

STAR WARS

THE PREQUEL TRILOGY



THE
PHANTOM
MENACE

ATTACK
OF THE
CLONES

REVENGE
OF THE
SITH

STAR WARS

THE PREQUEL TRILOGY

THE PHANTOM MENACE™

TERRY BROOKS

BASED ON THE SCREENPLAY AND STORY
BY GEORGE LUCAS

ATTACK OF THE CLONES™

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BASED ON THE STORY BY GEORGE LUCAS
AND THE SCREENPLAY BY GEORGE LUCAS AND
JONATHAN HALES

REVENGE OF THE SITH™

MATTHEW STOVER

BASED ON THE STORY AND SCREENPLAY
BY GEORGE LUCAS



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STAR WARS

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THE PHANTOM MENACE™

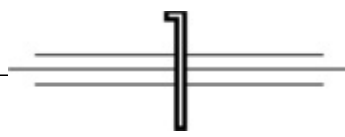
TERRY BROOKS

BASED ON THE STORY AND SCREENPLAY

BY GEORGE LUCAS

*To Lisa, Jill, Amanda, & Alex,
the kids who grew up with the story
&
to Hunter,
the first of the next generation*

A LONG TIME AGO IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY....



Tatooine.

The suns burned down out of a cloudless blue sky, washing the vast desert wastes of the planet in brilliant white light. The resultant glare rose off the flat, sandy surface in a shimmer of blistering heat to fill the gaps between the massive cliff faces and solitary outcroppings of the mountains that were the planet's sole distinguishing feature. Sharply etched, the monoliths stood like sentinels keeping watch in a watery haze.

When the Podracers streaked past, engines roaring with ferocious hunger and relentless drive, the heat and the light seemed to shatter and the mountains themselves to tremble.

Anakin Skywalker leaned into the curve of the raceway that took him past the stone arch marking the entry into Beggar's Canyon on the first lap of the run, easing the thruster bars forward, giving the engines a little more juice. The wedge-shaped rockets exploded with power, the right a tad harder than the left, banking the Pod in which Anakin sat sharply left to clear the turn. Swiftly, he adjusted the steering to straighten the racer, boosted power further, and shot through the arch. Loose sand whiplashed in the wake of his passing, filling the air with a gritty sheen, whirling and dancing through the heat. He ripped into the canyon, fingers playing across the controls, hands steady on the steering.

It was all so quick, so instantaneous. One mistake, one misjudgment, and he would be out of the race and lucky if he weren't dead. That was the thrill of it. All that power, all that speed, just at his fingertips, and no margin for error. Two huge turbines dragged a fragile Pod over sandy flats, around jagged-edged mountains, down shadowed draws, and over heart-wrenching drops in a series of twisting, winding curves and jumps at the greatest speed a driver could manage. Control cables ran from the Pod to the engines, and energy binders locked the engines to each other. If any part of the three struck something solid, the whole of the assembly would collapse in a splintering of metal and a fiery wash of rocket fuel. If any part broke free, it was all over.

A grin split Anakin's young face as he injected a bit more power into the thrusters.

Ahead, the canyon narrowed and the shadows deepened. Anakin bore down on the slit of brightness that opened back onto the flats, keeping low to the ground where passage was widest. If he stayed high, he risked brushing the cliff faces on either side. That had happened to Regga in a race last month, and they were still looking for the pieces.

It would not happen to him.

He shoved the thruster bars forward and exploded through the gap onto the flats, engines screaming.

Sitting in the Pod with his hands on the controls, Anakin could feel the vibration of the engines travel up the control cables and fill him with their music. Wrapped in his rough-machined jumpsuit, his racing helmet, his goggles, and his gloves, he was wedged so closely in his seat that he could feel the rush of the wind across the Pod's skin beneath him. When he raced like this, he was never simply the driver of a Podracer, never just an additional part. Rather, he was at one with the whole, and engines, Pod, and he were bound together in a way he could

not entirely explain. Each shimmy, each small throb, each tug and twist of strut and tie were apparent to him, and he could sense at any given moment exactly what was happening throughout the length and breadth of his racer. It spoke to him in its own language, a mix of sounds and feelings, and though it did not use words, he could understand everything it said.

Sometimes, he thought dreamily, he could sense what it would say before it even spoke.

A flash of gleaming orange metal shot past him on his right, and he watched the distinctive split-X of Sebulba's engines flare out before him, taking away the lead he had seized through an unusually quick start. His brow wrinkled in disgust at himself for his momentary lapse of concentration and his dislike of the other racer. All gangly and crook-legged, Sebulba was twisted inside as out, a dangerous adversary who won often and took delight in doing so at the expense of others. The Dug had caused more than a dozen crashes of other Podracers in the past year alone, and his eyes glinted with wicked pleasure when he recounted the tales of others on the dusty streets of Mos Espa. Anakin knew Sebulba well—and knew better than to take chances with him.

He rode the thruster bars forward, fed fresh power to the engines, and rocketed ahead.

It didn't help, he supposed as he watched the distance between them narrow, that he was human or, much worse, that he was the only human ever to drive in the Podraces. The ultimate test of skill and daring on Tatooine and the favorite spectator sport of the citizens of Mos Espa, it was supposed to be beyond the skill and capability of any human. Multiple arms and multi-hinged joints, stalk eyes, heads that swiveled 180 degrees, and bodies that twisted as if boneless gave advantages to other creatures that humans could not begin to overcome. The most famous racers, the best of a rare breed, were strangely shaped, complexly formed beings with a penchant for taking risks that bordered on insanity.

But Anakin Skywalker, while nothing like these, was so intuitive in his understanding of the skills required by his sport and so comfortable with its demands that his lack of these other attributes seemed to matter not at all. It was a source of some mystery to everyone and a source of disgust and growing irritation to Sebulba in particular.

Last month, in another race, the wily Dug had tried to run Anakin into a cliff face. He had failed only because Anakin sensed him coming up from behind and underneath, an illegal razor saw extended to sever Anakin's right Steelton control cable, and Anakin lifted away for safety before the saw could do its damage. His escape cost him the race, but allowed him to keep his life. It was a trade he was still angry at having been forced to make.

The racers whipped through columns of ancient statuary and across the floor of the arena erected on the edge of Mos Espa. They swept under the winner's arch, past row upon row of seats crammed with spectators cheering them on, past pit droids, repair stations, and the boxes where the Hutts watched in isolated splendor above the commoners. From an overlook in a tower centered on the arch, the two-headed Troig who served as announcer would be shouting out their names and positions to the crowd. Anakin allowed himself a momentary glimpse of blurred figures that were left behind so fast they might have been nothing more than a mirage. His mother, Shmi, would be among them, worrying as she always did. She hated watching him drive in the Podraces, but she couldn't help herself. She never said so, but he thought she believed that simply by being there she could keep him from coming to harm. It had worked so far. He had crashed twice and failed to finish even once, but after more than half a dozen races he was unharmed. And he liked having her there. It gave him

strange sort of confidence in himself he didn't like to think about too closely.

Besides, what choice did they have in the matter? He raced because he was good at it. Watto knew he was good at it, and whatever Watto wanted of him he would do. That was the price you paid when you were a slave, and Anakin Skywalker had been a slave all his life.

Arch Canyon rose broad and deep before him, an expanse of rock leading into Jag Crater Gorge, a twisting channel the racers were required to navigate on their way to the high flats beyond. Sebulba was just ahead, rocketing low and tight across the ground, trying to put some distance between Anakin and himself. Behind Anakin, close now, were three other racers spread out against the horizon. A quick glance revealed Mawhonic, Gasgano, and Rimkar trailing in his strange bubble pod. All three were gaining. Anakin started to engage his thrusters, then drew back. They were too close to the gorge. Too much power there, and he would be in trouble. Response time in the channel was compacted down to almost nothing. It was better to wait.

Mawhonic and Gasgano seemed to agree, settling their Pods into place behind his as they approached the split in the rock. But Rimkar was not content to wait and roared past Anakin's split seconds before they entered the cleft and disappeared into darkness.

Anakin leveled out his Pod, lifting slightly from the rock-strewn floor of the channel, letting his memory and his instincts take him down the winding cut. When he raced, everything around him slowed down rather than sped up. It was different than you'd expect. Rock and sand and shadows flew past in a wild mix of patterns and shapes, and still he could see so clearly. All the details seemed to jump out at him, as if illuminated by exactly what he should make them so difficult to distinguish. He could almost close his eyes and drive, he thought. He was that much in tune with everything around him, that much aware of where he was.

He eased swiftly down the channel, catching glimpses of Rimkar's engine exhausts as they flashed crimson in the shadows. Far, far overhead, the sky was a brilliant blue streak down the center of the mountain, sending a frail streamer of light into the gap that lost brilliance with every meter it dropped so that by the time it reached Anakin and his fellow racers, it barely cut the dark. Yet Anakin was at peace, lost deep within himself as he drove his Pod, bonded with his engines, given over to the throb and hum of his racer and the soft, velvet dark that folded about.

When they emerged into the light once more, Anakin jammed the thruster bars forward and streaked after Sebulba. Mawhonic and Gasgano were right behind. Ahead, Rimkar had caught Sebulba and was trying to edge past. The lanky Dug lifted his split-X engines slightly to scrape against Rimkar's Pod. But Rimkar's rounded shell eased smoothly away, unaffected. Side by side the racers tore across the high flats, headed for Metta Drop. Anakin closed on them, drawing away from Mawhonic and Gasgano. People said what they wanted about Watto—and there was plenty to say that wasn't good—but he had an eye for Podracers. The big engines jumped obediently as Anakin fed fuel into the thrusters, and in seconds he was drawing alongside Sebulba's split-X.

They were even when they reached Metta Drop and rocketed over and tumbled straight down.

The trick with drops, as every racer knew, was to gather enough speed going down to gain time over your opponents, but not so much speed that the racer couldn't pull out of the drop.

and level out again before it nose-dived into the rocks below. So when Sebulba pulled out early, Anakin was momentarily surprised. Then he felt the backwash of the split-X engines hammer into his Pod. The treacherous Dug had only looked as if he would pull out and instead had lifted away and then deliberately fishtailed atop both Anakin and Rimkar, using his exhaust to slam them against the cliff face.

Rimkar, caught completely by surprise, jammed his thruster bars forward in an automatic response that took him right into the mountain. Metal fragments of Pod and engines careened away from the rock wall in a fiery shower, leaving a long black scar along the ravaged surface.

Anakin might have gone the same way but for his instincts. Almost before he knew what he was doing, at the same instant he felt the backwash of Sebulba's engines slam into him, he lifted out of his own descent and away from the mountain, almost colliding with a surprise Sebulba, who veered off wildly to save himself. Anakin's sudden wrenching of his Pod's steering took him spinning away into the midday, off course and out of control. He pulled back on the steering, eased off on the thrusters, cut the fuel supply to the big engines, and watched the ground rise up to meet him in a rush of sand and reflected light.

He struck the ground in a bone-wrenching skid that severed both control cables, the big engines flying off in two directions while the Pod careened first left, then right, and then began to roll. Anakin could only brace himself inside, spinning and twisting in a roil of sand and heat, praying that he didn't wind up against an outcropping of rock. Metal shrieked in protest and dust filled the Pod's interior. Somewhere off to his right, an engine exploded in a ground-shaking roar. Anakin's arms were stretched out to either side, keeping him square as he placed through the pummeling the Pod experienced as it continued to roll and then roll some more.

Finally, it stopped, tilted wildly to one side. Anakin waited a moment, then loosened his restraining belt and crawled out. The heat of the desert rose to meet him, and the blinding sunlight bore down through his goggles. Overhead, the last of the Podracers streaked away into the blue horizon, engines whining and booming. Silence followed, deep and profound.

Anakin glanced left and right at what remained of his engines, taking in the damage and assessing the work they would need to operate again. He looked finally at his Pod and grimaced. Watto would not be happy.

But then Watto seldom was.

Anakin Skywalker sat down with his back against the ruined Pod, gaining what small relief he could from its shadow in the glare of Tatooine's twin suns. A landspeeder would be along in a few minutes to pick him up. Watto would be there to chew him out. His mother would be there to give him a hug and take him home. He wasn't satisfied with how things had turned out, but he wasn't discouraged either. He could have won the race if Sebulba had played fair. He could have won easily.

He sighed and tipped back his helmet.

One day soon he would win a lot of races. Maybe even next year, when he reached the age of ten.

Do you have any idea what this is going to cost me, boy? Do you have any idea at all? *Obi-wan!* *chee ka!*”

Watto hovered before him, launching into Huttese without even thinking about it, choosing a language that offered a vast array of insulting adjectives he could draw upon. Anakin stood stoically in place, his young face expressionless, his eyes fastened on the pudgy blue Toydarian hovering before him. Watto’s wings were a blur of motion, beating with such ferocity it seemed as if they must surely fly off his lumpy little body. Anakin stifled an urge to laugh as he imagined this happening. It would not do to laugh just now.

When Watto paused for breath, Anakin said quietly, “It wasn’t my fault. Sebulba flashed me with his port vents and nearly smashed me into Metta Drop. He cheated.”

Watto’s mouth worked as if chewing something, his snout wrinkling over his protruding teeth. “Of course he cheated, boy! He always cheats! That’s how he wins! Maybe you should cheat just a little now and then! Maybe then you wouldn’t crash your Pod time after time and cost me so much money!”

They were standing in Watto’s shop in the merchants’ district of Mos Espa, a dingy mud-and-sand hut fronting an enclosure packed with rocket and engine parts salvaged from scrapped and junked wrecks. It was cool and shadowy inside, the planet’s heat shut out by the thick walls, but even here dust hung in the air in hazy streamers caught by the ambient light cast by glow lamps. The race had long since ended and the planet’s twin suns had dropped toward the horizon with evening’s slow approach. The wrecked Podracer and its engines had been transported by mechanic droids from the flats back to the shop. Anakin had been transported back as well, though with somewhat less enthusiasm.

“*Rassa dwee cuppa, peedunkel!*” Watto screamed, starting in again on Anakin in a fresh burst of Huttese.

The pudgy body lurched forward a few centimeters with each epithet, causing Anakin to step back in spite of his resolve. Watto’s bony arms and legs gestured with the movements of his head and body, giving him a comical appearance. He was angry, but Anakin had seen him angry before and knew what to expect. He did not cringe or bow his head in submission; he stood his ground and took his scolding unflinchingly. He was a slave and Watto was his master. Scoldings were part of life. Besides, Watto would wind down shortly now, his anger released in a manner that would satisfy his need to cast blame in a direction other than his own, and things would go back to normal.

All three fingers of Watto’s right hand pointed at the boy. “I shouldn’t let you drive for me anymore! That’s what I should do! I should find another driver!”

“I think that is a very good idea,” Shmi agreed.

Anakin’s mother had been standing to one side, not saying anything during the whole of Watto’s diatribe, but now she was quick to take advantage of a suggestion she would have made herself, if asked.

Watto wheeled on her, spinning violently, wings whirring, and flew to confront her. But

her calm, steady gaze brought him up short, pinning him in the air midway between mother and son.

“It’s too dangerous in any case,” she continued reasonably. “He’s only a boy.”

Watto was immediately defensive. “He’s my boy, my property, and he’ll do what I want him to do!”

“Exactly.” Shmi’s dark eyes stared out of her worn, lined face with resolution. “Which way he won’t race anymore if you don’t want him to. Isn’t that what you just said?”

Watto seemed confused by this. He worked his mouth and trunklike nose in a routine manner, but no words would come out. Anakin watched his mother appreciatively. Her long dark hair was beginning to gray, and her once graceful movements had slowed. But he thought she was beautiful and brave. He thought she was perfect.

Watto advanced on her another few centimeters, then stopped once more. Shmi held herself erect in the same way that Anakin did, refusing to concede anything to her condition. Watto regarded her sourly for a moment more, then spun around and flew at the boy.

“You will fix everything you ruined, boy!” he snapped, shaking his finger at Anakin. “You will repair the engines and the Pod and make them as good as new! Better than new, in fact. And you’ll start right now! Right this instant. Get out there and get to work!”

He spun back toward Shmi defiantly. “Still plenty of daylight for a boy to work! Time to work, money!” He gestured at first mother and then son. “Get on with it, the both of you! Back to work, back to work!”

Shmi gave Anakin a warm smile. “Go on, Anakin,” she said softly. “Dinner will be waiting.”

She turned and went out the door. Watto, after giving Anakin a final withering glance, followed after her. Anakin stood in the shadowed room for a moment, staring at nothing. He was thinking that he shouldn’t have lost the race. Next time—and there would be a next time if he knew Watto—he wouldn’t.

Sighing in frustration, he turned and went out the back of the shop into the yard. He was a small boy, even at nine years of age, rather compactly built, with a mop of sandy hair, blue eyes, a pug nose, and an inquisitive stare. He was quick and strong for his age, and he was gifted in ways that constantly surprised those around him. He was already an accomplished driver in the Podraces, something no human of any age had ever been before. He was gifted with building skills that allowed him to put together almost anything. He was useful to Watto in both areas, and Watto was not one to waste a slave’s talent.

But what no one knew about him except his mother was the way he sensed things. Frequently he sensed them before anyone even knew they would happen. It was like a stirring in the air, a whisper of warning or suggestion that no one else could feel. It had served him well in the Podraces, but it was also there at other times. He had an affinity for recognizing how things were or how they ought to be. He was only nine years old and he could already see the world in ways most adults never would.

For all the good it was doing him just at the moment.

He kicked at the sand in the yard as he crossed to the engines and Pod the droids had dumped there earlier. Already his mind was working on what it would take to make them operable again. The right engine was almost untouched, if he ignored the scrapes and tears on the metal skin. The left was a mess, though. And the Pod was battered and bent, the control panel a shambles.

“Fidget,” he muttered softly. “Just fidget!”

Mechanic droids came out at his beckoning and set to work removing the damaged parts of the racer. He was only minutes into sorting through the scrap when he realized there were parts he needed that Watto did not have on hand, including thermal varistats and thrust relays. He would have to trade for them from one of the other shops before he could start on a reassembly. Watto would not like that. He hated asking for parts from other shops, insisting that anything worth having he already had, unless it came from off world. The fact that he was trading for what he needed didn't seem to take the edge off his rancor at having to deal with the locals. He'd rather win what he needed in a Podrace. Or simply steal it.

Anakin looked skyward, where the last of the day's light was beginning to fade. The first stars were coming out, small pinpricks against the deepening black of the night sky. Worlds he had never seen and could only dream about waited out there, and one day he would visit them. He would not be here forever. Not him.

“Psst! Anakin!”

A voice whispered cautiously to him from the deep shadows at the back of the yard, and a pair of small forms slipped through the narrow gap at the fence corner where the wire had failed. It was Kitster, his best friend, creeping into view with Wald, another friend, following close behind. Kitster was small and dark, his hair cut in a close bowl about his head, his clothing loose and nondescript, designed to preserve moisture and deflect heat and sound. Wald, trailing uncertainly, was a Rodian, an off-worlder who had come to Tatooine only recently. He was several years younger than his friends, but bold enough that they let him hang around with them most of the time.

“Hey, Annie, what're you doing?” Kitster asked, glancing around doubtfully, keeping a wary eye out for Watto.

Anakin shrugged. “Watto says I have to fix the Pod up again, make it like new.”

“Yeah, but not today,” Kitster advised solemnly. “Today's almost over. C'mon. Tomorrow's soon enough for that. Let's go get a ruby bliel.”

It was their favorite drink. Anakin felt his mouth water. “I can't. I have to stay and work on this until ...”

He stopped. Until dark, he was going to say, but it was nearly dark already, so ...

“What'll we buy them with?” he asked doubtfully.

Kitster motioned toward Wald. “He's got five druggats he says he found somewhere or other.” He gave Wald a sharp look. “He says.”

“Got 'em right here, I do.” Wald's strange, scaly head nodded assurance, his protruding eyes blinking hard. He pulled on one green ear. “Don't you believe me?” Wald said in Huttese.

“Yeah, yeah, we believe you.” Kitster winked at Anakin. “C'mon, let's go before our flapping wings gets back.”

They went out through the gap in the fence and down the road behind, turned left, and hurried through the crowded plaza toward the food stores just ahead. The streets were still crowded, but the traffic was all headed homeward or to the Hutt pleasure dens. The boys zipped smoothly through knots of people and carts, past speeders hovering just off surface down walks beneath awnings in the process of being drawn up, and along stacks of goods being set inside under lock and key.

In moments, they had reached the shop that sold ruby bliels and had worked their way up to the counter.

Wald was as good as his word, and he produced the requisite druggats in exchange for three drinks and handed one to each of his friends. They took them outside, sipping at the gooey mixture through straws, and made their way slowly back down the street, chatting among themselves about racers and speeders and mainline ships, about battle cruisers and starfighters and the pilots who captained them. They would all be pilots one day, they promised each other, a vow they sealed with spit and hand slaps.

They were right in the middle of a heated discussion over the merits of starfighters, when a voice close to them said, "Give me the choice, I'd take a Z-95 Headhunter every time."

The boys turned as one. An old spacer stood leaning on a speeder hitch, watching them. They knew what he was right away from his clothing, weapons, and the small, worn fighter corps insignia he wore stitched to his tunic. It was a Republic insignia. You didn't see many of those on Tatooine.

"Saw you race today," the old spacer said to Anakin. He was tall and lean and corded, his face weatherworn and sun-browned, his eyes an odd color of gray, his hair cut short so that it bristled from his scalp, his smile ironic and warm. "What's your name?"

"Anakin Skywalker," Anakin told him uncertainly. "These are my friends, Kitster and Wald."

The old spacer nodded wordlessly at the other two, keeping his eyes fixed on Anakin. "You fly like your name, Anakin. You walk the sky like you own it. You show promise." He straightened and shifted his weight with practiced ease, glancing from one boy to the next. "You want to fly the big ships someday?"

All three boys nodded as one. The old spacer smiled. "There's nothing like it. Nothing. Flew all the big boys, once upon a time, when I was younger. Flew everything there was to fly, in and out of the corps. You recognize the insignia, boys?"

Again, they nodded, interested now, caught up in the wonder of coming face-to-face with a real pilot—not just of Podracers, but of fighters and cruisers and mainline ships.

"It was a long time ago," the spacer said, his voice suddenly distant. "I left the corps several years back. Too old. Time passes you by, leaves you to find something else to do with what's left of your life." He pursed his lips. "How're those ruby bliels? Still good? Haven't had one in years. Maybe now's a good time. You boys care to join me? Care to drink a ruby bliel with an old pilot of the Republic?"

He didn't have to ask twice. He took them back down the street to the shop they had just left and purchased a second drink for each of them and one for himself. They went back outside to a quiet spot off the plaza and stood sipping at the bliels and staring up at the sky. The light was gone, and stars were sprinkled all over the darkened firmament, a wash of silver specks nestled against the black.

"Flew all my life," the old spacer advised solemnly, eyes fixed on the sky. "Flew everywhere I could manage, and you know what? I couldn't get to a hundredth of what's out there. Couldn't get to a millionth. But it was fun trying. A whole lot of fun."

His gaze shifted to the boys again. "Flew a cruiser filled with Republic soldiers into Makeb during its rebellion. That was a scary business. Flew Jedi Knights once upon a time, too."

"Jedi!" Kitster exhaled sharply. "Wow!"

“Really? You really flew Jedi?” Anakin pressed, eyes wide.

The spacer laughed at their wonder. “Cross my heart and call me bantha fodder if I’m lying. It was a long time ago, but I flew four of them to a place I’m not supposed to talk about even now. Told you. I’ve been everywhere a man can get to in one lifetime. Everywhere.”

“I want to fly ships to those worlds one day,” Anakin said softly.

Wald snorted doubtfully. “You’re a slave, Annie. You can’t go anywhere.”

The old pilot looked down at Anakin. The boy couldn’t look at him. “Well,” he said softly, “in this life you’re often born one thing and die another. You don’t have to accept that when you’re given when you come in is all you’ll have when you leave.”

He laughed suddenly. “Reminds me of something. I flew the Kessel Run once, long ago. Not many have done that and lived to tell about it. Lots told me I couldn’t do it, told me not to bother trying, to give it up and go on to something else. But I wanted that experience, so I just went ahead and found a way to prove them wrong.”

He looked down at Anakin. “Could be that’s what you’ll have to do, young Skywalker. I’ve seen how you handle a Podracer. You got the eyes for it, the feel. You’re better than I was at twice your age.” He nodded solemnly. “You want to fly the big ships, I think maybe you will.”

He stared at the boy, and Anakin stared back. The old spacer smiled and nodded slowly. “Yep, Anakin Skywalker, I do think maybe one day you will.”

He arrived home late for dinner and received his second scolding of the day. He might have tried making something up about having to stay late for Watto, but Anakin Skywalker didn’t lie to his mother. Not about anything, not ever. He told her the truth, about stealing away with Kitster and Wald, about drinking ruby bliels, and about sharing stories with the old spacer. Shmi wasn’t impressed. She didn’t like her son spending time with people she didn’t know, even though she understood how boys were and how capable Anakin was of looking after himself.

“If you feel the need to avoid the work you’ve been given by Watto, come see me about the work that needs doing here at home,” she advised him sternly.

Anakin didn’t argue with her, smart enough by now to realize that arguing in these situations seldom got him anywhere. He sat quietly, eating with his head down, nodding when nodding was called for, thinking that his mother loved him and was worried for him and that made her anger and frustration with him all right.

Afterward, they sat outside on stools in front of their home in the cool night air and looked up at the stars. Anakin liked sitting outside at night before bed. It wasn’t so close and confined as it was inside. He could breathe out here. His home was small and shabby and packed tight against dozens of others, its thick walls comprised of a mixture of mud and sand. It was typical of quarters provided for slaves in this part of Mos Espa, a hut with a central room and one or two bumpouts for sleeping. But his mother kept it neat and clean, and Anakin had his own room, which was rather larger than most and where he kept his stuff. A large workbench and tools took up most of the available space. Right now he was engaged in building a protocol droid to help his mom. He was adding the needed parts a piece at a time, scavenging them from wherever he could, slowly restoring the whole. Already it could talk and move about and do a few things. He would have it up and running soon.

“Are you tired, Annie?” his mother asked after a long silence.

He shook his head. “Not really.”

“Still thinking about the race?”

“Yes.”

And he was, but mostly he was thinking about the old spacer and his tales of flying mainline ships to distant worlds, of going into battle for the Republic, and of rubbing shoulders with Jedi Knights.

“I don’t want you racing Pods anymore, Annie,” his mother said softly. “I don’t want you to ask Watto to let you. Promise me you won’t.”

He nodded reluctantly. “I promise.” He thought about it a moment. “But what if Watto tells me I have to, Mom? What am I supposed to do then? I have to do what he tells me. So if he asks, I have to race.”

She reached over and put a hand on his arm, patting him gently. “I think maybe after today he won’t ask again. He’ll find someone else.”

Anakin didn’t say so, but he knew his mother was wrong. There wasn’t anyone better than he was at Podracing. Not even Sebulba, if he couldn’t cheat. Besides, Watto would never pay to have someone else drive when he could have Anakin do it for free. Watto would stay mad another day or two and then begin to think about winning again. Anakin would be back in the Podraces before the month was out.

He gazed skyward, his mother’s hand resting lightly on his arm, and thought about what it would be like to be out there, flying battle cruisers and fighters, traveling to far worlds and strange places. He didn’t care what Watto said, he wouldn’t be a slave all his life. Just as he wouldn’t always be a boy. He would find a way to leave Tatooine. He would find a way to take his mother with him. His dreams whirled through his head as he watched the stars, a kaleidoscope of bright images. He imagined how it would be. He saw it clearly in his mind and it made him smile.

One day, he thought, seeing the old spacer’s face in the darkness before him, the wry smile and strange grey eyes, I’ll do everything you’ve done. Everything.

He took a deep breath and held it.

I’ll even fly with Jedi Knights.

Slowly he exhaled, the promise sealed.

The small Republic space cruiser, its red color the symbol of ambassadorial neutrality, knifed through starry blackness toward the emerald bright planet of Naboo and the cluster of Trade Federation fleet ships that encircled it. The ships were huge, blocky fortresses, tubular in shape, split at one end and encircling an orb that sheltered the bridge, communication center, and hyperdrive. Armaments bristled from every port and bay, and Trade Federation fighters circled the big beasts like gnats. The more traditionally shaped Republic cruiser, with its tri-engines, flat body, and squared-off cockpit, looked insignificant in the shadow of the Trade Federation battleships, but it continued toward them, undeterred.

The cruiser's captain and copilot sat side by side at the forward console, hands moving swiftly over the controls as they steered closer to the ship with the Trade Federation viceroy's insignia emblazoned on its bridge. There was a nervous energy to their movements that was unmistakable. From time to time, they would glance uneasily at each other—and over their shoulders at the figure who stood in the shadows behind.

On the viewscreen in front of them, captured from his position on the bridge of the battleship toward which they were headed, was Trade Federation Viceroy Nute Gunray, his reddish orange eyes staring out at them expectantly. The Neimoidian wore his perpetual sour expression, mouth downturned, bony brow emphasizing his discontent. His green-gray skin reflected the ambient lighting of the ship, all pale and cold in contrast to his dark robe collar, and tricornered headdress.

"Captain."

The cruiser captain turned slightly in her seat to acknowledge the figure concealed in the shadows behind her. "Yes, sir?"

"Tell them we wish to board at once."

The voice was deep and smooth, but the measure of resolution it contained was unmistakable.

"Yes, sir," the captain said, giving the copilot a covert glance, which the copilot returned. The captain faced Nute Gunray on the screen. "With all due respect, Viceroy, the ambassadors for the supreme chancellor have requested that they be allowed to board immediately."

The Neimoidian nodded quickly. "Yes, yes, Captain, of course. We would be happy to receive the ambassadors at their convenience. Happy to, Captain."

The screen went dark. The captain hesitated, glancing back at the figure behind her. "Sir?"

"Proceed, Captain," Qui-Gon Jinn said.

The Jedi Master watched silently as the Trade Federation battleship loomed before them, filling the viewport with its gleaming bulk. Qui-Gon was a tall, powerfully built man with prominent, leonine features. His beard and mustache were close-cropped and his hair was worn long and tied back. Tunic, pants, and hooded robe were typically loose-fitting and comfortable, a sash binding them at his waist where his lightsaber hung just out of view, but within easy reach.

Qui-Gon's sharp blue eyes fixed on the battleship as if to see what waited within. The

Republic's taxation of the trade routes between the star systems had been in dispute since inception, but until now all the Trade Federation had done in response was to complain. The blockade of Naboo was the first act of outright defiance, and while the Federation was a powerful body, equipped with its own battle fleet and army of droids, its action here was atypical. The Neimoidians were entrepreneurs, not fighters. They lacked the backbone necessary to undertake a challenge to the Republic. Somehow they had found that backbone. It bothered Qui-Gon that he could not explain how.

He shifted his weight as the cruiser moved slowly into the gap in the Trade Federation flagship's outer wheel toward the hangar bay. Tractor beams took hold, guiding the cruiser inside where magnetic clamps locked the ship in place. The blockade had been in effect now for almost a month. The Republic Senate continued to debate the action, searching for an amicable way to resolve the dispute. But no progress had been made, and at last the supreme chancellor had secretly notified the Jedi Council that he had sent two Jedi directly to the ostensible initiators of the blockade, the Neimoidians, in an effort to resolve the matter more directly. It was a bold move. In theory, the Jedi Knights served the supreme chancellor in responding on his direction to life-threatening situations. But any interference in the internal politics of the Senate's member bodies, particularly where an armed conflict between worlds was involved, required Senate approval. The supreme chancellor was skirting the edges of his authority in this case. At best, this was a covert action and would spark heated debate in the Senate at a later date.

The Jedi Master sighed. While none of this was his concern, he could not ignore the implications of what it meant if he failed. The Jedi Knights were peacemakers; that was the nature of their order and the dictate of their creed. For thousands of years they had served the Republic, a constant source of stability and order in a changing universe. Founded as a theological and philosophical study group so far back that its origins were the stuff of myth, the Jedi had only gradually become aware of the presence of the Force. Years had been spent in its study, in contemplation of its meaning, in mastery of its power. Slowly the order had evolved, abandoning its practice of and belief in a life of isolated meditation in favor of a more outward-looking commitment to social responsibility. Understanding the Force sufficiently to master its power required more than private study. It required service to the greater community and implementation of a system of laws that would guarantee equal justice for all. That battle was not yet won. It probably never would be. But the Jedi Knights would not see it lost for lack of their trying.

In the time of Qui-Gon Jinn, ten thousand Jedi Knights in service to the Republic carried on the struggle each day of their lives in a hundred thousand different worlds spread across a galaxy so vast it could barely be comprehended.

He turned slightly as his companion in this present enterprise arrived on the bridge and came up to stand beside him. "Are we to board?" Obi-Wan Kenobi asked softly.

Qui-Gon nodded. "The viceroy will meet with us."

He glanced momentarily at his protégé, taking his measure. Obi-Wan, in his mid-twenties, was more than thirty years younger and still learning his craft. He was not yet a full Jedi, but he was close to being ready. Obi-Wan was shorter than Qui-Gon, but compact and very quick. His smooth, boyish face suggested an immaturity that had been long since shed. He wore the same type of clothes as Qui-Gon, but his hair was cut in the style of a Padawan learner, short

and even, save for the tightly braided pigtail that hung over his right shoulder.

Qui-Gon was staring out the viewport at the interior of the Trade Federation battleship when he spoke again. "Why Naboo, do you think, my young apprentice? Why blockade this particular planet, when there are so many to choose from, most larger and more likely to feel the effects of such an action?"

Obi-Wan said nothing. Naboo was indeed an odd choice for an action of this sort, a planet at the edge of the galaxy, not particularly important in the scheme of things. Its ruler, Padmé Amidala, was something of an unknown. New to the throne, she had only been Queen a few months before the blockade had begun. She was young, but it was rumored she was prodigiously talented and extremely well trained. It was said she could hold her own with anyone in a political arena. It was said she could be circumspect or bold when necessary, and was wise beyond her years.

The Jedi had been shown a hologram of Amidala before they left Coruscant. The Queen favored theatrical paint and ornate dress, cloaking herself in trappings and makeup that disguised her true appearance while lending her an aura of both splendor and beauty. She was a chameleon of sorts, masking herself to the world at large and finding companionship almost exclusively with a cadre of handmaidens who were always with her.

Qui-Gon hesitated a moment longer, thinking the matter through, then said to Obi-Wan, "Come, let's be off."

They passed downward through the bowels of the ship to the main hatch, waited for the light to turn green, and released the locking bar so that the ramp could lower. Raising their hoods to help conceal their faces, they stepped out into the light.

A protocol droid named TC-14 was waiting to escort them to their meeting. The droid took them from the bay down a series of hallways to an empty conference room and motioned them inside.

"I hope your honored sirs will be comfortable here." The tinny voice reverberated inside the metal shell. "My master will be with you shortly."

The droid turned and went out, closing the door softly behind. Qui-Gon watched it go, glanced briefly at the exotic, birdlike creatures caged near the door, then moved to join Obi-Wan at a broad window that looked out through the maze of Federation battleships to where the lush green sphere of Naboo hung resplendent against the dark sky.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Obi-Wan said after a moment's contemplation of the planet.

Qui-Gon shook his head. "I don't sense anything."

Obi-Wan nodded. "It's not about here, Master. It's not about this mission. It's about something ... elsewhere. Something elusive ..."

The older Jedi put his hand on the other's shoulder. "Don't center on your anxiety, Obi-Wan. Keep your concentration on the here and now, where it belongs."

"Master Yoda says I should be mindful of the future—"

"But not at the expense of the present." Qui-Gon waited until his young apprentice was looking at him. "Be mindful of the living Force, my young Padawan."

To his credit, Obi-Wan managed a small smile. "Yes, Master." He looked out the viewport again, eyes distant. "How do you think the viceroy will deal with the supreme chancellor's demands?"

Qui-Gon gave an easy shrug. "These people are cowards. They will not be hard to persuade. The negotiations will be short."

On the bridge of the Trade Federation battleship, Neimoidian Viceroy Nute Gunray and his lieutenant, Daultay Dofine, stood staring in shock at the protocol droid they had sent to locate the ambassadors after the supreme chancellor's ambassadors.

"What did you say?" Gunray hissed furiously.

TC-14 was impervious to the look the Neimoidian gave it. "The ambassadors are Jedi Knights. One of them is a Jedi Master. I am quite certain of it."

Dofine, a flat-faced, restless sort, wheeled on his companion in dismay. "I knew it! The ambassadors were sent to force a settlement! The game's up! Blind me, we're done for!"

Gunray made a placating gesture. "Stay calm! I'll wager the Senate is completely unaware of the supreme chancellor's moves in this matter. Go. Distract them while I contact Lord Sidious."

The other Neimoidian gaped at him. "Are you brain-dead? I'm not going in there with two Jedi Knights! Send the droid!"

He waved hurriedly at TC-14, who bowed, made a small squeaky sound in response, and then went out.

When the protocol droid was gone, Dofine summoned Rune Haako, the third member of their delegation, drew both his compatriots to a closed, separate space on the bridge where they could be neither seen nor heard by anyone else, and triggered a holographic communication.

It took a few moments for the hologram to appear. As it did so, a stoop-shouldered, dark-robed shape appeared, cloaked and hooded so that nothing of its face could be seen.

"What is it?" an impatient voice demanded.

Nute Gunray found his throat so dry that for a moment he could not speak. "The Republic ambassadors are Jedi Knights."

"Jedi?" Darth Sidious breathed the word softly, almost reverently. There was a measure of calm about his acceptance of the news. "Are you sure?"

Nute Gunray found what little courage he had been able to muster for this moment quickly evaporating. He stared at the black form of the Sith Lord in mesmerized terror. "They have been identified, my lord."

As if unable to endure the silence that followed, Daultay Dofine charged into the gap, wide-eyed. "This scheme of yours has failed, Lord Sidious! The blockade is finished! We dare not go up against Jedi Knights!"

The dark figure in the hologram turned slightly. "Are you saying you would rather go up against me, Dofine? I am amused." The hood shifted toward Gunray. "Viceroy!"

Nute stepped forward quickly. "Yes, my lord?"

Darth Sidious's voice turned slow and sibilant. "I don't want this stunted piece of slime to pass within my sight again. Do you understand?"

Nute's hands were shaking, and he clasped them together to still them. "Yes, my lord."

He wheeled on Dofine, but the other was already making his way from the bridge, his face filled with terror, his robes trailing behind him like a shroud.

When he was gone, Darth Sidious said, "This turn of events is unfortunate, but not fatal. We must accelerate our plans, Viceroy. Begin landing your troops. At once."

Nute glanced quickly at Rune Haako, who was trying his best to disappear into the ether.
“Ah, my lord, of course, but ... is that action legal?”

“I will make it legal, Viceroy.”

“Yes, of course.” Nute took a quick breath. “And the Jedi?”

Darth Sidious seemed to grow darker within his robes, his face lowering further into shadow. “The supreme chancellor should never have brought the Jedi into this. Kill them now. Immediately.”

“Yes, my lord,” Nute Gunray answered, but the hologram of the Sith Lord had already vanished. He stared at the space it had left behind for a moment, then turned to Haako. “Blow up their ship. I will send a squad of battle droids to finish them.”

In the conference room in which they had been left, Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan stared at each other across a long table.

“Is it customary for Neimoidians to make their guests wait this long?” the younger Jedi asked.

Before Qui-Gon could respond, the door opened to admit the protocol droid bearing a tray of drinks and food. TC-14 crossed to their table, placed the tray before them, and handed each a drink. It stepped back then, waiting. Qui-Gon motioned to his young companion, and they lifted the drinks and tasted them.

Qui-Gon nodded at the droid, then looked at Obi-Wan. “I sense an unusual amount of maneuvering for something as trivial as this trade dispute. I sense fear as well.”

Obi-Wan placed his drink back on the table. “Perhaps—”

An explosion rocked the room, spilling the drinks, sending the tray with its food skidding toward the edge. The Jedi leapt to their feet in response, lightsabers drawn and activated. The protocol droid backpedaled quickly, arms lifting, muttering its apologies, looking everywhere at once.

“What’s happened?” Obi-Wan asked quickly.

Qui-Gon hesitated, closed his eyes, and retreated deep within himself. His eyes snapped open. “They’ve destroyed our ship.”

He glanced around swiftly. It took only a moment for him to detect a faint hissing sound from the vents near the doorway.

“Gas,” he said to Obi-Wan in warning.

In the cage beside the door, the birdlike creatures began to drop like stones.

* * *

On the bridge, Nute Gunray and Rune Haako watched through a viewscreen as a squad of battle droids marched into the hallway just outside the conference room in which the Jedi were trapped. On crooked metal legs, they approached the doorway, blasters held at the ready, a hologram of Nute directing them from behind.

“They must be dead by now, but make certain,” he directed the battle droids, and switched off the hologram.

The Neimoidians watched closely as the foremost of the battle droids opened the door and stepped back. A cloud of noxious green gas poured from the room, and a solitary figure stumbled into view, arms waving.

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