

Hero of Cartao.

Episode II.

Hero's Rise.

by Timothy Zahn.

Coming to a midair halt above the kilometer-wide grassy strip separating the Spaarti Creations manufacturing plant from the northern edge of the Binalie family estate, the heavy cargo lifters began lowering their magnetic grapples. Kinman Doriana couldn't see the ground beneath them from his position - the estate's hills were blocking his view-but he could guess that they were hovering over the last of the shattered war machines that had ended up there in the aftermath of the Separatists' assault on the plant two days earlier.

At least, Doriana thought unkindly, the Neimoidians commanding the occupying droid army had learned not to simply drive cleanup vehicles onto that forbidden stretch of grassland. Glancing around to make sure the copse of trees he was standing in wasn't under observation, he pulled out his holoprojector and keyed in the contact code.

The connecting light blinked on as the device linked first to the local comlink central switching office, then to his personal ship and its special HoloNet node, then across the vast expanse of the Republic to one of the dozen HoloNet nodes on Coruscant, and finally to the private desk of Supreme Chancellor Palpatine himself. Doriana watched the lifters as he waited, wondering if Palpatine would be there or out at yet another meeting.

The image of the most recognized face in the galaxy appeared in the air above the holoprojector. "Master Doriana," Palpatine said, nodding to his advisor. "You have good news?"

"Just the opposite, I'm afraid," Doriana admitted. "The Separatists are still holding Spaarti Creations, and they seem to have finally figured out that vehicles or people on the plant's southern border upset the Cranscoc twillers inside. They're clearing the last of the debris off the grassland now, and my guess is that by tonight they'll be able to get the plant retooled for whatever it is they want to build in there."

"Not a pleasant thought," Palpatine said gravely. "Are you familiar with the D-90 project?"

"No," Doriana said. "Is it one of ours?" Palpatine's lip twisted. "Hardly. It's an experimental combat droid, reputed to be as tough as the Trade Federation's D-60 assault droid, but more versatile."

"I see," Doriana said. The D-60 was a hulking, man-and-a-half-size version of the super battle droids the Trade Federation had debuted at the Battle of Geonosis. "How much more versatile?"

"Considerably," Palpatine said. "They'll be coordinated in small teams instead of entire army blocks so that they can be used as commando units as well as simple battlefield shock troops."

"An unpleasant thought, indeed," Doriana said. So, the Separatists finally had a new weapon on the plotting board. About time. "You think they've come here to begin production?"

"That's what our Intelligence people believe," Palpatine said. "Personally, I suspect there are still some system flaws and that they hope to use Spaarti to test and finalize the design. What's the current military situation?" "For the moment, basically stalemated," Doriana told him. "Commander Roshton and his clone troopers have gone to ground, some of them here on Lord Binalie's estate, the rest dispersed elsewhere. They've been harassing the droids wherever possible, but the Separatists have mostly been staying inside where we can't get at them without risking damage to the plant."

"Which neither we nor they want," Palpatine said. "What about the techs?"

"Binalie has a secret safe room-basically a shielded sub-sub-basement-

that connects with the tunnel to the plant," Doriana said. "The techs are hidden down there." "Communications?"

"The Separatists are still blocking the local comm system and the HoloNet node," Doriana told him. "But Roshton's reconfigured their comlinks somehow to get around it. They'll be able to move quickly if they get the chance."

"Then they shall have it," Palpatine said. "A Republic light cruiser is on its way with the necessary firepower to destroy the control ship orbiting above you. Once the droid army is helpless, I trust Commander Roshton won't have any trouble with the Neimoidian overseers and their techs."

"I'm sure he won't," Doriana agreed. "When can we expect this ship?"

"Possibly as early as tonight," Palpatine said. "Possibly not for another three days. It depends on how much resistance they run into along the way."

"Understood," Doriana assured him. "Thank you, Chancellor. We'll look forward to their arrival."

Palpatine gave him a tired smile. The war, Doriana knew, was weighing heavily on him. "Keep me informed."

The image vanished. Doriana broke the connection from his end and looked back at the lifters. They had the blackened hulk of the last ruined war machine in the air now and were towing it back toward the plant.

Planning to dump it elsewhere on the extensive Spaarti grounds, no doubt. Why the alien Cranscoc insisted that this particular stretch of land—and only this particular stretch—be kept unsullied not even Lord Binalie knew. Doriana watched until the lifters and their burden had vanished behind the jutting roof of the Spaarti plant, then keyed a different code into his holoprojector. He'd done his official job, reporting the situation to the man whose office paid him.

Now it was time to do the same for the man who gave him his orders. As usual, it took longer for the holoprojector to make this connection. Doriana cultivated his patience, gazing idly at the sky as he wondered what the Neimoidians were doing inside the plant. Now that the south lawn was clear, they would certainly try tonight to get the Cranscoc twillers to retool the plant. The only question was, which direction would that retooling take? To create the D-90 prototypes, as Palpatine thought? Or were they up to something else? In the distance, he could hear the hum of repulsorlifts... And suddenly, four small transports appeared over the hills between him and Spaarti Creations, a squadron of STAPs flying defensive screening around them, everything moving with the urgency of pilots who knew there were snipers in the area. The whole crowd shot past nearly overhead, then angled downward, the transports abruptly splitting formation and swinging into position on the four sides of the Binalie mansion a kilometer away. With the kind of precision only remote-controlled droids could achieve, all four dropped simultaneously to the ground. And from the hatches poured military-straight lines of battle droids.

"Report."

With a start, Doriana jerked his attention back to his holoprojector. The hooded image of Darth Sidious hovered over the small projection platform, his expression unreadable. "Your pardon, Lord Sidious," Doriana apologized hastily. "My attention was distracted."

To his relief, Sidious merely smiled thinly. "The Neimoidians have finally made a move?"

"Of a sort, yes," Doriana said, daring to split his attention between his master's image and the activity going on around the mansion below. The battle droids had been joined on the lawn now by a handful of the hulking D-60 assault droids and a pair of droidekas. Most of them settled into a defensive cordon around the mansion, but four of the assault droids were waiting instead just outside the transport nearest the mansion's front door. As he watched, two Neimoidians emerged from the hatch into the protective square of the assault droids and scuttled across the lawn toward the door.

"It looks like they've decided to have a talk with Lord Binalie," he told Sidious. "Will talking be of any use to them?" Doriana shrugged as the group vanished inside.

"Binalie certainly can't get the plant up and running any faster," he

said. "Maybe they want him to act as interpreter with the Cranscoc..." he seems to understand that skin-coloration language of theirs. "More likely they're seeking a hostage."

"Possibly," Doriana nodded. "That could be useful, providing Roshton is willing to play along."

"You will make it your business to see that he does," Sidious said bluntly. "That goes for that Jedi, Tories, as well. I don't want either of them making trouble until the Republic task force arrives." Doriana blinked. "You knew about that?"

Another thin smile. "Did you think you were my only source of information, Doriana?"

"Of course not, my lord," Doriana said hastily. Still, he couldn't help but feel a touch of disappointment. He'd rather hoped to deliver that particular tidbit of news himself.

"But information is useful only when someone is in position to exploit it," Sidious continued. "And we cannot allow either the Republic or Separatist forces to damage Spaarti Creations."

"I understand, my lord," Doriana said.

"Good," Sidious said. "Then carry out your orders." The image vanished. Doriana put the holoprojector away. The droids had finished forming their cordon around the mansion, the assault droids holding down the building's corners and entrances while the droidekas rolled watchfully around the perimeter. It didn't look like anyone was going to be getting in or out any time soon.

His eyes drifted across the grounds, wondering how Lord Binalie's employees were reacting to the sudden invasion. But the only person he could see was a quarter of the way around the mansion to the east: a gardener on his knees beside one of the sculpted bushes. Apparently the more observant workers had reacted by hustling themselves out of sight. The gardener looked up, mopping his forehead with a gloved hand...

And Doriana stiffened. That was no gardener.

It was Commander Roshton.

Hissing a curse under his breath, Doriana headed off toward Roshton, walking as quickly as he could without drawing undue attention from the droids, Darth Sidious's warning echoing through his mind. Roshton, the idiot, was going to ruin everything.

"No," Lord Pilester Binalie said firmly. "I'm going to simply sit by and let those monsters take up residence in my plant." "I understand your frustration," Jafer Tories soothed. "But I'm sure they're not doing any damage in there. They could have destroyed Spaarti from orbit if that was what they'd wanted."

"I know what they want: the same thing Doriana and the Republic want," Binalie growled. "The point is that the longer this silly dance goes on, the greater the chance someone will eventually get careless. When that happens, it'll be the end of Spaarti Creations."

"But the Republic's going to send help, aren't they?" Binalie's twelve-year-old son Corf spoke up from his chair at the other corner of the desk.

"Probably," Binalie told the boy grimly. "But I'm starting to think that more soldiers are the last thing we want." Tories frowned. "What do you mean?" "Just what I said," Binalie growled. "The Republic and Separatists are like a pair of dokriks fighting over a bone. What does it matter which of them is in charge when the plant gets destroyed?" "So what do you suggest?" Tories asked.

Binalie's lips compressed briefly. "That we get the Separatists out ourselves, now, before Roshton and his clone troopers can regroup to attack. Bribe them, blackmail them—even help them finish their work if they'll promise to get out afterward."

"You can't be serious," Tories protested, frowning. There was a whisper of warning from the Force; a sense of alien minds nearby. "Why not?" Binalie countered. "What are you worried about, Roshton's blatherings about treason?"

That's nothing but a bunch of-" He stopped as heavy footsteps suddenly sounded outside the office door. "What in the world?" he muttered, starting to rise to his feet.

With a crash, the door was shoved violently inward, the warped panel slamming to the floor and bouncing another two meters across the room.

Binalie dropped back into his chair with a curse, his hand darting toward one of the desk drawers. "No!" Tories snapped, reaching out with the Force to lock the other's arm in place.

He was just in time. Half a second later the monstrous metal shapes of two large combat droids strode into the room, the heavy blasters permanently attached to their forearms lifted and ready. Their heads and weapons swung once around the room as they searched for danger, and then they moved back to flank the doorway in guard positions.

Through the opening stepped a pair of brightly dressed Neimoidians. The one in the lead wore the blue and purple robes and black miter of a unit commander, while the other wore a simpler outfit of red and purple. His headgear was blue, with four twisted horns atop it. "Good day, Lord Binalie," the commander said in a stilted voice. "I trust we do not intrude?"

Tories looked a silent warning at Binalie, got merely a glare in return. But the other brought his hand up-empty-and let it drop onto the desktop. "Of course not," he growled sarcastically. "It's not like I have any actual work to do. What do you want?"

"Permit me to introduce myself," the spokesman said, sending glances at first Tories and then Corf. "I am Tok Ashel, Commander of the Cartao Expeditionary Army." He gestured to his companion. "This is Dif Gehad, Master Creator of New Products."

"And what new products are you trying to build in my factory?" Binalie asked. Gehad started to speak. - "Not so quickly, Lord Binalie," Ashel interrupted.

"First, let us have the rest of the introductions." His large red eyes turned pointedly to Tories.

"I'm Corf Binalie," Corf spoke up before either of the two men could answer, his voice strong and defiant. "This is my private tutor, Master Jafer. Does this mean there's no school today?"

Ashel made a sound like crumpling tin wrap. "It may, young one," he said, eyeing Tories. "What do you teach, Master Jafer?"

"A little of everything," Tories told him. "Ethics, wisdom, the ways of life."

"Ah-a philosopher," Ashel said, giving a dismissive wave of his hand and turning back to Binalie. "Now, to business." He gestured to Gehad.

"As you have surmised, we wish to use Spaarti Creations to work for us," the Master Creator said, his voice neat and precise. "But thus far we have been unable to restructure the assembly lines. You will tell me now how to do that."

Binalie shook his head. "I can't."

"Do not speak foolishness," Gehad warned. "You are director of this facility. You know everything there is to know about it."

"Of course I do," Binalie agreed. "Including what can and cannot be done. Only the Cranscoc twillers can manipulate the fluid tooling system." He lifted his eyebrows at Gehad. "I take it they haven't been willing to do so?"

"It was the ruins of our vehicles on the south lawn," Ashel said. "We now know about that taboo and have moved to correct it."

"But we do not intend to be stymied in that way again," Gehad added. "So I repeat: you will tell me how we may change the tooling ourselves."

"And I repeat, I can't," Binalie said. "But there are things I can do to help. I'd like to suggest a deal that-"

"You will not block us further!" Ashel snapped, flicking his fingers in an odd and probably obscene gesture. "Not you, and not the Republic forces hiding in the tunnel beneath the southern lawn. Oh, yes, we know they are there-we have tried twice to dislodge them and have now sealed the plant's exit against them. We also know the other end of the tunnel is somewhere on

these grounds. Do not deny it!"

"I can't do anything about the Republic forces," Binalie said, starting to sound angry himself. "What I can do, however, is help you..."

"And you will tell us how to restructure the machines," Ashel insisted again, even more stridently this time. "Or you will regret the consequences." The skin of Binalie's face hardened, and even with the masking influence of two alien minds at close range, Tories could feel Binalie's sense harden along with it.

Even the invasion of his home and the destruction of his office door had apparently not put Binalie off the idea of offering the Neimoidians a deal to get them out of his plant. But threats were something else entirely. "And what exactly is that supposed to mean?" he asked, his voice deceptively calm.

"It means this." Before Binalie could do more than inhale sharply, Ashel wrapped his long fingers around Corf's arm and hauled him out of his chair.

"The grub will go with us," the Neimoidian continued, pulling Corf close in front of him. "When you decide to cooperate, you may join us in the plant."

"Let him go," Binalie ground out. He was on his feet now, ignoring the droid blasters suddenly pointed at him. "I've told you already..."

"And do not consider too long," Ashel warned, backing to the door with Corf firmly in tow. The boy's eyes, Tories saw, had gone wide with fear. "We are patient beings, but we will not be patient forever."

Corf threw Tories a half frantic, half pleading look. But the Jedi had already measured the distances with his eyes, and even with the advantage of surprise he knew he couldn't take two combat droids before at least one of them got off a shot. And that didn't even take into account what other forces the Neimoidians might have waiting outside.

Which simply meant he would have to try something else. "Just a moment," he said primly, standing up. "The boy has two exams to complete today. I will not permit my schedule to be disrupted." The Neimoidians paused in the doorway, gazing at him with those expressionless alien faces. Tories stretched out toward their minds, wondering just how susceptible this species was to Jedi suggestion. He'd seldom used this trick, and never before with a Neimoidian. If they didn't buy into his manipulation, he might have to tackle those combat droids after all.

"The boy will come with us," Ashel declared at last. "If you choose, you may come with him."

"Thank you," Tories said, bowing in proper tutor fashion. Throwing a warning glance at Binalie, he stepped over to join the Neimoidians.

"But bring many lessons," Ashel added as they stepped back into the corridor.

There were, Tories noted, two more of the big droids waiting for them out there. Just as well he hadn't gone on the attack. "Lord Binalie is stubborn, even for a human. You may be with us for some time."

"Don't worry," Tories said, squeezing Corf's shoulder reassuringly. "I have everything I'll need."

The two Neimoidians and their assault droid escort were still in the mansion when Doriana finally reached Roshton. The commander was bending over the sculpted bush in front of him, his face carefully turned away from the visitor, pattering away industriously with a set of pruning scissors.

"What are you doing here?" Doriana hissed at him.

"Tendin' the plants, my lord," Roshton said in a quavering old voice, snipping off a couple more leaves.

"Stop it, Roshton," Doriana ground out. "It's me."

Roshton angled an eye cautiously up at him. "Ah-Master Doriana," he said, abandoning both the accent and the phony garden work. "You're just in time for the show."

"What show?" Doriana asked. "What are you doing?"

"You'll see," Roshton said, shifting his eyes to the mansion and the ring of droids. "Ever seen a droideka go bounce?"

"Uh... no."

"Then you've got a treat in store." Roshton pulled the front of his tunic slightly back to reveal a comlink hidden behind the flap. "Number seven, stand by... now."

And from the direction of the house came the thundercrack of an explosion. Doriana twisted around in time to see one of the droidekas, still in wheel form, soaring over the heads of its startled companions. Behind it, a blackened hole in the ground trailed a strand of smoke. "Number ten: now," Roshton said.

There was a second explosion, this one squarely at the feet of one of the assault droids. The big machine lost its balance and toppled backward to land with a sickening thud. "Where are they firing from?" Doriana demanded, looking around in bewilderment. There were no clone troopers in sight, and precious little cover anywhere nearby for them to be hiding in. "Roshton?"

"Later," Roshton said. "Five and eight: go."

Two more explosions ripped into the defensive line, each sending a pair of battle droids flying across the neatly trimmed lawn. "And here come the soft ones," Roshton added as the brightly colored Neimoidian robes appeared in the doorway. "This should be fun."

"Hold it," Doriana said, squinting across the distance. Nearly hidden in the folds of the robes... "Hold your fire, Roshton," he repeated urgently.

"They've got Binalie's son with them."

Roshton muttered something under his breath. "Rotten cowards," he said contemptuously. "They can't just..."

He broke off, a tight smile suddenly twisting his lips. "Well, well. Cowards and fools both."

"What?" Doriana asked, frowning.

"They've got Corf Binalie, all right." Roshton gestured. "They've also got Jafer Tories."

He lifted his eyebrows at Doriana. "Like I said. This should be fun."

Two more explosions, the third and fourth by Tories' count, shook the house as Ashel and Gehad hurried them down the entry hallway to the mansion's main door.

"I do not understand," Gehad said nervously as they peered outside. "Where are they shooting from?" "What does it matter?" Ashel bit out, gesturing to the droids. "Droids! Form a cordon to the transport!" Obediently, the droids abandoned their encirclement positions, scurrying or rolling or lumbering, as their capabilities allowed, toward the vehicle squatting a dozen meters away. They were lining up into two rows, their weapons pointing outward, when another explosion caught the transport's right front corner, bouncing the vehicle a meter into the air and leaving a section of armor plating black and twisted.

"This is impossible!" Gehad shouted. "How do they do this?"

"Ask questions later!" Ashel growled, pointing toward the Spaarti plant. "Look! Here is our air support."

And impressive air support it was, too, Tories had to admit. A hundred STAPs had appeared in the sky, sweeping in from both east and west as they converged on the Binalie estate.

But the STAPs were still out of range, the droids in their cordon had their weapons and sensors aimed outward as they searched for their unseen attackers, and the Neimoidians were far too preoccupied with their own safety to be watching their prisoners. Time to go to work.

"Now," Ashel said, ungluing himself from the partial protection of the doorway and sprinting between the rows of droids toward the transport. Grabbing Corf's arm, Gehad started to follow, tugging the boy along behind him. They didn't get far. Reaching forward, Tories caught the boy's other arm and planted his feet solidly into the ground just outside the mansion's doorway. For a moment, Corf was stretched between them like a pull-war cable, and then Gehad stopped and spun around. "What do you-?" he snarled. He never

finished his question. In that same brief second, the two combat droids that had been marching along a meter behind them, caught offguard by Tories' sudden halt, arrived at either side of the Jedi. And in a single smooth motion, Tories reached beneath his robe, pulled out his lightsaber, and ignited it. Gehad gave a little deep-throated scream, letting go of Corf's arm as if he'd been burned and scuttling away from him. Tories gave the boy a quick shove back through the doorway as he slashed the lightsaber across the upper chest of the droid to his left. The brilliant green blade sliced through the thick acertron armor like it was wrapping plastoid, and the top third of the droid slid off and fell with a crash onto the ground. The rest of the machine, caught in a trick of balance, remained standing stolidly upright like a beheaded corpse patiently awaiting further orders. Tories didn't wait to see whether or not it would fall. The assault droid to his right was already reacting to this unexpected threat, twisting at its hips to try to bring its blasters to bear. Tories swiveled to his right to meet it, swinging his lightsaber around and down across the raised forearms above the mounted blasters and dropping them onto the ground. His second cut took off the droid's legs; even before the pieces clattered to the ground, he leaped backward through the doorway into the mansion. "Go!" he ordered the Neimoidians, lifting his lightsaber into guard position. As if in emphasis, another nearby explosion blew clouds of dirt into the air. The two aliens didn't need further encouragement. Turning, they sprinted down the line of droids and scampered into the transport. The surviving droids followed, closing up the cordon neatly behind them. A minute later the transport, joined now by three more of the vehicles, was heading east at high speed. "Wow," Corf breathed.

Tories turned to see the boy gazing up at him, a stunned expression on his face. "You all right?" he asked.

Mechanically, Corf nodded. "I never saw anything like that," he said. "Just doing what I was trained for," Tories said. With one last look outside, he closed down his lightsaber. "Let's go tell your father you're all right," he said. "And after that," he added grimly, "you may both want to go to your safe room. This could get nasty."

There they go," Roshton commented as the last of the droids piled into the transports. The first vehicle, the one with the Neimoidians aboard, had already left the ground and was clawing for distance, the STAP escort forming up around it. "They won't be trying that again for awhile."

"Probably not," Doriana agreed, his eyes still on the remains of the D-60s that had taken Tories maybe half a second to turn to scrap. He'd been around Jedi much of his life, but never before had he actually witnessed one in full combat mode.

And for the first time he began to truly see why Sidious wanted them eliminated.

"Estate units, secure," Roshton was saying into his comlink. "City, forest units: stand ready."

With an effort, Doriana pulled his attention back to the military situation. "What do you mean, stand ready?" he asked. "And how did you manage those shots?"

"Don't be dense," Roshton chided. "That was nothing but a set of strategically placed, remote-controlled land mines. You must not have noticed all the landscaping being done around the grounds the past two days."

"I had other things on my mind," Doriana said tartly, watching the fleeing transports. Instead of taking the straightest route back to Spaarti Creations, they were swinging far to the east. What in?...

And then, he got it. "They're avoiding the south lawn," he said. "They don't want to risk anything else crashing on it and irritating the Cranscoc."

"Exactly what I thought they'd do," Roshton said with grim satisfaction. "Forest unit: secure. City unit: fire at will."

Abruptly, a dozen blaster bolts sizzled up from the northern edge of

Foulahn City, blowing apart STAPs and peeling chunks of armor from the transports.

"What are you doing?" Doriana demanded. "You've chased them away. Isn't that enough?"

"No," Roshton said. "City unit: take them down."

The STAPs were returning fire now, and that whole section of sky seemed to be filled with multicolored blaster fire. Doriana found himself holding his breath as he watched the transports dodging and staggering, trying desperately to reach the safety of the plant. If Roshton's zealousness got the Neimoidians killed - or worse, if it panicked them into pulling their droids out of the factory for a counterattack...

And then, something else in the sky caught his eye. Just a pair of specks, but as he watched they grew visibly larger. "Roshton!" he snapped, fumbling out a compact set of electrobinoculars and switching them on. "We've got company."

"Let me see," Roshton ordered, reaching for the instrument.

Doriana twitched it away, pressing his eyes against the lenses.

A single glance was enough. "It's a pair of C-9979 landing ships," he told Roshton, handing over the electrobinoculars. "Looks like all your little stunt accomplished was to persuade the Separatists to bring in reinforcements."

The Neimoidian commander's careless choice of a landing spot two days earlier had enabled Roshton's clone troopers to slow down their troop deployment long enough for the Republic forces to evacuate the Spaarti Creations complex. With this second wave, the Separatists made no such error. The landing ships put down to the west and northeast of the city, in open territory where no close-in attack would be possible, and immediately began deploying their troops and vehicles.

Roshton had barely enough time to order his men to pull back before the MTT transports and AAT battle tanks made their orderly way through the streets of Foulahn City, along the serviceways of Triv Spaceport, and even into the mostly uninhabited wooded hills west and north of the Spaarti complex. The AATs took up position at official buildings and strategic road intersections, while the MTTs quickly found places to dump their deadly cargos of battle droids, super battle droids, assault droids, and droidekas. By late afternoon, every square meter for fifteen kilometers around Spaarti Creations was in Separatist hands. With one small exception.

"One of the C-9979S is here," Roshton said, tapping a spot on the holomap due west of Foulahn City. "Its droids and AATs are occupying western Foulahn, plus all the territory west and north of the Spaarti complex. The other one's here-" he indicated a point near the Quatreen River where it meandered its way between the city and the Triv Spaceport to the northeast of it"-where they can cover the eastern city and the spaceport. I hear some units have gone a ways up the Quatreen and into Navroc City, too, but I don't have independent confirmation of that."

Tories looked over at Binalie. The other's face looked pale, but that could have just been the lighting. With only limited power supplies available here in the depths of the Binalie family safe room-and with no desire to attract notice from the droids occupying the main house upstairs-Binalie had elected to shut down everything except the permlights. "So where does that leave us?" Tories asked.

"Basically, stuck in here," Roshton said heavily. "My troops are doing what they can to harass the droids, but we don't have nearly enough manpower to push them back to the landing ships. Master Doriana tells me Supreme Chancellor Palpatine has promised help, but that could be as much as several days away.

"And meanwhile, your clones and the droids tear Foulahn City to shreds," Binalie growled.

"We're keeping the war out of your plant, aren't we?" Roshton retorted. "Isn't that what you wanted?"

"What I wanted was for the whole cursed war to stay off my world," Binalie shot back.

"I'm afraid those choices aren't always ours to make," Doriana spoke up calmly.

"It certainly wasn't Commander Roshton's idea to bring the war here."

"So we just sit here and let them wreck our city?"

"If I were you, I'd focus on the central issue," Roshton said tartly. "Namely, once the sun sets they'll be able to get the Cranscoc to retool the plant. Once that happens, you can wave goodbye to any hope for your city or your world."

"What do you mean?" Corf asked, huddling a little closer to his father.

"The Separatists are about to launch a brand-new line of assault droids," Roshton told him. "Once they get it up and running, every hour they spend in there means a stronger droid army on Cartao. If they're not stopped, sooner or later they'll have enough troops to defeat anything the Republic can spare to throw against them."

He looked back at Binalie. "And at that point, the only way to stop them. . ."

"No," Binalie said flatly. "Don't even think it."

"You think I want Spaarti destroyed?" Roshton asked, his voice icy calm. "Those new cloning tanks we were building could conceivably turn the war around in a matter of months, and this is the only place we can fine-tune the production quickly enough to get the most efficient design possible. But at the same time, we can't let this new D-90 assault droid line get started, either. I'm sorry, but we're running low on options."

"Just a moment," Doriana said, straightening up and pulling a holoprojector from a belt pouch. "We may have news."

He flicked it on, and an image of an Iktotchi head appeared over the projection platform, its distinctively shaped horns curving down toward its shoulders. The words were too faint for Tories to hear, but suddenly Doriana smiled. "Thank you, General," he said, standing up and walking over to Roshton. "Commander, General FyefeeTiis of the Republic Light Cruiser Whipsaw would like a word with you."

He took the chair beside Roshton, holding up the holoprojector so that both of them could see and hear. Without waiting for an invitation, Tories moved over to the seat on Roshton's other side. Doriana flashed him a look, but said nothing.

"...with ten fully loaded LAAT/i gunships at your disposal," General Tiis was saying as Tories sat down.

"That's only four hundred troops," Roshton pointed out doubtfully. "Not going to do much good against three C-9979s' worth of droids and AATs unless you can knock out their control ship."

"Thank you for the suggestion," Tiis said dryly. "We had in mind to do just that. The gunships will be dropped in five minutes; ETA your position in thirty. We'll commence our own attack on the control ship in fifteen." The image vanished. "How's that going to work with the Cranscoc timing?" Doriana asked.

Binalie shrugged as he consulted his chrono. "Sunset's in about ten minutes. By the time the gunships arrive, it'll be nearly full dark."

"So we have a chance of getting the Separatists out before they can retool," Doriana concluded. "Excellent. What's the plan from this end, Commander?"

"Basically, to engage the enemy," Roshton said, pulling out his comlink.

"Between the incoming gunships and my own clone troopers, we should be able to cause a fair amount of chaos out there. With luck, that may distract the Neimoidians long enough for us to get in through the tunnel and retake the plant."

"You can't do that," Binalie objected.

"We'll be as careful as we can," Roshton said.

"That's not what I meant," Binalie said. "That Neimoidian commander-Ashel-said they'd sealed their end of the tunnel."

"Sealed it so well that a Jedi with a lightsaber can't get in?" Roshton shook his head. "I doubt that very much."

"You'll still be risking damage to Spaarti," Doriana pointed out. "Why not wait until the control ship has been destroyed? The Neimoidians certainly won't put up a fight once their army's out of commission."

"Two reasons," Roshton said. "One, because I wouldn't put it past Separatists to start wrecking things as soon as they know they've lost. And two-" he grimaced. "I should be out there with my men, not skulking around down here. The sooner I can get into action, the better."

"That's a pretty poor basis for tactical decisions," Doriana warned. "And Lord Binalie is right: we don't want any fighting inside the plant."

"Tell that to the Neimoidians," Roshton said shortly. "As of nineteen minutes from now, that'll be their decision, not mine."

"Just a minute," Tories said slowly as Roshton lifted his comlink, bits and pieces of an idea starting to swirl around in his mind. A strange, dangerous idea, but one that might work for all that. "What if we could get all the droids to come outside to fight?" "And how do you persuade them to do that?" Binalie growled. "Neimoidians are cowards-they wouldn't just send their guards marching away. Especially not with a possible tunnel attack to guard against."

"Unless they thought the tunnel was secure," Tories pointed out. "And thought the factory perimeter wasn't." Binalie blinked. "You've lost me."

"Of course," Roshton said, sitting up straighter. "Like I said, they know a Jedi can probably break through the tunnel. They also know, from bitter experience, what it's like to face one in battle."

"So what are you suggesting?" Doriana asked, frowning. "That we put Master Tories outside with your clone troopers?"

"Exactly," Roshton said. "Leading a charge against, say, the plant's east door. They'd have no choice but to throw everything they have at us." Doriana snorted gently. "Sounds suicidal."

"Not for a Jedi," Binalie said, his voice and sense suddenly tense with cautious hope as he saw a chance of getting his factory back intact. "You could do it, Master Tories. I know you could."

"Please?" Corf added, gazing pleadingly at Tories. "Just a moment," Doriana put in. "I'm not at all sure I can authorize an action like this. An attack of any sort will put the plant at serious risk."

"It's that, or the plant stays in Separatist hands," Roshton pointed out.

"Who's side are you on here, anyway?"

"Don't be insulting," Doriana said coldly. "You want to keep the enemy busy while the Whipsaw tries to take out the control ship, go right ahead. But keep away from Spaarti."

"Trust us, Master Doriana," Roshton said. "Or rather, trust in the Jedi." Doriana grimaced. "Well, when you put it that way... all right." Roshton looked at Tories. "Master Tories?"

"Let's see first if I can get through the droids upstairs," Tories said, getting to his feet.

"Let's see if we can get through them," Roshton corrected, standing up to join him. "Like I said, I need to be with my men." "You're both insane," Doriana declared. "But if everyone else is going, I might as well, too."

Roshton shook his head. "Sorry. No offense, but I don't want any bureaucrats getting in the way."

"None taken," Doriana assured him. "But as the Supreme Chancellor's representative here, I not only have the right to come with you, but I'm more or less required to do so." Roshton grimaced. "Fine-have it your own way. Then if we're ready...?" Corf took a breath - "No," Tories said firmly before the boy could speak. "You and your father are staying right here." "But-"

"Corf," Binalie said warningly.

The boy subsided. "Right," Roshton said, clicking on his comlink. "Let's get this off the launch pad."

Doriana never did learn how many droids the Neimoidians had left inside the Binalie mansion. All he knew was that there were eight of them between the three humans and the outside door. Tories dealt with all eight swiftly, efficiently, and amazingly quietly.

There were a few others on patrol outside, strutting around in the gathering dusk as if they owned the place. The Jedi dealt with those, too.

It was over five kilometers to the staging area Roshton and his lieutenant had settled on during their brief comlink communication. Fortunately, two of the clone troopers had managed to sneak a small landspeeder through the droid patrols and were waiting for them at the eastern edge of the Binalie estate. A short ride, with frequent zigzags and occasional pauses under cover, and they were there.

The clone trooper lieutenant was waiting when the landspeeder pulled up, standing quietly in the concealment of a group of trees perhaps a kilometer from the blank walls of the Spaarti plant. "Welcome, Commander," he greeted Roshton as the newcomers stepped up to him. "Glad you could make it."

"So am I," Roshton said. "Situation?"

"I've pulled together two hundred troops," the lieutenant said, gesturing around him. Doriana looked around, but wherever the troops were hiding, they were doing a good job of it. "The rest are still in the city, dodging the droids' house-to-house search," the lieutenant continued. "At last report the gunships were still approaching from the south; they should reach missile range in approximately five minutes, and laser-cannon range two minutes after that. Their first salvo will be our troops' signal to attack."

"What about the control ship?" Roshton asked.

The lieutenant nodded his helmet slightly upwards. "That attack seems to have already begun."

Doriana looked up. It was difficult to tell through the light clouds drifting across the sky, but he thought he could see faint flickers of laser fire. "Any idea how it's going?" he asked.

"General Tiis hasn't taken the time to keep us up to date," the lieutenant said, a bit dryly.

"That's all right," Roshton said. "If and when he destroys it, it should be easy to figure out. What's the local enemy status?"

"The Number Two C-9979 is approximately three kilometers to our south," the lieutenant said. "Most of their troops have been deployed to the spaceport and eastern Foulahn City, but there are at least three AATs and probably two hundred battle droids standing by on guard duty."

"Three kilometers," Doriana said, peering off that direction at the deceptively cheery city lights in the distance. "Isn't that a little close?"

"It's extremely close," Roshton agreed. "And deliberately so. If you'd ever fought the Neimoidians before, you'd know they dearly love overwhelming odds. I'm betting that the chance to catch our group in a crossfire will be too tempting for them to pass up."

He turned to Tories. "Any last thoughts or suggestions, Master Tories?" For a moment, Tories gazed out toward the wall of the plant, now little more than a vague shape against the darkening sky. Doriana gazed in turn at the outline of Tories' profile, watching the glint of his white hair in the dim light, wondering what kind of thoughts were going through that Jedi-trained mind.

How did Jedi think, he wondered suddenly. He knew something of how they acted and reacted, and as the man who often delivered Palpatine's messages to the Jedi Council, he had long since learned how to use their concerns and priorities to persuade them to do what he wanted.

But how exactly did they think? Was it basically the same as normal people? Or was there something about their training that left them more alien than any of the species making up the Republic?

In the distance to the south came the faint sound of multiple explosions. As it was joined by the stutter of blaster fire, Tories seemed to straighten fully up. "Nothing comes to mind, Commander," he said, sliding his lightsaber from beneath his robes. "Let's do it."

He set off toward Spaarti Creations, walking with a swift, firm pace. Three steps into the trip, he ignited his lightsaber, the green blade blazing upward like a beacon as he strode off into the darkness. "Well, don't just stand there, Lieutenant," Roshton said.

"Yes, sir," the other said, sounding a bit startled by the Jedi's bold move. "All troops: advance."

Doriana felt his breath catch in his throat. Suddenly, the area around them was swarming with clone troopers, emerging from shadows or piles of leaves or from beneath camouflage ground covers. They set off behind Tories, forming into neat ranks as they went.

Roshton was saying something. "I'm sorry?" Doriana said, tearing his eyes away from the silent soldiers.

"I asked if the Supreme Chancellor's representative would care to join us," the commander repeated as he slipped on a clone trooper headset.

"Thank you, but I think I'll stay here," Doriana said, getting his mind back to business. "I've already seen your men in action, but I haven't had a chance to observe General Tiis's troops."

He couldn't see Roshton's expression in the darkness, but there was no mistaking the cynical edge in his voice. "Of course," the commander said.

"Shall I leave you a guard?"

"That won't be necessary," Doriana said. "But I'd like to borrow your other comlink, if I may, so I can keep up with what's happening." "Sure," Roshton grunted, pulling out his belt comlink. "Over there behind that thick tree would probably be a good place to observe from." Doriana smiled to himself. It amazed him sometimes how easily people seemed to think they could offend him. "Thank you, Commander," he said calmly. "I'll expect a full report when you return."

They'd made it perhaps halfway to Spaarti Creations when the first response came from the picket line around the plant. Blaster bolts began to sizzle across the distance as the droids opened fire, passing harmlessly between the marching soldiers or bouncing almost as harmlessly off their armor. Tories peered ahead into the gloom as his lightsaber deflected away the bolts that came his direction, using the light of the enemy's own fire to see how they were configuring their battle line. The droids directly between them and the plant's east door were standing fast, while more droids were hurrying from north and south of that position to join them.

"Looks like this whole section of the picket line is pulling in to face us," Roshton murmured from beside him.

"Yes," Tories agreed, looking back over his shoulder. All he could see back there were the lights of the city and spaceport. "Any sign of that crossfire yet?"

"Two AATs and about fifty droids have just headed northeast," Roshton said. "We should see them soon. Ah."

Tories turned back. The plant's east door had opened, revealing a new set of droids hurrying through to join the picket line. "Here come the reinforcements," Roshton said. "I'd guess we'll be seeing those AATs very soon."

And with that, Tories knew, it was time to go. "How long can you hold out against them?" he asked, deflecting one last bolt and then closing down his lightsaber.

Roshton threw him a sideways look, wrapping his free hand around his headset's voice pickup. "What do you have in mind?"

"We're assuming they've largely emptied the plant of combat droids," Tories told him. "If I can get inside, I should be able to get the drop on the Neimoidians. If they're as cowardly as you say, maybe I can persuade them to surrender even if Tiis isn't able to take out the command ship."

"How do you expect to get in?" Roshton asked. "They'll have picket lines at all the doors."

"Leave that to me," Tories said, nodding to the left. "But I have to go before they close off that gap. So again: how long can you hold out?"

"As long as necessary," Roshton said, glancing around as he released his grip on his voice pickup. "Lieutenant: looks like there's a small hollow ahead and to the right. We'll deploy in defensive formation there." He looked at Tories again. "Good luck."

Tories nodded and turned to the left, taking a moment to get his bearings. Then, stretching out to the Force, he dropped into a crouch and ran.

Jedi were capable of incredible bursts of speed when necessary, at least over short distances. Tories used every bit of that capability, his legs pumping in a blur against the ground as he slipped around the end of the picket line now beginning to close into a semicircle around the beleaguered clone troopers. A pair of droid stragglers suddenly loomed in front of him in the darkness and then collapsed into broken rubble as he used the Force to shove them backward. By the time the burst of energy and speed faded and he trotted to a halt, he was standing at the southeast corner of the plant, just clear of the forbidden south lawn, facing a sheer, three-story-high wall.

He gazed up at the dark slab rising above him. Three stories was an impossible jump, at least for him. But halfway up the wall, a distance he could reach, was a line of louvered air vents, each about ten centimeters across.

He could only hope Lord Binalie's father had built the vents and louvers with the same ruggedness with which he'd built everything else in Spaarti Creations. Getting a good grip on his lightsaber, making sure his hand was safely away from the activation stud, he bent his knees, stretched out to the Force, and jumped.

He was near the top of his arc when he spotted the nearest vent, dimly lit by the flashes of laser and blaster fire coming from Roshton's position. With a quick flick of his mind, he reached out to the louvers, angling them up into a horizontal position.

And as his upward momentum slowed to a halt, he slipped his lightsaber hilt between two of the louvers.

The metal creaked in protest as his full weight came onto the hilt, but to his relief the louvers held. Stretching out to the Force, he pulled down hard against the wedged lightsaber, hurling himself upward again.

He made it with three centimeters to spare, catching the edge of the roof with his outstretched fingertips and heaving himself the rest of the way up to sprawl onto his belly on the cold permacrete. Swiveling around, he leaned partway over the edge, extricating his lightsaber hilt from the louvers and calling it back to his hand.

The blaster fire in the east seemed to be intensifying as he slipped silently across the roof toward the nearest skylight. He reached it, rubbed off some of the collected grit with his sleeve, and peered inside.

The factory floor below was deserted. He stretched out to the Force, trying to track down the agitated alien minds he could sense beneath him. Further to the west, perhaps? Yes, he decided: somewhere a little ways west of his position. He frowned, trying to visualize the layout of the plant... Of course. Cowardly or merely very cautious, the Neimoidians would have set up shop in Production Area Four, where they could keep an eye on the tunnel leading to the Binalie estate.

He set off that direction, keeping a wary eye overhead for wandering STAR patrols. But all the ones he could see were a good distance away, either swooping behind him to the east near Roshton's position, or else doing tight circles around the C-9979 landing ship over near the plant's west door. The cacophony from Roshton's position was definitely growing louder, possibly the droids from the landing ship now close enough to add their strength to the attack. A new sound shrieked through the air, and he turned in time to see a Republic gunship dive toward the ground, sweeping the droid positions with rapid-fire laser fire. It swung upward again, and was cutting around for another pass when it exploded in a brilliant red-and-yellow fireball. And then he was at the skylight over the Area Four control station. Again cleaning off a section of the transparisteel, he looked down.

There they were, directly below him on the control platform: the two Neimoidians who had earlier invaded Lord Binalie's office, plus a few more in much drabber clothing, all gathered together around a plotting display that had been set up in front of the Cranscoc twillers. The Master Creator, Gehad, was jabbing at something on the display, apparently arguing with Commander Ashel about it. Milling alertly around the control platform were a half dozen battle droids, their attention and blasters turned outward. The skylight's fastening catch was at the inside base directly across from Tories. Reaching out with the Force, he undid it and swung the skylight open on its hinges. Taking a deep breath, he dropped through the opening.

He landed on the platform directly behind Commander Ashel, his knees bending to absorb the impact. Ashel had time to twitch, and someone else had time to give a startled squeak, before Tories was upright again with his arm firmly around Ashel's chest and the business end of his lightsaber pressed just as firmly against the side of the Neimoidian's head. "Everyone stay still," he warned. But the droids' reflexes were apparently set on hair-trigger. Before Tories could say more, or Ashel could say anything at all, they whirled toward the platform, their blasters spitting fire toward him. Tories took a long step away from Ashel and the others, igniting his lightsaber and whipping it against the incoming blaster bolts. Two seconds later, all six droids lay shattered and smoking, destroyed by their own backscattered fire. Before the stunned Neimoidians could react, Tories took another long step back and regained his grip on Ashel's robes. "Let's try that again," he said mildly. "Everyone stay still."

"What do you want?" Ashel asked, his voice shaking.

"I want this to be over," Tories told him. He glanced at the Cranscoc twillers crouching down in front of the control system mud flow, wondering how they were taking all this.

But if they were worried, surprised, or even fully aware of what was going on, he couldn't see it. "Contact the command ship and order them to surrender."

"Impossible." Ashel made a cautious gesture toward the ruined droids. "We cannot communicate except through the droids, and you have destroyed them all."

"Really," Tories said. It was almost certainly a lie, but there was an easy way to call the other's bluff. "Fine. Come on."

"Where do we go?" Gehad asked timorously.

"It just so happens I know where there are other droids you can use," Tories told him. "And watch it. I doubt you want the kind of trouble I can make for you."

Keeping a grip on Ashel's robe, he led the way down the platform steps. The Neimoidians' sealing of the tunnel exit had been achieved by the simple procedure of welding the leading edge of the ramp solidly to the floor, and it took him only a couple of seconds to cut through the weld with his lightsaber. Ashel quivered in his grip as he did so, but said nothing.

Their footsteps echoed eerily as they headed east through the empty plant. Tories kept alert for a surprise attack, but apparently the Neimoidians really had sent all the rest of the droids outside.

The battle was still going on as they reached the east door and stepped out into the night air. "There are your droids," Tories said, giving Ashel an imperative push toward the light and noise. "Let's go talk to them."

"You cannot be serious," the Neimoidian protested, cringing back against Tories' grip. "We are not equipped for battle."

"Too bad," Tories said. "But if that's the only way to stop them..."

He broke off as, abruptly, the circle of blasters around Roshton's position fell silent. Something in the sky to the left caught his eye, and he looked over as a pair of STAPs plummeted to the ground.

He craned his head to look up into the night sky. There, almost directly above him, was the fading light of an expanding gas cloud.

General Tiis and the Whipsaw had come through.

"I guess we won't need to talk to the droids, after all," he commented. He could see movement from Roshton's position now as the clone troopers abandoned their positions, running toward him and the plant now wide open behind him.

"Come on," he added, returning his lightsaber to his belt and nudging the Neimoidians toward the approaching troops.

The two groups met halfway. "I see you've been busy," Roshton greeted Tories as he trotted to a halt, gesturing his troops to continue on toward the plant.

"What's it like inside?"

"Empty, as far as I could tell," Tories told him. "The tunnel's been unsealed, too, if you want to get the techs back in."

"Excellent," Roshton said in grim satisfaction. "We'll get the Cranscog to undo any retooling they did, then get back to work."

"I doubt the Neimoidians got very far with their retooling," Tories said.

"Speaking of which, what should I do with them?"

Roshton glanced past him toward the plant. "Would you mind taking them to Commander Bratt? He's in one of the gunships heading over to shut down the Number Two C-9979."

"No problem," Tories said. "I'll see you later."

Roshton nodded and hurried off after his men. Tories started his own party off in the opposite direction. "It is not yet over," Ashel warned as they walked.

"We have not yet been defeated."

"You just keep thinking that," Tories said. They'd reached the site of Roshton's stand now, and he paused for a moment, gazing across the battlefield. The ground was almost literally covered with the wreckage of droids, with the bodies of probably a dozen clone troopers lying among the debris, their armor no longer white. Fires were still burning in the remains of a couple of vehicles, one of them the gunship Tories had seen being destroyed. Standing amid the general carnage were probably a hundred more droids, still upright yet with an oddly sagging look about them, where the loss of their control ship had left them.

He was still gazing at them when, with a sort of collective twitch, they came back to life.

For perhaps half a second the sheer unexpectedness of it froze him to the spot. But for the Neimoidians, that half-second was all the time they needed. At a barked word from Ashel, the Neimoidians dropped flat on the ground.

And Tories found himself standing alone in the middle of a ring of blasters. There was no time for anything fancy, and literally nowhere to go but up. He leaped up and sideways, igniting his lightsaber and slashing behind him as he arced over the revived droid army, trusting in the Force to guide his hand and deflect the shots. He hit the ground running and dodging, heading away from the plant toward the city, a hail of blaster bolts nipping at his robes.

"Yes, run, Jedi," Ashel's mocking voice wafted after him, more painful even than the blaster bolt near-misses. "Tell us again of this trouble you can make for us."

Tories didn't answer. Ahead, he could hear the sounds of renewed blaster fire coming from Foulahn City, and from the sense of startled anguish rolling over his mind it was clear that the rest of the Republic forces had been taken as much by surprise as he had. Unless he could get to them in time, to lend his strength to theirs, the battle would be lost.

He couldn't.

And it was.

"I guess the Separatists have finally learned from their past mistakes," Doriana commented as he, Tories, and Binalie stood on one of the mansion's north-facing balconies. "They must have found a way to make a control matrix compact enough that they could bring a backup down to the planet surface. My

guess is that it's probably in one of the landing ships. Not that it really matters."

"And not that we'll ever know for sure," Binalie said bitterly, shivering in the cold night air. "They're all dead, then?"

"Dead, or scattered," Tories said quietly, and Doriana could hear the pain and self-reproach in the Jedi's voice. "Except for the ones Roshton took into Spaarti with him." Binalie sighed. "And they're as good as dead, aren't they?"

"I can't see it any other way," Doriana agreed, gazing out toward Spaarti Creations. Above the plant, a hundred STAPs were circling through the night sky like carrion-eaters, glinting with the light from a dozen distant fires. On the grounds around the plant, invisible from where the three men stood, a thousand combat droids and a dozen battle tanks stood their own silent watch.

And between the Binalie mansion and the plant, acrid smoke still rose from the crater where the Separatist hailfire droid had emptied both of its missile pods into the ground, collapsing the tunnel and cutting off the clone troopers' last avenue of escape. The Separatists had been nothing if not thorough. "The only reason they're still alive is that the Separatists don't want to wreck the plant trying to force them out," he added.

"But then, they don't have to, do they?" Tories said quietly. "By the time General Tiis can return with enough ground troops, they'll likely have starved in there."

"Yes," Binalie said. "Ironic, isn't it? Commander Roshton spent all that effort to retake the plant. And he succeeded.

"And that's where he's going to die."