

STAR WARS: THE CLONE WARS

THE STRANDS OF WAR

A story by Scott Weller

Based on characters and situations created by George Lucas

"The greatest force for good the galaxy will ever see."

Supreme Chancellor Palpatine turned his attention away from the newly arrived Clone Trooper legions now standing directly ahead of him, unwavering in their duty, to address his good friend and loyal Jedi Padawan, Anakin Skywalker. Yes, Palpatine thought to himself, *they were **his** legions.* His to command, having come into being to fight for him, to die for him. And for the Republic of course. How could he forget that? The gleaming white suits of armour, their distinct dark eyed visor slit eyes and grilled lined mouths- a façade that was totally subservient looking but with a cruel purpose about them-a face designed to bring fear and submission to their enemies. And they had a sense of control in everything they did-their parade lines of attention totally straight, not an arm or leg slightly out of place, the massive heavy weaponry on their shoulders not even betraying any sign of un-comfort. Their chest plates bold and outstretched, betraying the toned muscles underneath. The mere weeks of adaptability to their Republic universe, newly arrived from Kamino and now in this huge clone staging area on Coruscant, that the battalions had so easily pledged their lives to him was a factor that would continue to amaze the Supreme Chancellor; their unswerving loyalty met no boundaries. In just a few short hours, monitoring their disembarkations in huge numbers from the Republic cargo transporters, he had even seen the first signs of comradeship and loyalty building within their ranks. Whether he should be allowing such attitudes and feelings to develop, or whether he thought that such instincts should be purged from their consciousness-a fear that they could become like any mere human beings, susceptible to loss and resentment, even bribery and corruption, could they even try and rebel against their direct orders at a later date?- he didn't know. To remove them of those building instincts might make them less efficient at their jobs-less efficient guardians, even less efficient killers. And Palpatine knew that there must be few mistakes now. This war had to be fought. He knew that, his senators knew that, but in these first few months, the Republic and its peoples would be watching the events of this Clone War unravel. They will be praising for our victories, they will be supporting our troops, at least at first, but then, as the fighting continues and the people's everyday lives are disrupted far beyond the norms, the first sign of cracks in

their support will begin and the Supreme Chancellor knew that all of his, and even the Jedi's decisions, would eventually be met with criticism and scorn. Palpatine would be ready for such threats and was determined to face them full on. Should any of his Senators doubt his words, then he hoped to be able to come to their fullest aide should their worlds ever be attacked by the Separatists...

No one in the Senate will block the War now, and he was sure that no one would try to use the situation forced upon them for their own political ends. He had been re-elected beyond his term of office on his promises to fight the Separatists and bring peaceful resolution to the crisis. He recalled his words of calm to the Senate. *I love democracy. I love the Republic.* And he would make sure that those early promises were fulfilled. And the people would love him even more for it. There *will* be peace and stability. Even if it should take months or years. If the chance for peaceful negotiations was to come, or course -a route that he knew his loyal friend Senator Amidala would pursue at all costs-bless her soul!!-then he would pursue it as far as it went. Though, from his memories of working with Count Dooku, before he left the Jedi way, he knew that such peace negotiation overtures could not last long-that he would see her gestures as a sense of desperation and failure by the Republic, swelling the Count's need to eradicate the weak Republic by force, and at it's very heart...

Palpatine slowly but surely walked the huge paneled purple steps ahead of him, looking out to the further lines of Clone Troopers that seemed to stretch out into infinity. If anything, the Supreme Chancellor didn't walk, to many non political figures-none would dare make this opinion within the Senate-it always seemed as if he glided to his destinations, especially in the all-in-one grey, almost lizard-like skin outfit he was currently wearing. Whilst the light reflected off the Clone Troopers shiny, spotlessly clean armour, it had the reverse effect with Palpatine, it seems as if his attire was able to pull and absorb the sunlight into it, dragging it into its own private black hole.

"Together..." now stopped, Palpatine looked at a batch of red striped commandos with slightly different heavy weaponry, and smiled, addressing both Anakin now and any Clone Troopers that were within hearing range, "...we'll make the first steps in totally unifying the Republic. This will be the war to end all wars, and we will be victorious."

Climbing several short steps, Palpatine, having spent more than enough time looking at his loyal soldiers, and making sure that the holo news casters had been able to capture all the necessary camera angles for the "loyalty to the Republic" viz messages that were being sent across the galaxy, he now accompanied his loyal young friend, the equally well known and respected, as well as feared by his enemies, Jedi and "hero without fear" known as Anakin Skywalker, who, all through this somewhat staged inauguration, had acted almost like a quiet second shadow behind him during the parade walk. They now walked, almost as one, to a nearby circular command pod. Moments

later the transportation instrument, strictly monitored from a ground installation nearby, gently lifted upwards into the now sunset sky, the craft racing ever upwards, gracefully and almost naturally as its locked onto the command station/war room of the Clone Deployment areas half a mile away.

Past the reception window and the beautiful orange sky that now showed the departing Clone Troopers clambering into several hundred Republic Cruisers for re-deployment across the galaxy, a mighty grey/black shield door gave way before them, and the pair stepped into the massive open plan area that had become one of the many newly built and totally secure tactical nerve centers which berthed the Republic forces. Within the enclosure, Palpatine was proud of the people who had so quickly responded to the battle that they had now been force-ably dragged into. No space in this area was under-utilized, as the beautiful ghostly auras of hundred of planets and star systems and galaxy outlines shone brightly overhead in the air and the vast ceilings above them-each of them covered in constantly moving markers of differing colours. The available space on the main floor area in front of them was equally as busy, showing human and alien Republic officers, young Jedi Padawan's and technicians making constant refinements, adjustments and initiating new command protocols and updates into the gleaming new equipment being used to help their troops win the war against their aggressors. The battlefield had never become more complicated than it did now.

Around them was the cacophony of noise that were ship movements and re-deployments, of troop engagements on a hundred worlds so far and spreading. The sharp and fearful noises of laser fire and explosions. Of the success-the victories of the brave officers, mixed in with the failure-the sounds of the injured and the screams of the dying. It was all this intermingled in with the most commonest of other background instruments, that slightly un-nerved Palpatine, his apparent sadness of the involving war briefly shown to Anakin. It was strangely funny how war brought the two stands of life and death together in such uncommon ways of connection and communication.

Walking forward to the middle of the room, to one of the largest holographic displays, Palpatine and Anakin saw three huge planetary satellites, and almost underneath each one were, in turn, three of the most powerful and dedicated Jedi Knights to have ever lived and served the Republic. Three of the Jedi who were now the greatest hope for peace and order in the galaxy-the nine hundred year old diminutive but highly gifted and powerful being known only as Yoda, whose knowledge and ability to see the future gave Palpatine confidence that things were proceeding well in the universe, despite the burden of the war, the firmly rooted and almost intimidating, almost coldly analytical Mace Windu-a man that Palpatine almost felt was like an animal ready to strike at any moment, and Anakin's own Jedi Master/teacher, the respected Obi-Wan Kenobi, now sporting shorter brown hair, than the last time the Supreme Chancellor saw him, with what surprised

him to contain the beginnings of grey streaks in his sideburns, and his arms clenched in concentrated defense. Looking up at the continually evolving schematic above him, he quietly raised his left hand began stroking his beard intently.

Now seeing the arrived pair, all three Jedi gave a polite, modest bow to their leader, with Obi-Wan then giving an equally respectful nod of friendship to his Padawan, who was now standing back to his original position behind the Supreme Chancellor, almost like a protector to him- a situation Kenobi knew, rather perversely, that Palpatine enjoyed...

The Supreme Chancellor moved forward to study the planetary displays in greater detail, his head held high and the blue light bathing him in a positive and kindly glow. He now saw the pointed colour markers that showed Republic forces located on the various landmasses but then saw further numerous arrow shapes moving ever forward outside the planetary edges, arrows that were now moving slowly inwards towards these destinations. He outstretched his arm/hand out in a manner that encapsulated his assessment of the situation, and where, from Anakin's viewing position, looked as if he was almost trying to grasp the three huge worlds within a single palm.

After bowing his allegiance to the Supreme Chancellor, Mace Windu's manner was as straightforward as ever-he had no time for small talk and stood as rigid and defiant as ever-a stare powerful enough to scare a Gundark: "It seems that the Bothan spy network information your received was correct," he told him, almost with a sneer that such a man as the Chancellor would have the power to get such information without their knowledge-just what else is their leader keeping from them, he had often wondered to himself? "Three Separatist fleets of varying sizes have broken off from the first wave of fighting and are heading towards some of our critical facilities."

The little green Jedi returned to watching the display, the gruff of his aching bones as he looked up more than apparent to his colleagues. Not ready to talk yet, he then studied the reactions of the Supreme Chancellor as he read the holographic display information quickly emerging from the planetary zones, their human leader's ability to read the information and digest its content so succinctly was impressive to the Jedi Master, the results of years of beaureaucratic document reading and information training, he presumed.

The Chancellor looked towards the Jedi Leaders. "Kamino was always going to be an early target for the Separatists-the chance to destroy our cloning facilities there or at least or take them over with mind to creating their own battalions. But why Metherus and Drydebennie?" Palpatine looked concerned. "Are there things going on that that I haven't, *and should*, have been told about?"

Yoda walked forward, the sound of his small wooden cane on the metal grated floor lost amongst the various noises and hyperspace chatter around

him. "Production of vital new Jedi star fighters, Drydebennie has begun-in secret at our initiative. Leaked out word of the construction dry-dock has been. Protected it must be if we are to continue deep range defense. Outer world of Metherus and its high energy ores and fuel production, of even greater value to the Republic with the falling of the Urethera system to the Separatists."

Palpatine intensely disliked the idea of the supreme guardians of all that was peaceful and just in the Galaxy keeping secrets from their own Leader, and the look he gave the ill-at-ease Yoda and Obi-Wan betrayed that fact. Behind him, Palpatine could feel the sheer anger looming within Anakin that his colleagues could have betrayed both their Chancellor and their *Chosen One* like that-it was in that anger that Palpatine felt great kinsmanship and pride in the boy-whose loyalty to him had never, ever wavered since he was a child. Despite the lack of trust, in this instance, Palpatine knew he had to play his cards for the future with the Jedi close to his chest. That he had to live with this current situation. But the time would come, if the war continued, when such decisions made by the Knights would have to be curtailed, whether they liked it or not. "So, what are the next steps to counter these threats?"

Mace Windu's composure remained unflinching. "On Kamino, four battalions of Clone Troopers are already entrenched. Jedi Masters Kit Fisto and Shaak Ti will be joining them within three days with further re-enforcements."

It was here that Obi-Wan continued the mission plans. "We'll also be diverting forces away from the Taga system-that was one of the first planets to be attacked by the Separatists. Our people on that planet, led by Master Ttocs-Rellew, will be able to hold their own until we can send these new re-enforcements from Coruscant. Anakin and I will be heading to Drydebennie with the Nineteenth fleet, departed from the Chia Nebula, with troopers led by Clone Captains Rex and Cody. "

Though he had been listening intently to his colleagues, Anakin's ears soon piqued with interest when he discovered what the next mission was for both him and his Master. Even Palpatine, looking proudly towards him, noticed the palpable rise of excitement building up in the young man's face when he realized how important the next few days would be, and how critical the situation was that they faced.

Kenobi now centered on a section of display area above them that intensified into a starship design that Anakin assumed to be of Separatist construction. "Additional intelligence reports indicate several new types of Separatist cruisers heading to Drydebennie of a different design to anything we've seen before. We plan to capture one of those vessels and find out more about what they'll be sending against us for the future. There may even be important members of their movement on board them."

And what if Dooku's on board? Anakin's head raced with the possibility that the Separatists feared Leader may be personally handling the assault on the Drydebennie system-for their leader it was a target that included a chance to strike at the very people he was once a part of. Anakin had promised his beloved Padme that the war would end soon-taking out Dooku-captured alive or, worst case; dead- would help end this war quickly. It may even help them get one step closer to discovering the identity of the Sith Lord that, after years of searching, has proved ever more elusive to catch...

Palpatine was impressed with the Jedi's efficiency and planning. He now looked up towards the bigger of the three holographic worlds, which showed the largest areas of populace and structure-an industrial world he presumed. "And Metherus?"

Kenobi continued: "Our forces should be there within three days, led by Master Plo Kloon-the fastest we could mobilize them to such a far off location. Some of our ships have had to be re-routed, as our new battalions already here will now have to be re-trained en route to their new combat zones. On the positive side, Metherus is protected by an energy shield derived from the planets largest resource of natural energy twelve years ago- a gift from the then Chancellor Valorum, to help repel pirates from the nearby Suka Ariban system that were plundering its minerals. With the start of the Clone Wars, however, these pirates seem to have disappeared- our intelligence agents are working hard to discover exactly what has happened to them. They may possibly have merged with the BLACK SUN organization that seems to have grown in power within the criminal underworld since the Separatists movement began a few years ago..."

Mace Windu finished Kenobi's words with deadly finality. "But whatever has happened to them, the threat of attack for the planets rich natural resources by the Separatists remains."

"A situation that intensifies as we speak." Palpatine realized that the time for talk, for planning, was over. It was now time for action and risk-taking-to let the Jedi do what must be done in their loyal service to both him and the Republic. "The times ahead will be even more difficult that we realize," he addressed them powerfully but sincerely, "And the Separatists are a far more dangerous opposition that we could ever have expected. We are all indebted to you for your courage and loyalty. We wish you success."

All four Jedi bowed their heads to the Chancellor in equal reverence and respect . Yoda motioned, his cane carried closer to his heart in feeling than ever before..."May the Force be with us all."

"We should be on Coruscant within the next hour, milady." The sharp, confident figure of Captain Typho bowed in front of Senator Padme Amidala, who looked sullenly at the streaking hyperspace lights darting past the viewscreen in front of her. Oh, there were times when she would like to be lost in hyperspace forever-just enjoying the simplicity of its internalized universe around her- the beauty of those streaking lights, the serene quietness. If only the entire galaxy could be encapsulated within its serenity-to have such calm within the peoples hearts and minds. For a short time, her home world of Naboo had been that paradise. As a child up to the age of four, Naboo, despite the huge educational training she had taken on, of the worlds and peoples she had been taught about, Naboo had still been her personal centre of the universe. No other world had felt so peaceful, so colourful, and so innocent, so loving to her.

And then had come the turmoil, the taxation of trade routes, the Trade Federation, her duty as Queen of her people after the unexpected death of King Veruna. And now this, the Clone Wars...

Her universe had been destroyed from the inside out and she felt powerless to save it...

Now seated and at work on one of the nearby command consoles, Typho was making last minute preparations for their arrival through the planets interminable traffic areas and negotiating the landing pad lockdown procedures that they would have to go through as Senatorial VIPs, helped by her equally loyal droids, the squat but always friendly astro droid Artoo Detoo, her protector of many occasions, and almost as brave as her own guards, and her human sized Protocol droid, handily fluent in six million forms of communication, See-Threepio-a gift to her from her husband, her protector, her lover...Anakin Skywalker.

Typho had activated several communications instruments as the final plans with his security forces were set-they would be waiting en masse for them upon their arrival. After the assassination attempt on her highness's life earlier in the year, Typho and his men now had the surrounding areas within a miles distance sensor probed and sealed off, with a nullifying field in operation to disrupt the plans of any future would-be assassins. Her loyal Captain, under the command and help of his cousin of General Panaka, who himself was now in charge of several Clone Trooper assault forces protecting Naboo and its moons from attack/reprisal from the Trade Federation, had vowed that no assassin would ever get near Padme as long as his family lived to serve her. The use of decoys was also still in place and, fortunately, no more lives had been lost since the unfortunate Corde. Padme would often think of her, her explosion ravaged face, her white gown smeared in blood and debris, her shoes missing, her bare feet stoked blood and dirt, her eyes betraying tears of agony and her dying thoughts that she had actually thought she'd *failed* in serving her mistress. Corde's heart died quietly, but the agony of her passing still lingered in Padme's heat and soul. Typho had

known the Senator for several years now and the demon look of remembrance in her eyes since the tragic event had said it all. Now the lives lost in the Clone Wars hurt her even more, like a dagger being quickly thrust into her back and lingering within her.

As the command and communication frequencies settled in, a brief spurt of interstellar news broadcasting echoed through the command chamber- of which Threepio's golden head soon looked up to hear the noise, and stopping Padme in her hyperspace observations. Still seated, she turned and asked her loyal servants to activate those frequencies for her to listen to- something which Typho was for a few seconds unwilling to do, knowing that any bad news from the war front would make the Senators feelings for what was going on around her far worse- placing her small headphones around her ears so as not to distract her loyal protector in his important final stages of work, Padme realized that she had no choice but to listen intently to what the Republic news channels were revealing about the war. Newly instigated war correspondent Mira Djaric's news reports always seemed to be one jump ahead of everybody else's, and more accurate, even, to the similar ones she received on an almost hourly basis from the Republic's War Committee- what seemed like wild speculation on Djaric's part had often come true. At some point Padme decided that she would very much like to find out more about this woman, what's going on out in the galaxy and what might be happening that she, or her friends in the Senate, haven't been made aware of...

The first batch of reports were starting to come in- already a thousand Clone Soldiers- loyal troops created for the unique service of fighting for the Republic- *Our Grand Army*, as Palpatine had sickeningly called it- had died fighting for the Republic cause, as the Separatist invasion had started to arrive in greater force than originally anticipated. Fortunately, so far, there had been no Jedi casualties, and the worry of this situation had caused many sleepless nights and a weak pallor that worried her servants greatly, especially with the new reports that now indicated that several thousand fighter craft had left the Jedi Temple over the last three weeks, with more to follow, heading out to numerous positions across the galaxy in their newly promoted roles as Generals, having continued to pledge their allegiance to the Supreme Chancellor in assisting the Clones in all areas of combat. The Republic worlds had quickly gathered their industrial complexes together as well, making money and saving their individual economies at the same time (oh, how handy war was for the greedy!!!, she thought distastefully) and were churning out the war machines and technologies that would rain death and destruction onto thousands of worlds whether they wanted to be involved in the battle or not. And it had been a decision that Padme knew had had to be. She had originally resisted the need for an army, but with the legions of Separatists, and their huge droid army construction facilities on Geonosis, the assassination attempt on her life, the plot by Count Dooku to kill her beloved husband and Obi-Wan Kenobi- all of these had been critical factors in which she had had no choice but to reverse her decision. At first, her partaking in the opening salvo of the conflict on Geonosis had felt like the

right thing to do. And the Republic senators who had been shocked by her change of opinion and her partaking in battle herself, had soon not needed encouragement to vote for the Chancellor's war actions- having so much to lose politically from not being involved with the newly re- elected Palpatine. Unwillingly, she had succumbed.

Subconsciously she knew that the Clones, handily delivered by the Kaminoans, conceived by a fallen Jedi ten years before, were needed to help her husband and the rest of the Jedi, already beleaguered with the Separatist's disenchantment before the conflict, were, for the time being at least, the only course of action necessary in the fight against the overwhelming evil spreading through the galaxy, a situation now intensified by the rumours, which her husband would not confirm, that the Jedi's sworn enemies, the Sith, had returned from a thousand years of absence-of which she felt that she may have already encountered one such vile member of it's cannon, a red/black tattooed visage, a Zabrakian assassin named Darth Maul, ten years before during the Battle to liberate Naboo.

The Sith against the Jedi. Was this now a war without end?

Anakin, where are you now?

She thought of her husband. So brave, so young, so fearless...

Keep alive, my love. I need you...

It was only ten minutes into the news reports and Padme was starting to feel sick to her stomach over what was happening, and the thought of the dangerous activities that her husband would be involved in, making her restless even further-her face disturbed with the thought of what was to come. And what her husband was ready to sacrifice in order to do his job for her. And for the Republic. As a boy in what seemed like an eternity ago, she thought she'd truly known Anakin- he had never known of greed, that's what his mother had told her so long ago. Yet now, Anakin's beloved Shmi was dead, his mind filled with guilt and frustration that he hadn't acted on his earlier instincts to come to her aid sooner, his relationship with the Jedi Order and his mentor, Obi-Wan Kenobi, strained, almost severely damaged, over her death and their inability to help him through the difficult time. Now there is the war, and in its first battle, his pride has been damaged and his arm lost in lightsaber combat with Count Dooku. All of these things would tear any normal man to shreds. And yet, Anakin was trying his best to recover and overcome those obstacles. There was a steadfast determination to him that was greater than before and he was looking to the Force for guidance and learning. Yet, there were problems deep down that concerned her. The all efficient robot arm he now wore had perhaps contributed to a new aspect of Anakin's psyche-a need to improve himself- that brought worry. A new desire in him that, she felt, seemed almost forbidden for him to

have within the Jedi Order, a fire that burned brightly within this eyes, as his powers in the Force grew rapidly-though she hated to admit it, perhaps the need for war, his almost obsessive nature to win it for the Republic, may help him recover from the painful memories of the last few months. Oh, he had used the Force and his duties as a Jedi for peace, but she knew that a part of him, despite his injuries, thrived on battle, on conflict-in his mind the conflict had become a part of his way of helping people. Could his anger and determination really be a positive part of his Jedi psyche, as Anakin had skillfully implied, in that way that he always did whenever he needed to turn something around to his advantage? Deep down, Padme doubted it, and she desperately hoped that such determination on his part to not fail anyone again wouldn't lead to mistakes that could send him further over the edge of sanity and reason. Oh, how she wished she could help him through his worries. He'd never say it, but he needed her now for emotional, human support more than ever. And, what of their secret marriage? Will their love survive the strain of this war?? And what will happen if Obi-Wan, the Jedi Council, find out about them?

She remembered their fireside conversation at the Varykino safe house on Naboo, from what seemed an eternity ago. The way his love for her had shone out like a beacon. The way she had been aware of his infatuation, and, against her instincts to respond to his overtures, albeit one brief kiss several days before, had tried to resist their love. But to bring sense to an emotion as all powerful as love? It couldn't be done..

"We could keep it a secret." Anakin had told her.

"We'd be living a lie-one we couldn't keep even if we wanted to. I couldn't do that. Could you, Anakin?" she asked him, knowingly, as to what would happen if they pledged their love for one another.

"No." Anakin had turned away, his face torn by love and duty, of which his mind, rather than his heart, was now winning the argument against their union. The truth of such consequences, from so dangerous a love. "It could destroy us."

And yet, against such odds, in the face of such overwhelming risk and danger, they had indeed married. In many ways, their secret union on Naboo, Padme reflected that their impulsive actions together may unconsciously have been their own personal fight back against the galaxy-that their love for each other would never be broken-that they would survive against all the odds and difficulties being thrown against them-either within or without the Republic. But, in the face of such dangers, perhaps their beautiful union was a need to love before being permanently separated from each other.

She hoped that that would never be.

Deep down, despite the Jedi's own personal concerns for Anakin, they knew, as she did, that he was indeed the only one with the natural ability to help change the balance of power, for good, in the galaxy. Maybe Anakin is the start of a new phase of development for the Jedi. Perhaps it was not a case of his adapting to them but more of the Jedi having to adapt to him!! Anakin needed to finish this conflict. To his thinking, from the ashes of battle, we'll finally see in a new era for the Republic. A final end to war and conflict. By the fate of her people, she desperately hoped he was right.

As the newscasts entered their final reports, she also thought of all the other implications of the war. The conflict had become an almost living thing; it had broken free from its bonds and had entered a far wider, devastating area. Now seemingly out of control. The effects of the planets and the peoples involved, whether they wanted it or not, were weighing heavily on her mind. And not just the Jedi and the troopers affected, but the innocent lives used as unwilling pawns. This war could see in a new dark age. And then there were the personal risks to herself, her family, her world, as she fought for what she believed in for her people. Was it safe to leave her home world? She could have made the critical decisions she needed to do as Senator from a unique position on Naboo-she could have monitored the war from the comfort of her diplomatic quarters and no one, after her ordeals of the past, would have blamed her. She would not need to risk the life and limb of both herself and her loyal protectors, and would not have brought such anxieties to her family and friends at such a difficult time. But now, with the start of the war, she knew that her presence within the Senate was needed now more than ever. And despite her worries, her stubbornness had grown in the last few months, to the point where her older sister had joked that she was just as bad as Anakin. Perhaps she was right. But there had to be a way diplomatically, within the law, of stopping the fighting before it escalated further, and she would be working with friends she trusted, Mon Mothma of Chandrilla and Bail Organa of Alderaan, people of similar mind and heart to her, in order to make this happen. To aide her friend Palpatine, his hands tied with the diplomatic red tape of a thousand worlds and conflict, in ways that he couldn't. He knew of her work and was secretly supporting her plans to seek peaceful negotiations...

Surely the people will be sick of the conflict in a few short months. Surely they will be clamoring for her and the rest of the Senate to resolve this matter. To stop the killing. Padme had resolved to do everything she could – even, deep down if the worst came to the worst, if it meant her making the ultimate sacrifice- to save the lives of millions, she recently realized that she would gladly do it.

As the almost blinding sun shone brightly behind the swarm of traffic flying out from the jewel that was the Republic seat of power known as Coruscant, and as the ships view screen instantly lowered a special light filter to protect the sight of it's occupants, Padme's guardian looked towards her, the concern

on his own face conveying the feelings they both shared in a way that was more effective than anything that could have been spoken.

"Into the Rancor's den, Captain?" She asked him playfully, but the aura of deadly seriousness remained in her face...

Typho nodded somberly, his hands controlling the instruments of their craft as it made its powerful but graceful descent into the atmospheric layer of the majestic heart of the planet...

Shield engineer Madrak Daas was dead before he even knew what had killed him. His right hand firmly entrenched around his neck; almost unshakably still in its grip and ferocity, his broken orange skinned body soon falling to the floor like a rag doll, his left hand slamming across the nearby instrument panel in front of him with a lifeless thud. The shadowy grey cowed figure behind him, its two piercingly cold eyes staring out from the black void within it, surveyed the scene of destruction with great pleasure, as the noise of her Force controlled powers soon quietened down from their original echoing rumble.

The four Metherus engineer who had been diligently working at their posts at the command station were totally unprepared for her swift attack, and it had been an easy kill. So easy, she had not even needed to use any weapons. Only her mental prowess and physical agility had been needed. It had been a good kill, yet the four untrained engineers, unskilled in the art of combat, were no real test of mettle for the creature of darkness known as Asajj Ventress. In fact, the entire infiltration of Metherus base had been an easy assignment from the start. The infiltration of the droid controlled supply ship doing its regular supply run to the planet, the drop down into the base and the overriding of its lackluster security protocols. The slaying of the incompetent, apparently highly trained!!, security guards that littered the facility-none of them in peak physical condition, their side arms old and of limited power and range. The slayings had not been good sport at all. Her instincts demanded better animals to fight. She wanted to kill Jedi. Not just a single Jedi, but many Jedi. It was the only thing that had almost become all-consuming in her mind in recent days. The quiet, darkened brown lit room around her, which had now become a silent grave for the dead engineers, had bore no secrets that needed to be stolen, only the destruction of key shield control instruments. This was indeed a waste of her talents-a simple case of sabotage and detonation-yet, by doing this task, she had been promised many bigger challenges by Darth Tyrannus, who offered her a greater chance for death and destruction on the Republic and those Jedi of hers that she so dreamed of facing. Though this war was still only in its infancy, the odds for a Separatist victory now seemed better than ever,

especially if the rest of the Republic's planets were as primitive and lazy with regards to the conflict as this one had been. The *New Order* that Tyrannus had promised her and her other confederates was indeed coming-a New Order that she was promised a share in the dominion over-the dominion of life and death on anyone that stood in the way of achieving her dark dreams.

And dark dreams they were indeed...

From the grey cloak, a piercing red glow from a specially constructed, and highly individual lightsaber burst forward, her arms maneuvering the blade with a frightening precision as various instrument panels were sliced through and destroyed-resulting in small explosions erupting and quickly jumping from panel to panel as the dance of destruction was wrought on them. And Asajj Ventress enjoyed the destruction-however small. As alarm sirens now began to wail from the death of the important instruments, and the feminine computer voice echoed alerts and readings of the planetary deflector shield malfunctions and energy build-ups that were now tearing away, the Dark Side killer walked back into the darkness of the corridor behind her, a final quick movement from her arm as a small cylindrical object landed near the body of the deceased Madrak Daas. The thermal detonator exploded white and blue flame all around it as Daas's body disintegrated and the ceiling above collapsed inwards, sending further huge shards of flame spraying out into the corridor.

As fast as she had arrived, Asajj Ventress had now gone...

A short time later, as the small red/black fighter craft streaked upwards into the heavens above, Ventress heard the huge explosion from the Shield Generator base of Metherus as it became thousands of tiny dangerous pieces of debris, the shockwave of the blast literally springing out within a thousand mile radius, and now ascending at an equally cataclysmic size, as if was an individual entity trying to follow and catch her, to bring her down into the destruction she had wrought and enjoyed. But the blast waves were too slow for her crafts powerful engines. Ventress thoughts looked satisfyingly towards the next few hours. How the Republic would soon be feeling the after effects of today's sabotage and carnage for weeks and months ahead. The loss of life and technology, and the further deaths of the innocents to come from her Separatist brothers, however, was ultimately not important to her and, despite her success, there was no need to look back at the firestorm of chaos and destruction she had left in her wake. To look back would be to show a sign of pride. A pride that would lead to arrogance. Arrogance would lead to carelessness and mistakes, and Ventress had no time for such follies. In her work to destroy the Republic, and the Jedi that had sworn their allegiance to it, there would be no mistakes...

Fear shook the command deck of the newly built Separatist cruiser known as THE MALEVOLENCE, and the twelve battle droid technicians within it scurried pacily to complete their necessary work ahead of time. Was it possible for droids to have such a feeling as fear, the Neimoidian commander known as Rosca Lyttie wondered? The sensation that something terrible, a force of will so purely evil, was on its way had become a very palpable reality within his mind and now brought an icy chill to his heart. He had heard the stories of the creature known as General Grievous. He had heard about its horrific countenance, its genius tactical abilities, its twisted cruelty, and those stories had made his stomach squirm. And "It" had once been a living creature—a living creature now entombed in a droid body, created with a perpetual desire for war. Unlike Grievous, the Neimoidian species never had much of a stomach for fighting—in the case of the Clone Wars, however, greed and the opportunity for power had been promised to them by forces that he personally had yet to encounter. Both Rosca and the other Neimoidians under his command had trusted their Viceroy, Nute Gunray, in his belief that the time had come when the Trade Federation had much to lose from not taking a stand alongside the Separatists against the Republic. As the battle had begun, the Neimoidians had joined forces with hundred of different species, all with their own unique talents and foibles that they had gotten used to, and all of them had been promised the dreams of power and lucrative wealth, yet this creature known as Grievous, he had no such vices—he existed merely to cause anarchy and destruction. A warlord of unknown origin to their race-bred for total, all consuming war!!

And Grievous was now making his way up to the bridge from his small personal ship that had just recently docked with the father craft. Even from here, Rosca thought he could hear the metal spurred feet of the creature clanging angrily against the deck plates of the vessel-like mini earth quakes marching forward towards their objective. As the bridge's shield door opened, a lump reached Rosca's throat as a swirl of four thin, cloaked Magnadroids, acting as the advance guard for the all important military leader behind them, surveyed the area for safety, each holding long thin, cold steel electro energy staffs that, it had been said, had recently been developed so as to withstand and deflect the lightsaber blows of a skilled Jedi. *If the Jedi don't stand a chance against Grievous, what chance do we have?*, Rosca thought edgily, his hand partially covering his face from the fearsome force that was soon to appear.

As the droids parted to opposite sides of the bridge's upper level concourse, the grey cloak belonging to General Grievous, it's striking red underlining bellowing out like an individual being of it's own, cut through the air with the ferocity and deadly clarity of a sharpened blade. The figure certainly was the most fearsome sight Rosca had ever seen. Nine feet tall, with an almost Calreyian spider-like look about it, it's arms like pincers, while it's feet were almost birdlike, with talons ready to tear a creature in half quite easily. In fact, its whole body looked razor sharp, with the disgusting pieces of surviving veined and bloodied flesh of it's once being now becoming partially

visible throughout its exo-skeleton. But the face, that was even more terrifying- the grim facial visage-a pair of brutal, challenging organic eyes almost popping out from the almost primitive war painted metal mask they were encased in-a look that had been designed to create the ultimate, heightened quality of fear in the faces and hearts of anyone who looked at it. Such a reaction was certainly working on Rosca!!! It was an image that would leave a lingering memory in him; one that he felt would never leave him-even in death!!

General Grievous strode across the command deck, enjoying his new status as the commander of the droid armies, and taking in his new surroundings on one of the most powerful new Separatist cruisers to be used for battle. The MALEVOLENCE would become just that, causing the ultimate carnage and chaos with swift surprise and deft skill that he had promised his master, Darth Sidous, would come about. Then he saw the Neimoidian Commander and his lieutenant-he had noted their reactions towards him. That of unbridled fear. And he felt pleased. No one would ever question his command decisions here-there would be no one to try and usurp his power. No greedy machinations to quell. The Neimoidians were his toys to play with. His toys to die in battle for such a magnificent cause. The cause of Grievous.

His recently activated body and android analytical thought processes were in their prime-his mind swarmed with ideas of conquest and destruction against the Republic. He now looked at the mammoth view screen ahead of him and at the assembled Separatist fleet on the other side of the planet corridor as it approached the Drydebennie system. Though the assembling Republic cruisers were not yet to be seen from this distance, he felt their presence. *The fools, they'll never know what hit them,* he said to himself with the greatest feeling of smug self satisfaction and the thought of all the physical firepower under his command. The blood flowing to his still organic heart pumping with a controlled rhythm that made him feel ever more alive and ready for battle....

The fleet of three hundred Separatist cruisers and Vulture Droid fighter support moved resolutely on their side of the Drydebennie system, emerging from the nearby dark blue nebula cloud. The Republic fleet was now fully assembled to meet them in a newly created spearhead position, its vast ARC 150 class fighter support flying forward and eventually maintaining a waiting combat position ahead of their brethren Venator class Destroyers. Waiting like coiled animals ready for any move that would lead to further, inevitable conflict. Primed for any incursion into their space. And that threat was now moving gradually, gaining swift ground on them now. As if the enemy had finally seen them and was hurrying for battle. Amongst the Republic's x shaped fighters darting and firming up into position behind them, the two

unique lead Jedi starfighters glistened in their freshly created glory, the light reflections from the crystalline glow of the planet Drydebennie below soon giving them an aura of purity against the oncoming darkness...

Each of these smaller wedged vessels bore the familiar markings of both the Republic and the Jedi Knights, but each also betrayed a unique and individual colour scheme- one brown, one yellow- and each bore a flying pattern that was different to the other-the brown skinned vessel was more calm in its holding pattern near it's fellow fighter support, the other yellow skinned one shifting back and forth slightly against it's environment and it's colleagues, as if eager to leap forward and engage the approaching enemy fleet, which resembled long grey daggers with jeweled light colour flickering, on it's own terms-the vessel and it's pilots confidence seemingly unshakable.

Though the prospect of war had always repulsed him, at this moment Anakin felt the adrenalin rush of excitement for the oncoming battle, and relished the idea of using all of his Jedi skills to the fullest in serving the Republic. What greater loyalty could he bring to both them and his Jedi Masters than defeating such powerful enemies in battle? And he was also looking forward to showing how much he had grown in the Force over the last four months-the hard work he had put himself through and had refined further under Obi-Wan's tutelage-to prove to his friend that he would indeed one day be worthy of full Jedi Knight status, and an honoured place on the Council, despite his master's misgivings about what he perceived as his friend's continuing impulsive streak and the need for him to rein in his attitudes. *Attitudes? This from worrying "Ben"...*, Anakin had joked to his friend a short time back. *One day you'll learn what it's like to be me*, Obi-Wan had retorted. *You'll be giving me my own Padawan learner next*, Anakin had jokingly replied. And Obi-Wan's face had suddenly seemed serious...but, thankfully, it had only been for a second!!

Anakin looked towards his droid embedded in the hull outside his cockpit. "Arthree, see what you can do with a point three variation on the tracking instrument." The Astro Droid bleeped his response, ready to fulfill his master's request to the best of his abilities. Here was the chance, now, for the Republic and the Jedi to see if he can live up to the late Qui-Gon Jinn's predications that he was the Chosen One of the Force-that he will bring it the balance it so desperately needs during this difficult period of change for the Universe-this war may be the trigger that sets his final outcome as an individual of the Force. As much as with Obi-Wan, Anakin did not want to upset/disappoint the legacy that had been given to him by Qui-Gon, either. His failure in lightsaber battle against Count Dooku in the hangar on Geonosis had been a constantly sore reminder of his inadequacies, and Anakin was determined that a situation like that would not happen again-that no enemy will ever have the opportunity to break a barrier in his own personal defenses. And then there was the matter of his friends. The enemy, with all its huge armies of ships and Battle Droids at his disposal, would be a match for their own forces and he doubts their generals will be sloppy

Neimoidians. And if any of the fleet here got through there's no telling how much damage and destruction they'll cause. He had pledged to protect his friends, his loved ones, and most especially his secret beloved, his wife Padme Skywalker Naberrie. As his droid beeped that his masters commanded had been implemented, Anakin made the last of the necessary function re-checks to his starfighter, specially re-built and re-configured to his own exacting standards of speed and firepower. He then looked at his android arm and moved it away from the small interior's steering controls, flexing it through a series of warm ups and moves. Perfect-as good, if not, better, than what he originally lost. It's all working perfectly...

He was feeling as confident as Palpatine had been with him at the landing field on Coruscant two days ago. He had remembered how Palpatine trusted him, had smiled that totally sincere friendly smile and reminded him how he trusted his instincts and bravery more than any other Jedi or Clone Trooper fighting in this conflict. "I believe in you, Anakin. You'll do the right thing. For me. For the Republic." Of all the people in the world to have said such things, he never expected it from the Supreme Chancellor-a strong man like him who, over the years, had become the father figure he'd never had-especially more so now with the death of Shmi. They were the words that he wished Obi-Wan could have told him. Words that he knew, deep down, he would never receive from his Master, no matter how great their now almost brotherly friendship had recently become.

The path that his abilities and choices now faced held the fate of the Republic and the Jedi within his hands. It was a heavy burden, but Anakin had only one response-to face it head on and see what happens. The Republic needed, expected, his best in the face of danger-never to waver, never to shirk from his responsibilities. He would not let them down.

Now, less than five minutes away from each other, the two fleets were almost nose to nose. Anakin's calm leather gloved hands gripped the control instruments ever tighter, his computer targeting equipment locked in at its functioning best, his astro droid outside the ship, ready to take over the necessary steering functions whilst he applied the vessels firepower towards the lead cruisers hull.

Then, with unbelievable speed, Anakin watched dumbstruck as the lead ship of the enemy fleet suddenly seemed to burst forward, almost within reach of his cockpit and then disappeared completely from the heavens. Gone. Vanished. As had the rest of the Separatist cruisers that had once been behind it. The mass of stars in front of the young Jedi may have been vast but the lack of enemy ships to fight against was more than noticeable. The quiet of space now seemed almost un-nerving. The chance to fight the enemy had been denied them. And he was angrier than ever!!!

"MASTER!!!"

Anakin's shocked voiced rippled through Obi-Wan's microphone. The frustrated young Jedi had vented his feelings so clearly. Obi-Wan had wished that his friend could have controlled himself. But there were times when he shared the boy's frustration. This was one of those times. On the other end, the frustrated Anakin became even more annoyed that he had let himself become angry so easily. They hadn't even gotten into battle and yet he had already let his guard down, had shown weakness as a Jedi to his Master, right from the first hurdle....

"I know, Anakin. I know..." Obi-Wan returned concisely in reply, both as a way to end the boy's anger and to try and get him back to a focused reality within the Force.

Decoyed!!

We've been tricked. And tricked well. Obi-Wan hadn't seen such a bold, downright incredible, tactical move in his life. It had been a quick jump to Lightspeed that they had never seen coming-the Separatist vessels had somehow managed to hide the energy build up to their jump until the last few moments-perhaps the area of space around the planetary system's nebula was affecting the Republic fleet's sensors, even at this range? *Something that worked to the enemy's advantage this time, but a trick that may eventually backfire on them in the future.* The precision jump was clever-whoever was in control of the attacking fleet showed cunning and quick skill, and was definitely no clumsy Neimoidian. Dooku, perhaps? If so, he had become an even more dangerous opponent since their last encounter. And there would now be no chance of negotiation for peace. Dooku means to destroy the Republic...

The disappearance of the fleet was leading to a point of dread within Kenobi's thoughts. Exactly where had they gone? A destination that he and his Republic tacticians obviously didn't consider. And it was a big galaxy. Could the enemy be found and reached in time? The frustration in Kenobi's mind soon receded. Their new destination would be one that was far more advantageous for them than, in the end, just one shipyard of fighter craft. As Jedi, both Kenobi and his colleagues on Coruscant had foolishly presumed that Dooku would attack them directly-but it now seemed that they were just an annoyance to him and not yet a part of his plan of attack. This new target was one presumably that the Republic won't have seen coming until it was too late. For the briefest of moments, Obi-Wan shut his eyes and entered the Force, his mind attuned probing for a natural answer to the crisis, As he did so, he felt in unison the mental signature and physical energy of Anakin within its aura-it was good to have the company of his closest friend, almost like a son to him, within the energy field. And he was happy that his apprentice was able to almost instantaneously reason out the situation, despite his occasional impetuosity. In the briefest of moments they would soon discover the truth.

And it was within those sparsest of moments, that a name soon sprung to mind.

They both broke out of their Force link and spoke as one.

Metherus!!

It had to be. The planets natural energy and mineral resources were obviously too tempting a target to plunder for the Separatists. They've decided to enter the Republic through the rear door rather than the front, Obi-Wan quickly reasoned.

With their continued use of the Force within them, and with precision speed, both Jedi star fighter pilots soon had their ships veering away from the empty space in front of them- inside the cockpits they moved so fast, so quickly, it looked as if the stars behind them were struggling to catch up, the pilots working in moves, and against g-forces, that no other human or non-Jedi alien could have attempted so speedily. Even the Astro Droids, locked in the sockets of each craft, could be heard to give little yelps of amazement and fear at their maneuvering.

Locking in their new co-ordinates, their engines quickly getting into higher gear for the new jump to Lightspeed, the two Jedi knew that what lay ahead was going to be far worse than what they had prepared for just a few seconds ago..

"We'll be outnumbered...four to two," said Obi-Wan, clicking the last modifications into place. He looked towards Anakin in the fighter cockpit flying opposite him and saw the smile on his friends face as he replied.

"I already feel sorry for them..."

That's Anakin!!! Obi-Wan thought. He smiled back. As ever, it was good to have him at his side. With brave words like that, the older Jedi felt much better about his chances of coming out of this conflict alive..

Behind them, the Clone commanded T-65 fighters were quick to catch up with their fast paced rivals, whilst behind them the seemingly lumbering Republic cruisers followed in their wakes, the commanders of the vessels quickly setting in the new calculations for their jump to Lightspeed to Metherus. Moments later, the enormous, mighty wedged shaped vessels, carrying thousands of troops, and looking almost like whales following carrier fish, soon shot forth with a mighty blast to their next destination...

And the next wave of battle...