

Star Wars: Episode III Revenge of the Sith

[JW-Titus](#) (a Fan Novel)

Chapter 1

Space as far as the eye could see. Space potted with millions upon millions of pinpoints of light that were distant stars, planets and other such celestial bodies. A violent, unseen storm of cosmic rays and racing spacedust filled the vast sea of dark, but it remained unseen so all was regarded as peaceful, still. Serene.

That serenity was shattered by the sudden emergence of a giant ship out of hyperspace. At first the ship appeared impossibly long, stretching on for millions upon millions of meters, but as it reverted back into realspace it settled into its actual form—which was still quite enormous and impressive.

The giant Separatist cruiser tore through space on full, blood-red engines like a sleek, ravenous sea animal chasing its prey. The bow of the ship resembled a snarling jaw, and the wide windows of the bridge its glowing, angry eyes. It's tailfin was inverted. A gaping hole through the middle of the ship—the beast's empty stomach—housed its enormous hanger bay. One could see all the way through the ship to the starfield on the other side, showing why the beast was so famished and so intent on catching its prey. Prickling its body were countless turbolaser batteries like row upon row of barbs. But the most dangerous, the most intimidating feature of the ship was the giant bombardment gun on its underside.

Fifty smaller cruisers of unmistakably-similar design swarmed behind the lead ship like trailing spawn. They were smaller than their giant cousin, but equally fortified with weaponry across their dull gray hulls. These smaller ships were faster and more agile, yet a gap was forming between them and the larger ship as if they were falling behind. Yet they weren't being outrun. They were slowing intentionally to supply cover for their leader.

The reason for the cover came into view as forty wedge-shaped cruisers suddenly appeared out of hyperspace behind them and barreled down on the smaller ships.

The cluster of Separatist attack cruisers unleashed a hailstorm of red laserfire on the pursuing group of Republic ships. Assault Cruisers were the most prevalent model in the group, but leading the charge were five giant ships of a new design—*Venator*-class Star Destroyers. The Jedi cruisers, as they were more commonly known, were more heavily shielded and boasted much greater firepower than their smaller cousin, the Assault Cruiser. They also had greater speed and maneuvering capabilities, and could carry twice as many troops and vehicles. They were the greatest warships the galaxy had ever seen.

The Jedi cruisers and the Assault Cruisers returned fire immediately, absolutely pummeling the smaller attack cruisers. The black space between the opposing groups became alight with flashing explosions and fireballs of energy. Barrages of missiles were launched. Some reached their targets, tearing into the hulls of ships and spilling out troops and debris, but most were hit by stray laserfire that turned them into blue-white fireballs.

The smaller Separatist attack cruisers were outmatched and they knew it. These *Venator*-class Star Destroyers were too powerful to hold back for long. Relying solely on their missiles and laser batteries the Separatists could only hope to destroy ten, maybe fifteen, of the Republic ships before all fifty of theirs

were obliterated. They needed to do something to halt the advancing Republic forces to allow their larger cousin to reach its objective. If not, General Grievous' plan would fail, and he would not be pleased with such an outcome.

"It would appear the Republic was better prepared for our attack than you'd anticipated," Count Dooku said in his deep, smooth voice.

Standing on the upper level of the vast bridge of the giant Separatist Cruiser, The Count regarded the red and yellow, three-meter wide sphere that was a holo-display of the battle unfolding outside. The holo-display took up almost a quarter of the upper dais of the black and gray colored bridge, which was abuzz with the sounds of war-making. A curved railing ran along the wide edge of the upper level. Below, the rest of the bridge could be viewed. The cruiser's pilot's chair was on a small middle step a little ways below the railing. The main crew was seated in a semi-circle of high-backed chairs in front of flashing data consoles down below—right in front of the tall, curving bay of windows.

"Our attack cruisers won't last much longer against them. What do you plan to do next?" Dooku asked the figure standing only a few paces away.

General Grievous, Supreme Leader of the Droid Armies of the Confederacy of Independent Systems, turned his white-masked face away from inspecting the holo-display and stared narrowed, yellow eyes at The Count.

Dooku had fallen under that exact gaze numerous times before, and every time he had peered back without even a hint of flinching. And why should he flinch? Yes, General Grievous was a monstrosity of a being—living flesh molded together and kept alive by a mechanical, bone-white form—and he was the most brilliant military strategist he had ever met, but Dooku was a Dark Lord of the Sith! The power he wielded was far greater than that of some mechanical fighting machine. He had no reason to fear.

Yet Grievous continued the power struggle. The Droid General erected his tall form to its full height and turned to face Dooku, the hydraulic pistons in his legs making hissing, whirring sounds as he did. Grievous' bodyguards, three specially-modified droids programmed and built specifically for close combat with Jedi Knights, reacted instantly to The General's movement. The gray-caped droids walked forward from their spots along the wall, electro-staffs raised, their glowing, red eyes regarding Dooku intently.

A metal hand emerged from the slit in the white cape wrapped around Grievous' wide, upper body and brushed the cape back to reveal a holster belt. The movement was done nonchalantly, as if Grievous were merely readjusting the cape, but Dooku knew the movements true meaning. He didn't even have to look down to know what Grievous was showing him—to know the silent threat the Droid General was conveying.

The threat wasn't the blaster Grievous was displaying, nor was it signaling his bodyguards into action. The threat was the two lightsabers dangling from the holster belt; trophies gathered from Jedi Grievous had killed in combat. And they weren't the only two such trophies. Dooku knew that Grievous had gathered dozens over the past few years of the Clone Wars, but only kept those two, plus two on the other hip, on him.

The trio of bodyguards took another step forward and clicked their electro-staffs on. A red shaft of energy pulsed up and down the length of the staffs, creating a solid beam and a soft, crackling sound.

With a whirl of mechanics, Grievous snapped an open, metal hand up to his shoulder. The bodyguards tensed at the signal, looking as if they would pounce at any moment.

Dooku narrowed his eyes in anger and contempt. *How dare this thing challenge the power of the dark side!* he thought. *How dare it try to equate its conquests to those of the Sith! We have been killing Jedi for centuries without the help of mechanical perversion!.*

Although Grievous had no mouth with which to smile—just a vertical row of slits in his mask that were a vocal amplifier—Dooku could see a smile in The General's viper-like, yellow and black eyes.

His bodyguards still awaiting the order to attack, Grievous closed his hand into a fist. The droids straightened from their crouched, attack stances and deactivated their electro-staffs. Then, as if nothing had happened, they moved back to their places against the wall with staffs tucked to their sides.

For a moment this sent Dooku spiraling even further into internal rage, but he knew that getting angry would only play into The General's game, so he masked the fury and kept it welled up in the smoldering pits of his soul. The calm, diplomatic visage that he had mastered so well over the years slipped across his face. "What is it you plan to do next, General?" he asked.

They held each others' gaze for a moment, then Grievous turned his attention back to the holo-display and flicked a switch on the console. "Launch fighter groups from cruisers one through thirty," Grievous said into the console with his deep, heavily synthesized voice, the metal mandibles on either side of his vocal amplifier clicking back and forth with each word.

Dooku shook his head. "The Jedi fighters will tear our droid starfighters apart. We must launch all our sentient-piloted fighters if we are to stand a chance against them."

Grievous paid the dissent little attention. He merely kept his eyes on the display as he said, "Must I remind you that I am the military strategist here, Dooku? Our fighters will be perfectly fine. In fact, they will be more than that—they will keep those cruisers off our backs long enough for us to reach Coruscant."

"And *how* is that?" Dooku asked.

"Because there are only a handful of Jedi in that group of cruisers."

Surprise crossed Dooku's regal face for a handful of seconds before he wiped it away. He had not been informed that things had been planned so thoroughly. "Of course," he said, trying to sound as if he'd known all along.

Another smile flittered across The General's eyes. He had seen the momentary flash of surprise on Dooku's face. But he kept it to himself. He knew that Dooku had been left out of the loop on many upcoming events. Many.

For some reason, Dooku had doubts about the success of this mission. General Grievous had never failed before in a plan he had set forth, but this time things felt...different. He couldn't place exactly what it was, but something about it didn't feel right. A prompting in the dark side told him that something was wrong, and that he should be careful.

Dooku had known from the beginning that Grievous was secretly working for his Master, Darth Sidious. He had sensed it right away. Sent to keep an eye on him or to kill him once his worth as an Apprentice was spent, or both, it did not matter. Dooku was prepared for what would come, and would kill Grievous whenever he dared to strike.

He was not angered by the betrayal. It was part of being a Sith. He knew that his Master would do what he could to keep Dooku in line, as well as to keep him from growing too powerful. And Dooku would continue to try to overthrow his Master. In the Sith Order only the strongest could survive, and if you weren't strong or clever enough then you had to die.

But now, with this mission, Grievous' ties to Darth Sidious had been made blatantly obvious. Only the dark lord of the Sith had enough power and influence in the Republic to make certain Grievous' kidnapping of the Chancellor would be a success. Only Darth Sidious could have manipulated the Jedi and the Republic's military forces the way they had been just prior to this mission; dispersed and weakened. Only Darth Sidious could have insured such success.

...And now he was finding out that Grievous had been informed of certain aspects of the attack that he had not. This was most troubling indeed.

Matters in the galaxy were reaching a precipice. So much planning was about to reach its conclusion. So much was about to be revealed. The Jedi, Sidious' only real obstacle, were already so close to being

wiped out. It would only take one small push in the senate to turn their already poor perception of the Jedi into all-out mistrust and hatred. The fires need only be stoked a little more and the Jedi Order would fall.

Yet Dooku had not been informed by his Master. He was slipping up in the game.

That will soon change, Dooku thought, peering again at General Grievous.

But his time was running out, and he knew it. It was clear that Sidious wanted to make absolutely certain that Dooku knew of Grievous' true allegiance. This could mean only one thing—his Master was gloating. His Master wanted him to know that *he* was going to die, and soon. Just as Dooku thought, this mission was meant to end in disaster. His Master wanted him to know that he was responsible for his death. He wanted to leave no question about it. Sidious must have discovered that he had been plotting to get rid of him. That was the only logical answer.

A small smile crossed Dooku's lips as he peered at the holo-display. He would be prepared for the trap with Grievous. Soon, he would know everything he needed to become the Master, and then he would wield the dark side with such power that none could possibly oppose his might! Soon....

"General—all droid fighters have been launched from their designated cruisers," a Neimodian voice said through the comm. unit.

"Good," Grievous said, then began tapping into the datapad on the display console. "Order groups nine through fifteen to concentrate their assaults on these targets, while groups one through eight target the following."

There was a slight pause as the communications director waited for the data to be transferred, then he said, "Yes, *General*," and clicked off.

Dooku watched the display as the swarms of Vulture droid fighters reacted to their new orders and began to move into the designated formations. Dooku followed each group's intended path and saw what The General had in mind. It was a simple maneuver, yet if executed correctly it would force the Assault Cruisers to split their attention off of the attack cruisers and onto the fighters. That is—if General Grievous was right about the number of Jedi pilots there were on these cruisers.

A new cluster of small ships appeared on the holo-display underneath the group of Republic cruisers, flashing in the tell-tale yellow that signified a new threat.

"Enemy starfighters launched, General," the Neimodian communications director's voice said through the comm. *"Thirty squadrons of Clonetrooper starfighters...and one squadron of Jedi starfighters."*

"Re-order half of the droid fighter groups to concentrate on the Jedi squadron. Launch all sentient-piloted groups to handle the clone pilots," Grievous ordered.

"Yes, *General*."

Dooku watched as half of the droid fighters broke off of the main group and headed for the Jedi squadron. He looked out the windows and saw the shimmering sphere of Coruscant rapidly growing larger.

"How long until we reach Coruscant?" he asked.

"Estimated time of arrival; ten minutes," a Neimodian technician's voice said through the comm. unit.

Time was running out, but it was not yet gone. Dooku's keen observations and strength in the Force had afforded him sufficient warning for what was about to happen, and he had made his own plans, his own means of escape. And, as he always did, Dooku found opportunity in the situation.

"Very well," he said, keeping himself alert for the trap he knew was to come.

"Okay, squadron, stay sharp. Here they come," Anakin Skywalker said into the comm. unit of his head set.

The new Jedi Starfighters were a tough lot. They had the same wedged body shape as the originals, but were split down the middle from stern to the newly-designed, ball-shaped cockpit. They also had a pair of extendable, stabilizing wings near their back sides. Their shielding and weaponry were much stronger than their predecessors, and they were faster, too. Ever the mechanic, Anakin had made some extra-special modifications to his own starfighter. These modifications had proven so effective they had eventually been adopted by almost all of the other Jedi. But modifications or not, none of them could pilot like Anakin.

"Roger, Lead." "Affirmative, Lead." "Copy, Lead," the voices of several Jedi said into his comm..

Lead, Anakin thought. *My call-sign*. A smirk crossed his lips. It felt good to be in command; to have these Jedi—some of which were Jedi Master's twice his age—listening to and carrying out his orders, to have the ability to decide who would do what and when, to be respected for his skills. To have the power to do what he saw fit.

He had definitely earned it, as well as the level of Jedi Knight. For three years of the Clone Wars he had proved his worth countless times over. Numerous battles against the Separatists had been won because of *his* skills and cunning. Millions of lives had been saved and, yes, even ended, because of his decisions in battle. But those lives ended had been either enemy combatants or just merely clones, so he felt no remorse for their losses. Clonetroopers were disposable and easily replaced, and his enemies got what they deserved for their treachery.

The Republic had forced the Separatists back in the last few months despite General Grievous' hugely successful campaign. Now, the Separatist forces were on the very edge of defeat and they knew it, which is why they dared something so bold as to kidnap the chancellor.

Anakin's mechanical right hand began strangling the control yolk at this thought, the leather of the thick black glove over the hand crackling under the pressure. His upper lip curled back in an angry scowl. *You'll regret having done this soon enough, Dooku*, he thought.

Anakin saw the swarm of droid starfighters headed towards them. He looked to the blue and white astromech droid secured in its slot in his fighter and asked, "Artoo—how long until they are within firing range of Coruscant?"

The little droid swiveled its head around to peer at him through the viewport with its yellow and white, flashing visual sensor, then gave a series of whistles and beeps.

Anakin read the translation in his console, then said to himself, "Eight minutes.... We don't have much time." Then, to the entire squadron, he said, "Lock wings into attack positions." He flicked a switch on his control console to extend the stabilizing wings of the fighter.

Black panels with dull, gray lining folded out from the top and the bottom of the widest edge of the wedge-shaped fighters to create the wings. These wings' ionic chargers added extra power to the engines of the ships making them even faster. This added power also made the fighters more agile, which the Jedi used to their advantage.

The mass of droid fighters grew closer and closer, blocking their path to the giant Separatist cruiser.

"Stay tight," Anakin ordered.

"Roger that, Lead." "Copy, Lead." "Will do, Lead." "May the Force be with us...." were the responses.

The tension was malleable—even in a group of well-trained Jedi. Anakin could feel it in the Force. “Stay focused,” he ordered, and almost immediately he felt the tension ease. “Break into attack pattern beta on my mark.”

The group of fighters were nearly upon them now.

“Ready....” Closer.

Artoo gave a hurried series of beeps, and Anakin looked at the console to see that his ship had been locked on target by several fighters

“Ready....” Closer.

Anakin could feel the Force telling him what was about to come.

“Now!” he shouted.

The squadron of Jedi starfighters suddenly became a tangled maze. In a fluid, perfect execution the Jedi pilots zigzagged, shifted, and rolled each other as a torrent of red laserfire sliced through the space they had just been in. The maneuver was designed to throw off the tracking and targeting computer-brains of the droid fighters, causing them to waste precious time re-acquisitioning their targets—time the Jedi would use to their advantage.

The Jedi starfighters increased their speed, then barrel-rolled, dodged and spun their way through the groups of droid fighters. None of the Jedi fighters returned fire as they spun through the flood of fighters. The risk of hitting one of their own was too high. Besides—they were too occupied with piloting through the mass of fighters to try something like that.

Except for one.

Anakin twisted and rolled his fighter with the greatest of ease, the slightest of touch, releasing blast after deadly blast of laserfire. Each shot hit home, causing an explosion to erupt where a fighter had just been. He was all over the place. One second he was banking to the right, then he was in a barreling spin and rolling in the other direction. He was heading straight for a fighter, then spinning away as a cloud of fire and debris raced by underneath.

Anakin single-handedly cleared a wide swath in the middle of the swarm of droid fighters, and he did it all with nonchalant ease.

Emerging on the other side, the Jedi banked and looped in tight, fast turns. They attacked the backside of the group of droid fighters before they even had a chance to turn.

Working together through the Force and a plan of attack, the Jedi hammered the middle of the group with red lances of energy. Droid fighters exploded everywhere as the Jedi raced through in a V-formation with Anakin in the lead.

As Anakin continued to lead them through the group with half-closed eyes, Artoo cut into his thoughts with a series of beeps. He opened his eyes and looked down at his tactical display. The outer fringes of the group of droid fighters were swinging back around and in. Like a giant swarm of angry insects, the droids were closing in the gaps and encapsulating the Jedi. Once they did, the Jedi would be trapped in the middle of the sphere of droid fighters with attacks coming from all sides.

“Just as expected,” Anakin said to himself with a smile. “Squadron—their closing the net. Break in your designated directions on my mark, then form up in your pairs.” Anakin watched the tactical, holo-display of the fighters closing in all around them, and without even watching continued to shoot down fighters as he spun and dodged.

“Three, two, one—MARK!” he shouted, and the V-formation split with each Jedi fighter heading in a different direction. Anakin spun straight up, picking off fighter after fighter as he climbed.

When he finally came out of the group he had two enemy fighters on his tail. The Vulture droid fighters fired rabidly, but Anakin dodged every bolt. In an effort to shake the tails, he dove back into the swarm. The two fighters followed, and Anakin slowed to allow them to catch up with him. They were right on his tail now, but Anakin was able to avoid every one of their laser blasts. He let them get even closer, and Artoo gave a series of bleeps and whistles that was so hurried the console couldn't translate.

"I know what I'm doing," Anakin told the droid, allowing the shots of the fighters to come even closer. Then, he pulled the steering yolks hard and banked to the left. The droid fighters tried to match his move, but couldn't and slammed right into a cluster of their own in a fiery ball.

"See," Anakin told Artoo, who was warbling a series of woes.

"Anakin—where are you?" an all-too familiar voice said over his comm.. *"I could use some help."*

"What's your position, Obi-Wan?"

"I'm at point-two-nine. I've got three on my tail and can't shake them."

Anakin scanned his console, then looked out of the cockpit and over the right side of his fighter. "I see you," he said, then banked hard right to head towards him. "Turn to point-oh-three and I'll drop in right behind them."

"Hurry, will you? Two more just joined the others and they're getting close!"

"Patience, you must have, Master Obi-Wan," Anakin said, trying to sound like Master Yoda.

"That's not funny," Obi-Wan replied.

A broad smile crossed Anakin's face.

He put full throttle to the engines. Several fighters tried to cut him off on his way, but he rolled and picked them off as he continued forward. Finally, he came up behind the small group of fighters.

"Obi-Wan, I'm right behind them. Turn hard right in three...two...ONE!"

Obi-Wan jerked his fighter into a steep bank to the right. The fighters followed right behind him, as did Anakin. But Anakin didn't fire. He just continued following behind the group of droid fighters and Obi-Wan.

As soon as they came out of the turn the fighters began shooting at Obi-Wan's ship again, and still Anakin did nothing.

"Anakin—they're still back there! What are you doing!?" Obi-Wan asked as he spun and dove to keep from being blasted to pieces. Several of the shots came rather close, and a flustered Obi-Wan said, *"Look—this isn't funny anymore. This is no time for games. Get them off me!"*

Anakin smiled. "All right. All right. Bank hard left in three...two..."

"Are you actually going to do it this time? Or are you bluffing again?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Do you want to do this or not?" Anakin chided, his thumbs hovering over the fire buttons on the end of the control yolks.

"All right. Three...two...ONE!" Obi-Wan shouted.

Anakin pulled the yolks hard to the left, but realized as he did that Obi-Wan had banked to the right instead. Too late to change direction, Anakin just continued through his turn.

As he was coming out of it, he said, "Hey, I thought we were going to the—" He had to roll to the side to avoid crashing right into Obi-Wan's starfighter, then had to continue to juke to avoid the hailstorm of laserfire coming from the five droid fighters right behind it.

Narrowly coming out the other side unscathed, Anakin pulled his fighter back around after Obi-Wan and the pursuing fighters. A broad smile on his face, Anakin said, "All right. We're even."

"I wish I could have seen the expression on your face," Obi-Wan said, and there was no mistaking the smile in his voice.

Anakin sped up again and closed the gap. The droid fighters were close now. He closed his eyes to slits and let the Force guide his hands. He thumbed the triggers in short bursts; one after another, after another, then raced through the balls of fire and debris. When he opened his eyes again all that was in front of him was Obi-Wan's fighter. He pulled up next to him.

"Good shooting," Obi-Wan said.

There had been a time when Anakin would have wondered if Obi-Wan were being sarcastic, but that time was long gone now. The Clone Wars, and the long time they had spent fighting side-by-side in them, had changed that; had made them closer than ever before. Obi-Wan knew first-hand how skilled Anakin was in combat. A deep respect had grown between the two of them, and neither questioned the other's abilities anymore.

"Thanks," Anakin replied. "That was some good flying you did back there. I was impressed. Now let's get back to the fight, shall we?"

"Of course. After you, Lead."

The two of them rolled in unison, then dove back into the fray. Working together, they cut through the droid fighters with ease. Anakin was in the lead, with Obi-Wan slightly back and to the side as his wingman.

As they ventured deeper into the fight, they saw a pair of Jedi Starfighters being pummeled by a pursuing group of ten droid fighters. The Jedi did their best to evade, but they had been hit several times and were having trouble maneuvering.

"Anakin—"

"I already saw, Obi-Wan. That's Masters Torr  and Bindu. We've got to hurry," he said, then they dove to catch the group.

"Master Torr , Master Bindu, this is Anakin and Obi-Wan. We're coming around behind you. Just hold on for a little while—"

Master Torr 's fighter took a quick series of laser bolts.

"Mmwwaaaaahhhh!!!" the Jedi screamed over the comm., and then his fighter exploded in a large fireball.

"No...", Anakin whispered through clenched teeth. He strangled the yolks and focused his anger. He blasted the back two droid fighters of the group with quick shots, then three more. Seeing that they were in danger of being picked off, the last three droid fighters broke away from pursuing Master Bindu.

"Stay and protect Master Bindu, Obi-Wan," Anakin said. "I'll take care of these three."

Anakin took off after the trio of droids. They tried to shake him as a group at first, but when they saw that wasn't working they made to split up.

"No you don't," Anakin seethed. Closing his eyes and raising his hands off of the control yolks he concentrated his anger. He crossed his raised hands. Using the Force, he slammed the two outside fighters into the one in the middle in a violent blast.

Anakin's breathing remained heavy, his face contorted into a grim expression as the raw power he had just summoned continued to surge through him. He closed his eyes for a sweet, intoxicating moment and reveled in it. It felt wonderful. Using that power, he rejoined the fight.

Chapter 2

"We're coming up on the planet's first line of defenses now, General," a Neimodian voice said over the comm..

Grievous switched the holo-display to show the group of ships coming up in front of them. Twenty more Assault Cruisers, five more *Venator*-class Star Destroyers, and an assortment of smaller attack cruisers of differing designs. Grievous checked the giant cruiser's position, and when he saw it another evil grin crossed his eyes.

"Right on target," he said aloud to himself.

"General, should we call up some of our support cruisers from the rear-battle to help fend off these new ships?" a Neimodian tactical assistant asked. "Without them we'll be rather vulnerable to enemy attack on the bow."

Grievous paid the assistant no mind. He just stared at the chrono-clock in the console of the holo-display as it counted down.

Dooku watched Grievous, wondering if he should give the order to bring up the cruisers himself, but he could tell that Grievous knew what his next move was going to be so he held his tongue.

"Prepare all missile ports to launch. Prepare the main gun for firing," Grievous ordered.

He watched as the chrono continued to count down.

Dooku's eyebrows raised. Perhaps Grievous didn't have as much planned as he'd thought.

The Republic cruisers were getting closer and closer.

"Launch all missiles on my mark." Ten seconds left on the chrono.

"MARK!" Grievous shouted.

Hundreds of streaks of white fire and blue light shot out from the giant cruiser, filling the entire bay of windows on the bridge. They raced towards the on-coming Republic cruisers, who continued towards them unabated. The missiles approached, and the cruisers opened fire with their turbo laser turrets. Green and red laser fire was everywhere as the ships targeted the enormous barrage of missiles. Brilliant explosions began erupting all across the line of missiles as they were shot down, and the number of explosions only intensified as the missiles got closer to their targets. It looked as if the hail of missiles was going to be for nothing—that every last one of them would be destroyed before they even reached their targets.

Dooku shook his head in frustration.

Seeing this, Grievous said, "Watch and learn, Dooku. Watch and learn."

Dooku was about to tell him that he'd had just about enough of watching him turn this attack into a disaster when forty massive Separatist battleships appeared from out of hyperspace a short distance behind and to one side of the Republic cruisers. The newly arrived ships opened fire at once, launching volley after volley of their own missiles.

The Republic ships on that side were caught completely by surprise. The power to their shields concentrated mostly to the front of the ships, their back sides were left virtually unprotected. The newly arrived Separatist battleships' missiles and laserfire tore into these ships' sides and engine housings. There were explosions all over the ships, and some of them even exploded completely in brilliant flashes like a sun going supernova.

The Republic cruisers on the far side of the group reacted quickly and balanced their shielding power out across their hulls. They were able to withstand the blunt of the initial volley they received from the surprise attack, and several turned to face the new threat.

"Fire the main gun!" Grievous shouted, his synthesized voice charged with the elation of the battle.

The giant Separatist Cruiser rocked as the gun fired, and then a thick, red streak of light and energy shot away. The powerful bolt struck the underside of a Republic cruiser that had been banking and ripped all the way through the ship. A second later, the cruiser exploded in an massive fireball. The shockwave and racing debris from the explosion struck two more close to it, ripping huge chunks out of their hulls and sending them spinning out of control.

The Giant Separatist Cruiser barreled forward through the cloud of debris and the hole that had just been created in the picket of Republic ships. Several of the Separatist battleships fell into escort positions with the giant cruiser, while the others kept the Republic cruisers busy to keep them from pursuing.

Dooku peered up at Grievous and got smug, smiling eyes in return.

"We have things pretty much wrapped up here, Lead," Obi-Wan's voice said in Anakin's headset. *"What are your orders?"*

"The ARC fighters look like they could use some help," another Jedi said.

Anakin looked at his console. "Right. Form up. Let's go help the clones and our cruisers, Squadron," Anakin said.

What was left of the Jedi squadron formed up on Anakin and Obi-Wan's wings. Anakin inspected his squad. They'd lost four in the fight, and several that had survived were damaged—some rather severely.

Anakin scanned his tactical display to see how the halting of that giant Separatist cruiser was going, and was shocked to see that the ship had broken through the outer defense picket already. The ship was now less than two hundred thousand kilometers from the capital planet, and gave no signs of being stopped.

Suddenly, a horrible voice erupted on the Republic comm. channel.

"Republic Military forces—we have your precious leader captive aboard our ship," General Grievous' menacing, synthesized voice said. *"The glorious, military might of the Separatists has reached the very heart of your government. We have penetrated your pathetic defenses. By now you must realize that there is nowhere in this galaxy where you or your children are safe from us."*

"The Confederacy of Independent Systems demands the immediate halt of all Republic military aggressions and the withdrawal of your forces from within our borders. Should you refuse to meet our demands, we will unleash terror and destruction the likes of which you have never seen. Do as we say,

and I promise mercy will be shown. Defy us and you, and your Supreme Chancellor, will surely die! You have been warned."

Anakin's lip curled in a snarl as the echoes of Grievous' voice faded away on the comm.. Hatred, and with it power, surged through him. He broke off from the rest of the Jedi Squadron and began speeding away towards the giant cruiser.

"Stay on assignment, Squadron. I need to do something—alone. Obi-Wan, you have the lead," Anakin said.

"*Anakin*—" Obi-Wan began to say, but Anakin clicked off his comm. before he could hear another word.

He was not going to sit by and do nothing as Grievous and Dooku held the Republic hostage and assassinated Chancellor Palpatine. He had sacrificed too much, fought too hard and believed too strongly in the Republic and Palpatine's greatness as a ruler to allow such a thing to happen. And Palpatine had become too close of a friend. Somehow, he would stop that cruiser and save the Supreme Chancellor. Somehow.

An approaching Jedi Starfighter from behind caught his eye on his tactical display, and he clicked his comm. on. "Get back to the rest of the Squadron, Obi-Wan," he said, leaving no room in his voice for discussion. "That's an order."

"*Of course it is,*" Obi-Wan replied, yet continued to follow.

"I'm not kidding. You don't want to go along with me on this one. It's not going to be easy."

"*Since when has anything with you ever been easy?*" Obi-Wan jested. "*You're going to need my help. I'm going with you.*"

Despite his anger, a small smile crossed Anakin's lips and his anxiety lessened. He had come to depend on Obi-Wan's support and help in difficult situations, and vice-versa. They made an excellent fighting team, and always found a way to get through the impossible with each other's help. With Obi-Wan at his side what he had planned no longer seemed like such a suicide mission. There was hope.

"Thank you, Obi-Wan," Anakin said, and there was no mistaking that he truly meant it.

"*You can thank me later when we get through this. Now—what's your plan?*" Obi-Wan asked as their starfighters raced through the chaos of the enormous battle and after the giant cruiser.

Chapter 3

Anakin and Obi-Wan plunged their Jedi fighters through the ever-expanding battlefield around Coruscant and raced in the direction of the giant Separatist Cruiser. Even more massive battleships, cruisers and attack ships had emerged from hyperspace and joined in the fray. Now the number of Republic and Separatist capital ships fighting were too great to count. The battle was enormous; filled with a frenzied wrath and carnage the likes of which the galaxy had never seen. The true nature of war momentarily reared its ugly head right there above the central planet of the Republic. It presented itself proudly for all to see—death and destruction were its sole purpose.

The system's sun was creeping around from behind the city-planet, and as it did it lit the terminator of the planet with a brilliant, red and orange glow. The angle of the sun's light cast upon the uppermost levels of the battle; illuminating it, as if highlighting the destruction there. Dawn began creeping across the surface of the planet below, and the concentrated mass of lights of the city slowly began fading away.

The Cruiser was right above the planet now, positioning itself into a stable orbit. Surrounding it was a wall of Separatist battleships. These battleships fought like a crazed pack of Vulowolves, protecting their leader with such ferocity that no Republic ships had been able to penetrate their lines. But the Republic forces were gathering around the group now, and appeared to be set on breaking the protective barrier and getting at the giant cruiser.

Hundreds upon hundreds of Clone starfighters, droid fighters, other designs of Separatist fighters, and a handful of Jedi Starfighters that had come up from Coruscant, flocked around the enormous span of capital ships, locked in their own mortal combat. Anakin and Obi-Wan dodged their way through the mess, too intent on their objective to engage enemy targets. The chaos was terrible, and only beings as skilled in the Force as Anakin and Obi-Wan could pass through it unscathed.

The movements of their fighters were in perfect synchronism. When Anakin turned, so did Obi-Wan. When Anakin dove, twisted or spun, so did Obi-Wan. It looked as if one mind were controlling both ships, as if the flight plan had been pre-programmed. The long years of fighting together in The Wars had made them this way, had made them this good of a team.

They turned and headed straight for the concentrated mass of capital ships around the giant cruiser. This was where the fighting was the most intense, and the space was filled with blazing laser blasts, stray missiles, and enormous chunks of exploded cruisers on erratic paths.

A gap was beginning to form in the ring of battleships surrounding the giant cruiser. One had massive fires spouting out all over its hull, while two others had lost their stabilizers and were floating off course. Three of the Jedi Cruisers took advantage of the hole by focusing their weaponry on the ships in that area, overwhelming the battleships and making the hole even bigger. The line began to deteriorate and the Star Destroyers moved in, but the fight was far from over.

"Republic scum—if you dare to attack my flagship, I will rain down fire and destruction upon your capital city!" General Grievous' voice said over the comm.. *"And if that is not reason enough to give you pause,*

know this; I will not hesitate to kill your Chancellor should you attack! So you know that I am telling the truth, I will demonstrate this ship's awesome firepower! Watch, and tremble!"

Anakin looked at the giant cruiser through the mass of ships, and saw a bright red streak of light race out from underneath it. The giant laser beam raced towards the planet below, and Anakin's heart stopped for one terrible moment.

Padmé... She was all he could think about as he saw the red lance of light disappear through the atmosphere of the planet. The horrifying thought that that laser blast might be heading straight for her engulfed him, gripping him with fear. *Padmé!* his rage screamed.

"Anakin, calm down. It's all right," Obi-Wan said. *"That blast didn't even come close to the Jedi Temple. It struck somewhere in the industrial sector of the Old City."*

Anakin had to stop himself from spouting out that it hadn't been the Jedi Temple, but Padmé he'd been so worried about. Spilling the secret of he and Padmé's relationship would have been a terrible mistake.

He also berated himself for being so open with his feelings. Obi-Wan had been able to detect his anger far too easily. He needed to conceal it better than that if he wanted to continue to use such power in his former-Master's presence. And he knew that he needed to have such power at his disposal if he wanted to accomplish what he planned to. He *needed* it. Such power, if used wisely, could be a valuable tool. He'd learned as much over the course of The Wars. His raw emotions lent him abilities unmatched by any other Jedi.

But Obi-Wan couldn't know. He, and the rest of the Jedi, just wouldn't understand. They would accuse him of dabbling in the dark side and say that he was placing himself in grave danger. But Anakin knew he was no ordinary Jedi. He was The Chosen One! He could use such power without peril, and had done so on numerous occasions already.

Anakin closed his eyes and pulled his feelings in close, down into the depths of his presence in the Force. There, he allowed the dark power to collect and well where none could see it.

"Okay. Good," Anakin said, playing off his mistake as best as he could.

Cautiously, he reached out to Obi-Wan's presence in the Force to see if he'd bought it, and was pleased to find that his former-Master was far too busy piloting to pay it much mind. Anakin grinned. He had covered himself well.

Back to business, Anakin looked at his tactical display.

"We've got company incoming, Obi-Wan," Anakin said. "A squad of Tri-Fighters."

"Great," Obi-Wan bemused.

Anakin tightened his grip on the control yolks as the squad of Tri-Droids approached. Tri-Droids were a terrible menace. Their triple-curved wing assembly gave them their name. They were much faster, tactically-smarter and more heavily armed than Vulture Droidfighters, and were heading straight for them.

"Which ones do you want? The eight on the left, or the eight on the right?" Obi-Wan asked.

"We don't have time to deal with them. We'll just have to lose them somehow."

"Ummm...how?"

"Heads up!" Anakin shouted as the squad of Tri-Fighters came barreling in at them with blasters blazing.

The two Jedi fighters split out of the way of their charge and spun to safety. After the squad had passed, Obi-Wan and Anakin joined back up in formation in perfect unison.

"They're coming around, Anakin. What are we going to do?"

Anakin scanned the space in front of him. They were in the thick of things now. Just slightly below them were numerous capital ships fighting it out in close combat. The massive ships were pulling up right next to each other and pummeling their opponents at point-blank range.

Anakin got an idea.

The squad of Tri-Fighters had closed in behind them now. They began opening fire. Blaster bolts zipped right past Anakin and Obi-Wan's fighters.

"Follow me!" Anakin said, then rolled his ship into a dive.

Obi-Wan was right on his tail, and behind him the Tri-Droids. The droids continued firing as they dove, and both of them had to juke to keep from being hit.

Once they were nearing the battling capital ships, Anakin began bringing his fighter out of its dive and aimed to fly right between the big, opposing crafts.

"*You must be joking,*" Obi-Wan said when he saw where they were heading.

"Stay focused," Anakin said, then dove his fighter between the two ships. Obi-Wan followed.

The narrow corridor between the two ships was filled with blaster fire and the exchange of missiles. With the utmost skill, Anakin and Obi-Wan spun, dove, and twisted their way through the obstacles. More than once, the impact of a missile or a blast bolt sent debris exploding into their path. But with the Force on their side, they were able to foresee these dangers and avoid them. Moments later, they came out from between the two ships unscathed.

The Tri-Fighters, on the other hand, were not so lucky. Most of them were picked off by debris, missiles or blaster fire. But a handful made it through.

"*There's still four of them back there,*" Obi-Wan said as the two of them sped away from the capital ships and toward another line of fighting cruisers.

Anakin checked his display, and saw Obi-Wan was right. "We'll have to do it again, then." He aimed his fighter right between two more large ships, a Venator-class Star Destroyer and a Separatist battleship. Obi-Wan followed right behind.

The passage between these two ships was just as chaotic as the last. Laserfire and missiles were everywhere. Anakin noted as two more Tri-Fighters were picked off, but the last two were quite persistent.

A frenzied series of chirps and bleeps from Artoo snapped Anakin's attention back out the viewport.

"*Uhhhh...Anakin?*" Obi-Wan said over the comm..

The two cruisers were no longer just flying next to each other, they were going to collide. The front edge of the knife-like Star Destroyer collided and began cutting into the side of the battleship, tearing a gaping gash in its side. Escape by going up or down was now impossible. And the only thing keeping Anakin and Obi-Wan's starfighters from being crushed was a narrow, indented corridor in the side of the Star Destroyer. They were trapped in the middle of this trench with no way out but forward, and even that path was closing quickly.

Anakin narrowed his eyes and grit his teeth. "We can make it," he said.

The walls became closer and closer. Chunks of durasteel hull plating were all about. The thunderous crash and screeches of the ships colliding filled Anakin's cockpit. The space visible at the end of the trench was growing smaller and smaller, and looked like it would close completely at any second.

The walls were nearly touching the sides of their starfighters now, and Artoo whaled a loud scream. The end was almost closed completely. Sweat dripped from Anakin's brow. Closer and closer...

Anakin and Obi-Wan's starfighters zipped out from between the two ships only a split second before the opening closed completely. The two remaining Tri-Fighters crashed into the closed opening in fireballs.

"That wasn't so bad," Anakin said with a sly grin as they flew away from the two crashing ships.

"Remind me again why I always go along with you on your foolish adventures," Obi-Wan commented.

They were within the inner circle now. The giant Separatist Cruiser lay before them. The defensive line of battleships had been completely broken. Republic Assault Cruisers and Jedi Cruisers were moving in to surround the ship holding the Supreme Chancellor, while a handful of enemy battleships tried desperately to keep them back. Even though they now had a clear shot, no Republic ship fired upon the giant cruiser. They only surrounded it to make sure it had nowhere to go.

Anakin and Obi-Wan were close to the cruiser. It was so big that it filled the entire viewport of Anakin's fighter.

"So, *what do we do now?*" Obi-Wan asked.

"We're getting aboard that ship and rescuing Chancellor Palpatine," Anakin stated.

"How did I know you were going to say that. This is crazy. You know that, don't you?"

Anakin smiled. "It wouldn't be an adventure if it wasn't."

Artoo switched the image on the display to bring something to Anakin's attention. His brow furrowed, he pushed a few buttons on his console to magnify the image.

"Anakin, are you seeing this?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Was just taking a look," he said as he inspected the objects more closely. It was a group of droid starfighters, but they were a design he'd never seen before. They were similar to the Vulture droidfighter, but were wider with a larger, flat and round central core covered with bumps.

"What do you make of them?" Obi-Wan asked.

"I'm not sure.... Artoo—can you make anything of them?"

R2-D2 gave a series of beeps and whistles to tell Anakin that he'd never seen anything like them before either.

Anakin read the droid's response. "We may be in for a surprise," he said.

"I really hate flying," Obi-Wan said.

The strange fighters continued towards them. Anakin's hands were ready to yank the control yolks at the first sign of danger, and he reached out through the Force to feel for any such feeling. The fighters were closing in, and his thumbs moved over the triggers on the ends of the control yolks—hovering there and ready to fire.

The fighters were almost upon them now, and Anakin expected them to open fire at any second. But instead of firing upon them, the small bumps all over the tops of the central cores of the droid fighters popped off, and the fighters dove down and away from the Jedi Starfighters. The small cloud of half-sphere bumps raced towards Anakin and Obi-Wan's starfighters on blue-white engines, and revelation suddenly struck Anakin.

"Break away! Break away!" he shouted, turning his fighter sharply to the left and into a dive.

Obi-Wan, for the first time, reacted just a split second later, which was just a little too late.

Anakin watched as the cloud of half-spheres swarmed at Obi-Wan's ship as he turned. Right before they reached Obi-Wan's ship the domes of the half-spheres popped up to reveal the heads and four short, grappling legs of small droids. The droids turned completely around and latched onto Obi-Wan's fighter with their claw-like legs.

Once they landed the droids crawled across the surface like Dango beetles and headed straight for Obi-Wan's blaster cannons. Obi-Wan tried shaking his fighter back and forth to throw them off, but they held fast. Two more, shorter legs emerged from the front of the small droids and began shooting out a green laserbeam. The cutting lasers tore through the blaster cannons, and after only a few seconds the front half of one went flying off of the ship.

"I could use a little help here," Obi-Wan said through the comm.. *"These things are cutting apart my ship!"*

"I'm on it," Anakin said. He had come up behind Obi-Wan, and was waiting for a clear shot to try and blast some of them off of the ship. "Hold still, Obi-Wan," he said when Obi-Wan began shaking again to try to throw the droids off. "I can't have you moving around like that while I shoot them off."

"You're going to do what?!"

Another of Obi-Wan's cannons went flying off, and Anakin had to swerve to avoid being hit by it. "Just hold still, will you?" he said.

Anakin slipped into deep concentration and narrowed his eyes. His tactical display zoomed in on the small droids, and he lined up the cross-hairs. He waited for just a second, then fired one quick burst. The shot hit the droid full-on and sent it spiraling off of the ship in a trail of fire. He squeezed off another shot, then another and another—picking off three more.

"Anakin, hurry! They're going after Arfour!"

Anakin looked and could see that four of the things were around R4. The little, red and white astro-droid's dome was spinning as it tried to look at all of its attackers at once. The lasercutters began doing their work, and just moments later R4's domed head went flying off and rolling across the front of Anakin's fighter.

Artoo whistled and moaned after he watched the head float away, and Anakin fired twice more. The two shots got three of the four that had just taken off R4's head, but the forth began scurrying away. Anakin tried to track it, but both of his shots missed and struck Obi-Wan's fighter.

"Watch it! I'm on your side, remember?"

"Sorry," Anakin said. "This is taking too long. They're going to get to your ship's vitals before I can shoot them all off. I'm going to try something different."

Anakin punched up the throttle and came in right over Obi-Wan. "Just hold steady," he said, then rolled his ship so that he was upside down directly over Obi-Wan. Anakin ground his teeth in concentration. This was going to be tricky.

"I do hope you know what you're doing," Obi-Wan said.

Anakin moved his fighter quickly and with the greatest of skill. Using the edge of his ship, he scrapped off several of the small droids and they went floating away into space. Then, he did the same thing on the other side of Obi-Wan's ship. He got the droids there as well, but his turn wasn't quite as precise this time. His slight mistake scrapped off hull-plating and broke off one of his own ship's wings.

Anakin rolled away, and inspected the surface of Obi-Wan's ship. Sparks erupted all across its surface, but the droids were gone. "Got 'em," he said.

Movement on the left edge of Anakin's fighter caught his attention. "Oh-oh," he said under his breath as one of the small droids came into view. The thing must have jumped over to his ship as he was scraping them off of Obi-Wan's.

Artoo also saw the droid and gave a startled whistle, which caught the droid's attention. It crawled across the surface of the wing and up to Artoo. It extended the two front legs, where the laser-cutters were located, towards the base of Artoo's dome. But just before it could begin cutting, Artoo opened a small hatch in his body and extended a metal arm. Artoo zapped the droid with a blue-white shaft of electricity. A spasm ran through the multi-legged droid's mental body and blue-white light coursed over its frame. Then it let go and floated away into space.

"Ummm.... I seem to be having some problems here," Obi-Wan said. "I've lost my stabilizers, and the steering is hardly responding."

"Are your engines still working?"

"Yes."

"Good. If they weren't, you'd be in trouble," Anakin said.

As if on cue, the engines cut out.

"I think I'm in trouble."

Anakin looked ahead and saw that Obi-Wan's fighter was heading straight for the giant cruiser. "Can you eject?"

There was a slight pause, then, *"No. None of my secondary functions are responding."*

Anakin peered ahead and quickly assessed the situation. He knew that he was going to have to act fast if he was going to be able to do anything to save Obi-Wan. He pulled up right next to his former-Master, and with a swift jerk of the controls rammed the side of his fighter against Obi-Wan's.

"What are you doing?" Obi-Wan yelled.

"Saving your life. I'm aiming you at the open hangar of the ship." One more swift nudge, and Obi-Wan's fighter was on a direct course to fly into the enormous hangar through the middle of the ship.

"Okay.... Okay...." Obi-Wan said. His voice was filled with a tension Anakin had never heard before. "You're going to have to take out the shield generators for me to get through."

"Right," Anakin said, then sped ahead towards the ship.

Gun turrets opened fire on him as he approached. He dodged the fire with ease as he piloted towards an area right above the hangar opening. A massive, metal sphere sat atop of this portion of the ship, and Anakin opened fire on it with all his guns.

The intensity of the laser fire coming at him increased as soon as he began firing, but they did nothing to slow him or halt his barrage. He pummeled the power source of the shield generators with red lasers. The Force told him where to shot. It showed him the weakest spots in the sphere near its base. Finally, it erupted in a rolling ball of flame that his ship flew through.

As soon as the shields for the hangar went down, the computer systems of the ship automatically began closing the hangar doors. They were huge, lumbering pieces of durasteel, but they moved surprisingly fast.

"This just keeps getting better and better," Obi-Wan said.

"You'll make it," Anakin assured, even though he wasn't certain himself.

Artoo gave a series of concerned beeps and whistles.

Anakin positioned himself right behind and to the side of Obi-Wan's fighter as the closing doors loomed closer and closer before them. He could tell that it was going to be close. Really close.

With the Force on their side, both of them raced through the closing doors with only a handful of meters to spare on either side of their fighters. But now Obi-Wan was heading straight for the closed hangar doors on the other side of the ship.

A flash of light in Obi-Wan's cockpit caught Anakin's eye and he knew what Obi-Wan had in mind. Wanting to give him some room, Anakin banked away so as to make a pass of the inside of the hangar.

As he came around, he saw Obi-Wan's blue-white lightsaber blade sticking out of the top of his cockpit, cutting a hole. A second later the round piece flew away and Obi-Wan emerged. Obi-Wan jumped from the ship just before it crashed into the closed doors on the other side of the hangar.

Anakin watched Obi-Wan fall to his feet on the dull gray floor of the hangar. As soon as Obi-Wan landed he was attacked by a group of battledroids. Anakin swung his fighter around and came in. Obi-Wan was doing his best to fend off the tremendous number of attacking droids with his lightsaber, but there were too many. Anakin swooped in and opened fire, taking out a large swath of the droids.

Anakin landed as quickly as he could a short ways away and sprang from his cockpit. He ignited his own, blue-white lightsaber and ran to help Obi-Wan, taking out battledroid after battledroid along his way. He was swift and incredibly efficient with the blade. Each spin was tight, each swipe precise as if the blade were an extension of his body. His control was nearly perfect.

He reached Obi-Wan and they turned back-to-back.

"The elevators are this way. Let's get going," Anakin said, then began side-stepping to his right. Obi-Wan mirrored his moves as they swiftly walked towards the elevators with backs to each other, fighting off the attacking droids as they went.

Anakin and Obi-Wan stood with their backs to the elevator doors as they waited for them to open. Their lightsabers whirled up and down, back and forth as they continued to fend off the pursuing droids. Sparks from stray bolts hitting the wall behind them splashed across the backs of their Jedi robes. The droids walked after them slowly, firing as they came, stepping over their fallen comrades' broken metal frames.

A hiss from behind signified that the elevator doors were opening.

"Go! I'll hold them off," Anakin said over the noise of the fight.

Obi-Wan took a handful of steps back, then turned only to find a blaster muzzle pointed right at his face. Several battledroids were occupying the elevator, and were trying to get out to get at them. Obi-Wan blocked the first shot right back where it came from, then slipped to the side to dodge the second. He stepped right into the middle of the group of droids, spinning and chopping them down as he entered the elevator.

As he spun, something hard struck the hand holding his lightsaber. It slipped from his grasp and deactivated as it slid across the floor. Obi-Wan turned around to find a dazed droid standing behind him. He had struck it in the head with his hand and almost knocked it over. But it was regaining its balance quickly, and was raising its blaster to shoot. With only a split second to react, Obi-Wan grabbed the blaster with both hands and began wrestling with the droid. The droid held fast, and several shots fired off into the ceiling.

Anakin stepped backwards into the elevator, blocking blaster bolts coming from the charging droids outside until the doors closed. He turned to see Obi-Wan still struggling with the droid.

"Don't move," he warned Obi-Wan, then stabbed his blade right over his former-Master's shoulder and into the face of the droid. The droid went lax, then slumped to the floor to join the other droid bodies there.

"Thanks," Obi-Wan said, then the elevator began moving upwards.

Chapter 4

The bridge of the cruiser was even more bustling now. Dooku studied the holo-display with a wary eye, keeping his senses peeled for any sudden movement from Grievous or his bodyguards. Things were getting out of hand outside. The ring of battleships that had been protecting their cruiser were mostly destroyed, and now the ship was surrounded by Assault and Jedi Cruisers. It was as if the situation had been reversed. The Republic cruisers didn't fire upon the cruiser. They were only firing outward at the Separatist ships trying to break through.

The giant cruiser was trapped with nowhere to go.

"What now, General?" Dooku asked.

Grievous peered at him for just a handful of seconds, then clicked on the comm. and said, "Prepare to fire on the Republic cruisers."

Dooku had expected as much, but he still had to play his part of this whole charade to keep Grievous guessing.

Dooku clicked on the comm. and said, "Belay that order, Lieutenant."

Grievous stared daggers at Dooku, and Dooku said, "Are you mad? If we attack those ships they will surely defend themselves, and the fact that we hold their leader captive will no longer be a shield for us. They cannot afford to allow this ship to gain such an advantage. We will all be destroyed."

"Those ships will not stand a chance against our superior shielding and firepower." Grievous said. "Remember, Dooku—I have planned for everything on this mission." Grievous clicked the comm. on again. "Commence firing!"

Dooku watched on the display as the blaster bolts and missiles began striking the Republic cruisers. Apparently, the Republic ships had anticipated such a move, because they had their shields well balanced across their hulls and were able to withstand the onslaught without any serious damage. The Republic ships sat there taking the pummeling for some time. But then it was clear that the order to defend themselves was given, because all of them began returning fire.

"Prepare the main gun!" Grievous ordered.

"Sir! The intruder alert has been activated," a Neimodian voice said. *"Two Jedi have been spotted on the hangar level."*

Dooku could tell that Grievous hadn't expected this. Or so he thought....

"You seem surprised," Dooku jabbed. "Did your planning not include such an instance, General?"

"Lock down all elevators on that level," Grievous ordered. He began walking for the elevator, and his bodyguards followed right behind. "I'll handle this matter myself," he said as he passed Dooku.

"I'm sure you will, General," Dooku said with a sideways look as Grievous and his droids got in the elevator. After the doors closed with a hiss, he turned back to the holo-display and said to himself, "I'm sure you will."

Both Anakin and Obi-Wan nearly lost their balance and fell over as the elevator came to a sudden stop. Standing next to the control panel, Anakin looked it over. He tried pushing the button again. Nothing happened. Then, the flashing lights of the panel went out.

"I think they know we're here," Anakin said.

"Right," Obi-Wan said. He moved to the doors and tried to pry them open, but they wouldn't budge. He tried again, and got the same result. "The doors are magnetically sealed," he said as he reached into his robes and produced his lightsaber.

He clicked it on with a snapp-hiss and began cutting into the doors. Once he was finished, he deactivated the humming blade and replaced it on his hip. Then, with a quick wave of his hand he yanked the cut out piece of durasteel out of the door and let it fall to the floor.

Both he and Anakin approached the hole to peer through, and realized that there was no way they were getting out that way. There was nothing but a solid wall of plating in front of them. There was no door through which to get out of the shaft and back into the main part of the ship.

"We're wasting time," Anakin said, getting out his own blade and activating it. But instead of trying to cut through the wall of the shaft outside of the hole Obi-Wan had cut, Anakin turned his attention upwards and began cutting a hole in the ceiling. He made quick work of the hole, and once it was done he raised his black-gloved, right hand and blasted the metal out of the way with the Force. He moved under the hole and, gathering the Force within him, sprang up through it and onto the top of the elevator.

The shaft was dark and impossibly tall, stretching high into the air with no end in sight. Using the Force to aid his eyesight, Anakin saw a set of doors that led out of the shaft about twenty meters up.

He moved back to the edge of the hole in the ceiling of the elevator. Obi-Wan was standing just below him peering up. "I see a way out. Come on," he said.

Obi-Wan nodded. Then Anakin watched as his former-Master's eyes were drawn away from his to focus on something else. Obi-Wan squinted as he peered up and over Anakin's shoulder. Anakin was about to turn to see what he was looking at when a prompting in the Force told him to move—now!

Anakin rolled to the side on top of the elevator just in time to avoid being hit in the back by a barrage of red blaster bolts. The bolts exploded on the top of the elevator with a spray of sparks. Anakin came up out of the roll with his lightsaber in hand and activated it just in time to block three more shots from above.

A group of battledroids had opened the doors to the elevator shaft and were shooting down at him. Anakin tried his best to deflect the bolts back up at the shooters, but the angle of the shaft made it difficult. He waved his gloved hand and, using the Force, pulled the entire group of droids out of the doorway and tumbling into the shaft. The droids crashed onto the top of the elevator in a heap. With the door opening clear, Anakin gathered the Force within himself again and leapt into the air.

Anakin landed just inside of the doors with his lightsaber held at the ready. A group of eight battledroids were running down the hall, and as soon as they saw him they raised their blasters and opened fire. Anakin's saber moved swiftly, blocking every blast that came close to hitting him and sending several right back at their sources. The droids not taken down by deflected blaster fire met their end by the aggressive slashes of Anakin's blade.

The hall was empty again, and only the hum of Anakin's lightsaber and the soft hissing of the cut metal of the downed droids could be heard. Wisps of smoke and the smell of ozone filled the air as Anakin surveyed the hall ahead. He could hear something approaching, but wasn't certain what it was yet.

It finally dawned on him what it was. He tightened his grip on his lightsaber and held it up in front of him. He moved his feet into a more effective defensive stance.

"Obi-Wan, I need you up here—quick!" he called over his shoulder into the elevator shaft.

"I'm a little busy at the moment!" Anakin heard Obi-Wan's faint voice call up the shaft.

The sound grew louder, closer, and Anakin tensed. He narrowed his eyes as four Destroyer Droids rolled around the corner of the hall. The four droids unfolded mere meters away from Anakin and aimed their blaster arms at him. Their shields activated, encapsulating their rounded frames with a blue-white energy field, and they opened fire.

Anakin submersed himself in the Force, and drew upon the power his emotions lent him to stave off the attack. There were so many blaster bolts coming at him. Too many. His blue-white blade was a blur of motion as he moved to deflect each one that came too close to hitting him, but deflecting did no good. The bolts were merely absorbed by the shields of the droideka.

One deflected shot hit a pipe in the wall to Anakin's left side. The ruptured pipe caused a small explosion, which ignited the escaping gas into a fireball. The blast knocked Anakin backwards and off his feet. When he landed he continued tumbling head over heels as he fell through the open doors of the elevator shaft. His lightsaber fell out of his hand as he tumbled, and he grabbed the ledge of the doorway just in time to keep from falling into the darkness below.

Hanging on the ledge, unarmed, Anakin could hear the mechanical sounds of the droideka's walking towards the open shaft. They would be right in front of him any second, and he would be defenseless.

Anakin gathered the Force within him and pulled his body upwards. He launched up, and as he passed the open doorway he saw the Destroyer Droids just a handful of meters away. The droids opened fire upon seeing him. Anakin tucked and flipped to avoid being hit by the blasts, then let himself fall down into the darkness of the shaft.

Obi-Wan watched Anakin disappear through the hole in the ceiling. He moved under the hole to follow him up, and Anakin leaned back over the edge and said, "I think I see a way out. Come on."

Obi-Wan nodded, then the sudden appearance of light up the shaft over Anakin's shoulder caught his attention. He squinted and saw what the source of light was, then saw a streak of red light heading straight for them. Anakin rolled to the side. Obi-Wan ducked out of the way and moved back away from underneath the hole in the ceiling.

He heard the sound of Anakin's lightsaber igniting, followed by the whirring swish-swish of him blocking the blast bolts. This went on for some time, but then the sounds ended just as quickly as they had started. He couldn't hear any blasters shooting, and he couldn't hear the low hum of Anakin's lightsaber anymore.

But then there was a thunderous series of THUDs! on the ceiling. The loud crash caused Obi-Wan to flinch in spite of himself.

"Anakin?" he asked after a few seconds passed without any further stirring.

There was no answer. There was a slight scrapping noise, then the sound of footsteps.

"Anakin?" Obi-Wan asked again as he stepped towards the hole.

All of a sudden a battledroid dropped down through the hole with its blaster pointed right at him. Surprised, Obi-Wan ignited his lightsaber and blocked the first bolt, then cut the droid in half. As the droid fell in two halves, another droid suddenly dropped out of the hole in the ceiling. Obi-Wan backed away, blocking the blaster bolts as another, and another battle droid dropped down behind the first. It seemed as if as soon as Obi-Wan managed to cut down one droid, another dropped down through the ceiling to take its place. Sparks were erupting all over, and smoke began filling the elevator.

"Obi-Wan, I need you up here—quick!" Anakin's voice called down through the shaft.

"I'm a little busy at the moment!" Obi-Wan called back as he blocked a flurry of laser bolts and cut down yet another droid.

Finally, six battledroids later, the fight was over. But just in case there were more on the roof, Obi-Wan kept his lightsaber ignited and held at the ready as the smoke dissipated and sparks continued to fly from holes in the walls. With his free hand, he retrieved his comm. link from his utility belt.

"Artoo Deetoo, do you read me?" he said into the comm.. "Artoo Deetoo, come in."

He waited for a second, then a series of chirps and bleeps erupted from the comm..

"Good. I need you to get to a computer terminal for the ship right away. Anakin and I are stuck in the elevators and we need you to get them moving again. Do you think you can do that?" Artoo gave an affirmative chirp.

Obi-Wan was about to respond, when another loud thud hit the ceiling of the elevator. "Stand by," Obi-Wan said to Artoo, then put the comm. up and raised his lightsaber. He inched toward the hole in the ceiling as footsteps above came closer to it, ready to chop down the battledroids as soon as they appeared. A dark-clad figure dropped down through the hole and Obi-Wan raised his lightsaber to strike.

Anakin's eyes went wide at the sight of the raised blade. "Whoa! Whoa! I thought we were on the same side," Anakin said with raised hands.

Obi-Wan deactivated the blade. "Sorry. I thought you were another one of them," he said, indicating to the pile of droid bodies on the floor. More chips and whistles came from the comm. link, and Obi-Wan brought it back up to his mouth. "I don't know," he said in response to Artoo's question. "Just get them all operational again, I guess."

Artoo gave an affirmative bleep.

A second later the elevator lurched and began moving up again.

The elevator stopped several stories later. The outer doors opened, but the inner doors were damaged when Obi-Wan had cut through them, so they remained closed. Anakin peered out, then stepped through the hole in the doors and out into the darkened hallway.

The long hall showed no signs that any droid patrols were around. There were signs of severe wear and tear throughout the hall. Pockets of rust and dust were all over, and several pipes were leaking liquid and steam through cracks in their joint-sealings. The floor was covered by scuffmarks and signs of heavy traffic. Clearly The Wars were taking a toll on the Separatists' well-lined pockets.

Anakin waited for Obi-Wan to come through the elevator door, then the two of them began walking.

"All I'm saying is that this whole thing seems a little irrational—risking so much just to save one man," Obi-Wan said.

"One *great* man that has done more for the Republic than anyone in the past millennium," Anakin pointed out.

"From your point of view," Obi-Wan said as he glanced down a side hall.

Anakin stopped dead in his tracks. “What’s that supposed to mean?” he demanded.

Obi-Wan turned to regard Anakin. He shrugged. “I just don’t share with your view that Chancellor Palpatine is so great for the Republic. He’s too quick to push for, and accept, further expansion of his Emergency Powers.”

“Only when necessary for the good of the Republic.”

“But at what cost?” Obi-Wan countered. “How many more freedoms need to be removed *“for the good of the Republic?”* How much more power does the office of the Supreme Chancellor really need? Palpatine’s too comfortable with power and control. It makes me worried.”

“Then why did you even come here?” Anakin asked, defensive.

“To help you get through this alive, my friend,” Obi-Wan said with a small smile, clasping a hand on Anakin’s shoulder. Then he turned and began walking again.

Anakin was disarmed by Obi-Wan’s admission of loyalty. He could say nothing as he watched Obi-Wan walk away down the hall. Finally, he began walking again and said, “You’re wrong about Chancellor Palpatine. He’s a good man and knows what’s best for the people.”

“I’ve always been under the impression that the people know what’s best for the people—not one man,” Obi-Wan said as he was about to turn a corner in the hall.

A powerful shudder surged through the ship, and Anakin and Obi-Wan were tossed against the walls. Both of them stared at the ceiling, wondering what was going on. Another impact hit a second later, followed by the muffled echoes of explosions.

“They’re firing upon the ship,” Obi-Wan said.

“Have they gone mad!? They’re risking killing the Chancellor by doing that!” Anakin said, angry.

“What choice do you think the senate has?” Obi-Wan asked. “You saw what that bombardment gun was doing to Coruscant. Chancellor’s life or not, the city needs to be protected. Which means we’re running out of time...” Obi-Wan said, beginning to walk again.

A string of chirps and whistles from behind caused the two of them to turn around.

“What are you doing here, Artoo?” Anakin asked. “Wait back at the ship. It’s not safe for you here.”

The small droid stopped short of Anakin, and gave a high-pitched protest.

“Yeah, well, that doesn’t do much good against battledroids, now does it? Now get back to the ship,” Anakin said, pointing his gloved hand back down the hall.

Artoo gave a final, woeful warble, then turned and rolled back towards the elevator he had come from.

Anakin and Obi-Wan watched until Artoo was half way down the hall, then turned and walked around the corner.

Artoo was almost to the elevator before he turned his domed head around to make certain that Anakin and Obi-Wan were out of sight. Seeing that they were, the little droid turned around and began following them again—staying at a discrete distance so as not to be noticed.

Obi-Wan and Anakin hurried through the dark, dank corridors of the Separatist Cruiser, alert for any signs of droids and another elevator that would take them to a higher level. Distant, and not so distant, explosions continued to rock the ship. It appeared that the attack was in full force now, and that the Republic ships were determined to destroy the ship as quickly as they could.

A soft beeping suddenly erupted from Obi-Wan's utility belt. He retrieved the beeping device from his belt, clicked it open and looked at the small screen.

"We're picking up Shaak Ti's tracking signal," he said.

Jedi Master Shaak Ti had been in charge of the security for the Supreme Chancellor, and had been taken captive along with Palpatine. They had thought her dead, but the activation of her tracking signal gave Obi-Wan hope that perhaps she had escaped and was nearby. They could definitely use her help.

Slowly, Obi-Wan waved the tracking device from side to side to determine exactly which direction the signal was coming from, and how far away it was. His brow furrowed when he saw the result. He clicked the device closed and put it back in its pouch. "She's just down the hall and around the corner."

Anakin peered down the darkened, steam-filled hall, and Obi-Wan did the same. Something about the situation didn't quite seem right, but neither of them could sense any immanent danger. Regardless, they both retrieved their lightsabers.

"It's a trap," Anakin said.

"I agree. We must be cautious," Obi-Wan stated, then they began walking down the hall.

The hall ended in a T-intersection. The blast doors on the right were closed, so they could only turn left. Cautiously, they rounded the corner, then ignited their lightsabers as soon as they saw what was down at the end of the hall. Their eyes locked on the tall figure standing there, Anakin and Obi-Wan walked halfway down the hall, then stopped.

Anakin stared directly into General Grievous' viper-like eyes, hate washing over him and surging through his body.

Obi-Wan looked from The General, to his droid bodyguards and their electro-staffs, to Shaak Ti, who was standing directly in front of Grievous. Shaak Ti appeared exhausted. Her hands were in binders in front of her, and a smear of blood was running down the left side of her red and white colored face. Her knees were like jelly and she seemed to be having trouble standing. She might have collapsed onto the floor were it not for General Grievous' skeletal hand gripping the back of her neck, holding her up.

The Togruta Jedi peered at the floor in an defeated gaze, but once she finally mustered the strength to raise her head and saw Anakin and Obi-Wan they became wide and alert.

"Obi-Wan, it's a tra—nnguupp," she managed to get out before Grievous' vice-like fingers gripped her throat to silence her. A spasm of pain surged through Shaak Ti as she was lifted up onto her tip-toes by the Droid General.

Anakin took a bold step forward, but Obi-Wan brought him to a halt with an outstretched arm across his chest.

"No. It's exactly what he wants," Obi-Wan said, scanning up and down the walls of the hallway, searching for something. After a time he found what he was looking for and turned his attention back to Grievous.

"You should not have come aboard my ship, *Jedi*," Grievous said, his strong, mechanical voice reverberating throughout the hall. He released his grip on Shaak Ti's neck and she crumpled onto all fours. She gasped for air as her tired, bound hands pushed her up onto her knees. Grievous raised his right hand to reveal Shaak Ti's lightsaber. With a snap-hiss, he ignited the blue-white blade.

"The end of the Age of the Jedi is nigh!" Grievous declared, raising the blade into the air. "Prepare to meet your destiny!" Grievous brought the blade down. With a quick, forward thrust he stabbed it through Shaak Ti's back and out the middle of her chest.

Shaak Ti's black eyes went wide and her mouth opened as if to scream, but only a soft gasp came out as her last breath left her. Grievous retracted the blade, then deactivated it. Shaak Ti fell forward onto her face with a thud.

Anakin and Obi-Wan watched in horror. The brutality of it was too much for Anakin. He could no longer contain his rage. He rushed forward with his lightsaber held high.

Grievous reacted instantly. He tossed the lightsaber to the side and pulled out his blasters. He fired at Anakin with both barrels as he side-stepped to the right. Anakin blocked the blaster bolts with ease as he rushed forward, and the shots exploded in a curving arch on the wall with a shower of sparks.

Grievous continued to side-step until he was next to the wall. Then, when Anakin was only a handful of meters away, Grievous slammed a metal fist down onto a pipe, breaking it in half. The busted pipe spewed a torrent of white steam directly in Anakin's path and across the hall, cutting the Jedi off from being able to reach Grievous.

Anakin skidded to a stop to avoid being burnt by the blast, and through the hissing of the steam he could hear Grievous' grating laugh.

"Stupid, predictable *Jedi*," Grievous sneered at Anakin.

Filled with anger and an insatiable desire to kill Grievous, Anakin gathered his strength and took a step towards the scorching cloud of steam. He was confident that if he could focus his hatred enough the power of it would protect him from the heat. He knew he could do it. Somehow, he knew it.

He took another step forward, the power of his rage swelling inside him.

"Anakin, droids!" Obi-Wan yelled from behind.

Anakin snapped out of it and turned to look at Obi-Wan, who was staving off an aggressively approaching line of twenty or so battledroids, Super battledroids and Droidekas with what looked like even more behind them.

"They came from the other end of the hallway—from behind the closed door," Obi-Wan said.

Anakin forgot about Grievous and rushed back to help Obi-Wan.

"The hatch! Open the hatch on the wall!" Obi-Wan shouted as Anakin approached.

Anakin looked along the wall until he found the ventilation hatch Obi-Wan was referring to. With a few quick swipes of his lightsaber, Anakin cut the fastenings of the metal grating over the hatch, then he used the Force to yank the cover off and flung it across the hall to hit two approaching battledroids.

"Obi-Wan!" Anakin yelled as he put a foot inside the hatch.

"Go!" Obi-Wan yelled over the deafening sound of the laser fire as he backed towards the hatch. "I'll be right behind you!"

Anakin hesitated for a second, then disappeared into the vent shaft.

Obi-Wan blocked the flurry of blaster bolts with his lightsaber, moving it at incredible speed and accuracy. Droid after approaching droid fell from the deflected blasts, but many, many others continued forward in their places. Knowing that he needed to get out of there before he was overpowered, Obi-Wan turned and ran for the hatch opening and dove into its darkness.

Chapter 5

Anakin and Obi-Wan crawled their way down and through the darkened vent shaft. Several times explosions coursing through the ship knocked them into the walls of the narrow shaft. The attacks appeared to becoming more and more violent, and both of them knew that the damage the ship must be sustaining would eventually seal their own fate if they didn't hurry.

"I think we were followed," Obi-Wan said after hearing what sounded like metal bodies moving in the darkness behind him.

"I see light ahead," Anakin said. "We're almost out."

The source of the light came into view around the next bend in the shaft. It was another vent grating, and from it emanated a low, rhythmic hum of pulsing energy and machinery.

Anakin made quick work of the grating with his lightsaber, and he and Obi-Wan dropped out to find themselves in the middle of the vast engine room of the ship.

Twisting, metal pillars that reached to just below the ceiling of the long, narrow room, lining either side. Short barbs that were electrodes stuck out from the ceiling just above the pillars, and yellow-white energy snaked between them before jumping to a central collection node in the middle of the ceiling that shot the energy in a twisting shaft down and away into the far recesses of the room.

Several pipes along one wall had been ruptured by the explosions, and liquid fuel was spilling into the room at an alarming rate. Anakin and Obi-Wan began splashing through the shallow puddle, and Anakin noticed that after only a few steps the level had risen from his ankles to the middle of his shins. He looked around him at the highly-flammable fuel, then up at the ceiling and the power couplings. He turned to look at Obi-Wan and saw that he too was regarding the electrical surges with dread.

Movement behind Obi-Wan caught Anakin's eye and he looked to see several battledroids dropping out of the vent shaft they had recently exited.

"Come on," Anakin said, then turned around and began high-stepping it through the quickly rising fuel.

Luckily for them, the droids had big enough processors to know not to open fire in such an environment. If they had they could have possibly ignited the fuel and blown them, and most likely the ship, to pieces. The battledroids sloshed after them as fast as they could and tried not to be swept away by the growing tide.

Soon the fuel level was so high that running through it became impossible, and shortly after that even wading was not an option. So Anakin and Obi-Wan had to swim through the choppy torrent as it crawled closer and closer to the electrodes on the ceiling.

Obi-Wan glanced behind him for the battledroids, but they had disappeared. Not programmed to swim, he was sure that they had sank to the bottom and were no longer a threat. "We've got to get out of here!"

he called to Anakin over the noise of the rushing fuel and the crackling of the power couplings only a few meters above their heads now.

All of a sudden Obi-Wan felt a pair of metal hands grab his ankles, and the next thing he knew he was being pulled under the surface.

The fuel stung his eyes when he opened them to see what had grabbed him, and he found himself face to face with two battledroids. One reached out to grab Obi-Wan by the neck, while the other tried to pin his arms to his sides. He deflected the arms of one, then grabbed the wrists of the outstretched hands clawing for his throat. With a quick twist of his arms and a shifting of his bodyweight, Obi-Wan snapped the hands right off of the droid's arms and dropped them. Then he kicked off of the floor, and as he floated back towards the surface he kicked the other droid in the head, knocking it off in the process.

He took a deep, much needed breath when he resurfaced, then began swimming to catch back up with Anakin, who was just about to the hatch of an access tunnel.

The fuel level was getting dangerously close to the electrodes now, and Anakin eyed them warily as he forced the hatch open.

"Obi-Wan—hurry!" he yelled to his former Master, who was swimming towards him as fast as he could. Anakin waited as long as he dared for him to catch up, then he climbed up into the hatch and began crawling as fast as he could through the metal-ribbed tunnel. He could hear Obi-Wan trudging along behind him, and he hoped that they would both be fast enough to get out of this alive. Anakin knew that once that fuel reached those electrodes it would ignite in a big way, and if they were still in the tunnel nothing they could do would save them.

Anakin could see the end of the tunnel up ahead now, and he quickened his pace even more. When he reached the hatch he used all his muscle to open it and spilled out into the hall outside. Surprisingly, Obi-Wan was already poking his head out of the tunnel when Anakin got to his feet and turned around. Anakin pulled out his lightsaber as Obi-Wan dropped out of the hatch. He slammed the door shut, then ignited his blue-white blade and welded the door shut.

He had just finished when a deafening boom tore through his ears. The ship lurched as if a giant hand had picked it up and shook it, sending Anakin and Obi-Wan flying off of their feet and crashing into the ceiling, then the walls and back to the floor. The screeching sound of ripping metal pierced the hull of the ship, as if it were screaming from the pain of the explosion. The lights went out, and pipes ruptured spewing steam and liquids onto them as they lay on the floor, dazed from the violent jolt.

Klaxon alarms began droning in low, soft tones. The emergency lighting came online casting an eerie, yellow glow throughout the hall. Anakin and Obi-Wan came out of the shock of their tussle and struggled back to their feet. Anakin clutched his stomach, still trying to catch the breath that had been knocked out of him. They looked each other over, assessing one another for wounds or other serious injuries. Seeing none, they traded assuring nods that they were both all right.

"Come on," Anakin said, then began running down the hall.

The severity and desperation of the situation had just stepped up a notch. Anakin knew that the ship was no doubt severely damaged now, for how could it not be after such an explosion? It was falling apart all around them and they still didn't know where Chancellor Palpatine was. Anakin had to find him and rescue him. The very fate of the Republic depended on it. He knew it, and he would not allow anything, or anyone, get in his way. He would do whatever it took to do what he needed to do. Whatever it took.

The bridge of the giant cruiser was absolute chaos. The lights were flickering off and on, and sparks were spraying out of numerous control panels. Several of the Neimodian technicians manning the bridge had been tossed from their chairs at their consoles, and were groggily getting back up to re-man their posts.

Dooku had also been tossed off of his feet, but he had been able to control his fall and protect himself through the power of the dark side. He stood now at the railing on the upper dais of the bridge.

"Lieutenant—damage report," he ordered.

"One moment, sir. The computer isn't functioning properly," the Neimodian called up to him.

What in the galaxy does Grievous think he's doing? Dooku thought as he waited for the damage report. *He was supposed to kill the Jedi, not destroy the entire ship!*

"The computer is coming back in-line now, Count Dooku, sir..."

"What happened?"

"It appears that there was a fuel leak in the main engines housings, and that is what caused the explosion. All primary propulsion systems are off-line. No secondary propulsion systems are responding. Hull breeches on levels twenty-six through fifty-three, and sub-level five through..." the lieutenant trailed off, then stared up at The Count with a horrified expression. "The ship's been torn in half!" he yelled.

Dooku stared at him for a second, not believing what he was hearing. "Impossible!" he said. He considered the matter for a handful of seconds, then moved to the giant holo-projector console in the middle of the upper dais. He clicked a button and spoke into the receiver. "Hail our closest ship. Get me a holo-image of our ship—now!"

"Yes, sir."

Dooku peered out of the wide bank of windows that made up the viewport of the bridge. Coruscant was enormous in their view, filling up the entire bay of windows, and Jedi Cruisers and Republic Assault Cruisers had them surrounded. And if what the lieutenant was saying was true they were now at the mercy of the Republic's forces—sitting ducks for them to do with as they pleased.

"Holo-image transmitting," the Neimodian technician said through the comm..., and a second later a blue-white image of the outside of the giant cruiser appeared.

The ship had indeed been ripped in two by the enormous explosion. Right down to the keel. Debris and venting gases were spilling out of the ends of the halves of the ship, which was still on fire in several places. The force of the explosion had knocked the aft half of the ship quite a ways back towards the planet, and Republic and Separatist ships alike were trying desperately to scramble out of its way before it smashed into them.

Dooku watched as the aft portion of the ship tumbled further and further away towards the city-planet below. Without propulsion, the gravity well of the planet had grabbed a hold of the floating, mammoth piece of debris and was intent on reeling it in. Dooku wondered how long it would be before the same thing happened to the bow portion of the ship. Probably not long.

The sound of the elevator doors hissing open behind him brought Dooku out of his thoughts, and he turned to see Grievous and his droid bodyguards walking towards him. Seething with rage, Dooku marched towards him.

"You fool!" Dooku yelled, raising his right hand with his palm facing up. Grievous' large metal frame rose into the air as if a giant hand had picked him up and was holding him there. "You were supposed to dispense of the Jedi, not blast the ship in half," Dooku said with his arm raised.

Grievous' bodyguards came at Dooku with their electro-staffs ignited and ready. Dooku lowered his arm as the droids ran at him and Grievous dropped back to his feet, stumbling to keep from falling over. Then, with one quick wave of his hand, Dooku sent the droid bodyguards flying across the upper dais and into the far wall.

Grievous had regained his balance by now, and he was standing just mere meters away from Dooku with his hands held ready to pull out a weapon. The droids had untangled themselves from a pile on the floor

and were standing again, but Dooku paid them no mind as they approached more cautiously this time. Dooku just kept his eyes fixed on Grievous', his right hand hovering over the curved lightsaber hilt hanging from his utility belt. The chaos and noise on the bridge had come to a complete stand-still as everyone below watched the fight unfolding above them.

Grievous raised a hand to signal to his bodyguards to stand down, then growled, "This was not my doing. It was the Republic's attack that caused the rupture in the engine room."

Dooku's anger was still potent, but he reigned it in for the sake of their mission. "Now we have no choice but to evacuate the ship. I hope, for your sake, General, that you can execute something as trivial as a successful escape from this fiasco."

A growl seemed to emanate from Grievous' vocal amplifier as he stared at Dooku with hatred in his eyes, then he started for the comm. console to contact the closest ships in order to organize their escape.

The lull in the chaos on the bridge was short lived as two robed figures suddenly ran in from the hall onto the main, lower floor. Holding ignited lightsabers in front of them defensively, the two Jedi rushed into the middle of the floor of the bridge, eyes scanning and senses alert for any possible attack.

The Neimodian technicians at their consoles in front of the bay of windows jumped up from their seats and shrank away from the invading Jedi duo like scared children. They cowered in groups off to the sides, hiding their faces and looking to each other for comfort. The pilot was the only Neimodian that didn't run for cover, but that was only because he was separated from the Jedi by being on the small, middle level of the bridge. Yet the pilot's chair appeared even bigger than it already was because the Neimodian was sinking as low in it as he could to avoid drawing attention to himself.

Anakin and Obi-Wan scanned the bridge, then settled their eyes on the upper dais once they saw who was standing there.

Dooku was at the railing, leaning on it with both hands. Grievous and his bodyguards moved to stand right next to him.

"Where's Palpatine, Dooku?" Anakin demanded.

"Master Kenobi, Young Skywalker," Dooku said with a taunting smile. "I might have known it was the two of you. Only you are dim-witted enough to risk your lives to save someone like Palpatine." He turned to Grievous, and with a nod ordered him to act.

Grievous took the left flight of stairs down from the upper dais, while his bodyguards took the right.

"They're coming at us from both sides," Obi-Wan said. "We've got to stick together."

Anakin nodded, but he was only half listening. He continued to stare up at Dooku with hatred in his eyes as Grievous and his bodyguards reached the ground level and approached from both sides. Dooku stared right back, but not with hatred. Rather, his expression was a contemptuous sneer, which only further enraged Anakin.

The droid bodyguards approached Anakin slowly, cautiously, while Grievous took bold, heavy steps toward Obi-Wan. Obi-Wan raised his lightsaber defensively, ready for anything from General Greivous. He had heard that Grievous was a cunning warrior and was skilled in combat with practically any weapon.

A bony, white hand slipped into Grievous' cloak as he walked forward and emerged holding a dull-silver lightsaber hilt. Obi-Wan's eyes went back and forth from the hilt to Grievous' eyes. A wicked smile crossed the Droid General's eyes at seeing this, and he activated the green blade with a snap-hiss.

One of the droid bodyguards made the first move. It lunged forward at Anakin with its electro-staff. Still peering up at Dooku, Anakin raised his lightsaber to block the blow, then another, and another from the droid. The impact of his blade with the electro-staff made a screeching sound, like some strange animal crying out in pain. After the few futile attempts by the droid Anakin kicked it in the stomach and sent it skidding backwards across the floor.

The droid's companion was on top of Anakin as soon as the kick had hit its mark. It came at him quickly and without restraint. The second bodyguard rejoined his companion and they tried to divide his attention by coming at him from both sides. Anakin moved his lightsaber blade quickly from side to side, from shoulder to shoulder deflecting the swings from the droids.

Just after the pair of droids attacked Anakin, Grievous lunged forward at Obi-Wan. The Droid General came at Obi-Wan fast and hard, trading high swipes and low stabs at an incredible rate. Obi-Wan had to focus deeply on the Force to keep up with the moves, and his face contorted into a visage of stern determination.

Connected by their strong bond in the Force, Anakin and Obi-Wan were a dangerous and cunning duo. Their years of fighting together in such uneven matches had honed their skills to an unparalleled level. Without even a word, they both spun in the opposite direction and traded opponents. This unexpected move severely threw off the attacks of their aggressors, and they took advantage of the situation.

Anakin came at Grievous with so much aggression that The General was forced to backpedal. Obi-Wan had the advantage on the pair of droids. He drove them back several steps, but then the droids came at him with redoubled speed and determination and Obi-Wan was again forced to go on the defensive.

Or so the droids thought.

Once again Anakin and Obi-Wan used their strong bond in the Force to their advantage to cause confusion amongst their attackers. As Obi-Wan backed away from the two droids and their swinging electro-staffs, Anakin stopped his offensive push on Grievous and allowed himself to be backed up towards Obi-Wan's back.

But just before their backs touched Anakin leapt into the air. He back flipped over Obi-Wan and the two droids. A split second later Obi-Wan turned to handle Grievous, and Anakin landed behind the droid duo. With one quick horizontal swipe Anakin cut one of the droids in half at the waist, resulting in a brilliant spray of sparks and a gurgling sound from the droid as its red eyes went dark. The other droid turned to block another swipe by Anakin that would have cut it from head to hip.

As Anakin traded blows with the droid he saw Dooku turn and walk away from the railing up above. Dooku was getting away, and Anakin couldn't allow that. He needed Dooku to show him where they were holding the Chancellor.

With a scowl, Anakin turned his full attention back to the droid and attacked with full force. He spun and jabbed, parried and ducked until he got his opening. Then, he came up out of a spin and thrust his left arm out at the droid, hitting it with a powerful Force Push. The droid flew backwards through the air and crashed into the middle dais of the bridge right next to the pilot's chair.

Anakin began running after Dooku.

"Anakin—where are you going?" Obi-Wan called after him.

"He's getting away!" Anakin yelled.

"We're supposed to stick together! The Council wants Dooku alive. You can't do that alone!" But Anakin didn't listen.

Seeing Anakin coming right for him, the panicked pilot jump up from his seat and ran off, screaming. Anakin jumped into the air, flipped and landed on the floor of the upper dais. Ahead of him he saw the doors of an elevator and knew that that must have been where Dooku had gone. He ran to them and forced them open. The elevator car wasn't there. Only an empty shaft. Apparently the car was still wherever Dooku was.

"Anakin! I still need your help down here!" Obi-Wan yelled as he parried Grievous' swipes.

But still Anakin paid him no mind. His thirst for revenge on Dooku and his desire to find and rescue Palpatine had taken complete control of him now. He stepped to the edge of the shaft and looked up into the darkness. Then he jumped into the air to pursue his prey and to find the man he cared for the most, leaving Obi-Wan behind to face his enemies alone.

Silently, Obi-Wan cursed Anakin for racing off without him. Not only was he worried about handling Grievous and the remaining bodyguard alone, but he was also worried for Anakin's safety. Anakin's lightsaber skills had improved immensely over the past three years since he and Dooku had last fought, but he still had much to learn about the Force and control.

Dooku was skilled not only with a saber, but in many other, darker ways that Obi-Wan was certain Anakin would not be able to defend himself against. Even Master Yoda had been greatly fatigued by his fight with Dooku in that Geonosis hanger all those years ago. Even Master Yoda had not been able to stop Dooku from escaping alone. So what chance could Anakin possibly have?

Grievous spun forward with his green blade and Obi-Wan was forced to bring his thoughts back to the matter at hand. The remaining bodyguard had recovered from the toss Anakin had given him and was flipping through the air to land directly behind Obi-Wan. When the droid did, Obi-Wan was forced with the difficult position of having to defend the attacks of two swift opponents coming at him from opposite sides.

Obi-Wan spun and moved his blade in a complicated choreography from high to low to defend himself. Numerous times he tried to break to one side or the other to get out from between the two, but Grievous and the droid cut off his attempts with well-placed blows that forced him back between them. Obi-Wan held his ground as he fended them off, but he knew that eventually he would begin to tire while these two, being mechanical, would still be at their fastest. He needed to do something to get away from them and meet back up with Anakin before it was too late.

Obi-Wan tried again to get out from between them by side-stepping to the left. He took a large step to try to beat the blows he knew would come to block his way, but Grievous and the droid countered his move by side-stepping to meet him and obstruct his path. A quick glance over his shoulder showed Obi-Wan that his chance had come. As Obi-Wan had hoped, Grievous and the droid had overstepped in order to cut him off to the left in the direction of the bay of windows. Now there was a gap behind him, towards the middle of the room.

Obi-Wan leapt into the air and did a double back flip, landing several meters back away from the bay of windows and further into the middle of the room. Grievous and his bodyguard turned to watch him land then came towards him in a slow, predatory gait, fanning out to either side to try to surround him once more. But Obi-Wan wasn't planning on giving them such an opportunity again.

Seeing that there was enough room to make a run for it, the Neimodian crew dashed across the floor behind Grievous and the bodyguard and off the bridge. One of them hit a panel next to the doors as he ran out, and after he did the thick doors began to iris shut.

Closing his eyes to slits, Obi-Wan pulled at one of the high-backed chairs in front of a computer terminal with the Force. The chair barely budged. Obi-Wan dug in deeper and put more concentration into it and the chair began to tear from the bolts holding it to the floor.

Grievous and the droid were almost to him now. They were tensing, and Obi-Wan could sense that they were about to come in for an attack.

And then they did.

With one final jerk through the Force, Obi-Wan yanked the chair from its bolts and connecting wires with a spray of sparks. The droid bodyguard was coming in to deliver the first blow. It had its electro-staff held high and ready to swipe down at Obi-Wan. It was only a step away when the chair slammed into its back. Obi-Wan stepped to the side to take on Grievous as chair and droid raced by and crashed into the wall just below the pilot's chair.

Obi-Wan came at Grievous with a ferocious fervor, sending the Droid General on the retreat. He pushed the metal monster back, back across the main floor of the bridge. But just as soon as Obi-Wan thought he had the upper hand, Grievous spun and came back around with a kick of his metal, talon-toed foot right in Obi-Wan's chest.

A grunt escaped Obi-Wan's lips as the wind was knocked out of him and he flew backwards through the air. He crashed onto his side and slid across the floor until he ran into the short wall separating the lower dais from the middle. Shaking the stars from his mind, Obi-Wan looked up to see Grievous coming towards him with thunderous steps. Obi-Wan tried to push himself up to his feet, but he didn't have the strength. All he could do was lay there and watch as Grievous came towards him with murder in his yellow and black, viper eyes.

Grievous was only a few meters away now, and still Obi-Wan couldn't muster up the energy to move. His lightsaber lay just a small stretch away from his hand on the floor, and he focused what strength he could to reach out and grab it. He knew that doing so would make no difference—he was still far too weak to defend any attack from Grievous—but just having it in his hand gave him some sense of peace.

But then, just as Grievous was almost upon Obi-Wan, a violent shudder shook the ship, ripping the lightsaber from Obi-Wan's hand yet again. The floor of the bridge rippled as if it were a pond disturbed by the dropping of a boulder. The waves moved Obi-Wan involuntarily across the floor, towards Grievous who was trying desperately to keep his footing and, somehow, succeeding.

The rumbling quake stopped just as quickly as it had started, and Obi-Wan found himself right at the feet of General Grievous. It was unfathomable. It was as if some unseen force were trying to make Grievous' job of killing him that much easier. The Droid General looked down at Obi-Wan with a wicked smile in his eyes. He raised the green lightsaber blade over his head to deliver the killing blow. Obi-Wan watched, unable to take his eyes off of the glowing blade as it began its descent towards his chest and certain death.

But death did not come.

One side of the long, durasteel plate had been jostled loose by the most recent shaking of the ship, and it came swinging down from the ceiling and hit General Grievous right in the torso as he swung the lightsaber down. Grievous went flying back through the air, and as soon as the plate struck the floor the other side of it came loose and the entire thing fell right on top of the Droid General and several of the computer terminals.

Obi-Wan staggered to his feet and stared at the plate in disbelief.

"Thank the Force," he breathed.

He turned and picked up his lightsaber, then drunkenly ran up the flight of stairs to reach the upper dais. He walked to the elevator doors and they opened to reveal an elevator car with a meter-sized hole in the floor. As he stepped in and inspected the hole he noticed that it appeared to have been made by a lightsaber.

Anakin... Obi-Wan thought as the doors closed and the elevator began ascending. To where, he did not know. He just hoped that he would get there in time to save Anakin, or Dooku...or both.

The huge, durasteel plate stirred, then flipped over as two metal arms flung it off of General Grievous' body and it crashed to the floor with a thundering boom. Grievous stood and flexed his arms, then peered at the shoulders of his cape and saw a small rip on one side. He looked up at the upper dais with narrowed, hate-filled eyes, then followed after Obi-Wan Kenobi.

Chapter 6

Straddling the hole he'd cut in the elevator floor so that he could exit the shaft, Anakin pried the doors open with his powerful arms and peered into the darkened room. His deactivated lightsaber held ready in his black-gloved, mechanical right hand, he cautiously walked forward to the railing directly in front of the elevator and looked down into the General's Quarters. He quickly removed his dark brown Jedi cloak and activated his blade with a snap-hiss as soon as he saw who was below.

Standing below and a just in front of a long, metal table in the middle of the room was Count Dooku, his blood-red lightsaber humming in his hand.

"I've been waiting for you, boy," Dooku said. "Come to learn another lesson?"

Anakin's eyes narrowed in hatred at the memory of the pain of Dooku cutting off his hand in that Geonosis hanger. The metal hand strangled the lightsaber hilt, the black glove crackling. He wanted to jump over the railing and run Dooku through right then. He wanted to make him feel the same pain he'd felt back in that hangar. He wanted to see him suffer for all the horrific events he'd caused in the galaxy—all of the death and destruction that stained his hands. He wanted revenge. But his eyes caught sight of the figure strapped to the chair in front of the giant windows on the far side of the room and he controlled his rage.

His eyes back on Dooku, Anakin side-stepped to one of the curved flights of stairs and down to the lower level. Cautiously, he approached Dooku.

"Are you all right, You Excellency?" Anakin called across the room. "Are you injured?"

"Anakin," Palpatine said in relief. "I knew you would come. I am unharmed, but you must hurry. The ship is beginning to fall back towards the planet."

Anakin chanced a quick glance over Dooku's shoulder and out the giant row of windows. The gravity of the planet had a hold of the ship now, and it was pulling it in. The shimmering sphere filled the windows with its pre-dawn glow as the systems sun came around the planet. Jedi Cruisers and Trade Federation battleships fired upon each other with laser canons and missiles as they raced out of the path of the giant, falling hulk of debris. The occasional squad of starfighters raced by, locked in mortal combat. It reminded Anakin that the battle was still raging on outside, but his fight was just beginning.

"This ends here and now, Dooku," Anakin seethed, raising his lightsaber with both hands above his head.

"It does indeed," Dooku said with confidence, raising his own blade in salute.

They stood there for a handful of seconds, staring at one another. Tense. Both waited for the other to make the first move. It became clear to Anakin that Dooku, smug and ever-confident as he was, was waiting for him to strike first. Dooku was above doing so himself against such an opponent.

Anakin's eyes narrowed, and then he attacked.

He came in fast and hard, but controlled. He knew his skills had advanced greatly since their last meeting, but he also knew first hand how skilled and powerful Dooku was. He wasn't going to make careless mistakes by becoming too aggressive too soon. It wouldn't be like last time. No.

Holding his lightsaber in just one hand, Dooku parried the blows with ease, twisting his grip from side to side, meeting Anakin at every turn, every spin. Dooku's footing was flawless. His steps were measured for optimum balance and maneuverability. He moved swiftly and with great power. Clearly, his advanced years had no impact whatsoever on his performance—so strong was he in the Force.

Anakin spun away after the preliminary exchange in order to assess the situation.

"Your technique has improved since our last meeting," Dooku said, his lightsaber held at the ready. "The Wars have made you strong. But are you strong enough?"

Anakin came in for another exchange. He hardened his focus and tightened his moves, making each as precise as could be. His deepened concentration improved his speed. His lightsaber flashed in a blue-white stream around him as he tried to break through Dooku's defenses. But Dooku continued to counter each move with nonchalant grace and impeccable form.

Then, all of a sudden, Dooku went on the offensive, pushing Anakin back with a series of quick strikes meant to make him lose his footing. But Anakin stood strong and met Dooku's sudden attack, not missing a beat or a step. Dooku continued to push, forcing Anakin back towards one of the curved flights of stairs, but every time Dooku moved to strike Anakin's blade was there. He saw every feint for what it was and never took the bait. He more than held his ground, and it surprised Dooku.

Dooku backed off, peering at Anakin with narrowed, contemplative eyes as they slowly began circling one another.

Anakin flashed a confident sneer. "I think I can handle myself," he said.

"So it would seem."

Dooku came at him again, this time even more aggressively than the last. For just a split second Anakin was caught off guard by the intensity of the attack and he almost tripped over the first step of the flight of stairs behind him. Anakin found the step without falling, then went up another, and another, then jumped into the air and flipped over Dooku to land back on the main floor of the room. Dooku spun to his right to meet him and continued to attack.

Anakin reached inside for his anger and used it to sharpen his abilities. As soon as he did intoxicating power, energy and exhilaration surged through him, filling his whole body. Instantly he regained his edge and continued to repel the attack without fault. Filled with the Force, brimming with anger, Anakin went on the offensive and drove Dooku back.

"Anakin!" Obi-Wan shouted from the top of the stairs, drawing both Anakin's and Dooku's attention and unlocking them from their fight. Ignited lightsaber in hand, Obi-Wan ran down the steps and flipped to land just meters away from Anakin and Dooku.

Seeing Obi-Wan caused Anakin to lose some of the anger he was holding on to. Caused him to regain his posture and think as a Jedi should.

Dooku took a handful of steps back further into the middle of the room. He backed away from the twin sets of stairs to allow himself better positioning between the two Jedi.

Holding his lightsaber up defensively, Obi-Wan kept his eyes glued on Dooku as he cautiously walked to Anakin's side. "You should have waited for me," he said.

"He was getting away."

Obi-Wan eyed Dooku, thinking the matter over. "The usual?" he asked Anakin.

Anakin nodded, and they spread out and came towards Dooku in slow steps.

Dooku raised his lightsaber in front of him in his right hand and reset his feet for better balance. Anakin and Obi-Wan approached on either side, closing in with every step. Dooku stole quick glances at each in turn, an amused smile on his face. "Yes, come now. Put me out of my misery," he taunted.

Suddenly, Obi-Wan lunged forward and delivered the first blow. Anakin's blade was right behind his, and yet Dooku shrugged off both with a quick step and swipe in each direction. They traded several more blows in similar fashion, but only received the same result.

Without a word of communication, both Anakin and Obi-Wan spun to the right around Dooku and continued to strike. They circled the illustrious Count, trying to land a blow, but Dooku's spinning blade denied them.

Obi-Wan spun in low with his blade. Dooku brought his blade quickly across his body and passed it to his left hand. His red lightsaber met the blow with such force that he actually forced Obi-Wan's blade back and out of the way. Then, with his free right hand, Dooku punched an advancing Anakin across the face, then spun out from in between the two of them.

The blow to Anakin's face hurt, and in more ways than one. He tasted the bitter saltiness of blood in his mouth as anger began swelling in him again. Quick on their feet, he and Obi-Wan came together, then after Dooku side by side.

Connected by their strong bond in the Force, Anakin and Obi-Wan came at Dooku as if they were one being. In a bizarre looking, precisely-timed dance they twisted in and out of in front of one another as they stabbed and slashed at Dooku. Over and over again they traded positions, never staying in one place longer than a second. The fluidity of their movement put Dooku's abilities to the test and he was forced to backpedal greatly.

One instant Anakin was coming at him from high and to the right, then just a split second later Obi-Wan's blue-white blade was thrusting at his lower torso, then Anakin was slashing at him from yet another angle while Obi-Wan ducked under and in front to come at Dooku from the other side. Dooku twisted and spun, somehow managing to block each blow with his red lightsaber. But it wasn't easy for him.

All of a sudden Obi-Wan saw Dooku's eyes flash to look at something above and behind them, and then he felt the Force prompting him of danger. There was a loud THUD! behind them as if a huge hunk of metal had fallen to the floor, and Obi-Wan turned to see Grievous not a meter away swinging that green lightsaber blade right at his head.

Obi-Wan raised his own blade just in time to block the blow, then was forced to lean backwards to avoid the bone-white, metal fist aimed at his face. Before he could even straighten from avoiding the punch, Grievous swung the green blade in at him again. He blocked it, but the power behind the blow was so great that it knocked Obi-Wan off balance and falling to the side. Obi-Wan rolled with the fall and came back up to his feet just a few steps away.

"Obi-Wan!" Anakin exclaimed, seeing his former Master falling out of the corner of his eye. Anakin spun to the side to rejoin Obi-Wan, and together they backed away from Grievous and Dooku and closer to the middle of the room.

They stepped down a short flight of steps and onto the small, oval shaped inlet of a level housing the long table. Grievous and Dooku followed, Dooku eyeing them with disdain with plenty held in reserve for Grievous.

"Where are those *machines* you call bodyguards?" Dooku asked.

Grievous gave no answer, which was all the response Dooku needed to know what had happened to them.

Anakin and Obi-Wan were more than halfway down the length of the table, and well within reach of Palpatine's voice without him having to shout.

"You *must* hurry, Anakin. We don't have much time," the chancellor said. "Do whatever you need to, whatever it takes, to finish this quickly!"

Not taking his eyes off of Dooku and Grievous, Obi-Wan said, "Don't listen to him, Anakin. Haste and panic will only worsen matters."

But Anakin couldn't help but listen to Palpatine, to hear and feel the pleading in the aged politician's voice.

Together, Dooku and Grievous attacked.

Still distracted by Palpatine's beseeching, Anakin barely blocked the red lightsaber stab in time. Another came, then another and another. Anakin felt himself completely off guard, his head swimming with the thought of not succeeding in this mission. His lack of focus caused him to stumble and he fell, catching himself on the back of one of the tall chairs around the table.

Dooku raised his blade high above his head to slice into Anakin. He would have had Obi-Wan not acted quickly. Obi-Wan spun away from Grievous, grabbed Anakin by the shoulders and dove with him out of the way.

The red lightsaber cleaved the chair cleanly in two as the pair of Jedi rolled across the floor, then sprang back to their feet.

"Focus!" Obi-Wan yelled at him.

"Yes, focus your emotions, Anakin," Palpatine encouraged. "Use them to your advantage."

Obi-Wan was just about to tell Palpatine that he wasn't helping when he was forced to dive out of the way of Dooku flinging part of the severed chair at he and Anakin.

But the chair never struck. It stopped in mid-air, then was flung right back at where it had come.

Grievous jumped onto the table and out of the way, while Dooku raised his red blade and cut the flying piece of furniture right down the middle so that it passed by on either side without so much as a glance.

Getting back to his feet, Obi-Wan looked to see Anakin standing with his right arm thrust out, a grim expression in his eyes.

Power surged through Anakin. Power fueled by anger, hatred and despair. The intoxicating splendor of it coursed through his every nerve-ending, every fiber of his being. He felt life teeming throughout him, but with it came a strange chill that seeped ever-deeper into his soul, slowly eating at it.

But he didn't care about that. All he cared about was the incredible authority he felt. And he wanted to use it, exude his will onto those that opposed him.

As if in slow-motion he came at Dooku, attacking him with speed, exactitude and agility the likes of which he had never known. He saw Dooku's eyes go wide for a second as he wheeled back from the potent attack, then they hardened into malicious resolve and intense concentration.

Somewhere, off in the distance, Anakin heard Obi-Wan yelling after him to stop and to calm himself, but he paid it no mind. Shut it out. For the cold, dark thing creeping through his soul didn't want to hear it.

Instead, he heard the voice of reason; the voice of the man he trusted and respected above all others speaking into his ear as if he were standing right beside him.

"Good.... That's it," Palpatine hissed. "Anger is a source of power. Great power. Use it. Store it within you and draw from it like a well. Bend it to your bidding."

Anakin did as he said, and was pleased to see the power within him grow ever more potent. He felt alive like never before. He felt everything!

He had Count Dooku on the run now. The aged former-Jedi was back-stepping away from his blurring blue-white blade so quickly that they were already back in front of the balcony housing the elevator. There was a short flight of stairs there, leading down into an area just below the elevator balcony, and Anakin was pushing Dooku towards it. But just in front of the stairs Dooku jumped into the air and did a back flip up, over the stairs and the railing of the elevator-level balcony. Anakin was in the air the moment Dooku left the ground and landed right in front of him, continuing his attack with great wrath.

"Anakin! Anakin, calm yourself! Still your anger!" Obi-Wan called after him. But Anakin gave no sign of hearing him. He heard Palpatine saying something behind him, but he couldn't make out what it was. He turned to look at the aged politician strapped to the chair in front of the large windows and found him sitting with his eyes closed to slits, his lips moving around intangible words as if in a trance.

Swiftly, Obi-Wan turned his attention back to Grievous standing on the table. He needed to go after Anakin to make certain he didn't do something he would regret, but the only way around Grievous would be to face him first. He jumped onto the table and came at the Droid General, flashing his blue-white blade back and forth in a flurry of motion. Grievous blocked every blow, then began countering with a series of hammering strikes. Obi-Wan ducked under one particularly powerful, sideways swipe into a crouching position. Then he stuck out one leg and spun, sweeping Grievous' legs out from under him.

Grievous fell hard onto his back, his heavy metal frame denting the table top deeply. But Grievous was far from helpless in such a position. As soon as his back hit, he kicked out with one of his legs at Obi-Wan's shin. But Obi-Wan was already flipping through the air, over Grievous and to the far end of the table.

Obi-Wan landed and jumped off of the table to the floor. He took the small flight of steps leading up to the main floor of the room with a single bound and continued to chase after Anakin and Dooku, who had both just jumped up to the elevator-level balcony. A prompting in the Force entered Obi-Wan's mind as he ran, and he dove to the side just as a blaster bolt went by where his head had just been.

Obi-Wan came up out of the dive on one knee facing back towards the table and blocked three more shots from Grievous' blaster.

Standing at the end of the table, blaster and green-bladed lightsaber in hand, Grievous shouted, "I'm not through with you yet!" then jumped into the air.

He landed right in front of Obi-Wan and attacked. Grievous kept the blaster in his hand, but he didn't use it. Obi-Wan figured that he probably wouldn't chance having the shot deflected right back at him at such close range and was just keeping the pistol in hand to throw off Obi-Wan's focus. Well, it was working. Constantly, Grievous raised the pistol as he swiped with the lightsaber in the other hand, and Obi-Wan eyed the black barrel warily, senses alert for any coming shot.

Again Grievous was right on top of him, and Obi-Wan had to spin out of the way to avoid another powerful lightsaber thrust. Grievous was right there when he came out of the spin, and once more Obi-Wan was amazed by his speed as he blocked another blow, his eyes keeping that blaster in their sight. The Droid General pushed hard, and not for the first time Obi-Wan wondered what he had done to make Grievous so mad at him.

His mind distracted, his concentration on that pistol and worrying about Anakin, Obi-Wan didn't even sense it coming. In an amazing flash of speed and agility Grievous planted the hand holding the pistol on the floor while the hand holding the lightsaber stayed high enough to deflect Obi-Wan's. Before Obi-Wan even knew what was happening Grievous' legs were wrapped around his waist. A split second later Grievous rolled onto his back and, using the momentum of his roll, threw Obi-Wan clear across the room.

Helpless to control his descent, Obi-Wan flailed his arms as he flew right at the two-meter high, multi-faceted display terminal tower. With a grunt, he crashed right into one of the four display monitors making up the tower and crumbled to the floor. His lightsaber shut off as it slipped from his limp hand, and then everything began going dark as his consciousness slipped away as well.

The last, fleeting image he saw was of Grievous stomping towards him from across the room, the green blade glowing in his hand.

Chapter 7

Anakin pursued Count Dooku across the elevator-level balcony, keeping the leader of the Separatists continually on the defensive. So overwhelmed was Dooku that he was now holding his lightsaber with both hands. Gone was the smug smirk on the old man's wrinkled, regal face. Replacing it was a deep frown and eyes filled with concentration.

Dooku tried to offset Anakin's drive by a series of counterstrikes of his own. One swipe came in hard and from the left side. Anakin met the blow with his lightsaber held in both hands, then using his anger and the immense power surging through him he shoved Dooku's blade back and out wide to the side. Then he jabbed his mechanical, right fist into Dooku's wide-open ribs.

A small grunt escaped Dooku's lips and he spun away, out of Anakin's reach to regain his composure. His lips curled back in an angry snarl. It was the first time in as long as Dooku could remember that an opponent had actually struck him in battle.

Anakin smirked.

Dooku's eyes flashed with rage. He came at Anakin with a ferocity he had never displayed before. He hammered Anakin's defenses with powerful, yet precise, blows that came in faster than seemed conceivable. He advanced on Anakin as if intent on ending the fight right then and there.

But the fight did not end, nor did the tide of the battle shift to Dooku's advantage. Anakin delved deeper into the power surging through him and deflected every strike that Dooku gave. He back-stepped along the balcony from Dooku's enraged charge, but only to absorb the former-Jedi's powerful attack and wait for an opening. Anakin could sense that Dooku would soon begin to tire, so all he had to do was wait.

A flurry of stabs, thrusts, and swipes later the opening came.

Dooku delivered a wide swipe from the right. When Anakin blocked it, then used a sudden burst of power to block the red blade wide. Anakin followed through with the momentum of the push and spun. Then, when he came back around, he jumped and planted a kick right to the side of Dooku's face. The kick hurled Dooku backwards, over the railing and down into the darkness of the small, lower level of the room.

"Good," Palpatine's said, his voice strong and clear in Anakin's ears. "He is no match for you. Use your anger and defeat him!"

Anakin walked to the railing and looked down, but Dooku was nowhere to be seen. All he saw were the long shadows of the lower level. He was about to jump down to search for him, when a crashing sound and a prompting in the Force turned his attention elsewhere, across the room.

Anakin saw General Grievous standing over an unconscious Obi-Wan with that green-bladed lightsaber held ready to strike.

The fear of losing Obi-Wan rushed added strength and power into Anakin and he acted instantly. He reached out across the room to the Droid General with the Force and yanked him backwards nearly ten meters. Anakin jumped down from the elevator level to the main floor and came at Grievous. Grievous tumbled over onto his back, but recovered quickly and sprang to his feet to meet Anakin.

Grievous tried to outmatch Anakin, but it wasn't working. Anakin was far too consumed by the incredible power surging through him. Grievous contorted his body in impossible ways, bending it to deliver unexpected blows from different angles, but Anakin parried every one.

In a blur of speed Grievous jabbed out with a fist at Anakin's face, but Anakin had foreseen the attack coming and stepped to the side before it could hit. Anakin grabbed the outstretched arm with his free hand and, using the Force, tossed Grievous up and over the railing of the elevator-level balcony.

"That's it," Palpatine's voice interjected into his ears. "Use your emotions, Anakin. Let them guide you. They can only make you stronger."

Anakin felt compelled to do exactly what Palpatine said. He focused more deeply on his hatred and anger, and he felt the power of the Force swelling within as he did.

He turned and was about to chase after Grievous to finish the job, but he saw Dooku standing at the top of the stairs leading up from the lower level. Dooku emanated hatred and anger as he stared at Anakin with narrow eyes, his ignited lightsaber in his left hand.

Anakin stared right back.

The ship made a loud, low moaning sound as the planet's gravity took hold. A shudder ran through the ship as the pull from below began accelerating its fall. The city-planet was huge in the windows now. The orange and red glow of the sun rising across the planet's metal surface cast a fiery glow into the room, bathing Anakin and Dooku in it.

Grievous, standing on the balcony and seeing the city-planet growing ever-larger in the windows, headed for the elevator and escape from the doomed cruiser.

"This has gone on far enough, boy!" Dooku said. "Now it ends!"

Dooku raised his right hand and sent a shower of blue-white lightning racing at Anakin. Anakin raised his lightsaber and caught the lightning on it in a broad arc. The blade crackled and screeched as the lightning struck. Dooku sent forth another stream, and again Anakin caught it with his lightsaber. Yet this time the strength behind the blast began forcing Anakin's blade back in recoil. But he deflected it just the same.

Dooku took a handful of steps forward and unleashed another stream. Again, though with increasing difficulty, Anakin deflected the power behind the blast. But small lances of the blue-white, dark energy were coursing down the blade and into his arms now, causing him to grimace in pain and struggle to keep up his strength. Dooku continued to walk forward, shooting out another stream. No longer could Anakin repel the power of the blast with his lightsaber, so he was forced to retreat slowly from Dooku.

Panting, Anakin back away down the small flight of stairs leading to the strategy table in the middle of the room. Dooku continued towards him, baring his teeth in an evil grin.

"Did you honestly think you could beat me?" he taunted, then shot out another stream of lightning.

Anakin raised his lightsaber, but the lightning was too powerful and it spun him, sending him stumbling closer to the end of the table and the dais where Palpatine was seated. He lost his footing and fell, landing on the single step leading back up out of the table-level and to the main floor.

Dooku laughed contemptuously as he continued walking after Anakin.

As he struggled to push himself up from the step with his tired arms, Anakin looked up at Palpatine. The Chancellor looked down at him from the dais with a morose, disappointed expression, as if he'd expected more from Anakin.

"You're stronger than this, Anakin," Palpatine's sad voice said. "Use the *full* extent of your anger. Hold nothing back!"

Looking up at him, Anakin knew Palpatine was right. He had been holding back. There was a place inside his anger that he'd feared to go—a dark place that led somewhere else. There was great power in this place, but the darkness surrounding it made him apprehensive.

As if he were reading his mind, Palpatine quietly and calmly said, "It is the only way you can defeat him. It is the only way...."

Anakin knew he was right. It was the only way. He could feel it. He tapped into his anger, allowing it to surge energy throughout his body. The power washed away his fatigue. His arms no longer ached, were no longer weak. Once again the power he had used before while dueling Dooku filled him. He concentrated on his hatred of Dooku and all of the horrible things he had done. He added those thoughts to his anger, feeding the ever-consuming beast.

Dooku came to a stop just a few steps from Anakin's feet and looked down at him. He raised his hand to deliver another blast of lightning.

The blue-white energy shot from his fingertips and across Anakin's fallen body. At first Dooku didn't notice, but after a few seconds he realized that something was wrong. Terribly wrong.

Anakin used the full extent of the power flowing through him to channel the deadly lightning across the surface of his body and harmlessly away, into the floor. Dooku ceased his barrage, but only for a second before continuing. Still Anakin absorbed and deflected the energy using his anger.

He pushed himself to his feet in spite of the continued attack and turned to face Dooku. Dooku's eyes went wide, the surprise of it all causing him to stop shooting the lightning and lower his hand in uncertainty. Anakin took a step forward, and the hand shot back up to deliver another salvo. But Anakin merely raised his lightsaber and deflected it as he continued forward. Dooku shot another in a desperate, last-ditch effort, but it did no good and Anakin continued towards him.

Anakin raised his lightsaber high above his head and brought it down at Dooku. Dooku raised his red blade in both hands to block it, and had to struggle to repel the incredible force behind it. No longer concerned with finesse or precision Anakin hacked at Dooku madly. He forced Dooku back, along the length of the table. Dooku stepped to the side to get out of the small area alongside the table and back up onto the main floor of the room. Anakin chopped at him the entire way.

Dooku continued to block the powerful blows coming from Anakin, but his red blade sagged further and further with each axing as his arms tired. Dooku tried to escape to the side, but Anakin put up a wall with the Force that stopped Dooku cold in his tracks. He tried moving in the other direction only to find the exact same barrier. Finally, when Dooku could block the rage no longer, Anakin swiped Dooku's blade wide. Barring his teeth, Anakin slashed down at Dooku's exposed saber-arm and severed it at the elbow.

"Aaaaahhhh!!!" Dooku screamed, falling to his knees.

Anakin stood over him, his chest heaving and his eyes flashing wildly. He peered at what he had done to Dooku, and a satisfied smile slid across his lips. He had repaid what Dooku had given him.

Still, Anakin stood over Dooku with his lightsaber ignited, rage on his face.

Wincing and exhausted, Dooku peered up at him.

"Anakin, spare me. Please don't kill me. You are a Jedi, and Jedi are above such things. I beg of you..."

It took a moment for Dooku's words to penetrate Anakin's fury, but when they did he nearly recoiled at them. He closed his eyes and shook his head, allowing some of the anger to drift away. *Kill him? Why would he say that? Why would he think that?* Anakin thought.

His chest still heaving and his lips still curled around his teeth in a snarl, Anakin deactivated his lightsaber. "I'm not going to kill you, Dooku. You're going to the Jedi Council, then you're going to face trial for your crimes." He bit out the last few words, because he didn't think that someone like Dooku deserved a trial. But, he was a Jedi and he would do as The Council ordered.

"Anakin..." Palpatine said. "You cannot do that."

Surprised, Anakin turned to peer at Palpatine.

"What...do you mean?" he asked.

A saddened, painful expression crossed Palpatine's face, as if it hurt just to think of what he was about to say. "I'm afraid that a trial will only worsen matters. Should Dooku be placed on trial it will become a spectacle. He would use it as a platform to spout his traitorous ideals," he almost spat, looking at Dooku with a disgusted expression.

"Don't listen to him, Ana—" Dooku began to say, but Anakin swung around and hit him across the face with his mechanical hand to silence him.

Dooku fell onto all fours, a small trickle of blood seeping from his mouth and dripping onto the floor.

Dutifully, Anakin turned back around to face Palpatine so that he could continue while Dooku straightened to his knees.

"A trial would only bolster the resolve of his supporters and further the divide in the Republic," Palpatine continued. "He would become a martyr, and The Wars would continue needlessly." He leaned forward ever-so-slightly in the chair, and his voice became hushed, reverent. "Or you could end it all here, and now. You could stop all this chaos and misery by giving him what he deserves. You could do it, Anakin. You should do it!"

"Shut up, old man!" Dooku said, extending his remaining arm and launching a volley of blue-white Force Lightning at Palpatine. But the lightning never reached the consummate politician. It struck an invisible, red force-field surrounding Palpatine being generated by the red stands around his chair. The blue-white lightning scattered in all directions over the force-field and Palpatine gave the surprised Dooku a toothy grin.

Anakin turned instantly and kned Dooku in the chest, causing the Force Lightning to cease and Dooku to collapse back onto all fours.

Anakin stood over Dooku with wild eyes as he forced himself back up to his knees yet again.

Dooku looked up at him, pleading in his eyes.

"Do it..." Palpatine hissed.

His anger swelled to untold heights, and Anakin ignited his blue-white blade with a snap-hiss. "Anakin...please! Show mercy!" Dooku begged through ragged breaths.

"Do it, Anakin," Palpatine said. "It is the only way..."

Anakin raised the blade. Dooku's old eyes took on a defiant, enraged look. This made it all the more easier for Anakin to bring the blade in horizontally and through the enigmatic leader's neck, severing his head from his shoulders.

For a moment, the body stayed in the same position, unmoving, before collapsing to the floor in a heap. Anakin looked down at what he had done. He knew that, as usual, Palpatine was right and that it was the

right thing to do for the Republic. He knew that by doing what he had done he had saved countless lives. His actions had brought the terrible Clone Wars that much closer to resolution. But, still, he didn't feel completely at ease with his decision.

"It was the only way..." Palpatine said.

And Anakin knew he was right—it was the only way.

Anakin deactivated his lightsaber and turned from Dooku's lifeless body to look up at Palpatine.

"You've done well," the aged politician said, the smallest hint of a smile creasing his lips.

Anakin knew that he should feel proud for what he had done, but he didn't. What he had done had been the right thing to do—he knew that deep down inside—but he still couldn't shake Dooku's pleading words from his mind. He peered down at his lightsaber, then at his black-gloved, mechanical right hand, then at his other hand. They felt dirty, as if they were covered with dry, cracked mud.

Had he done what was right?

Another shudder shook the ship, bringing Anakin out of his thoughts. He looked up, out of the windows and saw the ship tumbling ever-closer to the city-planet below.

"We'd better get out of here," Anakin said, walking up to Palpatine.

"That would probably be a good idea," Palpatine jested with a smile.

A smirk sprang across Anakin's face as he reached the chair and inspected the binders holding the Supreme Chancellor in it. Palpatine always seemed calm and collected to Anakin. No matter what the situation he never panicked which, in Anakin's mind, was a sign of a true, confident leader. Anakin admired him for this greatly and aspired to have such self-control.

"I'll have to cut them," Anakin said, clicking on his lightsaber.

"Do be careful, will you? I like my hands just where they are," Palpatine joked, receiving another smirk from Anakin.

Two quick slices at the base of each binder and the metal clasps fell to the floor.

Palpatine stood, rubbing his wrists. Looking Anakin straight in the eye and with a heartfelt tone he said, "Thank you, my friend. For all you've done. I knew I could depend on you."

"It was an honor, Your Excellency," Anakin said with a slight bow of his head.

The ship gave yet another low moan, and then Anakin and Palpatine stumbled to keep their footing as the room began to tilt ever so slowly.

"Let's go," Anakin said, then jogged past Dooku's still form and towards Obi-Wan. When they reached him Anakin rolled his unconscious former-Master over, scooped him up and placed him across his shoulders. Using the Force to supplement his strong muscles, he continued towards the duel flights of stairs as the incline of the room's floor slowly grew steeper and steeper, making the short journey that much more difficult.

Just before they reached the stairs the ship gave off a rumbling groan, as if it were voicing its displeasure at being dragged towards the planet, and the floor suddenly became too steep to walk on.

Being top-heavy with Obi-Wan across his shoulders, Anakin lost his footing and fell right on his face, as did Palpatine behind him just a second later. Anakin crawled and clawed his way forward, as did

Palpatine, but the going was slow. The floor continued vertically until both of them lost their grips and began to slip, but then just as unexpectedly as it had turned vertical it began turning back level. Soon it was level enough for them to both stand and walk forward and they began up one of the flights of stairs.

When they reached the elevator, Anakin pushed the button and said, "I'm not sure how safe this is...."

"Well, at least we won't have very far to fall in there if..." The elevator doors opened, and Palpatine saw the hole in the floor. "Oh..."

That hole could cause them a lot of problems if the ship began spinning again. Anakin wasn't worried about himself. But what if The Chancellor fell through that hole and into the shaft? Or Obi-Wan, if he lost grip of him?

Another creak sounded throughout the ship, and Palpatine turned to peer out the windows. "We'll just have to take our chances," he turned around and said, stepping into the elevator and around the hole.

Anakin got in behind him, the doors shut and the elevator started back down.

"How is he?" Palpatine asked, indicating at Obi-Wan, still draped across Anakin's shoulders.

"I'm not sure. He hit his head pretty—" He cut off as the elevator suddenly started to lean and he fell into the wall. "Hold on!" he warned as the elevator continued to turn. He grabbed onto whatever he could, trying to plant his feet on whichever side of the elevator became the new floor. At first the ship rotated slowly, but after a while the pace quickened and it became more and more difficult—especially with Obi-Wan on his back. The elevator stopped its descent as the ship's safety features kicked in.

Palpatine, Anakin noticed, was handling the situation rather well. He adjusted to the new upside if the elevator quickly and without much trouble—which was more than Anakin could say. Palpatine dodged the hole with ease every time it came around. Again he found reason to admire the man. Though aged as he was, Palpatine was still quite capable in a dangerous situation. His strength intrigued Anakin, and he wondered from whence it came.

Finally, the tumbling slowed, then stopped all together. Anakin wondered for how long. The ship had stopped so that the doors were now the floor. Because the elevator wasn't very wide, Anakin was forced to stoop to avoid hitting his head. Anakin and Palpatine stayed braced against the walls for several seconds just to make certain that the toppling was over. Then Anakin moved to the hole in the floor of the elevator, which was now one of the walls, and peered out.

"I think we'll have to walk the rest of the way," he said.

Gently, he lowered Obi-Wan's body by the arm through the hole and to the new floor of the shaft. Then he crawled out, and once he was down he helped Chancellor Palpatine down, though he didn't seem to need his help.

They started down the dark shaft in a quick walk, heading for a small patch of light further down that Anakin was sure was the exiting set of doors. He kept his Jedi senses alert for any signs that the ship might start tossing around again as they went, and it was a little more than half way to the source of the light that he began to feel something.

"We've got to hurry," he said, picking up the pace to a swift jog.

A handful of seconds later the ship began to tilt vertically again.

"Run!" Anakin warned, and they did, as fast as they could for the light at the end of the shaft.

The ship didn't only tilt. It began rolling as well, which forced them to navigate the changing side of the shaft that became the next wall as they struggled to run uphill. The incline increased more and more as the ship continued to roll back to its true center. Running was becoming near impossible and their feet began slipping on the smooth surface of the wall of the shaft, yet they tried all the same. They were almost there. Just a few more meters....

Both of them jumped at the last minute before they lost their footing to grab the small inlet framing the doors. The ship was now nearing being completely upside down.

Anakin looked up, and in the light he saw a small control box next to the inside of the doors just a little ways above him. Using the Force to aid his muscles, he pulled himself up along the inside of the doors and closer to the control box—Obi-Wan still hanging over his shoulders as the ship continued to become more and more vertical. It was difficult, and fatigue threatened to take him. Gritting his teeth, he dug deeper into the Force and reached the small inset housing the control box.

He pulled himself up far enough so that he could stand on the bottom part of the inset of the doors and looked down at Palpatine. The shaft was nearly vertical now, and Palpatine was just holding on by his fingertips.

“Just hold on a little longer!” Anakin called to him.

Palpatine looked up, a slightly worried look on his face, and gave a wordless nod.

Anakin flipped open the control box and looked at its contents over. There were several small wires of differing colors and two control circuit boards. He ran his hand over the electronics, waiting for the usual prompting in the Force to tell him what to do. He had always been able to do that with machinery and electronics, ever since he had been just a small boy.

But he felt nothing this time.

He tried again, and still got the same result.

“Anakin—hurry! I don’t think I can hold on much longer,” Palpatine said, strain evident in his voice.

“Just hold on!” he urged, then gave the wires another quick scan.

He wasn’t getting any help through the Force, so he made his best guess. One hand holding onto the door framing, the other in the control box, Anakin pulled out two wires from their control panels with a flash of sparks. Then, he touched the ends of the wires together and waited to see what happened. Nothing happened.

Or so he thought.

Deep down in the darkness of the shaft the elevator began moving again.

Seeing that that hadn’t worked, Anakin tore two more wires from the board and twisted them together. This caused the emergency lights running along the inside of the shaft to come on. He tried again, and again, and again, but the doors didn’t open. Frustrated, he scanned the panel for the next pair he would try.

A whirring sound from below caught Anakin’s ears and he looked down. At first he didn’t understand what he was seeing. It looked as if the lights along the inside of the shaft were shutting off down its length coming towards them. His eyes went wide as he realized what it really was and he turned back to the wires, trying desperately to find the right combination to open the doors.

Palpatine had heard the sound as well and he looked down. “Anakin—the elevator!”

Anakin pulled and twisted together wire after wire, but nothing seemed to work. He looked down again and saw that the elevator was close, and getting closer by the second as it raced towards them.

He scanned the wires again for another pair to splice...nothing happened.

Closer...

He tried again...nothing.

The elevator was practically upon them now.

In a final fit of frustration Anakin smashed his mechanical fist into the control panel. Sparks flew into his face as he did, and then the doors opened with a hiss.

Anakin's eyes went wide in surprise. He swung himself through the doors and onto the ceiling of the bridge of the cruiser. Quickly, he set—rather, dropped—Obi-Wan off his shoulders and rushed back to the doors to grab Palpatine by the hand. Using the Force he yanked Palpatine clear of the shaft just before the elevator car reached him.

The two of them fell backwards onto the ceiling of the bridge on top of Obi-Wan, who stirred and gave a soft grunt before going limp and unconscious again.

Both of them breathing heavily, Palpatine turned to Anakin and, with a broad smile, said, "That was quite fun."

Anakin smiled, but then a loud thumping noise caught his attention.

He turned around, and as soon as he did he instantly sprang to his feet, his lightsaber in his hand, ignited.

General Grievous was coming right towards them, his blaster pistols drawn and raised.

Grievous stopped his approach several meters away and began shooting. He'd learned his lesson before with Anakin and wasn't about to get too close. He side-stepped as he fired, the shots coming one right after the other from his dual blasters.

Anakin moved his blade in a flurry to block them and tried to send several of the blasts right back at Grievous, but the Droid General's side-stepping made it impossible. All Anakin could do from this distance was deflect the shots.

"Stay down!" he warned Palpatine over the whirring of his blade, then took a handful of steps towards Grievous, blocking the laser blasts as he did.

Grievous backed just a bit, then did a back flip and landed several meters back. He commenced firing as soon as he landed and continued to side-step out of the way of any deflected bolts. Anakin barred his teeth in frustration as he side-stepped with Grievous, trying to stay between him and a clear shot of The Chancellor.

There was a meter-wide hole that stretched almost the entire length of the ceiling where a long piece of the plating had fallen, and Anakin and Grievous were forced to hop over it as they moved to the side. The heavy piece of durasteel lay on the far side of the room, and by the looks of several of the consoles on the floor of the bridge above it had done quite a bit of damage when it had rolled around the room. Some of the panels had even been knocked completely off of their base-plates and were sitting next to the long piece of fallen ceiling plating on the other side of the room. The place was a shambles.

Yet another groan surged through the ship, followed by several loud creaks and pops as the ship began to roll again. This time it rolled to the side, clockwise, as if it were trying to right itself and get the floor of the bridge back where it belonged.

Anakin stayed upright and kept his balance despite the tilt while he continued to deflect Grievous blaster shots, but after a while he began to slip.

Nearly losing balance himself, Grievous yelled, "MAGNETIZE!!"

The magnets in the soles of his feet activated and they clamped to the tilting surface of the ceiling, holding him there.

The incline quickly worsened, and Grievous continued to fire. Still blocking the blasts, Anakin tried to find something on the ceiling to hold on to as he slipped and fell to his knees, but there was little to grab onto.

on the smooth surface. Soon, the incline became so bad that he was forced to lay almost completely on his belly to keep from tumbling over backwards. He dug the fingertips of his left hand into the creases in the durasteel plating, trying desperately to hold on as he deflected shots with the other.

Out of the corner of his eye, Anakin saw Palpatine and Obi-Wan's unconscious body sliding down the incline across the room. He worried that Grievous might try shooting at them, so he let go and slid down the inclined surface of the ceiling on his back to join them at the new bottom of the room. Grievous continued firing at him as he slid, and Anakin was forced to block the shots without even seeing them with his lightsaber held up over his head.

Anakin stopped on the new bottom of the room—the wall—and got back to his feet. He rushed to Palpatine to protect him and see if he and Obi-Wan were all right. When Anakin reached them he chanced a quick glance away from the blaster shots Grievous was still sending at him and was glad to see that neither was hurt. He was also relieved to see that Obi-Wan was actually beginning to come to.

The room had turned nearly ninety-degrees now, and the control consoles that had been knocked loose began falling to the new bottom of the room. Anakin noticed the giant piece of ceiling plating right in front of them beginning to move.

"Move back!" he shouted to Palpatine. He reached down and grabbed Obi-Wan by the collar with one hand while he held his lightsaber up in the other. He dragged Obi-Wan back several meters and out of danger just in time. Just a split second later the long piece of metal fell over onto the new floor of the room with a thunderous crash.

Looking rather strange standing fully erect on what was the room's new wall, Grievous continued to rain down blaster shots on Anakin as the spin of the room seemed to pick up speed. But Anakin had his footing, for the moment, and had no problems deflecting the bolts. Yet Anakin didn't want to just deflect the shots. He wanted to take care of Grievous and stop this game.

The tilt of the room once again became rather precarious, and Anakin had to lean hard to keep from slipping. All around him the broken-off consoles were sliding and tumbling towards the next bottom of the room, and the long piece of durasteel was beginning to slide as well. If that durasteel plate began tumbling again, Anakin was certain that it would hit him, Palpatine, and Obi-Wan and crush them all. He needed to do something to halt the chaos, and he needed to do it quickly.

But what could he do while Grievous continued to fire down on him?

Again Anakin saw Palpatine and Obi-Wan's still-groggy form sliding down the incline towards the true floor of the bridge and he knew that he wouldn't be too far behind them. A console tumbled by as he tried to keep from sliding and he got an idea.

Channeling his frustration and anger, Anakin grabbed the console with the Force and reversed its course at more than five times the speed.

Grievous saw the broken console coming right at him and altered his blaster fire. He pummeled the box with several shots in a desperate attempt to blow it up as he tried to move his magnetized feet, but he wasn't quick enough. The console slammed into him hard, knocking his magnetized feet off of the ceiling and sending him falling for the floor across from Anakin.

Anakin came to a stop at the bottom of the incline on the floor of the bridge and watched as Grievous fell from the ceiling. With a sneer, he began running across the room to the Droid General to finish him, but a sudden, loud noise from above and behind stopped him dead in his tracks and caused him to turn.

The durasteel plate was sliding again, and right down at Palpatine and Obi-Wan.

Palpatine had seen it coming and was already running out of the way, but Obi-Wan didn't move. Fear gripped Anakin as he watched the durasteel plate begin to tumble down at his former-Master, and he knew that there was nothing he could do. Desperately, he reached out at the enormously heavy plate with the Force, but it did nothing to halt its fall.

“Obi-Wan!” he yelled.

Obi-Wan’s eyes opened and closed groggily as he came to, and they went suddenly wide as he saw the large plate of durasteel coming down right for him. Adrenalin and the Force surged through him, giving him back his strength. He rolled over and pushed himself up just enough so that he could dive out of the way. Right after he did the plate crashed to the floor right behind him.

Anakin let go of the breath he hadn’t even known he was holding. A frazzled Obi-Wan got to his feet and stared down at the durasteel plate, then turned and met Anakin’s eyes.

“That was close,” Obi-Wan said.

Anakin smirked. Then the sound of scrapping metal brought his attention back around towards where Grievous had fallen.

Grievous got to his feet, staring hate-filled eyes at Anakin.

Anakin raised his lightsaber up in front of him and took a handful of slow steps forward.

Grievous held his blasters at the ready, but didn’t fire as he slowly backed away from the powerful, young Jedi.

Obi-Wan joined Anakin, and together they came at Grievous. His eyes still on Grievous, Anakin unclipped Obi-Wan’s lightsaber from his belt and tossed it to Obi-Wan, who caught it and ignited it without missing a step or taking his eyes off of the Droid General. Together they stalked towards Grievous, who continued to retreat.

“This isn’t over yet, *Jedi!*” Grievous snarled, then spun and jumped up to one of the large windows along the wall.

Anakin and Obi-Wan lurched at his movement, but stopped as soon as they saw what he intended to do.

With his vice-like grip, Grievous gripped the metal framing of the window with one hand and smashed the other right through the window. It shattered instantly, and a torrent erupted in the room.

Obi-Wan and Anakin were swept off their feet and began flying across the room towards the window. Their arms scrambled for something to hold on to. Luckily, they both found a railing just meters away from the window and grabbed on for dear life, their legs flapping in the air behind them.

Anakin looked across the room for the Supreme Chancellor, and was glad to see that he had gripped the arm of a chair on the other side of the room and was safe.

Grievous’ grip kept him from being sucked out of the room right away, but he didn’t stay inside for long. He swung his legs through the shattered window and outside, then magnetized them again on the outer hull. He began walking as soon as his feet were secured and disappeared from the window and across the outside of the ship to his personal hangar where his ship was docked.

The whirlwind continued for several seconds longer before the window’s safety-shutter slid down and re-sealed the bridge.

Anakin and Obi-Wan got back on their feet, and Anakin peered out of the large bay of windows at the glowing, dawn surface of the city-planet right in front of them.

“We’ve got to get the Chancellor out of here!” Anakin said.

Obi-Wan looked out the windows, then nodded his agreement.

They rushed to Palpatine and helped him to his feet.

“Are you all right, Chancellor?” Obi-Wan asked.

Brushing himself off, Palpatine smiled. "I'm fine."

"We've got to get you to an escape pod, Your Excellency. Follow me," Anakin said, then began for the bridge doors in a fast walk.

As they continued down the darkened hall beyond, Obi-Wan asked, "Anakin, what happened to Dooku?"

Anakin's stomach tensed as he walked, but he gave no response. He just kept his eyes down the hall.

"Anakin?"

"Anakin defeated him, of course," Palpatine stated proudly, a broad smile across his face.

"Dooku's dead, and with him any hope of victory for the Separatists."

"What?" Obi-Wan said in disbelief. "Anakin..." he called after his friend, but Anakin said nothing and kept walking. Obi-Wan quickened his steps and came to stand in front of Anakin, stopping him. His arms folded across his chest, Obi-Wan asked, "What were you thinking!? We had *explicit* orders from The Council that should we ever meet up with Dooku he was to be taken alive! How can The Council question him now?"

Anakin met his eyes, but still said nothing. He knew that Obi-Wan wouldn't understand why he had killed him; why Dooku couldn't be allowed to face trial. Obi-Wan wasn't a realist like him, or Chancellor Palpatine. Obi-Wan didn't understand what a traitor like Dooku's would do to the Republic. And yet, he found himself unable to lie to Obi-Wan and give some other explanation as to how it happened.

"Well...?" Obi-Wan asked.

Anakin was getting mad and defensive now, and he was about to tell Obi-Wan everything when Palpatine spoke.

"I'm afraid it was quite unavoidable, Master Obi-Wan," the consummate politician said. "Anakin had disarmed Count Dooku and was readying to take him into custody when Dooku suddenly attacked once more. Anakin had merely a fraction of a second with which to defend himself. It was kill, or be killed. And, given the circumstances, I'd say he made the right choice," Palpatine finished with a smile.

Obi-Wan looked at Anakin, who was peering at Chancellor Palpatine with a furrowed brow, and studied his face. Something told him that he was not getting the full story, but he wasn't sure. Anakin gave Palpatine a small, imperceptible smile, then turned to look at Obi-Wan with renewed confidence, unflinching under his searching gaze.

"We'll deal with this later," Obi-Wan finally said.

A series of chirps and whistles down the hall caught their attention, and they all turned to see Artoo rolling towards them.

"Artoo? I thought I told you to go back to the ship?" Anakin said.

Artoo gave a series of bleeps in reply, then came to a stop right in front of them.

"Well, I'm glad you're here now. We can use your help. Can you tell us where the nearest escape pods are?" Anakin asked.

The little droid gave an excited string of whistles, and the light on his dome flashed back and forth between yellow and white. Then, the droid turned and started back the way he had come, turning his dome around to whistle at them to follow.

They followed him down the hall in silence, the tension over the matter of Dooku's death still thick in the air. Two halls later, the ship groaned and began to slowly incline as if it were going into a dive. The

group quickened their pace as they trotted up the slight incline, and were relieved when Artoo finally came to a stop in front of a long series of wide doors.

Anakin came forward and touched the panel next to the door. It opened with a hiss to reveal an escape pod.

The ship shuddered, and they all staggered to keep their balance. Anakin peered up at the ceiling of the hall, deep in thought. "Your Excellency," Anakin finally said, motioning towards the escape pod.

Palpatine walked past him. When he noticed they weren't following him, he turned and gave Anakin a quizzical look. "You're not coming," he stated once he understood.

Anakin shook his head. "The ship is heading right for Capital City."

"Very well," Palpatine said, obviously disappointed and worried. "Do be careful. The Republic needs a brave warrior such as yourself."

"I will, Your Excellency," Anakin said, then pushed the panel and closed the door.

Turning to Obi-Wan, Anakin said, "Come on. You, too, Artoo. We'll need your help," and began running down the decline of the hall and back towards the bridge.

Artoo gave a warbled, worried moan, but followed nonetheless.

Padmé. She was all Anakin could think about. Her, and this ship crashing right towards her.

Anakin began giving orders as soon as they ran back through the bridge doors.

"Artoo, plug into the computer and see if you can get those stabilizers working properly!"

The little droid gave an affirmative chirp and rolled as fast as it could to a small port beside a console on the wall. A door flipped open on his rotund body, and Artoo extended his computer interface arm and plugged in.

"Obi-Wan, help me man the controls," Anakin said, pointing to a nearby console as he headed up to the middle dais and the pilot's chair. Obi-Wan nodded, then went to take his seat. Anakin reached the pilot's chair and sat. He punched a few buttons on the small display screens set in the arms of the chair to bring the chairs control systems on-line. As they came up he turned to look out the windows.

The morning glow of Coruscant filled the bridge. Normally, the warm hues of red, orange and purple would have been beautiful and peaceful, but in this situation they were a sign of doom. Their radiance only reminded them of how close they were to the planet, and how desperate their situation was. He could see the outline of the large circles and lines that covered the surface of the city-planet. It was all so close now.

Anakin pried his eyes away from the windows and back down to the small display screens next to his arms. A deep frown crossed his face when he did. Less than half of the bow stabilizers were communicating with the ship's computers, and a great number of those still on-line were firing wildly.

"Artoo, I need you to get those stabilizers under control," Anakin said.

Artoo gave a defensive series of bleeps and chips. Anakin got the gist that he was working on it.

Anakin moved his fingers over the controls of the display in a flash and tried to adjust the ship's angle of descent. He put all of the working stabilizers on full power, but as the seconds went by he noticed that it hardly had any effect. Then, to add insult to injury, several of them went off-line under the sudden strain.

"Great," Anakin bemused under his breath. *Well this just keeps getting better and better*, he thought. But then an image of Padmé flashed into his mind and his focus was refined. His eyes closed to angry slits as his fingers once again moved across the screens, trying something else he thought just might work.

"We're coming in too steep," Obi-Wan said, perring at his console display. "I'm not sure the ship's hull can handle such an entry. It's damaged rather badly," he finished, turning to look up at Anakin.

"We have to try," Anakin said, his eyes fixed on his display screens. Then, without looking up, he said, "You may want to hold on to someth—"

He cut off as the ship suddenly jolted and he was nearly tossed from the pilot's chair. He dug his hands into the armrests of the chair and held himself in place. Obi-Wan nearly fell out of his chair, but steadied himself just in time.

A constant shudder, a low rumbling ran through the ship as it penetrated the top layer of Coruscant's atmosphere. Anakin kept at the controls, trying his hardest to get the ship out of this suicidal dive as the trembling intensified. A low rumble joined the shaking as the planet's atmosphere buffeted the hull. Outside the windows the warm radiance of the sunrise was intensified by the glowing of the surface of the ship. Soon, flames began licking the bottom and the tops of the panel of windows, and Anakin knew that something had to be done quickly if they were ever going to get out of this mess.

The quaking of the ship reached a fevered pitch as its mass sliced through the thick atmosphere, and it felt as if the ship were literally being torn apart. A second later Obi-Wan confirmed this suspicion from his console.

"Severe damage to the back quarter. The hull breeches from the explosion have weakened the supports. Giant pieces are breaking off!"

Anakin looked down at his own displays and saw that even more of the stabilizers were going off-line due to the breaking up of the back portion of the ship. He ground his teeth in frustration as the broken ship continued to plummet towards the capital city of Coruscant. The safety shutter over the window Grievous had shattered was beginning to glow bright red, and Anakin dreaded what would happen should it break or melt away.

Time was running out, and things were not looking good for them at all.

"Artoo...!?" Anakin yelled over the rumbling of their reentry.

Artoo's computer terminal interface arm spun as he worked. He gave a quick series of chips—none of which sounded encouraging—and continued to try to work out the problem.

The ship's shaking began to lessen, and the rumbling quieted until it was no more than a background noise as the ship exited the rough, upper layers of the atmosphere. Smoke from the burning of the hull blocked the view out of the windows in a thick, gray cloud for several seconds. Then, as if the heaven's were being parted, it suddenly evaporated and Coruscant sprang into view.

The two kilometer long half of the ship streaked through the sky like a fireball. Flames and smoke created a tail thrice the length of the ship across the morning sky high above the city planet, which was becoming more and more clear as the seconds went by. The outlines of the towering buildings could be seen clearly now, and they were headed straight for the center of them.

Padmé, Anakin thought, despair gripping his heart, for there seemed to be nothing he could do. He stared at the view in front of them. Obi-Wan stood, also unable to look away from the impending impact.

But then, all of a sudden, Artoo gave a series of excited chirps and whistles and spun his domed head around to peer back at them.

Anakin pried his eyes away from the sight outside and looked at the droid. Then, after another series of chirps, he looked down at his control displays and saw that almost all of the stabilizers were now working.

Immediately he got to work. He dialed every single one on the underside of the ship up to full power to try to get them out of this dive. He didn't worry about shorting them out, because there wasn't time to do anything else. Either it worked, or it didn't and they crashed. There was no middle ground.

“Obi-Wan, get that—” he began, but cut off as he saw that his former-Master was already set on doing what he was going to say. Obi-Wan had diverted extra power to the extreme-aft, top side stabilizers of the ship in order to push the backside down and help force them out of the steepness of the dive. Anakin kicked up the power on the front, lower stabilizers to aid Obi-Wan’s move and slowly, very slowly, the ship’s nose began to rise.

“I’ll bring up the repulsors,” Obi-Wan said.

“No! We’ll need the power for the stabilizers,” Anakin said. “Besides—we’re still too high. The repulsors wouldn’t do any good up here.”

The cityscape grew more and more perceptible, more defined, as they continued to dive towards it. As it did, the nose of the giant vessel also continued to rise ever so slowly. The upper traffic of military patrol craft and other such vehicles veered out of the way to avoid being slammed into, and some even fell in tow with the giant ship to keep an eye on its destination while radioing ahead to the lower traffic to get out of the way.

Sweat beaded Anakin’s brow as the ship’s nose slowly continued to rise. The towering skyscrapers were more than just abstract outlines now. He could even discern some of the more distinct buildings and knew where they were headed. The sweat began to trickle down the sides of his face as he saw that they were nearing the governmental district.

He cut off the stabilizers on the upper, aft section of the ship and put all power into the bottom stabilizers. Then, he kicked the repulsors with as much power going to them as he could afford.

The nose rose in a sudden jerk that nearly knocked Anakin from his seat. The skyscrapers were incredibly close now, and they all tensed as they continued getting closer by the second. Anakin’s eyes narrowed as he saw that they were on a direct path with the top of one particularly tall building and, again, his fingers danced across the controls in a flash.

He cut off all of the repulsors on the starboard side of the ship and put full power to those on the port side. The ship suddenly sagged to one side as he did this, and then it began turning ever so slightly. The building continued to grow in the windows, and it was clear that impact was inevitable.

“Hang on!” Anakin warned as the skyscraper neared.

The ship continued to bank away from the building, but it wasn’t enough. The front of the ship didn’t strike, but the entire bottom, port side did.

The ship shook violently as it tore through the side of the building. Obi-Wan went flying out of his chair, and Artoo was sent falling on his side with a high-pitched scream. Anakin hung on to the chair with the Force and his fingernails for a few seconds longer before he couldn’t anymore.

Anakin was back in the chair as soon as the shaking, and the collision, was over and readjusted the roll of the ship back to level. The next tall building was approaching and, again, it looked like it would be close. Another violent quake shook the ship as it skimmed across the top of the building, scraping off hull plating and several levels of the building itself.

Anakin did his best to level the ship out as it sailed over the tops of other buildings and towards the rundown, abandoned industrial sector just beyond, but still the ship was in a slight dive. They cleared the city, and the shinning, metal surface of the industrial sector rose to meet them.

The impact was tremendous, and this time there was nothing Anakin could do to hold on. He was tossed from the pilot’s chair and clear to the main floor of the bridge. Somewhere in the jumbled mess of it all he saw Obi-Wan flying through the air as well, and then they both hit the ground and slid, side by side, into the consoles right in front of the large windows as the skidding ship came to a stop.

Chapter 8

Debris and loose wiring were everywhere in the halls of the crashed ship. Artoo flashed his dome-light down the hall as he led Anakin and Obi-Wan through the maze. The occasional spray of sparks lit up the dark corridor as Obi-Wan and Anakin followed, careful not to trip. Half way down the corridor Artoo stopped and pointed his light into a small side hall. Then, he turned and gave a series of beeps and whistles to the others.

"I think he's found a way out," Obi-Wan said. He walked to the side corridor and peered down it. With the help of Artoo's light, he saw what it was. "It's an emergency hatch." He walked into the small corridor and to the panel next to the narrow door. None of the buttons on the panel were lit, but Obi-Wan pushed the hatch release button just in case. Nothing happened. "The panel's dead. We'll have to see if we can manually override it somehow," he said as he leaned in close and began searching the wall next to the door.

The sound and dull glow of an igniting lightsaber filled the hall, and Obi-Wan turned to see Anakin plunging his blue blade into the framing of the door. A few swift slices later, Anakin deactivated his blade and gave the door a powerful kick. It went crashing out of the ship.

"Well, I guess that's one way to do it," Obi-Wan said.

Sunlight and a stiff breeze spilled into the hall. His tunic billowing in the wind, Anakin leaned out of the doorway and looked down. "We're still a ways up from the surface, but it looks like there's a safe way down."

Obi-Wan joined Anakin in the doorway. Indeed, they were still a ways up from the surface—at least one hundred meters up—but it looked as if the belly-landing of the ship had displaced several thick durasteel support beams from the surface, and that one of these giant beams was no more than a few meters down from where they were. It would be tricky, especially with Artoo, but it was possible.

"Artoo, move into the doorframe and I'll lower you down," Obi-Wan said. The little droid complied, but once he saw what was ahead he turned his domed head and spat out a long series of questioning beeps. "Don't worry. It'll be all right," Obi-Wan soothed. "Trust me."

Artoo gave a warbled, disbelieving moan, then turned back around. Obi-Wan shut his eyes to slits and began lifting the little droid through the doorway with the Force. After setting Artoo down on the beam, Obi-Wan leaped down behind him, followed by Anakin.

The trip down was slow and arduous, especially for Artoo who almost fell numerous times and made his displeasure explicitly known, but finally they made it to the surface.

Anakin gazed back towards the city. Giant plumes of thick, black smoke were snaking into the air from the buildings they had struck. He also noted smoke in other places further off, and knew that they must have been the effect of the Separatist attack.

As he stared at the carnage waves of relief washed over Anakin. *Padmé is safe, and so is Chancellor Palpatine*, he thought. He had saved them. Unlike with his mother, this time he had made sure he was strong enough to save those he cared so much about. He had done whatever it took to keep them alive—to keep them in his life—and it felt good.

Moments later, the forms of ships began to materialize through the smoke.

“Here they come,” Anakin said, drawing Obi-Wan’s attention away from a shaking Artoo.

Four Republic Gunships appeared. Two stayed aloft while the other two swooped down and unloaded their contingents of Clonetroopers. The white armored, helmeted troops with their tear-shaped, onyx eyes rushed at them with their blaster rifles in hand. They made a defensive circle around the two Jedi and Artoo, staying alert for any possible threat from without.

“Are we secure?” A red shouldered and helmet-marked clone asked his fellow troops. He was answered with echoes of “clear!” from all around him. Then, the soldier came directly up to the Jedi, and seeing their ragged appearance, the Clone Captain asked, “General Kenobi, Colonel Skywalker—are you in need of any medical assistance?”

“We’re fine,” Obi-Wan said.

“Right.” the clone captain said, then turned and began scanning the area around them with the other troops. None of the Clonetroopers moved towards the gunships.

Obi-Wan and Anakin exchanged puzzled looks.

“Uhhhh, Captain? Shouldn’t we be boarding?” Obi-Wan asked.

“Negative, sir. I have orders to hold up here,” the clone captain said over his shoulder, never taking his eyes off of scanning the surroundings and the sky for any possible threat.

“From whom?” Obi-Wan asked, confused.

“Directly from the Supreme Chancellor.”

Anakin and Obi-Wan exchanged another puzzled look.

“Here they come,” the clone captain said into their thoughts.

Seconds later a long, red and black shuttle flanked by ten more gunships appeared from out of the smoke and began to set down on a flat portion of the ground a little ways away.

“The Chancellor’s shuttle has arrived. Stay sharp,” the clone captain said to his troops.

The Clonetroopers either nodded or gave quick hand signals to confirm they’d heard. The Chancellor’s shuttle set down, and a few seconds later its ramp began to lower. Four red robed Royal Guards filed out in their usual precision, followed by Mas Amedda, the Vice Chair of the senate. The Royal Guards and Mas came forward.

Anakin and Obi-Wan peered at the blue-skinned, Chagrian politician uncertainly. Neither of them knew what was going on.

Obi-Wan noticed that as he approached, Mas looked only at Anakin. Obi-Wan felt as if he wasn’t even there. A deep frown crossed his face and his eyes narrowed as the man came to a stop right in front of Anakin. He had never liked or trusted Mas Amedda.

“Master Jedi Skywalker,” Mas said with a slight bow. “We are deeply glad that you have returned safely.”

“Thank you,” Anakin said with a nod.

"Supreme Chancellor Palpatine requests your company aboard his shuttle back to the city. He wishes to speak with you," Mas said.

Obi-Wan was surprised, and did nothing to conceal it, but Anakin merely gave a nod and started for the large shuttle.

"Master Kenobi," Mas said coolly, as if he hated that he was even forced to recognize him. Then, he turned and followed Anakin with the four crimson, Royal Guards flanking them. The Clonetroopers surrounded the group and walked with them all the way back to the shuttle, leaving Obi-Wan standing alone.

The clones stopped at the bottom of the ramp of the shuttle, their helmets scanning from side to side, until Anakin, Mas and the Royal Guards boarded and the ramp closed. Then they hurried to their Gunships and got onboard. The chancellor's shuttle took off and so did the Gunships, joining the other ten in escorting the shuttle back to the city.

Artoo rolled up to his side and Obi-Wan watched the ships disappear into the smoke as the sound of another approaching gunship caught his ears. The ship landed a short distance away. Seeing this new shuttle's occupants, Obi-Wan and Artoo headed for it. They got in, and as soon as Obi-Wan took his seat the ship took off.

"Where's Anakin?" Jedi Master Windu asked, sitting next to Obi-Wan.

"He's returning to the city with the chancellor," Obi-Wan replied, shouting over the rushing wind.

A puzzled eye-exchange was shared between Mace and the being seated across from he and Obi-Wan.

"Tell us, you must, what happened aboard the ship." Yoda said.

"We felt a disturbance in the Force," Mace added.

"Dooku's dead," Obi-Wan said, then added, "...and General Grievous escaped."

Mace and Yoda shared another quick glance, then Mace asked, "How did Dooku die?"

Obi-Wan hesitated for a second. "Anakin killed him."

Yoda's ears drooped, and a pained expression came over Mace's face.

Obi-Wan continued, "They said it was done in self defense—that he had to do it or be killed himself."

"*They?*" Yoda asked, his curiosity peaked.

"Anakin and Chancellor Palpatine," Obi-Wan replied.

"You weren't there when it happened?" Mace asked, confused.

"I was unconscious," Obi-Wan said. "By the time I awoke it was over. Palpatine told me what'd happened later. Although..." Obi-Wan trailed off, deep in thought.

"What is it, Obi-Wan?" Mace asked.

"I'm not certain," he admitted, shaking his head, "but it felt as if they were holding something back...like they weren't telling me the whole story."

"Hmmmm..." Yoda said, his eyes closed to slits. "Question him concerning this matter, The Council will. Discover the truth, we must."

Obi-Wan was surprised by his statement, and immediately he felt guilty for revealing his doubts of Anakin's story. But he knew deep inside that those doubts were justified, and that it was important that the Jedi Council know exactly why Anakin had killed Dooku. He knew that his allegiance lay first and foremost with the Jedi, and that he shouldn't allow his personal relationships to get in the way. He must follow the code for the good of the Jedi...and possibly for Anakin's own good.

"Yes, Master," Obi-Wan said.

The landing platform just outside the Senate Building was filled with senators waiting to welcome back the Supreme Chancellor. They stood in two lines along the base of the landing ramp, some jostling for position to be the first to greet Palpatine. The quartet of Royal Guards disembarked first and took up position at the base of the ramp, baring the way of the jostling senators with their silver Force Pikes. Palpatine, with Anakin close at his side, began down the ramp. A wave of excitement rushed through the crowd at their appearance and applause broke out. Senators whispered to each other about Jedi Skywalker's heroics as they came down the ramp.

Senators Bail Organa, Mon Mothma, Orn Fre Taa, and Ask Aak were waiting at the ramps base. They all bowed as Palpatine and Anakin approached, and Bail said, "We're all greatly relieved that you have returned safely, Chancellor."

"Thank you, Senator Organa," Palpatine said with a broad smile. Then, turning to display Anakin, he said, "Although, I must say that I never would have returned were it not for the bravery of Jedi Skywalker."

More applause broke out, and Anakin smiled.

Then, raising his voice, Palpatine said, "Master Jedi Skywalker defeated and killed Count Dooku in battle!" A cheer rose up from almost all in the crowd. "The Wars are that much closer to an end, thanks to Anakin Skywalker!"

Another cheer erupted, and continued as Palpatine and Anakin passed Bail and the senators standing with him and walked through the narrow path in the crowd.

Anakin shook hands and received congratulatory pats on the back the whole way to the Senate Building as the cheering continued. It was exhilarating for him. Never before had beings showered him with such respect, admiration and honor. Never before had he been so recognized for his deeds. These senators—some of the most powerful and influential beings in the galaxy—were praising him. A swell of pride rose in his chest.

"It feels good, doesn't it?" Palpatine whispered over the cheering. "—being recognized for your abilities. You deserve this, Anakin. What you did for the Republic was a great thing!"

Anakin smiled and gave a nod of consent.

The applauding crowd followed them inside the building, filling the foyer.

For some time Anakin shook even more hands as he remained at Palpatine's side, hearing over and over again how wonderful what he'd done had been. After a while the crowd calmed down a bit and the senators began to converse amongst themselves as they waited their turn to come forward and welcome back Palpatine. Anakin began to search over the heads of the crowd for Padmé. He knew that she was bound to be here somewhere. He finally spotted her standing alone next to a window in the back of the crowd. "If you'll excuse me, Chancellor," he said.

"Of course, Anakin," Palpatine said before turning back to talk with senator Ask Aak.

Anxious to be near Padmé, Anakin made his way through the crowd of senators as quickly as he could. But the going was slow because of all the senators that wanted to congratulate him all over again. He

started with a series of polite thank you's, followed by quick smiles that eventually turned into him just brushing senators off completely so that he could get by without having to be stopped.

"Ani!!" a familiar voice called out.

Anakin stopped and turned to face the source of the voice. He knew that avoiding Jar Jar was impossible, so he decided to talk with him briefly before continuing on to Padmé. Jar Jar shoved his way through the crowd of senators to get to him, gaining irritated looks from all he pushed. Finally, the Gungan reached him.

"Ani!!" Jar Jar said throwing his arms around Anakin and squeezing the air from his lungs. He finally stopped and stepped back. "Mesa so proud of you, Ani! Yousa did a grand thing! A grand thing—saving da Supreme Chancellor!"

"Thank you, Jar Jar," Anakin said. Despite himself, Anakin couldn't help but smile. Jar Jar was quite troublesome, but his exuberant energy and optimism was contagious.

"Mesa heard about how you beatin' Count Dooku! Yousa a hero, Ani! Yousa bombad!"

Anakin's patience began to wear thin. He was anxious to get to Padmé. "Hey, Jar Jar, I was told that Vice Chair Amedda wanted to talk to you. I think he wanted to congratulate you on your fine service in the Relief and Aid Committee."

Jar Jar's eyes went wide with surprise. "Really? Hesa wantsin' to congratulate mesa?!"

"Yes. He's right over there," Anakin said, pointing across the room. "You'd better hurry if you want to catch him. I think he's just about to leave."

"Oh! Mooie, mooie, thanks, Ani!" he said before again pushing his way through the crowd.

A mischievous smile escaped Anakin's lips as he watched him go, then he turned and continued towards Padmé.

She noticed his approach as soon as he emerged from the crowd and they stared at each other. A smile escaped his lips as he came forward, and everyone else but her ceased to exist. Her hair was pulled up in braids that twisted around the crown of her head, and she wore a flowing blue and black dress. The dress was rather full-bodied and hid her figure well, but Anakin knew why—she carried a rotund belly that was sure to draw attention and unwanted questions from all who noticed it.

For three years now they had managed to keep their marriage a secret from the Jedi and those in the senate. Only Padmé's personal guards and handmaidens knew of the union, and fewer still knew about the child Padmé carried. It had been difficult, because between The Wars and Anakin's other Jedi duties, as well Padmé's political obligations, they saw little of each other. And when they did it was most often in a large group of onlookers like right now, so they were forced to keep their true emotions concealed. But at least they were able to be together, and that counted for something.

"Welcome back, Master Jedi Skywalker," Padmé said with a broad, sweet smile and a slight bow of her head.

"Senator Amidala," Anakin said, taking her hand and touching it ever so gently to his lips. As he did their eyes locked in a passionate embrace. Padmé smiled warmly, then realized where they were and pulled her hand away. She searched to make sure no one had seen.

"You shouldn't do that in public," Padmé admonished.

"I couldn't help it. You just looked so beautiful, I had to do it" Anakin said with a rougish grin.

Padmé blushed again and smiled. Then, a shadow seemed to come over her face and she looked down at her feet. When she finally looked back up her face was filled with worry, and her eyes were close to tears. "Oh, Anakin, I was so worried when I'd heard. For a while there I'd thought—"

The approach of someone from behind Anakin stopped her from speaking, and she turned her eyes down again in order to compose herself. Anakin looked over his shoulder to see whom it was that was coming, and when he did he wasn't pleased at all.

"Master Jedi Skywalker," Senator Fang Zar said in his gruff voice, his wrinkled face beaming as he approached. His arms were folded into the sleeves of his light purple, senatorial robe, and his black and gray hair was pulled up in a top-knot.

Anakin turned away from Senator Zar without saying a word, and Padmé was shocked to see the sudden glower on Anakin's face. Fang came and stood to the side of the two of them.

"I must thank you for a job well done," Fang wheezed, extending his hand. Anakin remained unmoving—didn't even turn to look at the senator. The smile melted away from Fang's face and he lowered his hand, looking from Anakin to Padmé uncertainly. "I...ahhh...know that your defeating Dooku will long be regarded as the turning point of this war. You have helped to greatly weaken the Separatists, and soon the Republic will begin to go back to what it once was."

Anakin still said nothing, but he turned to stare at Fang Zar with unguarded distaste in his eyes. A flash of surprise crossed Fang's face, but he had been in the political scene for far too long to allow his true feelings show.

"Anakin..." Padmé scolded softly.

Anakin gave her a quick look out of the corner of his eye, then in a low voice and with the slightest of nods, he said, "Thank you, Senator Zar."

Fang smiled and bowed deeply. "No—thank you, Master Jedi Skywalker. The Republic owes you a great debt for your loyal service. I see that I have interrupted your conversation here, so I will leave the two of you alone. Good day, Senator Amidala. Good day, Master Jedi Skywalker," he said with a bow to each of them.

"Thank you, Fang," Padmé said after him as he walked away.

Anakin watched him leave with ahte-filled eyes.

"What was *that* all about? Why were you so mean to Senator Zar?" Padmé asked.

"I don't trust him," Anakin said with a sneer, still looking at Fang.

"Don't trust him? Why wouldn't you trust him? He's one of the Republic's most loyal senators. He's served in the senate for decades. He's a good man."

Anakin turned to stare at her, and was about to speak when he felt a very familiar presence approaching. "Obi-Wan," he warned, then turned around so he could see his former-Master's approach.

Obi-Wan emerged from the crowd of senators, receiving handshakes and pats on his back as well, and came towards the two of them.

"I'm so pleased to see you back safely, Master Obi-Wan," Padmé said, and there was no mistaking the warmth and truth in her words.

Obi-Wan smiled and bowed, then shook her hand. "Thank you, m'Lady. And believe me—I'm glad I made it back in one piece, as well."

Padmé gave a small laugh. "Well, your heroism is greatly appreciated, as I was just telling Jedi Master Skywalker, here," she said, indicating with her hand to Anakin. "Both of you did a fine job. This will be a day long remembered in the Republic."

Obi-Wan smiled again, then turned to Anakin, his face all business. "Anakin, The Council has asked for a report immediately. We need to go."

"Of course," Anakin replied. Turning to Padmé, Anakin bowed and said, "Thank you again for your kind words, m'lady." He stared into her eyes for just a moment to speak unsaid emotions and desires.

"You're welcome, Master Skywalker," Padmé said, returning the quick exchange.

The moment was short and nearly undetectable, but Obi-Wan was still able to pick up small hints of it. He wasn't certain what it was, but he knew that he had just seen a glimpse of...something.

Anakin walked past Obi-Wan and towards the exit. "Excuse us, m'lady, and thank you" Obi-Wan said with another small bow, then walked away.

Padmé returned the bow, then stared after Anakin longingly as he disappeared from her sight.

Chapter 9

The giant bowl that was the Galactic Senate was bustling with voices as the senators and representatives waited for the emergency session to begin. Although filled with thousands of beings of countless differing species, the senate was only two-thirds full. The seats were empty not because the senators hadn't been able to return in time for the emergency session, but because those systems had abandoned the Republic in favor of the Separatists.

The loss had been quite an embarrassment for Palpatine, so he had attempted to fill those empty seats by creating new delegate positions and by allowing VIPs to sit in on sessions, which had caused even more controversy and claims that Palpatine was only appointing those that were favorable to him. The most contentious of these new positions was the Delegate of Military Affairs because the seat was allowed not only a voice, but a vote as well. Such a thing was unheard of in the Republic. That, and the confrontational manner of the delegation's appointed speaker, made them rather unpopular in certain circles.

Mas Amedda got to his feet in the chancellor's platform located in the center of the senate and moved to stand at the podium. Talking within the senate quieted, then stopped completely as everyone waited for him to speak.

"Our first order of business must be to recognize the return of Supreme Chancellor Palpatine," Mas Amedda finally said.

Echoes of agreement rang out from the majority of the senators.

"As vice-chair of the senate," Mas continued, "I hereby call for the immediate reinstatement of Supreme Chancellor Palpatine and the returning of all powers currently related to that office."

Numerous senators once again voiced their agreement, and applause broke out.

A lone pod floated into the center of the rotunda and came to stop just in front of the chancellor's podium. "Senators, instead of reinstating Palpatine, I move that the senate choose a new Supreme Chancellor," Padmé Amidala said.

The overwhelming negative response that ensued was powerful, but there were also dispersed voices of consent.

"Chancellor Palpatine has served the Republic diligently," Padmé continued calmly, ignoring the shouts, "but his service has far exceeded the allotted term limit. Count Dooku is dead and the crisis of the Clone Wars is near its end. Therefore, I believe that for the good of the Republic it is time that a new leader be selected."

"Don't be a fool, Senator Amidala," the occupant of another approaching pod, a tall Dangu, said. "The Clone Wars are far from over with General Grievous still out there. The Republic still needs Palpatine. He must remain in office until this crisis is fully resolved!"

Cheers of agreement filled the giant room. Padmé stood in her pod in the middle of it all, not believing what she heard. "Senators," she called, but her voice was lost in the din. "Senators!!" she yelled, finally bringing pause to the shouts. "Have we lost sight of our democratic ideals so much that we no longer follow them? The office of the Supreme Chancellor has a limited term to safeguard against the dangers of life-long rulers. These rules are there to protect us—to protect our very freedoms!"

"Who is better equipped as a leader to protect us from the armies of the Separatists?" The hawk-nosed, gaunt-faced Delegate of Military Affairs asked as his pod floated forward. "You, Senator Amidala?"

"I do not seek this position, Tarkin," Padmé responded, watching the slick military commander with cautious eyes. "But I do wish to see the laws of our government upheld."

"Even if doing so meant the destruction of our government—our very way of life?" Tarkin asked.

"What do you mean?" Padmé asked.

"Appointing a new chancellor now, while we are in the middle of such a fierce war, would certainly ensure the Separatists' victory. Why, the time needed for the senate to agree on a suitable replacement alone would be long enough for General Grievous and his droid armies to conquer our forces. Not to mention the time it would take for a new chancellor to gather enough support to be an effectual leader."

"I agree with Senator Amidala," Bail Organa said, his own pod floating into the fray. "Palpatine has served long enough. A new chancellor *must* be appointed."

"Ahhhhhh... And now we hear from another of The Great Appeasers," Tarkin mocked. "Tell me, Senator Organa; what was the outcome of those unsanctioned peace talks you initiated with General Grievous? Are your emissaries well?"

Three months prior, Bail had sent members of his personal staff to Duro to open prisoner exchange and temporary ceasefire negotiations with General Grievous. There were several Separatist-occupied worlds in the Duro region where political prisoners and captured citizens were starving, and Bail wished for relief supplies to be shipped in unharmed. Grievous had welcomed Bail's aides under a banner of peace only to kill them *and* all of the political prisoners they had asked to be released. It had been a terrible political embarrassment for Bail, as well as a painful, personal loss.

Yet, not allowing Tarkin to gain the upper hand, Bail retorted, "And how did your most recent campaign against the Separatists fair?"

Tarkin looked as if he might spit venom. The forces of a campaign he'd organized had been utterly and completely destroyed in an ambush of Grievous' just a few weeks ago. It had been a terrible blow to Tarkin's growing reputation as a great military strategist and the only one capable of standing up to Grievous' military brilliance.

"At least I have the courage to face our enemies head-on," Tarkin seethed. "If it were left to you our forces would crumble under the banners of pacifism and peace and the Republic would be lost!"

"At least we know which of us actually *wants* peace," Bail shot back with a casual air.

Infuriated, Tarkin was about to respond, but he was cut off.

"Enough!" Palpatine said from his spot on the central dais, and all eyes turned to him. "Commandant Tarkin is right; the situation in the galaxy is still too unstable to consider the appointment of a new Supreme Chancellor at this time."

"Chancellor, if I may be allowed to—" Padmé interjected.

"Furthermore!" Palpatine cut her off with a raised hand. "I fear recent events have left me with no choice but to reconsider my decision to take over *complete* control of the Republic's military forces."

Padmé stared in disbelief, as did Bail, and a collective hush filled the room at this unexpected change. A small smile spread across Tarkin's face.

"I will not do such a thing at this time, but the matter is weighing heavily on my mind," Palpatine continued. "The senate has proven itself far too indecisive to handle these military matters. This attack on Coruscant—the very heart of the Republic!—has reopened my eyes to the need of such a thing. General Grievous and his forces must be dealt with swiftly if we hope to end this war, senators." Sporadic applause broke out. "This is not a time for debate, but for victory. I promise you—if I do decide to take such control I will *not* allow our forces to fail!"

Cheers and applause erupted all around the rotunda. Padmé and Bail stood unmoving, their shocked eyes on Palpatine as their pods drifted back and forth in front of his podium.

"In the meantime, I will use my authority granted me by this body and increase the security forces here on Coruscant. I will place a soldier on every corner, a patrol on every street." Clapping broke out again. "The defense of this great planet will never again be compromised by the forces of the Separatists!"

The cheers became deafening. Padmé stood in the middle of it all in her pod, not believing what she was hearing.

Anger filled Padmé's face as she led the group of senators into the office of the Supreme Chancellor. Her jaw was tight and her eyes stared directly at Palpatine, who was standing behind his desk conversing quietly with his two aides, Mas Amedda and Sly Moore. Senators Bail Organa, Mon Mothma, Fang Zar, Giddean Danu, Bana Breemu, Nee Alavar, and a handful of others, followed behind Padmé, all equally as troubled.

"Chancellor—what is the meaning of this!?" Padmé demanded as they approached the small circle of chairs in front of Palpatine's desk. "I thought we had decided that you taking over control—"

"Senator Amidala," Palpatine cut her off, a stern expression on his face. "I will *not* allow such unruly behavior in my office. Nor will I tolerate such disrespect. Is that clear?"

The two locked eyes for several seconds. Padmé was so upset she was tempted to go on another diatribe, but knew that it would get her nowhere. Still, it wasn't easy for her and she bit her cheek as she bowed ever so slightly. "Forgive me, Chancellor."

Palpatine regarded her for several seconds, as if he were weighing whether or not to accept the apology. Then, he moved to the chair at his desk and said, "Please, sit, and I will hear what you have to say."

There was only a limited number of chairs available. Padmé, Fang Zar, Mon Mothma and Bail sat while the other senators stood behind them. The late morning sunlight spilled in through the wide window behind Palpatine's desk. Thick spires of smoke could be seen all throughout the city—harsh reminders of the Separatists' attack. It lent an odd effect to the sunlight, misting its warmth in a snaking darkness.

With everyone settled, Bail leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and spoke as diplomatically as he could. "We are concerned with your decision to remain in office. Some of us feel it was not your place to close the matter the way you did. This is an issue that the senate must decide, not you."

"You over-stepped your authority, Palpatine," Senator Zar said in his raspy voice.

"I did no such thing," Palpatine countered. "I had the right to do so under the Emergency Powers Act."

"But given the fact that Count Dooku is dead and the Separatist Leadership is fractured those powers should no longer be applicable," Padmé said. "There is no reason for you to have them any longer. They need to be rescinded."

"That is an issue for the senate, as I'm sure you all know. And the senate has voiced its opinion that I should keep my Emergency Powers," Palpatine said.

"You could give them up yourself—as you said you would when they were first given to you," Senator Mon Mothma said in her regal tone.

Palpatine said nothing for some time as he seemed to think the matter over. The senators waited for his response, hope in their minds.

"No," Palpatine finally said, and the senators sagged with disappointment. "Not at this time. Not while The Wars are still being fought."

"Chancellor," Padmé said, anger creeping back into her tone, "there is no guarantee that there ever *will* be a good time. Who knows how much longer these wars will go on? For the good of the Republic you *must* give up your powers and step down."

"I *cannot* in good conscience abandon the Republic to utter desolation. My abilities as a leader are needed far too much at this critical time."

"Then at the very least put to rest this notion of taking control of the military forces away from the senate," Bail said. "I thought we had already settled the issue. There needs to be *some* distribution of power."

"I know that we discussed it before, but recent events have forced me to reevaluate my position. I must, after all, do what I think is in the best interest of the Republic," Palpatine stated.

"But Chancellor—" Mon Mothma began, but she was cut off as Palpatine suddenly got to his feet.

"Senators—debate on this issue is closed. I will *not* be giving up my Emergency Powers, nor will I be stepping down from office unless the senate votes otherwise. Now, if you'll excuse me, there are many pressing matters I must address."

The group of senators were stunned—so much so that for several seconds none of them moved. Never before had Palpatine cut them off in such a manner and ordered a meeting to a close. Finally, those that were seated got to their feet and they all walked out of the office—each of them eager to be away from there so that they could discuss these alarming events amongst themselves.

Chapter 10

The Jedi Council room had changed quite a bit over the course of The Wars. The floor was dirty and unpolished. The chairs were nicked with scuffmarks and the upholstery was thinning on some. Several lights were out, and a general feel of disrepair filled the room. Those seated in the chairs had changed as a result of The Wars as well. Gone were several longstanding members to be replaced by less experienced, though qualified, Jedi Masters. The loss of Council Members in battle had been quite a shock to the moral of the Jedi Order at first, but as the horrors and defeats of The Wars continued it became less and less of a surprise.

Anakin walked into the room with confidence. He could see, and feel, the eyes of the twelve council members on him as he walked to stand on the Jedi Crest in the center of the room. The eyes were intent, searching, watching his every move. He knew why. He'd sensed their suspicions through the Force as he'd waited in the hall outside. Yet he didn't allow it to trouble him. He merely squared his shoulders to The Council's Head and prepared for what was to come.

As usual, Master Windu did nothing to veil the question in his eyes. He stared right at Anakin, disappointment on his face. Anakin met him pound for pound, taking it as a challenge from the powerful Jedi Master.

Ki-Adi-Mundi's flickering, blue-white holo-image looked up from his chair with interest and puzzlement. He was on duty somewhere off-world—and quite far away judging by the quality of the transmission. His gaze wasn't nearly as accusing as Master Windu's, but Anakin could still see uncertainty on his face.

Master Yoda peered up at him for only a heartbeat, then lowered his eyes and cradled his chin on his cane; a deep, thoughtful frown on his withered, green face.

Seated just to the left of Ki-Adi's holo-image was Obi-Wan. He had been appointed to The Council just a few months prior and it was still odd for Anakin to see him seated there. Anakin looked to his friend and former-Master for some sign of reassurance, but Obi-Wan was hesitant to make eye contact. He would shoot his eyes up in quick glances, yet when he saw Anakin peering back at him he would look away to the floor.

Reassurance from Obi-Wan, it would seem, was out of the question.

"Obi-Wan has already given his account of what happened aboard the Separatist ship," Mace said getting right down to business, as usual. "Now we'd like to hear your report. You may begin by answering why you abandoned Obi-Wan *and* your assignment to capture General Grievous to go after Count Dooku alone."

"Count Dooku escaped while we were taking control of the bridge," Anakin replied, his voice strong and confident. "I was concerned that he might get away, and seeing that Obi-Wan had the situation well under control with Grievous I decided to go after him by myself. I followed him to the Command Room where he was holding the chancellor captive."

"Why didn't you capture General Grievous first?" Mace asked. "That task was assigned to you by The Council, after all."

Anakin waited just a second, then said, "As I already said; I was worried that Count Dooku would escape, or that he might harm the chancellor."

"Did your desire to get Dooku cloud your judgment on this matter?" Ki-Adi's flickering image asked. "Is that why you abandoned the mission assigned to you by this council?"

"Did you chase after Dooku for revenge?" Mace added, more to the point.

Anakin was surprised by the forwardness of the question. He glanced to Obi-Wan. He knew he could be the only source for them thinking such a thing. But Obi-Wan still would not meet his eye. He turned back to Master Mundi. "No," he answered.

The surrounding eyes pried.

"No?" Mace repeated.

"No."

"Did you attack Dooku in anger at all during your fight?" Mace asked.

Again, Anakin's eyes flicked to Obi-Wan. How much has he told them? he thought, anger at the betrayal seeping into his heart.

Anakin knew that there was no way out of this one, so he sagged his shoulders and in his most penitent voice, said, "For a time, yes. I did." He paused for a second, his head lowered for added effect. He looked up. "But then, at Obi-Wan's heeding, I stilled my anger and fought on with a clear mind."

Silence followed for several seconds as The Council absorbed his answer and searched his feelings for the truth.

"How did Count Dooku die?" Yoda finally asked in his slow voice.

"I disarmed Dooku, and was preparing to take him captive when he made a sudden attack," Anakin lied. "I only had a split second with which to react and, unfortunately, his death was the result."

"Hmmm..." Yoda said, his eyes closed and his brow furrowed.

Anakin knew what Yoda was doing; he could feel him searching his thoughts and feelings to discover the truth through the Force. And Master Yoda wasn't the only one doing this. All the other council members were doing the same thing, but Anakin had been able to block and evade their prodding at every turn—including Master Yoda's. A tiny, triumphant smirk pulled at Anakin's lip. He saw Mace lean forward, his hand on his chin. He was staring directly at him. Anakin wiped any perceivable emotion from his face, and wondered if Master Windu had seen the smirk or not.

"So then that is a detailed, accurate account of how it happened?" Mace asked, question in his eyes.

"Yes," Anakin said.

There was yet another pause as The Council evaluated this answer.

"And what of the escape of General Grievous?" Ki-Adi Mundi asked.

"His escape is unfortunate, but not irreparable. I will find him again quickly. Stopping Dooku and saving the Supreme Chancellor was more important in this instance, as I'm sure The Council would agree."

Anakin glanced around the room for nods of consent, but none came.

Stone-faced, Mace stated, "The Council does not agree."

Anakin was taken aback by the admission. He could hardly believe his ears. "You think that capturing Grievous was more important than getting Dooku or saving Chancellor Palpatine?" Anakin asked.

Mace nodded, his face still stoic. "The Council does. Stopping The Wars is The Council's first priority, and we believe that most easily be achieved by stopping General Grievous. Without Grievous, the droid armies have no one to direct their battles. They'd be lost and easily defeated."

"You would let one of the greatest leaders of our time die just to stop General Grievous?" Anakin asked, still not believing what was being said.

Mace nodded, as did the majority of The Council.

A small flame of anger ignited in Anakin's belly, and he folded his arms into the sleeves of his brown robe and looked at the floor to control his emotions.

"Agree, you do not?" Yoda asked.

Anakin looked up at him. "No. I do not. Chancellor Palpatine has done more for the Republic than any one being in the past three centuries. Saving his life should be The Council's *first* priority in such a situation."

"What of the millions of lives saved by stopping Grievous and ending The Wars?" Ki-Adi asked. "Would you trade all those lives just to save *one man*?"

Anakin was about to answer with an emphatic yes, but he stopped when he studied the faces of those peering at him. They were all looking at him with suspicious disbelief. It was then that Anakin realized his folly; Jedi were not supposed to have such attachments. They were supposed to rise above such things and consider the greater good.

Yet it wasn't just his personal relationship with Palpatine that made him feel this way. He also knew Palpatine's value as a political leader. If Palpatine were to be killed who knew how many lives would be lost as a result? The Republic would surely fall, but did he dare voice such concerns to The Council? No. They did not view Palpatine in the same way he did. They would not understand. They were quick to voice their mistrust for Palpatine and his political ways. He could not voice his true feelings.

"No. I would not trade those lives for that of just one man," Anakin finally said.

Most of The Council seemed content with his answer, but Anakin saw Obi-Wan studying him with a curious, knowing look.

"Do you feel the outcome with Dooku would have been different had you and Master Obi-Wan taken care of General Grievous together first, then gone after Dooku as a team?" Ki-Adi asked, his voice and holo-image heavy with distortion.

"No," Anakin replied. "Everything happened so quickly that even had Obi-Wan been conscious nothing would have changed."

"Hmmm...know that for certain now, we will not," Master Yoda said.

"I agree," Mace said. "Since you disobeyed The Council's *direct* orders and went after Dooku without Obi-Wan's help we will never know if he could have been taken alive or not."

"I didn't need Obi-Wan's help," Anakin said defensively. "Besides—you wanted Dooku captured, I was worried he might escape so I went after him. And now I'm being accused of disobeying a direct order? Which is it?" Anakin asked, frustration and anger bubbling to the surface. "Would you rather I had done nothing and just allowed him to escape, or worse—murder the Supreme Chancellor?"

Mace raised an eyebrow, as did many of the other Council members. Anakin sensed that Obi-Wan, too, was taken aback by his sudden outburst. He could feel his former Master staring in surprise.

Anakin realized that he had failed to keep his composure. He reigned his anger, then said with a bow, "I apologize, Masters. That was uncalled for."

"Unfortunate, this is. Died with Dooku, answers to this mysterious Darth Sidious have. But resolved for now, this matter is. May the Force be with you," Yoda said with a wave of his hand, bringing discussion of the matter to a close.

Anakin bowed. "I will be leaving the capital as soon as I receive word of General Grievous' new location. It shouldn't take long for me to track him down again." Anakin began moving for the door.

"That won't be necessary, Anakin," Mace called after him.

Anakin stopped and turned to look at Mace. "What do you mean?" he demanded, his eyes narrow as he moved back onto the crest. Ki-Adi didn't meet his searching gaze, nor did Obi-Wan or Master Yoda.

But Mace met Anakin's eyes without hesitation. "You are no longer on the assignment," he said in a matter-of-fact tone.

Anakin was shocked.

"We are sending Master Obi-Wan to track down General Grievous. You will stay here on Coruscant," Mace said.

Anakin's jaw clenched with anger. He looked at Obi-Wan, and for once Obi-Wan met his stare with calm eyes.

"Might I remind The Council that *my* piloting skills halted the assault on the Ho'Din sector," Anakin said. "That *I* was directly responsible for the defeat of the Separatists at the Charro Outpost. That *I alone* destroyed the fuel and munitions dump on Breigang. That *I* am the one that rescued the Supreme Chancellor and that *I* was the only one here that was actually able to defeat Dooku—something even Master Yoda could not do!"

"Master Yoda wasn't trying to *kill* Dooku. He was trying to take him alive. Which, I believe, is something even *you* couldn't do," Mace pointed out. "And besides; you had your chance with Grievous and you passed it up."

Anakin stared daggers at Mace, and Mace stared right back.

"Powerful you have become, Young Skywalker," Yoda said. "Recognize that, The Council does."

Anakin pulled his eyes from Mace and looked at Master Yoda. "Then why am I being removed from this assignment?"

"Skilled, you are, but reliable, you—are—not," Yoda said, accentuating each word with a poke of his finger. "Too aggressive, you have become. Too sure of yourself, you are. Too often, the orders of The Council, you disobey."

"I didn't come here for a lesson, Master Yoda. I'm a Jedi Knight, remember?"

"Hmmp. And if Master you wish to one day be, still learn—you—MUST! Anger, you must control. Patience, you must have. Humility, and peace of mind you must learn, if become a true Jedi, you—"

Anakin couldn't take any more. He began walking for the doors, cutting Master Yoda off mid sentence. Surprise crossed the aged Jedi Master's face, but it was soon replaced by sadness.

"Anakin!?" Obi-Wan called after him in disbelief. Anakin didn't stop. Everyone watched him go in stunned silence. He looked over his shoulder at Mace with wrath-filled eyes as he walked through the doors and out of the Council Chamber.

When the doors closed behind him, Mace turned to Obi-Wan with raised eyebrows. Obi-Wan met his look.

"I'll go talk to him," he said, then walked after his former apprentice.

Mace watched Obi-Wan leave before turning to Yoda. "He's definitely hiding something. But what, exactly, I don't know. He was blocking me from his thoughts with the Force."

"Hmmm... As he was me," Yoda said, deep in thought. "Teach him that, we did not."

"One thing is for certain; something about his story didn't feel right."

"I agree," Yoda said, his face heavy with worry. "Concerned for Young Skywalker, am I."

"Anakin!" Obi-Wan shouted down the white-walled hall, but Anakin didn't slow his long stride. "Anakin—stop!"

"I don't want to hear it, Obi-Wan!" he called over his shoulder. "I'm not your Padawan anymore. I don't have to do what you say."

It had taken Obi-Wan some time to finally catch up with his former apprentice. He was already down on the hanger level, and seemed to be headed for a ship. He had to stop him. He had to try to make him understand The Council's point and repair the hurt feelings before he could storm off.

Obi-Wan knew that he would never be able to reach Anakin if he himself was upset. That would only make matters worse. So he loosed his anger. "Anakin, please. I just want to talk," he said calmly.

Anakin wheeled on him. "Did you know about this? Was this your doing?"

"What?" Obi-Wan was dumbfounded. "I had nothing to do with you being taken off the Grievous assignment."

Anakin stared at him with narrowed eyes for several seconds. A jolt of pain shot through Obi-Wan as Anakin tore through his thoughts. It was tremendously invasive, even violent, but Obi-Wan did nothing to shield his mind. He wanted Anakin to see that he was telling the truth. "I have nothing to hide," Obi-Wan said, spreading out his hands. Anakin finally stopped his prodding.

"I swear—no matter what I do I can never please them!" Anakin said. "I finally take care of Dooku, and they remove me from my assignment because of it?!"

Obi-Wan didn't say anything for some time. He just let Anakin vent for a while.

Once Anakin had stopped and was calmed a bit, Obi-Wan said, "I'm sorry for all this, Anakin. I truly am. And I know you don't want to hear this right now, but you can't act that way to The Council if you expect them to make you a Master. You need to show them that you're willing to follow their orders. You need to show them that you can control your emotions. You must show them the respect they deserve."

"And what about the respect I deserve?" Anakin asked, poking his chest with his thumb. "I've proven myself time and time again. I'm *the* hero of the Clone Wars! I've become more powerful than any of them, and *still* they try to control me!"

Obi-Wan was shocked by his misrepresentation. "They aren't trying to control you, Anakin. That's not what it's about at all. They're trying to guide you...teach you how to become a better Jedi. I understand your frustration. I know The Wars have been tough on you. But Master Yoda does have a point. You've become more aggressive, Anakin. The Wars have filled you with anger. Sometimes, I feel as though I don't even know you anymore."

Obi-Wan's calm, soothing tone eased a part of Anakin's anger. His sneer began to melt away. Obi-Wan saw this and knew that he was finally reaching him. But he could feel that Anakin wasn't convinced yet.

"No one doubts your abilities, Anakin. They have grown at an astounding rate and we are all proud of what you have accomplished. But it's your *emotions* that concerns The Council. They're worried that you may be too emotionally attached to the Grievous situation to be able to handle it properly. We all know how you feel about him...we all know where that scar on your face came from. The Council is just being cautious."

Without even thinking, Anakin raised his hand and ran a finger down the scar next to his right eye. Grievous had given it to him over two months ago, and Anakin had been waiting for the chance to get revenge ever since. That's why he'd wanted the assignment to begin with. He would have taken care of it earlier on the cruiser, but he'd had a score to settle with Dooku first.

Deep down he knew that part of what Obi-Wan was saying was right. He knew that seeking revenge was wrong for a Jedi. But he couldn't help it. His hate ran too deep to be uprooted. And besides, such hate gave him power, and why should he deny such power? He could feel the hate and the power that accompanied it right below the surface. Always it was there, waiting to be used...or wasted.

"Don't give in to your despair, Anakin," Obi-Wan pleaded. "Listen to The Council. They only want to help."

Anakin stepped to a wide window nearby. He gazed out across the Coruscant sky for some time. Lines of thick smoke still trailed into the air.

Obi-Wan stayed where he was, allowing Anakin time to think and feel this through.

In a far-off voice, Anakin said, "You're wrong, Obi-Wan." He turned to face his former Master, and with growing conviction, continued, "You haven't seen what I have—haven't seen what the Force has shown me. They *are* trying to control me. And I won't let them." He turned and walked through a set of sliding doors at the end of the hall.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Obi-Wan asked, walking through the doors after him.

The Coruscant sky was filled with traffic. The smoke had caused quite a traffic jam, and it was backed up for miles, crawling along. The gusting wind tugged at their robes. Anakin walked along the narrow walkway of the landing platform to the speeder at its end without saying a word. Obi-Wan followed, trying to find the right words to stop his friend from storming off, but the words wouldn't come.

"Where are you going?" Obi-Wan finally asked when Anakin opened the speeder's swing-up door and began to step in.

One foot already in the cockpit, Anakin looked back at Obi-Wan. "Somewhere where I can clear my mind for a little while," he said.

"Anakin, please, listen—"

"I've already listened enough!" Anakin cut him off, getting fully into the cockpit. Reaching up to pull down the door, Anakin stopped. He looked at Obi-Wan. "You would understand if you could see what I have, Obi-Wan. The Council can't be trusted."

"What are you talking about?" Obi-Wan asked, baffled.

Anakin gazed past Obi-Wan and up at the spires of the Jedi Temple. "Nothing," he finally said, then closed the speeder door. He started the engine, and sped off without looking back.

Obi-Wan folded his arms into the sleeves of his robe and watched the speeder disappear into the ever flowing traffic of Coruscant. He bowed his head and sighed in frustration. Anakin had been growing more distant and harder to reach for months now. He'd tried to talk to him about it, but that had only made matters worse. Now he was openly defying the Jedi Council.

With one final glance at where Anakin's speeder had disappeared into the skyline, Obi-Wan turned and headed back inside the Jedi Temple. He needed to talk to Master Yoda and Master Windu about all this. Perhaps they would have some answers.

Chapter 11

Padmé was unusually quiet on the ride back to her apartment. Sitting in the back of an open-topped speeder while the head of her security forces, Captain Typho, drove, she gazed absently at the slow moving Coruscant traffic all around her and the beginning of the sunset. The destruction of the morning's attack was still causing severe problems in and around the city as rescue and fire crews continued at their work. The mayhem was unsettling, but Padmé did her best not allow it to affect her too deeply. She had more than just herself to worry about, after all.

Her feet and lower back hurt, and she was looking forward to getting back to her apartment for some much needed rest. It had been a long day, and the attack and Palpatine's thoughts of taking over control of the military had only been the beginning.

The majority of the day had been spent in different committees debating, and even arguing, with senators over where limited relief funds and supplies should be sent. It had been an exhausting ordeal. There was just too high of a demand for the relief materials and not nearly enough to go around. Too much of the Republic's funds were being channeled into the buildup of the military and security forces, and those affected most by the destruction of The Wars were suffering because of it.

She let go a long, tired sigh and received a soft kick in the stomach in response.

A small smile tugged at her lips, and she began rubbing her large belly through her flowing dress.

All right. I get the message, she thought, calming her worries.

It never ceased to amaze her how sensitive the baby was. It raised issue with even the smallest change in her mood. Her stomach had taken quite the beating today, and she needed to give her little kicker some rest. If not, she was sure she would hear about it from the little one.

Just moments later the speeder began decelerating and she looked up to find that they were pulling up to the veranda of her apartment. Two of her handmaidens were waiting near the balcony of the veranda, the hoods of their gray robes pulled up over their heads and their hands clasped in front of them. Her protocol droid, See Threepio, stood just behind and to the side of the handmaidens, plated in shimmering gold and looking eager to please.

Captain Typho stopped the speeder and got out. His limp, Padmé noticed, was getting better, but he didn't seem fully healed yet. He had received the wound protecting her from yet another assassination attempt, and had never voiced a word of discomfort or complaint. With an outstretched hand, he helped Padmé step up out of the speeder and onto the veranda.

"Rest well, M'Lady," he said with a slight bow.

"Thank you, Captain," Padmé said, then began forward towards her handmaidens. "I'll be up in a little while," Padmé said.

The pair of handmaidens gave silent nods, then turned and followed Padmé deeper into the large veranda with Threepio in tow.

Two tall-standing statues flanked the edges of the veranda, and a series of columns lined with white drapery extended further in towards the face of the building and the curving flight of stairs leading up into the main area of the apartment. Two curved couches sat facing each other in the middle of the veranda with a small fountain at their end. Padmé stopped at one of these couches and sat while the handmaidens continued towards the stairs and up into the apartment.

Relief washed over her as soon as she sank into the soft cushions of the couch, and she could feel relief emanating from the baby as well. The slight breeze blowing through the air was soothing, and she closed her eyes and took a few deep, calming breaths.

The sound of shuffling feet and servo motors approaching caught her attention.

"Might I get you something, Mistress Padmé?" Threepio asked.

Padmé opened her eyes and smiled. "No thank you, Threepio. I'd like to be left alone for a little while."

"Oh! Of course," he said, bowing deeply before trudging off.

Padmé watched him walk towards the stairs with a smile. Threepio had been Anakin's droid before—he'd built him, actually—and had been with her ever since they'd gotten married. Although he was quite troublesome at times with his constant worry and nagging, Padmé was glad that he was here. He did quite a bit to help, and was an excellent translator should she ever need one. But most of all, he reminded her of Anakin and the day they'd first met.

Only a little boy, a slave on Tatooine at the time, Anakin had welcomed she, Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn, Jar-Jar and Artoo into his house for shelter from a storm. Anakin had been so excited to have them there, and he'd dragged her away from the rest of the group to show off Threepio in his room.

Even then she had been amazed by his skills and special, even abnormal, powers. But that hadn't been what had so endeared him to her; it had been his kind, welcoming nature. It still amazed her to this day that he could have been so sweet and giving having been raised as a slave. Most beings in similar situations would have been bitter and cold, but Anakin had welcomed complete strangers and offered them help at his own cost.

His caring, giving nature was what she loved about him the most.

A warm sense of pleasure washed over her, and once again she looked down at her belly and smiled. The baby always seemed to like it when she dwelled on fond memories and her feelings for Anakin.

Gently, lovingly, she began rubbing her belly again. Then, she turned and peered out across Coruscant and let her thoughts drift as she unwound.

The elevator doors opened to Padmé's apartment and Anakin stepped into the familiar setting of the sitting room. Immediately he was greeted by a familiar figure in gleaming gold coverings.

"Hello, Master Anakin," Threepio said.

"Hello, Threepio," Anakin said with little interest as he walked further into the room and past the droid. He really wasn't in the mood to talk with him at the moment. He wanted to find Padmé. He needed to see her; needed to vent his frustrations and receive her reassurance.

"It's so nice to see you back safely," Threepio said as he hurried to follow a searching Anakin back towards the bedroom. "After what we'd heard, Artoo and I have been most worried about your well-being—as has Mistress Padmé, of course," the golden droid added.

Anakin didn't find her in the bedroom. He turned to Threepio.

"...Which, considering her delicate condition, has made Artoo and I quite concerned. I told Mistress Padmé that she ought to—"

"Where *is* she?" Anakin cut in.

For a moment Threepio stared at Anakin, not sure how to react to his interruption. "Mistress Padmé is on the veranda with Artoo," he finally said. "I'll take you to her."

But Anakin was already walking through the wardrobe antechamber to the stairs leading down to the veranda. Threepio shuffled behind him trying to keep up, but Anakin's long strides put distance between them quickly.

Anakin walked down the curving stairway and out onto the veranda.

Dusk was setting over the towering skyline of Coruscant, and the smoke filling the air was lending everything a warm glow. The tall pillars along the inside of the balcony cast long shadows across the veranda. The twin, winged statues flanking the stairs to the lower balcony appeared almost alive in the light, as if they might take flight at any second. The small lights all around the veranda were illuminated, but it was still too bright out for them to cast any significant light upon their surroundings. Mostly, their glow just added to the warmth.

Being back in a place of such beauty and memory was good for Anakin right now, and he could already see Padmé sitting on one of the curved couches looking out across Coruscant's setting sun, Artoo close at hand.

Anakin stopped a few meters away to watch his young bride. She looked beautiful as ever as she peered out over the cityscape, her face filled with thought. Her long, brown hair was braided and pinned up at her ears by a metal headband. Her maroon dress was long and flowing as it spilled over the cushions around her. A smile creased Anakin's face and his heart swelled at the sight of her.

"There was a time when you greeted your visitors with a little more civility, senator," Anakin joked.

Padmé turned in surprise, and Artoo's domed head swiveled around to peer up at him. "Anakin!" she exclaimed as Artoo let loose a series of excited beeps. Padmé tried to spring to her feet, but it was difficult.

"Whoa there," Anakin said rushing to her side. With a loving arm around her he eased her back onto the couch. "You need to take it easy."

"Oh, Anakin. I was so worried, and then not being able to show my true feelings earlier was just...just... I'm so glad you're back safely!" she finally said, throwing her arms around him and hugging him tightly. She pulled back, slightly winded from the exertion combined with her worry. She shut her eyes and took a few deep breaths.

"Are you all right?" Anakin asked.

"I'm fine. Really."

"You shouldn't trouble yourself worrying about me. You don't need that added stress. Besides, you should know by now that I always come out all right—no matter what the situation," he said with a roguish grin.

Padmé smiled. "I know. I guess I'm still not used to carrying this around." She patted her large belly.

Placing his hand on her stomach, Anakin smiled. "Has he been kicking again lately?"

"And what makes you so sure our baby is going to be a *he*?" Padmé asked.

Anakin flashed her another charming grin. "It's just a feeling I have," he said with a shrug.

Padmé smiled back, then looked down at her belly and said, "There's been some rather healthy kicking all day. Quite the legs on this one."

Despite her glowing face, Anakin could see how tired Padmé was in her eyes. Waves of guilt washed over him. "I'm sorry I can't be here more often to help. I really wish I could."

"Oh, Anakin," Padmé said, a gentle hand touching his face. "There's really nothing you could do even if you could be here."

"Gee. Thanks," Anakin teased.

"You know what I mean." she admonished.

Anakin smiled broadly. "I know. I just feel guilty not being able to help." Thoughtfulness washed over his face and the smile disappeared. Staring at nothing, he said, "Perhaps soon I will have more time, though."

Padmé's brow furrowed, and she studied her husband's face. "Anakin, what's wrong?"

He hesitated for a moment. Eyes in his lap, he finally said, "The Council removed me from the assignment of tracking down General Grievous. Obi-Wan has the mission now."

Padmé said nothing in response, so after a few seconds he continued with increasing emotion. "Even after all I've done, they took away my assignment. They said I'm too reckless...too unpredictable. And now they're mad at me for killing Dooku!"

Padmé still didn't respond, and when Anakin looked up she turned away uncomfortably to straighten the folds of her dress.

Hurt, Anakin said, "Well, aren't you going to say something?"

"What would you like for me to say?" Padmé asked, looking at him.

Getting to his feet, Anakin said, "You could say that The Council is wrong and that I shouldn't have been taken off the assignment, that I'm stronger and better than Obi-Wan, that I'm the only one that was able to defeat Dooku! You could agree with me that The Council is still trying to hold me back after all I've done—after how powerful I have become!"

"It's not *all* about you, Anakin," Padmé said.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Anakin demanded.

Shocked by his sudden flare of anger, Padmé was momentarily taken aback. "It means not everything has to be the way you want all the time," she shot back. "It means just because you've proven how skilled you are you're not automatically entitled to special treatment. It means perhaps the Jedi Council knows a little more than you."

Anakin turned away, angry and hurt. He walked to the small, round fountain and stared down into the water.

"I thought at least *you* would understand," he said.

Padmé got to her feet and walked to him. She hugged him from behind, resting her head on his back.

"I *do* understand your frustration," she soothed. "But I also think you need to be patient...and listen to The Council and Obi-Wan. They do, after all, have your best interests in mind."

Anakin scoffed, not softening to her tenderness. "You haven't seen everything I have."

Releasing Anakin, Padmé sighed. "I'll just be glad when this whole conflict is over and the Republic can be put back to what it was before. Now that Dooku is gone it's time to start. The sooner Palpatine rescinds his emergency powers, the better."

"Palpatine can't step down or give up his powers yet. The Republic still needs his strength of leadership." Anakin turned from the fountain to look at her. "In fact, I think he should keep them permanently."

Padmé was stunned. "You don't really think that, do you?"

"Look at all that's been accomplished since he's had those powers. The senate has never been so efficient. The Republic needs a strong leader like Palpatine who has the strength and vision to do what is right for the galaxy."

"Anakin—do you hear what you're saying? You're talking about taking the right to decide away from the people and placing it all in the hands of a single person. Can't you see what that would do to the Republic? It would destroy it."

"Not in the hands of the right person. Chancellor Palpatine has never abused his powers, and I don't think he ever would. He's a good man, and I believe in him."

"And what if the wrong person got into office of Chancellor? What would happen then?" Padmé asked. Anakin was slow to give an answer, and wanting to drive her point home, Padmé added, "And I'm not so sure that Palpatine even is the right person."

Anakin became defensive. "Of course he's the right person."

Padmé was again shocked by his response. She'd never realized just how strongly Anakin supported Palpatine.

"Don't be so sure," she said. "He's a shrewd politician, and I don't believe he's above corruption. He's very good at hiding his true intentions and holding sway over senators. He *appears* to be a good man, but I'm not convinced. ...His growing power and support in the government frightens me."

A chill ran down Padmé's back at this last thought, and she turned to look out across the ever-flowing traffic of Coruscant.

Anakin's voice was low, but filled with conviction as he spoke to Padmé's back. "You're wrong about him, Padmé. His strength is just what the Republic needs in these troubled times. You'll see."

Padmé could tell that there would be no convincing him at the moment, so she decided to let the matter drop. Heavy waves of fatigue suddenly crashed over her and her shoulders sagged. She released a long, deep sigh. She needed rest.

She turned and walked to Anakin. Her hands on his hips, she looked up into his stone face and said, "Let's not argue, please. We always have so little time together. I don't want to ruin it by debating politics."

She wrapped her arms around him and buried her face in his chest. Anakin was still upset, so he left his hands at his sides. But as the seconds went by his hard heart began to soften, and he finally gave in. He wrapped his arms around her. When he did a relieved sigh escaped Padmé's lips and she began to weep softly. Guilt at arguing with her filled Anakin, and he held her even more dearly.

Through her quiet sobs and with her head still buried in his chest, Padmé said, "I'm just worried about what the future holds, about what kind of galaxy our child will grow up in." They embraced until Padmé stopped crying, then she said, "I'm tired. I need to go to sleep." Looking up into Anakin's eyes, she pleaded, "Will you stay with me for a little while?"

Gently brushing tear-matted hair out of her face, Anakin said, "Of course I will," then walked with her to the stairs leading back up into the apartment.

Chapter 12

The Capital City Theater House was a bustle of activity. Located in the upper levels of the entertainment district it was the crown jewel of high society. Long lines of limousines and hover cars waited outside the globe-shaped structure for their turn to unload their prominent passengers, while droid chauffeurs drove the empty cars out of the way for yet another round to pull up. A red carpet led the dapper, Coruscant elite of politicians and influential businesspersons through the main entrance of the theater and into its opulent lobby.

White marble veined with glittering gold filled the lobby, and the red carpet split into three differing paths; one leading straight ahead through velvet curtains and wide, arched doorways into the inner lobby and the main floor of the theater beyond, while the other two paths split away from each other up wide, curving staircases that led to the box seats above. Only the most elite of the most powerful had box seats, so the numbers heading up these stairs were few. These beings were watched with great envy by those below.

But Supreme Chancellor Palpatine and his entourage were by far the most watched as they walked up the stairs—even by those standing along the balcony at the top. Everyone already on the stairs stopped to allow the Republic's leader through, bowing their heads as he passed. Flanked, as usual, by his red-robed, Royal Guards, Palpatine gave curt nods to those he wished to recognize, and ignored the rest entirely. Accompanying him, Mas Amedda, Sly Moore, and senator Godan Ho'Din, looked straight ahead acknowledging no one.

The stares and bows continued down the curved hallway of the upper level where beings conversed just outside the doors to their boxes. Wide windows along the outer wall of the hall afforded those there a breathtaking view of the nighttime, Coruscant skyline, but none paid it any mind. They were far too busy networking to waste time on something so trivial. Palpatine continued to recognize only a select few as he and his entourage passed. Recognized or not, everyone bowed deep and reverently to the Supreme Chancellor as he walked by and through the doors to his box.

Inside, the elaborate theater was lined by white marble pillars, gold leaf trim, maroon walls and curtains. An enormous, golden chandelier hovered just below the domed ceiling. The occupants of the large hall stood in the aisles and next to their seats, conversing in a low din. The wide stage's maroon curtains, lined with gold tassels, were closed, and the multi-species orchestra was warming up in the pit.

Two Royal Guards entered the Supreme Chancellor's box and took up position on either side of the doorway, and all attention was immediately drawn there. The din of the crowd and the warming up of the orchestra stopped as all eyes turned to watch the box. Nothing happened for several seconds, yet everyone continued to stare eagerly.

Finally, Palpatine emerged through the curtains and into his box. The theater erupted in applause. The Supreme Chancellor walked to the balcony as the other members of his entourage filed in to stand behind him. Palpatine allowed himself to be viewed by the crowd below, kind, smiling face peering down upon them. Then, he turned his attention to the occupants of other box seats. All bowed as he looked over

them, and again Palpatine only nodded back at those he wished to be noticed. Those he nodded to held their noses slightly higher afterwards as the crowd below whispered about them.

The applause continued for several minutes, accompanied by spontaneous cheers. Palpatine stood at the balcony allowing it to continue, allowing the most influential of the Republic's government to shower their leader with fervent praise, allowing them all to know where they ranked in the grand scheme of things and where their allegiance lay. Another cheer erupted from the crowd, this one even more passionate than those preceding, and Palpatine finally raised his hands to still them. But this only caused the cheers to become louder, more intense. Matters continued in this way for several minutes more.

Finally, Palpatine took his seat. After he did the applause finally died off, and everyone else took their seats. The conductor stepped onto his podium and applause broke out again, though greatly sedated from what the Chancellor had received. The alien conductor stared right up at the Supreme Chancellor, then gave a deep, theatrical bow. Palpatine answered with an almost dismissive wave of two fingers. The blue-skinned conductor raised his four arms and his baton, and with a swift downswing the orchestra began the opening overture.

The music was extremely alien in origin; with deep, brooding notes and vivacious percussions. It continued for several minutes in this way, then took on a slightly lighter, more playful tone. The overture finished with a resounding burst of energy, then the music returned to the earlier lighter tone as the curtains drew back and the show began.

The flickering lights of traffic spilled in through the windows of Padmé's bedroom, casting long shadows across the bed. Anakin lay on his side, his head propped up by one arm while his gold, mechanical arm draped over Padmé's side. She was sound asleep and had been for over an hour now, but he was still wide awake, deep in thought.

Anakin hardly slept anymore since the beginning of The Wars. He meditated most times now. It was faster and did more for him, though it did have its drawbacks; recently he had been seeing disturbing images and sensing promptings of what he could only interpret to be the future. Every time it was the same feelings of betrayal, the same disturbing images. It had happened again tonight when he'd gone into his meditative state, only this time it had been much clearer and stronger than ever before.

Careful not to wake Padmé, Anakin got out of bed. He picked up a brown robe from the small bench at the end of the bed. He walked passed Artoo, whose light turned on as he gave an inquisitive chirp, but the little droid didn't follow. Threepio was seated in a chair near the stairway leading down to the veranda. He began to stir at seeing Anakin's approach, but Anakin didn't want to be bothered by the droid at the moment. With a quick wave of his mechanical hand he shut the droid off. Threepio's eyes went dark as his head slumped.

Anakin walked down the curving set of stairs and out onto the veranda. There was a slight chill in the air, so as he walked past the fountain he put the brown robe on over the scars and burn marks covering his back and chest—trophies from The Wars.

Standing at the top of the short flight of stairs leading down to the small, lower portion of the veranda, Anakin peered out across the shimmering Coruscant skyline. Endless streams of hover traffic crisscrossed between the towering buildings, and the soft sound of engine noises drifted to his ears. Something large up above caught his eye, and he looked up to see the outline of a patrolling Venator-class Star Destroyer a little ways above the tops of the skyscrapers. He gave a silent nod of satisfaction at seeing the ship, and knew that there were no doubt several others doing the same thing further away. But the pleasure at seeing the newly-added security was short-lived as the images and promptings resurfaced.

He folded his arms, wrapping the robe more tightly around his bulky frame. Closing his eyes, he bowed his head and tried to force the images out of his mind, but they held fast.

“...Anakin?” Padmé’s quiet, soft voice said into his thoughts.

He opened his eyes and turned to see Padmé, still in her silver evening gown, emerging from the staircase leading down from the apartment. He walked to meet her half way, and they both stopped right in front of the fountain.

“I’m sorry I woke you,” he said, his voice distant but sincere as he sat on the edge of the fountain.

“You didn’t. I just woke up and saw you were gone.” Her brow wrinkled in concern as she studied his troubled face. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” he lied. He noticed that she was wearing the Jappor snippet he had given her all those years ago. It reminded him of his childhood and more simple, carefree times. But those times were long gone now. Staring blankly at the far side of the veranda, he said, “Couldn’t sleep. That’s all.”

“Are you having dreams again?”

Anakin’s eyes shot to her face in surprise at her insight. Not wanting to lie anymore, he turned his eyes away again and gave a wordless nod. “They’re visions,” he said.

“Of what?”

“The future...I think,” Anakin said. He was almost positive that was what they were, but he wasn’t absolutely certain.

Padmé waited for him to elaborate. When he didn’t, she asked, “What did you see? What is it, Anakin?”

He wanted to tell her, but he was worried that she wouldn’t believe him. He worried that she might tell him these visions and promptings were nothing more than his feelings and his fears creeping into his thoughts. But he knew that wasn’t what they were. Somewhere deep down inside he knew that what he was seeing was the truth.

No. He couldn’t talk to her about it. Nor could he tell Obi-Wan, for he surely wouldn’t understand.

Always, he could think of only one person he trusted to tell—the only person that he was sure was wise enough to put his mind at ease. He had been hesitant to go to this person in the past because he knew what doing so could mean for the Jedi Order, but the matter felt to be at a precipice. He had to do something. He had to tell someone, and hope that person’s wisdom could assuage his fears.

His mind made up, Anakin got to his feet and said, “I’ve got to go somewhere.”

Padmé peered at him, worry filling her eyes. “Anakin, please tell me what’s troubling you,” she pleaded.

He came forward, placed his hands on her shoulders and kissed her gently on the forehead. Then, he wrapped his arms around her in a hug. Padmé did the same and held him tight.

“I will,” he said. “As soon as I figure it all out, I will.”

He released her and went back up to the bedroom to get dressed. He only hoped that Chancellor Palpatine wasn’t too busy to speak with him.

Dressed in his Jedi robes, Anakin walked along the curved hallway of the box seats level of the theater house. Getting onto this level of the building had been easy for him. The theater security recognized him immediately as the famous Jedi that had rescued the chancellor from Count Dooku and had been eager

to please. All Anakin had to tell them was that he needed to speak with the chancellor and they let him pass—even offering to take him up to the box themselves. But Anakin didn't want to be bothered by anyone at the moment, so he told them he could find it on his own.

Which he had. It had been easy to spot which one was Palpatine's because of the two Red Royal guards standing outside of the box. Anakin thought for a second that they might try to bar his way, but as he approached they actually opened the doors for him as if he were expected. Surprised, and a little leery, his steps faltered for only a heartbeat. He walked past them and into the chancellor's box.

The entrance hall was dark, but he could see his way through. He could hear the music of the orchestra playing a melodious tune with odd notes and beats. He parted the red velvet curtains slowly and saw Palpatine and his entourage just inside.

He walked down the handful of steps to the dual rows of seats, and just before he reached Palpatine's side he made his presence known. "Your Excellency?"

Palpatine turned, and upon seeing whom it was he got to his feet. "Anakin! What a pleasant surprise," he said as Mas, Sly and Ho'Din looked on.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," Anakin said.

"Not at all, my friend. Please, come sit with me and watch the show. It's quite good." With a smile, Palpatine gestured to the chair next to him, and Mas and the others began moving for the exit.

Anakin nodded, then they both took their seats. Anakin stole a glance around the lavish interior of the theater, and then at the performance taking place on the stage. A group of tall, alien beings were dancing and flipping in impossibly-fluid motions while suspended in the air by anti-gravity projectors. The sight of it was odd at first, but became rather beautiful and pleasing once he got used to it.

"Quite captivating, isn't it?" Palpatine said, noticing Anakin's stares.

This broke the trance and brought back all that was on Anakin's mind. But to be polite, he said, "Yes, it is."

"The Rylonnae are well-known for their distinctive arts. This particular piece is one of their finest, though it hasn't been shown here on Coruscant for quite some time. I'm glad to see it back now," Palpatine said.

Anakin only half-listened, and watched the fluid, mid-air acrobatics on the stage without really seeing it. His mind was too full of questions and doubts to really be interested in anything else now.

He felt at ease with Palpatine, as usual, but he still found it difficult bringing up why he was there. He was still too apprehensive, too unsure of what would happen if he were to actually tell him what his feelings and meditations were saying. He worried what the result might be.

"Anakin, I want to thank you again for what you did on the Separatist ship," Palpatine said, turning to look at him. "I know it wasn't easy for you. It took great courage and fortitude, and I'm glad you have both in you. But I can see that it's weighing heavily on your mind. You are understandably upset. Yet you must know that what you did was what was best for the Republic. Had Dooku survived to stand trial, I fear matters would only have worsened in the Republic." Palpatine looked him straight in the eye, and with the most sincere expression said, "Thank you."

"You're welcome, Your Excellency," Anakin replied with a slight bow of his head. "But killing Dooku isn't what's troubling me. He deserved to die after what he'd done. I have no problems with accepting that. Though, some might..." he trailed off.

"If you're worried about the Jedi Council, rest assured. Only you and I know what happened and I will never tell anyone. As I already told you, it will be our secret," Palpatine said.

Then, "I understand The Council called you before them to report on the matter. Did all go well? Were they able to learn the truth through your thoughts?"

"No. And I thank you for your guidance, Your Excellency. Though...how did you know?" Anakin asked.

Palpatine smiled. "I may just be Supreme Chancellor, but I know a thing or two about the Force," was his cryptic answer.

Anakin studied his face, puzzled.

"So tell me, my friend, have you come to say goodbye? Are you leaving to track down this General Grievous?" Palpatine asked.

Anger and resentment rushed into Anakin at the question. "No. I was taken off of the assignment. Master Obi-Wan is assigned to catch General Grievous now."

"What?" Palpatine said, surprised. He stared at Anakin for several seconds in disbelief. Then, shaking his head, he said, "After all you've done, after proving your powers and abilities time and time again—even after defeating Dooku!—The Jedi Council still refuses to recognize your great abilities."

Palpatine gave a heavy sigh, and Anakin slipped deeper into dwelling on his angry feelings towards The Council. "I'm sorry, my friend. Such disrespect must hurt," Palpatine consoled. He was silent for a beat, then said, "Though, I must admit I'm not the least bit surprised. The Jedi Council has long been hesitant to recognize you for the powerful Jedi you have become. I have watched them hold you back to keep you from becoming as powerful as you are meant to be. The weak often stall those that excel because they are jealous of their gifts. They don't like being without power, so they deny it to those that are *destined* to have it."

Anakin listened intently to what he was saying. He believed every word of it. Obi-Wan and The Council had always been holding him back, and all along he knew that it was because they were jealous of his abilities in the Force. He knew it! And hearing Palpatine, whom he trusted and respected so much, telling him the same thing only reaffirmed his feelings. He began to feel relief from his problems, and was glad that he had come to Palpatine.

"There are those that do not recognize true talent when they see it, Anakin, but I am not one of them," Palpatine said with a smile. "I'm glad that you came to see me. There is something that I have been wanting to discuss with you for quite some time, and now that you are without assignment I feel it is the perfect opportunity."

Anakin was puzzled. "How may I be of service, Your Excellency?"

"These are troubled and dangerous times, Anakin, and those that are strongest must band together if the Republic is to get through them. Just like you, I have many enemies both outside and *within* the Republic. They wish to see all the great things I have done for the galaxy destroyed. They want to see me removed from power because they long for it themselves. The Republic cannot risk another destabilizing event. If order is to be restored the people must be confident that their leader is safe, and that he has the strength to do what is right. And the only way I can see assuring them of that is by asking you to be my personal bodyguard and key advisor."

Anakin was stunned, speechless.

"You have proven yourself more than worthy," Palpatine said. "You have become as strong as I have always thought you would. Your Jedi skills have no equal, your cunning is extraordinary, and you, too, have a clear vision of what the galaxy needs. You have always been destined for greatness, Anakin. You must remember that. And I feel you will achieve your greatness with me."

"I am deeply honored, Your Excellency, and accept your gracious offer. I promise you—I won't let you down."

"I know you won't, Anakin. I know you won't."

Anakin's sudden elation evaporated as a thought entered his mind. "The Council may not like this. They make the assignments for Jedi."

"You are forgetting, my friend, that the Jedi Council serves me," Palpatine said with a smile. "I do not abide by their rules. If they do not agree it is of no concern. They hold no sway over me."

Anakin smiled.

A far-off, saddened expression came across the Supreme Chancellor's face, and he said, "I must tell you, Anakin; I feel as though I am surrounded by duplicity and betrayal. The courts are obsolete, the senate is corrupt, ...and now, I feel you are the only Jedi I can trust."

Silence was shared between them for several seconds. Anakin looked at the worried, down-turned face of the chancellor and felt sorry for him. Here was such a good, wise man.

"The allegations that have been raised against the Jedi in the senate are too serious for me to ignore. I am deeply troubled by them," Palpatine said. "Why did the Jedi commission this clone army ten years before there was even a need for it? And why did they keep the army a secret? If they foresaw trouble on the horizon, why didn't they inform the senate of it so that this war could have been avoided all together? And then there's Dooku; why would a former, high-ranking Jedi create a movement like the Separatists? These questions are...disturbing, to say the least."

Palpatine turned and saw that Anakin was uncomfortable. "I apologize for speaking so poorly about the Jedi in front of you, Anakin, but I felt it was something I needed to say."

"It's not what you're saying, Chancellor. It's just..." He trailed off. It was too terrible to admit. For years the Jedi Order had been the only life he'd known. How could he betray them in such a way?

But Palpatine saw what was on his mind. "You have noticed these things yourself, haven't you?"

Anakin gave a somber nod.

"What have you seen? Tell me."

Anakin hesitated one last time, then said, "I've felt promptings and seen visions of them turning against the forces of the Republic. I've seen them walking into the senate with their lightsabers, ...seen them storming your office, Your Excellency," he admitted with his head hung low.

Palpatine turned to look out across the theater, his face morose.

Anakin looked at him, feeling sorry for having brought such grief upon the good man. He didn't know what to do, what to say. "I could be wrong about all of this," Anakin said. "It may just be my frustrations with The Order getting the best of me."

"Perhaps, but I doubt it, Anakin. You are too skilled." Again, Palpatine retreated deep in thought. "This is greatly troubling."

"I'm sorry, Your Excellency," Anakin said, and he meant it.

"Don't be, my friend. You have done a great thing by telling me this. For some time I have suspected as much, but wasn't certain till now."

"What should we do?" Anakin asked.

"Nothing—for now. I can't very well go before the senate and declare the Jedi traitors without solid evidence. We will wait. We hold the advantage due to your foresight. We will wait for them to come to us...and then we will be ready for them."

"Yes, Your Excellence," Anakin said.

"Come," Palpatine said, getting to his feet. "We should leave. We have much to talk about."

Anakin followed dutifully as they walked out of the box. As soon as they emerged into the outer hall the Royal Guards snapped to attention and fell in step; Mas, Sly and Ho'Din in tow.

Seated in his own box across the way, Senator Bail Organa lowered his theater binoculars in puzzlement. He couldn't begin to imagine what Palpatine and Jedi Anakin Skywalker had just talked about, but judging by their facial expressions it must have been rather serious.

Still contemplating the matter, Bail turned back to the performance on stage.

Chapter 13

General Grievous sat at the controls in the cockpit of his personal ship; the mottled, blue-white of hyperspace swirling outside. The sleek, silver ship with its large, twin engines had been specially designed for Grievous. Numerous weapons systems and shielding had been added to upgrade the vessel, as well as added speed and long-range communications capabilities. All modifications had been made under Grievous' close supervision, and he took great pride in the ship.

Two new droid bodyguards stood in the shadows at the rear of the cockpit, their red eyes glowing intently as they stood at attention. Grievous cursed the loss of the others, because these two from the cargo bay of his ship were his last. He would have to see to it that another set be built, and that would take time.

A red light began flashing on the control panel. Grievous raised a bone-white hand to pull back the thick lever to bring the ship out of hyperspace. The swirling torrent in the windows outside subsided, then stretched into star lines before reverting back into realspace.

The scene out the window was an eerie sight. No bright star or system of planets was present in this remote region of uninhabited space. Darkness covered the area like a thick blanket; interrupted solely by a wide, blood-red, spindly-fingered nebula and the blue-white engines of a fleet of Separatist starships.

Immediately, Grievous punched up his sub-light engines and darted towards the large group of ships.

The fleet consisted of numerous different designs; Trade Federation battleships with their inward-curving arms and central core spheres, saucer-shaped Commerce Guild battle transports, Techno Union rocketships and, making up the bulk of the group, the long, sleek, Separatist battlecruisers.

As Grievous' ship approached he could see numerous pinpoints of blue-white light across the hulls of several of these battlecruisers. Immediately he knew what it was; worker droids and Geonosian crews repairing damage sustained by the battlecruisers in the recent battle above Coruscant. Grievous noted the number of ships receiving repairs with mild displeasure, and the low number of ships that had actually made it to the rendezvous point with anger.

He'd expected losses in the battle, but hadn't expected the Republic's navy to perform so well. The crews of his forces had shown themselves to be no match for the clone crews of the Republic. The clones were too fast of thinkers, too well trained, and worked together far better and reacted much more quickly than mixed crews of droids and sentient beings. Once again Grievous dreamed of what he could accomplish if he had an army of clones at his disposal. A small smile crossed his face at the prospect of such a thing.

A yellow light, accompanied by a soft beeping, began flashing on his dash. Grievous pulled his eyes away from the scene outside and turned his chair to face the side of the cockpit. There was a meter-wide, blank square of space set into the wall there, and Grievous watched it intently as he pushed the flashing yellow button.

When he did there was a slight crackle of audio distortion as the wavy, holo-image of a man dressed in a black cloak with arms folded into the sleeves appeared. The image came into sharp focus, and the life-sized figure peered out at the Droid General from the dark recesses of the cowl concealing his face. Somehow, the cockpit suddenly seemed to grow darker. Grievous bowed his head reverently.

"Darth Sidious, My Lord," Grievous said.

"You've done well, General. Everything went according to plan," Darth Sidious' grating voice said.

"Save one thing," Grievous said, then bowed his head deeply in repentance. "Kenobi survived. I failed you, My Lord."

"You will receive the opportunity to right this soon enough," the Dark Lord said.

Grievous peered up at him curiously.

"Kenobi has been assigned to hunt you down. You will allow him to find you," Sidious ordered. "It will be a pleasure, My Lord."

"Contact the leaders at the hidden base. Deploy all remaining forces. Disperse the Jedi across the galaxy and keep them busy. *Kill* as many as possible," Darth Sidious seethed.

"Yes, Lord Sidious," Grievous said as the holo-image flickered, then faded away.

General Grievous turned back to peer out the cockpit and the darkness beyond. A snide smile in his eyes, he aimed for one of the battlecruisers. He would contact the Separatist leaders from there as he coordinated his next series of attacks.

The planet Mustafar was in a perpetual state of fiery twilight. There was little the nearby sun could do to penetrate the dense clouds of smoke and ash blanketing the turbulent sphere. Constantly adding to this choking, suffocating barrier were the planet's hundreds upon hundreds of active volcanoes; most of which erupted daily, if they stopped at all.

Magma flowed through valleys like water. These rivers spilled into lakes of fire and smoke where the surface crusted into black, red-veined scabs of earth. Scorching, high-velocity winds tore across the landscape, kicking up whirlwinds of soot and toxic fumes.

The planet gave every indication of being most inhospitable, yet nestled into the slopes of the volcanoes and atop of high cliffs was a vast complex of stout, rounded buildings. Only a handful of windows pocketed the curved faces of the durasteel buildings. Affixed to the top of each building was a forest of antennas and other such long-range communications equipment, and framing the groups of buildings were durasteel channels to divert any possible flows of magma safely around them.

A low-ceilinged, trapezoidal control room was located on the top level of one of these buildings, and huddled in the dank, dark room were the leaders of the Separatists.

A wide, metal table surrounded by high-backed chairs sat in the center of the room. Control panels covered by multi-colored, flashing buttons filled the bottom halves of the four walls while slow-spinning, red holo-images of different planets across the galaxy hung suspended every three meters or so above them. These transparent globes were backed by large display screens streaming information coming in from each planet.

"What are we going to do now?" San Hill, the lanky, narrow-faced leader of the InterGalactic Banking Clan asked as he stood in the group gathered at the end of the metal table.

"I don't know!" Nute Gunray, Viceroy of the Trade Federation bit out.

Standing with Nute and San were Nute's aide Rune Haako, Senator Po Nudo, Passel Argente, Tundra Dowmeia, Poggle the Lesser and Wat Tambor. The control room, and the planet in general, was a far cry from the comfortable and spacious accommodations the privileged, corporate tycoons were used to. They had been living there for months now, and still hadn't become accustomed.

"We're doomed! Our fleet is decimated, and with Dooku dead who will lead us now?" Rune Haako said.

"I told Grievous this would happen, but he wouldn't listen to me!" Nute said, wheeling around to face Rune. Never one to stay calm, Nute began spiraling into a hysteria of uncertainty. His conical headdress bobbed precariously as he vented his continued frustrations with the Droid General. "His plans are too bold. His tactics too aggressive. And now look what's happened!"

A soft beeping from a nearby console caught Rune Haako's attention, and he moved to see what it was.

"His plans always worked in the past," Poggle the Lesser pointed out. "He's led our droid armies to victory more times than I can count."

"Yes, but what good does that do us now?" Nute countered. "How can we win with our fleet damaged so massively?"

Rune came rushing back up to the group. "It's *him*!" he said, a slight quaver in his voice and a cower in his posture.

"Put him on!" Nute demanded, then turned around to face a holo-projector on the other side of the room.

Grievous' life-sized, holographic image took the place of one of the spinning planets. Cape draped across his upper body, the Droid General looked down upon those gathered before him with an air of loftiness—something Nute loathed.

"Grievous—you've led us straight into disaster!" Nute shouted, scowling at the general. "Our fleet is in shambles because of your foolish tactics and—"

"Be quiet, Viceroy," Grievous cut him off dismissively. "I have no wish to hear of your pathetic strategic insights."

But Nute wouldn't step down. Rage on his face, he said, "No I will *not* be quiet! Your foolishness has most likely cost us the war, not to mention Dooku! And I'm *sick* of being trapped here on this accursed planet! I don't care what you say; we won't tolerate it any longer."

Suddenly, Grievous' image changed to a giant close-up of his face; his viper-like eyes behind that horrific mask boring into the Separatists. "I SAID SHUT UP!" Grievous' voice boomed through the room, causing the group to recoil in terror. "WHERE WOULD YOU BE IF NOT FOR ME!? I'VE LED YOUR ARMIES TO MORE VICTORIES THAN YOU COULD POSSIBLY HAVE DREAMED AGAINST THE REPUBLIC'S CLONE ARMY! YOU NEVER WOULD HAVE BREECHED THE MID-RIM WITHOUT MY CUNNING! IT IS *YOU* WHO NEED ME. I DO NOT NEED THE LIKES OF YOU TO RUN THIS WAR."

The General's voice echoed throughout the room several seconds longer after he'd finished. Nute regained his composure and steeled himself against Grievous' giant face, though he kept quiet this time. He didn't know how Grievous made the holo-projector do what he did, but he wished he could find out so he could stop him. Seeing those terrible eyes staring down at him so big frightened him almost beyond anything.

Once he was certain Nute Gunray would stay quiet, Grievous continued in a normal tone, though he left his image the same. "The defeat at Coruscant and the loss of Dooku are only minor setbacks. His usefulness as a political tool was used up years ago—since The Wars started. My military brilliance is all we need now. Our forces are still strong, and I will use them to strike back at the Jedi and the Republic for our loss!"

Grievous paused, then said, "I am ordering the *immediate* deployment of all our remaining forces across the galaxy."

The Separatists were stunned. A buzz of low conversation erupted behind Nute. "You can't be serious!" he said. "All our forces? And so soon after this latest attack? That is suicide!"

"No, Viceroy. It is brilliant," Grievous said, smugness in his voice. "The Jedi will not expect a strike of such magnitude so quickly. They will be caught completely off-guard."

"But...but it will take more than a week to gather our forces together for such a strike," Passel Argente said, receiving nods of agreement from the group.

"Not to mention the time needed to choose the appropriate targets," Wat Tambor's deep voice boomed, spurring discussion between the leaders.

"No time is needed," Grievous said, bringing the group's talking to a halt. "Our forces launch within the hour."

"How is that possible?" Poggle the Lesser asked.

Grievous' eyes smiled. "Because I planned the attacks more than a month ago. All necessary forces are positioned exactly where I need them to be." His giant eyes looked at something below and in front of him, and he said, "here are the targets, and the comm. frequencies you'll be needing to communicate with the leaders of the strike forces."

The spinning globes around the room changed to different planets all at once, and the screens behind them displayed the needed contact information.

"Rest assured. Victory is still well within reach. I will contact you again shortly," Grievous said. "I know it may be difficult, but do try to keep your wits about you, Viceroy." Nute's eyes narrowed as Grievous' taunting eyes faded away.

"I've had enough of him!" Nute said, turning to address the group. "I did not get into this and risk so much just to have someone like him tell me what to do!"

"What would you suggest—trying to remove him from command?" Wat Tambor asked.

The sudden thought of being without Grievous' cunning struck Nute. "No..." he said, not sure what else to say.

"Then what do we do?" San Hill asked.

"We do as he said and order the strike!" Viceroy Gunray answered. Then, turning back to peer at where Grievous' image had been with narrowed eyes, he thought, *And it had better work...*

"I'm pleased to see you all here," Senator Bail Organa said, seated behind the desk in his Coruscant office. "Thank you for coming."

Seated across from him in the white and gray colored, tasteful but humble office were senators Mon Mothma, Bana Breemu, Padmé Amidala and Fang Zar. A large, circular window filled almost the entire wall behind the seated senators, the mid-morning sunlight spilling in all around them as the endless sky traffic of the capital rushed by.

"I've summoned you here today because I consider you my most trusted allies and friends," Bail said. "For years now we have fought to end corruption in the senate and to make certain that the Republic remains a body for the people...and governed by the people. But I fear those notions are being swept away."

Bail sighed. "Palpatine isn't going to give up his Emergency Powers willingly. Nor will he step down on his own accord. That much is painfully clear now. I feel we must all come to terms with that fact."

"There must be *something* we can do to convince him to step down," Mon Mothma said.

"But what? We've already tried talking sense to him, but he just won't listen," Fang Zar rasped. "He's so overcome with self-worth that he's convinced he's the only thing that's keeping the Republic together."

"Well it's no wonder," Bana Breemu said. "With the way the senate fawns over him..."

"I agree with Fang," Padmé said. "Palpatine has become far too wrapped up in his own importance. But I also think it goes deeper than that. I firmly believe that Palpatine knows full-well what he is doing and is taking advantage of the submissiveness of the senate to further his own ideals. He has become too accustomed to having power, and now he doesn't want to give it up."

Pensive silence filled the room. They all knew what Padmé had said to be true. It was *power* that Palpatine really wanted. The fate of the Republic was a far second to him. Each and every one of them had known it for some time, but hadn't actually admitted it until now—hadn't dared to speak their concerns out loud. It was a fear that had nagged at the edges of their minds for countless months, but it had been so unthinkable that none of them wanted to accept it. Now, they all knew that they were paying the price for not listening to what their feelings were telling them.

"What do we do now?" Mon Mothma asked.

"That is why I called this meeting," Bail said. "What are we going to do about these troubling events? How are we going to get Palpatine removed from office and see to it that *true* democracy is restored to the Republic?"

Stunned silence filled the room for several seconds.

Leaning forward slowly, his words spoken carefully, Senator Zar asked, "Bail...are you suggesting what I *think* you're suggesting?"

Bail stared him right in the eye, his expression carved in stone. "I don't know, Fang. What is it you think I'm suggesting?"

Padmé's eyes went wide in disbelief. Mon Mothma lowered her eyes in troubled thought. Bana Breemu's brow furrowed. Slowly, Fang sat back, inspecting Bail for several seconds before giving small nods of agreement.

"Bail—you *can't* be serious!" Bana Breemu said.

"I'm afraid I *am* serious. More serious than I've ever been before."

"You're talking about committing treason," Mon Mothma said softly.

"I'm not suggesting we assassinate anyone or try to remove Palpatine by force," Bail explained. "But I *am* suggesting we discuss this issue openly. Palpatine is a threat to the very existence of the Republic and cannot be allowed to continue to grab up power."

"And besides," Fang Zar pointed out, "how is it treason to defend and preserve the laws of our government?"

Padmé said nothing. She sat deep in thought as the others talked.

"All I'm asking is that we talk about the possibility, and that each of you quietly, and as discretely as possible, see how many others in the senate share our views."

"That will be difficult—and dangerous," Bana said. "The corruption in the senate has grown out of control. Too many senators are on Palpatine's side."

"I fear most of them are being controlled by him in one way or another," Mon Mothma said. "Either through favors or bribes."

"Or intimidation," Fang pointed out. "His control over the special committees is staggering. How many of us here have had requests for relief funds or materials for our homeworlds slowed or denied just because we've opposed him? Every single one of us!"

"And the growing military presence here on Coruscant is troubling as well," Bana Breemu said. "I've heard rumors of people being arrested for no other reason than that they *might* somehow be affiliated with the Separatists. No proof, no supporting evidence—just the thought that they are. And Palpatine is behind it all."

"But if he has such power then what can we do?" Mon Mothma asked.

"We must *fight* him," Padmé finally spoke up, and there was no mistaking the conviction in her voice. "I agree with Bail. We *cannot* allow Palpatine to ruin the Republic. He already has in a lot of ways with the use of his Emergency Powers."

There was another lull as everyone absorbed this new statement of truth, as each of them came to terms with the idea.

Then Mon Mothma said, "We would need the Jedi on our side if we were to actually go through with this. I understand they are quite displeased with the way in which Palpatine is handling The Wars, and that they, too, are concerned with his growing power."

"I don't know if we can ask the Jedi to join us on this issue," Bail said. "They don't get involved in politics. It's not their place."

"But their place *is* to ensure justice and peace in the Republic," Senator Zar said. "Surely a matter such as this is within the realm of that mandate."

"It would be if Palpatine were going *against* the senate," Padmé said. "But since he is being handed such power through legal means the Jedi cannot take action against him."

"Senator Amidala is right," Mon Mothma said. "As long as the senate goes along with Palpatine there is little the Jedi can do. But we can at the very least assume that the Jedi Order does not agree with what's happening in the senate. They have refused Palpatine's request for their public support several times. That says something."

"The Jedi *must* become involved if we ever hope to win this fight!" Fang Zar said.

"Perhaps they could come before the senate and call for Palpatine to resign," Mon Mothma said. "Surely they would agree to getting involved in politics just this once on such an important matter. If the senate will not listen to us, then perhaps they will listen to the Jedi."

"Yes, perhaps the Jedi can convince the senate to vote Palpatine out..." Bana Breemu thought aloud.

"I fear that such a thing could be more harmful for *them* than it would be helpful for *us*," Bail said. "Their position has weakened considerably over these past few years because of the rumors in the senate. Them clearly taking sides might only make matters worse."

"Those rumors are nonsense!" Fang Zar said. "Who would ever believe that the Jedi orchestrated The Wars?"

"Quite a few senators, by the looks of it," Bana Breemu said.

"The fact remains we need the Jedi for this to work," Padmé said. "I will open a channel of communication with them to see how they feel on the matter. Even if they don't openly side with us, anything they can do to help will be beneficial."

"Yes. The Jedi would be key to all of this," Bail said. "Without them, I fear we would not succeed."

"What of Anakin Skywalker?" Fang asked, turning to Padmé. "I know that the two of you are friends. Would *he* side with us? The Great Hero of The Clone Wars would be most helpful on our side."

Padmé opened her mouth to speak, but Bail said, "I've heard he's just been appointed as Palpatine's new personal bodyguard. Apparently, Palpatine made the request himself. I think they're quite friendly towards one another. I'm not so sure that he is with the rest of the Jedi on this issue."

Shock flashed through Padmé, and her mouth remained hanging open for a second. She caught a hold of her surprise quickly and masked it as best as she could, though some still showed. The baby gave a sudden kick.

Palpatine's personal bodyguard!? she thought, baffled. Quickly, the confusion began morphing into anger at her having to find out about something so important from someone other than her own husband. *How could he not tell me?*

Then another chilling thought entered her mind—Anakin being even closer to and spending more time with Palpatine. His support for the political leader and the way in which he governed was already at a frighteningly passionate level. She worried that this new assignment would only serve to bolster Anakin's political ideals, which were already a matter of great contention between the two of them, *and* between Anakin and the Jedi.

She lowered her head and gave a soft sigh as the baby kicked again.

"...Padmé?" Bail's said, bringing her attention back to the discussion at hand.

"I will meet with a member of the Jedi Council as soon as possible," she said.

"Good," Bail said. Then, getting to his feet, he said, "We'll meet again shortly."

The others got to their feet as well and began for the doors of the office. No words were shared as they left. Each was consumed with their own thoughts on the magnitude of what had just happened; they had all agreed to subvert their own government. They had, every one of them, agreed to commit treason.

Chapter 14

Jedi Masters Mace Windu stood at the base of the large holo-projector in the middle of the Jedi War Room located deep within the Jedi Temple. The room was spacious, with an oval shaped floor bearing the Jedi Crest surrounded by a series of wide steps that served as seats for large gatherings of Jedi. Tall pillars illuminated by dim lights lined the walls at the top of these wide steps. The dull gray coloring of nearly everything but the floor conveyed that the room was geared more towards functionality than beauty; and rightfully so, for this was the room from which the Jedi coordinated the majority of their military operations.

Throughout the room were a handful of other Jedi monitoring display screens and holo-projectors showing information about this most recent campaign of Grievous'.

Mace peered at the six-meter wide holo-display of the galaxy slightly above him. Red flashes in the blue-white image indicated where the Separatists had attacked. General Grievous had wasted no time in regrouping his forces for another strike after the battle over Coruscant, and the dispersed nature of the attack led Mace to believe that Grievous was set on inflicting as much damage and suffering as possible with his remaining forces.

"He's attacking with much more determination than ever," Jedi Master Ki-Adi-Mundi's life-sized holo-image said. "The attack is much more aggressive."

"A last-ditch effort?" Mace asked.

"Perhaps. It's rather well organized if it is, though," Ki-Adi said. "They came almost from out of nowhere and with such ferocity. It seems too well-planned to be so desperate."

Master Ki-Adi's image faded away to be replaced by that of Jedi Aayla Secura.

"I'm sorry I'm late, Master Windu. Would you like my report?" the blue-skinned, Twi'lek Jedi asked.

But before Mace could answer yet another holo-image appeared, splitting the display in two with Aayla on one side and the newcomer on the other.

The new image was that of a clonetrooper standing at attention with his arms tucked neatly to his sides and his helmetless head held high.

"Master Windu, I have urgent news from Utapau," the clonetrooper said in his slightly accented voice.

"What is it, Commander Cody?" Mace asked, and Aayla's blue-white form turned to peer at his image, folding her arms in frustration at the interruption.

"The Droid General has been spotted here on Utapau," Commander Cody responded.

"Are you certain?" Mace asked, his hopes leaping at the possibility that they might track down Grievous so quickly.

"I'm certain, Master Windu. I saw him myself from a distance of no more than two hundred meters. He was right on the front lines of the attack here," Cody said.

Mace's brow furrowed, and several other Jedi nearby turned to peer at the Clonetrooper in puzzlement—including Aayla.

"Very well. Thank you, Commander Cody. Keep us posted on any new updates on the situation," Mace said.

"Yes, sir!" Cody said, then his image faded away.

Mace ignored all around him as he punched buttons on the console in front of him to activate the comm. unit there. He needed to alert Master Obi-Wan to this fortunate turn of events.

Obi-Wan stepped out of the speeder and onto the lower apron of senator Amidala's veranda. A gold-plated protocol droid was waiting for him on the small flight of stairs leading up to the main area of the balcony, and it addressed him as soon as he approached.

"Greetings, Master Jedi. I am See-Threepio, human-cyborg relations. Senator Amidala has been expecting you. This way, please."

Obi-Wan gave a nod and followed the droid further into the pillared, curtained veranda. They passed the fountain, and the droid stopped next to one of the curved couches.

"Make yourself comfortable," Threepio said, gesturing at one of the couches. "The senator will be with you shortly."

"Thank you," Obi-Wan said, wrapping his robe around him and sitting.

"Might I interest you in a refreshment?" Threepio asked.

"I'm fine, thank you."

Threepio nodded, then turned and shuffled towards the doorway and the flight of stairs leading up into the main area of the apartment.

Obi-Wan sat and waited on the veranda, peering around it at the statues and the stunning view. A stiff breeze blew across the balcony, ruffling the beige curtains and wafting the sounds of the bustling Coruscant traffic towards his ears. Although he had never been to this portion of Padmé's apartment in his previous visits something about the place seemed familiar. He couldn't place exactly what it was, but he sensed a familiar presence that made him feel as if he'd been there before....

"Thank you for waiting, Obi-Wan," Padmé said into his thoughts. He turned to see her walking towards him with a warm smile on her face, bringing one to his in kind as he stood.

"M'Lady. It's a pleasure to see you again," he said with a bow, then shook her hand. Obi-Wan noticed that she was dressed as informally as he'd ever seen her. Her long, curly hair was down and she wore a simple, tan dress that hung lightly over her frame. "I'm glad to see you are doing well."

"Please, call me Padmé. There is no need for such formality between old friends like us."

Obi-Wan gave a broad smile and said, "I'll try to remember, but old habits die hard."

Padmé smiled. "Please, sit." She gestured at the couch.

"Thank you," Obi-Wan said and they both took a seat next to each other.

"I'm glad to see that you have fared so well through The Wars. In fact—I think I can speak for the entire senate by saying that the Jedi have done a tremendous job in protecting our way of life and defending the people of the Republic throughout this horrible conflict. I understand that doing so has come at a high cost to The Order, and for that there can never be repayment. We are forever in your debt."

"Thank you," Obi-Wan replied. "The losses we've suffered have been unfortunate, but it's been for a good cause."

"And now, with Dooku gone," Padmé said, "I hear the remaining leaders of the Separatists are disorganized and fracturing under the pressure. I hear The Wars could be over completely fairly soon."

Obi-Wan nodded. "General Grievous still needs to be captured, but for the most part the Separatists are falling apart. They've launched a surprise campaign across the mid and outer rim territories, but it seems to be nothing more than a last ditch effort. It will all be resolved soon. Thankfully, things are almost at their end."

"Indeed. And the sooner they are, the sooner things can get back to normal in the Republic," Padmé said.

She straightened her back as she sat on the edge of the couch and Obi-Wan noticed her warm familiarity disappear to be replaced with cool, diplomatic posturing.

"I want to thank you for answering my request for a meeting on such short notice," she stated formally. "I understand that you are quite busy with the assignment of tracking down this Droid General, so I assure you I won't take up too much of your time."

"Thank you senator—er, Padmé," Obi-Wan said, slightly thrown off by her sudden change in tone.

Padmé gave him a bewildered look, then an embarrassed smile broke across her face. "I'm sorry, Obi-Wan. I'm speaking like a politician, not a friend. I guess I'm just not used to this."

"Like I said—old habits die hard," Obi-Wan joked.

Padmé's smile broadened even more, relieving tension.

More relaxed, she said, "To get to the point; I'd like to know what the Jedi Council means to do about Chancellor Palpatine remaining in office and his ever-expanding power."

"What...do you mean?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Several senators, myself included, are deeply concerned with the longevity of his service; not to mention his refusal to resend his Emergency Powers. He is growing too powerful. It frightens me. It frightens all of us! No one person should have that much control and power in the Republic—especially someone as dubious as Palpatine. We know that The Order is greatly displeased with the methods Palpatine has used in The Wars. Therefore, my colleagues and I would like to know what The Council is planning on doing about this matter."

Suddenly Obi-Wan realized he was in dangerous territory here. This was all politics. This was not an arena for the Jedi. He knew that he must tread lightly.

"The Council will continue to do what it has done in the past; not get involved in the politics of the Republic," Obi-Wan answered.

"You have no plans to make an exception on this matter then?" Padmé asked.

"There are no plans, yes."

"Even if doing so means the collapse of the Republic and the eradication of all its democratic ideals? Because that is what will happen if Palpatine continues in this way. He is changing the very nature of the entire government."

"I don't think the matter is quite as severe as you imply," Obi-Wan said, trying to keep things calm. "Besides, the mandate of the Jedi is to ensure peace and order in the Republic. We have no right to become involved in the law making procedures of the senate. If what the senate decides is the will of the people, then the Jedi can do nothing to interfere. It is not our place."

"What about justice?" Padmé asked. "Justice is also a mandate of the Jedi. What justice can be had if the Republic continues to be stripped of its democratic ideals? And that is what will happen, I can assure you. Palpatine has far too much support. He holds sway over too many senators now to ever hope for his removal. His power will only continue to grow until the Republic no longer resembles it's former self. What chance does justice have in a system like that—especially one already so wrought with corruption?"

She stared right at Obi-Wan, and after a time it was too much for him so he looked away at the floor. He knew that she was right and couldn't bare to look her in the eye. He was too embarrassed that things had gotten so far out of control; that the Jedi could have allowed things to get so bad in the senate by claiming no responsibility for the goings-on there. They had seen and had known about the corruption for years now, but had gotten themselves in a position they never should have been in—a position where they couldn't do anything about it.

He gave a heavy sigh, then said, "M'Lady, I understand your concerns. But what can the Jedi do? We cannot take any direct action to cleanse the senate of corruption. We cannot *force* Palpatine out of office. All we can do now is wait and hope that the citizens of the Republic choose the right path. It is not our place to force them to do so."

"But you can *voice* your position. You can alert the senate to the dangers of what is happening, to the dangers of where this is all leading! The voice of the Jedi has long been regarded as one of reason and wisdom by the senate. If you were to voice your concerns it very well may change the course of this issue. It very well could push for a vote to remove Palpatine from office. But if you stay silent..." she trailed off, leaving the statement open for Obi-Wan to draw his own conclusion.

"I'm afraid the reputation of the Jedi is no longer as influential as you think," Obi-Wan said, his voice heavy with sadness and regret. "These persistent accusations concerning The Wars have greatly damaged our credibility."

"It isn't as damaged as you think, I assure you."

Obi-Wan gave her a broad grin. "I appreciate your kindness, Padmé, but you have seen the same things happening in the senate that we have. Ever since those rumors began gaining popularity The Order's requests for troops and supplies have been delayed due to "*verification*." Our intelligence now has to go through a fact-checking committee before we can act on it. Our movements are monitored, and some members of the Jedi Council are even being investigated. Our reputation is damaged, and severely. Numerous battles have been lost that should have been easy victories because of this. ...And many Jedi have died that shouldn't because of it."

Padmé listened, and as she did her face grew more and more saddened. "I'm sorry, Obi-Wan. I hadn't known the situation was so bad for the Jedi. I'd never considered that these things would have such an effect on The Order."

"Can you see now what I'm trying to tell you?" Obi-Wan asked. "If the Jedi were to come out in open opposition to the Supreme Chancellor—the office we are supposed to *serve*—our position would only worsen. We would lose all credibility in the senate."

Padmé said nothing. Her sad and worried eyes fell her stomach as she thought the matter over.

Obi-Wan could feel how distressed she was and it surprised him. Her worry seemed to go far deeper than just her concerns about the political problems in the senate, and he wondered if there was something else that was causing her to press this issue so urgently.

"I will forward your concerns and your request to The Jedi Council," Obi-Wan soothed. "I cannot guarantee they will take action, but I will let them know what it is you requested."

"Thank you," Padmé said. She looked up, but not at Obi-Wan. Instead, she peered out across the skyline of the capital city.

Obi-Wan watched her in confusion for several seconds. He could sense that there was something else she wanted to say. He could see it in her eyes. Yet he didn't want to press the matter, so he sat and waited.

"Obi-Wan," she finally said, still peering out, her voice distant.

She said nothing more, so after a time, Obi-Wan said, "...Yes?"

Padmé turned her head slowly to look at him, and he could see that tears were not far from her eyes. "I've heard that Anakin has agreed to be Palpatine's personal bodyguard."

"...Yes, he has—and much to the displeasure of The Council. It is *their* responsibility to assign the Chancellor's protector, not Palpatine's."

"I'm...concerned about Anakin being so close to Palpatine," Padmé said, struggling to get the words out.

Obi-Wan could tell that she was choosing her words most carefully, but wasn't certain why. He knew that she and Anakin had become close friends while Anakin had been assigned to protect her and that the friendship persisted to this day, but this seemed to go deeper. He thought that she must have stronger feelings for Anakin than he'd thought, and that this was where her great concern was stemming from.

"Why would you be concerned about that?" Obi-Wan asked, yet feeling that he already knew the answer.

"I've spoken with Anakin throughout these past few years and he's given me the impression that he's a strong supporter of Palpatine's. They are close friends, he and Palpatine, and I fear what influence Palpatine's political views are having on him."

Obi-Wan was surprised that she knew so much of Anakin's personal feelings and beliefs. Obi-Wan knew of most of them, but he had been Anakin's Master for over ten years. Although, he hadn't known that Palpatine and Anakin were such close friends. That was surprising...and, somehow, alarming. He couldn't place why, but he felt it through the Force.

"Anakin has his own ideals and beliefs concerning politics, but he's a Jedi, Padmé. I trust that he knows what is best and will not allow Palpatine to manipulate him in any way. He will follow the Jedi Code as he always has."

Padmé suddenly turned away from Obi-Wan and looked back out across the Coruscant skyline. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Then, she turned back to look at him and said, "Obi-Wan, there's something I need to tell you—something personal. This is hard for me. I made a promise to keep this a secret, but with the way things are going that is something I know I can no longer do."

Obi-Wan listened, intent on her every word. He could tell that whatever she wanted to say was causing her great personal pain to do so. "Go on," he urged when she didn't speak.

"I need to tell you...I need you to know about—"

The beeping of Obi-Wan's comm. unit cut her short. "Excuse me," Obi-Wan said, retrieving the small communications device from his utility belt. As he did Padmé stood and walked a few paces away from the couch.

"Yes, Master Windu," Obi-Wan said.

"Obi-Wan," Mace's voice said through the comm. unit. *"We've just received word of The Droid General's current location. We need you back at the Temple as soon as possible."*

"I'll be right there," Obi-Wan said, then fingered the comm. unit off and placed it back in his utility belt. "I'm sorry. You were saying?" he said, looking up at Padmé.

She turned and looked at him, a polite smile on her face. "It can wait," she said. "You have an important job to do and had better go."

Obi-Wan stood. "Are you certain?" he asked.

"Yes. It'll be all right," she assured him with another small smile.

Obi-Wan wasn't convinced, but he couldn't very well force her to tell him what was troubling her. "Very well. We'll continue this conversation as soon as I return. Would that be all right?" he asked.

"I'd like that," Padmé said, another small smile on her face.

Obi-Wan bowed, then began for the edge of the veranda.

"May the Force be with you, Obi-Wan," Padmé called after him as he got ready to get into his speeder.

Obi-Wan turned with a smile. "May the Force be with you," he said just before getting into the speeder and heading back to the Jedi Temple.

Chapter 15

Obi-Wan walked into the dimly lit, sparsely furnished room that was Master Yoda's quarters to find Mace Windu and Yoda sitting on the round, cushioned seats in the middle of the room facing each other. They glanced up at him from the small, blue-white holo-image projected from the silver pole in the floor between them, then turned their attention back to Senator Bail Organa's image.

Obi-Wan walked closer and heard what was being said.

"His influence in the senate has grown considerably in the years since the beginning of The Wars," Bail's diminutive image said, "But it is unclear if Palpatine is pulling their strings, or if the senators are pulling his to get what they want. I am certain of one thing, though; Palpatine has become increasingly more power hungry since he was given those Emergency Powers. And now, since the death of Count Dooku, it seems that he's out to gain even further control over the governing apparatus."

"Then you've still heard nothing of this Darth Sidious?" Mace asked. "No rumors...nothing?"

"I'm afraid not, Master Windu," Bail's image said. "I've used every intelligence source available to me, and my staff has found nothing. Which leads me to believe that Dooku was lying to cause unrest and suspicion amongst us."

"Hm... Clouded the Force is. But out there, Darth Sidious is," Yoda stated. "Certain of that, am I."

Standing to the side, Obi-Wan was surprised, and troubled by Master Yoda's words. It was the first time he had heard Master Yoda say that he actually thought this Darth Sidious existed.

It made him think; Could Dooku have been telling the truth about the Dark Lord of the Sith controlling the senate with his dark influence? Could he really be right here under the Jedis' nose and them not be able to sense him?

Obi-Wan noticed that Mace, too, was deeply troubled by Yoda's statement. The powerful Jedi Master was sitting with his head hung low and his strong hands tightly wrought together.

"Then that is most disconcerting," Bail said. "Things are much worse than I'd thought. Do you think Palpatine might be under this Darth Sidious' influence as well?"

"We will find out," Mace said with conviction. "Thank you for taking the time to talk with us, Senator Organa. We'll keep you posted, as usual."

"Right. And I'll let you know as soon as I find anything else out," Bail said, and then his image disappeared.

Nothing was said for several seconds. The three of them just sat there lost in the thought that a Sith Lord really was manipulating the senate and, essentially, the Republic.

"When did you tell Senator Organa about Sidious?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Some time ago," Mace said. "We felt we needed his eyes to look for the Sith in the senate." Mace turned to Yoda, and asked, "How could this have happened? How could the Dark Lord of the Sith slip in right in front of us and us not know it?"

"Hmmmmm... Hard to sense, the dark side is," Yoda said. "But ourselves, I fear, we only have to blame. Over-confident, the Jedi have become. Alert for danger, ready for evil, we were not." He gave a heavy sigh. "Paying the price for our mistakes, are we."

The three of them shared another pensive moment, then Mace got back to business. "What did Senator Amidala want to see you about?" he asked Obi-Wan.

"She wanted to know what the Jedi Council means to do about Chancellor Palpatine and his growing powers. I told her that I would pass on her request for a member of The Council to address the senate about the dangers of such radical changes."

"Difficult for us now, that would be," Yoda said.

"Our position in the senate has been weakened too much," Mace added. "And Palpatine has far too much support."

"I know. I told her as much, but she insisted," Obi-Wan said. "I also believe that Senator Amidala and a group of senators mean to...cause trouble should Palpatine remain in office. She was quite frustrated with the situation, and I sensed that she means to act on that should matters worsen. I sense that Bail Organa may be a part of this group as well."

Yoda grunted in displeasure. "Need that, we do not. Our strongest allies, are they."

"If they rebel it will be yet another conflict we'll have to face," Mace said. "And I fear our strong ties with those senators will only worsen our reputation in the senate."

"Troubling, this is," Yoda said. "Defy Palpatine's grasp for power, we should, but unable we are."

Saddened, regretful silence fell over the group for a short time.

"She also mentioned something I found quite puzzling," Obi-Wan finally said. "She mentioned that she was worried about Anakin being so close to Palpatine. She said she was concerned about the influence the Chancellor has over Anakin's political ideals and what effect it might have."

"Hmmp. Over-steeped his bounds, Palpatine has. His place to assign young Skywalker, it was not. Talk with him on the matter, we must."

"I agree," Mace said.

"What of The Prophecy, Master? Will Anakin bring balance back to the Force?" Obi-Wan asked.

"If The Chosen One he is, The Prophecy he will fulfill. But troubled am I, for Young Skywalker. Distanced from the Jedi, he has become. Too aggressive is he." Yoda shook his head. "Uncertain, the future is."

Another pensive silence was shared between the three Jedi.

Then, Mace looked at Obi-Wan and said, "We've received word that General Grievous is currently on the planet Utapau. You leave immediately. His forces have already engaged ours on the planet and are giving them quite a bit of trouble; not to mention the numerous other campaigns he has launched across the mid-rim since Dooku's death. You *must* find him and stop him, Obi-Wan. We need to bring The Wars to an end. The sooner he's stopped, the better."

"Understood, Master," Obi-Wan said with a nod.

"Careful, you must be, Obi-Wan," Yoda said. "Dangerous, General Grievous is."

"I will be."

"May the Force be with you," Mace said, letting Obi-Wan know that it was time for him to leave.

Obi-Wan bowed, then said, "I will contact you as soon as I have completed the mission." Then, he turned and walked out of the room.

Troubled, Anakin strode past the desk of Dar Wac, Palpatine's personal aide, and towards the doors leading into the office of the Supreme Chancellor. The doors slid open as he approached. Anakin walked past the pair of red-robed guards flanking the outside of the doors, then past the two just inside and into the room. He saw the Supreme Chancellor emerging through the doorway leading from the room's antechamber and walked down to meet him.

Palpatine greeted his approach with a kind smile.

"Master Yoda and Master Windu are on their way. They're just down the hall," Anakin said, worry in his voice.

"Yes, I know. They're here to contest my appointing you to your new position. They see you slipping away from their control, and so they've come to re-stake their claim."

Anakin's brow furrowed. "How do you know?"

"I have foreseen it," Palpatine stated as if such a thing were not uncommon, peering out the wide window behind his desk across the room.

Anakin looked at him, puzzled. "What are we going to do?"

Palpatine turned with a small, reassuring smile. "Rest assured, my friend; the Jedi Council has not the authority to dispute my appointments." A beeping noise rose from his desk. As he moved to it, he said, "I will remind them of their place."

Anakin watched him walk away, the corner of his lip turned up in a smirk.

Palpatine sat, then pressed the flashing button on the arm of his chair. A half-meter tall holo-image of Dar Wac appeared in the middle of the desk. Dar Wac gave a bow, but before he could announce the arrival of the Jedi Masters Palpatine cut him off by saying, "Send them in."

Dar Wac peered at him for a handful of seconds, not knowing what to say. Then, he bowed and his image disappeared.

"Come," Palpatine said to Anakin. "Stand at my side."

Anakin did as he was told, and watched as the doors to the office opened and Master Windu and Master Yoda came through them. Yoda hobbled along as quickly as he could with his cane, and Mace walked slow to keep pace with him. As he approached, Yoda peered at Anakin with thoughtful, brown eyes. Anakin tried to retain his anger towards the diminutive, feeble Jedi Master for his admonishing words within The Council the other day, but he found it difficult. He had looked up to Master Yoda since he had been a padawan, and a part of him knew that what he had said was true.

He lowered his head and shut his eyes for a second to gather himself.

"I'm glad you are here, my friends," Palpatine called out with a smile once they were almost to his desk. "I was just about to contact you."

Mace and Yoda took their seats across the desk from Anakin and Palpatine. Mace wore a mask of calm, but Anakin could see that just behind it he was quite irritated. Seeing this allowed Anakin's anger to bubble back towards the surface.

"Now—what is it you wished to talk to me about?" Palpatine said with a smile.

Mace glanced at Anakin, then said, "We came to discuss your assigning Jedi Skywalker to be your personal bodyguard without first consulting the Jedi Council."

Palpatine appeared puzzled. "It was my understanding that Anakin was currently without assignment. The Council *did* remove him from the assignment of tracking down General Grievous, did you not?"

Mace looked at Anakin, who peered back with narrowed eyes.

"He was," Mace said, looking back at Palpatine. "But—"

"Well, then. I see no reason why he shouldn't be able to fulfill his duty to protect me," Palpatine said with a dismissive air. "Anakin is most gifted, and I will not allow such skill to go to waste. *Someone* must recognize and reward him for the powerful Jedi that he is."

Anakin looked at Palpatine with a small, pleased smirk.

"Your place, it was not, Palpatine. A matter for the Jedi, it is," Yoda said, raising his small hand and pointing his index finger.

Palpatine fixed Yoda with a stern stare. "And might I remind *you*, Master Yoda, that it is the place of the Jedi to follow the orders of the office of the Supreme Chancellor."

Mace was quite taken aback by his tone. Palpatine had never spoken to the Jedi in such a way. After the shock washed away he leaned forward to peer at Palpatine with his elbows resting on his knees.

A broad smirk spread across Anakin's face at seeing the two most superior members of the Jedi Council being berated in such a way.

Yoda stared right back at Palpatine, not budging one bit. "Too many times have you overstepped your bounds, Palpatine. Too much control you take in the senate. Too long in office, have you stayed."

"You seem to be losing sight of your place, Master Yoda," Palpatine said. "The length of my service and the extent of my powers are matters for the senate—*not* for the Jedi Order."

The two leaders locked eyes for several seconds more, and Anakin looked between the two, uncertain what to do.

"These are troubling times," Palpatine finally said, lightening his tone. "I can only afford the best protection, which is why I wanted Anakin."

Mace and Yoda exchanged saddened looks, and fell silent on the matter.

"As I mentioned earlier," Palpatine went, "I was just about to send for you, Master Yoda. There is a most delicate mission that demands your handling."

"What is it?" Mace asked.

"As you might have heard, the Kashyyyk system has once again come under attack from the Separatists. This is the third time this year. The Wookiees have suffered massive casualties, and are desperate for help to ward off this vicious assault. I have spoken with senator Yarua from Kashyyyk, and have told him that I would be sending you, Master Yoda, to help them win this fight."

"I will go," Mace said. "Master Yoda is needed here on Coruscant."

"Thank you for your valiant offer, Master Windu, but I feel very strongly that Master Yoda would be the best choice. The Wookiees do not take well to humans. And besides—Senator Yarua specifically requested Master Yoda. The senator is a long-time friend of mine, and I promised him that you would go."

"Hmmmmm..." Yoda said, his eyes closed as he reached out with the Force. He reopened them and looked at Palpatine. "Very well. Go to Kashyyyk, I will."

"The matter is settled, then," Palpatine said, getting to his feet. Mace and Yoda followed suit. "Now, if you'll excuse me, there are matters I must attend to."

Mace gave a small, almost reluctant, nod, then started for the door.

After a few steps he noticed that Yoda wasn't with him. He turned to see Yoda standing a few paces in front of Palpatine, looking up at him with thoughtful eyes. Palpatine returned his look with a guarded one of his own. And then, Yoda turned and began hobbling towards the door, Mace at his side.

Once they were through the doors and they had shut behind them, Yoda grumbled, "Hmmp! Tell the Jedi what to do..."

"Did you sense anything in him through the Force?" Mace asked.

"Hiding something, he is. But sense the dark side in him, I do not."

"Do you believe he is under the influence of Darth Sidious then?" Mace asked.

"Hmmmmm..." Yoda said, stopping in the hallway just outside of Palpatine's office and once again reaching out with the Force. Mace stopped as well and looked down at him. "Impossible to tell. Too powerful, the dark lord of the Sith has become. Too shrouded, the Force is. But certain am I; dangerous, this mission to the Wookiee planet will be. Clouded by the dark side, it is."

"Do you think it could be a trap?"

Yoda looked back at the doors to Palpatine's office thoughtfully. "Know that, I do not. But ready for one, will I be," he said, then began hobbling back down the hall with Mace at his side.

Chapter 16

Obi-Wan's new Jedi Starfighter came out of hyperspace a short distance away from the planet Utapau. He kicked in the sublight engines and headed for the cluster of Venator-class Star Destroyers orbiting the sphere.

He had expected to see Separatist cruisers surrounding the planet as well and find the opposing sides locked in combat, but only the Jedi Cruisers were present. He knew what it must mean; the Separatist ships had dropped off their forces and retreated to a place of safety. Which meant that Grievous was worried about losing more ships, which meant that their forces had been severely weakened in the battle above Coruscant.

This was all good news for Obi-Wan, because it meant that The Wars were that much closer to their long-overdue end.

His new bronze-domed, copper-paneled astro-droid gave a series of beeps and whistles, and he looked down at his screen. He was being hailed by one of the Star Destroyers.

He opened the comm. channel to be greeted by the all-too familiar voice of a clone soldier. "Please identify."

Obi-Wan could see four of the cross-winged, clone starfighters heading towards him from the cluster of ships.

"This is General Obi-Wan Kenobi. Identification confirmation transmitting now," he said, pushing a button on the console of his ship to transmit the appropriate data.

There was silence for a handful of seconds, then, "General Kenobi, we're honored to have you here. Commander Cody has been waiting for you. Sending you his current location now, and I'll alert him of your arrival. The fighters will escort you in. Good luck, General."

"Thank you, lieutenant," Obi-Wan said, peering at the new data coming up on his screen.

The quartet of ARC fighters zipped around and fell into escort position around Obi-Wan's fighter and the group continued through the cluster of Star Destroyers.

Utapau was an odd looking planet from space. It contained no surface water, only giant aquifers throughout its cave-riddled subsurface. Therefore, the majority of its surface was dull gray lined with veins of black, but there were small patches of bright, vibrant color here and there; blues like that of a deep, clear pool, dark reds, bright greens and orange the shade of a warm, Coruscant sunset. This patchwork of color was the giant plant life of Utapau.

Obi-Wan had read about the plant life on his journey here. They were, for the most part, giant vines that crawled up and down across the sinkholed surface, and the bursts of color were the pods and leaves of these vines. The leaves only grew to five or six meters at the most, but the pods got much larger. Some

of the biggest were over forty meters long. These pods were of sturdy construction, so once they died they were hollowed out and put to use in different ways by the planet's inhabitants.

Obi-Wan peered at his display console after the ships emerged into the atmosphere. His sensors were picking up quite a bit of activity in the north-east hemisphere—just a few kilometers away from one of the larger cities of the planet. This was where they were headed.

"Have they attacked the city?" Obi-Wan asked over the comm..

"Not yet, General, but that appears to be their objective. The residents are evacuating as we speak," one of the clone pilots answered.

Obi-Wan nodded.

They came through a patch of clouds, and then they could see the mottled surface of the planet below. The battlefield could be seen further off to the east. Streaks of red and blue laser fire slashed through the sky, accompanied by the occasional fireball or falling streak of smoke as a fighter or gunship went down.

The group of ships was low now—just a few hundred meters up. They passed over sinkhole after huge sinkhole on the surface below, stretching deep down into black darkness. Some of the sinkholes glowed with eerie, blue light along their walls and further down along their bottoms. These were the lights of the cities built into these giant pits. Other holes contained no cities, but their edges were covered by the bright colors of the leaves and pods of the vines spilling out of them and across the surface.

Several bright, curving streaks of light and fire being shot into the air came into view every few seconds on the horizon, and they headed straight for them. As they neared, Obi-Wan began to make out the source of the fiery streaks. It was the fifteen-meter tall barrels of a group of Republic cannons. As they neared the guns the military command center, located right next to the cannons, came into view. The command center was a grouping of three large, circular platforms manned by more than thirty Clonetroopers at display consoles. These clones directed the numerous aspects of the fight according to the information they received from their recon units.

Obi-Wan thought that his escort would slow and land at the command center, but they didn't. They just flew right past it and further towards the north.

"Aren't we going to the command center?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Negative, sir. Commander Cody is elsewhere at the moment. Seems the leader of the planet wants to meet you."

A few minutes later the wide lip of a giant sinkhole came into view. It was the largest one Obi-Wan had seen so far, and judging by the number of ships both big and small leaving from it he knew that this was that large city. They headed for the extreme outskirts of the city—more than ten kilometers from the actual sinkhole—and a small grouping of buildings came into view.

The buildings were clearly native in design. They were oval-shaped, ribbed structures with a blue-white glow emanating from their latticed rooftops. They appeared to have been designed after the shape of the pods on the vines—if they weren't actual pods themselves. Five Republic AT-TE's were around the buildings, keeping watch on the surrounding landscape. The lights of a circular landing pad were flashing on and off, and Obi-Wan knew that this must be where he was supposed to land.

He broke off from his escort of clonefighters and slowed in order to put down.

As his Jedi starfighter set down on the landing platform Obi-Wan caught his first glimpse of the locals. A handful of the tall, gaunt beings shuffled across the landing platform as quickly as their long limbs would carry them and up to his ship with fuel lines and other instruments that Obi-Wan didn't readily recognize. They were all dressed in yellow jumpsuits that were covered in dirt and spots of spilled fuel. As they neared Obi-Wan saw their faces and his eyes went wide. They were a frightening sight.

Their skin was ashen and covered by row upon row of vertical lines. It looked as if their skin had shrunk onto their thin frames, and the lines were the result. Spindly fingers tipped with long, yellow nails reached out from the ends of elongated arms, and their obsidian eyes betrayed no emotion.

Obi-Wan clicked off a few switches and shut the engines down, then opened the canopy. The hatch swung open as his Astro-droid warbled in fear at one of the beings inspecting its bronze dome for any possible damage. Obi-Wan hopped down to the stone surface of the landing platform and started across to the edge where he could see a group of three regally dressed natives waiting for him.

One of the trio stepped forward as he approached, and judging by his ornate dress Obi-Wan deduced that he must be the leader. He wore a rust-colored robe with high, ridged collars that curved all the way up the sides of his face and around the back of his head. The tall being had a long, metal cane that was incredibly detailed with swirling lines carved into its length and topped by a rounded, deep-blue stone.

The being inspected Obi-Wan with those black pools of eyes as he came to a stop in front of him, his expression guarded. Rather weary, Obi-Wan gave a deep bow and waited to be addressed. He came out of the bow to find the being, and his companions behind him, still studying him intently. Then, finally, the being's face softened and he gave a bow in return, splaying a claw-tipped hand out theatrically.

"Greetings, General Kenobi. I am Tion Medon, administrator of the nearby city," he said in a smooth, soothing voice. "We are honored to have you here with us. We here on Utapau have heard a great deal about your heroics throughout The Wars."

Obi-Wan was quite surprised by the calming nature of his voice, and it showed as he responded, "Th...thank you, administrator. I am looking forward to helping your people in any way I can."

"As we knew you would," Tion said with a small nod of a bow. "It would seem that General Grievous is intent on attacking and destroying our beloved city. The Republic forces have fought valiantly, but I fear much ground has been lost to the droid army. Yet now that you are here, I know that we can rest assured that our city will remain safe," Tion said, leaning forward and flashing a jagged mouthful of teeth in a smile.

"Thank you, administrator. I'll do my very best," Obi-Wan said.

Tion and his companions continued to gaze at Obi-Wan with those horrific smiles for several seconds longer. Then, Tion said, "Well then, let us not waste anymore of your time. We have secured your transportation as per your request, and your men await you. Please, follow me."

Tion and his two companions turned and walked back along the narrow path curving down from the landing platform and towards one of the buildings. Standing at the base of the curving path was a familiar-looking person; and it wasn't only because he was a Clonetrooper. A wry smile crossed Obi-Wan's face as he neared.

The group stopped in front of the yellow-shouldered, armored clone.

"It's been some time, General," the gruff, scar-faced man said with an outstretched hand and a soldier's smile on his face, holding his helmet in the other hand.

Obi-Wan took the hand and shook warmly. "Good to see you again, Commander Cody. Glad to see you're still faring so well."

Cody's smile actually crossed his lips. "I should say the same to you. I heard all about your little adventure above Coruscant. Sounds fun."

As usual, Commander Cody was his dry, no-nonsense self. He was a clone, but an exceptional one at that. The cloners had given a small number of the clones more personality and individuality so that they might make better leaders. They were still fiercely loyal and obedient, but more independent than their brethren. It made for an unusual combination, but one that Obi-Wan liked.

He was a great deal like the original host, Jango Fett, which made the friendship even more odd to Obi-Wan. Every time he peered into Cody's hard eyes and scarred face he was reminded of his brief time on the planet Kamino and his near-death tussle with Jango. Of course, all of the Clonetroopers looked and sounded like Jango, but Cody's wry humor and tough demeanor reminded him even more of the bounty hunter. It made him wonder if had he and Jango met under different circumstances, at a different time, if they could have been friends as well. With Jango dead he would never know. But still, it was an intriguing and puzzling thought.

"We'll leave you here with your men so that you might begin planning your counter attack," Tion said, gazing down on Obi-Wan with those black eyes. "Please let me know if you need anything. I'd be most honored to help."

"Thank you, administrator," Obi-Wan said with a bow, receiving one in return.

Obi-Wan and Commander Cody watched as the trio walked away.

"Cold bunch, aren't they?" Cody asked.

A smile crossed the corner of Obi-Wan's lip. You're one to talk he thought, but only said, "Yes. They are."

All business again, Cody said, "Let's get you to your ride," and turned and began walking towards the other side of the pod-shaped building.

Obi-Wan followed. "When was Grievous last spotted?"

"Just over three hours ago, making that a total of five times since the beginning of the battle," Cody answered.

Obi-Wan's brow furrowed. "That's odd.... Not like him to show himself that much."

"Agreed. We think it's because he knows this latest campaign is the deal-breaker for the Separatists and he wants to make sure all goes well.

Obi-Wan thought the matter over. "...Or because he wants to be seen," he said quietly, almost under his breath.

"What was that, sir?" Cody asked.

Obi-Wan shook the thought out of his head. "Nothing," he said as they began rounding the building.

Suddenly, Obi-Wan began hearing loud banging noises and a strange squealing cry coming from just around the other side of the building. Reflexively, he stopped dead in his tracks, pulled his robe back and reached for his lightsaber, but stopped as he reached out with the Force and saw that it was not an attack.

Beginning to walk again, he asked, "What in the galaxy was that?"

Just before they came around the curve, Cody turned to look at him with the biggest smile Obi-Wan had ever seen on the clone commander's face. "It's your ride," he said, and there was no mistaking the amusement in his tone.

Dumbfounded, Obi-Wan walked around the corner to find what looked like a giant lizard bucking and lashing about in the middle of a corral. Six poor Clonetroopers in full armor were desperately holding on to ropes attached to a bridle around the beast's face, trying to subdue it. Obi-Wan and Commander Cody approached the corral and peered through at the goings-on. Obi-Wan continued to watch with wide eyes, wondering how he was ever going to ride such a livid animal.

The thing gave a deafening cry, then got up on its two back legs and lifted the group of Clonetroopers off of their feet. When it landed, it shook its head from side to side and flung the troopers into the air. One

trooper slammed into the corral fence right in front of Obi-Wan and Commander Cody, and they ducked at the impact.

Straightening back up, Cody turned to Obi-Wan and clasped a hand on his shoulder warmly. "Why do you always get the fun assignments?" he joked, an even bigger smile than before on his face.

"Was it always like this? Shouldn't it be domesticated?" Obi-Wan asked.

"It was calm when the natives first showed us where it was. But then, all of a sudden, it went crazy when I sent the men in to get it ready for you."

Obi-Wan's brow furrowed in thought as he watched the beast chase two Clonetroopers across the corral. The clones had to dive through the fence to avoid being trampled, and as soon as they were away from it the animal stopped charging and bucking and calmed.

Suddenly, Obi-Wan realized what was wrong and made to step through the fence.

"Looks like it's tiring, now," Cody said. Then he noticed Obi-Wan stepping through into the corral and he said, "What are you doing?"

Standing within the corral, Obi-Wan said, "Going to get my ride."

Cody shook his head. "You really are crazy. And all this time I thought it was just because you were a Jedi."

The lizard-beast had spotted Obi-Wan within the corral and was eyeing him viciously, as if it meant to charge across at him at any second.

"Watch and learn, my friend. Watch and learn," Obi-Wan said over his shoulder as he slowly began walking towards the animal.

The beast reared up onto its hind legs and gave a loud, threatening cry as Obi-Wan approached, but Obi-Wan stretched a hand out and began soothing it with the Force. "Shhhhhh... It's all right. Shhhhhh..." he soothed. The beast stopped rearing and calmed considerably, but it continued to eye him warily and give the occasional cry of uncertainty.

He was close now—only a handful of meters away. He looked up at the lizard's face and into its deep brown eyes, his hand still stretched out as he continued to calm it through the Force.

"Clonetroopers, form up!" Cody called across the corral.

"Hold your positions!" Obi-Wan shouted back over his shoulder, and the clones did exactly as he said. The lizard-beast's eyes went wild and rolled around in their sockets at seeing the Clonetroopers again and it gave another troubled cry. "Whoa.... Easy there, girl. Easy...." Obi-Wan soothed, and the animal calmed.

He was right in front of it now. The beast bent its head down at Obi-Wan timidly, smelling him. It gave a soft, friendly-sounding cry and Obi-Wan reached up to pet its face. The beast gave another soft, pleased cry, then laid down on its belly. Obi-Wan stroked it kindly as he moved back along its shoulders to the saddle. He climbed up into the leather seat and the animal got back up to its feet as he took ahold of the reins.

Obi-Wan patted the animal softly. "Good girl.... Good girl."

He knew that the problem had been the clones themselves. It wasn't the first time he had heard of such a thing happening. It seemed there was something about the presence the clones gave off in the Force that troubled certain animals. Obi-Wan didn't know what it was exactly, but he guessed that feeling so many beings with the same presence was disturbing to these animals. That it was unnatural.

He wondered if he should tell Cody what had caused the animal to go so crazy, but thought against it. He knew that Cody would take no offense, but telling someone that their presence in the Force was unnatural just didn't seem nice.

Obi-Wan made a clicking noise with his mouth and heeled the beast forward, towards the fence the clones had opened on the far side of the corral.

Standing atop of a mounting platform just next to the fence, Commander Cody watched as Obi-Wan came up and stopped right in front of him. "I'll be damned...", he said, peering at Obi-Wan.

"We'd better get going. I don't want that droid army coming any closer to the city," Obi-Wan said.

"How do you plan to find General Grievous? My scouts say they haven't seen him again since that last sighting a couple of hours ago."

"I wouldn't worry about that," Obi-Wan said, peering out across the gray, potted surface of the landscape ahead. "I have a feeling he'll find me once I make my presence known. Now let's get a move on. We still have a battle to win. Heyaaa!" he said, kicking the animal into motion.

"Yes sir," Cody said, putting on his helmet as Obi-Wan and the beast began moving away at a fast walk. He walked down from the platform to find his group of clones already on their speeder bikes. His was on and idling at the front of the group. He got on, and they took off after Obi-Wan across the ashen surface of Utapau.

Obi-Wan raced towards Grievous and his two droid bodyguards at full speed atop of his steed, his ignited lightsaber held ready in his hand. Grievous and his henchmen were just meters away from the lip of a relatively small sinkhole, and were battling a small group of Clonetroopers they had no doubt ambushed.

Grievous fired his duel blaster pistols without inhibition, hitting whatever he aimed at while his bodyguards flipped from spot to spot, striking down the clones with swift strikes from their electro-staffs. The skirmish was over quickly, and Grievous and his bodyguards stood over the still forms of the clones with pleasure.

The beast Obi-Wan was upon gave an angry roar, drawing Grievous and his droids' attention to their approach.

A smile broke out across Grievous' viper-like eyes, then he opened fire with his duel blasters.

The shots deflected harmlessly off of the beast's scales. Angered, it made a beam-line for Grievous. Seeing this, the two droids stepped in front of Grievous to protect him. Just meters away, Obi-Wan took his feet out of the stirrups and jumped into the air. He flipped several times as the beast continued towards Grievous and his men below. The two bodyguards rolled to the sides and out of the way of the charging animal, and Grievous jumped high into the air at the last second before collision.

Obi-Wan landed, and Grievous' heavy, metal body thudded to the ground just meters in front of him, sending up a small cloud of dust. Slowly, Grievous erected himself to his full height and stared daggers at Obi-Wan, his blasters held ready down at his sides. Obi-Wan raised his lightsaber in front of him defensively, a determined look on his face. A quick glance told Obi-Wan that the two bodyguards were circling around to come at him from either side, so he decided to act before they could.

With a surge of the Force, Obi-Wan lunged forward at Grievous with incredible speed. Yet Grievous was equally as fast, and he began side-stepping, releasing volley after deadly volley of red laser fire. Obi-Wan deflected the blasts as he ran forward, his blue-white blade a blur of motion. But Grievous was so fast that he kept his distance, as well as keeping from being struck by any deflected shots Obi-Wan sent his way.

Obi-Wan felt, rather than saw, the bodyguard coming in from the left and behind, and he altered his focus away from Grievous just long enough to turn and thrust out his left hand to hit the droid with a powerful

Force Push. The wall of invisible energy hit the droid square in the chest, sending it flying backwards through the air. But the droid's programming was so advanced that it altered the sprawled flight into a tight, controlled series of flips and landed safely on its feet several meters back.

His focus back on Grievous, Obi-Wan deflected another fast series of blaster bolts from the mechanical general. Grievous was putting more distance between them, and Obi-Wan couldn't allow that. He would need Grievous close to be able to finish him. The pair of bodyguards were closing in again, and together this time, so he knew that he must take matters into his own hands.

Obi-Wan delved deep into the Force and dove forward just before the pair of droids struck him with their electro-staffs. His dive carried him quite a distance, and he tucked into a flip in order to land back on his feet just a handful of meters in front of Grievous.

He came at Grievous as soon as he landed. The Droid General's eyes narrowed behind his mask, and he let loose a quick series of blaster bolts. Obi-Wan deflected the shots with a flurry of his blade, then came in with a fast swipe to cut Grievous from right shoulder to left hip. But before the blade could even come close enough to strike Grievous did an incredibly fast backwards handspring, kicking Obi-Wan in the face with a metal-taloned foot.

The powerful impact of the kick sent Obi-Wan staggering backwards, and he was forced to regain his composure quickly and duck under a swing aimed right for his head from the electro-staff of one of the bodyguards. As he ducked he spun around and brought his blade up to block the downward swing of the other bodyguard's staff. The blade met the staff with a crackling hiss, and small sparks of energy sprang from the droid's weapon.

The droid pushed down hard on his blade, and Obi-Wan found himself straining to keep it from breaking his defense. It was odd; staring into the blank, emotionless, red eyes of the droid. No effort or fatigue showed on the thing's face as it tried to push the staff down onto him. With gritted teeth Obi-Wan pushed up on the staff, thrusting it and the droid back. He did this just in time to move both arms over his head and point his blade straight towards the ground to block a horizontal swipe from the other droid's staff aimed at his back. He twisted out of the difficult position and spun, kicking the droid square in the chest.

As he came out of the spin kick the Force alerted him to some incoming threat. He turned to face where Grievous was standing a ways away and saw a gray rock a meter wide hurling straight for him. Eyes wide, he moved his weapon to chop the rock, but he wasn't quick enough. The shimmering blade cut a small part of the rock off, but the rest struck Obi-Wan hard in the shoulder, spinning him around and sending his lightsaber flying from his hand.

Obi-Wan fell onto his stomach on the ground, stunned. He saw one of the droid bodyguards' metal foot fall a short distance from his head. He rolled over onto his back and looked up to see the electrified end of a staff coming down right for his face. His mind raced for what to do, but time was against him. The staff continued towards his head.

"STOP!! Grievous yelled.

The current-crossed staff stopped just centimeters from his face.

"He's *mine*! Grievous growled, striding forward.

Eyes narrowed, Obi-Wan stretched out his hand and called his lightsaber to it with the Force. It stirred, then skimmed the gray, dust covered surface. But just before it reached him the foot of one of the guards came slamming down on it, halting its flight.

A long shadow fell across Obi-Wan, and he turned his gaze to see Grievous standing at his feet, looking down at him with sadistic glee in his eyes. The Droid General raised his right arm, blaster pistol in hand, and pointed the weapon right at Obi-Wan's face.

"So long, *Jedi*, he mocked.

All Obi-Wan could do was stare at the dark muzzle of the gun aimed at him.

Grievous' eyes narrowed in hatred, and his finger tightened on the trigger.

But then, out of nowhere, a blue laser bolt zipped in and struck Grievous in the shoulder holding the gun. The shot threw Grievous back several meters, and he let loose a painful roar. The shot was soon followed by a barrage of others that zoomed by all around the bodyguards standing over Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan watched the droids turn to locate the source of the shots, then they set themselves for a fight with their electro-staffs held defensively. Obi-Wan sat up just enough to see Grievous springing back up to his feet, fury in his eyes as he examined the burnt patch on his shoulder. Those eyes soon turned up to regard the landscape beyond.

Obi-Wan heard the far-off sound of approaching speederbikes.

"Let's go!" Grievous ordered, turning with a flourish of his cloak and running back towards the lip of the sinkhole. His bodyguards obeyed immediately and ran after him as more shots passed by on all sides.

Obi-Wan rolled over far enough to grab his lightsaber, then got to his feet and ran after the retreating trio as the group of speederbike-mounted Clonetroopers approached from behind. Grievous was several meters ahead of him and his speed was widening the gap. The trio reached the lip of the sinkhole and flipped over the edge, disappearing into the darkness beyond.

Determined, and now a little ticked, Obi-Wan ran towards the lip of the sinkhole. He was just about to reach it when the sight of a metal leg with a big, three-taloned, metal foot coming up over the edge and right at him caused him to skid to a halt. He dove out of the way right before the foot crashed down onto the ground. When he came up out of the roll he was surprised to see another leg come up over the edge, followed by the spiked, circular body of some strange vehicle mounted with two large blaster rifles.

The circular part of the vehicle rotated independently from the open seating area; where Obi-Wan could see Grievous at the controls while his two bodyguards stood holding on to bars on the other side. The spikes on the wheel dug into the ground, adding traction to the legs. Two more, back legs appeared as the craft began walking away from the hole. No longer needing the legs to crawl up a wall with, they retracted up from the ground and the wheel took over full propulsion. The vehicle was fast--faster than Obi-Wan thought it could be--and it began speeding away, making a strange jingling noise as the wheel moved.

Grievous let loose several blaster shots at the approaching speeders, and one blast even hit one, causing it to explode. Then, he steered the vehicle hard to the left and towards a distant range of small, craggily mountains. The Clonetroopers fired harmlessly after the craft, but stopped as soon as it was out of range. The group of speederbikes approached Obi-Wan, who was busy brushing himself off.

"General Kenobi, are you all right?" Commander Cody asked.

"I'm fine, Commander; thanks to you. It's a good thing you showed up when you did."

"We'd better get after him before he gets too far away," Cody said, not even acknowledging the compliment.

"There's no need for that. I'll be going alone," Obi-Wan said, then raised a hand to his mouth and gave a loud whistle.

"But, sir...you'll need our help."

"No. I need you back at the command center directing the battle. It's imperative that we win. These Wars have got to be stopped!" Obi-Wan said, not looking at Commander Cody but at a growing cloud of dust that was quickly approaching.

He moved around to the other side of the group of mounted clones, still watching the approaching shape. As it neared, he called over his shoulder, "I'll return to base as soon as I've completed my mission."

Then, he jumped into the air and into the saddle of the lizard-beast, which didn't even break a stride.

Obi-Wan and the animal sped off towards the mountains and after Grievous, leaving Cody and his men behind in a cloud of dust.

"May the Force be with you, General," Cody said quietly as he watched his Jedi friend get steadily smaller on the horizon. "You're going to need it...."

Chapter 17

Obi-Wan pushed the lizard-beast as hard as he thought it could go in order to catch up to Grievous' speeder. They were making their way over a range of tall hills a short distance in front of the craggily mountains, and he knew that if he didn't gain sight of Grievous soon he would probably lose him. The animal panted hard and deep as it ran, bounding over the ashen surface in long strides.

They came to the crest of a particularly high hill and Obi-Wan pulled the reins back hard to bring the beast to a halt. He reached into his utility belt and retrieved a set of micro-binoculars. Sitting up tall in the saddle, he scanned the slight valley and foothills ahead just in front of the mountains. He panned across the area quickly, desperate for sight of his quarry but finding none.

Disappointed, he lowered the micro-binoculars and his shoulders slumped. He peered at the mountain range ahead; filled with gashing canyons, jagged peaks and towering cliffs filled with big, dark caves. Grievous could hide in these easily. Giving chase now, when he had no idea in which direction the Droid General had even gone, seemed a waste. It would probably be better to just turn around and head back to the command center and wait for Grievous to show himself again. He had done it several time before here, and chances were that he would do it again.

The lizard-beast pawed the ground impatiently and gave a soft roar.

Obi-Wan leaned forward and patted it softly on the neck. "It's all right, girl," he soothed. "It's not your fault. You did well."

The beast gave another soft, almost sad, roar.

"Come on. Let's head back to base," Obi-Wan said as he straightened back up in the saddle. He began pulling the reins and turning his mount when, all of a sudden, something off to the south caught his eye. Quickly, he put his micro-binoculars back up to his face and caught sight of Grievous' speeder just as it was going into a canyon.

"Looks like the chase isn't over yet," Obi-Wan said, pulling the reins back around to point the animal in the right direction. "Heyah!" he yelled, kicking the beast back into a run—which it was all too eager to do. They tore down the sloping hill and across the valley in the direction of the canyon Grievous had entered.

When he finally reached the beginning of the canyon, Obi-Wan was surprised to see that Grievous was still in sight. The canyon sloped downward from its mouth to further back between the mountains in what was practically a straight line. There were a handful of curves, but they weren't sharp enough to obstruct Obi-Wan's view. With the time it had taken for him to reach the canyon Obi-Wan had expected Grievous to be much further ahead than he was. Which meant that Grievous had slowed considerably.

Obi-Wan tried to find a reason for why Grievous would do such a thing as they raced into the canyon. He peered at the ground to see if perhaps the soil was loose; causing Grievous to slow, but the soil appeared no different than it had up on the pot-marked plains. He peered up the steep sides of the canyon wall to see if the possibility of an avalanche was the case, but the cliff faces appeared stable with no significant

amounts of loose rock. He tried to find any other plausible reason why Grievous might have slowed, but came up short. There seemed to be only one explanation left, and Obi-Wan didn't like the thought of that.

He knew how cunning Grievous was, and as he peered down the canyon with nothing but sheer cliff on either side he saw the limitless possibilities for a trap. Eyes narrowed, determined, Obi-Wan continued after his quarry.

Holding onto a bar on the left side of the cockpit of the wheel-speeder, one of Grievous' bodyguards turned its head all the way around to peer behind them with glowing, red eyes. The droid spotted Obi-Wan and his ride just entering the canyon.

Turning its head back around, the caped-droid raised a metal hand and pushed a button on the console in front of it.

A small display screen on the console next to Grievous' pilot's seat came to life, displaying an image of Obi-Wan racing after them.

A wicked smile crossed Grievous' eyes. "All too predictable," he said.

Then, he kicked up the throttle just a touch—but not too much. He wouldn't want to lose his pursuer.

Obi-Wan could see that Grievous had sped up, and he knew that he must have been spotted. He kept his senses even more alert than before. He watched every outcropping with suspicion, he came around every curve in the canyon ready for a surprise as he continued to chase. The canyon began to narrow even more, and turns in the rocky path became more and more common. But still he was able to spot Grievous every time he came out into a straightaway, just a few hundred meters away.

But then, all of a sudden, when he came around the next curve he found that Grievous' speeder had vanished without a trace. There was quite a ways until the next curve, so he knew that he hadn't lost him around that. At the speed Grievous had been going at he should have been no more than half way down this particular straightaway. Yet he was nowhere in sight.

Obi-Wan pulled back on the reins to slow the lizard-beast.

"Whoa, girl, slow down. Whoa..." he said, calming her desire to continue the chase.

At a slow trot, they continued through the narrow canyon. Obi-Wan gazed from side to side, up and down the potted, cracked surface of the cliff walls on either side for any sign of movement. The black mouths of caves covered the thousand meter tall cliff faces, and Obi-Wan searched each and every one with his sharp eyes for any sign of movement.

The wind howled through the canyon, kicking up clouds of dust and making the scene even more tense than it already was. Besides the wind, the only other sounds were the constant clicking of the lizard-beast's clawed feet on the stony ground and the occasional grunt from its mouth.

The wind kicked up again, only more violently this time. A thick cloud of dust headed down the canyon and straight at Obi-Wan and his mount. It fell upon them quickly, enveloping them in a stinging flurry of tiny bits of rock. Obi-Wan closed his eyes to shield them from the dirt, and it was because of this that he

survived.

As soon as he closed his eyes Obi-Wan saw an image, a premonition, through the Force. The vision was of a series of laser blasts coming right at him out of the mouth of a cave above and behind his current location.

“Heyaaaaa!!!!” he yelled, kicking the lizard-beast into a run through the dissipating cloud of dust.

The animal gave a startled cry, then began running.

A fraction of a second later the high-pitched sound of blaster cannons firing echoed throughout the canyon, and red laser blasts struck the ground right where Obi-Wan and the lizard-beast had just been. The initial volley was soon followed by a second, then a third, then another and another.

Obi-Wan sensed the blasts coming just soon enough to steer the beast out of their path, and they struck the ground right next to them, spraying them with flying bits of rock and other debris. The lizard-beast roared in fear at every near miss. His face a mask of concentration, Obi-Wan leaned forward in the saddle and steered them down the ever-narrowing canyon.

There was a slight pause in the barrage of blaster fire, and Obi-Wan peered behind him. Up on the cliff face, he saw Grievous’ speeder emerge from the darkness of the cave on its four legs like some strange insect. Then it used those legs to climb diagonally down the cliff. As soon as it reached the floor of the canyon it raised the legs and ran on the wheel.

Obi-Wan turned his attention back forward as the blaster fire started up again. The searing, red lances tore by on all sides, some coming so close that he could actually smell the ozone from them. The blasts struck the walls, sending large chunks of speeding rock at Obi-Wan and the lizard-beast. The beast was struck hard by one such chunk, and it’s step faltered for just a second as it let loose a roar of anger. Obi-Wan stole another glance behind them and saw that Grievous was gaining.

“Faster, girl! Faster!” he said.

The lizard-beast picked up speed, and they began to put some distance between them and Grievous.

No longer content with shooting directly at them, Grievous began aiming for the cliff walls instead. Rockslides fell all around them, and once again Obi-Wan had to steer them from side to side to avoid being hit. Several of the rockslides fell right in front of the beast, and it was forced to hurdle over them. It was a jostling ride, and Obi-Wan was forced to hold on tight to avoid being bucked off.

They raced around another curve in the canyon and Obi-Wan saw that a sharp turn was coming up ahead. He hoped that, just as Grievous had done, they could lose their follower around this next bend. But when they reached the sharp turn in the canyon Obi-Wan was shocked to find what he did—a dead end. The path continued for about fifty yards, but ended with sheer wall.

The lizard-beast came to an abrupt stop just in front of the wall and began circling, trying to find some way out. Obi-Wan could hear Grievous’ speeder approaching from around the corner, and judging by the frantic behavior of his mount it heard it as well.

Obi-Wan flipped back his robe and retrieved his lightsaber from his belt. There was nowhere to go. He would have to stand and fight. He ignited the blue-white blade and waited.

The sound of Grievous’ speeder was close now, and a second later it came around the corner and right at them.

The animal roared with fear, and began circling the area right in front of the wall, looking all around for a way out.

“Hold steady! Hold steady!” Obi-Wan said, trying to get her under control and to face the approaching speeder. But she continued to circle, turning her gaze up the cliff face.

All of a sudden, the beast turned to the wall and jumped. Obi-Wan was so caught off guard that he nearly dropped his lightsaber and fell from the saddle. He deactivated the blade and gripped the reins tight with both hands. Leaning forward so that he was practically laying on the saddle, he watched in disbelief as the beast began climbing straight up the cliff face as fast as if it were on level ground.

Grievous opened fire on them, and the laser blasts struck all around. But the lizard dodged every one as it continued up the sheer, rock surface.

Obi-Wan chanced a look behind them, and saw Grievous' speeder extending its legs and begin climbing up the cliff face right behind them. Grievous fired several more times as they climbed, but the shots ended up going harmlessly over Obi-Wan and the lizard-beast's heads. Yet Grievous continued to fire. Over and over again with reckless, nearly desperate, abandon. He figured that Grievous was doing this for no other purpose than to try to alarm them.

...Or so Obi-Wan thought.

Looking down, Obi-Wan saw that Grievous had stopped shooting and moved his claw-legged speeder off to one side instead of directly below them. His brow furrowed in puzzlement. He couldn't understand why the Droid General would waste time doing such a thing and chance them getting even further ahead. But then a trickle across his back of small rocks brought his attention back up the cliff face.

He looked up to see a steady stream of rocks falling from the jutting ledge of the cliff no more than one hundred meters directly above them. As he did Grievous reopened fire, and he saw what it was the Droid General was actually aiming at.

Obi-Wan could see a wide fissure spreading up the rock making up the ledge, and it grew more and more with every blast from Grievous' powerful guns. No longer were mere small trickles of rock falling. Now meter wide rocks, and boulders the size of a landspeeder were breaking away and tumbling down at them. One giant boulder slid off of the ledge face and came right for Obi-Wan, and his eyes went wide as he pressed his body fully against the back of the beast and the saddle to avoid being crushed. The whooshing wind from the passing boulder blew at Obi-Wan's robes, letting him know just how close it had come.

And then, after another long series of blasts from Grievous' guns, the cliff ledge gave a loud crackling sound, followed by a low, deep groan as the entire thing slid off the face of the cliff.

His mouth hanging open in disbelief, Obi-Wan could do nothing but watch for several precious seconds as the hoverbus-sized chunk of rock fell towards them.

Finally, at the distant, but distinct, sound of Grievous' laughing Obi-Wan snapped out of it.

"Move, move--MOVE!!" he shouted, tugging the reins hard to the right.

The lizard-beast protested, tugging back and giving out loud snorts. The huge chunk of rock was only a short distance away. Obi-Wan stared at it with his mouth hanging open. But then the beast realized what it was that was almost upon them and it reacted.

Obi-Wan gathered himself just in time to avoid being thrown from the saddle as the animal suddenly jumped more than twenty meters to the left side and out of the way of the giant, tumbling rock. The rock slammed into the face of the wall a few meters further down, and broke into several smaller pieces that all crashed to the ground far below with a thunderous BOOM!!

In the silence that followed the loud crash, Obi-Wan could hear that Grievous had stopped laughing, and turned to see his speeder crawling up the rock face again. They couldn't chance Grievous getting to the top before them. If he did, there was no telling what he would do.

Obi-Wan made a clicking noise with his mouth, and the lizard-beast began climbing once again. It was a race to get to the top of the cliff now, and both sides were just about even. The lizard-beast made it to the top just a second or two before Grievous' speeder, and immediately Obi-Wan steered her off to the left along the narrow cliff path with Grievous not far behind.

The cliff path wound around and through the multi-peaked, craggily tops of the mountains. Grievous opened fire on them with his powerful blaster cannons as soon as he was behind them, and once again Obi-Wan and his mount were forced to dodge the deadly lances, as well as the showers of rocks from near-misses. One such near-miss exploded an outcropping of rock just in front of and to the right of Obi-Wan and his mount, and the chunks of rock flew at them with incredible speed. One large rock struck Obi-Wan in the side of the shoulder, knocking him back and to the side and nearly out of the saddle.

Just as Obi-Wan regained his seat he looked up to see that his ride was heading straight for a wide cave in the side of the mountain. The mouth was pitch black, and there was no telling where it led or even if it led anywhere at all. Obi-Wan tried to steer the animal away from entering the cave, but it persisted and they entered.

They were plunged into complete darkness after just a few yards in, and the sound of the beast's clawed feet and its breath echoed throughout Obi-Wan's ears. The floor of the cave went up and down, up and down over and over again like he was riding on a series of waves. He ducked down just in case the ceiling was low, and could hear the rushing of wind as they passed rock outcroppings. Then light erupted all around them as Grievous continued to fire, and Obi-Wan chanced a look around.

He was alarmed to see that the inside of the mountain was actually a giant honeycomb-like structure, with ribbed buttresses of stone holding the entire thing together. Looking to the side and down, he saw that the animal was running along one of these buttresses; a narrow path of rock, like a bridge, no wider than two meters with an enormous, dark cavern stretching down into the depths of the mountain on either side. The lizard-beast jumped from bridge to bridge in order to evade Grievous' blaster fire. Obi-Wan knew that there was nothing he could do to help in the way of steering, so he just held on tight and hoped the animal didn't miscalculate a jump.

A shaft of light appeared ahead, and Obi-Wan was relieved to see that the beast was heading straight for it. After jumping to and from a handful more of the bridges, the lizard-beast emerged from the cave and back out onto the cliffs of the mountainside. They curved around the base of another peak in an attempt to lose Grievous' speeder, but the Droid General continued to be right on their tails.

Then, one of the blasts from Grievous' cannons struck the lizard-beast on a tender spot on its backside. The animal roared in pain, and began running even faster and more erratic—almost out of control. Obi-Wan bounced from side to side in the saddle, nearly falling off several times as he tried to get the beast calmed down and back under control. But it wouldn't respond, and Grievous, seeing what that last shot had done, began aiming for the same spot. He hit it again, and the animal became even more wild and frantic.

They tore across the narrow paths of the cliffs, and as Obi-Wan looked ahead he saw that the mountain pass widened into a small plateau of sorts. The animal sprinted across the plateau, trying to get away from the stinging blasts from Grievous' speeder. Something up ahead caught Obi-Wan's attention, and he sat up tall in order to get a better view. At first he thought what he was seeing was just a large shadow, but as they neared his eyes became wide.

They were heading straight for a giant hole forty yards wide in the middle of the small plateau.

"Whoa!" Obi-Wan shouted, pulling back on the reins. But the frantic beast continued to run straight for the hole. They were getting close now, and Obi-Wan could tell by the darkness of the opening that the hole must be a deep one.

"Whoa!!!" he shouted again, but it did no good. They were mere meters from the edge of the drop-off.

"WHOA!!!!" he yelled in a final, desperate protest, pulling back on the reins as hard as he could, but the animal continued sprinting forward, over the edge and into the deep darkness below.

Grievous watched in surprise and pleasure as the lizard-beast ran over the edge. He hadn't expected such a fortunate turn of events, but was pleased with the outcome nonetheless. Still, just to be on the safe side, he slowly brought the speeder to the edge of the hole and stopped it. He got out.

Drawing both blaster pistols and holding them ready, he walked to the edge. His bodyguards followed, their electro-staffs held ready in front of them as they all looked down into the hole. There was nothing but deep, oppressive darkness as far as his eyes could see. He aimed one of his blasters down into the hole and fired so that he could illuminate the pit. The red lance of light lit up the ribbed walls of the hole as it passed deeper, and deeper, and deeper down into the belly of the mountain before disappearing out of sight. A smile crossed Grievous' yellow and black eyes.

The wind tugging at his cape, Grievous holstered his pistols, turned away from the hole and began walking back to his speeder. "Let's get back to the base. Darth Sidious will want to know about this," Grievous said to his bodyguards, who turned and followed.

They all got back into the wheel-shaped speeder. As Grievous started it up, he took one last look at the hole. Then, he turned the speeder around and headed for his command center.

Hanging upside down on the back of the lizard-beast on the underside of the opening of the hole, Obi-Wan listened as the sound of Grievous' speeder slowly became more and more distant. He didn't know how his mount had known that the opening of the hole had this cleft—or even if it had known at all beforehand—but he was relieved that the chase was over and done with. He didn't want to go through that again anytime soon.

But there were more pressing thoughts on Obi-Wan's mind. Hanging there upside down, he contemplated what Grievous had said—or, rather; the name he had mentioned.

Darth Sidious.... So, The Good General is working for Darth Sidious. Interesting....

Turning his attention to the lizard-beast, Obi-Wan gave her a pat on the neck. "Good girl. Good girl," he said, and the animal gave a pleased grunt.

Then, it began moving back along the cleft and up and out of the opening of the hole. The wind blew all around them as Obi-Wan sat atop of the motionless animal just at the edge of the hole. Obi-Wan peered down the cliff edge Grievous' speeder had gone down.

"Let's get going," he said, gently kicking the animal into motion. "We don't want to lose him now." *Especially now that we know he's involved with Sidious*, he thought as they slowly began down the path.

Chapter 18

The group of ten, enormous, knife-shaped Venator-class Star Destroyers coasted just above the cloud-level in the atmosphere of the planet Kashyyyk. Several more Star Destroyers were still entering the atmosphere behind them, but time was short and these forces needed to be deployed as soon as possible.

A handful of Gunships suddenly appeared from out of the hanger bays on the undersides of the Star Destroyers. Packed with Clonetroopers, the ships drifted down and away from the bellies of the large war vessels and towards the top of the misty clouds. This small trickle of ships soon became a torrent as hundreds more Gunships, ARC Clonefighters, oval shaped troop transport carriers, and bulky, rectangular, heavy weaponry transports emerged from the ships and aimed for the clouds.

Yoda's Gunship, flanked by eight other Gunships and surrounded by an entire squadron of ARC clonefighters, descended through the clouds and towards the surface of Kashyyyk. The vibrant palette of colors making up the surface was breathtaking; the vast seas and oceans were a pleasant, sapphire-blue, the shores were beaches of bright yellow, and the landscape was covered with lush greens of all different shades.

The massive group of ships skimmed the surface of the giant trees of Kashyyyk. The trees had thick trunks--as thick as two troop carriers were long--with few branches along their length. The majority of the branches took up the top forth of the tree in wide, leaf-covered canopies that towered high above the surface of the planet.

Surrounded by Clonetroopers, Master Yoda stood in the open doorway of the Gunship with both hands resting on his cane while peering out across the tops of the trees, the wind gently tugging at his robe. Through the canopies of the trees several trunks could be seen to have thatched platforms spiraling up them, looking as if they had grown out of the trees themselves. These platforms and thatched huts made up different Wookiee towns and cities. The fur-covered residents of these settlements could even be seen as small specks standing on the uppermost of these platforms, staring up at the passing military might.

Filled with thought, Yoda paid little attention to his surroundings. His mission here was important, but he couldn't shake the feeling that matters of great importance were taking place elsewhere, back on Coruscant. He could sense in the Force that the dark side was stirring, and that the Dark Lord of the Sith was preparing to make some sort of move, but nothing of it was clear. Through meditation and persistence he had been able to see vague glimpses of what was to come, but for the most part everything was still clouded by the fog of the dark side.

Closing his eyes and lowering his head he gave a worried, heavy sigh.

But his lament was interrupted by the voice of the clone pilot calling back into the cargo hold. "Master Yoda--we have enemy fighters incoming."

All business, Yoda opened his eyes and turned to look up into the cockpit. "Order the clonefighters to attack, captain. Continue on course, the rest of the group will."

"Yes, Sir," the clone said, then turned back around and gave the orders into his helmet's comm. link.

Yoda was forced to steady himself with his cane as the Gunship suddenly accelerated and went into a slight dive. The rest of the Gunships, the troop carriers and heavy weaponry transports followed the dive, while the majority of the ARC fighters peeled off to attack the approaching swarm of droid starfighters.

Peering ahead, Yoda could see jagged, green covered mountains sprouting up through and towering over the trees. Just beyond these peaks he saw red and blue laser blasts criss-crossing into the air, along with long streaks of fire and pyres of smoke snaking high into the air. The battlefield was near.

The ARC and droid fighters clashed in an all-out melee a short distance above the group of Gunships, and the other trailing ships. Thick laser bolts flashed by the doorway as the droid starfighters tried to take out as many of the Gunships as possible. Some even broke through the defending ARC fighters and tore between the Gunships on all sides, firing as they dove, twisted and weaved their way through.

The clones in the ball-turrets of the Gunships opened fire on the droid fighters. Yoda watched calmly as a group of three droid fighters came diving in from the side and right at his ship. Several of the turrets of his ship, plus several more from the surrounding ships, opened fire on the small enemy group. The droids did well to evade the incredible barrage of laser fire; twisting and swerving as they approached and began to open fire.

For the most part their shots went wide or just under Yoda's Gunship. These wide shots hit the cockpit canopy of the Gunship right behind Yoda's; killing the clone pilot right before the entire front third of the ship exploded in a ball of smoke and flame and sending the ship spiraling towards the treetops. Then a series of well-placed blasts hit one of the droid starfighters right in the central core, blowing the craft in half and sending the pieces flying in all directions.

But the other two continued forward and continued to fire.

These shots were better placed than those before. Several hit the side of Yoda's Gunship in a spray of sparks while one even entered the cargo hold--hitting a Clonetrooper square in the chest and sending him flying out the other side. The unfortunate clone gave a loud scream as he tumbled through the air and towards the ground far below.

The droid fighters were getting close now, and even the Clonetroopers standing in the ship next to Yoda began opening fire with their blaster rifles. It was impossible for the two fighters to escape the sheer volume of laser fire coming at them. One was struck in the wing, and it careened out of control in a trail of smoke, while the last was struck numerous times from several different ships. The fighter exploded just a short ways away from Yoda's Gunship, and it looked as if a roiling ball of flame and debris would slam into the ship. But just before it could, a stern-faced Master Yoda raised a hand and, using the Force, shoved the crashing ship harmlessly off to the side.

The long group of ships were upon the mountains now, and they weaved their way through the soft mist blanketing the green-covered peaks. They came through the mist and the mountains into a wide lagoon with tall trees covered by the thatched buildings of a Wookiee city on one side, and even more jagged, vegetation-covered mountains on the other, and the chaos of war in the middle.

On the bright-yellow, near shores Yoda could see hundreds of Wookiees and Wookiee-craft firing across the turquoise colored water. White jets of water spraying high into the air erupted all across the lagoon's surface as the Wookiees defended their homes. On the far shores and cliffs Yoda could see what it was they were firing at, and being fired upon by; row upon row of Intergalactic Banking Clan tank droids.

The ranks of these tank droids were supplemented by Trade Federation forces of numerous kinds; AAT tanks, STAP's, Destroyer Droids, battle droids and super battle droids. The enemy forces were flowing out of giant, saucer-shaped Banking Clan warships, and there seemed to be no end to their ranks.

A group of Wookiee fighters flew up to meet the incoming group of Gunships. These Wookiee craft were two-seater fighters, and looked more like giant insects than weapons of war. A series of wings on the top and front of the craft supplemented repulsor engines for propulsion. The pilot and rear gunner sat back-to-back in the fighter, and the pilot steered the craft with two long hand levers and a series of pedals.

Yoda's Gunship broke off from the main group and was escorted down towards the large trees by the Wookiee fighters.

Meanwhile, the rest of the Gunships sped up to attack-speed and made to enter the main thrust of the battle while the troop transports and heavy weaponry transports scouted for a place to set down and unload.

The Gunships dove down low between the thick trunks of the trees and continued towards the lagoon's shore, following the path of a wide stream in the dark shade of the tree canopy high above. The surface of the ground was covered with bushes and small trees. Plant life grew nearly everywhere on the planet, and the area on either side of the stream was thick with it.

The large group of Gunships emerged back into the sunlight from between the trees and the undergrowth near the shoreline and headed straight across the lagoon. They flew just fifty meters above the surface and the Wookiees on the shores, in the pontoon-like hover boats and on the sand bars held their weapons aloft, giving thunderous roars of celebration as they watched the ships stream by overhead.

The ships swooped in on the Separatists' lines, opening fire with their multi-laser focusing dishes, missiles and turret guns. Green lances from the turrets cut steaming streaks across the water's surface as they raced to their targets. Banking Clan tanks all along the front line exploded as the laser blasts and missiles hit them, and several hoversleds carrying groups of battle droids were also sunk. But the Separatists adjusted and reacted quickly to these new threats; much to the dismay of several of the Gunships.

Great numbers of battle droids hiding in the brush along the far shore suddenly revealed themselves; each carrying a shoulder-mounted missile launcher. The battle droids opened fire, and a virtual wall of missiles came right at the approaching Gunships.

"Break away! Break away!" one particular clone pilot yelled into his helmet comm.

Some banked hard to one side or the other, some tried climbing into the air, others either reacted too slow or were boxed in with nowhere to go so they continued flying straight as the missiles came streaking in. They slammed into several of the Gunships, tearing into the hulls and exploding. A wide line of fireballs and streaking debris filled the air, and destroyed ships crashed into the water, or continued forward just long enough to crash into the sloping banks of the far side of the lagoon.

The Gunships that had avoided being shot down, which was most of them, regrouped and made strafing runs on the lead attack units of the Separatists', making sure to stay back far enough from those droids and their missile launchers until more support arrived. Even still, the droids adjusted their positions and took down several more ships, but the Gunships were getting far more tanks than how many were being shot down.

And then it was the Wookiees' turn to rejoin the attack.

An large group of the duel-skidded pontoon-like boats came forward, their sails filled with wind and their repulsor engines on full throttle. With the support of ten complete squadrons of the Wookiee fighters, these boats tore above the water and at the oncoming masses of enemy forces. The tall, long-furred Wookiees stood in the boats with their huge blaster rifles, bowcasters and powerstaves held ready, angry snarls displaying their white, pointed teeth.

The enemy tanks began opening fire as soon as the Wookiee forces came within range, and the fighters zoomed in to provide much needed cover. Neither the boats, nor the fighters had much in the way of shielding or other defensive fields. Wookiees were a proud species, and they firmly believed in the warrior code of accepting whatever danger they got themselves into. A number of fighters were shot down, and the proud Wookiee bodies tumbled to the lagoon's surface for a watery grave.

Yet not all that fell died.

One Wookiee that had fallen from a crashing fighter had survived. Badly injured, he still swam to the nearest Trade Federation AAT tank hovering along above the surface of the water and climbed atop of it. Using his anger and the sheer, natural strength of a Wookiee, he tore off first one of the side-mounted blaster cannons on the tank, then the other. Then the fierce warrior moved to the main barrel of the gun

and began stuffing the pieces of the blaster cannons into the barrel in between shots. After shoving the pieces in, the tall, black and cream colored Wookiee dove back into the water as the droids piloting the tank tried firing the main gun and ended up blowing the entire thing to smithereens.

Several of the pontoon-like boats battled their way to alongside Banking Clan tanks, then emptied their ranks onto the tops of these machines. The Wookiees tore apart circuitry, blasted laser guns off and planted small explosive charges all over the central cores before bailing out and letting the vehicles to explode.

Other pontoon-like boats pulled up next to battle droid transport sleds and raided these. Wookiees tore into the ranks of battle droids with reckless, fury-laden abandon. Most were so overcome with rage that they completely forgot about the powerful weapons they had and used their bare hands to tear apart the flimsy droids. The towering Wookiees tore their arms clean off, then stomped on the remains until they lay flat and motionless. Some took two at a time and bashed their heads together into a jumbled mess of circuits and pieces of metal. Others didn't even react after being shot, and used their powerstaves to slash apart entire groups of the droids.

But even after such gross displays of fury, the Wookiees' lust for revenge on the droid army for invading and terrorizing their home planet was not sedated. They raged on--injuries and all.

Master Yoda disembarked his Gunship onto the wide thatch platform set into the side of one of the thick-trunked, towering trees. Two giant Wookiees stood just a few steps away; one that looked incredibly strong with a thick, muscular frame with dark brown fur, thick dreadlocks hanging down over his armor-covered shoulders, and another that had a slimmer frame, slightly lighter brown fur and wore only a simple, shoulder-slung utility belt. Several other of the tall tree-dwellers stood behind them, but these two seemed to be the only ones that Yoda was supposed to address.

Cane clicking on the wooden floor, Yoda walked forward alone while his ship full of Clonetroopers stayed where they were. The two mammoth Wookiees dropped down onto one knee and lowered their heads to face the ground in deep, respectful bows as Yoda came near, and the others behind them followed suit. Even when they were kneeling, the Wookiees were still at least twice as tall as Master Yoda.

"For such a kind welcome, I thank you, General Tarful, Commander Chewbacca," Yoda said, bowing his own head in respect.

The pair of Wookiees peered up at his words, and Tarful gave a soft series of grunts and roars.

"All mine, the honor is," Yoda replied. "Of your peoples' great deeds, long have I heard. Respected by the Jedi, are the peoples of Kashyyyk."

Tarful and Chewbacca gave short grunts, as if protesting the idea that the Jedi had reason to admire them.

Yoda knew that honor and respect was of the utmost importance to these peoples, so instead of debating the issue needlessly, he said, "Come General, Commander; to the command center, take me, and see what I can do to help, I will."

Tarful and Chewbacca gave grunts of consent, then got to their feet and led Master Yoda across the landing platform and through a tall doorway carved into the trunk of the giant tree.

It was awkward for the Wookiees to walk with someone as small and aged as Master Yoda. They were forced to take small, extremely slow steps in order to avoid leaving the Jedi Master behind. To his credit, Yoda noticed this and hobbled as fast as he possibly could on his cane--which still wasn't very fast for a Wookiee.

The Wookiees were incredibly skillful builders; as was evident the entire way to the command center. The Wookiees had actually carved their cities and homes into the large trunks of the towering trees, and had

incorporated modern, technical amenities into the natural setting without them appearing out of place.

Tall, wide passageways and grand, intricate halls had been carved out of the centers of the trees, yet leaving the trunks strong enough to support the incredible weight of their canopies. Each hallway had been cut in an upward curve with wide windows everywhere, so as they went through and around the trunk they were afforded increasingly more breathtaking views of the lagoon below.

When they finally reached the command center, Yoda saw that it was the grandest of halls yet. The ceiling spiraled upward to more than fifteen meters high and an intricate design had been carved into the floor. All along the outer wall, facing the lagoon, the trunk had been carved out into an enormous opening. Thatch walkways connected the enormous room to wood buttresses attached to the trunk, and all along these buttresses were Wookiee homes and other, smaller halls. The huts appeared to be made of branches as thick as a Wookiee's arm strapped together, and they were shaped like two cones placed together with the top cone being upside down.

On the far side of this grand hall was a smaller, slightly higher level. A handful of stairs that had been carved out of the wood led up to this area, and along the wall Yoda could see a large array of technical devices; holo-projectors, display screens, tactical monitors and the like. The group walked up to this area, and General Tarful and Commander Chewbacca went straight for the tactical monitors.

General Tarful went through several screens, showing Master Yoda where their forces were placed and what plans of attack they had in mind. After a bit, Tarful turned the explanation over to Chewbacca, who told him where their special forces units were located and what their planned objectives were.

"Very good, Commander. Order your attack," Yoda said. "Inform my troops, will I. Take out those droid positions we must, for effective the Gunships to be."

Chewbacca gave a roar of agreement, then turned and brought up a comm. link to the members of his special forces.

Enhanced-vision goggles on their heads, the group of twenty Wookiees stood in the darkness of the wide cave, black water up to their hips. They were all as large, if not larger, than General Tarful, and each wore thick shoulder armor with straps that clasped down the chest to the waist. All of them had beaded braids of fur hanging down from their chins; a symbol of their special status amongst the Wookiee warriors.

Bowcasters and big, quick-repeater rifles in hand, they waited impatiently with soft grunts and growls for the order to strike.

One Wookiee at the head of the group had black fur broken up by patches of dark brown, and his chin braids bore the most multi-colored beads by far--indicating him to be of the highest rank out of the twenty. The comm. link in his ear suddenly came to life and he raised a thick, fur-covered paw to signal absolute silence. He then pushed the paw against his ear so that he could hear better, then lowered it and gave a quick, soft roar of acknowledgment.

Then, he turned to his men and gave another quiet roar, and they all began walking forward through the water and the darkness of the cave; malicious grins baring pointed teeth on their faces.

The islands all around the lagoon had an intricate systems of caves carved into them by centuries of tides. The Wookiees had mapped out almost all of them, but they were so extensive that many hadn't yet been fully explored. Now, they were using them to ambush the droid forces--who they were certain had no clue the caves even existed.

Light could be seen up ahead, and the leading Wookiee gave a quick grunt. Almost in unison, each

member of the group raised a paw to the side of their head and deactivated the enhanced-vision goggles. Then, they all slipped them off, folded them up and put them back into the utility pouches they had slung at their waists. The water became more and more shallow, and by the time they had reached the bright opening of the cave, which was overgrown with bushes and trees, the water was only ankle deep.

One by one the Wookiees slowly, cautiously, walked through the brush and out onto the side of the mountain on the far side of the lagoon. Two of the tall warriors took up kneeling positions at the head of the group to keep watch while everyone exited the cave. The group was on a narrow cliff just forty meters up from the water, and looking over the side they could see lines of tanks moving into the main part of the lagoon. But this group ignored that threat. They had another target around the curve of the mountain.

Once everyone had exited the cave the group got into a single-file line and began off towards the front of the mountain at a swift, but quiet, jog. It was surprising how little noise the towering Wookiees' footfalls made as they moved through the bushes and tall grasses, but these were skilled and well-trained warriors. They would not give away their position to an unsuspecting enemy before their ambush could be sprung.

As they moved along the narrow, vegetation-covered cliff and towards the front side of the mountain they met up with another special forces group. They fell into step one group right behind the other and continued on their way. The large group reached a fork in the path just as they were coming around the side of the mountain. The group that had joined took the path leading slightly up and around the front of the mountain, while the other took the path leading down towards the shoreline.

They slowed to stealthy, stalking steps, then came around the curve to the front of the mountain where the battlefield came into full view. Republic Gunships zipped by several hundred meters away, sending volleys of laser fire and missiles at the forward ranks of the droid armies. Numerous Wookiee fighter craft and pontoon-like boats zipped here and there across the water, causing as much damage as they could.

But the droids were being smart. Seeing how effective their missile launcher equipped units were they stayed back so that they were well within the range of their cover, while several of the units moved out onto the hover sleds to extend the sphere of influence. Not only that, but droids manning mobile, heavy-fire blaster cannons droid had taken up positions all along the brush along the shore. These units wreaked havoc on the pontoon-like boats, and their range was exceptionally good.

The Wookiees spread out and crouched low in the brush as they came down along the front slope of the mountain towards the shore; some even crawled on their hands and knees in order to stay concealed. Without making a sound, Wookiees came ever-nearer to the battle droid emplacements.

A pair of the enormous warriors came to the very edge of the brush behind a group of six battle droids manning a homing missile platform launcher. They waited patiently for several minutes, then acted.

First one, then two of the blank-faced battle droids came to the back of the emplacement to retrieve more missiles for the launcher. The crate of deadly projectiles were right next to the edge of the brush. As soon as the droids came within reach the pair of mighty Wookiees silently reached out with long, fur-covered arms and grabbed the droids. Without making so much as a peep, they yanked the droids back into the brush and snapped them in two with their strong hands.

One of the other droids noticed that his two companions hadn't returned with the ammunition, so he came around to the back of the launcher to see what was the matter. Upon discovering that they were nowhere to be seen, the battle droid stared at the munitions crates with the usual, blank gaze of a battle droid. But then, it took a step back to retrieve a blaster rifle from the front of the launcher and returned. Cautiously, slowly, the droid approached the thick brush at the rear of the small encampment. It came right up to the edge of the brush, peering into it with the blaster rifle held across its chest.

Suddenly a giant, brown paw reached out from the brush, grabbed the droid by the neck and yanked its head clean off.

As the droid's metal body collapsed to the ground the two towering Wookiees burst out of the brush and came around to the front of the launcher. The three droids standing there had just enough time to look up at the Wookiees before being blasted to pieces by their bowcasters.

The use of the blasters had revealed the Wookiees' presence, and several other nearby droid units were looking up at them with their slanted eyes. One of the Wookiees gave a loud roar, and then all hell broke loose.

The towering warriors sprung up everywhere along the brush-covered slope of the shore and opened fire on the droid encampments. Red laser fire and explosions were everywhere. A great number of the droids were taken down before they could even react, but most were lucky enough to arm themselves and return fire.

No longer concerned with stealth the Wookiees barreled forward through the brush, aiming and firing their weapons with deadly accuracy. One of them, armed with a huge quick-repeater rifle, burst upon a large gathering of droids. This Wookiee was the most muscular of the group, and he needed to be in order to carry and fire the quick-repeater rifle. The gun was as long as a battle droid, and had a wide muzzle and thick body.

THUD, THUD, THUD, THUD, THUD, THUD, THUD, THUD!!!! the gun went. The recoil was tremendous, and it actually rocked the enormous Wookiee's arms as he fired from side to side across the group. The thick laser bolts tore into the gathering of droids, sending them flying backwards through the air and pieces all over the place. One blast hit a crate filled with missiles a short ways down the slope, and it exploded in a huge fireball, causing the Wookiee to shield his eyes from the blast. Turning back to the clearing, the warrior saw that none were left standing, so he disappeared back into the thick brush.

Accompanied by two companions, the dark-furred leader of the group dropped down from a ten meter high ledge onto the yellow sands of the shore right behind a group of thirty droids waiting to board a hover sled heading out across the lagoon. The droids turned to regard them as soon as their heavy feet hit the ground, and the trio of Wookiees opened fire. They sprayed the gathering of battle droids with relentless rounds of fire, knocking several spraying sparks from holes in their chests into the soft waves at the water's edge.

One droid, armed with a shoulder-mounted missile launcher, turned, dropped to one knee and aimed the weapon right at the three Wookiees. The dark-furred leader of the group saw this and roared a warning to his two companions. They all dove to the sides and out of the way right as the droid fired the missile. It slammed into the small cliff and exploded, spraying sand and dirt everywhere.

Two of the Wookiees rolled up to their knees and commenced firing, taking out the missile-launching droid and the remainder of his companions, but the third lay motionless on the ground.

Once the shooting was over, the dark-furred leader noticed his fallen companion and rushed to his side. He dropped to his knees and rolled his friend over...only to find him dead. Small, sad grunts escaped his mouth as he stared down at his friend. They had fought many battle together, had bled countless times in the past.

With a gentle paw, he closed his friend's eyes, then placed that same kind paw on the body's chest--over the heart.

The fires of rage in his eyes, the dark-furred Wookiee rose back to his feet. Raising his arms above his head and tilting back his head so that his closed eyes faced the sky, he gave a wrath-filled roar. So loud was it that it could be heard over the din of the battle as it echoed off of the mountains and across the lagoon.

Then, he picked up his bowcaster and stormed off through the brush and after the next group of rather unfortunate droids.

Chapter 19

Trailed by a male and female aide, Bail hurried along the curved, windowed corridor of the senate building and towards the doorway to his pod, his steps filled with trepidation. Several other senators rushed by to their own pods; all of them uncharacteristically silent and unsocial as they did. Blue Senate Guards lined the hallway as usual, though there numbers were far greater than Bail had ever seen before. This troubled him.

The morning sun was just newly risen, and the hover-traffic lanes outside had not yet reached their optimum capacity. The calling of an emergency session of the senate was rare enough, but one *this* early was unprecedented.

Such urgency by Palpatine left no doubt in Bail's mind what the subject of discussion—or rather, the lack thereof, nowadays—would be. The thought left a sinking feeling in his stomach. Things were getting far more serious far more quickly than he'd thought they would, and the need for action on his part seemed more and more imminent. As much as he disliked the thought, he knew that soon he would be forced to take matters into his own hands and do whatever would be necessary.

Bail and his aides finally reached the doorway to their pod and walked in. Inside, the senate was filled with hushed whispers as senators quietly discussed impending matters with their own aides. Bail took a seat and waited for what was to come.

It didn't take long for Mas Amedda, Sly Moore and Chancellor Palpatine to appear at the top of the central dais. None of them took their seats. They merely stood there on the tiered podium. Mas Amedda scanned the pods with a harsh gaze as if he were waiting for the audience to give him reason to shout a call to order, but the senators stilled their quiet discussions as soon as they saw Palpatine take the stand.

Palpatine stood with a morose expression on his face, his sad eyes turned down in thought. He stood like this for several seconds before finally raising his gaze and his voice to those gathered before him. It was soft, yet firm.

"I feel I must apologize for the late notice and the early hour of this emergency session, but I felt that what I have to say could wait no longer." He gave a heavy sigh. "As we all know these are dangerous, trying times for the Republic. These wars have caused far too much destruction, have cost too many lives and have done nothing but divide the senate on issues of the utmost importance. It is my belief that the senate has lost sight of what really matters because of this divide, and the people are suffering as a result. Lives are at stake, worlds are being destroyed, yet the senate cannot agree on which action is best to counter these desperate attacks of the Separatists. I can no longer allow this to happen. There is far too much at stake here for me to stand by and watch my fellow citizens perish needlessly.

"Therefore, under the authority of the Emergency Powers granted me by this body, I am taking over complete control of the Republic's military forces—effective immediately."

Sporadic applause broke out around the senate hall.

"I will *not* allow these wars to continue any longer than they need to," Palpatine said over the growing noise. "I will use whatever methods necessary to stop the Separatists and defeat their armies. I will use this authority to ensure that peace and order is restored to the galaxy!"

Cheers broke out. Bail peered at Palpatine, who was nodding to those that worshiped him. The Alderaan senator shook his head in disbelief. How could so many senators actually condone such action? How could they be so blind to what was actually happening? Bail stood and squared his shoulders for what he was certain would be a very heated exchange. He moved to the front of his pod and pressed the button to move it into the middle of the senate room.

...Nothing happened.

Confused, he pushed the button again.

...Still, nothing happened.

"I would like to congratulate the Supreme Chancellor for his wisdom and bravery in such a bold move."

Bail looked up to see the source of the familiar voice; Tarkin. Bail pushed the button again and again, but nothing happened.

Tarkin's pod floated forward into the middle of the room, in front of the Chancellor's podium. "As Delegate of Military Affairs I agree wholeheartedly that such a thing is needed if we are to end The Wars!"

"I agree with Commandant Tarkin," a Quarren senator said as his pod floated forward to hover next to Tarkin's. "Thank you for your courage, Chancellor."

It was clear to Bail that his pod was not going to move. But with his pod's amplifier at least he could still make himself heard from where he was along the wall. He pushed that button.

"I do not agree with—" he said, but stopped as soon as he realized his voice was not being carried throughout the room as it should have been. His eyes shot up to Palpatine in shock and anger. As he did another, and another, and another pod floated forward with senators who wished to praise Palpatine, and Palpatine greeted their words with slow, receptive nods.

The comm. link on Bail's hip began beeping. He picked it up and clicked it on. "Yes?"

"Bail—my pod isn't working. Neither is Padmé's," Mon Mothma said, disbelief in her voice.

"Neither is mine," he said, staring angry eyes at Palpatine. "I have a feeling only those who are open supporters of Palpatine's are."

There was a slight pause on the other end of the comm. *"What should we do?"* Mon Mothma finally asked.

"I don't know," Bail said, watching the continuing spectacle unfolding before his very eyes. *I don't know...*

Her large dress swishing as she swiftly walked through the pillared, red carpeted ground floor of the senate building, Padmé neared the place where Chancellor Palpatine would exit the senate room. Moteé, Captain Typho, Artoo and Threepio followed her at a discrete distance. There were a handful of senators anxiously waiting just outside the doors for a chance to get some face-time with Palpatine, but the majority were still making their way out of the giant room on the upper levels. Padmé had left the session early so she could confront Palpatine.

Flanked by two Senate Guards, the tall doors a short distance away opened and the senators waiting outside sprang into action. Two red-robed, Royal Guards emerged, followed by Palpatine with Anakin at his side and flanked by two more Royal Guards. Nipping at their heels was a large group of senators jostling for position while praising the Supreme Chancellor, followed by Mas Amedda and Sly Moore. Bringing up the rear was a line of even more of the blue-robed Senate Guards.

Palpatine stopped in the middle of the hall and turned to allow the senators time to honor him, basking in it. Anakin stood nearby, his eyes as he scanned the crowd.

Padmé came toward the fringes of the group with determined steps, her eyes daggers for Palpatine. She nearly ran into the Royal Guard as he suddenly stepped in front of her, blocking her way. She stared up at the helmeted, visored face of the guard in disbelief, then made to go around him. The guard extended his arm in her path, barring her way yet again.

Shocked, Padmé gazed past the guard's arm at Palpatine, and saw that Anakin was peering at her and the guard with uneasy eyes. Padmé looked at Anakin with anger, and Anakin could do nothing but turn his regretful face to the floor.

With one last glance at Palpatine as he lapped up the promises of devotion from the senators, then another angry stare at Anakin, Padmé turned and stormed off.

Anakin watched her walk away, then turned his pained expression back towards the group of senators. The pain soon turned to anger, and the anger found a focal point as he watched the pathetic politicians pine for recognition. His wrath festered, grew and became more and more potent. Power rushed through his body; intoxicating power filled with life. A scowl broke out across his face as he peered at the politicians. They were not far off from worthless—all of them. Were it not for their ability to sway others to Palpatine's cause, he wouldn't object to their complete eradication from the political apparatus. In fact, at the moment, he would have been more than happy to do it himself.

But he controlled the urge and focused the great power he wielded. With it, he searched the minds of those around him to see what dark secrets they held—secrets he and Palpatine could use to make certain these political animals stayed in line and did as they were told. Without abandon he tore into their minds, yet he was skillful enough to not allow them to notice he was doing it. He found much that would be of good use, and use it they would.

"Anakin," Palpatine said.

Anakin pulled back out of the thoughts of the group of senators and turned to regard Palpatine. He was sad to let go of the power he had been suing, but Palpatine wanted to speak with him, so he did.

Palpatine walked away from the group of senators so as not to be overheard, and Anakin was right by his side.

"Yes, Your Excellency?" Anakin asked.

"Go to the Jedi Council. They will no doubt be distressed by the news of what I have done. Assure them this is only a temporary measure, and that I will return control back to the senate as soon as The Wars are over."

Confusion came over Anakin. "You mean to return control back to the senate?"

"No. But that is what you will tell them," Palpatine said, a cunning smile on his face.

Anakin returned the smile, pleased by the response.

"Be diplomatic. You know best how to persuade them. They are short-sighted and will not easily accept our way of thinking." Palpatine said. Then, his expression became most serious. "You must be careful, my friend. Guard your feelings. They would use them against us."

"I will, Your Excellency," Anakin said with a slight bow, determination across his face. Then, he turned and strode out of the building.

Dark brown robe wrapped around him, Anakin walked through the halls of the Jedi Temple and towards the elevator that would take him to the Council Chambers. He couldn't quite explain why, but after being gone and serving with Palpatine it felt strange being back here. It had been his home ever since he had been a little boy, but now it felt...alien, unfamiliar, cold. No fond memories entered his mind as he walked through the place—only glimpses of the injustices he had incurred while here.

He dwelled on these thoughts all the way up to the Council Room, feeding off of the anger and hate they generated to strengthen the barrier over his thoughts with the Force.

Numerous Jedi Masters stopped and bowed to say hello as he walked by, but Anakin ignored them and continued on without a glance. A group of young Padawans being led through the halls by their teacher spotted him and stopped to gawk at the legendary hero of the Clone Wars; whispering to each other about how great he was, but Anakin paid them no mind and kept his eyes forward. He had no time for such childish things now.

He took the elevator, and several floors later entered the Jedi Council Room. He kept his head low and eyes alert, focusing his emotions in order to conceal his thoughts. Discussion stopped and all eyes turned to him. A handful of Council Members were still present only in holo-image form, and he noted as he walked to the center of the room that two chairs were empty; Master Yoda's and Obi-Wan's. He was surprised to see that they weren't present via hologram from their missions. It wasn't like them to miss something so important. But at the same time he had to admit that he was also relieved. Their absence would make it easier for him to deceive The Council. Yoda, and especially Obi-Wan, were too good at reading him.

Standing in the middle of the crest on the floor, Anakin gave a small bow. "Thank you for receiving me," he said. "I won't take up much of The Council's time."

He raised his eyes to Master Windu, and saw a puzzled expression on the powerful Jedi Master's face.

"You are always welcome here, Anakin," Mace said. "You are a valued member of The Order and well respected as a Jedi. What have you to report?"

Anakin gave the Jedi Masters before him a quick one-over, then said, "I come at the request of Supreme Chancellor Palpatine. He wants to ease the minds of The Council about his decision to take control of the military."

Several of the Jedi exchanged puzzled looks.

Mace's eyebrows raised. "The Chancellor has been less than concerned with The Council's opinions on recent matters," he said. "Why should this be any different?"

Anakin resisted the urge to lash out with the anger such a comment had elicited. Instead, he kept it well-hidden under the veil of calm he was projecting. "Because of the drastic nature of such a change—because of the consolidation of power it creates. He wanted me to assure you that this is only a temporary measure. He promises to return full control of the military back to the senate as soon as The

Wars are over. He won't retain control for long."

Mace regarded Anakin with skepticism. "...And you believe him?" he asked.

Anakin nodded. "I do."

Anakin saw a flash of light out of the corner of his left eye, and he turned to see the life-sized holo-image of Master Yoda standing right next to him, gazing up at him with searching eyes.

"Master Yoda," Mace said, nodding. "I'm glad you could join us."

Yoda turned his eyes away from Anakin and to Mace at the front of the room.

Not wanting to stand directly next to Master Yoda, Anakin moved to Obi-Wan's vacant chair and sat. Several of the Council Members exchanged looks at him doing this, but Anakin ignored them.

"Just heard, have I, what Palpatine has done," Yoda said, an angry look on his face.

"He's gone too far this time," Ki-Adi-Mundi said, his holo-image flickering. His voice slightly distorted.

"He has too much power," Master Plo Koon's own holo-image said, his gravelly voice amplified through his mask. *"We must confront him on this issue."*

"I agree," Mace said, and several other members of The Council nodded their firm consent.

Anakin looked around the room with cautious eyes. It was just as he and Palpatine had thought. The Council could not see the long-term—could not see the obvious need for what Palpatine had done. The senate was worthless and was causing more problems than it was solving with The Wars. Palpatine was the only one with the strength and resolve to put an end to the destructive conflict, which is why he had taken such drastic measures. He wanted to end the slaughter and restore order...and yet, the Jedi Council wanted to stop him from doing so.

They were weak--all of them!--and couldn't handle the truth of what really needed to be done to keep order in the galaxy. They were too concerned with pandering to those less gifted—those that were destined to follow, and too selfish to allow those blessed with power to do what was right. It disgusted Anakin.

"Act on this, we must," Yoda said, adding his own agreement with a curt nod.

"This is absurd," Anakin said, shaking his head. He was careful to control his anger and conceal it from prodding minds, but let some frustration show.

All eyes turned to him.

"The Chancellor has said this will only be temporary," Anakin said. "He has promised to return control as soon as The Wars are over—which, by the looks of things, won't be much longer."

A harsh expression was on Yoda's face. *"Hmmp! Too many promises, Palpatine has broken. Trust his word, I—do—not!"* he said with a poke of a finger. *"And now, too serious, this matter is. Ignore it any longer, The Council cannot."*

"So what would you do—arrest him? Remove him from Office by force?" Anakin demanded.

Yoda was staunch in his views. *"If he will not stop this—Yes."*

"And how would that look?" Anakin asked.

The other Council Members became pensive, weighing Anakin's words and Yoda's hard-line response. They knew how bad it would look if the Jedi were to openly come out in opposition to the chancellor. And if they were to actually use force to stop the chancellor.... They exchanged uncertain glances.

Anakin saw this, and decided to take advantage of it. “How would the Jedi be viewed by the senate were we to do such a thing? The senate supports Palpatine’s decision. And what would the people think?” He saw that the determination had deflated from the Council Members—save Yoda. Yoda stood firm and unmovable in the middle of the room with both hands resting on his cane, while the others were deep in thought.

Hunched over with elbows on his knees and chin resting on intertwined hands, Master Windu finally said, “Perhaps Anakin is right. Maybe we should wait until the end of The Wars before taking any kind of action.”

A small smirk on his lips, Anakin looked around the room to see Mace being answered by slow nods.

Shock on his face, Master Yoda turned his head to watch the Council Members agree with Mace. His ears drooped and his shoulders sagged. He lowered his head with a sad, defeated sigh.

Standing in the middle of the command center in the Wookiee tree city on Kashyyyk, Master Yoda watched with sad eyes as young Skywalker stood to leave and the council meeting came to an end and the holo-image of the miniature Council Room faded away. He turned his gaze out the wide window and across the lagoon at the fierce battle still raging on. How could the Jedi have allowed themselves to get into such a position? How could things have gone so wrong and how could they have been paralyzed into such inaction?

He knew the answer, and it only caused more grief to rise; they had done it to themselves. They had become complacent, and now they were paying the awful price.

Down below, the AT-TE’s, ST-ATT’s and the massive numbers of Clonetroopers had arrived and joined the fight. It was all-out war, now. The Separatists were being driven back, but not without a fight. The droid army fought on even though they were now vastly outnumbered.

However, it was clear to Yoda that even though the Republic would win this war, the Jedi would lose. He turned his eyes back to the floor and gave another sad sigh.

Standing nearby and looking down at the morose, diminutive Jedi Master, Chewbacca gave a soft, sad cry.

Obi-Wan slowly, cautiously steered the lizard-beast around the bend of the cliff and kept his eyes open for any sign of Grievous or his henchmen. He had been rather fortunate in that Grievous’ speeder left an easily-spotted track behind it in the dusty soil covering the cliffs. Because of this, he was able to keep his distance and avoid his presence being detected.

As they came around the bend Obi-Wan saw that the cliff widened considerably and off to the right, in the side of the mountain peak, was a black, gaping cave. The dual treads of Grievous’ speeder disappeared into the darkness of the wide mouth, and something in the Force told him that this was the end of the line.

“Whoa, girl,” Obi-Wan said, pulling back on the reins and bringing the animal to a stop.

Then, he backed the lizard-beast back around the bend of the cliff—well out of sight of the cave—and dismounted. He removed his robe and tucked it into the cargo pouch on the backside of the saddle. The lizard-beast made soft cries and stomped its feet as he tied the reins around a tall boulder. It even nudged him in the back with its snout a couple times. It was clear the animal didn’t like the idea of him leaving it there and going on alone.

Obi-Wan turned and stroked its snout. “It’s all right. I’ll be back shortly,” he soothed. The animal closed its eyes to slits at his gentle touch, and was calmed by his kindness.

Then, Obi-Wan began back around the curve of the cliff; his steps light and his senses alert. The occasional gust of wind kicked up dirt off of the cliffs, and Obi-Wan shielded his eyes as the cave came back into view. He crouched behind a large rock and inspected the cave for several seconds, his eyes keen for a sentry. He didn't see one, but he was still leery of entering through the main entrance. There was far too much that could go wrong by doing that. He began scanning the rock face above the cave. There had to be another way....

And then he found it.

More than twenty meters above the cave and set into a small crevice where the two cliffs met was a narrow opening. He traced the wall of rock for the best way to get up to the opening, then began climbing. There were several times during the climb where he was nearly torn from the rock by the gusting wind whipping around the mountain peak, but his strong fingers held fast and he finally reached the narrow opening.

Inside, the opening stayed just narrow enough for him to squeeze through for several meters, but then widened to a comfortable width. It was dark and the uneven, wet surface of the rock floor made for a treacherous walk. He slipped more than once, and as he got back to his feet and wiped himself off he could feel the aches in his back.

"I'm getting too old for this sort of thing," he bemused under his breath.

The curving path of the cave continued downward, and finally he began to see a dim light. Cautiously, he approached the light and saw that the tunnel was connected to a spacious cavern up ahead. The faint sounds of beeps and whirrs from computer consoles and other such machinery reached his ears, and he carefully walked closer to the opening and looked down into the cavern below.

The opening of the cave was more than ten meters up the wall of the cavern, and down below he saw Grievous in the center of the command room. The Droid General's back was to him, and he was hunched over a circular table topped with a holo-display of the battle still going on across the pot-marked plains of Utapau. His henchmen stood at attention a handful of meters behind him. Tactical substations with battle droids seated in front of them filled the walls of the room. Each substation was covered with blinking lights of various colors and displayed holo-images and lines of data from the numerous battles still going on across the galaxy.

Obi-Wan crouched behind a slight outcropping of rock in the opening and inspected the room in order to plan his attack. Grievous and his bodyguards would be difficult to handle together, but he'd done it before. Besides—that was his mission, so he would do it. None of the battle droids at the substations were armed—at least, as far as he could see—and there didn't seem to be any weapons readily available for them. He was sure that there was probably a huge stockpile somewhere nearby, but wherever it was, he couldn't see it. So handling the battle droids wouldn't be a problem.

He knew there was the possibility that one of the passageways leading off from the cavern held more, already-armed battle droids, but he decided that was something he would just have to deal with when the problem presented itself. This whole thing had gone on for far too long and The Wars needed to end. Bringing down Grievous was the quickest way to do that, and so that's what he would do—no matter how difficult that turned out to be.

He gave the room one final scan, then gathered the Force within him. He came out from behind the rock outcropping and retrieved his lightsaber from his utility belt as he inched closer to the edge.

"Incoming transmission," a battle droid announced in its monotone, mechanical voice from a substation. Then it added, "Origin; Coruscant."

Obi-Wan was right on the edge, and just about to drop down into the room.

"It's Darth Sidious," Grievous said. "Put him through!"

Obi-Wan froze, one foot already hanging half way off of the ledge. He would wait to see who this Darth

Sidious was before jumping down into the room. This was more important than getting Grievous. Finding and getting rid of the Sith was just as important as finishing The Wars. He moved his dangling foot back up onto the ledge and waited.

As he waited for Sidious' image to appear he thought of what Dooku had told him in that Geonosis holding cell all those years ago. It had been a matter of great discussion between he, Master Windu and Master Yoda ever since; *could Sidious really be controlling the senate from the shadows? Could hundreds of senators really be doing his bidding?*

One thing seemed for certain—Dooku had been telling the truth about Darth Sidious' existence. *But was he telling the truth with the rest of his tale...?*

The holo-image of the battle scene on the table in front of Grievous disappeared, and was replaced with the life-sized image of a being cloaked and hooded in black. The cowl of the robe concealed all of the man's face except for his chin and mouth—which was turned down in a harsh frown. Somehow, the room actually seemed to grow darker at the spectral form's presence, and a chill ran down Obi-Wan's spine.

"Yes, General—*what is it?*" Sidious said, his voice low and unforgiving.

Grievous bowed in deep respect. "Lord Sidious, I thought you would like to know that Jedi Obi-Wan Kenobi is dead," Grievous said proudly, his eyes averted as he awaited the praise he was certain would come.

Sidious' head raised up and to the side ever so slightly. "*Are you sure...?*" he asked, skepticism thick in his voice.

"Yes, My Lord. I witnessed it myself. He will no longer be of any trouble."

Sidious said nothing for several seconds, and Grievous' bowed head began to stir uncertainly at the lack of a response.

"*Very well,*" Sidious finally said—much to Grievous' relief. "*Continue your assault throughout the Republic. Keep the Jedi occupied.*"

It was hard for Obi-Wan to hear everything clearly. He inched a little closer to the opening to hear better, but as he did he accidentally knocked a fist-sized rock loose. He watched with wide eyes as the rock tumbled towards the computer consoles below, and reached out with the Force to stop its fall just a few meters above impact. He winced as a dusting of tiny pebbles rained down on the console and looked up to see one of Grievous' bodyguards cock its head to the side as if it'd heard something. His worried eyes watched the droid for several seconds, and then he let loose a silent sigh of relief as the droid turned its head back around. He held the rock where it was with the Force as he continued to listen, straining his ears so as to pick up every word.

"Yes, Lord Sidious," Grievous said.

"*What of the Separatist leaders?*" Sidious asked.

"The loss of Dooku has been a great blow to their morale. I fear their confidence is waning without him."

A scowl crossed Sidious' face. "*Lord Tyrannus was a fool! He got what he deserved. ...But it does not matter. The Separatist Leaders and The Wars have nearly used up their usefulness. Soon, I will have the Chancellor declare the Jedi traitors in the senate and then nothing will stand in my way! The Jedi, the Separatists—all of them will be wiped from the face of the galaxy and the Sith will rule supreme.*"

"Yes, Lord Sidious," Grievous said, bowing deeply, gladly.

Obi-Wan's mouth dropped open, and he forgot all about the stone he was holding in the air with the Force.

The rock clanged on top of the computer console and all heads instantly turned. A second later they

spotted him perched at the edge of the opening.

He got to his feet and gave Sidious' holo-image one last, wide-eyed look before turning and racing back up through the darkness of the cave. His mission to take care of Grievous no longer mattered. He had another mission of the utmost importance to fulfill now—and that mission required that he make absolutely certain he be able to relay back to the Jedi Council what he'd just learned. Everything depended on it.

Grievous nearly spat at seeing Obi-Wan, and his mechanical hands clenched into fists.

"What is it?" Sidious demanded.

Grievous turned back around, and through angry, heavy breath bit out one word; "Kenobi."

Sidious' mouth turned into a furious, tooth-baring scowl. *"I thought you'd taken care of him,"* he bit out.

"I'm just about to," Grievous responded.

"See to it you do, General, ...or be forced to deal with me," Sidious growled before his image disappeared.

Grievous spun around to see both of his bodyguards standing by the wall just below the opening Obi-Wan had been spotted in, watching him intently with red eyes with their electro-staffs held ready. He gave them a flick of his hand and they both jumped into the air and disappeared into the darkness of the hole while Grievous made for the main tunnel leading out of the cavern. They would find Kenobi, and then Grievous would have the distinct pleasure of making certain that he was dead once and for all.

Obi-Wan ran as fast as he could through the uneven, slick cave. He could hear the sounds of scraping metal in the darkness behind him, and when he chanced a look back he saw two pairs of blood-red, glowing eyes coming after him. He nearly tripped on a rock sticking up out of the ground while looking back, and so decided to keep his eyes forward from then on. He needed to get out of here and back to his ship as fast as he could to relay what he'd just heard to the Jedi Temple. That was his number one concern.

His mind was still reeling from what he'd just learned. As he thought it all over he berated himself for not having seen it sooner. He couldn't believe how blind the Jedi had been, and how they could have allowed something as sinister as all this happen right under their very noses. The Dark Lord of the Sith had been working right there on Coruscant all those years and they hadn't realized it. They had ignored the signs. They had become complacent and had believed they would surely know if a scheme so grand was actually taking place. They had become overconfident.

But thinking about it, he realized that there was a positive side to this whole mess. Dooku was dead, and so that meant that only Darth Sidious remained. Because there could only be two at a time, the Sith were weakened. And when they found Sidious they could finally put an end to the Sith and bring the Force back into balance.

Obi-Wan could see the faint light up ahead that was the exit of the tunnel, and he quickened his pace. He came to the opening of the narrow crevice and looked down. He was relieved to find that there was no platoon of battle druids waiting for him on the wide cliff below. Then, the sound of scraping metal just meters behind him caused him to take a quick look back. The two bodyguards were right there, barreling down on him with those emotionless, glowing eyes. Obi-Wan knew that he wouldn't have time to climb down the rock face, so he just jumped. He used the Force to slow his descent and soften his landing, then began running for where the cliff narrowed into the path leading back around the bend and to his mount.

But as he ran he heard the clank, clank, clanking of metal above him. He looked up to see the two bodyguards jumping and flipping along the narrow ledges of the rock face above him. Then, all of a sudden, the two droids flipped and landed on the narrowed cliff path, blocking his way around the bend. The bodyguards held their electro-staffs up and clicked them on. The red beam of energy raced back and forth along the length of the staff as the two droids slowly came forward.

The path was far too narrow where they were for Obi-Wan to fight, so he backed up and towards the wider portion. As he did, movement out of the corner of his eye brought his attention to the large mouth of the cave. Grievous was walking out, electro-staff in hand and coming towards him. Obi-Wan shifted his backward walk to compensate for Grievous' approach, and took several glances over his shoulder to see how close to the ledge he was coming and to avoid tripping over a small rock. He stopped a little over six meters from the ledge and waited, staring at his attackers with watchful eyes.

The two bodyguards met up with Grievous and the trio approached in a triangular formation with Grievous in the back. Grievous activated his electro-staff, then gave it a small twirl before returning it to his side.

Obi-Wan's right hand hovered near his lightsaber on his belt. The stiff, mountaintop wind gave a sudden gust, and Obi-Wan lowered his brow to shield his eyes and steady his footing as the wind tried to knock him backwards and towards the long, long fall just meters behind him. He would have to watch for that wind. It could prove most dangerous.

The trio stopped a handful of meters in front of Obi-Wan and met his determined gaze; electro-staffs held ready at their sides.

Obi-Wan narrowed his eyes at Grievous, and The Droid General did the same right back. Just for a split second, Obi-Wan shot his eyes down to the small rock just in front of his feet, then raised them back up at Grievous and his henchmen. He looked at each in turn, then pulled out his lightsaber and activated it in the blink of an eye.

Grievous and the two bodyguards reacted instantly. The two droids raised their staffs and began forward—spinning as they did. Obi-Wan kicked the small rock at his feet and, using the Force, sent it hurling straight at Grievous' chest. Grievous saw the head-sized stone coming and spun his body and his staff. He struck the rock with the end of his staff. The rock exploded into a thousand pieces and a cloud of dust, and Grievous advanced through that cloud at Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan blocked the spinning staffs of the two bodyguards as they came at him from either side. The droids continued pummeling his lightsaber blade with assault after twisting assault, and Obi-Wan was forced to move his humming blade from side to side to block them. Grievous came in spinning directly in front of Obi-Wan, and caused him to have to worry about thrusts from directly ahead as well as from the sides. Obi-Wan gritted his teeth in concentration as he countered the blows and dug down deep in the Force to keep his strength and focus sharp.

He swung his blade vertically to the right to block a swipe from one of the bodyguards, then he was forced to bend backwards out of the way of a straight-forward thrust from Grievous directed at his face. Grievous shifted the thrust into a downward stab. Obi-Wan allowed his momentum to carry him back and down, and he rolled out of the way with a backwards somersault right before the electro-staff struck its mark.

He rolled back up onto his feet dangerously close to the ledge of the cliff, and a sudden gust of wind knocked him even closer and off balance. He peered over his shoulder as he struggled to regain his footing and his eyes went wide as he saw the thousand-meter drop below. He regained his feet just in time to block another series of swipes from the pair of bodyguards. His mouth a thin line of determination as he countered their blows with great speed, he watched Grievous coming forward he knew that he had to do something to get away from this cliff.

Calling on the Force for strength, he blocked a quick swipe from one of the droids, and then pushed the electro-staff back up into the air. Then, as the other bodyguard was spinning in for an attack, he thrust out his hands in either direction and hit both of the droids with a booming Force Push.

The droid on the right took the invisible blow right in the chest, and it sent it flying backwards through the air and skidding across the rock surface several meters away. Having been spinning towards Obi-Wan when the thrust hit, the droid on the left was sent spinning uncontrollably through the air and towards the ledge. But the skillful droid brought its careening under control and stabbed the end of its electro-staff into the ground right at the ledge. Then, using the staff and its own momentum in an incredible display of acrobatics, the droid avoided flying off the cliff by swinging around the electro-staff and landing back on the rock surface of the ledge.

Now with a small clearing, Obi-Wan jumped high into the air, flipped over Grievous and landed several meters away from the edge of the cliff. Grievous watched his arch through the air and was upon him as soon as he landed. Obi-Wan's humming, blue-white blade met the spinning electro-staff with a series of sharp hisses and screeches. Obi-Wan backpedaled away from Grievous' powerful, swift blows and in the direction of the large opening of the cave.

Grievous' bodyguards came running, flipped through the air and landed on either side of The Droid General. They rejoined the fight with equally intensive fury, and once again Obi-Wan did all he could to keep up with them. He swished his blade from side to side and up over his shoulders and down his back to block their blows. Their hissing staffs swiped in from all sides, and it was only because of Obi-Wan's incredible skill and strength in the Force that he wasn't struck down.

He spun out of the way of another volley of strikes, but his way was blocked by one of the bodyguards' staffs. They weren't going to allow him to get out from in between them so easily. Obi-Wan frowned in frustration. Too much time was being wasted. He *needed* to get out of here and back to his ship. The Jedi Temple must know what he had heard. Everything depended on it.

He blocked another flurry of swipes and another stab from Grievous. Grievous spun around out of the blocked stab with his electro-staff extended. He came back around in a crouch, and the bodyguard on that side flipped into the air to avoid the extended staff. Obi-Wan knocked away a thrust from the bodyguard on his left, then jumped into the air to avoid having his legs swept out from under him by Grievous wide swipe. Then, as he was landing, Obi-Wan raised his blade horizontally to block a downward chop from the droid on the right.

The droid pushed down hard on his lightsaber, trying to keep him locked with the staff while Grievous and the other bodyguard came in to stab at his relatively wide-open midsection. But Obi-Wan dipped his blade, spun counter-clockwise and to the right with incredible speed and out of the way of the thrusting electro-staffs. As he spun back around he swung his lightsaber out horizontally and cut the unsuspecting droid on the right in half at the waist. Sparks spat out of the droid's midsection and a gurgling sound erupted from its mouth as it crumpled to the ground.

Obi-Wan continued spinning to the right and away from Grievous and the remaining bodyguard, but they didn't allow him to get far. They pounced on him at once, and Grievous' fury seemed redoubled at the loss of the droid. But Obi-Wan met them blow for blow and, fueled by his resolve, even began to put them on the defensive.

He pushed them back towards the ledge of the cliff with an aggressive series of swings, thrusts, stabs and spins. His lightsaber was a blur of light and motion as he came at them with all he had, advancing them ever closer to the edge of the cliff. The bodyguard tried to side-step in order to get around behind Obi-Wan, but the Jedi cut it off with a swift thrust to that side and kept it in front of him.

Grievous, however, was much more skilled. The Droid General waited patiently for just the right opportunity, then flipped behind Obi-Wan. Yet Obi-Wan didn't allow this to falter his advances one bit. He turned sideways and with stutter-steps continued to drive the bodyguard back towards the ledge while blocking Grievous' attacks at the same time. So fast were Obi-Wan's attacks that the droid had to struggle to keep up with them while glancing repeatedly behind it to see how close the edge of the cliff was.

Grievous took a swing at Obi-Wan's head, but Obi-Wan sensed the attack coming far in advance. Obi-Wan ducked smoothly under the swipe, then thrust out with his lightsaber extended in his right hand towards Grievous' chest. The stab nearly missed as Grievous bent over backwards to avoid the humming blade. In a single, fluid motion Obi-Wan dipped slightly at the knees, twisted his upper body back towards the bodyguard while he windmilled his right arm upward.

The unsuspecting droid, who had both arms raised over its head to deliver a downward chop, was cut in half from between the legs all the way up and through the head.

Immediately, Obi-Wan spun back around to face Grievous, who was coming in swinging hard. Obi-Wan parried the attack with relative ease, but didn't see the hand heading for his face as The Droid General came around out of a spin. The hand grabbed him around the throat, and Grievous spun and tossed Obi-Wan back across the cliff like he was nothing.

Obi-Wan hit the ground hard on his face. A small trickle of blood beginning down the corner of his lip, Obi-Wan stood back up as Grievous came at him with a furious roar.

Electro-staff held above his head, Grievous charged forward. Obi-Wan waited for just the right moment as the staff came barreling down towards his head, then raised his lightsaber in his right hand while he grabbed Grievous' metal body with his left. Obi-Wan used the momentum of Grievous' downward swipe and rolled down and onto his back. He pulled The Droid General down with him, and as they somersaulted backwards together Obi-Wan got his feet under Grievous' body. He kicked out with all his might as they rolled back around and sent Grievous flying through the air.

Grievous' body struck the wall next to the large cave with a resounding boom, and as his body crumbled to the ground a large avalanche of rocks and boulders rained down on his metal form. Obi-Wan shielded his eyes and coughed from the dust kicked up by the rockslide. Then, as the cloud began to dissipate, he saw that Grievous had been buried by several meters of rock.

Not wasting any time, Obi-Wan deactivated his lightsaber and ran back around the bend of the cliff to his lizard-mount. The animal gave a soft roar at his approach, and nudged him happily as he untied the reins from the rock. Obi-Wan paid little attention to the lizard-beasts affection as he came around and mounted. The animal gave a surprised cry as Obi-Wan hurriedly jerked the reins around to point it back down the mountain path.

"I need you to hurry!" Obi-Wan explained as they turned, and the animal gave another startled cry. "Hurry, girl, hurry! Heyyaa!!" he yelled, kicking it into motion.

They flew down the mountain path at break-neck speed, but it still wasn't fast enough for Obi-Wan. He urged the animal on as hard as he could--as hard as he possibly dared. He needed to contact the Jedi Temple. They had to know!

Chapter 20

Obi-Wan leaned in hard on the back of the lizard-beast as it tore across the open plains of Utapau. The animal's breathing was heavy and rhythmic, matching the clickity-clomp of its taloned feet. The wind raced through Obi-Wan's hair as the potted landscape flew by, yet it still wasn't fast enough for him. But he knew that his mount was going as fast and as hard as it possibly could, so he didn't try to push it any more. He only urged it to keep up the current pace, and judging by the sound of its breathing that may prove to be a problem.

The battle had moved off to the east and north. The Republic's forces had done well in repelling the droid army away from the large Utapau city, and now they had the Separatists on the retreat. The droid forces were crumbling and were no match for the clone army. Soon, this last, desperate campaign of Grievous' would be over and The Wars would be at their end. ...But judging by what Darth Sidious had said that didn't matter much for the Jedi, for their true battle was just about to begin with him having them declared traitors in the senate.

Obi-Wan's eyes narrowed in anger at the thought. He reached for his comm. link and activated it.

"Come in, Commander Cody. Come in!" he yelled into it.

There was a slight pause, then, *"General Kenobi—I'm glad to hear from you. Our forces have driven the Separatists back and—"*

"No time for that now!" Obi-Wan cut him off. "Meet me back at my ship as fast as you can!"

"Trouble?"

"Yes, Commander. Yes."

"Right. We'll be right there," Cody said.

Obi-Wan replaced the comm., then leaned back down into the lizard-beast's back.

They came over a slight hill and the compound where his ship was located came into view off in the distance. The animal's pace began to falter and it nearly tripped over a rock. Obi-Wan knew it was becoming exhausted.

"We're almost there!" he urged, giving it a small series of kicks. "Just a little bit longer!"

The lizard-beast took his prompting and used every bit of energy it had left to keep up the pace, but it's breathing was becoming forced—almost wheezy. The animal was near collapse by the time they finally reached the compound, and Obi-Wan jumped off of it and ran for the landing pad where his ship was located. He ran up the ramp and onto the landing pad. As he did the copper-topped, Arfour unit nestled in its place on the ship turned its domed head around and gave an alarmed series of beeps and whistles.

“Send a top-priority message to the War Room care of the Old-Folks Home!” Obi-Wan shouted as he ran towards the ship.

The droid gave another small series of beeps, and then a panel opened on the hull of the ship and a dish-antenna extended to point at the sky.

Obi-Wan came to a skidding stop a meter in front of the astro-droid and anxiously waited for the Jedi Temple to receive and acknowledge his signal.

“Master Windu—priority transmission incoming from Master Kenobi,” a brown-robed Jedi seated at a comm. station called across the Jedi Temple’s War Room.

Immediately, Mace turned from the display console he was standing at to regard the Jedi that had just spoken, as did the several other Jedi spread throughout the room.

“Put him through,” Mace said, walking towards the large tactical table and holo-projector in the middle of the room.

The life-sized holo-image of Obi-Wan appeared standing in the center of the table as Mace reached it, and right away he could tell by the expression on his face that Obi-Wan was deeply troubled.

“What is it Obi-Wan? What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Palpatine is in league with Darth Sidious!” Obi-Wan said, and a ripple of gasps and stunned looks spread throughout the War Room.

“Are you certain?” Mace asked as all the Jedi around the room began to walk towards the large tactical table in order to listen, their faces shocked.

“I’m positive, Master. I heard it straight from Sidious’ own mouth. He means to have Palpatine declare the Jedi traitors, and with Sidious’ influence over the senate I can’t see them disagreeing too much.”

Mace stared at the table with stunned, angry eyes.

“It gets worse,” Obi-Wan said. *“Grievous is working for Sidious, and so was Dooku. Dooku was a Sith and is the one responsible for hiring Jango Fett to be the template for the Clone Army. The Sith orchestrated the Clone Wars from the very beginning!”*

The Jedi gathered around the tactical table exchanged disbelieving looks.

“/—“ Obi-Wan began to say, but then his head snapped to the side to regard something, his eyes wide with surprise, and all of a sudden he was tossed backwards through the air and out of the image. Then, a split-second later, the holo-image flickered and disappeared.

“Obi-Wan...?” Mace called. Then, he turned to a Jedi peering down at a control console at the end of the table. “What happened?” he asked.

The Jedi pushed a series of buttons, shaking his head. “I don’t know. We’ve lost his signal.”

Mace’s eyes turned back to the now-empty table. *Palpatine!* He thought, his hand tightening into a fist. This was the last straw. Now, the Jedi needed to take matters into their own hands or be destroyed.

His jaw clenched tight, Mace looked up across the table. Jedi Masters Agen Kolar, Kit Fisto and Saesee

Tiin were standing together on the other side, peering right back at Mace with equally stern expressions.

"Let's go," he said, and the four of them sprang into action. "Put The Temple on high alert!" he called over his shoulder as he met up with the other three at the end of the table. Then, the four powerful Jedi continued with purposeful steps up the stairs and out of the room.

They had business to attend to.

The shockwave of the explosion knocked the wind out of Obi-Wan and he flew backwards through the air and struck his head hard on the rock surface of the landing pad. He lay there for several seconds trying to piece together what had just happened.

...He'd been talking to Master Windu...

...He'd just told him about Palpatine's involvement with Sidious, and...and Dooku having been a Sith.

...And then, a flash of light out of the corner of his eye had caused him to turn his head and he'd seen...something. He couldn't remember what just then.

His knees weak and his breath finally returned, Obi-Wan staggered to his feet and shook the stars out of his head. He could feel the heat and hear the sounds of his Jedi Starfighter burning several meters behind him and across the landing pad. He would have to find a new ship so that he could return to Coruscant. The Jedi there would be needing all the help they could get to weather this storm and root out Darth Sidious.

But then he heard another sound; the familiar sound of rather distinct footsteps approaching from behind. He remembered now what it was he had seen right before his ship had exploded—Grievous racing towards him in his wheeled speeder. He spun around, retrieving his lightsaber from his hip as he did, and saw Grievous stomping into view from around the burning hulk that had been his ship. Grievous stopped just on the other side of the burning ship—the flames silhouetting his tall, metal form as he stared Obi-Wan down with fury in his eyes.

Obi-Wan came forward a handful of steps. He stared right back at Grievous, matching his harsh gaze. He saw that the rock slide had done more damage than he would have thought; Grievous' gray cape had been torn so badly only small pieces remained hanging across his shoulders, and scuff marks covered his body while a long crack ran diagonally across the mask covering his face.

So, Obi-Wan thought, *he's not indestructible after all...*

He'd done his part in alerting the Jedi to Sidious' plans, and now he would complete his original assignment by taking care of Grievous. His hand tightened on his lightsaber hilt. He would end Grievous, or he would die trying. Holding it down at his side, Obi-Wan ignited the blade, never moving his eyes from Grievous'.

Grievous reacted by crossing his arms across his waist and retrieving two of the lightsabers hanging there. Then, he uncrossed his arms and snapped them straight down to his sides, igniting the lightsabers with dramatic flair.

The two warriors began circling one another slowly, getting closer with each revolution.

"Hope you're ready to die, *Jedi*," Grievous spat, raising the green and blue blades and stroking them together as if he were sharpening carving knives. The lightsabers screeched and hissed as he rubbed them together.

Obi-Wan raised his blade defensively as he continued to circle ever-closer.

"You've failed to kill me all these times, Grievous, and you won't succeed now," Obi-Wan shot back, much

to The Droid General's anger.

They were close now—well within striking distance—and stalking one another slowly, carefully. Their narrow eyes never left each other as they circled, their senses alert for any attack. It was just a matter of who would make the first move.

With lightning speed Grievous lunged forward, swinging the lightsaber in his left hand at Obi-Wan's head. Obi-Wan blocked the blow easily, but then had to be quick to move his blade down and to the other side to deflect the second blade as it came in stabbing at his thigh. He batted the stab away just in time to switch his grip yet again and block another swipe coming in at his head. Then, he was forced to redirect to another blow coming in low on his other side.

Grievous kept him busy in this way—alternating high and low blows from both sides as the two of them spun and shuffled across the landing pad. It wasn't difficult for Obi-Wan to counter or evade—he was too attuned to the Force for that—but as it continued on for several minutes and he stared into Grievous' smiling eyes he saw what the true purpose of it all was; Grievous was trying to wear him down.

And it would work, eventually. Obi-Wan knew that. Even with the Force as his ally, sooner or later his muscles would become fatigued and his breathing would be more forced. Sooner or later he would react ever-so-slightly slower to a stab or a thrust...and Grievous would land the blow. It may not be a fatal wound, but any strike in a duel such as this would only further hamper Obi-Wan's abilities. Grievous didn't have to worry about such things. He never got tired no matter how much energy he used and his tough, metal frame could withstand being cut. He felt little pain, and he would never stop coming after Obi-Wan as long as he was alive.

Obi-Wan knew that for these reasons he couldn't allow the fight to become dragged out. Such a thing could only benefit his enemy. He needed to be more aggressive and take the fight to Grievous.

A glowering expression on his face, Obi-Wan blocked a high swipe from Grievous, then spun out to the side and away from the incoming, low stab.

They readjusted to face off against one another again, but before Grievous could come in at him Obi-Wan went on the offensive.

He stabbed in at Grievous' midsection, causing the Droid General to block the blade instead of trying to attack. Grievous tried to bring his other blade around and at Obi-Wan, but Obi-Wan merely ducked under the swing and came in at him again. Grievous was forced to begin back-stepping as he blocked Obi-Wan's swift attacks.

Obi-Wan came spinning in with his blade—the blue-white saber a blur of light. Much as Grievous had, he attacked high and low with alternating swipes and thrusts. Grievous blocked the fast blows, and was just about to try to go on the offensive again when Obi-Wan caught him quite off guard.

Obi-Wan came around in a spinning attack and Grievous blocked the swipe, but instead of continuing through on the spin Obi-Wan stopped his turn with a strongly-planted foot and reversed directions. Much to Grievous' surprise, Obi-Wan suddenly came back at him from the other direction with blade held out in a horizontal swipe. Grievous jumped back out of the way of the swing, but not fast enough. Obi-Wan's blade made a deep gash across his chest-plate armor.

Standing several meters away from Obi-Wan, Grievous gazed down at the smoldering cut in his chest-plate in disbelief. As he did the lower half of the armor came loose, fell off and clattered to the rock surface of the landing pad. Grievous was shocked. It was the first time a Jedi had cut him.

Obi-Wan took advantage of his surprise and came in at him again. Befuddled, Grievous was forced to retreat even further from the powerful attack, and was becoming dangerously close to being backed up into the burning remains of the Jedi Starfighter. Finally, Grievous got a hold of himself and held his ground, deflecting the continual barrage and itching for an opening so that he could take back the advantage.

Obi-Wan came in with a powerful, downward slice aimed to cut Grievous in half down the chest. The

Droid General crossed and raised his blades to block the blow, and the interlocking lightsabers brought the two warriors' faces in close to one another. Teeth barred as he pushed down as hard as he could, Obi-Wan stared into Grievous' narrowed, yellow and black eyes behind that white mask.

Grievous pushed up and to the side with his crossed blades and finally broke the lock, sending Obi-Wan, and his lightsaber, out wide before coming in to attack. But Obi-Wan used the momentum of the push and spun back around. He thrust out his hand at the approaching Droid General and hit him with a Force Push. The invisible wall of energy hit Grievous full on, but he was able to lessen its effect with a short hop backwards and firmly-planted, taloned feet in the rock surface of the landing pad. But his body was left wide open as he struggled to keep his balance.

Obi-Wan was upon Grievous right away. He lunged forward with his lightsaber extended in his left hand and stabbed right at Grievous' metal ribs. Grievous was forced to bend his midsection backward to avoid being run through by the humming blade, and then batted it away with a quick swipe of the lightsaber in his left hand. Immediately, Obi-Wan stepped forward with his right foot, and as he came up out of the crouched step he struck Grievous in the face with an incredibly powerful, right uppercut.

The punch hit hard and sent Grievous stumbling backwards several steps.

Right away Grievous could tell that something was wrong, and he raised a hand to his face mask. The diagonal crack in the mask had been made much worse by the punch, and now all that was holding the lower half on was a tiny piece just below his right eye. Infuriated, Grievous tore the broken, lower half of the mask off and tossed it aside revealing a grotesque hole where a nose should have been and a lip-less mouth filled with yellow fangs.

Grievous took several heavy, infuriated breaths, then turned his head to the sky and gave a guttural roar of primal rage—his gaping, lip-less mouth revealing row upon row of fangs.

Obi-Wan stared at the horrific visage, repulsed.

As the roar echoed across the plains, Grievous turned his gaze back down to Obi-Wan. He held his arms up and to his sides with lightsabers in hand. Then, all of a sudden, the two arms split in half all the way up to the shoulders to reveal two more arms. This new pair of arms reached down to his waist to retrieve two more lightsabers. Grievous ignited the two new blades, then held all four out at Obi-Wan.

Grievous began walking forward, each footstep like an earthquake. With eyes that could have burned through durasteel, he yelled, "I'M GOING TO TEAR YOU APART!!!"

Obi-Wan's disgusted expression melted immediately. His eyes wide and his mouth hanging open in stunned surprise, he stared at the quartet of lightsabers coming at him wondering what he was going to do to survive this one.

Obi-Wan began stepping backwards as Grievous steadily approached, his lightsaber held ready in front of him and concentrating deeply on the Force for guidance. Grievous stomped forward with giant steps, and once he reached Obi-Wan he raised his upper two arms high above his head while keeping the bottom two down at his waist. A snarl escaped the hideous Droid General's fanged mouth and then he attacked.

He brought the two lightsabers held above his head down in a powerful double strike, and as Obi-Wan raised his blade horizontally to block it, Grievous stabbed at his stomach with the lower two. His face a harsh scowl of concentration, Obi-Wan moved his blade from one attack to the next with deft speed and accuracy.

Obi-Wan spun away from Grievous to give himself a moment of repose, but it was brief. Grievous thundered after him and attacked with redoubled rage. Each of the four blades came in at Obi-Wan from a different angle. Swipe, thrust, swing, chop—all nearly right on top of the other. The combined humming and clashing of the energy blades was deafening, and Obi-Wan was right in the middle of it all fighting for

his life.

Obi-Wan tried to spin out to one side again, but was brought to an abrupt halt when he had to deflect one of Grievous' shimmering blades placed right in his escape path. Forced back into the middle of the torrent of lightsabers, Obi-Wan knew that he would be in trouble if he stayed there much longer. He could feel fatigue beginning to seep into his muscles and his mind. Even though he had the Force with him fortifying and sharpening his skills he wasn't foolish enough to forget that he was also human, and that his body had limits. He needed to level the playing field and get rid of those extra lightsabers. It was his only hope.

Drawing even more deeply on the Force, Obi-Wan deflected Grievous' attacks. He added just a little bit more power behind each block and shoving away of the lightsabers in an attempt to afford himself more room and time between blows. When he finally had what he wanted, Obi-Wan ducked under a swing that was aimed to take his head off, then rolled forward and to the side and out of the way of a chopping blow that cut into the rock surface.

Rolling back up onto his feet on the other side of Grievous, Obi-Wan stretched out his right hand to call a chunk of durasteel from his shattered ship towards him with the Force. He guided the piece of metal directly in front of him and at Grievous' lower, left hand as The Droid General turned to face him. The sharp edge of the broken piece of durasteel struck the lightsaber in Grievous' hand as it flew by, cutting off the emitter in a spray of sparks.

Grievous raised the hilt to inspect it, and upon seeing that it was now worthless tossed it aside. He came at Obi-Wan with the remaining three blades, and used his free hand for the occasional jab. A couple of the punches landed, hitting Obi-Wan in the ribs and causing him to grimace in pain, but Grievous had to be careful so as to avoid having the arm cut off by Obi-Wan's lightsaber.

Obi-Wan did his best to ignore the throbbing in his ribs, but it was difficult. He felt it with each turn, every twist and spin, but did his best to fight through it. There would be plenty of time to feel pain later. First, he had to survive this fight.

He blocked a quick flurry of attacks that came at him from all sides, then went into a spin—deflecting a horizontal swipe aimed at his back by bringing his blade up behind him in his right hand. As he came out of the spin he switched the lightsaber into his left hand behind his back and brought it around in a well-timed, well-placed upward swipe. The swing cut the gray hilt in Grievous' lower right hand in half—almost taking a metal finger with it.

But Obi-Wan's moment of triumph was brief as Grievous came around with that right hand and hit him hard across the face. The punch sent him flying backwards through the air and skidding across the rock surface on his back for several meters before finally coming to a stop dangerously close to the burning remains of his fighter. His lightsaber slipped from his hand when he struck the ground and slid somewhere amongst the burning wreckage.

He saw Grievous approaching fast so he rolled over and scrambled on his knees towards the burning remains to search for the hilt, but couldn't find it. All of a sudden Grievous was next to him and kicked him in the stomach. A muffled cry escaped Obi-Wan's lips as he again went flying through the air and skidding across the landing pad.

Stars filled his vision and his head swam as he tried to push himself up just far enough to see if Grievous was approaching with wobbly, uncooperative arms. Grievous wasn't coming at him again yet. He was merely standing in front of the flames of the ship and looking at Obi-Wan with anger and contempt. The Droid General's gaze fell to the two remaining lightsabers in his hands. And then, much to Obi-Wan's surprise, Grievous deactivated the green and the blue blades and tossed the hilts aside as if he were disgusted with them. Then, he made his four arms back into only two.

Grievous looked back up at Obi-Wan with a fang-filled scowl and began stomping towards him. "You don't deserve a quick death! I'm going to take my time with you and make you PAY!!!"

The idea of such a thing gave Obi-Wan the sudden strength and incentive he needed to get back up to his feet, but Grievous' stomping quickly turned into a run and he was upon him before he could steady himself.

Grievous came at him with full momentum and landed a deadly uppercut to Obi-Wan's chin. Obi-Wan landed and slid to the very edge of the slightly-elevated landing pad—his head and shoulders actually hanging over the ledge. Before he even knew what was happening, Grievous had grabbed him by the leg and tossed him into the air back across the landing pad.

Obi-Wan lay in a heap, his eyes barely open and unable to move much more than a twitch. But his ears were still working rather well, and just then he could hear General Grievous laughing on the far side of the landing pad.

"Stupid, pathetic *Jedi*! Did you honestly think you could defeat *me*?! I am the future of the galaxy!"

The words had a profound effect on Obi-Wan and, somehow, he found the strength to get back up to his feet to face his enemy—though shaky as he was.

Grievous saw this. "Still haven't had enough, eh? Well, more's the pleasure," he taunted as he began running forward.

Obi-Wan drew as much of the Force into him as he could for strength as he bent his knees in a defensive, crouched position.

Grievous came barreling in with a right hook. Obi-Wan ducked back and out of the way of the swing, and just had time to deflect a left jab with his hands as he straightened. Grievous came back in with a right uppercut, and again Obi-Wan dodged the punch, but wasn't fast enough to move out of the way of the left hook that struck him right in the stomach. The blow hurt terribly, but Obi-Wan merely grimaced and ducked under a wide right hook, then came back at Grievous with a right jab.

His fist clanged on the metal armor that was Grievous ribs, and instantly his mouth dropped open in a silent scream of pain. Grievous came back around with a swift backhand to Obi-Wan's face, knocking him staggering to the side. Then, before Obi-Wan could recollect himself, Grievous came in with a quick series of blows; jabs, hooks and uppercuts—Grievous treated him like a punching bag. Grievous finally ended the agonizing assault with a swift kick to Obi-Wan's midsection, sending him once again flying through the air and crashing to the rock surface of the landing pad.

Obi-Wan lay on his back, barely conscious with eyes closed to slits as Grievous approached. Those eyes sprang open wide when Grievous picked him up by the neck in a single-handed vice grip. Instantly Obi-Wan's hands went up to the metal claw around his neck, trying vainly to pry the long fingers away from his windpipe. His feet kicked air as The Droid General raised him so that they were face to face.

"Now, Jedi—YOU DIE!!!!" Grievous said, malicious pleasure in his voice.

His face contorted in pain and great effort Obi-Wan begged for breath, but found none. White spots and dark pools filled his vision, and he knew that the end was not far off if he didn't do something quickly. No energy left to pry at Grievous' unmovable fingers any longer, Obi-Wan's hands fell down to his sides. Grievous began laughing maniacally as he watched the life drain from Obi-Wan's face.

...And then, Obi-Wan's right hand bumped into something; cool durasteel. He stroked the object with a lazy finger to ascertain its identity, and found a glimmer of hope as the answer came to his mind—Grievous' blaster pistol. An image of the gun strapped to Grievous' hip holster during their fight entered his mind and he knew that he was right. He wasn't imagining it in these last seconds of his existence. It really was there.

Mustering up what little energy he had left, Obi-Wan pulled the pistol out of the holster. With a scowl on his face, he shoved the barrel as far up into Grievous' ribcage as he could and pulled the trigger.

Grievous' laughing stopped almost instantly, and his eyes showed confusion mixed with pain. Then, his eyes became droopy and his grip around Obi-Wan's throat relaxed. Grievous dropped him just before his knees buckled and he fell in a heap on the ground.

Gasping for air and exhausted, Obi-Wan fell right beside him, bringing his hands up to his throat to make

sure it was indeed still there. As he opened his eyes he found that Grievous' partially-masked face was merely inches from his own. The Droid General's fanged mouth hung open, and his blank eyes were oozing out of the holes in the mask accompanied with some strange, green fluid that Obi-Wan couldn't identify.

Coughing as he continued to regain his breath, Obi-Wan rolled onto his back and away from the terrible sight.

Chapter 21

Great purpose in his step, Anakin walked down the dimly-lit antechamber leading from Chancellor Palpatine's main office to the closed doors of his private office. He knew Palpatine didn't like being disturbed while behind those closed doors—in fact, Anakin had never even been inside the room—but this was a matter far too important to worry about such things. He walked past a wide window in the antechamber and distant flashes of lightning over nighttime Coruscant suddenly silhouetted his determined face.

A storm was coming.

The hallway widened into a small, circular portion with golden, cowed statues of eerie figures flanking the closed, gray doors of the private office. He stopped in front of the doors and reached out with his mechanical, right hand to press the button to open them, but they began sliding apart and into the wall before he could.

Leery of such a strange occurrence, Anakin stood in the doorway unmoving, peering into the darkness of the room beyond. He couldn't explain why, but something about the void felt odd, menacing. He knew he had felt such a feeling before, but couldn't remember when or where. It was familiar and at the same time alien. And it was alluring. He could almost hear the musing whispers luring him forward, drawing him into the black.

"Come, my friend," Palpatine's voice beckoned from within the dark.

A small part of Anakin told him not to, yet even before he realized it he was obeying and walking into the blackness towards the source of the voice. The doors slid shut behind him sealing out what little light there was spilling in from the hall outside and cutting off any escape.

At first he could see nothing but a dim, blue glow several meters away in front of him. But as he went further and his eyes adjusted, he began making out more detail.

The circular room broadened out from the entrance and a wide, curved wall made up the far side. He was amazed to find that the dim, blue glow he'd seen earlier was actually a giant display screen that filled the entire curve of the far wall, and on it was displayed the millions of pinpoints of light that were the star systems that made up the galaxy.

Anakin stopped at the top of the small set of stairs that led down into the main part of the office and gazed at the stars in awe. He felt as if he were a god looking down upon the universe he had created—a universe he could shape and command as he saw fit. His head swam in the sweet prospect of having such ability and a thrilling chill coursed through his veins.

"Impressive...isn't it?" Palpatine's voice said through the dark, bringing Anakin out of his reverie.

He turned his gaze down to the three chairs set in a triangular formation on the main floor—the middle and most distant of which was turned away from him. This was where Palpatine was seated. He came

down the small set of stairs and stopped just in front of a cone-shaped holo-projector sticking up out of the center of the floor a few meters back from Palpatine's chair.

"Yes," Anakin breathed, visions of power and absolute order still racing through his mind as he stared at the back of Palpatine's chair.

In the dim light he could just make out Palpatine's arms raising and stretching out from either side of the chair to gesture at the display.

"Soon," Palpatine said, "all of this will be ours to do with as we see fit. Together, we will shape the galaxy into what it was always meant to be—a place where the strong rule, and the weak obey."

Anakin's chest swelled with pride and confidence at him saying this. He knew what Palpatine said was true. The strong were meant to rule over the weak and the ungifted; for that is why some were extraordinary, and why most were nothing but pawns to be used in whatever ways necessary. The frail of purpose would follow them...or would be shown the truth. By force, if necessary. That was the way of things—the *true* nature of the galaxy. It had taken some time for him to see this fully, but now that he did there was nothing that could change his mind.

A sudden and disturbing thought entered his mind—the reason he had come here in the first place. His eyes narrowed and his thoughts turned away from the glory before him. His jaw tightened in anger and determination.

"The time has come, Your Excellency," Anakin stated. "What I have seen in my visions is about to happen. The Jedi are coming—now. I am certain."

Anakin watched the back of the chair as one of Palpatine's arms appeared again to give a quick wave of two fingers. The display screen suddenly went blank and the faint lights of the room slowly came on. Then, Palpatine's chair turned around without a trace of movement on its occupant's part—as if the chair had a mind of its own.

For a split second Anakin didn't even recognize the face gazing back at him. The dim lighting of the room cast long shadows across Palpatine's face, making his wrinkles appear much deeper, longer than they actually were, and for that short time Anakin saw a decrepit, pale, sickly old man instead of the face he had grown so used to seeing.

But the optical image passed after only a fleeting moment, and all returned to as it should be.

An impassive frown on his face, Palpatine said, "Yes, I know." Then his eyes became distant and in a hushed, hissing voice he added, "I have foreseen it..."

Anakin's durasteel gaze melted to a furrowed brow. He was confused by what he'd just seen and heard—and especially by what he'd just felt through the Force.

He sensed something different in Palpatine. There was a coldness in his presence, a darkness in his mind that Anakin had never sensed before—at least, not that he could remember. A stinging chill seemed to seep from the great leader—enveloping Anakin in an intoxicating embrace and penetrating him to the bone. It was nearly overwhelming.

The slightest hint of an amused smile in his penetrating stare, Palpatine continued in his slow, enchanting tone. "No doubt they are coming to remove me from office by force. Long have they dreamed of doing such a thing, and now it seems they've finally mustered the courage to do it. ...Or, at least, to try," he added, a malicious grin emerging.

Anakin peered at him with confused eyes, still trying to understand what he was feeling through the Force. Something definitely wasn't right here, but he couldn't pinpoint exactly what. His head felt light. His thoughts were spinning, and it was difficult to concentrate.

"Knowing what the Jedi mean to do, what do you purpose our next step of action be, my friend?" Palpatine asked. "Should we allow the *weak* to take what is rightfully ours?" he bit out, scowling.

"No," Anakin answered with conviction—with a brief glimpse of clarity of mind.

But that confidence quickly faded as he contemplated what such a thing meant. If the Jedi did indeed try to remove Palpatine from office by force—which his visions had told him they would—what would he do? Could he turn his back on the Jedi Order so fully? Had matters become that serious? Had their views and goals become so distant from his own? The Jedi had been his family for most of his life. Could he—*would he* be willing to stand against them in order to protect that which he believed in so strongly?

...Could he declare war on his brothers and sisters in the Force?

"Anakin, they will destroy everything we hold dear," Palpatine's slow, sad voice said. "They will ruin us and unleash chaos on the galaxy. Should we allow their foolish short-sightedness to take away all we have accomplished?"

Anger swelled in Anakin at the thought, and he came to terms with what needed to be done. The Jedi had become too corrupt to see what was right for the galaxy anymore. They would rather the corrupt have free reign than to use their power in order to ensure justice. He and Palpatine would bring that justice and restore order. And if they tried to go against them, they would have to be dealt with.

"They must be stopped," Anakin said, his jaw set and his brow low.

"Yes. They must," Palpatine said, nodding slowly, that deep frown growing deeper.

Yet Anakin couldn't help but wonder if he saw a hint of a smile on Palpatine's face....

Palpatine gave another quick, two-finger wave of his hand and suddenly the holo-projector sprang to life.

Anakin was taken back by seeing him do this, ...and by what he'd felt through the Force.

A shaft of light shot up out of the center of the cone-shaped holo-projector, then began shaping into a wavy form. The half-meter tall image flickered for just a second, then solidified into a uniformed man. But Anakin didn't look at the holo-image in front of him. Instead, his perplexed gaze was fixed solely on Palpatine.

"Commander Tarkin—begin the strike," Palpatine ordered. "Start with the inner-rim systems and work your way out. Leave Coruscant to me. I will handle the Jedi Temple myself."

Tarkin's blue-white image gave a curt bow. "Yes, Your Highness," he said, then his image flickered again and disappeared.

Anakin merely stood there staring at Palpatine in shock and disbelief, his brow furrowed in deep thought. There was no mistaking what he'd seen and felt. Palpatine had used the Force to turn on the holo-projector—just as he'd done to move his chair, and turn on the lights, and disable the display screen, and open the doors for Anakin...he couldn't believe it!

How could he do such a thing? He was no Jedi.

Palpatine returned his puzzled gaze with intense eyes that seemed to dare him to piece it all together.

Anakin couldn't handle such eyes, so he turned away to peer at the floor as he thought, trying to find an acceptable solution.

Palpatine rose to his feet. In a slow, commanding gait he began for the closed doors across the room, his deep maroon robe with its light-maroon vest appearing nearly black in the dim light. His head lowered, Anakin stole glances of Palpatine out of the corner of his eye as he walked past, then turned to stare at his back in confusion as the Supreme Chancellor continued towards the doors.

The doors parted before Palpatine, and Anakin's disbelieving expression began melting into one of anger. He'd again felt him use the Force, but through the mystical energy field he'd also seen glimpses of

Palpatine's thoughts—filled with such raw emotions of hatred and anger the likes of which he'd never felt before. In them he also felt great power, confidence...and a consuming darkness.

His head swam in surprise, and though he knew now what all of this meant, he still couldn't bring himself to fully believe it.

Angry, he followed after Palpatine.

Anakin's steps were cautious, careful as he walked through the doors. He found Palpatine standing just a handful of meters away with his back turned, gazing wistfully at a frieze on the wall in the small, circular outer hall of the private office.

"I've been waiting for this day for a long time now, Anakin, ...my friend," Palpatine said, his voice distant. "At long last the Sith will be returned to their rightful place as rulers of the galaxy, and the Jedi will be eradicated once and for all."

Palpatine paused for a few seconds, as if drinking up the glory of such a thought. A cruel smile creased his lips.

"Revenge is a dish best served cold..." he said dreamily. His smile melted into an angry scowl as he finished, "...*One-thousand* years cold!"

The snap-hiss of Anakin's lightsaber igniting and the ensuing humming of the blade suddenly filled the hall.

An amused smirk on his face, Palpatine slowly turned to face the young Jedi.

Anakin peered at him with angry, pained eyes, the blue-white blade held down at his side.

Palpatine took a step forward. Anakin suddenly raised the blade with his right hand in front of him defensively and began side-stepping to the left. Palpatine did the same, and they began circling one another.

"And so..., you finally know the truth," Palpatine hissed with that smile, his hands raised slightly and resting lazily in front of his stomach.

Lightsaber still raised in front of him, hurt on his face, Anakin was speechless. His anger at being betrayed by the man he'd trusted and believed in more than anyone swelled in his chest, and his mind swirled with uncertainty and rage.

He suddenly found himself questioning everything he thought to be true. No longer did things seem so black and white. No longer was he so sure that anything Palpatine had told him was true. Just minutes before he'd known exactly where he stood. Now, the rug had been pulled out from under his feet and he felt as if he were falling into darkness.

...And he wondered what it was his visions had *really* been trying to tell him all this time.

"You deceived me," Anakin bit out through clenched teeth.

Palpatine gave a soft laugh. But the evil grin was quickly replaced by a cold, hard expression. "You deceived yourself. I know you've suspected for some time, but your ambition and your thirst for power kept you from acknowledging such thoughts."

Anakin shook his head as if shaking the very possibility from his mind. "No," he breathed.

"You know it to be true," Palpatine said, further heightening Anakin's anger.

"No!" Anakin yelled, his anger taking hold.

"Good...", Palpatine hissed, a broad smile on his face as flashes of lightning strobed through the window

and down the hall. "Your hate is strong.... Use it. Shape it to your will. By now you must know the power of the dark side. You have felt it many times in the past. But there is much for you to learn. Join me, and I will teach you to wield more power than you've ever dreamed of!"

"I will not turn to the dark side. I'm a Jedi!" Anakin said, trying his best to ignore the lure of such promises, his hateful eyes fixed on Palpatine as they continued to circle one another.

"Indeed..." Palpatine said with another evil, toothy grin. "A Jedi that has just consented to the destruction of *all* in his Order."

Anakin's hand holding up his lightsaber slowly lowered as those words seeped in. His angry scowl became a look of stunned, helpless realization. And that sense of helplessness only plunged him further into darkness.

Palpatine's voice took on a soft tone. "It was the right thing to do. You know that. The Jedi are fools who don't understand the true nature of the Force," he said with growing conviction. "Only you and I understand the place of the gifted in the galaxy!"

Anakin couldn't keep his thoughts straight. His mind was clouded by anger, despair and hatred. Try as he might to push such feelings aside in order to find peace and light, he could not. Too entrenched was his wrath, too powerful his rage. He knew it must be useless to resist, but still he had to try.

"There is no need to fight it, my friend," Palpatine said in that soft, sad tone.

Anakin clamped his eyes shut. It was hard not to listen to him and give in to his will. He could feel Palpatine's dark presence enveloping him, calling to him to follow, and the ever-growing dark in Anakin begged to comply.

"It is the Will of the dark side. For why else would you have been gifted with such abilities if not to command others how to live?" Palpatine said. "Are you willing to let the Jedi take such an opportunity away from you? Only with me can you realize such dreams!"

A large part of him cried out in agreement. He truly believed what Palpatine was saying to be true. Yet, still, Anakin resisted. He searched through the pain and pounding hate inside for some ray of hope, but found nothing but the dark side. Anakin stopped his side-stepping and peered at Palpatine in anguish. Unable to resist his beckoning, Anakin pleaded desperately with his eyes for him to stop.

But he found no solace in Palpatine. The man merely stopped his own circling with his back to the opened doors of the private office and smirked at him, his hard, confident eyes low.

"Come," Palpatine hissed, beginning to walk forward slowly, past Anakin, "and witness the incredible power of the dark side!"

Anakin hesitated for a moment, his confused eyes darting from spot to spot on the floor as he continued to try to piece together what to do. Finally, he deactivated his lightsaber and turned to look at Palpatine walking down the antechamber. The lightning flashing through the window of the hall casting long shadows across the man.

Finally, Anakin started after him down the antechamber with slow, reluctant steps, his brow still furrowed.

When he emerged into the main office, he found Palpatine walking around his desk to his chair. The wide window filling the entire curved wall behind Palpatine was alight with violent flashes of lightning, showing brief glimpses of the silhouettes of towering skyscrapers and sporadic hovertraffic outside.

Palpatine took his seat behind the desk, then peered at Anakin with that impassive frown. Anakin was compelled to come forward, and so he did.

He walked across the office floor and up the small flight of stairs leading up to where Palpatine's desk was. His deactivated lightsaber still in hand, Anakin stopped in front of and to one side of Palpatine's desk, his pained eyes peering at the man he thought he knew.

Palpatine closed his eyes to slits and took a deep breath. Opening them again, he turned his gaze to the doors across the office. A malevolent smile on his face, he simply said, "They're coming."

Stone-faced, eyes narrowed, Jedi Master Mace Windu led Masters Saesee Tiin, Agen Kolan and Kit Fisto down the wide, red-carpeted hall leading to Chancellor Palpatine's executive office. They were an incredibly imposing looking quartet; exuding confidence, power and authority as they marched in their brown, Jedi robes. Clearly, they were on a mission, and their expressions said that nothing would get in their way. Nothing would stop them.

Seated behind his desk just outside of the Chancellor's office, Palpatine's personal aide, Dar Wac, looked up to see the group of determined Jedi approaching fast. Shock exploded across his green, Rodian face and he sprang to his feet.

[What are you doing!?] Dar Wac demanded in panicked Huttese, causing the pair of red-robed, Royal Guards flanking the closed, gray doors of the office to snap their helmeted heads towards the approaching group.

Mace gave the aide nothing more than a hard-eyed glance and continued towards the closed doors to Palpatine's office.

[The Chancellor is not to be disturbed! He is occupied!] Dar Wac continued, his tone becoming more and more frantic and waving his arms in protest at this unusual, and frightening, occurrence.

Suddenly, the pair of red-robed, Royal Guards crossed their Force Pikes in front of the doors, blocking Master Windu's way and bringing him up short.

His eyes daggers and his tone dangerous, Mace said, "You are interfering with *official* Jedi business. Get out of our way...or face the consequences."

But the faceless Royal Guards didn't move, didn't even budge.

Dar Wac was shaking with fear and uncertainty now. [The Chancellor is occupied...he is busy!] he squealed in vein.

Mace's jaw tightened, and he prepared to act at a split-second's notice. The other three Jedi stood just a few paces away, their senses alert and hands ready to retrieve lightsabers in the blink of an eye.

Just before Mace was about to spring into action, a voice erupted from the comm. unit on Dar Wac's desk.

"*Let them in,*" Palpatine's voice ordered flatly, calmly.

Glad to have the confrontation ended, Dar Wac practically slapped the button to open the doors. The Royal Guards uncrossed their Force Pikes and returned to standing at attention next to the doors as they slid open.

The four Jedi relaxed slowly from their stand-off with the guards. After a quick glance from Mace over his shoulder, the quartet strode through the doors and into the office, assurance in their steps.

They walked past the pair of couches in the small receiving area just on the other side of the doors, senses alert for danger, but feeling nothing. With quick glances out of the corners of his eyes, Mace noted the second pair of red-robed, Royal Guards standing along the back wall as he walked out from the receiving area and further into the room. The other Jedi took notice of the guards as well.

Kit Fisto, bringing up the rear of the group, stopped right at the end of the receiving area—slightly behind and directly between the two guards. Kit would remain back and make certain that the doors were

covered, as well as keeping his eyes sharp for anything strange throughout the office. His onyx-colored, orb-like eyes always remained forward, but he made certain that he was able to watch the Crimson Guards out of the corners of his eyes.

Mace, Agen Kolar, and Saenssee Tiin continued walking through the main part of the office. Mace saw Palpatine sitting behind his desk on the slightly elevated, far end of the office. His expression neutral, Palpatine merely watched as the remaining three Jedi came forward. The wide window filling the curved wall behind Palpatine was filled with flash after brilliant flash of yellow energy as lightning criss-crossed the nighttime, Coruscant sky.

The storm was becoming quite violent.

Saenssee Tiin stopped once they reached the small flight of stairs leading up to the gray-carpeted level where Palpatine's desk, and four chairs for guests, were located. He would stay back just slightly in case Kit needed any assistance at the doors.

Mace and Agen went up the handful of steps with strong steps.

As he got closer to Palpatine, Mace wondered what kind of deal the man had made with Darth Sidious. Had the Dark Lord promised him power? Riches? What had been Palpatine's price to aide the Sith in killing the Jedi and turning the senate against them?

Thinking back through the past several years several matters suddenly became painfully clear concerning Palpatine. Missions that had mysteriously become disasters—resulting in the deaths of numerous Jedi—suddenly weren't so mysterious anymore. Accidents no longer appeared such. Disappearances were now explained. Palpatine had no doubt knowingly sent those countless Jedi to their deaths at the orders of Darth Sidious. As Supreme Chancellor, Palpatine had had full knowledge of nearly every Jedi mission, and had certainly passed that information on to Darth Sidious to do with as he pleased.

Palpatine had the blood of hundreds of Jedi on his hands. And to think—this man had so utterly and completely fooled the Jedi all those years with his kind smiles and soft demeanor while he was secretly betraying them to the Sith! Someone so ruthless would not go easily. Mace knew this.

They would have to be cautious.

Anakin stood with his back to the approaching Jedi—facing Palpatine on the left side of the desk with his hands clasped in front of him. Mace found it slightly odd that he hadn't turned to greet them, or at the very least make eye contact, but brushed it off for the moment. There were more important matters to consider right now.

Mace continued straight towards Palpatine and stopped right behind the row of four chairs—just a few steps away from Anakin.

Meanwhile, Agen Kolar veered off wide and to the right of the desk. He stopped a handful of meters away from Palpatine and slightly behind him—just in front of the wide window. Facing in towards Palpatine, Agen had the most protected position. He had a clear view of the entire room *and* their target, and any ambush from behind was impossible.

Mace starred directly at Palpatine with hard eyes, and was surprised when the Supreme Chancellor's mouth actually broadened into a wide, confident smile. He couldn't be certain, but he thought he saw gloating in the man's eyes.

That will change soon enough, Mace thought smugly.

"Why, Master Windu, to what do we owe the pleasure of such an *unexpected* visit?" Palpatine said with a toothy grin.

Mace was certain he'd heard mocking in that tone, and his eyes narrowed at Palpatine. He was surprised by how confident and nonchalant the politician seemed at seeing four Jedi Masters storm his office. He wasn't batting an eye in surprise or fear. Mace knew that this was most likely due to Palpatine's

manipulative skills as a politician and his long experience with having to mask his true emotions. But even upon searching his presence in the Force, Mace still found no trace of alarm in Palpatine—just the usual, calm feeling he always got from the man.

Something wasn't right. Even someone as seasoned as Palpatine wasn't collected enough to not be shaken by an occurrence such as this. The Chancellor was far too confident.

...Something wasn't right. Something didn't *feel* right about all this to Mace.

A slight stirring from Anakin caught Mace's attention. Turning to look at him, Mace saw a quick glimpse of Anakin's confused, pained eyes before the young Jedi turned away again.

Puzzled, and knowing that Agen would have a better angle, Mace darted his eyes to the Zabrak Jedi. His confusion deepened at seeing Agen peering at Anakin with a perplexed look of his own. Agen Kolar noticed Mace's inquisitive gaze and turned to give him a quick shake of his head to indicate he didn't know what was wrong with Anakin.

Slightly worried now, Mace said, "Anakin...?" and reached out to his presence in the Force.

He was shocked by the sudden overflow of raw emotions he sensed churning in the young man. He had never encountered such hatred, pain and anguish before in all his long years of being a Jedi. Rage was pulsating throughout Anakin, and he seemed to be dangerously close to falling prey to his feelings.

Something was definitely not right—not right at all.

"Do not trouble yourself with Young Skywalker, Master Windu," Palpatine said with a smile and a dismissive wave of his hand. "He is no longer of any concern to *you*."

Mystified, and slightly angered by the comment, Mace turned sharp eyes back to Palpatine.

The Chancellor's smile quickly melted into an inquisitive look. Mace had a feeling that it wasn't at all sincere, but pandering, scoffing.

"I wonder, Master Windu, how well you know my young friend here after all your years together as Jedi?" Palpatine asked, indicating again to Anakin.

Mace didn't know where he was going with this and was getting impatient. It seemed as if Palpatine were stalling. He was just too confident! Mace knew that he had to be waiting for something to happen.

The other three Jedi also noted the strange actions and behavior of the Supreme Chancellor. It seemed to Kit that Palpatine was waiting for backup. Troops, perhaps? He wasn't sure. He didn't sense any large numbers of being approaching through the halls outside. Nevertheless, they all kept their senses alert for danger.

"That doesn't concern me right now," Mace said, his tone deadly serious. "We—"

"Of course it doesn't," Palpatine cut him off sharply. Then, his face morphed into a deep frown. "But, of course, the Jedi have never been concerned with Young Skywalker's well-being, now have they?" Turning to Anakin, Palpatine said, "Isn't that right, my young friend?"

Mace stole a glance of Anakin, and saw that the young Jedi's face was hardened in anger.

Once again Mace felt that same mix of powerful emotions emanating from Anakin. The young man seemed to be in great turmoil internally, and Mace wondered what had happened to make him so.

"Did you know, for instance," Palpatine said, "that Young Skywalker has been secretly married for several years now? *Secretely*, because he knew the Jedi would never allow such a thing."

Mace was stunned—as, he could sense, were the other Jedi spread throughout the room. Could this be true? Had he done something so severe and...deceitful? Could he be capable of such a thing? Anakin

had broken one of the cornerstone beliefs of the Jedi Code—to not have romantic attachments. Such things could only lead to ruin for a Jedi.

He turned to Anakin and saw him staring hateful eyes at Palpatine, his chin nearly quivering with fury. Meanwhile, the Supreme Chancellor peered back at him with morose eyes.

“So sad...so unfair,” Palpatine said in a sad tone to Anakin, shaking his head slowly as he spoke, “...to be denied what you desire most by those closest to you.”

“Anakin—is this true?” Mace demanded, anger creeping into his tone.

Anakin snapped his head and brought those piercing eyes onto him, redirecting his hate.

Mace hadn't expected the animalistic look in Anakin's eyes. And for the first time he actually sensed the dark side swirling within the young Jedi. More was at play here than seemed. He could sense as much. Palpatine was egging Anakin into anger. For what reason, Mace could not figure out at the moment.

...And yet...he was beginning to sense that they were all in danger here in this office. His feelings that something wasn't quite right were getting stronger. It was...something—a threat barely out of sight but always visible in the corner of his mind. He could just barely sense its phantom presence, but it refused to be seen.

Mace glanced from Anakin to Palpatine and found the man wearing a smug, toothy grin. Once more he was perplexed by the politician's demeanor. He'd never seen him so taunting, so sadistic. It worried him.

Wanting to focus on the matter at hand and get it resolved as quickly as possible so that they could leave this place, Mace turned back to Anakin. With a stern look, he said, “We'll deal with this later.”

“Yes.... I'm sure you will,” Palpatine hissed. His smile fading into an impatient frown, he continued, “Now, Master Windu—since you've failed to answer my initial question I'll pose it again, and more directly; *why* are you here?”

Mace lowered his brow, narrowed his eyes as he stared into the Supreme Chancellor's hard face. “It's over, Palpatine. We know of your involvement with Darth Sidious and his plan to use you to turn the senate against the Jedi. You're under arrest and coming with us—*now!*”

The two men locked eyes for several seconds, the tension thick throughout the room.

Standing between the two Royal Guards, Kit kept his senses keen for movement and ready for troops that might or might not come storming through the doors any second. Saenssee glanced back and forth across the room, searching for anything out of the ordinary and keeping an eye on the antechamber off to his left.

Mace saw Anakin out of the corner of his eye looking back and forth between him and Palpatine as if wondering what would happen.

Then, all of a sudden, Palpatine's harsh gaze morphed into a wicked smirk, and then he began to cackle softly.

The old man could not have surprised Mace more if he had pulled a blaster out of his maroon robes.

With a smile and in a taunting, saddened tone Palpatine said, “Poor, *foolish*, Master Windu. Little do you know that my plan is coming to full fruition as we speak. By the order of Young Skywalker my troops are, at this very moment, turning against their Jedi leaders throughout the galaxy.”

Mace was shocked, as were the other three Jedi that had come with him. Mace turned unbelieving eyes to Anakin, and once again found the young man practically quivering with anger while staring daggers at Palpatine.

But the surprise evaporated as a thought entered Mace's mind; *Did Palpatine just say his plan?*

Looking at the politician with searching eyes, he reached out to Palpatine's presence in the Force once again. Slowly, he was able to peel back the layers of the old man's façade and slowly, he began sensing something *very* different.

"By coming here as you have done, you've given me all the excuse I need to justify my actions to the senate," Palpatine mocked. "After all these years, I will finally be rid of your pathetic, *weak* Order."

As Mace stripped away the multiple levels of deception he began sensing the *true* presence of Palpatine—dark, menacing...and evil beyond comprehension.

"None will be left alive," Palpatine continued, shaking his morose expression slowly at Mace.

Sidious! Mace realized all at once, stunned.

"...Especially... **YOU!**" Palpatine bit out with barred teeth, springing to his feet.

Anakin watched in amazement. It all happened so fast. Palpatine sprang to his feet just as Master Windu reached for his lightsaber. But Master Windu wasn't fast enough. Just as he ignited his purple lightsaber and began to raise it he was struck by a crackling torrent of blue-white Force Lightning from both of Palpatine's hands. Mace was able to deflect a small portion of the powerful attack by raising his blade, but the vast majority of the Force Lightning struck him in the chest and sent him flying backwards through the air.

Agen Kolar was in motion just a split second later, but he only had time to run forward a handful of steps while reaching for his lightsaber before Palpatine turned to face him. With a swift wave of his left hand, Palpatine sent one of the chairs in front of his desk rocketing at the Zabrak Jedi Master. The gray colored chair struck Agen with tremendous force, sending him crashing through the wide, curved window with a scream and falling to his demise far, far below.

Mace turned the out-of-control hurl into a tucked flip and landed on his feet in a crouching position on the far left side of the room. The momentary wince from the searing pain of the lightning turned into a narrow-eyed, determined expression as he peered up at Palpatine, who was now turning to face towards Saesee Tiin.

The swirling wind of the storm rushed into the room through the shattered window, flapping Anakin's dark brown robes. The wind's buffeting strength and haunting wail paralleled the incredible surge of the dark side Anakin felt Palpatine unleashing upon the Jedi. So intense, so focused was the release of dark energy that Anakin nearly stumbled at being struck by its raw, unmitigated power.

Within the onslaught Anakin felt a tremendous sense of pleasure from Palpatine at finally being able to use such rage openly. The sadistic glee washed over him, coupling with his anger at Palpatine for his betrayal and the Jedi for all the wrong they had done him.

Across the room, and right after Agen had been launched through the window, Kit reacted quickly and ignited his green blade to meet the Force Pike of first one, then the second of the Crimson Guards. The guards tried to overwhelm him, but even their combined skill was no match for Master Fisto. He made quick work of the first, but before he could take out the second the doors to the office opened and the other two guards came rushing in. They entered the fray immediately. Kit held his own rather well against the three of them, but was forced to remain on the defensive until a clear shot presented itself.

Suddenly, in the blink of an eye, a lightsaber was in Palpatine's hand; its shimmering, blood-red blade humming. Faster than Anakin could have ever thought possible, Palpatine crossed the distance between his desk and the edge of the stairs leading down to the main floor of the office.

Jedi Master Saesee Tiin had his blue lightsaber ignited and raised just in time to deflect a powerful downward slice from Palpatine's red blade. The Dark Lord took the handful of steps speedily and

continued the offensive, swinging his blade at a blinding pace while Saesee Tiin quickly back stepped across the room and struggled to keep up.

Seeing that Saesee was struggling, Mace ran forward to his aid. While he ran, Mace noticed Anakin standing at the top of the short flight of stairs, watching the developing fight with a brooding look on his face and holding his lightsaber with his hand hanging down at his side.

“Anakin—help Kit!” Mace ordered with a quick nod of his head in Master Fisto’s direction as he approached Saesee and Sidious.

Anakin’s eyes narrowed as his frown deepened into a scowl at Mace’s demand. His hands clenched into angry fists.

Gritting his teeth, Mace came to the Iktotchi Jedi’s side and was just about to bring his blade in for an attack when all of a sudden Sidious’ red blade was thrusting out at him. Mace recoiled at the speed in which the attack had come, and barely had time to raise his purple blade to block the stab. Mace was amazed, and alarmed, that Sidious hadn’t even broken stride or flow to include him in his deadly barrage of swipes and thrusts. Sidious had adjusted to the added threat effortlessly, and now he had two powerful Jedi Masters on the retreat.

Somewhere within the flurry of action with the guards Kit found an opening and took advantage of it. With a broad, sweeping arc starting from the left, he deflected and locked all three Force Pikes together by ending the arc with his blade down and to the right. As the Crimson Guards struggled to free their weapons, Kit kicked the one farthest to his left square in the stomach. The red-robed guard went flying and struck the wall right next to the open doors of the office, then collapsed to the floor, unmoving. With a flash of gritted, yellow, broken teeth, Jedi Master Fisto pushed down on the Force Pikes of the two other guards, then cut back up with his lightsaber and through the guards’ torsos.

Their lifeless bodies fell to the floor in a heap.

Kit turned to face into the room and saw Mace and Saesee being pushed back towards the left wall by the spinning, swirling, red blade of Sidious’. His large, black eyes also peered up at Anakin Skywalker standing at the top of the stairs unmoving, watching the goings-on with a scowl. Kit didn’t understand what was wrong with the young Jedi, and right now he didn’t have time to worry about it. Mace and Saesee needed his help.

He ran towards them and at Palpatine’s back, his green lightsaber blade held ready.

Sidious sensed Master Fisto coming and took action. With incredible force, he shoved Mace and Saesee back by their blades to afford himself some room. The pair of Jedi were sent staggering backwards more than two meters by his powerful thrust, and this was all the room and time Sidious needed.

He spun around to face Master Fisto quickly. With gnashing teeth and pure hatred on his face, Sidious thrust his left arm forward and into the air—fingers curled into a deadly claw. Kit’s advance was abruptly brought to a halt as his body went stiff as his arms shot down to his sides, his face contorted in pain. Then, Kit raised into the air just enough so that his feet were off of the ground. Holding his humming, red blade up in his right hand, Sidious gave a swift wave of his left hand and sent Kit racing through the air towards him. Then, just before Kit reached him, Sidious stepped to the left and gave a single, violent swing. Sidious continued around with the swing to face Mace and Saesee as the two halves of Kit Fisto continued tumbling through the air.

Saesee was forced to duck to avoid being hit by Kit’s lower half as it continued flying towards the wall, and Mace looked on, stunned.

A small smirk crossed Anakin’s lips and he reveled in the vast power he felt Sidious displaying. The dark power swirled around him, penetrated him to his soul and filled it with intoxicating strength.

But then he remembered how Palpatine had betrayed him and the smirk faded to be replaced by one of confused confliction.

Even more determined to win now than before, Mace and Saesee rushed at Sidious together. But before they could even reach him, Sidious thrust out his left hand and hit the two Jedi Masters with a thunderous Force Push.

Mace and Saesee were tossed backward and into the wall as if they were child's toys. Then, before they even sank back onto the ground, Sidious turned sideways and waved that left hand to point across the room. Mace and Saesee immediately went racing through the air all the way to the other side of the room. Mace's feet touched the floor for just a second before his momentum carried him forward into the far wall. He struck it hard, and had to put great effort into keeping from losing his footing and collapsing onto the ground. Saesee barely missed striking his head on the doorway of the antechamber as he flew through it and went skidding several meters down the dimly-lit hallway.

Anakin watched, stunned. He never would have thought it possible for Master Windu to be outmatched so completely. He'd always viewed the man as one of the most powerful Jedi in the Order, an unbeatable opponent. To see him being treated like a novice was unbelievable. But what was even more awe inspiring was that it was happening while another powerful Jedi Master was aiding him.

He turned dumbfounded eyes to Sidious and watched as the man walked across the office and towards Mace and Saesee.

"Do you see the *incredible* power of the dark side, Anakin?" Palpatine said, not taking his hateful eyes off of the pain-filled face of Mace as he staggered against the wall, trying to stay on his feet. "With it, there is *nothing* you cannot do! *Everything* can be bent to your will!"

Anakin's chest swelled again at the glorious prospect. He could do whatever he wanted with such power. No longer would he be resigned to accept change without his consent. He could will everything to be what he wanted it to be, and it would happen with such power at his disposal.

"Anakin, what are you doing!?" Mace yelled across the room as he finally stabilized his footing and readied himself for the approaching Sidious.

Anakin's head snapped to peer at him in anger.

"Help us!" Mace shouted just before he was forced to raise his purple lightsaber to deflect a punishing attack from that humming, red blade.

Anakin stared after them as Mace was forced to backpedal through the doorway of the antechamber and down the hall. Saesee was back to his feet now, and rejoined the vigorous fight alongside Mace.

Sidious pushed them back mercilessly. His lightsaber was a humming blur as he went after them with a wicked scowl on his face. The hall was rather cramped for such a fight, and the Dark Lord used this to his advantage. Several times the two Jedi found themselves struggling to deflect thrusts or swipes in time to avoid being cut down because of the lack of space.

In a slow, stiff gate, Anakin followed several meters behind Palpatine. His brow furrowed, his pained eyes low, he watched the fight progress down the hall in front of him. His mind was still swirling with what to do. He was filled with almost uncontrollable hate, and it made it difficult to think of anything but hurting all those that had wronged him--to cause them to suffer just as he was now. Yet he did his best to push the hate back far enough that it didn't take a hold of his actions, but finding light at a time like this was near impossible. His rage was just too strong.

With a fast cross-body wave of his left hand, Sidious tossed Saesee to the side with the Force and directly at Mace. Mace barely had time to lean back to avoid being slammed into by Saesee's flying body. Caught completely off guard by the sudden attack, Saesee's shoulder slammed into the wall with a crashing sound, and a grunt of pain escaped his lips. The Iktotchi Jedi Master landed on his feet with wobbly knees, and was forced to hold himself up by the small table in the hall to keep from collapsing.

Anakin watched from behind as Sidious took a couple more swings at Mace, then quickly reversed his grip on his lightsaber's hilt with a quick twist of his wrist and stabbed the staggering Saesee right through the heart. Then Sidious just as swiftly removed the red blade to continue battling Mace.

Saasee Tiin's eyes went wide and his mouth dropped open as the blade struck. Then, those stunned eyes became blank and the powerful Jedi Master's lifeless body slowly slid down the wall to fall on the ground.

Mace found a rare opening in Sidious' attack and took advantage of it, thrusting forward with his purple blade to stab the Dark Lord in the stomach. But Sidious quickly closed the gap and deflected the blow, bringing the two powerful Force-users' faces only a handful of centimeters apart.

Sidious gave an evil grin while Mace's durasteel eyes stared disgust at the Sith. Then, Sidious' grin turned into bared teeth and he shoved back on Mace's purple blade, tossing the Jedi Master back almost as if it were no effort at all. The two began slashing at each other once more as Mace was backed into the small, circular portion of the hall right in front of the doors to the private office.

Deeply immersed in the light side of the Force, Mace felt the golden statue heading straight for his back from the wall and spun to slice it harmlessly in half before it could hit him. But he did not expect the second one to come in from the other side.

The second statue smashed into his left shoulder blade hard and sent him staggering forward, wide-eyed as he noticed Sidious' red blade thrusting straight for his chest. In an incredible display of concentration and calm, Mace raised his blade just in time to bat away the stab, then shoved out with his left hand and hit Sidious with a stunning Force Push.

Sidious hadn't expected the attack, and so was caught off guard. But only for a fraction of a second.

Using his hate and the limitless power of the dark side, Sidious lowered his head and brought his left hand up to deflect the majority of the Force Push so that he only went skidding backwards on the tips of his feet for less than a meter. After he stopped and had complete control, Sidious peered up at a shocked Mace with a wrath-filled scowl. With incredible speed, Sidious thrust forth his left hand and sent a flashing shower of blue-white Force Lightning at Mace.

Mace raised his blade horizontally in front of him to allow it to absorb the dark energy. The lightning crackled and hissed across his blade, and the tremendous power of the rage behind it caused Mace's arms to recoil backwards uncontrollably. Mace gritted his teeth and tried to push back against the force of the attack, but it was too strong and it just kept coming so he found himself forced to backpedal through the open doors of the private office quickly to avoid being overpowered.

Sidious finally stopped the barrage of lightning and came after Master Windu with renewed vigor.

Mace spun away from the lightning's trailing effects and gave this new room a quick survey. He was greatly concerned to find that there was no place else for him to go. There was no hall leading back out from this room and into any other office or chamber—only a set of seats with what looked like a holo-projector on the floor in the middle of them with a wide display screen filling the far wall.

He was trapped.

Sidious came spinning in towards him, and Mace spun away as he blocked the Sith Lord's attack. Anakin slowly entered the room with those brooding, pained eyes, and Mace stole a quick glance at the young Jedi.

"Anakin—you are The Chosen One!" Mace called to him between parries. "You can restore balance to the Force by destroying the Sith!"

Anakin's harsh gaze melted into one of tormented contemplation. His eyes lowered from the struggle before him and to the floor, searching back and forth as he thought.

He understood fully now what his visions had actually been telling him. A narrow window of clarity opened in his mind like a star shooting across a nighttime sky. His visions hadn't been showing him an impending, unjustified attack by the Jedi. No. The Force had been warning him of Palpatine's betrayal, and had been preparing him for the opportunity to restore balance to the Force.

His breathing became heavy, difficult, as he peered at Mace in torment. Then, those confused eyes looked down at the deactivated lightsaber in his right hand, and then he peered back up at Palpatine and Mace.

"HELP ME!" Mace pleaded. "Fulfill your destiny!"

But then, all of a sudden, Mace was thrown backwards and crashing into the display screen on the far wall.

Sidious spun to face Anakin with that harsh look. "Do not listen to him, Anakin. The Jedi are only trying to keep you under their control!"

Back on his feet, Mace came at Sidious. The Dark Lord spun back around just in time to block a powerful slice from Mace, and then the two of them continued to exchange blows as they spun around the room.

Sidious' words echoed throughout Anakin's swirling thoughts, and just like that the momentary clarity he'd experienced was gone. Dark thoughts found the light and crushed it before it could grow, and again he was left in confusion wondering if he could do what that darkness was whispering for him to do.

Mace's heart sank at seeing Anakin's continued inaction. He was crushed that the young Jedi could deny his calling in the Force. He knew that the dark side had a firm grip on Anakin, and he knew that once the dark side got its bloody hooks into your soul it was most difficult to break free, but he still clung to hope for the young Jedi.

There was still hope!

But if Anakin wasn't going to help him right now, then he needed to change his plans. He knew that he could not defeat Sidious on his own. The Dark Lord of the Sith was just too powerful. He needed to get out of this office and back to the Jedi Temple to warn them of what had happened—warn them of whom Palpatine really was and of the impending attack!

Delving even more deeply in the Force, Mace shoved back an attack from Sidious' blade and spun towards the open doors. Sidious came after him right away, and Mace back stepped out of the room as quickly as he could to escape the Sith Lord. Backing down the antechamber towards the main office, sweat began trickling down Mace's face at the difficulty in fending off Sidious' vicious lightsaber attack.

He passed Saesee's fallen body on the floor on the hall and noticed the Iktotchi Jedi's lightsaber resting next to his limp hand. He called the hilt to his hand as he continued to backpedal and ignited the blue-white blade. With incredible skill and finesse, Master Windu wielded the two blades, but still they were no match for Sidious' one. That red lightsaber continued to come at Mace at an astounding rate.

Just before Mace exited the antechamber and entered the main office a downward swipe came in right at his left wrist. The chop would have severed the hand had he not retracted it at the last second, but Saesee Tiin's hilt was not so fortunate. With a spray of sparks the hilt split in two, and immediately the humming blade disappeared.

Mace dropped the broken lightsaber and doubled his hands on the hilt of his purple-bladed one as he continued backwards and into the office. He remembered that Master Fisto's hilt should be laying on the ground nearby, and as soon as he saw it he called it to his hand.

But the silver hilt never reached him.

A face filled with fury, Sidious reached out his left hand and, using the power of the dark side, called the hilt to him instead. Once it was close enough, he swiped his red blade through the air and cut Kit's hilt in half as well.

Mace was shocked to see him do this, but he did not allow it to phase him. He needed to get out of this office! He needed to warn his fellow Jedi of the enemy in their midst.

With the Force as his ally, Mace stretched forth his left hand and called to two of the silver chairs in front of Sidious' desk. Once he had them firmly in his grip in the Force, he swung his arm back around and guided the chairs directly at Sidious. Sidious noticed the incoming missiles and sliced the first in half with a quick, downward swipe of his red blade, then ducked under the second.

This was all the time Mace needed. He turned and ran for the office doors. He passed the receiving area with its two couches and the fallen bodies of the red-robed, Royal Guards and continued through the opened doors. He turned immediately to his right and ran just a few meters down the long, curved hallway leading out of the executive offices portion of the building when, suddenly, the Force told him to move his head. He ducked, and a red laser bolt zipped by just centimeters above him.

Quickly he spun to find Palpatine's Rodian aide, Dar Wac, standing behind his desk with a blaster pistol pointed right at him. Dar Wac opened fire again, and again, and again, and Mace moved his blade to deflect the blasts into the ceiling and the walls. Then, Dar Wac shot again, and this time Mace, knowing that he didn't have time for this, sent the red bolt right back where it had come from. The red blaster shot hit Dar Wac right in the chest, sending the aide falling backwards and to the ground behind his desk.

No sooner had Dar Wac fallen than Sidious suddenly emerged from the office doors just a handful of meters away. Mace raised his blade to block the attack coming from Sidious as he started to shuffle-step backwards down the curved, window-covered hall as quickly as he could.

Anakin emerged from the office doors and followed the fighting pair, the flashes of lightning coming through the windows lighting the anger on his face. Sidious had been right. The Jedi were only trying to hold him back by speaking of his destiny. He would not accept such a thing, because it was not what he wished. The destiny the Jedi spoke of for him was no destiny he had chosen, and so he viewed it as just another tool, another trick the Jedi used to keep him under their control. He would not do their bidding anymore. He would not allow them to decide his life for him.

As he continued to struggle to fend off Sidious' tremendous attack, Mace called upon the Force desperately for strength. He could feel his muscles tiring, and to falter now carried too high a price. For Mace knew that he was fighting for more than just his own life. He also knew that he was fighting for more than the lives of his fellow Jedi.

He was fighting for the lives of every being in the galaxy.

Should Sidious' plan prevail, should the Sith succeed in wiping out the Jedi entirely and take complete control of the galaxy then all would be lost. There would be no one to stop him, no one with the power to stand up to his evil and cast him down. Darkness would cover the galaxy, and evil would rule.

Sorrow filled him at knowing that Sidious had wooed Anakin towards the dark side right before the Jedi's very eyes, and that it was the Jedi's inability to sense the approaching threat of the Sith that had caused such a downfall. If The Chosen One turned, if Anakin continued in his indecision and joined the Sith...Mace didn't know what would happen. He couldn't comprehend how The Prophecy could be fulfilled if The Chosen One was consumed by the dark side of the Force. He didn't know how.

The curved hall widened and met a long, multi-leveled staircase leading down to all of the other floors of the building, but more importantly to the main doors of the building. Mace felt that if he could just get outside he would have a chance. If he could get outside, Sidious would be less likely to use his powers lest he reveal his true identity to the public at large. That was something he was certain the Sith Lord wouldn't want at this most critical time in his plan.

The enormous staircase curved downward right along with the curve of the circular building. The inner side of the stairs was open to a wide courtyard that extended all the way to the top of the building, while the outer side was filled with giant, long windows as tall as ten stories.

Mace began down the steps backwards as quickly as he dared. But then, all of a sudden, Sidious' lightsaber left his hands and flew through the air towards Mace. The Jedi Master watched in astonishment as the red blade came in and began swiping at him just as if an invisible being were wielding it. Never before had he seen such skills in the Force, and once again he understood the disparity for the galaxy

should Sidious win the day.

Anakin, too, watched on in awe at Sidious' incredible power as he walked behind them with stiff steps.

Anakin peered at Sidious' back as he walked down the stairs behind him. It infuriated him that he had told the Jedi about he and Padmé. But that wasn't all—he was furious at Palpatine for lying to him about who he really was. He couldn't believe that the man he held in such high regard had just ruined his life! His hands clenched into fists and his eyes burrowed into Sidious' back.

Everything had been exactly the way he'd wanted it before tonight. He'd had his life with Padmé, though difficult as it was because of their need for secrecy. He'd had his life as a Jedi and a place of importance and great power in helping to rule the galaxy. Now, after tonight, all of that would be gone. The Jedi would forbid him from being with Padmé, and if he didn't agree to that they would expel him from The Order.

And now that the Jedi knew Palpatine was Sidious they would remove The Chancellor from office and Anakin would no longer have the position of power in the government he so coveted. No longer would he be able to directly effect the direction in which the galaxy went. No longer would he be in the position to make certain that the right thing be done and that corruption no longer plagued the government. No longer would he have these things that he wanted so badly.

...That is, *if* the Jedi got their way.

Hope entered Anakin's mind for the first time this night—hope that he might be able to keep all that he wanted in his life.

...And that did not include the Jedi.

His chest swelled with the dark thought, and suddenly he felt fully alive.

The lightning of the storm raging outside strobed through the windows, illuminating the faces of the three people as they continued down the stairs. Mace spun and parried on the numerous landings in the staircase, trying with all his might to keep Sidious' flying blade from landing a killing blow. The blade didn't only attack him from the front; it also fly around behind him and attacked him from the rear. Because of this, Mace's retreat was slowed considerably and he was forced to spin and turn even while going backwards down the stairs.

Sidious slowly walked down the stairs a handful of meters away from Mace, his hands hanging lazily at his stomach as hate-filled eyes peered at the Jedi Master.

Mace was on a wide landing of the long stairs fending off Sidious' swinging, twisting, stabbing blade when Sidious suddenly caught him off guard with a volley of Force Lightning. Recoiling in surprise, mouth agape, Mace raised his lightsaber and his hand to block the barrage. Using the power of the Force, Mace caused the lightning to deflect off of his hand but at an excruciatingly painful cost. The lightning fried his hand and the smell of ozone filled the air, but he had warded off an even worse result.

Mace continued to block the swinging, red blade, and when he was forced to spin in order to deflect a stab directed at the middle of his back Sidious unleashed another torrent of the blue-white lightning.

A scream of pain escaped Mace's lungs as the burning lightning hit him, and he felt his knees weaken ever-so-slightly as he look his next step down the stairs. Facing Sidious once again, Mace blocked several more swipes from the blade, and when it came around once again to attack him from behind the powerful Jedi Master merely raised his up over his head with both hands to block the deadly blow.

Sidious took advantage of this vulnerable position and let loose yet another stream of lightning just as Mace blocked the lightsaber attack, but Mace let go of his hilt with one hand and held that hand in front of him to deflect the lightning as best as he could.

Once again pain surged through Mace at doing so, and he could actually hear his skin sizzle, but he knew that he needed to survive!

Using the Force to direct his red lightsaber, Sidious brought it in at Mace from every direction, keeping the

Jedi guessing as to where it would be next. They were nearly to the bottom of the stair now—only forty or so meters from the main floor of the building—and Sidious felt this had gone on for long enough.

The red blade came in sweeping at Mace's shins. Mace easily jumped over it and it passed by under him. But then, Sidious released more lightning, and when Mace brought his purple blade around to block it the red blade suddenly reversed direction and came right in at the back of Mace's right shoulder.

Mace screamed loudly as the blade cut all the way through and out the front of his shoulder, causing him to nearly drop his lightsaber. Not satisfied, Sidious retracted the shimmering, red blade and brought it around quickly to cut off his left leg at the knee. Then, as Mace yelled in pain, Sidious hit him yet again with Force Lightning. Too stunned to block the lightning this time, it hit Mace square in the chest and sent him tumbling backwards head over foot down the remainder of the staircase.

With a hard-eyed Anakin right behind him, Sidious slowly continued down the steps. Mace, battered and exhausted, lifted his head just far enough to peer at the front doors no more than fifty meters away. His incredible will his fuel, he began dragging himself across the white, marble floor and towards those doors.

But then Mace heard a sound that stole all inspiration.

Standing just a handful of steps from the bottom of the staircase, Sidious began to cackle loudly, taunting the Jedi Master's futile attempt at escape.

Anakin stood next to Sidious, looking down at Mace with hatred. The intoxicating power of the dark side was swelling in him now. No longer could he deny its powerful allure. It was consuming him, but it had not done it completely yet. No.

"Go down to him," Sidious ordered through an angry scowl, never taking his eyes from Mace.

Anakin turned his head to look at Sidious, and his eyes lingered there for some time. Then, the feeling to comply became too strong and he walked down the remaining steps and towards Mace, his deactivated lightsaber heavy in his hand.

Rolling onto his back as Anakin approached, Mace looked up at him with pain and pleading on his face.

"Now..." Sidious hissed once Anakin stopped just a mere meter to the side of Mace, "...*kill him*."

Suddenly, Anakin's brow furrowed in uncertainty. With pained eyes, he peered back up at Sidious, who looked back with that deep scowl.

"Don't listen to him, Anakin," Mace said. "You still have a choice. The dark side doesn't own you yet!"

Sidious unleashed a powerful flurry of Force Lightning at Mace, and Anakin recoiled from it. The lightning surged across Mace's body like deadly fingers, and the Jedi Master writhed and screamed uncontrollably. The lightning stopped.

"Anger is an energy," Sidious said. "Use it. Lash out with it. Kill him!"

Anakin looked back down at Mace.

"Anakin—don't! You are a Jedi! You are The Chosen One! You can't do such a thing!"

Another volley of lightning struck, and once again Mace was screaming in pain.

Anguish surging through him, swelling his heart, Anakin peered from Mace to Sidious, trying to decide which path to take.

The lightning stopped yet again, and Sidious bit out, "What is it you want, *boy*—to live your life any way you see fit...or be a slave to the Jedi?"

Anakin snapped his head to stare up at Sidious.

Still wearing that angry scowl, Sidious said, "The Jedi would take away *all* that you covet. Only with *me* can you have all that you desire!"

Anakin's eyes flashed with the thought, and he could feel the dark side surge through his soul. Slowly, he looked back down at the lightsaber in his hand, then he looked at Mace. All of a sudden, it was such a small cost to have all that he'd ever wanted. No longer did it seem so impossible, so unthinkable for him to do. He could have his life with Padmé. He could have his family. He could have his place of power next to Sidious and could see to it that order ruled the galaxy. He could have everything—including the power to ensure that he would keep what was his.

He wanted that.

He *needed* that!

Staring at Mace with hatred in his eyes, he activated his lightsaber. Barely conscious, Mace stared up at him with sadness in his eyes.

"Don't do it, Anakin. Don't..."

Sidious used the Force to stand Mace up on his one good knee.

Staring at Sidious on those steps, Anakin tightened his grip on his lightsaber with his mechanical, right hand.

"Kill him with all of your hatred, and join me in ruling the galaxy!" Sidious ordered.

Anakin let go and allowed the dark side to flow through him freely. By doing so he was filled with life and power he had never known before. Its energy surged through his every muscle, every nerve, every fiber of his very being! He welcomed it. He relished in its haunting chill.

Gnashing his teeth in a primordial growl, Anakin raised his lightsaber with both hands. With every ounce of anger, every bit of hatred and suffering he felt he swung the blade forward. His eyes wild with hate, his body alive with the power of the dark side, Anakin Skywalker slashed his lightsaber at the Jedi Master and cut him down in exchange for everything he'd ever wanted.

Anakin stood over the broken body of Master Windu with that rage still surging in his eyes, his chest heaving as the hate and the infinite power of the dark side continued to flow through his body. Then, he turned those eyes up at Sidious, who was peering down at him with that angry, unforgiving scowl.

"Good," Sidious bit out. Then, with even more venom, "*Good!*"

Anakin was pleased that he was so pleased, and a small snarl crossed his lips.

"Now...gather your troops, and march against the Jedi Temple," Sidious said. "They are *all* that keeps you from what you want!"

Anakin knew it was true. He turned and began walking towards the doors leading out of the building.

Chapter 22

His brown robe billowing in the wind, lightning racing across the sky and thunder clashing all around, Anakin walked at the front of the massive Stormtrooper ranks with an aggressive air. Hundreds of Stormtroopers marched with him through the maze of buildings in the streets leading up to the Jedi Temple, with hundreds more waiting in the wings. They would *crush* the Jedi with one swift stroke, and then nothing would stand in the way of he and Palpatine doing what was right.

Nothing would stand in the way of him having everything he wanted.

Anakin came around the corner of one particularly large building and the illuminated spires of the Jedi Temple came into view, backlit by crackling flashes of lightning. He stopped and snapped his mechanical, right fist into the air so it could be seen over his shoulder. The enormous group of Stormtroopers came to a stop quickly at his signal.

Anakin peered across the giant, duracrete plaza in front of the Jedi Temple and at those shimmering spires, his eyes narrow with thought. He knew The Temple was most probably locked down on High Alert. With the information Master Windu and his companions had stormed the Chancellor's office with there could be no doubt of that. Furthermore, he knew the defenses of The Temple were formidable, and that it would be near impossible to get his troops inside with a full, frontal assault. The Jedi would see them coming.

Unless....

He turned to the group of armored clones behind him.

One with yellow shoulder-markings took a step forward.

"Wait here for my signal, Commander," Anakin ordered, his face stern.

"Yes, sir," the clone said with a nod, his voice mechanical through his helmet's amplifier.

Anakin turned and began walking again, raising his hood and bringing the cowl low across his face. He continued across the long, wide plaza alone and towards the Jedi Temple, the wind tugging at his brown robe.

The building towered before him as he approached the blast door covered main entrance. Anakin retrieved his comm. link from his utility belt and thumbed it on to the correct frequency.

"This is Anakin Skywalker approaching," was all he said.

Just a few steps later, the blast doors retracted into the walls with a mechanical whirr. Then the giant, main doors to The Temple, bearing the Jedi Crest, began parting with a low groan. The warm light spilling out of the doorway washed over Anakin, and he lowered his brow in order to keep that light from penetrating his raised hood and dark mood. He walked through the doors, which closed again as soon as

he was through them.

He stopped just inside of the doors and peered around. The Main Hall with its tiled floors, pillared archways and vaulted ceiling nearly one-hundred meters high was before him. The grand room was well lit, and he noticed several clusters of Jedi Master and Padawans conversing quietly, worriedly, about what was happening. Apparently, the news of Palpatine's treachery had spread quickly. Silently, Anakin wondered just how quickly. Had the Jedi off-planet already been warned, or had Tarkin acted quickly enough to prevent such a thing?

There was only one way to find out.

Raising his comm. link to his mouth yet again, Anakin thumbed it to a different frequency. "I'm in," he said flatly. Then, he replaced the comm. link to his belt and began walking again, making certain to avoid the groups of Jedi spread throughout the room and careful to conceal his dark thoughts from their detection. Some made to approach him, but he paid them no mind. He merely kept his eyes low and continued on to his destination.

The Jedi Temple War Room was located deep within the heart of the massive building. The doors to the lift that had taken Anakin there opened, and he stepped out into the pillared, stepped room. The room was the least active Anakin had ever seen or heard of. The sounds of beeping computer consoles were absent, as were the holo-images of distant worlds that often accompanied such sounds. Several Jedi were spread throughout the room; each frantically pushing buttons on consoles or discussing what to do in worried, hushed tones.

Anakin could feel fear and uncertainty permeating the air. He relished in it.

Carefully concealing his thoughts and his hood pulled low, Anakin walked down the stairs. He was noticed almost immediately. One particular Jedi, a human named Toss Kel'Doss, broke away from talking with another Jedi and waited for Anakin at the bottom of the stairs, worry in his eyes.

"Where are the others? Where is Master Windu?" Toss asked, peering over Anakin's shoulder and up at the lift doors as if expecting Mace to appear at any moment.

"They're not coming," Anakin said without emotion or even eye contact as he walked past the Jedi and further into the room.

Toss turned and regarded him with question and confusion, but there was far too much else going on right now to press the matter further.

Anakin walked to the large tactical table in the center of the room and asked, "What's our status?"

"Still no signal from the Durradune system!" A Jedi at a console across the room called.

"Nor from Felucia!"

"Or Caldronna!"

"No signal from *any* system," Toss Kel'Doss said, coming to stand next to Anakin and peering at the names of the planets scrolling by on the display screen set into the table before them. "Our communications are being jammed. All of them!" he said, shaking his head in stunned amazement.

A smirk threatened to cross Anakin's deep frown, but he controlled the urge well. All was going as planned. The Jedi spread throughout the galaxy were unable to communicate and completely unaware of what was happening. They would be caught completely unawares.

Suddenly, the holo-display in the middle of the large tactical table sprang to life to show a wide, blue-white image.

"Here they come!" A Jedi on the far side of the table yelled, staring at the image of rank upon rank of white-clad Clonetroopers walking across the long plaza and towards the Jedi Temple. The constant

flashing of lightning outside cast an eerie silhouette across their image, making the clones appear to be ghostly shadows marching against The Temple, death in their gait.

Collectively, the Jedi spread throughout the room came to stand around the large tactical table and stare at the holo-image. Some frowned in grief, some shook their heads in disbelief, but all kept their eyes on the horrific image, unable to pry them away.

Save for Anakin.

He moved away from the table and the Jedi unnoticed and walked to a particular console where he began pushing a series of buttons.

Seconds later, a female Jedi pointed to the tactical screen on the far wall displaying The Temple's defenses. "Look! The doors are opening!" she yelled.

A stunned gasp rippled through the group of Jedi as they turned away from the holo-image of the Clonetroopers to peer at the display screen. Eyes wide with fear, they watched as, one by one, the defenses of the Jedi Temple went off-line.

Jedi Master Toss Kel'Doss turned to say something to Anakin, but found him missing. He turned around to search for the powerful, Young Jedi and was alarmed to find him standing at the defense-control console, deactivating the systems.

Frantic, Toss ran towards him. "What are you doing?!" he demanded as he approached.

Anakin sensed his approach and, slowly, lowered his mechanical, right hand to his belt. He waited until just the right moment when Toss was nearly upon him...

And then he released his hate. He spun, igniting his lightsaber and striking Toss down with a swift upward swipe before he even knew what had happened.

The sudden, violent sound of the slashing blade caused all heads to snap around immediately, and wide eyes watched as Anakin came rushing forward with his blue-white blade. Several Jedi didn't even have time to react as Anakin came spinning and slicing through them, while others that actually had retrieved their lightsabers were too confused by this sudden, strange occurrence to fight effectively against the immensely-skilled Skywalker. They fell in a matter of seconds.

Hooded, Anakin came spinning around the tactical table with hatred chiseled on his face. Two Jedi rushed forward for an attack. They came at Anakin as one in an effort to overwhelm him, but with the dark side rushing through him he handled them easily. So powerful were his swings that he sent the two Jedi stumbling backwards, and while they were off-balance he came spinning in and ended them.

In a matter of seconds nearly all the Jedi in the room were dead—except for two Padawans that were on the run up the stairs to warn others of the impending attack.

But Anakin didn't allow them to go far. Using the incredible power of the dark, he reached out across the room to the fleeing Jedi-in-training and grabbed them in a vise-like grip with the Force. He flung them backwards through the air. One went crashing into a console with a brilliant shower of sparks. The other landed on the ground and skid across the dark gray floor. She lay there twisting in pain until Anakin came by and put her out of her misery with his cold, blue blade.

Reveling in the dark energy and the life pulsating through his body, Anakin gazed about the room with narrow eyes for survivors. Finding none, he walked back to the defense-control console and finished his work. After deactivating all defenses for The Temple, he turned and made to walk away when a thought struck him. He returned to the console and activated The Temple's Emergency Recall Beacon. This beacon would serve to call all Jedi back to the Jedi Temple as quickly as possible.

Satisfied, Anakin walked through the litter of fallen bodies and up the stairs to the turbolift. Whatever Jedi the Clonetroopers might miss in the battlefields across the galaxy, they would capture and kill here on Coruscant when they heeded the beacon and returned. Their victory would be complete. For the sake of what he wanted it had to be so.

Barely into his teen years, Jedi Padawan Tado sprinted down the stairs leading to the balcony of the grand hall of the Jedi Temple in search of his Master. Tado had felt a great rush of fear and surprise ripple through The Temple just a short time ago, and he wanted to find his Master to see what was wrong and see if there was anything he could do to help.

As he ran through the high arc and into the short hall just before the balcony a Twi'lek Jedi darted past him at incredible speed. Tado watched as the Jedi Master ran several meters out onto the balcony before jumping over the railing. Such urgency further bolstered Tado's worries that something was terribly wrong, and his desire to find his Master grew even greater.

"To the doors! To the doors!" he heard a male voice shout. "They're coming in!"

Then, Tado emerged from the short hall and out onto the balcony. He peered down at the grand hall fifty and saw more than twenty Jedi running towards the wide open, main doors of the Jedi Temple with green and blue colored lightsabers humming in their hands. Eyes wide in horror, he watched as a flood of white-clad Stormtroopers spilled through the open doorway and into the grand hall. The clones opened fire upon the Jedi immediately, and the hall was filled with the deafening echoes of battle.

Tado spotted his Master down in the group of Jedi. The tall, lean man was easy to see, and his green blade was alight with motion as he deflected the shots from the Stormtroopers. Tado watched nervously as the fight began to unfold.

As they continued to run forward at the invaders, the group of Jedi deflected the incoming blasts right back at their sources. The onslaught of blast bolts was incredible, but the Jedi fought tooth and nail to defend their Temple, their home, their very lives. Their shimmering blades were blurs of light as they moved them to deflect the blasts, and they pushed onward, ever onward against their faceless foes.

Numerous Stormtroopers fell, but more merely filed in behind them to take their fallen comrade's place. Working together as if they were a massive fist, the troopers continually pushed forward against the Jedis' defenses and further into the room. The main thrust came straight forward, but meanwhile many, many more rushed in through the open doors behind them and began fanning out in order to surround the group of Jedi.

Tado watched in terror as it all happened before him. The group of Jedi fought on bravely, rushing into the ranks of the white-armored warriors and taking out as many as possible, but in no time the Jedi were completely surrounded and forced to defend against attacks from every direction at once. One by one, the Jedi became overwhelmed and began falling. Meanwhile, Stormtroopers continued pouring into the hall by the hundreds. They began spreading out into the hallways branching off of the grand room and deeper into The Temple.

Tado forgot to breath as he watched his Master fight on against impossible odds in the middle of the fray. His heart cried out for some miracle in the Force that might allow his Master to escape with his life, though he knew deep down inside that wasn't going to happen. Yet that didn't stop him from gasping in shock as he watched a blast bolt strike his Master in the shoulder. His Master was phased by the pain of the blast, but after only a second was swinging again as best as he could.

But it wasn't good enough. He wasn't as fast with the wounded shoulder. Another shot hit him, this time in the stomach and he fell to his knees.

"NOOOOOOOOOO!!!" Tado yelled, his scream momentarily drowning out the thunderous sound of blaster fire.

The Stormtroopers swarmed the fallen Jedi Master, and after just a few more seconds no Jedi were left fighting on the floor of the grand hall.

Tado stared at where he'd last seen his Master, but all he could see were Stormtroopers down on the grand hall's floor. He didn't even notice the first red lance of light as it raced by right behind his head, nor the second. But the third exploded on the railing just a short distance away and sprayed him with a stinging shower of sparks. The pain snapped him out of his shock, and he turned to see a massive wall of Stormtroopers coming up the staircase at the end of the balcony and rushing towards him, blasting away as they did.

A series of shots came far too dangerously close, and Tado knew that he needed to defend himself or be killed. He retrieved his lightsaber from his belt and activated it. In a fluid, methodical style Tado deflected the incoming blasts with swipes of his blade while stutter-stepping towards them. Using his skill in the Force, he caused several of the blasts to ricochet off his lightsaber and right back at the Stormtroopers, who barreled forward regardless of how many fell around them.

Tado delved deeply into the Force—deeper than he ever had before. He was determined not only to exact some kind of justice on these attackers for the death of his Master, but he was also defending the only home he'd ever known, as well as the lives of any other Jedi that might be in the halls behind him. Using such resolve, the young man fought on honorably, but his skills as a Padawan were too limited and there were just too many Stormtroopers.

As the numbers against him became just too great and the onslaught too furious, Tado was hit first once, then again and again and again. As his unmoving body fell, and as his last breath left his young lungs, Tado knew that he had done all that he could and more. He knew that he was going to a better place where he would no longer know pain, suffering or sadness. And, above all, he knew that his Master was proud of him.

Led by four Jedi Masters and trailed by four more, the large group of over a hundred beings made their way through the dim halls of the lower portions of The Temple as quickly and cautiously as they could. The group consisted mostly of Padawans ranging in age from late to early teens, and Younglings ranging from six, all the way down to infants. Those Younglings that could walk quickly on their own did so, though they held the hand of a Padawan, while the rest were carried by the Jedis-in-training.

Wide-eyed with fear, faces flushed from bouts of momentary sobbing, the Younglings walking marched along as quickly as their little legs would take them. Constantly, the young ones looked up to the faces of the Padawans around them for reassuring, comforting smiles but found none. Most of the Padawans were just as scared as these Younglings, but they tried to hide it by kept their worried eyes forward for any sign of trouble. Comfort could be given later once they'd escaped.

The four Jedi Masters leading the group came to a corner in the dark hall and they slowed, bringing the entire group behind them to a stop. Approaching the turn carefully, they peered around it with caution, gripping their ignited lightsabers tight. A great sigh of relief left the four Masters' mouths as they saw that the way to the hangar doors was clear.

Turning back to the huddled and frightened group of Padawans and Younglings, Jedi Master Cin Drallig waved them forward and said, "The way is clear. Let's go!"

The group began filing by, and Cin remained where he was to guide the traffic and give orders where needed.

But then, all of a sudden, catastrophe struck the rear of the group and the horrible sound of blaster fire could be heard.

“Go! Go!” a male Jedi Master’s voice called from far back down the hall around the t-junction, quickly accompanied by the terrified, panicked screams of young children as the large group ran around the corner and suddenly surged forward.

Cin turned his eyes from the oncoming group of rushing, frantic Padawans and Younglings and back towards the head of the group. The other three Jedi Masters leading the group stood just in front of the doors to the hangar, peering back at Cin with question and agony in their eyes.

“Get them to the transports! Get them out of here!” Master Drallig yelled.

The three Jedi just stared at him for a handful of seconds, then gave grave nods of acknowledgment. They turned and opened the doors to the hangar and continued to shuffle the young ones through the doors—each Jedi Master halting their Padawan to tell them to get the ships prepped for take-off.

Cin rushed past the oncoming herd of Padawans and Younglings and towards the sounds of the battle—coming from around a t-junction down the hall.

“Master!” a teenaged, female Padawan called out to Cin and moved out from the group to meet him as he rushed forward.

Cin slowed as he approached her and said, “Rallà, get to the transports! They’ll need your help as a copilot.”

Rallà, her sandy-blond hair pulled up into a bun, lightsaber in hand, shook her head vigorously and said, “Master, I want to stay and fight with you! I’ll not leave you alone!”

A male Padawan, Xander, approached out of the group as it rushed past and said, “I’m staying, too!”

“No!” Cin said. “Now get going. There’s no time!”

But then, something further down the hall at the t-junction caught Cin’s eye, and he looked up to see a Jedi Master suddenly flung against the wall with incredible force. Then, a second later, another of the Jedi Masters backed into the hall from the t-junction battling a hooded figure dressed in Jedi robes and wielding a blue-white lightsaber. The style and technique of the hooded figure was very familiar to Cin, and he nearly gasped in disbelief when he realized whom the being was.

It was Anakin Skywalker, and he was leading the attack on the Jedi!

A few seconds later a small cluster of Stormtroopers rushed around the corner and mercilessly opened fire on the retreating Padawans and Younglings, hitting several in the back.

“Come on!” Cin shouted to Rallà and Xander before rushing to confront the Stormtroopers.

Cin watched with disgust as the Stormtroopers turned their emotionless eyes to see that he was coming, but continued to fire upon the helpless young ones instead of redirecting their attack to a real threat. With an angry yell, Cin, Rallà and Xander rushed at the Stormtroopers, and they finally redirected their aim upon the three of them at the last moment.

Cin deflected their shots with ease as he spun forward, as did Rallà and Xander. After just a few seconds, the three of them had cleared the immediate hall of Stormtroopers. But then, Cin looked up just in time to see Anakin, a scowl of pure hatred on his face, run through the Jedi Master he had been battling. Cin, Rallà and Xander watched in shock as the Jedi Master slumped forward onto Anakin’s shoulder, eyes wide and mouth hanging open in a silent scream of pain. Anakin, peering directly at Master Drallig with those angry, narrow eyes, tossed the dead Jedi Master off of him and slowly came striding forward.

Not taking his eyes from Anakin, holding his blade in front of him defensively, Cin said, “Get to the transports—both of you. There’s nothing you can do here.”

“Master I—”

"Go!" Cin shouted, and Rallà flinched at the harshness of his tone. But then, she and Xander took one last glance at Anakin's rage-filled face and finally began backstepping away before turning and running down the hall.

Cin squared himself as Anakin continued toward him. He knew how skilled this young man was, and he had no delusions of his own skills. But he would fight, and fight his best until the end. The Younglings needed to escape. He closed his eyes to slits and allowed the Force to flow through him. Then, with a clear mind, reopened them just in time to raise his blade to block a powerful, downward chop from Anakin.

Cin held his own for a short time, but Anakin was just far too powerful. He could feel the dark side surging through the young Hero of the Clone Wars. And before he knew it, he found himself stabbed in the side and knocked backwards into the wall by a Force Push more powerful than any he'd ever encountered.

Opening his pained eyes, hand clutching his side, Cin watched as Anakin came rushing towards him with his blue lightsaber cocked for the killing blow. But just as Anakin came in swinging with the blade aimed at Cin's throat another blue blade intercepted it.

Amazed, Cin looked up to see Rallà standing next to them, her lightsaber held out blocking the blow. Rallà's brow was furrowed with strain as she used all her strength to hold Skywalker's blade away from her Master's throat.

Xander's yell as he came running in snapped Cin's head to the side, and the Jedi Master watched in horror as a wickedly-amused smile crossed Anakin Skywalker's lips.

Anakin withdrew his blade and addressed the incoming Padawan, even backing away as if actually on the retreat as Rallà joined her young companion in the attack. Wincing, Cin pushed away from the wall and came after the three of them as quickly as possible, repulsed that Anakin could toy with these two young Jedi in such a way.

Seeing Cin approaching, the amused smirk on Anakin's face was quickly replaced by a deep, hate-filled scowl. Going back on the offensive and with a quick series of moves, Anakin ended the duel with the two young Padawans, sending their lifeless bodies crumpling to the floor.

Cin forgot all about the pain in his side and shouted out of a different kind of pain as he came at Anakin with lightsaber held high.

Anakin peered at Cin's approach with contempt, and then just before the Jedi Master reached him he thrust out his left hand and grabbed Cin with the Force. He tossed Cin with the vast power of the dark side and sent him crashing into the wall. Then, as Cin was sliding down the wall, Anakin walked past and ran him through with his humming, blue blade.

Anakin Skywalker retracted the blade and kept walking towards the hangar doors in his slow, commanding gait as Stormtroopers emerged from around the corner and followed.

Padmé had been sound asleep in her bed when something had suddenly woken her with a start. Groggy, she opened her eyes and lifted her head from her pillow in order to hear better, for something told her that it had been a noise that had interrupted her slumber. As she listened for the noise, she peered to the foot of her bed where Artoo was standing and saw that he was still shut down in sleep-mode.

Perhaps it was nothing, she thought, resting her head back onto her pillow and closing her eyes.

But then the sound of an enormous explosion rocked her ears, and her windows actually rattled. She sat up immediately, eyes wide and alert as adrenaline rushed through her veins. Artoo sprang awake and gave a startled whistle at the loud noise, his dome head and white eye spinning from side to side around

the room for trouble.

Then Padmé heard a series of what sounded like heavy blaster fire, accompanied by the sound of several smaller explosions. She tossed the blankets off of her and leapt from the bed, heading across the room and for the stairs leading down to her veranda. Artoo watched her walk past, then followed.

Padmé came out onto the darkened veranda and the dim lights around the balcony slowly came on. Artoo, and now Threepio, came rushing down the stairs to see what was the matter. Padmé heard more heavy blaster fire, and the sound of ship engines racing at high speeds as she neared the fountain and the couches of the veranda. Coming to the edge of the main level of the balcony, Padmé peered off to the east where the sound was coming from—in the direction of the Jedi Temple.

She watched as two transport ships suddenly emerged from behind the Jedi Temple and made a desperate climb into the air, racing for space. The ships didn't go far before a swarm of ARC-170 Clone Fighters swooped in from out of nowhere and began opening fire on the Jedi Transports. The Jedi ships could do nothing but plow forward into the sky as the fighters picked them apart with their powerful blaster cannons, and it didn't take long before the ships couldn't handle any more.

Suddenly, one exploded in a giant fireball with a deafening roar. Padmé gasped, raising her hands to cover her mouth, her eyes wide.

"Oh, my!" Threepio said in surprise, standing a handful of meters behind Padmé, next to Artoo.

Then, after another long barrage of hits, the second ship began spiraling out of control and plunged back towards the surface. Padmé watched it fall like a stone, then closed her eyes at just the last second before it crashed to the ground with another giant explosion.

She reopened them to see the Clone Fighters swooping in low over three large fires on the surface of Coruscant, searching for any possible survivors. Then, turning her gaze back to the Jedi Temple, she could just make out the shapes of AT-TE walkers standing in the plaza around The Temple, and around them she thought she saw hundreds of Clonetroopers.

Appalled, Padmé's mind raced for any possible explanation as to what was happening, but coming up empty. Tears threatened to fall from her eyes, and she tapped her mouth with her hand nervously as she thought. She stood there on the veranda for some time watching the on-going attack on the Jedi Temple; confused, and worried for the life of her husband.

The baby gave her stomach a soft kick, and she placed a hand on her large belly. Feeling quite faint all of a sudden, she moved to one of the curved couches and sat. Her mind racing with fear, she did her best to sooth her unborn child as it continued to kick.

Chapter 23

Obi-Wan lay on his back on the landing pad slipping in and out of consciousness for some time. How long, exactly, he didn't know. His groggy mind was slowly coming back into focus as the sound of approaching speeder bikes caused his eyes to flutter open. With a soft groan, he sluggishly sat up and cradled his aching head in his hands, shaking the throbbing from it as best as he could.

The soft sound of clanking armor brought his head up. He looked off across the landing pad to see Commander Cody and his men rush up onto the landing pad with weapons drawn, poised and searching for a fight. They relaxed once they saw him sitting next to the oozing mess that had once been Grievous. He gave Cody a weak wave of reassurance, then grimaced as he pushed himself up to his feet.

Commander Cody inspected the smoldering pieces of Obi-Wan's starfighter as he walked past it. Something caught his eye, and he bent over to pick up. The other eight clones spread out around the perimeter of the landing pad, taking up defensive positions and keeping an eye out for any approaching threats. Removing his helmet, Cody walked over to Obi-Wan, who was standing over the fallen form of Grievous inspecting the remains.

The clone commander came to a stop on the other side of Grievous' body.

"Looks like he finally met his match," Cody said. Then, with a wry smile as he locked eyes with Obi-Wan, "Right, General?"

Obi-Wan couldn't restrain the small smile that creased his lips, and he gave a small nod. Cody's dry sense of humor always had a way of lightening his mood.

"You dropped this," Cody said, stretching out his hand with Obi-Wan's lightsaber in it.

"Thank you, Commander," Obi-Wan said, taking the hilt and reattaching it to his belt.

Then, as his thoughts finally began to catch up with his mind, Obi-Wan remembered the gravity of events that had taken place right before his ship had been destroyed. He grabbed for his comm. link, but as he pulled it out he saw that it was broken beyond use.

"Commander, have a Cruiser in orbit patch through to the Jedi Temple on your comm. link immediately. And have them send a ship. I'll be leaving for Coruscant as soon as possible," Obi-Wan ordered.

"Yes, sir," Cody said, retrieving his comm. link and issuing the order.

Obi-Wan lowered his eyes back to Grievous' remains as Cody spoke into the comm., pondering what the Jedi's next move would have to be against Palpatine and Sidious. They needed to draw Sidious out somehow. That would be difficult. But perhaps when they removed Palpatine from office Sidious' hand would be forced and he would make a mistake. Perhaps.

"Are you certain, lieutenant?" Cody asked, the confusion in his tone catching Obi-Wan's attention. "Very

well.”

Obi-Wan peered at Commander Cody with question on his face as the clone lowered the comm. link from his mouth.

“We have a ship en route, General, but they couldn’t reach the Jedi Temple. The signal’s jammed.”

Brow furrowed in thought, Obi-Wan said, “That’s impossible! The Separatists can’t have jammed The Temple’s frequencies. They don’t have the technology. Only the Republic—”

Obi-Wan cut off as the awful reality suddenly sank in.

The Republic’s forces are jamming the Jedis’ communications frequencies!

His stunned mind raced to figure it all out. *Sidious! He’s used Palpatine to turn the Republic’s forces against the Jedi! He’s done it already!*

All of a sudden, Obi-Wan didn’t feel so secure surrounded by Clonetroopers—soldiers under the direct command of Supreme Chancellor Palpatine. He eyed Cody wearily and took a handful of steps back, his right hand easing down towards his lightsaber.

“General...?” Cody asked, perplexed by his sudden change in mood. But then, Cody’s comm. link began beeping urgently, signifying that a Priority Message was incoming. He raised it to his mouth, “Cody here.”

“This is Supreme Commandant Tarkin. By order of Chancellor Palpatine...,” was all Obi-Wan heard, and it was all he needed to hear. He watched as his clone friend suddenly went stiff. The confusion on Cody’s face as his eyes darted up at him said all Obi-Wan needed to know.

Obi-Wan continued to back away. His hand hovered over his lightsaber as he gave the other Clonetroopers around the landing pad quick glances. He was relieved to see that they were all still facing outward, looking over the surrounding area.

The message was over. Cody replaced his comm. link to his belt, looking at Obi-Wan with a conflicted gaze. Helmet cradled under his left arm, Cody began coming after Obi-Wan with stiff, robot-like steps.

“You don’t have to do this, Cody,” Obi-Wan said. “You don’t have to follow the order!”

Cody’s steps faltered for a handful of seconds, and he gazed from place to place on the ground in uncertainty. But then, seemingly against his will, Cody slowly began forward again. His face melted into an impassive, glossy-eyed stare as he raised the helmet to place it over his head.

“Don’t do it, Cody. *Please* don’t!” Obi-Wan pleaded as he continued to back away; his hand actually on his lightsaber now, ready to retrieve it at a moments notice.

Cody slipped the helmet down over his face, erasing any hint of humanity behind its emotionless, black stare. Then, the yellow-shouldered Stormtrooper’s robotic actions quickened as it pulled its blaster from its holster and leveled the muzzle at Obi-Wan’s chest. It spoke into its helmet’s comm., and Obi-Wan watched as the Stormtroopers spread across the landing pad suddenly turned and leveled their own blasters at him as they came running forward.

Obi-Wan pulled out and activated his lightsaber just in time to deflect the shot Cody sent racing at him. He sent the bolt out wide instead of back at its source. He couldn’t bring himself to do that just yet. Then, he thrust out his hand at Cody and sent him flying backwards through the air before turning to deflect several more blaster bolts from the oncoming Stormtroopers.

They were coming at him from all sides, firing away as quickly as they could. Just as he had with Cody, Obi-Wan sent the bolts flying off into the air or into the rock surface of the landing pad with a shower of sparks as he spun with his blade. But as the Stormtroopers continued to advance and the shots came more quickly Obi-Wan knew that he had no other choice. These clones had been genetically designed to follow orders from their superiors without question. And Palpatine was now their supreme leader. They

answered only to his will. There was no reasoning with them. They held no remorse. They had a duty to fulfill and that was all they knew.

As much as he hated it, Obi-Wan knew it was kill or be killed.

A deeply saddened frown on his face, Obi-Wan began fighting for his life. Spinning with his blue-white blade, he sent the blaster shots right back where they'd come from. The blazing, red bolts struck Stormtroopers square in their chests as they came running at him, and the armored troops fell to the ground. He came spinning around at a clone that had gotten dangerously close, and with a quick slash of his blade sent the trooper falling to the ground.

In just a matter of seconds it was over and Obi-Wan stood in the middle of a pile of fallen Stormtrooper bodies. But then, all of a sudden, Obi-Wan sensed danger and spun to deflect another blast. Cody came circling in at him quickly, firing away the whole time and careful to stay in front of the blasts that were sent back in his direction.

Obi-Wan was careful while deflecting the bolts. He hoped to hit Cody in the leg, or shoulder, or someplace else non-vital so as not to be forced to kill him. It would take time to do this, but it was worth it. Cody had always been a good friend.

But then the fast-approaching sound of Gunships caught Obi-Wan's attention. He turned his gaze towards the east and saw a large group of the vessels heading straight for them.

Obi-Wan winced. Cody had called in his location to the rest of the Republic's forces. In no time hundreds of Stormtroopers would be upon him, and then there would be no chance of escape.

And he *needed* to escape. He needed to!

Grimacing, pain in his eyes, Obi-Wan adjusted his grip on his lightsaber ever-so-slightly. When the next laser blast came at him he sent it right back at Cody. The bolt hit the yellow-shouldered clone commander in the middle of the chest, sending him flying backwards in a spray of sparks and to the landing pad's rock surface.

Obi-Wan walked over to Cody's fallen body and peered down at it in regret.

"I'm sorry, my friend," he lamented.

Then, looking back up at the cluster of Gunships and seeing that they were less than a kilometer away, he ran to the edge of the landing pad and jumped into the air. He landed right in the saddle of the lizard-beast, and it gave a startled roar.

"We've got to get out of here, girl!" he yelled, grabbing for the reins. As soon as he had them, he gave her a soft kick in the ribs. "Yah!" he shouted, and the animal took off in a sprint across the ashen surface of the planet.

Jedi Master Ki-Adi-Mundi peered out the doorway of the Republic Gunship and off to the west—away from the battlefield below. For a brief, handful of seconds he indulged himself with a wistful gaze at the capital city of the planet Risterra as they flew past. The bright, mid-day sun did little to penetrate the thick pillars of smoke and the haze of destruction hanging over the city, so all he could make out were the outlines of the abandoned, war-torn buildings off to the west.

The city had been beautiful once; with its elegant, spiraled towers and network of bridges. It was these bridges that made the city so unique. They were everywhere in the city and connected the buildings to each other on multiple levels—even on the highest levels of the tallest towers. They spiraled right along with the twisting architecture of the buildings and were used mostly for walking. They created a complicated maze throughout the city—a maze with breathtaking views.

But what Master Mundi liked most about the bridges was their symbolism. To him, those bridges illustrated perfectly the attitude of the people of the planet Risterra. For as long as he could remember, the Risterrians had been reaching out to beings across the galaxy and urging them to come together. For centuries they had been building bridges of understanding and peace. The Risterrian government had even pled neutrality in the conflict of the Clone Wars in order to remain impartial purporters of peace and a sanctuary for refugees on both sides.

Not anymore.

General Grievous had seen the strategic advantage of Risterra's location as a window into the inner-rim, so he'd attacked the planet and taken it over more than a year ago. As if that hadn't been enough, Grievous had used his twisted tactics of terror and had systematically wiped out all of the citizens of the peaceful planet. He'd even aired holo-vids throughout the galaxy of his droid armies committing the massacres in an attempt to break the moral of the Republic. It had had quite the opposite effect from what Grievous had wanted.

...Or so Ki-Adi thought.

The slaughter had opened doors that should have forever remained closed. The people, charged up by the rhetoric of numerous senators in the senate, had demanded blood. And since a mostly-droid army had no blood to offer, the peoples' vengeance was turned upon the citizens of the systems that joined the Separatists. The senate had called for more aggressive, more ruthless measures against these rogue systems—all of which Palpatine had endorsed, and a little too eagerly for Ki-Adi's tastes.

But now, the Republic was close to taking back the Risterra system. The droid armies on the planet were nearly destroyed, and only pockets of resistance remained. Master Mundi could finally see an end to this awful conflict. The Wars were nearly over, and then the Jedi could work on getting matters back to normal in the senate.

His ship zipped over a large gathering of Clonetroopers and began descending, bringing him out of his thoughts. The ship landed next to a mobile command center and Ki-Adi jumped out onto the metal landing pad, a handful of Clonetroopers disembarking right behind him. He walked up the short plank leading up to the command perch, and a helmetless, yellow-shouldered clone approached.

"Is this the last of them, Commander Bacara?" Ki-Adi asked as he walked past him and to the front edge of the command station, taking a set of micro-binoculars offered him by another nearby clone and raising them to his eyes.

"Yes, sir, General. They're dug in rather deep, but we have them outnumbered five-to-one and completely surrounded. It shouldn't be long," the Clone Commander said.

Ki-Adi scanned the small hills a few kilometers away with his micro-binoculars. He could see the droid army's dug-in defenses along the ridges and at the bases of the hills. Then, he lowered the micro-binoculars and furrowed his tall brow in thought.

"There's something not right here..." he thought aloud, speaking of the sense of danger he felt in the Force.

A trap by Grievous, perhaps? he thought. Then, he called out across the command center, "Lieutenant—are any ships approaching the system? Any at all?"

The clone pushed a few buttons on the console in front of him to do the proper scan. Then, through his helmet's comm. said, "*Negative, General. No vessels incoming.*"

Master Mundi mulled this over for a few seconds, then said, "Order a reconnaissance ship to the far side of the gas planet in the system. We need to be sure."

"Yes, *sir!*" the lieutenant said.

Clone Commander Bacara came to stand next to Ki-Adi-Mundi. "Are you sensing a trap?" he asked.

"Yes. I am," Ki-Adi answered, peering out at the distant hills with narrow eyes as he searched the Force for answers.

Commander Bacara's comm. link began beeping incessantly. The clone retrieved it and took a handful of steps away so as not to disturb Master Mundi's meditations.

Ki-Adi peered back at Bacara with question in his eyes as the clone walked away, wondering what the Priority Message could be about. It couldn't be from the recon ship already. They hadn't even left orbit yet. No. It was something different, yet he couldn't help but feel that it was somehow related to his sense of danger here.

He turned and peered back out across the battle-worn plain and at those hills, raising his micro-binoculars back to his face. Something wasn't right here, and the feeling was only growing stronger.

A thought entered his mind—why hadn't *he* received the Priority Message? Why had the message been routed directly to the Clone Commander serving under him?

The sense of danger became eminent, and Ki-Adi's eyes went wide with surprise as he suddenly realized what the Force was trying to tell him. In one swift movement he retrieved his lightsaber, ignited it and spun to deflect a series of blaster bolts aimed for right between his shoulder blades.

The yellow-shouldered Stormtrooper, now wearing its helmet, continued firing without pause.

Ki-Adi came forward as he blocked the bolts, and once he was close enough sliced the blaster in half along the barrel, the explosion sending Bacara falling onto his back.

"Clone Commander number 1138—what are you doing!?! " Master Mundi demanded, standing over him.

Unexpectedly, the Stormtroopers seated at their consoles around the command platform sprang to their feet, drawing their own blasters and opening fire on Ki-Adi-Mundi. He whirled his blade around just in time to block the flurry of red lances. Even more Stormtroopers ran up the plank to join the fight, and Ki-Adi found himself nearly overwhelmed. The Jedi Master couldn't even begin to understand what was going on, but he knew that he needed to get out of there.

Twirling his lightsaber as he backed away, Master Mundi jumped over the edge of the mobile command platform and used the Force to coast safely down to the ground nearly twenty meters below. No sooner had he landed when he discovered that his situation had just grown much more dire.

It wasn't only the clones in the command center that were suddenly after him. Stormtroopers came running at him from every direction, their blaster rifles raised and unleashing volley after deadly volley. Ki-Adi Mundi twisted and spun with his blade as fast as he could—faster than he ever had before—and began sending the bolts right back at their sources. A group of clones were getting too close for comfort so he thrust out a hand at them, hitting the group with a Force Push and sending them falling to the ground. But these weren't flimsy battledroids. They were far superior clones, and the group merely scrambled back to their feet and began running at him again. Several of the Stormtroopers in the command station above him began opening fire, and Master Mundi was forced to deal with a threat from yet another direction.

Ki-Adi began spinning towards the ever-growing wall of Stormtroopers near the tall, thick legs of the mobile command center. He slashed through the cluster of clones and ran underneath the giant girth of the command station. When he emerged on the other side he broke out in a full-on sprint, hoping beyond hope to reach the ruined outskirts of the capital city and lose the Stormtroopers there.

He ran with all his might, wondering what had happened to cause the clones to turn against him. The Force surging through him, he was able to dash at stunning speed. The landscape around him was a blur, as was his humming lightsaber. But he wasn't fast enough.

Soon, he heard the distinct sound of Gunship engines approaching from behind. Never had he thought that sound could cause his blood to turn cold, but it did. Peering over his shoulder, he saw the massive

cluster of Gunships approaching.

He could not outrun them. With all the help of the Force he could not. He knew this. So, Jedi Master Ki-Adi-Mundi slowed his sprint, then stopped and turned to face the oncoming rush of machinery. If he were to die he would not be shot in the back while running away. He would face his adversaries.

He peered up at the ships as they grew closer, his eyes narrow. Closing his eyes and taking a deep, calming breath, he raised his lightsaber in front of his face in a salute. Releasing the breath and opening his eyes with the calm clarity of the Force surging through him, Ki-Adi twirled his blue blade down from the salute and into a defensive posture.

The Gunships were getting close now, and the lead ship swooped in on the attack.

Ki-Adi watched as the two missiles shot out of the ports on top of the ship and directly at him. He raised his left hand and, using the Force, slammed the missiles into the ground several meters away. The deafening explosion sent a shower of dirt spraying over him, but he kept his mind focused.

Two more ships came in, but they opened fire with their ball-turrets instead of their missiles.

The four beams of solid, green energy sliced across the ground and towards Ki-Adi with incredible speed.

He allowed the Force to guide him, and when it told him the time was right he lunged forward and intercepted one beam with his blade just as the beam was cutting off. The force behind the beam was incredible, but he ground his teeth against it and kept his blade steady. The green laser shot right back up at the underside of one of the Gunships, and the vessel exploded in a giant, smoldering fireball.

The exploded ship went streaking overhead to crash into the ground several meters behind him. The blast was powerful, and the force of it caused his Jedi clothing to billow in the wind. Yet Master Mundi didn't so much as move a centimeter as he peered determined eyes at the even larger group of approaching Gunships.

The next cluster came at him with all they had, and Ki-Adi-Mundi's eyes narrowed and jaw tightened at the sight of more than twenty missiles headed straight for him.

He reached out with the Force and successfully guided several of the missiles off course, but there were just too many. He made to jump high into the air to avoid the immediate blast area, but a missile struck the ground and exploded just a split second before he could act.

The shockwave sent him tumbling head over feet backwards through the air. He was just about to bring his wild flight under control with the aid of the Force so that he might land safely when another, then another and another missile exploded. The blasts of each new explosion sent him this way, then that and spinning out of control until he finally struck the ground face-first.

Numerous bones broken, covered by black patches of scorched flesh and missing his left arm, Ki-Adi lay there face down in the dirt as the Gunships went zipping by overhead. Then, he heard the sound of several of the ships coming to land just a ways away.

With incredible pain, he raised his burnt face to peer at the landed Gunships and saw numerous Stormtroopers disembarking and running forward to surround him. With every ounce of strength he had left, he pushed himself up to his knees with his one arm to face his attackers.

The Stormtroopers stared at him with those blank faces, blasters aimed. Ki-Adi-Mundi looked down and was amazed to see that he was still holding his lightsaber. Not one to go out without a fight, Ki-Adi raised the shimmering blue blade at his assailants and—

The group of more than twenty clones opened fire as one, riddling the Cerean Jedi Master's body with laser bolts. The Jedi's arms flailed for several seconds as if he were actually attempting to ward off the shots. But, in all actuality, he was dead almost instantly and his body was merely having a spasm as the great number of laser beams cut into his flesh. But the Stormtroopers didn't know this, so they continued to fire until the lifeless body fell over to one side.

The Stormtroopers ceased fire and stood inspecting the charred form for any sign of life for several seconds. Seeing none, they turned and ran back to their respective Gunships in order to return to the battle, leaving Jedi Master Ki-Adi-Mundi's body out in the open for the scavengers.

Cato Neimoidia, a Neimoidian, colonial planetoid, was a barren moon consisting mainly of brown rock. Nearby, and more than filling its horizon, was the gas giant to which the moon was held captive. The gaseous planet the moon orbited was breathtakingly beautiful; predominately blue with swirls of white and surrounded by a thick series of multi-colored rings. The planet was beginning to "rise" at the moment, and the rings were at their most spectacular.

The moon held no strategic significance in its placement in the galaxy. It bordered the outer rim. Rather, its importance was measured by what littered the surface of the rocky orb.

Giant, green crystals—some several kilometers long—shot up from the surface of the brown rock in sporadic clusters and angles. Some pointed straight up, while others jutted out in acute angles. Others merely lay flat on the surface, surrounded by the tall piles of rock they'd dug up while crashing into the moon and sliding across its surface.

The crystals were not native to the moon. They had been formed within the core of another gas giant in the system millions of kilometers away. When that planet had imploded several thousand years ago it shot the crystals formed within its churning, high-pressure core in every direction. Eventually a great number of those crystals were captured by the gravitational pull of the gas giant the moon orbited, and as they were being reeled in Cato Neimoidia got in the way. The result was a relentless bombardment of the moon by the enormous crystals for over five decades.

Crystals of this particular kind were commonly used in weapons; typically blaster cannons. This was due to their sturdy construction and their ability to channel and focus high amounts of energy. Almost all laser cannons used such crystals; some green like these, some blue, some red.

Just a few months ago the Jedi had learned of the mining operation underway on the moon. At first they hadn't paid it much mind. The galaxy was filled with crystal deposits used in weaponry. They paid it little mind—that is, until they discovered just how large these crystals were. That information, coupled with rumors that the Separatists wanted to build a super-weapon of some kind, caught the Jedi's *full* attention.

Seated in his Jedi Starfighter, Master Plo Koon thought the matter over as he chased three droid starfighters through the thin atmosphere of Cato Neimoidia. He knew that with crystals of this size the Separatists could build a giant laser more powerful and more destructive than *anything* the galaxy had ever seen. The idea gave him the chills.

Bringing his thoughts back to the task at hand, Plo Koon saw the trio of droid fighters dive straight down, and gave pursuit. The droid starfighters dove into a cluster of the giant crystals in an attempt to shake Plo, but he remained right on their tails as they flew through the deep canyons. Judging by their skilled maneuvering as they twisted and turned through the complex maze of the enormous, crystal canyon, Plo could see that the droids had the newest upgrade in evasive software.

But it wasn't enough against a Jedi.

The three droid fighters banked hard to the left around a turn in the shimmering, green-walled canyon and Plo let loose a single burst. The laser lit up the walls in a shimmering wave and then hit the droid on the right side of the trio. The fighter exploded in a bright fireball—again illuminating the walls of the canyon. He came through the curve behind the droids and kept banking hard left as the turn continued in a crescent-shape. Then, leveling out as the curve came to an end and just before the enemy fighters banked to the right into a new passage, Plo fired another shot. Master Koon flew through the cloud of molten debris...and then tightened his jaw under his mask and narrowed his eyes as he saw what lay before him.

His Astromech droid also gave a startled whistle of surprise.

The passage the last remaining droid starfighter had taken was a dead end, and a sheer wall of green crystal lay right in front of him.

The droid fighter was struggling to climb, but it was clear to Plo it wouldn't make it. Not by a long shot. He only hoped the same wouldn't be true for him. He pulled back hard on the control yolks, putting every bit of strength into the climb. Slowly, the nose of his Jedi Starfighter began pointing skyward, but the wall was dangerously close. The droid fighter crashed into the wall below him. The wall was merely meters away from the bottom of his ship now, and Plo gritted his teeth behind his mask as he pulled back even harder.

A loud grunt of exhaustion left his lungs as his ship finally cleared the crystal wall and he shot out above the canyon, heading straight up. His R2 gave a warbled sigh of relief. He turned his ascent into a back-loop. Then he leveled the ship and flew back across the large cluster of crystals towards the main battle.

He flew over a mountain range of crystals and the battlefield came into view. Blue and red laser fire zipped back and forth across the surface, right in front of the main mining facility for the Separatists. The Republic's forces had pushed them back a long ways, and now the Separatists were fighting desperately to keep what was theirs.

There was a beep from his console, and he looked down to see what it was his Astromech droid was bringing to his attention. It was only a squadron of approaching ARC Clone starfighters, so he clicked off the alert. They were probably just coming to escort him back into the battle. But then, just a handful of seconds after he'd clicked it off, his R2 unit brought it back on. Puzzled, he inspected the screen to see if there was something he'd missed, but saw nothing save the ARC fighters. He clicked the alert off once more.

It came back on immediately, and his gaze shot out of the cockpit to his R2 unit to see its head swivel around to peer at him with its yellow, lighted eye as it beeped and whistled frantically.

The clone starfighters were getting close now.

Again Plo peered down at the display screen, and saw what it was his R2 was trying to bring to his attention; the ARC fighters were *not* in escort formation, but *attack* formation.

His brow furrowed in confusion as he tried to understand why.

Something felt odd....

Then, a much more incessant beeping erupted from his console and he snapped his eyes down to see that the fighters had him locked on-target!

His astro-droid gave a long string of obscenities.

Plo Klooon didn't know what has going on here, but the Force was telling him that he was in danger so he began banking hard to the right and climbing. The Clone starfighters opened fire right after he did, and their red blaster bolts went zipping by all around his ship.

His astro-droid erupted in what Plo could only interpret as a harsh berating for not having listened to it sooner.

He came out of the turn and applied all speed to his engines, heading back towards the canyon of crystals he had just left. He tried his radio in order to reach the stormtrooper pilots, but was greeted with nothing but static. His comms. were being jammed! The ARC pilots continued to fire upon him, and he was surrounded by red lances of light. He did his best to avoid them, but there were far too many.

One red bolt hit his upper, right stabilizer wing, blasting it off in a shower of sparks. Then, another zipped right to the left of the cockpit and burned a long streak across the surface of his ship—right next to his R2 unit.

The droid gave a loud scream of horror, followed by another series of expletives as its head swiveled around in terror.

Jedi Master Plo Kloon felt the next two bolts—one right after the other—strike the engine housings, and the engines began giving off a high-pitched whine as they quickly lost speed. Knowing that it was only a matter of time now, he raised his eyes to the shimmering blue-white sphere in front of him. Another laser bolt struck, knocking off the entire left wing, along with his R2 unit.

Suddenly he was spinning out of control and he lost sight of the blue orb. Then, he heard a thunderous THUD! as the last bolt struck.

Instantly he found himself encased in the pain of fire and sparks. Any solace he might have found while peering at that blue planet was lost. The ship exploded in a fireball as he screamed his last, long, painful scream. The pieces of his ship slowly drifted down to the surface of the brown-rock orb, where they would stay forever.

On the planet Felicia Jedi Aayla Secura made her way through the dense undergrowth of the fungus forest. She parted her way through thin, pale-green stalks more than a meter taller than her and topped with red buds with her taskforce of Clonetroopers following closely behind. These thin stalks were only a small portion of the overall undergrowth of the forest. There were numerous other types of fungi throughout, but they seemed to be in a part of the forest dominated by this particular species because they had been parting their way through them for some time now.

Every fifty or so meters they would come upon a tight-nit cluster of thick, white and red spotted trunks that reached nearly fifty meters into the sky. On top of these towering trunks were rust-colored, fungus canopies that were so large they nearly blotted out the sun. Peering up and slightly forward, Aayla could just make out small patches of the yellow-tinted sky as they made their way around the giant cluster of trunks and back into the dim undergrowth on the other side.

She and her trailing group of more than fifty Clonetroopers came out of the patch of the pale-green stalks, and were now entering an area dominated by waist-high, maroon colored fungi made up of multiple layers—one stacked on top of the other in a bulbous shape. They had encountered this nasty type of fungi numerous times before, and so they all walked very carefully through them so as not to bump them and trigger their defense mechanism—a large puff of foul-smelling, green gas. The going was slow through this particular bunch, and rightfully so, but Aayla could see the end of it in the near distance.

The comm. link of the yellow-shouldered clone following right behind Aayla gave a beep, then started to give another just a second later but seemed to be cut off. Then, the beeping commenced a few seconds later, only to cease yet again. Aayla stopped and turned to peer at the clone. The erratic beeping had the sound of a Priority Message, but she couldn't be certain. The clone retrieved the comm. link from his belt and clicked it on.

"This i—.... —andant Tarkin. By ord—... ..Palpa—" the broken message said, filled with static and interference before completely cutting off into full static.

"General Secura, I'm unable to make out this message. I request permission to scale to the top of the canopy for a clear transmission."

"Permission granted, commander. But hurry. We're on a schedule and cannot wait. You'll have to catch up," Aayla said.

"Understood," the clone commander said, then peered up at the canopy above as Aayla and the line of Clonetroopers began marching past. Seeing a gap in the canopy of wide mushrooms he started off that way, retrieving his repelling device from his utility belt.

Aayla watched the clone commander fire his repelling hook into the air, then turned her eyes back forward as the clone's feet left the ground and he was pulled straight up. Peering at the fungi jungle that

lay before her, she felt unease nipping at the back of her mind. She couldn't place why, but she felt a sudden sense of apprehension through the Force. She wondered if the message was warning them of a possible ambush, so she kept her eyes sharp. Battledroids could hide rather easily in this dense undergrowth.

They left the patch of bush-like fungi behind and entered a field of thigh-high, white-stalked fungi with elongated, bulbous heads. Aayla walked through the dense field of fungi, her nerves on edge. She nearly jumped when all of a sudden a strange looking bird on the ground gave a scared shriek as it ran away through the field of mushrooms.

Aayla berated herself for allowing her apprehensions get the best of her and permitting something so trivial to startle her. She closed her eyes and took a deep, calming breath to sooth her nerves. When she reopened her eyes she felt more composed, but the sense of danger persisted.

It was then that she knew for certain that something was wrong, and the danger was eminent.

She shot a fist into the air so that it could be seen by the clones behind her, and the signal to halt was passed all the way down the line until the entire group had stopped. Aayla turned and gave another quick hand signal to the clones behind her to stay put. One of the clones gave a nod of acknowledgment, and then Aayla went forward on her own.

Deactivated lightsaber in hand the blue-skinned, Twi'lek Jedi walked through the thigh-high mushrooms with careful steps. The danger—whatever it was—was nearby. She could feel that it was going to present itself at any moment. Her grip on her Jedi Weapon tightened as she walked, and the tension reached its apex.

The increasingly-loud sound of a wire being reeled out in a hurry turned her around and brought her eyes upward. She saw the clone commander repelling down from a hole in the canopy, his blaster pointed right at her.

Her eyes went wide as the first red bolt came racing at her chest, and she dove out of its way. The Stormtrooper fired again and again tracking her roll through the mushrooms, and Aayla moved out of the way just in time to avoid being hit. She came up out of the roll onto one knee with her blue lightsaber lit and held ready. She blocked the shots as the Stormtrooper continued to open fire, her mind reeling.

What is he doing!? she thought as the clone repelled down to the ground less than twenty meters away, then unhooked the line from his belt.

She stood as the yellow-shouldered Stormtrooper came running at her, blasting away as he did. She blocked the shots easily, trying to decide what she should do. Clearly there was something wrong with this clone. Some kind of defect that was causing it to act in such a way. Then, numerous more red blazes of light came racing toward her from behind the yellow-shouldered Stormtrooper. All of the clones were rushing her now, blasting away as they did.

With this new development it became clear that the clone commander was not malfunctioning. The clones were carrying out an order! The seriousness of the situation came crashing to her mind. She needed to try to escape, and that meant defending herself.

She began deflecting the laser bolts back at the mass of Stormtroopers rushing her, backing away as quickly as she could while she did. With the Force surging through her, she was able to block some bolts without even looking as she peered up at the canopy above. Seeing a nearby opening in the canopy, she steered herself that way. The Stormtroopers rushed her like silent, crazed men; bent on doing what they were told, yet lacking any conviction on the matter. One by one they were struck down by the very death they dealt out. But still they came.

Aayla finally reached the area with the opening in the canopy up above. Gathering the Force within her, she leapt into the air. Red laser blasts scorched the air all around her as she did, but none struck.

She cleared the canopy with ease and landed on the edge of the wide mushroom top. She gave a quick look around, squinting her eyes from the bright light of the sun. All around she was surrounded by what

appeared to be an endless sea of rolling mounds of different colors, and far up in the sky she could make out the outline of several Star Destroyers. Their recon vessels would probably be looking for her. She knew that she needed to get out of there and to someplace safe.

A slight whistling sound, followed by a dull THUNK! behind her caused her to turn around, and she saw a silver repelling hook dug into the edge of the mushroom top. Then there was another whistle and another THUNK! as a second hook suddenly appeared, then another, and another, and another.

The Stormtroopers were coming.

For just a second she contemplated cutting the edge of the mushroom off and letting the Stormtroopers fall back down to the ground and, most probably, to their death, but such a thing was below a Jedi. It was one thing to defend one's self when attacked or fired upon, and another to do such a thing as cut their lines. So instead she turned and began running across the tops of the giant mushrooms, jumping from top to top.

It wasn't long before blast bolts began streaking past her on all sides once more, and she looked over her shoulder to find ten Stormtroopers running after her across the mushroom tops. Then, as she turned to peer forward again, she was amazed to see ten more Stormtroopers hauling themselves over the edge of a mushroom and getting to their feet less than ten meters in front of her.

She changed direction immediately and began running north. But after only a few steps she was shocked yet again to find another group of Stormtroopers emerging from the edge of another mushroom and running towards her. She stopped and peered back behind her, seeing if she could possibly go south, but the groups of Stormtroopers approaching from the east and the west were closing in fast and that way would soon be blocked off as well.

She was trapped, surrounded on all sides.

The clones opened fire, and she moved her humming, blue blade in a blur. She defended herself valiantly, using all her skill to save her life. But there were too many Stormtroopers, too many blast bolts.

The first got through and struck her in the back of the right leg. Her head snapped back as she gave a yell of pain. Then, the second hit her in the left side of the chest. The inertia of the blast sent her spinning, but she kept her footing. She tried to regain her concentration and her defenses, but it was too late. The damage had already been done, and her body just couldn't move fast enough to keep up. Several more blasts struck all over her body, and she went stumbling backward and over the edge of one of the giant mushrooms, falling the thirty meters to the ground.

The Stormtroopers moved to the edge and peered down to witness her death as she struck the ground. The yellow-shouldered clone commander ordered five clones to go down and confirm her demise, then called in Gunships for an airlift out of the mushroom jungle.

Their original mission had been scrapped.

Chapter 24

The battle on Kashyyyk had gone extremely well for the Republic and Wookiee forces. By no means had it been easy, but they now had the droid army in full retreat and had pushed them back to the other side of the mountains—away from the lagoon and the tree city that had been threatened. The Wookiees had lost numerous brethren in the battle and grieving howls could be heard erupting all over the yellow shores of the lagoon as the towering warriors mourned their dead. These fallen soldiers would receive the grandest of funerals. They had fought and died defending their home, their friends and families. There was no greater honor than in doing so.

Standing next to General Tarfful and Commander Chewbacca in the Wookiee command center high up in the carved-out trunk of the mammoth tree, Master Yoda watched the holo-display of the continuing battle on the far side of the mountains. Matters were going well, and he was glad of that. He hoped to have this battle resolved as quickly as possible so that he might return to Coruscant, for he had sensed for some time now the growing shadow there.

The Jedi Order's conflict with the Sith was nearing its climax, and soon Darth Sidious would be revealed. Yoda knew it to be true, for the Force told him so.

But then, as Master Yoda watched the holo-display a sudden chill came over him. The cold, spindly fingers reaching out to him through the Force were filled with an evil more potent and more powerful than anything he'd ever felt before. The sensation grew more intense with every passing moment; filling the Force with anger, hatred and the power of the dark side.

Brow furrowed with concern, Yoda turned his gaze away from the holo-display and stared at the floor. The power and intensity of what he was feeling could mean only one thing; The Dark Lord of the Sith had finally revealed himself.

This was most troubling to Yoda, for he always thought he would be present when this happened. His overconfidence had gotten the better of him. The dark side had clouded his vision, and now there was no telling what price the Jedi Order would pay.

Then, all at once, a new source of dark power nearly equal to the first joined the storm. At that instant Master Yoda felt the very Force cry out in horror, pain and—most of all—grief.

Evil, pure evil, surged through the infinite energy field for some time before finally dissipating and slinking back into the vast darkness from whence it came. Yet even after the powerful blackness subsided the filth of the dark side lingered in Yoda's mind, causing him to feel nauseous.

The nausea eventually subsided to be replaced by an overwhelming sense of peril. Danger was on its way.

Peering down at the troubled Jedi Master, Commander Chewbacca cocked his head to the side and gave an inquisitive roar.

Yoda finally snapped out of his disturbed thoughts. "Bring my ship. Leave immediately, I must," he said with a deep, worried frown.

These words only worsened Chewbacca's confusion and concern, and they spun a surprised General Tarfful around with an questioning roar.

The first wave of the great disturbance in the Force nearly knocked the wind from Yoda's lungs and he winced. A second later another wave even more powerful than the first hit and he closed his eyes, pain spreading and deepening across his face as the screams began. Then another, and another, and another wave hit until they became one big wave that slammed into him through the Force.

Hand clutching his heart as it cried out in agony, Yoda staggered on his cane to a wide window overlooking the lagoon. The terrified screams of the children suddenly reached him, and he closed his eyes, tears nearly escaping.

The young ones.... Oh! The young ones!! he thought.

He peered out the wide opening in the trunk and up through the branches at the sky with saddened, pleading eyes; begging the Force to bring peace and serenity to all the Jedi he felt dying across the galaxy.

Tarfful and Chewbacca stood frozen with confusion, staring at Master Yoda. Tarfful turned to look at Chewbacca with questioning eyes when something on the holo-display caught his attention.

He wheeled around to the display and gave a bark of bewilderment, causing Chewbacca to turn as well. They both watched as all of a sudden all forces in the rear of the Republic's attack group turned completely around and raced back across the lagoon—directly towards the Wookiee tree city. Chewbacca gave a puzzled roar, and Tarfful responded with a worried shake of his head.

As the waves of the disturbance in the Force began fading away Yoda heard Tarfful's and Chewbacca's confused exchange and turned teary eyes to peer at them, his breathing still coming in tattered gasps. A puzzled expression crossed his face as he saw the mass of clone forces rushing back towards the tree city—towards his location.

Foreboding filled the Force.

"A bad feeling about this, have I," Yoda said, staring worriedly at the holo-display.

Yoda knew that the revelation of Darth Sidious and the deaths of the Jedi across the galaxy were related. They had to be. The clones had been ordered to turn on and kill their Jedi leaders, which meant the clones were now coming for him.

Tarfful pointed excitedly at something flashing red on the holo-display, and Chewbacca gave an alarmed roar, then turned to peer out over the lagoon.

Yoda sensed the danger approaching. Quickly, he turned to peer back out across the lagoon to see a group of four Gunships heading straight for them. The Gunships launched a flurry of missiles, then peeled away. The missiles streaked straight towards the command center level.

Knowing that there was nothing they could do, Tarfful and Chewbacca merely watched as the deadly projectiles came towards the wide opening in the trunk.

Yoda dropped his cane and raised his hand into the air, grabbing the fast-approaching missiles with the Force. With great effort, the aged Jedi Master waved his hand to the side and the barrage of missiles suddenly veered off course. The missiles screamed past their intended target and were lost in the jungle beyond.

Anger upon his face at the treachery of the Sith, Yoda peered into the sky above the mountains on the other side of the lagoon and saw an even greater swarm of Gunships heading straight for them.

He heard the sound of Wookiees roaring across the room behind him. He turned to look across the wide, hollowed out, honeycombed trunk that made up this level of the Wookiee city to see numerous Wookiees running towards the ramp leading down to the lower levels. Then the sound of blaster fire began making its way up that ramp, accompanied by even more enraged roars and growls.

One level down, a cluster of twenty or so Stormtroopers came running up the ramp leading from the landing bay. The clones rushed across the wide room, blasting at any and every Wookiee that got in their way and trying to make their way up to the command center level.

The Wookiees put up a grand fight against the Stormtroopers. The towering warriors rushed the white-armored clones in a fury, while even more Wookiees swung down from levels higher up to join the fight.

The rage of battle rushing through their veins and anger at being turned upon by the very forces that had come to protect them the Kashyyyk natives attacked. None of the Wookiees were armed. They had rushed too quickly into battle to retrieve any weaponry. Using only their incredible strength and long, sharp claws the Wookiees swung out at the clones, striking them and sending them flying across the room. Some Wookiees actually picked up Stormtroopers as if they were nothing and tossed them at other clones—sending entire clusters of the white-armored warriors falling out the wide windows. The clones gave loud screams as they plunged the hundreds of meters to the ground.

It looked as if the Wookiees would win, but then even more Stormtroopers rushed up the ramp to join the fight.

Soon, the Wookiees were outnumbered and out-gunned and they began falling.

The Stormtroopers fired upon the Wookiees mercilessly. They knew how strong these towering warriors' wills were, so they hit them with blast after blast until they were unmoving on the ground. Then, once matters were well under control, the Stormtroopers continued up the next ramp and after their objective.

The group of fifty clones came rushing up the ramp, blasters raised and ready to fire. One clone spotted Yoda and pointed at him, then the entire group came running across the room, continuing to fire upon any Wookiee that got in their way.

Tarfful raised his staff into the air, Chewbacca retrieved his bowcaster, and the two of them gave rage-filled roars as they made to rush at the clones.

"No!" Yoda yelled to the Wookiee commanders, raising a hand to signal them to halt. They heeded his word, staring at him and wondering what he was going to do. Retrieving and igniting his lightsaber, Yoda narrowed his eyes as he turned to look at the clones. "Handle this, I will."

Yoda knew that these clones were no longer allies to the Jedi. They were servants of the Sith, and would do whatever they were ordered. They were not evil—they lacked the mental capacity to be such—but they were doing Evil's bidding now. Yoda knew that he could not allow such a thing. He could not allow Evil to triumph.

He gave a loud yell as he jumped into the air and flipped towards the group of Stormtroopers. The clones opened fire, but Yoda blocked the blasts with his lightsaber with ease as he flipped towards them, sending the bolts right back where they'd come from. Yoda landed right in the middle of the cluster of

clones and began swinging, flipping and spinning with his shimmering, green blade.

In no time at all Yoda cleared a wide swath of the Stormtroopers, and their fallen bodies littered the wood-planked floor. He stopped his flipping and spinning and turned to face the remaining cluster of Stormtroopers. They opened fire on him as they stutter-stepped forward. Holding his lightsaber with one hand, Yoda moved the blade to block the blasts. Then, he raised his free hand and reached out with the Force. With a grunt, he waved the hand to the side. The Stormtroopers looked as if their bodies were attached to strings that had suddenly been yanked out of the windows.

Humming lightsaber in hand, standing amidst the fallen bodies of the Stormtroopers, a scowl-faced Yoda peered around the room. Then, he deactivated the blade and turned to peer back up at Tarful and Chewbacca, who were staring at him in awe.

A series of enormous shudders rippled through the trunk as AT-TE's opened fire on the tree. Yoda looked back out across the lagoon and saw that the Republic's land forces were getting nearer. He also saw that the enormous swarm of Gunships was nearly upon them.

Breathing heavily, Master Yoda said, "Leave this city, I must. In danger with me here, your people are."

General Tarful gave a series of barks and roars, to which Chewbacca roared his agreement.

"Suffered enough, your people have, General. Get away from here at once, I must," Yoda said.

The tree shook again, and wood beams began falling from the ceiling. Reluctantly, Tarful barked his agreement. Then, the Wookiee General turned and exchanged a quick series of barks and roars with Chewbacca. Chewbacca gave a roar, then came jogging across the room with purposeful strides.

The Wookiee military commander came to Master Yoda and swooped him up. Placing the small, green Jedi on his back as he continued to run at the wide opening in the side of the trunk, he jumped out the window and landed on a planked walkway ten meters below. Then, using his long claws and incredible dexterity, Commander Chewbacca jumped from level to level down the side of the giant tree trunk.

It was a hair raising experience—even for someone as seasoned as Master Yoda. His eyes were wide with alarm the entire way down to ground level.

Chewbacca landed in a valley of sorts between two of the enormous roots of the towering tree. The thunderous footfalls of AT-TE's and the high-pitched whine of other such Republic war machinery was close by, and Chewbacca peered around the corner of the end of one of the giant roots to make certain that they could proceed unseen. Hundreds of Stormtroopers were unloading from floating battle platforms along the beach, but they were a ways off. The way looked clear. Chewbacca turned and began running away from the lagoon and for the cover of the dense undergrowth of the jungle.

"Look! Over there!" Yoda heard a clone's voice shout. The Jedi Master turned to peer behind him and saw a group of Stormtroopers running around the large root and after them, opening fire with their blaster rifles. Searing, red bolts zipped by on all sides as Chewbacca ran as fast as he could for the undergrowth.

A loud THUD!, THUD!, THUD! caught Yoda's ear and he turned to look behind again. An AT-TE had come around the trunk and was positioning itself in order to take aim. If that thing fired at them there was little chance that they could avoid being hit.

Thinking quickly, Yoda turned and scanned the ground. He found what he needed right where the sand and dirt met the edge of the jungle. Gritting his teeth as he clung to Chewbacca's back with one hand, he stretched out the other and reached out with the Force. With great effort, Yoda picked a speeder-sized boulder up off the ground and sent it racing through the air.

The AT-TE had them locked on target and was just about to fire when the giant boulder came flying in from out of nowhere. The rock smashed into the mammoth walker with incredible force, knocking it backwards several meters before the AT-TE's legs collapsed and it exploded in a brilliant flash, sending Stormtroopers flying through the air in all directions.

Yoda watched behind them as they entered the undergrowth and saw that the enemy knew of their position. A vast number of Stormtroopers, Gunships and speeders were now coming after them. Yet, in spite of this, he saw that the Republic forces were also continuing to fire on the Wookiee tree city with their missiles and lasers. They seemed intent on destroying the thing now.

Yoda didn't know if this was being done out of revenge for the Wookiees having resisted the Republic's wishes, or to pacify the natives, or both, but as Chewbacca carried him deeper into the blackness of the jungle he knew that the galaxy was indeed entering dark times.

The clone forces were hot on their tail as Chewbacca ran through the undergrowth, smashing through bushes and trees as quickly as he could. Yoda knew that he needed to get back to Coruscant and discover what had happened to his fellow Jedi. He also knew that he must return in order to confront the Dark Lord. For the very future of the galaxy, he needed to escape this place alive so that he might defeat The Ultimate Evil.

He must!

Gunships came swooping into the high-canopied jungle and after Chewbacca and Yoda, lights affixed to their bottoms searching the dark ground as they flew deeper into the jungle. The clone pilots tried using their scanners to try to locate the beings in the undergrowth, but it was useless. There was far too much animal life in the dense foliage to pinpoint their target's location. So instead, they kept their eyes sharp and fingers perched over their fire controls.

Numerous Stormtroopers stood in the holds of the Gunships wearing infrared goggles, peering out across the jungle floor for any sign of the Jedi Master. Several AT-TE's smashed their way through the undergrowth, with more than a hundred searching clones running around their legs with lights affixed to their blasters. Several hoversleds, commandeered from the droid army, passed through the undergrowth carrying even more Stormtroopers after the escaped Jedi.

One particular clone pilot moved his helmeted head from side to side in the cockpit of his Gunship, scanning the ground for any sign of the Wookiee and the Jedi. He had been ordered to move slightly ahead of the main group just in case their quarry had somehow covered more ground than they thought possible. He was just about to turn around and double-check an area off to the east when movement caught his eye.

He craned his neck in order to see better and moved the light on the underside of the ship in that direction. Once the light was on the moving object there was no mistaking what he was seeing.

He'd found them.

"Target acqui—," the clone pilot began to say, but then his comm. unit suddenly burst with a shower of sparks. He tried it again to see if it would still work, but got nothing but static. He kicked up the engines and swooped in. He would contact the others at a later time. First he would accomplish his mission.

Yoda lowered his hand from having used the Force to crush the internal circuits of the Gunship's comm..

Chewbacca had run for quite some time in order to get away from the clone forces, but unfortunately he hadn't been fast enough. Now, with thick, deadly, green blaster bolts striking the ground all around them, the Wookiee picked up his pace even more. He made easy work of the underbrush; ripping through tangled bushes as if they were nothing, toppling arms-width trees and kicking through dense grasses in his haste to get Master Yoda to safety.

The Gunship fired relentlessly with its lasers and launched missile after missile. A jagged line of smoke

and smoldering brush lay in their wake, as if a fiery serpent had slithered across the ground.

“Left!” Yoda yelled. “Right! Right! Left! Duck!”

With Master Yoda telling him which way to dodge Chewbacca had done well in avoiding the assault. But then the trees began thinning out and they came upon a marsh. The knee-deep water slowed the powerful Wookiee’s pace and maneuverability considerably and the attack became much more on target.

The water continued to deepen as Chewbacca ran, and his speed suffered greatly. Closing his eyes to slits as he clung to Chewbacca’s furry back, Yoda used the Force to veer missiles away to splash and explode in the water, sending large sprays towering into the sky. He threw rocks sticking up out of the marsh and fallen tree trunks in the paths of laser bolts, and the debris exploded in brilliant flashes hot on their tail. All the while, Chewbacca continued to run as quickly as he could through the ever-deepening, mucky water.

Soon the water was up to Chewbacca’s waist, then it reached the bottom of Yoda’s dangling feet. Running was pointless, now, and the Wookiee barked to Master Yoda to take a deep breath.

They disappeared under the surface of the dark, muddy water, yet the clone pilot continued to fire upon their last known location for some time in an attempt to hit them. Eventually, he stopped and hovered over the water to search for any signs that he might have gotten them. Finding none, he steered the Gunship for the far bank and set down.

“Secure the shore. The comm. unit is broken. I’m going back to get the others,” the clone pilot turned and said into the cargo hold.

“Right,” the clone closest to the cockpit said with a nod, then turned and relayed the order to the other clones in the ship.

The fifteen Stormtroopers unloaded and the Gunship lifted back into the air. As it flew by overhead and back across the marsh the clones spread out along the bank, scanning the water’s surface for any sign of movement with blasters held ready.

Chewbacca surfaced slowly behind a drifting log and peered at the far shore to assess the situation. He scanned his eyes across the long line of white-clad troopers. He would have to head off to the right in order to avoid them. So, taking another deep breath, he slowly slid back under the surface of the water.

The clones moved their helmeted heads back and forth slowly; back and forth across the marsh. The hoots, howls and chirps of the jungle wildlife filled the still air. Then, the soft sound of some kind of engine echoed throughout the jungle, momentarily joining the din of the wildlife before fading away. Several of the clones raised their heads to the sky in search of the source of the sound of the strange engine, but saw nothing.

“Stay sharp,” a clone ordered, and immediately all eyes were turned back to the water.

As quietly as he could and with Yoda still clinging to his back, Chewbacca crawled up the small slope that made up the far bank of the marsh and into the tall bushes and grass. There was still water shin-deep on the other side of the slope, but it was much easier for Chewbacca to move through than before. Slowly, and hunched over so as not to stick out above the bushes, he walked through the water and deeper into the undergrowth.

Yoda’s eyes went wide. He had just enough time to retrieve his lightsaber and swing it to the left to block the blaster bolt that came at them from within the brush. Chewbacca gave a startled roar as the Stormtrooper burst out of the thicket, firing away as he did. Yoda dropped to the ground and moved his blade from side to side to block the blasts as the clone continued to fire. He sent a blast off of his green lightsaber and right back at the clone. The firing stopped.

But then the sound of numerous feet splashing through the water could be heard approaching as the rest of the clones came.

A strange sounding bird gave a low call in the nearby brush.

Chewbacca instantly recognized the call and gave several looks around as if searching the area, then ran forward into the thicker underbrush a short distance ahead.

A short time later three Stormtroopers emerged through the brush and into the small clearing Yoda was standing in. Before they even got off their first shot, Yoda gave a quick wave of his left hand to the side. The clones were jerked sideways and thrown into the air. As several more clones began emerging the sound of three large splashes could be heard off in the distance. Master Yoda stood his ground as he swung his blade to block the incoming blaster bolts, sending several more clones falling to the ground.

The last cluster of five clones emerged to find Yoda merely standing with his green blade down at his side. They raised their weapons to fire, but before they could Chewbacca and General Tarfful burst from the brush directly behind them with thunderous roars.

The Stormtroopers were taken completely by surprise. Tarfful grabbed two of the clones by their helmets with his giant paws and lifted them into the air. With a wrath filled growl, he smashed their heads together and let their limp bodies drop like garbage. Chewbacca slashed his long claws through the chest of one, then came behind another and grabbed his arms. With a roar that shook the heavens and a quick, upward pull he yanked the Stormtroopers arms right off.

The last remaining clone turned with his rifle and pointed it right at Tarfful's chest. But before he could get a shot off the Wookiee General snatched the gun from his hands and snapped it in two, sending sparks flying everywhere. The clone gawked in stunned disbelief. Then, Tarfful gave another roar and picked up the clone. Hefting him over his head, Tarfful grunted and tossed the screaming clone several meters through the air and at a nearby tree trunk. The clones screaming stopped abruptly upon the crushing impact.

Yoda deactivated his lightsaber and replaced it onto his belt while the two Wookiee warriors, chests heaving with rage from the battle, peered at him.

"Well done, General. Commander," Yoda said, nodding to each in kind.

The two Wookiees gave slow nods, then Tarfful began barking and roaring—explaining how he'd tracked them down and that he brought transport for them.

"Good. Hurry, we must. For approaching, the clone forces are," Yoda said, beginning to walk forward. Tarfful, with Yoda and Chewbacca closely behind him, led the way to his Wookiee fighter parked in a clearing a short walk away.

Tarfful began barking again. The General explained that Chewbacca would take Master Yoda to a ship and off of the planet while he distracted and diverted the Republic's forces. Chewbacca began protesting, saying that he should be the one to lead the clone forces away. But Tarfful calmly, and gently, placed a hand on Chewbacca's shoulder and told him everything would be all right.

Chewbacca lowered his head and gave a soft, sad roar, and then Tarfful told them that there was a starship in a village not far away waiting to take them off planet. After that he told them that they'd better get going.

Chewbacca got into the pilot's seat, while Tarfful picked up Master Yoda and placed him in the gunner's seat.

"A debt of gratitude, I owe you," Yoda said.

Tarfful bowed his deadlocked head deeply, reverently, as he barked that it was the galaxy that owed the Jedi for their brave sacrifice in The Wars. He backed away as Chewbacca started up the repulsor engines of the small fighter and the four, thin wings on top and on the front began flapping.

Tarfful stepped back and his fur, the bushes, trees, and the grass all began to swirl as the air picked up and the fighter took off. The Wookiee General watched the fighter for some time as it flew away, then

turned and went back into the underbrush.

He emerged back on the bank of the marsh. He had some clones to catch the attention of, and he could see their massive forces fast approaching through the jungle. His lips curled back in a snarl as he watched them continue to come.

He knew that this would probably be his end, but the Republic had gone too far. Too many of his people had been killed by the clones while they had been trying to protect Master Yoda for him to turn his back now. And now, because of their resistance, it seemed that the Republic had declared war on them.

So this would be his end.

But what an end he would make it!

Chewbacca seated in the pilots seat, Yoda in the chair next to him, the small, Wookiee starship lifted into the air from the landing pad on the thick branch of the tall tree. As the ship shot through the treetops and into the sky Chewbacca noted several Star Destroyers hovering just above the tops of the giant trees a few kilometers away. He gave a soft, saddened roar as he watched the giant, knife-like ships bombard the cities of his people with their blaster cannons, then turned his attention back forward as the ship started through the clouds.

Master Yoda peered at the small figure displayed by the holo-projector on top of the console in front of him, a morose expression on his face.

"Master Yoda! We've been terribly worried! What's happened, and how may I be of service?" the blue-white image of Senator Bail Organa said with a slight bow.

Yoda gave a long, heavy sigh. "Tell you everything, I will. But first, meet me you must."

Bail gave a curt nod. *"I'll get to my ship at once. Where would you like to meet?"*

Chapter 25

Hood pulled down low over his brow, arms folded into the sleeves of his brown robe, Obi-Wan walked swiftly through the crowded, bustling streets of the Utapau city. The city was bigger than he'd expected. The sinkhole that housed it was wide and deep and lined with ramps that spiraled along the walls from level to level. Red flags and banners flapped in the slight breeze all around the ramps of the city. Air speeders and small transports zipped around within the giant opening, and several starships took to the air for space.

As before, the natives had used giant seed pods as inspiration for structural designs. The bright blue and bright green pod-shaped structures stuck out from the walls all around the interior of the sinkhole, while some sat at the end of planks jutting out from the ramped walkways and serving as waiting stations for transports.

It had taken Obi-Wan nearly an hour to reach the city. His pace had been slowed considerably by the relentless search efforts of the clone army after his escape from Commander Cody and his men. Gunships, ARC fighters, and platoons of Stormtroopers on speeder bikes zigzagged all across the Utapau countryside in search of him. Because of this, he and his steed had been forced to make use of the grand network of caves linking the sinkholes until they had finally reached the city. Then, with grateful words, Obi-Wan had set the lizard-beast free. The city was no place for such a large animal, and it would only draw inquisitive eyes. Besides—not being a native Utapian would draw enough unwanted attention to Obi-Wan as it was.

And draw attention he did.

The tall, gaunt, ashen-faced citizens of the sinkhole metropolis gazed at him in curiosity and mistrust, stopping to whisper and point as he walked by. Women gave startled gasps at seeing him, and children asked quiet questions as they were hurried out of his path. Obi-Wan caught only snippets of what was being said, but what he heard wasn't good. Mostly he heard the words "Jedi", "traitor!" and "murderer!"—words he was not accustomed to hearing uttered in the same sentence.

He was confused and alarmed by this, and by the fear he felt emanating from the people. He wondered just what they had heard that had altered their view of the Jedi Order so drastically and so quickly. No doubt the Republic forces had told the people of this city something about why they were now chasing after their Jedi General, but what they had said Obi-Wan could only guess. By the sound of things, it hadn't been good.

He needed to get in touch with the Jedi Temple. He needed to find out what had happened. Most of all, he needed to get off of this planet.

Obi-Wan passed a tall, arched opening in the wall to his right, and he turned to peer at it to see where it went. But then he noticed the two Utapian guards standing at the archway staring at him and he turned away quickly. He hurried his pace as much as he dared without being obvious and tried to get out of the line of sight of the guards—which wasn't too difficult with him being nearly a half-meter shorter than everyone around him.

Obi-Wan cut around behind a man pulling a small, leaf-shaped hoversled piled with strange fruits and hid in a small crevice along the wall. Cautiously, he peered around the crevice and back down the ramp at the guards, a hand up next to his face to hold his cowl in place against the breeze. He saw the two guards standing next to each other along the wall several meters down the ramp, their gazes searching hurriedly through the crowd while one spoke into a comm. link.

Brow furrowed in frustration and disappointment, Obi-Wan leaned back from the crevice and gazed at the ground with pensive eyes. His situation had not improved in the least. Silently, he berated himself for coming to this city. He couldn't even remember now why he'd thought it a wise idea.

He looked back around the crevice and at the guards and was alarmed to see one of them spot him. Eyes wide, the guard pointed at him and brought the attention of his companion to bear, who promptly spoke into his comm.. Then, the guard deactivated it and the pair began walking up the ramp with quick, long strides.

Obi-Wan turned and hurried back into the crowd heading up the ramp. He kept his head low as he tried to get through the crowds as quickly as possible, moving his eyes from side to side for some place, some way to lose the guards. But then he noticed a widening part in the crowd up ahead, further up the ramp. He was worried, because he knew they weren't parting for him.

Obi-Wan's steps slowed as a pair of Utopian Guards materialized out of the crowd just in front of him; long, ornate, blaster rifles held ready and tall frames covered with body armor. He stopped and peered at them from deep within his hood, wondering what he should do. The crowd widened into a large circle around Obi-Wan and the two approaching guards, gasps of alarm rippling through the gathering.

Movement on the left and right caught Obi-Wan's eye, and he turned to see two more guards—the two that had spotted him earlier—coming through the crowd with rifles leveled. Slowly, Obi-Wan began sliding his right hand out of his left sleeve. He wanted to be ready to reach for his lightsaber when the time came. The guards seemed to notice this, and they tensed. Their postures changed into more battle-ready stances. They could see that a fight was coming.

But a prompting in the Force gave Obi-Wan reason to pause, and he stopped moving the hand. He searched the feeling to make certain he had interpreted it correctly, then slid the hand back into the sleeve and made his posture as passive as possible. This was not a time for action.

The guards eased visibly. One directly in front of Obi-Wan slung his blaster rifle over his shoulder and came forward. He stopped just in front of Obi-Wan and bowed. Puzzled, Obi-Wan slowly returned the gesture, then watched as all of the other guards shouldered their weapons and bowed as well.

"Administrator Tion Medon wishes to speak with you, General," the guard said, his lips moving around jagged teeth, onyx eyes gazing intently.

Obi-Wan's brow furrowed under his hood. *They're not going to arrest me?* he thought. Then, he said, "Of course. I...would like that."

The high-pitched whine of numerous rectangular, Republic troop transports slowly lowering throughout the sinkhole caused them all to look that way. They watched in shock as the ships began docking at transport stations all over the sinkhole city. The ships raised their wide doors, spilling massive numbers of Stormtroopers out of them. The people of the city cowered out of the way of the white-clad troopers as they hurried along the ramps and began taking up positions.

The guard turned back to Obi-Wan, worry on his face. "We must be quick. This way," he said, indicating back down the ramp in the direction Obi-Wan had just come from. The guard hurried past and Obi-Wan followed. The other three guards fell into step behind him.

The stunned crowd didn't move, so the guards were forced to push their way through. The people were transfixed by the sudden appearance of the Stormtroopers. Faces filled with mixed emotions of alarm, curiosity, and confusion, the masses exchanged hushed questions about what was happening as they watched the Republic forces take over their city.

All of a sudden screams began erupting further down the ramp. Obi-Wan peered around the guard in front of him to see what was the matter and saw a surge of terrified citizens running towards them.

"Against the wall! It may be our only way to get past them!" the guard shouted over his shoulder, and Obi-Wan nodded his agreement.

They moved to the wall, hugging it as they continued to struggle against the rushing crowd. The guard ran to the opening of the archway Obi-Wan had passed earlier and turned. "In here. This way!" he urged.

Obi-Wan struggled against the crowd until he finally reached the archway.

And then, as the last bit of the crowd went past, he saw what it was the people were running from—a platoon of Stormtroopers running up the ramp.

"There he is!" one of the helmeted clones said in that all-too-familiar voice.

"Blast him!" another said, bringing his blaster rifle to bear.

Obi-Wan got out his lightsaber and turned it on just in time to deflect the hail of blaster fire. He sent the red beams of light right back at the clones, and several dropped to the ground as they tried to come forward. The guards joined the fray and opened fire with their own blasters, picking off several clones themselves.

"Go!" one of the guards said to Obi-Wan, waving him through the arch while using its inside wall as cover. "We'll keep them busy!"

The guard turned and began shooting around the corner. But Obi-Wan didn't move. He felt guilty leaving these men here to fight his fight. A grunt behind him told him that one of the guards there had been hit. Then, several blast bolts exploded on the archway and the guard that had told him to flee was forced to recoil back around the corner. Seeing that Obi-Wan was still there the guard pleaded, "*Please*, Master Jedi! GO!!"

Obi-Wan winced. He wanted to fight, but if he did and was killed the sacrifice of these men would be for nothing. Baring his teeth in frustration, he turned and ran through the arch. He deactivated his lightsaber as he ran into the wide tunnel beyond. Two guards holding open a tall, thick set of doors hurriedly waved him towards them. As he neared the doors several more guards streamed through them and ran past to join the fight at the archway. Obi-Wan ran through the doors, and as he did the pair of guards pushed them shut behind him and went to join the fight themselves.

Obi-Wan lowered his hood and stood in the dimly lit, opulent foyer feeling as if he were lost. Fine paintings and statues filled the arched hallways leading off to the left and the right giving the place a sense of great importance. Directly in front of him was a tall, maroon carpeted staircase. Numerous guards rushed down the stairs, throughout the foyer and down the halls spurring from it, but they paid him no mind. They said nothing to him as they rushed past; too busy preparing barricades of furniture and other such things for an invasion of the building.

One guard came right at Obi-Wan. Thinking that this person might be the one that would take him to see Tion Medon Obi-Wan locked eyes with him and gave a curt nod. The guard returned the nod, but then simply walked right by to stop at the side of the large doors directly behind Obi-Wan. Confused, and worried by the growing sounds of battle on the other side of those doors, Obi-Wan turned to face the guard.

He was just about to ask where he might find the administrator when the guard simply stated, "Move."

Obi-Wan's brow furrowed, but then the guard pushed a button on the wall next to the doors. A low, rumbling sound filled the foyer as half-meter thick blast doors began sliding out from the walls, and Obi-

Wan took several quick steps further into the room to avoid being crushed between them. The guard began walking down one of the side halls without another word as the heavy blast doors closed behind Obi-Wan with an echoing BOOM!. And then once again Obi-Wan stood in the middle of the foyer without a clue as to where he should go.

"Master Kenobi," a voice called down from the stairs.

Obi-Wan raised his eyes up the maroon-carpeted steps to find the regal Tion Medon standing at the top; one hand resting atop of a tall, silver cane while the other reached out and beacons Obi-Wan forward with curled waves of spindly, clawed fingers.

"This way," the administrator said in his slow, smooth voice; his onyx-colored eyes peering down at Obi-Wan intently.

Obi-Wan hurried up the steps as even more armed guards rushed down the steps past him and began setting up barricades at the base of the stairs.

"I apologize for the lack of hospitality in my home at the moment, but I am sure you can understand that my men are quite...preoccupied at the moment," Tion said with a fanged smile as Obi-Wan neared the top of the stairs.

Most people would have found it difficult, or even crazy, to willingly approach a being as frightening in appearance as a smiling Utapian. But if there was one thing Obi-Wan had learned in all his years as a Jedi, it was not to judge things by the way they looked. The eyes could often deceive you.

Tion turned and began walking on his cane in his usual, slow gait as soon as Obi-Wan reached the top of the stairs. Obi-Wan caught up with him, and as they continued down the arch-ceilinged, darkened hall several more guards ran past and down the staircase.

"Thank you for your help, administrator," Obi-Wan said. "You put yourself at great risk by doing so. I am forever in the debt of you and your men."

"Think nothing of it, Master Kenobi," Tion Medon said with a dismissive wave of a pale, bony hand, keeping his eyes forward down the hall. "The Jedi Order has a long history of sacrificing for others without any thought of themselves. What we do here today is but a small payment in the debt of gratitude the galaxy owes the Jedi." He paused for a reflective moment, then said, "And besides, I could never believe what they are saying about you."

"What...are they saying?" Obi-Wan asked, not certain if he even wanted to know.

"That you are a traitor and disruptor in the Republic," Tion said, an edge of anger in his tone as he did. "They claim the Jedi tried to overthrow the government on Coruscant and attempted to kill the Supreme Chancellor. I know that cannot be true," he said with conviction. "But, even if it were, I know the Jedi would not do so without good reason."

Obi-Wan was stunned. His eyes filled with worry as he thought the matter through. *Tried to kill the Supreme Chancellor!? Impossible!*

He had warned Master Windu of Palpatine's involvement with Darth Sidious, and he was quite certain that Mace would have acted upon the information and gone to *arrest* the Supreme Chancellor, but not to *kill* him. Never to kill him unless it was done out of self-defense.

He pondered that possibility. *Had Palpatine resisted the arrest? Had Palpatine somehow been ready for the Jedi when they came? But how could he possibly...* Obi-Wan began to wonder, but then a most troubling thought entered his mind.

"I must contact the Jedi Temple as soon as possible!" he said.

Tion turned to regard Obi-Wan as he walked, a curious look on his face. "Of course. This way," he said, gesturing with his long, outstretched arm.

A loud THUD! THUD! THUD! echoed down the hall from back down the stairs at the blast doors. Alarmed, both Tion and Obi-Wan turned to look back down the hall towards the top of the stairs. More guards ran out of a doorway just to the side of the top of the stairs and then disappeared down them, weapons ready.

Turning back to Obi-Wan, Tion Medon said, "I think we'd better hurry."

The administrator walked as swiftly as he could, and Obi-Wan was nearly forced to jog to keep up.

Walking past a pair of saluting guards as thick doors slid open, Tion Medon and Obi-Wan entered the dimly lit room. The incessant beeps and comm. chatter emanating through those open doors told Obi-Wan all he needed to know about the room. His guess was confirmed as they exited the small antechamber and he looked around to see numerous Utapians hurrying around the room, as well as seated at consoles with display screens and banks of flashing buttons on them.

"This is my personal military command center," Tion said, waving an outstretched arm around the room. "You can contact the Jedi Temple from right over here," he said, leading Obi-Wan to an empty comm. station.

"Thank you," Obi-Wan said, taking a seat at the comm. station and beginning to press buttons right away. He was rather anxious, and becoming more so with every second that went by. The thought of what he feared had happened back on Coruscant was just too terrible.

He only had to wait for a handful of seconds for his hail of The Temple to be answered, but what he heard only served to deepen his concern; droning in and out in a seemingly never-ending call was The Temple's Emergency Recall Beacon.

Not once had he even heard of the beacon being activated before. Something terribly wrong must be happening. Obi-Wan stared at the console's bank of multi-colored, flashing buttons for some time before Tion's voice caught his attention.

"You look pale, Master Kenobi. Is something the matter?"

Obi-Wan looked up at the administrator with shocked eyes.

"I need a ship. I must return to Coruscant at once," he said in a soft, distant voice.

Tion regarded him worriedly for a few seconds, then said. "Yes. Yes, of course."

"Administrator!" someone shouted from across the room. "They've breached the front doors!"

"Sound the alarm," Tion Medon said calmly. Then, turning back to Obi-Wan, "Come with me."

Obi-Wan followed him across the command room and through a door near the rear, four guards right on their heels. Just as the door slid shut behind them, Obi-Wan heard the sound of thumping at the main door to the command room, followed by shouts of guards and technicians as they rushed to the doors with weapons ready. Then, after the door closed, the sound of blaster fire could be heard in the next room.

The Stormtroopers were close.

Tion led Obi-Wan down the long hall and through another door leading into an underground hangar, and as Obi-Wan entered he saw a rather familiar ship sitting in the middle of the large room.

"My men found it no more than an hour ago in a hangar in The Droid General's base of operations in the mountains," Tion explained. "I'd hoped to keep it as a souvenir of our victory over the droid army, ...but, I think you are in greater need of it," Tion said with another flash of a fanged smile.

The sound of blaster fire grew closer, and Obi-Wan and the administrator turned to look at the door to the hangar. The four guards were standing just a short distance away from the door, their long blaster rifles raised and ready.

"You must go. Now!" Tion said as the sound of cutting torches could be heard and sparks began erupting from the hangar door.

Obi-Wan ran to the sleek, silver, twin-engine ship. Just about to step up into the hatch, he turned and looked back at Tion Medon.

The administrator was looking back and forth between him, and the lengthening gash in the door. Reaching into his robes and pulling out a long-barreled blaster, he turned once more to Obi-Wan.

"Thank you," Obi-Wan said, meaning it from the bottom of his heart.

"Go, Master Kenobi! Go!" Tion Medon yelled, then turned to face the door with the blaster held ready.

Obi-Wan scrambled up the hatch and shut it behind him as the giant hangar doors on the ceiling peeled back to reveal a tunnel lined with strobing, white lights. He hurried up to the cockpit and began flipping switches on the dash as soon as he sat in the pilot's seat. The low hum of the engines coming on-line grew louder and more intense, and soon the cockpit was filled with the high-pitched sound of the powerful thrusters.

A flash of light filled the room, and Obi-Wan looked to see smoke billowing out of a large hole in the door across the room.

White-clad Stormtroopers emerged from the smoke and into the room, blasting away with their rifles. The guards and Tion Medon returned fire, and several Stormtroopers fell before they could get very far. But the clones just kept coming, and they kept firing, and as Obi-Wan kicked in the repulsors and the ship began to rise into the air he saw more than one Utapian guard fall, with Tion Medon not far behind them.

The Stormtroopers then turned their attention to Obi-Wan's ship. The THUD! of blast bolts striking the hull filled the cockpit as he lifted the ship further, then kicked in the main engines and tore off up into the tunnel.

The tunnel was angled favorably, and when Obi-Wan emerged from it at the surface he was pointed well towards the sky. He kicked the engines onto full and made all-speed for space. Just as he came through the top of the clouds he brought up the comm. unit of the ship and dialed the frequency of someone the Force told him he needed to contact—the only person he knew that the Jedi Order trusted with their most sensitive secrets.

Four ARC fighters swooped in after him as he neared the upper atmosphere, and Obi-Wan was forced to spin and weave to avoid their powerful laser blasts. The color of the sky began growing darker and darker, and then all at once the starfield filled the viewport and he was in space.

"Bail Organa, here," a man's voice said on the comm..

"Senator Organa! This is Obi-Wan Kenobi. I—" he said, but was forced to stop because of the need to dodge another barrage of blaster fire. A beeping erupted from the console, and he looked down at a display screen to see that two Star Destroyers were moving in to cut him off. "Great," he grumbled under his breath.

"Obi-Wan!?" Bail said, shock and relief evident in his voice. *"I'm so glad to hear you're alive! I'm en route to pick up Master Yoda as we speak."*

"Master Yoda!? Where!?" Obi-Wan blurted out, a heavy wave of relief washing over him.

"In the Sandarri sector," Bail said. *"I'll send you the coordinates."*

Obi-Wan was already punching them into the ship's navigation computer. "Don't bother. I know where it is," he said.

"Right. We'll see you there," Bail said, and then the comm. went dead.

A laser blast from one of the Star Destroyers closing in rocked the ship.

"If I make it out of here alive," Obi-Wan said to himself, adding as much power to the engines as they had left.

The ARC fighters and the Star Destroyers were right behind him now, but General Grievous' ship was faster and soon he was widening the gap. Then, the navigational computer began beeping to signify that he was far enough away from the gravity well of Utapau, and Obi-Wan pulled back the lever for lightspeed.

The stars turned to starlines, and the ship entered hyperspace leaving the ARC fighters and Star Destroyers behind.

Chapter 26

With strong, confident strides Anakin walked across the balcony of the Grand Hall of the Jedi Temple, the hood of his brown robe raised. All around him lay the fallen bodies of Jedi and Stormtroopers, but he paid them no mind as he walked. Stormtroopers rushed by on patrols, making certain that every threat in The Temple had been eliminated, but Anakin paid them no mind. His eyes were transfixed on the black-robed, hooded figure slowly walking towards him from across the balcony.

Six Royal Guards with their pikes, red robes and stoic, helmeted faces flanked the black-clad figure on all sides. Following them was a line of forty Stormtroopers.

Anakin peered at the dark figure; seeing him, in a sense, for the first time. He gazed upon Darth Sidious with a sense of awe, for he knew the man held the keys to all the secrets he so desperately wanted answers to.

Anakin felt the dark side welling inside him, but knew it was nothing compared to what Sidious could summon. This man wielded power the likes of which Anakin had only dreamed of! He knew that he too could one day obtain such power—but only with Sidious. *He* was the only one that could help him achieve such a lofty goal. Only this man could give him everything he'd ever wanted.

Humbled before such power and authority, Anakin dropped to one knee in front of The Dark Lord and bowed his head in deep respect.

Sidious approached slowly, gazing down at Anakin with a knowing smirk on his lips. He stopped right in front of Anakin. The red-robed guards and Stormtroopers stopped as well. Darth Sidious peered down at the top of Anakin's hooded head, pleased that his new apprentice had completed his mission with such efficiency and ferocity.

Indeed the boy is powerful, Sidious thought, pleased, yet cautious. Such a powerful apprentice could be dangerous. ...*But well worth the risk.*

Sidious stretched forth a hand and placed it atop of Anakin's hooded head. "Riiissssee, Darth Vader, Dark Lord of the Sith," his gravely voice said in that eerie, slow tone.

Sidious removed the hand and Anakin obeyed—getting to his feet to stand before his Master and bask in his glory. His emotions overflowed with pleasure at hearing his new Sith Title. He made a firm commitment then and there to make that name known throughout the galaxy—to make all that heard it tremble in awe and fear at his power and wrath.

A thin, pleased smile crossed his Master's face.

Sidious began walking again. Anakin fell in step at his side as the Royal Guards and Stormtroopers began walking as well. They walked for some time in silence, and Anakin waited eagerly to hear his Master's next order.

"You've done well," Sidious seethed.

Anakin's heart swelled at hearing him say this, for he felt compelled to please him. He wanted nothing more than to do as his Master ordered. "Thank you, my Master," he replied.

"And now, I have another mission for you...", Sidious said.

He explained the mission as they continued to walk deeper into the body-strewn Jedi Temple. A smug smirk tugged at Anakin's mouth as he listened, for he was very much looking forward to this next mission.

Sidious finished explaining the details of the mission. With a dismissive wave of his hand, he ordered, "Now go, Lord Vader. Do as you have been commanded and report back to me."

Anakin bowed his head. "Yes, my Master," he said, drunk with the controlling power of the dark side emanating from Darth Sidious. Then, Anakin turned and walked through the parting Royal Guards and Stormtroopers and back down the balcony of the Grand Hall.

He had one quick stop to make before leaving. And after this mission, he would have everything he wanted.

Senator Bail Organa's private escort ship, the *Tantive IV*, approached the planet Coruscant. The system's sun's bright rays reflected off of the white hull, making it appear as if the ship's rectangular body were alight with white fire as the bank of engines slowly brought it towards the city-planet. Traffic around the capital was surprisingly stilted, and the presence of numerous Star Destroyers orbiting the orb gave the planet an uninviting feeling—a sense of danger to all that approached. The enormous *Venator*-class Star Destroyers were spread out around the planet in a very deliberate way as if the planet were being blockaded. Which wasn't far from the truth.

The mood in the cockpit was in stark contrast to the warm, bright sunshine spilling in through its windows. Little was said between its occupants. The pilot and his copilot made small exchanges concerning flight vectors and speed, but besides that the only sounds were beeps from the flashing consoles. Seated behind the pilot and his second, Bail, Master Yoda and Obi-Wan peered out at the choking military presence around Coruscant with sad eyes.

Finally, Bail broke the silence while gazing at those Star Destroyers. "Are you certain this is a wise decision—returning to the very heart of the Republic when every clone with a blaster is searching for the Jedi?" Turning to look at Master Yoda seated next to him, and Obi-Wan seated next to Yoda, he shook his head and said, "It's too dangerous."

Master Yoda met his worried gaze with steady eyes. "Return to the Jedi Temple, we must. Discover what has happened, we must."

The determination in the aged Jedi Master's voice and the look in Obi-Wan's eyes told Bail that there would be no discussing the matter, so he dropped it. He turned his gaze back out the wide window of the cockpit, eyeing those Star Destroyers wearily as they grew larger by the second.

One particular Star Destroyer altered its orbit so that it was now on a path to intercept the *Tantive*. Seeing this, the pilot made to adjust his path. But before he could a calm, confident voice called out from directly behind him.

"Stay on course, captain," Obi-Wan said.

"But sir—they on an intercept trajectory!" the white-haired pilot said, dressed in a gray and blue jumpsuit.

"They're testing us," Obi-Wan soothed. "They want to see if they can make us nervous. If we show we're nervous, then we must have something to hide."

The pilot kept his hand on the lever he had been about to pull; uncertain if what Obi-Wan had said was correct. He knew to listen to the wise words of a Jedi Master. But if he were wrong...they would be in a

very bad situation.

"Trust me, captain," Obi-Wan said as the Star Destroyer came closer growing larger and larger by the second.

Slowly, the pilot pulled his hand back from the lever.

The Star Destroyer continued forward with no sign of stopping. Its mammoth size nearly filled the viewport now, and the Tantive became dwarfed in the shadow of its bridge tower. The mood in the cockpit became even more tense as several of the giant blaster cannon batteries along the side of the Star Destroyer turned to point at them. The pilot and co-pilot exchanged wide-eyed looks, while Obi-Wan and Bail traded baffled expressions themselves.

A hailing tone sprang from the cockpit's comm. unit, followed by the no-nonsense voice of a man.

"We have you locked-on in our systems now. Identify."

The pilot gave a quick look at Bail, who gave a curt nod. The pilot turned back around and clicked on the comm.. "This is the *Tantive IV* requesting immediate clearance to land."

"Clearance denied," the response came—and rather quickly, Obi-Wan noted. *"Power down all engines and prepare to be boarded. Your ship must be searched before clearance can be granted."*

Alarmed, all in the cockpit look to one another, wondering what they would do. Except Yoda. Master Yoda merely kept his calm eyes forward as he rested his chin on the top of his cane.

Clicking onto the comm. located in the arm of his chair, Bail said, "Lieutenant, I—"

"Captain," the man on the other end of the comm. corrected him quickly with a snide tone.

"Very well, *Captain*," Bail said, putting a hint of impatience in his commanding tone. "This is Senator Bail Organa of Alderaan. Here is my confirmation code," he said, tapping buttons on the comm. console. "As a member of the senate, I deny any boarding or search of my ship and demand you grant us passage *immediately*."

"I'm sorry, sir," the captain said, his smug tone replaced with uncertainty. *"But I have my orders."*

"And I am giving you new ones. By the authority invested in my office I *demand* clearance!"

There was a long pause on the other end of the comm.. The tension in the cockpit was thick. Bail turned to meet a curious look from Obi-Wan and gave a shrug; the worried expression on his face saying he wasn't certain if his gamble would work or not.

Despite the situation, Obi-Wan couldn't help but crack a small smile as he turned to peer back out of the viewport.

Adding a touch of anger to his voice, Bail clicked on the comm. again and said, "You are interfering with official senate business, captain. I do not have time for this nonsense."

Finally, the captain had had enough. Orders or not, he did not want to chance incurring the wrath of a member of the senate. *"Clearance granted, senator. I apologize for the delay."*

"Indeed you should, *captain*," Bail said haughtily, then clicked off the comm.. He turned to look at Obi-Wan and Master Yoda and gave them a quick smile as the pilot kicked up the engines and aimed the ship for the planet.

They found even more Star Destroyers in low orbit just above the tops of the skyscrapers. Boxy, military patrol vehicles were everywhere in the cities unusually-thin traffic, and white-clad Stormtroopers stood at nearly every corner, at every building, with their blaster rifles held ready across their chests. Security was even tighter now than it had been after the Separatist attack. The capital city looked like a military state.

Alarmed, Obi-Wan looked to Master Yoda and found a deeply troubled expression on his face.

Peering out the window, Bail said, "I do hope the two of you know what you're doing by coming back here."

Gazing back out the viewport at the seemingly endless streams of Stormtroopers, Obi-Wan said, "So do I...."

The *Tantive* slowly approached the senate building and its landing hangars, and Bail was troubled to see hundreds of Stormtroopers, as well as numerous AT-TE's and Juggernaut Tanks, surrounding the domed senate building in defensive positions. He was appalled by the sudden, drastic change on the capital. Nothing could have prepared him for this.

Bowing his head, he gave a soft sigh. The Republic had taken a dramatic turn—a turn he knew coming back from would not be easy. *Dark, troubling times lay ahead. Dark times indeed*, he thought, pained.

The wide doors opened below the long, white ship and it slowly descended into the deep landing berth. With a skilled hand, the captain set the ship down on its landing skids with only the slightest jolt. Bail, Master Yoda and Obi-Wan got to their feet and exited the cockpit as the whine of the engines shutting down filled the ship's white corridors. Bail led the way to the exit hatch, and after he opened it they walked out onto a narrow bridge to be greeted by a familiar pair of aides.

"Reena. Captain," Bail said with a curt nod to each as he walked towards them.

"Everything is in order," Reena said, falling into step with Bail as he walked past, Captain Antilles walking on the senator's other side. "We have transports waiting just outside."

Obi-Wan and Master Yoda raised their hoods and followed along the bridge behind the Alderaanian trio, senses alert for any trouble.

"We had a difficult time getting in," Captain Antilles said, a tinge of disbelief in his voice. "They have things locked down pretty tight."

"I saw," Bail said, nodding as the elevator doors leading down from the hangar came into view through the vented exhaust gases swirling around the bridge.

"We—" Reena began, but cut off as the elevator doors just a handful of meters in front of them hissed open and two blue-robed, Senate Guards with long blaster rifles slung over their shoulders stepped out onto the platform at the end of the bridge.

Silent, Bail, Reena and Captain Antilles slowly approached the guards.

One of the guards held up his hand as they approached, bringing them to a stop. "Identification," the visor-helmeted guard said in a voice all-too familiar to Obi-Wan.

Bail's aides reached to their hips not for their identification cards, but for the blaster pistols hanging there. Yet they stopped drawing the guns and stared in stunned silence as a hooded Obi-Wan walked right past them.

"You don't need to see our identification," Obi-Wan said with a flat tone and a slight wave of his hand as he came to a stop directly in front of the guards.

The guards peered through their visors at the hooded figure standing in front of them for some time. Then, the guard that had made the request flatly said, "We don't need to see your identification."

"We are free to pass," Obi-Wan said with another small wave.

"You are free to pass," the guard repeated, then he and his companion stepped to the sides and out of the way.

Obi-Wan walked by them and to the elevator doors. Master Yoda hobbled along on his cane right after him. Obi-Wan pushed the button and the elevator doors opened. The two Jedi stepped into the lift and turned to peer out of the dark depths of their cowls at a stunned, unmoving Bail and his two aides.

"Come on," Bail said, finally walking forward into the elevator.

Bail turned to peer at Obi-Wan with a questioning look as the doors closed, but the Jedi merely kept his eyes forward so he didn't say anything.

The lift came to a stop and the doors opened to reveal a sunlight-filled lobby of sorts. The far wall of the spacious room was filled with windows and the wide, senate plaza could be seen just outside—filled with troops and military machinery. The occupants exited the elevator with the Jedi in the back of the group so as not to make them too visible to the handful of Senate Guards standing near that wall of glass on the far side of the room.

"This way," Captain Antilles said, pointing with an outstretched arm in the opposite direction from the wall of windows and the guards and down a dim hallway.

Blasters drawn, Reena and Antilles led the group down the hall until they came to a small flight of stairs. Reena and Antilles led the way down the stairs, their movements stealthy. They stopped abruptly halfway down the stairs and pressed their backs against the wall. Four Stormtroopers were just outside of the doors at the bottom of the stairs inspecting the two abandoned air speeders idling there.

Reena whispered something to Antilles, and after he nodded she turned to signal to Bail and the Jedi to stay where they were at the top of the stairs. Then, the two aides walked down the remainder of the stairs and through the doors nonchalantly, their blasters hidden behind their backs. One Stormtrooper heard the doors slide open and turned to look at them.

"Are these your speeders?" the Stormtrooper asked, pointing to the two air speeders.

Reena and Captain Antilles said nothing as they continued forward. Then, in unison, they swung their arms holding their blasters around and fired. Blue circles of twisting light shot from the barrels, hitting the unsuspecting Stormtrooper. The other three troops spun around at the sound of the blasts, but were struck down by the blue-white beams before they could bring their blasters to bear. The four troops fell to the ground in a heap.

Reena returned to the doors while Captain Antilles got into the rear speeder's driver's seat.. "All clear," Reena said up the stairs. Bail, Yoda and Obi-Wan came down the steps and out onto the small ledge.

The stiff, Coruscant breeze tugged at Obi-Wan and Yoda's robes as they walked towards the front speeder with Bail at their side.

"What's your plan once you get back to The Temple?" Bail asked.

Obi-Wan waited for Master Yoda to answer, because he didn't know.

"Handle that when the time comes, we will," Yoda said, not stopping as he walked to the front speeder's open door and climbed over to the passenger's seat.

Bail and Obi-Wan watched him get into the speeder. Then, Obi-Wan began towards the speeder himself. Turning to Bail, he said, "We'll let you know what we plan to do as soon as we know ourselves."

Bail nodded. "Be careful," he said.

"We will," Obi-Wan replied as he stepped into the speeder and lowered the door to close it. Then, he fed power to the engines and sped off.

Bail watched the speeder disappear into the thin train of Coruscant sky traffic until Reena's voice brought him out of his thoughts.

"Senator?" the female aide said, standing at the back door to their speeder. "We need to get going."

Bail turned, walked to the speeder and got in. Reena got in behind him, then lowered the door as Captain Antilles kicked up the engines and the speeder took off.

Chapter 27

Padmé paced back and forth on her veranda staring intently at the floor, biting her lower lip and wringing her hands together nervously. Threepio and Artoo stood nearby watching her. Artoo gave soft, sad warbles while Threepio, having tried numerous times to aide his owner, appeared regretfully resigned to just stand and watch. Meanwhile, a cool, crisp breeze ruffled the curtains of the veranda and, occasionally, wafted the sounds of the Coruscant traffic towards them.

Padmé couldn't believe what was happening. In just a few short hours her life had been turned completely upside down. Not only had her beloved government undergone substantial upheaval and turned into a Police State over night, but from what she had seen in those twilight hours, and from the rumors she had heard that morning, the government had also declared war on the most trusted keepers of peace and justice in the galaxy; and in doing so had declared war on her husband.

She had not slept since seeing the attack on the Jedi Temple the night before. She had stayed up anxiously—sometimes frantically—waiting for any word on the fate of her husband, and information on what in the galaxy had happened last night.

Images of the attack on the Jedi Temple passed before her eyes and tears once again began to form. Witnessing such carnage had disturbed her deeply. An assault on the Jedi by the government was stunning! And the rumors she had heard justifying the aggression as a *defensive* measure on Palpatine's part sickened her. She couldn't believe that even Palpatine could sink so low as to accuse the Jedi of attempting a coup in order to solidify his place of power.

Anger flashed inside of her. She should have known that someone like Palpatine would stop at nothing to get what he wanted. But he would not get away with it. She would see to it that he paid for what he had done to the Republic and the Jedi!

The baby kicked yet again.

The child had not stopped since the middle of the night—since those awful, fleeting dreams she'd had of a shadowy, yet somehow familiar, figure unleashing unspeakable power in the moments before the attack on the Jedi Temple had awakened her. Sensations of hatred, anger and desperation had filled those images, and they had returned to her thoughts throughout the morning troubling Padmé deeply. It worried her so because something told her the dreams had been more than just that. Something told her that the visions had been real. Yet what was even stranger—what she could hardly begin to understand—was that the images seemed to be coming to her through her unborn child.

She knew that this had something to do with the Force. She had guessed for some time that the child, being the child of Anakin, was strong in the Force and that these images must somehow be related, but how she didn't know. She wanted desperately to ask Anakin because something told her he would have the answers, but she didn't even know where he was right now.

...Or if he were still alive.

A fresh wave of anxiety washed over Padmé and she began pacing yet again. The baby kicked in response.

The sound of a vehicle slowly approaching brought her attention around to the edge of the veranda where she saw a Jedi Starfighter docking. Her heart leapt with relief as the hatch opened and her husband appeared.

"Anakin!!" she cried, rushing towards him with tears of joy streaming down her face. She met him just at the top of the stairs leading up from the edge of the veranda and threw her arms around him, crashing her head into his chest in a sobbing embrace.

Anakin held her too, though not with as much zeal as Padmé thought he would. He seemed...cold. Distracted. Distant. But she didn't pay it much mind at the moment. Her emotions had taken control of her, and she just stood there with her cheek pressed against his chest, weeping grateful tears.

The droids came forward and stopped just a handful of steps away and Anakin looked up at them with sharp eyes.

"It's so wonderful to see that you are well, Master Anakin," Threepio said. "Artoo and I have been most concerned."

Artoo gave a whistle that he agreed.

"Artoo—get aboard the ship," Anakin said with a nod of his head towards the craft, an edge to his tone.

Artoo whistled a cheery compliance and rolled towards the stairs and down to the ship. Meanwhile, Threepio remained where he was, watching the embracing couple.

Padmé could have held him forever. "Oh, Anakin!" Padmé breathed into his chest, still clinging to him as tightly as ever as the tears began to subside. "I'm so glad you're here. I don't know what I would have done had you—"

"Padmé, I don't have much time," Anakin said, cutting her off sharply as he pulled her tight arms apart from around his waist and moved her back far enough so that he could look into her eyes.

Padmé was shocked by what she saw there. His eyes held no trace of kindness or love. They were set with a hate the likes of which she had never seen. Her joy at seeing him alive quickly began turning into worry. This was not the man that was her husband.

Stern eyes boring into hers, Anakin asked, "You've heard what's happened?"

She was taken aback by the sharpness and coldness in his tone.

What is going on here!? she thought, her mind racing for an explanation.

She found one; it was probably because of what had happened. Palpatine, whom Anakin greatly admired, had ordered an attack on the Jedi Temple. He had betrayed Anakin. She could understand why he would be so upset.

"I've heard the *lies* Palpatine is spreading around," she said nodding, her voice upset. "I knew he couldn't be trusted. He must be stopped!"

"Don't you *dare* say such things!" Anakin suddenly exploded, anger filling his face.

Padmé recoiled in shock at his outburst, her eyes wide with surprise as a towering Anakin came forward with aggressive steps. She had never seen such a look in his eyes before and it frightened her. She began backing away from him as he came forward.

This was *definitely* not the man she loved!

"Listen to me," Anakin bit out as he came at her. "What you heard was the truth. The Jedi attacked The Chancellor and tried to kill him!"

"Oh, my!" Threepio said.

Anakin turned to the droid with angry eyes at being interrupted.

Startled by the look, Threepio got the hint that he should leave them alone and walked off to speak with Artoo. Coming up next to the Jedi Starfighter docked at the edge of the veranda, Threepio said, "Something serious is going on here." Then, in a hushed, conspiratorial tone, "I've just heard the most disturbing rumor...."

Anakin knew what he was saying wasn't the full truth, but she couldn't know what was really happening. She wouldn't understand, and he wasn't going to risk losing her. He couldn't!

Not now.

Not after....

Besides—what she didn't know couldn't hurt her.

Padmé was stunned. Mouth agape, shaking her head as she continued to recoil from him, she said, "No.... It...it can't be. The Jedi would *never* do such a thing! Palpatine is lying to you."

She was surprised when her back ran into the pillar holding one of the tall statues flanking the edge of the veranda. Trapped with nowhere to go, Padmé watched as Anakin continued towards her with fire in his eyes.

"They're not lies! *I* was there, Padmé," Anakin said, jabbing the thumb of his gloved hand at his chest. "I saw the attack with my own eyes. *I* led the attack on The Temple!"

"*You what!?*" Padmé said in disbelief, her thoughts reeling. "Anakin...how could you?"

"I *had* to do it! They attacked The Chancellor!" he defended himself. Then, peering past Padmé with thought in his narrowed eyes and in a distant tone, "They would have ruined *everything*. They deserved it...."

Confused, Padmé watched as his hard expression melted into one of uncertainty. He seemed to be saying such things to convince himself. It was the first time since he'd arrived that Padmé saw the man she knew to be her husband in his eyes. She seized the opportunity to try to find some answers to what was happening with him.

"Anakin, what's wrong? What's happened to you?" she asked softly. "Ever since you returned here to Coruscant you've...been different."

Anakin squeezed his eyes shut tight, shaking his head ever so slightly. Then, reopening them he peered at Padmé with those caring, blue eyes. "I have to go. There's something I have to do. But when I get back things will be just the way we always wanted them. We will have *everything*, Padmé!" he said, a greedy smile crossing his face. Then, the fires of hatred were back in his eyes. "But first I need to do this."

Padmé was unsettled by his quick changes in mood. "What are you going to do?" she asked, not completely certain if she wanted to know the answer.

Looking at her with a pleased sneer, he said, "Something that will end these wars once and for all."

She couldn't imagine what such a thing could be, but his apparent eagerness to do it frightened her.

He saw her fear, her mistrust, and he took on an aggressive posture again. He was not going to lose her! She would stay with him. She was *his*!

Placing his hands on her shoulders, towering over her, he ordered, "I want you to stay here, Padmé. You'll be safe here. Don't talk to *anyone* until I get back. Do you understand?"

She didn't say anything. She merely peered up at him with horror in her eyes.

Wanting, no--*needing!*—an answer, Anakin began squeezing her shoulders.

Padmé winced in pain and tried in vain to shrug his powerful hands from her shoulders. "Anakin, you're hurting me!" she said.

"Do you understand!?" he demanded.

"Yes! Yes, I understand!" she said, just wanting him to let go.

He did, but he stood over her with questioning eyes because he doubted her sincerity. But that would have to be something he would deal with later.

Padmé cowered under his stern gaze, baffled by this drastic change in him.

The baby kicked aggressively.

"I'll be back in no time, and then everything will be better. You'll see," he said, then turned and began walking away.

Padmé watched him go, numb with shock, a hand rubbing one of her sore shoulders as she walked to the top of the steps.

"You'll see," Anakin called over his shoulder as he walked to his ship.

Threepio, still uncertain of Anakin, gave him a wide berth as he walked to the ship's open hatch.

Just before Anakin got into the cockpit he turned and said, "I love you."

There was no real emotion in his voice, Padmé noted. It seemed as if he had said it just to test her. The searching, questioning eyes he watched her with as he waited for her to reply reinforced the thought.

"I...I love you, too," Padmé replied, still confused by all this.

A pleased sneer crossed Anakin's lips, then he got into the cockpit. He looked up at her one last time through the viewport with those hard eyes, then sped off.

Padmé waited until his fighter was out of view, and then she staggered as she tried to catch her breath. She found the couch behind her and sat, cradling her pregnant stomach as tears began welling in her eyes once more.

She didn't understand what was happening to Anakin, but for the first time she had felt genuinely frightened of him. He was not the man she had once known. Not in the very least. She only hoped that when he got back she could get the answers she so desperately needed.

Obi-Wan and Yoda parked the speeder a safe distance away from the Jedi Temple and approached on foot. Their hoods pulled low over their faces, the odd-looking pair made their way from doorway alcove to doorway alcove through the barren streets and buildings surrounding the perimeter of The Temple, senses on high-alert. They saw no overt military presence in the area; save for the Star Destroyers coasting above in the clouds and the clone patrol vehicles dispersed throughout the sky traffic, but they knew that looks could be deceiving. They weren't going to take any chances.

Obi-Wan remained in the lead—reaching corners first to slowly peer around them while Master Yoda

hobbled along behind on his cane. Obi-Wan peered around the side of one particular, rather small building and saw the wide, duracrete plaza in front of the towering temple. The plaza was completely deserted, and The Temple showed no signs of having been disturbed.

"The Temple is unharmed," Obi-Wan said, gazing across the plaza with a curious face. "It bears no signs of attack at all." Turning to Master Yoda, brow furrowed, he asked, "How can that be?"

An angry frown on his face as he hurried to catch up on his cane, Master Yoda answered, "An attack from within, I fear."

"From within?" Obi-Wan asked in disbelief. "Who would possibly do such a thing?"

Yoda turned around and began walking back across the front of the small building they were hiding behind. "Find out inside, we will," he said over his shoulder, raising a hand and passing it across the stone surface of the building as he walked.

Obi-Wan watched him with a perplexed look, wondering what he was doing with his hand. Then, he turned to peer back around the corner at the empty plaza in front of The Temple. He reached out with the Force for any signs of danger there, and found plenty. Apparently, their enemy was well hidden.

Shaking his head, Obi-Wan said, "It's too dangerous to approach from the front. We'll have to find another way in."

As soon as he finished saying this the sound of sliding rock spun him around. He turned to see Master Yoda standing on the far side of the front of the building—eyes closed and hand outstretched. Directly in front of the aged Jedi Master a section of the wall was sliding back into the building, then to the side. Obi-Wan approached to see that a darkened, stone staircase lay within.

"What's this?" Obi-Wan asked as Yoda finally stopped moving the huge block of stone out of the way with the Force.

"One of many secret passages," Yoda said, walking forward on his cane and into the darkness. Yoda gave a wave of his hand, and lights lining the tops of the walls came to life filling the seemingly endless staircase with a dim glow.

"Lead into the Jedi Temple, they do," Yoda said as they walked down the stairs. "Very old, they are. Know of their existence, only a handful of Jedi do. Know of them, our enemies do not."

Obi-Wan followed, surprised that he'd never heard of these passages before. It was humbling, and it reminded him that the Jedi Order was an ancient one filled with many mysteries and secrets.

After what seemed like an eternity the stairs finally came to an end. Before them now was a long, twenty-meter tall hall made completely of yellow rock. The dim passage was filled with large statues, carvings and paintings along the walls of what appeared to be ancient, heroic Jedi. Numerous other passages spurred off from the main one they were on—some opening into incredibly large rooms. Obi-Wan gazed down these dim side passages in amazement, wondering what long-forgotten stories of the Jedi could be told within those halls. Some appeared to be packed full of artifacts, and a brilliant glow as bright as the sun could be seen shining around the corner at the bottom of one particular downward-sloped offshoot.

After several hundred meters Obi-Wan noticed that the passage began to rise slightly. Then, they came to another staircase—this one was much shorter than the last. At the top the passage finally came to an end. Yoda stood several meters back from the stone wall and once again stretched forth his hand and reached out with the Force. The wall gave a low groan, then began swinging towards them. Yoda opened the hidden door just enough so that the two of them could squeeze through. Then, once they were in, Yoda turned back and closed the door.

Obi-Wan gazed around to try to figure out where in The Temple they were, but didn't recognize anything. The long hall was slanted slightly. It went down to the left, up to the right.

"Where are we?" Obi-Wan asked.

Walking past him and up the hall to the right, Yoda said, "Far below The Temple, are we. Catacombs, these are, for some of the earliest Jedi Knights. A sacred place protected by secrecy, this is."

Obi-Wan merely nodded as he followed, peering from side to side at the numerous, circular grave chambers filling both sides of the hall. Like a path on the side of a steep mountain, the halls of the catacombs switched back and forth, back and forth. With each turn Yoda and Obi-Wan climbed higher until the hall leveled out and they came to what appeared to be the back of a large, silver statue.

Once again Master Yoda stretched forth his hand and reached out with the Force. With a low rumble and a cloud of dust the statue stirred, then began to move ever so slowly. Obi-Wan noticed that Master Yoda was taking extra care not to make too much noise, and the aged Jedi Master only moved the giant statue far enough for them to squeeze through.

Obi-Wan came out into the familiar-looking hall and noticed that they were near the lower hangars of The Temple. He peered down both sides of the hall for any signs of Jedi but found none. The pillared hall was deserted and showed no signs of disruption. A glimmer of hope entered Obi-Wan's mind. Perhaps the Jedi were safe, gathered somewhere in The Temple deciding what to do.

Yoda moved the statue back into its place, then once again took the lead and began walking down the hall to the left.

As they came to a turn Obi-Wan saw something on the wall up ahead that caught his eye and faded his hopes slightly; a long, black scorch mark. Then, when they came around the hall he nearly reeled and all hope was immediately shattered. Both he and Master Yoda stopped and stared in shock. Bodies lay prostrated all down the long hall; bodies of white-clad Stormtroopers and Jedi both young and old.

Obi-Wan winced, a deep frown on his face. Yoda lowered his head and shut misty eyes.

They stood there for some time in grief before Yoda finally began moving again. It became even harder for Obi-Wan as they walked through the litter of fallen frames and he recognized whom some of the dead Jedi were. Most, he saw, had been killed by blaster fire, but after they passed the doors leading into the hangar Obi-Wan saw something that caused him to gawk in disbelief.

He rushed ahead of Yoda to one body in particular sitting against the wall in a crumpled mess and crouched to examine it. It was Jedi Master Cin Drallig, and he had two very unique wounds on his body. Perplexed, Obi-Wan turned and saw the bodies of a young female and male Padawan laying nearby with similar wounds.

"These are lightsaber wounds!" he said in confusion as a saddened Master Yoda approached to inspect the bodies as well. Turning to the aged Jedi, Obi-Wan asked, "What in the galaxy happened here?"

A troubled frown on his face, he answered, "To the archives we must go. Find our answers there, we will."

Obi-Wan turned back to Master Drallig to pay his final respects as Yoda walked off. He reached up with a hand and shut the Jedi's eyes, then rose to follow Yoda.

They saw more and more of the same as they continued through the halls of The Temple, and their sadness only grew with each step. Trepidation filled Obi-Wan with every fallen Jedi they came upon. With each he feared he might find Anakin dead right along with all the others. He felt selfish for it, but he was relieved when each body turned out not to be his friend and former apprentice.

Obi-Wan still couldn't believe what he was seeing. The Jedi Temple, one of the safest, most secure places in the galaxy, had been sacked in no time at all and all the Jedi within had been killed. Not only that, but Jedi all throughout the galaxy had been turned on by their clone soldiers and murdered without warning.

Everything he'd known in his life had been abruptly swept away with one swift stroke, and all that remained was confusion and sadness.

They neared the end of the hall where it opened into a large room when the Force warned them that danger was fast approaching. They pressed themselves against the wall of the hall and into the shadows just before a line of eight Stormtroopers marched through the giant room on patrol.

Obi-Wan watched them walk past, then reached into his robes and produced his lightsaber hilt. But a small, green hand on his arm stilled him before he could give chase. Obi-Wan peered down at Master Yoda, surprised that he would stop him.

"Alternatives to fighting, there are Obi-Wan." Yoda said, perring up at him from within his hood. "Remain hidden, we must for now."

Obi-Wan knew he was right. Though his emotions were riding high at what he was seeing here he must remain calm. He must not give in to his anger and act rashly. He was a Jedi, and he was above such things.

Together they came to the end of the hall and carefully peered around the room. Smoke, debris and bodies filled the room. They saw the doorway they needed to take to get to the archives off to the right. Off to the left, on the far side of the wide room, two Stormtroopers were standing guard at another doorway. Raising his hand in the direction of the Stormtroopers, Master Yoda used the Force to influence the minds of the clones. As one, the two white-clad troopers turned and disappeared through the doorway where they were standing guard.

Yoda and Obi-Wan emerged into the room and walked through the doorway off to the right and up the stairs there. They hid from several more Stormtrooper patrols and used the Force to send clones on guard away from their posts on their long walk up to the archives. They were relieved to find the archives abandoned when they finally reached them—save for the sporadic body on the floor. They walked through the smoke, debris, and the glowing stacks of datafiles towards the back of the room.

Just before they reached the rear of the archives where the security, holo-display room was located Obi-Wan said, "I'll go cue up the proper files," and walked off between the glowing stacks.

Master Yoda hobbled to the rear of the archives and into the room housing the holo-projector in saddened, pensive silence. He stood before the touch screen of the holo-display set into the wall and waited.

After a few minutes Obi-Wan came in and said, "They're ready."

Yoda reached out a hand to the touch screen. It scanned his handprint for security, then gave a beep of confirmation and the holo-display sprang to life with a low hum to show a wide view of the Grand Hall.

They saw nothing out of the ordinary at first. Just Jedi walking throughout the enormous room. Obi-Wan reached forward and scanned ahead several hours, then stopped. The scene in the Grand Hall was quite different now. They saw numerous Jedi rushing from place to place, and it was clear that they were troubled. Then, the main front doors opened and a single, hooded Jedi walked into the hall.

"That's Anakin," Obi-Wan said with a nod at the holo-display, recognizing the confident swagger of his former apprentice. Anakin's blue-white frame walked through the room without a word to the other Jedi, then disappeared from the image.

"Hmmm...", Master Yoda said, then scanned the image forward a handful of minutes.

They watched as the main doors suddenly began to swing open once more. Panicked Jedi rushed the opening doors with lightsabers drawn, and right before they reached the doors a swarming mass of Stormtroopers spilled through with rifles blasting. They watched with sorrow as, one by one, the Jedi attempting to repel the invasion fell and more and more Stormtroopers rushed through those open doors. The ghostly images of the Stormtroopers spread throughout the room and down the connecting halls further into The Temple.

Apprehension gripped Obi-Wan once more. He now knew that Anakin had been inside the Jedi Temple when the attack had begun. He hoped beyond hope that his friend had escaped, but knew that would not

be likely. If he knew Anakin at all, he knew that he would stay and fight to his very last breath to keep the invaders out.

Master Yoda took control and began scrolling through the footage from different parts of The Temple; a wave of his hand changing to each different scene. Each room, each hall, showed the same thing—Stormtroopers on a killing spree. Master Yoda began changing between the camera more quickly now, and Obi-Wan peered down at him questioningly. It seemed to him as if the aged Jedi Master were searching for something...or someone.

Obi-Wan had had enough of watching his fellow Jedi being slaughtered. He kept his morose eyes on the floor while Yoda continued to scroll through the footage—backing it up several minutes in some places. Finally Master Yoda came to one particular room and stopped. He gave a long, sad sigh; bringing Obi-Wan's eyes back up to the holo-display.

Nothing could have prepared Obi-Wan for what he saw next.

Anakin was in The Temple's War Room, standing around the holo-display in the middle of the room with several other Jedi. Then, Anakin walked away from the holo-table and to a console along the wall where he pushed several buttons.

Something about Anakin's demeanor seemed odd to Obi-Wan. His former apprentice seemed...tense, stiff. Something was very strange.

He watched, perplexed, as the Jedi around the table reacted in shock and horror to something being displayed on the far wall. Then, he nearly lost his breath as Anakin's image turned with a swift swoop and struck down an approaching Jedi with his lightsaber.

He watched with wide eyes, mouth agape as Anakin unleashed a tremendous fury on the Jedi in the room. He could barely believe his eyes as he watched his former apprentice spin and lung from Jedi to Jedi, affording no mercy and exerting maximum lethality until all Jedi in the room were dead.

Then, numb and still in shock, Obi-Wan watched as Anakin walked to the comm. console and activated the Emergency Homing Beacon, then walked over the bodies of the Jedi he had killed and out of the room.

"...Anakin...what have you done!?" Obi-Wan breathed, saying it just loud enough for himself to hear the painful words.

A deep frown on his aged face, Yoda followed the powerful, young Jedi Knight with the footage.

Next Obi-Wan saw Anakin rushing down a hall towards a group of five young Jedi, shouting at them to get to the main doors of The Temple and that they were under attack. The group of young Jedi turned as Anakin approached and began running.

But they didn't get far.

Without warning, Anakin slashed into them with his lightsaber. Three fell before they even knew what was happening, and the other two weren't far behind. Then Anakin continued on with those stiff, power-filled strides. Anakin met several more Jedi in this way—feigning to be friend then attack as foe. The worst part of it was that most of the Jedi Anakin attacked were caught completely by surprise. And why shouldn't they have been? Anakin was one of their finest, after all.

Painful tears in his eyes, a deep frown on his face, Obi-Wan forced himself to watch as Anakin attacked Jedi after Jedi with a ferocity so raw he could nearly feel it through the holo-display. He felt sick, and it tore his heart out to see what was happening, but he couldn't turn away. He *had* to watch. He *had* to witness the horrible, unspeakable things his former apprentice had committed. As his former Master, he felt that he must.

A frightened group of Younglings huddled together in a room came up next, and Obi-Wan silently screamed out for it not to be so. But then he saw the robed figure of The Temple's Menace enter the

room with lightsaber in hand. Obi-Wan bashed an angry fist into the console of the holo-display in front of him, unable to fathom that Anakin could be capable of such a monstrous act. The Younglings in the display gawked at Anakin, fear and confusion in their eyes. Then Anakin began towards them and those little eyes grew even larger with terror.

Mercifully, Yoda switched the image on the holo-display before Anakin reached the children.

Yoda scanned for quite a while until finally stopping on footage of Anakin walking across one of the wide balconies of The Grand Hall. Obi-Wan watched, stunned yet again as Anakin approached a being clad all in black, then knelt before him.

Yoda shut off the holo-display, then wept quietly.

Obi-Wan leaned forward on the console in front of him. His head was spinning, and his heart was screaming out in anguish and regret. *Why?* he thought over and over again, trying to make sense of it all. But it didn't make sense. None of it did. *Darth Sidious and Palpatine were the ones that had turned the clones against the Jedi across the galaxy. Anakin wasn't part of that whole plot!*

Yet he couldn't deny what he'd just seen with his own eyes.

Finally, after some time, he asked, "Why, Master? *Why?*"

His voice weak with sadness, Yoda said, "Seduced by the dark side, The Chosen One has been. Too attached, Young Skywalker became."

"Attached? Attached to what?" Obi-Wan asked, though he had a sneaking suspicion to what he was referring.

"Know already do you, the answer to your question," Yoda said. "Trust your feelings, you must, Obi-Wan."

Padmé..., Obi-Wan thought, closing his eyes in pain. Long had he suspected that there was something between the two of them, but The Wars had kept him too busy to give it serious contemplation. He thought back to his conversation with Padmé just the other day. It seemed like an eternity ago now. He thought about all the clues he had spotted, yet willfully ignored. And as he contemplated their meeting he realized that she had wanted to tell him about it all. She had tried, but he'd been forced to leave.

Obi-Wan winced, wondering if all this could have been avoided had he just sat there a handful of seconds longer and listened to her.

"Used these attachments to turn him against the Jedi, Darth Sidious has," Yoda said into Obi-Wan's thoughts.

"But...how is that possible?" Obi-Wan asked. "Anakin's had nothing to do with Sidious."

"Hmmp! Right in front of us, all this time, the Dark Lord of the Sith has been," Yoda said.

Obi-Wan gazed at him, perplexed. Something was nagging at the back of his mind, but he couldn't place it.

Yoda gave a morose sigh. Closing his eyes and looking down, he said, "Palpatine, the Dark Lord is."

Obi-Wan gawked for some time. "*Palpatine...!?*"

Suddenly, so many mysteries made sense. "Palpatine!" Obi-Wan said with resolve mixed with a twinge of anger.

Yoda shook his head, clearly berating himself for figuring it all out too late. "Fooled us all, he did. Hid himself well with the Force, he has. And now...all we have lost," he said.

A most disturbing thought entered Obi-Wan's mind. "Master...with Anakin turning to the dark side...." It

was difficult still for him to accept the thought, and he needed time to collect himself before continuing. Then, with added resolve in his voice, "With Anakin turned to the dark side, what will become of The Prophecy? Is balance lost?"

Yoda's sad demeanor and response did little to quell Obi-Wan's fears.

"Know that, I do not," the aged Jedi Master said.

Obi-Wan stared at the floor, the weight of events finally hitting him like a ton of durasteel. "It's my fault," he said. "I should have listened to you. He was dangerous."

"Hmmm. Chose Skywalker's fate, you did not, Obi-Wan. Nor did I. Nor did the Force. His choice alone, it was."

The words held some comfort, but the load was far too heavy for Obi-Wan to lift so easily. "I have to find him. Perhaps there's something I can do. Perhaps there's still hope. Perhaps..." he trailed off. After what he had seen Anakin do he didn't think much could be done. But he had to hope. He would never forgive himself if he didn't at least try.

And then, if it couldn't be done....

"Agree with you, do I. Confront him, you must," Yoda said.

Obi-Wan watched as Yoda's eyes suddenly widened and he peered up at the ceiling, as if he were searching. Then, the old Jedi's eyes narrowed to determined slits and he peered back down at Obi-Wan.

"And face Darth Sidious, will I," Yoda said, his jaw set in a hard expression, his hand reaching out and clenching into a fist.

Obi-Wan nodded his thoughtful agreement. If anyone were to defeat Sidious, Yoda would be the one.

"I'll contact you as soon as I know where Anakin is," Obi-Wan said. "I think I know how to find him."

Yoda peered at him with an inquisitive gaze, then nodded his agreement. "Be cautious, you must, Obi-Wan. Your former apprentice, no longer, is he."

Obi-Wan's brow furrowed. Then, knowing that listening to Master Yoda was the wisest thing he could do, he said, "Yes, Master." Obi-Wan turned and started back towards the direction they had come and the secret passage.

"Obi-Wan," Master Yoda called after him, causing him to turn around. "May the Force be with you."

Obi-Wan fixed him with a most serious gaze. "May the Force be with you, Master," he said with a nod. Then, he turned and began walking away again.

Chapter 28

Obi-Wan's speeder slowly approached the edge of Senator Amidala's veranda and came to a stop. Still numb with shock, Obi-Wan sat staring into the console of the speeder for several seconds, unmoving. Flashes of Anakin attacking and murdering his fellow Jedi without mercy continually replayed in his mind, making his heart heavy with sorrow.

He couldn't get the image of Anakin's hate-filled face out from behind his eyes. It remained; ever-reminding him that *The Great Invader* of the Jedi Temple had once been his apprentice—that his former-pupil had betrayed the Jedi Order so completely and brought about their downfall. It was almost too great a burden to bear.

Movement from the corner of his eye brought him out of such thoughts and he peered out the hatch of the speeder. The senator's gold-clad, protocol droid stood at the top of the small set of stairs leading up into the veranda—fidgeting with anticipation to exert its primary function.

Eyes heavy with grief, Obi-Wan shut the speeder down and opened the hatch.

"Greetings, Master Jedi," the golden droid bowed and said as soon as the hatch opened. Apparently, the anticipation had become too great for the droid to wait for Obi-Wan to even get out of the speeder.

"It's so nice to see you again," Threepio continued cheerily as Obi-Wan came up the steps, then stopped in front of him. "I'm certain Mistress Padmé will be pleased to see you. I'm afraid she's been *most* distraught since Master Anakin and Artoo left nearly an hour ago."

Obi-Wan's eyes flashed in revelation at the mention of Anakin.

So.... *He was here...*, he thought with a small nod, the breeze blowing through his hair.

"Thank you," Obi-Wan said to the protocol droid. Brushing his hair from his face, Obi-Wan walked past Threepio and deeper into the veranda—his mind filled with thought. He wondered how much, if anything, Anakin had told Padmé. *The droid mentioned she has been distraught since his departure. Had he admitted everything to her? Nothing?*

As he walked past the fountain and between the twin couches Padmé emerged from the staircase leading down from the apartment.

"Master Kenobi!" she called to him, rushing forward with sadness and relief on her face.

They met in a loose embrace—hands clasping one another's shoulders as Obi-Wan kissed one cheek, then the other, in greeting.

"Oh, Obi-Wan, thank goodness you're alive!" Padmé exclaimed. They pulled back from one another, but continued the loose embrace. "When I heard what happened I was terrified! I can't believe it!"

Obi-Wan peered at her inquisitively. Releasing his light grasp on her shoulders, he asked, "What have you heard?"

Padmé's worried expression suddenly changed to an uncertain, uncomfortable glance. Obi-Wan watched as she avoided his eyes, knowing that such behavior could not be a good thing. Once again he wondered what it was Anakin had told her.

Still unable to meet Obi-Wan's penetrating stare, Padmé moved to the curved couch nearby and sat. Obi-Wan watched her go, then followed. He sat next to her and waited, watching as she gazed at the gurgling fountain, her face flush with emotion.

Finally, she spoke. "I was told the Jedi attacked Chancellor Palpatine, and that was why they were turned upon."

Obi-Wan said nothing. He merely continued to peer at her.

It was difficult, but after some time she turned to meet his gaze.

"Do you believe that?" Obi-Wan asked, locking eyes with her.

The look in her eyes told Obi-Wan all he needed to know; she did *not* believe it. Not for one second.

Again her anguished gaze fell to her lap. It was heart wrenching for her to admit she didn't believe Anakin's telling of events. She had thought about it and doubted ever since he'd left, but hadn't come to a conclusion until she was forced to at this very moment. Anakin hadn't been himself when he'd come. He was someone different—someone other than the man she'd married. Deep down, she knew this.

"No," she finally said. Her voice was weak, hurt.

Obi-Wan could see tears welling in her eyes. He looked away to the floor, understanding and sharing in her grief.

He gave her some time to collect herself. Meanwhile, he pondered how to address the issues at hand. He knew he could simply confront her outright about her romantic involvement with Anakin, but dismissed such a notion right away. He didn't want to make her defensive. He would need her help to track Anakin down. Tact was the best solution at the moment. After all—he was certain she had been about to confess everything in their last meeting. She *wanted* to tell him. He merely needed to give her the opportunity.

Finally, he said, "There was something you wanted to tell me before I was called away on our last meeting. What was it?"

Surprise crossed Padmé's face at the sudden shift in subject. She peered at Obi-Wan inquisitively; trying to understand why, in the midst of everything else that was going on, he would wonder about such a thing.

"Oh. It was nothing," she said with a shrug, but it didn't sound very convincing. She turned her attention to smoothing out the folds of her patterned dress with purple trim.

"You *must* tell me, Padmé." The words weren't forceful, but urging.

Padmé looked up from her dress in surprise at his insistence. When she saw his intense, unwavering gaze she understood;

He knows....

With a sigh, she lowered her eyes to the Japor snippet hanging from a chain around her neck. Raising a hand to the small, carved piece of wood she displayed it and said, "Anakin gave this to me a long time ago—just after we first met." The memory caused a tiny smile to cross her lips and she stroked the trinket fondly. Then, her sad, brown eyes rose to meet Obi-Wan's. "I haven't taken it off for nearly three years now—...since we were married."

Obi-Wan's face tightened in a grimace. It was much more serious than he'd thought. He shook his head. It hurt that Anakin could have kept something like this from him all that time. The Wars had brought them closer than ever before! But, from all the things he'd discovered in the past hour, it seemed he didn't really know Anakin at all. He closed his eyes; hurt and betrayed once more by his best friend. When he reopened them he saw the sadness and guilt on Padmé's face.

"I'm so sorry, Obi-Wan," she said, her tone truly repentant. "I wanted to tell you so many times before. It was unbearable to live such a lie!"

She lowered her head in angst and shame.

After some time of shared regret, Obi-Wan said, "Padmé, there are things you need to know—things about Anakin and what has happened recently."

Fearful eyes shot up at him. "Is he okay? Is he in danger?" she asked, the anxious questions coming nearly on top of one another. From the way Anakin had acted the last time they'd seen each other she knew something obviously wasn't right with him. Obi-Wan's sad eyes only increased her anguish. "Has something happened?" she asked, her voice growing weak with panic.

"Yes. Something's happened," Obi-Wan said. "Anakin is in grave danger, Padmé—danger of losing his very soul."

Padmé blinked in confusion. "*What!?*" she asked, dumbfounded.

Obi-Wan gave a weary sigh. Shaking his head, peering at the floor, he said, "For over a decade the Jedi Order searched for the Dark Lord of the Sith responsible for the attack on Naboo. But he couldn't be found. He was too powerful in the Force--too well hidden. Then, the Dark Lord orchestrated The Clone Wars with his new apprentice—Count Dooku. Together, they brought the opposing sides to boiling points to create havoc in the Republic and weaken it from within." He turned to Padmé. "*Power* is what the Dark Lord desires—power over all living beings in the galaxy."

His eyes and voice became pensive, wistful, "By the time the Jedi--Anakin especially--became aware of the Sith Lord's true identity it was too late. Matters had become too far gone." He turned to a perplexed Padmé. "The Dark Lord *used* Anakin to destroy the Jedi and take over *complete* control of the Republic."

Realization hit Padmé like a bolt of lightning. She gawked at Obi-Wan.

"Palpatine *seduced* Anakin to the dark side of the Force," Obi-Wan stated with a touch of disgust.

Her lip trembling, cheeks flush, Padmé shook her head in disbelief. "No. No. It's not possible!" she said, springing to her feet and walking several meters away. Then, she broke down with sorrow.

Obi-Wan remained where he was on the couch, watching her from behind as she wept softly. As he did, the grief and regret of the situation hit him once more.

"I knew something was wrong. I knew something wasn't right with him," Padmé said, her back still turned.

"I need your help to find him, Padmé," Obi-Wan said. "I must confront him before it's too late." *If it's not already*, he thought; images of the security footage racing through his mind.

Slowly, Padmé turned to face him. She said nothing for some time. She merely looked at him with great pain in her eyes.

"I—" she began, but stopped short. It was too hard to say. Her eyes filled with guilt. Slowly, she peered down at her stomach. She pulled the robe she was wearing over her dress away from her stomach, revealing her round belly through the cloth.

Obi-Wan watched, confused. Then he rose to his feet and wide eyes went to Padmé's as he understood.

Padmé gave a small nod and answered his unasked question. “Yes,” was all she said.

Obi-Wan was stunned, speechless. His thoughts raced to catch up with the new dimensions this added to the situation.

Padmé was pregnant.

What could this mean? he asked himself. Such a possibility had never even entered his mind. It was unthinkable! Yet now that he knew, a dim ray of hope seemed to penetrate the darkness. *The Child of the Chosen One....*

But as he thought of the hope the child brought to this dark situation a foreboding sense of danger gripped him in the Force; *Should the Dark Lord ever know of the child's existence....*

“You’re in grave danger, Padmé,” Obi-Wan blurted, filled with earnest as he walked to her. “We must leave. Now!”

“What? Why?” she asked, fear in her eyes.

Placing gentle hands on her shoulders, he said, “If Palpatine finds out you’re carrying Anakin’s child, he’ll....” He didn’t finish, but he could tell by Padmé’s shocked expression that she understood.

“But...what about Palpatine? He needs to be stopped! I can’t leave here now!”

“Master Yoda will handle that. He’s the only one that possibly can! If anyone can defeat the Dark Lord, it’s him,” Obi-Wan said, confident it was indeed true.

Yet Padmé was still uncertain. She had worked so hard and fought for so long against Palpatine and his continual grabs for power. And now she knew why he was doing it—he was a Sith and wanted nothing short of complete domination.

She knew that there was little she could do to stop Palpatine in the public arena now. It would take brute force. She was no Jedi. She could not do such a thing.

But, Anakin, on the other hand...

“Obi-Wan, I want to come with you,” she finally said.

Obi-Wan eyed her suspiciously. He had a feeling she wasn’t referring to coming with him to a place of safety. “What...do you mean?”

“I’m coming with you to confront Anakin. I know how we can find him.”

Shaking his head, Obi-Wan said, “No. You’re not. It’s too dangerous, Padmé. And besides—there’s no guarantee I can even reach Anakin anymore. He may already be too consumed by the dark side of the Force.”

“That’s why I have to go,” she said. “Together we stand a better chance than alone.”

Obi-Wan knew she had a point—if he could not reach Anakin through the darkness, who better than Anakin’s love to do it? But still, it was an awful risk to be taking—especially with the child.

“Padmé, I don’t think this is such a good idea....”

“Please, Obi-Wan!” she pleaded, her eyes once again filling with tears. “I love him. I’ll not give up on him so easily. And neither should you! I’ve got to try. For the sake of the child, I’ve got to try!”

Obi-Wan thought it over some more. It would get her away from here—away from Sidious. That was most important for her and the child right now. And besides—she was the one that knew how to find Anakin. If he refused, she could very well go after him alone. *That* would be more dangerous than anything. If she

was going they would have to go together. *If* matters got out of control and Anakin couldn't be reached, then he would be there to protect her.

Yet he still had a bad feeling about it.

"I don't like this," he said, slowly shaking his head.

"It's the only way."

Resigned, Obi-Wan said, "Very well. Let's get going then."

A determined look on her face, Padmé nodded. "Right."

Taking the speeder Bail's aides had given he and Master Yoda, Obi-Wan had gone slightly ahead of Padmé to the landing pad housing her ship. It was a silver, wing-shaped craft of Nubian design. Being only a personal transport it wasn't very large, yet was big enough to house several storage lockers and a napping bench. It was a comfortable ship, yet not flashy enough so as to draw unwanted attention.

Obi-Wan walked under the wing and came out on the front side of the ship; his eyes scanning the sky-traffic for any sign of Padmé's speeder. He had already done a full systems check and had the ship ready for take-off as soon as Padmé arrived. Yet when he searched for her speeder all he saw was the usual traffic and the more-than-occasional, slow moving, military patrol vehicle.

The sooner we leave the better, he thought, eying those patrol vehicles. Then he turned his thoughtful gaze off towards the domed, Executive Offices building—where he thought Palpatine was at the moment. His eyes, and thoughts, lingered there for some time. Then, he reached for his comm. link. He thought he'd better contact Master Yoda to let him know what was happening.

"Master?" he said into the comm..

Nothing.

"Master Yoda—come in."

Still nothing.

And then, much to his surprise, the other end of the comm. suddenly went dead.

Shocked, he eyed the comm. link in his hand, wondering what this could mean. The comm. had been deactivated from Master Yoda's side!

But...why would he do that? Obi-Wan thought, confused as he peered off in the direction of the Jedi Temple's spires.

Something didn't feel right.

He heard the sound of an approaching speeder from across the landing pad. He turned to see Padmé, her bodyguard, and the protocol droid approaching in the open-top craft.

Obi-Wan was torn. He could sense all was not well back at the Jedi Temple with Master Yoda, yet he had his duty to try to bring Anakin back and get Padmé and her unborn child away from Sidious. As Padmé's speeder docked with the landing pad floating high up in the Coruscant sky, Obi-Wan returned his troubled gaze to the direction of the Jedi Temple.

Although not in the least ideal, a possible solution entered his mind. Once again he raised the comm. link to his mouth as Padmé, Captain Typho and Threepio began getting out of the speeder.

"Bail? Bail—come in," he said into the comm..

There was a slight pause, then Bail's voice said, *"I'm here. What is it, Master Obi-Wan?"*

"Bail, I'm leaving the planet with Senator Amidala. I can't tell you why right now, but—"

"I just spoke with her a few minutes ago. She told me everything," Bail said, his voice laden with resigned sadness.

"Very well," Obi-Wan said, nodding. His sense of unease for Yoda intensified. "Master Yoda is still back at the Jedi Temple. He'll need transport off the planet once he is done there."

"I'll take care of it personally," Bail said.

Padmé, Captain Typho and Threepio had arrived and were standing in front of Obi-Wan, waiting. Padmé wore a curious look at hearing Bail's voice through the comm..

"Thanks, Bail," Obi-Wan said. Then, looking at Padmé as he spoke, "We'll contact you later for a rendezvous point. Until then—be careful, Bail."

"Will do. May the Force be with you, Obi-Wan," Bail's voice said.

"May the Force be with you," he answered. Bail was gone on the other end, but Obi-Wan continued to hold the comm. to his mouth as he contemplated those words.

May the Force be with you, indeed.

Snapping out of the thought, he clicked off the comm. and placed it back on his belt. He peered at Padmé.

She was wearing a short, tan dress with tights and brown boots. The dress was far less formal than those she usually wore and looked to be more for functionality's sake, rather than fashion. He noted that it also did little to conceal her large, pregnant belly.

"Is Master Yoda in danger?" Padmé asked.

"I don't know," Obi-Wan answered honestly.

"M'Lady," Captain Typho interjected, "are you certain you wouldn't like for me to come with you?"

"Yes, Captain," Padmé said firmly. "We'll be fine."

"We need to go," Obi-Wan stated.

Padmé gave a nod. Then, "Thank you for your help, Captain."

"Be safe, M'Lady," Captain Typho said with a bow of his head as she walked past.

Threepio shuffled along behind Obi-Wan and Padmé to the open hatch of the ship. Anxiety in his voice, the droid said, "Mistress Padmé—are you quite sure you wouldn't like for me to stay here and see to it that your belongings are safely transported back to Naboo?"

"Yes, Threepio. I'm sure," Padmé said as they walked up the ramp.

"I was worried about that," a dejected Threepio bemused as he scurried up the ramp and into the ship.

When they reached the cockpit Obi-Wan took the pilot's seat and began pushing buttons on the console. The low hum of the main engines coming on-line filled the cockpit as Padmé took the co-pilot's seat and strapped in. Threepio took the seat right behind her. Padmé began pressing buttons of her own on the console as the hum of the ship's engines reached their apex.

Obi-Wan engaged the repulsor engines and lifted the wing-shaped craft into the air. He shot it for the sky, making certain to stay a safe distance away from the patrolling, dagger-shaped Star Destroyers above the cityscape.

As they exited Coruscant's atmosphere and the blackness of space, backlit by a tapestry of stars, filled the viewport Obi-Wan asked, "Now—how do you plan on locating Anakin?"

Gazing at a small display screen in the console, Padmé pushed another small series of buttons and answered, "You're just about to find out...."

A second later the sound of electronic beeps and whistles erupted from the console.

Threepio perked immediately. "Artoo! Is that you?" he blurted.

Artoo gave an affirmative whistle.

Threepio's surprised tone turned perturbed. "Where are you when I need you? I've had to accompany Mistress Padmé as navigator in her starship because you weren't around. You know how much I dislike space travel!"

"Ask him where they are," Padmé said.

Artoo beeped a response to Threepio's comments that sounded less than cordial.

"Oh! Why you bothersome, little—"

"Threepio!" Padmé interrupted, cutting him off.

The droid restrained himself and regained his composure. "Mistress Padmé wishes to know where you and Master Anakin are."

Artoo immediately went into a long series of beeps and whistles. Padmé and Obi-Wan listened as they peered out the viewport at a Star Destroyer that seemed to be growing curious of their continued presence above the planet.

"Obi-Wan...?" Padmé said.

"I see it," he responded, redirecting their path slightly away from the giant ship.

"He says they're on a planet somewhere in the outer rim—a rather inhospitable place, from the sound of it. He's sending the coordinates now," Threepio said.

Padmé watched the small display screen in front of her as data began racing across it, until finally coming to a stop. "Here it is. Mustafar," she said.

"Mustafar...?" Obi-Wan repeated the name aloud, thinking. Then, with recognition and a nod, he stated, "Mustafar."

"Have you heard of it before?" Padmé asked.

"Yes," he said, his thoughts turning dark, eyes narrowing as he understood Sidious' intentions. "Jedi Intelligence had information that the Separatist Leadership might have a secret base there."

Padmé thought this over, and as she did her face became more and more fearful. "Anakin said he was leaving to end The Wars once and for all! The Separatist Leaders!"

Obi-Wan nodded. "Palpatine's sent him to clean up his dirty work."

Artoo began beeping again, followed by a frightened warble.

"Artoo says Master Anakin has been acting *most* strangely," Threepio said. "He says Master Anakin isn't quite himself."

Padmé's worried eyes shot to Obi-Wan, but he didn't return her gaze. He merely kept his firm eyes forward out the viewport.

Turning her attention back to the console, Padmé began entering the coordinates for Mustafar in the navigation computer. "Just stay put, Artoo. We'll be there shortly," she said. Then, to Obi-Wan, "The coordinates are set."

He gave a tight-jawed nod, moving a hand to the lightspeed levers. Moment-by-moment, with each new action he learned Anakin was taking, the less Obi-Wan thought he could be reached. Time was growing short--*if* time remained at all. "Hold on," he said, then pulled the lever back.

The stars turned to starlines, and the ship disappeared.

Chapter 29

Bail Organa stood in his Coruscant office with his comm. link held up to his mouth. Senators Mon Mothma, Fang Zar, Giddeon Dannu and Bana Bremmu stood nearby, talking quietly as they waited for Bail to finish his conversation.

"If Palpatine really is a Sith, as Padmé says, what can we do?" Bana Bremmu asked. "What hope would *any* rebellion have against the Sith without the help of the Jedi?"

"What's the alternative, Bana? Just allow it to continue?" Fang Zar asked.

"We *must* fight!" Mon Mothma said. "Palpatine cannot be allowed to get away with this!" Across the room, Bail half-listened to their conversation while also speaking with Obi-Wan.

"Thanks, Bail." Obi-Wan's voice said through the comm.. *"We'll contact you later for a rendezvous point. Until then—be careful."*

"We—" Giddeon Dannu began, but stopped short as his comm. suddenly began to beep.

"Will do. May the Force be with you, Obi-Wan," Bail's said, watching as first one, then another and another of his guests retrieved their own comm. links for incoming communiqués. Something was happening.

"May the Force be with you," Obi-Wan answered, then clicked off the comm..

Bail replaced the comm. unit. to his utility belt, taking notice of the grave faces of the senators around him as they listened to their incoming message. "What is it?" he asked Mon Mothma—the nearest of the group.

"Palpatine has called another emergency session of the senate," she said, replacing her comm. to her hip. "It is to convene in less than an hour."

"So he means to go forward with it after all," Fang Zar said, a stunned expression on his face. "He's actually going public with the Jedi attack."

"The senate will be screaming for their heads!" Bana Bremmu exclaimed, shocked.

"As will a majority of the rest of the beings of the Republic..." Mon Mothma said, slowly shaking her head in disbelief.

"Then there is no hope left for the Jedi," Giddeon Dannu said, dejected.

"Do not give up on the Jedi so easily, my friends. They are more cunning and resourceful than you know," Bail said. "We will meet again soon. Very soon. But I must leave right now, and I'm not certain for how long I'll be off-planet."

"You're not coming to the meeting in the senate?" Mon Mothma asked, surprised.

"No. There's something I must do. A friend may need my...help," Bail said.

The small group of senators eyed him with surprise for some time. "Very well," Fang Zar finally said, turning and walking for the door. Bana and Giddean followed right behind him.

But Mon Mothma stayed where she was in front of Bail, inspecting him with a weary eye. "Bail—are you sure what you are doing is wise?" she asked.

With a wry grin, he placed a comforting hand on her shoulder and said, "Treachery and danger are things we'll *all* have to get used to if this rebellion is to succeed, Mon Mothma."

She nodded. "You're right," she said. Then, she turned and followed the others out of the room.

As soon as she left, Bail began shrugging out of his senatorial robe as he walked back to his personal quarters. A change of clothes would be in order. A disguise, even. He couldn't chance anyone spotting him doing what he was about to do.

Master Yoda hobbled through the Jedi Temple on his gnarled cane, traveling higher and higher into the enormous building. He encountered numerous Stormtrooper patrols along the way, but with the shadows and the Force on his side he bypassed them easily.

As he went he saw more and more evidence of young Skywalker's awful betrayal and Palpatine's insidious design. It affected him greatly. As he'd watched the security footage he'd felt morose for the fallen and pity for Young Skywalker. In all his years as a Jedi there was one thing Yoda knew with certainty; the dark side was dangerously seductive and an incredibly consuming force. It could ensnare you without warning and, if you weren't careful, could take control of your very will. Yet as he continued to walk and he witnessed the full extent of the work of the dark side that pity began to change into something else; a hunger for justice.

His little, green face was a mask of determination. His jaw was clamped tight. His eyes could have burrowed through durasteel as he traveled through the scarred, littered halls of The Temple. He could sense where he needed to go. He had felt the presence ever since they had finished viewing the security footage and knew what he must do. Palpatine would pay for what he had done, and would be stopped before he could do any more evil.

The clank, clank, clank of marching boots alerted Yoda that a patrol of Stormtroopers was approaching from around the corner. As quickly as he could, he hobbled to the shadows afforded by the row of tall pillars lining the hall. Just as he entered the shadows and turned to look, the group of Stormtroopers went marching past. The white-clad soldiers kept the onyx eyes of their helmets straight ahead, their simple minds never wavering from their single order—patrol the halls of The Temple.

But then, much to his surprise, his comm.. link suddenly sprang to life.

"*Master,*" Obi-Wan's voice said. "*Master Yoda--come in,*" Obi-Wan said again.

Yoda reached down and clicked the comm.. off quickly, then looked up to see if the Stormtroopers had heard. He saw that the last of the troops had turned and was peering back down the hall, his blaster held ready. Yoda stepped back deeper into the darkness of the shadows. Then, he gave a wave of a hand in the direction of the Stormtrooper.

The trooper's head tilted to the side in thought, as if he were trying to remember what it was he had just been doing. Then, with a quick look around, the confused Stormtrooper turned and rushed off at a quick walk to catch up with his comrades.

Once the Stormtrooper disappeared down the hall, Yoda emerged. He went around the corner, and then stopped. A short hall lay ahead of him, and at the end was a wide doorway flanked by two thick, silver pillars. He was close now. He could feel the dark presence of his enemy emanating from within the room beyond.

And yet...now that he was closer he couldn't deny that something felt odd about the presence. It was far more potent than he would have thought. True, Sidious had no reason to hide himself now that he had been revealed, but even so the presence was unusually strong. He sensed it far too easily. It seemed almost as if Palpatine were purposely revealing his presence in The Temple as a challenge to Master Yoda to come fight him.

Yet if he were purposely drawing him towards him....

As Master Yoda continued towards the wide doors he knew that he must be cautious. With a wave of his hand Yoda caused the wide, metal doors of the room to slide back into the wall. The room beyond was dark, and a hollow howl of a breeze blowing out through the doors conveyed the sheer size of the chamber within. With a determined grunt, Yoda walked through the open doors and into the darkness.

Once in the room Master Yoda gave a wave of his hand and lights sprang to life all around him, filling the chamber. The room was enormous. It was oval in shape, lined with tall, thick pillars all around the perimeter and with a giant Jedi Crest laid into the center of the floor. Balconies wrapped all around the room, stretching up the towering walls row after row. Statues stood all around the edge of the room against the walls behind the tall, thick pillars. Tapestries and murals also adorned the walls, giving the room a strong sense of history and reverence. The room was literally, and figuratively, the very heart of the Jedi Temple. It was located exactly in the center of the giant structure, and was where the Knighting, Mastering, and other such ceremonies for The Order were performed.

Yoda hobbled across the floor. His narrow, determined eyes scanned from side to side as he walked, searching the shadows behind the pillars and the rows of balconies for any sign of Sidious.

But he saw nothing.

He came to a stop on the huge Jedi Crest in the center of the floor. Closing his eyes and stretching forth a small hand, he reached out with the Force to locate exactly where Sidious' presence was coming from within the room.

"Hmmmmmmm....," he said, his brow furrowed in deep concentration as he delved into the Force.

A shadow came over Yoda; blocking out all light in the room and filling his mind. And then, within the darkness, he began to hear a soft noise. The sound was nothing more than a distant whisper at first—a rustling, but it began to grow until Master Yoda could hear it plainly. The sound was that of a maniacal, grating cackle. The focal point of the taunting, evil laughter shifted from place to place around the room. One second it was to his left behind a row of pillars, the next it was in one of the balconies high above him on the other side of the room, then it was in a lower balcony just a second later, and then it was flying by directly behind him. The laughter moved all over the room.

But Master Yoda did not move. His feet remained planted right where they were. He knew this was an ancient trick of the Sith and that the shifting presence posed no real threat. The presence and the laughter was a phantom—a concentrated projection of the dark side meant to confuse him and hide the Sith's true location. He ignored them. He shut them completely out of his mind and searched the Force for the location of his true quarry, for he felt certain it was here within this giant room.

Strain upon his face, he dug deep into the Force and called upon its power. With it, he began to part the curtains of darkness Sidious had pulled over his mind. Through The Light of the good side, he started to see through the deceit. The rays of peace and serenity he emanated cut through the dark power surrounding him like the rays of a rising dawn—pushing the black back ever-farther. The laughter stopped, then turned into a growl as Sidious tried to fight against Yoda's power.

With a powerful surge the darkness thrust against Yoda's sphere of light, causing it to be pushed back a

ways. Yoda dropped his cane and raised that arm to join his other. With great effort on his face, he pushed up and out with his arms as if he were physically pushing the darkness away. The sphere of light pushed back against the darkness until it had overpowered it. Then the light continued to grow. Sidious tried again to smother Yoda with darkness, but his effort was in vain. There was nothing Sidious could do, and the blackness continued to retreat from Master Yoda's pulsating power.

"Reveal you at last, do I, *Sidious*," Yoda bit out through the strain. "Hide no longer, will you."

The room shook. The floor trembled and the pillars rocked from the tremendous struggle in the Force. It seemed as if the very room might break apart at any moment. There was a final, rage-filled growl, and then the phantom presence disappeared with a thunderous BOOM! The clash and the yell echoed throughout the room until finally melting away.

Yoda opened his eyes, expecting to see Sidious revealed and standing just meters away, but saw nothing. Turning narrowed eyes from side to side, he searched the room with the Force. But still he found nothing.

With growing confusion, Yoda broadened his search in the Force until he realized that Sidious was not even *in* the Jedi Temple!

Across the cityscape of Coruscant, seated behind the desk in his office, Darth Sidious opened his eyes. Then, an amused smile spread across his face.

With his ability to hide now gone, Yoda sensed Sidious' true location. He was across the cityscape at the Executive Offices. He reached out to him through the Force, creating a bond between them.

"Coming for you, am I," Yoda said to him through the Force, an edge of anger in his tone.

Sidious laughed. The cackle echoed in Yoda's mind.

Young fool..., Sidious' slow, amused voice said into Yoda's mind. *I knew you would return. My men have been waiting for you....*

At that, doors all around the room opened. Master Yoda retrieved his lightsaber and ignited it as hundreds of Stormtroopers rushed into the enormous chamber with blaster rifles raised and aimed.

They came at him from all sides, letting loose with their guns. Master Yoda swung and twisted his lightsaber to block the blasts, spinning and jumping on his small legs until he and the green blade were a blur of motion. Using his tremendous abilities in the Force, Master Yoda was able to send nearly every deflected shot right at one of the oncoming Stormtroopers. They fell all around the room as they rushed forward, yet so many were their numbers that it made little difference. White-clad Stormtroopers continued rushing through the doors on the main level of the room in a seemingly endless stream, while even more appeared in the balconies—taking up aim at Master Yoda from their lofty perches.

The cacophony of blaster fire filling the room was deafening, and in the middle of it all Master Yoda twisted and spun, flipped and dove for his life. He jumped high into the air and over the crowd of Stormtroopers; flipping and blocking numerous red lances of light as he did. As he came down from the high arch of his jump, Master Yoda thrust out a hand at the mass of Stormtroopers below him. A thundering BOOM! filled the room, and the Stormtroopers below were suddenly tossed backwards as a large circular opening formed in the group.

Master Yoda landed in this newly-formed clearing. Then, with great strain on his face, he waved his left hand across his body. Nearly fifty Stormtroopers were yanked to the left and sent flying into their comrades at the wave of his hand. He turned to his right, thrusting his left hand out at the troops there as

he continued to block laser blasts. Again there was a loud BOOM!, and again great numbers of Stormtroopers were sent flying backwards through the air as if they had been tossed by a colossal giant. Next, Yoda turned his attention up the walls. With another wave of his left hand he plucked entire platoons of Stormtroopers from their places in the balconies, sending them falling to the floor below—screaming as they fell.

And yet, none of it did any good. For every Stormtrooper that fell there seemed to be two to take its place. They continued to swarm around him—firing away with their deadly blasters. He needed to get out of there. He needed to escape so that he could confront Sidious! So much depended on that now.

Closing his eyes to slits as he continued to twist and turn to block the incoming blaster bolts, he raised his left hand up in front of him. His fingers clenched in a claw, he drew upon the incredible power of the Force. Then, once he felt he could draw no more of the power to him, he thrust his raised hand down at the floor.

A thunderous noise filled the room as a solid wall of invisible energy spread out on all sides from the spot on which he stood. As if an explosion had gone off at Master Yoda's feet, the Stormtroopers flew backwards through the air row upon row as the sphere of energy continued to expand.

Afforded a short reprieve, Master Yoda quickly deactivated and replaced his lightsaber to his belt, then again dug deeply into the invisible energy field. Stretching out both arms he reached out to one of the thick pillars lining the room with the Force. With great effort and a loud cracking noise, he yanked the pillar from its holding place. Immediately he turned the suspended pillar horizontally and began moving it. Hovering the pillar no more than a meter above the ground, Master Yoda swung it in a wide arc around the oval room—a strained grimace upon his face. He bowled down more than a hundred Stormtroopers with the large piece of stone until finally sending it flying through one of the walls with another tremendous BOOM!

Before the Stormtroopers could react, Master Yoda began running in the direction of the hole he'd just created in the wall. There were still a great number of troops between him and the hole, so he leapt high into the air, flipping over them. The moment he landed he continued to run as fast as his little legs could carry him. The Stormtroopers, finally realizing what was happening, began running after him and opened fire upon the retreating Jedi Master. But Yoda was already too far ahead by the time they began firing. He disappeared through the dust and into the dark hole in the wall as the blaster bolts exploded all around him.

Yoda continued to run through the adjoining room, and then the long hall beyond. He could hear the Stormtroopers beginning to emerge from the doorway and running after him, followed quickly by blast bolts, but he merely dodged and ducked the shots as he ran down the hall.

He was nearing a t-junction in the hall and had to decide which way to turn. He thought that perhaps he should turn to his right and continue down deeper into the Jedi Temple where he knew there were numerous secret passages he could use to his advantage, but as he neared the end of the hall something in the Force told him that he should turn left, and go up. Not one to argue with a prompting in the Force, Yoda turned left, then ran up the flight of stairs at the end of the next hall.

Once on the next level, the Force again told him where to go, and again he listened. Finally, he reached a long hall with a door leading out onto one of The Temple's many landing pads at its end. The Force told him that this landing pad was to be his destination. By the time he was less than twenty meters from the door the Stormtroopers finally emerged into the hall behind him and once again opened fire. Sprays of sparks erupted all around him as the blast bolts hit the floor and the walls. Nearly to the door now, Yoda thrust out a hand and opened the door with the Force.

With smoke billowing all around him, with Stormtroopers hot on his tail, Yoda emerged onto the narrow walkway leading out to the landing pad and saw a red speeder parked there. A man dressed in a gray outfit was standing next to the speeder. The man's eyes went wide in alarm at the hail of blaster fire that zipped past Yoda came right towards him—exploding all across the side of his speeder. The man ran

behind the vehicle for cover.

"Master Yoda—run!" the man yelled, and it was then that Yoda realized that it was Bail.

Yoda continued to run, and he watched as Bail withdrew a blaster from a holster on his hip and began returning fire at the rushing Stormtroopers. Yoda finally reached the end of the walkway and the edge of the landing pad, and Bail jumped into the driver's seat to start the speeder up.

As soon as Master Yoda jumped into the seat beside him, Bail hit the engines—banking hard to the side as the speeder lifted into the air. Numerous blaster bolts struck the bottom of the speeder as it turned, then continued to zip all around it as it made for the busy sky traffic of Coruscant.

"Master Kenobi said you might need a ride," Bail chided as he swerved back and forth through the slower-moving traffic. He heard Yoda give a long, tired sigh, and he turned to look at the Jedi Master. He found him sitting in the seat with his eyes closed, and exhausted expression on his face, his head hung low. Bail winced.

Finally, after some time, Yoda said with conviction, "To the senate building, take me."

Bail stole a glance from his driving and saw that a hard, determined expression was now on Yoda's face. Amazingly, only the smallest trace of the exhaustion remained.

"The senate? Why?" Bail asked.

"Sense Palpatine's presence there, do I. Face him, I must," Yoda said.

"He's addressing the senate as we speak," Bail said, confirming what Yoda had sensed.

"HMMMMMMMMM..." Yoda said, thoughtful; for he knew most certainly why Palpatine would be doing such a thing—he would be branding the Jedi as traitors.

Bail's brow furrowed in concern. He knew that there were hundreds, if not thousands, of troops stationed around and within the senate building now. Getting Master Yoda past them and actually inside would be difficult at best.

...And yet as he thought the matter over, he realized there was another way. They could use the underground access passages. These passages were sometimes used by senators going from building to building in the government plaza in order to avoid the crowds and congestion above ground. The passages were relatively small, so chances were that they couldn't have too many troops in them.

It could work.

"Very well," Bail said, turning the speeder and heading for the senate building.

Never before in the long history of the Republic had a murmur of such disbelief and incredulity filled the senate chamber. Thousands of senators from all across the galaxy waited in their pods, exchanging whispers about the rumors that had been floating around since the early morning hours. No one could believe what the rumors were saying—even those that opposed the Jedi most ardently couldn't believe them. Nearly all stood or sat dumbfounded as they waited for Chancellor Palpatine to appear and either confirm or deny this most frightening news.

Yet not all in the senate were exchanging gossip. Some sat and merely waited for what they knew to be the inevitable; Mon Mothma and Fang Zar amongst them. Mon Mothma tried to retain a visage of calm as she watched the hushed exchanges around her. Far too many senators wore hopeful smiles on their faces at the prospect of such rumors being true. It sickened and frightened her that things had become so in the senate.

But she also noticed a dispersed handful of senators that seemed concerned—even saddened—by such an occurrence. She made a mental note of whom these senators were, for she was certain a quiet, discrete talk with them about the direction in which the galaxy was heading was in order.

A rise in the pitch and excitement of the chattering senators caused Mon Mothma to turn her attention to the Chancellor's podium. There she saw Mas Amede and Sly Moore moving into their places. Mas wore a braided, blue robe with giant, leather shoulder pads, while Sly was dressed in her usual gown of shimmering white. Mas held the Staff of the Office of the Supreme Chancellor in his hand. The tall rod was blue in color and bore a robed, cowed figure on its top. He thumped the tall rod five times on the podium floor to gather the attention of the audience.

"Order!! Order!" Mas Amede yelled, though there was no real reason to do so seeing as how the senators had all become still and quiet by the staff's second wrapping. Even though all was in order Mas and the pale-faced Sly Moore *still* scanned the senate chamber with threatening eyes, as if daring anyone to oppose their will. Seeing that none would, the two affixed harsh eyes straight forward and waited.

A slight, almost fearful, stir coursed through Mas Amede and Sly Moore as Palpatine emerged and took his place at the very apex of the podium. Dressed in a thick, hooded, maroon robe bearing embroidered swirls and designs of a slightly lighter color, Palpatine scanned the rows of senators in their pods from within the darkness of his hood. A deep, unforgiving scowl was upon Palpatine's face, and right away all could see that something was clearly different about the man. Everything about Palpatine—even down to the smallest of movements—conveyed a man of great power to be feared and obeyed.

"I come before you today bearing ill news," Palpatine said, but his voice was not the kind, gentle tone all were so used to. Instead it was a slow, grating, menace-filled voice. "Long have I thought this day would come, but nothing could have prepared me for such *treachery!*"

A ripple of surprise spread around the senate chamber at the use of such a word. Palpatine, being ever-mindful of the theatrics of politics, allowed the senators some time. Then, he continued, "For years I suspected some *foul plot* was being hatched in the Jedi Order. For years I watched as they tried time and again to gain further power in the Republic. But not until last night did I understand the full extent of their desires—not until they tried to *kill* me and take control of the Republic for themselves!"

The senate chamber erupted with the sound of stunned gasps.

The scowl on Palpatine's face deepened as he bit out, "From this day forth, I declare the Jedi traitors and disruptors of peace in the galaxy! They shall be hunted down and destroyed for their crimes!"

Applause broke out around the enormous room.

"In light of this latest crisis, I use the power of my office to decree the Republic *dissolved.*" Another theatrical pause. "In its stead, I pronounce The Galactic Empire! As Emperor, I will ensure that *order* is restored to the galaxy! *None* shall challenge the might of The Empire!"

Passionate cheers joined the applause. The agreement in the senate was undeniable, unchallenged; for those that dared to disagree were now too frightened to voice their dissent. Palpatine had gained complete and utter control.

Mon Mothma watched and listened, numb, as Palpatine began instating Regional Governors to help oversee the rule of different sectors of the galaxy. It came as no surprise that Commandant Tarkin was the first to be announced. The newly-appointed Governor beamed with pride as his pod floated in front of the Emperor's podium. He had never looked so smug. It nearly made Mon Mothma ill.

As the appointments continued her thoughts began to shift. Anger began to set in—anger at seeing her beloved Republic twisted into something so horrible. That anger soon turned to a hard, cold determination.

This can not be allowed! The beings of the galaxy deserved freedom! she thought. And she was set on returning it to them—no matter how long it took.

She knew that to challenge Palpatine openly now came with the gravest of consequences. Such things would have to be done behind the scenes, in the safety of secret meetings and in the darkest corners of the halls of the senate. She and her fellow conspirators would have to be most careful. The Dark Lord of the Sith could not know they were actively plotting his downfall. For if he ever discovered their plans...all would be lost.

Palpatine wore a smug, toothy grin within the confines of his maroon, hooded robe as he, Mas Amede, and Sly Moore emerged from the lift leading down from the senate dais. Two crimson-robed, Royal Guards were waiting for them just outside of the elevator doors in the series of halls underneath the senate building, and they fell into step with The Emperor and his entourage as they began walking.

"Forgive me for asking, My Lord," Mas Amede said as they walked, trepidation in his voice, "but what do you plan to do with the dissidents? They said nothing today, but members of this *Delegation of Two-Thousand* are certain to cause trouble."

"They are of no concern," Sidious said, brushing the comment off with the smile still on his face. "Besides—once the Jedi have been completely wiped out the people will need a *new* enemy on which to focus their hatred and fears."

Mas Amede smiled, as did Sly Moore. "Yes, My Lord," Mas said with a bow of his head.

A pair of thick doors opened before them as they walked, and the group entered a large room with several doorways branching off from it. Palpatine took a handful of steps into the room, and then the smug smile on his face slowly melted away as he sensed something he hadn't expected to sense. He came to an abrupt halt. The others stopped as well, puzzled as to why they were not moving.

A deep, hate-filled scowl spread across Palpatine's face. "Leave me!" he said over his shoulder, then turned those fiery, angry eyes back to the door across the room.

Mas and Sly didn't understand the reason for the order, but they complied immediately and without question. "Yes, My Lord," Mas said with a bow, then he and Sly Moore walked through a door off to the left.

Once they were gone Palpatine gave a wave of a hand and the door across the room slid up.

Master Yoda stood just on the other side, peering at Palpatine with narrow eyes; his jaw clenched tight.

The two Royal Guards with Palpatine rushed forward at Yoda with their Force Pikes ignited. Yoda's piercing eyes never even left Palpatine's as he raised both hands up in front of him; grabbing the two guards in an invisible vise with the Force and raising them off the ground. With a subtle gesture of his arms, Yoda sent the two Crimson Guards racing forward through the air and smashing into the wall on either side of the doorway he was standing in. Then, as the pair of Royal Guards' bodies crumpled to the floor, Master Yoda took a handful of steps into the room.

He came to a stop a meter or so past the doors and just stared at Palpatine with that determined look.

Palpatine raised his hands and slowly lowered his hood—that glower remaining firmly on Yoda.

"Your end, this will be, Sidious!" Yoda said, raising a hand and pointing a small, green finger at him.

Sidious' eyes narrowed to slits. "It is *you* who will meet his doom this day, *Master Jedi!*" He spat the title mockingly.

A growl nearly escaped Yoda's lips. He moved a hand up to brush back his Jedi robe and revealed his lightsaber attached to his belt.

Sidious' eyes darted down to the silver hilt, then returned to Yoda's face. Then, the two Masters of the

Force stood staring at each other for several seconds—each waiting for the other to make the first move.

And then Sidious did.

Without warning Sidious' red lightsaber blade was in his hand, and he came hovering forward just a few inches off the ground at Master Yoda. In a flash of movement, Yoda retrieved his own lightsaber and jumped into the air. He ignited the humming, green blade as he flew forward, and he and Sidious met in the center of the room in a phenomenal clash.

Their blades were nothing more than swirls of red and green as they traded blows. So fast were their swings that the sound of each individual impacting became indiscernible. They came so closely on top of one another that they became one continuous hissing, grating noise.

Seeing that they would continue to remain at a stand-still, Sidious took a quick step back and thrust a hand out at Yoda.

The Force Push was more potent and powerful than any Yoda had ever encountered in all his long years. It sent him hurling backwards head-over-feet, but just before he slammed into the wall he gained control and slowed himself. He met the wall sideways; with one hand and both feet pressed up against it while the other hand held his lightsaber. Like a coiling spring, he allowed the remaining momentum to bend his arm and legs inward into the wall. And then, once the impact had been absorbed, he sprang away from the wall with incredible speed and shot himself right back at Sidious in the center of the room.

Watching Yoda come, Sidious snarled and thrust a hand out at him. Yoda's forward flight suddenly and completely stopped, and when Sidious threw his hand downward the Jedi Master was slammed towards the ground.

Yoda's face, chest and stomach struck the tile floor hard; so hard that the marble shattered underneath and around his body in a shallow indentation. His lightsaber was knocked from his hand as he hit, and as he turned his head he could see Sidious coming forward with his lightsaber held high to deliver a deathblow.

In the blink of an eye Master Yoda sprang to his feet and shot both arms out together in front of him. There was a loud noise like a thunderclap, and Sidious was forced to halt his advance and quickly raise an arm up in front of him. Sidious was able to block the majority of the Force Push to keep himself from being hurled backward through the air, but so powerful was the blow that it actually sent him skidding backwards on the soles of his boots.

Yoda turned and stretched out a hand to call his lightsaber back to it with the Force just as Sidious stopped sliding backwards on the heels of his feet. Igniting the blade once more, Yoda stood with it held up in front of him—the green glow illuminating his hard face.

"You don't know how much I enjoyed deceiving you all these years," Sidious said with an evil grin, red lightsaber held down at his side. "You Jedi are far too trusting. Pathetic!" he shouted with a growl, raising his free hand and sending a deadly volley of blue-white lightning at Master Yoda.

Yoda moved his lightsaber in the path of the lightning and it crackled and sparkled all along its length before dissipating with a hiss.

Sidious ground his teeth in anger, then redoubled the force behind the lightning.

This new torrent actually forced Yoda's blade back quite a bit, and the Jedi Master grimaced with strain as he pushed back against its power. The blue-white energy rippled up and down his green blade, occasionally biting at his hands and arms.

Sidious halted the assault of blue-white energy and began to cackle.

"Your Order has been decimated. Your... *Chosen One* now belongs to me. Tell me—how does it feel to be so completely and utterly defeated?" Sidious scoffed.

With a scowl, Yoda shot back, "Know *that* soon enough, you will."

Sidious' smile evaporated, and his eyes became furnaces of hatred. He shot forth more Force Lightning—this time with such energy that it caused Yoda's lightsaber to recoil almost all the way back into his face.

It was slow coming at first, but with the aide of the Force Yoda finally began pushing his blade back against the Force Lightning. Once his arms were fully outstretched in front of him he removed his left hand from the silver hilt and raised it up by his shoulder. His hand in the shape of a claw, Yoda began drawing the Force Lightning from his blade to his hand in a steady stream. Once he had a fist-sized orb of the blue-white energy collected in his hand he thrust the arm forward, sending the lightning right back at Sidious.

Sidious was forced to halt his barrage in order to block the one Yoda sent back at him. He moved his free hand into the path of the lightning and sent it ricocheting into the wall with a thunderous BOOM! and a shower of flames and sparks. Lips pulled back over his teeth in an angry snarl, Sidious released his grip on his lightsaber and sent it flying through the air at Master Yoda. Then, he raised both hands and shot two potent torrents of blue-white lightning from his fingertips.

But Master Yoda jumped and was flipping through the air before the lightning even reached him. He landed several meters to the side and raised his lightsaber to deflect several swipes from the floating blade before he was once again forced to jump through the air as another stream of lightning came his way. Back and forth Yoda jumped; each time barely getting out of the way before the lightning hit him, and continuing to block the swipes of Sidious' red lightsaber.

Finally, with animalistic ferocity, Sidious shouted, "Get back here!" and reached out to grab Yoda with the Force as he was flipping through the air.

Beyond his control, Yoda was forced to land. He was stunned to find he could not move his feet, and his surprised eyes looked up at Sidious just as the Sith Lord sent lightning hurling towards him from both hands.

Yoda raised his left hand to absorb the incoming lightning. Meanwhile, he continued to move his lightsaber all around his short body in the other hand to block Sidious' flying, dipping blade. Repeatedly he tried to break free of Sidious' grip on his feet, but they wouldn't budge. They remained planted exactly where they were. The strain of simultaneously absorbing the deadly energy Sidious and concentrating on deflecting the blade was becoming too much for Master Yoda. He could feel himself becoming fatigued, while Sidious showed no signs of stopping any time soon.

Closing his eyes to slits, Yoda grabbed Sidious' lightsaber with the Force and deactivated it. Before Sidious could regain control of the weapon from his grip, Yoda sent it hurling through the open doorway behind him. The silver and gold hilt clanked to the floor of the hall, then came to a skidding halt near the door on the far side. Then, Yoda took advantage of Sidious' momentary surprise to break the Dark Lord's Force Hold on his feet and jumped away from the streams of Force Lightning.

Sidious stopped shooting the lightning and stretched out a hand in the direction of the open doorway. Yoda turned to see Sidious' lightsaber stir, then jump into the air and fly down the hall back towards them. Moving his humming, green lightsaber from his right hand to his left, Yoda raised his free hand into the air, then quickly dropped it towards the ground. When he did, the door to the hall slammed down into the floor. Then, Yoda closed his hand into a fist and the door gave a loud screech as the metal was twisted all along the edges where the door met the wall.

That door would not be opening again any time soon.

Sidious' flaming eyes shot to bore into Yoda.

Yoda pointed the tip of his lightsaber at Sidious, then raised the corner of his lip in a smirk. "Hmph!" he grunted loudly so that Sidious would be sure to hear him.

A crazed look of pure and utter rage came across Sidious' face, and the room seemed to darken. With a strained, angry look on his face, Sidious raised his right hand palm-up in front of him.

Yoda watched, puzzled, as he did this—keeping his lightsaber in front of him and ready for any surprises.

As if he were crushing something, Sidious closed his hand into a fist in a swift, aggressive motion.

Yoda was amazed as his green blade suddenly disappeared and he felt something burning his hands. Immediately he dropped his lightsaber. Or rather—he let go of the twisted, gnarled hunk of metal that had once been his lightsaber. The useless hunk of metal clanked to the floor, spraying sparks as it did.

Immediately Sidious went on the offensive again, unleashing a steady stream of searing Force Lightning. Yoda held his hands up in front of him to stop and capture the energy before it struck him.

Gnashing his teeth, Sidious intensified the onslaught.

Yoda felt the sudden increase in ferocity of the attack and knew that Sidious was bent on ending this once and for all as soon as possible. The power behind the assault was monstrous; filled with hatred and rage so potent that it nearly made Master Yoda ill. He could feel the cold, spindly fingers of the dark side spreading all around him and trying to weaken his will with thoughts of hopelessness. But he fought on. He resisted even as the mass of energy between his hands became a churning sphere of pure darkness; black and thick.

Yoda closed his pained eyes against the enormous strain. Putting everything he had into it—drawing upon the absolute full extent of his training, knowledge and power in the Force—he concentrated on the black pool of energy expanding just in front of him. It came with great, immense effort, but he found peace and serenity within himself and drew upon its power.

It started as nothing more than a small, tiny pinpoint, but pure, white light appeared in the center of the sphere of the dark side. Master Yoda concentrated on it, adding to it more and more and more and finding added peace and serenity as he did.

Sidious watched as the single ray of light grew and expanded, and he increased the intensity of his attack up to the point where the dark side filled every single bit of him he physically couldn't draw in any more. His frustration and anger grew as he saw the strain slowly fade away from Master Yoda's face until he merely stood there with a passive expression. And still the sphere of light continued to grow within the churning darkness until it finally over came it completely! Blinding light filled the room, and Sidious was forced to halt his attempt at an assault in order to shield his eyes.

A visage of complete calm on his face, eyes closed peacefully, Master Yoda lifted the brilliant orb of pure light above his head, then threw it at Sidious.

“NOOOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!” Sidious screamed, horrified, as the meter-wide globe of light hurled towards him.

Yoda opened his eyes just in time to see the sphere of white light strike Sidious full-on. The Dark Lord was sent flying backwards through the air, then came crashing down onto the floor on his back where he lay still and unmoving.

...Dead.

Master Yoda peered at Sidious' lifeless body for a handful of seconds; content. But then incredible exhaustion washed over him. He nearly collapsed where he stood as his knees began to wobble, and he staggered to the closest wall for support. It seemed to take an eternity for him to reach it. When he finally did he braced himself up with his left arm and hung his head in fatigue.

He had done it. He had defeated the Dark Lord. There was hope still for the future.

For several minutes Yoda leaned against the wall in an attempt to regain his strength, but it wouldn't return. He felt numb. It felt as if his nerves, like a circuit-line in some machine, had been fried out by an

overload of energy.

But he had done it. It was over.

At first, Master Yoda paid the slight rustling he felt in his white wisps of hair no mind. He was certain it was nothing more than his body beginning to re-register feelings again, and that it was a trick of his mind. But as time went on and the rustling became a light breeze he began to take notice.

Mustering the energy to turn around, Yoda hobbled until he was facing Sidious' fallen form. His jaw dropped and his eyes went wide at what he saw; Sidious' body was slowly rising into the air and surrounded by a growing torrent of what looked like long and thin, black clouds.

The swirling breeze intensified to a gusting wind and the cloud-like blackness grew thicker and thicker as Sidious' body raised up to a standing position. A mocking cackle joined on the swirling winds, and Yoda peered at what he saw in front of him in disbelief. The Dark Lord's face was nearly unrecognizable. Sickly-pale, lined with row upon row of deep wrinkles and a creviced ridge of a brow, with pink-ringed, sunken eyes, his face looked nothing like it had before.

As if controlled by strings, Sidious' arms raised above his head as the now gale-force winds billowed and tugged at his maroon robe. Then, the lids of those sunken eyes opened to reveal piercing, yellow eyes as Sidious' feet touched down on the floor.

With a swift, downward swipe of Sidious' raised arms the twisting winds and the cackling stopped and all was again still.

Sneering, Sidious said, "*You fool! You cannot kill me! You know who I am! You know what I am! I AM THE DARK SIDE!!!!!!*"

Yoda gawked, uncertain as to what to do. Flee was his only option. If there were to be any hope for the future he must flee!

With what little energy he could gather to his worn body he turned towards one of the many doors in the room and ran. Using the Force, he opened the door and began down the hall beyond. He heard Sidious begin to cackle again, and turned to see him coming after him. A black aura seemed to emanate from the deathly-pale man as he came forward. He wasn't quite certain, but Master Yoda could have sworn Sidious' feet were floating a handful of inches off of the ground and he was hovering as he came after him.

Yoda ran as fast as he could away from this dark, cackling menace. He felt the floor begin to tremble, and the walls actually appeared to bow outwards as he heard cracking noises spreading across the ceiling above him. He barely moved out of the way of the first giant chunk of ceiling as it fell, then was forced to dodge the next piece and the next and the next. In this moment of dire need he was able to overcome his incredible fatigue and call upon enough power in the Force to move several chunks just enough out of the way to avoid being crushed.

Only a few meters away from the t-junction at the end of the hall, Yoda felt a glimmer of hope that he just might make it. Once again calling upon the Force, he stopped a falling piece of ceiling that surely would have killed him and sent it flying at the wall at the end of the hall. The chunk of rock exploded through the wall, revealing the bustling sky traffic of Coruscant outside.

Sidious gave a guttural roar as he saw the escape route Yoda had formed and used the colossal energy coursing through him to launch a huge, fallen piece of ceiling towards the Jedi Master at an incredible speed.

Sidious watched as Yoda turned to face the rock and tried to stop it with the Force, but he was too weak. The rock slammed into the small Master Jedi, then slammed into the wall where the hole was—making the hole even bigger. Sidious watched the rock disappear from sight as he continued forward and rushed to the hole to see if he had indeed accomplished his goal.

When he reached the gaping hole in the wall he saw the rock tumbling down through the sky traffic of the

Capital City. He watched the rock fall for nearly a kilometer--until it was too small to be seen anymore. Then, reaching out with the Force and closing his eyes, Sidious searched for any signs of Master Yoda's presence. He searched long and hard to be sure, and when he finally was, he opened his yellow eyes.

A smile spreading across his pasty, wrinkled face, he croaked, "He is no more."

Then, he turned from the hole and slowly walked back down the hall.

Bail felt the ground below him tremble, then heard the tremendous explosion erupt from down below over the edge of the building. He rushed from his speeder to the edge and saw a giant chunk of duracrete falling down and away from the building. Bail watched as the bustling traffic swerved crazily to avoid being struck by the rock as it plummeted toward the metal and stone rooftop of another building far, far below.

After a time the hunk of duracrete was no more than a falling speck, and Bail turned his gaze straight down to the hole where the rock had exploded through the wall. He found no scorch marks, no smoke, no fire—not a single sign of an explosion. His brow furrowed in confusion as he contemplated what could have caused such a thing to happen. How could the rock have been thrown through the wall if not by an explosion of some kind?

And then, the answer dawned on him.

Master Yoda! He did this with the Force!

Bail peered at the enormous opening in the side of the building in awe; trying to fathom the tremendous power required to do such a thing. The rock had been enormous, and judging by how far out from the building it had sailed it had been thrown at tremendous velocity.

Amazing! he thought, aghast at the power of the Force. Then, another thought entered his mind; *if Master Yoda could summon such power, surely Palpatine was defeated. Sith or not—Palpatine wouldn't stand a chance against such power!*

Hope was kindled in Bail's mind—hope that it was all over and that the Jedi had once again won the day for the Republic.

But then, movement down below caught Bail Organa's eye. He squinted and leaned forward, trying to make out the small figure on a ledge below and to the side of the giant hole. His eyes went wide and he gasped once he realized who it was; Master Yoda, wrapped tight in his brown robes and hunched over in pain. Stranded on the ledge.

Bail stood there for several seconds dumbfounded and unable to move. His mind wouldn't allow him to acknowledge what he was seeing. He did his best to deny his own logic. And yet, he knew what he was seeing meant—he understood the horrible truth of the situation.

He ran back to his speeder and jumped in. He fired up the engines with a loud whine, then lifted off of the ground and steered over the edge of the building.

Master Yoda peered up at him with sad, worried eyes as Bail slowly pulled the speeder up next to the ledge. Bail recognized the expression immediately. He had seen the look in his own reflection numerous times before over the course of his many years in the senate. It was a look of resigned defeat. The expression of someone that recognized and accepted a tremendous, personal failure.

Bail said nothing. He merely sat at the controls of the speeder and waited, still trying to piece together what possibly could have happened to bring about such an event.

Finally, Master Yoda began shaking his head slowly from side to side and gave him the answer.

"Defeat him, I could not. Too powerful in the dark side, is he," Yoda said, pain and loss in his voice.

Bail winced. He could think of no words that might bring solace to such a situation. Master Yoda—Master of Masters in the Jedi Order—had been bested by the Dark Lord of the Sith.

Hope seemed a futile thing. Victory was impossible. The Sith had won, and the Jedi and the Republic had lost. Yet through his remorse Bail had the sense to know that to linger here near this building any longer would be foolish. A patrol would be around at any minute.

"Master Yoda," Bail said, "We need to get out of here. We're still in danger."

Confusion and a deep humility filled Yoda's face. His shoulders seemed to sag more now than they had before. His hair appeared whiter, his wrinkles more pronounced. The aged master seemed lost, as if all he thought he knew and believed had suddenly been proven wrong. Yoda peered up at him with those sad eyes, and for a split second Bail worried that he might tell him to leave him there. For an instant he feared Yoda might give up.

But he did not.

With a heavy sigh, Yoda said, "Long have I studied the Force. Many of its mysteries, have I solved. But much to learn, it seems, I still have." His spirit seemed to lift at admitting and accepting these words, and a tiny glint of hope sprang back into his eyes.

His little, green legs hobbled to the side of the speeder. "Get away from Coruscant, I must," he said, climbing into the passenger's seat. "Or sense that I lived, he will."

Bail didn't fully understand what he meant, and he didn't ask. Not now. There would be better times for that. He merely nodded and sped off into the bustling traffic. He activated the comm. link on his wrist cuff with a push of a button.

"Yes, *senator*?" his female aide's voice said.

"Ready the *Tantive*. I'll be there within minutes. We leave at once," Bail said.

"Understood," the aide replied. "*Destination*?"

Bail looked to Yoda for an answer, but found him with his eyes closed tight and head bowed in meditation. "We'll deal with that later. Just see to it that we're ready to leave as soon as I arrive."

"Yes, *senator*," the aide said, then clicked off.

A short while later Bail and Master Yoda arrived at the senate docking bay where the *Tantive* was still housed.

The door leading into the hangar slid open with a hiss and Bail found himself staring down the barrel of a blaster rifle.

"Good. It's you," Captail Antilles said, holstering the weapon.

Bail followed a hobbling Master Yoda through the doors and into the hangar. Antilles waited for the two of them to pass, then fell in step behind them.

"Are we ready for take-off?" Bail asked.

"Yes," the young captain said. "We had some problems getting clearance for take-off, but finally got it with the use of your name and office."

They reached the hatch of the long, white ship and the door hissed open before him to reveal Bail's female aide standing just inside. Reena and Bail exchanged nods as the group walked into the ship.

Master Yoda stopped a short ways in from the hatch, and Bail and the others peered down to see what was the matter.

“Search the Force, I must,” Master Yoda said, his gaze earnest. “Solutions, I must find for this troubling puzzle.”

Bail fixed his female aide with a look. “Reena.”

“Yes, senator,” she said, then began ushering Master Yoda the other way down the hall to a private chamber.

Bail watched Master Yoda’s fatigued, labored steps with a twinge of guilt. The Jedi Master had gone through so much in such a short amount of time; the surprise attack of his clone soldiers in the field, the destruction of his entire order, the attack of the clones in the Jedi Temple, and then his defeat at the hands of Palpatine. Yet, still, the diminutive being worried himself with finding solutions of hope for the future of the galaxy. Who could possibly say they had done more to try to save the Republic than Master Yoda?

Bail and Captain Antilles turned and continued walking down the gleaming, white corridor in the ship towards the cockpit.

The *Tantive IV* raced away from the gleaming surface of the planet and for deep space. Numerous Star Destroyers, as if eager to provoke trouble, edged in close to the ship but did nothing else. Bail knew that this was to be the new order of business in the galaxy—intimidation through the display of power. It sickened him.

“Where to, senator?” the pilot asked.

“Set course for Alderaan—for now,” Bail said. “Just in case they are monitoring us.”

“Yes, senator,” the pilot said, then steered the ship in the proper direction. “Ready?” he asked his copilot.

“Ready,” the man said.

The pilot pulled back a lever on the control panel and the stars turned to starlines as the ship entered hyperspace.

Chapter 30

The control room on the fiery planet of Mustafar was filled with a frenzied, panicked mood. The turbulent, deadly surface of the planet could be seen out of every window, each showing a different view of the same things—either flowing fields of lava, or erupting volcanoes. The room was hot, and that heat only served to heighten the anxiety and tempers in the room.

The Separatist leaders stood spread out around the room, most whispering hurriedly with their aides or second-hand man about how, if at all, something good could be gleaned from this disastrous situation. It was a time for salvage. Treaty and alliances no longer meant a thing. Only survival mattered now.

Most troubled of all was Nute Gunray. Standing with his aide, Rune Haako, Nute gazed from one shimmering, holographic planet to another; hoping beyond hope that what he was seeing was just a dream. But no matter how hard he blinked the images remained the same. The Separatist armies were being utterly destroyed all across the galaxy.

"This can't be happening!" Nute exclaimed, hands clenched into fists. "Where is Grievous!? Why hasn't the fool contacted us!? I told him this plan would not work!"

"We must retreat and regroup our forces," Rune said.

"What forces!? Can't you see?" Nute screamed, pointing at the numerous holo-displays before them. "They're all destroyed!" A sudden, horrific realization came to him. "We're *ruined!*" he yelled in exasperated terror.

"Viceroy?" Passel Argente called out from a console across the room.

"What do you want now!?" Nute spun and yelled, expecting yet another earful for having dragged the wealthy, influential being into this mess. But as soon as Nute saw the horrified expression on Passel's face and the trembling of his hands he knew this would not be the case.

"It's...it's Darth Sidious," Passel said in terror, pointing up to the life-sized holo-image standing atop of the console in front of him.

A cold shiver of fear suddenly shot through Nute's body and he stiffened. He stood there with eyes wide, mouth hanging open for some time before finally snapping out of it and walking swiftly across the room. One did not keep the Dark Lord of the Sith waiting.

The shiver of fear was replaced by absolute terror once Nute stood before the console and gazed up at the ghoulish specter standing before him with arms folded into the sleeves of his black robe. Darth Sidious' face was a wrinkled, wizened mess of sickly-pale skin underneath that all-too familiar, black hood. Sunken, yellow points of light that were eyes peered out at him from within the darkness of the cowl, and Nute was certain they could see right through him. Sidious looked as if he'd been to hell and back—which was something that wouldn't surprise Nute, if true.

"Uh...My Lord," Nute said with a bow, finally getting a hold of himself. "I am most relieved to hear from you. Our forces are in disarray and General Grievous has not contacted us in some time. We—"

"General Grievous is dead, Viceroy," Sidious bit out between yellow teeth, a shriveled hand emerging from the sleeves of the robe and giving a dismissive wave.

A gasp of surprise spread throughout the room as the Separatist Leaders exchanged stunned looks. Nute looked to the side to a shocked Rune Haako, who was safely out of Darth Sidious' field of vision.

Nute turned back to Sidious. "What of our remaining forces, My Lord? Who will lead them with Grievous gone?"

"The matter has been resolved," Sidious said. *"My new apprentice is already en route. Lower your defenses. He will be arriving at any minute. He will explain to you the future of the Separatist Movement."*

Nute wasn't certain, but he thought he'd seen the smallest hint of a wicked smile crossing the Dark Lord's lips. "Yes...uhhhh...yes, of course, My Lord," Nute said with a bow.

With that, Sidious' terrible image disappeared, and the room was once more filled with the buzz of quiet conversation.

Viceroy Gunray's comm. at his personal console began beeping. He walked over to the dash of lights and pressed the one that was blinking red. "What is it?" he demanded.

"Viceroy, a ship has just entered the system and—" the Neimodian voice on the comm.. said, but was interrupted.

"I know a ship is approaching! It is expected," Nute cut off the Neimodian officer. "Lower the defenses and allow it to land."

"But, sir, I—"

"What is wrong with you, lieutenant?" Nute asked, angry. "Do as I say!"

"Yes, sir. I...I will, sir," the officer stammered, clearly flustered. *"It's just that the...the ship is a Republic Star Destroyer."*

"I don't ca.... Wait! *What!?*" Nute exclaimed. He stared at the speaker of the console in surprise for several seconds. Then, "Put it on screen!"

Nute turned to peer at the wall and watched as the holo-image of one of the planets disappeared to be replaced by the image of a large, wedge-shaped ship floating in space a short distance away from the planet. Several of the other Separatist Leaders walked over to peer at the image.

"What's going on here, Gunray?" one asked.

"What's that ship doing here?" another said.

"I don't know!" Nute exclaimed in self-defense. "But Darth Sidious said his apprentice would be arriving, and here is a ship. It must be him! There is no way the Republic could know of this base!"

Murmurs of disapproval floated around the dark, hot room, but none argued his point. Besides—what could they do? Contact Darth Sidious again to see if this was indeed his apprentice that had arrived? They would sooner be attacked by Republic forces than incur Darth Sidious' wrath.

Striding back to his personal comm. console, Nute said, "Lower the defenses! Tell him where to land."

"Yes, Viceroy," the lieutenant said, the clicked off of the comm..

Nute returned to peering at the image of the Star Destroyer as it settled into orbit above the planet,

wondering if he had indeed made the right decision. He felt confident he had. He knew that Darth Sidious held great influence over the most powerful beings in the galaxy. There had to be an explanation for all of this! There just had to be!

That confidence was shaken greatly as he watched a single ship exit the docking bay of the enormous, wedge-shaped ship and dive for the planet. He recognized the model of the starfighter immediately.

"That's a *Jedi* Starfighter!" one of the beings nearby exclaimed in disbelief.

Nute's shoulder's sagged in fear and uncertainty, but he continued to hold on to the thought that he had indeed been correct. *Sidious said he would come, and now here he is!* he thought.

But, still, he couldn't shake the feeling that something was terribly wrong here.

An oppressive darkness filled the viewport as Anakin piloted through the black, noxious clouds above Mustafar. Though he was on the dayside of the planet, there was little the system's sun could do to penetrate the suffocating blanket of smoke and soot that hung thick in the air. Even this far up from the fiery surface the cockpit already began to grow warmer, and a sheen of sweat appeared on Anakin's forehead.

His starfighter trembled violently as he steered it through the turbulent, hot air. Any lesser pilot might have had trouble handling the turbulence, but Anakin did it expertly; almost without thinking. He sensed the changing torrents on the wind before they even reached the ship, and his hands danced across the controls to make the proper adjustments at just the right instant.

Artoo gave a quick series of beeps. Anakin looked at the console display to see that the droid had found their destination a few kilometers to the south. He banked hard in that direction and increased speed.

He was anxious to complete the mission. Not only because of the urge he felt to release and utilize the smoldering hatred he felt welling within him, but because he wanted to return to Padme.

He'd sensed doubt and uncertainty in her in their last meeting--almost as if she'd suspected he was lying to her. He needed to get back to her quickly before she had time to learn the truth about what had happened. He knew that, despite his command, she would most probably speak with others about the vast changes occurring on Coruscant. It was in her nature to be independent and to go against orders she didn't agree with.

That was something he would have to change soon enough. For her own good, it was something he would have to change.

After emerging through thick, black clouds Anakin peered through the viewport and down at the ground passing below, gazing at the rivers and lakes of flowing, bubbling lava. He passed over a wide expanse of cracked, black rock riddled with glowing, orange veins. As he inspected the plain more closely he saw that the ground was shifting. He realized the plain was actually yet another, even larger lake of lava where the surface had cooled. The colder lava on top had formed a black crust that drifted at the mercy of the flows below--causing the fractured pieces to crash into one another, then break apart once again in a violent cycle.

Towering volcanoes were spread out all across the landscape. Magma slithered from them in endless streams to feed the rivers and the lakes below. But the most violent display--the area with the most concentrated activity--lay off in the distance straight ahead.

Numerous volcanoes were clustered together in an unusually tight group in this region. Like some deadly beacon, their peaks shot arcs of fiery lava several hundred meters into the air. The steep peaks here erupted with an unparalleled ferocity. The explosions seemed to have no end, no limit in their power.

Just in the shadows of these towering peaks lay a vast complex of buildings. In what seemed a suicidal

act of engineering, numerous rounded buildings were nestled directly into the sides of the behemoth mountains, while longer, angular building had been built right over rivers of flowing lava. The lava flow was unimpeded. It still flowed in enormous, durasteel canals under the buildings.

Most of the buildings built into the side of the mountains lay near their bases, but some snaked up the sides of the steep peaks and dangerously close to their mouths. Large, durasteel channels were set around most of the buildings to direct the flow of lava away from them. Yet, Anakin noticed that some of the channels actually served to direct lava into openings in the sides of some buildings. Lights were on all across the complex, proving that beings were daring--or foolish--enough to actually reside within.

Artoo gave a series of chirps, and Anakin looked at the display to see that the droid was directing him to their assigned landing pad. Anakin corrected his flight path to aim around the wide base of a volcano. Artoo gave another whistle, this time with a frightened warble in his tone. Anakin said nothing in response to the droid's fear of the deadly environment. He gave no words of comfort. Nothing. He merely gave a contemptuous sneer as they came around the volcano and the place they were to land came into view.

Several tall, rounded buildings were linked together by a series of sturdy walkways and set right into the side of the neighboring mountain. Magma flows cascaded down the channels on either side of the row of buildings, framing it with an orange glow. The curved faces of the buildings consisted of a smooth patchwork of scorched durasteel plates that were interrupted every twenty or so meters by a horizontal slit of glowing windows.

Just like all the other buildings in the complex, tall antennas were affixed to the peaked tops of each structure in the events of an electric storm. But it was the vast array of communications dishes set around these antennae that gave away the importance of these buildings. When he saw those dishes, Anakin knew that he had indeed arrived at the right place.

A wicked smile crossed his lips, and his hand suddenly itched with desire for his humming blade.

He slowed and approached the enormous cluster of buildings head-on. As he neared, he saw the circular landing pad and aimed for it. It was rather large--big enough for a medium-sized shuttle--and jutted out from the topmost, enclosed walkway linking the two buildings together; just below where the buildings began to taper up into their peaked tops. With growing anticipation, Anakin lowered the landing gear and settled down onto the durasteel surface of the large landing pad.

Anakin shut down the engines with a quick flick of switches, then opened the hatch. The air was so hot it felt like a slap in the face as it rushed in. It nearly took his breath away it was so warm and dry. Then the stinging sulfur filling the air actually did take his breath away as it burned his nostrils, his eyes and his lungs. But Anakin ignored it. He narrowed his eyes and used the Force to wash away the pain as he stepped out of the fighter's hatch. Artoo turned his domed head to peer at Anakin as he set foot on the landing pad and gave a worried set of bleeps and whistles.

"No. Stay here," Anakin ordered, an edge to his voice.

Artoo beeped acceptance, but didn't sound very happy about the idea of being left all alone in such a strange and inhospitable place.

Anakin raised his hood and walked between the wings of the fighter towards the door leading into the covered walkway. As he walked a low rumble shook the ground and he felt his steps sway. A loud explosion could be heard raining down from high above. He peered up with hard eyes through the swirling heat and blackness of smoke and saw the top of the volcano hundreds of meters above. A tall jet of lava sprayed straight up into the air, and numerous streams of the glowing liquid spilled down the sides of the jagged peak towards the buildings, only to be diverted by the channels.

Across the pad, the heavy blast doors leading into the covered walkway opened to reveal two armored Neimodian guards shouldering long blaster rifles. The two guards remained just inside the doorway and waited. Anakin gave a contemptuous sneer and walked to the guards. Once he was inside the walkway he stopped and the thick door slam shut behind him.

Anakin peered around with quick darts out of the corners of his eyes, assessing the location. The hallway

was dimly lit and shaped like a triangle with the top chopped off. There were numerous panels spread throughout the hall covered with red, blinking lights. Anakin guessed they were part of a system designed to monitor heat and gas levels, because after just a few seconds with the door being closed the red lights turned to yellow, then, eventually, green.

Apparently, the thick, durasteel walls of the building did little to keep out the heat because it was still blazingly hot inside. But the stinging fumes were gone, allowing Anakin to breathe and see freely as the guards silently began leading him down the hall to the right. Anakin followed, staring straight ahead with narrow eyes as the anger and the power festering inside cried out to be released.

Soon..., Anakin thought, relishing in anticipation.

The guards led him through another heavy blast door and into what looked like a security monitoring room. Droids and aliens sat at consoles peering at display screens, watching the complex and the volcano for any irregularities. Anakin gave the room a quick sweep of his eyes, and was pleased to see that the security was rather lax. But, then again, in a location such as this there was little need for security. The deadly surroundings made it virtually impossible for anyone to sneak into the complex unnoticed, and their enemies had no knowledge of the facilities existence whatsoever.

Or so they thought.

An evil smile crossed Anakin's lips in the darkness of the hood.

Several of the room's occupants glanced up to see who had entered. Their surprised eyes lingered on Anakin as the guards led him through the room and towards the short hall on the far side. Through the Force Anakin could feel their confusion mixed with fear at the sight of him. He soaked the emotions in greedily, adding their power to his own as the two guards led him down the short hall and towards a closed door.

With great stealth Anakin retrieved his lightsaber from his hip and tucked it in his right hand out of sight up his sleeve. The guards neither saw nor suspected anything as the door leading into the control room slid open and they led the hooded visitor into the room beyond.

Anakin took a handful of steps into the room, then stopped.

The guards continued forward for several more steps, unaware that the visitor was no longer following. But once they saw the mixed emotions on the faces of the Separatist Leaders spread throughout the room they stopped and turned to find the dark visitor standing just inside of the room's doors.

Head hung low, peering out from under his cowl with hate-filled eyes, Anakin slowly looked around the room at the Separatist Leaders. He had been waiting for this for years now--ever since the beginning of The Wars. He took a moment to absorb the rapture he was feeling in his heart--took a moment to bask in the fear he felt beginning to build in the room.

Then his hatred began to be too much. It was overflowing now, filling each and every fiber of his being with an urge to act--a necessity to strike and cause pain. Almost beyond his control his mechanical hand tightened on the hilt of his lightsaber. His eyes narrowed to slits and a snarl broke out across his face. He could wait no longer. The darkness filling him would not allow it. It had control of him now, and it demanded to fulfill its dark will.

And Anakin was all too pleased to let it do so.

Standing next to Rune Haako on the far side of the room, Nute Gunray recognized the hooded being walking into the control room immediately. Nute was frozen, unable to move even the muscles in his face to express the horror that had gripped him. His head spun as he tried to comprehend how this was happening, and how it had all come to this.

"Is that...!?" he heard Rune exclaim in disbelief.

Nute Gunray didn't know how, but Anakin Skywalker, famed Jedi hero of The Clone Wars, was standing before him.

In that instant Nute knew without a doubt that there was no hope.

They were all already dead.

The mood in the cockpit of Padme's Naboo skiff was tense. Padme and Obi-Wan had hardly spoken on the way to Mustafar. Both had been far too preoccupied with their own thoughts. Threepio had tried repeatedly to make small talk, but gave up after numerous failed attempts. He merely stood silent in the rear of the cockpit for the remainder of the trip through light speed. But now that the skiff had come out of hyperspace and the fiery, black orb of Mustafar hung in space before them that silence was finally broken.

"Star Destroyer," Obi-Wan stated, looking up from the scanning display and pointing to the dagger-shaped ship orbiting the planet.

Obi-Wan and Padme eyed the ship wearily. This was the last thing they needed right now.

"Do you think they've spotted us?" Padme asked, worry in her voice.

Obi-Wan turned his gaze from the viewport back down to the scanning display, and after further inspection said, "I don't think so. Looks like they're preoccupied at the moment."

Padme turned and gave him an inquisitive look, and he motioned down to the scanning display. Padme peered at the display with squinted eyes, then spun her chair around to face the bank of consoles on the right side wall and began pushing buttons. A few seconds later a meter-sized holo-image of the scan display appeared above the console. With another quick flip of a few switches, Padme zoomed the image in on the cluster of bulky ships idling next to the Star Destroyer. ARC starfighters surrounded the boxy group of ships, their blaster cannons pointed threateningly.

Obi-Wan turned his head to look, his hands still guiding the ship's controls towards the hellish world. A puzzled look crossed his face at the sight of the ships. "Those aren't battle ships," he said.

"No. They look more like cargo transports of some kind," Padme said. "I think they're being detained. Look! The Star Destroyer is sending over boarding parties."

Obi-Wan saw the cluster of small shuttles and nodded. They had gotten lucky. The Star Destroyer was too busy with these ships to pay much mind to anything else. Still, he steered the ship on an approach vector as far away from the Star Destroyer as possible. There was no need to test their luck.

Things got quiet again in the cockpit as the glowing, red planet grew larger in the viewport. They were so close now--so close to having to confront Anakin and the thought weighed heavy in their minds.

Though Obi-Wan had had the entire trip to think about what he would say, he was still at a loss for words. None of the scenarios he'd played through in his mind had seemed enough to reach a man capable of doing what he'd seen Anakin do in the Jedi Temple security footage. Reason seemed mad. Devotion and a sense of duty to The Order was far gone. Peace and serenity seemed to be lost ideals to Anakin now. The only possibility Obi-Wan could think of was drawing upon memories of their long friendship--dwelling on the bond they shared. It seemed the only way.

"Obi-Wan," Padme said, her voice quiet, pensive, as she stared out at the swirling clouds of ash and smoke surrounding the planet. "I have to face him alone."

Obi-Wan shook his head, not taking his eyes from the viewport. "It's too dangerous. Besides--we have a

better chance of reaching him together."

Padme peered down at her large belly, raising a hand to rub it gently, protectively. Then, peering back up, she said, "There are things you don't know, Obi-Wan--reasons why it could be dangerous for you to be there with me."

Brow furrowed in confusion, Obi-Wan turned to look at her. She met his gaze with remorseful eyes, but he also saw strength there, too.

"Anakin's jealous of you, Obi-Wan," she said quietly. "He always has been. In his eyes you've always been the ideal Jedi--everything he's always wanted to be, but felt he couldn't. He's been secretly competing with you for years now, and has been fixated on becoming the more powerful."

Obi-Wan was dumbstruck, numb as he turned back to peer blankly out of the viewport. He had noticed Anakin testing him throughout the years, but had thought it normal for a Master-Apprentice relationship. He had done the same to Qui-Gon more than occasionally as his apprentice. But hearing this--knowing just how far and how deep it went for Anakin--made him feel even more guilty than he already had.

How could I have allowed this to happen? How much more did I miss as his Master? he thought, wincing.

"That's a big part of why he's always tried so hard, wanted to advance so quickly," Padme continued. "If you're there with me, I'm afraid it will only make matters worse."

Obi-Wan closed his eyes and gave a solemn nod. If what she was saying was indeed true, then having him there would only inflame matters. He would have to count on Padme to reach Anakin through their love as husband and wife.

Padme's gentle hand on his arm brought his eyes back open. He turned and saw a firmness in her eyes, but kindness, too.

"Don't trouble yourself with the blame, Obi-Wan," she said.

He knew from her tone it was not a suggestion.

Then, sadness and guilt filled her face and she turned away. Peering down at her pregnant belly once more, she said, "There's more than enough of that to go around."

Nothing was said between the two as Obi-Wan piloted the ship through the clouds above the planet and navigated the heavy turbulence. But Threepio, on the other hand, had much to say about the apparent dangers of the planet--especially after a large plum of lava nearly struck the ship.

"Oh my! Mistress Padme--I'm quite concerned for you and the baby's safety in a place such as this. Are you certain this is necessary?"

"Yes, Threepio. It is," she said, keeping her eyes on the display screen. "Head north," she said, then peered out of the viewport at the frightening scene outside. "Artoo's tracking signal is coming from there." She pointed at the concentrated cluster of volcanoes off on the horizon.

As the complex of buildings came into view and the tracking signal got closer, Obi-Wan said with a firm jaw, "I'm going with you."

"No!" Padme protested fearfully. "Obi-Wan--I don't want to lose him! I *can't* lose him!"

"I don't want to lose him either, Padme, but it's far too dangerous for you to go alone. I'll stay out of sight. I won't interfere unless absolutely necessary."

Padme mulled it over as the landing pad housing Anakin's Jedi Starfighter came into view through the

smoke and ash. She thought back to the last time she had seen Anakin; how different he had been, how aggressive he seemed. How frightened she had been. She knew that Obi-Wan had a point. She sighed. "Okay, Obi-Wan. Just in case."

Obi-Wan nodded, then slowed the ship and lowered the landing gear. "I just hope we're not too late," he said.

Padme said nothing, but Obi-Wan could tell that she was thinking the same thing.

It happened quickly.

Recognition and realization shot around the control room filled with Separatist Leaders, and all at once they scattered—screaming in terror. One had the sense to slap the security alert button on a console during the mad dash, but it wouldn't do much good.

Anakin ignited his blue blade and leapt into action with a speed and a ferocity he had never encountered before. He felt the incredible control of the dark side filling him; taking him to a place in the Force where power seemed limitless, where anything seemed possible. Where he felt invincible. He marveled at the clarity in which he saw things—the truths he discovered there.

This is how the Force is meant to be used! he thought.

He dashed between the pair of guards in front of him—striking them down as if they were nothing as he chased after the scurrying Separatists. Passel Argente was the first to meet his humming blade. The terrified, former-senator's fear had frozen him in place. Anakin spun and lopped off his head with a quick swipe, then continued forward to cut down Poggie the Lesser as he tried to hobble away on his cane.

The cumbersome form of Wat Tambor tried desperately to hurry out of Anakin's wrath-filled path, but was not quick enough. However, Anakin—not wanting to trouble himself with the breath-suit clad being at the moment—merely picked him up with the Force and tossed him aside as if he were nothing. Wat Tambor slammed into one of the consoles on the other side of the room with a spray of sparks, then fell to the floor in a daze.

Anakin saw Nute Gunray and most of others rush through a doorway on the far side of the room and scowled after them, but knew they would not get far. Another two were just about to do the same to his right, but Anakin would not have that. Reaching out with the Force, he hit the button next to the door and it slammed shut right in the face of the two Separatists. Then, with a swift clenching of his left hand into a fist, Anakin crushed the internal circuits of the door with the Force. Po Nudo and Tundra Dowmeia raised their hands and began banging on the door, peering over their shoulders with frantic expressions as Anakin came towards them.

But before Anakin could reach them four Neimodian guards and a handful of battle droids rushed into the room behind him. Anakin spun to face them and raised his lightsaber to deflect an incoming blast bolt right back at its source. The droid that had fired the shot fell to the floor, and his companions trampled his metal skeleton as they rushed forward. Anakin continued towards the security forces with a series of quick spins, deflecting any shots that came near him. Two more battle droids went down with a clank of metal, then another and another.

Now only a few meters away from the widening group of aggressors, Anakin surged forward with a Force-aided dash. The battle droids didn't have the processing capacity to react quick enough, and the four Neimodian guards stood stunned, unable to comprehend how this man had suddenly appeared between them. Gripping his lightsaber with both hands, Anakin gave a low growl and spun violently. All four Neimodians were sliced through the midsection. But so consumed with dark lust was Anakin that he didn't stop there. Even as the bisected guards' bodies fell, Anakin continued around again in his spin and cut off each and every one of their heads. The heads went rolling off in different directions around the room, and the halves of the bodies collapsed to the durasteel floor in a large heap.

The battle droids, finally catching up to what was happening right in front of them, turned and surrounded Anakin with blaster rifles raised. They opened fire, and again it took some time for them to realize that their target had dived out from between them.

Anakin came up out of the rolling dive with an upward swipe—slicing a battle droid in half from hip to shoulder. Then, he spun to his right and struck down another. With great fluidity, he continued in that direction towards his next two targets—deflecting bolts right back at the droids standing across the pile of bodies and mechanical parts as he did. Two swift swipes of his lightsaber later and the batch of security forces were no more.

Anakin turned his hate filled expression back towards Po Nudo and Tundra Dowmeia. Banging absently on the closed door, the two stared over their shoulders in horror at the heap that was the butchered Neimodian guards. Seeing their expressions, Anakin couldn't suppress the wicked smile that spread across his face. He began towards them once more with that crazed smile, his brow low underneath his brown hood and holding his lightsaber down to his right side.

Po Nudo and Tundra Dowmeia turned their attention from the bodies on the floor to Anakin, and their eyes nearly leapt from their sockets at seeing the sadistic grin on his face as he approached. Their efforts in pounding the door were redoubled, and they began to scream in fear.

Anakin thrust his left hand out at the pair and hit them square in the back with a Force Push as he quickened his steps towards them. The two were slammed face first against the durasteel door, and before Po Nudo could even push himself off of the door Anakin's blue lightsaber blade stabbed all the way through him and into the door. Po gave a surprised gasp, which turned into a long, outward breath as life slipped away from him.

Anakin retracted the blade with a quick yank, and Po's body slid down to the floor. He then turned to face Tundra. The quivering, Quarren Separatist turned to face Anakin with hands raised in front of him in a sign of surrender. Anakin stared daggers at him, and Tundra began to whimper softly. With a disgusted sneer Anakin turned his back on the former-senator. Tundra stopped whimpering and gave a relieved sigh as Anakin took a step away. But then Anakin spun around with his blade held high in a horizontal swipe. Tundra Dowmeia gave a startled yelp, but it was cut short as Anakin's blade chopped off his head. Anakin continued around with the spin until he was again facing away from Tundra's falling form, then started for the door on the far side of the room where the others had gone.

As he neared the door, Anakin saw Wat Tambor stir out of the corner of his eye. Amused, he turned and watched as the head of the Techno Union tried desperately to run for the open door on the other side of the room—the door from which Anakin had entered. Just before the Skakoan reached the door Anakin thrust out his left hand and sent Wat Tambor flying through the air once again. Wat flew through the doorway and landed hard on the floor of the security. But Wat wasn't as dazed this time, and he got back up quickly just as even more battle droids began running through a door on the far side of the security room.

Anakin scowled. His hand choked the lightsaber hilt. He was just about to give chase, but then he remembered why it was that Wat Tambor wore the breathing suit to begin with. A twisted smile tugged at the corner of Anakin's mouth as he watched Wat Tambor through the doorway—trying to run for his life. Anakin raised his left hand. With the Force and a quick twist of his hand, Anakin pried loose one of the two hoses leading to Wat's mouthpiece.

Flames began shooting out of the hose immediately. Wat's hands dashed up to try to grab the flailing hose as he ran towards the group of oncoming battle droids. But it was too late. The atmosphere outside was already mixing and reacting with the gases within the breathing apparatus and beginning to combust. And then, a split second later, Wat Tambor exploded in a giant fireball that engulfed the entire group of battle droids.

Anakin turned and dashed through the doorway just behind him and found himself in what appeared to be a conference room. Windows lined the wall on the left, and the red glow of outside spilled in gave the room an eerie feel. A lone table surrounded by chairs sat in the middle of the long, narrow room, and standing dispersed around that room were several battle droids, along with San Hill, Nute Gunray and Rune Haako. The trembling Separatists bolted as soon as they saw Anakin.

Anakin rushed forward into the room and right at San Hill. The droids opened fire, but Anakin spun and blocked as he went, sending the blast bolts right back at the droids and destroying a great number of them. San Hill's long face was frozen in an expression of utmost fear as Anakin quickly approached, and he only had the sense to raise his hands over his face defensively as Anakin came in swinging with his humming blade.

Nute and Rune Haako stood motionless at the far end of the table, gawking at Anakin as he slowly strode towards them over San Hill's body. Anakin peered at them with hatred from within his cowl, eyeing the prize he desired most—Nute Gunray. Suddenly, Nute shoved Rune away from him and along the table across from Anakin. Rune stumbled for several steps, then finally caught his footing and stared back at Nute in surprise.

"Kill *him!*" Nute shouted to Anakin, pointing at Rune Haako. "*He's* the one you want—not me!"

Rune gawked at Nute's betrayal, then stared across the table at Anakin. Rune watched as Anakin turned those wrath-filled eyes from Nute to him, then back to Nute where they settled. Rune gave the door on the far side of the room a quick glance, then turned his eyes back to Anakin to see the Jedi still boring those eyes into Nute. Rune saw an opportunity, and he took it.

Anakin had sensed what Rune Haako was going to do before the Neimodian had even moved. He acted immediately. Anakin raised his left hand and called upon the Force as Rune sprinted back along the table and for the door there. He grabbed Rune by the back in a vice-like grip with the Force, then jerked his hand backwards towards his body. Rune was yanked off of his feet and flew backwards through the air. The Neimodian landed on the top of the table hard, then began sliding towards Anakin. As Rune slid towards him, Anakin saw Nute Gunray dash wildly through the doorway at the end of the room. He paid it no mind. He had wanted to save Nute for last all along.

Anakin used the Force to continue Rune's slide atop of the table. Rune screamed as he was dragged on his back. He flailed his arms in a desperate attempt to grab the protruding pattern set into the top of the table to stop his slide towards his executioner, but the edges were too far away. In a last-ditch effort Rune dug his fingers directly into the metal surface. A spine tingling screech filled the room as his nails dug in, but he continued to slide towards Anakin nonetheless.

Gnashing his teeth, Anakin raised his lightsaber above his head in his mechanical, right hand. Rune continued to slide towards him. Finally, once the Neimodian was right in front of him on the table, he stopped pulling him with the Force and began stabbing his blade downward. Rune's eyes went wide as he stared up at the blue-white lightsaber blade stabbing right down at his chest.

Reveling in the power and satisfaction surging through him, Anakin yanked the blade up out of the table and Rune's lifeless body, then turned and headed for the doorway Nute had gone through.

He reached the doorway and looked into the room just in time to see Nute duck down under the far end of another table. He was just about to go after the cowardly Viceroy when he heard something—a rustling from behind him.

With dark eyes Anakin tilted his hood-covered head to the side and listened. He heard the slight rustling again, and turned back towards the table Rune Haako's dead body lay on. Someone was still alive in the room. He searched the room with the Force for the location of the presence. He found it with ease and quickly moved to the end of the table just a few steps away. Using the Force, he tossed the chairs at the end of the table out of the way. When he did, he revealed the small form of Shu Mai huddled underneath. The female Gossam gave a frightened scream, then began crawling on hands and knees further under the table.

She got less than a meter away. Anakin was too quick. He reached under the table and grabbed her by the ankle. Then, he yanked her out from under the table and held her upside down in front of him. Shu Mai's small eyes were wide with fear as she peered up at Anakin's merciless face. She began to speak, her fast words and high pitched voice quavering as she pleaded.

Anakin peered down at her as if she were vermin—some pest to be exterminated. Still holding her up by

her ankle with his left hand, Anakin took a small step back—extending his right arm backwards as he did. Then, he swung his lightsaber forward and at Shu Mai's long, dangling neck.

Afterwards, he released her ankle and let her body fall to the floor to join the rest of her, then slowly walked to the doorway of the room where Nute had gone.

This room was also lined with windows on both sides and at the far end. Through them the smoldering slopes of the nearby mountains could be seen, draped by the eternal twilight of the planet. Filled with hatred, Anakin walked along the table until he reached its end. There, he stopped to find Nute's robed backside sticking out from the end of the table.

"Get out from under there," he growled.

Nute didn't move.

"Now!" Anakin yelled.

Nute could hear the venom in his tone, and so he began to crawl backwards out from under the table.

Once he was completely out from under the table Nute did not stand, but remained on his hands and knees; quivering and staring at the floor, unable to look up at Anakin.

"Stand up," Anakin ordered.

Again, Nute didn't move.

Anakin moved the tip of his lightsaber blade right under Nute's chin. "I said stand!" he bit out, then slowly began raising the blade closer and closer to the viceroy's flesh.

Nute could feel how close the blade was, and he began rising against his own admission.

Anakin kept his blade at Nute's neck until he was standing fully erect, then lowered it to his side. He watched as Nute's eyes remained glued to the floor. He scoffed at his cowardice. Then, he snarled as he said, "You have been the root of all the problems of the galaxy for more than a decade now. Your greed and lust for power started the Separatist Movement and caused The Clone Wars. *You* are directly responsible for the chaos in the galaxy and the deaths of countless beings!"

Anakin paused, tightening his grip on his lightsaber. He began to move his arm upwards.

Nute must have known that this was his last chance, because he finally looked Anakin in the eye and dropped to his knees. "Please! Don't kill me!" he begged. "I am still a wealthy man. I can pay you! I'll give it all to you if you just spare my life!"

Anakin continued to slowly raise his lightsaber.

"It wasn't my fault! None of it was my idea!" Nute said. "It was all Dooku's doing! And...and," he stammered, "And all because of Darth Sidious!"

"*What?*" Anakin said, surprised by the mention of his Master's name. He lowered his arm holding his lightsaber slightly.

"Yes! Yes!" Nute exclaimed, sensing a glimmer of hope in Anakin's reaction. "It is Sidious that you want—not me! *He* is the one that planned all this! It was all *his* idea from the beginning!"

Anakin eyed Nute closely with narrowed eyes. The Neimodian peered up at him desperately. Slowly, Anakin began shaking his head. "You lie," he said.

"No! I swear I'm telling you the truth!" Nute screamed, trying to hold on to the hope he had found. "I will tell you everything if you spare me!" he said, grabbing at Anakin's robe.

Anakin stared down at him, wondering if what Nute had said was true. *Could Sidious really have been behind it all? Was it all Sidious' fault?* he thought.

No.

Anakin realized that Nute would do or say anything to keep from being killed. He was lying. He had to be! Palpatine was a good man and would never do such things! Fury at the thought of this retched being trying to fool him filled him with the dark side. It swirled within him, boiling over into his thoughts and taking control. Once more he began to raise his lightsaber.

Nute saw this. *"Please! I don't want to die!"* he sobbed, burying his tearful eyes in Anakin's robe.

Anakin gave him a quick knee to the face, and Nute was thrust back away from him. Staring down at the kneeling, dazed and swaying Neimodian with his lightsaber held out fully extended, a deep scowl filling his face, Anakin seethed, "Save your lies and your money. They'll do you no good here."

Anakin swung with an unabated ferocity. His eyes alight with fire, filled with the dark side, he swiped his blade at Nute Gunray in revenge for all the evil he had caused.

Nute tried to scream as he watched the shimmering, blue-white blade approach, but all that came out was a strangled gurgle.

Anakin stood staring at Nute's slumped, headless form for several seconds; his breathing heavy, his body surging with power. A great wave of satisfaction washed over him, and a thin smile of pleasure crossed his face.

He closed his eyes, soaking up the power of the dark side.

...But then, something abruptly brought him out of his pleasure—something he never thought he would hear at that moment.

"ANAKIN!!!" he heard Padmé scream at him from across the room.

Dressed in her tan outfit that displayed her large, pregnant belly, Padmé left Obi-Wan in the cockpit of the Naboo skiff and ran for the covered walkway leading into the building. She stopped just inside and looked both ways down the dim hall; not knowing which way to go next. But then, she nearly jumped as a thunderous explosion rocked the door to her left. She knew that that must be the way.

She ran to the door and pushed the button—ready to jump back out of the way in case flames shot out at her. But there were no flames, just a thick cloud of black smoke and the acrid smell of what she was sure was burning flesh. Ducking low underneath the cloud, she spotted an open door directly in front of her across the room and ran for it. As she ran hunched over through the smoke-filled, charred room she made sure not to trip on the pieces of battle droids strewn across the floor, along with other pieces of burnt...something. She couldn't identify it, but she suspected it was where the smell of the burning flesh was coming from.

When she emerged from the smoke and into the room beyond she stopped dead in her tracks and stared at the floor. Eyes wide, mouth hanging open as she took a handful of steps closer, she peered down at the bodies of the Neimodian guards. She hoped beyond hope that what she was seeing was not Anakin's doing, but the tell-tale signs that it had been done with a lightsaber left no room for doubt.

Anakin—what have you done!? she thought, horrified.

The baby gave a quick series of kicks.

Stunned, head spinning and feeling nauseous, she peeled her eyes away from the butchered bodies and looked around the room. Her feet felt like durasteel as she walked over to another dead body, then

another and another and another—all killed by a lightsaber in an extremely ruthless manner. Her chest tightened. Breathing was difficult and the baby began kicking even more aggressively as she walked towards the doorway leading into the next room.

Guilt bombarded her thoughts as she walked. Wincing, she thought back to the tearful, angry words of Anakin's confession in that garage on Tatooine. He had admitted to killing the entire Tuskan Raider camp that had held his mother captive. Women and children had not been spared. By his own admission, they had all been slaughtered.

That had been her first sign that Anakin was heading down a dark, troubled path, but she had been so blinded by love that she ignored it. She explained it away and made excuses for him and herself. There had been numerous other signs since then, but she had explained them away as the stress and rigors of The Wars. She had told herself and had believed Anakin when he'd said that everything would be different once The Clone Wars were over. But, now, matters had only gotten worse. By not acknowledging and confronting the problem staring her in the face she had contributed to Anakin's slow descent into hell.

She only hoped it wasn't too late to bring him back from that awful place.

The sights in the next room were no better than in the last, and over and over again she asked herself if this was really happening. Once more she gazed around in disbelief, and wondered how Anakin could possibly be capable of such things.

The sound of an unfamiliar, unforgiving voice yelling reached her ears from a doorway across the room. Padmé rushed over more broken droids and the body of San Hill and towards the doorway. She slowed in repulsion as she saw Rune Haako's body laying on the table. His blank eyes were wide open, his head hung over the side of the table and his mouth was agape. A smoldering, smoking hole was in the middle of his chest.

Padmé gazed down at Shu Mai's headless body on the floor. She felt numb. She was frozen in place, uncertain how much more of this she could take. She finally snapped out of it in a jolt when the menacing voice yelled again, and she turned to the open doorway a short distance away and began walking.

It wasn't until the third time that she heard the voice that Padmé realized with horror to whom it belonged. She dashed to the doorway leading into the next room, but froze at what she saw; Anakin, rage in his eyes, lightsaber held high as he stared down at someone crying on their knees in front of him with their head buried in his robe.

She flinched when Anakin kneed the being away from him, then realized that it was Nute Gunray. She watched Anakin's lips move as he said something, but didn't hear the words. Her mind was reeling, unable to process everything that was happening. She felt as if she were dreaming. She wanted to scream—she wanted to call out to Anakin to stop, but her voice would not comply. She wanted to rush to him and grab his arm before he could lower it, but her feet wouldn't move.

She wanted to do so much, but could do nothing but stare. She watched, absolutely terrified, as her husband—the father of her child!—growled like some wild animal and cut a defenseless, crying and pleading Nute Gunray down without a hint of mercy.

A soft gasp escaped her lips as she felt her heart break.

She watched, stunned and repulsed, as Anakin basked in the pleasure of what he had just done. The revulsion became too much, and Padmé finally found her voice.

"ANAKIN!!!" she screamed, her voice the very sound her aching heart was making.

Anakin snapped his head around and peered at her with animalistic, rage-filled eyes from within that hood. She nearly jumped at the sight. His eyes were filled with such evil, such malice. But then he seemed to recognize who she was and his face softened to one of confusion.

"Padmé? What are you doing here?" he asked, his tone still slightly gruff, his muscles uncoiling into a less

aggressive posture as he switched off his lightsaber and lowered his hood.

"What am I doing here? What are *you* doing here!" she demanded, beginning towards him from across the room.

Brow furrowed, Anakin's eyes darted from place to place as he considered the question for some time. He peered past Padmé at what lay in the room beyond, then lowered his eyes to Nute's body.

Realization of what Padmé had seen set in. His confusion turned to anger as he stared up at her with narrow eyes. "I told you to stay on Coruscant!"

Padmé stopped short, alarmed by the look in his eyes and the sight of his hand tightening around the hilt of his deactivated lightsaber.

"I had to come," she said shaking her head, her voice soft. "I had to stop you from becoming..." she trailed off, her eyes falling to the floor.

"From becoming... *what?*" he demanded, eyes narrowing threateningly.

Her eyes widened at the challenge in his tone. She gawked at him, amazed at what he was doing. He was daring her to confront him; to berate him for his actions. Padmé knew that this had gone on long enough. He had to hear what she had to say. Whether he liked it or not, he had to hear it for his own good.

"From becoming *THIS!*" Padmé exclaimed, stretching out her arms to indicate all around the room, then, finally, to point at Anakin himself.

Anakin stared; his expression hard, his eyes searching. But then, after some time, the fire in his eyes slowly washed away to once more be replaced by confusion. His uncertain gaze fell to the floor, his eyes searching for something that made sense. He saw Nute's body, and a thought sprang to his mind.

Pointing to Nute's headless form, an edge of anger crept back into his voice as he said, "He tried to have you killed, Padmé! *He's* responsible for everything that's happened in the galaxy! The Wars were all his fault!"

Padmé shook her head in disbelief. "So you killed him in cold blood? You slaughtered he and his companions—just like you did the Jedi in The Temple?"

He stared at her in surprise. But then, he gathered himself and began to say, "I told you what happened. They attacked the chancellor! I had to do it!"

"Stop lying to me!" Padmé shot back.

Anakin was taken aback by her fortitude, her strength in opposing him.

"I know the truth, Anakin. I know what happened at the Jedi Temple," Padmé continued. "I know the truth about Palpatine and the choices you've made!"

Anakin's eyes darkened. "Who told you that? Who have you been talking to?" he demanded.

Padmé closed the gap between them and gently grabbed him by the biceps. "Turn away from him, Anakin," she begged, her eyes becoming misted with tears. "Come back from the darkness that's taken hold of you. You are a good man! This isn't what you want!"

Anakin peered into her caring, loving eyes and felt his heart soften. "I did it all for us," he said, his voice soft, pleading for understanding. "Can't you see that? All I wanted was for us to be happy." The shadow once more came across his face, and he said, "And we will—now that this is all over. With Palpatine we can have everything we've always wanted! We won't have to hide our love anymore. We can live our lives together!"

His eyes filled with a black lust for power and a wicked smile crossed his lips as he said, "Then, when I'm powerful enough, I will *kill* Palpatine and we will rule the galaxy together!" The idea intoxicated him. "Think of it, Padmé—we can rule as husband and wife! No one will get in our way!"

Padmé shook her head furiously. Tears began slipping from her eyes. She was horrified by what he was saying. She could see the darkness beginning to take a hold of him yet again. He was slipping away from her.

"No, Anakin! No!" she said, the tears flowing freely now as she watched the evil spread across his face. "Please, no! Turn away, Anakin! Let it go!"

But Anakin wouldn't listen. He was overcome by the prospect of having such power.

"Think of it, Padmé," Anakin said, his voice filled with dark hopes. "Think of the power we would yield! Together, we could bring peace and order back to the galaxy! We could control it all!"

"No!" Padmé yelled, firm in her resolve. "I know your idea of *"peace"*! I won't help you enslave the people of the galaxy!"

Anakin's lustful smile disappeared to be replaced by anger. He grabbed her firm by the shoulders and shouted, "You *will* join me! You're my wife!" Then, his voice lowered as he leaned in close and growled, "You're *mine*!"

The way in which he said these last words chilled Padmé to her very core. Terrified, she stared up into the eyes of a madman, not seeing a hint of Anakin at all. She couldn't believe this was happening. She closed her eyes and shook her head, hoping beyond hope that when he reopened them the scene would be changed.

"Let her go," a calm, yet firm, voice said from across the room.

Anakin's eyes shot up to see Obi-Wan. He couldn't believe it.

"Now," Obi-Wan added, a determined look on his face as he stared his former apprentice straight in the eye.

"Obi-Wan—no!" Padmé yelled, peering over her shoulder to look at the Jedi.

Anakin peered down at Padmé in disbelief, releasing her and taking a swaying step backwards. Finally, once his head stopped spinning from the realization of what was happening, Anakin said, "You led him here? You told him where I was!?"

"I had to, Anakin!" Padmé pleaded. "After everything he told me I knew we had to confront you—had to see if we could bring you back to the good side!"

Anakin stared at the floor, anger spreading across his face. His lips curled into a snarl. He looked back up at her with hate in his eyes, and in a low voice seethed, "You betrayed me. Of all people, I never expected *you* to be the one to betray me!" His body began shaking with fury.

"It's not like that!" Padmé said. "We love you, and we want to help you! We don't want to see you become lost in darkness!"

But Anakin didn't hear her. He only continued to swell with anger. Once more it rushed into him—even easier now than it had before. He allowed it to take him. He let it guide him where it would. Nothing else mattered now. He saw that the woman he loved was against him too, and that she wanted to keep him from what he wanted just like all the others.

Padmé saw him slipping away from her, and once again tears began welling in her eyes.

"Padmé—get away from him!" Obi-Wan yelled from across the room.

Anakin towered over her menacingly now. She was a threat. His eyes bore into her with rage.

Sobbing and desperate, Padmé grabbed his hand and placed it on her pregnant belly. "Please, Anakin!" she said through the sobs. "Don't do this! Let it go! For our child—*please!*"

But Anakin yanked his hand away. Then, he suddenly shot his mechanical right hand up in front of him. He pinched his fingers and his thumb together as if he were squeezing something between them. And he was. Through the dark side of the Force, he was squeezing Padmé's windpipe.

Padmé's eyes went wide in surprise and terror as, suddenly, she felt her windpipe being crushed. Again and again she tried to gasp for breath, but none came. Horrified, she stared through her tears at Anakin—hoping that the fear in her eyes would stop him.

But it didn't. He merely continued.

Tears began brimming Anakin's eyes, and through clenched teeth, he bit out, "I loved you so much! Why did you have to ruin it all by coming here!? *WHY!?*"

Padmé felt his grip tighten along with his rage, and stars began filling her eyes. She felt her feet begin lifting from the floor. The baby kicked more furiously than it ever had before, and the thought of them being harmed in all of this intensified Padmé's terror to unknown heights.

"Anakin—*what are you doing!?*" Obi-Wan demanded.

"I won't let you take her from me, Obi-Wan!" Anakin yelled. "Never!!"

Obi-Wan could see Padmé's feet lifting off of the ground now, and they began kicking in small, uncontrollable jerks.

"ANAKIN—STOP!" Obi-Wan yelled, retrieving his lightsaber from his hip.

"You don't tell me what to do anymore, Obi-Wan!" Anakin bit out, raising his arm, and Padmé, even further into the air.

Padmé's eyes were filling with more and more blackness as her cells ran out of air. Her mouth was open in a perpetual gasp, but it did no good. No air came. Her head began to sway as unconsciousness took over. Her eyes began slipping closed slowly, and her last thought before she lost consciousness completely was for the safety of her baby.

Obi-Wan watched Padmé's head begin to droop and the kicking of her feet begin to slow and knew that he could wait no longer. He needed to act—NOW!

Activating his lightsaber with a snap-hiss, he ran forward at Anakin. "Let her go!" he shouted as he approached, raising his blade for a killing swipe.

Anakin saw him coming. He gave Padmé's throat one final, angry squeeze through the Force, then tossed her dangling body aside and into the wall as if it were nothing. An instant later, just as Obi-Wan was nearly upon him, he activated his lightsaber to meet his former-Master's attack.

Their lightsabers clashed in a brilliant flash of light.

Chapter 31

Threepio waddled down the ramp of the Naboo skiff, ducking his head to avoid hitting it on the top of the hatch, and began towards Anakin's Jedi Starfighter. Immediately he saw whom he was looking for and called out to his dome-headed friend as he approached.

"Artoo!" he greeted cheerily.

Artoo spun his head around to peer at him. He gave a happy greeting of beeps and whistles of his own, but his tone quickly turned somber as he relayed the odd behavior of Master Anakin on the trip there.

Stopping at the edge of the wing of the fighter, Threepio replied. "Strange, indeed. Mistress Padmé and Jedi Master Kenobi have been acting odd as well. I fear something terrible is going on here."

Artoo gave a whistle of agreement.

A low rumble groaned through the rock and the durasteel structure all around them, followed by a small quake that jostled the landing pad. Artoo gave an alarmed beep.

"Oh, my!" Threepio exclaimed, using the wing of the fighter for balance until the quake finally subsided. The protocol droid peered up at the glowing peak of the volcano high above and saw thin streams of magma spilling down its sides. Turning back to Artoo, he said, "I *do* wish we hadn't come to this awful place. Volcanoes can be *most* treacherous."

Artoo gave a worried warble.

Threepio gazed at the landscape below and around the complex of buildings, inspecting the fields of erupting volcanoes and the constant flows of lava. "I'm concerned for the well-being of Mistress Padmé," he said. "She shouldn't be in a place like this—not in her condition."

Artoo gave an affirmative beep. Then, a second later, there was a whirl of mechanics and the little droid disappeared into the wing of the Jedi Starfighter, then reappeared on the underside as two arms lowered him to the landing pad surface.

Free of the ship, Artoo extended his third leg and began rolling forward. Threepio back away to allow him some room, then peered down at his friend as Artoo gave a series of beeps.

After Artoo finished, Threepio said, "I wholeheartedly agree. I will feel much safer knowing what's happening and how soon we can leave. Let's go find the others."

With that, the two of them started towards the door at the far side of the landing pad leading in to the building.

Anakin and Obi-Wan's blue blades screeched as they crossed, raised just above their heads. Anakin had blocked Obi-Wan's attack with the use of just one arm, and Obi-Wan's narrow eyes grew wide as Anakin easily pushed up against his blade, repelling the powerful blow. A thin smirk crossed Anakin's lips at seeing Obi-Wan's surprise, and Anakin pushed up against the blade even harder. Obi-Wan could tell where this was going, and it wasn't the place he wanted to go.

With a quick jump backwards, Obi-Wan unlocked their blades.

Anakin began towards him with heavy steps, his brow low. His eyes were filled with hate and a glint of eagerness as he shrugged off his hooded cloak and tossed it to the side.

Obi-Wan backed away from him along the side of the long conference room table, shocked by the lust for blood in Anakin's eyes.

"This isn't what I want, Anakin. This isn't what I came for!" Obi-Wan said, his lightsaber held up defensively in front of him. He would have lowered, or even deactivated the weapon, but the look in Anakin's eye told him that wouldn't be wise.

Obi-Wan's danger senses warned him of the approach of the two battle droids from the doorway behind him. He spun quickly and deflected the barrage of blaster fire they released, sending the bolts right back from where they had come. But as the droids' bodies fell, an even stronger warning of eminent danger flared through Obi-Wan. His eyes shot wide with disbelief. He spun back towards Anakin and raised his lightsaber just in time to block a deadly downward chop from his former apprentice.

Teeth barred in a growl as he shoved down on Obi-Wan's blade, their faces mere inches apart, Anakin demanded, "Then why *did* you come?"

Obi-Wan gritted his teeth against Anakin's surprising power, trying to keep the shimmering blade away from his face. It was difficult, because a part of Obi-Wan did not know what to do. The conflict within him was damaging his focus, and therefore his strength. He did not wish to fight Anakin. Even now, after all he had witnessed, he could not fathom fighting him—couldn't even think of trying to take his best friend's life. He simply couldn't find it within his heart to do such a thing.

Yet, as Anakin continued to mercilessly inch that humming blade towards his face, an urge entered Obi-Wan's mind—something primal, ancient, instinctive. Though he did not wish to fight Anakin, Obi-Wan knew he did not want to die. He knew that he must harness his power and repel this attack—if only to give himself more time to talk Anakin away from the edge of this madness.

With renewed focus, Obi-Wan shoved up against Anakin's blade.

Anakin pulled back his lightsaber and came in at Obi-Wan with a quick series of swipes and chops.

Obi-Wan blocked the blows, but did nothing to try to go on the offensive. He knew he mustn't encourage Anakin's anger, or his desire to fight. He back-stepped as he parried the attacks, trying to gain some room and time with which to speak. But Anakin wouldn't give him any. He continued after him with ever-increasing aggression.

Near the end of the long table in the conference room, Obi-Wan switched his lightsaber to only his left hand and continued to block Anakin's attacks. Then, using his free, right hand, Obi-Wan grabbed one of the high-backed chairs lining the table and spun to his left—flinging the chair directly in Anakin's path. Obi-Wan continued around in the spin and backed up several more steps, putting some distance between them.

He had hoped his actions would show Anakin he didn't want to fight, but judging by the expression that came across Anakin's face he'd taken it quite differently—all most as if he thought Obi-Wan were toying with him; mocking him, even. Anakin gave a quick wave of a hand and sent the chair smashing against the wall with the Force. Then, his path clear and his eyes daggers, Anakin continued after Obi-Wan.

"I came to turn you back!" Obi-Wan finally said, continuing to back-step away from Anakin and towards

the open doorway behind him. "I know you, Anakin—I know the good man that you are. Your place is not with the dark side!"

"My place is where I choose—not you!" Anakin countered, raising his blade as he came forward.

"You choose *nothing* when you're a slave to the dark side!" Obi-Wan got out just before Anakin attacked.

Obi-Wan countered the blows; swinging his lightsaber from left to right, up and down as Anakin chopped away at his defenses. Anakin swung with such anger, such ferocity that, not for the first time, Obi-Wan wondered if it were already too late for his friend.

He continued backing away, then spun through the doorway and into the room littered with the dead bodies of San Hill and Rune Haako. He had to be careful not to trip on San's small body as he parried Anakin's pursuit, and more than once he nearly lost his footing. Obi-Wan watched, disgusted, as an amused smile spread across Anakin's face at his missteps. And then, something happened that caused Obi-Wan to realize this was no game to Anakin and that he was *deadly* serious.

Obi-Wan's balance wavered as he stepped on the arm of San's small, fallen body, and immediately Anakin pressed the advantage. With a powerful swipe, Anakin knocked Obi-Wan completely off balance and falling to the floor. Laying on his back, Obi-Wan stared up in disbelief as Anakin, rage in his eyes, ferociously stabbed his blade down at his wide-open chest. Obi-Wan rolled to the side and out of the way just in time to avoid being completely impaled. Sparks erupted from the floor where Anakin's lightsaber had gone.

Springing back to his feet, Obi-Wan spun and turned surprised eyes to Anakin. This was getting out of hand, and fast. He watched as Anakin yanked his blade from the floor, then began after him yet again with those menacing, heavy steps.

Slowly backing towards the next open doorway, lightsaber held up and pointed at Anakin, Obi-Wan calmly stated, "Anakin—don't."

The anger on Anakin's face only deepened at his words.

Obi-Wan could feel a swell of darkness and power emanating from Anakin through the Force. It nearly made his stomach turn it was so strong and filled with evil. A buzzing filled his ears, and his head felt light. He found it difficult to concentrate.

Obi-Wan sprang into the air and onto the long table filling the middle of the room. Anakin followed immediately, swinging away with his blade. Their lightsabers crossed out to one side, and then they moved the interlocked lightsabers in a wide arch above their heads. As they did, the beams of pure energy cut into the ceiling, sending showers of sparks raining down upon them and spraying all around the room. Secondary explosions of sparks spewed out as severed electrical lines overloaded, and a handful of the lights lining the ceiling went out.

Anakin feigned a wide swing coming around from the left, then pulled it back just as Obi-Wan raised his blade to counter and jabbed straight for Obi-Wan's left thigh. Obi-Wan readjusted and brought his lightsaber across his body to catch Anakin's weapon just before it seared into his flesh. The momentum of Anakin's jab, coupled with Obi-Wan's deflective swing, brought their interlocked blades down and to one side. Once again their faces were within inches of one another. Scowling, Anakin pushed up to free his blade, but Obi-Wan held fast.

"Palpatine's using you, Anakin! Can't you see that!?" Obi-Wan breathed, straining to keep his hold down on Anakin's blade.

"At least he gives me what I want," Anakin replied through clenched teeth.

"And what of Padmé? Do you think *this* is the kind of man she wants you to be!?" Obi-Wan demanded.

Anakin's mouth was agape in shock at his words, then anger settled in and he rammed his forehead right into Obi-Wan's face.

Stars filled Obi-Wan's vision, and his head throbbed from the impact. The surprise of the blow caused him to ease his hold on Anakin's blade, and through his blurred, teary eyes he saw Anakin bringing the blade up for a wide, two-handed swing.

"How *dare you!* She loves me!" Anakin shouted as he came at him.

Despite the pain surging through his head, Obi-Wan's training and experience allowed him to regain his wits immediately. He knew what must be done. In order to regain control of the situation he needed to disarm Anakin as soon as possible.

Feigning still being dazed with his lightsaber held down at his side, Obi-Wan waited for Anakin to swing. Sparks continued to rain down all around them from the cuts in the ceiling. The low rumble of eruptions taking place all around the building reverberated through the walls. The red glow spilling in through the windows illuminated Anakin's sweat-covered face, deepening the lines of his scowl. Then, with a gnashing of teeth and a crazed look, Anakin swung. Obi-Wan waited until the blade was nearly upon him, and then he acted.

Obi-Wan took a full step backwards, bending his upper body away from the humming, swinging blade and allowing it to pass by just in front of his chest harmlessly. Then, he straightened and stabbed his own blade out—catching Anakin's on the backside of his swing where his grip was the most vulnerable. With a swift twist of his wrists and a small, downward movement of his blade, Obi-Wan wrenched the hilt from Anakin's grasp and sent it clanking down onto the floor. He hit Anakin square in the stomach with a swift kick and sent him falling onto his back on the top of the table.

Anakin landing hard; the unexpectedness of the fall knocking the breath out of him in a sharp *umph!* Opening his eyes, Anakin stared up at Obi-Wan; shocked that he had tricked him so. He made to scramble up off of his back, but Obi-Wan took a step forward to stand over him—pointing his blade down at his neck. Anakin stopped scrambling immediately, eyes darting from the tip of the humming blade to Obi-Wan's stern face and back.

"Stop this madness, Anakin!!" Obi-Wan shouted. "Can't you see what the dark side has made you?"

"Yes! It has made me powerful!" Anakin seethed.

Obi-Wan shook his head in disgust and sadness. Then, after a time and in an authoritative tone, he said, "Anakin Skywalker—if you refuse to turn away from the dark side, if you choose to continue down this evil path, then you will leave me with no other choice."

Wearing a defiant scowl, Anakin continued peering from the tip of the lightsaber only inches away from his neck, then up at Obi-Wan's face. "Then why not just end it right now?" Anakin challenged.

The harshness on Obi-Wan's face slowly melted away. He stepped back, away from standing over Anakin. He deactivated his lightsaber and slowly lowered it to his side. Brow furrowed, a deep sadness in his eyes, Obi-Wan spoke with a soft voice, saying, "You're like a brother to me, Anakin. I couldn't kill you."

Anakin's eager, snide eyes stayed on Obi-Wan's face, but he was watching the hand holding the lightsaber hilt very closely out of the corner of his eye. Once it was where he wanted it, Anakin sneered and said, "Then that'll be your greatest and your last mistake!"

Anakin's leg was a blur of motion as he brought it up and kicked Obi-Wan hard in the stomach. Obi-Wan staggered back several steps, and before he could regain his balance Anakin was back on his feet once more and charging towards him. Obi-Wan swung his blade out at Anakin defensively, trying to keep him away. But, using the same trick Obi-Wan had just seconds earlier, Anakin bent his upper body backwards and the blade went sailing over his bent form harmlessly. Then, Anakin stood back up straight and rushed forward to grab the wrist Obi-Wan was holding the lightsaber with.

Quickly, Obi-Wan swung his right arm up in a high arch from right to left in an attempt to break Anakin's grip, but it didn't do any good. Anakin held fast to his wrist. His arm locked in Anakin's tight grip, Obi-Wan gazed with sad eyes at the hate-filled face staring back at him. As he peered into those animalistic eyes,

he wondered where his familiar friend had gone. He wondered how it was that he had lost Anakin.

With a snarl, Anakin swung Obi-Wan's arm back through the air in another wide arch—back in the direction it had come. Then, as their arms reached the apex of the arch, Anakin shot his mechanical, right hand up to grab Obi-Wan by the throat.

Obi-Wan's eyes went wide and his mouth shot open in a gurgled gasp of surprise. The mechanical hand was strong; like a vise. Surges of pain shot through his throat as his windpipe was being crushed.

A sneer on his face, Anakin used the awful power of the dark side surging through him to bend Obi-Wan over backwards. He felt Obi-Wan try to resist—felt him try to wrench his arm holding the lightsaber free—but Anakin held fast and tightened his hand around Obi-Wan's throat. Flashes of memory from his fight with Grievous just hours earlier raced through his mind, and with them the same terror he'd felt then.

Gasping for air, face turning purple, eyes squinting in pain, Obi-Wan stopped trying to free his wrist. Anakin's grip was too strong. Besides—as blackness and stars began filling his vision from the lack of oxygen to his brain he knew he needed to conserve his energy until he could find a way out of this mess.

In a desperate move he began turning his wrist, and with it the hilt grasped tightly in his hand. As he turned his wrist, the humming blade began inching towards Anakin's face. Anakin tightened his grasp on his wrist and his throat in an effort to stop him, but Obi-Wan fought on through the pain; his knuckles turning white from the strain. It was the only solution he could think of to save his life. As Anakin continued bending him over further and further backwards by the throat, Obi-Wan continued inching the blue-white blade closer and closer to his former Apprentice's face. Through squinted eyes, Obi-Wan could see Anakin's gaze dart to the blade in worry.

But then, Anakin surged forward with renewed power from the dark side. Gnashing his teeth, he began pushing Obi-Wan's arm back, away from him. As he did the lightsaber blade moved further and further away from his own face and towards Obi-Wan's.

Obi-Wan eyed the humming blade in surprise, completely taken off guard by this sudden change in his plan. He did his best to resist Anakin's strength, but Anakin was just too strong. The dark side of the Force was feeding Anakin raw power through his emotions and Obi-Wan could not compete with that. Not in a situation such as this where he was already so weakened.

Obi-Wan's muscles ached from lack of oxygen, his lungs burned, his eyes filled with sporadic flashes of light through an ever-growing darkness as he tried to keep that blade away. But it did no good. Anakin continued to force the blade closer, his eyes alight with fury and madness...and evil.

A bolt of great betrayal rushed through the fog in Obi-Wan's mind at peering into those maniacal eyes. His heart cried out in sadness as he finally, reluctantly, came to accept that Anakin was, indeed, lost to the dark side. He was evil. He was a Sith, and was going to kill him if he could. In fact, Anakin appeared determined to settle for nothing less.

Obi-Wan could not allow that.

With his acceptance came clarity and a solution to this terrible situation. The glowing shaft of light was mere centimeters from his face now and getting closer by the moment. The sound of its hum filled his ears, and his nose was filled with the acrid smell of ozone from the blade. It was so close now. So close to cutting into his flesh and ending it all.

Calling upon the Force for strength, Obi-Wan moved his thumb onto the activation switch of his lightsaber. With a jerk of his hand, he thumbed the switch and the blue-white blade deactivated.

Obi-Wan could feel Anakin's surprise at the sudden disappearance of the blade in his grip. It lessened ever-so-slightly and Obi-Wan was able to sneak a tiny stream of air into his lungs with a quick gasp. But the surprise was short-lived and Anakin seemed to grow even more angry now than he had been before.

Anakin slid his hand up to the deactivated hilt and yanked it from Obi-Wan's grasp in one quick jerk. He tossed the hilt across the room—discarding it like trash—then joined that hand with his other in wringing

Obi-Wan's neck. With his grip and anger redoubled, Anakin bent Obi-Wan even further over onto his back.

Obi-Wan clawed at Anakin's hands with his own, trying desperately to pry those fingers from his throat. They didn't budge in the least. His eyes were blurred, and his neck felt as if it were going to snap at any minute. Through the pain Obi-Wan gazed up into the eyes of his soon-to-be killer, baffled that it had all come down to this. It all seemed like a strange dream. Everything was in slow-motion. He tried once again to think of some solution to his predicament, but nothing came. He called out to the Force for guidance, but no answer called to him through the Force.

But then, in his last, darkest moment, the image of something entered his mind. It took his panicked brain some time to realize what he was seeing, but once he understood he acted immediately. He slid his right arm along the table. He reached in desperation for the edge; twisting his upper body as far as he could from under Anakin's powerful arms until the hand was finally able to reach over the edge. Pushing away the pain and the great fear coursing through him, Obi-Wan calmed himself and channeled the Force as much as he could. The item on the floor stirred, but nothing more. Feeling himself on the very precipice of unconscious, his eyes beginning to roll back in his head, Obi-Wan desperately called the item to his hand once more through the Force. This time, the item stirred for another split second, then leapt into the air and into his hand.

Quickly, gasping for his very life, Obi-Wan moved the arm back in between he and Anakin and thumbed on Anakin's lightsaber.

Anakin's eyes went wide at the sudden appearance of the blue-white blade mere centimeters from his face. He released Obi-Wan and bolted up, staggering back a couple of steps.

Obi-Wan collapsed on his back and allowed sweet oxygen to flow into his aching body, his gasps deep and raspy. His arm holding the lightsaber fell down to his side as he coughed uncontrollably. Seeing that he was defenseless and distracted, Anakin made to pounce atop of him, but Obi-Wan quickly raised the lightsaber in front of him and pointed it up at Anakin, keeping him at bay. Then, Obi-Wan swayed back up to his feet as he continued to regain his breath.

Anakin took a few more steps away from Obi-Wan as he stood, eyeing the lightsaber and his former Master wearily. Then, Anakin began turning his head from side to side to peer at the floor all around the room, searching for where Obi-Wan's lightsaber had landed when he'd thrown it. He spotted the hilt and shot his hand out at it, calling it to him with the Force. He activated the blade as soon as it touched his hand and came forward with it raised in a two-handed swing.

Obi-Wan rushed forward with Anakin's lightsaber raised and ready to meet the attack. However, now Obi-Wan was no longer content with merely staying on the defensive. He blocked Anakin's powerful swipe, then came right back at him with a swift series of offensive blows.

At first Anakin was surprised by Obi-Wan's aggression. But once the initial shock wore off he took the assault in stride; parrying the familiar style of his Master with ease, almost nonchalantly. A contemptuous smile spread across his face as he and Obi-Wan danced back and forth along the top of the table. Obi-Wan tried time and time again to break through his defenses, but with no success. Anakin shifted Obi-Wan's blade so that he was holding it only by his right hand. He continued to block his former Master's attacks in this way—in a mocking display of superiority. Forced back to the edge of the table, Anakin leapt down to the floor and continued backing away from Obi-Wan's attacks in feigned, taunting defense.

Obi-Wan sneered at Anakin's overconfidence.

For a while.

As they entered the small security room just outside of the Control Room and he continued to be denied by his one-time Padawan's parries, Obi-Wan's sneer turned to a determined expression. He could not ignore Anakin's skill with a blade, nor the fact that it was being further facilitated by the powers of the dark side. He knew that if he were to have any chance at defeating Anakin he would have to modify his style to one not so familiar.

In all the years he'd spent teaching Anakin how to be a Jedi he'd taught him a great many things about lightsaber combat and the Force. ...But he hadn't taught him everything. There were some things Obi-Wan knew that could not be taught—things that could only be learned through experience. And when it came to experience, Obi-Wan knew he had his former Apprentice beaten. *That* would have to be his advantage, and use it wisely he would.

Just after they'd made their way through the doorway of the security room and into the hall beyond the sneer on Anakin's face changed to a snarl. Anakin halted his back-stepping and suddenly held his ground. Obi-Wan felt a surge of darkness from Anakin. All of a sudden, he heard the door directly behind him slam down to the ground as it shut. Then, Anakin thrust out his left hand and hit Obi-Wan square in the chest with a booming Force Push.

Obi-Wan slammed into the closed door hard. His arms fell to his sides. Luckily, he kept a hold of Anakin's lightsaber as it threatened to break free of his grip from the impact. But then, Obi-Wan realized he wasn't sliding down the door to his feet. He was shocked to find himself pressed firmly against the door and suspended just a few inches off of the ground by the Force.

Anakin stood just a few steps away, his left hand outstretched as he held Obi-Wan in place against the door with the Force. He came rushing forward at Obi-Wan with lightsaber cocked back, ready to stab.

Obi-Wan struggled and kicked against Anakin's hold on him in the Force as he saw him come forward, but his body didn't budge. Right before Anakin was upon him with his very own blade, Obi-Wan's left hand found the switch pad for the door and he slapped it with his palm.

The door slid up quickly, and as it did Obi-Wan once again found himself flying backwards through the air just a few inches off of the floor. Anakin hadn't been expecting the door to move, so his hold on Obi-Wan through the Force was broken quickly and Obi-Wan's feet once again hit the ground. Obi-Wan stumbled backwards a handful of steps, then raised his lightsaber to block an incoming attack by Anakin.

The duo circled each other as they exchanged blows in the security room, and soon Obi-Wan found himself being backed through the door. Once again they were back in the long hall connecting this part of the building to the landing pad and the rest of the complex.

Anakin was fighting with both hands again, and his attacks were becoming even more aggressive than before; faster and more intense. Obi-Wan parried them well, but not easily as he was forced to back-step away from Anakin's power.

Just as they were nearly half way down the hall, Obi-Wan heard the door leading out onto the landing pad open. The sound of the whipping wind rushed into his ears, followed by the prissy voice of See-Threepio.

"Well, I assure you that Mistress Padmé is—oh my!" Threepio exclaimed as he and Artoo came through the door and into the hall to find the combating Jedi just a handful of steps away.

Artoo gave a startled squeal at the scene, and he and Threepio hurried out of the way.

Obi-Wan stole a glance over his shoulder to see that the droids were blocking the way down the hall, so he was left with no other choice but to go through the door and out onto the landing pad. Scowling, Anakin pressed on after him, not giving him the smallest reprieve in his assault. The smoke, ash and fume-filled air outside stung Obi-Wan's eyes and lungs, but he ignored it as best as he could and concentrated on the difficult task at hand.

Anakin continued to drive him back across the landing pad. Obi-Wan spun as he parried, using the opportunities to peer around him for someplace else to go. He needed to get away from Anakin if just for a second to disrupt his aggressive push. Then, once they met back up, he could try to turn the tables. He allowed himself to be backed towards the edge of the landing pad, and once there he saw another landing pad several meters below to the side of the one they were currently on.

After another flurry of furious swipes and swings, Obi-Wan spun away from Anakin and leapt over the edge towards the landing pad below.

Hate filling his eyes, Anakin was not far behind.

"Oh, Artoo! What do we do!?" Threepio asked as the two of them stood just inside the hall and watched Anakin and Obi-Wan locked in fierce, mortal combat across the landing pad.

Artoo gave an uncertain exclamation of his own, and then they saw first Obi-Wan, then Anakin, disappear over the edge of the landing pad.

"This is *most* worrisome! What could they possibly be fighting about?" Threepio asked, gazing down at his short companion.

Artoo replied that he didn't know, then gave another series of beeps.

"You're quite right. Let's go find her and ask," Threepio said. "I'm sure she's most distraught over the situation."

He followed Artoo as he rolled down the hall in the direction Anakin and Obi-Wan had come from. When they came into the security room and saw the pieces of battle droids and the bodies there they became even more concerned.

"Hello? Hello? Mistress Padmé?" Threepio called out, searching all around as they made their way into the control room. "Oh!" he exclaimed upon seeing the slaughtered bodies laying on the floor there. The shock of the sight froze his feet in place and he gazed down at the mess. It wasn't until Artoo was through the adjoining door and into the next room that Threepio snapped out of it and realized he had been left all alone.

"Artoo! Wait for me!" he wailed, shuffling as fast as he could after the droid.

Artoo turned his domed head to the side and whistled something in reply, but did not slow his pace. He had his life-forms scanner on and was following it to a faint signal coming from the next room.

Threepio yelped several more times as he saw what lay in the next room, and tried in vain to catch up with Artoo. When the golden protocol droid hurried past San Hill's body and through the next doorway he was relieved to find Artoo stopped at the end of a long table across the room.

As he hastily walked towards the droid, Threepio said, "Artoo—why don't you ever listen to me! I told you to..." he trailed off as he reached Artoo's side and saw what he was peering down at—Mistress Padmé in a heap on the floor, unmoving.

Artoo gave a worried warble

"Mistress Padmé? Oh, my!" Threepio exclaimed. He rushed to her side and bent over her as far as his joints would allow—which wasn't very far. "Mistress Padmé, are you all right?" No response. "M'Lady?" Nothing. Peering back up, he said, "Artoo?"

The little droid gave a mournful response, shaking his domed head back and forth to show he didn't know what to do either.

A low rumble filled the room, which quickly turned into a violent quaking that shook the entire mountain. Threepio had to struggle to keep his balance. Once the shaking finally stopped Artoo gave a quick series of beeps.

"I agree wholeheartedly, Artoo. We need to get her to a safe place as soon as possible."

At that, the two droids did what they could to pick up Padmé's unconscious body and began moving her towards the only place of safety they could think of at the moment.

Chapter 32

Anakin allowed the dark side to flow through him freely, letting it take control of his actions, letting it guide his hand in the fight. He came after Obi-Wan with a ferocity that surprised even himself at times. He hadn't realized how much he really hated Obi-Wan until he had turned Padmé against him and forced him to punish her. He hadn't realized just how much his former-Master had held him back until now—until the dark side of the Force had shown him. With the insight and wisdom of the dark side Anakin saw his one-time Master for who he really was; a man filled with fear and jealousy of his abilities and a desperate desire to rule over him.

With this newfound knowledge, Anakin reflected upon his life as Obi-Wan's Apprentice. He recalled all the times Obi-Wan had scolded him, all the times he had belittled and embarrassed him in front of others, all the times he had stunted the growth of his abilities and his understanding of the Force—all done out of spite by his former-Master because he was jealous.

Anakin hated him for that, and he used that hate to make himself stronger in the dark side.

He basked in the incredible power surging through him. Peering into the swirling, black torrent that was the dark side he saw limitless possibilities. He saw that he could have or do anything if he would only devote himself to Its cause and do Its will. In the deep recesses of his mind he heard dark voices, like whispers on the wind, calling to him and telling him of the great deeds he could accomplish with Their help—*only* with Their help. He heeded Their call and gave way to Their will. Their sweet prospects were too much to be ignored.

He floated more than fell after Obi-Wan down to the lower landing pad, allowing dark currents of the Force to carry him in his descent. He peered down through the hot air rushing into his face at Obi-Wan. He watched as his former-Master landed hard on the landing pad, then rolled to lessen the impact. Anakin gave a sneer of contempt at Obi-Wan's lack of control and power, then adjusted his course ever-so slightly to land directly behind him. Lightsaber cocked for a rage-filled swipe, Anakin swooped in and touched down smoothly on the landing pad. Then, not missing a step, he rushed forward and attacked.

Obi-Wan sprang up out of the roll and turned to face Anakin. His eyes went wide at seeing him already there, and he raised his blade just in time to block the deadly blow.

Anakin pressed him back relentlessly, not allowing the slightest break in his attack. Obi-Wan backpedaled away from his aggressive press across the landing pad, swinging his lightsaber from side to side to defend himself. The acrid wind swirled all around them, blasting them with waves of heat, causing their faces to bead with sweat. The rumble and explosions of nearby volcanoes could be heard over the swooshing and clashing of their blades of energy, but just barely. So intense was their battle.

As Anakin drew more and more deeply upon the dark side to drive Obi-Wan back across the landing pad he realized just how much stronger he was. He marveled at the ease in which the power came. He was filled with it, overflowing. He saw glimpses of his true and full potential in that darkness, and knew that it was far beyond what Obi-Wan could have ever taught him. *This* was why Obi-Wan had always held him back—because Obi-Wan feared and was jealous of his power.

But no longer. Anakin had revealed Obi-Wan's deceit, his treachery, and now he would make him pay for all he had caused and done.

Not right away.

It was clear to Anakin that his skills were superior to Obi-Wan's. At first he had been intent on defeating his former-Master as quickly as possible, but now he wanted nothing more than to make him suffer, to give back a small part of the anguish Obi-Wan had caused him over all those years. Then, at the end when Obi-Wan was begging for his life, he would strike him down without mercy. He deserved nothing less.

A smirk spread across Anakin's face as he continued the attack across the landing pad.

Obi-Wan eyed the smirk suspiciously.

Wishing to display his superiority, Anakin switched his lightsaber to a one-handed style with his left hand. With fluid strokes, swift spins and quick twists of the wrist he continued to press the advantage until he had Obi-Wan once again pressed up against the edge of a landing pad.

Knowing the danger of the situation he was in Obi-Wan continually tried to get away from Anakin, but every time he made to spin out to the side or change direction he found himself blocked. And then, before anything else could be done, he was up against the ledge of the landing pad, his feet dancing dangerously close to the lip as he tried to keep Anakin away. He dug down deep, calling upon the Force and his experience to keep from tumbling over the ledge.

Anakin allowed Obi-Wan some time to defend himself on that ledge and didn't press him back too hard. But then, as the flash of an erupting volcano illuminated Anakin's wrath-filled visage, he came out of a spin and quickly brought his blade around to stab at Obi-Wan's face. Obi-Wan brought his blade straight up vertically and blocked the blade out to the side, but Anakin had been counting on that very thing to happen.

Twisting his body to put more weight and force behind the swing, Anakin brought his mechanical, right hand up and back-handed Obi-Wan across the face. Obi-Wan was sent reeling backwards over the lip of the landing pad and falling through the smoke-filled air below.

Anakin stepped to the ledge and peered down as Obi-Wan disappeared into the gray clouds of wafting smoke, then stepped off and followed him down.

At first, as the clouds enveloped him, Obi-Wan feared he was tumbling to his doom. But as the smoke began to clear and he twisted his body so he could see below him he saw that the fall wasn't nearly as far as he'd thought it would be. Just fifteen meters below was a series of wide rock shelves jutting out from the slope like giant steps carved diagonally into the mountain face. These steps led all the way down to the valley below filled with rivers of flowing lava and a massive processing plant that extended out from the base of the mountain.

Obi-Wan did a quick flip in the air and righted himself, then landed in a cloud of kicked up ash on the hard, rock outcropping. He turned quickly, knowing that Anakin would not be far behind, and readied himself. With narrow eyes, knuckling his throbbing jaw from Anakin's punch, he peered up into the gray smoke and watched and waited. Then he saw him coming.

He was upon his one-time Apprentice the second his feet hit the ground. Taken aback by his sudden aggressiveness, Anakin could do nothing but go on the defensive. Obi-Wan's attacks were swift and precise, controlled and measured; as they should be from a Master Jedi. Allowing his skill and the Force to guide him, Obi-Wan turned Anakin around and forced him backwards along the shelf.

Anakin noted the steely, determined look in his eyes as he forced him backwards along the shelf. At first

Anakin appeared surprised by the resolve he saw there. But that surprise soon turned to anger on Anakin's face. Anger, no doubt, Obi-Wan knew, at feeling betrayed by his former-Master's determination to defeat him.

Obi-Wan's mouth turned down into a tight frown and his narrow eyes grew sad as he thought of the madness that was Anakin's current state of mind. So consumed with hate was Anakin, so overcome with and blinded by the deceptions of the dark side was he that the truth and logic no longer mattered. It didn't matter that he had tried to kill Obi-Wan on numerous occasions already in their fight. None of the things he had done before; the slaughter at the Jedi Temple, the execution of the Separatist Leaders, his strangling of Padmé, was his fault. Anakin was not, in his own mind, to blame, nor should he be held accountable for his actions.

But Obi-Wan would see to it that he was.

Though Obi-Wan felt pity for who and what Anakin had become he did not let up. He continued on the offensive. He knew that Anakin was lost. He pushed Anakin back along the shelf. When Anakin reached the edge he turned and jumped down to the next step just a handful of meters below. Obi-Wan was right behind him and continued to attack with a flurry of quick swings and thrusts as soon as they landed.

"How could you, Anakin!?" Obi-Wan asked as he pressed him back along the next shelf. "You betrayed the Jedi for the Sith! You killed your fellow Jedi at The Temple!" he accused as they dropped down to the level below that.

Anakin said nothing in response. He merely scowled as he tried to keep up with Obi-Wan's offensive.

Then, his voice filled with pain and disbelief, Obi-Wan exclaimed, "You *murdered* innocent children, Anakin! *Children!!* And for what!? Power!? Possession!? *Nothing* is worth so much!" Obi-Wan yelled between swipes.

Anakin locked their blades down to one side so as to halt Obi-Wan's attack.

Their faces close, Anakin bit out, "The Jedi know *nothing* of the real world! They're blind to the true purpose of power!"

"And what is *that*!?" Obi-Wan shouted back right in his face. "Killing the helpless? Ruling through terror? Strangling those they supposedly love!?" Obi-Wan asked.

For a split second, Anakin gawked. But only a split second. Fury washed across his face and he drew back his hand for a punch right to Obi-Wan's face.

Obi-Wan saw the punch coming and tried again to yank his lightsaber free from Anakin's lock, but it wouldn't budge. He was stuck. All he could do was cringe and take it.

The hit was so hard that it knocked the blade loose from being locked and sent Obi-Wan staggering backwards several meters. He tasted the metallic tang of blood in his mouth as he finally caught his footing and shook off the ringing in his head.

Anakin came after him, saying, "*You* made me do that to her!" His attacks were the wide swipes of a madman. There was no finesse in the swings. No technique. They were merely crazed chops backed by the uncontrollable power of the dark side. "She would have gone along with me if not for you! *You* turned her against me!" he screamed between blows.

"I told her the *truth*!" Obi-Wan said.

"And turned her against me!" Anakin yelled, stopping his attack and jabbing his thumb at his chest.

Obi-Wan halted as well, peering at Anakin in disgust, shaking his head. "No, Anakin! Your *actions* turned her against you! *You* are to blame, not me!"

The mountain they were on gave a loud, low rumble, followed by a slight quake as Anakin came in yet

again and swung madly after Obi-Wan. It was as if the volcano were making a manifestation of Anakin's internal rage, displaying the depths of his fury, the power of his hate. Whether it was blind hate of Obi-Wan, or self-loathing, the mountain did not know, nor care. It simply reflected his anger. High above, the flows of magma down the peak became thicker, more intense as they encased the cone and filled the channels protecting the building complex.

Obi-Wan backed away from the frantic, wild attacks, straining to deflect the unbelievably powerful blows. Anakin pushed him back towards the side of the mountain. Obi-Wan ducked out of the way of a savage, downward chop that sliced into the rock face and sent chunks of black stone sliding off of it. Righting himself quickly to stand to the side of Anakin, Obi-Wan gave him a quick jab to the ribs. Anakin grunted, his back arching in pain, then he swung back with his right arm and hit Obi-Wan in the face with his elbow.

Obi-Wan merely shrugged off the painful blow and began back-stepping along the shelf towards the next, lower level as he blocked another brutal series of crazed attacks by Anakin. He jumped down to the next step as he reached the end of the one above, and ground his teeth in effort at blocking Anakin's attack. They continued in this way step after step down the side of the mountain face until they reached the area above the long tunnel leading to the processing plant from the base of the volcano.

The extreme far end of the building complex that the fight had begun in wrapped around the face of the mountain, and a thin portion of it extended all the way down to connect with the arm of the processing plant. Part of the off-shot of the building reached over to the last rock shelf before the bottom. As Obi-Wan backed alongside the durasteel side of the building he hoped to find a door to retreat into and get out of this smoke and gas filled air, but found none. Apparently, if the building complex above were connected to the processing plant, it was connected somewhere within the buildings in the base of the mountain.

Nearing the edge of this final shelf, Obi-Wan quickly spun away from Anakin and jumped down to one of the thin walkways he had seen attached to the outside face of the arm leading to the processing plant. He landed on the metal walkway with a *clank!*, and was soon joined by an enraged Anakin.

Anakin came at him with lightsaber held high, roaring in anger as he chopped down at Obi-Wan. Obi-Wan ducked below the swipe and rushed underneath Anakin's arms as his blade cut into the side of the building, sending sparks spraying everywhere. Anakin yanked his blade free and spun to swing at Obi-Wan again, but only succeeded in striking the wall and creating another brilliant scattering of sparks.

Obi-Wan was ready for Anakin when he came at him again, but was surprised to find his former-Apprentice's attacks more under control this time. Clearly, Anakin had seen that his mad swipes were getting him nowhere, and so he reined his anger for precision and command. And speed. Obi-Wan was amazed by how quickly Anakin was swinging, and he had to dig down deep in the Force to keep up with him.

With quick, measured steps Obi-Wan backed along the walkway away from the mountain and towards a door he had spotted earlier. His chest was on fire from breathing the acrid air. He needed to give his lungs a rest to keep up his strength. He approached the narrow door and used the Force to activate the switch. But as he spun away from Anakin and dashed through the door he found himself suddenly blasted by an intense heat. As he gawked at the inside of the enclosed channel he realized he may have made a terrible, terrible mistake.

The air inside the giant tunnel wasn't nearly as filled with noxious gases as the outside air had been, but the incredible heat inside stole the breath right from Obi-Wan's lungs. Nothing could be seen clearly at a distance. Everything shimmered upon waves of heated air, and the orange glow of lava flowing in the channel down below filled the tunnel.

Sweat began pouring down Obi-Wan's face as he hurried down the stairs the door had led to. The stairs took him down to the main level of the tunnel. The deep channel of flowing magma ran straight through the middle of this main level. The channel was sunk down ten meters to avoid splashes up onto the sides. Strange machinery with long arms that dipped down towards the river of lava lined the sides of the channel, and thick, steaming pipes and narrow walkways crossed the magma flow every twenty meters or so.

A *thud!* on the durasteel floor nearby caused Obi-Wan to turn, and he saw Anakin approaching from the side. Obi-Wan charged forward to meet him, and they continued their deadly dance back and forth across the main floor of the giant tunnel.

Obi-Wan pushed Anakin backwards and up a small set of stairs that led onto one of the railed, narrow walkways suspended over the river of lava. They parried back and forth across the walkway, sweat streaming down their faces as the heat of the lava radiated up to them. Their blades locked high above their heads during the fight, and as they both brought them down to the side to try to pry them apart the lightsabers sliced through the railing. The thin railing bowed out where it had been severed, but remained connected to the walkway.

Anakin came at Obi-Wan once again with his one-handed style. He reverted to mocking Obi-Wan and challenging his skills with a lightsaber. He ducked easily under stabs from Obi-Wan, and batted away swipes as if they were nothing. When he had Obi-Wan blocking a wide swing far out to his left side, Anakin used his free, right arm to grab quickly him by the waist. With a snarl, he tossed Obi-Wan directly at the gap in the railing.

Obi-Wan flew through the air, his eyes wide as the severed gap in the railing grew nearer, and below that the glowing river of lava. As he flew towards the opening, he reached out his left hand as far as he could and grabbed on to the end of the railing still attached to the walkway. His arm was nearly jerked from the socket as his grip stopped his flight over the edge, but he held fast through the pain. Then, he used the sudden transfer of momentum and tucked his legs in to swing himself back up over the railing and back onto the walkway.

He landed just behind Anakin. As soon as he did, he swung forward at Anakin's back with a powerful lung. But Anakin turned sideways swiftly and raised his blade to point directly down his back to block the blow. Obi-Wan retracted, then backed along the walkway towards the far side as he parried Anakin's strikes.

Once down the small set of stairs from the walkway to the main level Obi-Wan continued backing to his left—away from the gaping maw that led into the base of the volcano. But then, all of a sudden, there was yet another low rumble, followed immediately by a much stronger quake than any before. The ground shook beneath them. They were both sent wobbling from side to side on shaky feet until it became too much and were both knocked to the ground.

The quake continued for several seconds more, and as soon as it began to dissipate blaring klaxon alarms began to sound.

Obi-Wan and Anakin both jumped to their feet. Separated by a short distance because of the quake, Obi-Wan had some time to peer around and see what the alarms were for, though he had already had a terrifying idea. Peering far down the tunnel, away from the mountain and in the direction of the processing plant, Obi-Wan saw something moving, but couldn't quite make it out through the haze of heated air. It was big, whatever it was, and looked like an enormous, dark mass consuming the tunnel from the walls in.

It wasn't until he saw another of these strange occurrences, then another, then finally another just a few hundred meters down the tunnel that he realized what they were—giant doors closing along the tunnel to seal off the processing plant.

Obi-Wan peered down at the river of lava in the channel below, and saw that the level had more than two meters in the past few seconds alone. The river was being backed up, and soon it would flood over from the channel and onto the main level of the tunnel itself.

Anakin, seemingly oblivious to the eminent danger, came rushing towards Obi-Wan with his lightsaber. Once again they were locked in mortal combat, during which Obi-Wan tried to plan out his means for escape from the ever-rising lava. He had time. Not much, but he had enough time to get away from Anakin and out of there to safety.

Then, much to Obi-Wan's horror, there was a loud groan as the giant doors less than a hundred meters

down the tunnel began to slide closed. Anakin, for the first time, took notice of what was happening all around him and stopped his attack on Obi-Wan long enough to peer back at the closing doors, then down at the even faster rising river of lava in the center of the tunnel with dread.

It seemed like madness, but Obi-Wan knew that the only way to get out of this danger was to head straight into the belly of the erupting beast. So, while Anakin was distracted, he turned and began sprinting down the side of the tunnel towards the base of the volcano.

Anakin spun around to find him running away, and gave chase with an angry scowl.

Obi-Wan heard a loud hissing coming from above, and when he peered up he saw that several of the pipes running along the ceiling and down the sides to the channel were glowing red-hot from being overheated. Seals began to melt and stiff streams of steam began shooting out from them. One of these melting pipes extended down to the main level just ahead of Obi-Wan, and just before he passed by in front of it he felt a urgent prompting in the Force.

Obi-Wan came to an abrupt stop right before the pipe's seals gave way and it began spewing out a stream of scolding steam right in his intended path. He raised his arm to shield his face from the heat of steam, then backed away from the white torrent. He searched around for another path, turning all the way around to peer back in the direction he had come. He saw Anakin running towards him and knew that he couldn't go that way. He turned his eyes to the side, and spotted a thin pipe extending across the rising river of lava to the other side. This pipe was steaming as well, but didn't seem nearly as hot as most of the others.

Giving Anakin one last glance and seeing him approaching fast, Obi-Wan made up his mind and jumped down onto the pipe.

He started across the pipe as quickly as he dared, which wasn't much faster than a swift walk, and heard Anakin land behind him. He spun to face him and held his lightsaber out in front of him defensively. Anakin began forward after Obi-Wan, so he was forced to back away along the length of the steaming pipe.

Anakin bore hate-filled eyes into him, the glow of the lava casting eerie shadows across his scowling face. "She would still be alive if it wasn't for you! I could have saved her if you hadn't held me back!" he screamed.

"Anakin—what are you talking about?" Obi-Wan asked he backed along the pipe, confused.

"**MY MOTHER!!** I could have saved her! I know I could have! *You* killed her!!" Anakin yelled, crazed, then came rushing at him with his lightsaber.

The Force, help me! He's going to kill us both! Obi-Wan thought as Anakin came at him. Obi-Wan called upon the Force to steady his balance as he met Anakin's attack. He continued to back away as he did, trying to get to the other side as quickly as possible as he saw that the level of the lava was now just a meter or so below the pipe. He could feel the heat of the pipe through his boots, and it only grew hotter. He stole a glance down, and saw that the pipe was now glowing red hot just like so many of the others around the tunnel.

Another quake, this one less intense than the last, suddenly came on. Both of them wobbled back and forth, swinging their arms wildly to keep their balance and stay on the narrow pipe. Just as the quake subsided and they both caught their footing once more Obi-Wan saw Anakin raising his free arm to thrust it at him. Obi-Wan knew what he was going to do, and knew full well what the result would be—him being plunged into the lava just a meter below. Quickly, Obi-Wan shot his own hand up, and the two of them released opposing Force Pushes at the very same instant.

For the most part the opposing Force Pushes cancelled each other out, but neither made the thrust just one quick push, but a constant shove with the Force. Anakin began to be forced backwards just slightly as Obi-Wan's experience came through, but he ground his teeth and fed off of his emotions. Soon, he pushed back hard enough and righted himself. Obi-Wan grimaced and pushed back hard against Anakin's strengthened, invisible wall. It pressed against him, sending his boots skidding backwards a few paces along the pipe and perilously close to the edge. But, after a moment, he was able to call upon

enough of the Force to stop the sliding and cancel out Anakin's push.

The lava continued to rise as the river was backed up until it began licking the bottom of the pipe. The jets of steam shooting from the pipe's failing seams became even more intense and hot. The Klaxons blared away relentlessly. Obi-Wan was drenched with sweat. His feet were burning, and the pants of his tunic felt as if they were about to catch fire any second.

As Obi-Wan concentrated on the Force and called upon it for strength against Anakin he felt a prompting there. Some danger was approaching, and it was not the fast-rising lava just below their feet. He tried to shut it from his mind because it was distracting him and he felt himself beginning to be pushed back by Anakin's power, but it persisted.

It was then that a swift blast of hot wind came rushing at them from up the tunnel in the direction of the base of the mountain. Still keeping their individual Force Pushes going, both turned to look. Their eyes went wide and jaws dropped at what they saw; a wave of roiling lava five meters tall racing straight for them.

Obi-Wan turned from the on-coming wave to peer at Anakin, who met his gaze with one of fury and hatred. Anakin shut his eyes, and once again Obi-Wan's feet began sliding along the pipe and towards the edge as Anakin used the Force to push him.

Pushing back with as much might as he could, worry filling his mind as he saw the wave of lava growing closer down the tunnel, a strained look on his face, Obi-Wan yelled through clenched teeth, "Anakin, stop this!" His sliding finally halted, but the wave was growing closer and Anakin gave no sign of letting up. Obi-Wan could not let up. If he did he would be shoved into the roiling river below. But if he remained much longer... "You'll kill us both!" he shouted.

Opening his eyes to peer at Obi-Wan with loathing, Anakin bit out, "You're the only one that's going to die here today!"

The wave was close now. Obi-Wan could feel the blasting heat emanating towards them, growing nearer by the second. He gaze from Anakin to the glowing wave, then back and back again trying to find some solution, but coming up short. He ground his teeth against Anakin's dark power, forcing him back as much as he could. He hoped that if, perhaps, he could gain enough of an advantage on Anakin he could drop his Force Push and escape off of the pipe and to the other side before Anakin could retaliate. It was all he could think of at the moment.

Yet hope was in short supply. The wave of lava was nearly upon them, and Obi-Wan found it difficult to make any leeway against Anakin's hatred and unending anger. Peering over Anakin's shoulder Obi-Wan saw that the surge of lava was spilling over the sides of the canal and overtaking the main floor of the tunnel. Escaping off of the pipe wouldn't do any good. Even should he get to the sides of the tunnel he would still be overcome by the lava. Gazing across the pipe at Anakin in resigned sadness, Obi-Wan began accepting that this would most likely be his end.

One of the large pipes overhead had finally had enough of the heat. Its seals exploded, sending giant billows of steam cascading all across the ceiling of the tunnel. The steam was so searing that it severed a cluster of coolant hoses instantly, sending the thin hoses swinging down towards Anakin and Obi-Wan.

The wave was mere meters away now. Hands still stretched out in front of them at each other, both turned to stare their doom in the face. But then the hoses swung down in front of them. They quickly turned to peer at one another. Without a word, they both halted their Force Push at the exact same instant and jumped high into the air to grab the dangling, swinging hoses as the wave of lava rushed by underneath, melting the pipe they had been standing on instantly.

The hoses were sent spinning and swaying as soon as they jumped on them. Obi-Wan took a moment to peer down at the massive rush of lava just a few meters below as the hose swayed. He couldn't believe how close it had come to ending, and how Anakin could have been so insane, so overcome with hatred

that it could have even gotten that way to begin with. He turned his eyes to Anakin, and was shocked to see him swinging towards him on his hose with lightsaber cocked.

Obi-Wan raised his blade to deflect it just in time, but the incredible force behind it nearly knocked the saber out of his grasp and sent him swinging backwards. Coming back towards Anakin out of the swinging of the hose, Obi-Wan was ready and exchanged a quick flurry of swipes as they swung past each other. They did this several times, the power and momentum of their chops at one another making their hoses swing out more and more so that when they met back up again it only compounded the situation.

Obi-Wan peered at Anakin with narrow, serious eyes as he swung back and away from him after yet another pass. Both of them were dripping with sweat. The bright glow of the magma flowing below them illuminated their harsh visages, not hiding the smallest detail of their determination to best the other. The mountain gave a series of low groans as it prepared for yet another powerful quake.

As they swung back towards one another from some distance, Obi-Wan was surprised to see Anakin release his hose and suddenly leap into the air. He peered up and watched his one-time Apprentice for a short time. Anakin flew through the air, lightsaber held out in one hand while he reached out with the other for Obi-Wan's hose just a few meters above where Obi-Wan was hanging. Obi-Wan's eyes went wide as he realized what Anakin was doing. Acting quickly, Obi-Wan leapt from his own hose and desperately grabbed for Anakin's as it swung towards him.

Just after Obi-Wan jumped from the hose Anakin caught a hold of it and swung his lightsaber down below his feet, severing the hose and sending it falling towards the river of lava below. The hose burst into flames even before it reached the lava, and was completely disintegrated upon impact.

Obi-Wan watched the hose evaporate into nothing as he and Anakin swung away from each other, then turned determined eyes up to his former Apprentice. Using his legs and his free arm, Obi-Wan shimmied up the hose so that he was on Anakin's level and readied for an attack as they swung towards each other once more. Their exchange was fast and hard. Both chopped at the other with great power behind their swings, and their lightsabers meet with thunderous clashes. So strong were their blows that the impacts sent their hoses spinning. Because of the twisting of the hoses the next time they swung towards each other they were heading straight for one another.

Their bodies slammed together hard, and both gave grunts of pain. Then, as they became untangled, they traded more blows with their humming blades. Anakin came at Obi-Wan with a handful of low blows, then quickly raised his arm and swung high to sever Obi-Wan's hose just above his head. Obi-Wan stabbed his lightsaber upward just in time to stop the swipe from cutting his hose, then used that same hand to swing across and punch Anakin in the face.

The punch snapped Anakin's head to the side and he nearly lost his grip on his hose, but held fast with great concentration. Then, turning his head back to peer at Obi-Wan with fire in his eyes as he swung back towards him, Anakin raised both of his legs and kicked Obi-Wan square in the stomach. The air rushed from Obi-Wan's lungs in a loud grunt. His grip on the hose faltered, and he began to fall.

Obi-Wan grabbed frantically for the long hose with his free, left hand while trying to keep a hold of the lightsaber in his right. His fingers skid along the hose as he fell, but he couldn't get a firm grip. Finally, with the ever-growing pool of lava just five meters below him, his fingers caught the hose and his fall halted with a sudden jerk. His hand was sweaty from the heat and the surface of the hose was slick. He began sliding down the hose once more. In a swift motion, he deactivated the lightsaber and stuffed it in his utility belt, then grabbed the hose with both hands and stopped the sliding.

He finally stopped just a handful of meters above the burning hot surface of the swirling, rising lava pool. He could feel the bottoms of his boots begin to cook, and his pants were so hot they burned his skin upon contact. Swirling swells of heated air tugged at him. It was as if the lava were reaching up to grab him in an invisible grip and pulling him down to its insatiable appetite. Grinding his teeth, Obi-Wan held on with all his might and peered up at Anakin.

Anakin hung from the short hose several meters up, gently swaying back and forth, and gazed down at Obi-Wan with an evil smirk. All Obi-Wan could do was watch as Anakin pulled back his arm holding his

lightsaber.

“Goodbye, Obi-Wan,” Anakin said with a sneer and those hate-filled eyes. Anakin scowled and gnashed his teeth as he swung the arm forward, the lightsaber blade aimed directly at the hose Obi-Wan was hanging from.

Obi-Wan gawked as he watched the shimmering, blue blade—*his* blade—swing towards the hose. Then, determination taking over, Obi-Wan called upon the Force and leapt into the air.

The lightsaber in Anakin's hand sliced the hose with a shower of sparks. He turned eager eyes down to watch Obi-Wan's doom, but was surprised to find his former Master flying up towards him through the air. There was a sudden jerk on the hose as Obi-Wan grabbed the bottom and added his own weight to it. The added weight caused the hose to lower slightly, and high above the supports attaching it to the ceiling groaned under the stress.

Then, all of a sudden, several of those supports gave way. Their combined weight on the hose was too much. Anakin and Obi-Wan were sent swinging down and through the air towards the side of the tunnel as, one by one, the supports continued to give way along the ceiling. Obi-Wan's precarious grip on the end of the hose worsened as they swung, and more than once he had to readjust his grip to avoid falling. The hose caught on a pipe that crossed along the ceiling just below it and Obi-Wan and Anakin's downward swing began to rise back into the air, away from the lava.

Obi-Wan peered at the wall of the tunnel as they swung towards it, searching for any way out of this terrible situation. He knew that Anakin would cut the hose first chance he got and send him falling into the lava. He needed to get away from this. Peering at the wall as they swung towards it, Obi-Wan spotted a walkway suspended half way up the wall. If he could time his release correctly...

Obi-Wan waited a handful of seconds more for the hose to swing closer to the wall, then let go and sailed through the air. He landed hard on the railed walkway. His momentum carried him forward and crashing into the wall with an *umph!* Turning around, Obi-Wan peered at Anakin still swinging from the hose. Anakin stared daggers at him for escaping his clutches yet again.

Another quake rocked the tunnel, and Obi-Wan swayed back and forth into the wall and the railing as the walkway shook under his feet. Another surge of lava flowed into the tunnel in raging rapids. With the tunnel sealed off and nowhere for the lava to go, the level of the churning pool rose rapidly towards them.

Pipes and hosing broke free and fell from the ceiling because of the quake. Some of the debris crashed onto the walkway, and some splashed down into the growing lake of lava below. The quake continued, and was followed by the blaring of klaxon alarms again. There was a low groan as the giant doors fifty meters up the tunnel began to close in order to seal off the surging lava and save this portion of the tunnel from being completely flooded. But as Obi-Wan watched he realized that something was terribly wrong with the giant doors—they were slowing.

Sparks sprayed out of the area in the wall where the doors slid out, and the low groan of the closing doors was soon replaced by the sounds of screeching machinery and grinding metal. Whether the heat had become too much for the motors controlling the doors, or the lava had merely risen so high that it had overtaken them Obi-Wan didn't know. The doors had stopped closing. There was a gap of more than thirty meters between the partly closed doors and the lava was flowing through that gap freely and quickly. The level of the magma was rising with great speed, and soon this tunnel would be completely submerged.

Obi-Wan looked down the walkway to his left and saw where it widened just before a doorway leading into the base of the building complex built into the side of the mountain. Heavy blast doors began sliding closed over the wide doorway leading into the building, sealing off any escape from the tunnel. Obi-Wan turned to look at Anakin still swinging on the hose, and saw that he was turning from looking at the closing blast doors, to the rising lava, then to him. Obi-Wan could see the fear in Anakin's eyes.

“Don't you *dare* leave me!” Anakin seethed, staring hate at Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan looked at the ever-shrinking doorway, then back at Anakin. Then, Obi-Wan turned and sprinted

for the doors.

“OBI-WAN!” Anakin shouted after him, his voice overflowing with rage and loathing. **“OBI-WAN!!!”**

Obi-Wan dodged falling debris as he ran. Metal pipes and large pieces of girding rained down from the ceiling all around him. Sparks sprayed down as well, singeing Obi-Wan's hair and shoulders.

Blinded by hate at this newest betrayal, swelling with the power of the dark side, Anakin jumped from the hose and flew towards the wall through the air. He had let go far too high on the swing to land on the walkway. Instead, he was heading right for the wall several meters up from the walkway. But that didn't matter to Anakin. He gripped his lightsaber with both hands as he flew towards the wall, raising it in front of him and above his head to stab the wall.

Anakin hit the wall hard, but he used his forearms and his chest to dampen the impact. Then, with his blade buried in the wall, Anakin used it to slide down towards the walkway. The lightsaber cut a deep gash in the wall as he slid, leaving behind a molten trail of glowing, yellow durasteel all the way down to the walkway. His feet touched down and he yanked the lightsaber free of the wall. Then, he ran after Obi-Wan.

When Obi-Wan finally reached the doorway he picked up a meter and a half long pipe from the ground and ran through the iris-ing doorway. Once through, he turned and jammed the pipe horizontally between the closing blast doors. The pipe groaned as the heavy doors pressed in on it, but held.

Peering through the gap the pipe had afforded, Obi-Wan saw Anakin sprinting towards him. The lava had risen to a dangerously high level. It was now just a few meters below the walkway itself. Obi-Wan could see its metal floor beginning to glow orange from the incredible heat.

The ends of the pipe buckled under the pressure of the closing doors, and the opening shrank a bit. Obi-Wan looked at the pipe and saw that it was beginning to bow in the middle. It wasn't going to hold much longer. He peered through the opening at Anakin, and saw that he was still more than twenty meters away.

“Run, Anakin! RUN!!” Obi-Wan shouted, stretching out a hand through the opening in the door towards his one-time Apprentice.

Anakin lowered his brow and picked up his pace through the falling debris.

The pipe in the doorway bowed even more and the opening shrank a few more inches.

Obi-Wan turned from the door and hurriedly searched the wall for the control panel. He found the panel to the right and pressed the red button. ...Nothing happened. He slammed it again, then again and again, but got the same result. The door was on override. Manual controls no longer worked.

He was just about to turn back to the shrinking gap in the doors when a flashing display screen next to the panel on the wall caught his attention. He studied the yellow, flashing image of the complex of buildings set into the side of the mountain. Red text flashed above and below the image, stating:
WARNING!! DIVERSION CHANNELS IN SECTOR TEN NEARING OVERFLOW LEVELS!
STRUCTURAL INTEGRITY CRITICAL! EVACUATE SECTOR TEN IMMEDIATELY!!

The schematic image zoomed in from displaying the entire building complex to show only sector ten. Then, the image of sector ten flashed red with the words **WARNING!! EVACUATE IMMEDIATELY!!!** above and below it. Then, the image zoomed back out to a long view and the emergency message started over again.

Obi-Wan's mind reeled. He knew exactly where sector ten was. It was the command center wing of the complex; where the Separatist Leaders had been killed, where he and Anakin's duel had began.

...Where Padmé now lay unconscious on the floor, unaware of the eminent danger around her.

Obi-Wan rushed back to the gap in the doorway. “Anakin, you've got to—” he began, but cut off and

ducked out of the way as Anakin came diving through the gap in the doors.

Anakin turned the dive into a roll on the floor, then sprang to his feet and turned to face Obi-Wan.

"Anakin, we've got to hurry!" Obi-Wan began, pointing to the display screen. "Padmé's—" he cut off as, all of a sudden, Anakin came running at him.

Obi-Wan fumbled at his utility belt for his lightsaber. He backed away as he ignited and raised it to block Anakin's attack.

"Anakin, listen to me!" Obi-Wan said, spinning to the side and away from Anakin down the short hall leading into the building complex from the tunnel. "Padmé is in danger! We've got to get to her before—"

"Save your lies, Obi-Wan! They won't work on me anymore!" Anakin yelled, stalking towards him with lightsaber held ready.

"I'm not lying, Anakin! She's in grave danger!" Obi-Wan said, backing away from him down the dim hall that was shaped like a triangle with the top third cut off. "Just look at the screen."

Anakin didn't budge.

"LOOK!" Obi-Wan pleaded. But to no avail.

Anakin lunged, and the two of them had a swift exchange before Obi-Wan spun away once more.

"I just saved your life!" Obi-Wan shouted, both pleading and disgusted with Anakin.

That sadistic, evil grin of a madman returned to Anakin's face as he pursued. "Yes. You did," he said in dark amusement. Then, raising a finger to point at Obi-Wan as he circled towards him, "You should have left me to die when you had the chance. Now, your fate is sealed!"

Obi-Wan peered at him with steely eyes. All hope that Anakin could ever return evaporated in his mind. He knew now that his friend was truly gone, and all that remained now was this vessel of the dark side. He was evil, and must be vanquished lest the galaxy suffer his deeds.

Shaking his head, his eyes filled with disgust for this...thing walking towards him, his jaw tight with anger, Obi-Wan bit out in a low voice, "I wish I'd never trained you!"

He rushed Anakin. They traded a quick series of swipes.

"It would have been better than being with you!" Anakin snarled.

Between, and even during, attacks, Obi-Wan continued, saying, "I wish I'd never made that promise to Qui-Gon all those years ago! I should have listened to Master Yoda and sent you back to the slums of Tatooine where you belong!"

"Even if you had, I *still* would have been more powerful than you could ever dream to be!" Anakin countered.

Their fighting was much more fierce this time around, mostly because Obi-Wan was now matching Anakin's ferociousness pound for pound. His mind was made up. The Sith must not be allowed to get away. They must be eradicated from the galaxy once and for all. Nothing else mattered in his mind.

"You were like a *brother* to me!" Obi-Wan said, his heart crying out for the friend he'd lost.

"I've *always* hated you!" Anakin shouted back.

Obi-Wan knew it was a lie meant to hurt him, and it did. Even though he knew it wasn't true, hearing Anakin say such a thing hurt.

Obi-Wan allowed himself to be backed down the hall deeper into the base of the complex of buildings. He used the Force to open doors behind him when needed and waited for an opening. They both spun and lunged as they exchanged parries. It was a violent dance, and their weapons cast long shadows across the dimly lit halls and rooms it took them through.

Obi-Wan came around out of a spin and sent his leg flying. His boot caught Anakin in the side of the head and sent him stumbling into the wall. Obi-Wan made to go after him, but a display screen on the wall showing the same warning as the one before caught his eye.

Padmé..., he thought, gazing at the flashing screen, torn as to what to do. But Anakin was upon him again before he could do anything more. His mind elsewhere, Obi-Wan was forced to retreat from Anakin's barrage and struggled to keep up with blocking the blows. He was torn. He wanted to save her, yet did not want to lose this opportunity to deal a devastating blow to the Sith—especially if Master Yoda had been successful in disposing of Darth Sidious. If he had, then if Obi-Wan could defeat Anakin then the Sith would truly be extinct and the galaxy would be safe. Balance could be restored to the Force.

And yet, for all that raced through his mind the decision of what to do was easy for Obi-Wan. He would go rescue Padmé. It was the only choice, really. He could not turn a blind eye and just let her die. He just couldn't.

His mind made up and focus returned, Obi-Wan was able to counter Anakin's attacks better. No longer was he forced to retreat, but could make a stand. That is—make a stand until he got an opportunity to retreat.

It came quickly, for time was running short.

Obi-Wan used the Force to open yet another door as he was forced backwards by Anakin into yet another hallway. But this time, instead of going through the door, Obi-Wan stopped just before it and turned the tables with a swift twist of his wrist and a stab that forced Anakin on the defensive. He pushed Anakin back a handful of steps. Anakin spun and came around with a wide swing of his blade, followed by a swinging fist. Obi-Wan ducked under the blade, then the fist and was just about to counter with a punch to Anakin's ribs while he was crouched when, out of nowhere, Anakin's knee caught him right in the face.

Obi-Wan was sent stumbling backwards, then sliding on his backside through the doorway. Anakin's lightsaber was jolted from Obi-Wan's hand and went skidding across the floor behind him. Stars and a loud ringing filled Obi-Wan's mind, followed by a sharp throbbing in the middle of his forehead.

Tears in his eyes, Obi-Wan looked up to see Anakin rushing towards the doorway. He scrambled to his feet as fast as he could and ran for the doorway. He reached it just before Anakin did, and he slapped the button on the panel on the wall. The door hissed and slid shut right in Anakin's wild-eyed, enraged face.

Obi-Wan gave the panel next to the door a quick punch. Sparks sprayed out onto his tunic, and the door's release was shot. The dull *thump!* of Anakin's pounding filled the hall as a still-dazed Obi-Wan turned and walked to retrieve Anakin's lightsaber from the floor. He heard a sharp clash, followed by a hissing noise behind him and turned to see his blue-white lightsaber blade sticking through the door, cutting down the side from the top to the bottom. He knew that he didn't have much time. If he were going to get away from Anakin long enough to save Padmé he would have to hurry.

He began sprinting down the hall, searching every off-shoot for a turbo-lift. He heard a loud clanking from back down the dim hall and knew that Anakin was through the door. He ran faster. He searched more intensely. Finally, after coming around a slight curve down one hall, he found what he was looking for. He slapped the button for the turbo-lift and rushed in as soon as the wide doors hissed open.

The wide door made him wonder, but seeing the inside of the turbo-lift confirmed to him that this was a freight elevator. More than four meters wide by five long, it was big enough to fit several crates of supplies and a small binary loadlifter. He only hoped that it didn't move as slow as most freight elevators he had encountered before as he stepped in and scanned the panel on the wall.

Panting from all his running, he pushed the desired button and took a few steps back so as to lean over

on his knees and catch his breath.

But then, just before the doors finished closing, Anakin suddenly rushed in sideways through the narrow gap and into the elevator with lightsaber held at the ready.

Obi-Wan quickly activated Anakin's lightsaber with a snap-hiss and raised it to block a downward chop from his opponent. As they stood there in the middle of the elevator with sabers locked, faces mere inches apart, Obi-Wan wondered how he could even fight in such close quarters. It seemed impossible!

Yet, he knew he'd better find a way—and fast.

Anakin came at Obi-Wan without abandon in the confined area. He brought his blade up over his shoulder in both hands and swung down towards Obi-Wan with an angry chop. The tip of the blade caught the ceiling as he swung, and sparks rained down on he and Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan raised the lightsaber in his hands to block the downward swing. The sparks hit his shoulders and singed his hair and the sides of his face. He shrugged off the stinging and repelled Anakin's attacks.

They pressed each other back and forth, back and forth within the elevator in short, stutter-steps. One would try to force the other into a corner or against a wall, and the other would fight back with all his might to get out of such a bad position. Obi-Wan kept his swings in close and controlled in an effort to keep from cutting into the ceiling or the walls. He didn't want to risk cutting the elevator to pieces with his humming blade. Anakin, on the other hand, paid it no mind. His swings were wide and high, cutting large, glowing gouges all across the walls and sending even more sparks flying around the cramped space.

His back nearing the wall, Obi-Wan snuck in a quick stab at Anakin's chest to stave his aggression and force him back. Anakin transferred his blade into only his left hand. He twisted the wrist to block Obi-Wan's stab out wide, then, with a snarl, hit his former Master square in the chest with the heel of the palm of his mechanical, right hand.

Obi-Wan was sent flying backwards and crashing into the wall. The air was knocked from his lungs in a loud grunt. The back of his head hit the wall hard, and the lightsaber fell from his to clank onto the floor. He slid down the wall on his back onto wobbly feet. He leaned against the wall for balance and looked up to see Anakin coming at him with a charging thrust at his chest.

Obi-Wan turned his body sideways just in time to avoid being run through by his own blade. Quickly, he grabbed Anakin's arm holding the saber and continued to push it towards the wall—burying the entire length of the blade up to the hilt in the wall and extending Anakin in an awkward stance. Still holding Anakin's arm to keep the blade buried in the wall, Obi-Wan gave him a quick jab in the kidneys with his other fist. Anakin gave a sharp cry of pain and his head snapped back. Anakin tried to wrestle his hand free, but Obi-Wan held fast. He hit him in the lower back again, and once more Anakin's head snapped back.

Obi-Wan came in for a third punch, but Anakin let go of the lightsaber hilt stuck in the wall and spun around with his free, right arm. The metal fist struck Obi-Wan right in the jaw, forcing him to let go of Anakin's arm and sending him staggering backwards across the elevator. Anakin glowered at him for a heartbeat, then turned and yanked the lightsaber from the wall. Obi-Wan reached out a hand and called the lightsaber on the floor to it, then ignited it to meet Anakin's wild, wide swing.

Anakin used brute force and the dark side to try to shove Obi-Wan's lightsaber out wide. It took quite a bit of effort on Obi-Wan's part to keep Anakin from overpowering him. He ground his teeth in effort with every swing as Anakin pushed his blade out wide and into the wall. As a result of Anakin's wide shoves, both of their blades gouged all along the walls with bright flashes and quick sprays of sparks. The melted, glowing durasteel hissed as it slithered down the side of the wall.

After some time, Obi-Wan finally came forward with a surge of power and pushed Anakin's blade up, then stepped in close to him. Quickly, he grabbed Anakin underhanded by the utility belt with his free hand.

Using the Force to fortify his strength, Obi-Wan twisted his upper body and tossed a surprised Anakin right into the far wall.

Anakin hit face first. The lightsaber deactivated and slipped from his hand as he hit, then he fell hard on the floor. The walls of the elevator gave a earsplitting creek as he hit the floor, and several loud cracks and snaps rippled along the walls. The floor jolted down ever so slightly, but Obi-Wan and Anakin paid it no mind. They were far too preoccupied.

Obi-Wan darted towards Anakin with blade held ready for a downward stab. Anakin peered up and saw him coming. In a rush he rolled over backwards in a somersault and towards Obi-Wan. A sneer of anger on his face, feeding off of the power of the dark side, he pushed himself up with his arms as he rolled, kicking Obi-Wan hard in the chest with both feet and sending him flying backwards through the air.

Obi-Wan was stunned by the kick, but regained control quickly as he flew backwards towards the wall. He reached back with his left hand and, using the Force, slowed himself. Instead of crashing into the wall, he only bounced off of it lightly and back onto his feet. But Anakin was already up and rushing towards Obi-Wan as soon as his feet touched back down on the floor.

Anakin hadn't retrieved his lightsaber before charging. He was far too overcome with rage to bother himself with taking the time. Shouting at the top of his lungs, his face contorted in anger, Anakin lowered his shoulder into Obi-Wan's chest and tackled him into the wall.

Obi-Wan had raised his lightsaber to swing at Anakin as he came running forward, but he hadn't been fast enough. The shimmering blade went flying from his hand on impact and deactivated as it fell to the floor. Anakin plowed Obi-Wan into the wall. A loud *Umph!* escaped his lips.

The walls let out another screech of twisting, snapping metal when they hit the wall, and once more the floor suddenly jolted down another inch. Obi-Wan noticed the slight fall this time and wondered what the cause was. He could still feel the elevator ascending quickly, so he knew they hadn't stopped or descended. He wondered if it had happened because of another tremor in the volcano.

Anakin was upon him before he could give it any more thought. His punches were fast and hard, coming one right after the other. Obi-Wan winced and cringed in pain as each hit landed, feeling his rib bones bending and threatening to crack under the tremendous force—especially from Anakin's mechanical, right hand. The blows from that fist sent searing surges coursing through Obi-Wan's torso. He moved his arms in the way to try to protect his aching ribs, but Anakin found his way through them.

Needing desperately to get out of the situation Obi-Wan swung around to hit Anakin in the face. Sensing the attack, Anakin shot up a hand and caught the fist before the punch could land. Then, Anakin brought around his other hand, his mechanical one, and struck Obi-Wan across the face. Obi-Wan's entire upper torso was twisted to the side from the power of the punch, and he could taste fresh blood in his mouth. But Obi-Wan disregarded the pain. Barring his teeth, Obi-Wan snapped his upper body back around and hit Anakin across the face with a quick elbow to the forehead.

Anakin's expression became dazed and his head snapped back. He stumbled backwards several steps as stars filled his sight. Taking advantage of Anakin's loose balance, Obi-Wan kicked him in the stomach and sent him crashing into the wall on the other side of the elevator.

A deafening screech filled the elevator upon the impact of Anakin's body. When he fell to the floor there was another loud *Crack!* and the floor suddenly tilted downward on that side.

Obi-Wan's arms waved wildly and he tried to maintain his balance as the floor suddenly tilted down towards Anakin. He peered at the walls above Anakin's body on the floor. The horizontal cuts, gouges and fractures their lightsabers had made along the walls there had cracked completely through in a jagged edge. There was now a gap in the walls on that side nearly a half a meter wide, and the cracks were slowly inching towards the side Obi-Wan was standing on.

Anakin peered up at the walls around him, but disregarded the danger the wide crack posed as his hand accidentally fell upon a lightsaber on the floor. He picked up Obi-Wan's hilt, then started back up onto his feet—staring daggers at Obi-Wan as he ignited the blue-white blade. The floor and the walls creaked as

he stood, and the crack along the wall widened even more.

Obi-Wan hurriedly searched the floor around his feet for the lightsaber that had fallen from his hand earlier—Anakin's lightsaber—but didn't see it anywhere. He looked down the slight slope of the floor to Anakin, and a glint of silver on the floor behind his former-Apprentice caught his eye. There, leaning against the wall, was Anakin's hilt. Obi-Wan quickly raised his eyes to stare into Anakin's, crouching into a fighting stance with both hands held up and at the ready.

Seeing that Obi-Wan was without a weapon, a malicious smile spread across Anakin's face as he continued forward with the lightsaber held at his side.

Obi-Wan's reflexes were ready to react to the slightest move, the quickest of swings as Anakin came towards him with his own lightsaber. He cleared his mind of all fear and thought and concentrated on the Force. There, he sensed Anakin for what he had become—an agent of the dark side pulsating with dark swirls of power and evil. Obi-Wan concentrated on his shadowy presence, watching it for any intent and listening to the promptings from the ever-glowing light of the good side of the Force.

His wicked smile morphing into a snarl, Anakin came at Obi-Wan with a quick, downward chop. Obi-Wan spun out of the way just in time, and the shimmering blade cut into the wall behind him. Yet another shudder coursed through the floor of the elevator, and the slant became slightly more severe. Both Obi-Wan and Anakin struggled to keep their balance as the floor tilted, and the loud groan of the cracks continuing to widen along the walls filled the elevator.

Obi-Wan turned and shot a hand out towards the deactivated lightsaber hilt as soon as he regained his balance. He thumbed it on with a snap-hiss, and spun around to once again meet Anakin's attack. Suddenly, a prompting reached Obi-Wan from somewhere in the Force and he planned his next move.

Sensing what was to come, Obi-Wan went on the offensive immediately and attacked Anakin with a series of quick and precise swings and stabs. Anakin parried the assault well and was about to gain the upper hand, but then Obi-Wan suddenly thrust out his left hand at him and hit him with a powerful Force Push.

Anakin was tossed through the air and into the wall behind him. The walls creaked and cracked as he did, and the floor jolted downward at an angle even more. Anakin righted himself on his feet quickly, and was amazed by what he saw Obi-Wan doing next.

"What are you doing!?" he demanded, shocked and filled with fear.

Obi-Wan said nothing in response. He merely continued to swing his saber and cut it into the walls of the elevator on both sides. The screeches of splitting metal and the *Thud!* of the collapsing floor filled their ears as their world became more off kilter with every swing.

Anakin clung to the wall, staring at Obi-Wan as if he were a madman.

A deep frown on his face, Obi-Wan gave one more powerful swing accompanied by spray of sparks. The elevator had had enough. Metal cried out in anguish as it was suddenly separated and the floor dropped out from underneath both of them in one swift swoop.

Yet before it fell, Obi-Wan dove through the air and towards the opening doors of the elevator. He landed sprawled on the floor of the level he had wished the elevator to take him to, his feet still dangling over the edge.

"NOOOOOO!!!!" Anakin yelled in rage and fear as he fell down the shaft right along with the severed bottom half of the elevator.

Obi-Wan cringed at his cry, and closed his eyes in regret at the loss.

Exhausted, Obi-Wan took several quick, deep breathes before attempting to push himself up to his feet. But before he could push himself up, something as tight as a vice grabbed one of his legs and sent him flopping back down onto his face.

Turning his upper body to see what had grabbed him Obi-Wan saw Anakin, hate filling his face, grabbing his leg with that mechanical hand as he raised his lightsaber to cut off his legs with the other.

"Where are you going!?" Anakin said.

"To save the woman you supposedly love!" Obi-Wan yelled through clenched teeth. Then, he pulled back his free leg and kicked Anakin as hard as he could right in the face.

Anakin's grip on was jarred free and he went tumbling down through the darkness of the elevator shaft.

Obi-Wan peered at where Anakin had just been for some time, then sprang to his feet and began running down the long, dark hall filled with the blaring of alarms and the flashing of red lights to save Padmé.

Obi-Wan raced down the long, dark corridor connecting the complex of buildings and towards sector ten as fast as he could. The occasional tremor knocked him off his feet as he ran, but he picked himself up and continued on without hesitation. He was desperate to reach her. Not solely because he respected and cared for Padmé, but because she, and definitely the innocent, unborn child inside her, didn't deserve such a gruesome end.

Flashing, red lights and klaxon alarms filled the hall, only heightening his sense of urgency. Sweat not only from his exertions, but from the growing heat in the building, wet his tunic and matted his hair to his determined brow. His body ached from the fight with Anakin. His ribs throbbed with each deep breath. His head pounded right along with the droning of the alarms. His heart was in anguish over what had transpired.

Until today, Obi-Wan had thought he understood the dangerous allure and consuming nature of the dark side. He had, after all, witnessed a respectable Jedi, Count Dooku, turn to evil and succumb to darkness. He had faced Dooku in battle and had sensed the dark side surging through him both times. He had heard stories from Masters Yoda and Windu about how changed Dooku was since his fall, and how great of a man, and a Jedi, he had been before. He had pitied Dooku for giving in to his selfish, dark desires, and had used his memory as a cautionary tale for what could happen when you strayed from the path of the Jedi.

Obi-Wan had thought he understood the musing pull of such evil and how it could destroy someone. He thought himself wise and was certain he understood. Dooku was an odd instance—an exception amongst the Jedi. Only twenty Jedi, including Dooku, had left The Order since its inception thousands of eons ago. Not to mention that Dooku was, as far as he knew, the only one out of those twenty that had actually fallen to the dark side.

Obi-Wan had thought Dooku's fall would be the bane of this era of the Jedi—that tales of his wrong-doing would haunt The Order for centuries to come throughout the galaxy. That, in the middle of the night in hushed tones, Padawan's would re-tell the tale of Count Dooku and his awful turn to the dark side. He had thought he knew so much about how consuming the dark side could be—about just how dangerous a slithering serpent it was.

Until today.

Pain, regret, anguish and guilt washed over him as he ran. The dark side had stolen his one-time Padawan, his best friend, his brother!, right out from under his watchful eyes. Now, he did not know where that friend had gone. He found no trace of him in the shell of a man that was now serving as a vessel for the black Will of the dark side of the Force. No life, save for a burning hate and an insatiable will to dominate, remained in those once-kind, once-innocent, familiar, blue eyes. Greed, power, and control had taken over.

Now, through Anakin, Obi-Wan fully understood the awesome allure and dangerously intoxicating nature of the dark side. It frightened him beyond description. The dark side had taken his friend, and by its

influence had convinced him to do unspeakable, unthinkable evil. Obi-Wan knew that stories of Dooku's evil would forever pale in comparison to the sinister deeds of Anakin Skywalker; once famed servant of the Jedi Order, The Hero Without Fear, The Chosen One. Now, Invader of the Jedi Temple, Murderer of Innocence, and The Betrayer of The Order unto their utter and complete desolation.

Obi-Wan felt the tears of sorrow and loss welling in his eyes as he ran.

A shudder shook the floor, knocking Obi-Wan into a wall and out of his morose thoughts. As he righted himself, he realized the shaking had not been a quake in the mountain, but, rather, something striking part of the building complex. The initial crash was soon followed by sporadic beating sounds on the ceiling and Obi-Wan recognized it as rocks striking the structure. The mountain peak was falling apart due to the eruption, and now it was beginning to slide down to strike the complex. He knew that couldn't be good for the diversion channels above.

He sprinted through the end of the building that made up sector nine and entered a familiar hall. He ran past the doors leading out onto the landing pad where Padmé's ship sat and into the small security room littered with fallen, broken droids and the bodies of Neimodian guards. Display consoles set into the walls all flashed the same message: **SECTOR TEN DIVERSION CHANNELS CRITICAL!! COLLAPSE IMMINENT!!! EVACUATE AREA IMMEDIATELY!!!! EVACUATE AREA IMMEDIATELY!!!!** He ignored the warnings and dashed deeper into the building that made up sector ten.

He continued running through the security area and into the control room. He was forced to slow considerably as he entered the room. It was a maze of debris. He raised an arm to shield his face from the sparks raining down from severed cables and fallen lighting fixtures around the room as he picked his way through. Several of the large display screens set into the walls had fallen from their holdings and across the floor. Some of the sparks had caught the robes of one of the fallen Separatist leaders laying in the far corner on fire and the stench of burning flesh filled the air. .

The next room was in much better shape than the last, and Obi-Wan began running again. He darted through the room and into the next. He darted along the lengthy table set in the middle of the room towards where Padmé lay...only to find her gone.

Puzzled, Obi-Wan slowed as he approached the bare patch of ground, then stopped running completely and walked to stand next to the spot where she should have been. Brow furrowed in confusion, he began scanning the floor of the room for any sign of her.

He couldn't imagine that she were already conscious after the violent way Anakin had strangled her, let alone well enough to actually move any great distance. He peered under the long table in the middle of the room, then moved around to the other side of it to check back there.

Nothing.

There was a bone-jarring crash on the ceiling as yet another giant piece of rock struck the building complex, and Obi-Wan was thrown against the table. He grabbed the back of a chair to keep himself from falling. As soon as the shaking subsided, a slow creaking rushed through the back wall of the building and the entire room seemed to sway a few inches, then stopped.

Peering at the floor, Obi-Wan saw a strange set of tracks in the light coating of soot and dust there. Three parallel lines made up the track. Obi-Wan couldn't help but think that the tracks somehow looked familiar, but from where he couldn't think at the moment. He traced them with his eyes. They appeared to turn away from where Padmé's body had been and back out of the room....

"The droids!" he exclaimed to himself once the solution came to mind. They had been coming in as we went out! he thought. They must have taken Padmé's body to the ship! Relief washed over him as he began running back along the table and out of the room.

He made his way back through the handful of rooms and back into the hall leading out to the landing pad. He ran through the doors and onto the narrow walkway, but his pace quickly slowed and his heart sank at what he saw before him. Or, rather, what he didn't see before him.

Padmé's Naboo skiff was gone. Anakin's Jedi Starfighter was gone. In fact, the entire landing pad was gone!

Tunic flapping in the wild wind, Obi-Wan cautiously walked to the jagged end of what remained of the walkway. Loose wires dangled from the severed edge, and intermittent eruptions of sparks sprang forth from them. Slowly, hesitant of what he might see there, Obi-Wan peered down at what lay below.

He couldn't see much at first through the swirling black smoke and the heat-distorted air, but then a powerful gust of wind came along and temporarily blew the clouds away. For a brief instant he saw large chunks of what remained of the landing pad scattered across the black rocks below, as well as pieces of Anakin's Jedi Starfighter. His eyes darted from place to place amongst the rocks for any sign of the Naboo craft, but threads of magma began to overtake the rocks and the clouds gusted back over his view before he could find anything.

He turned narrow, searching eyes skyward as the winds continued to howl around him; hoping beyond hope that, somehow, the droids had escaped to safety with Padmé aboard.

Obi-Wan stood there on the edge of the broken walkway for some time, peering up into the dark sky with that glimmer of hope in his heart. But then, a troubling thought occurred to him; he no longer had a way to get off this planet. He reached for his comm. link, thinking that perhaps he could try to contact the droids before they got too far out of range and have them come back to pick him up. But when he reached into the pouch he found it empty. Brow furrowed, he peered down at his belt. He knew that the comm. had probably fallen from his belt during one of his many tussles with Anakin.

Another quake rocked the mountain. Obi-Wan flailed his arms wildly to keep from tumbling off the end of the walkway. As the trembling subsided he turned and peered up at the volcano peak high above. It was crowned by fire and the orange-yellow glow of magma. Long, thick streams of the molten rock slithered down its face in all directions. Further down, just above the building that made up sector ten, Obi-Wan spotted the cause of the call for evacuation. The diversion channel there was brimming with lava and long, seeping cracks traced back and forth across a twenty-meter section of the durasteel wall. If that channel collapsed, the entire building would be overrun by the lava.

He didn't have much time. He began jogging to the doorway leading back into the building complex. He knew he would be able to find a comm. unit somewhere in there with which to hail the droids and, if all else failed, maybe the location of a ship from a data terminal. He didn't want to risk being in the building that was sector ten if that channel broke, so he was planning on going the other direction down the hall once inside. In fact, he was planning on continuing all the way back to either building four or three to look for a comm.. just to be sure.

The doors slid open in front of him and the blaring of the alarms filled his ears. He stepped into the dark hall and made to go to the right, when all of a sudden his danger senses flared.

Obi-Wan ducked out of the way just in time to avoid being chopped in half by a deadly swing from the lightsaber, which dug into the wall with a flash.

Obi-Wan spun away, activating the lightsaber in his hand—Anakin's lightsaber—and raising it in a defensive position as he faced his attacker.

Anakin stood just a few steps away, murder in eyes literally alight with fire. He came at Obi-Wan with another crazed swing.

Obi-Wan dodged this swing as well, and once more the blade went crashing into the wall. They exchanged a handful of quick parries, and then Anakin gave a roar and swung down at Obi-Wan in that same wild manner. Obi-Wan jumped back several steps, then continued to back away from Anakin.

Anakin followed with long, heavy steps, his brow low and a dark glower across his face. "Where is she!?!?" he bellowed.

Staring Anakin straight in the eye, Obi-Wan bit out, "Away from you—where she and the child will be safe!"

Anakin gave a guttural roar of rage and came after Obi-Wan again. His face a fixed expression of disgust and determination, Obi-Wan deflected the powerful blows as he backed through the doorway and into building nine. The two went back and forth against each other throughout the next room, their shimmering, blue blades crashing together in quick succession amidst the sound of the alarms.

Obi-Wan raised his blade horizontally to block a downward blow from Anakin. Anakin pressed down with all his might, teeth gnashing.

"Tell me where you took her!" Anakin yelled, the full power of the dark side behind his rage.

Straining, Obi-Wan bit out, "Never.!"

With sabers locked together above their heads, yet another quake shook the ground below them. Both leaned hard against the other's lightsaber as they tried desperately to stay on their feet. Just as it had before when Obi-Wan had been on the walkway, the swaying of the building continued for several seconds after the quake subsided, though not as severely in building ten. The sounds of stressed metal creaked and groaned throughout the walls as the building's sway started to halt.

Anakin's Force Push caught Obi-Wan completely off-guard. He was sent flipping backwards through the air across the room. He slammed head first on the top of a console against the wall, then fell in a heap on the floor as his deactivated lightsaber clanked next to him.

Obi-Wan rolled over onto all fours and found the lightsaber. He grabbed it as Anakin came striding towards him, and was just about to get back up to his feet when something struck the building complex hard. Anakin stopped his approach to catch his balance as the floor swayed beneath him. Obi-Wan remained crouched on the floor, listening as a low groan echoed towards them from the direction of sector ten. His eyes shot to a nearby display screen, and his fear was confirmed.

The screen repeated over and over again: **WARNING!!! WARNING!!! DIVERSION CHANNEL IN SECTOR TEN BREACHED!!! WARNING!!! WARNING!!!**

A loud hissing noise, followed by a whoosh! could be heard coming from the direction of the hallway leading to building ten. Obi-Wan peered around Anakin's legs and through the doorway into the hall. His eyes went wide.

It hadn't taken long for the lava to burn through the walls of the building once it had broken through the channel, and now it was flowing into the building complex. A half-meter deep stream of lava was rushing out of the doorway of building ten and down the hall burning everything in its path—including the walls and sections of the floor.

Then, the walls of the room Anakin and Obi-Wan were in began to hiss. Obi-Wan peered at them, concerned. The metal there walls glowed red, then it turned orange, then changed to a bright, gleaming yellow. He could see that the lava flow had reached all the way over to this building as well, and was now eating its way through these walls.

Obi-Wan sprang to his feet and ran for the door leading deeper into building nine.

Anakin lowered into a crouched, defensive position at Obi-Wan's sudden movement, but relaxed once he saw that he was running away. Anakin sneered after him, filled with contempt at his cowardice and inability to stand up to him. But then Anakin saw that more and more light was beginning to fill the room and he turned to peer at the wall facing the mountain. The wall was glowing a blinding white, and smoke was rising from it.

Anakin broke into an all-out sprint in the same direction Obi-Wan had gone a mere instant before the walls completely melted and the lava began pouring into the room.

The walls of every other room Anakin ran through in building nine glowed with the same intensity as the first, and each gave way to the incredible heat of the lava just after Anakin hurried past.

He was in sector eight now.

Lighting fixtures and piping fell from the ceiling at Anakin as he ran, but he either dodged or brushed them aside with the Force in order to maintain his pace. His back felt like it was on fire. Peering over his shoulder, he saw that the lava was less than two meters behind him and gaining fast.

Sector seven.

The lava was gaining on him. He could see Obi-Wan a handful of doorways ahead of him. Anakin's eyes burrowed into his back. He hated him for not having warned him of the danger before he'd dashed off. He hated him for being so deceptive in the past and making him think that he was lying about Padmé being in danger when she actually had been. He hated him for stealing Padmé and his unborn child away from him. He hated him for twisting the situation and turning Padmé against him. Obi-Wan just didn't understand! He was weak and didn't see what the galaxy really needed.

...And the weak needed to be destroyed if they got in the way of what the strong knew to be right. It was the only way order could be garnered, then maintained.

But most of all, Anakin hated Obi-Wan for always having been right.

Yet now that he was so strong, Anakin had the chance to be the one that was right. Or, at least, to be the one that won the fight. Who was right and who was wrong was always determined by who won the fight. And Anakin would win. He was certain of it. Then, he would discover where Obi-Wan had put Padmé and would make things right again with her. If that didn't work—if she wouldn't see his point of view—then he would *make* her see it!

She was *his*.

The child was *his*!

They *would* be bent to his wishes!

He would accept nothing less.

So twisted and melted through was the building that made up sector ten that the structural integrity was no longer sound. The support beams and anchors set into the side of the mountain were being steadily eaten away, and the continual bombardment of falling boulders on the roof only compounded the problem. The heavy building no longer had anchor enough to remain attached. With a thunderous screech and a deep, grumbling groan, it began sliding away from the mountain. It happened slowly at first, but gravity hastened the demise.

The collapse of sector ten started a chain reaction. As it broke away from the mountain the building further weakened what strength was left in the supports and anchors of sector nine, causing that building to begin sloughing away, which caused the next, and the next and the next to do the same until the entire upper portion of the complex was being torn from the side of the building.

Anakin heard and sensed what was happening to the buildings behind him.

*I will **NOT** die today!* he told himself, his upper lip curling in a determined snarl.

His dark purpose fueled his power, and his pace was quickened to new heights. He was gaining on Obi-

Wan now, and was leaving the dangers of the lava melting through the walls and the collapsing buildings behind him.

Through the last remaining doorway on the far side of building one Obi-Wan saw outside. There appeared to be a walkway that led out to a rock path there, and that rock path wrapped around the side of the mountain towards the back side. He ran towards the open doorway with all speed, ignoring the horrific sounds of destruction all around him.

Once he made it through the final door and out onto the metal walkway he didn't stop. Not until he was on the firm ground of the rock path twenty meters away. He turned to peer back at the building complex once he reached the path and was stunned. He watched as, one by one, the buildings peeled away from the mountain face towards him. Fire and towering sprays of sparks filled the air as the buildings broke free, and a deafening crash drowned out the whipping wind.

Only buildings one and two remained now, but, by the looks of things, they wouldn't last long. Obi-Wan watched as they too began breaking free from the mountain face. Building two had broken free completely and was now tumbling down the side of the mountain with the rest of the complex. Building one wasn't far behind. The far side was already loose, and the near side of the building was violently torn away from the mountain a second later. It began leaning further and further away from the side of the mountain, taking the metal walkway connecting the building to the rock path Obi-Wan was on with it.

Movement from within the darkened doorway at the end of building one caught Obi-Wan's eye and he saw Anakin dive from the building and through the air towards him. Anakin flipped to right himself as he flew towards him, igniting the blue-white blade in his hand as he did. Obi-Wan took a handful of steps backwards along the rock path, thumbing on his lightsaber and raising it in front of him.

With a spectral-like, fluid grace Anakin landed on the rock path just in front of Obi-Wan and attacked at once. Obi-Wan backed along the path, dipping and spinning with his blade to block Anakin's onslaught. He had to be mindful of stones and boulders laying on the path behind him as he went, lest he trip and give Anakin the bloodlust he so craved.

Eventually the path took them up and around the side of the mountain, then leveled off. Obi-Wan nearly lost his concentration when, all of a sudden, the rock surface disappeared below him and he found himself on a catwalk bridge suspended more than one hundred meters above a boiling lake of fire.

He stole glances at his new surroundings between parries, making certain not to become too distracted. The bridge was long—over four hundred meters—and extended across the narrowest gap in the deep gully. The cleft had been formed when a wide chunk of the side of the mountain had been blown away in a particularly violent eruption long ago. Thick darkness surrounded them, and the eerie, orange glow from the lava below cast long shadows up through the catwalk.

Off to his left, away from the mountain, Obi-Wan saw a building with high, vertical, durasteel grating on its front that appeared to serve as a dam for the lake. The building filled the narrow area where the lake would have spilled over the edge of the cleft were it not there. Lava from the lake flowed into the giant, vertical grates of the dam and into the building. There, precious minerals were extracted from the molten rock and metal before the flow continued out the tunnels on the other side and down the face of the mountain.

To his right, lava poured down the face of the mountain to keep the crevice full. Yet, judging by the geysers spread throughout shooting towering streams of magma high into the air, it appeared a fissure in the bottom of the cleft also fed the lake. Boxy worker droids as big as a speeder could be seen hovering back and forth across the lake breaking up chunks of hardened crust floating on the surface with lasers in order to avoid blockage of the dam grating. One of the droids caught sight of them and rose up to inspect. It hovered over the bridge, following them for several meters before losing interest and dropping back down to its duties.

Swirling torrents of steam and smoke whipped all around the dueling pair as they made their way across

the rail-less catwalk, threatening to yank them off at any moment. Anakin continued to pummel Obi-Wan with powerful chops and swipes, but Obi-Wan's strength held fast and he repelled the blows through clenched teeth.

Anakin spun to deliver a wide, horizontal swipe. Obi-Wan caught the backside of the blade with his own and used Anakin's momentum to swing it down and to the other side. Locking Anakin's blade in place down to the side, Obi-Wan swung his left knee up into Anakin's gut.

Anakin gave a grunt as the air was forced from his lungs, then swung a fist up and right into Obi-Wan's jaw.

Obi-Wan was sent stumbling backwards across the bridge, but righted himself quickly and turned to face Anakin as he stalked forward.

They both raised blades in their right arms to chop down at each other, and also both raised left arms to catch the other's chopping, right arm. They were standing forehead to forehead now, scowling at each other with arms locked and raised above their heads.

"Where is she!?" Anakin demanded through the strain of keeping Obi-Wan's arm locked. "Tell me now!!"

Through grinding teeth, sweat dripping down his brow, Obi-Wan shouted, "You don't deserve her love! Your black heart doesn't even know what love is! To you, she and the child are nothing more than possessions to be owned and controlled! I'll *die* before I tell you where she is!"

The dark side surged through Anakin, giving him a quick burst of pure, black power. With that power he twisted his upper body, then surged forth with the arm gripping Obi-Wan's right wrist.

"RRRRWWWWWAAAAAAARRRRRR!!!!" Anakin roared as he tossed Obi-Wan backwards, sending him flying through the air as if he were nothing.

Obi-Wan's eyes widened in surprise and fear as he flew through the air along the catwalk. He peered down through the mesh of durasteel walkway at the churning lake of lava below, certain that that was where he was heading. He landed face first on the catwalk, then slid and rolled right towards the edge as his lightsaber fell from his grip.

Somehow, through the grace and Will of the Force, Obi-Wan's hands found and grabbed the edge of the catwalk just as his body tumbled right over the side. His fingers were nearly pulled from their sockets as his fall suddenly jerked to a stop, and the momentum caused him to sway back and forth.

Something silver came over the edge right after him, and Obi-Wan watched in horror as the lightsaber began falling towards him and for the lake of lava below. Desperate not to lose the weapon, Obi-Wan let go of the catwalk with his right hand and caught the deactivated hilt. His body twisted and swung from the movement, and pain shot through his left shoulder as the muscles were strained nearly to tearing. He gave an uncontrollable cry of pain, closing his eyes from looking down at the fiery pool below.

The clank of a footstep on the catwalk above whipped Obi-Wan's head and eyes upward. There, he saw Anakin standing right at the edge peering down at him with a hateful scowl.

"Tell me where she is!" Anakin shouted, shaking a fist down at Obi-Wan.

"No! I will not hand her and the child over to the Sith!" Obi-Wan said.

Anakin's lips pulled back over barred teeth. Chest heaving with rage, in a low, dangerous voice, he seethed, "Tell me where she is..." slowly, he raised the lightsaber in his right arm, "...or die!"

Obi-Wan narrowed his eyes at Anakin. Then, he turned his gaze back down towards the boiling lake of fire below. He peered down there for some time. Down there he saw his way out—his only way out. It was madness, but there was no other solution. He would not tell Anakin where he suspected Padmé was under any circumstances, and he knew Anakin would do as he'd threatened.

Obi-Wan turned his gaze back up to stare Anakin right in the eye. He held the stare for a handful of heartbeats, buying himself the time he needed while he counted down in his head. Then, he let go of the edge of the catwalk and fell towards the lake of lava below.

Anakin stared after him, stunned at what Obi-Wan had done. He never would have guessed that Obi-Wan would actually do it—that he would kill himself rather than tell Anakin where Padmé and his unborn child were. Then Anakin realized that with Obi-Wan's demise so went any information concerning Padmé's whereabouts. Face flashing with anger, Anakin stared daggers down at Obi-Wan as his body fell further and further away and towards his doom.

But then, movement of something dark skimming a handful of meters above the surface of the lava caught Anakin's eye. His dark brow furrowed as he inspected the boxy object and the path it was on. He ground his teeth in fury and strangled the lightsaber hilt once he saw what Obi-Wan had done.

Anakin turned and ran the handful of steps to the other side of the catwalk, then leapt off the ledge and into the air to chase after Kenobi.

After the long fall, Obi-Wan finally landed with a *thump!* on top of the flat head of the worker droid in a crouch. The droid dipped slightly from the impact, but righted itself quickly as it continued skimming barely more than a meter above the surface of the lake towards the mountain. Obi-Wan stood and peered around him to see where he might go next.

There seemed to be nowhere to go.

The cliffs on both sides of the cleft were nearly a hundred meters tall. Through the shimmering haze he could make out the processing plant damming the lake, but it seemed impossibly far away. And besides—the worker droid he was on was heading in the wrong direction. He noted the dark shapes of several other worker droids floating nearby over the boiling surface of the lake, breaking up hardened crust and rock with their lasers. He thought that if perhaps he could make his way over to one that was heading back in the direction of the processing plant, he might have a chance. If he could reach the plant, maybe he could find—.

Something landed hard on the worker droid behind him, sending it wobbling from the impact. Obi-Wan turned, amazed to find Anakin standing up from his crouched landing with ignited lightsaber in hand, darkness across his face.

"You won't get away that easy," Anakin scowled, pointing at him with his free hand. Then, he started towards him.

You call that easy!? Obi-Wan thought, igniting his lightsaber.

Obi-Wan didn't wait for Anakin to make the first move. He pounced, hitting Anakin with a quick, precise attack. Then, he stabbed at Anakin with a powerful, forward thrust with both hands on his lightsaber in an attempt to drive him back further towards the edge of the head of the droid.

Anakin shifted sideways in a flash, raising his blade vertically in front of his chest to block the thrust. Obi-Wan spun quickly on one foot, swinging his blade around to slash at Anakin's back. Anakin raised his blade over his shoulders to point directly down his back, blocking Obi-Wan's swing. Without missing a beat, Obi-Wan spun back in the same direction he had come twisting his wrist holding the saber for a downward chop.

Anakin was too quick.

Just as Obi-Wan came out of the spin and began bringing the saber down from over his head Anakin's

kick landed, hitting him in the face. Obi-Wan felt his feet leave the ground and his body twist from the power of the kick. But, using the Force, he concentrated bringing his spinning flight through the air under control. Swinging his head back and forcing his body into a back flip, Obi-Wan landed with both feet planted firmly. Then, eyes narrow, he came back in at Anakin.

The worker droid went about its job—blasting sections of hardened crust and chunks of rock with its laser, oblivious to what was happening atop of it. Back and forth Obi-Wan and Anakin parried along its top. The heat from the lake's surface, just a handful of meters below them, was intense. Both dripped with sweat as they tried to best the other.

The rumbling started low. From the beginning Obi-Wan could tell that this quake held malicious intent and great power. It built and redoubled in intensity with every passing millisecond until it sounded and felt as if the planet were tearing in two. Obi-Wan peered around as each and every one of the geysers spread across the lake spontaneously erupted with towering blasts much higher and thicker than ever before. They didn't dissipate quickly like they had all the other times. These were not mere quick fits sent up through the fissures at the bottom of the lake like the others had been. These remained potent.

Suddenly, the mountain behind Obi-Wan gave an enormous, deafening explosion that ripped through the air. He whipped his head around and looked up, shocked. Giant pieces of fiery, black rock raced into the sky as if gunning for orbit. A towering jet of magma raced hundreds of meters into the dark sky as the mountain finally gave way to the power within.

The droid they were on began to rise higher in the air and turned around to head back towards the processing plant. Obi-Wan gave a quick scan and saw that all of the other droids were doing the same—making certain to remain above the reach of the towering geysers. Obi-Wan surmised that they must all be recalled to the plant when such an eruption occurs to avoid unwanted losses.

Anakin took advantage of Obi-Wan looking away, but Obi-Wan sensed him coming and spun around to deflect his blade. Shoving the blade aside, Obi-Wan thrust out a hand and hit Anakin with a Force Push. Anakin went skidding backwards on his tip-toes across the top of the droid and towards the far end, his arms splayed out to the sides and head ducked low as he used the power of the dark side to halt the dangerous skid. He stopped mere inches away from the edge and lowered back down onto the soles of his feet.

Raising his sweat-covered head to stare hatred and darkness at Obi-Wan, Anakin stretched out his empty, left hand to point down at the surface of the lake. With a scowl, Anakin swung that arm up and around to point at Obi-Wan, sending a thick spray of lava flying at him with the Force.

Obi-Wan's eyes went wide at seeing the yellow-hot stream coming at him. He shot a palm up at the wave, using the Force to deflect it away. He was able to get most of it, but a handful of fist-sized globs continued right for his head and chest. He ducked under them, but one small glob caught him right on the left shoulder.

"AAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!!" Obi-Wan screamed in pain as the magma burned through his clothes and seared into his flesh.

Peering through squinted, pain-filled eyes, Obi-Wan saw Anakin gazing up behind him. He looked back down at Obi-Wan and a wicked smile spread across his face.

Just a second later Anakin took a few steps forward, his eyes searching the metal plating on the top of the droid. He stretched his left hand out in front of him; palm facing down and waving back and forth as if he were feeling something invisible in the air. He stopped just above a darker plate of metal on the top of the droid. Barring his teeth, raised his lightsaber up above his head in both hands, he stabbed down into the top of the worker droid with a snarl, burying the blade all the way to the hilt.

Sparks leapt from the small panel, and the droid lurched downward with a gurgled, droid-speak cry. Anakin leapt into the air immediately and Obi-Wan watched as he landed atop of a worker droid passing by overhead. Obi-Wan nearly slid off the front of the droid as its nose dipped violently towards the surface of the lake. Obi-Wan jumped, landing right on top of the back side of the droid. He only had a split second with which to act before the droid hit the surface. Gathering the Force within him, he jumped into the air

after Anakin.

The worker droid Anakin had landed atop of was going faster and had gone further than Obi-Wan had thought. As he flew up towards the back of it his mind filled with panic that he might not reach it and just fall back down into the lake. Straining, his left arm out as far as he could possibly reach, Obi-Wan desperately stretched himself towards the back end of the droid. He ground his teeth in effort as he reached. His flight through the air was reaching its apex. He would be falling back down towards the lake soon. A short rod sticking out of the bottom of the droid was mere inches away from his hand. He strained further, frantically further, and was just barely able to wrap his fingers around the rod.

Anakin turned and peered down at the other worker droid as it skipped and flipped across the lake, then finally began sinking below the yellow and orange surface. A twisted, mirthful smile crossed his lips as he watched the last bit of the droid be swallowed by the fire and lava.

He had done it.

He had beaten Obi-Wan.

Now, he knew that he truly was stronger and better in the ways of the Force than his former-Master. He had defeated him in battle. He had surpassed him in knowledge of the Force. Just as Sidious had said he would, he had become more powerful than any Jedi.

He gave the spot where the droid Obi-Wan had been on had disappeared one last, long look before it became too far away. He gazed at the sight until the haze of the heated air finally washed it from view. Then, basking in his victory, he turned forward to watch as the worker droid he was on continued through the air in the direction of the processing plant.

His chest swelled with pride and possibility. With the dark side as his ally, nothing could stand in his way. Now, he truly was unstoppable. He would find Padmé. He would use every means necessary to track her down and bring her back to him. If she refused...well, he knew how to handle that.

If she would not come with him he would deal with her and take the child. He would raise it in the ways of the dark side. He would have to hide the child from Sidious, of course. At least—until he learned all he could from the ancient man about the ways of the dark side. Then, once his purpose was used up, Anakin would kill him and take his place as ruler of the galaxy. With his child by his side, they would wield power the likes of which no Jedi, or Sith, had ever known! They would be invincible! The name Skywalker would be synonymous with power throughout the galaxy. All would bow before them. None would dare challenge their might.

Everything would be his to command and control!

His mechanical hand tightened on the hilt of Obi-Wan's lightsaber—a trophy of his victory—with dark anticipation. An evil smile spread across his face.

The snap-hiss of a lightsaber igniting behind him broke his revelry.

Stunned, Anakin turned to see Obi-Wan standing in a defensive crouch holding the lightsaber up in front of him with both hands on the other side of the top of the droid.

"This isn't over yet, *Darth!*" Obi-Wan mocked, his tone and stare deadly.

Fury filled Anakin. Obi-Wan had held him back in his studies as a Jedi all those years. Because of that, he had robbed him of his mother! Then, he had turned Padmé against him and stolen her from him! Now, he was stealing his glory of having defeated him in battle!!

Well, not for long! Anakin thought, opening the floodgates of hell and unleashing as much power in the dark side as he could muster.

Anakin came rushing at him with such ferocity, such unfettered rage and hatred that Obi-Wan's eyes went wide at the monster he had unleashed. But the surprise quickly changed to narrow eyes as he met his dark opponent head-on. The oily, sickening power of the dark side Obi-Wan felt emanating from Anakin turned his stomach. Such evil, hatred of such focus was nearly too much for him. It bombarded his senses and tried with all its might to overpower his will into hopelessness. But Obi-Wan was not hopeless. He was determined and fixated on one single purpose—using all his experience, all his power, all his might to, finally, put a stop to this conflict and prove to Anakin the power of the Light side.

He cleared all doubt from his mind. He washed himself clean of the dark emotions pounding his presence. He called upon the Force and let it fill him. It rushed to his beckoning quickly as if eager to aid him in this task, as if it were It's Will that Obi-Wan emerge triumphant and rid It of this dark stain; this perversion of It's ways.

Obi-Wan had never been to such a place in the Force before. He had seen glimpses, sure, but nothing like this. He knew that he had reached a new height in his understanding of the mystical energy field. It surrounded and filled him. He felt as if he were nearly one with it.

Anakin pummeled him with sheer power. He used brute force and the fuel of the dark side in an attempt to overpower Obi-Wan. But Obi-Wan held fast and was steady. The good side of the Force gave him strength from untold places. The aching in his muscles was gone. His fatigue receded. Clarity of mind came, and he saw and noticed things with much more ease; sharper, more in focus.

He moved his blade with the greatest precision; the smoothest style with the greatest conservation of energy, but with maximum results. His balance was just as it should be. The movement of his feet across the top of the droid was without fault. He and the Force worked in tandem with near perfect sync. Together, they began pushing Anakin back, repelling his attacks and putting him back on the defensive.

Obi-Wan could see the surprise in Anakin's face at this sudden change in momentum. That shock soon turned to anger and frustration, which Anakin used to feed his dark powers. Anakin charged back at him with this new thrust of power, sending Obi-Wan back a handful of steps as he parried.

Much contrary to what the smirk on Anakin's face betrayed, Obi-Wan was not being overpowered. No. He was merely bending himself to the power of his opponent. Not giving in to it, but not wasting energy or concentration by trying to stifle every aggression the moment it arose. He would ride out this wave of fury of Anakin's and bide his time until an opportunity arose. There was no need to do otherwise.

Obi-Wan didn't break his determined stare away from Anakin eyes the entire time. Each attack he blocked without looking. Every feint Anakin tried failed. The Force guided Obi-Wan's hands wherever they were needed.

He watched Anakin's fiery eyes grow more and more frustrated, more wild, with each passing moment. Anakin couldn't seem to understand why his rage was not getting him what he wanted—how it was that Obi-Wan could repel him so and with such ease. Anakin grew even more angry than he had been before. His anger was untamed, unfocused, and it showed in his wide, wasteful swings.

Obi-Wan turned the blows aside easily. Then, in the midst of Anakin's madness, he went on the offensive!

Anakin's eyes went wide as Obi-Wan stabbed his shimmering blade straight for his face. Anakin bent his upper body back to avoid being run through and swatted the stab away, but Obi-Wan had already removed the thrust and came in with a horizontal swing before Anakin even righted himself again. Anakin brought the tip of his blade around and down just in time to stop the swing, but, again, Obi-Wan was already well on his way to his next attack.

Obi-Wan continued pummeling Anakin in this way, surprising his one-time Apprentice at every turn. Finally, Anakin broke away from Obi-Wan's onslaught long enough to jump to the top of another droid that was flying past them off to the left. But Obi-Wan had sensed what he was going to do and was right on top of him the second he landed.

Again Anakin was taken aback by Obi-Wan's precision, power and relentless pursuit. The two of them traded a quick series of blows, and then Anakin was off through the air to the top of yet another droid off to the left. Obi-Wan was right behind him.

They continued in this way; from top of droid to top of droid, all the way across the expanse of the lake until they reached the high, wide cliffs of the far wall of the cleft.

Obi-Wan landed a short distance behind Anakin, who had his back turned to him. Obi-Wan came at him, and Anakin spun around, waving a hand towards him. The meter long, flat rock Anakin had picked up with the Force raced past him and towards Obi-Wan. Obi-Wan dove beneath the tumbling rock, then rolled and sprang back to his feet just in front of Anakin.

Obi-Wan backed Anakin up the inclined cliff with rapid attacks. Anakin flung more rocks at him with the Force. Obi-Wan merely dodged or sliced the stones as he continued after his former-Apprentice. Finally, they reached the top of the cleft. The lip of the cleft was nearly fifty meter wide, and was angled slightly back down towards the fiery chasm below. It was covered with a smooth stone that was unusual for such a place, and the footing was perilous.

Anakin surged after Obi-Wan, and he allowed himself to be backed up the slight incline of the lip of the cleft.

Though it brought tremendous, nearly unbearable anguish to his heart, Obi-Wan knew what must be done. Anakin's rage was making him reckless, was leaving him open for attack. Since he had calmed his mind, Obi-Wan had seen several opportunities to end this fight—permanently. The more wrath-filled Anakin became, the wilder he was—the more open to a deciding blow he had become. Had Anakin been more learned and experienced in the ways of the dark side, like Dooku or Maul had been, this would not be the case. But Anakin was still a novice in the ways of the dark side. Anakin's anger made him immensely powerful—tremendously so!—but he did not yet know how to reign in his emotions. They controlled him far too much and made him into a wild madman.

Obi-Wan had seen openings numerous times. But he hadn't taken them. It was still too terrible to think of. He loved Anakin like a son, had shared his life with him, had watched with great satisfaction as he had grown into a man and a powerful Jedi. Had laughed with him. Had cried. Had fought side by side with him and had trusted Anakin with his life, as he had with his. Long ago Anakin had become much more than just his Padawan. He was his brother. His blood. He could not betray that now. He could not do such a thing. Even if Anakin could, he could not!

No.

NO!

The tears began streaming down Obi-Wan's face as he took advantage of Anakin's rage and began pushing him back down the incline and towards the edge of the cliff. Anakin was no more. Obi-Wan knew that. Evil was all that remained. Where he to allow such evil to go free when he could have destroyed it, Obi-Wan would succumb to the exact same trap Anakin had fallen in—possession and attachment.

By letting Anakin go after what he had become, Obi-Wan would be placing his own selfish desires and attachments over all that the Jedi stood for. Countless beings would be in danger and the galaxy would remain in the hands of the Sith—all because Obi-Wan couldn't let go.

The mountain raged on with its eruption behind Obi-Wan, backlighting him with its orange glow and illuminating Anakin's face. There, Obi-Wan could see the fear in Anakin's eyes. That fear brought an innocence back to Anakin's face, and Obi-Wan nearly faltered as he saw the kindhearted, happy little boy he'd met all those years ago on Tatooine.

Yet still Obi-Wan pressed on. He had to.

Tears of impossible pain falling from his eyes, Obi-Wan began goading Anakin into his own demise. Obi-Wan knew Anakin well. He knew the tender parts of Anakin's life. He knew just the buttons to push. He didn't want to do it. But he knew that he must.

"You joined the dark side, and for what!? You've lost the woman that you love! She *despises* what you've become and will never come back to you!"

The lump was big in his throat as he lied.

Anakin's face contorted in hatred and, mercifully, the innocent, little boy Obi-Wan saw there was gone. In its place was now a monster. Selfishly, in a place Obi-Wan could hardly acknowledge, he was glad to see that monster back. To do what must be done while peering into the face of that child was too much to ask—too much for anyone!

Anakin came rushing at Obi-Wan, chopping at him violently.

The wind whipped and swirled around them.

Obi-Wan allowed Anakin to push him sideways across the slight incline of the lip of the cleft, grinding his teeth in effort as he blocked the powerful blows. Anakin lashed out at him with every bit of hatred in his body. Holding his lightsaber in his left hand, Anakin used his right to call rocks from across the cliff to him. A storm of rocks and stones came flying at Obi-Wan from all directions. Some struck home hitting him in the arms or shoulders. Others he dodged or deflected.

One stone—the last—he ducked under at the very last second before it hit him right between the shoulder blades.

Anakin's eyes went wide as the half-meter wide rock he had thrown with the Force was suddenly racing towards his chest. He shot up his left arm holding his lightsaber and gave the rock a quick, horizontal slice.

Obi-Wan shot up from his crouch, bringing his right arm up across his body in an upward, arching swing. A deep, morose frown across his face, he swung the lightsaber up.

"AAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!" Anakin screamed as his left arm, severed at the elbow, and his lightsaber went flying through the air. Clutching the stump with his gloved, mechanical hand, Anakin collapsed onto his knees; his head bowed, his eyes clamped shut in terrible pain.

Lightsaber held down at his side, Obi-Wan stood before Anakin. He gazed down at him through tear soaked eyes, his chest heaving with emotion. "How could you have done what you did to the Jedi, Anakin? How!?" he cried in anguish.

Snapping his head up to peer at him with loathing, biting back the pain surging through his arm, Anakin roared, "They deserved to die! They were weak! They would have stopped me from what I wanted!"

Obi-Wan shook his head in disbelief. His heart breaking, he yelled, "You were The Chosen One!! You were supposed to bring balance!"

"I decide my own destiny! I do!! No one does it for me!" Anakin yelled.

He would give Anakin one last chance to turn back. He had to. He owed him at least that. "Can't you see?" he pleaded, his voice filled with sadness. "Can't you see what the dark side has done to you, Anakin? Evil doesn't know free will. You're more a slave now than you were as a child!"

Anakin winced from the pain as he continued to peer up at Obi-Wan with that hate.

"Come back with me, Anakin. Turn away from this darkness!" Obi-Wan begged. "It's not too late!"

Anakin didn't blink. Didn't flinch. He stared Obi-Wan right in the eye, his voice eerily steady. "Never. I'll *never* turn from the dark side!"

Obi-Wan couldn't believe the conviction he saw there. "What would Qui-Gon say if he saw you like this, Anakin?" He paused a beat. Then, "What would your mother think!?"

Immediately, from the wide-eyed reaction he saw on Anakin's face, Obi-Wan regretted having said it.

Anakin sprang to his feet so quickly Obi-Wan didn't even have time to react. Anakin struck him across the face with a backhand from his mechanical arm, sending Obi-Wan stumbling backwards. Anakin called the lightsaber lying on the ground a short distance away to him and activated it.

"HOW DARE YOU SPEAK OF HER!!" Anakin roared as he chopped away at Obi-Wan with only one arm. **"SHE DIED BECAUSE OF YOU!! IT WAS ALL YOUR FAULT! ALL OF IT!!!"**

Obi-Wan deflected the incredibly powerful blows as best as he could, but so hard were Anakin's swings that they continued to knock his blade out wide, continued to send him stumbling backwards along the edge of the cliff.

The lake of lava spewed and churned below. The geysers sent plumes of fire high into the air. The volcano behind Obi-Wan continued its fierce eruption, sending wide rivers of lava racing down its steep sides. All around them hundreds of other volcanoes blaster magma into the sky, poisoning the air and devouring all in their path. To Obi-Wan it was as if the entire planet were a projection of Anakin's rage, a display of his internal conflict and the power the dark side had unleashed in him.

Obi-Wan knew that he was, at this very moment, going to be killed unless he did something. Anakin's hate was just too strong. He would not stop. He would come after him until he had killed him. The dark side demanded nothing less.

They were right on the edge of the cliff now. Their feet less than a meter away.

It was time.

Forgive me, Anakin! he pleaded within his mind. ***Please forgive me!***

Anakin came in with a horizontal swing across his body. Obi-Wan spun and ducked below it. Coming around out of the spin, sadness on his face, Obi-Wan cut off Anakin's right leg just above the knee with his own blade.

Anakin's head snapped towards the sky, he dropped the lightsaber and clutched his thigh with his only remaining arm.

"AAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!" he yelled. He had snapped his upper body back too quickly from the pain, and the inertia of it sent his remaining foot teetering backwards—right onto the edge of the cliff.

His eyes went wide with fear as he felt himself falling over the edge and, flailing his arm, he stared at Obi-Wan in terror, eyes begging for help.

"Anakin!" Obi-Wan shouted, as surprised as Anakin that he had fallen over the edge. He dropped his lightsaber and lunged forward, nearly diving off the cliff himself to reach the outstretched arm of his fallen Apprentice. Sliding onto his stomach with nearly half his own body hanging off the ledge, Obi-Wan reached after Anakin.

Their fingertips touched ever so slightly. Both tried frantically—desperately!—to grab the other's.

...But neither could.

"OOBIII-WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAANNNNN!!!!!!!!!!!" Anakin yelled, staring up into Obi-Wan's eyes with that fear still on his face.

"ANAKIN!!!" Obi-Wan shouted in terror, peering at the face of that young slave boy once more, his arm still stretching out after him as if he could, somehow, still reach him.

But he could not.

Anakin continued to fall away, down towards the lake of lava below, never taking his eyes from Obi-Wan.

“Anakin!” Obi-Wan said, tears streaming down his soot-covered face, finally beginning to lower his outstretched arm as Anakin’s body disappeared into the smoke and haze of the heat-distorted air.

Lowering his head, his upper body hanging over the ledge, Obi-Wan continued to weep.

“Anakin,” he said softly through the tears.

“...Anakin...”

Chapter 34

Anakin fell for what seemed like an eternity. Time slowed nearly to a standstill as he faced his last precious seconds of life. His mind raced with fear. No longer did he feel so invincible. That feeling was gone—had gone with his arm and leg and his pride at having lost to Obi-Wan.

His head struck a rock outcropping, sending his body tumbling through the air.

The crown of his skull split.

Tremendous pain surged through him.

Darkness took his sight and threatened to swallow him in unconsciousness. He could feel all sensation draining from his body. He heard no sound. The acrid smell of the air had vanished. He no longer tasted the metallic bite of blood in his mouth. But Anakin held strong and fought with all he had to retain one small shred of existence. He knew that were he to fade completely into that blackness nothing could ever bring him back. He needed to keep some part of him in this world, lest he be powerless to do anything to stop him from succumbing to this fate.

Pain.

Pain was the only thing Anakin was able to hold on to. It was the only thing keeping him from slipping away into complete unconsciousness.

With all other sensation gone the pain of his severed limbs and throbbing head increased one thousand fold. It was too much. It was unbearable!

Anakin gnashed his teeth and swore at Obi-Wan. He was responsible for this! This was all his doing! Unfathomable hate surged into Anakin, and with it the incredible power of the dark side. Sweet relief washed over him as the dark side eased his pain. Like a coddling temptress the dark side soothed his pain into submission, giving him repose from the agony.

Anakin was pleased to find that his anger could ease such suffering; that the dark side was so accommodating, so merciful. But with his loss of focus the pain returned twice as strong as it had been before.

He was taken aback. It was too much! He called upon the dark side to ease the pain, but the mercy was not so easily granted this time. The dark side wanted more—needed more!—to give him what he so desperately needed. Anakin complied, reaching deep down into his fading heart to give the dark side more anger, more hate, more control over him.

The pain was swept away almost immediately, replaced by power and darkness. This time Anakin kept his focus. There, in that lightless void, the dark side showed Anakin how to keep his hate potent, how to smolder over the emotions so they didn't wash away with time. The dark side taught him how to store that burning wrath deep, deep down inside where they would stay forever.

His tumbling body struck a slope. The air was knocked from his lungs by the impact and his focus was shattered. Pain threatened to take control once more.

Again Anakin called upon the dark side, and again it refused to comply unless he gave more of himself to it.

The pain was too much! He couldn't breathe!

He focused his hate upon Obi-Wan, upon the Jedi, the Separatists, the senate, upon his mother's death, Palpatine's betrayal and his suffering throughout The Wars. He focused on his hate upon everything; molding it into a concentrated mass, a living thing, amplifying it into power with which to soothe his suffering and restore his breath.

The dark magic opened his airways, forcing oxygen back into his lungs as he continued to slide down the steep slope. The rough rock tore at his clothing and his skin, but by the grace of the dark side he was able to withstand the anguish.

With his pain eased, and his hatred focused, Anakin became more aware of his surroundings. The air rushing past him was growing hotter by the second. An image of the boiling lake of lava flashed in his mind through the dark side, warning him of what was fast approaching. Though the knock on his head had temporarily stolen his sight, Anakin saw the lake of fire as clear as day. The dark side showed him details of the slope he was on—things he never would have seen otherwise. Showing him a way out of this disaster.

The dark side fought to save him. It did not want to lose its latest victim so easily.

With great effort, Anakin focused his malice and hatred on his mechanical hand. He forced the jointed fingers into the shape of a claw and dug the hand into the rocky slope. At first the hand merely skid along the surface of the rock and did nothing to slow his descent. There was not enough force being applied. There was not enough friction between the hand and the slope. Anakin dug deeper, intensifying his hate into a steady stream of energy and sending that strength into the hand.

His clawed fingers pressed down harder, harder until they began to dig into the rough, porous stone. The leather of the glove covering the hand melted and peeled away under the intense friction until all that was left was the wires and the gold, metal bones that made up the arm. The pointed tips of the gold fingers dug deep into the rock, sending sprays and chunks of stone flying through the air and leaving behind a deep trail.

Finally, Anakin's body began to slow some, but he was still going too fast.

All of a sudden he felt the slope disappear out from under him. His mechanical hand grasped desperately for something to hold on to, but nothing was to be found. Once again he was falling through the air.

Anakin landed hard on his stomach on the crusted lava lining the shore of the lake, while his face and mechanical arm landed on the rock edge that was the shore. His lower body began to melt instantly—sticking to the black, cracked crust. Searing, maddening pain shot through Anakin as the weaker crust beneath his one remaining leg split and his leg was suddenly plunged into the lava. Flames shot up from the hole as the flesh and bone of his leg evaporated in the magma.

The screams within Anakin's mind were deafening as the heat of the crust suddenly burst his clothing into flames. His screams continued as his flesh charred, as his lungs were filled with and ruined by the poisonous fumes of the lava. He clawed with his mechanical hand at the rock shore trying desperately to pull himself out of the flames and the heat, but he was too weak. The pain was far too great for him to focus his dark energy into the strength he needed to do so.

It was too much!

He thought to give up, to give in to the beaconing of his pain and allow himself to die. The prospect was sweet. No longer would he be forced to suffer. No longer would he be trapped in this hell of fire, agony and despair. No longer.

The dark side beacons him, promising him the power to survive if only he gave a little more of himself to It.

Anakin denied It what It wanted. Nothing could be worth surviving this. His hate was strong, yes, as was his lust for revenge. But neither could be worth enduring such pain to fulfill. Nothing was worth this.

The dark side thrashed with anger at his submission. It wanted so desperately to keep Its hold on him and wield Its Will through his black, captured soul. It would not give up on him so easily!

It bombarded Anakin with whispers of power, limitless power.

Anakin was tired. He couldn't fight the pain any longer. He just wanted it to end.

It promised to open to him every secret It held—dark abilities long forgotten over the course of millennia.

Anakin ignored them, letting his life fade from his body.

Frantic, the dark side tried anything—everything—to retain his will to live, to endure Its purpose.

Anakin paid them no mind. They weren't worth it anymore.

Then, a smile of triumph in Its tone, a single word came to Anakin's mind through the swirling torrent of the dark side.

Padmé.

Immediately Anakin turned away from the brink, intent on these impressions from the dark side. Anakin sensed the promises to reunite him with his lost love, to make everything right again so that he could have all that was his.

His will returned at the thought. For Padmé—to be with her again and have her as his own—he could endure such pain, such incredible suffering. He could get her back, make her stay with him and love him once more. She was his! He could have her again, and he would!

Anakin reopened the floodgates of his emotions, focusing every fiber of his being into his blind hate. He gave himself completely to the dark side for the power to be with Padmé once more, traded his soul to possess her.

Snarling as the flames continued to melt away his skin, Anakin Skywalker used his Black Will to claw out of that fiery pit. His movement only served to break the crust under his body even more, and his body began to sink below the crust into the lava starting from his hips and up to his stomach and chest.

The Chosen One called upon more power than any being had in nearly one-thousand years. He surrounded his body with the incredible power of the dark side, shielding it from being eaten away by the magma. So filled with the dark side of the Force was he that a shimmering, black aura enveloped his frame, throbbing in intensity.

He clawed himself free with this impossible power, digging his mechanical fingers into the rock shore over and over again until he stopped sinking and began moving forward.

The flames subsided as he pulled himself free of the burning hot lava. He continued to drag himself away from the heat and noxious fumes; the black, charred skin of his chest and stomach peeling off on the rock shore as he did. But Anakin didn't care. He would survive. He would once again own that which he'd coveted most in his life.

It would be his!

Safe from the lava, what remained of his burnt body sprawled on the rocky shore, Anakin finally allowed himself to be taken by unconsciousness. The black aura surrounding him grew fainter, then was gone.

But before he passed from consciousness completely, Anakin sensed a familiar presence approaching from far off. The presence was so overcome with evil that he was certain it was the dark side itself come to take him away to safety and fulfill its promises.

It got closer. The presence could feel echoes of the power he had just unleashed and was following them back to their source, amazed by what he had been able to do. He felt the presence pass him by as it searched the area for him. So faint was his life-presence that it nearly missed him, but as it passed away it recognized the faint glimmer of life that remained and came back.

It was then, as the dark presence found and focused on him, that Anakin recognized it for whom it truly was. It was then that Anakin understood that it hadn't been the dark side of the Force that had been coaxing him to survive, to give himself fully to the dark side in order to survive. Rather, it had been his Master.

It was his Master that had promised him all those things.

It was his Master that had promised him Padmé.

Lord Vader, Sidious called out to him through the Force.

Master..., Anakin replied weakly before allowing himself to slip into unconsciousness. He knew he would survive after all. His Master would save him, and he would live another day.

He would live to have Padmé once more.

Chapter 35

Obi-Wan stood on the lip of the ledge for some time, peering down into the sweltering haze below. Guilt and sadness filled him. He hadn't wanted to do it. He hadn't meant for it to happen. But Anakin was just too far gone. He was beyond reach, beyond reason. Beyond hope.

His tears gone, his ash-covered face a mask of mourning, Obi-Wan peered down into that boiling lake of lava. "I'm sorry, old friend," he said quietly, the words lost on the whipping wind. But perhaps, somehow, Anakin would hear them now that he was in the beyond.

Perhaps.

Now that he was dead.

The loud *boom!* of a ship entering atmosphere caught Obi-Wan's attention and he turned his eyes to the sky. He saw a streak of light through the black clouds, ash and smoke. He watched it for some time, wondering with hope if it were the droids coming back to get him. But then he began to feel something...odd, and grew more and more certain that it was not the droids coming back.

At first, the presence was nothing more than a faint warning in the back of Obi-Wan's mind as he peered up into the sky. But as the streak of light grew closer the presence, and the danger sense accompanying it, grew greater by the second. He stretched out with the Force towards the strange, mysterious presence and recoiled in disgust as soon as he caught a mere glimpse of it. The potency of the darkness emanating from it turned Obi-Wan's stomach. He felt queasy. His head began ringing.

Sidious! he thought, surprised and worried. Surprised that Sidious had somehow escaped Master Yoda, and worried by what such a thing meant. *How could he have defeated Master Yoda?* Obi-Wan wondered, peering up at the streak as it shot across the sky. *How?*

Sidious seemed to notice his probe and returned one of his own, casting his dark eye across the landscape in search of him. Obi-Wan did all he could to conceal his presence from the Dark Lord. He closed his eyes and concentrated, pulling himself inward and away from detection. He knew it to be a hopeless gesture, for if Sidious could defeat Master Yoda—the wisest and most powerful Jedi Obi-Wan had ever known—then he could certainly see through his concealment if he wanted to.

A chill raced through Obi-Wan's bones as the Dark Lord's search swept towards him across the torn landscape. Madness and whispers of great evil approached with the presence, threatening to break Obi-Wan's concentration and shout out in horror. The sweep came towards him from off to the left and...paid him no mind.

Puzzled, Obi-Wan opened his eyes as he felt Sidious' probe continue past him. The probe went over the cleft of the ridge and down towards the lake of fire where Anakin had fallen and, no doubt, left his dark mark upon death. Suddenly, Obi-Wan realized that Sidious was not searching for him, but for his Apprentice!

A great sigh of relief washed over Obi-Wan. Knowing now how powerful Sidious was, he thought himself

yet again facing his doom. And this time he would have certainly met it. If Sidious could defeat Master Yoda, then he would not stand a chance against him. Yet he was not out of harms way yet. Sidious was still coming right for him. Intended target or not, Obi-Wan knew he needed to get out of there and fast. He could now hear the high-pitched whine of the engines of the shuttle and the trio of one man fighters that accompanied it as they came through the clouds.

Attaching Anakin's lightsaber to his belt, Obi-Wan broke off in a run along the lip of the ledge. He thought he might try to hide in the craggily rocks off to the side of the mountain and watch what happened with Sidious. Then, if he remained undetected, he could find a way off of this planet after Sidious left. The lights and high-pitched whine of another ship coming around the side of the mountain caught Obi-Wan's attention. He was surprised, and more than a little relieved, to see Padmé's Naboo skiff make a wobbly approach, then an extremely rough landing on a flat patch of ground at the top of the lip of the cleft.

Obi-Wan ran up the sloped lip and towards the ship's open hatch.

The golden protocol droid was standing in the doorway of the hatch when Obi-Wan reached the ramp.

"Oh, Master Kenobi, thank *goodness* we found you! I was most worried we would be unable to after all this time, but Artoo insisted we keep trying," Threepio said.

"Thank you," Obi-Wan said as he reached the droid, then hurried past him and into the cargo area.

Threepio turned and followed, chattering away in his prim tone as he did. "I'm so glad you're here now, Master Kenobi. Artoo forced me to fly the ship and it was most unpleasant. But you can fly now that you're here."

Obi-Wan blocked the droid's chatter from his mind. He only had one thing on his mind at the moment—making certain that Padmé was aboard. Anxious, he went through the door leading into the seating area of the ship located right behind the cockpit and was relieved to see Padmé lying on a small cot extending from the wall. Sweat covered her brow. The squat, astromech droid stood right next to her, watching over her intently while monitoring a small display screen showing Padmé's vitals. The droid turned to peer up at Obi-Wan as he entered. Obi-Wan looked down at Padmé's still form with worried, sad eyes.

"That's not to say that I wasn't any good at flying," Threepio said at Obi-Wan's side. "I did rather well—for my first time. In fact, there was this instance where a giant boulder was heading straight for us on the landing pad! It would have destroyed us for sure, had it not been for my piloting skills and—"

"Please!" Obi-Wan cut him off with a raised hand; stern, yet kind. He was growing anxious.

Threepio seemed taken aback by being interrupted, and a little offended. But he listened to the Jedi Master as he continued in a most serious tone.

"I need you to return to the controls at once. We must leave immediately. Enemies are approaching, and I'm concerned for the senator's well-being should they find us here." *And for the baby...*, Obi-Wan added to himself, shivers running down his spine at the thought of Sidious getting his hands on the child. With the child of The Chosen One, there was no telling what Sidious could do.

"Oh! Of course, Master Kenobi," Threepio said, then turned and waddled as quickly as he could into the cockpit.

Obi-Wan moved to kneel next to Padmé, a deeply troubled expression on his face.

Artoo turned his domed head to peer at Obi-Wan, then turned back to watching over Padmé and the medical display screen. He gave a sad moan.

The whine of the repulsor engines picked up, then the ship began to teeter and wobble as it rose into the air. The ship stayed shaky as it rose into the air until Threepio finally added power to the main engines and aimed for the sky just before Sidious' shuttle and his three escorting fighters came through the smoke and clouds on the horizon.

Obi-Wan watched Padmé's face with concern as her eyes slowly opened ever so slightly, then shut, then opened again as she tried to come out of unconsciousness.

"How is she?" Obi-Wan asked Artoo.

The droid gave a mournful warble, then shook his head from side to side.

Obi-Wan cringed. "And the child?"

Artoo was silent for a moment as he inspected the limited medical data on the display screen, then gave a response saying he didn't know for sure.

Obi-Wan's brow furrowed in worry and thought as he gazed down at her.

Eyes still closed, Padmé's lips parted and she tried to speak, but nothing came out. She tried again. "The..." she said, her voice nearly more than a whisper. "...The...the...baby..."

"Sssshhhhhhhh," Obi-Wan soothed, placing a gentle hand on her head. "You must rest."

"...Leia...a girl," Padmé continued, her sentences no more than snippets of a thought. "Lu...Luke...if...a boy."

At first he was confused, but then Obi-Wan began to understand. She was trying to tell him the names they had chosen for the child. Luke, or Leia. "I understand," he said, nodding. "It's okay. I understand."

His words seemed to ease her mind. She stopped fighting to speak and settled back down.

Wincing in sadness, Obi-Wan peered down at her for some time. Then, he got up from his knees and headed for the cockpit. He needed to find out what he was going to do next. He needed to find some place nearby where he could take Padmé and try to save her and the unborn child's lives.

Just before he reached the cockpit Obi-Wan heard Padmé's shallow breathing suddenly become stronger, quicker. Panicked. He turned to find her with tears running down the sides of her cheeks, eyes closed tight, great sadness on her face as she jerked her head from side to side. She seemed to be reliving some terrible moment in her mind.

Obi-Wan made to hurry back to her side, but stopped dead in his tracks when she suddenly began to wail.

"Anakin, I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!" she cried. Pain and regret filled her face. "I didn't mean to hurt you. I love you..." she trailed off, calming and falling back into unconsciousness as the fitful dream passed. "...I didn't mean to..."

So much tragedy in such a short amount of time. An exhausted, ragged, beaten and emotionally drained Obi-Wan stood there for some time peering at Padmé, trying once more to make sense of all that had happened, but coming up as empty as ever. Flashes of Anakin's terrified expression as he fell backwards off of that ledge raced through his mind. He shook his head slowly, trying to rid himself of the haunting image.

It didn't leave. He wasn't certain if it ever would.

He closed his eyes and called upon the soothing comfort and guidance of the Force. He didn't know what to do next, where to go. He hoped that there, in the Force, he might find some answer to the dark situation.

"Excuse me, Master Kenobi," Threepio called from the pilot's chair in the cockpit, "but there's a transmission coming through for you."

Obi-Wan's eyes shot open in surprise. He turned and walked into the cockpit. "A transmission? Are you

sure?" he asked as he made for the copilot's seat. The blackness of space and the small pinpoints of stars could be seen out the viewport.

"Oh, yes. I'm quite certain," Threepio said cheerily, nodding, then turning his attention back out the viewport and back to his flying as Obi-Wan sat.

Obi-Wan turned the copilot's seat towards the side wall and pushed a flashing, red button on a console. A shaft of light shot up from the console, then resolved into a quarter-meter tall holo-image of Bail Organa.

"Good to see you're still with us, Obi-Wan," Bail's image said, the small smile on his face relaying how relieved he was to see him alive. The image flickered slightly from distortion.

Obi-Wan wished he could have greeted him with equal enthusiasm, but he just didn't feel up to it. He got right down to business.

"Bail, is Master Yoda with you?" Obi-Wan asked, hoping for good news for once. He knew it was probably a waste of time. With the appearance of Sidious Obi-Wan was almost certain Master Yoda was dead. However, he'd known of Master Yoda getting out of some pretty hopeless situations before in the past...

"Yes. *He's here on my ship,*" Bail answered. "*He—*"

"I must speak with him right away," Obi-Wan cut him off, a surge of urgency mixed with relief running through him. "It's most important."

"*I'm afraid that's not possible right now,*" Bail answered. "*He's indisposed at the moment and asked not to be disturbed under any circumstances. He said he needed time to rest and to meditate. But before I left him, he asked me to contact you and find out where you were. He said we needed to get to Senator Amidala as soon as possible.*"

Bail paused, and Obi-Wan's mind raced with what this could mean. *Did Master Yoda already have a plan in store? Had he foreseen Padmé's injuries through the Force?*

He was so lost in his thoughts that he'd nearly forgotten about Bail.

Finally, Bail added, "*He said she was in danger. What does he mean? Is Senator Amidala all right?*"

Obi-Wan snapped out of it and peered directly at Bail's small image, his tone grave. "No. She's not all right. Anakin...hurt her. Badly. She needs immediate medical assistance. Her life, and the life of her unborn baby, may depend on it."

Obi-Wan turned away from Bail's image and to another nearby console. He began searching for any system nearby that might have the medical facilities they needed.

Bail's image began consulting his own console.

Eyes filled with worry, Obi-Wan leaned forward in the copilot's chair with his elbow propped up on the cockpit's console, bearded chin resting on his hand. He peered at the small display screen as the list of systems scrolled by. Then, one name in particular caught his eye. He pushed a button to stop the scrolling and leaned in close, inspecting the name for some time. He'd heard of the place before, but couldn't place just where.

He began scrolling through the facility's profile, and became more and more certain that this was the right place. Moreover, something in the Force told him that this was where they should go.

He turned back to Bail. "Meet us on...Polis Massa," he said.

There was a slight pause as Bail's image checked for the planet's location on his own display screen, and then, "*Right. We'll see you there.*"

"And Bail...?" Obi-Wan said. "I think you'd better hurry."

Bail looked up at him, searching Obi-Wan's troubled gaze. Finally, he said, "...*Understood. See you shortly,*" and his image disappeared.

Obi-Wan clicked off the holoprojector, then entered the coordinates into the navigational computer.

"Do you think you could make a jump into hyperspace?" Obi-Wan asked Threepio.

"Of course, Master Kenobi!" Threepio said. "As long as I have the coordinates, that is."

"They're already entered," Obi-Wan said, then slowly sank back into the copilot's chair. He left it to the droid while he took some time to think; his troubled thoughts dwelling on a future so unclear, so uncertain and filled with shadow.

The trio of H-shaped fighters buzzed by overhead and in the direction of the volcano peak to provide cover as Darth Sidious' shuttle made to set down on the flat patch of ground at the top of the lip of the cleft. The shuttles two, downward-swept wings folded up so that the ship could land, and landing gear extended as the repulsor engines took over. The ship landed with a swirl of kicked up ash and soot as the volcano nearby continued to erupt, sending fresh sprays of the fine ash down all around the slope. The hatch opened almost immediately with a hiss of venting gas and a group of seven, specially-suited Stormtroopers rushed out of the ship.

Two of the noxious gas and heat-shielded Stormtroopers pushed a thin hover-cot between them, while the other four carried different pieces of a small crane and harness system. Once at the ledge of the cleft the Stormtroopers set to assembling the small crane and securing it to the ground with thick bolts. Once assembled, they attached the hover-cot and the two Stormtroopers manning it to the crane system and lowered them over the edge.

A deep scowl of anger on his face, Darth Sidious slowly strode down the ramp with two red-robed, Royal Guards at his sides. Dressed in his hooded, black robe, Sidious stared down the slope leading to the edge of the cliff with narrow eyes and grinding teeth. Through the dark side, he could see small snippets of what had transpired there. Most of the images were faint, nearly all no more than a blur. But he could see Lord Vader's fall over the edge as clear as if he had been standing right there when it had happened—so thick was the event with fear.

His pasty lips peeled back across yellow teeth in an enraged growl as he slowly continued forward with gnarled, sickly hands raised and dangling lazily at his stomach. He had lost yet another apprentice. And this one—the most powerful of them all—no less than a handful of hours after he had been turned. His body nearly shook with fury. The dark side burst within his chest, begging for him to unleash his fury and the power that came with it.

But Sidious restrained. The loss had not been complete. In fact, the boy had proven himself more powerful than he'd ever thought him to be by actually surviving the incident. Sidious had not thought the boy even close to being capable of such a thing. Not so quickly after having been made Sith, anyway. He knew that even Dooku, after all his many decades of studying the Force, could not have done such a thing!

Yes, indeed, the boy had shown himself to be most worthy of being saved and preserved. And now, with the boy so damaged, Sidious knew that he could control him without worry. After such injuries the boy was no longer such a threat to overthrowing him. Now, the boy could be twisted and shaped to do whatever he wished. Only one thing remained to be done, and then the boy would be completely devoid of any trace of humanity. After that, the boy's will would be completely broken and nothing would remain of his former life, his former self. Then, the boy would truly be *his*!

The dark side was truly on his side. Their Will the same.

A pleased smile spread across Sidious' shriveled, ancient face.

Ash and soot raining down all around them like a light snowfall, Sidious and the pair of Royal Guards stopped at the top of the slope leading down to the ledge. The wind and sweltering air tugged at their robes, kicking the flurry of ash into a momentary blizzard. Upon the winds of the Force, Sidious caught scent of another presence; one growing more and more faint as the seconds went by. He searched the dark side to discover the identity of the presence. Once he found whom it was hate swelled in his breast once more.

Kenobi! The word was like venom in his mind. That Jedi had been a thorn in his side for far too long. Far too long. And now, Kenobi had robbed him of the perfect Apprentice and escaped! So filled was he with wrath, that the dark side literally threatened to tear him apart.

One of the Stormtroopers approached from down the slope. Stopping in front of Sidious, it said, "Your Highness, my men have found the body, but report that the subject is severely injured. They say there is little chance he will survive. Do you wish to continue with this operation?"

Darth Sidious' rage became too much at the words. His right hand shot up, palm facing towards the sky, gnarled fingers the shape of a claw. Gnashing his teeth, Sidious slammed the hand closed into a tight fist, unleashing his pent up fury on the clone.

The trooper's armor made a sharp screeching and clanking as the entire chest of the suit, and the clone captain's body within it, was violently twisted and crushed as if squeezed by a mammoth hand. A sharp out-rush of air escaped the Stormtrooper's mouth as his chest imploded. Then, Sidious reopened the fist and thrust the hand out at the trooper's ravaged form.

Thunder louder than the greatest eruption split the sky and the Stormtrooper was sent hurling backwards. His white suit of armor was swallowed by the smoke, ash and swirling haze of air as the body flew out over the ledge of the cleft to fall down into the fiery lake far below.

The Stormtroopers manning the small crane turned to look up the slope to see what had happened—what explosion had sent their captain flying over the ledge. All they saw was Sidious in his black robes standing at the top of the slope with his pair of red-robed, Royal Guards at his side.

"Bring him to me!!" Sidious bellowed, seeping with anger and the dark side.

The Stormtroopers scurried back to work, redoubling their efforts to raise the hoversled and Skywalker's twisted, burnt body. In no time at all the sled emerged with the charred remains on it. The four clones work quickly, but carefully, to unhook the sled. Two of them began pushing it up the slope towards Sidious, while the other two lowered the line back down for the two still below.

Reaching the top of the slope, the two troopers with the sled stopped in front of Sidious.

Sidious took a step forward and peered down at the hairless, cut and battered, burnt face of his Apprentice with a deep frown. He hardly recognized what he saw. Reaching out with the dark side, he placed a pale, cold hand on the boy's forehead and closed his eyes. It didn't take long for him to find what he was hoping for.

Good... You hate is strong. Your Will potent, he thought, pleased at what he found.

Removing the hand and opening his eyes, Sidious bit out, "Place him in the medical chamber. We leave for Coruscant at once."

"Yes, Your Highness," one of the Stormtroopers said, hurrying off with his companion and the sled towards the shuttle's open hatch.

Sidious turned and walked after them, his Royal Guards never leaving his side. He stopped just before reaching the ship and turned a searching gaze towards the sky. He sensed Kenobi's ship enter Hyperspace. And with him...*something* else. Something he hadn't felt before. Another presence. It was faint. Nearly imperceptible. Yet he'd caught a tiny glimpse of it. The presence felt raw in the Force. Untamed, but with great potential.

The sensation faded quickly on the ever-changing flow of the Force. Sidious turned his gaze away from the heavens and continued up the ramp of the shuttle, still pondering the strange occurrence. He would have to search the dark side for an answer, but not now. Later.

He had matters to attend to.

Darth Sidious walked up the ramp and back into the dimly-lit cargo hold of the ship. The Stormtroopers had already placed the boy's body in the medical chamber with a breathing apparatus attached to his face to ease his broken lungs. Now, they stood out of the way as they awaited their next order.

The medical chamber was little more than a flat slab with a transparent, curved hood. It resembled a coffin more than anything else. It served as a sterile environment for the transport of severely injured bodies, in which special medications and procedures could be given.

Small nodes extended from the inside walls of the chamber, attaching monitors to the boy's chest and the sides of his scarred, bald head. A small display screen set into the bottom half of the chamber lit up and began displaying health readings.

Sidious noticed how faint they were. Once again he marveled at the boy's power, his natural bond with the Force and his affinity for the dark side. It was unlike anything he had seen before. Indeed, it was a good thing the boy had been damaged. If he hadn't been...well, Sidious understood the nature of the Sith all too well.

"Leave us," Sidious seethed, his angry scowl all that could be seen under the darkness of his hood.

The Stormtroopers and the Royal Guards obeyed immediately.

The door to the cargo bay hissed shut behind them and the lights of the room went out. The low hum, then the high-pitched whine of the engines filled the cargo hold as the ship took off, then raced for the sky.

The light cast by the illuminated interior of the cylinder was all that remained in the room, spotlighting Lord Vader's blackened remains. In these long shadows, Darth Sidious stalked to the side of the healing chamber. He peered within for some time, down at the helpless boy's deformed body.

He wondered, and not for the first time, if he should just kill him, if he should just let the boy die. He was, after all, the Jedi's *Chosen One*. Prophecy said he destroy the Sith and bring balance to the Force. He could be dangerous if left alive. Sidious had foreseen such before he'd decided to turn him. He'd seen one of the boy's many destinies in his dark meditations. This boy could mean his end....

Sidious pulled back from such thoughts in disgusted contempt. The boy had been turned. He was no longer Jedi, but Sith. And now, he was so far gone on the path of darkness that turning back was impossible. It could not be done—had never been done. The dark side would not allow such a thing. Its poisoned claws dug too deeply into its slaves, making certain there was *never* any going back.

The boy had been turned, so no danger lay in him now. The prophecy was nothing more than yet another failure of the Jedi. Yet another lost hope they had put too much faith in. The Jedi were gone. *This* was the Era of the Sith!

With a wave of his hand a hatch opened on the side of the chamber and a small, silver case extended. He opened the box to reveal numerous strange tools and implements—effects required for the cheating of death. He removed healing potions and an injector from the box. With another wave of his hand a small window in the side of the clear hood slid back, giving him access to his Apprentice.

Peering down through the transparent hood with a deep frown as the shuttle made the jump into hyperspace, Sidious set to work on Lord Vader.

The boy was *his* now. *Nothing* could change that.

No prophecy. No destiny.

Nothing.

Chapter 36

The Naboo skiff reverted to real space and shot towards the dense asteroid field filling the viewport. Peering from the view outside, then down to the display screen showing the lifeform scan readout he had done, a sigh of relief came over Obi-Wan. He was picking up numerous lifeform readings. The mining station was not abandoned as he feared it might be.

Boxy shuttles and ships floating from asteroid to asteroid came into view as they came closer, and Obi-Wan opened a hailing channel on the comm..

"Come in, Polis Massa mining station. Come in. We have an injured passenger and request immediate landing," Obi-Wan said.

No response.

"Please respond. We require immediate medical assistance," he persisted.

"What is the nature of your emergency?" the flat, metallic voice of a droid finally asked over the comm..

"We have an injured pregnant woman onboard. She's in grave danger," Obi-Wan said, and there was no mistaking the anxiety in his voice. "I fear for the survival of her child. Please, you must help us!"

There was a long pause on the other end of the comm.. Obi-Wan's heart sank at the thought that they might deny them admittance. If they did, he didn't know what they would do. He was certain Padmé wouldn't make it long enough to reach the next nearby system with a medical facility. He had gone back to check on her several times during the jump here, and she had looked worse, paler, each time. Her breathing more shallow than the last. Her heart rate slower than before.

If both she and the child died.... Obi-Wan winced at the terrible thought.

"We will help," the droid finally said over the comm.. *"Land at the designated docking bay."*

Obi-Wan watched as the information came up on the display screen. "Thank you," he said, letting go of a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

"Your name, please," the droid stated in its flat tone.

Obi-Wan hadn't expected such a request. "Uh...my name?" he asked, his mind racing with what he should do, what he should say. He couldn't give his real name. There was a chance, though slim as it might be, that the Empire had already reached this place with their decree that the Jedi were traitors and that anyone that gave them aid or harbor would be severely punished. He couldn't risk that.

"It is required for our records. All visitors must be logged," the droid said.

"Oh. Yes. Of course," Obi-Wan said, trying to buy time as he thought. Finally, he said, "Ben. Ben Kenobi."

Another slight pause, then, *"Thank you. All will be ready when you land,"* and the comm. went dead.

Obi-Wan stared absently at the comm. for some time. *Is this what the rest of my life will be like?* he wondered. *Hiding and living under an assumed name?* He sighed in resignation. Such a life was a far cry from the one he had become so used to as a Jedi Knight—as a respected and honored protector of the Republic.

Threepio's worried voice brought him out of such thoughts.

"Master Kenobi—I think it best if you pilot the ship now. I'm not certain if I can navigate this asteroid field."

Obi-Wan snapped his head up to see that the droid was shaking, and that they were just about to run into one of the giant, floating rocks. He took the controls and switched them over to his side quickly. "I'll take it from here," he said, steering the ship around an enormous asteroid.

Threepio collapsed back into his seat in relief. "Oh, *thank you*, Master Kenobi!" he said, exhausted.

After several minutes more of navigating the asteroid field their destination came into view. Set in one of the many deep craters of a particularly large asteroid was a vast building complex. Tall, round spires reaching up out of the crater, and domed buildings filled out the base. A handful of small shuttles darted from building to building, but for the most part the place was quiet. Very few windows across the complex were illuminated, giving the feeling that not many beings were stationed at the mining facility at the moment.

With deft skill, Obi-Wan piloted the Naboo skiff into their hangar, then set down and shut off the engines. He could see movement in a doorway across the hangar and made for the hatch.

By the time he got there and had it lowered the two beings were already waiting at the bottom with a small hoverbed between them. Obi-Wan inspected the strange looking, tall and thin beings for a handful of seconds. Their faces were white with no nose or mouth, and had two small holes in-set with beady, black eyes. The skin on their bald heads and the rest of their bodies was a grayish-blue, and their long fingers were bony with odd joints. They both wore aqua and tan bodysuits that didn't look like any medical gear Obi-Wan had ever seen. In fact, they looked more like caving suits than anything to Obi-Wan.

But, as odd as they might look, their deep-set eyes were kind. Obi-Wan sensed no danger from these people.

"Come in," he said, waving them up the ramp. "She's over here."

The pair of Polis Massan hurried up the ramp with the white, elliptical hoverbed and followed Obi-Wan to Padmé's unconscious form.

Obi-Wan made sure to stay out of their way as they brought the sled up next to the cot and began transferring her onto it. "She was strangled. Her windpipe may be collapsed," Obi-Wan said.

One of the tall, bluish-gray aliens leaned in over Padmé to inspect her neck. Then, it turned to peer at Obi-Wan quizzically when he saw no bruises, no lesions—no damage there at all.

Though the being had said nothing at all, Obi-Wan surmised the question all the same. "The injuries are more...internal," he explained.

The being seemed to remain puzzled by such an answer, but it began helping its companion in leading the sled out of the ship's hatch.

Obi-Wan and the droids followed right behind them as they exited the hangar and entered a hall.

"As you can see, she's pregnant," Obi-Wan said as he followed right behind the sled like some worried parent watching over a child. "Do you think the child should be delivered right away? Just in case of complications?"

Both Polis Massan's turned to give him a quick look, then peered at each other before turning their

attention back forward down the hall. One of them touched a small device attached to its shoulder as they continued on, but said nothing.

"Please—if there's anything you can tell me, I would much appreciate it," Obi-Wan said, trying to get something out of them. But neither spoke.

Then, Obi-Wan heard the soft hum of approaching repulsor lifts from around the bend of the long hall. A handful of seconds later a meter tall droid with blue-white, glowing eyes came floating towards them. The droid had no legs, but two arms that hung down from its hovering body. It settled next to one of the two Polis Massan for a short time, floating backwards down the hall as it faced the white-faced alien directly. Then, after a handful of seconds, the droid turned away from the alien and came right for Obi-Wan.

Floating a short distance in front of Obi-Wan, the droid said, "Selif Zam wishes me to inform you that they cannot answer your questions at this time, as they are unqualified to make such judgments."

"Unqualified?" Obi-Wan asked, puzzled. "Aren't they physicians?"

"Negative. They are exobiologists stationed to the facility for the archeological dig located in the caverns of this asteroid."

Obi-Wan was even more confused now than he was before. He gazed down at Padmé's sweat covered face, wondering if coming here was such a good idea after all.

"I can see that you are concerned," the droid said. "There is no need to be. Trained physicians are preparing the medical room as we speak. They will be attending to you companion."

Great relief washed over Obi-Wan. "Thank you," he said.

They finally came through a door and into a room divided by a transparasteel partition. Two other Polis Massan's wearing strange, orange hoods over the backs of their heads and around their necks stood in the room on the other side of the partition, readying medical machinery and the like. Another legless droid with padded arms also waited inside, hovering out of the way of the physicians. The pair of aliens leading the hoverbed pushed it through parted doors and into the sterile medical room beyond. Obi-Wan made to follow, but the droid barred his way with a metal arm.

"Halt. Access not granted. You may wait and observe from out here," the droid said.

Though he didn't want to leave Padmé's side--didn't want to take his eyes from her body--Obi-Wan gave a nod. The droid turned and went through the doors and they slid shut behind it. A deep frown of concern on his face, Obi-Wan stepped back next to the droids at the wide windows and watched what was happening inside.

Several long minutes went by as they watched the droids and the Polis Massan physicians do their work. Then, the doors leading from the long hall they had entered from opened. Obi-Wan turned, and was relieved to see Master Yoda hobbling into the room on his cane with Bail Organa at his side.

Obi-Wan had never been so glad to see the ancient Jedi Master before in his life. He walked to him and dropped onto one knee so that they might talk at eye level.

"Happy to see you alive, am I, Master Obi-Wan," Yoda said.

"I'm glad to see you, too, Master," Obi-Wan said, the sadness of the events that had separated them washing over him once more. He bowed his head as flashes of Anakin's frightened face as he fell over that ledge rushed through his mind.

"Did your duty, you did, Obi-Wan. Guilt, you should not feel," Yoda said.

He raised sad eyes back up to meet Yoda's. "I tried to turn him away from the dark. I tried so hard! But...it couldn't be done," he said, lowering and shaking his head once again in painful regret.

Master Yoda's own eyes began misting at witnessing his pain. Sadness washed over him, and his ears drooped. Then, he turned his attention to what was happening on the other side of the transparasteel wall. "How is she?" Yoda asked.

Obi-Wan stood back up and walked with Yoda to stand next to Bail and the two droids. "Not well. Her vitals are failing. Her life is slipping away."

"...And, the child?" Yoda asked, a tiny glimmer of desperate hope in his tone.

"I don't know," Obi-Wan said.

"HMMMMM....," Yoda said, deep in thought. Then he turned and began hobbling away.

Obi-Wan watched him heading for the door. "Where are you going, Master?" he called after him.

Yoda stopped and turned as the doors slid open in front of him. "Answers, I require. Council, I need. Consult the Force, I must," he said, then turned and continued walking away.

After the doors closed a puzzled Obi-Wan returned to watching what was happening within the medical room. With a heavy sigh, he lowered his head and crossed his arms across his burnt, torn tunic, hoping that all would work out, but fearing the worst.

Master Yoda sat cross-legged in the middle of the circular room atop of one of the many spires jutting out from the top of the building complex. Wide windows lined the walls all around him, giving him an excellent view of the vast sea of drifting asteroids outside. But Yoda paid them no mind. Eyes closed, deep concentration on his face, he searched the Force for answers.

He dug deep, deeper than he ever had before. His search was not wide, nor random. In fact, he knew exactly what he was searching for. Or, rather, *who*.

He'd happened upon the presence a handful of times before when he'd least expected it—the first of which being when he'd felt young Skywalker in such terrible pain just before the Clone Wars had begun—but he'd never been able to summon it at will. He hoped to change that, for their situation was dire and he needed answers only the Force could provide.

He needed to reach him....

Yoda, the peaceful, familiar voice said through the Force.

A relieved smile creased Yoda's face.

"Found you, have I," Yoda said, pleased.

I am always here, old friend, waiting for you to be ready to hear my voice, Qui-Gon Jinn's presence said. There was a pause, then, *I sense much sadness and turmoil in you*.

Yoda gave a heavy sigh. His shoulders sagged. His ears drooped. "Failed the Jedi, did I. Dangers of The Rising Storm, too slow did I heed. Prevent the destruction of our Order, I could not."

Do not dwell on such thoughts. You are powerful, but you cannot foresee everything. Nor should you desire to. You must trust in The Living Force and allow it to flow where it will.

"Defeat the Dark Lord, I could not," Yoda continued his lament.

It was not your place to. Only The Chosen One can do such a thing.

"Lost, the boy is," Yoda said, shaking his head. "Fulfilled, The Prophecy cannot be."

Perhaps. But perhaps not. Only time and the Force can tell.

Yoda was puzzled by the answer, and by the apparent lack of concern in Qui-Gon's tone. He sensed that Qui-Gon knew more than he was telling him. "Hope you still have, that balance can be restored?" Yoda asked.

There is always hope, Qui-Gon stated, dodging the question.

"Answer, me, you did not," Yoda pointed out.

There was a pause, as if Qui-Gon needed to think before speaking. Then, *When you are ready, you will come to know the answer for yourself.*

Yoda gave a nod. "Wise, you have always been, Qui-Gon. Know much of The Living Force, you do, that I do not understand."

In time, you will.

Yoda began shaking his head. "Learn such things, I cannot. Too old, am I. Too set in my ways."

A smile in his tone, Qui-Gon said, *A wise being one told me, "What can be taught, can be learned."*

Yoda smirked at having his own teachings used against him.

Learn from me, and I will teach you to merge with the Force at will. Not merely become one with It, but keep your awareness...and your physical form.

Yoda was stunned by the prospect, by the very idea of such power. "Live life beyond death to aid the Force in Its Will. So great a gift, it would be," he said, bowing his head in reverence at the idea. Then, with a bow of his body, "Very well. Your humble Apprentice, I become, Master Qui-Gon."

The door behind Yoda slid open, and Bail walked in. He came to a stop just behind Yoda and said, "I think you'd better come. Padmé is fading fast."

Yoda opened his eyes and let Qui-Gon's presence go. He was slow getting up, but with the use of his cane he was finally able to. He peered out across the asteroid field with a smile of assurance, thinking of Qui-Gon's words. Then turning to Bail, he said, "Very well," and walked with him out of the room.

Great concern across his brow, Obi-Wan stood next to the two droids and watched as the physicians finished working on Padmé, and began the process of delivering the baby. The droid he had spoken with earlier came out through the doors. Hovering a short ways away from Obi-Wan, the droid stated, "She is asking for an Obi-Wan."

"That's me," Obi-Wan said with a nod.

The droid inspected him for a split second, tilting its head sideways. Then, "Come with me," as it turned and went back through the sliding doors.

Obi-Wan followed, his stomach tightening in apprehension at what he sensed was to come. He went through the doors. The soft beeping and hum of the medical machinery all around him filled his ears. The droid floated ahead of him to the other side of the hoverbed. He approached Padmé laying with a sheet covering her up to the chest, a droid working at delivering the child.

Their work done, the pair of Polis Massan physicians backed out of the way at his approach, giving him room to be as alone as possible with Padmé. As he came near, Obi-Wan studied their faces for any sign of hope, but they were blank, unreadable. He turned his attention back to Padmé as he reached the side of the hoverbed. Her face was pale, her forehead covered in sweat. Her eyes closed in a restless sleep.

"All physical damage has been repaired, yet her condition continues to worsen," the droid said. "The physicians cannot explain it."

Obi-Wan peered up at the droid, then at the pair of Polis Massan.

"...Obi...", Padmé's weak, whisper of a voice said.

He turned to peer down at her, and saw that her eyes were open to small slits. Tears began forming in his eyes at seeing her in such a way.

"Obi-Wan...?" she asked, her lips hardly able to move to form his name. Barely conscious.

Barely living.

Swallowing the lump in his throat, placing a soothing hand on her forehead, Obi-Wan found his voice and said, "I'm here, Padmé. It's me."

With great effort, she widened her eyes just a fraction more so that she might be able to see him. Finally, she seemed to focus on his face and recognize him. "...Obi-Wan...", she whispered in relief.

Each syllable seemed to drain her more and more of life. Yet she fought on as she always had. She was strong, and she would accomplish what she had set out to do—even if it meant cheating death for just a little while.

Movement to his left caught his eyes, and Obi-Wan turned to see the mid-wife droid holding a small baby in its padded arms.

"It's a girl," the droid stated, offering the child to Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan took the child in his gentle arms, gazing down at the miracle in wonder and joy. Then, holding her in front of Padmé, Obi-Wan said, "Look, Padmé! You child! It's a girl!"

Padmé's eyes flickered wider, and with great effort she raised a weak hand to touch the child on the crown of the head. A tiny smile creased her lips and she breathed, "Leia."

Obi-Wan smiled despite the tears slowly trickling down his face. "Yes. Leia," he said softly.

Padmé's eyes suddenly rolled back into her head and her hand fell from Leia's crown of brown-spattered hair.

Panicked, Obi-Wan handed Leia back to the midwife droid and leaned in back over Padmé. His hand back on her forehead, Obi-Wan urged, "Stay with me, Padmé—stay with me! Then, bowing his head in sorrow, he wept. "Please don't go."

"Never...", she whispered, forcing her body to speak, forcing her last words to form.

Obi-Wan saw that her eyes held a strength and determination they had lacked before. She was weak, but her half-closed eyes were filled with insistence as she expended what little energy she had left to raise her right hand up across her body. She could not hold the hand very high, so it hovered right above her breast. Obi-Wan saw a leather string dangling from the hand as she offered it to him. He met the hand with his own, and Padmé collapsed them together onto her chest, her last bit of strength gone.

Then, that insistence in her gaze, she peered at Obi-Wan and breathed, "Never... never forget...Obi-Wan." She was forced to pause to regain her breath between nearly every word. So difficult was her struggle. "...There is...still.....hope."

"Hope for what, Padmé?" Obi-Wan asked, filled with great anguish at seeing her so.

Her eyes became wide with effort. Her chin arched upward, the veins in her neck jutted out and her head

wavered from side to side as she struggled to say her last words, to release her last breath.

“...There—...—is—...—still—...,” her eyes slid closed, her lips barely formed the words as her body and her hand suddenly went limp, “...gooooood...in hiiiiiiiiimmm....”

Obi-Wan watched, tears streaming freely down his face, as Padmé’s head slowly drifted to rest to the side.

Padmé Amidala Skywalker was no more. She had passed.

It took some time, but Obi-Wan finally pulled his eyes away from her face. With a soft, reverent touch, he raised his free hand to her right arm. He removed her hand off of his own on top of her chest, and gently set the arm back down by her side. Then, slowly pulling back and standing erect, Obi-Wan looked upon what she had placed in his hand. It was a small, alabaster object with the feel of stone. Carvings covered the surface of the trinket, and it was worn smooth in places from repeated touch.

Obi-Wan gazed from the Jappor Snippet, to Padmé’s still face in confusion. *What is this? Had Anakin given this to her?* he thought, sensing that he was correct in his guess.

He gazed down at her in saddened awe. That she could forgive Anakin, that she could think there still good in him after all he had done—after what he had done to her!—was humbling.

Such love is the greatest power of all..., Obi-Wan thought, gently closing his hand around the snippet.

“It’s a boy,” the midwife droid called out, startling Obi-Wan from his thoughts.

Stunned, Obi-Wan turned to see the droid holding the baby boy out to him on its padded arms. Carefully, he scooped up the child into his arms. The last remnants of his tears found their way down his face.

Twins, he thought, baffled.

A smile not of glee, but of hope and for the continuation of life, Obi-Wan gazed down at the small child and said one simple word.

“Luke.”

Chapter 37

Located far, far beneath the crust and skyline of the planet Coruscant, the underground lair had long served as the place where Darth Sidious could conduct his dark meditations without risk of detection from the Jedi. Now that the Jedi were all but gone, the dank complex served as the place where his Apprentice would be rebuilt. Reborn. Black cowl pulled low over his brow, deep frown lining his warped, shriveled face, arms folded into the sleeves of his black robe, Darth Sidious stood and watched from the back of the dark, slant-walled room as the medical droids worked to rebuild his Apprentice.

The sole light source in the room was a single spotlight located directly over the operating table his Apprentice lay spread out upon and chained to—as if to highlight the horror taking place there. Several droids, each with multiple appendages, surrounded the subject. The droids' multiple arms moved swiftly and efficiently as they worked to put the final pieces into place. Their long, thin arms cast strange, spindly shadows across the walls as they worked; looking like the beckoning waves of evil-tempting phantoms. The illusion was not far off, for the presence of the dark side was strong within the room.

To Sidious, it felt as if the dark side were personally overseeing this procedure—blessing it—to make certain all went well. It further bolstered his feelings that the boy was indeed meant to go on, that his purpose was the Will of the dark side.

Both legs had been replaced by mechanical counterparts, adding towering height for facilitated intimidation. Both arms were made of metal now, affording incredible strength and infinite stamina. It had taken days in a Bacta tank and many long hours of diligent work by the droids to heal the charred flesh of his Apprentice's torso and head, but nothing could be done to make it less unsightly. Pink and scarred, shriveled and mangled, what remained of his Apprentice's human form was unrecognizable as such.

His lungs no longer functioned. The noxious gases and deadly fumes of that lake of fire had seen to that. Now, instead, a life-support suit breathed for him. The leather suit covered his entire body concealing the terrible, mangled form from sight. Black on black was the suit. The only vestiges of color were the orange and red, flashing buttons on the control board set into the chest. All else was as black as the twisted, tortured soul housed within.

A sterling arm extended from the wall, a black helm tight in its grasp. The small group of droids backed away from the table slowly, almost reverently, as if worshipping The Dark Demigod of Fear they had created. The helmet slid over the mangled, pink skin of what was left of Anakin Skywalker's face; mercifully concealing it, yet creating a prison of madness within. With a hiss of escaping air the helmet clicked into place at the neck; sealing off the suit, and the horrid being housed within it, from the outside world.

Then, the work finished, the table slowly began to stand vertically.

Hollow, black orbs stared out from where eyes should have been. A slight snout ending in a stub of a nose with a triangular voice amplifier just below it and framed by small, silver-tipped tusks, made up the face. The helmet's rounded crown draped nearly to the shoulders on the back and sides, giving the impression of a permanently-raised, black hood. A silver chair, clasped about the neck like a leash, held a long, black cape in place on the imposing, dark figure.

Sidious began forward from across the room, gazing at his terrible creation in awe. It was horrifying. It was grotesque. It was an abomination.

It was just as he'd wished it.

Only one thing remained, and then the boy would truly be his.

A smirk of dark pleasure crossed his pale, twisted face.

"Wake him!" he ordered, the smirk replaced by an evil scowl.

One of the droids extended an arm to the side of the table and pressed a button.

Nothing happened for a handful of seconds. Then, a jolt coursed through the half machine, half man strapped to the erect table.

A loooooooooooooonnnng, sucking intake of air sounded through the breathing apparatus. It was held for some time, then released just as slowly as it had been taken in. The second breath was quicker and more even than the first, and was released with equal measure. Having found its rhythm, the breathing apparatus continued at an even pace as the warped being within came back to consciousness.

Anakin Skywalker's mind was filled with brilliant flashes of a thousand different images. Each image was of the same being, but from differing stages of her life. Beautiful, kind, happy, sad, passionate, caring, worried, gentle, pained, thoughtful, crying, confused, scared, terrified!—**CHOKING!**

"Padmé!" a strange, booming voice echoed through the audio receptors within his helmet. Puzzled, wondering if the voice he'd heard had been his, or someone else's, he repeated the call for his love. "Padmé!"

The voice was indeed his own, but it was not his.

Groggy eyes cracked open to peer out through tinted optical amplifiers. The room was dark, but what little light there was seared his eyes, sending jolts of pain through his mind. Pain. Focusing on that pain, he turned it into energy through the dark side. He overpowered the piercing sting racing through him and forced his eyes open completely, taking in the room around him and turning his head, searching for the one he longed to see—the one whose thought had kept him alive on that fiery bank. His love.

Padmé.

The room tilted and swirled, but he fought through the disorientation and forced his mind into sharp focus with the dark side. He saw several strange, multi-armed droids standing in a semi-circle around him, gazing at him blankly with their glowing, red, optical sensors. He paid them no mind and passed them by, continuing his search for his love. His reason for living.

He sensed a presence standing close beside him and spun his head in that direction, his heart filled with hope that it was his love.

That hope faded when he turned to see the shriveled, scowling, hooded face of a warped, old man staring directly at him with piercing, yellow eyes. Though the face was different, he knew who he was—Sidious. How he had come to look this way Anakin did not know. Nor did he care. All he wanted at the moment was to know where Padmé was. He needed her here with him. Needed to know she was safe. One thing was clear—she was not here with him.

He hung his head in sadness at not seeing her, at being greeted by the unkind face of evil at his awakening, and peered down at the strange body he found himself incased in.

"Lord Vader," Sidious called in his harsh voice.

Anakin raised his head and turned to face his Master obediently. He peered into that shriveled, deformed face for some time awaiting some order, some demand, but none came. The ancient man seemed to be waiting for him to say something, to ask what was on his mind. He complied with obedience.

"Where is she?" he demanded, his deep voice booming within his ears.

The scowl on Sidious' face melted away to be replaced by a deep, morose frown. Shaking his head slowly in mock sadness, Sidious replied, "She is no more, ...my friend. You killed her."

Anakin stared into that face for some time. "You lie," he finally accused.

Sidious' amused cackle pierced him, filled the room with madness. Raising and clapping shriveled hands in front of him in glee, Sidious laughed for some time. "Good!" he said, clapping his hands. "Goooooooood...", he seethed. Then, just as quickly as it had come, the taunting laughter and amused smiled reverted back into that harsh scowl. He bit out, "Search your feelings, and see if I lie!"

Anakin did as he said. He searched the winds of the Force for the familiar presence of his wife. His love. He knew he would find her there easily, for her presence was always near to his heart. The distance of space could not break their bond—so strong was their love.

He searched, and searched, ...and searched.

...And found nothing.

She was not there. Her presence was gone.

She was dead.

And *he* had killed her.

His gloved, mechanical hands tightened into fists. The leather crackled from the pressure. A trembling spread across his body as a guttural growl began seeping to the surface from someplace deep within—some place dark, some place filled with anguish and impossible suffering.

A low rumble began filling the room. The air started to stir, and quickly picked up until it was a deafening roar. Medical instruments were snatched up into the swirling vortex as if they were nothing, turning into missiles and sent crashing into the walls. The medical droids made to scramble for cover, but were snatched up by the gale and crushed into twisted hunks by a massive, invisible hand upon the wind before they could get very far. Then, their bits and pieces joined the swirling windstorm as Anakin ripped himself free from his restraints and stepped down onto the cold, steel floor; clenched fists of rage raised above his head as he continued to unleash his unholy fury.

The walls groaned and screeched against his power, then were violently bent outward in one swift, deafening push as that giant fist upon the wind—the fist of his Will—pounded them in relentless bombardment and power.

Great hate surged through Anakin Skywalker—hate more potent and powerful than any he had ever encountered. He hated Obi-Wan for turning Padmé against him and bringing her to Mustafar. He hated the Separatists for the anguish they had caused him—for furthering his deep, dark descent. He hated the Sand People for killing his mother, and for their slaughter at his hands. Were it not for them—were it not for their inhuman behavior—he never would have started down the path he had. He hated the Jedi for making him live his true life in shadows and for denying him his love of Padmé. He hated the corruption of the Republic and what he had been forced to do to cleanse the galaxy of such corruption. He hated Palpatine for lying to him and deceiving him as Sidious. He hated Sidious for keeping him alive; for preserving him in this perverted form of a man, for corrupting him so and for twisting him into becoming a slave to the dark side.

But, most of all—far beyond all of the rest one thousand fold—he hated himself.

He hated Anakin Skywalker.

He hated himself for what he had inflicted upon his love and his unborn child; for what he had become, what he had failed to do, for all he had done. He was a monster! He hated Anakin Skywalker with all his being, and would never forgive himself for his trespasses against all he held dear.

Never!

NEVER! NEVER!!

He would not—*could not!*—allow forgiveness to himself for the pain, suffering and death he had caused that which was so dear to him. He had killed his wife—his only love!—and with her his innocent, unborn child. He knew that he deserved to suffer eternal shame and anguish for doing so. He had betrayed all he held dear. He had become less than human. He had become a cruel animal, and cruel animals knew no pity, deserved no mercy, knew no sympathy. He would have wished himself dead, but death was too sweet an escape for someone as horrendous as him.

No.

Death was too merciful. His penance would be to suffer—to wallow in his own, miserable existence for as long as it lasted. To forfeit himself to the awful, dark power that had taken control of him and allow It to use him as It would. To be a puppet, nothing more, and to do the Will of his Master—the Will of All Darkness.

He would leave the excruciating, insufferable memories of the name Skywalker behind him. No longer would he acknowledge the name, lest it jog painful memories free of their carefully constructed prison. From this day forth, he would be The Dark Lord of the Sith Darth Vader and nothing more. He would find solitude and pain in such an existence.

It was all he had left.

It was the life he had made for himself.

And he would live it. Every sorrow-filled minute of it. 'Til the very end.

He knew in his heart that he deserved no less.

Darth Sidious stood in the epicenter of the storm—hands raised in front of him, calling out to the dark side for power and protection as the torrent raged forever on. Consoles and machinery imploded all around him. Sparks filled the swirling air. It took all his Will and might to repel the onslaught. Every fiber of his being ached to be spared the power unleashed by his tormented Apprentice.

How could he repel such potent power, such hate? How could He—Spawn of Dark Deeds, Bringer of Chaos—counter so focused rage?

He almost succumbed. He almost forfeit.

But he did not. He held fast to the dark side, because it would not allow him to let go.

...And he won in the end.

Eventually, sorrow and limit took hold of his Apprentice and he collapsed to one knee on the floor. The storm subsided and all fell from the air with thuds! and clanks! Then, hunched and defeated, broken and ruined, his Apprentice knelt on that one knee...and succumbed to the greatest tool of the dark side.

As the tempest subsided, Sidious lowered his arms and reached out to his Apprentice's presence through the dark side. There, he found what he'd longed to feel. Great pleasure took hold of him. It had been done. He had broken this man—this human—into something less than that. All traces of mercy and feeling had been wiped away.

Save one.

One emotion remained beyond any other and would not let go—**HATE**.

Not just any hate, but the most controlling, the most consuming, the most cancerous, the most powerful hate of all—the hate of one's self.

With such hate—with such self-loathing—his Apprentice was a broken, crushed shell of a man. Sidious knew that, now, his Apprentice would do as he was ordered to fulfill some self-ordained repentance. He would be a prisoner in his own failures—in his own wrong decisions. He would obey. He would not think to overthrow him now. Not with nothing left to live for but his own self-hate. Perhaps, had his love or the child survived, he would have, but now that they were gone nothing remained.

HE WAS *HIS*!!

A smirk of triumph on his face, Darth Sidious walked forward and placed a shriveled, distorted hand atop of the black helm of his Apprentice.

"Rise, Lord Vader, and do the bidding of the dark side!" he ordered.

His Apprentice complied without question, without hesitation. For what else could he do? His spirit was no more. He was not his own. He was possessed by his own self pity.

"Yes, my Master," Lord Vader replied, cowering in obedience and sorrow before that which owned him.

Chapter 38

Obi-Wan sat hunched over with elbows on his knees in the medical room of the Tantive IV, mulling over the events of the past several hours in his mind. So much had happened. His life had been turned upside down.

The twins lay sleeping in small medical cribs a short distance away, their tiny fingers and toes flexing open and closed as they slumbered in peace. Against the wall on the far side of the room on a hoverbed draped with a white sheet lay Padmé's lifeless body. Obi-Wan's eyes often drifted to her covered, still form as he pondered with great regret what he could have done differently, and how things could have gone so wrong.

He gave a heavy sigh and leaned forward, cradling his head in weak hands.

He was supposed to meet with Master Yoda and Bail Organa to discuss what they would do next, but had asked for some time alone first in order to sort out his troubled thoughts. He did not want Master Yoda to see him like this—so overcome with grief and emotion. He would not approve of such in a Jedi.

Suddenly, the twins burst into great wails.

Ripped from his thoughts, alarmed, Obi-Wan sprang to his feet and peered at the children. Their tiny bodies thrashed and kicked as they cried uncontrollably, small faces flush and taut with anguish.

And then, from somewhere across the far reaches of the galaxy, through the ever-reaching arm of the Force, the cause of their outburst finally reached Obi-Wan. Like a distant thunderclap, the disturbance came on as a low rumble at first. Then, with incredible speed and potency, like the roar of a fast-approaching ship, the disturbance erupted into his consciousness, knocking the wind from him as if he'd been struck in the chest with a giant fist.

The presence was wrought with incredible, unimaginable sorrow! It bombarded Obi-Wan, ripping through his soul. Staggering, head spinning, Obi-Wan made his way to the nearest wall as two female aides rushed into the room and scooped up the screaming infants in order to sooth them. Leaning his left hand against the wall to hold himself up, he placed his right across his chest—over his heart. He hadn't thought it possible for any being to feel such grief, such terrible torment. It was so strong!

For a time, he thought it must be the Force Itself; crying out in sorrow at the loss and death of The Chosen One. It was the only explanation he could think of. It was the only thing that made sense! But then, through the pounding hail of great emotion, Obi-Wan began to sense a familiarity in the presence. Puzzled, he closed his eyes and did his best to repel the onslaught from his mind so that he might get a better view of what he was feeling there. He sorted through the raw rage and sadness, through the hate and the torture until he could see more clearly.

He searched. And then....

His eyes shot open in amazement. He couldn't believe it! How could it be possible!?

He dashed for the door and ran down the white hall as the roar of immense sorrow continued through the Force.

Hurrying through the doorway leading into the small conference room where he knew he would find Master Yoda, Obi-Wan exclaimed, "Anakin survived! He's alive!!"

Bail spun to look at him, surprised and perplexed.

Master Yoda sat hunched over in a tall-backed chair with eyes closed, face contorted in sadness and pain as he, too, felt the disturbance through the Force.

Obi-Wan came around to stand to the side of Master Yoda's chair, peering at the aged Jedi Master with a stunned expression. The last ripples of Anakin's torturous roar drifted away, until finally disappearing back within the flow of the Force.

Obi-Wan watched as, slowly, Master Yoda opened his eyes to gaze thoughtfully at the long table directly in front of him in the middle of the room. No words were exchanged for some time. The three of them pondered this surprising turn of events.

Obi-Wan took a seat at the table near Master Yoda, his head still spinning at this unimaginable turn of events.

"What could this mean?" Bail asked. "How is it possible? How could Anakin have survived?"

A deep frown was across Obi-Wan's face. He turned to regard Bail. "He kept himself alive with his Dark Will. He would not accept death. He couldn't handle defeat." Shaking his head slowly, he said, "Reborn of fire, lost to evil, consumed by despair; he is Anakin Skywalker no longer."

Save for the soft beep of nearby consoles, the room was silent for some time.

"Masters?" Bail Organa finally asked through the repose.

Obi-Wan turned his attention back to Bail, as did Yoda.

"Forgive me for saying this, but...shouldn't this be a good thing?" he asked. "I don't presume to understand the mysteries of the Force as a Jedi does, but doesn't his survival mean The Prophecy can still be fulfilled?"

Obi-Wan peered at Master Yoda for the response he knew was coming, but the aged Master didn't speak. He simply peered at Bail with his ears perked and his head slightly cocked to the side, a finger raised to his mouth in thought. Turning to Bail, Obi-Wan decided to respond for his Master.

"I'm afraid that's not possible any longer, Bail," Obi-Wan stated. "Anakin has been consumed by the dark side. The Prophecy can no longer be fulfilled."

Bail nodded, conceding to Obi-Wan's wisdom on such matters. "Of course," he said.

"So certain are you, Obi-Wan?" Yoda asked.

Baffled, Obi-Wan turned and found the diminutive Jedi Master gazing up at him, his light-brown eyes shinning with a secret.

"What...do you mean?" Obi-Wan asked, perplexed.

That knowing smile still on his face, Yoda said, "Many mysteries, the Force has. Much, there still is, we do not understand. Judge so quickly, the fate of The Prophecy, we—should—not," he said, poking a finger at Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan's searching gaze drifted back to the floor. He couldn't make sense of what Yoda was saying. *With Anakin being consumed by darkness, how could The Prophecy still be fulfilled? How?* he thought.

His mind drifted back to Padmé's last words, to her belief that there was still good in Anakin. Had Master Yoda come under the same delusion? *How could The Prophecy ever be fulfilled if Anakin could not fulfill it...?*

But then, an idea shot into his mind like a bolt in the night. "The children!" he exclaimed, peering at Yoda in surprise. "You think Anakin's children can fulfill The Prophecy?"

That twinkle still in his eyes, Yoda said, "Fulfill?" He seemed to consider the word for some time. Then, "That I know not. But a part in The Prophecy, I know they will play."

Obi-Wan accepted Master Yoda's insight. Gazing at the table, nodding his head, he considered the situation. "We must separate them, then," he said. "I will take the boy, you will take the girl, Master. We will raise them in the Ways of the Force from birth. In the right way—as Anakin should have been from—."

Yoda raised a hand, bringing Obi-Wan up short. "Jedi training, their sole understanding of life should not be. Love, compassion, family they should know. Teach them all of those things, a Jedi cannot. Raised by others, they must be—ones that love them as their own. Then, when right the time is, bring them to us the Living Force will. Only then, trained will they be," Yoda said with a nod of finality.

Obi-Wan didn't understand. This went against everything he knew as a Jedi. But he knew better than to question Master Yoda's knowledge of the Force. "Yes, Master," he said, nodding.

"Now—raise the children, who will?," Yoda asked, a playful tone to his voice, gazing at Bail out of the corner of his eye. "Care for the child, they must. Love them, they should."

"Anakin still has family on Tatooine," Obi-Wan said. "He told me about them once. Long ago. A step-brother and step-father. They could watch after the boy. They're the closest thing to family the child has."

Yoda gave a nod. "Then go to them, the boy will," he said.

Obi-Wan nodded in response, then said, "I will stay on the planet—nearby—and make certain no harm comes to the boy."

"A wise decision, Obi-Wan," Yoda said. "Protected, the boy must be. But keep your distance, you must, until come the time does, for the boy to be trained."

"Yes, Master," Obi-Wan replied.

Yoda turned his gaze back across the room at Bail. "Bail," Yoda said, snapping the Aleraan senator from his hopeful thoughts. "A thought, have you? Someone wishing for a child, perhaps you know?" Yoda asked, a smirk on his face.

Bail peered at him with hesitation, as if he feared to get his hopes up too high.

Obi-Wan came out of his thoughts to peer up at Bail. He had to smile at the man's attempts to restrain his eagerness as his eyes darted back and forth between he and Master Yoda.

"I do, Masters," Bail finally said, swallowing the lump in his throat. "My wife and I have long wanted a child, but have been unable to have one. If we could raise the girl we would love her and care for her as if she were our own daughter. She would be safe—I would make certain of that. No one would suspect anything. I will take all the appropriate precautions to ensure it. I'll—"

"Raise the child, you will," Yoda stated, halting his plea and putting his mind at ease.

Bail's face lit up with joy. A broad smile spread across his face. "Thank you, Masters! Thank you!" he beamed.

Obi-Wan had to smile, as did Master Yoda.

"Return to Naboo, Senator Amidala's body you must, Bail," Yoda said, a slight sadness in his voice. "Still

with child, she must appear, for our plan to work. And take the droids, you will. In a Royal House, use for them can be found.”

“Of course, Master. I...I don’t mean to be rude, but I must take my leave now. Forgive me, but I’m certain the queen will want to hear the good news,” Bail said, bursting at the seams with happiness.

“Of course,” Yoda said, nodding.

Bail gave the two of them one last look each, then rushed through the doors of the room.

Obi-Wan watched Yoda smile after him for some time. There was something different about his Master lately. He couldn’t place what it was, but he seemed more...hopeful than he had before about their situation. Obi-Wan would have given anything to feel the same. His troubled gaze fell back down to the table as he contemplated the dark road ahead. So many questions. So little answers for him.

And that wasn’t the only thing. His guilt over what he’d done to Anakin and Padmé’s death still wracked his brain. He knew he shouldn’t let it. He was a Jedi. He shouldn’t cling to such attachments. But, still, he couldn’t allow himself to let go. He wished he knew how, but he couldn’t.

“A question, have you, Master Obi-Wan?” Yoda’s gentle voice said into his thoughts.

Obi-Wan turned his eyes to the kind face of Master Yoda. He considered telling him what was on his mind, but thought better of it. “No Master,” he replied.

Yoda placed a finger to his lips and studied him with searching eyes for some time. “Concerned, you are, by emotions you feel. Mourn senator Amidala, you do. ...Loved your Apprentice, you did.”

Obi-Wan knew it was useless to deny. “Yes,” he admitted, nodding solemnly as he continued staring at the table.

“Wrong to do so, you were not,” Yoda said.

Surprised, Obi-Wan turned to look at Master Yoda. “*What?*” he asked.

Yoda closed his eyes and shook his head in sadness, saying, “Wrong, have I been all these years. Allow the Jedi to adapt, I did not.” He reopened his eyes and looked at Obi-Wan. “Teach them to feel—to love!—I should have. Deny their feelings they should not. Dangerous, love can be, if left unchecked. But find a more powerful ally, a Jedi cannot,” he said with a poke of his cane.

Obi-Wan was amazed by what he was saying. It was so different from all he had been taught. Now, it made sense why Yoda wanted the children to be raised by others. Now, the plan didn’t seem so strange.

“Learn this the hard way, have I,” Yoda continued, a tone of sadness in his voice. “And much more to learn, I still have.” Then, his voice brightened a bit as he said, “but time to learn, there is. And a most capable Master, have I. With his help, nothing is impossible.”

Obi-Wan gawked. “*New Master?*”

Peering at him with an eagerness to tell him all, Yoda nodded. “Teach me well, he has—as he once taught you.”

Obi-Wan was more confused now than he ever had been. *It didn’t make sense! The only other Jedi that had taught him besides Master Yoda as a Youngling was Qui-Gon Jinn. But he was dead. He had been for well over ten years now. It couldn’t be him that was teaching Master Yoda. That was impossible!*

...Wasn’t it?

Brow furrowed, Obi-Wan peered back up at Master Yoda. Contemplating the impossible, but no other solution fit.

Yoda peered back at him with wide eyes that urged him to make the connection, eyes that begged him to believe in the impossible, quick nods asking him to say the name swimming in his mind.

Obi-Wan complied. "Qui-Gon Jinn?" he asked, aghast, still not understanding how it could be possible.

A pleased smile spread across Yoda's face, but he said nothing in response. Then, he stirred and began lowering himself from his high-backed chair. He hobbled to the doors of the room and they parted before him.

Obi-Wan gazed after him, still perplexed. Then, he sprang to his feet and gave chase as Yoda entered the hall. "But, Master Yoda—I don't understand. Qui-Gon Jinn is dead! How can this be possible?"

Yoda stopped and turned to peer up at him, that smile still on his face. "Learn that, while wait for the boy, you will. One with the Force, Qui-Gon has become. Search for him there, you must. Use your feelings, Obi-Wan, and find him *you* will."

A twinkle in his eye, Yoda gave Obi-Wan one last smile before turning and continuing down the hall.

Obi-Wan watched him go, still trying to comprehend all that had happened in these past few hours.

Bail had emerged from a door behind him, and Obi-Wan heard him speaking with Captain Antilles.

"The droids will be returning with us as well. Have them cleaned and polished. They will tend to my new daughter," Bail said.

"Yes, senator," Antilles said, then began leading the pair of droids down the hall.

"Isn't this wonderful, Artoo!?" Threepio asked. "We are going to serve in the Royal Court of Alderaan!"

Artoo gave an excited tweet of his own.

"Mistress Padmé has told me the most pleasant things about The Court," Threepio continued as they followed Captain Antilles down the hall. "Well, I mean, she did—when she was still alive." His tone took on a sad tone. "The poor child. She will never have known her real parents."

Artoo gave a sad moan of agreement.

Threepio brightened as he said, "I will tell her stories of Mistress Padmé's and Master Anakin's adventures every night before she goes to sleep! I'm certain she will enjoy hearing such stories and—"

Artoo cut him off with a series of warning beeps and whistles.

"Well why not, Artoo? I see no harm in telling the child—"

"Oh, and Captain?" Bail called after them, almost as an afterthought.

The group stopped and turned to look back at the senator.

"Have the protocol droid's memory erased."

"Yes, senator," Captain Antilles said, then turned and continued.

Artoo followed.

Threepio stood in the middle of the hall, head snapping back and forth from Bail Organa to Captain Antilles' back.

Then, hanging his head, his shoulders slouching, he moaned, "Oh, dear," and followed after Captain Antilles and Artoo.

Chapter 39

The *Victory*-class Star Destroyer cut through space on sub-light engines like a giant knife. The ship resembled its close cousin, the *Venator*-class Star Destroyer, in many respects, but differed in many others. More than a fourth larger than the *Venator*, the *Victory* boasted superior firepower and shielding. Its hangar bay could hold nearly twice as many starfighters, and more than eight full landing parties of thousands of troops and full support vehicles. It was the largest military vessel constructed in nearly one-thousand years.

Yet its size and capabilities wasn't what set it apart so much from the *Venator*-class Star Destroyer. The *Victory* lacked the tailfin of the *Venator*, and the command tower was more boxy. But above all that, what set it apart the most was its dull-white hull plating.

The plating shimmered in the sunlight cast by the distant sun of the system, illuminating the ship like a beacon. The ship's color drew immediate attention to itself, and its armaments and size did the rest. A vessel designed more than anything else to display power and invoke fear in those that were unfortunate enough to encounter, it did its job well.

It was the perfect vessel for the new Galactic Empire.

Inside that ship, in a dull-gray plated hall somewhere in the command tower, walked the Empire's other newest weapon of fear and terror—Darth Vader, Dark Lord of the Sith. The towering, caped, breath-suit encased, helmed being walked down the hall with heavy, menacing steps. And if one did not hear his footfalls approaching, the rhythmic sound of his breathing suit was certain to catch the ear. It was eerie. Inhuman. Instantly recognizable.

He had only been with them for a few days, but already his reputation as one without mercy was well known. He had seen to that. Every being he passed could not help but peer upon him in fear; could not help but stop what they were doing and hope beyond hope they would not fall under the frightful, emotionless, black-eyed gaze of The Beast; hope they would not hear his booming voice calling out TO THEM!

He was a monster.

None knew from whence he had come, and none dared to muster the courage to ask. Death came swiftly to all that crossed Lord Vader. His appetite for malice seemed to know no bounds, had no end.

"Lord Vader!" a brave, brave soul called out from back down the hall.

The Dark Lord stopped and spun to see who had dared address him, who had dared to call out his name. Every being in the hall tried to look away from him—tried to pry away their eyes so as not to seem the culprit. But it was impossible. They could not. The fear was too great, too controlling. Black Death moved from face to staring face, as if choosing which one of them he would kill. Perhaps it wouldn't even be only one! It could be all of them!

"Lord Vader!" the voice called again.

This time the identity of the being was clearer. Or, rather; more apparent, as the voice was heavily muffled from being transmitted through the voice amplifier of a Stormtrooper's helmet.

Technicians and military personnel all up and down the hall internally scoffed. Only a clone would be so stupid as to call out to Lord Vader in such a way! But then, as the clone and his companions passed them by, it became clear that it was not the clones that would be dying this day. Nor would any of the other ship's crew members or military personnel. No. Only one being would be dying this day.

The being wore a pair of stuncuffs, and was so weak that he was practically being dragged by the clones by the chain attached to the cuffs. Tattered and bruised, bleeding and scorched from what appeared to be blaster strikes on his shoulders, legs and sides, the tan-tunic-wearing man stumbled as he tried to keep up with the pair of leading Stormtroopers, while another pair shoved him along from behind.

Darth Vader's helmet dipped forward as he stared daggers at the Jedi prisoner. His mechanical hands clenched—the leather gloves crackling under the pressure. His hunched shoulders heaved as he breathed in anticipation.

"Lord Vader," the Stormtrooper captain said when they finally reached him. He gave a tug of the chain and sent the Jedi prisoner lurching forward. It was too much for the weak, battered man, and he lost his balance, falling to his knees before Darth Vader. "This is a Jedi we caught trying to escape the Correllian sector."

Darth Vader didn't even look at the Stormtrooper as he spoke. His eyes were fixed solidly on the exhausted, panting Jedi kneeling before him.

The Jedi was so tired he gazed at nothing, saw no detail of what was around him. His eyes continually rolled around in their sockets as death threatened to take him with every passing second.

Stretching out his right hand, Darth Vader grasped the Jedi by the throat.

The Jedi's eyes ceased their rolling immediately and found focus as the Dark Lord's vice-like hand crushed his throat. His stunned eyes wondered up the black-clad arm to discover the identity of his attacker, and nearly popped from their sockets upon seeing the terrifying image of his masked face.

"Where are your traitorous friends, Jedi?" Vader's deep voice boomed, spitting out the word Jedi as if it was a curse.

The man's chained and cuffed hands went up to grab Vader's metal wrist in a desperate attempt to break his hold. But it did no good. In fact, it did more damage than anything, as Vader began tightening his grip more and more just to spite his efforts.

Vader watched with pleasure as the Jedi's arms ceased their attempts at grabbing him and slowly let go, then slid off to fall back down. He sneered in contempt within his mask as the Jedi made desperate, futile gasps for air. He watched as the Jedi's eyes began to lose their focus once more, then rolled into the back of his skull as his lids slid shut. Vader tightened his grip until he heard the sound of bones cracking and life left the Jedi's miserable body. He tossed the Jedi's limp form onto the cold, durasteel floor as if discarding some piece of trash. Then, with one final look down at the dead body, he spun with a swish! of his cape and continued back down the hall.

Obi-Wan powered down the engines of the small craft Bail had given him and peered out through the viewport. Moisture vaporators jutted out of the ground every ten meters or so for as far as the eye could see. There were a handful of droids working amongst the vaporators, but aside from that the landscape was barren—save for one single building. He inspected the small, domed building sticking out of sand of the same color in the predawn light. The domed building sat at the edge of a small crater, in which was the homestead.

The Lars Homestead.

Obi-Wan wasn't certain how he was going to explain everything, or if they would even accept the child. But he had no other choice. He had to do this and hope for the best.

He hit the button to open the hatch, then exited the cockpit. Baby Luke was still sleeping soundly wrapped in a tan blanket in his crib. Obi-Wan peered down on him with a smile. Then, he raised the hood of his brown robe and scooped the boy up into his arms.

Obi-Wan hunkered over Luke's small form as he walked across the hardened sand towards the domed building. The yellow, orange and pink rays of the twin suns were just beginning to break the horizon and illuminate the handful of scattered clouds in the sky behind him, but the breeze still had a slight chill to it. He didn't want the boy to catch cold. Just a handful of meters before he reached the domed building Obi-Wan heard the hiss of a door opening. A scruffy man in his late twenties came hurrying up the small flight of stairs set into the doorway of the dome with a long blaster rifle in hand.

Obi-Wan stopped dead in his tracks.

The man stopped at the top of the stairs and, making certain to keep a safe distance between himself and the stranger, pointed the blaster right at Obi-Wan's chest. "Who are you!? What do you want!?" the man demanded.

"Owen Lars?" Obi-Wan asked, trying to make himself appear as non-threatening as possible.

The man's eyes flashed at the mention of his name, then quickly narrowed to slits. "Who's asking?" His eyes shot to Obi-Wan's arms. "And what's that you're hiding there?" he demanded, indicating with a quick raise of his chin.

Obi-Wan peered down at Luke's calm, sweet, sleeping face framed by the blanket for a short time. Once more he couldn't hold back a small crack of a smile at looking at the beautiful baby boy. Peering up at Owen, he said, "My name is Obi-Wan. Obi-Wan Kenobi." Extending the swaddling child out towards Owen with careful, tender hands so that he might see, Obi-Wan said, "And this is your nephew, Luke Skywalker."

Owen's hard face softened perceptibly. His arms lowered the blaster rifle ever-so-slightly as he gazed at the baby boy. But then, all of a sudden, Owen gave a shake of his head and those hard eyes returned. Leveling the blaster rifle again, he said, "We don't know anyone named Skywalker!"

Obi-Wan blinked in surprise at his response, pulling Luke back in close to his breast. "You are the step-brother of Anakin Skywalker, aren't you?" he asked.

"I have no half-brother!" Owen bit out, hate in his voice and in his narrow eyes.

Obi-Wan couldn't understand why this man would hold such anger towards Anakin. From what he'd been told they had only met once, briefly. Holding baby Luke back out towards him, Obi-Wan said, "Please, I—"

"No! Now leave, before I decide to use this thing!" Owen said, shaking the barrel of the blaster rifle.

"Owen!" a woman's exasperated voice called out from the doorway of the dome. A second later a woman slightly younger than Owen with a kind, youthful face and sandy-blond hair came rushing up the stairs.

"Not now, Beru," Owen called over his shoulder, not taking his eyes from Obi-Wan.

"Stop this nonsense! Acting so will never bring your father back!" Beru said, then hurried past Owen and towards Obi-Wan.

She came right up to him, stopping just a meter away. Obi-Wan gazed directly into her blue eyes as they darted from his, then down to baby Luke. Her eyes flashed with longing and hope as she gazed at the baby.

"Anakin would have wanted you to raise him," Obi-Wan said, peering down at her, holding the boy out for her to take.

Her eyes shot up to his, asking if this was indeed happening. Then, with a smile as bright as the rays of dawn lighting her face, Beru took baby Luke from his arms. Peering down at him lovingly, stroking his face with a gentle, warm finger, she said, "We've so wanted a child, but been unable to have one."

Owen gave a heavy, defeated sigh from behind her. Propping the rifle against the domed building, his heart finally softened, Owen came forward to stand beside his wife and gaze down at the boy. He, too, could not help but smile, and he wrapped a loving arm around his wife's waist. She looked up at him with tears of joy running down her cheeks and gave a small laugh of excitement for all she dreamed was now to come. Owen pulled her in close and kissed her on the forehead.

Obi-Wan watched, pleased to see how loving they were, his mind put at ease that they would be loving, caring parents. But he had a question he needed answered. "Excuse me, but...your father. What happened?"

Owen looked up at him with hard eyes again, as if he hated having such a happy moment ruined with such talk. But they softened quickly, and he gave another weary sigh, peering down at the ground and shaking his head.

Finally looking up, he indicated to Beru with a nod and said, "It was the night of our wedding. Almost three years ago, now. We had a small ceremony in Mos Eisley. Beru and I stayed in town for the night, while my father came back to the homestead."

He paused, and it was clear that his grief was still fresh. Still heavy. "The small group of Sandpeople spared in the massacre tracked the person responsible back to our house. They were waiting for my father when he got back." A lump formed in his throat. Tears welled in his eyes as he peered up at Obi-Wan. "My father didn't stand a chance. They killed him, then tore his body apart and left the pieces all over the desert."

Obi-Wan was stunned. He gazed at Owen with sadness. "And Anakin...?"

"Was responsible for it all!" Owen said. "If he hadn't slaughtered that Tuscan camp in revenge for them killing his mother none of this would have happened!"

Brow furrowed in thought and sadness, Obi-Wan peered off across the field of moisture vaporators. So *this is where it began...*, he thought, pondering Anakin's fall. He had contemplated how much of Anakin's story he should tell them the whole trip here. He had decided as little as possible would probably be best. There was no reason to burden them with it all if he didn't need to. But, now, he knew he had no other choice. They deserved to know it all—if for no other reason than to make certain they remained cautious and understood the dangers surrounding raising the boy.

"There are things I must tell you..." Obi-Wan said, preparing his wounded heart for reliving it all again.

Owen and Beru listened, shocked. By the time Obi-Wan finished several minutes later the first of the twin suns had broken the horizon fully, and the second was not far behind. Both Beru and Owen peered down at Luke with a newfound sadness, a newfound pity for the baby boy. Obi-Wan had told them all—save for Leia. She needed to be kept safe, hidden, if Luke were ever found.

"I will remain nearby to help look after the boy's safety," Obi-Wan said.

Beru nodded, but Owen did not. Instead, Owen peered at Obi-Wan with leery, uncertain eyes.

"There will come a day, when Luke is grown, when he will seek me out by name," Obi-Wan said. "When that day comes, you must bring him to me so that he can be trained in the Ways of the Force."

Again Beru nodded, but Owen did not. Placing his arm around his wife's shoulder, Owen stared at Obi-Wan and simply stated, "We'll see."

Not knowing what to say, Obi-Wan merely gazed back at Owen, then glanced at Beru. He knew nothing could be done to stop Luke from seeking him out if it were, indeed, the Will of the Force, so he let the issue drop. If problems arose later on, he would deal with them then.

Reaching forward and placing a kind, gentle hand on baby Luke's brow, Obi-Wan leaned in and softly whispered words for he and Luke only in the child's ear. Luke stirred in response, letting Obi-Wan know he'd heard.

Obi-Wan righted himself and peered at Owen and Beru in turn with a kind smile. "Thank you," he said with a nod. With one last look and a smile at Luke, Obi-Wan turned and began walking away towards the rising suns.

"What about your ship?" Owen stepped forward and called after him when he saw he was not heading back to it.

"It is yours to do with as you wish!" Obi-Wan called back. Then, raising a hand, "Farewell! 'Til we meet again, May the Force be with you!"

Obi-Wan lowered his arm and turned once more.

The streets of Theed City on Naboo were filled with thousands upon thousands of silent mourners; watching as Padmé Amidala's open casket was led through the streets by six cloaked and hooded Handmaidens. Pink-white petals of the Everlife flower rained down from every balcony the casket passed, were gently tossed into the road from the hands of every being standing along the curb. The petals fell all around Padmé's still, peaceful face and body, framing her with life and beauty.

Beings of all races made up the sad faces in the crowd. People from all across the galaxy had come to pay their last respects to the honorable, brave, kind senator. Tears were not uncommon. Most openly wept at the death of such a protector of peace and democracy—especially now that democracy was a thing of the past with the Empire in power.

The casket finally made its way through the streets to a long arm of an outcropping with a small, circular plaza at its end. Guests of honor stood with bowed heads along the arm of the outcropping, while family and beings closest in relation to the senator and former queen stood spread around the circular plaza.

Queen Apailana, dressed in her ornate, queen's outfit, stood next to Padmé's family with equal sadness on her painted face. Beside her stood a solemn Boss Nass of the Gungans, and beside him a quietly weeping Jar Jar Binks. From there the rest of the crowd made up other senators and beings that had served with Padmé throughout the years.

Quiet whispers of how tragic a loss it was—especially with an unborn child being involved—had been traded throughout the crowd as they'd waited for the arrival of the casket. Questions of how her death had happened and whom the father of the child was were quietly exchanged as well. But now that it was here all fell silent in pensive sadness and peered upon Padmé's beautiful, young face one last time.

Ruwee and Sola Naberrie—Padmé's parents—stood at the center of the group with Padmé's sister, Jobal, and her sister's two children. Sola and Jobal wept openly, hugging each other as the casket came into view down the outcropping. Ruwee tried to remain strong, tried to keep his composure, but it just wasn't possible. Tears were streaming down his frowning face as well.

Holding one another, weeping, Padmé's family stepped forward and gazed upon their daughter, their sister, the aunt one last time within that casket. Sola kissed her daughter's forehead softly, lovingly, in goodbye—her tears wetting Padmé's peaceful brow. Jobal came forward and gently pulled her mother away from the casket. They held each other tight as their sobs became uncontrollable.

Ruwee came forward and brushed his daughter's cheek gently with the back of his hand. The lower lip of his deep, deep frown trembled as he tried to hold the torrent of tears back. But they escaped anyway,

rolling down his face in streams.

Then, stepping back, Ruwee gave his daughter one last, long look before finally prying his eyes away. Staring out across the lush, green valley beyond, tears filling his eyes, long frown on his flush face, Ruwee gave a quick nod to no one in particular. One of the handmaidens took a step forward at the silent sign and pushed a button on the side of the hovering casket.

Breathing deeply, lip trembling, tears gently falling down the sides of his noble face, Ruwee Naberrie did all he could to keep from looking back down at his daughter just one last time as the lid to the casket slid in place. He could not look. He couldn't. He needed to let go, needed to live on despite the loss. His body shook at the effort. It was the hardest thing he'd ever done in his life, but Ruwee Naberrie did not look back down at his daughter's loving face again as the casket slid closed over her.

He needed to let go.

Eventually, Ruwee did let go—decades later when he, too, passed on into the great unknown, when he crossed that brilliant threshold and was reunited with his loving daughter.

Bail Organa stood with his arm wrapped around the waist of his beautiful, elegant wife on the balcony of tallest spire of their vast palace on Alderaan. A pair of droids—one tall and golden, one short and stout—stood together behind and to the side of them. The view beyond and below was spectacular; filled with rounded, shimmering, white buildings, lush, green fields and deep, blue water. It was breathtaking.

But the view was nothing to Bail and his wife compared to the angel of beauty Bail's wife held in her arms. They gazed down upon Leia with love in their eyes, caring in their smiles, and, above all else, hope in their thoughts for a brighter, better future for their child, and the galaxy.

On the swamp planet of Dagobah, Master Yoda leaned on his cane and peered at the new world around him. Closing his eyes, raising his face to the sky, he breathed in the sweet sensation of the potency of the Living Force all around him. He knew that this place would serve him well in his studies—and in his watching over of the children.

He reached out to search for Qui-Gon's presence in the Force, but no search was needed. He found his presence immediately. It was all around him. In the water, the trees, the rocks, the dirt, the animals, the insects—everywhere!

He smiled and opened his eyes.

Turning and peering at the round, open hatch of the escape pod that had brought him here, Yoda contemplated what he would do for a home. He decided he would use the pod in one way or another as part of his hut. Then, taking a deep breath and another glance at his surroundings, Yoda hobbled forward on his cane and set to work on building his hut.

Darth Vader strode through the doors of the bridge of the Star Destroyer. Everyone within the crew pit stopped what they were doing and peered up at him as he walked by, frozen with fear. Lord Vader ignored them as he walked past, staring ahead at the black clad being standing before a wide viewport next to a man dressed in a gray uniform.

The man in gray turned to peer at Vader upon his approach, and gave a curt, wordless nod of acknowledgement. Vader returned the nod to Commander Tarkin, then stepped forward to stand next to his Master.

Darth Sidious turned and gazed up at him; an evil, greedy smile on his shriveled, pale face, his yellow eyes glowing with lust for what lay beyond the viewport. Then, Darth Sidious, Emperor of the galaxy, turned his attention away from his greatest prize, to his most coveted.

Darth Vader turned to peer out of the viewport as well, crossing his arms across his chest as he looked upon the vast construction site.

Several other *Victory*-class Stay Destroyers floated nearby, but that was not what he looked upon with such wanting. Instead, it was the enormous durasteel skeleton of a space station the size of a small moon. The two poles, the central core, and the giant laser housing were in place, but the station still had decades to go before being fully completed. Giant ribs circled the outer shell of the skeleton, and thousands of tiny construction droids floated all around it.

Vader gazed upon the spectacle in awe, knowing that with such a weapon at their disposal no one would dare oppose their rule.

No one.

Obi-Wan stopped at the crest of the small hill and turned to gaze behind him once more. He could just make out Owen and Beru standing together, tiny Luke in Beru's arms, beside the small, domed building leading down into the homestead.

A small smile broke across Obi-Wan's face. *The Force will be with you, Luke, watching over you. Always...*, he thought. Then, with one final glance, Obi-Wan Kenobi turned and continued walking.

The second of the twin suns had just cleared the horizon ahead, filling the sky with warm, soothing light and the promise of another day.

There is always hope, Obi-Wan thought.

Hope....

THE END