

STAR WARS

EPISODE II

ATTACK OF THE CLONES™

R. A. SALVATORE

BASED ON THE STORY BY

GEORGE LUCAS

AND THE SCREENPLAY BY

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AND

JONATHAN HALES



**DEL
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PRELUDE

His mind absorbed the scene before him, so quiet and calm and . . . normal.

It was the life he had always wanted, a gathering of family and friends—he knew that they were just that, though the only one he recognized was his dear mother.

This was the way it was supposed to be. The warmth and the love, the laughter and the quiet times. This was how he had always dreamed it would be, how he had always prayed it would be. The warm, inviting smiles. The pleasant conversation. The gentle pats on shoulders.

But most of all there was the smile of his beloved mother, so happy now, no more a slave. When she looked at him, he saw all of that and more, saw how proud she was of him, how joyful her life had become.

She moved before him, her face beaming, her hand reaching out for him to gently stroke his face. Her smile brightened, then widened some more.

Too much more.

For a moment, he thought the exaggeration a product of love beyond normal bounds, but the smile continued to grow, his mother's face stretching and contorting weirdly.

She seemed to be moving in slow motion then. They all did, slowing as if their limbs had become heavy.

No, not heavy, he realized, his warm feelings turning suddenly hot. It was as if these friends and his mother were becoming rigid and stiff, as if they were becoming something less than living and breathing humans. He stared back at that caricature of a smile, the twisted face, and recognized the pain behind it, a crystalline agony.

He tried to call out to her, to ask her what she needed him to do, ask her how he could help.

Her face twisted even more, blood running from her eyes. Her skin crystalized, becoming almost translucent, almost like glass.

Glass! She was glass! The light glistened off her crystalline highlights, the blood ran fast over her smooth surface. And her expression, a look of resignation and apology, a look that said she had failed him and that he had failed her, drove a sharp point straight into the helpless onlooker's heart.

He tried to reach out for her, tried to save her.

Cracks began to appear in the glass. He heard the crunching sounds as they elongated.

He cried out repeatedly, reached for her desperately. Then he thought of the Force, and sent his thoughts there with all his willpower, reaching for her with all his energy.

But then, she shattered.

The Jedi Padawan jumped to a sitting position in his cot on the starship, his eyes popping open wide, sweat on his forehead and his breath coming in gasps.

A dream. It was all a dream.

He told himself that repeatedly as he tried to settle back down on the cot. It was all a dream.

Or was it?

He could see things, after all, before they happened.

“Ansiön!” came a call from the front of the ship, the familiar voice of his Master.

He knew that he had to shake the dream away, had to focus on the events at hand, the latest assignment beside his Master, but that was easier said than done.

For he saw her again, his mother, her body going rigid, crystallizing, then exploding into a million shattered shards.

He looked up ahead, envisioning his Master at the controls, wondering if he should tell all to the Jedi, wondering if the Jedi would be able to help him. But that thought washed away as soon as it had crossed his mind. His Master, Obi-Wan Kenobi, would not be able to help. They were too involved in other things, in his training, in minor assignments like the border dispute that had brought them so far out from Coruscant.

The Padawan wanted to get back to Coruscant, as soon as possible. He needed guidance now, but not the kind he was getting from Obi-Wan.

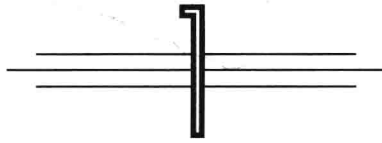
He needed to speak with Chancellor Palpatine again, to hear the man’s reassuring words. Palpatine had taken a great interest in him over the last ten years, making sure that he always got a chance to speak with him whenever he and Obi-Wan were on Coruscant.

The Padawan took great comfort in that now, with the terrible dream so vivid in his thoughts. For the Chancellor, the wise leader of all the Republic, had promised him that his powers

would soar to previously unknown heights, that he would become a power even among the powerful Jedi.

Perhaps that was the answer. Perhaps the mightiest of the Jedi, the mightiest of the mighty, could strengthen the fragile glass.

“Ansiion,” came the call again from the front. “Anakin, get up here!”



Shmi Skywalker Lars stood on the edge of the sand berm marking the perimeter of the moisture farm, one leg up higher, to the very top of the ridge, knee bent. With one hand on that knee for support, the middle-aged woman, her dark hair slightly graying, her face worn and tired, stared up at the many bright dots of starlight on this crisp Tatooine night. No sharp edges broke the landscape about her, just the smooth and rounded forms of windblown sand dunes on this planet of seemingly endless sands. Somewhere out in the distance a creature groaned, a plaintive sound that resonated deeply within Shmi this night.

This special night.

Her son Anakin, her dearest little Annie, turned twenty this night, a birthday Shmi observed each year, though she hadn't seen her beloved child in a decade. How different he must be! How grown, how strong, how wise in the ways of the Jedi by now! Shmi, who had lived all of her life in a small area of drab Tatooine, knew that she could hardly imagine the wonders her boy might have found out there among the stars, on planets so

different from this, with colors more vivid and water that filled entire valleys.

A wistful smile widened on her still-pretty face as she remembered those days long ago, when she and her son had been slaves of the wretch Watto. Annie, with his mischief and his dreams, with his independent attitude and unsurpassed courage, used to so infuriate the Toydarian junk dealer. Despite the hardships of life as a slave, there had been good times, too, back then. Despite their meager food, their meager possessions, despite the constant complaining and ordering about by Watto, she had been with Annie, her beloved son.

“You should come in,” came a quiet voice behind her.

Shmi’s smile only widened, and she turned to see her stepson, Owen Lars, walking over to join her. He was a stocky and strong boy about Anakin’s age, with short brown hair, a few bristles, and a wide face that could not hide anything that was within his heart.

Shmi tousled Owen’s hair when he moved beside her, and he responded by draping an arm across her shoulders and kissing her on the cheek.

“No starship tonight, Mom?” Owen asked good-naturedly. He knew why Shmi had come out here, why she came out here so very often in the quiet night.

Shmi turned her hand over and gently stroked it down Owen’s face, smiling. She loved this young man as she loved her own son, and he had been so good to her, so understanding of the hole that remained within her heart. Without jealousy, without judgment, Owen had accepted Shmi’s pain and had always given her a shoulder to lean on.

“No starship this night,” she replied, and she looked back

up at the starry canopy. “Anakin must be busy saving the galaxy or chasing smugglers and other outlaws. He has to do those things now, you know.”

“Then I shall sleep more soundly from this night forward,” Owen replied with a grin.

Though she was kidding, of course, Shmi did realize a bit of truth in her presumption about Anakin. He was a special child, something beyond the norm—even for a Jedi, she believed. Anakin had always stood taller than anyone else. Not physically—physically, as Shmi remembered him, he was just a smiling little boy, with curious eyes and sandy-blond hair. But Annie could do things, and so very well. Even though he was only a child at the time, he had raced Pods, defeating some of the very best racers on all of Tatooine. He was the first human ever to win one of the Podraces, and that when he was only nine years old! And in a racer that, Shmi remembered with an even wider smile, had been built with spare parts taken from Watto’s junkyard.

But that was Anakin’s way, because he was not like the other children, or even like other adults. Anakin could “see” things before they happened, as if he was so tuned to the world about him that he understood innately the logical conclusion to any course of events. He could often sense problems with his Podracer, for example, long before those problems manifested themselves in a catastrophic way. He had once told her that he could feel the upcoming obstacles in any course before he actually saw them. It was his special way, and that was why the Jedi who had come to Tatooine had recognized the unique nature of the boy and had freed him from Watto and taken him into their care and instruction.

“I had to let him go,” Shmi said quietly. “I could not keep him with me, if that meant living the life of a slave.”

“I know,” Owen assured her.

“I could not have kept him with me even if we were not slaves,” she went on, and she looked at Owen, as if her own words had surprised her. “Annie has so much to give to the galaxy. His gifts could not be contained by Tatooine. He belongs out there, flying across the stars, saving planets. He was born to be a Jedi, born to give so much more to so many more.”

“That is why I sleep better at night,” Owen reiterated, and when Shmi looked at him, she saw that his grin was wider than ever.

“Oh, you’re teasing me!” she said, reaching out to swat her stepson on the shoulder. Owen merely shrugged.

Shmi’s face went serious again. “Annie wanted to go,” she went on, the same speech she had given Owen before, the same speech that she had silently repeated to herself every night for the last ten years. “His dream was to fly about the stars, to see every world in the whole galaxy, to do grand things. He was born a slave, but he was not born *to be* a slave. No, not my Annie.

“Not my Annie.”

Owen squeezed her shoulder. “You did the right thing. If I was Anakin, I would be grateful to you. I’d understand that you did what was best for me. There is no greater love than that, Mom.”

Shmi stroked his face again and even managed a wistful smile.

“Come on in, Mom,” Owen said, taking her hand. “It’s dangerous out here.”

Shmi nodded and didn’t resist at first as Owen started to

pull her along. She stopped suddenly, though, and stared hard at her stepson as he turned back to regard her. "It's more dangerous out there," she said, sucking in her breath, her voice breaking. Alarm evident in her expression, she looked back up at the wide and open sky. "What if he is hurt, Owen? Or dead?"

"It's better to die in pursuit of your dreams than to live a life without hope," Owen said, rather unconvincingly.

Shmi looked back at him, her smile returning. Owen, like his father, was about as grounded in simple pragmatism as any man could be. She understood that he had said that only for her benefit, and that made it all the more special.

She didn't resist anymore as Owen began to lead her along again, back to the humble abode of Cliegg Lars, her husband, Owen's father.

She had done the right thing concerning her son, Shmi told herself with every step. They had been slaves, with no prospects of finding their freedom other than the offer of the Jedi. How could she have kept Anakin here on Tatooine, when Jedi Knights were promising him all of his dreams?

Of course, at that time, Shmi had not known that she would meet Cliegg Lars that fateful day in Mos Espa, and that the moisture farmer would fall in love with her, buy her from Watto, and free her, and only then, once she was a free woman, ask her to marry him. Would she have let Anakin go if she had known the changes that would come into her life so soon after his departure?

Wouldn't her life be better now, more complete by far, if Anakin were beside her?

Shmi smiled as she thought about it. No, she realized, she would still have wanted Annie to go, even if she had foreseen the

dramatic changes that would soon come into her life. Not for herself, but for Anakin. His place was out there. She knew that.

Shmi shook her head, overwhelmed by the enormity of it all, by the many winding turns in her life's path, in Anakin's path. Even in hindsight, she could not be sure that this present situation was not the best possible outcome, for both of them.

But still, there remained a deep and empty hole in her heart.



I can help with that,” Beru said politely, moving to join Shmi, who was cooking dinner. Cliegg and Owen were out closing down the perimeter of the compound, securing the farm from the oncoming night—a night that promised a dust storm.

Smiling warmly, and glad that this young woman was soon to be a member of their family, Shmi handed a knife over to Beru. Owen hadn’t said anything yet about marrying Beru, but Shmi could tell from the way the two looked at each other. It was only a matter of time, and not much time at that, if she knew her stepson. Owen was not an adventurous type, was as solid as the ground beneath them, but when he knew what he wanted, he went after it with single-minded purpose.

Beru was exactly that, and she obviously loved Owen as deeply as he loved her. She was well suited to be the wife of a moisture farmer, Shmi thought, watching her methodically go about her duties in the kitchen. She never shied from work, was very capable and diligent.

And she doesn’t expect much, or need much to make her happy,

Shmi thought, for that, in truth, was the crux of it. Their existence here was simple and plain. There were few adventures, and none at all that were welcomed, for excitement out here usually meant that Tusken Raiders had been seen in the region, or that a gigantic sandstorm or some other potentially devastating weather phenomenon was blowing up.

The Lars family had only the simple things, mostly the company of each other, to keep them amused and content. For Cliegg, this had been the only way of life he had ever known, a lifestyle that went back several generations in the Lars family. Same thing for Owen. And while Beru had grown up in Mos Eisley, she seemed to fit right in.

Yes, Owen would marry her, Shmi knew, and what a happy day that would be!

The two men returned soon after, along with C-3PO, the protocol droid Anakin had built back in the days when he had Watto's junkyard to rummage through.

"Two more tangaroots for you, Mistress Shmi," the thin droid said, handing Shmi a pair of orange-and-green freshly picked vegetables. "I would have brought more, but I was told, and not in any civil way, that I must hurry."

Shmi looked to Cliegg, and he gave her a grin and a shrug. "Could've left him out there to get sandblasted clean, I suppose," he said. "Of course, some of the bigger rocks that are sure to be flying about might've taken out a circuit or two."

"Your pardon, Master Cliegg," C-3PO said. "I only meant—"

"We know what you meant, Threepio," Shmi assured the droid. She placed a comforting hand on his shoulder, then quickly pulled it away, thinking that a perfectly silly gesture to offer to a walking box of wires. Of course, C-3PO was much more than a box of wires to Shmi. Anakin had built the droid . . . almost.

When Anakin had left with the Jedi, 3PO had been perfectly functional, but uncovered, his wires exposed. Shmi had left him that way for a long time, fantasizing that Anakin would return to complete the job. Just before marrying Cliegg had Shmi finished the droid herself, adding the dull metal coverings. It had been quite a touching moment for Shmi, an admission of sorts that she was where she belonged and Anakin was where he belonged. The protocol droid could be quite annoying at times, but to Shmi, C-3PO remained a reminder of her son.

“Course, if there are Tusken about, they’d likely have gotten him under wraps before the storm,” Cliegg went on, obviously taking great pleasure in teasing the poor droid. “You’re not afraid of Tusken Raiders, are you, Threepio?”

“There is nothing in my program to suggest such fear,” 3PO replied, though he would have sounded more convincing if he hadn’t been shaking as he spoke, and if his voice hadn’t come out all squeaky and uneven.

“Enough,” Shmi demanded of Cliegg. “Oh, poor Threepio,” she said, patting the droid’s shoulder again. “Go ahead, now. I’ve got more than enough help this evening.” As she finished, she waved the droid away.

“You’re just terrible to that poor droid,” she remarked, moving beside her husband and playfully patting him across his broad shoulder.

“Well, if I can’t have fun with him, I’ll have to set my sights on someone else,” the rarely mischievous Cliegg replied, narrowing his eyes and scanning the room. He finally settled a threatening gaze on Beru.

“Cliegg,” Shmi was quick to warn.

“What?” he protested dramatically. “If she’s thinking to come out and live here, then she had better learn to defend herself!”

“Dad!” Owen cried.

“Oh, don’t fret about old Cliegg,” Beru piped in, emphasizing the word *old*. “A fine wife I would make if I couldn’t out-duel that one in a war of words!”

“Aha! A challenge!” Cliegg roared.

“Not so much of one from where I’m sitting,” Beru dryly returned, and she and Cliegg began exchanging some good-natured insults, with Owen chiming in every now and again.

Shmi hardly listened, too engaged in merely watching Beru. Yes, she would certainly fit in, and well, about the moisture farm. Her temperament was perfect. Solid, but playful when the situation allowed. Gruff Cliegg could verbally spar with the best of them, but Beru had to be counted among that elite lot. Shmi went back to her dinner preparations, her smile growing wider every time Beru hit Cliegg with a particularly nasty retort.

Intent on her work, Shmi never saw the missile coming, and when the overripe vegetable hit her on the side of the face, she let out a shriek.

Of course, that only made the other three in the room howl with laughter.

Shmi turned to see them sitting there, staring at her. From the embarrassed expression on Beru’s face, and from the angle, with Beru sitting directly behind Cliegg, it seemed obvious to Shmi that Beru had launched the missile, aiming for Cliegg, but throwing a bit high.

“The girl listens when you tell her to stop,” Cliegg Lars said, his sarcastic tone shattered by a burst of laughter that came right from his belly.

He stopped when Shmi smacked him with a piece of juicy fruit, splattering it across his shoulders.