

Star Wars

Junior Jedi Knights

Book 6

Kenobi's Blade

by Rebecca Moesta

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In his room at the Jedi academy, Anakin Solo bent over a small worktable by the window slit. His ice blue eyes studied the project he was tinkering with. Although the thick stone walls of the Great Temple around him kept his room cool and dim, Anakin didn't mind. It was bright and hot outside today, and he needed the light low to see what he was doing. He found the dimness soothing. Having fewer distractions helped him to think. A fringe of straight dark hair fell across Anakin's eyes, as it often did, and he brushed the bangs aside so that he could see better.

"It's almost finished," he said.

On the windowsill, basking in the sun, a furry white creature with long floppy ears, a fluffy tail, and large blue-green eyes watched Anakin. The creature sat up to its full one-meter height and asked,

"Are you solving a puzzle?"

Anakin smiled. "Sort of. This is a programmable laser puzzle, and I'm trying to make a picture out of it—a hologram, really. I think I've just about got it." Anakin concentrated on blending and focusing the laser beams into the pattern he had programmed for this light "painting." Suddenly the hologram came together just as Anakin had planned, and he froze it into the puzzle's memory.

"There. What do you think, Ikrit?"

Ikrit, the white-furred Jedi Master on the windowsill, nodded.

"Mmmmm. You show great skill for one so young."

Anakin blushed slightly at the compliment. The red stain on his cheeks clashed with the orange of his comfortable flightsuit.

"I'm not that young," he pointed out. "I'll be a teenager next year."

Just then a knock sounded at the door and, without waiting for an invitation, Anakin's best friend danced into the room.

"Hi, Anakin. Good afternoon, Master Ikrit," Tahiri sang.

She took a few twirling steps on her bare feet, and her long blonde hair swirled around the shoulders of her orange academy flightsuit. "Guess what?" she said. "Master Skywalker has been called away to Coruscant, so we won't have any lessons with him for a couple of weeks."

Anakin nodded and smiled to himself. He knew that his friend would probably keep talking whether he answered her or not.

"We'll be having all our lessons with Tionne and Ikrit for the next week or two."

Tahiri finally came to a spinning stop beside Anakin's worktable. Her bright green eyes sparkled as she looked down at his project.

"That's a great hologram of your family, Anakin," she said in a wistful voice. "You're lucky to have such a nice family. I always wonder what my parents were really like. I don't remember much, except for what Sliven told me."

Sliven was the leader of a tribe of Sand People on Tatooine. He had adopted Tahiri after her parents were killed when she was only a few years old. Tahiri kept talking, not even stopping to take a breath.

"Isn't that a bolo generator? Where did you get it? And why aren't you in the hologram? I don't remember seeing it before. Did you have it made last time you were at home on Coruscant?" She paused for the briefest moment, and then continued. "So, aren't you going to say anything?"

Anakin shook his head. "I made this myself. I collected images of my family from everywhere I could find them, chose the best ones, and programmed them into this hologram. This one," he said, pointing to the image of Leia Organa Solo and Han Solo, "was from my last birthday. Mom left a meeting of the Senate to come to my party. To surprise her, Dad came back early from a trip to the Bepin System. I love that stunned and happy look on Mom's face."

He pointed to the images of his brother and sister, the Jedi twins.

"I added the pictures of Jacen and Jaina from shots taken here on Yavin 4 before they went home on break."

"Mmmmm. It is good to remember who your family is and what you are a part of," Ikrit said in his scratchy voice.

"I got the idea for it in Darth Vader's fortress," Anakin admitted.

"From the hologram he kept of your uncle Luke?" Tahiri asked.

"Yes. I like to think he kept it to remind himself of who he was. Maybe that's why-in the end, at least-he couldn't serve the dark side of the Force anymore," Anakin said.

"Sometimes I wish I had holograms of my parents," Tahiri said a little sadly. She put her hand up to touch the two pendants on the necklace she wore tucked inside her flightsuit; one held the thumbprints of her mother and father, the other held Sliven's.

"I do keep a little hologram of our instructor Tionne, though," she went on. "That's the next best thing. After all, she's the one who found me on Tatooine when I lived with the Sand People, and-Tionne! Yipes, I almost forgot! You'll never guess in a million years."

Anakin didn't try to guess, but that didn't seem to faze Tahiri. Her face glowed with the excitement of her news.

"Tionne invited us to do something special because we helped her find Obi-Wan Kenobi's lightsaber and the Holocron in Bast Castle. She wants us all to come and watch while she explores the lessons in the Holocron! She said to come right away. We're supposed to bring Uldir, too."

Anakin looked at his wrist chronometer.

"In that case, we'd better hurry. You've been here several minutes already, and this sounds like something we don't want to miss."

Tahiri grinned. "It's almost like going on an adventure-except there won't be as many stairs as in Vader's fortress."

After stopping to collect Uldir from the kitchen, where he was working, the junior Jedi Knights and Ikrit trooped up to Tionne's chambers. They settled themselves in a loose semicircle around the Jedi instructor. Uldir wiped his hands off on the brown Jedi robe he wore and ran them through his shaggy chestnut hair. Tahiri noticed that he seemed more excited than any of them to be able to find out more about the Holocron.

That was good, Tahiri decided. Uldir's parents were cargo pilots for the New Republic. He had stowed away on a freighter and come to Yavin 4 in hopes of becoming a Jedi. Even though Master Skywalker had found no Jedi talent in the sturdy teenager, Uldir had stayed at the Jedi academy to study the Force.

Anakin, Tahiri, and Uldir had become good friends. But since they had all returned from Bast Castle-the fortress that had once belonged to Anakin's grandfather, Darth Vader-Uldir had been so withdrawn and quiet that Tahiri had been worried. Now that Uldir had found something to be excited about, Tahiri was glad. After all, she was excited, too. She always enjoyed taking lessons with her teacher Tionne, of course, but this was something special.

"We will start at the beginning," Tionne said in hushed tones. The silvery-haired instructor's face dimpled into a smile as she sat down and held the gleaming milky cube lightly on one palm. She spoke in a musical voice and her enormous mother-of-pearl eyes seemed to shine.

"This is a Jedi Holocron. Each Holocron contains the recorded teachings of a Jedi Master, like a small library of knowledge. It passes on the Jedi Master's wisdom to future Jedi."

Tionne nodded to Ikrit, who dimmed the glow - panels for her. The teacher cupped her palms around the pearly cube. A glowing image sparkled to life in the air above it.

"Welcome, my children. How may I teach you today?" asked the hologram of Ash Krimsan, a tiny, plump woman with black hair. She wore a long, soft gown as red as wine.

"Please, tell us about yourself, Ash Krimsan," Tionne said. Tahiri shot her teacher a curious look. It seemed a bit odd to ask questions of a hologram.

Then, to her amazement, the hologram answered.

"I have spent the last two hundred years of my life teaching the very young," Ash Krimsan said. Her face beamed with kindness and wisdom that came from the Force.

"How could she hear our questions?" Tahiri whispered. "She's only a picture."

"When Jedi Masters record their Holocrons, they also program in answers to the 'questions they think will be asked most often,'" Ikrit whispered back. "That makes it easier to find information quickly."

The hologram paused for a moment, then continued.

"I believe that unless we teach future Jedi to use the Force when they are children, they may never reach the full talent they were meant to have. "

Uldir snorted. Out of the corner of her eye, Tahiri saw him clench his fists.

"Master Skywalker wasn't a child when he learned about the Force," he muttered, "and he's pretty powerful."

In the image, Ash Krimsan opened her hands and held them out as if offering a gift.

"That is why I have gathered all of my lessons and placed them into this Holocron for you, my children. These words are for you and for all Jedi who are to come. Teach your children well, and trust the Force. I will put this Holocron in one of the great Jedi libraries, so that future Jedi Masters may share what I have learned when they teach their students."

"Library?" the silver-haired Tionne said breathlessly.

Tahiri perked up. She had never heard of a great Jedi library.

"Can you tell me where it is?" Tionne asked.

With a sweep of the Jedi Master's arm, her image dissolved and a new one appeared. Robed figures with lightsabers at their sides walked through gleaming metal passages that curved away out of sight. Plasteel beams formed arches where corridors changed from one subject area to another. Large windowports framed triangles of multicolored transparisteel. Small alcoves filled with spot-lit artifacts dotted the walls. Crystalline data wafers filled row upon row of archive cases.

"The Jedi library," the voice of Ash Krimsan continued, "is on a space station in the Teedio System-Exis Station. The vast library there holds the collected knowledge of many, many Jedi."

"Exis," Tionne murmured. "I've seen it before."

Uldir jerked upright beside Tahiri. His amber eyes went wide.

"Exis Station? That's where the Mage Orloc said he was from."

The Jedi instructor's pearly eyes opened wide with surprise. She set down the Holocron, and the glowing picture of Ash Krimsan winked out. Anakin looked at Uldir.

"How do you know?" Uldir shrugged. "Orloc told me himself, when we were alone in the hangar bay in Vader's fortress." Tahiri remembered that when their group went to Vader's fortress on the planet Vjun to find Obi-Wan Kenobi's lightsaber, a strange man in purple robes had gotten there ahead of them. After the companions found the lightsaber and the Jedi Holocron, the Mage Orloc had stolen them. In the race to recapture the treasures, Uldir had been the first to find the Mage-and had almost paid with his life. In the end, they got back both objects, but the Mage had escaped.

"You mean that magician guy lives in a space station that holds a Jedi library?" Tahiri said.

"Well, not really," Tionne answered. "I know that the library isn't there anymore. The space station has been empty for a long time now."

"You mean you went there already?" Tahiri asked. "Was it in one of your research trips?" She knew how much her teacher Tionne loved to study Jedi history. Every few months the silver-haired instructor went out on a trip to find anything she could about Jedi Knights who had lived long ago-stories, songs, tapestries, and so on.

"Yes," Tionne answered with a faraway look on her face. "It was many years ago. I heard that there was an ancient library in the Teedio System, so I looked for it. The legends said that a great Jedi meeting was held there once. I had hoped..." She shook her head. "When I got to the space station, I found it had been deserted for thousands of years. According to the station's records, a disaster had happened that made the sun in the Teedio System send out solar flares and heavy radiation. "The station was evacuated and the contents of the library were sent to Jedi

throughout the galaxy for safekeeping. The flares lasted for so many years that no one ever returned to the station."

"Are there still flares?" Uldir asked.

"Every nine years or so the flares come again," Tionne said. "But there was no danger while I was at Exis. I decided that even though the library was empty, I had to save the station for what it once was. That was where Master Skywalker first found me. He was searching for new Jedi students at the time. I'm not sure exactly how we did it, but the two of us started the space station's engines and moved it to a safe distance from the sun."

"All by yourselves?" Uldir asked, looking doubtful.

"Well, we did have the help of Artoo-Detoo and some old space station droids," Tionne said.

"I'd like to see it someday," Anakin said. "It sounds like a pretty interesting place, even if it's empty."

"It sure does," Tahiri said with a grin, "but I'm not ready for another adventure yet—at least, not if it means climbing more stairs."

"How about another lesson from the Holocron?" Uldir suggested.

Tionne frowned. "I'm not sure we should.... Ash Krimsan said that she made the Holocron to be used by Jedi Masters."

Uldir's shoulders sagged with disappointment.

"Well, what about Ikrit?" he said stubbornly, nodding at the furry Jedi Master across the circle.

"Mmmmm." Ikrit nodded. "The boy is correct: I am a Jedi Master." He spread his white-furred paws. "But Luke Skywalker is the master of the Jedi academy. I will leave it for him to decide how this historical treasure should be used."

Tionne looked relieved.

"That's settled then. We'll put the Holocron back in Master Skywalker's chambers until he returns."

She stood, picked up the glowing pearly cube, and left the room. Ikrit followed her.

Uldir's amber eyes grew stormy.

"It's not fair," he muttered. "We're the students. We're the ones who need those lessons. I'm ready to learn more right now."

Tahiri put a hand on his strong arm.

"There are lots of other ways to study until Master Skywalker gets back. After that, I'm sure we'll get plenty of chances to have lessons from the Holocron."

"Uncle Luke should be back in a couple of weeks," Anakin added.

"Let's work on lighting candle flames-we can make a game out of it," Tahiri offered. She hoped she could distract the gruff teenager from his disappointment.

Uldir looked interested.

"Okay. That sounds better than trying to lift leaves. We've done that lots of times. I've never even gotten mine off the ground."

"But you're learning about the Force," Anakin pointed out. "That's important progress. It's one reason Uncle Luke lets you stay at the academy."

Uldir snorted.

"Progress? Maybe. It just seems like there ought to be a faster way."

The stone hallways of the Jedi academy were dimly lit at night. A hush had fallen over the Great Temple hours ago. No sound could be heard but the distant buzzing of millions of jungle insects. Everyone was quiet, everyone peaceful. Except for Uldir. He couldn't sleep. Each time he closed his eyes, pictures from the Holocron flashed through his mind. The kindly old face of Jedi Master Ash Krimsan smiled at him.

Next came the images of Exis Station, which had once held a library of Jedi knowledge. Exis had been a magnificent space station. Uldir was sure that if he had studied there for a few months, back in the days when Ash Krimsan was a teacher, he would have become a powerful Jedi.

Uldir's thoughts raced. There was no hope of going to sleep now, so he decided to walk the cool halls. He met no one as he moved slowly through the shadows, almost invisible in his brown Jedi robe. Most of the students were already asleep or meditating in their rooms. Tionne had retired to her chambers right after evening meal. Even Ikrit was curled up asleep at the foot of Anakin's bed when Uldir poked his head in to check on his friend. Feeling truly alone, Uldir heaved an unhappy sigh. Thoughts of his many failures in trying to learn about the Force nibbled away at his pride.

Uldir was sure now that Ash Krimsan was the key. If only he could study her lessons, he felt certain all of his problems would melt away. Unfortunately, he might never have a chance to learn the things that Ash Krimsan could teach him. So far, only Master Skywalker and Tionne could decide when to use the Holocron. But they didn't need the holographic lessons of a Jedi Master like Uldir did. It wasn't fair. Uldir wandered, paying no attention to where he walked. Soon he found himself at the end of a long passage. The hall on his right led back to the students' quarters. To his left, a stairway led upward. He was too restless to go

back to his room, so he decided to take the stairs. Climbing the stone steps, Uldir felt a flash of irritation at Master Skywalker and Tionne.

They were holding back valuable knowledge from him. Didn't they realize how important the Holocron could be in Uldir's quest to become a Jedi Knight? Of course they realized it, Uldir reasoned. After all, he badly needed someone who could train him to do the tricks all Jedi Knights had to know. He needed a good teacher, and he needed the Holocron. He had tried to follow the slow, painstaking lessons that Tionne and Ikrit taught. He had listened to Master Skywalker's lectures. But the lessons seemed tedious. The information was too hard to use. Uldir was getting nowhere. Uldir came to the top of the stairs and headed down the first hallway he saw, still deep in thought.

He felt a sharp pang of self-doubt. Was he really sure anymore that he was capable of becoming a Jedi? After months of going to classes and practicing, he couldn't lift even a small leaf or feather with his mind. One time he thought he had come close, but he couldn't be sure. And, despite his best concentration and effort, he hadn't made a single spark when he tried to light a candle flame.

He knew he had to show some progress soon, or Master Skywalker wouldn't let him keep studying at the Jedi academy. It wouldn't have to be much progress, but at least a little. Could they be holding something back from him? Uldir passed thick stone walls and heavy wooden doors, but he hardly noticed. His thoughts became gloomier by the minute. What if he never got the right training to use the Force?

Without it, he'd never be a Jedi; he might as well just work in a kitchen for the rest of his life. Uldir groaned. If only he had more time to practice. If only he could take a lesson whenever he wanted. If only Tionne and Master Skywalker would let him use the Holocron. Then he might make some progress. In fact, the Holocron might be his only hope of ever becoming a Jedi now.

As he began to see the direction his thoughts and his steps had taken him, Uldir stopped still. That was it, of course: he had to have the Holocron! If he could just borrow it, he could learn everything he needed to know. Uldir looked around and realized that he was outside Master Skywalker's chambers. His feet must have known where to go even before his mind did. The Holocron was inside there—just waiting for him to use it. Before he could think any further, Uldir took a step toward the heavy door that led into Master Skywalker's chambers. His breathing became shallow, and his hands shook as he reached for the door latch.

A cold watery feeling, like a puddle of melting ice, formed at the pit of his stomach. You can't just walk in there and take it, his mind warned him. That's stealing. Besides, what if someone sees you? Suddenly frightened, Uldir backed away from the door and flattened himself against the opposite wall.

Now he was hidden in shadows. He would have time to reconsider. Was this really stealing? Of course not, Uldir told himself. I'll just be borrowing it. He decided he would give the Holocron back someday. But for

now he needed it. It was his last chance to become a Jedi. Uldir darted a look up and down the corridor, but there was no sound, no movement.

Master Skywalker was gone, he remembered. Nobody would be inside the teacher's room. If he wanted the Holocron, he'd have to take it now-there would be no better time. And once Uldir had studied the Holocron and become a Jedi, everyone would agree that he'd had to do this. It was the only way. Uldir tried to screw up his courage. He would have to act quickly. But despite all his reasons, he was very nervous. Did he truly dare to break in and steal from the greatest Jedi Master in the galaxy? Uldir took a deep breath to steady himself.

There's always a price to pay if you want to be a Jedi, he reminded himself. He took another deep breath. Then, glancing all around again to be sure he was completely alone, he tiptoed forward. His heart pounded and he felt sweat prickle on his forehead. When he reached the door, he tried the latch. It was open. For some reason, this made him even more nervous, and the latch slid out of his fingers with a sharp click. It took him two more tries before his trembling hands could hold on to the latch long enough to pull the door open.

By the time Uldir slipped inside and quietly shut the door behind him, his legs were shaking so badly that he had to lean back against the door for support. Inside, the room was even darker and quieter than the hallway had been. Strangely shaped shadows crisscrossed in the air and made strange patterns on the flagstones at his feet. Uldir wondered - a bit late-if Master Skywalker had some sort of intruder alarm to guard his room. But Uldir heard no shouts of warning, no footsteps running through the halls. Like a blind man, Uldir held his hands out in front of him and moved forward, feeling his way along one wall.

He didn't dare turn on the glow - panels for fear of the light being seen through the window or under the door. Something brushed against his face, light as an insect's wing. Uldir just barely kept himself from crying out. The thing was still there brushing against him, so he jumped back and flailed at it with both hands, hoping to chase the creature away. A moment later he held the thing in his hands-a robe.

The "creature" he had feared was nothing more than one of Master Skywalker's Jedi robes hanging from a peg on the wall!

"Get a grip on yourself, Uldir," he muttered. "Jedi aren't supposed to get spooked that easily. A Jedi uses all the knowledge in his possession. You know what this room looks like, so stop acting like a baby gundark in a glass-blower's shop."

Shaking his head to clear it, Uldir hung the robe on its peg again. Next, he turned his back to the wall and headed toward the corner where he knew Master Skywalker's worktable stood. He guessed that was where Tionne would have put the Holocron objects while waiting for Master Skywalker to return. His legs bumped against the table when he reached it. Something thumped, rolled, then fell to the floor with a loud clatter. Uldir stood paralyzed for a moment, wondering if anyone had heard. That was silly, of

course. No one outside the room could have heard the sound, any more than they could have heard the furious hammering of his heart.

He bent to retrieve the object. It was heavy and shaped like a tube, with ridges along its metal surface.

A lightsaber.

It must be the weapon that had once belonged to Obi-Wan Kenobi. Uldir turned the handle so that the blade would point away from him and pressed a smooth button on the handle. Almost immediately, the bright, blue-white blade sprang to life with a whoosh. By the pulsing light of the energy sword, Uldir saw the treasure he had come for: the Holocron.

He reached a shaky finger out to touch the pearly, cube-shaped object. Nothing happened. Picking up the Holocron with his free hand, he held it high and waited for it to speak to him. Again, nothing happened. Why didn't it turn on?

The thing had always turned on as soon as Tionne wanted it to. There were no buttons to press, no switches to throw. What, then, was the secret? Uldir closed his eyes and concentrated. Turn on, he told it.

No hologram appeared.

He tried whispering the words out loud, but with no better effect. A knot tied itself in his throat and he swallowed hard.

"Let me speak to Ash Krimsan," he hissed. The Holocron remained stubbornly silent. Then a thought occurred to Uldir. Perhaps the Holocron responded only to a full-fledged Jedi or someone who knew its secret. In fact, the Mage Orloc himself had claimed to know the secret of the Holocron and had offered to teach him. It certainly made sense that if the Mage lived at Exis Station-a place that had once held a great Jedi library-he would know how to operate the Holocron.

Then Uldir remembered the Sunrider, the ancient ship that belonged to Master Ikrit. The ship still stood out on the landing field.... Did he dare?

"No guts, no glory," Uldir reminded himself in a fierce whisper. Yes, he decided: he dared. He still wanted to be a Jedi, and he had come this far. He would just have to go to Orloc and ask the Mage to teach him. With that decision made, he switched off the lightsaber. He tucked it and the Holocron into the folds of his brown Jedi robe and crept quietly out of Master Skywalker's quarters.

Tahiri loved the feel of the Great Temple's smooth, cool stones beneath her bare feet. She hummed a soft tune under her breath while she walked up and down the halls, but her mind was set on just one thing: finding Uldir. The teenager was already more than an hour late for a practice session he and Tahiri had planned this morning. It wasn't like her friend to be late. Anakin had gone for an early walk in the jungle with Master Ikrit.

They wouldn't be back until time for the midmorning lesson, so Tahiri decided to look for Uldir alone. She started with the kitchens. When she stuck her head in to look around, the food-prep area was bustling with activity. The scents of baking bread, stewing meats and vegetables, and freshly sliced fruits filled the air. Half a dozen cooks, servers, and cleaning people scurried about doing their chores, but Tahiri saw no sign of Uldir's shaggy chestnut hair or broad shoulders. In fact, the kitchen staff said that Uldir had not been in all morning. Tahiri shook her head and yanked thoughtfully at a strand of blonde hair.

This was not like Uldir at all. Next she tried the Grand Audience Chamber, where Uldir sometimes went to think. But this morning the huge auditorium stood completely empty. Tahiri looked in every one of Uldir's favorite places, both inside the Great Temple and out. She even searched on the landing field and noticed that Ikrit's ship, the Sunrider, was gone. The white-furred Jedi Master must have changed his mind and taken Anakin for a short flight instead of a walk, she guessed. Tahiri headed back inside. She was beginning to get worried about her friend. After checking the docking bay, the rear steps of the temple, and the Comm Center, her worry turned to alarm.

Then, like a blaster bolt, it struck her-she hadn't actually looked inside his room! She had only knocked once, and given up when there had been no reply. Of course, if Uldir was still in his room and hadn't answered her knock, that probably meant he was sick or upset over something. Still, she was relieved. She began humming her little tune again as she hurried toward his quarters as fast as her bare feet could carry her. At the door to her friend's room, Tahiri raised a small, strong hand and rapped sharply on the thick wood.

"Uldir, it's me," she sang out. "Can I talk to you?" When there was no reply, she tried again. "Uldir, are you all right? May I come in?"

Again, no answer. Tahiri sensed nothing from behind the door.

Nothing at all. What if her friend was really sick or unconscious? She would have to look. Carefully she eased the door open a crack and peeked in. The sleeping pallet in the corner was empty.

Pushing the door open so that she could step inside, Tahiri called, "Uldir?"

The room was empty. Completely empty. Not a trace of her friend. She even checked the refresher unit, but the door stood open and the cubicle was empty. Something was very wrong here. A feeling of dread clamped itself around Tahiri's chest, making it hard for her to breathe. In the little trunk where Uldir kept his few possessions, Tahiri found nothing. She whirled and looked at the wall. No flightsuit or Jedi robes dangled from the pegs there.

Uldir was gone. But where?

Anakin always enjoyed walks with Ikrit. Now that they were back, the white-furred Jedi Master sat on the windowsill sunning himself while Anakin got ready for his morning lesson. Artoo-Detoo stood in the corner nearby; the little droid always stayed close to Anakin when Master Skywalker was gone. Anakin had just finished pulling on a fresh flightsuit when Tahiri burst into the room. Pale yellow hair damp with sweat clung to her forehead. Her emerald green eyes blazed like they always did when she had something important to tell him.

"Uldir's not here!" Tahiri blurted out. "I can't find him anywhere. I looked all over the Great Temple while you and Master Ikrit were flying around in the Sunrider. No one has seen him all morning, and his room is empty. Well, aren't you going to say anything?" She rushed on before Anakin could grasp what she was telling him. "Even his clothes are gone, and his blanket. Everything. There's nothing at-"

"Wait a minute," Anakin said, trying hard to let his mind catch up with Tahiri's words. "Who told you that Master Ikrit and I were in the Sunrider? We went for a walk this morning."

"Well, one of the places I looked for Uldir was on the landing field, and when I noticed that the Sunrider was gone, I naturally figured that you and Master Ikrit were..." Her words trailed off.

Anakin shook his head. Ikrit spoke up from the windowsill.

"Mmmmmm, the girl is right. My ship no longer stands on the landing field."

Artoo-Detoo gave an astonished - sounding twitter.

"I've got a strange feeling about this," Anakin said.

Just then, their teacher Tionne appeared in the doorway. A worried frown drew her silvery brows together and creased her forehead. When she saw her two students with the Jedi Master, her face cleared.

"Oh, there you are. Did you borrow the Holocron, Master Ikrit? I wanted to ask it something before our morning lesson. But when I went to get it from Master Skywalker's room, the table where I had put it and Obi-Wan Kenobi's lightsaber was empty."

Anakin had been with Ikrit all morning and knew that the Jedi Master did not have the Holocron. When Anakin saw Ikrit's fluffy white ears droop, a dozen puzzle pieces fell into place in his mind.

"I'm afraid I know where the Holocron is," Anakin said heavily. "And Obi-Wan Kenobi's light - saber, too. I think they're in the Sunrider."

He glanced up at Tahiri and watched his friend's green eyes go wide with shock as she realized what he meant. His teacher Tionne, however, looked confused.

"Why? Who put them in Master Ikrit's ship?"

Ikrit sprang down from the windowsill.

"We must go after the boy," the white-furred Jedi said, as if the question had already been answered. "The Holocron is valuable. Although only a Jedi can use it, the boy could be in more danger than he suspects."

"Who?" Tionne asked again. "Why is the Holocron in the Sunrider?"

Anakin looked at the Jedi teacher.

"Uldir is gone," he said. "Tahiri looked and his rooms are empty."

"No one has seen him since last night," Tahiri put in.

"The Sunrider is also missing," Ikrit added.

Tionne closed her mother-of-pearl eyes and nodded her understanding.

"And now the Holocron and Obi-Wan Kenobi's lightsaber are missing, too. I see." She opened her eyes again, and her face held a look of determination. "You're right, Master Ikrit. We'll have to go after Uldir. There's no time to lose."

"I think I know where Uldir might be headed." Anakin brushed the fringe of dark hair away from his eyes. Another piece of the puzzle had just clicked into place. "Exis," he said. "The space station. He probably thinks that's the best place to learn to be a Jedi."

"And he said that Mage Orloc talked about Exis Station too," Tahiri reminded him.

"Can you fly us to Exis in the Lore Seeker?" Ikrit asked Tionne.

"Yes," Tionne said. "I remember how to get there. I can program the coordinates into the Lore Seeker's navigational computers."

Artoo-Detoo warbled and bleeped.

"Of course we'll take you along as our navigator, Artoo," Anakin said.

"I'm sure Master Skywalker would approve," Tionne agreed.

"What if Uldir just left for a little while? Maybe he'll come back by himself," Tahiri suggested.

"All right. Gather everything you'll need for our trip," Tionne answered. "I'll have the Great Temple searched again. But if the Sunrider and Uldir aren't here by this evening, we leave for Exis Station."

Alone at the controls of the ship, Uldir reached up and flipped a few switches overhead. The Sunrider shuddered and dropped out of hyperspace at the edge of the Teedio System. Uldir gave a whoop of triumph. He had

made it. He was almost there. For a few minutes at the beginning of his trip, Uldir had wondered if he would truly be able to navigate and pilot the Sunrider all by himself, but he was a good pilot and he had succeeded. Uldir knew from what Ash Krimsan and Tionne had said that the space station was somewhere in the Teedio System at a safe distance from the sun. The coordinates for the system had been easy to find in the Sunrider's navicomputer. Now that he had arrived, he'd have to scan for the station itself. But something that large, he figured, should be simple enough to locate.

"Way to go, hotshot," he congratulated himself, proud of a job well done. "I'll bet you could fly just about any ship if you had to." His parents, who were shuttle pilots for the New Republic, had taught him well. He checked his coordinates and began a survey of the Teedio System, searching for Exis Station.

Within minutes a blip appeared on the control panel in front of him. The thing was too big to be another ship, Uldir decided. The blip was the right size, shape, and age, and it was just about where Tionne said she had left the space station. Uldir grinned and laid in a new course straight to the station. The distant stars seemed to hold a welcoming twinkle, and Uldir told himself that he was definitely doing the right thing.

Or was he? Flying the Sunrider alone had been such a challenge that Uldir had not let himself think about what he had done up to this point. Now that he was finally close to his destination, though, doubts crept into his mind. Had the dark side of the Force brought him here?

After all, he had stolen the ship and the Holocron and the light - saber - no, he had borrowed them, Uldir corrected himself. A new thought sent a jolt of fear through him.

What if Orloc no longer lived at Exis? Or what if he did, but refused to help Uldir? Uldir set his mouth in a grim line. Well then, he would just stay at the space station without the Mage and study until he became a Jedi. Perhaps in this place that had once held a great library of the Jedi, the Holocron would work for Uldir. He would learn its secrets and return to his friends a full-fledged Jedi.

He would show them that he could make something of himself. But what if he was just falling to the dark side of the Force by coming here?

Uldir snorted. Sometimes a Jedi had to make difficult decisions, he assured himself. What choices did he have left, after all? Master Skywalker had said he saw no Jedi potential in Uldir. And outside the cave on Dathomir, the furball Ikrit had said there was nothing there for Uldir, for whom the cave had seemed empty.

Tahiri and Anakin had claimed to have strange experiences in the cave, and Uldir now believed them. What Uldir did not believe was that these "failures" meant he could never become a Jedi. They simply meant that traditional teaching didn't work for him. Well, he had seen another chance and he had taken it. He'd soon find out if the risk had been worth

it. He allowed himself a small smile. At least this time he wasn't a stowaway.

Uldir sat up straighter in the pilot's seat as he caught his first good glimpse of Exis. It looked like a many-armed sea creature made of metal, turning slowly in space. It was much larger than he had expected. The center of the space station was shaped like a thick, solid wheel. Satellite stations of all shapes and sizes were connected to the central hub by wide access tubes. He couldn't tell what the smaller stations were for, but he would ignore them, he decided, and head straight for the hub. Now came one of the trickier parts of his plan.

He couldn't be sure whether anyone was there on the space station monitoring the docking bays. However, most space stations had at least one fully automated emergency dock for use only by captains of damaged ships or travelers who were injured or ill. Taking a deep breath and holding it, Uldir sent the age-old signal that identified him as a ship in distress. For a long moment nothing happened.

Uldir's stomach churned, and still he held his breath. He gritted his teeth. What if he had guessed wrong? What if he had come all this way and there was no way to get aboard Exis Station? Suddenly an guessed wrong? What if he had come all this way and there was no way to get aboard Exis Station?

Suddenly an opening appeared in the side of the space station as a wide bay door slid aside. Rippling rows of bright lights appeared in the hangar bay walls to guide Uldir's ship into position. Letting out his breath in a sigh of relief, Uldir took the Sunrider in for a landing.

Except for the usual clanks, hums, buzzes, and thumps made by a working space station, Uldir was greeted by silence when he stepped out into the sealed hangar bay. There was plenty of breathable air in the station-he had checked before leaving the ship. Uldir clipped Obi-Wan Kenobi's lightsaber to the belt he wore around his Jedi robe. He stuffed the Holocron into a full supply satchel and slung the strap over his shoulder. He looked around and snorted.

"Not much of a welcoming committee," he muttered. Then he remembered that emergency docks were normally sealed off from the rest of the space station, in case the "emergency" happened to be a transport filled with spies or a ship about to explode. Even if Orloc was somewhere on Exis, he probably didn't know of Uldir's arrival.

It was dark inside-not as dark as space itself, but dark enough to make Uldir shiver. Once the hangar bay doors had automatically shut, the lights had dimmed again, so Uldir rummaged through his satchel and pulled out a glowrod. Turning it to its brightest setting, he raised the light high and looked around. Exis Station's emergency hangar bay was enormous, able to hold much larger ships than Ikrit's little Sunrider. The light from the glowrod didn't even reach the ceiling. Shadows sucked away at the edges of his light.

"Spooky old place," Uldir mumbled.

He jumped at the sudden hissing and ticking sound that came from behind him, but it was only the Sunrider's engines cooling. He laughed at himself. He hadn't realized how tense this new situation had made him. Holding the glowrod with shaking fingers, he headed toward the back of the docking bay until his light fell on a sealed airlock door. Uldir walked the length of the wall once, but the airlock door was the only exit. Sealed with blast-shielding, the door was only large enough to accommodate one person at a time-probably as a security precaution.

Any intruders who tried to attack the space station from this emergency hangar bay would have to do so one by one. Not knowing what to expect, Uldir reached for the airlock control switch. To his surprise, the airlock door slid open at his touch. It was unlocked and required no access code. Uldir stepped into the airlock with a smile of satisfaction and let the door slide shut. Next he threw the switch for the second door. When it slid open, his mouth fell open too. Waiting for him on the other side was one of the strangest sights Uldir had ever seen.

About a dozen droids of every shape and description stood, sat, trundled, or hovered in a rough semicircle outside the airlock. In front of the droids crouched a handful of large rodentlike creatures with gray-brown fur. The creatures, who wore purple sashes around their waists and silver armbands, would have been about as tall as his shoulder had they been standing. Uldir knew what they were, for he had seen some once on Tatooine: they were Ranats.

And each of them was holding a blaster - pointed straight at him.

He froze. Before Uldir could even speak, someone or something threw a rough sack over his head and pushed him to the floor. Tiny fingers with sharp claws tied his hands and feet together. Uldir thought of calling for help, but he knew there was no one to call to. When he tried to speak, he felt a sharp sting, as if a needle had pricked his arm. Then came a fizzy feeling, like he sometimes had when his foot fell asleep... only this was all over his body.

Then the darkness inside the sack turned even darker, and Uldir passed out. Uldir didn't know how long he was unconscious, but when he woke up he found himself on something hard and flat that was moving. Probably a stretcher or a repulsorsled, he guessed. He heard the voices of the Ranats chattering around him. They were not speaking Basic, so he couldn't understand what they were saying.

The sled hummed and rocked softly as they moved along. Minutes crept by and became half an hour, then an hour. Uldir stopped trying to keep track of the time. His arms and legs still had that fizzy feeling. Perhaps this time they were truly asleep. At last, after what might have been hours, the Ranats and the clanking droids and the repulsor - sled came to a stop. The platform Uldir lay on stopped humming, as if someone had flicked a switch, and he fell half a meter to land painfully on the floor.

He struggled back up into a sitting position. Someone yanked the sack off his head. Uldir blinked in the sudden brightness of a clean, well-lit room. The walls and floors were of polished metal, and plush cushions lay scattered on the deckplates. Suddenly a plume of smoke billowed up from amongst the cushions and Uldir heard a voice say, "Why, I do believe we have a visitor."

When the smoke cleared, Uldir saw a thin man wearing a deep purple cloak with silver spangles along its edges. The man threw back the hood of his cloak to reveal long dark hair, tawny eyes, and a small, neat beard. But Uldir already knew who he was. It was the Mage Orloc.

With afternoon sunlight glinting off its copper - colored hull and its solar sails spread like dragon wings on either side, the Lore Seeker lifted off from Yavin 4. Tahiri stared straight forward at the space between Tionne in the pilot's seat and Artoo-Detoo at the copilot's station. Ikrit was perched on the droid's head.

"Next stop, Exis Station," Tionne said glancing over her shoulder.

Artoo-Detoo twittered a response. Tahiri wasn't really looking through the front viewport, though. In fact, she wasn't looking at anything. She was thinking. Her green eyes were unfocused, and she tugged repeatedly at a strand of her blonde hair. Beside her, Anakin leaned over to whisper,

"Are you okay?" Tahiri still looked straight ahead. She nodded, then stopped and shook her head. She spoke in a halting voice.

"While... while we were looking for Uldir, and then when we were getting ready for our trip, I didn't let myself think about him...."

"But now you're thinking?" Anakin said.

She nodded.

"Me too," he admitted.

In the viewport ahead, the blackness of space deepened and pinprick stars appeared.

"I've got a strange feeling about this. I can't decide whether I'm really angry at Uldir or just worried about him," Anakin said. Tahiri blinked and turned to look into Anakin's ice blue eyes.

"Strange," she said, "I was trying to decide if I felt more guilty or betrayed."

Ikrit's scratchy voice drifted back from the front of the cockpit.

"Our course is verified."

Artoo-Detoo beeped once to show that he agreed.

"Switching to hyperdrive," Tionne replied.

Out of the corner of her eye Tahiri saw the specks of stars stretch into long white lines around the Lore Seeker as it jumped to hyperspace.

"Why?" Anakin asked. "Why should you feel guilty?"

Tahiri shrugged and wriggled uncomfortably in her crash webbing. Suddenly the ship seemed too quiet. There was no sound except for the low humming of the hyperdrive engines.

"I feel guilty because I should have been a better friend to Uldir," Tahiri said. "Maybe if I'd spent more time encouraging him and practicing with him, he wouldn't have done this."

"But we did help him," Anakin pointed out.

"If it hadn't been for us, I don't think Uncle Luke would have let Uldir stay at the Jedi academy." Tahiri sighed.

"Probably not. But if he hadn't stayed, at least the Holocron and Obi-Wan Kenobi's lightsaber wouldn't be missing. How could Uldir do something like that?" Anakin's cheeks turned pink, as if he were ashamed. "I don't know. I thought he was our friend. We fought for him and practiced with him, but I guess he didn't really trust us. Maybe it wasn't enough that we tried to be his friends."

"What else should we have done for him?" Tahiri asked, feeling despair fill her. Artoo-Detoo swiveled his head and whistled twice, the little droid's signal for no.

"Artoo is right," Tionne said. "You can't blame yourselves. We can never know exactly why Uldir left, but the reason probably made sense to him. To understand why people do the things that they do, we need to learn to see things through their eyes. One thing I'm certain of, though: Uldir is old enough to know right from wrong."

"Yes, the boy made his own choice," Ikrit agreed.

"You must let him bear the responsibility for his own actions." Tahiri noticed that the Jedi Master's downy fur had a grayish tinge, as it sometimes did when he was upset. "Are you angry with Uldir for stealing the Sunrider?" she asked.

Ikrit cocked his head to one side and wheezed several times. With surprise, Tahiri recognized the sound as the Jedi Master's laugh.

"The ship is a fine one," he said. "But it is, after all, only a ship. I do not care about it as I do for some other machines." Here Ikrit patted Artoo's domed head beneath him, and the little droid whistled softly. "Nor do I care as much about my ship as I do about all of you. Or about the boy. Even so, our young friend must accept the consequences for his own mistakes and learn to make them right. That is not for us to do."

"But Uldir could be in danger," Anakin said.

"And we are his friends," Tahiri added.

"If he's in danger, we can't just leave him to face it alone."

Tionne turned her silvery head to look at her students. "Of course not," she said firmly. "We won't leave Uldir out there alone."

No matter what their real reason was for being aboard the Lore Seeker, Anakin had to admit it was a fascinating ship. He and Tahiri amused themselves in the central crew cabin for a few hours as the ship sped toward Exis Station. Tionne had stocked the Lore Seeker with a hololibrary and decorated it with antique objects from a hundred different planets.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Tahiri asked. She held up a petrified kor egg decorated with Bith story carvings.

Anakin looked at the glossy egg his friend held.

"It sure is. The Lore Seeker may be too small to qualify as a museum, but it certainly comes close," he said. "We even get to handle the stuff that's on display, if we want to."

"The best part is," Tahiri added, her green eyes twinkling, "that Tionne likes it when we ask questions about her treasures."

"What questions?" Tionne asked, emerging from the cockpit with Ikrit behind her.

Anakin grinned. "Oh, questions like, 'What are those?'" He pointed past her into the cockpit at a pair of fluffy objects that dangled from the ceiling just above Artoo-Detoo's head.

"Oh, those? Those are Arkudan gaming cubes. They're supposed to bring luck, but I just keep them because they're centuries old, and I like the way they look. Do you have other questions?"

"Sure. What does Exis Station look like?" Tahiri asked. "On the outside, I mean. We saw it on the inside when we watched Ash Krimsan talking about it in the Holocron. Well, I doubt that it still looks exactly like that, since the Holocron was recorded so long ago. Still, it was enough to give us an idea of what it's like, but it really didn't show us the size of the station or how it's shaped. So I'd like to know a bit more before we get there." Tahiri finally stopped for a breath. "Well, aren't you going to say anything?"

The silvery-haired Jedi instructor laughed a musical laugh. She went to a panel on the wall and chose a recording from the holo library.

"I think I'll let this holo clip speak for itself," she said.

The lights in the cabin dimmed and a hologram flickered and then came into focus in the center of the room. Anakin was entranced. The hologram

of Exis Station hung in midair at about waist level, making it easy for him to study.

"Kind of weird, huh?" Tahiri said.

Access tubes spread out like the rays of a star from a solid center hub, connecting it to satellite stations of all shapes and sizes. Anakin guessed that these smaller satellites must have been added as an afterthought to expand the original station, since no two of them were the same shape or color. In the hologram, Exis spun slowly in the air, reminding Anakin of a Randoni carousel he had once ridden on Coruscant.

"Definitely strange," Anakin agreed.

"We'll dock over here," Tionne said, pointing to a bay on the edge of the central hub. "Last time we were there your uncle Luke and I programmed a couple of the docking bays to respond only to our signal. That bay is the closest one to Exis Station's main control center."

"It is a good place to begin," Tionne said.

"But begin," Master Ikrit said.

"Once we get there it will be a good place to begin," Tionne said. "But for now, I think we'd all better begin with some sleep. If there's danger waiting for us on Exis, I'll need you all as alert as possible."

Uldir wondered if he had made a mistake. Now that he'd found the Mage, he felt more nervous than he had at any time since he had decided on his bold plan of borrowing the Holocron. The Mage Orloc tilted his head back, looked down his sharp nose at Uldir, and pointed a slender finger at him.

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't drop you down the recycling chute with the rest of my garbage."

"I-well, I...", Uldir stammered.

This was the moment he'd been waiting for, he reminded himself. He was planning to become a Jedi, and Jedi must be bold. Uldir squared his shoulders and lifted his chin.

"I've brought you the Holocron you wanted, and the lightsaber of Obi-Wan Kenobi. They are yours-if your offer to train me still stands."

The Mage's tawny eyes blinked rapidly several times, as if Uldir's courage had surprised him. Then his face took on a shrewd, suspicious look.

"Why, this is a trap, isn't it? Your friends at the Jedi academy were probably worried that I'd return to steal their treasures, so you decided to lure me into the open." Orloc's lips twisted in a sneer. "Why, of course. I see it now. You arrive with the bait, and then your friends swoop in to capture the Great Mage of Exis Station. Hah! Do you think me a fool? Tell me, when do your friends arrive?"

Uldir was confused. As far as he knew, no one at the Jedi academy had given any thought to Orloc since Uldir and his friends had returned from Bast Castle. Did this magician really believe he was so important that the Jedi academy would risk two great treasures in a complicated plot to capture him?

"There's no trap," Uldir said simply.

The purple-robed Mage growled. Two Ranats in purple sashes moved to his side, raising their blasters to point at Uldir.

"Why should I believe you?" Orloc asked.

"Coming here was my idea. I'm old enough to make my own decisions. No one is following me," Uldir said. He tried to sound bold, though his voice changed with an embarrassing squeak as he spoke. "They don't even know where I went."

Orloc's tawny eyes narrowed.

"You'd better not be lying," he warned. "I feel it only fair to tell you that I've reprogrammed all of the droids on this station to obey only my orders." The Mage paused for emphasis, then lowered his voice to a threatening growl. "Some of them are assassin droids."

He motioned to a droid behind Uldir. It trundled forward, pressed a probe into his back, and gave him a brief electrical shock.

"I'm telling the truth-I came here alone!" Uldir gasped in helpless frustration, still smarting from the shock the droid had delivered. "I've been studying at the Jedi academy for months," he rushed on, "but Master Skywalker doesn't believe I've got any talent in the Force. Their way of teaching just isn't working. After all this time, I can't even light a spark or budge a speck of dust. Back in Bast Castle you said you could help me, so I came here to study with you."

The Mage motioned for the two Ranats to put down their blasters. His eyes narrowed shrewdly.

"Why, you want real power, don't you?"

Uldir nodded.

"Power like mine."

Uldir nodded again, afraid his voice would break if he tried to speak.

"Very well, then. I will accept the Holocron and the lightsaber from you as a token of your respect for your new teacher." He snapped his fingers and a purple-sashed Ranat scurried forward and held its tiny clawed hands open.

Uldir reluctantly surrendered the Jedi treasures to the Ranat, who scampered over and delivered them to Orloc. The Mage stretched out his arms, the Holocron in one hand, Obi-Wan Kenobi's lightsaber in the other. He stamped his foot and the glowpanels in the room flickered like lightning.

"Behold," Orloc said, raising the Holocron high in front of him. The entire room went dark.

Uldir expected at any moment to see Ash Krimsan's kindly wrinkled face and to hear her say, "Welcome, my children. What may I teach you today?"

But no hologram blossomed in the air above Orloc's hand. Orloc blinked furiously in the dimness.

"Why, it's ridiculous to begin with these lessons," he said. "I have so many things to teach you first that you could never learn from some old Jedi."

The Mage gave a careless laugh.

"Why, you haven't learned anything yet from all that Jedi teaching, have you? You must let me teach you myself. Ask me anything, my student. Where shall we begin?"

Uldir was excited. Now he would have the chance to learn. He would become a great Jedi.

"Well, I could never even use the Force to turn on a light," he admitted with a sigh.

The Mage chuckled, not unkindly. "Why, there's nothing simpler, my boy," he said striding over to stand beside Uldir. "Just for a moment, clear all thoughts from your mind. Don't concentrate on anything at all. Not words, not pictures; no commands, no requests. Now, leave your mind open and think of light. It only takes an instant."

Uldir swept all conscious thought from his mind, leaving it blank and open. A split second later all of the room's glowpanels flashed and returned to their full brightness. He was amazed. Just as he had always suspected, it had been simple to use the Force-so simple that Uldir wondered why he hadn't been able to do it before. Well, he could do it now. This was real progress, he thought. Soon he would be a Jedi.

The Mage tossed the Holocron high into the air and easily caught it with one hand. Then he tucked it deep into the folds of his purple robe.

"You see? You came to the right place after all," Orloc said with a smug grin. "And that, my boy, is only the beginning."

Big didn't even begin to describe it. Huge..... colossal... enormous.

.. gigantic. Anakin thought through all of the words in his vocabulary, but none seemed quite clear enough to express his first impression of Exis Station. Beside him Tahiri whispered,

"Great Bantha!" 'Bonne's musical laugh filled the cockpit. "It's quite a sight the first time, isn't it? Second time, too, come to think of it."

Artoo-Detoo bleeped once to show that he agreed.

"Mmmmmm. Most impressive," Ikrit wheezed.

Anakin was still trying to absorb what he was seeing. Exis looked like its own little solar system, with seven satellites orbiting a slightly flattened pewter-colored sun.

"Each part is so different," Anakin mused aloud.

He was already trying to figure out how each piece of the space station's puzzle fit in and what purpose it served.

"That's because the satellites were added one by one as the need arose," Tionne said.

"But why did they build the satellites?" Tahiri asked. "Did they need more room?"

Tionne piloted the ship in closer to the huge space station.

"In the beginning there was only the central hub, which held the libraries, the docking bays, and all of the living quarters. One company sent miners to live on Exis and mine gases from the nearby star. As more and more beings from across the galaxy arrived to visit Exis, mine star gas, or study there, satellites were built on to provide living areas for different species. See that one there?" The instructor pointed to a satellite that looked like a shallow soup bowl with a domed lid. "That one was filled with water for undersea dwellers."

"What about that one?" Anakin asked, indicating a rectangular satellite with rounded corners. It was a murky yellow color and several hundred meters long.

"From what I remember," Tionne said, "that one was filled with a chlorine-rich atmosphere for chlorine breathers. And that next satellite, the oval one, was built for visitors who needed a place with high gravity."

Artoo-Detoo warbled and trilled. Tionne looked down at the control console in front of her.

"It's all right, Artoo, I've got it," she said. "We're headed for Docking Bay 17. I'll transmit the code myself."

Soon the central pewter-colored hub loomed so close and large in the front viewports that it was impossible to see the satellites or the arms

that connected them to the space station-or even the stars, for that matter. Only the hull of the central hub was visible now.

Tahiri leaned over to Anakin.

"It gives me kind of a shivery feeling just looking at it," she confided. "If you feel that way now," the silver-haired Jedi instructor said, "just wait till we get inside."

"Mmmmmm," Ikrit said in his scratchy voice. "We must be cautious. We cannot be certain what dangers may wait for us inside."

Directly ahead of them, Hangar Bay 17 yawned open. Landing lights rippled to guide them in. Tionne retracted the Lore Seeker's solar sail "wings" as they entered the cavernous bay. Anakin was amazed at the size of the hangar. It could have held a dozen ships the size of the Lore Seeker and still had room to spare. Tionne brought the ship down in the center of the main landing pad. The hangar bay door sealed itself behind them, and the interior landing lights went dark. The companions gathered their packs of supplies while Tionne finished her shutdown of the Lore Seeker. Before they ventured forth, Artoo assured them that there was now sufficient air in the hangar bay for them to breathe.

When they all stood outside the Lore Seeker in the fitful light that flickered from glowpanels far overhead, Tahiri finally said what Anakin had been thinking.

"I hate to mention this, but this is a huge station. How can we hope to find Uldir with so many places to look?"

Tionne smiled reassuringly. "This station was where I first met Master Skywalker. He found me, even though I was the only other person on all of Exis Station."

"Was he looking for you?" Anakin asked.

"Not exactly," the Jedi instructor replied. "He didn't even know I was here at first, but he sensed me through the Force."

Anakin felt a tingling up the back of his neck. "Still," he said, "even with the Force, it could take days to find anyone in this place."

"Then I guess we'd better get started," Tionne observed. "The exit to this docking bay is up here." She climbed a short flight of stairs to a raised metal mesh walkway.

The dim, flickering lights made it difficult to see, and Anakin stumbled when he tried to follow her. He fell to one knee and then cried out in surprise as something brushed against his face. Artoo-Detoo gave a shrill whistle of alarm.

"It's all right," Anakin said, putting a hand to his face, "it was only cobwebs."

He just hoped that no one could tell that his heart was racing and a cold sweat had broken out on his forehead. He pushed himself back to his feet.

"Kind of spooky in here, huh?" Tahiri said from behind him.

"Yeah," Anakin admitted. "Definitely spooky."

Walking on the metal mesh made Anakin feel uncomfortable. The weak light from high above did not penetrate that far, and he couldn't help wondering if something might be beneath them, preparing to reach up through the grating. From somewhere in the hangar bay he thought he heard a thump and a scratching sound. He assured himself that it must be his imagination. Any space station-even an abandoned one-might have tiny maintenance droids scurrying about, or maybe some small rodents. Anakin wished he had his brother Jacen's skill for sensing animals through the Force and communicating with them. Anakin tried to reach out with the Force to search for any little creatures that might be in the hangar bay, but he sensed nothing.

Squeak. Squeak. Was that the sound of a small animal? Or was it wheels turning? Anakin pushed the thought from his mind. If anything, he told himself, he should be concentrating on sending out his thoughts to see if he could sense Uldir anywhere. He was relieved when Tionne finally stopped in front of a wide blast door.

"We'll go through here," she said. "It leads directly into the station." Tahiri swallowed hard. "Okay, let's get this over with."

"Yeah," Anakin said, "and let's hope we find Uldir quickly."

The Jedi instructor touched the control panel and the heavy blast door slid upward. Suddenly a blaster bolt whizzed past Anakin's head and spanged off the wall of the hangar bay near Tionne.

"Looks like someone found us first,"

Tahiri yelped as she, too, dodged an energy bolt. Then a realization struck Anakin. The blaster fire was not coming from outside the hangar bay, but from inside-from behind them. Artoo-Detoo shrilled a challenge at their unseen attackers. Instinctively Anakin, Tahiri, Ikrit, and Tionne all hit the floor as more blaster bolts streaked over their heads. But the floor offered no cover, no place to hide. The metal mesh of the walkway bit painfully into Anakin's cheek. It wouldn't be safe to stay where they were, especially if their attackers came at them from underneath. They would have to make a run for it-and soon.

Uldir concentrated. His arms were stretched out in front of him, his fingers spread wide. With excitement and pride he watched the gigantic platform rise higher and higher. The plasteel slab must have weighed a thousand kilos or more, and yet it felt like he was lifting it with no effort at all. With a grin of triumph he looked to where Orloc stood in the corner of the cargo storage chamber.

"Hey, I could be wrong, but I think I'm getting pretty good at this," Uldir said. "It's so much easier than the way Master Skywalker tried to teach me."

Orloc blinked several times and looked surprised, as if he had been thinking about something else.

"Why, yes... you show great talent," he said. "Now, try to put it down."

"Okay, here goes," Uldir said.

The Mage gave an absentminded nod and ran a slender finger along the silver spangles at the edges of his purple robe. Uldir dropped his arms to his sides and the enormous platform zoomed back down to settle on the floor with a solid thunk. Orloc stopped fiddling with the spangles on his cloak and let the material fall back into place. The Mage clapped loudly a few times.

"Why, you are a natural, aren't you?" he said. "You catch on so quickly."

Uldir let himself enjoy the praise of his teacher. It was refreshing to hear someone say that he had done well, for a change. Uldir ran a hand through his shaggy chestnut hair.

"The lifting part seems easy now. I still can't sense anyone's feelings like Jedi seem to, though."

"My dear boy, you're too modest," Orloc crooned. "Your abilities are greater than you know. Here - I'll show you. Tell me what I'm thinking right now." The Mage crossed his slender arms in front of his chest and looked at Uldir with a warm smile. Uldir tried to reach out with the Force to sense what the Mage was thinking. In truth, he could sense nothing. He thought about all of the marvelous things the Mage had shown him how to do in the past day: lifting objects, turning lights or machinery on and off with the wave of a hand, getting a Ranat to obey him by using a "voice of command," and so much more.

Why, then, was he unable to sense someone's thoughts? The Mage must be right, Uldir decided-he needed to have more confidence in his abilities. He opened his eyes again and took a guess.

"You... uh, you're proud of me?"

"There, my boy, you see?" Orloc said with a relieved smile. He stroked his neatly bearded chin with his slender fingers. "You had the power in you to sense my thoughts all along. You just didn't trust your instincts."

Uldir felt a rush of relief. He had passed the test-his hardest one so far. Yes, he thought, I will become a Jedi after all. Or something even better: an all-powerful Mage like Orloc himself.

"Hey, I know what I'd like to try next," Uldir said, but Orloc quickly held up a hand for silence. His head was cocked to one side, as if he

were listening to something that Uldir couldn't hear. The Mage's face darkened. His brows drew together in an angry frown.

"You betrayed me!" he snapped. "Your meddlesome Jedi friends have just arrived."

"No. They can't be here," Uldir said. "They don't know where I am."

"Really, my boy? Then can you explain why a ship calling itself the Lore Seeker has just entered Docking Bay 17?" Orloc raged.

"Please," Uldir said, taking a few steps backward. His voice squeaked with alarm. "It's not my fault. I don't know how they found me-but I don't want to go back with them. I want to stay here with you and learn."

The Mage rested a slender finger against his bearded chin for a moment, as if thinking.

"Very well then. I'll believe you for now. Don't worry, my boy, we're in no danger of being found here. Why, my headquarters are so well hidden it could take them weeks to find us. Exis is, after all, a very large space station. I assure you, your old friends will give up long before they get this far-I'll make certain of that."

Uldir started to breathe a sigh of relief, but the magician fixed him with a piercing glance from his tawny eyes.

"Be careful, my boy. If I find that you've lied to me, I'll strip you of your powers, and you will pay with your life."

"You don't need to threaten me," Uldir pointed out, trying to keep his voice calm. "You're a Mage, so you must be able to sense that I'm telling the truth."

"Yes." At that, Orloc seemed to relax, and he favored Uldir with a cheerful smile. He stroked a hand along the spangles on the sleeve of his robe. "Yes, of course. We'll be quite safe here. In any case, I've already alerted some of my... faithful assistants to keep your friends away from this area. Now then, my boy, what was it you wanted to learn next?"

Uldir shuddered. That had been a close call. He hoped fervently that his Jedi friends would give up the search for him quickly and leave Exis Station. He didn't want them to get hurt. Nor did he want a confrontation between himself and Orloc.

"I want to know how to make lightning and rain," Uldir said in an uncertain voice that cracked on the word lightning.

The Mage shrugged and fingered one of the silver spangles on his sleeve. Lights flickered and tiny droplets began to mist down from the ceiling.

"Lightning and rain, my boy? Nothing simpler. Why, I'll show you how it's done."

"We have to get off this walkway," Anakin yelled. "We're easy targets here."

"Quick-through the blast doors," Tionne urged.

Anakin tried to push himself to his hands and knees in order to crawl toward the opening. A few seconds later, when a blaster bolt hissed over his head, narrowly missing him, he dropped down flat again.

"This way," Tahiri said, pushing past him. She propelled herself forward with her hands, arms, elbows, and knees flat to the floor. Anakin followed suit.

Artoo-Detoo had already made it through the blast doors. Anakin noticed that the lighting was better out in the corridor, but that Ikrit was nowhere in sight. Anakin was within three meters of the blast door when he heard Tahiri's cry of pain. Fearing the worst, Anakin turned back. Even in the uncertain light he could see that her green eyes were alert and wide with panic.

"Are you hit?" he asked.

"No-my hair is caught in the floor grating," she said. "You'd better keep going without me or you'll be shot."

As if to emphasize her point, another blaster bolt zipped past his ear.

"I can't leave you here," he said. He reached behind Tahiri's head, hoping to pull her free, but the wavy blonde hair remained stuck. Anakin's heart skipped a beat as an energy bolt skimmed Tahiri's leg and singed the material of her flightsuit. The sharp smell of burning cloth filled Anakin's nostrils. He pulled harder. So did Tahiri. But the hair would not break or pull free.

"We need something to cut with," Anakin said.

Suddenly Tionne was beside them, her light - saber blazing in her hand.

"Anakin, get to the blast door and be ready to close it as soon as we make it through," she ordered.

Anakin wanted to stay with Tahiri, but this was no time to argue. Tionne blocked and deflected blaster bolts with her lightsaber while he launched himself to his feet and ran toward the door. He thought he felt something warm and furry brush against him as he ran, but he could see nothing. Artoo-Detoo warbled encouragement as Anakin dashed out of the hangar bay. With one hand on the blast door controls, Anakin turned just in time to see Tionne's lightsaber slashing in a downward arc.

The next moment it flashed upward again to deflect another blaster bolt. This time Tahiri sat up. The energy blade had done its work, slicing her hair free of its trap. A shadowy form helped the girl to her feet, and Anakin realized that Ikrit was beside her, his fur completely black.

Tionne covered their retreat as Tahiri and Ikrit ran toward the exit. She backed toward the blast door, still deflecting energy bolts as she went. The instant that Tahiri and Ikrit were through, Tionne yelled, "Now!"

Anakin hit the controls to close the blast door. The heavy shield began to lower. At the last instant, Tionne dove through the opening, and the blast door shut with a heavy clang.

Feeling faint, Tahiri dropped to the floor and gasped in huge lungfuls of air. For a moment in the hangar bay, she had been certain that she would die, chained to the floor by her pale yellow hair.

"Artoo, see if you can scramble those locks," she heard Anakin call. An instant later, his face swam into Tahiri's field of view.

"It's kind of interesting actually," he said, grinning at her. "The haircut, I mean."

"Pipes!" Tahiri sat up. Her hand instinctively reached to tug a strand of blonde hair on the side of her head that had been freed by Tionne's lightsaber. To Tahiri's surprise she found that the blade had made a clean cut. The hair on the left side of her head was chin-length in front, then swept down at a smooth angle until it blended with her longer hair in back.

"Truly weird," she murmured. Ikrit, his fur once again snowy white, scurried over to the two junior Jedi.

"The droids will come," he said in his scratchy voice.

"No time to rest."

Tahiri heard Artoo-Detoo give a triumphant chirp as his probe scrambled the lock on the hangar bay's blast door.

"Droids?" she asked in confusion. "What droids?"

"He means," Tionne said, reaching out a hand to help Tahiri back to her feet, "that our attackers back in the hangar bay are droids."

"I wished to scout without being seen, so I turned my fur black," Ikrit explained. "I counted at least eight droids. I returned when I heard you cry out."

"We'd better get moving," the Jedi teacher said tersely.

"She's right," said Anakin. "Even scrambled access controls won't hold droids for long. We'll be in danger if we stay here."

Still panting from her narrow escape, Tahiri glanced up and down the curved corridor. Except for a few doorways and some access ladders that led up through hatches in the ceiling, the hall was blank and featureless.

"Which way?" Tahiri asked.

In spite of the drumming of her heart in her ears, she could hear trapped droids already starting to work at the blast door.

"I'm not sure which direction is best," Tionne admitted. "I know where the main control center is from here, but I have a feeling that Uldir isn't there. He could be almost anywhere."

"True," Ikrit said. "We must trust the Force."

Artoo-Detoo, who was still plugged into the door's control panel, gave an urgent twitter. More clanking and thumping came from behind the blast door, along with a high-pitched whine.

"Uh-oh. Sounds like the droids are already trying to unscramble the locks," Anakin said.

"Then we'd better decide fast," said Tahiri.

"This way," said Tionne, heading up the corridor.

Just then the blast door raised about ten centimeters, creaking and groaning. Artoo-Detoo gave a frantic squeal as he struggled with the lock controls. The blast door reversed itself and began to close again. Artoo-Detoo still warbled and beeped as if trying to warn them.

"Hurry!" Tionne said, motioning for them to follow. The companions dashed after her—all except for Artoo-Detoo. The blast door creaked and groaned again.

"Come on, Artoo!" Anakin yelled.

Artoo beeped twice for no. Tahiri's stomach clenched.

"If we leave him here, those droids could blast him to pieces."

Ikrit said suddenly, "But there is a place for us where the droids will not be able to follow."

Before Tahiri could figure out what the Jedi Master meant, Ikrit turned and sprang toward the wall. He caught and clung to one of the ladders she had seen earlier.

"It will be safest up here if the droids break free," Ikrit said.

"But Artoo won't be able to follow us," Tahiri objected.

"We'll have to circle back for him later when it's safe," Tionne said firmly. "We won't do Artoo any good if we all get killed now."

Anakin turned and yelled to the barrel-shaped droid as Tahiri began climbing the ladder.

"Hang on, Artoo! We'll come back for you."

Artoo tweeted to show that he understood. Anakin scrambled up after Tahiri, and Tionne brought up the rear. The rungs of the plasteel ladder were hard against Tahiri's bare feet. She grimaced as she climbed higher and higher, following Ikrit's furry form.

"It's not stairs," she muttered to herself, gritting her teeth. "I never said anything about not wanting to climb ladders."

Once they were through the ceiling hatch, the ladder led upward through a tube-shaft that rose hundreds of meters into the darkness above. The tube curved slightly as they climbed, and soon they could no longer see or hear the corridor far below them. The only sound to be heard in the ladder shaft was the labored breathing of the companions and the rhythmic thumping of their hands and feet on the rungs as they climbed. When they were certain that the danger was past, Ikrit slowed their pace slightly, but they still kept going.

To Tahiri it seemed like they climbed forever. Her shoulder muscles ached from the effort of pulling herself up one rung after another, and blisters began to form on the soles of her feet.

Suddenly Ikrit stopped. "Wait here," he ordered.

Tahiri paused, gladly hooking an elbow and a leg over ladder rungs to give herself a chance to rest. Ikrit scampered up the ladder and out of sight.

"Are you all right?" Tionne panted from below.

"Sure," Tahiri gasped, "but I think I'd be feeling better if I had remembered to wear my boots."

A second later she yelped in surprise and pain as a finger poked the sole of her bare foot.

"Hold still," Anakin said. "I have something in my medikit that should help seal those blisters and protect your feet for a while."

A heartbeat later, Tahiri felt a cooling spray on the sole of one foot. By the time Anakin finished putting the medicine on both of Tahiri's feet, Ikrit had returned.

"Only a hundred meters more," the furry Jedi Master said. "There is an opening to a small room. We will rest there."

"A place to rest sounds really good right now," Anakin admitted.

With higher spirits and renewed energy, the four companions climbed again. The pain in Tahiri's feet seemed much less important at the moment than getting off this ladder. Now that she knew how far it was to the end of her climb, she wanted to get there as soon as possible. Ignoring the tight knots forming in her shoulder and leg muscles, she climbed faster.

After a few more minutes the companions tumbled through a hatch onto the floor of what seemed to be a storage compartment. Boxes and bundles were piled all around, but at least it was a place to rest. Tahiri's arms and legs felt rubbery, and she didn't think she could move right now even if she had to. Tionne found the controls for the glowpanels, and the room filled with a soft light. Tahiri noticed that Anakin's limbs were shaking almost as much as hers, even though he was sitting down and leaning against a crate.

In her exhaustion, everything seemed shaky and fuzzy. The whole room was slightly out of focus and tilted at an odd angle. It was a good thing she was already on the floor, she thought distantly, because the room was starting to spin....

Tahiri was surprised when she awoke feeling refreshed and clearheaded. Her muscles still ached, but they did not quiver or threaten to give way when she sat up.

"Welcome back," Anakin said, smiling.

Tionne handed her an energy bar and a small flask of water.

"How long-?" Tahiri began. "Not long," Anakin said.

"Only a few minutes really," Tionne answered, "but I used the Force to deepen your sleep, to help you heal a bit."

"Master Ikrit did the same for me before he went back up the ladder to scout around," Anakin said. "I feel a lot better now."

"I have good news," Tionne said. "Master Ikrit found an old refresher unit in the wall behind that pile of crates."

Tahiri grinned. "That's great news."

"I think I have good news, too," Anakin said. "Since I woke up I've been using the Force to reach out and search the station. It's a little hazy, but I definitely felt Uldir here."

Tionne looked at him with instant interest in her mother-of-pearl eyes.

"Where?" Tahiri asked.

Anakin shook his head. "I can't tell exactly. I don't have much of a bond with him, and he's not strong in the Force. All I know is that he's on Exis somewhere."

Tahiri took a bite of her energy bar and a swig of water as she thought over this bit of information. She swallowed.

"Well, it is good to know for certain that he's here. Why don't we take a look around this area while we wait for Ikrit."

"Sure, we might even find some clues that will help us figure out where Uldir is," Anakin said.

"All right," Tionne said, "but let's not go far."

Tahiri wolfed down the rest of her energy bar. After they had all taken turns in the refresher unit, they put their equipment packs back on. Tionne unsealed the door to the storage chamber, and it slid open with a hiss. They found themselves behind a screened partition at one end of a broad room. Air ducts and bright glowpanels were set into the walls and overhead in the main chamber. The room was filled with the strangest assortment of gizmos and gadgets and pieces and parts that Tahiri could remember seeing since that time she and Anakin had ridden inside a Jawa sandcrawler on Tatooine. A net full of supplies hung in one corner. Ropes, cords, and flexible steel cables dangled from every part of the ceiling.

Stacks of crates were piled up high against the walls. On a transparent panel, set like a window into the room partition, a diagram was etched. They all recognized it right away. Anakin rushed forward to study the map.

"It - it's Exis Station," he whispered.

A movement beyond the transparent panel caught Tahiri's eyes.

"Something's out there," she whispered, moving up to stand beside Anakin.

Tionne crowded in next to them, and together they peered through the window in the screened wall. Tahiri identified the creatures she saw instantly, since quite a few of them lived on her home planet of Tatooine.

"Ranats!" she hissed in surprise. Anakin nodded.

"But what are they doing here?" Tionne whispered.

They watched in silence for a few minutes. Each Ranat wore a silver band around its arm and a belt of purple cloth. The Ranats began unpacking boxes and satchels filled with tools, gears, strips of shiny metal, and electronic components.

"Looks like they've been salvaging," Anakin said in a low voice.

"Think they're friendly?" Tahiri asked.

"Maybe if we talk to them they could help us find Uldir."

The silver-haired Jedi instructor shook her head and backed away from the partition, motioning for Anakin and Tahiri to follow.

"We can't risk showing ourselves. Don't forget those droids that attacked us in the hangar bay."

"These Ranats might work for Orloc-or someone worse," Anakin agreed.

"Let's wait. We may not need to go out this way," Tionne said. "Once we find out what Ikrit has discovered-" Her voice broke off suddenly, and her mother-of-pearl eyes went round with surprise. Tahiri followed the direction of her gaze and then froze. The Ranats had gathered around the diagram of Exis, chittering and gesturing to each other. The three companions stood perfectly still, for fear that any movement would be noticed by the Ranats.

One of the creatures began marking off areas on the map of the station. Another Ranat held up a handful of mechanical parts and pointed toward the outline of a small room on the diagram. The first Ranat chattered and marked off that area as well. This process continued with one Ranat after another.

"Those must be the places on the station where they've already salvaged," Anakin whispered.

When the Ranats finished their mapping, one of them began sorting small parts into labeled bins that were stacked against a wall. Others picked up their empty satchels and left the room. Tahiri guessed they had gone to hunt for more treasures. Another Ranat lifted a heavy crate and disappeared from view. Tahiri groaned with relief. Her comfort was short-lived, however. A moment later the Ranat carrying a crate came around the corner of the partition and saw the companions. The instant it saw them, the Ranat dropped the crate and let out a warning shriek that brought all the other Ranats running. did not fall.

Tahiri seemed to understand what he was trying to do. Before he could give the screen another shove, she was there beside him, helping him push. Deflecting a hydrospanner that a Ranat tossed over the partition, Tionne said, "Use the Force."

They did. With Anakin and Tahiri's next shove the partition fell over, trapping two of their Ranat attackers beneath it. Now Tionne leapt over the fallen partition. Her lightsaber flashed, striking at the glowpanels on the wall. One after another they winked out until only a few flickering lights were left. A moment later a ball of white fur sailed across the room, clinging to a cable that dangled from the ceiling. Ikrit had returned and joined the fray. He must have used the Force to yank tools from the hands of their attackers, for Anakin saw several of the makeshift weapons fly through the air to hit the walls of the room with a loud clang. Using the Force, Anakin toppled a stack of crates. The empty boxes came clattering down. At the same time, Tahiri used the Force to shove boxes and crates into the path of running Ranats, who stumbled and fell. In the corner Anakin saw Tionne toss her lightsaber up toward the net filled with metallic canisters.

Ikrit was still sailing back and forth on the cable in the center of the room, and Anakin and Tahiri sent one crate after another scooting across the room toward the rodentlike creatures. The metal canisters spilled out of the net and came crashing to the floor. The last few attacking Ranats

could take no more. Dropping their weapons, the purple-sashed creatures fled the room.

"We'd better leave, too," Tionne advised. "They might come back with reinforcements."

"Quickly," Ikrit said. He scrambled up a cable toward one of the air duct panels in the ceiling and pushed it open.

"I've discovered an easier way to get around the station." Tionne switched off her lightsaber and clipped it to her belt while Anakin and Tahiri climbed the cable, then she followed. Once they were all inside the air duct, Ikrit closed the panel again so that the Ranats could not tell how they had escaped. The air ducts were round and roughly a meter across. Ikrit didn't have to duck and was able to move quickly; the others were forced to crawl. In a few minutes they came to a branching of air ducts and paused to consider their route.

"Mmmm," Ikrit said. "It is sometimes difficult to sense those who are not Jedi." He glanced at Anakin and Tahiri. "Look to the Force. Does it show you where to search for your friend?"

"I can sense Uldir," Anakin said, "but I can't tell exactly where he is."

"We know some of the Ranats are around this area, though," Tionne said. "We're pretty sure that they're working for Orloc."

"I'm almost positive that their sashes were the exact same color as the magician's robe," Tahiri added. "I'd never forget that color. And if we find Orloc, Uldir should be somewhere close by."

"She's right," Anakin said. "I don't think the Mage and Uldir can be far away. We found a map of the station back in the room where the Ranats were working."

"They were marking it to show where they had explored and done their scavenging," Tahiri explained.

Anakin nodded. "That's what makes me think we're close to Orloc's base of operations," he went on. "All of the places marked on the map seemed to be in one area of the space station. If Orloc is their master, I think he'll be at the center of that area." Anakin thought for a moment to get his bearings. "It was that way," he said, pointing through the duct wall at his right.

"Very well then. Follow me," Ikrit said, heading off down the right branch of the air duct. The companions crawled for hours, stopping only for brief periods to share some water out of their packs or to look down into the rooms they passed. Most rooms were empty, since the Ranats had already stripped them clean of all useful objects. Each time the air ducts branched, Ikrit led them toward the area where Anakin believed Orloc must be. Anakin could sense they were on the right track. The rooms they passed began to look lived in, with crates of supplies, sleeping pallets, and droid workstations.

"It's not much farther," Tahiri whispered, "I can feel it."

And she was right. Five minutes later, moving forward as quietly as possible, the companions found what they had been looking for. Through a grate in the air duct, they could see the Mage Orloc in his silver-edged purple robe far below in a brightly lit, high-ceilinged room. Ranats in purple sashes and droids of all shapes and sizes surrounded the Mage, ready to do his bidding. Beside Orloc, still dressed in his brown Jedi robe, stood Uldir, his shaggy chestnut hair thrown back. His arms were raised and spread wide. Tahiri and Anakin crowded closer to the grate to get a better look.

"Behold my power," Uldir said. His voice squeaked once, but it sounded deeper than Anakin remembered. "When I am finished you will go back to your friends and tell them what you have seen."

"What in the name of the Great Bantha is he doing?" Tahiri whispered.

Glowpanels flickered. Speakers set into the ceiling near the air duct boomed with the sound of recorded thunder. The Mage fidgeted with the silver spangles at the edges of his purple robe and watched his student. Suddenly Anakin heard water running through pipes somewhere nearby. Tiny droplets of water began to mist down through the room from safety sprinklers set into the ceiling.

Below, Uldir closed his hands into fists and laughed. The laughter echoed through the room, growing louder and louder.

"Now tell your friends about the wonders you have seen. Then tell them to leave," Uldir shouted. "I have no need of their puny powers."

Tahiri's green eyes blinked quizzically at Anakin.

"Who is he talking to?" she whispered.

Anakin scooted around to the other side of the grate to get a better view. Then he saw it: in the far corner of the room, drenched with "rainwater" and wearing a restraining bolt, was Artoo-Detoo!

"They have Artoo!" Anakin whispered. He pointed down through the air duct toward the corner where the little droid was being held captive. "They put a restraining bolt on him."

Tahiri leaned forward, trying to see where Anakin was pointing.

"Don't worry," Tionne said, "we'll set him free."

Then, without warning, disaster struck. Anakin and Tahiri were leaning over on either side of the air duct grate when the entire panel gave way. For the next minute everything seemed to move in slow motion. The grate fell, tumbling end over end toward the floor. Taken by surprise, Anakin and Tahiri fell, too. In a heartbeat, all of Uncle Luke's lessons about the Force flooded back into Anakin's mind. He could feel his Jedi

instincts taking over. Relax and trust the Force. Through the Force Anakin visualized the distance from ceiling to floor as nothing more than a short hop. He thought of the speed of his fall as no greater than it would have been had he jumped off a low wall.

With his mind, he created a springy cushion of air just above the hard deckplates. He knew that the floor was no longer rushing up toward him with a speed that would break his bones when he landed. He let his mind and body relax. Out of the corner of his eye Anakin saw the ceiling grate strike a glancing blow to a tarnished pirate droid. The weight of the hard panel bent one of its firing arms.

The grating clanged heavily to the floor. Anakin sensed Tahiri right beside him, and he sensed her trust in the Force. Below them Uldir's arm was raised, almost as if he were waving a greeting. Then Anakin and Tahiri reached the floor, bouncing slightly on the cushion of air. A moment later Tionne and Ikrit touched down behind them with a soft thump-thump. Uldir faced them all. His amber eyes blazed with anger.

"Why are you here?"

"For one thing," Tionne answered, "we're here to get back some objects that belong to us." She advanced toward one of Orloc's pirate droids that held the Holocron in its mechanical grip.

Anakin noticed that Obi-Wan Kenobi's lightsaber hung from Orloc's belt. The droid retreated and raised its blaster arm to point at Tionne. From the corner of the room Artoo-Detoo shrilled a warning. Tionne paused to assess the situation.

"We also came for you, Uldir," Anakin said.

"Come back to the Jedi academy with us," Tahiri pleaded. "You don't belong here."

Uldir's lip curled in a sneer. "So, you want to stop me just when I have real power within my reach? Just when I'm beginning to use the powers I always knew I could have? I thought you were my friends. I thought that you would be happy for me." His voice broke and sounded as if it might change, but Uldir stopped to clear his throat. When he continued, his voice came out strong and deep. "Surely you must have seen the storm I called up just a few minutes ago."

"You mean you really believe that you did all that?" Tahiri asked, confused.

"Yes," the broad-shouldered teenager said proudly. "I made the thunder and the lightning and the rain."

"But that's not real power," Tahiri said. "It was just glowpanels flickering-and the ceiling speakers made the thunder."

"She's right," Anakin said. "None of those things happened because of any power you called forth. Your `rain' came out of the emergency sprinklers up above. It was just a trick that Orloc played on you."

Uldir's face clouded with doubt. He looked at the Mage. Orloc shrugged eloquently.

"These children hope to trick you out of the power that's rightfully yours, my boy. Of course the glowpanels flickered. The lightning you made caused an electrical disturbance. And as for the emergency sprinklers? Why, I assure you those haven't worked in centuries."

While Uldir and Orloc were distracted, Anakin reached out with the Force and tried to loosen Artoo-Detoo's restraining bolt. The Mage clucked and shook his head sadly.

"I did my best to keep these meddlers from interfering, but you must know that we can't just give them my lightsaber and my Holocron. Why, your training has just begun, my boy. I'm afraid there's no other choice. We'll have to eliminate them."

Anakin gasped, unwilling to believe their friend would really hurt them.

Uldir shook his head.

"No. I used the Force to keep them safe when they were falling. I can't just let you kill them now."

Anakin and Tahiri exchanged surprised glances. Uldir thought he had saved them from falling? Anakin nudged with the Force at Artoo's restraining bolt again.

"Just let them go," Uldir urged. His voice was ragged with emotion. "Please. I'll make sure they don't come back."

"Sentimental fool," Orloc scoffed. "Why, I know of only one way to be sure they won't return." The Mage reached for the lightsaber at his belt and held it high.

But before he could turn it on, the lightsaber sprang from Orloc's hand as if drawn by a magnet and flew into Ikrit's grasp. At the same moment Tionne also used the Force to yank the Holocron away from the pirate droid. She caught it in midair. Orloc's face flushed with rage.

"Get them!" he roared, clutching his purple cloak. Smoke billowed behind him. Thunder exploded from the speakers.

"No-don't hurt my friends!" Uldir shouted.

One of the Ranats dove toward Ikrit, but the Jedi Master easily jumped over its head to land safely on the other side. Three more Ranats in purple sashes tackled him and wrested the lightsaber from Ikrit's grip, but they could not hold on to the spry Jedi Master. Just then Anakin succeeded in popping free the restraining bolt that held Artoo-Detoo in

place. The little droid gave a defiant squeal and rolled forward to help defend his friends. Glowpanels flickered. Water showered from the sprinklers overhead.

"Run," Tionne yelled.

Anakin and Tahiri needed no further encouragement. They ran.

"Come with us, Uldir," Tahiri shouted over her shoulder as they headed for the door.

Uldir did not answer, and there was no time to wait.

Tionne and Ikrit were right behind them, but so were the Ranats and the droids. The children were soaked by the time they reached the corridor. Still running, they headed left, but stopped when a blaster bolt zinged off the wall just in front of them.

"Turn!" Ikrit warned. Anakin and Tahiri spun and pelted the other direction down the hallway. The deck was smooth metal. As they rounded a curve, one of Anakin's feet slipped out from under him. He fell to the deckplates. At the same instant an energy bolt sang through the air in the exact place where his head had been a moment earlier. Before Tahiri or the others could help, Anakin rolled, bounced back to his feet, and kept running.

"Should we climb to the air ducts again?" Tahiri gasped.

A blaster bolt hit the ceiling above them, spraying sparks and molten plasteel in all directions.

"No time," Anakin said. "They're too close."

"There's a doorway up ahead," Tionne said, clutching the Holocron to her with one hand. "Maybe if we get inside we can secure the room and hold them off." Ikrit bounded ahead and unsealed the door.

The companions ran headlong through the opening, and the door slid shut behind them. Anakin turned toward the controls, hoping to lock the door against their attackers. Tionne, however, had already ignited her lightsaber and slashed at the control panel. The door would not open to the enemy anytime soon.

"Uh-oh," Anakin heard Tahiri say behind him. "I'm not sure this is the best place for us to hide."

Instantly wary, Anakin looked around the room. What he saw filled him with dismay. The chamber they had entered was barrel - shaped, like the inside of a hollow drum. Its polished metal walls and floors were covered with lights, nozzles, hologram projectors, speakers, half - assembled droids, and all sorts of gadgets that Anakin didn't recognize. The room's ceiling was three stories high, and a catwalk ran all the way around the wall above their heads. Two huge ancient-looking statues as high as the catwalk faced each other across the thirty-meter width of the chamber. A

complicated control panel was set back into the wall beside the far statue. Anakin's alert mind put together all the pieces and came to a quick conclusion.

"I think we stumbled into Orloc's main laboratory or workshop... his headquarters. This must be where he manufactures all that high-tech 'magic' we've been seeing."

"I knew all along he wasn't a real magician," Tahiri said. "Uldir will have to believe us now."

Suddenly the Mage's laughter boomed from above them-amplified by speakers in the ceiling. A doorway appeared in the far wall beside the control panel in a place where there had been no doorway visible a moment before. Behind it stood Orloc with several of his droids and Ranats.

"I'll take back that Holocron now," the Mage's voice thundered. "You won't be needing it anymore."

Keeping her eyes on the Mage, Tahiri took a deep calming breath. She was certain that Orloc would try to kill them now, and she was amazed to realize that she felt pity for the Mage mixed with her fear of him. She sensed that he wasn't nearly as sure of himself as he pretended to be. Suddenly Orloc's voice boomed out again and Tahiri knew he must have speakers hidden in the walls to amplify his words.

"Why not save yourselves a lot of trouble and give up now? You cannot hope to defeat me. My followers and I have you outnumbered by at least ten to one."

Tahiri felt Tionne place a hand on her shoulder. Her other hand, still holding the Holocron, rested on Anakin's shoulder. Strength and encouragement flowed through her touch.

"But our power comes from the Force," the silvery-haired instructor said, "so don't assume that the odds are in your favor."

Orloc's hollow laugh echoed around and around the curved walls of the large room.

"Why then, we must put your confidence in the Force to the test-and we will see whose power is the greater."

"Wait. Where's Uldir?" Tahiri asked.

The Mage raised his purple-robed arms in a shrug.

"I left him behind with your little droid. He knows nothing of my secret passageways into this room. Unfortunately, his friendship with you makes him weak and sentimental. This fight need not concern him. Now give me back my Holocron." Orloc made a motion with one hand, and a dozen Ranats in purple sashes appeared on the circular walkway five meters above the floor. Each Ranat held a blaster.

"We don't want to hurt you," Anakin said.

The Mage only laughed again.

"Why, isn't that a pity!" He folded his arms across his chest.

Tahiri noticed that Orloc's fingers still played with the silver spangles that edged his robe. Thunder echoed through the chamber. The sharp lightning - storm smell of ozone filled the air. Mist began to seep outward from the walls, hiding the armed rodent creatures up on the catwalk.

"Now defend yourselves-if you're able," Orloc scoffed.

A blaster bolt ricocheted off the floor directly in front of Tahiri.

"I will take care of the Ranats," Ikrit said to his companions. "May the Force be with you."

Then the Jedi Master bounded toward the closest wall and swarmed up one of the metal ladders toward the catwalk. More energy bolts whizzed toward the companions.

Trust the Force, Tahiri reminded herself as Ikrit's furry white form disappeared into the mist above. The next moment she and Anakin dropped to the floor and rolled in opposite directions. Blaster shots missed them by a few centimeters and spanged harmlessly off the floor. Tionne's lightsaber was in her hand now. With her blade she caught the energy bolts that came at her, deflecting them toward the ceiling. Tahiri jumped back to her feet, grabbed Anakin's hand, and pulled him toward one of the tall statues. Realizing that she meant to use the statue as a shield, Anakin ran with her. As they dashed for shelter, several blasters - twisted and warped beyond all hope of repair - clanged to the deckplates beneath the catwalk. Dodging between the statue and the wall, Anakin grinned at Tahiri.

"Good for Ikrit," he said. "I don't think we'll have to worry about those Ranats anymore."

Tahiri peeked out from behind the statue.

"Yipes!" she said. "Maybe we don't have Ranats to worry about, but here come the droids. I wonder where Master Ikrit went."

She looked around the side of the statue again. The Mage himself still stood near the opposite wall. Fog hovered behind him and a dramatic purple spotlight shone down from above, so that it looked as if he was surrounded by a bright purple haze. Tahiri knew he must be directing the attack, but she wasn't sure how.

"Are the droids coming this way?" Anakin asked, tapping the statue experimentally. It gave a hollow thunk, like a bell made of pottery.

"Yes," Tahiri said. "Uh-oh! They're halfway across the room! Tionne is trying to draw their attention. She's under the catwalk."

"Good," Anakin said. "Remember how we've used the Force together before? One of us thinks an object light and the other one lifts or pushes it?"

"Of course I remember," Tahiri whispered. "We're a team."

Suddenly she understood what he wanted to do.

"Okay... now!" Anakin said.

Tahiri let her eyes fall closed and imagined the statue being light, as light as a soap bubble floating on the air. Beside her she heard Anakin's quick indrawn breath. Then, just a few seconds later, a colossal crash reverberated through the room as the statue toppled and broke against the hard deckplates. Tahiri opened her eyes to survey their handiwork. Statue rubble lay scattered everywhere. In the wreckage she counted at least five ruined droids. One of the still-intact pirate droids turned and fired at them. They ducked and separated.

"Fools," Orloc's voice snarled. "Why, I can defeat you without my Ranats or my droids, if need be." He toyed with the spangled sleeve of his cloak. An ominous clanking, chugging sound rumbled from beneath the floor.

Before Tahiri could figure out what the sound meant, a door slid open in the curved wall. All of the droids in the room swiveled their blasters to point at it. Still crouched and ready to dodge blaster fire, Tahiri saw Uldir's broad shoulders and shaggy chestnut hair framed in the doorway. Beside him, riding on Artoo-Detoo's domed head, was Ikrit.

"So this is the chamber of wonders you've told me about," Uldir said in a voice that was deeper and steadier than Tahiri had ever heard from him before. Orloc looked surprised and confused for a moment. The ominous clanking, chugging sound grew louder. His eyes blinked furiously. Then he recovered.

"Why, yes, my boy," he said pleasantly. "As long as you're here, stay where you are-and watch true power in action."

Uldir watched as the Mage, his teacher, spread his arms wide. For some reason, Orloc held tightly to the silver edges of his purple cloak. Uldir soon saw why. A powerful wind roared through the room. The purple robe flapped madly about the Mage. Uldir's shaggy hair whipped around his face. Across the room Tionne, Anakin, and Tahiri looked as though they might be blown backward by the gale. Beside Uldir, Ikrit's snowy fur rippled like a field of grain in a storm.

"Mmmm. Watch carefully, young man," the little Jedi Master said to Uldir, "and see the magician's tricks for what they are. The Force is not with him. His magic is not real."

Uldir shook his head stubbornly.

"No, furball. I can't ignore what I've seen with my own eyes. How can you deny his power when he's showing it right here in front of you? I've used that power myself."

"Tricks," Ikrit's raspy voice replied. "Only tricks. The man's one true power is the power to deceive. He has lied to you, and you believe. It is because you believe him that his magic appears so strong."

"I can't close my eyes to what's right in front of me," Uldir said.

"No," Ikrit answered. "Keep your eyes open. But let yourself see what is truly before you."

Anakin held an arm in front of his face to block the wind that stung his eyes. He couldn't hear anything above the roar of the gale, except for the deep thrumming and chugging of machinery beneath the floor. Then a bright, bright light began to pulse overhead. On-off. On-off On-off. The strobing light made it harder to see the approaching droids. But one thing Anakin could see: Orloc was now holding Obi-Wan Kenobi's lightsaber in one hand.

The blade flamed bright blue. Staring at the lightsaber, Anakin took a step forward. Tahiri's hand grabbed his arm and yanked him back. A split second later, a jet of superhot steam shot up from the floor right in front of them.

Soon steam jets began spouting up like geysers all over the floor of the room. The pirate droids seemed to know where they were going. In the flashes of bright light Anakin could see that the droids were still coming toward them and that they were avoiding the steam jets.

"We have to get that lightsaber back," Tahiri yelled.

"It's too dangerous for you," Tionne answered.

"I'll go." Anakin knew that the Force could guide his silvery-haired instructor around the steam jets, but could she dodge blaster bolts from the droids at the same time? "Watch out for the droids," he shouted to Tionne.

"I won't have to," she yelled back. "I'm going up." She pointed toward the catwalk that ran around the side of the room. It was clearly visible, now that the wind had blown the mist away. All of the Ranats had disappeared. On the catwalk, Tionne might be able to go all the way around to the other side of the room and drop down on the Mage from above.

"Go ahead. We'll be fine," Anakin shouted.

Tionne clipped her lightsaber to her belt and ran toward a ladder on the wall. The Mage must have seen it too in the flashes of light. His voice boomed from the wall speakers.

"Get the Jedi woman. She is the most dangerous one. We can take care of the children and that... that animal later."

"No," Tahiri screamed as the pirate droid nearest them turned and fired up the ladder after Tionne.

"It missed!" Anakin said. He recognized the tarnished droid as the one that had been hit by the falling panel when they'd all tumbled out of the air duct in the other room.

"His aim is off," he yelled to Tahiri.

"Then help me," she said, pointing to a heavy chunk of statue. Together, he and Tahiri used the Force to lift the solid chunk and send it flying toward the droid. As the tarnished droid fired again they brought the chunk crashing down on its blaster arm. In the flashes of light Anakin saw its arm break off and fall to the floor, but the sound was masked by the roar of the wind and the chugging of the steam jets. The other pirate droids were having problems getting through the rubble of the statue.

"Very well then. Behold the power of a Mage," Orloc's voice rang from the speakers above. With a loud sizzling, all of the ladders leading to the catwalk lit up in a bright flash.

"Tionne!" Tahiri screamed. Anakin whirled back toward the ladder that Tionne had been climbing, only to have his worst fears confirmed. His teacher had almost reached the catwalk, but somehow Orloc must have sent an electrical current through the ladders that led to the structure. The Holocron dropped from Tionne's hand and clattered to the floor. The Mage's laughter thundered from the loudspeakers.

Another jolt of electricity flashed along the walls and through the ladders. Anakin sensed Tionne using every ounce of Force to push herself away from the ladder. In the next strobe of light he caught sight of her again. Tionne hung for a moment high in the air. Then she fell. Heedless of the danger to themselves, Tahiri and Anakin ran toward their fallen teacher, dodging jets of hot steam as they went. When they reached her, Tionne was trying to move, but her muscles were shaking. Anakin could smell singed hair. He saw that some of Tionne's silvery strands had been scorched. The instructor tried to reach for her lightsaber but stopped and cried out in pain.

"Must-fight-Orloc," she gasped.

Anakin reached out and unclipped the light - saber from Tionne's belt. He tried to hand it to his teacher, but Tahiri yelled, "No! Her hands and feet are covered with blisters. She won't be able to stand, much less hold a lightsaber."

In a voice almost too weak to be heard above the wind Tionne said, "Ikrit."

Then she fainted. Anakin whirled toward the Jedi Master, who, from his perch on Artoo-Detoo, had just lifted one of Orloc's few remaining droids

using the Force and smashed it down again. As if he sensed Anakin's urgency, Ikrit looked straight at him in the flashing light. Another droid advanced toward Anakin and Tahiri and their unconscious teacher. Tahiri tossed chunks of broken statue at the droid.

"Catch," Anakin yelled to Ikrit, and hurled the lightsaber.

Even though Ikrit was twenty meters away on the other side of the room, the lightsaber flew straight and true right into the Jedi Master's grip. Drawing himself to his full height on top of Artoo-Detoo, Ikrit switched on the blade.

Orloc's booming laughter mocked them.

"Why - do you really want to trust a child's pet to fight me?"

Artoo-Detoo shrilled a challenge and rolled toward the Mage. The blade in Ikrit's hand sparkled with silver-white fire as he rode forward to meet Orloc in battle.

A sense of horror flooded through Uldir. With growing alarm, he watched the fight between those he had thought of as his friends and the man he had thought of as his teacher. He had never considered the Mage his friend, of course, but Uldir had believed he could learn the way of the Jedi from this man. By now, though, Uldir realized that Orloc's power was not from the Force. The Mage did not use his magic to help others as Jedi did. Orloc's magic was selfish and destructive.

In a flash of clarity that had nothing to do with the strobing lights overhead, Uldir knew he had to do something to save his friends. Even if it meant giving up all hope of ever becoming a Jedi-even if it meant that the Mage might try to kill him, as well. Uldir could no longer follow Orloc. The lives of Anakin, Tahiri, Ikrit, and Tionne were in danger. And the companions would not have been here if it weren't for him.

Uldir knew he had to act, and soon. In the center of the room, Anakin and Tahiri were busy battling an assassin droid. Far away from them the wise Jedi Master, on Artoo-Detoo, was now almost directly in front of Orloc. In spite of the gale-force winds, Ikrit held his lightsaber high and did not waver. He might not have looked as impressive as a Mage, but to Uldir it was obvious that Ikrit was a Jedi Master. Uldir gritted his teeth when the Mage laughed at Ikrit-a rude, mean-spirited laugh.

"If you insist on fighting me, little hairball," Orloc said, "why, we must do this properly."

Suddenly the lights stopped flashing. They sank to a dusky glow, so that the two lightsabers burned brightly in the dimness. The roaring wind died down to a brisk breeze. The Mage blinked his tawny eyes furiously for a moment. Then he snapped his fingers and said, "Dispose of the Jedi woman. I'll take care of this one."

From out of the shadows behind Orloc appeared what must have been the Mage's last remaining pirate droid. Uldir recognized what kind of droid

it was right away: an assassin. He closed his eyes for the briefest moment. Uldir knew that he had to act now or his friends were done for.

No guts, no glory, he reminded himself. A torrent of power surged through him. Anakin Solo crouched beside his friend Tahiri, guarding the injured Tionne. Together, they had buried the last droid attacker under a pile of rubble from the statue. Now, as Anakin watched the purple-robed Mage again, the pieces of the latest puzzle came together in his mind. He knew how to defeat Orloc! For the moment, though, he would have to leave the Mage to Master Ikrit, because Orloc had just sent a new assassin droid straight toward Anakin and his friends.

They would have to do some fast thinking. The assassin droid used a repulsor to hover above the floor. Since it had no wheels, it could easily pass over the shards of broken statue that had kept the other pirate droids away. The droid's six arms each ended in a different tool. In the dim light Anakin could make out a blaster arm, a clamp hand with jagged edges, and a half-meter - long spike. It was too dark to see any more than that... but that was more than enough.

"Help me move Tionne," Tahiri said. They lifted their teacher, but jets of superhot steam shot up behind them, blocking their retreat. As they laid Tionne back down, she moaned a single word, "Holocron," before passing out again.

Tahiri swallowed hard and gently stroked her teacher's hair.

"Not yet," she whispered, though she knew Tionne couldn't hear her. "We've got other problems to handle first."

Anakin looked back toward the assassin droid. It was fifteen meters away now. Across the room, Ikrit's lightsaber and Orloc's stolen one crashed together in a shower of sparks. The assassin droid fired its blaster at Anakin and Tahiri, and the two friends dropped to the floor. Across the room the two lightsaber blades clashed again. At the same moment, Anakin saw Uldir charging across the center of the room. Looking as fearless as an ancient Jedi, the teenager nimbly dodged jets of steam and leapt over chunks of the broken statue. His chestnut hair flying behind him, Uldir let out a fierce war cry. The assassin droid swiveled toward him. At the end of one of its arms a jagged saw blade began to spin.

Uldir had untied the belt of his Jedi robe, and now, still running at full speed toward the deadly droid, he pulled off his brown robe, leaving only the orange flightsuit underneath. Anakin held his breath and waited for the right moment. A blaster bolt sang past Uldir's shoulder, but he didn't hesitate. He dove at the assassin droid and flung his robe over it, blinding the droid's sensors.

It kept firing through the robe as Uldir fell, catching him in the shoulder with a wild shot. Uldir hit the floor hard and rolled out of the way as quickly as he could.

"Now!" he yelled to Anakin and Tahiri. "You can do it!"

The two junior Jedi let the Force flow through them. Anakin gave the droid a hard shove with his mind.

"You picked the wrong team to attack this time," Tahiri cried, adding her power to Anakin's. As if the droid weighed no more than a feather, it floated into the air, spun wildly, and crashed against the wall of the circular chamber.

Something sparked beneath the brown robe. The assassin twirled and tried to free itself of its shroud. Wounded though he was, Uldir scrambled along the wall until he found the precious object he was looking for.

"I've got it!" he shouted, holding up the Holocron. Just then across the room Orloc cried out in rage, and Anakin saw Obi-Wan Kenobi's light - saber fly from the Mage's grasp. The hilt tumbled end over end through the air, no longer lit, and fell to the floor with a clatter just a few meters from Anakin. The Force flowed, directing Anakin's movements. Even though Uldir was wounded and Tionne was in danger, he knew he would have to confront the Mage to save them all.

With two leaps he reached the lightsaber handle, scooped it up, and sprinted straight toward Orloc. The furious Mage ran his hands along the spangled sleeves of his cloak and flung his arms out wide. A cloud of smoke burst in front of Anakin, but he kept going.

Next, swarms of miniature TIE fighters dropped from the ceiling to head him off. Anakin ducked. Blaster fire exploded in the air in front of him.

"It's not real, Anakin," Uldir yelled. His strong voice carried easily above the sounds of blaster fire and steam jets. "Show him, Tahiri!"

With that, he threw the Holocron straight at the blond girl. The pearly cube sailed through the air in a smooth arc. Tahiri caught it easily, as if the Force had guided it right into her hands. "Look, Anakin!" she cried.

Suddenly, a hologram of Ash Krimsan filled the entire room, larger than Anakin had ever seen her.

"Welcome, my children. What may I teach you today?" the kindly Jedi Master asked.

"Teach us about lies," Uldir shouted. In the image, the scarlet-robed old Jedi spread her hands. "Lies can only defeat you if you give them the power of your belief," she said simply.

Tiny TIE fighters flew through the kind old face, diving and shooting, and Anakin saw them for what they really were: holograms. As the image of Ash Krimsan dissolved, Anakin began running again, straight through the swarm of TIE fighters. He heard the assassin droid smash once more against the wall, and something in the back of his mind told him that Tahiri had taken over protecting Tionne.

He also knew that Ikrit and Artoo were on their way to help her. Thunder boomed from the speakers hidden in the walls, but Anakin did not stop until he stood directly before Orloc. Then, pressing the switch on the handle of Kenobi's blade, Anakin ignited the lightsaber. The blade hummed in his hand, a bright pure blue sending its light through the darkness. Orloc's tawny eyes blinked furiously and he lifted his arms, as if to bring lightning down on Anakin. Anakin raised the lightsaber. From a distance, Anakin heard Uldir cry, "Don't hurt him!"

Anakin didn't put down the lightsaber.

"Trust me," he called to his friend. Then he brought the blade sweeping downward in a curving arc at the purple-robed Mage. Silver spangles flew through the air and sparkled as they pattered to the floor. The holograms disappeared. Anakin brought the lightsaber up again and swept down once more. Wires sparked and spangles fell.

The Mage howled with anguish, "No! You've destroyed it!" But his voice no longer boomed from the speakers overhead; it seemed weak and puny. The Mage ran his fingers along the edge of his purple cloak, which was now in tatters. There were no more silver spangles-nothing left with which to control his "magic."

Anakin had realized that the Mage touched the dangling bits of silver each time he used his "powers." Now Orloc was stripped of his controls. The Mage looked past Anakin. His eyes held a tortured look.

"Please, help me," he said.

Anakin turned to see Uldir. His friend's amber eyes were filled with pity-only pity. Uldir slowly shook his head and put a hand up to touch his injured shoulder.

"You would have killed my friends-and maybe even me-just to keep the Holocron and Obi-Wan Kenobi's lightsaber. You thought they could give you true power, just like I believed you could give me real power. The power of the Force is real. But you knew you never had it. I was the fool."

"Why, I still have one power left to me," the magician snarled. Anakin turned to look at Orloc, but in a bright flash and a puff of smoke, the Mage was gone. Anakin knew that the smoke was not magical. It was merely one of Orloc's tricks, and he wondered if they should follow the Mage.

Uldir struggled over to Anakin's side, holding one hand to his wounded shoulder.

"I think we can let him go now," Uldir said. "He's lost his droids, his Ranats, his robe, his chamber of wonders, the Holocron, and Kenobi's blade. I don't think he'll attack us again."

"Mmmmm. Perhaps he has learned a lesson," Ikrit murmured, coming to stand by them.

"I hope so," Uldir said. His voice was deep and sad. "I certainly have."

Tahiri snugged a webbed belt across Tionne's unconscious form. The Jedi teacher lay on the repulsorsled that Uldir had pointed out to Ikrit. Artoo-Detoo gave a mournful whistle.

"Don't worry. Ikrit says she'll be just fine," Tahiri assured the little droid. "We just need to get her to a bacta tank to heal her wounds."

"I'm sorry I caused so much trouble," Uldir said. "I never thought anyone would get hurt."

"Your injury will also heal in a bacta tank," Ikrit said. The white-furred Jedi Master finished bandaging Uldir's shoulder where the teenager had been hit by the assassin droid's blaster.

"We'd better hurry," Tahiri said, hovering anxiously at Tionne's side.

Anakin checked the controls of the repulsorsled and powered it on. Tahiri blinked as a new thought struck her.

"Tionne won't be able to pilot the Lore Seeker out of here," she said, turning to Ikrit. "Can you take over?"

"The Lore Seeker's controls will not adjust to a pilot as small as I," Ikrit said. "Perhaps we could take the Sunrider."

Uldir cleared his throat and looked sheepish. "Um... I'm afraid that Orloc's Ranats did some scavenging aboard your ship. I think it might take a while to get the Sunrider spaceworthy again. But if you don't mind, I could fly us all home in the Lore Seeker-with a little help from my friends, that is."

"Can you fly with your shoulder wounded like that?" Tahiri asked. "Does it hurt very much?"

"It hurts, but I can fly," Uldir said. He tried to shrug, and instantly grimaced with pain. "Anyway, I'm not really worried about me. We've got to get Tionne out of here and get her to some medical help."

"Are you sure you can pilot Tionne's ship?" Tahiri asked hopefully, tugging at a long strand of blonde hair on the side that had not been trimmed by the lightsaber.

Uldir nodded. "I've watched Tionne fly it a few times."

His voice was deep and sure as he gave them all a shy smile.

"And I really am a good pilot, you know. I want to help. That is, if I can count on one of you to be my copilot and one to act as navigator."

Ikrit sprang to the top of Artoo-Detoo's domed head.

"Mmmm. It is a good plan," the Jedi Master said in his scratchy voice. Artoo-Detoo beeped and whistled excitedly.

Tahiri grinned at Uldir. "I think that's a definite yes."

Uldir had never been happier to see the bright green moon of Yavin 4 appear in the front viewports. With the help of Ikrit and Artoo, he had done an excellent job of piloting the Lore Seeker. Anakin and Tahiri took shifts in the crew compartment, tending their injured teacher with supplies from the ship's emergency medikit. The silvery-haired instructor had been unconscious for most of the trip, but when she awakened and began to speak, Anakin came forward to the cockpit to share the good news.

"Tionne says that she was using a Jedi healing trance that Uncle Luke taught her," Anakin explained.

"Mmmm," Master Ikrit said, "I am glad she used the healing trance. She will recover quickly."

"That's great news," Uldir agreed. He felt happier and more relaxed than he could remember being in years. "We'll have her back on Yavin 4 in less than an hour." Anakin looked at the older boy with surprise.

"Uldir..." Anakin hesitated, as if unsure of what he wanted to say. "I thought you told me you hated to fly, but you seem to be enjoying yourself. "

Uldir turned and grinned at his friend.

"I did. And I am. In the past week I've figured out that I don't mind flying. In fact, I enjoy it. Well, not the kind of flying that my parents do—you know, the same old shuttle flying the same old routes, carrying the same old supplies. But I've realized that that's not the only kind of flying there is."

Anakin nodded. "As Tionne likes to say, there are always options."

Uldir took the Lore Seeker down into the atmosphere of Yavin 4.

"I've heard her say that," he said. "I guess it never sank in before, but now I finally know what she means."

A week later, Anakin stood on the landing field in front of the Jedi academy with his best friend Tahiri, Ikrit, and Artoo-Detoo. Tionne, now fully healed, was talking quietly with Master Skywalker, who had returned from Coruscant the day before.

Uldir, his bags packed and ready to go, stood near the Lightning Rod, old Peckhum's battered supply ship.

"I'm sorry I messed up your ship, Master Ikrit," Uldir said.

There was no trace of squeaking or cracking in his deep voice.

"Mmmm. I may return to Exis for the Sunrider someday," Ikrit said. "But I came away with something equally important."

The furry Jedi Master patted the lightsaber he now wore clipped at his belt.

"I have just built myself this new Jedi weapon. Because of you, I learned that there are still causes worth fighting for and students well worth teaching. For that, I thank you."

"One thing I don't understand, though," Uldir said. "If I didn't really have any magic powers, how did I dodge the steam jets and the blaster bolts? How did I defeat the assassin droid? How did I throw the Holocron straight into Tahiri's hands? I mean, I thought I was trusting in the Force right then. Was I just lucky?"

Luke Skywalker came over to place a hand on Uldir's shoulder.

"No. Trusting in the Force is not just luck."

Uldir had spent several hours last night in conversation with Master Skywalker, but Anakin had no idea what they had said.

"I think you learned more than you knew while you were with us," Tionne said with a warm smile. "So perhaps the Force guided you, after all."

Old Peckhum now appeared from behind the Lightning Rod.

"You about ready to go?" he called.

"Just a minute," Uldir called back. Then he took Anakin and Tahiri aside. "I'll have to leave soon," he said.

"We'll miss you," Anakin replied. Tahiri gave Uldir a fierce hug. "Remember that we'll always be your friends," she said.

"I know that now," Uldir answered. "I also know that there are no shortcuts to real knowledge and power. Anyway, that's not what I want anymore."

"Are you going to be a pilot?" Tahiri asked.

Uldir grinned. "One of the best pilots ever. Master Skywalker says there's a group of emergency pilots on Coruscant. They help evacuate people during disasters, fly emergency medical supplies to colonies, pick up and deliver ships that are old or difficult to fly. Most importantly, they help people. So in my own way I'll be a bit like a Jedi." He smiled again. "A bit like my two best friends."

With that, Uldir made his last goodbyes, and he and old Peckhum got into the Lightning Rod. The ship lifted off, and Anakin, Tahiri, Luke, Tionne, and Ikrit all waved farewell. Artoo-Detoo gave a hopeful warble. As the ship carrying their friend dwindled to a speck in the sky,

Anakin and Tahiri both said, "May the Force be with you."