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Hero of Cartao.

Part 3

Hero's End.

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The streets of Foulahn City were dark and deserted as Kinman Doriana picked his way through the litter of broken droids, small missile craters, shattered buildings, bodies, and the general clutter of war. The military comlink he'd borrowed from Commander Roshton had allowed him to listen in on the Republic side of the battle, and he'd known the fighting here and at the Triv Spaceport had been fierce. But even that knowledge hadn't prepared him for the actual carnage the soldiers had left behind.

A half dozen craters overlapped each other across the street in front of him, half filled with rubble from the buildings the missiles had destroyed and a few mutilated bodies of the civilians who'd been caught in the crossfire. The fighting here must have been particularly bad, he decided, with a higher-ranking officer directing the Republic side of the attack. Maybe here he'd finally find what he was looking for.

He hoped so. It was well after midnight, he was achingly tired, and the new Separatist masters of this part of Cartao undoubtedly had a curfew in place for the citizenry. The first patrol that spotted him would be trouble, and he wasn't in the mood for arguing with combat droids. Despite the dramatic events and reversals of the past few hours, things were still adhering reasonably closely to Lord Sidious's plan, but that didn't mean Doriana himself had to enjoy the situation. He'd had his fill of battles a long time ago, and very much preferred to stay at his desk in Supreme Chancellor Palpatine's office and handle his schemes and manipulations long-distance.

A glimmer of white to the left caught his eye, and he picked his way carefully toward it through the shattered road material. Probably just another piece of the deco-rative white roof trim Foulahn's residents were so fond of, he thought sourly, but it still had to be checked out.

But it wasn't a piece of roof trim. It was the half buried body of a clone trooper. A lieutenant, from the markings on his armor.

Finally.

Under normal circumstances, it would have been the work of perhaps two minutes to dig the body out of the rubble. With the need for absolute silence, it took Doriana closer to ten. But it was worth the effort. Hidden away in the back of one of the survival pouches on the lieutenant's utility belt was an unlabeled datacard. Slipping it into his pocket, Doriana resealed the survival pouch and started to straighten up.

"Halt," a flat mechanical voice ordered from behind him. Doriana froze in mid-crouch. "Don't shoot," he called, stretching his hands slowly to the sides so that the droids could see they were empty. "I'm an official medical observer."

"Turn and identify," the voice ordered.

Doriana obeyed, turning carefully on the uncertain footing. It was a complete patrol, all right: six of the old-style battle droids, one of them standing slightly in the lead. In the dim light, Doriana couldn't tell whether there was anyone of command rank among them. "Identify," the droid in the lead repeated.

"My name is Kinman Drifkin," he told them. "I'm a member of the Aargau Medical Observer Corps. We're a neutral power sworn to observe and report on any atrocities taking place

during this conflict."

The droid seemed to digest that. "Come forward," he ordered. "Do you have official identification?"

"Of course," Doriana said, slipping his hand into his ID pocket as he walked toward the group. The droids lifted their blasters warningly as he withdrew his hand, relaxed slightly as they saw he held only a datacard. "Which of you has a reader?" he asked.

"I will take it," the spokesman said, shifting his grip on his blaster and extending a claw-like hand.

Doriana stepped to him and handed him the datacard. So this one was definitely the leader; and at this distance, he could see now the pale yellow markings of a command officer on its head and torso. Excellent. "I believe you'll find my credentials are in order," he added, glancing casually around. There was no one else in sight, human or droid.

"We will see," the officer droid said, taking the datacard and sliding it into a reader slot set into the lower part of its jaw line. "It says here that your assigned observation area is...'

"Barauch seven-nine-seven," Doriana said in a low voice. "Filliae gron one-one-three."

The officer broke off in midsentence. Doriana eased a few centimeters to his right, watching to see if the droids and their weapons would track his movement.

They didn't. To all appearances, the entire squad was frozen and oblivious. "I'll be crocked," Doriana murmured to himself, feeling muscles relax that he hadn't noticed were tense. So, the magic backdoor lockout code that Sidious had given to him actually worked.

And if the lockout code worked... "Pinkrun four-seven-two aprion one-eight-one-one," he said, reaching out to the spokesman's jaw and retrieving his false ID. "Backskip three minutes; pause one minute; restart. Execute."

The patrol gave a group shiver. "Accessed," the spokesman said, his mechanical voice sounding somehow even flatter than it had before.

Smiling tightly, Doriana sidled past them, heading back the direction they'd come from as quickly as he could manage without twisting his ankle on the loose stone. He had just one minute to disappear before the droids came out of their freeze and restarted their patrol, with this little incident conveniently erased from their group memory. He reached the nearest corner and ducked around it, pausing there to listen. A few seconds later he heard the distinctive clunk as the droids came to life again. With more clattering, they continued on their patrol, their footsteps fading off into the night breezes. Smiling again, Doriana detached himself from the wall and headed back toward the Binalie estate.

"You all right?" a voice asked softly from the shadows. Doriana jumped violently. "Who's there?" he hissed.

"Relax," Jafer Tories calmed him, stepping into view from a doorway, his lightsaber ready in his hand. "It's just me."

Doriana took a deep breath. "You nearly stopped my heart there," he said reproachfully. "In the future, kindly practice your Jedi skulking techniques on someone else."

"Sorry," Tories said with a faint smile. "But for a moment there I thought I was going to have to demonstrate more than just skulking. What happened over there?"

"What do you mean, what happened?" Doriana hedged, wondering uneasily just how much the Jedi had seen. "It was just a standard security patrol."

"Who looked at your ID and then let you go," Tories said pointedly. "Since when do the Separatists give free passes to Palpatine's advisors?"

Doriana started breathing a little easier. So, the Jedi had been close enough to see the confrontation, but not to hear what was said. Good enough. "No free passes for advisors, no," he told Tories, digging out his false ID again. "But plenty for neutral observers. Kinman Drifkin, Aargau Medical Observer Corps, at your service."

"Cute," Tories said. He took the ID, peered at it, and handed it back. "Holds up to baseline scrutiny, does it?"

"As you saw," Doriana reminded him, putting the datacard away again. "Supreme Chancellor Palpatine can hardly afford to let his people get picked up by the enemy in the middle of a war zone. Speaking of which, what are you doing out here, anyway?"

"Funny; I was going to ask you the same question," Tories said, his voice suddenly going a little odd. "Lord Binalie said you'd gone into the city and asked me to see if you might be in trouble. So what are you doing?"

"Feeling mildly pleased with myself, and ready to get out of here," Doriana told him. "Has Lord Binalie found a place to settle in yet?"

"We've got one, yes," Tories said.

"Good," Doriana said. "Take me there, and we'll all sort it out together. "

For just the briefest moment Tories continued to gaze at him in that discomfiting way Jedi all over the galaxy seemed to have learned to perfection. Then, reluctantly, Doriana thought, he nodded. "All right. Follow me."

He headed off down the deserted streets. Doriana followed, scowling to himself. It was Tories' fault, after all, that the situation had ended up the way it had, with Roshton and his clone troopers holding the plant while the Separatist droid armies waited uselessly outside. It wasn't at all the way Darth Sidious had planned this operation, and he winced as the thought of what the Sith lord would say about it the next time Doriana contacted him.

Still, the situation was far from lost. Republic reinforcements were undoubtedly days away, which gave Doriana time to put things back on track.

And as for the Jedi...

He gazed at Tories' broad back as the other picked his way around yet another missile crater. Now that he thought about it, Tories' unabashed heroics tonight might actually work to Doriana's advantage. Certainly the other had risen to new heights of respect and prestige in the handful of days since Doriana had landed on Cartao.

Which would make it that much more of a pleasure to bring the Jedi down.

With the tunnel under the Spaarti Creations' south lawn collapsed and impassible, there was no longer any reason for the Neimoidians controlling the Separatist forces to occupy the Binalie estate. They had occupied it anyway, probably out of spite for the way Tories had helped chase them out of the mansion not too many hours earlier. With his home occupied by battle droids, it had become necessary for Lord Binalie and his son Corf to find other accommodations.

The estate's greenhouse had been probably the least likely possibility, given the near-complete visibility through the building's long transparisteel panels. Which was precisely why Tories had suggested it. What any searchers would assume—at least, what Tories hoped they would assume—was that there was no chance of anyone hiding in such an open place and move on to more likely prospects.

What any such searchers would have forgotten was the profusion of plants inside the greenhouse, plants that could be shifted and adjusted and layered to form hidden areas as sheltered and invisible as a military camp in deep forest.

Binalie and Corf had nearly finished setting up their new quarters when Tories and Doriana arrived. "Ah; Master Tories," Binalie said, setting a package of emergency food rations beside three more against a line of tall plants with wide overhanging fronds. "Did you find Doriana? Oh—there you are," he added as he caught sight of Doriana in the dim starlight. "Any trouble?"

"None," Tories said. "I found him bluffing his way past a droid patrol."

"Really," Binalie said. His voice was casual, but Tories could sense the sudden suspicion in his sense. "And how exactly do you bluff battle droids?"

"With the judicious use of false credentials," Doriana told him briefly. "But never mind that. I have something to show you that should be considerably more interesting. Is there a place where we can have a little more light?"

"I suppose," Binalie said reluctantly. "Master Tories-?"

"Why don't you go ahead and take him downstairs," Tories suggested. "I'll go take a quick look around outside."

"Thank you," Binalie said, sounding a bit relieved. "This way, Master Doriana."

By the time Tories returned from his sweep of the surrounding area, Binalie, Corf, and Doriana had taken up seats in the greenhouse's underground storeroom. "All clear," the Jedi confirmed, lowering the trap door back into place and plunging the space into complete darkness. "Go ahead, Corf."

A moment later he found himself squinting as the boy flicked on a small ceiling light. "All right, Master Doriana," Binalie said. "Let's hear it."

"This is a soldier's ID," Doriana said, producing a datacard. "I took it from a dead clone trooper lieutenant. Normally, it contains nothing but name, rank, and operating number. A field officer's card, however, also has something called a contingency deployment profile. It gives detailed instructions as to where and how to regroup in case of command structure disruption or the kind of disaster we've just experienced."

"I've never heard of anything like that," Binalie said.

"It's not well advertised, for obvious reasons," Doriana said dryly. "For the same reasons, the information's also not easy to access."

"But you can do that?"

"Yes," Doriana said. "By morning, when the townspeople are allowed to move around outdoors again, you and Master Tories should be able to casually travel to the rendezvous point and make contact with the survivors of last night's battle."

"Just the two of us?" Tories asked. "You're not coming?"

Doriana shook his head. "Now that the Separatists are in control here, I need to keep as low a profile as possible. My face might have been seen in the background on one of Supreme Chancellor Palpatine's broadcasts, and I can't take the risk that someone will recognize me. I can give you an authorization datacard, though, that will confirm you have the authority to give them orders."

"Wait a second," Binalie said, frowning. "What orders?"

"We have to get Roshton and his people out of there, Lord Binalie," Doriana said, his voice suddenly low and sincere and very persuasive. "The longer they're trapped inside Spaarti, the weaker and more vulnerable to attack they'll become. Don't forget, all those techs he took in with him probably weren't carrying soldiers' field packs, which means the whole group is starting out critically low on food and water. If we let them get too weak, our chances of getting them out alive will slip from poor to nonexistent."

"And you don't think the Republic will send help?" Corf asked quietly.

Tories focused on the youth. It was remarkable, he thought distantly, how rapidly Corf had grown up over the past few days. He'd started out as a cheerful, carefree boy, content to track down siviliv weeds or just hang out with Cartao's resident Jedi Guardian.

And then Doriana had arrived, and the events that had followed had turned Corf's home and his neighborhood into a war zone. Now, he was quieter, more thoughtful, more brooding.

The war had come to Cartao. Sadly, it had also come to Corf Binalie.

"I don't know, Master Binalie," Doriana admitted, his voice as grave as the boy's. "I've spoken with Supreme Chancellor Palpatine, and I know he truly wants to help. The question is whether there are any Republic forces strong enough and close enough to deal with this particular Separatist army. I'm sure you understand that there are many other worlds and systems out there in equally desperate situations."

He looked at Tories. "Unless there are other forces available that I don't know about?"

Tories frowned. "What do you mean?"

For a moment, Doriana gazed at him as if trying to read something hidden. Then, almost too casually, he shrugged.

"Nothing," he said. "I just thought you might have a line to-never mind."

He gestured to the trap door above them. "I'd suggest the three of you go back up and get some sleep," he said. "I need to stay down here for awhile and get this contingency deployment decrypted."

Binalie looked at Tories, his eyebrows lifted slightly. Tories shrugged microscopically in return. He could sense an air of secretive-ness surrounding Doriana's mind, but that could be nothing more than the natural caution of a man dealing with high-level military security. "All right," Binalie said. "Let us know when you're ready to come back up."

"I will," Doriana promised, turning off the light so the others could open the trap door without giving their presence away.

"Good-night. And don't worry," he added, his tone suddenly thoughtful in the dark. "I have a feeling that by tomorrow night this will all be over."

There had been seven possible rendezvous points listed on the contingency deployment datacard, ranked in descending order of preference. The first, one of the hangars at the spaceport, was already occupied by Separatist forces busily working on damaged vehicles. The second, a warehouse on the northern edge of the city, had been effectively demolished in the night's battle. At the third, an automated hydroelectric plant straddling the Quatreen River, Tories and Binalie found the Republic forces.

"This is all rather irregular," their commanding officer, a young-looking lieutenant, said as he handed back the introductory datacard Doriana had given them. "But it does seem to be in order." He gave a hand signal, and the ring of clone troopers that had suddenly appeared on their third step through the door lowered their blasters. "I'm Lieutenant Laytron. What's this all about?"

"What it's about is a couple hundred Republic troops and a thousand Republic techs trapped inside the Spaarti Creations plant," Tories told him.

"Yes; Commander Roshton's group," Laytron said. "We've been in brief contact with him. It sounds like they're making good progress on whatever the project is they're working on in there."

"That's nice to know," Binalie said sourly. "Did he happen to mention food or water or other irrelevant subjects?"

Laytron regarded him coolly. "For the moment, he seems to be doing all right."

"Which is a complete illusion," Tories pointed out. "And you know it."

"The question is, what are you doing to do about it?" Binalie added.

"Look around you, gentlemen," Laytron said darkly. "We hit Cartao with ten gunships and four hundred fifty officers and men. I'm the last officer still alive, and I have exactly two hundred thirty-three troops - and no vehicles-left to work with. Balance that against probably two thousand functional combat droids, plus STAPs and battle tanks, and you're talking seriously poor odds. I'm cut off from higher authority, and I can't legally justify taking action on my own without a reasonable chance of success. That chance doesn't exist."

"So you're not even going to try?" Binalie demanded.

"I'm sure reinforcements are on the way," Laytron said. "When they arrive, my men and I will be right there fighting beside them. Until then, there's nothing I can do except hope that Roshton's people can hold out."

"What if we lower our expectations a little?" Tories suggested.

"Instead of defeating the Separatists, how about if we just get Roshton and his people out?"

"Leaving the place open for the Separatists to move in?" The lieutenant shook his head. "I'm sorry, but our mission parameters were very specific on that point."

"Then you condemn those troops and civilians in there to death," Binalie shot back, starting to sound angry. "Roshton won't surrender - he's too stubborn for anything that sensible. Do your mission parameters have anything to say about that!"

"We understand your orders, Lieutenant," Tories said, throwing Binalie a warning look. "But what if the Separatists didn't know Roshton's people had escaped?"

The other's eyes narrowed. "Explain."

"I'm sure you came here equipped with a map of the area," Tories said. "Do you remember how Spaarti Creations is laid out? A central manufacturing plant, plus three underground Outlinks two to five kilometers away for storage and product transfer?"

"All of them connected to the main plant via underground tunnels," Laytron said, nodding. "Unfortunately, the Separatists have the same maps we do. They've got the Outlinks and their tunnels covered."

"Actually," Tories said, "they don't."

He lifted his eyebrows at Binalie. The other still wasn't happy about this, Tories could tell, but he'd made up his mind to go through with it. 'The fact is, Lieutenant, that the maps are wrong," Binalie said. "We've actually built a fourth Outlink, west and a little south of the plant and about two kilometers away. It's not quite ready yet, which is why it's not on any of the official maps. But the Outlink structure itself is built."

"More to the point, so is the connecting tunnel," Tories said "The only thing missing is the opening into the main complex itself."

"Which a lightsaber-equipped Jedi could easily remedy," Laytron said, sounding thoughtful.

"Exactly," Tories agreed. "If you can stage some kind of diversion to draw the roving patrols away from that part of the grounds, I should be able to slip in and get Roshton's people out without the Separatists being any the wiser."

"Interesting idea," Laytron agreed. "You have any particular diversion in mind?"

"We were hoping you could come up with something," Tories said.

"I'm sure you have a better grasp of the military situation than either of us do."

"Well, there's one obvious possibility," Laytron said. "With their control ship destroyed, they have to be running their droid army off the secondary control matrix they brought down here with them. If we threaten that, they'll have no choice but to respond."

"Good idea," Binalie grunted. "Question is, where is it?"

"It's not in one of the battle tanks or MTT transports," Laytron said. 'There's only so much miniaturization you can do with something like that. It therefore has to be in one of the landing ships."

"Unless it's not even in this area," Binalie pointed out. "There are about a million square kilometers of empty space out there where they could have hidden it."

"No," Laytron said, shaking his head. 'There's no combat droid presence anywhere else on the planet, at least nothing serious. Neimoidians aren't nearly daring enough to leave something that important lying around without a full defense screen around it. No, it's definitely in one of the landing ships. Question is, which one?"

An image flashed back to Tories' memory: hurrying through the darkness across the plant rooftop, noticing the STAPs circling the first landing ship that had put down by the plant's west door. "It's in the first one," he said. 'The one sitting right beside the plant."

"How do you know?" Laytron asked, frowning.

"It was under heavy guard during the battle last night," Tories told him. "If the Neimoidians are as nervous as you say, they'd certainly want it where their ground forces can protect it at the same time they're protecting the plant."

"Besides, the plant's the one place on Cartao both sides are intent on protecting," Binalie agreed. "I think Jedi Tories is right."

"I suppose," Laytron said doubtfully. 'That's going to make for a much trickier diversion, though. The Outlink isn't all that far from the siege line around the plant, and from what you said it sounds like the tunnel passes almost directly beneath the landing ship."

"Are you saying there's no way to do it?" Binalie asked. Laytron smiled tightly. "Not at all," he said. "When did you want to start this operation?"

"As soon as possible," Tories said. "It would be nice to get to them while they still have the strength to walk out under their own power."

"Fine," Laytron said, waving over one of the clone troopers. "This afternoon, just before sundown, then. I suggest, Master Tories, that you be ready."

"Master Tories?" Corf's voice called softly. "It's time."

Tories blinked his eyes open, letting the Jedi meditation trance fade away into the corners of his mind. Corf was standing over his cot, a pinched look on his face. 'Thank you, Corf," Tories said, yawning and stretching his arms and hands. "Where's your father?"

"He left with Master Doriana and that Republic lieutenant about an hour ago," Corf said. "Dad said you were supposed to meet him at Outlink Four."

"I know," Tories said, glancing at his chrono. Still early. Plenty of time for a nice casual stroll through the woods west of Spaarti Creations. "How are you holding up?"

The boy shrugged. "Okay, I guess," he said. "A little worried."

"No need for that," Tories assured him. "I'll make sure your father stays clear of the fighting."

"I know," Corf said. "Dad promised me that, too. I'm mostly worried about you."

"I'll be fine," Tories said, smiling. "I'm a Jedi, remember?"

"Oh, that's right," Corf said. He tried to smile in return, but his heart clearly wasn't in it. "I forget sometimes."

"Well, don't," Tories admonished him lightly as he tucked his lightsaber inside his robes. "Stay out of sight and trouble, and I'll see you later."

"Okay," Corf said; and to Tories' surprise, he stepped forward and gave the Jedi a quick hug. "Be careful."

Tories had spent part of the day wondering about Laytron's seemingly casual choice of timing for the operation. It was only as he slipped off the Binalie estate and made his way westward through the edge of Foulahn City that he realized the timing hadn't been nearly as random as he'd first thought. At sunset, most of the enemy forces surrounding Spaarti would have to face directly into the setting sun to see Roshton's quiet exit from Outlink Four. Even droid optical sensors had trouble with direct sunlight, and Tories' estimation of the young lieutenant had gone up as he realized the young man had taken that weakness into account.

Twice along the way, Tories had to take quick cover as a pair of droids on wide picket marched past. But he'd planned for possible delays when he'd scheduled his wake-up call, and he reached the flat, sod-covered roof of Outlink Four with time to spare.

Binalie was waiting beneath a cluster of trees, along with a pair of armored clone troopers. "Master Tories," Binalie greeted the Jedi, his voice and sense tight with nervous anticipation.

"Anyone see you?"

"No one shot at me, anyway," Tories told him, eyeing the camouflaged roof. "We aren't going to have to raise the whole roof to get in, are we?"

Binalie shook his head. "There's a service stairway along the side."

"Then let's get to it," Tories said, peering into the sky. A dozen STAPs were circling in the east, patrolling the sky over the plant and the landing ship beside it.

"Shouldn't we wait for the diversion to start?" Binalie asked.

"We can't afford to," Tories said. "We'll need every bit of diversion time just to move all those people out of the plant."

"You're right." Binalie took a deep breath, and set off across the open ground. "Follow me."

The section of roof over the service stairway swung open with gratifying speed and silence. Binalie led the way down the steps, then waited at the bottom for the others to catch up before using the small control panel attached to the railing to seal the top again. "All the wiring is in place," he said as he flicked on a pair of glow rods and handed one to Tories. "But I thought running any power in here, even just enough to handle the lights, might be risky."

"Good point," Tories agreed, turning to the clone troopers. "You two stay here and guard the exit," he ordered.

"Acknowledged," one of them said.

Tories nodded, and he and Binalie set off at a quick jog down the empty tunnel. Ten minutes later, they reached the other end.

"There should be a set of pumps right here, and the intake for the tunnel's ventilator system about here," Binalie said, pointing out spots to the left and right of the wall. "It would make this operation a whole lot cheaper if you could manage to miss both of them."

"I'll do my best," Tories said, igniting his lightsaber. Pushing the tip of the blade carefully through the center of Binalie's indicated safe zone, he began to cut.

A minute later had carved a man-sized rectangle. Closing down the lightsaber, he stretched out with the Force and deftly pulled away the half-meter-thick section of wall.

To find himself gazing down the muzzles of a half dozen blaster rifles. "Commander Roshton?" he called.

The muzzles instantly lifted. "About time," Roshton said, stepping into view in front of his troops, a grim look on his face. He was equipped for action, Tories noted, wearing his usual clone trooper comlink headset and a pair of bolstered blasters on his belt.. "I was starting to wonder if you'd been caught."

"What are you talking about?" Binalie asked. "We're right on time."

"You're two minutes late," Roshton corrected tartly. "If Lieutenant Laytron is on schedule, the diversion will be starting in fourteen minutes. We want to be already moving people out the other end of the tunnel by then."

"Then we'd better get started," Tories said. "Your people ready to move?"

In answer, Roshton lifted a hand. The clone troopers who'd been pointing their rifles at Tories lifted the weapons into carry position across their chests and passed single-file through the newly made opening. Reforming into ranks of three, they set off down the tunnel at a quick jog. They were followed by another squad of six, and another, and another. "What about the techs?" Tories asked as the fifth batch of troopers jogged past him.

"When will they be coming through?"

"When we've got enough firepower at the other end to protect them," Roshton grunted, stepping through himself and giving Binalie a nudge. "Come on, both of you. Our turn to move." The clone troopers who'd gone on ahead of them were waiting at the far end of the tunnel when Tories, Binalie, and Roshton arrived. 'Two minutes to go," the commander said, consulting his chrono. "What's cover like up there?"

Binalie opened his mouth to answer - "Open space for three meters to the north, twenty meters to the south," one of the clone troopers they'd left behind on guard duty spoke up. 'Tree cover begins five meters to the east and remains intermittent."

"Not perfect, but it'll do," Roshton decided. "Line up on the stairway. Lord Binalie, is there any trick to operating the exit door?"

"The controls are right there," Binalie said, pointing to the panel, his tone suddenly sounding strange. "But-"

"But what?" Roshton demanded, glaring at him.

Binalie threw a quick, ambiguous glance at Tories. "Nothing," he muttered. "It'll keep."

"Fine." Roshton looked up the stairway as his troopers headed up. "Get in position," he called softly. "We break cover at the sound of the first shot."

"Two minutes to go," Lieutenant Laytron said, consulting his chrono. "All squads, report by number."

He fell silent, listening intently to the reports coming in over his headset. Doriana found himself gazing off to the north, across the open grassland and the picket line of combat droids standing guard there. The force was largely a token one, of course, since there were no doors or windows on the southern side of the plant. The main droid army, plus all their remaining AAT battle tanks, was concentrated around the more vulnerable eastern, western, and northern approaches.

But even a single person or machine on that forbidden stretch of lawn was anathema to the Cranscoc twillers who were the actual heart of the Spaarti operation. They were probably still twitching their indignation, in fact, over all those droids standing around out there. But of course, the Separatist commanders didn't care about that.

On the other hand, since the plant's tooling was still set for the cloning cylinders the Republic forces had been sent to Cartao to manufacture, Roshton probably didn't much care if the twillers were upset, either. Two huge political systems, locked in a massive battle of wills and weapons and death, completely oblivious as to how their actions affected those around them. But those actions frequently involved a lot of unexpected collateral damage. That was a lesson someone was going to learn today.

"One minute," Laytron said. "Stand ready."

Doriana took a deep breath, willing calmness into himself. He had carried out his part of the plan, he knew, maneuvering both sides to precisely the right place and the right time. The rest was now out of his hands, and he could feel the churning sense of frustration that always came upon him at times like this.

"And... go."

With the multi-level roar of a dozen different engine models, a dozen commandeered civilian landspeeders leaped into view from concealment among the hills dotting the landscape, each loaded with anywhere from four to eight clone troopers. Quickly, they maneuvered around their hills to form an attack line on the southern edge of the grassland. Then, as the enemy pickets and the high-flying STAPs seemed to take notice, the engine pitches changed, and the vehicles set off at full speed toward the plant.

"Stand by, cover fire," Laytron ordered. The STAPs were swooping in to the attack, their twin blasters spitting fire at the landspeeders. Ahead of the advancing landspeeders, the picket forces were drawing inward to form a solid counterline between the clone troopers and the plant. Their blasters opened up, too, searching for the range...

"Fire," Laytron said.

The tops of a dozen nearby hills suddenly blurred as camouflage covers were thrown off and heavy weapons scavenged from damaged gunships and AATs were swung around to bear on the enemy. Laser cannon bolts sizzled across the incoming STAPs, destroying half a dozen in the first salvo and sending the rest twisting away into evasive maneuvers. A pair of missiles streaked from one of the hills to hit the droid counterline dead center. When the smoke, dust, and purple afterimage of the explosion cleared from Doriana's sight, there was nothing left of the picket line but a crater and a hundred smoking pieces of combat droid.

"Here they come," Roshton murmured, pointing to the east. Doriana shifted his eyes that direction. Three AAT battle tanks had appeared around the side of the building, laying down fire of their own as they lumbered toward the incoming landspeeders.

"They're too late," Doriana said, estimating distances and speeds.

"Absolutely," Laytron agreed as the hilltop covering fire shifted aim and began pummeling the AATs. "The fatal flaw of droid armies, Master Doriana: the soldiers actually on the scene can't think or anticipate."

Doriana smiled. "Which is why the Republic is going to win."

The battle tanks were still firing uselessly as the landspeeders reached the plant. Even before the vehicles came to a complete stop the clone troopers were leaping out, slinging their heavy rifles over their shoulders as they formed up beside the wall. The first two dozen to reach position lifted liquid-cable guns and fired upward. The grapplers caught the top edge of the rooftop, and a moment later, the soldiers were being reeled swiftly upward as their comrades held guard position beneath them. The remaining STAPs swung to this new threat, managing to kill two of the rising clone troopers before fire from the troopers below eliminated that threat.

The first wave reached the roof and scrambled up onto it, unslinging their rifles and setting up a defensive perimeter. The second wave was already halfway up the side of the building by the time they were in position, with the final wave just leaving the ground.

"And that's that," Laytron said with grim satisfaction as the clone troopers regrouped and started across the rooftop, weapons at the ready. "The Separatists can't fire on them without risking damage to the plant, but they'll be able to fire on the landing ship as soon as they're in range. Is that the sort of diversion you were thinking about, Master Doriana?"

Doriana smiled. "Yes, Lieutenant," he said softly. "That should do nicely."

The sounds of distant blaster fire were clearly audible as Tories emerged from the tunnel into the late afternoon sunlight.

"Sounds like it's started," he muttered to Binalie as the two of them raced for the trees where most of the clone troopers who had gone before them had already taken cover. "I just hope they can keep it up until everyone's out."

"Doesn't matter," Binalie said as they reached the trees.

"What do you mean, it doesn't matter?" Tories asked as they squatted beneath the cover of a wide-crested forlaine bush.

"That's the whole point of this exercise."

Binalie shook his head. "Maybe it was your point, and mine," he said, his voice tense. "But it wasn't Roshton's. He has no intention of getting those techs out."

"What are you talking about?" Tories demanded, frowning.

"Didn't you hear him?" Binalie countered. "Him and his soldiers? He asked about cover, and they gave him the stuff north, south, and east. They never said anything about cover to the west; and he never asked."

Tories blinked as the memory of that conversation flashed back to him. Binalie was right: Roshton hadn't inquired about conditions to the west. Yet west was the obvious direction for anyone fleeing the plant to go.

But if they weren't leaving...

His eyes flicked around, looking for Roshton, understanding suddenly stabbing into his stomach. He spotted the commander standing beside the tunnel entrance, gazing down the stairway as clone troopers continued to file out.

Tories rose to his feet and started toward him. He'd taken perhaps three steps when Roshton lifted a hand and pointed east. And suddenly, the army was on the move, blasters at the ready, running toward the landing ship towering above the treetops. The last of the troopers was passing Roshton when Tories caught up with him. "What are you doing?" he demanded, catching the commander's arm. "This was supposed to be a rescue mission."

"Out of my way, Jedi," Roshton snapped, shrugging off his arm. "Of course it's a rescue mission. It's a rescue of Lord Binalie's precious manufacturing plant."

"But..."

"No buts," Roshton cut him off, gesturing with his blaster. "This is our one chance to get into that landing ship and destroy the droid control matrix. You want to help, fine, we'd be glad to have you. If not, just get out of our way."

Tories looked back at Binalie, still crouching beside his bush, his face rigid with anger and fear and frustration. "Go back to the estate," he called to the other. "I'll meet you there."

Binalie's eyes flicked over Tories' shoulder toward the plant.

"Go," Tories repeated.

Binalie's expression still looked pinched, but he nodded. "All right."

He slipped away through the trees, and Tories turned back to Roshton. "I'll come with you," he said, pulling out his lightsaber. "But we will talk about this later."

"Sure," Roshton grunted. "Come on."

They headed off after the soldiers, dodging between trees and around bushes. Occasionally Tories caught a glimpse of white armor ahead of them, but the clone troopers were traveling at least as fast as they were and had a fair head start on top of it. "So what's the plan?" he asked Roshton. "The new revised plan, I mean."

"Laytron's got men up on the plant roof laying down fire," Roshton panted. "The droids by the landing ship are currently trying to pick them off without damaging the plant. With luck, they should all have their backs to us when we hit them." Tories grimaced. And when they found their army in a crossfire, what would the Neimoidians controlling the droids do? Whatever they deemed necessary to defend themselves, including wrecking the Spaarti plant? Probably.

It was up to Tories to make sure that didn't happen.

"First elements have reached firing position," Roshton reported, pressing his headset tighter against his ear. "Following units are fanning out. If we're lucky, and they're not spotted-" He broke off, and Tories caught his breath as the volume of the firing ahead suddenly changed. "They were," Roshton growled.

"All units: fire at will."

He leaped ahead, picking up his pace. "Spotted?" Tories asked, catching up with him.

"By one of the guards at the landing ramp," Roshton confirmed as weapons of a different pitch joined the sounds ahead. "But we've still got the advantage."

They ran another fifty meters through the forest. And then, suddenly, they were there.

Square in the middle of a pitched battle.

Roshton ducked into the partial cover of a nearby tree, his blaster already blazing away against the enemy. Tories stopped beside a tree of his own, trying to get a quick sense of the action. Two AAT battle tanks, which had been facing the door into the plant, were

trying to turn around to deal with this new threat, their maneuvering slow and awkward as they fought the tangle of underbrush and heavy fire from two directions. Advancing briskly toward Roshton's group of clone troopers were three ranks of super battle droids supported by a few D60 assault droids. The whole line was taking considerable damage, but was still coming.

The tanks, Tories decided, were his first priority. "I'm going in," he called to Roshton over the noise, pointing toward the tanks. "Cover me."

"Right," Roshton shouted back as Tories ignited his lightsaber.

"All units: cover fire left!"

The rain of fire from the clone trooper blasters abruptly changed focus, concentrating all their fury on the left flank of the advancing forces and blowing the droids on that side into a chaos of shards and rubble and smoke. Gathering his feet beneath him, Tories ducked under the friendly fire and dodged around the end of the disintegrating enemy line.

The droids in the AATs saw him coming, of course. Even as their primary laser cannon began chewing up the landscape along the right flank of the Republic forces, the short-range defensive blasters on either side of the main air-cooling intake began firing at him. Tories' lightsaber flashed in answer, deflecting the bolts away or bouncing them into the backs of the advancing droids whenever he could manage it.

He reached the nearest AAT and jumped up onto the front. Positioning himself in front of the air intake where he was out of reach of both defensive blasters, he stabbed his lightsaber downward through the heavy armor into the forward repulsor disk. The vehicle pitched forward, its nose slamming into the ground like a quadruped that had had both front legs kicked out from under it. Tories leaped straight up as it dug itself half a meter into the dirt, landing just in front of the top hatch, and with three quick slashes sliced off the primary laser cannon and the two side-mounted secondary laser guns.

The second AAT had abandoned its attack on the clone troopers and had swung to this new threat. For a moment Tories stayed where he was, balancing on the now badly sloped top of the grounded battle tank as he deflected a couple of shots from the second tank's defensive blasters. One of the bolts went straight back down the blaster's muzzle, eliciting a burping sort of explosion from the weapon. Taking advantage of the momentary chaos inside the tank, Tories stretched out to the Force and made a giant leap across to the second tank, dealing with its primary and secondary lasers as he had with the first. Leaning over the hatch, he swung his lightsaber one more time, cutting off the vehicle's command receiver antennas.

A droideka appeared from around the landing ramp, bouncing a little as it rolled across the uneven ground. Stretching out to the Force, Tories lifted one of the two secondary laser guns he'd cut off the first AAT and sent it flying into the center of the wheel shape. There was a screech of stressed metal, and the droideka came to an abrupt halt. For another second it held position, its micro-repulsors fighting to keep it balanced.

Then, something inside it failed, and it toppled ignominiously over onto its side.

A stutter of multiple blaster fire sliced through the air over Tories' head. He ducked reflexively, turning to see a group of super battle droids disintegrating behind him. The friendly fire was coming from above, he saw, and he looked up to see a group of clone troopers firing from the edge of the Spaarti roof. He waved his thanks; in response, one of them jabbed a hand toward the landing ship base.

Tories shifted his eyes that direction. Another battle tank was lumbering down the ramp, clearly intent on joining the battle. He gave a quick acknowledging wave to the rooftop snipers, then jumped off the crippled vehicle he was still standing on and began to weave his way through the chaos toward the landing ship. If he could slip up onto the ramp beneath the tank, he might be able to take out its repulsorlift coils and disable it on the spot.

"Jedi!"

Tories paused, turning as the faint shout came to him over the noise of the battle. The advancing droids were closing on the Republic forces, considerably fewer now than had started, but still coming. The clone troopers didn't seem to need his help; but there'd been a definite note of urgency in that call.

"Jedi!"

This time he was able to get the direction of the shout, and he looked over to where Roshton was standing beside his tree. The commander was looking back at him, beckoning frantically toward himself. Frowning, Tories changed direction, lightsaber blazing as he again skirted the droid attack line to the relative safety of the trees. "What is it?" he called as he came within shouting distance of Roshton.

"Didn't you hear me?" Roshton shouted back. 'The Jedi!"

"What about me?" Tories demanded, thoroughly confused now.

"Not you." Roshton jabbed a finger skyward. "The Jedi.

"The Jedi have come."

"The Jedi?" Doriana demanded.

"You got it," Lieutenant Laytron said, a mixture of surprise, hope, and relief in his voice as he peered into the eastern sky.

"A whole assault transport full of them, the message said, heading in to help. We've got orders to pull back and give them room."

"But that's impossible," Doriana objected, watching the other's face carefully. "Where could they have come from?"

But if there was any doubt at all in Laytron's mind, none of it reached his face or voice. "I don't know, and I don't care," the younger man declared. "All units: pull back. Where?" He tilted his head upward. "Got it," he confirmed, pointing to the sky. Doriana followed the direction of his finger. There, in the distance, he could see a dark speck moving swiftly toward them.

"Hustle on that pull-back," Laytron ordered. 'They're on their way."

He grinned tightly at Doriana. "Now we're going to see some serious work."

Doriana didn't answer. On the near edge of the rooftop the clone troopers had made it back to their ascent lines and were sliding back down them toward the waiting landspeeders. The approaching air vehicle was growing steadily larger, and he could see now that it was indeed a Republic assault transport.

And as it grew closer, it opened fire.

Laytron inhaled sharply. "What are they doing?" he breathed.

"They're..."

"Aren't they firing on the landing ship?" Doriana asked.

"They're firing on the plant," Laytron snapped, pulling his headset voice pickup closer to his mouth. "Republic transport, cease firing on the plant. Repeat, cease firing on the plant!"

The only response was an intensification of the transport's fire, alternating now between the plant and the enemy STAPs swarming to engage it. For a long moment, the Republic and Separatist forces traded fire as the assault transport continued racing forward.

Then, without warning, the vehicle suddenly dipped off its approach. Doriana held his breath as the STAR attack was joined by blaster and laser bolts from the Separatist ground forces encircling the plant. The transport dipped even further...

And as Laytron reeled off a string of helpless curses, Doriana watched as it plunged straight through the plant's roof.

For what seemed like a small eternity, nothing happened. Then, with a horrible series of muffled explosions, whole sections of the roof blew skyward, scattering fragments all around like small erupting volcanoes. The building's walls followed, bulging and cracking

and finally shattering into mudslides of rubble. Another, louder explosion echoed across the landscape, and through the roiling smoke and debris Doriana caught a glimpse of a fireball burning into the sky from the western side of the plant.

"They've stopped," Laytron said dully.

"What?" Doriana asked.

The lieutenant pointed wearily across the lawn. "The droids," he said. "They've frozen up. That last blast must have taken out the landing ship and control matrix."

"I see," Doriana said slowly. "Do we count this as a victory?"

Laytron snorted. "The Jedi might," he said bitterly. "Who knows how they think? But the rest of us certainly won't."

"To save the world," Doriana murmured the old cynic's saying, "we had to destroy it."

"That's about it." Laytron shook his head tiredly. "Come on. Let's go find Commander Roshton."

Lord Binalie said very little as the three of them walked across the littered floor, their boots crunching through the remains of what had once been Spaarti Creations. Corf, walking at his father's side, was even quieter. "I don't know what to say," Tories said softly as they came to a halt beside a mixed group of Cranscoc and human bodies. "Except that I'm very sorry."

"Of course you are," Binalie said, his voice under rigid control. "You're sorry, Commander Roshton is sorry, Master Doriana is sorry. I'm sure the entire Jedi Council would be sorry, too, if they would pause long enough in their search for someone to blame for their part in this."

He turned dead eyes on Tories. "What good is any of it?"

Tories shook his head. "None," he conceded. "I don't suppose there's any chance...?"

"That we can rebuild? With nearly all the twillers dead?" Binalie shook his head. "No. Not for another generation at least. And then only if we can get the Cranscoc to trust us again."

He turned away. "I certainly wouldn't if I were them. Trusting the word of a human is a stupid thing to do."

Tories winced. "I'm sorry," was all he could think of to say.

"I'm sure we'll see you later, Master Tories," Binalie said, not turning back around.

It was a dismissal. "Yes, of course," Tories said. "Good-bye, Lord Binalie. Good-bye, Corf."

Neither of them replied. With a sigh, Tories turned and trudged toward the broken wall where he and the others had come through into the ruined plant, his heart feeling like a lump of blackened and twisted hull metal within him. So, that was that. Despite all his efforts - despite even the efforts of the Republic and Separatist forces, for that matter-Spaarti Creations was gone. Destroyed by carelessness, stupidity, and arrogance.

The carelessness, stupidity, and arrogance of the Jedi.

He closed his eyes briefly against the depth of sadness washing through his soul. Losing the plant was bad enough, but for himself Tories had lost something far more valuable. Binalie was very clearly blaming him personally for the Jedi intrusion, despite the fact that he had had nothing to do with it. And while civility and politeness might eventually come back to their relationship, the trust and friendship that had once been there would probably never return.

And Corf, who had once looked on the old Jedi Guardian with the respect and awe usually accorded to the greatest of heroes, now hated him. And would probably continue to do so for the rest of his life.

He reached what was left of the wall and picked his way over the rubble, an edge of anger stirring through the well of sadness. The Jedi Council could claim as loudly as it wanted that it knew nothing about what had happened here today. But there had been Jedi robes and broken lightsabers among the assault transport's wreckage-Tories had seen them with his own eyes. Someone on Coruscant knew where those Jedi had come from, and who exactly had sent them.

One way or another, Jedi Guardian Jafer Tories was going to track that person down.

The hooded face of Darth Sidious blinked into view above Doriana's holoprojector. "Report."

"The operation has been successful, my lord," Doriana said. "The Spaarti Creations plant has been destroyed."

"And the Jedi?"

"As far as the public is concerned, the blame rests entirely on their shoulders," Doriana said.

"Excellent," Sidious said with satisfaction. "Has anyone expressed interest in examining the assault transport?"

"Commander Roshton suggested it should be done," Doriana said. "But it was a half-hearted remark, focused mainly on seeing whether they could identify who had been aboard from the designs of the various lightsabers in the wreckage."

"Encourage him to continue along that line," Sidious ordered. "By the time he discovers that such an examination is a dead-end, all evidence of the transport's remote-control system will have vanished into the scrap recyclers." He smiled thinly. "One of the many small advantages of dealing with Jedi, Master Doriana. With a few small props-a robe, a lightsaber, an unrecognizable body-you can easily create the illusion of a fallen hero."

"Indeed, my lord," Doriana agreed. "I presume the remote operator himself will be leaving Cartao soon?"

"He is already gone." There was a pause, and Doriana had the sense of those unseen eyes probing his face. "You still disapprove of this operation, don't you?"

"I don't disapprove, my lord," Doriana hastened to assure him. "But I am still puzzled. Why deliberately destroy Spaarti? It could be of immense service to the Separatists. Why not keep it intact for experimentation and manufacture?"

"Because by its very nature it is indefensible," Sidious told him. "The Republic might instead gain hold of it and could utilize it with equal devastation against us."

He shook his head. "No, Master Doriana. With a wild card of this potential, it's far better to take it off the table entirely." He smiled again. "Especially when other long-term advantages can be squeezed from it."

"That part was most definitely a success," Doriana agreed, nodding. "I don't think Jedi are going to be very welcome on Cartao for a long time to come. Certainly not if Lord Binalie has anything to say about it. Even Tories, who had become something of a hero among the people in all this, is pretty well finished."

"And as the economic ripples of Spaarti's destruction spread through that region, so will that attitude," Sidious said. "The destruction of the Jedi will be only half a victory if the people of the galaxy mourn their loss. Thanks to your work there today, few in Prackla Sector will shed a even tear at their passing."

"Absolutely," Doriana said, nodding. "Have you further orders, my lord?"

"No," Sidious said. "Stay long enough to clean up any final details, then you may report back to your post on Coruscant." The other's head tilted slightly. "One other matter. The reports I saw indicated that the clone cylinders created during the Republic's time in the plant were destroyed in the attack. Is that true?"

"No, my lord," Doriana said. "They were stored in one of the Outlinks several kilometers away from the main complex and made it through undamaged. Supreme Chancellor Palpatine has instructed me to transport them secretly to an old underground fortress on Wayland that he

recently reactivated."

"Really," Sidious said thoughtfully. "How many are there?"

"Several thousand." Doriana hesitated. "If you'd like, I could arrange for them to be lost."

Sidious pursed his lips in thought, and Doriana held his breath. It would be easy enough for him to sabotage the transport of the cylinders in transit, of course, or even before they left Cartao. The problem was that with so few people in on the secret, that kind of action would open him up to a dangerously high risk of discovery. Still, if Sidious wanted it done...

But the Sith lord shook his head. "Don't bother," he said, his lips twisting contemptuously. "A few thousand extra cloning tanks will hardly make a difference to the war effort. Let Palpatine have his little trophies."

Quietly, Doriana let out his breath. "Yes, my lord."

"I'll contact you soon," Sidious continued. "Once again, well done. The plan continues to move forward."

"And I look forward to its completion," Doriana said. "Farewell, Lord Sidious."

Sidious smiled. "Until next time, Master Doriana."

The End