zekk quietly joined his friends on the ledge.

One arm was bandaged. Lowie rumbled a question, but Zekk just gave a secretive smile and focused on Master Skywalker.

"I grew up on Tatooine," Luke said. "A desert planet with two suns. I was the foster son of my uncle Owen, a poor moisture farmer who had

little happiness in a life filled only with hard work. Aunt Beru spent days at home watching the farm while my uncle and I checked our moisture vaporators, or went into Anchorhead or Mos Eisley to get supplies we couldn't buy from Jawa traders.

"Uncle Owen knew who I was: the son of Anakin Skywalker, whom most of you remember as Darth Vader. My uncle knew I had the potential to be a great Jedi, but he wanted to protect me. He tried to keep me from my dreams because of the risks I might encounter along the way. He was doing what he thought was best for me.

"My uncle was a sad man, with great guilt on his shoulders. He knew what Darth Vader had done, and because he was afraid for me-he spent his life protecting me on that desert planet. His heart was in the right place ... but if he had succeeded, think of the outcome: I would still be a moisture farmer on Tatooine, the Empire might still be in power, and there would be no Jedi Knights."

Luke looked up. His eyes glittered in the firelight, though most of his body was cast in shadow. Perched on the stone blocks beside Jacen, Tenel Ka nodded. He sat closer to her as his uncle's point became clear to him.

"Challenges and diversity make us strong. Too much protection can prevent us from learning, from reaching our potential. We can learn from others, but we must also learn from our own experiences ... and

our own mistakes," Luke said. He smiled. "Just try not to make too many of them before you learn."

Another figure emerged from the base of the temple, a young man with dark hair and squared shoulders dressed in a black jumpsuit and a cape.

The sleek Jedi outfit looked comfortable, serviceable, and wellworn.

"Master Skywalker is right. And some of us certainly made huge blunders before we managed to come back to the right course," the young man said.

"This is Kyp Durrón," Luke announced with a broad grin, "one of my first students here at the Jedi academy, many years ago. Han Solo rescued him from the spice mines of Kessel, and he came here to learn the ways of the Force."

Kyp nodded at the audience with a grim smile. Firelight splashed across his face. "I came here to learn, but I was impatient. I listened too closely to the spirit of an old Dark Lord of the Sith, Exar Kun, and I'm sorry to say I caused quite a bit of trouble for the new Jedi Knights."

"Like me," Zekk murmured.

"So did I," another voice said as a second man emerged from the temple.

A nimbus of wild white hair floated around his head and fluttered above his thin beard. He wore a vest and breeches with so many pockets that Jacen thought he probably could have carried all the components for his own starship engine inside them.

"That's Streen," Jaina whispered, and Jacen immediately recognized the man. Once a cloud prospector on Bespin, the old hermit had developed an affinity for controlling the weather and the winds.

Luke said, "These two have been Jedi Knights for well over ten years now. They learned from their mistakes and their successes, and they've served the New Republic admirably." Kyp Dutton and Streen looked both powerful and exhausted, as if they had come through some terrible ordeal that had made them stronger-though neither seemed ready to tell the story.

"Looks like they've had some interesting adventures," Jaina observed.

Lowie rumbled thoughtfully. Zekk nodded.

"I, for one, do not wish to hear about them," Em Teedee said. "I've heard quite enough horrifying stories about Jedi adventures in Mistress

Tionne's legends." The silvery-haired instructor was a Jedi scholar and minstrel, and had also been among Luke's first trainees.

"Then I guess Tionne'll just have to make up some songs about the new Jedi Knights," Jacen said.

Tenel Ka nodded. "Soon there will be many Jedi Knights; we must remember our heroes."

Jacen brought his finger close to the lizard again. It flashed its scarlet frill and raised up on its forelegs. The frill spread about the creature like a tiny cape. A sudden thought occurred to Jacen. He glanced over at his sister and knew she was thinking the same thing: Kyp Durrón had been a very close companion of Han Solo's.

"Think Dad knows Kyp is on Yavin 4?" Jaina said.

Jacen gave his sister a sly grin. "Well, there's no reason we can't send him a message. Hey, you never know -Dad might even come for a visit." As it turned out, Han Solo was already en route to Yavin 4 to visit his children when he got word of Kyp Dutton's arrival on the jungle moon.

Since he had just finished his business on Kashyyyk, he calculated the fastest possible route for the Millennium Falcon and, with a bit of

fancy piloting, got there in record time.

With a discerning eye, Jaina watched the battered light freighter descend. She had spent plenty of time honing her own engineering skills and studying the mechanics of how starships worked. By now, the Falcon was one mass of repairs and replacement parts. Sections of new hull plating had replaced old blaster-scarred shields. She wondered how many-or how few-of the ship's original components remained. Many fancier ships were available to Han Solo, but the Falcon held such a special place in his heart that Jaina knew her father would never get rid of it.

Jaina noted that the repulsorjets seemed stronger on the starboard side than on the port side, causing the Falcon to sway as it landed.

Fortunately her father was a superb pilot and knew full well how to compensate for any eccentricities of his beloved craft.

A flock of stubby-winged avians swept above the overgrown temple ruins toward the deep jungles. They flew in a triangular formation, emitting deep hooting sounds, like a broken Kloo horn. Jacen watched them pass.

Jaina could tell that he was trying to identify the species of bird and probably wondering if he had ever caught one for his menagerie.

When the boarding ramp extended, Jacen and Jaina rushed across the weedy clearing, and Han Solo emerged from his ship wearing a big grin.

Jaina expected to see Chewbacca standing behind him, the tall, hairy form that her mother had once reportedly called a "walking car pet."

Instead of the huge Wookiee, though, only her little brother came out.

Anakin was slight of build, quiet, and dark-haired, a year and a half younger than the twins. Their brother did not usually attend training sessions at the Jedi academy at the same times Jacen and Jaina did.

"Anakin!" Jacen said, and their younger brother beamed.

Jacen and Jaina hugged their father. At sixteen they both felt a bit old for such displays of affection, but Jaina got little enough time to see her father, and she enjoyed every moment of it.

"Hey, kids," Han Solo said. "I was on my way here when I got your message. Your mom couldn't break away from the Senate, but I got an interesting assignment and figured it was a good excuse for a Solo family outing."

"Aw, and I thought you came just to see me," Kyp Durrone called, walking from the temple to the landing field and waving. The darkhaired Jedi Knight looked thoroughly refreshed now after a night's rest and a change of clothes.

Streen had gone off by himself to enjoy the solitude of the jungle.

Jaina remembered that the old cloud prospector liked peace and quiet more than anything else.

Upon seeing his friend, with whom he'd gone through so many adventures back when the twins were just small children, Han Solo's face lit up.

He came forward to clasp Kyp Dutton in an enthusiastic embrace. "How you doin', kid?" He pounded Kyp on the back.

Kyp smiled. "Not so much a kid anymore, Han."

"Yeah, Dad-you've got kids of your own," Jacen pointed out.

"And we're hardly kids anymore either," Jaina said.

Han gave a dismissive wave of his hand. "You'll always be kids to me.

All of you. Even your uncle Luke." He seemed barely able to contain

his excitement at seeing Kyp as they walked from the Falcon back toward the Great Temple. "What've you been up to? I haven't seen you in

...

since, ah . . ."

"It's been a long time, Han," Kyp said. "I've been off saving colonies, slaying monsters, rescuing the universe ... you know, the usual. Master Skywalker sends most of the Jedi he's trained out on missions, while our friend Tionne stays here and helps him handle the youngsters." He jerked an elbow toward Jaina. "Like these."

Jaina flushed, and her brothers both laughed.

"Heard about your fight with the Leviathan of Corbos," Han said.

"That was a tough one," Kyp answered. "Kirana Ti, Dorsk 82, Streen, and I really had our hands full on that mission. But Jedi Knights expect to face challenges like that."

Han smiled. "I know some younger Jedi Knights who've run into quite a few challenges of their own." He tousled Jacen's hair, and the young man flinched.

"Dad, I'm not a little boy anymore."

"Uh-oh. That mean you're too old to go with me to the Blockade Runners Derby on Ord Mantell?" Han raised his eyebrows at his twin children.

" You mean the race?" Jaina said. She had heard of the annual spectacle, one of the grandest, most daring races a pilot could enter.

It was an honor just to compete in the Derby.

Han nodded. "The Falcon won it three times already during my smuggling days. But this time I'll be going as a representative of the New Republic. Folks running the Derby sent in an official request, asking for me as their Grand Marshal." He gave his wry grin. "How could I refuse?"

Jaina laughed. "I doubt they could've kept you from that race if they put a few Imperial Star Destroyers in the way."

Han Solo squared his shoulders. "Hey, my wife and kids aren't the only ones who enjoy facing some challenges every now and then."

"I wish I could go with you, Han," Kyp said, stopping at the base of the looming stone temple. "But Streen and I may have to leave again in a few days. Even though Master Skywalker trains more Jedi every year, the New Republic is a big place. There are lots of missions to send

Jedi Knights on and not enough of us to handle all the situations that need our attention."

Han turned to his three children with mock sternness in his expression.

"Well, I'm not letting you kids go on any missions for the time being.

You're coming with me in the Falcon, and your assignment is to have some fun. Some ... quality time together, a family vacation.

You're gonna love the Blockade Runners Derby."

Lowbacca, walking down one of the Great Temple's exterior stairways, let out a loud Wookiee bellow of greeting. Perplexed, Jaina bit her lower lip and turned back to the Falcon.

"I know Mom couldn't make it, Dad, but where's Chewie?"

"Ah. Chewie'd been talking about visiting his family, you know.

And I'd been talking about spending some time alone with you kids.

So when this Derby thing came up, I suggested now might be a good time

for Chewie to take that vacation back to Kashyyyk. Dropped him off on my way here," Han answered, then lowered his voice and gave her a conspiratorial wink. "Besides, that means I need a good copilot for a while. Know anybody I might be able to use?"

Jaina perked up. "Me? You'd let me help fly the Falcon at the Derby?"

Han gave her an appraising look. "You've certainly got plenty of experience. I'm awfully proud of you, you know. If it's not too much of an imposition. . ."

"What are we waiting for?" Jaina asked.

"It's a deal then?"

"Does that mean we're entering the race?" Jacen said.

"Naw, I'm not a contestant this time," Han said. "I'm strictly at the Derby in an official capacity. My hotshot days are well behind me, since I'm, well ... respectable now. Anyhow, your mother sure wouldn't want me taking any chances with you kids."

"No. Of course not," Jacen said with mock seriousness.

Kyp gave Han a curious glance. "You've got that look in your eye

again."

"I think he's got a plan," Anakin said quietly.

Han gestured toward himself, his face the picture of innocence.

"Me? How can you think such a thing of your father?"

"He's got a plan," Jacen and Jaina said in unison.

Han shrugged. "Least I've got a good copilot. We'll stay here for a few hours while you kids pack. Kyp and I have a lot to catch up on.

Did we ever tell you about the time he stole the Sun Crusher and went after the Imperials, as if he could take on the whole Empire with his bare hands?"

"Yes," Jacen answered quickly.

"You told us," Anakin said.

"Plenty of times," Jaina added.

" Well, it's a good story-about what not to do," Kyp said hurriedly, his cheeks turning red. "I've learned a lot since then."

"That's a relief," Han joked. "I'd rather not have to chase you again from one end of the galaxy to the other." He turned back toward his children and draped his arms across their shoulders as they all walked into the cool shadows of the temple's interior. With flashing lights and a bleeping sound Artoo-Detoo trundled forward to meet them.

Han reached around Anakin and patted the droid's domed head in greeting.

"It'll be good to spend some time alone with the family. Just my kids and me," Han said. "A quiet, relaxing vacation."

"Oh, I doubt that, Dad," Jaina said. "From what I hear, there's always something interesting happening on Ord Mantell."

Even if Jacen wasn't entirely thrilled about leaving his close friend Tenel Ka behind for a few days, Jaina reveled in the chance to fly beside her father as his genuine copilot. Although she felt dwarfed by the huge seat that normally accommodated a burly Wookiee, she handled the Falcon with as much expertise as she did the Rock Dragon.

So far it was one of the best times she had ever shared with her father. Young Anakin, with his ability for grasping problems and solving complex puzzles, studied the navigational charts and considered various paths through hyperspace, until he announced that he had found

a perfectly safe shortcut to Ord Mantell.

After Han Solo double-checked Anakin's calculations, he announced that he saw no reason not to try the new route. If his son was right, the new path would cut a full six standard hours off their transit time.

Once the Falcon was in hyperspace, Han said to his children, "Ord Mantell's in the middle of nowhere, but that's not necessarily a disadvantage. A lot of smuggling traffic goes through there. Its position makes the planet about equally close to anyplace else along certain hyperspace paths. So even though it's not exactly convenient, Ord Mantell makes a good way station or stopping point."

"If it's a smugglers' hangout, you probably spent some time there between Derbies-right, Dad?" Jacen asked. "Before you became respectable, I mean."

Han Solo laughed. "Plenty of times, Jacen. I never tried to hide my checkered past from you all. Doesn't seem to bother your mother anymore. After all, I learned some of my most useful skills when I was a smuggler and a crack pilot-even studied at the Imperial Academy for a while. All that stuff in my past is part of who I am; the things I learned made me a vital asset to the Rebellion when we fought the Empire. I don't spend time regretting what I've done in my life, so long as I can use it now to help the people I love."

Jaina raised her eyebrows. "So if we ever do anything you think is dumb, you'll understand, right? You'll just accept it as part of our growth and training?"

Han knitted his brows. "Uh, that's not exactly what I meant."

Jacen stood leaning against the back of his father's chair in the Falcon's cockpit. "Tell us what you did on Ord Mantell, Dad."

"I ended up there pretty often when I was a smuggler. Seems like every time I went to Ord Mantell I ran into one bounty hunter or another, and every one of 'em meant trouble. One of the worst was an insect creature named Cypher Bos, a mercenary, as vile and selfcentered as they come. He was impersonating his identical hatch-mate brother, who was a Rebel sympathizer. But all those bug-people look alike, and I couldn't tell the difference. Cypher Bos sold us out and almost captured your mom and Luke and me. Then the three of us nearly got fed to the Imperials by a cyborg bounty hunter named Skoff. They just never learn." He shook his head.

"But one of the worst pinches I ever got into was against a tough smuggler named Czethros, and his Rybet henchman Brim. They were licensed bounty hunters, as well as black-marketeers in the Ord Mantell system, and had some connection to Black Sun. When Chewie and I were in a tight situation once with the Falcon, we had to land on Ord

Mantell and get repairs. The system was crawling with Imperials, but we made it without getting stopped.

"When Czethros found out I was on Ord Mantell, he and his pal set up a trap, kidnapped Chewie." Han gave a halfhearted grin as he relived the memory of his bygone adventure. "Told me to give myself up for the reward, or he'd kill my Wookiee friend."

"So how did you get away?" Jacen said.

"Turned the tables on 'em, of course. I'd been keeping an eye on Czethros through some smuggler friends and found out he and Briff were taking an unmarked skimmer out to the place where I was supposed to give myself up. I stole Czethros's own ship from its hangar bay, did a few things calculated to make the Imperials mad, then led them on a merry chase on my way to the exchange point."

"Must've been quite a ride," Jaina said.

Han grimaced. "Not one I'd like to repeat. I made it to the rendezvous with just enough time to hide before the stormtroopers showed up and nabbed Czethros along with his Rybet buddy. He claimed total innocence, of course, but the ship obviously belonged to him.

The stormtroopers searched the ship and found plenty of ...

irregularities.

Weapons, drugs, and so on. While they were busy, I managed to sneak over and free Chewie. Next thing we heard, the Imperials had carted Czethros and Briff off to the spice mines on Kessel. I think his henchman worked some kind of deal a year later with Moruth Doole, a Rybet who worked on Kessel. From what I've seen in recent reports, Czethros is actually something of a respectable businessman on Ord Mantell these days. 'Course I'd bet my left repulsorpack module that he's still heavily into the smuggling business."

"Aren't you afraid he might try to cause trouble for you while we're there?" Jaina asked. "He could still be holding a grudge."

Han blew air through his lips. "Not a chance. Been too many years.

It's all lava under the bridge by now." But Jaina noticed a twinge of concern on his face.

She turned toward the navigation controls. "Time to drop out of hyperspace. We should be pretty close to Ord Mantell."

Han looked over and smiled at his youngest son. "Well, Anakin, let's see how your calculations worked out."

Jaina was pleased to see, as they dropped out of hyperspace, that the Falcon was already so close to the correct position that they were able to slip into orbit with only minor course modifications.

Ord Mantell was a bland planet of average size, with average gravity, and an average atmosphere. Its topography showed the usual landscape variations-mountains, forests, and swamps. Skeins of clouds embroidered white patterns in the sky below. However, for orbital convenience and launching maneuvers, much of the equatorial band across the continents had been settled and converted into spaceports that boasted large docking bays and no-questions-asked cargo-handling policies.

Ord Mantell had some of the most lenient banking laws in the New Republic, famous for their flexibility. Banks there would accommodate anyone, in any line of business. As long as customers didn't cause trouble, or at least didn't get caught-and remembered to pay the appropriate landing fees, tariffs, and permit taxes-bankers never interfered.

Han looked over at his daughter. "Ever piloted a ship down from orbit all the way into a docking bay?" he asked.

Jaina brightened. "Nothing as big as the Falcon. I've done it with the Rock Dragon quite a few times, though."

"Well then, this'll be no problem for you," Han said, but his lop sided smile twitched slightly, as if he were nervous. Jaina pretended not to notice. "Go ahead and take her down."

Jaina used the copilot controls to alter their vector and plow into the atmosphere at a shallow angle. While they descended, Anakin helped her to locate a landing beacon from the docking bay at which Han had reserved a berth for the Falcon. He programmed in their landing coordinates.

The atmosphere shone blue on the equator as they dove closer to the surface. Jaina watched the silver-white belt of development that girdled the world resolve itself into a bustling metropolis filled with blocky prefab buildings, large flat rooftops, and countless balconies that extended out far enough for small private craft to launch secretly in the dead of night.

"Most of those buildings don't have addresses," Han Solo explained.

"On this planet, if you don't know where you are and where you're going, then you don't belong there."

"How do people find their way around?" Jacen asked.

"It looks challenging," Anakin said.

"Except for the Derby, Ord Mantell's no place for tourists," Han went on. "People don't come just to hang around. You can get a lot of things done here if you happen to be willing to bend a few rules-but sightseeing isn't one of them. This planet's mainly for passing through, a place to pick up cargo or get a new assignment. Imperials used this system for fleet training maneuvers because the outer planetary orbits are so hazardous. The cometary cloud's pretty thick-that's where the course is for the Blockade Runners Derby."

While Han rambled on, Jaina sweated. She gripped the controls in preparation for landing the big Corellian ship. She didn't know why she suddenly felt so anxious, but her hands grew damp with perspiration as she brought the Falcon in. Maybe she just wanted her father to be proud of her. Gusty winds swirled around the tall blocky building in the center of her scope. Far below, red, blue, and green ground cars crawled along; illuminated skimmers soared between the buildings in skyward alleys.

"Just take it easy, Jaina. You're doing fine," Han said.

"Yeah, don't sweat it," Jacen said. "We trust you."

Jaina paused and let her confidence build, despite the warble of uneasiness she had heard in her twin brother's voice. She took a deep

breath.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" she muttered to herself, and brought the Falcon down toward the big flat rooftop outside the landing bay.

As she approached, running lights illuminated a rectangular slit that yawned open, wide and dark. "Those're the docking doors, Jaina. You have to float down below. Our berth is in the upper bay."

Jaina swallowed. She had thought just landing the light freighter on the rooftop would be challenge enough; now she had to slip through this narrow hole that, from this height, looked barely a meter wider than the Falcon's hull. She couldn't let anything happen to her dad's ship.

"May the Force be with you," she heard Jacen whisper. Then she remembered that her uncle Luke always told them to use their Jedi senses in addition to their training in any skill.

She was a good pilot. And she was a Jedi. She drew a deep breath, let her body relax into the seat.

The Millennium Falcon became part of Jaina, an extension of her mind, and she could sense the distance to the outer walls. She slipped the light freighter between the opening doors without so much as a wobble or a jitter.

Han looked at her in proud amazement. "That's very smooth, Jaina."

"Just tell me where to land," she said. Her fingers danced across the repulsor engine controls. Her calm voice betrayed none of her uneasiness.

"Over there." Han gestured, and she saw a broad docking bay where a group of people stood waiting to greet them. Amber lights flashed, and someone holding bright laser torches directed the Falcon to its landing place.

With a final hiss, the landing pads touched down on the deck plates.

Jaina felt a thrill of exhilaration. What had she been so worried about?

Han hugged her.

As they all unbuckled their crash restraints and stood up to head for the landing ramp, Han said, "Wonder who's in our welcoming committee.

" "They could've hired musicians ... maybe some kind of a band," Jacen said. "You are an official representative of the New Republic."

"Not only that," Han said, brushing the front of his vest. "I'm Grand Marshal of the Blockade Runners Derby. That's a pretty big honor around these parts."

Han Solo, along with Anakin, Jacen, and Jaina, hurried to the landing ramp-only to find a group of armed soldiers blocking their exit.

Looming in front of them was a tall, broad-shouldered man who wore a cape and blasters at his hip. Close-cropped moss-green hair covered the top of his head. A band of metal, inset with lights and sensors, encircled his head like a ring around some pale-green planet. The front half of the silver metal band was a visor that completely covered his eyes. The rest of the metal band appeared to be permanently affixed about his ears and the back of his skull. He seemed to be receiving a continuous flow of information through the apparatus, and his lips curled in a sneer. A constantly moving cyboptical laser sensor burned through a thin slit in the narrow visor, glaring at all of them.

Han Solo stopped in his tracks. His confident expression quickly faded. "Czethros!" he said, a look of disbelief in his eyes.

The sinister-looking man lifted his chin, his gaze frozen in a metal glare. "Han Solo," he said in a rough, gravelly voice. "I knew if I waited long enough, you'd return to Ord Mantell."

Though Han fought to keep a calm expression on his face, Jacen sensed the sudden wave of apprehension rippling through his father.

The guards looked tense, ready to fire.

Han had long since stopped carrying a blaster at his hip—a good thing, Jacen supposed; otherwise they'd probably be in the middle of a shoot-out right now. His father had been hoping for a calm family outing while he did a bit of official work for the New Republic as a special guest at the famous race. They hadn't been prepared for anything like this.

Then Czethros stepped forward and surprised them all by extending his thickly gloved hand. The skin on his face rippled as his lips twisted in a smile. "Welcome back to Ord Mantell, Solo. A lot has changed since you and I were ... opponents those many-years ago."

Eyes narrowing just a fraction, Han Solo reluctantly slid his hand into the former smuggler and bounty hunter's grip. "Uh, yes ... that's right," he said, still cautious. Jacen felt the thick uneasiness in the air.

He, Jaina, and Anakin looked at each other in confusion.

"Back then, I was an officially licensed bounty hunter. You were a

posted Imperial target," Czethros said. "Nothing personal, of course.

No hard feelings."

"Of course." Han flashed the metal-visored man one of his most charming lopsided grins. "I thought after all those years in the spice mines you might, uh, hold a grudge."

"It's the nature of the bounty-hunting business," Czethros said. His laser-red cyber-eye drifted left and then right. "I used every trick to apprehend you, and you used every trick to get away. You just happened to have one more trick in your repertoire than I did-at the time, at least." He stepped back toward the gathered guards. "But I'm no longer in that line of work. I have a thriving business here on Ord Mantell. In fact, I pulled a few strings to get you selected as Grand Marshal for the Blockade Runners Derby. Since you'd settled down and weren't likely to be one of our contestants this year, I thought you might want to participate in some small way ... if only to see what you're missing."

"Thanks, Czethros," Han said, polite but uncertain. "I appreciate the gesture." Moving in unison, the formal guards spun about on their heels.

Their machine precision reminded Jacen eerily of trained

stormtroopers.

"I've assigned this honor guard to escort you to your quarters, Solo.

Tomorrow is the big opening rally, and the Millennium Falcon will be the 'pace craft." You'll run through the course before any of the actual contestants. The honor is always given to a pilot who has demonstrated great bravery and skill ... in the past." Shoulders back, head held high, Han walked close to the former bounty hunter.

"Well, it's all just a bunch of show, if you ask me. Limp gun dark noodles."

"But the spectators love it," Czethros said, without looking at him.

"Remember your old glory days, when you were one of those hotshot pilots ... a long time ago?"

Han stiffened, but said nothing as Czethros continued. "The course changes each year due to orbital mechanics, and we've mapped out a particularly convoluted obstacle path. I think it will make this year's Derby the most exciting ever."

"I'm familiar with the routine," Han said in a clipped voice. "I've won the race three times, remember."

Jaina and Han Solo spent the next morning in the docking bay facilities fully reconditioning the Falcon's hyperdrive and coolant systems, as well as its maneuvering jets.

When Jaina assured her brothers that the repairs were under control, they retired to a corner of the docking bay. Jacen produced a programmable holoprojector puzzle and tried to concoct intricate designs to stump the younger boy, but Anakin managed to solve each 3-D maze before Jacen could come up with a new one.

Han stubbornly resisted most of his daughter's attempts to recalibrate the systems, but she won out eventually, after demonstrating to him that the ship really would be safer and would fly more precisely.

't quite manage to conceal his proud smile.

inally, when the time had come for their exhibition run through the space course, Jaina signaled for her brothers to join them in the ship.

In less than a minute, Jacen and Anakin were fastening themselves in with crash restraints as Jaina sealed the boarding ramp and Han powered up the repulsor engines. From the Falcon's cockpit, Han informed the Derby officials they were ready.

"Hang on, kids," Han said. He was clearly not comfortable to be the center of so much attention as Grand Marshal of the Blockade Runners Derby, but he was also just cocky enough to want to show off for all the spectators.

"It's just a little practice trip," Jacen said. "No big deal." Both Jaina and Han turned to look at him with mischievous glints in their eyes.

"We might have to execute a few fast turns," Jaina said.

"Just to make it more realistic," Han added.

" 'Execute,' " Jacen said. "I'm not sure I like the sound of that."

Anakin gave his brother a teasing look. "Nervous?"

"Don't worry, we've got everything under control," Jaina assured her twin.

Together, she and her father worked the Falcon's systems, moving like an experienced team. Jaina could sense what her father intended to do, and she realized she might indeed have the makings of a great copilot.

"Hey, where does a full-grown bantha sit?" Jacen asked.

Jaina groaned and rolled her eyes, but Anakin played along. He answered in a serious voice, as if this topic had been of a lifelong concern to him. "I've always wondered about that-where does a fullgrown bantha sit?"

Jacen chortled. "Anywhere he wants to!"

Jaina reached behind her seat to give her twin a good-natured swat as the comm speakers crackled to life.

"This is Ord Mantell docking control to Millennium Falcon," a voice announced. "We are ready for you to begin."

"We're coming," Han said as the Falcon drifted up through the rooftop hatches. The bright sunlight in Ord Mantell's open sky splashed across the hull, gleaming through the cockpit windowports.

As Jaina's eyes adjusted, she saw that the blocky, drab buildings were now festooned with colorful banners. Bobbing repulsorspheres floated in the air, trailing narrow metallic streamers. Rainbow-hued tassels, like levitating balls of tangled ribbon, flitted about in flocks.

Jacen cried out with delight. "Hey, they're alive! I've heard of them-Ord Mantellian flutterplumes."

Jaina could see that the tiny ribbons were indeed alive, drifting like clusters of colorful worms in the air.

The voice over the cockpit speakers grew louder, as if shouting to millions of other listeners. "The Ninety-Third Annual Blockade Runners Derby is about to begin! Please welcome the Millennium Falcon, piloted by General Han Solo, three-time winner of the Derby!"

The cheers drifting up from the rooftops below sounded like a distant avalanche. Small one-person fliers drew close to the Falcon, shoving holocams to the viewports and taking pictures as the ship cruised along. Han grinned and waved at the nearest HoloNet news reporter.

"Didn't expect such a big send-off," Jaina muttered.

Han grinned at her. "Guess we'd better give them a show worth watching." He punched the sublight engines, and a blue-white glow flared from the rear of the Millennium Falcon, pushing them forward.

They arrowed up into the sky, leaving the holocams and the crowds behind. Their journey would be broadcast, though, by remote observer cams planted in buoys all along the route to record the race.

Jaina called up the course diagram and displayed it in three dimensions

so that Anakin and Jacen could study it to find any potential points of difficulty Han and Jaina might have missed. The Blockade Runners Derby ran up out of the orbital plane into the tangled, diffuse cometary cloud that surrounded the Ord Mantell system like a distant bubble made up of mountains of ice and rock.

Frequently, gravitational perturbations from nearby star systems or planetary alignments would knock some of these tenuously held comets loose from their holding patterns, and the comets would fall down toward the sun. As they heated up, the gases would evaporate, stretching out into wispy tails of dust and ionized gas, making beautiful sights in the Ord Mantellian sky. But out here, in the deep cold of space, the comet chunks were dark, erratic navigational hazards, as dangerous as a swarm of piranha beetles.

During the Blockade Runners Derby, ships weaved through the tumbling ice cloud, ducking around and through protocomets. Speed and skill counted for everything ... including a ship's survival, of course.

Leaving the planet's atmosphere, Han Solo increased the Falcon's speed.

He roared up at full acceleration, straight out of the ecliptic and into the cometary cloud. Jaina felt the skin on her cheeks pulled back by gravitational force as the engines labored. She was glad they had just tuned them up.

"Why so fast, Dad?" Jacen said from his seat in the rear. "We're just a slow, sedate pace craft, not an official contestant."

Anakin said in a level voice, "I think Dad's just trying to get some of the frustration out of his system."

"Not exactly," Han said to his sons. "We're running through the course, but"-he raised his forefinger-"they're also recording our time."

So wouldn't it be wonderful if the old Falcon happened to do better than any of the actual contestants? How could the real winner ever live down his shame?"

"Or her shame," Jaina said.

"Or its shame," Jacen added.

"I get the point," Han said. "I intend to beat even my last speed record, when I actually won this thing."

"Is that breaking the rules?" Anakin asked.

"Naw. But it'll give the crowds something to talk about for years."

Han worked the controls, increasing speed again. "Hang on, everybody.

Comet cloud ahead."

Jaina adjusted the controls, activating the newly installed windowport filters. "I'm increasing infrared pickup," she said. "There's not much reflected sunlight out here, but this way we'll be able to detect the comets a little better."

Suddenly the view changed color as they hurtled forward. Glinting, tumbling specks became visible like a cloud of sparks drifting toward them. In the holographic projection of the cometary cloud, a dotted line wove like a needle and thread through the loosely packed cluster of ice fragments.

"All right," Han said. "Get ready for some tricky maneuvers."

Almost before Jaina realized it, they exploded into the blizzard of ice chunks. Some were nearly round, some blocky and geometric, others spiny with crystalline formations.

Han gave a howl of delight as he spun the Falcon around. Jaina watched the engines while Anakin monitored their course. They skimmed low over one ice field, then looped around. The comets were so small and light

that their weak gravity had little effect on the ship's navigation.

A tiny fragment of ice too small to be detected on their sensors evaporated against their deflector screen in a sparkle of light. More bright flashes appeared as the Falcon continued without slowing.

"Hey, it's like we're in a snowstorm," Jacen said.

"More like a hailstorm," Jaina said. "Those little bits of ice would poke holes right through us at our speed if the deflector shields weren't working."

"You did tune them up, didn't you?" Jacen asked.

"Naturally. Nothing to worry about."

Han focused ahead and plowed through a gaping cave in a fragile ice latticework, a comet that looked like crystal straws melted together.

One of the tiny shafts struck the deflector shield and snapped. The entire cave opening began to collapse as the Falcon soared through and burst out the other side. But the comet's gravity was so low that it would take well over an hour for the avalanche to complete itself "I'm increasing speed," Han said.

"Dad, you're already close to the red lines," Jaina warned.

"And close to beating my record, too. Let's keep on with it, but keep your Jedi senses alert for anything unexpected."

"We will," Jacen said with conviction.

"We always do," Anakin added.

The ice boulders spun around as they whipped through a denser orbit.

Jaina spotted holocam buoys mounted on some of the ice chunks, and she knew that thousands of spectators on Ord Mantell were even now watching their flight. By now everyone would see that Han Solo was recklessly trying to break his speed record, and that his kids were helping him.

Jaina smiled to herself. She would just have to make sure her father didn't get embarrassed.

"Let's tighten the course," she said, looking at the projection.

"Gravity calculations show we could come even closer to that next comet, make a sharper turn to shave off a bit of distance here and increase our speed, whip around this hazard, come out in a backward spiral, and pull up."

"Yeah. That might make just enough difference," Han said with a grin.

They soared so close to the rotating ball of ice that Jaina could have extended the landing ramp and scraped a long gouge across the ice field.

"This is just like when we ran through the rubble field of Alderaan," Jacen said.

Ahead, four large fragments drifted close together where one comet had broken into loosely attached boulders. Han narrowed his eyes, and Jaina scanned the motion of the chunks.

Anakin watched them intently. "I see the patterns" he said. "We can go straight through-if you time it right."

"At full speed?" Han said.

"You're going to have to," Anakin answered.

Han roared ahead, straight toward the apparent blockade, but Jaina could see the comets moving, opening up. She saw the gap spreading and wondered if it would be wide enough to allow their ship to pass through.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," Jacen said. Jaina thought her brother was making a joke with their father's oft-used phrase, but as they approached the broken comet, she felt uneasiness herself.

"Yes, something's wrong," Anakin said.

Jaina watched the fragments moving, plotted their course again. It would be tight, but it seemed clear they would make it. The ship entered the slowly opening gap between rocky mountains of snow. Their deflector shield sizzled, vaporizing some of the snow and ice away from the broken comet.

"If you're worried about something, kids, tell me now."

"It's not the comet, Dad," Jaina said. "It's. . ." Then she looked up at the enhanced infrared filter and saw an array of small artificial objects, a matrix of tiny spheres, hovering just outside of the broken cometary hulk.

"Hey, what are those?" Jacen said.

"Space mines," Anakin answered in a maddeningly calm voice.

"Punch it, Dad!" Jaina cried. Han Solo reacted instantly, hammering at the emergency thrusters. The Falcon was already sailing at twice

the expected speed for the pace craft, and now it went into an overdrive launch.

Jaina grabbed the navigation controls herself and yanked the ship to one side, putting the Falcon into a tight corkscrew that plowed through the array of space mines like a drill bit. They zoomed by so fast Jaina barely caught a glimpse of the deadly explosive devices as the cluster detonated.

The Falcon roared away as fast as the shock wave accelerated toward them. Fourteen of the space mines blew up behind them. Jaina could count them through the rear sensor screens. When it struck, the shock wave knocked them about, but they were already tumbling. The Falcon narrowly missed another large comet as Jaina regained control in the copilot's seat.

"Space mines!" Han cried. "How did they get out here? This is the Derby course! It's supposed to be completely mapped and checked out before anyone ever flies it."

The Falcon slowed, recovering, and Jaina, Jacen, and Anakin all looked at each other. Han gasped, "If we hadn't been traveling so fast, and you kids hadn't warned me in time, we would've been right in the middle of that cluster when it exploded. But you dodged it, Jaina. Good piloting. And our speed helped us outrun most of the shock wave."

"But the course should have been clear and safe," Jacen insisted.

"That's why they have a pace craft, isn't it, Dad?" Anakin said suddenly. "To prove that the course is safe for the contestants?"

"Sure ... but it's always been just a formality. Until now."

Jaina shivered and gripped her crash restraints tightly. "You mean maybe somebody put the explosives there on purpose-knowing the Falcon would be the first ship to fly through."

After the "accident," Han Solo circled back to collect debris from the space mines and deactivate two unexploded duds. The pieces would serve as evidence of the explosions and help them to find out who had set the trap.

"I guess this ruined your chance at a record-breaking time," Jacen said as the ship headed back toward Ord Mantell. Jaina and Anakin scrutinized the exploded bits of metal and the unmarked casings, careful not to contaminate the pieces so that they could be analyzed more thoroughly later.

"Hey, we're alive," Han said. "That's more important than any speed record."

When the Falcon landed back on the rooftop receiving area, Czethros and several other concerned representatives rushed forward to help the Solo family disembark. The crowds of spectators who had witnessed the explosion were in an uproar, and the people sent up a cheer as Han Solo and his children gave a confident wave to show that they were all right.

A nervous-looking race official approached Han, bowing and stammering.

"Oh, I'm most sorry, sir! This is terrible! We have, of course, postponed the Blockade Runners Derby at least until tomorrow. We've already sent a crew of freelance inspectors up to comb through the obstacle course in search of any other hidden traps."

"This was a near-tragedy. We must not risk anything worse happening," said a second official.

Czethros stood tall, sunlight making his green hair look like a mosscovered boulder. "I doubt the inspectors will find anything," he said grimly. "My guess is those mines were originally being taken to An obis, a planet in the next system that has been engaged in a civil war for decades now. They frequently order weapons from black-market dealers on Ord Mantell." The Derby officials flushed in deeper embarrassment.

"Hey, how could space mines from some civil war land right in the middle of the racecourse?" Jacen asked.

"The war's still going on, and has been for almost thirty years.

Many of Ord Mantell's smugglers work as gun runners to supply the war effort." Czethros shrugged. "Those mines could have been part of a dropped shipment, or even a trap set for former space authorities before Ord Mantell became more enlightened and allowed freer trade."

"Uh-huh," Han said.

The following day, after the brief and frantic postponement, racing officials attempted to relaunch the Blockade Runners Derby with renewed fanfare. Looking forward to the day's festivities with subdued eagerness, Jacen, Jaina, Anakin, and their father ascended a tall observation tower above the docking buildings.

Bald, pink-skinned Bith band members followed them, playing stirring and dramatic music to mark the beginning of the Derby. The crowd cheered. The ever-present HoloNet news reporters made repeated references to the Solo family's miraculous escape from deadly explosives the previous day.

Inside the observation tower, Jacen sat next to his sister and younger

brother, while most of the reporters focused their attention on General Solo. The huge windowscreens were transparent to allow the gathered VIPs an unobstructed view across the landing centers and docking bays of the Ord Mantell strip. Once the Blockade Runners Derby began, most of the screens would turn opaque and show images transmitted from the holocam buoys. This would let everyone follow the haphazard progress of the contestants in their assorted souped-up ships as they roared through the tangle of the outer cometary cloud.

Several lavishly dressed racing officials hovered near Han Solo, preoccupying themselves with insignificant details. Han looked somewhat out of his element, uncomfortable in his formal clothes.

"Since I already flew the course once, what exactly do you want me to do here as Grand Marshal?"

"Well, whenever you're ready," one of the bureaucrats said, fluttering perspiration-damp hands in the air and indicating a single red button on a panel, "we need you to push this button."

"That's it?" Han said.

"It's a very important task," the bureaucrat answered, blinking in surprise. "It's how we start the race."

Han gave him a lopsided grin. "Well then, I'll be sure to do my best."

"No need to worry, sir," the bureaucrat said. "So far, in the ninetythree-year history of the Derby, only two Grand Marshals have failed to do it correctly."

Jacen couldn't imagine how anyone could possibly manage to push a single button incorrectly, but then he'd seen some pretty disastrous bungling of simple matters in the course of his adventures.

"All right then, let's get this over with," Han said, his finger hovering near the button.

"No, no! Not yet," the bureaucrat insisted.

"You said, whenever I was ready," Han reminded him.

"But we have to send the thirty-second warning to the contestants first. And the HoloNet reporters need to get into position." The bureaucrat frantically twiddled some dials and punched codes into a small yellow touchpad.

In the observation tower several of the broad windowscreens dimmed, now displaying transmitted images of spacecraft up in orbit.

Other contestants remained on landing pads as a second wave in the breakneck race through the cometary obstacle course. All ships would be clocked, and the winner would be determined by the fastest time through.

Han grinned. "Did I ever tell you kids how I made the Kessel run in under-" "Yes," Anakin broke in.

"How could we not know, Dad?" Jacen said. "It's one of the most famous things you've ever done."

Han brushed his fingers down his vest. "I wouldn't say that, exactly.

I mean, saving your uncle Luke countless times, infiltrating the Death Star, freeing your mom from an Imperial prison chamber, helping defeat the entire Empire, exploring unknown worlds-" The bureaucrat interrupted him. "Now you may proceed, sir," he said. "All ships have been informed and are ready to begin."

Han stepped forward to the red button and extended his finger.

"This button, right?"

"Yes, that's the one."

"You're sure I'm doing this properly?"

The bureaucrat did not pick up on his sarcasm at all. "You seem to be performing most admirably."

"Good," Han said. He pushed the button. The Blockade Runners Derby began.

Ships roared off pell-mell, choosing their own preferred routes to the cometary cloud, some swinging around the planet for a gravitational boost, others heading in a straight-line path, still others taking an incomprehensibly convoluted course.

The holocam buoys captured some of the contestants as they streaked by, an odd assortment of supercharged vessels, modified so that the pilots could withstand excessive acceleration; some ships had heavily reinforced shields to allow them to rip through the course without worrying about ramming into a few comets along the way.

Jaina stared at the viewscreens, her face filled with fascination.

"Look at the range of spacecraft!" she said. "Skimmers, freighter's, courier vessels ... Dad, I don't even recognize some of those vehicle types."

"Anybody with a few spare parts and some ingenuity can create their own new vehicle type," Han said. "Done it myself a few times."

A new ship flashed across the screen so rapidly that though Jacen thought for just a moment that he recognized the configuration, he decided it must be just his imagination. After all, he'd been daydreaming about Tenel Ka. It was only natural. Even though he was glad about being able to spend some time with his father, he also missed the young warrior girl.

And Lowie, too, of course ...

Since the discovery of the space mine cluster on the course, several contestants had dropped out. Han had commented that they must have been too fainthearted in the first place and it was no great loss. Now only the toughest, most seasoned pilots remained in the race.

The ships jockeyed for position, jostling each other and nearly causing a few collisions as they tried to find the best routes that didn't intersect each other. The vehicles scraped by far closer than their collision-avoidance systems should ever have allowed, but most of these crack pilots had probably shut off their warning systems anyway.

One viewscreen showed a graphical representation of the race. Blips with code numbers traveled through the obstacle course on the grid.

Jacen could watch the progress of the contestants by tracking the colored lights. Some blips moved forward; others fell behind. The holocam buoys, while an ingenious idea to cover the race, nevertheless provided only infrequent snapshots at discrete points-not enough images for anyone to follow the entire spectacle.

A Sullustan Vector-class spaceskimmer went slightly off course, and careened into the comet field. The buoy holocams caught the image as the skimmer struck an icy protrusion, then went into a spin. Enhanced deflector shields protected the pilot from instant death, but the ship was knocked completely awry, and the Sullustan pilot, disoriented, zoomed away in the wrong direction.

A pair of Corellian single-occupant fightercraft swept along opposite sides of a comet and nearly collided with each other at the other end.

They spun out. One ship crashed in the ice field, its pilot ejecting in a lifepod at the last moment and sending out a distress beacon. To their credit, race officials reacted instantly, dispatching medical droids and rescue craft that waited just outside the cometary cloud.

"I wish Lowie were here to see this," Jaina said, still fascinated by the dazzling images of the great race.

"And Tenel Ka," Jacen said, narrowing his eyes. "She must be thinking of us. I feel like I'm sensing them somehow-as if they're closer than we think."

On the gridmap of all the racing ships, Anakin pointed to one blip that was slowly passing every competing vessel. "This one will win," he said. "I can tell by the piloting, by the speed. It has already overtaken most of the others that were launched first, and this ship entered the race near the end. It won't crash, either. I'm sure of it."

Outside in the streets of Ord Mantell, spectators watched the flat unmarked walls of square buildings that had been turned into transmission screens to carry images from the buoys scattered along the racecourse. Elsewhere in the New Republic-particularly in gambling casinos such as those in Cloud City on Bespin, cantinas on Borgo Prime, and various other legal and illegal meeting places-people placed bets on the Derby's outcome.

If Jacen had ever decided to gamble, he would certainly have taken his younger brother's recommendation. Anakin had an uncanny ability to predict things such as this. He watched the blip creep past several other racers as the ship zoomed through the cometary debris.

"Who is that contestant?" Jacen asked. He looked down at the code

number, but it meant nothing to him.

The bureaucrat came over, all smiles. "That one qualified at the last minute." He rubbed his hands together in a nervous gesture. "And it looks as if we were correct to let them enter so late. The pilot seems most skillful."

The mysterious ship passed two more competitors, swooped around a large comet, then zigzagged through the toughest part of the course.

The craft moved in time with the broken icy space debris, reminding Jacen of an intricate dance. The ship and the comets seemed to be cooperating, moving as one connected system. He had never before seen anyone fly with such sensitivity to the surrounding environment and obstacles.

The ship hurtled around the last comet and then looped back toward Ord Mantell and the finish line. The time displayed on one of the screens was better than any of the other competitors had clocked. No one would be able to beat it.

As the craft zoomed past the last holocam buoy, Jacen and Jaina watched the blur. Jaina recognized it almost immediately, but took a moment to put her thoughts into words. "That ... that's a Hapan passenger cruiser. I recognize the design."

"It's Tenel Ka!" Jacen said. "And Lowie. They must have a great pilot."

"I've never seen Lowie fly that fast," Jaina said.

"Well," Han said, "they certainly won the race."

The bureaucrat stood up. "Come, Han Solo. You are the Grand Marshal.

You must be on the upper platform to greet our winners as they arrive back from the cometary cloud. The other ships will straggle in, but you must be there to wave and shake their hands ... or appendages."

"Well, somebody's got to do the job," Han agreed.

"We're going along," Jacen replied. "If that's Lowie and Tenel Ka in the Rock Dragon, I want to be the first to see their faces."

The bureaucrat glanced at him after checking the race contestant records. "I'm afraid you may be mistaken. No one by the name of 'Lowie' or 'Tenel Ka' is registered as the pilot of this vessel."

"We'll just see for ourselves," Jaina said.

A turbolift took them to the top of the observation tower, and then a floating platform shuttled them across the crowded rooftops. The hastily erected grand stadium stood by itself, garlanded with beautiful feathers, flowers, and the colorful flutterplume creatures that Jacen had identified.

Jacen shaded his eyes and looked up at the azure sky until he saw a glint of the ship appearing from high orbit, cutting through the gusty winds. The pilot unerringly found the reception platform and the waiting celebration. Jacen and Jaina waved, recognizing the Hapan passenger cruiser that Jaina herself had flown so often with Lowie at her side as copilot.

"You're right, kids," Han Solo said. "That's the Rock Dragon. No doubt about it."

When the small ship settled down, dozens of new floaters surrounded the stage and platform, holocams and curiosity seekers. In the distance, cheering crowds of humans and aliens stood on rooftop landing pads, in ship hangars, and on balcony flight decks, waving banners and shouting.

Jacen could already see other contestants coming in to land, now fighting for second or third place.

But when the Rock Dragon's hatch opened and a figure emerged, Jacen was

astonished to find that it was neither Tenel Ka nor Lowie.

"Zekk!" Jaina cried. Behind Zekk, her other two friends stepped out and stood next to their new dark-haired pilot.

Tenel Ka gave only the faintest smile upon seeing Jacen-then again, she never gave more than a faint smile about anything-but Lowie bellowed loudly, raising a ginger-furred fist in victory. He seemed immensely pleased that the Rock Dragon had won the prestigious daredevil race.

Zekk's emerald eyes flashed, and he gave his friends a warm smile.

"Just following Master Skywalker's instructions," he said. "He told me to find something I was already good at, and try to use my Jedi skills to become even better. I've always enjoyed piloting, so I thought a hotshot race might just be a good test."

"And it was indeed quite a challenge for us all," Em Teedee chirped, sounding exhausted.

Jacen looked around at his friends. The crowd cheered the winners, but all that mattered to Jacen was having the young Jedi Knights back together again.

Together again, the young Jedi Knights learned how to deal with being

celebrities. Jacen, Jaina, and Anakin had already spent a lot of time with their father in his duties as Grand Marshal of the Blockade Runners Derby, but now that Zekk, Tenel Ka, and Lowie had actually won the race, publicity seekers and HoloNet reporters pestered them constantly, taking their images, interviewing them, asking them what it was like to receive such an honor.

In the history of the Derby, no crew so young had ever won the challenge. Upon discovering that these were Jedi trainees, some of the losers cried "foul," claiming that the use of the Force gave an unfair advantage-though the Rock Dragon had not taken advantage of the permitted mechanical modifications, as most of the other contestants had.

Fortunately the controversy died down quickly. The newspeople had other planets in the galaxy to dash off to, and Ord Mantell preferred to keep media attention to a minimum. Large groups of organized smugglers-some of them rivals, some allies-were a powerful political force, and they managed to shoo away the reporters shortly after the Derby ended.

Some of Ord Mantell's most prestigious "businessmen" (important smugglers, Jaina presumed) had invited Han Solo to a banquet to thank him for his work as Grand Marshal, no doubt in an attempt to curry favor with the husband of the New Republic's Chief of State. Jaina smiled as she thought of this possibility: her father had nothing to

gain by taking bribes, but she doubted the smugglers would realize this. Jaina wondered if Czethros would be there.

Meanwhile, the Solo children spent the afternoon with their friends in the docking bay where the Falcon was berthed. At Han Solo's request, Zekk had been allowed to dock the Rock Dragon in the same secure V.I.P bay where Jaina had landed the Falcon, so that the Grand Marshal's ship and the Derby winner were isolated and protected in the same security area.

When the twins told their friends about their adventure during the trial run of the obstacle course, Tenel Ka immediately suspected an assassination attempt. The warrior girl tossed her red-gold braids and squared her shoulders, obviously ready for action. She'd had plenty of experience with political intrigues in the tough environment of the Royal House of Hapes.

Lowie expressed concern and Em Teedee dutifully translated, though Jaina could already make out many of the ginger-furred Wookiee's words.

"Master Lowbacca suggests that we look at the space mine debris.

Perhaps with some attentive analysis, we can determine the mines' origin."

"Good idea, Em Teedee," Jaina said absently, then looked up into Lowie's golden eyes. "I mean, Lowie."

The little translating droid detached himself from Lowie's fiber belt and floated in the air on his microrepulsorjets, bobbing about the docking bay. They went to the storage locker near the Falcon, where Han had insisted on keeping the evidence, believing that only he and his New Republic technicians could be trusted to perform a thorough analysis.

"For some reason," Jaina said, "Dad isn't too confident that the people on Ord Mantell will give us an honest answer."

Jacen said, "They're probably more interested in keeping their smuggling records secret."

"Secrets are fine," Zekk said, "except when one of those secrets holds the key to who tried to kill you."

On a worktable mounted to the docking bay wall, Jaina spread out the twisted fragments that had been scooped up by the Falcon's tractor beam. The young Jedi Knights pressed closer. Not much remained after the mines' detonation and vaporization in space, but Anakin scrutinized the shrapnel carefully and began to sort the pieces into piles he knew went to individual mines. Jaina let her younger brother work, knowing

how well he was able to solve puzzles and visualize the way pieces fit together in three dimensions.

In short order, Anakin had several partial mines reassembled. Lowie and Jaina helped him with the wiring, finding parts of serial numbers and determining the initial configuration using the two duds as a reference. The duds were dangerous, though they had been defused. If the mines had not detonated as programmed, Jaina didn't trust them to behave properly when deactivated either.

Lowie growled as he picked up some of the pieces with his long fingers.

Zekk studied the shrapnel as well. "I think these are contraband war materials," he said. "So much smuggling goes on through Ord Mantell, this could have come from a black-market weapons merchant."

Jacen suggested, "Didn't Czethros say something about a civil war on a nearby planet? Anobis? The smugglers are supplying them with munitions."

"But were those mines out there just dumped by a gun runner who was about to be caught," Jaina asked, "or were they intentionally set up to take us out of the picture?"

Jacen sighed. "With all those HoloNet news reporters here covering the race, you'd think some of them would want to do a story about that terrible war everybody's talking about."

"That would be too dangerous," Zekk said with a snort. "They'd rather do a nice, fun story about a space race." Jaina set down one of the broken space mines and shook her head.

"We're not going to find out anything else unless we learn who some of the weapons dealers are. But for now ... I'm hungry!" She smiled at Zekk, then turned to Tenel Ka. "Don't suppose you upgraded the food-prep units on the Rock Dragon yet?"

Tenel Ka nodded. "This is a fact. They are now programmed to provide the best Hapan cuisine."

"Sounds good-I'm starved." Jacen said, then looked over at the warrior girl. "In fact, let me push the buttons so I can say I made you a fine lunch."

"That would be most appreciated, friend Jacen."

Ducking inside the Rock Dragon, Jacen tinkered with the food-prep units until they produced some kind of meal whose name he couldn't pronounce.

Tenel Ka called it "authentic" and "delicious"; Jaina found it "interesting."

They laughed and talked, sharing food and friendship. Jaina especially enjoyed having Zekk as a close friend again, rather than an enemy or a guilt-ridden young man. Zekk was rapidly becoming the person she had known for so many years. No, not the same person-better. More mature.

Around a mouthful of food, Jacen said, "Hey, stop me if you've heard this one. A bounty hunter, a Jedi Knight, and a Jawa trader walk into a cantina-" A resounding chorus of "We've heard that one!" rang through the cabin.

In the middle of a swirling gelatinous dessert that insisted on crawling around the plates by itself, Tenel Ka sat up straight and alert, her eyebrows raised as if something was wrong. Lowie also growled.

"what's up?" Jacen asked.

"I sense something," Tenel Ka said. "I would like to investigate."

She stepped out of the Rock Dragon, moving with feline grace, reaching out with her senses. Jaina watched the warrior girl, admiring the

smoothness of her actions. Although she had lost her left arm in a lightsaber battle with Jacen, Tenel Ka had not allowed the handicap to slow her down.

The docking bay was silent, except for the hum of machinery, the ventilation system, and the distant sky traffic overhead through the rooftop doors. The bay walls were smooth gray metal. The Millennium Falcon sat unattended in shadows.

Tenel Ka froze for a moment, then stepped away from the Rock Dragon, flicking her granite-gray gaze from side to side as she walked deeper into the docking bay. Jaina stood beside Lowie at the hatch. The young Wookiee's fur bristled, and she could feel his uneasiness.

Tenel Ka stood stock still in the middle of the large room, her shoulders rigid, her arm partially bent at her side. She scanned the wall and studied the shadows, the old lubricant stains and smoke smears from hundreds of landings and takeoffs. She took three steps closer to the small workbench where the recovered space mine fragments had been spread out.

Tenel Ka waited, narrowed her eyes, listened, and finally pulled out her rancor-tooth lightsaber. Jaina couldn't figure out what the warrior girl was doing. The walls remained gray and featureless.

Tension hung thick in the air. Finally, when the warrior girl held up

and switched on the glowing turquoise blade ... the shadows on the wall began to move!

Jaina gasped. Lowie surged past her and ran to help. Figures on the walls shifted, and Jaina could make out gray-skinned creatures, vaguely humanoid. They moved like spiders with angular arms and legs that allowed them to crawl up the metal walls. The colors on their smooth, clammy skin shifted, patterns of stains on the walls reflected in their body pigmentation. When they held still, the chameleon-like creatures were almost invisible-but now that Tenel Ka had startled them, they were more easily seen. These shadows might be identical in color to the walls, but the play of light exposed them.

Em Teedee cried, "Oh, dear! What are those creatures? I'm certain they're not at all friendly."

One of the gray-skinned things scuttled down, snatched up an intact dud space mine, and scrambled back up the wall toward an air vent near the ceiling. Another chameleon-thing grabbed two more fragments.

"They're stealing the evidence!" Zekk said.

Then all the young Jedi Knights charged toward the docking bay wall to join the fray. Lightsabers ignited: Lowie's molten-bronze blade that was nearly as wide as Jaina's arm, her own electric-violet sword, and

Jacen's emerald green. Zekk, who had forsaken his lightsaber upon returning to the Jedi academy, now drew a handy old blaster.

Thinking fast, Anakin raced to the Rock Dragon's communications console and sounded an alarm, calling for the authorities.

One of the chameleon-skinned creatures dropped from above to land on Tenel Ka's shoulder, driving her to the ground, its hands around her neck. Jacen tackled the thing and knocked it off his friend. Tenel Ka recovered quickly. Soon she and Jacen stood side by side with their lightsabers, driving the creature back.

Several other creatures ran back to the wall, pressed themselves against it, and vanished in front of Jaina's eyes. But she knew they were there. Zekk reached up with his blaster, turned the setting to "stun," and fired at the blank spot on the wall. Circular blue arcs rippled out to illuminate the lumpy form of a chameleon creature. It dropped like an insect sprayed with poison and curled up on the floor.

Jaina could hear the movement of soft gripping hands and feet as more of the creatures moved along. She had no idea how many of them there were, only that the young Jedi Knights were greatly outnumbered.

But they were Jedi, so the odds were fairly even.

One of the unseen creatures struck Jaina from behind. She whirled about, still holding her lightsaber. With a sizzle, the violet blade connected with something solid, and one of the creatures let out a hollow wail. She saw it clearly in the flash of her energy blade, its lips smooth, its mouth toothless. Patterns on its skin shifted like a thunderstorm of colors in its pain.

Zekk fired his blaster again, and a second chameleon creature fell, this time from the ceiling, a great enough height that Jaina could hear the sharp sound of hollow bones cracking from the impact.

Lowie fought in a mass of muscular, ginger-furred arms. Em Teedee cried out, "To your left, Master Lowbacca. I sense a distortion! To your left!" Lowie turned as one of the chameleon creatures leapt.

With his free hand the Wookiee smacked its soft smooth skin and belted the thing aside.

Suddenly, at the peak of the battle, Jaina saw a stranger charge into the docking bay—a young woman in her mid-twenties. She was wiry and moved like a whip. Her hair was dark, but streaked with lines like honey, as if she had woven strands of pale blond hair through her thick mane; a patterned leather band was wrapped around her forehead, holding her hair in place. Her face was narrow, her almond-shaped eyes large and dark and sad.

But what most astonished Jaina was that the young woman carried a blazing lightsaber!

The newcomer uttered a howl of challenge and ran into the fight, slashing from one side to the other, wielding her acid-yellow blade like a club. All the young Jedi Knights paused in shock, as did the chameleon creatures.

The stranger took advantage of the hesitation and attacked. She seemed able to see the camouflaged creatures, or perhaps in the young woman's wild frenzy, she struck at everything in sight and happened to get lucky several times.

Two of the creatures rippled into visibility, clutching their smoking wounds. They fell with the now-familiar hollow cries of pain before they died.

"Don't just stand there-keep fighting!" the woman snarled, and the young Jedi Knights resumed the battle.

But with the appearance of the newcomer, the creatures' fighting resolve broke. They began to flee, a flicker of barely seen shadows.

"Hey, they're getting the space mines!" Jacen cried. Jaina raced toward the workbench as the surviving creatures grabbed the last

components and swarmed up toward the air vent near the ceiling.

Jaina watched the dark shaft swallow the shadowy creatures. The young woman ran ahead with a burst of speed and leapt up at the wall, sweeping with her lightsaber and striking the last chameleon creature in the back. It fell with another wordless wail as the rest of its companions escaped.

Jaina frowned at this last needless slaughter. "You didn't have to do that. It was running, not attacking us."

"They all need to be dead," the young woman said bitterly.

Zekk and Lowie knelt over one of the fallen bodies, looking at the fading colors in the skin tone. Jaina knelt beside the one she had struck, gasping its last breaths.

"Who are you? Who sent you?" she said, but breath only rattled in the creature's inhuman face, and it died. Then she saw emblazoned in its fading multicolored skin a mark, a solid dark circle with designs around it.

She recognized the symbol. Zekk stood next to her, looked at the tattoo and then at Jaina. "That symbol reminds me of Black Sun."

Jaina swallowed hard. She knew of the legendary underworld criminal organization run by vile gangsters and evil crime lords such as Prince Xizor in the days of the Rebellion. Many other cruel leaders had also had far-reaching claws that extended into numerous activities, controlling a large portion of the most insidious crimes in the galaxy.

"But Black Sun's been quiet for years," she said.

Zekk frowned. "I wonder if they're starting up again. Or if this is something else."

Jacen turned to their unlikely helper. The wiry young woman stood there, large eyes wide, pupils dilated, body still trembling. Her arms jittered as if she were a barely contained mass of energy searching for another target to fight. Her comfortable, form-fitting shirt left her arms bare, displaying a tattoo on her right shoulder that looked to Jacen something like a piranha beetle with a lightning bolt on its back, but definitely not Black Sun.

"These creatures don't know anything. They're only henchmen, sent here to remove your evidence. Those space mines were a setup to destroy the Millennium Falcon."

"Yeah, we guessed that too," Jaina said. "But what I can't figure is who you are. Are you a Jedi Knight?"

The woman snorted. "Just because I can use a lightsaber doesn't mean I'm a Jedi. I don't need all that elite training mumbo jumbo. I can fight just fine on my own."

"We could see that," Jacen said, enthralled.

Tenel Ka narrowed her eyes. "Fighting with finesse is a greater challenge than indulging a simple battle frenzy."

The woman scowled. "Yeah? I seem to remember taking out more targets in this little skirmish than you did."

At that moment, Han Solo came rushing in, accompanied by several members of the Ord Mantell security forces. He looked around, taking in the carnage and the sight of the young Jedi Knights standing with their lightsabers still blazing. "We came as soon as we got Anakin's alarm! Are you kids okay?"

Jaina switched off her weapon. "We handled it, Dad," she said.

"I can see that." Then he noticed the young stranger, who was now staring at him, her dark eyes ablaze with fury. She stepped forward in a tense, threatening posture, her yellow lightsaber held out in front of her. "Han Solo!" she said, her voice dripping with anger.

Han looked at her, but his face showed no recognition.

"Han Solo," she repeated. "You killed my father!"

Upon hearing the stranger's shocking and sinister announcement, Jacen instinctively moved with his sister to stand beside their father.

Anakin came out of the Rock Dragon, lifting his chin high.

"I don't know what you're talking about, young lady," Han said.

"I don't even know who you are."

"You'd better explain yourself," Jacen said. "Sure, we're glad you helped us out, but how dare you go accusing my father of murder?"

The young woman did not tear her gaze away from Han Solo. Her dark, sad eyes narrowed, as hard and glassy as chips of obsidian. Tenel Ka, Lowie, and Zekk also stood beside Han, but the young woman did not seem to care a whit about being outnumbered. She still held her flickering lightsaber as if ready to take them all on.

"My name is Anja," she said, her voice cold and even. "Anja Gallandro.

" Jacen watched his father flinch and draw back. His expression fell, and he swallowed hard. Jacen blinked, surprised at the guilty reaction his father had shown. Was there something to what this young woman had - said?

"You ... you're Gallandro's daughter?"

"In the flesh," Anja said. "I was just an infant when you murdered my father."

"Wait a minute." Han held up a hand. "I didn't kill Gallandro."

"I'm surprised you even remember him," Anja said bitterly. "With a career like yours, the way you stepped on your competition, cheated people, dumped your spice loads at the first sign of Imperial patrols, no wonder you've had a price on your head for most of your life."

"Of course I remember Gallandro," Han spluttered. He looked around nervously at the Ord Mantell security troops who had come with him to investigate the alarm, at the dead chameleon creatures that lay strewn on the floor. Han didn't seem to notice that the space mines had been stolen.

He said to the troops, "Clean up this mess and ... report everything to the authorities. I want to file an official complaint." He tossed his

dark hair back. "My kids were threatened. They could have been hurt."

"How touching," Anja said.

Han marched briskly toward the Millennium Falcon with a strong gesture.

"Come with me. We'll talk inside the Falcon, where we can have a bit of privacy." He strode up the boarding ramp and did not look back.

Jacen turned to his sister, and they shared a hard glance. Then all the young Jedi Knights quickly followed Han into his beloved, battered ship. Anja sniffed, drew a deep breath, and switched off her lightsaber.

She clipped it at her side. After waiting for them all to board the Falcon ahead of her, she followed them up, wary, as if suspecting a trap.

Han slumped heavily into a seat in the small recreation lounge, with its scratched and dented hologame table in the center. Equipment, spare parts, and leftovers from various cargo trips hung in the supply bins and nets. The ship looked lived in, comfortable and messy, like a familiar bedroom that wasn't cleaned up any more than it had to be.

Jacen knew that their mother Leia never made any demands on Han Solo's upkeep of the Falcon. This was his private area, and he could do what he wanted here, so long as it was safe.

"You can't lie to me, Solo," Anja said, preferring to stand despite the empty seats available. Instead, she watched him, then paced around the room looking at Han's mementos and trophies of missions he had flown.

"I've spent my life learning about my father. My mother told me some stories before she died, and there are plenty of records in the Corporate Sector Authority archives."

"Well, your father was a hard one to forget," Han Solo admitted.

"He was reputed to be the fastest draw in the galaxy. Challenged the clan leader to a duel on the planet Ammuud, but when I was picked as his opponent, Gallandro declined to fight me."

Anja snorted in disbelief "There was more to it than that. My father was working for the Corporate Sector Authority to break a slaving ring.

Slavers you were involved with, Solo."

"I didn't know!" Han said. "Anyway, I'm the one that got all the

records the Corporate Sector needed to convict the ringleaders."

"But then you overwhelmed my father, humiliated him, and fled justice so you couldn't be charged for the crimes you had committed."

Han looked at his children, who stared back with questions in their eyes. "Hey, that was a long time ago-and I didn't really do anything wrong."

Anja laughed bitterly. "Nothing wrong? How about when you killed my father?"

"But," Han insisted, "I didn't kill him. I wasn't even there. He had stunned me, and then went off-" "Hah. You were in the buried derelict Queen of Rangoon, searching for the lost treasure of Xim the Despot.

My father and you had agreed to work together to find the hoard that had been hidden thousands of years before the rise of the Old Republic.

But when you finally discovered the treasure vaults, you double-crossed him. Shot him in the back, from what I hear."

"No. That's not true," Han Solo said, his face drawn and angry now.

Jacen looked back and forth, from the stern, troubled anger of the

young woman to his father's baffled yet clearly guilt-ridden denial.

"It wasn't my fault," Han said.

"And a few years later, I was left an orphan on war-torn Anobis.

My father had come through Ord Mantell many times. He met my mother on nearby Anobis just as the civil war was starting. They fell in love, but he wasn't home much because he had his missions to accomplish. My father did great work as an agent for the Corporate Sector.

"But from one mission he never returned home. My mother was devastated. My planet was being ripped apart by a civil war caused by the Imperials and the Rebellion-and she died in despair, a widow. You took my father away."

"Hey, I didn't kill your father. Gallandro was responsible for his own death. He made a choice, and let down his guard..... Han struggled to find the right words. "He set himself up for what happened."

"Yeah. And you shot him," Anja replied.

Han Solo spread his hands but seemed to see the futility of making any further protestations. Jacen wondered why his father couldn't just convince her, why he didn't haul out proof of what had actually

happened, why he didn't even explain himself fully. What did he have to hide?

Anja sniffed the recirculated air inside the Falcon's enclosed spaces.

Jacen suddenly noticed the sour smell of Ifibricants, old upholstery, numerous meals from Corellian food packs, and the metallic tang from air that had gone too many times through the oxygen scrubbers.

"You've done well for yourself, Solo," Anja said, her eyes huge and tired. "Married to the New Republic's Chief of State, three kids training to be Jedi, Grand Marshal of the Blockade Runners Derby. I'll bet you're pretty proud. But at what price did you gain all this?

Everyone you stepped on along the way can see full well how you got where you are." Anja abruptly turned and marched toward the boarding ramp. "This isn't what I expected. I had hoped for a fight. I wanted you to argue.

But you, Han Solo ... you're nothing. Compared to my father, what he was and what he did, you're too insignificant for me to kill."

"Wait!" Han Solo said with no conviction in his voice whatsoever.

"There's a lot I can tell you about your father. He and I weren't

always enemies, you know. More like rivals, just competitors."

"I don't want to hear it, Solo. Especially not from you." She strode out. The young Jedi Knights followed her to the boarding ramp, and Han Solo joined them as Anja stalked away from the ship.

Outside, the Ord Mantell guards and cleanup crew had nearly finished restoring the docking bay to a reasonably tidy appearance. They paid no attention to the angry young woman who hurried away from the battered spaceship.

Suddenly Anja stopped, as if gathering her nerve, and turned around to flash another angry glance at Han. "If you're such a champion of goodness and righteousness, Solo," Anja said, her voice laced with venom, "and if you and the New Republic really have the best interests of the galaxy in mind, why is it that for about twenty-five years throughout the Rebellion and now during the growth of the New Republic-you have simply ignored my war-torn world? Why has Anobis been completely passed over by all of your peacekeeping and reparation efforts? Why have we received no help?" Her voice was choked with emotion.

Jaina turned to her father. "I never even heard of Anobis before we came to Ord Mantell," she said.

Anja continued, hurling the words at him like weapons. "Anobis began to fight with itself in the last days of the Empire when the agricultural plains villages took up the cause of the Rebellion, hoping to overthrow Imperial rule. The mountain mining villages, though, required interstellar trade to survive and wanted to maintain the stability of the Empire. Thus a civil war began, with Rebel sympathizers and Imperial sympathizers tearing each other apart. It's never stopped, and our world is now one big scar."

"But the Rebellion's been over for decades," Jacen said. "How could it still be an issue? The Emperor's long dead."

"And my people are still fighting. Only now they're fighting for a cause rather than for reality. You should go to Anobis, Solo. Take a good look at what's happening there. If you can tear yourself away from such important diplomatic duties as watching space races or waving banners in the winner's circle."

She glanced one more time over her shoulder. "Why don't you find out where your help is really needed? If you're brave enough to accept the challenge." Then Anja marched away, leaving Han Solo and the young Jedi Knights behind, flustered and disturbed.

Putting the despised Han Solo behind her, Anja hurried away from the docking bay, moving faster than she had expected. Emotions surged through her, and adrenaline flooded her body. She had been warned that

the encounter might affect her strongly, but she now found herself relishing the moment she had anticipated all her life.

The setup had been perfect, and Solo's reaction was priceless. Guilt had been written like a brilliant holographic billboard across his face.

Even his own children would have to doubt him now.

Oh, how she hated the man. Anja gripped the lightsaber hilt that hung at her waist. Her fingers spasmed. She stretched out her hand in front of her and watched her fingers tremble until she forced a calm upon them.

Calm ... calm.

She stepped into a turbolift that took her down to the lower levels of the tall, nondescript warehouses. She paced inside the enclosed lift, feeling like a trapped animal. With a clenched fist she pounded on the metal wall, but the slow repulsor engines took no notice of her frustration. She gritted her teeth and breathed deeply, but the cold air held a tart and metallic smell. Sweat trickled down her temples and leaked out from under the leather headband.

Han Solo's face kept flashing in front of her mind's eye, taunting her

with the thought of all the unfair advantages he had in his life-his three delightful children, his beautiful quarters at the old Imperial Palace ...

After an eternity, the lift doors opened, and Anja dashed out onto the midlevel connecting walkways. She glanced at her wrist chronometer.

It was late. She would miss her meeting unless she ran. A feral grin spread across her face. She could handle it. She had plenty of excess energy to burn off, so she sprinted. Her small feet made light clanging sounds on the metal walkways as she turned, descended a hollow-sounding staircase, and ran between a pair of large buildings in search of the right entrance.

Because of the privacy and secrecy requirements on Ord Mantell, most buildings were not numbered or identified in any way. That proved a detriment only to people who didn't know where they were going.

And Anja Gallandro knew where she was going.

Inside the echoing, complicated enclosures, she saw a host of shady-looking creatures. Some were bounty hunters or scavengers, criminals of various sorts huddling in the alleyways. Suspicious eyes gleamed at her, some on swiveling stalks, some with faceted insect eyes that captured multiple images of her figure as she flitted down one narrow alley into another. When she finally reached a sealed door with

a hidden keypad, Anja punched in the code, then paced and fidgeted for the two seconds it took for the door to acknowledge her presence and slide open.

She ducked inside, hot, anxious, burning with inner energy. The door sealed behind her with a thunk. Inside, the room was dark. Anja waited, refusing to be intimidated. Her heart still pounded, and her head seemed to crackle with static from the fading aftereffects of the dose she had taken.

Suddenly all the chamber lights blazed on. Anja stood blinking, unmoving. She knew this couldn't be a trap, because her employer had had ample opportunity to kill her before-and now she had information he needed.

"So what have you learned, little velser?" Czethros said from his comfortable seat. His single cybernetic eye blazed red behind his visor.

Velser. At first, Anja had hated the nickname Czethros gave her after taking her under his wing and training her- to be his tool, his weapon.

But then Anja had learned that velsers- :re fearsome, fastflying predatory creatures from Bepin. They were sleek, deadly attackers.

She could think of worse things to be called.

"I learned quite a bit. I met Han Solo," she said. "I told you those old space mines you set as a trap wouldn't fool him for an instant.

Now he's on his guard. I hate the man, but I respect his abilities.

His children have excellent skills as well-I watched them fight." She tossed her streaked hair back, adjusted her headband, and raised her chin. "Not as good as me, of course, even though they're using Jedi skills. They don't have quite the ... enthusiasm." Czethros laughed.

"Enthusiasm? You go into a berserker rage when you've had too much."

"It's useful sometimes," Anja said. "And I managed to drive back most of those clumsy chameleon attackers. Your work, I presume?"

"Did they get away with the evidence?"

"Easily. I hope you didn't mind losing a few of them. We had to kill about seven."

Czethros shrugged. "They're cheap. I can always buy more."

"Now it'll be harder to kill Solo," Anja said. "The one thing I'm after. You might have screwed up my chances."

Czethros laughed, though his pale, sickly-looking face showed no humor at all. He ran one hand over his moss green hair. "Solo is cocky.

His easy escape from the space mines, and your resounding defeat of the chameleon creatures, will probably only make him more willing to jump into peril, not less. He doesn't know how to be careful. And his children seem to have even greater potential for getting into trouble than he does."

"Well, I've planted the suggestion in his mind," Anja said, getting down to business. "I taunted Solo with the desperate situation on Anobis. If he rises to the bait and blunders happily into the war there, he's doomed."

"Excellent," Czethros said. "That way my overall plan can proceed without his interference. He's one of the few people in the galaxy who can expose the enterprises we're trying to build through Black Sun."

"And, if you help me get rid of him, there can be no greater payback for me than to avenge my mother and father."

"Be patient, Anja. The time will come," Czethros said. "You've waited

this long. Let's do it right."

She bit her lip and nodded. She tapped her fingers on the metal surface of the nearest table, stood up and fidgeted, looked around. "I ...

may need to go with Solo, in order to nudge a few things along." She hesitated.

Czethros watched her with his cybernetic red laser eye, waiting.

The cruel streak was coming out in him. He had to know what she wanted, but he twisted the screws, making her ask for it. For what she needed.

She drew herself up again, trying not to look weak. "But in order to be at my peak performance, as this mission requires, I'll need. .

She trailed off. He knew what she meant.

Czethros continued watching her. "Yes?"

Anja felt a flash of anger, and pounded her fist on the metal wall with a dull clang. "I need my supply! I used my last dose of spice in order to fight your clumsy henchmen."

Czethros laughed and then made a taking sound. "You seem so desperate.

Don't worry, little velser. You can count on me." From his pocket he withdrew a sealed black case and held it aloft, just far enough away that she would have to step forward and reach out to take it from him.

He tried to toy with her, pulling it back, but Anja moved too quickly.

Still in the aftereffects of her hypersensitivity, she snatched the case before he could play his little trick. Czethros covered his surprise at the speed of her reactions.

"There's your supply of andris spice," he said. "You're taking too much of it, you know. I can't keep up this rate of payment without further results."

"You'll get results," Anja said, checking the contents of the tiny carbon-freeze box. Each of the small cylindrical containers inside was wrapped in an insulated covering. Exposing the andris fibers to deep cold intensified the effect of the spice. But she didn't need another dose now-though she wanted one very, very badly. She would keep the samples, hoard them, take them only when she needed the spice.

When she needed it more than she did now.

Without a word of thanks or goodbye, Anja turned and slipped back out of Czethros's hidden warehouse. She would keep a close watch on Han Solo, and insinuate herself into his journey to Anobis. She was almost certain he wouldn't be able to resist going there now that she had challenged him.

And once he got there, he would be very surprised indeed.

Back in the diplomatic suite of Ord Mantell's most luxurious hotel, the Ord Ambassador, Jacen could not get his mind off the girl Anja.

Her sad, pain-filled eyes had seemed so out of place. Her features were delicate and beautiful ... and there had been such a strength in her whip-thin body that Jacen had expected her gaze to be as steady and cool as Tenel Ka's. But her personal pain-perhaps even a slight madness-had been all too apparent in the looks she had given Jacen and his friends.

Zekk had felt it too, because Jacen had seen the older boy's sympathetic nod when Anja spoke of her father's death, and about having been raised as an orphan. Who would understand better than Zekk how such events could change a life?

But Jacen didn't have Zekk to talk to right now. The tonner Dark Jedi had returned with Tenel Ka and Lowie to the Rock Dragon for the night.

Jacen sighed and ran his hands through his tousled curls. Why couldn't he stop thinking about Anja? He paced restlessly about the central chamber of the suite. After the long day today, Jacen had taken a hot sonic shower, but his mind did not feel refreshed. Something was bothering him, and he couldn't quite, put his finger on it. When his brother Anakin entered the room, hair still damp from his own shower, the younger boy's ice-blue gaze stopped Jacen in his tracks.

"Something's wrong," Anakin said. A statement, not a question.

Startled, as always, that his younger brother could sense things so quickly, Jacen hunched his shoulders and plopped himself down on a stone repulsor bench beside the ornamental firepit in the center of the room.

Anakin perched himself on a bench opposite Jacen and stared into the flames. "She was a very interesting person, wasn't she?" he said quietly, then waited for Jacen to answer.

Jacen glanced sharply at his little brother and stared at him for a full minute before the reason for his inner turmoil clicked into

focus.

"Dad never really explained what happened to her father," he finally blurted. "He just evaded her questions with vague answers."

"Well, he said he didn't kill Gallandro. What more do you want to know?" Jaina asked, gliding into the room and helping herself to a seat between her two brothers. She wore a loose robe, and droplets of moisture still sparkled on her cheeks from her recent bath.

Jacen set his chin stubbornly. "I want to know what happened."

Anakin shrugged. "Then let's ask Dad."

"Ask me what?" Han said, entering the room, a white sheet of absorbent material draped around his neck so that it hung down his bare torso.

He took a seat opposite Jaina and between his two sons; the four Solo family members were like points of a compass, with the artificial fire at their center. Jacen glanced at his sister. She bit her lower lip.

Anakin gestured to him, as if to say, This is your question; ask it.

Jacen knew he might sound rude, but he wanted an answer and he didn't know how else to put it. "Anja said you killed her father. You denied

it, but you never explained what happened to Gallandro."

Han nodded slowly. "That young lady took me by surprise. She reminded me of an incident from my past ... a time I'm not too proud of. "

Jacen wondered if guilt was the source of the hesitation he heard in his father's voice.

"So, what happened?" Jaina prompted, her brandy-brown eyes alight now with interest.

"We were looking for an ancient treasure, a lost legacy of Xim the Despot," Han began. He paused, then sat up straighter. He spread his hands as if backing up to provide more explanation. "Gallandro was a smuggler, you see. A quick draw, a sharpshooter and, uh"-a corner of Han's mouth quirked in a lopsided smile-"a fellow scoundrel. We found where Xim hid his treasure, but Gallandro betrayed the rest of our team. Decided he wanted it all for himself. Challenged me to a blaster fight."

Jacen was instantly alert. His father had always been one of the best shots in the New Republic. "And?"

His father lifted one shoulder for a second, then gazed down into the flames. "And I lost."

All three young Jedi stared at him in disbelief "But you're not dead,"

Jacen pointed out.

"How did Gallandro die, then?" Anakin asked.

"His aim was good, but not fatal. He drew first, hit me in the shoulder. My shot went wide, and I dropped my blaster as I fell.

While I was down he put binders on me and went off to chase one of the other members of our team, a Ruurian."

"They look kind of like miniature Hutts, don't they?" Anakin asked.

"Only furry, and with legs?"

Han nodded again. "I wasn't even there when Gallandro caught up with the Ruurian. But the treasure vaults had been booby-trappedrigged so that if you drew a weapon in certain areas, the automated defenses would take you out. There were warning lights in those areas, but the Ruurian had removed them. Gallandro never realized he was walking into a trap."

Han grimaced. "I don't know. Maybe I'd've done the same thing.

The Ruurian explained it to me afterward: he figured Gallandro had nothing to worry about-so long as his intentions were peaceful. But if

the guy drew his blaster ... well, then he'd get what he deserved.

Could be that Gallandro only meant to injure the Ruurian, like he did me. In any case, the vault's defenses did the rest."

Jaina squeezed her eyes shut. "How awful."

Jacen remained skeptical. "If that's the way it happened, then why didn't you just tell Anja?"

His father's eyes clashed with his. "Tell her what? That her father was a traitor? A man who turned on his own team once the treasure was found and took it from them? A hotshot blaster jockey who got fried because he thought with his weapons instead of his brain?"

Han drew a deep breath, let it out with a slow shake of his head.

"Besides, I had no idea before today that Gallandro had a daughter or that she's blamed me for his death all these years. With the resentment she's built up in her life, if I told her what really happened, she might just take it into her head to go after the Ruurian, Skynx, because he disabled the glow signals that would've warned her father not to draw his blaster."

Han's eyes filled with doubt, and he looked back into the artificial

firepit. "Still, I do feel a kind of responsibility toward her. I wish there was something I could do."

Jacen wondered if there was some additional reason why his father should feel responsible. Had he told them everything?

"Maybe there is something we can do," Anakin said.

Han sat back, a thoughtful look on his face. "Her planet, you mean?"

Jacen brightened at this idea. "That's right. Anobis isn't too far from here. And that civil war sounds terrible."

"It wouldn't hurt to go check it out," Han admitted. "In my official capacity, of course-see if there's anything the New Republic could do to help."

"Kind of a diplomatic mission, you mean?" Jaina said.

"I'm sure Mom would agree to that."

A slow lopsided grin spread across Han Solo's face. "Yeah. I think she would," he said, getting to his feet.

He reached out to ruffle both of his sons' hair, then walked around the circle, leaned down, and kissed Jaina on the cheek. "You kids get some

sleep now. I'm gonna get dressed, go down to a comm center, and put in an official call to the Chief of State of the New Republic."

Jacen nodded with satisfaction. It was the least his father could do.

After a strangely restless night populated by images of unbearably sad eyes and flowing dark hair streaked with blond, Jacen woke to find his sister standing beside the cushioned pallet on which he slept. She tossed a clean jumpsuit at him.

"Time to get up, sleepyhead. We want to get an early start."

Jacen, groggy from his lack of rest, blinked up at her. "What for?"

Just then Anakin appeared in the doorway, a travel satchel slung over one shoulder. "I'm all packed," he announced.

"For the fact-finding mission to Anobis," Jaina explained. "Mom said it was a good idea. She sent Dad a transmission this morning of everything the New Republic knows about the planet and their civil war.

Unfortunately, it's not much."

The impact of his sister's words finally sank in, and Jacen came fully awake. Untangling himself from the cushions and blankets, he leapt to his feet. "Where's Dad now?"

"Went down to the docking bay to start preflight checks on the Falcon," Jaina said.

"We leave in less than an hour, Jacen-if you're ready," Anakin said, running a skeptical eye over his older brother. "Zekk, Lowie, and Tenel Ka are already there waiting."

As he scrambled to get dressed, Jacen felt miraculously energetic.

They were going to do something to help Anja's planet, he thought.

Maybe they could find a way to banish the sadness from her eyes forever. The young Jedi Knights were going on a true rescue mission, just like the ones Tionne used to tell them about from Jedi legends.

He flashed his siblings a cheerful grin. "Don't worry. I'll be ready."

By the time Jacen reached the docking bay, Anakin was already at work at the navigation controls and Jaina was examining the external sublight engines. Tenel Ka, Zekk, and Lowie were gathered around Han Solo, being briefed on the upcoming mission.

Seeing Jacen, Han gestured for him to join the other young Jedi Knights. "So, if this planet is as torn up from the war as Anja says it is," he concluded, "we might just need a few extra helping hands. I think we should all stick together on the Falcon, though. Got plenty of room and there's less chance of running into trouble if we don't slip up." Jaina looked up from her work on the sublight engines.

"But what about the Rock Dragon?" she protested.

Han glanced at the Hapan passenger cruiser. "I think we can station an extra guard or two here without much difficulty."

Tenel Ka's lips curled in a hard smile. "And the vessel has its own ... security systems."

"Indeed, yes," Em Teedee said. "And they are most efficient. I had a fine conversation with them just this morning."

"It's settled then." Han clapped his hands and began giving out assignments.

Jacen was glad to know that all of his friends would be coming along.

They worked well as a team, and he had no doubt that together they

could handle anything that happened on Anobis.

He had no sooner begun his task of examining the Falcon's lower hull than a familiar figure sauntered into the docking bay. She held herself straight and proud, and her dark, streaked hair trailed behind her like the tail of a comet.

"Hey, what are you doing here, Anja?" Jacen asked, managing to sound brash, if not outright rude. He felt himself turn red with embarrassment as he realized his blunder.

The young woman seemed not to notice. She bent to look at him beneath the Falcon's hull, her big eyes serious. "After what happened yesterday, I wanted to make sure that your ship had come to no harm."

"Hey, that's kind of a coincidence," Jacen said. He started to stand to get a better look at her, but only succeeded in smacking his head on the belly of the Falcon. He quickly ducked down again. "What I mean is, we're all on our way to Anobis-to help your people, like you suggested."

Anja cocked her head slightly as she digested this information, then shrugged as if this were no more than she had expected. "I'm on my way back there myself."

"Hey, Jacen. Don't forget to check those two rear struts when you're

finished," his father's voice called from inside.

"Uh, Dad?" Jacen called back. "Do we have room for another passenger?"

"Depends. Who-?" Han jumped off the ramp to land beside the ship, and his question ended in a wordless whistle of surprise.

"Anja needs to go to Anobis, too," Jacen hastily explained, seeing the strained look that passed between his father and Gallandro's daughter.

Anja backed away from the Falcon, drew herself to her full height, and folded her slender arms across her chest. Her attention remained on Han Solo while Jacen continued.

"I thought maybe we could give her a ride. She can probably show us the safest places to land, maybe even introduce us to a few important people."

His father returned the girl's challenging stare. "Would you be willing to do that?"

Anja gave a curt nod. "Maybe not to help you-but to help my people, yes."

Han gave her a hard look, as if he didn't quite trust her motives.

"All right. You're welcome on the Falcon, then. You can tell us more about your planet's war once we're under way."

Jacen listened with fascination as Anja recounted the tale of the strife that had been raging among her people for decades, since the days of the Empire.

. "And so," Anja continued, "the people of the valley who worked all of the rich farmlands declared war on the mountain people simply because we traded with the Empire. They stopped trading with us or selling us food. What else could we do?" She looked earnestly around to her circle of listeners.

"In the mountains we had no way to make a living except with our mining. If we hadn't agreed to trade with the Empire, the Imperials would have come and taken the raw materials from us by force. We had very few herd beasts, and no croplands. We would have starved."

Seeing the skepticism on the faces of his father and his sister, Jacen could not help but come to Anja's defense. "The valley people should have been helping you. After all, it wasn't a crime just to trade with the Empire. A lot of current members of the New Republic did that."

Anja gave a sad sigh and nodded. "Not only did the farmers declare war on us, they also sabotaged our mines by booby-trapping the tunnels.

They continue to do so even today. The tunnels collapse, our people are killed, and our work becomes ever more difficult."

"Yeah, well, there are two sides to every story, kid," Han said.

"Maybe more than two."

Jacen thought about the story his father had told Anja about Gallandro's death, and what he had told Jacen, Jaina, and Anakin the night before. He wondered if there might not be more than two sides to that story as well....

"We're on a fact-finding mission here," Han went on. "And we'd like to get the story from as many points of view as we can before we decide how the New Republic can help."

Anja gave him a haughty look. "Of course, I just have to hope you know the truth when you hear it."

Jacen wondered.

As they cruised away from Ord Mantell, Anja sat stiffly against a

bulkhead wall facing the Falcon's cockpit, where Han Solo and Jaina sat at the ship's controls. Anja's face was hard, her arms folded over her chest.

Across from her, Jacen smiled. "Why don't you relax," he said.

"We'll find a way to help your planet."

Anja closed her big, sad eyes and gave a mirthless laugh. "Right.

A few pampered kids and one former smuggler will fix everything. I feel better already."

Lowie gave a soft growl, turning in the passenger seat to look at Anja.

Tenel Ka sat stiffly beside Jacen, as if ready to protect him. "This is not a fact. We are not children," she said. "We are Jedi Knights.

We have all faced hardship."

"And war," Jaina added. "And the death of friends and family."

Zekk spoke up from beside Lowie. "And General Solo here has some real influence with the New Republic fleet."

Anja looked skeptical. "It's just hard to believe, since nobody in the New Republic has ever bothered to think of us before, much less offer us help."

"Give us a chance," Jacen said. "We're your friends-at least we'd like to be."

"With the past history between our fathers, I'm not certain becoming friends is possible," she said in a flat voice. No anger, no hope ...

no emotion at all now. Jacen watched her, wondering deep in his heart exactly what had happened between Han Solo and Gallandro so many years before the twins were born. "Besides," Anja continued, "the flight to Anobis is brief enough that there's little point in getting comfortable."

"The hyperspace route to the Anobis system is short," Anakin said.

"We'll arrive in less than a day."

"Then that's when the fun starts," Anja murmured.

She removed her lightsaber and began playing with it, looking at the

intricate knobs and buttons. Every lightsaber was different, made from various raw materials. Jacen, Jaina, Tenel Ka, and Lowie had built personal energy blades using their skills and their imaginations. Anja was not a Jedi trainee, yet she had a sophisticated-looking lightsaber, apparently an ancient one.

Jacen tried again to strike up a conversation. "Hey, that's an interesting weapon. Have you had any Jedi training?"

Anja threw her head back and looked at him with scorn. "I don't have time to sit around in the jungle and concentrate at rocks and leaves."

She made a rude noise. "No. I bought this lightsaber from an old trader. He said it's some sort of Jedi relic. Who cares? It works.

That's all that matters to me."

"But you used it well against the chameleon attackers," Tenel Ka observed.

Han Solo turned in his pilot's seat. "You don't need to be a Jedi to use a lightsaber, kids," he said, still trying to make a gesture of peace toward Anja. "Fact is, I used your uncle Luke's lightsaber on Hoth, to cut open a tauntaun so we'd have a place to keep warm until I could set up a snow shelter." Anja looked at her weapon again, studied

the ancient carvings and scrollwork on its handle. She shrugged. "I can fight with reckless enthusiasm and enough skill to overpower any opponent I've encountered so far. It doesn't matter whether the Force is with me or not."

Fifteen hours later, the Falcon dropped out of hyperspace at the edge of the Anobis system.

In the cockpit Jaina sat with Zekk looking over her shoulder at the copilot controls. The dark-haired young man seemed intrigued by the systems of the modified light freighter.

"I can fly this ship," he said.

"No you can't," Han answered.

"In theory, I meant," Zekk said. "The Lightning Rod's very similar, only a little smaller and designed to be flown by only one person."

He looked down at the sensor array that scanned space in front of them.

He pointed to the small blip just as Jaina herself noticed it.

"There's another ship sharing our course," Zekk said.

"We're approaching pretty fast. That ship doesn't seem to be in much of a hurry," Jaina said. "Must be a cargo hauler."

Zekk nodded. "It has smaller engines, a bulky design. Not built for speed. It's a cargo hauler all right."

"Better let them know we're here." Han Solo leaned forward to the comm unit and opened a hailing frequency. "Ship ahead, this is the Millennium Falcon. Looks like we're on the same heading. Please identify yourself " Instead, the small hauler released a cluster of metallic spheres that drifted in space for a few seconds before exploding in a blossom of multicolored fire. Then the ship jinked to the right, altered course, and swept downward using its low-power engines. The Falcon dodged the debris and rapidly closed the distance.

"Space mines," Zekk said.

"Again? Does he think he's running his own Derby out there?"

Jaina asked.

"We'll catch up to him in no time," Zekk said. "He's got no chance of outrunning the Falcon."

The pilot ahead seemed to realize the same thing. He returned to his course and responded over the comm system. "H-hello, Millennium Falcon. This is Lilnt, captain of the Rude Awakening-an officially licensed cargo hauler from Ord Mantell. M-m-my apologies for that accidental release a minute ago. Our defensive systems malfunctioned and identified you as an enemy. I trust no one was injured?"

Han grunted. He nudged the Falcon closer to the other ship.

"What's your destination, Lilmit?"

"Anobis. I've g-got some important ... supplies to deliver."

Anja glanced up from where she sat behind an invisible psychological wall that cut her off from the companions. She came forward to the cockpit.

"He must mean food and medicinal supplies," Jaina said, not realizing that Han still had the comm circuit open.

"N-not, uh, exactly, Millennium Falcon," Lilmit said. "But my c-cargo is important to the war effort, nevertheless."

Anja moved farther into the cockpit. "He's running weapons," she said.

Her voice dripped with scorn.

"Lilmit, this is Han Solo, a special emissary from the New Republic.

I'll be coming aboard for a brief inspection." He brought the Falcon so close to the small cargo hauler that their hulls nearly touched.

"Y-Y-You what?" Lilmit stammered. The Rude Awakening put on a burst of speed that the Falcon easily matched. "Y-you have no right to detain my ship. I'm-I'm officially licensed."

"Then we should have no problem. Besides, I'm well aware of how much a license from Ord Mantell is worth," Han said, "and exactly how much one costs." He glanced at Anja. Her face bore a troubled expression.

"Are you ready to be boarded?" he said into the comm system.

The two ships flew along side by side, nearly touching, but Lilmit still refused to answer. Han extended his grappling hook and attached the docking field. "Let's do this peacefully, Lilmit. Don't make me blast you and take over the wreck of your ship. It'd be a heck of a lot of trouble for both of us."

The other pilot mumbled something unintelligible, which Em Teedee offered to relay, but the young Jedi Knights quickly assured him that

some things were better left untranslated.

&' C-c-come on aboard, then," Lilruit grumbled. "B-but you're delaying my delivery. I'm perfectly legal."

"His actions suggest otherwise," Tenel Ka said.

The docking clamp engaged with a loud metallic clank, and after a hiss of air equalization, both ships were ready. "I'm going across first, kids," Han said, taking the lead. "Just in case there's a trap."

"If it's a trap, Dad," Jaina said, following close behind him, "you'll need us next to you, not hiding inside the Falcon."

Han looked over his shoulder and cocked an eyebrow at her. "You know, you may be right."

He opened the hatch and quickly descended into the smaller ship.

Anja's face contained a thunderstorm of anger in anticipation of what she knew they would find aboard the smuggler's ship.

Lilmit, a small grayish-skinned man, had winglike eyebrows and a wrinkled, ridged scalp. He met them with frowns and flailing hands.

Jaina noticed that his fingertips were connected by thin translucent webs of skin. Finally, he forced a ridiculously fake smile onto his face.

4 I Han Solo! W-welcome aboard my ship," he said. "It's not in very g-good condition, but it's paid for. I've had it for many years-and this war on Anobis has been providing some of our best business since the Empire fell." He rambled on, his tone obsequious. "We've g-g-got a lot in common, don't we? You used to be a smuggler yourself. Y-you ran spice for Jabba the Hutt, didn't you?"

"Nearly cost me my life a few times," Han answered. "It's been decades since I ran those kinds of risks for a quick profit."

Lilmit sighed. "If only we c-could kick back in a cantina on Ord Mantell, sh-share a Rhuvian fizz or some Osskom ale. Then we'd have time to socialize."

"I'm not here to socialize, Lilmit," Han said coldly. "We're here to check out your ship's cargo."

Anja snatched out her lightsaber, switching it on so that its acidyellow glare flooded the small compartment. "Show us your cargo now! " Lilmit recoiled, holding up his webbed hands. "It's j-just my usual run! I've been doing this for years. N-rmobody's ever bothered me before."

"Then today's your lucky day," Zekk said, standing close to Anja.

The young woman, tall and slender, had a sort of animal energy that dominated the room. Zekk had no lightsaber himself. Jaina, Jacen, Tenel Ka, and Lowie did not draw their weapons, though the smuggler could surely see them at their sides.

"All right, all right. C-come with me."

Inside the cargo hold they found crates filled with munitions: blasters, burrowing detonators, sonic punchers, and other explosive devices.

"Just as I thought," Anja said. She pointed to the box of sonic punchers. "He's taking these weapons to the enemy."

"War material is forbidden, even for smugglers," Han Solo said.

"I can't remember the exact statute or regulation in the New Republic charter, but I'm sure that's the case."

"I would be pleased to look it up for you, Master Solo," Em Teedee volunteered. Lowie rumbled that it didn't matter at the moment.

Lilmit looked completely flustered. "I'm m-merely trying to make a living. There's a good m-market for these things on Anobis. There's quite a demand. P-people need to defend themselves."

"And which side have you chosen?" Tenel Ka said. "Which army do you support?"

"Oh, I couldn't take s-sides in a civil war," Lilmit said. "That would be unfair. I supply everybody. L-I-let them work it out. That's my creed."

Anja flared with anger, barely able to keep herself from cleaving the smuggler in two with her lightsaber. "You supply the enemy and our side? You sell to both equally?"

"Wait a minute," Jaina said. "Which one is 'our' side? We're just going there to investigate."

Anja didn't hear her. She turned to Han Solo. "If you really pride yourself in being a high-and-mighty representative of the New Republic, you cannot let him deliver these weapons. Think of how many people these munitions will kill ... how much more blood will be on your hands."

Han drew himself up. "Anja's right. We're going to have to confiscate your cargo, Lilmit."

"You c-can't do that!" the smuggler wailed. "I've got m-mouths to feed-an entire litter of offspring back at Ord Mantell. You'd put them out into the streets! I'll f-file a complaint!"

"I happen to know it doesn't cost much more to get a license permanently canceled than it costs to buy one in the first place."

Han's gaze didn't waver. "And in your case, I'd consider the credits well spent. You might want to try a more reputable line of business."

Han gestured to Lowie, who helped him lift a large crate of burrowing detonators and set it in the center of the cargo floor, just above an iris-ing space hatch. "Let's pile these other crates on top," Han said.

Zekk, Tenel Ka, and the twins used the Force to help, while Anakin did his best to be of assistance in directing their efforts. Anja remained where she was, her lightsaber still drawn as if daring Lilmit to argue with them.

"I'll report you to the authorities on Ord Mantell," the smuggler whined. "Y-you say you're confiscating my cargo, but you'll probably fence it yourself, s-s-sell it on the black market."

"Hey, not a chance," Jacen said.

Han Solo opened up a crate and removed one of the powerful detonators.

After setting its timer, he placed it back in the box and sealed it.

They locked all of the cargo crates together magnetically and coded the locks to a single control. After Anakin scrambled the coded combination for him, Han stood back. "I think we'd better leave our friend Lilmit alone so he can jettison his crates."

"B-b-but there's a fortune tied up in those weapons!" the little man said. He waved his webbed hands as his eyebrows flew upward like flames to his wrinkled scalp.

Han drew his blaster and pointed toward the crate with the timer ticking down. "If I were you, I'd get rid of the cargo, Lilmit. If you don't your ship'll become the newest, brightest little star in this part of the galaxy. I can't make that choice for you, but I'm not going to wait around to see what you do." He gestured, and the young Jedi Knights hurried after him to the Millennium Falcon's docking port.

Lilmit wailed, "B-but I'll never get that open in time! How m-much

time did you set the countdown for?"

"Oh, a minute ... maybe two. Can't remember exactly."

The smuggler ran to the crate, pounded on its side. "I can't g-get it open!"

"I suggest you jettison your cargo without delay," Tenel Ka said.

Lowbacca added his growl of affirmation.

The companions scrambled back into the Falcon. Han headed straight for the pilot's seat and strapped himself in while Jaina released the magnetic docking connection. They split away from the smaller cargo hauler and drifted off to a safe distance.

"How long does he have, Dad?" Jaina asked.

"Plenty of time," Han said. "I think."

Finally they saw a cluster of glittering objects pop out from the bottom of the smuggler's ship. Lilmit's sublight engines kicked in, and he streaked away only moments before the jettisoned cargo containers erupted into a white-hot ball of light.

„Looks like he ' made the right decision," Jacen said.

"This is a fact," Tenel Ka agreed.

"Not bad, Solo," Anja said. "Your method was crude, but it's good to know you occasionally do make the right decision."

Aboard his small ship, Lilmit swung between despair and outrage. He had just lost a huge profit. It would have paid for his long-awaited vacation on Tatooine. For years he had scrimped and saved so that he could fly out under the double suns, soak up warmth from the glittering sands, enjoy the wild nightlife in Mos Eisley. Now those dreams and plans were trashed.

With trembling fingers he opened a special private comm signal. It was time to express his anger to the people in charge. Perhaps they could do something about this marauder, this space pirate named Han Solo.

Lilmit clenched a fist, trying to control his anger.

The image of Czethros appeared on the screen. The angry-faced leader appeared greatly annoyed that Lilmit had bothered him. His red laser eye burned bright behind his metal visor.

"You m-must do something about Han Solo!" the smuggler blurted, leaning so close that his flat nose nearly touched the viewplate.

"He and a group of kids just boarded my ship en route to Anobis. They confiscated my cargo and forced me to destroy all the weapons."

"Really?" Czethros said. "You didn't mention my name, did you?"

"I don't want Anja to know that Black Sun is involved in her own little war."

"Of course I kept m-m-my mouth shut," Lilmit said. "But what am I supposed to do now?"

"Obviously, you'll have to make up for these losses."

"D-don't you think I know that?" Lilmit said. "But I want you to make Solo p-p-pay for this-in blood. I work hard, I pay my protection money, and I do whatever you ask. Now it's time for Black Sun to do something for me. K-keep the spacelanes to Anobis safe for us gun runners." Czethros laughed, but the laser-red eye in his visor did not waver.

"You can't order me around, Lilmit. You're no one, a mere underling who drives a craft and delivers boxes."

Lilmit trembled, knowing he had overstepped his bounds in talking to

Czethros that way. One didn't make an enemy of the powerful crime organization without paying a steep price. Thanks to the efforts of Czethros, Black Sun's tentacles now reached into every known business in this part of the galaxy.

Then Czethros did smile; it appeared to be a genuine smile, or perhaps the man was a much better actor than Lilmit thought. "It just so happens, though, that your wishes exactly parallel mine with regard to Solo. Sort of a personal grudge of mine. Don't worry about it for now."

"But how will I g-get restitution?" Lilmit stuttered.

"Someone has to p-pay for my lost cargo."

"You're absolutely right," Czethros said. "You do. You allowed yourself to be boarded. You didn't deal with the situation properly, and you lost the weapons. It comes out of your account."

Lilmit swallowed hard. He knew of no way he could escape his obligation now.

Czethros laughed. "If it's any consolation, Solo is walking right into the civil war on Anobis. He seems to think he can make everything better, but I've got about a thousand different ways to make sure he never leaves that planet alive."

"Well," Lilmit mumbled. "That's one thing to look forward to at least." Slumping deep into his pilot chair, he switched off the communications channel, then called up his credit records and banking tables in an attempt to figure out how he could possibly pay for the lost merchandise.

From the corner of her eye, sitting in the Falcon's copilot's seat, Jaina observed the change in Anja's demeanor after the run-in with the weapons smuggler. It seemed the thin, angry girl had gained a small measure of respect for Han Solo, though it was clear she still carried an enormous chip on her shoulder.

Then, as Han brought the ship down through the atmosphere of Anobis toward the war-scarred inhabited areas, something happened to fire up Anja's temper all over again.

She pointed to a wrinkled ridge of mountains in a temperate zone.

"My mining village is down there. The leader of the town, Elis, holds great power in the loose federation of mountain villages. We should talk to him. He'll confirm everything I've said."

"But aren't they the Imperial sympathizers?" Zekk said.

Anja bristled. "That's what the original debate was about, over twenty years ago. Now the war has become ... something more."

But instead of heading for the mountains, Han arced the Falcon away toward the flat fertile ground embroidered with rivers and green forests, square patches that had once been fields, and small clusters of homes. The farmland, now brown and abandoned, was dotted with small craters.

"I want to try talking to the people of a farm village first," Han said. "We've already heard Anja's side of the story. Let's get a little perspective." Anja fumed. She jutted her chin forward. "You don't believe me?"

You think I lied to you?"

"I didn't say that at all," Han said.

"He just wants to get a different point of view now," Jacen said.

"Don't worry. We'll talk to both sides."

Anja lowered her voice. "Right. More than twenty years of war and a former spice smuggler is supposed to trot in, talk to a few people, and put an end to the fighting."

Tenel Ka's voice became gruff, matching Lowie's deep growl.

"Perhaps it is time someone did something to prevent your people from continuing their fighting."

"You're asking for trouble," Anja said bitterly. "Those farmers down there can't be trusted. They'll probably try to blast you out of the skies as you come in for a landing."

"Good thing we just upgraded the Falcon's shields, then," Han said.

Jaina grimaced. "If we can't even land safely, how did you expect us to survive in the midst of a whole civil war?"

Anja narrowed her eyes as if this exact question had occurred to her already. Somewhat unsettled, Jaina turned back to the copilot controls and scanned the ravaged landscape that rolled past beneath them.

Anobis had been an agricultural and mining colony world, never heavily populated and somewhat off the beaten path, despite its easy access to Ord Mantell. It seemed that the colonists managed to survive well enough to build their homes and live their lives, but no one ever became rich here. Except maybe the gun runners, Jaina thought, since the war had continued for so many years.

Even before the days of the Empire, the miners and the farmers had traditionally been separate groups with different needs and distinctly different outlooks. From the sketchy background files her mother had sent, Jaina knew that the miners and farmers had once cooperated with each other, exchanging metals and raw materials for produce.

But the two groups had been divided by their political leanings during the Rebellion. The miners, more dependent on offworld trade, worked to maintain the status quo of the Empire. The farmers had wanted freedom instead-the ability to succeed or fail on their own merits without the angry yellow eyes of the Emperor watching them.

As galactic struggles had raged and resolved themselves independently around Anobis, the colonists had battered each other, continuing to fight long after the New Republic had won its victory.

As Jaina looked out the Falcon's cockpit windows, she saw a world with the potential for beauty, but with so many scars that a long time of peace would be needed for complete healing. A large forest fire burned in the hills, far from the nearest farming village. It might even have been a natural fire.

"Jacen," Han said, "try the comm system; see if you can talk to anybody down there. Let them know we're here to help, not to fight."

Anja rolled her eyes and sat back, crossing her arms over her chest.

Jacen sent out repeated calls on the comm system, but received no answer.

"Doesn't mean they don't hear us," Jaina pointed out. "They might just have a receiver and no transmitter."

"Or they might be setting a trap," Anja said.

Han brought the ship in low over the largest fanning village he could find. Jaina maneuvered the Falcon to a smooth landing not far from the cluster of rickety homes. The boarding ramp extended, and the group climbed out, blinking in the hazy sunlight of the war-torn world.

In the distance, the smoke from the distant fire curled up from the hills.

The timid villagers slowly crept out of their huts, heads lowered and shoulders hunched. They gaped in astonishment and fear at the strange spaceship. Jaina and her companions lifted their hands in a wave of greeting.

Han Solo said, "I'm an official representative from the New Republic, come to investigate your civil war and to offer any assistance we can."

The people remained quiet and did not venture any farther out of their shelters.

"You'd think they'd have some kind of welcoming conu-nittee," Zekk muttered. He stepped close to Jaina.

"Maybe they can't afford one," Han mused aloud.

The buildings needed a great deal of work. Every one of them had obviously been patched and rebuilt numerous times in the wake of repeated battles. Some of the walls were new; others were composed entirely of salvage and scrap. A rickety grain-storage tower barely managed to stand upright at the rear of the village.

The hazy sky was bright, the air humid and warm, smelling of smoke.

Cleared flatlands extended into the distance toward a thick forest that separated them from the rugged mountains. From what little Jaina knew about farming, she suspected this should have been the peak of the growing season-but she saw only a few skittish figures out working in the fields, hopping and dodging about in a strange way that made no sense to her. No crops grew in the barren fields, only a few patches of greenery that had sprouted all on their own.

Jacen bowed and flashed a friendly smile, trying to charm the

villagers. "Take us to your leader?"

Finally, several of the farmers came out. Their eyes were sunken, their faces gaunt. Some looked angry; many wore bandages from injuries.

Anja hung back, scowling, and muttered to Jacen, "I can't believe we were ever afraid of these people. They look too skittish to fight a nerf colt."

"They've probably been through a lot," Jacen said.

"So have my people in the mountains," Anja retorted.

The other villagers faced one of the central dwellings and waited until a door swung open and a broad-shouldered man hobbled out. He had obviously once been a muscular person, perhaps a great farmer who could lift his own weight in punja grain or fight herd beasts bare-handed.

But now the man's skin had a pale appearance, as if he spent all his time indoors.

As he stepped forward, the man's left foot clanked on the ground.

Jaina saw that his real leg had been amputated just below the knee; he

wore a makeshift replacement limb, cobbled together from secondhand droid parts that didn't quite fit together. Although the servomotors no longer functioned, the man used his droid limb as a peg leg to help him walk about as he needed.

"We don't get many visitors here," the man said, "except for people wanting to sell us weapons ... or to prey on us."

"We're not trying to do either," Han Solo said. "We want to help. "

"Then I don't know what you think you can do for us." The man sighed and clomped forward, extending a callused hand. Han Solo took it gratefully. Jaina also shook the man's hand while the others greeted him in their own ways. Anja remained at a distance, her face a mask of distrust.

"My name is Ynos," the man said. "I'm what passes for a leader in this group of villagers, though we're mostly starving and we don't amount to much of anything."

"If you're starving then why aren't you out working the fields?"

Jaina asked. "There seems to be plenty of cropland, and it's a beautiful day."

"Because we're afraid to," Ynos said, his lips twisting in an angry snarl. "The mountain miners have ruined all of our fertile land."

There was a time when we harvested enough to keep us fat, with plenty left over for trading with the miners, as well as for export offworld.

Now we barely scrape by with our tiny gardens here."

He gestured to small patches of plants outside the ramshackle homes.

"A few of our people have tried to clear some of our old acreage, but it's a dangerous task. The cursed miners plant burrowing detonators everywhere."

Jaina shuddered. She had heard about mobile robotic explosives that tunneled into the ground and waited there for someone-anyone-to unwittingly step on them.

"Some of our braver young men and women venture into the forests to hunt for food, but even the trees and shrubs are booby-trapped with deadly pits and trip wires. Sometimes our hunters don't come back."

Several villagers sighed or smothered soft moans of despair.

"It is only a matter of time before we're all wiped out," Ynos said.

"Then the mountain villagers will have won the war."

"Unless we kill them first," said one brash young helper.

"And then we will all be dead anyway," Ynos replied in a heavy voice.

Tenel Ka looked at the man and studied his stump of a leg. She seemed to feel a camaraderie with Ynos, though her injury had been caused by an accident, and his by an act of war. "There is no honor in such destruction. Only cowards kill those they cannot see. And only a fool kills when there are other options."

Ynos sighed and looked around at the squalid village. Jaina followed his gaze. Her heart went out to the desperate workers in the nearby fields. She saw a few figures moving slowly, taking each step with meticulous care.

A sudden wash of dread flooded through her. All the young Jedi Knights whirled and focused on the same field, sensing the danger just as one of the distant farmers stepped forward. An explosion ripped under his feet, sending up a cloud of dust and dirt shards, along with an incinerating heat.

The scattered workers in the fields screamed. Some froze in utter terror, while others ran blindly back along the narrow, well-packed trails that led safely through the cropland. The villagers lurched

into motion, rushing toward the field.

Anakin popped back into the Falcon and emerged a moment later carrying the medikit. Tenel Ka ran like a hunting cat, with Anja pacing her step for step, as if it were some kind of a competition rather than a race to rescue an injured man who had stepped on a burrowing detonator.

"Be careful!" Ynos shouted, limping behind them as the other young Jedi ran. At the edge of the fields, many of the farmers stopped to embrace those who had successfully made it onto safe ground. The young Jedi Knights followed the narrow footpaths. Jaina could see where other detonators had left craters and pockmarks in the fields, uprooting precious crops, leaving their poisonous residue as a chemical stain on the once-fertile dirt.

Ahead, Jaina saw the mangled body of the man who had been hurled high by the explosion and dropped back down among the rocks and clods of dirt. His clothes were torn, his face and limbs scorched from the blast. Blood seeped from massive injuries in his legs and chest. The man groaned. Jaina and her companions rushed to his side.

"Saw it..... the man groaned, " saw it coming toward me ...

jumped." He gasped for breath, and Jaina thought she could hear his

ribs cracking as he inhaled. "Not fast enough. This place ...

infested with burrowers."

Han came up, panting. "Looks bad. Can we get him back to the Falcon's medical bay?"

Anakin opened the medikit, but the mangled man shuddered. Blood still oozed from his wounds. A moment later, he collapsed backward with a convulsion. Jaina could tell without checking that he had died.

Just then Ynos hobbled up on his mechanical leg and looked down at the dead man. He assessed the injuries with narrowed eyes and nodded grimly. "Perhaps it's best he died quickly. He'd never have recovered, and he would have hated being crippled."

"That is not for us to judge," Tenel Ka said. "We cannot know what he might have contributed-even with a handicap-had he survived."

Ynos shook his shaggy head in despair. "There will be more deaths and injuries like this. Many more, and there's nothing we can do about it.

The miners buy burrowing detonators and turn them loose in our fields faster than we can clear them. We'll never have happy lives again.

"We'll all starve."

Han Solo forced an optimistic expression and put a hand on the old man's shoulder as three farmers gently carried their friend's body away.

"You won't starve tonight. The Falcon has plenty of food packs in its prep unit. I can make you all a decent meal, something to give you strength. It's not much, but it's the best we can do right now."

Ynos looked at them, hunger in his eyes. Jaina could see he desperately wanted to accept the offer.

"No argument," Han said, before the limping man could think of anything to say.

One by one, the other villagers approached, eyes still wide with horror at the death they had witnessed, but ready to see how Han and the young Jedi Knights intended to help them.

Before Han Solo and the young Jedi Knights prepared evening meal in the Millennium Falcon, the villagers all worked together to dig a grave for the man who had died that afternoon. They buried him in an area already dotted with mounds, and Jacen realized with shock that each mound was a grave. He doubted that many of the dead had fallen prey to

natural causes.

Anobis appeared worn out and stretched to its limits, as if it were making a last gasp for life. As far as Jacen could tell, agricultural settlements such as this one continued fighting only out of sheer habit, not because of any lingering convictions. The current of hatred ran too deep to be diverted by any rational arguments.

The fanners ate the Falcon's food supplies with great gusto as Jacen and Jaina served meal after meal from the galley. Tenel Ka, Lowie, and Em Teedee welcomed guests and cleaned up after each one, while Zekk and Anakin tinkered with the food-prep unit to see if it could produce the meals faster.

The sun of Anobis set in a coppery orange glow behind the ominous mountains where the enemy mining villages were located. The smoke in the air made the colors more vivid. Keeping to herself, Anja gazed toward the craggy shadows with something akin to longing, while the farming villagers looked at the mountains with fear and loathing.

Outside, Han ate with old Ynos. The village leader seemed content that his people had received this small reprieve. "So who speaks for all the farmers?" Han asked. "Is there a council I could talk to? What would it take to bring about a cease-fire between the miners and farmers-stop all this death and destruction, even temporarily?"

Jacen paused in his serving to listen to the old farmer.

"Each of the farm communities is separate and independent, though ours is one of the largest," Ynos said, wiping his mouth. "I can speak for these people as well as anyone else. I know how they feel."

He heaved a great sigh. "You saw what happened this afternoon.

It is a common occurrence. Day after day, our people are slaughtered indiscriminately by brutal weapons that strike unarmed targets. None of us are soldiers. The graveyard beyond the village is filled with the innocent victims of the miners' hatred."

Jacen saw his father shoot a glance over at Anja, his face troubled.

Jacen was confused because the young woman had told a completely different story about how much pain the farmers caused the people in the mountains. He would have to assume that neither story was exactly correct.

As twilight turned into deeper dusk, the most physically fit young men and women finished eating their fill of the donated rations, then went out as sentries to guard the village. The mine-laced fields sprawled toward the forests and mountains in the west, while behind them rocky hills etched with canyons looked just as inhospitable. Night insects,

birds, and more sinister-sounding creatures bumbled and set up their songs around the darkening plain, particularly from the rugged hills to the east where the brush fire still glowed.

"What are you afraid of?" Jacen asked one of the villagers. "What are you guarding against?"

The gaunt young man looked at him in shock. "Everything," he said.

When Jacen finally settled down to eat, he felt uncomfortable with his usual large plateful when these people had been starving for so long.

Off in the darkness he heard the strange night sounds getting louder.

A low hooting and snarling from the rocks came closer. The villagers looked up in alarm.

The ferocious sound grew louder, echoing, as if it came from dozens, perhaps even hundreds of throats. Now a rustling approached through the distant, fire-ravaged hills. After a moment of rising tension, the sentries shouted an alarm.

Tenel Ka sprang to her feet and stood beside Jacen. "What is it?"

she said. "Are the mountain miners attacking?"

Anja dropped back toward the Falcon, a startled look on her face.

Lowie sniffed the air and growled. "Dear me, Master Lowbacca," Em Teedee said. "I'm certain I can't identify the specie,;, but I do agree those definitely sound like the voices of predators."

The sentries yelled out, "Knaars! Knaars!" The villagers who were still eating dropped their plates of precious food and scrambled back to their homes. Some grabbed sticks, others gathered prized possessions.

Many wailed in panic.

"What is it?" Jacen cried. "What are knaars?"

"Monsters!" Ynos said, pivoting on his droid leg. "It sounds like an entire herd migrating from the hills. The fire must have driven them in our direction." He hung his head as villagers continued their disorganized evacuation efforts all around them. "Now the miners will have cause to rejoice. Our village will be wiped out."

"Can you not fight these monsters?" Tenel Ka said.

"For a few minutes," one of the villagers said.

"I'm going to kill five before they take me down," a brash young man said, though the look of terror on his pale face belied his brave words.

"Killing five won't even help," Ynos said. "A migration pack contains hundreds, and the fire has driven them into a frenzy."

"We can fight beside you." Tenel Ka clutched her lightsaber. "We are Jedi."

"Then you might kill five yourself But we'll still all fall under their fangs and claws." Ynos shook his head. "We may as well fightthere's nowhere to run." He glanced over at the deadly minefields blocking their path toward the forest, their direction of escape.

Han stood up and put a protective hand on Jacen's shoulder as the sounds of hooting and howling grew louder. They heard thundering feet, claws skittering on stones. "I could take some refugees in the Falcon.

I can't carry nearly enough, though."

Ania stood beside the boarding rwnp. "I'll get my lightsaber," she said, and ducked inside.

Jacen glanced after her with a questioning look. He had thought she

always wore the weapon at her belt. But that hardly mattered now. He was much more concerned about the oncoming predators.

Inside the back cabin where she had stashed her pack, Anja rummaged among her belongings and took out the small black carbon-freeze unit.

Her fingers trembled. She had been wanting the spice so badly; now, at last, she had a perfect excuse.

Hunching over to hide what she was doing, Anja took one of the tiny black cylinders in her hand. Its coldness felt welcome against her sweaty palm. Czethros had given her only enough andris for four doses-not as many as she wanted ... but she would have to make it last.

Looking longingly at the three remaining packages of spice, she sealed them in her pack. Then she carefully unwrapped the insulating opaque paper that surrounded the spice. The andris spice came from a newly discovered vein on Kessel, the highest quality available.

Anja could barely wait. Outside she heard shouts, human voices among the predatory growls. She would have to hurry.

Before the spice could warm to air temperature, she slipped it under her tongue and felt the energy course through her. Her muscles sang.

Her nerves became much more sensitive. Her thoughts whirled. Her blood pumped more freely, the air tasted sweeter, and her mind opened to things around her that she had never before noticed.

The spice heightened her senses, increased her ability to fight, improved her reflexes. Anja clasped the ancient lightsaber at her side. With the full dose of spice surging through her body, she felt vibrant, powerful, ready to take on any foe.

As Han Solo led a group of escaping villagers into the Falcon, Anja pushed past him to run outside. At this moment she didn't care how many knaars were attacking. She could handle them all.

"There's no time to argue, Dad," Jaina said, standing at the base of the ramp as Han Solo tried to cram a last few people aboard. Zekk had already gone into the cockpit and was powering up the engines for immediate takeoff. A dozen of the remaining villagers huddled around Jaina in terror, holding sticks and agricultural implements. One woman had a small laser drilling tool.

"Take Anakin and go," Jaina insisted. "We have our lightsabers, and we have to help these people."

"But I can't leave my own kids behind," Han said, obviously torn.

"We're Jedi Knights, Dad. We have a better chance than any of these villagers. We've got to protect them."

And with that, the first knaars charged out of the darkness at the ramshackle line of buildings, looking for prey. Jaina stood startled for a moment. Tenel Ka, Lowie, and Jacen all stared at their new enemy.

"We're doomed," Em Teedee wailed.

The knaars were fast-moving reptilian predators, sleek saurians with purplish-blue scales and a silver frill of razor-sharp spines along their backs. Tails slashed back and forth, inflicting damage on anything around them with their wicked barbs. The creatures' muscular anus ended in a fistful of claws, and their immense jaws were heavy machinery designed only for eating.

The pack of bloodthirsty beasts stampeded into the village. They swiveled their heads from side to side, clenching and unclenching their grasping claws, looking for flesh to tear.

As the Falcon blasted its repulsobets and rose up, Jaina watched it swivel around and fly low to the ground, approaching the predatory knaars. Han and Zekk would use blaster cannons to shoot the creatures, Jaina knew, but as the pack of monsters continued to flow from the

hills, she realized it would never be enough. This migratory pack consisted of hundreds upon hundreds of members, each hungry from its long charge through the rocky hills.

Jaina's lightsaber blazed violet in her hand, and her friends drew their weapons as well. Anja rushed up, looking flushed and full of adrenaline; she danced from foot to foot, as if anxious to attack anything that came close. But the moment the knaars fell upon the nearest guard and tore the old woman apart, the other villagers turned and fled, forgetting to put up even a pretense of a fight.

Instantly Jaina saw that the battle was hopeless. Even with their lightsabers, even with the Millennium Falcon's blasters, they couldn't possibly drive the knaars away. Their best choice was to flee and hope to find a place of refuge or a protected area in which they could make a stand.

And their only path to escape lay through the detonator-salted fields.

The Falcon blasted two of the leading knaars. Several of their fellows fell upon the bodies, stripping the meat off the bones of the dead predators. But scores of knaars kept coming.

The Falcon fired again. Heedless of this minor interruption, the monsters surged forward, slashing with claws, snapping their jaws at

their helpless prey. Jaina, with her companions and the remaining villagers, turned and ran headlong into fields full of burrowing detonators.

As the Millennium Falcon took off with a roar, Zekk heard the villagers crowded in the back of the Falcon moan with fear. His attention, though, was focused on the sparks and flashes of light that signified lightsabers as the young Jedi Knights fought down below.

"Zekk, get into the gun well and start blasting those creatures!"

Han Solo shouted.

"I hope your laser cannons are fully charged," Zekk said, climbing down into the gun well. He dropped into the chair, strapped in, and powered up the Falcon's weaponry.

Han soared low to the ground, swooping back toward the ramshackle village. The reptilian predators prowled along, moving with the speed of hunger, cunning evident in their intelligent yellow eyes.

"There are so many of them!" Zekk muttered, seeing the sinuous shapes dart forward like purplish-blue shadows. One of the creatures grabbed a young man and swallowed him in a single gulp before Zekk could aim the laser cannons. He wondered if that victim had been one of the

brash young men who had tried to act so brave when the knaars were first coming.

Zekk targeted and fired, blowing the reptilian creature to sizzling bits. He rotated in the gun well again, seeking another target. It was difficult to zero in on the dark shadowy monsters-and he didn't dare risk hitting one of the people.

Below, a knaar advanced along the pale wall of a building. One villager had tried to take shelter around the corner, in the doorway.

The knaar approached, sniffing, its claws extended. Zekk targeted and fired.

The frightened villager scrambled to one side as the smoking body of the enormous reptile slumped to the ground in front of him, its fanged mouth open wide.

A shot now fired from the other gun well, striking one of the saurians in its lower leg. The moment it collapsed, honking and howling in pain, other knaars fell upon their wounded companion.

"Hope you don't mind, Zekk," Anakin said through the comm system.

"I've had a bit of target training myself, but the twins get to practice more often."

The knaars continued to sweep forward. Two new ones seemed to appear for every one Zekk blasted.

Han Solo circled around and came back for another run. His concerned voice came over the comm system. "What's she doing?"

"Jaina's leading them toward the minefield!" Anakin's voice replied.

Zekk looked down and saw by the glow of the lightsaber blades that the young Jedi Knights had turned and headed with the remaining villagers into the barren fields that were full of burrowing detonators.

He thought of Jaina down there fighting against monsters and running into even more dangerous territory. His heart sank, but he gritted his teeth and grabbed the firing controls. If he couldn't pull off a spectacular rescue, at least he'd do his part to keep her safe-or as safe as she could possibly be under the circumstances.

Jaina planted her feet firmly on the rough ground and held her lightsaber high. The slaving knaar in front of her did not seem at all intimidated by her violet Jedi blade. The reptilian creature gave a high-pitched bellow, then reached forward with its claws, snapping with powerful jaws that looked strong enough to rip a repulsorpod from a starship engine.

Jaina swung forward and down with her crackling lightsaber, cleaving the monster from its shoulder down to the center of its rib cage.

The creature thrashed and fell down as smoking blood bubbled from its dying heart.

Anja continued to let out loud whoops and shouts of challenge. She ran faster than the knaars, darting from one to another, wounding them with her lightsaber and diving out of the way as their claws slashed at her.

She let the other carnivores do the rest of the work for her. She needed only to wound a beast, then the other knaars would tear it to pieces for the meat.

Anja's hair flew in the wind, barely held in place by the leather band.

Sweat dripped down her temples onto her flushed face, but she was so full of adrenaline she seemed incapable of slowing down.

Lowbacca let out a loud Wookiee roar as he and Jacen motioned the villagers to follow them into the treacherous cropland. The villagers dropped their fanning implements and ran. Panicked, some of them dashed right past the young Jedi.

"Wait! We have to find a safe path for you!" Jacen yelled. But one middle-aged woman clutching a satchel of valuables over her shoulder tore ahead in blind terror as she fled from the knaars.

"No! Wait!"

She ran through the uncleared cropland. Jacen felt an intuitive stab and a chill at the back of his neck-a premonition-just before she stepped down on one of the hidden burrowing detonators. The explosion ripped the night with a flash of brilliance and a boom of echoing thunder. The woman fell instantly, but the monsters charged toward the fields and Jacen could not take a moment to determine whether or not she had survived. The villagers screamed in despair, caught between their fear of the minefield ahead and the rampaging predators behind.

Lowie roared something at Jacen about the Force and gestured to the ground. Em Teedee quickly translated. "Master Lowbacca suggests that by using your Jedi senses, you could perhaps determine the locations of the burrowing detonators and thus avoid them. That would give us the best chance of survival."

Jacen realized that his Wookiee friend was right. If he could calm himself enough to use the Force, he might be able to map out a safe path that the villagers could follow-a path that the knaars would not

understand.

"And I do suggest you be careful," the little droid added. "I have no desire to become a useless lump of floating metal with no one to translate for."

As his eyes adjusted to a darkness lit only by the green glow of his lightsaber and Em Teedee's optical sensors, Jacen trotted ahead as fast as he dared, keeping his eyes to the ground. Stretching out his free hand before him, he sensed ripples in the dirt, tiny echoes of movement and then he spotted a slight trembling where the mechanical explosives had tunneled beneath the surface. Across the fields he could see a checkerboard pattern of places to avoid, and places where it was safe to walk.

"Follow us!" he shouted, holding his emerald lightsaber like a beacon overhead. "We can see a path!"

The ginger-furred Wookiee bellowed a confirmation, raised his own molten-bronze blade, and sprinted ahead on his long legs. A magenta glow from Tenel Ka's rancor-tooth lightsaber indicated another safe path.

Jaina and Anja remained behind to guard the group's retreat and to slow down the charging beasts. Overhead, the Millennium Falcon's engines rumbled in the air. Laser beams lanced out from both gun turrets,

striking knaars. Still more of the migratory pack surged like a camlyorous flood out of the rocky hills.

The villagers ran onward, grasping at any shred of hope as they followed Jacen and Lowie through the minefield. Fortunately, the knaars did not understand the explosives. They surged forward on their scaly, muscular legs, ready to snatch anyone who fell behind.

Two of the largest knaars, their silvery razor frills raised and yellow eyes glowing like lamps in the darkness, circled around to the left to charge ahead of the fleeing group and cut off their retreat. Tenel Ka turned to face them, glaring with her granite-gray eyes as if daring them to approach.

The two reptiles kept moving, staying close together. When the larger knaar stomped on one of the burrowing detonators, the explosion knocked both creatures aside, tearing open their rib cages. They lay wounded on the ground, honking and roaring in pain. Tenel Ka would have dispatched them herself, but their noises only served to attract other hungry knaars. Before long, under the double moonlight of Anobis, the two predators fell silent as their roars were replaced by the wet sounds of tearing meat and gnashing fangs.

The Falcon soared above the knaars, blasting more of the creatures.

One of the villagers tripped. Before he could scramble to his feet again, two monsters fell upon him. When another young man turned back with a shout and tried to defend his friend, the knaars attacked him as well.

At the last instant, when it seemed the young man was surely doomed, Anja appeared beside him. Her lightsaber swept out in a blazing swath of acid yellow to lop off both forearms of the predator. The sizzling stumps of its clawed hands fell to the ground, and the monster roared, flailing about, unable to grasp anything. In blind rage it chomped at the nearest creature-another knaar. The two reptiles tore at each other, wrestling one another to the ground. In moments, other predators came in to finish off both of them.

The cropland stretched ahead, seemingly forever. Jacen continued to run, finding it easier to pick his way around the burrowing detonators now. He saw some active ones shifting their positions underneath the soil.

Beyond, the thick forest looked like a goal line. If only they could get to the shelter of the trees, perhaps they could fight better than out in the open. But Jacen couldn't be sure. For now they were just running.

He couldn't imagine how the group could possibly turn aside all the knaars, even with five active lightsaber blades and assistance from the

Millennium Falcon.

Two more explosions ripped the night, and Jacen was relieved to see that it was only more reptilian predators stumbling upon the explosives. He looked to one side and saw a bobbing metallic sphere.

Em Teedee had detached himself from Lowie's belt and drifted ahead on his microrepulsolets, flitting from side to side in front of the beasts like a remote practice drone.

One of the largest knaars lumbered forward, attracted by Lowie's molten-bronze lightsaber blade. The Wookiee stopped his headlong run and whirled to face the monster. The knaar charged forward, exposing its razor teeth.

Em Teedee flitted in front of the monster's jaws, distracting the creature so that it snapped at the silvery sphere and diverted its fiery gaze from Lowbacca. Lowie used the moment of distraction to strike sideways, severing the knaar's body at the waist; its head still twisted and snapped even though it had no body to move.

The surviving villagers kept running. Ahead of them, the forests loomed taller. Dozens and dozens of the saurian giants had been killed, but though the pack seemed to be thinning a bit, Jacen did not feel at all relieved. The Falcon circled by again, blasting away.

More of the monsters died. The people continued to stumble along on the haphazard path the young Jedi Knights picked for them through the booby-trapped field. Many villagers were in shock, just following, placing one foot in front of another, unable to fully face their peril.

Jacen sensed their fear and could only hope the situation would change once they entered the thick trees. "Hurry up. Get to the forest!" he shouted. With despairing sighs, the people nearest him tried to increase their pace, but they were too exhausted. Weak from malnutrition and years of living in fear for their lives, several of them stumbled and fell, only to be helped to their feet by their equally exhausted companions. Jacen could tell that everyone's energy reserves were running out.

If they had to continue this battle, they would not make it much farther.

The Falcon swept overhead, strafing the oncoming monsters. Jaina and Anja fought behind the others, attacking more of the knaars. The air was filled with the snarls of the predators, the sizzling buzz of the lightsabers, and the despairing cries of the staggering villagers.

Then, to Jacen's surprise, the migratory knaars faltered in their advance, honking at each other uneasily. Many in the pack were covered

with blood from their victims, both human and reptilian. But they all paused in their tracks as if unwilling to come any closer to the forest.

Jacen, sensing the monsters' hesitation, desperately tried to use his Jedi senses in another way. The knaars were at the edge of their territorial range. Jacen could feel that they had never come this far before, that the forests ahead were a great unknown, and that the predators had little desire to keep following. He sent out his thoughts, giving the knaars a vague feeling that they had come far enough, that they should turn and go home.

They smelled the blood in the air, dimly understood that a great many of their number had already died on this trek.

The knaars honked at each other in a rudimentary form of communication.

With sagging shoulders and trembling knees, the villagers turned to watch in shock as the predators ground to a halt, snapping sharp teeth into the air as if they had reached some invisible boundary.

Lowie gestured with his big hairy arms to keep the people moving toward the forest during this unexpected respite. "Dear me! How very odd! I do hope the knaars don't change their minds and attack again," Em

Teedee said.

The Falcon circled back and blasted one motionless knaar who stood in the lead. The other reptiles howled and snapped their jaws in defiance of the disk-shaped ship that cruised overhead. Then they turned about, moving much slower now, and began their trek back through the minefield. The stragglers stopped to snort among the scraps of meat that remained on the carcasses they'd left behind during their chase after the fleeing villagers.

Jacen stood at the edge of the forest, surveying the tall dark trees and the shadows beyond. Farther in the distance, beyond the forest, steep mountains with winding switchback roads led up to the open tunnels and cliffside stone villages of the miners.

The Falcon came to the edge of the forest and hovered low. Jacen and Lowie reached out with their Jedi senses, found an area clear of the burrowing detonators, and gestured for Han to land. With a hiss not unlike that of the monstrous knaars, the ship settled down on the uneven terrain. The boarding ramp extended, and Han and Zekk bounded out.

"You kids okay?" Han said, breathless.

"We are, Dad," Jacen said. His sister, looking exhausted, came up next to him.

"We lost quite a few of the villagers," Jaina said, "but there was nothing more we could do. We tried our best."

Zekk turned his emerald-green gaze on her. "Without you, they would all have been slaughtered. I just wish I'd had my own lightsaber so I could have fought at your side."

Jaina touched his arm. "You'll have one soon, Zekk-and you'll earn it the right way."

"You helped us out just fine in the Falcon," Anakin said.

Jaina smiled. "You weren't so bad yourself-for a little brother, or course." Anja joined them now, sweating, flushed, but seething with energy.

To Jacen it almost seemed as if she wanted the knaars to attack again, just so she could enjoy the fight.

His droid foot clanging on the boarding ramp, Ynos stepped to the opening of the ship and gazed back across the fields to where an explosion boomed in the distance. One of the retreating knaars had stepped on another burrowing detonator.

"That's one way to clear a minefield," Jacen said. Anja chuckled, but Jacen didn't feel like making any more attempts at humor.

"Now we have nothing." Ynos shook his shaggy head, and his broad shoulders appeared to carry more weight than even his once-great muscles could bear. "We've abandoned our village, and the only way to get back is to cross the land-mine field again. Even then, the knaars have destroyed many of our homes, and will be waiting for us if we return to the village now. We've survived this night, but now what do we do?"

Anja stood, flushed, her lightsaber still in hand. Though the other young Jedi Knights had switched theirs off, she kept hers powered on and throbbing. Its garish yellow light threw stark shadows on her face as she pointed it up at the mountains just visible above the trees.

"You can go there. That's where I used to live, my village in the mountains."

The farmers cried out in anger, and Ynos glowered at her. "What, and become slaves to the miners?"

Han Solo, perhaps still hoping to make peace between himself and Anja, ewne forward. "I can take some of you up to that village in the Falcon. We'll talk to their leader. I need to hear both sides of the story anyway. This could be the best way to get your groups

talking."

"Hey, what are the rest of us supposed to do?" Jacen said. "Should we just wait here and make camp?"

"We could walk through the forest," one of the villagers said.

Lowie growled, and Em Teedee translated. "Master Lowbacca recalls hearing about other traps and detonators throughout the forest."

Jaina nodded. "Right. But it could be just as dangerous to sit out here in the open-especially if those knaars decide to come back."

"I know a safe way through," one young villager said. "I've been into this forest many times. We just have to be careful."

Han stood close to Anja, who pointedly took a step from him. "We can take Ynos and the weaker farmers and fly up to the mountains. The rest of you follow us through the forest. It's safer than any of the alternatives." Tenel Ka looked sternly at the villagers, who, though exhausted, seemed fearful of going to the mountains. "If this war is to end, many things must change. You must face your fears and be responsible for yourselves."

"I still wish we had weapons. . . since we're going into the household

of our enemies," one of the villagers said.

"Then you'd miss the point entirely," Jaina said, still shaky and exhausted from her battle; she was growing frustrated with the villagers' stonewalling. It could well be, she mused, that the reason the civil war had dragged on for so long, and with so many innocent casualties, was that no one on either side was ready to face the challenge of making peace.

"Look," Han said, "I'm going up there even if none of you comes with me. But this is your war, not mine. You should be involved in this."

"We will go," Ynos said. "But I don't expect anything to come of it."

"As Anja boarded the Falcon, Zekk turned back to Jaina. "I'll go with the ship," he said, and then looked at the villagers. "You have to have faith that there are options open to you. Trust in your own abilities, and in each other, and in the Force." The villagers just mumbled. Han hugged each of his children. He looked squarely at Jacen and Jaina. "You kids are awfully brave," he said. "But it may take a while before I learn to stop thinking of you as children."

A few moments later the Falcon lifted off above the trees. Jacen and Jaina waved farewell, and the flattened ship's white sublight engines lit as the craft roared off across the forest toward the mountains.

Jacen, Jaina, Tenel Ka, and Lowie looked at the refugees around them.

"We're a pretty ragtag group," Jaina said.

Em Teedee drifted back down to be reattached to the Wookiee's belt.

"Indeed, yes," the little droid commented.

"These people are our responsibility," Tenel Ka said. Lowie grunted his agreement and patted Jaina's back with a furry hand.

Jaina sighed. "Right. What are we waiting for?" She looked into the thick forest and gave her brother a nudge.

Jacen turned toward a young woman and two young men who claimed to know the way to the mountain village. "Let's go," he said, lifting his lightsaber like a green torch to light the way through the murk of the trees. "We've got a long march ahead of us before we get to shelter.

" As the ominous animal sounds grew louder, the young Jedi Knights plunged into the thick wilderness, knowing that this forest held as many deadly pitfalls and booby traps as the minefield had.

By the time the Falcon flew low over the knotted mass of the forest, dawn announced its arrival with a splash of color behind the mountain

crag. As the sun rose, light spilled down the rugged stone cliff faces.

Zekk could make out the thin white slash of a road winding its way up the steep mountainside. Scattered black holes marked entrances to mining tunnels and the city within the rocks.

Anja came forward from the passenger compartment and eagerly drank in the sight of the rough stone wall through the windowports.

"It's been many years since I came back here," she said. "I've made my life offworld on Ord Mantell, doing whatever I could to survive."

Zekk looked at her. "Sounds familiar," he said. "I've been through a lot of the same things you have."

She glared at him. "No one's been through what I have."

"Don't be so quick to judge," he replied. His voice was hard, but it held no anger. "My parents were both killed on Ennth. When I was still young I fled offworld, and lived on the streets of Coruscant, deep in the underlevels where no one goes—at least no one who wants to stay alive. I survived for years as a scavenger, until I was kidnapped by the Shadow Academy. They trained me as a Dark Jedi to fight for the Second Imperium."

Anja shrugged one shoulder. "Our mountain villages took the side of the Empire a long time ago. It's nothing to be ashamed of" "Maybe.

But now I've learned and grown and adapted instead of wallowing in bitterness about my past. Sure, things went wrong with my life, but I think I've finally learned how to make something better."

"Or you've finally convinced yourself to let the people who hurt you get away without punishment."

The dark-haired young man could tell that Han was listening to this exchange with great interest. Zekk gave a wry smile. "If punishing other people is the most important thing in your life, then perhaps you need to look for another hobby."

Anja turned away. "Other things are important to me." Somewhat subdued, she moved to the back of the cockpit.

Ynos staggered forward and looked at the approaching mountain city.

"No one from our village has gone openly into that place since the beginning of the war."

I'd say it's about time for a change, then," Han said. He arrowed toward the widest opening in the cliffside, where lights and a landing

pad were visible. Zekk guessed these must be facilities for smuggler ships, supply runners, and weapons merchants like Lilmit, who came to take advantage of the desperate plight of the people of Anobis.

Han turned to Anja. "Do we need to contact them or request permission to land?"

She shook her head. "The only ships that come in are unauthorized smugglers." She raised an eyebrow. "You know the type, Solo."

Han and Zekk landed the Falcon in the middle of a broad rocky floor.

Tunnels riddled the walls between buildings built from blasted stone blocks mortared together, chips of rock cemented into multiunit structures. People came from the buildings and tunnels to study the ship suspiciously.

Anja recognized the man in front, who had a black beard, thick eyebrows, and hair with a long streak of gray down the left side.

"He's the one to talk to," she said. "His name is Elis."

The miners held stone-cutting implements, pickaxes, vibrohammers, and other excavating devices. To Zekk the tools looked like potential deadly weapons.

Han extended the boarding ramp. "Let me go first. Anja, you can come with me if you like."

She looked over at him, gave a curt nod. "As long as you don't make it seem as if we're allies."

Zekk looked at the young woman, wondering what he could do to reach her and whether he could somehow dislodge the large chip on her shoulder.

Anja Gallandro could have been strikingly beautiful if she hadn't had such a sour demeanor.

"Just give him a chance, Anja," Zekk said. "Nobody planned that knaar stampede, but for now we're all in this together." She shot him a resentful glare.

Han, Anja, and Zekk emerged from the ship together as the miners pressed forward. Dark-haired Elis took the lead, scrutinizing them curiously. He recognized Anja. "It's been a long time since we've seen you," he said. "And who is this you've brought with you? Another trader?"

"Han Solo," she said. "And aboard this ship are Ynos and many survivors from a knaar attack on the farming village below."

At this, Ynos hobbled forward on his droid leg. Though broad and burly, he still held the boarding ramp piston for support. The miners set up a gruff cheer.

Elis smiled, showing his teeth from within the dark nest of his beard.

"Excellent work, Anja. With such important hostages, we can end this war once and for all."

"Now wait a minute!" Han cried.

Elis gestured and the miners rushed toward the Falcon, their stonecutting implements raised like weapons.

if it hadn't been for the minefield and the ferocious knaars behind them, the dense dark forest would not have been an acceptable option at all.

In the dim but colorful light of sunrise, Jacen could see the dense branches adorned with blue-silver leaves. Some of the trunks were smooth and metallic, others blistered with scaly orange-red bark.

Lichens and mosses dangled down, clustered with lemon-yellow flowers that opened and closed in snow plant reflexes.

Tenel Ka stood next to Jacen, ready to use her lightsaber as a machete.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Jaina asked. "Let's get hiking."

One of the young men from the village gestured ahead. "I know the way, but you'll have to follow carefully." He started forward, scanning the ground, squinting in the dim forest shadows as the ragtag band pushed their way into the wilderness.

Jacen and Jaina flanked the young villager, with Tenel Ka and Lowbacca each moving out on either side of the group, their senses alert.

Lowie's dark nose snuffled the air, and his ginger fur bristled with intense concentration. The young Wookiee had survived the dangerous underlevel forests of Kashyyyk, and had won his precious fiber belt by snatching the threads from a carnivorous syren plant. Compared with the ominous forests of the Wookiee world, the woods of Anobis couldn't be too dangerous, Jacen thought.

But then, he wondered, after twenty years of civil war, how many hidden booby traps had been planted in the dense foliage?

They crunched their way along an ill-defined path. Jacen's feet popped spherical mushrooms, and wet shapeless things slithered out of the way

in the weeds. With a buzzing cry of alarm, two flying creatures that looked halfway between moth and bird fluttered into the upper sparkling leaves.

Within moments it seemed as if the forest had swallowed them up, and Jacen could no longer see the cleared cropland behind them.

As the day strengthened and the sunlight grew brighter, the forest shadows remained a thick lattice around them, allowing only scattered glimpses of the bright blue sky overhead.

Tenel Ka turned her gray eyes toward Jacen; in a cold voice, she said, "Anja could have stayed here to help guide us through. Perhaps she and some of her people planted their own traps."

Jacen felt an irrational urge to defend the orphaned girl. "You don't know that about her," he said. "Just because her people have suffered as much as these"-he turned his chin toward the stumbling villagers-"doesn't mean you have to think the worst of her."

Tenel Ka gave him a puzzled look. "We just need to be aware of the dangers here," she said, and then drifted away.

Suddenly, Lowie howled and raised his hairy arms, gesturing for them all to stop. The people, already on edge, halted in their tracks, glancing around with wide eyes. Em Teedee said, "Ah, yes, Master

Lowbacca. I see it too. How horrible!"

"What is it?" Jaina came close to the Wookiee. As the sunlight glittered through, Jacen could see a fine tracery stretched between the silver tree trunks, a gossamer line like the whisper of a cobweb.

Lowie picked up a branch from the ground and tossed it in front of him.

The branch passed through the faint lines and dropped to the ground on the other side, sliced cleanly into small pieces.

"Monofilament wire?" Jaina asked.

Jacen came close and understood the threat: a fiber so strong and so thin it surpassed even the sharpest razor blade. Anything that touched it would pass through and be sliced in two.

The villager in front stopped, looking greenish with dismay. "That wasn't here before," he said. "I slipped through here to the mountain village just six standard days ago."

"Then everything has changed," Tenel Ka said, not asking what this farmer would have been doing on his way to the mining settlement.

"We must be cautious."

Carefully, they skirted the wire-strung trees, giving them a wide berth. But just as they passed into what they thought was safety, a hidden motion sensor hummed. A laser beam tracked them, spraying a red targeting lance toward the group. "Look out!" Jaina cried as the refugees scattered and dove.

The weapon discharged and blazed holes through nearby trees. One middle-aged man cried out and fell backward into the bushes with a blackened hole through one shoulder. Then, after only a few seconds, the laser ceased firing.

The young Jedi Knights waited in hiding for a few moments, expecting another attack, but when the forest fell quiet again except for the leftover squawks and rustlings of disturbed forest creatures, Jaina stood up and made her way toward the source of the laser blasts.

She found the hidden weapon, its energy pack drained. "It's a single-use munition," she said. "Strictly here to gun down one or two trespassers."

"It was made only to kill," Tenel Ka said. "To kill anyone. Not specifically an enemy, or a friend ... anyone."

"This is a different kind of war than anything we've seen so far, Jaina

said, her expression grim. "With no objective in mind, no military targets. The factions just want to destroy everything."

"You see how horrible the miners are?" one villager said. "They plant burrowing detonators in our cropland, and look what they've done in this forest, where we have to hunt! I can't believe your father wants us to talk peace with them."

"Let's just get to the mountains and take it from there," Jacen said.

"I'm sure Anja will put in a good word for us."

After encountering these two deadly traps, they proceeded with the utmost caution, and continued on for hours without further incident.

"Not finding any booby traps is even more nerve-racking than stumbling upon one," Jacen muttered.

Finally, after what seemed an interminable time, they paused for a rest. A few villagers had found edible fruit on a tree, which they passed around to their exhausted and hungry companions. They had been through a terrible ordeal, but over the years of civil war they had become inured to such circumstances. They walked with numb shock, fearing another trap.

Jaina and Tenel Ka suggested that Em Teedee scan the fruit for implanted poisons, but the little droid happily pronounced each one of the red scaly clusters to be clean of contamination.

Lowie looked up at a tall, silver-trunked tree and chuffed a suggestion. "Master Lowbacca wishes to climb up to the canopy and take a look around," Em Teedee said. "He believes it might be useful in making certain we're close to the mountain village."

"I agree," Jaina said. "Go take a look around, Lowie."

With his lanky arms and legs, the Wookiee scrambled from one branch to another, in no time disappearing into the mass of silvery-blue leaves.

Lowbacca loved to climb tall trees and sit in solitude. The

Wookiee probably wanted to rest up there, but they couldn't sit back and wait.

With a crashing of small branches, Lowie bounded down, leaping from branch to bough, enjoying the freedom. He landed on both feet in the middle of the clearing, and gave his quick report with barks and growls.

"We are very close to the edge of the forest," Em Teedee said. "I am

so pleased to be nearly out of this dismal place."

"Then let's get moving," Jacen said. "I'm anxious to have our whole group back together."

With a collective groan of weariness, the villagers struggled into motion again. The man who had been injured from the laser blast was carried along by two of his companions. They moved slowly, with exquisite care, and Jacen was very proud that they had not lost any of their party through the various traps planted among the trees.

One of the villagers called for them to move left in order to avoid a flower-filled meadow. Jacen saw nothing suspicious, though he did feel a tingling through the Force, warning him of danger. With a wan grin, the young man slipped over to another tree trunk and pushed a hidden button, switching off a tiny holographic generator. Part of the placid meadow disappeared, revealing a jagged-edged hole filled with durasteel spikers that gleamed in the forest light.

I "The mountain miners aren't the only ones who can plant traps," he said proudly.

Jacen felt sickened. "That's no way to end a war," he muttered, thinking that Anja's villagers might have fallen into that deadly trap.

"You've seen what the miners have done to us," one farmer said.

"How can you fault our people for defending ourselves?"

"This is no defense," Tenel Ka said.

Soon they could see daylight and cliffs through the tattered edge of the forest. The mountain and its steep pathway lay ahead.

As they were about to emerge from the forest, though, just when Jacen thought they had passed through without incident, one member of the group close to Lowbacca stepped on a flat stone, which triggered a detonator that blew up beneath one of the wide-trunked trees.

The booby trap didn't kill the woman who had triggered it, but instead blasted the roots from the huge tree and shoved it back toward them.

Its sprawling branches crashed through the adjoining trees as it tumbled.

"Look out!" Jacen cried.

Lowie roared and slashed at the oncoming branches with his lightsaber.

The other villagers scattered, screaming. One ran straight between two microfilament-laced trees and died an instant, bloody death. Another villager stepped on a small explosive, which blew him into the air before he fell dead and broken atop the thick-trunked tree as it crashed in among where they had all been standing only moments before.

The villagers wailed. Jacen felt a sharp pain in his heart. "We almost made it through," he said.

„We're all going to die," one of the villagers said.

"No you're not," Jaina snapped. "We just have to keep moving."

Raising her chin high, she walked bravely forward, accompanied by her brother and friends. The villagers followed, relieved to stand in the sunlight again, where they could look up at the sky after so many hours in the murky shadows. But now, free of the forest at last, they gazed at the steep pathways chiseled into the gray granite sides of the mountain, and they appeared on the verge of despair again.

"Come on. It's up this road," Jacen said. He could see the cave openings-numerous mining tunnels and the large, smooth-edged mouth where Jacen figured the mining village must be located. "My father and Ynos have already been in there, making arrangements for us. I'm sure

they'll have food and water and a safe place for us all to rest."

"Or they'll just use blasters to gun us down as we walk toward them,"
one farmer said.

"And maybe a comet will crash down right now and wipe out the mountain village," Jaina said, impatient. "You can worry all you want, but I'd like to get where I can rest."

They started up the steep switchbacked pathway. Since it was a road used by the miners themselves, Jacen didn't expect to find any pitfalls planted there.

Though the clear sunlight baked down, the air grew thin and cooler.

Overhead, wispy white clouds did little to cool off the day. The rugged mountainside provided no shade, but Jacen and his companions led the others on a slow, steady march. He could sense people watching him from above, thought he saw faces peering out from the honeycombed mine shafts in the rock face.

Now that they had accepted their destination, the villagers plodded along without complaint, without any comment whatsoever. Jacen could tell they were at the end of their rope. They had little to live for, and little hope that anything would get better soon.

Finally, panting and sweating, Jacen and his sister arrived at the top edge of the cliff city. Wearily, with a heavy arm, he gestured down to the group that had straggled out along the steep path. "Come on. It's cool, and there's shade up here."

The city seemed quiet, though he could see people in doorways, watching them suspiciously. But he could think only about getting inside and resting. The farmers trudged in, standing in the cool rock grotto, where burn marks on the floor showed that many spacecraft had come and gone.

Jacen's heart surged when he saw the Millennium Falcon, landed off to one side with a rippling rock wall arcing overhead. "See? We'.z all safe now," he said as Tenel Ka and Lowbacca brought up the rear.

"Oh, my. This is much better," Em Teedee quipped.

Then, when all the villagers stood inside the cave, the miners marched out in a well-coordinated group. Others poured out of the mining tunnels below and came up from the rear, encircling them. Jacen saw no sign of his father or Anja, nor did he see any welcoming expression on the miners' faces. Each one of them bore a weapon of some sort.

"As enemies of the mining community," one man spoke up, "we will hold you as prisoners for crimes you have committed against our people."

Zekk found himself imprisoned in the same stone-walled room with Han and Anakin Solo. The miners provided them with some sparse comforts-food and water, blankets and furniture. Anja's work, perhaps?

Zekk wondered. Zekk guessed they were being treated far better than the other captive villagers, though their repeated questions about Ynos and the farmers went unanswered.

After hours without explanations, the dark-haired and bearded leader Elis came to them with surprise guests in tow, surrounded by guards from the mountain villages.

"Jaina!" Zekk cried. Jacen, Tenel Ka, and Lowbacca also came with them.

Han Solo leapt to his feet to see his children safely arrived. "You made it through the forest then," Han said. "I was worried about you."

"Had a pretty unpleasant welcoming committee when we got up here to the mining settlements, though," Jaina said. "What do these people think they're doing?"

"They think they can end their war this way," Zekk mumbled.

"You don't understand the type of people we're dealing with," Elis said, his voice a low growl. "The fanners have done heinous things-"

"But those people were under my protection," Han insisted. "I'm from the New Republic. I trusted you to recognize my diplomatic immunity."

"And we are not harming you or your close friends, General Solo," Elis said. "You personally have caused us no damage. Ynos and his murderous farmers have done us great harm, though, and we will not treat them like visiting royalty." A storm seemed to pass across Elis's face, but he brought his emotions under control. "It was only out of courtesy and respect for your position that we did not execute every one of those villagers as they arrived."

"That's something at least," Han said, considering Elis through narrowed eyes.

"We've seen the cropland where you planted all those burrowing detonators. Those weapons take their toll on innocent people, as well as fighters," Jaina said. "I'd call that an act of terrorism, not a brave military strike."

"There are no innocents in the fanning villages," Elis said. "I don't know what lies they've told you. Ynos tries to make himself appear

helpless and pitiable, but he has the blood of hundreds of miners on his hands."

"Ah. Aha. Yet he himself stepped on one of your burrowing detonators," Tenel Ka said coldly. "That is how he lost his leg."

"His heart was dead long before that," Elis answered. "For many years we had a booming business here. My mountain workers labored hard to excavate the various ores and crystals from the rich mineral veins. We still sell whatever we find to offworld traders, smugglers, anyone brave enough to come to this world and take the meager riches we have to offer. In exchange, they bring us supplies and equipment and food."

"And weapons, too," Zekk pointed out. "We stopped one of those shipments."

"We must protect ourselves," Elis answered, standing at the doorway to the stone chambers. "We have a right to do that, don't we? The fanners won't trade with us anymore. We would starve if it weren't for the smugglers. The fanners once provided us with what we needed, and we did the same for them."

"But because the bloodthirsty rebellion brought its message here to Anobis, beyond where even the Emperor cared to look, everything came crashing down. Anobis could have remained neutral, stayed out of all

the fighting, but the farmers had to choose a side. They stopped trading with us. I ask you, what good does politics do any of us, if we're barely managing to survive from day to day?"

He gestured for them to come with him out into the dimly lit tunnels.

"Come, we have something to show you," Elis said. "You need to see this."

Han went first. Zekk took Jaina's hand and followed, with the others close behind. They walked through stone corridors, excavated tunnels that jerked left and right, curving sideways and down as the miners followed veins of precious minerals. As the miners worked the mountains, it looked as though they left open chambers where new families built houses into the sides of the rough walls using rubble and tailings from the mine mortared together.

Finally the group reached a place where temporary support beams were hammered into place. Sealant foam had been sprayed on the ceilings and walls, and crossbeams stretched from one side of the tunnel to the other. Past several posted DANGER signs, Zekk could see that glowlamps had been crushed and the ceiling had fallen down in broken slabs.

The debris was pale and fresh, and the air smelled dusty. Zekk heard tiny pebbles trickling down as the rockfall settled.

Elis gestured with a broad grimy hand. His fingernails were broken, as if he did most of his work by grasping the rock with his bare fingers.

"This was one of our largest mining chambers, our most active vein.

Numerous tunnels led to this place-and now what do you see?"

"Just rubble," Zekk said.

"You don't want to see what's buried in that rubble," Elis said, his voice hollow. "An entire mining crew was in there. Sixteen men and women, working hard at excavating. There are many tunnels like this.....

"Was it a rock slide?" Jaina asked.

"No. The fanning villagers did this," Elis said. "Commandos come in the night. They make their way through the forest, wait for sundown, then race up the pathway and into our mine access shafts. Their sonic punchers are quite effective. They slip them inside active tunnels, hiding them in the shadows behind stones or at floor level in cracks in the rocks where no one can see them. Then they set an activation timer and flee back into the night like the cowards they are."

"What are sonic punchers?" Jacen asked.

"Motion-activated grenades," Elis said, his lips curling, his teeth pressed so tightly together that Zekk thought they might crack at any moment. "It's not enough for the farming villagers just to destroy our tunnels or hinder our work. These weapons are more insidious than that.

A sonic puncher waits until someone comes by. When it explodes, a person gets killed. Every time."

He nodded toward the rubble pile; faint pale dust sifted into his dark hair. "As a fresh mining crew entered this grotto, their movements set off one of the sonic punchers. The trigger could have been the sound of their laughter, or the songs they sang as they went to work.

"The sonic blast cracked and shattered the rock walls and the ceiling.

The entire crew was buried-crushed and battered to death under the collapse of the cave.

"We can never go into this area again. It's too unstable. We do not even dare to excavate the grotto to retrieve their bodies." Elis drew a long shuddering breath. "The miners must rest here, buried in the

tunnels where they worked. Over the ages they will become part of the mountain themselves.

"Perhaps by then, there will be an end to this war." The mining leader's voice was bleak.

Seeing the anger in the man's eyes, Zekk wondered.

When all the prisoners, including Han Solo and the young Jedi Knights, had been separated by Elis and the miners, Anja slipped away.

She saw an opportunity too good to ignore. She also knew exactly the person who could best take advantage of the circumstances.

Protas, the younger brother of the mining leader, was a bitter and grim-faced youth, barely nineteen. He had a wispy, pale beard and dusty skin from spending most of his life inside the stone tunnels, working his fingers until they bled among the rocks. But the intense young man also made frequent unofficial excursions down to the forests and croplands, where he planted traps to do his part in the fight against the fanning villagers.

Now, with Anja's help, he could strike a blow the farmers would never forget.

When one of the mining crews took a break, Anja trotted down through

the tunnels asking questions until she was finally directed to Elis's younger brother. She gestured for him to join her in one of the shadowed rocky alcoves. "Protas, I need to speak to you."

He raised his eyebrows. They had been children together, and if Anja had stayed on Anobis, they might well have gotten married. But she had slipped off to Ord Mantell to join some band of smugglers.

Because of their past, though, Anja knew Protas would listen to what she had to say.

"We now hold all of the farmers from one village captive inside the tunnels," she said.

Protas grinned. "I know. What more could we ask for? You led them right to us. Thank you, Anja."

"I'll tell you what more you could ask for." Anja smiled, moving closer to him. The skin under her leather headband itched, but she ignored it. Her voice was breathless as she spilled out her plan.

"Their village is abandoned now. They left it completely unoccupied.

We can go there tonight, slip in and burn everything down. Not only have we captured them, we can destroy everything they hold dear."

Protas's eyes gleamed, and he placed a conspiratorial hand on her shoulder. "We still have plenty of burrowing detonators, but we could never before get close enough to plant them right in the village. But now, we can rig explosives in all of their homes, make it so that the farmers destroy their own dwellings. Just by going home, they'll bring about their own doom!"

Anja's large, dark eyes twinkled. "That's even better. This way, if any of the farmers survive, they can blame Han Solo and his companions for meddling. I knew I could count on you."

Protas nodded to her. "I'll get the weapons and bring some of my men.

We'll depart as soon as the sun sets."

They did not share their plan with Elis or any of the other miners.

Anja, Protas, and four angry-faced commandos slipped out through one of the smaller tunnels, walking with sure feet on the smooth stone walkways.

Outside, careful but confident, they dashed down the mountain switchbacks, listening to loose rocks clatter behind them as they raced along.

The double moonlight provided but a pale silvery illumination and stole all colors from the landscape, marking the terrain with only lightness and shadow.

As they entered the thick forest, the sounds of night insects and small creatures rustling through the branches did not bother Anja. She had her lightsaber. And minutes before leaving the mountain village, she had gone alone into the Millennium Falcon and taken one of her precious doses of andris. With enhanced senses, she could experience the sharp edges of details around her. She would spot any traps waiting for them. Protas and his fighters had chosen a safe trail that avoided all of the deadly surprises they had themselves rigged.

Heading east, she wondered about the knaars that had swept through the ramshackle village and across the croplands. But that had been a full day and a half before; given slim pickings, the migratory herd's surviving members would have gone in search of other villages or abandoned livestock left to graze by fanners who had been killed during the long civil war.

The group of commandos picked their way across the barren fields.

Protas consulted a diagram of where they had planted burrowing detonators . The tunneling robotic explosives could move about, but

only within a certain radius of where they had been buried.

As she trotted along beside the young man, Anja saw blasted craters where detonators had exploded, some triggered by the heavy footsteps of the knaars, others by farmers stumbling into the wrong place.

The stark moonlight shone down, making the croplands look like a moonscape. None of the once-rich fields had been planted for many years. Perhaps, she thought, the miners could use their new captives as slaves to work the land again and provide food for the mountain villages. Or maybe that was just too much trouble.

She saw a shattered skeleton lying on the dirt, a femur and a hipbone, part of a rib cage. The knaars had stripped all the flesh from the bones of their victims, whether human or reptilian. Anja felt a small twinge of pity. Han Solo and his young companions had landed the Falcon here despite her protests. Though reluctant, she had eaten a meal with these people, had listened to their pathetic sob story of all the trials they'd endured.

The knaars were not part of this war. They had not been sent by the mountain miners, but were simply a vicious vagary of the natural world.

Anja was glad the attack had happened here, rather than in her own village. The knaars had unwittingly helped the miners' fight, removing

some of their enemies.

When they reached the abandoned village, she could see the silhouettes of the dark, leaning houses, uninhabited now that the farmers had fled.

Their usually well-guarded homes now had no defenses whatsoever. If the miners had come at any other time, the farmers would have put up a fierce resistance-but not this night.

"The village is ours," Protas said. "Nothing can stop us from destroying everything." The men gave a husky cheer.

They opened their packs to remove the burrowing detonators.

Anja's fingers tingled in an afterwash of spice. She reached into her sack and took out one of the small mechanical bombs. It was an oblong hemisphere, segmented and flexible like a pillbug. Claws and scoops moved on articulated joints so the device could tunnel beneath the soft dirt, implant itself, and wait for an unsuspecting footstep.

With a snle, Anja decided that she would plant one of the detonators directly on the doorstep of Ynos, the village leader. She could claim that small victory for herself ... if the one-legged farmer ever managed to get free of his captivity in the mines.

Anja bent down, cradling the device. She peered into the hollow shell of the home where Ynos lived. The hut was windowless, its walls patched and repaired. A slight evening breeze whispered through, like the breath of a sleeping man in the midst of a nightmare. She had not seen him with a wife or any family. Maybe they had died in earlier battles. The place seemed so lonely, so empty, so ... sad.

Anja shook her head, gritting her teeth until her jaw hurt. She couldn't think of things like that now. They had a mission to accomplish.

She pushed the activation button and set the small burrower on the ground. Its metallic joints whirled, digging in. The blunt nose of the roving mine tunneled underneath the surface like a robotic mole and covered itself, shifting the topsoil so that it left no sign of its presence.

She backed away carefully, knowing that the land mine now lay in wait for Ynos when he came back to cross the threshold of his abandoned home.

Satisfied, she jogged to a new building and planted her second detonator. Then she circled behind the scattered village and found one of Protas's men inspecting the nearly empty grain storage warehouse.

He stepped toward the silo, igniter in hand, ready to set fire to the building.

He looked at Anja, his eyes gleaming. "I want to see something burn this night."

"Fine," she said, "but take the grain out first. Our own villagers need it. We'll take turns carrying it back to the mines."

The young man nodded, went into the silo, and salvaged all that he found: three limp sacks containing barely enough for a single meal, though the farmers had hoarded it as if it were gold. Then Anja stood back to watch as the man set his thermal igniter in one of the corners.

The flame blazed white-hot, and the silo caught fire immediately.

Flames trickled up the walls to the rooftop, and soon the entire structure was engulfed.

The fire crackled and hissed, and the smoke smelled sharp and satisfying in Anja's nostrils. The other commandos shouted that they were finished, and Anja came back around to the front of the cluster of wellings.

"Let's go," she said. "We have to get back before daybreak."

"Wait," Protas said. "I've got one last burrower to plant." He held it high, grinning through his wispy blond beard. Then, to Anja's horror, he ran straight toward the village leader's house. "I'm going to give Ynos a real surprise if ever he comes home."

"No!" she shouted. "Wait, I already-" But before he could stop, Protas stepped directly on the spot where Anja had planted her detonator.

The explosion ripped the night, throwing Protas high in the air, his clothes in flames, his body mangled. The front walls of Ynos's house collapsed into rubble. The young man's scream was swallowed in the echoes of the blast.

Anja pressed her hands to her mouth in horror. The other young men stood in shock, staring at where the young brother of their village leader had been only moments before. As rocks, clods of dirt, and other debris began to patter down like a small meteor storm, Anja suddenly broke through her stunned immobility and raced forward.

"Protas!" she shouted, knowing in the pit of her stomach that there was nothing she could do. She found the young man's body lying broken and bent in odd places, as if someone had folded him up and swatted him like a bothersome insect. His skin was burned, his open wounds bled,

but his heart no longer pumped. Breath no longer filled his lungs.

She looked up in bleak despair, her dark eyes burning as she blinked and blinked. Her throat constricted painfully. Heedless of the blood that stained her hands, she touched the young man's shoulder, ran her fingers along the wispy blond strands of his beard that now would never grow to bushy fullness like his older brother's.

The commandos stared speechless at what they had inadvertently done.

Anja's heart felt like a lead weight in her chest. She knew that she herself, and no one else, would have to tell Elis.

in one of the stone-walled gathering rooms, Elis's anguished wails echoed from the rocks and seemed to hang in the air like cold icicles.

Jacen shuddered at hearing the pain and sadness in that voice. The dark-bearded man cried out again, a wordless moan. He squeezed his eyes shut, and tears coursed down through the rugged crevices in his dusty face. When he ground his teeth together, his bushy beard stood out like black spines.

Jacen stood without moving, frozen in the moment next to his friends and his father. It was early morning. They had slept uncomfortably,

restlessly, and then they had been summoned from their rooms to meet with the mining leader. Elis wanted to discuss what the New Republic could possibly do to improve the situation on Anobis.

With fresh hope, the group had trooped into the room to listen to the village leader and to offer suggestions as to how the long and painful civil war might finally reach a cease-fire, so that the parties could start talking. Although nothing had changed in decades, nothing was likely to change until the miners and the fanners at least began to communicate. Then, perhaps they could learn to talk in a civilized fashion.

But before Han Solo or Elis could speak, Anja had burst into the room, her face drawn, her huge eyes even more grief-stricken than Jacen was accustomed to seeing them. She kept her trembling voice low, but Jacen understood most of the devastating news she passed to Elis. Zekk caught his breath. Lowbacca, with his sensitive Wookiee ears, listened and groaned. Em Teedee made no effort to translate. Han Solo fidgeted uncomfortably. Jacen and Jaina looked at each other.

Elis turned away from them, hiding his face. The dark-haired mining leader clenched his left hand into a fist and began pounding on the stone wall of the meeting room. His chest was racked with sobs that he tried to contain within himself. As Elis smashed his knuckles again and again against the stone, Jacen saw a growing smear of blood blossoming there.

Finally, the leader drew a deep breath and seemed to control himself.

When Elis opened his eyes, the look of pure hatred behind them made Jacen turn cold. "I will kill them!" Elis roared. "Bring Ynos here now!" he shouted, and other miners scurried off to the cells to fetch the one-legged farming leader.

"Why blame him?" Zekk asked, his voice surprisingly stern. His nostrils flared. "Those farmers didn't do anything this time. From what I could hear, the fault belonged to your brother-and those who went with him."

Anja looked up in dismay, but did not argue.

Jaina spoke up. "Ynos and his villagers didn't kill Protas, did they, Anja?" she said. "It was one of your own burrowing detonators, Elis.

You planted them. You seeded the fields so that no one could grow crops anymore. It was an accident caused by your people, with your own weapons."

"Yeah," Jacen said. "You certainly can't be angry with the farmers for this."

"The true casualties of war are rarely those we expect," Tenel Ka added.

Stricken, Elis was unable to sort through his thoughts. He didn't seem to hear anything the young Jedi Knights said. He stood up and looked down at his bloodied knuckles, as if surprised. "I will call Lilmit or one of our other suppliers. They will help us get enough weapons to wipe out the fanners and end this war forever. My brother will be the last casualty on our side."

"It's kind of odd, don't you think?" Han Solo said. "That Lilmit is selling weapons to both sides, I mean. If you buy more, then the other side will buy more. Pretty soon you won't be able to count all the victims."

"at?" Elis said, astonished. "Lilmit? Impossible. He wants to help us win."

"No," Anja croaked, her voice rough and weak. "We intercepted him on his way here and confiscated his cargo. He had weapons for our miners, all right. But he also had sonic punchers and other equipment the farmers use against us."

"They're selling to both sides?" Elis said in horror.

Just then, the guards dragged in an indignant and weary-looking Ynos.

His mechanical droid leg scraped along the stone floors. He had heard the last of the exchange. Standing, he shook off the grasp of the guards.

"You buy weapons from Lilmit as well?" he growled.

Elis looked at him, and the expression on his face rippled with pure rage. "They're playing both sides for fools-supplying all of us, while we continue to fight and harm each other all for nothing!"

"I wouldn't be so sure." Zekk crossed his anus over his chest.

"They may have been keeping this little war going for as long as possible, just because business is so good."

Ynos and Elis glared daggers at each other.

"I understand your little brother was trying to destroy our village, and had a little accident," the one-legged man taunted.

With a roar, Elis charged toward the farming leader, but Jacen and Jaina moved with their father and friends to block his way.

"Protas shouldn't have gone to the village last night. Anja was there with him," Jaina said. "Ynos had nothing to do with it."

"It's my fault," Anja said. "I planted that burrowing detonator to destroy Ynos's home. It went off ... too soon, and the explosion killed your brother."

"My home is gone?" Ynos said. "Our village is ruined, as well."

He hung his shaggy head. He turned his eyes toward Anja. "And who would have died if the detonator hadn't gone off 'too soon'?"

Anja did not meet his eyes.

"Someone must pay," Elis insisted. "You farmers have much to atone for-all of the sonic punchers you have planted, the tunnels you have collapsed, the miners you have killed with your cowardly hidden weapons." Ynos drew himself up. "And who will pay for all of my people who died while trying to plant crops for our very survival?"

What of the victims of your burrowing detonators, your monofilament nets in the forest?"

"Nothing you do can bring those people back," Jacen said.

"Blaster bolts! If you keep trying to take revenge for what the other

side does, this war will never end."

"Your people have demonstrated that over the last twenty years," Anakin pointed out.

"But we can't just forget and put it all behind us," Elis said with a scowl. "Too much blood has been shed, and too many traps remain.

People will continue to die for years as they stumble upon leftover sonic punchers buried by these ... renegades in our precious mines."

"And how are we to farm?" Ynos cried. "All of our most fertile land is still full of deadly explosives. We can't even plow the fields, much less plant our seeds."

"Then maybe all of you should work together to clear out those traps and explosives," Jacen said, "instead of wasting all your time rigging more murder weapons to strike back at each other."

"Why spend your efforts on causing more damage instead of on healing your world?" Tenel Ka asked.

Anja looked up at them, her eyes weary. She heaved a huge sigh.

"You ask the impossible."

Jacen and Jaina looked at each other, recalling their uncle Luke's story of his Jedi training with Yoda. Luke had thought Yoda asked the impossible.

"Believing that peace is impossible-that you can't change-is what keeps your war going," Jaina said.

"That's a surefire way to fail," Jacen said.

"It's true," Zekk said. A look of pain flashed in his emerald eyes.

"You have to be willing first-willing to do things a new way, willing to look forward instead of back."

"And speaking of willing," Han said, "our offer still stands. If you're willing to forget the word 'impossible,' we're willing to help out in any way we can."

Elis closed his eyes tightly, his face etched with grief, as if he were reliving decades of murder, destruction, and hopelessness in his mind.

"What do you say, old man?" he said, turning toward Ynos without opening his eyes. "Are we willing?" A single tear escaped from beneath one lid.

Ynos's voice was rough with emotion. "Our way has helped no one-except for those who sold us weapons. I do not know how we can make this change. But, yes, I am willing."

Elis opened his eyes. "Where do we begin?"

Anakin's face lit up as he considered the problem. "I think I just might have an idea."

When the young Jedi Knights began cleanup operations on Anobis, they realized it wasn't exactly the type of battle they were accustomed to fighting ... but it was a battle nevertheless.

The nondiscriminating weapons planted by both sides had taken countless victims, and not just soldiers in battle. Many of the deadly traps had been set years, even decades before, and continued to take their toll, as much in terror as in blood.

Jacen doubted the planet's scars would ever vanish-completely, but with the temporary cease-fire brought on by grief and despair, the wounds might at least begin to heal.

Han Solo came back from the Millennium Falcon in the landing grotto.

He rubbed his hands briskly together and smiled at his children.

"Well, I just sent out a message, summoned a little help from a few friends."

"We can use all the help we can get," Zekk said.

Han gave one of his famous wry smiles. "You saying a couple of Jedi Knights can't handle everything?"

Lowie stood tall among them, chuffing a suggestion. Em Teedee translated. "Master Lowbacca believes that perhaps some of the key commandos from each side could help us locate the booby traps that were planted."

:If they can remember," Jacen said. "There are so many of them."

"Then we've got a lot of work to do," Jaina observed. "What are we waiting for?"

While the others went off on separate missions, Jacen and Zekk made their way to the dangerous mining tunnels. Accompanied by Anja and two downcast farmers they searched for hidden sonic punchers.

Many times, farmers had slipped into the mining tunnels from the cliff face, and so Jacen, Zekk, and Anja, and the others climbed down the

steep mountain path outside and entered through the boarded-up entrances to played-out shafts.

They moved along holding shining glowsticks that bore an eerie resemblance to miniature lightsabers. The pale, cold light spilled ahead of them into the passageways. The farmers blinked, warily looking in both directions. Anja followed, tense and seething, lips pressed together, as if she could barely resist the urge to pull out her ancient lightsaber and strike these enemies down. But she contained her anger and focused on disarming the hidden traps.

"We haven't worked these tunnels for years." Anja narrowed her sad eyes at the farmers. "It would have been foolish to plant a sonic puncher here."

The two young men looked sheepishly at each other. "We don't know much about your work," one said. "We just planted the punchers wherever we could."

They turned a jagged corner to a branching of dark tunnels. The glowsticks shone ahead, but pushed back the shadows only a small distance.

"Wait," Zekk said, holding up his hand.

Jacen felt his senses tingling. "Down there," he said, pointing to the left.

One of the farmers shook his head. "No, we didn't go down there.

I'm sure of it."

"Doesn't matter," Zekk said. "We sense danger down there."

"Could be an older trap," one of the men suggested.

"Old or new, we have to get rid of them all," Jacen said. "You three stay here." He and Zekk edged forward, pushing the glowsticks into the ominous tunnel.

"Quiet," Zekk cautioned in a whisper. "Sonic punchers are activated by disturbances in the air. If we get too close, we'll set it off."

Despite their warning to stay back, Anja came up behind them.

"How are you going to get rid of it? Once a puncher is activated, no one can get close without blowing it up."

"Maybe we can," Jacen murmured, raising an eyebrow. For some reason, he wanted to impress Anja. He saw sweat darkening the leather headband she wore and heading on her forehead. He and Zekk stood shoulder to

shoulder, looking deeper into the darkness.

"Our Jedi senses can do the searching for us," Zekk said in a low voice. He turned to his friend. "Are you up to it?"

Jacen nodded. Calming himself, he reached out with his mind, and used the extra eyes and ears the Force gave him. He could tell Zekk was doing the same. They scanned into the dimness of the tunnel, locating rocks, crystalline formations, rubble piled at the bottom of the channel. His mind moved in farther. He breathed slowly, feeling his heartbeat. Blood pounded in his temples.

There. He sensed something wrong, an object out of place ... a device that didn't belong in the rocky debris.

"Found it," Jacen said.

"Me too," Zekk answered.

With his mind Jacen ran invisible fingers over an outer metal casing, glittering controls, and finely tuned sensors just waiting to be triggered by an unexpected motion in the air.

"Careful," Jacen whispered. "Help me lift it out."

They used the Force, stretching out together with their minds, to move the rubble gently away from the weapon. This small device contained enough power to crack open fissures in the tunnel walls and bring the entire ceiling down.

Anja came up close behind them. "Maybe you should just detonate it in there," she said. Her soft words startled Jacen, nearly making him lose control of his concentration. He could feel her warm breath on the side of his face and neck. "Throw a few rocks down the tunnel and set it off." Zekk glanced back over his shoulder toward her. "No.

We may need to explode some of them, but I think we can do most of the punchers our way. There's been enough damage already."

Working as a team, they used a silent Jedi mind grip to lift the sonic puncher, carefully raising it off the floor. Just then, a loose rock fell from a pile and clattered to the floor. The sound was like thunder, and the vibration was enough to activate the trigger.

"No!" Jacen cried. With his mind he clamped onto the distant controls, freezing the mechanism.

Zekk reacted in a different way, lashing out with the Force to rip circuits free inside the detonator, deactivating it forcibly. An instant later his face fell, as if he was ashamed of himself "You found a better way, Jacen."

"Either one would have worked," Jacen said. "Just let the Force guide you, and stay calm inside."

Together they walked into the tunnel and picked up the now-inert sonic grenade. Jacen handed it to Anja. "A souvenir for you. Our first success."

"Fine," she said, and looked skeptically at it. "But don't get cocky."

"I hear we've still got about forty to go."

Lowbacca reveled in being in the forest again, despite the hidden traps and dangers he knew waited for them there. Tenel Ka trotted at his side among the silvery trees. A few miners and fanners came with them, trying to recall where each group had planted weapons.

They stopped at the edge of a pristine-looking meadow, with its colorful wildflowers like fireworks among the grasses. Tenel Ka marched immediately to where the holographic generator covered a spike-filled pit. She picked up a rock and threw it. They all watched as it vanished into the lush grasses. The camouflage hologram rippled with a flicker of static, then returned to its serene appearance.

The miners gasped. Lowie went over to a stout tree and with his bare hands ripped the controls away, shorting them out. The hologram flickered and faded, revealing the open pit and its sharp spikes.

The miners looked furious at the thought of the cowardly trap the farm villagers had set. But one farmer snarled, "Is that any more vicious than your monofilament wire that can butcher us into pieces as we walk?"

The miners took the lead, showing where they had strung their wires between trees. Lowie could barely see the laser-sharp lines, but he knew they were there. He and Tenel Ka drew their lightsabers and swept through the air, as if fighting invisible spiderwebs. The scaring blades severed the monofilament wire, making the passage safe again.

Lowie sniffed. On the forest floor below where the cutting web had been strung, he saw numerous dead animals: birds whose wings had been neatly amputated when they flew between the wrong trees, and larger forest animals, cut down as they walked, left to decay in the forest mulch, surrounded by the bodies of carrion eaters who'd also ventured into the deadly trap.

Both sides were subdued now, resentful but cowed.

"Come," Tenel Ka said gruffly, marching forward. Her pale skin and glittering lizard-hide armor looked out of place in the silent,

primeval forest. "We have much ground to cover, and years of accumulated dangers to eliminate."

Jaina once again took her place as the Millennium Falcon's copilot.

She felt very comfortable in the position, though she realized that as soon as they left Anobis, her father would travel with Chewbacca again.

She didn't feel sad, however. Being her father's copilot was a wonderful experience and had taught her much, but she preferred flying the Rock Dragon. Even though the Hapan passenger cruiser technically belonged to Tenel Ka, Jaina knew that once her skills were sufficiently advanced, she would get a cruiser of her own, perhaps an old ship like Zekk's Lightning Rod, or maybe something newer and faster.... She grinned at the thought.

Han looked over at her, wondering what she was thinking. "Don't get distracted now, Jaina," he said. "This is a touchy operation."

The Falcon cruised over the treetops and suddenly burst out above the open cropland. Jaina could see where the land had long ago been cleared for farming. Green weeds showed how fertile the dirt could be, but first the deadly harvest planted beneath the soil, the burrowing detonators that waited for any unsuspecting footfall, would have to be

removed.

"All right, kids," Han said. Anakin came forward to stand between Jaina and his father. "I need something that not even the Falcon can do for me. Use your Jedi senses to help your old man find those detonators and get rid of them."

Anakin nodded, squinting his eyes in concentration. Jaina recalled how she had avoided the buried explosives during their desperate flight from the knaars. In her mind she saw a dotted pattern of ripples below, like a scrambled checkerboard of targets on the ground.

"There's an awful lot of them, Dad," Jaina said.

"Swarms," Anakin added.

"Well, let's get started then. Give me some coordinates."

"Just fly in a slow rig-zag across the field, Dad," Jaina said.

"It will be hard not to find a detonator," Anakin agreed. He helped his sister aim one of the ship's laser cannons.

Jaina fired from the copilot's controls, and was rewarded with a large explosion, much greater than the laser should have made. "Got one!" she cried.

"There are hundreds more," Anakin said.

Jaina targeted another detonator, and the laser cannon eliminated that one as well. After she blew up three more, Han asked, "We getting close?"

"Not in the least," Jaina said. "This'll take all day."

"A single footstep could set one off at any time," Anakin said.

"But they move around a bit. We'll have to target each one precisely."

"You kids are doing great." Han patted the Falcon's control panel.

"But I think I've got a faster way."

"We can't miss a single one," Jaina warned. "It could start the fighting all over again."

"Don't worry, I think we can get full coverage." Han activated the ship's deflector shields, which had blasted comets out of the way during their final trial run of the Derby. Now, as he cruised low, the force field pressed down, like a heavy unseen hand, on the ground.

"We'll just cruise over the fields. The force field will push down and pop any of those land mines we encounter."

The Falcon moved slowly, its deflector shields placing pressure on the dirt. As the deflectors ruffled the soil, one of the burrowing detonators exploded directly beneath them, rocking the craft from side to side.

Jaina and Anakin looked at their father.

"Not to worry," Han said. "This ship can handle a lot more than that."

"They flew in a straight line as Anakin marked the pattern of their flight on a holochart he called up. Three more detonators exploded."

Clouds of suspended dust and smoke looked like phantom trees growing from the barren field.

"Ah, looks like our reinforcements have arrived," Han said.

Jaina looked into the sky to see the fleeting shape of another ship—a familiar ship. The Hapan passenger cruiser circled low, coming in to pace them. "But—we left the Rock Dragon on Ord Mantell."

Han shrugged. "I asked somebody to pick it up for us." He toggled the conim switch. "Hey, Kyp. That you, kid?"

"You bet," Kyp Dutton said. "With Streen-and I brought some more assistants from the Jedi academy, in case you could use an extra hand."

"Or hoof," another voice broke in.

"Is that Lusa?" Jaina asked, suddenly recognizing the voice of the centaur girl who had come to Yavin 4 after escaping from the Diversity Alliance.

"Yes, we've got Lusa here, and young Raynar, another friend of yours," Kyp continued. The young man from the Bomaryn trading fleet greeted them.

"Looks like we're going to have quite a reunion tonight," Kyp said.

"But for now, we've got some land mines to clear."

"Hey, I'm just a good pilot who happens to be here on a diplomatic mission," Han Solo said. "I'm trusting all of you to use your Jedi powers to make sure we do a thorough job."

The two ships parted and began to crisscross the vast acreage that had once been cropland. It was clear that the fields of Anobis could grow food enough to feed all its inhabitants, once the land was made safe again.

The rumble of repeated land-mine detonations sounded like rapid gunshots in the empty sky. The Rock Dragon and the Millennium Falcon continued without pause. Their deflector shields pushed down on the fertile ground, at the same time smoothing out many of the jagged holes and pits left from earlier explosions.

"Never thought we'd be using our spaceships to harvest bombs," Jaina said.

Han smiled at her. "The Falcon's good for just about anything," he said. "Course I prefer to give her more glamorous duties."

Both ships left their comm systems open. Jaina chattered with Raynar and the centaur girl Lusa, catching up on news as they continued their work. Toward the end of the afternoon, Lowie and Tenel Ka emerged from the dense forest and waved up at the ships crisscrossing the air.

"Looks like they're finished," Jaina said. "But I have the feeling we just did the easier parts of the job. We can go home once these weapons are cleaned up. But the people of Anobis still have to come to terms with all their hatreds and prejudices. They've got a long

history to overcome."

Han looked at his daughter. Another burrowing detonator exploded behind them, but he didn't even seem to notice. "The rest is going to be up to them," he said. "Sure, your mom'll send in some New Republic peacekeepers and inspection teams, but these people have to determine in their own hearts whether this war will ever end."

"That was hard work. I'm starved," Jaina said. She collapsed onto a wooden bench beside her brother and looked appreciatively at the feast being laid out by both miners and farmers on long shady tables in the fading afternoon sunlight at the foot of the mountains.

"You're hungry?" Jacen said. "Hey, what about us? Zekk and Anja and I weren't just sitting on a ship and flying around all day, you know.

There was nothing between us and those explosives except for the Force and our lightsabers."

"Lowbacca and I were also in considerable danger afoot," Tenel

Ka pointed out.

Jaina grinned good-naturedly. "Guess you're probably even him grier than I am then, huh?"

The one-armed warrior girl crooked an eyebrow at her. "This is a fact."

Anja stood with feet spread apart, shook back her long silky hair, and heaved a dramatic sigh. "I could eat a whole gun dark right about now, without even bothering to cook it first."

"I know what you mean," Zekk said.

Jaina noted with amusement-and perhaps a hint of alarm-the playful look Anja directed at both Zekk and Jacen as she said, "I don't like to share."

Jacen chuckled. "Don't worry. We'll find our own gundarks."

"So, uh, how does it feel?" Jaina asked, changing the subject. She looked at Anja, then gestured toward the miners and farmers as they uneasily worked together to prepare the meal.

"Strange," Anja admitted. "It's ... hard to start trusting someone you've hated all your life. I'm not sure what to do with myself now.

I've always been a fighter and a smuggler, not a miner."

"Why not come back to Yavin 4 with us?" Jacen suggested. Jaina

blinked in surprise at what her brother had said.

"Really?" Anja asked.

"Sure," Zekk said with a twinkle in his emerald eyes. "After all, you're pretty dangerous with a lightsaber already. Master Skywalker might be able to teach you a bit more about control."

Jacen said, "It's obvious you've got some talent."

A suspicious look entered Anja's enormous dark eyes. "I don't know. I don't take rejection very well. Your Master Skywalker might not let me study there. I'd hate to make the trip for nothing."

"Trip? Where're you heading?" Han Solo asked, striding up with Anakin, Kyp Durrón, and Streen.

"Urn, Jacen had an idea that Anja might want to study for a while at the Jedi academy," Jaina said uncertainly.

Kyp smiled and looked at Han. "I was quite a handful myself, as I recall."

Han drew a deep breath, let it out slowly in a soundless whistle. He looked into the eyes of the young woman who had hated him for so many

years. "If you're really interested, I'll put in a good word for you with Luke."

Jaina tensed, expecting Anja to throw her father's offer back in his face. Instead, the young woman said stiffly, "Thank you. I accept."

Then she whirled, her long hair lashing like a silken whip behind her.

"Now if you'll excuse me," she said over her shoulder. "I have to say some goodbyes. I'll return in an hour." Without another word she sprinted off toward her village.

Anakin stared quizzically after the young woman. "It's all settled then?" he asked.

"Guess so," Jaina murmured.

Just then Lusa trotted up, with Raynar running easily beside her, as if he were now used to such exercise. "Elis says the feast is almost ready," the centaur girl said. "We must come and eat."

Han nodded. "We'll stay for evening meal, and then take off. You kids want me to fly back to Yavin 4 with you?"

"Naw," Jacen said. "We'll be fine in the Rock Dragon."

"We can manage," Jaina added. "There's plenty of room for all of us."

Her father nodded again, as if he had expected this.

"In that case, do you mind if Streen and I get a lift back to Coruscant with you?" Kyp Dutton asked. "Master Skywalker told us that's where we'd begin our next assignment."

This suggestion brought a grin of pleasure to Han Solo's face.

"Hey, no problem. Be just like old times, huh, kid?"

"Two of the best hotshot pilots in the galaxy together again," Kyp agreed.

Anakin looked over at his sister. "This could be interesting."

Jaina bit her lower lip and looked in the direction Anja had taken toward the mountain village. "Yes. Very interesting."

Anja stood impatiently in front of the viewscreen in the mining village's secondary comm center. She crossed her slender arms over her chest and tried not to fidget. It would not do to show her

impatience.

Why was the transmission taking so long to go through?

Finally, the static on the screen cleared, revealing the close-cropped green hair and the rugged, visored face she had been expecting:

Czethros. "Things didn't go exactly as you had planned," she said with a tight smile. "Solo is still alive. But I've managed to get the situation back under control."

Czethros's image remained impassive, but Anja could see the interest in his eyes. "Tell me," he said.

"Solo's own children invited me to join them at the Jedi academy."

Czethros's mouth opened slightly. He looked suitably impressed.

"Once I'm in place on Yavin 4," Ania went on, "I'll win their confidence. And I believe many opportunities will present themselves.

..."

Czethros nodded his moss-green head, and a dangerous smile formed on his face. "You've done well. As long as you can stay in touch with me, I'll make sure you're supplied with andris."

Czethros broke the connection and Anja allowed herself to relax.

That was all she had needed to hear.

For Jacen, the return trip to Yavin 4 proved to be endlessly fascinating.

While Jaina and Lowie piloted the Rock Dragon with Em Teedee as their navigator, Zekk, Raynar, Lusa, Tenel Ka, Anja, and Jacen gathered in the crowded crew cabin to talk.

They shared stories of their adventures on various planets. Lusa spoke of her experiences with the Diversity Alliance. Zekk talked about the Shadow Academy and about his time as a bounty hunter. Raynar spoke haltingly of the bounty Nolaa Tarkona had placed on his father's head, and of Boman Thul's death in the Emperor's plague storehouse.

Jacen and Tenel Ka explained how the warrior girl had lost her arm in a lightsaber training accident. Last, Anja shared more about her experiences growing up as an orphan on the war-torn planet of Anobis.

As she told her story, tears formed occasionally in her huge sad eyes, but she never allowed them to fall. Jacen found it hard to imagine the horror of seeing so many friends die year after year.

"We got rid of a lot of the land mines, punchers, and detonators,"

Jacen said, trying to comfort her. "Maybe now your people can stop living in fear."

"Ah," Tenel Ka said. "Aha. But that is only a beginning."

"That's true," Zekk said. "War changes people. They're going to have to learn how to trust and accept each other now. It ... it doesn't come naturally."

Anja looked ruefully around at the faces of the young Jedi Knights.

"That's going to be difficult for me too. It's been a long time since I trusted anyone."

Lowie roared a comment from the cockpit. "Master Lowbacca wishes to inform you that we will be emerging from hyperspace in one standard minute," Em Teedee said.

"Almost there," Jaina added. "Hang on, everybody." The companions moved forward to the cockpit to get a good view of the tiny jungle moon.

When it appeared in the front windowports, Jacen said, "There it is, Anja. Yavin 4. For now, your new home."

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

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

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

Her mother, former princess of Alderaan and the New Republic's current Chief of State, would have been aghast at Jaina's disheveled appearance. Her straight brown hair dripped with sweat. Leaves,

branches, and trailing vines whipped at her face, though she hardly seemed to notice.

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

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

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

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

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

Jaina and her friends burst through the dense foliage and into the

clearing by the broad, slow-moving river.

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

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

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

"Are you all right?" Raynar asked.

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

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

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

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

flightsuit and removed her boots.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

to complain about something. Like the weather: she hates the humidity.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Raynar opened his mouth as if he were about to ask something, then seemed to think better of it. He simply said, "Oh." The blond haired

boy looked curiously from Jaina to Tenel Ka for a moment, then added, "Well, I hope they know what they're doing." He flushed slightly. "I ... I mean, lightsaber practice with someone who isn't really trained in the Force can be pretty dangerous."

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

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

She chuckled. "Including Tenel Ka."

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

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

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

A bland smile was fixed on Anja Gallandro's face, a smile that did not

reach her large, sad eyes. She seemed not the least bit perturbed.

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

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

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

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

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

neck.

A symbolic gesture, Jacen guessed.

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

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

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

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

"I can manage that," Zekk said.

"Anja," Jacen warned, "just remember that you can't afford to make

mistakes like that one against a real enemy. He won't give you a second chance."

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

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

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

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

"Kinda stubborn, you know?"

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

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

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

"Well, thanks for giving her a chance," Jacen said. "I'm sure you won't be disappointed."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

To make matters worse, her own normally well-controlled emotions were playing strange tricks on her. For the past several days she'd had a profound feeling of missing Jacen ... and Zekk, of course. It didn't make sense. It wasn't as if the two young men were gone, as Lowie had been when he'd accompanied his friend Raaba to visit the Diversity Alliance.

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

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

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

outside.

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

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

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

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

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

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

By the time he reached the bottom of the ramp and greeted Jaina and Tenel Ka with a kiss each on the hand, and Lowbacca with a friendly

slap between his furry shoulders, Zekk and Jacen were running across the landing field toward them. Master Luke Skywalker followed at a more leisurely pace.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

way to Cloud City."

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

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

"Old smuggler buddy?" Jaina asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lando chuckled. "Not exactly, but close. I was hoping to borrow this fine crew of young people to visit the place with me before I open it to the public. Give me their ideas and opinions, maybe even doublecheck things to make sure there aren't any potential hazards our engineers have overlooked."

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

The Jedi Master narrowed his eyes thoughtfully and then nodded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Instead of proving heartless, self-centered, and prideful as she had believed they would be, Jacen, Jaina, and their friends at the Jedi academy had shown themselves to be helpful, patient, and honorable—even

in the face of her most withering sarcasm. To make matters worse, Jacen had turned out to have an endearing love for animals and a quirky, silly sense of humor that Anja had come to find more and more pleasant as the days passed.

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

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

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

They would probably show their true colors sometime soon.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He turned around and waved his sister and Anja inside. His face lit with a quick smile. "Hey, I'm almost done here. I was just setting the timers on those new feeding and exercise monitors you designed, Jaina.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That was pretty rude."

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

Tension crackled in the air between them until Jacen intervened.

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

him a chance."

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

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

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

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

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

"Ready for jump to hyperspace."

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

"Too bad we couldn't have brought the Rock Dragon," Jaina said.

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

Lowie gave a noncommittal rumble.

"Come on, now," Lando said, "we didn't need to bring a whole fleet! "

"It was unnecessary," Tenel Ka agreed.

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

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

"Besides, don't tell me it's a hardship to practice your copilotting skills in the Lady Luck."

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

Lando's face shone with childish excitement. "I don't know about that.

SkyCenter Galleria is fantastic. I can't wait to show it to you. My friend Cojahn and I are sparing no expense in making it the best entertainment complex in the galaxy. If you can't find something to

enjoy in our galleria, you're probably dead. Cojahn's putting everything into it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Dazzling," Zekk said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As Lando and Jaina emerged after shutting down the Lady Luck's systems, a small and somber group of Exex, the city officials, marched across the docking platform toward the space yacht. At first Lowie thought it might be a small committee to welcome home the former Baron-Administrator of Cloud City-but he could sense immediately that something was wrong.

Lando raised a hand in greeting. "Good to be back. How ya doing?" He

looked at them, perplexed. "This is all the fanfare you could manage?"

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

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

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

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

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

But the sad news about Cojahn had not left Lando and the young Jedi

Knights much in the mood for fun.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lando chattered something back in the alien-sounding language.

The Ugnaught shift boss nodded, then leapt to a crossbrace on the

hovercoaster track and clambered up, yelling for the crew to get back to their duties. The other Ugnaughts returned to work, attaching crossbraces to the high-speed levitating hovercoaster.

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

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

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

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

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

Lando shook his head.

Jaina stepped closer to him. "If Cojahn was so concerned with safety, it doesn't seem likely he'd be careless enough to slip and fall off a dangerous outer balcony."

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

He'd never have just fallen off a balcony."

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

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

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

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

Together, they continued walking through a narrow, oddly angled corridor. The trapezoidal walls and upwardly sloping ramps seemed

designed to disorient and confuse any visitors. Moving mirrors added to the confusion, and Jaina found it difficult to keep her footing.

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

Zekk yelled. Lowie snarled. Tenel Ka leapt into a battle stance, yanking the rancor-tooth lightsaber loose from her belt. But Jacen just laughed, making a face at the hideous images. "Those simulated creatures are ridiculous, Lando," he said. "Who could believe anything that ugly would exist in this universe?"

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

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

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

Lando glanced appraisingly at the illusionary monsters, which still

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

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

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

He kept his voice flat as he struggled to control his emotions, though Jaina could tell that Lando remained deeply disturbed. "We'd intended this place to be a long-term investment, our greatest success. We had a ten-year plan for expanding, bringing in new people."

He stared upward at the catwalks, support braces, and colorful backdrops of cloth. "That's why it was so important for me to have you

kids here as 'test consultants.'" We wanted to get everything right-the look, the details, the thrills. Now I don't know how I'm gonna do half of this by myself."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As Jaina dropped, she could hear the miniaturized translating droid scolding as they all dropped down, down..... Oh my! Master Lowbacca, are you absolutely certain that this is safe? It may not have been tested yet. We could be doomed.....

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"We loved it," Jaina said.

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

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

"It was quite stimulating," Tenel Ka agreed.

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

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

"I'd call that a successful test run," Lando said, then sighed.

"Maybe this will work out after all."

"I sure hope so," Jaina said.

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

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

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

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

Lando looked at her sharply, his big brown eyes narrowing. "I've considered that."

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

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

"We'll never know unless we investigate," Zekk said.

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

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

smell right."

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

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

"This is a fact," Tenel Ka agreed.

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

Lando looked gratefully at the companions. "You know, kids, one of the

things I've learned in my life is never to turn down a sincere offer of help-especially if the offer comes from a Jedi Knight."

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

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

Here at the top of the immense metropolis in the sky, they were buffeted by winds. The temperatures varied: cool and warm breezes swirled as updrafts caught around the structure, carrying snatches of vapors from the cloud depths below.

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

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

Since rich patrons frequently came from halfway across the galaxy to

relax and spend their vacations on Bespin, the Board required that all smelly and noisy activities remain far enough away so as not to spoil the view.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm surprised you have so little faith in your own abilities, Anja."

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

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

: "What's going on?" Jaina asked.

'A show, I think," Jacen said. Tenel Ka leaned forward to watch.

To the sounds of muffled cheers from all up and down the sides of the huge levitating city, a group of creatures arrowed out of one of the broad docking bays with a flutter of wings. The snub-nosed, bullet shaped creatures flapped their broad wings like giant fish swimming gracefully under thick water. They had no feathers, only gray leathery

skin, like sails stretched tight over flexible cartilage and a network of thin bones. Except for the rushing of air, the beasts made no sound in their flight.

"Hey, those are thrantas!" Jacen cried. He turned to Jaina. "We've seen holos of them. Remember some of the images Mom has? Thrantas were actually native to Alderaan, but someone brought them here many years ago to use as beasts of burden at the gas refineries and for constructing the floating cities." He nodded toward the cluster of swooping batlike creatures that circled, dove, and flew in formation.

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

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

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

Lowie growled in surprise. "People are jumping!" Jaina cried.

"Out into open air!"

"Wait. They seem to know what they're doing," Zekk pointed out.

"Watch. I think it's part of the show."

Jacen's eyes gleamed. "They're thranta riders!"

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

Flapping sail-like wings, the thrantas swooped beneath the tumbling, dropping humanoids. The thranta riders completed their aerial acrobatics and each one of them landed perfectly in position on a small harness on a thranta's back. With a resonant sound muffled by distance and the vastness of the giant floating city, spectators applauded and cheered the show.

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

creatures-and the riders, too."

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

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

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

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

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

Jaina sat up as cool dusk wind blew her straight brown hair around her

face. "Ought to talk to the people at the SkyCenter construction site, too. Maybe the Ugnought shift boss who got fired, if we can find him, and anyone else Cojahn had contact with."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jaina bit her lower lip, stared at Lando in shock. Looking at the circle of serious faces around him, Lando spread his hands wide in apology. "I ... I thought you knew. Believe me, I've run into this enough times that I recognize the symptoms: wide eyes with huge dilated

pupils, excess energy, restlessness, large appetite but never seeming to gain any weight. Not to mention always looking for chances to get off alone and then coming back with a fresh burst of energy, and the pale, almost translucent skin, quick temper. .

Jaina sighed. "Sounds like Anja, all right."

"That's impossible," Jacen said. "I would have known."

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

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

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

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

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

herself from any companionship.

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

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

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

Anja's face flushed, and her words were filled with heat. "Well, obviously Jaina must have found it. Otherwise, why would she-" "Wait," Jaina said. "Nobody found anything. And we haven't been going through your stuff. But there were, urn... you just seem to ...

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

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

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

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

Han Solo killed him, remember?"

With that, she stormed out of the restaurant.

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

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

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

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

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

They had all come to Cloud City to enjoy themselves and-until nowAnja

had been enjoying herself, in spite of the somber news about Cojahn's death. It certainly wasn't her fault that the clumsy guy had taken a cloud dive.

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

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

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

Her footsteps quickened, and in less than five minutes she found herself at the doorway to a private comm center. She paid her credits and slipped into a soundproof booth. She knew the transmission codes

by heart, and within moments an image tonned on the screen in front of her. The man had close-cropped moss-green hair and an eye visor that circled the base of his skull like a ring around an oddly shaped planet.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Even as Lando explained each new attraction to the interested young Jedi Knights, she could tell he kept his eyes open for any clues to what really lay behind Cojahn's death. He had asked them to use the Force to sense any hidden dangers at the construction site: workers with malicious thoughts, sabotaged assemblies, or substandard materials.

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

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

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

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

different kinds of entertainment he was going to bring in here."

Lando led them around the edge of the central hub until he came to a door marked SwAmp, MARSH, BOG, BAYOU. They stepped through the doorway and found themselves in a small antechamber.

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

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

Before the Wookiee donned his suit, Em Teedee detached himself from Lowie's syren-fiber belt and the little droid hovered to and fro, "supervising" the process and making helpful suggestions.

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

Lando rubbed his hands together. "Everyone ready? Let's get into some mud."

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

Occasionally, Tenel Ka noticed construction workers adding finishing touches to the exhibit—a bit more hanging moss here, another holographic swamp creature there—but otherwise, the impression of an unexplored swampland was surprisingly convincing.

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

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

That water's perfectly clean, by the way. It's been artificially

'muddied' with purified sand and food colorings."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"We call this the Bayou Buffet." He spread his arms and indicated a serving area fifty meters long. The tables were made to look like

fallen and rotting logs whose tops just happened to be perfectly flat.

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

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

The young man nodded, but continued working.

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

"Sounds like fun," Jaina said.

"Yeah, well," Lando said wistfully, "I guess he never got around to booking a band before-" "Excuse me, sir," the scrawny young man on the stage interrupted.

Tenel Ka sensed tension in the wispy-bearded boy.

"Yes?" Lando gave the boy his full attention.

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

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

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

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

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

Lando mused. "We haven't even opened yet."

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

"So where are they now?" Lando asked.

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

"Didn't collect their credits? That doesn't sound like Figrin at all!"

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

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

"It's not much of a connection," Jaina observed quietly.

"No," Lando said, "but it's the best lead we've got so far. I'd say that the band's disappearing on the same day Cojahn died is a bit too much of a coincidence. One way or another, I've got to find out what they know."

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

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

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

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

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

Czethros sat at his cluttered desk in a high warehouse tower on Ord Mantell. Outside in the anteroom, computer screens and robotic receptionists diverted the common business activities, aboveboard

correspondence, and trivial conversations that allowed Czethros to run one of the most successful shipping and packaging companies on the entire planet.

Everything had been set up for him through Black Sun.

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

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

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

Yet numerous crackdowns and disasters had forced Black Sun to go underground, into hiding. Some thought the criminal organization had

been mortally weakened. But now Czethros and a few other lieutenants were working to build a newer, more powerful organization.

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

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

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

Tweaking a volume control, he turned up the dissonant Sullustan opera that had been playing in the background. The squeaky, overlapping tones gave most people instant headaches-at the very least, the noise kept strangers out of his office. Coincidentally, Sullustan opera had the added benefit of being particularly effective at jamming all known listening devices.

Czethros focused his cyber-eye on the secondary screen and scratched at the moss-green hair that covered his scarred head. Then he adjusted the visor over his eyes, tuning the reception spectrum deeper into the infrared. He nodded with satisfaction as a formerly invisible series of letters and words suddenly appeared on the screen. Human eyes could

not read them, but with his visor Czethros could pick up every letter as perfectly as if it were written in fire.

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

Dimly, he could hear their sultry voices repeating the familiar phrases: "Master Czethros is in a meeting," "Master Czethros is unavailable," "You'll find that Master Czethros has already attended to that matter."

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

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

Czethros had tried to have Anja take care of the meddlers, but since he'd been forced to keep his involvement in Anobis gun-running activities a secret-especially from her-he could hardly explain to Anja why it was important to him. Anja was so volatile, such a loose

cannon, that she might even turn against him, if she ever found out he had kept the war going on her home planet to increase his profits.

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

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

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

On the spectrum-shifted screen a star map displayed bright points that represented Black Sun strongholds; the galaxy looked very bright indeed. After such a long buildup, his operatives were in place

preparing for the great revolt. It would not be long before Czethros could give the signal. But first he had to cement the rest of his plans.

The illicit spice-running market continued to grow. His pirates and smugglers hijacked shipments of glitterstim, andris, and ryll spice, selling the contraband substances at greatly inflated prices to waiting customers. Shortly before the brief battle and its utterly assured victory, Czethros would place himself in control of the famed spice mines of Kessel.

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

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

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

visor, burning red.

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

Unfortunately, the news Anja had just sent him from Cloud City meant that the young Jedi Knights would not rest until they had meddled in all of his affairs. He knew he'd have to take care of the situation quickly and cleanly. His choice was clear, and his conscience-if he still possessed one-would not trouble him. Besides, Czethros already had plenty of blood on his hands. A little more would make no difference.

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

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

He fixed a smile on his face and signaled his receptionist droids that

it was safe to begin admitting regular visitors. Czethros and his shipping company were now open for business.

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

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

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

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

"Can't wait to compare notes when we get back," Jaina said.

"Hey, Em Teedee," Zekk called, tying back his long, dark hair, "did you go over our route to the Bith homeworld? We don't want to get lost on

our way there."

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

"Clak'dor VII isn't a place many people go by choice," Lando said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As Jaina climbed the steep ramp she turned to Zekk. "Hope you brought

your swamp boots along."

Zekk grinned back at her. "And my bug repellent."

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

Don't you guys wish you were coming along?"

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

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

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

Besides, you've heard one swamp band you've heard 'em all."

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

"I guess we'll just have to rough it here," he said with a feigned sigh.

Clak'dor VII had once been a paradise, perfectly suited for organic carbon-based life and thriving with countless species. But centuries of ecological damage and intercultural warfare among factions of the Bith race had ruined the world.

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

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

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

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

"Is that where you think we'll find Figrin D'an and the band?"

Zekk asked. "Inside a dome?"

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

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

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

"It varies," Lando said. "That Figrin D'an is a die-hard sabace player. I should know, since I've played against him quite a few times and so has your father, Han. Figrin recently spent a bunch of hot credits, registered some property, and bought wilderness supplies. It seems he and the rest of the band have gone into hiding on one of the dense bayous."

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

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

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

Sitting in the Lady Luck's padded andornately carved captain's chair,

Lando smiled. "I happen to know a lot of Figrin's gambling buddies

...

and they know me. I called in a few favors."

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

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

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

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

On a screen in front of him, Lando called up a detailed topographical

map of the swamps and waterways. Jaina, as copilot, watched the progress of their flight, comparing the diagram with the sinuous creeks and rivers that sliced through the overgrown wasteland.

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

"Welcome to the garden spot of Clak'dor VII," Zekk said.

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

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

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

Lando studied the clear area skeptically, using his own scanners. "I might get the sidewalls dirty ... but you're right. I don't see a

better place." With a burst of repulsorjets the Lady Luck settled down onto the wet sand, showering clumps of mucky debris into the air and out over the placid surface of the pond.

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

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

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

"Sure," she said. "But I doubt it'll handle all this."

"Sometimes you've got to get a little dirty to be a real Jedi Knight."

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

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

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

It's hard to see very far if you're at the water level."

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

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

Three colorful insects the size of small birds flapped around, hissing and spitting tiny globs of a sticky fluid at them, which Jaina brushed aside. Between her fingers the fluid felt like molten spiderwebs. The butterfly-like things swirled in the air and flew off into the treetops; a large creature with a reptilian head and brightly feathered wings swooped down and gobbled two of the insects in a single dive.

"Jacen would really like it here," Jaina said. "He'd have fun watching

all this bayou life."

"Your brother's welcome to all of it he can handle," Zekk said.

"For me it's just noisy and distracting."

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

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

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

"Obviously there's more to it than that," Lando agreed. "It's a good sign."

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

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

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

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

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

"Sounds like the Biths we're looking for," Zekk said.

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

The music suddenly stopped with a loud squawk. They heard clatters, thuds, and bumping noises, as if people were scurrying about in a panic inside the tiny huts. One polished pink head popped up, just barely

visible through a tiny window opening, and Jaina recognized the familiar alien form of a Bith musician.

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

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

sounds like Figrin himself," Lando said. "Figrin! Wait, it's me!"

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

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

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

"No!" Jaina shouted.

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

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

"It's just mud!" he said, aghast. "They're shooting mud bombs at us."

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

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

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

"Hey, man. Who's out there?" said the original Bith voice.

"It's Lando Calrissian," Lando said. "And if you don't stop firing mud

at me, I've got two Jedi Knights here who'll do more than get your shirts dirty."

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

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

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

"Black Sun?" Jaina said in alarm.

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

"Maybe even play a little round of sabace or two."

Other Bith band members stood up in the adjoining shacks to look with huge black eyes at the new arrivals. A few dissonant musical notes

rang out as they gathered up their jumbled instruments.

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

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

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

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

Then you'd have been facing a really unpleasant interrogation session."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Figrin sighed and a few of his band members struck up a low, mournful tune. "Man, that's a sad song," he replied. "A real tearjerker.

We don't usually have stuff like that in our repertoire. Cojahn ...

that story has good guys, bad guys, treachery and tragedy. You know, all the stuff that makes for a surefire hit."

"So you'll tell us everything?" Jaina said. "All the details?"

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

"Why not?" the Bith handleader said. "We got plenty of time ...

and it's been too long since we had a really attentive audience." in the rain forest sector of the Climateria, Lowie hung upside down from an artificial tree branch, admiring the view. Em Teedee hovered right-side-up half a meter beneath the Wookiee. Anja, who paced back and forth on a limb adjacent to Lowie's, seemed as edgy and impatient as ever. Two meters lower down, Tenel Ka straddled a branch and practiced Jedi relaxation techniques while Jacen searched in vain for tiny creatures on the bark of the synthetic tree.

"Remind me exactly what it is we're supposed to be pretending to look for while Calrissian and the others are off joyriding," Anja said with

an exaggerated sigh.

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

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

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

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

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

Step-bounce, step-bounce. A dangerous game. Lowie gave a cautionary woof, but she seemed utterly confident and tensed like a predatory

animal ready to spring. The thought of falling did not seem to worry Anja; in fact, Lowie wondered if it had even occurred to her. Then again, he mused, maybe it had and she found the thought exhilarating.

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

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

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

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

Before Em Teedee had finished speaking, both Jacen and Tenel Ka were completely alert. Lowie's furry arm shot out, and he managed to slow Anja's descent, but he could not get a grip on her. Jacen and Tenel Ka, however, each succeeded in grasping one of her limbs and pulled Anja to safety on their branch.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Someplace with more people, to start with?" Anja said, making a shaky

attempt at humor.

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

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

Tenel Ka nodded. Anja smiled.

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

Lowie groaned.

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

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

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

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

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

Jacen's mouth fell open.

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

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

All of them seemed to find the physical activity relaxing.

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

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

have done something so noble for her?

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

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

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

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

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

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

of fluffy white chunks. He retaliated immediately.

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

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

Lowie gave a questioning growl.

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

"1/2at did?" Jacen said.

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

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

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

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

"What for?" Anja asked in alarm.

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

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

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

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

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

"Me too," Jacen said.

Lowie rumbled his agreement.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There. There it was.

Anja had no memory of the intervening few minutes in which she opened the vial and took the spice. The next thing she knew, she felt energy coursing through her body. Her vision was clear and acute, her mind alert, her doubts gone.

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

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

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

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

The warrens were dimly lit, and just barely tall enough for Jacen to

stand up in. Lowie, however, had to stoop to move around.

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

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

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

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

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

Em Teedee stopped. "Just a moment, Master Jacen. Dear me! Although I realize I'm not endowed with the Force, I was attempting to reach out with all my sensors, and I believe I've just intercepted a communication originating from somewhere extremely close by. The words were in Ugnaught dialogue-with which I am of course quite familiar, being fluent in over sixteen forms of communication-" Lowie growled and

tapped the floating droid with one finger, as if to remind him that they were in a hurry.

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

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

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

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

Lowie gave a thoughtful growl.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Stealth is of utmost importance."

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

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

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

"Where did he go?" Jacen asked.

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

"The Ugnaughts use them," Tenel Ka said. "They live in these tunnel warrens."

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

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

of building a city in the clouds.

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

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

And where was he going now?

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

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

"Something is not right," she said.

"I know it," he answered, frowning. He knew they had been quiet, using

their Jedi skills, but in such an uninhabited area, he found it hard to believe that the Ugnaught ahead didn't suspect their presence.

The furry creature popped down another dropshaft, and Jacen, Tenel Ka, and Lowie hurried so they wouldn't lose sight of him. "I wish I knew where he was going," Jacen muttered. "This is like a scaredmynock chase."

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

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

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

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

Tenel Ka pressed closer to Jacen, her back against his. The contact

sent a tingle through his senses, though he would have enjoyed it more had they not been in such a tense situation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The seven thugs pulled out images printed on evaporating flimiplast.

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

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

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

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

"No," Tenel Ka said quickly.

The Wookiee roared, and Jacen nodded. "I agree, Lowie-if we can't

fight them, we'd better turn around and run!"

The thugs shouted in surprise and fired off scattered blaster shots as Jacen, Lowie, and Tenel Ka bolted toward the nearest exit door. Their feet clanging on the metal decks of the lower levels in Port Town, the young Jedi Knights dashed out of the room, sprinting ahead as fast as they could go. Jacen swung around metal-walled corners, his sweaty hands squeaking on grimy durasteel plates as he grabbed them for balance.

. Lowie banged his head on the low ceiling and yowled in pain, but kept charging ahead. Em Teedee sputtered along, doing his best to keep up.

"Wait for me!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lowie chuffed and nodded in agreement. "Oh, no! We're doomed!" Em Teedee wailed.

They ducked under a half-open shipping bay door and entered an

inventory sector where canisters of spin-sealed Tibanna gas stood behind guard fields. Since Tibanna gas was used for hyperdrive cores as well as blaster powerpacks, hazardous-material signs marked every door and each separate shipment.

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

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

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

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

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

He decided it must be from exertion.

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

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

"But we are now close to other people."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

started."

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

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

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

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

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

Bespin's open sky.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Jacen!" Tenel Ka cried.

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

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

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

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

The fame of Figrin D'an and his crew had risen and fallen over the years, and "Fiery Figrin" himself never understood what they were doing right or wrong. All through old Imperial days, the time of Rebellion, and then the formation of the New Republic, the Modal Nodes had played

their own music, sometimes to great fanfare, sometimes to few-if any-appreciative ears.

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

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

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

They'd also done a stint in the floating casinos on Mon Calamari, but the gambling tables proved too tempting for Figrin, and his own

musicians had finally dragged him away and taken a booking on Cloud City. Lando's business partner, Cojahn, had promised them that their new gig to publicize SkyCenter Galleria would be a renaissance for them, a real comeback tour.

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

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

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

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

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

Galleria....

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

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

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

"Thanks ... I think," Lando said.

"But you're right," Figrin said. "Cojahn wasn't easily pushed around."

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

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

Zekk nodded and rested his chin in his hands. "If you're running a business like Cojahn was, you'd have to be ready to stand up to hoodlums and all sorts of people trying to push you around."

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

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

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

Lando nodded grimly. "But Cojahn didn't give in to them?"

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

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

falling."

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

"So why'd you run, Figrin?" Lando asked. "Were they after you, too?"

"Black Sun's trying to get its hands into the Intergalactic Musicians' Guild. They wanted us to pay triple membership dues just so they could take their cut-and man, Cojahn hadn't paid us much. We'd only done a few gigs for him. I mean, SkyCenter Galleria isn't even open yet! We got a few tips when we played the bars in the Yerith Bespin, but not enough for that kind of extortion." He shook his huge smooth head. "I hate gangsters that don't have budget payment plans!"

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

Zekk made a grimace of distaste.

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

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

"Hey, home is home," Figrin said with a shrug.

Jaina felt sickened. "So Cojahn stood up for his morals and ethics

...

and paid for it with his life."

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

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

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

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

Perspiration trickled down her neck and her back.

The band members stood up, bustled around the hut, and propped the rest

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

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

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

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

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

The other band members added their own inspirations and embellishments,

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

Jaina listened, enjoying the exotic tune. She had never heard music like this in her life, and she knew it was an experience she wouldn't forget. She winked at Zekk. "This is almost better than dry clothes," she said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jacen ...

At his side she had fought Dark Jedi, vicious beasts, bounty hunters, assassins, and misguided patriots. But never, even in her wildest nightmares, had she imagined that he could be taken from her like this—lost in an instant to gravity and some nebulous foe against whom she'd never even had the opportunity to fight.

The sharp pain in her arm did not come close to matching the wrenching pain in her heart, but it did bring her back to reality. Lowie groaned

in weariness and despair. Tenel Ka's booted feet flailed in the air.

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

But that couldn't last forever.

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

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

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

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

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

She winced, distracted from her torturous thoughts, and welcomed the pain that brought her mind back to sharp reality. The warrior girl looked up into Lowie's golden eyes and saw there a reflection of her own anguish ... and something more: determination.

Determination to stay alive. Determination not to lose another friend. Determination to warn Jaina, Zekk, and Lando that their lives were in danger too. Determination to find whoever had done this and bring them to justice.

Blood trickled from the deep wounds where Lowie's talons dug fiercely into her skin. Through the Force she felt his resolve flow into her, like the warm blood that poured down her arm. The wind made her red-gold braids whip wildly around her and caught at the droplets of blood, spattering them across her face.

The braids of a warrior. The blood of a princess.

Tenel Ka gritted her teeth. She would not fall, and she would not allow Jacen's murderers to go free. Her eyes still locked with Lowbacca's, she used the Force to steady herself. "I'm ready."

The Wookiee, who still had one arm wrapped around the sturdy antenna that protruded from the bottom of the city's structure, pulled himself

upward with that arm until he was able to wrap his strong legs around a crossbar. With both hands freed, he pulled her up by one arm and grasped her around the waist with the other. Then, shaking from the strain, he curled upward toward the antenna, as if sitting up and lifting weights simultaneously, until Tenel Ka could grasp the center bar of the antenna herself.

When he withdrew his claws from her arm the gush of blood made the antenna slippery and harder to hold on to, though Tenel Ka hardly noticed. She quickly hooked a leg over the crossbar and helped Lowbacca pull himself upright. For several long moments they clung to the antenna, shuddering from their efforts.

Finally Tenel Ka drew a deep breath. "Thank you, Lowbacca, my friend.

Let us continue."

Lowie roared and pointed up toward the chute through which they had fallen. Tenel Ka looked and saw with despair that the hatch had closed behind them! "You are correct, my friend. We seem to be stranded."

A split second later the hatch mysteriously slid open of its own accord. Lowie gave a triumphant bellow. They would still need to find a way to climb inside the sheer tube, but the first hurdle had been overcome. As the two young Jedi struggled to a standing position on

the antenna crossbar, a familiar silver ovoid hovered down through the open disposal chute.

"Oh, thank the Maker! Master Lowbacca, Mistress Tenel Ka!

You're alive! Do make haste-I'm not certain how long I can keep this access hatch open."

Tenel Ka fumbled with the pouch clipped at her waist and removed her grappling hook and fibercord.

"Oh, excellent idea!" Em Teedee said. "There is a ledge exactly three point seven meters above you where an air vent feeds into this disposal tube." Tenel Ka felt a strange light-headed sensation as she attempted to swing the grappling hook for her throw. Her fingers were bloody and the hook slipped from her grasp as she made the toss.

Lowbacca's hand shot out and snatched the cord before the hook could fall. Tenel Ka saw this as if from a great distance. The Wookiee then secured one arm around her waist and the antenna while he used his other hand to draw in the grappling hook, swing, and make the throw.

The hook caught and held firm.

"Excellent shot, Master Lowbacca!" Em Teedee said. "I say, wherever

could Master Jacen be?"

An angry Wookiee bellow exploded beside Tenel Ka's ear, but it didn't matter. A curtain of soft darkness descended upon her mind and she remembered nothing more.

Anja had everything back under control. She had reminded herself of her priorities and her goals, of who she was and who her enemies were.

She felt refreshed, invigorated, ready to take on anyone or anything.

She was once again convinced that she had not befriended Jacen, Jaina, and their associates. She was merely using them to get to Han Solo.

Well, perhaps she had slipped a bit and begun to think that their silly belief in the Force might actually give them some advantage, some power that she didn't possess. But the sentiment had been short-lived.

Everything seemed so much clearer to her now. She was completely self-sufficient. Anja Gallandro needed nothing and no one except Anja Gallandro. She had her wits, her intuition, her reflexes. And that made her every bit as good as a Jedi Knight.

As these comforting thoughts filled her mind, a heavy knock sounded on the door to her quarters. She hurriedly swept all of her private

belongings off the sleeping pad and back into the satchel from which they had come hours earlier, including the empty spice vial. She stepped to the refresher unit and stuffed the satchel into a corner before answering the knock.

She waved her hand over the OPEN switch, and the door slid aside with a hiss. Lowbacca, Tenel Ka, and Em Teedee practically fell into the room. Em Teedee's casing had been badly scratched, Tenel Ka's arm seeped blood from several deep wounds, and Lowie's ginger fur stuck out wildly in all directions.

Startling as it was to see them in this bedraggled condition, Anja was determined not to lose her composure again. She raised her eyebrows and tried for some humor. "I see you've come to appreciate my opinion of Ugnaughts."

"You were right not to come with us," Tenel Ka said in a weak voice.

Her eyelids drooped, and Anja could now see that the Wookiee was supporting most of the warrior girl's weight. Blood dripped from Tenel Ka's wounds to the floor.

"It was a trap," Em Teedee cried. "Curse my foolish circuits, I should have seen it earlier."

Lowie growled. "Oh, yes!" Em Teedee translated. "And Mistress Tenel Ka requires immediate medical assistance-immediate!"

"Trap," Tenel Ka echoed. Her face was pale, her breathing ragged.

Lowie picked up the warrior girl and gently deposited her on the sleeping pallet.

Anja pushed a button on the comm unit beside the door. "Emergency medical team to room 0914."

"Request acknowledged," a droid voice replied. "Estimated arrival: two point four minutes."

Anja nodded and turned back toward the two Jedi. "So where's Jacen?" she asked. "Torturing the Ugnaughts by telling them jokes?"

Lowie leaned back against the wall and crooned a strange note that Anja had never before heard from a Wookiee. Tenel Ka did not reply, but tears appeared from beneath her eyelids. Anja guessed that her pain must be terrible, because she had never seen the warrior girl betray any emotion whatsoever.

The Wookiee crooning grew louder. The miniaturized translating droid spoke in an oddly hushed voice. "If Master Lowbacca were capable of making any reply, he would regretfully inform you that Master Jacen

...

is dead." With that, the little droid fell silent and hovered fretfully between the Wookiee and the warrior girl, as if trying to comfort them.

Ridiculous! Anja thought. Jacen could not be dead. She had seen him only a few hours ago. This had to be somebody's idea of a joke.

But Lowie's eerie crooning and Tenel Ka's tears convinced her that something terrible had indeed occurred-more surely than any words could have.

In subdued tones, the translating droid explained what had taken place.

Anja was not prepared for the storm of conflicting emotions that swept through her. Anger, guilt, hopelessness, loss, despair. Jacen had not deserved to die. He had befriended Anja, amused her, taught her, defended her, learned from her, saved her life. He had been there for Anja. That's what friends are for, he had said.

But she had not been there for him.

An even worse thought now occurred to her: she might actually have

caused Jacen's death ... just as she had always told Czethros she would do someday, given the chance. It had been a lie. She hadn't meant to.

Not really.

But Anja herself had told Czethros of the young Jedi Knights' arrival on Cloud City and what they were investigating. Now Lowie and Tenel Ka were wounded. And Jacen was dead. If Anja knew Czethros and she thought she did-these events were not unrelated. That meant Czethros did have something to do with Cojahn's death and that Anja's friends had come too close to finding out about it.

She had no one to blame but herself. Her chest began heaving, and deep, wordless sobs wrenched from her throat.

She had lied. She had lied to Czethros. She had lied to herself.

Jacen had been her friend. Why should he be dead now?

An icy knife of anguish plunged deep into Anja's heart. Hot tears spilled down her cheeks. She stumbled backward into the refresher unit and shut the door tightly behind her. Racking sobs shook her as she scrambled in the corner for what she needed-what she had to have.

There was no choice.... The spice would help her.

A minute later, when the emergency medical team arrived at the door to her quarters, Anja came out of the refresher unit and let them in. She was controlled now, full of energy.

But nothing, nothing, could dull the pain....

Jacen fell.

And he kept on falling.

As he plunged down from Cloud City, the giant hanging metropolis seemed to shoot up and away from him like a spacecraft rocketing toward orbit.

In the first several seconds he let out a panicked cry for help. But he kept dropping ... dropping, with no bottom in sight. A cold wind rushed past his face, roaring in his ears, rippling his clothes, making it hard for him even to draw a breath. He quickly realized that screaming only wasted his precious energy.

Jacen concentrated, trying to use what Jedi powers he possessed to help him stop his endless fall. He had to think of a way. With the Force he could make himself lighter, perhaps slow his descent ... for all the good that would do him-it would only prolong the inevitable.

He felt as if he were floating and envisioned the Force as an invisible hand cradling him, lifting him up ... but he knew that was only an illusion. No matter how hard he concentrated, how much he tried to use his Jedi skills, he could not push himself back up to the now-distant Cloud City.

Worse, Bespin was a gas giant, a huge ball of atmospheric mixes, with no true surface, only a superdense liquid core hidden under thousands of kilometers of clouds. Jacen would keep falling into denser and denser gases, but he would be crushed long before he ever reached the central sphere. He would just fall forever into the gas giant, until the pressure squashed him flat.

The clouds swirled below, streaming in spirals like a whirlpool far, far beneath him. With each instant he fell closer and closer to oblivion.

In his mind he tried to call out to his sister Jaina or to Tenel Ka, but he couldn't seem to make contact. In any case, there was nothing they could do ... at least, not in time.

He did use his Jedi training to keep himself calm, remembering the techniques that Master Skywalker had taught him. Great, he thought with a flash of grimy humor, at least I'll die calm.

But he was not ready to give up yet. He lay back and continued to fall and fall and fall, sending out a silent cry for help ... though he didn't know where to direct it.

The wind and gases burned his eyes. He let them drift halfway shut.

Even so, the sunlight dazzled him, creating tiny rainbows through the ice crystals high in Bespin's atmosphere, and the colors of the pink and orange airborne algae seemed painfully bright.

Then, curving out at the edge of his vision, he saw a flicker of dark wings swoop through a nest of clouds and streak away. He blinked and spun around in the air. The gusting winds caught at his clothes.

He saw the shape again. It flitted by, closer this time. Suddenly, with a burst of speed, the flying creature cruised closer still to examine him like some giant curious hawkbat with a smooth bullet-shaped body and fleshy wings.

A thranta! "Help!" Jacen shouted. The colorfully painted rider on the creature's back gently tweaked the harness, directing the thranta.

Jacen continued to drop, and the flying creature swooped down as well, effortlessly sweeping the air aside with its broad wings. Jacen heard

the flapping sounds and a faint squeal that might have been a high-pitched subsonic call. As they streaked downward together the thranta rider met Jacen's eyes, nodded, and brought the creature under him, matching the speed of the young man's descent. Then he nudged upward so that Jacen dropped gently onto the creature's broad back, as if caught in a safety net.

The rider tossed Jacen the loose end of a sturdy rope that he had tied about his own waist. Jacen clutched the rope, trembling as the realization that he had almost died caught up with him. He gasped, but for a long moment could say nothing more than "Thank you."

Seeing Jacen secured on the back of his mount, the rider gave the harness a light snap and nudged the thranta with his knees. The creature took off with glee, soaring toward a white cloud bank far from the gleaming technological island of Cloud City, which was now only a silvery sparkle in the distant sky.

As he sweated and shuddered, just trying to catch his breath, Jacen pulled himself forward and held on to the skinny thranta rider by the waist. He was a young male, earless, with smooth skin that was painted or tattooed in swirling colors and patterns that made the thranta rider himself look like an optical illusion. The rider glanced over his bony shoulder at his unexpected passenger, smiling and flashing ebony teeth like polished gems.

"That's not a very good acrobatic routine you have, my friend," the thranta rider said. "You really shouldn't jump unless you know your mount will be there to catch you." The rider's voice was high-pitched and musical, in contrast with the roaring air around them.

"I ... I didn't mean to jump," Jacen admitted, then heaved a huge sigh of relief. His entire body shuddered. "We were ambushed by assassins."

My two friends managed to catch themselves on an antenna beneath Cloud City, but I couldn't hang on."

"Ambushed and fell," the thranta rider said. He nodded, his face pinched and sorrowful. "Yep. I've seen that before." He flew on without further explanation.

Jacen held on tightly, gradually regaining his composure, and finally he introduced himself. "I suppose I should tell you whose life you saved. I'm Jacen. Jacen Solo."

The thranta rider said, "My name is M'kim. I practice with the sky rodeo troupe, but I'm not a full-fledged member of the performing team ... yet."

The boy snapped the reins of the thranta, and it dove like a meteor, then pulled up into a sharp loop in the air. Jacen was afraid he'd

fall, but the thranta circled, somersaulted, and became level again.

At any other time, he might have enjoyed the brief rush of exhilaration, but he'd already had enough thrills for one day.

"So most days I come out with my friend here." M'kim patted the solid fleshy side of the flying creature, and the thranta ducked and bobbed in the air, showing off. "Just to practice."

"Hey, I'm certainly impressed," Jacen said. He held on, and found he was actually enjoying himself as the thranta soared and danced. Life seemed so sweet and exhilarating after his long fall and near brush with death.

Suddenly he realized with a sick jolt that if Lowie and Tenel Ka had managed to rescue themselves under Cloud City, they would believe he had fallen to his death. He couldn't let his friends live with such grief a moment longer.

"I've got to get back," he said, shouting into M'kim's ear hole. "I need to let my friends know that I'm alive."

But the thranta rider set his face in a grim expression and flew on, arrowing deeper into the clouds below, and away from Cloud City.

"If I take you back too soon," M'kim said, "those who tried to kill you

might still be waiting. Better for now to let them think you're dead."

"But that means everybody else thinks I'm dead too," Jacen said.

"And my friends may need my help."

The thranta soared through a layer of mist that slapped Jacen in the face; he spluttered in the cold moisture and smelled a strong chemical tang of gases that drifted up from the deep cloud-deck layers below.

"We'll go here first." M'kim released the harness and gestured ahead in the direction of the thranta's flight.

Behind an obscuring veil of white mist, a heavy green-brown cloud floated like a mat above the other layers of vapor. The dark island in the sky seemed solid enough, and as the thranta brought them closer, Jacen saw that the sludgy raft-cloud was actually a huge cluster of algae nodules. The airborne sacs of gas-filled plant life drifted at an equilibrium level in the clouds and photosynthesized by soaking up sunlight, water vapor, and chemicals from the clouds.

"Amazing!" Jacen said. "It's like a living island."

The thranta flapped its sail-like wings and drove them closer to the

spinning, bobbling raft in the sky. "This is a place of solitude," M'kim said. "We can talk here and rest without fear of being discovered.

There's no hurry. You're not at risk with me."

Jacen nodded. He was still deeply concerned about his friends, though, and worried about what else might be happening to them while he wasn't there to help. He didn't even know for certain that the two Jedi Knights had managed to rescue themselves from their precarious perch beneath Cloud City, but he believed his friends were resourceful enough to get themselves out of a fix like that.

The thranta hovered over the floating algae island. Uncertain, Jacen looked down at the squishy surface. But M'kim deftly danced off the back of his flying creature and landed on the soft clusters of algae sacs, bouncing on the surface of the green-brown nodules as if he were swimming.

The thranta rider lay back, gesturing for Jacen to join him. "Come on.

We can watch the clouds go by and talk about what's really happening over there in Cloud City." His face turned grave. "I have a feeling you need to know this."

Still holding the harness, Jacen stood up on wobbly legs and balanced on the back of the thranta. Then he jumped.

Jacen fell for the second time that day, but this time he landed on the soft, squishy mat of tangled algae clusters. It was like a damp organic mattress that floated aimlessly, carried by the winds. The bumpy green masses made a soft, uneven surface, like a cluster of lighter-than-air pillows.

Watching him, M'kim lay back laughing as Jacen stumbled, then fell on his face into the wet algae nodules. The greenish clusters shifted like a living mass of solid bubbles. One greenish-brown bubble popped with a splat in front of him, spraying Jacen with the strong, earthy smell of compost.

He struggled to wipe away the sticky juice, but finally lounged back and forced himself to relax. He could change his clothes later, and he desperately needed a rest.

Rootlike tendrils dangled from the bottom of the algae island to soak up moisture droplets and nourishing chemicals. Jacen listened to the breeze rustling the tendrils. He heard the little fluttering noises of small flying creatures darting in and around the tangled organic mat.

He spotted tiny insects and colored plantlike things that made up the

island complex, forming an entire ecosystem.

"I'm surprised there's so much life around here," Jacen said. "I thought Bespin was just ... just an empty gas giant."

"Nothing in the universe is really empty," M'kim said. "Our troupe has traveled all over, and I've found very few places that are truly dead."

Life is ... tenacious."

"Yeah, I sure didn't expect to still be alive after that fall."

Bespin had many different levels where life clung, whether in artificial cities, gas-storage refineries, or -temperate-layer algae islands.

Thunderheads gathered in the vast sky overhead.

Jacen crawled to the edge of the squishy algae platform and looked over the edge toward the soup of clouds far below. He saw flashes of lightning and deep glows that skittered beneath the surface. Large storms rose up as deep heat currents in the lower layers of the gas giant stirred and shifted. It still looked impossibly far down.

Jacen gulped. If M'kim hadn't rescued him on his thranta, he would

still be falling....

Free of its rider, the thranta swooped above and below them, circling the algae island, nibbling at the tender ends of the dangling root threads and playing in the sky. Watching the exuberant creature, M'kim laughed.

Jacen turned to the thranta rider. "What did you mean when you said that other people were ambushed and fell off Cloud City? Someone we know recently vanished off a balcony. The official report said he jumped to his death." He shuddered, thinking of Cojahn and the long, long terror he must have endured during his drop through the clouds.

M'kim looked nervous and sad. "When was this? When did it happen?"

Jacen counted back. "It would have been ... six standard days ago, I guess."

M'kim nodded, pursing his lips. "Twelve Bepin days. Yes, that's what I thought."

"You know something about it?" Jacen jerked and tried to sit upright too quickly; the algae nodules shifted under him, and he had to squirm to regain his balance. "Please, tell me."

M'kim looked away. His thranta swooped overhead again, giving its near-silent high-pitched call. "I saw it with my own eyes," the thranta rider admitted.

Jacen scrambled closer to the thin, painted boy. "What happened to Cojahn? We need to know."

The thranta rider stared off into the distant skies. The sunlight filtering through layers of mists dappled the tattoos on his face and skin.

M'kim said, "I can tell you this much. Your friend didn't jump of his own free will."

: "What happened to Cojahn?" Jacen pressed again.

"We were out practicing, flying around on the other side of Cloud City.

We'd gone to the top to do loops around Kerros Tower. I was behind the rest of the group, because I'm not part of the actual act yet, even though I practice with the team. I saw a man on one of the outer balconies, but he wasn't alone."

"Who? Who was with him?" Jacen said.

"One big, angry man who looked like he was in charge, and a couple of thugs. I was surprised that the two thugs didn't do the dirty work for the angry man."

"What did the man look like?" Jacen said.

"Pretty strange. He had some sort of visor across his face, a red optical sensor, and short green hair the color of this algae you're sitting on. He was quite unmistakable."

Jacen swallowed hard as he recognized the description: Czethros!

But the former bounty hunter and smuggler who had once promised to take revenge against Han Solo was now a respectable businessman on Ord Mantell-wasn't he?

"I know who you're talking about," Jacen said, "but what would Czethros be doing on Cloud City?"

"That man shows up every once in a while," M'kim said. "Things go on in Port Town and in some of the casinos that the Cloud City Gambling Authority intentionally ignores. I've heard rumors that a powerful criminal organization is trying to take over the gambling, entertainment, music ... everything that happens on Bespin-and probably other planets as well. Nobody pays much attention to us thranta

riders, but we see things. . . ."

Jacen thought of the sky-rodeo performers darting past windows, looking in. Nobody would think to watch for a spy from the outside on a city in the clouds.

"That man with the green hair-Czethros, was it?-he comes here, supposedly on legitimate business. He meets with some of the important Exex." M'kim shook his head. "But something strange is going on."

"What happened to Cojahn on the balcony? Was he pushed?"

"They were having an argument," M'kim said. "The man with the green hair seemed very sure of himself, but when Cojahn didn't agree, the two thugs came forward to threaten him. Czethros waved them away. He just picked your friend up by the collar, yelled something at him, and tossed him off the balcony. Just ... threw him over like a piece of garbage. The man fell."

Sickened, Jacen imagined Lando's friend reaching out for help and dropping, dropping.. .. "You couldn't help him? You couldn't catch him like you caught me?"

M'kim shook his head. Tears glistened in his eyes. "We were pretty high above Cloud City. I swooped down, but the winds were too strong.

Thunder clouds were rising, and the sky was so dark that the man just vanished into the black clouds. We couldn't find him."

Jacen drew a deep breath. "So why didn't you report this?"

"We don't know who we can trust." M'kim shook his head vigorously.

"Do you know how easy it would be for someone to sabotage one of our harnesses or drug one of the thrantas before a show? We've already received warnings and threats-nothing specific ... but enough to make us worried." He drew a deep breath.

"Cloud City has a reputation as a clean place. If you gamble here, you know everything's fair. But someone's trying to change that. We do our sky rodeo, and our performances are well-attended. We've always been paid well; we risk our lives. But now"-he cleared his throat-"other factors are making life ... uncomfortable." Jacen felt decidedly uneasy. "I need to get back to Cloud City," he said. "I have to tell my friends."

M'kim hung his head. "I know. We can go now. My people will be worried about me too, I suppose." He placed his long fingers to his lips and blew a loud shrill whistle, startling Jacen. Instantly, the thranta flapped up above the edge of the island, hovered overhead, and

bobbed about playfully.

"Climb up," M'kim said as the thranta dipped one of its broad, sturdy wings. Jacen scrambled onto the smooth back. The thranta rider leapt into place, grasped the harness with one hand, and snapped it lightly to set the flying creature in motion.

As they flapped away from the algae island, Jacen looked down to watch the matted mass disappear in the mists below. The thranta swept its wings gracefully in broad powerful strokes that carried them higher and higher into the sky.

Thick clouds had gathered, knotted conglomerations of mist and gas, turning the sky dark. Jacen couldn't tell in which direction Cloud City lay, but he hoped they would get back before the storm.

"Hey, how do you know where we're going?" he said close to M'kim's ear.

The thranta rider shrugged. "We know."

The thranta flew onward and upward as a thunderhead nearly the size of an asteroid rose in front of them. The thranta circled around, keeping a good distance between them and the storm cloud. Lightning crackled inside the huge cloud like tiny explosions.

Jacen spotted several black shapes circling the outer surface of the great storm. M'kim seemed more uneasy now, and the thranta gave the thunderhead an even wider berth.

"Are those more thrantas?" Jacen said, pointing to the other large flying creatures that seemed drawn by the discharges from the storm.

"No. We have to stay clear," M'kim said. "Those are velsers."

Jacen watched with a mixture of dread and fascination. He'd heard of the sleek, fast-flying predators on Beshin that could swoop in and rip apart their prey with rows upon rows of jagged teeth.

"If those velsers see our thranta," M'kim said, "we're done for."

"But why are they so close to the storm?" Jacen asked. "Isn't it dangerous for them?"

"Velsers are always attracted by storms. I think the lightning discharges give them some kind of energy." With a nervous chuckle, M'kim shrugged again. "All I know is that I don't want to get close enough to one to find out." Though Jacen would have loved to see such a spectacular creature up close, he realized that would be foolish. He had already come too near to death for one day.

They climbed higher and swept past the thunderhead. The velsers didn't notice them, and Jacen could sense M'kim relaxing. Jacen patted the side of the thranta. "Good work," he whispered, though he had no idea if the creature could hear him.

Finally, he spotted the gleaming metropolis of Cloud City up ahead.

Lights spangled the sides of its hemispherical dome. The thranta drove toward it, and Jacen drew a deep breath. He couldn't remember ever seeing such a beautiful sight in his life.

He'd survived his ordeal-and he fervently hoped that Lowie and Tenel Ka had survived theirs as well.

Flanked by a stoic Lowbacca and a disturbed but aloof-looking Anja, Tenel Ka waited for the Lady Luck to cruise back into the docking port on Cloud City. Feeling her stomach muscles knot, she closed her burning eyes and tried to face down the fear inside.

The prospect of doing this, of telling Jaina Solo that her brother had been killed, was more frightening than any battle or other ordeal Tenel Ka's Jedi training had put her through.

The warrior girl's throat was tight. Though she and Lowie had almost died in the same assassination attempt, she still felt there must have been something more she could have done to keep her friend Jacen

alive.

She was a Jedi! But she had failed him.

Another more subtle failure haunted her as well. Tenel Ka had always believed that the connection between her and Jacen was so close, so strong, that she would be able to sense if any harm came to him.

She should have felt it through the Force the instant he died-but she hadn't. Instead, her emotions had betrayed her, taunted her with the hope that Jacen had survived somehow. She even imagined she'd heard his voice calling out to her in her mind. But she had been delirious at the time, in shock from loss of blood. The Cloud City medics had been able to heal the wounds on her arm, but not the ones in her soul.

Fleeting thoughts tormented her even now, daring her to believe that Jacen was still alive.

Lowbacca fidgeted beside her, his dark lips drawn down in a frown.

Em Teedee, silent for once, had dimmed his optical sensors in a gesture of respect. Anja's pale face looked pinched and she avoided eye contact with the others. Tenel Ka could sense tendrils of pain and sorrow floating like a tangible mist all around them. It was so

difficult to face this truth.

Jacen was gone.

Lando's polished space yacht followed floor guidance lights as it landed on the platform. Tenel Ka's cool gray eyes filled with tears and she took one step forward to face the ship. Lowbacca put a strong, hairy hand on Tenel Ka's bare shoulder. Anja moved back to stand alone behind them. Em Teedee hung silent and unmoving on Lowie's syrenfiber belt.

The Lady Luck settled in and landing clamps locked it down. Tenel Ka steeled herself for the fresh grief her news would bring. But just moments after the space yacht's landing ramp descended, a door on the other side of the docking bay whooshed opened. Tenel Ka turned, unable to believe what she saw with her own granite-gray eyes.

Jacen himself entered the bay, looking bedraggled and dirty, but perfectly healthy. He grinned a weary, lopsided grin.

"Jacen Solo!" Tenel Ka cried. "Jacen, my friend!" She bounded toward him, moving even faster than the Wookiee's long legs could carry him.

When Tenel Ka fairly tackled Jacen, throwing her arm around him in a joyous embrace, he was nearly as astonished as the warrior girl.

He hugged her back, laughing. "Wow! That was almost worth falling for."

Lowbacca swept both of them together into a massive Wookiee hug.

Jacen spat ginger fur out of his mouth. "Okay, okay! I'm all right, you big walking carpet! At least I was fine until I got into this pileup here."

"But how, Jacen, my friend? What happened? How are you alive?

How did you get back here?" Tenel Ka asked in a rush.

Lowie roared his own barrage of questions, and Em Teedee added in a scolding tone, "Master Jacen, you gave us all such a fright. It was really terribly inconsiderate of you."

"Thanks, Em Teedee. I'm glad to see you, too," Jacen said. "I'll try not to do it again."

Lando, Jaina, and Zekk emerged from the Lady Luck, blinking in surprise as the other young Jedi Knights remained clustered around Jacen instead of greeting them upon their return from Clak'dor VII.

"Hey, did I miss something here?" Lando said.

Em Teedee answered for them all, speaking loudly in his tinny voice.

"You certainly did, Master Calrissian. And you don't know the half of it."

Anja came up to Jacen, trembling. He could see the relief in her eyes, which she tried to cover up with a bland imperturbable smile.

"Now, this is one story I've got to hear," she said. "Don't tell me Jedi Knights can fly now?"

Jaina and Zekk ran to join their friends as Lando sealed his space yacht behind them. "Wild trip. We got a lot of information," Jaina said.

"Found out what's going on here in Cloud City."

"Ah, we found out a few more things, too," Jacen said. "And I discovered exactly what happened to Cojahn on that balcony."

Tenel Ka couldn't cover her gasp of surprise. Lowie growled.

Lando's interest was obviously piqued. "Looks like we've all got some talking to do."

Anja seemed unaccountably disturbed. She crossed her arms over her chest and gave Jacen a shaky smile. "You're just full of surprises, aren't you?"

"Hey, never underestimate a Jedi," he said.

As they sat together sipping hot broth drinks in a quiet cantina that overlooked the thranta practice for the upcoming sky rodeo, they all shared their separate stories.

Lando, Jaina, and Zekk recounted what they had learned from Figrin D'an and his band about how Black Sun was trying to infiltrate the workings of Cloud City. Tenel Ka, with additions from Lowie, told of the assassin attack after they had followed the fired Ugnaght construction boss, while Jacen described his rescue by M'kim the thranta rider, and how M'kim had seen a visored man with algae-green hair murder Cojahn ... an angry, ruthless man who was almost certainly Czethros himself.

"But you can't prove it's Czethros," Anja said. "It's a big galaxy.

There are plenty of other people with moss-green hair."

"And the laser visor?" Jaina asked skeptically.

"Certainly not enough evidence to convict anyone," Anja said firmly.

"I prefer solid proof myself, instead of hearsay from an 'eyewitness' who was flying around with the setting sun in his eyes. If M'kim was so close that he could make out the facial features of the person who allegedly boosted Cojahn over the side of the balcony, how come he wasn't close enough to catch the man as he fell?"

"I already explained that," Jacen said. "There were storms-" Lando raised a hand for peace. "It's easy enough to determine whether or not Czethros was here. I still have my old BaronAdministrator access codes. Let's just find a nice quiet business area, and we can check Cloud City's central computer banks. Lowie, I think you might help me with that."

The young Wookiee chuffed in agreement and nodded his shaggy head.

"We can check the records. Everyone coming in or out of Cloud City has to leave some sort of passport information. Docking records, passenger manifests, tariff documents. It'll be quite a search.....

"Czethros is kind of hard to miss," Zekk said.

Lowie stood up from the table, his ginger fur bristling, the dark streak prominent on his forehead. Em Teedee said, "If I can be of any help, I would most gladly offer the assistance of my circuits."

"Thanks, Em Teedee," Lando said. "Let's see what Lowbacca can find first."

As the other young Jedi Knights gathered around the computer terminals, Lowie bounced through the public records databases, scanning for the name Czethros. The search ultimately turned up nothing.

"See, he never came here," Anja said. "Your thranta rider made a mistake."

"I thought you told us we were gullible," Zekk answered. "Any man who's got that many connections and is involved in illegal activities would know how to hide his tracks."

Next, Lowie looked through docking records, credit receipts, list of purchases made and transmissions sent. It was a monumental task and required all of the Wookiee's concentration as well as the full access given to him by Lando's high-level security codes.

"Sure glad you were Baron-Administrator," Jaina said. "We would've hit a dead end right away if you hadn't opened some of those passworded files."

"We may still hit a dead end," Lando said. "Just a lot farther along the way."

Anja watched, arms crossed over her chest, still skeptical. She had so obviously been relieved, even overjoyed, to see that Jacen still lived.... Now, perhaps out of embarrassment, she hid behind a haughty mask.

Lowie's golden eyes narrowed in suspicion as he stared at the images that flickered by from docking bay holocams. He plugged Em Teedee in to help him monitor the data. Some of the video snapshots stuttered and wavered. Em Teedee suddenly blurted in a shrill voice, "Oh dear, these images have been tampered with! I'm detecting skillful erasures and fine video cuts. Most sophisticated."

Lando watched as Lowie worked furiously, his long fingers tapping the controls. He growled something, and Em Teedee said, "Master Lowbacca is attempting to move beyond the obvious. If someone has assisted in covering up the arrival of Czethros, they most likely have sanitized recordings from the docking bay ... but they may have overlooked other holocams.....

Images flowed by in a rapid blur. Jaina peered over Lowie's shoulder.

Everyone intently studied the screen. Finally, Lowie growled in triumph.

"There! I see it, too!" Jaina said an instant later.

"That's him," Jacen agreed. "Good old respectable Czethros."

An external holocams from one of the Port Town gambling casinos had managed to catch the image of a tall man with moss-green hair and a narrow silver laser visor; the man emerged from a docking port and ducked into the shadows between buildings, trying to lose himself in the crowd.

"He couldn't clean up everything," Lando said.

Lowie froze the image and enlarged it.

"Now do you have any doubts?" Zekk asked Anja. She avoided his gaze as he continued. "Any man who intentionally removes all record of his presence here has got something to hide."

"It doesn't mean he murdered anybody," Anja said.

Jacen looked at her in surprise. "Maybe not. But he was here at exactly the right time, in secret, and tried to erase all evidence of his presence from Cloud City records. We know that a criminal organization has been blackmailing and threatening professionals here on Bospina criminal organization that has ties to Ord Mantell, where

Czethros lives. And we also have an eyewitness who says he saw Czethros throw Cojahn off the balcony. How much more proof do you want?"

Tenel Ka nodded grimly. "Do you believe Czethros is involved with Black Sun criminal activities?"

Lando frowned. "More than that, I'm afraid. From his background and from what I've seen here, I think Czethros may well be one of the key figures behind Black Sun. Worse yet," he added, "the fact that all these records and images have been doctored tells me that he must have some pretty important people in Cloud City's administration under his thumb."

"Figrin said Cojahn had tried to report the danger to the authorities, but they never did anything about it," Zekk pointed out.

"We've got to report this," Jaina said in a determined voice. "But this time to someone who'll take it seriously. If Black Sun is on the prowl again, we've got to do something before they get too powerful to stop."

Nobody noticed how Anja jumped when she heard Jaina's words.

With the doorlock cyber-sealed, Anja retrieved the meager luggage she had brought from the Jedi academy. She rummaged in the bottom of her

case, popped out the false bottom, and removed the high-power small transmitter screen that she used only in emergencies. When the screen wasn't switched on, it looked like a portable mirror. But it was much more.

Moving her fingers along the edges of the frame, she depressed buttons, entering a code and sending her signal. She tossed her long, honey-streaked hair behind her, feeling sweat prickle her scalp.

Oh, how she needed a dose of spice right now. She had to have one ...

but the need wasn't any greater than it had been all day. Anja just didn't know how long she could tolerate this pressure. Her personal supply was nearly gone, and she didn't know what she would do unless Czethros came through for her. She hated to depend on him.

The secret crime lord followed his own paths, busy setting up his own game. In the past, though, he had spent an incredible amount of time with her on Ord Mantell, taking her under his wing, training her in the ways of making a profit at the expense of less-vigilant people.

Anja had connected with him in the first place because of a shared hatred for Han Solo. Czethros had helped her arrange the fateful meeting with him and the attempted ambushes on Anobis, but Han Solo had

survived it all. Then, Solo's own children had adopted her as their friend.

At first she had gone along, pretending. Anja had been most eager to do whatever she could to hurt Han Solo for his despicable crime for shooting her father Gallandro in the back. Even though Han Solo denied it, Anja knew the truth. Czethros had told her what had really happened.

After an interminable silence and a transmission delay, the mirror finally clouded, and the face of Czethros appeared. The laser-red dot of his optical sensor beamed through the visor that covered his face.

His moss-green hair seemed distorted, discolored by the numerous scrambling and descrambling routines buried in his signal.

"Ahh, my little velsers" he said. "You must still be on Cloud City.

By now I'm sure you've learned of the tragedy that has befallen your young Jedi friends."

"Tragedy?" Ania said with a frown of distaste. "So, you did set that up."

"Of course," Czethros said. He looked down at his fingertips, then back up again, smiling at her.

"Well, they're not dead," she said in a flat voice. "None of them."

Alarmed, Czethros drew back. "But I've already had a report from my operatives. At least three of those meddling kids were thrown down an exhaust chute and dumped out into the open skies of Bespin."

"Is that the best you could do?" Anja chided. "I've told you before, they're resourceful and strong," She was amused by his obvious surprise. "They've been trained by the Jedi Master Luke Skywalker himself, and they've been through a lot worse than falling down a hole."

Czethros snarled. Anja took a new tack, scowling back at him.

"How could you send a bunch of hired assassins to kill a few teenagers?

Even for you, isn't that a bit"-she searched for the right word-"cowardly?"

Czethros raised his eyebrows above the visor, and the red laser eye flashed back and forth in agitation. "Do I detect compassion for the Solos in your voice, Anja Gallandro? I must not have trained you well enough. You were a predator, as ruthless as the velsers on Bespin.

And now you're feeling sorry for the children of the man who killed your father?" He laughed out loud. "Do you realize how ridiculous that is?"

Anja bit back a reply, not sure exactly how she felt. Jacen had been so friendly toward her. Jaina had accepted her. And even their friends considered her part of the group. She'd never felt this way before. She'd always been bitter about her life, holding on by her fingernails, fighting for every little advantage she managed to get.

Never before had Anja felt the slightest bit sentimental.

Czethros leaned closer, his face growing larger on the mirror-screen.

"Have you changed your mind? Don't you want Solo's children killed?"

Perhaps you'd like me to send some flowers to Han Solo himself.?"

Anja felt torn. After what Solo had done to her father, she'd spent her life trying to get even with him. He deserved to be hurt. But when she had believed Jacen Solo was dead, it had twisted her insides.

The pain had been unbearable.

"It doesn't matter anyway," Czethros said. "Even if you did change your mind I doubt I could stop my plans now. Everything is set.

Soon I will send my signal, and Black Sun will appear everywhere, simultaneously taking over key installations and assuming key positions.

Then the galaxy will run smoothly for us.

"My operatives are in place. They received orders days ago to eliminate Jacen and Jaina Solo and their friends, as well as Lando Calrissian. I can't afford to let anyone find out too much about how we've been working our way through the bureaucratic levels of Cloud City.

Bespin will be ours, as will Kessel, Mon Calamari, Ord Mantell, Borgo Prime, and every other important installation. Even Coruscant will feel our strength." Anja swallowed hard and forced herself to change the subject.

"I'm ... almost out of spice," she said. "You promised me more, and I've done everything you asked."

"Yes, yes," he said, brushing aside her comment. "I'll get it to you as soon as I can."

"When?" she said. Her lips trembled. Her eyes stung. She hated to beg.

Czethros looked at her and smiled faintly. "It's on my schedule.

Don't worry your pretty head, my little velser. Now get back to your work. I have details to attend to. My killers are professionals, who always carry out their orders. Just stay clear of Lando Calrissian and the Solo kids, and you'll be safe."

Czethros switched off the flat screen from his end, and it became a mirror again in Anja's hands. She stared at the polished surface for a long time, seeing only her own reflection ... and Anja did not like what she saw there.

When Lando went straight to the Wing Guard on Cloud City and demanded a high-level investigation into the assassination attempt on Jacen, Tenel Ka, and Lowie, he held back his suspicions about Black Sun ... for now.

When the appropriate Exex and Wing Guard commanders responded, they summoned the three "alleged victims" to a private debriefing at an unfamiliar address high in Cloud City.

Lando, Jaina, Zekk, and Anja intended to accompany the others to add

their observations on the story, but as they prepared to leave their V.I.P rooms in the extravagant Yerith Bepin, Lando received an urgent message. He read the screen, then turned away from the comm system, frowning.

"We've got trouble at the construction site," he said. "There's something strange going on, and I have to attend to it." He looked over at Jacen. "Do you three think you can handle the interview alone?"

"Hey, no problem," Jacen said. "Blaster bolts, if we lived through the incident itself, I guess we can handle talking about it."

"All right," Lando said, grabbing his burgundy cape and preparing to deal with whatever troubles he might encounter down at SkyCenter Gaileria.

"We'll come with you, Lando," Jaina said. "You might need some ...

Jedi backup."

"I know better than to turn down help. Sounds like this is some kind of labor dispute."

Anja looked from one group to the other, and offered to join Jaina,

Zekk, and Lando. The four of them ran to a lift tube as Jacen, Tenel Ka, and Lowbacca headed off to their own meeting.

After dropping down several levels, then transiting to the outer walls of the city, Lando took his group to the site of the soon-to-be-completed SkyCenter Galleria. Using his passwords, he escorted them into the barricaded construction area. Jaina stood next to Zekk, looking around.

Anja fidgeted, feeling very out of place. The four of them stayed close together as the sheer silence and oppressive tension in the air struck them.

"What's going on?" Lando said. "There was supposed to be a riot happening here."

"Looks like everybody went home early," Zekk said.

Anja snorted. "False alarm, then."

They moved farther inside, under the tall, skeletal structure of the primary hovercoaster. Bright glowpanels dangled from exposed wires high in the girders and catwalks overhead. The temporary fabric walls blocked most of the high breezes, but still let drafts whistle in.

There were no other sounds. The shadows were thick.

"Hello!" Lando called out. "Uh, what seems to be the problem here?"

His words echoed from the equipment and construction shacks, but no one answered.

"Where is everyone? We've got a completion schedule to meet," he said with a huff, toming to Zekk, Anja, and Jaina. "I promised myself that I wouldn't let Cojahn's work go to waste. We'll open this galleria on time."

Zekk frowned. "Not if all your workers are gone."

"There must be some explanation for this," Lando said. They ventured deeper in. Doors of construction shacks hung open, loose. Computer terminals glowed with inventory records, unattended.

"It's like they all got up and ran away," Jaina said.

"Yeah, maybe somebody sounded an evacuation alarm," Anja suggested.

As the four continued into the construction site, exploring and passing under overhangs, Jaina mumbled, "I've got a bad feeling about this."

Suddenly, from under some debris hidden behind stacks of crates, a

small brown Ugnaught dashed out. Ducking past the startled Jaina and Lando, he ran, squealing and chittering.

"Hey, wait!" Jaina said.

Zekk leapt to intercept the small creature, but the Ugnaught shrieked in terror, split to one side, and dove headfirst down an open airventilation duct. He disappeared with a thud of tumbling limbs.

Zekk peered into the darkened shaft. "He certainly was in a hurry to leave."

"Maybe he knows something we don't," Jaina said, looking around with wary apprehension. Cautiously she drew her lightsaber and ignited it. The blaze of violet rippled and flickered against the naked structural metal of the tall entertainment machinery. "Just to be safe," she explained, though she knew its brilliant glow might draw attention to their hiding place. Anja made no move to draw her own antique Jedi weapon.

Suddenly all the garish glowpanels overhead winked out, plunging the enclosed construction area into deep shadows that were alleviated only by the glow of Jaina's weapon and by scores of tiny emergency lights that reminded her of the phosfleas the Wookiees used in their forest cities on Kashyyyk.

"Great," Zekk said. "Now I've got a bad feeling about this, too."

Two doors opened up on either side of the construction area and in the blaze of light from the exterior corridors, Jaina could see burly silhouettes of heavily armed men wearing padded bodysuits. The ominous figures stepped forward.

Lando heaved a sigh of relief. "Ah, those are uniformed Wing Guards," he said. "Man, are we glad to see you!"

Then, in unison, the guards opened fire-directly at them.

"Look out!" Jaina tackled Lando to the ground, while Zekk moved fast enough of his own accord, dropping and rolling under a low girder.

Anja staggered back and fumbled for her lightsaber. Deadly blaster bolts ricocheted and sponged from girders, sending out sparks with every impact.

"Get down," Jaina warned the older girl, deflecting one of the bolts with her weapon.

"Seal the other exits!" one of the traitorous Wing Guards said.

"Hey, you're supposed to be the good guys!" Lando bellowed.

"What are you doing?" More blaster fire cut off further discussion.

"It was a setup," Zekk said through gritted teeth. "We were lured here. These must be hit men, paid off by Black Sun."

Lando grumbled, "There's something rotten in Cloud City."

They ducked into the shadows, taking shelter behind crates. "At least we've got plenty of places to hide," Jaina said.

"They didn't think very well before they planned this ambush," Anja said, crouching beside her.

Lando shook his head and frowned. "Maybe not, but if they've got the exits covered, we have no place else to go. They can take their time."

They heard the marching of booted feet as more turncoat security forces entered the construction area and barricaded the doors. Jaina wiped perspiration from her hand and gripped her lightsaber more securely, ready for hand-to-hand battle.

"Maybe we could climb up," Zekk suggested, "find some way out the top to a higher level."

Jaina looked up toward the nest of girders and hover-scaffolding, trying to scout out an escape hatch-but she suddenly realized that the thick building frames were moving, as if alive. She saw the flickering shadow of a humanoid shape as something scuttled down, crawling like an insect.

"More of those chameleon creatures!" Jaina said, remembering the murderous henchmen that had attacked them in the docking bay on Ord Mantell. Though foiled in their assassination attempt, the chameleon creatures had stolen the evidence of the space mines that had nearly destroyed the Millennium Falcon. Jaina drew a deep breath as it hit her: even that must have been part of a complicated Black Sun plot.

"Now I know what Jacen, Tenel Ka, and Lowie felt like when the assassins cornered them down in Port Town," Jaina said. "This time we get all the excitement while they attend their little meeting."

"Well," Lando said. "With these traitorous Wing Guards here, I don't believe anything is as it seems. I hope they're safe."

Another volley of blaster bolts erupted, and Lando ducked as sparks flew overhead. The deadly chameleon creatures scrambled closer, surrounding their prey, closing the trap.

"Right now, let's just worry about ourselves," he said.

When Jacen arrived with Tenel Ka and Lowie at the address for the supposed debriefing facility, they found only an empty hangar dock filled with old-model cloud cars and other small sky vehicles waiting for repair.

"There's nobody here," Jacen said.

Tenel Ka looked around. "Are you certain this is the correct location?"

Jacen checked again. "This is where they told us to come."

"Indeed, I can verify that," Em Teedee added, though no one had asked him.

Lowie sniffed the air. His black Wookiee nose wrinkled, and he let out a low, uneasy groan.

"Something is not right here," Tenel Ka said.

"Hey-this is afact," Jacen agreed with forced humor. Tenel Ka and Lowie unconsciously moved closer to him, as if preparing for battle.

The outer bay doors were open wide, and clouds stretched out in a vast empty skyscape, tall gray thunderheads rising above the white ritists

far below. Judging from the weather patterns, Jacen suspected that heavy storms would strike the floating city before the day was out.

The three went deeper into the docking bay, looking around, growing more uncertain by the moment. "We'd better check with someone," Jacen said.

Lowie stopped by two of the cloud cars, bent over, and touched their control panels. One was painted a rich blue, the other a bright scarlet. Both were typical recreational vehicles, cloud cars that had been souped up and probably used for races or sky patrols.

Lowie grumbled something, and Em Teedee scolded him. "Master Lowbacca, these are not our vehicles. It's of no concern to us that they are still functional. We're going to be late for our debriefing."

"We are here," Tenel Ka pointed out. "The others are not."

Jacen glanced at Lowie. "Hey, maybe you and Jaina could tinker with some of those things later. Lando could probably get them for us cheap, if they're just sitting here, decommissioned."

Tenel Ka, her reflexes coiled like an overwound spring, suddenly whirled about. In the only entrance to the cloud-car bay were the hairyfaced bounty hunter and the slime-dripping alien from the first

attempt on their lives. Beside them stood two Wing Guard security policemen.

"Hey, you caught them," Jacen said to the Wing Guards, thinking that this was part of the debriefing: identifying two of the hit men who had attacked them. "Those are the ones who tried to kill us."

"I say! If those men have been arrested, why are they all carrying their own weapons?" Em Teedee said, as the Wing Guards and the two hit men hauled out their blaster rifles.

Lowie roared in outrage.

"We have been betrayed," Tenel Ka said.

Jacen backed up, holding his hands in front of him to prove he had no weapons. Only a few meters behind them stretched the open entrance to the cloud-car bay and another immense drop.

"Just keep backing up until you're over the edge," the slimedripping killer said with a chuckle. "Save us some energy in our blaster packs.

" "Not again," Jacen said with a groan. Lowie snarled. Tenel Ka reached for her lightsaber.

"Don't make us shoot you down right where you stand," said one of the Wing Guards. "That would leave us with quite a mess to clean up."

Thinking quickly, Lowbacca swept out with one ginger-furred arm and knocked Jacen into the nearest cloud car. He roared and pointed for Tenel Ka to leap into the scarlet vessel beside Jacen, while the Wookiee scrambled into the blue cloud car.

"Duck!" Jacen called, squirming to right himself inside the cramped pile of seats. Tenel Ka bent down and fired up the engines as she wriggled into her own seat beside him. Lowie roared his blue vehicle into motion while the surprised security men cried out and rushed into the room after them.

Blaster bolts rang out, one sizzling and ricocheting off the scarlet paint near Jacen's head. He fumbled with the cloud-car controls and adjusted the dials to their maximum output.

"Punch it, Lowie!" he called to his Wookiee friend as the four killers ran toward them, howling and firing indiscriminately.

With a lurch, Jacen's cloud car blasted out into the open sky and spun in a full circle. He and Tenel Ka nearly tumbled out of their seats, but they managed to bring the car under control and fasten their crash restraints in time.

With a bestial roar, Lowie careened out of the hangar bay in the second cloud car, a blue streak across the sky. Jacen wrestled with the controls and soared onward at full speed. He breathed a great sigh of relief.

"I guess they didn't count on our alternatives," Jacen said.

Tenel Ka twisted around to look behind her at the gleaming white metropolis in the clouds. "It does not appear that we are safe just yet, Jacen, my friend," she said.

Not far behind them, they could see that the thugs had helped themselves to a pair of cloud cars, newer and brighter than the ones the young Jedi Knights had found. The killers raced after them in hot pursuit.

Surrounded by the clutter of girders and construction debris, Jaina gripped her extinguished lightsaber, wishing she dared turn it on again to light their way. But for now the tangled darkness offered them places to hide from the turncoat security guards who still hunted the four companions in the abandoned amusement park site. Overhead, however, chameleon creatures scrambled along catwalks and crossbeams, keeping an eye on them as they fled.

Luckily, the chameleon creatures carried neither blaster pistols nor

stunners. Instead, they brandished wicked-looking transparent knives with blades fashioned from crystal shards.

Since the creatures were nearly invisible, Jaina had a difficult time counting the camouflaged enemies, but she caught glimpses of the smooth forms as colors and shadows shifted across their bodies. Their cruel lipless mouths grinned as they approached their prey.

"Oh, why didn't I carry my own hold-out blaster?" Lando muttered.

"Ever since I became respectable, I stopped packing weapons."

Zekk commiserated with him. "Right now I wish I had a lightsaber, too ... even my old one from the Shadow Academy."

"We'll just play hide-and-seek as long as we can." Anja seemed more angry than afraid at the prospect of the creatures' attack.

Jaina gritted her teeth as they hurried along. "Looks like we women'll have to defend you men."

"We'll do our best to help out," Zekk said, flashing her a grim smile.

"Somehow or other."

The pack of chameleon assassins made soft thumping sounds as they swarmed along the girders above. Lando and his three companions dashed under the twisted superstructure of the enormous looping hovercoaster.

it was the most massive part of the amusement park; the heavy beams and bent durasteel framework loomed high above them like a fossilized prehistoric creature.

"We can't hide under here," Anja said, ducking as a brilliant bolt zinged past her face. She fired up her acid-yellow blade.

"I don't know where else to go," Lando replied. More blaster fire rang out from the shadows as security guards marched into the enclosed space, targeting Anja's bright lightsaber now. "If you have any suggestions, I'm all ears."

Jaina gazed up at the chameleon creatures slinking along the hovercoaster above them. Their sharp crystal blades twinkled, reflecting the dim emergency lights. Skins rippled and flickered, adjusting their camouflage, as the creatures gathered their forces overhead. Although viciously armed, the chameleons seemed to be relative cowards, unwilling to attack until they had massed for a single strike.

Jaina intended to use that to her advantage. "Everybody stand back," she said. "And dive for cover." She stood up, switched on her blazing violet lightsaber, and held it high.

"Wait!" Lando called. "What are you going to-" The Wing Guards shouted and ran toward them.

"What are you waiting for?" Zekk said. Jaina slashed sideways.

Her dazzling lightsaber blade sliced through the main pillar that supported the central section of the hovercoaster. The energy-blade severed the heavy durasteel brace as easily as if it were a hot knife slicing through Ithorian sap gelatin. She stood back to look at the smoking, sizzling ends of the huge support beam. As if in slow motion, she saw the metal begin to slide. The hovercoaster tilted.

"Look out!" she cried, and dove for a pile of heavy crates.

Anja and Zekk had already scrambled backward. Lando stared in horror.

"My hovercoaster!" he clustered chameleon creatures skittered about, scrambling for balance. Suddenly the entire framework toppled beneath them, groaning, bending, twisting.

Jaina looked up, shielding her eyes against any debris that might fall in their direction. The smooth-skinned creatures tumbled downward, shaken loose from their precarious perches. Their skin color shifted as they tried to match the color of the air through which they fell.

Girders groaned and crumpled. With a resounding crash, the central section of the hovercoaster slammed down onto the deckplates.

"That's just great," Lando said, astounded. "Now I'm even more behind schedule."

Showing no consideration whatsoever in response to his financial plight, the traitorous Cloud City security troops opened fire again, running toward the scene of the crash.

"We've got them now," bellowed one deep voice.

As Lowbacca roared across the sky in his commandeered blue cloud car, he hooked sharply off to the left, intentionally veering far away from Jacen and Tenel Ka. Separating and causing their pursuers to split up seemed their best chance of escape.

"Master Lowbacca, what do you think you're doing?" Em Teedee said shrilly.

Lowie jerked the controls and accelerated even more, spinning around in

a sideways loop as the pursuing hit men fired their weapons.

The bolts sizzled through the air, and Lowie's sensitive nose could smell the ionization drifting up, a taint of ozone and other burned gases from Bespin's atmosphere. The blue cloud car lurched from one side to another, letting the bolts pass harmlessly beneath the hull.

"You realize, of course, that you're not licensed to pilot this craft," Em Teedee continued. "You have no training. We're all doomed!"

Lowie barked a warning.

"How do you expect me to be quiet? This is an emergency!" the little droid wailed, but when Lowie growled that every small distraction would increase their likelihood of crashing, Em Teedee promptly fell silent and blinked his optical sensors with internal misery.

As Lowie soared along, though, his sensitive ears detected a flutter in the cloud car's engine. The craft may well have been unused for months or even years, and it was severely out of tune. With one glance he confirmed that he had very little fuel as well.

He looked behind at the single predatory craft that still followed.

Inside it, the slime-dripping alien and one Wing Guard pushed closer,

firing their weapons. Unfortunately, their vehicle did not appear to have the least bit of engine trouble.

Lowie ducked and looped, then finally spun around and headed back toward Cloud City. Maybe someone would see the dogfight. Maybe he could get some help there.... Of course, since some important members of Cloud City's own infrastructure were out to kill the young Jedi Knights, he wasn't sure he could trust any offer of assistance.

In the clouds and rising tendrils of mists he saw no place to hide.

Lowie's cloud-car engine popped and sputtered again. He wrestled for control as the vehicle suddenly began losing altitude. The engine picked up again and he climbed ... but during the brief interval he had lost most of his lead. His pursuers came right behind him. The roar of their engines filled his ears.

He ducked his head as a blast streaked directly above him, so close that it singed his ginger fur. Lowie did what he could, accelerating, punching all the controls in an attempt to find some kind of emergency override. Then, with a disheartening pop, the hum of the turbines dropped to a lower pitch. The engines barely managed to keep the cloud car moving along. Lowie growled in despair.

Suddenly the hunters were right beside him.

Lowie searched for some kind of weapon, but the vehicle he had commandeered was no more than a pleasure craft, a skyskimmer used for racing among the clouds-and even as a racer, this cloud car wasn't much good. He hoped he had at least bought enough time for Jacen and Tenel Ka to escape in their own cloud car.

Beside him, the slimy assassin and the treacherous guard leveled their handheld blasters at Lowie. He knew that they had no intention of letting him survive.

With his cloud car failing and unable to outrun them, with no other weapon, Lowie let loose a huge Wookiee roar at them. He flashed his fangs and snarled loudly enough that even his uncle Chewbacca would have been proud.

Just then, shadows passed overhead. Great wings flapped as creatures swooped and ducked. The slime-dripping alien looked up and instinctively fired his blaster, though the bolt went wide. Within moments, seven great thrantas circled the pursuing cloud car, sweeping down.

The painted riders on the thrantas called to each other in a strange high-pitched language, shouting orders to set up a routine, as if it were mere practice for their sky rodeo. The thrantas flitted under the pursuing cloud car now. One of the flying creatures bumped against it,

sending it into a spin.

The Wing Guard pilot cried out while the slime-dripping alien waved his blaster pistol, but the riders were much too fast for them.

They continued their sky ballet, swirling, looping. Finally, one thranta swooped down just above the pursuing vehicle, so that its rider could drop a slender lasso artfully around the pilot's chest and amns.

Cinching the noose tight, the rider yanked the pilot up out of his seat in the cloud car.

He kicked and struggled, thrashing his head from side to side, but his arms were pinned to his ribs. His weapon dropped from his gloved hand and fell tumbling far down into the soup of clouds below.

The slimy alien assassin, now the only occupant of the cloud car, looked around wildly, trying to avert the flying creatures' attack. He wrestled to keep the vehicle under control, but as he reached toward the navigation console, another cloud rider skimmed by, close enough to lasso him around the shoulders of his slime-stained uniform. The alien clawed at the rope and pulled himself free just as the thranta rider jerked him out of the cloud car. Still dripping slime, he tumbled over the side of the vehicle to fall, screaming and flailing his anus.

Then two thrantas dove even faster than Bepin's gravity could pull the would-be assassin downward. The thranta riders snatched the alien in midair, looped a rope around him, and tossed him onto the back -I one of their thrantas. When the alien began to struggle, the cloud rider grinned and easily tossed the slimy captive off his thranta, so that his partner could spin around to catch him on the second thranta's smooth back.

The second thranta now flapped up to join the cluster of other sky performers and the entire troupe made a show of tossing their two helpless captives from one thranta to another as if they were balls in a juggling contest.

Unpiloted now, the pursuing cloud car spun out of control, its rudder sending it into a dive until the craft zoomed at full speed down into the deep layers of impenetrable clouds.

Lowie brought his own puttering vehicle closer to Cloud City. Under the watchful eye of the thranta rider, he used every trick he could think of to increase his altitude and keep the cloud car afloat.

Finally he reached an open-rigged set of free-form hover-scaffolding that clung to the underside of Cloud City's hull.

As he brought the craft in, the thranta riders flew off with their

captives. Lowie wondered what the colorful aliens would do with them when they returned to their berths on Cloud City.

"Ah, it is a fine thing to have friends in high places," Em Teedee said.

Lowie barked his agreement. He held on tightly as the cloud car bumped and skidded onto an open platform on the hover-scaffolding.

Sparks flew from scraped metal. Although the engine had completely died, he managed to spin the craft around so that it came to a rest with a loud thump on the unoccupied ledge right near an emergency exit into Cloud City.

Groaning, the Wookiee turned to look at the vast sky behind him, thick with bulging clouds. He saw no sign whatsoever of Jacen or Tenel Ka.

Running deeper into the maze of the amusement park, leaving the hovercoaster wreckage behind them, Lando cast about for inspiration.

He looked with fresh eyes at the shadowy attractions, the stations that he hoped would one day be rides and entertainment stands enjoyed by millions of beings young and old.

Lando stopped as an idea occurred to him. "Wait a minute! We've got an advantage that I'm willing to bet these guards don't have."

"I'll be glad to hear it," Anja growled.

Lando smiled. "I know this place. I know what it can do, and everything that's already functional." Jaina remembered from their initial tour what lay ahead, and she instantly understood what Lando intended.

Zekk's emerald eyes gleamed; he saw it, too. "Then let's show them a few of the attractions."

The Wing Guards approached from separate sides, trying to box them in.

When their victims dashed forward, the guards shouted and opened fire again, running at full tilt. Jaina intentionally slowed down just enough to give them an enticement. Closer now ... closer ...

Suddenly she and Lando ducked left as they passed a triggering sensor.

Zekk yanked Anja along behind him.

Huge slavering monsters leaped out of nothingness, the most hideous creatures that holographic artists could devise. The monsters lunged

with inhuman roars and howls.

The pursuing guards screamed, firing their blasters at the illusionary threats. With nervous chuckles at the success of their plan, the companions dove farther along, trying to escape.

One of the guards bellowed, "Those are just projections, you idiots!

" Some of the guards looked askance at the holocreatures who continued to snarl and sweep their harmless claws through the air. Then they ran after Jaina, Lando, Anja, and Zekk. The four stretched out their lead, but continued to lure the guards forward.

"You thinking what I'm thinking?" Jaina said.

"You can bet on it," Lando said. "Too bad the antigrav chamber isn't working yet, though."

They sprinted toward the vortex shaft, the experience-filled pit they had tumbled through on their first trip into the amusement center.

"Over here!" Jaina shouted, taunting the guards.

"Hey, you forgot to cover this escape hatch," Lando called.

"We're home free now," Zekk added, and dove down the swirling hole to

be swallowed up in the flashing lights. Jaina and Lando jumped after him, and Anja followed with only the slightest reluctance.

The guards bellowed and careened forward in pursuit.

"Don't let them get away now!" a Wing Guard captain ordered.

Moments later, the five pursuing guards jumped down the chute.

Jaina held her arms over her head, straightening her body to reduce her air resistance. They dropped faster and faster through the hot mists and the cold steam, falling through the tangled bubbles as they plunged down to the mat below. Zekk struck bottom and bounced, rolling off the platform so that Lando, Anja, and Jaina would have room to land.

They all leapt to their feet, their knees trembling. The three younger companions stood guard for Lando as he worked the control panel.

"Safety systems," he said, wiping sweat from his forehead. "You've got to have security overrides. And I've got the codes." He pressed buttons and flicked switches to deactivate the access to the vortex chute.

A restrictive force-field clamped down on the top and bottom of the chute.

Alarm lights winked on and Lando laughed up at the shadowy silhouettes of the guards as they swirled around inside the shaft. "The repulsors in there will keep that group going up and down, up and down.

They won't be able to get out until I use my private password to release them."

Jaina went over to a comm unit on the wall. "Do you think if we summon enough of Cloud City security, we'll get some who aren't tainted by Black Sun?" Anja shifted uncomfortably, but made no suggestions.

"I think if we called them all here, we'd be able to wrap things up nicely," Lando said.

They stood together, panting, and resting for a moment. After Lando sent his signal again using his Baron-Administrator's emergency codes, they waited for the authorities to arrive and take care of the would-be assassins.

Lando couldn't wait until they began to debrief the turncoat Bespin Wing Guards. "This should be very interesting," he said out loud.

Bespin's incredible ocean of sky provided an infinite expanse through which Jacen and Tenel Ka could run. Unfortunately, it offered no place to hide.

The isolated metal island of Cloud City fell behind them as Jacen pushed the cloud skimmer's engines. The turbines whined as the cloud car soared away from the trap the traitors had set for them.

Behind them-and rapidly gaining ground-came a sleek black cloud car with a pair of sharp-angled bows. Cradling his weapon, the hairy-faced thug leaned forward to take a carefully aimed shot while an armored Wing Guard drove the patrol vessel at its highest possible speed.

Jacen jiggled from left to right, diving down and then swooping back up again, but in the open emptiness of the sky, the evasive maneuvers did little good. The bearded hit man shot twice. Jacen dodged and twirled. Even so, one of the powerful bolts ricocheted off the bottom of their cloud car, leaving a long dark scorch mark across the bright scarlet plating.

Tenel Ka sat beside him, grim-faced. She fingered the rancor-tooth lightsaber at her waist. "I prefer a direct fight," she said. "These men are cowards."

"% Yeah? They're traitors, too," Jacen said. "But who's keeping track?" Then he perked up as an idea struck him. He wrestled with the controls, dodging another blaster bolt that skimmed close beside them.

"You could still use your lightsaber, Tenel Ka. Block those blaster shots from hitting our repulsor-engines."

"Excellent idea, Jacen, my friend." She drew her lightsaber, switched on its pulsating turquoise blade, then turned to kneel on the seat, precariously balanced on her muscular legs. Tenel Ka slashed from side to side with her blade as the pursuers continued to fire. She leaned far out to deflect the attack, and Jacen worried that the one-armed warrior girl might lose her balance and tumble into the clouds, as he had done.

The skies grew darker. They flew neck and neck with their enemies now.

Black thunderheads rose all around them like craggy islands in the sky.

Long fingernails of lightning scratched against the thunderheads as storm systems clashed together. Other glows flickered deep within the clouds.

Jacen narrowed his eyes to stare at the ominous weather patterns ...

and had another idea. "Tenel Ka, get back in and strap down.

I think we're in for a bumpy ride."

Hearing the tone in his voice, she did as he advised without questioning. Then Jacen set his course on a straight line for the largest, nearest bank of thunderheads. The wind whipped the warrior girl's redgold braids around her face. Her expression became stern.

"You are not actually flying into a storm system, are you?"

Jacen flashed her a lopsided grin. "They'd be crazy to follow us, wouldn't they?"

The tumbling wall of gray mist grew larger, but slowly. Jacen realized that the distance to the storm was greater than he had expected.

And the storm itself was much, much larger. He searched in vain for the tiny black specks he had hoped to find. Lightning screeched across the cloud surface, leaping from one thunderhead to another.

"Hang on," Jacen said, and dove toward the roiling dark mass.

Behind them, the assassins tried to put on more speed, firing indiscriminately now. The Wing Guard pilot had trouble aiming his vehicle's built-in laser cannons, but the hairy-faced assassin scored a direct hit on Tenel Ka's side of the scarlet cloud car. Its impact was

much too close to her for Jacen's comfort.

An explosion of thunder slammed through the air with a sound like two Star Destroyers colliding. Jacen's ears rang with the reverberations; the cloud car's front windowplate and side panels rattled and vibrated as if they'd been hit by a physical blow.

A lightning bolt roared behind them. The gigantic blast of discharged energy boomed in a rippling cord across the open space. Jacen's skin crawled, his hairs prickled, and tiny flecks of color sparkled in front of his eyes. He didn't think even a Star Destroyer's turbolaser could have been much more powerful than that immense blast.

Jacen kept looking for any hint of movement, any dark forms around the cloud-but he noticed nothing.

"What do you seek, Jacen, my friend?" Teriel Ka said.

"You'll see if I find it."

After the lightning blast, the patrol car behind them spun out of control, losing ground for several moments until the pilot managed to get back on course. In frustration, the Wing Guard fired his laser cannons five more times, but all of the shots went wide and disappeared harmlessly into the dark depths of the cloud.

Heavy winds jounced them from side to side as if invisible hands were playing a drumbeat against their cloud skimmer. Suddenly, Jacen hit a pressure differential, and their scarlet cloud car plummeted like a stone until another air current buoyed them up.

Jacen gripped the controls, feeling the blood drain from his face, Tenel Ka sat stoically through it all.

With a surge of engine power the sleek black patrol craft careened in behind them, weapons blazing once more. Jacen took a chance-an extraordinary chance-hooking left to arc around the gigantic storm system. He plunged into an outcropping of dark mist and dove into a knot of thunder clouds, hoping to lose himself in them.

Opaque mist flew in his face, acrid-smelling from the gaseous chemicals deep in Bespin's cloud layers. Unable to see, he was glad at least to know there were probably no obstacles with which he could collide in the open sky.

Thunder rumbled deep in the main mass of the cloud like boulders cracking together-but behind it, he could hear the hum and roar of the high-powered pursuit craft.

"They are still following us," Tenel Ka said.

"Maybe we can lose them with some fancy flying," Jacen said, but he knew that was a slim hope. The attackers charged in, following the engine noise of the scarlet cloud car.

As he drove farther through the fringe of the thunderstorm, the mists parted in front of him, and he burst into open sky on the far side of the thunderhead.

Right into the middle of a pack of predatory velsers.

Startled, the chevron-shaped flying creatures soared about, wheeling like razor-winged hawkbats, darting along the edge of the powerful storm as if they fed on lightning discharges.

The creatures were huge, sleek, and affnored, like living attack craft.

When Jacen's cloud car burst in among them, they swirled around like angry piranha beetles. Within moments, they had formed into a squadron intent on attacking the intruder.

Tenel Ka unbuckled her seat restraint and whipped out her lightsaber again. The velsers were black, their skin tough and layered with tiny scales. Jacen saw no eyes, only sleek skinplates, smooth heads at the apex of sharp wings. But as the cloud car dove underneath the outer edge of velsers, Jacen saw that their underbodies consisted of rows and

rows of jagged mouths, lampreylike teeth with suckers to anchor themselves, and grinding jaws that could rip any prey to shreds.

"This was your intention, Jacen?" Tenel Ka said, alarmed.

"I was hoping they'd be nicer." He spun the craft about to fly between two ferocious velsers. The creatures collided in the air, then began attacking each other.

Tenel Ka reached up with her lightsaber, using the blazing tip of her turquoise blade to slash the side of one velsar that dove toward their cloud car. Its skin ripped open and volatile gases spilled out, sparking and flashing in the flame of the lightsaber. Unable to keep flying, the velsar spun out of control; the other creatures fell upon it.

Tenel Ka parried again, ripping open the mouth-filled belly of a second attacking creature. For an instant the velsers drew back, intimidated.

But only for an instant.

Another creature dive-bombed toward them, rows of mouths clacking, teeth gnashing, ready to shred either the scarlet metal of the cloud car or the soft flesh of the young Jedi Knights.

Jacen concentrated with his Jedi powers as he flew, trying to use his affinity for animals to get these beasts to back off and pursue other prey. He had calmed a ronto and any number of large deadly creatures, but these velsers had few thoughts in their minds-except to attack and destroy.

Maybe at least Jacen could change their focus.

Behind them, the black patrol car burst out of the thunderhead knot and into the angry pack of velsers. In utter panic, the Wing Guard pilot swooped up and around.

With the sudden flurry to distract the furious flying creatures behind them, Jacen applied full speed, roaring away from the dangerous flock.

He used his thoughts to focus the velsers' attention on the black craft, their pursuers.

"Better prey," he said, mumbling aloud. "A better target. Ignore us."

Jacen could think of no other way for them to escape.

The velsers swirled and turned to concentrate their vicious attack on

the black cloud car. The pilot swerved, trying to flee, but the velsers were much too fast, much too intent on destruction.

As Jacen flew farther and farther from the roiling thunderhead, he saw the velsers attack. His craft damaged, the traitorous Wing Guard pilot spun out of control and dropped down toward the deep gray soup of the storm. Lightning flashed all around.

The velsers swirled in a frenzy and renewed their attack. The black cloud car plunged out of sight, and the velsers flew after it. All of them vanished deep into the stormy grayness.

Another chorus of loud thunder shook the sky. Jacen spun the vehicle about and began the long journey back to Cloud City.

Together again on Cloud City, the young Jedi Knights, Anja, and Lando, though exhausted and ragged from their ordeals, waited for the big show to begin. They sat on a set of open-air scaffoldings, now converted into spectator seats. The gentle winds ruffled Jaina's straight brown hair and she blinked into the bright rising sun as Bespin's twelvehour day began again.

They had found prime observation spots on the hover-scaffolding that had originally been erected for polishing and replating parts of the city's external hull. Lowie had climbed to the highest level and

dangled his hairy feet down as he held on with one lanky arm. He seemed not the least bit bothered by his precarious position, high above nothing.

"Master Lowbacca, do be careful," Em Teedee scolded, but the Wookiee paid him little heed.

Lando reached over and tousled Jacen's curly hair. "Why is it that every time I try to take a simple vacation with you kids, something disastrous happens?"

"I have a feeling we just draw adventure to ourselves," Jacen replied.

"A genuine vacation would be nice one of these days," Jaina said.

"But since we're trying to be real Jedi Knights, I don't suppose there'll ever be a time when the New Republic doesn't need us."

Anja sat off to one side, withdrawn and quiet, threading her fingers through her honey-streaked hair. Something was obviously bothering her ... but then again, Jaina had rarely seen the older girl be anything other than bothered. She wondered if Anja was more shaken by their recent adventures than she dared to admit.

"I'm proud of all of you, you know," Lando said. "None of what we did

can bring Cojahn back to me or his family, but I do know that' we've all done a good thing. I told his wife about what really happened to him and she seemed comforted to know we found out the truth.

We've exposed a dangerous criminal element. Black Sun is on the move again."

"Yes," Jaina said, frowning. "We'll have to call Mom and give her all the information we have."

"I'm sure the Chief of State of the New Republic can set a few law enforcement wheels in motion," Zekk agreed.

Tenel Ka nodded firmly. "We must be certain they are not traitorous security forces, like some of the Wing Guard here on Cloud City."

, "This would never have happened when I was Baron-Administrator.

I guess you just can't find good help these days." Lando shook his head.

"Meantime, I'll just have to be content with helping to expose some of the tainted Exex and Wing Guard members, and a few key people in the Merchants Guild and other politicians. This conspiracy runs deep."

With what they had learned from the thranta rider and Figrin D'an, and everything Lowie had pulled from Cloud City computer archives, they had a fair idea of just how far-reaching the plans of Czethros were.

He had influence on many types of gambling, smuggling, and strongarm operations.

Jaina suspected, though, that they had only begun to uncover the depths of the insidious schemes of Black Sun. They had sent out an alert, and New Republic forces planned to apprehend Czethros immediately-but Jaina knew that the supposedly respectable businessman from Ord Mantell must have spies and information sources everywhere, and realized that Czethros might already be gone ... one step ahead of them.

As morning sunlight spilled across the lower cloud banks, painting them with a golden glow, Jaina heard a loud musical fanfare from the outwardly directed speakers mounted on the scaffolding and on launching platforms.

"It's starting!" Jacen said, scooting closer to Tenel Ka.

"I look forward to the performance with great enthusiasm," Tenel Ka said in a neutral voice. The barest hint of a smile quirked one corner of her mouth.

With silent, flapping wings, a swarm of thrantas burst out, streaked

away from Cloud City, and circled in the clouds. The skirling music rose and fell in a hauntingly beautiful melody. The thrantas looped about, dancing a sky ballet in time to the notes. The tattoos and body paintings on the cloud riders were so bright, they dazzled like rainbows as the thrantas whirled through the air.

Two of the performers unfurled a brilliant fluttering ribbon, tossing it from one rider to another, hurling the fabric ever higher to weave a colorful pattern like a cat's cradle in the sky. All the thrantas continued to fly in perfect formation, the cloud riders holding on to their corners of the long ribbon.

Then a second troupe of thrantas launched themselves from their docks on Cloud City, flitting ahead of and around the colorful ribbon structure in the sky. They swarmed through openings and loops in the fabric-mesh, flying so close that their wing tips almost, almost touched the fluttering banner. But Jaina saw no mistakes, no slipups.

Then, at an unspoken signal, the cloud riders exchanged positions, shifting the pattern of the woven ribbon, reshaping it like a bright laserlight design in the sky.

Jacen stood up, hooting, applauding, and yelling at the top of his lungs. The second squadron of cloud riders broke free and darted back

toward Cloud City. Jaina watched in amazement as one of them stripped out of formation and buzzed past the hover-scaffolding where they all sat. A thin young rider waved a broad hand and grinned from the back of his thranta.

"That's M'kim!" Jacen shouted, waving.

Directly in front of them, the barefooted rider did a backward somersault in the air and landed effortlessly on the flying creature's back. The thranta streaked off to rejoin the rest of the performing group.

"It looks like they're letting him be an official part of the troupe at last," Jacen said. "He's finished his training."

Tenel Ka nodded, a contented look on her serious face. "Training must end eventually, and then the real work begins."

"That doesn't mean you can't always learn something new," Zekk added.

Lando, still watching the sky rodeo, turned back to the young Jedi Knights. "Speaking of which, it's about time I got you all back to Yavin 4."

With the oppressive sounds and smells of the jungle moon around her once again, Anja did not know what she was going to do. She sat alone

on a high stone ledge of the Jedi academy's Great Temple. The chipped, weathered stone, covered with moss, felt cold and uncomfortable. But she didn't care.

Anja stared out above the tangled forest to where the orange pastel ball of the gas giant planet Yavin dominated the sky. She felt trapped on this humid, overgrown moon-helpless. She hated to feel helpless.

No one knew her secret, though she wasn't sure how much it mattered now. She was at her wits' end, torn between incompatible loyalties.

Yes, Anja had pretended to show surprise at the news that had so interested the young Jedi Knights, but in her heart she had greeted it only with a kind of stoic dread. As they had feared, Czethros had disappeared completely, draining all readily available credits from his accounts and shutting down his respectable warehouse and shipping business on Ord Mantell.

He had gone underground, vanished without a trace. New Republic troops had confiscated everything that remained in his stripped offices, while investigators searched for clues to his whereabouts ... but Anja knew Czethros well enough. She was certain that the Black Sun lieutenant had left no loose ends, no evidence, no information through which he could be traced.

Czethros was gone. She had no way to contact him.

And her last precious supply of andris spice was almost gone!

What could she do when it ran out? She had no idea where she might obtain another supply. It wasn't fair. She'd worked so hard, done all of the devious things Czethros had demanded of her. They'd had a partnership of a sort: he had requested small tasks of her, in return for which he had set her up with Han Solo and his children and given her the opportunity for her ultimate revenge.

But now, the moment the tide turned against him, Czethros had abandoned her. He had run, leaving her to fend for herself. Anja was certainly good enough at that. She'd taken care of herself all her life, since her father had died when she was an infant-shot by Han Solo.

Or had that truly happened? Anja was no longer certain. She had never wanted to believe that the great Gallandro, her father, might have been responsible for his own situation. She had wanted to find a scapegoat, someone to blame for his murder ... and Han Solo had fit the bill perfectly. What better revenge could Anja take than to go after his children?

Czethros had been true to his word there, at least, but now she felt as if she'd been set adrift, abandoned....

Laughing, Jacen bounded out of the temple shadows and ran across the stone platform on the roof of the rebuilt Massassi temple. He skidded to a halt in surprise when he saw her sitting there alone, deep in thought.

"Hey, Anja!" Jacen said. "Zekk and Jaina and Lowie and Tenel Ka and I are going out into the jungles, do a little exploring. You want to come along? There's plenty to see out there-the strangest plants and insects you've ever imagined. I'll even show you a piranha beetle if you want.- They look just like your tattoo."

"No thanks," she said automatically, without even thinking about her response.

With a beep and a twitter, Artoo-Detoo trundled out behind Jacen.

The astromech droid flashed his sensor light, assessing the situation.

Jacen shrugged. "Okay, but remember, we want you to feel like you can participate in stuff that we're doing. I know Uncle Luke doesn't believe you have real Jedi potential, but that doesn't matter. You can still learn. You can still improve yourself-your reactions, your abilities."

"I know all that, Jacen," she said snappishly. "I'll make up my own mind, okay? No need to treat me like a baby."

Jacen stepped back, startled. "Hey, I wasn't treating you like a baby," he said. "I was treating you like a friend."

Then he turned and followed Artoo-Detoo back into the temple.

The small droid twittered and gave a mournful whistle, as if scolding Anja. She just glared at the polished domed head as Artoo rolled back inside.

She stared out at the jungle again, her thoughts in turmoil.

Everything had been so clear until she'd gotten to know the Solo twins better. She hadn't had any doubts in the beginning. Her resolve had been inn. Why was it so difficult now?

And did she really want Jacen and Jaina to be harmed in retaliation for something that had happened long ago to Gallandro, a man whoshe had to face it-she'd never really met?

Czethros, her supposed mentor, might never show his face in open sunlight again. He would be too easily recognized. He was a hunted man now.

And that left her here, to continue the charade. Anja didn't know what she could do in this place. She certainly didn't want to be a Jedi!

She reached down, picked up a pebble, and tossed it off the edge of the ziggurat toward the jungle. She watched as it fell into the underbrush below.

She already felt the hunger and the deep need for another dose of spice, but she would tolerate it for now. She could be strong. Anja had always been strong.

But she didn't know how long she could last.

The simmering jungle sounds grew louder as she listened to them.

The verdant jungle moon and Luke Skywalker's Jedi academy seemed far, far away from anything else she had ever known.

"She's not coming," Jacen said, joining the other young Jedi Knights at the base of the Great Temple.

Jaina must have heard the note of dejection in his voice, because she put a comforting hand on his arm and said, "Anja probably wouldn't enjoy exploring with us right now, anyway. She could probably use the time alone."

"She seems kind of edgy since we got back," Zekk agreed. "I'm sure it's nothing personal."

Lowie rumbled a suggestion.

"Indeed!" Em Teedee exclaimed. "I daresay we shall have an excellent time together if we make the attempt."

"Ah. Aha." Tenel Ka cleared her throat, then paused as if considering a very important topic. Her cool grey eyes met Jacen's brandybrown gaze. "Did you ever hear the story about the Jawa who mistook a rancor for a ronto?"

Jacen grinned and took her hand in his. "Yeah, I think so. But it's a good one. Why don't you tell it to us?"

Together, the friends walked toward the jungle.

This one is for Catherine Ulatowski-Sidor for helping us look organized even when we're not, for being there to catch any balls we drop, for being a careful and enthusiastic reader, and for being a friend

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On the grassy landing field in front of the Jedi academy's Great Temple, an old-model cargo ship gleamed in the morning sun. Though some might have considered the Lightning Rod little more than a junk hauler well past its prime-perhaps better suited to be hauled away as junk-it was Zekk's pride and joy. The young, dark-haired Jedi walked in a slow circle around his ship, appraising the recent repairs with his sharp emerald gaze.

"You're awfully attached to this scrap heap, aren't you?" Jaina

observed with good humor.

Zekk looked into her brandy-brown eyes, raised an eyebrow, and grinned.

"Jealous?"

"Maybe just a little." Jaina took a sudden interest in a minute scratch on the hull plating. "Kinda silly, I know. But sometimes I wonder if you don't care about your ship more than, urn... more than most people do," she finished lamely.

Zekk shrugged. "Why not? Old Peckhum gave me the Lightning Rod, and he's the closest thing I've got to a family. This old ship was a special place for us. I practically grew up with her, kind of like you and Jacen did with the Millennium Falcon."

Jaina nodded and bit her lower lip. "Sure. I can understand that."

"But there are other reasons that I care more than most people would about this ship," Zekk went on. "Fixing up the Lightning Rod was part of my healing process after I left the Shadow Academy."

Zekk's face grew serious as he spoke. "And the Lightning Rod was with me all through my days as a bounty hunter while we were fighting the Diversity Alliance, while I was learning to trust the Force again."

He gave her a playful look. "Not only that, but it seems like every time I need to fix up my ship, there you are helping me." He paused, as if searching for words. "So in a way, you-and Jacen and Lowie and Tenel Ka-are all a part of how I feel about the Lightning Rod."

Zekk reached out to push a strand of straight brown hair back from Jaina's face.

Her cheeks turned a delicate pink. She opened her mouth as if to answer him.

"Hey, did somebody call us?" Jacen's face appeared over the top of the old light freighter. He wagged his eyebrows comically as Lowie's and Tenel Ka's faces joined his, looking down at Zekk and Jaina.

Tenel Ka's red-gold hair, part of it flowing free and part fixed in its traditional warrior braids, hung around her face and draped along the Lightning Rod's hull. "We have completed the external hull patch as you requested, Zekk," she announced.

Lowbacca, the lanky young Wookiee, scratched at the dark streak that ran up through his fur above one eye. He rumbled a comment as well.

The miniaturized translating droid Em Teedee hovered beside the

ginger-furred Wookiee's head. "Oh, indeed, yes! The workmanship is so fine that I daresay it is virtually undetectable-except perhaps by a droid."

Zekk smiled. "Well, thanks everyone, that's great. But I still don't understand why all of you decided the Lightning Rod needed an overhaul this morning. It's not as if we're planning a trip."

"Well, no, not exactly..... Jaina said, her voice trailing off. "But there is something-" "Of course, it never hurts to look your best," Jacen interrupted, jumping down beside his sister and Zekk.

"This is a fact," Tenel Ka said. The warrior girl leapt down to join them.

Lowie looked up at the jungle moon's horizon above the Massassi treetops and gave an inquiring bark. Then, with a joyful bellow, he grabbed the oval translating droid, tucked Em Teedee under one arm, and dove off the side of the Lightning Rod. He somersaulted on the short grass and bounded to a standing position beside his friends.

"Well, really, Master Lowbacca!" Em Teedee scolded as he was being clipped back at his accustomed place on the Wookiee's syrenfiber belt.

"Such grandstanding could result in permanent damage to my circuits.

Do be careful!"

Zekk ignored the little droid and looked at Lowie. "What did you mean when you said, 'There he is' just before you jumped down here?"

Jaina grinned. "Right on time."

"Who's right on time?" Zekk asked in confusion. "Certainly not Anja Gallandro. I haven't seen her all morning."

"Oh," Jacen said, "I forgot to tell you. I checked in on her 'cause she missed morning meal. I asked her to join us, but she said she wasn't feeling well. I believe her. She was shaking all over."

Zekk frowned. "Spice withdrawal?"

Jacen shrugged a shoulder. "That was my guess. Funny thing is, when I asked her why she was shivering, she tried to make it into a joke.

Said she'd just been thinking about what the weather must be like on Kessel this time of year."

"Ah. Aha," Tenel Ka said, placing her single hand on her hip.

"Definitely spice, then. The spice mines of Kessel are the main source for the drug."

"Anyway, we weren't talking about Anja being on time," Jaina said, getting them back on track. "Look up."

Zekk's face broke into a broad smile as he recognized the enormous modern freighter descending toward the landing field: the Thunderbolt.

"It's Peckhum!" he yelled. Zekk ran out onto the flattened grass and began to wave frantically.

"He wanted to surprise you," Jaina said above the whine of the repulsor engines as the ship descended.

"So that's why you wanted the Lightning Rod looking her best."

Zekk laughed.

"And we got you out onto the landing field without making you suspicious," Jacen added, his brown hair blowing wildly as the Thunderbolt approached.

By the time the modern freighter touched down, Zekk was already running toward it, yelling incomprehensible words of greeting. The moment the

hatch opened, the old spacer with lanky hair and gray beard stubble started down the ramp. At the same time, Zekk jumped onto the Thunderbolt's still-lowering ramp, bounded up, and met him halfway.

Old Peckhum caught him up in a gleeful bear hug as the companions gathered beside the ship to watch.

"So, we surprised him after all, did we?" old Peckhum asked.

"This is a fact," Tenel Ka confirmed.

Peckhum laughed. "I knew I could count on you. Now where's this new young lady you've been talking about in all your messages recently?" he asked, turning to Zekk. "Anja, is it?"

Zekk gave a guilty start, then glanced at Jaina to see if she had noticed. She seemed to be studying something in the grass at her feet.

Zekk turned back to the old spacer. "Urn, she's not feeling very well.

You'll meet her later, Peckhum. But meanwhile, come on into the Jedi academy. I've got a lot to tell you."

Anja Gallandro prowled around the interior of her guest quarters inside the Great Temple. Her agitation would not allow her to sit or stand still for even a moment. Twice already this morning she had ransacked every corner of her room, every pocket of her clothing, every crevice in the cupboards, every fold of her travel bags. It was time she faced the truth.

She had run out of andris spice and there was no more to be found.

Still, her huge dark eyes darted around the room searching for inspiration, never resting on any object for more than a second.

Think, she ordered herself Think.

So she thought. But the more Anja thought, the more certain she became that there could be no andris anywhere on Yavin 4, even in the Jedi academy's infirmary.

Anja had insisted to the young Jedi Knights that she was not addicted to spice-that she only used it because she liked the way it made her feel, liked the way it could speed up her reactions and clarify her thoughts. Andris is an enhancement, not an addiction, she assured herself.

Then why, she wondered, were her hands trembling? Why was she close to panic at the very thought that she had no way of getting another dose

of andris on this tiny backwater moon? And she needed one now.

She growled and shook her head like a nek battle dog on the attack.

Her waist-length hair, highlighted by streaks of honey, snapped like a whip made of silky strands.

What was she doing on Yavin 4, anyway? It had been her hatred for Han Solo and her belief that he had murdered her father that first motivated her to befriend his twin children, Jacen and Jaina. It had all been part of her plan to take revenge on Solo, either directly or through his children. But now she had gotten to know the twins and their friends and, in spite of the fact that she distrusted and despised their father, she had come to the conclusion that she did not want to hurt them. They didn't deserve it.

Czethros, however, had tried to have them all killed on Cloud City and earlier on the war-torn world of Anobis. Anja no longer trusted her former mentor as she once had.

Still, she wished she could contact him. After all, Czethros had been her main source of spice over the years. He had, in fact, been the first person to show her, years ago, all the benefits andris could provide. He had told her back then that only weaklings became truly addicted. But for the strong-willed, he had insisted, andris was

merely a useful tool.

She thrled her shaky fingers through her flowing dark hair and gave it a vicious yank. She had believed Czethros. About everything.

But Anja was no longer certain what she believed.

With a groan, she threw herself down onto the sleeping pallet and covered her eyes with one arm, trying vainly to slow the rapid beating of her heart. Czethros had lied about the addictiveness of spice. He had ordered her friends murdered. Perhaps he had lied about Han Solo's role in her father's death as well....

This was the idea she found most difficult to accept. Since childhood, her hatred of Han Solo had given her a focus, someone to blame for everything that had gone wrong in her life. Loathing Solo, and knowing that he was to blwne for all her problems, had been one of the few constants she had been able to cling to during the turmoil of her youth.

It would be hard for Anja to give up her hatred-every bit as hard as giving up spice. This was one reason why, in spite of the fact that she now cared about the young Jedi Knights, she still found herself snapping at them, even though they'd done nothing to earnher anger.

Unable to stay still any longer, Anja pushed herself up off the

sleeping pallet and began prowling her chambers again.

"I've got it under control," she gritted through clenched teeth. "I can handle this." She reached behind her head and retied the leather band she wore around her forehead to keep her flowing hair in check.

Although she hadn't been doing any real physical activity, perspiration dripped from under the headband and down the back of her neck.

"I can handle this," she repeated, more forcefully.

But Anja knew she was lying to herself.

Alone in a workroom by an outer wall of the Great Temple, Zekk sat next to the table and listened to the rainstorm outside. Old Peckhum had gone to see Master Skywalker, and Zekk was spending some time by himself, working hard. He could smell the spattering droplets of fresh water that moistened the chiseled stone of the rebuilt pyramid's walls.

Open window slits allowed the calming noises of the afternoon rain shower to drift in along with the wonderful jungle scents, without letting the water leak into the rooms. The huge orange planet Yavin had set behind the Jedi academy, leaving only dim and distant sunlight to penetrate the storm clouds. In the sky above the thick treetops, a

fresh crop of kite plants blossomed in brilliant colors, drifting about on the winds and soaking up the falling rain.

Peace ... calm ... thoughts of the light side of the Force.

After he had recentered his concentration, Zekk turned back to constructing his new lightsaber. Tools lay strewn about on the stone table surface, and bright light spilled down from a single glowpanel to illuminate his efforts.

He had moved to this study room from his own quarters so he could be alone, so he could think. Zekk needed to focus on the important task at hand. Building a personal lightsaber was an assignment reserved for trained and trusted Jedi Knights-and he intended to do his best work.

This time. ' As he picked up the components, aligned them, tightened connectors, adjusted the power pack, he felt a turmoil in his heart.

He had wielded a lightsaber many times in the service of the Shadow Academy.

But back then, when the dark Jedi Brakiss had taught him how to use the energy blade, Zekk had never gone through this rite of passage.

The Shadow Academy had manufactured cheap and identical lightsabers by the dozen, presenting them to their evil-trained students during

practice sessions and before the attack on the New Republic. Zekk had had a lightsaber given to him-but he hadn't ever built his own.

Zekk had never felt such an attachment to any weapon before. At the Shadow Academy, the lightsaber with which he had dueled and led the attack on Yavin 4 was simply a tool, interchangeable with anyone else's. This energy blade, though, would be his own. Zekk would never make the mistake of falling to the dark side again. He understood that everything about this weapon was his responsibility. Building a lightsaber was so ... personal.

When he had attempted the delicate task back in his own quarters, though, an anxious Jaina had hovered behind him, looking over his shoulder, making suggestions, and tinkering with the components. Then Jacen had arrived, spouting conversation and the usual string of jokes.

Lowie had leaned in, groaning and growling in the Wookiee language, to ask if Zekk needed any assistance. His friends all meant well, but what he needed most was to be alone ... to do this himself.

Peckhum's recent arrival had reminded Zekk of his youth on Coruscant, simpler times when Jacen and Jaina and Zekk had been carefree friends ... back before he had betrayed them. Zekk had learned to overcome the guilt from the bad things he had done, but he'd never forgotten.

What mattered most was who he was now and who he would become in the future.

Outside, flying creatures swooped high in the air with jaws wide open.

They snatched the colorful kite plants from the sky and dragged them down to the treetops to feed, all the while scattering jewel-like spores that helped the drifting life-forms reproduce.

Zekk fitted the last components together, then took the lightsaber apart again, triple-checking the connections and alignments before he snapped the casing closed for the last time. He held the new weapon in his hand, squeezed the polished grip, examined the power studs, flicked the hilt from side to side to test its weight and balance. Somehow he was reluctant to switch on the lightsaber, afraid that he might have done something wrong.

"Do, or do not. There is no try," Zekk muttered to himself.

He pressed the power stud-and the lightsaber flared to life at the first touch. The throbbing blade glowed a pure yellow-orange, like a captured flame enclosed in a long, thin tube. With the greatest care, he moved his weapon, and the ionization thrum made a musical sound in the air. The lightsaber felt right in his hand-not a seductive power

that he might be tempted to misuse, but a precise and well-controlled weapon that fit him perfectly. A Jedi weapon ... for a Jedi Knight.

Relief washed through him. Zekk allowed himself a contented smile. He held the flame-orange blade high. The bright glow on his face seemed like a purifying fire. He had come through his long ordeal and survived. From now on, everything would be right.

Nothing would ever be right again.

Anja tossed and turned in her room and finally rolled over to slam her fist against the hard stone wall. The pain jarred her thoughts, distracted her for just an instant. But the stinging of her knuckles rapidly faded to a dull throb, far overshadowed by the demanding outcry of need that coursed through her body. Andris ... andris ... andris ...

Anja had thought she could stand it for as long as necessary, but time had only amplified the pain until the screaming need inside her head became unbearable. She couldn't kid herself any longer. Czethros had gone into hiding after the disaster on Cloud City. He would never provide her with the supply of spice she desperately needed. Anja couldn't count on him, and she couldn't survive if she didn't get another dose of andris-and soon.

She would have to get some herself. She would go right to the source.

There was no other way. She had to take matters into her own hands.

Anja certainly couldn't obtain any spice here on Yavin 4, definitely not at the Jedi academy. These students of the Force seemed to draw their pleasure simply from staring at rocks and meditating. She had tried, but that just didn't work for her. Anja had always been independent.

When a problem presented itself, she faced the challenge, she devised a solution, she found a way.

She got up from her sweat-soaked bed, turned the glowpanel to its lowest setting, and dressed quietly. The rain had stopped late that afremoon, and the Great Temple had fallen into a peaceful quietness as the other Jedi students slept or practiced their mind-intensive studies.

Anja gathered her few meager supplies, hesitated before she clipped her antique lightsaber in place on her belt. Without the boost she received from a dose of spice, she didn't know how well she could use the Jedi weapon.

Anja again retied her leather headband around her forehead to hold back

her long, streaked hair. She tucked her boots under her arms and scurried barefoot across the cold stone floor.

She froze in the shadows as she heard the rolling hum and saw the blinking form of Artoo-Detoo trundling down one of the corridors ahead.

Fortunately, the little astromech droid turned left and disappeared into the shadows without seeing her. She drew in a deep breath and started moving again.

Anja hurried until she reached the opening down to the hangar beneath the pyramid. Standing in the cool shadows, she looked around, trying to make her choice from the ships parked there. She knew she could fly any craft. She'd been trained for years as a smuggler, flying from Ord Mantell back to her war-torn homeworld of Anobis. She needed something fast, without markings.

The Lightning Rod.

Ducking low, Anja crept to the door of the hangar bay and looked across the landing field toward Zekk's battered craft. Old man Peckbum, who had used the stock light freighter for many years to haul supplies in and around the New Republic, had given it to Zekk as his personal ship.

Anja had no choice. She had to get away, to get what she needed before the pain overwhelmed her. Anja's eyes narrowed, and she allowed herself to focus on nothing beyond her goal. Her feet made no noise on the dew-soaked grass as she ran across the landing field to the Lightning Rod and up the still-open ramp. She slipped into the worn cockpit seat, strapped herself down, and powered up the engines.

Security was lax here on Yavin 4. With so many Jedi Knights around, Luke Skywalker seemed to believe they could drive back any military assault; a New Republic fleet in orbit also helped to protect the academy. But no one would stop her from the inside. She could take the little freighter, fly out, and dive into hyperspace before anyone reacted quickly enough to question her.

When she powered up the repulsorjets, a sleepy guard came running to the distant door of the hangar bay and stared in surprise at the commandeered ship. He waved, signaling for her to wait, but Anja punched the engines, raised the craft off the field, and streaked out over the treetops.

The Lightning Rod rapidly left the tall Massassi pyramid behind, flying low over the jungle canopy to foil any scanning attempts. The tangled foliage was like a lumpy carpet below her. After she had rounded the sharp curve of the small moon, Anja arced off into space.

Determined to let nothing distract her from her goal, Anja ignored the comm chatter as alarms were raised. She would be gone well before the defensive fleet could intercept her.

Anja set the coordinates in the Lightning Rod's navicomputer, filling them in from memory. Spice... she had to have spice. There was no time to weigh the many options: she would go directly to the source.

Starlines unfolded around her and the Lightning Rod plunged into hyperspace... heading for Kessel.

it was the start of as perfect a morning as Zekk could ever remember.

Outside, bright sunshine poured down on the Jedi academy, and a fresh breeze carrying the scents of a thousand luscious jungle plants waited in through the thick stone window openings. The young Jedi Knights were used to getting up very early, and today they had special reason, since Peckhum was due to leave.

At morning meal, Jaina greeted Zekk and Peckhum with a hug.

There had been no mistaking the pride in her eyes when she saw the new lightsaber hanging at Zekk's belt. "Looks like a fine weapon, Zekk.

If you want a sparring partner later on, come see me."

"After I show Master Skywalker."

"Hey," Jacen said as he sauntered in, grinning. "Two Gamoffean guards are walking down a narrow, deserted canyon when suddenly a rancor comes out and starts chasing them. One of the Gamoffeans stops to put on his best running shoes. "Don't waste time," shouts the other one, 'you can't outrun a rancor with those!' 'I don't have to outrun a rancor,' says the first one as he finishes lacing his shoes, 'I just have to outrun you!'"

" A chorus of chuckles and groans rewarded him.

With additional jokes, Jacen was in rare form during the meal, and they all laughed so hard it was difficult not to choke as they ate. Tenel Ka offered a rare toast of friendship to the entire group seated at their table. Lowie surprised them all by presenting a dramatic Wookiee speech while Em Teedee provided hilariously inaccurate translations, which the companions now recognized with their increasing grasp of Lowbacca's native language.

Jaina, sparkling with good humor, teased old Peckhum fliroughout the meal and squeezed Zekk's hand under the table. The old spacer laughed and enjoyed the attention.

Even when it was time for Peckhum to go, Zekk's mood could not be

dampened. "I'm sorry you couldn't meet Ania," he told the spacer.

"I knocked on the door to her quarters, but she didn't answer. Must be keeping to herself again. She's got ... a lot of things to work out in her head. Besides, her communication skills aren't always the greatest."

As they left the temple and walked through the dim corridors leading out, old Peckhum gave Zekk a mock stern look. "Speaking of, uh, communication skills-if I hadn't switched schedules with another freighter pilot so that I could come to Yavin 4 and visit my favorite Jedi trainee, I might not've heard about your progress for another month.

You didn't mention you were going to build a lightsaber last week when I talked to you."

Zekk hunched his shoulders. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I guess maybe I was afraid I'd fail. There was always a chance that I might build a faulty weapon and I'd have to throw it away and start all over.

Worse, I thought maybe the wrong kind of blade might try to draw me back toward the dark side."

The old spacer gave a thoughtful nod. "I understand that, but don't forget that you can trust me. I'd like to know whenever something important is going on in your life. I'm always willing to rearrange my schedule so I can share a special occasion with you."

Jaina snorted. "And you can put that nonsense about going over to the dark side behind you, Zekk."

"Thanks for trusting me," Zekk said in a low voice as they all emerged into the sunlight in front of the Jedi academy. "That trust was what gave me the strength to leave the dark side for good."

"The trust of friends is rare and important," Tenel Ka observed.

Lowie crooned his agreement.

They walked down the temple steps toward the landing field. Several New Republic soldiers milled about taking readings at a freshly scorched spot on the ground. A group of assorted investigators stood inside the small craft bay on the pyramid's lowest level, talking in urgent tones with the night-shift guard who had been on duty the evening before.

Preoccupied with the old man's departure, the companions began walking across the grass with Peckhum toward the Thunderbolt. Suddenly, Zekk stopped and turned back to the burned, empty spot on the landing

field.

His mouth fell open. He blinked in confusion. "You didn't have to move my ship inside, Jaina. I would have done it myself. Of course, I know that flying a ship is never hard work for you, but-" "No," Jaina said. "I haven't been anywhere near the Lightning Rod this morning."

"Something's wrong," Jacen said.

Old Peckhum looked curiously at the spot where his tonner ship had been when he arrived the day before. But the Lightning Rod was nowhere to be seen.

"Ah," Tenel Ka said in a matter-of-fact voice. "Aha."

Jacen drew a deep breath, let it out slowly. "I've got a bad feeling about this."

Inside the shadows of the small craft bay, Luke Skywalker left the other members of the investigative team and marched purposefully toward Zekk. The dark-haired young man felt a cold twist in his stomach as his suspicions grew. Master Skywalker looked directly into his green eyes.

"Zekk, I'm afraid Anja has taken your ship."

Later, after Peckhum's tight schedule had forced him to leave, the young Jedi gathered in Luke Skywalker's office. Jaina squirmed as she watched a storm of emotions cross Zekk's face. "Anja stole the Lightning Rod!" he said through gritted teeth. "She ran away from the Jedi academy."

Luke nodded patiently. "She caught the hangar guard by surprise and took off before any of the orbital forces could stop her."

Zekk went on, fuming. "Anja is a thief, and I want my ship back.

What are we going to do about it? We've got to find her."

Jaina cleared her throat. "We could, urn, ask Mom and Dad to send out some security forces. Maybe they can track down the Lightning Rod, wherever Anja's taken it?"

"Or they could probably issue some bulletins to the authorities on various planets..... Jacen's voice trailed off.

Luke raised his eyebrows and pursed his lips, waiting for a full minute of silence before he spoke. "As for Anja leaving the Jedi academy, that is her choice. Not only is she an adult, she's not exactly a Jedi. We can't stop her from leaving if she wants to."

"But she can't take my ship to do it," Zekk said.

"No. That's true enough. But first-" he spread his hands and gazed around at his assembled students "-you tell me. Is she a criminal or a friend? Would you like to have her arrested?"

Zekk squirmed at the Jedi Master's question. "Too bad we can't still send people to the spice mines of Kessel," he grumbled.

Each of the young Jedi shook their heads in turn.

Incarceration would serve no purpose," Tenel Ka said. "I believe she must have been desperate."

Jaina looked down at her hands in her lap. "And I think we all know why she was desperate." , Lowie woofed an observation. Jacen nodded and in a low voice said, "Spice."

"She was going through withdrawal," Zekk said, meeting Master Skywalker's eyes.

"Do you believe she intends to keep your ship-or even sell it?"

Luke asked. "In order to get credits to buy spice?"

Jaina was surprised when they all reacted instantly. Lowie bellowed a protest. "Indeed not!" Em Teedee added.

"She wouldn't do that. I think she's planning to bring it back," Jacen said in a confident voice.

Jaina bit her lower lip. "I have a feeling she's in more trouble than we know."

Luke stood. "Then I'd say this isn't exactly a job for New Republic security. Don't you think this is a situation that her friends, five Jedi Knights-not to mention one extremely talented droid-could handle on their own?"

They all agreed, and the Jedi Master left them alone to discuss the details.

"At least we've got the Rock Dragon," Jaina said. "She's a good fast ship."

"But how do we find her? We can hardly go running from system to system with a large holograph asking, 'Have you seen this girl?'"

Jacen pointed out.

Lowie gave a long grumble. "Master Lowbacca suggests that perhaps we

could consult with some of the guardian forces stationed in orbit around this moon."

"They might have tracked the Lightning Rod's initial vector," Jaina agreed.

Zekk shrugged. "I'll take any lead we can get."

Within five minutes the companions all stood in the comm center.

On half of the screen, a weary-eyed officer who was obviously off-duty rubbed a hand over his eyes. The other half of the screen displayed a starmap.

"I'm sorry," the shift officer said, "we tried to scan the ship's navicomputer before it went into hyperspace, but the most we were able to determine was that the Lightning Rod was heading for one of the systems in this sector. It still covers hundreds of planets, though."

Glowing white lines appeared around a segment of space in the starmap.

"I've got a team on it."

"Hey, thanks," Jacen said, trying to sound enthusiastic. "You've been a big help." The portion of the screen that held the officer's face went blank, leaving only the starmap.

Tenel Ka's cool gray eyes narrowed suddenly, as if something important had just occurred to her. "Jacen, my friend, what joke did Anja attempt to make yesterday when you sensed she was going through withdrawal?"

He shrugged. "I can't remember her exact words. Something about Kessel, but I don't see what that has to do-oh! " Jaina said, "Under stress, it's not unusual for people to joke about what's really on their minds."

"Zekk also mentioned the spice mines," Tenel Ka pointed out.

"Perhaps because of Anja's addiction, or because of her joke."

A slow grin spread across Zekk's face. He pointed toward the starmap still covering half the screen. "And Kessel just happens to be right in the middle of that sector."

After years of running the spice mines of Kessel, Chief Administrator Nien Nunb finally thought that the place felt like the warrens of home.

The dim winding tunnels with their cool rock walls seemed much like the crowded burrows that honeycombed the crust of Sullust, where mousy-faced, large-eyed Sullustan families preferred to live together.

Nien Nunb often went back home to visit his family, whenever he could spare himself here.

The spice mines had once been a feared place, an Imperial prison planet and work camp. But over a decade ago Lando Calrissian had purchased the mines, setting up his friend and copilot Nien Nunb as their administrator. Together, they had turned the once-dreaded mines into a productive industrial facility that held few of the grim connotations that Kessel formerly had. They'd found a way to turn it into a true credit-making enterprise.

By choosing alien species who were comfortable underground, who preferred living in tunnels and in darkness, Nien Nunb had made the place an efficient working environment. Spice production had increased greatly in the past ten years. Nien Nunb and his old friend Lando liked to joke that the mines were one of Calrissian's few ventures that actually turned a profit, although the initial investment for extensive revamping and new equipment had cost an emperor's ransom.

In his younger years, Nien Nunb had led a life of adventure, tagging

along with Lando on smuggling runs, breaking through Imperial blockades and delivering much-needed supplies to restricted planets. In the Millennium Falcon, borrowed from Han Solo, Nien Nunb had served as copilot when Lando made his desperate run to destroy the second Death Star. Nervous by nature, Nien Nunb had been certain they would die in the attempt ... but somehow the Falcon had survived, and Lando had gone on to become a hero of the New Republic.

But the Sullustan copilot had had enough excitement in his life, and now he was content just to work here in the calming twisted tunnels beneath the cold surface of Kessel. He liked running a business. He thought it much better than getting shot at every other day.

Kessel was a small, low-gravity world, roughly potato-shaped, with a very thin atmosphere. Like Sullust, the planet was habitable only belowground, behind the sealed entrances to the dark tunnels. Large cities and giant atmospheric generation plants had been established to stabilize the amount of air clinging to the surface, but Kessel's gravity was simply not strong enough to keep all of the atmosphere from escaping into space.

Whenever he looked through the panoramic viewing ports up into the sky, the Chief Administrator could see a ring of broken meteors strewn out about the planet, shards from Kessel's companion moon.

They orbited, glittering with reflected light, and even during dim

daylight, a sparkling show of meteors rained down to pound the surface of the mining planet. Fortunately, no one lived out there in the hazardous zone.

The Death Star prototype had destroyed Kessel's moon during the resurgence of Imperial activity many years before. Since that time, though, Kessel had been a quiet place, as if the whole planet had decided to take a deep breath and regather its energy.

Because of the spice's desirable effects—a burst of energy or telepathic enhancement—many black-market entrepreneurs sold spice illicitly. Spies, smugglers, and information brokers used it, as did thrill seekers. As a result, the substance became rare and too little was left for the legitimate users throughout the New Republic. Spice was vital for many medical treatments: to save weakened patients, to restore the memories of amnesia victims, to enhance communication in deeply impaired individuals, and so on.

Because of the long and well-established tradition of illegal spice distribution, Nien Nunb had taken years to crack down on the edge-of-the-law traders. His kindheartedness had paid off. Happy workers had rewarded the Chief Administrator by finding a rich new strike of andris spice on the far side of Kessel. Nien Nunb was exceedingly pleased.

Andris, a rare form of the drug, was as valuable as glitterstim or

ryll. Its properties were further enhanced by exposure to extreme cold.

Much andris had already been excavated here on Kessel, bringing excellent financial returns on the new mine. Seeing the opportunity to increase the potency of the andris (and their profits as well), Nien Nunb and his workers had recently completed installing a carbon-freezing facility in the main processing center.

Today was just another day at work, as the Sullustan accompanied his Second Administrator, Torvon, on their weekly inspection tour.

Together, the tall administrator and the short, mousy manager entered a main work chamber.

In the enormous hollowed-out room below the surface, holding pits and carbonite generators bubbled and steamed under a rocky ceiling.

Cold white mist oozed out of exhaust valves on a rattling conveyor.

Blind beetlelike creatures worked with multiple claws, packaging and sealing the purified andris before it was sent into the hissing vat of pure carbonite that had been freshly delivered from the rings of the Empress Tera system.

Torvon's high shiny forehead was split into hemispheres that implied an

increased cranial capacity. The tall secondary administrator had solid pale green eyes with no pupils Nien Nunb could see. Torvon had come highly recommended after serving as a high-ranking administrator in no less than six other financially successful industrial facilities. The man was so tall that the Sullustan's shoulders barely came up to his knobby knees.

As he walked beside his secondary administrator, Nien Nunb studied the details with his huge black eyes, which glinted as he flicked his gaze along the assembly line. The blind beetles seemed perfectly happy with their work. They were well fed, well paid, and lived in a community in abandoned glitterstim tunnels on the far side of Kessel. They asked for little else.

Lift platforms carried sealed, code-numbered crates of processed andris up to the surface, where a domed spaceport received the cargo for shipping. Armed vessels flew off to deliver the treasure. Each cargo ship received a percentage, and the remaining credits were transmitted back to Kessel.

Ventilation ducts and piping thrummed around the generators and cold-storage receptacles. Machinery protruded above and below, fitting together in a jigsaw puzzle of controlled chaos that offered a variety of small crannies and hollows to be used for equipment storage. Nien Nunb noted ways to make more efficient use of space. Perhaps employees

from other areas could bring their storage items in here.

He studied the monitor panels and controls as the brooding Torvon stepped close beside him, towering like a tree. The Sullustan manager glanced at the pressure gauges of flowing raw carbonite and noticed that many of the needles had edged up into the red zones. He muttered in alarm and tapped one of the dials, double-checking the reading.

Torvon reached up out of sight and fiddled with one of the controls.

Nien Nunb assumed he had seen the same problem and was working to correct it.

Suddenly the gauges jumped. The readings went much higher much too fast. What had Torvon done?

Nien Nunb gave a loud squawk of alarm. He heard a faint creaking groan, saw that one of the coolant pipes close to him was bulging, buckling with the strain. He cried out and instinctively dove headfirst into a protected cranny between two huge pieces of equipment.

Torvon's knobby legs appeared, striding closer to where Nien Nunb had taken shelter. The Sullustan yelled for the secondary administrator to get out of the way, but instead Torvon bent over, his unreadable pale green eyes flashing. He reached into the cranny, trying to grab Nien

Nunb. Couldn't Torvon see the danger? What was he doing? The Sullustan couldn't understand why he didn't get out of the way. A moment later, Torvon's hands clutched Nien Nunb's vest and began to drag him out.

Torvon was going to haul him into the line of the accident!

Just then, though, the groaning pipe burst. Too soon.

Gushing, infinitely cold vapors blasted Torvon's legs, right where he'd been trying to pull Nien Nunb. The carbonite instantly froze the tall administrator's joints, turning his lower legs into poles of solid ice.

Torvon howled in shock and tried to move out of the way, but his feet were stuck to the floor. The tall man bent over, tugging at his feet, but his legs, like sticks of brittle kindling, shattered. Torvon fell face-first into the blast of ultrafrigid gas.

The carbonite did its work, even as the murderous administrator's broken body fell, freezing his head and body core absolutely solid in the fraction of a second it took for him to tumble the remaining distance to the hard stone floor. When he struck the unyielding surface, Torvon smashed into a million glittering pieces. His hand still clutched Nien Nunb's vest-not frozen, but no longer alive.

The Sullustan manager backed up to huddle in the cranny again, terrified but unhurt.

Alarms sounded. Lights flashed. Automatic systems sealed off the breached carbonite tube, preventing further loss of the precious freezing substance.

Within moments the air would clear, though Nien Nunb didn't know if he would ever be able to drive away the chill in his heart. He had trusted Torvon-and Torvon had tried to kill him. Hadn't he? Nien Nunb shook his head to clear it. He didn't know what exactly had gone on here, and he doubted anyone else would give him the answers-but the Chief Administrator knew for certain that this was no mere accident.

Torvon had died, but the actual target must have been Nien Nunb himself.

When Anja headed for Kessel in the stolen Lightning Rod, it felt just like old times. She was flying in a ship as an independent pilot-just like the smuggler and expediter she had been for Czethros. She could take care of herself She always had. Anja had her wits about her, and she had the antique lightsaber she had bought from a scavenger merchant in an illicit market on Ord Mantell. She didn't need the Solo twins or their friends to solve her problems for her.

She could handle this.

As she came in to the Kessel system, she steered clear of the treacherous conglomeration of black holes known as the Maw Cluster, which had given rise to the classic challenge of the "Kessel Run."

Kessel itself, a small world not much bigger than a planetoid, was surrounded by a wispy white mane of atmosphere that leaked away into space like a comet's tail.

The shattered moon, blasted apart by the prototype Death Star, had turned into countless obstacles in the sky, but Anja was confident in her piloting abilities. She locked onto the spaceport beacon, and the Lightning Rod cruised down through the atmosphere, banging and bouncing as it struck meteors too tiny to be marked on any hazard charts.

"Spaceport Control, this is an unlicensed trader," she said into the comm system. "I wish to land for maintenance and services. I'm out of Ord Mantell and ran into some damage flying too close to the black holes out there."

"You're far from home, unlicensed trader," said the attendant.

"Yeah, right. And I'm trying to get back there," Anja replied. "Do you have a maintenance dock I could hire?"

"Follow this vector," ewne the answer. Coordinates scrolled up on her screen. Anja smiled, followed the beacon to a contained cargo area at those coordinates, and approached the opening dome to land.

Anja felt the hunger screaming inside her more stridently than ever.

Down beneath the white alkaline surface of Kessel, hidden in the rocks of this planet, was spice ... spice for the taking. All she needed for now was one more dose just to help her get by. She only had to track down a sample, just a tiny amount. That would buy her more time in which to battle her addiction.

She hadn't been lying to Jacen and Jaina Solo when she'd said she only took andris because she liked to. Just for kicks. She had believed that. Sometimes she did need spice, though. And the twins had made her realize, reluctantly, that she needed andris more than she had let herself believe.

Anja Gallandro did not like to depend on anyone or anything. She had to kick this habit, break her addiction ... and she would start as soon as she formed a plan. After she got herself another dose to tide her over, she would be able to think more clearly.

But now that she was on Kessel, with the Lightning Rod settled into an unmarked berth inside the enclosed cargo bay, she didn't know how to go

about obtaining a new supply. Security would be tight. Although smugglers sometimes made a living from selling andris and glitterstim and ryll offworld, she couldn't just step into the local mercantile and order a container for herself. But she hoped there might be some people in the docking bays who had a tiny bit of skim they could sell from their cargo ... under the table, of course.

She stepped out of the cooling Lightning Rod, looked around, and tossed her long hair behind her back. She still wore her skintight outfit from her smuggling days. The sleeveless shirt showed off her taut muscles and the piranha beetle tattoo on her arm. But Kessel was a cold world, and even here in the docking bay she felt a bite to the air.

Shivering, she considered going back into the Lightning Rod to rummage through the supply compartments and find warmer clothes.

But then her eyes fixed on a familiar craft at the other side of the docking bay. She was puzzled for a moment. She'd seen the ship not long before. When a little grayish-skinned man with winglike eyebrows and a ridged scalp emerged, she put the pieces together instantly. She remembered this man and his ship.

Lilmit.

His craft was the Rude Awakening, a cargo hauler licensed out of Ord Mantell. Lilmit had been on his way from Ord Mantell to Anja's homeworld of Anobis, hauling a load of black-market weapons. Those contraband tools of destruction were for sale to one of the sides fighting in the ongoing civil war that had devastated Anobis for decades. Worst of all, Lilmit was no mere gunrunner: he was an opportunist without a conscience. He had sold weapons to both sides in the conflict, making his profit by perpetuating the destruction, the misery, the bloodshed.

Han Solo had stopped Lilmit's ship, using the Millennium Falcon to intimidate him. Together, Anja and the young Jedi Knights had boarded the Rude Awakening, discovered the weapons cache, and destroyed all the deadly items in an explosion in space. It was one of the few good things Han Solo had ever done, as far as Anja was concerned.

And now she had caught Lilmit here on Kessel, no doubt causing more problems.

Before she could stop herself, Anja sprinted across the enclosed cargo bay, her long legs carrying her rapidly in the low gravity. Lilmit looked up from tinkering in his open engine compartments. He saw her coming and either recognized her or instinctively drew back from the blazing fire in her large eyes. He raised his webbed hands and backed against the hull of his ship in surrender.

Anja was there, glaring down at him. "What are you doing here, little man? Procuring more weapons?"

"No, no!" the diminutive smuggler said, flapping his fingers.

"There's nothing in my cargo that would interest you. It has nothing to do with you-and Czethros would be very angry if you sabotaged me again."

Czethros? Anja drew back. "What are you talking about?"

Lilmit misinterpreted her question. "Don't think I've forgotten you.

Your name is Anja Gallandro, and I found out that you work for Czethros, too. You were with Han Solo, and you helped him destroy my entire cargo on its way to Anobis. Czethros really didn't seem surprised when I told him. Oh, he was displeased to hear that you cost him most of his business on Anobis, but he was most displeased with me.

He said your assignment was your business, and my assignment was my responsibility. I had to pay Czethros back for that loss out of my personal accounts. I barely kept my family from being sold into slavery. Now that I'm almost back on my feet, I won't let you destroy my work again.

I can't afford it."

"Czethros ... you're sure you work for him?" Anja said, thinking of how Czethros had pretended to be her friend, taken her under his wing, trained her on Ord Mantell. How could he be involved in such terrible things? Of course, he had ordered his henchmen to kill the young Jedi Knights....

"Yes!" Lilmit insisted. "Just as you do! But after that disaster of losing all the weapons, Czethros assigned somebody else to those duties and transferred me to the spice run instead. Please-don't ruin this for me." His voice carried a whining tone.

"I wouldn't do that to you," she said masking her confusion with a smooth reply. "We're colleagues, right?" She fell silent, hoping he would blunder through more of an explanation. But already Lilmit's words echoed like thunder through her head. Czethros himself had been involved in the gunrunning to Anobis!

She couldn't believe it. He had lied to her! And not just about the addictive properties of spice. He'd known all along how much she despised the endless conflict on her war-torn world. He had pretended to understand what Anja had been through. Czethros had consoled her, offered her a new chance at life, given her a job working for him. And all the while he had secretly been selling weapons so that the people

on her world could destroy themselves!

He was a liar and a traitor.

Czethros had played her for a fool. He'd kept his true activities secret. He'd used her. In fact, Anja suddenly found it easy to accept that, in all likelihood, the man had purposely addicted her to spice just to keep her under his thumb.

It made complete sense now. Czethros was not a generous or benevolent man. He had managed to trap Anja in a prison of her own anger and need, and now that she needed the andris more than anything else ... he had run. He'd disappeared, gone into hiding to protect his own skin.

He didn't care about her at all.

Her face hardened into a grim scowl. "And just where were you intending to go, Lilmit? You have a shipment of spice, you say?"

"I'm picking one up today. Just a small shipment," the smuggler said.

"Taking it to Mon Calamari. Czethros probably told you all about the Black Sun activities there. We've been building up quite a spice stash close to Crystal Reef, their largest resort city, near the Arctic. We

hide the andris in the water beneath the polar ice caps to keep it potent.

From there, we plan to sell it to select clientele in the floating casinos.

The profits from this operation alone could make Czethros a wealthy man for the rest of his life. There's a thriving black market. Only the wealthiest people from all over the New Republic can afford to stay on one of those oceangoing resorts. Especially Crystal Reef" Anja nodded slowly. A stash of andris on the ocean world.... Black Sun agents making illicit drug sales to customers in the floating casinos.

It all made sense now. Czethros was indeed part of Black Sun, perhaps one of its leaders. He already had his claws into the gambling and entertainment on Cloud City. He stockpiled drugs on Mon Calamari ...

and had been running weapons to the civil war on Anobis, all the while pretending to be her friend and protector. Many of Anja's people had died because of him. She began to wonder how many pots Czethros was stirring that she didn't know about yet.

"Tell me the coordinates of your stash, Lilmit," she said. "How do I find it? I'll be taking over this run from you."

Lilmit blanched. "No, please!"

"It's all right. I've been testing you," she said. "For Czethros. He wanted to be sure you were up to the new assignment." She paused, thinking fast. "You'll make the delivery to Coruscant. I'll take care of Mon Calamari, because-because it falls into my new territory. I'm surprised Czethros didn't warn you."

Lilmit said, "But what you ask is impossible. I couldn't possibly make it past security to Coruscant with a load of spice."

She sighed and shook her head in a disgusted fashion. "I told him he wouldn't be able to entrust this mission to you, but he assured me you wouldn't disappoint him again.....

"Wait! No. I can do this. If Czethros is trusting me to pull this mission off, then I will."

"Good. Now tell me how to find the stash of andris on Mon Calamari.

Czethros has ordered me to move it."

In a stuttering voice, Lilmit told her. He gave her maps and the transponder frequency of the stash so that she could locate the supply in the extremely cold waters of the ocean world's polar seas.

"I need to hurry," Lilmit said, his voice quavering. "I don't have much cargo, but. . ." He looked around furtively, anxiously. The other people in the domed space dock didn't seem to feel his nervousness.

"You know something's about to happen here-and it's got to be very soon now. Czethros has plans for Kessel." He lowered his voice. "Between you and me, I don't want to be here when his troops come in for the big takeover."

"When?" Anja said.

"I don't know. If he didn't tell you, he certainly wouldn't have told me." Lilmit shrugged. "But these people don't suspect at all, and I don't want to be here during all the blaster fire. I need to get off this planet."

"You will," Anja said. "But I'm leaving first."

"Wait. Why didn't Czethros tell me about this change of plans?"

Lilmit wanted to know.

"You said yourself there are many things Czethros tells me that he wouldn't tell you," Anja said.

"All right." Lilmit glanced furtively around. "Just don't let Czethros touch my family."

Remembering that Lilmit had a family-one that he had barely kept out of slavery-Anja felt a pang of conscience. Although this man had smuggled who knows how many weapons to Anobis to fuel the war there, Anja found it harder to judge him now. She herself could no longer justify all of the work that she had done in Czethros's service.

She couldn't even be certain that she knew the consequences of all of the tasks she had performed for him.

"If all goes according to plan, I assure you Czethros will never touch or threaten your family again," she said.

Lilmit's eyes lit with enthusiasm and wonder. "Then this assignment is important."

Anja cocked her head to one side and gave him a wordless look that said, Of course. What did I tell you?

"Now, I'm going to need two doses of spice before I head out," Anja said briskly, folding her arms across her chest and fixing him with a no-nonsense stare. She cast about in her mind for a good reason. "Uh, Czethros has asked me to do a bit of ... spying for him while I'm on

Mon Calamari." She gave a meaningful lift to her eyebrows.

"Oh, I see. Certainly," Lilmit said, hurrying into his ship and returning moments later with two insulated cryovials and a miniature carbon-freeze unit. "He told me I might need to be flexible on this assignment. Now I understand." He handed her the vials. "Czethros warned me I wouldn't be able to contact him until everything was 'in place.'" So when you speak to him next time, tell him that I got the message. I won't let anything get in my way this time, not even Han Solo himself."

Anja tucked the two insulated vials into a pocket, then graced him with a thin smile. "I see Czethros was right about you after all, Lilmit.

I'll remember not to underestimate you from now on."

Lilmit squared his bony shoulders. "Yes. You remember that, young lady. Someday we may even end up working on the same team."

Anja did not try to hide the genuine smile that sprang to her face.

Things were working out even better than she had hoped. She had gotten her needed dose of spice, had discovered Czethros's true colors, and had already hatched a plan to make her former employer pay for at least some of his misdeeds.

With any luck she would also be able to keep the poor bumbling Lilmit out of harm's way while she carried out her plan. Perhaps Kessel would be the safest place for him. For now. She gave him a brisk nod.

"No time to lose." She started to go, then turned back. "And Lilmit, whatever happens, don't let yourself be caught or hurt."

Lilmit nodded, misunderstanding her words. "Yes, I know how important the mission is. I won't let Czethros down. Just let me pack up and go now."

"Of course," Anja said. "I've got what I need. Thank you."

The man scuttled back into his craft and closed the door, sealing the hatch as if afraid she might follow him inside.

Anja looked around to make certain she wasn't being observed, and quickly took a dose of the precious spice.

More andris awaited her. She would go to Mon Calamari and find the stash. But now that she realized she'd been betrayed and duped, it had become vital for her to foil Czethros's plans. She would keep only a small amount and destroy the rest, denying him that profit. She would ruin this scheme, just as she had helped destroy Lilmit's Anobis-bound weapons.

"You called me your little velser, Czethros," Anja puffed in a low voice. "Now I'll show you just how unwise it is to get a velser angry!"

She clicked on her antique lightsaber, and the acid-yellow energy blade throbbed and sizzled. She ducked low, narrowing her huge eyes to see the workings of Lilmit's engines. She slashed quickly, severing two of the coolant lines in a sizzle of flashing sparks and smoking lubricants.

Lilmit might not notice immediately, but as he warmed up his engines in preparation for takeoff from Kessel, the engines would overheat and burn out. His craft would be stranded here, out of her way-and out of harm's way-for the duration of whatever was about to happen.

Before Czethros could set his plans in motion, Anja would be far away, putting her sabotage plans into effect on Mon Calamari.

At first, Czethros probably wouldn't even suspect who was doing this to him. But eventually he would learn.

Yes, eventually he would learn.

Iaina was surprised at how good it felt to be in the pilot's seat of the Rock Dragon once again, even if they weren't exactly going on a fun

trip. The pleasure of being surrounded by her best friends added fuel to the fire of her excitement as they set out on this new adventure.

"How's our navigator doing?" she asked, settling herself more comfortably in her seat, anxious to be off.

"Perfect," Zekk assured her. "Em Teedee's got the route and the timing to our first stop calculated down to the second."

"And naturally, I have been very thorough, as I always wn when safety is concerned," Em Teedee preened. "You've come to expect only the best of me, and I should hate for your trust to be misplaced."

Jaina chuckled.

"Just give us the count, Em Teedee," Jacen urged. "We've got to go find Anja."

The little droid made a sound as if clearing its throat. "Prepare for transition to hyperspace in five, four, three, two . . ."

"Punch it, Lowie," Jaina said. Her ginger-furred copilot grumbled with satisfaction as he switched on the hyperdrive engines. Glittering stellar pinpricks exploded into brilliant starlines around them.

Jaina couldn't keep the smile of exhilaration off her face. "Isn't this exciting?"

"I'd be a lot more excited if I didn't feel responsible for the situation Anja's in," said Jacen.

Jaina swiveled in the pilot's seat to give her twin brother a strange look. "Responsible? How? We didn't have anything to do with Anja getting addicted to spice."

"Well, if Dad hadn't killed her father, maybe she'd've had parents to teach her right from wrong. She might never have gotten hooked on andris in the first place."

Jaina bristled. "I don't believe Dad shot Gallandro in the back, no matter what Anja says. She can't even be sure what happened. It's not as if she was there."

"Neither were we," Jacen pointed out. He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "Anyhow, it's not just Anja I'm worried about. I mean, we're heading for Kessel. I've got kind of a bad feeling about this."

Lowie smoothed the fur at the back of his neck and gave a thoughtful rumble.

"Have you sensed something through the Force?" Tenel Ka asked.

Jaina glanced back at her brother. He shrugged. "Not exactly, but Dad and Chewie sure had a hard time of it when they crashed on Kessel years ago." Jaina turned and looked back out the front viewport. "It was hard for them to get away, but that was back when the spice mines were a slave pit. Dad reminds us whenever he gets a chance that Lando and Uncle Luke had to disguise themselves in order to sneak in and help him and Chewie escape." She bit her lower lip. "Now that Lando owns the mines, though, we shouldn't need to worry about anything."

"It's still not a place I'd like to go for a vacation," Zekk muttered.

"Hey, don't worry about it too much," Jacen said. "I told you, I didn't really sense anything through the Force. I'd just be extra careful when we land there."

Jaina nodded, but a frown of concern still wrinkled her brow.

"Such caution would be sensible," Tenel Ka agreed.

Once the Rock Dragon had landed near the spice mine's administrative offices on Kessel, a thin and dour-looking administrator arrived to greet them, introducing himself as Second Administrator Kymn.

"Your clearances are all in order," he said. "In fact, Master Skywalker himself sent a message asking for our cooperation in your mission-whatever it is. I'm to conduct you directly to the Chief Administrator's office. Nien Nunb is a very busy man."

The young Jedi Knights followed the sour-faced man. Jacen looked around at the bleak landscape and felt the barest hint of a tingle along the back of his neck, so faint he didn't think it could possibly be a warning through the Force. He scratched the back of his neck and tried to divert his thoughts.

"Well, I wouldn't exactly say we're on a mission," Jacen told the man.

"We're just looking for someone. We won't take up much of his time. " The dour administrator looked suspiciously at him but said nothing as they entered the main administrative buildings. When they were finally led into the Chief Administrator's underground office, mousy little Nien Nunb got up, came around his low desk, and greeted each of them effusively, although they did not actually know one another. Em Teedee promptly provided translation services, since Nien Nunb's Basic was difficult to understand.

"Master Nien Nunb would like to thank you all for taking the time for this visit. He deems it a great honor that the relatives of his old

friends Han Solo and Chewbacca of Kashyyyk have come to visit, and extends you any help he can offer."

"Thanks," Jacen said. "Maybe if we could look at-" Nien Nunb held up a hand for Jacen to pause, then turned to the sour-faced administrator and said a few short words in his own language. Em Teedee continued translating. "Master Nien Nunb says thank you, Second Administrator Kynm. He will not require your services any further." Kynm's lips pressed into a thin, tight line, but he made no argument as he withdrew. Nien Nunb strode to the doorway, shut the heavy door, and pressed his ear against it for a moment. Then, to all of their surprise, he locked the door.

The Sullustan Chief Administrator spoke rapidly and spread his hands to indicate a cluster of cushioned repulsor benches in a group on one side of his rock-walled office. "Master Nien Nunb urges you to be seated, and he is now anxious to learn the nature of the business that has brought you all here."

The five young Jedi explained about their search for their friend Anja and how they had hoped to find her here on Kessel. Nien Nunb put a hand to his chin and shook his broad head while he replied. In translation, Em Teedee explained that the Chief Administrator had not seen the Lightning Rod and, since he had known old Peckhum a good many years, he believed he would have recognized the ship had it landed

anywhere in the main docking domes. He had been very busy and very concerned, however, so he couldn't be sure.

"Is it possible that she might have managed to sneak past your security screens?" Jaina asked.

Jacen frowned at his sister for implying that Anja was trying to do something illegal on Kessel, but Nien Nunb was already answering.

"In the past, Master Nien Nunb would have assured you that very little could get past his security screens here on Kessel, and that he knew of all comings and goings on this planet," Em Teedee said. "But in recent months there have been some small ... occurrences that have led him to believe that perhaps all is not as it seems here. Therefore, he has offered to put the full resources of Kessel's computer records at your disposal. You may also physically search for Mistress Anja if you believe that will be of any use. He only urges you to be extremely cautious."

Tenel Ka, always slightly suspicious, sat up straighter. "May I inquire what the source of your concern is?"

The Chief Administrator opened his small mouth under drooping folds of skin, closed it, opened it, and closed it again, as if he could not decide exactly what to say. Finally the story spilled out, and he described the "accident" from which he had barely escaped with his

life, the blasts of carbonite and the suspected sabotage that had cost the life of Torvon, the predecessor to Second Administrator Kymn.

"Master Nien Nunb has ordered immediate inspections and has implemented new safety systems in order to foster the appearance that he has no suspicions of anything at all sinister." The young Jedi Knights looked at each other, trying to decide how dangerous the spice mines might really be.

Em Teedee went on. "He does not wish anyone to know that he now suspects treachery, and is no longer certain which of his employees he can trust. As of yet, however, he has no solid proof. Therefore, in return for his assistance in helping you with your search for Anja, he requests that you remain alert to any signs of illegal activity, danger, or deceit." Tenel Ka gave a curt nod, and her warrior braids swayed around her shoulders. From the corner of his eye, Jacen saw Zekk's hand go to the hilt of his newly constructed lightsaber.

Jacen nodded, acknowledging the gravity of the situation. "Sure, we can do that."

Their search for any sign of the Lightning Rod in Kessel's haphazard docking records was apparently fruitless. Lowie, Em Teedee, and Jaina had chased through even the most elusive of electronic notations, looking for aliases, last-minute substitutions on standard cargo runs,

even any vessel that might have requested sight-seeing privileges.

Anja and the Lightning Rod were nowhere to be found. Either she had failed to identify her ship, or she had never come there at all.

Meanwhile, Zekk pored over a hard-copy diagram of all usable docking facilities on the planet, both authorized and unauthorized. Tenel Ka, with Jacen beside her, studied a listing of docking authorizations in the past week. Many of the ships were unnamed or only partially listed.

Jacen was about to ask just what kind of clue she expected to find when the warrior girl nodded with satisfaction. "Ah."

"Aha?" Jacen asked, not knowing exactly what she had found.

Zekk hurried over from the computer console. "The Lightning Rod?

Or at least a lead we can follow?"

"No, but something unusual, nonetheless. A ship we have encountered before, on our way to Anja's world of Anobis."

Zekk squinted down at the shimmering electronic page. "The Rude Awakening?"

Jaina looked up from her computer console and scratched her head.

"Sounds familiar but I can't place it."

"Hey, wasn't that the name of the ship we bumped into not far from Ord Mantell, that gunrunner?" Jacen said.

Jaina frowned. "You mean Lilmit? But what would a gunrunner or even an ex-gunrunner be doing here on Kessel?"

With a thoughtful growl, Lowie began punching commands into the computer console. A moment later he gave a suspicious woof.

"Yes, indeed, Master Lowbacca. Very odd!" Em Teedee agreed.

"It seems that our smuggling friend has a valid authorization to pick up a shipment here on Kessel." Lowie added something with a sharp bark. "Why, yes. Given the circumstances, I daresay he should have docked in one of the standard commercial loading bays."

"But he's not," Jaina observed. "According to this code list, Lilmit's authorization came directly through Nien Nunb's late Second Administrator."

"So where is he docked then?" Zekk asked impatiently.

Jaina stood, leaned over Zekk's sheet of docking diagrams, and pointed.

"A cargo bay way over here, near all the new andris-mining and processing operations. Perfectly legal, of course. Just ... really out of the way."

"Sounds suspicious to me," Jacen admitted. "I don't think Anja actually knows this guy, but it seems like an awfully big coincidence that he just happened to be in the Anobis system when we were there, and now he just happens to be on Kessel."

Tenel Ka nodded. "Perhaps Nien Nunb's conspiracy theory has a more solid foundation than we realized."

"Hey, either way," Jacen said, "I'd say it's about time we paid our old smuggler friend Lilmit a visit."

Without saying a word as he came up from behind, Jacen put a hand on Lilmit's slumped shoulder. The onetime weapons smuggler, his head and neck buried in the engine compartment of the Rude Awakening, gave a start and banged his head.

"Anything we can help you with, Lilmit?" Jaina asked sweetly.

"What do you mean, sneaking up on a guy like that?" Lilmit muttered, backing up to extricate himself from the opening in the access panel.

Lowie gave a warning rumble. Lilmit whirled at the sound, stumbled backward a step, and hit his head again, this time on the outside of the engine compartment.

"No, no, it can't be!" the hapless man said, staring around at the semicircle of faces he had not seen since his disastrous weapons smuggling assignment to Anobis. "Not you, too! I'm ruined. Why can't everyone just leave me alone?" Lilmit squeezed his eyes shut.

"Please let me go. I was just about to leave."

Exchanging amused glances, Jaina and Lowie popped their heads inside the engine compartment to take a look. Jaina withdrew again and gave Lilmit a skeptical look. "From the looks of your engines, I don't think you're going anywhere soon."

Lowie's roar echoed inside the engine compartment. "Master Lowbacca confirms this diagnosis," Em Teedee translated.

Jaina placed her hands on her hips. "Even if Kessel does have all the replacement parts you need, it'll take a pair of skilled mechanics two days to get this mess fixed."

Lilmit blanched. "Days? I don't have days. I don't even have any credits. I need to leave before Kessel is-" He clamped his mouth shut.

His eyes darted from side to side as he fluttered his hands, spreading his webbed fingers. "I, uh, have to leave today. Is there any way I might persuade you to help me?"

"Why?" Jacen asked sourly. "So you can deliver some more weapons to desperate people in war zones?"

The former arms smuggler drew himself up haughtily. "I'm not in that line of business anymore." He blinked rapidly. "I- I'm completely legitimate now."

Tenel Ka raised an eyebrow. "Transporting spice, perhaps?"

Lilmit looked defensive. His nostrils flared. "Yes, a small, authorized shipment. And it's ... urgently needed."

:"Ah," Jacen said.

'Aha," Tenel Ka finished, nodding gravely.

'So you see," Lilmit said defensively, "you mustn't interfere with my

business anymore. I'm on an errand of ... mercy."

"Actually, we're not here to interfere with you at all," Zekk said, stepping forward a bit. "We're looking for some information about a friend of ours. You see, our friend ... borrowed my ship, the Lightning Rod." Jacen could sense Zekk's struggle to come up with an explanation that would not involve lying. His emerald-green eyes clouded for a moment, then cleared. "We had planned to rendezvous at the first stop, but our friend obviously got here first and didn't wait."

The story was true, Jacen thought admiringly. The young Jedi had hoped to meet Anja here. Anja herself had not known this, though, and so of course had not waited for them.

"I don't know. I haven't seen her," Lilmit protested. "Or that hunk of junk she was flying."

Her, Jacen thought, and that hunk of junk. So Anja and the Lightning Rod had been here. It was fortunate for the young Jedi Knights that Lilmit was such a poor liar. The fellow was obviously desperate to get away. There was no doubt left in Jacen's mind now that the former gunrunner had not only seen Anja, but had spoken to her as well. He could sense it strongly through the Force.

Jacen moved closer to Lilmit and spoke in a confidential tone.

"Look, we already know Anja was here in the Lightning Rod." He had only known this for a few seconds, but Lilmit didn't need to be told that. "She desperately needs our help with something she's trying to do," he continued in a low voice. At least, Jacen thought Anja was trying to give up using spice. From everything Lando had told them and from what Jacen had seen so far, Anja would need her friends' help to get through this.

"We were sent here to help her," Jaina added in a persuasive tone.

She sighed with feigned resignation. "But if you don't know anything, you don't. It's a shame, too. The Chief Administrator of this facility owes us a favor and probably would have been more than happy to give us a few rather hard-to-find engine parts that you could have used to fix your ship."

Jacen shrugged, turning to go. "Well, good luck anyway, Lilmit.

I'm sure you'll understand we're in kind of a hurry." He took a stab in the dark. "We'll just have to hope we link up with her at the next rendezvous before it's too late."

Lilmit swallowed convulsively but did not speak.

"You do understand, do you not, that we were sent to assist Anja Gallandro with the spice?" Tenel Ka said, leaning close to Lilmit, a meaningful look in her cool gray eyes.

Lilmit's eyes went wide as comprehension dawned. Jacen was pretty sure Lilmit didn't know they'd been sent by Master Skywalker, and therefore he had no idea what sense Lilmit might have made out of Tenel Ka's cryptic comment, but he was aware that the warrior girl had an intricate understanding of deceptions, plots, and conspiracies.

Somehow, Jacen thought in admiration, she had known just what to say.

Jaina added a last little push. "Well, there's no time to lose. We may as well get going and just hope we can rendezvous with her at Ord Mantell. . .

Jacen saw no answering flicker of confirmation in Lilmit's eyes.

"Or," Jaina went on, "Coruscant ... ?"

"No!" Lilmit practically yelped. "Calamari! She's gone to Mon Calamari." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "The Coruscant assignment is mine."

Jacen tried to clear his mind. They were getting answers, but he had

no idea what they were talking about! He hoped someone knew.

Lilmit seemed to warm up to them now. "I was testing you, of course.

For Anja. You can never be too sure about these things," he said, nodding several times. "Especially since you interfered with my shipment to Anobis. I got into a lot of trouble for that."

"We had our reasons," Zekk broke in, "but we'd like to make it up to you now."

Lilmit smiled. "You're sure you can get me the engine parts I need?"

Of course-nothing simpler," Jaina assured him smoothly.

Lowie rumbled a curt suggestion. "Master Lowbacca advises you to talk first," Em Teedee translated. "Then we will see to getting your parts." I "But you'll have to do the engine work yourself," Jaina warned.

"We've got our own mission."

Lilmit nodded. "Fair enough. Just as long as I get off of this rock

...

in time."

As a Jedi, Jaina felt bound by her promises, no matter whom she made them to, and so once they got back to Chief Administrator's cozy underground office, the first order of business was to make sure Lilmit got the promised engine parts. Once that was taken care of, Nien Nunb listened carefully to their description of the encounter with the former gunrunner.

The Sullustan touched a finger to his layered lips and murmured thoughtfully. Em Teedee was proud to offer an immediate translation.

"Master Nien Nunb believes that Lilmit's urgent desire to leave Kessel before some mysterious deadline indicates that some conspiracy is indeed afoot."

"Does seem to kind of support your theory that something's going on, Nien Nunb," Jaina agreed. "But we have no idea what. Lilmit's anxiety could be something perfectly simple."

"Or perhaps not," Tenel Ka said ominously. "We must be prepared. " Lowie roared, and the little droid responded rather than translating.

"Oh, indeed, Master Lowbacca, we mustn't leave Master Nien Nunb unprotected here in the spice mines. He can trust us, of course, but otherwise he has no idea who his friends or his enemies might be."

"All right. So we'll have to leave someone here while the rest of us go look for our friend," Jaina said. "Zekk?"

He gave a vigorous shake of his head. "Anja has the Lightning Rod.

I'm not going to stay here while the rest of you go after her."

Jaina frowned but had to admit the logic of this. She knew better than to get between a being and his ship. "Jacen, how about you?"

Her brother gave her an "Oh, come on!" type of look. "Jaina, if

Anja trusts anybody, it's me. I can't leave her out there to face her problems all alone."

Jaina's heart sank. She couldn't really ask Tenel Ka to stay here and let Zekk and Jacen go flying off in her ship, the Rock Dragon. She turned toward her last hope. "Lowie?" she said in a weak voice.

Lowie slapped a ginger-furred hand on her back and rumbled something consoling.

"An excellent idea, Mistress Jaina," Em Teedee said. "Master Lowbacca and I should be delighted to stay here with you and er, urn... protect the interests of Master Nien Nunb."

Jaina gave an unconvincing smile. "Right." She hadn't really wanted to stay here herself, but she couldn't argue the matter now.

Zekk put an arm around her shoulder, leaned close, and whispered, "Thanks for understanding."

Jaina snorted. Zekk kissed her playfully on the cheek and said, "By the way, is it my turn to rescue you this time, or the other way around?"

Jaina pretended to glare at him until he kissed her on the other cheek.

He grinned. "Don't worry. If you need me, I'll be back."

Jaina slid both arms around his waist to hug him tightly. She pressed her cheek against Zekk's, whispered, "May the Force be with you," and then let go.

With Zekk as pilot, Jacen as copilot, and Tenel Ka as navigator, the trio set off for Mon Calamari in the Rock Dragon. Jacen was interested to see that Zekk looked much more relaxed when he was piloting a starship. He could sense that his dark-haired friend used the Force unconsciously to help him maneuver, judge distances, and react to small

emergencies.

Jacen's spirits were rising too, not only because he enjoyed doing something useful during a flight, but also because Tenel Ka was there working beside him. And because they had found a solid lead as to Anja's whereabouts.

"Jacen, my friend, did you not say you knew someone who could assist us on Mon Calamari?" Tenel Ka said once they were well under way.

"Right. Her name is Ambassador Cilghal. Guess I ought to send her a message to see if she's there right now and if she has time to work with us."

"Cilghal?" Zekk said. "Didn't she used to be a student of Master Skywalker's, back in the early days of the academy?"

Tenel Ka looked interested. "She is a Jedi and an Ambassador?"

"Yeah. A Jedi healer and an Ambassador. The only one that I've heard of, so far," Jacen said. "But Cilghal is so quiet and gentle, you'd never know she has all that power." For the next few minutes he busied himself sending a communique that explained their current mission and requested Cilghal's help. Moments after the Rock Dragon dropped out of hyperspace into the Calamari system, they received the Ambassador's answer.

According to the message, it would be Ambassador Cilghal's greatest pleasure to assist them, and she had already begun making inquiries about recent arrivals on the planet to track down the Lightning Rod.

She had also set up the appropriate clearances and approvals for the Rock Dragon to have a berth in the V.I.P docking section near her offices on Foamwander City for as many days as the young Jedi Knights might need it.

Tenel Ka looked impressed. "It would seem that Ambassador Cilghal is most efficient."

A lopsided grin brightened Jacen's face. "Yeah, she thinks of everything."

"Good," Zekk said. "You think there's any chance she'll have the Lightning Rod waiting for us by the time we land?"

Jacen rolled his eyes. "Even I'm not that optimistic."

Tenel Ka reached over to pat Zekk on the shoulder with her single hand.

"It is important to keep one's hopes up."

In less than an hour, the Rock Dragon was docked in the V.I.P area of Cilghal's beautiful floating metropolis of Foamwander City. The Ambassador herself met them as they disembarked from the small Hapan passenger cruiser on one of the mist-dampened upper decks. Jacen made the introductions, and the female Calamarian greeted him and his friends with all the warmth of a proud aunt.

Cilghal was a gentle-voiced member of the fishlike race that also included the famous Admiral Ackbar. She wore watery blue robes that seemed to ripple and change color like the tides of the sea. Her blunt, salmon-colored head was streaked with a flush of pale green.

She raised a massive flipperlike hand in greeting.

With the formalities over, Cilghal led them to a beautiful private dining area. Handing each of them a datapad into which the week's arrivals from off-planet had been downloaded, she excused herself and ordered them all some food: salted fish, seaweed rolls, and something moist and delicious that they plucked out of scrolled shells.

Before they had finished their midday meal, the young Jedi Knights had tracked down not only the point and time of Anja's arrival, but also the city to which she had moved herself and the Lightning Rod the evening before. The location was far to the north, in the ice-choked waters of the arctic circle.

"Crystal Reef!" Cilghal said with surprise when they showed her their findings. "A vacation resort reserved only for the wealthy and elite.

If you wish to go there, I had better get to work immediately.

Everybody wants to go to Crystal Reef, and even the planet's Ambassador to the New Republic doesn't necessarily get preferential treatment. "

Three hours later, they found themselves at Foamwander City's water docks with all arrangements made for their trip north to Crystal Reef.

The three young Jedi walked behind Cilghal as she led them to her waveskimmer.

"Most efficient," Tenel Ka stated again with obvious approval, looking at the Ambassador and her sleek watercraft.

Cilghal crossed the gangplank, boarded the skimmer, and began a safety check. "How does she do it?" Jacen wondered aloud.

"Cilghal is amazing, all right," Zekk agreed, walking across the narrow plank and stepping down into the skimmer. Jacen went next.

The seas were choppy and the little boat dipped and swayed beneath him.

Far below, he could discern shadowy forms swimming just barely out of sight. He turned to offer a hand to help Tenel Ka across. But with a mischievous glint in her eye, Tenel Ka ignored his hand, ignored the plank and the railing. In a single bound, she jumped aboard.

Just another day at the spice mines of Kessel.

The routine went as usual: transports came in, packages were marked, cargo was unloaded and shipped off under carefully observed transport restrictions. Nien Nunb had established rigid protocols and accounting methods to be sure that all spice orders were watched and sold to the properly authorized customers. Nothing could ever be perfect, but he knew the setup was as efficient as that of any other business in the sector.

The small Sullustan sat in his deep control chamber, overseeing the daily business of his spice mines. He was surrounded by several important business associates and administrators, as well as his hired mercenary guards. So far he had managed to keep from panicking about the attempt on his life, and it made him confident to know that Han Solo's children and their Jedi friends were investigating the "accident."

But how many henchmen did Torvon have hidden here in the mines?

And who did they really work for?

In fact, Jaina, Lowbacca, and their translating droid were even now out scouting for evidence of untoward activities and trying to find clues as to what was really going on. Nien Nunb had had to trade a few engine parts for the news that something was going to happen here on Kessel, but it was a small price to pay for the knowledge that he did, indeed, need to stay alert.

His new right-hand man, Second Administrator Kymn, moved to ward the transport control deck. The screen showed a string of lights that indicated all approaching craft, all scheduled arrivals, and all major navigational hazards from the debris of Kessel's exploded garrison moon.

"Administrator Nunb, we have a large cargo transport arriving from Ord Mantell. Exactly on schedule, sir," Kymn said.

The mousy Chief Administrator blinked his huge watery eyes and leaned closer to the display. Nien Nunb could not recall any expected arrival of such an enormous cargo ship. He jabbered quickly, since Second Administrator Kymn understood the Sullustan's language.

"Oh, yes, Administrator Nunb. This was set up weeks ago," Kymn answered. "That transport is carrying the new office furniture, as well as food supplies, life-support recharge packs, and atmosphere enrichment generators. Don't you remember signing the requisitions?"

Nien Nunb still had no recollection of the ship's impending arrival, but he squinted at the screen again and saw that everything seemed to be in order. In fact, the craft had already descended through Kessel's wispy atmosphere and was even now approaching the opening doors of the central cargo bay.

Nien Nunb blinked in surprise. Normally, such a transport would be routed to the supply annex.

Second Administrator Kymn pointed to a list of heavy items on the cargo manifest. "I felt it would be more efficient to bring him into the main loading bay where we have our best equipment to handle large cargo."

The Sullustan mumbled his agreement, though a quiet uneasiness had begun to work in his abdomen. His instincts urged him to crawl into a dark tunnel and hide where he knew he would be safe.

Kymn touched a communicator stud in his ear, listened for a moment, and then said, "Acknowledged." He turned to Nien Nunb with a smile. "The captain requests that you come to greet him personally."

He's something of an amateur historian of the Rebellion against the Empire, and he would be honored to meet you and get your autograph."

The Sullustan beamed and stood up, chattering with surprise.

"Yes, I'm certain of it. He wants to shake the hand of the man who flew copilot with Lando Calrissian at the destruction of the second Death Star." The Chief Administrator bumbled with pleasure, but insisted that they bring guards along, just in case. Kymn agreed and pointed to three of the guards in the control room, naming them specifically. "Come with us."

Together, they all marched down to the main cargo bay. They put on breathing masks before going into the docking area, which was now open to the thin, cold air of Kessel so that the cargo ship could enter.

Nien Nunb stood beside his secondary administrator. The guards flanked him on either side, while another hovered close in the rear.

The cargo ship landed. Its markings were from a private Ord Mantell trading company. Nien Nunb thought the spice mines had dealt with that trading firm before, but couldn't be sure. This bothered him, because normally his memory for that sort of detail was quite reliable.

Perhaps his anxiety from the assassination attempt had disturbed him more than he'd suspected.

The exit hatch on the cargo ship hissed open, and the captain swung out. He had tousled blond hair, a freckled face, and bright blue eyes that fixed instantly on the Sullustan manager. When the captain smiled, his teeth flashed so white it looked like starfire. "Nien Nunb! Boy, am I glad to meet you!"

The Sullustan stepped forward on his small feet, pleased at such recognition. The grinning blond captain pumped his small, rodentlike hand and then turned back to his cargo ship. "I knew I was coming to your place, Chief Administrator Nunb, sir, so I wanted to bring a special surprise. I hope you don't mind. Here, follow me so you can watch me open up my cargo doors. You're not going to believe this."

The captain worked the controls to release the large doors covering the craft's cargo bay. Second Administrator Kymn stepped close to Nien Nunb, as if eager to observe his surprise. The three handpicked guards they had brought along stationed themselves at strategic points in the bay.

When the cargo ship's doors cracked open, Nien Nunb saw movement.

Startled, he took half a step back. A split second later, armed mercenary fighters boiled out of the cargo ship, shouting, weapons

drawn.

A nearby guard planted his blaster rifle against the Chief Administrator's back.

Feeling the cold muzzle pressing between his shoulder blades, the Sullustan squawked and raised his hands. More mercenaries charged down the ship's ramp, leaping into the cargo chamber and firing their weapons into the air. Within an instant they had created massive confusion and havoc.

Second Administrator Kymn drew his own weapon, a holdout blaster, and turned to fire a shot at one of the other guards who stood over by the communications array. The surprised man flew backward into the wall.

The remaining two guards who had come from the command control center also opened fire. Nien Nunb thought for a moment they might defend him and repel the attackers. But instead the guards-his own guards!-joined the newcomers, adding their strength to this surprising coup in the spice mines of Kessel.

Gunfire ricocheted off the walls, rattling the insulation plates. The mousy Sullustan tried to duck out of the way. He wondered how long this turmoil would go on. As he blinked and looked around, he saw that the brilliant smile on the blond pilot's face now held a wicked edge.

Nien Nunb had been deceived-completely deceived.

He had no choice but to guffender.

Continuing their investigation through the winding tunnels, Jaina and Lowie trudged after the miniaturized translating droid as he floated along following a map of the mine catacombs he had downloaded earlier.

"I've got a strong feeling that something's gone wrong," Jaina said.

"But we haven't found a thing yet."

Lowie growled his agreement, and they used their Jedi senses in an attempt to pinpoint where the crisis would occur. They emerged at the edge of a shaft that opened on the upper wall of the central control and cargo bay-just as blaster fire erupted ahead of them.

"Oh, my!" Em Teedee said. "Take cover quickly! What if a blaster bolt ricochets up here? We're doomed!"

"Jedi Knights don't hide in a crisis," Jaina said. Lowie growled and reached for his lightsaber, ready to push forward, but Jaina held him back. "On the other hand, looks like an entire military force down there. We're heavily outgunned. Wouldn't do any good to jump into

that mess without a plan. We'd be captured or killed in seconds."

Lowie groaned his acquiescence.

"You show admirable restraint, Mistress Jaina," Em Teedee said.

They looked down and watched helplessly. Within minutes, the mercenary soldiers had subdued all resistance with as little bloodshed as possible.

"Put the element of surprise to good use, didn't they? A complete takeover." Jaina narrowed her eyes and glared down at the turncoat guards and Second Administrator Kymn, knowing that this treachery must have been planned for some time. She also recalled the members of the Wing Guard on Cloud City, who had turned traitor and sold out to Black Sun. Something was definitely going on at the fringes of the New Republic-something big.

Kymn ran to the intercom on the wall, pressed the transmit button, and shouted, "Signal Alpha! Signal Alpha!" Then he went back to take his position, proudly holding his blaster pistol.

"I do believe that must be some sort of code," Em Teedee said.

Lowie grumbled for the little droid to be quiet so as not to give away

their position.

Second Administrator Kymn, wearing a superior smile now, spoke quickly to the Chief Administrator. "Our allies are in place at every important station on Kessel. We have just finished taking over all the control points. I hope our people were able to assert themselves without too many deaths. The important thing is that they're well armed and prepared to do what's necessary. Don't doubt it."

Fresh soldiers continued to file out of the large cargo ship.

"It's an entire occupation force," Jaina whispered.

The invaders brought out heavy equipment, weapons, and supplies.

Forming rows, the mercenary troops looked on attentively as a tall shadow moved inside the cargo hold. Jaina gasped with recognition as the towering man stepped into the light. Sickly pale skin contrasted with close-cropped moss-green hair. A thin metallic visor sported a dark red cyber-eye that glinted, shifting constantly from one side to the other.

"Lord Czethros!" Administrator Kymn said. "Welcome to the spice mines of Kessel. Our takeover is complete. This facility is now yours. "

Czethros strode down, square-shouldered and proud, as if there had never been any question of ownership in his mind. "Excellent job," he

said. "Kessel will become my new base of operations. From here we will coordinate our lightning strikes-multiple covert attacks just like this one, only on a much larger scale. I'm glad our plan here operated so efficiently. A good sign."

He smiled, and his mercenaries beamed at the praise. Jaina knew that Czethros was not a man to give compliments easily.

"In a similar manner, all of our infiltrators in key positions in important systems will be able to strike as soon as we transmit the signal for our coordinated takeovers. The attacks will be simultaneous. Within days we will bring the New Republic to its knees.

Black Sun will prevail! " He raised a fist in the air, and the other mercenaries shouted in unison, "Black Sun!"

"Dear me! Whatever are we going to do?" Em Teedee said as Jaina and Lowie backed deeper into the shadows of the tunnel.

"Well, there's one good thing about all of this so far," Jaina said, her face grim and determined. "We're Jedi Knights-and Czethros doesn't know that we're here."

Piloted by Cilghal, the waveskimmer roared across the choppy seas

toward the polar oceans of Mon Calamari. The sky was steely gray, the water cold. Mountainous icebergs floated in the distance like broken white teeth jutting up from the surface of the waves. The air felt so frigid that it seemed it might break if they tore through it too quickly.

"There, those sparkling colors," Jacen said, pointing. "Is that Crystal Reef?"

Cilghal nodded. "Crystal Reef is one of the most popular casinoresorts on all of Mon Calamari."

Protruding from the waves and surrounded by an archipelago of icebergs was an artificial island, a glittering mound of lights and metal that drifted about on the frigid currents. The Crystal Reef casino-resort was incredibly exclusive, isolated, a place for the wealthiest members of any species to go and have fun.

Zekk shivered, even wrapped in his warm cloak. "Why would anyone want to come up here? It's too cold to relax."

Tenel Ka, clad only in her lizard-hide armor, seemed unaffected by the drop in temperature or the brisk salty spray that feathered up from the racing waveskimmer.

"Wait until you see Crystal Reef from the inside," Cilghal said, her

voice soft, the words rich. "If I weren't an ambassador to my people, we would have had to wait a month simply to get docking privileges. I ... pulled a great many strings."

"Then how did Anja Gallandro manage to get here?" Tenel Ka said.

Jacen raised his eyebrows and looked over at her. "You should know by now not to underestimate Anja when she's determined to do something."

Cilghal brought the waveskimmer into a crowded V.I.P docking area that looked like a series of metal-ceilinged caverns at the floating island's water level. Expertly, she wove her way between other bobbing vessels-many of them jewel-spangled or gaudily painted-and nudged the skimmer into place. Jacen, Tenel Ka, and Zekk scrambled out onto the well-lighted dock, while the Calamarian ambassador filled out the proper forms and punched in her access codes.

Jacen gazed upward, lifting his chin so he could see the pearly metallic ceiling, the curved girders that supported the casino-resort's organic, flow-form architecture. The style reminded him of the strange coral reef design he'd seen the Mon Calamarians use in the designs of their world's impressive star cruisers.

A surprising variety of beings bustled about, many of them obviously tourists, others uniformed employees of the Crystal Reef resort.

Jacen noticed Mon Calamarians, tenacled Quarren, Bith musicians, walrus-faced Aqualish, homed Devaronians, and ten other races of sentient creatures he could identify, as well as two dozen more he, could not.

Layered musical tones filled the air like scents, ranging from rumbling subsonic pulses, through music discernible by human ears, up into high-pitched frequencies that he could detect only as a faint vibration in his teeth.

"Crystal Reef is a large place in which to find a single person," Tenel Ka said.

Cilghal spoke in her soothing voice. "Fortunately, the resort has no choice but to allow me access to its records."

"Then we should be able to track Anja through the resort's own computer systems," Zekk said, in a determined tone. "She doesn't seem to be trying as hard to cover her tracks here. We'll find her-and the Lightning Rod, I hope. I miss my ship."

Jacen continued to defend her. "I don't think she's necessarily been hiding from us. Anja obviously needs to do something quickly, and is trying to do it before anyone gets in the way."

" She still stole my ship..... Zekk grumbled. "And she might have guessed we'd come after her."

"We'll ask her when we find her," Cilghal said and led them up into the main levels of the resort. After consulting some maps on the walls, the Mon Calamarian ambassador asked for guidance from uniformed attendants. Even she had not been to this place before. The courteous and helpful attendants answered every question.

On different levels in the floating city, temperatures and atmospheric compositions varied from cold and clammy to hot and dry environments.

In some, Jacen could smell acrid sulfurous gases; in others the air seemed so fresh and pristine he wanted to take huge gulps of it and wished he could save some for later.

The support columns in the vaulted rooms were hollow water-filled cylinders made of transparisteel. Seaweeds, water flowers, and brightly colored fishes drifted from level to level through the connecting tubes.

Finally, after ascending several ramps and sliding stairs, they reached the upper decks of Crystal Reef, high above the glittering, icechoked water. Out in the frigid air, Jacen watched cold puffs of fog rise up in front of his face each time he exhaled. Chattering Bothans played a

game by sliding colorful tiles across a frost-slick surface.

Steaming hot tubs bubbled at the center of the deck, their warm vapors rising a few meters before condensing into icicles on the deck railings and nearby furniture. Inside the tubs lizardlike aliens basked in the incredible liquid heat. Jacen could feel the increased temperature hovering over them like a steamy atmosphere dome.

Meanwhile, Dralls frolicked in the water of the polar ocean below, their dark, short fur protecting them from the freezing temperatures.

He watched them splash and play, having the time of their lives in the icy waves.

"Do you think Anja would be on one of the casino decks?" Zekk asked.

Tenel Ka frowned. "We can rule out no possibility."

Jacen shook his head. He looked behind him at the tall white towers glistening like spikes above the floating city. All legal forms of gambling were practiced on Crystal Reef—from races to simple games to major sabace tournaments. Jacen wanted none of that, and he had to believe that Anja Gallandro didn't either.

"I doubt gambling has anything to do with w'ly Anja came here.

If she wanted to gamble, she could have done plenty on Cloud City but she didn't show any interest then. No, she came to Mon Calamari for some other reason after leaving Kessel. Maybe she was looking for someone she knows. In any case, we'll just have to find out what she really had in mind."

"You forget, Jacen, my friend," Tenel Ka said, "if she is connected with Black Sun, they would wish to control all the gambling here.

Therefore, her contacts may be on the gambling levels. This is a fact."

Jacen had to concede the point, but it still didn't sound right to him.

Finally, Cilghal found an information kiosk studded with computers and keyboards fitted for various types of tentacles, claws, and manipulative digits. She spoke quickly but politely to the data-hunter at the kiosk, a small-boned creature with ten articulated arms.

Cilghal gave her diplomatic credentials and described the person they were seeking.

The data-hunter's smooth, toothless mouth smiled politely. Its numerous arms and hands moved in a blur, typing in requests, searching

records, hunting through databases. "Ah, what excellent luck, Ambassador. Anja Gallandro should be easy to locate in our beautiful city," the data-hunter said. "The young lady has not yet visited any of our casinos or gaming establishments, though with your good luck, Ambassador, maybe you should."

Jacen tried unsuccessfully to suppress a chuckle at this blatant sales pitch. When Cilghal did not answer, the data-hunter quickly continued.

"In fact, your friend has run up only a minimal bill during her stay here. Perhaps she is on the budget plan?"

"That is a strong possibility," Tenel Ka confirmed.

"Wouldn't surprise me a bit" Zekk muttered.

Impatient to get going, Jacen leaned forward. "So where is she now?"

"Ah." The data-hunter looked down at the screen, though Jacen could see only a blur of symbols flashing by. "At this moment, Anja Gallandro is visiting in our popular vehicle-rental docks attempting to procure a highly enjoyable underwater mode of transportation. I see ...

she has been there for some time already. I believe she is engaged in

an energetic discussion with our fine entertainment representative.

"Unfortunately, your friend has no reservation or established credit, and we have quite a long and enthusiastic waiting list. Our state-of-the-art minisubmersibles are one of the most sought-after forms of entertainment here on beautiful Crystal Reef. I could book one for you, if you are interested, Ambassador. We have a spectacular brochure " The data-hunter reached out an articulated hand to offer them a packet of colorful images.

But Cilghal turned away with a polite smile. "Thank you. You've been most helpful." Giving a friendly wave, she ushered her young Jedi friends toward a lift platform behind the information booth. The datahunter raised all ten arms in a shrug of dismay and waited for another customer from whom it could earn a commission.

They descended again to water level, where durasteel arches opened out onto the cold oceans, letting some of the waves drift in, lapping against the supports. The structure of the Crystal Reef casino-resort muffled the water's extreme choppiness.

A slow moving, treelike Yarin stood at the water's edge with its root-feet dangling into the water. The Yarin blocked access to all the rows of parked watercraft and minisubs. Anja stood there arguing with him, looking frustrated and weary, as if she'd been through the same

phrases time and again. Her body seemed to tremble, but whether it was from tension or fatigue or something else, Jacen couldn't tell. A line of customers waited behind her, glowering.

Jacen saw her and ran forward, accompanied by Zekk. "Anja! Hey, am I glad to see you!"

"You weren't too easy to find," Zekk added.

The young woman whirled and snatched the lightsaber handle from her waist. Her huge eyes opened wide at seeing the young Jedi Knights.

Her face flushed, and her hand shook slightly as she released her grip on the lightsaber, but in a moment she recovered her arrogant demeanor.

She tossed her head so that her long flowing hair drifted back behind her shoulders. "Good. I'm glad you're here. Will you tell this ...

this tree stump here, who seems to have wood for brains, that I need to get a submersible, and I need it now?"

"Perhaps I could be of assistance," Cilghal said, gliding forward in her rippling blue robes, "if you would explain to us why you need it.

But not otherwise."

Anja crossed her arms over her chest, flashing her dark tattoo. "And who are you? Another one of these Mon Calamarian casino employees trying to push me around?"

"I am Cilghal," she said, nodding patiently and rolling her round brown eyes. "I am a Jedi Knight, and the ambassador for this planet."

"Oh," Anja said, somewhat flustered. "I ... I'm pleased to meet you."

"What purpose will a submersible craft serve?" Tenel Ka asked.

"We have already found you here. Do you need to escape again?"

"And where's my ship?" Zekk asked pointedly. "You'd better have taken care of the Lightning Rod."

"Not a scratch," Anja said. "And I would have returned it, if you'd given me time. I just ... needed to get some transportation in a hurry."

"I'm listening," Zekk said, still skeptical. "But you're not explaining very much."

"Why should I have to explain everything to you?" Anja said, her voice uncharacteristically shaky. "I've got my own problems."

"You stole my ship, for one thing," Zekk retorted. "I'd say that deserves some explanation."

"Hey, if you want our help," Jacen said, trying to calm them both down, "maybe a few answers would make things easier. Come on, give us a break, Ania. We're your friends."

The young woman sighed, then stalked away from the tree-like

Yarin, who seemed entirely unfazed by the confrontation. The other customers came forward, relieved to have their turn at last.

A frown wrinkling her brow, Anja sat down on a damp bench and put her chin in her hands. "This is humiliating." Tears welled in her enormous eyes, but she didn't let them fall. "I found out that I've been a fool." Jacen blinked in surprise to hear such an unexpected admission from the disturbed young woman. "Your friend Lando Calrissian was right: I ... I'm addicted to spice.

"I told you I could quit whenever I chose to. I believed it myself.

Then I tried to quit. That was when I learned I'd only been fooling myself. I went to Kessel to get another dose, and it was there that I

discovered the extent of my foolishness. I've been betrayed."

"Not by us," Jacen assured her, an anxious expression on his face.

"No," Anja said in a heavy voice.

"Who do you know on Kessel?" Zekk asked. "And why did you go there in the first place?"

"Black Sun has been controlling me," she said with a bitter laugh.

"And I didn't even know it. Czethros acted as if he was my friend. He helped me when I needed it. He gave me food and supplies and training when I was just a desperate street kid. He gave me all the andris spice I wanted. I wouldn't have had a career piloting small ships without him."

"But ... Czethros?" Jacen said, aghast. "He's a criminal, a murderer-" "Czethros is an evil man," Tenel Ka said. "He is in hiding and the entire New Republic is searching for him."

"I'm out to get even with him, too," Anja said. "He lied to me.

He said he had my best interests at heart. I trusted him, but now I know that behind my back he was selling those terrible weapons to

perpetuate the civil war on Anobis. He's the one responsible for so many years of hopelessness, so much suffering, so much death. He used me. And I allowed it to happen.....

She shuddered, then looked up at Jacen, Zekk, and Tenel Ka. Her face grew ruddy with anger and embarrassment. "But not anymore.

Czethros is involved in spice smuggling, you know. He also controls the gambling in hot spots throughout the galaxy, and he's engineering a major takeover. He's got operatives-traitors-in positions of importance everywhere. There's no way the New Republic can stop him."

She flashed a humorless smile. "But I know a way to hurt him."

She looked back toward the submersibles. "He has a large stash of andris spice here, under the Calamarian ice caps."

"Makes sense," Zekk said. "That would keep the andris cold, and intensify its effects."

"It's been delivered from Kessel in small shipments and stored there.

Black Sun dealers will start distributing it to some of the highrolling gambler clientele here soon ... unless I can destroy it first."

Tenel Ka frowned skeptically. "If you are addicted to spice, why should you be eager to destroy it?"

"Because it'll hurt Czethros."

"And you're sure you won't just save a little for yourself?" Zekk challenged.

"You can come with me if you want," Anja said defiantly. "In fact, I could use your help to get past that stupid tree-man. I've got to rent a minisub. We can go together, find the stash, and destroy it. I guarantee that'll deflate some of Czethros's plans."

"But why do we not take the spice back to doctors and patients who need it?" Tenel Ka asked.

"Because some of Czethros's men may already be on their way to stop me.

If we don't destroy that spice, I have no doubt Czethros will manage to put his hands on it again before we ever have a chance to get it safely away from Mon Calwnari."

Jacen looked at Zekk and Tenel Ka. "It would be a pretty safe way to strike a blow against him-and with all those credits lost, it would

really hurt." He glanced back at Anja. "Was Czethros behind the troubles we had on Cloud City?"

She hung her head. "Yes ... and I didn't do a thing to stop him.

At the time, I still wouldn't let myself trust you. Even so, I had no idea he would try to have you murdered. Please believe me."

"Sure, but why didn't you trust us? We've tried to be friends to you in every way," Jacen said, still surprised.

"Yes, but you're also the son of Han Solo. I was hoping that you might still prove yourself to be as cowardly and untrustworthy as your father." Anja's eyes did not meet his. Despite the cold, perspiration ran in rivulets down her face and neck. Her hands shook.

Jacen drew a deep breath to calm himself. So, Anja still blamed Han Solo for the death of her father, though Han denied the situation vehemently, insisting that she didn't have the correct story. But now that she had soured on Czethros, Jacen mused, perhaps she would listen to an explanation of events different from the one told by the man who had betrayed her.

Cilghal stood up. Her watery green-blue robes flowed around her.

"I wish to rid my world of this illegal spice that you say is stored

under the ice caps. We will go with you, Anja Gallandro, and help you destroy it. If you are telling us the truth, we will assist you in every way."

"If you are telling us the truth," Tenel Ka added.

"I'm not a liar," Anja said. Her entire body trembled.

"Well, you didn't exactly tell us the truth about yourself and who you worked for," Zekk pointed out. "And you did steal my ship."

Tenel Ka arched an eyebrow at Anja. "You also said you were not addicted to spice. This was not a fact."

"And how did you get the Lightning Rod on and off Kessel without any entry in the records-if you didn't lie to someone?" Jacen challenged.

Anja flushed a deep crimson. "That was different." All business now, she stood up, brushing everyone's comments aside. "Okay, I lied.

But that was before. Things have changed, and I'm not lying to you now. I want to destroy that spice. Are you going to help me or not?"

They all nodded.

"Good," Ania said. "I only wish I could be there when Czethros finds out what we've done."

The cold, winding tunnels of the spice mines were almost completely devoid of light. Because glitterstim-the most common form of spice found on Kessel-was mined in total darkness, glowpanels were rarely used down here, and then only in areas where no mining was performed.

Jaina shivered uncontrollably as she, Lowbacca, and Em Teedee made their way cautiously through the shafts, careful to avoid any contact with Czethros's henchmen.

Lowie's thick ginger fur provided ample protection against the cold, but Jaina's comfortable brown flightsuit warmed her only a little.

Lowie was also better equipped to see in the darkness, but since no light whatsoever was allowed to filter down into the tunnels, it was difficult for either of them to discern what lay ahead.

At Lowie's suggestion, Em Teedee brightened his optical sensors just enough to allow the two Jedi to see a meter in front of them. They did not want to attract the attention of anyone who might turn them over to Czethros. With Lowie's permission, Jaina walked a step behind, her numb fingers threaded into the fur on his back for warmth. The

processed air in the tunnels chilled her throat and lungs with each breath.

When she exhaled, a white mist streamed from her nostrils, further obscuring her dim vision.

A part of Jaina wished that Zekk, Jacen, and Tenel Ka were here to help them fight against the hostile takeover of Kessel. On the other hand, Jaina and Lowie were Jedi Knights themselves. They were resourceful, and she had no doubt that the two of them could find a way to seriously disrupt the plans Czethros had made.

"Do you suppose we're anywhere close to that computer terminal we need?" Jaina asked through chattering teeth.

"Yes, indeed, Mistress Jaina," Em Teedee replied in a modulated whisper. "I daresay we are now less than point-three kilometers from one of the emergency administrative terminals."

Hope warmed Jaina, but only slightly. Lowie gave a questioning bark.

"Oh, yes. Quite certain," Em Teedee replied, swiveling on his imcrorepulsorjets to look back at Lowie. "You see, I took the liberty of downloading not only the diagrams of the docking facilities on Kessel, but also a topographical map of all the major mining areas,

along with a listing of landmarks and technical stations, before we left Master Nien Nunb's office."

: "You what?" Jaina said. Lowie gave a surprised woof 'Oh, but I assure you I had his complete authorization to-" "We believe you, Em Teedee," Jaina said, laughing out loud with relief. "Why didn't you tell us that before? We could have used a more detailed map."

"Well, you didn't inquire," Em Teedee said, continuing to lead the way with his dim illumination. "The subject simply never arose. I had no idea that information would be so useful. I certainly didn't anticipate an invasion force overthrowing the legal administrators and staging a complete takeover of the spice mines."

Jaina shivered. "Neither did I. I certainly didn't dress for it."

Lowie began walking faster; knowing that they were close to their goal seemed to give him renewed energy. Jaina forced herself into a trot to keep up with the lanky Wookiee. Through the Force and her contact with her friend, Jaina could sense that a plan was beginning to form in Lowie's mind. Her spirits lifted.

"Hey, Em Teedee?"

:. Yes, Mistress Jaina?"

"I'm glad you're on our team."

Lowie groaned as the terminal rejected his request for access to the secure systems on the administrative level for the third time. Jaina bit her lower lip and tried to apply some creative thinking.

"I sure wish we knew what Czethros was up to right now," she said.

Lowie shrugged and pounded a hairy fist against the terminal in frustration.

"Master Lowbacca, if I might be so bold ... ?" Em Teedee piped up.

"Perhaps my circuits can be applied to overcome some of Kessel's security routines?"

"It couldn't hurt," Jaina said.

Lowie popped open Em Teedee's casing, pulled out a few leads, and connected them to the terminal's input port. Em Teedee proceeded to "Hmmm" and "Aha" for a few minutes, then said, "Oh, yes! Most gratifying. Even better than I might have hoped."

A moment later, the image on the terminal screen split itself into five parts, with four small "windows" across the top and one large image

taking up the lower two-thirds of the screen. To both Jaina and Lowie's surprise, each of the smaller images began changing rapidly, showing a different scene: the main cargo bay, various mining tunnels, the packaging chamber and conveyor belts, assorted refresher units.

Suddenly Lowie howled in triumph.

"Go back, go back!" Jaina said. In front of them appeared the image of the silver-visored Czethros seated in Nien Nunb's own administrative offices. He was speaking to his henchmen, who were gathered around him.

"Can we get sound?" Jaina asked, her teeth chattering. Within seconds, the invasion leader's gruff voice came from the terminal speaker.

"Now that we've consolidated our position on Kessel, we need to reconfigure the main transmitter. When that is finished, we send our signal. And then nothing will be able to stop us. That signal will launch a thousand different takeovers in key industries and businesses across the galaxy. Everything perfectly timed. My army may not be large, but I have the right people in the right places. Once they take control, my network will be too powerful for even the New Republic to fight against.

"Only I could have brought this about." He smiled around at his

confederates. "And you, my trusted colleagues, will be there to see it all happen. I've planned everything down to the last second. Nothing begins until we send our signal, because any resistance to our plan at any of the key points in my network could bring everything crashing down around us."

His fiery cyber-eye glared around at his followers as he continued.

"And anyone responsible for the slightest hitch in my plan will pay with his life."

"Good work, Em Teedee." Jaina shivered as she grinned over at Lowie.

"Well, we know where he is now."

Lowie rumbled thoughtfully.

"No, Master Lowbacca," Em Teedee said in a tiny voice. "I'm afraid Master Nien Nunb did not grant me authorization to access any of the primary security systems." The translator droid gave a mechanical sigh. "Of twenty possible clearance levels, I'm afraid I've been granted only two. These levels are designated for infrastructure operations."

"And what does infrastructure operations include?" Jaina prompted.

The little droid made an embarrassed sound, as if he was clearing his throat. "The er, janitorial functions, it would seem."

Lowie's lips peeled back from his Wookiee fangs in a feral grin.

Jaina's eyebrows raised, and she looked at her friend. Her imagination sparked with quite a few interesting ideas. "I think we can work with that. Don't you?"

Lowie gave a gleeful bark and began issuing orders to Em Teedee at a rapid rate as he punched in commands at the terminal. "Ah, yes. I see." Em Teedee passed the commands on through the appropriate authorization filters. "Oh my, that would be most unpleasant."

Within minutes, an alarm shrieked through the administrative levels.

In the tiny image onscreen, fire-retardant systems sprang to life all around Czethros, spewing protective foam from hidden valves in the walls and ceilings. The bubbly mixture squirted across his visor and into his moss-green hair.

"Shut that thing off!" the tiny image of Czethros snapped.

Half a dozen foam-covered lackeys sprang to do his bidding. Jaina chuckled. It took several minutes for the confusion to die down and

the alarms to be turned off, but Jaina and Lowie were ready.

Under Jaina's direction, Em Teedee methodically accessed each of the refresher units-and reversed the sewage containment systems. Jaina and Lowie did not have to wait long for results. In less than two minutes, Second Administrator Kymn, covered in disgusting glop, came running into the office where Czethros and his people were still cleaning up the fire-retardant mess. His eyes looked slightly wild, as if something had just happened to him that lay outside the scope of his imagination.

"Sir, we have a problem," he announced. Around him, other henchmen's noses began wrinkling in distaste. Kymn lowered his voice, leaned toward Czethros, and began whispering, his arms gesticulating to emphasize his point. Czethros grabbed the five men closest to him, rattled off a string of orders, and propelled them bodily from the room along with Administrator Kymn.

Jaina and Lowie shook with laughter. At the moment, Jaina hardly noticed the chill.

By the time Kymn and two of Czethros's mercenaries entered the maintenance turbolift, Em Teedee was ready again. The turbolift moved just a few meters before Em Teedee froze it in place with an urgent clean-and-refurbish authorization code. Despite the gravity of their

situation, tears of mirth trickled from the corners of Jaina's eyes.

She and Lowie exchanged a happy hug.

"I think we've made a good start," Jaina said.

Lowie growled a sobering comment.

"You're right, of course," she agreed. "If we're going to stop this coup, we'll have to do everything in our power to bring Czethros down."

Zekk walked beside Ambassador Cilghal as she returned to the long line of vacationers hoping to rent oceangoing vehicles. The Calamarian Jedi did not push herself forward, but waited patiently until the Yarin had finished dealing with his current customer. When the transaction was complete, the Yarin gave Cilghal a small deferential bow.

"And how may I make your stay at Crystal Reef more enjoyable?" the treelike creature asked ponderously, reaching for Cilghal's flippered hand. The Jedi ambassador accepted the question graciously.

At the corner of his vision, Zekk saw Anja roll her eyes; she'd been through this tedious routine herself. With her free hand, Cilghal gestured to Jacen. "Please allow me to introduce Jacen Solo ... son of the New Republic Chief of State. I'm guiding him as a special favor to

his uncle ... Master Luke Skywalker." Zekk noticed an instant change of expression on the Yarin's woody face. "And these are his friends, Tenel Ka-princess of the Hapes system-as well as Anja and Zekk. They are all from the Jedi academy," Cilghal continued. "Naturally, I take my duties as special ambassador for Mon Calamari seriously, and I'm afraid my young friend here, Jacen Solo, has his heart set on showing his friends the beauties of the Calamarian oceans."

Zekk admired the older Jedi's melodious voice as she spoke soothingly, persuasively to the Yarin. "I'm sure you can understand how important this could be for the public image of Crystal Reef: Jedi extolling the virtues and beauties of our resorts, the gratitude of the Royal House of Hapes ... perhaps even a visit from Han Solo and Chief of State Leia Organa Solo herself."

As if blown by a light breeze, the Yarin began to sway back and forth to the singsong rhythm of Cilghal's words. "Hmmm. Ah yes, I see.

Unfortunately, I have no submersibles left for rent." At Cilghal's expression of disappointment, he hurried on. "But if you would allow me, Ambassador, being harbormaster at Crystal Reef does have its privileges. I have my own private submersible nearby. I use it mainly for fixing small underwater problems, and for a bit of pottering about, but I would be honored if you would consent to it. It may be a tight fit for five people, but I'm sure-" "Hey, that's great!" Jacen said.

"It'll do just fine."

"Why, thank you. We'd be delighted," Cilghal assured the tree creature.

The Yarin beamed at the small group. His kindly eyes lit on Anja.

"I'm sorry, young lady, that I almost disappointed you. You should have let me know you were in such distinguished company."

Zekk saw Anja blink, as if surprised that the Yarin now believed her to be in "distinguished company." Her cheeks reddened, as if it had not occurred to her until now that running around with Jedi Knights, royalty, ambassadors, and the children of war heroes and the Chief of State might actually impress some people.

"This way, this way," the Yarin said, motioning them toward his private dock. He gave Zekk a shrewd glance. "And you, young Jedi, have the look of a fine pilot about you, if I'm not mistaken. I believe I could entrust my minisubmersible to your capable hands." Zekk looked at the Yarin in surprise.

"Hey, I'm a pretty fine pilot myself," Anja objected as they reached the dock where the minisub was tethered.

"Zekk is an excellent choice," Tenel Ka interrupted. "I believe he is the finest pilot among us."

"Besides," Zekk muttered to Anja, "you're not going to pilot anything until I get my ship back." She clamped her lips shut and folded her arms across her chest. "I'm sure Cilghal will help me pilot the sub, since I'm in unfamiliar waters."

The treelike harbormaster opened the hatch with one branchy hand and helped the young Jedi climb down into the submersible. "And you, Ambassador," the Yarin said as he helped Cilghal down, "are probably most familiar with Calamarian oceangoing craft. I trust you will be able to handle any emergencies that might arise?"

Cilghal gave him a stately nod.

"We'll take good care of your little sub," Zekk assured him. "Does it have a name?"

The Yarin gave a wheeze that Zekk figured must have been a chuckle and said, "I call her the Elfa. Among my people, it is a word that means fish-so-small-that-it-is-not-worth-catching."

"We can't thank you enough, Harbormaster," Cilghal said. "We will take good care of your Elfa."

The ocean beneath the arctic ice was beautiful. The blue-green glow of water-filtered daylight transformed every creature, sea plant, or chunk of ice into a thing of magic. Particulates suspended in the water sparkled like gold dust. The Elfa was smaller by far than the Lightning Rod, and less maneuverable because it was in water, but Zekk enjoyed every moment of piloting it.

"The transponder signal's getting stronger," Anja announced in a ragged voice. "We're almost to the spice stash." Her breath seemed labored.

Zekk wondered if she had a fear of enclosed places and disliked the unusual feeling of being deep under water. Either that, he decided, or she was going through spice withdrawal again.

"Just let me know if I need to make any course adjustments," Zekk said.

Over the past two hours, Cilghal had shown him how to use most of the systems on the tiny submersible, and he now felt as comfortable with the Elfa as he had ever felt with any ship besides the Lightning Rod.

"Over there. Is that it?" Jacen asked, pointing.

"I believe so. You have excellent eyes," Tenel Ka said.

"Thanks. You have pretty nice eyes, too," Jacen teased.

"The signal's strong and clear," Anja said, ignoring the banter.

"Do you see it?"

"Got it," Zekk said, already making the course correction.

In less than five minutes he had maneuvered them into position beside the cache, which had been tucked away beneath blocks of freefloating arctic ice. The four separate containers were sealed, armored cases, quickly stashed there for safekeeping, anchored to the ice.

Anja crowded close to the windowport, looking over Zekk's shoulder to get a better view. Her face was flushed, her breathing ragged, her hair damp with perspiration.

:"Okay, now what?" Zekk asked.

"Now we destroy them, just as we all agreed," Anja said.

"Hey, I hate to mention this, but those containers look like they're pretty well armored. How do you expect to get rid of them?"

"I believe I can be of assistance there," Cilghal said. She set to work at the controls of the two grappling arms attached to the minisub, maneuvering until one of the sealed containers was in her grasp. Then she squeezed with the claw mechanism until one of the claws pierced the armor and the buoyant container began to fill with water.

"Should we just let it sink?" Zekk asked.

"No, that's not good enough!" Anja snapped. She calmed herself and lowered her voice. "Czethros's people would still be able to locate it by the transponder and retrieve the spice. This is valuable stuff, remember."

"In that case, perhaps this will work," Cilghal said, reaching out with the other claw-arm to grasp a second heavy cargo container. She swung them both outward and then back together again to smash them into each other. The already-punctured storage bin burst at the impact and a flood of tiny sealed ampoules cascaded from the container. Some of the vials shattered; others just drifted free and then slowly began to sink into the frigid depths of the ocean.

"Is this an acceptable solution?" Tenel Ka asked Anja.

Anja was silent for a full minute, just staring at the shimmering ampoules in the water around them and panting. Zekk wondered if she regretted her decision to destroy them, but a moment later Anja

answered.

She raised a triumphant fist. "Yesss!" She gave a weak laugh.

"Even if Czethros's men manage to find the transponder signal now, I'd like to see them all searching several square kilometers of ocean floor and trying to collect all of those tiny little ampoules-one by one."

Zekk gave a satisfied nod. "As Jaina would say, what are we waiting for? Let's smash the other ones."

Still leaning over his shoulder, Anja whispered, "Two down, two to go."

" While Zekk handled the minisub's piloting controls, Cilghal deftly maneuvered the pincer claws, grasping the final sealed container of andris spice with one of them. To Jacen's surprise, the Jedi ambassador stopped and blinked her huge fishy eyes. "Something is not right."

The submersible's lights seemed to have attracted something in the murky, ice-clogged water ... something large and dangerous and seeking prey.

"What's that?" Jacen leaned toward a thick transparisteel porthole.

"There's a shadow out there, something ... swimming." He let his eyes fall halfway closed, reached out with the Force. "Uh-oh."

As he stood, stretching his thoughts into the dark water, a giant yellow eye flashed in front of the window, its pupil as large as Jacen's head. His eyelids snapped up, and for a fraction of a second, he froze, pinned by its cold and angry gaze.

"Jacen, any friend, do you have a 'bad feeling' about this?" Tenel Ka asked.

He nodded. The creature swam forward. Its eye was followed by a mouth filled with huge fangs, each one seemingly large enough to crush an X-wing starlighter.

"Look out!" Jacen cried.

Zekk and the Calamarian ambassador grappled with the sub's controls.

The minisub rocked back and forth under the water as the startled sea beast moved closer to look at the curious thing.

A huge tentacle the size of a space-station docking tether whipped across their front field of view, slithering, probing.

Though the creature felt hungry to Jacen, it remained cautious as it approached its new victim. The minisub turned about, its propellers whirring in the water, pushing them ever so slowly toward safety.

The giant sea creature swam past again like an immense underwater ship, not attacking yet. Its scaly hide rippled as it cruised by. More tentacles streamed out in all directions.

Jacen gave a low whistle. "It's awfully big. Do you know what it is, Cilghal?"

The Mon Calamarian shook her large head. "There are many things deep in the oceans of my world that have never been named, or even seen, by living creatures." , "We might not qualify as living creatures for long, if that thing decides to go for us," Anja said.

The current from the beast's passage stiffed the waters, making the minisub buck and sway. Zekk grasped the controls more tightly. Jacen pressed his face against the cold porthole, observing the armored hide, the long neck, the huge head with its mouth that could swallow the largest of fish. And tentacles everywhere.

A thick, sinuous arm struck the side of the minisub. Not hard-just an exploratory tap-but it sent them careening end over end beneath the water. Bubbles burst out all around the submersible.

Cilghal wrestled with the controls. "Hang on," she said as Zekk tried to steady the craft in the midst of the foamy turmoil.

Anja was thrown backward into her seat.

Lights flickered and dimmed inside the cabin before the emergency generators kicked on, adding fresh illumination.

Zekk grunted as his head smacked against the wall. "Tell me this sub has some sort of defense system."

"Unfortunately, this is not a fact," Tenel Ka said. "And I doubt we are capable of outswimming that creature."

Jacen looked through the front windowports into the cold arctic sea.

He sensed that the giant shadowy hulk would turn and swim back, return for another pass-and that this time it would be less reticent to make a full-fledged assault. He reached out with his mind, trying to use the Force to find the massive creature's primitive mind. But the beast's attention was entirely absorbed by the new prey.

"That wasn't even an attack yet," Zekk said. "The thing was just checking us out." He rubbed the back of his neck, as if he tingled, and looked back at Jacen. "Next time it'll want a meal."

The minisub's stabbing lights spread out in white cones through the water. Bubbles still drifted up, shrouding them in a watery bead curtain.

Moments later the gigantic silhouette swam into the light, showing off its thick body core studded with long deadly tentacles, and its large ravenous mouth. The creature undulated toward them, thrashing through the water. The tiny underwater vehicle would never be able to travel that fast. They could not escape through sheer energy alone.

The creature's maw opened wide.

Cilghal added power to the hull attitude jets, tilting the craft at a steep angle to rise toward the jagged ceiling of ice under the polar cap.

The sub sputtered out of the way. Snapping with its tentacles, the monster pursued.

Despite Cilghal's attempts to control it during the violent evasive maneuvers, the small grappling claw that held the last andris container ripped loose. The second claw bent and jammed. The crate popped free, drifting ... slowly sinking.

"There goes the spice!" Anja said, and Jacen couldn't be sure if she was disappointed or just observing a fact.

Seeing the bright morsel fall away from the larger craft, the sea monster swerved and ducked toward it. Long tentacles reached out, grasped, and in a single swift movement the creature's fanged mouth came forward and chomped down on the container. Swordlike teeth tore through the outer coverings, freeing the spice ampoules.

Vials began to shatter. . . and the beast swallowed a thousand doses of andris. All at once.

Jacen stared as the monster gulped down an immeasurable quantity of the intense stimulant. "Uh-oh," he said, "now we're really in trouble. If you thought that monster was hyper before, wait until the andris kicks in." Below them, the creature thrashed about in growing agitation.

And then it turned its attention back to the minisub.

Under the humid, hazy sunlight of Yavin 4, a steady flow of Jedi Knights came and learned and became the hope of the galaxy. Nothing would stop them now.

Master Luke Skywalker considered his students over the years, remembering them all. Alone at first, he had been so tentative, so uncertain, as he tried to bring back the association of heroic fighters

who had performed so many legendary deeds in the days of the Old Republic.

But now the Jedi training center had taken on a life of its own. The new Jedi learned as much from each other, and from his former students, as they took from Luke's lectures and intensive training sessions.

Never again would the order of Jedi Knights be limited by the bottleneck of having only one teacher and a single student.

Luke's very first trainees, the batch of twelve he had taken and trained after his Jedi search, were full Jedi Knights. They traveled throughout the young New Republic fighting battles, helping to maintain planetary stability, and performing the various good works a Jedi was called upon to do. Some of those candidates had become legends in their own right, a new generation. Now, with the remarkable capabilities of Han and Leia's twins, as well as their young Jedi friends and their younger brother Anakin, Luke felt that the Force had truly been reborn.

The Jedi Knights were strong now. He did not believe they would ever fall again.

He wished Obi-Wan Kenobi could be here to see him now. The "old wizard" from the Jundland Wastes had changed his life more profoundly

than Luke could ever have imagined. Kenobi had turned a simple farm boy from a desert planet into a Jedi. And, in so doing, he had single-handedly set in motion the events that had brought down the

Empire, restored the Jedi Knights, and helped create the benevolent New Republic. Kenobi had died sacrificing himself on the Death Star before he could see any of his seeds bear fruit, but Luke would never forget him. The teachings of the old Jedi would always be a part of Luke's continuing work at the Jedi academy.

Students came and went here on Yavin 4. Luke's partner in teaching, Tionne, had been one of his first students. In order to keep from repeating the mistakes of the past, she made certain the candidates were well grounded in history. Tionne loved to tell tales of past Jedi. She shared her knowledge of the lore of those who fought for the light side of the Force in ancient times. Through her teachings, the legends survived and grew, fixed again in history-though the evil Emperor had tried to obliterate them from the memory of all living beings.

As Luke stood pondering, Artoo trundled up, bleeping a greeting and chittering a new assessment of supplies and needed equipment.

Luke rested a hand on the astromech droid's domed head.

"Relax, Artoo. I was just thinking about how things have changed."

He recalled his uncle Owen and aunt Beru, who had tried to shield him from all traumas his life would bring. Their attempts to corral him on a desert world and keep his dreams small had been unsuccessful. His aunt and uncle had wanted him to hide on Tatooine, to live the uneventful life of a quiet, simple moisture farmer. Uncle Owen had known Luke's heritage, who his father was, and what dark connections a Skywalker child might have. Despite the best of intentions, the overprotectiveness of Owen and Beru Lars had nearly cost Luke-and the galaxy-the ultimate freedom.

Visions of the last time he had been home as a boy filled his mind-the burned-out moisture farm, the blackened corpses of Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru, gunned down by stormtroopers in an act of terrorism.

He had no idea what horrors they had experienced in their last moments, whether his aunt and uncle had been tortured by the Imperials for information ... even though they'd had nothing to tell.

But the stormtroopers had killed them anyway.

He wished Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru could be here now to witness all he had accomplished. Luke Skywalker had established a firm place in history. But lasting victories often demanded harsh sacrifice.

Luke vowed that such violent repression would never happen again, not if he or his Jedi Knights could prevent it. There would be battles to fight, and there would be casualties. He didn't try to give his new trainees a false sense of reality. There were great costs associated with being a Jedi. They might be called on to suffer, to feel pain ...

or to die for a cause.

But Jedi did what they believed was right-not what was simple or safe.

They trusted the Force.

In front of the rebuilt temple on the training field, a dozen students sparred and clashed. Some practiced alone, using their minds to work with the Force. Others developed the fine points of teamwork. His students, all of them ... but they were also their own people. They would go through their own ordeals.

Despite the perils he knew some of his students would eventually face-and that the young Jedi Knights might be facing even now on their quest to find Anja out in the galaxy-Luke had no regrets. He had made difficult choices. He had done what he'd had to do. His students were doing the same.

And the Force was with them all.

Given the undersea monster's enormous body mass, the powerful spice worked more quickly than Zekk could possibly have imagined. He gripped the controls and tried to maneuver the minisub away with all possible speed, but they gained only a minimal distance-nowhere near enough.

After swallowing the prodigious amount of andris, the beast fl?tled briefly, then began darting from left to right, its tentacles thrashing, grabbing, jittering, as if from seizures and convulsions.

Jacen rubbed his temples, concentrating, then gave a sigh of exasperation. "There's no way I can get through to it now. It's got a storm going through its brain!"

Cilghal released the useless grasper controls of the sub's remaining mechanical claw and threw herself into helping Zekk. He pushed the minisub's engines beyond their maximum recommended levels, heading higher into the inverted canyons of iceberg roots, toward the blocky mass of the polar cap and away from the thrashing beast.

"Maybe he won't notice us," Zekk muttered.

"Yeah, and maybe Han Solo's on his way to rescue us at this very moment," Anja said with clear scorn. Her face was flushed, her

forehead sweating-but she seemed to be fighting internal battles beyond simple fear for their survival. "Face it, Zekk-we're in trouble."

The leviathan's flailings became even more frenzied. It spun about, tentacles waving like handfuls of bullwhips. Finally, it focused its energy on a single target: the minisub. The creature turned its long head on its sinuous neck, its glowing yellow eyes flaring with a brighter light as the monster dove in to attack.

Cilghal uttered a wordless sound as she jammed the throttles from the copilot's station. Zekk let her maneuver, since she was more familiar with oceangoing vessels. The sub's propellers and bubbles swirled behind its main body as they shot off through the frigid water.

The sea monster followed, reaching forward, stretching, trying to grasp. The tip of one tentacle brushed against the main propeller on the rear of the sub, which sheared it off. The creature drew back, but seconds later the maddened monster resumed the chase, frothing the water behind it. Its sharp silver-fanged jaws clocked together, as if prepared to cut through the metal hull.

With a rapid sideways motion, a tentacle slammed into the directional fin that guarded one engine. The inner compartment of the minisub rang like a heavy bell from the blow. The engines squealed and groaned, spilling smoke, but they continued to work-just barely.

Zekk and Cilghal took the sub higher, closer to the ice-locked surface.

Zekk's ears popped with the pressure difference.

Outside, drifting slabs of ice smashed against the hull with loud thunks and bangs that reverberated through the chamber. Cilghal swerved the minisub's rudder, and Zekk tilted the craft to avoid a knotted underwater cliff that dangled beneath a heavy iceberg.

By grasping the rough ice with its tentacles, the sea creature hauled itself forward. Closer and closer.

"Up there!" Zekk said, pointing to a fissure in the ice. "It's too small for the creature to follow us inside." Cilghal saw and nodded.

Anja frowned, covering her fear with her usual show of skepticism.

She seemed to be exceedingly tense and appeared to be shivering. "I doubt even the sub could get in there."

The creature lashed out with its sharp-ended tentacles and slapped the ice. Large blue-white chunks broke off and drifted around them, like boulders rising and falling in slow motion. The minisub ducked below a jagged ceiling of frozen ice and accelerated as the gap widened,

spewing bubbles. The sea creature charged after them, thrashing, groping with its tentacles. One of the long whiplike appendages finally fastened on to the rear of the sub, somehow gaining purchase with its suckers on the smooth hull.

Inside, Jacen was tossed into Anja. Her breathing rasped in his ears.

Tenel Ka was the only one who managed to keep her place. Zekk was thrown halfway from the pilot's seat to slam against the sub wall.

Cilghal gripped the controls and held herself erect.

"It's got us," Zekk cried, trying to regain his balance. His ears ringing, he pushed himself back into his seat. Cilghal throttled the engines down, let the minisub drift backward for a second, and then revved up the engines in a sudden burst to push them forward again.

Slowly, the slippery hull pulled free from the suction cups, leaving the monster's bruised and throbbing tentacle behind.

Bubbles sprayed in front of the windowports, and Cilghal could barely see to help Zekk navigate. Huge, jagged chunks of ice blocked their way. One smashed into the front of the sub, making a scar on the thick windowport and shearing off the minisub's remaining grappling arm.

Cilghal placed a flippered hand on Zekk's arm. He felt strength flow into his mind. Guided by the Force, Zekk twisted the rudder from left to right, and the sub looped around an obstacle, more because of the Force than from any spectacular piloting skill. The torn end of the ruined grappling arm sparked and sprayed, then went dead as Zekk disabled its power systems.

"You're sure there aren't any weapons on this thing?" Jacen called from the rear of the sub. "Anything at all?"

"It's a working craft, mainly for tourists or that Yarin's personal use," Cilghal answered. "I'm sure it was never meant to drive off an attack."

"There is the towing beam." Tenel Ka pointed out a small tractorbeam that could fasten onto an underwater object and drag it to the surface.

"Perhaps that could assist us."

"Hey!" Jacen said. "Good idea."

"Great," Anja said with a snort. "Am I the only sane person down here?"

Or does someone else agree that the last thing we want is to pull that monster closer to us!" Perspiration stood out on her upper lip.

"Not that-we can grab a big chunk of ice and pull it behind us.

Block the way," Zekk said, seeing Tenel Ka's idea.

Cilghal didn't argue, immediately running her webbed hands across the controls. A pulsing beam stabbed out from the rear of the sub and grasped a knob of ice, yanking the berg into the path behind them. The ice moved slowly through the thick, cold water-but it did move. The frozen wall drifted enough to cover their escape.

The creature rammed into it, wrapping tentacles around jagged bluewhite edges.

The moving iceberg pounded into others, slamming ice against rock-hard ice. Zekk moved the minisub up into the fissure between the broken chunks of the polar cap, rising higher. Cilghal continued to use what was left of the ice chunk as a shield. Shattered pieces of other floating mountains snapped off and drifted back into the channel through which they had just passed.

The sea monster suddenly found itself surrounded by a hail of floating boulders. Its tentacles reached out to knock the ice chunks aside as the beast struggled forward in pursuit of its prey. But the icebergs

ground together, sealing off access.

The discouraged monster battered its tentacles against the ice. At last, expelling a mouthful of bubbles and gnashing its long silvery teeth, the creature swam away, still writhing with energy. Jacen sensed the monster propelling itself into the dark depths of the polar ocean in search of easier prey. The overdose of spice would give it energy to hunt for a long, long time....

Zekk had difficulty maneuvering toward the surface. Ice walls closed around them, sealing off their retreat while blocking any forward motion. The sub couldn't even rise up to where the occupants could reach the cold air on the surface.

Jacen and Tenel Ka stared in the direction of the departed monster as more ice chunks lodged into place further sealing them off.

"The beast believes it has given us a mortal wound," Tenel Ka said.

"It has gone to hunt elsewhere."

"Practically speaking," Zekk said, "we do have a mortal wound.

Is it as bad as I think it is, Cilghal?"

The Calamarian ambassador examined the controls, worked them a bit, but the minisub made no headway. The engines rumbled and smoked. "Our vehicle is damaged," she said. "Our air is limited, and we find ourselves trapped in a maze of blue ice."

Zekk grunted in acknowledgment. He hadn't wanted to be right about the damage to the sub.

"At least we got away from that monster," Jacen said, always the optimist.

"Great," Ania answered in a shaky voice. She looked very much on edge, very distressed. "But have you noticed that we're stranded beneath the polar ice cap?"

]Huddled in the wall channel of a dormant atmosphere factory, Jaina and Lowie set about determining the best way to fight Black Sun's invasion force.

The rock walls all around them were cold, and the air was thin but the environment would be far worse if they traveled up the long rusted stairs to reach the open surface.

No matter how harsh the conditions they faced, though, Jaina knew they had to do something, anything to prevent Czethros from enacting his terrible schemes. The New Republic depended on them.

Lowie looked out of the tunnel entrance into the shadows of the broad pit that rose vertically toward the surface. In the past, the miners on Kessel had constructed gigantic factories to chemically release gases frozen in the rocks and spew them upward to thicken the atmosphere.

But such extravagant efforts had been only a temporary solution, and in recent years the small planet had rapidly reverted to its natural state of frigid cold with a rarefied atmosphere.

Next to the rock wall, the Wookiee took a deep breath. Fine threads of frost laced his ginger fur, and the lanky young Jedi looked miserable-but a fire of determination burned in his golden eyes. He growled.

Jania understood much of the Wookiee language, but Em Teedee translated anyway. "Master Lowbacca suggests that our primary mission should be to cause a serious malfunction to the sophisticated transmitter Czethros intends to use."

"Agreed," Jaina said, looking at Lowie. "If we get rid of that transmitter, Czethros can't send his signal. His coordinated plan fails."

"Yes, but Mistress Jaina," Em Teedee chimed in, "however are we to disable such a large piece of equipment?"

Jaina shrugged and then smiled at the shiny little translating droid.

"First thing is to find some sort of explosives.... Then we may just need you to sneak in there, Em Teedee."

The floating little droid's electronic squawk reverberated through the tunnels.

Each of the control rooms in the spice mine catacombs was sealed with a heavy door, code-locked and computer-controlled. Lowie used his programming expertise, with an occasional assist from the little droid, to crack the codes and force their way into one of the equipment lockers.

It wasn't difficult to find a supply of shaped explosives of the sort used for blasting mine tunnels. Kessel was, after all, an industrial excavation area. Lowie found small packaged cylinders marked with red HAZARD labels. He hefted them in his hands and looked over at Em Teedee's microrepulsorjets. He gave a growl of satisfaction.

"You can handle these, Em Teedee," Jaina said. "They don't weigh much."

"Oh, my!" the little droid replied. "But I've never carried explosives before."

"Not much different from a rock," Jaina said encouragingly, "except that these'll explode if you bump against anything."

"I appreciate your support, Mistress Jaina, but I find your optimism ... unsettling." She patted the floating silvery ovoid as it hovered in the air.

The tunnels were empty. The spice mine loading docks were shut down, denying access to any cargo ships, since Black Sun had taken over.

Czethros could not keep up this charade for long, but security threats against Kessel oftentimes required such random crackdowns, and the merchants waiting in orbit would just have to wait longer. No complaints or unusual-occurrence reports would be filed for at least another standard day.

Czethros would no doubt launch his widespread takeover before then.

Therefore, Jaina and her friends needed to complete their sabotage before that could happen.

Most of the dusty tunnels were silent and abandoned. The actual

numbers in the Black Sun occupation fleet were quite small, but they had placed armed guards in key positions. Nien Nunb and his loyal followers had been sealed in the slave barracks left over from the days when Kessel had been a prison facility. Many other workers, along with a few unfortunate cargo ship pilots, were being kept under guard behind force fields. It was an unstable situation, and Jaina knew it wouldn't take much to turn the tables.

But first, they had to get rid of that transmitter.

They climbed up through air shafts, avoiding lift platforms for fear of whom they might encounter. Finally, they reached the upper main loading dock on the surface. Access doors would be closed but not locked. No one in their right mind would go for a casual walk on the surface of Kessel.

According to maps and diagrams of the spice mine and its comm station, they had a good idea where Kessel's sophisticated transmitter currently being modified by Black Sun-must be located. The powerful antenna was large ... and probably well guarded. Two human-sized intruders could not possibly remain hidden as they made their way across the bleak, rugged surface.

But a small silvery droid might just be able to slip in undetected....

The ships in the cargo bay sat quiet and empty, as if the place was abandoned. Jaina recognized one of the familiar craft, though. A small man worked furtively beneath the engines.

"Lilmit's still around!" Jaina said. While the other pilots were taken prisoner, Lilnt had probably been allowed to remain here because he worked for Black Sun.

The strange man looked up, and his eyes went wide as he noticed the Wookiee and the young woman. The hapless smuggler raised his webbed hands in panic. "Oh, no! But you're gone. Your ship left. I saw the docking records. Go away-there's nothing more I can tell you."

"Great," Jaina muttered. "Now we'll have to take him hostage."

Lilnt wailed. "Please, I didn't have anything to do with this. I just wanted to get off Kessel before the Black Sun takeover. Czethros will be furious if he sees that I'm still here."

Jaina looked at Lowie, wondering how they would ever manage to keep Lilnt quiet. If the little man caused a scene and got them noticed, they were sunk. But instead, the frantic smuggler ran into his ship to hide and sealed the hatch.

"I do believe our diminutive friend has panicked," Em Teedee said.

"Let's hope he stays quiet for just a little while," Jaina said.

Lowie growled and gestured toward the outer doors of the cargo bay. If they could complete their mission quickly and hide again in the tunnels, they wouldn't be found, no matter what Lilmit did. Jaina suspected that the terrified smuggler would not want to call anyone's attention to his presence. But then again, the little pilot's fear of Czethros might just prompt him to report the presence of two unauthorized young Jedi....

Lowie chuffed something again, and the translating droid replied, "Indeed, Master Lowbacca, 'What are we waiting for?'"

Togetner, Jaina and Lowie reached the door, grabbed a pair of breath masks from a locker, and slapped them over their faces. The slow trickle of oxygen would be enough to keep them alive in the harsh environment, though the freezing temperatures and the crackling dry air would take its toll before long. They didn't have much time.

Jaina unsealed the hatch, and they passed through. Gusts of wind roared after them as air flowed out of the pressurized cargo bay. They stood out on the bleak, white alkaline desert of Kessel's surface.

"Lovely place," Jaina said, her voice muffled by the breath mask.

Frost clung to the rocks, and steam rose into the air from heating and recirculation vents deep in the spice mines. Near the foreshortened horizon they saw the metal and wire-mesh flower of the massive transmitter. Czethros would use it to send his coded, high-powered signal burst announcing that now was the time for Black Sun's ultimate takeover.

The flat, broken land was strewn with boulders and chunks of powdery white salt dried into lumps and low pillars. Cracks split the landscape. Jaina saw very few places for them to hide; her jumpsuit, along with Lowie's ginger-brown fur, would stand out like a striking beacon.

They had no choice but to send Em Teedee.

His fingers already numb with cold, Lowie bent down to manipulate the tiny cords. Using a special quick-release knot, he attached the two canisters of explosives below the hovering droid's casing. With her hands, Jaina showed Em Teedee the distance he needed to keep between his casing and the rough surface of the planetoid.

"You have this much play between the explosive and the ground right now," she said. "We'll need you to fly as low as possible to keep from being seen, but don't let the explosives hit a rock."

"Indeed, Mistress Jaina. I assure you that I won't."

Lowie grunted something, and Em Teedee snapped, "What do you mean by 'famous last words'? I intend to follow our plan exactly!"

Lowie touched the buttons on the shaped charges with his claws and chattered to the droid.

Em Teedee answered in alarm, "Six standard minutes? Do you think that will be sufficient time?" The Wookiee shrugged.

"These aren't high-capacity charges, Em Teedee," Jaina said. "I don't think they're made with long timers."

"Very well, I shall do my best." The little droid hovered off the ground and then, with a burst of his microrepulsorjets, skimmed across the powdery surface of Kessel like a glinting silver bullet. Keeping low, he wove around rocks, over fissures, across the broken and rugged terrain.

A troop of guards would likely be stationed in a protective hut near the transmitter, just waiting for Czethros to send his signal. The droid had to get there before they saw him.

Em Teedee increased speed, still painfully aware that he could not allow the canisters of explosives to strike against a hard rock or a

projection of encrusted salt. His internal clock counted down the seconds that remained on the bomb timers. The transmitting dish seemed very far away.

Em Teedee pushed his microjets faster and faster, drawing closer.

Finally, the structure loomed up ahead of him: scooped amplifiers and curved screens to focus the communication beam. The miniaturized droid rose like a tiny satellite over the lip, then dropped toward the center of the flower. There, an aiming antenna would direct the signal while the pulse ricocheted off the parabolic petals and increased its power, sending it out to all secret receiving stations attuned to the Black Sun's command frequency.

After he landed in the center, Em Teedee gently touched the explosive canisters to the central control point, jerked upward against the quick-release knots to detach the short cables, then rose into the air.

He had very little time left, and he was anxious to get away. Stealth had required him to take longer than anticipated reaching the station, and now that there was nothing to delay him, the droid shot upward and sped away.

He must have made a fine glittering target, because two guards barreled

out of a small hutment beside the transmitting station. They were curious at first, gazing up at him, then began shouting. One of the men turned back to the transmitting station as if he realized something must be wrong. The other guard grabbed for his weapon, but didn't seem to know what to shoot at.

Em Teedee streaked across the rocky landscape and vanished into the distance.

Jaina and Lowie stood up, waving him on toward the doorway that would lead back into the pressurized docking bay.

When the translating droid was only a hundred meters away from them, the transmitter erupted in a blossom of orange fire. Shrapnel blew sky-high-some of it perhaps even into orbit, because of Kessel's low gravity.

Jaina and Lowie watched as the fires from the explosion slowly sputtered out for lack of oxygen. Huge sections of the antenna fell, teetering before they collapsed. A few seconds later, the shock wave and the sound reached them at the docking bay doors, high-pitched and tinny due to the thin air.

"Let's go!" Jaina said. "They're really going to be after us now."

They ducked back inside the spice mines of Kessel, hoping they could

find a safe place to hide.

When Czethros learned of the disaster, his roar of rage was almost as loud as the explosion itself. His blazing cyber-eye scanned back and forth, looking for someone to blame.

"Timing is everything!" he bellowed. "If I don't send my signal, the uprising will never commence-and unless we do this all at once, the New Republic will find a way to crush each separate little brush fire." A guard nodded. "I understand, my Lord Czethros."

"Of course you understand! An idiot could understand. But what can you do about it?"

"Nothing that I know of, my Lord Czethros."

The Black Sun lieutenant stormed back and forth in Nien Nunb's office, which he had commandeered. He knew his superiors were counting on him, and he knew that the leaders of Black Sun were not very forgiving when something went wrong.

"I thought you had imprisoned everyone who could cause problems for us," Czethros said, whirling about. "What did you forget to take into account? Who is still missing?"

"I don't know, my Lord Czethros."

"Of course you don't know, or the situation would already be under control!" He pounded a hand on the Chief Administrator's low tabletop.

He wished the Sullustan were taller so that his office and its furnishings would have been a bit more comfortable for a man of his size.

Czethros glared at the guard. The other armed mercenaries milling about in the hall nervously awaited their turn for a reprimand. Each hoped he would survive the wrath of Czethros.

"It's safe to say we have some sort of little rodents unaccounted for.

The saboteurs know what they're doing, and they intend to ruin my plans. Make sure all our prisoners are securely locked away. Then I want full teams to comb every inch of the spice mines. We must find whoever is responsible for blowing up my transmitting station. I want them-dead or alive. I don't care which."

He turned, not deigning even to look at his crew anymore, then slowly glanced back over his shoulder. "Of course, if you don't find them for me to torture"-his cracked lips curled in a faint smile-"I'll be forced

to take out my frustrations on some of you instead."

Anja had never felt so out of control.

While the Jedi all around her in the minisub worked with brisk determination to diagnose and fix the ailments of the Elfa, she felt herself slipping away into a zone of pain somewhere between madness and death.

Her vision narrowed and filled with static at the edges. She found she could not concentrate on what her friends were doing-the need for spice was too great, no matter how she tried to push it back. The tiny claustrophobic vessel felt unbearably hot, stifling, despite their arctic prison. Unreasonable quantities of perspiration soaked her leather headband, streamed into her large eyes, ran down her neck and back to leave damp stains on her clothing.

The others around her were talking, planning, brainstorming, but it all seemed so far away. A deep ache burned in her muscles and ate its way down to her bones, igniting liquid agony in every joint of her body.

Moving her hands or any part of her body produced an instant punishing pain. So she did not move. Each breath became a struggle. Her head throbbed with unimaginable pressure. She realized now that only one substance in the galaxy could put an end to her agony: andris.

Stupid, her mind raged. How could she have let this happen to her?

Addiction was for fools and weaklings, not for someone like herself independent, intelligent, strong-willed. She had never meant for the andris to affect her this way. She'd always thought she was in charge of her own body, but now she was a prisoner of spice.

Fool! she snarled at herself Anja had been sure that addiction was for other people, weak people. She had convinced herself from the beginning that she would be able to handle it. She'd known when she started taking spice that many people had been destroyed by addiction.

Anja had watched it, had known it for a fact. And yet, with firm conviction, she had believed that it would not happen to her.

I am strong. Immune. Invincible.

Anja gave a bitter laugh. Delirious was more like it. Somewhere in the back of Ania's mind, a memory stirred, a childhood memory of her mother shaking her head and saying, "So like your father. Taking the easy way even though it's dangerous, and not thinking for a moment that you could be hurt." Anja could not have been older than three or four when her mother had said those words. Her mother had died while Anja was still young. Yet somehow part of Anja's feverish brain had

remembered. She didn't even try to control her shuddering.

So-she and her father had something in common: both took foolish risks, both believed themselves indestructible. Anja drew a ragged breath.

She had to admit now that Han Solo was probably telling the truth. In the end, it had most likely been her father's foolishness that had killed him-just as her own foolishness would kill her now.

She gripped the arms of her seat as streamers of fire unfurled in her muscles and joints. Short of dying, there was only one way to stop the pain.

"Spice!" she rasped.

The frenetic activity around her quieted and, as if from a distance, she heard Jacen's voice say, "Anja? Are you all right?"

"Spice," she repeated. "Andris."

"It's fine. We managed to destroy almost everything."

Something-a hand?-touched her arm, and where it touched, her suffering was more bearable. She blinked hard, trying to focus her vision.

Jacen's face, complete with lopsided grin, swam into view. "Hey, you look terrible."

"That's because ... I'm dying," she managed in a hoarse whisper.

Anger flashed in his brandy-brown eyes. "No you're not!"

Tenel Ka's serious face suddenly appeared beside Jacen's. The warrior girl stretched out her single hand and made a brief, thorough check of Anja's pulse, skin temperature, pupil dilation, and muscular tremors.

At each place the warrior girl's fingers touched, the pain eased-just for a moment-before she moved on.

"You will not die, Anja Gallandro," she said. "We will not allow it."

Anja suddenly felt the relief of another Jedi touch on her left hand.

A pair of emerald-green eyes stared into hers. "It's bad, isn't it?"

Zekk asked. "Spice withdrawal, right?"

Anja felt too weak to reply, but Zekk seemed to see the answer in her eyes. "I went through something similar. Well, not with drugs. I was addicted to using the dark side of the Force. I knew it was wrong, but

I told myself I had good reasons for what I was doing. Anyway, when I wanted to stop, the dark side didn't want to let me go. I almost didn't make it." He glanced up briefly at Jacen and Tenel Ka. "If it hadn't been for my friends, I don't think I would have."

Anja shivered. Her teeth rattled together. Tenel Ka reached out and pushed a few sweaty strands of hair out of Anja's eyes. Cool, tingling relief followed her friend's touch.

Her friends, Anja thought with distant surprise: Tenel Ka, Jacen, Zekk.

Yes, even Jaina and Lowie. Master Skywalker, too. Why hadn't she seen it before? Maybe she'd just been too busy believing the lies Czethros told her; she'd lied to herself too much to notice it. Yes, these were her friends. They would help her.

"I need andris. Just one more dose," she pleaded with them. "Then I'll find a way to quit. I promise." The effort of her long speech left her trembling and slumped over in her seat. She didn't see the irony in the fact that she had told herself the same thing last time.

A soft, melodious voice broke through Anja's pain. "There is another way." Ambassador Cilghal stroked a webbed hand against Anja's cheek.

"It is more difficult, requires more strength, but it can be done."

Anja shook her head. "Too much pain. I'll die."

"We won't let that happen," Jacen said, more confidence in his words than in his voice.

"How-?" Ania began.

"I am not simply an ambassador," Cilghal answered, "I am a Jedi healer. If you will let me, I can draw the toxins from your blood."

"Will that end the addiction?" Zekk asked.

Cilghal shook her fishy head. "I can take away only the poisons of the body. The poisons in her mind she must learn to remove for herself. "

Anja shook her head violently, causing pain to flare in her neck.

Droplets of sweat flew from side to side. "Too hard."

"You will not be alone," Tenel Ka said.

"We'll be here to help you," Jacen said, clasping her hand tightly.

Tenel Ka covered Jacen's hand with hers.

Zekk folded both hands tightly around Anja's left hand. "We'll be right here with you. All of us."

Anja felt an impossible comfort and relief flowing from her friends' hands to hers. At first, she thought the relief must be in her imagination, that her need had fooled her weakened mind. She withdrew her fingers from Zekk's. Instantly the pain in her left hand returned.

She gave a wordless gasp and stretched her arm back toward him. When he took Anja's hand this time, she knew the relief was real. It began in her fingers and tingled in cool waves up her arm.

Anja turned her tortured gaze back to Cilghal. "One more dose.

Then I'll accept your help."

Cilghal said nothing. She simply folded her flippered hands and stared at Anja with calm resolve.

Tears of pain now streamed down Anja's face along with the perspiration. The pain was unbearable. She knew what she needed to do.

Deep down, perhaps she had always known.

"You're right," Anja choked at last. "Putting it off won't help.

And I can't do this alone." She shuddered. "All right. What do I have to do?"

Cilghal nodded. She gently pushed Anja's seat back until it reclined.

Then she placed one flippered hand on her forehead, one on her stomach.

Anja felt Zekk, Tenel Ka, and Jacen press close around her. In all of her life, she had never felt such caring ... or such pain.

After the longest and most excruciating half hour of her entire life, Anja slipped into blissful unconsciousness.

Anja came back awake, blinking her big eyes, with a strength and alertness that she could not remember experiencing since before she had begun taking andris.

Andris! To her surprise, though the very thought of the spice still enticed her, she found she could withstand its allure. She pushed herself up in her seat. Around her, the young Jedi were hard at work trying to repair the damaged minisub.

"How long-?"

Tenel Ka checked the chronometer. "Three-point-two hours."

Anja rocked back on her elbows in surprise. "Then it's over? I'm cured?"

Cilghal turned to fix her with a fishy stare. "Not cured, my child.

Cleansed. The toxins are gone, but your body is still capable of experiencing the craving for spice."

Anja accepted the news without flinching. Then she glanced around at Jacen, Zekk, and Tenel Ka, meeting each pair of eyes in turn. "Thank you for using your powers to heal me."

Jacen shook his head. "Hey, most of those powers came from inside you.

From your wanting to stay alive and wanting to be healed."

Anja smiled at them all, a warm, genuine smile. "Maybe. But I don't think I'd have found that strength inside me if I hadn't had friends.

6roping through the spice mines' access tunnels, Jaina, Lowie, and Em Teedee decided that their next step would be to liberate Nien Nunb and his loyal workers. With the help of the prisoners, maybe they could retake Kessel.

Throughout the previous hours, they had heard teams marching up and down the main tunnels, shouting to each other, shining bright glowlamps into dark corners. Judging from the angry tones Jaina heard, the destruction of the transmitter had been a complete success! She could tell that Czethros had stepped up his efforts to find them ... but the mercenary teams were so loud and clumsy, only a fool would be unable to avoid them.

Jaina and Lowbacca were no fools.

The advantage to the young Jedi, now that Black Sun had all of its resources dedicated to finding the mysterious saboteurs, was that there were too few troops to keep careful watch on the captives. Only one guard remained standing in front of the security field by the prison quarters where Nien Nunb and the Kessel workers were held.

Peeking from the shadows of a low access tunnel, Jaina observed the lone guard near the shimmering stun-field. The guard was grayskinned, with a long lantern jaw, smooth lipless mouth, and sunken orange eyes.

He looked as if he had been dead for some time and had begun to mummify, but Jaina decided this must be what his species looked like.

The guard carried only a small blaster at his side. Although either of the two young Jedi could easily have dispatched him with their lightsabers, Jaina preferred to do this without killing. Instead, she thought, this was a perfect time for them to use their Jedi powers.

Quietly she whispered her plan to Lowie, and the two companions concentrated, reaching out with their minds through the Force and probing until they touched the glimmering consciousness of the guard.

They sent messages of relaxation to place him into a suggestible state of calm, partially hypnotized, partially asleep.

When they stepped out into the open hall, he spotted them and reacted, nearly making them lose control of his mind. Jaina strode forward quickly. "I wouldn't move, sir-especially not if I had a Kessel scorpion-rat on my shoulder ... one that's prepared to sting."

The guard glanced down, and his sunken orange eyes widened in shock and dismay. In his imagination, he saw the horrible crablike creature resting on the shoulder pad of his uniform, its segmented tail and wicked hooked stinger poised and dripping with a deadly greenish venom.

He wailed and thrashed around. "Get it off! Get it off!"

Lowie rushed forward. Instead of drawing his blaster against the oncoming Wookiee, the guard swatted again and again at his neck and upper arm, as if he continued to see the hideous creature scuttling back and forth there.

Lowie grasped the guard by both shoulders and pushed him into the pulsing stun-field that held the prisoners hostage. The guard raised his hands as crackling sparks flew all around, then slumped backward onto the floor, unconscious.

"Easy enough," Jaina said.

"It may require significantly greater skill to break through these Black Sun security codes," Em Teedee said.

"Maybe," Jaina answered, looking over at Lowie. "But then, I've got you two to help."

Nien Nunb and the other spice mine workers, seeing what had happened, clamored and cheered from the other side of the security barricade.

They knew they were about to be rescued.

Within moments Lowie and Em Teedee had succeeded in switching off the stun-field. The crackling shimmer in the air faded, and Nien Nunb and his companions rushed out. Smiling and laughing, they clapped each other on the back and offered profuse thanks to Jaina and Lowie.

As Jaina looked at the crowd of former captives now loose in the spice mines, she knew the tide was turning. At first, Czethros had used armed guards and the element of surprise to imprison them. But the tables were turned now, and his advantage was lost.

Czethros had a lot more to worry about than just two young Jedi Knights.

While most of the guards continued to comb through distant and isolated spice tunnels in search of the fugitives, Nien Nunb led the escapees to a main armory and control chamber, protected from outside attack, near the darkest and least used of the excavation shafts. Here his people would be able to pick up supplies, arm themselves, and prepare for the fight to retake Kessel.

Together, they entered the deeply buried control chamber. Once inside, Nien Nunb keyed his administrative codes into the computers.

With a blur of furry fingers, he punched in commands. Lowie assisted, growling and offering suggestions. Rapidly, block by block, the

Sullustan Chief Administrator denied access to Czethros and his takeover crew.

Cheering, the workers gathered up their weapons and requested permission to return to their quarters to make sure the invaders had not destroyed or commandeered their private possessions. Kessel was a dreary assignment for many of them; they couldn't bear the thought of Black Sun mercenaries pawing through their personal effects.

Regretfully, the Chief Administrator shook his head.

Jaina paced the floor of the control center, still anxious, knowing they weren't safe yet. They had a long fight ahead of them to drive the invaders from Kessel. "Can we use this room as our base of operations?" she said. "It's well guarded and we can take care of it."

Nien Nunb nodded.

"Perfect." She explained how she and Lowie had successfully sabotaged the communications array so that the Black Sun plans could not proceed.

Things were already falling apart for Czethros, and now that his prisoners were freed, this resistance would be the last straw.

Nien Nunb turned back to his computer console, satisfied with what he had accomplished, and brought up the security holocam images. Lowie rumbled a warning. Figures were moving down the tunnel, sporting weapons and dark uniforms-led by the treacherous Second Administrator Kymn! Directly beside him strode the smiling blond-haired captain who had lied about being impressed with Nien Nunb's part in destroying the Death Star at the Battle of Endor.

The Sullustan made a thin growling sound in his throat and jabbered brief instructions, telling everyone to stay alert. He would take care of this instantly-he had his own score to settle.

"But whatever shall we do?" Em Teedee said.

"I think we'll just have to be prepared-for anything," Jaina answered.

Workers brought up their weapons and made ready for a fight as the Chief Administrator scuttled out the door of the control center and down the dark and winding corridors. Nien Nunb felt anger blazing inside him-a new sensation for the timid Sullustan. He vowed to show that blond-haired captain just how a hero really handled himself.

He hustled along, moving with determination ... trying belatedly to figure out his plan. Kymn's crew of searchers would be surprised to

see him free, since they were simply hunting for one or two hidden
sahotellrs: Jaina and Lowbacca. Or so they thought.

Nien Nunb turned the next corner-and froze stock-still as the
treacherous Second Administrator and the blond-haired captain cried out
in surprise.

"He's escaped!" Kymn yelled. "Grab him! No-shoot!"

"I thought Czethros wanted him kept alive as a hostage," the blond
captain said as the guards surged forward.

"Don't trouble yourself," Kymn sneered. "This little rodent has been
bossing me around in various jobs for too many years. I'd like the
pleasure of seeing him squirm for a change."

Black Sun mercenaries charged forward. Reacting with a panic that was
only the slightest bit feigned, Nien Nunb squealed and whirled. He
pelted back down the low, dim corridor.

Laughing and shouting, believing their quarry had no chance against
them, the guards gave chase, led by the bellowing Second Administrator
and the captain.

When Nien Nunb rounded the last corner before the control chamber,
though, he ducked to one side and pressed himself against the cool rock

wall near the door. His loyal fellow prisoners surged out, weapons ready. The two young Jedi Knights stood with pulsating lightsabers.

The opposing guards tumbled into each other, piling up as they scrambled backward in a panic. They had expected no resistance at all.

Thinking Kessel secure, Czethros had already reassigned his best mercenaries to other potential battles out in the New Republic. But his own base of operations was the weakest point.

The freed prisoners shouted and aimed their weapons. Blaster fire rang out, cracking walls and spouting tongues of rock dust and smoke.

The surprised invaders returned fire, scorching the armor of Nien Nunb's defenders-but Second Administrator Kymn quickly realized the ambush had caught them in a very bad situation. Two of his mercenaries fell, writhing in pain. Nien Nunb's fighters kept to their sheltered positions, while Kymn's troops remained completely exposed.

Second Administrator Kymn yelled, "Go left! Move down this way !

Shots rang out, fired by the turning guards more in confusion and anger than in defense. None of the bolts hit their targets. Broken rock showered from the walls. Nien Nunb's workers fired back, scorching the

backplate of one of the retreating Black Sun guards. After only a minor flurry of blaster bolts, the dust settled. No one seemed injured.

The Black Sun forces had fled.

Nien Nunb's defenders charged after the retreating guards, raising their voices. Their howls echoed in the tunnels as Kymn's team rushed away into the deepest spice mines. Nien Nunb shouted at the top of his squeaking voice, and the defenders reluctantly pulled back, letting the mercenaries run onward in the dark tunnels.

Back in the control chamber, the Sullustan Chief Administrator busily entered codes and punched in more commands. Loud metal doors clanged shut deep in the passageways. Lowbacca chuffed with laughter.

Jaina peered down at the screens to see what he had done. "You mean they're all sealed down in those tunnels?"

Nien Nunb's thickly folded lips curved in a smile. Through Em Teedee's translation, he explained that such deep sections of mines could be sealed off at the senior administrator's discretion. Kymn and his guards would remain trapped behind heavy plasteel barricades, where they could cause no trouble. The legitimate security forces on Kessel would eventually get back to them, once they finished mopping up all the other problems here in the spice mines.

The mood was elation. The defenders cheered their first victory. It had been simple and bloodless. Still, Jaina felt uneasy. There was at least one major obstacle left: Czethros himself.

Over the past hour, the temperature had dropped dramatically inside the trapped minisub. Ice walls clasped the Elfa like a clenched fist.

The only light that trickled in was a filtered crystalline blue-green from the polar ice pack. Zekk feared that before long the air in the sub would grow thick as well. Deprived of oxygen, filled with carbon dioxide, the atmosphere would offer less and less for its five imprisoned passengers to breathe.

He crawled up to his waist into the Elfa's engine compartment, wriggling his head and arms through the small access hatch. Nominally, Calamarian repair crews would either have hoisted the sub into its dock on Crystal Reef or labored underwater to complete repairs. Here, though, Zekk had to make do with what access he could gain from within the cramped cabin.

He had to use a too-small hydrospanner, one of the few tools available in the meager emergency repair kit. He could see how the gears had ground together, how the electrical connections had been broken and the precise flow conduits knocked out of alignment during the tentacled sea

creature's attack. He nudged and tweaked and banged with the hydrospanner, straightening out what he could.

Jacen hovered behind him. "I wish Jaina were here. She's always good at fixing things."

Zekk banged with the hydrospanner again, discouraged, and skinned his knuckles instead. "I'm not such a bad mechanic myself," he said.

"And these aren't exactly ideal conditions, you know."

"Not ideal," Anja agreed. "Besides, if Jaina were here, we'd have one more set of lungs using up what's left of our oxygen."

Tenel Ka frowned at the young woman's remark.

"I guess you're right," Zekk said. "I feel better knowing she's safe on Kessel."

Jacen gave Tenel Ka a lopsided grin. "Yeah, my sister's probably just relaxing, bored to tears while we're stuck with all the troubles."

Zekk reattached the connections to the small engines as best he could, using his sore fingers when the tool itself wouldn't work. "Try it now, Cilghal," he called over his shoulder. Then he backed out of the access compartment, his clothes and hands and face grimed with engine

lubricants and dust.

The Calamarian ambassador worked at the controls. With a thrumming, puttering growl, the minisub's engines fired up. Propellers turned, then ground to a halt against the solid ice that pressed in around them.

"Seems to be working smoothly enough," Jacen said.

"Yes, but we are not able to move anywhere," Tenel Ka pointed out. She listened to the sound of ice scraping against the hull.

"If those icebergs shift, our situation will become even more perilous," Cilghal said. "We'll be crushed."

"Great," Jacen answered. "Up until now I was having a tough time imagining how things could possibly get any worse."

Her face grim, Tenel Ka stood. "We are trapped ... but it is only ice." She looked around at the four other passengers crowded into the small sub. "I count five lightsabers among us. Certainly that should suffice to cut us free." She raised her eyebrows. "If we are, willing to go outside."

Per regulations from the Crystal Reef Amusement and Tourism Council,

the minisub was required to carry enough slicksuits for each passenger in an emergency. Their current situation, Jacen thought, was about as much of an emergency as anyone could have imagined.

" You know this is probably suicidal, don't you?" Anja said as she slipped into the flimsy garment that clung to her skin like a symbiotic organism. She pulled the skull-fitting hood over her voluminous hair, so that most of her head was covered. The glistening Calamarian fabric molded itself to bodily contours and provided temperature control.

Jacen wondered, though, if even the most efficient heaters would keep them warm enough this deep under the polar ice.

Cilghal stepped forward and took hold of a flap at the neck of Jacen's suit. "This membrane will allow you to breathe," she said, stretching it tight over his mouth and nose. Now only his eyes were exposed. "It will filter oxygen molecules from the water. You can breathe as usual.

Just do it slowly and carefully."

"Are you sure our lightsabers will function underwater?" Zekk asked, looking at his newly made-and untested-weapon.

Cilghal nodded, her round Calamarian eyes swiveling as she held up her own lightsaber. The hilt was lumpy, but with a smooth, pearly

finish.

"It will, if you constructed it properly."

Tenel Ka frowned down at her lightsaber, made from a carved rancor's tooth, and flashed a glance over at Jacen. Zekk knew she must be recalling the day her own defective lightsaber had failed, resulting in the loss of her arm. But she had built a new weapon, taking extra precautions.

Zekk thought of the extraordinary care with which he had built his new lightsaber. Master Skywalker himself had approved. He took a deep breath, nodding confidently. "Then my weapon won't fail."

Jacen, Zekk, Tenel Ka, Anja, and Cilghal finished suiting up, then took turns going through the force-field doorway into the deep, cold ocean.

Jacen inhaled deeply. The membrane that covered his face produced a warm flow of breathable air.

Still, he hesitated at the portal. Anja, standing next to him, gave him an inquiring look. Finally, Jacen stepped through the shimmering hatch and out into a world of liquid ice.

Pulsing lightsaber blades blazed through the water like colorful torches, attracting tiny darting fish that somehow lived and flourished in the inhospitable arctic environment. Stalactites of clear blue ice lurked around them like massive fangs. Broken icebergs trapped the insignificant minisub. The lightsabers shimmered in the murky water, cutting an underwater channel through the frozen mountains.

With her one arm-the other sleeve snubbed tightly and knotted so it would be waterproof-Tenel Ka wielded her turquoise blade. She slashed, severing a slab of ice. Steam and bubbles erupted as the chunk slowly drifted away, freeing one of the fins of the minisub.

Jacen hacked and chopped at the prison of ice. His lungs heaved, drawing tendrils of air through the membrane. All around him the water felt like a smothering blanket of carbonite. The slicksuit fought off most of the deadly chill, but the cold eventually seeped through.

Jacen found his arms and legs growing sluggish. His mind felt lethargic and stupid, as if he were thinking in slow motion.

Cilghal, better adapted for underwater work even in the arctic seas, swam ahead, using her throbbing lightsaber to hack her way forward.

Bubbles churned upward until they were trapped by the ice ceiling.

Cilghal cleared a narrow channel, then moved along the fresh

passageway, rolling with her lightsaber.

Zekk swam directly behind her, widening the channel with his energy blade.

Jacen, Tenel Ka, and Anja worked closer to the Elfa. When the last of the frozen jaws were sheared away, the small craft settled slightly and drifted loose. Jacen felt the cold growing more and more intense all around his body. His arms and legs seemed heavy. Too heavy.

Tenel Ka watched him with a look of concern. They were both good swimmers. Together they had spent many days swimming in the river on Yavin 4. But this was cold, infinitely colder....

Jacen forced his hand to give a thumbs-up sign, and Tenel Ka nodded.

Together they swam back toward the minisub's force-field hatch.

Jacen waved for Anja, who floated in place close to the Elfa holding her acid-yellow lightsaber. She signaled that she would be behind them in a moment. Jacen and Tenel Ka rapidly stroked toward the hatch, toward warmth.

Up ahead, Cilghal and Zekk had nearly finished with their labors as well.

Anja had worked as hard as she could manage. She had no strength in the Force, and her only special abilities with a lightsaber had come from having her body pumped up with andris spice. She was free of that addiction now, however. She would never use the spice again ... but that also meant she would never feel the same rush again, the energy she had once considered a part of her strength.

The lightsaber in her hand was a fraud, nothing more than an antique she had purchased from a peddler who specialized in Jedi artifacts.

Anja knew how hard Zekk had worked to build his own sleek and simple weapon-and its hilt looked nothing like the heavy,ornate design of her energy blade.

However, Zekk's lightsaber was real. He had earned his, and he knew how to use it. The Force guided him. Anja's didn't belong to her, no matter what she had paid for it. It was a Jedi weapon, and she was not-nor would she ever be-a Jedi. Perhaps the lightsaber was itself a symbol of her addiction-her willingness to rely on something that was not a part of her.

Caught up in her restless thoughts, she swam around the fin of the minisub and saw something trapped between two struts in the support casing that held the rudder in place: a single remaining vial of andris spice, glittering and preserved in the frigid water. It must have

caught there when they broke open the containers hidden under the ice caps, or when the sea monster had attacked them and consumed the rest of the stash.

As if drawn by a magnet, Anja swam forward and plucked out the vial.

It was pure andris.

Anja hesitated. She could take it ... treat herself to one last dose.

She felt the yearning return inside her, a longing for that familiar surge of energy that made her feel so intensely alive. She knew it was more mental than physical. If she succumbed now, if she kept this dose for herself ... it would be like voluntarily placing her hands into a set of stun-cuffs. She might as well lock herself up and become a prisoner of her own addiction once more.

But Anja didn't want that. She didn't want it ever again.

She let the vial drift out of her hand. The small object floated there in front of her, taunting her, daring her to change her mind.

Anja locked her acid-yellow lightsaber ON and, with an effort, swept down, slicing through the offensive vial. It disintegrated in a puff

of scared materials.

Then, as she stared down at the Jedi relic in her grasp, Anja knew she could never use it again. Deep inside, she felt a calm finality at this knowledge.

Anja's cold fingers released their grip on the hilt and let the lightsaber drift away. Then, with a feeling of satisfaction, Anja swam back to the warmth and companionship that waited for her aboard the minisub.

Czethros was on the run. He could see no way out of his situation.

If he managed to escape Kessel and elude the young Jedi Knights and Nien Nunb's security team, he might be even worse off ... because then he would have to explain this failure to his brutal superiors in Black Sun. Czethros was certain those people could think of much more imaginative punishments than any New Republic justice organization could.

Even his old nemesis, Han Solo, would probably be more kind.

With the signal generator destroyed, Czethros had no way to rally his scattered forces around the galaxy. The few operatives he had planted in appropriate positions of power controlled key systems-but unless everything happened simultaneously at Czethros's command, it would all

come to naught. The few isolated emergencies would easily be dealt with by the New Republic.

His chance had now been lost. Even his grasp on the spice mines of Kessel had slipped. Instead of orchestrating the sudden overthrow of industries and minor governments across what remained of the Empire, Czethros found himself running for his life. Hiding in the dark mines.

Humiliated.

The tide had turned. Nien Nunb and his security troops controlled the catacombs. Second Administrator Kymn and the other infiltrators Czethros had planted here had either been captured or otherwise neutralized.

Perhaps if he could get to a docking bay, he could steal a ship and get away. Perhaps Czethros could make a new life for himself, hiding somewhere in the Outer Rim. He didn't seem to have much of a chance, but it was better than waiting here. And it was better than letting himself get caught by Black Sun.

As silently as possible, he crawled up ladders, rung by rung. He wasn't used to such physical exertion. During all the many years he had been running the show on Ord Mantell, he hadn't had to fend for

himself much. He'd always had droids or henchmen.

But now Czethros was alone. He knew he could trust no one.

Furtively, he consulted one of the electronic wall maps of the spice mines. The projection grids were frequently out of date, since new shafts were always being drilled and new excavations dug. But the main docking bays were permanent structures, and so most of the directions remained valid.

Czethros followed narrow ventilation shafts. He felt uneasy, as if he were a poisonous insect creeping into a peaceful home, but he had to get to an empty ship and escape somehow.

When he emerged into the main cargo bay, he poked his head out of the shadows to make certain he could move without being seen. There among the stranded empty spaceships he spotted a little man moving about, tinkering with the engines on his craft. Czethros recognized him as the hapless and not terribly bright smuggler, Lilmit.

The small man used his webbed fingers to fiddle with the external flow controls, and the sublight engines sent out a bright blast. Then the repulsors made a rewarding and satisfying hum. Lilmit jumped up and down with glee.

Czethros's heart swelled with hope. This was what he needed to see.

He marched forward, squaring his shoulders to look as intimidating as possible. Lilmit was his employee, someone he could easily manipulate.

Czethros crossed the docking bay floor. Lilmit didn't even notice him until the Black Sun lieutenant was nearly at his side. "Keep those engines running, Lilmit," he said. "You and I are going to get out of here-right now."

The small smuggler squawked. "Czethros! I was just leaving! What happened to your takeover?"

"There's been a change. Nien Nunb has regained control-and you are going to help me escape."

"But then they'll chase after my ship. I have only minimal weapons and-" "I'm offering you a great honor, Lilmit. Don't let me down."

Just then, shouts erupted from the far side of the docking bay. Han Solo's brat Jaina, the Wookiee Lowbacca, the meddling Chief Administrator Nien Nunb, and some troops from the Kessel guard forces surged into the docking bay.

"There now. You see?" Em Teedee chirped. "I tracked his voice via

the station audio system! Didn't I tell you he would be here?"

"Czethros, halt!" one of the guard captains shouted.

Nien Nunb chattered something loud and harsh in Sullustan. Jaina and Lowie powered up their lightsabers.

Lilmit squealed in terror and scrambled up the boarding ramp of his ship faster than Czethros had ever seen a panicked rodent move.

The Black Sun lieutenant turned, knowing that Lilmit now had no choice but to get them out of there.

But as he moved toward the hatch, hydraulics roared and the heavy door slammed shut in his face. With a hissing sound, the pressure seal engaged. Lights winked on, indicating that access was no longer possible.

With a roar of rage, Czethros pounded on the outer door. "Lilmit, let me in!" He heard only a distant squeak of terror. The Kessel guards rushed forward, and Czethros knew he could not stand and argue with the treacherous little coward.

Spotting an open turbolift to one side of the docking bay, he ran at full speed. He was closer to it than his pursuers.

Some of the guards fired blaster bolts, only a few of them set on ,stun." He dodged. Sparking bolts ricocheted off the insulated walls.

Czethros dove headfirst into the turbolift and activated it.

The guards ran toward him, howling with frustration at losing him again. The door hissed shut. Czethros felt the floor drop out from under him as he plunged down, down into the deepest mines.

"Where does that turbolift go?" Jaina shouted, her face flushed from the exertion of the chase.

The Sullustan administrator jabbered an answer, and Em Teedee politely translated. "Master Nien Nunb says that turbolift is a direct link to the new andris spice processing facility. He calls it an 'express tube.'"

It would appear that Czethros is heading directly down to the new assembly lines and carbonite chambers."

"How do we catch up with him?" Jaina cried.

The Sullustan chittered, and Em Teedee said, "Because of the recent addition of the carbonite-freezing facilities for the andris spice,

Master Nien Nunb had a second, freight-only turbolift installed to handle the increased load."

Lowie roared and pointed to an adjacent turbolift. The mousy administrator nodded.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Jaina was already rushing toward the open doors.

Crowded with Nien Nunb, Lowbacca, Jaina, Em Teedee, and several guards, the turbolift plummeted. Since this lift was designed primarily for hauling cargo at high speed, the passengers were forced to hang on for dear life. Fortunately, the group was so tightly packed that there was little room for jostling about.

As soon as the doors whisked open again, a blaster bolt streaked into the turbolift. Jaina and Lowie ducked. A guard cried out as a scorching bolt singed the shoulder of his uniform.

Jaina and Lowie dove out and rolled as they hit the floor. Keeping low, they crept around the equipment in the assembly line. They could see the polished black legs of the blind beetles that worked there.

The sharp insectoid limbs were suddenly thrown into a frenzy as the unexpected violence disrupted their daily work.

Czethros blasted one of the beetles. Its shell split open, and it fell dead beside one of the open vats of raw carbonite, cracking its jaws.

Steaming green ooze poured from the smoking wound. Another wild bolt shattered vials of andris on the conveyor belt line, and the machinery groaned to a halt. Sparks and smoke filled the air. The Kessel guards took up defensive positions, laying siege to the lone fugitive.

"Czethros, you can't get away now. Give yourself up," Jaina said.

Lowie roared, adding his encouragement.

Czethros did not surrender. Instead, more blaster fire rang out from where he had hidden himself between the bubbling vats of carbonite and their monitoring systems.

"Dear me! It would appear that he doesn't wish to be taken alive," Em Teedee said.

"I'd rather not kill him," Jaina said. "I'm hoping the New Republic'll find him a nice comfortable prison cell off on an asteroid somewhere.

But first we have to capture him." She raised her voice. "We know all about your plan, Czethros! You can't send your signal. Black Sun has failed. It's over."

"Maybe," Czethros bellowed back. "But we've still got a thousand traitors in a thousand important positions throughout the New Republic.

You'll never figure out who they are. Someone else will pick up the plan."

Jaina wondered if he wanted to bargain with them, but she didn't have that kind of authority, nor did anyone here. They would just have to capture him and let the New Republic deal with his crimes. "That's possible," she said, "but right now the entire plan is useless without your coordination. We'll ferret your people out sooner or later."

One of the guards shouted, "Why don't you surrender, Czethros?"

It's the only way you'll come out alive."

"Black Sun will kill me no matter what prison you choose. I don't have a chance anyway."

"But we could try to protect you," the guard argued. Lowbacca roared, urging Czethros to come out.

, 'All right then. I'll surrender." Czethros's answer came too easily; Jaina sensed a subtle devious intent in his voice. "I'm holding out my

weapon. I'm coming out. Don't shoot."

Czethros slowly eased from his sheltered position between equipment, moving around boxlike storage alcoves, cabinets, and engine housings.

He held his blaster in front of him, carefully pointing it away from all the others. They watched uneasily as he crept forward, edging along the side of the carbonite vat where the dead beetle he had gunned down still sprawled.

His face looked cloudy, uncertain, just the way a prisoner's should.

The moment the majority of the guards had lowered their weapons by the merest fraction, Czethros rolled, swung up his blaster rifle, and stepped sideways, screaming, "You won't take me alive!"

But as he let fly a full-power blast from the rifle, his foot came down in a pool of slick, oozing green blood from the beetle he had killed.

He slipped and stumbled over the carcass. With a loud cry, his blaster rifle firing harmlessly toward the ceiling, Czethros lurched backward-and fell into the open vat. The carbonite enveloped him in its fog of absolute, penetrating cold.

Tendrils of white vapor whirled up as the carbonite made quick work of

the Black Sun lieutenant. In an instant, Czethros was frozen solid

...

perfectly preserved by the frothing liquid.

Grumbling, Lowie crept forward to stand carefully at the edge of the vat. Guards stood in shock. Nien Nunb chattered under his breath, not sure what to do.

Lowie looked down into the swirling, metallic-gray currents and mumbled something. He felt the unrelenting cold wait up to freeze the fur on his face.

Jaina agreed. "You're right, Lowie. This is one way to capture him.

The minisub that sailed back into the artificial harbor at Crystal Reef was as battered as any starship Zekk had ever seen survive a space battle. Before the companions could even emerge from the Elfa, the treelike harbormaster was there on the dock beside it, making horrified exclamations. To Zekk's absolute amazement, however, the Yarin's expressions of concern were for the passengers, not his damaged ship.

Still fussing and exclaiming, the Yarin ushered them past the queue of waiting customers and into his office. The look of dismay on the treelike alien's face was truly comical, and he waved and rustled his branched arms. Without asking for an explanation, the harbormaster

ordered hot drinks and soft warm robes for each of the returned passengers.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am that your undersea experience here at Crystal Reef was not everything that you had hoped." The Yarin eyed their injuries with some trepidation: Zekk's cut and blistered fingers from working in the engine compartment with insufficient tools, the lump on his forehead, the bruise on Tenel Ka's cheek from a chuck of floating ice ...

"I assure you we'll attend to your medical needs immediately, but if there's anything else I can do to make it up-" "Please," Ambassador Cilghal broke in gently, "it is we who should apologize. In our enthusiasm to explore the polar ice cap, we neglected to take into account the ... appetites of some of the ocean's larger denizens."

With a look of wonder, the Yarin leaned toward her. "Tell me.

What happened?"

Cilghal, with the help of Zekk, Jacen, Tenel Ka, and Anja, told the story of their encounter with the mighty sea creature, strategically leaving out all information about the andris spice. After all, the Jedi did not know who at Crystal Reef might be working for Black Sun.

The Yarin listened with rapt attention, asking a series of probing questions and delighting in their answers.

"Then it's true," he said at last. "You actually saw a Great Arctic Skra'akan and survived to tell of it." His voice held a tone of awe.

"Did you perhaps capture the event with a holocam?"

"Not intentionally," Tenel Ka replied.

"We were all kind of occupied at the time," Jacen added.

"I guess we didn't realize what a big event it was," Anja admitted.

Zekk thought for a moment. "I don't suppose the Elfa's equipped with one of those microholocams that makes a complete record of a trip in case some sort of disaster happens?"

The Yarin's face lit with excitement. "Yes, of course! I use it as a supplementary log. I cannot wait to review the recordings! It is good luck, you know, to see a Great Arctic Skra'akan."

Anja gave him a wry smile. "Well, we're lucky to be alive. Does that count?"

Cilghal looked at her battered companions. Jacen wondered if they

would have to edit the images of destroying the spice stockpile, or if the Ambassador would classify the tapes.

"Your ... Skra'akan, was it? ... got pretty violent there for a while," Jacen said.

A look of apprehension dawned in the bulky harbormaster's eyes.

"You didn't. . ."

"Kill it?" Zekk said. "No. In fact the last time we saw the creature, I have no doubt he was still happily imagining us as his next meal."

The Yarin gave a satisfied sigh. "Then all is well."

Cilghal took a long drink from her mug and said, "There's still the matter of payment for the damage to your vessel."

The harbormaster waved a branchlike arm. "Think nothing of it. If you truly brought back images of a Great Arctic Skra'akan, I believe that the Elfa and those holos may become a permanent tourist exhibit here at Crystal Reef.

"Besides"-he dropped his voice to a tone of confidentiality"the

administration of Crystal Reef has promised me that if Jedi Master Skywalker, the Chief of State and her husband, or the rulers of the Hapes cluster make an official visit to Crystal Reef thanks to your efforts here, I will be rewarded with two new minisubmersibles of my choice."

Jacen grinned at him. "Great! We'll just have to see what we can do to arrange that."

After Crystal Reef's medical droids had treated their injuries, the companions thanked the harbormaster again for his assistance.

Promising to meet Jacen and Tenel Ka back on Kessel, Zekk and Anja said their thanks and good-byes to Cilghal and went to retrieve the Lightning Rod from the docking bay where Anja had left it. Zekk was glad to be back behind the controls of his own ship again.

Cilghal took Tenel Ka and Jacen in the waveskimmer and headed back to her floating city, where the Rock Dragon waited for them.

"Jacen, my friend. I have been meaning to ask you something," Tenel Ka said in a serious tone as the waveskimmer carried them across the ocean. "Would you consent to be my ... copilot?"

Jacen's lopsided grin was instant and enthusiastic. "I thought you'd never ask."

The journey back to Kessel passed much too quickly for both of them.

Their conversation was constant and interesting, and Tenel Ka even encouraged Jacen to tell a few jokes. He teased her throughout the trip, and when he called her "Captain," a smile of amusement curved the corners of her mouth.

"Remind me to give you something when we get back to Yavin 4," Jacen said as he and Tenel Ka brought the Rock Dragon down through Kessel's thin atmosphere toward the docking bay that ground control had just approved for them.

She arched an eyebrow at him. "What shall I tell you to give me?"

Jacen felt his face grow warm. "Just something I made for you.

I've kind of been waiting for the right time."

The next few minutes were occupied with landing procedures. Jacen, who hadn't often seen Tenel Ka pilot a ship, was surprised and pleased at how well she handled the Rock Dragon. The landing was smooth, clean, and uneventful.

"Back to boring old Kessel," Jacen said. "I could use a bit of a

rest."

The Lightning Rod was berthed next to the Rock Dragon. Between the two ships, Jacen was amazed to see Jaina, Lowie, Zekk, and Anja exchanging warm hugs of greeting. Nien Nunb was there too, and Em Teedee hovered about, happily providing translations for anyone who needed them.

As Jacen and Tenel Ka disembarked in the industrial-looking docking bay, Zekk looked up at Jacen and shrugged. "I've already apologized to Jaina for not coming to her rescue."

"Why?" Jacen said. "Because she was so bored?"

Lowie roared an objection. Jaina punched her brother on the arm.

"Bored? While you all were off on your little pleasure cruise," she said, a teasing look in her brandy-brown eyes, "we were busy trying to save half the major businesses in the galaxy from a hostile takeover by Black Sun."

Lowie gave a roar for emphasis. "Indeed," Em Teedee said. "You have absolutely no idea how much we have to tell you."

With the crisis finally over, the return trip from Kessel to the Jedi academy was uneventful. The companions-Zekk, Jaina, and Anja in the Lightning Rod, and Tenel Ka, Jacen, Lowie, and Em Teedee aboard the

Rock Dragon-spent the time exchanging stories of their adventures.

When they all arrived at the landing field on Yavin 4, with its lush jungle surrounding the spectacular ancient pyramids, Master Skywalker himself was there to welcome them back.

Wearing a mock-stern expression on his face, the Jedi Master looked around at the young Jedi Knights and Anja and Em Teedee. "I just received an enlightening message from a former student of mine on Mon Calamari, Ambassador Cilghal. I'm not sure I understand why the administration at Crystal Reef wants me and Han and Leia to take an all-expense-paid vacation there."

Luke pursed his lips and gave a slow bemused shake of his head.

"And I got a glowing message a few minutes ago from Nien Nunb on Kessel. He thanked me repeatedly for allowing you to stay long enough to help him fix his transmitter ... ?"

He shook his head again, as if he could hardly believe what he had heard. "I thought I sent all of you out to find a friend who was in trouble-not to save the entire New Republic from a hostile financial takeover." The stern set of his lips softened into a proud smile. "I wonder if I'll ever stop being surprised by the things my students manage to accomplish when they work together."

The companions looked at each other, somewhat embarrassed.

"Anyway, now I have a surprise for you. The New Republic has decided to hold a celebration here in a few days-and it's about time, after all the work you've done. I think you're all going to receive some long-overdue appreciation, after defeating the Shadow Academy and thwarting the Diversity Alliance, and now Black Sun. Our first guests should be here by evening meal. But before they start arriving, I'd like the chance to speak with each of you alone. We have some important issues to discuss about your future. All of you."

"Luke-Master Skywalker?" Anja spoke hesitantly. "If you wouldn't mind, sir, I'd like to be first."

The Jedi Master looked into her large eyes for a long moment and then nodded. "I see you've come a long way."

By twilight the entire Jedi academy was in a state of controlled pandemonium. Excitement and anticipation hung in the air like rich perfumes. Cooks and Jedi trainees and even New Republic security guards bustled back and forth in the kitchens, helping to serve the guests who were already beginning to fill the Great Temple.

With a minimum of the usual fanfare that accompanied the travels of the Chief of State, the Millennium Falcon showed up in time for evening

meal, carrying Jacen and Jaina's parents, their younger brother Anakin, Chewbacca, and the golden protocol droid See-T'hreepio. Jacen made a point of sitting next to his father as the Solo family ate their first meal together in months. While Jaina was busy explaining how Czethros had schemed to trigger a revolution of sorts via transmitter, Jacen spoke quietly with Han.

"I know I've been kind of a jerk, halfway believing you murdered Anja's father because of how she told the story, and I'm sorry. I guess she was just so hurt and angry all the time, I figured there had to be a reason." Han raised his eyebrows. "And I was that reason?"

Jacen shrugged. "Well, Anja believed you were."

"And you believed Anja." Han's face became more stern.

"Not anymore," Jacen said. "I've known you all my life, and you've never lied to me. Well, maybe exaggerated sometimes-but only for dramatic effect. Anyhow, I should have known you were telling the truth."

"A pretty girl with a pair of sad eyes can make it hard to see the truth sometimes," Han observed.

"Yeah," Jacen admitted, squirming a bit. "But hey, that's no excuse."

I'm sorry I doubted you."

Han put an arm around Jacen's shoulder and gave him a brief hug.

"Thanks, kid. You've got no idea how good it feels to hear you say that. Really makes me feel like we're a family again."

Jacen felt as if a weight had been lifted from his mind. He grinned around like an idiot at his father and mother, then at Jaina and Anakin.

Anakin's ice-blue eyes were rolled to one side in that odd expression he wore when solving a puzzle. Around them, the buzz of conversation in the eating hall rose and fell in random patterns.

"Okay, I think I've got it," Anakin said. "Nothing simpler."

Jaina smiled and ruffled her younger brother's dark hair affectionately. "All right, what does the master puzzle-solver of the galaxy think the solution is?"

"Solution to what?" Jacen wanted to know, reaching over to take a hot bread-puff. Two serving droids hustled in with trays of steaming foods, recipes sure to please the palates of any number of species. He thought briefly of the wild food fight they'd had just after they'd

first met Lowbacca-so much had changed in all that time.

Leia spread her hands on the polished table. "We still need to find out who the Black Sun infiltrators and operatives were. I'm hoping to thaw Czethros out from that block of carbonite he's in so that I can question him."

"I'd like to be there when you do that," Han Solo said. Half of his mouth quirked in a wry smile. "I have some experience with carbonfreezing. And besides, Czethros was an old ... acquaintance of mine."

Leia's dark eyes lit with amusement, and a dimple appeared in her cheek. "Yes, you might be of some help. I seem to remember it wasn't easy to get you unfrozen from carbonite and away from Jabba the Hutt.

But even if we work together to question Czethros, we don't know if he'll cooperate and give us any names."

"Wait. I have another idea," Anakin said.

"All right, kid, shoot," Han said encouragingly.

Anakin brushed his straight dark bangs away from his piercing blue eyes. "You haven't made any general announcement yet about capturing

Czethros, have you?"

Leia shook her head. "I've asked Nien Nunb to keep it quiet. We don't want Black Sun putting out a bounty on Czethros before we have a chance to interrogate him."

"Good." Anakin looked at his sister. "Did Czethros program in any specific destinations for his message beacons?"

Jaina sighed. "Afraid not. He had the message programmed in, but it's in some sort of unbreakable code. All we managed to learn for sure was the frequency he planned to use."

Anakin clapped his hands. "That should be enough." He directed his gaze back toward his parents. "This could be tricky. Here's what I suggest. Pick a planet and alert the people there that something important is about to happen and to watch for it."

"Go on," Jacen urged, interested in his brother's line of thinking.

"Then we send a message via direct beam only to that planet," Anakin said. "Use the message Czethros programmed, and sent it on the frequency he was planning to use." He shrugged. "Then sit back and wait to see what happens."

Han and Leia exchanged hopeful glances.

"Just might work," Han said. "We can fight the little takeovers one at a time, instead of all at once. Black Sun doesn't stand a chance that way."

"I knew I had one brother who was a genius," Jaina said with a teasing look at Jacen.

It was Anakin who blushed, though. He shrugged. "The biggest problem with my plan is that you'd probably have to do this dozens of times," he said.

Leia leaned over to give her younger son a kiss on the cheek, then stood briskly. "I guess I'd better get our people started on this right away, in that case. Before word leaks out." She smiled down at her husband. "I'll be in the comm center if you need me." Then she swept out of the room.

That evening, while Leia made strategic arrangements, more visitors poured into the Jedi academy—friends, family, dignitaries, and the occasional HoloNet news reporter. During this time, Anja found a moment to draw Han Solo aside and speak with him.

Han looked decidedly uncomfortable as they sat opposite each other on wooden benches in a small alcove. A narrow window slit in the stone

wall let in moonlight that splashed on the floor like a dividing line painted between them.

Anja took a deep breath, knowing that there was much she had to say.

She hardly knew where to begin. "I-I never thanked you," she stammered at last.

Obviously surprised, Han Solo sat up straighter. This wasn't what he had expected at all. "For what?" he asked with a hint of suspicion.

"For taking me in. For going to my planet and helping to stop the civil war there. For keeping Lilmit from supplying more weapons to my people. For putting in a good word with Master Skywalker for me, even though I obviously despised you.....

Anja's voice caught in her throat, and she swallowed back a sob of emotion. She remembered how Jacen often tried to lighten the mood when things got tense. "And thanks for not throwing me out the Millennium Falcon's airlock when you had the chance."

Han Solo seemed to relax a bit. "Hey, no one's perfect. I'm glad I was able to help."

"Your children helped me too."

"They're great kids, Jacen and Jaina," Han said with no small amount of fatherly pride.

"Did you know I tried to turn them against you?"

"It worked a little," Han admitted. "At least with Jacen. But the truth is stronger than hatred."

"I got close to your kids because I wanted to hurt you, because I believed you murdered my father and ruined my life. But once I got to know Jacen and Jaina, I started to understand that if anyone had ruined my life, it was me. I chose the wrong person to trust. I was always looking for someone to blame. I believed Czethros and his lies about you, because I wanted my problems to be somebody else's fault."

"And now?" Han asked.

"I don't want to hurt you anymore," Anja said. "My father was responsible for his own life-and probably for his own death-just like I'm responsible for my life and the way I've decided to live it so far.

I judged you before I ever got to know you. Can you ... forgive me?"

Han nodded. "I had my scoundrel days, too, you know. Did plenty of

things I'm not proud of Even though I didn't kill your father, I have a lot of other things I could feel guilty about. But that's long in my past now-put it all behind me and made a new life. It's possible, you know."

"Yes, I know. Even so, if my friends hadn't trusted me, I wouldn't have believed in myself." Anja felt a sense of relief But where did she go from here? "I'll have to find a job, I guess. A legal one, that is. I know I'm not cut out to be a Jedi Knight," Anja admitted.

"I never used to believe in all that Force mumbo jumbo, but I see now that it's real. It's just not me. I can't stay here at the Jedi academy. Know anyone who needs a good pilot?"

Han put a hand to his chin and thought for a moment. "I just might have a few ideas, at that."

Over the next two days, preparations continued for the great ceremony to honor the young Jedi Knights. Arrivals continued on the jungle moon as well, until nearly everyone at the Jedi academy had welcomed some visitor or other.

Zekk spent considerable time with old Peckhum, who had returned in the Thunderbolt. Tenel Ka's parents-Teneniel Djo and Isoldercame to see her, followed by Ta'a Chume, Tenel Ka's grandmother from Hapes, and Augwynne Djo, her great-grandmother from Dathomir.

In addition to Chewbacca, Lowie was surprised when his entire family showed up on Yavin 4. His parents, Mahraccor and Kallabow, had taken a brief leave from their jobs at the computer fabrication facility on Kashyyyk. His sister Sima had also managed to break away from her duties as a New Republic emergency pilot to come see her ginger-furred brother honored in the ceremony. Raynar's mother, Aryn Dro Thul, and his uncle Tyko-who were assisting the Chief of State in her investigation into Black Sun activities-were also very much in evidence, dressed in formal Alderaan colors as well as the insignias of the Bomaryn trading fleet.

Han and Leia spent as much time with their children as possible between planning sessions for the grand awards ceremony or conducting the Black Sun investigation. Anakin's best friend and fellow student Tahiri had the full attention of the Jedi historian Tionne whenever the silver-haired instructor was not teaching classes. When they were offduty, even See-Threepio, A-rtoo-Detoo, and Em Teedee enjoyed long droid conversations together, discussing the merits of various lubricants or the superiority of one type of motivator over another.

Master Skywalker himself welcomed many of his former students who had returned for the festivities. Looking unruffled and serene, he split his time, sometimes visiting with Leia and her family, sometimes catching up on news with former students, sometimes greeting visiting

dignitaries, and sometimes encouraging his students and trainees.

On the day of the actual ceremony, in the midst of all the furor, the companions managed to steal away to the platform on the top of the Great Temple and find some quiet time together. Anakin and Tahiri sat at one side of the platform, dangling their bare feet over the edge, while the fluffy creature Ikrit, their frequent companion, basked in the sun beside them.

At one corner of the platform, Raynar and the cinnamon-maned centaur girl, Lusa, sparred with stunsticks. Lowie, Em Teedee, Jaina, Zekk, and Anja arranged themselves along another side of the platform to watch the busy landing field. Having just finished taking care of his menagerie of animals, Jacen now joined his friends, his fluffy blue pet gort riding on his shoulder. Tenel Ka, just finished with her morning's calisthenics, dashed up one of the staircases at the four corners of the Great Temple to meet them.

When they were all together, Anja said, "I guess this is about as good a time as any to say good-bye. I'll be leaving after the ceremony."

"Why?" Jacen asked, sounding the slightest bit disappointed.

"Because I don't belong here," Anja said. "I've got to do something with my life, but being trained in the Force just isn't it."

"So, where are you going?" Zekk asked.

Anja shrugged. "I'm not sure, but I can't stay at the Jedi academy.

I'm not a Jedi. But you all are-you belong together."

"We will not always be together, however," Tenel Ka said. Lowie woofed his agreement.

"Right," Jaina added. "We all just had that long talk with Uncle Luke.

You know, the one that goes, 'Now that you're more or less a full Jedi, you have to think about what you want to do in life.'"

" Anja gave a wry smile as she threw her silky dark hair behind her shoulder. "That's not exactly the talk I had with him, but it's close enough."

"Well, hello..... A voice from behind startled them all. "Han told me I might be able to find you here."

"Lando!" Jaina jumped up and greeted their visitor with a hug.

Lando Calrissian's smile was as brilliant as his flowing cape in the

morning sun. "I'd like to thank you all personally for what you did to stop Czethros. Cloud City is perfectly normal again." He gave a slight bow, swirling his colorful cape. "Just like me, there are a lot of lucky business owners in the galaxy whose companies are intact because of what you did. They just don't know it. But I do, so I wanted to thank you." I They all assured Lando that he was very welcome.

"Now, since that piece of business is taken care of," Lando went on smoothly, "there's another reason I came up here this morning."

His flashing eyes fixed on Anja Gallandro. "My buddy Han tells me you might be in the market for a brand-new job. And I just happen to be in the market for a good pilot."

Anja jumped to her feet. Her face looked hopeful, and at the same time slightly suspicious. "I do need a job, but. . ." Her voice trailed off.

"But ... ?" Lando prompted.

"I was pretty rude to you the last few times we met. I can't believe you'd want to hire me."

Lando flashed his white teeth. "I try not to hold a grudge. Besides, I know what it's like trying to find honest work when you know all you

need is a chance." He held out a hand to Anja. "Would you mind being ... respectable for a while? It's all I've got to offer."

"I'll take it," she said, shaking his hand.

Instead of letting her hand go, Lando smoothly tucked it under his arm and began walking with her toward the stone steps, spilling details of the position. "Now, you understand it doesn't pay much at first, but there's plenty of room to advance in my businesses."

Anja's attention focused completely on Lando. "Fair enough, Calrissian. I can handle that. What about benefits? Do you use incentives?

Profit sharing?"

Lando threw back his head and laughed. "Young lady, I can see that we speak the same language."

As they approached the entrance to go down into the Great Temple, Anja looked back at her friends and waved. "I'll see you at the ceremony," she said, then returned her attention to Lando.

As the two disappeared, arm in arm, Jacen heard Anja say, "If you're really interested in giving people a chance to reform, I know this guy

named Lilmit. I think he could really use a job, too.....

Jacen grinned. Anja really had come a long way.

"Jacen, my friend?" It was Tenel Ka. "Would now be an appropriate time to ask about the item you intended to give me?"

"Sure. I brought it with me," Jacen said, reaching into the pocket of his rumpled brown jumpsuit. He held the object out to her. Irregular shards of translucent pearly pink dangled from a knotted cord of fine leather. "It's a necklace," he explained unnecessarily. "I made it from the shards of Nicta's gort egg. Many cultures consider it to be very precious-the egg, I mean." The gort sat angelically on his shoulder.

Perhaps it was a trick of the light, but Jacen could have sworn that some sort of liquid shimmered in Tenel Ka's gray eyes when she said, "It is beautiful, Jacen, my friend. Would you please assist me in putting it on?"

Jacen reached both arms beneath her red-gold warrior braids to tie the theng at the back of her neck.

Before he could finish, Tenel Ka pulled him into a strong embrace and said, "I will treasure your gift more than all the rainbow gems of Gallinore." Zekk put an arm around Jaina. "I don't have a necklace

for you, but you can be my copilot-or my pilot-anytime you want."

Resting her head on his shoulder, Jaina chuckled. "Don't think I won't take you up on that. Besides, necklaces aren't exactly my style."

Lowie looked thoughtfully, longingly up at the sky. He rumbled a mellow comment. "Indeed?" Em Teedee replied. "Well, I'm afraid I, for one, shall never understand these humans."

The grand audience chamber of the Great Temple was filled to overflowing. Thousands of friends, family, dignitaries, students, and other spectators crowded the stone benches. Leia Organa Solo and her husband Han stood with Master Luke Skywalker on the dais at the front of the room, flanked by Chewbacca, Artoo-Detoo, and See-Threepio.

It was the same dais on which they had stood more than two decades ago after the destruction of the first Death Star, to receive special medals from the struggling Rebellion. But this time the former heroes of Yavin were here to honor their children, their nieces and nephews, their students and friends-the new heroes of a new generation.

Stirring music soared through the air and reverberated from the ancient walls. To cheers and applause, Jacen, Jaina, Tenel Ka, Lowie, Zekk, Em Teedee, Anakin, and Anja advanced up the main aisle and climbed the stairs to the platform. As they reached the dais, Master Skywalker

welcomed each one with a medal. Next, Leia, Han, and Chewie offered thanks and congratulations on behalf of the New Republic.

The young Jedi Knights, along with Anja and Em Teedee, turned to face the audience. Raynar and Lusa also joined them, recognized for their assistance during the struggle against the misguided Diversity Alliance. Row upon row of friends and loved ones looked up at them with pride.

At a signal from Master Skywalker, the fully trained Jedi Knights in the first row of the audience drew their lightsabers and switched them on. Then Luke's former students held their glowing energy blades high in blazing tribute to the new heroes before them.

When the crowd had spent a full two minutes roaring in approval, the Jedi historian Tionne quietly moved to the front of the dais at one side. Raising the stringed instrument she conied, the silvery-haired Jedi began to play.

Slowly, a hush fell over the audience, and Tionne lifted her voice in song. Her ballad told of the rise and fall of the Shadow Academy, the defeat of the insidious Diversity Alliance, and how the threat of Czethros and Black Sun had been overcome. The melody carried a message of new hope as Tionne sang of bravery in the face of danger, betrayal and redemption, trust in the Force, and sacrifice.

New legends of the new Jedi.

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KEVIN J. ANDERSON and his wife, REBECCA MOESTA, have been involved in many STAR WARS projects. Together, they are writing the fourteen volumes of the YOUNG JEDI KNIGHTS saga for young adults, as well as creating the JUNIOR JEDI KNIGHTs series for younger readers. Rebecca Moesta also wrote the second trilogy Of JUNIOR JEDI KNIGHTS adventures (Anakin's Quest, Vader's Fortress, and Kenobi's Blade).

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