

STAR WARS™

SHATTERPOINT

MATTHEW STOVER

THE ESSENTIAL LEGENDS COLLECTION



STAR WARS BOOKS BY MATTHEW STOVER

Star Wars: The New Jedi Order: Traitor

Star Wars: Shatterpoint

Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith

Star Wars: Luke Skywalker and the Shadows of Mindor

**STAR
WARS**™

SHATTERPOINT

STAR WARS™

SHATTERPOINT

MATTHEW STOVER



1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Del Rey
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road
London SW1V 2SA

Del Rey is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.



Penguin
Random House
UK

Star Wars: Shatterpoint is a work of fiction.

Names, places, and incidents either are productions of the author's
imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events,
locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2003 by Lucasfilm Ltd. & ® or ™ where indicated.
All rights reserved.

The story "Equipment" first appeared in *The Star Wars Short Story Collection*
produced by Paizo Publishing LLC, in association with Hasbro Toys.

First published in the United States by Penguin Random House in 2003

First published in the UK by Century in 2003

This edition published in the UK by Del Rey in 2021

www.penguin.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 9781529150407

Book design by Edwin Vazquez

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future
for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made
from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.



Copyrighted Material

For Robyn, my wife,
for making me grateful
that I am not a Jedi

for the fans
for keeping the dream alive

THE ESSENTIAL LEGENDS COLLECTION

FOR OVER FORTY years, novels set in a galaxy far, far away have enriched the *Star Wars* experience for fans seeking to continue the adventure beyond the screen. When he created *Star Wars*, George Lucas built a universe that sparked the imagination and inspired others to create. He opened up that universe to be a creative space for other people to tell their own tales. This became known as the Expanded Universe, or EU, of novels, comics, videogames, and more.

To this day, the EU remains an inspiration for *Star Wars* creators and is published under the label Legends. Ideas, characters, story elements, and more from new *Star Wars* entertainment trace their origins back to material from the Expanded Universe. This Essential Legends Collection curates some of the most treasured stories from that expansive legacy.

PROLOGUE

THE CLONE WARS

BY GEORGE LUCAS

FOR A THOUSAND years, the Old Republic prospered and grew under the wise rule of the Senate and the protection of the venerable Jedi Knights. But as often happens when wealth and power grow beyond all reasonable proportion, an evil fueled by greed arose. The massive organs of commerce mushroomed in power, the Senate became corrupt, and an ambitious politician named Palpatine was voted Supreme Chancellor. Most disturbingly, the Dark Lords of the Sith reappeared, after a thousand years of seeming absence.

In the midst of this turmoil, a separatist movement was formed under the leadership of the charismatic former Jedi Count Dooku. By promising an alternative to the corruption and greed that was rotting the Republic from within, Dooku was able to persuade thousands of star systems to secede from the Republic. Unbeknownst to most of his followers, Dooku was himself a Dark Lord of the Sith, acting in collusion with his master, Darth Sidious, who, over the years, had struck an unholy alliance with the greater forces of commerce and their private droid armies.

The turning point came when Count Dooku lured the unsuspecting Jedi into a trap on the desolate planet of Geonosis. Having just discovered the existence of a clone

army that had been secretly commissioned for the Republic ten years earlier, the Jedi were well prepared when they confronted the Separatists on Geonosis, but their victory in that heated battle was pyrrhic. It would prove to be merely the opening salvo in a war that would spread like fire across the galaxy and engulf thousands of star systems in the legendary Clone Wars.

Having already been granted emergency powers in the face of the growing threat, Chancellor Palpatine used his ironclad grip on the Senate to seize even greater authority, all in the name of security. To address the urgent military needs of the Republic, he enlisted the Jedi Knights as generals to command the Clone Army. The Jedi valiantly accepted their assignment, though never having served as military commanders, they were unaccustomed to the wages of war. Their ranks, once sufficient to serve as the guardians of peace and justice, were spread perilously thin in the face of this unthinkable challenge. Their relationship with Palpatine grew strained. At the same time, they felt their own power waning even as their most promising new apprentice completed his training and stood poised to fulfill his destiny as the chosen one who would bring balance to the Force.

The Clone Wars raged for years, tearing the Republic apart and spawning countless tales of heroism, bravery, treachery, and betrayal, as heroes on both sides fought to defend their ideals. As dedicated as the Separatists were in their resolve to create a new order to replace the failing Republic, the Jedi were equally determined to preserve the Republic and defeat the Sith, who they understood all too well were the masterminds of the Separatist movement. They still believed in the Republic, still deemed it a Republic worth saving. Their faith, which gave them superhuman strength in the face of the mind-boggling power of the enemy, had yet to be shaken.

INTRODUCTION

DANGEROUSLY SANE

FROM THE PRIVATE JOURNALS OF MACE WINDU

In my dreams, I always do it right.

In my dreams, I'm on the arena balcony. Geonosis. Orange glare slices shadow from my eyes. Below on the sand: Obi-Wan Kenobi, Anakin Skywalker, Senator Padmé Amidala. On the rough-shaped stone within reach of my arm: Nute Gunray. Within reach of my blade: Jango Fett.

And Master Dooku.

No. Master no more. *Count* Dooku.

I may never get used to calling him that. Even in dreams.

Jango Fett bristles with weapons. An instinctive killer: the deadliest man in the galaxy. Jango can kill me in less than a second. I know it. Even if I had never seen Kenobi's report from Kamino, I can feel the violence Jango radiates: in the Force, a pulsar of death.

But I do it *right*.

My blade doesn't light the underside of Fett's square jaw. I don't waste time with words. I don't hesitate.

I *believe*.

In my dreams, the purple flare of my blade sizzles the gray hairs of Dooku's beard, and in the critical semisecond it takes Jango Fett to aim and fire, I twitch that blade and take Dooku with me into death.

And save the galaxy from civil war.

I could have done it.

I could have done it.

Because I knew. I could *feel* it.

In the swirl of the Force around me, I could feel the connections Dooku had forged among Jango and the Trade Federation, the Geonosians, the whole Separatist movement: connections of greed and fear, of deception and bald intimidation. I did not know what they were—I did not know how Dooku had forged them, or why—but I felt their power: the power of what I now know is a web of treason he had woven to catch the galaxy.

I could feel that without him to maintain its weave, to repair its flaws and double its thinning strands, the web would rot, would shrivel and decay until a mere breath would shred it and scatter its strings into the infinite stellar winds.

Dooku was the shatterpoint.

I knew it.

That is my gift.

Imagine a Corusca gem: a mineral whose interlocking crystalline structure makes it harder than durasteel. You can strike one with a five-kilo hammer and do no more than dent the hammer's face. Yet the same crystalline structure that gives the Corusca strength also gives it shatterpoints: spots where a precise application of carefully measured force—no more than a gentle tap—will break it into pieces. But to find these shatterpoints, to use them to shape the Corusca gem into beauty and utility, requires years of study, an intimate understanding of crystal structure, and rigorous practice to train the hand in the perfect combination of strength and precision to produce the desired cut.

Unless you have a talent like mine.

I can see shatterpoints.

The sense is not sight, but see is the closest word Basic has for it: it is a perception, a *feel* of how what I look upon fits into the Force, and how the Force binds it to itself and to everything else. I was six or seven standard years old—well into my training in the Jedi Temple—before I realized that other students, full-grown Jedi

Knights, even wise Masters, could sense such connections only with difficulty, and only with concentration and practice. The Force shows me strengths and weaknesses, hidden flaws and unexpected uses. It shows me vectors of stress that squeeze or stretch, torque or shear; it shows me how patterns of these vectors intersect to form the matrix of reality.

Put simply: when I look at you through the Force, I can see where you break.

I looked at Jango Fett on the sand in the Geonosian arena. A perfect combination of weapons, skills, and the will to use them: an interlocking crystal of killer. The Force hinted a shatterpoint, and I left a headless corpse on the sand. The deadliest man in the galaxy.

Now: just dead.

Situations have shatterpoints, like gems. But those of situations are fluid, ephemeral, appearing for a bare instant, vanishing again to leave no trace of their existence. They are always a function of timing.

There is no such thing as a second chance.

If—*when*—I next encounter Dooku, he will be the war's shatterpoint no longer. I can't stop this war with a single death.

But on that day in the Geonosian arena, I could have.

Some days after the battle, Master Yoda had found me in a meditation chamber at the Temple. "Your friend he was," the ancient Master had said, even as he limped through the door. It is a peculiar gift of Yoda's that he always seems to know what I'm thinking. "Respect you owed him. Even affection. Cut him down you could not—not for merely a *feeling*."

But I could have.

I should have.

Our Order prohibits personal attachments for precisely this reason. Had I not honored him so—even loved him—the galaxy might be at peace right now. *Merely a feeling*, Yoda said.

I am a Jedi.

I have been trained since birth to trust my feelings.

But which feelings should I trust?

When I faced the choice to kill a former Jedi Master, or to save Kenobi and young Skywalker and the Senator . . . I let the Force choose for me. I followed my instincts.

I made the Jedi choice.

And so: Dooku escaped. And so: the galaxy is at war. And so: many of my friends have been slaughtered.

There is no such thing as a second chance.

Strange: Jedi I am, yet I drown in regret for having *spared* a life.

Many survivors of Geonosis suffer from nightmares. I have heard tale after tale from the Jedi healers who have counseled them. Nightmares are inevitable; there has not been such a slaughter of Jedi since the Sith War, four thousand years ago. None of them could have imagined how it would feel to stand in that arena, surrounded by the corpses of their friends, in the blazing orange noon and the stench and the blood-soaked sand. I may be the only veteran of Geonosis who doesn't have nightmares of that place.

Because in *my* dreams, I always do it *right*.

My nightmare is what I find when I wake up.

Jedi have shatterpoints, too.

MACE WINDU STOPPED in the doorway and tried to recover his calm. An arc of sweat darkened the cowl of his robe, and his tunic clung to his skin: he'd come straight from a training bout at the Temple without taking time to shower. And the brisk pace—almost a jog—he'd maintained through the labyrinth of the Galactic Senate had offered no chance for him to cool off.

Palpatine's private office, in the Supreme Chancellor's suite beneath the Senate's Great Rotunda, opened before him, vast and stark. An expanse of polished ebonite floor; a few simple, soft chairs; a flat trestle desk, also ebonite. No pictures, paintings, or decorations other than two lone statues; only floor-to-ceiling holographic repeaters showing realtime images of Galactic City as seen from the pinnacle of the Senate Dome. Outside, the orbital mirrors would

soon turn their faces from Coruscant's sun, bringing twilight to the capital.

Within was only Yoda. Alone. Perched solemnly on his hoverchair, hands folded around the head of his stick. "On time you are," the ancient Master observed, "but barely. Take a chair; composed we must be. Serious, I fear this is."

"I wasn't expecting a party." Mace's boot heels clacked on the polished floor. He pulled one of the soft, plain chairs closer to Yoda and sat beside him, facing the desk. Tension made his jaw ache. "The courier said this is about the operation on Haruun Kal."

The fact that of all the members of the Jedi Council and the Republic High Command, only the two senior members of the Council had been summoned by the Chancellor implied that the news was not good.

These two senior members could hardly have appeared more different. Yoda was barely two-thirds of a meter tall, with skin green as Chadian wander-kelp and great bulging eyes that could sometimes seem almost to take on a light of their own; Mace was tall for a human, less than a hand's breadth short of two meters, with shoulders broad and powerful, heavy arms, dark eyes, and a grim set to his jaw. Where Yoda had let his sparse remnants of hair straggle at random, Mace's skull was smooth-shaven, the color of polished lammas.

But their greatest difference perhaps lay in the *feel* of the two Jedi Masters. Yoda emanated a sense of mellow wisdom, combined with the impish sense of humor characteristic of the true sage; but his great age and vast experience sometimes made him seem a bit removed, even detached. Nearing nine hundred years of age led him to naturally take the long view. Mace, in contrast, had been elevated to the Jedi Council before his thirtieth birthday. His demeanor was exactly opposite. Lean. Driven. Intense. He radiated incisive intellect and unconquerable will.

As of the Battle of Geonosis, which had opened the

Clone Wars, Mace had been on the Council for more than twenty standard years. It had been ten since anyone had last seen him smile.

He sometimes wondered privately if he would ever smile again.

“But it is not the planet Haruun Kal that brings you in a sweat to this office,” Yoda said now. His tone was light and understanding, but his gaze was sharp. “Concerned for Depa, you are.”

Mace lowered his head. “I know: the Force will bring what it will. But Republic Intelligence has reported that the Separatists have pulled back; their base outside Pelek Baw is abandoned—”

“Yet return she has not.”

Mace knotted his fingers together. A breath brought his voice back to its customary deep, flat dispassion. “Haruun Kal is still nominally a Separatist planet. And she’s a wanted woman. It won’t be easy for her to get offworld. Or even to signal for extraction—the local militia use all kinds of signal jamming, and whatever they don’t jam they triangulate; whole partisan bands have been wiped out by one incautious transmission—”

“Your friend she is.” Yoda used his stick to poke Mace on the arm. “Care for her, you do.”

Mace didn’t meet his eyes. His feelings for Depa Billaba ran deep.

She had been onworld for four standard months. She couldn’t communicate regularly; Mace had tracked her activities by sporadic Republic Intelligence reports of sabotage at the Separatist starfighter base, and the fruitless expeditions of the Balawai militias trying—and failing—to wipe out Depa’s guerrillas, or even contain them. More than a month ago, Republic Intelligence had sent word that the Separatists had pulled back to the Gevarno Cluster, because they could no longer maintain and defend their base. Her success could not have been more brilliant.

But he feared to learn at what cost.

“But it can’t simply be that she’s missing, or . . . ,” he murmured. A dark flush spread over his bare dome of skull when he realized he’d spoken his thoughts aloud. He felt Yoda’s eyes on him still, and gave half an apologetic shrug. “I was only thinking; if she’d been captured or—or killed—there would be no need for such secrecy . . .”

The creases on Yoda’s face deepened around his mouth, and he made that *tchk* sound of mild disapproval that any Jedi would instantly recognize. “Frivolous, speculation is, when patience will reveal all.”

Mace nodded silently. One did not argue with Master Yoda; in the Jedi Temple, this was learned in infancy. No Jedi ever forgot it. “It’s . . . maddening, Master. If only . . . I mean, ten years ago, we could have simply reached out—”

“Cling to the past, a Jedi *cannot*,” Yoda interrupted sternly. His green stare reminded Mace not to speak of the shadow that had darkened Jedi perception of the Force. This was not discussed outside the Temple. Not even here. “Member of the Jedi Council, she is. Powerful Jedi. Brilliant warrior—”

“She’d better be.” Mace tried to smile. “I trained her.”

“But worry you do. Too much. Not only for Depa, but for all the Jedi. Ever since Geonosis.”

The smile wasn’t working. He stopped trying. “I don’t want to talk about Geonosis.”

“Known this for months, I have.” Yoda poked him again, and Mace looked up. The ancient Master leaned toward him, ears curled forward, and his huge green eyes glimmered softly. “But when, finally, to talk you want . . . listen, I will.”

Mace accepted this with a silent inclination of his head. He’d never doubted it. But still, he preferred to discuss something else.

Anything else.

“Look at this place,” he murmured, nodding at the expanse of the Supreme Chancellor’s office. “Even after ten

years, the difference between Palpatine and Valorum . . . How this office was, in those days—”

Yoda lifted his head in that reverse nod of his. “Remember Finis Valorum well, I do. Last of a great line, he was.” Some vast distance drifted through his gaze: he might have been looking back along his nine hundred years as a Jedi.

It was unsettling to contemplate that the Republic, seemingly eternal in its millennium-long reign, was not much older than Yoda himself. Sometimes, in the tales Yoda told of his long-vanished younger days, a Jedi might have heard the youth of the Republic itself: brash, confident, bursting with vitality as it expanded across the galaxy, bringing peace and justice to cluster after cluster, system after system, world after world.

For Mace, it was even more unsettling to contemplate the contrast Yoda was seeing.

“Connected with the past, Valorum was. Rooted deep in tradition’s soil.” In the wave of his hand, Yoda seemed to summon Finis Valorum’s dazzling array of antique furniture gleaming with exotic oils, his artworks and sculptures and treasures from a thousand worlds. Legacies of thirty generations of House Valorum had once filled this office. “Perhaps *too* deep: a man of history, was Valorum. Palpatine . . .” Yoda’s eyes drifted closed. “A man of today, Palpatine is.”

“You say that as though it pains you.”

“Perhaps it does. Or perhaps: my pain is only of this day, not its man.”

“I prefer the office like this.” Mace half nodded around the sweep of open floor. Austere. Unpretentious and uncompromising. To Mace, it was a window into Palpatine’s character: the Supreme Chancellor lived entirely for the Republic. Simple in dress. Direct in speech. Unconcerned with ornamentation or physical comfort. “A shame he can’t touch the Force. He might have made a fine Jedi.”

“But then, another Supreme Chancellor would we need.” Yoda smiled gently. “Better this way, perhaps it is.”

Mace acknowledged the point with a slight bow.

“Admire him, you do.”

Mace frowned. He’d never thought about it. His adult life had been spent at the orders of the Supreme Chancellor . . . but he served the office, not the man. What did he think of the Supreme Chancellor as a person? What difference could that make?

“I suppose I do.” Mace vividly recalled what the Force had shown him while he watched Palpatine sworn in as Supreme Chancellor, ten years before: Palpatine was himself a shatterpoint on which the future of the Republic—perhaps even the whole galaxy—depended. “The only other person I can imagine leading the Republic through this dark hour is . . . well—” He opened a hand. “—*you*, Master Yoda.”

Yoda rocked back on his hoverchair and made the rustling snuffle that served him for a laugh. “No politician am I, foolish one.”

He still occasionally spoke as though Mace were a student. Mace didn’t mind. It made him feel young. Everything else these days made him feel old.

Yoda’s laughter faded. “And no fit leader for this Republic would I be.” He lowered his voice even further, to barely above a whisper. “Clouded by darkness are my eyes; the Force shows me only suffering, and destruction, and the rise of a long, long night. Better off without the Force, leaders perhaps are; able to see well enough, young Palpatine seems.”

“Young” Palpatine—who had at least ten years on Mace, and looked twice that—chose that moment to enter the room, accompanied by another man. Yoda stepped down from his hoverchair. Mace rose in respect. The Jedi Masters bowed, greeting the Supreme Chancellor with their customary formality. He waved the courtesies aside. Palpatine looked tired: flesh seemed to be dissolving beneath his sagging skin, deepening his already hollowed cheeks.

The man with Palpatine was hardly larger than a boy,

though clearly well past forty; lank, thinning brown hair draped a face so thoroughly undistinguished that Mace could forget it the instant he glanced away. His eyes were red-rimmed, he held a cloth handkerchief to his nose, and he looked so much like some minor bureaucratic functionary—a clerk in a dead-end government post, with job security and absolutely nothing else—that Mace automatically assumed he was a spy.

“We have news of Depa Billaba.”

Despite his earlier reasoning, the simple sadness in the Chancellor’s voice sent Mace’s stomach plummeting.

“This man has just come from Haruun Kal. I’m afraid—well, perhaps you should simply examine the evidence for yourself.”

“What is it?” Mace’s mouth went dry as ash. “Has she been captured?” The treatment a captured Jedi could expect from Dooku’s Separatists had been demonstrated on Geonosis.

“No, Master Windu,” Palpatine said. “I’m afraid—I’m afraid it’s quite a bit worse.”

The agent opened a large travelcase and produced an old-fashioned holoprojector. He spent a moment fiddling with controls, and then an image bloomed above the mirror-polished ebonite that served as Palpatine’s desk.

Yoda’s ears flattened, and his eyes narrowed to slits.

Palpatine looked away. “I have seen too much of this already,” he said.

Mace’s hands became fists. He couldn’t seem to get his breath.

The shimmering corpses were each the size of his finger. He counted nineteen. They looked human, or close to it. There was a scatter of prefabricated huts, blasted and burned and broken. The ruins of what must have once been a stockade wall made a ring around the scene. The jungle that surrounded them all stood four decimeters high, and covered a meter and a half of Palpatine’s desk.

After a moment, the agent sniffled apologetically. “This is—er, *seems* to be—the work of Loyalist partisans, under the command of Master Billaba.”

Yoda stared.

Mace stared.

There—those wounds . . . Mace needed a better view. When he reached into the jungle, his hand crawled with the bright ripples of the holoprojector’s scanning-matrix lasers. “These.”

He passed his hand through a group of three bodies that gaped with ragged wounds. “Enhance these.”

The Republic Intelligence agent answered without taking his handkerchief away from his reddened eyes. “Uh, I’m uh—Master Windu, this recording is, er, is quite unsophisticated—almost, uh, *primitive*—” His voice vanished into a sneeze that jerked him forward as though he’d been slapped on the back of the head. “Sorry—sorry, I can’t—my system won’t tolerate histamine suppressors. Every time I come to Coruscant—”

Mace’s hand didn’t move. He didn’t look up. He waited while the agent’s whine trickled to silence. Nineteen corpses. And this man complained about his *allergies*.

“Enhance these,” Mace repeated.

“I, ah—yes. Sir.” The agent manipulated the holoprojector’s controls with hands that didn’t quite tremble. Not quite. The jungle flicked out of existence. It reappeared an instant later, spread across ten meters of the office’s floor. The tangled upper branches of the holographic trees had become glimmering scan patterns on the ceiling; the corpses were now almost half life-sized.

The agent ducked his head, scrubbing furiously at his nose with the handkerchief. “Sorry, Master Windu. Sorry. But the system—it’s—”

“Primitive. Yes.” Mace waded through the light-cast images until he could squat beside the bodies. He rested his elbows on his knees, folding his hands together before his face.

Yoda walked closer, then crouched as he leaned in for a better view. After a moment, Mace looked up into his sad green eyes. “See?”

“Yes . . . yes,” Yoda croaked. “But from this, no conclusion can be drawn.”

“That’s my *point*.”

“For those of us who are not Jedi—” Supreme Chancellor Palpatine’s voice had the warm strength of a career politician’s. He rounded his desk, on his face the slightly puzzled smile of a good man who faced an ugly situation with hope that everything might still turn out all right. “—perhaps you’ll explain?”

“Yes, sir. The other bodies don’t tell us much, between decomposition and scavenger damage. But some of the mutilation on the soft tissue here—” A curve of Mace’s hand traced gaping slashes across a holographic female torso. “—isn’t from claws or teeth. And they didn’t come from a powered weapon. See the scoring on her ribs? A lightsaber—even a vibroblade—would have slashed right through the bone. This was done with a dead blade, sir.”

Revulsion tightened the Supreme Chancellor’s face. “A—dead blade? You mean just—like a piece of metal? Just a sharp piece of metal?”

“A very sharp piece of metal, sir.” Mace cocked his head a centimeter to the right. “Or ceramic. Transparisteel. Even carbonite.”

Palpatine took a deep breath as though suppressing a shudder. “It sounds . . . dreadfully crude. And painful.”

“Sometimes it is, sir. Not always.” He didn’t bother to explain how he knew. “But these slashes are parallel, and all of nearly the same length; it’s likely she was dead before the cuts were made. Or at least unconscious.”

“Or—” The agent sniffled, and coughed apologetically. “—just, er, y’know, *tied up*.”

Mace stared at him. Yoda closed his eyes. Palpatine lowered his head as though in pain.

“There is, uh, a history of, uh, I guess you’d say, *recreational torture* in the Haruun Kal conflict. On both sides.” The agent flushed as though he was ashamed to know such things. “Sometimes, people—people *hate* so much, that just *killing* the enemy isn’t enough . . .”

A fist clenched in Mace’s chest: that this soft little man—this *civilian*—could accuse Depa Billaba of such an atrocity, even by implication, grabbed his heart with sick fury. A long cold stare showed him every place on this soft man’s soft body where one sharp blow would kill; the agent blanched as if he could count them all in Mace’s eyes.

But Mace had been a Jedi far too long for anger to gain an easy grip. A breath or two opened that fist around his heart, and he stood. “I have seen nothing to indicate Depa was involved.”

“Master Windu—” Palpatine began.

“What was the military value of this outpost?”

“Military value?” The agent looked startled. “Why, none, I suppose. These were Balawai jungle prospectors. *Jups*, they call ’em. Some jups operate as a kind of irregular militia, but irregulars are nearly always men. There were six women here. And Balawai militia units never, ah, never bring their, ah, *children* . . .”

“Children,” Mace echoed.

The agent nodded reluctantly. “Three. Mm, bioscans indicate one girl about twelve, the other two possibly fraternal twins. Boy and a girl. About nine. Had to use bioscans . . .” His sickly eyes asked Mace not to make him finish.

Because a few days in the jungle hadn’t left enough of them to be identified any other way.

Mace said, “I understand.”

“These weren’t militia, Master Windu. Just Balawai jungle prospectors in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Jungle prospectors?” Palpatine appeared politely interested. “And what are *Balawai*?”

“Offworlders, sir,” Mace said. “The jungles of Haruun

Kal are the galaxy's sole source of thysel bark, as well as portaak leaf, jinsol, tyruun, and lammas. Among others."

"Spices and exotic woods? And these are valuable enough to draw offworld emigrants? Into a *war* zone?"

"Have you priced thysel bark lately?"

"I—" Palpatine smiled regretfully. "I don't care for it, actually. I suppose my tastes are pedestrian; you can take a boy out of the Mid Rim, but . . ."

Mace shook his head. "Not relevant, sir. My point: these were civilians. Depa wouldn't be involved in something like this. She *couldn't*."

"Hasty, your statement is," Yoda said gravely. "Seen all evidence, I fear we have not."

Mace looked at the agent. The agent flushed again.

"Well, er, yes—Master Yoda is correct. This, uh, recording—" He twitched his head around at the ghostly corpses that filled the office. "—was made with the prospectors' own equipment; it's adapted to Haruun Kal work, where more sophisticated electronics—"

"I don't need a lesson on Haruun Kal." Mace's voice went sharp. "I need your *evidence*."

"Yes, yes of course, Master Windu . . ." The agent fished in his travelcase for a second or two, then came up with an old-fashioned data wafer of crystal. He handed it over. "It's, uh, audio only, but—we've done voiceprint analysis. It's not exact—and there's some ambient noise, other voices, jungle sounds, that kind of thing—but we put match probability in the ninety percent range."

Mace weighed the crystal wafer in his hand. He stared down at it. There. Right there: the flick of a fingernail could crack it in two. *I should do it*, he thought. *Crush this thing. Snap it in half right now. Destroy it unheard.*

Because he knew. He could feel it. In the Force, stress lines spidered out from the wafer like frost scaling super-cooled transparisteel. He could not read the pattern, but he could feel its power.

This would be ugly.

“Where did you find it?”

“It was—uh, at the scene. Of the massacre. It was . . . well, at the scene.”

“Where did you *find* it?”

The agent flinched.

Again, Mace took a breath. Then another. With the third, the fist in his chest relaxed. “I am sorry.”

Sometimes he forgot how intimidating some men found his height and voice. Not to mention his reputation. He did not wish to be feared.

At least, not by those loyal to the Republic.

“Please,” he said. “It might be significant.”

The agent mumbled something.

“I’m sorry?”

“I said, it was in her *mouth*.” He waved a hand in the general direction of the holographic corpse at Mace’s feet. “Someone had . . . fixed her jaw shut, so scavengers wouldn’t get at it when they . . . well, y’know, scavengers prefer the, the, er, the tongue . . .”

Nausea bloomed below Mace’s ribs. His fingertips tingled. He stared down at the woman’s image. Those marks on her face—he had thought they were just marks. Or some kind of fungus, or a colony of mold. Now his eyes made sense of them, and he wished they hadn’t: dull gold-colored lumps under her chin.

Brassvine thorns.

Someone had used them to nail her jaw shut.

He had to turn away. He realized that he had to sit down, too.

The agent continued, “Our station boss got a tip and sent me to check it out. I hired a steamcrawler from some busted-out jups, rented a handful of townies who can handle heavy weapons, and crawled up there. What we found . . . well, you can see it. That data wafer—when I found it . . .”

Mace stared at the man as though he’d never seen him

before. And he hadn't: only now, finally, was he truly *seeing* him. An undistinguished little man: soft face and uncertain voice, shaky hands and allergies: an undistinguished little man who must have resources of toughness that Mace could barely imagine. To have walked into a scene that Mace could barely stomach even in a bloodless, translucent laser image; to have had to smell them—*touch* them—to pry open a dead woman's *mouth* . . .

And then to bring the recordings here, so that he could live it all again—

Mace could have done it. He thought so. Probably. He'd been some places, and seen some things.

Not like this.

The agent said, "Our sources are pretty sure the tip came from the ULF itself."

Palpatine glanced a question. Mace spoke without taking his eyes off the agent. "The Upland Liberation Front, sir. That's Depa's partisan group; 'uplanders' is a rough translation of *Korunnai*—the name the mountain tribes give themselves."

"Korunnai?" Palpatine frowned absently. "Aren't those *your* people, Master Windu?"

"My . . . kin." He made himself unclench his jaw. "Yes, Chancellor. You have a good memory."

"A politician's trick." Palpatine gave a gently self-deprecating smile and waved a dismissive hand. "Please go on."

The agent shrugged as though there was little more to tell. "There have been a lot of . . . disturbing reports. Execution of prisoners. Ambushes of civilians. On both sides. Usually they can't be verified. The jungle . . . swallows everything. So when we got this tip—"

"You found this because somebody wanted you to find it," Mace finished for him. "And now you think—"

Mace turned the data wafer over and over through his

fingers, watching it catch splinters of light. “You think those people might have been killed just to deliver this message.”

“What a hideous idea!” Palpatine lowered himself slowly onto the edge of his desk. He appealed to the agent. “This can’t be true, can it?”

The agent only hung his head.

Yoda’s ears curled backward, and his eyes narrowed. “Some messages . . . most important, is how they are framed. Secondary, their content is.”

Palpatine shook his head in disbelief. “These ULF partisans—we ally ourselves with *them*? The *Jedi* ally with them? What sort of monsters *are* they?”

“I don’t know.” Mace handed the wafer back to the agent. “Let’s find out.”

He slotted it into a port on the side of the holoprojector and touched a control.

The holoprojector’s phased-wave speakers brought the jungle around them to life with noise: the rush of wind-rattled leaves, skrills and clatters of insect calls, dim dopplered shrieks of passing birds, the howls and coughs of distant predators. Through the eddies and boils of sound drifted a whisper sinuous as a riversnake: a human or near-human whisper, a voice murmuring in Basic, sometimes comprehensible for a word here or phrase there, sometimes twisting below the distorting ripples of the aural surface. Mace caught the words *Jedi*, and *night*—or *knife*—and something about *look between the stars* . . .

He frowned at the agent. “You can’t clean this up?”

“This *is* cleaned up.” The agent produced a datapad from his travelcase, keyed it alight, and passed it to Mace. “We made a transcript. It’s provisional. Best we can do.”

The transcript was fragmentary, but enough to draw chills up Mace’s arms: *Jedi Temple . . . taught* (or possibly *taut*) . . . *dark . . . an enemy. But . . . Jedi . . . under cover of night.*

One whisper was entirely clear. He read the words on the datapad's screen as the whisper seemed to come from just behind his shoulder.

I use the night, and the night uses me.

He forgot to breathe. This was bad.

It got worse.

The whisper strengthened to a voice. A woman's voice.

Depa's voice.

On the datapad in his hand, and murmuring in the air behind his shoulder—

I have become the darkness in the jungle.

The recording went on. And on.

Her murmur drained him: of emotion, of strength, even of thought; the longer she rambled, the emptier he got. Yet her final words still triggered a dull shock inside his chest.

She was talking to *him* . . .

I know you will come for me, Mace. You should never have sent me here. And I should never have come. But what's done can never be undone. I know you think I've gone mad. I haven't. What's happened to me is worse.

I've gone sane.

That's why you'll come, Mace. That's why you'll have to.

Because nothing is more dangerous than a Jedi who's finally sane.

Her voice trailed off into the jungle-mutter.

No one moved or spoke. Mace sat with interlocked fingers supporting his chin. Yoda leaned on his cane, eyes shut, mouth pinched with inner pain. Palpatine stared solemnly through the holographic jungle, as though he saw something real beyond its boundary.

“That’s—uh, that’s all there is.” The agent extended a hesitant hand to the holoprojector and flicked a control. The jungle vanished like a bad dream.

They all stirred, rousing themselves, instinctively adjusting their clothing. Palpatine's office now looked unreal: as

though the clean carpeted floor and crisp lines of furniture, the pure filtered air, and the view of Coruscant that filled the large windows were the holographic projection, and they all still sat in the jungle.

As though only the jungle were real.

Mace spoke first.

“She’s right.” He lifted his head from his hands. “I have to go after her. Alone.”

Palpatine’s eyebrows twitched. “That seems . . . unwise.”

“Concur with Chancellor Palpatine, I do,” Yoda said slowly. “Great risks there would be. Too valuable you are. Send others, we should.”

“There is no one else who can do this.”

“Surely, Master Windu”—Palpatine’s smile was respectfully disbelieving—“a Republic Intelligence covert ops team, or even a team of Jedi—”

“No.” Mace rose, and straightened his shoulders. “It has to be me.”

“Please, we all understand your concern for your former student, Master Windu, but surely—”

“Reasons he must have, Supreme Chancellor,” Yoda said. “Listen to them, we should.”

Even Palpatine found that one did not argue with Master Yoda.

Mace struggled to put his certainty into words. This difficulty was a function of his particular gift of perception. Some things were so obvious to him that they were hard to describe: like explaining how he knew it was raining while he stood in a thunderstorm.

“If Depa has . . . gone mad—or worse, fallen to the dark side,” he began, “it’s vital that the Jedi know *why*. That we discover *what did it to her*. Until we know this, no more Jedi should be exposed to it than is absolutely necessary. Also, this all might be entirely false: a deliberate attempt to incriminate her. That ambient noise on the recording . . .” He

glanced at the agent. “If her voice was faked—say, synthesized by computer—that noise could be there precisely to blur the evidence of trickery, couldn’t it?”

The agent nodded. “But why would someone want to frame her?”

Mace waved this off. “Regardless, she must be brought in. And soon—before rumor of such massacres reaches the wider galaxy. Even if she had nothing to do with them, having a Jedi’s name associated with these crimes is a threat to the public trust in the Jedi. She must answer any charges before they are ever publicly made.”

“Granted, she must be brought in,” Palpatine allowed. “But the question remains: why *you*?”

“Because she might not want to come.”

Palpatine looked thoughtful.

Yoda’s head came up, and his eyes opened, gleaming at the Supreme Chancellor. “If rogue she has gone . . . to find her, difficult it will be. To apprehend her . . .” His voice dropped, as though the words caused him pain. “Dangerous, that will be.”

“Depa was my Padawan.” Mace moved away from the desk and stared out the window at the shimmering twilight that slowly darkened the capital’s cityscape. “The bond of Master and Padawan is . . . intense. No one knows her better—and I have more experience in those jungles than any other living Jedi. I’m the only one who can find her if she doesn’t want to be found. And if she must be—”

He swallowed, and stared at the moondisk of light scattered from one of the orbital mirrors. “If she must be . . . stopped,” he said at length, “I may be the only one who can do that, too.”

Palpatine’s eyebrows twitched polite incomprehension.

Mace took a deep breath, finding himself once more looking at his hands, *through* his hands, seeing only an image in his mind, sharp as a dream: lightsaber against

lightsaber in the Temple's training halls, the green flash of Depa's blade seeming to come from everywhere at once.

He could not unmake what he had made.

There were no second chances.

Her voice echoed inside him: *Nothing is more dangerous than a Jedi who's finally sane*, but he said only—

"She is a master of Vaapad."

In the silence that followed, he studied the folds and wrinkles of his interlaced fingers, focusing his attention into his visual field to hold at bay dark dream-ghosts of Depa's blade flashing toward Jedi necks.

"Vaapad?" Palpatine repeated, eventually. Perhaps he'd grown tired of waiting for someone to explain. "Isn't that some kind of animal?"

"A predator of Sarapin," Yoda supplied gravely. "Also the nickname it is, given by students, for the seventh form of lightsaber combat."

"Hmp. I've always heard there are only six."

"Six there were, for generations of Jedi. The seventh . . . is not well known. A *powerful* form it is. Deadliest of all . . . But dangerous it is—to its master, as well as its opponent. Few have studied. One student alone to mastery has risen."

"But if she's the only master—and this style is so deadly—what makes you think—"

"She's not the only master, sir." He lifted his head to meet Palpatine's frown. "She is my only student to *become* a master."

"*Your* only student . . ." Palpatine echoed.

"I didn't study Vaapad." Mace let his hands fall to his sides. "I created it."

Palpatine's brows drew together thoughtfully. "Yes, I seem to recall now: a reference in your report on the treason of Master Sora Bulq. Didn't you train him as well? Didn't he also claim to be a master of this Vaapad of yours?"

"Sora Bulq was not my student."

“Your . . . *associate*, then?”

“And he did not master Vaapad,” Mace said grimly. “Vaapad mastered him.”

“Ah—ah, I see . . .”

“With respect, sir, I don’t think you do.”

“I see enough to worry me, just a bit.” The warmth of Palpatine’s smile robbed insult from his words. “The relationship of Master and Padawan is intense, you said; and I well believe it. When you faced Dooku on Geonosis . . .”

“I prefer,” Mace said softly, “not to talk about Geonosis, Chancellor.”

“Depa Billaba was your Padawan. And she is still perhaps your closest friend, is she not? If she must be slain, are you so certain you can strike her down?”

Mace looked at the floor, at Yoda, at the agent, and in the end he had to meet Palpatine’s eyes once more. It was not merely Palpatine of Naboo who had asked; this question had come from the Supreme Chancellor. His office demanded an answer.

“May the Force grant, sir,” Mace said slowly, “that I will not have to find out.”

PART ONE

MEN IN THE JUNGLE

THE DOWNWARD SPIRAL

THROUGH THE CURVED transparisteel, Haruun Kal was a wall of mountain-punched clouds beside him. It looked close enough to touch. The shuttle's orbit spiraled slowly toward the surface: soon enough he would be able to touch it in truth.

The insystem shuttle was only a twenty-seater, and even so it was three-quarters empty. The shuttle line had bought it used from a tour company; the tubelike passenger fuselage was entirely transparisteel, its exterior scarred and fogged with microbody pits, its interior bare except for strips of gray no-skid laid along the aisles.

Mace Windu was the lone human. His shipmates were two Kubaz who fluted excitedly about the culinary possibilities of pinch beetles and buzzworms, and a mismatched couple who seemed to be some kind of itinerant comedy act, a Kitonak and a Pho Ph'eahian whose canned banter made Mace wish for earplugs. Or hard vacuum. Or plain old-fashioned deafness. They must have been far down on their luck, to be taking a tourist shuttle into Pelek Baw; Haruun Kal's capital city is a place lounge acts go to die. Passenger liners on the Gevarno Loop only stopped there at all because they had to drop into realspace anyway for the system transit.

Mace sat as far from the others as the shuttle's limited space allowed.

The Jedi Master wore clothing appropriate to his cover: a stained vest of Corellian sand panther leather over a loose shirt that used to be white, and skintight black pants with wear patches of gray. His boots carried a hint of polish, but only above the ankle; the uppers were scuffed almost to suede. The only parts of his ensemble that were well maintained were the supple holster belted to his right thigh, and the gleaming Merr-Sonn Power 5 it held. His lightsaber was stuffed into the kitbag beneath his seat, disguised as an old-fashioned glow rod.

The datapad on his lap was also a disguise: though it worked well enough for him to encrypt his journal on it, most of it was actually a miniature subspace transmitter, frequency-locked to the band monitored by the medium cruiser *Halleck*, onstation in the Ventran system.

The Korunnal Highland swung into view: a vast plateau of every conceivable shade of green, skirted by bottomless swirls of cloud, crisscrossed by interlocking mountain ranges. A few of the tallest peaks were capped with white; many of the shorter mountains plumed billows of smoke and gas. The eastern half of the highland had already rolled through the terminator; when the shuttle passed into the planet's shadow, gleams of dark red and orange specked the world like predators' eyes beyond the ring of a campfire's light: open calderas of the highland's many active volcanoes.

It was beautiful. Mace barely noticed.

He held the recording wand of the fake datapad and spoke very, very softly.

FROM THE PRIVATE JOURNALS OF MACE WINDU

[INITIAL HARUUN KAL ENTRY]:

Depa's down there. Right now.

I shouldn't be thinking about this. I shouldn't be thinking about her. Not yet.

But—

She's down there. She's been down there for months.

I can't imagine what might have happened to her. I don't want to imagine.

I'll find out soon enough.

Focus. I have to focus. Concentrate on what I know is true while I wait for the mud to settle and the water to become clear . . .

A lesson of Yoda's. But sometimes you can't wait.

And sometimes the water never clears.

I can focus on what I know about Haruun Kal. I know a lot. Here's some of it:

HARUUN KAL (Al'Har I): sole planet of the AL'HAR system. *Haruun Kal* is the name given to it in the language of the indigenous human population, the Korunnai (uplanders). It translates to Basic as "above the clouds." From space, the world appears to be oceanic, with only a few green-topped islands rising from a restless multicolored sea. But this is deceptive: the sea that these islands punctuate is not liquid, but an ocean of heavier-than-air toxic gases, which plume endlessly from the planet's innumerable active volcanoes. Only on the mountaintops and the high plateaus can oxygen-breathing life survive—and not on many of these; unless they rise far above the cloudsea, they are vulnerable to Haruun Kal's unpredictable winds. Especially during Haruun Kal's brief winter, when the *thakiz baw'kal*—the Downstorm—blows, the winds can whip the thick cloudsea high enough to scour lowlands free of oxygen breathers within hours. Its capital, *pelek baw*, is located on the sole inhabited landmass, the plateau known as the korunnal highland,

and is the largest permanent settlement on this primarily jungle-covered planet. The indigenous humans live in small seminomadic tribal groups called ghôsh and avoid the settlements, which are maintained by offworlders of a wide variety of species. The Korunnai lump all offworlders and settled folk under the somewhat contemptuous category of Balawai (“downfolk”). There is a long history of unorganized local conflicts . . .

This doesn’t help.

I can’t fit what I know of Haruun Kal into a guidebook description. Too much of what I know is the color of the sunflash and the smell of the wind off Grandfather’s Shoulder, the silken ripple of a grasser’s undercoat through my fingers, the hot fierce sting of an akk dog’s Force-touch.

I was born on Haruun Kal. Far back in the highland.

I am a full-blooded Korun.

A hundred generations of my ancestors breathed that air and drank that water, ate the fruit of that soil and were buried deep within it. I’ve returned only once, thirty-five standard years ago—but I have carried that world with me. The feel of it. The power of its storms. The upswelling tangle of its jungles. The thunder of its peaks.

But it is not home. Home is Coruscant. Home is the Jedi Temple.

I have no recollection of my infancy among the Korunnai; my earliest memory is of Yoda’s kindly smile and enormous gentle eyes close above me. It is still vivid. I don’t know how old I might have been, but I am certain I could not yet walk. Perhaps I was too young to even stand. In memory, I can see my plump infant’s hands reaching up to tug at the white straggles of hair above Yoda’s ears.

I recall squalling—*shrieking like a wounded glowbat*, as Yoda prefers to describe it—as some kind of toy, a rattle, it might have been, bobbed in the air just beyond my grasp. I recall how no amount of shouting, screaming, howling, or tears could draw that rattle one millimeter closer to my tiny fist. And I recall the instant I first reached for the toy without using my hands: how I could feel it

hanging there, and I could *feel* how Yoda's mind supported it . . . and a whisper of the Force began to hum in my ears.

My next lesson: Yoda had come to take the rattle away, and I—with my infant's instinctive selfishness—had refused to release it, holding on with both my hands and all I could summon of the Force. The rattle broke—to my infant mind, a tragedy like the end of a world—for that had been Yoda's way of introducing the Jedi law of nonattachment: holding too tightly to what we love will destroy it.

And break our hearts as well.

That's a lesson I don't want to be thinking about right now.

But I can't help myself. Not right now.

Not while I'm up here, and Depa is down there.

Depa Billaba came into my life by accident: one of those joyous coincidences that are sometimes the gift of the galaxy. I found her after I fought and killed the pirates who had murdered her parents; these pirates had kidnapped their victims' lovely infant daughter. I never learned what they wanted to do with her. Or to her. I refuse to speculate.

An advantage of Jedi mental discipline: I can stop myself from imagining such things.

She grew to girlhood in the Temple, and to womanhood as my Padawan. The proudest moment of my life was the day I stood and directed the Jedi Council to welcome its newest member.

She is one of the youngest Jedi ever to be named to the Council. On the day of her elevation, Yoda suggested that it was my teaching that had brought her so far while still so young.

He said this, I think, more from courtesy than from honesty; she came so far while still so young because she is who she is. My teaching had little to do with it. I have never met anyone like her.

Depa is more than a friend to me. She's one of those dangerous attachments. She is the daughter I will never have.

All the Jedi discipline in the galaxy cannot entirely overpower the human heart.

I hear her voice again and again: . . . *you should never have sent me here, and I should never have come . . .*

I can't stop myself from reaching into the Force, though I know it is useless. Since shortly before Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan Kenobi stood in front of the Council to report the rebirth of the Sith, a mysterious veil of darkness has clouded the Force. Close by—in both space and time—the Force is as it has always been: guide and ally, my invisible eyes and unseen hands. But when I try to search through the Force for Depa, I find only shadows, indistinct and threatening. The crystal purity of the Force has become a thick fog of menace.

Again: . . . *but what's done can never be undone* . . .

I can shake my head till my brain rattles, but I can't seem to drive away those words. I must clear my mind; Pelek Baw is still Separatist, and I will have to be alert. I must stop thinking about her.

Instead, I think about the war.

The Republic was caught entirely unprepared. After a thousand years of peace, no one—especially not us Jedi—truly believed civil war would ever come. How could we? Not even Yoda could remember the last general war. Peace is more than a tradition. It is the bedrock of civilization itself.

This was the Confederacy's great advantage: the Separatists not only expected war, but *counted on it*.

By the time the smoldering Clone War burst into Geonosian flame, their ships were already in motion. In the weeks that followed, while we Jedi tended our wounds and mourned our dead, while the Senate scrambled to assemble a fleet—any kind of fleet—to match the power of the Confederacy of Independent Systems, while Supreme Chancellor Palpatine pleaded and bargained and sometimes had to outright threaten wavering Senators to not only stay loyal to the Republic but also support its clone army with their credits and their resources, the Separatists had fanned out across the galaxy, seeding the hyperspace lanes with their forces. The major approaches into Separatist space were picketed by droid starfighters, backed up by newly revealed capital ships: Geonosian Dreadnaughts that lumbered out from secret shipyards.

Strategically, it was a masterpiece. Any thrust into the worlds at

the core of the Confederacy would be blunted, and delayed long enough for Separatist reserves to engage it; any attack with sufficient strength to swiftly overwhelm their pickets would leave hundreds or thousands of worlds open to swift Separatist reprisal. Behind their droid-walled frontier, they could gather their forces at leisure, striking out to swallow Republic systems piecemeal.

Even before the Republic was ready to fight, we had lost.

Yoda is the master strategist of the Jedi Council. A life as vast as his predisposes one to see the big picture, and take the long view. He developed our current strategy of limited engagement on multiple fronts; our goal is to harass the Separatists, wear them down in a war of attrition, chip away at them and prevent them from consolidating their position. In this way, we hope to gain time for the titanic manufacturing base of the Republic to be converted to the production of ships, weapons, and other war matériel.

And time to train our troops. The Kaminoan clone troopers are not only the best soldiers we have, they are very nearly our only soldiers. We would use them to train civilian volunteers and law-enforcement personnel in weapons and tactics, but the Separatists have managed to keep nearly all 1.2 million of them fully engaged, rushing from system to system and planet to planet to meet probing attacks from the bewildering variety of war droids that the Techno-Union, with the financial backing of the Trade Federation, turns out in seemingly unlimited quantities.

Since we need all our clones simply to defend Republic systems, we have been forced to find ways to attack without them.

The Separatists don't enjoy unalloyed popularity, even in their core systems; and in any society, there are fringe elements eager to take up arms against authority. Jedi have been covertly inserted on hundreds of worlds, with a common mission: to organize Loyalist resistance, train partisans in sabotage and guerrilla warfare, and generally do whatever possible to destabilize the Separatist governments.

This was why Depa Billaba came to Haruun Kal.

I sent her here.

The Al'Har system—of which Haruun Kal is the sole planet—