

DELUSIONS OF GRANDEUR

by

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To our nieces and nephews whose pride in us is both flattering and
energizing

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A KNOCK AT the wooden door startled Jaina Solo out of her reverie. She had to blink a few times to orient herself as she shook off memories of recent events.

Her gaze swept around her stone-walled room, across the sleeping pallet and the small work desk by the window slit. Against one wall, neatly stacked containers of spare cyberfuses, salvaged circuit loops, and miniature gears gave evidence of her love for electronics and tinkering.

When Jaina heard the second knock, she glanced toward the arched doorway. "Oh--come in!" she called, and her twin brother pushed open the newly repaired door.

Jacen's eyes, the same brandy-brown color as her own, shone with barely contained excitement. "Hey, guess what? My gort egg is finally about to hatch! It's

making weird noises and rocking around. Wanna come watch?"

It took a moment for Jacen's news to sink in.

"Sure," she said, proud to know that the incubator she had built for Jacen's gort egg--a gift from their father, Han Solo--had worked so well. "I'll be right there. I'm just finishing up something. Give me five minutes."

Jacen gave her a curious look. The room held no obvious projects that could not wait until after the hatching. "Okay, but hurry--that egg could hatch anytime now. I'm going to get Tenel Ka." He raced out of the room.

Jaina smoothed her straight brown hair back behind her ears and turned to face the tiny holocam that sat in front of her on her desk almost hidden by a mound of spare parts. "Let's try this one more time, from the top," she muttered. Then, taking a deep breath, she switched on the holocam.

"Hello, Zekk. Things are pretty quiet here on Yavin 4. I really miss--well, we all miss you. I wish you'd reconsider and come back to the Jedi academy. Uh-oh. That's no good." She flicked the tiny holocam off, erased her message, and flicked it on again. She cleared her throat and started over.

"How are you, Zekk? I realize you didn't stay here for very long, but things at the academy just haven't been the same since you left.

It seems like such a long time since we last saw you."

Jaina switched off the recorder again. "Oh, great.

That was cheery," she scolded herself. "Guaranteed to send him running

to the Outer Rim Territories and beyond."

She closed her eyes and imagined Zekk was right here in front of her . .
. his emerald eyes alive with intelligence, his almost-black hair tied
back at the nape of his neck

Opening her eyes again, she reset the recorder to the beginning and
readjusted her features to look more happy and relaxed. She actually
felt calmer then, and switched the holocam back on. One more time.
Forcing a twinkle into her eye, she flashed him the same lopsided grin
that she and Jacen had inherited from their father.

"Hi, Zekk. Hope you get this hololetter soon. I recorded a few others
and gave them to old Peck-hum.

He said he'd send the messages to you, but he couldn't guarantee when
you would get them." She cleared her throat and kept talking.

"We're all busy as ever, still at work rebuilding the temples."

She winced at the memory of the Shadow Academy attack Zekk himself had
helped to engineer, but plunged ahead and steered her thoughts toward
safer topics. "Seems like each time we get settled in, something comes
up and I'm off with Jacen, Tenel Ka, and Lowie on some new adventure.

Not as exciting as the life of a bounty hunter trainee, maybe, but it keeps us on our toes."

She bit her lower lip and thought for a second.

"By the way, nothing fresh to report about Bornan Thul's disappearance yet. In fact, things only seem to be getting worse. We went to a planet called Kuar to look for clues and wound up tangling with a batch of combat arachnids instead. You should've seen the battle! Anyway, Thul's brother Tyko showed up afterward to help us search. That night we were attacked by assassin droids led by IG-88!

We fought in the catacombs, but there were so many droids and combat arachnids! IG-88 snatched Tyko Thul right in front of our eyes--and there was nothing we could do to stop it. Now both Raynar's father and his uncle Tyko are missing."

Jaina shook her head. "I know you're looking for Bornan Thul, too. Have you caught any news on your end?" she added hopefully.

"Wish we could find something good to tell Raynar when we see him next.

Last we heard, he was still in hiding with the Bornaryn fleet--the trading ships his parents own. We tried to send messages, but we can't tell if word got through." She sighed. "Course, I have no idea if this letter'll get through to you, either.

"Anyhow, if you run into the fleet or get any word about Bornan or Tyko Thul, we'd sure like to hear from you." Jaina stopped, blushed slightly.

"Well, we'd like to hear from you anyway, if you get the chance.

I'm rambling, so I guess I should sign off now. Peckhum will encrypt this message and send it out to all the bars, cantinas, smuggler's dens..." She grinned. "You know, all those places where scoundrels and bounty hunters hang out. I'll send another hololetter when I have time.

Until then, may the Force be with you." She smiled one more time.

"Bye, Zekk."

Jaina stopped recording and nodded. "That ought to do it--not too gushy or emotional." She really hated having to walk on eggshells when she spoke to an old friend.

Eggshells. Egg.t

She had completely forgotten about Jacen's gort egg hatching!

Slipping the hololetter into a pocket of her flight suit, she dashed for Jacen's room.

Only one room of the Great Temple boasted an entire wall of terrariums, incubators, cages, and aquariums on sturdy stone shelves: the room occupied by Jacen Solo. On most days at the Jedi academy, Jacen spent an hour, or sometimes two, feeding and caring for his various pets, using the Force to send them pleasant thoughts and to sense anything they needed.

Today, however, he was interested in only one creature--one he had never seen before.

"The shell appears . . . flawless," Tenel Ka said, holding her hand above the spheroid egg.

Under the light of the incubator, the pearly pink shell gleamed softly.

Jacen glanced at the warrior

girl who crouched beside him watching the egg.

The egg made a sudden rocking movement, but Tenel Ka didn't flinch.

"Pretty neat, huh?" Jacen said.

"A beautiful color," she remarked.

"Uh-huh," Jacen said, though at the moment he was admiring the red-gold

of Tenel Ka's hair, some of which was loose and flowing, the rest caught up in braids that fell forward over the shoulders of her green lizard-hide armor.

"May I touch your egg?" Tenel Ka asked. She nodded toward the object, which had once again

begun to rock and emit clicking noises.

"Uh . . . sure," Jacen said.

"Did I miss it?" Jaina burst into the room. "Did it hatch yet?"

The pearly egg gave a soft thump-thump and rolled up against one wall of the incubator.

"Looks like you're right on time." Jacen moved a bit closer to Tenel Ka, ostensibly to give his sister a better view of the incubator's front panel.

Jaina glanced around the room before plopping herself on the floor beside him. "Where's Lowie?"

she asked.

"He has not yet arrived," Tenel Ka said.

"I told him about the hatching," Jacen added. "He said he needed to stretch his legs, but he should be here any minute." The pearl-pink sphere in the incubator bounced a few times and made a louder ticking noise.

"Come on, little one," Jacen coaxed, leaning closer to the incubator.

"You can do it."

A moment later, a warbling bellow could be heard just outside the smashed window opening in Jacen's room. All three young Jedi turned just in time to see Lowie swing through the opening in an uncharacteristic display of swashbuckling bravado.

Part of the window area had been demolished during the Shadow Academy attack, but since there was no major structural damage, Jacen was in no hurry to get it repaired. He liked the fresh air.

Now the lanky, ginger-furred Lowbacca landed neatly on the flagstones, smoothed a large hand over the black streak of fur that ran up over his head above the left eye and down his back, and roared a Wookiee greeting.

Tenel Ka raised an eyebrow and glanced at Lowie. "A fine entrance, friend Lowbacca," she observed. "I will remember it."

"Dear me, I do hope we haven't arrived too late," Em Teedee said.

The little silver translating droid was clipped to his usual place on Lowie's syren-fiber belt. "I've never had the opportunity to witness a gort hatching before."

As if on cue, the gort egg made a sharp clacking noise. Lowie crossed the room in three long strides and crowded between Jacen and Jaina on the floor.

The gort egg knocked loudly, bounced, and rolled until it rested against the front panel of the incubator.

"Good," Jacen said softly. "That's it--you've almost got it. A few more times now."

Click-click. Thunk. Clack.

Jacen touched his fingers to the transparisteel.

"There's a warm, friendly place waiting for you," he whispered.

With one more click and another thunk, a tiny fissure appeared in the

surface of the shell.

Lowie gave a thoughtful rumble. Jaina drew in a sharp breath and bit her lower lip. Tenel Ka reached out and placed her hand just next to Jacen's on the clear front panel, her fingers barely touching his.

Jacen felt soothing, welcoming thoughts join his own and flow toward the egg.

The egg tapped and bounced. Another crack appeared.

A loud noise at the doorway interrupted them as one of the New Republic soldiers stationed on the jungle moon during the reconstruction activities stuck his helmeted head into the room. He blinked, looking somewhat confused. "Excuse me, I was trying to find a refresher unit." The soldier made a hasty retreat and continued urgently down the hall.

The young Jedi Knights turned their attention back to the hatching egg.

"Oh, I can scarcely bear the suspense!" Em Teedee said in a hushed voice. "Master Lowbacca, if I might impose on you for just a moment? I should like to get a closer look."

Lowie unclipped the little droid from his belt and held him up to the incubator for an unobstructed view. The gott egg bounced and rocked, bumping itself repeatedly against the clear front panel.

"Come on, you can do it," Jacen whispered.

Crack. A piece of shell, perfectly triangular in shape, fell away from the side of the egg. Then the egg jumped and rolled until the triangular opening was on top. Suddenly a downy ball of blue fluff poked through the hole. The fluff parted, like two halves of a curtain pulling aside, to reveal an inquisitive sapphire-blue eye.

"Hey! Hello there," Jacen said gently.

The sapphire eye went wide, then nictated a few times, as if it could not believe what it saw. It swiveled on its down-covered eyestalk for a complete view of its surroundings. Another ball of fluff appeared through the hole in the egg, and a second sapphire-blue eye blinked furiously at them. The two fluffy eye-balls bobbed up and down on their stalks, looking first at each other, then around the incubator. When the two eye-balls were joined by a third puff of downy blue that blinked sleepily at them, Jaina giggled.

"Oh my!" Em Teedee said. "How many ocular appendages does this creature possess?"

Jacen shrugged. "Just three . . . I think." Tenel

10 Ka's hand dropped away from the incubator, and she looked at Jacen in surprise.

The eye-balls bobbed wildly. A hollow tapping sound came from inside the remaining eggshell.

Finally the shell broke apart into a dozen pieces, revealing the tiny gort hatchling.

Blue fluff clothed every square centimeter of the creature, except for the wide, flat beak set a third of the way down its little body.

The rounded body, as large as Jacen's fist, perched atop a pair of short legs, supported by broad, flat feet. The three toes were splayed for balance, and the gort's thin prehensile tail curled into the air behind it. The tip of the tail reached forward to scratch one of the gort's eyestalks, as if it were confused.

"Hello, little girl," Jacen said. He turned to the others.

"Don't ask me how I know it's a girl. I just do."

Lowie gave an urf of laughter, and tapped one finger against the incubator's front panel. All three of the gort's eyestalks retracted into its body, and the eyes nictated shut, so that the creature looked like a lump of blue down.

"What is her name?" Tenel Ka asked.

All three eyestalks extended again and the sapphire eyes blinked open.

"She blinks a lot," Jacen said. "I think I'll call her Nicta."

Jacen slid open the feeding chute in the incubator; several insects and grubs he had collected cascaded into the feeding dish. "There you go, Nicta. Morning meal."

With a warbling sound, Artoo-Detoo entered Jacen's student quarters.

"Artoo, what brings you here?" Jaina said.

The silver, blue, and white barrel-shaped droid beeped and twittered a rather long explanation.

"Uh, Em Teedee?" Jacen said, still preoccupied with his new pet.

"Would you mind translating on this one?"

"Why, certainly, Master Jacen. How could I mind? After all, translating has always been my primary function, though it's seldom used these days. I am fluent in over six forms of communication. Why, in my prime, I--"

"Em Teedee," Jaina cut in.

"Yes, Mistress Jaina?"

"The translation please?"

"Oh, yes. My associate, Artoo-Detoo, was sent by Master Luke to request that you report to the landing field to assist Master Peckhum in unloading supplies for the Jedi academy and for the New Republic defensive forces. He is due to arrive in just over four standard minutes."

"Old Peckhum's coming here?" Jaina asked.

"Hey, that's great," Jacen said. Lowie jumped to his feet.

"Perhaps Peckhum will bring news of Zekk," Tenel Ka said.

Jaina blushed slightly and looked away, and Jacen knew the same thought had occurred to her "Well, what are we waiting for?" she asked.

Jacen turned back to the incubator. He picked up the perfect, triangular shard of eggshell, put it in his pocket, and crooned to the little hatchling. "Don't worry, Nicta. We won't be away long." Then he and his companions raced together out to the landing field.

.Though they'd seen it twice before, Jacen found it hard to get used to Peckhum's new ship, the Thunderbolt. It still seemed strange to see the old spacer flying the modern midsized cargo hauler.

The gleaming entry ramp extended, and several more New Republic soldiers accompanied Peck-hum down to the ground.

"Hope you don't mind some company," Peckhum said as the guards headed for their briefing rooms.

"Had to drop off supplies with the ships up in orbit, and these five needed shore leave something' fierce.

I also brought someone else with me. Chief of State Organa Solo wanted to make sure he got here safely."

Jaina's eyes lit up. "Zekk?"

Peckhum sighed. "Naw--wish it were. I have been getting' messages from Zekk fairly regular, though. Doesn't say much, 'cept that he's learnin' a lot about bounty huntin'."

Jaina slipped the holorecording out of her pocket and pressed it into Peckhum's hand. "Will you get this message to Zekk for me?"

"Sure will," Peckhum said. "Least we know the people we love are safe,"

he added. "Which is more

than my passenger can say."

"Raynar?" Jacen guessed.

Peckhum nodded. "I'm afraid that boy could use a good deal of cheerin'

up right now."

Lowie rumbled his willingness to help and headed up the ramp.

"Don't worry, we'll take good care of him," Jaina assured the old

spacer.

"This is a fact," Tenel Ka said. "We will remain close to him while we

unload supplies."

"We'll find a way to get his mind off his worries," Jacen said,

following Lowie up the ramp.

"I'll even tell him some of my best jokes."

"Uh-oh," Jaina said as she and Tenel Ka hurried on board. "We're all in

trouble now."

A SHOOTING STAR streaked across the velvety blackness of the night. From his safe perch in the treetops, Lowbacca looked up hopefully, wondering if it was a ship arriving unannounced. Perhaps a stranger, perhaps another addition to the New Republic defense fleet .

. . perhaps his friend Raaba.

His golden eyes studied the trail of light--but it dwindled to a fiery sparkle. Just a small meteor. The complex gravitational paths in the Yavin system sent many fragments of rock and dust into the fourth moon's orbit.

It wasn't Raaba, then. Not yet.

With a grumbling sigh, Lowie leaned back against the cushioning branches of the Massassi tree. Another false alarm. Returning to his routine of scouting the night sky, he let his thoughts and his memories drift again
....

He had come here alone after dark, disregarding

the dangers of Yavin 4's wilderness. Lowbacca was a powerful Wookiee, and he could take care of himself. The jungle moon's predators couldn't hold a candle to the nightmares he'd already encountered in the lower

forest levels on Kashyyyk.

Trying to hide his inner turmoil from his friends Jacen, Jaina, and Tenel Ka, Lowie had climbed out of the partially rebuilt Great Temple in the middle of the sleeping period. Lowie had hauled himself along the dew-slick stone blocks until he reached the place from which he could spring across to the wide boughs of the nearest Massassi tree.

From there, he climbed higher until he reached the treetop canopy.

He spread the shiny leaves and found himself a spot where he could sit back and look up into the vastness of stars. Where he could keep watch.

His friend Raaba was out there . . . somewhere.

Lowie touched his syren-fiber belt where Em Teedee normally hung.

He had left the little droid switched to recharge mode on a shelf in his quarters.

Em Teedee would have scolded him for going out alone at night, and undoubtedly would have talked too much when Lowbacca simply wanted peace and quiet.

Below, he heard a large animal crashing through vines and underbrush.

Plant-eating creatures chattered through the leaves, searching for

tender night-blooming flowers. He heard the howls and snarls and snapping twigs of some violent struggle, but the commotion was far away. A nocturnal stalker had found its food for another day.

It seemed long ago that Lowie had undergone his ordeal, risking his life in the lower Wookiee forests.

It had been an important rite of passage to secure the gossamer fibers from the jaws of the carnivorous syren plant. And he had done it alone.

Lowie had been cocky, so foolishly brave, but he had come back a hero, earning new respect from his fellow Wookiees. That newfound standing had won him the freedom to choose what he wished to do with his life. More than anything else, Lowie had wanted to be a Jedi Knight

He hadn't dreamed, though, that his bravado might prove deadly for his friend Raabakysh, a chocolate-furred Wookiee female who was a close companion of Lowie's sister Sirrakuk.

Normally, comrades would accompany Wookiees during this coming-of-age ritual. But Raaba had been so impressed by Lowie's solo feat that she had attempted to duplicate it. If Lowbacca could do it alone, Raaba reasoned, then she needed no assistance either.

Raabakysh had vanished that night, leaving behind only a bloodied

backpack. Lowie and Sirra had mourned the loss of their friend.

Everyone had presumed her dead.

But on Kuar, while Lowie and the other young

Jedi Knights were searching for Bornan Thul in the ancient ruins, Rabba suddenly reappeared. She had been hiding all this time, trying to find her own way in life.

During her long absence, Raaba had joined the Diversity Alliance, a political movement she believed in fervently. Its leader, a Twi'lek woman named Nola Tarkona, demanded restitution for all the damage inflicted by humans upon alien species.

When Tyko Thul offhandedly insulted Tarkona in conversation, Raaba had taken offense and departed from Kuar.

Now Lowie feared his long-lost Wookiee friend might not come back--at least not anytime soon.

But he still held out hope.

From his perch in the trees he perked up again as he saw another flaming streak cross the sky. The burning white line sliced the night.

But it was just another shooting star.

He sighed again and settled back to wait. It would be a long night.

The next morning, his body aching from his long vigil, Lowie went to the comm center and requested permission to send a message to his family.

The request was quickly granted. All Jedi trainees had the freedom to communicate home whenever they wished.

While Lowie secured a transmission link back to

Kashyyyk, he checked the chronometers on the wall and calculated the time shift, hoping he wouldn't wake his family in the middle of the night. He saw that it was early morning back on the forest world; both of his parents would be at work in the high-tech computer fabrication facility.

Lowie's sister Sirra answered the call; her image glowed brightly before him. She stood back in surprise, opening her mouth in a wide grin as she recognized her brother. Thanks to her radical trimming and cutting, Sirra's fur stood up in bristly shocks. She shaved it in various patterns at the wrists, ankles, knees, and elbows to give herself a distinctive look, an individuality that many younger Wookiees preferred. They each designed their own fur patterns, trying to establish a new identity for the youth of their species in this time of prosperity after

years of Imperial oppression.

No one else in the comm center had any idea what the two barking, growling Wookiees were saying to each other, so Lowie did not worry about eavesdroppers. He had wanted to let Raaba keep her secret, give her time to deliver the news herself, but he needed to talk to someone--someone who understood.

Warning Sirra to keep his words in strictest confidence, he told her he had good news and bad news. Lowie stumbled around at first, unsure of how to begin. Finally, he blurted out that Raaba

was alive, then breathlessly summarized how the chocolate-furred Wookiee had shown up on Kuar.

Sirra was overjoyed to hear the news and voiced a yelp of ecstatic surprise. She followed with several minutes of joyous questions and demands for details, interspersed with low crooning and cries of delight.

When Lowie explained how Raaba had vanished again, though, Sirra gave a concerned growl. But even that sad note was not enough to diminish her joy at learning that Raaba still lived.

Lowie's own thoughts remained in turmoil. No matter how often he contemplated Raaba, he still couldn't make up his mind how he really

felt about her, what he hoped might happen between them, or what he expected her to do.

After leaving appropriate greetings for his parents, Lowie signed off.

He shuffled down winding stone corridors on the way back to his quarters.

With a long, throaty sigh, Lowie picked up the translating droid and switched it on, finally ready to face the day's training activities.

Em Teedee bubbled happily. "Ah, Master Low-bacca, good morning to you!

I must say, I feel thoroughly recharged. How utterly restful it is when we're not out having dangerous adventures."

With a click, Lowie attached the little droid to the glossy fibers of his belt.

"I trust you slept well yourself, Master Low-bacca?"

the droid asked.

Lowie gave a noncommittal grunt, which Em Teedee took as a yes.

INSIDE THE BUSTLING, hollow asteroid of Borgo Prime, signs along the walkway fluoresced and flickered, leading Zekk back to Shanko's Hive.

The dark-haired young man had received his first bounty assignment inside that popular cantina--and he had come back empty-handed.

Zekk rehearsed various explanations. The blue-skinned bartender, Droq'l, had hired him to find a scavenger and his cargo, but Fonterrat, the missing scavenger, was dead and his cargo of precious ronik shells destroyed. He had no idea how his employer would react to the bad news.

How would Boba Fett have handled this situation?

Zekk asked himself. Fett, one of the most respected (and feared) bounty hunters in the galaxy, would waste no energy on lengthy explanations or excuses. Fett would come straight to the point. Zekk decided he would have to do the same.

Tossing his ponytail over his shoulder, Zekk stopped before the entrance to an enormous cone-shaped building with horizontal ridges like smooth circular waves up its sides. He took a brief moment to perform a Jedi relaxation technique, something Master Skywalker had taught him--not Brakiss of the Shadow Academy.

Then, projecting all of the confidence a professional bounty hunter ought to feel, Zekk strode into Shanko's Hive.

Air clouded with exotic scents and flavors enveloped him in a pale gray haze. Though the interior of the hive cantina had no flat edges, the

contrasting islands of sound and silence, of light and dimness, gave the illusion of dozens of shadowy corners. A quick glance at the bar told Zekk that the insectoid proprietor Shanko had emerged from hibernation and was in no mood to humor fools.

Brief, confident, professional, Zekk reminded himself. His steps did not falter as he walked toward the bar and tossed a credit chit on it. "Osskorn Stout," he said without preamble. "I have business with your bartender."

Dark, foamy ale sloshed onto the counter from the flagon Shanko thumped down in front of him. As Zekk scooped up the tankard to take a gulp, one of Shanko's many glossy arms roughly swept out to mop up the spill while another gave an abrupt jerk, indicating an area to Zekk's right.

Still drinking thirstily, he looked over to see Droq'l in conversation with a patron who stood just outside the circle of light cast by the bar's globe-lamps.

Zekk nodded his thanks, and with renewed confidence strode toward the three-armed bartender.

As if he had an extra eye in the back of his head--which he did, Zekk now recalled--Droq'l turned just as the young bounty hunter approached, tankard in hand.

"Did you find what I sent you for?" the bartender asked, his blue face eager.

"Fonterrat is dead. On Gammalin."

Droq'l grimaced, showing his shiny black teeth.

"Gammalin, huh?"

Zekk shrugged. "Fonterrat accidently exposed the colony to a plaque. He was imprisoned after the plague hit. The frightened colonists destroyed his ship and burned his cargo, but the sickness swept through the colony anyway. It killed every human."

"And Fonterrat wasn't human," the bartender mused, "so he starved alone in prison after those colonists ruined my shipment of shells." A glint of pleasure replaced the disappointment in his eyes.

"At least it was a slow, lingering death."

Zekk nodded warily. He reached into his vest pocket and produced the holocube that contained the scavenger's final message.

Droq'l watched the entire holomessage, sighed, and spread all three hands in a gesture of resigned

acceptance. "Just as well. I might've been tempted to terminate Fonterrat myself for his incompetence."

Then, to Zekk's pleasant surprise, the bartender paid him in full.

"Glad to see a young trainee with some presence of mind," he said.

"You finished what I sent you to do, and you had the good sense to bring back proof of it. That's more than I could say for some bounty hunters two or three times your age."

A thoughtful look crept over the bartender's blue-skinned face, and he drummed the fingers of two hands on the bartop. "Come to think of it, I may have another job for you, if you're interested. Got a client who's looking for a bounty hunter. Wants someone resourceful and trustworthy--but unknown.

That might just be you."

"You seem to be a good enough judge of character," Zekk said, crossing his arms over his chest.

"After all, you've judged me correctly."

The bartender chuckled at his bravado. "You'll take the job, then?"

Zekk didn't dare let his excitement show. "Of course. May I speak to him?" He felt a sense of exhilaration. He'd fully expected to come away in disgrace, without pay, after reporting his failure . .

. but now, because of his sense of honor--something he'd feared the dark side had

stolen from him forever--a new job had dropped right in his lap!

The bartender grinned. "He's pretty particular, even a little skittish--I think he'll want to talk to you himself before you're hired."

Zekk could learn nothing for certain about his prospective employer. Sitting at a low table in the shadow of a staircase that spiraled up the inner wall of Shanko's Hive, Zekk stared at the . . .

creature in front of him.

"My name is Zekk," he offered. "I hear you need a bounty hunter."

"Yes. You come well recommended," the creature replied. "Call me . . . Wary. Master Wary."

Yes, that will do."

Zekk shrugged in amusement. "Whatever."

Wary's voice was masculine, but synthesized. His body and arms were engulfed in gray robes and furs that made it impossible even to guess the creature's species or probable shape. He wore a holographic mask set to randomize so that his features changed constantly. A reptilian tail coiled out from beneath the robes and furs, but this could have been part of a disguise. For all Zekk knew, he could have been talking to a female Wookiee, a Jawa on stilts, or even his friend Jaina Solo.

The thought of Jaina made him smile again, and he patted his vest pocket, in which rested two

message packets--one from Jaina and one from old Peckhum; the bartender had found them for Zekk in the general-delivery message area behind the bar.

"And who exactly do you want me to find, Master Wary?" Zekk asked, deciding on a direct approach.

Wary looked around, as if to be sure no one was listening in.

Zekk glanced unobtrusively toward the nearby tables. A Devaronian

played Sabacc with a pair of disreputable-looking spacers; a Ranat consulted a Hutt information broker; a furry white Talz and a hammerheaded Ithorian drank colorful intoxicants and sang duets to the accompaniment of a nine-stringed wrist harp. No one paid any particular attention to Wary.

"I want you to find a man who's been kidnapped," Wary said, though the mouth of his disguise mask did not move. "His name is Tyko Thul?" Zekk's entire attention snapped back to the creature in front of him.

"Did you say Tyko Thul?"

The holomask blurred and shifted. "Yes, Tyko Thul," Wary repeated. "He was recently abducted by several assassin droids. I want you to find him."

"Every other bounty hunter in the galaxy is out looking for Bornan Thul," Zekk pointed out. "Are you sure it's Tyko you want?"

Wary nodded. "The two are brothers. I have

reason to believe the disappearances are...

related--just as the two men are."

An interesting twist, Zekk thought. Finding one brother might lead to

information about the other.

After failing to find Fonterrat, Zekk had intended just to strike out on his own, looking for clues to Bornan Thul, hoping to repair his reputation. But this direct commission was a much better prospect.

"I'll take the assignment," Zekk said. "How much are you paying?"

Wary quoted him a generous figure. "But only if you find him."

Zekk tried not to show his surprise at the high amount. But then, Wary stood to make a lot more credits than that if Zekk retrieved information that led him to Bornan Thul.

"But that is not all there is to the task," Master Wary cautioned.

"I also need you to send a message for me. I have other urgent business to attend to that prevents me from sending it myself. I will give you instructions on how to transmit it." He slid a hololetter packet across the table toward Zekk. "Do not try to listen to the message. It would mean nothing to you."

"That's it?" Zekk accepted the packet and slid it into his vest pocket.

"Not as simple as it would seem," Wary said.

"The message is for the Bornaryn fleet. All the ships went into hiding shortly after Boman Thul's disappearance, and they are impossible to locate."

"Then how do you expect me to get the message to them?" Zekk asked, instantly suspicious.

"I ask only that you broadcast the message to the following locations." He listed several sites along major trading routes, many of which Zekk was already familiar with from his days with the old spacer Peckhum.

".I-will meet you here again in ten days to learn of your progress--and to pay you if you have already achieved both of your goals."

Zekk relaxed again. He still wasn't sure why Wary would want to send a message to the Bomaryn fleet, though. Did he hope to flush them out of hiding? To question Thul's employees and family members in hopes of locating him?

Just as Zekk opened his mouth to ask, an explosion erupted at a nearby table. Zekk blinked, trying to see what had happened as a cloud of white smoke billowed outward from where the Talz and the Ithorian had been sitting.

Droq'l bustled up with a disgusted snort to sweep the broken and steaming glasses away. "I told you two not to let your drinks come into

contact with each other," he growled in exasperation. "You should know they're chemically incompatible!"

With a big paw, the Talz batted at a smoldering patch of its white fur.

Amused, Zekk turned back to the conversation with his new employer--only to find Master Wary gone.

Apparently the assignment was made and the interview had ended.

Zekk shrugged. He had his commission, and he knew what to do. He might as well stay to view the new hololetters from Jaina and Peckhum.

Calling Droq'l over, Zekk ordered another Osskom Stout, drew one of the message packets from his pocket, and slid it into the reader slot on the table in front of him. He waited eagerly for the image of Jaina to appear--then blinked in disappointment.

ENCRYPTION PROPRIETARY MESSAGE UNREADABLE Why would Jaina or Peckhum have sent him a message in code that no standard reader could decipher?

He realized his mistake as he pulled a second hololetter from the pocket of his vest and then a third.

He had accidentally tried to view the message from Master Wary.

But how could the disguised man expect an encrypted message to get through to the Bornaryn fleet? And how would the fleet read it unless they already knew the key?

Perhaps they did, Zekk mused. Maybe this was a code that belonged to the Bornaryn trading company.

Wary might be a former employee . . . or even Borman Thul himself!

As the thought occurred to Zekk, he suddenly saw the truth of it.

He felt it in his bones, in the background music of the Force that sang through all things. Master Wary's synthesized voice had held an urgency when he spoke of the need to find Tyko Thul, and a tender quality when he spoke about the fleet.

Zekk shook his head to clear it. Borman Thul had been here, right in front of him!

He jammed the message packets back into his pocket and jumped to his feet just as Droq'l approached carrying a fresh tankard of ale in his middle hand.

"Which way?" Zekk asked, breathless. "Where did he go?"

The bartender didn't pretend he had no idea what Zekk meant. He jerked

his head toward a small door in the wall to the other side of the stairway.

Dashing out into a tiny alleyway, Zekk looked left and right, but saw no sign of his new employer.

His heart raced with the realization that he had been less than a meter away from the most sought after bounty in the galaxy! Although he knew Thul was probably far away by now, he kept looking.

Farther down the alley, Zekk was not surprised to find a pile of gray robes and furs along with a prosthetic reptilian tail. Borman Thul had shed his disguise

THE T-23 HAD never been so crowded, but Lowie was proud of the way his skyhopper handled the load.

While other engineers continued to repair the ancient pyramid, he and Jaina had fixed the damage the skyhopper had sustained in the Shadow Academy attack, then augmented the T-23's engines and stabilizers. Eager to test the improved craft, Lowie offered to take his friends out for a spin.

Because Raynar was so downcast about the disappearance of both his father and his uncle, none of the Jedi trainees had the heart to exclude

him.

The young man had appeared in the hangar bay wearing a plain brown jumpsuit, instead of his usual robes of garish purple, scarlet, yellow, and orange.

Now, as they soared above the canopy of Mas-sassi trees, the skyhopper's performance was flaw

less, even with so many extra passengers. Lowie roared a question back to his friends.

"I think my foot's asleep," Jaina answered from the cargo well, where she had volunteered to sit.

"But other than that, I've probably got the most comfortable spot on board."

"Hey, I'm fine," Jacen said. He and Tenel Ka were jammed together on the passenger seat.

"I am experiencing no discomfort," Tenel Ka reported.

"Uh, this is fun," Raynar said stoically. He was wedged sideways in the passenger footspace with his knees drawn up to his chest. One of his elbows rested on the few remaining square centimeters on the passenger

seat.

"Indeed, Master Lowbacca, I am also quite comfortable.

Thank you for inquiring," Em Teedee answered last of all.

Once he'd traveled far enough from the Jedi academy's traffic of transport ships, construction crews, and military vessels, Lowie decided there was little danger in a bit of creative flying. With Raaba gone, he'd been feeling restless for days and needed a safe way to release his pent-up frustration.

Lowie woofed a warning for everyone to secure their crash webbing so he could test the T-23's maneuverability. He zigged and zagged across the treetops, eliciting squeals and laughter from his

passengers, though he did detect one or two of them applying their Jedi relaxation techniques.

He brought the T-23 about in a tight curve above the trees, spiraling in until everyone on board was thoroughly dizzy. Then, amidst giggles and applause, he took the skyhopper into a steep climb.

After pausing in midair, he put the craft into a steep dive toward the Massassi trees. Lowie pulled up just before crashing, then leveled out

to skim across the treetops.

Jacen whooped, and Jaina shrieked with the thrill. Raynar spoke in a rather timid voice. "I've

never done that before. It was fun."

"This is a fact," Tenel Ka said.

"Quite exhilarating, I'd say," Em Teedee put in, "so long as the appropriate safety factors are applied."

"We'd better be getting back," Jaina yelled from the cargo well.

"Tionne asked us to help her out with lessons this morning."

"Yeah, it wouldn't be fair to leave her alone with all the new trainees, since Uncle Luke is off on an adventure again," Jacen said.

"Besides, I want to check on Nicta--I'm not sure how much care a baby gort needs."

Lowie turned the skyhopper back toward the Great Temple, feeling some of his tension relieved at last.

The Jedi instructor Tionne asked all students to gather in the practice

courtyard just outside the temple. With Master Skywalker off on another mission for the New Republic, she had taken over the lessons. Above, workers continued to repair the roof platform on the damaged pyramid.

Joined by his friends, Lowie climbed up one of the courtyard's retaining walls. Though the afternoon was warm and humid, a light breeze rustled the jungle leaves, and Lowie could almost imagine he was alone in the treetops--or perhaps with Raaba--listening to the tales of heroes who fought to defend what they believed in.

Tionne sang an ancient ballad--one of her favorite methods of teaching--about young Gay and Jori Daragon, a Force-talented brother and sister who had given up on their Jedi training. They'd tried to make their fortune by exploring the galaxy, but instead stumbled upon the ancient Sith Empire and sparked a war that nearly toppled the Old Republic.

Lowie closed his eyes and let the story grow like a secret garden around him. Tendrils of tale and melody twined together in his mind, blooming with ancient splendor. He wondered if Raaba would enjoy this tale, too. He might tell it to her . . . if he ever saw her again.

Then, all too soon, the music ended. A murmur of appreciation rippled through the crowd of Jedi trainees and the few New

Republic guards who had stopped to listen. Reluctantly, Lowie opened his eyes and looked up at the Jedi teacher and historian.

"Gay and Jori had meant to discover many things--but not what they actually found," Tionne said in her melodious voice. "Remember that what you look for and what you find may be two different things." Her fine silvery hair floated on the breeze, and her enormous mother-of-pearl eyes seemed to look directly at Lowie.

"As your Jedi training progresses, many causes will call for you to use your powers on their behalf.

But how can you know if the cause is one you should champion? You must learn to listen to the Force, and the Force will guide you. Hate and mistrust, domination, revenge--even glory--these are not the things a Jedi fights for.

"A Jedi defends justice, protects the weak from tyranny, and rescues those in harm's way--but always with the guidance of the Force.

If you do not believe this in your heart, you are not ready to become a full Jedi." Tionne's delicate face dimpled into a smile. "But do not despair: there is time. Time to learn. And that's why we are all here: to learn together."

The Jedi instructor then dismissed them all to continue their

independent lessons.

Jaina's mind was completely exhausted after hours of practice sessions with various Jedi techniques.

As always, she had made sure the subtle exercises strained her abilities to the limit--that was the best way to learn and grow in the Force.

Tenel Ka rolled both shoulders to stretch the kinks out of her muscles. Perspiration from the late afternoon heat glistened on her face and neck. "Very satisfying effort," she said, "but I believe I could use a swim in the river."

"Hey, great idea!" Jacen said. Raynar hesitated, then agreed.

Jaina nodded. The suggestion brought back memories of the last time she and Zekk had gone to the wide greenish-brown river that ran through the jungles.

"Sure, it'd be refreshing."

At the river's edge, Jacen, Jaina, and Raynar all stripped down to their minimal exercise gear. While Tenel Ka peeled off her boots and her lizard-hide armor, Lowie unfastened the syren-fiber belt from his waist, with Em Teedee still attached, and set it aside.

The little droid gave what sounded like an aggrieved sigh. "So, I'm simply to be left behind.

Unwanted. Unneeded."

"We could try to float you on the water, Em Teedee," Jacen said with a roguish grin.

"Oh my, no, Master Jacen!" the little translator

cried. "I'm certain I should sink and be lost forever."

Jaina cast the droid an apologetic glance. "If you want, I could figure out a way to waterproof you. A few gaskets, some aquasealant .

.."

"I should like that very much, Mistress Jaina!"

Em Teedee said. "It's a wonder I hadn't thought of it before."

Tenel Ka, already poised on a rock, dove into deep water, and Jacen immediately followed her.

Raynar waded through the shallows, while Lowie climbed a boulder and

leapt into the water with a Wooldee bellow.

Taking up the challenge, Jaina plunged in after him. Soon all of them were splashing and enjoying themselves. Jaina, Lowie, and Tenel Ka took turns diving to the bottom of the river to bring back interesting water creatures for Jacen to examine.

Even Raynar seemed to release his worries. After the boy had been humiliated in the river during the battle with the Shadow Academy, Tionne had taken it upon herself to teach him how to swim better. Now he enjoyed spending time in the river.

While the Wooldee was on one of his dives, Jaina surfaced and heard the sound of a ship's engines.

Looking toward the landing field, she saw a small two-passenger star skimmer circle in front of the temple and then head straight for the river. Jaina

recognized the Rising Star, Raaba's ship! Jaina gave a tentative wave as the skimmer sped toward them, no more than two meters above the water's surface.

Lowie burst up from the river bottom holding a six-clawed crustacean.

With a speed and precision that Jaina had to admire, the Rising Star

spun once, zipped up the riverbank, and came to a neat landing just clear of the mud. Jaina stifled a giggle at her friend's roar of surprise and recognition.

Before Lowie could recover from his shock and make his way to shore, the chocolate-furred Wook-lee woman had climbed out of her skimmens. Shedding unnecessary pieces of equipment with each running stride, she headed directly for Lowie.

"Oh, do be careful," Em Teedee exclaimed as Raaba's foot narrowly missed him on her way into the river. The two Wookiees swam toward each other, bellowing and growling and barking at each other like a pair of nek battle dogs.

Jaina chuckled as she picked out a few of the guttural phrases--things like "I thought I'd never see you again" and "I told you I'd find you"--but most of the interchange was too fast for her to follow.

Watching the two splash and frolic in the water, she felt a pang. Jaina couldn't help but wish that Zekk was here, too. She had so much to say to the young man who kept trying to find a way to erase his dark side past.

She realized that Raaba and Lowie must also have a lot of things they wanted to say to each other.

Chiding herself, she said, "Jacen, Raynar, Tenel Ka--I think we need to

get back to the Great Temple now. Lowie can come back whenever he's ready?" Tenel Ka, treading water beside Jacen, caught on quickly.

"This is a fact," she said.

Jacen shrugged. "Okay." He swam with the warrior girl back to shore.

Raynar gave Jaina a questioning look, but did not argue.

Turning back toward the river, Jaina yelled, "Hey, Lowie, will you be needing Em Teedee for anything?"

He rumbled a negative and cocked his head, as if to inquire why two Wookiees would need a translating droid.

"Okay, I'll take him to my room, give him a tune-up, maybe figure out how to waterproof him."

But the two Wookiees didn't hear her. Lowie and Raaba were already splashing together toward the far side of the river....

For the next two days, the Wookiees were completely absorbed in each other as they went for climbs in the jungle and flew around the small moon in the Rising Star or in Lowie's T-23.

Jaina found it sweet to see Lowie so smitten, but disturbing as well.

Aside from perfunctory greetings, Raaba made no effort whatsoever to converse with anyone but Lowie and one or two alien Jedi

trainees. She seemed to find humans not worth the bother.

Jaina knew, of course, that Raaba was angry at Tyko Thul for insulting Nola Tarkona and the Diversity Alliance just before she'd left Kuar, but Jaina had hoped the chocolate-furred Wookiee would want to get better acquainted with Lowie's friends.

That did not prove to be the case.

It came as an even greater shock, then, when Lowie announced that he was leaving the Jedi academy, at least for a while.

Raaba intended to return to Kashyyk for a reunion with her best friend, Sirra, and to announce to her family that she was still alive.

She had invited Lowie to come along so that he could visit his own family and so that she could spend more time talking with him about the Diversity Alliance on the way there and back.

He would be gone with Raaba for no more than a few weeks, Lowie assured them all. Then, without ceremony, he packed a small satchel of belongings and necessities for the trip and clipped his lightsaber to the glossy, woven belt. Since he would have no need for a translator

among Wookiees, he asked Jaina to take care of Em Teedee for him while he was gone.

"Do be careful, Master Lowbacca," Em Teedee called forlornly from Jaina's hand. "I shall await your return with great anticipation."

Lowie made his goodbyes and climbed into the Rising Star. Jaina, Jacen, Raynar, and Tenel Ka stood back, and Raaba's little skimmer took off.

Tucking the translating droid under one arm, Jaina watched the ship dwindle into the distance and vanish into the cloud-streaked skies.

Lowie was gone.

THE DAYS ON the jungle moon seemed longer and emptier.

Jacen missed Lowbacca. It wasn't as if the young Wookiee had never gone away before, but this was different--unplanned, an interruption of their normal Jedi training schedule. It also hurt that Lowie had so easily chosen other priorities and left his friends behind.

Jacen felt uncomfortable not knowing exactly when his friend would return to them. He had no logical reason to worry, but the situation was disquieting all the same. His sister had seemed upset as well.

She and Lowie had been planning some modifications to Tenel Ka's ship, the Rock Dragon. But without the ginger-furred Wookiee to assist her, Jaina made excuses to put off the project, even though Jacen, Tenel Ka, Raynar, and even Em

Teedee had offered to help. Jacen hoped she would perk up soon and change her mind.

Luckily, the antics of his little gort hatchling often cheered Jacen.

"Here, Raynar. You hold her," he said, handing the long-tailed ball of blue fluff to the other boy.

Raynat pushed back the sleeves of his plain brown Jedi robe. A bit gingerly, but with obvious pleasure, the young man held Nicta in the palm of his hand and stroked her with a forefinger. The little creature wound her tail around the Alderaanian boy's forearm and trilled happily.

Raynat was beginning to show a genuine, though timid, interest in Jacen's numerous pets.

Nicta chose that moment to leap from Raynat's palm with her tail still wrapped around his wrist.

She dangled upside down, clacking her wide, flat beak. Raynar laughed.

"She'll probably be a good tree climber like Lowie. Too bad he can't be here to see this. I think he'd enjoy it."

"Yeah," Jacen agreed. "I was just thinking the same thing."

A knock sounded at the door and, without waiting for a reply, his sister popped her head in.

"Hi, Jaina," Jacen said. "Need us to work on those sublight engines yet?"

She shook her head. "Comm center just received a message from Uncle Luke. Said he's coming back with a surprise and wants the two of us to meet the

Shadow Chaser out on the landing field. No idea what it's all about."

"Well, well, well," Raynar said, standing up and putting Nicta back in her terrarium. He had been careful not to intrude too much on the activities of the other young Jedi Knights. "I've got some studying to do back in my room. I'll catch up with you later."

Luke Skywalker's surprise, as it turned out, was a visitor.

"Lusa!" Jaina exclaimed. Her mouth opened and closed a few times in amazement as she looked at the beautiful alien girl who stood before her--a Centauriform, with the lower body and four legs of a horse and the upper torso of a humanoid.

Jaina reached out to hug the girl. Just seeing Lusa again brought back a flood of memories of when she, Jacen, their brother Anakin, and the Centaur girl had all been kidnapped by power-hungry Heth-rir, nearly ten years before. To increase his own power in the Force, Hethrir had hoped to sacrifice a Force-talented child to a being named Waru near the Crystal Star. Jaina and the centaur girl had formed a bond during their captivity and had helped each other resist Hethrir's attempts to control them.

Though all the children had been rescued, Jaina still had occasional nightmares about the ordeal.

As she pulled back to look at her old friend, though, she saw torment in Lusa's wide, round eyes.

She wondered if their past experience had scarred the Centaur girl more deeply than it had the Solo children.

A bit shyly, Jacen extended his arms to squeeze Lusa's hands in greeting. "Hey, you've . . . urn, changed." He stumbled a bit over his words.

"What've you been doing all these years?" The red-gold Centaur child had grown into a beautiful young woman. The color of her mane and flanks had deepened from a coppery color that nearly matched Tenel Ka's hair to

a rich reddish-brown like polished cinnamon. The dapple markings were gone from her flanks now, and her curly mane fell down her bare torso nearly to her waist.

Transparent horns with smooth ridges like carved ice grew through the cinnamon curls on Lusa's forehead.

"It's good to see you again," Jaina said. "Have you come to study at the Jedi academy?"

Luke Skywalker had been watching the reunion with sober interest.

Now he spoke up as the Centaur girl shifted uncomfortably from hoof to hoof and flicked her long tail. "Lusa has a lot she wants to tell you, but let's get her settled first."

Jaina invited her to join them for the midday meal, and Lusa accepted in a husky voice, her eyes not quite meeting Jaina's. Then she followed Master Skywalker quietly into the Great Temple, her hooves clopping on the flagstone floor.

At mealtime, Jaina was surprised to find that her uncle had arranged for the young Jedi Knights, as well as Raynar, to eat with him in his private quarters rather than in the large dining hall. She soon understood why.

"Lusa has a painful story to tell us. I felt it might be easier if She started with a very small group," Luke said. "A group of friends."

The meal was already on the table, and the companions seated themselves. When Lusa folded her horselike legs beneath her and sat up at the table, her head rose to the same height as Luke's.

After introductions, Tenel Ka immediately offered a toast of friendship to the new arrival, while Raynar stared tongue-tied at the beautiful Centaur girl.

Luke scanned the tiny group for a moment, as if searching for Lowie.

Jaina watched her old friend Lusa glance nervously around the table, then look down for several seconds. "Master Skywalker thinks it's important that you all hear this," Lusa said. "And I agree." Her voice, though barely audible at first, carried a husky, mesmerizing quality.

"Ever since we were kidnapped . . . when we were children"--she looked at Jacen and Jaina--"I've had an angry place inside of me. Even when I returned to my family, they never understood that anger. Maybe I didn't either. As I grew up, I had a hard time making friends, a hard time trusting anyone . . . until two years ago.

"I met others who knew what it was like to have their lives disrupted,

how it felt to be violated. They understood my anger--and shared it.

They had dedicated themselves to making life better for the downtrodden of the galaxy. They offered me a place working for justice and fair treatment of nonhuman species. They were fervent and idealistic. And so was I. I admired what they stood for.

"For the first time in many years, I felt accepted and needed.

Not only did I have a place where I felt I belonged, but I was doing good for others. With each individual I helped, I saw a pattern emerging.

In one way or another, they all had been taken advantage of or harmed by humans . . . like Hethrir."

She spat the name.

Jaina blinked in surprise, leaving her food untouched.

She wasn't sure what she had expected of Lusa's story, but it hadn't been this. The tone reminded her of some of the things Raaba had told Lowie back on Kuar.

"My new friends showed me how human domination had caused our problems.

It was so clear, !

wondered why I hadn't seen it before," Lusa continued.

She seemed distant, as if talking in a dream.

Jaina felt her stomach tie itself into a knot, and she exchanged glances with her brother: Certainly Hethrir had been human . . . but so was Jaina, and

so were the people who had rescued the children from him. How could the Centaur girl have blindly accepted such a pernicious generalization about humans? With a sinking heart, Jaina waited to hear what Lusa would say next.

"The more I understood how humans had trampled my species and the other aliens I was helping, the greater responsibilities I was given in our group.

Our leader began sending me on covert missions. I saved alien lives, rescued slaves, helped to overthrow tyrants. I knew I was doing good work, and for a good reason.

"Then, about ten days ago, our leader gave me an assignment to wipe the navicomputers of a geological survey ship, Through carelessness and neglect, its crew had destroyed a forest on the planet Kaisa and had caused the extinction of the Buro, a species of ethereally beautiful

sentient insects. My job was to make sure that the survey ship's navicomputer would never again guide its geologists to a new world they could destroy.

"I eagerly took the assignment. I had been so indoctrinated by the group that I cringed at the very sight of the humans whose computer I had been sent to sabotage. But for some reason--maybe because one of the geologists had a daughter who was the same age as you were when I knew you, Jaina . . . I--"

Lusa's voice broke, and she paused before going

on. "As I watched the geologists boarding their craft, whose computer I had just sabotaged, I realized that after their very first hyperspace jump no one aboard would have any idea where they were.

When they emerged from hyperspace it was entirely possible that they would be lost in uncharted territory--or worse yet, that they might come out at the center of a star or at the edge of a black hole. I could be responsible for killing all of them."

Lusa's body went rigid, and she shuddered at the memory. "I had never stopped to think exactly what I was willing to do for the cause I believed in. Was I willing to kill? And if so, what must the victim's crime be to deserve that death? Should I judge each one, or could I

trust my leader to judge them for me?" She shuddered again and tossed her mane of glossy cinnamon curls. Her crystal horns glinted in the light.

"I couldn't go through with it. I stopped the geologists and told them what I had done. I planned to surrender myself to the proper authorities. I was shocked when, instead of hating me, they were grateful. After their navicomputer was repaired, the geologists offered to take me anywhere I needed to go. I went with them to Coruscant. I was afraid to contact the Chief of State of the New Republic--or you--directly, but I recalled that Master Skywalker had suggested that I consider studying at the Jedi

academy someday. I sent him an urgent message, and he came to Coruscant to get me." Lusa fell silent.

Luke Skywalker nodded. "I think Yavin 4 will be a good place for you to recover and to get a sense of perspective, to let your mind heal."

"You are welcome among us," Tenel Ka said.

Jaina reached out to touch her friend's arm. "I'm glad you remembered we're your friends, Lusa," she said. "I'm happy you're here."

Raynar said in a bemused voice, "I never knew anyone could hate us so much . . . just because we're humans."

Jaina bit her lower lip. A memory tickled at the edges of her mind and she asked, "This group that you were a part of, Lusa--did it have a name?"

The Centaur girl sighed. "A silly, idealistic name.

One that sounds like it includes everyone. But that would be a false assumption." She shook her mane.

"We called ourselves the Diversity Alliance."

Jacen yelped. "Hey, Lowie's friend Raaba is part of the Diversity Alliance."

Luke Skywalker looked at them in alarm.

Jaina swallowed hard. "And Lowie left here with her. Alone."

ZEKK BROUGHT THE Lightning Rod down through the atmosphere, confident that no one would disturb him . . . at least not here. This planet was the farthest place from anywhere he could possibly find.

The charts called the bleak world Ziost. Glaciers covered much of what had once been a towering outpost of the fallen Sith Empire, so that only

a few broken turrets still protruded from the landscape of ice. Frozen tundra crackled blue under the shimmering auroras dancing above in the sky.

Ziost was too inhospitable to harbor any sort of colony and the Sith ruins too decayed to shelter pirates or other refugees who might seek to hide from the scrutiny of authorities.

It was, however, a good place for Zekk to do his work, undisturbed and alone. Without risk of detection.

The disguised man on Borgo Prime--whom Zekk was certain must be Boman Thul himself--had commissioned him to transmit a coded message to the Bornaryn merchant fleet. In the wake of Thul's disappearance and the kidnapping of his brother Tyko, the fleet had gone into hiding and now hopped at random through hyperspace to keep from being found.

Zekk had to communicate with them somehow.

His bounty depended on it. "Master Wary" had offered suggestions, places from which he might attempt to send his message--and Zekk intended to try them all. He would not give up easily.

The Lightning Rod headed toward a broad shelf of ice under a twilit sky. Fissures ran across the frozen plain, and slushy water burst through the cracks, propelled by tidal pressure. Trusting his instincts, Zekk found

a safe place to land and shut down all systems: he would leave no bright sensor traces for spying eyes, however unlikely their presence might be.

Working in silence, he rigged up his transmitter, fed in power from the engines to give his signal a spectacular boost--and began sending Boman Thul's message.

Zekk wasn't sure what the coded burst said, but now he could hazard a guess: Thul would most likely explain his disappearance, announce that he was still alive, or perhaps estimate when he expected to come home.

He first sent the signal to the Bornaryn headquarters on Coruscant, on the chance that Aryn Dro Thul might check in for urgent news. It only made sense that she would have made arrangements to learn if her missing husband reappeared.

Zekk didn't know why the man was so desperately hiding, but Thul was obviously frightened. He did understand why Thul might go to Shanko's Hive in disguise to hire a bounty hunter--a little known bounty hunter like Zekk. Since Thul had such a high price on his own head, he would be foolish to send the message himself. Any glory-seeking bounty hunter might spot the signal and race to its source fast enough to capture him.

Being a bounty hunter himself, Zekk was paid to assume such risks.

Even so, he did not intend to be easy prey for his competitors.

Everyone in the galaxy seemed to be looking for Borman Thul--including Zekk . . . until he had unwittingly been hired by the very quarry he sought. On the other hand, Thul had already set up another meeting with him, so perhaps when the time came, Zekk could capture the wanted man after all and take the whole bounty. Then he would prove himself a bounty hunter to be reckoned with.

The ethical question was a hindrance, of course.

Next he sent a duplicate message to other places 'where "Master Wary" thought the merchant fleet might pick up transmissions. Zekk couldn't be certain exactly how Thul's scheme worked, but the merchant might well have made plans for such a contingency. Their business had boomed, and successful traders always lived with the threat of being held for ransom.

Leaning back in his creaking cockpit seat, Zekk transmitted the message to a fourth and final set of coordinates. He had fulfilled his obligation, everything "Master Wary" had asked him to do. Time to go.

As he reached forward to power up the Lightning Rod, he felt suddenly uneasy in the cockpit. Were his rarely used Jedi senses sending him a warning?

Or was his imagination just running away with him?

He decided to leave Zios as quickly as the battered old ship could carry him. Repulsodifts blasted, melting a crater into the plain of ice. Zekk let the ship hover as he contemplated his course.

Next, he would begin his search for the abducted brother, Tyko Thul.

The ship's rear sensors sounded an alarm. Zekk's hand flew over the control panels and spotted another ship fast approaching--a souped-up hunting craft made from new and old components pieced together.

The intruder soared out of hyperspace without

slowing, barreling directly toward the Lightning Rod. A warning tingle along Zekk's spine supplemented the flashing red lights on the control panels.

The newcomer had already powered up his weapons systems--and Zekk was in his sights.

A gruff, phlegmy voice came over the comm system. "I have my targeting computer locked in on you, Boman Thul. Surrender--or I'll simply destroy your ship and take your remains for the bounty."

The Lightning Rod protested as Zekk flew a rapid evasive maneuver.

He shouted into the voice transmitter.

"Wait, who is this? I'm not Thul, I'm a bounty hunter, just like you are! My name is Zekk!"

After a pause, the bounty hunter's voice came over the speakers again.

"Never heard of you, Zekk . . . but you've no doubt heard of me. I am Dengar. Now surrender your ship. I must interrogate you regarding Bornan Thul."

Zekk streaked across the glacial plain, pushing the Lightning Rod's engines to greater speed. He certainly knew of Dengar, one of the most fearsome hunters in the galaxy.

Shadowy circles surrounded deep-set eyes on Dengar's pasty face, giving him a skull-like visage.

His head was wrapped in bandages to cover the scars and perpetually seeping wounds from a hideous injury long ago. Once a crack flier in a swoop gang, he had suffered a severe accident caused by a

young Han Solo, and later his brain had been cybernetically enhanced by the Empire. Dengar was also one of the elite hunters Darth Vader had hired to track down the Millennium Falcon after the battle of Hoth.

This was indeed a man Zekk did not want to cross--but neither did he want to surrender for a long and intense conversation with the bounty hunter.

"I can't tell you anything about Bornan Thul," Zelc, said, still flying at breakneck speed. "By the Creed you can't fire on another bounty hunter unless I am obstructing your own target."

Dengar replied, "I interpret your resistance as such an obstruction. You transmitted a coded communication for the Bornaryn fleet through relays to known rendezvous points. I planted numerous drone buoys to intercept any suspicious signals, then waited. You triggered my alarms; therefore, I intend to seize your data banks and study them for myself."

Any other person might have laughed, but Dengar simply let the pregnant silence extend for several seconds. At last he said, "I will have that information, whether you give it willingly--or force me to rip it from you."

Without waiting for a reply, the veteran bounty hunter fired a pulsed ion cannon, a disrupter that

was as high-powered as it was illegal to own. Zekk had not imagined the device could be made with such devastating output.

The ion blast brought down all of Zekk's shields.

Luckily, the Lightning Rod's life-support and engine systems ran off of a separate protected power array and survived. The Lightning Rod was now defenseless, however. One more shot would cripple it completely.

Zekk swerved upward from the base of a sheer cliff of ice that bristled with rock outcroppings.

Dengar's ship howled close behind, demonstrating the bounty hunter's cybernetic reflexes. Zekk leveled off at the top of another frozen plateau and streaked along, low to the ground.

Dengar launched a small concussion grenade, and Zekk braced himself for impact, knowing his disabled shields could offer no protection against the explosive. The detonation would destroy his rear engines and send him to crash and burn on this abandoned ice-age world.

The grenade struck his starboard hull . . . but no explosion followed. He heard only a dull metallic thud, as if a hammer had smacked his cruiser. He breathed a huge sigh of relief at this incredible stroke of luck--Dengar had fired a dud!

Master Skywalker at the Jedi academy had said there was no such thing as luck or coincidence.

There was only the Force, which moved in mysterious ways . . . and Zekk wondered if he could subconsciously have used a trace of Jedi powers to deactivate the explosive.

Before the bandaged bounty hunter could launch another attack, though, Zekk gritted his teeth and threw every possible ounce of his piloting skills into getting away. Right then: Dengar fired laser cannons, but Zekk intuitively knew what to do, knew how to react. He jinked the Lightning Rod to the left, then curved up in a loop, elbowing back to the right, zooming in a serpentine maneuver that neatly avoided the bounty hunter's pattern of strikes.

Zekk felt the fluid instincts move through him, like a Jedi Knight using his lightsaber to deflect blaster bolts. The entire ship seemed a part of Zekk.

He dodged and hopped, ducked and swerved, perfectly avoiding the rapid-fire attack. Like a Jedi. It simultaneously frightened and exhilarated him.

"You may not have heard of me, Dengar," Zekk said, "but you will.

One of these days, I'll rival even Boba Fett."

In an uncharacteristic display of emotion, Dengar roared at him over the comm systems.

The ice-bound plain swept beneath him, reflecting the booms from his high-powered engines. Zekk got an inspiration--a desperate idea that just might allow him to escape

He powered up his forward laser cannons and

deployed them in a wide arc, firing low and directly ahead. Using all of his weapons without slowing for an instant, Zekk strafed the frozen glacier field.

His superhot lasers bombarded the snow and ice, slicing open a molten wound as he flew onward.

The meltwater flashed into steam that billowed up in huge evaporating clouds and froze again into icy mist crystals. Fog swelled to fill the air behind him like an ever-expanding smoke screen. The cloud slammed into Dengar's ship, blinding him.

Zekk pulled the Lightning Rod up, rocketing straight toward the edge of the atmosphere. Below, he left the befuddled bounty hunter's ship enveloped in condensing steam.

Knowing he had only a few seconds, he let the Force flow through him and

punched numbers at random into the navicomputer. He'd have to trust in his inordinate "luck" to select a course by chance that wouldn't take him through the core of a star or down the gullet of a black hole.

As soon as he escaped the gravitational pull of the planet, the starlines of night elongated to welcome the Lightning Rod as it shot forward. The entire planet of Ziost shrank to a tiny pinprick behind him as the nothingness of hyperspace swallowed him up.

Dengar would never know what had hit him or where Zekk had gone.

ARYN DRO THUL stood on the busy bridge of the flagship Tradewyn, gazing out into space. She turned slowly to get the full 360-degree view of her fugitive fleet. A simple gown of midnight blue shot with silver draped around her like the star-dusted vista of space. Her fingers plucked absently at the material of her garment.

Even surrounded by the entire Bornaryn fleet, she felt alone.

Her husband was missing, her brother-in-law kidnapped, her son Raynar returned to the Jedi academy.

The merchant fleet looked to her for guidance and reassurance, but Aryn had no one to rely on but herself. As the wife of Bornan Thul, she was their leader, and she could not let them--or herself--down.

She would not let them down.

Aryn forced herself to stop fiddling with her gown. She excused the communications Officer

from his post. Sitting down at the station, she quickly calculated the coordinates for sending a routine message to her staff on Coruscant, composed a dispatch, and set the message pod's origin memory to scramble as soon as it left the Tradewyn.

Taking care of business details like these kept her busy, kept her mind off her own troubles.

Aryn sent a similar message pod every few days to corporate headquarters on Coruscant. The reports were encrypted with a proprietary code, based on a complex combination of music, light, and speech, which Aryn and Bornan had devised together while they were still students at the university on Alder-aan, a long time ago.

In this way, she managed to communicate with the fleet's administrative staff, who also sent out regular messages in encrypted scattershot packets, hoping that the fleet would intercept at least some of them. So far, Aryn had only obtained the messages numbered two, seven, and fifteen. She took a deep breath, straightened her shoulders, and launched the new packet with its instructions for the staff and a

special note to her son Raynar.

Then Aryn scanned the hyperwave frequency bands in hopes of finding one of the message bursts sent from Coruscant. A minute later, her efforts were rewarded when she located a transmission packet carrying a Thul family identifier. Grateful to finally have some news from headquarters, Aryn

quickly retrieved and decoded the message while her navigators and helmsmen calculated a new jump through hyperspace.

Staring off through the viewports while she waited for the usual audio message to begin, Aryn Dro Thul was astonished to see a tiny hologram appear in the air above the comm console.

Bornan Thul, himself.

It was her husband, alive and well! The image of his face seemed thinner, and he wore the rough-woven garb of a Random trader, but he seemed healthy.

The figure seemed to stare directly at her as it spoke. "My dear wife and son, I've been hiding for so long now that you may have feared me dead. But I am very much alive--for the moment at least. In my tradings I learned of a conspiracy so powerful, so . . . evil, that

the fate of all humanity may depend on its prevention. I can tell you no more without placing your lives in great danger. I will not contact you again until I'm certain this threat is no longer to be feared. I hope I can survive long enough to do it. My thoughts are, as always, only with you."

The tiny figure raised its hand as if to turn off a recording device, then seemed to think better of it.

In a low voice, Bornan Thul added, "Perhaps I have too rarely told you in the past, but I love you both."

The image dissolved into static.

70 Silent tears of relief, joy, and loneliness ran in rivulets down Aryn Dro Thul's face. She reset the holomessage and played it again from the beginning.

Lifting a finger to touch the tiny image in front of her, she listened.

Again. And again.

FOR THE TENTH time Lowie adjusted his crash webbing and rearranged his limbs in the Rising Star's cramped copilot area--but his fidgeting was due more to nervousness than discomfort. In contrast, Raaba's movements were spare and confident, like a well-rehearsed dance." Her deft fingers

punched in coordinates and flicked switches, preparing for the skimmer's jump to hyperspace.

Away from Yavin 4, away from his friends at the Jedi academy.

Lowie's fingers tapped restlessly against one hairy knee, until Raaba told him to relax. He tried folding his hands and leaning back in the seat, but that felt too stiff and awkward. He reached down to check Em Teedee, only to remember that he had left the little droid behind with Jaina on the jungle moon. The tension inside Lowie just had to get out.

He jiggled one leg but decided it might irritate

Raaba, and so he stopped. He settled for simply crossing his arms over his chest.

It was ironic that Lowie should feel so self-conscious alone with Raaba. She had been his sister Sirra's friend, but Raaba had always admired him when they were growing up--had even attempted her rite of passage alone because that was the way Lowie had done it.

But now ... the chocolate-furred 'Wookiee seemed different.

Poised, independent, self-assured.

He was not sure what to make of her anymore. Even the freshly washed strip of red cloth she wore cinched above her ears as a headband made him wonder how well he knew her--or had ever known her. She carried an energy and a sense of direction that he couldn't help but admire. Lowie supposed anyone would find those qualities attractive.

A tunnel lined with star streaks dilated in front of them as Raaba launched the Rising Star into hyperspace.

Lowie shifted his weight and began to assess his agitation and restlessness with detached interest.

He had always been confident, too, priding himself on being a deep thinker; he knew he could figure this out. Reason and logic came naturally to him--and he had no rational cause to be nervous, just because Raaba had changed.

In the past, however, deep thought and discussion had not really been something that he and Raaba had shared. Lowie wondered if she had changed in

that respect, too. Well, they were going to be in hyperspace for quite a while, so there was no better time to find out. He started the conversation by telling Raaba that it seemed she had done a lot of growing up since they'd known each other on Kashyyyk.

The Wookiee woman found grim amusement in his observation and answered with a bitter growl of laughter. It would have been hard not to grow up after the atrocities she had heard of and witnessed firsthand. She and Lowie had both led sheltered lives in their beautiful tree city on Kashyyyk, she explained. Even the dangers of the lowest forest levels were nothing compared to the barbarous cruelties the alien species of the galaxy had suffered.

This was what the Diversity Alliance had taught her. And most of those atrocities had been committed by humans.

That was why the Diversity Alliance was so important as a political force for change, Raaba went on, the passion in her voice rising. The Alliance accepted and championed the rights of all the species who had suffered indignities at human hands. For example, the Empire had never been punished for its enslavement of Wookiees. The Diversity Alliance vowed never to allow such a thing to happen again.

All species had been affected by the human-loving Empire's repression and prejudice, in fact.

Raaba spoke with fire in her voice. Her eyes flashed, and Lowie couldn't help but realize how large and beautiful those eyes were--or how the shaved patches at her wrists, elbows, and neck contrasted with her luxurious dark fur.

Clearly, Raaba had given some thought to the Diversity Alliance and what it stood for. Lowie was impressed by her spirit and enthusiasm . . . but also disturbed by the conclusions she drew.

Humans were not the only species that had ever mistreated another, he pointed out. Surely she couldn't believe that all of the ills of the galaxy were the sole responsibility of human beings?

Raaba pondered for a moment. No, she admitted that other species had also mistreated one another.

The Diversity Alliance abhorred any abuse of alien species--even by each other.

Lowie rumbled thoughtfully, then asked if the Diversity Alliance also abhorred the mistreatment of humans by other species.

Raaba looked uncomfortable at the turnabout.

Fr now, the Diversity Alliance did not have the resources to concern itself. with the treatment humans received. The subject simply did not come up. Raaba shrugged. Besides, such situations were anomalies, a minor swing of the pendulum. It was the alien species who needed protection from abuse; humans could take care of themselves.

With the Diversity Alliance, Nolaa Tarkona was searching for the answer to all of their problems, and as soon as they found the long-awaited solution, the galaxy would be free again.

In a consoling tone, Raaba asked Lowie not to make up his mind in advance. She wanted him to meet her friends and listen to what they had to say.

The Diversity Alliance was a place where she felt she belonged.

If Lowie kept an open mind, he might find that he belonged there, too.

It would be so nice to have him with her.

The Diversity Alliance could very much use the help of someone special like a Force-talented Wook-lee.

Perhaps his sister Sirra would want to join, as well. Even if Sirra wasn't interested, though, Raaba asked Lowie to think about how much time the two of them could spend together if they were both part of the Diversity Alliance

Lowie thought about it. A lot.

"YES, I DO have a plan," Nolaa Tarkona said.

"And I don't think the humans will enjoy it very much." When she smiled, her sharply filed teeth glinted like daggers in the dim light.

"All the better then," remarked Adjutant Advisor Hovrak, a bristly faced wolfman who growled under his breath. He used a long claw to pick shreds of meat from along his gumline. A few fresh blood spatters on his otherwise neat uniform indicated that Hovrak must have eaten recently.

Nolaa glided past the long black table in her private chambers.

"Are the other representatives here in the caves? The three Diversity Alliance soldiers who have recruited the greatest number of new members?"

"Yes, they just arrived on Ryloth." The wolfman shuffled his feet, uncertain. "I agree they deserve induction into our inner circle as a reward for their

efforts. But are you sure that it's wise to use our last sample of the plague for so small a demonstration?"

"It isn't a small demonstration, Adjutant Advisor," she said. Her remaining head-tail twitched with agitation, making her tattoos ripple.

From the folds of her black robes she withdrew a vial that contained the deadly solution. "This spark will ignite the fire of utter loyalty we require."

Two decades earlier a rebellious nonhuman group, the Alien Combine, had attempted to accomplish goals similar to Nola Tarkona's.

But the Alien Combine had been unwilling to take sufficiently extreme actions. Nola knew how to learn from mistakes, though, and she vowed that her Diversity Alliance would succeed... no matter what it took.

With the wolfman beside her, she walked into the echoing main grotto to receive her newly promoted followers. The chamber was cool and dim, just the way she liked it. The light was a deep red, as if filtered through panes of bloodstained glass.

Three important Diversity Alliance soldiers stood waiting for her, puffed with pride. Out of all the thousands of members in her political movement, Nola had chosen them for this private meeting.

She studied Rullak first, a tentacle-faced Quarren from the ocean world of Calamari. Decades ago, the amphibious Quarren species had collaborated with the Empire to protect their underwater cities, while the more peaceful Mon Calamari were enslaved, their floating cities

blasted to rains. Now, Rullak stood basking in the shadows, robbing his clammy hands together to distribute the bodily excretions that prevented his skin from drying out.

In the middle, a reptilian Trandoshan named Corrsk loomed silent and ominous, sluggish but powerful. His breath came out in a rasping gargle.

The Trandoshans had a long-standing blood feud against Wookiees, and their bounty hunters made a habit of collecting Wookiee pelts. But in uniting alien species to fight the common enemy--humans--Nolaa had managed to secure concessions even from the vicious reptiles. Corrsk had sworn to ignore his natural bloodlust for any Wook-lee who adopted the cause of the Diversity Alliance.

All others were, of course, fair game.

Finally, on the right stood a wily Devaronian female, Kambrea, whose curving horns, hooded eyes, and pointed fangs gave her narrow face the appearance of a she-devil.

"You three have heard me speak before great crowds, but this demonstration is for your eyes alone," Nolaa said, and sat down easily in the massive stone chair. On a low pedestal at her left she kept a rough file for sharpening her teeth during idle moments. She toyed with the tool now, running its pointed end under her tingemails.

"This is a private ceremony--a reward for your

80 unwavering service." Her breath came out in a hiss of anticipation. "What I am about to show you will convince you more than any words I can say."

"You don't need to convince us, Esteemed Tarkona," said Kambrea.

The Devaronian female's bright eyes darted from side to side, as if probing for assassins in the shadows. "We know our cause is just. The weight of human domination has crushed the galaxy for too long. We will follow you wherever the fight may take us."

"Kill humans!" said Corrsk in a rough voice.

Even with this brief statement, the towering reptilian seemed to feel he had said too much.

"I wish to see this demonstration," the Quarren countered, the tentacles around his mouth quivering.

Rullak's voice bubbled up like words spoken through a drinking tube into polluted water. "I harbor no doubts, Honored Tarkona . . .

but I am certain it will be entertaining."

Nolaa laughed. "Yes, it will be very entertaining."

She held up the glimmering vial so that reddish light twinkled from its crystal sides. "This vial contains more destructive power than the Death Storm than even the Sun Crusher. Selective destruction."

The Quarren and the Devaronian sat in anticipation.

Nolaa did not know how to interpret Corrsk's breathy snort.

"You see, the Emperor did more than just create

weapons of mass destruction. He had an entire cadre of his finest scientists--humans, but talented nonetheless--working on more insidious schemes.

The great biological engineer Evir Derricote created numerous diseases that spread like wildfire through some species, particular species.

Recall how non-human peoples suffered during the unleashing of the Krytos plague on Coruscant during the Rebel takeover."

The three representatives all nodded gravely, remembering the death and terror shortly after the fall of the Emperor.

"I have learned that Derricote also developed an organism more deadly than Krytos, perhaps even as bad as the Death Seed plague. A virus so horrible that Emperor Palpatine himself feared to use it."

She held the vial out toward them. "This contains a sample of that plague."

The three Diversity Alliance soldiers shifted uneasily and took an instinctive step backward.

Nolaa restrained her smile of self-satisfaction.

Good, she had impressed them--but not nearly enough. Her slick robes draped themselves regally around her as she stood, then she took two steps down to the floor of the grotto. The three representatives flicked nervous glances at each other.

Clutching the vial, Nolaa snapped at her Adjutant Advisor.

"Hovrak, bring out the prisoner." Her tattooed head-tail thrashed in anticipation, while the

optical sensor implanted in her other tentacle stump gleamed, recording all the details around her.

The wolfman barked a command, and two lumbering Gamorrean guards strode in from a side tunnel, bearing between them the cloaked form of an Imperial guard. Limp scarlet robes hung around him. His bullet-shaped helmet was an impenetrable red mask with only a black vee-slit over his eyes.

"An Imperial guard!" Rullak said, raising his moist hands. "I thought they had all been destroyed."

"This one had schemes of his own," Nolaa said.

"He and several partners concocted a fake Emperor in hopes that they could rule a Second Imperium in his name, like a gang of thugs--but their plans fell apart when the new Jedi Knight defeated the Shadow Academy. He was the only one to escape."

The captive struggled, but the piglike Gamorrean security escorts held firm, paying no heed to the Red Guard's resistance.

Kambrea, the Devaronian, leaned forward and cackled. "Yes, I remember how powerful the Red Guards were. They used to bully us."

"Kill humans," Corrsk growled, as if the comment were somehow relevant.

Nolaa stood in front of the scarlet-robed man.

"This Red Guard continued to wear this uniform, this mask, to bank on his intimate connections with the former Empire. He went to the fringes of

the underworld, hoping to ingratiate himself with certain...

criminal elements." Her head-tail twitched. "For some reason he apparently considered the Diversity Alliance a 'criminal element.' He didn't realize just how much hatred alien species still hold against the Empire. And now the tables have turned on him."

Nolaa leaned closer to the guard, who stood rigidly at attention.

"We can still make use of his Imperial knowledge, however."

"But what about the plague?" the Quarren asked.

"When will we see the demonstration you promised?"

Nolaa wrinkled her brow. "Though the Emperor had no intention of ever unleashing it, he could not bring himself to destroy such an efficient, useful tool. So he ordered it stored in a hidden weapons depot on a small asteroid station. Then he erased the depot's coordinates from Imperial archives, so that no one knew where the stockpile of his terrible virus lay hidden.

"Most of the surviving Imperials have been scattered by now, but this one ranked high, close to Palpatine himself. I presume he knows the location of the plague storehouse. I have asked him to direct me there so that the Diversity Alliance may commandeer these valuable resources "Nolaa ran her clawed hand along the polished plasteel of the Red Guard's helmet. He flinched. "But he has

declined our offer." She flicked a glance back at the three spectators.

"So far."

She held up the tiny vial in front of the Red Guard's eye slit.

"Tell me where the rest is stored.

This is your final chance."

The Red Guard's helmet swung from side to side in mute defiance.

Nolaa heaved a sigh. "Very well, then, face the consequences."

She dropped the crystalline vial to the stone floor of the cave. With barely disguised relish, Nolaa stamped down and crushed it with her booted foot, exposing the viral solution to the open air.

The three spectators staggered backward. Gaspings in horror, they

scrambled to cover their mouths and nostrils and tried--unsuccessfully--not to breathe. Confused, the Gamorrean guards blinked stupidly down at the broken vial, wondering if they should clean it up.

Nolaa Tarkona merely watched.

The Red 'Guard lunged and writhed in a violent attempt to escape the Gamorreans' grasp--but the seizure rapidly became something else entirely. His body trembled. He bucked convulsively.

"You may release him," Nolaa said. "There's no longer any danger." The piglike guards looked at each other, shrugged, then stomped away.

The captive sank to his knees, shaking. His gloved hands pawed at his chest, his stomach. The

three honored Diversity Alliance soldiers stood back against the wall of the grotto, staring in fascinated horror.

The Imperial guard's chest heaved. Gurgling sounds came from beneath the scarlet helmet, as if he were trying to suck in lungfuls of air but only managed to inhale viscous saliva.

His gloved hands reached up to grasp his smooth helmet, fumbled with the

hidden catch. His arms shook and his feet tapped against the floor as the plague flowed like molten lead through every nerve in his body.

Above the noise of his rasping and retching for breath, Nola could hear the clasp of the helmet come loose. The Red Guard's hands clutched the glossy plasteel and pulled. His body arched. The helmet lifted just a little, not quite revealing the guard's face--then he sagged into a limp pile of scarlet cloth.

"Impressive," Hovrak said with a growl, his long tongue licking the points of his canine teeth.

"Even better than I had hoped." Nola turned to the three still-frightened Diversity Alliance observers.

"You see, the plague was developed to be DNA-specific. It affects only victims with a human genetic structure. Aliens are immune. All of us here are breathing the same air, moving in the same room--yet the disease struck down only this pitiful

Red Guard, while the rest of us went about our business unaffected."

"But," Kambrea said, gradually inching forward, "why would the Emperor develop such a thing?

Human were his subjects."

"True," Nolaa answered, "but many were also Rebels. Palpatine intended to unleash this plague to quash insurrections on colony worlds--until he realized how easily it could spread. One carrier from world to world might break a quarantine--and within weeks this disease could have made his Empire a galaxy-wide charnel house."

At Nolaa's gesture of dismissal the Gamorreans came forward, grabbed the Red Guard's body, and dragged him by his scarlet sleeves across the stone floor. Once they turned down a side passage and out of sight, Nolaa heard the Red Guard's helmet clatter to the flagstones.

The Gamorreans grumbled and snorted, blaming each other for the accident, then one apparently snatched up the helmet again. They continued dragging their victim away to where he could be disposed of.

"You mean to spread this plague?" Corrsk asked.

"Kill all the humans?"

Nolaa crossed her arms over her chest. "Wouldn't that be the proper work of the Diversity Alliance?"

Rullak leaned forward, facial tentacles quivering.

"How did you obtain this sample, Esteemed Tarkona?

And where may we get more?"

She stepped up onto the dais, where she slumped back into her stone chair. Hovrak stood quietly beside her, letting Nola do the talking.

"A scavenger named Fonterrat stumbled upon the secret depot where this plague is stored. He stole two small samples, not entirely realizing what he had found, and brought the vials to me, along with a description of the facility. But Fonterrat was suspicious and greedy.

He cited an outrageous price. I quibbled with him.

"Because only Fonterrat knew the location of the depot, he was afraid I might torture him for the information. Of course, the Diversity Alliance would never harm a fellow alien." She smiled sweetly.

"Humans are our only targets.

"Fonterrat requested that I send an emissary to a neutral location.

There, my emissary would hand him a time-locked container holding his enormous fee. He, in turn, would deliver his entire navicomputer module, the only repository of the plague depot's coordinates."

She tapped her long fingernails on the arm of her chair. "It seemed a

safe enough arrangement for all concerned. It amused me to enlist a human emissary to do my dirty work. Such delicious irony. I chose Bornan Thul, an arrogant merchant, who seemed to think he owned the galaxy.

"Thul met with Fonterrat on the ancient world of Kuar. They presumably made the exchange and

went their separate ways--but Bornan Thul never delivered the navicomputer to me. He must have figured out what he had been given, what the module contained, and so he chose to disappear.

Thul never arrived at the Shumavar trade conference where we were to have consummated our deal."

Nolaa folded her hands together, wearing a perplexed expression.

"Oddly, he hasn't gone to the New Republic either. Perhaps he assumes that the Diversity Alliance has infiltrated the government on Coruscant. And of course we have."

She tapped her other fingers on the opposite arm of her chair

"Unfortunately, since Fonterrat didn't trust me enough to make the deal directly, and since my human go-between betrayed me, I still haven't retrieved the information I paid for. I had my joke on Fonterrat,

though. In the sealed locker containing his fee, I placed one of his plague samples. As soon as he unsealed the time-locked box to study his reward, a device secretly cracked open the vial.

Since Fonterrat was immune to the disease, he didn't even know that his ship was full of the plague organism when he landed on the isolated human colony of Gammalin."

Nolaa smiled, looking up at Hovrak with her rose-quartz eyes.

"Everyone on Gammalin is now dead. Unfortunately, no one managed to leave the colony to spread the virus. The plague organism

doesn't survive long in open air without a host, and so Gammalin did not prove to be a proper flash point for the plague. Regrettable .

. ."

The three spectators now came forward, eyes gleaming. The Trandoshan scooped up a few broken shards from the plague vial. He brought them to his blunt nose and sniffed with great interest.

"So how are we to obtain an adequate stockpile of this weapon to aid us in our fight against oppression?" Kambrea asked, brushing a hand across her smooth horns. "This was your last sample, and Bornan Thul has disappeared with the knowledge of where the rest is stored."

"It is merely a setback," Nolaa said. "I have offered a large enough reward that every bounty hunter in the galaxy is trying to bring Thul to me.

He won't be able to move anywhere without someone capturing him."

She stroked her tattooed head-tail, feeling the tingle of response from her sensitive nerve endings.

"It's only a matter of time."

IN FLIGHT, ZEKK spent days studying the Bounty Hunter's Creed, memorizing its rules and practices as he wrestled with conflicting thoughts. He had so many questions, and so much to learn.

It seemed impossible to reconcile the desire to capture Bornan Thul with the fact that he had accepted an assignment from him, regardless of the fact that Thul had been disguised at the time. Zekk also remembered that in the rubble field of Alderaan he had promised to give Jaina any news of the missing man who was Raynar's father...

Of all the hunters in the galaxy mDengar and Boba Fett and a thousand others who were scouring the starlanes--he alone knew where Bornan Thul could be found. He had a meeting scheduled with his mysterious employer

in less than a week, to tell him of his progress.

At that rendezvous, Zekk could easily set a trap, deliver Thul to Nolaa Tarkona, and

reap the fame and extravagant reward. How could he pass up such an opportunity?

But betraying his own employer would forever blacklist Zekk among bounty hunters. No one would trust him for the rest of his life.

Jaina and Jacen would be angry with him, too. His situation seemed untenable.

He pondered the question while mulling over where to begin searching for Tyko Thul, the other half of the assignment he had accepted. Could he somehow take both bounty hunting assignments--find and bring back both brothers? Or would he have to make a choice? No matter how long he drifted in the Lightning Rod, he wouldn't resolve his dilemma by himself.

He remembered hearing that Boba Fett had recently turned up on Tatooine in his own relentless search for Bornan Thul, and came to a decision.

Since he was in the same sector, Zekk would go to meet the fearsome hunter who had proved an uneasy ally on the plague-ridden colony of

Gammalin

Fighting thermal updrafts, Zekk cruised under the harsh double suns down to the broiling city of Mos Eisley, the hub of civilization (such as it was) on this backwater world. Below him, the space-port's towers and low adobe structures shimmered in the afternoon haze.

Zekk requested clearance and transferred credits for a temporary berth in one of the low-rent docking stalls in the busy traders' district.

After he landed, he shut down his ship's systems and activated the theft-prevention devices old Peckhum had installed . . .

though the best deterrent had always been the Lightning Rod's own battered appearance, which did not speak well for the fortunes of its owner.

Zekk stepped out of the dock only to slam into a wall of heat rising from the dusty streets. He tied his dark hair back in a sweaty ponytail and kept to the shadows of low buildings, seeking relief from the harsh sunlight as he staggered along. He breathed through his sleeve to filter out the worst dust as he looked for the infamous cantina.

The other creatures stirring in Mos Eisley's afternoon seemed either stunned and lethargic or hurried and anxious to get into the shaded coolness indoors. Zekk, his green eyes stinging, wanted to do the same.

After making his way down narrow back alleys, he entered the noise and smells and blessed air-conditioning of the spaceport bar. The Mos Eisley cantina had a long history and quite a reputation, but little cleanliness or fresh air. In this dark and seedy bar, Luke Skywalker and Obi-Wan Kenobi had first hired Han Solo and Chewbacca for their legendary run to Alderaan.

Boba Fett himself had come here in search of clues to help him ferret out Borman Thul.

Behind the bar stood a grizzled old Wooldee named Chalmun, who owned the cantina. Other bartenders often took care of the actual work so that Chalmun would not have to mingle with his own disreputable clientele.

Zekk strode up to the bar, trying to look surly and tough, just like everyone else in the place. The old Wooldee snorted, seeing right through the young man's act, as if he had witnessed these shows of bravado so many times that they no longer impressed him.

Zekk ordered a cold fizzy drink, then lowered his voice. "I'm looking for Boba Fett."

The furry bartender chuffed with surly laughter.

Zekk didn't understand the Wooldee language very well, and Chalmun

gestured toward a small hairy creature propped up on one of the stools.

The creature blinked its huge black eyes and spoke in a squeaking voice.

"He laughs at your request," the creature said. "Boba Fett always looks for other people. No one looks for him."

"He and I have met before. I need to speak with him, and in return"--Zekk swallowed hard--"I can provide information that may assist him in his current assignment."

"Boba Fett will be here," the furry creature said.

"Just drink and wait." The creature took a long snort

from a foaming green beaker, swallowed noisily, and said, "But you'd better keep drinking or Chalmun may throw you out into the streets. Hot out there."

Eavesdropping, the Wooldee laughed and went off to serve other customers

....

Zekk waited. The hours passed at a crawl, and he drank as slowly as he could get away with, ordering another beverage only when he saw the old Wookiee scowling at him.

On the bandstand a group of soft-skinned amphibious musicians with multicolored neck frills auditioned for a job. The song sounded like echoing belches made into a sensitive microphone, while "musicians" jangled high-pitched bells at random.

On the cramped and dirty dance floor, two aliens that looked like sea urchins with far too many eyes rolled around locked in an embrace--whether dancing or brawling, Zekk couldn't decide.

He continued waiting. Another hour dragged by.

Boba Fett did not enter the cantina until the light had begun to fade during the first of Tatooine's twin sunsets.

The band stopped playing, and most of the background noise in the bar dwindled to murmurs.

The masked bounty hunter paused in the dimness, swiveling his head back and forth, exuding confidence.

Zekk could feel Fett's gaze burning through the black slit in his Mandalorian helmet.

The bounty hunter saw Zekk and froze, suspicious.

The moment of silence ended, and the band began playing again.

Through his peripheral vision Zekk noticed several patrons wince at the resumption of the noise. The two sea-urChin aliens on the dance floor continued tumbling about; they had not stopped even during the brief silence.

The bounty hunter strode up to the bar beside Zekk. Zekk momentarily wondered if the Wookiee bartender would require Fett to buy a drink as well, but Chalmun pointedly remained at the other side of the bar, serving customers who watched the masked hunter with unconcealed anxiety.

Zekk could feel the power, the spring-tight rage and dark energy in this man. Fett had killed an uncounted number of enemies, served no cause, and had at one time worn Wookiee scalps at his belt.

Zekk could imagine no glimmer of friendship from this vicious man--but Boba Fett was one of the best bounty hunters in existence.

And Zekk needed to learn from him.

Zekk turned, but the bounty hunter spoke first.

"What do you want from me? And what do you offer in exchange?"

The young man gathered his courage. "I need advice. If I'm going to be the best bounty hunter, I had better ask questions of the best."

"Advice?" Fett said dubiously, scornfully. "Nothing is free."

Zekk sat up straighter. "I have information that may help you find Bornan Thul." He certainly wouldn't give away the knowledge of his scheduled rendezvous on Borgo Prime . . . but he had less-important details to offer. He let the words hang in the air, then added, "I know where another bounty hunter was searching for him. It may give you a clue."

Boba Fett said, "Many are searching for Thul.

Most of them are fools. The value of your information depends on how much I can trust this lead."

"It's Dengar," Zekk said, then squared his shoulders.

"I know where Dengar went looking for Bornan Thul."

Fett paused, as silent as a statue. "Dengar is . . .

not a fool." The bandage-wrapped hunter had rescued a grievously injured Boba Fett after he blasted his way free from the sarlacc in the Pit of Carkoon.

"What do you need?"

"Listen to this problem," Zekk said. "I'm new to being a bounty hunter, and this is a hypothetical situation that any of us might run into."

Fett waited. The alien musicians croaked an announcement that they were taking a break but would be back with more music before long.

Only a few inebriated patrons clapped.

"Suppose I accept an assignment--say, to find a

lost treasure or a missing document--and in the course of my hunt I stumble upon completely unrelated information that reveals the location of a much larger bounty."

Fett said, "Then secure both. Keep your honor and make a greater profit."

Zekk arched his eyebrows. "But what if chasing after the second bounty puts my first employer at risk? In fact, if I find the larger bounty, my original employer will certainly come to great harm." He paused, hoping he wasn't giving too much away.

The bounty hunter pondered in silence. "You must not betray your employer. That is one of the worst crimes a bounty hunter can commit."

"So I just have to give up the second bounty?"

Zekk said, somewhat disheartened, though a bit relieved.

"No," Fett said. "Deliver the first bounty, take payment, and terminate your service with that employer. Then pursue the second bounty with a clear conscience, since you no longer work for the employer who might be harmed."

Zekk mulled over this answer. He had already discharged half of his assignment by sending the coded message to the Bornaryn merchant fleet.

Now, if he could just find Tyko Thul, he would be under no further obligation." From that point on, Zekk would be free to do as he pleased.

Zekk had no idea what Thul had done to warrant

such a manhunt or why Nola Tarkona wanted him so desperately--but it was clear she primarily wanted his cargo, some mysterious navicomputer module.

Zekk smiled. He could do it. He could do both.

"Now," Boba Fett said, "tell me where you saw Dengar."

Zekk told him about Zios, but gave few other details. Then the two of them hurried away from the Mos Eisley cantina, parting without any word of farewell to return to their respective ships.

TWO CRACKLING STUN-RODS crashed against each other in a shower of sparks. Jacen descended a few steps on the temple's rugged stairway and went on the attack. Below him, Raynar backed down two stairs as he deflected the next several blows with his own stun-rod.

With the sleeve of his jumpsuit, Jacen blotted away the sweat running into his eyes, then swept the training weapon in a counterstrike. The sun that beat down outside the Great Temple already seemed unbearably hot for this time of morning.

He pressed downward another step, raising his glowing pewter-colored staff. Raynar spun out of the way and danced along the wide stone ledge, dodging some scaffolding that had been erected by the repair crew, then rapped the stun-rod against Jacen's wrist.

Jacen howled at the sudden tingling zap. "Ow!"

he said, then, "Nice move, Raynat!" He hopped down to the ledge and continued the sparring match, bringing up his own staff. The pewter

rods clashed again. "Pretty soon you'll be ready to fight against a real lightsaber."

Raynat's sweat-soaked training robe clung to him but did not hamper his movements. "Thanks," he said, catching the next blow against his stun-rod.

"That's why I asked for your help during practice.

You're one of the best here at the academy."

Jacen fell back a step. "Jaina's as good as I am."

Raynar swung low, and Jacen blocked again.

"She takes it too easy on me," Raynat panted.

"Feels sorry for me, I guess."

Jacen gave a wicked grin. "How about Tenel Ka, then?" He nodded toward the base of the ancient pyramid to where the warrior girl and Lusa were setting out for a morning run. The two exercised together because no one else could keep up with them.

Raynat shook his head, and droplets of sweat flew from side to side.

"Just the opposite--no mercy whatsoever." He turned to stare at the two

runners with great interest. "Can we take a breather for a minute?"

"Sure," Jacen said, ready for a break himself.

Powering down the stun-rod, Raynat. sank to the ledge and dangled his feet over the side. Jacen

followed suit, and the two watched Lusa and Tenel Ka race each other across the landing field, cinnamon mane and red-gold braids streaming out behind them.

"Amazing, isn't she?" Raynar said, still breathless from their workout.

Jacen watched Tenel Ka's easy long-legged strides with admiration.

He felt a brief flash of jealousy at Raynar's comment, but it was gone as quickly as it came. "I've always thought so," he said. "You mean you just noticed her?"

"I, uh . . . not exactly." Raynar blushed a deep red. "I thought so from the moment we met, but I've only known her for a few days."

Jacen suddenly realized that Raynar was talking about the sleek Centaur girl, not Tenel Ka. A slow smile spread across his face.

"Yeah," he said. "I know just what you mean."

Holding a pair of delicate wires with two fingers, Jaina stuck her other hand out from beneath the Rock Dragon's sensor array panel.

"Could you hand me that circuit fuser please?"

An electronic sigh answered her. "I should very much like to accommodate your request, Mistress Jaina," Em Teedee said morosely, "but I'm afraid I'm completely useless to you in that respect--useless in almost every respect at the moment, I should say. I can't move about on my own, I am no longer needed for my translation functions--" Jaina groaned and dropped the wires. For a second she had forgotten that Lowie was not here working beside her, and now she had hurt the miniaturized translating droid's feelings. She scrambled out from under the control panel and grabbed the circuit fuser herself. "Sorry, Em Teedee, I didn't mean--"

"Oh, it's quite all right, Mistress Jaina," the little droid said. "I'm resigned to the possibility that being wired to a diagnostic panel may be my only beneficial purpose. And even that is nonessential, since you have such an excellent ability to diagnose malfunctions on your own." He gave an electronic moan. "Why, I shouldn't be at all surprised if one morning I reactivated from my shutdown cycle only to find myself in one of those electronics bins in your chambers, ready to be disassembled for Spare parts."

Now it was Jaina's turn to sigh. She closed the access panel under the sensor array she'd been adjusting and then heaved herself up into the copilot's seat. Lowbacca's former seat. "I miss Lowie, too, you know."

"I'm certain Master Lowbacca misses all of his friends here at the academy as well." Em Teedee's electronic voice quavered. "I'm the only one he hasn't any use for anymore."

Jaina reached out and disconnected the silvery

droid's leads from the Rock Dragon's diagnostic panels and tucked them back into his case. Carrying Em Teedee under one arm, Jaina went to the rear compartment where she stored maintenance supplies.

"You know, Em Teedee," she said, "you'll feel much better after a lubricant bath. Then I'm going to do that waterproofing I promised you."

She placed a small bucket on the floor and opened the valve above it, letting an iridescent blue liquid flow into the pail.

"But, Mistress Jaina," Em Teedee protested, "unlike my predecessor, See-Threepio, I have almost no moving parts. My continuous function does not rely on lubricant baths. Why, I've never even experienced

one--"

"There's a first time for everything," Jaina said, shutting off the lubricant valve. She held Em Teedee above the full bucket and gave him a little pat.

"Enjoy it. You'd be surprised what a good bath can do to change your outlook on things." She lowered the little droid into the iridescent fluid.

Em Teedee had just enough time to say, "Indeed?"

before his speaker grille was completely submerged.

Walking along beside Lusa after the midday meal, Raynar clasped his hands behind his back to keep himself from fidgeting. He had hardly expected the Centaur girl to agree when he'd offered to show her his favorite waterfall.

Well, she hadn't actually agreed. Upon overhearing Lusa shyly turn down Raynar's invitation, Master Skywalker had stepped in and encouraged her to reconsider. The Jedi teacher quietly reminded Lusa that as part of her healing she needed to learn to make new human friends. With obvious trepidation, Lusa had relented.

Now, alone with the cinnamon-maned Centaur girl, Raynar came to a

belated realization. He had never really learned to make conversation with people whom he did not know, since people usually came to him to talk. Raynar had begun to learn negotiation techniques from his father--Bornan Thul could wield words much as Master Skywalker wielded his lightsaber--but he had unfortunately learned most of his conversational skills from his uncle Tyko's proud boasts and blunt observations.

Though his mother possessed grace and social skills in abundance, she had not yet managed to pass them on to her son.

Frantically trying to remember what Aryn had taught him about polite conversation, RaYnar walked faster along the jungle path. A multicolored swarm of button beetles buzzed up from a nebula orchid where they had been feeding. Lusa let out a small gasp of delight at the shower of colon

Raynar held aside a branch that had grown across

the path so that Lusa could pass without being scratched. He wondered whether his action would be seen as kind or merely insulting.

She edged past him, nodding to Raynar in silent thanks. The tips of her crystal horns sparkled, and the tense rippling muscles in her cinnamon flanks seemed to relax a bit.

Encouraged, Raynar asked her a question. "What do you admire in .

. ." He searched for a suitably neutral word. "I mean--what is it you look for in a friend, exactly?" He hoped that her answer would not be something simple and abrupt like, "I look for nonhumans as friends."

He didn't want to remind her of the Diversity Alliance. Then again, he thought, perhaps he should consider it progress if she answered him at all.

At first Lusa said nothing. They continued in silence through a thicket of blueleaf until they emerged beside a chattering stream in a small clearing. Raynar turned and headed upstream.

Lusa finally answered him. "Loyalty. Commitment.

Deep beliefs and a willingness to act on those beliefs. I look for an openness to finding new solutions to old problems." She paused.

"I guess those are some of the things that drew me to the Diversity Alliance."

Raynar tensed at her mention of the political group. Before Lusa, he'd never been aware that he could be hated--not because he was proud and boastful, or because of the tough trading deals his family negotiated .

. . but for no other reason than his species.

"Um, the waterfall's just a little farther that way."

He raised his arm to point higher along their route and accidentally brushed against Lusa. She instinctively recoiled from him and took off at a gallop upstream.

Startled, Raynar ran after her. He caught up with the Centaur girl beside the sparkling green pool at the base of the waterfall. She stood on the bank with her front hooves in the water, staring at her own reflection and shuddering.

"I . . . I'm really sorry," Raynar blurted. "I didn't mean to--"

"No," she answered. "You did nothing wrong."

Master Skywalker was correct: I let the Diversity Alliance poison my mind against humans, and now I must unlearn the hate they taught."

She tossed her head and sent him an apologetic smile. "Please be patient. It may take me a while." She looked longingly at the waterfall, then back at Raynar.

"Would you mind if I went in?"

Feeling humiliated that a brush of his arm had been so revolting to the beautiful girl, Raynar decided they could both use time to collect themselves.

He climbed up onto a round boulder beside the stream. "Go ahead," he said. "I'll wait for you here."

Lusa plunged into the pool and made straight for the deeper water beneath the surging waterfall.

Watching the silvery liquid cascade over her, Ray-nat wondered if she would ever consider him her friend. Loyalty, she had said. Deep beliefs

She looked for these things in her friends.

What exactly did he believe in, though? He believed in his training as a Jedi, he supposed. And when he finished that training he would go out on an assignment to defend the New Republic before taking his place as heir to the Bornaryn fleet.

But what about now? He believed in his family.

How had he acted on that belief?

Raynat could go out to search for his father and his uncle, he mused,

but as only one of many, many searchers. He would probably make no difference to the final outcome.

He could do nothing to protect his mother that she could not do for herself.

Bornaryn Trading headquarters on Coruscant did not need him.

So what could he do?

Lusa submerged herself completely in the water and then surfaced again, letting the rushing stream beat down on her head and shoulders, as if its flow could cleanse her inside and out.

Raynar smiled. He loved waterfalls. They reminded him of fountains like the ones used in the Alderaanian ceremony of waters. He and his mother

and Uncle Tyko shared a love for that ceremony

Raynar sat up straight. Uncle Tyko. There was something he could do for his uncle. With Tyko kidnapped, all the systems on Mechis III would be running unsupervised. He could go to the droid world and see that the manufacturing facilities there did not fall into disrepair while his uncle was absent.

Raynar's excitement grew as the idea caught hold in his mind.

When Lusa cantered up onto the soft riverbank, he jumped down from the boulder to share his news. Before he could approach, she stretched luxuriously and then shook herself dry, sending glistening droplets of water in every direction.

Raynar didn't mind getting wet. He waited to make sure Lusa saw him and would not get spooked.

She met his eyes tentatively, smiling. This time she did not recoil as he came closer.

Eyes bright, Raynar told Lusa of his new plan to go to Mechis III.

"It's the least I can do for my family."

She looked surprised, supportive, and--Raynar hoped he sensed it correctly--slightly disappointed.

"Will you be going alone?" she asked. "Do you have your own ship?"

The question brought Raynar up short. He had not thought of how he would actually get to the droid world. "Well, if I have to find my way there

alone, I will," he said firmly. He was surprised as he spoke the next words and realized they were true: "But I have some friends--I think they'll volunteer to go with me."

And he was right.

AFTER HIS DISCUSSION with Boba Fett, Zekk plunged into the search for Bornan Thul's brother.

According to Jaina's recent hololetter, Tyko had been kidnapped by the assassin droid IG-88 during a battle in the lost city on Kuar.

Jaina sent Zekk news-filled messages to reassure him of her friendship.

Someday he intended to respond, when he felt confident enough in his new life that he could rise above the dark things he had done to her and her friends when he was part of the Shadow Academy.

Zekk missed Jaina more than he could admit--even to himself--but he couldn't face her until he redefined who he was. First, he had to make his name as a bounty hunter. At the moment, an important part of his quest was to find Tyko Thul.

By tapping into galactic information databases, Zekk compiled a dossier of background information

on Raynar's uncle. After the destruction of Alder-aan, Boman and Aryn Dro Thul had transformed their remaining family wealth into a profitable merchant fleet. Tyko, on the other hand, had invested his fortune in rebuilding the droid manufacturing facilities on Mechis III.

Next Zekk reviewed Jaina's hololetters and quickly summed up the details. When his brother became a fugitive, Tyko had retreated briefly to the safety of the Bornaryn fleet, and then joined Jaina, Jacen, and their friends to search for clues on Kuar.

In the ruins, the group ran afoul of IG-88 and his squad of assassin droids, and the other Thul had been abducted during the battle.

Zekk found it astonishing that IG-88 had so far made no ransom demands. The assassin droid seemed to be waiting for Bornan Thul to reappear from hiding and ask for his brother's release. But Zekk alone knew that the wanted man had other plans. Zekk would have to find Tyko himself.

He searched through the Lightning Rod's navigational files until he found a minor notation on the ancient world of Kuar--enough to help him plan his route. Kuar was a faint clue at best, but at the moment he had no better leads. The ship launched into hyperspace.

All civilization on the planet had turned to dust, leaving only skeletal cities poking out of craters and

cliffsides. Archaeological evidence from long-ago expeditions suggested that this place had once served as a gladiatorial training ground for the fearsome Mandalorian warriors. Now, only mined cities remained, like scars gradually fading with time.

It didn't take his sensors long to locate residual traces of the young Jedi Knights' encampment and the site of their fateful battle.

At least now he had a place to start.

He set the Lightning Rod down on the crater rim where Jacen and Jaina, Tenel Ka, and Lowie had begun exploring the rains. Standing beside his ship, which ticked and hissed and clanked as it settled on its landing pads, he stared into the immense bowl-shaped crater. These ruins were older than even the Mandalorian conquests. Towering skyscrapers had fallen apart, leaving only girder superstructures that protruded from the floor of the crater and rose nearly to its rim.

The crater's sheer walls were riddled with tunnels and catacombs, like worm-infested wood. He let his imagination wander. On the balcony seats below, spectators had once watched life-and-death straggles inside the arena.

Zekk surveyed the crater, pondering his next step.

In order to search for any clues, he would need to find the exact site of the battle with the combat arachnids and the assassin droids.

He armed himself with two blasters, knowing that the catacombs might still be swarming with the ferocious spider-monsters. Zekk wanted to make his inspection and get out before he attracted the attention of the arachnids.

Keeping his weapons handy and his Jedi senses alert, Zekk followed ramps, crumbling stairs, and interlocked balconies down the crater wall. When he discovered scuffed footprints in the dust where his friends had walked, he did his best to retrace their steps. Perhaps in the aftermath of battle, some clue had been left unnoticed by one of IG-88's droid henchmen.

It was a slim chance, though, and he didn't hold out much hope.

Zekk followed the trail until he came upon recent blaster scars.

Zekk reconstructed the details of the battle from what he saw.

and his cohorts had pulverized part of the crater wall to get into the catacombs. Under attack, Jacen and Jaina had fled downward, hauling Tenel Ka, Lowie, and Tyko Thul after them. They had rushed into the dark passageways, hoping to escape. But the assassin droids had found

them anyway--and so had the combat arachnids.

Zekk sniffed the metallic tang in the air, the mustiness, the sharp odor of dust and long-dried blood. Yes, this was the place.

He listened intently for the tapping of jagged

feet on stone, large bodies stirring, mandibles clacking . . .

but the tunnels were filled with only the sifting of dust, the whispers of shadows.

He switched on a glowrod, keeping the light down low, Then he advanced deeper inside.

Within the chamber he saw numerous dark tunnels in the cliffside, probably the dank lairs of surviving combat arachnids. Zekk tried to keep his light from dancing inside the protective darkness of those passages. He was not afraid to fight, but he didn't want to.

He thought he heard a sound. Pausing in midstep, he waited to hear it repeated. A trickle of sweat crept down his back. Silence, punctuated by his own pounding heartbeat and the roar of his own breathing. He continued his inspection, trying to maintain his concentration. He didn't want to miss a thing.

On the ceiling and walls of the grotto Zekk saw pitted impact points where energy bolts had struck.

The floor itself was stained, discolored, tacky with dried ichor from the slaughtered creatures.

Like discarded garbage, the torn and blasted remains of slain assassin droids were scattered everywhere. Durasteel arms, torsos, central processors, built-in weapons systems, and metallic skull-heads lay where they had fallen. Either the combat arachnids had no interest in the spare parts, or they had intentionally left the fallen enemies to show their scorn, "Must have been a titanic battle," Zekk muttered.

He picked up the twisted remnant of a tubular durasteel torso from one of the powerful assassin droids. Such merciless killing machines were illegal and kept under tight security even during Imperial days.

He found it incredible to discover so many here, in one place.

Zekk reached in, fiddled with the wreckage, and finally pulled out the central processing unit from the metal body core. He studied the serial number on the CPU, frowning deeply.

This was not at all what he had expected.

Zekk had assumed that IG-88, an old-model semi-sentient assassin droid, had gathered a cadre of discontinued machines that were still deadly, still functional. In theory, at least, assassin droids had not been constructed for decades--not since the fall of the Empire.

But this chip was new. The date-coded serial number and designators suggested that its programming was less than two months old. This assassin droid had been manufactured recently!

Zekk held up the chip, shining his glowrod onto its surface again to double-check its markings.

Something was terribly wrong here. This was a mystery he had not anticipated.

He heard a stirring noise, clear and definite this

time: the cautiously approaching footsteps of a creature that had far too many legs.

Zekk stood up straight, gripping a blaster in one hand and his glowrod in the other. He dimmed the light even further when he heard clacking noises and skittering footsteps from other catacombs, coming closer, getting louder. The combat arachnids were alerted to his presence. They were nearby . . .

and he had no doubt they intended to deal with another intruder swiftly and permanently.

Grabbing the CPU chip that held the information he needed--as well as another, deeper puzzle--he sprinted back out to the balconies and into the hazy sunlight of Kuar. He didn't look behind him. His legs were strong and fit and carried him at full speed back to his ship.

The combat arachnids could give chase if they wanted, but he sensed that they would be cautious, for a short time, at least--and he would get to safety first. He had left the Lightning Rod prepped for a fast getaway.

Sliding into the pilot's seat, Zekk activated the repulsorlifts and raised his ship off the dusty rim of the crater, taking time to fasten his crash restraints only after he had reached the air. Then he cruised away at a leisurely pace to give himself time to Zekk held the chip in his hand, contemplating the inexplicably recent serial number.

He ran a data check on the number using the Lightning Rod's computers.

The results verified his suspicions but raised many more questions than were answered.

The assassin droids that had accompanied IG-88

to kidnap Tyko Thul had been manufactured only a few weeks ago--on Mechis III.

In Tyko Thul's own droid factory.

As he reached the blackness of space, Zekk stared out at the cascade of stars . . . and decided that he had no choice but to follow the mystery where it led him. He was a bounty hunter, and he had an assignment to complete. He would go to Mechis III.

But first, he had one stop to make.

MECHIS III WAS a black world, its surface blanketed with slag and industrial debris, its continents covered with factories, processing centers, and automated assembly lines. It had originally been a lifeless planet with a breathable atmosphere, but ugly and barren--a place where huge factories could be set up without local inhabitants complaining about environmental damage. Better here, everyone agreed, than on some world worth saving.

Mechis III served its purpose, as evidenced by the proliferation of droids throughout the galaxy.

Other planets, such as Telti, produced high-quality droids as well, but for generations this had been the center of the industry.

During the last days of the Empire, though, Mechis III had undergone a turbulent upheaval, which was largely undocumented. The supervisors of the automated assembly lines had been killed, but

the mechanized, self-sufficient systems had continued regular production, unsupervised, for some time. In fact, several years had passed before anyone even noticed that the human attendants were no longer alive!

In the meantime, the systems had fallen into disarray.

Programming glitches and minor breakdowns went unrepaired and gradually compounded themselves into worse disasters.

Thus, by the time Raynat's uncle took on the immense project of restoring Mechis III's former glory, entire sections of the factory had been blackened, burnt out, or shut down from lack of power.

Much of the machinery lay in disrepair or total ruin.

But Tyko Thul had promised to bring the place to peak production levels and had succeeded admirably--at least until he was kidnapped by an assassin droid.

Now Raynar vowed he would not let all of his uncle's work go to waste

....

As the Rock Dragon approached Mechis III, Jaina looked out the front windowports at the landscape far below. The lights of a thousand factories glittered like bright embroidery across the slag-covered surface. Beside her, Raynat sat in Lowbacca's accustomed copilot's seat, though the young man did not venture to help with the actual flying. Jaina did it all with only Em Teedee's assistance--which made her miss Lowie even more.

Jacen and Tenel Ka sat beside each other in the back, talking quietly.

"Say," Jacen said, "what does an Imperial Star Destroyer wear to a formal occasion?"

"Why would Imperial Star Destroyers wear anything?"

Tenel Ka asked. The warrior girl from Dathomir seemed to enjoy frustrating him, and Jacen never failed to rise to the challenge.

"Still don't quite have the hang of these jokes, do you?" he said in exasperation. "Come on, you know that's not the fight response."

"Very well," Tenel Ka said with the barest smile, "what does an Imperial Star Destroyer wear to a

formal occasion?"

"A bow TIE!"

Jaina groaned. "That one's bad even for you, Jacen. I think we may have to strand you here on Mechis III."

Raynar leaned forward in the copilot's seat to study the view, eager and nervous at the same time.

"I've got coordinates for the administrative headquarters," he said. "My mother sent them. If Uncle Tyko left any messages, that's where they'll be."

"All right," Jaina said, thankful to turn back to flying the ship, "key the coordinates into the navicomputer and we'll be on our way."

The blond young man blinked in surprise that she would have him do the work. Jaina raised her eyebrows. "Well, what are you waiting for?"

With obvious pleasure, Raynar quickly punched in the data and changed course down to the industrial planet. After cruising through thick clouds of obscuring smoke, Jaina brought the Rock Dragon down on the roof of the administration towers.

Raynar was the first to the hatch. Jaina picked up Em Teedee, tucked

the little droid under one arm, and opened the passenger shuttle. Gusts of smoky air drifted in, smelling of burnt chemicals and ozone.

The companions stepped out and gazed around at the skyline.

Lightning rods spiked upward from the corners of the tallest buildings, drawing down static in discharge blasts. Towering factories spewed exhaust into the air, and black clouds simmered just above the 'tops of smokestacks.

Tenel Ka drew a deep breath, scowled, then took a more cautious sniff.

"The air is . . . brooding."

She looked up at the blackness in the sky. In the distance lightning flickered. "Perhaps a storm is approaching."

"I think that's just the pollution, Tenel Ka," Jacen said.

A roof doorway opened, ratcheting on tracks that had not been lubricated in a long time. A platinum-colored protocol droid emerged, an older model that still managed to move with well-oiled grace.

"You are not authorized to be here. No visitors allowed." Its voice was harsher, less silken than

See-Threepio's. "You must depart immediately . . .

or accept the consequences."

Em Teedee made a disbelieving sound that was muffled slightly by Jaina's arm. "Well, really! I am authorized translating droid Em Teedee, and my companions are students at the Jedi academy on Yavin 4.

I can assure you we have every right to be here."

"I am Threedee-Fourex, official protocol droid and welcoming committee--and you are not welcome," the protocol droid snapped.

"Protocol droid, indeed!" Em Teedee scoffed. "I should say your programming requires significant adjustment, not to mention your manners."

Threedee-Fourex continued to block their path.

"Go away. If you were the Emperor himself you would not be wanted here."

"The Emperor is dead," Jaina said, "and we have business on Mechis III."

The protocol droid did not budge.

Finally Raynar stepped forward. "I am Raynar Thul, nephew of Tyko Thul,

the administrator of this facility. In his absence, I have come to see that his business affairs run smoothly until he returns."

"You are not essential to this operation," Threedee-Fourex said.

"Your presence will complicate matters unnecessarily."

Raynar drew himself up with all the dignity and determination his noble upbringing had given him.

"And a mere protocol droid is not authorized to make that decision. Now show me to my uncle's offices. We have work to do."

"I will do no such thing," Threedee-Fourex Said, then swiveled about.

"It would violate my current priority programming--which is to keep guests away. Depart immediately, or I shall be forced to take extreme measures."

Tenel Ka withdrew her lightsaber, but did not switch it on. "We are Jedi Knights, droid." She held the rancor-tooth handle with studied nonchalance.

"Your 'extreme measures' would be useless against the Force."

After reconsidering the situation, the protocol droid scuttled away. The

companions hurried after him, catching a lift platform that took them down several levels to the main administrative floors. But Threedee-Fourex had disappeared.

Raynar frowned. "Oh well, we don't really need him anyway. We can use one of these wall diagrams to find my uncle's office."

Jaina activated the computerized map and plotted the shortest route to Tyko Thul's suite of rooms. A few minutes later Raynar stood looking through the doorway in a heavy bulkhead that led into a spacious room. "Here's the head office," he said.

A desk, sitting area, and beverage center all sat carefully arranged in front of a wall of windows that provided a spectacular, if frightening, view of the

grim industrial landscape. Computer screens lined a desktop piled high with old manifests, outdated production quotas, repair logs, and rebuilding plans.

A set of holographic models shimmered on one corner of the desktop, showing projected upgrades to machinery and factory lines.

"My uncle told me he ran all of Mechis III from his office," Raynar said. "We can use this as our command center. Luckily, the systems are pretty well automated, so I should only have to keep an eye on the most

important functions."

"Sounds like a big job, Raynar," Jacen said.

The young man nodded gravely. "Yes, but it's something I need to do . . . for my family. My mother would consider it great training."

I hope Uncle Tyko would be proud of me." He sniffed.

"One thing I intend to do is program certain droids to be more courteous!"

Raynar went to the desk console and checked the screens. He found a glowing icon that said "Current Operational Status," and touched it.

The screen lit up.

Suddenly loud alarms blared throughout the room.

A harsh mechanized voice bellowed from the speakers. "Intruder alert! Security lockdown initiated."

"Uh, wait!" Raynar said. "I didn't mean--" The heavy bulkhead door to Tyko's office slammed shut with a thunderous clang, like an ore hauler crashing into a rock wall. Pneumatic locks hissed as the door sealed

itself in place.

"Oh my!" Em Teedee wailed. "We're trapped!"

Drawing her lightsaber, Tenel Ka sprang to a fighting stance.

"Oh, blaster bolts. Now we're in for it," Jacen groaned, looking frantically around. "I'll bet Threedee-Fourex is laughing at us right now."

Jaina ran over to the computer console and nudged Raynar aside to see if she could deactivate the alarm. Glancing up, she suddenly noticed targeting lasers at the four corners of the ceiling. The weapons began to move, using motion sensors to acquire their marks.

"Laser cannons! Get them before they get us," she cried.

Jacen immediately saw the threat and drew his own lightsaber. Its emerald-green blade sprang out, ready for action. Needing neither explanation nor guidance, Tenel Ka streaked to the opposite side of the room, ready to do her part.

A brilliant laser danced out, leaving a black smoking crater in the floor at Raynar's feet. He yelped and lunged out of the way.

Jaina ducked, still hunched over the computer but with senses alert for

any other blasts. She scrambled at the controls, working to open the heavy door.

"Run for cover, Raynar," she called, and the blond-haired young man dove under the solid desk.

Feeling a warning through the Force, Jaina threw herself to one side as a laser bolt sizzled very close to where she had been standing.

Then she leapt back to her work, trying to understand the ancient automated systems. "Come on," she muttered, "how does this work?" She fervently wished Lowie were there--he could always figure out strange computer systems.

Tenel Ka held her lightsaber in her hand, its deep turquoise throbbing with power as she slashed upward. The glowing blade severed the nearest targeting laser, leaving a stump of smoldering plasteel that sizzled and sparked.

Jacen chopped another of the weapons to pieces.

"Two down," he said, "two to go." Instinctively working as a team, he and the warrior girl streaked toward opposite corners of the room.

The remaining weapons fired a dizzying web of laser bolts, which the

young Jedi easily managed to dodge by letting the Force guide them.

Jaina wondered if the targeting sensors had malfunctioned or if they were merely inaccurate. It seemed unlikely the powerful weapons would miss so many times.

Perhaps office security upgrades were not among the high-priority repairs Tyko Thul had completed.

She was thankful for that at least.

Jacen swiped with his lightsaber blade again, trashing the third of the weapons. Lasers burned scars into the walls like black bullet holes.

Jaina punched a final sequence into the computer, hoping she had guessed the proper string of commands--and heard a hissing thunk as the door unsealed. It didn't raise of its own accord, but at least the bulkhead was unlocked and they could lift it now. "To the door!"

Smashing the final laser cannon, Tenel Ka stood proudly under the rain of shrapnel. "We are safe," she announced. But loud alarms continued to blare.

Jaina still felt uneasy. "We don't know what other security forces might be coming," she said. "Better get out of these offices until the clamor dies down."

She ran to the heavy metal bulkhead. "Help me with this. We'll need to lift it ourselves."

Together, the companions heaved, using their muscles and their Jedi strength. The heavy door reluctantly rolled up into its socket

And there, looming in the doorway, was the towering assassin droid IG-88, just waiting for them. Blinking red lights flared like the eruptions of

miniature volcanoes in its conical head.

"Look out!" Jaina cried.

The assassin droid moved smoothly, relentlessly, raising both of its powerful metallic arms. IG-88

spoke no threat, but it clearly meant to take deadly action. In one arm its built-in blaster cannon powered up; in the other, a concussion grenade levered into place, ready for launch. The droid aimed its

weapons and prepared to fire on the young Jedi Knights.

"Wait!" a man's voice shouted. "I command you to stop!"

A moment later, Tyko Thul himself appeared from the shadows! His face was flushed, and his eyes showed annoyance rather than fear.

Raynar's supposedly kidnapped uncle, dressed in the garishly colored robes of the house of Thul, glared at the young Jedi Knights, then scowled directly at Ray nar.

"Well, what are you doing here, boy?" Tyko demanded with a tremendous sigh. "Now you've ruined everything!"

THE RISING STAR dipped and looped and cavorted with its pilot's exuberance as Raaba flew across the jungle canopy of Kashyyyk. Lowie didn't have to use his Jedi senses to see how excited she was about coming back home.

He couldn't wait to see his sister's face when she saw her best friend again. Of all Raaba's friends and relations, Sirra alone knew that the long-lost Wookiee was actually alive. But even Sirra didn't know that Lowie and Raaba were coming for a visit.

He bared his teeth in a gleeful grin as Raaba accelerated, flipped the little star skimmer over, and flew briefly upside down just above the dense canopy. The branches were so thick and interlocked that thoroughfares as wide as highways had been chopped through the treetops so that beasts of

burden could walk from place to place. Deep beneath the rooftop of branches lay the dark underworld where few Wookiees ever ventured.

Raaba flipped the Rising Star over again and waggled the tiny craft's airfoils back and forth so that the skimmer ruffled the leaves below it, like a Calamarian seaskiff dancing across the green waves.

Then, finally, they headed toward the vast treetop city where they had both grown up.

The crowns of the tallest wroshyr trees rose above the level canopy like islands in an ocean; wooden platforms at various heights served as gathering areas and landing pads. High-tech facilities, such as computer fabrication labs and the planetary traffic control tower, had been erected in some of the larger trees, while more distant tree clusters served as dwellings for Wookiee families.

Raaba chose an open landing platform high on the outskirts of the city. Cinching the red band tight around her head, Raaba bounded out of the star skimmer, as full of cheerful energy as Lowie had ever seen her.

She made Lowie promise not to tell anyone, not even Sirra, of her presence. Instead, she planned to make her way unobtrusively to the Great Tree Arena, where she would register a request for an all-city

meeting. She would let the Wookiee registry

spread the word for her, and then make her surprise reappearance tonight with everyone present.

Raaba had much to do between now and then, and it had to be done just right. The sleek, dark Wookiee woman hurried off after Lowie agreed to urge his sister and family to attend the gathering.

It was a long way to Lowie's house yet, but he was in no hurry.

His parents, Kallabow and Mahrac-cor, were probably still at work at the computer fabrication facility. After hours of cramped flight, he wanted to stretch his legs by striding along the spicy-smelling branchtop thoroughfare. The morning sun was warm, and the breeze fragrant. It felt good to be home.

He went to see his sister first.

A distinguished-looking older Wookiee with yellowing fur pointed Lowie toward the flight training area where Sirra took classes to become a star pilot.

He leapt and climbed from branch to branch to reach the leafy field above which Sirra flew her training vessel.

He looked upward, watching her ship make one long dive and then another pass. With no slight amusement, he noted that Sirra's piloting style was very much like Raaba's. The two had been fast friends for years, after all.

The refurbished Y-wing had a cramped instructor's station built into the compartment where the gunner formerly sat. From the speed with which Sirra banked and looped, however, one would never have guessed that her practice vessel was a discontinued model now used primarily for training.

Sirra simulated a perfect reverse-throttle hop against an imaginary opponent, followed by an under split, then disengaged after performing a flawless Talion roll. Her exhaust nacelles glowed orange-white as she roared back toward the treetop city.

With her lesson finished, Sirra brought the Y-wing to the landing platform low and fast, barely a meter above its polished surface. No doubt showing off, she pulled up into a steep climb, looped around, and landed with microcaliper precision directly in the center. Her ship's repulsorjets let out a hiss like a nervous sigh of relief.

Sirra popped the Y-wing's canopy and sprang out of the cockpit.

Because she was pumped with adrenaline from her flying antics, she did

not notice her brother at first, but Lowie had a front row seat for an amusing exchange.

Sirra raked long fingers through her ruffled patchwork fur, while her instructor, a portly human whom Lowie did not recognize, levered himself slowly and painfully out of the rear compartment.

The man's face was flushed and indignant, and his

voice shook when he spoke. "Why, in my day, young lady--" he began.

Wookiee, Sirra corrected him, growling in her own language.

"Yes, well, Wookiee then," the man said: "In my day, trainees understood how to follow instructions.

And they did it politely with a 'Yes, Captain Thorn' or a salute.

No grandstanding."

Sirra reminded Captain Thorn that she was not in the military, nor did she ever intend to be. Then, with sly deliberation, she pointed out that she had actually followed every one of his instructions. She had simply added a bit of . . . embellishment.

"Precisely," Thorn said, "embellishment. I did not tell you to

embellish."

But he hadn't told her not to embellish, Sirra insisted in a mild voice, wrinkling her black nose.

Lowie, nearly shaking with laughter, chose this moment to heave himself up onto the landing platform where his sister could see him.

Sirra uttered a yelp of happy surprise and crossed the platform in two long leaps. She threw herself into her brother's arms, and the two Wookiees set up a joyous interchange of growls, barks, and chuffing laughter.

Captain Thorn flushed a deep red all the way up to the scalp that showed through his thinning hair and stalked off the platform, mumbling something about needing a pay raise.

Sirra wanted to know why Lowie had come unannounced, when he had arrived, why his little translating droid had not accompanied him, how he had gotten to Kashyyyk . . . and whether or not he had heard anything from Raaba.

Lowie tried to explain without giving away Raaba's secret. Sirra gave a pleased growl, not noticing how he had evaded her questions.

His timing was perfect, she assured him--though she cast an annoyed look in the direction of her departed instructor. She hoped that Lowie could stay a while and watch how well she had learned to fly since she, too, had completed her rite of passage down in the dangerous underworld.

She had so much to tell him, it might take days.

At early evening, Lowie and Sirca made their way to the amphitheater just outside the treetop city. Their parents were already there, along with half the city's inhabitants.

Sirra complained that they would have more fun staying home and playing combat-simulation games on their entertainment unit. Why in the sector would he want to attend an open city forum in the Great Tree Arena? Such meetings were always dull and never had any relevance to the younger members of society.

With a mysteriously cocked brow, Lowie hastened to assure his sister that she would find this particular meeting very interesting.

Sirca threw him a doubtful glance, but did not argue further.

They chose seating branches high in the amphitheater, where they could get the best view. The sun sank below the horizon of the sprawling forest, and the sky grew rich and dark overhead. Lowie had a hard time distinguishing between the soft rustling of Wooldees finding their seats

and the whisper of leaves in the evening wind.

Sirra grew restless for the meeting to start. Lowie began to worry that something had gone wrong or that Raaba had changed her mind.

Maybe she had reconsidered her confession, and was ashamed after all to tell how she had staged her own death.

Then, just as the first few stars brightened in the sky, a shaft of blazing light stabbed upward from the center of the stage. In the center of the light stood a chocolate-furred female Wooldee--wearing her own dazzling belt made of syren fiber. Fresh syren fiber!

Sirra nearly fell backward off her branch in surprise, and Lowie fared no better. He had known Raaba set up this meeting, but the implications of her belt were enough to stun him as much as everyone else in the assembly. Surprised murmurs of recognition spread through the crowd, and Lowie heard Raaba's name repeated over and over. Sirra glared at her brother accusingly. He had kept this a secret from her!

Before Lowie could explain why he had kept silent about her friend's return, Raaba raised her arms to quiet the crowd. In a loud, clear voice she introduced herself, so that there could be no mistaking who she was.

Next, the beam of light in which Raaba stood split into a hundred smaller rays that opened and spread themselves flat on the stage, like the petals of some gigantic fiery flower with her at its center.

She told everyone how she had been all but dead after attempting her rite of passage... and how the Diversity Alliance had given her back her life.

In much the same way, she said, the Empire's enslavement of Wookiees had taken the life of Kashyyyk. To a great extent, Wookiees still slaved for humankind, in one way or another. Lowie sat listening uneasily. He had not known Raaba was going to make this a political speech. Sirra, though, seemed thoroughly enthralled.

Raaba continued. Aliens of all species had suffered similar treatment since before the rise of Emperor Palpatine--all at the hands of humans.

And the most shameful part, she said, spreading her arms to the crowd, was that none of it would have

been possible if the nonhuman peoples hadn't allowed it to happen.

The Diversity Alliance and its visionary leader, Nola Tarkona, were ready to show the way. If Wookiees and Talz and Biths and Twi'leks and all other species would band together, unified under one leader, they would never need to fear the domination of humans again.

She urged anyone who was willing to help to send a message to the Diversity Alliance, to go to Nola Tarkona herself on Ryloth, or to talk their friends into joining the cause as well. · Wookiee murmurs ran through the crowd again, this time sounds of approval. Raaba's voice grew no louder, but her words became more persuasive.

Each of the glowing rays around her shattered into a million tiny shards of light, surrounding her like a swarm of phosfleas.

Individually, Raaba explained, each of them was no more than one of these tiny specks. Alone, they could do nothing. But together--she raised her arms high over her head and the phosfleas-specks of light coalesced into a hundred dazzling rays--they could change the galaxy!

The rays snapped together again into a single brilliant beacon that speared upward toward the stars.

Then the stage went completely dark.

Wookiees on every side shook the branches to show their approval.

Swept along by the emotion, Lowie and Sirra joined in.

Suddenly and without warning, Raaba stood there with them, out in the

amphitheater seats. With a roar of joy, Sirra hurled herself upon her friend, pounding Raaba on the back and growling happily.

Raaba chuffed her own delight to see Sirra again as she showed off her glossy new belt.

Unable to restrain his curiosity any longer, Lowie asked Raaba when and how she had gotten her trophy. The chocolate-furred Wookiee flashed her fangs in a wide grin, pleased by his surprise.

She had gone down to the world below only that afternoon, just before returning home to visit her stunned parents. Raaba had been hiding for almost a year, running away--and she wanted to have her trophy before she showed herself again. Completing the fateful mission that had been interrupted so long ago had made her return even more dramatic.

But then her expression grew serious again.

Raaba looked shrewdly at her two friends. She needed to return to Ryloth that very night, she said; she had to report in to Nola Tarkona and the Diversity Alliance. There was no time to waste. Her eyes burned with an intensity Lowie could not entirely understand.

Then Raaba eagerly clasped both of their shoulders.

If Lowie and Sirra would accompany her to

Ryloth, just for a few days, she would tell them all about her adventures in the lower levels and her battle with the syren plant.

Before Lowie could consider the question, Sirra enthusiastically agreed for both of them.

SPARKS FROM THE mined targeting lasers continued to sputter into Tyko Thul's administrative office. The young Jedi Knights stood frozen in shock after hearing Raynar's uncle issue orders to the deadly assassin droid.

Perturbed, Tyko tried with little success to step around the metallic hulk of IG-88. "Out of the way, you big clod," he said as he pushed against the assassin droid's body core. The droid clanked dutifully sideways to give Raynar's uncle room to pass.

Tyko strode to the nearest of the wrecked automatic weapons in his office, grimaced, then turned to face Raynar and his friends. "You didn't need to destroy them all, did you? I specifically calibrated the targeters not to hit anybody," he said with a huff. "Now the entire defense grid in this room is mined, and I'll have to have it replaced."

He heaved

a long-suffering sigh. "As if I didn't have enough to do already."

"But," Raynar spluttered, "Uncle Tyko, what's going on?"

Tyko rolled his eyes. "Isn't it obvious, my dear boy? I was trying to lure your irresponsible father out of hiding by making it look as if I were in incredible personal peril. I did it for all of us--so we can get everything back to normal working order again. But I see Borman doesn't care a whit about me after all."

IG-88 stomped to the doorway and took up a position guarding the room's entrance. He held out his powerful upper limbs, high-energy armaments fully extended. Tyko flashed the droid a sidelong glance.

"Oh, deactivate your weapons, you half-witted hunk of antiquated machinery! Can't you see you're not intimidating anyone anymore?"

Tyko shook his head in disbelief. "Droids! No matter how sophisticated you make them, they still have no sense of propriety."

"I beg your pardon?" Em Teedee said.

Jaina shushed the little translating droid and turned to Tyko.

"We could use some explanations, sir. This whole situation is pretty complicated, and we only came here to help. This isn't what we expected to find at all."

Tenel Ka's muscles tensed as she faced Tyko Thul, her voice gruff.

"We believed you were in true

danger. We risked much for you on Kuar--yet you say your entire abduction was a mere hoax?"

"I had to make the whole thing look believable, of course," Raynar's uncle said with a shrug. "But my droids were very careful."

Standing by the desktop computer pad, he punched in commands that shut off power to the security systems and stopped the flow of sparks from the broken targeting lasers. "Well, we'll have to fix that some other time. Come with me. I'm scheduled to check one of the assembly lines. We can discuss this as I go about my business." With that, Tyko turned and bustled out of the room, his bright robes swirling around him.

The young Jedi Knights followed, still perplexed.

The assassin droid stood motionless and threatening, guarding the empty room.

"Well?" Tyko called over his shoulder. "Don't just stand there, IG-88.

Come with us."

The droid strode after them, metallic feet pounding on the floor.

"I know my brother very well. Unfortunately--and I'm sorry you have to hear this, Raynar--" Tyko said, looking sympathetically at the young man, "your father has always tried to outsmart everyone in negotiations, relying on his wits . . .

and that frequently gets him into trouble. I'm convinced he's on the run because some scam backfired on him--something too embarrassing to admit. And now he's simply hiding, without bothering to consider the incredible inconvenience he's causing the rest of us."

They stopped at a broad lift platform big enough for all of them to climb aboard. Tyko pushed a button, and the floor suddenly dropped out beneath them as the lift plunged down to the lower manufacturing levels.

"Bornan's dear wife Aryn is in constant torment," Tyko went on.

"The trading fleet has stopped most of its work, subcontracted their primary merchandising accounts until further notice, and gone on the run from imaginary enemies. Poor Raynar here is worried sick about his father." He huffed.

"I decided I'd simply had enough of this charade, so I staged my own kidnapping, hoping that I could flush Bornan out. It was perfectly

reasonable to suppose that if he thought his own brother was in danger, he would finally come out and set things to rights." Tyko sighed.

"But instead of him coming to find me, you children arrived. Now he'll never show up."

The lift stopped, and they entered a tube shuttle that rocketed them to another factory complex. A symphony of industrial noises thundered all around them. Silvery pistons gleamed under harsh lights, whooshing up and down. Jets of superhot steam hissed, while pumps circulated supercold gases through cylinders of bubbling liquids.

Conveyor belts hummed as they hauled sparkling new parts to various assembly stations where meticulous multiarmed droids pieced the components together. Bulky worker droids thumped from one end of the cavernous room to another, using portable repulsorsleds to move completed machinery to the shipping areas.

"My, this is fascinating, isn't it?" Em Teedee said. "Look at all the activity."

Raynat's uncle stopped, distracted by one section of the line where droids were installing dozens of optical sensors like black blisters on a dome-shaped head assembly; farther down the same line, other droid workers attached the head assembly to a mobile torso equipped with small

rocket engines.

The entire unit was then installed in a self-contained hyperdrive pod.

"This is the production line once used to create the thousands of probe droids Darth Vader commissioned, back when he was hunting down Rebel bases like the one on Hoth," Tyko said. "Now we've retooled the probot apparatus and programming to produce these mapping and surveyor droids. They proved quite useful during the Black Fleet Crisis.

"The New Republic needs an accurate map of the galaxy, so that they won't be ignorant of lost colonies or uninhabited worlds rich in resources.

The best surveys are centuries out of date, and many aren't up to the standards our modern technology will allow."

Proudly, Tyko rapped his knuckles on the hemispherical assembly, and spoke to the droids on the construction line. "Good work. Keep it up."

Then he strode away. The droids took no notice of the compliment. IG-88 marched behind them like a bodyguard.

"But what about IG-887" Jaina said, still more interested in Tyko Thul's explanations than in his tour. "The whole attack on Kuar? The assassin droids?"

Tyko clasped his hands behind his back and pressed his lips together.

"The other assassin droids on IG-88's commando team were of . . . recent manufacture. I happened upon some old plans in the assembly facilities here on Mechis III, so I produced an extra dozen or so."

Raynar sounded indignant. "But it's illegal to manufacture assassin droids, Uncle Tyko! That was clearly stated in the New Republic charter when they turned this planet over to you. I just read all of those documents, because I was coming to help run this place while you were gone."

"Well, I suppose it's illegal . . . from a certain point of view,"

Tyko said, "if you're strictly literal about it. But they were just for show. All of my new assassin droids had explicit programming to prevent them from harming anyone. Rather disqualifies

them as 'assassin' droids, wouldn't you say? Not terribly practical either, except that their other capabilities make them unusually versatile and powerful."

Tenel Ka's brows knitted together, and her storm-gray eyes flashed. "So. We were never in actual danger on Kuar?"

"Oh, you were in plenty of danger--but not from my droids," Tyko said.

"The combat arachnids could have sliced you to pieces. I never

anticipated those beasts." Tyko patted the gleaming durasteel arm of IG-88. "In fact, it's a good thing my droids were there, because I'm not sure you kids could have handled all those ferocious monsters."

Tenel Ka seemed somewhat mollified to know that at least some of the danger had been genuine.

Jaina looked the assassin droid up and down.

"So, IG-88's just a replica, too? A copy of the original?"

"No, he's real enough," Tyko said. "I found him here when I took over Mechis III. This whole planet was such a mess!" He shook his head, and then moved on to inspect another station where motivators were being installed into the torsos of a new series of astromech droids.

"When I got here, all the systems were in a shambles. There was some sort of revolution here, and it took me a long time to uncover all the details.

I was astonished to discover that the droids themselves had fostered this rebellion, killing their human masters as part of some grand plan to take over the galaxy. According to the records I was able to reconstruct, IG-88--the real assassin droid--was behind it somehow.

"Apparently, IG-88 had made several copies of himself, which went out to

do the bounty-hunting work that made him so famous. Those copies were all destroyed in various escapades. This one, though, the primary one, had developed a scheme to upload his entire electronic consciousness, if it were, into the second Death Star computer core so that he could become the galaxy's most powerful weapon!"

"Not the best choice," Jacen said. "We all know what happened to the second Death Star."

Tyko smiled indulgently at him. "So IG-88 left behind the empty shell of his original body, which I found. I was careful to completely purge its systems, every memory bank. I replaced its central processing core, gave it new programming. This droid is now absolutely loyal to me, but still as capable as the old IG-88."

After completing the circuit of the manufacturing floor, Tyko took them back to the tube shuttle, which returned them to the main headquarters building.

"Well, well," Raynar said, his forehead creased with concern as he sorted out the details of Tyko's

plan. "At least you've got IG-88 to protect you, if there's ever a real assault from the people who are after my father."

Tyko looked skeptically at his nephew. "My dear boy, I'm certain Bornan's gotten himself into some sort of trouble, but I doubt that there are really people chasing him who intend to harm him," he said as he led them to the broad lift platform again.

"Mark my words--there's no danger here."

The lift platform lurched as it shot them skyward again, back up to the administration levels.

BEFORE HEADING OFF to Mechis III on his search for Tyko Thul, Zekk diverted the Lightning Rod to the asteroid station of Borgo Prime.

He had no intention of missing the scheduled rendezvous

with his mysterious employer.

Bornan Thul.

Zekk sat inside Shanko's Hive all alone at a table, wearing a scuffed flight suit, his long dark hair neatly tied back. While he waited, Zekk studied a datapad to which he had downloaded the shipping records and permits issued for legal droid commerce throughout the New Republic. All restrictions against constructing automated assassins remained in effect. According to public transaction records on file with the Department of Galactic Commerce, no droid construction

facility--including Tyko's own operation on Mechis III--had a permit either to build or sell assassin droids.

IG-88 and his newly constructed companions remained a mystery to Zekk. Something just didn't fit

He had ordered a hot meal from the insectlike Shanko, but chewed without tasting, wrapped up in his own thoughts. Apprehending Bornan Thul for the famous bounty was not an option at the moment, since the contract with his employer was not yet complete. He still had to find Tyko.

Repeatedly glancing at his chronometer, he rehearsed what he intended to say to the man. Though Boba Fett had given him advice, questions remained at the back of Zekk's mind. This was a dangerous time for him. Less than an hour now until his meeting

Zekk slurped another mouthful of the spicy stew. His stomach roiled, but Shanko had assured him that this meal was human-compatible.

His queasiness was due more to anxiety over the impending meeting than any lack of quality in the cooking.

Shanko's Hive was abustle with hundreds of patrons of all different species. The insectoid owner kept his crowded establishment clean and in excellent repair, much in contrast to the dingy Mos Eisley cantina.

Zekk kept his eye on everyone, studying, searching.

Bornan Thul arrived in a new disguise this time,

but Zekk spotted him from afar. His employer wore a maroon caftan, a brown turban around his head, and a metal breath mask that covered his nose and mouth, the type worn by inhabitants of heavily polluted worlds.

Thul didn't notice Zekk at first. The man's partially obscured gaze darted around the bar furtively, as if he were anxious about being among so many people. If Zekk had any lingering doubts about his employer's identity, they were dispelled the moment he sensed Thul's tension.

At his table Zekk sat back and wondered whether he should raise a hand to wave his employer over.

He decided the attention might startle Bornan Thul, so he simply waited until the disguised man noticed him.

"I have only a few moments," Thul said without preamble when he finally located Zekk and slid into the seat next to him. The metallic breath mask filtered his voice. "Quickly--give me your report!"

Under the turban, Thul's gaze continued to dart warily around at the other patrons in Shanko's Hive.

Zekk found this alermess ironic, since right now he himself was the bounty hunter Bornan Thul should have feared the most.

Zekk laced his fingers behind his head and feigned relaxation.

"I've completed the first part of your task," he said. "I sent the message for the Bomaryn fleet through all the communication nodes you suggested. I have, of course, received no word as to whether Aryn Dro Thul actually got the transmission . . . but it's likely."

Bornan Thul seemed to melt with relief, and instantly the lines around his shadowed eyes softened.

Waves of long-repressed emotion flowed from him like a physical presence.

Zekk decided to tell the rest of his story. "Immediately after I transmitted your message, a bounty hunter attacked me. He'd been waiting for just such a signal. He pounced, but I managed to outwit him and escape."

The disguised man nodded gravely. "You see--I was right to be cautious."

"Yes. That bounty hunter thought he had found you . . . Bornan

Thul." Zekk's voice was barely above a whisper.

The man stiffened and looked ready to leap away in panic. Zekk held up a hand. "If I had planned to capture you, I could have stunned you the moment you sat down. Relax." Zekk tossed his long dark hair, trying to unwind the tension in his neck. "How long did you think you could hide it? You were pretty obvious. I guessed your identity the first time we met, even in your disguise."

Bornan Thul swallowed so hard that Zekk could hear it through the metallic breath mask. Thul kept

his voice low. "I was raised as a noble of Alderaan.

I have been a successful merchant, a prominent trade negotiator--I have had little practice at hiding myself."

"That much is obvious," Zekk said with a thin smile. "I'm impressed that you've managed to elude capture so far. You know, I'd earn incredible fame and notoriety if I were to take you in now--but that wouldn't be honorable. The Bounty Hunter's Creed forbids me to work against my employer. I accepted your assignment, and I won't betray you. So you're safe--at least until I've fulfilled all my obligations to you.

"I still haven't found your brother, though I've got a lead on Tyko's

kidnapping. I have quite a few questions that are still unanswered, so I'm on my way to Mechis III. I have a feeling I can learn more there about what's happened to him, maybe even find him."

"We cannot meet again," Bornan Thul said, his voice trembling.

"Now that you know who I am."

Zekk's emerald eyes narrowed. "Then how can I be sure I'll get paid when I accomplish the task?"

"I'm an honorable man, too," Thul said. "When my brother is found, the credits will appear in your account. From that point on, I will consider you another enemy to be avoided at all cost."

He stood up, considered, then turned back to the

table. "Young man, you can't begin to understand the consequences if you delivered me to Nolaa Tarkona. Do you have any idea why she wants me so badly?"

Zekk shook his head. "A bounty hunter doesn't ask questions! My job is to complete the task.

Politics, emotions, and legal nuances are better left to more complex

entities."

Thul heaved a ponderous sigh. "Perhaps you would think differently if you knew all that I know," he said. "If Nola Tarkona were to get the information I am protecting, she would not hesitate to use it.

It might result in the extinction of all humans.

Consider how far you're willing to go to earn fame as a bounty hunter--and how many lives you would risk in the process."

Zekk shifted uncomfortably, trying not to consider the implications.

Unexpectedly, a loud and unruly fight broke out at the automated musical-selection apparatus on the other side of the bar. A burly, white-furred Talz shoved aside a tusk-faced Whiphid. The Whiphid roared, lowered his cliff-sized head, and butted the Talz in the chest.

The white slothlike creature squealed in high-pitched alarm and began pounding the Whiphid in turn.

Tables crashed over. The music machine toppled with a jangle of synthesized squawks. The murmuring conversation in Shako's Hive changed to resounding gasps and cheers as friends of the combatants and other enthusiastic patrons hurled themselves into the fray.

Shanko gestured with one pair of multijointed arms, and his three-armed bartender lumbered into the brawl with a loud bellow.

Droq'l grasped the Talz and the Whiphid with his outer two hands, forcefully separating them. At the same time, his central hand balled into a battering-ram fist and punched each creature in an extremely sensitive area particular to their species.

Both fighters dropped like stones, and Droq'l glared down at them as their supporters backed away to slink into the shadows. The bartender righted the music machine, kicked it once to start it working again, then glowered at the two groggy aliens.

"Your bar tab will reflect a surcharge for the necessary repairs," he growled, then stalked back to the bar. There the insectoid Shanko, who had watched the entire altercation without comment, rewarded his bartender with a full tankard of Oskorn Stout.

Zekk shook his head and turned back to Bornan Thul--but the man was gone. He looked around in alarm, but saw no sign of the fugitive.

Thul had vanished completely, just as he had last time

Zekk decided there was no point in pursuing his employer. It would do no good. Instead, he would finish his stew, and then head for Mechis HI

straightaway.

WHEN THE YOUNG Jedi Knights returned to the administrative offices, Tyko hurried off to arrange for a meal to be brought in. Now that he had let them in on his plan, he seemed determined to be the attentive host.

But something still bothered Jaina. "I'm not sure quite what it is," she said, "but something about your uncle's story doesn't add up, Raynar."

Raynar frowned, as troubled as she was, "You don't think he was lying, do you?"

· "We would have sensed that, I think," Jacen said.

"He was telling the truth."

Tenel Ka arched an eyebrow. "I found several logical flaws in his scheme."

"Well, for one thing," Raynar said, "he's assuming my father is pulling a scam. He doesn't seem to believe my family is in any real danger."

"Yeah, that doesn't make any sense," Jacen piped

up. "Your uncle may have faked his own kidnapping, but Boba Fett was

sure serious enough in the shards of Alderaan."

Jaina added, "Yes, and the bounty hunter Kusk and his brother who tried to get you and your mother away from the Tradewyn were no hoax.

I'd say they were pretty real--not to mention dangerous."

"We need to tell my mother that Uncle Tyko is safe," Raynar said.

"That'll be one less thing for her to worry about." Looking around the spacious administrative office, his eyes glinted with determination.

"We should get these targeted defensive lasers working again before we leave--just in case Uncle Tyko gets any unwanted visitors."

"I'm certain that the gesture would be greatly appreciated," Em Teedee said. "If Mistress Jaina would be so kind as to link me to the defense control systems, I believe I might be of some assistance."

Jaina grinned and pulled her multitool from the pocket of her jumpsuit.

"I'm always prepared."

She rapidly removed the access plates on the mined weapons systems. By the time Tyko returned, followed by IG-88 and a serving droid that carried the midday meal, the young Jedi Knights had managed to repair

two of the four targeting lasers.

"I don't believe it!" Tyko beamed. He patted

Raynar on the back. "But then, of course, we Thuls have always been resourceful."

"I didn't do this alone," Raynar objected. "Everyone helped--even Em Teedee."

"Yes, of course, my boy," Tyko answered. He glanced over at the console to which the translating unit had been wired. "Ah, Em Teedee, how kind of you to lend, um. . . to lend a wire. You are the one droid in the galaxy I truly trust--with the exception of my own IG-88, of course."

"Why, thank you, Master Tyko. I do try," Em Teedee said, almost preening. The compliment seemed to make no impression on IG-88, however.

Working and tinkering always helped Jaina to concentrate, to let her subconscious work out things that were bothering her. Something clicked now in her mind, and she turned from her work to stare directly at the red-eyed assassin droid.

"Now; children, what may I offer you to eat?"

Tyko asked. "We have kebroot stew, dried ossber-ries, a fine--" "Wait,"

Jaina said, her eyes still on IG-88. "I have a few questions first."

"Very well, my dear, but don't dawdle. Our meal is waiting."

Jaina worded her question carefully. "Didn't you say that those new assassin droids were programmed not to kill?"

"Why, of course, my child. I programmed them

myself," Tyko answered. "Nothing at all to worry about. Now, can I offer you some sparkling ale or would you prefer--"

"But," Jaina interrupted again, "on Kuar your assassin droids blasted several combat arachnids into dripping chunks."

Tenel Ka nodded suspiciously. "This is a fact. It certainly qualifies as killing."

"Hey, that's right," Jacen said. "Combat arachnids are very rare creatures."

".No! Combat arachnids don't really qualify, of course," the round-faced man spluttered. "The droids were protecting you.

Besides--it's not as if those things were human."

Jaina's stomach clenched as the implications of his words sank in.

Raynat had also gone as pale as stormtrooper armor. "Are you saying," the young man asked in a strangled voice, "that your droids have no compunctions against killing anything--or anyone--that isn't human?"

"An assassin droid wouldn't be much of a bodyguard if it couldn't protect me from an attack by those combat arachnids, would it?" Tyko said.

"Our Wookiee friend Lowbacca was with us on Kuar as well," Tenel Ka said in a dangerous voice.

"And he's not human," Jacen said. "Neither is Raaba."

"Neither am I, I might add," Em Teedee chimed

in. "And I am completely without defenses of my

own."

Jaina swallowed to loosen the tightness in her throat. "Does that mean, then, that Lowie could have been killed in your little staged attack?"

Tyko looked distinctly uncomfortable. "Well, I suppose it might have happened. In theory, at least."

He held up his hands in a placating gesture. "But it's hardly an issue anymore. It didn't happen, and that's what's important."

Raynar's hands squeezed into tight fists, and his jaw clenched.

Jaina had never before seen such an angry expression on his face. "In that case, Uncle, I'd say it was a very good thing that all of your assassin droids were destroyed on Kuar."

"Yes," Jaina said, turning her attention back to IG-88. "All but one."

"Well, well, well," Raynar said. His eyes narrowed, and a shrewd expression stole over his face.

"That gives me an idea."

Though Jaina missed Lowie's expertise in programming, she set to work on IG-88 as soon as they had finished their meal. Annoyed over what she intended to do, but unable to argue against it, Tyko Thul left in a huff to check on more assembly lines.

With Em Teedee's assistance, Jaina decided to use the broad

administrative desk as an "operating" table. The sinister configuration of IG-88 still caused her to shiver as she pondered all the beings this machine must have killed over the decades. But Tyko Thul had flushed its murderous program and replaced its processors.

Now, the menacing droid awaited its revised instructions--and Jaina obliged.

"This was an excellent idea, Raynat," Tenel Ka said, clapping an approving hand on the blond boy's shoulder.

While Jaina completed her special "modifications," the rest of the young Jedi Knights finished the repairs to the targeting-laser defensive systems.

Jacen peered into the open durasteel casing of IG-88's torso where Jaina was working. "I think it just may work."

"There, that ought to do it," Jaina said. She triggered a test switch.

The assassin droid raised his gun arm, but did not fire. She smiled and flicked the switch off again. "All systems function perfectly, but there's no way this droid could ever intentionally kill someone--human or alien. He's programmed to serve and protect." She closed IG-88's casing and disconnected Em Teedee's diagnostic leads.

Raynar smiled. "I doubt my uncle could have programmed him any better

than you did. Now he's the perfect bodyguard."

At this Em Teedee piped up. "In light of your uncle's expertise, I wonder if I might make a special request? . . ."

STEAM HISSED ON the primary droid assembly line. The pungent smells of molten plasteel, lubricants, and hot machinery filled the air.

"Best droid enhancements anywhere in the galaxy," Tyko Thul said with obvious pride, gesturing toward the rows of conveyor belts.

"Manufactured right here and subjected to the most rigorous quality control you'll find anywhere. I'm sure you can find anything you need."

Flustered, Jaina continued to tinker with Em Teedee, wondering what parts she might "need."

She turned the little droid around in her hands so he could better view the dozens of assembly lines that stretched for kilometers down the length of the utilitarian facility.

"Why, it's breathtaking, isn't it?" Em Teedee said in a reverent voice.

"I am dreadfully sorry to be so

much trouble. I never meant to impose. I'm certain you all have more

urgent matters to attend to."

Jaina raised the silvery oval to her eye level and looked earnestly into his yellow optical sensors.

"It's all right. You're important to us too, you know."

"Come now, my dear little droid," Tyko said.

"You must allow me to give you a gift as thanks for all you've done to help protect the Thul family.

BeEides, I'm delighted at the opportunity to demonstrate our workmanship in such a practical way.

Go ahead, feel free to select any enhancements that interest you."

"That's a terribly gracious offer," Em Teedee said in a warbling voice.

"I can't help but think that if I'd had a few more enhancements--if I were a bit more useful--Master Lowbacca might not have left me behind ."

"Take your pick, Em Teedee," Jacen said. "Plenty to choose from."

"Do you not wish to be enhanced?" Tenel Ka asked. "Consider the question well." After the warrior girl's arm had been severed in a lightsaber training accident, Tenel Ka had struggled with whether or not

to use a synthetic arm. In the end, she had decided against it.

"Perhaps I should start by showing you what's available?" Tyko suggested with a broad gesture.

For the next two hours Em Teedee was as happy

as a child in a plaything emporium. Jaina could understand the feeling, since she was almost as fascinated by the endless possibilities as the little droid was. They considered enhanced optical sensors, motion detectors, new remote analysis routines.

"Dear me! I've always been a simple translating droid," Em Teedee said.

"Whatever would I do with so many capabilities?"

"Ah, then you might be interested in our linguistic upgrades."

Tyko held up a new traced-circuit crystal. "Here on Mechis III we produce a variety of modules containing anywhere from ten languages to ten million, depending on what a particular droid is required to know."

"I'm afraid Em Teedee's processor wasn't designed to handle a million languages," Jaina said.

"He just doesn't have that kind of capacity."

"No," Tyko agreed. "But a few--say, ten--additional languages shouldn't strain his capacity."

Unaccustomed to being the center of attention, Em Teedee listened to each opinion before making his choice. In the end, he selected a secondary protocol module that added ten of the most frequently used languages in the galaxy to those he already had.

When the installation process was finished, Jaina closed the silvery casing. "Well, Em Teedee, how does it feel?"

"Why, it feels absolutely . . . ops'nyzh! That is an expression that means 'approaching euphoric' in the Bothan language. Oh--I didn't know that word before. Now I am fluent in over sixteen forms of communication!"

Em Teedee decided against adding an obscure idiom analysis chip, but at the next assembly line, he discovered an unexpected enhancement opportunity that was too enticing to turn down: his own repulsor unit.

"Just think of it," the droid said, "complete mobility for the first time since I was activated!"

"Hey, yeah. We wouldn't have to carry you around all the time when Lowie's not here," Jacen said.

That clinched it. The companions needed to offer no further encouragement for Em Teedee to accept the enhancement.

Jaina brought out her multitool and commandeered a set of specialized instruments from one of the assembly lines. She fitted a narrow circular collar with a hundred microrepulsorjets to the base of Em Teedee's oblong head.

"There," she said, tightening the last tiny bolt into place. Em Teedee's optical sensors gleamed with curiosity. "The controls are wired directly into your processor. By selecting the number, strength, and location of the repulsors operating at a given

time, you should be able to maneuver in any direction."

"Oh, thank you, Mistress Jaina. This is even more exciting than the waterproofing gaskets you outfitted me with."

"Well, try it out," Raynar said. "Let's see you move."

The repulsorjets whispered, and the ovular miniaturized droid lifted from the table like a levitating ball. "This seems simple enough," Em Teedee said.

"I think I'll try going a little higher."

The little droid rocketed toward the far distant ceiling like a projectile fired from a cannon. His speaker grille sounded in alarm, and the next thing Jaina heard was a metallic clang as Em Teedee struck one of the overhead support girders.

"Em Teedee, be careful up there!" she called.

Next the silvery oval came down, only to streak past them, moving sideways down the long corridor, out of control. "Help! Please help!

Dear me!"

"The lateral thrusters seem to be working well," Tyko said calmly.

"Dampen the output!" Jaina cried. "Use your collision-avoidance routines."

Em Teedee managed to reverse himself and shot back toward them.

Flying upside down, the translating droid circled the table where Jaina had performed her modifications. "How very odd! Everything seems to have changed. What have I done?

Were my optical sensors damaged when I hit the ceiling? I'm doomed! Now

I shall be dismantled for scrap metal--" Jaina reached out and twisted the little droid in the air, righting him. "There. Now take a look around."

Em Teedee hovered, wobbling as he adjusted repulsors to maintain his balance. "Oh my, this is quite disorienting. I never realized how challenging mobility could be."

"Just think of it as your baby steps." Jacen grinned as they gathered around the upgraded droid.

"You just need a little more practice."

Em Teedee's golden optical sensors flickered.

"Ah, that's better. My gyroscopes and coordinate sensors needed to be recalibrated. I'm certain I'll be much more stable now--so long as I proceed with caution. Just let me get my bearings and--oh! Look out behind you!" he wailed.

Suddenly a compelling voice rang out through the echoing lower levels.

"Stop right there! I've got blasters aimed at you. No one moves--no one gets hurt."

Raynar knew the voice, though he couldn't place it in the flash of

adrenaline that surged through his bloodstream. Surprisingly, his Jedi senses told him that this voice brought no threat, no danger, despite the words.

"No fast moves now. Everyone, raise your hands and turn toward me."

Raynar turned to face a pair of blasters pointing at their little group, but the intruder lurked in shadow behind the assembly line machinery. Then a young man stepped forward, emerald-green eyes wide with amazement. His long dark hair had come loose from the thong at the base of his neck.

"Why, Master Zekk, what a great pleasure it is to see you again!"

Em Teedee caroled from somewhere over Raynar's head.

"Zekk!" Jaina cried out, her face suddenly turning a flattering shade of pink.

The young bounty hunter looked tired. Smudges of filthy lubricants stained his cheeks and forehead, and one sleeve of his tight-fitting uniform was scorched through. "Jaina! Jacen!" He gaped at the others around him. "What are you all doing here?"

"Hey, Zekk," Jacen replied with a welcoming

grin. "Kind of a rough way to say hello, isn't it?"

"Greetings," Tenel Ka said.

As Zekk lowered his weapons, Jaina launched herself into his arms and twirled him in a happy hug. "It's so good to see you again! Did you get my holomessages? Hey, how did you make it past the targeted lasers?"

Zekk indicated the singed place on his arm. "It wasn't easy."

Tyko chose this moment to break up the reunion.

"More to the point, my young hoodlum, what are you doing here?"

What business do you have threatening us? You're lucky IG-88 didn't blast you to cinders."

Zekk took a moment to holster his weapons and give Jaina a real hug before looking directly into Tyko's eyes. "I take it you're Tyko Thul? I was hired to rescue you. But it looks like I'm a bit late for that."

Tyko stared skeptically at Zekk. "Do you really expect me to believe you were hired to help me? A scruffy-looking bounty hunter like you? Aryn Dro Thul would hardly have contracted with some disreputable

juvenile to come to my rescue. She could afford the most famous names in the business."

Raynar considered this with surprise. Would his mother have hired Zekk?

Remembering how the dark-haired young man had dumped him into the river mud during the Second Imperium's attack, he still felt some resentment toward Zekk.

"First of all," Zekk answered in a stern tone, "the 'most famous names in the business' are already out hunting for your brother.

Second, it was Bornan Thul himself, not Aryn Dro, who hired me. He wore a disguise, but still risked his life to enlist my help.

Just to find you. He attempted to remain anonymous, but I discovered his identity anyway."

This news changed everything. Raynar's face lit

up. "You saw my father? Is he all right? Where is he? Can I go to him?"

Compassion showed in Zekk's emerald eyes when he looked at the blond-haired boy. "He's alive and healthy, at least--but he had to go back into hiding. Everyone is after him."

"Why didn't you simply bring him in, you fool?"

Tyko snapped. "Aren't you a bounty hunter? Our family would have rewarded you with more than enough credits to make it worth your while."

"It was tempting," Zekk admitted. "But that wouldn't have been honorable. I can't betray my employer."

"Honor," Tyko sneered. "Who ever heard of a bounty hunter concerned with his honor? Besides, Boman left his entire family to think him kidnapped or dead, for who knows what reason. How honorable is that?"

Raynar rounded on his uncle. "All right, let's discuss honor.

Aren't you the one who arranged to have yourself kidnapped, Uncle Tyko?

You let us believe you were in great danger. How honorable is that?"

"I had only the best of intentions, my dear boy," Tyko blustered.

"I just wanted to help my brother to--"

"Help? You tried to trick my father into revealing himself, without even knowing what he was hiding from. And you succeeded! If someone other than Zekk had found him, my father could be dead right now."

"He's right," Zekk said. "I believe Borman Thul is in hiding for a good reason. I can tell you for certain that his life is in danger.

There were only two things he hired me for: to locate you"--this with an accusing glance at Tyko--"and to send a message to his family."

Zekk reached into a pocket of his vest and pulled out a message packet. He tossed it to Raynar, who, though surprised, easily caught it. "Now I've fulfilled both parts of my job for him. If he's smart, Borman Thul won't come out of hiding again without expert protection."

"At least we know my father's not hurt," Raynar said. "Yet."

"It is also fortunate no one was hurt by coming to Mechis III," Tenel Ka said pointedly.

"Not hurt much, at least," Jaina said, examining the burn on Zekk's arm. She grinned at him and gave him another hug. "I'm glad you're here. At least this time you didn't show up in the middle of a bounty hunter attack, like you did at Alderaan!"

AS RAABA GUIDED her star skimmer toward Ryloth, she proudly shared details about her adventures in procuring the syren fiber for her belt.

Then she added some history of the homeworld Nola Tarkona had reformed.

In the cramped Rising Star, Lowbacca and his sister Sirra listened with interest.

Tarkona had chosen Ryloth as the headquarters of her ever-expanding Diversity Alliance. With its slightly irregular shape, the planet was tide-locked in orbit: one side always faced the sun, while the opposite hemisphere remained perpetually in shadow.

This made the climate inhospitable, except for a narrow band of twilight between the baking day and the freezing night.

In this thin habitable zone and on the cold side, the Twi'leks had dug mountain warrens, honey-combing the rock with chambers and passages as they mined the addictive mineral ryll, which was sometimes sold as spice.

When Old Republic representatives had stumbled upon their world, many Twi'leks chose to leave and see the vast galaxy. Some had been trained as Jedi Knights, including the legendary Tott Doneeta, who had fought during the great Sith War four thousand years ago. In recent times, the lawyer and X-wing pilot Nawara Ven had been a talented member of Rogue Squadron.

But not all Twi'leks were so revered, Raaba went on. The reviled

scientist administrator Tol Sivron had served the Empire by running a hidden super-weapons lab. The traitorous Bib Fortuna had prof-ired from the misery of his own species, selling Twi'lek women as slaves--including Nolaa's beautiful half-sister Oola. The talented dancers were in great demand among wealthy thugs such as Jabba the Hutt. But Nolaa had done her best to quash that trade.

Raaba had no doubt that Nolaa Tarkona marked a new high point in the history of her people. She had founded a political movement that would achieve widespread social acceptance and equality for all alien Species. The New Republic, with all of its sweet-sounding promises, would finally be forced to live up to its commitments.

As he listened to Raaba's speech, Lowie rumbled uneasily. He had spent a great deal of time with the

New Republic. Although he had observed some continuing difficulties, most could be explained by ill-mannered individuals, not by any overarching human policy of discrimination and repression.

Still, Raaba seemed so passionate about her new calling that Lowbacca decided not to argue. He would hear with an open mind what her friends had to say. His sister Sirra viewed this trip away from home as a great adventure, and he did not want to ruin her enjoyment by making hasty judgments about Raaba's beliefs.

As soon as the Rising Star entered orbit around Ryloth, a string of defensive satellites sounded their alerts, demanding that Raaba identify herself. A harsh voice forbade her to proceed until she had been cleared or her skimmer would be destroyed instantly.

Unflustered, Raaba transmitted her identification code, furry fingers dancing over the keypad. With Wookiee growls she announced herself as a loyal member of the Diversity Alliance, bringing two new members to meet Nolaa Tarkona. She was immediately authorized to enter the atmosphere and approach the mountain stronghold. Raaba's dark lips peeled back in a grin, exposing her fangs.

As the skimmer cruised toward the blackened crags, Lowie saw that all entrances to the warrens had been covered and textured to be almost indistinguishable from the rippling rock. Towering blast

doors in the naked cliffside ground open for the Rising Star.

Without hesitation, the chocolate-furred Wookiee barreled into the passage, swooping down into the lower warrens. Sirra gave a squeal of delight, and Lowie recalled his sister's own practice flying back at the treetop city.

Raaba clearly knew where she was going. She easily followed a path of lights that lit the curving rock walls like colonies of phosphorescent

creatures in a dark cave. Paying scant attention, she skimmed around corners, apparently selecting appropriate passages by instinct alone.

Finally, they reached an underground docking area where supply ships, passenger shuttles, and courier drones lay in various stages of preparation.

Mixed groups of aliens bustled back and forth, carrying out the business of the Diversity Alliance.

They scrutinized maps on electronic wallboards and hauled supplies to storage grottoes. Droids moved about, alert for spies or sabotage from enemies of the political movement and at the same time recording everything for later victorious documentaries.

As the three Wookiees climbed out of the Rising Star, Lowie stretched his lanky, ginger-furred arms and sniffed the air. His sensitive nostrils detected volatile hyperdrive fuels and coolants, as well as the body odors and pheromones from a host of different species.

Beside him, Raaba seemed proud to be an

integral part of such great work. She tugged on her glossy syren-fiber belt, reveling in her newly acquired badge of honor.

A Shistavanen wolfman in an impressive military uniform marched up to

greet them. "Welcome back, Raabakyysh--we are pleased that you have brought new recruits to us." He brushed his dark fur back and bowed, baring his fangs in a gesture of respect. "I am Adjutant Advisor Hovrak."

The wolfman made a deep bow toward Lowie and raised his eyebrows, letting an interrogative growl escape his throat. "The fame of Lowbacca and his work as a Jedi Knight reached our ears some time ago.

The Diversity Alliance welcomes you."

He gestured with one fiercely clawed hand. "Come.

Nolaa Tarkona will see you right away."

Inside her grand receiving chamber, Nolaa Tarkona stood from her massive seat and smiled to show sharply filed teeth. Her tattooed head-tail squirmed with pleasure. Lowie noted a glint from the optical sensor implanted in the scarred stump of the other head-tail.

Raaba marched forward with Hovrak, while Lowie and Sirra remained respectfully behind, waiting to be introduced. Lowie was impressed that the political workers were making such a grand gesture to welcome them. Surely, not all potential recruits received this kind of treatment?

Still, something about the Diversity Alliance made him uneasy. He couldn't quite identify what it was . . . but he reassured himself by thinking that Raaba would not have allowed herself to become involved in anything unsavory.

"I am very pleased to have you among our members, my Wookiee friends," Tarkona said. Her voice was powerful, flowing with rich currents of charisma. "Raabakysh has been one of our most loyal supporters, and I am sure that you will also do your species proud."

She strode across the dais, her black robes sweeping around her.

"I am especially honored to have a Jedi among us," Tarkona continued. "The Diversity Alliance has great work to do, and you possess crucial skills." She stepped down to floor level. Raaba smiled, her furry face crinkling with pleasure.

"Raabakysh tells me that you were also searching for Bornan Thul, Lowbacca. I certainly hope he is found soon. He betrayed my trust in him and . . . stole a precious treasure, a critical key to our work."

Tarkona's head-tail thrashed with agitation.

"Humans have always found our weak spots and exploited them, uncovering whatever means the most to us--and then taking it! It was my own foolishness to put my faith in a human in the first place."

As she paced the floor, her feet whispered against the polished stone.

"Not all humans are so unworthy, of course," she amended when she saw Lowie bristle at the sweeping censure. Her tone was conciliatory.

"Some humans have even accepted our assignment to hunt down this unworthy man who has so greatly wronged me. Of course, their reasons are purely mercenary, rather than honorable--but the end result is all that matters."

At that moment Corrsk, the Trandoshan, strode into the chamber, carrying an electronic datapad and a sheaf of documents. He clearly meant to deliver them to Nolaa Tarkona, but when the giant reptilian alien saw the three Wookiees standing in the grotto, he stopped short.

Instinct drew his muscles taut, and he dropped the datapad to the floor.

Documents fluttered down as Corrsk raised his clawed hands to an attack position. A simmering growl bubbled like a geyser out of his throat.

Outraged and betrayed, Lowie roared defensively at seeing the Wookiees' natural enemy. Bristling, he stepped close to Sirra, so that he and his sister could fight together. Trandoshan bounty hunters were famous for killing Wookiees, and Lowie had no intention of losing his pelt.

Sirra growled, also ready to fight with tooth and claw--but Raaba

intervened, holding up her dark brown arms to prevent them from doing anything foolish. She cinched her red headband tighter, and her biceps bulged, holding her metal armlets in place.

"Corrsk, control yourself! Enough posturing," Tarkona said impatiently. "Raabakyysh, thank you for deflecting this battle." She turned to Lowie and Sirra. "Perhaps the concept has not yet sunk in, but here in the Diversity Alliance we've put aside our differences.

Ancient rivalries and blood feuds are erased. We agree to surrender interracial hatreds to focus on the most pernicious enemy, our most important foes: humans everywhere. Wookiees and Trandoshans can only triumph if they fight side by side as comrades. We must!"

Shamefaced, the Trandoshan lowered his clawed hands and retrieved the items he had dropped.

Lowie and Sirra watched the reptilian predator cautiously as he slunk forward to place the datapad and documents on the table beside Tarkona's chair.

Without a word, Corrsk vanished down a long dim tunnel.

Only then did Lowie allow himself to relax.

Raaba chuffed with laughter, treating the entire incident as a joke.

Lowie didn't find the experience terribly amusing, but he vowed to do his best to accept other species and to fit in with the ways of the Diversity Alliance.

20

THE ASSAULT ON Mechis III came with such sudden force and devastation that Jacen could hardly believe only one bounty hunter was responsible.

The attacking vessel pummeled its way through the atmosphere, throwing off sonic booms like obscuring veils. The ship thundered overhead, crashing through the roiling clouds, pausing only briefly to loose a volley of concussion torpedoes.

Smokestacks crumbled, dropping like felled trees.

Secondary detonations ignited combustible gases that rose from the industrial sections in an inferno that blasted through the underground tunnels. A line of factory buildings toppled in a devastating chain reaction as the spreading shock front ripped out their foundations.

Alarms screeched through the administration building.

Lights flashed, sirens wailed.

Tyko Thul ran to the diagnostic screens inside his

office. His skin had gone a pasty gray, and his eyes widened in terror.

Beside him stood Raynar, his simple Jedi robes contrasting with his uncle's garish display of noble heritage.

The young Jedi Knights scrambled to defensive positions. Tenel Ka took her place beside Jacen, cool and ready to fight, her hand on the hilt of her lightsaber. Even in the midst of such confusion, it made Jacen glad to see how quickly the warrior girl came over to fight next to him.

"Why bother with all the sirens?" Jaina said, pressing her palms to her temples. "The whole planet's automated. Do droids care about that stuff" Jacen looked out the window across the smoky landscape.

Another building erupted into flames.

"Good thing there aren't any people out there."

"But think of all the droids!" Em Teedee wailed.

"They're doomed!"

Zekk stood near Jaina with his arms crossed over his chest. He squinted into the soot-stained sky as the attacker swung around for another

furious pass.

A cargo-load of concussion bombs dropped again, blowing up another thermal exhaust port. Zekk's face turned grim as he recognized the ship. "That's Dengar," he said. "How did he know to come here?"

Targeting rooftop-cannons tracked Dengar across the sky and fired long blasts of crackling blue ion

bolts or sharp green turbolasers. But the cybemetically enhanced bounty hunter reacted too quickly--flying, dodging, skipping left and right. The clumsy automated defensive systems could not keep up.

A gruff voice came over the citywide intercom system, echoing from a thousand amplification speakers. "This is Dengar. I know the bounty hunter Zekk is down there--I have followed him here to the hiding place of Borman Thul."

"Why does everybody make that assumption?"

Zekk said.

"I intend to cause much more damage unless you surrender my bounty."

After a pause, Dengar's deep voice continued, "Further negotiation is . . . not acceptable."

An army of scurrying machines spread out through the factory city.

Fire-response droids and disaster-mitigation crews pumped flame-suppressant chemicals onto the burning wreckage. Salvage crews set to work cleaning up portions of the assembly lines and strove to keep them running at all costs.

Dengar's ship cruised overhead, banked, then came back toward the administration building. With calculated malice, he dropped another bomb directly onto a droid fire-response fleet, obliterating them.

Tyko gazed around in confusion and horror.

"What are we going to do?"

Tenel Ka turned toward him skeptically. "First we must know if you staged this attack. The timing would appear somewhat . . .

convenient. Is this a new hoax--like your assassin droids on Kuar?"

"Certainly not!" Tyko looked at her, the picture of appalled innocence.

"My dear girl, that terrorist is destroying my factories!"

Raynar studied his uncle for a second. "I believe him. He'd never damage his own facilities like this."

"No, Dengar doesn't work for Tyko," Zekk agreed. "He's after Tarkona's bounty. He intends to bring in Boman Thul, dead or alive--it doesn't matter which." He frowned, his green eyes hard as emeralds.

"I outwitted him once, but I wouldn't count on it again. Dengar's one of the best."

The broad windows rattled with the thunder of Dengar's passage as he swooped past the administrative headquarters. As if to taunt them, the bounty hunter loosed another explosive... but detonated it in midair, so that the walls of the office buildings merely shuddered.

Jacen looked at Raynar with concern, "Hey, we promised to keep Raynar safe on this trip--and it's not very safe just to sit here in an office while we get bombed. I think we should head for the Rock Dragon and get out of here. If we all leave Mechis III, Dengar won't have any reason to stay and cause more damage."

Zekk looked over at Jaina. "The Lightning Rod is

closer. We could get to my ship and harass him, create a diversion so the others can escape." He raised an eyebrow hopefully.

"I could use a good copilot, Jaina . . . if you wouldn't mind coming

with me."

She hurried to Zekk's side. "What are we waiting for? Em Teedee, you go with Jacen--he's a fair pilot himself, but he and Tenel Ka may need your assistance getting the Rock Dragon out of here."

The little droid floated upward in his excitement, barely managing to keep his new microrepulsors under control. "Oh my! This is a sobering responsibility--I will do my utmost not to let you down, Mistress Jaina."

Jaina grabbed Zekk's hand and they raced out of the offices together, toward where he had docked the Lightning Rod. Jacen, Tenel Ka, and Raynar headed for the door as well.

Tyko Thul stood all alone, looking sickened.

"But . . . but I can't leave here. This is my factory planet! I got Mechis III up and running when all the systems had fallen into disrepair. I won't abandon it just because some... some vandal comes in shooting."

Raynar spluttered, "But you can't stay here, Uncle Tyko--you'll be killed. You've got to come with us."

"No! I'm going down into the reinforced lower levels. I'll be

perfectly safe there. You children go on now." Leaving his office, Tyko turned and jogged out of sight down the corridor.

Jacen looked after him, but Tenel Ka gestured for them to hurry.

"Jacen, we must get to the roof or our plans will be wasted."

The three ran toward the nearest turbolift. Em Teedee floated after them, still working to control his new repulsorjets. "Wait!

Wait for me!"

Breathing hard, Jaina secured her crash webbing as Zekk lurched the Lightning Rod into the air, roaring out of the overhang-covered shipping area where he had landed. She glanced at the dark-haired young man as he worked, his gaze intent on the controls.

"Sure is good to fly with you, Zekk," she said.

"You seem to be making this a habit--getting into situations where I have to come rescue you," he said, smiling slightly.

"Hah! I'm not half-bad at rescues either, you know. Watch it, or I might just turn the tables on you one of these days."

"I don't suppose I'd mind that so much." Zekk punched the engines for a new surge of acceleration.

They streaked up between tall manufacturing centers and into the open air. Jaina leaned forward to the cockpit windows, trying to see through the thick cuds of smoke.

Dengar dropped a thermal shock-wave generator

onto the roof of the building adjacent to Tyko's administrative headquarters. The weapon burned its way downward like a luminous diving bell, incinerating floor after floor after floor until it impacted the building's foundations.

"I'll concentrate on flying," Zekk said. "You take the weapons controls."

"Sounds like a plan. Let's go," Jaina said.

As if out of nowhere, they soared in. Jaina fired the laser cannons without mercy, targeting the hull of the bounty hunter's ship.

They skimmed past so close that Jaina could have kicked Dengar's craft if the Lightning Rod's access hatch had been open.

Zekk sped onward, and Dengar launched after them in hot pursuit.

Wrestling with the piloting controls, Zekk rolled the battered old ship.

He took them into a downward loop and flew beneath his enemy, jerking sideways and up. Jaina could see that subconscious instincts made Zekk use his Force skills to dodge, but she said nothing to interrupt his concentration.

Dengar followed, blasting away furiously with his ship's weapons.

"Think he'd hold a grudge against me for what I did to him on Zios?"

Zekk said.

With a touch of irony, Jaina said, "At least he's stopped damaging the buildings. Our goal was to distract him so the others could get away to safety."

"Of course, I'd like to get away, as well," Zekk

said. "Hang on." He headed in the direction of the smoldering buildings Dengat had already blasted.

"That looks like a good prospect."

Sagging and ready to collapse, twin skyscrapers blazed side by side in parallel infernos. With the bounty hunter still clinging to their

afterburners, Zekk artowed the ship directly toward the blazing columns.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," Jaina muttered.

The Lightning Rod shot into the gap between the burning towers as a network of connecting girders broke loose. Damaged beyond repair, the skyscrapers began to topple

Up on the rooftop, the smell of fire saturated the air. Jacen and Tenel Ka ran side by side, with Raynar close behind them. "There they are!" the Alderaanian boy said, pointing. The polluted wind rippled the sleeve of his Jedi robe.

With Dengar's ship perilously close behind them, firing its blasters, the Lightning Rod plunged recklessly between two collapsing buildings. Fire and smoke raged upward as the towers crashed together, and Zekk's ship vanished into the inferno.

Dengar broke off his pursuit at the last instant, hauling his ship around and up, away from certain death. He left the wreckage behind and came about.

Tenel Ka drew a breath of dismay as the Lightning Rod vanished into the billows of smoke and debris. But Jacen shook his head. "I'm sure they made it, somehow. Zekk's too good a pilot--and I'd sense it if Jaina got hurt."

"This is a fact," the warrior girl said.

Jacen looked over his shoulder toward the stair-well, trying to locate Em Teedee. The little floating droid had not managed to keep up with them. When Dengar spotted them and soared toward the rooftop, Jacen forgot about Em Teedee and thought instead about their own survival. "To the Rock Dragon-quick!"

The Hapan passenger cruiser sat where they had landed it on the opposite side of the roof. Tenel Ka sprinted along to the sheer edge, running as if she were simply doing her morning workout. Tossing her red-gold braids behind her shoulders, she glanced down, observing the extreme height with interest. "Lowbacca would have enjoyed being up here."

"Yeah, I'd rather he was here to pilot the ship, too. Em Teedee !"

Jacen called. "Where can he be?"

Dengar's inelegant ship circled low. Before they could reach the safety of the Rock Dragon, the bounty hunter landed defiantly at the edge of the roof, blocking the way.

Jacen, Tenel Ka, and Raynar staggered to a stop, looking grimly at each other.

The bounty hunter opened the hatch and leapt

out. His shoulders were broad, and he carried two massive blaster cannons--each of which usually required two arms to lift, though Dengar easily held one in each hand. The mouth on the bounty hunter's bandage-wrapped face sagged like his loose-fitting clothes, which were dirty and stained from a thousand fights and a thousand quick repair jobs on his ship.

Dengar's sunken eyes flicked from side to side as he scanned the three young Jedi Knights like a targeting computer assessing damage potential. He aimed both blaster cannons at the companions.

"Hostages. Expendable." He scowled. "Where is Boman Thul? Tell me."

Raynar crossed his brown-robed arms and put on a brave face. "I am Raynar, son of Boman Thul. My father isn't on Mechis III. He never was."

Dengar's expression did not change. "Then you will tell me how to find him, or I will begin eliminating hostages." His sallow face showed no sign of regret or anticipation. "I hope one of you cooperates before all three of you are dead."

Around the metropolis, emergency-response droids cruised through the damaged areas. Smoke poured into the sky, blacker and more noxious than

the pollution belched out by the manufacturing centers.

Jacen and Tenel Ka exchanged glances, but no one spoke.

Dengar waited precisely five seconds. Then he raised his blaster cannons, both pointing at a single target--Jacen.

The young man's heart thudded, and his hand groped for his lightsaber. He wondered if he could possibly use its blade to deflect such high-powered explosive bolts. He was sure his uncle, Luke Skywalker, could have done it.

"You will not kill my friend," Tenel Ka said, stepping in front of Jacen to shield him with her body. She drew her own rancor-tooth lightsaber and flashed its turquoise blade. Jacen saw her lips part in a feral grin, filled with challenge and menace toward anyone who would threaten him.

Jacen glanced over at Raynar, who stood concentrating, his gaze fixed on Dengar's ship. Jacen felt a ripple in the Force and instantly knew what the blond boy was trying to do.

"Doesn't matter to me who I start with," Dengar answered coldly.

He readjusted his aim toward Tenel Ka. She didn't flinch.

Jacen added his own Jedi abilities to Raynar's, concentrating on the bounty hunter's ship. The craft had landed close to the edge of the rooftop, and its rear support pad rested . . .

"Let this first one be a lesson to you," Dengar said. The bounty hunter's finger tightened on the firing stud. Defiant and fearless, Tenel Ka held up her lightsaber, ready to block the shot.

Jacen squeezed his eyes shut and focused. He had to help her!

With every ounce of his concentration, Jacen drew on the Force to nudge, push, shove.

Dengar fired both blaster cannons.

Using the Force, Jacen jostled the weapons. Both shots went wide, missing Tenel Ka. Behind him, Raynar was still focused on one goal.

"And let this be a lesson to you, Dengar," Tenel Ka said. Sensing that she was joining her efforts to Raynar's, Jacen lent his assistance as well.

Dengar's ship slid backward, scraping across the rooftop. Its rear support pad dropped over the side of the building. The craft tipped and lurched, its hull grating against the rough edge of the roof.

The bounty hunter whirled in alarm. "What--?"

Suddenly the rooftop door burst open. The towering bulk of IG-88

strode out, arms extended, weapons powered up.

Em Teedee, hovering above the assassin droid's body frame, amplified his normally tinny voice to a commanding boom. "I suggest you leave our friends alone, you arrogant bully!"

Tyko Thul in his colorful robes confidently followed the two droids out onto the rooftop.

"IG-88, I order you to protect us!" The assassin droid aimed his built-in weapons.

Dengar reacted with lightning speed, whirling away from Tenel Ka and letting loose a volley of blaster bolts. Most ricocheted harmlessly off the

assassin droid's durasteel torso, leaving cherry-red spots of absorbed energy.

However, one bolt glanced off IG-88's skeletal frame and hit Em Teedee's

outer casing. The little translating droid shrieked as sparks flew from his side; his optical sensors flickered wildly. Spinning in the air like an asteroid after a collision, he let out an electronic wail.

IG-88 opened fire again and again, but with such precision that instead of blasting the bandage-wrapped human off the rooftop, his weapon discharges tamed one of Dengar's heavy blaster cannons to slag in his fist.

Jacen remembered that the assassin droid's new programming prevented him from shooting down the bounty hunter outright, even to protect his masters. But IG-88 was resourceful enough to find alternatives.

Behind him, Dengar's ship teetered precariously on the edge of the roof.

Still expressionless, Dengar tossed the smoldering firearm away and grabbed his remaining cannon with both hands. But IG-88 targeted carefully with a volley of shots that blew away the muzzle of the second blaster, leaving Dengar unarmed.

Then the droid bombarded the roof plates at the bounty hunter's feet.

Seeing that the situation was hopeless, Dengar dove for his ship.

Off balance, it groaned and tilted toward an inevitable crash between the buildings.

IG-88 fired once more just as the bandage-wrapped bounty hunter scrambled through the hatch. Blaster bolts sizzled off the frame as Dengar sealed himself in.

With a final shriek of protest, the ship fell from the rooftop.

Jacen gasped, and Raynat raced to the edge of the building to look down. The ship plunged and spun, like a paving stone dropped off a cliff.

At the last instant, Dengar managed to power up his engines and wrench the ship out of gravity's clutches. Spinning the craft sideways, the bounty hunter thundered through the narrow gaps between buildings. From the rooftop IG-88 launched grenades toward the stern of Dengar's ship in an attempt to disable the engines as he departed. The explosives fell short as the bounty hunter whirled and dipped, zigzagging skillfully along a random course.

"No more grenades," Tyko yelled at the assassin droid. "If you can't bring yourself to actually destroy his ship, at least wait until he comes back into range, or you'll damage my buildings."

Before Dengar could circle around and come back again, though, the Lightning Rod shot up out of an alleyway, gaining speed as Jaina blasted volley after volley of laser fire into Dengar's already damaged craft.

"All right, Jaina!" Jacen cried. "Go!"

Facing Zekk's unexpected and relentless pursuit, Dengar made a logical choice. He set course for escape, and with an angry roar, his ship careened into the sky.

Standing beside Tenel Ka, Jacen watched the bounty hunter's craft jet upward at high speed until it was swallowed by the swirling black smoke.

Dengar disappeared into orbit, leaving behind the smoldering wreckage of his devastating attack.

Planting one fist on each of his hips, Raynar observed the bounty hunter's departure with defiant satisfaction. "That'll teach him not to tangle with young Jedi Knights!"

IN THE AFTERMATH of Dengar's attack, Zekk brooded, trying to find answers to the question that now haunted him: how had the bounty hunter found him? Despite this worry, Zekk was delighted when Jaina offered to spend two days helping him recalibrate the Lightning Rod's systems.

As they worked, he told Jaina about his encounter with Dengar on Zioist, and mentioned his subsequent stops on Mos Eisley, Kuar, and Borgo Prime before coming to Mechis III. Zekk didn't give her many details, but hoped she could help him figure out how the other bounty hunter had

found him.

"Odd. Why would Dengar think you were here?"

Jaina mused aloud.

"I guess it's possible that he discovered the droid debris on Kuar and made the same assumptions I did about the CPU chips. The trail would've led him to Mechis III "Zekk shook his head. "But I

just can't swallow that much of a coincidence.

Dengar knew I was here."

"You think maybe he managed to mark the Lightning Rod, assuming you'd eventually lead him to Boman Thul?" Jaina asked. "He might've thought you worked for Raynar's father. After all, you were sending messages to the Bomaryn fleet."

Zekk smiled at the irony. "If Dengar was tracking me, then he followed me to the wrong Thul. If he'd gone to Borgo Prime instead, he might have caught Boman."

Jaina frowned at the thought. "He probably figured you were just stopping for messages or supplies and he didn't want you to suspect that

he was on your trail," she guessed.

"If there's some sort of tracer on my ship, I want to know about it," Zekk said through gritted teeth. It gave him the creeps to think that someone could have been tracking his every movement.

Jaina grinned. "Well, then, what are we waiting for?"

Together, Zekk and Jaina carefully inspected the outer hull of the battered transport ship. Zekk couldn't imagine how many times his old friend Peckhum had been in tight situations with this craft.

After the Second Imperium's attack on the Jedi academy, when the brutal TIE pilot Norys had nearly destroyed the Lightning Rod, Peckhum had made certain the ship got a complete overhaul.

Noting the carbon scoring, Zekk thought back on some of the skirmishes he himself had been through.

Dengar had fired on him at the ice world of Zios, and before that Boba Fett had fought him in the rubble field of Alderaan. It was a good thing that Jaina could help him check the ship over. They found countless patches, spot-welded armor plates, and external systems that had been jury-rigged so many times Zekk couldn't fathom how they managed to remain functional.

As soon as Zekk spotted it, he knew what was wrong. Surrounded by a starburst of slag, a small object had attached itself to the Lightning Rod's hull. He showed it to Jaina.

"Limpet mine," she said. "Perfect for planting a tracer."

"So . . . that 'concussion grenade' Dengar fired at me wasn't a dud, after all," Zekk said, tapping it with a fingertip. "A tracer, huh?"

He pried off the limpet mine and held it in his hand, considering what to do with it. Finally, a sly grin crossed his face

At one of Mechis III's shipping platforms, Zekk and Jaina found a tiny courier pod. The high-speed drone was only large enough to carry small emergency-repair parts or hardcopy messages that were too sensitive to be transmitted with normal encoding over hyperwaves.

Jaina gleefully assured Zekk the limpet's transmitting beacon still functioned properly before they sealed it inside the courier pod.

Next, he programmed a course that would take the drone high above the galactic plane--far away from any inhabited star systems. The tracer's journey would take it on a one-way trip to nowhere, still winking its insidious message . . . luring Dengar to follow.

They launched the courier pod out of the receiving bay and watched it dwindle to a pinprick and vanish into the vast gulf of distance.

Zekk stared after it with a fiery satisfaction burning in his emerald-green eyes. "Happy hunting, Dengar," he murmured.

Tyko Thul kept himself busy by programming armies of construction droids and cleanup crews to work on the damaged towers. He had reluctantly accepted Raynar's offer of temporary assistance, and together the two discussed the damage.

"You know, those structures have needed upgrading for some time now, anyway," Tyko said. "Never got around to it." Somewhat disheartened, he called up the intricate designs for the facilities.

Raynar studied the diagrams. Then, letting his eyes fall half closed, he said, "I think I might have a few modifications to suggest."

With calm assurance, he began altering the schematics. He worked for nearly an hour before stopping.

Perplexed, Tyko stared at the screen. "I don't understand. Why should I want to make these changes?"

Raynar shrugged. "By combining those two operations, you can run the

systems in parallel. If one assembly line breaks down, you have the capacity to speed up production on the first line, make your repairs to the second one, and still meet delivery schedules."

"Yes!" Tyko crowed. "I see it now. It's nothing short of brilliant!"

Raynar blinked in bemusement and blushed at the praise. "I wonder if there's such a thing as a merchant Jedi," he mumbled.

Jaina, taking a break from her repairs to the Lightning Rod, turned back to her work on the assassin droid IG-88, while Em Teedee hovered overhead like a practice remote. "This is most interesting," he said.

After repairing a few scrambled circuits, the modified translating droid now functioned like a new machine. Dangling diagnostic leads hung down, connecting the translating droid to IG-88's main memory core.

Tenel Ka, Jacen, and Raynar crowded around Jaina, watching the additional alterations with interest.

Jaina glanced over at Raynar. "You're sure your uncle's going to let us do this?"

"He will," Raynar answered. "In return for his cooperation, I promised not to reveal his 'little hoax' to my mother. My message to her will just say that we rescued Uncle Tyko and he's unharmed."

The young man smiled.

Scrutinizing the inner mechanisms of the once-lethal droid, Jaina nodded. "All right. When I'm finished here, we'll be able to turn IG-88 loose to continue the search for your father."

"It is a good idea," Tenel Ka said. "This droid was built to track down people who do not wish to be found. We could not ask for a better ally."

"Yeah," Jacen said, "and we've got the perfect job for him."

Em Teedee piped up. "I've tapped directly into IG-88's memory area reserved for storing information about current bounty assignments."

"And you input all of the data about my father?"

Raynar prodded.

"Just as you requested, Master Raynar," Em Teedee said.

"Everything from the file. IG-88 knows all about Boman Thul's business affiliations, old friends, favorite haunts, familial connections--"

"Thanks, Em Teedee," Raynar broke in. "There's not another bounty

hunter in the galaxy who knows as much about my father as IG-88 does now."

"He will be a fine seeker--relentless," Tenel Ka said, clapping a hand on Raynar's back. Her rustic warrior appearance made an interesting contrast with the gleaming mechanized facility populated by droids. But Tenel Ka seemed perfectly at ease. She

was who she was, regardless of her location, and she never let circumstances diminish her self-confidence.

"Are we finished, then, Em Teedee?" Jaina said.

"Yes, indeed, Mistress Jaina," the little droid answered brightly.

"IG-88 is now wholly dedicated to finding Bornan Thul and keeping him safe." He paused to consider. "In theory, at least, IG-88's superior design and capabilities make him more likely to succeed than the numerous other bounty hunters attempting to find Raynar's father. Why, perhaps with my additional assistance--" Jaina disconnected the leads from the translating droid and let the silvery oval float free. "He probably doesn't want your company, Em Teedee.

You'd only distract him."

"I'm certain you're right, Mistress Jaina," the droid said wistfully.

"It isn't my primary function, after all. Though at the moment, I'm not certain just what my primary function is."

"We need you, Em Teedee," Jaina said.

"Thank you, Mistress Jaina," the little droid replied. "I do miss Master Lowbacca though. I certainly hope he's all right."

"So do we, Em Teedee," Jaina said, struggling against worry as thoughts of her Wookiee friend came again to the front of her mind.

"This is a fact," Tenel Ka agreed.

Zekk and the young Jedi Knights accompanied IG-88 to the upper launch platform to see him off on his quest. Raynar looked at the dark-haired young man, remembering how Zekk--the Shadow Academy's darkest Knight--had used the Force to huff him into the river mud.

Although it had taken Raynar a long time to recover his pride, he realized now that Zekk had in effect saved his life by doing so, humiliating him in front of the other dark Jedi attackers to dissuade them from killing Raynar outright with their burning red lightsabers.

And now the assassin droid had also been precluded from taking fatal actions. "I'm glad IG-88

can't kill anymore," Raynar said.

"Not even aliens," Tenel Ka affirmed.

Jacen tapped the droid on one arm. "Hey, hear that?" he said.

"Try not to think of yourself as an assassin droid anymore."

"He can still cause plenty of damage, though," Jaina said.

"Especially if it looks as if they're going to be dangerous to your father."

Uncle Tyko hurried up, wringing his hands and looking flustered.

"Sorry I'm late," he said. "So much to do. I solve one problem and it leads to two others. But I'll get this place running smoothly sooner or later."

He stopped as the looming assassin droid rotated

its cylindrical head. The blinking red sensors showed no sign of recognition, no memory of its past. Without a word, the droid swiveled its body core and clomped toward a needlelike ship that was identical in

design to the IG-2000, the droid's original craft. Because the durable assassin droid had no need for life-support systems or acceleration dampers, the vessel had an incredible bank of engines and superior power efficiency.

"Please find my father, IG-88," Raynar said.

The assassin droid climbed into his ship and fired up the engines.

The gathered spectators watched as the sleek vessel stabbed up into the atmosphere like a dagger slicing Cloth.

Jacen turned to Raynar and clasped his shoulder.

"Things are looking up, you know," he said. "Zekk gave us the news that your father is alive, and IG-88

is on the chase."

"And now that we've 'rescued' your Uncle Tyko," Jaina said, "we can hope that it's just a matter of time until your entire family is together again."

Raynar swallowed hard. "My father must have a good reason for hiding. I just wish I knew what it was."

Zekk nodded grimly. "He seems to think that something terrible is going to happen to the human race if he's caught."

Raynar nervously straightened his Jedi robe and ran a hand over his spiky hair. He seemed embarrassed at his friends' efforts to encourage him.

"That doesn't mean we're going to stop searching for him, does it?"

"Not a chance," Jacen said. Then, in a moment of sadness, he added, "I just wish Lowie was here to help us out."

JAINA STOOD NEXT to Zekk, desperately searching for the right words, as he stood on the boarding ramp of the Lightning Rod. She had to say something before he left.

"I'll see you soon, I promise," Zekk said. "But right now I'd better be on my way. Maybe I'll even find Bornan Thul before IG-88

does. The least I can do is take him a message from Raynar."

Jaina swallowed. "Remember, Zekk, we're always willing to help you--to talk or listen, if you need us."

"I know, Jaina." He smiled at her, and before she knew it, she found

herself caught up in a fierce hug, right there on the rooftop.

She returned the hug for a long moment. Then Zekk backed into his ship, waving in farewell. "Maybe I'll drop in to rescue you again sometime soon."

"Unless I rescue you first," Jaina countered. She

stood with stinging eyes on the rooftop as he sealed the hatch of the old freighter. "Don't fly through any black holes, Zekk," she said in a hoarse whisper.

The Lightning Rod soared off into the sky, doubling back in a complex loop as Zekk showed off his flying prowess before taking the ship up into the atmosphere, and deep space.

Jacen sat frustrated in the comm center of Mechis III, while Em Teedee hovered and bobbed in the air over his shoulder, practicing with his new micro-repulsorjets.

Tenel Ka entered and stood in the doorway, her hand on her hip as she waited for Jacen to finish.

With a sigh he swiveled to look at the warrior girl, and flashed her a smile.

"I've left three messages at Lowie's home on Kashyyyk, but I haven't gotten any response," he said. "Lowie should be there, or at least his parents, or his sister Sirra. I sure hope nothing's wrong."

Tenel Ka's face remained expressionless.

"Lowbacca is a good fighter and a talented Jedi. I am certain he can take care of himself."

"I do hope so," Em Teedee interjected, "but there is still sufficient cause for concern."

Jacen gave up his seat at the comm controls, since he knew Tenel Ka had been wanting to contact her parents in the Fountain Palace on Hapes. The

warrior gift sat down and, even with only one hand, her fingers flew over the controls, setting up the hyperwave link.

"I am taking the added precaution of using the royal family's encryption codes," she told Jacen, and waited for an answer.

When Isolder and Teneniel Djo appeared on-screen, she told them about the Diversity Alliance, describing it as an antihuman conspiracy that masqueraded as a benevolent political movement. Her parents took Tenel Ka's concern seriously and agreed to put their best counterconspiracy

opera-fives into action; they would find out whatever they could about the group.

Privately, Tenel Ka hoped--no, Tenel Ka knew--that her grandmother would intercept this message and feel compelled to investigate the Diversity Alliance.

With her own brand of ironic humor, the warrior gift asked her parents to convey her greetings to her father's mother--realizing that Ta'a Chume would probably hear her words even before the communications link between Hapes and Mechis III was broken.

Her grandmother would no doubt put her best spies to work immediately.

So much the better, Tenel Ka thought. The Diversity Alliance would find Ta'a Chume a formidable enemy.

As soon as Tenel Ka had ended the transmission, an override signal winked on the panel. Jacen rushed forward to accept the transmission.

"Busy day," he remarked.

"Oh my," Em Teedee said, hovering over the panel, "according to the designators, that message is coming from Kashyyyk. I do hope it's Master Lowbacca."

Jacen was rewarded by the on-screen images of Lowie's parents Mahraccor and Kallabow. "You'd better help translate, Em Teedee," he said.

"At last, my primary function!" the little droid said. "I am fluent in over sixteen forms of communication, you know."

After a brief greeting and message, Jacen learned from the slow Wookiee growls that Lowie was no longer on Kashyyyk, that he had left the planet days ago.

"What?" Jacen said. He and Tenel Ka exchanged a concerned glance.

"Where did they go.?" He and Sirra had gone with Raaba to meet Nola Tarkona in person and learn more about the Diversity Alliance.

Many other Wookiees had expressed a similar interest, after the fine speech Raaba had given.

"They have gone to the headquarters--on Ry-loth?"

Tenel Ka asked, and both older Wookiees nodded.

Jacen felt the blood drain from his face, but he forced a cheerful expression and thanked Kallabow and Mahraccor--no need to trouble them unnecessarily until he knew more.

"Dear me," said Em Teedee from where he hovered just above Jacen's right shoulder. "After what we've learned of the Diversity Alliance, I fear Master Lowbacca has fallen in with an unsavory lot.

I do hope he's safe."

Jaina gave the little droid a sympathetic pat.

"Don't we all, Em Teedee," she said. "Don't we all."

A trio of young Wookiees stood at a tunnel entrance that faced the cold night side of Ryloth.

Together, they gazed up into the star-studded sky.

Sparkling white glaciers and ice fields covered the rugged landscape beyond the twilight boundary.

The chill wind was harsh enough that it penetrated even their thick pelts.

Chocolate-furred Raaba stood between Lowie and Sirra, an arm across each of their shoulders.

Lowie was glad he had found his old friend again and that Raaba and Sirra were reunited, but he often thought about his companions Jacen and

Jaina and Tenel Ka. And he couldn't break himself of the habit of touching the empty spot on his fiber belt where Em Teedee should have been clipped

As if sensing the flow of his thoughts, Raaba spoke in firm and cheerful tones to reassure him.

· He was among true friends now, she said. Lowie was where he belonged.

They watched the stars for a while, then went back into the winding tunnels.