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**Star Wars: Dark Lord –  
The Rise of Darth Vader**

James Luceno

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## **About the Book**

The newly created Darth Vader flexes his Force-muscle as the Emperor's enforcer to maintain order and obedience in a galaxy reeling from civil war and the destruction of the Jedi Order.

To the galaxy at large, Jedi Knight Anakin Skywalker - the Chosen One - died on Coruscant during the siege of the Jedi Temple. And, to some extent, that was true - Anakin was dead.

But from the site of Anakin Skywalker's last stand - on the molten surface of the planet Mustafa, where he sought to destroy his friend and former master, Obi-Wan Kenobi - a fearsome spectre in black has risen.

Once the most powerful Knight ever known to the Jedi order he is not a disciple of the dark side, a lord of the dreaded Sith, and the avenging right hand of the galaxy's ruthless new Emperor. Seduced, deranged and destroyed by the machinations of the Dark Lord Sidious, Anakin Skywalker is dead ... and Darth Vader lives ...

## **About the Author**

James Luceno is best known as half of the writing duo that was Jack McKinney, author of the Robotech series; the other half was Brian Daley, of Star Wars fame. Jim lives in Annapolis, Maryland, with his wife and youngest child.

By James Luceno

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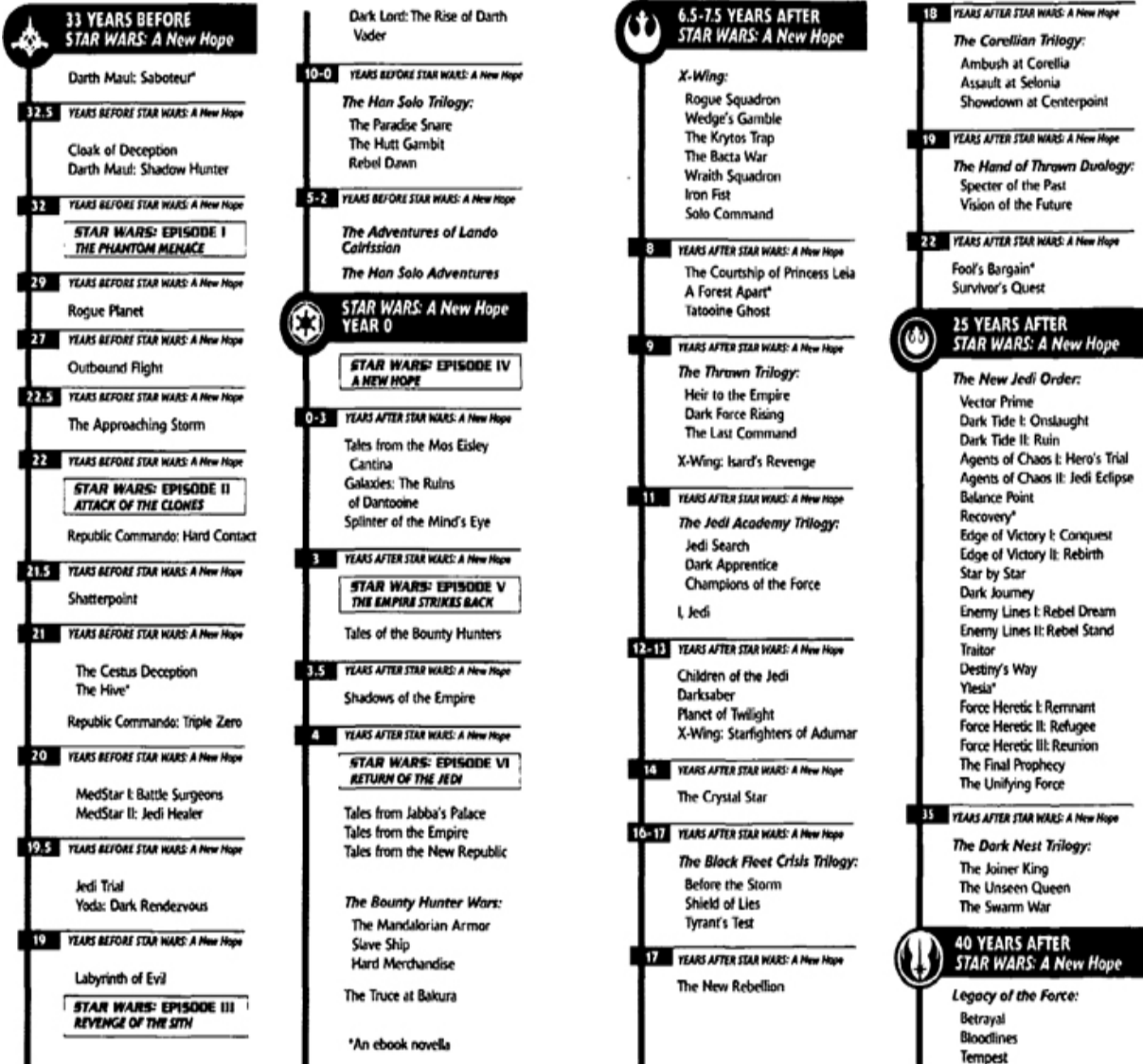


For Abel Lucero Lima, ace guide at Tikal  
(aka Yavin 4), with whom I've left bootprints  
throughout the Mundo Maya

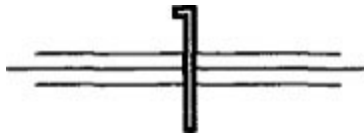
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# THE STAR WARS NOVELS TIMELINE



**PART I**  
**THE OUTER RIM SIEGES**



## **MURKHANA. FINAL HOURS OF THE CLONE WARS**

DROPPING INTO SWIRLING clouds conjured by Murkhana's weather stations, Roan Shryne was reminded of meditation sessions his former Master had guided him through. No matter how fixed Shryne had been on touching the Force, his mind's eye had offered little more than an eddying whiteness. Years later, when he had become more adept at silencing thought and immersing himself in the light, visual fragments would emerge from that colorless void—pieces to a puzzle that would gradually assemble themselves and resolve. Not in any conscious way, though frequently assuring him that his actions in the world were in accord with the will of the Force.

Frequently but not always.

When he veered from the course on which the Force had set him, the familiar white would once again be stirred by powerful currents; sometimes shot through with red, as if he were lifting his closed eyes to the glare of a midday sun.

Red-mottled white was what he saw as he fell deeper into Murkhana's atmosphere. Scored to reverberating thunder; the rush of the wind; a welter of muffled voices ...

He was standing closest to the sliding door that normally sealed the troop bay of a Republic gunship, launched moments earlier from the forward hold of the

*Gallant*—a *Victory*-class Star Destroyer, harried by vulture and droid tri-fighters and awaiting High Command's word to commence its own descent through Murkhana's artificial ceiling. Beside and behind Shryne stood a platoon of clone troopers, helmets fitting snugly over their heads, blasters cradled in their arms, utility belts slung with ammo magazines, talking among themselves the way seasoned warriors often did before battle. Alleviating misgivings with inside jokes; references Shryne couldn't begin to understand, beyond the fact that they were grim.

The gunship's inertial compensators allowed them to stand in the bay without being jolted by flaring anti-aircraft explosions or jostled by the gunship pilots' evasive maneuvering through corkscrewing missiles and storms of white-hot shrapnel. Missiles, because the same Separatists who had manufactured the clouds had misted Murkhana's air with anti-laser aerosols.

Acrid odors infiltrated the cramped space, along with the roar of the aft engines, the starboard one stuttering somewhat, the gunship as battered as the troopers and crew it carried into conflict.

Even at an altitude of only four hundred meters above sea level the cloud cover remained dense. The fact that Shryne could barely see his hand in front of his face didn't surprise him. This was still the war, after all, and he had grown accustomed these past three years to not seeing where he was going.

Nat-Sem, his former Master, used to tell him that the goal of the meditative exercises was to see clear through the swirling whiteness to the other side; that what Shryne saw was only the shadowy expanse separating him from full contact with the Force. Shryne had to learn to ignore the clouds, as it were. When he had learned to do that, to look through them to the radiant expanse beyond, he would be a Master.

Pessimistic by nature, Shryne's reaction had been: *Not in this lifetime.*

Though he had never said as much to Nat-Sem, the Jedi Master had seen through him as easily as he saw through the clouds.

Shryne felt that the clone troopers had a better view of the war than he had, and that the view had little to do with their helmet imaging systems, the filters that muted the sharp scent of the air, the earphones that dampened the sounds of explosions. Grown for warfare, they probably thought the Jedi were mad to go into battle as they did, attired in tunics and hooded robes, a lightsaber their only weapon. Many of them were astute enough to see comparisons between the Force and their own white plastoid shells; but few of them could discern between armored and unarmored Jedi—those who were allied with the Force, and those who for one reason or another had slipped from its sustaining embrace.

Murkhana's lathered clouds finally began to thin, until they merely veiled the planet's wrinkled landscape and frothing sea. A sudden burst of brilliant light drew Shryne's attention to the sky. What he took for an exploding gunship might have been a newborn star; and for a moment the world tipped out of balance, then righted itself just as abruptly. A circle of clarity opened in the clouds, a perforation in the veil, and Shryne gazed on verdant forest so profoundly green he could almost taste it. Valiant combatants scurried through the underbrush and sleek ships soared through the canopy. In the midst of it all a lone figure stretched out his hand, tearing aside a curtain black as night ...

Shryne knew he had stepped out of time, into some truth beyond reckoning.

A vision of the end of the war, perhaps, or of time itself.

Whichever, the effect of it comforted him that he was indeed where he was supposed to be. That despite the

depth to which the war had caused him to become fixed on death and destruction, he was still tethered to the Force, and serving it in his own limited way.

Then, as if intent on foiling him, the thin clouds quickly conspired to conceal what had been revealed, closing the portal an errant current had opened. And Shryne was back where he started, with gusts of superheated air tugging at the sleeves and cowl of his brown robe.

“The Koorivar have done a good job with their weather machines,” a speaker-enhanced voice said into his left ear. “Whipped up one brute of a sky. We used the same tactic on Paarin Minor. Drew the Seps into fabricated clouds and blew them to the back of beyond.”

Shryne laughed without merriment. “Good to see you can still appreciate the little things, Commander.”

“What else is there, General?”

Shryne couldn’t make out the expression on the face behind the tinted T-visor, but he knew that shared face as well as anyone else who fought in the war. Commander of the Thirty-second air combat wing, the clone officer had somewhere along the line acquired the name Salvo, and the sobriquet fit him like a gauntlet.

The high-traction soles of his jump boots gave him just enough added height to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Shryne, and where his armor wasn’t dinged and scored it was emblazoned with rust-brown markings. On his hips he wore holstered hand blasters and, for reasons Shryne couldn’t fathom, a version of the capelike command skirt that had become all the rage in the war’s third year. The left side of his shrapnel-pitted helmet was laser-etched with the motto LIVE TO SERVE!

Torso markings attested to Salvo’s participation in campaigns on many worlds, and while he wasn’t an ARC—an Advanced Reconnaissance Commando—he had the rough edges of an ARC, and of their clone template, Jango Fett, whose headless body Shryne had seen in a Geonosian



arena shortly before Master Nat-Sem had fallen to enemy fire.

“Alliance weapons should have us in target lock by now,” Salvo said as the gunship continued to descend.

Other assault ships were also punching through the cloud cover, only to be greeted by flocks of incoming missiles. Struck by direct hits, two, four, then five craft were blown apart, flaming fuselages and mangled troopers plummeting into the churning scarlet waves of Murkhana Bay. From the nose of one gunship flew a bang-out capsule that carried the pilot and co-pilot to within meters of the water before it was ripped open by a resolute heat seeker.

In one of the fifty-odd gunships that were racing down the well, three other Jedi were going into battle, Master Saras Lorne among them. Stretching out with the Force, Shryne found them, faint echoes confirming that all three were still alive.

He clamped his right hand on one of the slide door’s view slots as the pilots threw their unwieldy charge into a hard bank, narrowly evading a pair of hailfire missiles. Gunners ensconced in the gunship’s armature-mounted turrets opened up with blasters as flights of Mankvim Interceptors swarmed up to engage the Republic force. The anti-laser aerosols scattered the blaster beams, but dozens of the Separatist craft succumbed to missiles spewed from the gunships’ top-mounted mass-drive launchers.

“High Command should have granted our request to bombard from orbit,” Salvo said in an amplified voice.

“The idea is to *take* the city, Commander, not vaporize it,” Shryne said loudly. Murkhana had already been granted weeks to surrender, but the Republic ultimatum had expired. “Palpatine’s policy for winning the hearts and minds of Separatist populations might not make good military sense, but it makes good political sense.”

Salvo stared at him from behind his visor. “We’re not interested in politics.”

Shryne laughed shortly. "Neither were the Jedi."

"Why fight if you weren't bred for it?"

"To serve what remains of the Republic." Shryne's brief green vision of the war's end returned, and he adopted a rueful grin. "Dooku's dead. Grievous is being hunted down. If it means anything, I suspect it'll be over soon."

"The war, or our standing shoulder-to-shoulder?"

"The war, Commander."

"What becomes of the Jedi then?"

"We'll do what we have always done: follow the Force."

"And the Grand Army?"

Shryne regarded him. "Help us preserve the peace."



MURKHANA CITY WAS visible now, climbing into steep hills that rose from a long crescent of shoreline, the sheen of overlapping particle shields dulled by the gray underbelly of the clouds. Shryne caught a fleeting glimpse of the Argente Tower before the gunship dropped to the crests of the frothing waves and altered course, pointing its blunt nose toward the stacked skyline and slaloming through warheads fired from weapons emplacements that lined the shore.

In a class with Mygeeto, Muunilinst, and Neimoidia, Murkhana was not a conquered planet but a host world—home to former Senator and Separatist Council member Passel Argente, and headquarters of the Corporate Alliance. Murkhana’s deal makers and litigators, tended to by armies of household droids and private security guards, had fashioned a hedonistic domain of towering office buildings, luxurious apartment complexes, exclusive medcenters, and swank shopping malls, casinos, and nightclubs. Only the most expensive speeders negotiated a vertical cityscape of graceful, spiraling structures that looked as if they had been grown of ocean coral rather than constructed.

Murkhana also housed the finest communications facility in that part of the Outer Rim, and was a primary source of the “shadowfeeds” that spread Separatist propaganda among Republic and Confederacy worlds.

Arranged like the spokes of a wheel, four ten-kilometer-long bridges linked the city to an enormous offshore

landing platform. Hexagonal in shape and supported on thick columns anchored in the seabed, the platform was the prize the Republic needed to secure before a full assault could be mounted. For that to happen, the Grand Army needed to penetrate the defensive umbrellas and take out the generators that sustained them. But with nearly all rooftop and repulsorlift landing platforms shielded, Murkhana's arc of black-sand beach was the only place where the gunships could insert their payloads of clone troopers and Jedi.

Shryne was gazing at the landing platform when he felt someone begin to edge between him and Commander Salvo, set on getting a better look through the open hatch. Even before he saw the headful of long black curls, he knew it was Olee Starstone. Planting his left hand firmly on the top of her head, he propelled her back into the troop bay.

"If you're determined to make yourself a target, Padawan, at least wait until we hit the beach."

Rubbing her head, the petite, blue-eyed young woman glanced over her shoulder at the tall female Jedi standing behind her. "You see, Master. He does care."

"Despite all evidence to the contrary," the female Jedi said.

"I only meant that it'll be easier for me to bury you in the sand," Shryne said.

Starstone scowled, folded her arms across her chest, and swung away from both of them.

Bol Chatak threw Shryne a look of mild reprimand. The raised cowl of her black robe hid her short vestigial horns. An Iridonian Zabrak, she was nothing if not tolerant, and had never taken Shryne to task for his irascible behavior or interfered with his teasing relationship with her Padawan, who had joined Chatak in the Murkhana system only a standard week earlier, arriving with Master Lorne and two Jedi Knights. The demands of the Outer Rim Sieges had

drawn so many Jedi from Coruscant that the Temple was practically deserted.

Until recently, Shryne, too, had had a Padawan learner

...

For the Jedi's benefit, the gunship pilot announced that they were closing on the jump site.

"Weapons check!" Salvo said to the platoon. "Gas and packs!"

As the troop bay filled with the sound of activating weapons, Chatak placed her hand on Starstone's quivering shoulder.

"Use your unease to sharpen your senses, Padawan."

"I will, Master."

"The Force will be with you."

"We're all dying," Salvo told the troopers. "Promise yourselves you'll be the last to go!"

Access panels opened in the ceiling, dropping more than a dozen polyplast cables to within reach of the troopers.

"Secure to lines!" Salvo said. "Room for three more, General," he added while armored, body-gloved hands took tight hold of the cables.

Calculating that the jump wouldn't exceed ten meters, Shryne shook his head at Salvo. "No need. We'll see you below."

Unexpectedly, the gunship gained altitude as it approached the shoreline, then pulled up short of the beach, as if being reined in. Repulsorlifts engaged, the gunship hovered. At the same time, hundreds of Separatist battle droids marched onto the beach, firing their blasters in unison.

The intercom squawked, and the pilot said, "Droid buster away!"

A concussion-feedback weapon, the droid buster detonated at five meters above ground zero, flattening every droid within a radius of fifty meters. Similar

explosions underscored the ingress of a dozen other gunships.

“Where were these weapons three years ago?” one of the troopers asked Salvo.

“Progress,” the commander said. “All of a sudden we’re winning the war in a week.”

The gunship hovered lower, and Shryne leapt into the air. Using the Force to oversee his fall, he landed in a crouch on the compacted sand, as did Chatak and Starstone, if less expertly.

Salvo and the clone troopers followed, descending one-handed on individual cables, triggering their rifles as they slid to the beach. When the final trooper was on the ground, the gunship lifted its nose and began to veer away from shore. Up and down the beach the same scenario was playing out. Several gunships failed to escape artillery fire and crashed in flames before they had turned about.

Others were blown apart before they had even offloaded.

With projectiles and blaster bolts whizzing past their heads, the Jedi and troopers scurried forward, hunkering down behind a bulkhead that braced a ribbon of highway coursing between the beach and the near-vertical cliffs beyond. Salvo’s communications specialist comlinked for aerial support against the batteries responsible for the worst of the fire.

Through an opening in the bulkhead hastened the four members of a commando team, with a captive in tow. Unlike the troopers, the commandos wore gray shells of *Katarn*-class armor and carried heftier weapons. Hardened against magnetic pulses, their suits allowed them to penetrate defensive shields.

The enemy combatant they had captured wore a long robe and tasseled headcloth but lacked the sallow complexion, horizontal facial markings, and cranial horns characteristic of the Koorivar. Like their fellow Separatists

the Neimoidians, Passel Argente's species had no taste for warfare, but felt no compunction about employing the best mercenaries credits could buy.

The burly commando squad leader went immediately to Salvo.

"Ion Team, Commander, attached to the Twenty-second out of Boz Pity." Turning slightly in Shryne's direction, the commando nodded his helmeted head.

"Welcome to Murkhana, General Shryne."

Shryne's dark brows beetled. "The voice is familiar ...," he began.

"The face even more so," the commando completed.

The joke was almost three years old but still in use among the clone troopers, and between them and the Jedi.

"Climber," the commando said, providing his sobriquet. "We fought together on Deko Neimoidia."

Shryne clapped the commando on the shoulder. "Good to see you again, Climber—even here."

"As I told you," Chatak said to Starstone, "Master Shryne has friends all over."

"Perhaps they don't know him as well as I do, Master," Starstone grumbled.

Climber lifted his helmet faceplate to the gray sky. "A good day for fighting, General."

"I'll take your word for it," Shryne said.

"Make your report, squad leader," Salvo interrupted.

Climber turned to the commander. "The Koorivar are evacuating the city, but taking their sweet time about it. They've a lot more faith in these energy shields than they should have." He beckoned the captive forward and spun him roughly to face Salvo. "Meet Idis—human under the Koorivar trappings. Distinguished member of the Vibroblade Brigade."

"A mercenary band," Bol Chatak explained to Starstone.

"We caught him ... with his trousers down," Climber continued, "and persuaded him to share what he knows

about the shoreline defenses. He was kind enough to provide the location of the landing platform shield generator." The commando indicated a tall, tapered edifice farther down the beach. "Just north of the first bridge, near the marina. The generator's installed two floors below ground level. We may have to take out the whole building to get to it."

Salvo signaled to his comlink specialist. "Relay the building coordinates to *Gallant* gunnery—"

"Wait on that," Shryne said quickly. "Targeting the building poses too great a risk to the bridges. We need them intact if we're going to move vehicles into the city."

Salvo considered it briefly. "A surgical strike, then."

Shryne shook his head no. "There's another reason for discretion. That building is a medcenter. Or at least it was the last time I was here."

Salvo looked to Climber for confirmation.

"The general's correct, Commander. It's still a medcenter."

Salvo shifted his gaze to Shryne. "An *enemy* medcenter, General."

Shryne compressed his lips and nodded. "Even at this point in the war, patients are considered noncombatants. Remember what I said about hearts and minds, Commander." He glanced at the mercenary. "Is the shield generator accessible from street level?"

"Depends on how skilled you are."

Shryne looked at Climber.

"Not a problem," the commando said.

Salvo made a sound of distaste. "You'd trust the word of a merc?"

Climber pressed the muzzle of his DC-17 rifle into the small of the mercenary's back. "Idis is on our side now, aren't you?"

The mercenary's head bobbed. "Free of charge."



Shryne looked at Climber again. "Is your team carrying enough thermal detonators to do the job?"

"Yes, sir."

Salvo still didn't like it. "I strongly recommend that we leave this to the *Gallant*."

Shryne regarded him. "What's the matter, Commander, we're not killing the Separatists in sufficient numbers?"

"In sufficient numbers, General. Just not quickly enough."

"The *Gallant* is still holding at fifty kilometers," Chatak said in a conciliatory tone. "There's time to recon the building."

Salvo demonstrated his displeasure with a shrug of indifference. "It's your funeral if you're wrong."

"That's neither here nor there," Shryne said. "We'll rendezvous with you at rally point Aurek-Bacta. If we don't turn up by the time the *Gallant* arrives, feed them the building's coordinates."

"You can count on it, sir."



MURKHANA HAD BEEN a dangerous world long before it had become a treacherous one. Magistrate Passel Argente had been content to allow crime to flourish, under the condition that the Corporate Alliance and its principal subsidiary, Lethe Merchandising, received their fair share of the action. By the time Argente had joined Count Dooku's secessionist movement and drawn Murkhana into the Confederacy of Independent Systems there was almost no distinguishing the Corporate Alliance's thug tactics from those of Black Sun and similar gangster syndicates, save for the fact that the Alliance was more interested in corporate acquisitions than it was in gambling, racketeering, and the trade in illegal spice.

Where persuasion failed, the Corporate Alliance relied on the tank droid to convince company owners of the wisdom of acceding to offers of corporate takeover, and scores of those dreaded war machines had taken up positions on the steep streets of Murkhana City to thwart Republic occupation.

Shryne knew the place about as well as anyone, but he let the commandos take the point. Dodging blasterfire from battle droids and roving bands of mercenaries, and trusting that the captive fighter had known better than to steer them wrong, the three Jedi followed the four special-ops troopers on a circuitous course through the switchbacked streets. High overhead, laser and ion bolts splashed against the convex energy shields, along with droid craft and

starfighters crippled in the furious dogfights taking place in the clouds.

Shortly the allied team reached the approach avenues of the southernmost of the quartet of bridges that joined the city and the landing platform. Encountering no resistance at the medcenter, they infiltrated the building's soaring atrium. Wan light streamed through tall permaplex windows; dust and debris wafted down to a mosaic floor as the building trembled in concert with the intensifying Republic bombardment.

The particle-filled air buzzed with current from the shield generator, raising the hairs on the back of Shryne's neck. The place looked and felt deserted, but Shryne sent Chatak, Starstone, and two of the commandos to reconnoiter the upper floors, just in case. Still trusting the captive's intelligence, Shryne, Climber, and Ion Team's explosives specialist negotiated a warren of faintly lighted corridors that led to a turbolift the captive had promised would drop them into the shield generator room.

"Sir, I didn't want to say anything in front of General Chatak," Climber said as they were descending, "but it's not often you find a Jedi and a commander at odds about tactics."

Shryne knew that to be true. "Commander Salvo has good instincts. What he lacks is patience." He turned fully to the helmeted commando. "The war's changed some of us, Climber. But the Jedi mandate has always been to keep the peace without killing everyone who stands in the way."

Climber nodded in understanding. "I know of a few commanders who were returned to Kamino for remedial training."

"And I know a few Jedi who could use as much," Shryne said. "Because all of us want this war over and done with." He touched Climber on the arm as the turbolift was coming to a halt. "Apologies up front if this mission turns out to be a waste of time."

“Not a problem, sir. We’ll consider it leave.”

Outside the antigrav shaft, the deafening hum of the generator made it almost impossible to communicate without relying on comlinks. Prizing his from a pouch on his utility belt, Shryne set it to the frequency Climber and his spec-three used to communicate with each other through their helmet links.

Warily, the three of them made their way down an unlighted hallway and ultimately onto a shaky gantry that overlooked the generator room. Most of the cavernous space was occupied by the truncated durasteel pyramid that fed power to the landing platform’s veritable forest of dish-shaped shield projectors.

Macrobinoculars lowered over his tinted visor, Climber scanned the area.

“I count twelve sentries,” he told Shryne through the comlink.

“Add three Koorivar technicians on the far side of the generator,” the spec-three said from his position.

Even without macrobinoculars, Shryne could see that the majority of the guards were mercenaries, humans and humanoids, armed with blaster rifles and vibroblades, the brigade’s signature weapon. Cranial horns—a symbol of status, especially among members of Murkhana’s elite—identified the Koorivar among the group. Three Trade Federation battle droids completed the contingent.

“Generator’s too well protected for us to be covert,” Climber said. “Excuse me for saying so, but maybe Commander Salvo was right about letting the *Gallant* handle this.”

“As I said, he has good instincts.”

“Sir, just because the guards aren’t here for medical care doesn’t mean we can’t make patients of them.”

“Good thinking,” Shryne said. “But we’re three against twelve.”

“You’re good for at least six of them, aren’t you, sir?”

Shryne showed the commando a narrow-eyed grin. "On a good day."

"In the end you and Salvo both get to be right. Even better, we'll be saving the *Gallant* a couple of laser bolts."

Shryne snorted a laugh. "Since you put it that way, Climber."

Climber flashed a series of hand gestures at his munitions expert; then the three of them began to work their way down to the greasy floor.

Surrendering thought and emotion, Shryne settled into the Force. He trusted that the Force would oversee his actions so long as he executed them with determination rather than in anger.

Taking out the guards was merely something that needed to be done.

At Climber's signal he and the spec-three dropped four of the sentries with precisely aimed blaster bolts, then juked into return fire to deal with those who were still standing.

As tenuous as his contact with the Force sometimes was, Shryne was still a master with a sword, and almost thirty years of training had honed his instincts and turned his body into an instrument of tremendous speed and power. The Force guided him to areas of greatest threat, the blue blade of his lightsaber cleaving the thick air, deflecting fire, severing limbs. Moments expanded, allowing him to perceive each individual energy bolt, each flick of a vibroblade. Unflinching intention gave him ample time to see to every danger, and to carry out his task.

His opponents fell to his clean slashes, even one of the droids, whose melted circuitry raised an ozone reek. One mercenary whimpered as he fell backward, air rasping through a hole in his chest, blood leaking from vessels that hadn't been cauterized by the blade's passing.

Another, Shryne was forced to decapitate.

He sensed Climber and the spec-three to either side of him, meeting with similar success, the sibilant sound of their weapons punctuating the shield generator's ceaseless hum.

A droid burst apart, flinging shrapnel.

Shryne evaded a whirling storm of hot alloy that caught a Koorivar full-on, peppering his sallow face and robed torso.

Tumbling out of the reach of a tossed vibroblade, he noticed two of the technicians fleeing for their lives. He was willing to let them go, but the spec-three saw them, as well, and showed them no quarter, cutting both of them down before they had reached the safety of the room's primary turbolift.

With that, the fight began to wind down.

Shryne's breathing and heartbeat were loud in his ears but under control. Thought, however, intruded on his vigilance, and he lowered his guard before he should have.

The shivering blade of a mercenary's knife barely missed him. Spinning on his heel, he swept his attacker's feet out from under him, and in so doing rid the human of his left foot. The merc howled, his eyes going wide at the sight, and he lashed out with both hands, inadvertently knocking the lightsaber from Shryne's grip and sending it skittering across the floor.

Some distance away, Climber had been set upon by a battle droid and two mercenaries. The droid had been taken out, but its sparking shell had collapsed on top of Climber, pinning his right hand and blaster rifle, and the pair of mercs were preparing to finish him off.

Climber managed to hold one of his would-be killers at bay with well-placed kicks, even while he dodged a blaster bolt that ricocheted from the floor and the canted face of the shield generator. Rushing onto the scene, the spec-three went hand-to-hand with the merc Climber had booted