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Hero of Cartao

Part 1

Hero's call.

by Timothy Zahn.

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ONE YEAR AFTER THE BATTLE OF GEONOSIS

"Master Doriana?" Emil Kerseage's deep voice called. "We're here."

Kinman Doriana awoke with a start, blinking his eyes against the sunlight streaming in through the shuttle's viewports. For a moment he gazed at the landscape rolling beneath him, trying to remember where exactly he was. There had been so many systems...

The disorientation cleared. He was on Cartao, major trading center for Prackla Sector, carefully nonaligned in the war between the Republic and the Separatists. And home to...

'There it is," Kerseage said. He turned the control stick delicately, rolling the shuttle slightly to the left to give Doriana a better look. "Spaarti Creations."

Doriana gazed out the side viewport, impressed in spite of himself. Situated among a group of forested hills just north of the compact town of Foulahn City, perhaps three kilometers northwest of the equally compact Triv Spaceport, was the unique manufacturing plant known as Spaarti Creations. Over a kilometer across at its widest, it had the patchwork look of something that had repeatedly been added onto over the decades. The roofline echoed the frozen chaos, with towers, heat exchangers, antennas, and skylights poking out at apparently random spots along the building's overall three-story height. There were no windows he could see, ventilation apparently being handled by a line of small, louvered air vents dotting the outer walls about midway up the sides. "Impressive," he commented.

"You think so?" Kerseage shrugged. "Personally, I've always considered it an architectural version of a weed patch. No order or organization anywhere."

"Ever been inside?"

"No one but employees get to go in," the other said, his lip twisting with disgust and resentment. 'Them, and the high and mighty."

"Like me?" Doriana asked.

Kerseage glanced at him, as if suddenly remembering just who his passenger was. "No, no, I was thinking about Lord Binalie's chums," he backtracked hastily. 'The Prackla Trade Council-that sort of crowd."

"You don't think much of them?"

Kerseage shrugged again, uncomfortably this time. "It's nothing to do with me," he muttered. "I got a shuttle; I fly people places. That's all."

"I see," Doriana said, returning his attention to the manufacturing plant now passing directly beneath them. Clearly, Kerseage didn't want to say any more.

But then, he didn't have to. Like everything else he ever did, Doriana had made sure to research Cartao before coming here and hiring this particular man to bring him across the sparsely settled planet to Spaarti Creations. The cargo transport company Kerseage had once owned had been inadvertently run out of business two years earlier by a poorly worded regulation the Prackla Trade Council had issued after the Battle of Geonosis.

Kerseage's appeal was still crawling its way through the system, but by now the issue was essentially moot. His company was gone, and he clearly blamed Lord Binalie for it.

"What about the plant's satellite facilities?" he asked, his eyes flicking around the forested areas north and west of the main facility. 'The buildings where they store raw materials and finished product."

"You mean the three Outlinks?"

"Right," Doriana said. "Where are they?"

"I don't know, exactly," Kerseage said. 'The closest one's supposed to be about three kilometers northeast, just past that big gray-topped worker barracks thing." He pointed.

"Mm," Doriana said, peering into the distance. There was nothing showing in that direction that he could see. Well camouflaged, either by accident or by design. That could be useful. "Where does Lord Binalie live?"

"There." Kerseage pointed to the left as he brought the shuttle around in a wide semicircle. "You see Foulahn City, just south of that kilometer-wide stretch of grassland?"

"I see it," Doriana said. "I don't think I've ever seen a city come to a stop that abruptly before. Except where there's a lake or cliff to limit it, of course."

"It might as well be a cliff," Kerseage grunted. "That particular line of grassland marks the southern edge of Spaarti land, and no one travels or builds there. The Cranscoc insist on it. Anyway, you see that big open area on the northern edge of the city, butting up against the grass strip?"

"Yes," Doriana said. It looked like a park-grassland, quite a few clumps of trees, large sections of sculpted bushes-with a few small buildings and one very large one. Even from this distance, the place reeked of wealth and power. On one of the low hills facing the plant, he could see a pair of figures standing together. 'The Binalie estate?"

"You got it," Kerseage said. "You seen enough?"

Doriana took a last look around, fixing the geography in his mind. Foulahn and Navroc Cities lay to the south and southeast of the plant, with the craggy Red Hills pushing up against the southern ends of both cities. Triv Spaceport was to the east, with low, increasingly forested rolling hills to the north, and a small river winding its way between the two cities and then between Foulahn and the spaceport.

"Yes," he told the pilot, resettling himself in his seat. "Let's go see Lord Binalie."

They're turning around some more," Corf Binalie announced, shading his eyes with his hand as he peered upward into the sky.

"I think they might be coming here."

"Who, the people in the shuttle?" Jafer Tories asked, his white hair blowing past his cheek as he gazed downward at the ground, trying to pick out the particular siviliv vine he and the boy had been following for the past half hour. "Yes, I know."

"You know who they are?" Corf asked, frowning up at him. "Did Dad say something to you about visitors?"

"No, but he didn't need to," Tories assured the boy. "It's been obvious for nearly a minute now."

"Oh, come on," Corf objected in that tone of strained patience twelve-year-olds did so well. "How could you?"

"Simple logical deduction," Tories told him in that pedantic instructor's tone seventy-three-year-olds did equally well.

"There was no reason for them to pass directly over the plant unless that was what they were specifically looking at. After realizing how little that gained them, their natural next step is to want to take a look from the inside. For that, they need to come see your

father."

Corf shook his head in amazement. "Boy," he said. "I wish I were a Jedi."

"If you were, you'd probably have to goto war someday," Tories warned.

"You didn't have to," Corf pointed out.

"Not yet," Tories said with a grimace. "But I could be called up at any moment. The Council merely decided to leave a few Jedi where we are for the moment in case of unexpected Separatist moves in our areas. I could get to the scene of trouble anywhere in Prackla or Locris Sectors long before they could send someone from Coruscant or one of the major battle areas. Being a Jedi is never easy, and can be downright dangerous."

"Yeah, but you're real smart," Corf said. Clearly, distant rumblings of war didn't faze him in the slightest. "You're good at figuring out stuff."

"Logical thinking is hardly the exclusive preserve of Jedi," Tories admonished him. "Anyone can learn to put facts together in their proper order. "

"Maybe," Corf said. "I still think it's a Jedi thing." Tories smiled, shading his eyes with his hand as he watched the shuttle approach. In point of fact, of course, he hadn't really known the shuttle was coming to the Binalie Estate, but had merely concluded there was a high probability of it. If it turned out the pilot was merely showing off Spaarti Creations to some visiting friend, he was going to look pretty foolish.

This might not be a bad thing. Tories had spent the past thirty years on Cartao, dispensing wisdom, mediating disputes, and handling the occasional pirate or overeager crime lord. Some of the locals had come to respect him, others had chosen to hate him, while most had never been more than vaguely aware that Prackla Sector even had a resident Jedi guardian.

But never in those thirty years had he run into a case of hero-worship like Corf Binalie's.

In his earlier days, it would have been highly gratifying, not to mention flattering, to be held in such high esteem. From the perspective of his years, though, he could see the danger lurking beneath that kind of unthinking adulation. Even at twelve Corf should be able to recognize a person's weaknesses as well as his strengths; should be learning how to accept people as they were, not creating a lens of perfection through which to gaze at them. Instead, the boy insisted on regarding him as the Ultimate Jedi: tall and strong, wise and kind, and never, ever wrong.

This particular incident wasn't going to do much to change that perception, either. The shuttle passed low over their heads, leaving no doubt that it was indeed making for the private landing pad beside the Binalie mansion.

And as it did so, Tories got a clear look at the company name on the shuttle's side.

"Come on," he said, taking Corf's arm and turning him toward the house.

"We're going back?" Corf asked, frowning. "I thought you were going to help me track this sivitiv vine back to its root."

"We can do that later," Tories told him. "Right now, I think we ought to go see what these people want with your father."

"Okay," Corf said, clearly not understanding but willing to accept Tories' word for it. "You're the boss."

"I'm not the boss," Tories reminded him as they headed down the hill toward the distant house and the shuttle settling onto the pad. "I'm just the Jedi."

"Yeah," Corf said off-handedly. "Same thing."

Tories sighed to himself. Hopefully, the boy would grow out of it on his own.

One of Doriana's more simple amusements these days was to I count off the minutes between the time a droid or servant I disappeared into his master's inner sanctum with Doriana's credentials and the time Doriana himself was ushered in. In the case of Lord Pilester

Binalie, that interval was less than a minute. Either Binalie was unusually respectful of Coruscant authority, or else he was too worried about this unexpected visitor to play power games.

"Master Doriana," Binalie said, rising from the massive chair behind the even more massive desk as the protocol droid escorted Doriana into the office. "It's a great honor to receive a representative from Supreme Chancellor Palpatine himself."

"A pleasure to meet you, as well, Lord Binalie," Doriana said in turn as he walked across the room. "I appreciate you giving me some of your time."

"My pleasure," Binalie said, waving Doriana to a chair facing the desk and sitting back down himself. "I wish you'd given me notice of your visit. I could have sent a shuttle to meet you, or else directed you to Triv Spaceport where you could have come over by landspeeder."

"There were reasons for coming into Cartao where I did," Doriana told him, watching the other's face closely. "As there were for choosing the particular transport I did."

A muscle in Binalie's cheek twitched. So he'd spotted the name on Kerseage's shuttle, too. "Yes; Emil Kerseage," he said. "I'm familiar with his case, Master Doriana, and I assure you the Trade Council is working to rectify it."

He waved a hand self-consciously. "It's certainly nothing Palpatine needs to involve himself with."

"Supreme Chancellor Palpatine is the champion of the common citi zen," Doriana reminded him.

"Of course," Binalie said hastily, the first hints of perspiration beginning to sheen his face. "It's just that-" He broke off.

"Yes?" Doriana prompted.

The cheek muscle twitched again. "Let me be honest with you," Binalie said. "Cartao is trying to keep a low profile in this war against the Separatists. We don't have nearly enough military power to send troops or ships halfway across the galaxy on expeditionary missions. So far we've mostly escaped official notice; but if Chancellor Palpatine begins taking an interest in some minor bureaucratic dispute, that official notice is likely to be drawn our direction."

He tapped the desk in front of him with his forefinger. "And not just from the officials on Coruscant," he added pointedly. "The Separatists have so far ignored us, too."

"I understand your concerns," Doriana said. "But you have to understand in turn that no one has the luxury of deciding how a war is going to affect them. Nor is anyone permitted to choose how he can best serve in that conflict."

Binalie's eyes were very steady on Doriana's. "You're not here about Kerseage at all, are you?" he said quietly.

Doriana shook his head. "It was, and is, a useful cover story."

But no, Supreme Chancellor Palpatine sent me on far more important business."

Binalie's stony face went even stonier. "Spaarti Creations."

"Exactly," Doriana said. "The Supreme Chancellor is intrigued by the reports he's heard about this factory whose production lines can be changed practically overnight. If the technique can be duplicated, it would mean a great deal for the Republic's war effort."

"It can't be," Binalie said flatly. "It's the Cranscoc and their fluid-tooling system that make it possible, and as far as we know the Cartao colony is the only place Cranscoc live."

"Thousands of them, I presume?"

Binalie hesitated the barest fraction of a second, as if wondering whether he could get away with a lie. "About fifty thousand, yes," he conceded, apparently deciding not to risk it.

"But they breed very slowly, and only a small fraction of each generation has the talent that allows them to serve as twillers.

Those are the ones who actually manipulate the fluid retooling that make Spaarti possible."

"I see," Doriana said, as if he hadn't already thoroughly researched the whole operation. "Still, the Supreme Chancellor will want me to be absolutely certain. Would it be possible for me to inspect the facilities themselves? Quietly and privately, of course."

Binalie knew a politely phrased order when he heard it. "Of course," he said, getting to his feet. "I have a private way into the plant."

They were halfway down the corridor leading back toward the landing pad when a boy's voice split the mansion's elegant silence. "Hey! Dad!"

The two men stopped and turned. Hurrying toward them was a young boy about twelve years old-Lord Binalie's son Corf, Doriana tentatively identified him. Behind the boy, walking with a longer stride and a more measured pace, was the final player in the day's scheduled drama: Jedi Knight Jafer Tories.

"Corf," Binalie said, sounding surprised and a little uncomfortable. "I thought you were on weed control this morning."

"We saw the shuttle," Corf explained as he trotted up to his father's side, giving Doriana a quick once-over as he arrived.

"Are you going to the plant?"

"For a few minutes, yes," Binalie said.

"Can I come along?"

Binalie shook his head. "Not this time."

The boy blinked. Clearly, that wasn't the answer he'd been expecting. "Why not?"

"Business," his father said firmly. "Only Master Doriana and I are going. "

"But..."

"No arguments," Binalie said sternly, shifting his attention away from Corf as the Jedi reached the group. "I'd like you to meet Jafer Tories, our local Jedi guardian. This is Kinman Doriana, special advisor to Supreme Chancellor Palpatine."

The skin at the corners of the old Jedi's eyes crinkled slightly at Palpatine's name. Small wonder-the Supreme Chancellor and the Jedi Council had been increasingly at odds with each other over the past few months. "Master Tories," Doriana said, nodding.

"I'm glad you're here. As Lord Binalie said, we're going to see the plant. Would you care to accompany us?" Corf looked at his father in surprise. "But you said-"

"Be quiet, Corf," Binalie cut him off, looking at Doriana with some surprise of his own. "I thought you said this was a private matter."

"That was before I knew Master Tories was in the area," Doriana said, gazing into Binalie's face. It would be worth the risk, he decided suddenly, to see just how far the man could be pushed.

"For that matter," he added, "I see no reason why your son shouldn't come, too. You will begin moving him into a management position in a few years, won't you?"

The muscles in Binalie's throat tightened, his eyes narrowing dangerously. Lord Pilester Binalie, the biggest fish in this particular little pond, was unused to having people casually cut the ground out from under him this way.

But Doriana understood power, too. He held Binalie's glare steadily, without challenge or malice, wondering if the other could see far enough past his annoyance to remember whom he was dealing with.

Apparently, he could. "As you wish," he said stiffly. "Follow me."

Torles had been in the Binalies' private tunnel to Spaarti Creations only a handful of times, and it never failed to evoke a sense of wonder. The Cranscoc themselves had burrowed out the long passageway, Lord Binalie had once told him, without the use of any machinery. The result had been a rough-hewn tunnel that perpetually held the rich tang of recently turned dirt.

But despite the fresh aroma, he also knew that in the digging process those same dirt walls had somehow been converted into a material as tough and durable as permacrete. And the apparent roughness of the surface hid the more subtle swirls and delicate patterns the Cranscoc diggers had carved into it.

Functional, artistic, and-by all generally accepted technology-impossible. This was, Tories reflected, a pretty fair description of Spaarti Creations itself.

"The Cranscoc don't want people or vehicles on the strip of grassland between the plant and Foulahn City," Binalie explained to Doriana as the landspeeder slid silently down the tunnel.

"They say it upsets them, though we don't know how or why.

Hence, this tunnel."

"What about the other employees?" Doriana asked. "The non-Cranscoc ones. How do they get to work?"

"Most of them live on-site," Binalie said. "There's a group apartment cluster along the eastern edge of the plant, between the main building and Outlink One, for the unmarried workers.

The Cranscoc have a cluster of homes north of the plant, between Outlinks One and Two, while the non-Cranscoc families live in their own cluster to the north-west, between Outlinks Two and Three."

"And how do all of them get to work?" Doriana persisted. "More tunnels like this one?"

"There are tunnels leading between the main plant and the Outlinks," Binalie said. "But those are mainly for cargo and equipment transfer. The workers usually just walk across the lawns to work."

He smiled slightly at Doriana's puzzled look. "I know.

Apparently, it's only this one strip of land the Cranscoc insist be left completely open. Again, no one knows why."

The tunnel floor began to slope upward, and Tories found himself surreptitiously watching Doriana. The first time he'd taken this trip, he'd naturally expected the tunnel to deposit them into some sort of receiving area, and could still remember his shock when they'd arrived smack in the middle of one of the production areas. It might be instructive to see whether Doriana would also be taken by surprise.

He was. He kept his face impassive as a section of the ceiling lifted like a drawbridge above them and the landspeeder moved up a ramp into the center of the bustling factory, but Tories could sense the flicker of astonishment behind those expressionless eyes. "Interesting endpoint," was all he said as Binalie let the landspeeder coast to a stop

"The Cranscoc like to know what's going on around them," Binalie said, climbing out of his seat as the floor swung shut behind them. "This is Production Area Four, where we're currently making specialized harvesting equipment for the marshlands of Caamas. The ground there is too interlaced with vineroots for normal equipment to operate without breaking down every other day."

"So you're in the business of filling niche markets?" Doriana asked.

"Basically," Binalie said, nodding. "There isn't enough of that kind of cultivatable marshland in the Republic to justify setting up a permanent assembly line to make the equipment necessary to farm it. But with the Cranscoc system, we can spend a few days or

weeks making everything the Caamasi will need for the next year or two, then retool and move on to other projects."

"And where does all this magic retooling take place?" Doriana asked.

"It starts at the main control station," Binalie said, pointing toward a round platform rising two meters off the floor between two of the assembly lines. 'The one for this area is over there."

They crossed to the platform, Binalie guiding his guests through the maze of conveyers, transport carts, and human and alien workers. Climbing up the steps, they found themselves beside a long console that had always reminded Tories of a cross between an elongated volcano and a very muddy hillside, with a segmented waterfall of pale green paste oozing ponderously and continually along various sections of the slope. In front of the collecting basin lounged five Cranscoc, their chitinous outer shells gleaming in the sunbeams streaming in through the skylight three floors directly above them. Their long, multi-jointed legs tapped out syncopated rhythms on the thick grass that covered the entire top of the platform, keeping time to music apparently only they could hear. 'These are five of the Cranscoc twillers," Binalie said, keeping his voice low. "Whatever they do to that fluid flow will affect most of those machines you can see."

"They can do all the retooling from here?" Doriana asked.

"No, each machine needs its own adjustments," Binalie told him.

"There are roving twillers assigned to each area for that purpose. Depending on the complexity involved, a given production area can be retooled in anywhere from two to eight hours."

"Your basic overnight alterations," Doriana said, nodding.

"Very literally overnight," Binalie agreed. "The Cranscoc will do minor adjustments during the daylight hours-that's why this group is on duty, in case one of the machines drifts off true and needs to be recalibrated. But they'll only do a major retooling after it's completely dark outside."

"And you don't know why?"

"Frankly, we know next to nothing about the Cranscoc," Binalie admitted. 'They breathe oxygen, their diet is mostly local vegetables and grains, except that it all has to be enriched with extra magnesium and cobalt, and they like to farm and dig and create artistic objects."

"Fortunately, marshland farm equipment falls into that last category?"

"Farm equipment and everything else," Binalie said. 'They seem to love using Spaarti to make things." He led them back down to the main floor. "You say this is Production Area Four," Doriana said. "How many others are there?"

"We currently have twenty-seven operating areas," Binalie told him. "Eight of them are larger and more complex than this one, while the others are comparable or a bit smaller."

"I'd like to see one of the larger ones."

Binalie's lips compressed briefly, but he merely nodded. "Of course. This way."

They visited two other lines before Doriana decided he'd seen enough. 'That will do," he said as Binalie started to lead them on to the next area. "Is there an office where we can talk more privately?"

Binalie frowned sideways at him. "What is there to talk about?" he asked, his voice dark with suspicion. "Surely you see now that this technique can't be duplicated elsewhere."

"A private office, if you please?" Doriana repeated.

Binalie took a deep breath - "And it may be best if the boy leaves us now," Doriana added.

Binalie's eyes hardened. Suddenly, it seemed, he'd had enough of being led around by the nose. "I have no secrets from my son, Doriana," he bit out. "If you have anything to say

to me, you can say it in his presence."

Doriana let his lip twitch, as if he hadn't finessed the other into precisely this result. "If you insist," he said.

Binalie nodded shortly. "In here."

He led the way to a room marked "Schematic Plotting," ordered out the human and Duros who'd been working on a pair of large plotting boards inside, and keyed the door closed behind them.

Swinging one of the two chairs around for his visitor, he hiked himself up into a half-sitting, half-leaning posture against one of the boards. "Let's hear it," he said gruffly.

"It's quite simple," Doriana said, sitting down and gazing calmly up at the man now towering over him. "As you say, Spaarti Creations is one of a kind. Since we can't duplicate it, we'll have to use it as is."

Binalie's expression didn't even twitch. Clearly, he'd already guessed where this whole visit was going. "Impossible," he said.

"This is the single viable business of an entire sub-minority species - the Cranscoc - and as such comes under Senate Directive 422. Governmental interference with its operation is strictly and expressly forbidden."

"Desperate times call for desperate measures," Doriana countered, pulling a datacard from an inside pocket. "Senate Directive 3591, authorizing Supreme Chancellor Palpatine unlimited authority to commandeer any resource or group of resources he feels necessary for a swift conclusion of hostilities."

He held the card out to Binalie. "Beginning this evening, Spaarti Creations will be turning its complete facilities over to the manufacture of a new design of cloning tanks."

Slowly, Binalie took the datacard and slid it into his datapad.

For a long minute, the only sound in the room was the muted din of the assembly line floor outside the office's transparent canopy as he read and reread the directive. "You can't do this," he said when he finally tore his eyes away from the text.

"Weren't you listening to what I said back in my office? You take over Spaarti, and it'll just be a matter of time before the Separatists move in."

"Point one: you have no choice in the matter," Doriana said, letting his voice harden. "The Senate's directive is clear, and the Supreme Chancellor's decision has been made. Point two: there's no reason for the Separatists to hear anything about this. If we do our job properly, no one will know that crates marked farm equipment or tunneling gear actually contain cloning cylinders. As for my presence on here, I've already established the cover story that I'm intervening on Emil Kerseage's behalf."

"What about my workers?" Binalie countered. "Not counting the twillers, we employ nearly thirteen thousand humans and aliens here. How are you going to guarantee that they all keep quiet?"

"They can't talk about what they don't know," Doriana said. "And in approximately four hours you'll be pulling every one of them off the floor and confining them to their homes."

"Oh, I will, will I?" Binalie said sarcastically. "And how exactly do you expect me to justify that?"

"No justification needed," Doriana said calmly. "Medical quarantine is required by law for an outbreak of plyridian fever."

Binalie's mouth dropped open a centimeter. "Plyridian fev...?" His eyes darted to the canopy. "What have you done?"

"Calm yourself, Lord Binalie," Doriana soothed. "The three humans and two aliens I treated as we passed - "

"You did what!" Binalie snarled. "You deliberately infected them?"

"I said calm yourself," Doriana repeated, putting an edge to his voice. "Of course I didn't infect anyone. The incubation period for plyridian fever is four weeks. What I did do is give them something that will mimic the disease, creating a convincing set of symptoms. They're not in any danger, and neither is anyone else. But no one will know that for at least those four weeks." Binalie had the look of someone chewing on a sour mifka. "And while they're all in quarantine, you'll naturally be offering me a caretaker unit?" he growled.

"It's that or close down the plant entirely," Doriana pointed out. 'The Cranscoc, being cold-blooded, are immune from plyridian fever, so they can continue to work as usual."

"This is completely unconscionable," Tories spoke up from the corner of the room.

Doriana had been wondering when the Jedi would say something.

Irreverently, he wondered if perhaps the old man had dozed off and missed some of the conversation. "Excuse me?" he asked, swiveling to face the old man.

"This is a gross violation of every accepted standard of behavior," Tories insisted. "I cannot and will not stand by and be a party to it."

"This is war, Master Tories," Doriana reminded him. "Not only war, but a war of survival. If we lose, the Republic is finished."

"I don't care," Tories said flatly. "I can tell you right now the Jedi Council will not stand by and allow you to terrify the people of Cartao with fear of a nonexistent plague."

"Perhaps the Jedi Council sees things differently than you do," Doriana said, pulling a second datacard from his pocket. "Here are their instructions, ordering you to cooperate with me and my people."

He lifted his eyebrows. "You do still acknowledge the authority of the Council, don't you?"

Silently, with the same complete lack of enthusiasm with which Lord Binalie had taken the first datacard, Tories accepted the second. "Good," Doriana said briskly, getting to his feet. "Then all that remains is for you to return home and prepare for five of your workers to suddenly slump over with dizziness and fever."

"And you, I suppose, will do all the rest?" Binalie said bitterly.

"Of course," Doriana said. 'That's why I'm here."

The first worker began complaining of dizziness at precisely five minutes after the predicted time. Nine minutes after that, as he was being examined by the plant medic, he suddenly col lapsed, twitching and groaning. The second worker was more stoic, and was still at his station fifteen minutes later when he hit the floor. Three minutes after that, Lord Binalie ordered the plant evacuated.

"Ah-Doriana," the stolid face hovering above Doriana's holoprojector greeted him. "You have news?"

"The plant is ready, Commander Roshton," Doriana said. "You may land at your convenience."

"Excellent," Roshton said approvingly. "And in less than one day. You do admirable work."

"I do what the Supreme Chancellor commands," Doriana said with just a hint of warning. In these days of turmoil and suspicion, it never hurt to remind people as to where his loyalties lay.

"No more; no less."

"Of course," Roshton agreed calmly. "As do we all."

"Yes," Doriana agreed, glancing out the office canopy at the darkening skylight halfway across the room. "It's nearly nightfall, which is when the Cranscoc do all their serious work."

How soon can I expect your people?"

"The first transport's on its way, with the chief techs and operational schematics aboard," Roshton said. 'They'll be there in an hour.'

"Good," Doriana said. "I'll make sure the Cranscoc are ready.

They've already been informed they'll be doing a complete retooling tonight."

"Are you sure a two-thousand-unit contingent will be enough?" Roshton asked, his forehead wrinkling slightly. "I've been doing some research myself, and it looks to me like the plant usually requires over six times that number. "

"We're supposed to be a caretaker unit," Doriana reminded him.

"It wouldn't look right if we completely repopulated the plant."

"Yes, but..."

"Besides, the majority of those thirteen thousand workers are involved with maintenance, shipping, and raw material movement," Doriana cut him off. "If the Supreme Chancellor decides to extend the operation, we can bring in personnel to handle those aspects. For now, let's concentrate on our mission: to create and stockpile the cloning cylinders we need to create more troops."

"Yes, sir," Roshton muttered. "You'll have your schematics in an hour, with the rest of the transports following at thirty-minute intervals."

"I'll look forward to seeing them, Commander," Doriana said.

"Doriana out."

He broke the connection, lowering the holoprojector into his lap as he again looked out of the office. It was an eerie feeling, sitting alone in the middle of such a huge room. Rather like being the last living cell in a dead body, he thought.

Across by the area's control platform, a small motion caught his eye. A group of Cranscoc were wandering around, their footsteps seeming to stutter as they walked. Still beating out their silent music, he decided, perhaps humming along on auditory wavelengths humans couldn't hear.

Strange aliens. Strange technology. But apart from that, a very straightforward job. Lifting his holoprojector again, he punched in a new code.

The connection this time took considerably longer to make.

Doriana forced himself to wait patiently, watching the panes of the distant skylight fading toward black.

And then, with a suddenness that somehow always startled him, the ghostly hologram image appeared. "Report," the hooded figure ordered quietly.

"The Spaarti Creations plant has been cleared, Lord Sidious," Doriana said. 'The first Republic techs will be landing in an hour, with the rest of the techs, workers, and troops arriving during the night'

"How many troops will there be?"

Doriana hesitated. "I'm not sure," he admitted, bracing himself.

Darth Sidious didn't like it when his people didn't have all the answers to his questions. "Palpatine gave that part of the planning to Commander Roshton, and he's been very secretive about his contingent's exact makeup. It can't be more than a thousand clone troopers, possibly as low as five hundred, with Roshton and a few other officers in command."

To his relief, Sidious merely nodded. "Roshton has ambitions of his own, and thinks he knows how to play the game," he said contemptuously. "No matter. Even a thousand troops will not be a problem. What of the owner and the Jedi?"

"They're not happy, but they've bowed to the inevitable," Doriana said. 'The only problem may come if Tories decides to check with the Jedi Council directly to confirm the order. They weren't enthusiastic about the idea in the first place, as I told you, and if he catches Yoda or Windu at a bad moment, one of them might decide to unilaterally reverse the decision."

"Even if they so dared, all Tories can do at this point is make noise," Sidious assured him, a malicious edge to his voice. "No, all is going according to plan. You have done well."

"Thank you, my lord," Doriana said, feeling the warmth of relief and pride trickling through him. "Any new orders?"

"Not yet," Sidious said. "Continue as you are, and allow the plan to work itself out." He smiled sardonically. "Report again when things become interesting."

"I will, my lord," Doriana promised.

The hooded head nodded, and the image vanished.

Taking a deep breath, Doriana stood up, sliding the holoprojector back into its belt pouch. So the chance cube had been thrown, and the game was in motion. The next move would be the Republic's.

He paused in the office doorway, listening to the heavy silence and thinking, as he always did at moments like this, about the incredibly thin tightrope he had chosen to walk. Palpatine had no idea that his trusted aide and advisor was in fact the agent of a Dark Lord of the Sith, working in the shadows to destroy everything the Supreme Chancellor stood for. If Palpatine ever discovered the truth...

He shook his head firmly. No, that would never happen. Sidious was too powerful, and Doriana himself too clever, to ever allow such a useful relationship to be ruined.

He headed across the empty floor, his footsteps echoing from the high ceiling. Binalie would be waiting at the plant's main entrance for the incoming Republic force. The honored representative of Supreme Chancellor Palpatine should be waiting with him.

"It's not fair," Corf groused, throwing a small stone at a group of flutteries darting among a cluster of flowers at the crest of the hill. "How can they just come in and take over like this?"

"We're in the middle of a war," Tories reminded him.

"Everyone has to make sacrifices."

"I'll bet you Palpatine isn't making any sacrifices," Corf said with a sniff, picking up another stone and heaving it after the first.

Tories reached out to the Force, and the stone stopped abruptly in midair. "I understand that you're angry, Corf," he reproved the boy, lowering the stone to the ground. "But that's no reason to take it out on innocent flutteries."

Corf hissed between his teeth. "I know," he conceded reluctantly, looking up into the cloudless sky. "It's just that-well, look; here comes another one. "

Tories peered upward. In the distance a black speck had appeared, dropping from space toward them. "Look on the bright side," he suggested. "Maybe it's a transport coming to take them all away."

"Yeah. Right," Corf grunted, stooping and picking up another stone. Tories watched him warily, but the boy merely began fiddling with it. "Dad would have said something if they were about to clear out. Or at least he'd have started smiling again."

Besides, it's only been a week, and that fancy-pants Doriana said they'd be here for four."

"Master Doriana," Tories corrected him automatically. "And you shouldn't always look on the negative side of things."

Considering the progress they're making, they could very well decide to cut their time short."

"Why would they?" Corf countered. "If they're getting so much done, why quit?"

That was a good question, Tories had to admit. And if he could come up with a good answer, he might actually be able to argue Doriana onto precisely that path.

Think, Jedi, he admonished himself. After all, mediation had been his primary job for the past thirty years. Surely, he could come up with a way to hammer a compromise out of this situation.

And then, suddenly, he had it. Maybe. "Where's your father?" he asked.

"In the plant," Corf said, frowning up at him. "What is it?"

"Maybe the right lever to use on Doriana," Tories said, pulling out his comlink.

"Master Doriana."

"I stand corrected," Tories said dryly as he keyed in Lord Binalie's frequency.

"So what's the plan?" Corf asked. "Come on, tell me."

"What's the possibility that has to concern Master Doriana the most?" Tories asked rhetorically. "Answer: that the Separatists will find out about this and move in to stop it."

"Okay," Corf agreed, frowning. "So?"

"So all we have to do is convince him that four weeks will be pushing his luck," Tories said, frowning in turn. The comlink seemed to be taking an unusually long time to connect. "Because if the Separatists do figure it out, Spaarti is lost to him forever. Dooku's people will blockade Cartao, and that'll be the end of it."

Corf made a face. "Yuck."

"Yuck, indeed," Tories agreed. "If, on the other hand, Doriana takes this in small bites, sneaking his people in for just a few days at a time, he may be able to keep the whole process going indefinitely."

"You mean he'd be taking over the plant once every month or so?" Corf asked doubtfully. "Boy. I don't think Dad'll go for that."

"He will if it comes to a choice between Doriana's annoyances and a Separatist blockade," Tories said, turning the comlink off and then on again, the skin on the back of his neck starting to tingle. Something was very wrong here...

He caught his breath, twisting his head to look upward as he silently cursed his lack of attention. The black speck they'd seen earlier was much closer, dropping toward them like an impatient asteroid.

And at this distance, Tories could now see the ship's ail-too distinctive double-winged silhouette.

"What is that?" Corf asked, his voice tight.

"A Trade Federation C-9979 landing ship," Tories bit out, jabbing one last useless time at his comlink's controls.

"Oh, no," Corf breathed, fumbling at his belt for his own comlink. "We have to warn Dad!"

"We can't," Tories told him, shoving his comlink back into its pouch. "They've knocked out the system."

"Then we have to get over there," Corf said, turning back toward the house. "Come on."

"Wait a minute," Tories said, catching the boy's arm, his mind racing. By the time they made it back to the house and down the tunnel, the invasion would be well underway. What

they needed was some way to send a message now to the people inside.

"What?" Corf demanded. "Come on."

"Quiet," Tories ordered him. "Let me think." Above them, the C-9979 settled into a high hover position directly over the plant, and perhaps twenty tiny craft erupted from its leading wing.

STAPs, he recognized them: nimble flying platforms carrying a single battle droid each. They swept outward from the landing ship in ever-increasing spirals, searching for defenses or other threats that might interfere with a landing or troop deployment.

And three of them were at this very minute flying over the forbidden stretch of grassland between the Binalie estate and Spaarti Creations....

It was a long shot, he knew, in every sense of the word. But it was all he had. Pulling out his lightsaber, he ignited it and locked the activation stud, picking out the STAP that seemed to be drifting the closest to where he and Corf were standing.

Judging the droid's speed and distance as best he could, he stretched out to the Force and hurled his lightsaber toward it.

The droid, its attention on the ground around the plant, probably never even saw it coming. The spinning weapon shot across its STAP, the brilliant green blade slicing through the power cell housing just above the footlocks. With a flat electronic exclamation of surprise, the droid and machine dropped out of the sky and thudded to the ground.

The other droids reacted instantly, two of the STAPs swinging around toward their downed comrade, metallic heads swiveling back and forth as they searched for the source of the attack.

"Run," Tories ordered Corf as he called the lightsaber back toward him. "Back to the house and the safe room. We've done everything we can here."

"But what about Dad?" Corf asked anxiously, moving a couple of reluctant steps down the hill.

"I'll take one of the landspeeders down the tunnel as soon as you're safe," Tories told him. The droids had spotted him now, and the STAPs' twin blasters were starting to track. "Go on-I'll be right behind you."

A pair of blaster bolts shot past them, uncomfortably close.

"All right," Corf said, finally turning and taking off. "But I'm going with you," he shouted back over his shoulder. 'The landspeeders won't work without someone from the family in them."

The lightsaber made it back to Tories' hand about half a second before the droids finally found the range. But for a Jedi, half a second was more than enough. The lightsaber blurred in his grip, twisting like a hunting makthier as it intercepted the blaster bolts and sent them bouncing back again. A pair of volleys later, there were three ruined STAPs and droids lying crumpled in the forbidden zone.

Closing down his lightsaber, Tories turned and ran, following the boy now halfway to the mansion. He'd done all he could to warn those inside the plant. Now it was time to join them.

He could only hope he would be there ahead of the droids.

I hope you realize just how incredible this is," Commander Roshton commented as he handed the datapad back to the tech.

"We'd projected that the raw materials we'd stockpiled would last the full four weeks. In actual fact, at current production rates we're going to have to resupply after two."

"I'm not surprised," Doriana said. "Spaarti Creations already had something of a reputation for doing the impossible."

"It's an incredible resource, Lord Binalie," Roshton agreed, turning toward Binalie. "You should be very proud." Binalie didn't answer. He'd been increasingly silent lately, Doriana had noted, as he watched his beloved manufacturing plant turning out rows and rows of cloning tanks.

Roshton either hadn't noticed or didn't care. "I don't know if Master Doriana mentioned it, but these are a more advanced model of cloning tank than the design they used on Kamino," the commander went on, turning his head slowly as he surveyed the bustling assembly area. 'That's the main problem with keeping yourselves isolated; you don't keep up with modern technological advances. These should be able to turn out clones in a tenth of the time the Kaminoans needed to do the job. We get a few million of these on-line, and the Separatists can kiss their precious droid armies good-bye."

He frowned suddenly. "What's going on with them?"

"Who?" Doriana asked, following the other's line of sight to the area's control platform. The five Cranscocs on duty were vibrating like a set of bad repulsorlifts, their hides flickering with rapid color changes beneath the translucent coatings.

"Something's wrong," Binalie declared, snapping out of his sulk.

Brushing past Roshton, he sprinted to the platform, taking the stairs two at a time.

He was leaning over the nearest alien when Doriana and Roshton caught up with him, his eyes narrowed as he studied the alien's changing color pattern. Up close, Doriana could see that the alterations were more varied and subtle than he'd realized.

"They're upset about something," Binalie muttered. "A violation of some taboo..."

"You can read that?" Roshton asked. "I didn't realize they could..."

"Shut up," Doriana cut him off. Roshton turned a glare toward him - 'The grassland," Binalie said abruptly. "Someone or something is on the south grassland strip."

"Is that all?" Roshton said, sounding disgusted. "Probably some stupid kid from the city."

"No," Binalie insisted. "Everyone in this part of Cartao knows better. It's either your people..."

He broke off, looking sharply at Doriana. "Or the Separatists," Doriana finished for him, grabbing for his comlink. "Commander: full alert."

"Ridiculous," Roshton insisted. But he had his comlink out and was tapping at the key. "How could they have?..."

"I'm not getting anything," Doriana said, trying another channel. "Commander?"

"They've been blocked," Roshton said, the skepticism abruptly gone from his voice.

"What do we do?" Binalie asked nervously, looking around as if he expected to see a droid army clawing its way up out of the drainage grilles.

"We prepare to meet the enemy," Roshton said, his voice icy calm. Drawing his blaster, he aimed it at the ceiling and squeezed the trigger.

Even amid the loud auditory mosaic of factory noises, the distinctive sizzle of a stun blast easily cut through the noise.

Roshton fired three more times, paused, then fired twice.

Doriana strained his ears. From the next chamber over, he heard the faint sound of an answering signal. 'The alert's being passed," Roshton said, putting away his comlink but keeping his blaster in his hand. "Come on-my command center's in the next assembly area."

A clone trooper lieutenant and the senior master tech were waiting when the three of them arrived at the command center, the former standing stiffly to attention, and the latter looking almost comical as he nervously shuffled his weight back and forth between his feet. "Report," Roshton ordered, glancing at the status schematic that showed troop disposition.

"One Trade Federation C-9979 currently hovering over the plant," the lieutenant replied. "Approximately twenty STAPs running air support; three have crashed to the south. One Trade Federation Lucrehulk-class control core ship has appeared over the horizon.

No other vehicles currently in detection range."

"How bad?" Binalie murmured.

"Bad enough," Roshton told him. "A single C-9979 can carry eleven MTT large-transport vehicles, with a hundred twelve battle droids each, and a hundred fourteen AAT battle tanks.

Plus, the core ship up there probably has another couple more C-9979s in reserve if they get impatient."

Binalie had actually gone pale. "You're saying there could be over three thousand battle droids out there? Plus all those tanks?"

"Actually, if you add in the AAT crews, we're talking more like five thousand droids," Doriana murmured.

"So five thousand droids," Binalie bit out. "And you have, what, nine hundred men?"

Roshton smiled tightly. "I have nine hundred clone troopers," he corrected. "There's a big difference. Lieutenant, do we have spotters in position?"

"All doors are being watched," the clone trooper confirmed.

"Whenever they put down, we'll know it."

"Fortunately, there aren't many possibilities," Roshton murmured, looking at his status board again. "The east and west doors are the only ones with the kind of clearance outside that a C-9979 needs."

"Agreed," the lieutenant said. "The troops are currently layering at both of them."

"What does that mean, layering?" Binalie asked.

"They're forming successive defensive lines from those doors inward," Roshton told him. "What about the north and northwest entrances? We're not leaving them unprotected, are we?"

"Wait a minute," Binalie interrupted again. "Defensive lines inside the plant? You can't fight in here."

"Well, we sure can't fight outside," Roshton pointed out. "Not without air support."

"Then you're not fighting at all," Binalie said flatly. "The equipment in here is delicate and irreplaceable." Roshton snorted. "You'd rather just turn your plant over to the Separatists?"

"If those are my only two options, yes," Binalie said, his voice icy. "Maybe you don't understand what this plant means to Cartao and the rest of the sector..."

"Just a minute," the lieutenant cut him off, his helmet cocking slightly to the side. "They've lifted the comlink blocking.

Broadcasting a message on all public channels."

Roshton already had his comlink out. "...ublic forces," a typically oily Neimoidian voice came from the speaker. "You are surrounded and outnumbered. Surrender, or we will be forced to destroy you."

"I've heard that before," Roshton countered, giving a set of hand signals to the lieutenant. The other nodded and turned away, and Doriana could hear the faint sound of his voice through his helmet as he gave rapid orders. "But I'll humor you.

What do you want?"

"We want Spaarti Creations," the Neimoidian said. "You will all step outside the west door and lay down your weapons..."

Roshton switched off the comlink. "West door," he told the lieutenant.

"Confirmed," the other replied. "The C-9979 is setting down in the cleared area between the forest and the plant. We're shifting troops to respond."

Roshton nodded. "Let's go."

Binalie caught his arm as he started to leave. "Commander, I won't let you fight in my plant," he warned. "If necessary, I'll open the doors to them myself."

"You do and you'll be executed for treason," Roshton growled, shaking off his hand.

Binalie turned to Doriana, his face twisted with frustration.

"Doriana?"

"Lord Binalie is right, Commander," Doriana said. "Spaarti Creations is too valuable to risk damaging it."

Roshton turned furious eyes on him - "But at the same time, Lord Binalie, Commander Roshton cannot simply let his civilians fall into enemy hands," Doriana went on. "I'm afraid I don't see a clear answer here."

Binalie's lips compressed into a thin, bloodless line. "What if I take the techs through the tunnel to my house?" he suggested.

"Can you hold the droids off-outside-long enough for me to get them all clear?"

"We can try," Roshton said, studying his face a moment and then turning to the senior tech. "Get your people to Assembly Area Four for evacuation. Lieutenant, let's go."

The two of them headed across the floor toward the west door at a fast run. Doriana waited long enough to make sure Binalie and the senior tech were indeed making for Area Four, then set off after the soldiers.

It was, after all, only proper that he should at least stay long enough to watch such brave soldiers begin their last battle.

The "west door" was in fact more like a major vehicle hangar than a simple doorway, consisting of a large transfer room behind a pair of sliding doors big enough to handle anything a modern manufacturing plant could ever need. Doriana reached the transfer room to find that the huge doors had been opened a crack, with Roshton and the lieutenant peering through the gap.

Throughout the transfer room hundreds of white-armored clone troopers were moving purposefully around, settling into positions near the doors and behind some of the heavy crate-moving vehicles parked along the walls, or setting up a semicircle of tripod-mounted laser cannon on the floor a dozen meters back from the doors. "What's happening?" he asked as he crossed to Roshton.

"They've landed," Roshton said, sounding distracted as he peered out the crack. He had donned a clone trooper comlink headset, Doriana noted; probably listening to a running status commentary from the rest of his officers. "Doing their little sensor scans to make sure the ground is clear of mines."

"What's the plan?" Doriana asked, taking a cautious peek between the doors. Even set firmly on the ground, the landing ship loomed over them like an angry metal storm cloud.

"We stop them, of course," Roshton said shortly. "At the very least, we make them pay dearly for every square centimeter."

"What are you talking about?" Doriana asked, frowning. "Weren't you listening back there? You can't fight in here." Roshton swiveled his head to look at him. "I thought you just said that to get Binalie off our backs."

"Absolutely not," Doriana said. "My position was exactly as stated. We can't allow the

techs to fall into Separatist hands-they know too much about our technology. But neither can we allow the plant to be damaged."

"So what you're saying is that I should move out into the open?" Roshton demanded bluntly. 'That I should stand there and watch my troops get slaughtered just to buy Binalie time to evac the techs?"

"I'm sorry," Doriana said in a low, sincere voice. "I know that puts you in an impossible position. But I'm afraid we have no choice."

"We blasted well do have a choice," Roshton snapped. "And if you think... " He paused. "What? All right, put him on."

"What is it?" Doriana asked.

"Your Jedi's arrived, along with Binalie's son," Roshton said briefly. "Master Tories? Yes, this is Roshton."

For perhaps half a minute he listened, his forehead wrinkled in concentration. Then, surprisingly, he smiled. "Understood," he said. "We'll give it a try. Lieutenant?"

"I'm on it, sir," the clone trooper said.

Roshton turned back to Doriana. "Maybe we do have a choice," he said. "Defense line, configure for inverse hailstorm; target on my command. And get these doors open."

With a ponderous rumble, the heavy doors began to slide slowly to the sides. 'Time to get to cover, Doriana," Roshton said, gesturing to the side. 'This way."

A few seconds later they were crouched behind a large cargo truck parked along the side wall. "What's going on?" Doriana asked, trying to keep his sudden misgivings out of his voice.

This was suddenly not going the way he'd planned. "Won't this open us up to a full-scale assault?"

"It might," Roshton agreed. "Or it might let us come up with a different ending for this game."

That sounded distinctly ominous. "Is this what the Jedi said to do?" Doriana probed carefully.

"No, this part was my idea," Roshton said. "Master Tories simply reminded me of another of our objectives." He craned his neck.

"There they go."

Doriana eased an eye around the truck's push plate. Outside, the C-9979's heavy clamshell deployment doors were swinging open, the foot ramp starting to slide down toward the ground. In the relative darkness behind the doors, he could see the slightly bulbous nose and blaster cannon of a MTT armored droid transport waiting in the landing pedestal. "Stand by," Roshton ordered calmly. "Target is starboard laser capacitor."

Doriana frowned; but before he could ask, the MTT gave a brief snort of cooling system ground vents and began to slide forward toward the ramp.

"Fire," Roshton said calmly.

And with a thunder of weaponry that echoed deafeningly through the huge room, the clone troopers opened fire.

Doriana squinted into the glare as the hundreds of energy weapons focused their fury on the thick armor behind the MTT's leftmost blaster cannon ball turret, wincing at the noise and the waves of heat that rolled over him. The MTT's armor was incredibly thick, he knew, but the transport's designers could never have anticipated a situation where so much firepower would be focused on such a small spot. The sun-bright glare around the power capacitor began to diffuse outward as the casehardened metal alloy vaporized into superheated plasma...

And barely two seconds into the assault, the Republic weapons burned through the armor to the high-energy capacitor behind it.

The entire left front of the MTT vanished in a gigantic fireball that writhed its way upward to billow across the leading edge of the C-9979's forward wing. A series of smaller blasts erupted from behind the first as secondary systems went up in a chain reaction. A few seconds later, with an earsplitting scream, the repulso-lifts disintegrated, and the blackened shell that had once been a fully loaded MTT collapsed onto the ramp.

Completely blocking the vehicles waiting behind it.

"That's it!" Roshton shouted over the pandemonium, a savage grin on his face. "All units withdraw!" He grabbed Doriana's arm.

"Come on, Doriana."

They didn't stop running until they were two assembly areas into the plant and the noise outside had faded to a dull roar.

"Clever," Doriana said, breathing hard as Roshton slowed them down to a fast jog. "You block the exit ramp, and they're stymied until they can clear out the wreckage. But what exactly did it gain you?"

"Options, of course," Roshton told him, glancing back over his shoulder. Doriana looked, too, to see the clone troopers following in an orderly retreat. "Before we did that, there would have been no way to retreat without bringing the battle into the plant, which you had forbidden us to do. We would have had to stand and die."

He gestured ahead of them with his blaster. "Now, we should have time to get through that tunnel of Binalie's and go to ground." Doriana felt his lip twist. Nine hundred clone troopers, ready and waiting to harass the Separatist army. This was not how it was supposed to have gone. "So what exactly did Tories tell you?"

Roshton threw him a smile. "You'll see. Come on, and save your breath for running."

They stood on the hill at the edge of the Binalie estate: Tories, Binalie himself, Doriana, and Commander Roshton, the latter now disguised in civilian clothing. "So that's it, is it?" Binalie asked.

"For now, yes," Tories told him, gazing across the grassy strip that lay between them and Spaarti Creations as the pinks and yellows of sunset began to fade from the western sky.

And the shadows from the smoldering hulks of half a dozen AAT battle tanks stretched across the forbidden grassland. "My compliments to your gunners," he added.

"It wasn't hard," Roshton said grimly. "Standard Trade Federation attack procedure always includes throwing a cordon around the target zone. All we had to do was set our ambush and make sure we dropped the ones in the place that would irritate the Cranscocs the most."

"Yes," Tories murmured, feeling a twinge of guilt. It had been his idea, and it had been necessary. But he still didn't much like the fact that he'd deliberately caused distress and discomfort to sentient beings. Especially sentient beings who had nothing to do with the chaos now swirling around them.

"I just hope it works," Doriana murmured.

"It will," Tories assured him. "The twillers aren't even going to be able to relax until those hulks are removed, let alone retool the plant for anything the Separatists want to build in there."

Roshton grunted. "Let's hope they don't figure it out until our reinforcements get here," he said. "Then we'll see how good they are."

"As long as you don't destroy the plant in the process," Binalie warned.

"We'll do what we can," Roshton promised. "But that's up to the Separatists now."

Tories felt his throat tighten, the fading light in the sky mirroring his own darkening mood. Because even if Spaarti survived, the thing he'd feared for so long had already

happened.

The war had come to Cartao.