

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Star Wars: The Approaching Storm

Alan Dean Foster

Contents

About the Book

Also by Alan Dean Foster

Title Page

Dedication

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Copyright

About the Book

WHILE THE ENTIRE GALAXY WATCHES AND WAITS,
TWO JEDI AND THEIR APPRENTICES BATTLE
IMPOSSIBLE ODDS TO PROTECT THE REPUBLIC ...

The Republic is decaying, even under the leadership of Supreme Chancellor Palpatine, who was elected to save the galaxy from collapsing under the forces of discontent. On the tiny but strategic planet of Ansion, a powerful faction is on the verge of joining the growing secessionist movement. If their demands are not met, they will secede – an act that could jump-start a chain reaction of withdrawal and rebellion by other worlds of the Republic.

At the Chancellor's request, the Jedi Council sends two Jedi Knights, Obi-Wan Kenobi and Luminara Unduli, to resolve the conflict. Obi-Wan and Luminara, along with their Padawans Anakin Skywalker and Barriss Offee, set out across the wilderness. Many perils lie waiting to trap them and the Jedi will have to fulfil near-impossible tasks before they can complete their mission ...

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Published by Ballantine Books

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THE APPROACHING STORM

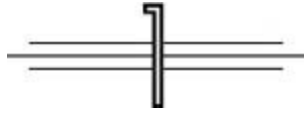
ALAN DEAN FOSTER



arrow books

For Shelby Hettinger,
So that everyone will know you're not kidding,
From Uncle Alan

A LONG TIME AGO IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY. ...



“IT SEEMS TO me that mine is becoming a very important planet, Honorable Shu Mai.”

The president of the Commerce Guild smiled thinly. “Small keys can unlock very big doors, Senator Mousul.”

As they conversed, the dignified quartet strode slowly through the galaxy. Not the actual galaxy, of course, but an immense, intricately delineated, fully three-dimensional representation. It filled the entire private chamber. Stars glowed all around them, enveloping the strollers in a haze of soft, multihued refulgence. By reaching out and touching a planetary system, a visitor could summon forth a detailed, encyclopedic description of that system and its individual worlds: everything from species and population to minute characteristics of flora and fauna, economic statistics, and future prospects.

One of the strollers was a blue-skinned Twi’lek female who was quiet and contemplative of aspect. Her companion was a very important and readily recognizable Corellian industrialist. The president of the Commerce Guild was short and slender, greenish of skin, with the typical coiffure for females of the Gossam species: a rising, upswept tailing. The fourth member of the group, trailing elaborate robes woven from the most exotic materials to be found on his homeworld, was the Senator from the world called Ansion. Despite his high standing, he looked nervous, like someone afraid of being watched. As for the Twi’lek and

the Corellian, they were clearly master and supplicant—though the second was a very powerful supplicant indeed.

The president of the Commerce Guild halted. With a single, expansive gesture she encompassed shimmering pinpoints of light representing a thousand worlds and more. Amazing, she thought, how trillions of sentient beings and entire civilizations could be reduced to mere specks hovering in a single room. If only the reality were as easy to organize and manage as was this efficient, luminous depiction.

Given time and the assistance of carefully nurtured alliances, she reflected confidently, it would be.

“Your forgiveness, noble lady,” the Corellian murmured, “but my associates and I also do not configure the importance of this world called Ansion.”

Shu Mai clapped her hands softly. “Excellent!”

Among her three companions, confusion readily crossed species lines. “You find it satisfying that we do not see this place’s significance?” the female Twi’lek asked.

“Absolutely.” A tolerant grin creased the Gossam’s face. “If you do not see it, then neither will our enemies. Pay attention, and I will do more than make it evident—I will make it visible.”

Turning, she reached into the pulsing panoply of worlds and suns to pass the tips of the fingers of her right hand through a small but centrally located star. With words and gestures, she proceeded to manipulate the system she had singled out.

In response to her actions, a trio of laser-bright blue lines appeared, linking the first system to three others. “The Malarian Alliance. On the face of it, one of hundreds of such casual alliances.” Her slim, deft fingers moved again. Yellow lines appeared, tying the first star to six additional systems. “Keitumite Mutual Military Treaty. Never invoked, but still in force.” Her smile widened. She was enjoying herself. “Now, observe this.” Her hands

proceeded to play with the surrounding galographics like a musician strumming an expensive quintolium.

When at last Shu Mai finished, her three companions eyed her triumphant handiwork in silence. The four visitors were enclosed by a web of lines, straight and uncompromising: blue, yellow, gold, crimson—all the colors of the spectrum. Perhaps even, some dared to think, the colors of an empire.

And at the nexus of this web of intensely bright, unwavering lines that represented outstanding treaties and alliances, pacts and planetary partnerships, lay a single, suddenly far less insignificant world.

Ansion.

With a wave of one hand and a dismissive word from Shu Mai's lips, the elaborate network faded. It would not do to have someone not privy to the machinations of the group walk in unannounced and see what was being discussed. Awkward questions might ensue.

"Who would have suspected that a world such as this could lie at the center of so many interlocking treaties?" The blue-skinned female was suitably impressed.

"Precisely the point." Shu Mai inclined her head slightly in the female's direction. "There are other worlds that occupy comparable positions of strategic importance; worlds more heavily populated, thoroughly industrialized, and frequently mentioned as important players when the current unsettled state of affairs within the Republic is being discussed. In contrast, no one thinks to bring up Ansion. That is the beauty of it." Steepling her fingers, she glanced significantly at Senator Mousul.

"If we can get the Ansionians to commit to pulling out of the Republic, no one will really care. But because of their alliances, their withdrawal should be enough to sway their already vacillating partners in both the Malarian Alliance and the Keitumite Treaty to follow. You saw how many other systems are tied, in turn, to both of those pacts. The

effect will be as of an avalanche; starting small, growing fast, and accelerating of its own accord. By the time the Senate knows what has hit it, forty systems or more will have withdrawn from the Republic, and we will be well on our way to solidifying the kind of changes we wish to see come about."

Mousul's fingers clenched tighter and tighter until whiteness showed beneath the skin. "That will be the spark that we need to propose the passage of extraordinary measures to cope with the emergency."

The Corellian industrialist was all but dancing with excitement. "It's wonderfully cunning, this plan you've devised! I know that the interests I represent will agree to send a force to Ansion immediately, to compel the inhabitants to withdraw from the Republic." For an instant, Senator Mousul looked alarmed.

"Which is exactly what we do not want them to do," Shu Mai countered sternly. "As I seem to recall, the Trade Federation already tried something similar elsewhere. The results were, shall we say, somewhat less than triumphant."

"Yes, well." The Corellian coughed uncomfortably into one hand. "There were unforeseen complications."

"That continue to resonate to this day." Shu Mai was unrelenting in her tone. "Don't you see? The beauty of this plan is the seeming insignificance of its linchpin. Send a fleet, or even a few ships, to Ansion, and you will immediately attract the attention of those forces that continue to frustrate us. Obviously, that is the last thing we wish. We want the Ansionian withdrawal to appear wholly natural, the result of internal decisions reached in the absence of external influences." She smiled benignly at Mousul.

"Will it be?" the Twi'lek asked pointedly.

Shu Mai eyed her approvingly. She would be useful, she knew. As would the others she had involved—if they could keep their wits about them.

It was Senator Mousul's turn to respond. "Like so many peoples, the Ansionians are divided as to whether they should remain within the Republic or step outside the corruption and sleaze that permeate it. Rest assured that there are among its citizens those who are sympathetic to our cause. I have taken care and expended considerable political capital to ensure that these elements are appropriately encouraged."

"How long?" the deceptively soft-voiced Twi'lek wanted to know.

"Before Ansion decides?" The Senator looked thoughtful. "Assuming the internal divisions continue to widen, I would expect a formal vote on whether to withdraw from the Republic within half a standard year."

The president of the Commerce Guild nodded approvingly. "At which point we can look on with satisfaction as those who have been traditionally allied to Ansion follow suit, and those allied to the allies fall in turn. Surely, as children all of you played with blocks? There is invariably one key block near the bottom that, if removed, will cause the entire structure to collapse.

"Ansion is that key. Remove that one block, and the rest of these systems will crumble." Her thoughts, as well as her gaze, seemed to focus on something outside the range of vision of her associates. "On the ruins of the old, decrepit Republic those of us with foresight will build a new political structure, perfect and gleaming. One without any weak links, free of the moralistic waste that encumbers and slows the appropriate development of a truly advanced society."

"And who will lead this new society?" The female Twi'lek's voice was tinged with just a touch of cynicism. "You?"

Shu Mai shrugged modestly. "My interests lie with the Commerce Guild. Who can say? That is something yet to be determined, is it not? The cause must succeed before

leaders can be chosen. While I admit I would not turn down such a nomination, I believe there are others who are more qualified. Let us begin with small things."

"Like this Ansion." Having recovered from the previous mild reproach, the Corellian's enthusiasm had returned full strength. "What a pleasure it would be, what a wonderment, to at last be able to conduct business unencumbered by mountains of superfluous rules, regulations, and restrictions! Those I represent would be forever grateful."

"Yes, you would at last have the chance to secure the restrictive monopolies you so devoutly seek," Shu Mai observed dryly. "Don't worry. In return for your political and financial support, you and those you represent will receive everything they deserve."

The industrialist was not intimidated. "And of course," he added shrewdly, "this new political arrangement will open all manner of opportunities to the Commerce Guild."

Shu Mai gestured modestly. "We are always eager to take advantage of shifting political realities."

In the midst of mutual congratulations and expectations, she noticed that Senator Mousul was saying little.

"Something burrows in your thoughts like a worm with indigestion, Mousul. What is it?"

The Ansionian glanced back at his associate, a look of mild concern on his face. His large, slightly bulbous eyes stared evenly back at the president of the Commerce Guild. "You're sure no one else could winnow out the true nature of these plans for Ansion, Shu Mai?"

"None has thus far," the other replied pointedly.

Mousul straightened to his full height. "I flatter myself that I am intelligent enough to realize there are those who are smarter than me. They are the ones who concern me."

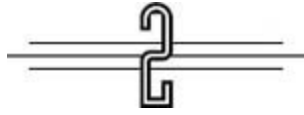
Stepping forward, Shu Mai put a reassuring hand on the Senator's shoulder. "You worry overmuch, Mousul." With her free hand and without regard for tact, Shu Mai

gestured, and the point of light that was Ansion reappeared. "Ansion! Look at it. Small, backward, unimportant. If queried, I wager not one politician or merchant in a hundred could tell you anything much about it. No one except those of us in this room are aware of its potential significance."

Stymied by and angry at the casual venality and suffocating bureaucracy that had come to rule the Republic—and to complicate his business dealings—the Corellian industrialist could purchase entire companies and whole territories with a mere touch of his imprinting finger. But for all his wealth, he could not buy a glimpse into the future. At that moment, he would have gladly signed over a few billion for the answers to one or two questions.

"I hope you are right, Shu Mai. I hope you are right."

"Of course she is." Having agreed to this meeting somewhat reluctantly, the Twi'lek was feeling far more confident of the future following their host's detailed explanation. "I am both impressed and moved by the full scope and subtlety of President Shu Mai and Senator Mousul's strategy. As they have so eloquently pointed out, this world is far too unimportant to attract anything in the way of significant outside attention. ..."



“HAJA, SWEET SCENT—WHAT’RE you hiding under that big ol’ robe?”

Luminara Unduli did not look up at the large, unshaven, rough-hewn, and unpleasantly fragrant man or his equally coarse and malodorous companions. She treated their knowing grins, the eager forward tilt of their bodies, and their leering eyes with equal indifference—though their collective body odor was somewhat harder to ignore. Patiently, she raised the spoonful of hot stew to her lips, the lower of which was stained a permanent purplish black. A series of interlocking black diamonds tattooed her chin, while more intricate markings decorated the joints of her fingers. The olive color of her skin contrasted strikingly with the deep blue of her eyes.

These rose to regard the younger woman who was seated on the other side of the table. Barriss Offee’s attention shifted between her teacher and the men crowding uncomfortably close around the two of them. Luminara smiled to herself. A good person, was Barriss. Observant and thoughtful, if occasionally impulsive. For now, the young woman held her peace, kept eating, and said nothing. A judicious reaction, the older woman knew. *She’s letting me take the lead, as she should.*

The man who had voiced the impropriety whispered something to one of his friends. There was a ripple of crude, unpleasant laughter. Leaning closer, he put a hand on Luminara’s cloth-draped shoulder. “I asked you a

question, darlin'. Now, are you gonna show us what's under this lovely soft robe of yours, or d'you want us to take a peek ourselves?" An air of pheromone-charged expectation had gripped his companions. Huddled over their food, a few of the establishment's other diners turned to look, but none moved to voice outrage at what was happening or to interfere.

Spoon pausing before her lips, Luminara seemed to devote greater contemplation to its contents than to the insistent query. With a sigh, she finally downed the spoonful of stew and reached down with her free right hand. "I suppose if you really want to see ..."

One of the men grinned broadly and nudged his hulking companion in the ribs. A couple of others crowded closer still, so that they were all but leaning over the table. Luminara pulled a portion of her outer robe aside, the intricate designs on the copper- and bronze-colored metal bands that covered her upper forearms glinting in the diffuse light of the tavern.

Beneath the robe was a metal and leather belt. Attached to the belt were several small and unexpectedly sophisticated examples of precision engineering. One of these was cylindrical, highly polished, and designed to fit comfortably in a closed hand. The aggressive spokesman for the group squinted at it, his expression slightly confused. Behind him, a couple of his heretofore hopeful cronies abandoned their leering expressions faster than a smuggler's ship making an emergency jump to hyperspace.

"Mathos preserve us! That's a Jedi lightsaber!"

Expressions falling like hard rain, the band of would-be aggressors began to back off, split up, and drift hurriedly away. Unexpectedly deserted, their erstwhile leader was unwilling to admit defeat so quickly. He stared at the gleaming metal cylinder.

"Not a chance, no. A 'Jedi' lightsaber, is it?" He glared belligerently at the suddenly enigmatic object of his

attentions. "I suppose that would make you a 'Jedi Knight,' sweet splash? A lovely, lithe Jedi at that!" He snorted derisively. "Sure and that's no Jedi lightsaber, is it? Is it?" he growled insistently when she failed to respond.

Finishing another spoonful of her meal, Luminara Unduli carefully set the utensil down on her nearly empty plate, delicately patted both her decorated and her untouched lip with the supplied linen napkin, wiped her hands, and turned to face him. Blue eyes peered upward out of her fine-featured face, and she smiled coldly.

"You know how to find out," she informed him softly.

The big man started to say something, hesitated, reconsidered. The attractive woman's hands rested, palm downward, on her thighs. The lightsaber—it certainly *looked* like a Jedi lightsaber, he found himself thinking apprehensively—remained attached to her belt. Across the table, the younger woman continued to eat her meal as though nothing out of the ordinary was taking place.

Abruptly, the gruff intruder became aware of several things simultaneously. First, he was now completely alone. His formerly enthusiastic companions had slipped away, one by one. Second, by this time the woman seated before him was supposed to be anxious and afraid. Instead, she only looked bored and resigned. Third, he suddenly remembered that he had important business elsewhere.

"Uh, sorry," he found himself mumbling. "Didn't mean to bother you. Case of mistaken identity. Was looking for someone else." Turning, he hurried away from the table and toward the tavern's entrance, nearly tripping over a scraps bowl on the floor next to an unoccupied serving counter. Several of the other patrons watched him go. Others eyed the two women fixedly before finding reason to return to their own food and conversation.

Exhaling softly, Luminara turned back to the remnants of her meal. Making a face, she pushed the bowl and what

remained of the meal away from her. The boorish intrusion had spoiled her appetite.

"You handled that well, Master Luminara." Barriss was finishing up her own food. The Padawan's perception might occasionally be lacking, but never her readiness to eat. "No noise, no fuss."

"As you grow older, you'll find that you occasionally have to deal with an excess of testosterone. Often on minor worlds like Ansion." She shook her head slowly. "I dislike such distractions."

Barriss smiled gaily. "Don't be so somber, Master. You can't do anything about physical attractiveness. Anyway, you've given them a story to tell, as well as a lesson."

Luminara shrugged. "If only those in charge of the local government, this so-called Unity of Community, were as easy to persuade to see reason."

"It will happen." Barriss rose swiftly. "I'm finished." Together, the two women paid for the meal and exited the establishment. Whispers, mutterings, and not a few awed words of admiration trailed in their wake.

"The populace has heard we're here to try to cement a permanent peace between the city folk of the Unity and the Alwari nomads. They're unaware of the far greater issues at stake. And we can't reveal the real reason for our presence here without alerting those who would oppose us to the fact that we know of their deeper intentions." Luminara drew her robe tighter around her. It was important to present as subdued yet impressive an appearance as possible. "Because we can't be completely honest, the locals don't trust us."

Barriss nodded. "The city people think we favor the nomads, and the nomads fear we're on the side of the city folk. I hate politics, Master Luminara." One hand fell to her side. "I prefer settling differences with a lightsaber. Much more straightforward." Her pretty face radiated a zest for

life. She had not yet lived long enough to become inured to the new.

"It's difficult to persuade opposing sides of the rightness of your reasoning when they're both dead." Turning up one of Cuipernam's side streets, chaotic with traders and city folk of many different galactic species, Luminara spoke while scanning not only the avenue but also the flanking walls of commercial and residential buildings. "Anyone can handle a weapon. Reason is much more difficult to wield. Remember that the next time you're tempted to settle an argument with a lightsaber."

"I bet it's all the fault of the Trade Federation." Barriss eyed a stall dripping with jewelry: necklaces and earrings, rings and diadems, bracelets and hand-sculpted flash corneas. Such conventional personal ornamentation was forbidden to a Jedi. As one of her teachers had once explained to Barriss and her fellow Padawans, "A Jedi's glow comes from within, not from the artificial augmentation of baubles and beads."

Still, that necklace of Searous hair and interwoven pikach stones was just *gorgeous*.

"What did you say, Barriss?"

"Nothing, Master. I was just expressing my dissatisfaction at the continuing scheming of the Trade Federation."

"Yes," Luminara agreed. "And the Commerce Guilds. They grow more powerful by the month, always sticking their money-hungry fingers in where they're not wanted, even if their immediate interests are not directly involved. Here on Ansion, they openly support the towns and cities that are loosely grouped together as the Unity of Community even though the law of the Republic guarantees the rights of nomadic groups like the Alwari to remain independent of such external influences. Their activities here only complicate an already difficult situation." They turned another corner. "As they do elsewhere."

Barriss nodded knowingly. "Everyone still remembers the Naboo incident. Why doesn't the Senate simply vote to reduce their trade concessions? *That* would settle them down a bit!"

Luminara had to fight to keep from smiling. Ah, the innocence of youth! Barriss was well meaning and a fine Padawan, but she was unsophisticated in the ways of governance.

"It's all very well to invoke ethics and morals, Barriss, but these days it's commerce that seems to rule the Republic. Sometimes the Commerce Guilds and the Trade Federation act like they're separate governments. They're very clever about it, though." Her expression twisted. "Fawning and bowing before emissaries of the Senate, issuing a steady stream of protestations of innocence: that Nute Gunray in particular is as slippery as a Notonian mudworm. Money equals power, and power buys votes. Yes, even in the Republic Senate. And they have powerful allies." Her thoughts turned inward. "It's not just money anymore. The Republic is a soiled sea roiled by dangerous currents. The Jedi Council fears that general dissatisfaction with the present state of governance is giving way to outright secession on many worlds."

Barriss stood a little taller as she strode along beside her Master. "At least everyone knows that the Jedi are above such matters, and aren't for sale."

"Not for sale, no." Luminara sank farther into preoccupation.

Barriss noted the change. "Something else troubles you, Master Luminara?"

The other woman mustered a smile. "Oh, sometimes one hears things. Odd stories, unaccredited rumors. These days such tales seem to run rampant. This political philosophy of a certain Count Dooku, for example."

Though always eager to display her knowledge, Barriss hesitated before responding. "I think I recognize the name,

but not in connection with that title. Wasn't he the Jedi who —"

Stopping sharply, Luminara threw out a hand to halt her companion. Her eyes flicked rapidly from side to side and she was suddenly no longer introspective. Her every nerve was alert, every sense on edge. Before Barriss could question the reason for the action, the Jedi had her lightsaber out, activated, and fully extended before her. Without moving her head, she raised it to a challenge position. Having drawn and activated her own weapon in response to her Master's reaction, Barriss searched anxiously for the source of unease. Seeing nothing out of the ordinary, she glanced questioningly at her teacher.

Which was when the Hoguss plunged from above—to spit itself neatly on Luminara's upraised lightsaber. There was a brief stink of burning flesh, the Jedi extracted the beam, and the startled Hoguss, its now useless killing ax locked in a powerful but lifeless grip, keeled over onto its side. The heavy body made a dull thump as it struck the ground.

"Back!" Luminara started to retreat, the now anxious and alerted Barriss guarding her Master's rear and flanks.

The attackers swarmed down from rooftops and out of second-story windows, came bursting through doorways and up out of otherwise empty crates; a veritable flash flood of seedy infamy. Someone, Luminara mused grimly as she retreated, had gone to considerable trouble and expense to arrange this ambush. In the midst of genuine concern for herself and her Padawan, she had to admire the plotter's thoroughness. Whoever it was clearly knew they were dealing with more than a couple of female tourists out for a morning's sight-seeing.

The question was, how much did they know?

There are only two ways for non-Jedi to defeat Jedi in battle: lull them into a false sense of security, or overwhelm them with sheer force of numbers. Subtlety obviously being

a notion foreign to their present assailants, a diverse rabble of bloodthirsty but untrained individuals, their employer had opted for the latter approach. In the crowded, active streets, the large number of attackers had gone undetected by Luminara, their inimical feelings submerged among those of the greater crowd.

Now that the attack had begun, the Force throbbed with an enmity that was out in the open as dozens of well-armed hired assassins fought to get close enough to their rapidly withdrawing targets to deliver a few final, fatal blows. While the narrowness of the street and the aimless fleeing of panicked bystanders eliminated a clear line of retreat and kept the two women from sprinting to safety, it also prevented those of their attackers who were wielding firearms from setting up a clear shot at their intended targets. Had they been tacticians, those in front swinging blades and other less advanced devices would have stepped aside to give their more heavily armed comrades room in which to take aim. But a reward had been promised to the ones who made the actual kill. While this served to inspire the truculent rabble, it also made them reluctant to cooperate with one another in achieving their ultimate objective, lest it be a colleague who claimed the substantial bonus.

So it was that Luminara and Barriss were able to deflect bursts from blasters as well as blows struck by less technical weaponry such as long swords and knives. With high walls shielding them on either side and merchants and vendors continuing to run for cover, they had room in which to work. Bodies began to pile up in front of them, some intact, others missing significant portions of their anatomy, these having been neatly excised by whirling shafts of intensely colored energy.

Barriss's exuberance and occasional shouted challenge were complemented by Luminara's steady, silently ferocious work. Together, the two women not only kept

their attackers at bay, but began to force them back. There is something in the hushed, frighteningly efficient aspect of a fighting Jedi that takes the heart out of an ordinary opponent. A would-be murderer has only to see a few blaster shots deflected by the anticipatory hum of a lightsaber to realize that there might be other less potentially lethal ways to make a living.

Then, just when the two women were on the verge of pushing the remaining attackers around a corner and back out into an open square where they could be more effectively scattered, a roar of anticipation rose above the fray as another two dozen assassins arrived. This mélange of humans and aliens was better dressed, better armed, and tended to fight more as a unit than those who had preceded them. A tiring Luminara realized suddenly that the previous hard fighting had never been intended to kill them, but only to wear them out. Steeling herself and shouting encouragement to a visibly downcast Barriss, she once more found herself retreating back down the narrow street they had nearly succeeded in escaping.

Drawing new courage from the arrival of fresh reinforcements, their surviving assailants redoubled their own attack. Jedi and Padawan were forced steadily backward.

Then there was no more backward. The side street dead-ended against a featureless courtyard wall. To anyone else it would have appeared unscalable. But a Jedi could find hand- and footholds where others would see only a smooth surface.

"Barriss!" Lightsaber whirling, Luminara indicated the reddish-colored barrier behind them. "Go up! I'll follow." Dropping to his knees, a man clad in tough leathers took careful aim with a blaster. Luminara blocked both his shots before taking one hand briefly off the lightsaber to gesture in his direction. Like a living thing, the dangerous weapon flew out of his hands, startling him so badly he fell

backward onto his butt. Protected by his fellow assassins, he did not panic like a common killer but instead scrambled to recover the blaster. They couldn't keep this up forever, she knew.

"Up, I said!" Luminara did not have to turn to sense the unyielding wall behind her.

Barriss hesitated. "Master, you can cover me if I climb, but I can't do the same for you from the top of the wall." Lunging, she disarmed a serpentine Wetakk who was trying to slip in under her guard. Letting out a yelp of pain, it stepped back and switched the hooked blade it was holding to another hand, of which it still had five remaining. Without missing a breath, the Padawan added, "You can't climb and use your weapon, too!"

"I'll be all right," Luminara assured her, even as she wondered how she was going to make the ascent without being cut down from behind. But her first concern was for her Padawan, and not for herself. "That's an order, Barriss! Get up there. We have to get out of this confined space."

Reluctantly, Barriss took a last sweeping swing to clear the ground in front of her. Then she shut down her lightsaber, slipped it back onto her belt, pivoted, took a few steps, and leapt. The jump carried her partway up the wall, to which she clung like a spider. Finding seemingly invisible fingerholds, she began to ascend. Below and behind her, Luminara single-handedly held back the entire surging throng of eager killers.

Nearly at the top, Barriss looked back and down. Luminara was not only holding off her own assailants, but had moved forward to ensure that none of those in the back would have time to take aim at the climbing Padawan. Barriss hesitated.

"Master Luminara, there are too many! I can't protect you from up here."

The Jedi turned to respond. As she did so, she failed to see or sense a small Throbe standing behind a much larger

human. The Throbe's blaster was small, its aim wild, but the undeflected shot still managed to graze the woman in the umber robes. Luminara staggered.

"Master!" Frantic, Barriss debated whether to ascend the remaining distance to the top of the wall or disobey her Master and drop back down to aid her. In the midst of her confusion, a subtle tremor ran through her mind. It was a disturbance in the Force, but one very different from anything they had experienced this dreadful morning. It was also surprisingly strong.

Yelling encouragement, the two men plunged past on either side of Luminara. Neither was physically imposing, though one had a build suggestive of considerable future development. Lightsabers flashing, they fell in among the bewildered band of assassins, their weapons dealing out havoc in bantha-sized doses.

To their credit, the attackers held their ground for another couple of moments. Then, their associates falling all around them, the survivors broke and fled. In less than a minute, the street was clear and the way back to the central square unobstructed. Letting go of the wall, Barriss dropped the considerable distance to the ground, to find herself facing an attractive young man who wore confidence like a handmade suit. Smiling cockily, he deactivated his lightsaber and regarded her appraisingly.

"I've been told that morning exercise is good for the soul as well as the body. Hello, Barriss Offee."

"Anakin Skywalker. Yes, I remember you from training." Automatically nodding her thanks, she hurried to her Master's side. The other newcomer was already examining Luminara's blaster wound.

"It's not serious."

Luminara pulled her garments closed rather more sharply than was necessary. "You're early, Obi-Wan," she told her colleague. "We weren't expecting you until the day after tomorrow."

“Our ship made good time.” As the four emerged onto the square, Obi-Wan’s gaze swept the open space. Presently, it was as void of inimical disturbance, as was the Force. He allowed himself to relax slightly. “Since we arrived early, we suspected there would be no one to meet us at the spaceport. So we decided to come looking for you. When you weren’t at your stated residence, we decided to take a stroll to acquaint ourselves with the city. That’s when I sensed the trouble. It drew us to you.”

“Well, I certainly can’t fault your timing.” She smiled gratefully. It was the same intriguing smile that Obi-Wan remembered from working with her previously, framed as it was by its differently toned lips. “The situation was becoming awkward.”

“Awkward!” Anakin declared. “Why, if Master Obi-Wan and I hadn’t—” The look of disapproval the Jedi shot him was enough to destroy the observation in midsentence.

“Something I’ve been curious about ever since we were given this assignment.” Barriss moved a little farther away from her counterpart and closer to the two senior Jedi. “Why are *four* of us needed here, to deal with what seems to me to be nothing more than a minor dispute among the native sentients?” Her impatience was palpable. “Earlier, you spoke of greater issues.”

“You remember our discussions,” Luminara explained patiently. “Well, the Alwari nomads think the Senate favors the city dwellers. The city folk are certain the galactic government will side with the nomads. Such perceptions of favoritism on the part of the Senate are dangerously close to persuading both groups that Ansion would be better off outside the Republic, where internal disputes could be settled without outside interference. Their representative in the Senate appears to be leaning in that direction. There is also evidence to support the contention that offworld elements are stirring the pot, hoping to induce Ansion to secede.”

"It's only one world, and not a particularly important one at that," Barriss ventured.

Luminara nodded slowly. "True. But it's not Ansion itself that is so critical. Through a multiplicity of pacts and alliances, it could pull other systems out of the Republic as well. More systems than I, or the Jedi Council, likes to think about. Therefore, a way must be found to keep Ansion within the Republic. The best way to do that is to remove the suspicions that exist between the city dwellers and the nomads, and thereby solidify planetary representation. As outsiders representing the will of the Senate, we will find respect on Ansion, but no friends. While we are here, suspicion will be our constant companion. Given the fluid complexity of the situation, the matter of shifting alliances, the possible presence of outside agitators, and the seriousness of the potential ramifications, it was felt that two pairs of negotiators would make a greater and more immediate impression on the situation than one."

"I see now." There was much more at stake here, Barriss found herself thinking, than a disagreement between city folk and nomads. Had Luminara been instructed to conceal the real reason for their journey from her Padawan until now, or had Barriss simply been too preoccupied with her own training to see the larger issues? Like it or not, it appeared that she was going to have to pay more attention to galactic politics.

For example, why would forces beyond Ansion want to see it secede from the Republic badly enough to interfere in the planet's internal affairs? What could such unknown entities possibly have to gain by its withdrawal? There were thousands upon thousands of civilized worlds in the Republic. The departure of one, or even several, would mean little in the overall scheme of galactic governance. Or would it?

She felt sure she was missing some vital point, and the fact that she knew she was doing so was exceedingly

frustrating. But she couldn't question Luminara further about it, because Obi-Wan was speaking.

"Someone or several someones beyond Ansion doesn't want these negotiations to succeed. They *want* Ansion to secede from the Republic, with all the problematic consequences that would ensue." Obi-Wan squinted at the sky, which had begun to threaten rain. "It would be useful to know who. We should have detained one of your attackers."

"They could have been common bandits," Anakin pointed out.

Luminara considered. "It's possible. Anyway, if Obi-Wan is right and that rabble was hired to prevent us from continuing with our mission, their employer would have kept those who attacked us in the dark as to his or her identity and purpose. Even if we had been successful in capturing one of them, an interrogation might well have been useless."

"Yes, that's so," the Padawan had to admit.

"So you were on Naboo, too?" Feeling left out of the conversation between the two older Jedi, Barriss turned curiously to her counterpart.

"I was." The pride in the younger man's voice was unapologetic. *He's a strange one*, she mused. Strange, but not unlikable. As stuffed full of internal conflicts as a momus bush was with seeds. But there was no denying that the Force was strong within him.

"How long have you been Master Luminara's Padawan?" he asked.

"Long enough to know that those who have their mouths open all the time generally have their ears shut."

"Oh great," Anakin muttered. "You're not going to spend all our time together speaking in aphorisms, are you?"

"At least I can talk about something besides myself," she shot back. "Somehow I don't think you scored well in modesty."

To her surprise, he was immediately contrite. "Was I just talking about myself? I'm sorry." He indicated the two figures preceding them up the busy street. "Master Obi-Wan says that I suffer from a surfeit of impatience. I want to know, to do, *everything* right now. Yesterday. And I'm not very good at disguising the fact that I'd rather be elsewhere. This isn't a very exciting assignment."

She gestured back in the direction of the side street they had left piled high with bodies. "You're here less than a day and already you've been forced into life-or-death hand-to-hand combat. Your definition of *excitement* must be particularly eclectic."

He almost laughed. "And you have a really dry sense of humor. I'm sure we'll get along fine."

Reaching the commercial district on the other side of the square and plunging back into the surging crowds of humans and aliens, Barriss wasn't so certain. He was very sure of himself, this tall, blue-eyed Padawan. Maybe it was true what he said about wanting to know everything. His attitude was that he already did. Or was she mistaking confidence for arrogance?

Abruptly, he broke away from her. She watched as he stopped before a stall selling dried fruits and vegetables from the Kander region to the north of Cuipernam. When he returned without buying anything, she eyed him uncertainly.

"What was that all about? Did you see something that looked tasty but on closer inspection turned out not to be?"

"What?" He seemed suddenly preoccupied. "No. No, it wasn't the food at all." He glanced back at the simple food stand as they hurried to catch up with their teachers. "Didn't you see? That boy over there, the one in the vest and long pants, was arguing with his mother. Yelling at her." He shook his head dolefully. "Someday when he's older he'll regret having done that. I didn't tell him so directly, but I think I got the point across." He sank into