THE NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING SERIES

STAR WARS. THE HIGH REPUBLIC



QUEST FOR THE HIDDEN CITY

GEORGE MANN

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QUEST FOR THE HIDDEN CITY

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NILAH MAGRUDER



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For Ems—keep being true to yourself, kiddo. Dad's got your back.

Contents

Title Page

Copyright

Dedication

Introduction

Star Wars Timeline

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

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Twenty-Five

Chapter Twenty-Six

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Chapter Thirty

Chapter Thirty-One

Chapter Thirty-Two

About the Author

About the Illustrator

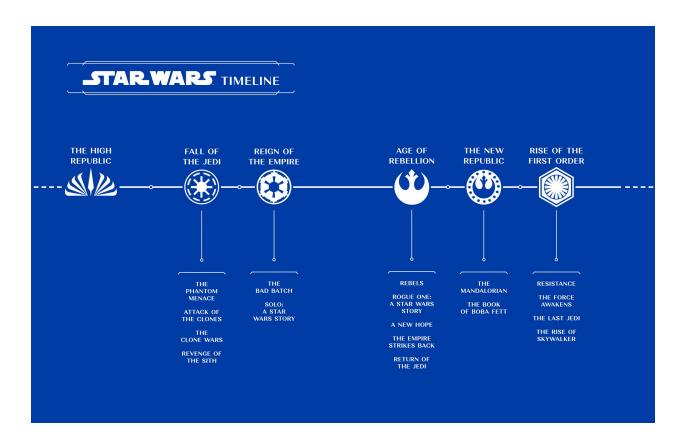
STAR WARS THE HIGH REPUBLIC

QUEST OF THE JEDI

It is a time of great exploration. In an effort to unite the galaxy, the Chancellors of the Republic, working alongside the courageous and wise Jedi Knights, have dispatched dozens of PATHFINDER TEAMS into the farthest reaches of the Outer Rim.

But it is also a time of great uncertainty. Communication is unreliable, and tall tales of mysterious planets and monstrous creatures abound. Prospectors and pirates roam the frontier, and the worlds of Eiram and E'ronoh are locked in a FOREVER WAR.

And on the far-off planet of DALNA, a new threat to the galaxy is beginning to emerge....





The droid had been drifting for days.

Around it, the inky void of space stretched in every direction, cold and stark. Empty.

If it had once had a designation, it no longer remembered it. Nor was it sure of the purpose of its journey, or even if it was still moving in the right direction. Those thoughts had all gone, obliterated by the same asteroid storm that had damaged its thrusters. What memories it still retained were glitchy, just a spiraling sequence of images—snapshots of other worlds, other times.

It was alone, and it was lost.

It had seen things, during its long, difficult flight. A dying star blooming into a bright red giant, eating up its orbiting planets like angry fireballs. A vast school of purrgil elegantly weaving through a gauntlet of crashing moons. The brilliant glow of artificial lights twinkling from an inhabited water world.

And monsters.

It had seen monsters.

Or perhaps those had come before. Back when Master Rok and the others had made their expedition to Gloam. Before the long journey across the stars.

Had that been after the ship exploded?

The droid couldn't be certain. Everything was mixed-up. Scrambled. Nothing seemed to make sense.

And so it continued to drift, perhaps sensing, somewhere deep down in its damaged circuits, that there had once been a destination in mind, a message it was supposed to deliver.

SIL

Dass Leffbruk had never had what others might have considered a typical life. No rural homestead or city apartment, no apprenticeship on a farm or in a factory, no school, no community, no friends. Well, not beyond the small network of prospectors' kids he would occasionally bump into at way stations. And he didn't really think those counted.

Ever since he'd been old enough to bounce on his father's knee—his mother had died in a shuttle accident when he was still a baby—Dass had been out among the stars, living a nomadic existence. Always traveling from place to place, city to city, world to world. Scooting about in their faithful old prospecting ship, the *Silverstreak*, just Dass and his father, never sleeping in the same place for more than a couple of nights. Searching the frontier for new, unexplored hyperspace routes, playing their part in making the galaxy just that little bit smaller.

In many ways it was a happy life, and Dass had long ago learned to be content with it. To him the stars *were* company. There was little he loved more than standing beneath them on a cold, clear night, surrounded by nothing but wilderness, knowing that he and his dad were the only two people on the entire world.

Nothing like that to put things into perspective, to make a person realize how lucky they were. He'd seen a lot in his brief twelve years. Ice floes drifting on pink-water seas. Firestorms lighting up the horizon like the glow of a new dawn. Worlds overrun with poisonous plants that wanted to eat him. Ancient, forgotten shrines on long-abandoned moons. Jungles. Deserts. Rolling tundra, bursting with animal life. *So many* species. And paradise. He had seen paradise.

And now he was *here*.

Dass heaved a weighty sigh. How had it come to this? *Stranded*.

He didn't even know what the planet was called, but he knew he *hated* it. There was nothing here. Nothing but an endless landscape of dark, jagged rock that harbored pools of acidic water, kilometers of mined-out tunnels infested with large ugly beetles that seemed to *adore* the taste of human flesh, and storms. Endless electrical storms, lighting up the sky, rumbling like the brutal thunder of distant war.

Like the war ravaging the planets of Eiram and E'ronoh, which had caused so much disruption throughout the entire sector. Hyperspace lanes closed. Food and supplies rationed. The debris of terrible space battles drifting among the stars. Dass and his father had even been caught up in a blockade that had seen them trapped in their ship for several days and questioned by so-called security forces. And then they'd had to flee from a gang of pirates who were making the most of the disruption to plunder otherwise peaceful sectors.

Why couldn't people just get along?

Dass looked up. It was a habit, always looking to the stars for answers. But there were none that Dass could see beyond the thick layer of smog that swirled like a blanket across the sky.

Yes, he *hated* it here.

And he'd felt that way even *before* he'd learned about the things that came in the night.

The monsters.

But he didn't want to think about those.

Right now, he was more concerned with catching dinner. Dass had become an expert in catching the little lizard-like creatures that scuttled around in the crevices among the rocks. He'd been bitten only three times that day.

His father, Spence, was back at their makeshift camp, working on the emergency beacon they were building together. A few days earlier, Spence had hurt his leg during a salvage expedition to one of the old wrecked mining ships that were strewn across the rocks around these parts. He'd fallen and twisted it badly as he was trying to pry loose a sheet of hull plating, and ever since had been forced to remain close to the camp in case...

Dass shook his head. He felt the fear bubbling up inside him, the cold pressure of it in his chest.

Don't think about the monsters. Concentrate on the scrabblers.

He took a deep breath and then jabbed his spear—a wooden branch he'd sharpened to a point—into a crevice in the rock. He heard the scrabblers squealing, but they were too fast and growing wise to his moves. He'd have to move on and try to find another colony. The search for food was taking him farther and farther afield every day. Farther from camp, and from his dad.

He glanced up, sensing movement. His body tensed. He scanned the

horizon. But it was just the wind, stirring his mop of curly hair.

Just the wind.

Out there in the gloom, something howled, long and plaintive. Dass felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickle. He squeezed the shaft of his spear until his knuckles were white.

Was it just the wind again, whistling between two spurs of rock? Or was it *them*?

Dass wasn't taking any chances. He turned and ran. They were out there, those *things*, hiding in the shadows. Watching. Waiting.

Dass's feet pounded the rocks as he hurried back to camp.

He'd be safe there.

For now...



Well, Amos, I'm at a complete loss. I don't know what to make of it. I'm utterly speechless," said Kam, tapping his foot annoyingly on the metal grille. "I mean, I have no words."

"Sounds like it," said Amos, rolling his eyes. He could swear his horns were prickling—a sure sign that something wasn't right about all this.

The two communications engineers were standing side by side in the loading bay of their small shuttle, peering down at the wreckage of a droid they'd just hauled in with their remote load lifters. Kam, a Rutian Twi'lek with pale blue skin and long head-tails that were draped over his shoulders, had his arms folded across his chest. His face was screwed up in a ponderous expression. He opened his mouth as if to say something more and then evidently changed his mind and closed it again.

Beneath his breath, Amos muttered a curse in his native Theelin. He dropped to a crouch to study the damaged droid more closely.

It was one of the hardy little EX models used to establish communications on the frontier once new treaties and trade routes had been negotiated. They were designed to carry messages back to waiting comms teams, requesting the launch of relay buoys that would allow more and more worlds to remain in contact with the Republic. Usually, the droids accompanied Republic Pathfinder delegations to frontier worlds, part of the teams that initiated communication with previously unknown sentient species or assisted them if they required help or aid.

All of which meant that this little droid belonged to a Pathfinder team, which also meant it was intended to be somewhere else, with a message for a

different comms team.

It also wasn't in particularly good shape.

"I mean, it's not the droid we're expecting, is it?" said Kam. "And even then, Ninebee isn't due back for several months."

EX-9B was the EX droid assigned to the Pathfinder team that Kam and Amos usually worked with, consisting of two Jedi—Master Silandra Sho and Padawan Rooper Nitani—as well as a pilot and a medic. But Kam was right. EX-9B's team had only just set out on a new mission.

"And if Silandra and Rooper didn't send it..."

"Who did?" said Kam. This was a thing they did, finishing each other's sentences. It was probably a sign that they'd been working too closely together for too long, but Amos kind of liked it all the same. It could get lonely out on the frontier. No wonder the two of them had grown close.

"I suppose we'd better try to find out," said Amos, scooping up what was left of the droid. Two of its legs were missing, and its thrusters were buckled and damaged beyond repair. Its eye lens was cracked, and its outer shell was pitted and scarred. "Looks like it encountered a bit of trouble out there."

"A bit?"

Kam followed Amos over to the workstation in one of the side rooms off the main shuttle hold. It was a little cramped, not because the space itself was small but due to the sheer number of heaped components, scattered tools, and half-assembled buoys that were all jostling for room.

Kam cleared a section of the workstation with a sweep of his arm, scattering mess on the floor. His head-tails bobbed.

Amos laid the broken droid carefully on the workstation. "There's a hole in the casing here," he said, showing Kam a ragged-looking breach in the droid's shell. "It looks as though the memory and navigation circuits could be damaged. Still, they're sturdy little things, these EX models. Most droids wouldn't have made it this far, especially without a thruster engine containment pod."

"Try to reactivate it," said Kam.

Amos popped open a hatch on the back of the droid's disc-shaped central housing. He poked a finger inside and jabbed a button. Lights flickered behind the droid's eye lens like distant lightning. The whole shell shuddered, the remaining leg twitching, but then it powered down again with a dull burring sound. Amos met Kam's eye. "Do you think we can risk patching it into the ship's systems?"

"It doesn't look like we have much choice," replied the Twi'lek. He pulled a length of snaking cable from under the workstation and offered one end to Amos. The other he plugged into a socket in the wall, just below a small bank of monitor screens. Amos connected the droid.

"Bee-dee-biddle-boop!" Almost instantly, the droid began making shrill, excited beeping sounds as its circuits buzzed to life. "Bipp-bipp-biddle-wheee."

"Yes, yes, all right," said Amos, flicking a series of switches inside the droid's casing. "I can't make head or tail of what you're saying."

"I don't think even *it* knows what it's trying to say," said Kam. "Everything just sounds garbled."

"I'll put it up on the screen. Maybe that way we can make sense of whatever's left of its memory banks." Amos pushed another button, and the monitors filled with a flickering stream of letters.

"Oh," said Kam. He stared at the readouts for a moment. "This is bad, Amos. This is Atesee. It belongs to Outer Rim Expedition Two-Five-Two."

"That's Master Buran's Pathfinder team," said Amos. "But aren't they supposed to be...?"

"Visiting the planet Aubadas in the next sector." Kam glanced at the shell of EX-8C on the workstation and then back at the monitors. "And judging by what I'm seeing here, it didn't go at all well. Something about an explosion and a monster and—wait!" He stopped suddenly. "There's a partial message in there. Look, a sequence that's trying to repeat, over and over. Hold on." He tapped at a keypad on the wall, his fingers dancing over the worn buttons. "This should do it." He punched another button, and the ship's speakers hissed to life.

At first there was nothing but the crackle of static. And then: "... sabotage. We were...ambush...Maliq and the others, they're...and now I'm trapped...Gloam. There's something dangerous here. I'm sending...find you. May the Force be..."

Kam turned to meet Amos's eye. "That was Rok."

The moment stretched as they both considered the implications of what they'd heard.

An ambush. Sabotage. Something dangerous. And where was Gloam? Weren't they supposed to be on Aubadas?

Even more troubling was the question of what had happened to Maliq—Rok's Padawan—and the rest of the team. The galactic frontier was often

dangerous, but *this*? This sounded decidedly bad. Rok was one of the most experienced Jedi Masters in the Outer Rim. He *lived* for frontier life, venturing out to new worlds, meeting new peoples, happy to never know what to expect from day to day. And if *he* was in trouble...

Amos rubbed his thumb up and down one of the short horns that jutted from the temples of all Theelin. His head was spinning with thoughts, and none of them were good ones. "We're going to have to call Silandra and the others back, aren't we?"

Slowly, Kam nodded. "They're the nearest team. There's no one else in this sector close enough to help. We don't even know how long it's been since Rok recorded this message." Kam reached over and yanked the plug out of the back of EX-8C's shell. Instantly, its twitching leg grew still and the stream of text on the monitors winked out. "We need to do it now."

"I'll go and fire up the long-range comms," said Amos. "You..."

"Set a course for Aubadas," said Kam, nodding. "Already on it." He turned and hurried from the room.

Amos watched him go and then glanced back at the silent damaged droid on the workbench. "I just hope one of us will get there in time."



It took Master Sho's Pathfinder team less than a day.

"Two planets?"

Jedi Padawan Rooper Nitani peered out of the forward viewscreen of the *Umberfall* at the worlds below. Her reflection seemed to peer back at her from the transparisteel, eyes wide with wonder. A strand of her long dark hair had come loose, falling across the side of her slender face. She blew at it ineffectually from the corner of her mouth.

The twin planets were of similar size—small by galactic standards, barely bigger than moons—but from orbit, they couldn't have appeared more different. Where one was covered by expansive blue oceans and landmasses blanketed in emerald-green vegetation, the other appeared to be choked by a thick layer of black smog. The pollution swirled through the upper atmosphere of this second planet, flickering with storm light and obscuring Rooper's view of the land below. Every glimpse she did manage revealed only barren rock. The sight of it left Rooper with a deep sense of foreboding. There was something sinister about the place.

"Yup," said Dietrix, in the pilot's seat to Rooper's left. "It's pretty special, and very rare. According to Ninebee, the two worlds orbit each other as well as their star. It's like a complex dance, lacing in and out like strands in a Padawan braid." Rooper glanced over to see Dietrix beaming as she made circling motions in the air with her hands. Rooper smiled back.

Dietrix was what Rooper had come to think of as *perpetually enthusiastic*. She saw the joy in every new thing, particularly if it involved ships, ship engines, or repair work. She was the *Umberfall*'s pilot but, only

six years older than Rooper's fourteen, she was also Rooper's friend. Plus she had one of the most stylish haircuts Rooper had ever seen—a bright stripe of rainbow-dyed hair that ran like a fanned crest down the center of her shaved head. Just being around her made Rooper smile. Sometimes she wished she had the courage to express herself as confidently as Dietrix. Not that she was entirely sure what that would mean. The people of Rooper's home planet, Rohm, sometimes used colorful inks to draw intricate patterns on their cheeks, but Rooper had always preferred to keep her soft brown face free of such markings. But her *hair*…

Maybe after this mission she'd consider dyeing it bright red. She wondered what Master Sho would think of that.

"So which one is Aubadas?" said Rooper, returning her attention to the two planets.

"The one that looks like it has a breathable atmosphere, at a guess," replied Dietrix. "Although the mission briefing said nothing about twin worlds."

"The mission briefing didn't say much about anything," said Rooper.

"Just that Rok Buran's team was sent to Aubadas ahead of the Republic negotiation team after the Katikoot requested aid and that they haven't been heard from since. Not until their droid turned up half a sector away with that garbled distress call. All we can do is head to his last known location, on Aubadas, and see what we can find."

Dietrix rocked back in her pilot's chair. "I've been thinking about that," she said. "We could be facing anything down there. A diplomatic crisis. A hostage situation. An accident."

Rooper tried to stifle her grin. While she hoped that no one from Rok's team had been hurt, she was thrilled by the prospect of an adventure. At last, she was getting to do something *exciting*. Wasn't that what they were supposed to be doing out there, on the fringes of the Outer Rim? Venturing to new, uncharted worlds, helping people in need, averting crisis, exploring?

So far, all Master Silandra Sho seemed to want to do was work on lightsaber drills, meditation, and diplomacy training. Every world they'd visited had been either an empty rock or a tiny outpost where the most interesting thing Rooper had found to do was check out what unusual local fruit was being sold at the markets. Rooper had a great deal of respect for her master—perhaps more than for anyone else she had ever met—but she wished that Silandra would ease up a little and have some fun. Yes, a Jedi

had a duty. A responsibility. Rooper understood that. But it didn't mean they had to be *bored*. What was the point in being out there if they didn't at least *try* to enjoy it?

Still, it seemed that things were about to change.

"It could be a trap," said Rooper, a little too brightly. "It could be anything."

"Precisely why we should avoid speculation and focus on the *facts*," came a reproachful voice from behind her. Rooper turned to see Silandra Sho entering the cockpit.

Silandra was a tall, slim human woman with sweeping brown hair that was tied back behind her shoulders. Unusual for a Jedi, she carried a large, disc-shaped shield, strapped to a harness on her back. It was formed from a silver metal rim joined across the center by a barred grip. Two empty panels on either side of the grip fizzed to life as rippling sheets of plasma whenever the shield was activated. Silandra rarely used it when they were sparring, but Rooper knew it was emblematic of Silandra's deep belief in the Jedi Code to raise arms only in defense of herself or others. Often, she had told Rooper that she would rather be a shield than a sword, to always choose to stand guard and protect rather than fight. That wasn't to say she never used her lightsaber—she was one of the most proficient fighters Rooper had ever seen —more that she favored her shield unless the situation demanded otherwise.

Silandra was quiet and thoughtful and had a capacity for calm resilience that Rooper could only begin to aspire to. She also tended to know exactly what Rooper was thinking, sometimes even before the Padawan had thought it.

"Master Sho," said Rooper. "We were just—"

Silandra waved her quiet. "I understand. You're anxious to test yourself. But we must remain mindful of our goals. We will make contact and rendezvous with Master Buran and his team. Then we will complete their original mission, providing what help we might offer to the local population." She placed her hand on Rooper's shoulder. "No matter the circumstances." Her expression gave nothing away, although Rooper knew that Silandra and Rok were old friends and that, surely, she must be as anxious as everyone else to ensure he was safe.

Rooper had never met Rok, but he had a reputation for being almost as rugged as the EX droids. Whatever had happened down there, there was every chance he'd be fine. She hoped the same was true of his Padawan,

Maliq. They'd never been close, back at the temple, but she knew and respected him, as she did most Padawans of a similar age to her own. He was another who always seemed to be wearing a smile.

"Have you tried the comms?" said Silandra, looking to Dietrix.

Dietrix nodded. "No reply. From either Rok's team or the Katikoot. I've set a message to broadcast on repeat, but so far they're either ignoring it or there's something wrong with their comms network."

Silandra nodded. "Then we've done all we can to give notice of our arrival. Take us down."

Dietrix flicked a series of switches and then took the ship's flight controls in both hands. The view beyond the forward screen shifted. Rooper tried not to focus on the bubbling sense of unease that washed over her every time she glanced at Aubadas's brooding twin world, the burst of swirling inkiness it set off in her mind.

Slowly, the *Umberfall* began its descent toward the unknown.



Where in the name of the Blue Sun has it gone?"

Dietrix frowned as she hunched over the controls, her eyes flicking from the computer readouts to the viewscreen and back again. They were low in Aubadas's atmosphere, flitting over the rolling moors and marshlands below. It looked to Rooper like a wild place, draped in a pretty cloak of wispy mist. Rain pattered against the ship. But of the Katikoot city, there was no sign.

"You're sure you have the right coordinates?" said Obik from the doorway. He was the team's medic, an extremely tall green-skinned Mirialan. He wore an intricate pattern of geometric tattoos across his cheeks and the bridge of his nose—a record of past achievements—and was dressed in the white-and-navy uniform common to all Republic Pathfinders who weren't part of the Jedi Order. EX-9B, their EX droid, was hovering above Obik's left shoulder.

"Same as the Katikoot provided to the previous team," said Dietrix. "But as you can see"—she waved a hand at the view—"nothing here."

"Perhaps it was a trap," said Rooper. "We should tread carefully."

"Beee-broo-deet," said EX-9B with a nervous-sounding whine.

"Don't worry, Nibs," said Obik. "We've got this."

"Whoooo," replied the droid. It didn't sound convinced.

"I'll bring us around for another pass," said Dietrix, pulling back on the controls. The *Umberfall* banked sharply, lifting up and away, engines roaring as the pilot maneuvered them around, circling back the way they had come. Rooper felt her stomach lurch and grabbed for the console to keep herself from tipping out of her seat. "I'll come in a little lower this time, just in case

we missed something," added Dietrix.

After a moment, the ship settled back into a steady descent, sweeping low over the undulating landscape. This time, Rooper could make out a network of gullies and valleys among the nestled hills but nothing that looked like a city. The land hadn't even been farmed. In truth, the place looked as uninhabited as most of the other worlds they'd visited in recent months.

"Slow down, Dietrix," said Silandra. She'd been so quiet in her place behind Rooper's chair that the Padawan had almost forgotten she was there.

The ship slowed as Dietrix cut the power to the thrusters. Silandra came around to stand beside Rooper. She dropped into a crouch so she could look Rooper in the eye. "Rooper. Reach out with the Force. Tell me what you feel."

"Yes, Master." Rooper nodded. She'd always been good at sensing people's presence through the Force, but lately, she and Silandra had been practicing extending the range of her senses, banishing all distractions so she could reach farther and farther beyond her immediate self.

"Remember your training. You can do this," said Silandra, her tone encouraging.

Rooper chewed her bottom lip for a moment, and then, settling back in her seat, she steadied her breathing and closed her eyes. She pushed out with her senses, beyond the rhythmic thudding of her own heart, beyond the confines of the cockpit—where the rest of the team seemed to glow like brilliant, swirling patterns of light—beyond the *Umberfall*, and farther still, until the landscape below fizzed to life.

Rooper had always seen the living Force as a melting pot of shimmering colors, each life, no matter how large or small, contributing to the overall pattern, the shining glow. It was a web that stretched throughout the entire galaxy, linking all living things. Now she saw pinks and purples, greens and reds, yellows and ochres. The surface of Aubadas gleamed with life. And there, in the distance, among the valleys and gullies, deep within the hills...a riot of color, so bright it was almost dazzling. A massive concentration of life.

"There," she said, raising her arm, pointing toward the source of the light. Her eyes were still closed. "In the gullies."

She felt Silandra's hand on her shoulder again. "Good. Well done, Rooper."

Rooper opened her eyes, breathing deep. Beneath her, the landscape was

just as it had been before, rolling green and sodden marshes. Right beside her, Silandra was smiling.

"Set us down as close as you can, Dietrix," said Silandra. "We'll have to make the rest of the journey on foot."

"Aye," said Dietrix. "That outcropping over there looks just about perfect."

"I'll fetch my pack," said Obik, "just in case the others need medical attention when we find them. Come on, Nibs."

Rooper was still staring out at the webwork of gullies that crisscrossed the surface of the landscape before them. Had the Katikoot really built an entire city down there, among the cracks in the bedrock?

She supposed she'd soon find out.



Rooper skidded down the scree-covered slope, stirring up a trail of loose gravel in her wake.

"Steady, Padawan," came Silandra's mildly chiding voice behind her.

Rooper wheeled her arms once to keep her balance, feeling the tingling resistance of the Force as she called on it to help her slow. She reached the bottom of the slope and came to a stop. She knew she shouldn't allow herself to get so carried away. She was a Jedi, after all. But the anticipation of finding the Katikoot city was like a warm, fuzzy glow at the center of her being.

This was it. This was why she was here, out among the stars. This was why she'd been chosen for this assignment, to serve with Master Sho on the frontier. Because of her restlessness, her need to be out there, anywhere, *doing* something. And finally, she was going to prove to Silandra that she was capable. That she could be trusted. That she was ready to take on more *real* missions, like this one. She was going to make her master proud.

She glanced back up the slope. The others—Silandra, Dietrix, Obik, and their sturdy astromech droid, GT-11—were trudging along behind her, while EX-9B hovered somewhere off to the left, scanning the area for any sign of civilization.

She caught Silandra's eye, and the Jedi gave her a curt nod—permission to scout ahead into the first gully. Rooper nodded in return. Was that the curl of a smile she'd seen on Silandra's lips?

Slowly, Rooper crept toward where the jagged edges of the gully sprouted from the bedrock, rising up on either side to form a channel. Luckily, the rain had stopped, although Rooper kept the hood of her robe pulled over her head all the same. Her long black hair was pulled back in a tight braid, mirroring the smaller Padawan braid that curled behind her left ear. The hilts of her lightsabers were holstered at her belt. Several small cloth pouches were tied by bands around her upper arms and legs, creating pockets that allowed her to carry provisions and equipment from the ship. The clothes were a far cry from the ceremonial robes worn at the temple, but they were designed for a different sort of life, filled with necessity and practicality. And besides, temple robes were itchy. Rooper loved the freedom of this simpler attire.

She started as a flock of yellow birds took wing, startled by her sudden arrival. They soared up into the misty sky, hooting and whistling as they made for a safer perch elsewhere.

Rooper's hands strayed to her lightsabers as she rounded the bend...

...only to find that the gully was empty.

Well, not empty *exactly*. There was life there, in multitudes. Vibrant mosses clinging to the sheer walls, curling vines, enormous trees that stood tall on fat roots like stilts, scuttling lizard-like creatures the size of tooka cats, and more birds, of all varieties, sizes, and colors.

"No city, huh," said Dietrix, coming to stand beside her.

"I guess not." Rooper's heart sank. Had she really been so wrong? She couldn't have been. Silandra would have sensed otherwise and stopped them coming this way if that were the case.

"You think this is what you were sensing? All this wildlife?" asked Dietrix.

Rooper sighed. "Perhaps. But I don't think so. There's something not right here."

"Perhaps it's just a bit further on."

"Yeah, maybe."

But Rooper knew it wasn't that simple. Something felt off, like a cold shiver running down her spine. She turned on the spot, drawn suddenly by an urgent sense that she was being watched.

Sure enough, up on the crest of the gully, a lone figure stood looking down at them. It was too far away for Rooper to be able to determine any features, but it was roughly humanoid in size and shape, and appeared to be wrapped in a black cloak or robe. It stood stock-still, so much so that, for a moment, Rooper wondered if she was seeing things and it was just the broken trunk of an old tree. But she was certain it was not.

"Rooper?"

Rooper glanced down to see Silandra approaching. "Up there," she said, pointing to where she'd seen the lone figure. "Someone, or something, is watching us."

Silandra turned to look, her shield sliding fluidly from its harness onto her left arm. She held it in front of her, covering her torso and lower face, ushering Rooper and the others behind her. "I don't see anyone."

Rooper followed her master's gaze. Sure enough, the figure had gone. "We must have frightened them."

"What did they look like?"

Rooper was pleased to hear there was no sign of doubt in Silandra's voice. She believed her Padawan utterly. "Hard to tell. They were dressed in black. Tall, thin...I didn't really have a chance to get a better look."

"No matter. We'll remain on our guard."

"I may not be touched by the Force," said Obik, "but I know that something's off here. What if Rooper was right and we're being herded into a trap?"

Silandra straightened, sliding her shield back up onto her shoulders. She looked at the medic. "Then we'll be exactly where we need to be to find out what happened to Rok and the others."

Obik waited until she'd turned her back, and then he rolled his eyes at Rooper. *Jedi*…he mouthed silently.

Rooper grinned.

"I can hear you, Obik," said Silandra.

Obik frowned. "But I didn—" He was cut off by the sudden burst of static that erupted from his comlink. The noise reverberated through the entire gully, startling another flock of birds and sending them twittering skyward. Obik pulled the comlink from a pouch on his hip. Smaller handheld comms were the norm among Republic agents or Jedi in the field, but the Pathfinder teams often carried hardier, longer-range units for just this sort of situation. Or if they got stranded. Which also made it odd that Rok hadn't responded to their earlier transmissions.

"*Umberfall*?" A man's voice crackled through the comlink's speaker. It was barely audible.

Obik spoke into the handset. "This is Obik Dennisol of the *Umberfall*." A brief pause. "Is that you, Rok?"

"Negative. This is Amos Tillian, of the Republic Communications Team Oh-Arr-Ee-Three-Six-One. It's good to hear your voice, Obik."

"Roger," said Obik. He glanced at the others. "Where are you now?"

The reply was almost drowned out in a wash of static. "Just entering Aubadas atmosphere now."

"We're still in the vicinity of our ship. I'm transmitting our coordinates now. We'll meet you here. Over."

The only response was another fizz of static.

Obik returned the unit to his belt. "Something's interfering with the comms. We should stay close, try not to get separated."

"Agreed," said Silandra. She turned to Rooper. "And don't look now, Rooper, but your watcher is back. This time they're on the opposite side of the gully."

"*Bree-boop*," said GT-11, who was trundling to a stop just beside Dietrix.

The pilot patted the droid on the top of his cone-like head. "*Definitely* a trap," she agreed.

"Baa-doo-whooo-waa," muttered EX-9B beside Obik.

The medic glanced at the hovering droid. "I've told you before, Nibs—if you haven't got anything nice to say, keep it to yourself."

GT-11 emitted a low buzzing noise that, to Rooper, sounded distinctly like a growl. She shook her head. The two droids never managed to get along.

Rooper shifted her position slightly, until she could catch the figure out of the corner of her eye. Silandra was right. It was clearly the same one as before, silhouetted in black, like a shadow. "You have a plan, Master?" she murmured.

Silandra nodded. "I think it's time we put some of those practice drills to the test, don't you?"

This time, Rooper didn't even bother to hide her glee.



"Is that you, Son?"

Dass felt a sudden flood of relief at the sound of his dad's voice. He bounded across the last few rocks, breathing hard, and there, sitting before their small campfire tinkering with a knot of electrical components, was Spence Leffbruk, the famed hyperspace prospector and the only fixed point in Dass's universe.

Spence was the sort of man who'd always looked comfortable in his own skin. You could tell he'd lived a rugged life—his flesh might once have been pale, but after years spent under different suns, on different worlds, it was permanently tanned and lined, like worn leather. Salt-and-pepper bristles jutted from his chin, and a tangle of dark hair hung loose around the nape of his neck. His right arm was withered from a long-ago injury, sustained in the accident that had killed his wife, Dass's mother, but he was more than proficient with his other hand and tended to favor it. And he never wore anything but his old brown tunic and pants and the crusty leather waistcoat with all its pockets jammed with tools, jerky, precious stones, and other strange objects he'd collected on his travels.

To Dass, he looked like home.

Spence's lined faced cracked into a grin that was swiftly replaced by an admonishing frown. "Thank the stars, you're back. You were gone too long again, Dass. You *know* how I worry. I made a promise to your mother that I'd look after you. But I can't protect you if I don't know where you are...." Spence's voice trailed off, concern creasing his brow as he took in the sight of his breathless son. "Dass?" Slowly, he got to his feet, testing his weight on

his bad leg. "What's the matter, boy?"

"It's nothing," said Dass.

"Dass..."

"I got scared. That's all. It's this place. It's not right."

Spence ambled over, pockets jingling, and gathered Dass into a big hug. Dass squeezed him back, a little tighter than usual. "You need to be careful out there, Dass. We've got to look out for each other. I don't like you going off so far away from camp." Spence stood back, holding Dass by the shoulders. "I know you probably think you're old enough now and it's just your old dad nattering on, but I don't know what I'd do if anything happened to you. All right?"

"All right," said Dass.

Spence grinned. "Now, come and get some food in that belly, eh?" He patted his stomach loudly.

"It smells good," said Dass, nodding toward the roasting lizards.

"I thought I'd surprise you. Roasted scrabblers. Haven't had those since...oh, *breakfast*." This was just like his dad, trying to make light of their situation. He'd been the one to give the scrabblers their nickname, too, because of the way they scrabbled in and out of the rocks when you tried to catch them. Currently, three of them were crackling over a makeshift spit. He'd obviously taken them from the small store that Dass had been trying to build up over the past few days.

Spence turned back to the fire, then picked his way across the rocks, back to where he'd been sitting when Dass arrived. "This place has a way of making everything seem worse, doesn't it? But we're doing all right, you and me. We're doing just fine."

Spence always seemed to know the right thing to say and the right time to say it. Even when he was tired, when things weren't going their way, Spence always had time for a smile and an encouraging word. It was one of the things Dass loved most about him. But this time it was different. Dass could tell that, beneath all the cheer and bluster, Spence was worried. And that meant Dass was worried, too.

That was why Dass had been gone for so long. He'd spent the day venturing out from their camp, this time heading east, mapping all the recognizable landmarks, searching for any sign of civilization or habitation. And hunting for food, of course. With Spence unable to leave camp, it made sense—his dad could continue to work on the beacon while Dass looked for

help or resources. But that didn't make it any less scary, and if Spence knew how far Dass had wandered...well, "overprotective" would have been an understatement.

Still, it wasn't like Dass had a choice. He'd been doing the same thing for days, striking out in different directions, reading the landscape, trying to make sense of what he found. Looking for anything that might help them get out of this mess.

Exploring. Prospecting.

He supposed it was in his blood. That was how his father had made his fortune: seeking out new worlds, exploring the Outer Rim, finding treasures or opportunities and being the first to exploit them.

But what good was a fortune to them now that they'd been betrayed, stranded on this awful planet, and left to die?

Dass rubbed at his tired neck. He'd found something earlier that day, out among the desolate rocks. The ruins of a town or city. The buildings were nothing but stubs of dressed stone and burned-out husks, but as he'd walked what remained of the old cobbled streets, the place had seemed to come alive in his mind. The bustling market, the overflowing tavern, the warm little homes filled with light and life.

Something had happened there. Something terrible.

And that was why they needed to finish making the distress beacon just as quickly as they could.

He looked down at the heap of components on the folded blanket before his dad. They'd stripped parts from the equipment in their emergency packs and were close to fashioning something useful. It wouldn't have much of a range—the transmitter was basic and cobbled together—but it was *something*.

And at least it kept them busy.

Dass walked over to sit beside his father.

"How's it going?" He nodded at the beacon.

Spence shrugged. "Getting there. A couple more days and we should have something that works. I think."

"We will." Dass only wished he felt as confident as he sounded.

They sat in silence for a moment.

"Do you think we're ever going to get off this rock, Dad?"

Dass heard the older man swallow. It took a moment for him to answer. "I don't know." He rubbed his hands over his face. "I'm so sorry, Dass. We

shouldn't be here. It's my fault we're in this mess. If it hadn't been for my greed, my need to find the big score, then we'd never have fallen in with Sunshine Dobbs, and we'd never have ended up stranded here with no ship."

Dass shook his head. "No, Dad. It's not your fault. None of this is your fault. I promise."

Spence looked across at Dass. "You're a good lad, Dass. I'm proud of you."

Dass nodded. "Anyway, I think we will get off this planet. And sooner than you think. Someone's going to help us. I know it."

He felt his dad's arm slip around his shoulders and leaned a little closer. "I think you're right, Son. Tomorrow, things are going to start looking up." Spence patted Dass on the back and then withdrew his arm. "The light's beginning to fade. We should head back inside."

Dass glanced back at their makeshift camp. It was little more than a shallow cave in the rocks, with a barricade made of old scrap they'd managed to salvage on their first night there. "All right, Dad." He got to his feet, bundling up the components of the beacon into the blanket, which he then slung over his shoulder. "You grab the scrabblers off the fire, eh?"

Spence groaned as he got to his feet, stretching his weary limbs. "Aye. I'll be right behind you, boy."

"No, it's okay. I'll wait."

The monsters would be there soon, and there was no way Dass was leaving his dad out there alone.



Rooper crouched behind a leafy bush and tried to ignore the marsh water that was leaking into her boots. It was cold and gritty as it ran between her toes. She resisted the urge to alter her position in case she made a sound. She fought to steady her breathing, to tamp down the excitement that was welling up inside her.

The Force is with me. I am one with the Force.

She could hear Silandra's voice, echoing around her head, just as it had in so many training drills. *Steady now, Padawan. Center yourself. Remember your purpose. The Jedi are san instrument of* peace. *So we must be at peace, even at our most trying times.*

Peace.

Rooper's hammering heartbeat began to slow.

She knew she was supposed to be calm and collected, just like in her training. She'd pulled off this maneuver countless times before in the practice arena at the Jedi temple on Geptish, the planet to which she and Silandra would sometimes return between missions. Which, admittedly, was rare. Most of her training took place on the *Umberfall*, or in the dusty sands, wooded glades, or open plains of the new worlds they visited.

But still...she knew what she was doing. It was just that, doing it for the first time for *real* felt different. It was both exciting and a little bit scary. And if she messed up, what would Master Sho think of her?

She wouldn't judge. She wouldn't blame. That's not who Master Silandra is.

Silandra was still in the gully below, waiting with the others. They'd

positioned themselves carefully, moving as naturally as possible to block Rooper from the watcher's line of sight. While the mysterious figure remained on the lip of the gully, looking down, Rooper had slipped away, scurrying through the shadows until she reached the boughs of the great tree a little farther along the crevice.

She'd slipped underneath it, passing through what turned out to be a habitat of sorts for nesting ground birds that seemed to be protected by the wiry young roots of the tree itself. The roots tried to wrap themselves around her ankles every time she ventured too close to one of the nests, threatening to trip her and forcing her to slow down and choose the placement of each footstep with the utmost care.

On the other side, she'd jumped, using the Force to propel herself up, landing on one of the thick jutting branches. Being careful to remain out of view, she'd then scampered up the tree, hopping from branch to branch until she reached the shelter of the leafy canopy above.

From there, she'd used the cover of the tree to climb down onto the gully edge, keeping low. The front of her robes was filthy from where she'd slithered across the damp grass to reach a moss-covered boulder. From there it had been a simple matter to dart from cover to cover until there she was, crouched in the dirt watching the silent figure from behind.

It was close now, and Rooper could see that it was tall—taller even than Obik. Its head and shoulders were stooped slightly as it peered down at the others in the gully, meaning she could make out only the tiniest hint of gray fur around its neck.

Just like an animal stalking prey...

Rooper's hands strayed to the hilts of her lightsabers. Her palms were still stinging from the rough branches she'd used to haul herself up during her climb, but she pushed the annoyance away.

She reached out with the Force, sensing warm colors wash over her. She felt Silandra's presence down in the gully, a bright burst of vibrant red in the ebb and flow of the world, reassuring and safe. And then that presence was moving, soaring up and up as Silandra used the Force to launch herself into the air.

Rooper moved, throwing herself into a forward somersault. She landed just behind the black-clad figure, feet planted firmly in the soft loam, lightsabers at the ready: one raised, one held horizontal across her body.

Silandra landed facing the figure on the lip of the gully, her shield on her

left arm. She crooked it defensively before her. The energy panels flared to life, bright and blue, with a low hum. The hilt of her lightsaber remained at her belt, within easy reach if required.

Faced with the sudden appearance of the Jedi Master, the figure turned, twisting on the spot as if to flee—only to find itself facing the Padawan, who had successfully completed the pincer movement, trapping the mysterious watcher between her and Silandra. Rooper's lightsabers blazed brilliant blue as the blades flowed out from their hilts, and she raised them before her, warning the creature not to risk any sudden attack.



Rooper had no time to congratulate herself, however, as the creature—which had an appearance like a large humanoid bat—emitted a screech, baring its teeth and throwing its head back in fear or anger.

Rooper's heart felt like it was hammering against the inside of her ribcage. She raised both of her lightsabers, holding them before her like a ward, as if their mere existence might hold the creature back from making an attack.

The creature flung its arms to the sides, revealing a pair of impressive leathery wings attached to the undersides of its arms.

Rooper took a step back warily, taking it all in. The creature didn't appear

to be armed. No talons, no claws, and no hidden blasters. Its upper body and head were covered in thick downy fur, but from the waist down it was dressed in a pair of loose-fitting brown pants.

Perhaps, Rooper realized, this wasn't a creature at all, but a person belonging to a species she had never met. She frowned.

"Who are you?" demanded Rooper. "And why have you been watching us?" She gripped the hilts of her lightsabers tightly, working her jaw.

"Rooper..." said Silandra, her voice level. "Tread very carefully."

The tone of Silandra's voice prompted Rooper to risk a glance to her left and right, and the sight was like a trickle of ice-cold water running down the length of her spine. More of the bat-like beings had appeared, from every direction, as if they had simply stepped out from the shadows like cloaked sentinels, waiting and watching. They lined both sides of the gully, and even without looking, Rooper knew that there were more of them behind her. She didn't need to count—she could tell that they were badly outnumbered. Their only chance was to show these people that they weren't a threat. That this was all just a big misunderstanding.

Rooper lowered her lightsabers slowly. The first being watched her with interest, red eyes narrowed thoughtfully. She took a deep breath, then let it out. Then she extinguished her weapons altogether. She slipped the hilts into the holsters at her belt, mindful to make no sudden movements.

The being didn't react. It simply stood there with its arms outstretched, its wings fluttering in the cool breeze.

"I asked you a question," said Rooper, struggling to keep her tone even. "Did you understand me?"

The being cocked its head to one side. Then it, too, seemed to relax, finally drawing its wings back around itself. It emitted a short series of hoots, clicks, and piping whistles. The sounds seemed to drift away on the wind.

Behind it, Silandra lowered her shield, but Rooper noticed that she kept it in place on her arm rather than returning it to the webbing on her back.

"I'm sorry," said Rooper. "I don't understand."

"No. I don't suppose that you do," said someone with a reedy voice behind her. She turned to see another of the beings approaching. It held its arms out to the sides in a gesture of conciliation.

"Who are you?" said Rooper. She sensed Silandra moving around to stand beside her.

The newcomer stopped a few meters away, regarding them coolly. "I am

Mittik, of the Katikoot. Daughter of Kittik. This is Brithik." She indicated the being Rooper had been questioning and then swept her arm to take in the others all around them. "And these are our people." She glanced from Rooper to Silandra. "You are Jedi." She spoke Basic with a slight hiss but impressive confidence.

"I am Jedi Master Silandra Sho," she said with a slight bow of her head, "and this is my Padawan, Rooper Nitani. We are part of a Pathfinder team in this region, and our friends in the gully below are Obik Dennisol, a medic; Dietrix Jago, a pilot; and our two droids, Ee-Ex-Ninebee and Geetee-Eleven." She slid her shield onto her back. "I am sorry for the misunderstanding. We believed ourselves lost and wished only to establish why we were being followed."

"Lost?" said Mittik. "Were you not aware that you had landed on Aubadas?"

"Yes," said Silandra, and Rooper could hear the tension in her voice. "We were looking for your city. We wished to make contact. We tried reaching out with our comms but were unable to raise any response."

Mittik rolled her head from side to side in a gesture that Rooper took to be the equivalent of a shrug. "There are some...difficulties with the communications systems at present." She fixed Silandra with a look that was hard to interpret. "Why have you come?"

Silandra cleared her throat. "You invited the Republic here to carry out a survey. To help resolve a local fuel supply issue. We understand that another Pathfinder team arrived ahead of the main delegation, but they haven't been heard from since. Until their droid turned up unexpectedly, damaged and requesting urgent assistance."

Mittik's teeth chattered disconcertingly. "Your friends were here. They made us promises they could not hope to keep."

Silandra frowned. "What happened? I'm sure whatever it was, it was a simple misunde—"

"So many *misunderstandings*," interrupted Mittik, and this time the displeasure in her voice was impossible to ignore. "Your friends gave us assurances that they could help. But it seems even the mighty Jedi cannot solve every problem." She waved her hand. "They are gone."

"Gone?"

"And now *you* should leave, too. The Katikoot will see to their own problems from now on. We should never have asked you to come." Mittik

started to turn away.

Rooper couldn't stand the way the Katikoot were simply dismissing them like nothing was wrong. "Wait, please," she said.

Mittik stopped mid-turn and looked back to regard the Padawan, her brow furrowed in a deep frown.

"They're our friends. We can't leave until we understand what happened here, and where they've gone. You must see that." She took a step forward. "And we won't make you any more promises, other than this: if we can help you, we will. No matter what's gone before. That's what we do, you see. It's what the others were trying to do when something must have gone wrong. We try to help." Now that she was talking, Rooper found that she couldn't stop, not until she'd gotten it all out. The words were just spooling from her tongue. "It doesn't always work, but it can't hurt to let us try, can it? There must be a reason you asked for the Republic to send help in the first place." She swallowed. Her mouth was suddenly dry. "Maybe we can help our friends at the same time...if you'll let us?"

For a moment, Mittik didn't respond. Then she bared her fangs in what Rooper hoped was a broad smile. "I like this one," she said to Silandra. She waved to the other Katikoot, who seemed to melt back into the shadows just as quickly as they'd appeared. "Come, then. Let us talk. We shall tell you of your Master Buran, and the sad tale of Gloam." She gestured down the slope toward the gully.

Rooper glanced at Silandra, suddenly anxious. Despite everything she'd just said, how could the Jedi be sure they could trust these people? Hadn't Rok and his team visited in good faith, too? And now they were missing.

Silandra nodded and gave an almost imperceptible pat of her lightsaber hilt—a sign for Rooper to remain very much on her guard. "You ask us to come with you but make no assurances of our safety," she said. "As you were so quick to point out, another of our teams has already gone missing here on Aubadas."

Mittik shook her head. "Not here, and not at the hands of the Katikoot. We asked the Republic for *help*—you really believe it would be in our interest to bring harm upon its people?"

They stood in silence for a moment.

"All right," said Silandra. "We'll hear what you have to say."

Mittik nodded and then turned and set out.

Rooper and Silandra fell in behind the Katikoot as she walked, circling

back around to the long slope that led to where the rest of the Pathfinder team were waiting in the gully below.

"Where are you taking us?" said Silandra.

"To the place you were seeking," said Mittik over her shoulder. "To Diurna, our capital city."

Rooper breathed a sigh of relief, allowing the tension to drain from her body. Nevertheless, she kept her hands close to the hilts of her lightsabers, just in case.

As they walked, Silandra placed a hand on Rooper's shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. "Well done," she said, her voice low. "I see all that diplomacy training is finally starting to pay off...."



Rooper hadn't been out on the frontier long, not like Master Sho or Master Buran, but she'd seen a lot of impressive sights during her short tour. Now, though, she was forced to admit that the Katikoot's subterranean city had to be among the most breathtaking so far.

Mittik and a small escort of Katikoot had led them back down into the gully and through a hidden opening in the rock face—a gateway of sorts leading down to the true location of Diurna, nestled in an immense bowl-shaped cavern deep beneath the ground. She and Silandra had left Obik, Dietrix, and the still-bickering droids to greet the incoming comms team, then continued ahead with the Katikoot.

Now they were standing on a railed balcony at the top of a long winding road that would lead them around the edge of the cavern and down into the city proper.

Rooper marveled at the sight.

She didn't know what she'd been expecting, but it wasn't this. Despite being only a fraction of the size, the city rivaled even Coruscant in its majesty. The buildings were clustered to form a series of immense avenues, where colorful mosses grew abundantly to form soft carpets underfoot. The buildings themselves were carved from shimmering soapstone, with sweeping arches and slender towers. Vast phosphorescent waterfalls cascaded down the insides of the cavern walls, not just providing a brilliant source of natural light but also forming a riverlike moat around the city, spanned by elegant bridges.

Katikoot bustled between the buildings, with hoversleds flitting about in

aerial lanes above their heads. Strange droids, which looked as though they were designed to resemble small, four-legged animals, skittered and scurried about, trying not to get under people's feet. Neon signs flashed brightly over the doors of what Rooper took to be shops or hostelries. The mingling scents of spicy food wafted from the stands of various street vendors, causing Rooper's stomach to gurgle in anticipation.

And the *noise*...It was a far cry from the empty solitude of the surface. Or anywhere else that Rooper had visited in recent months.

This, then, was what she had sensed through the Force, back on the *Umberfall*. An entire prosperous, highly technological civilization, hidden away from view right under their noses.

"Do none of the Katikoot fly?" asked Rooper as Mittik led them down the curling path toward the river moat. It had struck her as odd that, despite their elegant wings, none of the Katikoot she had seen so far had been airborne—besides those in the hoversleds, of course.

Mittik made a ticking sound that Rooper hoped wasn't a sign of annoyance. The last thing she wanted to do was infuriate their host with ill-considered questions. But Mittik turned to her with another of her toothy smiles. "Most perceptive." She extended her arm, allowing one of her wings to unfurl.

Stretched taut like that, Rooper thought she could almost see through the thin, parchment-like vanes of skin. "It's beautiful," she said.

"But useless," said Mittik, folding the appendage back around her body as she walked. "The Katikoot may have wings, but we are flightless." She glanced at Silandra. "An apt metaphor, as I think you will discover."

As they came to the foot of the winding path, Rooper's ground-level view of the city seemed somehow even more impressive than the view from above. That the Katikoot had built this place spoke of incredibly advanced engineering skills. That they kept it running suggested even more impressive systems of government. Clearly, they were not to be underestimated. So why, then, had they requested the Republic's help in the first place?

The small group crossed the narrow bridge over the glowing water. Rooper stopped for a moment to peer over the side, entranced by the flow of what looked like liquid light beneath her. It foamed and sparkled like tumbling diamonds as it slid under the bridge. She hurried to catch up with the others.

"Plankton," said Mittik as Rooper fell back in beside Silandra. "That's

what makes the waters glow. The moss provides the breathable atmosphere. The plankton provides the natural light."

"So it's always 'daylight' here?" said Silandra.

"You get used to it," said Mittik.

They walked along one of the alleyways before cutting down a side street between two imposing, official-looking buildings. The moss was springy underfoot. Rooper noticed they were attracting looks from the other Katikoot as they trailed along behind Mittik. Nothing unkind or suspicious—more that the people they passed in the street seemed intrigued by the two human Jedi in their midst.

"This place is full of wonder," said Silandra. "You must be very proud of everything your people have achieved."

"Hmmm," said Mittik. "Such wonder comes at great cost. As you will no doubt come to understand. It is for this reason that the Katikoot requested the Republic's help." She gestured to the building on her left, where two Katikoot stood to either side of a grand pillared entranceway. They uncurled their wings in greeting, revealing swirling white patterns that seemed to shift and move as Rooper tried to focus on them. She couldn't tell if it was just the way the patterns seemed to affect her eyes or whether they really were changing as she watched.

"We are here," said Mittik, "the chambers of the Grand Council, where you may speak with my father, the duly elected minister of works."

"The minister of works?" said Rooper. It didn't sound much like the spokesperson for a whole nation.

"We would be honored," cut in Silandra, shooting Rooper a warning look. They were on difficult ground here, attempting to reestablish relations after *something* had gone wrong with Rok's mission. Silandra was clearly being cautious. "Please, after you."

Mittik acknowledged the two guards with a burst of hoots and clicks in her own language and then gestured for the Jedi to follow her. They ducked into the shadowy interior of the building.

To Rooper's mind, it was much like the interior of any grand administrative building the galaxy over. The floor was laid in shining slabs of polished stone. Great tapestries hung on the walls, depicting historic moments from Katikoot society. They included, Rooper noticed with interest, images of figures in flight. They were Katikoot, but they were gliding on the air currents over the gullies and canyons of the surface. The ceiling was

domed and decorated in bright swirling patterns, like those she'd seen in the guards' tattoos. And waiting to greet them at the foot of an impressive spiral staircase was a smaller, older Katikoot, whose gray hair was beginning to fade to streaks of white. He leaned heavily on a brass cane, and his shoulders were hunched forward, the back of his neck supported by a metal brace or implant.

He looked up as they entered, his kindly eyes fixing on his daughter. "So you rounded up the newcomers, Mittik." Mittik went to his side, offering her arm in support. He waved her away, but his smile was bright.

"Well, two of them, at least." Mittik introduced the two Jedi. "The others are waiting for their friends."

"You've come in force, have you?" said Kittik. He took a shaky step forward, his cane clacking on the floor. "I see, I see...."

"Minister Kittik, we have come to offer our assistance," said Silandra. "And to discover what has happened to Master Rok and the Pathfinder team who previously answered your plea for help."

"Ah, yes." The old Katikoot's eyes looked sorrowful. "Then I suppose you'd better come in and take a seat."



"I'm afraid this entire sorry affair is all about power."

They were sitting around a large lacquered table in the council chambers, a warren-like suite of rooms that branched off the main hallway through which they'd first entered the building. More tapestries hung on the walls there, this time showing proud scenes of Katikoot politicians debating goodnaturedly around a circular table or speaking at rallies in what looked like a square or plaza elsewhere in Diurna. It was all very familiar. Rooper found herself wondering if politicians were the same in every culture.

They'd been joined by a third Katikoot, who'd introduced himself only as Rillik, nephew of the minister. His manner seemed somewhat gruffer and less welcoming than the others', and he was plagued by a persistent hacking cough.

"Power?" said Silandra. "You must understand that neither the Republic nor the Jedi can involve themselves in local political matters. You appear to have a healthy democracy here on Aubadas. It would be inappropriate for us to endorse any particular movement or faction, or to sway the opinions of your people in any way."

Kittik held up a hand. "No, no. Please, my competency with your language has failed me."

Silandra smiled warmly. "Not at all. Your grasp of Basic is truly quite impressive."

"I mean to say that it is about *energy*. Resources. *Fuel*. There is no disagreement amongst our ruling council. This is a matter that *must* be resolved, and we are grateful for any help you and the Republic can offer."

"Tell us," said Silandra.

Kittik nodded. "As a world, Aubadas is one of twins."

"The other planet," said Rooper. "The one we saw when we arrived." *The one blighted by storms and choking smog*, she almost added, but decided it would be better to keep that observation to herself.

"Yes. Gloam," said Kittik. "Our sister world. Almost identical in size and mass to Aubadas. Hooked in the same orbit around our star. And yet, these siblings were created anything but equal. Where Aubadas has always been barren, Gloam was once rich with the precious minerals that enriched our soil and powered the engines that enabled us to flourish. And we did. We mined those minerals and grew powerful, and arrogant, and rich. We developed seemingly impossible technologies, and in turn we grew hungrier for more, and more, and more. We learned to *consume*. And all the while, we mined. Deeper and deeper into the bedrock of Gloam, stripping it of every resource we could find." Kittik shook his head, as if the very thought of it pained him.

"For millennia this went on," he continued, "fueling the growth and expansion of our world at the cost of another. Until one day, not so long ago, we realized we had all but murdered our sister planet." Kittik stood, leaning heavily on his stick. "By then it was too late for Gloam. The planet was blighted. All but the hardiest life-forms were gone, rendered extinct. And that's when we realized the worst of it—that the fuel we were mining, refining, and burning, the very stuff we'd destroyed Gloam to get at, was harming us, too."

He sighed. "People started to grow sick. Workers began to go missing, and there were...alarming stories. Soon people refused to travel to Gloam, and all mining operations ceased. And now our resources run low, and we, too, are threatened with extinction. Even the life-giving moss that grows all around us here in Diurna has begun to wilt and die. We have only a few weeks' worth of fuel left before the entire city grinds to a stop, and yet the people do not heed our warnings. They continue about their business as if nothing is wrong, refusing to acknowledge the dire circumstances in which we find ourselves. We built our entire civilization by exploiting the resources of Gloam, and now we reap the rewards of our mistakes."

Kittik rapped his staff against the table. "So yes, we sent to your Republic for help. Because we can no longer help ourselves." He slumped back into his chair.

"I'm sorry," said Rooper. She knew that the words were not enough.

None of her training had prepared her for anything like this. An advanced civilization on the verge of collapse. A poisoned world. A species on the precipice of its very existence. She felt foolish for ever thinking of this mission as an adventure.

"How can we help?" said Silandra.

"The team you sent believed the Republic could help us find a new clean energy source. One that would allow Diurna to survive, without the need for mining or minerals from Gloam."

Silandra was nodding. "Yes. I believe the Republic *can* help you. Resources are scarce right now, due to an ongoing war in a nearby system—"

Mittik waved her quiet. "Your Master Rok told us all about this petty war between Eiram and E'ronoh. We have all felt the repercussions. Closed hyperlanes. Sparse resources. No trade. No communication. The effects of this needless conflict spill out like ripples throughout the sector, disrupting all our lives. We Katikoot want nothing to do with it and only wish for it to be over so the Republic might hasten to our aid."

"I understand," said Silandra. "The Jedi are making efforts to mediate between the two worlds, and we hope to help them reach a resolution soon. That is why Master Buran's Pathfinder team were sent ahead of the main delegation. Many of our negotiators are tied up attempting to bring an end to that conflict. Rok came because you said your need was urgent."

"It is," said Kittik. "Most urgent indeed."

"Then I must ask—where *is* Rok? You said his team had *gone*. Surely they were as anxious to help as we are," said Silandra.

Kittik looked at Rooper and Silandra in turn. "They went to Gloam." "To Gloam? Why?"

"They understood the urgency of the situation," said Mittik. "That we couldn't just stop producing fuel, at least not until the Republic was able to help us install new harvesters to harness the power of our sun. They saw that we needed to acquire more minerals. Just enough, you understand, to help us bridge the gap until their engineers could come. To help us survive while this war of yours played out."

"So they went to restart mining operations?" said Rooper. That didn't sound right. Not at all.

"No. They went to investigate the monsters," said Kittik.

"Monsters?" Silandra sounded as confused as Rooper felt.

"There have been tales of monsters on Gloam for as long as anyone can

remember," said Kittik. "And then longer still. Ancient stories of terrifying beasts deep in the mines. Creatures so dreadful that they have never been named. The miners were always superstitious about them, claiming that one day they would wake from their long dormancy and bring destruction down on us all."

"And now they've woken?" said Silandra.

Kittik nodded. "I fear so, yes. As I explained, people had started to go missing. Tales of terrible monsters were soon circulating. The workers were recalled, and no one has been willing to go back."

"Until Rok and his team arrived and offered to investigate," said Silandra. She shook her head. Rooper knew it was what any of them would do. "Tell us what happened."

"I'm sorry," said Mittik. "There's very little to tell. Rillik here was the only one to make it back alive."

All eyes settled on the other Katikoot, who had remained silent other than to introduce himself when they arrived. He glowered at Rooper with a sullen expression. "We were attacked. The creatures came for us in the night. We weren't ready. We were in the mines, beneath the old ruins. We scattered. The Jedi tried to stop them, but the *sounds…*" He paused for a moment, catching his breath. His eyes had taken on a haunted look. His body rocked with a sudden hacking cough. When it finally subsided, he continued. "I was there to show them the area where the others had gone missing. The miners. I used to work in the mines, as a supervisor."

"And you were the only one to get away?" said Silandra. Rooper could hear the slight tremor in her voice. Just like Rooper, her master could hardly believe what she was hearing.

Rillik nodded. "I think so. I think…I didn't see any of the others make it out. I waited until dawn, but no one came. I found the Pathfinders' ship, but the creatures had destroyed that, too. I couldn't even call for help, because the comms were down. I hid in a crevice in the rocks for another night, listening to the creatures searching for me, the sound of their claws scraping on the rocks…"

Rooper shuddered at the thought. "Did someone come for you?"

"No. I managed to get one of the old mining barges working. I got away as quickly as I could. There was no sign of any other survivors."

Rooper's heart sank. Could it be true? Were Rok and the others one with the Force? She blinked away tears.

No. They didn't know for certain yet. Rillik hadn't *seen* them, after all. Perhaps they were still there.

"And yet Rok managed to send out the team's EX droid, carrying a call for help," said Silandra. "He always was one of the tough ones." She looked at Kittik, her expression fixed and serious. "Minister—did anyone go back to Gloam to check? To look for survivors?"

"No...I..." He faltered. "It was deemed too dangerous. I'm sorry." Silandra nodded. "Then there's still a chance some of them are alive. I cannot ignore Rok's message."

"But it's been weeks."

"Pathfinders are resourceful. It's in our nature."

Rooper wanted to punch the air. She knew Silandra wouldn't just give up hope like Rillik. She might be quiet and serious, but she had a core of durasteel, an unshakable faith in the Force and her fellow Jedi. If there was even a chance that Rok and the others were still alive, Silandra wouldn't rest until they were found. More than that, none of them—Silandra, Dietrix, Obik, or Rooper—would be prepared to let the Katikoot suffer. They'd find a way to keep Diurna running until the Republic could offer a more permanent solution. They had to.

"You haven't been to Gloam," said Rillik with another hacking cough. "You haven't seen what it's like there."

"No," said Silandra, getting to her feet. "But I think I'm about to."



Some days it was difficult to tell where day stopped and night began.

The swirling smog was like a gray wash across the world, casting everything in the same endless gloom. The storms came and the storms went. Nothing changed.

They slept when the monsters prowled, and upon waking, Dass would eat three or four strips of dried scrabbler meat, gulp down some of the foultasting water Spence had boiled, and then set out to explore. When he grew tired and hungry—or too scared—he would return and sit by the fire, working on the beacon with his dad. He would talk with Spence over dinner, coaxing the old prospector to relate one of his stories from his years on the frontier. Dass found comfort in the familiarity of those tales, no matter how many times he'd heard them before. Often they seemed as nourishing as any meal. Then when the story was over, the two of them would retreat to their camp in the cave to see out another night.

Sometimes it felt as if it had been this way forever. And at least they had each other. That was the way it had always been: the two of them against the galaxy. Sometimes Dass felt guilty that he couldn't even remember his mother, and he knew his dad still felt her death like an open wound. But recently he'd started to talk about her more, mentioning her in some of his stories, and Dass figured that could only be a good thing. Happy memories for them both to cling to.

Dass felt his eyes beginning to droop. The exertion of his earlier walk and the closeness of the fire were nudging him toward sleep. He'd found little of worth to the west, his chosen direction that morning. Not even any scrabblers.

He *had* glimpsed more of the old ruins, this time set into the face of a massive basalt cliff, where row upon row of carved archways stood in the rock like empty doorways, halfway up the side of the world. The scale of it was hard to take in. But there was nothing for them up there. Even if he'd been prepared to brave the climb. Just old ruins and abandoned mining equipment. It seemed as though that was all there was left on this dying world.

In the end, Dass had returned tired and empty-handed. But at least the beacon was nearly complete. His father had made good progress while Dass had been out exploring.

Dass picked it up, turning it over in his hands. Not the most elegant of designs. In fact, it looked like a pile of junk. Which, he supposed, it was, stuck together with twisted lengths of salvaged wire and a few boiled scrabbler bones they'd wrapped in fabric torn from their packs.

None of that would matter, though, if the beacon worked. If they could finally let someone know they needed help. Maybe then things would be okay.

Tomorrow, once he'd tracked down some more food, they should be able to complete the final tests. Now, though, he was far too tired to concentrate.

He placed the beacon back down on the blanket, yawning. He rubbed his hands over his face. Overhead, a storm was beginning to rumble. It sounded close.

"Dass!" Spence's shout was a strangled cry that cut through the fog of Dass's tiredness, bringing him around. He opened his eyes. "Get inside, now!"

Dass turned to see his dad standing by the entrance to their makeshift camp. "Dad? What's wrong?"

Spence looked *terrified*. His eyes were wide with concern. He was waving frantically for Dass to come running. "Hurry!"

Dass scrabbled to his feet. What was going on?

Another rumble. This one closer. Too close.

That's not a storm.

Dass glanced in the direction the sound had come from. The gloom was closing in, wrapping itself around the camp like a shroud. Hairs prickled on the back of his neck.

Was there something out there?

Was it them?

Lightning flickered like a silver thread stitched through the dark clouds, lighting up the rocky landscape in stuttering flashes—revealing the hulking shape that was slowly approaching their camp.

It was a huge humanoid figure with massive shoulders and a stooped neck. Its claws scraped across the rocks as it walked, drawing fizzing sparks. Dark, impenetrable shadows trailed in its wake like a flapping cloak.

*No, not a cloak...*wings.

It stepped closer, baring its teeth.

Dass edged back, trembling. The thing was *huge*. Tall and broad, about twice the size of Dass, with muscular arms and a thick neck. Its snout was flat, and its ears were pointed. Its teeth were vicious fangs, and its eyes glittered like black jewels in the reflected light of the storms, which continued to rage far above.

To Dass, it looked like a cross between a human and a bat, but more terrifying than either.

The monster threw back its head and howled, and the sound was like the world shattering beneath Dass's feet. He felt his stomach flip. Behind him and to his right, more of them were closing in, screeching in furious delight.

They'd *learned*. The creatures had changed the pattern of their hunting. They'd come early, before Dass and Spence had settled in for the night.

They'd figured out how to catch him unawares, just as he'd done with the scrabblers.

And now he was going to die.

Dass took a staggering step forward, toward his dad. His legs felt like jelly. Why wouldn't they move like he told them to?

He was too late. He was...

And then Spence's hand was tight around his wrist, and they were running toward their camp.

"Come on, Son. I've got you."

Dass stumbled as Spence shoved him through the opening into the cave. He fell roughly against the jagged wall, scraping his wrist, drawing beads of bright blood.

Hissing in pain, he righted himself, turning to help his dad just as Spence threw the barricade up, wedging the old metal plating—salvaged pieces of old mining ship—into place across the narrow opening.

Spence edged back, breathing heavily. Dass eyed the barricade nervously. He could hardly breathe. His heart felt like it was thudding against his ribs.

Outside, he could hear the scraping sound of the creatures' movements, scritch-scratching on the rocks. They were close. Just a few steps away. He could hear their rasping breaths, the slavering sound of their dripping jaws, the rustle of...something. He had no idea what that could be. He'd never really been able to get a good look at them, and for good reason—whenever one was close, he'd been running.

And he didn't want to get a better look at one of them now, either.

Outside, the sounds stopped.

Dass glanced at his father. Their eyes met.

Was that it?

Had the monsters given up? Realized that he and his dad were safe inside their cave, behind the barricade?

Cautiously, his breath still shallow, Dass approached the barricade.

Still nothing.

He leaned closer.

There were no sounds coming from the other side.

He pressed his ear to the metal sheeting. It was cold and smooth against the side of his face.

He decided they must have gone. He let out a long breath and started to turn back toward Spence.

And that was when the monster punched a hole in the barricade right beside his head. Dass screamed.

One moment there'd been nothing, the next the metal plate had flowered open around the creature's fist, curling back like ragged petals. The hand grabbed for Dass as he tried to squirm away, talons digging into his shoulder and causing him to cry out again as he felt them biting into his skin.

The creature yanked him back, slamming him into the barricade, which trembled with a boom as he struck it, jarring his back. Hot tears streamed down his cheeks. He clawed at the creature's furry arm, trying desperately to prize its talons out of his shoulder.

"Hold on, Dass!"

Bleary-eyed, he saw his father had something in his hands. A long metal pole, a shaft taken from one of the wrecked mining crafts they'd been stripping for useful parts. Spence had claimed he was going to turn it into a walking stick for his bad leg in case they were forced to make a long trek across the rocks, but he was firing up a power pack he'd attached to one end of it, and the other end was glowing, crackling with electrical charge.

Grimacing, Spence ran at the hole in the barricade, jabbing the makeshift weapon against the creature's arm. "Get away from my son!"

Dass felt the creature's hand spasm and release his shoulder, and the arm was tugged roughly back through the hole. Outside, the monster emitted a furious roar. The sound was so deep and primal that Dass felt it rumbling through his entire body.

He slumped onto his knees. His shoulder hurt more than anything had hurt before.

"Son. You're okay. You're all right, Dass. It's going to be okay."

He looked up into his dad's worried face. "What is that thing?"

Spence's brow creased into a frown. Then he glanced at the pole in his hands. "I haven't just been working on the beacon, you know, while you've been off exploring. I was making a weapon so I could defend us. Figured those furry blighters might try something like this."

Dass grinned. "I love you, Dad."

"You too, Son."

Another thunderous roar from outside was followed by angry thudding against the barricade. The sound echoed around the inside of their small cave.

Dass winced. He felt panic rising in his chest. "What if they get through?"

Spence held out his weapon. "Then we've got this." He straightened up, hauling Dass to his feet with his free hand. "We need to get you patched up. But first, help me strengthen this barricade. Pile everything up against it. Everything we've got."

Spence moved to the small pile of bags and equipment and began heaping them up against the front of the cave. "We can fetch more hull plates from the wreck in the morning when they've gone, make this thing impenetrable." He peered through the hole and then, narrowing his eyes, jabbed the end of his pole through again. It connected with another of the creatures, which stumbled back, whimpering. "That should scare them off for a while," he said with grim satisfaction.

Sure enough, the monsters seemed to be falling back.

Dass, trying to ignore the fiery pain in his shoulder, set about helping his dad build up the barricade. "We need to cover up this hole. I can't stand the idea of them looking in and watching us. There's probably something in my pack…" Dass's voice trailed off as realization hit him like a wall.

"What? What is it?"

"The beacon..." said Dass.

"It's still out there. With *them*," said Spence. His expression was grim. Dass slumped back against the wall. He couldn't believe it. All that work. Their only hope of getting off this miserable world.

And now it was stuck out there, with the monsters.



"An underground city!" Amos whistled. "I'm impressed. Just think of the power needed to run this place." He ticked things off on his fingers as he listed them. "Air scrubbers, lights, heating, ventilation—and that's on top of all the usual stuff needed to keep a city like this up and running." He paused for a moment to catch his breath. "And have you seen the hoversleds? They're built to a completely different design than anything I've come across before. I've got to ask them for the specs. We could learn a lot by understanding the Katikoot's technology. They seem to have a very different way of approaching things than the Republic."

There was no response.

Amos glanced at Dietrix and Obik, who were sitting across the table from him in the ambassador's lounge. They'd been led there by the Katikoot after the comms team had arrived. It was as impressive as everything else they'd seen in Diurna, with tall ceilings, elaborate wall hangings, and tiny vents in the floor that gave out little puffs of sweet-scented air.

Amos leaned forward in his chair. "You must love this stuff! Visiting new worlds, meeting new people, seeing the wonders of the galaxy." He took another sip of the violet fruit juice he'd been given by one of the Katikoot's strange skeletal host droids. It tasted good. Full of sugar. Maybe too much sugar. "Anyway, aren't these drinks good?"

Neither Dietrix nor Obik looked as though they knew how to respond.

"And he says *I* talk too much," muttered Kam.

"Bee-doo!" came the beeping reply from GT-11, who was loitering nearby, apparently listening to every word.

Kam glowered at GT-11 with mock hurt. "Really?"

"I couldn't agree more, Geetee," said Amos, beaming at the Twi'lek. Kam shook his head.

Obik was drumming his fingertips on the tabletop, looking thoughtful. EX-9B was hovering over his shoulder. It seemed reluctant to mingle with GT-11. Apparently, there'd been some sort of falling out between them after EX-9B had accused GT-11 of being lazy. It hadn't gone down well.

"To be honest," said Obik, "most of the places we visit aren't even half as sophisticated as this. What the Katikoot have achieved here is hugely impressive."

Amos nodded enthusiastically. He nudged Kam. "See. Obik agrees."

"I think you should stop drinking that stuff now, Amos. The sugar is making you all jittery."

"It is? I feel perfectly fine. Better than fine, in fact." He brought the glass up toward his lips again.

"Trust me," said Kam, reaching over and plucking the glass from the Theelin's fingers.

Amos frowned at him for a moment and then shrugged. Maybe Kam was right. Now that he mentioned it, Amos *was* feeling a little jittery.

Dietrix had started pacing the room, making a clacking sound with her tongue. Amos wondered if she'd had a little too much of the sugary fruit juice, too. "They're taking their time," she said to no one in particular.

"They have a lot to discuss," said Obik.

"I know, I know," said Dietrix. "It's just..."

"You want to know what happened to Rok and his team," finished Kam.

Dietrix nodded. "That's why we're all here, isn't it? An entire team went missing on Aubadas. And now we're enjoying the Katikoot's hospitality like nothing happened. But where's Rok and Maliq? Joneth and Branda?" She looked at them each in turn. "Something doesn't feel right."

"That's because something *isn't* right," someone said from the doorway. Amos glanced around to see a familiar tall, slim Jedi. Silandra was human, with copper-hued skin and brown hair that featured a prominent blond streak. She had her shield strapped to her back at the shoulders, and her lightsaber hilt clipped to her belt. Beside her was her Padawan, Rooper, a shorter human Jedi with darker skin and deep brown eyes.

"Silandra. Rooper," said Dietrix. "What news?" Silandra glanced over at Amos and Kam. She nodded in

acknowledgment. "The Katikoot have outlined the situation," she said. She told them about Gloam, the Katikoot's request for help, and the previous team's mission to investigate the creatures. Then she related the story that Rillik had told them about what had happened on the other world.

"But Rok must have sent Atesee *after* the attack," said Amos. "He mentioned the ambush in his message. It also explains why the droid was so beaten up. The asteroids didn't help, but maybe it was damaged earlier...."

"When the team's ship was destroyed," finished Kam. "That means Rillik is wrong. We know at least Rok must have survived, even after Rillik fled in the mining ship."

"Precisely," said Silandra. "He could still be out there. So could the others."

They lapsed into silence as they all considered the implications. Could any of them have possibly survived so long alone on a hostile world? Amos didn't like their chances, even for someone as used to the harsh frontier life as Rok. But then again, could they ignore the possibility?

"We're going after them," said Rooper.

"Good," said Dietrix. She grinned at Rooper. "Because if you'd said you weren't, you might have had a mutiny on your hands."

"Same goes for me and Nibs," said Obik, patting EX-9B, who was still hovering above his left shoulder. The droid emitted a plaintive little bleep.

Silandra nodded. "Thank you. It's undoubtedly dangerous. If a Jedi Master like Rok could be caught off guard..." Her voice trailed off, her point clear.

"We're a *team*," said Dietrix. "Besides, if you think I'm letting any of you get your hands on my ship, you've got another think coming."

Amos glanced at Kam. A flicker of understanding passed between them. He cleared his throat and rubbed unconsciously at his head spikes. "Ahem. You can count on us, too. Me, Kam. We'll come." He swallowed, then moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue. "To Gloam. Where there's danger. And scary, hostile creatures." Kam nodded and passed Amos his drink back. Amos glugged the rest of it down appreciatively.

Silandra smiled. "Your courage does you credit. But there's something I would ask you to do here on Aubadas if you will."

Amos tried to hide his relief behind his glass—despite the fact it was empty.

"There's something wrong with the comms," said Silandra. "The

Katikoot have lost all contact with Gloam, and even here in Diurna, long-range transmissions are meeting unusual interference."

"Comms?" said Amos.

Kam shot him a look and then prized the empty glass from his hands. "We noticed on the way in," said the Twi'lek. "There was some sort of interruption to the connection, like a relay was down."

"Or something is creating a dead zone," said Amos.

"A dead zone?" asked Dietrix. "You think someone might be messing with the comms on purpose?"

"No, no. It's probably nothing like that," said Amos. "There could be any number of reasons why they're down. We won't know until we investigate." The thought of examining a new alien communication system filled Amos with utter glee. Plus there were no dangerous creatures in Diurna. The relief was palpable.

"Then you'll do it?" said Silandra.

"Of course we're going to help," said Kam. He glanced at Silandra. "Will the Katikoot give us access to their systems?"

Silandra nodded. "They've already agreed. They're anxious to help. In fact, two of the Katikoot have volunteered to come with us to Gloam. Mittik, the woman who first greeted us when we arrived, and Rillik, so he can show us where the other team were attacked."

"Doo-dee-bee?" said GT-11.

Silandra glanced at the droid, then back at Kam and Amos. "Looks like Geetee-Eleven would like to stay and help with the comms systems," she said.

Amos beamed. "We'd be delighted to have you, Geetee!"

"Braa-doo-woo," said EX-9B.

"Whaaa-weee-doo-baa-doo!" exclaimed GT-11.

"Bee-do-doo-waa!" said EX-9B, its pitch growing shrill.

"That's not true and you know it!" said Obik. "*Neither* of you are lazy. And Geetee—I think you should take that remark back."

"Whaaa-wooo," said GT-11.

Silandra crossed her arms. "Hardly an apology, is it?"

GT-11 spun on the spot to demonstrate his annoyance.

Rooper sighed. "Come on, Geetee!"

The droid turned to look at her, then expelled a jet of gas as if to offer a reluctant sigh. "*Waa-woo-boo*," he said.

"Da-dee-bree-woo," muttered EX-9B in response.

"There." Obik got to his feet, shaking his head. "So when do we leave?"

"The Katikoot are already packing provisions," said Rooper. She was smiling in a way that made Amos think she was actually *excited* about venturing to a hostile world. "We'll be on our way in an hour."

Amos sighed and leaned back in his chair. "Time for another round of juice then," he said.



"She's going to kill us all!"

Rillik was clinging to the edge of the table in the *Umberfall*'s common area as if his life depended on it. His taloned fingertips were digging furrows in the tabletop.

Mittik, sitting nearby, rolled her eyes in exasperation. "You must have made this trip over a hundred times before, Rillik." Rooper got the sense that the woman didn't have a lot of time for Rillik's melodrama.

The other Katikoot coughed. "Yes. But never in a tin can like this, and never with a *Republic* pilot at the helm."

The ship gave a sudden shudder, slewing dramatically to the right as it was battered by yet another brutal crosswind. They were flying through the heart of the dark storm clouds that filled most of Gloam's upper atmosphere. Dietrix was doing an admirable job holding them steady, but there was no doubt it was some of the worst conditions Rooper had ever flown in. She peered out of the viewport at the sea of ominous swirling gray, the threads of lightning forking through the gloom. It was no wonder none of the Katikoot wanted to return. Especially Rillik, after everything he'd been through. The fact he'd volunteered at all was a credit to him.

"How can you be so calm?" said Rillik, his voice rising in pitch as the *Umberfall* swooped left, flipping onto its side to avoid a flickering arc of lightning.

Rooper braced herself against the bulkhead and offered him a lopsided grin. "I trust in the Force," she said, "and I know Dietrix is one of the best pilots in the whole Republic." She didn't add that she was also feeling deeply

unsettled as they approached the troubled world. Not because of Dietrix's flying but because something about Gloam just felt *wrong*.

Where the living Force usually appeared to Rooper in the form of bright, swirling colors, when she closed her eyes and reached out across the dark planet below, everything was washed in muddy browns and suffocating grays. There was more wrong there than the environmental disaster that had blighted the skies. And she couldn't help thinking that it was somehow going to end up being connected to Rok and what had become of his team.

If her instincts could be trusted, that was. She'd been going over and over what had happened on Aubadas. She hadn't been wrong, exactly, leading the others to that gully...but if circumstances had been different, she might well have stumbled headlong into a trap. It was pure luck that Mittik and the other Katikoot had turned out to be friendly. Well, luck and a bit of diplomacy. But Rooper couldn't help wondering what might have happened to Dietrix, Obik, and the droids if things hadn't gone their way. She was a Jedi, and that meant she had responsibilities. The others trusted her. She needed to live up to that trust. Maybe this was something she'd talk to Silandra about later. Her master always had a good perspective on such matters, a way of making things seem right when Rooper was feeling uncertain.

The ship banked again, then turned into a sequence of swooping rolls as Dietrix finally dipped them out of the thick clouds, swooping low above the bleak landscape of the planet's surface.

Rillik emitted another wet, rasping cough. It didn't sound good.

Rooper had been trying to persuade the Katikoot to let the medic look him over, but so far, Rillik had refused. Rooper wasn't sure if it was stubbornness or a fear of finding out what was really wrong. It seemed many of the Katikoot miners suffered from the same affliction, and Rillik was unwilling to talk about it. He was unwilling to talk about a lot of things. Unless it was to criticize Dietrix's flying.

The others were all in the cockpit, and Rooper couldn't say that she blamed them. The *Umberfall* wasn't a particularly small ship, but it somehow felt cramped with both Mittik and Rillik aboard. Pathfinder teams spent so much time together on their ships, or out together among the stars, that they formed a close bond. Rooper supposed they'd become like a family, in a way. They were used to each other's company, and they had their routines. So it always seemed a bit strange when others were invited into their home. Not that anyone had objected to the Katikoot joining them for the mission, of

course. Quite the opposite—they were grateful for the help. Especially considering what Rillik had gone through to get off the planet in the first place. But still, it was different, having strangers aboard. Something that Rooper still hadn't gotten used to.

Or perhaps it was just her own self-doubt making her feel out of sorts.

The ship bucked again, causing Rillik to wail. And then they were settling into a steady descent. Rooper watched through the viewport as the landing pad seemed to swim up to meet them. The ship settled with a soft thud.

Outside, mist curled around the ship, and the sky was dark and gloomy. Dietrix had landed among the bristling spires and gantries of an old mineral refinery, part of the abandoned mining operations on Gloam. The spiky, angular towers loomed out of the mist. Rooper gave an involuntary shiver, imagining what it must be like to be lost out there, beneath that brooding sky. She thought of Maliq and what it must have been like for him. And now she was following in his footsteps.

She could hear the others chatting as they made their way from the cockpit. The talk was subdued, lacking the excitement that usually accompanied their arrival on a new world. Everyone was aware of the stakes and what they might be facing on Gloam.

She turned at the alarming sound of more coughing from Rillik. He was standing, holding himself up with one hand on the table while he bent forward at the waist, his expression pained. Mittik, too, was on her feet. She reached out to take his other arm, but he pushed her away, spluttering.

"I'm all right. It's just a...just a..." He broke down into another frantic bout of coughing and then promptly toppled over, collapsing on the ship's deck.

"Help!" Mittik was immediately by Rillik's side, dropping to her knees to cup his face in her hand. "Rillik? Can you hear me?"

He groaned but didn't reply.

Rooper hurried to join them. "Obik? Ninebee?"

"We're here," said Obik, huffing as he rushed over.

EX-9B was hovering over his left shoulder. "Deet-doo-bee."

"Yes, Nibs. Fetch my emergency kit." The droid swiveled around, firing its thrusters to propel it through the air to the lockers on the other side of the common area, where Obik kept his medical supplies. It opened the locker and began rooting around inside.

"If you could give me some room," said Obik, ushering Rooper and

Mittik back. He kneeled beside the fallen Katikoot. Rooper could sense the others gathering around, all of them being sure to give Obik plenty of room to work.

Obik held Rillik's wrist, silently mouthing as he counted out the beats of Rillik's pulse. He stooped low, listening to the Katikoot's labored breathing for a moment. He glanced up at Rooper. "His breathing is shallow. Pass me that pillow."

Rooper did as she was asked, fetching the pillow from the sofa where Rillik had been sitting. Rillik groaned again as Obik lifted his head lightly to slide it beneath.

"It is the miner's curse," said Mittik. "The rot that sets into their lungs when they spend too long in the mines. It comes to them all after a time. There is nothing we can do." For a moment Rooper thought the other Katikoot was being unkind, but the concern was evident on Mittik's face. This was just her way. She was making a statement of fact as she understood it.

"We can't just leave him to die," said Rooper. "There must be *something* we can do."

"We've tried. The illness is caused by mineral particles lodging inside the lungs. They embed in the tissue and begin to reproduce, until the lungs eventually stop working, becoming lumps of mineral themselves. We searched for a cure for many, many years. But we've found nothing that can halt the disease's progress once a person becomes infected."

"Then let Obik try. The Republic has access to medicines from hundreds of worlds, for thousands of species. There must be something he can do," said Rooper. She felt Silandra's reassuring hand on her shoulder.

"Obik?" said Silandra.

Obik met her eye. His expression was serious. "I don't know. His physiology is different from any I've seen before. There's nothing in Nibs's databanks, either. We checked earlier. I need to run some tests before I can even begin to think about treating him." He frowned in concern as Rillik gave another wheezing cough. "I think me and Nibs should stay here on the ship with Rillik."

"Agreed," said Silandra. "He's already told us where we're most likely to find Rok and the others, in the ruins of the old city. It's not far from our landing zone. We should be able to pinpoint the location on the map and find our way from there." Mittik nodded. "Then it is done."
"I will do what I can for him," said Obik.
On the ground, Rillik coughed weakly and rolled onto his side.



With Rillik safely moved to the small medical bay at the rear of the ship, overseen by Obik, the others had gathered in the common area to discuss their next move.

EX-9B, having assisted Obik in making his patient comfortable, had been temporarily commandeered to help interrogate the topographical maps of the area, which had been uploaded into its databanks before leaving Aubadas. It was hovering above their heads, projecting a large hologram into the center of the space, and the others had gathered around it.

Silandra had her arms folded across her chest as she peered thoughtfully at the three-dimensional image. It seemed to show a rugged landscape formed from jagged rocks and peaks. Some of the low, flat areas appeared to have flooded, and there was a small wooded area that Mittik had explained was a shifting forest created by trees that actually uprooted themselves and shuffled around on their stumpy roots to follow the tides of the seasonal lakes.

But the thing that had drawn everyone's interest was the rendering of a cliff face that appeared to be dotted with a series of doorways and windows, most of them set into the rock at over thirty meters high.

"So the city is built into the side of the cliff?" said Silandra.

Mittik shrugged. "Yes. Or so I believe. I have never been to Gloam. I'm told the tunnels lead back into the cliff and, from there, down into the mines deep inside the rock."

"Surely it would have been more practical to mine from the base of the cliff," said Dietrix. "Why open shafts so high up in the facing of the rock?"

"Because the early engineers were making use of the ruins that were

already there," Mittik said a little defensively. "Why cut new tunnels when the ancients had already done it for them?"

"But—"

Silandra held up her hand to interject. "Debating the practicalities of the mining operations isn't going to help us find the other Pathfinder team. If this is where they were last seen, then this is where we go."

Dietrix nodded. Or at least that was what Rooper imagined. She'd tried focusing on the debate, but her eyes and her attention kept being drawn to the viewport beyond the flickering projection. It was like something out there was calling to her, deep down inside. Like it was reaching out, wrapping its fingers around her wrist, and trying to drag her into the night. To lead her to something. The problem was, she couldn't tell what that *something* was and whether it meant her harm. Either way, it felt important.

She closed her eyes and reached out with the Force, seeking the reassuring peace of its presence.

The Force is with me. I am one with the Force.

The sounds of the conversation going on around her seemed to dim. Colors flowed and blurred. The bright greens, pinks, blues, and yellows that represented the presence of her friends in the Force mingled and swirled all around her. She pushed out farther, beyond the boundary of the ship, into the cold nightscape beyond.

Immediately, she recoiled. The hue changed. Darker colors impinged on her mind. Blacks, grays, midnight purples, and bruised reds. Everything seemed distant, faint. Sounds were just echoes. And she was alone. So alone.

Rooper fought the urge to pull back, to surround herself with the vibrant life of her friends. She had to know. She had to find what was calling to her. She followed its pull through the darkness.

Hello?

Who's there?

She was walking in a sea of black. Bleak. Silent.

Just rocks. Endless rocks.

And then there it was. A dim glow, right in the midst of that endless wash of emptiness. The spark of a life, touching the living Force. A fading glow. A lone traveler among the shadows.

And it was looking directly at her.

Rooper opened her eyes with a gasp.

She was standing in the center of the common area, right in the middle of

the hologram. Blue light flickered all around her. The others were all staring at her in silence.

Rooper realized she was holding out her hand. Her pointer finger was extended. She was indicating a place on the map. A spot among the rocks, out in the middle of nowhere, to the west of the ruined city that marked their destination.

Embarrassed, she took a deep breath. She flicked her eyes toward her master, who was looking at her with concern.

"Rooper? Are you okay?"

"I...umm..." She didn't know what to say, how to explain what had happened. And even if she *could*, she didn't know if she *should*. What if it was nothing? Worse, what if it was a trap? Or another mistake, like the one on Aubadas?

Silandra stepped forward, walking into the holo to stand beside her. It shimmered like water around them before settling again. EX-9B made a sound that reminded Rooper of the exasperated noises Obik made when he was losing an argument. Rooper still hadn't lowered her arm. "What is it, Padawan?" Silandra's tone was gentle. "What did you see?"

Rooper turned to Silandra and saw the look of utter trust, of affection, in the woman's eyes. How could she risk letting her down?

"It's all right, Rooper," said Silandra. "Tell me. What's there?"

Rooper swallowed. "I don't know. A light. A *life*. Alone in the dark. Someone is out there, and their light is fading."

Silandra nodded. "Did you recognize that light? Have you seen it before?"

Rooper understood then that Silandra had listened to her. Had really *listened*, striving to understand the way Rooper visualized the Force, how each person could be identified by the swirling colors that radiated from them. That's what Silandra had been doing these past few months, pushing Rooper to reach out farther and farther, to test her, to help her learn to trust her instincts. *Teaching* her.

"No. I don't think so. But the only person I know from the other team is Maliq." Rooper lowered her hand. EX-9B blinked off the projection. "It could be anyone. But I know it's a person, and I know they're in trouble."

"Could they be hostile?" asked Dietrix.

"Does it matter?" asked Rooper. "There's someone out there in need. Alone. On this dangerous world. They might not want our help, but isn't it our duty to try?"

Silandra took Rooper's hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. "I'm proud of you, Rooper. So proud. But Dietrix is right—we can't give up on the others. They could be trapped in the ruined city or the mines, like Rillik said."

"What if it *is* one of them?" said Rooper. "What if the person I saw is Rok or one of the others? They might have gotten away, like Rillik did. They might be lost and alone out there, hoping that someone is coming to find them. They reached out to me, Master. I felt it. Like they were trying to guide me to them." All her previous doubts were melting away. She knew she was right about this. She felt it.

Silandra looked pained. "It could be dangerous."

"Everything about this mission is dangerous," said Rooper. "You know that. And I know you agree with me, deep down. We have to find whoever is out there."

They lapsed into an awkward silence.

"I do not pretend to understand this light you believe you have felt," said Mittik, "but we have mystics who speak of the deep connection between all living things. Like the roots of an immense tree, worming beneath the soil, they weave together, the lives of all Katikoot, all creatures, all things that grow. In this way, we are all one. We touch the lives of everything and everyone around us." She stared at Rooper, her red eyes intense. "I believe you."

Rooper felt tears prick the corners of her eyes. "Thank you," she said.

"You must trust your instincts," said Mittik. She looked to Silandra. "And so, too, must we seek your missing friends in the ruins."

"You want us to split up?" said Dietrix. She shrugged. "That could work. I'll go with Mittik to the ruins. You two go and do your Jedi stuff first and then meet us there."

Silandra's brows furrowed as she tried to weigh up the decision. "If Rillik's story is true, those creatures are deadly, even to a Jedi."

Dietrix grinned. "We already know Rillik got it wrong. Rok made it out to send the message, didn't he? And besides, I have no intention of taking on any dangerous creatures. If I see anything even vaguely terrifying, I'm planning to run and hide."

Mittik smiled, baring her fangs. "Then it seems we are decided. We must save everyone we can."

Silandra nodded slowly. "Obik and Ninebee remain here on the ship with

Rillik. The two of you go and explore the ruins. *Carefully*. Rooper and I will make a brief detour to check in on this possible survivor before coming to find you."

Dietrix turned, crossed the room, and collected her pack, then hoisted it onto her shoulder. "Don't look so worried, Rooper. Everything is going to be *fine*."

Rooper sucked in a deep breath. She only wished she had Dietrix's optimism.



How many hours had passed since he'd last heard the creatures moving about outside? Four? Five?

Beside him, Spence had finally dropped off to sleep and was snoring loudly, like he always did, his lips rumbling with every exhaled breath. Dass found it strangely comforting. And annoying.

They'd propped themselves up against the back wall of the small cave, facing the inside of the barricade. They'd cut the lights and wrapped themselves in as many layers as possible to keep off the chill. Spence had sat clutching his makeshift weapon in both hands, squeezing it so hard that Dass thought he risked crushing it if he wasn't careful. For hours, the creatures had paced outside the cave entrance, even once or twice testing the barricade with the occasional thump or scrape. So far, though, they hadn't made a real effort to get in, not since Spence had jabbed at one of them through the hole, sending it running off whimpering.

Dass glanced at his dad. Spence had stayed awake most of the night, insisting on standing guard, and it was only after he seemed sure that the threat had passed that he'd agreed to take a short break while Dass kept watch. He'd been reluctant, but Dass had convinced him that he was going to need his strength in the morning, too. Whatever happened, they were going to have to rebuild and reinforce the barricade, or perhaps even find a new location the monsters weren't aware of.

Despite his dad standing guard, Dass hadn't been able to sleep. He supposed it was a mix of adrenaline, fear, and worry keeping him awake. He kept replaying what had happened, how he'd nearly been caught out there

unawares. How the monster had punched a hole right through the barricade and dug its talons into his shoulder. He flexed it, wincing. His dad had done his best to clean and bind the wound, and Dass knew he'd been lucky. It would heal with no permanent damage, other than a few scars. Assuming, of course, they ever managed to make it out of the cave and off the planet alive.

And there was little chance of the latter if they couldn't get back to the beacon. It'd been hard enough to make it with the bits they'd been able to scavenge and repurpose from their kit bags. There was no chance they'd be able to make another.

He thought about it, out there on the rocks by the fire. It was basically ready. A couple of last checks and he could activate it. If the monsters hadn't destroyed it, of course.

And as far as he knew, they'd gone away, at least for a while.

He eyed the prod on the floor by his feet, then glanced up at his sleeping dad. Spence looked peaceful, as if the worry of the past few weeks had all just melted away and they were back on that paradise world, soaking in the wonder. This time, though, Dass knew it wouldn't last. As soon as Spence woke up, reality would kick in again, like a boot to the side of the head. He'd remember where they were and what had happened and how Dass had been injured. And he'd blame himself, like he always did. Dass sighed. He couldn't save his dad from any of that, but at least he could leave the man sleeping for now.

Quietly, Dass got to his feet and crossed to the barricade. He peeled away the canvas patch he'd stuck over the ragged hole in the plating and peered out. It was still dark—but then it always was. He couldn't see any of the creatures moving about.

The embers of their fire had burned down low so that the few remaining logs gave off a soft orange glow but little light. He could just make out the shape of his bundled blanket on the rock close by, and the silhouette of his pack. There was no way of knowing if the beacon was still intact, or if it was even still there.

Dass frowned. Well, he supposed there was *one* way of knowing....

He paused for a moment, looking out through the barricade. The monsters could be anywhere. They could be standing right there on the other side of the metal plating, just out of view. Ready to pounce on him as soon as he stepped outside.

Or they might have gone back to wherever it was they slunk off to during

the day.

He looked back at his sleeping dad and then at the barricade again. They were going to have to go out there at some point. If they stayed inside, refused to risk going out at all, they'd be as good as dead in a few days anyway. They needed food and water. And they needed that beacon.

Decision made, Dass crept back to the other side of the cavern and picked up his dad's prod. It was neat, for something he'd fashioned out of scrap. Lightweight but strong, with a small power pack and the salvaged head of a welder, so far as Dass could make out.

Dass returned to the barricade. He looked out again. Still nothing.

He felt a shiver of apprehension. Was this a crazy idea? Probably. But if he was going to do it, it was now or never.

Steeling himself, he began lifting away the kit they'd piled up earlier, placing it quietly against the wall nearby. Then, before he could talk himself out of it, he took a deep breath and lifted away one of the metal plates.

Nothing.

Just the cool breeze stirring his hair. Even the storms seemed to have blown themselves out. For now.

Clutching the prod across his chest, Dass took a single step out of the camp.

Still nothing.

He fought back a wave of terror at being out there again.

Face the fear and push through, Dass.

He turned on the spot, searching for any sign of the monsters.

Just rocks, as far as he could see.

He'd been right. They must have retreated.

He glanced at his abandoned pack. It was just a few steps away. A short run, a pause to snatch it all up, and a short run back. Yesterday, he wouldn't have thought twice about it. Now, though, it felt as if he was thinking about running over hot coals.

You can do this, Dass. You can do this.

He gripped the prod and ran.

His feet pounded the rocks. His heart thrummed in his chest. And then he was there, skidding to a halt before his stuff.

The beacon was still intact. The monsters had left it alone. Dass's heart soared. Maybe there was still a way off this miserable world after all.

He stooped to collect his pack, holding it by the straps.

Something snorted over his shoulder.

Without thinking, Dass pitched his damaged shoulder low and brought the pack up and around in a wide arc. It caught the creature beneath its drool-encrusted chin, whipping its head back and causing it to stumble. It hissed, momentarily dazed, but Dass knew he had to press his advantage while he could. He palmed the controls for the prod and jabbed it forward, shoving it against the creature's hairy chest even as the blue light flickered to life, discharging a searing bolt of electricity into the monstrous thing. It squealed, lashing out with its claws, its black crystalline eyes glistening in the half-light of the dying embers.

It lurched forward, a hulking thing, its leathery wings flashing out to either side, swamping Dass in darkness.

Dass ducked, hitting the controls and jabbing again, this time catching it under the arm and causing the enormous thing to stagger back again. Panicked, Dass kept going, jabbing and jabbing until the monster's dark gray fur was smoldering, driving it back, away from him and the camp.

He could barely think. He was just reacting, doing everything he could to protect himself and his dad. All he could think about was the fact his father was still asleep in the cave and he'd left the barricade open. If he let the monster get free, it might beat him back to the cave.

Grunting with the exertion, Dass thrust the prod at the thing again, but this time the creature was ready for him and batted the prod aside with a swipe of its arm. Dass watched in terror as the weapon tumbled from his numb fingers, clattering against the rocks by the monster's feet.

It turned to him and raised itself up to its full height, mouth yawning to reveal rows of daggerlike fangs.

Dass felt as if his heart was going to burst out of his chest. "No! *No!*" He threw his hands up as the creature launched itself at him...

...and then there was a tremendous thunk, and the creature staggered back, screeching in fury and shaking its head. A large rock had opened a deep gash in its forehead.

"Get back!" yelled Spence, snatching up the prod from where it had fallen. He fired the trigger, jabbing the creature in the throat.

This time it had clearly had enough, as it screeched again, threw its arms wide, and launched into the air, its wings billowing as they caught the air currents, lifting it up and away.

Dass watched it go, his every breath searing his chest. Then, when he was

sure it wasn't circling to come straight back, he glanced at his dad.

Spence looked furious. "What were you thinking?"

Dass felt tears welling but fought them back. "I...I just..." he mumbled, unable to find the words. "I wanted to..."

Spence gestured to the cave. "Get back inside. We can talk about this when you're safe."

Dass stooped and grabbed the blanket containing the beacon, and then he ran for the cave as quickly as he could before his legs turned to jelly beneath him.

Spence hurried in behind him.

"Quickly, Dad. The barricade," Dass managed to gasp as he fell to his knees, still clutching the bundled blanket in his arms.

It was only a moment's work for Spence to restack the panels of the barricade, wedging them back into place against the cave mouth. When he was done, he circled around to crouch before Dass. His face was a picture of fatherly concern. "Why, Dass? Why did you go and do something like that?"

Dass, still gasping for breath, allowed the bundle in his arms to unravel, spilling its contents gently onto the cave floor. "The beacon, Dad. I got the beacon. We're going to be okay."



SIL

But how can I be certain? It's not that I don't trust in the Force. It's that I'm not always sure I understand it."

Rooper and Silandra were hiking across the bleak landscape of Gloam. Above, the sky was marred by the same thick layer of smog they'd seen from orbit, blotting out much of the sun. Where it did pierce the dull gray canopy it fell in bright shafts, illuminating the glistening wet rocks beneath. Hardly anything grew there, aside from the odd patch of slimy moss, clinging on to life at what felt like the very edge of existence. Had people once lived there? The fact there were ruins suggested they had, sometime long before the world was broken. Perhaps, Rooper hoped, people would one day live there again.

Beside Rooper, Silandra laughed softly, but it was a kind laugh and not a teasing one. "I'm not sure any of us ever truly *understand* the Force, Rooper. Even Master Yoda and the others on the Council. We train our entire lives to learn how to harness the abilities it grants us, and the responsibilities, too. We learn to trust in ourselves *through* the Force, as beings that exist as a part of it. But there are no certainties. All we can do is put our faith in ourselves and others and allow the Force to guide us toward the truth."

"But what about what happened on Aubadas?" said Rooper. She skipped slightly to avoid stepping in a pool that had formed among the rocks.

"What happened on Aubadas?" said Silandra. She looked genuinely confused.

"I led us to the gully. I was so sure that's where we'd find the Katikoot city. But instead, I put us in danger."

Silandra stopped walking. She shook her head. "No, Rooper. Listen to

me. You put your trust in the Force, and you led us exactly where we needed to be. If we hadn't followed your instincts, we would never have met Mittik. Without Mittik, we might not have been able to persuade the other Katikoot that we were there as friends. You didn't make a mistake. You did as you needed to do. I'm very proud of the Jedi—and the person—you're becoming." She set off walking again. "Everything you did put us on the path to being here, right now."

Rooper grinned. She gestured around her. "Yeah, and who wouldn't want to be here?"

Silandra laughed. "Like I said, we're exactly where we need to be. I believe that, Rooper. The Force reached out to you, back on the ship. You were right to let it guide us, despite my initial concerns."

Ahead of them, the ground rose toward a gentle peak. The slope was covered in loose shale that caused Rooper's boots to slip and slide as she walked.

"Sometimes I have trouble letting go," said Silandra. "But you should never think that I doubt you, Rooper. Quite the opposite. I lost someone, a long time ago, and learning to let go was very difficult. But it *was* necessary. One day you will come to understand that, in training a Padawan, the master learns as much as the pupil. Perhaps even more."

"I'm sorry," said Rooper. She had heard from the others back at the temple that Silandra had lost a Padawan on a dangerous mission many years before, but this was the first time her master had ever brought it up. Rooper knew better than to press for details, though. If Silandra wanted to talk about it, she would.

Silandra nodded her acknowledgment. The moment stretched.

"I intend to make a pilgrimage to Jedha," said Silandra. "When circumstances allow. It's been many years since I observed the Season of Light and looked upon my reflection in the kyber mirrors beneath the Dome of Deliverance. I think it might be time."

Jedha! Rooper had read about the Holy City in the library on Coruscant and longed to walk its ancient streets, to spend time among the pilgrims of the many sects that saw it as a place of worship.

Rooper was about to ask Silandra whether she could tag along and join her on her pilgrimage but stopped herself, buttoning down her rush of excitement. People made pilgrimages for all sorts of reasons, and this might be something that Silandra wished—or *needed*—to do alone.

They approached the ridge. There, the shale was speckled with fragments of something dull and black. Rooper stooped to pick one up. It was a hunk of metal, charred black from some sort of fire or explosion. It left a film of dirt on her fingers. She handed it to Silandra, who turned it over in her palm.

"Starship hull," said Silandra. "Perhaps there was a crash or..." Her voice trailed off as they reached the crest of the ridge.

Down below, where the shale sloped toward a flat spur of rock, were the remains of a ship.

A familiar ship. One almost identical to the *Umberfall*.

A Pathfinder vessel.

"Oh," said Rooper. The two Jedi stood and stared at the shocking scene of destruction before them.

The ship had clearly detonated from the inside out, bursting open like a flower opening toward the sun. Bits of the hull were strewn in every direction, and even the dark stone showed signs of scorching where the temperature had reached abominable heights. There wasn't much left of the rear section of the ship, but the thick hull plates had shielded much of the nose of the vessel, including the cockpit, from damage. Except now it was upside down, presumably flipped over by the force of the explosion.

It was a vision of utter devastation.

Rooper felt her pulse quicken. She followed Silandra down the slope.

"Be careful, Rooper. Stay alert."

They approached the wreck with caution, but the heat of the flames had long died away, leaving just the blackened, twisted frame of the ship.

A ship that had once been people's home. Rooper shuddered, imagining how she would have felt if it had been the *Umberfall* there. Jedi weren't supposed to form attachments, *especially* to starships, but that didn't mean she could just turn those feelings off. And it didn't mean she couldn't empathize with those who had lost. Those like Silandra. They all had to learn to deal with those emotions. They weren't expected to feel *nothing*. They just had to try their best.

Rooper circled the ruined ship. Everything was eerily silent and still.

"It was called the *Foundling*," said Silandra, "because Rok always believed in helping waifs and strays. Those who were lost and needed help."

"I believe he still does," said Rooper.

Silandra offered her a sad smile.

"What could have caused an explosion like this?" said Rooper.

"A massive engine failure, perhaps?" said Silandra. "A crash landing?" Rooper didn't think that sounded right. "If it was a crash, surely the front of the ship would be more damaged, too. And how many engine failures have you heard about since we've been out here?"

Silandra shrugged. "I know. But it certainly wasn't the creatures Rillik described." They walked around to the front of the ship, where the cockpit appeared to be largely intact—if upside down—from what Rooper could see through the forward viewport, which was cracked with a spiderweb of fissures.

"There's no way in."

Silandra drew her lightsaber. "Stand back." The blade flared to life with a familiar hum. It seemed even more brilliant against the drab backdrop of Gloam's persistent night.

Silandra approached the side of the cockpit, held her lightsaber hilt in both hands, and jammed the searing blade into the metal hull plate. It fizzed and spat as she dragged it around in a wide circle, leaving a bright glowing furrow in its wake. Liquid metal dripped, striking the ground by her feet. She grunted with the effort as she finally completed the looping incision, and then she stepped back as the newly cut panel fell outward, clanging noisily against the rocks by her feet. Musty old air sighed out in its wake.

Silandra gestured for Rooper to look inside.

Careful not to brush her robes against the still-molten edge of the new opening, Rooper crept into the wrecked ship, her hand straying to the hilt of one of her own lightsabers. An ill feeling stirred in the pit of her stomach as she took in the scene. It felt odd, walking on the ceiling, looking up at what should have been the floor.

Inside it stank of old smoke and burnt metal. It should have seemed familiar—the layout of the cockpit was pretty much identical to the *Umberfall*—except for the fact that the instrument panels, control desk, and monitors had all been smashed. It looked as though someone had taken a heavy tool to the inside of the cockpit, trashing everything in sight. Even the chairs had been ripped out and mangled, and lay in a heap in the corner.

It was a very deliberate act of violence.

Silandra stepped up into the scene of ruin behind Rooper, holding her lightsaber aloft for extra illumination. "This was no accident," she said, taking in the scene. "This was done before the explosion. Whoever's responsible must have done this and left the ship before it detonated."

"Sabotage," said Rooper. "Just like Master Rok said in his message." "It looks that way."

Rooper rubbed the back of her neck. "It doesn't tally with Rillik's story. He said he found the ship, but the creatures had destroyed it."

"Unless he really did believe they were capable of doing *this*." Silandra gestured at the damaged console directly above her head. "He probably didn't stick around long enough to be certain. He would have been terrified and desperate to get away."

"You're probably right," said Rooper. Silandra always counseled her to keep an open mind and try to think the best of people. But something about the way the *Foundling* had been destroyed just didn't feel right. She was beginning to think that there was more going on there than they'd been led to believe. Had Rillik told them the truth about what happened on Gloam?

"Time will tell," said Silandra. She hopped down out of the ship. "Which way now?"

"We keep heading west," said Rooper, jumping down beside her and indicating the way, toward the storm-ridden horizon. "Whoever is out there, they're waiting for us, reaching out to us...."

Silandra set out across the sea of shale. "Well, we'd better hurry up then, hadn't we?"



"Have you heard anything from the others?"

Dietrix was fiddling with the comlink as she walked, trying to figure out a way to boost the signal. Her tongue was poking out of the corner of her mouth. She looked up to see Mittik watching her expectantly. "I'm sorry?"

"I said, have you heard anything from the others?"

Dietrix shook her head. "No. The comms are still down." She glanced up at the rupturing sky. "It could be storms creating interference."

Mittik shook her head. "No. The storms were here long before the comms went down. This is a recent problem."

Dietrix slipped the comlink back into her pack. "If there's a problem, Kam and Amos will find it."

"You mean the one who got all...excited after he drank the Hibinacho juice? And his friend?" said Mittik.

Dietrix was far from an expert on Katikoot facial expressions, but she could see that the other woman looked dubious. "Oh, *that*. Yeah, comms engineers are all a bit…*odd*. It's a good thing. Comes with the territory. All the best engineers have a wild side." She ran a hand through her stripe of multicolored hair as if to underline her point. "All pilots, too."

Mittik still didn't look convinced.

"Plus, they have Geetee-Eleven with them. He'll keep them in line."

Mittik shrugged and nodded. She clearly had more faith in the droid than she did in the engineers themselves.

Dietrix checked the readout on her tracomp, the digital compass she wore on her wrist. "We're about halfway there. The city should be coming into view over that outcropping soon."

They trudged on in the direction Dietrix had indicated.

"It's strange being here, after hearing all the tales about this place," said Mittik. Dietrix noticed she had wrapped her wings around herself protectively, as if she were giving herself a hug.

"How does it compare to what you imagined?"

"It's worse," said Mittik. "Far worse. I knew that Gloam was a blighted place, damaged beyond repair, but even the images couldn't prepare me for *this*." She sighed. "When I was a child, I used to sit on the edge of the gully —the one where we met—and look up at the night sky. I'd imagine all the adventures I could have on that twin world, hanging up there in the sky like a lantern. It used to be so *bright*." Her shoulders slumped. "But even then, the years of mining were already taking their toll. As I grew up, I watched it change. In time, what had once been a bright and welcome sight became the symbol of our shame. The black clouds closed in. The storms racked the surface. People grew sick. And still the ships left Aubadas empty and returned full, and the drills bit deeper and deeper."

"I'm sorry," said Dietrix. "But it's not too late. The Republic can help. There are programs dedicated to restoring worlds like this one."

"Can they bring back the ones who died? Can they restore our history?" "Your history?"

Mittik shook her head. "Never mind. It is I who should apologize. Here you are, searching for your missing friends, trying only to help my people. Your Republic must be a happy place."

Dietrix laughed. "Sometimes. But that's the thing about the Republic. It isn't so much a place as an *idea*. A way of living. A way for people from different worlds and backgrounds to come together and help each other. Sometimes that works. Other times it's harder."

"Now you sound like one of your Jedi friends."

Dietrix clasped her hands over her heart. "You wound me!"

Her comlink trilled loudly. Frowning, she studied it for a moment. "Now that's unexpected."

"What is it? Have we gone the wrong way again?"

"Again? I told you, that was a simple misunderstanding...."

The comlink trilled again.

"A warning?" prompted Mittik.

"No," said Dietrix. "A distress signal. It's just activated. From over that

way." She pointed to the left.

"Away from the city," said Mittik.

"Yeah," said Dietrix. She studied the horizon, but there was nothing but more jagged hills of dark rock. "It's local, too."

"How is it bypassing the interference that's affecting the other comms?"

Dietrix shrugged. "It's broadcasting on a wide spectrum of frequencies. And it must be close enough that we can pick it up locally, rather than relying on the satellite relays."

"Silandra and Rooper?"

"No. They went in the other direction. Besides, it's not one of our beacons. The call pattern is unfamiliar."

"A trap then?"

Dietrix frowned. She couldn't exactly rule out a trap, but weren't there supposed to be *dangerous creatures* on Gloam? Since when had animals learned how to activate distress beacons? "I don't think so."

"Perhaps it's the missing Pathfinders then?" said Mittik. "If they escaped from the city, they may have set up a camp somewhere nearby."

"Then why only activate the beacon now? And again, the call pattern would be familiar." Dietrix turned on the spot, trying to figure out what to do. "No. This is short-range. Different." She looked at Mittik. "Could there be anyone else on Gloam?"

"It's possible," said the Katikoot. "The workers were evacuated long before Rok and his team ever came to Aubadas, but as my father said, some did go missing. We searched for them before the evacuation, but they were never found. Other off-worlders could have come here, too, but it seems unlikely." She sniffed, her bat-like snout twitching. "It's far more likely that survivors from the attack have been forced to fashion a new beacon after theirs went missing or was destroyed, is it not?"

Dietrix beamed at her. "Yes. Yes, it is." She set out, pivoting to follow the new signal toward its origin.

"So I guess we're going that way, then?" said Mittik.



It felt as if the trees were closing in all around them. Their angular, barren branches formed vicious-looking shapes in the gloom. Pools of shadow seemed to describe the outlines of people lurking among the thorns, leaving Rooper with the distinct sense that they were being watched.

They'd wandered into an area of dense mangroves, wading through ankle-deep water where the rocks were covered in slimy moss. Carrion birds wheeled above their heads, squawking noisily. Occasionally, something ropy and slick would bump against her leg in the water. These were the first real signs of life they'd encountered on Gloam, and it felt to Rooper like some sort of last gasp of a forgotten wilderness. A final stand for natural life in a dismal dying world.

She knew she was being dramatic. There had to be forests and rivers and seas elsewhere on the planet; otherwise there'd be no breathable atmosphere at all. At least, that was how most worlds worked. That meant it was a place still worth saving. Perhaps one day this place would be brimming with life again, and the skies would be clear and blue. She could only hope.

"Ewwww," she said as a slimy root brushed against the back of her knee. She heard Silandra chuckle quietly to herself nearby.

They'd found evidence of a small settlement as they'd passed through, beyond the shale valley where they'd discovered the wreck of the *Foundling*. A few scattered homesteads and cobbled streets, the remains of a village or hamlet. Perhaps the people who'd lived there—Katikoot, Rooper imagined—had been farmers, working the land before the soil was all eroded and the black bedrock was exposed. A peaceful life, just like the farmers on Rohm,

the agricultural world where Rooper had been born and spent her early years before the Jedi came and took her to Coruscant to train.

That might have been her life, too, if the Force had not pulled her in a different direction. It wouldn't have been so bad. Nor would it have been as exciting as being out on the frontier with Silandra. Perhaps her master had been right, after all. Perhaps the Force had led her exactly where she needed to be, by Silandra's side.

They were drawing closer to their destination. She could sense it, the nearness of the light she sought to find in the darkness. Its pull was getting stronger.

"This way," said Rooper as they came to a forking path through the mangroves. Silandra nodded, following without question, her feet sloshing in the cool water that was now up around their calves. "We're close."

Rooper closed her eyes, reaching out with the Force. Here the world seemed vibrant and bright, an oasis in the darkness, as the color of the trees and the birds and the fish erupted all around her, a flowing tide of life. Rooper reveled in it, drinking it all in.

This is how the world should be. Full of life and light.

She pushed out farther, beyond the trees, toward a colder, darker place where the light was fading, the color slowly leaching away. "We haven't got long," she said, her eyes still pressed shut. "Their color is fading. I think they might be wounded. I think—"

"Rooper!"

Silandra's warning cry cut through the haze of her vision. Rooper's eyes blinked open. Her lightsabers were already in her hands, flickering to life. She moved instinctively, ducking to the right, swinging her blades up before her defensively.

A huge shadow passed over her left shoulder, splashing down into the water beside her. She danced back, weapons raised, stirring the streambed as she planted her feet.

The creature gave a low growl.

It was a massive thing that looked like a cross between a large charhound and a giant cat with antlers. It walked on all fours, and its thin coat of green-and-black fur revealed rippling muscles along the entire length of its body. It had three eyes across the center of its head and a set of jaws that opened *exceptionally* wide to reveal twin rows of needle-fine teeth. A pair of antlers protruded from its forehead, black and spiky, just like the trees.

Rooper eased herself back, moving slowly away from the beast as it lowered itself into the water, yellow eyes fixed on her every move. It was getting ready to pounce again.

She risked a glance at Silandra and wished she hadn't. The Jedi Master had drawn her lightsaber and shield and was circling back in the same way as Rooper, so that within moments they would close the gap between them, protecting their rear flanks. But two more of the enormous beasts were closing in on Silandra, too, and Rooper realized that they were being herded, their escape routes closed off.

"So you think these are Rillik's so-called monsters?" said Rooper as she felt Silandra's presence at her back.

"No," came Silandra's reply. Her voice seemed calm, level. How did she do that? "I think these are just very lonely, very hungry predators."

"*Just*?" said Rooper. They looked like killing machines from where she was standing.

"Defend yourself," said Silandra, "but if we can minimize loss of life, then we must. These beasts have no malign intent."

"They want to *eat* us," said Rooper, trying desperately to keep her tone respectful.

"They believe us to be their prey. We must show them we...are...not." Silandra spun as she completed her sentence, throwing up her shield arm as one of the beasts launched itself at her, springing up out of the water and leaving a stream of droplets in its wake. It would have collided with her headon, but her neat spin and sidestep meant that it sailed past, unable to halt its own momentum, and was pushed off course by Silandra's shield, which hummed as it struck the creature's flank.

Then Rooper was spinning, too, whirling her lightsabers in a wide circle to create a defensive barrier between herself and the other beast, which had risen from the murky water and was stalking around her, its antlered head swaying from side to side.

She heard Silandra grunt, followed by the ringing clang of her shield, presumably connecting with a beast's horns. The one facing Rooper opened its jaws and bellowed a thunderous challenge.

And then it leapt.

Rooper feinted left, then darted right, both lightsabers—one in each hand—swinging up and around in a synchronized arc that grazed the tips of the leaping beast's antlers, slicing them free. The severed chunks of horn

tumbled through the air and splashed into the water by Rooper's feet as the creature, wailing, thudded into the stream, flopping clumsily onto its side. It righted itself immediately, shaking water from its fur. The tips of its antlers were blunted, but their loss didn't seem to have put the creature off.

"They must be *very* hungry," said Rooper, falling back into a circling pattern with the beast. "They're not giving up."

"I think they're trying to tire us out," said Silandra. "Circling and attacking until one of us makes a mistake, drops her guard."

"Great," said Rooper beneath her breath. This trip to Gloam really wasn't turning out to be the sort of adventure she'd had in mind. Getting eaten by a hungry animal *definitely* wasn't near the top of her list.

The creature leapt again, and this time Rooper was forced to throw herself into the water to avoid its flashing jaws. Her head ducked beneath the surface for a moment before she came up again, spluttering, calling deep on the Force to push her up and out, mere moments before the beast charged. Its jaws closed where her throat had been just seconds before. She landed softly back on her feet, this time behind the creature. Dripping wet.

"This isn't working."

Silandra nodded. "Here. Let me try something." She extinguished her lightsaber, slipping the hilt back into the holster at her belt. The three creatures had now re-formed the loose circle around the two Jedi and were creeping ever closer, trying to push them back among the daggerlike branches of the trees.

"I think you'd better hurry," said Rooper.

Silandra flicked a glance in her direction and grinned. "Remember, Rooper—the Force is with us." She unhooked her shield from her arm and held it out before her, facing the circling beasts.

"What...?" started Rooper, but her voice trailed off as she realized exactly what her master was doing.

Silandra had released the shield, which remained hovering in the air before her. She closed her eyes, extending her right hand, palm open, fingers turning slowly as if nudging around an invisible dial.

The shield trembled for a moment before shooting forward, propelled by the Force. It struck one of the beasts flat on the snout, causing it to rear up on its hind legs, mewling in fright. Silandra flicked her wrist and turned, her eyes still closed, and the shield soared up into the air, swooping around behind her in a wide defensive arc. She pushed outward with her other empty hand, palm flat. The shield swooped again, following her directions, changing course in midair to dip low and bash the second beast, also flat against the end of its glossy pink nose. The creature lurched back, screeching, raising its paws as if to fend off the hovering shield. But the shield had already gone.

The third beast, having witnessed the attacks on its kin, had backed away from Rooper and lowered itself into the water, presumably trying to make itself less of an obvious target.

Silandra was having none of it. The shield tipped on its axis at the crook of her finger, and then a sweep of her arm sent it dipping low, trailing across the surface of the stream with a hiss. The creature reared out of the water, mouth agape in fear as it, too, was struck firmly on the end of its snout with the flat of the humming shield.

Silandra extended her arm, and the shield whipped out of the water, returning, dripping, to her hand. She slid it back onto her arm. Her eyes flickered open. The beasts were all watching her nervously.

She took a step forward, raising her shield arm. As one, the beasts took a step back. "Leave. Now."

Rooper knew that the creatures couldn't understand her, but on some instinctive level, they must have known what she intended, as they all turned on the spot and charged off into the mangroves on the other side of the stream.

Silandra huffed a relieved sigh. "Well, I'm glad that worked."

Rooper was staring at her master in wide-eyed appreciation. "That was...incredible!"

Silandra shrugged. "It was necessary." But Rooper caught a glimpse of another hidden smile curling at the corner of Silandra's mouth.

"Are you okay? Hurt?"

Rooper shook her head. "No. Just wet."

The other woman nodded, relieved, and gestured in the direction they'd been traveling before the attack. "Well, you'd better lead on, before they decide to come back."

Rooper pointed at a clump of trees. "Just there, up ahead," she said. She sloshed through the stream toward the gently sloping bank, where the vegetation grew suddenly thinner. She'd reached what appeared to be the edge of the mangrove area, where the spiky trees and shallow water gave way to rockier dry land.

Yet there, the rocks had been shaped, carved into what had once been a beautiful cylindrical tower but had slumped, its side crumbling away to become a mass of strewn masonry around the base of what remained of the structure.

Something about the place seemed to call to Rooper, urging her on. She stepped out among the fallen hunks of rock. She could see where the blocks had once been expertly shaped, engraved with unfamiliar geometric patterns. "What is this place?" she said as she crouched to examine what appeared to be a fragment of wall painting, still clinging to the underside of a broken piece of black rock. She couldn't make out anything beyond what looked to be the edge of a white robe threaded with gold.

She felt Silandra step up behind her. "I can't quite believe it, Rooper. Even though it's right here before my eyes. You've led us to the ruins of an ancient Jedi temple."

Rooper looked up at the shattered tower, her eyes wide. "Oh," she said.



Obik was fussing again.

Rillik wondered if it was just in the Mirialan's nature. He'd filled at least nine vials of blood samples already, and now he was talking about having the droid—which he called Nibs for some annoying reason—carry out some scans. It seemed like a lot.

Did the medic suspect something?

"So far as I can tell, the crystallization of your lung tissues hasn't progressed as far as we'd all feared. But we do need to find a way to reverse it. Or at least halt its progress before you lose too much function." Obik spoke while he ran tests on the blood samples at a small workstation he'd folded out from a panel in the wall. They were in the medical bay at the rear of the *Umberfall*. Rillik was lying on a small bed, hooked up to a series of bleeping monitors. Outside, the wind was howling.

"I can see why your people are concerned," Obik continued. "Although these minerals are harmless in their natural, unrefined form, they work like parasites once they've entered your body. They seem to be activated by contact with Katikoot blood. Once they've taken root, they have the power to alter your physiology, turning healthy tissue into copies of the original mineral cells. It's almost as if they're *alive*. Not in the same sense as you or I, but more like a deadly plant or fungus. They colonize the host body and slowly take control. As far as I can tell, the host eventually dies, but the parasitic minerals try to keep it going, even beyond the point of death." He paused, holding one of the vials up to the light. Rillik could see that the blood inside it had begun to crystallize, taking on a shimmering hue.

Just like the stuff we mine on Gloam.

Obik placed the vial on a rack, alongside several others. "If you hadn't originated on another world, I'd have assumed the minerals evolved at the same time as the early Katikoot and adapted their reproduction cycle to take advantage of the abundant population."

"So you're saying they use us like eggs, to grow new copies of themselves?" said Rillik.

"Yes, a little bit like that," replied Obik. "In theory, the host bodies would allow the minerals to spread and defend the colony. Although I'd expect only a handful of hosts to prove successful in this way. Most people who become infected will simply die and remain dead. In a way, it's absolutely fascinating." He glanced over his shoulder, shooting Rillik a beaming smile. "But more to the point, I'm certain that, with the proper time and equipment, we should be able to engineer a cure for those who've been infected. Including you." He turned his attention back to his work.

Rillik breathed a sigh of relief. So the answer was no. It didn't seem that Obik suspected anything.

Good.

Rillik gave a rasping cough. "Thank you," he said, drawing a deep breath. "I had my doubts about the Republic coming here, I don't mind admitting that. But I can see now I was wrong." He ended with another cough, for effect.

It was true that his lungs *did* feel as though they were burning half the time, and he knew that his days were numbered, just like the rest of his old mining gang. But these Republic types seemed so credulous, so ready to believe anything they were told. All they wanted to do was help. It was sickening.

Help wasn't going to make anybody rich, and that was the only thing Rillik had ever dreamed of. He wasn't about to allow a bunch of fools like Obik and his friends to spoil that for him. Not now. Not when he was so close. And not when he had limited time left to enjoy it.

He'd heard talk of cures before. All the great Katikoot scientists who'd boasted of medical breakthroughs being "a matter of weeks away" had since been forced to give up and admit defeat. The disease was incurable. They all knew that. That wasn't why the Republic had been invited in. No one was expecting them to find a cure for the miner's sickness. They wanted help finding a new, cleaner power source.

Which meant everything that Rillik had devoted his life to was about to be consigned to history. Forgotten. So the way he saw it, his people *owed* him. For the life he'd miss when the sickness ran its course. For the chance to live out his dreams.

Kittik and the others were too blind to see it. They were the ones who'd gotten him into this mess. But Rillik wasn't about to sit by, idle, and put up with it. Not if he could do something about it. He groaned, rolling over onto his side.

"Bwoo-beep," said the droid, which Rillik realized had been hovering above his bed, just out of sight. He'd have to watch that when the time came.

"Thanks, Nibs." Obik put his vials down and crossed to Rillik's bedside. "I'm sorry," he said. "But I promise you, I *will* find a way to help."

Rillik nodded, closing his eyes and coughing into his pillow.

"I can give you something to help you sleep?" said Obik.

Rillik waved him away. "No. No, I'll be fine," he croaked. The last thing he wanted was to miss his chance because he was too busy snoring.

"All right," said Obik. "But I'll be just over there if you need me."

Rillik watched the medic return to his workstation and start making up slides to examine beneath his microscope.

Oh, *yes*, he thought, stifling a smile. *I know* exactly *where you're going to be....*



Are you sure that thing isn't leading us out into the middle of nowhere?" said Mittik.

Dietrix looked up from her wrist comp. She frowned. The landscape there seemed empty of...everything. No trees, no lakes, no ruins. Just endless stretches of undulating black rock and...

...the remains of a campfire. Just sitting there, perched on a shelf of rock. Dietrix couldn't believe her eyes. Her heart leapt. "Look, over there!" She hurried over. Mittik followed.

Flakes of white and gray ash had scattered across the nearby rocks, carried by the breeze from where the burnt stubs of three old logs still leaned against one another. There was other evidence of recent occupation in the immediate area, too. A few small animal bones that had been picked clean. A makeshift spit that had, presumably, been used to roast said animal over the flames. A few broken electrical components stuck in the crevices of the rocks, where they'd obviously been discarded or dropped.

"Someone's been living out here," said Dietrix. "As impossible as that seems. They've been cooking meals and building something. It could even be the beacon we've been tracking."

"Maybe even more than one person," said Mittik.

"Maybe!" said Dietrix brightly.

"Perhaps even a young human boy and an older man. Might even be his father."

Dietrix frowned. "Well, that's strangely specific, but I suppose anything is possible." She looked up to see Mittik grinning. "What?"



Mittik jabbed a finger over Dietrix's shoulder.

Dietrix turned to see a young human boy and an older man, who looked as if he might be the boy's father, standing in the mouth of a small cave.

She peered at them for a moment and then turned back to Mittik. "Have they been there all along?"

Mittik shrugged, which made her wings flap loosely by her sides. "Umm...yes. And I don't think they're particularly pleased to see us."

Confused, Dietrix turned to look at them again. She narrowed her eyes. Now that Mittik had mentioned it, they *did* look a little scared. The older man was clutching a pole with some sort of device affixed to one end. The other end was glowing with a flickering electrical current. The boy's shoulder was bandaged up with rags. Dietrix gave him a little wave. He looked unsure about whether to wave back.

"Who are you?" called the older man.

Dietrix started to walk toward them. "I'm Diet—"

The man cut her off. "Wait! Don't come any closer!"

Dietrix stopped in her tracks. She held out both her hands to show she wasn't carrying a weapon. "My name is Dietrix. I'm part of a Republic Pathfinder team. We're here on Gloam looking for survivors of an earlier mission. Some of our friends have gone missing. Do you know anything about that? Were you here with them?"

"No," said the man. He was gripping his pole very tightly. "We don't. We're not part of any team, and you're the first person we've seen since we were stranded here."

"So it was your distress beacon we were tracking?" said Dietrix. She sensed Mittik coming over to stand beside her and saw the man bristle.

"It was our beacon," said the boy. "I'm Dass. Dass Leffbruk. And this is my dad, Spence."

Mittik clicked her tongue. "I thought they were related."

Dietrix smiled at the boy. "Did you build it yourself?" Dass nodded. "Out of scavenged parts?" Another nod. Dietrix beamed. "Wow! I'm impressed! You'll have to show me, later. How did you manage to find a wave regulator out here?" She didn't wait for him to answer. "No! Hold on! Don't tell me. You had a…let me guess…a…" She snapped her fingers. "No, I can't think."

"I stripped it from the coolant system of one of the downed mining ships," said Dass. He looked pleased with himself.

"Nice work," said Dietrix. "So are you going to show us around, or

what?" She took another step forward.

Spence raised his pole again. "I warned you."

"Dad. Perhaps it's not what we think."

Mittik cleared her throat. "And what *do* you think?"

Spence eyed her warily. "It's just...you're one of them."

"A Katikoot?" said Dietrix.

"A monster," said Dass. "The things that come for us in the night."

"Now look here," started Dietrix, "you can't just go—"

"It's all right," said Mittik, waving her quiet. "I understand."

"You do?"

"Yes. The creatures. The ones Rillik told you about, the ones that attacked your friends. They look like us."

Dietrix shook her head, confused. "They look like you? Like a Katikoot?"

Mittik sighed. "Yes. That's how the stories go. Monstrous versions of ourselves, from our ancient past, that come to hunt us when we misbehave. Hulking, twisted spirits of Katikoot who died in ages past. We all thought it was just a legend told to children to scare them into behaving themselves. But it seems the legends are true. The creatures are real. And these people have seen them."

"They were here earlier," said Dass. "Four or five of them." He glanced around nervously, as if he expected them to arrive at any moment. "They used to come after we'd packed up camp and gone to bed each night. We figured out their habits, kept out of their way as best we could. But then they changed them. They surprised us yesterday. And they were still here this morning."

"One of them did that to you?" asked Dietrix, pointing to Dass's shoulder. He nodded.

"I'm sorry," said Mittik. "I hope it doesn't hurt too much."

"So...you're not like them?" said Dass. His tone was hopeful.

"If I was, do you think I'd be standing here, talking to you about it?" said Mittik wryly.

"I suppose not," said Dass. He stepped out from beside his father and walked over, extending his hand. "It's nice to meet you...?"

"Mittik."

"Dass..." Spence warned.

"It's all right, Dad. Come on. These people are here to help us." He looked at Dietrix. "Aren't you?"

"Of course," said Dietrix. "We have a ship, and there are more of us, including some Jedi, looking for our missing friends. We'd be glad to take you somewhere safe, once we've figured out what's happened to them."

The boy's eyes were as wide as the search lamps on the *Umberfall*. "*Jedi*?"

Dietrix nodded, her lip curling into a grin. Most people had never seen a Jedi. At least, not outside of a holorecording. But many of them had heard the stories, about all the amazing things they could do and about the work they were doing out on the frontier, helping people without the desire for profit or personal gain. Dietrix was going to enjoy seeing the look on Dass's face when he met Silandra and Rooper.

"Have they brought their lightsabers?" said Dass.

"Of course," said Dietrix. "And Master Sho has a shield, too. I think you're going to love it."

Dass beamed.

Spence had come forward to stand beside his son. He lowered his makeshift weapon and then reached out and shook Mittik's hand. "I'm sorry," he said. "It's just...we've been living in fear these past few weeks. I think I'd just about forgotten what a friendly face looks like. I'm very glad to meet you."

Mittik smiled. "It's incredible you've managed to survive this long. How did you get stranded here?"

"Ah," said Spence. "Well, that's a long story." He sighed heavily.

"Then I've got just the thing," said Dietrix, reaching into her pack. "Fresh provisions and tea. Assuming you're about ready for a decent meal?"

Spence shook his head in grateful disbelief. "If you only knew..."

"Well then," said Dietrix. "You can tell us all about it while we eat. And how about we see to that leg while we're at it, too? And your arm, Dass?"

Spence wrapped his arm around Dass's shoulders. "Thank you" seemed to be about all the words he could muster.



"We'd been out prospecting for new hyperspace routes. It's what we do, you see, me and Dass. Travel the unexplored routes, seek out new worlds. Meet new people. Explore." Spence took a swig from the tin can he was using as a mug.

Dietrix nodded. "Not so different from us then." She glanced at Mittik. "Well, the Pathfinder teams, I mean." She took a sip of her own tea.

Spence glanced at Dass, as if saying this in front of the boy made him uncomfortable. Dietrix supposed it was understandable, not wanting to stir things up again by going back over whatever miserable story had left them stranded. "We got word of a new route," he said. "A hyperspace lane that hadn't been charted before."

Dietrix nodded.

"Now, what you've got to understand is that this was the big one. The real deal." His eyes were wide, like he was seeing some faraway place. "The sort of score that only comes along once in a generation. There've been tales about the planet at the end of that hyperspace lane for millennia. A paradise. A place beyond anyone's wildest imaginings. One of the true wonders of the galaxy. And now we had a lead on where to find it." Spence sniffed and took another gulp of his tea. "Problem was, so did another prospector, fella called Sunshine Dobbs. Now, I'd worked with Sunshine before and always took him to be a decent sort, so when we both discovered we were on the same trail, we agreed to pool our resources and split the findings between us."

"Sounds fair," said Dietrix.

"And it was. *Fair*. You see, we have a code out here, us prospectors. We see each other right. And once we've agreed to split a take, we always see it through."

"I'm sensing a *but*...."

Spence tapped the side of his nose. "You're a sharp one. Yeah, there's a *but*. You see, finding that place was like running a gauntlet. Once you were through the hyperspace lane—which was no mean feat—you had to pierce the veil around the planet."

Dietrix leaned forward. She was caught up in Spence's story, hanging on every word. "The veil?"

"Aye. A kind of, well, an ocean of living water that's wrapped around the atmosphere. That's the only way I can describe it. Like a protective, electrified bubble, but not, if you get what I mean."

"Not really," said Mittik with a sniff. Dass chuckled.

"Anyway, suffice to say, it was a perilous place to fly, and our ship, the *Silverstreak*, took it hard. We had to make a crash landing. But it didn't matter, right?"

"Because Sunshine Dobbs was right behind you."

Spence nudged Dass in the arm. "Told you she was sharp. So we set her down. And let me tell you, the place we'd found at the end of that hyperspace run, well"—Spence puffed out his cheeks and exhaled loudly—"it'd take your breath away. About as far from a place like this as you could imagine."

"So it really was a paradise?" said Dietrix.

"And then some. Go on, tell her, Dass."

Dass shrugged. "He's right. It was like...well, I can't explain it, really. It had more colors than I'd ever seen. And the sunlight was *perfect*. And the smell of the flowers...I know this doesn't make any sense, but it just felt like *home*. Like everything in the whole galaxy was still and at peace, and you never had to worry ever again."

"It must have been wonderful," said Mittik. "I'm surprised you ever left."

"Ah, well, there was the matter of the agreement we had with Sunshine. And we needed to fetch someone to help fix our ship."

"So Sunshine agreed to give us a ride," said Dass.

Spence nodded. "He was supposed to get us back to Batuu. Then he hit engine trouble and needed to make a repair stop. We figured he'd taken some damage during our exit through the veil. We put down here...wherever *here* is."

"Gloam," said Mittik.

"Gloam," echoed Spence. He glanced at Dass. "Fits."

"Anyway, while we were trying to get our bearings, exploring, Sunshine took the opportunity to make a run for it. Tossed our packs out—with just about enough rations and equipment to survive—and abandoned us here," said Dass.

"That's awful!" said Dietrix.

"Figured he'd renege on our deal and take the spoils for himself," said Spence. "Said he'd left us with a 'fighting chance' by leaving us our packs."

Mittik made a hissing sound that Dietrix imagined was a sign of her disapproval. "Dishonorable," she said.

"And the rest, you know," said Dass. "We've been here for a couple of weeks, I think, surviving by boiling the rainwater and catching and eating scrabblers."

"Scrabblers?" said Dietrix.

"The little rat-lizards you can dig out from between the rocks," explained Dass. "They don't taste so good, but we didn't have any choice. We built the beacon out of parts from our packs and bits we salvaged from some of the

abandoned mining ships."

"Are they nearby, these mining ships?"

"Yeah. Well, a couple of hours' hike. They're not far from the ruined city in the cliff."

"You've seen the ruined city?" Dietrix placed her half-full can of tea on the ground. "Have you been inside? Did you see anyone else?"

"I've seen it," said Dass, "but I didn't go near it. The whole place looked abandoned. We've not seen another person here until, well, the two of you." He hugged himself, as if the very thought of the place filled him with unease. "It's like the miners just up and left. There's three whole cargo containers full of mineral ore that have never been shipped off-world, out on the landing pad."

Dietrix caught Mittik's eye. This didn't sound quite right. If there was unrefined mineral ore there, just waiting to be processed, why hadn't the Katikoot already taken it back to Aubadas? Given how desperate they were for fuel, Dietrix would have thought it would have been a priority, even with the creatures. It wasn't as if anyone would have to do any more digging in the mine shafts. "Can you show us?"

Dass nodded.

"Now, hang on a minute," said Spence. "I thought you were going to help us get out of here."

"We are," said Dietrix. "But like I said—we have to find out what happened to our friends first. The last they were seen, they went into that city."

"How do you know they're still alive?" said Spence.

"We don't. But if you're still here after all this time..."

"We'll help. Of course we will," said Dass. He got to his feet, dusting himself down. "I'd better collect my stuff."

"What, *now*?" said Spence.

Dass laughed, grabbing his father's arm and pulling him up. "No time like the present," he said. And then his features darkened. "And besides, we don't know when those *things* are going to be back. We'll be safer if we're moving. They won't know where to find us."

Spence gave a reluctant nod. "I suppose I'd better bring my prod then."



The ruins of the Jedi temple were scattered over a wide area, overgrown with a thick carpet of moss. The ragged edges of the fallen masonry had been blunted by time, scoured by the wind and rain to take on new shapes, like pieces of a puzzle that would never fit together again.

As Rooper meandered through the wreckage, she found herself wondering how many years had passed since the temple had last been inhabited. The place still had a certain kind of peace to it, a special sort of reverence, as if the land itself remembered what it had once been. She supposed a place that had once been so strong in the Force might never lose that feeling.

Nearby, Silandra was climbing over a pile of heaped boulders. "These were moved here recently," she called. Rooper went over to take a look.

Sure enough, it was clear from the large indentations in the moss that the boulders had once been strewn around the area but had recently been gathered into a large pile. It towered over Rooper's head, at least twice her height, and seemed to lean against the base of a ruined building.

Silandra was standing on one of the boulders, peering at something within the gaps in the uneven stones. "I thought so." She dusted her hands and hopped back down to Rooper's side.

"What is it?" asked Rooper.

"There's a doorway or opening of some kind behind here," said Silandra, jabbing her thumb in the direction of the boulders. "Someone's built a barricade." She tugged on her earlobe thoughtfully. "Or a prison."

"Someone built this?" said Rooper. "But how could they move all these

massive stones? Without the right equipm—" She stopped abruptly as the answer dawned on her. "Ahh."

The Force. Someone had used the Force.

"But that's *good*, isn't it?" she said.

"We won't know until we open it," said Silandra. "Give me a hand?" Rooper nodded.

Together, the two Jedi extended their arms. Rooper closed her eyes, reaching out with her senses. She saw the heaped stones like anchors in the swirling colors of the Force, obstacles stopping its natural flow. And so she willed them to move.

At first, they didn't budge.

Beside Rooper, Silandra grunted. Rooper pushed harder, lending more and more pressure, more strength.

And then the stones were shifting, grating against one another as three of them peeled away from the others, rolling down the sloped heap like misshapen balls and coming to a stop among the mossy rocks below.

Rooper opened her eyes. The exertion had been difficult but exhilarating. Beside her, Silandra was grinning. The way ahead of them was open—the dark mouth of an ancient carved stone gateway.

Rooper felt a warm breeze against her cheek, whispering from inside the old structure. She knew instinctively that this was the place they'd been looking for. Whoever—or *whatever*—had been reaching out to her through the Force was inside.

"Well, so far, so good," said Silandra. Rooper must have looked confused, as Silandra added, "No angry locals."

When Rooper didn't respond, Silandra said, in a gentler voice, "Are you all right, Padawan?"

Rooper shook her head to clear it. "Yes, sorry," she said. "I'm fine. It's just...this place. There's something about it. A sense of time and history, of being *lost*."

Silandra nodded. "The Force is strong here. It remembers all that has passed. But we must remain on our guard. It would be easy to lose yourself to that pull. Stay focused."

"Yes, Master," said Rooper. She followed Silandra as she clambered back up the pile of stones, sliding down the other side and through the opening.

Inside, the ground sloped away in a long narrow passageway. The only light was what spilled through the hole behind them. Instinctively, they both

ignited their lightsabers to help them see. The flickering light caused shadows to dance on the sheer stone walls, where moss and creeping vines had taken up residence.

They crept on, down the steep slope. The air was warm and stale, like a breath that had been held for too long. Their footsteps rang out loud and sharp, and the echoing sound the walls reflected made it seem to Rooper as if the building were whispering to her, shushing in her ear.

After a minute or two, the sloping passageway opened, growing wider and taller and beginning to level off. They were deep underground, Rooper realized, beneath, she supposed, what was left of the old tower. This, then, was the lower level of the ancient Jedi temple, saved from the worst of the destruction by being buried so far beneath the bedrock of Gloam.

She caught sight of something on the wall to her left—a flash of color—and stopped for a moment to examine it. She held one of her lightsabers above her head, leaning closer. It was a wall painting, a fresco, depicting white-robed figures in simple but beautiful art. They were Jedi, and they were working together to push back a dark and ominous figure that seemed to tower over them, its lower body emerging from billowing black smoke. Just the sight of it made Rooper's skin crawl. The painting moved on in a sequence that seemed to be relating a story of how the Jedi had defeated this mysterious figure, but large fragments of the art had flaked off in the intervening centuries.

Rooper followed the story as best she could as she paced behind Silandra, but then she saw something that made her stop in her tracks.

"Master? Look at this."

Silandra backtracked a few steps to join her, holding up her own lightsaber to cast more illumination on the scene on the wall. "Lots of the ancient temples have scenes such as this," she said. "Stories of the ancient Jedi, holding back the dark."

"It's not that," said Rooper. She indicated a particular panel on the wall, where a lone figure, a Jedi, stood with arms outstretched, surrounded by a halo of light. "Look there."

Silandra's expression shifted as she took in what Rooper was showing her. "A Katikoot."

"A Katikoot *Jedi*," said Rooper.

"This must be hundreds of years old," said Silandra. "Perhaps even thousands."

"I think something happened here on Gloam," said Rooper. "Something long ago. A story that we haven't been told."

"I think you might be right," said Silandra. "But we can't worry about that now. Not until we've figured out what happened to the other team."

They stepped away from the frescoes, continuing down the passageway. But Rooper couldn't shake the feeling that whatever she'd just seen was somehow connected to what had happened to Rok and the others. It had to be.

Ahead, the passageway opened into a cavernous space. There, the natural black bedrock had been carved back to create a great hall, large enough to contain the entire *Umberfall*, perhaps twice over. Huge smooth-sided pillars lined a path through the center of the space, and towering statues of two longforgotten Jedi stood at either end of this avenue. One had partially collapsed, half the woman's hooded face lying in ruin around the pedestal on which she stood. Several of the pillars had fallen, too, shattered into segments that still lay where they had fallen. Dust and grit covered the once polished floor.

And lying on his side with his back to them, right in the middle of the chamber, was a robed man.

Silandra's cry echoed loudly through the enormous space. "Rok!"



"It does seem odd."

"The tea?" Kam sighed. "Of course it does. It's *different*, isn't it? It's not really *tea*. Not in the sense that it's made from tea leaves, from the same tea plants that we grow. The principle is the same, a mash of leaves steeped in boiled water to create a tasty drink, but since the leaves are from a different plant, it's always going to seem odd to us, who're used to *our* sort of tea." He sipped from his mug as if to underline his point. "It's only to be expected when you visit new worlds."

"I wasn't talking about the tea," said Amos.

"You weren't? Then why didn't you say?"

The Theelin pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. "Because you didn't give me a chance. Look, let's forget about the tea."

"But I'm enjoying it. I don't want to forget it."

"I didn't mean you can't drink it," said Amos, his exasperation plain.

"Then why did you say I had to forget it?" pressed Kam. "Sometimes, Amos, you say the strangest things."

Amos slowly counted to five beneath his breath. *One, two, three, four, five...*"I was talking about the communications blackout."

"Bwoop-wheee-deet," said GT-11.

"Yes, I know it was an obvious statement, Geetee," said Amos. "Look, I was just trying to make the point that it's unusual, that's all."

"But is it?" said Kam, shaking his head so his lekku bounced against his shoulders. "I mean, the electrical storms in Gloam's atmosphere would be

enough to play havoc with long-range communications regardless. It's no wonder we can't reach them."

"Ah," said Amos, narrowing his eyes. "But it's not the long-range comms that have me worried. It's the short-range."

"The short-range?"

"Precisely! That's the real mystery. The storms would interfere with any satellite transmissions, but the surface-level comms should still be working, shouldn't they? Think about it. The Katikoot have had mining operations on Gloam for centuries. Think about everything that would have to go wrong for *all* their short-range comms to go down. Not just the systems themselves, but all the backups, too. No one builds a system that can break so easily."

The three of them—Kam, Amos, and GT-11—were in the systems hub at the center of Diurna, along with a Katikoot named Sullik, who had fur so fine and light it appeared almost white. He was perched on a stool, watching them with interest as they stood around sipping tea and debating what to do next.

Well, GT-11 wasn't sipping tea, but the point stood.

Amos felt almost blinded by all the amazing circuitry and technology on display in there. He knew that most people would just see a room filled with trailing cables, control panels, dials, knobs, and instrument panels, but to him, it was like...well, it was like being a little kid on Life Day. There was so much to learn. So much to take in. The Katikoot had a unique way of doing *everything*, so far as he could tell. He wanted to try to understand it all, to explore it like the Pathfinders explored worlds, but first they had a job to do—not least because he knew the others were relying on him, Kam, and GT-11 to get the comms back up and running.

"Well," said Kam, "maybe the Katikoot don't build in backup systems like we do."

"In a city like this?" said Amos. "You've seen it out there. The Katikoot are as advanced as any civilization I've seen. Yes, they have a problem with resources, but any engineer who knows how to build a hoversled knows about creating a backup system."

Kam seemed to be chewing on a mouthful of tea. Amos wondered how that was even possible. He watched the Twi'lek's throat bob as he swallowed. "Maybe we take another look at the main relay. We might have missed something."

"But we've been over it twice," said Amos. "And the Katikoot engineers have examined it countless times, too. You really think we've missed

something?"

"What else could it be? Geetee says the satellites are all registering on the scans as operational."

"Bee-doop," said GT-11, by way of confirmation.

"So it seems unlikely that someone's tampered with those." Kam placed his mug on a bank of monitors.

Amos winced at the thought of what would happen if it spilled. And then he frowned. "Tampered? You think the problems might be *on purpose*?"

Kam shrugged. "I don't think we can rule it out. Either the problem with the systems is very far from obvious..."

"Or someone's hiding it very well indeed." Amos considered this for a moment. "You're right. And we've only been looking for the obvious. We're trying to find a catastrophic fault, something big that would stand out."

"Which makes sense. It would have to be a major problem to affect the entire communications network," said Kam.

"But if you're right, if someone's tampered with it on purpose..."

"Then they'll have covered their tracks."

Their eyes met. Amos felt excitement bubbling up inside him. They were onto something. He was sure of it.

He hurried over to the alcove where the main communications relay was housed and pulled open the hatch. Inside, tiny lights winked in a series of bright patterns. Wires coiled in every conceivable direction, like a nest of snakes. He felt Kam's hand on his shoulder as they both leaned closer, following the looping trail of wires, redrawing circuit patterns in their minds. This, Amos knew, was what he'd been born to do.

Data switch. Relay module. Static discharge regulator. Power hub... He paused.

"Kam, does that power hub look different to the others?"

Kam leaned a little closer, screwing up his eyes. One of his lekku pressed against the side of Amos's face. Amos tried to nudge it away with his chin. "You know, I think it does. It might be nothing, but the casing is slightly misaligned, just on that outer edge."

Amos pushed him back enough that he could breathe. "I thought so, too. Geetee?"

"Beedoo?" came the electronic beep from somewhere just below him.

Amos glanced down. The astromech was crammed into the confined space, too, his little mechanical arms already unfolded. Amos sighed. "See if

you can open the casing of that power hub, would you?"

"Dee-doo," came the excited response. It seemed that the droid was just as thrilled about getting to the bottom of the problem as Amos and Kam were. Amos felt a warm glow at the thought.

"Oh, and be careful. It might be booby-trapped. Or have a fail-safe that will take down the whole system."

Behind them, Sullik said something urgent in the Katikoot language. Amos couldn't understand what it was, but he thought he probably got the gist of it. "Don't worry, Sullik! Everything's going to be fine!"

GT-11 had the casing in his grippers and was carefully teasing open the power hub. After a moment, the casing made a popping sound and fell apart, revealing another circuit, dotted with more winking lights.

"That's not a power hub!" said Kam.

"Bwooo-woo," said GT-11.

"Sabotage," whispered Amos.

All the lights blinked out.



The ruined city loomed before them. Now he was standing at the foot of it, Dass was taken aback by its incredible size and scale.

A city built into the side of a cliff.

It seemed impossible. There were no steps, no elevators, no obvious means by which to reach the array of ornate arched openings that had been cut into the black rock. Some of the openings had small jutting balconies, although many of these had since perished, crumbling away to leave just a few protruding ledges of rock.

One thing was obvious to Dass—this was no modern city. In fact, he'd be hard-pressed to believe it was built anytime in the past five hundred years. It looked more like an archeological site than anywhere people might still inhabit.

"A city that only goes *up*," said Dietrix. "Who would even build such a thing?"

"People who weren't confined to a horizontal plane," said Mittik, beside her. She extended her arms, allowing the big flaps of skin beneath them to billow in the wind. "People who had wings."

Dietrix seemed to consider this for a moment. "You're right. That makes sense."

"And you're sure your friends went in there?" said Spence, who was standing beside Dass, peering up at the sheer cliff face.

Dietrix made a clacking sound with her tongue. "That's what Rillik told us. And back on Aubadas, Kittik explained that this was all part of the Katikoot's mining operation." Dietrix and Mittik had given Dass and Spence

the full story as they'd trekked across the rocky plains to get to the city, including outlining the dire situation the Katikoot had found themselves in and the efforts of the Pathfinder teams to help.

"That explains the three silos of mineral over there," said Dass, pointing out the massive containers. They were the ones he'd told the others about back at the camp. "And all of the old equipment laying around."

"It's true," said Mittik. "The mineral seams in the old shafts had run dry. The tunnels beneath the refinery spread deep and far, but the miners hadn't been able to extract anything usable for months. So the order was given to venture into the ruined city and reopen the ancient mines. The seams in there are still rich." She shrugged. "My people were reluctant. There were the stories...."

"About the monsters?" said Dass.

Mittik nodded. "Bedtime tales. About nameless creatures that dwelled in the old city and had once consumed the entire population who lived there."

"That bit's new," said Dietrix. "And not particularly encouraging."

"Of course, there were no monsters to be found. The city had been abandoned millennia ago. So new shafts were sunk, and the mineral continued to flow."

"Until the monsters showed up, after all," said Dass.

"Yes. People died. The mines were abandoned, and the miners all fled, taking most of the usable transport ships with them." Mittik looked up at the ruins before them. "And now here we are."

"And your friends went inside..." said Dass.

"To try to help," said Dietrix. "To investigate."

"And they haven't come back," said Spence.

"No," said Dietrix.

"And now *we're* going in," said Dass. He swallowed. His throat was dry. He unclipped his canteen from his pack and dribbled some water into his mouth. When he'd finished, he noticed that Dietrix was looking at him. "You want some?" He offered her the canteen.

"No, thank you. But listen, you don't have to come with us. You've both been through enough. You can wait here while we take a look inside, find somewhere safe to camp down until we're back. Then we can all head back to our ship."

Dass felt a sense of panic rising inside his chest. He didn't want them to go without him. Not now they'd found him and his dad. Not after *everything*.

He didn't think he could handle being stranded again. And there was little chance the beacon would work a second time. "I think it's better that we stick together," he managed to say, his voice strained.

"I agree," said Spence. "There's safety in numbers. And besides, my curiosity is already getting the better of me. I want to see what's in there."

Dass gave a relieved laugh. "Ever the prospector, Dad."

"There's just one problem," added Spence.

"What's that?"

"How are we even going to get up there?" Dietrix beamed. "Ah. That's the fun bit!"



It turned out the fun bit was scrabbling up the side of a huge abandoned mining vehicle and helping Dietrix jump-start the engine. Together, she and Dass had popped the inspection hatch and tugged out a bundle of wires. Dietrix had sorted through them, and the look of concentration on her face as she pulled on each thread, the tip of her tongue sticking out from the corner of her mouth, had caused Dass to laugh harder than he'd laughed for weeks.

He liked these people. Not just because they'd come to help him, but because they *wanted* to help. There was something about Dietrix's casual manner, the way she always seemed to be putting others first, that was so different from the sort of crowd they usually hung out with. People like Sunshine Dobbs, who had clearly only ever thought of himself.

Mittik, too, seemed genuinely concerned about Dietrix's missing friends and the plight of her people. Just being around them made Dass feel like everything was going to be okay.

Spence had clearly taken to the newcomers, too. He'd sat with Mittik while Dass and Dietrix worked, relating stories of his adventures among the stars, laughing, and telling his awful jokes. Maybe things really were looking up.

Now they were standing in the cradle of a large pneumatic crane that was built on the back of the mining vehicle while Dietrix slowly guided them up, higher and higher, toward the first level of the city. It hadn't taken much in the end to get the vehicle up and running, and Dass realized this was clearly how the miners had entered the old tunnels, too.

"What about your friends?" said Dass, a sudden thought occurring to him.

"Hmmm?" said Dietrix.

"I was just thinking, how did your friends get into the city? They can't have used the same crane, because we had to get it started."

"Jedi," said Dietrix, as if that was the only explanation necessary.

Dass stood by the rail as the cradle continued to rise.

After a moment the crane juddered to a halt, and Dass was forced to grab the rail to stop himself tumbling over the side. He looked down, and the ground seemed to swim up to meet him. He felt Mittik's hand on his back, pulling him away from the edge.

"Best you focus on looking straight ahead," she said.

Dass nodded, fighting back the urge to vomit. They were higher up than he had thought.

The cradle had drawn level with one of the openings in the side of the cliff face. Now that they were up there, Dass could see that the arched opening was far more elaborate than he had imagined from down below. He'd thought they were simply like cave mouths, yawning open into passages with tunnels behind, but now he could see the opening had been expertly chiseled into the dark rock, with intricate patterns running up the sides describing what looked to be interweaving leaves and vines. The passage of years had eroded the crispness of the stonework, but it was still incredible to look upon it and consider the history behind it all.

What was less incredible to look upon was the gap between the cradle's platform and the stone ledge on the other side. Dass watched in horror as first Dietrix, then Mittik hopped across, as if the massive drop beneath them was nothing to fear.

"Dad..." he started, but Spence was already following suit, jumping across to the ledge where the others had made room.

He landed neatly and then turned around and held out his hand to Dass. "Come on, Dass. You'll be fine. I've got you."

Dass, standing on the edge of the cradle, made the mistake of glancing down at the plummeting drop between him and the ledge. He couldn't even see the ground anymore. His vision swam. He was starting to feel woozy. "Perhaps I'll just wait here, on the cradle," he said. "That way I'll be ready if you have to make a run for it."

Spence pulled a face. It was a familiar one—the one he always pulled whenever Dass didn't want to do something that needed to be done. "Come on. I'm not going anywhere without you. It's perfectly safe. Just step across

and take my hand."

Perfectly safe.

It didn't look it. But then—hadn't he faced the monsters on his own, just the day before? He'd plucked up the courage, gone out there, and fetched the beacon. He'd used his dad's prod to fight one of the things off. And because of that, because of what he'd done, Mittik and Dietrix had found them.

Maybe I can do this. Maybe...

He hopped across the gap before he could change his mind.

His foot landed on the ledge and slid, scooching on loose grit. He wheeled his arms for a moment, felt himself toppling back—and then Spence had his wrist and was pulling him in, holding him steady until he found his footing.

He finally remembered to breathe.

"Well done, Son," said Spence. "You're a born prospector."

Dass smiled, relieved. But then he looked at Dietrix, who had lit a glow rod from her pack and was holding it above her head, already descending into the tunnel that wended its way into the side of the cliff. He could see the eagerness on her face, not just to explore but to find and help her lost friends.

The thought bubbled up inside Dass before he could stop it. Maybe he wasn't a born prospector, after all. Maybe he was something else.

Maybe he was a Pathfinder.

Patting his dad on the shoulder, he set out to follow the others into the ruined city.



Rillik peeled open his eyes.

The overhead lights were bright and stinging. He blinked away watery tears. After a moment, his focus returned.

He'd been pretending to be asleep for some time. An hour, maybe? It was hard to tell. Obik had finally stopped running annoying tests, poking and prodding him and drawing vials of his precious blood. Now the big green Mirialan was busy trying to synthesize a cure.

Well, good luck with that.

Rillik could hear noises coming from somewhere on his left. He turned his head slowly on the pillow, unsure whether he was being observed by either Obik or the droid.

No. Obik was nowhere to be seen. The workstation looked cluttered with bottles and test tubes, and the noises were coming from a small white machine that was slowly churning and whirring on the bench. Rillik guessed that Obik must have set the machine going and then gone to get something to eat or drink. It had been some time since their last meal.

Cautiously, he propped himself up on one elbow, looking around for any sign of the droid. He grinned when he saw the stupid tin can was gone, too. He was alone. They must have left him to sleep, just as he'd hoped.

Rillik swung his legs down off the cot and sat up, yanking away the wires, tubes, and sticky pads that Obik had attached to his body. He winced as the pads tore away small patches of fur. He tossed them onto the bed. Luckily, the monitoring equipment hadn't trilled in sudden alarm.

He took a deep breath, stretched, and then stifled a cough. There was no

doubt about it—the disease *was* getting worse. All the more reason to get moving. He had to buy himself all the time he could to enjoy the spoils of his victory.

There was still every chance his plan could work. The arrival of the second Pathfinder team had been a wrinkle, but if he played things right, he could turn it into a win. The two Jedi had gone off on some wild chase in the middle of nowhere, and the rest of them had been foolish enough to listen to Rillik's story about the old ruins.

Which just left the medic and the droid.

Rillik got to his feet, looking around for something he could use as a weapon. There was nothing obvious to hand. Several medical units—more testing or monitoring equipment—sat unused on metal carts in one corner of the small room. The machines themselves were too big and bulky to serve as useful weapons, but the metal struts of the carts looked as though they could be easily disassembled.

Perfect.

Rillik glanced at the door, which opened out into a narrow passage that led into the belly of the ship, terminating in the common area. Still no sign of anyone coming. He crossed to the nearest cart and started unscrewing one of the struts.

It came away after only a minute or two, causing the cart to list awkwardly to one side. The slightest nudge and the whole thing would come crashing down. Not that it would be a problem soon.

Rillik weighed the metal bar in his hand. It was reassuringly solid. It would suffice for his needs. He slipped the metal bar beneath the fold of his wing and hurried to the door. Then, when he was sure the coast was clear, he set out, marching along the passageway at a near run. He wanted to get this over with.

As he entered the common area, he saw that things were just as he'd imagined. Obik sat at the small table, eating stew from a bowl, while the droid, Nibs, was hovering close by.

Obik looked up, concern creasing his brow. He dropped his spoon into the bowl with a clatter and started to get to his feet. "Rillik? You shouldn't be up and about. Not in your cond—"

He didn't get to finish the sentence, as the swing from Rillik's metal bar struck him across the side of the head, sending him crashing heavily to the floor. He was unconscious immediately. He didn't even let out a groan.

"Bweeee!"

Rillik spun to see the droid darting toward him, its three metal arms extended as if to grab for him. He swung the metal bar like a club. It connected with the droid on the underside of its disc-shaped head, sending it spinning out of control across the room. It crashed against the wall with a resounding clang and then clattered to the ground, the light in its central eye dimming. It rolled a few meters across the floor and then came to a stop. Its case was dented, and it wasn't moving.

Rillik stood for a moment, breathing heavily, shoulders rising and dipping.

It felt good to be in control again.



TWENTY-THREE

"Silandra? Is it really you?"

The look of sheer relief on Rok's face was enough to move Rooper to tears. She wiped at her eyes as Silandra embraced her fellow Jedi Master in a heartfelt hug. He winced as her hands brushed against the torn fabric of his robes.

"You're injured," said Silandra.

Rok nodded. "Aye, but it's not so bad. Not as bad as it could have been."

Silandra turned him around, her hands on his shoulders. Rooper was appalled to see three huge gashes in his dark brown flesh, stretching from his right shoulder to the small of his back. His robes hung loose around the wounds, encrusted in dried blood.

Rooper couldn't understand how he was even standing. He had to be in constant agony. He'd clearly received no medical treatment at all.

"What did this to you?" asked Silandra.

Rok turned back to face her. "You mean you haven't met them yet?" "Met what?"

"The creatures." Rok glanced at Rooper and cocked a crooked smile that didn't quite reach his sad, tired eyes. He ran a hand through his wiry black beard. "Sounds like the two of you have been very lucky."

"This is Rooper, by the way," said Silandra. "My Padawan." She gave a proud smile. Rooper fought the urge to roll her eyes.

"Good to meet you, Rooper," said Rok. "I only wish it could have been under better circumstances."

"And you, Master Buran," said Rooper.

"Rok, please. Call me Rok."

"Of course. Rok." There was a moment of awkward silence.

"What happened, Rok?" said Silandra. "Where's Maliq and the others?" Rok searched Silandra's face for a moment before replying. "They're gone."

"You mean...?"

He nodded once. It was enough. The pain on his face was plain to see. "They're one with the Force now. All three of them."

Maliq.

Rooper had hardly known the boy, but the sheer horror of hearing he was gone was like a punch to the gut. He'd been so young. Just the same age as Rooper.

So much potential, lost.

"I'm sorry," said Silandra. "I'm so, so sorry." She shot Rooper a glance filled with empathy and sadness. Silandra knew that Rooper had known Maliq, even if only a little, and knew that the Padawan would be feeling the boy's loss. Rooper gave her a slow nod.

Rok looked away, as if the kindness hurt as much as the memory itself. This was far from the Rok whom Rooper had always heard about in stories from the other Jedi—the willful, sociable, hilarious man who'd grown a little *too* accustomed to life on the edge of the galaxy. But it was hardly surprising. He'd clearly been through a lot.

After a moment, Rok said: "I survived. Barely. And that's all I've been doing in the days since. Surviving. I hoped someone would come, but Atesee was so damaged and I wasn't sure..." His voice trailed off.

"We got your message, Rok. We're here."

His shoulders drooped, and Rooper couldn't tell if it was relief or sadness or just knowing that, finally, he wasn't alone anymore.

"We'd better get those wounds cleaned up," said Silandra. "Rooper, why don't you raise a fire. Night will be closing in soon, and we might as well make camp here, where it's safe." She put her hand on Rok's shoulder. "And then you can tell us all about it."

Rooper watched them for a moment and then went to gather wood for the fire.



"Something led me here," said Rok.

They were sitting cross-legged around the small fire that Rooper had managed to build from salvaged bits of wood she'd found in the temple ruins. Silandra had washed and dressed Rok's wounds as well as she'd been able, and now they were sipping hot water as Rok related his tale.

"The Force, I think. I was nearly delirious with the pain and loss, but I knew I had to get away. I couldn't believe my eyes when I found a Jedi temple out here in the wilderness, abandoned."

"It's remarkable," said Rooper.

Silandra smiled. "You have Rooper to thank for us finding you. She sensed your presence here the moment we landed."

"I'm grateful," said Rok. "I've been here for what feels like weeks. It's the most defensible position I could find. The creatures—they come at night." He shrugged. "I've been able to move around a little in the day, as much as my wounds will allow. That's how I got to the *Foundling* and managed to rescue Atesee, send him out with a message. I found a few packs of rations that hadn't been destroyed in the explosion, and I've been sitting it out down here ever since. I knew I wouldn't get far on my own. I couldn't even consider taking on those *things*, injured as I am."

Rooper wondered what the creatures were that could take on an experienced Jedi Master like Rok. And his entire team. She was beginning to hope she'd never have to meet one. Perhaps all this adventuring wasn't as exciting as she'd imagined. She couldn't stop thinking about poor Maliq, and the rest of Rok's team. How would she feel if it were Obik, Dietrix, and Silandra who'd died? Jedi were taught to deal with loss, but that didn't mean they didn't *feel* it.

For the first time, Rooper thought she understood why the Jedi were out there on the frontier, why Silandra was always so focused on doing whatever needed to be done to help people, whether that was dealing with diplomats and politicians or fixing water pumps on agricultural worlds. Because it wasn't about *them*, the Jedi. It wasn't about adventure and having fun. It was about doing what was necessary. About saving lives. And when a Jedi put themself in danger, it wasn't for the thrill. It was because someone needed to stand in the way of the monsters.

Always the shield.

Perhaps what Rooper had mistaken as sensible and boring in Master Sho was really just a deep sense of compassion and duty. Shielding everyone else

from harm's way, just like she shielded Rooper every day.

Now Rooper needed to be that shield, too. For Rok. For Silandra. For the rest of her own team. And for the Katikoot.

She only hoped she was up to it.

"Tell us about the attack," prompted Silandra, her tone gentle.

Rok took a sip of his water. "We went to Aubadas because the Katikoot needed help. Creighton and his team were held up dealing with the conflict between Eiram and E'ronoh, and we were the closest alternative. We were happy to do what we could while the Katikoot awaited the main Republic delegation."

Silandra nodded. "We visited Aubadas before we came after you. We know about their resource issues. And the legends about the monsters."

Rok sighed. "Then you know we came to Gloam to investigate. We figured if we could get to the bottom of what was going on and allow them to reopen the mines, even temporarily, it would see them through until the Republic could send engineers to install an alternative."

"You did what any of us would have done."

"We were offered a guide. A Katikoot called Rillik. He promised to show us where the miners had been attacked. In the old city in the cliff," said Rok.

Rooper sipped her steaming water, warming herself by the fire. So far, Rok's story matched what Rillik had told them. She thought of him, back on the ship with Obik and EX-9B, and hoped he was doing okay.

"But when we got in there..." His voice trailed off. His eyes looked unfocused. Rooper realized he was replaying those horrible memories, reliving every step he'd taken. "We were ambushed. We didn't see them coming. Maliq was the first to..." He swallowed. "By the time I knew what was happening, one of them was on top of me. I went down, injured. It was chaos. All I could hear was the others, screaming." He was squeezing his tin mug so hard that it began to buckle and twist in his grip. "And then the screaming stopped."

"But you got out," said Silandra, her voice level.

"I think they left me for dead. I was badly hurt. I dipped in and out of consciousness for a while. When I came around again, they'd gone. I dragged myself up and got out of there as quickly as I could. It was clear Joneth and Branda hadn't made it, either. But this place"—he looked up at the statues of the two Jedi, silent sentinels in the gloom—"it called to me. Brought me to safety."

"Thank the light," said Silandra. She placed her mug on the ground by her feet and spread her hands before her, banishing the chill with the warmth of the fire.

"It was a couple of days before I was strong enough to make an expedition outside," said Rok. "That's where I first encountered the creatures again and realized that they weren't really creatures at all."

"What do you mean?" said Rooper.

"They look like Katikoot," said Rok. "But much bigger, with flatter snouts. And they lack true sentience. There was no reasoning with them, and I couldn't reach them through the Force. When I cut one, all that spilled out was a stream of fine black crystals instead of blood."

"Crystals?" said Silandra.

Rok nodded. "I've been developing a theory. See, what if the minerals that the Katikoot have been mining here were once alive, millennia ago? Alive and *malicious*. And what if now, even in their inert form, they still retain some of the malign intent? You can feel that darkness in the Force radiating off the creatures when you're near them." Rok looked from Silandra to Rooper. "What if, long ago, the minerals somehow infected some of the Katikoot, possessing their bodies and rewriting their minds?"

"So you think these so-called monsters were once Katikoot but are now, what? *Undead*?" said Silandra.

"Exactly," said Rok. "With nothing but the minerals keeping them moving, driving them mindlessly with their ancient hatred."

Rooper shuddered. The thought was appalling. "So you managed to defeat one?"

"Yes, with some difficulty. And then I retreated here. I observed them for a few days, waiting for an opportunity. As soon as I saw one, I made a break for the *Foundling*." He hesitated. "Only to find someone had destroyed it, to stop me getting away."

"We saw what was left of it," said Rooper.

Rok nodded. "That's when I realized the ambush wasn't accidental at all. We were led into a trap. Someone knew the creatures would attack us, and they didn't want any of us making it off Gloam alive."

"Who?" said Silandra. "Do you have any idea who could have done such a thing?"

Rok worked his jaw, his expression grim. "Rillik," he said. "Our Katikoot guide. He wasn't there when we were attacked. He must have peeled off

behind us in the tunnels, then blown up the *Foundling* before getting away in a mining ship he'd left prepared for the purpose."

"Rillik," said Silandra. "This is bad, Rok. We brought him back to Gloam with *us*. And he's aboard the *Umberfall* now, with Obik." She stood, suddenly anxious. "Rooper, try the comms. See if you can get hold of Obik." But Rooper was already on her feet and running for her pack.



Dass was feeling better now that they were inside the ruins. At least the ground there felt safe beneath his feet, and because they were moving deeper into the cliff face with every step, he didn't have to think about how high up they were.

Dietrix led the way, holding her glow rod above her head, with Mittik close behind her. Then Dass, with Spence bringing up the rear. They'd agreed to stick together while they tried to figure out their bearings and work out how to locate the mines.

It was pitch-black inside the structure, and Dietrix's glow rod bathed everything in a cool blue light. Dass felt cold, and the smooth carved rock of the walls even glittered like ice all around him.

The ruins were fascinating. Although *ruins* might have been too strong a word. It was more that the city—or at least this part of it—had been abandoned. As if the people who'd once lived there had simply up and left.

The arched entrance through which they'd come had soon opened into a large central avenue with a tall ceiling and more openings branching off to either side. These, it seemed, were the doorways to separate little warrens of rooms. Dass guessed they must have been where people once lived. The contents of each of these homes had mostly gone, rotted away over time or looted by later generations. The work that had gone into carving them, though, was exquisite. This had been a sophisticated society.

So what had happened to them? Why had they seemingly fled without a trace?

"There's something eerie about this place," said Dietrix, up ahead. Her

voice seemed to bounce off the walls before echoing up toward the high ceiling, lost in the gloom.

"It is filled with ghosts," said Mittik with a sniff.

"Ghosts?" said Dass.

"Not in the sense of lingering spirits," said Mittik, "as might be feared in your culture. Merely that this city feels like it has stories still to tell, about the people who once lived here."

Dass allowed himself to exhale. Monsters were one thing, but ghosts, too? That would have been too much to bear.

"It's like a hive," said Spence. "All of these little chambers, the central aisle, the fact there's dozens, if not *hundreds*, of other dug-out tunnels just like this one in the cliff face."

"If it's a hive," said Dietrix, "then surely there must be some central point, a gathering place where the people could come together."

"That makes sense," said Mittik. "Deeper in the rock. Maybe that's where we can find a path that leads to the mines." She said something that sounded like a curse in her own language. "I wish Rillik was here. He could have led us straight to it."

"Let's keep on following this avenue," said Dietrix. "We're heading deeper into the rock as it is. I'm sure we'll find...Oh, now look at *those*!"

Dietrix had come to a stop before a wall, facing another open archway just like the one through which they'd entered the city. More syrupy darkness lay beyond. But hanging above the archway and stretching along the length of the wall was a series of moldering, half-rotten tapestries. They were suspended from corroded metal rails high above and hung low, like long banners or pennants. Each one depicted a different scene, although some were so discolored and moldy that the images were difficult to make out.

Dietrix held her glow rod high, directing the light toward the faded panels.

Dass edged forward to take a better look. "There," he said, pointing to the first of the drapes, which depicted a series of dark gray figures flitting in and out of the familiar cliff face city. The land all around them was lush and green, different from the bleak landscape out there now. "They look like Katikoot."

"Impossible," said Mittik. She edged closer, peering up at the image.

"They do *look* like Katikoot," said Dietrix.

Mittik sniffed again. "But this city is ancient. Built before anything on

Aubadas. It would mean..." Her voice trailed off as the consequences dawned on her. "It would mean the Katikoot were on Gloam *first*."

"But they're flying," said Spence. "I thought the Katikoot couldn't use their wings for flight."

"Not anymore," said Mittik, her voice level. "But once, a long time ago." She was still staring up at the tapestry. "It..." She hesitated. "I can hardly believe it, but it might mean that my ancestors built this place." She shook her head. "But we've always been taught that we originated on Aubadas. It doesn't make any sense."

Dass moved on to look at the second picture. "This one shows them opening up the mines, deep inside the cliff," he said. "And this one is unreadable." He was walking slowly beneath the row of banners, examining each in turn. "They seem to be telling a story. Here, some of them are growing ill."

"Let me see," said Mittik. She hurried to his side. "The miner's curse. Look. They're getting sick from the minerals they've mined." She rushed ahead of Dass and the others. "And here, it's...Oh, no...It can't be that...."

"What is it?" said Dietrix.

"If this is true..." Mittik's voice sounded strained. She seemed unable to finish her sentence.

Dass and Spence hurried over. The tapestry showed huge Katikoot with gleaming eyes, grown tall and monstrous, looming over the others. Most of the Katikoot were trying to run, but the monsters were laughing as they tore them to shreds. The destruction was shocking. It looked as though the monsters had rampaged through the entire city.

"They were transformed," said Dass. It was all starting to make a terrible sort of sense. *That* was why the monsters looked so much like Mittik, why he and Spence had been so scared when they first met her.

Because the monsters had once been ancient Katikoot themselves.

"The minerals didn't just kill them," said Mittik. "They turned them into something else. They attacked the city." She moved on. "And here. Some of the Katikoot drove them back, down into the mines. They imprisoned them there. Then they sealed up the mines and abandoned the city."

Dass had reached the end of the row of tapestries. "And here the Katikoot are, arriving on a new world."

"Aubadas," said Mittik. Her voice was barely a whisper. "So it's true. Everything I've been told about our history is a lie."

"No," said Dietrix. "It was so long ago. Thousands of years. Stories change in the telling. Histories are rewritten, events forgotten. It doesn't mean that anyone lied. Just that it's been so long, they've forgotten the truth."

"And the warnings," said Spence. "They've forgotten those, too. The reason for these tapestries. Your ancient ancestors were trying to warn future generations about the mines, and the minerals."

"The stories. The tales told to us as children. They were *true*. They're all that's left of the real memories of what happened here," said Mittik. She sobbed.

"I'm sorry," said Dass. He didn't know what else to say or do.

"We didn't listen. We opened new mines, away from the city. We kept on stripping Gloam, fueling our progress with the awful stuff we dug up. And then, when even those mines began to run dry, we came back here and reopened the ancient tunnels."

"And set the monsters free," said Dass. "They must have been here all this time, sealed somewhere below."

"What have we done?" said Mittik.

"You didn't know," said Dietrix. "You're not to blame for any of this, Mittik."

Mittik wiped her eyes. "Perhaps not. But I can still help to put it right. I can't let history repeat itself."

Dietrix nodded. "And we're here to help."

"Then we start by finding your friends," said Mittik. "Rillik said they'd been attacked somewhere down in the mines. So that's where we go. We find Rok and the others, and then we return to Aubadas and tell my father and the Grand Council what we've learned."

Dass glanced at his father, but the question died on his lips when he saw the look of steely resolve in Spence's eyes.

Of course we're going to help, too.

"Come on, then," said Dass, flashing his most confident smile. "Looks like we might be needing another one of those glow rods."



The comlink emitted another shrill burst of static in Rooper's hand. She almost tossed it at the wall in frustration.

"Obik? Can you hear me? It's Rooper."

Another crackle of interference.

"Ninebee? Nibs?"

Nothing.

"It's all right, Rooper. I think you can stop now. The comms network is obviously still down. Hopefully Kam, Amos, and Geetee-Eleven will get it working again soon," said Silandra. Her voice was calm, but her manner was anything but. She was pacing up and down the colonnade, her fingers laced behind her back, her face screwed up in deep thought.

"You're going to wear a groove in those flagstones," said Rok. Silandra didn't answer.

"We've got to do *something*," said Rooper. "If Rillik is responsible for what happened to Rok's team, and for blowing up the *Foundling*, then we can't afford to wait around any longer for the comms to come back online."

"I know, Rooper," said Silandra. "But Rok's injured, and night has fallen out there. The creatures will be on the prowl."

"Don't worry about me," said Rok. "I'll be fine."

"Dietrix and Mittik have gone into the city, and Obik is on the *Umberfall* with Rillik. We're the only ones who know the truth. We have to go. We have to risk it."

Silandra stopped pacing. She looked at Rooper. She opened her mouth to say something, but Rooper got there first.

"We are the shield," she said. "I get it now. It's our job to protect those who can't protect themselves. To help those in need. No matter what. This isn't about me seeking adventure, Master. It's about me seeking to do my duty as a Jedi."

"I think she's got you there, Silandra," said Rok. He was smiling, and this time Rooper could see that he meant it.

Silandra sighed with resignation. "Once again, you astound me, Rooper. Very well. We head for the *Umberfall*. We apprehend Rillik and then go after Dietrix and Mittik. But we're not splitting up. It's too risky." Now that the decision was made, she seemed filled with purpose again. She drew her shield from her back and slipped it onto her arm. "We'll be the shield they deserve." She cocked her crooked smile. "I'm proud of you, Padawan."

Rooper felt a bloom of pride, but the feeling soon gave way to trepidation. Silandra was right—the creatures were out there, somewhere, and they all knew what the things were capable of. It seemed unlikely they'd be able to avoid them, both out in the wilderness and in the mines. She was going to have to face them, one way or the other.

"Rok?" said Silandra. "Do you think you can make it? We can always come back for you in the morning."

Rok stood, trying to hide the grimace of pain that crossed his face as he stretched his wounded back. "If you think you're leaving me behind, you're sorely mistaken. I've spent enough time hiding down here alone. I owe it to Maliq and the others to see justice served. Rillik should answer for his crimes. And besides, we promised to help the Katikoot."

"Very well. Then we go together, and we remain on our guard. Rooper, we'll retrace our route through the mangroves. Once we're on the other side and back on firm ground, we run, all the way back to the ship if we're able."

"Yes, Master," said Rooper.

"Then lead the way."

Rooper palmed her lightsaber hilts and set off up the path toward the exit. The two Jedi Masters fell in quickly behind her.



The power was still out, throughout all Diurna, and the Katikoot were growing increasingly anxious. Different people kept hurrying in and out of the small room where Amos was still working alongside Kam and GT-11. They would speak with Sullik in a flurry of high-pitched flutes, whistles, and clicks and then dart out again, relaying whatever had been said to whoever was waiting outside.

Clearly, they weren't very impressed.

"To the left a little bit, Geetee," said Kam. The end of his nose twitched as if it were itchy, but he didn't have a hand free to scratch it. He was lying on his belly on the ground, his eyes screwed up tight as he peered at a bundle of thin wires he'd pulled out from the bottom of the communications panel. GT-11 was providing a narrow beam of light from a lens beside his eye. He shifted slightly, and the beam tracked left, highlighting a small junction box. The fake power hub they'd discovered earlier—from which GT-11 had inadvertently triggered the fail-safe that shut down the whole city's power—was still hanging open close by.

Amos watched as yet *another* Katikoot came in, looked at them, shook their head, and then left. This time they didn't even say a word to Sullik, who looked like he was already carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders.

Or at least the weight of the city.

"Umm. I think they're starting to get a bit anxious," said Amos. "Possibly something to do with the lack of air and heat extraction from the cavern. How are you getting on?"

"Mmmm hmmmuff, mmmh woommf," said the Twi'lek.

"What?" said Amos.

Kam removed the tool from between his teeth. He scratched his nose. "I said, it's impressive work. Whoever did this knew exactly what would happen when their tampering was discovered. It was designed to create chaos and stop the power being switched back on. But I think we can find a way to bypass it."

"Soon?"

"You can't hurry a thing like this, Amos, as you well know," said Kam. "Of course, you're welcome to trade places with me down here on the floor."

Amos glanced at the angry Katikoot behind them. He couldn't help wondering if it might be a safer option. "No, no. You carry on. Just do it a bit faster, that's all."

"Beeet-teet-doo," said GT-11.

"I know, I know." Amos held up his hands. "But let's not bring that up again."

Kam sniggered. "He's right. You *were* the one who told him to open the case."

"What choice did I have?"

"Exactly. You can't roast a tip-yip..."

"Without plucking its wings. I know. But breaking a whole underground civilization might be taking it a bit far. I'm worried they're going to drag us off to cells soon."

"I wouldn't worry," said Kam.

"Why not?"

"Because the chances are their cells will have electronic locks, and given there's no power..."

Amos sighed. "Oh, right. I feel a lot better now."

"Good," said Kam. He took the tool that he'd been holding between his teeth and inserted it into the little junction box, from which a bundle of wiring was streaming like fine multicolored hair.

There was a popping sound and a shower of sparks, and then the lights flickered back on with a resounding clunk. Amos heard Katikoot cheering in the street outside.

"Maybe we'll be heroes, after all," said Kam.

Then the lights blinked out again, the junction box sprayed another shower of tiny sparks, and the cheering abruptly stopped.

"Oh."

"This is why they don't let us come on diplomatic missions," said Amos. "Here, let me have a go."

Reluctantly, Kam shuffled backward to give Amos more room. He passed Amos the tool. It was still sticky with drool.

"Thanks," said Amos.

"You're welcome. Now, what I was trying to do..."

"Was link the positron distributor to the arc manifold without going through the sub distribution relay," finished Amos.

"Well, yes."

"Quite brilliant," said Amos.

"You think so?"

"Yes. It's an excellent plan," said Amos, tinkering with the wires as he worked. "Only you forgot you'll also need to bypass the static compressor. And reroute through the charge looper to create enough feedback resistance. Oh, and *this*." He reached up, grabbed the fake power hub, and yanked it out of the comms array. He tossed it over his shoulder. He heard a Katikoot grunt. "Sorry!"

"Now what?" said Kam.

Amos got to his knees. "Now this." He reached up and pushed a button on the console.

Nothing happened.

He looked at Kam. Kam looked at him. The moment stretched.

"Press it again," said Amos.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

"You're certain?"

"Just do it, Kam."

"If you insist." Kam pressed the button.

The lights came back on. Fans started whirring. The comm unit crackled to life, and the tiny lights on the array started dancing as communications were restored.

"Why's no one cheering?" said Amos, getting to his feet and dusting himself down. There were broken cobwebs clinging to his horns.

Kam shrugged. "I guess they were feeling burned after the first five times."

Amos scratched his ear. "I suppose you're right." He glanced over at Sullik, who was showing them his teeth in what Amos hoped was a smile.

"Got any more of that strange tea?" he asked.



Obik's head was throbbing.

No, *throbbing* was too mild a word for it. His head was *pounding*, as if someone were beating a drum right next to his left ear.

He groaned and opened his eyes. His left eye was gummy with dried blood. He tried to remember what had happened. He'd been sitting at the table, eating stew....

The memory came flooding back.

Rillik.

The Katikoot had come storming in. He'd swung something at Obik's head and then...

Well, then this.

He was still in the common area of the *Umberfall*, but he was sitting against the wall, across the room from the table. His hands were behind his back. He tried to move them. They wouldn't budge. Confusion clouded his mind for a moment. His thoughts were sluggish. He shook his head, trying to clear it, then wished he hadn't as pain flared where he'd been struck. He'd have to get that looked at.

He tried again. No. His hands still wouldn't move. He looked down. His legs stretched out before him. His ankles were bound and tied with a length of cable.

Ahh...

Rillik had tied his hands behind his back, too. Why had it taken him so long to figure that out?

Because you have a concussion.

"That makes sense," he mumbled.

You need to stay awake.

Somewhere deep down, behind the layers of confusion, his medical training was kicking in.

Stay awake. Warn the others.

Obik took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He blinked again, straightening up.

That's it. That's better. Get the adrenaline pumping.

He looked around for any sign of Rillik. He wasn't there. Obik cocked his head, listening. He could hear noises coming from the cockpit. That had to be the treacherous Katikoot. Was he planning to steal the ship?

Obik cast around, hoping to spot EX-9B. When he did, his heart sank. The droid was lying on the ground a meter away, a huge dent in the side of its chassis. It seemed to be still and powered down.

"Oh, Nibs," he said quietly.

At this, the droid shifted slightly so that its eye lens was looking straight at him. A little red light swam out of the blackness behind the glass.

"Nibs! You're okay," said Obik. The sense of relief was palpable.

"Deet-do-beep," said EX-9B, its voice low.

"Yes, all right," whispered Obik. "I'll keep it down. I was just pleased to see you!"

"Doo-dee-woot," EX-9B responded. Obik watched as the droid slowly levered itself upright, using its three arms to form a tripod. It was listing slightly to one side, where its gyro mechanism had obviously been damaged.

"Can you get me out of this?" asked Obik.

"Whooo," said EX-9B. "Doo-beep-dat-doo-wheee."

"Look, I wasn't trying to question your competence," said Obik, still whispering. "And yes, it was an excellent plan to play dead until I was awake."

"Dee-breet," said EX-9B. It made a slight jerking movement, lifted slightly into the air, and then sank hastily back down. It shook itself, repeated the motion, and this time was able to propel itself into the air. It circled haphazardly and then swept toward Obik.

Grunting, he shuffled forward to allow access to his bound wrists. EX-9B settled wonkily on his shoulder.

"Watch the head," said Obik, craning his neck to avoid bashing his wound against the droid's casing. He felt EX-9B's arms snipping away at the

cable around his wrists. "Ow! And watch the wrists, too. I'm starting to think you're as badly concussed as I am."

"Booo," said EX-9B.

A moment later, Obik felt the cable slacken and his wrists were free. He rubbed at them before shuffling back against the wall and untying his ankles. Instead of getting up, however, he draped the cable back over his ankles to give the illusion that he was still tied up. "Now, Nibs," he said. "Here's what I want you to do…."



"Rillik!"

Rillik heard the Mirialan calling from the other room. His voice sounded feeble. Like the weak fool he was.

A broad grin split Rillik's face. He got up from the pilot's chair, where he'd been entering coordinates into the ship's navigation systems. He knew he shouldn't gloat. It was a failing, really, the urge to lord it over those whom you'd bettered. But it made him feel good, and he wanted to see the look on the do-gooder's face when he realized his friends wouldn't be coming back for him.

Rillik walked to the common area, his grin growing even broader at the sight of the bedraggled medic, still tied up and slumped against the wall. He lifted his head as Rillik entered the room, his eyes looking watery and confused.

"Why?" said Obik.

Rillik shrugged. "You were in my way, just like the others."

"The others?"

"Rok and those fools he brought with him. Joneth and the rest."

Obik's eyes widened in shock. "So *you* were the reason they went missing."

"Well, me and a few helpful monsters," said Rillik. "But yes, I was the one who sent them to their deaths. I found those creatures down in the old mines, where they'd been sealed away for millennia. So I set them free. A distraction to keep people away from all those precious minerals." He sniffed. "And it worked, too. Suddenly, all the old stories came true. The rest of the miners fled. No one wanted to come back to Gloam. Except me, of course. And those stupid Pathfinders. But I soon dealt with them." He laughed as

Obik tried feebly to wrestle against his restraints. His arms remained pinned behind his back.

"What are you doing this for?"

"What else?" said Rillik. "Credits. While the Grand Council back on Aubadas is busy cozying up to the Republic, there's billions of credits' worth of minerals still in those mines, just waiting to be sold to the highest bidder." Rillik rubbed his hands together, thinking of the luxury it was all going to bring. "And given there's a war raging between Eiram and E'ronoh at the moment, there are plenty such bidders." He coughed, his lungs burning.

"You're profiteering. From a *war*. From people's death and misery," said Obik.

"Life is nothing but death and misery. And what about *me*? All those years I put into those mines, and what did I get? The miner's curse." He patted his chest, which led to a spluttering cough. "I don't have long. You know it as well as I do. I have to do something to make sure I enjoy what's left of my life."

"I've already explained," said Obik, "I can help you. The Republic can help you. I'm already synthesizing a trial cure." The Mirialan's eyes were pleading. "Stop this now, and we can forget it ever happened. I want to help you, Rillik."

Rillik sneered. "Just like all the others. Too busy thinking about other people to look after your own."

Obik narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean?"

"Your friends. It's too late for them, just like it's too late for me. The creatures will hunt down your Jedi, out there in the wilderness where there's nowhere to hide, and the others have gone to the ruined city."

"What's at the ruined city?"

"Only death," said Rillik, flashing his teeth. He coughed again. His head was starting to swim, and the vision in his right eye was growing hazy, almost as if he were peering through a faceted lens or stone. "Enough talking now."

"Drooo-deet," said the hovering droid behind him.

But...

Rillik turned just as EX-9B discharged enough electrical current into the Katikoot's body to make all his fur stand on end before he dropped, unconscious, to the floor.



"You heard him," said Obik, huffing as he tied Rillik's ankles and wrists with the same cables he'd been bound with just a few moments before. "The others are in danger."

"Bee-dooo-waaa," said EX-9B.

"I don't know. The comms might still be down, but it's got to be worth a try," replied Obik. "See if you can reach Silandra and Rooper."

"Wheee-woo," confirmed EX-9B.

The droid opened a channel.



The first Rooper knew they were under attack was when she heard the whooshing sound of Silandra's lightsaber igniting.

She flicked her eyes left and saw four hulking shapes emerging from the gloom. Her lightsabers flared to life in her fists, and she pivoted, acting purely on instinct, swinging around to run toward the threat as she'd been trained.

Rooper tried to squash down her doubts, her rising sense of fear.

She could do this. And she had two Jedi Masters at her side.

She clutched the hilts of her lightsabers tighter and swung out wide to meet the oncoming creature on the right flank.

They'd been running through the rocky landscape for an hour, having passed through the mangroves without incident. No more hungry animals and no sign of the monsters...until now. But here they were, charging out of the shadows, just as Rok had warned them.

Hunters, coming for them in the night.

Silandra's lightsaber flashed as it hummed through the air, cutting down one of the creatures as it pressed its attack. It crumpled backward, black shards spilling from its innards as it sprawled on the rocks.

The others shrieked, throwing their heads back to scream into the empty night. The sound was piercing, like breaking glass. As lightning flickered overhead, Rooper got her first proper look at the things.

Rok had been right. They *did* look like Katikoot, only much taller, broader, and infinitely more terrifying. Rooper felt the ill intent radiating off them through the Force, like a swirling stream of deep purple. It clotted

around them, dark and malignant. These were not just wild, hungry creatures like the beasts they'd met in the mangroves. These were monsters in the truest sense, and all they wanted was to tear the Jedi apart.

Creatures born of the dark.

Rooper closed in, narrowing the distance between herself and the one on the right. Her lightsabers flashed defensively as she tried to narrow its angle of attack. But she hadn't been expecting the creatures to be able to fly.

As the tips of her lightsabers swung low, mere centimeters from the creature's chest, it coiled its legs and sprang, launching up and over her head. Surprised, Rooper craned her neck, watching as the creature unfurled its leathery wings, wheeling around in the air and dropping into a dive, feetfirst. Its talons gleamed, sharp and dangerous.

Rooper barely had time to flip herself forward into a roll, using the Force to cushion her landing as the creature struck the ground behind her, talons raking sparks from the black rock.

As she sprang back up, she saw that both Rok and Silandra had engaged with the other two creatures, lightsabers humming.

Rooper twisted to avoid a lashing forearm. The creature hissed, air rattling through its cage of needlelike teeth.

She thrust forward with one lightsaber, swinging in from the other direction with the second, but the creature skittered backward, using the rocks for purchase.

The lightsabers sang harmlessly through empty space.

Rooper gritted her teeth.

The creature threw its wings out to either side, emitting another shriek as it shot up into the air again, whirling around like a liquid shadow. Rooper struggled to see it clearly against the backdrop of the black storm clouds and almost missed its next dive, dancing to the side just as it came down again almost on top of her. She felt its claws rake the cloth of her robes, opening a wide gash down her sleeve but luckily missing her flesh by mere centimeters.

The creature wasted no time, springing straight back into the air as soon as its feet touched the ground.

Rooper searched the sky, but the creature was too fast, too well camouflaged. It was like fighting air, and she knew now how these things had managed to get the better of Maliq and the others, how they'd been able to injure a Master like Rok. Especially as they'd been caught unawares.

Movement on her left. She twisted, bringing one lightsaber around while

protecting her torso with the other.

She was grateful she did as the creature lurched, altering its trajectory to avoid the blades. It had feinted, trying to cause her to expose her belly. And now it was back in the air again and difficult to see.

She knew what she had to do. Rooper closed her eyes. She reached out with the Force.

The Force is with me. I am one with the Force.

Around her, the world became a blur of swirling grays and livid purples. The bright lights of Silandra and Rok were the only punctuation in a wasteland from which life had long been leached. The creatures, though, still held some impression in the Force—although not much. She could see them as ominous knots of black and purple swirling in the air above.

She breathed and felt calm wash over her, soothing her jangling nerves.

From above, the creature dived.

Rooper adjusted her stance.

The creature was almost there, on top of her. Its dark intentions bubbled through the Force like an alarm, threatening to drown out all else, to blot out her own color as if she had never existed.

But still she held on.

And on...

Until it was too late for the creature to alter its course.

Her lightsabers flashed, completing a circular motion.

Rooper opened her eyes.

The creature lay at her feet, sliced straight through the middle. But more disturbing than the sight of the body was the fact that there was nothing spilling from the creature's remains but a mass of dark black minerals.

Rooper dropped into a crouch. It was just as Rok had described back at the temple. Shimmering black crystals, like uncut diamonds, had tumbled out where her lightsabers had passed through the creature's body.

She frowned, powering off her weapons. She stirred the black crystals with her fingers. Rok's theory made an odd kind of sense. The creatures weren't truly alive, not in the sense that they had once been. That was why they were nothing but smudges in her vision of the Force. The thing before her was just the shell of a being, colonized by the minerals and twisted into something evil. It had been dead for a long time.

Rooper stood, turning to see Rok standing over another of the creatures, lying still on the ground. Rok had been showered in the same little black

crystals, brushing them off his shoulder with his free hand as his lightsaber extinguished in his other fist.

Beyond him, Silandra was still fighting but clearly had the upper hand. As Rooper watched, her master used her shield to batter the last remaining creature back, then took its head from its shoulders with one quick sweep of her lightsaber. Silandra fell back, catching her breath as the creature slumped to the ground.

Rooper hurried over to join her.

"Minerals," she said, holding up a fistful of the sinister black substance. "Master Buran was right. It's like this stuff has replaced all of their organs, all of their bones...."

Silandra nodded. "This must be the miner's curse. Or at least, what it does to people if it's left to run its course."

"Things on this world are just getting stranger and stranger," said Rok. "But I'm glad you're both here." He dabbed at a fresh cut on his forehead, then wiped his hand on his robes. The sooner they got him proper medical attention, the better.

"Is everyone okay?" said Silandra.

Rok nodded. "I'm all right."

Silandra dropped to a crouch, putting her hand on Rooper's shoulder. "Rooper? I know this is a lot to take in."

"Yes, I'm okay," said Rooper.

Silandra studied her for a moment, then nodded. "Good. Then let's keep going. There might be more of them out here, and we still need to get back to Obik."

They were just about to resume their run when the comlink crackled to life in Rooper's pack. She saw Silandra glance over.

"Rooper? Silandra? Are you there?" The voice was muffled and broken by static, but it was instantly recognizable.

"Obik!" Rooper dropped her pack off her shoulder and fished around inside for the comlink. She brought it up to her mouth. "Obik? It's Rooper. We're here. Can you hear me?"

"Thank the stars," said Obik. Rooper could hear EX-9B beeping away in the background. "Yes, yes, Nibs. They're okay." A pause. "You are okay, aren't you?"

"Yes, we're fine. But we need to tell you something urgent, Obik. It's not safe on the ship—"

"Rillik," said Obik, cutting her off. "I know. That's why I've been trying to reach you. Kam and Amos must have finally got the comms working again."

Silandra beckoned to Rooper, who handed her the comlink. "What's happened, Obik?"

"Rillik attacked me and Nibs," came Obik's crackling reply.

"Are you okay?" said Silandra.

"A bit sore," said Obik, "but we managed to overpower him and tie him up. Listen, Silandra—he's the one behind all of this. He's been harvesting minerals to sell to the warring planets for a profit. And he set those creatures free."

"While his own people suffered," said Rooper. "Unbelievable."

"It's worse. He was the one who sent Rok and the others to their deaths. He led them into a trap."

"We know," said Silandra. "We found Rok. He made it out. The only one. That's what we were rushing to tell you when we couldn't get you on the comms."

"Rok? Is he there?" said Obik.

"I'm here," said Rok.

"It's good to hear your voice. And I'm sorry for what happened. But I must ask, can you remember the way to the mines in the ruined city?"

"Yes," said Rok. "Of course."

"Good. Because Rillik sent Dietrix and Mittik there. For the same reason. It's a trap. He's sent them to their deaths." He paused, catching his breath. "You have to find them, before it's too late."

EX-9B issued a series of bleeps in the background.

Rooper looked to Rok and then Silandra. She didn't need to hear their agreement to know what they were thinking. She took the comlink back from Silandra. "We're on our way to the ruined city now, Obik. Leave it with us. You keep Rillik there. I'm sure the Katikoot are going to want some answers from him when we get back to Aubadas."

"Understood. And, Rooper?"

"Yes?"

"Be careful."

The comlink went dead.



They'd left the room with the tapestries some time ago, and now Dass, Spence, Dietrix, and Mittik had come to a vast central chamber at the very heart of the ancient city. Here, an immense circular pit had been cored out of the very heart of the cliff, like a well shaft about a kilometer across and with no obvious bottom.

Carved staircases wound around the wall of the shaft, descending in a spiral like the grooves on a screw. There was no sign of a rail. At various intervals, the smooth sides of the shaft were punctuated with hollowed-out recesses and tunnel entrances.

A soft orange glow appeared to originate from somewhere deep inside the shaft, giving everything a strange warmth that seemed at odds with the chill air and the unwelcoming atmosphere of the place.

They stood in a line at the edge of the shaft, peering down. Dass was already starting to feel unwell at the sight of the immense drop, and he took a step back, clinging to his dad's elbow to keep himself steady. His shoulder was still throbbing where the monster had scratched him, but he tried to put it out of mind.

"The power and engineering skills it must have taken to hollow out a cliff..." said Spence, awestruck. "It's incredible."

"Clearly my ancestors weren't quite as primitive as I'd thought," said Mittik. She looked down. "That must lead to the mines."

"Where the others went missing," added Dietrix.

"We can't go down there," said Dass. "Those steps don't look very safe."

"We're lucky there are steps at all," said Dietrix. "For a species who

could fly, it's very considerate."

"Perhaps they were added later, by the miners who reopened the works down here," suggested Spence.

"There must be another way in and out," said Dass. "They had to ferry out the mineral loads they dug out from the tunnels to those containers outside. They won't have hauled them all up here, flying or otherwise."

"You're right," said Dietrix. "Good thinking. That could be a useful exit for us, too, if we can find it. But we're here now." She glanced at Mittik, who nodded, then looked at Dass and Spence. "The offer still stands. If you want to go back, you can wait for us where we came in."

"No," said Dass. "I can do it. Just…let's take it slow, okay?"

"Oh, I won't be hurrying down *those* steps," said Dietrix, "don't you worry." She was grinning again, and Dass wondered where she found all that enthusiasm. It was infectious. Being there, with her and Mittik—it made him believe he could do things he'd never even imagined.

Like walk down a set of ancient stone steps into a bottomless pit, without even a rail to hang on to.

He swallowed and followed Dietrix slowly down the first flight.

"Go steady, Son," said Spence over Dass's shoulder. "I'm right behind you."

Dass tried to focus on Dietrix's back, refusing to glance down at the yawning chasm to his right.

Just one step after the other. And then the one after that. Every step taking him back toward solid ground.

"It's not so bad, really," he said.

"Erm..." said Dietrix.

"What?" Dass felt a prickle of fear. "What is it?"

Dietrix was drawing her blaster. "I think we've found your monsters," she said. She leveled the weapon and began firing down into the chasm. The screech of the blasts was so loud it seemed to drown out Dass's thoughts. He chewed on his lower lip. And then, knowing that he had no choice, he braved a look over the edge.

Four of the creatures were flying up out of the shaft toward them, twisting on the updrafts, their leathery wings billowing. They looked just like the ones he'd fought outside their camp—and just as fearsome.

"Burning sun," cursed Mittik.

Behind Dass, Spence was readying his makeshift prod. "Dad, pass it

here," said Dass.

"Don't worry, Son," said Spence. "I've got this."

"Dad," said Dass, thrusting out his hand. "They're coming *up*. That means they're going to reach me first. I need to protect Dietrix so she can keep on shooting."

As he spoke, one of the monsters struck the wall, falling into a spiraling tumble, a blaster hole punched through its chest. Streamers of fine black crystals followed it down.

"That's not blood," said Dietrix through gritted teeth.

"Whatever it is, I'm happy to see it," said Spence, "if it means we're not going to get torn apart!" He shoved the prod into Dass's hand. "Go on, Dass. Do your worst!"

Dass swiveled, bringing the crackling end of the prod around and down, striking one of the screeching monsters just as it reared up over the lip of the stairs, its talons grabbing for Dietrix. The end of the prod struck it hard between the eyes, and the monster shuddered, wheeling back as the electrical charge seemed to shock it into inaction. Its wings folded and it fell back, twisting in the air as it went.



But more were coming from below. Dozens of them, in a near endless stream.

Dietrix's blaster whined, but it obviously wasn't enough. "There's too many of them!"

Dass jabbed at another one, sending it careening away, only for it to recover and swim back up through the air, hissing angrily. Its dark eyes glittered like crystals.

"We need to fall back," called Mittik. "There's no way we can fight them all."

"No!" said Dietrix. "If we turn our backs on them, we're done for. They'll drag us down. We need a more defensible position."

Dass cast his eyes around, still jabbing wildly with the prod. He felt a surge of sudden resistance, and then he was being pulled forward, toward the edge of the steps. He saw that one of the creatures had managed to grab hold of the other end of the prod and had planted its feet against the side of the shaft, batting its wings to maintain its hold as it tried to yank him over.

Frantic, Dass tottered near the edge, trying to gain enough purchase with

his heels to stop himself being dragged forward.

But the creature was too strong.

The prod slipped in his grip.

He felt hands closing around his upper arms, pulling him back. "I've got you, Son. Let it go."

"But..."

"Let it go."

Dass released his grip on the prod.

The creature jerked back unexpectedly as the prod was suddenly released, jamming it hard into its own chest. The electricity discharged, and the creature went rigid, falling away like a dropped stone and smashing into another flying creature as it went down, sending them both spinning toward the orange glare. Others darted out of their way as they rose from the endless depths. The prod tumbled after them, disappearing into the darkness of the shaft.

"Quickly, in here."

Dass spun around to see Dietrix, who'd managed to reach the bottom of the first flight of stairs and had hopped across into the mouth of a small opening or tunnel set into the side of the shaft. "I can keep them busy while you see if there's another way out."

Dass hurried after her, kicking out at a clutching hand as he ran. He could hear Spence and Mittik following.

He stopped at the bottom of the steps. There was a gap between the last step and the lip of the entrance.

"Come on!" bellowed Dietrix. She raised her blaster and shot one of the monsters that had been rising up behind him. More were coming. Many, *many* more. "Make the jump!"

Dass met her gaze.

And then he jumped.



"This is it," called Rok. "Just ahead."

The three Jedi barreled across the fractured landscape, past three huge containers and the rusted hulks of old mining machinery, and into the shadow of the ancient city.

Rooper could hardly believe the scale of the place. Or the age. It looked like it had been there for a thousand years or more, the chiseled stone eroded by the weather until all the edges were blunt, making it seem out of focus.

She could see where a crane had been used to gain entrance to one of the lower levels. That had to be it. "Over there," she called, gasping for breath. "That must be where they went in."

Silandra nodded and raced toward the old vehicle, streaking ahead of Rooper and Rok. For a moment, Rooper thought her master was going to use the crane's extended arm as a ramp to run up to the entrance, but instead she simply jumped, flinging herself up with the power of the Force. She arced through the air to an impossible height, landing perfectly on the stone ledge by the archway without even kicking up a cloud of dust.

Rok glanced at Rooper as he followed suit, circling closer to the cliff and bending his knees slightly before he launched himself up to join Silandra.

Rooper had managed to make a jump that high only once before, during training on the moon of Barroth, and that had taken her at least five attempts.

This time, her friends' lives depended on her making it in one.

She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and *bounded*.



They were in trouble, and Dass couldn't see a way out of it.

There was nowhere to go, and they had only one blaster among the four of them. Against hordes of the monstrous creatures, each of which seemed intent on tearing Dass and the others to shreds.

The hollowed-out entrance Dietrix had found was a dead end, little more than a deep alcove where the rock had been scooped out to create a small space. Dass had no idea of its original purpose, but he was quickly coming to see it as the place where he was going to die.

He could hardly believe it. So soon after being rescued, too.

No cobbled-together distress beacon was going to help them now.

Dietrix stood in the opening at the front of the alcove, still firing away with her blaster, sending scattered clouds of black crystals blooming into the air with every shot. The monsters were full of the stuff. And they kept coming.

"The minerals have infected their entire bodies," said Mittik. She sounded appalled. "This cannot be the legacy of my people."

Dietrix cried out, staggering back into the alcove, the flesh of her forearm torn and bleeding where one of the creatures had tried to rake the blaster from her grip. Mittik quickly stepped forward, grabbing the weapon from Dietrix's hands and taking her place. The alcove entrance was a storm of thrashing limbs as the monsters tried to draw ever closer—and succeeded.

Dietrix fell back, leaning against the wall, hissing in pain.

"What can we do to help?" said Dass.

Dietrix just shook her head, tearing a strip from her uniform to wrap around her wounded arm.

Dass understood her meaning all too well.

It'll be over soon. No use worrying about it.

"I love you, Dad," said Dass, clutching Spence's arm.

"I'm sorry, Son."

Dass felt his heart breaking. "You've nothing to be sorry for."

"It's like I said before, we'd never have ended up stuck here on this planet in the first place if it wasn't for me. I should never have trusted Sunshine Dobbs. I should never..." Spence hung his head. "I should have kept my promise to your mother."

"You did, Dad. You kept it. Looking after me doesn't *just* mean protecting me from harm. You've shown me the stars. There are people out there who live their entire lives on one world, in one city, in one house.

Because of you, I've stood under different suns and watched starships breaching hyperspace. I've had adventures and met droids, dozens of different species, and...and I've learned that it's okay to be scared. But that you shouldn't let it stop you doing the right thing anyway."

Spence looked at him with watery eyes. "I'm proud of you, Son. *So* proud."

Dass swallowed. "If we get out of this, Dad...I want to be a Pathfinder. Like Dietrix. I want to help people. I know we're a team, and I *like* prospecting, but—"

Spence bundled him into a tight hug. "You can be whatever you want to be, Dass. And you'll be brilliant at it, too."

Dass closed his eyes. Any minute now...

And then Mittik was shouting, but not in alarm.

In relief.

Dass opened his eyes to see the multicolored blur of lightsabers whooshing through the air beyond the alcove, flitting among the screeching monsters.

The Jedi had arrived!



The shaft was buzzing like a hive, filled with an entire swarm of the monsters, all of them with the same glistening black eyes.

All of them infected with the poison minerals, their minds long overwritten and reshaped.

They seemed fixated on a small alcove at the bottom of some steps, where Mittik stood in the entrance, defending herself with a blaster. Rooper knew that Dietrix had to be down there, too—as well as some others she could sense through the Force.

People she didn't know.

People who were scared.

Time to be that shield.

Silandra had run ahead, circling the lip of the immense shaft. As Rooper watched, she flipped into the air and dived, her shield flaring to life as her lightsaber ignited. Her lightsaber whooshed, spilling dark crystals as she launched herself from the back of one creature to the next, using them like stepping stones as she worked to slow their frenzied assault on the alcove.

Rok headed for the stairs, perhaps too injured to risk such a bold and athletic move, or perhaps reading Silandra's intentions and attempting to clear an escape route for the trapped people below.

Rooper could see what she had to do. With Silandra slowing the tide of creatures coming up from below and Rok defending the steps, Mittik and the others needed Rooper's support at the alcove.

She took a running start and leapt into the chasm.

But the creature she'd been aiming for—wise to what Silandra had been doing—ducked to the right, swerving Rooper's jump so she missed her anticipated footing and tumbled past, arms wheeling.

For a moment, she felt as if the entire world had fallen away beneath her and she was simply going to drop and keep on dropping until she hit the bottom of the shaft.

But then her feet struck something solid—the outer rim of Silandra's shield, which was hovering beneath her in midair—and she was springing up onto the back of one of the shrieking monsters, riding it back up the shaft toward the morass at the top. She caught Silandra's eye for a fleeting moment, and then her master was gone again, lost amid the thrashing limbs of the beasts.

They were nearing the top of the shaft, and the creature was bucking and writhing beneath her, trying to claw her off its back. Rooper's lightsabers crossed, and the creature fell silent, minerals showering from the wound like spilled sand. She threw herself forward, following Silandra's lead and bounding across the backs of the creatures as she whipped her lightsabers around herself in a protective circle. Within moments, she had landed in the mouth of the alcove beside Mittik, who grinned at her appreciatively.

"You took your time," said the Katikoot mischievously. She raised her blaster and fired off another shot, sending one of the creatures spiraling back into a knot of its vile kin.

Rooper planted her feet, forcing back more of them with every sweep of her lightsabers. "It looks as though you had it under control," she said, laughing.

Silandra was still moving like a blur, her lightsaber singing, her shield whipping back and forth in a protective arc around her. Rok had cleared the steps and stood with his back to the wall, keeping the creatures at bay.

"How did you know where to find us?" said Dietrix from deeper inside the alcove. Her voice sounded tight and controlled. A quick glance back told Rooper she was injured. Behind Dietrix, a man and a boy were staring at Rooper with wide eyes.

"Long story. But we're getting you out of here."

"What about the other team?" said Dietrix.

"We found Rok," Rooper called over her shoulder, shouting above the noise of her singing lightsabers. She didn't add that the others were dead. That could wait. "Who did *you* find?"

"Spence Leffbruk," said the man at the back.

"And Dass," added the boy. "We're prospectors. We got stranded here."

Rooper whipped her lightsabers around, fending off another thrusting attack. It was beginning to work—the combined efforts of the Jedi, along with the constant bark of Mittik's blaster, were driving the monsters back. "Stranded? *Here?*" said Rooper. "That's a story I want to hear when we're back on the ship." She glanced at the boy and grinned. "Are you ready to run?"

He nodded.

"Good. When I say, you run back up those steps and you don't stop running until you reach the crane. Okay?"

"Okay!" Dass and Spence said together.

"Dietrix?" prompted Rooper.

"On it," said the pilot.

"Same for you, Mittik. We've got you covered."

"Thank you, Jedi."

"Thank me when we're safely back on Aubadas." Rooper grunted, pivoted, and altered her stance to drive the swarming creatures back, away from the steps. She glanced at Rok, who nodded.

"All right," called Rooper. "Go!"

Behind her, the others burst into action, hurtling for the steps. Rok was there to greet them, and he perched on the lower steps, his lightsaber flashing as he covered their retreat.

Rooper watched him back up the steps behind them until he reached the edge of the shaft.

"Master!" Rooper bellowed as she followed Rok, leaping backward across the gap to land on the steps and then hurrying up behind him.

Impossibly, the creatures were still swarming up the shaft.

Rooper reached Rok's side, and a glance told her Dietrix and the others had already made their escape down the narrow passageway leading from the

chamber.

Thank the stars. Now they just had to make it back to the *Umberfall*.

She turned back to the shaft.

Silandra had made it to the opposite side of the circular mouth, her shield back on her arm, and she was using it to batter away more of the creatures as she hurried around to join them. "We need to find a way to seal them in," she called through gasping breaths. She was sporting several fresh cuts on her arms and face. Luckily, they all appeared to be superficial.

She skidded to a halt beside Rooper.

Below, one of the creatures gave a shrill shriek. They'd be coming again, in force, at any moment.

"There could be endless kilometers of mine shafts down there," said Rok. "We've no way of knowing where they're coming from."

"Then we'll just have to seal *this* shaft," said Silandra.

"But...it's *huge*," said Rooper. "How...?"

Taloned arms were beginning to appear over the edge of the shaft. Rooper could hear the hissing of dozens of the creatures. The dark malevolence of their presence was like a constant pressure in the back of her mind.

Silandra looked up. "We bring the ceiling down."

Rok gaped at her. "We do what?"

"We're shutting this place down, permanently. The Republic engineers will provide the Katikoot with a new energy source, and there's enough minerals in those three containers out there to get them by in the meantime."

One of the creatures had made it up over the lip. Rooper's lightsabers blazed as she sent it back where it came from. "Incoming!" she said.

"All right," said Rok, nodding. "But you'd better be ready to run, Silandra. And fast."

"Rooper?"

"I'm with you, Master." Rooper backed away from the edge.

"Give it everything you have, Padawan...." Silandra closed her eyes. Her breathing steadied. She reached out her hands.

On Rooper's right, Rok was doing the same.

Rooper glanced at the creatures coming up over the lip of the shaft. With a gulp, she extinguished her lightsabers.

Trust in the Force.

She closed her eyes.

Colors swirled around her, but they seemed so small and insignificant

against the black pit at the center of the chamber, awash with ill feeling and dark intent. The minerals—or whatever they really were—had destroyed anything that was once good about these ancient ancestors of the Katikoot.

She felt the pull of her fellow Jedi, reaching out to the rocks, calling them down, and she joined that chorus, lending all she could of her strength.

She heard the rock crack. It was like the roar of the world being sundered. Rooper opened her eyes.

The ceiling of the chamber had split down the middle, yawning open in a massive sinister grin. As she watched, a hunk of it the size of a small shuttle broke free, tumbling down into the shaft, dragging the swarming creatures in its wake.

The floor seemed to shift beneath her feet, tilting like the deck of a speeder. More cracking sounds split the air. Dust rained from above. And then another massive chunk of rock broke free, smashing against the far edge of the shaft before rolling down into the abyss below.

Rooper felt a hand on her shoulder and looked around to see Silandra's face, close to her own. "Rooper, *run*!"

Rooper ran.



As she barreled through the tunnels and passageways of the ancient city, it felt to Rooper like the world was ending. The ground kept shaking beneath her feet, and more than once she'd thought that she was running forward only to realize that forward was now up as the entire city lurched. All the mine shafts beneath it were beginning to cave in, collapsing the foundations on which the massive structure was resting. The air was thick with billowing dust and debris, causing Rooper's lungs to sting with every indrawn breath. The whole city was coming down around them.

As she bounced painfully against a wall, she felt something hard roll against the side of her boot. She glanced down to see it was the hilt of an unfamiliar lightsaber. Frowning, she scooped it up and slipped it into the folds of her robes.

And then she was running again for all her life, charging toward the exit through which she hoped Dietrix and the others had already reached safety.



Dass ran, holding his father's hand, pulling him along. Behind them, the ancient city had begun to collapse, folding in on itself as if someone had kicked out the supports that were holding the place upright.

Worse, the rumbling had begun to travel, too, sending quakes and aftershocks radiating out through the network of mine shafts that perforated most of the surrounding area. The ground beneath them shuddered and shook as they ran. Dass knew the mine shafts were liable to start subsiding at any moment—meaning they'd all get swallowed in the massive wave of destruction rolling out from the dying city.

"Hurry, Dad," he called, but his words were lost beneath the groaning thunder of the tumbling rocks.

Ahead, Dietrix was sprinting, leading the way, with Mittik just a few paces behind. They were heading for the Pathfinders' ship, parked at the refinery he could see on the horizon, its tall metal gantries like distant pointing fingers. Dass just hoped they could make it in time.

He risked a glance back, and his spirits lifted to see the three Jedi running in a line toward them. They'd all made it out. Just. The ground behind the Jedi was folding, rumpling like a sheet as a wave of splintering rock rose toward an enormous crest.

Dass fixed his eyes on the horizon and ran as hard as his legs would carry him.



"Obik?"

The comm unit crackled to life with an urgent bark of static. Obik was already on his feet, peering out the viewport as the ground around the *Umberfall* started to shake with violent tremors. As he watched, the foundations of one of the metal gantries gave way, the stone beneath its feet rending open to expose the mining tunnels beneath. The tower toppled, crashing into its neighbor with a terrible clang.

He thumbed the receiver on the comms. "Dietrix?"

Her response came amid a series of sharp breaths. "Obik...fire...up the... engines. We're...all coming...and we're...in a hurry."

She sounded desperate. As if she was running. "Are you okay? The mines were a trap. Rooper and the others—"

"We're all...fine, Obik. Or we will...be...if you...get the ship...ready... for takeoff."

Obik's hands were already dancing over the ship's flight instruments. "I'm on it."

"And Obik?"

"Yes?"

"Open...the bay doors. We...won't have...time...to stop."

The comm went dead just as another of the gantry towers groaned and toppled, the ground opening to swallow it whole.

"Beee-dooo," said EX-9B ominously.

Obik took a deep breath and let it out. What was happening out there?



In the *Umberfall*'s medical bay, Rillik felt the ship lurch as the whole world seemed to tilt to the left.

Those idiots! They were ruining everything. Were they *destroying* the mines? Blowing them up?

Weren't the Jedi supposed to *help* people? Instead, they were going to kill them all.

And worse, he was going to lose everything. Those three containers of raw minerals would sell for millions of credits. It was everything he'd been working for. His final legacy, before the miner's curse finished him off. He'd sacrificed all those people's lives. Now it was time to collect his reward—not to die in a prison cell or tied up in the back of a Republic ship as the world

ended around him.

He glanced down at the cables binding his wrists. His vision swam. Was that the aftereffect of the shock the droid had given him? Or was it...?

No. It can't be. Not yet.

He craned his neck to peer around the hold. There was no sign of the medic or the droid.

This was his only chance. He had to get out there and save his investment. He wouldn't allow it to end like this.

He raised his hands to his mouth and began gnawing frantically on the cables, ignoring the taste of fresh blood—and something else, something oily and crunchy—as the exposed wires bit into his lips.



They were almost there.

Rooper could see the *Umberfall* sitting on the landing pad in the midst of the collapsing refinery, its bay door open, its engines roaring. Behind them, the ancient city's collapse was near complete, but the waves of aftershock were tearing up thousands of years' worth of mine shafts, causing the planet's surface to buckle and shift, falling away beneath every hurried step. If it wasn't for the Force pushing them onward, Rooper knew that she and the other Jedi would have been swallowed among those churning rocks well before.

Ahead of her, Dietrix, Mittik, Dass, and Spence were closing on the ship. Another few steps. That was all they needed.

We're going to make it. We're going to...

She caught movement out of the corner of her eye. Something dark and tall and...

Rooper's heart thrummed.

Oh, no...

One of the creatures had escaped and was closing on Dass and Spence. The father and son were so fixated on reaching the ship that they hadn't even seen it coming.

"Dass! *Dass!*" Rooper bellowed, but her voice was just a whisper compared with the roar of the rending rock.

There was nothing she could do. No way of reaching them in time...



Rillik couldn't believe it. The foolish medic had even left the bay doors open.

Biting through his wrist bindings had proved simple, if painful, and once free he'd been able to untie his ankles in a matter of moments. He hadn't bothered to scoop up a weapon or confront Obik. There wasn't time for that. But he hadn't expected to be able to just saunter off the ship as if nothing had happened, either.

He shrugged, spitting blood—it seemed strangely gritty—and hurried down the ramp into the chill gloom beyond. His legs felt oddly leaden, and the vision in his right eye was still hazy and blurred, as if he were looking through a thousand eyes at once. But he was alive. That was all that mattered.

The noise out there was incredible, as if Gloam itself were screaming, as if the planet were dying, its body thrashing as it tried desperately to cling to life. The ground was shifting like the surface of a lake in a violent storm, pitching one way then another, cracking and falling away in every direction.

For the first time, Rillik wondered if his escape plan had been the right move, after all. But then, how else was he going to get his credits?

He stepped onto the shaky ground just as a group of people came hurtling toward him out of the chaos. Mittik was there, as well as the Republic woman, Dietrix, along with two other humans he didn't recognize.

He saw Mittik look at him, her eyes wide. She raised her hand to point. Her mouth was moving as she shouted something incomprehensible under the noise of the collapsing tunnels.

Probably alerting the others to his escape. Well, he wasn't sticking around for that.

He took a lurching step, but his legs didn't seem to want to respond. He peered down at his feet, which remained firmly rooted to the spot. He frowned. Why wouldn't they do as they were told?

He tried again, but still his legs refused to move.

Rillik felt a sudden surge of panic.

He could see that the ends of his toes had started to split apart, the tips of shining black talons emerging, pushing out painfully through the broken skin. Around them, the blood looked dark and strange, more like tiny black crystals than...

Oh, no...Not this. Not now.

It was happening. He felt it, like a cold grip tightening its hold inside him

—as if something other than him was beginning to take control of his body.

The minerals...

The miner's curse...

He was beginning to transform. Into one of *them*.

He opened his mouth, but the scream wouldn't come.

And then he saw it. The monster swimming out of the darkness, bounding toward him, fangs bared.

And the only thought running through his head was...

What about my credits?



Rooper watched in horror as the creature lurched toward Rillik, who'd inexplicably run out of the ship and then frozen on the spot, directly in its path.

Something was happening to the Katikoot. His body was twitching, wings spread out and thrashing as if he was fighting some sort of internal battle for supremacy of his own body. His face was set in a terrified snarl, and one eye had ghosted over, black and glossy, to resemble the glittering dead eyes of the monsters.

This was the miner's curse, the minerals that had infested his body beginning their terrible transformation.

Rooper shuddered. It was too awful to contemplate. But perhaps there was still time. Perhaps Rillik could still be saved and brought to justice....

The others had skidded to a halt at the bottom of the ramp, looking on in appalled fascination. Dass was averting his eyes.

Silandra, Rok, and Rooper closed on them. Rooper's lightsabers flared. "Go!" she bellowed, turning to face Rillik and the creature. "I'll cover you."

"Rok," said Silandra, "get them onto the ship." She appeared at Rooper's side, shield raised, lightsaber in hand. Her expression was grim, determined.

Behind them, Rok was bundling the others up the ramp.

The monster clomped to a stop before Rillik's tortured form. It raised its head and sniffed the air inquisitively around him and then, with a snarl, turned its head and peered at the two defiant Jedi. The ship's engines roared as the *Umberfall* began to lift slowly off the landing pad.

Rooper's grip tightened on her lightsaber hilts.

And then the creature turned and lumbered away. Rillik watched it go,

pain and confusion clouding his features.

It had recognized him as one of its own.

For a moment, Rooper watched it lurch away into the darkness. Then she took a step toward Rillik. Closer, she could see the torment etched on his face. He looked terrified.

"Help...me..." he muttered, and the words seemed to cost him every ounce of fight he had left. He buckled at the waist, screeching in pain.

"Of course we'll help," said Rooper, powering down her lightsaber and hurrying to his side. "We're Jedi." She stepped closer, looping her arm around Rillik's hunched shoulders and pulling him into a tight embrace. His body felt hot to the touch. Obik would have to work quickly to help him. If help was even possible.

"Ready?" called Silandra. She was already turning back toward the rising ship.

Rooper nodded. "Ready."

They leapt, using the Force to propel themselves up onto the boarding ramp as the ship began to bank. They slid into the hold, Rooper still clutching Rillik close to her as Dietrix—who had clearly found her way to the flight controls—sent the ship careening away from the devastation.

Around them, the refinery was folding in on itself, gantries and towers collapsing as the ground opened in every direction. The *Umberfall* corkscrewed, gaining speed as they weaved through fallen crossbeams, tumbling docking stations, and buckled storage tanks.

And then they were away, flying clear of the debris and up into the atmosphere, leaving Gloam, and whatever monstrous things had once inhabited it, far behind.



TWO DAYS LATER

In Diurna, the Katikoot were in a celebratory mood.

The previous couple of days had passed in a blur of activity. Mittik was already overseeing the recovery of the three buried mining containers from outside the wreckage of the ancient city—the last of the minerals that would ever be used by the Katikoot to power their home. It would see them through their crisis, until the Republic engineers arrived to install a solar power source. Kittik had been in touch with the Republic ever since communications had come back online, and the delegation was already on its way.

Now, Rooper was sitting on a moss-covered rock with Dass, at the foot of one of the gushing waterfalls on the edge of the huge cavern that contained the Katikoot's city.

"When we get to Batuu, you won't forget about us, will you?" said Dass.

Rooper turned to grin at the boy. "Well, I'm not sure. What was your name again?"

He punched her lightly on the arm. "You know what I mean."

"You don't have to worry," said Rooper. "We'll be there."

"And Dietrix? You think she'll talk to me about what it's like to be a Pathfinder? I mean, I'll never be a Jedi, but I think I could maybe be a pilot like her."

"I think you'll make an excellent pilot," she said.

Everything had been agreed. Once they were finished on Aubadas and the Republic engineers had arrived to oversee things, Rooper, Silandra, Obik,

Dietrix, and the droids would escort Spence and Dass to Batuu, where they could start making plans to recover their ship, the *Silverstreak*, from where it had been left on their so-called paradise planet to await repairs.

The Pathfinder team would spend some much-needed time on Batuu, giving Obik a proper chance to heal from the head wound inflicted on him by Rillik, and the others time to reflect on what had happened on Gloam. Rooper was looking forward to passing some time meditating and training at the small Jedi research temple there.

Silandra, on the other hand, would finally make her pilgrimage to Jedha for the Season of Light. She'd asked Rooper if she wanted to come, and while it sounded exciting, Rooper had decided there would be time for such things later. For now, she wanted some peace.

She supposed there was a first time for everything.

Rooper turned at the sound of footsteps. "Hello, Master," she said.

Silandra smiled. "You two look as thick as thieves. Everything okay?"

Rooper rolled her eyes. "Of course."

Dass laughed, nudging her in the ribs. "Parents, eh?" he muttered. He turned to Silandra. "Everything's great. My dad is already making big plans for once we get our ship back. And he's promised me I can train to be a pilot, too."

"I'm pleased to hear it," said Silandra. "The Katikoot are planning to throw a party this evening, to thank us for our help." She glanced at Rooper. "We should be there. It's a great honor."

Rooper nodded. "Of course." She watched the luminous water tumbling down the inside of the cavern wall, foaming as it churned into the river below. "Do you think they're going to be okay?"

"The Katikoot?" said Silandra. "Yes, I do. The first stage of finding help is asking for it, and they've already taken that step. The power situation can be resolved, and perhaps then they can even start healing Gloam, too."

"And what about Rillik?"

Silandra looked pained. She shook her head. "Obik was able to slow the transformation, but it had already progressed too far. Rillik will be kept comfortable, but there's nothing anyone can do." She smiled. "Still, the things Obik has learned from studying Rillik's case mean he's been able to accelerate the work he was already doing on a cure. His treatment for the miner's curse is showing positive results. Most of his current patients will make a full recovery."

Rooper smiled. She nudged Dass. "Then I think a party is just the right thing, don't you?"

Dass laughed. "I'm not sure I've ever been to a party. Not one like that."

"You're going to love it," said Rooper. A thought occurred to her. She looked at Silandra. "Where's Rok?"

The Jedi Master had spent the past couple of days receiving medical treatment for the wounds and malnourishment he'd suffered on Gloam, but Rooper had since seen him up and about again, exploring Diurna.

"He's up on the surface," said Silandra. "Waiting for the other Pathfinder team that's coming to collect him."

Rooper frowned. "So he's not coming with us to Batuu?"

Silandra shook her head. "Rok has his own path to follow."

Rooper jumped down from the boulder. "Then I'd better go and find him," she said. "I want to make sure I say goodbye." She turned to Dass. "See you at the party?"

"I'm counting on it," he replied.



She found Rok standing on the edge of the gully, right where they'd first encountered Mittik and the other Katikoot. He looked thoughtful as he studied the sky, waiting for the other Pathfinder ship to come in.

Rooper sidled up beside him. He didn't turn to look at her when he spoke. "Hey, kid."

"I hear you're leaving."

Rok shrugged. "Moving on, I guess, like we all must." He turned to look down at her, and there was sadness in his eyes. "Although I admit, it's not going to be easy."

Rooper nodded.

"I owe you my thanks. You saved my life."

"Isn't that what we do?" said Rooper with a lopsided grin. "Help people?"

"Silandra is proud of you, Rooper. You'll make a fine Knight someday." Rooper felt her cheeks flush. That day still seemed a long way off.

They stood in companionable silence for a few moments. Then Rooper reached into her robes. "I've got something for you," she said. She held it out.

After a moment, Rok looked down. "That's..." He cleared his throat, choked with sudden emotion. "That's Maliq's lightsaber."

Rooper nodded and gestured for him to take it. He did, holding it in both hands. "I found it in the ruins as we were fleeing," she said. "I guessed... Well, I thought you might want it."

For a moment, Rok didn't say anything. Then he slipped the lightsaber hilt into a pocket of his own robes and patted Rooper gently on the shoulder. "Thank you. I shall use it, to honor him."

"I think he would have liked that," said Rooper.

From somewhere below, there was the sound of a scuffle. Rooper looked down into the gully to see a blue-skinned Twi'lek and a green-skinned Theelin peering up at them. Kam and Amos. They seemed excited.

Amos cupped his hands around his mouth when he saw her looking. "Come on! You'll miss it!" he shouted.

"Miss what?" called Rooper.

"Haven't you heard?" replied Kam. "The war is over! Eiram and E'ronoh are going to sign a peace treaty! The party's starting early!"

Rooper could hear the excitement in their voices. The war was over! Now that really was something worth celebrating. She glanced at Rok. "You coming?"

He shook his head. "No. Not right now. But you go. Have fun. You've earned it."

Rooper started to turn and then hesitated. "Will I see you again?"

Rok looked down at her and beamed. "I've no doubt about it," he said. "Your adventure is only just beginning."

"And yours?"

"There's life in me yet," he said. "Now go. Go on. Before those two comms engineers come up here and drag you there themselves."

Rooper turned and started down the path, back down the side of the gully. Perhaps Rok was right. She'd come to Aubadas looking for excitement, but she was leaving knowing that the *real* adventure wasn't so much about scary monsters and exciting battles but about the people she'd met along the way. Out on the frontier, there were *so many* people who needed her help. And in that way, her adventure really was just beginning.

Rooper smiled and looked up at the clear sky, imagining all the worlds beyond that pale horizon. She couldn't wait to see which one of them she'd visit next.



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