

STAR WARS™

CLONE WARS GAMBIT

SIEGE

KAREN MILLER

Author of *Star Wars: Clone Wars Gambit: Stealth*

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About the Book

The second installment of a two-book Obi-Wan Kenobi and Anakin Skywalker adventure, set against the backdrop of the Clone Wars! Obi-Wan Kenobi and Anakin Skywalker are trapped on the Separatist controlled planet Lanteeb, on the run from General Lok Durd and his droid army. After being forced to abandon their jerry-rigged groundcar they continue on foot, hunted, as they try to find a safe place to hide and regroup before escaping the planet altogether. Eventually they seek shelter in a remote Lanteeban village, but the Separatists track them down. Now they're under siege ... and the little time they've bought themselves is running out.

About the Author

Karen Miller is a speculative fiction novelist who lives in Sydney, Australia, and writes full-time. When she's not having too much fun adventuring in that galaxy far, far away, she's writing fantasy novels under her own name and her pen name, K. E. Mills.

ALSO BY KAREN MILLER

STAR WARS®: Clone Wars Gambit: Stealth
STAR WARS®: The Clone Wars™: Wild Space

The Innocent Mage
The Awakened Mage
The Prodigal Mage

Empress
The Riven Kingdom
Hammer of God

Stargate SG1: Alliances
Stargate SG1: Do No Harm

The Accidental Sorcerer
Witches Incorporated

STAR WARS™

CLONE WARS GAMBIT SIEGE



KAREN MILLER



arrow books

*Stories make the world go round.
This is for everyone who ever loved a story.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



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The fans, who keep the flame burning bright.

Richard Errington, who won the *Star Wars* Charity auction to raise money for the victims of the Victorian Black Saturday bushfires in 2009. Thanks, mate. You really made a difference.

THE STAR WARS NOVELS TIMELINE

OLD REPUBLIC 5000–33 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Lost Tribe of the Sith^a
Precipice
Skyborn
Paragon
Savior

3650 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Old Republic
Fatal Alliance

1020 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Darth Bane: Path of Destruction
Darth Bane: Rule of Two
Darth Bane: Dynasty of Evil

RISE OF THE EMPIRE 33–0 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Darth Maul: Saboteur^a
Cloak of Deception
Darth Maul: Shadow Hunter

32 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

STAR WARS: EPISODE I
THE PHANTOM MENACE

Rogue Planet
Outbound Flight
The Approaching Storm

22 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

STAR WARS: EPISODE II
ATTACK OF THE CLONES

22–19 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Clone Wars
The Clone Wars: Wild Space
The Clone Wars: No Prisoners
Clone Wars Gambit
Stealth
Siege
Republic Commando
Hard Contact
Triple Zero
True Colors
Order 66
Shatterpoint
The Cestus Deception
The Hive^a
MedStar I: Battle Surgeons
MedStar II: Jedi Healer
Jedi Trial

Yoda: Dark Rendezvous
Labyrinth of Evil

19 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

**STAR WARS: EPISODE III
REVENGE OF THE SITH**

Dark Lord: The Rise of Darth
Vader

Coruscant Nights

Jedi Twilight
Street of Shadows
Patterns of Force

Imperial Commando
501st

The Han Solo Trilogy

The Paradise Snare
The Hutt Gambit
Rebel Dawn

The Adventures of Lando Calrissian
The Han Solo Adventures
The Force Unleashed
Death Troopers



**REBELLION
0-5 YEARS AFTER
STAR WARS: A New Hope**

Death Star

0

**STAR WARS: EPISODE IV
A NEW HOPE**

Tales from the Mos Eisley Cantina
Allegiance
Galaxies: The Ruins of Dantooine
Splinter of the Mind's Eye

3 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

**STAR WARS: EPISODE V
THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK**

Tales of the Bounty Hunters
Shadows of the Empire

4 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

**STAR WARS: EPISODE VI
RETURN OF THE JEDI**

Tales from Jabba's Palace
Tales from the Empire
Tales from the New Republic

The Bounty Hunter Wars

The Mandalorian Armor
Slave Ship
Hard Merchandise

The Truce at Bakura
Luke Skywalker and the Shadows of
Mindor



NEW REPUBLIC
5–25 YEARS AFTER
STAR WARS: A New Hope

X-Wing

Rogue Squadron
Wedge's Gamble
The Krytos Trap
The Bacta War
Wraith Squadron
Iron Fist
Solo Command

The Courtship of Princess Leia
A Forest Apart*
Tatooine Ghost

The Thrawn Trilogy

Heir to the Empire
Dark Force Rising
The Last Command

X-Wing: Isard's Revenge

The Jedi Academy Trilogy

Jedi Search
Dark Apprentice
Champions of the Force

I, Jedi

Children of the Jedi

Darksaber

Planet of Twilight

X-Wing: Starfighters of Adumar

The Crystal Star

The Black Fleet Crisis Trilogy

Before the Storm
Shield of Lies
Tyrant's Test

The New Rebellion

The Corellian Trilogy

Ambush at Corellia
Assault at Selonia
Showdown at Centerpoint

The Hand of Thrawn Duology

Specter of the Past
Vision of the Future

Fool's Bargain*

Survivor's Quest



NEW JEDI ORDER
25–40 YEARS AFTER
STAR WARS: A New Hope

Boba Fett: A Practical Man*

The New Jedi Order

Vector Prime
Dark Tide I: Onslaught
Dark Tide II: Ruin
Agents of Chaos I: Hero's Trial

Agents of Chaos II: Jedi Eclipse
Balance Point
Recovery*
Edge of Victory I: Conquest
Edge of Victory II: Rebirth
Star by Star
Dark Journey
Enemy Lines I: Rebel Dream
Enemy Lines II: Rebel Stand
Traitor
Destiny's Way
Ylesia*
Force Heretic I: Remnant
Force Heretic II: Refugee
Force Heretic III: Reunion
The Final Prophecy
The Unifying Force

35 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Dark Nest Trilogy

The Joiner King
The Unseen Queen
The Swarm War



LEGACY
40+ YEARS AFTER
STAR WARS: A New Hope

Legacy of the Force

Betrayal
Bloodlines
Tempest
Exile
Sacrifice
Inferno
Fury
Revelation
Invincible
Crosscurrent
Millennium Falcon

43 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Fate of the Jedi

Outcast
Omen
Abyss
Backlash
Allies
Vortex**
Conviction**

*An eBook novella

**Forthcoming

DRAMATIS PERSONAE



Ahsoka Tano; Jedi Padawan (Togruta female)
Anakin Skywalker; Jedi Knight (human male)
Bail Organa; Senator from Alderaan (human male)
Bant'ena Fhernan; scientist first level (human female)
Greti; child (Lanteeban female)
Jaklin; teacher (Lanteeban female)
Lok Durd; Separatist general (Neimoidian male)
Obi-Wan Kenobi; Jedi Knight (human male)
Padmé Amidala; Senator from Naboo (human female)
Palpatine; Supreme Chancellor of the Republic (human male)
Rikkard; head miner (Lanteeban male)
Taria Damsin; Jedi Master (human female)
Tryn Netzl; biochemist (human male)
Yoda; Grand Master of the Jedi Order (nonhuman male)

ONE



ANAKIN COULDN'T BELIEVE IT.

More than three standard hours—really, closer to four—since their desperate escape from Lok Durd's droid army and they were still flying instead of falling. What a shame Obi-Wan wasn't awake—he was in the mood for a little not-undeserved boasting. But despite putting up a strong fight Obi-Wan had succumbed to sleep nearly two hours earlier. In the groundcar's dim console light his mentor looked washed out. Burned out, or close enough. Their last-stand battle in the Sep compound had taken him to the edge of endurance and then pushed him right over.

Good thing I'm the Chosen One or we might be in trouble.

Well. More trouble. Another glance at their stolen vehicle's power-cell readout sent his spirits into a swift downward spiral. If they were lucky—ha—they had roughly one more hour of propulsion remaining. And after that ...

The Lanteeb night continued thick and dark around them. To conserve their precious power—and remain hidden from prying eyes—he hadn't turned on the rigged groundcar's headlights, trusting instead to his instincts and the Force. And so far so good. Neither had steered him wrong. It was Obi-Wan's decision to get them as far away

from the city as possible before ditching their makeshift speeder, and since he didn't disagree with that strategy it was exactly what they'd done. With the city falling farther and farther behind them, together they'd stretched their overstretched senses, trying to determine the best direction to take. To find safety, or what might pass for it, on what had without warning become the most hostile of worlds.

Bant'ena.

The kidnapped scientist's betrayal was just one more pain, burning in chorus with the others. At least, that was what he tried to tell himself. But really, it was a lie. That particular pain burned brighter than all the others combined.

Bant'ena, how could you do it? I trusted you. I tried to save you.

Slumped beside him in the passenger seat, Obi-Wan stirred. "Don't," he said, his voice slurry. "What's done is done, Anakin. Let it go. Now—how are your engine modifications holding up?"

"We're still flying."

"True," Obi-Wan conceded. "And for that I sincerely thank you. But it seems to me there's a rough note sounding in the primary coolant valve."

Stang. Trust Obi-Wan to notice. "It's fine. It'll hold."

"If you say so." With a stifled curse, Obi-Wan sat up. "Anyway. Where are we?"

Anakin sighed. "You're kidding, right?"

"No, not really," Obi-Wan said, then smothered a yawn. "How long have I been sleeping?"

"Oh, you know," he said vaguely. "Not that long."

"*Anakin.*" Obi-Wan glared. "I am *not* a decrepit relic."

Oooh. Sticky ground. "I didn't say you were. But Rex says a smart soldier eats and sleeps every chance he gets. You want to argue with someone, argue with him. I'm just following his advice."

"Well, now you can follow *my* advice," Obi-Wan snapped. "That's twice on this mission you've conspired to stay awake while I slept. Do it a third time and there *will* be repercussions."

Repercussions or not, he'd do it as many times as he had to—but that was a fight for another time and place. To keep the peace here and now, he nodded. "Whatever you say."

And that earned him another sharp look—but sharp looks he could live with.

Obi-Wan raked his fingers through his hair. "How many more villages have we bypassed?"

"Since you fell asleep? Two. They didn't feel right, so I kept going."

"Good," said Obi-Wan. "Let your feelings guide you, Anakin, and you won't go far wrong." He muffled another yawn. "But even so, I think circumstances are going to force our hand soon enough. No pun intended."

"You're right," he said, and tapped a finger to the power cell's readout. "We're just about flying on fumes. How much longer do you want to keep pushing our luck?"

"Until we hear it scream for mercy," said Obi-Wan, frowning. "I know we've already traveled a good distance from Lantibba City but right now there's no such thing as too far."

Actually, I'm starting to wonder about that. "I don't know. We've got a long hike back to the ship as it is. Assuming it's still there, and some spaceport official hasn't impounded it. Maybe we should be thinking about—"

"I am thinking about it," said Obi-Wan, testy. "Now hush a moment. I'd like to get a sense of who and what's ahead."

Even tired to the bone, Obi-Wan used the Force the way a surgeon used a laser scalpel, neatly and cleanly cleaving his way through the night.

"There," he murmured, eventually. "Can you feel that?"

Anakin nodded. "That's the largest village we've sensed so far, I think."

“And there’s safety in numbers,” said Obi-Wan, opening his eyes. “I don’t feel any immediate danger surrounding the place, do you?”

He was already angling the groundcar in the distant village’s direction. “No.”

Ominously, the controls were feeling sluggishly heavy now, less responsive than ever. Without warning the vehicle lurched, then dropped. Cursing, he wrestled it back under control.

“Blast,” said Obi-Wan, checking the power-cell indicator. “Are you sure this gauge is accurate, Anakin?”

Teeth gritted, arms aching, he fought the groundcar against another precipitate plunge. “Depends what you mean by *accurate*. And *sure*.”

A third lurching drop, then a stomach-churning sideways twist as their makeshift speeder tried to fishtail its way through the night. Obi-Wan grabbed the passenger-door handle. “So is *this* the point where we start falling instead of flying?”

He hated to admit it, but— “Yeah. I think it is.”

“Wonderful,” Obi-Wan muttered. And then he sighed. “Well, at least turn on the headlights. It seems a pity not to see death rushing to meet us.”

“Pessimist,” Anakin said, fiercely grinning, and flooded the endless dark with light. “Now hold on, Master Kenobi. Things are about to get a little bit interesting.”

ANAKIN WAS A BRILLIANT PILOT, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t use some help. Ignoring his leaden exhaustion, the warning ache in his bones, and the drag in his blood, for the second time that night Obi-Wan discarded prudent self-preservation and abandoned himself without reservation to the Force. Its power howled through him, setting his nerves alight. And howling with the power was the starkest of warnings: *Danger ahead, Jedi. Danger all around.*

Sweating and swearing, Anakin fought the crippled, dying groundcar. They were down to the dregs of its power cell now, encased in a shell of unresponsive metal. The headlights were fading fast and with them any hope of making some kind of informed landing. Darkness poised to swallow them. Death, too, if they didn't find a way to control their out-of-control descent.

I may be a pessimist but it's not without cause.

And then the groundcar's shielding gave out in a defiant spray of sparks, like fireworks.

There. You see? Wonderful.

"Sorry," said Anakin, his fingers bloodless on the stricken vehicle's control yoke. "I thought we had a bit more juice left than this."

Obi-Wan managed an encouraging smile. "Never mind. You're doing fine. Just—"

With an ominous grumbling of stressed metal joints the groundcar's nose dropped, sending them into a sharp dive. On a desperate gasp he wrapped the Force around them, swaddling the groundcar as once he'd swaddled Bail's starship coming in powerless to a space station dock. Except this time was different. It might've handled like a flying brick but at least Bail's small ship had been in a controlled glide. Their improbably rigged-up groundcar was *falling* like a brick. And when bricks hit the ground from a great height they had the disconcerting habit of smashing to splinters and shards.

"Okay!" Anakin panted. "You've got it. Hold it there, Obi-Wan. If you can just hold the barve *right there* I can—"

"Forget it, Anakin. This thing is past flying. All we can do now is cushion the blow."

"No—no—I've still got it. I can do this. Just hold on to it, Obi-Wan—don't let go of the blasted thing, whatever you do!"

If it had been anyone other than Anakin ... but it *was* Anakin, so Obi-Wan poured his will into cradling the

machine as his former apprentice bullied it into cooperating. The console lighting failed next—and then last of all the headlights. In the moment they winked out he caught a final glimpse of the onrushing tree-scattered ground. Heard a curdling scrape of high branches along the groundcar's belly.

And then the groundcar's power cell died.

"Anakin?" He tore his gaze from the unshielded wind-screen. "We're out of time."

No need to talk about it. In perfect, familiar unison they flung themselves into an active trance, imposing the Force upon the unresponsive groundcar and flattening their lethally steep trajectory. Amid loud crashing and splintering the groundcar blundered through the pitch-dark countryside's clustered treetops, then struck one broad trunk hard and slewed wildly sideways. Blood swirling, their vision blotched and smeared, they used up what was left of their meager strength, keeping the Force wrapped close around the groundcar. It was the only thing standing between themselves and a bloody death.

And then they struck Lanteeban soil, skipping over the open ground like a stone across a flat pond. The noise was ferocious. Metal sheared and screamed and buckled and tore. They hit something unyielding, a rock or a felled tree, maybe the lip of a culvert, that flipped them into a crazy sideways roll. With the power cell drained dry, the expensive groundcar's auto restraints couldn't engage. Pebbles in a bottle, they rattled around and around and around.

At last, with one final roll and a rending shriek of stressed durasteel, their pulverized vehicle slammed right-side up and rocked to a halt. Stunned, his head still spinning, Obi-Wan sat in silence and breathed, just breathed, and waited for his pounding heartbeat to subside.

We're alive. Who'd believe it? We must be better than I thought.

His ears were ringing. He could taste blood in his mouth and feel it on his face and arms and legs. On his sweaty skin he felt the caress of fresh night air, flowing in through the ragged tears in the groundcar's metal shell. It smelled cold and clean. No taint of habitation, sentient or otherwise. He couldn't see a thing through the cracked windscreen but wherever they were, the village he and Anakin had felt through the Force was clicks and clicks away. Wonderful. Because there was nothing he liked better than tramping through an unknown wilderness in the dark. All that was missing now was a Sith Holocron.

I swear, the next time Bail Organa says he's got intelligence for me to look at I really will throw him out of his speeder.

Equally stunned, Anakin slumped in the driver's seat. And then he laughed, sounding almost giddy with relief.

"So—Obi-Wan—what is it with you and crash landings, anyway?"

"Aren't you the one who said every man should have a hobby?"

"Me? No," said Anakin. "Sorry. Must've been one of your other former Padawans." Another giddy laugh. "Seriously, Obi-Wan. So far you've accounted for a speeder bike, a starship, and now a groundcar. If you're not careful you're going to get a reputation."

Since he was hurting too much to even contemplate moving, and they were in no danger of bursting into flames, Obi-Wan let his aching head rest against the back of the crumpled passenger seat and gave himself permission to indulge.

"I reject your hypothesis," he said, deliberately prim. "I did not wreck the speeder bike, it was blown up by a bomb. And the Sith crashed Bail's starship, not me. As for this

groundcar, well, technically speaking I'm merely a passenger. So clearly I bear no responsibility at all."

Anakin's amusement flared brighter. "Admit it. You're a common denominator, Master Kenobi."

"Alas. That is sad but true," he agreed. "Perhaps I should smuggle myself onto Grievous's flagship. After all, what's the point in having the mystical power to crash flying machines if one isn't prepared to use it in a good cause?"

"Now that's a plan," said Anakin. "I'll remind you to suggest it to the Council when we get home."

When we get home. Amusement fading, Obi-Wan closed his eyes. Yes. Getting home. Having survived Lok Durd's ambush, that was their next challenge—which they wouldn't conquer by sitting around in the dark.

Step one: exit the groundcar.

Warily, holding his breath, he shifted a little in his battered seat. There was pain, but no grinding of bones. No sudden gush of blood. Thank the Force for minor miracles.

"We need to get out of here. Are you still in one piece?"

"I think so," said Anakin. "You?"

"Apparently."

A soft snort. "In that case maybe we should go find ourselves a casino."

"I'll settle for a humble cottage and some friendly native faces." Still moving cautiously, he tested the passenger door. "I'm trapped on this side. Can you get out on yours?"

A rustling of clothes and a muttered curse as Anakin tried his own door. "No," he said, giving up. "Hold on."

The darkness disappeared in a flash of blue light as Anakin activated his lightsaber.

Obi-Wan flattened himself against the passenger door. "Watch out! You'll be cutting me in half with that thing if you're not careful!"

Anakin tut-tutted. "Now, would I do that? Shield your eyes. There's going to be dripping metal any second."

Slowly, carefully, cursing their groundcar's cramped interior and the droplets of slagged durasteel he didn't manage to avoid, Anakin cut through the buckled roof, then used the Force to peel back the scarlet-edged sheet of metal.

His own skin stinging from a scattering of pinprick burns, Obi-Wan nodded. "Good. Now let's get out of this tin coffin, shall we? I'll go first."

For once, Anakin didn't argue.

Clambering clear of the groundcar woke every last bruise and scrape and blaster-bolt burn on his body. Letting the sharp discomfort ride him unopposed, standing free and clear of the smashed vehicle, Obi-Wan tipped his face to the moonless night and breathed out his shuddering relief. Then he sought for any immediate danger in the Force—and felt nothing. But was that because there *was* nothing, or because his reserves of strength were too depleted for him to tell?

On a slow surge of Force propulsion Anakin leapt from the groundcar to land unsteadily beside him. "I think we're safe for now, Obi-Wan."

He shook his head. "Hardly. The Separatists' disarray won't have lasted very long. There'll be droids on our tail soon, if they're not hunting us already. And you don't need a casino to bet on that."

"Sure, they'll send droids after us," said Anakin, unconvinced. "Without the first idea of what direction we took. They're flying blind, Obi-Wan. The odds of them finding us straightaway—or at all—are—"

"And if Durd turns to Dooku for help?"

"Durd's not going to tell Dooku about us," said Anakin, scoffing. "He's going to keep this quiet. If he doesn't, he risks getting his head handed to him."

"Possibly, but we can't assume that," Obi-Wan retorted. "We can't assume *anything*. Mind yourself. In our situation overconfidence could easily prove fatal."

Anakin's impatient irritation seethed through the Force. "Maybe. But second-guessing ourselves could get us killed just as fast. So could a lack of conviction and being timid instead of—"

"Timid? Who said anything about being *timid*?" He took a deep, painful breath. *Stay calm. You know what he's like.* "I'm saying we should be *prudent*, Anakin. There is a time for bold action and a time for reasoned caution and under the circumstances I think caution is called for."

Silence. And then Anakin sighed softly. "Yes. It is. So what do you want to do?"

"Well ..." He scratched his beard, considering their tediously limited options. "You're not wrong about the odds being in our favor, at least for the moment. I say we lengthen them by hiding the groundcar, then getting to that village we were aiming for."

"On foot?" Anakin heaved another sigh. "Yeah. Great. Because I was only just thinking that what I really need right now is blisters."

Oh, Anakin. "Cheer up. Things could always be worse."

"Yeah, I know," said Anakin. "Weren't you listening? *Blisters.*"

Truly, their situation was anything but funny, but still—he had to laugh. Anakin's irrepressibly irreverent humor was one of his most endearing traits.

"Come on," he said. "That groundcar isn't going to hide itself."

Once more working in wordless tandem they used the Force to lift and shift and drop and lift and shift and drop the mangled vehicle back to the straggle of trees they'd crashed through on their descent. The task proved brutally hard. They were both so tired and knocked about, and even Anakin's intimidating powers weren't limitless. But they had no choice.

Done at last, bent over with his hands braced on his knees, his breathing harsh and fast, Anakin glanced up. "I

don't know if this is good enough. Wrecked or not, the kriffing thing still looks like a groundcar and there's not enough cover here to hide it from a passing spy droid."

Obi-Wan leaned against a handy tree trunk. There wasn't a finger's-width of flesh and bone in his body that didn't hurt. "I know."

Gingerly, Anakin straightened. "We'll have to cut it up. Small pieces. Then we'll need to scatter them. Spread dirt over them afterward so they don't catch the light."

Anakin's endless resourcefulness never ceased to impress him. "Good idea. And speaking of light ..."

At the far edge of the horizon a thin bright line was spreading like spilled plasma. Dawn. If they were going to do this they'd have to hurry. There was no telling how many spy droids were out looking for them, or how long it would take one to stumble on to their crash site. So they took out their lightsabers and dismembered the groundcar, hacking and slicing it into piles of scrap metal. After that they used the Force to scatter and camouflage the pieces.

And after *that*, spy droids or no spy droids, they both collapsed to the inhospitable ground.

"Wake me up this time next year," Anakin muttered, sprawled full length, eyes closed in his filthy, blood-smeared face.

Slumped cross-legged on leaf litter and small stones, Obi-Wan pressed his fingers to his aching temples. "I wish I could. But we can't stay here, Anakin."

"I know." Anakin sighed. The growing light showed a deep cut on his forehead and a blackish purple bruise on his cheek. His humble Lanteeban work clothes were badly stained and torn, and he looked to be favoring his right shoulder. There was a scorch mark along his side where he'd been clipped by a blaster bolt. "Just—" He cracked open one eyelid. "Let me catch my breath."

Anakin *never* admitted exhaustion. Concerned, Obi-Wan stared at him. *I don't think he's been this pushed since*

Maridun. "Yes. All right. A few minutes. But then we *must* go."

A Jedi was taught from earliest childhood that the Force was to be used but never abused. And that used judiciously it would grant a feeling of well-being. Of buoyant energy. That it would replenish and nourish and gently nurture.

Of course, the key word is judiciously. Anakin and I, on the other hand ...

He felt like he was ripping apart, in slow motion. The Force was never meant to be used the way they'd been using it these past few days. These past months. Ever since the war began, in fact.

Bail's right. We're flesh and blood, not machines. We can't keep doing this. One day the price will be simply too high to pay.

"Hey," said Anakin. "You all right?"

Obi-Wan straightened his spine, wincing. "Truthfully? I've been better. Anakin ..."

"Yeah, I know," said Anakin, resigned. "We've got to go." He pulled up his knees. "*Stang*. My bruises have bruises."

"As have mine," Obi-Wan said, allowing sympathy to show. "But we'll feel better once we're moving again."

"Yeah ..." Anakin looked at him. "So who was it exactly nicknamed you the Negotiator? Because from where I'm lying you couldn't sell water to a man dying of thirst."

He smiled. "Ouch."

"Sorry," Anakin muttered. "But right now the only thing that would make me feel better is—"

"What?"

"Lok Durd's head on a plate."

Was it his imagination or had Anakin meant to say something different? It was hard to tell; he'd covered his eyes with his forearm.

"We will get him, Anakin," he said quietly. "General Durd's days are numbered."

"Everyone's days are numbered, Obi-Wan," Anakin retorted. "Not even Yoda's going to live forever. The point is, we blew it. *I* blew it. I trusted Bant'ena—I pushed you into trusting her, too—and now look where we are." Sitting up, he rubbed his hand over his face. "We should've taken out the lab while we had the chance. Blown that blasted bioweapon to smoke and debris."

It hurt to hear him this disillusioned and full of self-blame. "Don't be so hard on yourself, Anakin. You followed your feelings. You argued for what you thought was best. That's nothing to be ashamed of."

"No?" Anakin's eyes were bloodshot with weariness and strain. "Obi-Wan, trusting that woman nearly got us killed. You were right. She reminded me of my mother and I let that blind me. I'm sorry."

Anakin was a proud young man who hated to admit fault. But the point was he *did* admit it. Maybe not straightaway—*often* not straightaway—but still ...

Late is always better than never.

He shrugged. "It doesn't matter now. What matters is that this mission isn't over. If we act swiftly, I believe we can still thwart Durd before he can use that weapon. There's even a chance we can recapture him."

Eyebrows raised, Anakin looked around them. They really were in the middle of nowhere. No birdsong. No speeders. No groundcars. No sense of even the most rudimentary, partially sentient life nearby. The silence was absolute. Only on the farthest edge of awareness, a whispered hint of the village they'd been trying to reach. They had no food, no water, no communications, no transport. No weapons, beside their lightsabers. No allies. No backup of any kind.

"Yes. Well," he added. "I didn't say it would be *easy*."

Anakin pulled a face. "No kidding." Then he fumbled to his feet and looked down. "Obi-Wan, we're in so much trouble."

"I know."

"But a solution is bound to present itself? Maybe. Except one of these days that's just not going to happen." Anakin held out his hand. "You do know that, right?"

Obi-Wan wrapped his skinned fingers around Anakin's wrist and levered himself off the ground. "Yes. But it won't be today."

For the briefest moment Anakin wasn't General Skywalker, the Chosen One, scourge of the Separatists and hero of the Republic. He was instead the small boy who'd looked for reassurance from a stranger on the night of Qui-Gon's funeral.

"Promise?"

Obi-Wan patted his former apprentice's undamaged shoulder. "Promise. Now let's go."

KEEPING UP A STEADY PACE, eventually they came to the end of barren, uncultivated countryside and discovered a ferrocrete road, narrow but well maintained. No traffic in either direction. The Force prompted them to turn left, so they turned left and kept walking. The almost treeless landscape was sere, its sparse vegetation crinkled brown and thirsty. The intel provided by Special Ops Brigade Agent Varrak had mentioned drought, and here was the proof. Once these had been crop fields, but no crops grew here now. Scatterings of bleached bones and strips of desiccated hide suggested farm animals long since perished. Hinted at a prosperity lost, perhaps forever. Especially if Lanteeb could not be freed from Dooku. From the Sith.

An hour passed. Another. And another. The sun crawled higher in the pale and cloudless sky, and the flat land around them gradually began to fall and rise in frozen ripples. Unnervingly aware of their ongoing danger, they told and retold their false life stories and quizzed each

other on them until their recitations were faultless. They had to be. Weary as they were, they might have misread the Force. There could be a Separatist presence in the village, and if that was the case their first mistake would likely be their last.

"All right," Obi-Wan said eventually. "Enough. I doubt we'll forget our new histories in a hurry."

"No," Anakin agreed. "I'm pretty sure I'll be dreaming about Teeb Markl when I'm ninety."

Let me reach ninety and I'll happily dream about him, too. "That's the general idea."

Skirting the small beginnings of a pothole in the ferrocrete road, Anakin squinted into the middle distance. "*Stang*. I thought that might be a mirage, but it's not, is it?"

Obi-Wan looked. "No. Those are hills."

One hand clutched behind his head, Anakin jiggled in frustration. "Great. We've been walking for hours and what—now we have to go *mountain climbing*?"

"Pimple climbing's more like it," he said, staring at him. "D'you know, I'm pleased we left Ahsoka behind. All this complaining is not what *I'd* call setting a good example. And if *Rex* could hear you ..."

Disgruntled, Anakin shut up and they kept on walking. Cultivating blisters. Ignoring their thirst and hunger and pain. Sliding in and out of the Force, they remained exhaustedly alert for the first signs of danger. The road they traveled remained empty of traffic, and so far they'd seen no sign of droid activity. No trundle carts, no mobile security cams, and certainly no battle units. But that could change at any moment, especially if the village they headed toward held some value for the Separatists. An unarmed civilian population could be effectively controlled by only a handful of armed droids. They'd seen that on Naboo, and on more than a dozen even larger planets since the outbreak of war.

After a while Anakin slowed to a halt. "You feel that? I think the village is just on the other side of your pimple."

Halted beside him, Obi-Wan nodded. The village was only a few clicks distant now. Through the Force he could read its busy, sentient life. No stark fear or misery, no overwhelming sense of immediate danger or dread, just a dull, muffling sadness shot through with brighter threads of anxiety.

"Doesn't mean we're out of trouble, though," Anakin added, glancing sideways. "With our luck the place'll be lousy with Sep droids. If it is, how do you want to handle them?"

"Carefully," he replied. "But I'm sure if we stick to our story, they'll have no reason to suspect anything."

"Unless they've been beamed a security alert."

And you call me a pessimist? He wiped his torn and filthy sleeve over his sweaty face. "Unlikely. You said it yourself, Anakin—the last thing Durd wants is for Dooku to find out we evaded capture."

Sighing, Anakin pressed his fists into the small of his back. "Let's hope so, because neither of us is in any shape for another fight."

"If we keep our wits about us there'll be no need for fighting," he retorted. "We're humble laborers returned to our home planet after three long years in the galactic wilderness, remember? With the emphasis on *humble*."

"Yeah, yeah," Anakin muttered. Then he looked at the empty, undulating countryside surrounding them. "It doesn't make sense. Why would anyone build a village way out here? You'd find more life in the Jundland Wastes. At least the wastes have got herds of wild banthas. But there's nothing out here except dead trees and dead grass."

"I don't know," Obi-Wan said wearily.

Anakin flicked him an irritated look. "You're not curious?"