

Star Wars

The New Jedi Order

Ylesia

by Walter Jon Williams

#####

Nom Anor suppressed a shiver at the sight of the Shamed. One Onimi leering from the doorway. Something in him shrank at the appearance of the lank creature with his misshapen head and knowing smile.

Onimi's grin widened.

Nom Anor, distaste prickling, pushed past the Shamed One and entered. The rounded resinous walls of the chamber shone with a faint luminescence, and the air bore the metallic scent of blood. In the dim light Nom Anor made out the magnificently scarred and mutilated form of Supreme Overlord Shimrra, reclining on a dais of pulsing red hau polyps. Onimi, the Supreme One's familiar, sank into the shadows at Shimrra's feet. Nom Anor prostrated himself, all too aware of the scrutiny of Shimrra's rainbow eyes.

The Supreme Overlord's deep voice rolled out of the darkness. "You have news of the infidels?"

"I have, Supreme One."

"Stand, Executor, and enlighten me."

Nom Anor repressed a shiver of fear as he rose to his feet. This was Shimrra's private audience chamber, not the great reception hall, and Nom Anor was absolutely alone here. He would much rather be able to hide behind his superior Yoog Skell and a whole deputation of intendants.

Never think to lie to the Supreme One, Yoog Skell had warned.

Nom Anor would not. He probably could not. Fortunately he was well prepared with the latest news of the infidels' efforts against the Yuuzhan Vong.

"The enemy continue their series of raids against our territory. They dare not confront our might directly, and confine themselves to picking off isolated detachments or raiding our lines of communication. If a substantial fleet opposes them, they flee without fighting."

The Supreme Overlord's head, the sum of its features barely discernable as a face with all its scars and tattoos and slashings,

loomed forward in the shadowy light. "Have your agents been able to inform you which of our conquests are being targeted?"

Nom Anor felt a cold hand run up his spine. He had seen what happened to some of those who disappointed the great Overlord Shimrra, and he knew his answer would be a disappointment.

"Unfortunately, Supreme One, it appears that the new administration is giving the local commanders a great deal of latitude. They're choosing their own targets. Our agents on Mon Calamari have no way of knowing what objectives the individual commanders may select."

There was a moment of silence. "The new head of state, this infidel Cal Omas, permits his subordinates such freedom?"

Nom Anor bowed. "So it appears, Supreme One."

"Then he has no true concept of leadership. His rule will not trouble us much longer."

Nom Anor, who thought otherwise, chose not to dispute this analysis. "The Supreme One is wise," he said instead.

"You must redouble your efforts to infiltrate the military and provide us with their objectives."

"I shall obey, Supreme One."

"What news of the Peace Brigade?"

"The news is mixed." The collaborationist Peace Brigade government had been established on Ylesia, and had grown sufficiently large and diverse to have divided into squabbling factions, all of which competed ferociously in groveling to the Yuuzhan Vong. None of this cringing actually aided the creation of the Peace Brigade army and fleet, which, when built up to strength and trained, were to act as auxiliaries to the Yuuzhan Vong.

"Perhaps it should be admitted that infidels so disposed as to join an organization called the 'Peace Brigade' may not be temperamentally inclined toward war," Nom Anor said.

"They need a leader to exact obedience," Shimrra concluded.

"That role was to be assigned to the infidel Viqu Shesh, Supreme One," Nom Anor said.

"Another leader shall be assigned," Shimrra said. His eyes shimmered from blue to green to yellow. "We should choose someone who has nothing to do with these factions. Someone from outside, who can impose discipline."

Nom Anor agreed, but when he searched his mind for candidates, no names occurred to him. "We are having better luck with infidel

mercenaries," he said. "They have made no true submission and possess no loyalty, but they are convinced they have joined the winning side, and are content to obey so long as we pay them."

"Contemptible creatures. No wonder a galaxy that spawned such as these was given by the gods to us."

"Indeed, Supreme One."

Shimrra shifted his huge form on his dais, and one of the polyps beneath him burst under the pressure, spraying the wall with its insides. An acid reek filled the room. The other polyps at once turned on the injured creature and began to divide and devour it.

Shimrra ignored the clacking and slurping. "Speak of our visitor from Corellia."

Nam Anor bowed. "He is called Thrackan Sal-Solo."

"Solo? He is related to the twin Jeedai?"

"The two branches of the family are estranged., Supreme One."

A thoughtful rumble came from the dais. "A pity. If otherwise, we could hold him hostage and demand the twins in exchange."

"That is indeed a pity, Lord."

Shimrra waved one huge hand. "Continue, Executor."

"Sal-Solo is the leader of a large political faction on Corellia, and has been elected governor-general of the Corellian sector. He says that, with our support, he can assure that the Corellian system -- five planets -- is detached from the infidel government. Once this is done, he can assure its neutrality, including the neutrality of the Centerpoint weapon that so devastated our force at Fondor. Then, as diktat, he will sign a treaty of friendship with us."

Shimrra shifted thoughtfully on the pulsing bed. The dismembered polyp twitched and fluttered as its siblings consumed it.

"Is this infidel trustworthy, Executor?"

"Of course not, Supreme One." Nom Anor made a deprecatory gesture. "But he may be useful. He gave us the location of the Jedi academy, and that information was correct, and led to our colonization of the Yavin system. Corellia is a major industrial center, where many weapons and enemy ships are built, and its neutrality is desirable."

"What is our information on the Centerpoint weapon?"

"Sal-Solo did not come alone. He brought with him a supporter and companion, a human female called Darjeelai Swan. While I interviewed Sal-Solo, we took his companion and interrogated her. According to this

person, the Centerpoint weapon is not functional, though efforts are being made by New Republic military forces to rehabilitate it."

"So this Sal-Solo offers to trade us what he does not have."

"True. And -- also according to Darjeelai Swan -- it was Sal-Solo himself who fired the Centerpoint weapon at our fleet at Fondor."

Shimrra's hands -- giant black taloned things, each implanted from a different carnivore -- made massive fists. 'And this creature has the effrontery to bargain with me?"

"Indeed, Supreme One."

Onimi piped up,

"Fetch him to our presence, Lord,

And bring us all into concord.

I wish it known and made a rule

That I am not the only fool."

Shimrra's vast frame heaved with what might have been laughter.

"Yes," he said. "By all means. Let us meet the master of Corellia."

Nom Anor bowed in response, then hesitated. "Shall I bring his guards, as well?"

Contempt rang in Shimrra's answer. "I am capable of defending myself against anything this infidel should attempt."

"As you desire, Supreme One."

Like most humans Thrackan Sal-Solo was a thin, ill-muscled creature, with hair and beard growing white with age. His eyes widened as he entered the chamber and perceived, in the darkness, Shimrra's burning rainbow eyes. Nevertheless he summoned a degree of swagger, and approached the Supreme Overlord on the pulsing polyp bed.

"Lord Shimrra," he said, crossed his arms, and gave an all-too-brief bow.

Nom Anor reacted without thought. One sweep of his booted foot knocked the human's legs out from under him, and a precise shove dropped the startled Corellian onto his face.

Onimi giggled.

"Grovel before your lord!" Nom Anor shouted. "Grovel for your life!"

"I come in peace, Lord Shimrra!" Sal-Solo protested.

Nom Anor drove a boot into Sal-Solo's ribs. "Silence! You will wait for instruction!" He turned to Shimrra and translated the human's words.

"The infidel says that he comes in peace, Supreme One."

"That is well." Shimrra contemplated the splayed human figure for a moment. "Tell the infidel that I have considered his proposals and have decided to accept."

Nom Anor translated the overlord's words into Basic. Sal-Solo's face, pressed against the floor, displayed what might have been a trace of a smile.

"Tell the Supreme Overlord that he is wise," he said.

Nom Anor didn't bother to translate. "Your opinions are of no interest to the Supreme Overlord."

Sal-Solo licked his lips nervously. "The only way I can guarantee the success of the plan is to be given a free hand in Corellia," he said.

Nom Anor translated this.

"Tell the infidel he misunderstands," Shimrra said. "Tell him that the only way the plan will succeed is if I am given a free hand in Corellia."

Sal-Solo looked startled as this was translated, and his lips began to frame a protest, but Shimrra continued.

"Tell the infidel that we will give his associates in the Centerpoint Party all assistance necessary to gain control of the Corellian system. He will direct them to cooperate with us. Once Centerpoint Station is taken by his people and surrendered to our forces, the Centerpoint Party will rule Corellia in a state of peace with the Yuuzhan Vong."

Sal-Solo's eyes widened as he listened to Nom Anor's lengthy translation. The executor did not bother to state the fact that, in the Yuuzhan Vong language, peace was the same word as submission.

Sal-Solo would find that out in time.

Sal-Solo licked his lips again, and said, "May I stand, Executor?"

Nom Anor considered this. "Very well," he said. "But you must show complete submission to the Supreme Overlord."

Sal-Solo rose to his feet but didn't straighten, instead maintaining a sort of half bow toward Shimrra. His eyes ticked back and forth, as if he were mentally reading a speech before giving it, and then

he said, "Supreme One, I beg permission to explain the situation on Corellia in more detail."

Permission was given. Sal-Solo spoke about the complex political relations at Corellia, the Centerpoint Party's desire to cast off the New Republic. As he spoke he seemed to grow in confidence, and he paced back and forth, occasionally raising his eyes to Shimrra to see if the Supreme Overlord was following his argument.

Nom Anor translated as well as he could. Onimi, from his posture at Shimrra's feet, watched with his upper lip curled back and one misshapen fang exposed.

"I shall have to return to Corellia immediately in order to undertake the Supreme One's plan," Sal-Solo said. "And regretfully I must warn that it will be difficult to gain cooperation once it is known that the Yuuzhan Vong plan to seize the Centerpoint weapon after we evict the New Republic military."

"The answer to that difficulty is a simple one," Shimrra said through Nom Anor. "Do not tell your associates that the Yuuzhan Vong are destined to control the weapon."

Sal-Solo hesitated only a fraction of a second before he bowed. "It shall be as the Supreme Overlord desires," he said.

Shimrra gave an appreciative growl, then turned, to Nom Anor. "Is the infidel lying?" he said.

"Of course, Supreme One," Nom Anor said. "He will never voluntarily relinquish a weapon as powerful as the Centerpoint device."

"Then tell the infidel this," Shimrra said. "It will not be necessary for him to return to Corellia -- he will simply inform us which of his Centerpoint Party associates we should contact in order to deliver his orders and our assistance. Tell the infidel that I have a much more important duty for him to perform. Tell him that I have just appointed him President of Ylesia and Commander in Chief of the Peace Brigade."

Nom Anor was struck with admiration. Now that is truly inventive vengeance, he thought. Thrackan Sal-Solo had destroyed thousands of Yuuzhan Vong warriors at Fondor, and now he would be publicly linked with a Yuuzhan Vong -- allied government. His reputation would be destroyed; he would be at the mercy of those whose warriors he had killed.

Sal-Solo listened to the translation in horrified silence. His eyes ticked back and forth again, and then he said, "Please tell the Supreme Overlord that I am deeply honored by an appointment to this position of trust, but because this would make it impossible for his plans for Corellia to be realized, I regret that I must decline the appointment. Perhaps the Supreme Overlord doesn't realize that the Peace Brigade is not admired by all Corellians, and that anyone identified as Peace Brigade wouldn't be able to command the respect necessary to win power in

Corellia. It is, furthermore, absolutely necessary that I be in Corellia to coordinate the Centerpoint Party, and . . ."

Sal-Solo went on at some length, long enough so that Nom Anor began to feel toward him a thorough contempt. Sal-Solo, convinced of his powers to charm others, thought that once he could get in the same room with Shimrra, he could talk to him, one politician to another, and convince him of the rightness of his schemes. As if he could, lobby the Supreme Overlord of the Yuuzhan Vong the same way as he might lobby some miserable Senator from his home world!

"Executor," Shimrra said conversationally, as Sal-Solo continued to speak, "is there a place where one might strike a human in order to cause immobilizing pain?"

Nom Anor considered, the request. "There are organs known as 'kidneys,' Lord. One on either side of the lower back, just above the hips. A strike there causes considerable anguish, often so severe that the victim is unable to cry out. Or so I am given to understand."

"Let us find out," Shimrra said. He made a slight gesture, and Onimi rose from his place at the foot of Shimrra's dais. In the dim light Nom Anor saw, coiled in the Shamed One's hand, a baton of rank, the officers' version of the amphistaff. He was shocked to discover that Shimrra permitted his familiar to carry weapons.

But who else would be more trustworthy? Nom Anor thought. Onimi must know that if Shimrra is killed, his own death will surely follow.

Onimi stepped behind Sal-Solo and flung out his lank arm. The whiplike baton froze into its solid form, now a lean staff, and Onimi with a single efficient swing slashed the weapon into Sal-Solo's left kidney.

The human opened his mouth in a silent scream and fell like a bundle of sticks, hands scrabbling at the floor. Nom Anor stepped to the helpless man, bent, and seized him by the hair.

"Your resignation is declined, infidel," he said. "We shall see you are transported immediately to Ylesia, where you may take your place as head of the government. In the meantime, you will give us the names of your associates on Corellia, so they, too, may be given their instructions."

Sal-Solo's face was still distorted by an unvoiced shriek, and Nom Anor decided that his information regarding a human's vulnerable kidneys was true.

"Nod your head if you understand, infidel," Nom Anor said.

Sal-Solo nodded.

Nom Anor turned to Shimrra. "Does the Supreme One have any further instructions for his servants?" he asked.

"Yes," Shimrra said. "Instruct that human's guards well."

"I shall, Lord."

Nom Anor prostrated himself beside Sal-Solo's shuddering body, and then he and Onimi carried Thrackan Sal-Solo to his guards, who managed to stand the man upright.

"I believe I address you as 'President' from this point," Nom Anor said.

Sal-Solo's lips moved, but again he seemed unable to utter a sound.

"By the way, Your Excellency," Nom Anor continued, "I regret to say that your companion Darjeelai Swan died while furnishing the Yuuzhan Vong information. Is there anything you wish done with the body?"

Sal-Solo again voiced no opinion, so Nom Anor ordered the body destroyed and went about his business.

The pale form of the cruiser Ralroost floated in brilliant contrast to the green jungles of Kashyyyk below, the immaculate white paint of its hull a proof that the assault cruiser served as the flagship of a fleet admiral and was maintained to the standard that befitted his rank. Around the cruiser were grouped the elements of an entire fleet -- frigates, cruisers, Star Destroyers, tenders, hospital ships, support vessels, and flights of starfighters on patrol -- all formed and ready for their next excursion into Yuuzhan Vong-controlled space.

Jacen Solo watched the swarming fleet elements through the shuttle's forward viewport. The outlines of the warships seemed too hard somehow, too defined, a little alien, lacking the softer outlines of the organic life-forms he had grown accustomed to while a prisoner of the Yuuzhan Vong.

"Bets, anyone?" came his sister's voice. "Where's the next raid? Hutt space? Duro? Yavin?"

"I'd like to see Yavin again," Jacen said.

"Not once you see what the Vong have done to it."

He turned at the bitter tone in Jaina's voice. She stood slightly behind him, her intent gaze directed toward Ralroost. A major's insignia was pinned to the collar of her dress uniform, and a lightsaber hung from her belt.

Yavin was our childhood, Jacen thought. And the Yuuzhan Vong had taken that childhood away, and Yavin with it, and left Jaina a grown woman, hard and brittle and single-minded, with little patience for anything but leading her squadron against the enemy.

Sword of the Jedi. That's what Uncle Luke had named her at the ceremony that had raised her to the rank of Jedi Knight. A burning brand to your enemies, a brilliant fire to your friends. That's what Luke had said.

"I think it will be Hutt space myself," Jaina said. "In Hutt space the Yuuzhan Vong have had their own way for too long."

Yours is a restless life, and never shall you know peace, though you shall be blessed for the peace that you bring to others.

Luke had said that as well. Jacen felt an urge to comfort his sister, and he put an arm around her shoulders. She didn't reject the touch, but she didn't accept it either: he felt as if his arm were draped around a form made of hardened durasteel.

It didn't matter, Jacen thought, if she accepted or rejected his help. He would make his aid available whether she wanted it or not. Luke had offered him a choice of assignments, and he had chosen the one that would place him near Jaina.

When Anakin had died, and Jacen had at the same time been made a prisoner of the Yuuzhan Vong, Jaina had allowed herself to be overcome by despair. The dark side had claimed her, and though she had fought her way out of that abyss, she was still more fragile than Jacen would have liked. She had grown fey, haunted by death, by the memories of Chewbacca and Anakin and Anni Capstan and all the many thousands who had died. To his horror Jaina had told him that she didn't expect to survive the war.

It wasn't despair, she insisted; she'd beaten despair when she conquered the dark side. It was just a realistic appraisal of the odds.

Jacen had wanted to protest that if you expect death, you won't fight for life. And so he volunteered for duty with the fleet at Kashyyyk, determined that if Jaina wouldn't fight her utmost to preserve her life, he would fight that battle on her behalf.

"I think Yavin is a good bet for the next strike," another voice said. "We've had squadrons clearing Yuuzhan Vong raiders off the Hydian Way, as if they're preparing a route for us. We might soon find ourselves moving in that direction."

Corran Horn stepped to the viewport. The Rogue Squadron commander wore a battered colonel's uniform that dated from the wars against the Empire.

"Yavin," he said, "Bimmial, Dathomir . . . somewhere out there."

A polite hissing signaled a disagreement. "We forget the enemy are behind us," hissed Saba Sebatyne. "If we take Bimmisaari and Kessel the enemy will be cut in two."

"That would bring on a major battle," Corran said. "We don't have the strength to fight one."

"Yet . . ." Jaina said, and through their twin bond Jacen felt the fierce power of her calculation. She had, probably reckoned to the day when the New Republic would have the power to shift to the offensive, and could hardly wait.

The Sword of the Jedi wanted to strike to the enemy's heart.

The shuttle swept into Ralroost's docking bay and settled onto its landing gear. The droid pilot, a metal head and torso wired onto the instrument console, opened the shuttle doors. Its head spun clean around on its shoulders to face them.

"I hope you enjoyed your ride, Masters. Please watch your step as you exit."

The four Jedi stepped out of the shuttle onto Admiral Kre'fey's pristine deck. Scores of people bustled about, rode hovercarts, or worked on starfighters. Most were furred Bothans, but among them were a fair number of humans and other species of the galaxy. Jacen was suddenly conscious that he was the only person present without a military uniform.

They stepped toward the bulkhead, with its open blast doors that led forward to the ship's command center. Above the open doors was a sign: how can i hurt the vong today?

This was what Admiral Kre'fey called his Question Number One, which everyone in his command was to ask her-or himself every day.

In a few moments, Jacen thought, he'd hear an answer to that question.

Jacen craned his head as he passed through the blast doors, and on the other side he saw Kre'fey's Question Number Two. how can i help my own side grow stronger?

The answer to that question was going to be a little harder to find.

The four Jedi reported to Snayd, Admiral Kre'fey's aide, who took them to a conference room. Jacen followed the others into the room, and in the dim light he first saw the Bothan admiral Traest Kre'fey, who stood out by virtue of the unusual color of his fur, the same brilliant white as Ralroost's paint. As Jacen's eyes adjusted to the room's darkness he saw other military officers, including General Farlander, and another group of Jedi who were quartered on the cruiser. Alema Rar, Zekk, and Tahiri Veila. Jacen felt the welcoming presence of the others greeting him in the Force, and he sent his own warm reply.

"Greetings!" Kre'fey returned the salutes of the three military Jedi, and stepped forward to clasp Jacen's hand. "Welcome to Ralroost, young Jedi."

"Thank you, Admiral." Unlike other military commanders, Kre'fey had been happy to work with Jedi in the past, and had sent a specific request to Luke Skywalker for more Jedi warriors.

"I hope you'll be able to help us in this next mission," the admiral said.

"That's why we're here, sir."

"Fine! Fine." Kre'fey turned to the others. "Please be seated. We'll begin as soon as Master Durrion joins us."

Jacen seated himself in an armchair next to Tahiri Veila, the soft, smooth leather embracing his body. The little blond Jedi gave him a shy smile, her bare feet swinging clear of the carpet beneath her.

"How are you faring?" he asked.

Her wide eyes turned thoughtful as she considered the question. "I'm better," she said. "The meld is helping a lot."

The fierce, impulsive Tahiri had loved Jacen's brother Anakin, and had been present at Myrkr when Anakin had met his hero's death.

Devastated by Anakin's passing, her fiery character had come close to being snuffed out. She had withdrawn, and though she had continued to function as a Jedi, it was as if she were only going through the motions. Her impetuous personality had vanished into a subdued ominously quiet young woman.

It had been Saba Sebatyne, the reptilian leader of the all-Jedi Wild Knights Squadron, who had suggested that Tahiri should be sent to join Admiral Kre'fey at Kashyyyk. Kre'fey wanted as many Jedi as possible under his command, to form, a Jedi Force-meld in combat, all the Jedi linked together through the Force and acting as one. Saba insisted that the Force-meld would help a wounded mind heal, by drawing a Jedi in pain toward light and healing.

Apparently Saba had been right.

"I'm glad to know you're doing better," Jacen said. His own experience with the meld, on Myrkr, had been more ambiguous: if it amplified Jedi abilities, it also enlarged any disharmony that existed among them.

Tahiri gave Jacen a quick smile and patted his arm briefly. "I'm glad you're here, Jacen."

"Thank you. I wanted to be here. It seemed to be where I was needed."

He wanted to experience the meld again. He thought it could teach him a great deal.

The doors slid open, Kyp Durrone entered, and at once the mood of the room seemed to shift. Some people, Jacen thought, carried a kind of aura with them. If you met Cilghal, you knew at once you were in the presence of a compassionate healer, and Luke Skywalker radiated authority and wisdom.

When you looked at Kyp Durrone, you knew you were seeing an enormously powerful weapon. If only Jacen didn't know how erratic that weapon had been.

The dark-haired, older Jedi wore a New Republic-style uniform without any insignia, to show that he led an all-volunteer squadron that fought alongside the military forces but was not formally a part of them.

Kyp and his unit, the Dozen, had always gone their own way. They flew with Kre'fey not because they were under orders, but because they chose to.

Kyp and the admiral exchanged salutes. "Sorry I'm late, Admiral," Kyp said. He showed the datapad he carried in one hand. "I was getting the latest intelligence reports. And, uh-" He hesitated. "-some of the data were kind of interesting."

"Very good, Master Durrone." Kre'fey turned to the others. "Master Durrone has submitted a plan for action against the enemy. As it's fully in line with our operational goals as established by Admirals Sow and Ackbar, I've given it my tentative approval. I thought I would place it before my senior commanders, and you squadron commanders, to see if you might have anything to add."

Jacen looked at Tahiri, startled. She was a squadron commander? Her feet would barely reach the foot controls in a starfighter cockpit.

And then, as what he'd heard struck home, he exchanged a quick glance with his sister. Kyp Durrone's plans, in the past, had been aggressive in the extreme; at Sernpidal he'd tricked Jaina and the New Republic military into destroying a Yuuzhan Vong shipwomb, thus stranding untold numbers of Yuuzhan Vong in intergalactic space and dooming them to a cold, lingering death.

Kyp was said to have changed in the months since then, and had been appointed to the High Council that advised the Chief of State and oversaw Jedi activities. But Jacen was prepared to examine carefully any plan put forward by Kyp Durrone before he could bring himself to approve it.

Kre'fey surrendered, his place at the head, of the room and seated himself on a thronelike armchair. Kyp nodded to the admiral, then swept the others with his dark eyes. Jacen sensed Kyp's firmness of purpose, his conviction.

He also thought that it was a good idea to be wary of Kyp's conviction.

"When the Vong struck at us," Kyp said, "their way had been prepared for them. They had agents already in place, both disguised Yuuzhan Vong and traitors like Vigi Shesh. And after our first encounters with the Yuuzhan Vong, the enemy found there were tens of thousands of people who were willing to collaborate with them in attacking and enslaving their fellow galactic citizens."

He gave a shrug. "I'm not willing to speculate why the Peace Brigade and their ilk chose to work with the invaders. Maybe some are simply cowards, maybe some were bought, maybe some were given no choice. I suppose most of them are opportunists who think they're on the winning side. But I know this -- up until now there's been no real penalty for being willing to betray the New Republic and work with the invaders." The amber room lights glowed in Kyp's eyes. "I propose we inflict a penalty," he said firmly. "I propose that we strike the Peace Brigade right in the center of their power. I say we raid Ylesia, their capital, destroy the collaborationist government, and show everyone in the galaxy that there is a penalty for collaboration with the Yuuzhan Vong, and that the penalty is a dire one."

There was a moment of silence, and Jacen again turned to Jaina. You were right, he thought. Hutt space after all.

Corran Horn raised a hand. "What kind of opposition might we expect?"

Kyp pressed the datapad in his hand, and a number of surreptitiously taken holos were projected on the wall behind him. "We have no permanent intelligence presence on Ylesia," he admitted, "but Ylesia's most profitable export is glitterstim spice, and a number of New Republic agents have scouted the planet while posing as crew from the merchant ships. They report few Yuuzhan Vong warriors -- most of the Vong on the ground seem to be members of the intendant class, who help the Peace Brigade run their government.

"There haven't been any Yuuzhan Vong fleets in orbit since the original conquest, though sometimes Vong fleet elements, mostly coralskippers and their transports, transit the Ylesia system on their way to somewhere else. What we have instead is the Peace Brigade military itself -- the Yuuzhan Vong are trying to build up the Brigaders as an 'independent' government, with their own fleet. They're also using glitterstim revenues to hire mercenaries. Here are the agents' estimates of what we might be up against."

More figures flashed on the screen. "Mostly starfighters, a mixed bag," Kyp continued. "There are a dozen or so capital ships -- Intelligence thinks they were probably in dry dock in places like Gyndine and Obroa-skai when the Vong captured them. The Vong then completed the repairs with slave labor and handed the ships to their allies."

"It looks easy," Tahiri said softly in Jacen's ear. "But I don't believe En easy anymore."

Jacen nodded. He couldn't bring himself to believe in easy, either.

Kre'fey rose from his chair. "Excellent, Master Durrone!" he boomed. "I will commit fleet resources to this, including interdiction ships -- enough to assure that this so-called fleet can't escape! Fifteen squadrons of starfighters! Three squadrons of capital ships -- we'll outnumber the enemy three to one!" He held up a white-furred hand and then drew the fingers together, as if capturing an enemy fleet in his fist. "And, then we'll sit above the enemy and obliterate their capital from orbit."

Jacen felt a mental hesitation from every Jedi in the room. Even Kyp Durrone's face reflected uncertainty.

Tahiri's voice piped up instantly. "What about civilian casualties?"

Kre'fey made a deprecatory gesture. "The population of Ylesia is very scattered," he said. "The civilians were slaves of the Hutts, working in glitterstim packing plants scattered over the countryside, and now they're slaves of the Vong -- or of the Peace Brigade, it's hard to say which. The town the Peace Brigades are using as their capital used to be called Colony One, but now it's Peace City, and there are few slaves there. Most of the city's inhabitants are collaborators, and they're guilty by definition."

Kyp Durrone gave a solemn glance to his datapad. "The latest reports have slave barracks all over Colony One. They're constructing palaces for the leaders of the Peace Brigade, and a building to house their Senate." He paused. "And they were excavating one very large shelter, just in case someone tried orbital bombardment."

"Destruction would be awfully random," Tahiri said.

Kre'fey nodded, then stepped toward her and looked at her with what seemed to be great respect. "I esteem the Jedi traditions of compassion for the innocent, and of precise personal combat with an enemy," he said. "But my own people don't have your training. It would be too great a danger to send them to the planet to sort out the innocent from the guilty, and I don't want to lose good troops in a ground fight when I could accomplish the mission from orbit in safety." Kre'fey turned to Kyp. "All that shelter would require is increased firepower, and then we get all of them in one go." His eyes traveled from one Jedi to the next. "Remember who we're dealing with. They destroyed entire worlds by seeding alien life-forms from orbit. Just think what they did to Ithor. What we're doing is merciful by comparison." He shook his head sadly. "And those slaves would be dead anyway, within a year or two, just from overwork."

Jacen could see the logic in Kre'fey's argument--and he had to admire a powerful, important fleet admiral who would bother to engage in a serious debate with a fifteen-year-old -- but he could also see the reverse of Kre'fey's position. Killing civilians was something the enemy did. The fact that the civilians were slaves made their deaths even more unjust--the New Republic forces should be liberating the slaves, so that

even if the Hutts returned they would have no workers for their wretched factories . . .

"Let's capture the government instead," Jacen said, the idea occurring to him even as he spoke it aloud.

Kre'fey looked at him in surprise. "Jacen?" he said.

Jacen turned his face up to Kre'fey. "If we captured the Brigaders' government, and put them on trial and exiled them to some prison planet, wouldn't that be more of a propaganda coup than simply bombing them?" He forced a smile. "They'll all be in one shelter, right? As you say, that should make it easy."

"Jacen has a point," Kyp said, from over Kre'fey's shoulder. "If we destroy Peace City, we make an announcement and then it's forgotten. But if we put the traitors on trial, that would be on the HoloNet for weeks. Anyone thinking of switching sides would have to think twice, and any collaborators would be shaking in their boots."

"Not only that," Jacen said, "but a team could be landed in Peace City to become our permanent intelligence presence in the enemy capital, and perhaps to organize the underground there."

Kre'fey's long head turned from Jacen to Kyp and back again. He tugged at his white-furred chin in thought. "This requires a more elaborate mission -- perhaps you do not realize how much more elaborate. With the original plan there's very little that can go wrong. We transit to the system, engage, win our victory, and leave. If the enemy are too strong, we run without a fight. But with Jacen's idea we'd need transports, drop ships, ground forces. If things go wrong on the ground, we'll take a lot of casualties just getting our people away. If things go wrong above the planet, the forces on the ground may be stranded there."

"Sir," Jaina said, "I volunteer to lead the ground forces."

The Sword of the Jedi, Jacen thought, thrusting straight to the heart.

Kyp turned to Jaina, his voice hesitant. "I, uh-" For once in his life Jacen was privileged to watch Kyp Durrion embarrassed. "I really don't think that would be a good idea, Sticks."

Jaina's eyes flashed, but her voice was very controlled. "You don't have to be so protective of me, Master Durrion," she said.

Surprise rose in Jacen. He sensed history here, something between Jaina and Kyp that he hadn't known existed.

Now that's interesting.

"Ah, that's not it," Kyp said hastily. "It's just that-" He looked at his datapad. "The latest news from Ylesia indicates that you have a personal relationship with, ah, one of our potential captives." And, as

Jaina's indignation increased, Kyp turned to Jacen as his embarrassment deepened. "And Jacen, too, of course."

"Jacen, too?" Jaina demanded, outraged.

Kyp looked at the datapad again and shrugged. "The Peace Brigade just announced their new President. He's, ah, your cousin Thrackan."

Confusion swept Jaina's face. "That doesn't make any sense," Jacen said immediately.

"Sorry," Kyp said, "I know he's a member of your family, but--"

"No," Jacen said, "that's not it. I'm not going to defend Thrackan Sal-Solo because he's a distant cousin--"

"A cousin who's vicious as a slashrat and slippery as an Umgullian blob," Jaina added.

Jacen took a breath and continued, intent on making his point. "I was only going to point out," he said, "that it doesn't make any sense because Thrackan is a human chauvinist. He's always wanted to run Corellia so he could throw the other species out. He'd never make a deal if that meant he'd have to collaborate with an alien species."

Kyp looked dubious. "I suppose the story could be false," he said, "but it's all over the HoloNet, complete with pictures of your cousin taking his oath of office in front of the Peace Brigade Senate."

Jacen saw Jaina's face harden. "Right," she said, "now I've got to be with the ground party."

"Me, too, I guess," Jacen said. "It'll be ... enlightening ... to see cousin Thrackan again."

Traest Kre'fey looked from Jaina to Jacen and back again.

"I must say," he said, "that the two of you belong to the most interesting family."

Admiral Kre'fey continued his show of reluctance, but eventually he set his staff to "exploring" the possibility of a landing to capture the Peace Brigade leadership. By the time Jaina entered the shuttle that would take her party back to their quarters on the old Dreadnaught Starsider, she was already calculating her deployments for the battle -- she'd leave Tesar in command of Twin Suns Squadron and take Lowbacca onto the ground with her. She'd like Tesar with her, too, but a Jedi would have to stay with the squadron and keep it connected to the meld . . . and keep her new pilots from doing anything foolish, as well.

Before the operation she'd get her squadron as much practice as she could fit into their schedule. The military had taken half her veteran pilots to use as a cadre around, which to build new squadrons, filling

their slots with rookies, inexperienced pilots who needed all the drill Jaina could give them.

The New Republic's industries were finally on a war footing and pouring out war materiel by the millions of tons. All the personnel losses the military had suffered in the war had been replaced-but with raw recruits. What had been lost was experience. Jaina was terrified of Twin Suns Squadron being committed to a major battle before her new pilots were ready.

That's why she was a supporter of Kre'fey's current strategy of raiding the enemy only where the Yuuzhan Vong were vulnerable. His raids were staged only against weak targets, building morale and experience against an enemy guaranteed to lose.

She could only hope the Yuuzhan Vong didn't move against Kashyyyk, or Corellia or Kuat or Mon Calamari -- a place where the New Republic would have to fight. That would be a conflagration in which Twin Suns Squadron would be lucky to survive . . .

"Odd to think of Tahiri as a squadron commander."

Jacen's comment interrupted Jaina's thoughts.

"Tallin's doing all right," Jaina said.

"She's not a crack pilot, though."

"She's more experienced than most of her pilots -- almost all of them are green -- and she fought well at Borleias. Kre'fey's given her a good executive officer to help her with organization and red tape." She smiled. "Her pilots are very protective of her. They call themselves Barefoot Squadron."

Jacen smiled also. "That's good of them."

Jaina sighed. "The Barefoots' real problem is the same one most of us have -- too high a percentage of rookie pilots." She looked at Saba and Corran Horn. "Some commanders get all the luck."

Horn's mouth gave a little quirk. "Saba has the true elite force here. What I wouldn't give for a roster made up of Jedi . . ."

Saba's eyes gave a reptilian glimmer, and her tail twitched. "A pity you humans lack the advantage of hatchmates."

Horn raised an eyebrow. "Hatching Jedi. Now that's an interesting idea."

Saba hissed amusement. "I can testify that it workz."

"I hope you enjoyed your ride. Masters." The head of the droid pilot spun on its neck. "Please watch your step as you exit."

A few minutes later, after they'd separated from their companions and begun walking toward their quarters along one of Starsider's avenues, Jaina turned to Jacen.

"Kre'fey will give you a squadron," she said. "I'm surprised he hasn't asked you already."

"I don't want one."

"Why not?" Jaina asked, more snappishly than she intended. Jacen had always been on a quest for the deeper meaning of things, and that meant that occasionally he'd give something up just to find out what it meant. For a while he'd given up being a warrior, and he'd given up use of the Force, and for all intents and purposes given up being a Jedi . . . now he was giving up being a pilot?

The one thing he hadn't given up was being exasperating.

"I can pilot and fight well enough," Jacen said, "but I'm rusty on military procedure and comm protocols and tactics. I'd rather fly for a while as an ordinary pilot before I'm given responsibility over eleven other lives."

"Oh." Jaina was abashed. "You could fly with Tahiri, then. Another Jedi in her squadron would be a boon to her."

"But not this next mission," Jacen said. "Not Ylesia. I want to fly with you, since we're both going on the landing party."

Jaina nodded. "That makes sense," she said. "We'll find a slot for you."

Jacen seemed uneasy. "What do you think about Kyp Durrone's plan?" he asked. "Do you see a secret agenda here?"

"I think Kyp's past that sort of thing. It's your plan that worries me."

Jacen was taken aback. "To capture the Brigadier leadership? Why?"

"Kre'fey was right when he said there was a lot that could go wrong. We don't have enough data on Ylesia to make certain the landings will go as planned."

"But you agreed to join the ground party."

Jaina sighed. "Yes. But now I wonder if we oughtn't leave Ylesia alone until we have a more seasoned force and better intelligence."

Jacen had no answer to this, so they plodded up the corridor without speaking, stepping carefully past a droid polishing the deck. The scent of polish wafted after them. Then Jacen broke the silence.

"What's with you and Kyp Durrone? I sensed something a little odd there."

Jaina felt herself flush. "Kyp's been feeling a little . . . sentimental . . . toward me lately."

Jacen looked at her in solemn surprise. It was that solemnity, Jaina decided, that she disliked most about him.

"He's a little old for you, don't you think?" Jacen asked. Solemnly.

Jaina tried to throttle her annoyance at this line of questioning. "I'm grateful to Kyp for helping me come back from the dark side," she said. "But with me, it's gratitude. With Kyp . . ." She hesitated. "I'd rather not go into it. Anyway, it's over now."

Jacen nodded. Solemnly. Jaina came to her cabin door and put her hand on the latch.

"Good," Jacen said. "Because you've been conquering a bewildering number of hearts while I was away. First Baron Fel's son, and now the most unpredictable Jedi in the order . . ."

Supremely irritated, Jaina opened the cabin door, stepped inside, and in the darkness of the cabin was seized by a pair of arms. Pressure was applied in an expert way to her elbow joints, and she was whirled around. A familiar scent, a spicy aroma from the Unknown Regions, filled her senses, and a hungry mouth descended on hers.

A moment later -- and the length of that moment was something she would not forgive herself -- it occurred to her to resist. Her arms were securely pinned, so she summoned the Force and flung her assailant across the room. There was a crash, and items tumbled off a shelf. Jaina took a step to the door and waved on the lights.

Jagged Fel lay sprawled across her bed. He touched the back of his head gingerly.

"Couldn't you just have slapped me?" he asked.

"What are you doing here?"

"Conducting an experiment."

"A what?" Furious.

His pale green eyes rose to meet hers. "I detected a degree of ambiguity in your last few messages," he said. "I could no longer tell what your feelings toward me might be, so I thought an experiment was in order. I decided to place you in a situation that wasn't the least bit ambiguous, and see how you reacted." An insufferable smile touched the corners of his mouth. "And the experiment was a success."

"Right. You got thrown into the wall."

"But before you remembered to be outraged, there was a moment that was worth all the pain." His eyes turned to the door. "Hello there, galactic hero. Your mother told me you'd escaped."

"She mentioned she'd met you." Jacen, in the doorway, turned his owlsh expression to Jaina. "Sis, do you need rescuing?"

"Get out of here," Jaina said.

"Right." He turned back to Jagged Fel. "Nice seeing you again, Jag."

"Give my regards to the folks," Jag said., and sketched a salute near his scarred forehead. The door slid shut behind Jacen. Jag looked at Jaina and removed from his lap some of the objects that had fallen from her shelf.

"May I stand up?" he said. "Or would you just knock me down again?"

"Try it and see."

Jag elected to remain seated. Jaina folded her arms and leaned against the wall as far from Jag as the small cabin would permit.

"Last I heard you were clearing Vong off the Hydian Way," she said.

He nodded. "That's where I met your parents. It's important work. If the routes from the Rim to what's left of the Core are broken, the New Republic would be broken into - - well -- into even smaller fragments than it is now."

"Thanks for the lecture. I never would have guessed any of that in a million years." She frowned down at him. "So you left this important work in order to sneak into my cabin and conduct your experiment?"

"No, that was by way of a bonus." Jag swept a hand over his dark short-cropped hair. "We're here for routine maintenance. Since my squadron flies Chiss clawcraft that aren't in the New Republic inventory, it's difficult to find maintenance facilities geared to our requirements. Fortunately Admiral Kre'fey's Star Destroyers have all the equipment necessary to maintain Sienar Fleet Systems TIE fighter command pods, and their machine shops should be able to create anything we need for our Chiss wing pylons." He smiled up at her. "A lucky coincidence, don't you think?"

Jaina felt herself softening. "I've got six rookie pilots," she said. "And there's an operation coming up."

He gave her an inquiring look. "You weren't planning on taking them out on an exercise at this very moment, were you?"

"I --" She hesitated. "No. You've got me there. But there's a ton of administrative work, and --"

"Jaina," he said. "Please allow me to observe, one officer to another, that it is not necessary to do all the work yourself. You absolutely must learn to delegate. You have two capable, veteran lieutenants in Lowbacca and Tesar Sebatyne, and not only will it aid you if you share the work with them, it will aid their development as officers."

Jaina permitted herself a thin smile. "So it's to the benefit of my officers and pilots to spend the evening in my cabin alone with you?"

He nodded. "Precisely."

"Do you play sabacc?"

Jag was surprised. "Yes. Of course."

"Let's have a game, then. There's a very nice sabacc table in the wardroom."

He looked at her mutely. She broadened her smile and said, "I played your little game, here in the darkened cabin. Now you can play mine."

Jag sighed heavily, then rose and stood by the door. As she walked past him to open the door, he clasped his hands behind his back.

"I should point out," he said, "that if you chose to kiss me at this moment, I would be absolutely powerless to prevent you."

She regarded him from close range, then pressed her lips to his, allowed them to linger warmly for the space of three heartbeats. After which she opened the door and led him to the wardroom, where she skinned him at the sabacc table, leaving him with barely enough credits to buy a glass of juri juice.

Her father, Jaina thought, would have been proud.

Jag contemplated the ruin of his fortunes with a slight frown. "It seems I've paid heavily for that stolen kiss," he said.

"Yes. But you've also paid in advance for others."

Jag raised his scarred eyebrow. "That's a good thing to know. When might I collect?"

"As soon as we can find a suitably private place."

"Ah." He seemed cheered. "Would it be precipitate to suggest that we go immediately?"

"Not at all." She rose from the table. "Just one thing."

He gained his feet and straightened his impossibly neat black uniform. "What's that?"

"I think you're right about my not doing all the work. I intend to delegate a fair share to you."

Jag nodded. "Very good, Major."

"I hope this will contribute to your development as an officer."

"Oh." He followed her out of the wardroom. "I'm sure that it will."

Thrackan Sal-Solo looked out his office viewport at the squalid mess that was Peace City -- half-completed construction covered with scaffolding, muck-filled holes in the ground, slave barracks boiling with alien life -- and he thought, And all this is mine to command . . .

If, of course, he could avoid being murdered by one of his loyal subjects. Which was the topic of the present discussion.

He turned to the black-haired woman who sat before his desk and contemplated the suitcase he'd opened on the desktop. The suitcase that contained a kilogram of glitterstim.

"You get one of these every week," he said.

She looked at him with cobalt-blue predator's eyes and flashed her prominent white teeth. "And how many people do I have to kill to earn it?"

"You don't have to kill anyone. What you have to do is keep me alive."

"Ah. A challenge." Dagga Marl steepled her fingertips and looked thoughtful. Then she shrugged. "All right. It'll be more interesting work than all the boring assassinations the Senate has been handing me."

"If I ask you to kill anyone," Thrackan said, "I'll pay you extra."

"Good to know," Dagga said as she closed the case and stowed it neatly under her chair.

He stepped from the viewport to his desk, then grimaced at the stitch in his left side. He massaged the painful area, feeling under his thumb the scar from Onimi's nasty little baton. Thrackan swore that if he ever caught up with Onimi, that malignant lop-headed little dwarf was going to lose a lot more than a kidney.

The first thing he'd done on Ylesia was be sworn in as President and Commander in Chief of the Peace Brigade.

The second thing he'd done on Ylesia was to meet with the chiefs of the Peace Brigade, an experience that left him undecided whether to laugh, cry, or run in screaming terror.

The Peace Brigade had originally owed its allegiance to something called the Alliance of Twelve. Maybe there had been twelve of them at one point, but there were around sixty of them now, and they called themselves a Senate. One horrified look had shown Thrackan what they were: thieves, renegades, criminals, slavers, murderers, and alien scum. The people who had betrayed their galaxy to the terror that was the Yuuzhan Vong -- and it wasn't as if they'd done it out of conviction in the rightness of their cause. They made the Hutts who had built the original colony look like a congregation of saints.

The Hutts were dead: the Yuuzhan Vong had made a clean sweep of the whole caste, then installed the Peace Brigade in their place without altering any of the Hutts' other arrangements. The flayed skin of the Hutt chief was still on display in front of the Palace of Peace, where the Senate met, just in case anyone was tempted, to grow nostalgic about the old order.

Most of the population of the planet were slaves, and most of these, oddly enough, were volunteers -- religious ecstasies who worked themselves to death in the glitterstim factories in exchange for a daily blast of bliss directed at them by the Hutts' telepathic t'landa Til henchmen. The t'landa Til were still very much a part of the picture, having exchanged one overlordship for another.

Thrackan didn't like slavery -- at least for humans -- but he supposed there was no alternative under the circumstances. The Yuuzhan Vong wouldn't allow the use of droids, so someone had to dig the ditches, build the grand new buildings of Peace City's town center, and process the addictive glitterstim that made up the entirety of Ylesia's gross planetary product.

The son of Tiion Gama Sal had been raised on an estate, as a gentleman, with an army of droid servants. In the place of droids, he needed someone to see to his comforts.

Just as he needed someone to keep from him being murdered by the Senate and their cronies. They'd been madly conspiring and committing quiet violence against one another over control of the glitterstim operation, but now they'd united against their new President.

Thrackan decided that he needed to find the most cold-blooded, ruthless, efficient killer among them, and win that person to his side. And one look at Dagga Marl had convinced him that she was exactly what he was looking for.

She was completely mercenary and completely without morals, something Thrackan thought was to his advantage. She made her living as a bounty hunter and an assassin. She'd killed people for the Peace Brigade, and she'd killed Peace Brigade on behalf of other Peace Brigade. She

seemed perfectly willing to kill Peace Brigade on behalf of Thrackan, and that was all he asked.

The most important thing about Dagga was that she was smart enough to know when she was well off. Others might offer her a large sum to kill Thrackan, but they weren't going to offer her a kilo of spice per week.

The spice was the only thing on Ylesia that passed for money. The Yuuzhan Vong intendants in charge of running his supposed economy hadn't even seen a need for money. Their chief economic principle was that those who obeyed orders and did their work without question would be rewarded with shelter and food. It hadn't occurred to them that a person might want a little more than organic glop to eat, a membranous cavern to live in, and an overgrown fungus to sit on. A person might prefer to live in marble halls enjoying a bath with golden fixtures, and the latest-model atmosphere craft.

Dagga looked up at him. "Is there anything you'd like me to do right now?"

Thrackan sat, fingers stroking the smooth polished surface of his desk. "Evaluate security here in my office, and in my residence. If you can't fix whatever's wrong, tell me and I'll fix it."

She flipped him a casual salute. "Right, Chief."

"And if you can recommend any reliable people to assist you . . ."

She tilted her head in thought. "I'll think about it. Reliability isn't one of the more common Peace Brigade virtues."

"Did I say Peace Brigade?"

Dagga seemed startled by the vehemence of Thrackan's words.

"I said reliable. I'll import someone if he's good enough. Though," he admitted, "I prefer them human."

A white smile flashed across Dagga's features. "I'll put together a little list," she said.

There was a knock on the door. Dagga made a slight adjustment to her clothing to enhance her homicidal capabilities, and Thrackan said, "Who is it?"

It was his chief of communications, an Etti named Mdimu. "Beg pardon, sir," he said, "but the advance party for the joint maneuvers has entered the system."

"When are they scheduled to arrive?" Thrackan asked.

"They'll be landing at the spaceport in approximately two hours."

"Very good. Send the quednak to the spaceport now, and I'll follow in my landspeeder at the appropriate time."

"Ah --" Mdimu hesitated. "Sir? Your Excellency?"

"Yes?"

"The Yuuzhan Vong -- they don't like machinery, sir. If you arrive at the spaceport in a landspeeder they may consider it an insult."

Thrackan sighed, then explained slowly and simply so that even an alien like Mdimu could understand. "I'll arrive before the Vong and then send the landspeeder back to its docking bay. I will return with the Vong on the riding beasts. But I will not ride those stupid six-legged flatulent herbivorous lumbering ninnies to the spaceport when I don't have to. Understand?"

Mdimu hesitated, then nodded. "Yes, sir."

"And please tell the construction gangs to keep their machinery out of sight while the Vong are in town."

"Yes. Of course, Your Excellency."

Mdimu left the room. Dagga Marl and Thrackan exchanged looks.

"Of this I build a nation," he said.

The Yuuzhan Vong frigate analog, which looked like a large brownish green lump of vomit, arrived escorted by two squadrons of coralskippers, which looked like rather uninteresting rocks. Thrackan's official bodyguards -- whom he would not have trusted to guard his body if it were the last on Ylesia, and who were most likely in the pay of various factions of the Senate anyway -- shuffled into line and presented their amphistaffs.

Amphistaffs. One of the Yuuzhan Vong's most annoying and dangerous exports. Thrackan gave his official bodyguards a wide berth, as experience had shown they weren't very good at controlling the weapon their Yuuzhan Vong sponsors had so graciously given them. The previous week he'd lost two guards, bitten during practice by their own weapons' poisonous heads.

Followed by his real bodyguard, Dagga Marl, Thrackan marched to the frigate analog and waited. Eventually a part of the hull withdrew somehow, and an object like a giant, wart-encrusted tongue flopped down to touch the landing field. Down this ramp came a double file of Yuuzhan Vong armored warriors with amphistaffs -- which these warriors looked as if they knew how to use. Once formed on the pavement, they were followed by Supreme Commander Maal Lah, architect of the Yuuzhan Vong capture of Coruscant.

Maal Lah's appearance was presentable, for a Yuuzhan Vong. Unlike Nom Anor, with his brand-new plaeryin bol implant -- this eye replacement

even larger and nastier than the one he had lost -- or Shimrra, who was so scarred and mutilated that his face looked as if it had gone through a threshing machine, Maal Lah's regular features were still recognizable as features. He'd restrained the impulse to carve himself up in honor of his vicious gods, and for the most part settled for red and blue tattoos. Thrackan could actually look at him without wanting to lose his lunch. If he let his eyes go slightly out of focus, the tattoos formed an abstract pattern that was almost pleasing.

He made a note to try to keep his eyes slightly out of focus for the rest of the day.

"Greetings, Commander," he said.. "Welcome to Ylesia."

Maal Lah had fortunately brought a translator along, a member of the intendant caste who had cut off an ear and replaced it with a glistening, semitranslucent sluglike creature the function of which Thrackan preferred not to contemplate.

"Salutations, President Sal-Solo," Maal Lah said through his translator. "I come to remind you of your submission and to bring your fleet to its obedience."

"Er -- quite," Thrackan said. A fine way with diplomacy these Vong have. "The intendants on Ylesia have . . . grown . . . your damutek. Would you care to see it?"

"First I will inspect your guard."

Thrackan stayed on the far side of Maal Lah as the warrior inspected the Presidential Guard, hoping that if Maal Lah were accidentally sprayed with poison, Thrackan himself might have a running head start before Yuuzhan Vong warriors began to massacre everyone present. Fortunately no fatalities occurred.

"A shabby lot of useless wretches, totally without spirit or discipline," Maal Lah commented as he walked with Thrackan to the riding beasts.

"I agree, Commander," Thrackan said.

"Discipline and order should be beaten into them. What I wouldn't give to see them in the hands of the great Czulkang Lah."

Now that might be fun, Thrackan thought, though without knowing who or what Czulkang Lah might be. Thrackan always enjoyed a good thrashing, provided he wasn't the one on the receiving end.

"I'll dismiss their commander," he said. Their commander was a Duros, and therefore expendable. He'd replace the Duros with a human, provided he could find one who might conceivably be loyal.

"I trust the Peace Brigade fleet is ready?" Maal Lah said.

"Admiral Capo assures me that they are fully trained and. alert, and eager to serve alongside their gallant allies, the Yuuzhan Vong." Actually Thrackan had no great hope for the motley force that was the Peace Brigade fleet. In fact he rather hoped that Maal Lah would be so disgusted as to execute the Rodian Admiral Capo, thus providing another vacancy Thrackan could fill with a human.

Again, if he could find one to trust. Here that always seemed to be the problem.

Reflecting that he was a little old for this sort of thing, Thrackan followed Maal Lah up the vine ladder to the purple-green resinous tower atop the six-legged form of a Yuuzhan Vong riding beast. The quednak's moss-covered scales reeked of something that needed flushing down the nearest sewer. At the urging of its intendant handler, the beast lurched to its feet and set off for Peace City at a slow walk. Thrackan hoped the motion wouldn't make him ill.

A pair of swoop analogs -- open-cockpit fliers with a crew of two and sped along by dovin basals -- rose to take position on either side of the riding beast. Maal Lah wasn't trusting his life entirely to guards who moved on foot.

Thrackan cast a glance at the double file of Yuuzhan Vong warriors trotting along in the big reptoid's wake. By the time they traveled the twenty-two kilometers to Peace City, perhaps even the fabled Yuuzhan Vong would be tired of the pace.

"Now that we have more of your people on the planet," Thrackan ventured, "I wonder if we might better provide for their spiritual needs."

Maal Lah's answer was dry. "How would you do that, Excellency?"

"There are no temples to your gods here. Perhaps we could provide one for your people."

"That is a generous thought, Excellency. Of course, it is we who would have to provide the template for the structure, and, of course, the priest."

"We could donate the ground, at least."

"So You could." Maal Lah considered for a moment. "As with many of my clan, I have always been a devotee of Yun-Yammka, the Slayer. It would be an act of devotion to foster his worship on a new world. Of course, the worship requires sacrifice . . ."

"Plenty of slaves for that purpose," Thrackan said, as heartily as he

Maal Lah bowed his head. "Very good. So long as you are willing to donate one from time to time."

Thrackan waved a hand dismissively. "Anything we can do for our brothers." At least he could make sure none of the victims were human. "I have a piece of land already in mind," he added.

He certainly did. The land in question was adjacent to the Altar of Promises, where the t'landa Til administered to the slaves their daily dose of telepathic euphoria. The t'landa Til were said to have powers over all humanoid species, and Thrackan was inclined to wonder if that

The sight of the Yuuzhan Vong rolling about in ecstatic bliss would certainly be a pleasing one. The sight would be even more pleasing if he could get the mighty warriors addicted to their daily blast of cosmic

It seemed worth sacrificing a few aliens to have a whole regiment of Yuuzhan Vong addicts willing to do anything Thrackan suggested in return for a daily ecstatic thunderbolt from their god.

Thrackan chuckled to himself. And Shimrra thought he was an expert on the taking of vengeance.

So agreeable did Thrackan find this vision that he almost missed Maal Lah's next statement.

"You should prepare yourself and the Senate for a special visitor in the next few days."

It took Thrackan a few seconds to realize the import of this. All his pleasing fantasies vanished like vapor before the wind.

"Shimrra's coming here?" he gasped.

Maal Lah snarled at him. "The Supreme Overlord" he corrected savagely, "will remain in his new capital until the gods tell him otherwise. No, it's another who will soon be paying you an official visit. With this one you will sign a treaty of peace, mutual aid, and nonaggression." A smile snarled its way across the warrior's face. "Prepare yourself to meet the Chief of State of the New Republic."

The streaming stars flashed and nailed themselves to the heavens, and the Ylesia system leapt into life on Jacen's displays. Alarms bleeped at the realization that the ships in orbit around the planet were enemy. Jacen closed up on Jaina, the formation leader, his X-wing tucked in neatly behind his sister's fighter.

"Twin Suns Squadron, check in!" Jaina's voice on the comm.

"Twin Two," said Jaina's Neimoidian wingmate, Vale, "in realspace with all systems normative."

"Twin Three," another pilot said. "In realspace. All systems normative."

The pilots all checked in, all the way to Jacen, who had been added to Jaina's flight as Twin Thirteen. He made his report, the Force filling

his mind, and through it he felt the Jedi: fierce, loyal Lowbacca and the exhilarated Tesar near at hand; Corran Horn distracted by his own pilots' checklist; the cold-blooded exhilaration of Saba Sebatyne and her Wild Knights. And, more distantly, with other elements of the fleet, the concentration of Tahiri, the melancholy determination of

Alema Rar, the confidence of Zekk, and. the sheer power of Kyp Durrone, a power very much akin to rage.

And, most clearly of all, Jacen felt the presence of Jaina, her mind ablaze with machinelike calculation.

The Jedi meld filled Jacen's mind, a psychic feedback mechanism between himself and the other Jedi. He was impressed by the meld's power, and by how it had grown since he'd last experienced it on Myrkr. There, it had been a mixed blessing, but then the Jedi war party at Myrkr had been divided among themselves. Here, they were united in a single purpose.

Jacen's sensitivity to the Force had grown within the meld, and he was aware of the other lives around him, the non-Jedi pilots of Twin Suns Squadron, and others nearby, particularly the disciplined minds of Jagged Fel's Chiss squadron, which flew to port and slightly behind them. Jag had volunteered his squadron for this fight, even though they weren't technically a part of Kre'fey's command. Once Kre'fey had been reminded that Jag's veterans had originally been a part of Twin Suns Squadron before being split off, he'd accepted Jag's offer.

"Listen up, people." Jaina's voice came again on the comm. "I know we outnumber the enemy, but that doesn't make the ordnance they'll shoot at us any less real. This isn't a drill, and you can get killed if you're not careful. I want everyone to stick with their wingmate and keep an eye open for an enemy maneuvering to get behind you. Streak," she said to Lowbacca, "I want your flight to our right, a couple of clicks behind. Tesar, you're flying above and behind."

Above was a meaningless term in space, but it was easier than saying "ninety degrees from my and Lowbacca's axis," and Tesar knew what she meant, anyway.

"Copy," Tesar said, and Lowbacca gave an answering roar.

"Remember that Jag Fel's to our left. Understood?"

There was a chorus of acknowledgments.

"Right then," Jaina said. "Let's teach these traitors a thing or two."

Jacen was impressed.. He hadn't realized Jaina had. become such an effective leader. Her performance was even more impressive because, through the Jedi meld, he could also sense her scanning her displays while she was talking, minding her comm channels, and worrying about her

inexperienced pilots while trying to work out tactics that would keep them from killing themselves.

Jacen kept his fighter tucked into formation behind Jaina's, an extra wingmate for Twin Leader. His eyes scanned the displays and saw that Kre'fey's entire armada had by now entered realspace, three task forces grouped as close to Ylesia as the planet's mass shadow would permit. Each of the three groups was the equal of the entire Peace Brigade fleet, and they had the enemy force trapped between them. The only hope for the enemy commander was to leave orbit instantly and attack one of Kre'fey's task forces, hoping to smash through it before the others arrived to overwhelm him.

Moments ticked by, and the enemy commander made no move. His only real hope was slipping through his fingers.

And then the enemy fleet moved, choosing as its target Twin Suns Squadron, and the task force behind it.

The Chief of State of the New Republic was in the middle of his address to the Ylesian Senate when one of Thrackan's aides -- the human one, fortunately -- came scuttling down the aisle of the Senate building and began to whisper in Thrackan's ear. Maal Lah, who was watching the speech from another seat nearby, suddenly became very preoccupied with talking into one of the villips he wore on the shoulders of his armor.

Thrackan listened to the aide's agitated whisper, then nodded and rose. "I regret the necessity of interrupting," he began, and saw the Senate's malevolent gaze immediately turn in his direction. "A fleet from the New Republic has appeared in Ylesian space." He watched the august Senatorial heads turn to one another in growing panic as a buzzing filled the hall. Thrackan turned to the Chief of State of the New Republic.

"You didn't tell anyone you were coming, did you?" he asked.

If it weren't a dire emergency in which he might be killed, Thrackan might almost enjoy this.

"These are rebels!" the New Republic Chief of State proclaimed. "Rebels against rightful authority! They wouldn't dare fire on their leader!"

"Perhaps," Thrackan suggested, "you'd care to get on the comm and order them to stop."

The Chief of State hesitated, then came down from the podium. "This is the sort of misunderstanding that can only be cleared up later. Perhaps we should, umm, seek shelter first."

"An excellent idea," Thrackan said, and turned again to the Senate. "I suggest that the honorable members proceed to the shelter." As a few bolted at top speed for the exit, he added, "In an orderly manner!" -- as if it would do any good. His words only seemed to accelerate their

flight, desks overturning as the founders of the noble Ylesian Republic jammed shoulder to shoulder in the doors.

Thrackan turned to Maal Lah and suppressed a shrug. These people hadn't betrayed their own galaxy out of an excess of courage, and he couldn't say he was surprised by their behavior.

The Yuuzhan Vong commander was barking into his little shoulder villip. His translator sidled up to Thrackan.

"Commander Lah is ordering the forces that were already in transit for the joint maneuvers to come at once."

"Very good. Will the commander be going to his command ship?"

"The distance to the spaceport is too great."

Especially if you're traveling at the pace of a fat ugly Hutt-sized reptoid, Thrackan thought.

"I can offer the commander room in our shelter," Thrackan said.

"The commander has no need of the shelter," the translator said. "He will instead take charge of the troops here in the capital."

"Excellent! I'm sure we're in good hands."

Maal Lah finished his one-sided conversation and stalked toward Thrackan, his fingers curled around his baton of rank. "I will need to take command of your Presidential Guard and your paramilitaries."

"Of course," Thrackan said. "Be my guest." He feigned thought, and added, "It's a pity the Yuuzhan Vong gods are so opposed to technology. If they weren't, we'd have installed planetary shields and be perfectly safe."

Maal Lah gave him a murderous glare, and for a moment Thrackan's kidney tingled at the thought that he'd gone too far.

"Will you lead your forces into battle, Excellency?" Lah demanded. "Or will you seek shelter with the others?"

Thrackan raised his hands. "I regret that I have no warrior training, Commander. I'll leave all that to the professionals." He turned to Dagga, who had been waiting politely behind him all this time. "Come, Marl."

He left the room at a rapid but dignified pace, Dagga falling into step by his side and half a pace back. "Will you be going to the shelter, sir?" she asked.

Thrackan gave her a sidelong smile. "I know better than to hide in a hole with no back door," he said.

Her cold grin answered his own. "Very good, sir," she said.

"I'm going to the docking bay in back of the Presidential palace and take my landspeeder on the fastest route out of town."

Dagga's smile broadened. "Yes, sir."

"Can you drive fast, Marl?"

She nodded. "I can, sir. Very fast."

"Why don't you drive, then? While I make use of the razor I've stored in the backseat, and change into the fresh clothes I stored there."

"Shadow bomb away." Jaina's voice came over Jacen's headphones. "Altering course, thirty degrees."

"Copy that, Twin Leader," Jacen said.

Jacen remained tucked in behind Jaina's X-wing as the fighter lifted out of the way of the enemy fleet, which was set to come rampaging through this part of space in about ten seconds, and he used the Force to help Jaina push the shadow bomb on ahead, toward its target, a Republic-class cruiser that was spearheading the Peace Brigade escape attempt.

"Enemy fighters ahead. Accelerating . . ."

Jacen had already felt the enemy pilots in the Force. He opened fire at where he knew they would be, and was rewarded with a flash that meant an enemy pilot hadn't powered his or her shields in time. Jacen shifted to another target and fired, another deflection shot, but the bolts slammed into shields and flashed away. The target formation burst apart like a firework, each two-fighter element weaving away from Twin Suns' attack.

At that moment Jaina's shadow bomb hit the enemy cruiser, and its bow blossomed in a blaze of fire.

Jacen was following Jaina after the corkscrewing enemy fighters -- E-wings -- and the Jedi meld rose in his perceptions. He felt Corran Horn making a slashing run at an enemy frigate, the Wild Knights methodically destroying a flight of B-wing's but the knowledge wasn't intrusive -- it didn't demand attention, or take away from his piloting, it was just there, in the back of his mind.

"Stay close, Vale," Jacen told Jaina's wandering wingmate.

"Oh! Sorry!"

"No chatter on this channel," Jaina admonished. "I'm breaking right. . . now!"

Vale wandered even farther from her assigned position during this maneuver, and through the Force Jacen sensed the intense concentration of an E-wing pilot trying to get her into his sights. Jacen deliberately wove out of his assigned place in an S-curve, and as he did so he was aware through the Force-meld that Jaina knew exactly what he was doing, and why.

"Turning left thirty degrees," Jaina said, which swung her fighter and Vale's into what the enemy pilot certainly thought was a perfect setup . . .

Except that it led the enemy right into Jacen's sights. He touched off a full quad burst of laserfire and saw the E-wing's shields collapse under the concentrated barrage. Jacen fired again, and the E-wing disintegrated.

Jacen's heart gave a leap as the E-wing's wingmate chanced a deflection shot and scored a triple laser burst on Jacen's shields -- which held -- and then Jacen wove away, the E-wing in pursuit, until Jaina's own fighter swirled through a graceful, unhurried series of arcs, and she and Vale blew the Brigader and his craft to atoms. As she overtook Jacen he could see Jaina's grim satisfaction through the cockpit, and she wagged her wings at him as he slid once more into position.

Then he sensed her mood shift, and he knew she was receiving orders on the command channel.

"Twin Suns," she said. "Regroup. Re-form on me. We're going to cover the landing party."

Jacen knew she was reluctant to leave the combat once it had begun, but he also knew that the fight was going well for the New Republic. The forces were evenly matched in numbers, but the Peace Brigade personnel simply weren't up to the mark. Some mercenary pilots in starfighters were giving a good account of themselves, but the capital ships weren't fighting very well, and some of them were shedding escape pods even though they hadn't taken critical damage. A pair of enemy starfighter squadrons was fleeing the battle as fast as they could, with A-wings in pursuit. Kre'fey's two additional task forces would soon be on the scene, decisively tilting the odds even farther toward the New Republic, and at that point Jacen wouldn't be surprised to see some of the Peace Brigade ships surrender.

It was good to feel the enemy in the Force again, Jacen thought. The Yuuzhan Vong were an emptiness in the Force, a black hole into which the light of the Force disappeared. These Peace Brigaders at least registered as a part of the living universe, and because he could feel them in the Force, Jacen could anticipate their actions. Compared to the Yuuzhan Vong, these people were easy.

Easy to destroy. He tasted a whiff of sadness at the necessity -- these targets shouldn't be targets; they should be fighting on behalf of the galaxy against the invaders. Instead they had chosen to betray their

own, and Kyp Durrone and Traest Kre'fey were determined they pay the penalty.

Twin Suns Squadron re-formed, and Jag Fel's Chiss squadron fell into place on their flank. The blue-and-white sphere of Ylesia grew closer. Jacen saw the landing force separating itself from the closest of Kre'fey's task forces.

"We're going to take out the spaceport," Jaina said. And also to draw fire, Jacen knew, so they could learn where the defenses were and knock them out before the ground forces, in their lightly armored landing craft, attempted their assault.

"Configure your foils for atmosphere," Jaina said.

The X-wings took on an I-shape as the foils drew together to become wings. The blue planet rolled beneath them ... and then they saw a patch of green, one of the small continents coming up, and Jaina tipped her fighter toward it, with Jacen and the others after.

Jacen's craft rocked to the buffets of the atmosphere. Flame licked at his forward shields. If he looked over his shoulder he could see sonic shock waves rolling over his foils like spiderwebs. The green land drew closer.

Then new symbols flashed onto his displays, and his own voice echoed Jaina's cry. "Skips! Coralskippers, dead ahead!"

The enemy fighters were rising from the spaceport, two squadrons' worth, their dovin basals yanking them clear of the planet's gravity. And in their wake came a much larger target, a frigate analog. The Yuuzhan Vong were clearly aiming for the landing force, which was swinging above the planet in high orbit, guarded by a pair of frigates and the Screammers, a rookie squadron of X-wings under a twenty-three-year-old captain. The escort could probably handle the attackers -- eventually -- but in the meantime the Yuuzhan Vong could cut up the landing force badly.

"Accelerating! Maximum thrust!" Jaina called, and Twin Suns poured power to their engines. They were in a good position to bounce the enemy as the Yuuzhan Vong clawed their way up through the atmosphere. Jacen looked at his displays and calculated angles, trajectories ...

"I've got a shadow bomb, Twin Leader," he said. "Let me take a run at the frigate."

Through the Jedi meld, he felt Jaina duplicating his own calculation. "Twin Thirteen," she decided, "take your shot."

Jacen dipped his nose and aimed for the patch of air he thought the frigate would pass through in another twenty standard seconds or so. The moment of release was difficult to judge -- he couldn't find the frigate analog in the Force, and Jacen would have to make a guess based on how it appeared on his displays.

Suddenly he felt the power of the Force swell in his body, as if he'd just filled his lungs with pure universal power. Calculations stormed through his mind, faster than he'd thought possible. And distantly, he found he could detect the enemy ship -- not as a presence in the Force, but as an absence, a cold emptiness in the universe of life.

There were Jedi nearby that hadn't yet engaged the enemy -- Tallin, Kyp Durrón, Zekk, and Alema Rar. Since they hadn't been distracted by combat, they had just loaned him their power through the Jedi meld, sending him strength and aiding his calculation.

He felt the cold metal of the bomb-release mechanism in his fist, and he pulled it. "Shadow bomb away." And then, as he pulled back the stick and fed power to the engines, he fired a pair of concussion missiles.

The shadow bomb was a missile without propellant, packed instead from head to tail with explosive, and would either drift toward its target or be pushed with a little help from the Force. The lack of a propellant flare made the bomb hard for the Yuuzhan Vong to detect, and the extra explosive gave it tremendous punch when it hit.

The two concussion missiles were intended as a distraction for the Yuuzhan Vong -- if the enemy were paying attention to the two missiles, coming in on a different trajectory, then they'd be less likely to see the shadow bomb dropping toward them.

Thanks, Jacen sent into the meld. And then he felt the others fade from his perceptions as first Kyp, then the others, entered combat.

The three parts of Kre'fey's fleet had. just united, Jacen thought, with the Peace Brigade forces trapped between them. The Brigaders were about to lose their whole fleet.

The nose of Jacen's X-wing pointed higher, toward the distant glowing exhaust ports of Jaina's squadron. This put the frigate below in a perfect position to shoot at him, the fire heading practically up his tail. He saw the plasma cannon projectiles and missiles coming, and he jinked wildly for a few seconds, until his shadow bomb hit the Yuuzhan Vong ship and blew its nose off. Along with the nose went the dovin basals that were being used for defense, so even the two concussion missiles slammed home.

What doomed the Yuuzhan Vong frigate wasn't the damage, but the aerodynamics. If the frigate had been in the vacuum of space it probably would have survived, but its fate was sealed by Ylesia's atmosphere. The frigate began to weave through the air like an out-of-control skyrocket as the wind seized hold of its torn bow section. Parts tore off and flew away, spinning downward; and then the frigate lost control completely and began a death spiral toward the planet below.

Jacen's attention was already on the combat above him. Jaina and Jag Fel had bounced the coralskipper and had killed at least three of them, their wrecked hulls plunging downward in the atmosphere with tails of flame, but now the battle had become a melee. Again aerodynamics worked to the advantage of the New Republic: a coralskipper had all the aerodynamics of a brick, but the X-wings, with their foils closed, made decent, maneuverable atmosphere craft. Still, Jacen sensed Jaina's tension through the Jedi meld: half Twin Suns Squadron were still rookies, easy meat for an experienced enemy; and the Yuuzhan Vong were flying like veterans.

An X-wing trailing fire plunged past Jacen as he climbed, and he saw a flash as the pilot ejected. Fragments of burning yorik coral crashed onto Jacen's shields as he climbed that meant another coralskipper accounted for.

He would be at too much of a disadvantage if he climbed straight into the tight, so he avoided the battle and got above the furball before rolling his craft into a dive. He felt control surfaces biting air as the X-wing accelerated, and found a target ahead, a coralskipper maneuvering onto the tail of an X-wing that seemed to be wandering around randomly, like a dewback looking for its herd -- doubtless one of Jaina's rookies. Jacen chanced the deflection shot, quadded his lasers, and opened fire, and only when he saw the coralskipper explode behind him did the rookie panic, flinging his fighter all over the sky to avoid a menace that Jacen had already destroyed.

Jacen flew on, saw a coralskipper being chased by a Chiss clawcraft, the Yuuzhan Vong's dovin basal snatching the pursuer's bolts from the air as he flew. It was another chancy deflection shot, but Jacen carefully pulled the fighter after the enemy, a smooth curve . . . then found that he was falling short, the enemy dancing just ahead of his shots. Frustration sang in his nerves, and he was on the verge of ordering his astromech to check his controls when he realized it was all the fault of the air -- the atmosphere had slowed the fighter too much. He triggered a concussion missile then, and was rewarded by seeing it slam home on the Yuuzhan Vong's flank. The tough coralskipper kept on flying, but its dovin basal was distracted and the Chiss pilot's next shot flamed it.

Jacen's heart leapt as he realized he was in danger, and he jerked his stick to the right as shots flared past his canopy. He'd spent too long lining up his last target and an enemy had jumped him. He corkscrewed through the sprawl of swirling fighter craft and managed to lose his pursuer, and when he stopped his dodging there was an enemy right in front of him, flying right into his sights while lining up on a clawcraft. Jacen blew him apart with a quad laser burst.

He was through the furball now, and pulled back the stick to climb and repeat his maneuver. The others had. slowed down to maneuver, and were easy targets for anyone diving in from above. He doubted that he could manage three hits on every pass, but there was no reason not to try.

Jacen made a lazy loop while he scanned the fight through his cockpit, then he half rolled upright and fed power to the engines. A sudden cry came over the comm. "I've just lost rear shields! Anyone! This is Twin Two -- I've just lost an engine! Help!"

Twin Two was Vale, Jaina's rookie wingmate -- probably lost, and without cover. He felt Jaina's rising tension through the Force-meld as she searched for Twin Two, and he scanned the mass of weaving fighters as he approached, seeing one madly dancing X-wing with a tail of flame, a pair of skips weaving after her.

"Break left, Twin Two," he called. "I've got you."

"Breaking left!" Panic and relief warred in Vale's reply.

Jacen hit the atmosphere brakes and the X-wing slowed as if it had hit a lake of mercury, and then he crabbed his jouncing fighter around into a shot on the lead coralskipper. His laser bolts blew the canopy away and sent the craft in an end-over-end spin for the planet below. The second enemy dodged his lasers, and Jacen yanked his fighter into an even tighter turn, the atmosphere jolting the craft, dropping its speed. The enemy swallowed his concussion missile into the singularity of its dovin basal and caught the laser bolts as well, but Jacen saw Vale dart away into safety while her pursuer was preoccupied. And then enemy rounds were hammering on Jacen's shields, and he released the atmosphere brakes and tried to roll away, punching the throttle.

He'd, slowed down too much, losing speed and maneuverability and choice. An enemy had found him and was hovering off his tail, hurling round after round after him while he tried desperately to regain speed and the ability to maneuver . . .

Jacen's astromech droid chattered as the aft shields died. And then there was a crash that Jacen felt through his spine, and the stick kicked against his gloved hand. The X-wing slewed abruptly to the left. It slowed so much that the pursuing coralskipper overshot, passing within meters of Jacen's canopy, and his head swiveled on his neck as he looked frantically in all directions, trying to spot any additional threats . . .

And there it was. On the end of Jacen's left foils, its claws dug into the paired laser cannons, was a grutchin, one of the winged, insectoid, metal-eating creatures that the Yuuzhan Vong sometimes released with their missiles. A grutchin whose malevolent black-eyed gaze stared back at Jacen, before it turned to its work and took a leisurely chomp out of the upper left foil.

Jacen dived to gain speed, working the controls frantically to keep the X-wing balanced as the weight and drag of the grutchin threatened to destabilize it. As speed built he was rewarded by the grutchin digging its claws more firmly into the foil, hunching against the battering it was receiving from the atmosphere. Jacen felt his lips draw back in a harsh smile. He'd hoped the wind would strip the grutchin away, but this

was the next best thing: the creature couldn't eat his ship as long as it was spending all its strength just to hang on.

Then Jacen pulled back on the stick and fed power to the engines. The only way to get rid of the grutchin was to open the canopy and shoot the thing off his wing, but he couldn't open the canopy and stand up as long as he was in Ylesia's atmosphere -- the wind would tear him right out of the craft and send him tumbling toward the planet below with half the bones in his body broken.

An interesting dilemma, he thought. The grutchin couldn't eat his craft as long as Jacen was flying at speed through the atmosphere, but he couldn't get rid of the grutchin until he got out of the atmosphere altogether. This would call for fine judgment.

"This is Twin Thirteen," he said into the comm. "I've got a grutchin on my wing. I'll be back after I deal with it."

"Copy," came Jaina's voice. He could hear the strain of combat in the terse expression, and feel her stress in the Force.

Jacen kept his eyes on the grutchin and his throttles all the way forward. He kept the nose tipped as far as he could without losing speed, and slowly the buffeting of the atmosphere eased as the air thinned. When the grutchin was able to lift its head and take another bite of the upper port laser cannon, Jacen stood the X-wing on its tail and fled straight up into space. The grutchin shifted its grip and took another bite, and the laser cannon tore free and spun away into the darkening sky. Jacen reached for his blaster and loosened it in its holster. The whisper of wind on the canopy was almost gone. The second laser tumbled into the sky, and the grutchin turned, its claws clamped firmly on metal, and walked methodically along the two united foils, heading for the engine.

Jacen extended the foils into the X-position, hoping to shake it free or slow it down, but without success. Instead he felt, rather than heard, a crash as the grutchin's head drove like a metal punch into his engine cowling.

Better do something, he thought. He threw the cockpit latch; as the cockpit depressurized, force fields snapped into place around him, preserving his air. The sound of flight vanished, though he could still feel the vibration of his craft sounding up his spine. Red lights were flashing on his engine displays. He nudged the controls to the cockpit servos, lifting it slightly open. When he felt no turbulence he opened the cockpit all the way.

He summoned, the Force to guide the fighter's controls as he stood in the cockpit and pulled his blaster from its holster. As he leaned out of the cockpit he saw the upper left foil fly away spinning, eaten away at the root. There was a flash of fire in the engine and it died.

Surely, he thought, the flameout was enough to cook the grutchin. He leaned farther out, bracing one arm on the cockpit coaming, and thrust out the blaster.

The grutchin's beady eyes stared back at him with malevolent purpose. And then the creature's wings extended, and Jacen's heart gave a lurch as he realized the grutchin was going to leap straight for his face.

He fired while mentally rehearsing the move necessary to snatch his lightsaber with his free hand in case the blaster didn't do the job. He fired again, and again. The grutchin reared, its clawed forelegs pawing the airless space between them, and Jacen fired twice more.

The grutchin's head tumbled away into the emptiness. The rest of the grutchin then followed.

Blasters work, Jacen reminded himself as he eased back into the cockpit and sealed the canopy.

His astromech droid had already prepared a damage report. Rear shields down, both port lasers gone along with the port upper S-foil; the other port foil damaged, and one engine destroyed.

Jacen thumped a frustrated fist on the cockpit coaming. The X-wing's aerodynamics had been wrecked -- if he went into the atmosphere to aid Jaina now, his craft would go into a spin that would end only when he hit the ground.

He had come here to aid Jaina, to make certain that she would never be without his support. Now he was leaving her in a desperate fight with the enemy.

But once he had time to listen on Twin Suns' comm channel, it appeared that Jaina no longer needed his aid. She was ordering her squadron to regroup.

"Twin Leader, this is Twin Thirteen," he said. "The grutchin's dealt with."

Jaina was all business. "Twin Thirteen, what's your status?"

"I'm going to need to get a new fighter before I can rejoin. What's your condition?"

"The fight's over. Kyp and Saba came to help us. We're regrouping to hit the spaceport and cover the landing."

"And the Brigaders' fleet?"

"Surrendered. That's how Kyp and Saba were free to join us." There was a pause. "Twin Thirteen, Twin Two has lost an engine. I need you to escort her to rejoin the fleet."

"Understood," Jacen said, "though considering the state of my fighter, Vale may end up escorting me."

He heard snickers over the comm. Through the meld Jacen felt his sister bearing the humor with patience.

"Just get her there, Twin Thirteen," she said finally.

"Understood," Jacen said, and rolled his fighter so that he could spot Vale approaching from the planet below.

"Inertial compensators," Thrackan said as he contemplated the wreck of his landspeeder. "What a good idea."

It had taken Thrackan and Dagga Marl longer to escape Peace City than he'd expected, largely because so many others were fleeing on foot and had gotten in the way. Barely had they emerged from Peace City's ramshackle limits than a colossal spiraling chunk of yorik coral had come tumbling down out of the sky like a grayish green lump and impacted on the road just ahead of them.

The explosion had thrown the landspeeder off the road and spinning into a patch of trees, where, between tree trunks and flying chunks of yorik coral, it had been comprehensively destroyed. But the deluxe landspeeder -- built originally for a young Hutt, to judge by the fittings -- had been equipped with inertial compensators, and these had failed only after the vehicle had come to a complete halt. Thrackan and Dagga emerged from the wreck unscathed.

Thrackan turned to look at the shattered Yuuzhan Vong frigate lying in fragments beneath a thick cloud of smoke and dust.

"I don't think Maal Lah's forces are doing very well," Thrackan said. There was a horrific smell of burning organics, and he remembered that the frigate had actually been alive, that something akin to blood had pulsed through its hull.

He turned to Dagga. "You wouldn't have private means of getting us off the planet, do you?"

"No, I don't."

"Or knowledge of a landspeeder anywhere nearby?"

Dagga shook her head. Thrackan shrugged.

"That's all right. One will come along in a minute, stop to work out how to get around the wreckage -- and then we'll steal it."

Dagga flashed him her shark's grin. "Boss, I like the way you think."

They crouched for some time in the trees by the road, but no landspeeder came. The explosion, with its cloud of smoke, had discouraged anyone from fleeing in this direction.

Thrackan shrugged. "I guess we walk."

"Where are we walking to?"

"Away from the city that's about to be pounded into gravel." Thrackan began picking his way through the debris field. There was relatively little left to burn -- most of the frigate had been rock -- and the smoke was dissipating.

He and Dagga fled back into the cover of the trees as a flight of fighter craft howled out of the sky and shrieked along the road toward Peace City. The fighters were distinctive, with ball cockpits and weird jagged pylons on either side. Thrackan was annoyed.

"TIE fighters? We're being attacked by the Empire now?" He glared. "I call this excessive!" He shook his finger at the sky. "I call this overkill on the part of Fate!"

He waited a few minutes, then rose from his crouch among the bushes and scanned the sky carefully. "I guess they're gone. But let's stay in the trees and--"

Dagga cocked an ear to the sky. "Listen, boss."

Thrackan listened, then ducked into the bushes again. "This is outrageous," he muttered. "Haven't these people anything better to do?"

Another squadron of fighters -- X-wings this time -- blasted along the road, their wakes sending the last of the debris smoke swirling out to the sides in huge corkscrew whirls. Then out of the smoke came a phalanx of whining white landing craft that settled onto the huge scar created by the falling frigate. The last wisps of smoke were flattened by the repulsorlift fields as the landers neared the ground, and then the great forward hatches swung open and whole companies of armored soldiers floated out on military landspeeders that bristled with armament.

"Right," Thrackan said as he and Dagga tried to dig themselves into the turf. "We wait till they've gone on to the city, and then we steal one of the transports and head for home."

Dagga gave him a look. "Home had better be pretty close. Those transports won't have hyperspace capability."

Thrackan ground his teeth. This was not working out.

The soldiers briskly secured a perimeter, and more craft whined to a landing. It looked, as if the soldiers had landed in at least regimental strength.

"I think we're in trouble," Dagga said.

The soldiers' perimeter had expanded as new craft landed, and troopers were now quite close. An officer with a scanner had spotted the two life-forms in the trees, and at his command a pair of landspeeders swung toward the wooded area where Thrackan and Dagga were hiding.

"Right," Thrackan said. "We give ourselves up. First chance you get, you break me out and we steal a ship and head for freedom."

"I'm with you there," Dagga said, "right up to the point where I take you with rue. I don't think you're going to have access to a weekly kilo of spice after this."

"I've got more than spice," Thrackan said. "Get me to Corellia, and you'll find I'm stinking rich and willing to share-"

His words were interrupted by an officer's amplified order.

"The two of you in the woods. Come out slowly, and with your hands up."

Thrackan saw Dagga's cold eyes harden as she calculated her chances, and his nerves leapt at the thought of being caught in a crossfire. He decided he'd better make up her mind for her. "Darling!" he shouted. "We're saved!" And then, as he scrambled to his feet, he whispered, "Leave your weapons here."

He pasted a silly grin to his face and came out of the trees, his hands held high. "You're from the New Republic, right? Bless you for coming!" The officer approached and scanned him for weapons. "We saw those TIE fighters and we thought maybe the Emperor was back. Again. That's why we were hiding."

"Your name, sir?"

"Fazum," Thrackan said promptly. "Ludus Fazum. We were part of a refugee convoy from Falleen, got captured by the Peace Brigade and enslaved." He turned to Dagga, who was walking carefully out of the trees with her hands raised. "This is my fiancée Dagga, ah-" He coughed, realizing Dagga might have a warrant out for her. "-Farglblog." He gave her a grin. "Whaddya think, darling?" he asked. "We're rescued!"

She managed a smile. "You bet!" she said. "This is great!"

Dagga was scanned and came up clean. The officer gave them a searching look from under the brim of his helmet. "You look pretty well fed for slaves," he said.

"We were house slaves!" Thrackan said. "We just did, ah . . ." His invention failed him. "House things."

The officer turned to look over his shoulder. "Corporal!"

Thrackan and Dagga were marched to an open area under the guard of the corporal. The area, gouged dirt scattered with hot, crumbling yorik coral, had been reserved for captured civilians, but Dagga and Thrackan were, for the moment, its only two occupants.

"Farglblog?" she grated.

"Sorry."

"Howdoyouspetf it?"

Thrackan shrugged. He looked at the troopers in their white armor, ready for an advance on Peace City, and wondered what they were waiting for.

The answer came in the form of a pair of X-wings that hovered to a stop right over their heads, not knowing the large open space had been reserved for civilians. Thrackan and Dagga were forced to move to one side as the two craft settled onto their repulsorlifts. Thrackan spoke under cover of the engine whine.

"You've got a hold-out, right?"

"Sure. I always carry a weapon that'll get past a scanner."

The engines whined to a halt, and the cockpits lifted.. A ginger-haired Wookiee stood in the cockpit of the nearest and lowered himself to the ground. "Good," Thrackan said, lowering his voice. "It's a Wookiee. They're not very bright, you know. What happens now is that you clip the Wookiee, then we both hop in the fighter and rocket out of here."

Dagga raised an eyebrow. "You can fly an X-wing?"

"I can fly anything Incom makes."

"Won't it be a little crowded?"

"It'll be uncomfortable, yes. But it won't be nearly as uncomfortable as prison." He gave her a significant look. "You can take my word on that last part."

And if the cockpit seemed to be too small for them both, Thrackan thought, he'd just leave Dagga behind. No problem.

Dagga gave the matter some thought, then nodded. "It's worth a try."

She turned to examine the situation more closely just as the second pilot stepped around the Wookiee's craft. Thrackan saw the slim, dark-haired form and felt all the color drain from his face. He turned away abruptly, but it was too late.

"Hi, Cousin Thrackan," Jaina Solo called. "However did you know we've been looking for you?"

"I wonder if you can remember when you held me prisoner," Jaina said cheerfully.

Thrackan Sal-Solo tried to fashion a smile. "That was all a misunderstanding. And long ago."

"You know . . ." Jaina cocked her head and pretended to study him. "I think you look younger without the beard."

General Tigran Jamiro, the commander of the landing force, whirled up in his command vehicle, rose from his seat, and gave Thrackan a careful look. "You say this is the Peace Brigade President?" he asked.

"That's Thrackan all right." Jaina looked at the black-haired woman who had been with Thrackan. "I don't know who this is. His girlfriend, maybe."

Thrackan seemed a little indignant. "This is the stenographer the government assigned me."

Jaina looked at the woman and her cold eyes and bright white teeth, and thought that clerical assistants were certainly looking carnivorous these days.

Thrackan approached the general and adopted a pained tone. "You know, there's a family vendetta going on here." He pointed at Jaina. "She's got it in for me over something that happened years ago."

General Jamiro gave Thrackan a cold look. "So you aren't the Peace Brigade President?"

Thrackan threw out his hands. "I didn't volunteer for the job! I was kidnapped! The Vong were getting even with me for killing so many of them at Fondor!"

Lowbacca, who had been listening, gave a complex series of moans and howls, and Jaina translated. "He says, They got revenge by making you President? If you killed more of them, they'd make you emperor?"

"They're diabolical," Thrackan said. "It's a very elaborate piece of revenge!" He jabbed a finger toward the small of his back. "They destroyed my kidney! It's still bruised -- you want to see?" He began pulling up his shirt.

Jaina turned to the commander. "General," she said, "I'd put Thrackan on the first landspeeder into town. He can guide us to our objectives." She turned to her cousin and winked. "You'll want to help us, right? Since you're not Peace Brigade after all."

"I'm a citizen of Corellia!" Thrackan insisted. "I demand protection from my government!"

"Actually you're not a citizen anymore," Jaina said. "When the Centerpoint Party heard you'd, defected., they expelled, you and sentenced you in absentia and confiscated, your property and--"

"But I didn't defect! I--"

"Right," General Jamiro said. "On the first landspeeder he goes." He looked at Thrackan's companion. "What do we do with the woman?"

Jaina looked at her again, cogitated for a moment, and moved. In a couple of seconds she had the woman's wrist locked and had relieved her of her holdout blaster.

"I'd put stun cuffs on her," Jaina said, and handed the blaster to General Jamiro.

"How did you know she was armed?"

Jaina looked at Dagga Marl and thought about why she'd made her decision. "Because she was standing like a woman who had a blaster on her," she decided.

Dagga, her wrist locked and her elbow hoisted above her head, snarled at Jaina from under her arm. Troopers came to cuff her and put her under guard.

"Let's get moving," Jamiro said.

Jaina marched Thrackan to the first landspeeder and sat him in front, next to the driver. She herself folded down a jump seat and sat directly behind him.

The operation was going better than she'd expected. Jamiro had landed most of his force here, to drive on Peace City, but he'd stationed blocking forces on all routes from the capital to catch any Brigaders trying to flee. The fight in the atmosphere had delayed things a bit, but it had also wiped out the only Yuuzhan Vong ships in the system. Still, a wary alertness prickled along Jaina's nerves. There was plenty that could yet go wrong.

She turned to Thrackan. "Now, you be sure and let us know where your side's first ambush is going to be," she said.

Thrackan didn't bother turning to face her. "Right. Like they'd tell me."

The first ambush took place on the outskirts of the city center, Peace Brigade soldiers firing from atop flat-roofed buildings on the landspeeders below. Blaster bolts and shoulder-fired rockets sparked off the landspeeders' shields, and the soldiers aboard returned fire from their heavy vehicle-mounted weapons.

Jaina, crouched behind the bulwark in case something got through the shields, looked at her cousin, who was crouched likewise, and said, "Want to order them to surrender, President?"

"Oh shut up."

Jaina ignited her lightsaber and sprinted to the nearest building, a two-story block of offices. Lowbacca was on her heels. Rather than burst in through a door, which was what defenders might expect, Jaina sliced open the shuttered viewport and hurled herself through the gap.

There were no Peace Brigaders, but there was a mine set up to blast anyone coming in through the door. Jaina disarmed it with the press of a button, then cut the wire connecting it to the door for good measure.

Lowbacca was already roaring up the stairs, his lightsaber a brilliant flash in the dark stairwell. Jaina followed him to the roof exit, which he smashed open with one huge furry shoulder.

Whatever the dozen or so defenders on the roof might have expected, it wasn't a Jedi Wookiee. They fired a few bolts at him, which he deflected with his lightsaber, then before Jaina even emerged they fled, dropping their weapons and crowding for the wooden scaffolding that supported a part of the building that was being reinforced. Lowbacca and Jaina charged them and were rewarded by the sight of several of the enemy simply diving off the building in their haste to escape. When Jaina and Lowbacca reached the scaffolding, with the eight or nine soldiers still clinging to it and lowering themselves to the street, Jaina looked, at Lowbacca and grinned, and knew from his grinning response that he shared her idea.

Swiftly the two sliced the lashings that held the scaffold to the building, and then -- with Lowbacca's Wookiee muscles and an assist from the Force -- they shoved the scaffolding over. The Brigaders spilled to the ground in a splintering crash of wood and were swiftly rounded up by more of Jamiro's troopers, who had sped around the ambush to outflank it.

Jaina looked up. Enemy on the next roof were still firing at the landspeeders below, unaware their comrades had been captured.

She and Lowbacca had worked together so long they didn't need to speak. They trotted ten paces back from the edge, turned, and sprinted for the parapet. Jaina put a foot on the edge and leapt, the Force assisting her to a soundless landing on the roof.

The squad of Brigaders were turned away, firing into the street below. Jaina grabbed one by the ankles and tipped him over the edge, and Lowbacca simply kicked another over the parapet. Jaina turned to the nearest as he was reacting, sliced his blaster rifle in half with her lightsaber, then punched him in the face with the hilt of her weapon. He sprawled over the parapet unconscious. Lowbacca deflected a bolt aimed for Jaina, then caught the rifle with the tip of his lightsaber and flung it into the air. Jaina used the Force to guide the flying rifle to a collision with the nose of another Brigader, which gave Lowbacca time to heave his disarmed enemy into the street below.

That took the fight out of them, and the rest surrendered. Jaina and Lowbacca chucked the captured weapons to the street, then turned them over to a squad of New Republic troopers who came storming up the stairs.

The shooting was over. Jaina looked ahead to see the large, new buildings of the city center. She saw no reason to return to the landspeeder --she could guide the military to their objective from her vantage point on the rooftops. She leaned over the parapet and gestured to General Jamiro that she would go ahead over the roofs. He nodded his understanding.

Jaina and Lowbacca took another run and leapt to the next roof, checking the building on all sides to make certain that no ambush lurked in its shadows. They then sprang onto the next building, and the next.

Across from this last was what was probably intended to be a wide, impressive boulevard, but which consisted at the moment of a muddy excavation half filled with water. The air smelled like a stagnant pond. Beyond were some large buildings that would be very grand when finished. Jaina knew from her briefings that a large shelter had been dug behind the largest building, the Senate house, and subsequently covered over by the plantings of what was supposed to be a park.

The whole expanse was deserted. Smoke rose from several areas on the horizon. Jaina called the Force into her mind and probed ahead. The others in the Force-meld, sensing her purpose, sent her strength and aided her perception.

The distant warmth of other lives glowed in Jaina's mind. There were indeed defenders in the Senate building, though they were keeping out of sight.

Sending thanks to the others in the Force-meld, Jaina clipped her lightsaber to her belt, hurled herself off the building, and allowed the Force to cushion her fall to the duracrete below. Lowbacca followed. They trotted back to General Jamiro's command speeder. There they found the general conferring with what appeared to be a group of civilians. Only on approaching did Jaina recognize Lilla Dade, a veteran of Page's Commandos who had volunteered to lead a small infiltration party into Ylesia in the aftermath of the battle and set up an underground cell in the enemy capital.

"This is your chance," Jamiro told her.

"Very good, sir." She saluted and flashed Jaina a grin as she led her team into the nearly deserted city.

Jamiro turned to Jaina, who saluted. "There are defenders in the Senate building, sir," she told him. "A couple hundred, I think."

"I have enough firepower to blow the Palace of Peace down around them," Jamiro said, "but I'd rather not. You might see if you can get your cousin to talk them into surrendering."

"I'll do that, sir." Jaina saluted and trotted back to the lead landspeeder. "The general's got a job for you, Cousin Thrackan," she said.

Thrackan gave her a sour look. "I'll give diplomacy my best shot," he said, "but I don't think Shimrra's going to give Coruscant back."

"Ha ha," Jaina said, and jumped into the landspeeder.

Jamiro's forces advanced on the government center on a broad front, repulsorlifts carrying them over the boggy, torn ground, their heavy weapons trained on the half-finished buildings. Starfighters split the sky overhead.

The landspeeders halted two hundred meters from the building. Jaina looked at what she'd thought was a tarpaulin stretched over some construction work, and then realized it was the flayed skin of a very large Hutt. She nudged Thrackan.

"Friend of yours?"

"Never met him," Thrackan said shortly. At Jaina's instruction, he stood and picked up the microphone handed him by the landspeeder's commander.

"This is President Sal-Solo," he said. "Hostilities have ceased. Put down your weapons and leave the building with your hands in plain sight."

There was a long silence. Thrackan turned, to Jaina and. spread his hands. "What did you expect?"

And then there was a sudden commotion from the Senate building, a series of yells and crashes. Jaina sensed, the soldiers around her tightening their grip on their weapons. "Repeat the message/" she told Thrackan.

Thrackan shrugged and began again. Before he was half finished the doors burst open and a swarm of armored warriors ran out. Jaina started as she recognized Yuuzhan Vong. Then she saw that the warriors had raised their hands in surrender, and that they weren't Vong, just Peace Brigade wearing laminate imitations of vondaun crab armor. In their lead was a Duros officer, who ran up to Thrackan and saluted.

"Sorry that took so long, sir," he said. "There were some Yuuzhan Vong in there, intendants, who thought we should fight."

"Right," Thrackan said, and ordered the warriors into the hands of the landing force. He turned to Jaina, his look dour. "My loyal bodyguard," he explained. "You see why I decided to head out on my own."

"Why are they dressed in fake armor?" Jaina asked.

"The real armor kept biting them," Thrackan said acidly, and sat down again.

"We need you to lead us to the bunker where your Senators are hiding," Jaina said. 'And to the secret exit they'll use for their escape."

Thrackan favored Jaina with another bitter glare. "If there was an escape hatch from that bunker," he asked, "do you think I'd be here?"

The bunker turned out to have a huge blastproof door, like a vault. Thrackan, using the special comm relay outside the bunker to talk with those inside, failed to persuade them to come out.

General Jamiro was undeterred, sending for his engineer company to come down from orbit and blast the door off the bunker.

Jaina felt time slipping away. None of the delays so far had been critical, but they were all beginning to add up.

Maal Lah restrained the instinct to duck as another flight of enemy starfighters roared overhead. The villip in his hands retained the snarling image of the dead executor he'd used to try to command President Sal-Solo's useless bodyguard, and whom the Presidential Guard had killed rather than obey.

The cowards would be thrown in a pit and crushed by riding beasts, he promised himself.

The damutek grown on the outskirts of the capital to house his troops had been destroyed early in the attack, fortunately after he'd gotten his warriors out. But since then they'd been forced to remain in cover, pinned down by the accursed starfighters that patrolled at low altitude overhead. Fighter cover had been so heavy that Maal Lah had been unable to move even a few of his warriors toward the city center to guard the Peace Brigade government.

He gathered that the Peace Brigade fleet had surrendered -- more candidates for the pit and the riding beasts, Maal Lah thought. His own small force of spacecraft had at least gone down fighting. And now, he suspected, Ylesia's government was about to fall into the hands of the enemy.

But even considering these developments, Maal Lah found himself content. He knew that the New Republic forces were about to suffer a surprise, and that the surprise should draw the heavy fighter cover away.

And once he could safely move his warriors, there would be more surprises in store for the raiders of the New Republic.

And many blood sacrifices for the gods of the Yuuzhan Vong.

Jacen and Vale brought their limping X-wings aboard Kre'fey's flagship Ralroost. By the time Jacen powered the fighter down he knew that the Peace Brigade forces had folded like a house of cards, both in space and on the ground, and that the New Republic forces were digging the last of the leadership out of their bunker.

Those who had nothing in common but treason, he thought, had no reason to trust one another or fight on one another's behalf. There was no unifying ideology other than greed and opportunism. Neither was likely to create solidarity.

He dropped to the deck, breathing gratitude that the raid was a success. It had been his idea to capture the heads of the Ylesian government, and his fault that Jaina had volunteered to go in with the ground forces. If the mission had gone wrong he would have been doubly responsible.

Jacen first checked out Vale to make certain she was all right, then inspected their X-wings. Both would require time in a maintenance bay before they would fly again.

"Jacen Solo?" A Bothan officer, very much junior, approached and saluted. "Admiral Kre'fey requests your presence on the bridge."

Jacen looked at Vale, then back at the officer. "Certainly," he said. "May Lieutenant Vale join us?"

The Bothan considered the question, but Vale was quick to give her own answer.

"That isn't necessary," she said. "Admirals make me nervous."

Jacen nodded, then followed the Bothan out of the docking bay toward the forepart of the ship.

And then he felt the universe slow down as if time itself had been altered. He was aware of how long a time it seemed to take for his foot to reach the floor, aware of the long space between his heartbeats.

Something had just changed. Jacen let the Jedi meld that had been sitting quietly in some back room of his mind come to the fore, and he felt surprise and consternation in the minds of the other Jedi, a confusion that was soon replaced with grim resolve and frantic calculation.

Jacen's foot touched the deck. He took a breath. He was aware that a Yuuzhan Vong fleet had just entered the system, and that his plan for the Battle of Ylesia had just gone terribly wrong.

"I think we'd better hurry," he told the startled Bothan lieutenant, and began to run.

The huge cutting beams of the engineers' lasers were chopping the vault door into scrap. Jaina shrank away from the bright light and heat. She could sense panic through the vault doors, panic and flashes of desperate readiness from those preparing themselves for hopeless resistance. A few blaster bolts came spanging out of the torn vault, but the lasers were shielded and the blasters did no damage.

Jaina looked at the troopers preparing to storm the Senate bunker, and she thought that was a lot of firepower to subdue a group who might be no more prepared to resist capture than their army or fleet. She found General Jamiro and saluted.

"Sir, I'd like to be first into the vault. I think I can get them to surrender."

Jamiro took barely a second to consider the request. "I'm not going to tell a Jedi she can't be the first into a tight spot," he said. "I've seen what you people can do." He nodded. "Just be sure you call for help if you need it."

"I will, sir."

She snapped the general a salute and trotted back to the vault door. The cutting was almost done. Melted duralloy had frozen on the floor of the anteroom in the shape of a waterfall. Jaina stood next to Lowbacca, who gave her a significant look as he undipped his lightsaber.

Jaina grinned. Without a word he'd shown he understood her plan, and approved.

Jaina ignited, her own lightsaber as the laser finished, its final cut. With a shove of the Force she pushed the final chunk of the vault door into the interior, where it rang on the floor. Blaster bolts flashed out of the hole, and someone inside shouted, "You people keep out!"

Jaina leapt through the door headfirst, tucked into a somersault, came out on her feet. The blasterfire sizzled after her, allowing Lowbacca to follow through the hole without being targeted.

The room was bare duracrete, with no furniture and few fixtures: the Peace Brigade Senators were huddled in corners, shrinking away from those who were determined to fight for their freedom. Blaster bolts came at Jaina thick and fast. She leapt for the nearest shooter, parrying blasterfire with her lightsaber. Bolts ricocheted off the hard walls and ceiling, and someone cried out as he was hit. The shooter was a big Jenet, and snarled at Jaina as she came for him.

She sliced the blaster apart with her lightsaber, then kicked the Jenet in the teeth with an inside crescent kick. She followed through with a heel hook that dropped the Jenet to the floor.

She saw Lowbacca grab a couple of other shooters, a pair of fighting Ganks, and bang their heads together. Peace Brigade Senators scuttled and huddled for cover. Another blaster went off, and Jaina parried the bolt back into the shooter's knee. The Force powered a jump that took her the six meters to the Ishi Tib shooter, where she kicked the blaster out of her hand; and then the Force seized the blaster and smashed it into the face of another shooter. His own bolt went wild into the crowd of Senators, and there was a scream. Lowbacca leapt on him from behind and smashed him in the head with one massive furry hand.

There was silence, except for the sobs of one of the wounded. The room stank from the ozone discharge of weapons. Armored. New Republic troopers began to enter the room, weapons directed at the Brigaders.

Jaina brandished her lightsaber over the cowering group, its loud thrummm echoing in the small room, and called, "Surrender! In the name of the New Republic!"

"On the contrary," a commanding voice said. "In the name of the New Republic, I call on you to surrender."

Jaina looked in surprise at the tall, cloaked figure that rose from a huddled group of Brigaders, at the arrow-shaped head and writhing face-tentacles.

"Senator Pwoe?" she said in surprise.

"Chief of State Pwoe," the Quarren corrected. "Head of the New Republic. I am present on Ylesia in order to negotiate a treaty of friendship and mutual aid with the Ylesian Republic. I call upon New Republic forces to cease these acts of aggression against a friendly allied regime."

Jaina was so taken aback that she barked out a surprised laugh. Pwoe, an avowed foe of the Jedi, had been a member of Borsk Fey'lya's Advisory Council. When Fey'lya died in the ruin of Coruscant, Pwoe had declared himself Chief of State and began to issue orders to the New Republic government and military.

He might have gotten away with it if he hadn't overplayed his hand. When the Senate reconvened on Mon Calamari -- ironically, Pwoe's homeworld -- they'd issued an order calling on Pwoe and all other Senators to join them. Instead of obeying, Pwoe had issued an order to the Senate calling for them to join him on Kuat.

The Senate had been offended, formally deprived Pwoe of any powers, and conducted their own election for Chief of State. Eventually -- and after a full measure of the usual skulduggery -- the pro-Jedi

Cal Omas was elected. Since then, Pwoe had been traveling from one part of the galaxy to another, trying to rally his ever-diminishing number of supporters.

"This peace treaty is vital to the interests of the New Republic," Pwoe went on. "This typical Jedi violence is on the verge of spoiling everything."

Jaina's grin broadened. Apparently Pwoe had grown so desperate that he'd decided that he could only regain his prestige and following if he came to Mon Calamari waving a peace agreement.

"I'm very sorry to disturb any important treaties," she said. "Perhaps you would care to step outside and speak to General Jamiro?"

"That will not be necessary. I call upon the general and the rest of you to leave Ylesia at once."

The Ishi Tib, lying at Jaina's feet, began a gradual movement aimed at freeing a weapon concealed somewhere within her robes. Jaina stepped on her hand. The movement ceased.

"I think you should speak to the general," she said, and turned to the dozen soldiers who had been quietly entering the room during the course of this discussion. "Please escort Senator Pwoe to the general." Two armored troopers marched to either side of Pwoe, seized his arms, and began carrying him toward the vault door.

"Take your hands off me!" he boomed. "I'm your Chief of State!"

Jaina watched as Pwoe was carried away. Then she bent to relieve the Ishi Tib of her hidden blaster, and straightened to address the rest of the Brigaders.

"And the rest of you" -- she raised her voice -- "should file out of the room one by one, with your hands in plain sight."

Soldiers searched and scanned the Brigaders, then cuffed them, before they were allowed out of the vault. Engineers entered and began preparing explosives to destroy the bunker once it had been evacuated, Jaina and. Lowbacca waited in the bare room as the Brigaders slowly left.

They were aware of the change in the Jedi meld at the same time, the sudden vast surprise at the appearance of a new enemy.

Here's where it all goes wrong. The thought sang at the back of Jaina's mind.

She looked at Lowbacca, and knew that the Wookiee shared the knowledge that their time on the ground had run out.

Maal Lah gave a roar of triumph as the patrolling starfighters suddenly throttled up their engines and pointed their noses to the sky. The arrival of a Yuuzhan Vong fleet had given the infidels better things to do than cruise the air above Peace City.

It was time to meet the enemy, but Maal Lah knew that the battle was lost at the city center. There was no point in reinforcing the Peace Brigade's failure.

Another course recommended itself. The commander also knew where the New Republic forces were at the present. He knew that eventually they would have to retreat to their landing zones outside of town.

Between these two places he would make his killing ground. And conveniently, the quednak stables happened to be nearby.

He called into the shoulder villip that communicated with his warriors. "Our hour has arrived!" he said. "We will advance to meet the enemy!"

Jacen arrived breathless on Ralroost's bridge to find Admiral Kre'fey already making his opening moves. An enemy fleet had leapt out of hyperspace, and Kre'fey was placing his own ships between the Yuuzhan Vong and the ground forces on Ylesia.

"Welcome, Jacen," the white-furred Bothan said, his eyes still fixed on the holographic display that showed the relative positions of the fleets. "I see you understand there's been a new complication."

"How many?" Jacen said.

"Their forces are roughly equal to ours. But so many of our personnel are inexperienced, I would prefer not to engage." He raised his eyes from the display. "Fortunately my opposite seems in no hurry to begin a fight."

Indeed this was the case. The Yuuzhan Vong weren't moving to attack, but were instead hovering just outside Ylesia's mass shadow.

"Can you give me a starfighter?" Jacen asked.

"I'm afraid not. Our fighter bays were packed with operational craft only, plus their pilots -- we carry no spares."

Frustration snarled in Jacen as Kre'fey's attention snapped back to the display. "Ah," the admiral said. "My opposite is moving."

The Yuuzhan Vong had detached a part of their force and were extending it to one flank, perhaps intending a partial envelopment.

"Easily countered," Kre'fey said, and ordered one of his own divisions to extend his own flank, matching the enemy movement precisely.

Jacen stalked around the room in a brief circle, angry at his own uselessness. He considered returning to his X-wing and flying to Ylesia to Jaina's aid, and then realized that his wounded craft wouldn't be an asset, but a liability -- she'd have to detach pilots to look after him, pilots who would have many better uses in an engagement than escorting a crippled ship.

He finally surrendered to the fact he was going to spend the rest of the battle aboard Ralroost.

Jacen found a corner of the bridge out of everyone's way and let the Jedi meld float to the surface of his mind. If he couldn't be of any direct use in the upcoming battle, he could at least send strength and support to his comrades.

Jaina and Lowbacca, he sensed, were in motion, speeding toward their fighters. The other Jedi were waiting in their cockpits, waiting

for the battle to begin. Jacen could sense them in relation to one another, an array of intent minds focused on the enemy.

Through the meld, he sensed the Yuuzhan Vong fleet make another move, another division shifting out onto the flank, extending it farther into space. Only half a minute later did he hear Kre'fey's staff announce the move, followed by the Bothan admiral's counter.

The Yuuzhan Vong kept moving to the flank. And Jacen began to wonder why.

Pwoe and Thrackan Sal-Solo, cuffed, were keeping each other company in the back of the landspeeder. Neither of the illusory Presidents seemed to have much to say to the other, or to anyone else, at least not since Thrackan's muttered, "Do I really have to sit with the Squid Head?" as Pwoe was directed into the vehicle.

As it turned out there was no room for Thrackan or anyone else to sit. The landspeeders were standing room only, packed with soldiers, prisoners, and refugees.

The vehicles moved as fast as possible toward the landing zone, though they were being slowed by crowds of refugees, slaves, and other unwilling workers begging for transport offplanet. As many as could fit into the landspeeders were pulled aboard. In their withdrawal to the landing zone the speeders hadn't gotten onto the roads in any particular order, and the speeder that Jaina shared with Lowbacca, Thrackan, and Pwoe was more or less in the middle of the column.

The column had reached the outskirts of the city, which at this point consisted of a strip of buildings on either side of the main road, all surrounded by wild country, unaltered terrain.

Jaina turned at the sound of an explosion behind her, a concussion followed by a shock wave that she could feel in her insides. Smoke and debris jetted high over the surrounding buildings. The engineers had just destroyed the Brigaders' bunker, as well as the Palace of Peace and other public buildings.

Jaina turned to face forward just as a giant, lichen-colored beast stepped from behind a building into the road in front of the column. Jaina's heart thundered as the lead landspeeder crashed into the animal, enraging the beast even though the inertial dampeners on the machine saved the crew and passengers. Another speeder smashed into the first from behind, preventing it from reversing. The beast reared onto its hind legs, and Jaina saw Yuuzhan Vong warriors clinging for dear life to their basket on the beast's back. Shields sparked and failed as the qujednak's first four feet dropped massively onto the speeder. Jaina could hear the screams of the passengers as they died.

Jaina reached for her lightsaber, then her blaster, then hesitated. None of her weapons could kill this animal.

Vehicle-mounted weapons split the air as they opened fire on the riding beast. The quednak screamed and charged forward, crushing the forepart of a second landspeeder and brushing aside a third. One of its riders was hurled from his seat and flew, arms windmilling, into the side of a nearby building.

"Back! Back! Take a side street out of here!" The officer in command of the landspeeder barked orders to the driver. And then Jaina felt a shadow fall over her, and she turned.

Another riding beast was being driven out into the road behind Jaina's speeder. Her lightsaber leapt into her hand and she took three long jumps to the back of the landspeeder and launched herself for the riders on the quednak's back.

The Force seemed to catch her by the spine and fling her onto the creature's back, and she gave silent thanks to Lowbacca for the assist as she landed on the broad, flat haunches. She was poised atop the middle pair of legs, her balance uneasy with the creature's lurching, swaying motion. The two riders sat in a shell-shaped box forward. Jaina ignited her lightsaber and charged, her boot driving for traction on the moss-covered surface of the beast's scales.

One of the Yuuzhan Vong in the box leapt out to face her while the other continued to guide the beast. The air reeked of the quednak's stench. Landspeeders dodged from beneath its clawed feet. Panicked gunners at the tail of the column were opening fire, scorching the creature's massive sides, but the quednak remained under the control of its driver.

Jaina's opponent thrust out his amphistaff, its head spitting poison. Jaina slapped the poison out of the air with a Force-generated wind and sprang forward to engage, thrusting right for the Yuuzhan Vong's tattooed face. His circular parry almost tore the lightsaber from her fingers, but she managed to disengage in time, and now she made a less impulsive attack.

Jaina's violet blade struck again and again, but the Yuuzhan Vong parried them all, an intent look visible under the brim of the vonduun crab helmet. He was concentrating solely on defense, on keeping her off the driver until he could trample the maximum number of landspeeders under the beast's claws. Frustration built in her as she redoubled her attack, the violet blade building into a pattern that would result in the amphistaff being drawn out of line and opening the Yuuzhan Vong for a finishing thrust.

Unexpectedly Jaina threw herself flat on the quednak's back. A bright red-orange bolt from a blaster cannon ripped the air where she'd been half a second before. The Yuuzhan Vong hesitated, blinking, dazzled by the flash, and then Jaina rose on one hand, only and lashed a foot forward, sweeping the warrior's feet. He gave a cry of pure rage as he tumbled off the creature's sides.

Jaina hurled herself toward the driver in his box, but another cannon opened fire, and the box disappeared in a flash of flame, the heat scorching her face. Frantically she looked for a way to control the creature. The quednak gave a cry of absolute fury and began to back, trying to turn to get at the source of the blaster bolts that were tormenting it.

A volley of bolts slammed into the beast and blew Jaina off the creature's back. She tumbled free, calling the Force to cushion her landing on the duracrete. Even so the impact knocked the breath from her lungs, her teeth clacking together on impact. From the position on the ground she saw Lowie dragging wounded civilians from a wrecked landspeeder, other intact speeders milling amid a swarm of confused refugees and stunned prisoners, and the death agonies of the other quednak, which had finally succumbed to heavy weapon fire.

Then the second beast, the one she'd ridden, took a cannon bolt to the head, and reared as it began to die. Jaina saw the slab-sided wall flank begin its fall, and she scuttled like a crab out of the way as the creature came down in a wave of stench and blood. An agonized thrash of its tail threw a pair of landspeeders against a wall, and then the giant reptoid was dead.

Dead riding beasts now blocked the road at either end, trapping the column between rows of buildings. Overhead came a pair of swift flyers, swoop analogs, that dived over the street, plasma cannons stuttering. Jaina rolled away from fire and flying splinters as superheated plasma ripped the duracrete near her.

The worst threat from the swoop analogs wasn't their cannons, however. Each had a dovin basal propulsion unit in its nose, and these living singularities leapt out to snatch at the landspeeders' shields, over-loading them and causing them to fail in a flash of frustrated energy.

Jaina rose to her feet, her head swimming with the magnitude of the disaster. There was nothing she could do against the aircraft without her X-wing, so she staggered across the duracrete to aid Lowbacca in helping injured civilians. With the Force she lifted rubble from a wounded Rodian.

Concentrated fire from the soldiers blew one of the swoop analogs apart. The other, trailing fire, was deliberately crashed by its pilot into a landspeeder, and both craft were destroyed in an eruption of flame.

It was then that Jaina heard the sudden ominous humming, and her nerves tingled to the danger as she swung to face the sound, her lightsaber on guard.

A buzzing swarm of thud and razor bugs sped through the air, racing for their targets -- and then Yuuzhan Vong warriors swarmed out of the office buildings on the south side of the street, while from either end of the street they came pouring like a wave over the bodies of the dead

riding beasts. From five hundred throats came the chorused battle cry, "Do-ro'ik vong pratte!"

There were screams as scores went down before the flying wave of deadly insects. Jaina slapped a thud bug out of the sky with her lightsaber, and neatly skewered a razor bug that was making a run for Lowie's head. The Yuuzhan Vong warriors slammed with an audible impact into the stunned, milling crowd in the street. The New Republic soldiers were so hampered by the swarms of noncombatants that they were barely able to fire in their own defense. The Yuuzhan Vong leapt right aboard the landspeeders that had suffered the loss of their shields, slashing through screaming civilians and prisoners in order to reach soldiers so tightly packed they couldn't raise a weapon.

Jaina parried away an amphistaff that was swung at her head, and let Lowie, thrusting over her shoulder, dispose of the warrior who wielded it. The next warrior went down before a pair of lightsabers, one swung high, one thrust low. Jaina readied a cut at a figure that lurched toward her, then realized it was one of Thrackan's bodyguards in his preposterous fake armor. A shrieking human female, bloody from a razor bug slash and helpless with her hands cuffed, stumbled into Jaina's arms, and died from the lunge of the snarling Yuuzhan Vong warrior who was willing to run her through in order to reach Jaina. Jaina shuffled away from the thrust in time, and then, before the warrior could clear his weapon from his victim, her point took him in the throat.

The two halves of a razor bug, sliced neatly in half by Lowie's lightsaber, fell on either side of Jaina. She and Lowbacca were able to protect themselves against the buzzing horror, and the troopers were at least armored, but the civilians had no defense and were being torn to shreds. The handcuffed prisoners were even more helpless. "We've got to get these people into the buildings where we can protect them!" Jaina shouted to anyone who could hear. "Get them moving!"

With shouts and gestures, Jaina and Lowie rounded up a group of soldiers who helped to herd the civilians into the buildings on the north side of the street. This gave other soldiers, and the few landspeeders that were still in operation, a clearer field of fire, and the Yuuzhan Vong began to take more casualties.

In the midst of the confusion Jaina saw General Jamiro staggering backward with a group of his troopers around him. All of them seemed wounded; a squad of Yuuzhan Vong were in pursuit, their amphistaffs rising and falling in a deadly, urgent rhythm.

"Lowie"! Its the general!" The Jedi charged, lightsabers swinging. Jaina hamstrung one enemy warrior, then ducked the lunge of another to drive her lightsaber up through the armpit, the one part unprotected by armor. A third Yuuzhan Vong was knocked to his knees by a

Force-aided double kick, after which one of Jamiro's troopers shot him with a point-blank blaster bolt.

Two of the soldiers grabbed Jamiro under the arms and hustled him to one of the buildings on the north side of the street, a restaurant with booths by the viewports and a bar against the back wall. There, other soldiers firing from the viewports had clear fields of fire and were able to score hits on any pursuers. Lowie and Jaina covered the retreat, blocking one shot after another with their lightsabers before rolling backward through the viewports.

The room was filled with stunned people, most of them civilians slumped at the tables. Jaina recognized Pwoe standing tall among them, his face bloody, one tentacle sliced neatly off by a razor bug.

The Yuuzhan Vong were still fighting, trying to get into the buildings. Jaina and Lowbacca each chose a viewport, cutting and parrying through the opening while the soldiers fired continuously at the attackers.

It was flanking fire that eventually drove the attackers away. The Yuuzhan Vong had ambushed only the first half of the returning convoy. The rear part of the column was largely intact, though unable to maneuver its speeders over the dead riding beast that blocked the road. Instead Colonel Tosh, in command of the rear guard, pulled his soldiers off the landspeeders and sent them climbing up the massive flank of the dead quednak. From its summit the troopers commenced massed volley fire on the street below, a fire intense enough to cause the Yuuzhan Vong to fall back to the buildings on the southern side of the street.

Jaina extinguished her lightsaber and gasped for air. It was amazing how fast things had gone wrong.

Time was running out. And with it, lives.

General Jamiro stood gasping for breath, one arm propping him against a wall while he talked into his comm unit. Blood, stained his white body armor. He looked up. "What's behind us?" he said. "Can we pull back to the north, then rendezvous with the landspeeders?"

One of the soldiers made a quick check, then returned. "It's uncleared forest, sir," he reported. "The landspeeders couldn't get through it, but we could move through on foot."

"Negative." Jamiro shook his head. "We'd lose all cohesion in the woods and the Vong would hunt us to death." He turned to look out the shattered front viewport. "We've got to get back to the landspeeders somehow, then take another route around the roadblock." He looked grim, and pressed a hand to a wound on his thigh. "Tell Colonel Tosh he's got to give us covering fire as we break out. But we're still going to lose a lot of people once everyone gets into the street."

Jaina became aware that her comlink was bleeping at her. She answered. "This is Solo."

"This is Colonel Fel. Are you in difficulty? The other Jedi seemed to think so."

Relief sang through Jaina at the sound of Jag's voice, though the relief was followed immediately by embarrassment at its intensity. She struggled to keep her voice calm and military as she answered. "The column's run into an ambush and has been pinned down," she said. "What's your location?"

"I'm with Twin Suns Squadron in orbit. We're on standby, waiting for you and Lowbacca to rejoin us. An enemy fleet has appeared and the situation has grown urgent. It's imperative that the landing force return to orbit as soon as possible."

"You don't say," Jaina snapped, her relief fading before annoyance at Jag's pompous tone.

"Stand by," Jag said. "I'll lead the squadrons on a bombing and strafing run and blast you out of there."

"Negative," Jaina said. "The Vong are right across the street, too close. You'd hit us, and we've got civilians here."

"I still may be able to help. Stand by."

"Jag," Jaina said., "you've got too many rookies! They'll never be able to stay on target! They're going to splatter a hundred, civilians, not to mention the rest of us!"

"Stand by, Twin Leader," Jag said, insistent.

Annoyance finally won over relief. Jaina looked at General Jamiro in exasperation. "Did you hear that, sir?"

Jamiro nodded. "Even if he can't do a strafing run, starfighters might keep the Vong's heads down. We'll wait."

"General!" Pwoe's commanding voice rang from the back of the room. "This is absolute folly! I demand that you allow me to negotiate a surrender for these people before those fire-happy pilots blow us all to pieces!"

The Quarren stalked forward. Jamiro faced him, straightening, and winced as he put weight onto his wounded leg.

"Senator," he said. "You will oblige me by remaining silent. You are not in charge here."

"Neither are you, it appears," Pwoe said. "Your only hope, and the hope of all under your command" -- with his cuffed hands he made a gesture that encompassed the soldiers, the civilians, and the prisoners -- "is to surrender at discretion. I shall undertake the negotiations entirely at my own risk."

"Surrender at discretion." Jaina was surprised by Thrackan's sarcastic voice coming from the back of the room. Her cousin rose from

the chair he'd occupied and limped forward. She could see that the long muscles of his back had also been sliced open by a razor bug.

"Up until now I'd thought the Jedi were the most pompous, annoying gasbags in creation," Thrackan said. "But that was before I met you. You take the prize for the most preposterous, self-important, prolix fiasco I have ever seen. And on top of that-" He stared at close range into Pwoe's indignant eyes. "On top of that, sir, you are a fish! So sit down and shut up, before I take a harpoon to you!"

Pwoe drew himself up. "Your display of rank prejudice is-"

Thrackan waved a hand. "Can it, Chief. Nobody's listening to your speeches now. Or will ever again, I guess."

Pwoe returned Thrackan's glare for a long moment, and then his gaze fell, and he retreated. Then Thrackan turned his scowl on the others -- Jaina, Jamiro, and the rest. "I'm not a Vong collaborator, no matter what the rest of you think. And I'm not about to let a subaquatic imbecile sell us out to the enemy."

With an air of painful triumph, Thrackan dragged himself to his seat.

From above came the peculiar creaking roar of a claw fighter, passing slowly overhead. Jaina could imagine Jag in the pilot's seat, flying the clawcraft inverted to give himself a better view of the scene below. When Jag's voice returned, it was thoughtful.

"Our forces are on the north side?"

"Yes, but-"

"The Yuuzhan Vong are regrouping -- they'll be launching another assault in a few minutes. I'll commence a bomb run with our two squadrons to break up the attack. Tell your people to stay under cover, and be ready to run."

"No!" Jaina said. "I know my rookie pilots! They don't have the experience!"

"Stand by, Twin Leader. And tell those soldiers standing on the dead animal to take cover."

Jaina almost dashed the comlink to the ground in frustration. Instead she gave a despairing look to General Jamiro, who was looking at her with a furrowed, thoughtful expression. Jamiro raised, his own comlink to his lips.

"Fighters are about to make a run. Everyone is to get under secure cover, and prepare to run for the landspeeders on my command. Tosh, get your people off that creature and under the speeders' shields again."

And then, with weary, silent dignity, General Jamiro took shelter beneath a table. The others in the room did their best to follow suit.

The roar of starfighters floated through the broken viewports. Jaina, remaining on her feet, stepped to the viewport and took a quick look out.

Black against the western sky was the Chiss squadron, the craft flying nearly wingtip to wingtip, echeloned back from the leader in a kind of half wedge.

Of course, Jaina thought in admiration. Jag Fel would be in the lead, flying along an invisible line down the battlefield between the Yuuzhan Vong and the New Republic troops. The others were echeloned onto the Vong side of the line -- as long as they maintained their alignment on the leader, their fire couldn't hit friendly forces.

Laser cannons began to flash on the Chiss leader, then on the others. Bolts fell on the street and on the roofs of the buildings opposite, a clatter of high-energy rain. Jaina dived under the nearest table and found Lowie already taking up most of the room.

"You know," she said, "sometimes Jag is really--"

Her thought was left unfinished. The first wave seemed to suck the air from Jaina's lungs, then transform it into light and heat that Jaina could feel in her long bones, her liver and spleen and bowel.

Twenty-one more detonations followed the first as the Chiss unloaded. Whatever was left of the restaurant viewports exploded inward. Storms of dust blasted in from the street, and bits of debris.

And then there was a silence broken only by the ringing in Jaina's ears.

Slowly she became aware that her comlink was talking at her. She raised, it to her lips.

"Say again?"

"Hold your positions," came the faint voice. "Twin Suns is next."

Tesar would be in the lead position, with the rest echeloned in the same formation Jag had used. Jaina had no fear that any of the fire would go astray.

"Hold your positions!" Jaina called. "Another strike coming!"

There were sixteen runs this time, two from each of the X-wings remaining. Jaina coughed as wave after wave of dust blew in the viewports.

Again there was silence, broken only by the sound of sliding rubble from the buildings opposite. As she blinked dust from her lashes Jaina

could see General Jamiro rise painfully from his position under one of the tables, then raise his comlink to his lips.

"Soldiers, take up positions to cover the civilians! All noncombatants to the speeders -- and then the rest of us follow!"

Hands tore the rubble off him, and Maal Lah saw the sky where he had thought he would never see the free sky again. He wheezed as he coughed dust out of his lungs. "It's the commander!" someone called, and a host of hands joined to rip the debris away, then lift Maal Lah free of the wreckage.

Maal Lah gave a gasp at a sudden, nauseating wave of pain, but he clenched his teeth and said, "Subaltern! Report!"

"The infidels made their escape after the bombing, Supreme Commander. But they've left hundreds of dead behind." The subaltern hesitated. "Many of them our Peace Brigade allies."

Pain made Maal Lah snarl, but he turned the snarl into one of triumph. "The treacherous infidels deserved their fate! They should have died fighting, but instead they surrendered and left it to us to give them honorable death!" He managed to turn another grimace of pain into a laugh. "The invaders feared us, subaltern! They fled Ylesia once they had felt our sting!"

"The Supreme Commander is wise," the subaltern said. Dust streaked the subaltern's tattoos, and his armor was battered. His eyes traveled along Maal Lah's body. "I regret to say, Supreme Commander," he said slowly, "that your leg is destroyed. I'm afraid you're going to lose it."

Maal Lah snarled again. As if he needed a young infant of a subaltern to tell him such a thing. He had seen the duralloy beam come down like a knife, and he had felt the agony in the long minutes since . . .

"The shapers will give me a better leg, if the gods will it," Maal Lah said.

He turned his head at a series of some booms: the infidel landers leaping skyward from their landing field.

"They think they've escaped, subaltern," Maal Lah said. "But I know they have not."

Before the enemy fire blew the building down on him he had been in contact with his commanders in space, and devised a strategy that would give the enemy another surprise.

Was it possible to die of surprise? he wondered.

As a tactician, he knew that it was.

Jacen stood in silence and held the Jedi meld in his mind. The last of the landing party was leaving Ylesia, with Jaina and Lowbacca, and the enemy commander still had not made his move. Instead he continued to extend his flank, shifting a constant trickle of ships into the void. Admiral Kre'fey matched, each enemy deployment with one of his own. Both lines were now attenuated, too drawn out to be useful as a real battle line.

But why? Why had the enemy commander handicapped himself in this way, drawing out his forces until they were no longer able to fight cohesively? He had similarly handicapped Kre'fey, that was true, but he wasn't in a position to take advantage of it. What he should have done was attack immediately and try to trap the ground forces on Ylesia.

In Jacen's mind he could feel the Jedi pilots in their patrolling craft, scattered up and down the thinned-out enemy line. He felt their perceptions layered onto his, so he knew as well the positions of most of the fleet. And through their unified concentration on their own displays, he understood where they were in relationship to the enemy.

Why? Why was the Yuuzhan Vong commander maneuvering this way? It was almost as if there were a piece missing.

A missing piece. The piece fell into place with a snap that Jacen felt shuddering in his nerves. With some reluctance he banished the Force and the comforts of the meld from his mind, and he called up his Vongsense, the strange telepathy he had developed with Yuuzhan Vong life-forms during his captivity.

An immeasurably alien sense of being filled his thoughts. He could feel the enemy fleet extending its wing out into space, the implacable hostility of its every being, from the living ships to the breathing Yuuzhan Vong to the grutchins that waited packed into Yuuzhan Vong missiles . .

.

Jacen fought to extend his mind, extend his senses deep into space, into the void that surrounded the Ylesia system.

And there he found what he sought, an alien microcosm filled with barbarous purpose.

He opened his eyes and stared at Kre'fey, who was standing amid his silent staff, studying the displays.

"Admiral!" Jacen said. "There's another Vong fleet on its way!" He strode forward among the staff officers and thrust a pointing finger into the holographic display. "It's coming right here. Right behind our extended wing, where they can hammer us against the other Yuuzhan Vong force."

Kre'fey stared at Jacen from his gold-flecked violet eyes. "Are you certain?"

Jacen returned Kre'fey's stare. "Absolutely, Admiral. We've got to get our people out of there."

Kre'fey looked again at the display, at the shimmering interference patterns that ran over Jacen's pointing finger. "Yes," he said. "Yes, that has to be the explanation." He turned to his staff. "Order the extended wing to rejoin."

A host of communications specialists got very busy with their microphones. Kre'fey continued staring at Jacen's pointing finger, and then he nodded to himself.

"The extended wing is to fire a missile barrage here," Kre'fey said, and gave the coordinates indicated by Jacen's finger.

The capital ships on the detached wing belched out a gigantic missile barrage, seemingly aimed into empty space, and scurried back to the safety of the main body. When the Yuuzhan Vong reinforcements shimmered into realspace the missiles were already amid them, and the new arrivals hadn't yet configured their ships for defense, or launched a single coralskipper.

In the displays Jacen watched at the havoc the missiles wrought on the startled enemy. Almost all the ships were hit, and several broke up.

Kre'fey snarled. "How can I hurt the Vong today? We've answered, that question, haven't we?"

One of his staff officers gave a triumphant smile. "Troopships report the landing party has been recovered, Admiral."

"About time," someone muttered.

Since the wing was contracting inward anyway, Kre'fey got the whole fleet moving in the same direction. The newly arrived Yuuzhan Vong were too disorganized, and too out of position, to make an effective pursuit. The first arrivals charged after Kre'fey, but they were strung out while Kre'fey's forces were concentrating, and their intervention had no hope of being decisive.

But even though Kre'fey had assured the escape of his force, the battle was far from over. The Yuuzhan Vong commander was angry and his warriors still possessed the suicidal bravery that marked their caste. Ships were hard hit, and starfighters vaporized, and hulls broken up to tumble through the cold emptiness of Ylesian space, before the fleet exited the traitor capital's mass shadow and made the hyperspace jump to Kashyyyk.

"I don't want to do anything like that again," Jaina said. She was in the officers' lounge of Starsider, sitting on a chair with a cup of tea in her hand, her boots off, and her stockinged feet in Jag Fel's lap.

"Ylesia was like hitting your head again and again on a brick wall," she went on. "One tactical problem after another, and the solution to each one was a straightforward assault right at the enemy, or straightforward flight with the enemy in pursuit." She sighed as Jag's fingers massaged a particularly sensitive area of her right foot. "I'm better when I can be Yun-Harla the Trickster," she said. "Not when I'm playing the enemy's game, but when I can make the enemy play mine."

"You refer to sabacc, I take it," Jag said, a bit sourly.

Jaina looked at Jacen, sitting opposite her and sipping on a glass of Gizer ale. "Are you going to take Kre'fey up on his offer of a squadron command.?"

Jacen inhaled, the musky scent of the ale as he considered, his answer. "I think I may serve better on the bridge of Ralroost" he said finally, and thought of his finger floating in Kre'fey's holo display, pointing at the enemy fleet that wasn't there.

"Ylesia," he continued, "showed that my talents seem to be more spatial and, uh, coordinative. Is coordinative a word?"

"I hope not," Jag said.

Jacen felt regret at the thought of leaving starfighters entirely. He had joined Kre'fey's fleet in order to guard his sister's back, and perhaps that was best done by flying alongside her in an X-wing. But he suspected that he'd be able to offer a higher order of assistance if he stayed out of a starfighter cockpit, instead using the Jedi meld to shape the way the others fought.

"Look," Jag pointed out, "Jaina's got it wrong. Ylesia wasn't a defeat. Jaina's downed pilots were rescued, and so were mine. We hurt the enemy a lot more than they hurt us, thanks in part to Spooky Mind-Meld Man, here." He nodded toward Jacen. "We destroyed a collaborationist fleet and captured enough of the Peace Brigade's upper echelon to provide dozens of splashy trials. The media will be occupied for months."

"It didn't feel like a victory," Jaina said. "It felt like we barely escaped with our necks."

"That's only because you don't have a sufficiently detached perspective," Jag said seriously.

Mention of the Peace Brigade had set Jacen's mind thinking along other channels. He looked at Jaina. "Do you think Thrackan's really innocent?"

Jaina was startled. "Innocent of what?"

"Of collaboration. Do you think the story he told about being forced into the Presidency could possibly have been true?"

Jaina gave a disbelieving laugh. "Too ludicrous."

"No, really. He's a complete human chauvinist. I know he's a bad guy and he held us prisoner and wants to rule Corellia as diktat, but he hates aliens so much I can't believe he'd work with the Yuuzhan Vong voluntarily."

Jaina tilted her head in thought. Jag's foot massage had put a blissful expression on her face. "Well, he did call Pwoe a Squid Head. That's a point in his favor."

"If Sal-Solo wishes to prove his innocence," Jag said, "he need only volunteer for interrogation under truth drugs. If his collaboration was involuntary, the drugs would reveal it." Grim amusement passed across his scarred features. "But I think he's afraid that such an interrogation would reveal how he came to be in the hands of the Yuuzhan Vong in the first place. That's what would truly condemn him."

"Ahh," Jaina said. Jacen couldn't tell if she was enlightened or, in light of the foot rub, experiencing a form of ecstasy.

Jacen, sipping his ale, decided that whatever the truth of the matter, it wasn't any of his business.

Thrackan Sal-Solo paced across the durasteel-walled prison exercise yard, his mind busy with plans.

Tomorrow, he'd been told, he would be transferred to Corellia, where he would undergo trial for treason against his home planet.

He'd accept the transfer peacefully, and behave as a model prisoner for most of the way home. But that was only to lull his guards.

He'd catch them at a disadvantage, and bash them over the head with an improvised weapon -- he didn't know what exactly, he'd work that out later. Then he'd, take command, of the ship -- he hoped, it was an Incom model, he could, fly anything Incom made. He'd crash the ship into a remote area of Corellia and. make it appear he died, in the flames.

Then he'd make contact with some of the people on Corellia he could still trust. He'd reorganize the Centerpoint Party, strike, and seize power. He would rule the world. No, five worlds.

It was his destiny, and nothing could stop him. Thrackan Sal-Solo wasn't meant to be condemned to a miserable life on a prison planet.

Well. Not more than once, anyway.