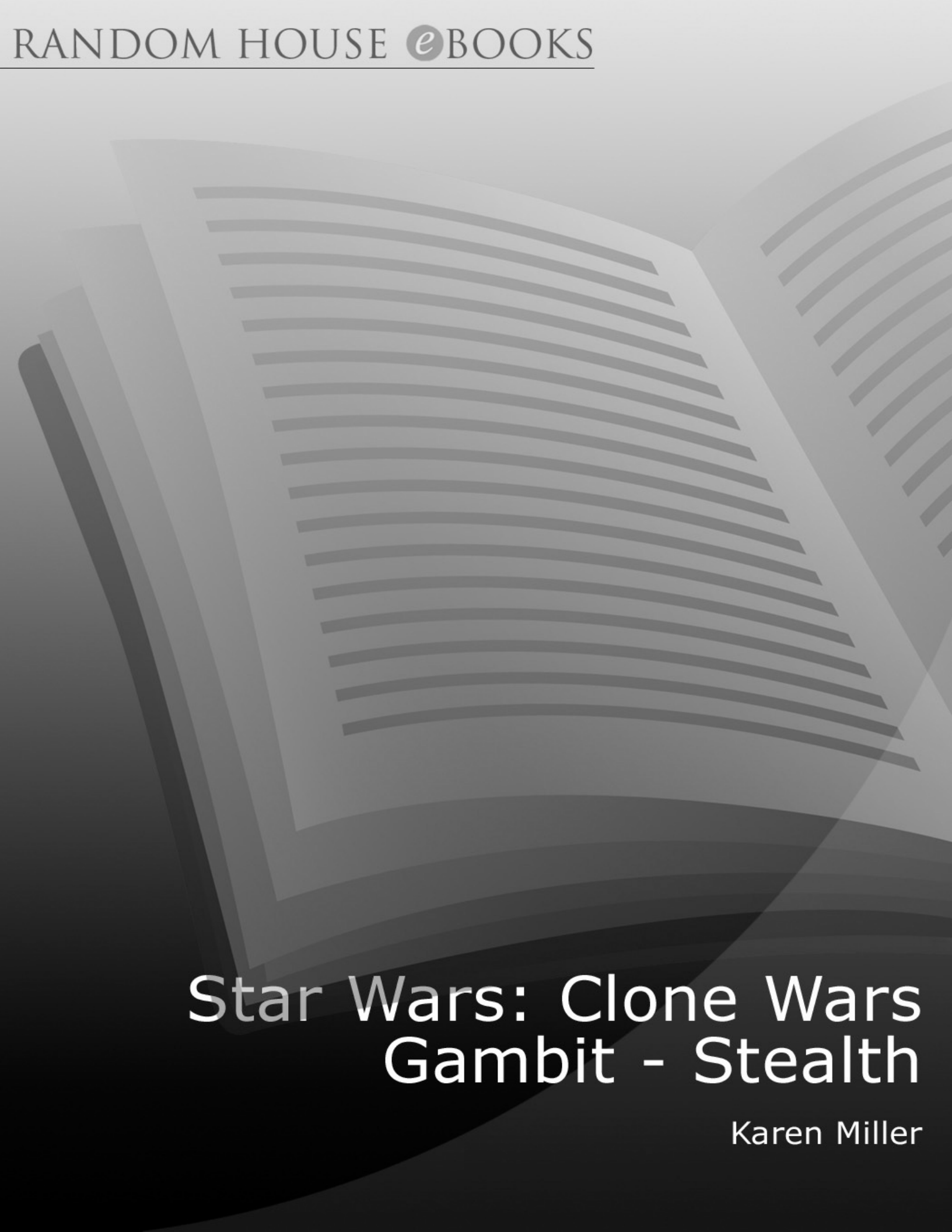


RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Star Wars: Clone Wars Gambit - Stealth

Karen Miller

Contents

About the Author
Also by Karen Miller
Title Page
Dedication
Acknowledgments
Dramatis Personae

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty

Copyright

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™ : 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: STEALTH



KAREN MILLER



arrow books

*To the fans of that galaxy far, far away,
who have made me so welcome*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



Shelly Shapiro at Del Rey, for her unwavering support and guidance. Sue Rostoni at Lucasfilm Ltd., for being such a fabulous gatekeeper. The support teams of Del Rey and Lucasfilm Ltd., for helping to keep us writers on track. Karen Traviss, for lighting the way. Jason Fry, Mary Webber, and James Gilmer, for their insights.

THE STAR WARS NOVELS TIMELINE



5000 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Lost Tribe of the Sith:
Precipice
Skyborn
Paragon

1020

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Darth Bane: Path of Destruction
Darth Bane: Rule of Two
Darth Bane: Dynasty of Evil



33 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Darth Maul: Saboteur*

32.5

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Cloak of Deception
Darth Maul: Shadow Hunter

32

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
**STAR WARS: EPISODE I
THE PHANTOM MENACE**

29

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Rogue Planet

27

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Outbound Flight

22.5

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
The Approaching Storm

22-19

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
**STAR WARS: EPISODE II
ATTACK OF THE CLONES**

The Clone Wars
The Clone Wars: Wild Space
The Clone Wars: No Prisoners
Clone Wars Gambit: Stealth

Republic Commando

Hard Contact

Triple Zero

True Colors

Order 66

Imperial Commando

501st

Shatterpoint

The Cestus Deception

The Hive*

MedStar I: Battle Surgeons

MedStar II: Jedi Healer

Jedi Trial

Yoda: Dark Rendezvous

Labyrinth of Evil

**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

10-0

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
The Han Solo Trilogy:
The Paradise Snare
The Hutt Gambit
Rebel Dawn

5-1

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
The Adventures of Lando
Calrissian
The Han Solo Adventures
The Force: Unleashed
Death Troopers



STAR WARS: A New Hope YEAR 0

Death Star

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

0-3

YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: 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

3.5

YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope
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

5

YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope
Luke Skywalker and the Shadows of
Mindor



6.5-7.5 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

X-Wing:

Rogue Squadron

Wedge's Gamble

The Krytos Trap

The Bacta Wa

Wraith Squadron

Iron Fist

Solo Command

8

YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope
The Courtship of Princess Leia
A Forest Apart*
Tatooine Ghost

9

YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope
The Thrawn Trilogy:

Heir to the Empire

Dark Force Rising

The Last Command

X-Wing: Isard's Revenge

11

YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope
The Jedi Academy Trilogy:

Jedi Search

Dark Apprentice

Champions of the Force

I, Jedi

12-13

YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope
Children of the Jedi

Darksaber

Planet of Twilight

X-Wing: Starfighters of Adumar

14

YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope
The Crystal Star

16-17

YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope
The Black Fleet Crisis Trilogy:

Before the Storm

Shield of Lies

Tyrant's Test

17

YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope
The New Rebellion

18

YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope
The Corellian Trilogy:

Ambush at Corellia

Assault at Selonia

Showdown at Centerpoint

19

YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope
The Hand of Thrawn Duology:

Specter of the Past

Vision of the Future

22

YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope
Fool's Bargain*

Survivor's Quest



25 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

The Dark Nest Trilogy:

The Joiner King

The Unseen Queen

The Swarm War



40 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Legacy of the Force:

Betrayal

Bloodlines

Tempest

Exile

Sacrifice

Inferno

Fury

Revelation

Invincible

Millennium Falcon

Crosscurrent

Fate of the Jedi:

Outcast

Omen

Abyss

Backlash

*An ebook novella

DRAMATIS PERSONAE



hsoka Tano; Jedi Padawan (Togruta female)
nakin Skywalker; Jedi Knight (human male)
ail Organa; Senator from Alderaan (human male)
ant'ena Fhernan; scientist first level (human female)
ok Durd; Separatist general (Neimoidian male)
bi-Wan Kenobi; Jedi Knight (human male)
admé Amidala; Senator from Naboo (human female)
alpatine; Supreme Chancellor of the Republic (human male)
aria Damsin; Jedi Master (human female)
vullf Yularen; Admiral for the Republic (human male)
oda; Grand Master of the Jedi Order (nonhuman male)

ONE



AS FAR AS Ahsoka Tano was concerned, the only thing worse than being up to her armpits in battle droids was waiting to find out just how long it would be before she was up to her armpits in battle droids. She *hated* waiting. But it seemed that war was all about waiting—at least, when it wasn't about staring death in the face.

But I'm not scared. I'm not scared. I'm not scared. I'm not ...

With *Resolute* out of rotation for a refit, she stood on the bridge of *Indomitable*, one of the next generation of cruisers to come out of the Allanteen VI shipyards. Cruisers that were faster and more responsive than ever before, thanks to her Master's—what had the chief shipwright called it? Oh yes. *Tinkering*. Thanks to Anakin's tinkering, the new vessels were a definite cut above the first Republic Cruisers that had rolled out of production for service in this war against Dooku and his Separatist Alliance.

The differences had been noted, and were talked about whenever and wherever military types crossed paths—in battle, in briefings, sharing some chitchat and a drink in this mess or that one, or even the occasional civilian bar. The Jedi who fought on the front lines were talking about them, too. Everyone who relied on the massive Republic warships knew that their odds of survival had increased because Jedi Knight Anakin Skywalker liked to muck about

with machines—when he wasn't busy being the scourge of the Separatists.

Anakin.

That's how she thought of him now, after arduous months of fighting by his side, learning from him, saving him, and being saved by him. But she never called him that to his face. She *couldn't*. The idea of saying *Anakin* felt more disrespectful than a cheeky nickname. *Skyguy* was familiar but it wasn't ... *intimate*.

First names were intimate. They implied equality. But she and her Master weren't equals. She suspected they never would be. She was pretty sure that no matter how hard she trained, how hard she tried, even after she'd passed the trials and been made a Jedi Knight, she would never come close to matching him as a Jedi.

How can I? He's the Chosen One. He can do things that aren't meant to be possible.

She snuck a sideways look at him, standing on the far side of *Indomitable's* bridge in hushed conversation with Master Kenobi and Admiral Yularen. Letting down her habitual guard the tiniest bit, she prepared to stretch out her senses. To feel what he was feeling behind his carefully constructed mask. It wasn't prying. She didn't *pry*. As a Padawan it was her job—no, her *duty*—to make sure her Master was well. To be constantly attuned to his mood so she could anticipate his needs and more perfectly serve him. Since joining Anakin on Christophsis she'd lost count of the times that keeping a close eye on him had made the difference between success and failure. Life and death. Young she might be, and still in training, but she could do that. She was *good* at that.

Besides, once assigned to this man she'd made her own private and personal vow quite apart from the public oaths she'd sworn in the Jedi Temple.

I will not be the Padawan who gets the Chosen One killed.

Around her, the bridge crew conducted its military business with brisk efficiency. No chatter, since the admiral was present. When Yularen was elsewhere his officers sometimes indulged in a little gossip, a few jokes, a smattering of idle wartime speculation. Nothing detrimental to discipline, nothing un toward, just harmless camaraderie to help while away the tedium of days, like this one, when battle was yet to be joined and the void beyond the transparisteel viewports remained empty of enemy ships and impending slaughter.

She could hear, humming in the background, all the baffling hardware that made these warships possible. Sensor sweeps and multiphasic duo-diode relays and cognizant crystal interfaces and quasi-sentient droid links and—and *stuff*. So *much* stuff, and it made no sense to her. The slippery info-laneways of computers she could work with, but she didn't possess any kind of knack for nuts-and-bolts-and-circuits machinery—constructing her own lightsaber had nearly given her a nosebleed. Anakin, on the other hand ...

Machinery was meat and drink to Anakin. He loved it.

But she was letting herself become distracted, so she pushed those thoughts aside. Her immediate task was to ascertain what Anakin was feeling. That way she'd have a better idea of what to expect from him when the news they were waiting for at last came through ... and an idea of how best to deal with him, once it did. Dealing with her Master's sometimes overpowering emotions was becoming more and more a part of her duties—and as the war dragged on, and their losses piled up, that job wasn't getting any easier.

He feels too much, too keenly. Maybe that's what happens when you've got the highest midi-chlorian count in Jedi history. Maybe that's the trade-off. You feel everything, so you're brilliant. You feel everything, and it hurts.

Not that his emotions got in the way. At least, *he* didn't think they did. And to be honest, she didn't, either. At least not as often as some people thought. Like Master Kenobi, for example, who chided his former Padawan for taking crazy risks, for pushing himself too hard, for letting things matter too much and losing his carefully measured Jedi distance.

She didn't always disagree. And sometimes, when Anakin had given her a really bad fright or when his mood became difficult, she wished she could chide him, too. But as a Padawan she had to find another way to let her Master know he'd gone too far. So she sassed him, or invented nicknames that were guaranteed to get under his skin. Sometimes she even deliberately flouted his wishes. Anything to break him free of sorrow or frustration or some bleak memory he refused to share. Anything to let him know, *Hey, what you did then? That was stupid.*

But mostly she kept her fears for him to herself, because all his bright and burning passion for justice, his reckless courage, his hunger for victory and his refusal to accept defeat—they were what made him *Anakin*. He wouldn't *be* Anakin without his feelings. She knew that, she accepted that, no matter what Temple teachings said about the Jedi and their emotions.

And even though he scolds, I think Master Kenobi accepts it, too. He only scolds because he cares.

So ... what was her brilliant, sometimes volatile Master feeling now?

Eyes drifted half closed, Ahsoka breathed out a soft sigh and let her growing Jedi awareness touch lightly upon him.

Impatience. Concern. Relief. Loneliness. Weariness. And grief, not yet healed.

Such a muddle of emotions. Such a weight on his shoulders. Months of brutal battle had left her drained and nearly numb, but it was worse for Anakin. He was a Jedi general with countless lives entrusted to his care, and

every life damaged or lost he counted as a personal failure. For other people he found forgiveness; for himself there was none. For himself there was only anger at not meeting his own exacting standards.

Feeling helpless, she chewed at her lip. She didn't know what she could do to make anything *better* for him. She couldn't heal his grief for the clones who'd fallen under his command, or the civilians he'd been unable to save. She couldn't make him less tired, or order him home to Coruscant where his mood always lightened. She couldn't promise the war would end soon, with the Republic victorious.

At least he had Master Kenobi's company for a little while. She was sure that accounted for his relief. They cheered each other up, those two. No matter how dire the straits, Anakin and Master Kenobi always managed to find a joke, a laugh, some way to ease the tension and pressure of the moment. Between the two men lay absolute trust. Absolute faith. Now, *they* were equals. On the outside, looking in, she couldn't help feeling a little forlorn.

Will he ever feel that way about me? Will he ever believe in me the way he believes in Obi-Wan?

She opened her eyes to find Anakin looking at her. Though she'd tried so hard to be discreet, still he'd felt her sensing of him. She held her breath, expecting a reprimand. Anakin *hated* when she did this.

But no reprimand came. Instead her Master raised a tolerantly amused eyebrow at her ... and in his eyes was a kind of tired appreciation. She felt herself shrug, a tiny twitch of one shoulder, and curved her lips into a small, rueful, *I can't help it* smile.

He took a breath, he was going to say something—but then his head lifted. So did Master Kenobi's. A few moments later she felt it, too: a sharp, almost painful tingle of awareness. Something was coming. And a few moments

after *that*, the comm officer straightened in her chair and pressed a finger to the transceiver plugged into her ear.

"Sir—"

Admiral Yularen, lean and predatory as ever, and alerted already by the Jedi on either side of him, practically leapt for the comm station. "Lieutenant Avrey?"

The slight, blond officer danced her fingers over the ship's comm panel, frowning, then gave a pleased nod. "Sir, I have an incoming message from the Jedi Council, Priority Alpha."

"Recorded or real-time?"

The lieutenant checked. "Recorded, sir. Sent by triple-coded multiple-routed shortburst."

Priority Alpha. Skin prickling, senses jittering, Ahsoka held her breath. This was it. This was what they'd been waiting for as they dangled idly out here for hours in the middle of nowhere, an empty stretch of space on the border between the Expansion Region and the galactic Mid Rim, parsecs from anywhere remotely civilized.

This is it.

Yularen's nod was swift and grim. "Very good, Lieutenant. Master Kenobi?"

"I think we'll take this one in the Battle Operations Room, Admiral," Master Kenobi said. His voice was mild, completely unperturbed, as though an Alpha transmission from the Council came along once or twice a day ... instead of only as a last-resort emergency.

Ahsoka eyed him with unbecoming envy. *One of these years I'm going to be as untwitchy as him.* "Masters—"

"Yes, Padawan, *we* means *you*," said Anakin. "So what are you waiting for?"

She nearly said, *An invitation.* The smart remark was awfully tempting. He'd practically asked for it. But she held her tongue, because she was no longer that uncertain, mouthy Padawan who'd met her new Master in the midst of battle on Christophsis. She'd changed. Grown. Smart

remarks at a time like this weren't funny. They were disruptive and unhelpful and they made her mentor look bad.

She'd learned that lesson from Clone Captain Rex.

"Lieutenant," said Admiral Yularen, sounding almost as calm as Master Kenobi. "Comm the captains of *Pioneer* and *Coruscant Sky*. Stand by for orders, battle alert."

"Yes, Admiral," said the comm officer. Color washed into her space-white face. All around the bridge the crew snapped to stricter attention. The scrubbed air tightened with a palpable anticipation.

Yularen flicked a tight smile at Anakin and Master Kenobi. "Lead the way, gentlemen."

With an effort Ahsoka smoothed her expression into uncaring blandness, hating that Anakin and Master Kenobi could sense her true feelings. As her Jedi superiors and the admiral swept past her she fell into step behind them, lightsaber bouncing lightly against her hip. Her mouth was dry—how annoying. She'd seen plenty of action since the start of the war; surely she should be *bored* by this now. But no. Her body betrayed her with a dry mouth and a racing heart, and sweat slicking the skin between her shoulder blades.

Soon we'll be fighting. And if I make a mistake I'll get Anakin killed.

"Ahsoka," said Anakin, not even looking over his shoulder. "How many times do I have to tell you? Our thoughts create our reality. Cut it out."

He always knew. "Sorry, Master."

It wasn't far from the bridge to the Battle Operations Room, just one short corridor and a single flight of stairs. As soon as they were ranged around the broad central holodisplay table, Admiral Yularen toggled his comm to the bridge.

"Patch it through, Lieutenant."

The holoimagers blinked on, bright blue-white light against the Battle Room's muted illumination. The air above the holodisplay shivered, mirage-like, and then an image flickered, partially disintegrated, flickered again, and finally coalesced into a recognizable form.

Master Yoda.

"Confirmation we have, Master Kenobi, of the initial report," said the Jedi Order's most respected Master. *"Misled the Special Operations Brigade was not. A target have Dooku and Grievous made of Kothlis and its spynet facility. In Republic hands must they remain, for compromised the Mid Rim cannot be. Once the strength of the enemy you have determined, call for reinforcements you can if defeating Grievous without them is not possible. But contact the Council in real time do not until Kothlis you have reached. Stealth and secrecy are our most potent weapons. Use them wisely. May the Force be with you."*

Master Yoda's image winked out.

"Well," said Master Kenobi, breaking the tense silence. "This is going to be interesting."

Anakin frowned. "What reinforcements? Our people are scattered from one side of the Republic to the other."

"Coryx Moth is on patrol near Falleen, is she not? That's the closest—"

"One ship?" Anakin shook his head. "Obi-Wan—"

"It's better than nothing, Anakin."

Anakin didn't think so, if the look on his face was anything to go by. He scowled at Master Kenobi and Master Kenobi stared back, his expression unreadable.

"I'm sorry, but Master Yoda's message is too cryptic for my tastes," said Admiral Yularen. One narrow finger stroked his mustache, a sure sign he was uneasy. "Bitter experience has taught us we can't attack Grievous with anything less than overwhelming force. Not if we wish to finish him once and for all—and avoid a catastrophic level of loss on our side."

“And in an ideal galaxy we would have that overwhelming force at our disposal,” said Master Kenobi, arms decisively folded. “Alas, Admiral, this galaxy of ours is far from ideal. And cryptic or not, we have our orders. Yoda’s right—we must keep Kothlis out of Separatist hands.”

“I know that,” said Yularen curtly. “But the notion we can’t call for support until we’re in the thick of the fight? We all know that’ll likely be too late.”

“True,” said Anakin, stirring out of somber thought. “But we’ll have to live with it. In fact—” He shot the admiral a dark look. “I think we’ll have to think twice about calling for help at all. Because if someone does come to our aid, it means somewhere else gets left undefended.”

Yularen bristled. “What? You want me to risk this battle group—three cruisers—against—”

“I beat him with three cruisers last time,” said Anakin, deceptively mild.

“I know!” Yularen retorted. “And that would be my point, General Skywalker. Grievous isn’t stupid. He learns from his mistakes. He’s going to make sure he has more than enough firepower to easily take us down! I’m not prepared to risk—”

“I’m sorry, Admiral,” said Master Kenobi, still calm. “But I’m afraid you might have to. Anakin’s made a good point. What we’d prefer hardly factors in to this. We simply don’t have spare battle groups idling about.”

Abandoning his mustache, Yularen drummed his fingers on the edge of the holodisplay table, angrily resentful of the cold, hard facts. “I know. I know. I’m just—” He sighed. “I don’t like it. That’s all I’m saying.”

“We should comm Grievous, then,” said Anakin, his eyes glittering in the dull light. “Let him know his plans are inconvenient. Ask him to make sure he only sends in a couple of—”

“Anakin,” said Master Kenobi quietly.

"Sorry," said Anakin, and made a visible effort to relax his gloved prosthetic hand. "I'm a bit ... on edge."

Ahsoka looked at him from under lowered lashes, feeling his agitation as a hot breeze blowing over her skin. *No kidding.*

"So," her Master added. "I guess now we head for Kothlis."

"Without further delay," said Master Kenobi. "Admiral?"

Yularen nodded, his face grave. Resigned now to what had to be done, no matter how hard he found it. "Agreed. And with any luck we'll beat Grievous to the punch and be waiting for him. Even the smallest advantage might make the difference for us." He toggled the comm button again. "Lieutenant Avrey? We have a mission."

While Yularen relayed battle group orders with staccato speed, Master Kenobi drew Anakin aside with a glance. "I suggest we play to our strengths on this one, Anakin," he said, his voice low. "If we do reach Kothlis and find that Grievous has stolen a march on us, it's likely we'll be looking at both air and ground assaults. Should that prove to be the case, I suggest you lead the fighter squadrons and I'll take care of the ground assault with Captain Rex and our clone trooper companies."

Anakin almost had his edginess under control. Just a hint of disquiet churned in him now, like water on the brink of boiling. "And if we've stolen a march on him?"

"In that case," said Master Kenobi, his expression fastidious with distaste, "I shall join you in leading the fighters against Grievous's pilots."

Ahsoka watched them exchange quick smiles, then cleared her throat. "Um—Masters? What about me?"

They stared at her, startled, as though for a moment they'd forgotten she existed. In the silence she heard—felt—the shift in the warship's sublight drives as they broke their stationary position, getting ready for the hyperjump to Kothlis. Washing in its wake, the subliminal buzz through

the Force as every sentient being on all three cruisers accepted the reality of imminent battle. Possible death. It was a song sung without words, in a minor key. Haunting. Sorrowful. Shot through with stark courage.

"You, Ahsoka?" said Anakin, blinking himself free of the same thing she was feeling. "If it comes to a ground assault, you'll fight with Obi-Wan and Rex. And if it doesn't, you'll stay here on *Indomitable*."

Stay behind? While he threw himself heedless into danger? "But—"

Anakin's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Don't argue."

Not fair, not fair, she raged in silence.

"Ahsoka ..." Anakin gentled his tone. "This isn't about your competence. I know what you can do. But we have plenty of pilots. Your skills will be better utilized here."

"Master Skywalker's right," said Admiral Yularen. Finished giving his orders, he was unabashedly listening in. "If you do remain aboard ship, there'll be a tactical targeting array with your name on it." He unbent far enough to offer her a small, not un-sympathetic smile. "I've yet to meet a Jedi who couldn't out-sense our best sensors."

"But it's more likely you'll be needed on the ground," added Master Kenobi. "With me. I do hope the prospect's not unbearable, Padawan."

He was being sarcastic. She felt her cheeks burn. Anakin was watching her closely. If she protested again, she'd disappoint him.

"Not unbearable at all, Master Kenobi," she said, staring at the deck. "Serving by your side is always an honor." She risked glancing up. "It's only—"

"I know," said Master Kenobi, more kindly. "You worry for Anakin's safety. But there's no need. And now the subject is closed." He turned to Yularen. "What's our estimated jump time to Kothlis?"

"Thirty-eight standard minutes," said the admiral. "I'm dropping us out of hyperspace just inside sensor range of

their spynet. Close enough for us to contact them, and to sweep for Sep ships if we have beaten Grievous there."

"Our own intelligence agents will have alerted the Kothlis Bothans to the danger they're in," said Anakin, frowning again. "For all the good it'll do them. Without a standing army or space fleet of their own, they're ripe for plucking." His gloved prosthetic hand clenched. "I should've seen this coming. I should've known Grievous wouldn't forgive or forget the insult of losing to me at Bothawui. This is a rematch—and you know he's itching for the fight. If we lose Kothlis to him—if he manages to breach the Mid Rim ..."

"Don't let your thoughts run ahead to disaster, Anakin," said Master Kenobi sharply. "As you say, you defeated Grievous once. There's no reason to think you—we— can't defeat him again."

Anakin's chin lifted at the reprimand. Ahsoka, watching him, felt her breath hitch, felt the flash of fury sizzle through him. And then he relaxed, pulling a wry face.

"Sorry," he said. "You're right. I should know better."

"Thirty-eight minutes," said Master Kenobi, his eyes warm now. "Give or take. Just enough time, I think, for a little pre-battle meditation. You're not the only one who's feeling a trifle on edge, my friend. I could do with some refocusing myself."

"You?" Anakin's eyebrows shot up. "I find that hard to believe."

Master Kenobi rested his hand briefly on Anakin's shoulder. "Believe it, Anakin. You know how much I hate to fly."

"I think you just say that," Anakin retorted, grinning. "You couldn't be such a good pilot if you hated flying as much as you claim."

Master Kenobi grimaced. "Trust me, if I'm a good pilot it's out of a well-developed sense of self-preservation. As

far as I'm concerned, Anakin, anyone who actually *enjoys* flying is in serious need of therapeutic counseling."

Anakin was struggling not to laugh. "If you're not careful I'll tell Gold Squadron you said that. So—are we going to navel-gaze or aren't we?"

"Please excuse us, Admiral," said Master Kenobi, the amusement dying out of his face. "And look for us on the bridge ten minutes before the battle group drops out of hyperspace."

Admiral Yularen nodded. "Of course, General. In the meantime I'll have the fighters and gunships prepped for flight."

"Ahsoka," said Anakin, as Master Kenobi headed for the Battle Room's closed hatch. "Make yourself useful and give Rex the heads-up, will you? Run through the pre-battle routine with him and his men. Half of Torrent Company's still a bit green. They'll settle with you there."

Under his careless confidence, she sensed a hint of that unhealed grief. The loss of greenies Vere and Ince during the Jan-Fathal mission ... the loss of other Torrent Company clones since then ... his pain was like a kiplin-burr, burrowed deep in his flesh. Anakin had a bad habit of nursing those wounds, and no matter what she said, tactfully, no matter what Master Kenobi said without any tact at all, nothing made a difference. He hurt for them, and always would.

"Yes, Master," she said. She waited for him to leave so she could sprint to midships and let Rex know that like as not they'd soon be going into battle together. Again.

"SO, WHAT'S THE SKINNY, little'un?" Rex asked, as Ahsoka skidded into the mess hall. "Since we're on the move at last, have we got that clanker Grievous in our sights?"

"Sort of," she said, dropping into a spare chair beside Checkers, one of Torrent Company's latest additions.

“We’ve confirmed the preliminary intel—he’s definitely after Kothlis. Now it’s a race to see who gets there first.”

Rex’s perfect teeth bared in a feral smile. “Ah. Then it’s game on.”

The crowded barracks mess hall erupted into muttering and exclamation. Force-sensing from habit, Ahsoka tasted the clones’ swirling emotions. A little caution. A lot of excitement. At first she’d thought the Republic’s clone soldiers welcomed battle because they had no choice—because they’d been genetically programmed to fight and not question that duty. But while that was an uncomfortable truth, one she found herself wrestling with more and more as the war dragged on, it was also true that most of the clones she knew enjoyed combat—and not because some Kaminoan scientist had tweaked a test tube and made sure they would. No. They enjoyed winning. Outsmarting the enemy. Liberating citizens who were being used as pawns by Count Dooku, and Nute Gunray, and the other shadowy leaders of the Separatist Alliance.

Was it so hard to believe, really? Saving the innocent—that *did* feel good. Besting—or surviving—lethal foes like Asajj Ventress? Like Grievous? That felt good, too. She knew Anakin and Master Kenobi deplored this war, deplored the senseless loss of life, the suffering ... but she wasn’t blind. She’d seen in their faces the exhilaration that came with victory. It was no less real than their grief when lives were lost. She’d felt it, too. She’d celebrated when vicious, venal beings were defeated.

It’s so complicated. If war is wrong, how come we can find moments of pleasure and triumph in it? Isn’t there something ... twisted ... in that?

Disturbed by the thought, she heard herself whimper in her throat, just a little bit. And that alarmed her so much she crushed the notion, savagely. *Little fool.* It was exactly the wrong thing to be thinking when they were racing through hyperspace to confront that monster Grievous and

save the helpless people of Kothlis from Separatist enslavement—or worse.

Ahsoka Tano, you know better.

Rex was deep in conversation with Sergeant Coric, so she turned to Checkers. He might be a newcomer to Torrent Company, but he wasn't a greenie clone. The deep scarring on his right cheek attested to previous combat experience ... as did that certain glint in his eye. The same glint she sometimes saw in Rex, and Coric, and any number of Torrent Company's men. It set them apart as soldiers who'd been fought to a standstill, who'd stared down death—and survived.

Checkers felt her gaze on him and looked up. "Ma'am?"

She blinked. "Oh, I'm not a ma'am."

"What, then?" said Checkers, with a wry half smile. "Something tells me I won't get away with *little'un*."

"You can call me Ahsoka," she said, charmed. "Everyone else does."

"Ahsoka it is, then," he replied. "Togruta, aren't you?"

"That's right. Checkers, can I ask how you got here? I mean, how did you get assigned to Torrent Company?"

Checkers flicked a glance at his fellow clones talking among themselves in the mess hall, pursed his lips for a moment, then seemed to reach a decision. His face relaxed, and his shoulders settled. "I requested the transfer. Used to be in Laser Company, under General Fisto."

Oh. "Is that when you were wounded?" she asked, her voice small. "In the Kessel encounter?"

His fingers came up, touching lightly to the bubbled scarring under his eye. "That's right."

"I knew there was only one clone survivor, but I didn't realize that was you."

He shrugged. "No reason you should. You weren't here when I joined Torrent, and there's no point talking about it. Can't undo what happened."

"But there's still a Laser Company, isn't there?" she said, frowning. "I thought Master Fisto—"

"There is," said Checkers, with another shrug. "But I wanted a clean break. After they got through patching me up at the clone medfacility, they offered me a posting of my choice."

"And you chose Torrent Company?" Charmed all over again, she couldn't help smiling, even though his terse story covered a chasm of pain and loss. "Don't get me wrong, I'm glad, but—why?"

"Not because I blamed General Fisto," Checkers said quickly. "Don't think that, Ahsoka." His dark-eyed gaze shifted and came to rest on Rex, still talking logistics with Sergeant Coric. "The truth is I want to survive this war. That means serving under the best officer I can find."

Checkers was keeping his voice down, but Rex still heard that last comment. Startled, he broke off whatever he was saying to Coric and shifted in his chair. Seeing *and* feeling his barely muffled astonishment, Ahsoka grinned. It wasn't easy to rattle Rex ... and she did find it comforting to know he *could* be rattled. At least when they weren't on the front lines, facing death.

"Stow the chatter," he snapped. "We're on the chrono."

Silence claimed the mess hall, abrupt as a cut comlink. Ahsoka winced at the suddenly ratcheted tension buzzing through the Force like a vibroblade. It made her teeth ache and her vision blur.

"Ahsoka," Rex added, skewering her with his most direct, no-nonsense stare. "What's our ETA at Kothlis?"

She checked her almost infallible Jedi time-sense. "Twenty-three minutes, Captain."

"Ground assault's confirmed?"

"Not confirmed, but highly possible. If the Seps have beaten us there and started an invasion of Kothlis, General Kenobi will handle the counteroffensive while my Master and Shadow Company clear the skies."

Rex nodded. "That means you're with us? Good." His gaze swept the hall. "Then we need to gear up. Torrent Company—get to work!"

Within a heartbeat the mood changed again. Lingering anxiety and uncertainty disappeared in a wave of purposeful action as Rex's men began the familiar countdown to combat.

Because she couldn't help with that, because she couldn't do anything now but wait, Ahsoka got out of the way. She perched herself in a corner and tried, like Anakin, to calm herself with meditation. Which was fine, mostly—except one thought kept intruding, over and over.

May the Force be with us. And please, please, don't let my actions get any of these clones killed.

TWO



"IT'S NO GOOD, Admiral," said Lieutenant Avrey, Flushed with dismay. "I'm sorry. I don't know how they're doing it but the Seps have every comm channel jammed, even our internal network. We're silent across the board."

Yularen glared at her. "That's unacceptable, Lieutenant. Find the problem and fix it."

"Sir—" The comm officer's face lost its hectic color. "Yes, sir. I'll do my best."

As Yularen swallowed an unprofessional response, Anakin looked to Obi-Wan. His former Master raised an eyebrow, resigned. "This time the advantage goes to the enemy," he murmured. "It's going to get ugly, I fear."

Beyond the bridge's main viewport Grievous's new flagship and its four satellite cruisers hung low and threatening above the Bothan colony world of Kothlis. Two of the planet's three small moons were completely obscured by Grievous's fleet, and the void of space lit up at haphazard intervals as the Separatist general's invasion troops blasted a path through the thin belt of asteroids ringing their intended target, bullying their blundering, unopposed way toward the planet's undefended surface.

Joining his Jedi colleagues, Yularen blew out a furious breath. "We've never lost communications like this before. They've upgraded their countermeasures. How in the Nine Hells are they getting their intel?"

"That's an excellent question, Admiral," said Obi-Wan. "And we need to find the answer—just as soon as we've dealt with General Grievous."

"Obviously—but how can we do that if we can't talk to one another?" Yularen demanded. "And if it turns out we're outgunned and we're not able to send for reinforcements, how can we *possibly*—"

"Sir!" said Lieutenant Avrey, crawling out from under her comm console, her light hair darkened with sweat and grime. "Sir, I think it's a virus."

Yularen swung around. "How serious?"

With a grunt and a swipe of her sleeve across her face, Avrey scrambled to her feet. "It's corrupted the comm software, Admiral. As far as I can tell we've got ship-to-ship tightbeam—and most likely the clone troops' helmet tightbeam will work, too. Aside from that—" She shrugged. "We've been gagged. And the systems diagnostic can't recognize the virus coding. I can tell you it's complex and multi-stranded—three quadruple helixes at least—self-replicating on a random cycle and specifically targeted to our systems."

For a moment Anakin thought Yularen was going to burst a blood vessel. "*And it's on my ship?*" He turned, every muscle rigid. "General Skywalker—"

"Admiral, each new cruiser tested clean before it left Allanteen Six," Anakin said. "And none of my modifications could've introduced a virus. In fact, I designed blind-alley redundancies to make sure something like this couldn't happen." He glanced at Obi-Wan. "And if they've failed, that means—"

"Sabotage," said Obi-Wan, his eyes bleak. "The Seps must have infiltrated our shipyards."

Silence followed as they digested that unpalatable fact.

"Avrey, can you fix this?" said Yularen. "I can't send men into harm's way without communication."

Seated again at her console, Avrey looked up from punching in a swift succession of commands. "Admiral, I'm initiating a systemwide purge but it'll take time—and I don't know how effective it'll be. I've never seen a virus like this. I'm almost positive it was remotely activated—probably from Grievous's command ship as soon as we jumped into range. Whoever designed it—they're a genius. For all I know—" Breaking off as her console beeped and flashed, she adjusted her earpiece, listened for a moment, then turned back to them. "Tightbeams from *Pioneer* and *Coruscant Sky*. They report the same problem, Admiral. Battle group comms are down."

"Is there nothing you can do, Lieutenant?" said Obi-Wan. "No other solution but trusting this purge?"

Avrey dragged her fingers through her hair. "I don't think so, General. I don't—"

"What?" said Yularen, stepping closer to his officer. For all his formidable self-discipline, a note of hope sounded in his voice. "I know that look, Lieutenant."

She flicked him a frowning glance. Anakin, focusing all his senses on her, felt trepidation and a faint buzz of cautious optimism. "Sir, I did my Academy dissertation on pre-praxis crystal bio-anode circuitry," the lieutenant said. "The technology's years out of date, it's practically ancient history, but the theory's still sound."

"If it's ancient history, how can it help us?" Yularen demanded. "I need solutions, Lieutenant, not—"

"This might be a solution, Admiral," she said, meeting his hot gaze unflinching. "For all the upgrades and improvements we've got around here, I'm pretty sure we've still got some of that circuitry on board—in the waste core's tertiary adjunct conduits. They're another kind of triple redundancy. Pre-praxis bio-anodes used to have comm applications. If I can strip them out and rig them into the comm console, I think I can punch a signal through subspace strong enough to reach Coruscant."

Yularen stared at her. "You *think*?"

"Sir," said Avrey, the remaining color draining from her cheeks. "I know."

"You're saying you can restore communication?"

A muscle leapt along Avrey's narrow jaw. "I'm saying we've got a better than even shot at it, yes, sir."

"How long, Lieutenant?"

"To rig *Indomitable*? An hour, give or take."

"Then another two hours for *Pioneer* and *Coruscant Sky*?" Yularen shook his head, frustrated. "That's three hours neither we nor Kothlis have to spare. Have you looked through the viewport? Grievous's forces are invading as we speak."

"Lieutenant," said Obi-Wan, mildly, as though they weren't facing an utter disaster. "Can you tightbeam detailed instructions for the comm officers on our other two ships? If all three of you work simultaneously, your plan might still succeed in time to do us some good."

Avrey snapped out of her almost imperceptible slump. "Yes, General Kenobi. I can do that."

"Then get on to it," said Yularen. "Every minute wasted means more lost lives."

"Wait," said Anakin, abruptly unsettled. *I have a bad feeling ...* "What about our fighters? And the larties?"

"They should be unaffected, General," said the lieutenant. "They're not linked into our comm systems."

He looked at Obi-Wan. "No. But if Grievous can remotely activate a computer virus—"

"Then he might have the power to jam our ship comms," said Obi-Wan. There was unease in him now, too, the bad feeling shared. "Despite our anti-jamming precautions. I suggest we find out before we launch an attack."

Leaving dourly silent Yularen and frantically working Lieutenant Avrey, Obi-Wan and Anakin made their way to *Indomitable's* flight deck. The hangar's deckhands, on standby now that they'd prepped the fighters, watched