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THE CLONE WARSTM

NO PRISONERS

KAREN TRAVISS

PROLOGUE

CAPTAIN GILAD PELLAEON'S CABIN, REPUBLIC ASSAULT SHIP *LEVELER*, DANTUS SECTOR

SO WHO WANTS TO MAKE ADMIRAL, ANYWAY?

All braid and memos. Is that any way for a fighting man to spend his days? Committees, budgets, politics. No, thank you. I have a war to win.

Anyway . . . the command of a warship is all that *anyone* in this game wants, *should* want, because this is what it's all about. I didn't join the navy to write memos. *Captain* Pellaeon suits me just fine.

So you can keep your promotion board, gentlemen. I don't require your validation.

Stang—either this mirror is cracked, or I'm starting to get wrinkly. Hallena won't like that.

"Sir?" Lieutenant Meriones raps on the bulkhead. "Sir, you asked me to let you know when—"

"I'm *shaving*, Lieutenant..." The boy's like one of those hyperactive little rodents on Ber de Val, all mangy hair, twitches, and zero attention span. "I need to concentrate."

"Might it not be safer to use a depilatory rather than a razor, sir?"

Meriones and I are *not* from the same navy, that much has long been evident. And he has *connections*. That's the only way he could possibly get a commission. There are some bitter jokes in the Republic Fleet—if you're warm, you're in. Eyesight test: we don't test 'em, we only count 'em. And so on. The selection board seems to require only a pulse and the right social back-ground these days.

We're new to all-out war. The Republic's never had to fight like this before. Now we all find out what we're made of, even Meriones.

No wonder we had to buy a clone army . . .

"Very well, Lieutenant, you'd better spit it out before I sever my jugular."

"Chief engineer reports that we're ready to slip, sir. And there's an encrypted message from an Agent Devis."

There's no smirk in his voice. He has no idea about Hallena Devis—and me. I'd like to keep it that way. "I'll be on the bridge as soon as I'm done. I'll take the message here."

What's she up to now? Why is she contacting me like this? Hiding in plain sight?

There's really no need to worry. Is there? Hallena is an intelligence agent. A spy: a spook. If anyone can take care of herself in a dangerous place, it's Hallena, and that's what makes her so appealing. I don't find weak women attractive.

Even so ... I still worry.

Leveler's fresh from a refit in the Kemla shipyards, with a few extra bells and whistles. I always get the prototypes. Maybe the Fleet board thinks I'm no great loss if any of their new experimental toys blows up. So now we need to find a quiet spot in the Dantus sector, a long way from any trouble and well away from the yards—a few days' work-up to iron out any problems, just as we're supposed to.

Then we get on with the business of the war.

The console of my desk chirps to let me know Hallena's message has been transferred from the bridge.

"Very good, sir." The rodent-child waits as if I'm going to read it in front of him. "Oh, one more thing, sir."

"Yes . . ."

"Captain Rex sends his compliments and asks if he might join *Leveler* for an acquaint. He has new troops and a green Padawan to bring up to speed with this class of vessel."

"Certainly." Rex is a solid, sensible chap. He also tells *very* good jokes when he's not playing the obedient soldier. "No Gen-eral Skywalker?"

"No, sir. Just his Padawan. A Togruta female."

So Rex is free to tell jokes in the wardroom. Good.

"Very well. Let me know when he's inbound. Dismissed."

I go back to shaving the old-fashioned way, and worry about Hallena whether I have cause to or not. Yes, I know my predilec-tion for unsuitable women has effectively killed my promotion prospects. Unbecoming for an officer, they say; I should be more discreet, settle down, get the right career wife to match a spot-less career status. But we have a short time in this galaxy, and I swore to live that time to the full.

There's a war on. My time may be . . . short.

Now let's read that message. No, she doesn't say where she is. She never does.

Ouch. The little rodent was right about that blade, though.

ONE

JanFathal has been a loyal member of the Republic for as long as I can remember. Let's not allow a little thing like internal strife to get in the way of that. I'm afraid the Fathalians' wish for democratic change will have to wait until the war is over, because right now we need to keep that planet.

—Armand Isard, Director of Republic Intelligence

ATHAR, CAPITAL OF JANFATHAL, OUTER RIM

The DUST THAT blew in from the plains was pale gray, as fine and as clogging as ferrocrete powder.

It was a small wonder that the locals kept their windows and doors tightly shuttered at this time of year. Hallena kept her ker-chief over her mouth and nose, but the dust still managed to work its way into her eyes. Her vision blurred; blinking didn't clear it. She was forced to shelter in a doorway on the main square while she tried to rub the stuff out of her eyes.

Now she understood why the Athari were so prone to spit-ting in the streets. They were very good at it, too—accurate, dis-creet, and almost elegant in their technique. Since she'd arrived a few days ago, Hallena had learned to dodge the streams and even manage an occasional well-aimed squirt of her own.

Fit in. Go gray— *blend in with the population, like you've been here all your life . . .*

It was just like wine-tasting in a smart Coruscant tapcaf, ex-cept the flavor filling her mouth was the flat mineral bitterness of dust coating her tongue, not a rich, fruity Ondo Lava—

Is this stuff toxic?

Swirl. Lean a little. Aim. Spit hard.

Hallena put a bit of force behind it. Sometimes it was more difficult than it looked. She was aware of someone walking to-ward her, head lowered against a steady wind that never seemed to drop, and then she realized why Gilad always warned her when they sailed his personal yacht to test the wind direction be-fore dumping liquid overboard.

Splat.

"Aw, *terrific*," said a male voice. "Lady, can't you even spit straight?"

She had to shield her face with her hand. Sharper, bigger fragments of dust stung her eyes. Her gaze traveled up from a dark, wet patch on the leg of a pair of tan pants to the indignant face of their owner.

"Sorry." She was careful to maintain the right accent. "Let me clean that up."

"You looking for the carpet shop?"

Ah. She knew the response she had to give. She felt better al-ready. "I hear it's closed midweek."

The man was in his forties, thin-faced and balding. He stared into her eyes for a moment, then winked. The simple code had been confirmed. This was her contact.

"Galdovar," she said. It probably wasn't his real name, and she didn't care if it was or not. All that mattered was that he was the man she was supposed to meet; and that was all she was going to trust. He wasn't a random stranger she'd spat upon. Trust didn't come easy in her line of work. Trust got you killed. That was why she placed it solely in herself, and why her hand was still resting on the blaster hidden in the folds of her coat. "You'd better be, anyway."

"I am, so at least I got my pants ruined by the right woman. Come on. Let's get inside." He indicated the far end of the de-serted road with a discreet nod of his head, then looked down at the damp patch on his leg. "Original way to identify yourself, Agent Devis."

"No, I really *did* miss the spot," she said. Now it worried her that she hadn't been alert to anyone following her or watch-ing her. It was basic intelligence procedure, as unconscious as breathing; situational awareness. "How long have you been watching me?"

"A few minutes."

Stang. If he'd been a sniper . . .

But he wasn't, and she was fully alert after a moment's lapse. The building at the end of the road was an office complex with shops and tapcafs. As they entered, the world changed; the de-serted streets full of swirling dust that made Athar look like a ghost town gave way to bustling life conducted wholly behind shuttered doors. Athari citizens went about their business under cover during the windy weeks of late autumn.

"Up the stairs," Galdovar said, gesturing with his thumb. "Second floor. Union offices."

Hallena blended seamlessly into the bustle of Fathalians. She spoke Basic with a convincing Athari accent, and—like most of them—her skin was black and her hair dressed in neatly coiled plaits. Nobody had any reason to suspect she was a Republic spy, sent to infiltrate.

She'd been in Athar for less than a week. The place wasn't quite the same picture that the intelligence briefing had painted. Places seldom were.

"In here?" Hallena gestured, one hand still deep in her pocket.

"In there," said Galdovar.

"After you."

No, she wasn't *that* dumb.

The doors parted and she followed him into a routinely time-worn office with pleekwood desks and shelves that had seen better days. The interior doors, though, looked as if they'd been smashed down and repaired; two of the panels were bright new wood, devoid of any patina or termite scarring.

"Burglars?" she asked. "Or are you just slack on building maintenance?"

"Got to look the part," Galdovar said. "And we know ex-actly how a union office should look after the authorities have raided it, don't we?"

He was one of those who normally did the raiding. She had to concede the point. Sounds of movement behind the repaired door made her check automatically for a way out if this meeting turned out not to be one she'd bargained on. The only place she felt safe these days was on a Republic warship, and not just because of Gilad; the entire galaxy was in turmoil. The front line didn't end at planetary boundaries, or sometimes even within families.

Hallena walked into a small back office filled mainly by a bat-tered table. If it hadn't been for the two heavily armed men sitting at one side of it—she could spot the outlines of weapons as well as anyone—she might even have swallowed the cover story about this place being an administrative office for the Union of Fabri-cants, Plastoid Molders, and Allied Trades, Local 61.

"Well, well," she said. Their eyes locked on hers as if they weren't entirely sure she was genuine. "Unity is strength, people, power to the workers, and all that. So what have you got for me?"

The younger of the two men raised a bleached-blond eye-brow. He didn't offer any introductions. "I'm glad you're getting into character," he said sourly. "We think the people you're looking for are these two."

He shoved a holoimage projector across the table, flicking his thumbnail against the controls to activate an image. It was a snatched shot of a man and a woman caught in midstride as they hurried toward a

speeder; early thirties, heads covered by factory workers' caps, like thousands of other laborers in the city.

"Merish Hath and her boyfriend, Shil Kaval," he said. "The usual troublemaking variety of malcontent."

Hallena studied the image. The JanFathal police couldn't just pick them up and make them disappear, like they usually did. The Regent had held absolute power for thirty years; he wasn't going to get a hard time from his judges because he'd had them all jailed some years ago. But pieces in this particular puzzle were missing.

It was her job to find them.

"We'd like this sorted," said the younger man. The stark contrast of his eyebrows against his ebony skin was hypnotically weird; and he was obviously more senior in the hierarchy than he looked, or else he was just massively arrogant. "We don't want a few million droids landing in our backyard uninvited. The troublemakers we've been monitoring have been a lot more active in the last few weeks, like they're preparing for something."

"Maybe your Regent should concentrate on building a proper army instead of blowing his budget on internal security." Hallena took the holoimager and transferred the image to her own device. The more she saw of some of the Republic's allies, the less weight she gave their strategic value. "So can you get me into their circle, or not? What's my cover identity?"

"Well, Sister Devis—"

"Tell me you haven't used that name ..."

Blond Brows sucked his teeth, clearly annoyed at the interruption. "We might be a long way from Coruscant, ma'am, but we're not country bumpkins. Your ID says Orla Taman. You're a union convener from Nuth, which is far enough away to explain why you're not one of their little cabal, and you've been in prison for a few years for your unpatriotic activities. Now you're out and looking to sow dissent and hasten the glorious revolution."

Blond Brows passed her an identichip and a few battered personal possessions of the kind that a newly released prisoner might have: an old-style comlink, a few folded sheets of tattered flimsi that looked like a precious letter hidden and reread for years, and a holozine on the virtues of obedient citizenship of the kind that all those freed were given on release to keep them on the straight and narrow.

Hallena looked them over carefully. "Got it."

"Okay, then we get you into the armaments factory tomorrow morning, and you line up for a job. They take casual labor by the day or week."

"Do I have an impressive resume?"

"You're fully proficient in removing metal swarf from factory floors. A genius with a broom."

It certainly beat passing herself off as a brain surgeon. There was no arcane professional knowledge to bluff through when she was pushing a broom. She didn't even have to pretend she'd done it before. "Very well. I'll head back to my modest hovel and go begging for work tomorrow."

The older man sitting beside Blond Brows spoke for the first time. He looked like a chunk of granite that had been dumped by an avalanche, all square solidity and craggy grayness, the kind of man who would stand firm until time flowed around him.

"If you're caught," he said, "they'll kill you and go to ground, and we'll have to start all over again. We might not have the time to do that."

It was the simplest of statements, dazzling in its self-evidence.

"Sounds like every job I've ever done." Hallena got up to leave. One hand still rested on her blaster. "I'll be back in touch when I have something useful for you."

Maybe. I'll see how it goes. This is for the Republic.

The granite-and-blondness double act didn't move as she took a step or two backward without turning. For some reason, she felt more wary in this building among nominal allies than outside, surrounded by potential assassins.

If they ever venture out in this wind, of course . . .

Back at her lodgings, a stark and cramped little room above a grocery store, the ubiquitous dust had crept through every gap and left a convenient intruder warning system across every flat surface. Hallena closed the front doors behind her and stood listening for a moment, checking who might be where. When she studied the thin coating of dust, footprints and scuffs had worn a clean path between the side doors to the shop and the owner's living quarters across the passage. The layer on the stairs was still undisturbed, though. Nobody had gone up to her room since she'd left.

She had no real reason to check. It was just habit; careful, wary habit.

The shop doors parted and the elderly female owner stuck her head through the gap, smiling to reveal more gaps than teeth. "Won't last much longer, my dear," she said. "Regular as sunset, that wind. It'll die down by this time tomorrow, and then the rains start."

"I remember," Hallena lied. It sounded as if the woman didn't think she was local. "Used to visit Athar as a kid." *Don't push it, don't get a conversation going.* "I'm going to get a job tomorrow. I'll be out all day."

"You're a bit secretive, you are."

Stang, is she Force-sensitive or something? That risk had never troubled Hallena before, but the war had suddenly made her aware of how many beings there were who could sense her feelings or even try to shape her thoughts. Spies liked to be the ones who did the shaping and sensing. It was the natural order of espionage.

"I've just been released from prison," Hallena said at last, suitably awkward. "It's not something I want to brag about. Don't worry—it's nothing violent or dishonest."

"It never is," the woman said, suddenly serious. "It's always political these days."

Hallena didn't take it any farther. She retreated to her room, and spent the rest of the day tinkering with her comm kit—minimal, concealed within the old comlink, nothing that would make her look too well equipped in this austere world—and observing the activity in the street below through a small clear patch in the grimy transparisteel pane. Yes, the wind seemed to be dropping; a few more people were out on the walkways, some wearing goggles, others with their mouths still covered by scarves, but they seemed to know that respite was coming.

How long am I going to be here?

Hallena was glad she'd never been a sleeper, living under-cover for a lifetime until a controller she'd never seen finally called one day and gave her a mission within a society she might have grown to think of as her own. Short bursts of being some-one and something else were much more manageable.

I can only live so much of a lie.

Gil Pellaeon knew exactly what she was and accepted her for it. That was a rare source of honest stability in her line of work. She didn't even keep a holimage of him with her: too risky, like any genuine personal possession that might identify her if she was captured. But Gil understood the nature of their relationship—snatched moments, denials, no real prospect of routine, daily, comfortable domestic bliss like other couples—because his job wasn't so different.

Will either of us survive long enough to get out, to retire? Gil. . . no, he loves his ship. I'll have to join him one day.

That night, Hallena slept fitfully with her blaster on the nightstand. In the early hours, noise from the street woke her; her dozing brain told her it was drunks outside, typical Coruscant nightlife, but she snapped fully alert into Athar, JanFathal, where wild revelry wasn't routine.

The voice was a scream, a protest, not drunken shrieking. Lights played on the buildings opposite. The crunch and thud of doors being forced open gave way to speeders revving their drives. When Hallena

got a glimpse of what was happening from the window, she saw a man and a woman being bundled into a vehicle marked with the livery of Athar's not-so-secret po-lice. One masked officer brought a bludgeon down on the head of the man in one practiced movement as he shoved him into the police speeder. The arrest was suddenly over. The lights swung around; all the vehicles sped off. All that remained was the gap-ing doors of the house opposite, yellow light streaming onto the pavement, and the complete absence of any neighbors coming out to see what was happening.

They must have heard it all.

This had to have been pretty common in Athar for lights not to be switched on and drapes pulled aside to see what was hap-pening.

Common enough for everyone to know to mind their own business.

Hallena pondered on the irony of friendly governments, reminded herself she was here to win the war and not the battle, then—somehow—went back to sleep.

REPUBLIC SHUTTLE, INBOUND FOR ASSAULT SHIP *LEVELER*

General Skywalker *could* have made it an order, of course. But he hadn't; it was just a *request*. A mere *suggestion*.

Clone Captain Rex added reading between the lines to the list of things they'd never actually taught him on Kamino.

Okay, sir, I get it. Understood. You want your Padawan out of your hair for a few days. Done.

Orders were orders, and orders given subtly seemed to have even more weight. They did if they came from Anakin Sky-walker, anyway.

"Am I getting on his nerves?" Ahsoka asked.

"As if." Rex could see a little frown wrinkling her nose. "Now, why would he *ever* think that?"

She gave him a narrow-eyed stare for a moment, almost the-atrical, searching the T-shaped visor as if she was trying to look him in the eye, and then grinned.

"You're hard to read, sometimes."

"Everyone needs a break from combat, littl'un. Even Jedi. And even if it's spent training. That's all."

It was true. Rex believed that—well, *generally*, anyway—so if Ahsoka wanted to test how he felt about it in the Force, she wouldn't sense it as a lie. But he'd decided *he* didn't need to know why Skywalker wanted her out of the way for a while, and if *she* wanted to know—well, it was time for her to learn about need-to-know. She was going to have a little trouble mastering that skill.

He was more concerned with the six new clone troopers as-signed to Torrent Company.

They were *very* new indeed.

While Ahsoka gazed out of the viewport, they sat on the two bench seats, three men on each side, facing one another in still, studied silence. Sergeant Coric, one of only five of his men from the original Torrent Company who'd survived the assault on Teth, sat to one side, seeming engrossed in his datapad.

In theory, the new boys had learned all they needed to about every class of warship; in practice, they'd had only Kaminoan flash training, which was thorough but no substitute for hands-on experience. And anyone fresh out of Tipoca City could never be fully prepared for the real world beyond that cloistered train-ing existence, the untidy galaxy of thousands of new species that had nothing in common with humans or Kaminoans.

I wonder how much they'll see of it before they get killed.

It was a thought that had become quietly insistent at the back of his mind, not enough to eat at him, but an uncomfortable feeling he tried to brush away.

Rex considered them carefully, listening for the telltale clicks and faint breaths that would tell him what was going on inside their helmets. He could see what they appeared to see; their point-of-view icons in his head-up display all showed the man sitting opposite.

Well, that was where their helmets were facing, anyway.

Takes a long time to rebuild a company from five survivors. Takes a lot more than training, too. What do Kaminoans know about bonding? Less than they thought, I reckon. A lot *less*.

Ahsoka interrupted his thoughts. "What's so special about *Leveler*?" She gazed out the viewscreen as the shuttle came alongside the warship. "Looks like all the others of her class."

"All ships have their own peculiarities." Rex called up the schematic of *Leveler* on his HUD with a couple of rapid blinks. "Even ones that look the same. But *Leveler's* just had a refit, so she's got some experimental toys for us to try out."

"Destructive toys?"

"Advanced concussion missiles. Prototypes designed for orbital bombardment and ship-killing. So if they're not destructive, Pellaeon better ask for a refund."

The six new clones—Ross, Boro, Joc, Hil, Vere, and Ince—didn't move a muscle. Rex switched to his internal helmet com-link so Ahsoka couldn't hear him.

"Gentlemen, show me some life signs before I resort to CPR . . ."

"Receiving, sir," Ince said. "Just. . . awaiting orders."

"You can move, you know. And talk •

"Yes, sir."

Rex decided he'd have to factor some *social* time into the training. His new boys needed to loosen up. Maybe they were nervous about being 501st Legion now because a certain ca-chet—a certain *responsibility*—came with that cap-badge.

And if they didn't start talking and giving him all the little clues of individuality that helped one clone trooper recognize another in a sea of near-identical faces and armor, then he'd have to resort to checking who was who with his tally sensor. That was somehow discourteous—like having to read an officer's name tag every time—and an admission that, as a commander, Rex didn't *know* his men.

"Permission to engage in witty banter—in your own time, go on."

"Witty banter commencing, sir . . . stand by."

So Ince had a sense of humor after all. Rex smiled to himself and let them mull over the fact that they weren't on Kamino any longer.

The shuttle aligned with the aft bay and settled on its dampers with a slight shudder. As the ramp went down, Ahsoka bounced out first, ahead of Rex. As he put his boot on the deck, Gil Pellaeon walked across the durasteel plating in his gray work-ing rig and came to a halt a few meters away. His stance said that this was his world, his ship; and the captain was the law.

He looked down his nose at the tiny Togruta Jedi, not un-kindly, but out of necessity. Ahsoka was short. She might have acted as if she were Wookiee-sized, but nothing could change the fact that she was *small*—and a kid. A few crew paused to watch, some clones, some nonclones. Rex hovered on the brink of in-tervention.

"Ma'am." Pellaeon nodded formally, clicking the heels of his polished boots. "Welcome aboard. First thing we do is get you kitted out in proper rig." He glanced over his shoulder. "Chief? Chief, get Padawan Tano some fireproof fatigues and safety boots. Smallest size the stores can find. Cut off the length if you need to."

Rex hadn't actually thought to warn Ahsoka about suitable attire for the acquaint. It was sensitive stuff, telling a female what to wear, especially a Jedi, even if she was a fourteen-year-old. Besides, Pellaeon was so much more *gracious* with the ladies. The captain kept his eyes fixed on hers.

"I didn't have to wear fatigues on any *other* ship," Ahsoka said stiffly.

"You're not suitably attired, my dear." His tone was very paternal for a moment. "We do *not* expose flesh in this ship, not only because it's unbecoming, undisciplined, and *distracting*, but because a ship is a dangerous place. Sharp edges, noxious chem-icals, hot exhausts, weapons flash. Safety first, Padawan. Cover up."

"But I *fight* like this." Suddenly Ahsoka was any youngster defending her choice of fashion to a stuffy parent, not a Jedi at all. She looked down at her bare legs and midriff as if she'd sud-denly realized she had them. "And I never get hurt. Admiral Yu-laren let—"

"Admiral Yularen may do as he wishes in his own ship. This vessel is *my* domain. You'll cover up, please, Padawan Tano."

"But I always—"

"Not in *my* navy."

Rex had no choice but to stand at attention and wait for the battle of wills to end. The new troopers were commendably un-moving in a neat line to his left; Coric rocked back and forth on his heels very discreetly, movement almost unseen, boots creak-ing a little. Pellaeon waited, and then extended one arm out to his side as the Fleet Chief came striding toward him with a pair of solid boots and folded dark blue coveralls.

Pellaeon took the items without even looking around and handed them to Ahsoka.

"Thank you," she said, chin down. Then she trotted back up the ramp.

Pellaeon's shoulders relaxed visibly. "Good grief, Rex, doesn't Skywalker tell his underlings to put clothes on? What does he think this is, a cruise liner?"

It was at times like this that Rex savored the true value of his bucket. He silenced his helmet audio for a moment with a quick eye movement, roared with laughter, and then switched the speaker back on.

"Would you like me to ask him, sir?"

"Rex, you're enjoying this ..."

"Me, sir? Never, sir."

"We're both captains, Rex . . . it's Gil. Drop the *sir*. "

"Navy captain outranks army captain, sir. Strictly speaking."

"Shut up, for goodness' sake, man, and come have a drink."

Good old Pellaeon. He didn't give a bantha's backside about protocol. They worked in silence. Eventually, Ahsoka strode back down the ramp of the shuttle, blue fatigues belted tightly at the waist, over-long sleeves rolled up to her wrists, and pre-sented herself to Pellaeon.

"Will this do?" Poor kid; she looked embarrassed. The brightly colored stripes on her three head-tails looked more vivid than ever—a blush, Rex had learned, sometimes one of dis-comfort, sometimes anger. He guessed it was a little of both this time. "I just want you to know that it's so baggy that I'm going to trip over it and break my neck, that's all. Not very *safe*. "

"You'll grow into it, my dear," Pellaeon said, looking satis-fied. "And Jedi are too spatially aware to trip, yes? Chief Massin will show you to your cabin."

Pellaeon waited for Ahsoka to vanish through the bay doors behind the Chief, then turned to Rex. "How long a respite do you need?"

"I'm told two to three days."

"Ah, not *your* request for downtime for your men, then."

"No." Rex trod carefully. "General Skywalker has his rea-sons for wanting to operate alone, whatever they might be, and his Padawan is still at the over-curious stage. I really appreciate your help, Captain."

"My pleasure." Pellaeon beckoned to the troopers; Coric followed them up like a herd dog. "Besides, you might be able to help me knock some of my crew into shape. Ah, for the days when a commanding officer could dump a useless minion out the air lock without having to worry about filling in *forms* ..."

"Very unsporting, sir," Coric said. "Unless you give them a fifty-meter start."

Pellaeon laughed. But like all humor in this war, it was a thinly worn veneer over permanent anxiety, and the crew *did* end up dying in hard vacuum, and the only way most personnel seemed able to cope was to joke in ways that seemed inappro-priate to beings cocooned in peace and safety.

Rex took his laughs where he could. This was as near to downtime as he might ever get: among others who understood him, far from civilians on Coruscant who never would, a safe limbo between the two extremes.

"It's going to be boring, sir," Coric said to him as they walked down the passage to the mess deck. "And in a *good* way."

"Make the most of it," Rex said. "Catch up on some sleep. All of you."

Two or three days of relative idling was just what they needed. All he had to do was to keep Ahsoka occupied. And how hard could that be?

A tiny figure came striding down the passage toward them, coping remarkably well with a pair of durasteel-capped safety boots. Ahsoka's head-tails bounced like braids.

"I'm ready, Rex." She beamed. "Show me the cone missile bay."

ATHAR: NEXT MORNING

"YOU!" YELLED THE OVERSEER AT THE FACTORY GATES. He WAS strikingly pale, and for a moment Hallena thought he was an al-bino. But he was just very blond, an oddity in Athar. "You, with the red scarf! You want some machine shop work?"

She realized he was pointing at her. She stood in the ragged line of laborers outside the munitions factory, just one of a crowd waiting for work assigned by the day.

Great way to miss security checks. Some dictatorships are so wonderfully dumb.

"No, sir." That was always the hardest act for her: pretend-ing to be deferential. "Just sweeping up. You got any jobs?"

The gray dust had drifted everywhere like fine, grubby snow. At least the wind had dropped.

"We've always got sweeping jobs," the overseer said, kick-ing a pile of dust into the air by way of demonstration. "Espe-cially now. Get in here. Where's your ID?"

Hallena edged her way to the front of the line, drawing surly and envious glances as if she were being accorded some kind of privilege. As she turned sideways to edge between two men— *re-member, mind your body language, think passive, think humble*—she caught the eye of one of them, and it was a moment of re-minder, of revelation. She looked into the eyes of a starving man; not literally, because he seemed solidly built, but a man desperate to find a day's work, and perhaps she had snatched it from him. The man stared back. It was just a heartbeat, not even a second.

She had never seen that look on Coruscant, not up close. Suddenly she understood the heart of the enemy she was facing; and it scared her more than warships and invasions because it could not be shot down, bombed, or brought to a negotiating table. It was the face of desperation, of a fear and need so primal that it could be mobilized to do *anything*.

We've picked a loser here.

This place is ripe for revolution. No wonder the Seps want to move in. One push, one coup—

"What are you kriffing well waiting for, then?" the overseer yelled. "You want this job or not? I got a hundred ready to take your place, sweetheart."

"Sorry, sir." *Arrogant barve. I hope I have cause to drop you . . .* "Right away, sir."

Hallena jerked her eyes away and pushed through the line. She hadn't realized it had been that obvious. It was just a split second's glance. She'd have to be much more careful in a society where everyone was clearly geared up to watching and de-nouncing their neighbor to survive.

She held out her fake identichip to the overseer. He took it, slipped it into a chip reader, and stared at the display. It wasn't the first time that she'd stood on that knife-edge between life and death, hoping that her cover wasn't blown, but—

Hey, I'm not behind enemy lines yet. I'm here with the Re-gent's consent and knowledge. Why am I feeling like this?

The overseer smirked as he glanced at the readout. It must have shown him her prison record. "Learned your lesson, then, troublemaker?"

"I just want to keep my head down and put food on the table," she said.

"If I get a single *sniff* of you stirring up the rabble in here, I'll personally cut your throat."

Yes, *this* was the hardest part of undercover work. Not star-ing down the muzzle of a blaster; not dreading discovery and a lonely, anonymous death, undiscovered and a long way from home. The most unbearable moment for Hallena Devis was bit-ing her lip while a piece of scum like this insulted her intelli-gence, and *not* dispensing the instant justice he richly deserved.

But she could find a few moments for that in her busy sched-ule later, she was sure.

"Like I said," she murmured, eyes lowered, hating herself for even being able to *feign* submission, "I want to eat. That's all."

The supervisor seemed to feel that he'd made his point. "Re-port to the personnel office," he said, and stepped back to let her pass into the compound. The rusty main doors parted to let her in, and the clanging, hissing, throbbing noise of a busy factory spilled out in a deafening wave. It hurt her ears as she walked with her head lowered through the cavernous hangar, past as-sembly lines where scores of workers were sealing small canis-ters or checking durasteel components against measuring rods, but nobody took much notice of her. One man glanced up, smiled, then went back to riveting a durasteel sheet around the curve of what looked like an exhaust. By the time Hallena got to the personnel office—a shabby cubicle at the far end of the factory floor—a scruffy droid that looked in worse shape than the metal being hammered all around her was watching intently.

While one arm continued shuffling flimsi and the other tapped on an accounting pad, it reached out behind itself with a manipulator mounted on its back. A broom arced around in that third hand and almost smacked her in the legs. If anyone was doing an efficiency study, the droid scored a clean hundred every

time. Hallena wondered what it was doing with its legs under the desk. No limb was idle, that was for sure.

"One broom," the droid said. "You break it or lose it, you pay for it. You sweep the entire production area floor plus the refreshers and the corridors. Ten-minute meal break when the klaxon sounds. You go home when the place is inspected and approved by the overseer. If he approves, you get paid and come back again in the morning. If he doesn't, you get nothing and don't come back. Any questions?"

Hallena was tempted, but her discipline had kicked in fully now. She didn't even *think* a sharp retort.

"No," she said, and took the broom in both hands, quarterstaff-style. "I don't need a floor plan to find my way around, doI?"

The droid was incapable of sneering, but it managed to convey its disdain pretty well simply with pauses that would have made an actor envious.

"What's to find?" it said at last. "Eyes down, find the dust, push the broom. Stop when you can see the original color of the tiles. Anything else you find dirty—clean it."

So Hallena had managed to disappear instantly into the shrouded existence of the workforce. So far, so good. She headed for the refreshers and concentrated on looking authentic.

Stang, they stank. If she needed any excuse to hide away from the factory floor, a pail of disinfectant and a brush would be the perfect cover to retreat out of here. She got to work. A quick and discreet sweep with the bug sensor set in her wrist chrono showed there was no surveillance cam making sure the workers didn't linger too long in here with a copy of a holozine.

Is the rest of the planet as vile as this?

Republic Intel said it was. But it wasn't the Republic's problem. All that mattered was stopping the Separatists from overthrowing the Regent and invading the planet.

Maybe they can overthrow the regime when the war's over. This isn't an ally I like very much . . .

The one good thing about living in a dictatorship like Jan-Fathal, though, was that the information underground, the ex-change of whispered news and gossip, was a lot faster and sharper than in the complacent walkways of Coruscant, where they were more worried about smashball scores and scandalous holo-vid actresses. That was democracies for you: they didn't know what they had until they lost it. Here, information was precious. Secrets mattered. And within an hour, Hallena backed out of a refresher cubicle to find the path of her broom blocked by two workers in dark gray coveralls.

Their working clothes had probably been another color once, but that gray dust got everywhere.

Hallena paused and leaned on her broom.

"My mama used to say to lift your feet when a lady was doing the cleaning ..."

The two were familiar. They should have been. She'd studied their holoimages for long enough.

"Sister Taman," the worker said, holding out her hand. "I think you're among friends again. I'm Merish Hath, and this is my comrade Shil Kaval. We're *union*."

"Union," Hallena said slowly, "got me a few years in jail."

"Times are changing," said Shil. "But not fast enough."

Hallena went back to sweeping. "Don't expect me to help you speed 'em up . . ."

Merish had effectively blocked the exit. It was all working better than Hallena had hoped. "They say you were a committed activist in Nuth before the Regent had the town razed to the ground."

Oh, great briefing, Intel. What? Razed when?"Don't want to talk about it."

"And we've got more *supportive* friends to call on now the war's kicked off."

Hallena paused, straightened up, and maintained a skeptical face. Desperate people did indeed do desperate things. This was, just as Intel had said, the route to the Separatist infiltration here. It was going to be a more straightforward job than she thought.

Maybe just a few weeks. Maybe— *I can find some time with Gil.*

Maybe I won't feel bad at all when I look back at how I stopped these people putting their Regent's head on a well-deserved spike.

"This had better be good," she said. "I'm not doing any more time inside."

"You won't need to," said Merish. "All that's going to change."

Hallena managed one more careful moment of hesitation and then shook the woman's hand. Shil patted her on the back.

Now— *now* she was behind enemy lines.

TWO

Do you seriously believe that half a galaxy would side with

Nute Gunray because *all those planets, all their inhabitants,*

are evil? What does evil *mean* anyway? *How can that*
many beings be just. . . evil? *For every scheming Trade*
Federation politico out to crush the Republic, there are
trillions of beings who have real reasons to hate the
Coruscant regime. All they were waiting for was a leader
to give them an excuse to do something about it.

—Cormen A'Lanti, political analyst, HNE

SENATOR AMIDALA'S APARTMENT BLOCK, SENATE DISTRICT, CORUSCANT

Padmé loved surprises. She was certainly going to get one now.

Anakin Skywalker teetered on the parapet two stories above her balcony, judging the leap he would need to make to land on the rail below and then slip through the transparisteel doors unseen. There'd be the security cam recording to erase, of course— a little Force wipe, swiftly and discreetly applied—but he'd be-come very good at that. He understood the need to protect politicians in a war like this. His own wife didn't need protect-ing from him, though.

This is crazy. It shouldn't be this way.

He stared out over Galactic City. At night, it was magical, a starfield in its own right; scattered pinpoints of every color across the spectrum, hubs of intense light, nebula-like effects of an illuminated tapcaf sign seen through the gauze of a steam vent. And for all that light, all that life above and below and around him, he was invisible. Nobody noticed a man in a dull brown bantha wool cloak merging with the shadows and con-trasts of a building that stretched a thousand meters into the night sky.

Beautiful.

Anakin took a breath, held it, and jumped.

The wind caught his cloak and slowed him, but he was brak-ing his descent with the Force anyway. The sensation was not one of falling but of feeling the world accelerate past him. When his boots hit the permacrete fifteen meters below, the cushioning effect made him wonder what it was like for ordinary beings to fall that far.

Painful. Lethal. Do I really know what danger feels like to other people?

No, he didn't, and it made him marvel again that ordinary men, his troopers, would follow him into situations that he could stroll through with Force assistance and they could not. He hoped he never forgot that.

He opened the side door carefully and slipped in, still ready to deflect a blaster bolt if he startled her. "I'm home," he called. "Padmé?"

The bedroom doors parted sharply and she stepped out into the living room, face covered in a thick white paste and a towel wrapped tight around her hair.

"You could have called first. . . ," she said, lips hardly mov-ing. She sounded like one of those voice-throwing acts where a guy made his performing akk dog look as if it were talking. "Don't make me crack this. I have to leave it on for an hour."

Anakin tried to hug her as best he could without getting close to whatever the goop was on her face. It seemed to have set hard, like plaster. "You don't need all that. You're beautiful enough without it."

"Even a Senator is entitled to a girl's night in with a beauty mask and a holozine."

"I can go back to the Outer Rim if you like ..."

"Don't you dare."

"Have you heard the one about the Trandoshan who goes into a tapcaf?"

"Don't make me laugh."

"Well, the Trando goes up to the barkeep and says—"

"Don't."

"—he says, 'I'll have four mugs of—' "

"Don't!" Padmé froze for a moment and then burst into gig-gles, hands pressed hard to her face. When she took them away, chunks of the mask fell off like the collapsing facade of a build-ing. "Oh, I've cracked it. . . great. All that waiting, and now I've got to apply it all over again."

"No, you don't," he said, and took her hand. "Come on. I've taken a couple of days off, and we're not going to spend it on beauty treatments ..."

Padmé followed him to the refresher door. "*Days?* Where's Ahsoka, then?"

"I left her with Rex." Anakin ushered her gently into the room. "Rinse all that gunk off. Come on."

Padmé turned on the faucet and splashed her face with water. "You do place a lot of responsibility on Rex, Ani. Above and beyond."

"He can handle it." Anakin watched the white-faced stranger transform back into his wife. He had so little time with her, and it was always furtive time, *stolen* time, so even these silly moments felt intense and precious. "Ahsoka might talk like she's the Grand Admiral of the Fleet, but she *respects* Rex. And I suspect some lessons are easier when learned from him instead of me."

"Rex can be very charming when he wants to be."

Anakin bristled instinctively and then felt stupid about it. "He can also bring her back down to ground level pretty fast when needed."

"So we have a couple of days."

"And it's not like we can go out and be seen together, is it?"

"I get the idea." She grinned as she dried her face, then un-wound the towel around her hair. "Discretion . . . look, this city runs on gossip, and we can never be too careful. Make some caf, darling, would you? I'll just tidy myself up."

We can never be too careful.

She'd said it before; he knew that well enough, even though he resented it more each day. Just walking around Coruscant—any world, in fact—reminded him that they couldn't do the trivial things that any ordinary couple took for granted: a stroll in a park, a drink in a tapcaf, a trip to the theater. Sometimes he struggled with his simmering anger about it all, and at others he wondered how he could take his Jedi calling seriously while de-ceiving not only the Jedi Council, but Obi-Wan as well.

If I don't believe the Order is right about attachment. . . what else am I going to reject? Where will it stop?

This war was the only clean-cut thing about his life apart from Padme; he had a real, tangible enemy trying to kill him, and he loved Padme to the point of sickening fear at the thought of her ever being taken from him. Those were the twin certainties in his life. So he fought, and he loved, because he knew how to do both.

But philosophy was much harder to grasp in his hand than a lightsaber.

"Ani, have you gone to Charra to grow that caf yourself?"

Anakin looked up, jerked out of his thoughts as he stood with the container still in one hand and the caf pot still empty. Padme glided into the kitchen in one of her elegant gowns, fierce electric blue sateen that cast a turquoise reflection on the glossy white cabinets.

"Just thinking," he said.

Padmé gave a theatrical sigh. "You just can't get good help these days."

She took the caf container from him and started making a pot herself. *See, there's an ordinary moment. A Senator, a queen, a woman who can change the galaxy, making caf like any Cor-uscant housewife. Why not? Isn't that what life really is?* Anakin wasn't sure how long he could keep this up. He wondered why Obi-Wan didn't sense what was going on. How could he miss the turmoil and passion in the Force, right under his nose?

"Have you seen the latest on Senator Herbin?" Padmé held the caf container to her nose and inhaled deeply. It wasn't a dis-tracted moment. Anakin knew when she was making an effort to look unconcerned. "It's all over HNE. Dating that awful holovid actress from *Republic Medcenter*. The one who protests about the war."

"I don't know Herbin," Anakin said. "I don't care about gossip. There's a war on."

"I meant that politicians are vulnerable to prying."

"So what's the scandal?" Anakin reached for the cups, translucent porceplast from Naboo that still had a royal crest on it. "That he's a married man, that he dates a protester, or that he's obviously got lousy taste in holovids?"

"You know what I mean. We have to be more careful. We have to be more aware that people *notice* things. The way you look at me in public, the way we talk. All the little *signs*."

That didn't sound like Padmé. She hadn't been this nervous to begin with. "Has someone said something to you?"

"No, not at all. I'm just on edge. I look at Herbin being hounded, and I think what it would do to you if the Jedi Council found out."

Anakin hadn't really thought about what discovery would do to Padmé's reputation. He hadn't considered it in those terms; she didn't so much have a career as a never-ending duty, so he couldn't imagine her worrying about being forced to re-sign. If it was just the Jedi Council's outrage, that was another thing entirely. He'd handle that when the time came.

This isn't going to go on forever.

"But we're not like Herbin and what's-her-name," he said. "We're *married*. We're not cheating on our spouses. There's no disgrace in this."

"Okay, let me put it this way." The caf was boiling now, sending steam into the air and clouding the windows. Padmé turned off the heat and poured from the pot. "What would you do if Master Yoda found out we were married and told you— well, what *would* he tell you to do? Divorce me?"

"He would make me choose between you and the Jedi Order." Would he? Anakin didn't actually know. Now that he stopped to think it through, he had gone no farther in his imagination than the immediate arguments and dire warnings of what attachment would lead to. He hadn't done what any general should have, what he *would* have done if this had been a real battle rather than a war of Jedi ideologies: he hadn't asked what the worst outcome might be. "And I'll never give you up. *Never*."

It wasn't an answer. Anakin knew that. He wanted to say that he would tell Yoda that he refused to obey, but he wasn't sure where that would leave him as a Jedi. Could he remain one? Of course he could. It wasn't like the Senate, and party allegiances, where politicians got kicked out of their parties if they didn't vote the right way. He didn't have a Jedi party membership card. His Force-using nature was in his blood, in his very cells.

Padmé took the cups and steered him toward the living room. "I'll never give you up, either, Ani. But let's not risk a con-frontation with the Jedi Council. Not yet."

Anakin felt the resentment, doubt, and bewilderment start to bubble up again. He stretched out on the sofa, his head resting on Padmé's lap, and thought of one member of the Jedi Council.

Ki-Adi-Mundi's got wives. Not just one. Five. And lots of daughters. Usual for a Cerean. But a Jedi?

The Cerean didn't look as if he'd been corrupted by attach-ment. Nobody mentioned it; Jedi *did* marry, then, and the galaxy didn't implode. This fact was the bantha in the dining room, the huge, silent, looming thing that everyone could see but nobody talked about, as if it wasn't there at all, and had to be ignored at all costs.

Just because Cereans had a low birthrate, and too few males, they had to take wives. So Ki-Adi-Mundi could remain a Jedi, serve on the Council, and have a family. Suddenly none of this made sense to Anakin. The needs of Cerea had no bearing on it. Either attachment was a bad idea for Jedi, or it wasn't.

Fine. Have it your way, Master Yoda. I feel no guilt about bending the rules to fit my heart if you bend the rules on the basis of species. Or expedience. Or whatever.

"They say love turns a Jedi to the dark side," he said at last. "I can't see how love can do that. But being forced to skulk around and lie—that's a recipe for trouble. Now, look at Ki-Adi—"

"You're not going to have this out with Master Yoda, are you, Ani?" Padmé stroked his hair. "Please?"

"No. I promise."

"Good. Let's make the most of these few days."

"Are you *sure* nobody's said anything to you? You're really edgy."

Padmé reached for her caf, and he found himself staring up at the bottom of the exquisite antique cup, so fine and delicate that the light filtered through it.

"I'm just rattled by this business with Herbin," she said. "Humor me."

Anakin would do whatever she asked. He was besotted, and always would be, he knew. He didn't feel any less of a Jedi for loving her so much.

"I will," he said.

REPUBLIC ASSAULT SHIP *LEVELER*, WORKING-UP POST-REFIT, DANTUS SECTOR

PELLAEON SLID THE LAST FEW METERS DOWN THE LADDER TO the lower engineering deck, boots braking against the polished rails, and scattered some junior ratings as he landed. They saluted as the smell of singed paint filled his nostrils and caught the back of his throat. There were *good* new smells in a refitted ship, and worrying ones; these were the latter kind.

"Lammin, what the stang is going on with those dampers?" He never broke into a run, not unless the vessel was at action stations, but he could stride at record speed along the passages. He swung through the hatch to the main drive section. "Lam-min? She's lurching like a drunk every time we hyperjump."

"I think we've still got a low pressure problem, sir." Lam-min, the chief engineer, was wedged in the small space between two bulkheads, trying to shift a stubborn bolt. He cursed elo-quently and held out his hand to the engineer waiting patiently with his tool kit, like a surgeon gesturing to a nurse for a scalpel. "Ollo, hand me the Weequay servodriver, will you? Some preci-sion work's required."

Ollo selected the biggest hammer in the box, handed it to Lammin, and put his fingers in his ears. Lammin leaned back as far as he could and took a mighty swipe at something Pellaeon couldn't see. The resulting clang of metal was so loud that it *hurt*.

Lammin whacked the defiant bolt—or whatever it was—a few more times for good measure. It was like standing inside an Andoan monastery bell when the monks struck it. Pellaeon felt his teeth vibrate clean through to his sinuses.

"Ah, *that* shifted it. . . ," Lammin said happily.

"I'm relieved you're not a surgeon, Chief."

"Well, if I was, my patients wouldn't be in pain for very long, sir." Lammin eased himself out of the tiny gap and peered at the gauges on the bulkhead. "I freed up *something*. Better check exactly what. I hate mysteries."

"Carry on," Pellaeon said. He opened his comlink and called his first lieutenant. Every single fault was being collated and transmitted back to Fleet to be passed to the procurement overseers, and no doubt to the accountants to enable them to argue about the costs. "Number One, make another note for the yard, will you? The damper pressure relief valves—"

"Sir, sorry to interrupt, but long-range sensors just picked up some activity in the adjacent sector, off Tangar. A Sep flotilla dropped out of hyperspace, then jumped again."

Pellaeon conjured up a mental three-dimensional chart of the region, calculating transit time. If anything kicked off, he needed to know if *Leveler* could respond, and how fast.

"Keep an eye on it, Rumahn," he said. "Any friendlies in range?"

"Only us, sir. Dark and lonely work out here."

Working-up had to be done in remote places or very well-defended ones these days because nothing invited an attack quite like a ship that wasn't at full fighting efficiency. And there was nothing to be gained in charging after every Sep hull that pre-sented itself. Some commanders might have felt obligated out of some bizarrely misplaced machismo, but Pellaeon preferred pru-dence over showy enthusiasm. He'd bide his time.

"Let's hope they don't present us with an inevitable target, then," he said. "I want the ship to be ready to fight. We've still got some problems."

He left the engineering crew to their task and continued his tour of the lower decks, checking through the tick-list on his dat-pad as he visited each section to see how well *Leveler* was hold-ing up. He could have called the section heads to a meeting and just listened to their reports. But that wasn't Gil Pellaeon's way. He needed to *see*. He needed to *feel*. He needed to *listen* to the sounds of the ship. And he needed to see the men and women who worked to keep her spaceworthy and ready to fight.

There was no substitute for firsthand examination of the many small systems that made this vast, complex island of durasteel into a fighting machine.

And it was *home*, too. It was *community*. No civilian could possibly understand the emotional significance of a ship to those who served in her. It didn't matter if they were clone or non-clone; this was one united ship's company, and he refused to allow it to be any other way.

I just wish I could tell them apart more easily ...

He had his techniques, though.

A group of clones passed him, all helmeted. "Sir," one said, nodding polite acknowledgment.

Pellaeon had taken off his cap, so there were no formal salutes. He checked the electronic reader that scanned clone armor tallies to identify them, and a list of names flashed up on the tiny screen.

"Petty Officer Bren," he said. "Mess deck accommodation to everyone's satisfaction?"

"Small problem with the water pressure in A-seven-two 'freshers, sir, but that's been resolved."

"Splendid." Pellaeon made another quick note, tapping on his datapad. "Carry on."

So I need a prompt. Any commander of a ship this size does. What matters is that every crew member knows he or she mat-ters, too.

He strode on, distracted for a moment by the thought of where Hallena might be now, and what she would think of *Lev-eler*. Yes, he'd bring her on board and show her. Gossip didn't bother him. He had nothing to lose now except battles.

Overall, the yard had done a typical rush job—Pellaeon-grade *inadequate*, anyone else's *reasonable*. There was always some nagging problem that irritated him, often small but poten-tially lethal oversights like fresh paint blocking valves, hidden wiring faults, or unseated gaskets pinched between blocks, ready to leak at any time. Those were the things he sought out. Any idiot could see major defects from ten clicks; he could, anyway.

So far, all he'd found to trouble him were the dampers and some of the command systems. Software, the technicians said, could be fixed.

Show me, then.

Climbing the ladder to one of the concussion missile bays, he found himself looking up at Rex as the clone commander leaned over from the gantry above. Rex, even without his dis-tinctive blue-and-white 501st armor, was easy to spot among the ship's company. He had his helmet clipped to his belt, and he was sporting another new hairstyle. Instead of being shaven to a fine polish, as when Pellaeon had last seen him, his scalp was now covered with short fuzz of blue-dyed hair cut into stripes.

"Very . . . *different*, Rex," Pellaeon said.

Ahsoka leaned over the rail beside Rex, although she had to stand on tiptoe to do it. She twitched her striped head-tails. "Nothing wrong with stripes, sir."

"Bolo-ball final," Rex said. "I'm somewhat partisan. Byllu-ran Athletic."

Pellaeon had no idea how Rex—bred on Kamino without any of the usual sense of geographic or species tribalism—decided which team to support. Bylluran was a Sullustan team. But most teams had fans who'd never been within ten parsecs of their home ground, and some couldn't even breathe the same atmo-sphere, so maybe that was... *normal*.

Stang, he's like any other being. A normal human male. It's hardwired in all of us, this need to ally and belong.

"So, Rex, what do you think of the upgrades?"

Rex replaced his helmet. "I can't judge the new concussion missiles until I see them take out a city or a capital ship, but I'm not convinced that the improved laser recharge time was worth the expenditure."

"That's the Treasury's problem."

"Maybe so, but—"

Rex stopped. Pellaeon heard the comm alert at the same time as the clone commander did, a nasal tone from the small transmitter in the comlink attached to his belt.

"Ops to Pellaeon, we have enemy vessels exiting hyperspace in the Fath system. Stand by."

"That's a couple of hours away," Ahsoka said. "What are they doing there?"

Pellaeon climbed the ladder and headed for the nearest ops room to see what was on their sensors. Fath was close to a hy-perspace lane; apart from that, it was the scruffy backside of the Outer Rim, nothing remarkable. Were the Seps just emerging from hyperspace, dropping out to receive essential comms be-fore jumping elsewhere again, or did they have a more local tar-get?

"How many vessels?" Rex asked. "I can't patch my HUD through to the ops display. One more glitch for the list."

"Six." Pellaeon decided there was no harm keeping an eye on the flotilla. "Comms, can you intercept any signals?"

"Just out of maximum range, sir," Rumahn cut in. "Another problem we've found."

"Very well, assuming that we still have propulsion, Number One, can we *move* within range?"

"I'd rather not jump until the dampers are sorted, sir."

"Let's stroll in their direction on sublight, then."

Pellaeon trusted his gut as much as any sensor, and his inter-nal alarm bells were starting to ring. The crew knew that. The more relaxed his tone, the more worried they knew he was. Rex stood and watched the scan with him—or at least he appeared to be facing it. Once Rex had his helmet on, there was no way of telling whether he was watching what was in front of him or occupied with something happening on his HUD. Ahsoka edged up beside them.

"I feel it," she said hesitantly.

"What, my dear?" Pellaeon asked.

"A disturbance in the Force." She reached out and held her hand close to the repeater screen without touching it. "A lot of . . . misery boiling over into anger."

Pellaeon never turned down useful intelligence. He just pre-ferred definitive bearings, coordinates, and distances, and Jedi unnerved him; the young ones troubled him most of all, like this little Togruta, a gauche kid arguing about her short skirt one moment and then changing before his eyes into an ancient

and primal creature connected to something he could never see. It seemed a vast gift for the universe to grant such a child. "You can tell that from touching the screen, can you?"

"No, Captain, it just helps me concentrate if I focus on an image."

"So is that a threat assessment?"

"Last time she said that," Rex muttered, "the next word was *incoming*. "

Pellaeon was reassured that his gut worked almost as well as a Jedi's senses. "I'll take that as a solid early warning, then."

"I'll round up my men," said Rex.

There was always the chance it would end in nothing; there was a great deal of seething anger everywhere in the galaxy these days, and predicting trouble was a safe bet. But Pallaeon knew he wasn't that lucky.

He opened his comlink. "Lammin," he said. "Let me know the moment you get those dampers fixed."

A TAPCAF IN THE METALWORKERS' QUARTERS, ATHAR,

IP JANFATHAL: LATER THAT NIGHT

HALLENA WAS SURE SHE'D NEVER BE ABLE TO LIFT HER ARMS again.

Twelve hours. Twelve hours of sweeping and scrubbing that cesspit of a factory. There was only so much sweeping she could do before she was conspicuously idle, so she'd ended up cleaning all the refreshers, and the smell of disinfectant clung to her.

She braced her elbows on the tapcaf table and stared at her hands, fingertips still wrinkled from being constantly wet.

"You timed this very well," said Merish. Shil placed two mugs of ale in front of them on the table and pulled up a chair. "Who sprung you?"

Hallena was now in the limbo of winging her way through a conversation that could end in victory or death. At least she was exhausted enough to act convincingly surly. "You don't need to know."

"True." The woman kept glancing at the doors. She seemed more triumphant than nervous. "You might find some familiar faces joining us tonight, then."

I hope not. There aren't any.

"So what do you want from me?" Hallena asked.

Open questions, suspiciously asked. It was all she could do. Local intelligence hadn't filled her in on all the blanks, evidently. No wonder they needed backup from Republic Intel; they were only good for spying on citizens for minor garbage like being dissatisfied and vocal about it.

"When things change, we need people who we can trust," said Merish. "People we know aren't tainted by association with the old regime."

"And I qualify." Posing as a newly released political prisoner excused all hesitation and cluelessness on Hallena's part. "Well, thanks."

"You're union. You know how to organize people. We're going to need that very soon."

"Forget it," Hallena said. *No, don't. Keep it coming.* "I've had enough of that. I can't face the prospect of year after year of banging my head against a wall and seeing nothing change."

"Oh, change is coming all right, Sister. Sooner than you think."

"Yeah. Whatever."

Merish looked beatific. That was the only way Hallena could describe it. As more people crowded into the tapcaf for an ale to end the day, and the noise level rose, she kept an eye on the doors. The place smelled of sweat and musty spices. Exotic tunes—discordant half notes, not unpleasant, just unfamiliar—crackled from an old audio unit set high on the wall to her right. The conversations around her, while part of a general high level of noise, were somehow hard to eavesdrop upon, as if everyone in that tapcaf had grown used to speaking in a way that wouldn't attract the attention of the authorities.

She'd seen almost no droids here at all since she'd arrived on the planet, the office droid at the factory being a notable exception. When she craned her neck to look through the open doors to the tapcaf kitchen, there were no droids there, the one place she was certain they'd have mechanical help.

She couldn't ask why. She was supposed to be a native.

"No kriffing droids," she said flatly. It could have meant anything. She meant *someone throw me a line here.*

"No, at least *that* hasn't happened yet," Merish said. "Flesh and blood is still cheaper. And most people are still more docile when they're kept busy all day."

Thank you, Merish.

There were all kinds of things the intel briefings never really told an agent. But these were the things she liked to know: she liked to know about *attitude*. She liked to know *why*.

But all that she had been *told* was that the dissidents in Athar had regular contact with Sep agents. Her sole task was to map that network, identify as many individuals in it as she could, and turn that information over to someone else to . . .

To what? Observe. Break. Arrest. Maybe even to flood the network with disinformation and double agents.

Shil was so quiet that Hallena wondered if he was allowed to talk when Merish was around. She watched him from the corner of her eye, and tried not to look too curious about why he kept tugging his right sleeve down past his wrist. At first she thought it was a nervous tic, and then she wondered if he was simply concealing a weapon. It was only when he reached for his ale and knocked a sodden table mat onto the floor that she understood what he was covering up. As he bent down and stretched out his hand to retrieve the mat, his sleeve slid back, and she saw the scars.

They were not random.

They were old cuts; not the irregular marks of an accident, or the clean incisions of surgery, but a carefully inscribed net-work of cut after cut after cut, as if someone had tried to decorate him like a piece of Emori leatherwork. Her eyes froze on the raised scars for a long second. She knew without asking that they weren't some form of body art or anything voluntary. A couple of the lines had odd branches, as if he'd moved during the process and someone had to do it again.

It was odd how something glimpsed so briefly could sear an indelible image into her mind. She wouldn't forget those scars. As Shil straightened up, he caught her eye for a moment, then pulled his sleeve back into place.

"To set an example to the rest," Shil said softly. "Fear needs its advertising like any other commodity, or else who's going to buy it?"

And that was why he was covering it up. Not shame; not embarrassment. He didn't even need to flaunt that he'd been tor-tured but was still walking free, still defiant. He was simply denying whoever had hurt him the outcome they'd wanted. He was *not* going to let anyone else see what his punishment had been, and be cowed by it.

"I understand," Hallena said.

Yes, I do. And I mustn't.

Merish, distracted for a moment, reached to smooth Shil's hair, then went back to watching the door as she sipped her ale. Her free hand rested on his leg in the shadow of the table.

Hallena had been trained to do a dirty job. One of her earliest lessons had been that there was no clear-cut line between enemy and ally, and that if she looked for one she would only forget what she was there to do. She would, her spymaster had once said, meet enemies she liked, and allies she hated. It wasn't her job to decide who was more worthy of support. Her sole task was to serve the Republic because she could have no idea of the bigger picture in which she blindly painted small sections.

It's going to be hard sometimes, Hallena.

She could hear his voice now, even through the hubbub of the tapcaf.

You're not immune to good and evil. You're not on the wrong side. You're just ignoring smaller complications that get in the way of the bigger task.

Gil Pellaeon called it collateral damage. Sometimes she wanted to talk to him about how he handled causing death and pain to people who got in the way when his ship was seeking bigger targets. But she'd never found the right moment to explain why, and reveal all the things she'd done.

Am I a bad person? Why can't I answer that question?

"So what did they do to *you*?" Merish asked at last.

Hallena didn't look at her. "What would drive me crazy quickest. Keeping me in solitary."

She couldn't claim it was violence. She was sitting beside people with real scars, and if anything went wrong, the story was easily disproved by examining her. But crazy—crazy was invisible. She could do crazy. She had no idea yet how long she might have to keep it up, but she was sure she could manage a long, long time.

"You're not going to trust us until we show you, are you?"

It was cruelly easy. First there was guilt, and then, when an agent found pleasure in being *clever*, there was callous smugness. Then, as age and bitter experience eroded that layer, guilt and disgust crept back in.

"No," Hallena said, playing the game of stating the truth to create a lie. "Look, I don't know anything about you, and you don't know anything about me. Why should *either* of us trust the other?"

"Oh, we know plenty about you. The office droid's very cooperative about sharing identichip data, if you know how to ask nicely."

The preloaded persona on the bogus chip had looked pretty bland to Hallena—a long-forgotten person from a town swept clean off the map—but it seemed to have more import to Merish and Shil.

"So prove to me you're not just *them* jerking me around before hauling me back inside again."

"Why would they want to do that?"

"Because they're scum," Hallena said, "and that's what small people with too much power do."

Merish stared into her face for a few moments as if looking for cracks in her story. "In a day or so it won't matter anyway."

Ah. There's a timetable. For what?

The tapcaf doors sighed apart again, admitting more thread-bare factory workers and a gust of humid night air scented with the smoky exhaust of obsolete ground speeders. The old woman had been spot-on with her forecast of rain. Hallena didn't ask why a day would make a difference. She waited to be told.

"Varti," Merish said suddenly, craning her neck. "Look, it's Varti."

A small, bald man who looked close to retirement wove his way through the drinkers and headed for the table. Hallena thought his scalp was simply shiny, but as he moved under the overhead lights, she could see that his dark skin was tattooed with white designs from ear to what had been his hairline. If there was one lasting impression that she would take from this place, beyond its grime and casual brutality, it was the sense of inversion, of a negative holoimage, the expected areas of light and dark reversed.

Well, that's remarkably apt. . . because I really can't see any clear black and white in this situation.

Varti smiled at her, looking a little puzzled. He cocked his head slightly to one side. In the street outside, klaxons screamed as more than one police speeder ripped past. Several men at the bar paused to look out the windows.

"I don't remember you, Orla," he said, holding out a thin, veined hand to Hallena. "But then Nuth is only memories itself now, and memories are fragile things."

Oh stang . . . steady, now. Don't blow it.

"I would have thought I'd have remembered you, too," she said, indicating his intricate white tattoos.

"I had hair back then."

The sound of traffic outside was becoming deafening, and Hallena found it hard to hear him. Merish just took another pull at her ale. Shil turned his head slowly to look at her and smiled, as if there were some wonderful joke they were about to share that excluded everyone else in the place, and Hallena took it as something romantic, nothing more.

"I'm used to a bit of quiet." Hallena was now into her stride as surly, disturbed Orla Taman, making statements to get an-swers. "Where's all that traffic going?"

Shil turned his gaze from Merish.

"Toward change," he said. "They're heading for the power station, I expect, if things are going to schedule." He cocked his head. "Isn't it a lovely sound?"

And then all the lights went out. The bar was plunged into darkness.

Hallena's hand was on her hold-out blaster even before she thought about it. A loud cheer went up from the tapcaf crowd: in the second or two it took her eyes to adjust to the scant light from a couple of oil burners smoking gently to kill bugs, she saw glistening, metallic movement and heard the *shunk-shunk* of safety catches being drawn. A constellation of blaster charge lights winked into life, red, blue, green, amber.

Ambush.

Shil chuckled. More vehicle klaxons screamed outside the doors, their sound falling in pitch as they sped past. Hallena could feel the vibration as the downdrafts shook the walls.

Ambush . . .

The tapcaf flooded with light again, this time the ghostly green of a generator-powered emergency system.

Every drinker in the bar had a blaster rifle drawn, and some had a sidearm, too. They didn't look scared. They looked *elated*. The entire tapcaf was silent, like an army awaiting orders.

Ambush . . .

"Revolution," said Shil. He had a blaster rifle in his hand now, and so did Merish. "Now it begins. *Now* it begins, brothers and sisters. *Now* we take back what's *ours*."

The cheer was deafening. It drowned out the convoy of emergency speeders streaking through the city. Hallena drew her blaster automatically, and had no choice but to follow the flow.

The revolutionaries of Athar had mobilized. She'd landed in the middle of a coup.

As she joined the crowd streaming through the doors into the night, she felt exhilarated, but she wasn't sure that it was for the right reasons.

THREE

But Master Altis doesn't subscribe to those views about family.

Does that place him on the dark side? What about the Jedi who founded our Order? They didn't ban attachment. Does that mean everything we are today is built on a foundation of darkness? Why did we decide it was suddenly a bad thing?

And are there other Force-users on the light side? I've never met any. Surely they exist?

—Padawan Bagar Nei-Leit, asking questions in philosophy class at the Jedi Temple

BRIDGE OF THE CARGO VESSEL *WOOKIEE GUNNER*, OUTER RIM

"Master Altis?"

"Yes, I feel it, too, my dear."

Jedi Master Djinn Altis stood at the command console and closed his eyes to concentrate on the welter of sensations in the Force. Sometimes he sensed light dying somewhere behind his eyes, tiny short-lived flashes like subatomic particles; sometimes the lights lived longer and turned into great shimmering ribbons of color that wove and tangled into infinity. Now, though, the sensation was like microscopic pellets of hail hitting his scalp just under the skin, melting into cold water that ran down inside his spinal canal.

He recognized it as the collective distress and anger of a world tipping over into conflict. This was how the Force spoke to him, its unique voice, its tone different for every Force-user who listened.

The melting-hail effect was starting to become a common sensation in this war.

"We don't *have* to sit out this war." Callista Masana slid into the navigator's seat and checked the screen in front of her as if some crisis might be visible on the plot. She put both hands on the transparisteel plate that covered the display, eyes closed, as if she were communing with the computer system. She seemed to be as attuned with inanimate objects as she'd been with the tsaelkes on her parents' farm. "Is there nothing we can do?"

"We're *doing* it, Calli. Humanitarian relief." There were hundreds of tons of supplies—food, medicine, water purifiers, tents—in the ship's hold, bound for Yarille. "Someone has to. A war's not solely about fighting."

"You've never said if you think we should take up arms or not, Master. One day soon, we may have to do just that."

"I'm not a pacifist. I'll meet force with force when I *have* to."

"The definition of a pacifist," Callista said, easing herself out of the seat again, "is someone who knows the depth of violence inside them, understands that there's no going back once it's unleashed, and so chooses to never let it loose."

"I never said pacifists lacked courage or aggression. Actually, you've just defined the philosophy of many militarists—that force is there *not* to be used."

"But what's a deterrent worth if you know it'll never be unleashed?"

"And there, my dear, is the line. The pacifist says—I will not add fuel to this fire, even though I may want to because it may consume the world, and someone has to say . . . *stop*." Altis tapped the lightsaber hanging from his belt. "A pacifist would not carry *this* because he would not want the temptation of using it. The Jedi ... the Jedi, then, is *not* a pacifist because he chooses to stop the fire by violence, on the basis that fewer will suffer that way. The difference is vast—do ends *ever* justify means? That's our constant dilemma."

"And we're at war. It's not theoretical now."

"It never is. The choice is always with us, demanding to be made with every action we take, even in peacetime." Boots clattered down the passageway, and Geith stuck his head through the hatch. "Forget the disturbance in the Force for a while and get something to eat. We have heavy work ahead of us when we reach Yarille."

Geith wandered onto the bridge and put his arm around Callista's shoulders. They made a very charming couple. The fact that they *were* a couple, nothing remarkable in this Jedi sect, was a quiet embarrassment that the rest of the Jedi Order tried hard to ignore.

Attachment leads to suffering. Suffering leads to fear. Fear leads to anger . . .

The trap of passion. The fast track to the dark side.

Very well, Master Yoda. What about the trap of abstraction? Compassion— *compassion is an act, not an idea.*

"I missed a good debate, Master." No, Geith was just a de-cent young man with Force powers who happened to love a girl very much like him. There wasn't the slightest hint of darkness in him, only this comfortable sense of an orb of warm light, like a sunset at the end of a still day. "If the means are morally unac-ceptable, then the ends must be unjustifiable."

"And what does that mean in real terms? Will you know it when the decision has to be made?" Altis feared the disconnec-tion with reality that he felt he saw in the Jedi Order. The theory was laudable, the lesson repeated faithfully, but it had to be ap-plied with each breath, each step; to crush an insect carelessly or step to one side, to return fire or call for peace talks. *Do it. Don't just say it.* "Show me the next time you have to face that choice. Call me to witness it."

Callista and Geith leaned against each other like trees that had grown together over the years, oddly old and permanent for a moment.

"You think we should overthrow the Republic, then?" Geith said. "Yes, Master, we should. Shouldn't we?"

"Explain."

"The excuse of 'they started it' might be fine for children, and self-defense is reasonable, but. . ."

"Go on."

"The army. Anyone with a scrap of honesty can see it's wrong to breed human beings and make them fight. We have no moral authority. We've already lost what we're supposed to be fighting for in this war. Even if the Republic wins."

Geith, like Callista, had known his parents before he became a Jedi. He'd been orphaned, but he remembered them, and that attachment— *love, let's call it what it is, love, any kind of love you care*

to name—felt good and secure. Callista—she'd been an *adult* working on her parents' farm when she became Altis's second Padawan. It was unheard of, in the Jedi Temple at least. She knew her own mind.

I prefer my Padawans to enter the Order with open eyes. An act of conscious choice, not habit or coercion or someone else's decisions.

There was no way—even if he wanted to—that Altis could make Callista and Geith believe that attachment was the seed of a darkness that would engulf them.

And this is why the orthodox Jedi way is to begin with infants. They know no better.

"So . . . how do we deal with a war we can't avoid?" Altis asked at last.

"We pick our battles," Geith said. "We fight, but on our own terms. Not that the rest of the Order wants our help anyway."

Altis had offered to help the war effort. He had been . . . *un-specific*. Yoda had been gracious, noncommittal . . . and *distant*.

But it's not about my relations with the Jedi Order. It's about my duty to living beings. I don't need anyone's permission to do that.

"It might not be their decision to make," Altis said. "Now go eat." He shooed the two away. "Fetch me some mealbread when you come back, please."

Altis felt the icy water trickle through his spinal canal again. He settled down in the pilot's seat, folded his arms, and let the navigation screen blur into slight defocus as he meditated. Yarille was a yellow dot in the top left corner at this range, and on the right-hand margin the Fath system was just visible.

Sometimes, when he did this, he wasn't immediately sure what he was seeing for a moment—the traces

on the screen itself or some visual manifestation of his state of trance. He drifted for a moment at that point between perfect awareness of his surroundings and complete detachment from the physical world. Throughout the ship, members of the sect—male and female, adult and child, families and individuals, Jedi and non-Jedi alike—seemed to pause as well.

The ice wouldn't leave him alone.

Lights danced.

Altis snapped out of his trance and hit the range control on the scanner. The region of space covered by the sensors magnified a hundredfold to give him much more detail, and he saw a small cloud of enemy transponder traces appear right on top of the Fath system. He adjusted again, and the Separatist ships were moving on JanFathal.

Altis knew with Force certainty that *Wookiee Gunner* would need to be *there*, and soon.

He hit the hazard alarm on the console. A shipful of Jedi didn't need the alert.

But Altis sounded it anyway.

OPS ROOM, REPUBLIC ASSAULT SHIP *LEVELER*

"CAPTAIN? *SIR!*"

The lieutenant swung around fast in his seat. He almost collided with Rex as he sidestepped a technician whose legs were poking out from underneath a partly dismantled sensor console.

MERIONES. Rex noted the name tag on his gray working rig. "What's the problem, Lieutenant?"

The ops room was cluttered with techs trying to trace a faulty wire that had left six sensor screens in a bank of fifteen completely dead. The fascia was unbolted and propped upright on the deck, leaning against the console.

"I meant—Captain Pellaeon, sir." Meriones paused for a breath. "But look at the scan. That's a lot more Sep ships, sir, I'm sure of it."

Rex leaned over the flickering screen and gave it a heavy thump with the heel of his hand. The image stabilized for a moment; yes, there was now a cluster of ship icons in the Fath region, but no transponder IDs. The sensor should have generated an enemy code and superimposed it on the plot.

"Garbage," Rex muttered, thumping the screen's housing again.

The Sullustan civilian technician working at the rear of it muttered mild annoyance, and Rex gave him an apologetic smile. When civvie contractors went space-side with a ship post-refit to iron out problems, they knew they weren't safe at home in the yards anymore; they were on the front line with the grunts. Rex admired their willingness to live—or die—by the quality of their workmanship.

"I was going to do that myself." The Sullustan went on test-ing wires. Then he picked up a small rubber-headed mallet. "Got a special tool for it. . ."

"But is it Seps?" Meriones asked.

Pellaeon walked into the ops room and came to have a look. "Yes," he said. "It is."

"It's a few hours' transit time," Rex said. "Once we find out what they're doing."

"Now do the rest of the math." Pellaeon's eyes flickered as if he was reading the screen. The image shook and distorted. "One of us, seven of them, and we're not firing on all drives yet."

The Sullustan's voice drifted up from behind the console. "Drives are fine ..."

"I was speaking figuratively."

"I can't patch into ship tactical data yet," Rex said, "but we're a day closer to Fath than any other vessel if HQ needs any surveillance."

Pellaeon walked over to the nearest comm console, glared at it as if willing it to be in better shape than the rest of the kit in the room, and hit the key.

"Levelerto Fleet," he said. "Fleet, this is Pellaeon."

"Go ahead, sir."

"We're picking up Sep vessels in the Fath sector. Out of our range, but we'll continue to observe."

"Copy that, *Leveler*. Are you fully operational?"

"No, Fleet, we are *not*. Stand by, out."

Rex's detachment of clones were the only troops on the ship apart from *Leveler's* crew. There were no land forces embarked; this was just working-up, a sortie to evaluate the state of readiness of the ship, a test drive. *Leveler* wasn't intended to fight— not yet.

So all she could do was observe.

Pellaeon seemed to be chewing something over. He raised his personal comlink to his lips. "Number One, take us in a little closer to Fath until we get in transponder range. Then we'll de-ploy an observation

droid. Nice and steady."

"Very good, sir."

Rex decided to get ready for a little more than a sightseeing trip anyway. If push came to shove, *Leveler* had operational— if not combat-tested—concussion missiles. She was never in-tended to land, just to bombard targets from orbit or deploy landing craft to insert ground troops. He and his men weren't going to need to slug it out in classic infantry style.

Even so, Rex liked to be ready.

"Just popping back to the messdeck, Captain," he said, heading for the passageway.

Coric was showing the new boys the schematics of the new targeting arrays when Rex walked into the compartment. The troopers were all minus helmets, looking earnest, black hair meticulously trimmed. Rex suddenly regretted his novelty hair-cut and decided to shave it off when he got a chance. He didn't want to be that different from his lads. It was a dumb fad any-way, rather undignified for an officer. And they were Torrent Company, 501st Legion, the elite within the elite, the backbone of the infantry—Anakin Skywalker's own.

Ahsoka was sitting on one of the bunks against the port bulkhead, knees drawn up to her chin, arms clasped around her legs. She had that far-away look again; the one that said she was tuning in to something distant that Force-users alone could sense. *Well, at least she doesn't have faulty wiring. That's some-thing.* Rex folded down a seat and joined his troopers. They all looked at him.

"Sep vessels clustering around Fath," Rex said. "We're going to hang around in stealth mode and keep an eye on them. Not much else we can do at the moment. Some critical systems are down, and anyway, there's just one of us."

"Never stopped us before," said Coric.

"If there was a fight worth having, Pellaeon would be right on it, believe me."

Joc glanced at Hil. "Is it true he keeps getting passed over on promotion boards because he likes the ladies too much?"

"You're in this tub five minutes and already you're listening to gossip."

"Sorry, sir." Joc paused. "But why *has* an officer's personal business got anything to do with his promotion? Unless he likes Sep females, of course. I can see that would be a bit of a prob-lem."

Rex had to admire Joc's persistence. And that unblinking naivete might well have been a dry sense of humor emerging.

"It's conduct unbecoming to an officer," Rex said. "They're supposed to be squeaky clean and upstanding."

"He's not married."

Joc should be in Intel. The kid has a natural talent.

"But maybe his lady friends are," said Rex.

Ahsoka chimed in. "Attachment leads to the dark side. Be-cause it leads to fear, jealousy, and anger."

"Yeah, but that's just for Jedi," Coric said, seeming to give up on his carefully prepped talk on electronic warfare. "Not everyone else."

Nobody asked the obvious—whether clone troopers were *everyone else* or not. Joc looked from Ahsoka to Rex and back again. "What's wrong with attachment?" he asked. "Why can't you have attachments? You mean *love*, right?"

Ahsoka looked at the clones wide-eyed but in slight defocus, as if she was trying to recall something.

"Love is acceptable," she said at last. "But not attachment."

"What's love if it isn't attachment?"

"Attachment is . . . putting personal relationships first, car-ing about the people you love so that it influences how you act." Ahsoka seemed to be picking her words carefully. Coric stared back at her. "You know, it affects your judgment."

"But ol' Pellaeon's just having a spot of *romance*, if you know what I mean. It's not like he gets *attached* to any of them, is it? Is *romance* allowed? Can you have a spot of *romance* if you don't get attached?"

Ahsoka's stripes became more vividly colored, embarrassed. Yes, she obviously did know what Coric meant by *romance*. It wasn't the word he usually used for it, but Ahsoka was only a kid, and Rex had decided from the start that talking about *that sort of thing* was something best left to her Jedi Masters. *Yes, General Skywalker, I think that's a job for you, sir.* It wasn't a clone's duty at all.

"Romance," Ahsoka said stiffly, "is acceptable. Jedi are not . . . celibate. Just... no attachment."

Ince adopted a wonderful frown of apparent bewilderment. "That's a bit *cold*, ma'am. Love 'em and leave 'em?"

Not that he knows what that means, poor lad, but. . .

"What about all the negative things Jedi might feel *without* attachment?" Boro asked. They were all piling in now. "You know . . . bitterness. Resentment. Jealousy. Loneliness. Anger."

"Yeah," Ross said. "It's not normal. Can't be healthy."

Ahsoka was under siege. Rex debated whether to stop the baiting or see where it was going. These were *kids*, all of them. If Ahsoka wanted to command—and she did, it was clear—then she had to learn that young officers got a rough ride. His young clones, regardless of the constant training that told them Jedi were invincible and omniscient, saw her as a novice like them, projecting no real authority.

I don't remember being like that. I'm maybe a year older than them, if that.

And it's only months since Geonosis, not even a year. It feels like a lifetime ago.

Ahsoka let go of her fierce defensive grip around her legs and sat up straight, boots on the floor.

"I don't make the rules," she said at last. Her voice was very different; there was a faint, rasping undertone, like the echo of a sand panther's growl, and Rex was reminded yet again that the Togrutas' primal ancestors were predators. "But I accept that wiser beings made them, and so I'll follow them."

"We follow orders, too," Hil said. "We understand. Except we can usually *see* what goes wrong when we don't."

"Yeah, you get hurt," Ross said. "Or worse."

"I have to deal in the unseen," Ahsoka said quietly.

Coric looked as if he was going to say something, and then thought better of it. He went back to his datapad. Rex decided the maneuvering was over and that Ahsoka had at least main-tained her dignity.

"Okay, I want you all to be ready for enemy contact," he said. "And this is not a drill."

It was a cue for Ahsoka to leave if she wanted to. He knew her well enough by now to spot the ebb and flow of her moods, and he was guessing that she probably felt outnumbered; she would want to find a quiet spot to meditate.

"Shall I check out the ops room, Rex?" she asked.

"Yes, good idea." When he first met her, she'd tried to pull rank on him as a Jedi. Now she'd matured enough to understand that she got a lot more respect by using a little restraint. "Lieu-tenant Meriones probably needs cheering up. I think he's the wardroom outcast. I'm not good at that kind of thing, but you are . . .

Ahsoka gave him a sad smile that said she knew perfectly well what he was doing and why. It was a good understanding to reach. After she was well out of earshot—Togruta Jedi earshot, which was a *lot* farther than a regular being's range—Rex folded his arms and leaned on the narrow table that was bolted to the deck between the bunks.

"Okay, why are you on her case?" he asked. "Ince? Vere?"

Vere hadn't said much at all since he'd arrived at the 501st barracks. "Just making her feel part of the team, sir. She likes joining in."

"And she's a bit of a know-it-all, sir," said Ince. "Even if she *is* an officer. Even if she's a *Jedi*. "

"I think she knows that. Go easy on her. We've no way of knowing just how touchy some Jedi are about their regula-tions." Rex realized he'd inherited a tight-knit group of new troopers who were now settling in even better than he'd ex-pected. He needn't have worried about them. "She means well. Jedi were never trained to lead troops."

"Well, at least she understands orders," Joc said. "Even if she's lonely."

Yes, she did. Rex thought back to the look on Skywalker's face whenever he saw Senator Amidala on the HNE newscasts or heard her name mentioned. Now, *there* was a man dealing with attachment. Nothing overt, just the small giveaways that another man noticed if he spent enough time with his boss:

the way Skywalker didn't look away from the Senator quite soon enough, the way he always seemed to snap to attention when he heard her name.

Must be hard for him to know he can never do a thing about it.

Rex put the thought out of his head. Gossip was for the ranks, and dwelling on life's restrictions didn't do much for any-one's morale.

"Come on," he said, standing up. "Get down to the hangar deck. I want fifteen circuits of the deck, in full fighting order, record time, and then we'll familiarize ourselves with all the planets in the Fath system. We'll be in range soon. Get to it."

Busy. That was the way to deal with everything. *Stay busy*. And clones were never short of tasks to complete.

ATHAR, JANFATHAL: ONE HOUR AFTER THE START OF THE WORKERS' UPRISING

HALLENA HAD ONE CHOICE, and she took it.

Someone had shoved an obsolete blaster rifle in her hands and pushed her along with the growing mob that now crowded the streets around the center of Athar. There was an undercurrent of steady noise, the hum of thousands of voices—not yelling or screaming, just *talking*.

All the street lighting was out, and the homes and shops and factories were in darkness. A red glow marked the heart of the city.

"Burn, you scum." Varti sounded almost conversational. He was looking toward the fire, a beatific smile on his face. "It's been a *long* time coming. Right, brothers and sisters?"

A cheer went up again. "Right! Yeah, it's payback time!"

Mob—no, *mob* was the wrong word. There was a solid sense of purpose. It was, for an armed crowd with no apparent plan, quite orderly. Nobody was looting. Nobody was setting fire to anything—except in the city center. A collective decision had been made, like a flock of migrating birds deciding that snow was coming and it was time to move.

If anything, it felt like a busy shopping mall in Coruscant on Republic Day, when the half-price bargains went on sale; crowded, a little harassed, but generally good-natured.

Yes, but these people are armed. Not with credit chips— *with rifles*.

And my job's to see that the Regent stays in power long enough to aid the Republic.

Hallena was alone, and there was nothing she could do now to stop a revolt. She'd failed.

Hey, come on. I didn't fail. Intel didn't come through for us. And my job is to reassess, to regroup, to look for another plan.

The only thing that could stop the riots was screaming along an elevated section of highway above the advancing mob, now thousands strong. It was a string of government armored vehicles; searchlights swung wildly from side to side. The con-voy was heading for the bridge that led down into the factory quarter.

"Barricades!" a voice yelled.

A column of fire rose into the air about a hundred meters away, not far from the munitions factory Hallena had spent the day cleaning. A deafening cheer went up. Something was burn-ing. She could guess what it was—a prearranged signal to set fire to barricades around the city—but she didn't know. The sense of helplessness was overwhelming.

She caught Varti's arm. A little way ahead, she could see Merish and Shil walking steadily, a little space around them as if they were spearheading an advance even in the middle of this apparently leaderless mass. Mainly men, most in working cover-alls, but some in relatively tidy suits, others in waterproof boots that suggested they'd come from a ship or a dockside factory.

"You going to tell me what's going on, Brother Varti?" Hal-lena asked. "I'm along for the ride, but I've been away for a bit. Someone draw me a picture."

"We're overthrowing the Regent. We're burning down Gov-ernment House. And we're setting up a citizens' parliament."

Hallena's brain was trying to process a dozen questions at once. Where were the Athari intelligence agents she'd made contact with yesterday? If the Regent was out of office, dangling from a rope somewhere in the glowing red heart of the city, should she now be trying to get the new regime on the Republic's side? Did the Separatist connection matter anymore?

"How many times have we tried *that* before?" She tried to remember her background briefing on JanFathal. Past revolts had been brutally put down. "And it never worked."

"This time," Varti said, "things are going to be different." He was walking beside her at a steady pace, turning occasionally to glance at her. "I really should remember you. I'm sorry. It's troubling me."

"Not important now," she said. The comlink in her pocket shuddered silently. Either her Athari contact was trying to raise her, or Republic Intel was calling. Neither were calls she could safely take. "What do you need me to do? Right now, I mean."

"Get ready to fight," he said. "You look like you know how to use that rifle. Where did you learn that?"

Of course; this wasn't Coruscant, and in a dictatorship like this, there'd be were much tighter controls on who owned firearms. No tyrant worth his salt wanted an angry armed mob lurking out there—although that seemed to be exactly what the Regent was facing now.

She was firearms-trained, a qualified sharpshooter, able to handle most of the commonly used weapons

available around the galaxy. Spook core skills: something—the *one* thing—she did almost without thinking.

Varti had spotted it.

"I like to be prepared," Hallena said cryptically. Who was to say she hadn't picked up bad habits in the jail she'd never been in, from bad guys she'd never met? Varti couldn't know. "And I'm a fast learner."

But she could feel the comlink shuddering in her pocket, its chime silenced. There were very few people who could reach her that way, and none of them were social. *It can't be Gil. He never uses Intel links.* It had to be her Athari intelligence contact or her controller. Either way, they weren't calling to see how she was.

Stang...

She had to check the message. She reached into her pocket casually and took out the comlink. The more furtive she looked, the more likely Varti was to ask questions. When she glanced down at the miniature screen, the comm ID was clear: Coruscant, her emergency controller, the being—she had no idea of their gender or species at any given time—who gave her instructions.

SEP SHIPS INBOUND TO YOUR LOCATION. STAND BY. IF UN-ABLE TO TALK, KEY 555.

Stand by? Okay. Fine.

She hit 555, trying to look as if she were stabbing in frustration at a nonoperational control panel. Were Republic warships inbound, too? Was there going to be some battle for control of JanFathal? She couldn't ask. She didn't dare comm back over voice links. She was—as spies often were—completely on her own and without backup.

And the most immediate problem was staying alive because she could hear the armored convoy heading down the ramp, on an intercept course with the path of the mob.

"Too late to comm home," Varti said, slipping his rifle off its sling. "We just blew the transmitter."

A woman to the far side of Varti tried her comlink. "Yes, the network's down."

But not mine, brother .. .

"Right on time," Varti said.

"Nobody home anyway," Hallena said, keeping in character. "No home to be *in*."

Beams of white light stabbed at the night sky as the vehicles turned right and trained their searchlights on the road. She forgot the fires raging beyond. All that mattered now was not dying when the security forces opened fire on the crowd.

They would. She had no illusions.

Stang, I would if I were them.

No good guys and bad guys now, just folks trying to stay alive— *confused, scared, reduced to instincts and reflexes*.

She checked the charge on her rifle and knew she'd do what her own instincts told her; either those packed in front of her would be mown down, in which case she had a shield, or the crowd was in fact an army that had a plan.

In a few seconds, she'd know.

Yes, she was scared. Her gut knotted. She found herself worrying in that flash-frame, end-of-life way about whether Gil would ever find out what happened to her, who would take the Khomri tapestry on her apartment wall, and if she would be buried or left to rot.

Everyone should face this, just once, just to know what matters.

A volley of cannon fire ripped in a sheet above their heads. The crowd ahead of her parted like grain, everyone diving for the cover of buildings on either side of the road, and then they returned fire.

Hallena—still standing there, *idiot, idiot, idiot*—could see bodies flat on the pavement, picked out by the flaring light of weapons fire. The rectangular outlines of riot scoops on the front of the security vehicles rushed at her. The darkness and relative quiet of seconds before had erupted into white-hot light and the deafening *bdapp-bdapp-bdapp* of blasterfire, and the air tasted instantly of discharged blaster and scorched hair.

And here she was, standing in the middle of the road, wondering why everything was taking so long.

When the searchlight blinded her, she simply fired down its beam and rolled to one side. Or maybe she fell. She didn't know. She just felt her elbow crack on the pavement, and the pain seared through her body right to the roots of her teeth.

Someone grabbed her shoulders and pulled her away. Whatever happened, the arrival of a Separatist fleet was the very last of her problems.

FOUR

The military has to do this nobody-gets-left-behind thing
because it's part of holding a team together. But us,
sweetheart— *we work alone. And one day, maybe we'll*
need to leave you *behind. Be sure you can handle that.*

There's a special capsule for you, because when
we say no prisoners, we mean it.

—Republic intelligence recruiter, name withheld for security reasons, explaining the realities of an agent's life to Hallena Devis, job candidate

SENATOR AMIDALA'S APARTMENT, CORUSCANT

ANAKIN WOKE TO THE INSISTENT CHIRPING OF HIS COMLINK and reached for it without opening his eyes. Padme didn't stir.

"Skywalker," he said sleepily.

"Sir, I need to brief you for your situational awareness."

"Oh, Rex . . ."

"Bad time, sir?"

"No. Go ahead."

"Leveler's diverted to the Fath system. There's Sep activity around there, and we're the only vessel close enough to keep tabs on it. I'll keep you updated."

Rex was loyal; not just the professional, *soldierly* kind of loyal, but *personally* loyal. He knew what might happen if his general was caught being out of the loop—a loop he really should have been in. Anakin just hoped Rex didn't know why.

Do I, though? I think Rex would understand. Of the few be-ings I feel I owe an explanation about all this subterfuge, he's one of them.

"Good thinking, Rex."

"Captain Pellaeon's warned Fleet, so you may well be asked questions about it."

"I'll add diplomacy to your list of skills, Rex."

"And you should be aware that the work-up has shaken out a few faults and that your Padawan is settling in with the new trooper intake."

Anakin could have left it in Rex's hands, but the Force nagged at him. Something would go wrong. He knew it. And here he was, taking an illicit break, when his troops were facing potential action. It didn't matter that the rest of Torrent Com-pany were in barracks. There were seven men on their own out there. And he was sitting on his backside.

"Rex, I'll rendezvous with *Leveler*. Keep sending me posi-tion and intended movement, and I'll be there as soon as I can."

"No need, sir."

"Yes, there is. Skywalker out."

Anakin was fully awake now. He went to the refresher, ran the water cold, and felt certain he was being tested by the Force for his dishonesty. Lying about his marriage was wrong on many levels; but leaving your men to fend for themselves—that was the worst. He'd sworn he'd never leave anyone to their fate again. He'd already left Rex behind once at Teth, and it was down to the man's own courage that he came out of that alive.

Nearly the whole kriffing company killed. And I told Rex I'd come back for him.

And then there was his mother.

Anakin couldn't keep that nagging guilt out of his mind for long. Sometimes he tried to drown it with the logical argument that his old Master or even Yoda could have saved his mother from slavery. But her death was his own fault. He didn't go back for her, either, not until it was far too late.

Never again.

He would never again rely on others to do what he had a duty to do himself.

"Ani? Is there something wrong?"

Padmé was standing at the refresher door, hugging her bathrobe around her.

"I'm sorry, I've got to go," he said, rubbing his hair dry with a towel. "*Leveler* might run into problems. Rex just commed me. Don't be mad at him—he didn't want me to be put on the spot if anything went wrong."

Padmé didn't even look disappointed. That stung a little. He'd braced himself for at least halfhearted protests, but he knew deep down that Padmé wasn't that kind of wife. She was all about responsibility.

"No, I'm not mad at Rex," she said. "Duty's harsh. He's looking out for you, too. I appreciate that dedication."

She didn't even have to pack for him. A Jedi owned almost nothing, and what little he carried would fit in a small satchel. When he finished dressing, Padmé was waiting by the balcony doors with the bag in her hand.

"It's funny," she said. "I never ask what you're going to use for transport. You just say you're off to the Outer Rim, and I nod and say, yes dear, I'll see you when I can."

"How did you know where I was going?"

"I'm a Senator. I have ways of finding out where warships are." She draped the satchel's strap over his shoulder. "And I wasn't asleep. Not after the comlink went off, anyway."

Anakin grinned, but a little pang of uneasiness tweaked at his heart. The sensation was gone as soon as it started. He kissed her, slipped through the doors, and headed back to the hangar to persuade the ground crew to let him stroll off with a Torrent fighter.

If he needed to get to the Outer Rim fast, then he'd make sure he had some useful firepower, too. The Rim was an unstable, dangerous place.

Anakin rather liked it that way.

SOMEWHERE IN ATHAR: SOMETIME AFTER THE START OF THE UPRISING

HALLENA COULD HEAR POUNDING in her head.

For a moment she thought it was inside her skull. But when she shook herself out of her stupor, she realized it was the sound of cannon fire in the distance, and that she was stretched out on a dirty permacrete floor with a coat bundled up under her head.

"No real damage," said Merish. "Baton round. Hurts, though."

Yes, it did. It was the first time that Hallena was aware she'd been hit by something. Every time she tried to move, her brain felt as if it was shearing away from the membranes that surrounded it.

The brain has no pain sensors. Don't be stupid. Get a grip. Think.

She raised her hands instinctively, trying to feel for the source of the throbbing pain. There was no dressing. Eventually she found a tender lump under her hairline.

"They're firing whatever they can lay hands on," Shil said. "Blasters, crowd-control weapons—that's what hit you."

"I know what a baton round is, thanks."

"They weren't being nice and nonlethal, sister. They usually fire them point-blank so that they fracture the skull. You were just lucky."

Hallena could hear the fighting going on outside, although it didn't sound close: blasters, yelling, ballistic rounds hitting walls. "How long have I been here?"

"Couple of minutes."

She'd imagined hours. "Come on, then. Let's get on with it."

"We stand a better chance outside anyway. If those barves start using flamethrowers—come on." Merish hauled her to her feet. "The Seps are going to be landing troops soon, so all we have to do is keep the security forces busy all over the city and make it easier for them."

Hallena fought to focus on a plan beyond not getting hit in the head again. Everything she'd been sent here to do had gone out the window—it was beyond too late to worry about infiltrating the Sep sympathizers. She couldn't stop an invasion single-handed. But she could grab as much useful information

as possible, and make sure that it reached Republic forces.

Now, what do I need to do?

It was a straight recon job, to be the eyes and ears of the Re-public on the ground. Yes, she could do that.

"Where are the Seps landing?" she asked.

She started feeling her pockets, trying to give the impression she was looking for her blaster, but she was going for her com-link. If she set it to free-transmit, it would pick up every sound around her, and then all she had to do was make sure she asked the right questions to extract the answers that the Grand Army and the Republic Fleet would need.

The rifle that had been thrust into her hands earlier had vanished. Maybe it was still in the road outside. But her fingers settled on the comlink, fumbling for the controls, and she had to rely on touch and memory to hit the right sequence.

Hallena was transmitting now, and safely encrypted as far as she knew. But she couldn't risk getting confirmation yet that her message was being received.

"They're taking out the ground-based comms and the state guard barracks first." Shil handed her back her rifle. He'd retrieved it, then. "They're taking the center of the city first and moving out from there. Not what I thought they'd do, but they're the experts."

"Droids," Hallena said.

"Normally I'd only see a droid as something robbing an honest worker of a wage to buy food," Shil said. "But I'd rather they fought wars than flesh and blood."

"So we just keep the security forces busy?"

Merish steered her toward the doors. "The Regent's spent the last thirty years spending on palaces for himself and secret police to stop us from burning them down," she said. "So he never quite got around to building an army that could deal with an invasion. It'll all be over pretty fast."

Shil put his hand under her elbow to steady her as she stumbled over the rubble in the street. She felt faintly disgusted with herself for double-crossing him; she didn't know much about him, but she knew he'd been through a terrible time that hadn't broken him, and here she was doing her best to finish the job while he was making sure she was okay.

It's a dirty job. If I haven't accepted that after all these years, I'm only lying to myself.

"You think we're going to be better off under the Seps, do you?" she asked sourly.

"Can't be any worse, Orla," said Merish.

The use of her assumed name threw her a little. "I don't see any Sep landing ships." Hallena stared up into the night sky, seeing nothing but the reflection of fires on the low cloud. "You sure they haven't betrayed us?"

"They'll be here."

Are you getting this, Control? Can you hear all this? As soon as I get a moment to myself, I need to check they know where I am, what specific data they want from me.

"And if they lose?"

"They won't. But if there's any delay in kicking the state guard into the next system—we'll join the Sep forces and fight. They'll lose. Just a matter of now or later."

The fighting had moved on. Shil, Merish, and Varti broke into a slow jog to catch up with the rear guard, giving Hallena the chance to keep pace. She didn't feel much like running. Her head throbbed every time her heel struck the ground; she wondered if she'd collapse and die later. She'd been knocked out. Head injuries like that could take you down hours after you thought you were fine.

Last of my worries right now. It really is.

Then her comlink chirped.

But I shut off the sound. That's Control trying to ping me.

Hallena tried to ignore it, but even with the background noise of blasterfire and explosions, her companions stopped in their tracks to listen.

Shil grabbed his own comlink and stared at it.

"There's still no kriffing signal," he said slowly. "Our militia took out the transmitter. So who are *you* in touch with, Sister Taman?"

Merish and Shil paused for a second, then lunged for her, pinning her arms. Hallena had seen it before; the frozen moment of revelation. They had a spy among them. She decided whether to fight—and almost certainly die—or play for time and wait for a chance to escape.

If they don't kill me now anyway.

Merish and Shil pushed her to her knees, rifles held to her head, while Varti took her blaster from her belt. Even if she hadn't been injured, she wouldn't have stood a chance.

Varti, seeming oblivious to the fighting nearby, stood looking down at her. "You're the Regent's agent..."

That'll get me killed for sure. The truth might help for once.

"No, I'm with the Republic," she said, knowing the gamble she'd taken.

"You'll be useful, then. Our new Separatist allies will be pleased to meet you. Actually, let's do them the courtesy of call-ing them what they are—the Confederation of *Independent* Sys-tems. I *like* that word." The old man held out his hand, palm up. "Now give me the comlink."

There was no abuse, no kicks, no anger. Hallena had been trained to expect the very worst treatment if she was captured. That was why agents were issued a fast-acting poison, a final act of mercy contained in a tiny pellet hidden in a metal container in her wallet in her pants. She was under no illusion that the re-strained and professional treatment she was getting at the hands of these revolutionaries would continue. They'd all suffered too much.

And she *knew* what the Seps would do to her.

Funny, I feel more at home with the revolution, even if they want to blow my head off. Control always warned me about that. Identifying with your target. Occupational hazard.

"Inever said you didn't have cause to hate the Regent," she said. "But if the Seps win this war, you've got no idea how bad things will be."

"But have *you*?"

No. Actually, no. I haven't. Hallena hated things that made her want to stop and think at times like this.

"We'll see," she said.

"Shil, get her comlink."

It was her last chance to send a distress signal. She had little guarantee of being rescued, but an agent was told to at least pre-prepare for one. This way, she got to hold the comlink for long enough to try.

"Okay," she said. "Here it is."

She put her hand inside her coat with slow caution to make it clear she wasn't going for a concealed weapon. Professional as they seemed, Varti's rebels hadn't searched her. When she pulled out her hand—slowly, very slowly—the comlink sat in her palm, its yellow power light winking.

Hallena had one second left. She seized it.

As she handed the comlink to Varti, she hit the send button to relay an emergency message, a heartbeat before Shil brought his boot down hard on her hand, and on her hopes of getting off JanFathal alive. The comlink skidded across the ground.

But she'd known the score when she signed up.

Gil, at least, would know that.

BRIDGE, REPUBLIC ASSAULT SHIP *LEVELER*

"SAFEGUARD RULE NOW IN FORCE. REPEAT, safeguard rule now in force."

Pellaeon felt the change in mood throughout the ship. He didn't have to be a Jedi to sense the adrenaline pumping around him. For a while *Leveler* would carry on getting herself fully spaceworthy as planned, but the announcement on the ship's broadcast system marked the shift in status from work-up and exercises to a state of readiness to deal with real threats. If *Lev-eler* were threatened, any pipe—any

announcement—would be preceded by the word *safeguard*, repeated three times, so that everyone knew it wasn't a drill any longer.

Pellaeon was a stickler for the old tried-and-tested ways of the navy. If other captains wanted to mess around with high-tech verification systems, that was their business. He was still dealing for the most part with a human crew, and humans hadn't changed much in a very long time.

Ahsoka watched him. He could feel her eyes fixed on him, and when he turned his head to look, she seemed mesmerized. It unnerved him. Rex wandered around the bridge, helmet in one hand, probes in the other, still trying to get his HUD to talk to the ship's status system. He'd shaved his head again. Pellaeon would have to ask him why when the current tension had sub-sided.

"Sir," said the ops room controller's voice, "a freighter just dropped out of hyperspace."

Pellaeon zeroed in on the transponder that was now track-ing across the sensor repeater. At times like these, it made sense to assume all ships were potentially hostile until proven other-wise; a bogus transponder that would fool even Republic sen-sors wasn't hard to come by. And the technicians were still fixing glitches in the system.

Pellaeon tapped the controls by his right hand.

"Ops, can you ping the hull at this range and get a confir-mation?"

"You don't need to, sir," said Ahsoka. "The ship's full of Jedi. I can feel them."

The ops room commander paused. "Sir, it's a *Vernal-class* freighter, registered as *Wookiee Gunner*, and the Republic data-base identifies it as hired for disaster relief duties by . . ." Pel-laeon heard the tapping of keys. "By Master Djinn Altis. Not the Jedi Council."

Pellaeon turned and gave Ahsoka a smile. He couldn't bring himself to call her *Commander*, even if any Jedi officer who wasn't a general held the rank. *Technically. But not in my navy.* She was fourteen, for goodness' sake. He refused to play this game. The promotion board could add that to his list of failings: *shows insufficient deference to child Padawans.* That was fine by him.

"Good radar," Pellaeon said. "So who's Master Altis?"

Ahsoka seemed to be racking her brain for an answer. She looked to one side, blinking.

"I'm not sure," she said. "I've never heard of him. But . . . he's definitely strong in the Force. So are many of his companions."

"There's no chance he's one of your Sith cousins, is he?"

"They're *not* our cousins. No, I can't sense any darkness at all. What do you know about Sith, anyway?"

Force-users were used to the general public knowing little about them, but Pellaeon made it his business to know as much as he could. And the Jedi couldn't silence the annals of galactic history nor claim a monopoly on its knowledge. It was just a place where few beings ever bothered to look.

"Just let me know if I need to blow him out of my space, **that's all.**"

"No. Not at all, Captain." Ahsoka still looked unsettled. Either there was something she could sense about the freighter that bothered her, or she was worried that she couldn't place Altis. "Nothing amiss."

Pellaeon kept an eye on the sensor screen. He could see more Separatist ships gathering around JanFathal now, and there was little *Leveler* could do about it except feed back information until Fleet decided whether it had ships to spare.

"Sir, the freighter's on an intercept course with us," said the ops commander.

The ship might have been looking for sanctuary. That, at least, was something Pellaeon could offer.

"Comms, flash the ship's master," he said. "I want to ask him what he's doing, and whether he knows he's got a Sep flotilla within *ill-advised* range ..."

"Of course he knows," Ahsoka said, almost to herself. "He's a Jedi."

"But I'd bet he still uses sensors, my omniscient Padawan." Pellaeon switched his comlink through to the ship's circuit. "Freighter *Wookiee Gunner*, this is warship *Leveler*, please state your intended movement. You are standing into danger, repeat you are standing into danger, over."

He waited. The voice that bounced back was informal and didn't follow Fleet comm procedure.

"Warship *Leveler*, this is Master Altis, *Wookiee Gunner*. We might require your help."

"Master Altis, this is Captain Gilad Pellaeon. How may we assist you?"

"We picked up a distress call from a Republic agent on Jan-Fathal, and as you and I seem to be the only Republic vessels within a reasonable response time, I think we should attempt to extract the agent before the Separatists invade."

Pellaeon paused and switched the link to mute out of habit. "Rumahn, why haven't we received that signal?"

"Nothing received, sir," said the first officer. "Channel six-teen's working fine."

Pellaeon wondered whether a Jedi was likely to be tricked by a bogus message. He opened the link to *Wookiee Gunner* again.

"We haven't picked up a distress call, Master Altis. Before I commit my ship, I'd like to be sure I'm not

walking into an am-bush."

"We sensed a disturbance in the Force long before we intercepted the signal, Captain, and we picked it up on a frequency we didn't expect. On a navigation channel that's rarely used."

Pellaeon was trying to be patient. "Oh, you travel out here a lot, then?"

"Yes—our community is constantly on the move, and I've spent more than forty years seeking knowledge in these distant places."

Well, perhaps he knows something we don't. . . "What did the message say?"

"We tried to make contact with the transmitting comlink, but we lost the connection shortly after. The agent thought she was transmitting to Republic Intelligence. We think her name is Orla Taman."

The name meant nothing to Pellaeon. He figured that even Hallena wouldn't have recognized it; agents tended not to know what they didn't absolutely need to, as a security precaution.

"Wait one, Master Altis." Pellaeon turned to Rumahn. "Number One, get Rep Intel right away. Ask them to confirm Orla Taman, tell them why, and ask if she's operating out here."

Rumahn withdrew to another comm station to make the call. There was no guarantee that Intel would even tell them who they had deployed where, but it was suicidal not to at least try to verify the message. If Intel played its usual foolish game of need-to-know, Pellaeon would have to make the call: to treat the transmission seriously and risk his crew, or to ignore it and perhaps leave an agent to die.

An agent like my Hallena. If it were her in that position, wouldn't I want another ship to do what it could?

Rumahn walked back to Pellaeon's seat and leaned close to his ear. Ahsoka watched with the intense curiosity of a child who knew the grown-ups were having a private conversation; Rex took a couple of

slow strides to stand between her and Pellaeon, presumably to distract her.

Good man, Rex.

"Sir," Rumahn said quietly. "Intel thinks it's genuine. They've not received the signal, either, but they say Orla Taman is an operating alias for their agent who arrived in Athar on Jan-Fathal a couple of days ago. They say that if we're operationally capable, they'd appreciate our help with an extraction because we're a day or less closer now than any other ship."

"Very well, let's RV with the Jedi ship, cross-deck Altis and his key people here, and we'll get a plan going. Rex, are you up for this?"

Rex turned around. "Well, you don't have any troops em-barked other than us, so—yes, can do."

"Excellent," Pellaeon said. "We're not equipped for this at all, but I like a challenge. Good for morale when we pull it off." *Good for that poor woman down there, too.* "Did they happen to give you her real name, Rumahn? I hope so. That way she'll know we are who we say we are."

"Yes, sir." Rumahn looked at his 'pad. "Hallena Devis."

Pellaeon felt his heart stop. It was still pounding away, he knew that, but a strange raw sensation ran from the roof of his mouth into his chest, and it took all his self-control not to blurt out a curse.

Rumahn hadn't a clue who Hallena was, of course. Pellaeon had at least been discreet about *that*. But Ahsoka whipped her head around to stare, no doubt able to sense his shock and fear. Rex, who seemed to use Ahsoka as a smoke detector, stopped fiddling with his helmet circuits.

I have to save her.

But I'm too close to this.

And if I'm going to ask men to risk their lives . . .

They had to be told. It was only fair.

"I need to declare an interest," Pellaeon said quietly. "I don't want there to be any misunderstanding about why we're doing this. You need to know that Hallena Devis is ... a friend of mine." He took a deep breath. "A very good friend indeed."

FIVE

A prisoner is a burden to his captor and a liability

to his comrades. Neither take a prisoner nor

let yourself become one.

—Ancient Irmenu military doctrine, said to be still practiced today

CONFERENCE ROOM, REPUBLIC ASSAULT SHIP *LEVELER*

CALLISTA HAD NEVER BEEN IN A SHIP OF *LEVELER'S* SIZE BEFORE, and it fascinated her.

It felt... *alive*.

She walked up the passageway behind Master Altis, dis-tracted by the sense of nerves and blood vessels around her. It was the only way she could describe it; she'd felt the same sen-sation on other vessels to a lesser degree, but this ship, this self-contained *city*, was another order of magnitude altogether.

"What's wrong?" Geith asked, nudging her in the small of the back to keep her moving. "What are you staring at?"

"Can't you feel it?" she asked. "The power in this thing? It's like a pulse. Like brain activity."

"You and machines ..." He kept looking at members of the crew as they went about their business, from an assortment of beings in gray uniforms to white-armored clone personnel with their helmets on. "You're going to be communing with droids next."

"You *sure* you can't feel this ship? The electrical charge?"

"No, but that background hum is getting on my nerves." Geith gave her a playful swat on the backside. "I think you're hypersensitive to electronics because you grew up sea-farming. Lots of fish and sea creatures depend on detecting charges and electrical fields, don't they?"

"True."

"If we ever need the income, you'd make a great electri-cian—"

She turned to make an arch comment back at him—they were on a serious mission, and he was in one of his rebellious moods—but when she looked back, she saw a little Togruta fe-male walking behind them, looking quietly stunned.

She was wearing a set of blue fatigues several sizes too big for her. A lightsaber hung from her belt.

"Oh," Callista said. "I didn't realize *Leveler* had Jedi on board." She stopped to let the Togruta catch up with them. "I'm Callista. This is Geith."

"Ahsoka Tano," the Togruta said, incongruously adult for a moment. "General Skywalker's Padawan."

You're really Jedi? Not just Force-sensitives?"

She was looking at Geith suspiciously. Callista felt a strong sense of shock from her, and . . . guilt? Fear? Disapproval? *Of course*. She'd just seen Geith openly showing affection. Ahsoka was a mainstream Jedi, raised on scare stories of how *attach-ment* led to the dark side, so the child thought she was watching them falling to the Sith or some such nonsense. It was only when Callista saw Ahsoka's reaction that she realized how much of a gulf lay between the two schools of belief.

"Yes, we're Jedi." Geith's tone had the faintest tinge of im-patience. He rarely met orthodox Jedi, and Callista hoped his urge to point out the narrowness of their ways didn't get the bet-ter of him now that he finally had a target. "There's more than one way to use the Force for good."

Ahsoka said nothing more. She simply walked ahead of them in silence, but the impression she left in the Force was more eloquent than any comment: she was *confused*. Callista waited for her to disappear into the doorway at the end of the passage, then caught Geith's sleeve.

"You know what happens," she said. "Other Jedi see us, and we scare them. There's no point arguing about it."

"Okay, okay ..."

"Promise me."

"No point debating with a kid, either. But it's more than the fact that we can marry and they can't. Oh, and how many Padawans a Master can take. Like any of that matters. No, this is about *dogma*. About *control*."

"Like I said, we unsettle them, and the best thing we can do is to let them go their way while we go ours."

She gave him her I-mean-it look. He sighed, then smiled and nodded. There was a time and a place for ideological debate, and this wasn't it.

But then they walked into the meeting room, and she felt Geith react again. Not to a shocked little Padawan this time; to the clone troopers sitting in a group by the holochart, helmets off, deep in conversation. It wasn't so much their identical faces that got her attention as how very young they looked, even the shaven-headed one who had captain's insignia on his armor.

Younger than me. Younger than Geith. But otherwise—*just like us*.

No Altisian Jedi had come across clones before setting foot on this ship. Everyone in that community had its views on the ethics of breeding combat troops, but views were just empty theory until the subject of those views sat right there in front of you. Callista could have predicted what was going to happen without any assistance from the Force. Geith walked straight over to the clones and held out his hand for shaking. Then he sat down with them. It was a statement—not to everyone else, but to those men—that they weren't a means to an end.

That's why I love him. He lives what he believes.

Pellaeon activated the holochart and got immediate silent attention without saying a word. Some of his officers sat at the table watching him intently. Callista focused on their name tags.

"Ladies . . . gentlemen." Pellaeon used none of that *listen up, people* tough talk she'd seen on holovids. Despite looking somewhere in his thirties, Pellaeon seemed an old-fashioned man. And he also looked like an anxious one. "We've been tasked to extract one of our agents from behind what's now enemy lines. We don't know if she's alive or dead, or even where she is. That puts us at something of a disadvantage." He paused. "And it's only fair that I tell you she's a *very close* personal friend of mine. I mention that not to encourage you to try harder, but because I need you to tell me if and when my judgment's clouded, and my emotions put you or this ship in unreasonable danger."

Callista liked Pellaeon instantly. *A courteous, decent man*. She could see that Altis did, too; he smiled to himself.

"We're volunteers," Altis said. "Agent Devis shouldn't have less expectation of rescue simply because her lover happens to be the first command to respond. If we didn't allow those we love to help us, think of the faith we would have to place in those who hate us."

Pellaeon still looked stricken, but the frown lines in his fore-head relaxed slightly.

"Indeed," he said. "And that means that I expect to shoulder the risks in this rescue."

"You don't mean go on the mission, do you, Captain?" The clone with the shaved head and captain's insignia folded his arms across his chest. "It's not really your job. It's mine, in the absence of any embarked troops. And I've done extractions before. Except we'll do this one my way, and with any luck it won't turn out like Teth."

There was some unspoken debate going on between them. *Hands-on commander*, Callista thought. *Doesn't want to look like he's letting others do the dirty work*. Ahsoka watched, eyes unblinking, clearly still unsettled by the new Jedi.

"Of course, Rex," Pellaeon said at last. "I'm just indicating my willingness to front up and do what you require of the ship. Plan?"

"It'll be entirely guesswork. Locate, confirm she's alive, have one team to distract while the other extracts, and then we exfil."

Ahsoka cut in. "What about the other ships? Isn't General Yoda sending reinforcements to repel the invasion?"

Rex raised an eyebrow. "Too late for that, littl'un. Master Skywalker's on his way, but that's your lot. All we can do is try to get that agent out, and then regroup to fight another day. Assuming there's not another hundred worlds more critical than JanFathal."

"I'm volunteering for the recon," Geith said. "Nothing like a Jedi for locating people. And we know a little about what happened before she lost contact because we have the ambient sound recording from her comlink. She's been taken by people we can identify locally."

"Rep Intel were gracious enough to tell us a little of what they were up to in Athar," Pellaeon said sourly. "Hallena was undercover as a union agitator. If we could raise the JanFathal intel people, then we could

pin that down, but the comms to Athar have been cut."

He'd used her name. It suddenly made it all very personal, and Callista had no problem with that.

"Ask them if they know who Merish, Varti, and Shil are," Altis said. "Those are the names we heard."

Pellaeon nodded to his first lieutenant, Rumahn. "Get on to them, Number One. Don't accept any interdepartmental need-to-know nonsense from them, either."

"And that's our plan?" Ahsoka asked.

"Can't do any more planning until we know the location," Rex said. He indicated the holochart in front of him. When he magnified the images hanging in the air, they resolved into street plans and the layouts of key buildings. "That's why we've been familiarizing ourselves with the delights of downtown Athar. Once we get an approximate location, then we can apply a plan."

"You just happen to have charts," Callista said.

"No, someone thought it would be a good idea to collate capital maps and building plans from as many Republic allies as possible, just in case," Rex said. "Not exactly comprehensive. But we've got access via our HUDs, and any information at all is better than going in blind."

"That's why *we* should do it," Geith said. "No offense, Cap-tain, but we have our special uses. We can do things on our own that you'd need a lot of equipment to duplicate."

Rex exuded wary suspicion in the Force. He gave Geith an appraising look. "Suddenly everyone wants us to take a day off."

"None of you have any choice," Geith said. "But I do. So you tell me what needs to be done, and I'll—"

"We'll do it," Callista interrupted.

"That's very thoughtful of you, but this is my job." Despite his apparently relaxed expression, Rex was deeply troubled by the conversation. Maybe he was offended that Geith thought he needed protecting in some way. "I'm not trained to do anything else. You can see I'd never make a living at hairdressing."

"We've trained all our lives for this, ma'am," said one of them. Callista longed for a name, but they had no visible IDs like the *Leveler* officers present, none of whom were clones. "We want to do the job for real now."

It sounded as if he'd never been in action before. Geith looked stricken. Altis was simply watching, saying nothing, and so was Pellaeon; given the urgency of Agent Devis's plight, Callista wondered if the officers thought this debate was an irresponsible waste of time. But she knew this was the heart of the matter. It was how Altis had trained her. There were no ethical shortcuts to be taken, no hand-waving and promises to do some-thing unsavory just this once because the circumstances were pressing. Because there was never *just this once*. It became habit.

"You won't feel right if you don't do this, will you?" Geith said.

"No, sir." Rex seemed to be getting agreeing nods from the other clones. "I definitely won't. *We* definitely won't."

Pellaeon slapped his hand down on the table. "Very well, let's get on with it. What about your original mission, Master Altis?"

"It can continue without us," Altis said. "And we'll rejoin it when our work here is done."

The meeting broke up so quickly that Callista almost felt everyone was escaping rather than face a barrage of arguments from Geith. She was probably imagining it; it was just the urgency of the situation. Ahsoka shot out the doors after Rex, pausing for a split second to glance back at Geith and Callista, much less like a child and suddenly more a caged animal seeking escape.

"And so you show me," Altis said. He gave Geith that wonderful smile, the lines of age and wisdom mapping out a lifetime of discovery. It was the smile not of a teacher who'd succeeded in making a lesson stick in a student's mind, but that of a man who had learned something precious. "Thank you, Geith. I asked you to make sure I witnessed the time you had to make a moral choice."

Geith didn't look happy. "And I didn't. I just went along with it. And so, Master, did you." He looked at Callista accusingly. "And you. We all do it. That's how slippery the slope is. Why are Rex and his men expendable, to save someone who has no more right to exist than they have?"

"That's true for any soldiers, not just these men. You think that's what your decision was about?"

"Yes."

"Why did you concede, then? And what would you have done instead—refused to go on the mission, and left those men to fight alone?"

"I backed down because it was so clear they *wanted* to do it," Geith said. "And if I'd been able to make them do otherwise, then I'd have been as guilty as the Jedi Council of denying them choices."

"Exactly. This is for the troopers' peace of mind, not yours. Choice isn't as simple as it appears, is it?"

"That'll make me feel so much better if they get killed."

"Now you see the true nature of bad decisions," Altis said. "Even if we're not the ones who make them, if they're bad enough, they force us into other bad choices because they've so affected reality. But we can't isolate ourselves from them by re-fusing to take part in the world they create. That's irresponsible." He turned to Callista. "You're very quiet, for once."

"I'm ashamed, Master." She was; she was sure she would take a principled stand, but when the time came she found no position to take. It was far easier to do the right thing if you could work out what it was. "And I can't think of an alternative."

"Then make what good you can of this particular situation, as will I, because I am as compromised as you are."

Altis left. Callista had never asked how old he was, but he was still fit and strode away at a decent pace to leave them standing in the semi-darkness of the deserted room. She wondered if Master Yoda ever told his acolytes that he hadn't a clue what to do next and that he was as ignorant and flawed as they were.

It wasn't what most beings wanted in a leader. Yet, for all his apparent lack of clarity, Djinn Altis *led*.

"Make the best of a bad job," Callista said. "Do no harm. That's our dilemma. I can see why the mainstream Jedi view proves more popular. Clarity."

"Submit, forget those troublesome feelings, and don't ask awkward questions. Yes, no angst-ridden issues there."

"You're in a real snappy mood about this, aren't you?"

"One day, we may well be asked why we let this happen, or why we did nothing to stop it. And what will our answer be?"

Callista didn't have one, and neither did he. That was what was frustrating him. He took responsibility gladly, but he had nothing to grasp here.

"Let's concentrate on saving Agent Devis first," she said.

Geith looked as if he was about to argue again, but then he took her hand and they ambled down the passage to the hangar deck. Around her, the ship breathed and pulsed, its systems almost tangible in her particular awareness of the Force like parts of a liv-ing body. All any being could do was to make decision after deci-sion, moment by moment, and strive for the cleanest choice.

Unfortunately, some choices looked identical from every angle.

"Cheer up," said a voice from behind. One of Rex's men, the one with sergeant's insignia, overtook them. "When you pull off a mission like that, it's the best feeling in the world. Ale in the mess afterward, okay, sir? Ma'am?"

He walked on, whistling, helmet under one arm.

Callista gave up on clarity and simply decided to do what-ever it took to keep everyone—clone, agent, and Jedi—alive.

EMPTY OFFICE BLOCK, SOMEWHERE SOUTH OF THE BARRICADE, ATHAR

"What's happening?" Merish asked.

Shil looked out the window. Flashes illuminated his face, the only light apart from the faint yellow of a glow stick on the floor near Hallena's feet.

"That's the problem with taking down the comm transmit-ter," Shil said. "I don't kriffing well *know*. We have to wait for a runner. All I can see is. . . yeah, it's all been held up at the bridge. They've blocked us."

"As long as we keep them busy," she said.

"Why haven't the Seps landed anyone?"

"Maybe they have. We'd never know."

Hallena, handcuffed, sat on the floor with her back braced against the wall. Whatever business took place in this office on a normal day, someone hadn't done much cleaning for a while. A vomit-like smell of sour milk was getting to her.

Funny. I'm going to die— *if I'm lucky— and it's a bad smell that's bothering me most.*

It was never a good idea to taunt a captor, but at least she was getting some idea now that the rebels weren't quite as savvy as they'd first appeared. They'd stymied themselves by neglecting comms. They couldn't communicate across the city except by runners.

You'd have thought the Seps would have given them a few comlinks that would run off their ship network . . .

But even professional armies did dumber things than that.

Shil didn't look away from the window. "You're not a lot of use to us, Orla, or whatever your name is, so your sole reason for being alive now is so we can hand you over to the CIS."

Oh, you think so?

When she couldn't sleep, Hallena had sometimes spent the dark hours thinking through what she might do in the worst situations. The one that came to mind most often, inevitably, was when she would decide to finish it all and take that capsule. Contrary to popular myth, the fast-acting toxin wasn't in a special compartment in a tooth. She had to remove it from the lining of her escape kit, the small collection of survival tools concealed in a small wallet in the back of her pants. The tooth trick, she decided, was easier.

How will I know when it's the point of no return?

And that was the gamble.

She forced herself to stop wondering if anyone had received her call for extraction. That kind of thinking wouldn't keep her going. She had to rely on her own resources to get out of here. Then she could worry about getting off the planet—it would be easier to go to ground in a world in the chaotic grip of a war, anyway.

See? All the training comes back. Keep planning to escape. Use every second. Don't give despair a chance to paralyze you and do the enemy's work for them. Take control of your situation. They can't get into your head unless you let them.

She was still working out how far she might get if she couldn't free her hands when the floor shook underneath her. The sound was muffled; whatever had detonated was big, but not close. *Artillery*. Did the Regent have much by way of heavy weapons? No, he had the kind of forces he needed to keep a civilian population in line, not the kind he needed to fight a war against a conventional enemy with warships and laser cannons.

"Sounds like the Seps have arrived," she said. "How are you going to let them know where you are so they don't grind you into nerf mince along with the state guard?"

"The deal was to stay out of the city center once they showed up." Merish handed Varti something that looked like a breadmeal snack. "So that's what we're going to do now."

These folks were too organized not to have asked the obvious question of their Sep contact: *how will you let us know when it's over?* That was the trouble with civil wars—with any wars. They weren't tidy, they weren't easy to get a handle on even if you had good comms, and they didn't end with the final whistle like a bolo-ball match. Hallena was starting to work out that Merish was waiting for some contact that hadn't happened, and now she was getting uneasy.

And it was much harder at night. Getting an idea of what was happening purely from watching from a window—that was impossible. And Hallena could only see the world from a child's height, the movement of legs in front of her, and no view outside other than what was framed in that window.

Merish, Shil, and Varti were as scared and helpless as she was.

Maybe she had some way of exploiting that.

Helpless except for the fact that they've got blasters, and I haven't, and it takes only one bolt to the head to end it all.

She shook her head hard to stop herself drifting back to the insistent thought of whether someone was coming for her. That kind of thing only happened in holovids. There weren't even special forces extraction teams coming to get her. The commando squads were few and far between, and they had too big a galaxy to cover to be spared for jobs like nursemaiding agents who were dumb enough to get caught.

You're talking yourself down again . . .

I will get out of here. I can find somewhere to lay up. They'll be too busy fighting one another or rounding up their neighbors for a spot of retribution to look for me.

"What the stang is that?" Shil asked.

Whoomp.

Another explosion, closer this time, then another. Judging by the way Shil was trying to lean out of the window, he couldn't tell where it was coming from, either. But the thumping sound was getting more frequent, ever closer.

"Sssh. *Sssh!*" Merish fumbled frantically in her pocket. As if hushing a barrage would make the noise stop; people did the craziest things under stress. "My comlink—"

The device was chirping. Hallena could hear it. Merish flicked the key and listened with the comlink pressed close to one ear and her hand cupped over the other. Even in the near darkness, Hallena could see the expression on her face relax as if she'd just had the news she'd been waiting for.

"The first Separatist droids have landed," she said, comlink still pressed tight to her ear. "The commander's set up a mobile transmitter, so we've all got comms again. The commander says to sit tight while they secure the government building."

Hallena couldn't begin to estimate how long that would take, but it wouldn't be a matter of minutes. She had something to focus on. But the cannon fire was now close enough for her to feel dust drifting down from the ceiling with every explosion, peppering her face.

"I hope they know we're in here," Hallena said again. "I wouldn't put my faith in droid precision if I were you."

"It's taken care of." Merish turned away from her, lips moving, and walked toward the pitch-black corridor outside the office. Hallena couldn't hear what the woman was saying now, but she appeared to be coming various codes and talking as if checking where people were.

From time to time she cursed loudly enough for Hallena to hear, as if something hadn't gone to plan, or someone had been killed, but her body language suggested she was feeling more confident by the moment.

Varti seemed to have relaxed, even though they were probably more at risk now from a stray cannon round than they ever were from the state militia while they were so far back from the front line of the uprising.

"Hard to believe we finally did it," he said, more to himself than anything.

Merish walked back into the room. "It's not over yet. Jarlio says there's heavy fighting around the guard barracks. Who'd have thought they had the stomach for that?"

There was a lot more to taking a planet than just seizing its capital, but Hallena thought it wasn't the right time to give them her opinion on the best way to destabilize an enemy.

"Is the Regent dead?" she asked.

"Why? Was that your mission, to get the scum to safety be-fore we lynched him?"

"Would you believe," Hallena said, "that we hadn't realized things had progressed this far?"

Shil stepped back from the window. "No. But then you don't seem to have any idea how much the Republic's loathed across the galaxy for the regimes it shores up, so maybe I shouldn't be surprised. Coruscant leads a cocooned existence, doesn't it?"

Yes.

Don't you think I know that?

Don't you think I have my doubts when I end up in places like this and see how people live?

If she survived this, she swore she'd get out of the business. Fifteen years was enough for anyone. It was a little more than simply giving notice because agents never completely retired until death—natural causes or otherwise—ended their career. Even in old age, they could still be called upon to do the occasional job, or analyze intel. They knew too much. But she was getting out, *really* out, where nobody could find her.

First, though, she had to get out of Athar.

REPUBLIC ASSAULT SHIP *LEVELER*, JANFATHAL SPACE

THE SHIP'S ADDRESS SYSTEM BOOMED. "SAFEGUARD, safe-guard, safeguard, ship is now on defense watch."

Well, at least that was working. The Sullustan technician crawled out from under the bank of sensor screens and bolted down the cover plates.

"Done?" Pellaeon asked.

"Done," said the technician. He knelt with his arms folded on the desk. "Calibrated, too. Hit the display reset first."

Lieutenant Meriones rushed to obey. Pellaeon had to admit that the little rodent was trying hard, but then it was hard to do otherwise when you were in a ship that was less than ready for combat and within range of the enemy.

"Ten enemy vessels in JanFathal orbit," Meriones said, fin-ger stabbing at the controls. "All in the northern hemisphere, clustering over Athar . . . eight of those appear to be troop car-riers."

"Well, Rex, what do you think?" Pellaeon asked.

The clone captain smoothed his palm over his scalp. "Fastest way in is still to merge with their landing craft. Tinnies don't make a visual check. Those crates don't have viewscreens anyway. They'll read any transponder code we choose to feed them and that'll be it." He made a swooping gesture with his hand. "Probably, anyway. Right in behind them, land, do the business, and get out."

"Let's hope our Jedi friends can locate her."

It was hard to say Hallena's name. Pellaeon felt guilty that he wasn't sure why this was so painful; it should have been simple, honest fear for the woman he loved, but now he was worried that it had been tainted by embarrassment at having to admit they were *involved* and that he was committing a warship and other beings' lives to getting her out. He'd been certain that he'd feel something *purer*, something less like those dreary little desk-drivers who sat in judgment on his career and didn't think a healthy relationship had any part to play in that. Pellaeon didn't like not knowing his own mind. It was a rare dilemma.

I think I understand why Jedi fear attachment so much.

"Is your young Padawan okay?" Pellaeon asked. "She seemed very disturbed by the Altis people. I rather like the man myself."

"She says they're heretics. Something about their beliefs being different from the Jedi Order's," Rex said carefully. "Skywalker's a lot more *soldierly* than the others. I understand him just fine."

"I knew very little about Jedi before they were deployed with the army. It's an education."

"I find it helps to think of them as a very complex sensor whose technology is so far above your security clearance that you might as well just press the button and use it."

"And you're seriously going to take that child on the mission?"

"She's a *lot* more competent than she looks." Rex checked his chrono. "Better get under way. Let's see how the shuttle's doing." He beckoned to the Sullustan. "Come and do your trick with the transponder, chum."

On the hangar deck, ground crew were busy fueling one of the replenishment vessels. They were anonymous-looking craft, not much different from the millions of civilian light transports that could be found anywhere in the galaxy, except *Leveler's* had a discreet Republic pennant code on the fuselage and defensive cannon. What they didn't have in armor they made up for in modesty; this one would attract far less attention than a LAAT/i gunship.

"You sure you don't need civilian clothing?" Pellaeon tried to imagine a squad of clones remaining unnoticed in that glossy white armor. It would be broad daylight by the time they started moving around the city. "You're rather *visible*."

"I'd rather trade armor advantages against stealth," Rex said. "And we're not going to be hanging around long."

The Jedi were sitting on upturned crates by the aircraft ramp that moved the Torrent fighters between decks. They all had their heads in their hands, even Ahsoka, looking as if they were locked in some communal act of despair.

"I hope they're playing radar games or something," Pellaeon said. "Or maybe their smashball team didn't win."

Rex gave him a reassuring pat on the back. "We'll find her. Don't worry."

"I'm that transparent, am I?"

"Humor. It has many uses."

"Indeed."

Callista looked up as they approached. She didn't seem the mystic type at all; she didn't even wear the usual Jedi robes, just a normal close-fitting flight suit, like the lad with her. Master Altis looked more like an academic, in scruffy loose-fitting clothes, and all they seemed to have in common with Ahsoka was a lightsaber hanging from their belts. At a less stressful time, Pellaeon would have been fascinated to examine the gulf between the two sects, but it seemed a distraction at the moment. He just hoped they could work together.

He also hoped he hadn't overplayed his hand by risking a less than fully functional ship in a war zone.

Would I have done this if it hadn't been her?

Yes. I was already committed before I knew it was Hallena. Wasn't If

"Captain, have you anything personal belonging to Agent Devis, something she's handled?" Callista asked. "It might help us."

Pellaeon thought that kind of thing was just for police tracker akks. But in the very brief time he'd been working with Jedi, he'd learned that anything was worth a try. Each one seemed to have a different technical manual from the next.

Right again, Rex.

He fished in his pocket. Hallena had lent him a stylus and he'd never returned it, sentimental idiot that he was. "I'd like it back if possible."

Altis held the stylus in one hand and closed his fingers around it.

"Not an invasive test," he said, shutting his eyes. "Think of it as calibration."

Pellaeon was never sure where to look when Jedi did that sort of thing. It always smacked of a conjuring trick to him, and he found himself back on Corellia, a youngster watching a car-nival show and vowing he'd work out exactly how the guy in the red sequined suit had done the hoop trick. There was no such thing as magic.

Maybe he'd just had the wrong word for it.

Altis opened his eyes again. Then he passed the stylus to Cal-lista, who held it for a while with her eyes closed before handing it to Geith. When Geith had finished meditating on it, he offered it to Ahsoka.

Ahsoka clasped it and shut her eyes, but she was clearly un-easy. Pellaeon marveled at the power of taboos over otherwise sane beings. What *did* Altis's sect do that was so unacceptable?

Just find Hallena. Don't let her die alone down there.

Ahsoka finally passed the stylus back to Altis. "That's a great help, Captain," he said. "Thank you. You want to ask, don't you?"

Pellaeon shrugged and pocketed the stylus again. *And there I was, thinking I had my sabacc player's face on.* "I'm a logical man."

"Just as your sensors scan for thermal profiles and drive fire-frequencies to identify vessels, I look for something very similar in the living Force."

That wasn't what I wanted to ask. "Even for non-Jedi."

"It's harder to detect, but I often find it. We now have, as you say, a *fix*."

"But is she alive? If she is, can you tell what shape she's in?"

"She's still alive," Altis said. "And she feels— *strong*."

The Sullustan sensor technician climbed out of the shuttle cockpit. "Done," he said, and stared at the cluster of Jedi. It was hard to read expressions on Sullustan faces, but his meaning was clear. "Don't put me out of work, will you?"

Benb. His security badge said Benb. Pellaeon tried for an in-spirational tone. He needed these workers, and they certainly hadn't signed up for combat duties. "I'll see you get a bonus," he said. *Even if I have to pay it myself.* "I consider your commitment a personal favor."

It worked every time. He also meant it. Benb shrugged. "Better start on the concussion missile targeting, then ..."

Rex's sergeant and the six new troopers piled into the shuttle, followed by the Jedi. Altis was a lot more

agile than his white hair suggested. He leapt up into the crew bay.

I hope I'm still that active when I'm his age. I don't think re-tirement's ever going to suit me, either.

"Come on, Ahsoka." Callista ushered the Togruta ahead of her. "Let's you and me have a girl-to-girl chat."

Rex leaned out of the hatch again. "Look out for General Skywalker, won't you? He's tracking my secure link."

The hatch closed. Pellaeon opened his comlink to the bridge.

"Take us into shuttle range of JanFathal, Number One. Maintain stealth procedures as long as you can."

A silent ship on minimal power was still going to be spotted sooner or later. But the Seps weren't expecting any company, and one thing he'd learned about them in the last few months was that they let confidence get out of hand.

Chances were that they wouldn't see *Leveler* at their backs until it was too late.

SIX

Make the most of this opportunity. The Republic changes its encryption irregularly, so there's no way of knowing when the transmissions will be unintelligible to us again. I want to know everything there is to know about the ship's new capabilities—

and if you can seize the ship, so much the better.

Pacifying JanFathal can wait a little longer.

—Trade Federation commander, to CIS captain standing off Fath, after breaking current Republic Fleet codes

REPLENISHMENT SHUTTLE, INBOUND TO ATHAR

Rex hung on to the cargo restraints in the shuttle's bay and told himself that at least they weren't trying to take a heavily defended mesa from the ground up this time.

This was only half as insane.

"You sure she's still alive?" he said.

Altis had his eyes closed as if he was dozing, as did Callista and Geith. Ahsoka seemed to be keeping a wary eye on them, as if she was looking for something. Rex, who'd never given much thought to the fact that there might be differences of belief within the Jedi ranks, found himself fascinated and wanting an explanation, but it definitely didn't seem like a good idea.

Coric kept glancing over his shoulder from the pilot's seat at the motley squad as they waited for a Sep ship a few clicks away to disgorge its landing craft.

"Yes, alive, and she's still in Athar," Altis said at last, eyes still shut.

Coric switched to the squad's internal helmet comm circuit. "Captain, are you going to sort out Ahsoka before we land? Re-mind her that she needs to keep her eyes on the Seps, not Altis. We need to be firing on all Jedi."

Rex wondered if Skywalker would have taken her to one side for a little pep talk, but he hadn't a clue

what to say—he didn't know much about the attachment argument, but he knew enough to know it was a minefield to skirt around. The ARC troopers seemed to have no problem giving the Jedi a piece of their minds; Rex preferred to do things more diplomatically. He couldn't just bark orders, not when they weren't in life-or-death situations, anyway.

"Ahsoka," he said. *Mustn't call her little'un in front of the others.* "You okay?"

She seemed to take the hint, and looked toward him. "Fine, Rex."

"Just checking." He nodded at Altis. "If I might usurp your status here, sir."

"No, Captain, this is your show." Altis nodded back, ex-tending his hand in a polite after-you gesture. "Remember, I'm not a soldier. I just help them out when they're busy."

"We're sorry if we've put you in an awkward position, Cap-tain," Callista said kindly. She struck Rex as *sensible*, a greatly underrated quality. While she spoke, she tinkered with her corn-link. "Jedi politics. We're not like other Jedi, as you might have noticed. Some of the things we practice are what most Jedi have been warned to shun as the path to the dark side. We tend to keep ourselves to ourselves, so we can be a little distracting when we show up."

Ah, this isn't going to end well. . .

"Cognitive dissonance," said Altis, eyes closed again.

"Is it contagious?" Ince asked. "I've not had my shots."

"And we allow a Master to have as many Padawans as he or she feels is appropriate," Callista went on, visibly suppressing a grin. "Not just one."

"Sounds expensive," Rex said, deadpan. A joke defused a situation, usually. "But tax deductible."

Altis chuckled. "I'm learning a great deal from you, young man."

Ahsoka drew herself up, lips fixed in a thin line, and turned to Rex. He felt instantly guilty. "Try to imagine what you would feel if *you* went into battle and found nobody following the op-erating procedures or proper drill you were taught from child-hood," she said. "You'd be curious, at the very least. Yes?"

It was all too weird for Rex. *Time to call a halt*. He knew what the problem was, but there was nothing he could do to solve it; all he could do was suspend it for the duration of the mission.

"Okay," he said. "I know you can all set aside your ideo-logical differences to get the job done. Coric, how are we doing?"

"I'm picking up movement on the passive sensors, sir. Stand by."

There was a communal click as all the clones switched to their private circuit at the same time.

"Are they always like that, sir?" Boro asked.

Ross sighed. "In training, they always told us the Jedi were *sorted*. "

"Skywalker's fine," Rex said. Poor lads: straight out of Kamino, no contact with any command yet except him and the Awkward Squad here. If anyone was getting hit by the shrapnel from expectations colliding with reality, it was them. "I think these other guys are fine, too. And Ahsoka's still a kid, so don't worry. She's coped before."

Vere checked the charge on his DC-15. "Right you are, sir."

Coric just cleared his throat meaningfully. Rex took the comments less as criticism than the healthy

gripping of the fight-ing man, one of those rituals of bonding. It was when they weren't gripping that he was worried.

Nobody outside their ranks realized that they griped at all, of course. The Kaminoans were unforgiving of *aberrance*. A clone knew how to keep his mouth shut outside his own immediate circle.

"Okay, people, here we go," Coric said.

The shuttle accelerated. Without viewports, Rex couldn't tell where they were, and there was no real sensation of speed or change of direction. All he had was Coric's point-of-view icon displayed in his own HUD, and that gave him a very restricted view of the battlespace in front of him.

The crew bay fell silent. All he could hear was the clicking of jaws and steady breathing on his comm circuit. The POV icons in his HUD showed him that the troopers were staring down their rifles or straight ahead at the opposite bulkhead.

They might have had their eyes shut, of course. He had no way of knowing that. The miniature helmet cams picked up only what was potentially visible to the trooper, not what was actually hitting his retina.

"I'm right up this guy's tailpipe," Coric said. "If he picks up any sensor blips, he'll think it's some glitch."

Rex gave in and resized the feed from Coric's HUD with a couple of quick blinks. He always found it disconcerting, like being in the pilot's seat with no controls to grasp. Coric wasn't joking. He was just outside the safe range of the Sep landing craft's exhaust vents. To the margins of the image, Rex could just about see points of reflected light as the star at the heart of the Fath system reflected off other vessels in the squadron while they headed for the terminator of JanFathal, the ever-moving line between night and day. It wasn't easy to spot small objects in space without a high-contrast background. And that worked both ways.

Now you see us . . . now you don't.

"Stand by for a quick break from formation when I need to peel off for Athar," Coric said.

Rex minimized Coric's HUD icon again. "They're probably all going our way."

"Yes, sir, but I plan to drop out early and come in low over the coastal plain. Through the suburbs."

"How low?" Geith asked.

"Low enough to pick up a holozine or two on the way ..."

"Good man."

"Anytime now . . . hitting the atmosphere . . . owww!"

Coric was gone before the Seps even knew he'd been there, and the descent was every bit as rough as Rex had expected. The restraints only just held him; he hadn't secured them tightly enough. Coric's HUD icon showed the brilliant flame of a red-hot reentry for a moment before his protective filter cut in to shield his eyes. It seemed to take a long time for the shuttle to level out and the shuddering to stop. It was only minutes.

"We're over the sea," Coric said. "Master Altis, you're the navigator now."

"You want me to sit up front," Altis asked, "or do a little steering from here?"

"Don't scare me, sir. I'm only a lad."

Altis edged up behind Coric's seat. "Let us all focus on Agent Devis," he said, as if the Jedi were doing some mystic sig-nal enhancement. "My, this is an *unhappy* world."

Rex was more worried that it might be an unhappy world with more ground-to-air defenses than Republic Intel had told them, but nothing seemed to be showing on the warning systems. As he shifted position to look ahead through the cockpit viewport, he saw a coastline of ugly docks and decaying buildings rushing at him. The sun slanting between storm clouds did little to improve its looks, but something brilliantly golden bounced searing reflected sunlight back at him.

"Regent's palace," Coric said. "Or one of them, anyway. I bet he's loved by his people ..."

Coric changed course frequently to avoid anyone getting a fix. But Athar didn't seem to be set up to defend itself. The shuttle streaked over factories and square pools of liquid that could have been anything from water treatment plants to fish farms.

"I think it's going to rain again," Coric said casually. "Look at the water lying everywhere. It must have been bucketing down all night."

Rex was at the wrong angle to spot people or vehicles on the streets, but he could see palls of thick black smoke in the distance, and occasional puffs of fresh smoke and flame blooming in the sky above the city, as if someone on the ground had anti-air weapons.

Altis kept a hand on Coric's shoulder, muttering directions in his ear, and the shuttle dropped to such a low altitude that Rex was convinced Coric was going to have a head-on collision with some ground transport.

"We're close," Altis said. "Very close."

"You want to risk overflying the target, sir?" Coric asked, jerking his head in Rex's direction. "We get to see broad layout, but they might spot us."

"No, let's find a laying-up point and get this crate out of sight somehow." There weren't any convenient empty hangars likely to be around, but a shuttle like this could probably get away with nestling on an airstrip parking apron or something. It was just another transport vessel when seen from the outside. "Then we can send up a remote to recon the building."

"Okay." Coric cut his speed. "Holochart says disused repul-sortruck factory the other side of that canal. Let's see if there's a parking space."

The site was such a wreck that a cratering run wouldn't have made it look any worse. Huge potholes in the staging area had filled with water. Coric landed the shuttle in the lee of a crumbling brick wall, and Boro and Joc jumped out to take up defen-sive positions around it while the others ran for the cover of an outbuilding.

It's their first real op. That's the first time they've done this for real.

Rex had to remind himself of that.

Like every other city where he'd inserted, the absence of people was unnerving. There had to be a population in hiding, or driven out to safer parts. It was hard to tell. There was simply a sense of suspension. Life wasn't going on as normal.

"Ahsoka?" he called quietly. "All clear in there?"

She pointed to the building, shook her head, and gave him a thumbs-up. Once inside, Ross primed a remote. The roof had leaked; they were squatting in puddles.

"Where are we sending this, sir?"

"Can I see what it records?" Altis asked.

"Yes. The images get fed to our HUDs."

The Jedi Master held out his hand. "May I borrow your hel-met for a moment, then? I can direct the device using the Force."

"Okay. The bucket takes some getting used to, but—"

"Just set it to run the image full-frame and let Master Altis take a look," Rex said. "He doesn't need to change any set-tings."

"Thank you, young man." Altis placed the helmet gingerly over his head like he'd just won a beauty pageant and was awed by the honor. "Oh my . . ."

Geith chuckled. Rex savored the incongruous sight of a scruffy Jedi Master with the head of a clone trooper. Ross rolled the remote outside onto the shattered permacrete for it to take flight and go wherever Altis steered it. It left a little wake in the surface water for a few moments.

"Ahhh . . .," Altis said, voice muffled by a thick layer of plastoid and electronics. "Ahhh!"

ONE BLOCK FROM HALLENA DEVIS'S LOCATION, SOUTH ATHAR

CALLISTA CLIPPED THE COMLINK TO HER COLLAR AND LISTENED to the welter of voice traffic, trying to pick out the messages she needed to hear.

In the process of bypassing the Separatist encryption, she'd opened up all their comm channels, and too much was almost as bad as nothing at all; she tried to think how she might separate them, straining to filter layer upon layer of sound purely by ear. There was definitely some transmission taking place between the building Altis had identified as Agent Devis's temporary prison and a Sep relay.

Ahsoka crouched down beside her in the shelter of a door-way, lightsaber in hand. There were a few people in the build-ings around them, but she could sense their fear, and they weren't taking the risk of venturing out while they could still hear fighting from the city center. To the north, smoke hung in the air; the steady heartbeat of artillery fire thumped the ground beneath them. The remote was still circling the area high above the buildings. Rex darted across the street to hunker down with them, then sighted up with his rifle.

"The Seps have crossed the river," he said. "They've just rolled over the state guards on the bridge and they're heading this way. The local rebels seem to have moved on elsewhere. We've got maybe ten, fifteen minutes."

Callista concentrated on the tapestry of voices, trying to find one loose thread to unpick. "So what's the plan now?"

"Secure the exit from the building, put a team on the roof to clear the block from the top, and do a standard hostage extrac-tion."

Ahsoka scanned the skyline. "I'll take the roof."

"I've got a better idea. You can throw things around with the Force, right? Well, that makes you our fire cover. If anything comes down this street while we're breaching the building, cream it. Got that?"

Ahsoka frowned. "Yes, Rex."

"Don't look at me like that, littl'un. It's not the soft option. I need you to do it. If those droids kill enough militia, they can just walk over the dead bodies like a carpet and stroll down here."

Callista nodded. "Okay." She wasn't sure if it was the proper thing to call him Rex like Ahsoka did. "We'll do that."

"Move forward on my mark, and keep a comm channel clear for instructions."

Rex checked around him and then darted back to the other side of the street. The office block—three stories, nothing major—was a hundred meters ahead. Rex signaled to move, and Callista bolted.

Three seconds.

Jedi seconds weren't quite the same, but she appreciated the advice. That was how long it took a sniper to get a lock on a moving target. She could hear a distant steady noise, higher-pitched than the artillery fire, metallic and regular like someone hammering a box of rivets, and she watched Ahsoka's reaction.

"They're coming," she said.

Callista sprinted. By the time she reached the intersection, Altis, Geith, and the clones had found cover in a doorway.

Rex gestured. Callista switched to his comlink channel.

"Ready?"

"Yes. Can you switch the remote feed over to our data-pads?"

"Done. Stand by."

Callista tuned out of what was happening in the building because Altis and Geith were more than capable of keeping a watch on that. It still felt like turning her back on a responsibility. Ahsoka looked into her face again. Maybe it was a Togruta habit, not tactless at all, but Callista thought it was high time the Padawan realized they were on the same side, especially now that they had a much bigger problem advancing toward them. But Ahsoka seemed to be more preoccupied by Callista than by the battle droids.

She stared at the images being relayed by the remote as it hovered high above a company of droids. Either it was too small to be noticed, or they didn't care that they were being tracked.

"You're not what I expected," Ahsoka said at last. Her voice was a whisper. She focused on the road again. There were no droids to be seen, just that awful, inexorable sound of their feet hitting the paving in

perfect synchronization.

Callista decided to watch what Ahsoka was watching. "What, a Sith?"

"You're mocking me now."

"You're looking at me as if I've got two heads. I know I shouldn't let it offend me, but it does."

"You could stop, you know. You and Geith could just be friends."

Ahsoka was a kid. She probably thought that life really was that simple. Callista tried to explain. "Our sect is made up of families. There's no *friends* about it."

"It might seem okay now," Ahsoka said earnestly, "but the decisions you make won't be the right ones. It'll cloud your judgment. It'll take you down a dark path."

"Are you trying to *save* me?"

"Yes." Ahsoka still didn't take her eyes off the road, but she *felt* afraid. And it had nothing to do with the fact that they were in the middle of an invasion. "Please. I know you're a sincere person. I feel it."

"Do you think Ki-Adi-Mundi needs saving? He has wives and children."

"He's Cerean." Ahsoka definitely wavered for a second then. "That's *different*. They need to increase their population."

"Why? Did the dark side give him an exemption? Not very *dark*, then, is it, if it lets you off in special cases?"

"He's not *attached* to them. So it does no harm."

Had Ahsoka any idea how callous—and foolish—that sounded? Callista found a retort forming on her lips, but bit it back. She couldn't blame this child simply because she had swallowed what Callista saw as an intolerant doctrine. She'd probably never known any life but the Jedi Order. Callista had become a Jedi as an adult, fully aware of the options open to her, *choosing* this path as the best for her because Master Altis made her see the world differently; he showed her how her rare gift could be used for so much more.

"I'm not going to argue with you, Ahsoka," Callista said. "I'm not going to tell you you're wrong. I'm just saying that Jedi aren't the only Force-users on the light side, and others do things differently without going dark."

"What others are there?"

"Talk to Master Altis. He'll tell you."

Ahsoka didn't break her fixed gaze on the road, but Callista felt a little jolt in the Force, as if the Togruta was struggling with something. This was the debate Callista always dreaded: the one where she pointed to the real world around her, the evident benefits of love, and expected an ideologue whose entire life had been consumed by an all-or-nothing dogma to notice the evidence and suddenly agree that she had a point.

Being right didn't matter. *I* have to be more tolerant. Unless the mainstream Jedi did harm, active harm, then she had no duty or right to argue or oppose them.

Geith, though, felt they were already doing harm.

She glanced down at the remote's output on her datapad. A wall of light brown moving metal, relentless in its pace and uniformity, marched on.

"Here they come," Ahsoka said. She ignited her lightsaber, transformed from child to warrior in a second. "No more than ten minutes."

Callista opened her comlink. "Rex?" It just slipped out. "The battle droids. Ten minutes, maximum. Get a move on."

"A good explosive Force push can bring down the front two ranks," Ahsoka said. She was suddenly completely in control of her situation, confident about seeing off a company of battle droids. "If they pack the street, they tend to block themselves in. And if you get close enough to use your lightsaber, the heads come off ever so easily."

"Thanks." Callista realized she knew no more about Ahsoka's world than Ahsoka understood of hers. "I've never faced them before."

"We're Jedi," she said. "We can take a bunch of tinnies any-time. That's what Rex calls them, you know. *Tinnies*."

"Tinnies it is, then," said Callista.

The steady *chunk-chunk-chunk* of durasteel feet was getting closer by the second.

ONE BLOCK AWAY FROM HALLENA DEVIS, SOUTH ATHAR

DJINN ALTIS TOOK THE LIGHTSABER FROM HIS BELT AND pressed his thumb on the controls. The blade of amber energy was his personal watershed, the line between who he tried hard to be and what he inevitably became.

And now I'm ready to end a life.

And if I wish there was another way— *why don't I make one?*

He felt the clone troopers tense as the blade ignited—the new clones, beings so raw and young that he sensed them in the Force as children. Their commander, Rex, had obviously seen lightsabers used in earnest many times. For the youngsters, this had to be the first time.

"Okay—Joc, Ince, and Ross—cover the exit." Rex gestured. "The rest of you, with me. We scale the wall, go in via the roof-light. Okay? Usual drill." He turned to Altis. "You know how we do this, don't you? We go in and shoot everyone who isn't a hostage. You can stay here and hold off the tinnies."

Rex was giving him a gracious way out. *Too dirty a job for a Jedi.* But Altis couldn't back out now.

"There are only three others on that floor apart from Hallena Devis. We might find that much force isn't necessary."

"Force with a small *f*."

"Yes."

"The aim is total incapacitation of the hostage-takers before they have a chance to shoot their hostage or detonate any de-vices, and to remove the hostage as fast as possible. That means overkill. That's why I've got six men on this and not tasked to fight the droids."

"Let me go in first. Just because I'm older than the Jedi you're used to serving with doesn't mean I'm incapable of de-fending myself."

I'm still complicit in this if I stand outside, and the enemy will be no less dead. So I'll do it. And perhaps I now understand Yoda's slide into militarism a little better.

"Okay, but we have to make this snappy."

"I'll draw their attention to get past the door," Altis said, switching off the lightsaber. He concealed it in his sleeve ready for action. "Just an old man looking for a lost daughter in the chaos of civil war. Yes?"

Rex gave him a thumbs-up. "Make sure you leave your comlink open so we hear what's happening. Wait for the signal."

Vere fired a grapple over the edge of the roof and tugged on the line to make sure that it would take a man's weight. Reassured, they hoisted themselves on individual lines and disappeared over the parapet. Geith peered over the edge and nodded. Then the three clone troopers covering the exit waved Altis in.

Go.

It was a rickety old building, and the only way up was several flights of stairs. The turbolift was out of action; there was no power to the building. Altis anticipated a panicky, trigger-happy reception if he startled them, and put on his bewildered-old-man persona.

He made a point of creaking slowly up the stairs, then paused on the first landing to give them enough warning—and enough of something else to focus on beside the noises they might hear from the roof.

"Is there anyone here? Linnie? Are you here?"

He got to the third landing and headed for the office door, feeling Hallena Devis more strongly in the Force than ever. As he reached the door, which was slightly ajar, a woman with a blaster came out and blocked his path.

"I'm looking for my girl," Altis said, wondering if some mind influence might speed things up. But this woman didn't look the suggestible type. "I haven't seen her since the fighting started. Have you seen her? She's—"

The door opened wide now, and a man came out. Altis got a quick glimpse of a tall, dark-skinned woman being hauled to a standing position from the floor. *Hallena*. Yes, it *was* her. "Who is it, Merish?"

"Just some old guy looking for his daughter." She seemed distracted by the comlink she held in one hand, as if she wanted to get back to a conversation. "Look, we haven't seen your daughter. We're moving out of here now, so—"

Bang.

The explosion of transparisteel and permacrete above his head was a genuine shock. Boots hit the floor next to him. Debris rained down.

His reflex was to draw his lightsaber; all he saw was the woman's blaster lifting to fire—at him, at one of the clones who suddenly landed beside him?—and he simply brought the blade up diagonally in a defensive stroke. It cut clean through her arm and sliced under the chin. Where the blaster fell, he had no idea; the man behind her screamed "Merish! No, *Merish!*" and some-one else tried to slam the door shut before he stepped clear. But Rex and two clone troopers smashed through the door, firing, and Altis followed.

The rattle of blasterfire stopped almost as soon as it had started. In the second—a *second*, no more—that it took him to enter the room, Rex stood with his blaster to an old man's head; the man in turn held Hallena Devis around the neck in a stranglehold, with a blaster pressed to her temple.

There was a moment's standoff.

"Nice to see the Republic finally showed its face," the man said. Hallena was completely still, hands bound, face impassive, exuding that tension that said she was looking for a way to drop this man herself. "What do you want—want me to bargain, your spy's life for mine?"

Rex said nothing and simply pressed the trigger.

It was that fast. Altis didn't expect Rex to do that at all.

The blaster discharge knocked the old man backward, but he was dead before he slid all the way down the wall. Hallena fell, too. Rex, completely calm, hauled her to her feet again and ejected a vibroblade from his gauntlet to cut the cuffs around her wrists.

"Time to go, Agent Devis," he said. Outside, the chunking sound of droid feet was getting very close. "The droid army's coming for you."

Rex tried to push her to the exit. But she tried to stop to check the younger man, sprawled on the floor with a massive blaster burn from mouth to chest.

"He's not dead—"

"Not our problem. *Go.*"

"But—look, let me get my comlink back, okay?"

She rummaged in the man's coat, but Rex just picked her up bodily and almost threw her to Hil, who ignored her protests and bundled her down the first flight of stairs. Altis went after them. It was a narrow staircase, and they needed a fast exit. Geith—no questions, no orders—leapt down the stairwell and held up his arms. Hil threw her down to him; she yelped. It was as if they'd been drilled to do it all their lives, and yet Geith had never seen the troopers before today, and the trooper could have had no idea how much weight a Jedi could safely take when it was dropped on him. Suddenly there was nobody below, the sound of droids was deafening, and Altis realized he was going to be trapped in this building along with Rex, Vere, and Boro.

"Sir! Get out, we'll cover you." Ince's voice was audible over the open comlink. "Move it!"

Rex grabbed Altis's arm. "Nice job, Master. Now run. Can't keep Coric waiting."

As the four of them reached the entrance to the building, the firing started. Altis couldn't see Callista or Ahsoka; he had to get out of there. Rex gestured to wait and adjusted his rifle.

"Ince, are you clear? Is Devis okay?"

The trooper's voice sounded breathless. He was running. "Yeah—heading for the shuttle—she's running—had to put my boot up her backside, though—"

Rex made an irritated huff, an oddly mild reaction with bed-lam breaking loose outside. "Okay, get to Coric and bang out as soon as you need to. Don't wait for anyone except the Jedi."

Altis cut in. "No. We take our chances, like you."

Rex seemed to ignore him, took a deep breath, and burst out into the street, straight into a sea of battle droids.

SEVEN

One day, if it pleases some Jedi Master's personal convenience,
the Council will abandon the rule of no attachment completely
and have families. Then they'll build powerful dynasties.

Their ends always justify their means on any given day.

As do ours— *but we admit it, do we not?*

—Count Dooku, to Asajj Ventress

ATHAR, EN ROUTE TO THE EXTRACTION POINT

HALLENA WAS SO PUMPED WITH ADRENALINE THAT SHE COULDFeel no pain in her head

as she ran.

Her lungs were screaming at her to stop, though. She felt the energy ebbing from her because she simply couldn't seem to get enough air down her throat. She also realized she was nowhere near as fit as a clone trooper, and that was who she was trying to keep pace with.

But she had her comlink. The data on that was too valuable to let fall into enemy hands. She left it on locate-transmit setting, just in case, just so that Control knew where she was now.

Behind her, she heard the shooting. She'd also heard the orders barked over the clones' audio system.

"We can't leave them," she panted.

"Keep going, ma'am." Ince grabbed her arm. She was slowing. "Coric's started the drives."

"We don't leave until the other guys catch up, you hear?"

"Ma'am—orders are to extract you—that's what we're doing."

She had a long list of questions backing up in her brain like an angry mob demanding answers. Her body told her they could wait their turn and that she had to get as far away from here as she could. But there was Shil maybe *not* dead, and she cared what happened to him, and there were all these strangers risking their lives to get her out, and she didn't have any information, *anything at all*, that made it imperative to rescue her.

"That's what my toxin capsule's for," she said. "So that I don't need extracting."

"It's not a myth, then ..."

The sound of gunship drives made them scatter for cover. One of the other troopers, one whose name she hadn't caught, pulled her down into the shelter of a basement entrance until the vessel passed overhead.

"Ince here, sir." Hallena could still hear him. Their helmets had external speakers. "Sep gunship, five minutes from you— heading northwest, probably going to miss you, but be aware." He sprang up from his crouch and waved them on down the street. "Hug the walls, guys. The captain's going to kill us if we screw up first time out."

The short breather had given Hallena a second wind. She ran as hard as she could. When she rounded the corner behind Ince and saw the derelict factory, she could already hear the faint rumble of a shuttle drive idling.

"It's *us*, Sarge," Ince yelled. "Got her. Open up."

The civilian with them—the one she'd been thrown to like a roll of carpet—helped her into the crew bay. She slumped onto one of the bulkhead benches and tried to get her breath back while he checked her head wound.

The pilot turned in his seat. He didn't have his helmet on, just a comm headset. He was a serious-looking young man with black hair cut menacingly short, and Hallena suddenly realized that she was looking at the face of an entire army.

"The captain's pinned down," he said. "You been listening to your comm?"

The three troopers pitched in all at once.

"I can see his HUD output, Sarge ..."

"Yeah, come on. We go back and help them, or what?"

"We can't just sit here."

"You can," the sergeant snapped. "And you *will*. Or else we could end up losing the whole detachment. Give it a few min-utes. I'm watching the remote, and if you stopped to think for a second, you could patch into it, too."

Hallena had no idea what was going on—again. For more than a day now, she'd been effectively blind and deaf. And now she couldn't see or hear everything that the clone troopers could, just the parts of their conversation they let her hear, and she wasn't used to being that far out of the loop. The seconds were dragging like hours.

"You," she said to the civilian. "Are you Intel?"

"Jedi," he said. "Jedi Knight Geith Eris. I don't think even a trooper could catch you from that height without breaking something."

"Have you flashed *Leveler* to let Pellaeon know she's okay?" Ince asked the pilot. "He'll be crawling the walls if he can hear any of the comm traffic."

"Yes. I have, *Trooper*."

The mention of Gil's name—and his ship—split Hallena down the middle. Part of her felt foolish elation, and the rest was mortified that the romance was now clearly common knowledge even in the ranks.

"How's the ship holding up?" another clone asked. "No point banging out of here if we don't have a ride home."

"Sensors online, drives are fine, but the concussion missile targeting's not looking too clever. Maybe we can try for Kemla Yard in this crate if the worst happens."

"Range limited by oxygen, remember? Nah, we've got to get back on board."

It was clear they were talking about a warship. "Are you transferring me to a ship?"

"Leveler,ma'am. Where else?"

Gil was insane. Had he come all this way—from wherever, doing whatever—and risked his ship because she was in trouble, and somehow that emergency comm had reached him? Guilt overwhelmed her. Spooks weren't supposed to need bailing out. They were supposed to do the bailing. It happened, but she didn't feel good about it.

"Crazy," she said to herself. "What's happening to your men back there?"

The sergeant—he had to be Coric—held his receiver a little closer to his mouth. "Wow. Hey, check your HUDs. Are you blind or something? See, this is why you always have to pack a Jedi or three."

Hallena couldn't stand it any longer. "Show me," she said to Ince. "Show me what you can see."

The trooper reached into his belt and pulled out a datapad. The small screen showed a jerking, chaotic picture like a holo vid chase sequence, but it was obviously a clone's helmet cam recording what he was seeing. A mass of droids filled the street in front of him. What first looked like a barricade of rubble turned out to be shattered droid parts, and a few meters back from that barrier, two humans and a—a child, yes a *child*, a Togruta—stood with lightsabers drawn and their free hands extended. Blasterfire ripped into the droid ranks. A couple of white-armored figures appeared for a moment as the cam turned. When the helmet cam tilted—as the clone trooper looked down—she saw another trooper on the ground, his armor shattered, and another trying to pull him clear.

This is all over me. It's not about vital intelligence. I don't have any, not now.

It's never worth all those lives. I'm *never worth all those lives*.

Hallena caught Ince's arm to get his attention and had to shake him slightly. He was watching his comrades in trouble, torn between orders and doing what he felt he had to.

"Get them out of there," Hallena said. "*Now.* "

BATTLE DROID LINE, ATHAR

VERE'S POV ICON WAS STILL LIVE ON THE LEFT MARGIN OF Rex's HUD, and he couldn't shut it off.

He was sure Vere couldn't see the clouded sky he seemed to be staring at.

"No go, sir," Boro said. He was still trying to get a line into Vere's arm, the plastoid plates flung aside and sections of black undersuit peeled back. "No pulse, nothing."

Every second Boro spent trying to revive Vere put his own life at risk. As Rex drained another clip into the droid lines and dropped behind cover to reload, he struggled with a rising tidal wave of incoherent anger for a kid whose active service had lasted just eight days, from the time he shipped out of Kamino to the moment a droid grenade shattered his last line of defense, his armor.

Eight days wasn't enough for anyone.

The only things he could make pay for that were massed in front of him. *Fine*. Even in the few months of this war, he'd lost so many men that it didn't seem to matter if he joined them sooner rather than later. If he did—he wouldn't have to spend another second feeling like he'd failed them and wondering how many more he'd lose tomorrow.

"Boro, pack it in." He caught the young clone's arm. "He's gone, kid. You'll be next if you don't grab that Deece and start shooting."

"Sir, I've done all the medic training. I can—"

Boro stopped abruptly, sat back on his heels for a moment, and sighted up with his rifle again. Rex heard his outgoing audio click off, so he was either yelling curses or sobbing or whatever he needed to do to cope with losing his buddy. But he got on with it. He laid down fire, and only someone who knew what went on inside the helmet could have guessed what it was doing to him.

"Rex! Rex!" Ahsoka broke from Altis and Callista, who were struggling to hold back the droid front ranks. "Take Vere and go."

The mass of metal was getting seriously congested now. If the tinnies ever had a smart thought, they'd break off a few pla-toons from the back and try another route to the side, but the images from the remote told Rex that they weren't. The side roads had been blocked by barricades thrown up by the rebel mob.

See, we'd just get a demolition team to blow a gap in it and run through. Tinnies don't think.

"He's dead," Rex said, and opened fire again.

"Oh."

"We can't keep this up much longer. Give me a couple of minutes to rig some charges across the street, then bang out."

"I could hold them back long enough for everyone else to make a run for it."

Rex snapped a grenade launcher to his rifle. It was a mod the DC-15 wasn't supposed to have, but it did now, and it worked okay. He took aim at a point just behind the front ranks and fired. Shrapnel arced high in the air and fell fizzing around him.

"Noble," he said. "And useless, because I can't lose a Jedi on my watch."

"I can run like anyone else. You know I can."

"My squad," he said, wondering why he couldn't feel any panic now, just this awful choking anger. He counted his supply of grenades and tried to calculate how far the reel of high-yield detonite tape would stretch. "My decision. Hold that line while I lay the charges."

"You'll be killed."

"And the maximum number extracted. You know what your bosses say about attachment, littl'un. Don't get too at-tached to *me*."

Ahsoka blinked for a moment, then backed away, lightsaber drawn to deflect blasterfire as if it was an afterthought.

"Experienced captains are worth more than meat cans," Boro said. "Why don't I—"

"Okay, the line for senseless square-jawed sacrifice starts over there," Rex said irritably. "Take a ticket and we'll get to you as soon as we can."

"Sorry, sir."

"No, my fault. I'm sorry. As soon as we get this primed, get ready to grab Ahsoka and get her out of here."

"Would we be doing this if it hadn't been Pellaeon's girl-friend, sir?"

"Yes. Because that's what we'd want someone to do for *us*."

The ground underneath his boots was shaking. At first he thought it was artillery pounding away somewhere, but then he saw the cracks in the paving. They appeared as hairlines snaking across the permacrete, soon gaping apart in places to form wider fissures.

"Master Altis?" Rex yelled. "What's happening?"

Altis looked down. He still had his hand raised as if he were pushing against an invisible door where he wasn't a welcome caller. Callista and Ahsoka stood frozen in the same pose.

"Oh, that again," he said. Sweat beaded on his forehead. "We're generating so much pressure that it's causing subsi-dence."

Masonry toppled from buildings on either side of the road. Some debris plunged onto the droid ranks. And what had seemed like a ghost town suddenly erupted into desperate life as people boiled out from doorways, locals who'd been hiding until the fighting passed. Now they were flushed from their hiding places by the threat of collapsing buildings.

"I think you ought to let go and run," Rex said.

"Good idea," said Altis. "Or I'll end up killing more non-combatants than the enemy." The Jedi Master grabbed Callista's shoulder as if to break her out of a trance, making her whip her head around. "Your trooper's passed. I'm sorry."

"So am I," said Rex. "Coric?" He flashed the shuttle on his comlink. "Coric, we're pulling back now. Stand by." He ges-tured to Altis. "Give us a count, then, sir."

"In three . . . two . . . *now!*"

Well, three seconds' warning was better than nothing.

As soon as the Jedi released the Force push, the building to the right of the droid front line collapsed in a rumbling plume of dust that raced across the street like a volcanic eruption.

Boro looked back a few times as he ran. He had a piece of Vere's armor in his hand, a shoulder plate, but Altis ran to him to do the necessary before Rex did. The old Jedi put his hand on the trooper's back and said something. Whatever it was, it got Boro moving. Rex sprinted for the side roads, expecting the worst.

"Sir, stay put," said Coric's voice in his earpiece. "We're coming for you. We're setting down at the end of the street. Can you see the metal railings at the intersection?"

Rex did an about-turn and signaled everyone else to stop. There were no droids on their tail yet—they were probably still trying to negotiate the rubble because the stupid kriffing things couldn't climb—but that didn't mean they wouldn't get attention from anything airborne.

"I see it," Rex said. "And I told you to wait."

"Agent Devis said to come back for you, sir." Coric sounded as if he was trying extra-hard to make light of things. "An officer's missus always outranks him, so she's like a commodore. And she's in my face."

"Okay, give us time to make our way down there."

They ran again, sprinting in bursts and keeping well spaced apart, just in case any of the locals were armed and aggrieved enough to settle a few scores with a Republic that had done nothing for them.

Good old Coric. How does a man know when you really, re-ally *wish he'd disobey an order*?

It was too late for Vere. Rex could feel himself putting his anger to one side again, bolting it down to make sure it was just fuel for focusing on the job at hand. He'd let rip later, when no-body was around to watch him fall apart.

The familiar chuntering noise of the shuttle's drive was now audible, muffled by the buildings until it moved into the open street with a sudden burst of noise. It hovered a meter above the pavement; its downdraft sent water spray leaping from the puddles. Ross and Ince jumped out to take up defensive positions, then the vessel settled on its dampers, still sitting on what looked like a cushion of mist.

"Boro," Rex yelled, "go."

He grabbed Boro's shoulder to push him ahead, surprised that his instinct right then wasn't to look after Ahsoka but to take care of his men. He sent the others racing for the shuttle one at a time, then ushered the two troopers inside. He didn't even have time to dog the hatch shut behind him before Coric lifted off.

"Good timing," Coric said. Rex hung on to the safety rail and looked down. "The tin-can army's arrived."

Beneath them, clunking along in orderly ranks as if nothing untoward had happened, battle droids moved toward the spot where the vessel had set down just moments earlier. There were a lot fewer of them; so these were the slightly smarter or randomly luckier ones that managed to blunder through the debris. They raised their blasters with the precision of a ceremonial honor guard at a state funeral, aimed, fired—and missed. Blaster bolts passed beneath the shuttle's hull in red streaks.

Rex realized that all he knew about funerals—any funerals—was gleaned from what he'd seen on HNE. He pulled the hatch closed and sat back on one of the benches with his eyes shut for a few moments. When he looked up again, Hallena Devis was staring right at him.

She couldn't tell if he was looking at her or not, of course. All she saw was a closed helmet with a T-shaped visor like every other clone's. Just to be diplomatic, he took it off and let her make eye contact.

"Thanks for saving my life," she said. He could see a big lump in her hairline. A medic would need to check that out. "And I'm sorry that it cost one of your men."

"That's the job, ma'am." Rex actually wanted to say something else, but it wasn't her fault, and he was the one who'd volunteered them for the mission. "You understand that as well as anybody."

"Never be a prisoner and never take one. That's what the Irmenu say."

Rex thought that was a conversation waiting to happen, and he wasn't the man to have it. He noted that Ince, Boro, Joc, Hil, and Ross had all fallen silent, the unnatural absolute silence of men who had cut their comms. They were on their own frequency. Rex didn't intrude. Whatever they were sharing, they must have needed that privacy badly; it was one of those points of etiquette that he observed strictly. If they thought he was an idiot, if they were cursing him, or if they were just in the first throes of grief, then that was their business, and he'd only over-ride that circuit in an emergency.

This is the first time they've had a buddy die on them. Easy to forget that.

Altis, wedged up against Boro on one of the seats, seemed to be able to hear something anyway. The Jedi Master simply put his hand on Boro's forearm and said nothing.

Now, there's a kind man.

"Anyway, you tied this up so fast that we'll be back on board before General Skywalker catches up with us," Rex said. "Good job, everyone."

The shuttle streaked toward the upper atmosphere, rising above the cloud cover through shades of blue, then violet, then black. All they had to do was dock in *Leveler* as fast as they could, and leave JanFathal behind.

It was lost to the Republic for now.

But the worst was behind them today, Rex thought, and then cursed himself for tempting fate.

REPUBLIC TORRENT FIGHTER ECHO-97, ENTERING FATH SYSTEM AND INBOUND
FOR JANFATHAL

ANAKIN WONDERED IF THE FORCE WAS FINALLY TEACHING HIM a lesson for defying the rulings of his Masters.

I goof off, and my men end up in trouble.

I shouldn't have to sneak around to see my wife.

Okay, that's an excuse. It's true, but it doesn't justify this.

"Skywalker to *Leveler*." He could see the warship's motion-less transponder icon on his cockpit display. "I'm getting some scary traces from Rex's comlink. What's happening?"

Anakin didn't get the usual comm officer. Pellaeon answered the call personally. "He's inbound now, from JanFathal."

"I've been bouncing in and out of hyperspace all the way from Coruscant trying to track him. How did he end up there?"

Pellaeon sounded oddly restrained. He was always an enormously confident man, exceptionally unapologetic even in the face of an angry admiral, but there was something making him uncomfortable. Anakin could feel it strongly.

"We were tasked to extract a Rep Intel agent when the enemy invaded," Pellaeon said. "The lady is *known* to me, by the way."

Anakin let that sink in. Pellaeon's tone said it all. *Well... not much room for me to complain about that, is there? Even if there's any complaining to be done.*

"Understood, Captain. What's the security situation?"

"We're standing off some distance because some of our systems aren't entirely trouble-free yet. If Rex looks as if he might run into Sep problems, though, we'll engage."

"I can escort him in," Anakin said. "What am I looking for?"

"A replenishment shuttle. It might still be showing a spoof transponder code, so be cautious."

Okay, I'll feel if it's Rex or not, but saying that tends to make folks nervous. "I'll confirm visually before I open fire, Captain."

"Well, he has Jedi with him, so you can probably ping them with your Force radar or whatever it is that you fellows do."

"Ahsoka insisted on going, then."

Pellaeon inhaled very quietly as if negotiating a delicate issue. "Yes, along with Master Altis and two of his followers."

No, Anakin wasn't expecting *that*.

Altis.

Anakin vaguely knew the name, but, staring into the starfield around his Torrent to let the memory come to him, he didn't know why. It took a few moments to remember.

Qui-Gon Jinn, his Master-who-never-was, the man who wanted him to be a Jedi despite the Jedi Council's refusal to train him, had mentioned Altis. He had mentioned Dooku, too, as his former Master. Qui-Gon had mixed with the most challenging and unorthodox of Jedi—the thinkers, the debaters, the iconoclasts, and, ultimately, even the traitors.

Anakin couldn't recall what Altis's brand of dissent had been. But that didn't matter. Now he had a chance to relive happy memories of his old mentor. He missed Qui-Gon.

"General, are you there?"

"Sorry, Captain. Just trying to recall the name." Anakin shut his eyes for a moment and centered himself, letting the ebb and flow of the Force wash over him. Yes, he felt a cluster of strong presences. It was harder to feel clearly these days with all the backwash of violence and fear muddying the Force waters, but he had a bearing now that no ship's nav computer could give him.

"That'll give us something to chat about in your shiny new wardroom."

Pellaeon paused again. It was the merest fraction of a second, less than a blink, but Anakin heard it. "Your Padawan will no doubt fill you in on that."

Ahsoka must have been really testing Pellaeon's patience. His tone said it all.

"And JanFathal? I've been out of comm contact. Is Master Yoda sending forces to repel the invasion?"

"I understand from Intel that he decided against it, given the popular support for the regime change. We'd be fighting on two fronts."

"We need to pick better allies . . ."

"Indeed. We're in comm contact with Rex's shuttle now, so I'll warn him that you're coming."

Anakin calculated the sublight transit time to the planet from his current position at the edge of the Fath system and decided to jump to hyperspace. It was a matter of seconds, and pretty wasteful of fuel, but if Rex needed an escort then he needed it right now—and not in half an hour.

Anakin hit the jump control and watched the starscape stretch and distort as the fighter leapt almost instantly into the heart of the system. Short jumps were the riskiest maneuvers of all. The smallest error, a moment's lapse, and his fighter might drop out of hyperspace into the mantle of a star.

It didn't, of course. He prided himself on his piloting, not just his preternatural Force skills but also the basic discipline and long hours common to Jedi and mundane pilot alike.

I worked hard to get this good. I'm more than lucky. More than my Force senses, too.

The Torrent dropped back into realspace almost as soon as it had jumped. Its viewscreen was now filled with the almost-full disk of green and white marble that was JanFathal.

"Skywalker to Rex, over..." Anakin's sensors showed a number of Sep vessels close to the planet.
"Skywalker to Rex ..."

Coric's voice cut in. "Receiving you, General. We don't have a visual on you yet."

"Still using a bogus ID?"

"Yes, sir. We had to bang out in a hurry, and we thought we might have company."

"I've got you on my screen. Can you confirm you're show-ing as a Trade Federation fleet tender?"

"Confirmed."

"Apart from the brief excitement you had on JanFathal, is everyone okay?"

" 'Fraid not, sir. We lost Trooper Vere."

Vere? Anakin hadn't even met him yet. Now he never would. He'd only been assigned to the 501st a matter of days ago. Rex wasn't going to be in the best of moods, then; the man was good at keeping up a stoical front, but Anakin's Force senses saw past the veneer and knew just how passionately Rex felt about things.

"I'm sorry. I should have been with you. Tell Rex that—"

"Stang," Coric muttered. "Apologies, General, but are you picking up something moving fast on a direct course with *Lev-eler*?"

On the Torrent's sensor screen, a yellow enemy icon appeared to have separated from the rest of the Sep flotilla and was heading for Pellaeon's ship. A warship that didn't want to be found and could minimize its footprint on background space was a small target in that infinity. Folks put too much faith in sensors—but it was all that the vast majority had.

"Yeah, Sep ship," Anakin said. "They've found *Leveler*."

"They worked out we need to dock with a much bigger tar-get nearby."

Anakin opened the link to the warship. "*Leveler*, this is Sky-walker—you've got one Sep vessel heading your way at speed, grid seven-seven-nine-five. I'm going in."

"We're tracking it, General."

"What's your operational status?"

"Concussion missile targeting is offline, but we have a laser cannon and torpedoes."

"Okay, I'm on it," Anakin said.

The simplest thing would have been for *Leveler* to jump to hyperspace. As Anakin headed on an intercept course with the Separatist vessel, he reflected on the fact that the enemy thought the Republic wouldn't do that kind of thing. It wouldn't abandon its own to attack or to a lonely death while trying to reach the nearest base with dwindling oxygen.

A decent captain would wait to let the shuttle dock, even with an enemy warship homing in on it.

The Seps had to be counting on it.

And Anakin was counting on the Seps wanting *Leveler* — refitted, state-of-the-art, full of technology and classified data— in one piece.

EIGHT

I'm a Corellian. As the saying goes, we won't be driven.

—Gilad Pellaeon

REPUBLIC ASSAULT SHIP *LEVELER*, JUST OUTSIDE JANFATHAL

SPACE

"SAFEGUARD, SAFEGUARD, SAFEGUARD. ALL hands to action stations."

Leveler was fighting for real now; the work-up seemed a life-time ago. Pellaeon stood on the darkened

bridge, hands flat on his command console, and stared out into a void that would re-veal nothing until it was too late. Intel data said the Sep ship was the light cruiser *Discord*, but Pellaeon now wondered if he'd trust Rep Intel to tell him the correct time of day.

"Enemy contact localized, range one-three-six-hundred, bearing, tracking ..." The principal warfare officer—Derel— was a clone, and if Pellaeon had had his way, he'd have filled all the warfare posts with them. "In range, sir."

"What do you think our Sep chums want, Derel?"

"Given that *Discord* is within her firing range, sir, I'd say they want us in one piece."

It would normally have been the PWO's job to decide when to engage a target. This time Pellaeon decided to fight the ship personally, and he hoped Derel wasn't offended.

"I'd go along with that," Pellaeon said. "So why hasn't the rest of the flotilla joined in? They can't possibly be that busy with JanFathal. The place doesn't have a spacegoing navy, or else they wouldn't need us."

"Perhaps they don't think they're equipped for a fight with us. Purely opportunistic."

"Meriones? Give me that real-time chart on the large display, Lieutenant." He tapped the kid sharply on the back of the head to get his attention. The tactical workstations were within arm's reach if he took a step left or right. "Come on. Snap to it."

"Ready, sir."

Pellaeon rubbed his forefinger over his mustache, mind racing through the scenarios. This wasn't about winning a battle. This was about saving the ship and the shuttle, or—at very least—denying the enemy a chance to seize *Leveler*. She might not have been a pride of the Republic fleet, but she *did* have advanced weapons, and the Seps' behavior made him wonder if they knew that. The Republic certainly had agents in some CIS yards, but Kemla?

The Seps knew somehow.

They could hit us at this range. And we could hit them.

Why send just one ship after us when there's a flotilla? If they can detect the shuttle, then why don't they attack it?

Because they know we have no reason to stick around once the shuttle's gone. And it's *this ship they want*.

Pellaeon inverted the problem in his mind. The Sep ship was taking a risk by straying out here. If he engaged it, though, he'd end up taking on all of them, and *Leveler* would probably lose even if she was 100 percent operational. The Seps—in space, at least—were an enemy made up of idiot droids and less-than-inspired organics, but out here they had numbers on their side.

The points of light suspended in the holochart in front of him shifted a little and grabbed his attention.

"Sir, two Seps have broken away from the group and appear to be heading this way, too." Derel paused to check another screen. "Concussion missiles still offline, but the drive dampers are stable and we're good to go on everything else."

Pellaeon felt he could see a full 360 degrees around the bridge. There were, he knew, a thousand solidly rational reasons why he was hyperaware during combat. And there were many near-subliminal indicators in the ship, on the bridge, that told him what his crew was feeling. He heard the little clicks and *wet* sounds that gave away facial expressions—words formed but held in check, unspoken, breaths held.

"Rumahn," he said to his first lieutenant, "what would you do?"

Pellaeon could *hear* his discomfort. Rumahn was a solid second in command, the kind of man who always managed to find the balance between concern for the ship's company and doing what was necessary. He applied Fleet regulations, but *kindly*. And he would never have been caught the worse for drinking after a Fleet dinner, serenading a beautiful woman beneath her apartment balcony, until her

husband came out and asked him to leave immediately. That had been the gist of the request, any-way.

Derel tapped the controls on his sensor display. For a moment the bridge was so quiet that Pellaeon could hear the officer's fingernails on the plastoid.

"I'd close the gap between us and the shuttle, sir," Rumahn said, "and lay down a laser barrage to defend the ship while taking the vessel inboard."

"And if Agent Devis *weren't* on board?"

Rumahn didn't blink. "I'd jump out of this sector right now, sir. We may be in no shape for a fight, and engaging isn't the best way to test the ship's readiness."

It was brutal and honest. It was correct procedure according to the Republic Fleet regs because a couple of thousand crew and a warship were at stake here. But it was also . . . wrong.

"The moment we don't make every effort to save every last crew member, every last trooper, that's the moment this navy, the Grand Army, *everything* starts to come apart," Pellaeon said. "Seps don't have prisoner-of-war camps as far as I know. And that's the best option for the shuttle crew. So, Commander Rumahn, we're going to close the gap as you suggested. Helm, take us in. Rex, General Skywalker, are you ready? Fast docking, then jump. Only engage if absolutely necessary. We can outrun *Discord*, and I estimate we've got a good few minutes on the other two ships."

"Wait one, sir. They know where we are now, so we might as well use the active scans." Derel pinged *Discord* instead of taking the passive scan readings. It confirmed *Leveler's* course and speed to the enemy, but that was academic now. "Let's just make sure we know what we're dealing with ..."

Pellaeon leaned over the console to look down at the screen. It took a trained operator to interpret the readings accurately, but he had a good idea of what he was looking at.

"That's no light cruiser." The active sensors were picking up the signature of a much bigger, better-armed ship. "So unless Intel got it wrong again—"

"Maybe not, sir," Derel said. "Seems that two can play bogus transponder games. It's not *Discord*. It's a destroyer. Maybe forty turbolasers."

Stang. More firepower than *Discord*, *and faster, too*.

"Blast," Pellaeon said quietly.

He turned to the comm officer and indicated with a side-to-side cutting gesture across his throat that he wanted all external comms cut immediately.

The comm officer just nodded.

REPLENISHMENT SHUTTLE, INBOUND FOR *LEVELER*

"SO, NO CAVALRY TO THE RESCUE EXCEPT THE GENERAL," CORIC muttered. "*Leveler's* on her own, and so are we. Fair enough. Can do."

"At least HQ didn't order us to fight to the last man." Ince leaned over the back of the copilot's seat to look at the sensors. He could have patched in via his HUD, but Rex understood that basic human need to physically take a look. "Let's face it, we're just as dead regardless of whether it's a cruiser or a destroyer, right, Sarge?"

Coric made a noncommittal grunt. "It's being so cheerful that keeps us going."

"You got a fix on *Leveler* yet?" Rex asked.

"If you mean am I aiming us at the bay doors, yes, sir." Coric was doing his best with basic piloting skills in a basic ship. He wasn't a fighter ace. "But if the Sep commander isn't going to vape us or *Leveler*, I can't guess what his next maneuver is going to be."

"He'll try to disable her," Rex said. "Drives first, then weapons. Easier said than done."

"What happened to the good old days of just firing broad-sides until one side ran out of warships?"

"That was way back—last month."

Limited situational awareness.

That was what Rex didn't like about a spacegoing navy. He liked to feel his boots on the ground, be able to look around with a bit of help from his helmet systems—or even just take the bucket off and use his own eyes, ears, and sense of smell.

He took off his helmet anyway. In a situation like this, he should have kept it on in case the hull was breached. But he had a feeling that an hour's grace before the reality of hard vacuum took him was going to be a moot point.

Through the limited field of a viewscreen, there was nothing to see but a narrow rectangle of black, star-speckled space. It was impossible to see anything unless it was right in front of him, at the right angle to catch the light from Fath's star, and even then—space was awfully big.

And sensors lied.

"At least Skywalker can find us," Rex said. "Handy things, Jedi." He glanced back over his shoulder. "No offense."

"Being useful is a virtue," Altis said. "Thank you."

Coric lowered his voice. "Even the general can't perform miracles, sir."

"Well, he can provide cover, and that's close enough for me." Rex glanced back at the crew bay again. Hallena Devis didn't look too bright now; that blow to the head was starting to take its toll. *Don't go and die on us after all this*. He fretted about subdural hemorrhage, delayed-onset coma, all the things that could still go wrong. *Where's Skywalker?* "Come on, close that gap."

"Whoa—" Coric stared at the screen for a moment. "Where'd he go?"

"What?"

"I don't want to worry you, but *Leveler's* just jumped."

"That's done a pretty good job on the worry front. Let me see."

Rex didn't believe it. He leaned over Coric's shoulder to check the screen for himself, and yes—*Leveler's* icon and track had vanished from the plot.

"He's probably just killed his transponder to spoof them." *Can't see. Can't stanging well see. I hate this*. "Pellaeon would never run, not without warning. Or maybe it's another tech problem."

There was an awkward silence. Rex glanced at Hallena just in time to see her lock her expression into neutral. But she couldn't fool a clone, not someone who relied on the smallest tics and tells to identify individuals in a sea of identical faces.

Yeah, she thinks he's not the man she thought he was . . . and she's looking for reasons to be wrong.

"Okay, Sergeant, kill all nonessential systems." Rex took a step back into the crew bay and tapped Boro

on the top of his helmet. The lad's head was down as if he were looking at his datapad, which was centered in his HUD icon. But he needed to be distracted from what was really on his mind. They all did. "Work out how much oxygen we've got left, Trooper, and if we can make Kemla."

They all knew their chances of making Kemla Yard without being shot down were remote now, oxygen or not. But Rex took a guess that there wasn't one being on this craft who would give up and die that easily. Ahsoka looked him straight in the eye. Altis and his two Jedi seemed grimly resigned.

Boro didn't take long. He didn't look up from his datapad. "We've got twelve pairs of lungs and enough oxygen for roughly halfway, maybe closer if we reduce our oxygen consumption as far as we can."

Well, we all knew that. Lucky I'm not with a panicky bunch of folks.

"Okay." Rex braced both hands on the trunking that ran across the deckhead, looking down the length of the crew bay. "Stark choice time." *When was it ever any other way? It just keeps happening. Over and over and over.* . . . "Hang around and hope, halve the number of lungs the hard way, or find the nearest sustainable source of oxygen, which is currently a hostile planet beneath us."

Hallena looked up at him. "I'm equipped for the lung-halving exercise. And seeing as this is all due to me, I'll volunteer . . . but I don't recommend being taken prisoner."

She trailed off, but her eyes didn't leave his.

"I wasn't planning to go quietly, either," Rex said. "I didn't enjoy captivity much last time."

Altis leaned forward, elbows on knees. "We—Jedi—can put ourselves into a deep enough trance to cut our oxygen consumption, but I'm not sure it'll be enough to get the rest of you through. I'm all for heading back and making a fight of it." He glanced at Callista and Geith, and they nodded. "See?"

"Me, too," said Ahsoka.

Rex looked to his troopers. He almost hoped they'd dis-agree, argue, *anything* but do what they'd been trained to do every day since they were old enough to walk: follow orders. But they were 501st, so they took the most decisive option.

"If I'm going to die sooner than planned," Hil said, "then I'd like to take a few more tinnies with me, sir."

Rex could have bet safely on that. "It's not going to save JanFathal, but it'll make *us* feel better, right?"

"Yes, *sir*," Boro said. "Works for me."

"And while we're down there, maybe we'll have a few ideas for getting off that rock eventually."

Coric turned the shuttle nearly a full 180 degrees, shut down all the systems except propulsion and life support, and headed back down to the surface.

"This is as stealthy as I can get, sir. Where to?"

"Athar." Rex opened his comlink and sent a brief coded message to Skywalker. The less time he spent on comms, the less chance they had of being traced. "Better the trouble you know than the trouble you don't."

V-19 TORRENT ECHO-97, JANFATHAL SPACE

ANAK1N STREAKED INTO THE PATH OF THE DESTROYER AND knew something had gone badly wrong.

It was way too late for stealth. He could feel the ship's vast presence as a disturbance in the Force, but

all he could see was a large target on his sensors and a completely starless patch of space where the vessel hung in darkness. It was only when he looped around that the blinding sun picked it out in stark relief.

And *Leveler* was gone. She'd jumped to hyperspace.

"Rex?" Anakin checked the comm transmission again. Just a simple code: 0065, return to last known coordinates. It wouldn't have meant a thing to anyone intercepting it and de-coding it. It could have been anything from an order to an acknowledgment. And only the recipient knew what those coordinates were.

The last location from which Rex's comlink had sent a signal was Athar.

"Okay, Rex, last time I said I'd come back for you—I didn't." Anakin couldn't detect the shuttle on his instruments at all, but he could certainly feel the Jedi. "This time's different."

The Sep destroyer could probably detect the Torrent even at this range, but Anakin sensed that the commander wasn't interested in a solitary fighter. He was probably reassessing his task now that *Leveler* had vanished.

This wasn't Gilad Pellaeon's style.

Even a battle droid could have worked that out. But as to what his plan was—and why he'd jumped in complete silence—Anakin couldn't begin to guess. He headed for the planet, navigating by the kind of signature that no sensor could ever pick up, the distinctive trail of Jedi.

A couple of them felt very strong in the Force, quite distinct from Ahsoka. She felt almost obscured by them.

Altis. Yes, Qui-Gon must have had some interesting friends.

"You're smart enough to guess what I'll do, aren't you, Rex?" Anakin muttered to himself. "You won't open fire if some unidentified fast-moving object blips your sensor, right on your tail . . ."

Anakin closed his eyes for a moment and followed the pull in the Force, like a sensation in his sinuses that eased when he aligned himself with its source. By the time he looked up again, a matter of moments, traveling at thousands of kilometers an hour, the disk of the planet filled most of his cockpit viewscreen. And silhouetted against the wash of green sea and white cloud was the shuttle.

Any Sep ship must have picked up the fighter's thermal signature by now—if they were looking, anyway. Maybe they were preoccupied by working out if and where *Leveler* might reappear.

Unless she's got a major operational problem, of course. Not like Pellaeon to go totally silent...

Anakin came in over the top of the shuttle and tilted so that the Torrent's distinctive three-winged shape was instantly identifiable to the pilot. He rocked the Torrent side-to-side to indicate he'd lead the shuttle in. Comm silence was still the best option for the while. He kept a visual check on the shuttle from the reflection in the Torrent's cockpit shield right up to the moment he hit the top of the atmosphere, and then everything vanished in a reentry haze of hot gas.

He was at fifteen thousand meters before his comlink came to life and Rex's voice said, "Do you know where you're going, sir, or shall we recommend somewhere picturesque?"

"It looked a lot nicer from farther out."

"You know there's nothing more you can do for us now, don't you? You should get out while you can."

"I can keep you company until transport arrives."

There was a brief pause. "Thank you, sir."

"Got a local chart?"

"Break right and loop around behind us. We know all the best derelict buildings," Rex said.

"Did you get any transmission from *Leveler* before she jumped?" Anakin asked.

"Nothing, sir. Pellaeon will have a plan, though. He always does."

It was a very casual conversation; no urgency, no strict voice procedure, nothing to indicate that the two vessels had deliberately flown back into what was now enemy territory in any sense of the word, and that they could neither escape nor fight a fleet. Anakin didn't think Rex was a resigned-to-fate kind of guy, but even with a group of Jedi—

Okay. Got it.

"We've got five Jedi, a Rep Intel agent, and seven Five-oh-first troopers," Anakin said. "Applied intelligently, that's an *army*."

The trick was in looking at a situation from the right perspective. Overwhelming enemy forces, or a target-rich environment; enemy territory, or a rich source of weapons and transport.

"I feel better already," said Rex.

NINE

We've lost *Leveler* completely, sir. Do you want us to hold this position in case it's a feint? If we allow the other hostiles to land on the planet, then we at least have hostages.

—CIS destroyer *Reaper* to Trade Federation command

REPUBLIC ASSAULT SHIP *LEVELER*, SOMEWHERE IN THE OUTER RIM

THE FATH SYSTEM WASN'T THERE, NOT even in the distance.

"Blast," said Pellaeon.

Derel and the officer of the deck—Baradis—were head-to-head over a bank of screens, physically checking calculations with a stylus and datapad. The moment *Leveler* had dropped out of hyperspace, it was clear she wasn't where the navigator had planned to jump. The bridge watchkeeping team all wore the same expression, regardless of species: *worried*.

"Okay, *why* aren't we where we thought we'd be?" Pellaeon demanded. "Because if we can't even *jump* straight now, we're in serious trouble. It's a long way home at sublight."

| And Rex is in trouble, too. I might have overplayed my hand this time.

"I think it's all the same problem, sir," Baradis said. "The sensor tracking, the nav computer—the galactic positioning software isn't talking to the systems, or at least it's not giving them consistent or current information."

They couldn't even comm Fleet HQ. It was clear to Pellaeon now that their encrypted channel had been compromised, and that the Seps knew not only which armaments *Leveler* had acquired at refit, but also how many systems were down. The ship really was on her own now.

"Where's Benb?" Pellaeon hit the ship's broadcast override. He needed the Sullustan technician. "Supervisor Benb to the bridge immediately, please."

The bridge was in darkness to make the displays easier for operators to see; at action stations, concentration was intense and crew members might be stuck at a console for hours at a stretch. Occasionally, though, the darkness gave Pellaeon the impression that he was on a stage, staring into footlights, unable to see the faces of the audience but aware that he needed to give the performance of his life.

I'm not thinking about Hallena the whole time. Am I good, bad, callous?

He was doing what he had to do, for his ship and for those stranded back in JanFathal space. The choice became starkly clear when he had to make it.

There's your attachment, Master Altis. It's a dilemma for us all, not just Jedi. And everyone handles it differently.

"Baradis, have you got a position for us yet?"

"Sir, we're in the Poressi system."

"We're way off, then." Pellaeon brought up the holochart to almost full magnification. A few seconds' deviation at supralight speeds translated into huge distances. It had just been a quick jump, a simple ploy to jump out of the area and then drop back in again minutes later on a different heading to spring an ambush. "But we need to know—is this a consistent fault, or random? We jumped from Kemla without any problems."

Benb trotted onto the bridge, probe wires trailing from his coverall pockets like festival streamers.

"I know, I know," he said irritably. "We're working on it."

Pellaeon now had absolute silence on the bridge. It was a small team anyway, fewer than twenty, but with the comms shut down it was eerily quiet. "Just tell me what *it* is."

"Put simply," Benb said, "the central chrono software that tells the ship's systems what time it is, so they can keep updating and sharing information exactly when they need to, is com-pletely *borked*. That's what put the sensor displays out. And weapons targeting. And that's why you've jumped somewhere you weren't expecting."

Navigation was largely about time. Navigation beacons re-lied on precisely timed signals; ships worked out their positions by speed and bearing over a given time. It was all done by nav computers now, but the basic principles were the same as when Pellaeon took his yacht out on the open sea.

"Can it be fixed, and if so—how long?"

"Complete system shutdown. Purge and reboot, then run checks. Six standard hours."

Pellaeon looked at Baradis and Derel. "Can the calcs be done manually, or at least without a working chrono?"

"Yes." Baradis didn't sound confident. "But they're so com-plex that it's *all* we'll be able to do."

"Can you put this ship in the right place at the right time faster than Benb's team can get the systems back up?"

"Yes, if I can divert crew and computing power to do the calcs—and the engineers can engage the drive on my signal and maintain a set speed." Baradis snapped his fingers to demon-strate. "Start, put your boot to the metal, and stop. It's the basic stop-chrono and chart technique that submersibles use."

"Do it," said Pellaeon. "I want us back in JanFathal orbit as fast as you can. Derel—I want a manual solution for cannon and turbolasers."

"So, do you want me to carry on working on the system or not?" Benb asked, glancing down at the fob chrono clipped to his breast pocket.

"Not unless you can do it without shutting down all systems."

"I can't," he said. "I'll just bypass the chrono so you've got manual control, then." Civilians weren't bound by the etiquette of service life, and they knew it. A civilian contractor could tell a captain that his plan sucked without fear of the consequences. "But if it takes you four hours to calculate that jump, and it doesn't work, then it's six hours to fully reboot on top of that delay, remember..."

Pellaeon wondered if anything more than minutes was going to make a difference now. But all he could do was pull out all the stops and do it as fast as he could.

"I'll remember," he said.

Cocooned in the relatively small world of a warship's bridge, some commanding officers forgot there was the equivalent of a small city around them, full of beings with their own doubts and questions. Pellaeon never did. It was why he walked the lower decks so often, why he had to see everything for himself, and why he refused the isolated privileges of rank like having his own dining room and chef.

"Rumahn, make sure section heads keep their personnel informed about why we're twiddling our thumbs in the middle of nowhere at the moment. And I'll address the ship's company personally." The sound levels on the bridge rose a little as officers began moving and talking quietly again. They thought the situation was under control. Yes, this *was* theater, and projecting confidence *created* confidence. "Derel, how many weapons can we aim using manual targeting alone?"

It was the longest wait of Pellaeon's life. Meriones showed up with caf and snacks for the bridge crew at intervals, forcing the captain to revise his view of the boy as a chinless rodent who'd struck lucky in his choice of sire. Everyone found their level in this war, and even the likes of Meriones came up trumps sometimes.

As Pellaeon watched Derel patching feeds from external cams through to the bridge monitors, he wondered what would have happened to the Republic if it hadn't conveniently found a remarkably well-trained, well-equipped, ready-made army and a fleet to go with it. The most serious conflict that Pellaeon had been involved in before this all-out galactic war was interdiction: anti-piracy patrols. There wasn't a nonclone officer in the Republic who could be described as *ready* for this kind of war. After just a few months of this most unforgiving of training on the job, an awful lot still weren't. Without the clone army—the clone *navy*—the Separatists would have rolled straight over the Republic's inexperienced,

police-action fleet.

Very convenient, all these clones.

Someone knew we'd need them. When did they start plan-ning it, though? And why?

It was the kind of question that anyone would ask if they'd experienced the glacial speed of Republic procurement. Pellaeon wasn't fussed about getting an answer right then, but it had played on his mind more than once in the last few months. He expected to find dirty politics at the heart of it. Was there any other kind?

"Don't worry, sir, it's going fine," Baradis said, not looking up from the four datapads spread in front of him on the console. From time to time, his comlink chirped and someone read a string of numbers to him. "We'll have this sorted in a couple of hours."

Pellaeon realized he'd been drumming his fingers on the con-sole. Baradis had read that as impatience rather than anxiety. Yes, that was inevitable, but Pellaeon was gripped now by a much rarer phenomenon—self-doubt.

I really did do this because I was tasked to extract an agent— *any agent*. *Didn't I?*

So my personal motives aren't an issue here.

Or are they right about me? Do I lack the right stuff because I can't resist a pretty face? Have I endangered my ship and my crew for personal motives?

There was nothing more he could do now except wait. Next time *Leveler* jumped, she had to get it right—if only to avoid emerging from hyperspace too close to a star. Derel beckoned to him and indicated the monitors.

"There you go, sir." He pulled back one of the seats. "By-pass the computers. We can get range and

bearing with the manual targeting laser, check visually via the external holocams, and fire from here. Basic artillery skills. We're all cross-trained."

You call us mongrels, don't you? I overhear things around the ship. Regular beings dismiss you as subhuman, artificial, and you bite back by regarding us as random accidents of existence.

"Good work, Derel," Pellaeon said. "I'll leave you to select your gunnery team. Again, I reflect on how lucky we are to inherit a combat-ready force."

Derel made a show of busying himself with checking the laser calibration panel. "Before you ask, sir, I don't know much about our commissioning process, either. The Jedi paid up front, I hear."

"Jolly decent of them," Pellaeon said. "How are we doing, Commander?"

Baradis rubbed his forehead with the heel of his hand, eyes looking bloodshot. Meriones appeared out of nowhere with more caf.

Ah, he missed his vocation. A steward.

"Getting there, sir."

Pellaeon opened his comlink and patched into the ship's broadcast system. A word of reassurance from the old man always worked wonders; there was nothing worse than being hunkered down in an engine space or some isolated compartment and not knowing what the stang was going on.

"D'ye hear there," he said. He always stuck to procedure. "This is the captain. We'll be jumping back to JanFathal space sometime in the next two hours—rough estimate—and the nav calcs are being done manually, just so we have no more—"

He was cut short by one of the sensor operators. "Contact, range three hundred clicks, bearing zero-zero-five off the port bow, elevation forty-two. Ship out of hyperspace." The whole bridge went

silent. "Confirmed, sir, it's *Wookiee Gunner*."

"Comms, please." Pellaeon had to warn the Jedi freighter that encryption had been broken. "*Wookiee Gunner*, be aware we're on an open channel."

A female voice came over the comlink. "Understood." There was a pause. "We'll pass that to Fleet so they can make the nec-essary adjustments. Wait one."

"Good grief, sir, they're getting very *naval*," Baradis mut-tered.

Pellaeon was impressed that they'd located *Leveler*. Jedi senses seemed able to beat scanners some days. "Remind me never to complain about mystic imprecision again."

It seemed like a very long wait. Pellaeon counted down the minutes and seconds on the bulkhead chrono, the analog device that didn't rely on the ship's computer.

Wookiee Gunner came back on the comm net at last.

"This is Jedi Ash Jarvee. Fleet Comms says they've now changed code keys and that comms are secure again. You can safely make contact."

Well, at least Pellaeon could now explain the size of the problem, even if Fleet could do nothing about it within the time frame except make sympathetic noises. And he could try to maintain contact with Rex and Skywalker.

"Thank you," he said. "I thought you'd be at Yarille by now."

"And we thought you needed a hand. Can we help in any way?"

"Nav computers are beyond the reach of the Force, but thank you for the comm assist."

"Oh, you'd be surprised what we can do." Ash sounded amused. "Callista's the most skilled with computers, but Master Altis has taught us some useful Force techniques that he's discovered on his travels. Permission to come aboard?"

Baradis raised an eyebrow. Pellaeon decided now was as good a time as any to abandon a data-rational approach. If Jedi were smart enough to pre-order a few million clones and a fleet, then they probably knew more about the Republic's armed forces and its systems than they were letting on.

Why they did—didn't matter right now.

"Permission granted," Pellaeon said.

OCCUPIED ATHAR, JANFATHAL

"You'd think they'd deploy vulture droids." Coric steered the shuttle into a column of smoke in the upper atmosphere and followed it all the way down to the surface. He seemed to be confident flying on sensors, but Altis still maintained a watch in the Force for unseen hazards. "They could have brought us down anytime. Couldn't they?"

"We're more use as collateral and interrogation material than we are as a barbecue," Rex said. "Besides, shooting us down would mean they realized we were a threat. And I don't think they ever learn just how much damage a handful of wets can do to them."

"Wets?" asked Callista.

"Organics." Rex gestured. "The likes of you and me."

Coric banked left and suddenly the shuttle was in clear air, fifty meters above a blackened maze of streets on the north bank of the river, the city-center side of the disputed bridge. Altis caught a glimpse of it over the sergeant's shoulder as the shuttle swooped low behind the cover of the last towers still standing. He appeared to be heading for the massive arches of a viaduct.

And following him was Anakin Skywalker's Torrent fighter.

Altis didn't even need to look at the sensor screen to know that. Skywalker's presence in the Force couldn't be ignored. It was like being trailed by a whirlpool, a faint but definite sense of being on the edge of something that might drag in everything it touched.

It was going to be interesting to meet him face-to-face. Not the most perfect of settings, but. . . no, this was ideal; the measure of a man was in the extremes, on the brink of death, not in polite discussion.

"So what's the plan?" Ince asked. The shuttle passed into deep shadow and settled on its dampers. As soon as Coric cut the drives, Altis could hear the sporadic thumping of laser cannon hitting something. "I'm up for anything that involves pay-back for Vere, sir."

They have no time to deal with grief. Maybe that's for the best.

"Let's see what General Skywalker plans," Rex said. "Personally, I like the idea of liberating a few Sep assault tanks and seeing how much damage we can do before they stop us."

"And then getting out," Geith said.

"That has its appeal, too, I admit."

Altis drew his lightsaber before he stepped out of the shuttle, ready to deflect incoming bolts, but the Separatists' attention was elsewhere. Ahsoka and Callista jumped down to flank him.

"Careful, sir," Rex said.

"I'm always surprised by this." Altis inhaled the smoke in the air. "In the middle of battles, there are always these little pockets of quiet. The boundary between life and death is very slim."

On the south side of the river, civilians were already ventur-ing out of the buildings and standing around in bewildered groups. Altis wanted to go to them and find the injured, to try to help, but he had to make a choice; all he could do here was help a few.

But it matters to them.

His failing was indecision, and he knew it. *A greed for happy solutions*. His priority had to be the Jedi and troops with him. There was no greater inherent virtue in saving strangers, however much the idea had been elevated into something more laudable, a curious idea that the act of detachment itself some-how made the lives saved more valid.

All about the giver, not the receiver.

"Here's the general," Rex said, crouching in the cover of a brick arch. "You've been in combat before, then, sir?"

"Small skirmishes," Altis said. Skywalker—behind him, to the left—now felt like the heat of a furnace when the doors were opened. "Little wars that escaped the Republic's attention. I used to call it *peacekeeping*, but I do so hate euphemism. I fought."

Altis turned. Anakin Skywalker, blue lightsaber in hand, ran at a crouch from another arch of the aqueduct to join them.

So this is the Chosen One.

"Master Skywalker," Altis said. "I knew Qui-Gon Jinn. Fine man."

Skywalker gave him a polite nod. Altis reached out and put his hand on the boy's shoulder. It was curiosity as much as greet-ing; and what he felt gave him such a jolt that he felt he under-stood much more and yet had a thousand more questions.

Time slowed. A second to everyone around him—but an eternity to Altis.

Skywalker seethed within, not with anger, nothing clearly negative like that. . . no, it was a strange blend of fear, desper-ate love, and guilt. Altis could almost taste it. He wondered if other Jedi had detected it, this obsessive, terrified passion for someone or something that the lad seemed to think was his last chance, the last thing he could bear to lose after everything else he cared about had gone. It was more than love. It had passed beyond that into a liability, something that could be used to bring him to heel as surely as a choke-chain on an akk. And it wasn't greed or ambition—it was focused on another living being.

Unrequited love?

No, Altis didn't sense that at all, no confused yearning to know what words or actions might do the trick and secure a sec-ond glance from the beloved. Skywalker exuded certainty. But it was certainly *forbidden* love, whatever the circumstances, be-cause Yoda would not allow the manifestation of what Sky-walker felt.

Either they feel this in him, and they refuse to accept what it is, or they don't recognize passionate love.

Altis knew that kind of love when he sensed it because his community was awash with it.

But he got that inevitable feeling that he should help because there was something else looming, something unhappy, but it was too vague to pin down. The whole messy storm of emotion was something he never came across in his own relaxed commu-nity. Skywalker might have found some peace there. Driving this underground would simply make it toxic, dangerous, ripe for distortion.

Yoda will not take kindly to you poaching his Jedi, even by accident. Find another way to help this lad.

"I'm always pleased to meet his friends, Master," Skywalker said. Suddenly the present returned to normal time, a second passed. "Preferably in a more social setting, though. Shall we find some better transport and get off this planet?" He jerked his thumb in the direction of the fighting, eyes on the signs of a battle raging a kilometer or two east that was marked by palls of smoke and the hammering chatter of blasterfire. "They're still landing battle droids and organics. That means they've got troop carriers touching down. And I've seen at least three CR-twenties."

That seemed to mean something to Rex and the others. Altis felt the general mood lift.

"We should order some of those from the Corellians," Coric said. "But let's try before we buy."

"A test drive would seal the deal, yes." Skywalker smiled as if he was trying to strike a balance between being upbeat and acknowledging they'd lost a comrade. "Let's go find a paint job we like. And tell me who you are because we've not met before, have we? Got any spare remotes for a quick recce?"

"Last one, sir," Ince said. He handed the little self-propelling holocam to his general. "Trooper Ince."

"Okay, Ince, and you?"

"Boro, sir."

"Boro, you and Ince locate a CR-twenty for us, and we'll plot a two-pronged assault to seize it." Skywalker turned to the others. "Agent Devis, I assume? And . . . ?"

"Jedi Callista Masana," Callista said, "and this is my fiancée, Geith Eris."

Oh . . . dear.

Skywalker's face didn't betray the massive flare of shock that Altis felt rise up in him. Only the clones wouldn't have known how much the revelation wounded him.

I wish I weren't right this time.

But Rex seemed to understand that perfectly well even with-out Force senses. Altis watched the chin piece of his helmet dip for a fraction of a second as if he'd shut his eyes and winced.

Skywalker just bowed his head politely, moving along the group that had gathered in the cover of the archway. "Ahsoka," he said. "And you, troopers?"

"Hil, sir. He's Ross; that's Joc. Vere didn't make it."

"Then let's do this for Vere. Make his sacrifice mean some-thing."

The group fell silent as Ince tossed the remote into the air with a flick of his wrist, as if he had a natural gift for wick-ball. It soared into the sky, a tiny and near-invisible sphere against the backdrop of smoke and chaos, and within moments it was send-ing back images of the battlefield within jogging distance of their position. Altis watched on his datapad. An assortment of transports disgorged droids and organic troops, then pulled back.

"CR-twenty . . .," Ince said, apparently staring straight ahead. Altis could now visualize the welter of superimposed images, text, and symbols that the young clone was watching on his HUD. "Let's see where it goes."

Altis felt something a long way from JanFathal, a distant but distinctive surge of something brightly wonderful in the Force, and was distracted for a moment. His comlink chirped. He rushed to silence it despite the noise of blasterfire that would have drowned out anything less than a Gungan municipal band.

It was Ash Jarvee.

"We found *Leveler*, Master," she said. "We hope to have her back with you soon."

"What happened?"

"Technical problem. Got to go, in case they get a fix on you."

"We're going to commandeer transport and make another attempt to escape the planet."

"Let's not rely on that, Master. Ash out."

The comlink went dead again. Rex looked around.

"My people have located *Leveler*," Altis said. They all needed that boost, especially Hallena Devis. *He wouldn't let you down, my dear. Can't you see the kind of man he is? He wouldn't let anyone down.* "She's coming back."

"Okay, that limits the time we have to ruin the Seps' day, but let's do what we can." Skywalker stood up, seeming relieved by something other than the prospect of rescue. "Troopers, work your way to a position on this road bridge." He held out his datapad to indicate the elevated section of road above a sports field where a number of troop transports had set down. "We'll work around from the other direction onto the field itself, dis-tract or divert any Seps, and seize the ship. You provide covering fire until we lift off, then we hover level with the bridge, and you embark. Got it?"

Rex nodded. Altis cut in. "I think at least one of us should go with the troopers," he said. "Callista, will you do that for me? Hallena, you come with us. Are you feeling well enough for this?"

"It's just a headache." She brandished a DC-15 rifle. "And I can use this just fine. It's not like I can sit here and wait, is it?"

All plans sounded simple. Then they were tested against re-ality. Altis regarded this as his watch, and he wanted no more ca-sualties on it if he could help it. Callista simply nodded and darted off with Rex and

his men, keeping close to the line of trees and bushes along the river.

Ahsoka darted to Skywalker's side as if seeking refuge. She hadn't said a word. She glanced at Geith, less wary this time, but she must have felt at least some of her Master's discomfort. He was still shaken, and Altis could feel it.

"Okay, Snips?" Skywalker asked. "Never known you this quiet."

"I'm fine, Master."

"Let's talk about it later," he said. It was pretty clear what *it* was. "First things first."

"What's a CR-twenty got that's so special, anyway?" Altis asked, following them. Hallena kept pace with him. "Hyper-drive, I assume."

"Correct," Skywalker said. "And unlike a Sep multitroop transport, it's designed for organics, so we'll have oxygen and all those little life-support luxuries that they don't have on droid transports."

"How are we going to coordinate this with *Levele*? She's trying to jump back here. We could be dragging her back to Jan-Fathal for nothing if we can jump in the CR-twenty."

"I'll see if I can comm Pellaeon when we lift off. But we need to get clear of the planet first. We're going to draw some serious fire. So if she gets back—we'll probably need her."

It paid never to look farther than the next impossible step you had to take, Altis thought. *Steal a Sep transport. Avoid can-non fire. Get clear of the planet. Jump. Hope that Republic forces ask questions before shooting. Oh, and hope that Leveler doesn't make a wasted journey only to find we've gone and she's surrounded by angry Sep ships.* That was war; it was one grim insurmountable obstacle after the next, never-ending.

"They're all in basements," Hallena said, as if she was talk-ing to herself.

"Who are?"

"The civilians. The ones who weren't involved in the upris-ing. Keeping their heads down and hoping it'll all be over soon."

The streets were deserted. That made it harder to move around: the Jedi were conspicuous simply by being on the street, not because they looked like Jedi. Only Skywalker was wearing the traditional brown robe, although he managed to make it look raffish by hitching it up on his belt.

It was the lightsabers that were the giveaway.

They reached the end of a row of buildings and were faced with an open expanse of highway between them and their next cover, a row of shops and offices. A couple of wrecked and burned-out speeders—possibly the local police patrols, judging by the remains of the paint—were still smoking in the middle of the road.

"I don't sense any imminent danger," Geith said.

Skywalker looked around. "Sprint or leap?" he said.

Hallena gave a little snort. "I'm stuck with sprinting, Gen-eral ..."

"Okay. One at a time—go!"

Altis ran for one of the wrecked speeders and dropped down behind it. When he looked up and peered over the top of the door to check whether the road was clear, he found himself face-to-face with a charred body, limbs drawn up as if it was hud-dling for warmth. The shock made him catch his breath. He shook off the brief horror, counted to three, and ran for the buildings. Geith, Ahsoka, and Skywalker were way ahead, nearing the far end of the street, but Hallena stuck with him.

"So, Jedi powers don't quite run to instant cardiovascular fitness," she said. "Welcome to the world of us lesser mortals."

"Yes, but let us not forget that the appearance of age can work to our advantage." She was right, though: he needed to stay fitter than this now that he'd drifted into the war. "Watch me do something that takes a young, fit Jedi a whole basket of mind tricks to achieve ..."

They caught up with Skywalker at a speeder bus terminal opposite the sports field. The terminal's roof had collapsed and the vehicles smoldered in neat rows, burned out where they were parked. Even from here, Altis could see potholes and craters of fresh soil in the expanse of turf facing them.

The good news was that he could see troop carriers, too.

"CR-twenty," Skywalker said. "The dull gray thing that looks like a giant carpet cleaner with drives."

"So we need to board that *persuasively*." Altis could both see and sense organics among the battle droids. They were Neimoidian, and a couple of them wore data goggles. *Pilots*. "This is where old age and treachery trump youth and experience, my young general. Ahsoka? Come here, child."

"I'd be happier if you explained your plan," Skywalker said.

Altis squatted down to look at Ahsoka. Her eyes were wide and wary. She flinched when he took the scarf from around his neck and tried to put it over her head.

"Let's cover your head-tails so you're less conspicuously Togruta, and then you and I, a harmless scrap of a child and a senile old fool, will make our way across to the Neimoidians and beg for help because you've been injured in the shelling."

She tolerated the new headgear. "And?"

"Then we addle their brains a little in the good old-fashioned Jedi way, cut down the droid sentries, and take the ship." Altis looked at the others. "By that time, I expect *you* to be providing full backup."

"Works for me," Skywalker said. "Let's make sure Rex and the squad are in position first." He tapped his ear. "Remember to listen to your comlink."

"Shouldn't I be doing this?" Hallena cut in. "I've had enough of kids risking their lives for me. And dying."

So that's how she sees the clone troopers. There goes my comfortable stereotype of intel agents being amoral and cold-blooded, exploiting anyone who's of use to their mission.

Altis managed an avuncular smile by way of defusing the potential standoff. Hallena, even with a lump on her head, a swollen eye, and sagging with fatigue, looked like serious trouble. Ahsoka, who was equally capable of killing, just looked like an appealingly grubby waif in her filthy fatigues and makeshift scarf.

She was also a featherweight.

"Rex is ready, Master," Skywalker said.

Here we go.

"I'm sure you'd be a formidable force, Agent Devis," Altis said. "But trim as you are, I'm not going to carry your dead-weight and make the enemy wonder why this old man can carry a big, strong girl like you." He scooped Ahsoka up in both arms without warning. "But my unconscious granddaughter here—*that* they'll buy. Long enough for me to draw my lightsaber, any-way . . ."

"But—" Ahsoka squeaked.

"Silence, Padawan," he said. "You're unconscious."

Altis gathered himself for a moment, thought *desperate*, thought *distraught*, and then ran for the Separatists as if he were stumbling through his very last breaths to save a life.

SEPARATIST STAGING AREA, ATHAR

ANAKIN WAS GLAD THAT HE WAS IN THE MIDDLE OF A FIGHT. It took his mind off what was in danger of driving out every other thought from his brain.

Jedi. Jedi who allow marriage. Jedi who haven't been turned to the dark side by attachment.

He'd heard vague stories about dissident Jedi who clung to the old, chaotic ways. He'd never met one. Now he had, and the simple reality encountered face-to-face left him winded and drowning in questions.

Part of him, the sharply conscious calculating mind, watched Altis make his way across the ruined sports field, a pathetic figure stumbling with a child in his arms. The other part of him . . . that felt resentful and betrayed, lied to, a disillusioned child who could no longer trust the grown-ups.

Get a grip.

The droids paused and watched, their stupid tin-bird heads bobbing and jerking, blasters held across their bodies, not on alert at all. The Neimoidian pilots stood still and let Altis make his way to them. He limped before them, tottering as if he was about to collapse.

"My little one!" he sobbed. Anakin could hear him from here. "Help her! Help her!"

Quite an actor. But he can'tact *untouched by the dark side. That's for real. I'd know. Callista and Geith, too. Why tell us these things about attachment when they're clearly not true?*

Anakin didn't hear what the Neimoidian pilots said, but they were going to be the ones who needed help.

"Stand by," Anakin said. "Rex?"

"We'll take the Neimies first if we get a clear shot."

Altis was in full wailing desperation now. "You *want* to help her!" he begged. Now, *that* was a new take on mind influence. But then Altis seemed to have a new take on everything that Anakin had been taught. "You *want* to get a closer look at her injuries ..."

He laid Ahsoka on the grass. The droids had gathered around to watch, and the two Neimoidians leaned forward slightly to get a better look. She had one hand buried in the folds of her fatigues. Anakin felt the two Jedi tensed on the brink of explosive violence.

"Geith, Hallena—move out *now*. "

Anakin ran at a crouch for the CR-20, skirting around behind the ship to come at the ramp from underneath. Hallena and Geith stood on either side of the door, weapons ready.

Altis leaned over the huddled body of Ahsoka, weeping.

"My little girl! She's dead!"

Then the two of them uncoiled like wires breaking under strain, lightsabers flashing, and the Neimoidians fell. Blue blasterfire from the clones on the road above rained down like a sheet to cut off more droids running to aid their comrades. By then, Ahsoka was chopping down the droid sentries and Altis was finishing off the stragglers. Anakin looked away. If they didn't get caught in the crossfire—

Concentrate.

"We've got company inside," Geith said.

"Then let's get in and remove them."

Hallena looked at the hatch locks. "Just remember this crate has to stay vacuum-tight."

"Easy," Anakin said, and put his hand on the locking mechanism. A little Force push, the merest touch to vibrate the lock at a certain frequency, and a little energy surge, also courtesy of the Force . . . Anakin visualized the internal locking mechanism in his mind and triggered the sequence of impulses until he found the right one. Air sighed from the ramp seal as the bay doors unlocked. It took seconds. It had been long enough, though, for Altis and Ahsoka to run to the ship under Rex's covering fire.

"Three or four organics, and possibly lots of droids," Altis said, panting. He crouched to the left of the ramp as it lowered. "I can feel a lot of electrical activity on board."

"You can't sense droids in the Force ..." But Anakin knew as soon as he said it that Altis could do a whole load of things he wasn't supposed to. "You feel a disturbance."

"I feel an electrical field and variations in it. It's a useful skill to practice."

Blasterfire from the bridge above the field still rained down on ranks of droids advancing across the field. Rex's men and Callista were exposed, and it would be only minutes before Sep forces started showing up in serious strength, probably counter-attacking from the air. Anakin held up his hand.

"Three—two—go!"

It wasn't the way to storm a large vessel. They didn't have time to do it right, simultaneous breaches from two or more positions. They just burst up the ramp into a storm of blasterfire, batting away energy bolts and cutting down everything that stood in their way. Hallena—unarmored, dependent on speed and a rifle—had no choice but to use the Jedi as cover. Anakin shoved her back behind him as she tried to

push forward. The only cover was the stanchions that braced the deck and ran the full height of the bay to the deckhead.

"Up there," he said, pointing to the gantry around the top of the loading bay. "Can you get to the emergency controls? The override pad with the yellow and black chevrons? Can you shut the bay doors behind us?"

"Watch me," she said. "Better still—don't."

Adrenaline was a magical thing. Hallena seemed to find re-newed energy as she darted for the ladder up to the gantry—a semicircle of sheet durasteel with rungs across the diameter. As she climbed, Altis and Ahsoka pursued three droids into a pas-sageway off the bay. Anakin heard a hatch clang shut, followed by the buzzing and droning of lightsabers being used with a heavy hand. They were cutting the hatch open.

Anakin couldn't follow because he was too busy dealing with a Quarren in a flight suit who had emerged from the star-board side. He leapt clear of the stanchion across the full width of the ramp to draw the Quarren's fire from Hallena.

Once the ramp was raised and locked, the ship could take off. If there were still a few Seps on board to mop up)—fine. The priority was to lift, grab Rex and the others, and run for it.

As he rushed the Quarren and lunged with his lightsaber, the bay darkened. He heard the high-pitched grinding of gears. The ramp was lifting double-speed; Hallena had reached the emergency control. The Quarren's eyes—like spheres of glass at this angle, this close—shone with reflected blue light. Anakin brought the lightsaber up into his chest.

It could have been a female. Anakin was never sure with Quarrens unless they spoke. This one didn't get a chance, nothing beyond a strangled grunt.

Now there was nothing between Anakin and the cockpit. The hull rattled under blasterfire from outside. Rex had to be facing a heavy assault. As Anakin burst through into the cockpit, Altis and Ahsoka appeared through a hatch from the deck beneath.

"I've never flown one of these," Anakin said, flicking all the power switches on. The drives whined into life. "How hard can it be?"

"Taking off's the easy bit." Altis dropped into the copilot's seat. "Holding it steady while you drop the hatch for Rex— that's the tough part."

It was suddenly very easy to be with Altis. Anakin felt he'd known him all his life. There was a common spark in them, maybe, a little of Qui-Gon's influence somehow. It didn't matter. All Anakin cared about at that moment was that as soon as he pulled back on the yoke, the CR-20's nose lifted. A hail of red blasterfire hit the viewscreen. Then the ship was soaring verti-cally. It was at a hundred meters before he knew it, and Ahsoka was flung sideways as she tried to hang on to the back of his seat.

He banked to starboard. Beneath him on the elevated section of highway, a cluster of white armor and a small figure in a flight suit were trading blasterfire with droids on the ground from the cover of a barrier of burned-out speeders. One trooper was down.

It made sense to land on the highway behind them. But it left Rex's team exposed and forced to turn their backs when they finally broke contact and ran for extraction.

Anakin decided to drop into the droid line of fire and form a defensive barrier while he lowered the ramp.

"We're Jedi," he said. "If we can't drop a ramp onto a bridge while hovering, who can?"

TEN

Attachment is a closed room. It can be a sanctuary or a prison; both have locked doors. The fine line between them is who holds the key and is ready to turn it— *in either direction*.

—Master Djinn Altis, in conversation with his students

CADAMAN ROYAL HIGHWAY, ATHAR

"VULTURE DROID," SAID JOC, looking up.

It was only a matter of time. Eventually, even droid commanders worked out what to do, the dumb tinnie barves.

Rex kept an eye on the CR-20 as it slowed and swung its tail 180 degrees at a right angle to the road. The cover they'd made by moving hastily abandoned ground speeders against one of the pillars that supported the suspended section of highway wasn't going to hold out forever.

"How's Ince doing?"

"He's hanging in there." Hil pressed a wad of gauze hard into Ince's groin, trying to stop the bleeding farther down his leg by keeping pressure on the femoral artery. "Sooner we can move him, the better."

"Let me take over," Callista said. "I can use a little Force first aid, too."

Above the CR-20, a Vulture droid swooped and strafed. The ship was taking a pounding. The vulture broke off to dive down on the clones' position, spitting laserfire, and the paving behind them ripped open, scattering debris like someone had pulled a zipper, flinging chunks of permacrete. Rex ducked just as Cal-lista raised her hand and deflected the debris, sending it tumbling off the edge of the highway like a miniature avalanche. Then she laid aside Ince's rifle—she was a pretty good shot, Rex noted—and edged across to the wounded trooper.

"Okay, Hil, quick as you can— *now*." She slipped her fist, knuckles down, onto the wad of dressing as Hil pulled his hand away. Ince made a noise that sounded as if he was objecting. "No need to be embarrassed, Ince. I'm practically a married woman. Come on. Talk to me. Stay awake."

Ince muttered something unintelligible. Rex couldn't take his eyes off the Vulture now, and he kept a stream of blasterfire targeted on it until it was obscured by the CR-20 backing onto the highway at an angle so that the ramp aligned with one open end of the makeshift barrier of vehicle debris. Ten meters separated that and the edge of the road, which meant six or seven seconds between making a run for it and the cover of the open bay. Ince had to go in first. Rex started working it out in his mind's eye.

Callista can do some Force thing to hold the bleeding while we just carry him by his webbing. They can do that. I've seen *Jedi do some weird things. A few seconds of Force pressure should be easy for her.*

The CR-20's tail swung against the road again, ripping out the crash barrier and sending permacrete tumbling. It pulled forward a few meters then tried again, and finally the ramp section scraped along the permacrete, showering sparks before it came to a noisy stop as the rest of the vessel hung in midair at forty-five degrees to the barrier with the drives whining. Rex signaled the troopers to stand by.

Skywalker's voice cut into his comm circuit. "Rex, the ramp's going down *now*. "

"Copy that, sir. Ince is down, so we're moving him while Ross and I keep the Vulture busy." Laser rounds hit the top of the vehicle barricade, and red-hot shrapnel rattled against Rex's visor. The ramp gaped open. Seconds, just *seconds*, and they'd be out of here. "Just get Ince back safe, please, sir?"

Skywalker hesitated for a moment. "Will do, Rex."

Rex had never made a plea like that before. He felt briefly embarrassed. But right then Ince mattered more than anything.

Why? Do I think that I'm going to make it all right if he gets a few weeks or months or even longer in the front line before someone puts a round through him?

"Okay, Ross—covering fire with me, everyone else—grab Ince and get moving on my mark." Callista managed to keep her fist pressed against Ince's artery while the others picked him up, slung between them on webbing, legs higher than his head to help his heart deal with the reduced blood volume. Rex waited a few more seconds. The ramp wasn't fully open yet but it was low enough for them to get Ince

on board. "Go, go, go!"

The droids at ground level didn't have a clear shot with the CR-20 blocking their line of sight, but the Vulture was harder to evade. The thing could land and walk by rotating its wings into legs. Rex had quickly come to dread vultures even more than the SBDs, the bulky super battle droids that made the regular ones look like toys. A Vulture was smart, persistent, and could get pretty well anywhere on land, in the air, or in space. Rex wondered for a moment if the damned things could swim, too. If he'd been nearer the river, he'd have been willing to test the theory and drag it down personally.

This vulture was every bit as agile and persistent as its kin. It landed, durasteel scraping on the road surface, and clattered toward the wrecked vehicles with its cannon aimed. It could have turned them all into charcoal right away. But it was simply stalking.

Why? What does it want intact?

"Ross," Rex said, "get out. Go."

"Sir--"

Rex could see the top of the Vulture moving toward them. It was within a couple of meters now; he could hear the faint hissing and whirring of its servos as it edged along, hunting. It was level with him now, a stranger on the other side of a metal wall.

Like anything with weapons, the droid had to be able to use its cannon or its sharp-edged wings. Rex had never wanted to get close and personal with a Vulture, but the fact that he could even smell the slightly grassy smell of its lube oil made him wonder if it was worth a try.

Personally.

He gestured at Ross. *Move out, slowly.*

Ross's expression behind the visor could only be guessed at, but Rex heard the slow intake of breath. Ross squatted to keep his head below the level of the barrier and moved gradually toward the open end, almost in line with the CR-20's ramp.

"Rex, what's the holdup?" Skywalker's voice filled his hel-met. "We're taking a lot of fire."

"I've got company," he said. "Vulture, grounded, stalking. Give me a few more moments." He gestured at Ross again. He could see the Vulture as it moved back and forth past the chinks and holes of a wrecked speeder.

I can jump it.

"Ross, on my mark ..."

"Warn me, sir?"

"Just lure it. When I say move, edge out."

Ross's faith in his captain was touching. "I can do *lure*, sir."

"Okay ... go."

Ross creaked a little as he crabbed to the edge of the barrier, rifle held in both hands at shoulder height. The Vulture froze, whirring quietly, and then there was the tap-tap-tap of its wingtips as it moved in the direction of the sound.

Rex took his rappel line in one hand and his sidearm in the other.

Tap-tap-tap.

At the moment he saw it blot out the narrow chink in the wall of debris, he rolled over the top of the speeder, fired the grapple point-blank between its legs, and hit the winch control on his belt. The Vulture turned, already tangled in the line. Rex was yanked across the barrier so hard by the miniature motor that he crashed hard onto the droid's casing and rolled to one side. But he was still bound to it by the grapple and line.

Too close, buddy? Let's see who blinks first.

Rex clung on for dear life, getting a lock on one of its legs as it spun to try to throw him off, wrapping the line farther around itself. The Vulture couldn't use its lasers on a target stuck to its own limbs, and now it couldn't even fly. It tried to roll; it bucked and spun. Rex hung on grimly. The world around him tilted and flashed in his HUD image, and his head hit the ground hard enough to shake his teeth despite his helmet. The best he could do was grip with both legs and one arm while his right hand thrust his blaster under the thing's . . . *chin*.

He could only think of it as a chin. Then he fired and kept firing. The blasterfire seemed to go on for a while after he eased back on the trigger. The next thing he knew the Vulture stopped dead, shuddered, and fell to one side, smashing him to the ground.

I'm not dead.

His helmet optics were scrolling randomly, but he was con-scious and breathing. It was a short-lived relief. He could hear the *bdapp-bdapp* of continuous blasterfire nearby and the occasional boom of a cannon very close.

Someone grabbed his wrist and hauled him to his feet, still tangled in the rappel line. Ross's visor was suddenly right up against his.

"Get a move on, sir." Ross cut the line and pulled Rex free. "See? Their legs come off easier than I thought."

Rex glanced back for a moment as he ran for the open ramp of the CR-20. No wonder the Vulture had

fallen over. While he'd been drilling its head section with his sidearm, Ross must have blasted through one of its wing joints. It wasn't going any-where now. Lasers weren't a whole lot of use if your attacker was right in your face and you couldn't move.

All you have to do is run into their arms.

It was true of all droids, he thought.

The ramp started to lift the moment their boots hit the metal. Rex pulled off his helmet, frustrated by the crazily scrolling display, and punched the reset button inside. He grabbed the nearest safety rail as the CR-20 lifted and sent scraping noises echoing through the hull while the vessel's tail dragged along the road for a few meters before lifting free. He hoped its shuddering and *whoomp* noises were just the cannon loosing off a few rounds on the tinnies beneath. When he looked up from inspecting his helmet, Ross was making his way to the nearest ladder. Hallena was waiting at the top, looking down from the gantry.

"That was mindlessly brave, Captain," Hallena said.

"That was the only option left," said Rex. "Now, how's Ince?"

REPUBLIC ASSAULT SHIP *LEVELER*, PORESSI SYSTEM

"YOU WANT TO GO AHEAD WITH THIS?" Ash Jarvee asked.

Pellaeon was prepared to try anything now. "Are you going to explain how it actually works?"

"I can try, but. . . it's more of a feeling."

Yes, he was even ready to navigate his ship by feeling. "As in?"

"We influence inanimate objects—machines, computers— by telekinesis, but we can also sense where there is no Force within the fabric of the universe, and so feel what it is to *be* a ma-chine. We can move ourselves into a state of coexistence with it."

Pellaeon chewed that over for a moment. "I can't even pre-tend to understand that," he said. "But you mean you can fill the gaps between atoms and direct energy. Sounds a trifle dangerous to me, but..."

"Right down to the smallest charge in a computer's circuits and crystals. It's very imprecise in your terms, but... we can feel when we get it right. It's a rare skill even among Jedi."

Pellaeon checked the Galactic Standard Time chrono again, unable to stop himself from stroking the knuckle of his forefin-ger down his mustache, nose to lip. Hallena, Rex, and everyone with them didn't have the luxury of time.

"Sir?" One of the young male Jedi raised a nervous finger as if asking for permission to speak. "Think of it as the Jedi equiv-alent of bashing a holoreceiver to fix it. Except we're very, *very* lucky at bashing, and we always get a nice clear picture in the end."

Pellaeon nodded. *I did crazier things than this in the piracy war.* "Bash away, then. Remind me never to get on the wrong side of you folks."

The band of eccentric Jedi clasped hands in a circle on his bridge like children playing a game. Just another unusual tech-nology. This war had changed his definition of *normal* out of all recognition.

Hydrospanner, demagnetizer . . . Jedi.

"Propulsion, Navigation—stand by." Pellaeon nodded at Baradis. "Derel—all cannon teams ready?"

"Yes, sir."

If Pellaeon wasn't entirely convinced that *Leveler* would jump back to the position he expected, at least she'd emerge with all cannon and turbolasers ready for action. He glanced at Ash and nodded. Then he leaned forward and pressed the emergency klaxon, sounding the alert throughout the ship. Lights pulsed on his command console.

"Begin manual jump sequence," he said.

Baradis didn't take his eyes off the viewscreen. "Propulsion, engage drive."

The Jedi shut their eyes, and some lowered their chins a little. The oldest looked about twenty. That in itself didn't bother Pellaeon, but the complete lack of anything tangibly engineer-like was slightly unnerving for a man responsible for a warship and several thousand hands.

Leveler's drives emitted a muffled, rising note that began just on the threshold of his hearing. Then, for a second that felt as if it simply would not move on the chrono, the stars visible through the viewscreen stretched into smears of white light. *Leveler* hovered on the brink of potential destruction. The whine of the drives reached a peak and—

Shhbb-unnk.

She jumped.

It was a matter of minutes. Pellaeon hadn't intended to jump far out of JanFathal space, just enough to reposition and jump back again, but seconds could mean missing a star system at these velocities. Baradis watched the bulkhead chrono, checking it against his own timepiece as it rushed through fractions of seconds in a blur of symbols. Without the nav computer's unseen intervention, controlling millions of simultaneous calculations, he had to pick the precise moment to decelerate and drop out of hyperspace. Pellaeon didn't envy him. He'd made the decision to drop out short of the exact coordinates to allow for error.

Like slamming into the planet.

The Jedi were still locked in that trance, communing some-how with the nav computer and the physical world of realspace. Pellaeon felt like a nervous passenger trying to count passing buildings to distract himself from the wild ride he was suffering.

Before the war, he'd only known Jedi in passing—local law-keepers, Republic agents, shadowy monastic figures who appeared occasionally in the background behind the Chancellor or some Senator. The Jedi Temple was a Coruscant landmark, but a temple closed to almost everyone else, and whenever he flew past its four corner towers he found himself wondering what actually went on within its ancient, unyielding walls.

These Altisian Jedi didn't know, either. *Isn't that extraordinary? How many other flavors do Force-users come in?* These were the oddballs, the chancers, the freethinkers, the ones who dabbled in even more arcane knowledge—and who had families. They were utterly unlike the ascetics of Master Yoda's Order in every way that he could see. They struck him as the eccentric aunt everyone avoided at family gatherings after she'd had one Sullustian gin too many. He rather liked them.

Benb the technician stood nearby with both hands gripping a rail, staring into mid-distance and occasionally glancing at the chrono. It was an awfully long time for a few minutes. Pellaeon caught his eye.

"I won't insist on a union card," he muttered.

"One standard minute," Baradis called. "Stand by, Propulsion."

And maybe we'll end up a few hundred light-years Core-ward.

"Thirty seconds."

I'm glad it was Leveler *that got the call, though, Hallena.*

"Twenty ..."

I should be out of my mind with worry. I'm not. Don't I care enough?

"Ten . . ."

Worry doesn't help. Problem solving does. Get a grip. Keep on top of it. That's the only way.

"Five ..."

And nobody could spare a ship to back us up?

"Four."

Get used to it. We were never ready for this war.

"Three."

Except the clone army, of course.

"Two."

Dirty politics. Or maybe the Jedi sensed what was coming, and got ready. But for whose benefit?

"Disengage!"

Pellaeon's speculation ended abruptly as the visible starscape snapped back into normal points of light and the hairs on the back of his neck tingled. Normal space. Realspace. Where?

The swirled green disk of JanFathal filled the far right section of the bridge viewport. Ash bounced up and down on the spot for a moment like an excited teenager, grinning from ear to ear. She *was* an excited teenager. She was also in the middle of a war. Pellaeon had just enough time to give her an approving thumbs-up and switch the ship's comms to pick up Skywalker's and Rex's channel before Derel reminded them exactly what they'd jumped back into.

"Enemy contacts, range four thousand klicks, close to Jan-Fathal, two vessels in pursuit of a CR-twenty, four more Sep ves-sels changing course." The clone warfare officer paused to check the monitors as bridge teams prepared to direct the turbolaser batteries. "Turbolasers one, three, five—"

* * * *

"LEVELER, that'd be us," said Skywalker's voice over the com-link. "The CR-twenty. Two Seps on our tail and a serious casualty inbound. Ignore your transponder codes. Repeat, ignore your transponder codes."

"General, we're back to basics," Pellaeon said. "Manual targeting. Thanks for the heads-up. Can you outrun them? Can you jump?"

"Jump, yes. Outrun—maybe. But this is their vessel—they're all networked because of the droid command system. They can see the jump points we lay in."

"Think you can land it on the hangar deck?"

"If you've room ..."

Pellaeon gestured to Rumahn. "Clear the hangar deck, Number One. General—you're going to have to

follow our lead. We'll close the gap but you're going to have to do some sharp flying to stay out of the firing line when we engage the two ships pursuing you."

"Copy that, Captain. Just make sure the bay doors are open wide, and we'll do the rest."

Jedi were very confident pilots. Sometimes Pellaeon wondered if they had delusions of immortality. He put the question of who the serious casualty might be to the back of his mind because it would only get in the way of what he needed to do now. The ship was back in the hands of ordinary flesh and blood, crew who knew their tasks and how to carry them out even with essential systems crippled, but it had been handy to have some Jedi help with the nav computer, and they'd need it again very soon when they jumped clear of the system.

"Damage-control parties, medbay team, stand by on hangar deck." Rumahn's knuckles were white as he gripped the comlink held close to his mouth. If a vessel that big hit the deck wrong, then the damage could be catastrophic. "Deck crew, prep for emergency landing." .

"Baradis," said Pellaeon, "take us in, please. Derel—engage enemy vessels at will. Jedi Jarvee, Propulsion—stand by to get us out of here as soon as the transport's inboard and the bay is secure."

Leveler began her attack run. It wasn't the textbook way to stage a rescue, and Pellaeon could have done with those concussion missiles about now. As learning curves went—this was an ice-covered vertical mountain on Hoth, minus ropes.

Pellaeon hovered on the verge of saying something inspirational and suitably go-get-'em, but it didn't seem quite fitting. There was no inherent glory in getting killed. But there was a lot of sense for a malfunctioning ship to survive to fight another day.

Pity the concussion missiles aren't online.

On the sensor screen—glitches or not—he could see the more distant Sep ships heading his way. *Leveler* bore down on the two vessels harrying the CR-20, devouring the distance so quickly that the flashes of cannon fire were now visible with the naked eye against the darkened limb of the planet. Either the Seps lacked a certain skill in firing solutions or Skywalker was a prodigious pilot when it came to evasion. Pellaeon suspected the latter.

"You've come a long way since Geonosis," Pellaeon said, al-most to himself, and then remembered that none of the Jedi on his bridge had actually fought in the very first days of the con-flict.

Did they feel it was their war now? He resolved never to see the Jedi Order as one seamless and tidy bloc under Yoda again. It was simply the public face of something far more complex that he might never understand—the paramilitary wing, perhaps the most organized faction of something that had all kinds of splinter groups he didn't even know existed. He'd heard that there were even Jedi opposed to the Republic who thought it was their duty to bring it down and refuse to be its enforcers.

They were a strange bunch. He had a feeling that they were going to play a much bigger role in his life now, and that it wouldn't always be a happy one.

"Your beloved will be fine," said the pleasant young man who'd explained the computer-meld so vividly. He'd sensed Pel-laeon's uneasiness but interpreted it as something else entirely. "I feel that certainty in the Force."

"What else do you feel in the Force?" Pellaeon asked.

The young man smiled. "That we're going to kick their butts, Captain."

COMMAND DECK, CR-20 TROOPSHIP, INBOUND FOR *LEVELER*

ANOTHER CANNON ROUND ROCKED THE TROOPSHIP, MAKING the hull boom and vibrate.

Joc and Hallena tried to hold Ince steady as Callista and Hil worked on his shattered leg. It was hard trying to do that while keeping his legs elevated to help circulation. He'd lost a lot of blood; his heart would be struggling to keep it pumping, and keeping his head lower than his legs gave him a better chance.

"Is he warm enough?" Coric kept chipping in with suggestions. They all knew emergency first aid, it seemed, and not being able to apply it appeared to be driving them nuts. "Hypovolemic shock. You need to keep him warm."

The other clones squatted nearby, visibly frustrated, with their helmets on the deck, leaning on them one-handed. They reminded Hallena of a smashball team, all very young, earnest, and fit. Even Coric looked too young to her. Then they all put their helmets back on and just waited.

They're talking among themselves. That's what they're doing, talking on their private comm circuit.

Hallena couldn't find it in herself to feel excluded from the conversation. She just felt oddly guilty.

"Joc, did I hear right?" she said quietly. "You're only just out of basic training?"

"Yeah." He didn't look up. He was focused on Ince. "Not quite two weeks."

She didn't know what else to say. She wasn't sure if she'd get a chance later.

"Find me some more wadding," Callista said to nobody in particular. "Anything clean and absorbent."

There was nothing by way of med supplies on board because droids didn't need them, and they definitely didn't need pain-killers. If the Neimoidian pilots kept first-aid kits for organics, Hallena hadn't been able to find any.

Boom. The CR-20 shook again. Ince was unconscious. At least that solved the problem of keeping him topped up with analgesics.

"I think they gave up on taking us alive," Ahsoka said. She obviously didn't like standing around doing

nothing in a crisis— even though standing was the last thing even a Jedi seemed able to do with the troop cruiser jinking and looping to evade enemy fire. "Masters, do you mind if I take the other cannon? Rex can't cover all the angles."

Hallena paused and looked up. She could see Altis with both hands on the controls, shoulders hunched, but—in the reflection of the viewscreen—both eyes tight shut. She really didn't want to look at Skywalker in case he had his eyes shut, too. That was too much to handle.

I don't know what they're doing when they go into that trance stuff. At least, I hope that's what the old guy is doing . . .

"Knock yourself out, Snips," Skywalker said.

Ahsoka scrambled up through a hatch, and a few moments later the booming discharge of the cannon on one side of the ship was matched by identical noise from the other. A child was pounding the Nine Corellian Hells out of two enemy warships. That child was older than the visibly battle-weary soldier firing out of the other turret.

And that's this war in a nutshell. What's going on here?

Wondering wasn't going to help Ince. She emptied out the contents of the clones' medpacs on the deck and rummaged through the various sealed flimsiplasbags, looking for anything sterile to pack into the wound. Ince had lost a fist-sized chunk of thigh just above the knee, and the area around it was shredded.

"Gunnery wasn't part of my basic weapons training," she said to Callista.

"Mine either." Callista seemed pretty adept at first aid and unfazed by the blood that had soaked into her sleeves. She looked up a few moments before Geith appeared in the hatch-way, even before Hallena heard his boots tapping on the metal deck, as if she'd sensed he was coming. "Found anything?"

Geith held out a bundle of cream-colored rag that might have been a dust sheet of some kind. "Not sterile, but we can deal with any infection later."

"He won't have to worry about bugs if we can't stop this bleeding."

"Can't you do some Jedi stuff?" Hallena asked. "You can smash droids to shrapnel, but you can't hold this kid together?"

"What do you think I'm doing?" Callista looked agitated. No, Hallena was never going to come to terms with beings who could alter the physical world without touching it. "He's already lost a lot of blood. He needs more pumped in."

"Hey, if we're a compatible group, I've got blood to spare," Hallena said, gesturing with one arm. "Got any large-bore sharps? We can do an emergency intravenous. I've seen it done."

Hil nodded, eyes still on what he was doing—trying to compress the smaller blood vessels. "Yes, but no tubing."

"Well, the sooner we get on board *Leveler*, the better." Hallena was on the verge of ripping out some hydraulic line, but there was no way of cleaning it. "Better hope the Force is with him, yes?"

Boom. The hull shook again. How much longer was this going to take? Ross came and knelt down beside her, taking off his helmet again.

"I'll take over," he said.

It was a polite hint to get lost and let him take care of his buddy. She could understand that. She didn't want to take her eyes off Ince, either, because Vere was already dead thanks to her, and she didn't want two way-too-young men dying because she couldn't do her job—to get in, do the job, and get out without needing the whole stinging fleet to come to her rescue. She knew what everyone thought of spooks; the very name said it all. Shadowy, cold, not like normal beings, casual in the dispensing of death, at ease with the dirtiest of tricks. No, she didn't feel like that at all. She had no problem killing when she had to because it really was often a case of kill or die, but that didn't mean she took it lightly or had lost all sense of what she left behind in her wake.

Shil. Merish. Varti. Who knows what they went through in their lives. And I show up to help keep barves like the Regent in power. And the three of them are dead. Is that the kind of galaxy I want to live in?

It wasn't. And that was a sickening thought.

Ince made another incoherent sound or two. He wasn't un-conscious, then. Callista and Hil were getting quieter and more intensely engrossed in the battle to save him, their heads almost touching as they leaned over his body.

"His pulse is thready," Callista said.

"Stang, he's cold."

"Geith, is it safe to give him epinephrine? That helps heart output, yes?"

"I don't know. I just don't know if that'll make matters worse."

Boro cut in. "But you can feel his . . . life, can't you? I mean, Jedi can feel the life force. Is he going to make it?"

"I'm doing everything I can," Callista said. "Geith, just concentrate on constricting blood vessels. Visualize the smallest ones closing. Try to keep his blood pressure up."

It was the first time Hallena began to understand how Jedi dealt with things—Callista, anyway. She seemed very practical, not remotely mystic, just a regular woman who saw the physical world as Hallena did, except that she could touch it with thought, and even *move* it.

"Got it?" Callista said.

Geith had his eyes shut. "I think so."

"Bleeding's slowing a bit," said Hil.

The deck now looked like an operating theater, covered with small piles of blood-soaked material. Neither Skywalker nor Altis turned around to look over the back of their seats; they were locked in their own struggle, steering this unfamiliar ship through a pursuing barrage of cannon fire while *Leveler* raced head-on to meet them. Hallena braced her back against the bulkhead that ran across the width of the ship and looked straight ahead.

Yes, *Leveler* was rushing at them head-on.

The warship was a definite arrowhead of light now, growing by the second. Brilliant streaks of laserfire seemed to be streak-ing out to meet her as the pursuing ships missed the CR-20 and the cannon rounds went wide of its hull.

Hallena didn't know that much about fleet combat tactics, but she knew about arcs of fire and muzzle awareness. The CR-20 was almost sandwiched between the pursuing Seps and *Leveler*. If *Leveler* opened fire ...

Gil knows what he's doing. So does this Skywalker guy.

"It'll be fine—don't worry," Altis said suddenly.

His head was still bent over. Hallena had no idea if he was just making generally comforting noises or if he could sense her and her anxiety. She would have preferred the former.

"Master, if you could concentrate on deflection from the *port* side ..." Skywalker muttered.

No, she preferred the latter. Altis could be as otherworldly and magical as he liked as long as he could get cannon fire to skid off the hull. *That* was what he was doing, then; why didn't every warship deploy with a Jedi? It would save a heap of prob-lems.

There probably weren't enough of them to go around.

"Skywalker." A voice emerged from the open comm. It wasn't Gil. "Skywalker, this is *Leveler*. You're closing fast now. Are you ready? When you get to five hundred meters, just dip underneath us. Just *dip*, okay? When you clear our stern, come about, align with the bay doors, and land any way you can."

Easy enough for you to say. Five hundred meters. That's nose-to-nose in space terms at these speeds.

"And you'll maintain your current course and speed."

"Yes, General."

"Forgive me for pointing this out, but you appear to be on a collision course with at least one of the Sep ships."

There was a brief pause. "Captain Pellaeon sends his com-pliments and says that's the general idea, sir."

"Impressive," Skywalker said. He sounded as if he was smil-ing. "Copy that."

Gil Pellaeon, the love of her life, had somehow vanished from the equation while she watched poor Ince bleeding out his short life on the deck. Now he was back; the very formal, charming, but utterly maverick officer who'd learned his trade fighting pirates. She'd never seen him in his natural environment like this before. It was terrifying and comforting at the same time.

If anyone could pull off this insane rescue, it was Gil—and the equally unorthodox Skywalker.

"Hang in there, Ince," Hallena said to herself.

ELEVEN

I'm gravely concerned that the CIS was able to break our Fleet, codes, Director hard. It's not enough to change them on a monthly basis. We must change them more frequently.

—Chancellor Palpatine, after passing the code keys to General Grievous, Separatist Supreme Commander—in his alternative guise as Darth Sidious

REPUBLIC ASSAULT SHIP *LEVELER*, ON ATTACK RUN

"I HOPE SKYWALKER IS UP TO THIS, SIR," Derel said.

"Well, if he isn't," Pellaeon said, "we'll have a fascinating new hood ornament *very* soon."

If only the concussion missiles had been online. They were smart ordnance, able to identify a target and pursue it independently; they could loop around obstacles and drop down—if *down* meant anything in space—in top attack mode. But for now, *Leveler* was stuck with basic line-of-sight targeting, avoiding the troop carrier that was now a small eclipse against the backdrop of a CIS destroyer.

Assault ships were armed for pounding ground targets, not for taking on other ships; that was the point of trialing advanced concussion missiles, a relatively easy retrofit, provided the kriffing things worked. Pellaeon hardly dared think about it. The battle could have been over now if those wretched things had been online.

"Leveler," Derel said into the comlink, "don't deviate to port, *your* port. Hold your course." He pressed the mouthpiece of his headset closer to his lips. "Cannon, three and five— *take, take, take!*"

Two broken lines of blinding white light streaked away into space. Pellaeon could follow them simply by watching the vista from the viewport. In a matter of seconds, the laserfire passed to the CR-20's port side and clipped the destroyer, sending a visible plume of debris tumbling away; the Sep ship veered slightly but kept coming. The strike seemed to slow it, though, because the CR-20 suddenly surged forward on a direct line with *Leveler's* bows.

And *Leveler* was on a collision course with the Sep as well.

"You've done this before, sir, haven't you?" Derel asked. It really *was* a question.

"Yes," Pellaeon murmured. He had to remind himself to breathe; he found he was holding his breath and suddenly wondered why he took an occasional gasp. He concentrated on the third row of digits on the bulkhead chrono, flashing tenths of a second, and was surprised how clear and slow they seemed at that moment. "Not with a vessel of this size, but, yes, I've played this game before."

It was a long time ago, or at least it felt that way. And the ship in the middle of the squeeze hadn't been one he wanted to salvage intact, but. . . the maneuver was the same.

"One minute to impact," said Baradis.

"Let's not word it *quite* like that, Commander."

"Stand by, cannon."

Pellaeon was aware of someone edging closer to him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ash Jarvee. There was nothing the Jedi could do for him now; this was a matter of shiphandling, of piloting skill, of knowing the abilities of ship and crew, and pre-cision timing.

It was about knowing when to blink.

"Won't they realize the transport's *got* to dodge out of the way?" Ash asked.

"Of course they will," Pellaeon said. *Forty seconds*. "But they don't know if it *can*. They don't know if we're going to veer to port or starboard, or move in a vertical axis. Or if we're just going to time it wrong and smash into it. But it's the second ship you need to keep an eye on."

I'm risking a lot of lives. Civilian lives, too. The shipyard contractors. The Jedi.

If the Seps were paying that much attention to the imminent collision, they weren't paying that much attention to the CR-20. It was the second destroyer that was the threat, the one a few seconds behind its sister vessel, the one most likely to be ready to fire.

"Second target's got a lock on us, sir," Derel said. "Cannon, two and four—take, take, take."

Lasers streaked away thirty degrees to starboard, and five seconds later a faint flare of white light bloomed on the right-hand edge of the bridge viewscreen. The second Sep ship was out of visual range for the moment, but its transponder was still visible on Derel's screen. Pellaeon could see it. He could also hear the rapid chatter in the background on the comm system, the sound of sensor operators trying to confirm how much damage the turbolaser impact had caused.

"She's not dead," Derel said, "but she's got enough problems to slow her down, sir."

"That might be enough." Pellaeon stared at the growing shape that was the CR-20. Five hundred meters was ludicrously close. *A near miss*. Or not a near miss, if everyone was unlucky. "Skywalker, twenty seconds."

"I see you, *Leveler*."

"How very reassuring ..."

"Here we go."

Rumahn took the only sensible precaution left. It was cor-rect procedure. It was also unnerving. "Brace, brace, brace— collision, collision, *brace, brace, brace.*"

Pellaeon thought that the last problem he'd have to worry about was his spine or knees taking a pounding if that kriffing transport didn't duck in time. The vessel seemed to be streaking down the length of *Leveler's* deck, and then it was gone.

The lead Sep destroyer had taken its place. The two ships were now head-on. The second destroyer had fallen back some distance.

"Okay, chum," Pellaeon said. "Get out of my sky."

Maybe the Sep on the other bridge was staring at *Leveler* and saying the same thing.

One thing was certain: Pellaeon would not pull up until he was right on the point of collision. And that was—

Less than a minute away.

Derel tapped his sensor screen as if to get attention. "If Sep Two fires on us from that position, he's going to endanger *this* joker."

"Cruiser's clear," Baradis said. His face was close enough to his sensor screen to throw legible light on it. A pulsing red light traveled down his chin. "And coming about. . . aligning . . ."

"Hold course until he's docked." If *Leveler* deviated now, Skywalker would miss the bay at best and smash into it at worst. "Steady ..."

The Sep destroyer didn't look like it was about to blink first. It loomed in the viewscreen.

"Cannon—ready?"

"Ready, sir."

Safe range was a matter of seconds away, too. There was no point blowing up a ship right under your nose and getting hit by its debris.

"Is Skywalker onboard?"

"No, sir—"

It was a split-second call. Forward collision, getting caught by an exploding ship, losing the troop transport. Pellaeon, rely-ing on his instinct as surely as any Jedi, had to make it.

"Fire."

Derel didn't even manage to give the *take* command. Brilliant blue streams filled the viewscreen as the turbolasers tar-geted the Sep destroyer. The first rounds hit the destroyer's hull just under its bows, but Pellaeon saw very little detail after that. The blinding light, spinning short-lived flames, and red-hot storms of debris gave him no idea what was happen-ing other than they'd hit the Sep hard and the ship had started to break apart. Then a massive jolt that felt like having his head hammered down into his spine left Pellaeon reaching for the collision alarm. He hit it with the flat of his palm. Lights flickered; the Sep ship was swinging wildly as if trying to turn 180 degrees, venting flame and plasma and clearly out of control.

But it had managed to get a few shots in of its own. Either that, or one of the approaching Sep cruisers had fired. It was now hard to tell what had actually hit them. Unable to see any-thing other than the stricken Sep destroyer from the viewport, Pellaeon leaned over Derel to check his screen.

Suddenly the battle had fallen into slow motion.

"We've lost maneuvering, port thrusters," Baradis said.

"Damage reports," Rumahn yelled over the noise. "Hull breach in engineering section six, port thrusters damaged, one bank of hyperdrive generators down."

Pellaeon stared at the screen. The Sep cruisers seemed to be tak-ing their time. "They're not exactly rushing," he said. "That was the whole point, then, to disable us. They still want us in one piece."

Had the Seps really been ready to sacrifice one warship to keep *Leveler* occupied while another crippled her?

And I've just about killed my ship to rescue one woman. That's how it stacks up in the history books, personal feelings apart.

Maybe the Sep ships were taking it slowly because they thought *Leveler* might self-destruct rather than be captured. They certainly seemed to think the concussion missiles were that significant. There was nothing else *Leveler* had that other Re-public assault ships didn't.

"Is the CR-twenty docked now, Number One?"

"It is, sir."

"Can we jump? Commander?"

"We're not dead in the water," Baradis said, "but it's going to take ten or fifteen minutes to patch through enough power to jump again. We need to reroute relays."

Pellaeon was running on blind reflex now. It had always stood him in good stead in the past. There was a fine line between guesswork and training so ingrained and finely honed that it literally didn't require conscious thought. But no computer targeting, no reliable nav computer, and now hyperdrive trouble; he was running out of ideas.

"Have we got enough power to fire up the shield arrays?" Shields were massively hungry systems. It was always a trade-off between weapons and shields. "We need to buy some time."

"I'll find a way, sir . . ."

"Good man. Do it."

Leveler wasn't finished yet. Pellaeon was certain.

But he still thought one step beyond the unthinkable, what he would do if the next plan didn't work. He knew what his orders were.

He wondered if a few thousand lives were really worth the secrets of missiles that would probably be sold to the next highest bidder within the year anyway. He glanced at the group of Jedi, utterly silent. Ash Jarvee looked as if she was waiting for orders.

"Do you do miracles?" he asked.

HANGAR DECK, LEVELER

THE CR-20 SKIDDED ALONG THE DECK, LITTLE SKIPS like a stone tossed across water. The metallic screeches put Callista's teeth on edge.

She'd thought Skywalker was a better pilot than that. She was too busy keeping Ince stable to look up, but she heard Sky-walker muttering angrily, and flashing hazard lights reflected off the interior bulkheads as the transport shuddered to a noisy halt. When she realized that the CR-20 was stationary, it took a mo-ment for her to work out that *Leveler* was vibrating, not the troopship, and the flashing lights were hazard warnings on the hangar deck. Rex and three of the troopers were carrying Ince down to the ramp when crew in fire hazard suits raced in to meet them halfway.

"We've been hit," one of them said. "You might want to bang out of here and see how far you can jump under your own power. You can make Kemla."

Skywalker jumped down from the gantry as if he'd taken a shortcut. "No, this man's too badly injured. We need to get him to medbay right away."

"Your call, sir."

"How bad is the ship?"

"Manual targeting, no concussion missiles, and they're try-ing to restore hyperdrive generators. We're relying on shields and manual turbolaser targeting for about fifteen minutes."

"What about the concussion missiles?"

"Offline. Computer targeting problem. It's all computer problems."

Altis made his way down a gantry ladder and dusted off his hands. "Now, we might be able to help there . . . Callista?"

"I can do it," said Callista. The ship that had seemed like a living beast to her when she first boarded it now drew her again. "Let me try. Show me the targeting computer."

"You need to touch it?"

"Yes."

The crewman went quiet, finger pressed to his ear as if he was talking to someone on a comlink. Callista couldn't see his face under the fire-resistant hood, and she couldn't hear him. While she waited, Ince was whisked away on a repulsor and the ship shuddered a few times as if taking heavy fire.

"Captain says go ahead, and Lieutenant Derel will meet you at the end of passage seventy-eight-alpha on this deck." He pointed to blast doors on the opposite side of the hangar. "You want a ride down there? We have speeder carts."

"I can outrun one of those, thanks."

She didn't look back; she simply sprinted for the doors, al-most forcing them apart in frustration when they didn't open fast enough, and then ran full-tilt down the passage, scattering crew and civilian contractors. She was suddenly aware of Ah-soka on her heels.

"What are you coming for?" Callista panted.

"You might need a hand," Ahsoka said.

"You can't feel machines. I can."

"I'm coming anyway."

At least she doesn't think I'm a crazed dark sider anymore. That's something. Nothing like a late epiphany, is there?

The passage was a lot longer than she'd imagined. *Leveler* wasn't a full-sized assault ship, but she was big enough to leave Callista gasping for breath by the time she reached the turbolift that ran from the bridge down to the deck. Derel was waiting. She could see him all the way down the passage from the final turn, hands clasped behind his back, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, head down, occasionally glancing up; an-other clone almost exactly like Ince in appearance, but giving a distinctively different impression in the Force.

He seemed remarkably relaxed. There was nothing he could do to make her run any faster, after all.

She skidded into the turbolift with Ahsoka behind her. Derel punched the controls and the cage fell like a stone. "This is a separate system," he said. "The missiles are independent of the main weapons systems because it's just a bolt-on for trialing. Do you need to know how it works?"

"Well, yes..."

The bridge deck levels flashed by the viewport in the turbo-lift. **"Whatkind of detail?"**

"Just tell me in the broadest terms, like it's an animal. I have to think myself into the computer. I don't need technical data to do that."

"Okay." Derel blinked a few times. "The concussion mis-siles have onboard computers that let them track a target. But they need to leave the ship with all kinds of information on what they're hunting, so they don't pick on the wrong prey. Like a friendly ship, for example. The missile computer needs to tell each missile what its prey looks like and where it needs to bite it, and how hard, to kill it. But the problem seems to be that the missiles can't hear it. Does that make sense?"

Perfect. "Yes. You give good briefing, Lieutenant."

The turbolift doors opened. Derel led Callista and Ahsoka down a ladder and keyed open a compartment. As soon as Cal-lista put her hand on the bulkhead, she felt the ship respond to her like a tsaelke. She could almost feel a heartbeat. Warships each had their own unique sounds and vibrations

that told those who lived in them that all was well, or if something was out of kilter, and she understood that completely now. The missile computer turned out to be a modest durasteel box about the size of a speeder drive. The only visible signs of activity were blue and green lights on the side, and a small diagnostics screen sunk into the metal.

"Where does it get its information on targets?" she asked. She placed both palms flat on its top. She could feel its sharp mind, its insatiable need to search. "Which systems talk to it?"

"It's got a database of known ship profiles from Rep Intel, and we augment that with sensor readings during missions. It should be able to see the Sep ships as confirmed targets."

Callista nodded. "I can do this." She could feel it; she could feel the targeting computer searching over and over for some-thing, constantly tripping over ... a gate, a closed door, some-thing it simply could *not* pass through. "Okay, when the systems talk to one another, do the missiles launch?"

"If the launch key's open."

"Open it."

Whatever that meant, the key wasn't turned down here. Derel pressed his headset mouthpiece close to his lips and said something. But by then she was already losing herself in the crys-tals and circuits of the machine, feeling the zip and tingling of minute electrical impulses, seeing at first a wonderfully regular, intricate landscape of lines, lights, and gleaming metal. There was a sense of movement, of things happening at breakneck speed, yet frozen motionless. Then she felt overcome by the faintest vibration that seemed to start in her stomach. It filled the marrow of her bones; it traveled to her skin. She was somehow a very different shape now. Whereas she'd been aware all the time of existing at a fixed point—a perfect intersection of a line that ran from ear to ear, and another that passed through the crown of her head to midway on her tongue—she was now everywhere on a flat plane. Everything that she'd understood of physical existence no longer applied.

She was the machine—she was the whole ship. She could feel the barrier that stopped the computer from reaching its ob-jective. She was also a mass of senses far beyond those of human flesh and blood, the ship's sensor arrays; she was the beating heart of its generators. She looked without eyes from one part of the infinite plane to another, saw the barriers, and opened them with a breath. She felt as if she were inhaling cool clean air after being trapped in a stuffy cage.

The sense of escape was wonderful. Somehow, she felt she was flying. It was like nothing she'd ever known before.

The world within her eyes—not before them, *in* them—was now velvet black and infinite. She was flying at incredible, effortless speed, consumed with hunger for something, hunting. She found herself hurtling toward something as complex and alive as herself, but the two of them couldn't exist in the same world—she knew that more surely than anything at that moment—and one had to die. The black velvet changed instantly to searing white-hot light. She thought that was the end of it, but she made the journey again and again, each time with more certainty.

It was bliss. It was unimaginable freedom. It was—

She was jerked out of the silent idyll. She thought she fell a long way. The world around her was suddenly confused, soft, imperfect, dirty, *noisy*. And she was . . . flesh and blood again. A head, four limbs, weighed down and sluggish.

Already, she missed flying in that perfect infinity.

"Wow!" The voice was very distant. "I've never seen anything like that in my life! Hey, are you okay? You did it! You did it!"

She was almost sure she was Callista now, and she thought of a kelp farm. Maybe that was why the voice was muffled; she was underwater. No, she was looking up into two faces—a young man and the vividly marked face of a nonhuman.

"That's very . . . weird," said a female voice. It wasn't her own. "I thought I was never going to get you out of that trance. You look terrible."

Ahsoka. Yes, that was Ahsoka, and the man was Derel, and she was Callista Masana.

"Where's Geith?" she asked. Geith! How could she have wanted to fly alone when Geith was still here? "Can we get out of here now?"

"No hurry," Derel said. He slapped her back enthusiastically. "You took out seven Sep ships. The last two aren't big enough to tackle us, even with half our systems down. Nice job, ma'am."

But she wasn't herself yet, not fully. She could still feel a sense of *ship* in her, of being a totally different shape and size.

Something was different; she felt as if she had water in her ears, as if her fine-tuned senses had been dulled a little. She wasn't sure what it was, but she knew she was *different* somehow.

Ahsoka had hold of her shoulders, eyes wide and anxious. "Are you okay?"

"Just a little groggy." Callista got to her feet. Now she knew what the problem was. She could barely sense anything in the Force. Even Ahsoka, standing right next to her, felt so muted that Callista had to concentrate hard to feel her as a Jedi at all. It was as if she'd been deafened by a blast. "Did I get hit by something?"

Ahsoka took her arm. "No. You just blanked out. You were just—right in with the targeting computer. I could *see* it. I don't know *any* Jedi who can do that with a machine. *Nobody*. "

She said it as if it was a dark art that scared her. At that moment, Callista had no recollection of the meld at all other than a wonderful clarity, an answer for everything when she reached for it, the most crisply detailed images of stars, and ships right down to their rust streaks, tiny meteor pocks and flaking livery. That intense clarity had gone now, leaving her with an unsettling fuzziness. Perhaps that was all it was. She'd moved from machine perspective back to a fallible human one again, and it was simply the contrast that made her feel she'd lost her Force senses.

Like reading a holozine with the text magnified, and then going back to a regular page. It looks blurred for a moment. That's all it is.

Isn't it?

If it had scared Ahsoka, it had terrified *her*. She tried to work out what she needed to worry about.

"Is everyone okay?" she asked, still not sure who *everyone* was. "Someone was hurt."

"Ince," Ahsoka said. "Come on. Let's go to medbay and see how he is."

Callista had been to only a few areas of this huge ship, but somehow she now knew her way around without even looking for the stenciled numbers that identified the decks and sections. She headed for the medbay. If anyone had told her where it was, she couldn't have equated those directions with what she could feel somewhere in her brain.

So I do have a little of the ship left in me.

It wasn't the first time. She'd immersed herself in machines before, and they hadn't been anywhere near as complex or in-tense as this. But she'd always felt slightly altered afterward in ways she found hard to define.

If I tried to understand a droid at that level.. . if I melded with a droid . . .

Callista had always been curious, never afraid to confront her own limits or challenge beliefs she'd always held. But she could hardly bear to think of what might happen if she saw the galaxy from a droid's perspective.

Yes. I was the computer. I was the ship. I was every concus-sion missile. If I ever knew what it was to be a droid, could I fight this war?

She knew she had to avoid ever finding out. It was hard enough to stomach a war that churned out living men like machines on a production line. Clone troopers—she was *right* to feel outrage and sympathy for them. There was no other way to see them but as human beings. But if there was anything to feel in a droid, anything to understand, then destroying them would be agony.

She couldn't afford that. She had to close her eyes to it.

It was an ugly realization. She had made a decision there and then *not* to experience what it was to be a battle droid. She knew that they thought, by any definition of the word. But she didn't want to know if they *felt*.

You know the answer, don't you?

You know that life takes more forms than we can possibly imagine. But there comes a point where you daren't look.

"Expedience," she said, heading unerringly for the emergency compartment in medbay. "It gets us all in the end."

BRIDGE, REPUBLIC ASSAULT SHIP *LEVELER*

PELLAEON STARED AT THE SLOWLY TUMBLING DEBRIS THAT had been a small fleet of Separatist warships, and waited for bad news, but none came.

Baradis kept pacing up and down in the gap between the weapons stations and the sensor operators, one arm folded across his chest, hand cupping his elbow, tapping his thumbnail against his teeth. He was waiting for bad news, too. There'd been so much of it that it hardly seemed believable that they were out of trouble now.

"Two Sep vessels withdrawing, sir," he said. "And we'll be ready to jump in roughly five minutes."

It had taken longer than the fifteen-minute estimate already, but that didn't matter now. The fight was over. The survivors simply stood breathless and wary, preparing to walk away. There were no winners.

"Do they know we're out of concs?" Pellaeon had gone beyond the sensible quitting point, but there was no point pursuing the stragglers, and there was nothing *Leveler* could do on her own about JanFathal even if she'd been fully operational. "Well, at least those missiles worked pretty well. Even if they did need a Jedi to kick-start them."

Benb watched impassively, arms folded on a rail. For a civilian who'd gone on a work-up expecting to do nothing more hazardous than tighten a few bolts, he seemed to have taken imminent death rather well.

"How's your team, Benb?" Pellaeon asked. Maybe they weren't quite so sanguine.

"Never better," the Sullustan said casually. "We're on triple overtime. Hardship allowance kicks in once the shooting starts."

It was another universe, the civilian dockyards.

Ash tapped Pellaeon's shoulder. "Sir, we've identified a safe rendezvous point at Kemla to meet up with *Wookiee Gunner* for transfer."

"Good grief, no." The guilt had set in now. "We've interrupted your mission, put you at risk, and relied on you to save our skins. The least we can do is let you go on your way."

"You still can't jump accurately without a Jedi, sir."

She had a point. "I'll mention you in dispatches," he said. "If only to see the look on Master Yoda's face when he sees that the heretical anarchists rode to the rescue."

Ash looked slightly embarrassed. Maybe gloating wasn't a very Jedi thing to do.

"Agent Devis is in medbay," she said cryptically, and walked away before he had the chance to work out how she knew.

He couldn't put it off any longer. He didn't want to. But it seemed indecent haste when his ship was limping back to the dockyard with damage and casualties.

"Go on, sir," Baradis said quietly, eyes still on the nav sensor screen. "I can finish up here just as easily without you fidgeting and fretting..."

Permission from his navigator or not, Pellaeon tried not to be seen to hurry.

Medbay was busy. Droids were tackling a lot of minor in-juries—fractures and lacerations from being thrown around by impacts, some burns—but there were a few serious ones from the generator compartment that had taken a direct hit.

"Fatahs?" he asked the physician commander.

"Ten, sir. Under the circumstances, we got off lightly."

"Give me the next-of-kin details, Commander, and I'll send personal messages."

"Eight clones, sir. Only two messages to write."

That reality never sat well with Pellaeon. It felt like erasure. They had no families. So he'd find out who their friends were among the crew, who would miss them most, and talk to them for a while. If he didn't—then he might as well have been a Neimoidian with a crew of droids that meant nothing to him. A man couldn't run a warship that way.

"And," said the commander, "she's over there."

The commander didn't need to say who *she* was. Pellaeon's private life was now no longer private. He wondered if it ever had been, but at least it was out in the open now, and there would be no sly looks in the wardroom.

Hallena's voice wafted from a screened cubicle. When he slid back the screen and stepped into the treatment area, he found it crowded—a med droid, a clone flat on the diagnostic table with tubes leading into arm and neck, and a small crowd of onlookers. Hallena had hold of the clone's free hand. Rex watched grimly, arms folded, gaze alternating between Ince and the biosigns screen on the bulkhead.

"Ince, you're going to be fine," Hallena said. "Ince? Have you ever been to the entertainment district on Coruscant? I bet you haven't. Well, I'm going to take you out for the biggest nerf steak ever."

Ince couldn't hear her, Pellaeon suspected, but even people in comas heard things sometimes. The med droid checked the catheter pumping fluid into his body via his jugular vein. Rex paced slowly around the edge of the treatment bay, occasionally stroking his palm over his scalp as if checking for stubble. Coric and Ahsoka were absent. It looked as if Rex had told him to get her out of the way for a while. There was no sign of Skywalker.

Pellaeon said nothing, but put his hand on Hallena's shoul-der. She glanced back as if she hadn't realized he was there, then just looked up at him with an expression he hadn't seen before: regret.

"I put you all to a lot of trouble," she said quietly.

It was the first time they'd seen each other in weeks. Noth-ing unusual, given their jobs, but this wasn't the romantic re-union he'd planned.

"How's he doing?" Pellaeon asked.

He wasn't sure who was going to answer. There was a silent pause as the rest of the clones either looked at Rex, or didn't look up at all.

"His kidneys are failing," Rex said. "So that makes any brain damage from hypoxia a bit academic now. He lost too much blood."

Pellaeon wondered if it was better to take Hallena away. He squeezed her shoulder.

"Give his buddies a turn," he said tactfully, indicating the exit. "Not much room to move in here."

They stood outside in the lobby for a moment, trying to keep out of the way of rushing med droids and repulsor gurneys. Altis waited with Callista and Geith at a discreet distance, talk-ing in hushed tones. Pellaeon caught Callista's eye and raised his thumb in silent approval for the missile strike, but then the Jedi all turned their heads at once, all looking toward the treatment cubicle. Pellaeon realized what had caught their attention. It wasn't him.

He couldn't hear or see it, of course. But they could.

"Oh, stang," he said.

Rex came out of the cubicle, his face ashen as if he was ei-ther scared or furious, but the set of his jaw said the latter. He had to pass Pellaeon to leave the medbay. He undipped his hel-met from the back of his belt and rammed it on as if he didn't want to have any conversation.

"Make that *two* troopers I've got to replace," he said, and strode away at speed.

Hallena shut her eyes for a moment and let her chin drop.

"You should have left me," she said. "Look at all this. What was I thinking, calling for extraction? I didn't even have any intel worth rescuing. What do I say to those troopers? That it's all part of the job?"

She went as if to return to the cubicle, but Altis walked up to her and blocked her way with a quiet

persistence. "I'd let them have a little time," he said. "Short of abducting them, Agent Devis, there's nothing you can do to stop this happening to them again."

Hallena gave Altis an odd look, then glanced at Pellaeon. He wondered if the old Jedi had tried a little of that mind influence on her, but he'd heard it only worked on the suggestible, and she was anything but that.

"I'll be in the wardroom," she said, walking away. "When I manage to find it."

Altis bowed his head slightly to Pellaeon. "Let a harmless old man go talk to her, Captain. I'd feel just like her in this situation. Guilty."

But that's my beloved. The woman I want to marry. I should be the one she turns to in a crisis.

Altis had a point. Feeling responsible for this mess was typically Hallena. She always felt she could manage things, and that if they went wrong, it was due to error, not bad luck. Perhaps she was right. When you worked alone, you tended not to see the million ways that an interconnected group of beings could run into problems without any single definable mistake being re-sponsible for the way events turned out.

"Tell her I'll be along later." Pellaeon felt the rising frequency of a telltale vibration as *Leveler* powered up to jump. That, at least, was going to plan. In a few hours, they'd be back at Kemla to start all over again. "A pity this journey will be so brief. I would have enjoyed dinner, Master Altis."

"I'm sure we'll get another chance one day," the Jedi said, and walked away with Geith and Callista.

Leveler jumped, Jedi-assisted. This part of the ordeal, at least, was over.

CHIEF PETTY OFFICERS' MESS, *LEVELER*, ON COURSE FOR RV AT KEMLA WITH

WOOKIEE GUNNER

"Rex?"

He looked up without lifting his head, chin resting on clasped hands.

He hadn't even heard Ahsoka approaching. Jedi could do that kind of stealth thing, but for a moment he was worried that he was losing his edge. The little Togruta was wearing a smart gray naval tunic and pants. He had no idea where she'd found a uniform to fit her, but she was so touchingly earnest, so intent on doing things right and fitting in, that it almost upset him.

"You're too young to drink in here," he said.

"And you're younger than me—from a certain point of view."

She could always make him laugh, too, however bad he felt. Being a Jedi, she didn't need him to explain that to her. She knew. He *knew* she knew.

She sat down beside him at the table and leaned close as if she had some joke to share. He was wondering how he was going to handle her well-meaning attempts at cheering him up.

"Do you ever have days," she said, "where everything you thought you knew for sure is just gone, overturned, and you don't know where to start again to make sense of it all?"

So she wasn't here to improve his morale. He thought for a moment that she was hitting his own problem square on the head. Then he realized she was describing her own.

"You bet, littl'un," he said quietly.

"How do you cope?"

"Good question."

"Doyou cope?"

"I'm still standing ..."

"I'll tell you mine if you tell me yours."

"Okay," Rex said. "I'm a soldier. It's all I am. I don't know a lot about the outside world, but I'm pretty sure that other sol-diers have families and lives outside fighting. We don't. Is that why I feel so bad about guys like Vere and Ince getting killed so soon out of training?"

"And nobody should die that young."

"But whole regiments of us are going to die, sooner or later. Maybe *all* of us. Young men. We knew that. Why does it make me feel *cheated*?"

Ahsoka grabbed his hand as if she'd been suddenly scared by something. Rex had seen some of the little clones do that when they got their first taste of live ordnance. The Kaminoans didn't approve; clones weren't supposed to show fear, not even as children.

But Ahsoka's grip was like nothing he'd ever felt, not just be-cause Togrutas had strangely cool skin, but because he felt as if he'd been connected to something he didn't understand, plugged into a universe too vast to grasp. Now he was the one who was scared.

"Rex, is it true what Geith says? That we're all guilty of using you?" She was distraught. He could hear the rasping wild undertone in her voice. "That we're all following orders blindly and not asking questions?"

Rex felt his world beginning to unravel. If he let Ahsoka go too far down that path—no, if he let *himself* go down that path, then he wouldn't be able to do the job, and if he didn't do this job, then he had no idea what his life was about. If he let that doubt take hold, he would never be able to deal with Skywalker again, or be able to lead his men. And he *had* to lead them be-cause they depended on him. His whole existence depended on believing in what he was doing.

The little nagging voice that he tried to ignore was actually being more constructive this time. *Don't even think about it*, the voice said. *Because you can't change a thing. So what if it's true? Where are you going to go? What else could you do? And what would happen to your men?*

Some things were so overwhelming and beyond your control that simply noticing they were there would destroy you. Rex de-cided he could shut it out. He could shut out anything if he put his mind to it.

"I don't know," he said at last.

"You said orders were there for a reason. That they kept us alive."

"That's true."

"Jedi have orders as well. Like no attachments. And . . . well, you've seen Callista and Geith. Master Altis lets all his Jedi marry if they want. But they've not fallen to the dark side, so what's really true?"

The best Rex could do was help her live with uncertainty. He couldn't tell her what was true. And the fact that the Seps were trying to kill them— *that* was true. Did the rest matter?

Pull one brick out of the wall, and the whole edifice comes crashing down. For any of us.

"Remember how I said that you don't always have the big-ger picture, that you get orders because someone higher up the chain of command has information that you don't, so they don't necessarily make sense? Maybe your orders are like that." It wasn't a lie. It might not have been what Rex actually wanted to say— *I don't understand what's happening, I don't like what's happening, something's wrong*

—but if he said that, then he was adrift, too, and that didn't help *anybody* stay alive. "And maybe Jedi end up in the places they're meant to be—that the ones who can handle attachment find their way to Altis, and the ones who can't..."

Well, maybe that wasn't the smartest thing to say. Ahsoka's agitated expression—head-tails more deeply colored, chin down—made him wonder if she was sweet on somebody and facing the reality of *orders* for the first time. But it had to be kinder than agreeing that yes, it was weird that Yoda and all the Jedi Masters had told her something that now looked . . . un-true.

Cope with it. That's the best anyone can hope for. To cope with life.

"The world's *full* of attachment," Ahsoka said. "I just don't know why it's only wrong for Jedi."

"You think the last couple of days would have been simpler if everybody had decided that it was only one woman stuck in Athar, and rescuing her would risk too many lives?"

"Yes, but that wouldn't have been the *right* decision."

"Why? You see, that's the kind of decision a commander has to make all the time—when to call a halt because you'll be los-ing more lives than you're saving. Remember we talked about that?"

Ahsoka didn't answer. She stared into mid-distance for a while and chewed her lip. She still had a ferocious grip on his hand; he almost expected her to unsheath claws.

"Yes, I remember," she said. "And I argued with my Master about it, too, except he was the one who said we should never abandon anyone."

"Well, General Yoda faces the same dilemmas. Maybe the Jedi found out a long time ago that it's easier to make tough calls if you don't get emotionally involved. A bit of cold distance. Eas-ier to make the decisions, easier to live with them afterward. That's command."

Now Rex felt better. He was back to solid *truth* again, not just avoiding outright lies. He and Ahsoka—all the clones, all the Jedi—were in a spot they didn't choose, and making the best of it. All he and Ahsoka could do was try to make the right call every time, decisions they could live with, and accept that the bigger game wasn't theirs to play.

"Do you understand the dark side?" she asked.

"Not really."

"Neither do I."

"Explain something to me, littl'un," Rex said. Maybe he could have asked Skywalker this same question, but something told him it was a bad idea. "What's the difference between Jedi who fall to the dark side, and do whatever it is that dark siders do, and Jedi who just let bad things happen on their watch?"

He really wanted to know.

"I'm still thinking about that," she said. "But I'm trying not to let bad things happen on *my* watch."

Rex wasn't sure if the conversation had helped Ahsoka at all, but it had certainly helped him; the politics and ideology and moral arguments were beyond his influence, and all he could focus on—all he *had* to focus on—was the day-by-day, hour-by-hour act of looking out for his brothers in arms, and making sure he dropped enemy before they dropped him. That was the foundation of his life, the essence of his existence.

The rest, as Master Altis said, was commentary.

CAPTAIN'S CABIN, *LEVELER*

"I THOUGHT YOU WERE GOING TO THE WARDROOM," Pellaeon said.

Hallena was sitting in his sole concession to the privilege of rank, a comfortable, shamelessly padded Boruga armchair. One of *Leveler's* maintenance engineers had even put retractable bolts on it so it could be secured to the deck when necessary.

"I thought you would have had a rough wooden chair with extra splinters," she said. "You really do take this all-of-one-company thing seriously, don't you?"

"Yes, I don't even have a chef." Most ships' commanding officers had their own separate daily menu, prepared by a personal cook, meals taken in their own dining cabin. Pellaeon had always thought it a tad insulting to the crew. "I'll eat what my crew eat. And in the mess, too. Nothing erodes commitment and discipline like telling sailors you think you're a higher form of life than they are."

"You and Altis, a right pair of troublemakers, upsetting the natural order of society ..."

Hallena seemed completely relaxed—not content, though, just resigned. Pellaeon glanced discreetly at the decanter of syr-spirit on the side table just to check if she'd been drinking. The security cap was still in place. It was probably exhaustion, then. She'd been through a particularly rough mission.

"You really should get that bump seen to." He reached out to smooth her hair. She flinched. "Do you feel all right?"

"I feel a lot better than Trooper Ince. Or Vere." She uncrossed her legs as if she was going to stand up. "Or Shil, or Merish. See, that's my real use in life. Finding the beings who've already been screwed over by the system and making sure they're *really* finished. How many hells do you Corellians have, Gil? Nine? Add a tenth. I'll need one to myself."

He'd never seen her like this. But then they'd never been brought up hard against their respective jobs simultaneously before, with each seeing exactly what the other was obliged to do.

"It can't be the first time you've done a dirty job."

She was fiddling with something in her pocket. "No, but it's the *last* time."

"Just tell me what's tipped the balance."

"Maybe it was making sure that torture victims got killed. Or it might have been seeing two kids killed on their first mis-sion. Hard to call."

He'd have to ask her about the torture victim. But he under-stood the *kids* reaction. Nobody with a functioning conscience could have looked at clone troopers and not felt uneasy about using them. They weren't even conscripts. It was a whole new kind of warfare for the Republic.

"Gil, has everyone gone stupid overnight?" Hallena took whatever she was fidgeting with out of her pocket and stared at it. It was a tiny durasteel dispenser, like the ones made to hold that searing Alderaanian snuff. "I know we're still reeling from the war kicking off, and things take time to emerge, but am I the only being with enough functioning brain cells to ask where these troops came from? And *why*? There's nothing even in Rep Intel records about them. Anything like a multimillion-troop army complete with equipment and vessels is *not* something that Rep Intel forgets to file notes on. What the stang is going on here? And why are the Jedi in on it?"

Pellaeon sat down on the bunk and pulled off his boots. He could have used a glass of syrspirit right then, but he was tired, and alcohol plus fatigue was his personal recipe for disaster.

"The bigger the anomaly," he said, "the less likely folks are to look at it. Want to get away with a lie? Pick the biggest one you can and brazen it out."

"So you think it's a lie, then. Of sorts."

"I think it's inexplicable, yes, but I have no idea what to do about it."

Hallena opened the container, twisting off the top and gesturing with it. "If I were running Rep Intel, it would be the first task on my list. Who paid for the Grand Army? And why did they think we needed one?" She held up one finger, anticipating him perfectly. "And don't feed me the line about smart Jedi seeing things coming in the Force. They didn't see Geonosis coming any more than we did. Altis—now, Altis is a plain-talking man. No mumbo-jumbo and mystic nonsense. I bet *he* wonders where the army came from. I'm going to spend some time talking to him."

Pellaeon glanced at the bulkhead chrono and did a few mental calculations to convert GST to local time at Kemla. "You think that's wise?"

"*Wise?* You think perhaps it might be *right?*"

"And what are you going to do with the truth when you find it?"

It was a good question. Everyone was certain that they wanted the truth in life, but in reality not many did, and even fewer knew what to do with it when they got it. Entire civilizations ran on that principle. The Republic certainly did. Pellaeon had no illusions. He shortened his horizons so that all he could see was what mattered—keeping his ship and crew alive. *Just like Rex. We understand each other.* Right then all he wanted was to hold Hallena, but she was completely absorbed in her outrage.

She upended the lower half of the snuff container, and a few tablets fell into her palm.

"No prisoners," she said. "You know what these are, don't you, Gil? Insurance. In case I'm ever really stuck without hope of escape. A quick way out, before I compromise the Republic and get a lot more people killed. That's the idea, anyway. Instead, I called for backup, and I got people killed anyway. So next time—if there's ever a next time—I won't make that mistake again."

"So, us."

"What about us?"

"It's open knowledge now. Shall we get married?"

"You're not the marrying kind, Gil."

"For you, I *can* be."

He wasn't joking; he was utterly in love with her, not just be-cause she was striking, not just because she was smart, but be-cause she was so passionate about life—the *living* of it, yes, but also about the rights and wrongs of it, which struck him as odd for a spook. But the hours were terrible and the pay was mediocre; why else would anyone do it? There was only delu-sion—the juvenile belief in excitement and glamour, which was inevitably crushed with the first dreary mission—or a desire to do the right thing in some vaguely patriotic and unquestioning way.

Like me, really. Why did I lie about my age to join the navy?

Spies seldom got to find out if they ever *had* done the right thing, of course. Hallena was one of the awkward ones who wanted to hang around and see how things panned out.

"I'd marry you in a heartbeat," Hallena said at last. "But I need to get myself straight first."

Pellaeon was quietly devastated. He'd been so sure she'd say yes. "Is that a charming brush-off?"

"No, it's the way I feel at the moment." She put the tablets back in the container and slid it back inside her jacket. Pellaeon hoped the toxin didn't leave residue on her hands. "I've never run away from anything before, but fifteen years in this game is long enough. There are even *Jedi* who think the Republic needs dismantling. I don't expect my government to be utterly blame-less, but I really worry when I don't know if they're the lesser of two evils any longer."

"So what are you planning to do?"

"I'm getting out. Really out. No just-one-more-job-for-us."

"I see. Just deliver a crisp sheet of signed white flimsi to the Boss Spook." Intel—like all spymasters—never really let go of their agents. There was always some little errand to run, even in retirement. And if they thought someone was going rogue . . . "Don't risk making your farewell party rather too final, will you?"

"I know. I know they don't just let you walk away and open a cantina without expecting you still to be at their beck and call. That's why when I go—I'll go."

He wasn't sure he'd understood her correctly.

"What are you saying?" He wanted to call her *darling, sweetheart*, but it would have come out all wrong. "You're not going to do anything foolish. Not you."

He meant the toxin. It was so unlike Hallena that he had no idea why the thought had crossed his mind, but that was his im-mediate fear. Sometimes the only way to evade Rep Intel was drastic.

"I'm going to take a break," she said. "Somewhere that they can't find me."

"That's . . . still quite extreme." *She's running from me, too. I've lost her.* "They don't tend to take kindly to that."

"I know."

And now he had to ask. "Will I ever see you again?"

"Yes. You'll always be able to find me. They won't."

"How?"

"I'll let you know when we reach Kemla." She looked at the bulkhead chrono. "We've still got an hour. Do you know what to do with an hour?"

It wasn't celebratory; it couldn't be. It was more a sad acceptance of the lives they led, with no end or prospect of domestic normality in sight. It was as much for comfort as anything.

"I can probably think of something," he said.

TWELVE

As with all faith, some basic messages become distorted over time. Why should attachment *lead to the dark side*? Loving commitment is the cornerstone of civilization, of society, and unites all living creatures. How can it be wrong? I assert that it's fixation—obsession— *that leads to darkness and evil*. That blind focus can corrupt any area of our lives. We *may do* terrible things because we're obsessed with a lover, with wealth, with power . . . or even with a set of inflexible beliefs that have come to mean more to us than the welfare of living beings themselves. Do you take my point, Master Yoda?

—Master Djinn Altis, in a rare exchange of letters with Master Yoda, some years before the outbreak of war

HANGAR DECK, *LEVELER*, HALF AN HOUR OUT FROM KEMLA

ANAKINHAD PUT IT OFF FOR AS LONG AS HE COULD, but now he had to face it.

He clambered around the interior of the CR-20, making notes on his datapad and imagining how the ship might be better adapted for the Grand Army. A fleet of these would be useful; larger than a LAAT/i, hyperdrive-capable, well armed. Just the job for inserting troops when an Acclamator was far too big and a Larty was too small or the range too great. *Good option for special forces, perhaps.* His interest was genuine, but he admitted to himself that the examination was distraction from what was eating at him.

Altis.

He felt the man coming. He didn't leave an impression in the Force like any Jedi Master Anakin had known, except perhaps for that sense of uneasy curiosity that felt almost familiar.

Anakin waited until he heard Altis's boots on the metal ramp before he turned around.

"I'm sorry about your men, General," Altis said.

"Yes, we lose far too many." Anakin put the datapad away. There was no point trying to fool Altis into thinking he wasn't rattled by his eccentric ways, and by one way in particular. "I know Rex is especially disturbed. I'll talk to him later—he tends to prefer a little space at times like these."

"And at times like these, no doubt you see the wisdom of avoiding attachment. Growing too fond of someone is a certain route to pain for one of you."

Does he know?

It was Anakin's first thought. He almost panicked.

Altis wasn't like other Jedi; he might have been able to sense all kinds of things that even

Obi-Wan—even Yoda—couldn't. His followers could do things that no other Jedi seemed able to—the affinity with machines, with computers. Anakin was a gifted mechanic, but Callista could *live* the machine. It was al-most alarming.

Not half as alarming as thinking that Altis might know about Padmé, though.

"Rex regrets the brevity of their lives—as do I." Altis looked a little younger now. He'd changed his posture subtly, no longer clasping his hands above his belly, but hands on hips. It trans-formed him from a sage into a veteran soldier somehow. Anakin knew he wasn't dealing with a lightweight.

"General Skywalker, I knew Qui-Gon Jinn. Extraordinary man."

"He certainly made a big impression on me."

"I sense what's troubling you."

"Oh." *What do I say? He'd never tell anyone, of course. I feel it.* "It's quite a list."

"It's not wrong to have disagreements with the Jedi Council. Qui-Gon had his differences with them, as do I. It's not neces-sarily a bad thing."

"Master . . . how many students have you taught?"

Altis shrugged and looked off to one side as if calculating. "Probably thousands. I'm a traditionalist—I keep it simple. No point being more complex than we need to be. So I teach being good, doing good, and asking good questions. That's about it, really."

Anakin almost gasped. He felt stupid for being shocked, but he'd had no idea how many followers Altis might have. Now he knew. This wasn't a tiny sect of lunatics.

Altis smiled. It wasn't smug. It was regretful. It was as if he felt he was too late for something.

"Aren't you going to ask me what you really want to know, young man?"

It was Anakin's only chance. He knew he was unlikely to see much of Altis again, if ever. Altis seemed to know that, too. He appeared to be giving farewell advice. And he didn't look like the kind of man who did that out of habit.

"Would you answer me if I did?"

"Of course."

"Are you married?"

Altis tilted his head slightly to one side. "I lost my wife some years ago. I miss her terribly. I was a better Jedi for her influence, too."

"Attachment hasn't. . . turned you to the dark side, clearly. Nor any of your followers."

"Now we might get to your real question."

Anakin almost broke. He felt such compassion, such honesty and humility in Altis, that he wondered if he could safely confide in him. It wasn't fear of Altis exposing his secret marriage that scared him, though. He was scared that once he discussed his turmoil openly, then he could never cope with being a Jedi—*his* kind of Jedi, Obi-Wan's kind of Jedi—again. And he had no idea where that might lead.

"I'm not sure I have one," Anakin said.

"Well, if I give you an answer, then you needn't feel you be-trayed your Masters by asking one." Altis sat down on one of the bulkhead safety rails. "I don't know why Master Yoda or any of the other Jedi Council members rarely prepare their fol-lowers for the fact that we exist and yet haven't fallen prey to the dark side. It's certainly true for many beings, Force-users or not. But their problem isn't attachment. Their problem is *obsession*." Altis paused for a moment. Anakin felt he was being searched somehow, his thoughts probed. "So before I could tell you if attachment was right for you, you would have to ask yourself if you could handle it—Jedi or not."

Anakin was now ready to slam the ramp shut if anyone looked like wandering in and cutting this conversation short. He *had* to know more. He had to be able to *understand*, so that he didn't go back to Coruscant overwhelmed by the urge to con-front Yoda.

"How would I tell if I could handle it, Master?"

Altis shrugged. "Could you let someone go, if you loved them? Could you let them walk away? Could you live without them? How far would you go to stop them from leaving? What would you do to save them? Ask yourself, listen, and if any of your answers make you feel afraid . . . attachment may be fraught with misery, for you and those around you."

It was simple; Altis said he liked to keep things uncompli-cated. And, like all simple things, it was hard to do. Anakin still couldn't tell if Altis knew about Padmé, but he certainly knew about attachment, and he gave the impression that he knew Anakin struggled with it. Maybe he also knew that Anakin struggled with the knowledge that he had failed to save those dearest to him.

Well, Anakin wanted the truth. He was prepared to be scru-tinized.

"You really are a very good teacher, Master Altis."

"Not really," he said. "I just know how to ask questions. My students give me the answers. So, I am in fact... a student. I always will be. The oldest Padawan in town. Now, may I ask *you* a question?"

"Certainly."

"They call you the Chosen One. Do you feel chosen?"

"Not really." Altis had a way of disarming him. He wasn't sure he'd have said that to anyone except Padmé. "I feel . . . dif-ferent. I don't quite fit in. I try. Maybe I started too old."

"Callista was older than you are now when she became my Padawan. I think some life experience can make a better Jedi. But I wouldn't want you—or Master Yoda—to think I was try-ing to lure you to our little community. I don't seek recruits." Altis looked deadly serious now. Anakin knew exactly what he was saying, weighing his words as carefully as a man could. "But if you ever get kicked out of the Temple, remember you can always find us. We never close."

He got up, made a few grunts of pain, and put both palms flat on the small of his back.

"I can sense your Padawan coming," he said. "She's had a bit of a culture shock meeting us. I'm sorry if that causes you problems. Just tell her we're harmless nuts if it starts to become a problem."

"How *does* anyone find you?" Anakin asked. He had to ask, even if it was obliquely put. "I'd never heard of your community, although Qui-Gon mentioned you by name."

Altis touched two fingers to his brow in a mock salute. "Just look in the unhappy places everyone else forgets," he said. "We'll be there, doing what we can." Then he walked down the ramp, still rubbing his back ruefully. "Don't forget to ask your-self those questions, General."

Anakin found himself staring at the open bay door long after Altis had vanished. Maybe there was a solution after all. The old Master seemed to have more answers than he admitted to.

Could I live without her?

Would I let her go?

Anakin felt uneasy, as if he were looking down into a well with his hands firmly on the sides, but starting

to slip as he stared in dismay at something emerging from the depths. He pulled back. Maybe this wasn't the time to ask himself those kinds of questions, not here in the aftermath of battle. He'd leave it until he had a quiet moment to meditate. That sense of not wanting to look was . . . misleading. It had to be.

Altis couldn't be right about everything, after all.

Anakin decided the first thing he'd do when *Leveler* dropped out of hyperspace was to comm Padmé and tell her.

She'd never want to leave him, anyway, nor would he ever leave her. Altis's question didn't really apply.

Did it?

TRANSFER DOCK, KEMLA SHIPYARDS

THERE WAS STILL WORK TO BE DONE. CALLISTA SAT WITH Ash, saying nothing, thinking a lot, and watching Geith sparring playfully with one of the Ryn who occasionally traveled with them.

"You wouldn't believe we'd just fought a battle," Ash said.

Wookiee Gunnereased onto one of the berthing piers at Kemla's transfer dock, an insect alongside *Leveler*. The damage to the assault ship was now painfully visible in the high-output illumination that bathed the orbiting dock in harsh, blue-white light. She was a mass of scorch marks, buckled plates, and missing spars. Dockworkers were already putting lines on her and marshaling tiny pilot vessels into place around her.

Callista nodded in the direction of the warship. The battered hull filled most of the viewport on that side.

"Oh, I believe ..."

"What did it feel like to merge with the missile system?" Ash asked.

Callista could now only recall brief but vivid freeze-frames of the event. The moments of machine-like clarity stayed with her, though. She was sure that was why her Force senses didn't feel quite the same even now.

"There was a point at which I thought I might never separate from it," she said. "I think I quite enjoyed being a machine for a while."

But not a battle droid. One step too far.

She thought of Rex, and wondered if she'd be able to check up on Joc, Boro, Hil, or Ross, to see that they were okay. The speed with which folks formed bonds in combat still surprised her, even though she should have known it was always that way.

"Do you think," she said, "that combat binds us tighter than everyday friendships because it's a defense mechanism? That we've evolved to stick together with the beings most likely to fight to defend us?"

"That's a very . . . machine-like view."

"You're laughing at me now."

"Not at all. But I'd rather think that we bond more strongly in adversity because we see others for what they really are—prepared to die to save us, rather than run away."

Not everyone.

Just the good ones.

"That's near enough for me," Callista said.

Yarille was the next stop. It was a world nobody cared much about; even the fighting there had been brief and had moved on, as if the place wasn't even worth conquering. The Republic's meteorological information service said Yen Bachask—the worst-hit town—was facing a harsh winter, and that the snows had already started.

Master Altis wandered across to her, no sign of impatience while they waited for the transit shuttle. Geith gave up his mock boxing bout with the Ryn boy—even a Jedi had to struggle to get a punch past his guard—and flopped down on the seat beside her.

"I hope we didn't upset the general and his Padawan too much," Callista said.

"Oh, a little challenge to our beliefs every day is a bracing walk for both the intellect and the soul." Altis stared at *Leveler*. "I certainly had a few challenges to mine in the last few days."

"I meant that I don't want to call down the Jedi Order on our heads, Master."

"I doubt that'll happen, my dear. We've had an *arrangement* for some time, after all."

"But what kind of *arrangement* can we have if we think they're wrong about this war?" Callista stood and offered him her seat. "We can't ignore it."

Altis shook his head politely and pointed to his lower back, indicating that it was playing him up again.

"I'd be a liar if I said that I didn't feel negative about Master Yoda sometimes," he said. "So I ask myself why, and recognize that I have to deal with my own insecurities and conceits. But when I strip that away, and I look at what worries Geith, then I find more objective grounds to concern me."

"Then what do we do about it?"

"We deal with what the war presents us, as if there were no Jedi leading the Republic's forces. It's not a matter of being on *their* side or not. We are on the side of those who need us most."

"Then we may well end up fighting for the Republic."

"And there will be days when we won't." Altis held up his finger, distracted for a moment as if he'd interrupted himself. "Correction. When *I* won't. Because I won't dictate matters of conscience to the rest of you."

"Is there no point talking to Master Yoda? He might see sense."

"He already believes he does, and I think I see sense, too, but we see very different things. Do you think I could sway him? That's a genuine question."

"I don't know him."

"I fear my own negativity. But if I try to stand back from my emotion, then I'm simply left with a question—whether a being who has lived for centuries can possibly understand what's best for the majority of beings whose time is much, much shorter."

"Master, emotions aren't inherently bad," Geith said. "Why set them aside this time?"

"Because I need to be sure I oppose Yoda's position for the right reasons, and what it is that I actually oppose. Supporting the Republic even when it's flawed? Using clone troops? If I put aside emotions, what reality am I left with?"

"Emotions are our programming, the reactions that keep us alive and help us understand what's right and wrong. If I'm upset when someone treats me as having no worth or rights, isn't that how I work out that I shouldn't treat a clone trooper the same way, or a servant or anyone else? If it offends me, then it probably offends others."

"A good point, Geith, but beware the assumption that all beings react as you do."

"Master, I'd lay down my life for you, but I don't accept an argument that says if others are not like us, we can treat them differently. That's an excuse for exploitation. That *is* the path to the dark side."

"I wasn't suggesting that. Just that understanding others' motives and being able to see the world as they do is the key both to compassion . . . and to success in battle." Altis ruffled Geith's hair. "And while I'm touched by your devotion, I would much rather you lived a long and happy life, influencing others by your example, and raising children to do the same. You, too, young woman." He patted Callista's head. "Enough of the sac-rificial tendencies. A *little* selfishness keeps you alive to do more good for others, yes?"

The transit shuttle swung into view and settled with its docking ring against the bulkhead. The air lock sealed, warning lights flashed, and the interior doors parted. It was time to go.

"You go ahead," said Altis. He shooed them forward. "I'm waiting for someone."

"If you miss this shuttle, the next circuit's not for another half an hour."

Altis shrugged. "Do you mind waiting for me?"

"Master . . . where would we go without you?"

"I'm not the community. You are. One day, it *will* have to go ahead and leave me behind."

"Never."

"Never is a long time. So if you then decide to hand my mortal remains to a taxidermist, and display me somewhere in the ship," Altis said stiffly, "I shall return as a ghost and ruin every game of sabacc you ever play." He smiled. "I'll wait."

Callista hung around with him until the last moment, until the pilot droid hit the warning light for embarkation and Ash shooed her on board after the others.

"It's someone important," she said.

"Everyone's important to the Master," said Callista.

She stared out the viewport as the shuttle pulled away on the short journey to dock with *Wookiee Gunner*, until Altis was just a small speck of charcoal gray in the brightly lit bubble of transparisteel and plastoid of the transit area.

Yes, everyone mattered. And every action they took mattered, too.

CAPTAIN'S CABIN, *LEVELER*, ORBITAL DOCK, KEMLA SHIPYARDS

GIL WAS BUSY WITH THE SHIPYARD SUPERVISOR, and Hallena had never been good at farewells.

He'd understand. It wasn't forever. But it had to be *now*.

She had no luggage; that didn't matter. Gil's steward and one of the clone supply officers had cobbled together a few items—Fleet gray coveralls, man-sized underthings she could alter later, toiletries—and

she stuffed them in a small fabric bag. She also had untraceable credits she could convert to cash creds. That was the great thing about being a spook: Rep Intel had trained her to vanish, to leave no traces, and given her the means to do that and survive anonymously in the field. Now she could do just that. She'd have to make the cash cred hit in one go, though, or else her constant dips into the untraceable account would get their attention, and they'd shut it down.

I don't really need much. I'm a survivor.

As she looked at herself in the mirror on Gil's cabin bulk-head, she wondered if the lump on her head was somehow con-nected to her decision to go into hiding. It was, after all, not her style; she'd always imagined herself storming into Isard's office, calling him everything but a Hutt's backside, and telling him what he could do with his job. That day hadn't even really fea-tured in her fantasies, though. She accepted—less willingly, less easily with each passing day—that she may not like her job, or even be able to sleep well after some parts of it, but that it had to be done. Her job was to go to the dark places where nobody else could.

The trouble was that she'd found the dark place within her-self. It wasn't a place she could live any longer.

There was nobody to apologize to; there was nothing she could do here to atone. But she looked up at the deckhead, be-cause *up* was the only direction that felt appropriate.

"Sorry, Vere. Sorry, Ince. Sorry, Shil. Sorry, everyone who died so I could have a second chance. I'm not going to waste it. I promise."

She should have apologized to Gil, too, but theirs was a more complicated relationship, and always would be. She fin-ished writing the letter—real flimsi, a proper letter for a gentle-man who cared about such things—and sealed it carefully before kissing it and leaving it under the syrspirit decanter.

He'd look there.

He'd be the only one who would read it and understand its meaning.

And then he'd know where he could find her.

If she didn't leave now, then she never would, and Rep Intel were fully aware of her last known position. The decent thing to do was to relieve Gil of all complicity in her disappearance.

No prisoners. No hostages.

And, because he loved her, he would let her go—and for the time being, she had to.

THIRTEEN

We Jedi are tainted by our connections to the Republic.

Many see us as its enforcers. We're on the wrong side.

We should be helping to bring the Republic down,
once and for all.

-Jedi Knight Sora Bulq

YARILLE, OUTER RIM

IT WAS YET ANOTHER WASTELAND; ANOTHER SHARD of the big-ger war, and more shattered lives.

Altis stood on the loading ramp of the *Wookiee Gunner* and stared at the devastation with a sinking heart that did not befit a Jedi Master.

We can deal with this. Really, we can.

A brand-new city had sprung up on the tundra, a city of tents. Behind it, like a shattered vase, the regional capital of Yen Bachask lay in ruins. The area was so unrelentingly flat that Altis was sure he could see another bombed town in the far distance.

Maybe it's a mirage. Can you get mirages in cold climates?

Geith put his hand on the Master's shoulder. Neither man said anything as little dark shapes emerged from the tents to stand and stare back—refugees displaced by the fighting that had hit their world, then moved on.

"Let's do it," Geith said. He scanned the horizon, hands on hips. "Not even a tree. What a miserable place."

Callista, Ash, and the others who acted as section leaders moved out from the ship onto the thin dusting of snow to begin walking with slow, deliberate, we're-here-to-help care toward the tent city to make contact. It was always a good idea to send the females in first. Altis had known so many lethal, violent women that he wasn't sure why that usually reassured the scared and suffering; but refugees reacted better when the first hand extended to them was a woman's. Perhaps it was because soldiers tended to be male, right across the galaxy.

He waited until a few of the locals, huddled in heavy coats against the bitter wind, stepped forward and exchanged hand-shakes with Callista and Ash.

"She's a good girl," Altis said, more to himself than Geith.

"I know," Geith said. "She always bounces back. That com-puter thing really scared her. But she seems fine now."

Altis hadn't been thinking of that. But Callista had changed subtly, and he made a mental note to keep an eye on it. He took a wide path around the makeshift camp to see what might be dragged from the town and salvaged. As they neared the town walls, he found himself walking on an increasing density of

de-bris, tan and white, metal and plastoid.

It was the remains of droids and clone troopers.

Ince. Were. Those young men, allowed to know nothing else.

It wasn't so much the realization of what he was walking upon that stopped him in his tracks and made his stomach lurch, but what he sensed. The Force seized him by the collar, shook him, made him look. *See what your kind have done, Altis. Feel the pain and misery that empty piety begets.* He had no choice but to listen to it.

"Yoda, you fool—you fool." He dreaded going farther. He knew he would see bodies, and he knew that somehow the bod-ies of troopers would disturb him even more than those of civil-ians. He would ponder on that. "And you wonder why the dark side has been growing these many years? Because we're letting it creep up on us a step at a time."

Geith caught his arm. "Master?"

"I'm fine, Geith." Altis put his hand on Geith's and patted it rather than shake it off. He didn't want to be touched. He felt unworthy of concern or sympathy. "I just have moments of clar-ity that cut me to the bone."

He walked on anyway, and, yes, there were bodies. He would arrange cremations. He would try to notify next of kin. Troopers had none, but surely somebody—*somebody*—kept records of their individual existence and passing. Rex cared. Therefore if nobody else would mourn them, then at least a clone brother would want and need to know.

There is no passion, only serenity.

"Garbage," Altis spat. "*Garbage*. Where's the passion for justice? Where's the passion for peace? The passion for *rights*? We *need* passion! No passion—only complacency! We forgot what we were put here to *do*."

Geith, like the rest of his students, was used to these angry Altis-versus-Altis debates. He walked alongside his Master patiently.

"We all feel the darkness coming, Master."

"It's not *separate!*" It was so clear now; the Force was shaking him and demanding that he listen. "It's not a separate entity! It's not another being! It's *us*, it's *in* us, it's *part* of us. It's our blindness, that we think our little identity that says good guys exempts us from looking at our own acceptance of evil. It's so much easier to point to Dooku and blame him. Isn't it? Dooku was a *good* man when I knew him. A *principled* man, a man with honest passions. *We* drive such men to extreme actions when we refuse to look at what troubles them. *We* are the dark side, all of us. It's what we all do—and *don't* do."

Geith was a good man, just like Dooku had once been. He had a fine mind; he never accepted authority because it stood over him with a fist or a disapproving look. He was unflinching in examining his own shortcomings. But it wasn't enough to examine and think. Every being had to *do*. Good intention wasn't enough.

Good intention, and blind eyes turned to a nagging reality, had killed the soldier who lay crumpled a few meters away in the shelter of a doorway. He could have been asleep, huddled against the biting wind, had it not been for the fact that a large part of his body was missing.

Who planned such an army? And how did they know war was coming?

"I think the time when that problem could have been solved was over long before you were even born, Master," Geith said. "So before you blame yourself for this, for withdrawing from mainstream Jedi life—don't."

"That," Altis said stiffly, "is the denial of personal responsibility. We can all make a difference."

"Master, if one man *could* change the galaxy—you'd have managed it by now."

Altis steeled himself to squat down and turn over the body. It was stiff, not from rigor mortis but from the cold. He wondered whether to remove the helmet, but he couldn't bear to see the face. He'd looked into Rex's eyes once too often. Geith put his hand under his elbow and helped him stand upright.

His back hurt. It had been a hard few days, and he wasn't getting any younger.

"We've tried to stay away from Republic business," he said. "But it won't stay away from us."

"Master," Geith said softly, "it doesn't mean we've compromised."

"We have to stop this war."

"You saw how I tried and failed to remain aloof, Master. Walking away from Rex and his men doesn't keep our hands clean. They still die. We do nothing—well, good can *never* come from doing nothing."

"I feel afraid when I realize that Sora Bulq has a point. That the Republic might well need bringing down."

"I don't think we can do that, either. All we can do is take responsibility for ourselves, and help the victims of this war."

Altis looked back at the ship. There was now a steady stream of Jedi and their support teams ferrying supplies to the refugees. "Like these wretched people."

"And those." Geith indicated the dead trooper. "They're victims, too."

"Let's make ourselves useful," Altis said. He needed to compose himself before he dealt with the bodies, and a little honest labor, even with a bad back, was a good way to do it. "Just getting the generators going will save lives. Is it my age, or is this place as cold as death?"

"It's cold, Master."

They walked back to the camp. Altis's heart broke; it wasn't the injuries he saw among the civilians so much as the look on their faces that tore at him. It was bewilderment. *Why us?* Why had the war come to them? A woman with a small child clinging to her legs held out a cup to him, steam curling from its rim, and he realized she wasn't asking for it to be filled, but offering him a hot drink. She probably saw an old man, his face pinched by the cold, in need of something warming. She was, frankly, thin and ugly, worn out by poverty; but he'd never seen such beauty and radiance in his life. It was perfection; a simple act of generosity, love in its raw and natural state.

Serenity, my backside. Passion. Passion and anger and love. That's what this galaxy needs, not serenity. Passion for change. Anger at this brutality. Love— *buckets of it, for everyone, love between child and parent, between spouses, between brothers and sisters, between friends. We need more attachment, not less. Attachment can stop us from tearing ourselves apart.*

Altis had a gift. However these things worked, he had been given rare abilities by the galaxy, and it was his duty to use them. He just didn't always know how best to apply them.

Altis took the cup, drank, and embraced the emaciated woman. He found a few candies in his pocket for the child. One of his non-Jedi students, Gali, trotted over to him with an arm-ful of blankets.

"We thought we'd lost you, Master," she said. What he thought was a blanket on the top of the pile turned out to be a coat, and she thrust it at him. "For goodness' sake put this on."

Altis pulled the overcoat around him to humor her. There was no rule against a Jedi Master teaching those who had no Force powers. If there was—bah, he'd ignore all that nonsense. The ordinary men and women in his community taught him more daily than he could possibly teach them in a lifetime. Like his dear late wife always said—not sensitive to the Force at all, prone to using his lightsaber to cut stubborn branches—there was more to wisdom than being able to move a table with the power of your mind.

Yes, Margani. I hear you. I hear you still.

Geith paused among the tents to make notes on his datapad. Everyone in the community knew their role in an emergency. Geith was noting how many refugees needed medical care; the urgent cases were

already being treated by first responders, but there were others who would need drugs and special care when the first rush was over.

"Am I letting my doctrinal pride get in the way, Geith?" Altis said. He picked up a little boy who tottered up to him, and examined the child's runny eyes. A woman came running as if to find the kid, and Altis handed him back. "Tell me straight. Is this just vain ideology on my part, some idiotic schism with Yoda?"

Altis wanted it to be. He really did. Two old fools arguing over theories, academic vanity. It would have been so much eas-ier to swallow than feeling he could avert a disaster if he only argued harder.

"No, Master," said Geith. "I wish it were. It's about living the belief. I think our ascetic brethren have been co-opted by government. And government is usually about the exercise of power."

Ah, the little revolutionary firebrand; Geith had never trusted power. He didn't even enjoy using his own. That was what made him admirable. "And if the government had come to us for help instead of Yoda, would we have refused? We'll never know."

"This will end in disaster for all of us; you know that, don't you?"

Altis felt his stomach knot. Geith was always the one who thought the unthinkable. Someone had to.

"Then let's do the maximum good that we can while we still have breath in our bodies," he said.

Altis heard the crunch of boots behind him. Someone was steering a repulsor pallet, whistling tunelessly. Hallena Devis seemed a lot more at peace today than she'd been when he first met her. Had it only been a matter of days? They said a spy's life was nowhere near as glamorous as the holovids made out, but he doubted she'd ever set up field refreshers before. She seemed perfectly happy with the task.

Smart woman. Takes guts to walk out on the Republic. I do hope she remembers to take time to be with her gallant captain, though. In the meantime . . . she's safe with us.

"Where do you want this, then, Master?" she asked. The pallet was full of pails, drainage pipes, and duraplast containers of disinfectant. "We're setting these up outside the camp, yes?"

"Better make it thirty meters from the perimeter," Altis said. "Callista's in charge today. Perhaps we can reroute the water supplies from the town."

Hallena nodded and walked on with the pallet. Altis closed his eyes for a moment, remembered the intense passions he'd felt in Anakin Skywalker, and hoped that someone would have the sense to channel those passions rather than try to suppress them. He felt. . . foreboding. Anyone with that amount of raw power in the Force needed to be carefully directed, not put in harness.

Skywalker would have an unhappy future. Altis felt it. It was clear he already had an unhappy past. What that meant for the galaxy . . . but then one man couldn't change a galaxy.

I hope. Not even me.

There were no trees, just as Geith had said. So there was no firewood; funeral pyres were out of the question. The dead had to be buried, not only for disease control, but because Djinn Altis felt everyone had a right to end their time with dignity—even if in the rest of life it had been denied them.

"Please, fetch me a shovel, Geith," Altis said. "I have work to do."

[end]

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