

Star Wars

Young Jedi Knights

Book 11

The Fall of the Diversity Alliance

The Emperor's Plague

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AFTER DAYS OF recuperation, Jaina Solo steadied herself on the edge of the bacta tank, dripping. Programmed to be courteous, the Too-Onebee medical droid helped her out. Slippery fluid from the healing tank trickled from Jaina's hair and bare skin onto the floor, where it gathered in iridescent puddles before flowing into a drain by her feet.

The bacta smelled healthy. Even beneath the brief strips of medical wrap she wore, every square centimeter of her flesh tingled with renewal. Cautious at first, she planted her feet on the floor and tested her strength before letting go of the droid's green metal arm. Her legs had not supported her full weight for several days now and she wasn't quite sure they would hold her.

Confident at last, Jaina stretched luxuriously, then looked down at herself. Her skin was pink and new, showing no indication of the bumps and injuries she had recently suffered during their escape from the Twi'lek homeworld of Ryloth.

For a moment Jaina wondered if the whole ordeal had merely been a nightmare-the capture of the young Jedi Knights, laboring in the spice mines, the mad flight from Diversity Alliance guards through winding catacombs, the brutal heat of Ryloth's dayside. But it was all real.

Definitely real.

"Glad to see you're feeling better," a warm voice said close behind her.

Jaina whirled.

"Zekk!"

"In the flesh-more or less, that is," he said. He held out a sheet of white absorbent cloth and helped Jaina drape it around her shoulders. "You looked like a roasted nerf sausage when I picked you up a few days ago," he said, snuggling the soft material around her. "Now I can hardly tell you were burned."

Jaina smiled at her friend. His long hair, a shade lighter than black, hung at the nape of his neck neatly tied with a thong. His dark clothing was rumpled, as if he had slept in it; the shadowy smudges beneath his emerald-green eyes attested to a lack of sleep.

"I thought you were part of my dream," Jaina said. "I kept thinking that I was waking up, and I would see your face, kind of distant and blurry... but always there."

The centaur girl Lusa wrapped a sheet around the dripping form of Raynar at another bacta tank nearby. She remarked, "Zekk hasn't left the medical center since all of you went into the tanks."

Jaina smiled at Zekk. He shrugged, as if embarrassed.

"I don't get out much these days. Training to be a bounty hunter kind of puts a crimp in your social life. Besides," he added, "old Peckhum's been off on a supply run, so I didn't see much point in going home for a visit."

Raynar toweled off his spiky blond hair and blinked groggily at Lusa.

Zekk continued, "Anyway, I'm not the only one who's been haunting the medical center. Lusa was here practically around the chrono. Your parents and Master Skywalker came in every couple of hours. And Threepio kept bustling in to check on us and to bring us meals." He smiled. "I remember when he wanted to fit me with a fancy new suit for that important state dinner your mother hosted."

"That was a long time ago," Jaina answered softly, tugging her own clothes on. "That was the same night I was captured by the Shadow Academy," he added, then paused a moment as a troubled expression crossed his face. The centaur girl Lusa offered Raynar a clean set of garish colorful robes that displayed the scarlet, purple, orange, and gold colors of the noble Thul family from Alderaan. Of late, Raynar had been wearing more drab and serviceable Jedi clothes, but now he accepted the fresh garments gratefully.

"Lowie and your little brother were here, too," Lusa said.

"Anakin wasn't a bother, was he?" Jaina asked.

Zekk looked amused.

"Far from it. I learned a thing or two from watching him. With the Force, he looked inside the controls of each of your bacta tanks, then made some suggestions to Lowie on how to improve their performance." Zekk's voice sank to a whisper as he glanced over at Lowbacca, who was helping the warrior girl Tenel Ka out of her bacta tank, while the medical droid assisted Jacen. "Lowie and Anakin spent hours optimizing the diagnostics relays on each of the bacta units. They ran a physiology-specific calibration on all the bacta regulators, while Lusa and I overhauled the nutrient monitors."

"Are you sure all that was really necessary?" Jaina said, shaking her head. Her bacta-wet hair hung close against her face. "I feel fine."

He gave a wry grimace.

"I think Lowie feels guilty you all got hurt on Ryloth, since he was the reason you went there in the first place."

"I'm just glad that we're all back together and safe," Jaina said. Then she smiled ruefully. "Guess I owe you another one, huh?"

"Maybe you'll get a chance to even up the score," Zekk said. "Our battle with the Diversity Alliance isn't over yet."

Tenel Ka dried herself with the absorbent cloth Lowie handed her, then let the damp material drop to the floor. By now she had learned how to do just about everything quickly and efficiently, even with only one arm. She felt energized and alert, and she couldn't wait to get out of the medical center and do some calisthenics or go for a run across the rooftops of Coruscant. Her thick red-gold hair clung in damp clumps around her bare shoulders, but it would not take her long to tame it into her customary warrior braids again. Turning her cool gray gaze to inspect Jacen, she was relieved to see that the frostbite, cuts, and bruises her friend had sustained on Ryloth's frozen nightside had left no lasting damage. Jacen's unruly brown curls were plastered flat to his head by bacta fluid, and his brandy-brown eyes told her that he was rested and strong again. He flashed Tenel Ka a lopsided grin that made him look like his father, Han Solo.

"I'm glad to see that we're all bacta normal again," he said. He raised his eyebrows at the pun, as if waiting for her response. Tenel Ka kept her face expressionless, though deep inside she was glad that their ordeal had not changed Jacen's sense of humor.

"This," she said, "is a fact."

Later, Zekk tinkered with the Lightning Rod, readying it for his continuing search for Bornan Thul. Running diagnostics gave him something to do while Raynar and his mother Aryn Dro Thul—who had just arrived on Coruscant with the entire Born – aryn fleet—spent some long-overdue time talking in private. Tenet Ka had gone to see her parents Isolder and Teneniel Djo, newly arrived from Hapes. Her wily grandmother Ta'a Chume, who was also on Coruscant, had been using her spies to uncover further disturbing evidence about Diversity Alliance activities. At the same time, Lowie and his sister Sirra had gone to visit with their uncle Chewbacca, while Jacen, Jaina, and Anakin were enjoying a private family meal with their parents. That gave Zekk a few hours to himself.

He could hardly begrudge the families some time alone together. He knew how difficult it was for General Han Solo and Chief of State Leia Organa Solo to find the time to relax with their Jedi-trainee children. Even so, Zekk thought as he cleaned the life-support recirculation modules, he couldn't help being a little jealous. He was left out of all those warm family gatherings, since he had no relatives of his own. Zekk sighed.

Just then a gruff voice drifted up the Lightning Rod's boarding ramp from outside.

"I hope you're taking good care of this fine ship, boy. Not giving you any trouble, is she?"

Zekk dropped the replacement intake filter and bounded toward the entry hatch as a grizzled old spacer trudged up the ramp.

"Peckhum!" Zekk exclaimed. The older man returned Zekk's greeting with a bear hug, and Zekk's spirits soared. Now he was truly at home; this was his family. Raynar still couldn't believe that his mother had risked coming out of hiding. Now both he and Aryn Dro Thul stood on the highest balcony of the Bomaryn headquarters building, overlooking a broad plaza that bustled with people.

"This view was one of the reasons Boman and I chose this building for our headquarters."

His mother wore her midnight-blue gown shot with silver and belted with a sash in the colors of the House of Thul. Her fingers toyed with the sash and her lips curved in a faint smile.

"Somehow I feel closer to your father just standing here."

At the heart of the plaza, a fountain with hundreds of tiers burbled, trickled, gushed, and spouted. The spectacular display reminded him of the Dro family's Ceremony of the Waters, a tradition from their Alderaanian heritage. For the millionth time since his father's disappearance, Raynar found himself wishing that his whole family could be together again, and that he had remembered to enjoy those times more in the past....

"He's in danger, you know," Raynar said.

Without looking away from the fountain, Aryn nodded.

"Tell me what you've learned."

Raynar took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. "It all started with the Twi' lek leader, Nolaa Tarkona. Dad was negotiating some trade agreements with her when he disappeared."

Her gaze still fixed on the fountain, Aryn nodded.

"Boman was planning to meet with her at the Shumavar trade conference... but he never arrived."

"Dad decided to disappear, but he had a good reason. Nolaa Tarkona's interplanetary political movement, the Diversity Alliance, was supposed to bring nonhuman species together to right the wrongs of the past. Unfortunately, Nolaa decided that the only way to right those wrongs was to destroy all humans."

"But why should she have singled out Borran?" Aryn asked.

"An alien scavenger named Fonterrat discovered an Imperial storehouse that held a plague that could kill humans specifically. Fonterrat offered to sell the information to Nolaa Tarkona, but he refused to deal directly with her. Instead he insisted that she send a neutral party to meet with him on an ancient planet called Kuar."

"And so Nolaa Tarkona sent Boman?" Aryn said.

"Right. As far as we know, Dad traded a time - locked case full of credits for a navicomputer module that had the location of the plague store-house in its memory. Just a simple exchange. Dad was supposed to deliver the navicomputer to Nolaa Tarkona at the Shumavar conference. He'd probably never have known what he was carrying-but at the last minute I guess Fonterrat confessed it to him."

Still looking down at the bustling plaza far below, Aryn Dro Thul shook her head.

"That scavenger could have been exaggerating about the plague."

"He wasn't," Raynar said. "Early in his negotiations with Nolaa Tarkona, Fonterrat gave her at least one sample. Nolaa used that sample to booby - trap his payment. At Fonterrat's next stop, an all-human colony on Gammalin, the plague killed everyone. The colonists locked him up before the plague killed them, and Fonterrat died in a tiny jail, since no one was left alive to take care of him. If Nolaa Tarkona ever gets her hands on that plague, the entire human race will be destroyed. So, ever since he got the navicomputer from Fonterrat, Dad has been on the run, trying to keep it from her."

Aryn's shoulders drooped. "That sounds like your father-but why didn't he simply destroy the module, or bring the information here to Coruscant?"

"It's not that easy," Raynar said. "We know that some members of the Diversity Alliance have infiltrated the New Republic government. A Bothan soldier wearing a New Republic uniform even tried to kill Lusa on Yavin 4. Maybe Dad suspected the information wouldn't be safe if he delivered it here."

"Yes, your father has always had good people instincts," Aryn agreed.

"Then he probably also guessed that Nolaa Tarkona would stop at nothing to get that plague-with or without the navicomputer. When Jacen, Jaina, Tenel Ka, and I were prisoners on Ryloth, we learned that she wants to release that plague and infect every last human in the galaxy."

"I wish I were there to help your father," Aryn said.

"I wish I could help him too," Raynar said, taking his mother's hand a bit awkwardly. It felt strange at first, but he had come to realize in the past months how easy it was to lose the things and the people that you cared about. "I'm glad you came out of hiding, Mom," he said.

Aryn Dro Thul stood tall, straightened her shoulders, and looked into Raynar's eyes.

"Sometimes we simply have to face our worst fears," she said. "You've shown so much courage since your father disappeared. I'm very proud of you, you know."

Raynar sighed.

"I guess facing our fears is a part of growing up."

His mother raised her eyebrows at him.

"Maybe. Even so, it never gets any easier."

With a contented smile, Leia Organa Solo gazed slowly around the meal table in the Solo family's quarters of the Imperial Palace. It was still hard to believe that her husband and three children were here at home, all at the same time. She allowed herself to enjoy the moment, though it had taken a galactic crisis to bring them together.

"More nerf sausage, Master Jacen?" See-Threepio offered. "It is a particular Corellian favorite."

"Maybe just one," Jacen answered. Leia noted that Jacen was taller than she had remembered. It amazed her to see how the twins and Anakin changed each time they returned from their studies at the Jedi academy. After serving Jacen, the gold protocol droid turned to Jaina. She held her hands over her plate, as if to protect it from Threepio's enthusiastic service.

"Couldn't eat another bite," Jaina protested.

"Over here, Goldenrod," Han said, holding out his plate for more. "These are just like the ones Dewlanna used to make for me when I was a kid." Anakin smiled sympathetically at his brother and sister.

"I have a feeling you're going to need all your strength when you speak to the New Republic Senate tomorrow morning."

"Tomorrow?" the twins asked in unison.

Leia nodded.

"I've scheduled a special meeting of the New Republic Senate. I'd like you and your friends there to present your findings. I think the whole galaxy needs to know what the Diversity Alliance has been planning."

THE NEW REPUBLIC Senate chambers were full to overflowing. Jaina looked uncertainly through the door into the immense, crowded room and then back at her mother.

The Chief of State shrugged.

"We had a vote coming up on several major issues, so I requested full attendance today. I haven't seen some of those senators and delegates in months."

Tenel Ka said, "Perhaps they heard of our intention to discuss the Diversity Alliance."

"More than likely," Leia admitted. "I know you all understand how much is at stake here."

"If you want, I could loosen up the crowd with a joke."

Jacen waggled his eyebrows. Leia turned toward him with a startled look, but Jacen held up his hands in a placating gesture.

"Hey, I was just kidding!"

Beside him, Lowie and his sister Sirra both rumbled deep in their Wookiee throats.

"Okay - bad timing, I admit," Jacen said. "It's just that we all seem so tight and edgy."

"You're right," Jaina said, drawing a slow deep breath and letting the Force flow through her. A wave of calm clarity washed the worry from her mind. Around her, the other companions also used Jedi relaxation techniques, with varying degrees of success. Her father and Chewbacca, along with her uncle Luke, the Jedi historian Tionne, and Kur, the Twi'lek politician rescued from exile on Ryloth, had already taken their seats toward the front of the Senate chambers.

"Well then, what are we waiting for?" Jaina asked.

Much later, an hour after they had finished telling of their adventures and delivered their alarming news, it still wasn't over. Jaina grew defensive as yet another representative stood up to take the floor. She could sense her brother's bafflement at the response with which the Senate had greeted their announcement. Tenel Ka, as usual, was stolid and alert, probably scanning the crowd for any signs of trouble. Only Chief of State Leia Organa Solo seemed perfectly calm, as if she had expected the reactions of the senators and delegates. She looked around the room with a practiced ease, seeing everything, listening to everyone, gauging the reactions of her audience.

Jaina bit her lower lip, willing herself to be more like her mother, ordering herself to listen with an open mind to the squeaking Chadra Fan senator.

"And so, it is not the members of the Diversity Alliance who should be censured-rather, these willful human children need to be taught respect for legal governments," Senator Trubor concluded, triumphantly swiveling his triangular batlike ears.

Alarmed, Jaina looked over at Luke Skywalker, hoping the Jedi Master would react to these accusations. But already it seemed as if too many humans had spoken out. Luke met Jaina's gaze, giving her his silent support.

Without comment, Leia nodded and announced the name of the next speaker.

"Senator J'mesk Iman."

The small cherub-faced Tamran steepled his fingers at chest level and bowed slightly. J'mesk Iman's expressive brows rose as he spoke.

"Forgive me if I have misunderstood the situation, but it is not the habit of the New Republic to meddle in the affairs of local governments, is it?" Fmesk Iman spread his hands in a traditional gesture his people used when offering peace. "Perhaps this could all be viewed as a cultural misunderstanding. From an objective point of view, what these young Jedi did might be described as well-intentioned but ill - advised. There should be no need to consider it an act of outright espionage."

Jaina shifted uncomfortably at the ambassador's benign condemnation. Her brother flinched, and she sensed rather than heard a growl forming deep in Lowie's throat. The black streak of fur over his eye bristled.

"Since the children's arrival was neither announced nor authorized-since it was, in fact, covert," Iman continued, "the government of Ryloth had ample reason to view it as an act of aggression."

"But we explained what we were doing there," Jacen objected. "The Diversity Alliance was holding Lowie against his will. And they still threw us into their spice mines."

Iman fixed them all with a serious look and cocked his head to one side. When he answered, though, his voice was not unkind.

"Yet had any of you requested their government's permission to enter its headquarters?"

"No," Jaina answered truthfully. "But we never intended any harm. We just wanted to get our friend back."

"Even so, since your mission was not a diplomatic one, and not sanctioned by any government, you placed yourselves under the jurisdiction of local laws by trespassing as you did. I do not believe even the New Republic could allow such an intrusion without punishing the perpetrators. It is only natural that any government should want to deter others from doing what you did."

Jaina bit her lower lip. She knew there was no way to refute the ambassador's logic...

"But what about the spice mines?" Raynar asked. "We were taken prisoner, turned into slaves."

"Very well, then. How long did you spend in the spice mines?" Iman asked.

Jaina answered, "We didn't have chronometers with us."

"Very well, a few days, then? A harsh punishment perhaps for highborn youngsters such as yourselves, but not outside the realm of reason. Were you denied food or water or sleep?"

Jaina grimaced at the memory of the fungus they had been expected to eat and the foul-tasting water they had been offered, but she shook her head. Raynar took a sudden interest in studying the floor near his feet and said nothing.

"But they never released us," Jaina pointed out. "Lowie had to help us escape."

The ambassador steepled his fingers at his chin and smiled. "And yet here you all are, alive and well. So allow me to summarize. You broke into the headquarters of a well-respected political movement. The legal planetary government sentenced you to a short term of unpleasant yet not unjustifiable punishment-long enough for you to learn a valuable lesson, we can hope. Then, before you had served your complete term, your friends, who at the time were working for the Diversity Alliance"-at this, Iman's brows rose expressively-"released you from captivity and assisted you in departing from Ryloth without further punishment. And during all that time, the only true injuries you sustained were as a result of the ill-advised paths you chose when leaving."

Jaina drew in a deep breath and held it for a long moment before releasing it. It wasn't fair when the story was presented that way. At this point Lowie spoke up in a series of rumbles, barks, and growls. Em Teedee made a throat-clearing sound to be sure he had the attention of the entire assembly and then provided a translation.

"Master Lowbacca does not choose to dispute your interpretation of the events surrounding his associates' arrival and departure from Ryloth. He does, however, wish to clarify two facts. First: the current government on Ryloth does not necessarily represent the Twi'lek people"-at this point, the overthrown leader Kur stepped forward and nodded his confirmation - "And second: during the time they were held by the Diversity Alliance, Master Lowbacca, his sister Mistress Sirrakuk, and the centaur girl Mistress Lusa all noted a distinct antihuman sentiment that had the potential for expressing itself with some violence."

A salmon-colored Mon Calamarian female with glossy blue-silver robes approached the floor, her large round eyes swiveling to study the audience. J'mesk Iman yielded his position, and Leia announced the new speaker with a sense of relief.

"Ambassador Cilghal, please speak."

Cilghal, one of Luke Skywalker's first Jedi students, nodded to Leia and stood tall.

"I do not believe any government is sacred. It may well be, as my colleague has said, that nothing more happened on Ryloth than a juvenile infraction of local laws and the punishment of that infraction."

A murmur of approval ran through the Senate.

"However," she continued, "if the government of Ryloth and the Diversity Alliance are peaceful and do no more than work in the interests of their members, then they should have no objection to a visit by diplomatic inspectors. This would, of course, be prearranged and approved through appropriate channels with their government. Some of the charges against the Diversity Alliance are indeed troubling and warrant our attention. Therefore, I propose a simple fact-finding mission. The delegation should consist of a representative mixture of species and include a few members familiar with the government of Ryloth" - Cilghal nodded to the Twi'lek Kur - "and the Diversity Alliance."

Here she gestured with a broad flipper - hand toward the Wookiees and Lusa.

"If we find no evidence of wrongdoing, as some of my colleagues expect, then this inspection will be the simplest method of putting the matter to rest."

From the corner of her eye Jaina saw her mother relax considerably. Taking a cue from her, Jaina ordered her muscles to unknot themselves. The Chadra Fan senator Trubor approached the floor again, but from the small smile of triumph on Leia's face, Jaina knew there was no longer any doubt of the outcome: a team of investigators would soon be on its way to Ryloth. Then they would find undeniable proof of Nolaa Tarkona's schemes.

ZEKK HAD NOT expected it to be so easy, especially not after the debacle in the Senate hall.

"What?"

"I said, 'Of course.' When do we leave?" Raynar answered. Zekk had anticipated several tedious meetings with Aryn Dro Thul, explaining why her son should accompany him on the dangerous quest to find Borran Thul. Zekk already knew how to find the fugitive, since he had placed a tracer on Thul's ship a week ago, but he had no reason to believe Borran Thul would willingly return with him, or even listen to reason. That was why Raynar had to come along. The Alderaanian boy clasped his hands behind his back and began pacing up and down the length of the battle-scarred Lightning Rod. His footsteps echoed in the large repair bay.

"I can be ready in a few hours, if that's not too long," he said with an eager expression. Zekk shook his head and tapped a hydrospanner against the ship's hull. "It'll take me at least that long to finish here. Less than that if Jaina can help us-and if I know Jaina, wild gundarks couldn't keep her away."

As it turned out, Jaina also recruited her twin brother, as well as Tenel Ka, Lowie and his sister Sirra, and of course Em Teedee. In addition, she

offered to accompany Zekk and Raynar on their rescue mission to serve as navigator, copilot, or anything else they might need.

"No, Jaina," Zekk told her in a gentle but firm voice. "Raynar's one of two people in the galaxy that Boman Thul is likely to trust. I need him with me, but I'm not risking anyone else."

Jaina tried to hide her hurt by turning toward the navigational console and double-checking Em Teedee's connections.

"Run the usual diagnostics, Em Teedee," she said. "And don't forget the special ones I asked for."

"Certainly, Mistress Jaina," the little droid replied. "But do you believe it's absolutely necessary to--"

"Just do it, Em Teedee," Jaina broke in with an edge of impatient urgency. Then she turned back to Zekk. "I understand exactly how dangerous this situation is. Whether you find Raynar's father or not, you're probably on the Diversity Alliance's most-wanted list by now. And you're definitely considered fair game for bounty hunters, since you turned against them and helped Bornan Thul escape before."

A pair of Wookiee voices bellowed from the cargo bay, and Jaina yelled back,

"I think Tenel Ka and Jacen have the sealant patches. They're outside working on the hull."

Zekk placed his hands on Jaina's shoulders, shook her gently.

"There's a chance Raynar and I won't make it back. He has to go, and so do I-but I won't put you in that kind of danger."

Jaina looked past him out the cockpit viewports, pretending an interest in the Sorosuub ion skimmer that had just cruised into the docking bay. What gave Zekk the right to decide whether or not she could put herself in danger? Her hands clenched and unclenched a few times.

"If that plague gets loose, none of us will be safe anyway," she pointed out, still trying to make him see reason. "There's a lot at - stake, and everyone's taking risks. Lusa and Sirra and Uncle Luke are all going on the inspection team headed for Ryloth. They'll all be in danger. So will you. You'd stand a much better chance of coming out of this alive if I came along, you know."

A long silence stretched between them.

"I don't know if you can understand this," Zekk said at last. He pulled her closer to him-a move that surprised Jaina. His voice was tight with emotion. "I made some choices back when I joined the Shadow Academy-the wrong choices. I was willing to put the whole New Republic at risk just to prove to myself that I was as good as you and your family. All I managed to prove to myself was how wrong I was."

"I came close to killing you once, because Brakiss had convinced me-or I had convinced myself-that you thought I was unworthy. Now the New Republic is in jeopardy again, and I'm one of the few people who can do something about it." He gave a mirthless laugh. "Funny thing is, this time I don't feel like I have anything to prove. I just need to know that you're safe, that your family's safe, that old Peckhum's safe. I want to make sure that humans, Wookiees, and all other species are safe from anyone who rules by murder and hate... or because they have something to prove." Zekk pulled back, and his emerald eyes bored into Jaina's. "I'm going to try to save Raynar's father. But if I can't, I'll do whatever I can to keep the galaxy safe-whether it means blowing up his ship, or my ship... or everything."

Jaina sensed the fierce determination in Zekk. Her eyes filled with tears, and she tried to blink them away. Yes, she understood. She understood only too well, and she knew there would be no changing Zekk's mind. She unclenched her fists, slid her arms around his back, and squeezed him tightly.

Jacen's upside-down face appeared in one of the side viewports. He dangled from the roof of the Lightning Rod, making faces at his sister, and pointing to where Raynar and Lusa stood in front of the ship, also sharing a goodbye embrace. Jacen's upside-down eyebrows raised and lowered comically.

"Well then," Jaina said, somewhere between a laugh and a choke, "what are we waiting for? We have a ship to get ready for its most important flight ever. You got everything we need, Em Teedee?"

"Yes, indeed, Mistress Jaina." Zekk pressed his cheek against hers. "Thank you," he whispered.

Raynar leaned over the navicomputer console and fine-tuned his lock on the tracer frequency.

"Looks stable this time," he reported. "The beacon hasn't cut - out or faded."

Zekk nodded.

"Good. Your father's not making any more hyperspace jumps right now. Let's hope he decides to stay put for a while."

"Should I calculate a route to these coordinates?" Raynar asked.

Zekk had spent the past day filling in the gaps in Raynar's star-piloting education. The blond-haired boy now felt competent to set a course, calculate hyperspace jumps, and operate some of the weapons systems. Zekk had even let him fly the Lightning Rod for a couple of hours.

"Go ahead," Zekk said as he watched the boy enter the coordinates and plot the route. "You're not a half-bad copilot, you know?"

Raynar flushed with pride at Zekk's expression of confidence.

"Thanks for taking the time to teach me. I guess I've always been so used to people doing this stuff for me that I never thought to learn it for myself. Actually, I'm surprised Jaina didn't insist on coming along to be your copilot."

Zekk grimaced.

"She did." He paused for a long moment, as if considering how to say something unpleasant. "I told her I didn't want her along... because we might not make it back."

"We have to make it back," Raynar said with a stubborn optimism he hadn't known he possessed. "I promised Lusa. Besides," he added, flashing Zekk a calculating glance, "you don't expect Jaina to stay out of trouble just because you're not around, do you? Who'll come to her rescue?"

As Raynar leaned forward to fiddle with the navicomputer, he heard a soft chuckle from Zekk.

"You're right. We will have to make it back."

With that the the dark-haired young man flicked a few switches and plunged the Lightning Rod into hyperspace.

They traveled in companionable silence for a few hours. Finally, Zekk shook himself from a deep reverie.

"Speaking of convincing people not to come along, how did you talk your mother out of trying to come with us?"

"It was easier than I expected," Raynar said. "I told her that if a couple of Jedi couldn't bring my father back safely, then two Jedi and a businesswoman wouldn't be any more likely to succeed."

Zekk's eyebrows raised slightly when Raynar said two Jedi.

Raynar added, "She knows that if anything happened to my father and me, she's the only one who can run Bornaryn Trading. She has a responsibility to all of those clients and employees. Anyway, I think it made her a bit happier just to learn that my father had a good reason for running. He was trying to protect us all."

"And now we've got to protect him," Zekk said, looking down at the navicomputer. "Here we are."

He nodded to Raynar when the Lightning Rod dropped out of hyperspace. Raynar's breathing sped up, and his heartbeat pounded in his ears. After a long, long search, he was finally going to see his father again.

"Uh-oh," Zekk said as normal space resolved into clear focus around them. "Looks like your father's not just taking a break-he's got uninvited guests."

Raynar swallowed hard as he surveyed the scene before him. His father's ship was here, all right. But so were two other ships: Boba Fett's vessel Slave IV and another craft he didn't recognize. He flicked on the comm system.

"Dad, it's me, Raynar. Zekk and I are here to rescue you." A split second later, both bounty hunter ships fired on Borran Thul.

EVEN THOUGH HE recognized the Lightning Rod as the ship flown by ambitious young bounty hunter Zekk, Bonnan Thul decided he couldn't be choosy - not anymore. With both Boba Fett and the other bounty hunter Shakra firing on him, he either had to trust Zekk or sacrifice himself and blow up his ship. But Bonnan wasn't ready to self-destruct. Though it would obliterate the deadly knowledge he carried, the plague storehouse itself still existed; Nolaa Tarkona would keep searching for it. For him, the deciding factor was hearing his son's voice. Raynar was traveling with Zekk!

He toggled the comm system to SEND. "I'll come over in the escape pod, Raynar. But I can't leave anything behind here. Just give me a minute... and stay clear of my ship." Boman swallowed hard and, with trembling fingers, engaged the destruction subroutines he had hoped he would never need. Cutting the time as close to the edge as he dared, he set the countdown.

Inside the claustrophobic ship, he could hear his damaged engines whining as they looped energy overloads back into themselves. The cockpit temperature gauges crept into the red with astonishing speed. Without wasting a second, Boman Thul grabbed the precious navicomputer Fonterratt had given him and ran for his ship's single escape pod. The module that had caused so much distress contained the coordinates for the Emperor's munitions storehouse, the laboratory asteroid where Evir Derricote had developed plague organisms specific to races the Emperor had found troublesome. Derricote had created many diseases-including the one that would kill only humans. But even the Emperor had not dared to release the horrific scourge. Palpatine wanted to destroy only troublesome groups of humans, such as the Rebels-not the entire race.

Nevertheless, the Emperor had left an immense storehouse filled with plague canisters. This navicomputer module held those coordinates, and Nolaa Tarkona desperately wanted that knowledge. Boman Thul had vowed to die before letting such a terrible weapon fall into the hands of the Diversity Alliance. He had flown to the abandoned storehouse himself and seen that it was indeed as terrible as he had imagined. More terrible, in fact. He hadn't found a way to destroy the place single-handed, and he couldn't risk approaching the New Republic.

Nolaa Tarkona had too many converts, too many spies, among the alien members. It would take only one stolen vial of the plague released into a major spaceport... and the New Republic would be lost. No, Boman Thul knew that until the entire storehouse was destroyed, he had to keep the location of the biological weapons depot a secret from everyone. And so

he had taken the navicomputer module-and vanished. It had worked... until now. Red lights flashed in the cockpit, and klaxons squawked.

He cradled the module, knowing that everything else would become space dust in a few minutes, including his ship's own computer. As he clambered into the escape pod, Borran Thul glanced over his shoulder for one last look around the little ship that had served him so well during his months on the run. But he was startled to see activity lights flashing on his systems console-more than just the self-destruct sequence. His ship's memory banks were being split open remotely. Someone was slicing into his computer! Thul paused in dismay. Certain illegal technology allowed illicit users to rip data directly from other computers.

He had intended to destroy his vessel before anyone could get close to it-but it might already be too late. Too late.

"I hope you're ready for me, Zekk," he muttered. His escape pod should take him to safety before Boba Fett or the other bounty hunter could latch onto him. He sealed the hatch and hit the launch button. Acceleration threw him back against the small padded seat, and Boman Thul held on while the lifepod ejected. As the predatory bounty hunters moved into position, he looked out the small round porthole, hoping the right ship would retrieve him first.

While Boba Fett's Slave IV raced after the dwindling escape pod, the bounty hunter Shakra sat in her bare cockpit considering another alternative, another way to achieve her goal. Her reptilian frill plumped with excitement and her large slitted eyes narrowed as she made her choice. She accelerated toward Boman Thul's newly abandoned ship. She would get aboard and tear out his computer banks with her own sharp-knuckled hands. Most of all, Shakra hoped to find something Boba Fett might have neglected. The bounty and the fame she'd receive from Nola Tarkona were the incentive that drove her ambition-but the reward of knowing she had outsmarted Boba Fett would be nearly as sweet.

She docked her little craft against Boman Thul's empty vessel and used robotic grapplers, magnetic sealers, and powerful blasters to rip her way into the abandoned ship. She didn't care about causing damage. All that mattered to her was the information she might find inside. Shakra came aboard like a predator stalking a wounded creature. She looked from side to side, scanning the decks, observing the cockpit, tasting the air with her forked tongue. Through the front windowports she watched Fett's ship closing in on the escape pod, while the newly arrived Lightning Rod raced to intercept. They had left Shakra alone with this craft, and she hoped to make a killing.

Alarms flashed in the cockpit. The engines groaned, rumbled, and whined as power built up. Her hard lips expressed her distaste in a scaly frown. Her slender black tongue flicked out. The air tasted hot, angry. Apparently, this craft had sustained more damage during the attack than she had expected. But anything that remained was now hers. She let out a long hissing laugh, and her slit pupils widened as she contemplated which files to steal first. Abruptly her attention fixed on the engine

diagnostics, the power levels, the heat exchangers that blazed a silent warning: a countdown. Her frill shot up in astonishment and alarm.

Thul had set his ship to self-destruct! She whirled about, her fanged jaws wide open as she gasped in the hot recycled air. The timer showed only seconds remaining. Crying out like a coward, Shakra fled toward her ship, glad that none of her brood-mates could see her reaction. If only she could get far enough away from the blast zone! Her clawed feet scrabbled on the deckplates. Through the hole in the hull up ahead she saw her own ship, her escape...

Just as she reached the opening, Borran Thul's craft exploded like a supernova, obliterating Shakra, her ship, and itself, along with any residual information its computers might have carried....

As Zekk jockeyed into position to cut off Boba Fett's ship, he looked grimly at the Lightning Rod's weapons systems. He had shot at and chased the masked bounty hunter before, but in each case Zekk had had the element of surprise, and he had fled before the firefight could get too intense. Fett outgunned him by a significant margin.

"Get the tractor beam on that escape pod," he said to Raynar. "We don't have much time."

"Which is the tractor beam?" Raynar said, looking frantically at the control panels. "We haven't covered that one yet."

Zekk dodged and rolled the Lightning Rod, skimming past a volley of laser fire from Boba Fett.

"That one!" he said, jabbing quickly at a control panel in front of the copilot's chair. He fought his impatience with Raynar's lack of training. The blond-haired young man was just as interested in rescuing his father as Zekk was in surviving this encounter. Slave IV came in shooting. Boman Thul's voice came over the comm system.

"If you're going to rescue me, you'd better do it quickly."

"I got him!" Raynar yelled as he successfully locked on the tractor beam. Boba Fett cruised toward them, ready to snatch the escape pod directly from their grip. At that moment, without warning, Borran Thul's ship exploded in a nightmare of blinding white that washed across space in an expanding sphere.

"Hang on!" Zekk swung the Lightning Rod around to shield the escape pod just as the shock wave struck. Fett's ship was knocked into a dizzying spiral. Zekk barely held position, nudging his thrusters to keep the Lightning Rod balanced.

"We're still here. We're still intact," he said.

"So am I," Boman Thul shouted over the comm system. "But I won't be for long unless you get me aboard."

Fett recovered quickly and came after them again, angry now. Zekk fired, but his weapons were much weaker than the bounty hunter's. He fed all available power to his shields but still felt the pounding of Boba Fett's blasts. He checked to see if Raynar had drawn the escape pod into the cargo bay yet.

"What's this alarm light mean?" Raynar asked.

"It means our shields are failing!" Zekk said. Suddenly, another ship soared out of hyperspace, emerging from the glare of Bornan Thul's self-destructed vessel. Without pausing to take aim, the new ship fired immediately upon Boba Fett. Bright streaks of fire sprayed space and struck Slave IV.

"Yee-ha!" Jaina Solo's voice crowed over the comet system. "Take that, Boba Fett-and don't mess with our friends!"

Zekk fired his own weapons again in tandem with the Rock Dragon's second full-powered volley. Fett, seeing himself clearly at a tactical disadvantage and not knowing if other ships might soon arrive, broke off his attack. He sent one brief comm burst as he wheeled about.

"I have what I need." Then he vanished into hyperspace.

"Nice turnabout, Jaina," Zekk said, with a tense smile. "About time you came to rescue me for a change!"

The Rock Dragon pulled alongside, and Jaina's chuckle came through the comm system.

"Kind of a family tradition. Dad did the same thing for Uncle Luke at the Death Star, you know. Anyway, couldn't let you keep thinking you're the only one who can pull off a surprise rescue."

Raynar was relieved, nervous, and exhilarated all at the same time. At the moment, nothing was more important to him than getting down to the cargo hold, where the retrieved lifepod rested. He ran to be reunited-at last-with his father.

THE SHARP SCENT of ozone and metal drifted up from the escape pod, along with a crackle of static electricity from the recently disengaged tractor beam. Raynar could hear the chugging of the pod's life-support systems mixed with the whine of the Lightning Rod's sublight engines as Zekk maneuvered to dock with the Rock Dragon. He had never heard or smelled anything so wonderful. The harsh glare of the cargo hold's glowpanels was cheering, welcoming. Everything seemed brighter, sweeter, fresher to him than it had for nearly a year. The galaxy would soon be set to rights. His father had returned. With shaking fingers Raynar pressed the hatch release, and the heavy top panel popped open with a whoosh of depressurization. Giving a joyful cry of welcome, Raynar leaned into the pod-only to find a blaster aimed straight at his heart.

Jaina was the first to stumble through the airlock from the Rock Dragon. Setting his external sensors to full alert to keep an eye out for

unwanted visitors, Zekk threw aside his crash webbing and bounded out of the Lightning Rod's cockpit and into the crew cabin. He twirled Jaina in a happy hug while they both laughed with relief, but then he growled,

"I thought I told you you couldn't come with me!"

Jaina knew he was trying hard to sound stern, but she could hear the pleasure in his voice. She pulled back and favored him with a Solo grin.

"Since when have you ever done anything I wanted you to do?" She gave an unladylike snort. "I'm just as worried about your safety as you are about mine, you know."

"All right," Zekk admitted, "I'm glad you came. But I still don't know how you found us."

Jaina shrugged and grinned again.

"Trade secret."

"Hah!" Jacen said, appearing in the airlock with Tenel Ka behind him. "Some trade secret. More like a sneaky droid, if you ask me."

Lowie also emerged from the airlock in a flurry of ginger fur and full-throated Wookiee bellows.

"Why, if you're referring to me, Master Jacen, I'll take that as a compliment," Em Teedee said, zipping past him into the crew cabin on his microrepulsor jets.

"This is a fact," Tenel Ka said. "You are an excellent `sneaky' droid."

Zekk looked accusingly at Jaina.

"What did Em Teedee do?"

"When we were helping you with your preflights," she stammered, "I kind of, um, had Em Teedee download the frequency and encoding for the tracer you used on Boman Thul's ship."

"Hey, it was a good thing, too," Jacen picked up where his sister left off. "After we saw the delegation off to Ryloth, we all had this feeling that something was about to go wrong."

Lowie woofed and brushed at the back of his neck to indicate the tingle of danger they had sensed.

"Mom must have felt it too," Jaina said, "because when I told her you were going to need our help, she didn't even try to argue. She was glad she had some Jedi she could send on such an important mission-even if two of them were her own kids."

Tenel Ka nodded.

"Her one stipulation was that we send her a message if we required reinforcements." She raised an eyebrow and looked around at her friends. "Do we require reinforcements?"

"Not if Boman Thul made it out intact with his navicomputer."

"Or managed to destroy it," Zekk added. "We'd better go down to the hold and find out."

"Don't shoot, Dad-it's me!" Raynar said. His father, looking haggard and wary, glanced around but did not lower his blaster. "Are you a hostage? Have you been coerced into helping a bounty hunter or the Diversity Alliance?"

"No, Dad. Zekk may have worked as a bounty hunter, but he's a... a friend." Raynar was surprised to note as he said it that this was true. Zekk was a friend, and the dark-haired young man had risked his life more than once for each of them. "He believes what you told him about all humans being in danger. He wanted to help you, so he came to get me-he figured you wouldn't trust him alone."

Borran Thul's haunted eyes closed for a moment, and he nodded.

"Your... friend was right. I wouldn't have trusted him." Raynar's father lowered the blaster and extended a hand for his son to help him out of the escape pod. Raynar had thought about this too long to be embarrassed anymore, although his family had rarely engaged in physical contact when he was growing up. Even before his father's feet were firmly on the deckplates, Raynar threw his arms around Borran in a fierce hug. And his father, perhaps because he was unsteady, or perhaps because he'd also had months to reflect, did not hesitate in returning the embrace. Only the sound of his friends' footsteps descending into the cargo hold brought Raynar back to reality. His father flinched and reached for his blaster, instantly suspicious again.

"These are my friends, too," Raynar said, and introduced them one by one. "They're all Jedi trainees, except of course for Em Teedee, who is the best miniaturized translating droid ever to be retrofitted on Mechis Ill-and a pretty good navigator to boot."

"Speaking of navigators," Zekk said, "what about the module Nola Tarkona wanted so badly? Was it onboard your ship when it blew up?"

Borran Thul pointed into the emergency pod.

"No, I brought it along. It's here with me."

Raynar felt giddy with relief.

"Then you don't have to run anymore," he said. "All we have to do is destroy the information."

His father's mouth formed a grim line. All the blood seemed to drain from his once-round cheeks. He shook his head.

"It's not that simple. Before I got into the escape pod I noticed that the computers on my ship were all being accessed at once. I don't know how, but someone was slicing into them remotely."

"Ah. That would probably be Boba Fett," Zekk said.

"He did that to the Rock Dragon when we were in the rubble field of Alderaan," Jaina explained, then looked questioningly at Boman Thul. "But you have the navicomputer with you. Boba Fett couldn't have sliced into it."

"You don't understand." Boman's voice rasped as if it were painful for him to speak. "I knew that even if I destroyed this navicomputer Nola Tarkona would never stop looking for the weapons depot. That's why I went there myself, hoping to destroy it. I couldn't find a way, though, so I left again, planning to buy supplies and weapons so that I could return to blow up the storehouse." Raynar blanched. "But that means that the location of the plague storehouse - "

"-was in your ship's own automatic navigation log before it blew up," Jaina finished for him.

"In that case," Zekk concluded, "Boba Fett has the information. And he won't hesitate to give it to Nola Tarkona."

NOLAA TARKONA GRITTED her sharpened teeth when she learned of the impending arrival of the New Republic inspection team. Her hirelings had failed to find either Boman Thul or the location of the Emperor's plague storehouse. And now she was being pushed against the wall. Her glorious political movement was in grave danger. Her finest plan, her highest expectations, had been thwarted-so far. The Diversity Alliance might never be able to unleash its storm of vengeance to obliterate the human race in punishment for the evils of the past. She had tried, and she had failed, because of one missing piece of information. Her hopes of liberating all oppressed species had collapsed like an imploding star. Even so, Nola did not intend to give up willingly.

She would make her mark in blood if nothing else. When pushed to the wall, some creatures turned very vicious indeed. She summoned Rullak, the Quarren representative, and Kambrea, the Devaronian female whose wily ways had allowed her to move up quickly in the ranks of the Diversity Alliance. Kambrea had recruited many members, both from her own race and from other downtrodden species. Nola also sent for Corrsk, her reptilian Trandoshan general wounded in combat by the young Wookiee who had betrayed them and fled back to his cronies in the New Republic.

She looked stonily at her three generals as they came forward. All had increased in rank since the untimely death of her wolfman Adjutant Advisor, Hovrak.

"The New Republic is sending a team to inspect Ryloth," Nola said, "and we must choose whether to surrender meekly, or fight to the death. We can either be cowards or martyrs-and I know which I must choose."

She didn't ask for their decision. She knew Corrsk would fly into a battle frenzy, but Rullak and Kambrea were not quite as determined to lay down their lives for a dream. They had come to the Diversity Alliance to gain personal glory, and Nolaa doubted they would sacrifice their own blood for the cause.

"We've gathered arms, weapons, explosives," Nolaa pointed out. "We have a few fighting ships, enough for a small armada. And we have sufficient weaponry and devoted soldiers to make a stand here. We can fight! We will lure the unsuspecting New Republic team into our catacombs and slaughter them. Then we declare Ryloth neutral-exempt from human law-and refuse to grant them any further access."

Kambrea looked astonished.

"But they will never let you get away with that. They will force their way in, howling for revenge!"

Nolaa stiffened. Her tattooed head-tail lashed back and forth.

"We have the power of righteousness on our side. If we become martyrs, the whole galaxy will see how humans treat any resistance to their domination. "

Kambrea took a step backward. The Quarren fidgeted, his face tentacles quivering. Corrsk stood like a towering statue.

"Kill humans," he said in his gargling voice. A signal alerted Nolaa, and she felt cold inside. She hadn't expected the human team to arrive for another day, at least-but it would be just like them to attempt to catch the Diversity Alliance unawares. One of the Duros command system operators signaled her.

"Esteemed Tarkona, Boba Fett's ship has arrived. He bears urgent information for you."

"Boba Fett!"

She did not allow herself to hope. The masked bounty hunter had already reported failure too many times. Still, he would not have come without good reason. She waited for the Slave IV to enter the landing bay and for Fett to be escorted into her presence. Ignoring the guards, the masked bounty hunter strode directly up to Nolaa Tarkona, his shoulders squared. In one gauntleted hand he carried a data cylinder. The slitted visor showed nothing of his face.

It was difficult to read his body language, but Nolaa thought she detected a swagger of pride that had been missing the previous times he had come to her.

"We cornered Bornan Thul," Fett said without any greeting. "He escaped in a small lifepod and triggered his ship to self-destruct."

Nolaa wanted to strangle something, someone nearby.

"So he got away again? You dare to report another failure?"

"No," Fett said. He held up the data cylinder. "Before his ship exploded, I sliced into his computers and drained the files. I sorted through them during my flight here." He handed the cylinder to her. "Thul took Fonterrat's navicomputer with him, but he went to the place you seek-five days ago. His ship's own log carried the precise coordinates."

Barely able to contain her excitement, Nolaa snatched the cylinder, raised her clawed fingers, and motioned for a data reader to be brought to her. A Talz guard hustled up with the apparatus. She inserted the cylinder and began scanning files. Her rose-quartz eyes flicked from side to side. Finally Nolaa bared her sharp teeth in a broad grin.

"Yessss," she said. "It is here. This changes everything."

Leaping out of her stone chair, she called the other generals to her side. Then she instructed her Sullustan clerks to pay Boba Fett the full bounty from the Diversity Alliance coffers.

"Our business is finished then, Nolaa Tarkona," Fett said.

"Yes. Yes, of course." She waved impatiently to get rid of him so that she could discuss Diversity Alliance plans with her generals in privacy. When Fett was gone, she gathered Corrsk, Kambrea, and Rullak around her.

"Assemble the armada-all the ships we have. Nothing will stop us now. Corrsk, you and Rullak come with me. We'll go directly to the storehouse and take as many plague samples as we want. Kambrea, you will remain here to deal with the New Republic inspectors. Delay them until we can unleash our final solution."

"Me?" the Devaronian said in alarm. She lifted her pointed chin so that her curved horns tilted backward. "But what can I say to them? How will I answer their questions?"

Nolaa scowled at her.

"Use your imagination. Clear away anything that might arouse suspicion. Remove the slaves from the spice mines and find volunteers to work there. Hide all the weapons storehouses. Make sure the team spends most of its time in our happy, tame Twi'lek cliff cities. That should convince them everything's in order."

"But - how long will I have to keep them distracted?" Kambrea said.

"Not long," Nolaa Tarkona answered, gesturing for Corrsk and Rullak to follow her. "Once we reach the plague storehouse and get what we need, we'll never have to worry about humans again."

JAINA' S MIND KICKED into high gear as the implications of Bornan Thul's words struck home. Somewhere in the galaxy was a secret storehouse that

held a plague lethal to humans. Raynar's father had actually been there, but hadn't managed to destroy it. And very soon the asteroid's location would no longer be a secret. If Boba Fett already had the information, Nolaa Tarkona would have it, too.

"Hey, I don't get it," Jacen said. "If you found the plague, why couldn't you destroy it?"

"Was the facility heavily guarded?" Tenel Ka asked.

All eyes turned back to Boman Thul. He looked down at the deckplates, as if ashamed.

"From what I could tell, the weapons depot was an old Imperial research facility. It was completely abandoned. But I couldn't blast through its outer domes with the weapons I had on my little ship."

"Ah. Aha," Tenel Ka said. "Then you were unable to enter."

"No... I got in," Thul said, "as Fonterrat had before me. I don't think the Imperials expected many intruders-its location was highly classified. Inside, though, I found the facility's vaults locked. I've no idea how Fonterrat got into any of them to get his samples." He sighed. "Unfortunately, the only weapon I had with me was my blaster, and I was all alone." He ended with an apologetic shrug. "Not much chance destroying an entire munitions depot that way."

Jaina shook herself and stood up straighter.

"Well, you're not alone now," she said. Lowie roared his agreement and then woofed a few times for emphasis.

"Master Lowbacca wishes to point out that you now have several trained Jedi to assist you. And, if I might be so bold," the little droid added, "I myself am quite accomplished at interfacing with strange computers, analyzing cyberlocks, retrieving encrypted data, and so forth. And, now that I have been upgraded, I am fluent in over sixteen forms of communication."

The forlorn expression on Raynar's face wrenched Jaina's heart.

"But we can't go to that asteroid, Dad. We were supposed to bring you back to Coruscant as soon as we found you. Mom's waiting for you there, and the Chief of State needs to hear what you found."

"No time for that anymore," Zekk said. "As soon as Nolaa Tarkona gets a report from Boba Fett, she'll be on her way to the plague storehouse."

Raynar set his mouth in a stubborn line.

"I'll have to figure out a way to get a message to Mom, then. And we promised to signal for reinforcements right away if we needed them."

"They'll have to meet us at the plague storehouse," Zekk said. "There's no time to waste."

Jaina nodded to Borran Thul.

"We've got to download the coordinates from your navicomputer module right away into both the Lightning Rod and the Rock Dragon. Then we'll let our mom know where we're going."

"Wait. Even if Nolaa Tarkona already knows the location of the storehouse," Zekk said, "we can't just broadcast it over the hypercom."

"Then encrypt the message and send it immediately," Tenel Ka said.

A look of hope dawned on Bornan Thul's face. He looked at Raynar.

"Did anyone manage to break our family's proprietary codes while I was in hiding?"

"I don't think so," Raynar said. "Tenel Ka says it's one of the best encryption systems she's ever seen."

"If anyone else had broken that code, I'm sure I'd have heard about it by now," Zekk added. "After all, I couldn't break it when you had me send those messages for you."

"Then we'll transmit to your mother through Bomaryn headquarters on Coruscant," Boman said, rubbing his hands briskly together. "First we send a message. Then we blow up a weapons depot."

"Hey, just another day's work for a bunch of Jedi trainees," Jacen said. Lowie barked a call to action.

"But what if we can't do it by ourselves?" Raynar asked.

"Then we'll just have to hope the New Republic reinforcements arrive in time," Jaina said.

In a blur of activity, Borran Thul composed his message while Raynar entered coding subroutines with Em Teedee's assistance. Jaina and Zekk downloaded the coordinates to their respective vessels' navicomputers and calculated hyperspace routes to the isolated depot. Jacen, Tenel Ka, and Lowbacca made a quick check of each of the ships' subsystems. In no more than five minutes, the message was sent, the Rock Dragon and the Lightning Rod were decoupled in space, and the ships made the jump to hyperspace. As it turned out, it took six separate hyperspace jumps and twice as many hours to get to the weapons asteroid. There was no more direct route available. Fonterratt had found the place by accident, and they had to follow his wandering path.

"I can see why no one just stumbled on this place," Jacen commented as Jaina brought the Rock Dragon in toward the lumpy asteroid on a parallel approach with the Lightning Rod.

"Looks like a wormy piece of half-eaten fruit," Jaina observed.

Beside her Lowie woofed and pointed with a furry arm to a cluster of transparisteel blisters on the surface of the asteroid.

"Rock Dragon, this is the Lightning Rod," Ray - nar's voice came over the comm speakers. "My father says there are several single-ship docks on the outer edge of the central dome. We can land without being seen by any other visitors."

"Automatic laser cannons or anything else we ought to know about?" Jaina asked.

"Thul says no," Zekk replied. "I guess this asteroid's secrecy was the best security system the Imperials thought they'd ever need. Just pick an airlock and dock to it."

Lowie gave a suspicious rumble, but did not comment further as he guided the Rock Dragon toward the cluster of domes.

"All right then," Jaina said, "we'll meet you inside."

THE NEW REPUBLIC inspection team arrived in a heavily armed escort frigate, flanked by ceremonial squadrons of X-wing and B-wing fighters. The starfighters were supposedly just for show, but Leia Organa Solo wanted to make it clear that she meant business and would tolerate no delays or resistance from the Diversity Alliance. Given the serious nature of the charges that had been brought, Leia refused to waste time on political games.

Standing on the bridge of the escort frigate, Luke Skywalker looked down at the harsh, mountainous planet of Ryloth. The Twi'leks lived in excavated tunnels and cliff cities in a band of twilight between the baking day and the frozen night. The inspection team would tour Ryloth's cities, searching for any evidence of Nola Tarkona's misdeeds. Beside the Jedi Master, Lusa stamped a forehoof nervously. The centaur girl had twice escaped from the clutches of the Diversity Alliance. They had brainwashed her, taught her to hate all humans. She was loath to return, but believed it was her responsibility.

Lowbacca's sister Sirrakuk growled quiet encouragement; she herself had been taken in by the Diversity Alliance before she broke away and helped the young Jedi Knights escape. Kur, the exiled Twi'lek leader, kept silent watch at the bridge windowports. As he stared down at the swirling coppery colors of the blazing daylit hemisphere, his head-tails twitched. Luke sensed that for Kur there could be no happy homecoming. Kur had been defeated by Nola Tarkona, though she had refused to let him die, as was the tradition of vanquished head-clan members. Instead, she had sent him out to survive in the glacial cold of night. Now, he was returning, accompanied by humans and New Republic soldiers.

The small bat-faced Chadra Fan senator, Trubor, marched haughtily up to Luke, his squeaky voice indignant.

"Jedi Master Skywalker, you had best hope we find substantial evidence to back up the accusations of those young troublemakers." He put his small hands on his narrow hips. His triangular ears swiveled from side to side to pick up subsonic vibrations. Wide nostrils flaring, he blinked his tiny black eyes. "I've long known that Chief of State Organa Solo was concerned about the agenda of the Diversity Alliance, but it is not for the New Republic to make judgments on what beliefs people should or should not hold."

"I agree," Luke said, "but we must take action if an extremist group has kidnapped innocent hostages, taken slaves, and threatened to spread a plague so powerful it could wipe out an entire species."

With a tiny furred hand, Trubor rubbed his forehead in disbelief.

"That story is as ridiculous as the propaganda the Empire used to spread."
"

"We'll see soon enough," Luke answered in a mild tone that nonetheless held power and conviction. He turned to find even-tempered Ambassador Cilghal, whom he had trained at the Jedi academy, by his side. A Mon Calamarian like Admiral Ackbar, Cilghal had huge fishlike eyes and a salmon-colored head. She spoke calmly, looking down at the Chadra Fan senator.

"I intend to keep an open mind. I will observe with my own eyes, and no one—not you, not Master Skywalker—will tell me my opinion. I will decide for myself, as I hope you will do."

"Of course, of course," Trubor said. He waved his hands, then scurried off the bridge, somewhat flustered. A signal chimed on the escort frigate's comm system, and the glowering image of a female Devaronian flickered to life on the hologenerator. Her horns were polished and decorated with what appeared to be golden glitter. Though she spoke with forced amiability, her eyes were hard and suspicious.

"Welcome, representatives of the New Republic. I am Kambrea. Although your worries are completely groundless, we will bow to your demands and allow you to scrutinize our private cities."

Luke stepped forward into the range of the hologenerator.

"When may we schedule an audience with Nola Tarkona? We would like to discuss certain matters with her."

"The Esteemed Tarkona was called away on urgent business, and I have been left in charge." She huffed. "An important political movement such as the Diversity Alliance cannot grind to a halt simply because a handful of human children decided to make up stories about us."

Cilghal now stepped forward and spoke in quiet, calming tones.

"It is the nature of justice that we must investigate any accusation of such magnitude."

"Perhaps you should investigate crimes committed by humans with the same zeal," Kambrea snapped. "A crime is a crime, no matter who commits it. I assure you we will be impartial and study the facts. Will you escort us, or shall we find our own way around Ryloth?"

Cilghal said, sliding smoothly into a change of subject.

"I'll transmit a homing beacon to one of our main cities,"

Kambrea said. "I will meet you there. Follow the beacon precisely, or you risk activating our planetary defense systems." Immediately on the heels of this veiled threat, she switched off.

Luke piloted the transport shuttle from the escort cruiser. The shuttle bore an equal mixture of humans and aliens acting as New Republic escort guards. Lusa, Sirra, and Kur went with him, as did Cilghal, Senator Trubor, and the other members of the inspection team. When he passed from the daylight side over into the dark, cold night, Luke fought against the turbulence caused by extreme temperature variations. Around him, team members peered out the viewports, awed by the dramatic landscape, where hot, blurry whirlwinds of heat storms whipped across the border into the night and blasted ice from cracks in the frozen mountains. The peaks looked like a dragon's spine. The beacon directed Luke's shuttle to the mouth of a vast cave in one of the main cities the Twi'leks had built in ancient times. By Ryloth's standards, the cliff city was a huge metropolis.

The shuttle landed in a high-ceilinged grotto where various other ships were docked: unmarked supply craft, small personal vehicles, massive ore haulers for ryll mining activities. Kambrea came out to meet them, surrounded by a cadre of heavily armed and surly-looking guards-piglike Gamorreans, white-furred Talz, and a brutish, one-eyed Abyssin.

Odd, Luke thought. Nolaa Tarkona's group includes no Twi'leks, even though this is their own world. Perhaps in her takeover, Nolaa Tarkona had killed most of those who had previously wielded power. People like Kur.

"We're here to cooperate." Kambrea's brittle voice broke into Luke's thoughts. "But this is not a holiday outing. Simply tell us what you need to see, and we will show you. You'll quickly realize that your government's accusations are baseless. We view this visit as a form of harassment - a punishment because our politics do not agree with those espoused by your Chief of State."

"Believe me," Trubor said, "we will be open - minded and fair to the Diversity Alliance. Not everyone agrees with the former Princess Leia of Alderaan." Cilghal kept her own counsel.

Lusa and Sirra came out of the shuttle behind the honor guard. Kur emerged last, blinking his eyes and sniffing the air of the tunnels with apparent unease. Kambrea studied the group, and a storm crossed her face.

"The New Republic insults us. Are these to be our judges? Lusa, who was cast out of the Diversity Alliance because her incompetence caused three of our ships to crash, killing all aboard?"

Lusa reared up in astonishment. "That's a lie!"

Kambrea looked next at Sirra. "And this Wookiee sabotaged our supply storehouses. She destroyed medicine and food containers being sent to refugee worlds, while her brother Lowbacca meddled with our computer files!"

The alien guards beside her shifted restlessly and let their hands stray toward their weapons. Sirra bristled and growled. Luke laid a hand on her furry arm. Finally, Kambrea looked at Kur.

"And this-the greatest dishonor by far. A humiliated Twi'lek, defeated and exiled during the liberation of Ryloth."

Cilghal said, "Then it's true that Nolaa Tarkona sent him to die in the cold wastes?"

Kur hung his head in shame at hearing his disgrace spoken of so openly. Luke could sense the resentments boiling in each of his fellow team members. Kambrea lifted her pointed chin.

"Surely you know the Twi'lek custom: if any member of the head clan dies, or is overthrown, the remaining members sacrifice themselves by going out into the Bright Lands to die. That is the way it has been for centuries. After Kur's defeat, he proved himself a coward. He insisted on fleeing out to the cold wastes in hopes of surviving. You offend us by bringing him back here, where he has no place." The Devaronian snorted. "Saboteurs, incompetents, and cowardly exiles-is this the best team you could find to investigate us?"

"We chose the members we felt were necessary," Luke said. "Show us the areas we've asked to see, and we'll make our own observations."

Kambrea spun about, shoulders rigid. Her guards clustered close around her. "Very well-follow me. You are about to see one of the most wonderful cities the Twi'leks ever built."

THE SILVER SPECKS in Aryn Dro Thul's gown swirled around her like a spiral galaxy as she rushed into the comm center at Bornaryn headquarters.

"Are you certain the message is for me?"

"No doubt about it," the comm officer said, standing up and making way for her at the console. "The proprietary encryption is layered," he said. "I was only able to decode the first level that addressed it to Lady Aryn Dro Thul."

Aryn did not allow her hands to shake as she deftly input her authorization to decode the message. It was trilevel-encrypted, which

meant that it must be from either her son or her husband. Not even Boman's brother Tyko Thul possessed authorization for the third level of encryption. The comm officer discreetly activated his console 's privacy field. Aryn barely noticed when the soundproof and light-scattering security field formed around her.

Realizing that this message might contain news she did not wish to hear, she cued it up to play immediately. Her husband's voice was accompanied by a sphere of light that pulsated with a variety of ever-changing colors and an audible pattern of harmonics from which Aryn's musically attuned ears gleaned more information than Boman's words could possibly have expressed in so short a time.

"My dearest wife. I greatly regret that my work here is not finished and I cannot return to you. I received two shipments that will delay my return."

The sphere of light pulsated with two colors side by side, representing Bornan and Raynar together. The vividness of the hues meant that they were both in good health. Around the edges, bright splashes of color indicated the presence of other friends. At the same time, the music told her through a series of harmonizing tones that her husband and son were happy-but the music skipped a beat or two, then paused on an open chord that symbolized something missing from that happiness: her presence.

"There is no urgency to this message. I am completely alone and need no help,"

Boman's voice went on. Pastel colors wove through the sphere of light, intertwining and then reversing their colors. So, Aryn thought as she recognized the code, the exact opposite is true. Someone was already there helping, but Raynar and Boman needed reinforcements. Urgently. An undulating low tone warned of danger and the possibility of traitors around her.

"You are a strong-willed woman, my love, and I cannot tell you what to do-but I believe you know what I ask."

Squiggles of alternating color indicating friends and enemies alike began at the outer edges of the sphere and rippled inward to converge on a single point. It meant that he needed her to bring help to a single location, and that the enemy might already be on its way. The music became a precise arpeggio, and in her mind each individual note became distinct, relaying to her a series of numbers. Coordinates-a map that would take her to her husband.

"Until I see you again, remember that I love you," Boman ended.

Light-swirls of sincerity and regret surrounded a bright core of love. A musical note of tenderness rang out a single time. And suddenly the message was gone-music, lights, words... everything. Aryn Dro Thul did not waste time replaying the entire message. She fixed the notes of the arpeggio firmly in her mind, deleted the message, and switched off the privacy field. Coming to a swift decision, she stood and nodded thanks to

her comm officer. Then she swept out of the room and headed toward the Imperial Palace. She had to see Leia Organa Solo.

"So you believe your husband found the source of the plague, and he needs our help immediately?" Leia said, leaning forward to study Aryn Dro Thul's serious expression.

The two women sat together in the Chief of State's private office.

Aryn nodded.

"From the way his message was formatted I would guess he already has several people helping him in addition to our son-your children perhaps?"

Leia nodded.

"It sounds like they all found each other."

"He indicated that they need even more help," Aryn said. "But Boman seemed to be concerned about spies and traitors."

Leia smiled grimly.

"Don't worry. We'll send them some trustworthy reinforcements, if I have to hand-pick every member of the team myself. And my husband, General Solo, will lead the mission personally."

THE EMPEROR'S OLD weapons depot was a labyrinth of pressurized domes, tunnels, and sealed chambers where unimaginable mechanisms of death lay stored. Since the isolated asteroid station had, as far as they knew, no large docks or entrance points, the Rock Dragon and the Lightning Rod were forced to dock against separate domes. The cargo hatches sealed against the airlocks, and the seven companions gathered inside the silent, abandoned station. Low rock ceilings and tunnels plated with metal made the confined chambers feel like a prison. Jacen looked all around, sniffing the air, which was none too fresh. Other than the scavenger Fonterratt and Boman Thul, he guessed that no one had set foot here for decades.

Now Thul looked sickened.

"I wish Fonterratt had never stumbled on this place."

Raynar stood close to his father.

"I wish the Emperor had never even thought of making this asteroid into a weapons storehouse."

The older man looked down at him with a sympathetic smile.

"Well, what are we gonna do about it?" Jaina asked. Zekk stood next to her, his face grim.

"We'll destroy the depot, of course. Isn't that why we're here? Nolaa Tarkona's probably on her way already."

"First, we must find where the plague itself is stored," Tenel Ka said. "Then we can neutralize it."

Jacen nodded vigorously to show that he agreed with the warrior girl. But then, he usually did. Bornan Thul took a step forward, placing himself in the lead.

"Follow me. I found it before, but I couldn't get inside." He swallowed hard. "At the time, there didn't seem much chance Nolaa Tarkona would ever get here. I thought there might be another solution."

"We're here to help you this time," Raynar said consolingly. "We can solve this problem if we work together."

Squaring his shoulders with determination, he marched beside his father through the enclosed corridors. The artificial gravity generators still functioned on the tiny rock in space. The companions passed through a central complex where curved transparisteel domes overhead showed a sprawling view of an endless starfield, studded with the occasional floating mountains of asteroids in space around them. At one time, Jacen knew, Star Destroyers had come here to stock up on weapons. They carried stormtroopers and munitions to oppressed worlds so that the Empire could squeeze its iron fist even tighter. Here in this station, Evir Derricote had tested and stored his most deadly creations, diseases against which no blaster could defend. Derricote had released the Krytos plague on Coruscant just after the capital world had fallen to the Rebels. Because the disease struck only nonhumans, its spread caused a great deal of friction among the member races in the Rebel Alliance.

Now, in a frightening turnabout, it seemed the opposite was about to happen. In order to get her revenge against humans, Nolaa Tarkona wanted to release the ultimate plague—a disease even the Emperor had considered too terrible to use—so she could strike down all of humanity. But the young Jedi Knights would never let that happen. Jacen picked up his pace.

After hesitating at an intersection of corridors, where half-open bulkheads seemed ready to crash down on them, Bornan Thul said, "This way to the central chamber."

He led them through another dome to a large blast-shielded airlock that blocked their way. Though the door was closed, the controls were not passworded. Bornan Thul worked the keys easily, sliding the long-silent airlock door open. The next corridor held more secure airtight interlocks. Thul operated door after door, until finally they entered a central hub, the core of the asteroid depot.

"This is the chamber of horrors," he said.

Jacen hovered near Tenel Ka's shoulder, gasping in awe as he stared through broad panels of transparisteel that looked down into the main room. Raynar remained beside Bornan Thul. Zekk and Jaina stood next to

each other, while Lowie, taller than the rest, peered over their heads. Behind the sealed windows, Jacen saw a vast room where row after row of tanks and cylinders stretched to the far side of the chamber: small canisters, large tubes, vats, gurgling spheres. Each was filled with bubbling, evil-looking liquid. Refrigeration racks full of tiny vials and flasks covered one entire wall, floor to ceiling. Every last container held a colorful mixture that was deadly to one species or another.

Jacen could hardly believe his eyes.

"There's enough contamination in there to wipe out every living creature in the galaxy!"

Lowie growled in agreement.

Em Teedee chirped, "I do believe you're right, Master Jacen. I could make a reasonably precise estimate, if you like. Given the rate at which the human plague organism spread on Gammalin, and assuming each of the plagues could as easily be passed from one member of a targeted life-form to another, I should venture to guess that--"

"We understand, Em Teedee," Jaina cut him off, but she could not tear her eyes away from the transparisteel window. "We understand all too well."

Doors marked with an ominous skull and DNA symbol to denote the deadly virus gave access to the chamber. The two-way intercom system would have allowed for communication between Imperial workers inside the sealed chamber and stormtrooper guards on the outside. But Boman Thul did not go near the entry.

"We shouldn't risk setting foot inside just yet," he said. "If any one of us were exposed to that human plague... we could all die before we have a chance to destroy anything."

Zekk frowned.

"No. We didn't come here to die. Any ideas on how to demolish the storehouse? The place looks pretty secure. Could we use blasters to break all of the cylinders?"

Boman Thul shook his head.

"No, that would merely spread the plague. We'll have to expose it to space."

"To accomplish that, we must turn this entire asteroid to dust," Tenel Ka said.

"Hey, sounds reasonable to me," Jacen said.

"Shouldn't we get started before Nola Tarkona arrives?"

"We don't know how much of a head start we have on her," Raynar pointed out. "We've got to hurry."

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Jaina said. "Any suggestions?"

Borran Thul raised his eyebrows.

"This is a weapons depot. The Emperor stored munitions here as well as biological weapons. The plague canisters are in this central chamber, but I'm fairly certain that some of the other bunker rooms contain thermal detonators, explosives, space mines, heavy demolitions equipment."

"Yeah... we could use stuff like that," Jaina said with a twinkle in her eye.

Jacen let out a low whistle. "Sounds just like what we saw Nolaa Tarkona hiding in the tunnels of Ryloth."

Tenel Ka gave him the faintest of smiles. "Those stockpiles produced rather gratifying explosions."

Jacen looked at her and flashed a grin, remembering how they had escaped from the ryll mines.

"If we wipe out every speck of this plague," Raynar said, "Nolaa won't pose much of a galactic threat anymore."

Borran Thul strode to a side doorway, unsealed it, and led the way to a tangential corridor inside the asteroid. Jacen paused for one long moment, feeling a shiver down his spine as he looked at all the cylinders filled with the deadly plague, then turned to hurry after his companions. Thul took them to where a heavy, blaster-shielded door blocked his way.

"I think this is one of the main weapons vaults," he said. "All the munitions should be in there, but..." His shoulders slumped. "Unfortunately this one has security coding. I was never able to get in to see if I was correct."

Tenel Ka snatched at her lightsaber handle and flicked on the turquoise energy blade.

"A Jedi Knight could find a way in."

"Excuse me," Em Teedee said quickly, "but perhaps I could manage the code? I have had some experience with Imperial systems."

Jacen paused, his hand on his lightsaber handle.

"Let him try, Tenel Ka. We can always use our lightsabers later."

The warrior girl agreed.

"I will save my weapon for the real battle."

Jaina hooked up the leads in Em Teedee's case to the door control systems. The little droid's golden optical sensors glowed and pulsed as

his computer brain worked through the encryption levels. With a thunk and a hum, the locks unsealed themselves and the door slid open.

"Quite masterful, if I do say so myself," Em Teedee stated, sounding insufferably pleased with himself. The young Jedi Knights drew together. Bornan Thul and Zekk moved closer as they gazed into a room filled with explosives, detonation packs, sonic grenades, and every form of compact destruction Jacen had ever heard of. The shelves of demolition equipment seemed to go on and on.

"I think that'll be quite enough firepower," Zekk said, crossing his wiry arms over his chest. Tenel Ka nodded and whispered, "This is a fact."

WHEN NOLAA TARKONA'S armada arrived at the plague storehouse, the Twi'lek leader could barely contain her excitement. She gripped the bridge rail and leaned forward as the Wookiee woman Raabakyysh guided the flagship into orbit high above the small asteroid. Nolaa's single head-tail thrashed from side to side, while she observed the expressions of her crew through the optical sensors in the stump of her other head-tail. She saw anticipation, eagerness for battle, and a bloodthirsty desire for vengeance upon the cursed humans.

The asteroid depot itself was small and nondescript, studded with pressurized domes. Slash marks showed where excavation had shaped the giant rock. The place looked abandoned, though the numerous domes and airlocks and hollow bays offered plenty of hiding places for small ships. She had feared she might encounter an entire guardian fleet of New Republic warships-but she had beat them all. She had arrived first.

"The human-killing virus is down there," she said. "It is the only weapon we need for our ultimate victory. Raaba, you will command my armada while I go down personally to make sure we get everything we need. Corrsk, Rullak, come with me. Bring guards... and plenty of weapons. I'm not in the mood for further delays."

Nolaa spun about as Raaba proudly took her seat in the flagship's command chair.

The Diversity Alliance guards suited up, belted blasters to their waists, and prepared to go down to secure the Emperor's plague. After docking to an isolated dome at the pole of the asteroid, Diversity Alliance guards stormed out of their ships. They marched through mazes of interconnected corridors, weapons raised and ready to shoot anything that moved. Nolaa fervently hoped her soldiers wouldn't blast any of the plague cylinders in their enthusiasm. She didn't want to waste the precious deadly substance. She walked with brisk footsteps, her dark robe swirling, her body armor confining but protective. This place stank of humans. It had been built by the human Emperor, used by human scientists, guarded by human stormtroopers. The twisted biologist Evir Derricote had worked here-also a human.

But in a way he hadn't been so terrible.... Derricote had, after all, devised the means for bringing about the extinction of his own race.

"Spread out," Nolaa said sharply. "This is a small asteroid. It shouldn't take long to find what we need."

Directing Rullak and Corrsk each to take a team of guards, she herself took charge of the third group.

"And remember, this was a munitions storehouse." She turned back with a smile, flashing teeth that had been filed to delicate points. "Keep an eye out for anything else we might find useful to our cause."

They split up, each choosing a different hallway. As Nolaa's group passed through pressurized doors, she saw how foolish the Imperials had been for not installing better security or identification locks. It made her task almost too easy. She and her soldiers marched down the stone-floored corridors, casting a critical eye at the metal walls, the interlock doors, the decades-old technological enhancements. Someone with less finely attuned senses might have thought this place similar to the comfortable Twi'lek tunnels on Ryloth-but to Nolaa Tarkona it had an entirely different feel. This had been made by humans, dug out as a pit in which to store weapons, not a civilized place for a species to grow and expand.

The soldiers fell into step with her; the pounding of their hard boots echoed in the chill, sluggish air. They explored each alcove and side passage under the pressurized domes, searching for the place Fonterrat had described-the chamber that contained the plague. It held the future of the Diversity Alliance, and the death of the human race. They came to a series of small cells. Each had been sealed and marked as contaminated and hazardous.

Curious, Nolaa peered through the thick transparisteel windows at what seemed to be secure pens, each with a cot and a refresher unit but few amenities. Inside lay the desiccated, plague-ridden corpses of various aliens. She saw the remains of a Quarren, a Wookiee, a Twi'lek, and many other species that were unidentifiable because of the advanced decomposition. Test specimens for other genetically engineered diseases, targeted at specific alien species. Here, before her eyes, was clear-cut evidence of the horror Evis Derricote had intended to inflict upon nonhuman species.

Any glimmer of pity that might have remained in her for all humans who were about to die faded in an instant. Nolaa Tarkona could not wait until the murderous species was eradicated entirely.

"Pick up the pace," she said. "Let's find that plague and get out of here. The Diversity Alliance has important work to do."

On the flagship, Raaba growled orders, insuring that the other ships in the Diversity Alliance armada into line. The asteroid field was sparse but still held hazards for clumsy navigators or inexperienced pilots. Raaba wanted their cluster of ships to act like a military fleet, to Pull together like a well-trained force. Attitude was essential. They cruised above the weapons depot, and she growled for two outlying vessels to tighten up the formation. While Nolaa Tarkona was on the asteroid, Raaba

intended to keep the armada alert. They had no reason to anticipate any resistance, of course-or that New Republic forces might come after them-but Raaba would not be taken by surprise.

Lowbacca and Sirra had already done that to her.... Leaning back in her command chair, Raaba scanned the asteroid below. She used the ship's high-resolution sensors to study the pockmarked surface, analyzing the structural refinements Imperial engineers had added: the blister domes and bunker outcroppings, the fuel station, the numerous small docking ports. Then, as she focused in on what seemed to be an anomaly, she sat up with a growl and stared at the image before her eyes, unable to believe what she saw.

In an instant she recognized two small craft nearly hidden in the rocky shadows beside the domes: the Rock Dragon and Zekk's ship, the Lightning Rod. She leaped up from her command chair with a startled roar.

The young Jedi Knights were already here! They had arrived at the weapons depot before the Diversity Alliance.

Raaba toggled the communications system, sending a tight-beam transmission directly to Nola Tarkona. She had to warn her leader that she might be walking into a trap.

THE YOUNG JEDI Knights emerged from the munitions bunker, each carrying a pack that held enough explosives to blow up a substantial portion of the depot. As they'd realized what they were about to do, their lighthearted camaraderie had turned to grim determination. When Bornan Thul narrowed his eyes, inspecting the companions, Jacen was worried the man might dismiss them as a bunch of kids caught in a dangerous situation. But instead, Raynar's father saw bravery there, and a dedication to purpose. He obviously considered them all, including his own son, to be real Jedi Knights. Jaina dug in her pack to take inventory of the explosives, the detonators, and the space mines she had stashed there.

"We'll have to find strategically vulnerable areas on the asteroid. It'll take plenty of explosives, carefully positioned at specific structural weak points, to bring this place down."

"We will find the weaknesses," Tenel Ka said.

"Let's split up into teams," Zekk suggested. "We can go off in different directions and plant more explosives in less time. I want to slag this depot and get out of here before anything goes wrong."

"If anything does go wrong, though," Jacen said, "we'd better agree to rendezvous in our ships out in space."

"An excellent suggestion, Master Jacen," Em Teedee said at Lowie's side. "I, for one, will be glad to have this Diversity Alliance business over with so that we can get on with more pleasant pursuits."

Lowie patted the little translating droid as if in commiseration. He barked and chuffed an alarming suggestion, which Em Teedee passed along.

"Master Lowbacca suggests that since he is the only nonhuman in this group, he should be the one to plant explosives inside the plague chamber." Jaina exclaimed, "We can't let you go in there by yourself, Lowie!"

"Lowbacca is correct," Tenel Ka said. "If the rest of us are exposed, we are doomed. He may be immune because he is not human."

"Hey, I think we'll all encounter sufficient dangers in setting our own explosives," Jacen said, understanding the grim truth behind Lowie's realization. Somberly, they went in separate directions, carrying their explosives. Lowie trudged toward the central plague chamber, Em Teedee clipped to his belt. Zekk and Raynar stayed with Bornan Thul, who was still loading up at the munitions storage room, while Jacen, Jaina, and Tenel Ka went off to disperse their detonators at structural weak points in the domes and tunnel junctures.

As they hurried, Jaina scrutinized the tunnel walls, corridor intersections, and pressurized domes. She hesitated outside the doorway to one of the overhead domes, unslung her pack, and withdrew a heavy disk, a space limpet mine. Holding the mine against one of the metal walls, she pushed a button to activate its magnetic seal. With a clank, the mine attached itself to the wall. She looked over at her brother and Tenel Ka, raising an eyebrow.

"These limpet mines used to be sent out like a cloud into space. If one attached itself to the hull, it could blow up an entire Corellian corvette."

Tenel Ka grunted in appreciation. "Devastating," she said. "The only problem was, they clung to anything metal in the vicinity. They used no discrimination routines, and several Victory-class Star Destroyers ended up victims of their own space mines."

"Serves them right," Jacen said.

"It is always tragic when warfare causes unintended casualties," Tenel Ka pointed out. "Even Imperial ones."

"Well, if we destroy this depot, the Emperor won't cause any more casualties," Jaina said. She activated the space mine, and its lights winked green: READY FOR DETONATION. She went farther down the wall of the dome and planted another mine on the opposite wall. "That should take care of this dome," she said.

"Now let's move on to the next one." Jacen followed, planting detonators at the branchpoints of corridors.

Once they set off all this destruction, nothing would remain of the asteroid but a rock as dead as it had been before the Empire set foot on it. Lowbacca hesitated outside the doorway to the central plague chamber. This airtight room contained more death than he had ever seen in one place: sealed transparent cylinders filled with multicolored liquids,

vials of plague solutions, nutrient baths teeming with virulent organisms. It was his responsibility to destroy them all, and he carried high-temperature incinerating explosives to do the job. It wouldn't do just to crack open the vials and disperse the liquids. He had to make sure the explosion was hot enough, with incandescent heat from a dozen thermal detonators, to annihilate the virus that had been created to kill human beings.

"Well, Master Lowbacca, it does no good to wait," Em Teedee scolded. "It's high time we went inside and plant the detonators. The others are counting on us."

Lowie growled something, and Em Teedee huffed.

"I am not being impatient. Just because I'm a droid and can't get a plague doesn't mean I don't understand the dangers. I can well imagine computer viruses, you know." Rather than endure more of the droid's talk, Lowie worked the airlock controls, assisted by Em Teedee's rapport with the computer systems. The air within the pressurized chamber was kept sterile, and backup systems and fail-safes prevented any possible leaks. Lowie stepped inside, his fur bristling with apprehension. The metal floor felt cold against his feet, and the air smelled harsh and disinfected. He looked around at the tubes and spheres of deadly solution and planned his strategy. He left the pressure door open behind him, not relishing the prospect of being trapped inside the lethal chamber.

Then he cautiously walked in among the towering cylindrical tanks. He moved slowly, carefully, until he finally snapped himself out of his daze and removed the thermal detonators from his pack. He was a Jedi Knight, and he had a threat to wipe out. He placed his first set of heat explosives under the largest of the bubbling tanks in the center of the room; then he spiralled outward, ducking down, moving like a machine as he planted one detonator after another.

He didn't want to think about the swarming virus behind the thin walls of transparisteel. He didn't want to smell the reprocessed air. He just wanted to be out of here and destroy it all behind him. As he planted another set of detonators, though, he noticed a marking near the base of the tube labeling the solution inside-KRYTOS PLAGUE, MULTIPLE SPECIES, SLOW-ACTING.

Lowie stiffened, recognizing this disease that had harmed so many aliens, including Wookiees, just after the fall of the Empire. So... this plague storehouse held far more than just the human-killing plague after all! Lowie now turned his attention to the other tanks and vials, inspecting their labels. The colored solutions contained numerous deadly agents. Label after label made his blood run cold. GAMORREAN, SLOW - ACTING. QUARREN, FAST-ACTING. WOOKIEE, SLOW-ACTING. TWI'LEK/CALAMARIAN, VARIABLE VIRULENCE.

Lowie realized that if Nolaa Tarkona got her hands on all of this, not only could she destroy humans, but she could also threaten every other race in the galaxy! The leader of the Diversity Alliance could assert her power over any species in a way that even the Emperor had not dared to

do. Lowie planted his remaining detonators as fast as he could, then rigged up a central explosive controller, which he placed near the main containers in the middle of the room. He would be very glad to get out of this place.

Not even he was safe in here.

After the other young Jedi Knights went on their way, Raynar stayed beside his father inside the munitions bunker. Zekk put his hands on his hips and looked up at the remaining explosives, blasters, and detonators.

"Still plenty left here to cause quite a bit of destruction," he said.

Boman Thul went to work opening cases and linking detonators, preparing to trigger the remaining explosives.

"If we set off all these," Thul said, "we'll put this entire asteroid into a spin."

"I'd rather not be here when that happens," Raynar said.

His father looked down at him with an understanding smile.

"We won't be, Raynar," he said. "I'll make sure you get out of here safely."

Borran Thul worked hard to arrange boxes, linking up blast points for sympathetic explosions. His son dutifully opened more cases, while Zekk moved from one to another, making connections, checking timers, and setting the stage for the biggest explosion he could imagine.

"If Jaina can find enough structural weak points to booby-trap, then this should take care of the weapons depot once and for all," Zekk said, confident in his friend's abilities.

Borra sighed.

"I should have found a way to do this myself a long time ago."

"We're finished here," Zekk said, impatient to get moving again. He grabbed several explosive packs to take with him. "We'll plant these along the way," he said, "then pick up Lowbacca back at the central chamber."

WITH EACH EXPLOSIVE she planted, Jaina felt the metal-lined hallways seem to close in on her. At her direction, Jacen set timed explosives in alternate places, while Tenel Ka drew her lightsaber and sliced partway through support beams or disabled safety interlocks.

"Blaster bolts! When this place blows, it's really going to blow," Jacen observed. "Hey, how many thermal detonators does it take to blow up an Imperial weapons depot?"

"Ah. Aha," Tenel Ka said, responding to Jacen's attempt at humor as if the question were a serious one.

"The answer is obvious." Jaina finished setting the time delay on her detonator, moved farther down the corridor, and began setting up the next one. "Okay then," she said, rising to the bait, "how many thermal detonators does it take?"

Still holding her lightsaber, Tenel Ka shrugged eloquently.

"All of them, of course." Jacen chuckled. "Yeah. I think you're right. We..."

"Wait." Tenel Ka held up her hand for silence. She listened, then switched off her lightsaber so its hum would not mask any other noises. Jaina heard the sound and sprang to her feet.

"Company?"

Tenel Ka backed a few steps down the corridor toward Jaina and Jacen, alert and looking in the direction from which the sound had come.

"Uh-oh," Jacen said, rubbing the back of his neck. "Something tells me that whoever our visitors are, they didn't arrive on the Lightning Rod or the Rock Dragon."

Jaina bit her lower lip as she felt the same tingle of warning.

"The Diversity Alliance?"

"This is a fact," Tenel Ka said. "We must stay ahead of them in order to complete our mission." But before the three young Jedi could move, several figures rounded a corner far down the hallway. A furry white Talz and a tentacle-faced Quarren were in the lead. They all recognized the Quarren, whom they had seen on Ryloth with Nola Tarkona. Lowie had told them his name.

"Rullak," Jaina said. Before Nola Tarkona's henchmen took another step, the three friends ran in the opposite direction down the corridor. Behind them the Quarren burred a command and fired his blaster. The energy bolt spanned harmlessly off a metal wall and deflected into the ceiling, where it left a small, smoking hole.

"Excellent," Tenel Ka said as they ran.

"What?" Jacen asked. Another shot zinged past without touching them. "They're trying to kill us!"

He ran full tilt toward an intersection of corridors.

"Yes, excellent," Tenel Ka said, moving into the lead beside him. Her long red-gold hair and warrior braids streamed out behind her. "Because Rullak's aim is terrible."

A third blaster bolt hit the floor several meters behind them, and Jaina realized that Tenel Ka was right. Jaina still carried a concussion grenade under one arm and a microdetonator in her hand. Risking a glance behind her, she noticed that the alien guards had not gained any ground. She had already set the detonator in her hand. Without stopping, she reset the timer with her free hand, activated the microdetonator's magnetic backing, and smacked the explosive against one of the metal walls, where it clung. Then, pulling the concussion grenade from under her arm, she armed it and dropped it to the floor as Jacen and Tenel Ka disappeared around a corner ahead.

Jaina barely managed to dive to the floor around the corner before the first of her explosions went off. Jacen and Tenel Ka dragged Jaina back to her feet as the second blast shook the corridor.

"Those were only minor explosions," she panted. "Won't hold 'em long."

"Hurry then," Tenel Ka urged, switching her lightsaber back on and taking up her position in the rear as they pelted down the hallway. Sooner than they might have hoped, Diversity Alliance guards reappeared behind them, pursuing with renewed vigor. Blaster bolts--this time from several weapons--pinged and sizzled around them. Tenel Ka, running backward now, used her lightsaber to deflect any shots that came close.

"This way," Jaina said. She turned down a branching corridor just as a blaster bolt hit close to the floor at Tenel Ka's feet, forcing her to jump. When a second blast zinged off the corridor wall beside her, Tenel Ka threw herself backward, brought up her lightsaber, and deflected the bolt -- but not without a price. Unable to regain her balance in time, Tenel Ka tried to pull herself forward again to land on her right leg, but her foot encountered a loose chunk of plasteel broken free from the ceiling. Her foot slipped, and the ankle turned at an angle it had never been meant to assume.

One of the guards saw her loss of balance and shot past the Quarren toward Tenel Ka. Knowing her leg would not hold her anyway, the warrior girl relaxed her body and allowed it to fall, so that the energy bolt sizzled harmlessly over her--a hair's breadth from the breastplate of her lizard-hide armor. Tenel Ka tucked and rolled as she hit the floor, having the presence of mind to switch off her lightsaber as she tumbled a few meters to avoid more blaster fire and--even with only one arm -- displaying her prowess as a fighter.

Jacen stepped out of the corridor in front of her, his lightsaber blazing to deflect the enemy fire.

"That way," he yelled, jerking his head to indicate the corridor from which he had come.

Pushing off from the metal wall behind her, Tenel Ka launched herself into the side corridor in a tumbling roll. During calisthenics she'd often used such maneuvers to bring herself out of a defensive position, back to her feet, and ready to go on the offense. This time, though, when she came out of the roll with both feet planted beneath her, a jolt of

pain lanced upward from her right ankle. She bit back an outcry. She could not afford to draw Jacen or Jaina's attention away from their own defenses by causing them concern for her.

"This way," Jaina's voice hissed.

Jaina stood farther down the corridor at the control panel to a safety interlock, where a vaulted portal was set into a bulkhead. Jacen backed around the corner beside Tenel Ka, still deflecting blaster bolts. "Come on, you two," Jaina called. Her brother turned and ran, grabbing for Tenel Ka's arm. She gritted her teeth and pounded down the hallway next to him, ignoring the spear of pain she felt every time her right foot touched the ground.

Moments later they were through, and Jaina swung the heavy portal shut behind them.

"I set an entry code on the emergency interlocks," she explained, "but I don't know how long this'll hold them."

Tenel Ka ignored the flaring pain in her right leg, tuning it out as if switching off a faulty comlink.

"Perhaps our situation calls for desperate measures," she said.

INSIDE THE PLAGUE chamber, Lowie planted his last thermal detonator and set the controls. He stood up, satisfied with his work, and growled at the insidious storehouse of destruction. He looked around one last time, surrounded by a forest of tall, bubbling cylinders. Suddenly he felt a chill as his Jedi senses brought him to full alert. He was no longer alone in the room. Lowie heard no change in the background hissing and burbling, no muffled conversation-but he did feel an unaccustomed stir in the air currents. From the center of the crowded equipment room he couldn't see the outer walls.

In fact, he could see very little except barricades of tubes and canisters. But as he listened, his fur prickling against his skin, he heard a grating, rasping breath... heavy footfalls that came slowly, stealthily.

As if something were stalking him. Lowie's fingers drifted to his lightsaber. His muscles tensed, and the dark streak on his forehead stood upright in an intimidating brush. Danger, he sensed, danger. He held himself utterly still.

Then Em Teedee said in a whisper that sounded louder to Lowie than his uncle losing a hologame, "Master Lowbacca, I do believe there's someone else--"

Lowie jumped backward, startled, and planted a ginger-furred hand over Em Teedee's speaker grille. But it was too late. - He heard a roar and the scrape of claws on the cold floor as the giant reptile Corrrsk marched around the corner, his fang-filled jaws open as wide as their hinges would allow.

His hiss was like a boiler explosion.

"Time to die, Wookiee!" Corrsk drew a huge blaster, wrapping his scaly fingers around its grip. Lowie ignited his lightsaber with a throbbing snap-hiss.

"Master Lowbacca, you mustn't allow him to shoot at you in here!" the droid said. "Any blaster fire could break open one of the plague canisters!"

Lowie roared to acknowledge that he was fully aware of the danger. Licking the scaled edges of his mouth with a long tongue, Corrsk nodded and reholstered the blaster with a gleam of pleasure in his cold yellow eyes.

The Trandoshan came at Lowie, his bare claws extended. Lowie ducked behind two cylinders as Corrsk lumbered after him, growling with anger but also expressing joy in the hunt. Em Teedee was absolutely right-he had to get the Trandoshan out of the plague chamber so that their fight would not cause accidental damage. Lowie ran full-out in a long-legged sprint across the slick metal floor. After gaining some distance, he deactivated his lightsaber, afraid of what a careless blow against one of the cylinders might do. He heard the Trandoshan follow, crashing... and then the reptile fell silent, stalking him again.

Lowie slipped between two large canisters that contained the human-killing virus. The fluid-filled transparisteel felt very cold against his back. He growled quietly for Em Teedee not to voice a word. The little droid flashed his optical sensors to show he understood the order. The Wookiee listened, but heard nothing. He stepped out, cautiously peering around. He gazed down a long corridor filled with identical - looking tubes of plague solution. The chamber door remained open, inviting him to dash out into the corridors. He had not sealed it, thinking to leave himself a clear path for escape-but he had inadvertently made it easy for Corrsk to come in and stalk him. If Lowie could get out the door and lock it behind him, he could perhaps trap the Trandoshan inside.

But then another realization struck him-Corrsk could not possibly be on the asteroid alone. He must have brought the Diversity Alliance with him! Perhaps Nola Tarkona herself was already in the plague depot. Lowie moved as silently as he could, ready to dash for the doorway. Suddenly, with an exploding roar, Corrsk lurched out from where he had hidden, waiting for Lowie to head toward the chamber door.

The Wookiee's Jedi senses warned him in the same instant, and he leaped aside. The giant reptile, however, wrapped his muscular arms around Lowie in a murderous bear hug. Lowie struggled and roared, but his arms were pinned at his sides. He looked down to see a smooth, waxy scar on the scaled arm, the remnants of the light - saber gash Lowie had dealt him during their previous battle, when he had caused a tunnel ceiling to fall down on Corrsk.

The Trandoshan should have died then, but the monster was just too mean to die so easily, Lowie thought. Lowie could not move his arms, could not bunch his muscles or draw his lightsaber. He was helpless. Corrsk snarled a hot, wet breath against his fur-covered ear. The sharp teeth were close, close enough to rip out Lowie's neck if they wished, but Corrsk was enjoying his victory too much. He tightened his grip.

Lowie's ribs creaked; his muscles strained. His lungs wanted to burst because he could not draw a breath. He could not reach his weapon-so instead, with a final bestial wheeze, Lowie used the primal weapons he still had available to him. He opened his mouth wide and sank his Wookiee fangs deep into the Trandoshan's scaled shoulder, biting down with all the force he could muster. Leathery skin ripped, and greenish-black blood spurted into Lowie's mouth as he bit down hard again, snarling. Corrsk drew in a long hiss of shock and pain and loosened his grip just enough for Lowie to snap both of his arms sideways, breaking free of the embrace. Without taking the time to draw his lightsaber, he spread both of his hands and clapped them like cymbals against the Trandoshan's flat earholes.

Corrsk staggered back, disoriented and shaking his head. Lowie broke away and ran as fast as he could. He had no need to be quiet now, no requirement for stealth. Corrsk howled after him, but Lowie made his best speed toward the door. The Trandoshan, finally giving up his attempt to savor the kill, drew his blaster and fired. Lowie ducked, and the energy bolts struck the metal walls of the plague chamber. Luckily, the ricochets dissipated, and the secondary bolts struck none of the plague canisters.

"Run, Master Lowbacca, run!" Em Teedee urged. For once Lowie did exactly what the translating droid told him, without the least thought of argument. The reptilian charged after them, bellowing in fury.

BACK IN THE tunnels on Ryloth, Luke Skywalker had to admit that the Diversity Alliance had done a good job of sanitizing its operation. Kambrea surrounded herself with armed soldiers to match the New Republic honor guard. All business, eager to get rid of her unwanted visitors, the Devaronian led them through a large Twi'lek city and spoke of how the once-bloodthirsty race had risen above violence to form peaceful collectives.

The inspection team stood in a vast cavern hollowed from the mountain's heart. The rubble itself had been used to construct tall buildings like warrens hugging the grotto walls. Twi'lek families and clans lived and worked inside the stone-walled dwellings, going about the shadowy business of Ryloth-much of which was now devoted to promoting and assisting the Diversity Alliance.

Luke watched everything, absorbing details. The Calamarian ambassador Cilghal stood next to him, also observing, though he could not read any expression on her fishlike face. Kur, the exiled clan leader, spent most of his time staring at the floor, as if afraid to gaze at the cave city. Trubor, the Chadra Fan senator, seemed impressed by Twi'lek society. The rodentlike creature scuttled around, making appreciative noises every

time Kambrea pointed out newly erected dwellings, prisons that punished corrupt slavers who had once captured Twi'lek females renowned for their dancing skills. Nolaa Tarkona's own half sister Oola had been sold as a dancing girl and killed by Jabba the Hutt. The underground commerce in sentient beings had now been halted.

Kambrea turned her homed head to Luke Skywalker.

"So you see, the Diversity Alliance takes a stance, not just against human oppression, but against oppression in all its forms."

"Very admirable," Luke said, but made no other comment. Lusa and Sirra followed the group, remaining together. The centaur girl was skittish, barely able to face her fear at being in the realm of her greatest enemy. She was immensely relieved that Nolaa herself was not there to confront them. However, the question remained as to where the Twi'lek leader was, and what she was up to.

Luke noticed the hateful sidelong glances Kambrea flashed at both Lusa and the young Wookiee girl. The Diversity Alliance did not tolerate betrayal: a Bothan assassin had already tried to kill Lusa on Yavin 4, and though the alien soldier insisted he had no connection with the Diversity Alliance, Luke could sense otherwise. Kur followed meekly, offering no commentary. He seemed ashamed to set foot in the cliffside cities again, though occasionally he looked longingly at the tall rock-walled buildings and the hardworking people that had once been part of his clan. The Twi'leks looked down at him with cold hatred. They despised Kur-but Luke couldn't tell whether it was because he had been banished... or because he had failed them and let Nolaa Tarkona take over.

After a day of being shown the glories of Twi'lek civilization and all the changes Nolaa Tarkona had wrought, Senator Trubor whined in exasperation.

"I see no evidence of all the horrors those children claimed," he said. "The New Republic is a diverse group of worlds, with many species-not just humans, but Chadra Fan and Calamarians and Wookiees and all manner of intelligent races. I am insulted that Chief of State Organa Solo would pit us against each other so soon after we formed our government and drove out the hated Empire-the human Empire, I might add."

"I won't argue with you the terrible nature of the Empire," Cilghal said calmly. "But we must continue to look. Remember, we are seeing only what Kambrea wishes to show us."

As Sirra growled, Lusa added her own comment with a snort. "Yes, we need to see the ryll mines. Take us to where slaves excavate the mineral for Diversity Alliance profit. Then we'll see what Nolaa Tarkona's really doing."

Kambrea brushed nervously at one of her curved horns, then let out a long sigh.

"The ryll mines are in a different portion of the mountains, but we can take our tunnel transport system, if you really insist on seeing them."

"We insist," Luke said. "This is an inspection team, not a guided walk for tourists."

Kambrea sighed again.

"Come with me." She looked over her shoulder, fixing a cold glance on Lusa. Then she returned to Cilghal and Trubor with a more placid expression. "Remember, though, it's an industrial area for rock excavations. It's not pretty-but you'll see that we have no captive humans. All of our workers are willing laborers." She laughed, and the sound made it clear that Kambrea was not accustomed to laughing. "Certainly not slaves!"

They boarded a high-speed transport train that shot them southward beneath the spine of mountains. As they held on to their seats, the New Republic honor guard looked nervous: this would be a perfect place for an ambush, if the Diversity Alliance decided to turn against them. The alien guards seemed just as uneasy as the humans, though, finding themselves in the awkward position of having to question their own prejudices. When the high-speed train stopped, the air grew colder, picking up a breeze from increased air circulation. The glowpanels overhead flickered, then grew brighter. Kambrea looked up to the rocky ceiling, where conduits rose upward through sloped tunnels to the mountain peaks high above.

"A heat storm just passed over the surface," she said. "We receive most of our power and air circulation from wind turbines erected on the twilight borderline. The shifting temperatures create the terrible storms that drive our turbines."

"We know," Lusa said. "Our friends were trapped outside in one of those storms after they escaped from slavery in your ryll mines."

Kur stepped forward. "Yes, I rescued them out in the cold, and took them to where their ship could take them away from your oppression."

Kambrea looked at them coldly. "So you say."

The Diversity Alliance soldiers grumbled, and the human guards reached for their weapons, ready to fight. Cilghal raised her flipper hands.

"So let us see the mines. We wish to inspect the work conditions there."

Kambrea hesitated, then turned, ignoring the previous exchange. She led them into a large cavern where scores of Twi'leks were busily hammering out chunks of rock, seeking veins of the precious mineral buried deep in the mountain. The Rodian crew boss stood around waving his sucker-tipped fingers and giving orders. Luke saw the large polished eyes, the narrow flexible snout, and the warty head; he remembered the inept bounty hunter Greedo who had tried to capture Han Solo in the Mos Eisley cantina. Luke hoped all Rodians weren't so gullible. This shift boss seemed to be doing a good job keeping his workers in line. Twi'leks scurried over the walls

using sonic hammers; others dangled from the ceiling in harnesses as they chipped away at fungus-covered stalactites.

"They're all Twi'leks!" Lusa said in astonishment.

"Of course," Kambrea answered, "volunteer labor from the cliff cities. Ask any one of them - they work here and get paid well. In fact, people wait in line for this opportunity."

She laughed again in her broken-glass chuckle.

"We have no need to take slaves. Besides, Twi'leks work harder than weakling humans, especially human children."

"I've seen enough," Trubor squeaked, putting his hands on his tiny hips. He perked his wide, fanlike ears around as if listening for hidden prisoners, cries for help. "There is nothing the least bit suspicious in all these tunnels. I, for one, must say that Nolaa Tarkona's concerns about of human prejudice and intolerance seem to have a very firm grounding-especially with what the New Republic has demonstrated here."

Luke used his Jedi senses, but could detect no struggling human prisoners. He hoped that Nolaa Tarkona hadn't ordered their immediate execution upon learning of the inspection team's visit.

"Is there nothing else we can show you?" Kambrea said.

"Yes!" Lusa snapped. "Show us everything you have hidden."

The Diversity Alliance guards stiffened, but Cilghal proved calmer. She turned to Sirra.

"Is there anything specific you suggest?"

Sirra growled something, a suggestion, and the Calamarian ambassador turned to Kambrea.

"You wouldn't mind if we looked at your loading dock, would you?"

"Certainly not," the Devaronian answered with a huff. "As I've said repeatedly, we have nothing to hide."

Luke's senses prickled as Kambrea led them to one of the main shipping and receiving bays. Stacks of crates stood tall against one wall. Bulky alien workers and numerous droids lifted the crates, catalogued them, and loaded them into small transports.

"You see," Kambrea said with a gesture, "food and medicinal supplies for alien colonies, settlement worlds the New Republic has abandoned."

"Very commendable," Cilghal said.

Trubor emphasized the point further.

"The New Republic cannot help every world, though we wish we could. The Diversity Alliance serves a good purpose by assisting those we cannot." Sirra growled curiously as she strode over to the wall of crates.

Luke watched her carefully. The Wookiee seemed to know exactly what she was doing.

"I hope you're satisfied," Kambrea said, intent on Trubor. "There's nothing to warrant the treatment we have received. We trust you'll return to your New Republic and report our displeasure to your government." Sirra gave a challenging bellow. As everyone turned to look, she balled her furry fist and punched in the side of a supply crate marked FRAGILE: MEDICINAL SUPPLIES-URGENT. The container split open. Kambrea yelped in astonishment, and Sirra stood back as the crate cracked, groaned, and then spilled packaged blaster power-packs and handheld laser rifles out onto the floor. At that point, all chaos broke loose.

JAINA TROTTED UP the metal-lined corridor beside Tenel Ka and Jacen. Looking back over her shoulder she saw that the emergency interlock still held Rullak and his Diversity Alliance guards. She couldn't tell how much longer the barrier would last, though. A moment ago it had sounded as if Tenel Ka might have a plan.

"Exactly what kind of drastic measures did you have in mind?" Jaina asked.

"Speed is essential," Tenel Ka replied, and picked up her pace. Her expression flickered with physical pain, but the warrior girl did not falter or slow down.

"Yeah, I think we can all agree on that," Jacen panted.

At the next branching of corridors, Tenel Ka said, "This way!" and turned so quickly that Jaina had to pivot on one foot to make the turn, causing her to fetch up sharply against the wall.

Jacen grabbed her left arm and pulled her forward again.

"Come on, Jaina. So what's the rest of the plan, Tenel Ka?"

Jaina willed her legs to keep moving.

"Kind of hard to have a committee meeting while we're" - she gasped-
"while we're on the run."

"Almost there," Tenel Ka said, turning left again at the next intersection. Jaina sped up and hoped that Tenel Ka really did have a plan.

"Almost there," Jacen echoed, trying to encourage Jaina.

"Hey-almost where?" Tenel Ka skidded to a stop without warning, and Jacen collided with her, forcing him to throw an arm around her to keep her

from falling down. Jaina overshot the intersection by a few steps before she managed to stop.

"We must set explosives here," Tenel Ka said.

Jaina's mind quickly switched to analytic mode and her gaze swept the walls, ceilings, joints, and supports of the intersection.

"Structural weak points there, there, and here." She pointed to each location as she swung her knapsack from her back and rummaged around for the larger thermal detonators. She tossed one to her brother, who caught it easily and began setting it up where she had indicated. Jaina set another one by herself.

"If my sense of direction serves me, the Rock Dragon is docked just over one hundred meters from here," Tenel Ka said.

"Set the timers for three minutes." Jaina blinked at the other girl.

"But the blast from these detonators is going to be huge--"

"--and we won't be able to get far enough away from the blast unless we do a full takeoff in the Rock Dragon," Jacen finished for her.

"Exactly, my friends."

Shaking his head, Jacen positioned his detonator and set the timer. Jaina rigged her second and third detonators, lobbed one at the warrior girl, and situated the remaining one for maximum damage.

"Hey, we can't leave Zekk and Lowie and--"

"We will take off only for a few minutes," Tenel Ka said, catching the detonator with her one hand and thumbing it into position, "then return to a different point, free of pursuit."

As one, the three young Jedi Knights began to run down the corridor toward the Rock Dragon. Jaina put on a burst of speed which barely kept her ahead of the clock that ticked down each second in her mind. The passageway seemed to stretch endlessly ahead of them.

"Almost there," Jacen chanted as they ran. Jaina's entire concentration focused on the effort of placing one foot in front of the other without slowing down. Left, right, left, right, left, right. An airlock hatch swung open right in front of her. Through her haze of exhaustion she glimpsed her brother's face streaming with perspiration as he held the hatch open for her.

"Don't stop now, Jaina!" She couldn't have stopped then if she had tried. She bolted straight through the hatch into the Rock Dragon without even thinking about where she was going. She dove into the pilot's seat, and her hands instantly began moving across the console controls. There was no time for mistakes. In the back of the Rock Dragon Jacen slammed the airlock shut, and Tenel Ka was already beside Jaina, slapping the

engine power to full. Jaina checked her chronometer and knew there was no time to wait for her brother to get into his crash restraints. Uncoupling from the asteroid dock, she threw the Rock Dragon into full reverse.

Repulsorjets kicked the Rock Dragon free a split second before the asteroid began to shudder from the shock of the explosions. In the back, she heard Jacen stumble and fall with a loud thunk. Flames and shattered rock sprayed out of the dome and docking area, but the Hapan passenger cruiser shot away at full power.

"Hey, no need to worry about me-I'm fine." Jacen scrambled into the cockpit as the Rock Dragon pulled away from the tiny asteroid.

"You are bleeding," Tenel Ka observed. Jaina looked back in alarm to see a large discolored lump forming on the side of her brother's forehead. Blood trickled from a ragged gash beside his eye. Jacen shrugged a shoulder and pulled his crash webbing around him.

"Builds character."

Beneath them, an angry, fiery glow marked the site of the detonation.

"We'll wait another minute until all the aftershocks have died down," Jaina said. "Then we'll find a new place to dock."

"There," Tenel Ka said, pointing to a dock far below. Jaina nodded.

Jacen said, "Uh-oh. We're not alone out here."

Jaina looked out the windowport at a cluster of ominous ships racing toward them-the Diversity Alliance armada.

FROM SPACE, RAABA watched the weapons depot like a ravenous hawkbat waiting to pounce on a juicy rodent. The chocolate-furred Wookiee was well aware of the honor she held by being in charge of the Diversity Alliance fleet. Nola Tarkona trusted her, and Raaba would not let her leader down. Keeping the fleet in attack-ready formation, Raaba took them around the asteroid again and again, altering their course each time so that they got a view of the plague storehouse from every angle. The human ships were still down there, but one was no longer docked at the asteroid. She looked at the ship glinting in the reflected light of the distant sun. The sight sent a meteor storm of conflicting emotions through her. She had first seen that Hapan passenger cruiser on Kuar, where she had found Lowbacca and explained to him why she had faked her own death. Then, more recently, the Rock Dragon had appeared on Ryloth. Lowie and Sirra had stolen the ship, rescued their human friends, and left Raaba behind.

Deep inside, Raaba grudgingly admitted to herself that she was glad the humans had not actually died in the ryll spice mines. Still, it had been hard for her to accept that her lifelong friends Lowie and Sirra could so easily abandon her in order to save other friends, especially humans. Yet a part of her could not help but understand. After all, she would have done the same for either Lowie or Sirra. And, taking the responsibilities

of command seriously, she knew she would willingly risk her life for any of the Twi'leks, Talz, Devaronians, Bith, or other Diversity Alliance members who worked around her with such dedication. Raaba knew her duty to the Diversity Alliance. The Rock Dragon could not be allowed to interfere with their plans.

She had informed Nolaa Tarkona of the intruders, and the Twi'lek leader had promised to deal with them appropriately. Raaba swallowed hard. Lowie himself might be on the Rock Dragon, and even if he wasn't, his human friends were surely aboard. But her loyalty was clear—at least she thought it was. She couldn't let her emotions or sentimentality get in the way. She had thought about this for part of an hour, ever since she had spotted the ships, and she had to come to a decision. Sitting down in her command chair, she ordered the front viewscreen's magnification to be increased. She swung a console into position in front of her, then ordered half the weapons systems to be switched to her control.

The Ugnaught weapons officer complied, and Raaba took careful aim on the Rock Dragon. She could not betray Nolaa Tarkona, but for the sake of their friendship, she would do this one thing for Lowie—even if she never had the chance to tell him about it. Raaba's fingers depressed a firing stud. Her shot narrowly missed the Hapan cruiser. She knew she had to be cautious: she only wanted to disable the ship, not destroy it. She took another shot and scored a good hit, though the Rock Dragon's defensive shields held admirably.

Suddenly a third shot exploded against the hull of the Rock Dragon—but Raaba had not fired again. The Ugnaught weapons officer turned to grin at her, obviously waiting for Raaba to commend him on his excellent shooting. She commanded the crew to wait, but another blast lanced out, this time directed by the security console on the other side of the bridge. Seeing her actions, everyone had decided to take a potshot.

No! Raaba wanted to cry. Do not destroy the ship! But she knew she had no reason to give the command. Nolaa Tarkona's orders had been specific. Shoot to kill. Take no prisoners.

"Maybe this wasn't such a great idea after all," Jaina muttered, throwing the Rock Dragon into a spin to avoid a new volley of fire from the Diversity Alliance armada. "How many?" she gasped.

Jacen's voice was tense. "I'd say thirty-maybe forty ships."

"Standard Old Imperial attack formation," Tenel Ka added in clipped tones. "Use the asteroid as a shield."

"Full sublight," Jaina snapped, pulling the ship into a tight curve around the asteroid. "I guess we won't be getting back down there as soon as we planned."

Jacen leaned forward to help Tenel Ka yank the power levers into position, and all three passengers were thrown backward in their seats. The ship shot out of range as laser fire speared through space behind

them. Within seconds Jaina had managed to put the bulk of the depot asteroid between the Rock Dragon and the Diversity Alliance fleet.

"Not much of a shield for us," Jacen pointed out. "Those ships will not fire on the asteroid as long as Nola Tarkona is down there," Tenel Ka said.

The flagship of the Diversity Alliance armada appeared around the edge of the asteroid, and Jaina dodged back into the asteroid's shadow for cover again.

"I don't know how much longer we can keep this up," she said. A moment later her heart skipped a beat as Diversity Alliance ships appeared around the edges of the asteroid from three directions simultaneously. The split armada triangulated and converged on the Rock Dragon. The young Jedi Knights' ship shuddered as turbolaser fire struck the hull, further weakening their shields. Jaina zigged and zagged. Bright fire lanced under, above, and to either side of the ship. Then-suddenly-their path was cleared. More ships streaked overhead, emerging like missiles out of hyperspace.

New Republic ships-at last! A wild cry of exhilaration sounded over the comm speakers, followed by a Wookiee roar of challenge. Jacen and Jaina gaped briefly at each other in astonishment.

"Dad?" Jaina said.

"Chewie?" Jacen asked.

"Half of the New Republic fleet," Tenel Ka said. The warrior girl was not exaggerating. An entire cavalry of friendly vessels had dropped out of hyperspace to engage the Diversity Alliance attackers. A few of Nola Tarkona's ships, apparently not yet ready to give up their quarry, began firing again at the Rock Dragon. A moment later one of those ships exploded into a fireball in space behind them.

Han Solo's voice came over the comm speakers again.

"I suggest you kids get to safety while we handle the heavy artillery out here."

"But Dad-Lowie and Zekk and Raynar are still on the asteroid!" Jaina objected as turbolaser fire exploded uncomfortably close to their port shields.

"We're just heading back there." Chewbacca roared so loudly over the speakers that sparks flew. Han Solo spoke grimly, communicating both his concern for his children and his high estimation of their competence.

"Just stay clear of the crossfire," Han said. "Wait for an opening, but until then, stick close to the Falcon."

Tenel Ka pointed out, "Until the Diversity Alliance armada is under control, our safest alternative is to stay with the New Republic fleet."

Jaina swerved to avoid another turbolaser blast. Then, with a determined whoop, she pulled the Rock Dragon alongside her father's ship.

JAINA'S BLAST IN the subsidiary dome rocked the entire asteroid. The eruption destabilized the munitions depot, knocking out several artificial gravity generators in distinct sections. The shockwave threw Lowbacca to his knees as he fled from Corrsk down a long corridor. The walls shook, and suddenly the tug of gravity went slack and the floor and ceiling spun around him. The Wookiee lost his footing and tumbled, disoriented in the weightlessness. He banged against the wall, flailing his furry arms and legs. Em Teedee clanged on the metal plates with a loud ringing sound.

Lowie's ears popped from a surge of decompression elsewhere in the asteroid. At the other end of the corridor, Corrsk lurched through an open pressure door, unbothered by the shift. His entire attention was focused on his prey.

The Trandoshan aimed his blaster at the Wookiee but an aftershock threw him to one side. His shot streaked past Lowbacca and struck the airlock at the tunnel juncture. Alarms rang out after the explosion created a violent decompression. With a grunt, Lowie surged toward the end of the hall, but he was too late. Automatic systems slammed the blast doors closed, sealing off and compartmentalizing sections of the asteroid to stop the loss of air. The heavy door closed shut just as Lowie reached it, pounding his hairy paws against the unyielding surface. He was trapped in a dead end, facing the reptilian hunter. At the far end of the corridor, Corrsk gave a dry rasping laugh, like sandpaper on a raw wound.

Lowie didn't intend to give the predator the satisfaction of an easy kill. He drew his lightsaber, and its molten-bronze blade blazed brightly as he bounced from one wall to the other, as if dancing on marionette strings. The asteroid's natural gravity was barely enough to keep his feet touching the floor. Corrsk blasted at him again, and Lowie leaped up, hitting the ceiling, ricocheting back down at an angle to the wall, and then springing off again.

He took the initiative and lunged toward the Trandoshan. Blaster bolts streaked in another haywire pattern, and Lowie swung his lightsaber in the air for intimidation. Its humming, buzzing sound was like a swarm of deadly insects in the enclosed tunnel.

"No escape," the Trandoshan gargled. Lowie growled something untranslatable in response. He was concerned about his friends, about the explosion that had just rocked the asteroid, about Nola Tarkona and the plague—but right now, despite all his training as a Jedi, the primary force surging through him was a bestial hatred of this reptilian species that had slaughtered hundreds, maybe thousands, of Wookiees, taking their fur as trophies. The Trandoshans were Lowie's natural enemies, and he did not intend to become a prize pelt for Corrsk. Corrsk braced his blaster and fired again, but Lowie ducked out of the way.

The bolt singed the metal wall near a control panel for the environmental systems and the pressurized doors. Lowie crashed into the tall reptilian, and they grappled, hammering at each other. He did not simply strike Corrsk dead with the lightsaber as he could have. He resisted that-for now-but he doubted there could be another end to this battle. He snarled, and the Trandoshan hissed back at him. During the fight, the catch holding Em Teedee onto Lowie's prized syren-fiber belt snapped, and the little droid sprang free, using his microrepulsorjets to bob into the air.

"Master Lowbacca, please be careful-I could have been seriously damaged!" Lowie rammed the Trandoshan into the wall, and Corrsk struck back, pushing hard and driving Lowie across the corridor. The low gravity made resistance futile, and they bounced and caromed like foam balls in a spin-dagat tournament. Lowie saw that on the other side of the sealed pressure door the dome had been ripped open, leaving only the vacuum of space. He could not take the time to find a different way out; he would have to go back the way they had come. Many corridors reeled out behind them, but other pressure doors had locked down as well-and right now all he could see was the blazing hatred in Corrsk's eyes; all he could smell was the sour breath of half-digested raw meat that clung between the Trandoshan's teeth. They continued to fight. Lowie backed off, raising his lightsaber.

The Trandoshan fired his blaster, and Lowie deflected it. Corrsk fired again, stepping closer, raising his weapon. Lowie had no room to move. As the Trandoshan prepared to push the firing stud again, Lowie had no choice but to slash with the lightsaber, severing Corrsk's arm high above the elbow. The reptilian roared, but before his amputated arm could fall to the floor, he, reached out with his other hand and grabbed his detached wrist, trying to snatch the blaster pistol from its twitching grip.

"It will regenerate," he said. Em Teedee flew free, spinning up and over to the control panel on the wall. The little droid bounced against it, pushing buttons with his casing. As Corrsk stood up and lunged, a hot blast of steam came from an environmental control nozzle in the ceiling. The reptilian yowled in surprise, and Lowie bent over, pushing against the floor and springing outward. He crashed full force into the Trandoshan's torso, knocking him backward. Corrsk spun end over end in the low gravity, leaking black blood from the broken cauterized stump of his arm. Lowie fought to regain his footing, his balance. He wasn't accustomed to struggling in near - weightlessness.

Em Teedee wailed,

"Over here, Master Lowbacca! I'm over here, if you're trying to find me."

Lowie was more interested in the control panel itself. As he drifted past, he snagged the square box, then held on to a sturdy support pipe that ran up the wall. Staggering and unable to catch his footing, Corrsk drifted to the back of the passageway and slammed into the pressure door on the opposite end. Still clutching his severed limb in his good hand, he tried to wrestle the blaster pistol away from the reflexively clenched

dead fingers. At the control panel, Lowie frantically worked to analyze the Imperial codes and the buttons used for fail-safe mechanisms. Corrsk succeeded in prying his blaster free from his dead hand's grip and held it out in his left hand, aiming at Lowie.

Lowbacca punched in the final sequence and disengaged the airlock mechanism, which popped open the pressure door. The metal bulkhead slid aside right behind Corrsk. He snarled and reached out to grab for support, but his arm was no longer there. Suddenly, with a wail, the vacuum of space ripped him away. The Trandoshan flew backward into open space. Air gushed out, swooping and cold. Lowie fought to lash his syren-fiber belt around the support pipe, which held him firmly in place against the wall.

"I'm being pulled out!" Em Teedee wailed, fighting a losing battle with his microrepulsorjets at full power, being sucked away in the vacuum. With one hand Lowie snagged the little translating droid as he frantically used his other hand to punch the buttons that would seal the door again. Air roared around him. As atmosphere rushed from the compartment, Lowie managed to get the door shut again, sealing Consk outside. The towering Trandoshan drifted up and out into airless space, still flailing feebly in outrage. Lowie grabbed the power conduit connected to the control panel and yanked it free.

Sparks flew. Then emergency power sources flickered on, and the artificial gravity generators cycled, adding normal weight to the room again. Debris crashed to the floor.

"Oh, my. That was a close call," the little droid said as he bobbed in the air, released from Lowie's grip. Lowbacca slumped down to the cold metal deck, feeling weak from the battle. His stomach clenched and he fought to control his feelings after having just killed a sentient being, even one as despicable as Corrsk. Lowie clipped Em Teedee back into place. He looked in both directions down the corridor. The heavy pressure door behind him had also sealed shut... and he had just ripped out the power conduit.

He groaned in dismay. Now he would have to rig a way to fix the controls, or he would never get back to the central plague chamber and complete his mission.

THE ROCKING EXPLOSION also caused Raynar to slip and stumble, and thus lose his grip on the delicate munitions he carried. Zekk reacted quickly. He sensed the instant danger and snatched the explosives from the Alderaanian boy's hands, catching and cradling them before Raynar could drop them to the floor.

"I hope that wasn't an accident from one of our team," Boman Thul said.

Raynar looked about, his face pale in its texture of fear.

"Maybe we're under attack!" Zekk held the explosive pack carefully, trying to control his trembling. He shook his head. "That was Jaina. She's all right, but something's gone wrong." He marched forward. "We'd

better find Lowie quick and make sure he's set the detonators in the plague chamber. Then we can all get off this rock before anything else happens."

Raynar swallowed hard and followed him.

"Unless some disaster has already taken place."

They dashed down the curving corridors from the munitions chamber back to the central room that stored the plague canisters, pausing only briefly to plant the last of their explosives at strategic points. Pressing his lips together in a grim line, Zekk fixed the linked detonation transponders so they could set off all the bombs at once. Zekk's Jedi senses tingled. Despite his ordeals of the past, he was no longer entirely reluctant to use the Force, especially in a situation where those skills might mean the difference between life and death. He pulled himself up short and looked at Raynar; they could both sense danger around the corner.

Bornan Thul eased past them, taking the lead.

"We can't waste any time."

As soon as he turned the corner, though, Bornan Thul nearly ran into a lumbering Gamorrean guard, who appeared to be lost. The guard grunted at him in surprise and blinked stupid-looking eyes. Bornan Thul snatched out the blaster pistol he had taken from the munitions room and shot the guard twice before the piglike brute could make a move.

Raynar gasped.

"I can't believe how fast you reacted!" he said to his father. "You protected us all."

Bornan looked at the dead Gamorrean and sighed.

"I used to be a merchant lord. My entire battlefield was in trade negotiations. I was able to pull a faster trick than even the great Lando Calrissian." He drew a long, heavy breath, and then shook his head. "At one time I thought I could sell sand to Jawas—look at how I've changed."

Raynar put a comforting hand on his father's arm.

"Maybe it's because you're concerned with more than just the Bomaryn fleet this time. Maybe you're thinking on a much broader scale, and your priorities have changed."

Thul looked at his son and smiled.

"That's very perceptive, Raynar."

Zekk looked down at the fallen Gamorrean guard and urged them to move again.

"I admire your reactions, Boman Thul." He tossed his long dark hair behind him. "This means we're not alone on the asteroid. Nolaa Tarkona and the Diversity Alliance must be here already."

They hurried along the corridors as rapidly and as cautiously as they could. They reached the plague chamber without incident, but they did not see Lowie when they surreptitiously peered through the transparisteel windows into the collection of plague containers. Instead, they looked down in astonishment to find Nolaa Tarkona standing triumphant in the middle of the chamber.

She held a control box, the central connector for all the incinerators and thermal detonators Lowie had dispersed among the plague cylinders. Her single head-tail thrashed, making the tattoos ripple. Flashing her pointed teeth and looking utterly confident, Nolaa disconnected the explosives. Boman Thul watched with cold anger on his face. Raynar stifled a soft moan of despair.

Zekk gritted his teeth.

"Looks like we need to try something else then-if it isn't already too late."

Surrounded by hundreds of liters of concentrated death, Nolaa Tarkona experienced the thrill of long anticipation, the payoff of years of searching. At last she had a weapon to exterminate the human vermin for all time. Then alien races could be free. They could work together. They could reclaim their stolen worlds and live with all the glory they were meant to have. As she stood among the transparisteel containers, she breathed the oh-so-clean-smelling air, sterilized and disinfected. But she knew something was terribly wrong. The sealed door had already been opened, and her guards scoured the plague chamber, searching for evidence of sabotage. They had shouted in outrage when they found dozens of incinerators and thermal detonators strung together, planted at strategic points. Nolaa had moved to the center of the room and found the control box.

She could smell Wookiee in the air, and she knew that Lowbacca, one of the great traitors to the Diversity Alliance, had been here already. He wanted to destroy this stockpile in the war for alien freedom. With her rose-quartz eyes, she studied the control box now that she had disconnected the sabotage devices. Then she yanked out the remaining cables before tossing away the useless box. It made a resounding, satisfying clang on the metal floor. Nolaa glowered down at it, her sensitive head-tail twitching. The Twi'leks had an extensive but subtle language that depended on the movements of their head-tails. But she had only Diversity Alliance soldiers beside her, none of her own Twi'lek people to understand her thoughts and her emotions.

No race could truly comprehend the downtrodden hopelessness the Twi'leks had endured-centuries of slavery, technological inferiority, hellish environmental conditions, even treachery from their own race. Now that she had control of the Emperor's plague, though, Nolaa could become the savior of aliens everywhere, and she relished that position. As she

glanced at the various liquid solutions, Nolaa saw other test plagues, hideous viruses targeted to nonhuman species-the biological weapons Evir Derricote had developed and tested on those hapless alien prisoners they had found sealed in the small cells. These other plagues certainly had potential as well.

The Diversity Alliance could free all nonhuman races by spreading one kind of plague... but in the aftermath, she was certain to encounter further resistance, struggles against her benevolent rule by various commando groups from different species. She might have to deal with strongholds that resisted their own liberation, and these biological solutions would give her an edge against the Wookiees, the Calamarians, and other races that might prove troublesome. She had to take samples of these other plague organisms as well.

With the optical sensors mounted in the stump of her severed head-tail, she saw a flash of movement behind the transparisteel windows above. Someone spying on her. She set her sharpened teeth on edge. A part of her already knew who the intruders were. Nolaa took a deep breath and stifled the anxious twitching of her head-tail.

She was not worried. She had gotten here in time to secure the plague samples. She had plenty of soldiers with her, all armed with blaster rifles. The little Jedi saboteurs had been foiled in their plan, and Nolaa would bide her time. They would come to her. Then, with all the plague solution she would ever need, and with the human meddlers all dead, she could begin the great work of her life.

USING HIS POWERFUL fingers as tools, in addition to Em Teedee's cables and diagnostics for leads and crossovers, Lowie managed to hot-wire the inner door. The sealed pressure barrier hissed open, finally allowing him to run back toward the central plague chamber. At least he didn't have to worry about Corrsk anymore, and the gravity here was normal again. Farther along, he encountered another barricade, more sealed doors. Lowie groaned, disconcerted. His fingers still ached from prying open the previous control panel, and now he had to work his way through a second one. He had no idea how many other pressure doors had automatically closed behind him after the explosion.

"Now then, Master Lowbacca," Em Teedee said, "we mustn't lose patience. We must be cautious and persevere. We have a mission to complete. I will offer whatever assistance I can."

Lowie fully understood the implications. Nolaa Tarkona might even now be making her way off the asteroid with the deadly plague samples, and he knew he had to stop her. The companions each had their separate missions, but he cared too much for his friends not to worry about them, all the same. First, though, he had to get past this door. Lowie dug his hard claws into the screw bolts holding the cover plate on the access controls. He twisted with his fingers, and one of his claws cracked, but the screw finally turned, and he pried it away. After loosening another, the plate came away sufficiently that he could just bend it aside, ignoring the other two screws. Impatient, he studied the wires, circuit boards, and cyberfuses.

This control setup was more complex, governing four different automatic doors in the adjoining passages. He dug his fingers into the nest of electronics and jammed wire leads through Em Teedee, connecting one circuit to another. He took the final cable and without double-checking, jabbed it into position, just as Em Teedee squealed,

"No, Master Lowbacca, not-" Sparks flew as two incompatible linkages short - circuited. The control panel blazed, as a small fire erupted. Black smoke spewed up, stinking of insulation, burned plastic, and melted wires. Lowie yanked the wires away, but it was too late.

"Oh, my!" Em Teedee wailed. His voice warbled up and down, quickened then slowed. "I think all my circuits are scrambled. What day is it today?" Then he made strange bleeping noises as he ran a diagnostic and bypassed his damaged circuits. "Ah, there! Much better. Please don't do that again, Master Lowbacca. You must be more cautious."

Lowie gave a long sigh as he looked at the blackened panel. He would never be able to operate the door controls now. He had ruined them. He stepped back. At the very least, he could use his lightsaber to hack his way through. Lowie gripped the weapon in his right paw, finding the power stud with his thumb. But before he could activate the energy blade, a loud booming sound came from one of the other sealed bulkheads.

"Oh, dear," Em Teedee wailed. "Perhaps it's the Diversity Alliance firing upon us. What if they break through and take us prisoner? What if it's that horrible Nola Tarkona?"

The Wookiee ignited his lightsaber, this time ready to fight. The crash came again. It sounded like something immensely heavy, metal against metal, like a relentless battering ram. The bulkhead buckled outward, and convex mounds appeared in the center of the heavy door, as if someone were punching fists into a thin sheet of dough. After another slamming crash, the hinges groaned.

Lowie stood with his feet planted apart, his lightsaber raised in a fighting stance. After enduring three more heavy strikes, the blockading door broke free of its supports and toppled into the corridor with a crash like an explosion. Out of the sparks from tearing metal, and the shadows of smashed and flickering glowpanels in the ceiling, a giant angular shape lumbered into the intersection. Lowie froze as he recognized the blinking red lights on the conical metal head, the broad durasteel shoulders, the arms, torso, and legs made of impenetrable metal tubing. The framework created a body somewhat resembling a human's, but it was clearly a droid-an assassin droid.

"My, how very unexpected!" Em Teedee said. "IG-88! What are you doing here?" The assassin droid clomped forward, raising its scarred durasteel fists and arming grenade launcher and built-in blaster rifles.

"What is he doing?" Em Teedee said testily. "IG-88, don't you recognize us? I wonder if he's been this sluggish ever since Jaina reprogrammed him back on Mechis III."

The assassin droid did not seem the least bit impressed by Lowie's lightsaber. Instead, IG-88 paused, swiveling sensor eyes toward them, and then lowered his own weapons.

"Ah, very good. You do know who we are," Em Teedee said.

The towering droid's lights flashed, and Lowie wondered if Em Teedee could understand them as some sort of communication.

"I know why he's here, Master Lowbacca," Em Teedee said. "Mistress Jaina reprogrammed IG-88 to search for Boman Thul. His assignment was to find Raynar's father and stay as his bodyguard, following his wishes, or at the very least protect him from harm."

Lowie slowly lowered his lightsaber when the assassin droid made no threatening move. The Wookiee and IG-88 stood motionless, regarding each other.

"We've tried to keep our own mission quiet, but with the numerous ships involved, some comm traffic must have gotten' through. IG-88 could well have picked up the evidence that Boman Thul was here, and he came to complete his mission! We're saved, if he'll protect all of us."

Lowie grumbled skeptically.

"Come along with us, IG-88. You can help," Em Teedee said to the big droid. "We're supposed to meet Bornan Thul near the chamber where the plague cylinders are stored. But these doors have gotten in our way. Could you assist us in removing them?"

Lowie still held his deactivated lightsaber, ready to cut away the door if necessary. But IG-88 clomped forward to the partially opened but frozen barricade that blocked them from the central chamber. He planted his metallic feet on the floor, adjusted his stance for traction, and then grabbed the blast door.

Servomotors whined; straining gears and metal joints squealed. IG-88's durasteel arms and torso flexed ever so slightly, bending with the immense strain-an then the pressure door groaned and snapped. Through metal fatigue the hinges simply broke away, and IG-88 shoved the wreckage aside.

"Very good," Em Teedee said. "Now do let us hurry. We can assist you in finding Borran Thul."

IG-88 plunged ahead into the corridor, fearing no Diversity Alliance soldiers or any other obstacle that might slow him down. Lowie followed, knowing that at least they wouldn't have any further trouble with bothersome doors.

MEANWHILE, BACK ON Ryloth, as soon as Sirra exposed the Diversity Alliance's secret cache of weapons, Kambrea screamed at the top of her voice,

"Guards! Stop them before they kill us all!" Kambrea's words provided exactly the right provocation for the already-tense guards. Her soldiers whirled about in search of a target. The Gamorreans, slower-witted than the others, simply opened fire without aiming. Several blaster bolts struck near Sirra and the stockpile of contraband weapons. Luke Skywalker threw himself backward, his Jedi reflexes ready and tight as a spring.

"Stop shooting! Stop shooting!" Senator Trubor squeaked, but nobody listened to him.

Lusa galloped across the loading bay and knocked Sirra aside as a volley of bolts struck a small box of packaged hand blasters, detonating it. The explosion shoved them all backward. They scrambled to keep their balance.

"Don't let them leave!" Kambrea shouted. "They can't escape!"

Under a barrage of alarms, dozens of Diversity Alliance soldiers raced in. Luke felt a deep sadness as he ignited his lightsaber and prepared to fight. Most of these soldiers, he knew, had been swayed by Nola Tarkona's words and struggled against enemies who did not need to be enemies. They knew nothing about the circumstances here, only that they felt threatened. Kambrea's soldiers shot in a cross fire across the loading bay. New Republic guards fell back with their own weapons blazing. Two human escorts stood next to Kur, protecting him as they held their blaster rifles, ready to fight to the death. Another blast ricocheted off the ceiling, and broken stone rubble pattered down around them.

Cilghal stepped up to Luke, her lightsaber glowing. She looked at him with her large round eyes.

"Even though I'm an ambassador," she said, "I always carry my Jedi weapon with me."

Luke raised his energy blade beside his former student.

"Diversity Alliance soldiers!" he called. "We did not come here to fight. Surrender now, and the New Republic will punish only the treacherous members of your organization."

"You mean like me?" Kambrea shouted. "And Nola Tarkona? These humans want to destroy us all! We must fight for our lives!"

Outraged, the alien fighters redoubled their blaster fire. Lusa and Sirra had taken shelter behind one of the ships. Sirra dug in a broken container marked MEDICINAL SUPPLIES and drew out a blaster of her own. She squatted, carefully picking her target. Three brutish Abyssin set aside their heavy spiked clubs and hauled out energy rifles as they hunkered behind a small skimmer. Sirra watched the one-eyed soldiers preparing to fire on the New Republic troops. Flashing her fangs in a grim smile, she lined up her blaster crosshairs with the fuel module of the tiny ship. Here in the landing bay, the skimmer would have no

shields, no protection. She fired at full strength. The fuel pod exploded nicely.

The Abyssin were blown back with the rain of shrapnel. Diversity Alliance soldiers continued to stream in, increasing their firepower. A human soldier died with a smoking blaster hole in his chest. When a Gamorrean guard lumbered forward to check on his kill, another human soldier cut down the piglike creature in turn. The entire grotto was filled with sounds of weapons fire, explosions, ricochets, screams of terror, and howls of pain. Luke realized how outnumbered they were-and their enemies were increasing moment by moment.

Kambrea kept herself sheltered near a barricade of weapons crates stacked high behind her. The Devaronian female had all the firepower and ammunition she would need to hold off assailants for many days. She gestured with a clawed hand, trying to attract the attention of her fighters, pointing toward Sirra and Lusa, who huddled in scant shelter near the small craft.

"Get those two! They're traitors to the Diversity Alliance. They brought all this upon us!"

As the weapons fire turned toward his two young charges, Luke knew he had to help protect them. Sirra shot her own blaster, but she couldn't possibly hold off the entire barrage. Ambassador Cilghal ran beside Luke toward where Lusa and Sirra were making their last stand. With crossed lightsabers Luke and Cilghal intercepted the blaster fire, deflecting energy bolts into the stone walls and occasionally into enemy attackers as well.

Lusa, boiling with frustration and wanting to strike a blow against the radical group that had caused her so much misery, saw Kambrea hiding behind the wall of weapons crates. From where he stood, Luke Skywalker could sense the centaur girl tapping into the Force. He knew Lusa had great potential to become a Jedi, but she was untrained, did not know what to do-and so she could not control the surge she directed at Kambrea. Her rippling tug made the wall of heavy crates shake, tilt... and finally topple down.

The Devaronian had only time to look up and see the avalanche of weapons containers falling toward her. Kambrea roared and tried to squirm away, but she was far too late. Tons of heavy crates fell on top of her, burying the provisional leader of the Diversity Alliance. Seeing Kambrea killed, the Diversity Alliance soldiers, who were still duped as to the actual cause of the fight, let out a howl of outrage, roaring vows of revenge. Their blaster fire increased.

More soldiers rushed in. It looked as if nothing could stop the complete obliteration of the New Republic inspection team. The bloodlust and anger bottled in the grotto grew even higher, as everyone fought for their lives, for revenge, or for political ideals. On the other side of the chamber, left unattended except for two small Sullustan guards wearing the uniforms of the New Republic, Senator Trubor crawled along, trying to stay under cover.

He squeaked, "We surrender! We surrender! It's the only way!"

The small Chadra Fan stood up, waving his hands-and two of the Gamorrean guards, seeing only someone they knew as their enemy, targeted him. Both shot the senator. Little Trubor died with a high-pitched squeal as he tumbled backward into the hands of the helpless Sullustan guards, who dragged his body away. The New Republic soldiers cried out in anger.

Unexpectedly, the Twi'lek refugee Kur stood up, shook away the restraining hands of his two New Republic escorts, and strode into the thick of the firefight. He seemed willing to die, or convinced of his own invincibility. Standing out in the open, in the middle of the chamber, he held up his clawed hands.

"You must cease firing. All of you!" His voice was stronger and prouder than anything Luke had expected. Several more blaster shots rang out; a Gamorrean guard fired at him and missed-but more rapidly than Luke would have thought possible, the blasterfire tapered off and then fell silent. Kur looked at the barricaded fighters in the bay, squaring his shoulders. His head-tails thrashed with agitation, and he tried to meet them all with his piercing gaze.

"Aliens have shed alien blood!" he shouted in a tone of voice that expressed horror to all present. He gestured down at the dead Chadra Fan senator. "But for what? Did you gain peace? Freedom from tyranny? No! The search for revenge has only brought you death and given you cause to distrust each other. Isn't this exactly what the Diversity Alliance promised to prevent?" Kur paused and stared at all the fighters, who were huddled down for shelter. But they were listening now, and not shooting. "Look around you. This time there is no scapegoat - no excuse to blame the killing on one species or another. All races must stop trying to place the blame for the injustices of centuries gone by-and begin working together." He held up a fist. "As equals. We must build from the present, not resort to savagery because of the past." As he looked at all of them, he swelled with pride.

Luke felt the strength in the air, felt that Kur had regained his self-confidence. In a brave gesture, Cilghal switched off her lightsaber and stepped away from her shelter to stand next to Kur. Luke went out to join her, willing the others to come out as well. Several of the Diversity Alliance soldiers, idealistic aliens who fought for what they believed was right and knew nothing of Nolaa Tarkona's other plans, also tossed down their weapons and came forward.

"We must talk together," Kur said. "Only that way can we find peace."

Luke looked at the exiled refugee. Though Nolaa Tarkona wasn't there, and Kambrea had already been killed, he sensed that the Twi'leks had found a powerful new leader.

IN ORBIT AROUND the insignificant-looking asteroid,, the Diversity Alliance armada and the New Republic fleet battled for the right to continued existence. Violent explosions from blasted warships punctuated

the blackness all around, made all the more eerie because of the silence of vacuum. Raaba might have been watching a hologram of an event that had occurred long ago. No smells of flaming gases or singed flesh reached her nostrils. No expanding ball of heat threw her backward or scorched her chocolate-brown fur. No thunderous detonations burst painfully upon her eardrums. Yet to Raaba, who had never witnessed such death and destruction of those she knew, space itself seemed to shudder at the savagery-and that shudder she felt all the way to her bones.

The Ugnaught gunner on her bridge crew clipped a New Republic X-wing with a lucky shot. Raaba's crew cheered as the little ship blossomed into an expanding cloud of hot gas and debris on the front viewscreen.

The cheers died to grim murmurs when a few seconds later one of their own midsize transports disintegrated in slow motion before their eyes. Raaba paced the deck behind her tactical officer. She continued to issue orders, forcing a calm and steady tone into her voice that she did not completely feel. She couldn't allow herself to panic. If she lost control, even more lives could be lost. Raaba ordered her comm officer to contact Nola Tarkona on the asteroid and inform her that the entire armada was now under attack. Raaba had hoped not to bother her leader again, especially not with bad news, but the senseless losses being suffered by the Diversity Alliance left her little choice.

Most of the pilots in the Alliance armada already wanted to retreat. Raaba could smell the terror that a dose of true combat had injected into the veins of her crew.

"I'm sorry, Captain, there's no response from the Esteemed Tarkona," the comm officer told Raaba. "We picked up a couple of explosions on the surface just before that Hapan ship took off. We have not been able to reach her since then."

Another New Republic fighter exploded and vanished into insignificance in the vastness of space while Raaba looked on. A growl of rage and protest built in her throat. What did this fighting gain them? One moment a human enemy died, the next it was one of her compatriots. Talz, Bith, Ithorian, Sullustan, Ugnaught, Rodian, Kushiban, human-what did it matter? People were dying! Raaba could not let this go on much longer. Facing the tactical officer in charge of the armada, she gave him simple, strict orders: he was to draw the New Republic fleet away from the asteroid but engage them as little as possible, keep losses to a minimum. Raaba herself would go down to the weapons depot to fetch Nola Tarkona. If their leader was alive, Raaba would bring her back within the hour, triumphant.

If Raaba had not returned by then, the tactical officer must retreat to Ryloth and await further orders. The tactical officer, a short, fearless Sullustan named Ma'thu, started to object, but Raaba growled that her orders could be countermanded by no one but Nola Tarkona herself. With that, the chocolate-furred Wookiee sprinted off the bridge toward the docking bay, where her skimmer Rising Star awaited. If luck was with her, she could make it to the asteroid in less than five standard minutes.

After today's events, however, she could no longer be certain that luck was with her.

BORNAN THUL STOOD outside the central storage chamber, cold with anger and sick with despair. Nolaa Tarkona had found the human-killing plague at last, and now she had in her grasp the means to destroy everyone. And it was his own fault for not taking care of it sooner. Boman knew what he had to do. Hunkered next to Zekk and Raynar, he took a deep breath. He reached out to squeeze his son's shoulder.

"Lowbacca isn't in there-or if he is, Nolaa Tarkona's already dispatched him. I have to go in and finish setting the explosives myself." Raynar looked at him with wide eyes. His moon-round face flushed with astonishment.

"But you can't! It's dangerous in there. All that plague-"

"I know, and we can't risk letting it get out. I have to stop Nolaa Tarkona."

"We'll go with you," Zekk said. "The three of us can fight her together."

Bornan Thul stared at the hardened, dark-haired young man.

"That would risk all of us, and it's not worth the cost." He stopped to look at Raynar. "I've already put the galaxy in danger. I can't do even worse by getting you killed." He gave his son a quick hug, and Raynar clutched him tightly.

"But I just found you again, Father. Don't go in and get yourself killed."
"

"I don't intend to," he said. "I sincerely hope I come out alive, but I have to seal the door behind me. I can't let any of that plague get loose."

Sweat beading on his forehead, Bornan Thul gripped the blaster pistol with which he had killed the Gamorrean guard. He slid along the wall, keeping low so that he couldn't be seen through the observation windows. Then he ducked over to the heavy door, flashing one last glance at the mournful face of his son before he slipped inside the deadly chamber. He clutched the blaster, hoping against hope that he wouldn't have to fire it. Any stray bolt could easily shatter one of the plague canisters.

Thul reached up and worked the controls until the heavy airtight door hummed and moved sideways. With a hiss it slid shut, then compressed against its contamination-free doorjamb. He knew he couldn't remain hidden after all that noise, so he dashed into the forest of plague cylinders, taking shelter between the canisters.

Nolaa Tarkona cried out. "So the vermin are here at last-hoping to save themselves from the fate they deserve. Rullak, see that they don't escape!"

Boman Thul slipped between the nearest bubbling cylinders, seeking shelter. He heard the pounding feet of guards, and he shrank into the shadows. As he peered around the curve of the transparisteel cylinder, he saw Raynar's look of horror through the window above. The boy stared in at his father and the armed guards lunging toward him. Thul crouched low and scuttled between a pair of bubbling cylinders, skirted a scarlet-filled sphere, and ran down the next aisle of liquid-filled tubes. Guards charged after him.

He caught only a glimpse of burly alien forms as he wove in and out. He stopped, breathless and panting, beside a coolant station whose coils hummed with high-power efficiency. Other noisy generators pumped aeration and support systems, keeping the biological contamination viable after all these years. A blaster shot ricocheted off the floor near Thul's foot, and he realized that he was partially visible. So he got up and ran again, ducking past the edge of a huge recirculation fan that blasted sterile air in all directions, stirring the enclosed atmosphere. Its noise would cover any movement he made.

The guards were shouting now, and he heard Nola Tarkona also screeching orders. She was his target, Thul knew... if he could get one clean shot. He held the blaster, always ready, in his hand. Just one clean shot, and he could remove the leader of the Diversity Alliance. No one else had Nola's charisma, her power. No one else could hold the disparate alien bands together, with or without the terrible plague. Taking a deep breath to marshal his courage, Boman Thul dashed toward her voice. That was the most important thing—to stop Nola Tarkona.

As soon as he emerged from between two large cylinders filled with bubbling solution, he suddenly came upon the tentacle-faced form of Rullak, the Quarren. The amphibious creature's mouth feelers quivered, and he thrust his blaster forward.

"Shall I kill you now, or let Nola Tarkona do the job?"

Thul didn't pause, though. He charged forward, smashing into the Quarren, who was too startled at this reaction to fire. Rullak struggled and knocked the blaster pistol out of Thul's hand. Thul let the weapon drop, shouldered the Quarren aside, and fled as Rullak gave a phlegmy howl of anger. Thul ducked between two more cylinders. Finally, on the far side, he could see Nola Tarkona, fuming as she listened to the scuffle. Grim, he paused to decide how best to attack her. Then Rullak began firing at him. The angered amphibian shot indiscriminately. Blasts ricocheted off the ceiling, striking the plague cylinders and spheres all around them.

The transparisteel containers cracked. Some of the smaller cylinders shattered entirely. Deadly microbial solutions sprayed into the air.

Bornan Thul ducked, but the canister to his left split open with the flash of a blaster bolt. Plague solution sprayed toward him. He rolled and missed most of it, but still the droplets splattered over his body. Rullak seemed to be laughing as he shot, but Nola Tarkona's bellow was horrible to hear.

"Stop firing, you idiot!" As the blaster fire continued, she raised her voice so loud it must have scraped her vocal cords raw. "Stop! There are other kinds of plague here! Plagues that could kill all of us!"

Finally the blasts ceased, and Thul pushed himself forward, panting. His breath rasped hot in his lungs. He saw Nolaa Tarkona ahead of him, and he could think only of staggering toward her. He didn't care about the other guards anymore, didn't care about Rullak or the Gamorreans or anyone else trapped in the chamber with him. He only wanted Nolaa. But as he approached her, he realized that he no longer had his blaster.

Nolaa's rose-quartz eyes blazed; her head-tail thrashed. When her lips opened in a terrible, deadly smile of pointed teeth, Thul knew he was defeated. He took deep, hitching breaths, and felt dizzy. His lungs seemed to be choked with something that kept him from drawing in enough air. His head throbbed. With each step he knew with utter certainty that he had been exposed to the plague. He turned, grasping one of the intact transparisteel cylinders for support, an irony not lost on him.

He gripped the bars on its outer casing and turned to look back at the observation window where he had just left his son and Zekk. To his dismay, Boman Thul saw Raynar's face looking back at him, stricken with absolute despair. IG-88 marched toward the central chamber with pounding metal footsteps that hammered the floor - plates like a mallet striking a bell. Lowie followed him closely, guiding the assassin droid whenever it hesitated at an intersection. IG-88 ripped aside one more sealed blockade before they reached the central chamber, arriving just in time to hear the sound of blaster fire, a vigorous battle. The huge droid picked up speed, and Lowie groaned uneasily as he raced after the metallic hulk.

"Dear me, I do hope it's nothing serious," Em Teedee said. When they reached the observation windows, Lowie took in the situation at a glance. He saw Zekk, crouching and itching to fight. Raynar pressed his face against the observation window, not caring if he was seen. His face was filled with utter anguish. Lowie roared as he looked into the chamber, whose door was now sealed again.

Nolaa Tarkona stood surrounded by several broken cylinders. Multicolored plague liquids streamed from the containers, spilling everywhere, splashing, evaporating to suspend billions of disease organisms in the air. Worst of all, he saw Borran Thul stagger away from the cylinders, disoriented, already exposed to the deadly plague. Bornan stumbled forward, trying to reach Nolaa..

. but what the human merchant lord would do once he reached his nemesis, Lowie could not guess.

IG-88 had been commanded to assist Boman Thul, to help him or save him - and seeing the man next to Nolaa Tarkona struggling with the onset of the disease, IG-88 charged implacably toward the wall. The droid knew his programming exactly. He raised his durasteel fists. Lowie realized what the assassin droid could do. IG-88 would batter his way in, tear down the walls, breach the isolation chamber, and expose them all to the plague-filled air.

Lowie threw himself at the assassin droid, but IG-88 simply batted him away with such a blow that the young Wookiee crashed into the wall. Raynar was too focused on his father's plight to notice.

Zekk shouted, "No! You'll flood all the corridors with the plague!"

But IG-88 paid no heed. He hammered on the wall, and bright polished dents began to appear. He would crack open the chamber in less than a minute.

RAYNAR PRESSED HIS face against the transparent barrier that separated him from his dying father. He pounded his fists against it in rage. As if imitating him, IG-88 continued pounding his powerful fists against the airtight door. The plague organism was free inside the vault - the plague that his father had hoped to destroy before it could ever be turned loose against human beings. Raynar wished he'd gone inside with his father. He might have been able to do something, use the Force to stop Rullak or Nola Tarkona. Or if not, at least he would be inside with his father to comfort him now in his last moments.

Raynar pressed his hands against the transparisteel, harder, harder, as if he might reach through it to his father if only he exerted enough force. At the edge of his awareness Raynar heard Zekk yell, "No, IG-88! If you open that door you'll kill us."

Lowie roared, but the assassin droid knocked the Wookiee aside again. Inside, Boman Thul stumbled toward the upper observation window that separated him from Raynar. His skin had a grayish cast now, and Raynar could see how labored his breathing had become. Blotches of green and blue appeared on his skin. He crawled toward the controls of the two-way intercom system in the wall. Unable to tear his eyes away from his father's agony, Raynar felt an imaginary band of durasteel clamping around his own heart, tighter, tighter, until it seemed impossible that it could go on beating.

"Go," his father rasped into the speakers. "It is too late for me."

IG-88 continued to batter at the door to the room. Lowie roared again, to no effect.

"I can't!" Raynar cried in anguish. "Not now. I just found you again."

"Never forget... how proud I am of you. My work... unfinished, though," Boman Thul gasped. "I leave it to you... to destroy this place-stop Nola." Raynar briefly shifted his attention to the Twi'lek leader of the Diversity Alliance. She stood toward the back of the vault, vainly attempting to stamp some order into the chaos inside the trashed chamber. Rullak writhed on the floor in his death throes, succumbing to one of the deadly plagues his own blaster fire had released. Raynar knew his father was right. He could not simply give up now because of his grief. Millions of lives were at stake if Nola Tarkona put her plan into action. Raynar's mother and uncle would die, and Master Skywalker, Jacen and Jaina, and everyone else he cared about. His mind railed against the

injustice. It wasn't fair. His vision grew blurred and distorted, as if he was looking at his father through a current of water. Something hot and wet burned its way down Raynar's cheeks, and his throat constricted so tightly he could hardly breathe.

Suddenly Zekk was beside him yelling something to Boman Thul.

"The assassin droid IG-88 is programmed to protect you-to bring you back alive. You're the only one who can stop him from breaking down that door and releasing the plague right now! Tell him to stay away!"

Suddenly Raynar's vision cleared and he focused on his father, who drew a shuddering breath.

"Stop," Boman Thul croaked. Though his voice came out as no more than a hoarse whisper, the powerful droid paused to listen. "IG-88, I order you to save the only part of me that can still be saved: my son. I am beyond help."

With that, he fell against the wall beneath the transparisteel pane to which Raynar's face was still pressed.

"I love you, Father," was all Raynar had time to say before IG-88 clanked over to where he stood. His father nodded weakly as the assassin droid grabbed the young man and dragged him away from the chamber of death. A white mist formed across Raynar's vision, and he could see nothing more.

All he knew was that IG-88 was leading him by one arm and that Zekk was holding his other. Lowie loped ahead, his lightsaber drawn to guard against any other enemies. Zekk droned a steady litany of instructions to IG-88, explaining where their ship was and which direction they needed to go. Occasionally Zekk let go of him, and Raynar could hear some sort of safety interlock whoosh shut behind them. For all Raynar could tell, they might have hurried along like that for hours, but it must have been only minutes. When the droid released his arm, Raynar nearly collapsed. Zekk turned to IG-88.

"It's not far to our ship now." Em Teedee chirped, "Many thanks, IG-88. You are a credit to all droids." As Raynar swayed to his feet again, the big assassin droid spun about and then marched back the way he had come, unable to escape his primary programming.

Zekk called to Raynar. "We have to get out of here before any more of those explosives blow and bring this place down around us." Feeling leaden, Raynar followed Zekk and Lowie, not knowing what else he could do. He looked back the way they had come. The assassin droid vanished into the shadowy corridors, heading back toward the plague chamber to see if he could do any last thing for Boman Thul.

AS SOON AS she set foot on the Imperial weapons asteroid, Raaba had her blaster out and ready, unsure of what she might encounter. She raced down the corridors. Her instincts were good, and she had found a space to dock on the edge of the primary biological weapons complex. She understood security systems well and had an uncanny knack for finding her way to the

heart of any important facility. It was one of the skills that had made her so valuable to Nolaa Tarkona. This time it might just save her leader's life-or at least, Raaba hoped so as she searched through one tunnel after another. Hold on, Raaba thought. I'm coming. Too many lives had been lost already this day. Coming upon a sealed doorway with a safety interlock and a flashing hazard symbol, Raaba used her blaster to fry the controls. Then she wrenched the door open using the manual override and her own Wookiee strength.

Good, Raaba thought. Directly before her, she saw Nolaa Tarkona emerging from a vault-locked chamber whose bent and battered door stood wide open. Nolaa's rose-quartz eyes held a strange look, somewhere between overwhelming grief and wild triumph.

"Raabakyysh! I knew I could count on you."

Raaba loosed a happy roar to see her leader alive, but her cry of joy turned to a questioning growl when she looked past Nolaa Tarkona to see the body of Rullak sprawled on the floor in the chamber, blotched with disease.

"Rullak is dead through his own fault-and the human's," Nolaa said, spitting out the word with obvious contempt. She swayed on her feet, looking very unwell. "Bornan Thul is dead, too. Their foolishness nearly put an end to my plan. Most of my guards were killed, and all my generals are lost to me now. But we have no time to mourn them. You must get me back to the fleet."

Raaba paused in confusion. How had Rullak died? And Bornan Thul? But then a pair of blaster bolts zinged past her and ricocheted off the vault door, nearly striking Nolaa Tarkona. The emergency distracted Raaba from worrying about any additional questions. Raaba did not think-she acted. She spun and fired on her assailant.

It was the assassin droid IG-88. Nolaa Tarkona had her own blaster out now and fired, but Raaba could not let the great leader put herself in danger. Stepping forward, Raaba let loose a volley with her blaster and backed down the hallway, pushing the Twi'lek woman behind her and shielding her with her own body.

IG-88 fired again. In desperation, Raaba shot back, but she knew she couldn't hold off an assassin droid forever. They had been very lucky to escape injury for this long. With stubborn determination, Raaba pushed her leader back toward the questionable cover of a corner at intersecting corridors. A blaster bolt grazed Raaba's knee, singeing fur, and she dove after Nolaa Tarkona. Then a strange thing happened. As soon as Raaba and Nolaa Tarkona disappeared into the adjoining tunnel, the blaster fire ceased abruptly.

Stunned and suspicious, Raaba peeked back around the corner, only to find that the droid had apparently lost all interest in them. Instead, IG-88 clanked slowly, almost mournfully, through the vault door and into the steaming, sparking plague chamber. Although Raaba did not understand why the droid had given up his attack, she wasted no time questioning their

good fortune. Instead she grasped Nolaa Tarkona's arm and propelled the Twi' lek leader down the long corridors toward the place where the Rising Star waited. As they ran, Raaba explained that the New Republic fleet had arrived to drive back the Diversity Alliance armada.

Without slowing, Nolaa Tarkona attempted to switch on her mobile comm unit. When there was no answer, Raaba snatched the comlink from her belt and handed it to her. They were almost to the Rising Star now. A burst of static and then a squawk of surprise and delight came over the comlink.

"You're alive! Esteemed Tarkona, is it truly you?"

"Yes," she said. "Raaba and I will be with you shortly, but we need your help to escape from this accursed asteroid."

"Anything, Esteemed Tarkona," the voice on the comlink replied.

"Drive the human fleet away from here," Nolaa said. Apparently out of breath, she coughed a few times and gasped. "We'll join you soon. And then I will personally lead you to victory."

HAN SOLO WAS taken by surprise when the Diversity Alliance armada did an abrupt about-face from its cautious retreat and surged toward the New Republic fleet. Like a pack of nek battle dogs, the battered survivors of the little armada pressed their attack, pushing back the ships under Han's command. Chewie roared beside him, and Han gripped his controls.

"I see it, I see it!" He swerved to avoid an oncoming strike cruiser, adding more power to his front shields, then did his famous corkscrew maneuver to elude the turbolasers. One of the New Republic snub fighters behind him wasn't so lucky, and spiraled out of control with a damaged S-foil.

"Boy, those guys just got inspired!" Han said. "I wonder what they're trying to defend."

Chewie roared.

Han agreed. "Right. Or who."

He toggled the Falcon's comm system to the coded military frequency.

"All right, blue and green groups-attack formation delta. Remember your training."

Han knew that sooner or later he would turn the plague-storage asteroid into cinders, but first he had to make sure his kids were safe. At the moment, though, all resources were engaged in fending off the Diversity Alliance.

As the New Republic fleet harried the scattered Diversity Alliance warships, Jaina watched from the cockpit of the Rock Dragon, still desperately trying to return to the Imperial weapons depot to help her stranded friends. She flew near the Millennium Falcon, protected in part

by her father's shields and his talent with the laser turrets-but she knew that she and Jacen could shoot as well as Chewbacca, and she wanted to do her part in the fight on her way back down to the asteroid. Diversity Alliance ships orbited the weapons depot, reluctant to retreat into hyperspace: somewhere down there on that rock, their leader Nola Tarkona still had business to complete. Jaina spotted the blown-out atmosphere containment dome she had wrecked during her escape earlier. Right now, she wished she knew what was happening to Zekk, or Lowie, or the others they had left behind.

She needed to be sure her friends were away from the depot before the New Republic fleet blasted the asteroid to incandescent dust. The space battle was sheer chaos. The Diversity Alliance ships fought vigorously, taking outrageous chances, careening toward New Republic cruisers and then flitting back. Nola's space navy had performed no drills, made no concerted effort - they just shot at their enemies in a free-for-all that caused little damage but much confusion. The Diversity Alliance fleet hit their own vessels as often as they struck the New Republic ships. Jaina soared around in the Rock Dragon, seeking an opening where she could cripple one of the ships. New Republic vessels already outnumbered the enemy fleet, but Nola's soldiers fought anyway, recklessly.

Then hyperspace shimmered, the folds of the universe blinked-and even more ships appeared. Another battle fleet.

"Blaster bolts!" Jacen exclaimed at her shoulder. "Who's coming now?"

Jaina had a sudden dread that Nola Tarkona had access to additional warships hidden in reserve, another portion of her fleet armed with stolen weapons. Tenel Ka recognized the ships first.

"That is the Bornaryn fleet." The massive form of the flagship Tradewyn took the head of a phalanx as the merchant convoy, surrounded by numerous security vessels and fast fighters, plunged into the fray. The comm system crackled with Aryn Dro Thul's iron-hard voice.

"This is the Bornaryn fleet offering our assistance to the New Republic. I understand my husband and my son are down there."

Jaina recognized another voice as Tyko Thul's.

"If you Diversity Alliance troops know what's good for you, you'll give up right now."

The New Republic ships drew together, and the Bornaryn vessels closed in like the other half of a jagged jaw, squeezing the rampant alien ships. Turbolaser fire crisscrossed space, and Jaina added her own shots, but she didn't cause any serious damage. One of the Diversity Alliance ships, a small but heavily armored strike cruiser, erupted in space, leaving yellow afterimages on Jaina's eyes. The rest of the enemy fleet began to move away from the depot, driven out of the system. As part of the New Republic fleet peeled off in pursuit, Jaina swerved the Rock Dragon back toward the asteroid.

"That's a good start at least," Jaina said, watching the warships with satisfaction. Now they could at last go back to retrieve their friends. Dodging turbolaser fire from the battle in space overhead, Jaina found a free airlock on the asteroid and docked the Rock Dragon again. Before Jaina had even finished powering down the cruiser's engines,

Tenel Ka had opened the airlock and begun scouting out a route to the plague chambers. Grabbing a mobile comlink, Jacen flicked it on.

"Em Teedee, can you hear me? We need to know where you are so we can help you."

A Wookiee roar blasted from the tiny speaker.

"Yes, Master Jacen, you are quite audible-but, Master Lowbacca urges you to reconsider. Several plagues have already been unleashed. It's far too dangerous here! Do not attempt to open any safety interlocks. He says to set whatever explosives you have left and save yourselves. We will make every effort to find our own way out."

The little droid gave an electronic equivalent of a gulp.

"Of course, we could be doomed."

Deep in the asteroid tunnels, Zekk kept running with Lowie and Raynar.

"The Lightning Rods up here somewhere," he said. "Once we're away, we can get the New Republic fleet to open fire and blow this asteroid into powder."

Raynar sniffed, overwhelmed by grief at the death of his father. "There's nothing here worth preserving," he said. "Let's destroy it all so it can't harm anyone else."

Zekk's green eyes looked at the young man with hard understanding. They rushed down the corridor through half-opened pressure doors and barricades that had been tom from their hinges by the assassin droid. They raced along tunnels past domed landing bays and access areas. Zekk knew the Lightning Rod was just down one of those corridors. He could almost smell the old cargo freighter's lubricant fumes and exhaust. He wanted nothing more than to be off this weapons depot. Running ahead, though, Lowie skidded to a halt and let out a roar, grabbing for his lightsaber. Zekk felt the cold tingle of Jedi senses an instant before another cluster of Diversity Alliance soldiers emerged from the branching tunnels.

They had been lying in wait, ready to ambush the companions as they returned to their ship. These alien fighters were not interested in taking prisoners. The soldiers stepped out, drew their weapons, and with a mingled roar from various species, they opened fire. Zekk and Raynar threw themselves against the walls. Lowie held his ground, powering up his lightsaber and slashing to deflect blaster bolts. But he, too, had to press for shelter against the curve of the wall. The nine Diversity Alliance soldiers continued shooting. Blaster bolts ricocheted like a

sideways - slanting rain of sparkling flames. Zekk yanked out the blaster pistol he had taken from the munitions chamber and fired.

His first shot struck a clumsy Gamorrean just above the knee. The creature squealed and fell on his side, out of commission. The others scrambled out of the way, but were more interested in shooting than in taking cover. After all, they were faced with only three young companions, and just one of them had a long-range weapon. Zekk shot again and again, but his opponents managed to keep to shelter. Lowie strode recklessly forward with his lightsaber, and Zekk followed behind him. This was their last chance, and if they couldn't make it back to the Lightning Rod, he was going to go down fighting. After all this time of trying to find himself, searching for a way to remove the shadow of guilt from his past, Zekk understood that he had to get his friends out of this situation, even if it meant sacrificing himself so they could get to the ship. Lowie was a good enough pilot.

He could take Raynar out of here, back to safety. Zekk had been with the Shadow Academy, and he had fought against Luke Skywalker's Jedi Knights on Yavin 4. He had gone to his birth world of Ennith in hope of rejoining his people, but he'd found no home there either. Then he had become a bounty hunter, searching for lucrative targets, but not understanding why he needed to seek them. He had not bothered to ponder the consequences if Bornan Thul were caught. No matter what his skills, no matter how good he was at his job as a bounty hunter,

Zekk could never be just a mercenary. He had to think through his actions, and he had to choose what was right. Luckily, Zekk had learned his lesson in time, so that he could fight on the right side-and now he had to carry that fight to its finish. He stood next to Lowie, prepared to fire. Diversity Alliance soldiers pushed forward until the volley of blaster bolts grew so thick that Lowie could not deflect them all. A long bolt singed the ginger fur on his arm.

Then, just when they were at their most vulnerable point in the middle of the corridor, Boba Fett emerged from a side passage. The grim man in battered Mandalorian armor stepped out boldly. He held a blaster pistol in each gauntleted hand. The Diversity Alliance soldiers cheered, welcoming Nola Tarkona's crack bounty hunter. They stopped firing, happy to let Boba Fett finish their job for them. Fett trained both blaster pistols at Zekk, and Zekk was more afraid of those guns than of all the other weapons held by the alien guards.

He recalled how the masked man had reluctantly assisted him, and also how he had tricked Fett into helping Boman Thul get away. He swallowed hard, prepared to die. Suddenly the bounty hunter whirled about with such speed that Zekk could barely follow his actions. Boba Fett fired both of the pistols continuously, strafing from one Diversity Alliance guard to another. He ruthlessly mowed them down as they stood paralyzed with shock.

Without wasting time on questions, Zekk reacted as well, opening fire and taking out the aliens Boba Fett hadn't already shot down. In the suddenly silent, smoke-filled corridor, Boba Fett stood motionless, victorious.

Rock dust and sifting debris drifted down from the ceiling. The smell of melted metal burned Zekk's nostrils. He couldn't move. Lowie held up his lightsaber, not knowing how to react. Raynar had stepped up behind Zekk and Lowie, directly into the line of fire-but no Diversity Alliance fighter remained alive.

Zekk's astonishment gave way to scorn. He looked at the black slit in the helmet of the bounty hunter.

"So you're a turncoat? Just like that, you're on our side?" Lowie also grumbled his disbelief.

Raynar exclaimed, "I thought you were working for Nolaa Tarkona. She had you out looking for my father."

Fett turned to him. "Nolaa Tarkona wanted the location of this depot. I gave it to her. My work for her is finished, paid in full."

Zekk stared in astonishment, remembering how Boba Fett had told him that all obligations to an employer ended once the bounty had been delivered.

"So what made you choose our side? A twinge of moral responsibility?" He raised his eyebrows.

Fett's impenetrable helmet gave the slightest shake.

"A bounty hunter does not take sides."

"Then why are you here?" Raynar asked. A flush colored his cheeks.

"Tyko Thul hired me. He offered a large reward if I could bring you and your father safely away from this asteroid."

Raynar hung his head. Zekk could barely speak himself. "Too late, Boba Fett. Bornan Thul is dead from the plague."

Fett seemed unaffected.

"Then I will complete the rest of my assignment, and see that Raynar gets out safely. I will cover your retreat. I trust you can make it to your ship without assistance?"

Zekk regarded the masked man with distrust.

"It doesn't trouble you that your very next bounty is to assist the enemy of your former employer?"

Boba Fett straightened, as if the answer to the question should be obvious. "I don't judge right or wrong. I just do my job."

Zekk squared his shoulders and suddenly knew he was stronger than Boba Fett. His mind was clearer. His heart was cleaner.

"Then I guess I don't want to be a bounty hunter after all," he said, and tossed his long black hair over his shoulders. "I don't let a paycheck decide between right and wrong for me."

Leaving Boba Fett behind, he walked with Lowie and Raynar down the last remaining tunnel to the Lightning Rod and their escape from the asteroid.

RAABA'S STOMACH LURCHED as she threw the Rising Star's engines into full reverse and pulled away from where she had been docked against the asteroid. Yes, it looked as if they might escape after all. But something was terribly wrong with her leader. Nolaa Tarkona coughed again, and her pale face streamed with oily perspiration. Her single head-tail writhed and contorted in convulsions of pain. Watching the Twi'lek woman, Raaba hovered just above the rocky surface. Nolaa's breathing was labored, but her eyes burned with unquenchable fervor.

"Hurry," she said, "we must get back to the armada. Our time of triumph is at hand. Don't hesitate now."

But Raaba could not deny the evidence before her eyes: Nolaa had been exposed to the Emperor's plagues. One of the diseases had killed the human Bornan Thul, and another had killed Rullak-and now it was apparent that one was also working its poison on Nolaa Tarkona herself. Raaba shook her head to clear it and growled a question: how many plagues had been let loose in the Emperor's biological weapons chamber? The Twi'lek woman looked surprised.

"Three, four, perhaps a dozen. What does it matter? Many of the canisters were destroyed." Nolaa reached inside her cloak and pulled out a fistful of vials labeled HUMAN, FAST-ACTING. "Don't you see?" she said. "We have what we came for. The means to destroy our enemies for all time!"

Raaba felt her chocolate-colored fur stand on end. She sucked in a deep breath, but coughed instead. Only then did Raaba understand what she had done. Yes, she had rescued her leader from the plague chamber-but at what cost? The Twi'lek leader was sick, perhaps dying from one of the plagues she had encountered. Certainly, she'd been exposed to both the human and the Quarren specific organisms. Even if Nolaa's intention was to kill every human in the galaxy, how could she not recognize that she also endangered every Quarren and every Twi'lek, at the breathe. By going into the plague chamber to rescue her leader, Raaba herself might have been exposed to a virulent plague that could also be fatal to Wookiees.

Perhaps she was doomed as well. With her clawed hands shaking, Nolaa Tarkona attempted to work the copilot's controls and take the Rising Star on a heading toward the armada. Raaba knew that the time for a decision was now.

Jaina, Jacen, and Tenel Ka finished setting their last explosives in record time and threw themselves into the cockpit of the Rock Dragon. Em Teedee had just transmitted a message from Lowie, Zekk, and Raynar in the Lightning Rod to inform the other young Jedi Knights that they were on their way, escaping from the asteroid. He also passed along the news about the death of Borran Thul. But they had no time to grieve now. Not

in the middle of a battle, with the fate of the plague storehouse at stake. Like a team long accustomed to working together, they flicked switches, sealed airlocks, and programmed courses with deft hands guided by the Force.

"Fifteen seconds," Tenel Ka stated in a firm voice, referring to the amount of time left on the five detonators they had found and been able to set without going any farther into the weapons complex.

"Fifteen seconds? No sweat," Jacen muttered.

"Almost got it." Jaina slapped the repulsorlifts to full.

"Ten, nine..."

Tenel Ka hit the switch to release the Rock Dragon's airtight seal on the depot docking hatch.

"Eight, seven, six..."

"Hang on. This ride's going to be anything but smooth," Jaina shouted.

"Five, four, three..."

The Rock Dragon's engines whined as the Hapan cruiser began to pull away.

"Let's just get away from this place," Jacen said.

"Two... one."

The Rock Dragon lifted fractionally from the pad on which it had rested, then rose higher.

"Zero."

Although the Rock Dragon was no longer touching the ground, the asteroid rocked around them. One of the secondary domes exploded in a hail of transparisteel fragments that momentarily clouded the front viewscreen with a crystalline spray. Something struck the Rock Dragon hard.

"Get those shields up," Jaina barked at her brother, and he scrambled for the controls. None of the companions had had a chance to fasten their crash webbing, and the blow sent them reeling out of their seats.

Struggling with the panels, Jaina yelled, "Help me! We need to get farther away."

Tenel Ka reached out with her mind for Jaina's, felt Jacen's mind join the two of theirs. Together the three minds visualized the asteroid beneath them and placed their combined pressure firmly against it like a springboard and pushed. Suddenly the ship spun clear of the asteroid in open space, halfway to the New Republic fleet.

Jacen said, "Uh-oh," as a familiar ship swung into their field of vision in their front viewports: the Rising Star. Raaba's ship.

With the Bornaryn fleet holding the Diversity Alliance ships at bay, Han Solo's choice was clear.

"Chewie, let's make sure no one else ever gets hold of the deadly stuff down there."

A voice crackled over the comm speakers.

"New Republic fleet, this is Zekk in the Lightning Rod. Once the Rock Dragon is clear, feel free to use the asteroid for target practice."

Han strode to the comm panel.

"We copy, Zekk. You're cleared to come aboard one of the escort frigates. Red and silver leaders, bring your squadrons after the Falcon. You're with me. We're going in."

Raaba pulled the Rising Star into a backward arc to avoid hitting the Rock Dragon.

"Just shoot them," Nolaa ordered, "then take me to the fleet!" She subsided into a fit of coughing.

Raaba barked a rebuke at her leader. Didn't she know how many people had died already this day? Neither of them could be certain how many plagues they'd each been exposed to in that chamber on the asteroid. If the two of them returned to the fleet now, they might risk killing every loyal member of the Diversity Alliance-and how could killing all the humans help them now?

"Such sentiments are for fools," Nolaa gasped, shuddering as much now with anger as with the chills that racked her body. "In every revolution some must sacrifice themselves to overthrow the tyrants and save the rest."

Just then a voice came over the comm speaker. It was Jacen.

"Raaba, is that you? If you need our help, we can take you aboard."

Nolaa Tarkona muted the speakers.

"Yes, it's perfect!" she said. "Accept their offer. That is how we can begin to spread the plague among the humans-with those Jedi as our first victims."

A rumble of outrage was building deep within Raaba like the boiling of a geyser. Even after all that Raaba had done, these humans-Lowie's friends - were worried about her. They were willing to help. But Nolaa Tarkona had been right, in a way: in every revolution there must be sacrifices, and Raaba owed her allegiance to the Diversity Alliance. Her leader was dying, and she could not abandon her.

Nolaa toggled the comm speaker back on. Again Jacen's voice spoke.

"Hey, Raaba, are you there? Are you all right? Do you need our help?"

Below, New Republic ships bombarded the asteroid with a stream of turbolaser fire and proton torpedoes. Pressurized domes exploded just as Raaba wished she could explode to release the pressure building in her.

"Yes, we are coming, we accept," Nolaa Tarkona hissed. Shaking her head with a low growl in her throat, Raaba came to a decision. Her long Wookiee fingers flew over the controls of the star skimmer, setting a course and sending them sailing out and away from the asteroid. She increased their speed toward the Diversity Alliance armada. Faster, faster. She allowed herself to transmit only one message, not by voice but by a brief encoded burst that she flashed toward the Rock Dragon before starlines stretched out around them.

Together, Raaba and her leader Nolaa Tarkona plunged into hyperspace. Behind them, unable to resist the concentrated barrage of firepower from the New Republic fleet, the Emperor's weapons depot erupted in a chain reaction of fire and dust, sparkling as it crumbled into nothingness.

Boba Fett sat in Slave IV, rising up out of the plane of the asteroid belt and watching the continuing battle below with some amusement. Tyko Thul had paid him for his efforts, and Fett was once again between bounties. The passion and devotion some people gave to their causes, their sacrifices, never ceased to amaze him. It seemed a terrible waste of energy, and not profitable. But then, it wasn't his business to understand. Avoiding all contact with other ships, Fett cruised away, setting a new course. It wouldn't be long before he had another bounty assignment....

OVER THE NEXT few hours the Bomaryn ships and the New Republic fleet rounded up the last remnants of the Diversity Alliance armada. But despite the excitement, the time passed as slowly as a century for Raynar. It would have been a kindness, he thought, if the shock of his father's death had thrown him into a numbing fog that blurred the hours while he waited for the space battle to end, while he waited to go aboard the Tradewyn and speak with his mother, to explain to her what his father had done and why. Instead, Raynar experienced every excruciating moment as if it were an eternity. How could he break the news to his mother that, after months of searching, after hopes that had been repeatedly renewed, Raynar had been unable to save his father?

In the docking bay of the cavernous Calamarian cruiser, Raynar refused even to get out of the Lightning Rod. He could think of seeing no one but his mother, could think of nothing but her pain - and his own. Zekk came and went, bringing Raynar reports of the final skirmishes with the Diversity Alliance armada. Raynar heard, yet did not hear, Zekk speaking. Even the news that Nolaa Tarkona had escaped meant nothing to him. His mind absorbed little of the information, as his spirit curled into a tight ball of grief. Raynar was only vaguely aware that Lowie had not

left the Lightning Rod either and sat somewhere close by, keeping watch but saying nothing.

Later, Jacen, Jaina, and Tenel Ka also came in to see him, one by one. To his great relief, the young Jedi Knights did not try to cheer him up, did not try to talk with him. Each of them simply entered and laid a hand on his back or shoulder, and then quietly withdrew again. But with each touch of a friend's hand, Raynar felt his pain ease.

Peace flowed into him through the Force, and though his sorrow was not diminished, he found that he could face it now, accept it. By the time Zekk returned with the news that the space skirmish was over and it was safe to take him over to the Tradewyn, Raynar was ready to see his mother. Aryn Dro Thul and Uncle Tyko met the Lightning Rod in one of the Tradewyn's docking bays just seconds after pressure and atmosphere were restored to the enormous chamber.

Aryn Dro Thul's midnight-blue gown clung to her as dignity clings to a queen. One look at her told Raynar that she already knew of her husband's death. She wore the multicolored sash of the House of Thul tied in mourning about her left arm, rather than in its usual place at her waist, and she carried an air of regal sorrow about her. Tyko Thul's moon-round face was damp with tears, and he too wore his sash on his left arm. Raynar walked slowly down the Lightning Rod's ramp. Then, as if in a choreographed dance, he and his mother and his uncle drew together in a tight circle and embraced.

"You were right about your father," Tyko said in a voice taut with emotion. "He was a good man."

"I'm so proud of him for what he did," Aryn added. "And you." She produced a Thul sash from a fold in her gown and held it out to Raynar. He took the colorful strip of cloth and gravely tied it around the left arm of his Jedi robe, in tribute to his father. Hearing a noise behind him, Raynar turned to find Zekk standing beside the Lightning Rod.

"I guess I'll just be going now," the dark-haired boy said. "I think you're in good hands here, Raynar."

His mother nodded. "We'll take him back to the Jedi academy when he's ready. We have a Ceremony of the Waters to celebrate in honor of his father first. Thank you for your help, Zekk-for everything you've done."

"From all of us," Tyko Thul added.

"Will I see you back on Yavin 4?" Raynar asked.

"When I get there?" Zekk's emerald eyes opened wide, as if surprised at the question. "I don't know," he said simply. "I've got some thinking to do."

During the next week, Coruscant was abustle with activity, more so than Jaina could ever remember. Delegations were requested and brought in from every species on every planet that had been allied with the Diversity

Alliance. Kur, newly appointed head of Ryloth's government, sent two representatives for his people: one Twi'lek man and one Twi'lek woman. Jaina's mother spent all but a few hours each day in meetings with the new delegates, both individually and in groups. During her few precious free hours, Leia slept. The young Jedi Knights spent nearly as many hours as Leia did welcoming delegates to the capital world and giving further reports to the New Republic Senate on what they had learned of the Diversity Alliance. Lusa and Sirra, now back from Ryloth, gave their accounts, as did Master Skywalker and the other members of the investigation team. All of them spent hours interviewing various former members of the Diversity Alliance and finding out their reasons for joining, what they had hoped to accomplish.

Em Teedee was constantly pressed into service to provide translations during these interviews, since, as he often pointed out, he was fluent in over sixteen forms of communication. By the end of the week, a Cooperative Council of Independent Planetary Governments had been formed with representatives from every species on every world. Their charter included an agreement, signed by every member, to work together for the good of all species and the detriment of none.

Aryn Dro Thul placed the Bornaryn Trading Fleet at the disposal of the new council and its representatives, while Tyko Thul volunteered the resources of his droid manufacturing facilities on Mechis III. The Hapan government offered financial assistance to the Cooperative Council. There was work for everyone, and when Leia asked Lowie's sister Sirra to become a liaison to strife-torn planets, and to look into and report on the violation of any species' rights, Lowie could not have been more proud if his own sister had been named Chief of State. Eventually, after weeks of political upheaval, the young Jedi Knights returned to Yavin 4.

BACK ON THE jungle moon, Lowie sat comfortably ensconced at the top of a Massassi tree, staring patiently into the starry night sky and thinking about the final transmission burst Raaba had sent from the Rising Star. There had been no voice message, no hologram - only a cryptic line of code in old-fashioned clicks and bursts of static that she knew he would understand.

The words, conveyed in Basic, had been simple: "If I survive, I'll find you."

Lowie leaned back and watched a shooting star streak across the sky. And waited. Raynar's hand shook slightly and he sought out Master Skywalker's eyes. Even now he was unsure of himself, was not certain he dared... was not certain he was worthy.

The Jedi Master's eyes were kind and serious. He nodded.

"Go ahead, Raynar." Fumbling slightly because his hands were slick with sweat, Raynar moved his thumb into position and pressed the switch. With a whoosh-hum, an energy blade the color of polished pewter sprang from the hilt of his newly constructed lightsaber.

"The workmanship is excellent," Master Skywalker observed. "And I've seen how well you do with the stun-sticks. Would you like me to ask Tenet Ka to practice with you?"

Raynar blanched.

"Now?"

The Jedi Master chuckled.

"Maybe I'd better have you practice with Jacen for a while first. But not yet. Right now, I've got a surprise for you. We have a new permanent student here at the Jedi academy. I thought maybe you could show her around for a while."

With that, he stepped back and opened the door to his chambers.

"Lusa!" Raynar exclaimed as the centaur girl appeared in the doorway. "I thought you wanted to work for the Cooperative Council."

Lusa tossed back her long cinnamon mane and gave an eloquent shrug of her bare shoulders.

"I might someday, but I have a lot to learn first. I've asked Master Skywalker to teach me more about my powers with the Force."

Raynar found himself with nothing to say. His mouth hung open.

"I think you can put your lightsaber away for now,"

Master Skywalker said. "There'll be plenty of time for that later."

Raynar snapped out of his surprise-induced immobility and turned off his lightsaber.

"I..." Raynar blinked at Lusa and tried to collect his thoughts.

"Would you like to go for a walk?" the centaur girl asked. "I know of a very pretty waterfall."

On a small planet without a name, far out in a barely charted sector of the Outer Rim, Raaba built a burial cairn for Nolaa Tarkona. She worked alone-she was the only being on this entire world-to find large rocks on the crumbling ridge where she had made their base camp. Using her strong Wookiee fingers, she pried up stones and piled them higher where she had buried the Twi'lek leader. Nolaa Tarkona had died of the plague the day before. Raaba had flown here, navigating by instinct rather than any star chart, and she had set down her star skimmer near a cluster of habitable caves on this silent planet.

Nolaa had grown rapidly worse, day by day, as the slow-acting disease ravaged her body, destroyed her immune systems. She had thrashed and raved, insisting that Raaba take her back to Coruscant so that she could receive medical treatment in the capital of the New Republic. But Raaba

had refused. She could not risk bringing the sick Twi'lek woman anywhere where she might infect others, where she might spread the evil plague developed by twisted Imperial scientists. The disease had proved fatal to Twi'leks, and might well be able to cross many species boundaries.

Raaba could not take that chance. And so she had tended her leader all by herself. The chocolate-furred Wookiee had suffered ill effects of her own: a fever, pounding headaches, muscle cramps. Some of her fur had fallen out in patches. Raaba had been sure she would follow Nolaa Tarkona in a lingering death. But her strong constitution had ultimately defeated the plague. She recovered just about the time that Nolaa had died, but even now, she knew she might still carry the disease organism; she might still infect others.

The breeze picked up, whistling along the knife edges of the barren rock. The air smelled like hot dust. Tall brown ferns protruded from cracks in the ridge, rattling their dry leaves together. The sun shimmered thick and orange near the horizon. Raaba piled another heavy stone on the cairn. She would finish her work here soon. Her star skimmer might also be tainted with the organism; her own systems might still bear the plague. Raaba had to quarantine herself here, at least for a while.

After seeing Nolaa's long and suffering death, Raaba wanted no part in spreading such a scourge throughout the galaxy. She would wait here, for as long as it took.

A group of large rodents with hard shells on their backs scuttled out of their warrens in the cliffside. They stood in groups like miniature soldiers, watching the Wookiee woman's strange activities. Raaba glanced at them, then turned back to her labor. She piled boulder after boulder atop the place where she had interred the leader of the Diversity Alliance. Finally, she had an impressive monument, a marker to commemorate all the dreams and dedication Nolaa Tarkona had stood for.

Her need for equality and reparations had been valid, but her tactics had taken her beyond the reach of reason.

"Rest in peace, Nolaa Tarkona," she said, looking across the burial mound to the distant horizon. The world was empty, but peaceful and quiet. A good place to think, a good place to heal. Someday she would come back to the galaxy; someday she would find Lowbacca. But only when she was ready.

"Yes, I'm sure," Zekk said, looking directly into Master Luke Skywalker's eyes. "I wasn't ready before, but now I am. It took a while for me to understand that I don't have to use the dark side if I don't want to. I need you to teach me the right way. Teach me to use the light side of the Force, so I can become a true Jedi Knight."

"Do you still have your lightsaber?" Luke asked.

Zekk was surprised.

"No, I got rid of that when I gave up being a Jedi, after the Shadow Academy was destroyed. I'll... I'll have to build a new one."

"We'll do it the right way this time."

Luke Skywalker gave a thoughtful nod.

"It's been a while since we got any new trainees here at the academy-and now we're getting two in one day. I have a feeling we needed some new blood here," he said with a faraway look. "Yes, I think it's high time." The Jedi Master clasped Zekk's hand. "I know how hard this decision was for you. But a well - considered decision is far better than one made in haste."

He raised his eyebrows and flashed a mischievous smile at his new trainee.

"Would you like to tell my niece, or shall I?"

Zekk grinned. "I'll tell her myself."

All the attendees of the Jedi academy, along with Han and Leia, Anakin, old Peckhum, dozens of New Republic engineers, and a multitude of dignitaries had gathered to celebrate the newly completed reconstruction of the Great Temple. After a ceremony involving several speeches, awards, and commendations in the grand audience chamber, the entire assembly moved outdoors for a celebratory festival.

During the festivities, the young Jedi Knights, both old and new, withdrew to their favorite place by the wide river that flowed past the Great Temple. They waded into the water and spent hours talking and splashing and enjoying the feeling of wholeness that came from being together again. Em Teedee delighted in his new microrepulsorjets, zipping in and out among his friends or bobbing along on the surface of the river.

Lowie actually engaged the little droid in a couple of water games. Lusa and Raynar stayed near the shore, sharing memories of the losses they had experienced and the lessons they had learned. Tenel Ka and Jacen challenged each other to swimming races, while Jaina and Zekk floated lazily and discussed what materials might be most appropriate for the lightsaber the young man would soon build for himself. After hours spent in pleasant pursuits, the friends gathered on the shore and talked until the sky began to grow dark. The topics were light, and the silences comfortable.

They spoke of the Rock Dragon, the Lightning Rod, Lowie's T-23, Jedi tales and legends that Tionne had told them, the rebuilt temple, and favorite planets they had been to.

In the wake of one long silence, Jaina said, "I wonder what's next for us. Do you suppose all Jedi trainees go through the sorts of adventures we've had before they become full Jedi Knights?"

"After all we've been through together," Jacen replied, "I'm not sure anything in the future could surprise me."

"Ah," Tenel Ka said, turning to him. "Aha." Then she kissed Jacen firmly on the mouth. "So... were you surprised, friend Jacen?" she asked, with a twinkle in her granite-gray eyes. Lowie gave a bark of laughter at Jacen's astonished expression.

Zekk chuckled and put an arm around Jaina.

"I don't know what the future will bring, either. But I'm looking forward to it-and I'm pretty sure it won't be boring."

Almost as one, the other young Jedi Knights replied, "This is a fact."