

STAR WARS

In Search of Knighthood

The story of the rebellion against the Empire has been told many times before and the names of the Heroes of Yavin will never be forgotten, but the rolls of the rebellion were as vast as the thousand thousand worlds that comprised the Empire itself. Most of these rebels fought and died as unrecognized as they lived. It was the sum of their individual sacrifices that led to the events that resulted in the death of Emperor Palpatine and the overthrow of his vile Empire. This is the story of a handful of those anonymous rebels and their part in the sum of victory.

Chapter One

"Wake up Lon-Chi, its time for practice." Said Carek Argonaut shaking his still groggy roommate awake.

"I guess this four o'clock in the morning wake up stuff is supposed to build character." Said Lon-Chi as he yielded to Carek's insistent rousing and rolled out of his bunk. "While it is my firm belief that four A.M. is a great way to end a day, it is my further belief that it is definitely not a way to start a day."

"You knew going into this, that becoming a Jedi would require some sacrifices." Carek laughed and turned for the door. "You've got five minutes to get to the meditation room, or when Master Havsoltek is through with you, you'll wish that you had stayed an apprentice mining supervisor on Essowyn. I'll see you there."

Lon-Chi Wilks watched his roommate exit their Spartan quarters. "It's just not fair, he comes from an agriculture world, hes used to this getting up before the sun stuff." He sighed heavily. "I've got to get me a roomie that understands the fine art of sleeping in."

The would-be Jedi dressed quickly and regarded himself in the mirror. He didn't possess the solid, beefy build of most miners, being only a hundred and seventy-four centimeters tall and a sparse seventy-three kilos. His lips and nose were too strong for him to be considered handsome, but the twinkle that shone in his deep set green eyes, showed the kindness of his heart and despite his size, he had been a cherished member of his mining crew for his uncanny ability to locate deposits of ytterbium and more importantly for his "premonitions." Not a single member of his crew had ever been injured in a cave-in while Lon-Chi was working, his "premonitions" always steering them clear of trouble. It was a "premonition" that had brought him to the starport city of Lyndon on Chanlot and to Master Havsoltek.

He took an extra second to smooth his tunic before he noticed the time. "Burning stars! Thirty seconds to get downstairs!" Lon-Chi took off at a dead run, knowing full well the consequences for being late.

The Jedi temple of Yevgenny Havsoltek was a split level sprawling structure that had started out as a plantak processing plant. The tall native plantak grass was, when properly processed, a highly sought after designer fabric that was as comfortable as it was strong. The plantek craze had reached it's peak several years ago, and many of the smaller companies had gone out of business. Havsoltek had

purchased the old factory in the outskirts of Lyndon's industrial area for a pittance. He had the upper floor offices converted to austere living quarters for the six aspirant Jedi and himself. The cavernous main floor of the warehouse had been turned into the training area, meditation room, obstacle courses, library, and gymnasium. Lon-Chi raced down the stairs taking them three at a time, certain that he would be the last to arrive. He took his place in the circle of aspirants and glanced at his fellow students, to his right was Philla Kalrendis, a tall, striking, brunette with the lithe build of a dancer. She had been a nursing student before coming to the temple less than six weeks ago.

Next to her stood Conrad Davies, a ruddy, big boned, bull of a man as solid as a ferrocrete piling, his face was a series of crags and angles that only a mother could love. He had become Havsoltek's first student, when the Jedi Knight had sensed his potential after he had been subdued by Havsoltek during a factory workers revolt that the Jedi had been called in to mediate.

Jenall Cadson was to the right of Davies at the head of the circle, a wiry youth from the sere steppes of the desert world Seracco, Cadson was small of frame and big of heart. He was deeply tanned and kept his long black hair braided in an elaborately tied top knot.

Wilk's roommate Carek Argonaut was to his immediate left. Carek was of medium height and build, A handsome man with dark brown hair, grey eyes, and a winning ready smile. Carek of the House of Argonaut was his formal title, but to Carek it always sounded so pretentious that it bordered on being pompous. He was the second son a a minor noble on the agricultural world of Beaufort, he had left his home to follow his lifelong dream of becoming a Jedi Knight.

The last of the students was Oos Felorren, he was the only alien at the temple. A Ho'Din, Oos was tall for his race and considered quite handsome.

Still winded from his mad dash, Lon-Chi began calming his breathing, he was still exhaling his second breath, when Master Havsoltek entered and took his place at the head of the meditation stone completing the Jedi circle.

"I see you're still pushing the envelope Mister Wilks." Said the Jedi Knight. "You've been here long enough to know that. Even though the Council of Masters is no longer available to grant me the rank of master, I still expect you to abide by the letter and the spirit of the rules I have established for your training. Since you seem to have a problem with rising in time for our four A.M. work call,

for the next week you will rise at two A.M. and stand in contemplation here at the base of the meditation stone, where you will have time to reflect upon the Force and your decision to become a Jedi."

Lon-Chi could only wince and nod in silence.

"Today's training will consist of the Gauntlet, repulsor field gymnastics, and the first lightsaber cadence. Kalrendis, Davies and Argonaut will run the gauntlet. Wilks and Felorren will go to the gymnasium and conduct two hours of calisthenics with the repulsor field set at 1.4 Gee. Cadson you will remain with me and perform the first cadence. You have three minutes before we start."

The aspirants split up to head to their assigned training.

Enroute to the intense geomorphic obstacle course that had been dubbed "The Gauntlet" by Davies, Philla broke the silence that had followed Havsoltek's pronouncement. "I wonder how he's got it configured this time?"

"I know one thing for certain," Davies replied. "no matter what you have in mind, it will not be what you suspected and it will be more difficult than you imagined possible."

"That last part goes without saying." Added Carek. "When I first got here I foolishly thought that, after my first time through, the Gauntlet would get easier. Flaming Suns and Comets was I wrong about that! The sad thing is, that mistake was only the first in a series of miscalculations about becoming a Jedi that I've made in the six months that I've been here."

"Carek my friend, we've all found that there's more to becoming a Jedi than any of us bargained for." Said Davies stopping before the door that led to the dreaded Gauntlet. "Who's first into the breach?"

"Well tradition says 'ladies first.'" Quipped Carek.

"Well you can stuff that 'tradition' where ever you got it from. Carek of the house of Argonaut." Keyed up by the pending test, Philla responded sharper than usual. "I say we flip a credit chip, odd man goes first."

"I was just kidding, Philla. Coin toss is fine by me."

Carek was the odd man and rather than prolong the inevitable, he plunged through the door and right into the thick of the Gauntlet. At one minute intervals, Philla, then Conrad followed.

Hours later, Carek and Lon-Chi were using Jedi meditation techniques to unwind from the exhausting physical and mental regimen that had, in the last few

weeks, become the routine fare at the temple of Master Havsoltek.

"I think I've finally figured out his plan Carek." Said Lon-Chi massaging a particularly stubborn cramp in his left calf.

"Oh really, well would you be so kind as to share your epiphany with me?"

"It's all quite simple really, he runs us ragged for a year, anyone that survives the process, become Jedi by default."

"That's unusually cynical even for you."

"Sorry, I guess I'm just venting."

"I don't blame you for that, I've recently found myself wondering, if I might have failed to think this Jedi thing through enough."

"Look at us." Said Lon-Chi pouring himself a hot cup of Rendis, a beverage made from the bark of a Hazalroot tree, Rendis was known for its soothing effect to tired muscles and more importantly, for its ability to restore minor damage to muscles and blood vessels. "I've been here five months, you've been here six and for most of that time, our training has been demanding, but well within reason. Now that Master Havsoltek moves us to the next phase of our training we start whining like a couple of lonely Ghandel birds."

"Well, this must be another of those tests of character that he's always springing on us. We've just got to suck it up and endure."

"That's seems to be the only option we have, aside from quitting and I'm not about to do that." Lon-Chi looked at his chronometer. "I hate to have to end this thrilling philosophical debate, but as you know, I've got an early start tomorrow, so I'm going to turn in. Good morrow to you friend Carek." He said slipping into the formal speech of Essowyn.

"Peace to you friend Lon-Chi." Responded Carek with the formal reply. "I'm going to go see if any of the others are still about. I'm just too keyed up to sleep. See you in the morning."

"Right."

Carek found that the day's training had been difficult for everyone, the only other aspirant that hadn't already gone to sleep was Philla, whom he found pacing cat-like in the long hallway that led to the meditation room.

"I'm glad to see that I'm not the only one too wired to sleep." She said when she spotted Carek. "I don't know how

much more of this pace I can stand Carek, running the Gauntlet almost killed me today."

Sensing that she was nearing the end of her tether, Carek reached out to his friend and cradled her gently.

"Come on now Philla," He said softly. "I know you're stronger than that. You took a pretty mean hit from that stun staff, but you have more strength than you give yourself credit for, we've all had set backs, you just have to trust in the Force to show you the way."

Wincing from both the physical pain of rotating her shoulder and the memory of the day's training, Philla suppressed a shudder. "Carek, I never saw that stun staff coming. Usually I can sort of sense when an attack is coming, I'm not saying I'm good enough to parry everything that comes my way, but even if I fail to parry, I have enough warning to roll with the blow. Today I didn't even know it was coming."

"Don't be so hard on yourself Philla, I couldn't believe how tough the Gauntlet was today. The stun staff that hit you was concealed in a tree in the middle of a holographic forest and it ambushed you while you were already under attack by a pair of practice droids that had you flanked."

"You got past it okay."

"Philla, I've been here six months, you've only been here six weeks, I only avoided that trap by vaulting between the droids. If I had tried to fight my way through them, I'm certain I would have been hit too."

"So, it was one of those 'find the least line of resistance' tests."

"See, I told you, you were smarter than you give yourself credit for."

"You said stronger."

"Stronger, smarter, what's the difference? All I know is you'll make an excellent Jedi one day if you can learn to trust in the Force."

"You haven't been here long enough to be able to see the future."

"True. However I do know people, and you are one of the smartest, strongest, and kindest people I've ever met. And if that isn't the very definition of a Jedi, then I don't know what is."

Philla canted her head as she thought about what Carek had said, then her face that had been tight with anxiety, softened and she smiled. "Thank you Carek. I think I might just be able to sleep now."

"The House of Argonaut stands ready to be of assistance at any time, M'lady."

"Now don't go getting formal on me." She laughed. "See you in the morning Carek."

"That you will."

When his chronometer's alarm went off at one-thirty the following morning, Lon-Chi cursed and rolled out of bed, moving quietly so as to not disturb Carek. He got dressed and took his place at the base of the meditation stone five minutes before two.

"Okay, I know there must be some hidden test, or message that I'm supposed to get out of this." He said to no one in particular, his gaze sweeping the room and coming to rest on the meditation stone. He knelt down and idly ran his hand across the face of the obelisk.

"I don't suppose you can tell me something?" He was about to make a scathing comment about losing his mind for talking to a rock, when he felt the stone begin to resonate, caught by surprise he was unable to comment on the phenomenon before being gripped by a powerful vision.

The room melted away and Lon-Chi felt himself being swept into a maelstrom of brilliantly colored lights that quickly resolved itself into a vast metropolitan vista that could only be Coruscant. The perspective changed from bird's eye to that of someone standing on the highest ramparts of the Imperial palace. Lon-Chi was swept into the palace at breath taking speed and into a small side chamber. Lon-Chi felt his pulse quicken when he recognized two of the three occupants in the room. One was the hulking, black cloaked Darth Vader. The second was the aging form of the Emperor himself! The third man could only be a Jedi Knight, his ragged clothes and disheveled appearance could not hide his regal calm and demeanor.

Lon-Chi's vision began to cloud, but he could faintly hear the Emperor snarl a single word. "Submit." The Jedi Knight responded in a voice as peaceful as eternity itself. "I can not." Even through the mist that had all but completely obscured the scene, Lon-Chi could see the visage of the Emperor twist with hatred. The vision ended with the sight of jagged bolts of blue lightning striking the Jedi Knight and his horrible scream.

Lon-Chi was over come by the all encompassing blackness that followed the pain in that scream, a blackness that continued long after Lon-Chi knew that the vision had ended and he was once again in the relative safety of the

meditation room. He managed to break physical contact with the stone before he collapsed from the awe inspiring power of the vision.

When Lon-Chi's eyes fluttered open, he was looking into the concerned face of his Master. "M-M-Mast...Master. I didn't..." He half croaked, trying to explain what had happened.

"I know Lon-Chi, I know you didn't fall asleep. I had hoped that you would attempt to further yourself and experiment with the stone, unfortunately there is no way of knowing what visions that you will be shown. I didn't mean for you to come to any harm, or for you to see so grim a version of our future. You need to relax for few minutes, I'm here and you are going to be okay."

After the room stopped spinning Lon-Chi asked "W-Who was that Jedi?"

"His name was Locean. I only met him once, years ago, but he was a good man and he deserved far better."

"Could we have helped him?"

"You still have much to learn Lon-Chi. The Force can show you things that have been, things that are, and things that will be. What the Force just revealed to you, occurred six weeks ago."

"If the Emperor is hunting down the Jedi, aren't we in danger?"

"The way of the Jedi has always been fraught with danger. You have chosen to enter an honorable profession at a dangerous time. It is not your fault that the Masters allowed themselves to dwindle and to become reclusive and isolated. Our teaching tradition was once one of enlightened knowledge, freely shared at a number of venerated Jedi academies. Now our ranks have sunk to the point that our formal training program has collapsed. Is it any wonder that the evil that the Jedi have held in check for millenia, is taking full advantage of our weakness to try and eliminate us once and for all?"

"Palpatine is but the latest in a long line of Dark side champions that have tried to turn the Jedi to the Dark side and I'm sad to say that he will not be the last. We do however, face our greatest threat since Exar Kun seized the title of Dark Lord of the Sith four thousand years ago. Greater, as we do not have the infrastructure that we had then. And even with that intricate support system and mass of experience, it took the full might of the Jedi to stop Kun. So you need not blame yourself for the times we live in, or for events that have been building since the time of the Clone wars."

"I know this will be difficult after what you have just seen, but I want you to calm your mind and use your remaining time, before the others rise, meditating on meaning of what the Force has revealed to you."

"Yes Master."

"Excellent. I will see you in an hour."

Lon-Chi stood at his place in the meditation room and smiled as he watched the other students file in. He smiled for today was the last day of his week of penance. "It has also been a week since you let Locean die too." Some dark portion of his mind intruded, causing his smile to fade instantly.

"Now where did that come from?" He thought as he played back the dreadful day of his vision in his mind.

Although he was still reeling from the implications of what he had seen, Lon-Chi had managed to calm himself enough by the time the rest of the students arrived, that he was able to keep his vision to himself and to somehow make it through the day's training. He had ultimately chosen not to reveal what he had seen and despite the unease that vision had caused him, he had continued to use the meditation stone to try and fathom the vision's significance. However, the Force had only seen fit to show him mundane images that even he could see were of no consequence.

Master Havsoltek took his place and gazed slowly at each of his students.

"I want you all to know that I am very proud of all of you. The pace of training has been difficult and you have all met that challenge without wavering and without complaint. In the past month you have all noticed an increase in the intensity of the training and I think it is a testimony to your character that you have all continued to persevere in the face of such adversity. Today's training will consist of the Gauntlet for all of you, except for Argonaut who will execute the first cadence.

"I want you to be aware that today, the Gauntlet has been configured to be a test of teamwork. Oos Felorren will be team leader. You have one minute to prepare yourselves. Mr. Argonaut come with me."

Havsoltek spun on his heel so abruptly, that Carek had to trot to catch up. When they reached the duelling circle, Carek was surprised to see that the candelabrum had actual candles with wicks, instead of the usual ball bearings atop a wax cylinder.

"This is a low tech version of the standard cadence." Said Havsoltek before Carek could ask. "The object is instead of destroying a ball bearing, you must light the wick without damaging the wax. The wicks are larger targets, but vary in uniformity unlike the bearings and thus, this version is just as difficult to execute as the more modern version."

"Master, may I ask why the change?"

"I have found this method to be more serene as you will end up bathed in soft candle light as you proceed, but it is more advanced than the standard ball bearing test. You have all progressed to the point that it is time to begin with this version. Now, no more delays. Begin."

Carek brought himself to the ready position and ignited his blade.

"That's it Carek, let the Force flow." Said Havsoltek. "Shut off the conscious part of your mind and let the Force guide your hand."

Carek completed the cadence, closed his lightsaber down, and turned to face Havsoltek.

"You did very well with that last exercise, I think you're ready to move to the next stage of your training. Now, I want you to repeat the exercise left handed."

"Yes Master." Carek replied, shifting his lightsaber to his off hand and looked glumly at the task before him.

Havsoltek could clearly see the doubt on his student's face.

"You can do it Carek, just trust in the Force."

"Yes Master I will do my best."

"That's what I expect from you at all times. You do know how important it is for you to complete your training don't you?"

"Yes Master I do." Was what Carek replied, inside he thought. "Actually I have no idea why you're driving us so hard."

"Let's hope that you do. Begin."

Igniting his lightsaber, Carek began the exercise again.

"A great darkness has been set free to feast on the galaxy and precious few will survive it's grim harvest." Havsoltek thought as he watched his student and let his mind drift. "The death screams of the Jedi slain by Vader and Palpatine have slowed to a trickle and I fear that the visions that have tormented me of a galaxy bereft of Jedi may come true. The events of the future are never set until they have happened, but for now, the days of the Jedi are

clearly numbered. I may not be able to stop the darkness that is upon us, but as long as these young Jedi can carry the spark of our order, then there will always be hope that the Jedi can be born anew. I can only hope that the other remaining Jedi Knights are doing the same to keep the flame from going out, so that some day, somewhere, some one will rise up and end this madness."

The still morning was suddenly shattered by the distinctive double sonic boom of at least two ships making a very fast re-entry.

"Who in the blazes is that!" Carek exclaimed as he halted in mid swing. He turned and saw his Master standing with his eyes unfocused, his face grimmer than Carek had ever seen.

"Carek! Round up the rest of the students and bring them here!"

"Master, tell me, what is wrong?"

"The Empire has arrived. NOW, MOVE!"

Carek raced out of the meditation room and up the stairs, calling for his fellow students.

Havsoltek turned and walked calmly to his meditation stone. The huge engraved stone platform was two meters square and a half meter thick. It had been carved at the ancient Jedi academy on the planet Ossus from a solid block of Valardine, a deep blood red stone found only on that world. The Jedi cherished Valardine above all other material for it's unique ability to absorb the psychic essence of someone it was in direct physical contact with, this property allowed the stone to become a focus to aid a Jedi when he called upon the Force. This stone had been a treasured heirloom of the Havsoltek family for more than a hundred generations and had been deeply ingrained with the Light side of the Force.

"Please forgive me this final self indulgence," Said Yevgenny as he caressed the fine runes that had been worked into the stone. "but I must know how my students will fair." The stone responded to his caress by gently starting to resonate.

"Light and Dark...Dark and Light..." Yevgenny gasped at the power of the vision. "a path of death and betrayal, but still one of hope..."

The clatter of feet on the stairs broke his concentration and forced him back to the here and now. He stepped clear of the stone and reached out with the Force. The stone slowly rose and revealed a narrow passage leading down.

"Hurry, there is precious little time." Said Havsoltek.

"Master what is going on?" Asked Lon-Chi. "Just before Carek alerted us to come here, I caught a glimpse of an Imperial assault shuttle."

"Now is not the time. Go!" Havsoltek pushed Lon-Chi into the passage and allowed the stone to drop back into place.

The passage was dimly lit from some unseen source above them and led off in four directions.

"Follow me. I will explain as I go." Havsoltek said as he struck off down the leftmost passage. "You are all aware that, since the Clone wars, the Jedi have been in decline. Our numbers have fallen to an all time low. That is one of the reasons that you have been training with me, instead of with a true master and at a proper Jedi academy. The second reason that you aren't training with a true Jedi Master, is that there aren't any left to teach you."

The apprentice Jedi all blinked in disbelief then they all tried to speak at once.

"What!"

"How can that..."

"Master, you can't be..."

"I know you have been wondering why I have been drilling you so hard in the last few weeks, but none of you have had the time to progress to the point where you could sense through the Force the horror that has befallen the sad remnant of our order. The Emperor and his foul lacky Darth Vader, have systematically hunted down the remaining Jedi Masters and have forced them to either submit to the Dark side of the Force or be destroyed. It would seem that most of them chose to fight, as their death screams have rippled through the Force like shockwaves, but I have not felt one of them in more than two years."

"Master Havsoltek?" Kalrendis managed to croak, her voice thick with emotion. "I...I have been troubled by a recurring dark dream in which I can hear someone, I don't know who, crying out in agony, then the scream cuts off with a horrible finality. You mean I've been hearing the 'death screams' of Jedi Masters?"

"Yes Philla, but what has disturbed your dreams, have been the death screams of Jedi Knights. The Masters have all been eliminated, now the Emperor has turned his attention to us. I have been trying to complete as much of your training as I could, in the little time that I have remaining with you." Havsoltek had been setting a crushing pace through the twisting maze of tunnels, but this last statement brought all the students to an immediate halt.

"What do you mean 'little time remaining?'" Said Felorren. "Where do you expect us to go, if not with you?"

"And where is this maze taking us?" Added Cadson.

"We've got to keep moving." Havsoltek answered, redoubling his pace. "I'm taking you to the starport. I have a friend there named Toris Mons, he owns a freighter and more importantly, he also happens to owe me a favor. If we can avoid those stormtroopers up there, we stand a decent chance of escaping."

"You didn't answer my question." Said Felorren. "Why did you say we didn't have much time remaining together?"

The students could see the play of emotions on their master's face even in the gloom of the storm drains.

"I have foreseen that my destiny is not to finish what I have started. I knew that when I began teaching you, but my goal was not to save the Jedi personally, but to spread the living flame of the Jedi. I can not say for certain what will actually transpire, for the future can be changed by the choices made now, but either way, You are to be my greatest legacy. If you remember nothing else that I have taught you, remember that as long a spark remains, the Jedi are not defeated. One day there will be a return of the Jedi."

The Jedi students were too stunned by the power of their master's words to respond, so they followed him through the dank tunnels each lost in their own thoughts.

The frenzied march lasted close to an hour, before Havsoltek reached the access hatch that he had been seeking. He paused and extended his senses with the Force to carefully search the area around the hatch, before he quietly eased the hatch open. The alley was deserted and the fugitives quickly exited.

"Mons is in docking bay twenty-two. The name of his ship is the Tigershark." Havsoltek said to his students. "We are just outside of docking bay nineteen, this is as close as we can get below ground, from here on we will just have to trust in the Force."

"The stormtroopers will have the starport under heavy guard. We should be able to blend in with the crowd as long as you don't give them any reason to be suspicious, just remember the calming techniques I have showed you and we will be okay."

Havsoltek waited until the exit of the alley was obscured by a group of passing pedestrians before he, coolly exited from their hiding place. However all of his precautions failed to account for just how thoroughly the stormtroopers had been briefed. As soon as Havsoltek

rounded the corner, he was challenged by a squad of stormtroopers.

"Halt! You are under arrest!" Barked the sergeant.

"I believe you are mistaken." Havsoltek said calmly as he reached out with the Force to take control of the man's mind.

"I believe I am mistaken." The sergeant parroted.

"We are free to go."

Before the sergeant could continue, the rest of the squad snapped their weapons into firing position. Havsoltek had to release his control of the sergeant and desperately dodge the intense blaster fire, drawing his lightsaber as he evaded away from the troopers.

Conrad Davies burst from cover, lightsaber ignited and at the ready. "You have made your last mistake!" He said slashing the sergeant in half.

Havsoltek took full advantage of Davies' diversion the finish off the rest of the troopers. Havsoltek's attack was so thorough that the troopers were unable to score even one hit. But the damage was done, the troopers had managed to send a frantic call for help that had broadcasted the location of the fugitives to the Imperial commander.

"Run for it! It's our only hope!" Havsoltek called out as he rallied his students.

The Jedi had covered less than a hundred meters, when they spotted at least a company of stormtroopers approaching from three sides. One platoon blocked the corridor that led to docking bay twenty-two and it was against this platoon that the Jedi fell upon with desperation.

The Jedi were in such close proximity to their comrades that the disengaged platoons could not fire. The stormtrooper captain ordered half his men to close into hand-to-hand range and the other half to set their blasters on stun. The delay gave the Jedi time to shatter the blocking platoon and make a break for docking bay twenty-two.

"Conrad, you take point." Yevgenny hollered somehow making himself heard above the roar of the blasters. "I've got the rear! Everyone stay alert!"

The Jedi raced the last fifty meters to the huge bay doors.

Toris Mons was assisting his co-pilot Drex Dunhill make minor repairs on the Tigershark's lateral thrusters when the sounds of the furious blaster fusillade overpowered the din of the powerspanner that he was using.

"What in the moons of Nar Hutta is..." Said Mons wrenching off his safety goggles, his mouth dropping open in shock. "Yevgenny! I might have known." He added when he spotted his friend. "Drex close that panel! We're making an unscheduled lift!"

"Unscheduled lift he says." Drex responded cringing from the stray blaster bolts that had started to strike the ship, but the delay cost him his life.

The captain of the stormtroopers had realized that his quarry was about to escape, and not wishing to be assigned to a penal battalion, had called for reinforcements. As the students were sprinting for the Tigershark and as Drex rolled down from the top of the ship, a second company of stormtroopers arrived and the already intense volume of blaster fire doubled.

Drex was the first to die. He had reached the base of the loading ramp when he was hit by a volley of fire that tossed his broken body aside like it was a rag doll.

The student's were as yet unharmed due to the skill of their master. Yevgenny's lightsaber flashed through the air like a living thing, deflecting the deadly bolts away from his beloved students. However, even though the Jedi had decimated one of the platoons of stormtroopers, there were still more than two hundred and fifty of the Imperial shock troops firing on them and not even a fully trained Jedi Knight could deflect the mass of fire that they faced.

The students formation had become strung out in the mad dash for the docking bay. Davies was leading the pack by virtue of having been told to take point by Havsoltek. Close on Davies' heels was Jenall Cadson, who was taking every advantage of his upbringing as a Seraccan steppe runner to evade the deadly hail of blaster bolts. Oos Felorren and Philla Kalrendis were in the middle of the fleeing Jedi, while Carek Argonaut and Lon-Chi Wilks, with their master covering the retreat, brought up the rear.

When the initial volley from the second company of stormtrooper's scythed toward the Jedi, Yevgenny was forced to make the hardest decision of his life. He was helped by the fact that as he trusted to the Force, Davies and Cadson managed to board the Tigershark milliseconds ahead of the blinding wall of fire, making Havsoltek's job easier by one third.

"May the Force forgive me for not being able to cover them all!"

Unable to extend his protection to the two students farthest from him, Yevgenny concentrated on trying to save Carek and Lon-Chi. Yevgenny became a blur of motion and

even though he stretched his Jedi talents to the limit, it just wasn't enough. Lon-Chi was hit square in the sternum and instantly crumpled. Carek somehow managed to catch his room mate, but took a bolt in his left shoulder doing so. Carek fought off the pain that threatened to engulf him and stayed on his feet and continued to move toward the Tigershark.

Unprotected by their master, and possessing no special training of their own, Oos Felorren and Philla Kalrendis were both hit immediately. Felorren was shot to pieces as he sacrificed his dying body in a final and futile attempt to save Kalrendis.

Facing the certain death of Carek and Lon-Chi, Yevgenny reached down to the very core of his being and where he had been a blur before, he became a ghostly apparition behind a wall of lambent light cast by his lightsaber as he closed on the nearest Imperials.

The stormtrooper captains didn't even notice the two wounded Jedi reach the battered old freighter, as both were too stunned by the sight of the lone figure charging into and completely annihilating a platoon of troopers. After a second of shock, they both ordered their entire companies to open fire on the deadly menace.

Toris Mons had to make a hard decision too. When he saw his friend charge into the Imperials, he knew what Yevgenny was doing and why, with tears streaming down his face, he began punching in the code that would over ride the safeties on the repulsor drives.

"Must make it!" Carek said with single minded intensity as he forced his body to cover the last five meters to the boarding ramp. He had to ignore the bodies of his friends Oos and Philla. He had to ignore the blood that flowed freely from the gaping hole in Lon-Chi's chest. He had to ignore the agony in his shoulder. Carek's life had become the boarding ramp. He could see Jenall waiting for him on the ramp, his subconscious mind even noticed Davies enter the Tigershark's dorsal turret and begin firing on the troopers.

Once both of Carek's feet were solidly on the boarding ramp, the Tigershark lifted. The unexpected movement caused Carek to pitch forward and both he and Lon-Chi sprawled headlong. Jenall pounced from where he had taken cover in the airlock and pulled Lon-Chi inside.

"NNNOOOOOO! WAIT! The Master isn't aboard yet!" Carek roared as he rolled over and looked back for the missing Jedi Knight. Toris Mons chose that moment to pivot the Tigershark around for the exit and the movement allowed

Carek to catch sight of Havsoltek. The beleaguered Jedi Knight was surrounded by a mound of stormtroopers. Havsoltek's robes were in tatters from multiple blaster burns.

"Carek! Give me your hand!" Said Jenall from the airlock. "You've got to come in!" Carek whipped his head around to face Cadson. "NO! The master is still alive. We've got to save him!"

"What's that damn fool's problem?" Snarled Toris Mons who had been waiting to engage the boarding ramp's closing mechanism. The comm system was pinging furiously and Mons saw the docking bay doors begin to close, knowing he was unable to wait any longer, he punched the close switch and slammed twenty-five percent above rated maximum power into the repulsor drive.

The sudden motion caused Jenall to stagger back from the airlock's hatch. The closing ramp caused Carek to slide toward the airlock. As he slid to safety, from the corner of his eye, he saw Havsoltek stagger. The Tigershark was pulling, thanks to the safety over ride, five Gs and Carek had to fight to keep the sight of his master in focus, but the last thing he saw before the hatch closed, was Havsoltek's empty robes collapsing upon themselves.

"Th-Th-That can't be." He stammered as Jenall pulled him out of the airlock.

"What can't be?"

"Didn't you see what happened to the master?"

"No. I was too busy getting Lon-Chi into the rec room. What did you see?"

"Nothing. I...I guess I'm just seeing things. Is Lon-Chi going to make it?"

"I'm sorry Carek, Lon-Chi is dead. He died saying something about joining someone named Locean. Whatever that means. You, however are going to make it as soon as I can get a medpac on you."

"What are we going to do?"

"That my friend is an outstanding question."

"Five minutes to realspace children," The intercom crackled. "you'd better strap in. I'm pullin' an old smuggler's trick and usin' a sandstorm to mask our arrival from approach control and I can guaranty it's goin' to get rough."

Carek and Jenall were sitting in the Tigershark's tiny lounge contemplating their now uncertain fate. Carek looked at his chronometer as he strapped in.

"Five days. Can it really only be five days since...since..." He started, but could not finish. The pain was still too new, too sharp to face straight on.

"I know Carek." Said Jenall Cadson. "I can't believe that our master is gone either."

"I've known for a long time that Jedi didn't have a place in the Emperor's the New Order, but I just couldn't bring myself to believe that the Purge was real. I guess there's no doubt about that now."

"Where's Davies?" Jenall sneered, contempt for his ex-comrade plain to see.

"In the cockpit I suppose, after all he is the new co-pilot for this old tub."

"I still can't believe that he would betray everything the Master stood for so easily, he was the Master's first student and was with him longer than any of us. Davies should have been the first to suggest joining the rebellion."

"I know Jenall, but he's made his choice and there is nothing we can do about it."

Jenall started in again about betrayals and loyalties and that made Carek sigh deeply. He had had this discussion with Cadson several times since Davies made his stunning decision that he would be replacing Drex as Mons' co-pilot and that he was forever renouncing becoming a Jedi. Jenall just could not accept Davies' decision and the two had very nearly come to blows when Davies first announced his decision.

Davies had entered the cargo hold where Carek and Jenall were practicing the first lightsaber cadence with a crude facsimile of the candle and ball bearing test they had managed to construct. Davies asked to borrow Cadson's weapon, who although mystified by his friends request, agreed. Davies tossed his own lightsaber into the air and sliced it into three pieces.

"I've agreed to become Toris' co-pilot. If you two have any sense, you'll find yourself some out of the way, loser planet and become a nerf herder."

"I never had you pegged as a coward Davies." Cadson responded quietly, his hands flexing rapidly open and closed.

Davies stopped and looked at Cadson with eyes as hard as flint.

"If you knew anything about my life before I met Havsoltek, I would break every bone in your scrawny body. Because we were once friends I will remind you this just once, I am no longer bound by the Jedi code. You had better

remember this if you ever choose to accuse me of being a coward again."

Davies walked out of the cargo bay and had not spoken to Jenall, or Carek again.

The two remaining Jedi were so stunned by the revelation that the man they considered their leader would not lead them, that it was up to Toris Mons to give them direction again. Short on ideas at the time of the rapid departure from Chanlot, Mons had chosen to make contact with a mutual friend of Havsoltek and his, a Twi'lek by the name of Dag Caltare who lived on the remote planet of Tatooine. Dag was an information broker and Mons figured that, if anyone could find a home for the two young Jedi it would be Dag.

When Mons explained this to Jenall and Carek, Jenall perked up for the first time since they entered hyperspace.

"Does this Caltare have any contacts with the Rebellion?"

"Uh...I'm...not sure." Mons replied, clearly holding something back.

"Please, Captain Mons I beg of you. We have just lost everything we owned and most of what we believed in." Jenall said with eyes bright with tears. "I have to get in contact with the rebellion. They are the only ones that are trying to stop that maniac Palpatine. I owe it to Master Havsoltek to take up the fight he couldn't be here for, please help me do what's right."

"Son, danged if'n you don't want to go from the black hole, straight into the super nova. You're already wanted for bein' a Jedi, why would you want to hook up with the only other people that are as high on his majesties wanted list."

"I owe to the Master."

"We owe it to the Master." Added Carek with a determined nod.

"Okay, okay. If'n you two are so fired up to jump down the Sarlacc's throat. Yes, Dag can get you in contact with the rebellion. We'll look him up in the Mos Eisley cantina as soon as we get there."

The rest of the flight to Tatooine had been an exercise in boredom. Carek and Jenall had spent a fair portion of the journey trying to figure out how they had escaped from Chandlot so easily, after the intensity of the attack they had to endure to get to the ship.

"Well I'm not too sure about how we pulled that off either. I was certain when we broke orbit, we were about to make the final jump." Said Mons when the two Jedi

eventually came to him for the answer. "I made as much use of Chandlot's southern pole's magnetic interference as I could, but that's an old, old trick. I guess that the captain of that Dreadnaught cruiser must not have had any anti-smuggler patrol experience. He had his fighters at the wrong latitude for an intercept. I dropped straight down off the galactic plane until we were free of the planet's gravity well and hit the jump sequence for lightspeed. I guess we just got lucky."

The Tigershark began to vibrate and a violent shudder shook the entire ship as Captain Mons fought with the raging, winds that tossed the ship about with a jolt that brought Carek out of his revelry.

"And I thought our departure from Chanlot was a wild ride." Jenall grunted as the ship pitched down alarmingly, almost righting itself, then rocking violently from a huge explosion.

"ABANDON SHIP!" Mons managed to make himself heard above the scream of the dying ship. "Get out and get out now! The repulsors have failed and we're going down!"

Carek and Jenall looked blankly at each other, then they each punched the quick release on their safety harness.

In the cockpit, a quick glance at the status board told Mons all he needed to know. The sandstorm's negative ionic charge had caused the primary repulsor field coil, which unknown to Mons had microfractured from his earlier overload, to depolarize and shatter. The resultant explosion had caused a fire that activated the safety shut down of the main fusion reactor, cutting power to the ship's sublight drive and thrusters. Re-initiating the reactor would take longer than they had time for, the Tigershark was going to crash.

Mons turned to face his new co-pilot, and found Davies staring at the rapidly approaching surface of Tatooine.

"WHAT ARE YOU WASTING TIME FOR? GIT!"

"Not without you. I've already lost one mentor this week. I'm not going to lose another."

"Look Conrad, The inertia dampners are offline. If someone doesn't hold the old girl steady, centrifugal force will keep anybody from reachin' the pod. Now, I'm givin' you an order. Get to the pod!"

The look on Conrad's tormented face made it clear what he thought of that order.

"It's okay son. I got us into this mess and I'm going to get you out of it."

"If anyone can do it, you can sir." Said Davies as he finally turned and raced for the pod.

Once he was alone, Mons rerouted power from the life support emergency backup battery to give him partial maneuvering thrusters.

"I'm not goin' to be needin' life support where I'm goin' and it'll give me just enough control to save those young'uns."

In the main cabin, Jenall and Carek had freed themselves and were struggling for the pod. As they fought to keep their feet, an automated abandon ship siren started to sound, triggered by a ground proximity sensor, a strident voice burst over the intercom.

"WARNING! IMPACT WITH SURFACE OF PLANET IMMINENT! IMPACT IN TEN SECONDS. TEN. NINE. EIGHT..."

Despite Mons' efforts to keep the ship stable, the wildly careening deck was making it all but impossible for the scrambling Jedi to reach the pod.

"SEVEN. SIX..."

Jenall had had the fortune of being closest to the escape pod when the evacuation order came over the intercom and once again, his years as a steppe runner aided him. When he reached the pod, he looked back and saw that Carek was a good five meters from safety and was not going to make it.

"FIVE. FOUR..."

Knowing that Carek outmassed him by twenty kilos and that he would never be able to pull his friend aboard the pod in time, Jenall made a decision.

"THREE. TWO..."

In the cockpit, Mons could see the ground clearly and knew it was time to play his last sabacc chip. He rolled the ship slightly to starboard, so that the escape pod, which was mounted on the port ship of the ship, would be able to blast high and clear. The roll however, put the exposed cockpit closest to the ground. Mons knew this, as it also meant that cockpit would absorb the initial impact and give anyone who didn't reach the pod a very slight chance of surviving the "decelleration trama" of the crash.

"ONE..."

"There's only one way to handle a heavy load..." Thought Jenall as he spun around and grabbed Carek's arm, using the momentum of his pivot, and adding his full wiry strength, he swung Carek into the pod. "...you put your back into it." The natural reaction from his swing, caused Jenall to be flung away from the pod. Jenall stabbed at the

lunch control and watched it seal and blast free. He had less than a second to register Davies' strangled gasp behind him and to savor the priceless look of surprise on Carek's face, before the Tigershark impacted with bone crushing force and everything went black.

"Jenall how could you..." Carek croaked from the escape pod's tiny viewport. "you were safe. Why would sacrifice yourself for me?"

Carek did not actually see the crash of the Tigershark, when he reached the viewport, the ship had already flipped on it's back, exploded and was completely engulfed in flames. The pod was caught by the fringe of the sandstorm and by the time Carek and the autopilot gained control, the dark plume of smoke that marked the passing of the Tigershark, was no longer even visible.

Alone and far from help, Carek had to make the toughest choice of his life. The pod did not contain sufficient supplies to mount an overland trek into kilometers of trackless desert. Carek's only viable option was to head for the nearest settlement.

The Tigershark had gone down just ahead of sunset and the twin suns had sunk below the horizon, bathing the bleak landscape in twilight. Carek had gathered the survival gear he would need for the fifty-kilometer hike to Mos Eisley. He stood silently and faced the first of the stars that had begun to sprinkle the vast open sky.

"Davies. Felorren. Kalrendis. Wilks. Cadson. Havsoltek. I will never forget you. I will honor your memories by never giving up the Master's dream of keeping the spark of the Jedi alive. I don't know why I have been chosen to carry on your legacy, but by the Force and all that is right in this galaxy. I swear, I will see the return of the Jedi!"

Guiding on the distant glow of Mos Eisley, Carek began his journey.

"I'm looking for Dag Caltare." A foot sore Carek asked the grizzled bartender of the bizarre Cantina.

The man looked Carek up and down, shrugged and nodded towards a lone figure sitting a table in the center of the room.

"Thanks." Said Carek and flipped the man a ten credit piece, which the bartender deftly caught and pocketed.

Carek had to wend his way through a crowd that contained more aliens than he had ever seen in his life. He tried to be discrete, as he all but stared at the bewildering array of creatures that were assembled in the smoke filled room. Carefully avoiding a tall, insectoid that staggered into his path, Carek reached the shadowed figure which had resolved itself into a cloaked Twi'lek.

"Excuse me. Are you Dag Caltare?" Carek shouted above the din of the crowd.

"Whom is wishing to know?"

"My name is Carek. I am...was a friend of Toris Mons."

"What are you to be meaning, was?"

"His ship the Tigershark crashed in the desert two days ago. I was the only survivor."

The Twi'lek's brain tails twitched and Caltare's yellow eyes bored into Carek's grey eyes, looking for signs of a lie.

"This is news of the worst sort. Please to be having..."

Before Caltare could finish, there was a loud commotion at the Cantina's front entrance. Carek glanced that way, only because anything that could make a commotion loud enough to be heard over the constant roar of the patrons was worth noting. When Carek saw what had caused the problem, his blood froze.

"Stormtroopers! How could they have found me so fast?" Carek gasped.

The four troopers were holding their rifles at port arms as they forced their way through the crowd. Carek certain that he had been tracked down, looked about desperately for a means of escape. The stormtroopers, however ignored Carek and leveled their weapons at Caltare.

"I don't know what you've done my friend, but if you were a friend of my master," Carek called out to Dag as he whipped out his lightsaber, "then, I will not let them take you without a fight!"

Carek opened himself to the Force and lashed at the nearest trooper. Caught completely by surprise by the flashing blade, the trooper was down before he realized he was dead. Carek stuck at the next of the troopers, who was

cut down while still in the middle of reacting to this unexpected threat. Carek became aware that some people in the crowd were firing on the remaining troopers. Caught in a crossfire and facing Carek's lightsaber, the last two troopers fell without getting a chance to fire.

"We must to be going." Said Caltare pressing something into Carek's hand. "Thanks I am owing you." He added as he rushed out the door. "That's actually a lightsaber." Said a mousy, little man that Carek recognized as one of the shooters. "You can't really be a Jedi. They're all dead."

"We don't have time for 'let's admire the antique' Jarrus, we've got to get out of here." Said a stocky black haired man. "I'm Rex, Captain of the Wandering Bantha. This is my engineer Jarrus. I saw Dag slip you a data disk, that disk holds the coordinates to our rendezvous. I can only guess that you're here for the reason we all are." He said indicating four other men that had joined him.

"And that reason is?" Asked Carek trying to maintain some form of control on a situation that was rapidly approaching meltdown.

"Don't play games with us kid." A burly man wearing bounty hunter armor said harshly, then dropping his voice to whisper. "We're all trying to get in contact with the Rebellion and that data disk is where we have to go. Now either you're in, or hand over that disk!"

"I'm in." Carek said without hesitation. "Where's your ship?"

"We got trouble." Said a bald man with an oddly tattooed face. "More troopers inbound."

"Out the back. Now." Yelled the bounty hunter over his shoulder as he reached the exit.

The rest of the would-be rebels raced after the hunter and between using the crowd for cover and Rex's intimate knowledge of Mos Eisley's twisted alleys, they gave the stormtroopers the slip. Carek and the others were very fortunate that Rex had parked his ship in the nearby docking bay eighty-six and they reached the Wandering Bantha well ahead of any pursuit.

"I never got your name kid." Said Rex as they dodged across the last bit of open ground before the docking bay doors.

Carek hesitated as the weathered paint of the huge doors had given him an unwelcome touch of deja vu of the last time he raced for a ship with stormtroopers in pursuit.

"Uh...Carek. Carek Argonaut."

"Oh by the way, good work with that antique."

"Antique?"

"The lightsaber. Never actually seen one in use before. I guess they live up to the legend." Rex reached the access panel and entered his security code. While the boarding ramp lowered he added. "Okay, all aboard that's going aboard. You all better strap in, this is going to be a bumpy ride." He turned to Carek. "Give me the disk kid. I've got to start the plot."

Carek thought of the events that had brought to this point and with no one else left to trust, he decided that it was time to trust again.

"You got a gunner?" He said handing over the disk.

"Just you. Follow me. Leland, why don't you come along, I'm going to need a co-pilot."

"You got it slick." Said the scruffiest looking of the men from the cantina detaching himself from a safety harness, following Rex's lead.

"This is the turret access Carek." Rex said indicating a small ladder leading upwards. "The Bantha only mounts twins. I haven't had the ship long enough to make the sort of modifications I would like make."

"Twins are better than nothing, Rex. Clear skys." Said Carek scrambling up the ladder and into the gunner's seat. "I hope I don't end up looking like a fool." Thought Carek stepping through the twin laser's power up sequence. The Bantha had lifted by the time the laser power indicator shifted from stand by to ready. Carek activated the targeting scope and got an immediate return.

"Carek to Rex. I'm tracking four TIE fighters inbound angels twenty-seven."

"Roger, Guns. Weapons free. You need to keep them off us for..." Rex paused and was obviously talking to Leland. "Thirty seconds. Good hunting. Rex out."

"Thirty seconds! I've never..." Carek stopped himself. "I've never struck anyone down with a lightsaber before today either. Okay Argonaut, your big mouth got you here, it's time to deliver."

Carek began tracking the closest TIE, his mouth as dry as the Tatooine desert. The TIEs began firing as soon as they reached long range. Carek spasmodically pulled the trigger when he saw the red flashes of laser fire darting toward the ship. Rex rolled sharply to port and the deadly streams passed on either side of the ship.

"Twenty seconds to lightspeed." Rex barked over the intercom.

"I know. I know. I'm doing my best!" Carek shouted back in frustration and this time taking careful aim before firing.

The Bantha jinked hard, then pulled up in a steep climbing turn to the right. The maneuver had the desired effect of causing the TIE's fire to go wide, but it also caused Carek's carefully aimed burst to miss as well.

"Flaming suns and comets! I had him that time." Carek hissed and realigned for another shot.

"Ten seconds."

"Oh shut up."

The superior speed of the TIE fighters had allowed the Imperials to close to short range with the Bantha. Carek calmed his mind and this time let the Force guide his hand. He saw the lead TIE swell in the targeting reticle and gently squeezed the trigger. Carek watched twin green bursts from his lasers strike the center of the TIE fighter's cockpit and with the detached part of his mind, he saw the TIE become a flaming ball of hot gasses. At that point the stars stretched into starlines and the remaining three TIEs were left far behind.

As Carek climbed down turret access ladder, he was met by Rex and Leland.

"Good shooting Carek!" Said Leland. "How do you feel about getting your first kill?"

"He was just misguided. I take no joy in his death."

"You've got a lot to learn." Leland replied pushing past Carek and heading for the ship's lounge.

"You'll have to excuse him," Said Rex. "he's kind of hyper. Come on, you haven't had a chance to meet the others."

With the danger behind them now, the crew and passengers of the Wandering Bantha had a chance to meet and exchange their reasons for wanting to join the rebellion.

Kyle, had the build of a bounty hunter, he was nearly two meters tall and massed an even hundred kilos. He kept his black hair long, to keep his rugged square face in shadow. His black eyes never seemed to rest and never missed a thing.

He wanted to meet with the rebellion for retribution on a crooked Imperial Moff. He had been sent to capture a scientist with a legitimate bounty for the Moff and Kyle had delivered the man to the Moff alive, as the bounty required, then instead of payment, the Moff ordered his stormtroopers to "eliminate this jackal." Kyle had had to shoot his way clear and escape via his jetpack, but it had been far too close. Kyle felt that if the Empire could no

longer be trusted, it was time to link up with the people trying to eliminate them.

Leland Archimedes was an enigma, he was 180 centimeters tall and a solid eighty kilos, with sandy brown hair and languid blue eyes. He claimed that he was just looking for a job. His employer had died unexpectedly while on Tatooine. Afterwards Leland discovered that his boss was deeply in debt, to salvage his boss' reputation, he sold what was now his own ship to pay the debt. This left Leland without a ship and without a job. While selling the ship, a contact of a contact had mentioned Dag. "I'm the best pilot there is and while I ain't no crusader, I need a job bad enough to go where the jobs are, and if that means working for the rebels, then as long as that's the only game in town, then I'm in. But just remember, if something better comes along, I'm leavin' faster than a scalded Mynock."

Jarrus Schnellman could best be described as mousy. Small of frame and a quiet manner, he had the type of face you would never see in a crowd and even if you spoke to him directly, you wouldn't remember either his name or his face five minutes later. He was an unlikely candidate for joining the rebellion, but if you mentioned the Empire, he would wax eloquent on how Palpatine was a tyrant and how he must be resisted in any way possible.

Physically, Lazarus Maxenties was the most interesting of the lot. He was a near human who had evolved on a world that rarely saw a day above five degrees. At a glance, you would think he was an albino, his skin was that pale, however his violet eyes and hyacinth hair showed that he was not a true albino.

His story was a sad one. He was a droid repairman, and a good one, with no reason to get involved in the affairs of the galaxy. Until an Imperial star destroyer, by way of a precision orbital bombardment, showed his home world "a demonstration" to those who would consider not paying their proper taxes. The "precision" of the demonstration, of course included a small amount of collateral damage. Lazarus explained that the "collateral damage" included his entire family killed when his shop was destroyed by an errant turbolaser salvo.

Ardent Belial Mo'duaglozen looked every bit of the mercenary warrior that he claimed to be. His odd last name was actually the clan that owned him. His initiation into his clan had left him with a shaved head and a distinctive set of tattoos that ringed his left eye and marred his left cheek.

His world was only at the steam age of development, when the Empire made contact with his clan leaders and began contracting whole regiments to fight for the Empire. Ardent's regiment had been wiped out when Imperial reinforcements failed to arrive. One of only a handful of survivors, Ardent wandered about near penniless in a society far in advance of his own, until being abandoned on Tatooine by a freighter captain that no longer had need for a strong back and a weak mind. Ardent had heard of the rebellion during his wanderings and decided it would be an excellent way to strike back for his regiment being betrayed.

Rex, the owner of the Wandering Bantha, was a rakishly handsome man of twenty-five with short black hair, brown eyes, and that certain something that just made you want to like him. As the captain of a free trader, he would normally not be involved in a losing deal like the rebellion, but an Imperial customs official had had Rex's co-pilot killed right in front of him, for no other reason than to make a point about keeping maintenance records up to date.

They were an eclectic lot, as different as you could ask any seven people to be.

The coordinates that Dag gave Carek were to a base in the Candotti system. The Bantha was allowed to dock at basestation Heracles only after Carek mentioned that they were friends of Dag. When the Bantha landed they were met by a large security detachment led by a woman who would have been considered pretty if not for her somber demeanor. The woman stepped up to each would-be rebel and placed her hand on their temple for a few seconds, Carek recognized this as a Jedi mind search technique. The woman seemed satisfied.

"I am Ehrinn Challis the base commander," She said.

"follow me to your quarters. I will tell you your assignments as soon as I have a chance to check your qualifications." Then as an afterthought she added.

"welcome to the Rebel Alliance."

Chapter Two

"We've just received a coded message for you Commander Maldamon." Said the young Imperial lieutenant, his voice a study in carefully practiced neutrality. He had learned the hard way that the Empire's anti-alien policies did not apply to Dark Jedi. He had also learned the hard way that this alien was to be shown the greatest possible respect at all times.

The alien in question was a tall, black and white furred biped that easily massing a hundred kilos. He had large pivoting ears and even larger tarsier-like eyes to mark his nocturnal and arboreal ancestry.

The brooding figure did not acknowledge him.

The lieutenant assumed the position of attention and waited. On his first day of duty, the lieutenant had made the mistake of looking down his nose and sneering his disapproval at having to deliver a message to an alien. It had taken three operations for the ship's surgeon to rebuild the lieutenant's leg from the telekinetic rending that the Dark Jedi had inflicted. The lieutenant knew better now, and he was prepared to wait until he was acknowledged, be that in an hour, or be that next week.

When it became obvious that the once arrogant human would not be foolish enough to earn another session of 'special instruction,' Maldamon finally answered. "Who is it from?"

"The code header indicates Lord Vader. Sir."

"I'll take it here."

"As you command sir."

Once he was alone, Maldamon activated the holotransmitter. A short burst of multicolored light resolved itself into the grim form of the Dark Lord of the Sith, Darth Vader.

"There has been a Sighting." Said the expressionless black armored form.

Maldamon inhaled sharply. A Sighting was an Imperial euphemism for the detection of an unturned Jedi. The purge had been so effective, that a true sighting had become a very rare occurrence. "May I ask where my Lord?"

"Out on the rim, on a backwater planet known as Tatooine. A group of rebel sympathizers stopped a detachment of stormtroopers from arresting a suspected rebel informant. Only one of the troopers survived the attack, however, he was most emphatic when he was debriefed, that one of the rebels attacked them with a lightsaber.

"You and the Predator are the closest to Tatooine. You will proceed there immediately. You are now detached from all other duties until this young one has been turned. Do not fail, the Emperor is watching."

The transmission ended as abruptly as it began.

"A Sighting! And the singular honor of turning him had been given to me!" Maldamon smiled an evil smile as he savored the moment. He knew that since Lord Vader was not pursuing the Sighting himself, that it could not be a true Jedi Knight that had been located, only some lesser student with pretensions of being a Jedi. But, the chance to turn another Jedi to the Dark Side was still the greatest honor that one who served the Emperor could be given. He smiled again as he remembered his mentor's comment that the Emperor was watching. "No. My Lord Vader I will not fail."

He reached for the intership comm, then stopped himself. Instead he crossed the lavishly appointed captain's ready room that he had claimed for himself and entered the bridge.

"Navigator, plot a course for Tatooine. Minimum time, no mistakes. Helmsman, execute when ready." He pivoted and returned to his ready room.

Once alone, Maldamon allowed himself to luxuriate in the moment. "The chase is on little one. And one way or the other, you will be mine."

The Victory class star destroyer Predator gathered herself and lept to hyperspeed moving five percent past her top rated speed. The chase, was indeed, on.

The would-be rebels had to wait for three days before Challis was satisfied that they were not Imperial spies. She joined them in their spartan quarters to tell them their new assignment. While Leland had the lofty dream of being assigned to an X-wing squadron, The rest of them just hoped for positions in the Rebel army.

It turned out that they would be assigned to work together aboard the Bantha. Their primary function would be to run supplies, taking full advantage of the Wandering Bantha not being affiliated with the rebellion.

The team proved itself to be more than cargo haulers on their very first mission. During, what was supposed to be the simple pick up of a shipment of weapons from a cyborged human gunrunner named Arcturus. Team Bantha ended up capturing a passenger liner and turning it over to the rebellion, after turning the tables on a band of pirates that had hijacked the liner that Arcturus was smuggling the weapons on.

It was while inspecting the modest one hundred and fifty passenger liner that Challis stopped thinking of them as supply runners and began thinking of them as a candidates for a special operations team.

"How certain are you of what you reported? Your life depends on its accuracy" Maldamon said with his huge yellow eyes boring into the terrified human before him. It had been eleven days since the Tatooine sighting and the trail was of course cold by the time the Predator had arrived. Maldamon's systematic search had not yielded anything useful and that had forced him to call on less savory means to find his prey.

While it was a well known fact that the Empire had spies and informants everywhere, what was not as well known, was that the Empire paid a handsome bonus for a confirmed sighting of a Jedi. That description included anyone that exhibited Jedi-like powers, to include using a lightsaber.

The small, nondescript human that stood trembling before the Dark Jedi had reported in with the first lead since the initial sighting. "Ab-Absolutely certain, sir." The informant quavered. "Information is my life, sir. Accuracy is vital to my livelihood. My orders were to follow Arcturus the cyborged human gun runner and report on his activities. The liner that we were on was hijacked by a pirate group known as the Starwolves. Things got confusing during the seizure, but, I am certain that cyborg was not involved in the hijacking.

I could not observe Arcturus during the time that the pirates were running the ship, as initially, we were confined to our quarters. However, just prior to a scheduled rendezvous with a stock light freighter, a few passengers were allowed out of their quarters to lend credence to the 'everything is okay' ploy the pirates tried to pull off."

"What type of ship was it?" Maldamon asked neutrally.

"A Corellian YT1300. I couldn't get her name." The informant answered instantly. "I'm not sure how they figured it out, they looked like tauntaun fodder to me, but somehow they made the pirates. The pirates made the mistake of trying to take them down and all conflagration broke out. They may have looked like fodder, but sir, they knew how to fight."

"Was that when you saw the man wielding a lightsaber?"

"Yes sir. I've never actually seen one in action before, but I'm certain of what it was. The pirates were

caught offguard by the intensity of the rebel's initial attack and they never managed to recover."

"How did you escape?"

"I wasn't given a choice. All the passengers, except for Arcturus, were placed in escape pods and ejected. They must have signalled the local customs patrol before they jumped, as we were picked up less than three standard hours later."

"Very good. You have served me well. Go now I have much thinking to do."

The informant nodded once and breathed a sigh of relief as he left.

"Do you believe him sir?" Asked Maldamon's assistant, Lieutenant Hudek Rahos of the Imperial Security Bureau.

"Yes. If he had lied to me, he would not have left my ready room alive."

"So that confirms the Tatooine Sighting sir."

"Yes it does." Maldamon looked out of his ready room without really noticing the splendor of the Damascine Nebula that bathed the Predator in a soft red glow. "I'm going to have to set a trap for this upstart. I think it's time to welcome the fly to my parlor."

"How can you be sure that the Rebels will send the Jedi sir?"

"The two sightings occurred within F'ek'tok sector, a area of space known for its desolation. It is thus a perfect location for a rebel base. My parlor is less than five days travel from the F'ek'tok sector. Were I in the rebel commander's place, for a prize as valuable as the one which I will offer, I would have to send my best operatives to insure its safe acquisition and transportation.

"The rebels still worship the memory of the Jedi and it is certain that the rebel commander will have great faith in this neophyte, no matter how weak he may actually be. I am positive that this young one will be sent. Even if only for luck, he will be there."

"You have forseen this sir?"

"No I have not. I am well aware of the status of aliens in the Empire. I have studied human behavior in order to gain the advantage, where I otherwise would have none. The rebel commander will send his Jedi cub. I want you to handle the necessary signals personally."

"All will be ready sir."

"Leave me, I must prepare. I want it made clear I am not to be disturbed for anything less than a message from Lord Vader or the Emperor himself."

"As you command sir."

Maldamon watched his assistant leave. He then turned back toward the transparisteel viewport and the Damascine Nebula. He noted the departure of the informant's shuttle, then he began focusing his mind. He flexed his hands open and closed once, then he reached out to the Dark Side of the Force, his most powerful ally. The harmonics generated by the crewers of the Predator assaulted him. He could feel it all, from the tension and fear that immanated from the nearby bridge officers just beyond the blastdoor, to the less well defined anxiety of the rest of the crew.

Maldamon was pleased. The Dark Side fed on fear and his presence had generated enough fear for the Dark Side to return that power tenfold. He reached for the Jedi training remote on his desk. He activated the remote and tossed it into the air, calling his lightsaber to his hand from across the room. He smiled as he easily blocked the the remote's first shot.

Maldamon was certain of two things at that moment: One, it would be the Jedi cub that responded when tha trap was set, and Two, the cub would be no match for him.

Chapter Three

"Our first real mission." Thought Carek as the Wandering Bantha settled on the landing field. In order to evaluate them as special operations candidates, Challis had sent team Bantha, less the newly commissioned Rex who was attending command school, to the planet Tauntara with two technicians to verify the Tauntaran's claim that they had invented a practical cloaking device. "If we can actually bring back a working cloaking device, that ought to show Challis that we can do more than run supplies."

The incognito rebels were met at the landing strip by a large landspeeder and four security men. As the speeder came to a stop outside the facility, one of the security men jerked violently and collapsed in a heap. Half a second later, the rebels heard the blaster's report.

"What the blazes!" Carek exclaimed as he spotted the attackers and dived for cover. "There was nothing about terrorists or whatever these guys are in the briefing."

The remaining guards began returning fire. That they were under fire was becoming routine, but what made this experience unique, was that the bolts from the Tauntaran blasters were invisible to human eyes.

Ardent and Leland had spotted the attackers and took off in the speeder to outflank them. Carek noticed a stairway that looked like it had access to the roof top and using the rest of the team's fire for cover, he cut across the open ground to join the pursuit.

Lazarus, Kyle, Jarrus and the surviving security men managed to get the techs inside when the attackers, sensing the pursuit, retreated across the rooftops. The pursuit then became a mad steeplechase. The attackers however, knew the terrain too well and successfully escaped.

Lazarus, Kyle and Jarrus were waiting at the door to the technical facility when their fellow rebels returned.

"Any luck?" Asked Lazarus.

Leland replied. "Not when the bad guys can run like bloody tauntauns and know every bloody centimeter of the city. They made us look like a bunch of amateurs."

"The techs are already inside." Lazarus said as the team entered the building. "The security chief is waiting for us. He had a royal fit over the 'dastardly attack on our most welcome persons.' He couldn't apologize enough. You should have heard him try."

"Well its nice to be cared for. I guess." Said Leland.

The rebels entered the technical facility and were met the Tauntaran security chief.

"Greetings travellers. I am W'helohsk. If you will permit me, I will show you our humble facilities before we show you the device you came to see."

"That would be fine. Please lead on." Answered Carek.

W'helohsk led them on a complete tour of the facility. When it was over, Leland thought. "I don't see how it's possible for anyone with technology at least ten years behind the Empire is supposed to have come up with a cloaking device."

The team was led into a large room with blast doors in each wall. As the blast door closed behind them, Carek felt a disturbance ripple through the Force.

"Something's not right, I've never felt such a tremor before." Before Carek could voice this thought, The doors to their front and both sides opened to reveal an ambush! The Tauntarans had sold them out to the Empire.

The team faced a full stormtrooper squad to each side, the three remaining security escorts and W'helohsk behind them, an Imperial officer and a Tauntaran that had to be the source of the disturbance in the Force-a Dark Jedi-to the front.

"Surrender now rebel dogs there is no escape" Said the officer. Outnumbered twenty-two to six, the situation seemed hopeless.

"I will not yield to a Dark Jedi." Was Carek's only thought, he trusted to the Force and hoping that the ambushers would be caught off guard, he charged the troopers on the right.

As Carek closed on the troopers, the room came alive with blaster fire as the rebels desperately tried to fight free of the ambush.

"Take that 'most unwelcomed person!'" Leland shouted as he paid back W'helohsk's treachery with a heavy blaster bolt. He then opened up on the three security men.

Ardent's blaster spoke simultaneously with Leland's dropping the dumb-struck Imperial officer, who, had belatedly, attempted to draw his own blaster. Ardent's second shot was deflected by the Dark Jedi.

Rebel blasters had felled three of the stormtroopers firing on Carek by the time he made it into lightsaber range. Carek slashed into the troopers cutting down three more. Kyle, Lazarus, and Jarrus then had to shift fire to the troopers on the left.

Things might have gone badly for the rebels had not Fate intervened. Lazarus was wounded by a blaster and staggered into a control podium causing the louvered floor

to open, dumping all eight of the left side squad of troopers, the three security men, plus Lazarus, Leland, and Jarrus into the shaft below.

Kyle jumped clear of the pit, but he landed badly, tripping over W'heohsk's body. He struck his head on a support beam and was knocked unconscious.

Ardent flailed wildly and caught the narrow catwalk that remained. He was in a most precarious position and to make matters worse, the Dark Jedi, who had stood in silence as his ambush came apart at the seams, began to advance on him.

Carek's charge had taken him past the louvered part of the floor and into close quarters with the squad on the right. The only troopers not to fall into the pit were so disorganized by the sudden change in the odds, that Carek was able to cut them down before they could react.

Carek ran for the control podium fearing the worse. However, when he reached the edge of the pit, he found that the shaft had been rigged with a safety net some five meters down and that had broken everyone's fall.

Leland took a quick look around the pit, then grabbed onto the net. "Hang on." He yelled to his companions, he then blasted a huge hole in the net.

Leland's tactic had the desired effect of dropping all eleven of the ambushers that were caught in the net to their deaths, but Lazarus and Jarrus were also caught off guard and they too began to fall. Leland made a desperate grab and caught Lazarus. Jarrus' piercing scream cut short after he fell fifteen meters onto a catwalk and lay very still.

The Dark Jedi was approaching too fast for Ardent to climb out of the pit. Desperate, Ardent began a steady stream of fire at the Dark Jedi and prepared to die.

Carek raced along the catwalk and prepared for his first lightsaber duel. "Sweet merciful Force help me this day." He thought, fighting to calm his mind.

The Dark Jedi had closed on Ardent. "Behind you." Said Ardent, as he saw Carek approach behind the Dark Jedi. The Tauntaran actually laughed at the old ploy, until he heard the snap-hiss of a lightsaber.

When the Dark Jedi turned to face Carek, Ardent opened fire. The Dark Jedi was well trained in the use of the Force, and was still able to deflect his shots. He responded by trying to push them from the catwalk telekinetically.

"This guy is much better trained than I am," Carek thought grimly as the Dark Jedi ignited his own lightsaber.

"I am the student of the Jedi Knight Havsoltek, I am a servant of the Force and it is my ally. I will feel no fear. I may not be able to stop this man without help, but I will stand before the Dark with my very life."

Carek unleashed a furious attack sequence, but the Dark Jedi parried easily. Ardent crawled to safety and continued pour fire at the Dark Jedi. The three figures stayed locked in combat with neither side able to gain an advantage.

Kyle groaned in agony as he rolled back to his feet. "Wh-Wh-What is th-that infernal buzzing?" He croaked, forcing his blurred vision to focus on the wildly flashing glare that stabbed at his eyes. His vision cleared, his eyes widened and he went for his blaster.

Carek parried a lightning fast strike and pivoted away from the edge of the pit that the Dark Jedi was trying to pin him against. He fought the fear that was the call of the Dark Side. "You know that I can help you," The Fear said. "just tap into that wellspring of power that you know you have. It will make you stronger than he is."

"I will not summit to you, anymore than I will summit to him." Carek yelled back to the Fear. "Don't bother me, I'm busy right now!"

Carek feinted low, checked his swing and then slashed laterally. The attack was again, easily parried and he suddenly found his lightsaber nearly knocked from his hand by the Dark Jedi's reposte that struck with quicksilver speed. The Dark Jedi went on the attack and Carek was driven back toward the pit.

Ardent could see his friend being herded by the Dark Jedi and he began firing faster and faster in the hope that he might cause a distraction that Carek might exploit. The Dark Jedi continued to almost casually deflect every shot he made. It wasn't until Kyle added his steady stream of fire, that the Dark Jedi's attack was stopped.

It took the combined attack of the three of them to overcome the Dark Jedi's defense, Kyle firing the shot that wounded and knocked him into the shaft. Carek grabbed for Dark Jedi as he went over the edge, but this Jedi needed no help, he used the Force to pull part of the blasted netting to him and swung down to one of the lower catwalks, disappearing through a side corridor.

Carek used his lightsaber to cut through a conduit and dropped the exposed cabling down to the team members still in the shaft. Leland climbed down to where Jarrus had fallen and applied a medpac to the seriously injured engineer, before helping him out of the shaft.

"That wasn't one of your better ideas." Jarrus slurred angrily when he climbed out of the pit.

"Well it basically worked," Insisted Leland. "next time when I say 'hang on.' you should take me seriously."

"Someone's coming." Kyle called out from his lookout post before Jarrus could respond.

The team prepped for the worst.

"Don't shoot! We're here to help!" A voice cried out from the hallway.

"Who are you?" Leland yelled back.

"We're the local resistance."

"Okay, I'm willing to buy that. Step out into the open and don't make any sudden moves."

"You've got a lot of explaining to do." Said Ardent when he recognized the Tauntaran standing before them as one the locals that had fired on them outside the building.

"Don't go getting hyper on me. My name is R'totsh, I'm the cell leader. I'm sorry about the mix up, but we weren't informed that you were coming until after our attack. You were never in any real danger, we were only trying to capture you. Just let me explain..."

While the Tauntaran spoke, Carek played the attack back through his mind and realized that the only people fired on were the security men.

R'totsh's story convinced them that there had been a simple decoding error and that the locals had actually shown great restraint.

R'totsh said. "Now that we're all friends again, we've got to get out of here. Follow me."

"Lead the way." Carek replied.

R'totsh led them out of the research facility and to the speeder he had parked outside. Leland left behind the controls and R'totsh guided them through the city's backstreets to the docking bay where the Imperial shuttle, where the two techs were being held. Enroute Carek asked about the Dark Jedi.

"That would be Maldamon." R'totsh sneered. "He is a disgrace to us all."

They reached the port quickly, but they found that the shuttle was guarded by a squad of stormtroopers.

"I've got a plan." Said Leland accelerating the speeder straight at the shuttle. Leland's plan consisted of driving the speeder directly into the shuttle's open cargo bay. The stormtroopers were caught completely off guard and Leland succeeded in flattening six of the eight troopers. As the rest of the team finished off the disorganized survivors,

Carek ran forward to the command deck and captured the two pilots, who were then kind enough to release the two techs.

The locals took charge of the prisoners and all of the trooper's blaster rifles. It turned out the Tauntarans see further into the infrared spectrum than humans and could see their weapon's blasts,

however, the Tauntaran weapons were weak by Imperial standards and the rebels could use the added firepower.

When the team was ready, R'totsh said. "Thank you for these weapons, they will aid us in our struggle with those of our government that have sold us out the Empire."

"May the Force be with you." Replied Carek.

R'totsh gunned the speeder and vanished into the spaceport traffic.

"I want this shuttle." Leland said and began the preflight check.

"Makes sense to me. Who rides where?" Asked Lazarus.

Kyle, Ardent, and Jarrus ended up taking a transport tube to the Bantha. While Leland, Lazarus, Carek, and the two techs stayed to prep the shuttle.

The two ships cleared the planet without problem and then docked, As Leland was the only one really qualified to plot the course back to base station Heracles, docking allowed Leland to slave both nav computers together so that he could plot both ships at the same time.

Leland was nearly finished with the computation when a flight of TIE fighters was detected on an approach vector.

The rebels split up and ran for hyperspace with each ship drawing two TIEs. Carek manned the shuttle's turret and Lazarus manned the shields, as Leland began some of the most inspired flying Carek had ever witnessed. Carek's gunnery skills were not impressive and he failed to score any hits, but his frantic firing helped throw off the TIE's aim. The Bantha being a much better ship than the shuttle, easily outdistanced their pursuers and jumped to hyperspace when the wounded Jarrus finished the computation.

With only one target to vent their frustrations on, all four TIEs began blasting away at the shuttle. Leland could not hope to duck all of their shots and the shuttle began to take damage.

The bigger problem was Leland that could not finish the plot while evading the TIEs, which left them unable to escape.

"Lazarus take over the guns." Shouted Carek, as he jumped down from the turret and ran for the flight deck. "I'm not hitting anything and the shields have been shot

away, I think I know a way to complete the plot and get us out of here."

"You THINK you know a way?" Said Lazarus.

"Astronavigation is not my forte, but I do know that it's not something that you THINK you can do. Either you can do it, or you leave it alone."

"It will take too long to explain. You'll just have to accept that there is a way."

"Okay, you got it. I guess taking our chances on whatever you have planned has got to be better than getting blasted out of the sky by TIE fighters."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

Lazarus raced up the stairs to the gun well and Carek eased behind the astronavigation console and began trying to clear his mind. The ability to plot a course without using the nav computer was not a skill that Carek had ever tried to use before.

"I remember practicing instinctive astrogation back on Chanlot," He thought. "I only hope I can pull this off."

Lazarus brought them some breathing room by destroying one of the TIEs and that may have been the difference, for finally, after several tries, Carek managed to call on the Force and complete the plot. Just before they made their jump, Leland ran out of luck, and the shuttle was hit hard losing the lateral thrusters. Somehow the shuttle held together to make the jump, The stars stretched into starlines and they were safe. It had been altogether too close.

The techs managed to repair the shuttle in flight and they arrived at base station Heracles ten hours behind the Bantha. When they landed, they were met by Commander Challis, who informed them that Jarrus had died of his wounds during the return flight.

The team had expended all of their medpacs on Tauntara and Jarrus had had to heal naturally. Twenty hours into the jump, Jarrus collapsed. Ardent and Kyle tried everything they could think of to break the infection, but failed. Jarrus died in less than twelve hours later.

Relaxing in his quarters at base station Heracles after the funeral, Carek took some time to reflect on their first mission.

"We failed to bring back a cloaking device and I lost a member of the team, but we did escape an Imperial ambush and captured a shuttle, which once repaired, will be very useful for commando raids. And while no shuttle can possibly balance the tragic loss of Jarrus, the mission wasn't a complete loss."

Carek did not consider himself a philosopher, but his last thought as he went to sleep was, "Life in the rebel alliance may not be guaranteed to be very long, but it is guaranteed to provide no shortage of triumphs if you know how to recognize them."

"I am surrounded by idiots!" Maldamon raged at the stormtrooper major standing before him. "How were six men armed with only blaster pistols and outnumbered four to one, able to defeat two full rifle squads?"

The major glanced nervously at the body of his predecessor, lying in a heap with its head twisted at an impossible angle.

"Sir, the colonel was not informed that the floor of the ambush site was louvered. It was the near human activating the floor mechanism, that caused the ambush to fail."

"It is a well that, that fool W'helohsk did not survive. Not only did he not mention that the floor louvered, he also failed to inform me of the presence of active rebels in the city as well. That failed attack outside the facility, must have put the rebels on guard." Maldamon spat. "When will Lieutenant Rahos be fit for duty?"

"He will be in the bacta tank for at least two days sir."

"Good. I don't have time to train another assistant. Did the fighters manage to plot the rebels escape vector, or did they botch that as well?"

"No sir, The rebel's course was downloaded to the navigation computer as soon as the fighters were recovered."

"Very well, have the navigator work up all the possible destinations based on their last known heading and have him report his findings to me. I'm certain that the rebels changed course immediately after they left the system, but you never know, they may have been rattled enough by the ambush to have made a mistake.

"One last thing. Since you are now the senior stormtrooper aboard the Predator, you are hereby advanced to the rank of colonel. I hope that you will learn from your predecessor's failure. Please remove his carcass when you leave."

"Yes sir!" The new colonel barked, pivoted about and scooped up the grim reminder, easily lifting the armored bulk to one shoulder. He departed the ready room without looking back.

Maldamon looked out the viewport at his home world below. He stood there for a long time, before moving to sit in the plush zaralope hide autoforming chair.

He reached into his pocket and removed a cred chip sized piece of valardine. He held the stone and used it to focus his rage at losing his prey. The stone began to resonate with a discordant hum. Concentrating on the stone, he felt his ready room fade away until he was once again in the sub basement of the Tauntaran technical facility...

"The rebels that chased after the attackers have returned empty handed sir." Rahos said with obvious disappointment.

"I agree lieutenant, it would have been the ultimate in ironies, if these rebels would have been responsible for capturing the local rebel cell. However, the local cell is W'helohsk's problem. I will deal with him later for allowing the locals to interfere with the timing of my plan. Do the rebels seem alerted?"

"No sir, W'helohsk has apologized profusely and seems to have allayed thier suspicions."

"Excellent. Where are the two technicians?"

"In custody. W'helohsk told the rebels that the techs are consulting with the designers in the sub basement and will meet the rest of the team there."

"All is in readiness," Maldamon activated the comlink to the two stormtrooper squad leaders. "The targets will be here in eleven minutes. The rebel wielding the lightsaber is not to be harmed. Use stun setting only on him. Try to take the other rebels alive if possible. If they resist, kill them."

Maldamon watched the security pickups as the rebels followed security chief W'helohsk lead the rebels through the sham tour and into the sub basement. He motioned Rahos to open the blast doors and initiate the ambush.

As the doors were opening, Maldamon felt a tremor in the Force. "The cub has detected me!" He thought sharply. "He is further along in his training than I have been led to believe!"

The revelation of his quarry's capabilities had distracted him for a split second, leading Lieutenant Rahos to make his, soon to be proved completely inaccurate, threat. "Surrender now rebel dogs, there is no escape."

The rebels reacted faster than he had ever seen and with a blinding fury he would never have thought possible.

This part of the ambush Maldamon remembered with crystal clarity. It was the jumbled images after the room

became a kaleidoscope of blaster bolts, that had led him to use the precious valardine seer stone to bring the rest of the debacle into focus.

In the vision, while he was in the process of drawing his own lightsaber, he saw the cub under the covering fire of his fellow rebels, charging the stormtrooper squad on the left. The vision allowed him to see W'helohsk be cut down at almost the same instant that Rahos was hit. He saw his lightsaber ignite in time to deflect the bolt fired at him by the tattooed human that had felled Rahos. As he fought for his own life, the cub felled three of the troopers. He then saw something that made his blood freeze with anger. The vision clearly showed the near human stagger back from a blaster hit and accidentally activate the louver control, which in turn, had caused the majority of the stormtroopers to fall into that thrice damned pit.

"AN ACCIDENT!" He raged, and outside the ready room the bridge officers involuntarily cringed at the explosive outburst. "MY AMBUSH FAILED BECAUSE OF AN ACCIDENT!" Maldamon leapt to his feet and discovered that his lightsaber had somehow found its way into his hands. Blinded by rage, he slashed at his custom made greel wood control station repeatedly, until all that remained was a sparking ruin.

He stood there fighting the impulse to visit havoc on the rest of the ready room. After an eternity, he felt his control and reason return. He sat back down in his luxurious chair and made himself return to the point of the ambush where he could clearly remember the sequence of events without resorting to the use of the seer stone.

"There was a half second pause as we all came to grips with the sudden turn of events." He recalled. "Aside from myself, the only other Imperials to avoid the pit were the two troopers that were direct contact with the cub. Of the rebels, only the cub had avoided the pit cleanly. The tattooed human had almost fallen into the pit, but had caught onto the narrow remaining catwalk. Another rebel had knocked himself out while diving to avoid the fall.

"Forced into action by the loss of the stormtroopers, I had resolved to bring the cub in myself, when suddenly the tattooed human started firing on me again. I was about to end his miserable existence right there, when the little freak actually warned me that the cub was approaching me from behind. I turned to face the cub and could see that the last of the troopers were down. As I came en guard, the tattooed freak began firing on me from behind. The cub was fairly good, but as I had predicted, he was no match for

me. I could feel his fear as he fought me, but I also felt him master that fear without calling on the Dark Side. However, it was only a matter of time before I would have taken him if it hadn't been for that third rebel joining the fight.

"I guess I was so tuned into sounding out the cub's abilities, that I lost track of the rebel that had knocked himself out. I tried to herd the cub over the edge, but their combined attack finally got past my defenses, and knocked me over instead.

"It is also my responsibility for not having studied the layout of the facility in advance. By the time I found the turbolift, the rebels had fled. To add insult to injury, the rebels located the two techs we had captured, rescued them and stole the shuttle they were being held in. I was so certain of the ambush's success, that I failed to plan for a space intercept. The on-station TIE patrol failed in its attempt to intercept and both the rebel's freighter and the stolen shuttle successfully escaped."

Maldamon walked over to one of the secondary computer stations, his boots crunching on the debris of his once beautiful greel wood desk. He began writing his report to Lord Vader based on his own eye witness account and supplemented by what he had seen in his vision.

After completing the report, he stared at the last page wishing that there was some way to lessen the how bad it made him look. Total Imperial losses: thirteen stormtroopers and one TIE fighter pilot killed. One TIE fighter destroyed. One Kappa class shuttle stolen. One officer and three stormtroopers wounded. Collateral losses. Five Tauntaran nationals killed.

"I have been given an incredible opportunity and I have made a fool of myself." He mused. "This is one report I do not look forward to sending. I can only hope that after he reads this, that I am not reassigned to interrogating prisoners at the spice mines of Kessel."

Maldamon activated the hypercomm and moved to look out the viewport again. He watched his homeworld below and wondered if he would ever see it again.

And for once, the Force gave him no insight on the answer.

Chapter Four

The team's next mission was back to running supplies to a rebel garrison. Their mission was complicated by the appearance of fierce virtually unstoppable raiders. After driving the attackers off, the team found a freighter that had crashed on the planet. The captain had a cargo of alien medical artifacts that could restore life-of sorts-to the dead, and that the raiders were his semi-dead crew. The team destroyed the artifacts and escorted the captain off planet.

As a part of a sustained effort, the team had to return to what they had begun to call "the Zombie planet." The team was asked to investigate an outpost that had stopped reporting. During the investigation, the team discovered an unknown wrecked alien ship.

The aliens had subjugated huge whale-like living beings and were using them as ships. The ship also carried some form of rat-like creature when it crashed. The rat creatures escaped and reproduced so quickly, that they had over run the outpost and were now a threat to the entire planet. The team tried to stop the creatures by seeking out their nest, but the rats were highly intelligent, or possibly even sentient. The team was routed, and the rebels were forced to evacuate the entire planet to base station Heracles.

"You have failed." The mechanical voice wheezed to the figure kneeling before him.

The simple statement of fact cut Maldamon like a whip across his back. "Yes my Lord Vader." He heard himself reply.

"The Emperor is displeased."

Despite his best effort not to, the Tauntaran Dark Jedi shuddered. "Yes my Lord Vader." Again, his voice replied without his input.

Maldamon cringed at the quiet, deadly tone that Vader was using. He knew Vader only spoke that way when he was about to lose his temper, and Vader's temper was legendary. Since he received the terse "Return to Imperial Center at once." reply to his report he had filed after the debacle on Tauntara, he was prepared for the worst.

It was a long time before Vader continued. "I was the one who turned you to the Dark Side. You understood the opportunity that you had been presented and fully embraced all that the teachings of the Sith offered. In return I

have guided your progress as a Jedi and provided you with the means to excel.

"Now I find myself in a most unusual position because of you. If I were to discipline you harshly for your failure, I look the fool for choosing you for something so important as capturing a unturned Jedi apprentice. Yet, If I don't discipline you, I again look the fool for allowing such gross incompetence go unpunished. I WANT YOU TO UNDERSTAND THIS AS YOU'VE NEVER UNDERSTOOD ANYTHING IN YOUR LIFE. I DO NOT LIKE LOOKING A FOOL!" Vader's voice had slowly increased in volume until his voice filled the room with its fury.

"The only thing that has kept you from a permanent assignment to Alpha Z-8 Prison on Veska, is that this is the first time that you have ever failed me. If you do not bring me that apprentice, I will personally sign the order sending you to Veska. Now leave!"

Maldamon left the palace as fast as decorum allowed. He personally flew his shuttle to the Predator and had the Predator in hyperspace less than five minutes later.

Base station Heracles had been very overcrowded for the past few weeks as the refugees from the Zombie planet were relocated to other bases. The team had ferried refugees and supplies all during the relocation and were just getting back to their regular schedule.

It was the first chance for a game of holochess in weeks and Carek had finally put his opponent Roberts, a one time pirate and new to the rebellion, in check, when he noticed an unfamiliar face run across the docking bay.

"Excuse me for a minute." He said leaping to his feet to follow the disappearing figure. "Paranoia just comes with being a rebel."

Carek managed to track the intruder to the main sensor control bay by boosting his natural senses with the Force. The access hatch was locked from the inside and neither Roberts who had followed him, or Carek could override the lockout. Carek decided to accept the reading of the riot act that, Challis the base commander would give him and cut through the hatch with his lightsaber.

As they searched, Carek sensed for life signs with the Force and found a human in the act of planting detonite charges!

"Don't come any closer or I'll kill us all!" The man snarled.

As Carek gathered himself to jump, Roberts snapped off a shot in the hopes of stopping the saboteur, he missed and the saboteur triggered the explosives.

The shock wave hammered outward, causing heavy damage to the base's sensors and blowing them offline. Carek was wounded and the saboteur was close enough to be incapacitated by the blast. Carek grabbed an extinguisher, doused the fire, then they headed for the sickbay dragging the unconscious man between them.

Enroute Carek notified control to launch the ready squadron, Carek told Roberts. "Someone has just gone to a lot of trouble to blind us and it would only be a matter of time before that someone attacks."

It turned out that, that matter of time was eighteen hours later. The main sensors were still offline and the base was running a standing patrol of six Z95 Headhunters on watch at all times. Leland Archimedes, Kyle, Roberts, and Carek were scheduled to take part in the next patrol and were prepping their Headhunters in the hangar bay.

The base station's klaxon suddenly began sounding.

"Intruder inbound. Pilots man your ships." The intercom crackled.

The rebels jumped into their fighters and prepared to intercept as the last two pilots raced into the hanger and began a rapid preflight.

When Leland got his comm set activated, he contacted Operations.

"Okay boss, what's going on?"

"We've just received a message from the on station patrol, they've detected a freighter inbound. The patrol is very low on fuel and is not in a position to intercept. When can you launch?"

We've got four fighters ready now. The rest will be ready in two minutes."

"Launch now."

"Rodger Ops. You heard 'em guys. Let's roll!"

The four fighters roared out of the hanger and raced to intercept the unknown freighter."

Lazarus Maxenties, Ardent Belial Mo'duaglozen, and Lazarus' girlfriend Melia also heard the alert and began prepping the Wandering Bantha for launch. The Bantha launched within seconds of the fighters and also moved in on the freighter.

"I just know I'm in way over my head." Said Carek more to himself than to anyone. "I've had some pilot training

but, I don't know if I'm ready for ship-to-ship combat yet."

As they closed with the freighter, it launched a pair of shuttles and blasted the shields protecting the hangar bays with a very large ion cannon. It then turned to intercept the Bantha. Kyle and his wingman Roberts broke off to pursue the shuttles, leaving Leland and Carek to engage the freighter.

"Whoever these guys were they're phenomenal pilots." Thought Carek. "This guy is sticking like glue to the Bantha and has dodged every shot Leland, the Bantha, and I make."

The two shuttle pilots evaded Roberts' and Kyle's fire and made straight for the hangar bays of the command pod and auxiliary hangar pod. The shuttles gave every indication that they were going to board the base station.

The freighter was only firing the heavy ion cannon at the Bantha and seemed to be taking extreme pains not to do any permanent damage as if they were trying to capture her intact.

"I'm not going to be able to stay with this guy, he's just too good." Said Carek as the freighter continued to pull out of range. "I'm going back to Heracles, I know I can do more against boarders then I can against this freighter."

When Carek peeled off, that left Leland alone in his attempt to assist the Bantha. Leland tried everything he could think of to stop the freighter but, was having no luck.

"I know! I can ram him." Leland smiled. "There's no way he can dodge that."

Leland set his proton torpedo launcher sequence on automatic and prepared to eject. He accelerated directly at the freighter, this might have been the last of his "great ideas", but fortunately for Leland, the freighter angled his shields in such a way that Leland's fighter bounced away sustaining severe damage in the process.

When the Z95-and his head-stopped spinning, Leland came to a quick decision. "I think heading back to Heracles and getting one of those X-wings might be a better idea than trying that again." He peeled off for Heracles and toggled his comm unit. "Don't give up guys, I'll be right back!"

As Leland and Carek chased the freighter, the two shuttles entered Heracles' two docking bays. Kyle fired a proton at the shuttle heading for the command pod, but despite causing severe damage, the heavily armored shuttle

was still able to land. Roberts, in an attempt reduce collateral damage, limited himself to firing lasers and was only able to cause heavy damage to the shuttle heading for the auxiliary hangar pod.

Carek landed in the command pod in time to see the shuttles dismount three assassin droids each. As Carek slowed for docking, he had the satisfaction of seeing Kyle blow one of the droids apart with a well aimed proton. Carek's fighter bucked from the shock wave, but he was able to put it down safely. He dismounted quickly as the two surviving droids were beginning to cycle the airlock into the command pod.

"I don't even want to think about assassin droids getting loose in Ops." He said coiling himself to jump. "So, I've got to stop them!"

Carek made a Force assisted jump of fifteen meters to make it into contact with the droids before the airlock closed. He landed with his lightsaber ignited and in two clean strokes, destroyed both droids.

With the command pod secured, Carek made his way to a X-wing. Kyle landed his Headhunter and also got into a X-wing. While they were firing up the fighters, the shuttle no longer having any reason to wait, launched in an effort to escape.

Kyle and Carek were joined by Lieutenant Varlo, the X-wing's Red Leader and on his mark, they launched. Varlo cut the shuttle's escape short by crippling the shuttle and leaving it dead in space.

While Carek was fighting the droids trying to enter ops, in the auxiliary hangar pod, Roberts had lost control while landing and had crashed. He crawled out of the cockpit in time to see Leland destroy one of the assassin droids with a proton, unfortunately the remaining two droids entered and cycled the airlock taking them completely out of the line of fire. Unable to be of any further assistance, Leland headed for the command pod and the waiting X-wings. The droids were now the problem of the security forces on the auxiliary hangar pod.

"Now's my chance to prepare a nice welcome for them." Roberts said as he carefully approached the waiting shuttle. He entered the shuttle and found himself in a fierce blaster battle with the shuttle's two pilots.

"What have I got myself into." He said diving for cover and returning fire. "There has got to be a better way to make a living."

Roberts was still fighting the pilots, when Leland caught up with Lieutenant Varlo, Kyle, and Carek. They paired up and raced to support the beleaguered Bantha.

Melia had gotten the hang of the Bantha's controls, and had begun to pull away from their pursuers. The freighter noticed the rapidly closing fighters and began firing both ion cannon and laser cannons with a vengeance. The Bantha immediately took heavy damage and soon ground to a halt when the freighter's ion cannon disabled the Bantha's sublight drive. Before the reinforcements could close, the freighter snared the Bantha with a tractor and began its run for hyperspace.

The auxiliary hangar pod's security and Challis had had their hands full with the droids. Challis was severely wounded destroying one of them, however, the rest of the security detachment was scattered allowing the second droid to reach its target: Rex the smuggler. The attack was a repo! Rex owed big credits on the Bantha and the loan was long overdue.

The surviving droid avoided the remaining security forces and tossed the unconscious Rex into the shuttle next to where Roberts, who had come off second best to the two pilots, lay wounded and hog tied. The shuttle launched and followed the freighter in trying to escape.

When the fighters of Red wing closed to firing range, the freighter's pilot once again displayed his phenomenal flying ability.

"I will not be denied this time!" Vowed Carek. "The Force will show me the way. R2 drop the aft shields and feed the power to the drive."

The X-wing left forward. Carek made the most of the Force and scored two hits at long range causing severe damage. Before he could fire again, the freighter jumped to hyperspace. The fighters immediately turned to intercept the shuttle, but it too jumped to hyperspace. They had lost both the Bantha and the hostages.

"FLAMING STARS AND COMETS!" Leland thundered when the last the raiders disappeared.

"All ships return to base." Said Lieutenant Varlo. "I managed to get a partial plot on their course. I need to run the info through a nav computer to narrow it down."

The rebels flew back to where the remaining shuttle lay drifting in space and took it in tow to the command pod.

The base was still in an uproar from the raid and having a tangible target brought all of the station crew to

the hanger bay that were not otherwise occupied with the ongoing recovery operations.

The shuttle crew, which consisted of a Wookiee and a Jawa, did not try to resist when they saw the force Varlo had arrayed against them.

"Where did your comrades take my people?" Varlo asked the captives.

The two aliens stood mute. When it became obvious that neither of them would answer, Varlo had them taken to the brig to join the still recovering bomber.

"I want that shuttle torn apart. Get me some answers." Varlo barked to the technical chief.

"Aye sir. You'll have an answer fifteen minutes ago."

Team Bantha was in Ops when the technical chief called Varlo.

"You want the whole story or the blaster bolt?" The chief asked over the comm.

"The bolt." Varlo responded.

"She's a Epsilon class shuttle, once a mainstay of the Old Republic and at least thirty-five years old, but more importantly the nav computer indicates a probable course to Tatooine."

"Thanks Chief. Ops out." Varlo turned to face the remnants of team Bantha. "The shuttle's data is backed by the station's nav computer analysis of my partial plot. Based on the concurrence of the nav data, I will be assigning you an X-wing, and a pair of Y-wings. I will not be able to go to Tatooine with you. With Commander Challis severely injured in the raid, that leaves me as senior man at the station. You are to make best speed for Tatooine and bring your team mates home. Are there any questions?"

"No sir!" Carek answered and the three members of team Bantha moved out at double time.

While preping the Y-wing, that he had been assigned, Carek got word that Challis wanted to speak to him.

"She's found out about the hatch." He thought as he headed for sickbay. "I can't believe with all that's happened, that she has the time to chew me out over a hatch."

Carek entered sickbay so caught up in his fate, that he was startled by Challis' appearance. She was swathed in bandages and was as pale as he had ever seen her.

"Be at ease Carek," She said when she noticed his arrival. "you need not worry about that hatch, I would have done the same thing if I had been in your place. The reason I asked to see you is, that I know that you are dedicated to the Jedi code and can be trusted."

She handed Carek a disk with some astrogation coordinates before she continued.

"I have been using the Force to observe what may be. I must admit that I don't know their significance, or even to where this disk will take you. However, I do know that it is critical to your development as a Jedi for you to have that disk."

Mystified Carek replied. "I will guard it with my life."

Challis said. "Enough of that. Get to the hanger bay, you've got a mission."

"See you soon and may the Force be with you." Said Carek as he sped for the hanger bay. When the door closed, Challis said very quietly. "Carek, I hope the Force is indeed with you."

"Okay, is everybody ready?" Asked Leland after confirming that his X-wing was fully operational.

"Red two, roger." Carek answered, squirming to get his safety straps comfortable.

"Red three, roger. Lets go bag us a Bantha." Kyle responded glibly.

"Ops, this is Red one." Said Leland. "Go ahead and download the data I plotted to Tatooine."

"Roger Red one, standby for download." Said Lieutenant Varlo. "Here you go. Clear skies Red flight. You're clear to launch."

Once the three fighters were on course, Leland activated his comm unit. "I wanted to arrive ahead of those repo pukes, so I shaved ten hours off the standard four day course."

"Do you think that will be enough?" Asked Kyle.

"I don't know for sure. I didn't want to push my luck and trim so much off the plot that we ended up inside a gas giant or something equally unpleasant."

"Why the caution Rammer?" Carek asked innocently.

"Don't call me Rammer! I didn't notice you coming up with anything better. In fact, I seem to recall that you had bailed out by then."

"Peace Leland, I was only kidding. I just hope ten hours is enough."

"Me too."

"Ready to jump?" Asked Leland.

"Lets go." Kyle responded, tensing as he always did before a jump.

The sleek, powerful fighters flickered with psudomotion and vanished into hyperspace.

It had been a very boring flight. Alliance fighters were second to none in the galaxy. Fast, hardhitting, and their hyperdrives gave them a tactical edge that was almost impossible to defend against. However, once in hyperspace, virtually everything was automated and controlled by their R2 units, leaving precious little for the pilot to do during an extended flight. "My father neglected to mention this part of being a fighter pilot." Carek reflected after fifty-seven hours in hyperspace. The cockpit did not allow for much movement and the minimal hygiene facilities had left him feeling decidedly ripe. "Still, I'm luckier than most pilots. This trip has given me time to practice entering a Jedi hibernation trace. I can't imagine what this has been like for Kyle and Leland."

His fledgling Jedi talents however, were not reliable enough for him to risk trying to make the entire trip in hibernation. He had had to limit his down time to shifts of just under twelve hours, that still left him with twelve hours fully conscious in the cramped cockpit.

He looked at his chronometer. "Three hours before I can stretch out in the luxurious ambassadorial suite. I can't..."

An abrupt stream of beeps and whistles from the battered R2K8 droid snapped him out of his daydreaming. He quickly read the translation of what the droid said.

"Good work Katie. I know I never would have noticed that signal, can you focus in on it any better?"

The droid made a positive sounding beep and the signal slightly improved.

"I still can't quite make that out. Try and hold the signal at that level katie, I've got something I can try."

Carek concentrated on the garbled sounds and allowed the Force to add to his natural hearing.

The first sound to become understandable was the steady pulse code of an escape pod's emergency signal. Riding on top of the beacon was a second signal. He then realized that the beacon had been modified to transmit a short message. And the voice was Ardent's!

"...ing Bantha...aught in a tract...eaded for...tooine..."

The message repeated itself and was obviously a recording. Carek continued to listen to the message, until Katie informed him that he had lost the signal.

As soon as he was certain that the signal had indeed been lost, Carek wasted no time in contacting the rest of the team.

"Are you sure Carek? My R2 didn't didn't notice anything." Said an obviously half awake Leland.

"I had my R2 running a full spectrum sweep of Alliance frequencies. Did you?"

"No I didn't." Said Leland stifling a yawn. "And why would you have your R2 doing that anyway?"

"I had...well, I just thought that someone should keep there ears on." Carek knew that neither of his companions gave much credence to the Force. He didn't want to let on that during his first trance, that in a flash of insight he heard Ardent speaking to him from a vast distance. He wasn't ashamed of his Force abilities, he just didn't want to have to argue about them right now.

Okay whatever. I believe you Carek. It is nice to know that we're on the right track. I only wish that we could be certain that we're going to get there first."

"Was there a time stamp on that message?" Asked Kyle.

"Negative. Voice only. Badly garbled at that."

"Does this change the plan, that is if there is a plan?" Said Kyle.

"No it doesn't. And I'll have a plan by the time we get there." Leland snapped.

"If you say so Rammer." Kyle shot back.

"I said-" Leland began, but was interrupted by both Kyle and Carek speaking simultaneously.

"-don't call me Rammer!"

"Very funny you two. If you're quite finished, I'm going to go back to sleep and I will have a plan by the time we reach Tatooine."

"Roger Red one. I can't wait." Said Kyle signing off.

"Yeah, whatever." Leland mumbled and tried to find the one semi comfortable spot that he had managed to find with the control seat fully reclined. "I'm going to have to talk to the guys at Incom about these blasted seats."

The three rebels settled themselves back into the rhythm that each pilot developed when on a long flight. Soon, the three men were again alone with their thoughts. It was hard to tell if confirmation of there course had settled, or unsettled those lonely thoughts.

The rescue party arrived at Tatooine without incident. Carek, with great trepidation, showed his fellow rebels the smuggler's trick of using a sand storm to mask there landing from Approach Control. They got their fighters hidden and after camouflaging them with the sensor scattering nets from their meager stores, They gathered around Leland to hear his 'plan.'

"First thing is to make contact with that Twi'lek that turned us on to the rebellion in the first place. He's an information broker, he's got to know if the Bantha's here and where it's hidden if it is."

"That actually is a decent idea Leland." Kyle said, enjoying his first full, unhindered, stretch in almost four days. "You know, we met Dag almost six months ago, but with what we've been through, it seems like years ago since we had to blast our way out of here."

"I know what you mean." Said Carek. "Time seems to have compressed and left us moving far faster than the rest of the galaxy."

"Is that more Jedi stuff?" Leland said, his eyebrow arched in amusement.

"No, just an observation. The last time I had to walk through these canyons, I was alone and even with the Force to keep the worst of the heat off of me, I barely made it. We've landed much closer than where the Tigershark's escape pod put me down. Moving at night we should be able to reach Mos Eisley by morning. Get some rest. We've got about four hours to suns set."

"You seem to know what you're talking about, so I'll follow your lead on this one." Kyle replied and moved back to the shade of his Y-wing.

"I hope you know what you're talking about Carek, but I'm going to love the chance to get some sleep someplace other than in that stinking cockpit." Added Leland also moving to the shade of his fighter's wing.

"It's okay guys, I'll stand guard." Said Carek to the retreating men. "Somehow, I've been out maneuvered." He thought as he moved to a better lookout post. "I'm going to have to work on my negotiations skills."

Carek found a shaded spot and began his vigil.

When the rebels met up with Dag, it was something of an anticlimax. He reported that neither the Bantha, or a shuttle had arrived before them. He did however, know the loan shark that Rex owed and more importantly, he knew where his fortress was located. Dag agreed to drive Carek out to the fortress in his landspeeder to do a quick recon.

"Are you still to be wanting to be a Jedi?" Said Dag when they were halfway to the loan shark's fortress. "I am knowing of a Jedi enclave on Alderaan, and with you them I can put in contact."

Carek was stunned. "I have no way of thanking you for your help Dag, I owe you more than you'll ever know." He managed to reply.

"Considering what the Empire is to be doing to Jedi these days, you may not be thinking that way for long, but anything to help a friend."

On reaching the hulking fortress, Dag hid the speeder in the best cover he could find. Carek dismounted and scouted on foot. He carefully made his way completely around the fortress, taking special care not to be seen. Once back to the speeder, Dag drove back to where Kyle and Leland were waiting.

"I didn't see any obvious gun emplacements, or other signs of heavy weapons." Said Carek climbing out of the speeder and dusting himself off.

"Guns could be hidden." Kyle offered.

"True, so our job is to avoid any surprises." Said Leland. "How good is the cover out there?"

"Not as good as here, but there's enough to ditch three fighters." Carek replied after a short pause.

"That's all we need." Leland clapped his hands and turned to Dag. "Thanks once again for your help."

"I am pleased to be helping. Now I will be leave taking." Dag hopped into his speeder and sped off.

"There goes a good soul." Carek said watching the Twi'lek slip out of sight.

"That he is." Kyle added slapping Carek on the back. "Now lets talk this move through..."

The rebels waited until nightfall to move the fighters to a position where they could overwatch the fortress and set up an ambush. All they had to do now, was wait.

Two days later a heavily damaged shuttle made its re-entry and headed for the fortress.

In accordance with the plan that they had worked out in advance, the three fighters erupted from their hiding place as soon as the R2s, who were monitoring the sensors continuously, alerted the rebel pilots of the shuttle's arrival. Leland's X-wing peeled away and headed directly for the fortress. Roaring in fast and low, he fired a proton into the blast doors of the fortress, sealing them temporarily and preventing any reinforcements from interfering with the rescue.

Kyle and Carek managed to surprise the shuttle and hit it with ion cannons at short range. The attack crippled the shuttle and forced it to land. Kyle and Carek also landed, leaving Leland flying top cover.

The shuttle pilots, a Jawa and a Saurian, realizing how badly the tide had turned, dragged Roberts and Rex into the open and tried to use them as hostages.

"We'll give you one of the hostages if you let us go free." The Saurian hissed.

"You'll give us both the hostages and we'll let you go free." Carek hissed back. The Jawa was happy to comply, but the Saurian decided to fight. The Saurian pushed Rex out of the way and opened fire with a very modified repeat blaster. Carek tried to try deflect the blast but failed. Rex managed to somehow, dive out the way on his own. Carek then reversed his slash and cut the Saurian in half.

Seeing what had happened to his bellicose partner, the Jawa surrendered without a fight. Carek disarmed him and moved to help the badly shaken Rex to his feet.

Kyle moved forward to untie Roberts. Just as he reached his fellow rebel, the last of the assassin droids burst from the shuttle with its built in laser blazing.

The rebels were forced to scatter to avoid the withering barrage. Somehow they heard the scream of the approaching X-wing and dove for cover. Leland's proton torpedo blasted the droid all over the desert. The shock wave of the blast rolled over the them, but they had all managed to find enough shelter for no one to be hurt. The kidnapers completely accounted for, they now had a Bantha to rescue.

The rebels had moved far out into the desert to maintain their passive sensor scan on the battered fortress. When the rebels had split up, Carek had moved over to gunner on Kyle's Y-wing, allowing Rex to fly the second Y-wing with Roberts as his gunner. It was three days before the freighter returned, but it had returned alone.

"Great Diety! What have you done with my ship!" Rex raved as the rebels raced to intercept. "All ships. Ions only. We need to someone to interrogate!"

The freighter spotted the fighters and immediately turned to fight.

Over zealous at the loss of his ship, Rex pressed home the attack too closely and was hit, taking heavy damage.

"I'm not going to go though this again!" Leland spat. "Kyle follow my lead and nail these buggers!"

"On your mark!"

"Mark!"

Leland whipped his fighter across the freighter's path drawing heavy fire, but easily spiralling out of the way. Kyle slipped in, and despite what Rex had ordered, tagged the freighter with a proton, and leaving it drifting wreck.

"Blast you Kyle! I said ions only." Rex snarled.

"The majority of them are still alive. You've got plenty of people to interrogate." Kyle answered unrepentantly.

"I hate to break in on your little tiff guys, but we've got unwanted company." Interrupted Leland.

A quick look at the sensors showed that an Imperial customs frigate had noticed the fight and was moving to intercept.

"But the Bantha!" Wailed Rex.

"It's too late! We've got to go." Leland insisted.

"Roger that." Said Rex relenting at last.

Forced to flee. It was with a heavy heart that the rebels made the jump for Heracles.

The rescued and the rescuers were still being debriefed by the recovered Challis and Varlo, when Ops received a request to land from the Wandering Bantha!

The hijacked freighter gracefully entered the hanger and was met by nearly half of the station's crew. The loading ramp lowered and Ardent, Lazarus, and Melia slowly walked out, reveling the attention. The returning team members were hust-

led to the conference room to join the rest of the team's debriefing.

"May I be the first to congratulate you on your escape." Challis said calling the debriefing back to order. "I also very much want to hear the details of this feat."

The three escapees spoke among themselves for a moment and then Ardent rose. "There's not much to tell. First, Laz repaired the damage to the Bantha while they were in hyperspace. That took us almost three days. Second, when the repo freighter dropped out of hyperspace to repair its own damage two days later, we were waiting. We detached the tow linkage and ran for it. They were so surprised, that we made it into hyperspace before they could react." Ardent's expression became sheepish. "Unfortunately, we blew our initial plot. It took us the better part of a week to confirm our location and to make it back to Heracles."

"A gallant tale indeed." Challis responded with a ghost of a smile, the first any of the team had ever seen. "That will complete the debriefing. You are free to go."

The team members made straight for one of the station's cantinas. After the first rounds of drinks were delivered, Leland burst into laughter.

"What's so funny?" Asked Carek valliantly trying to keep a straight face.

"It...It only took you guys five days to escape..." Leland choked out. "But-But-But...it took you over a week to get home." He finally managed to finish.

That was enough to release the laughter that everyone had been trying to hold in check since they left the conference room.

Team Bantha enjoyed the heartfelt laugh and the rescue party lasted long into the night. Afterwards, Carek was very glad that the Jedi knew how to purge themselves of poisons, for everyone had had far too much to drink.

The following morning, Carek told the crew of the Bantha that he had been told by Challis to deliver some information to Alderaan. Carek knew that wasn't the exact truth, but Carek figured that an enclave of Jedi was just what the Alliance needed.

"The Jedi code is very strict," He rationalized. "however, I guess there's some room for interpretation."

Chapter Five

"If you have not heard by now, Alderaan is the planet of peace. All weapons either have to be checked with customs, or secured aboard your ship. No exceptions." The customs official explained after their arrival on Alderaan. The rebels checked their weapons with customs and received itemized receipts for their property. Carek hesitated at leaving his lightsaber.

"I would like to speak with the customs chief." He said after a moments thought.

"Sir, If you have a problem with the rules, I sorry, but I said no exceptions. If you do not wish to check you weapons with me, you will have to secure them aboard your ship."

"As you wish."

"Finally a lead." Maldamon exclaimed as he read the coded message in his ready room. He stabbed the comm unit. "Navigator. Set a course for Alderaan. Engineer. I want this ship moving as fast as it can be made to move. Captain Gellen. There has been a confirmed sighting of our quarry. I want the capture team in place and ready to launch as soon as we enter realspace. There will be no mistakes." Maldamon ended the connection without waiting for a response.

He sat back and tried to still the rush of exhilaration that raced through him. It had been an excruciating ten weeks since the rebels had escaped him on Tauntara. Maldamon had activated every member of his impressive network of informants in an all out effort to ferret out some hint of the rebels whereabouts. The Predator had prowled the Rim with a vengeance following up on each one of the few scraps and rumors that his network had produced since then.

The blood hammered through both his primary and secondary coronary loops. As he brought his pulse under control, he realized that the thrill of rediscovering the prey was tempered by the cost to his spy network.

"It will take me months to rebuild my web. I have burned the cover of virtually every mole and double agent in my organization." He reflected grimly. "And the infuriating part is, I didn't have to! The cub just shows up unannounced on Alderaan and is spotted by of all people, Imperial Customs! Fortunately, my agent on Alderaan was able to intercept the message and route it directly to me before anyone else had a chance to see it." He smiled for

the first time since departing the palace. "This time young one, with my specially trained capture team in place, you will not escape me. And if some miracle you reach your ship, my agent has taken steps to insure that you not elude me again.

"With what you have cost me, I will take great pleasure in your capture. I can only hope that by capturing you, that I will have redeemed myself enough in Lord Vader's eyes, that he will allow me the honor of participating in your conversion to the Dark Side." His smile broadened at that thought until it became horrid, feral thing that would have frozen the heart of a battle hardened member of the Mandalorian Guard.

It took two days of pounding the pavement to find their contact that knew the enclave's location. It was with great sadness, that the old man told them, that the enclave had been betrayed three months ago by a Dark Jedi and wiped out.

Carek was bitterly disappointed, but the old man told them that the general location of the enclave was in a wooded area fifty kilometers north of the starport.

It took them three days of searching in a large forest to find the Jedi cave, which was so strong in the Force that it stood out to Carek like a torch. Entering the abandoned cave, was to Carek like desecrating a grave. The rebels had only been searching for a few minutes when Lazarus found a holographic wall. As the hologram faded, there stood the Tauntaran Dark Jedi whose ambush they had barely escaped from three months ago.

Over his shoulder, Maldamon turned and said. "I told you they would come Master."

It was then that a hulking vision, dressed in black robes and armor, stepped from the shadows and resolved itself as Darth Vader the Dark Lord of the Sith. The effect was immediate, everyone stampeded for the exit.

All except Ardent. He levelled his rented hunting blaster and opened fire.

Carek was as panicked as the others, but when he saw Ardent stand his ground, Carek checked his retreat and stood with him. "I will not leave so gallant a friend to stand alone." He thought, the fear that had led him to panic bleeding away.

Ardent's fire, to Carek's profound disbelief, cut down both of the Dark Jedi.

It was then that Carek realized that they had never been there at all, they were just the manifestation of the rebel's own fears, magnified by the power of the Force

resident in the cave. Carek had heard of this sort of test in the later stages of Jedi training. He also realized that he had failed the test.

"How did you know Ardent?" Asked Carek, his eyes wide awe. "I'm supposed to be the Jedi, and I completely failed to see that vision for what it was."

"I didn't know anything about any vision. All I saw was a chance to take on that son-of-a-dewback Maldamon with my feet on solid ground."

"Well friend Ardent, you have earned my respect all over again and you have given me much to think about."

The rest of the team returned sheepishly.

"When we realized you weren't with us we decide to come back for you was going on so we came back." Said Roberts.

"What happened to Vader and Maldamon?" Asked Kyle carefully searching the corners of the cave.

"They were never here. It was a vision caused by the Force." Said Carek.

"Well normally, this is where I would say, that's a load of hooey." Said Leland. "But, since I saw it with my own eyes, I'll have to give you the benefit of the doubt on this one."

"That's mighty big of you." Carek replied.

"And here's one more thing. I have admit this cave is kind of creeping me out."

"Uh, can we get on with this?" Said Lazarus. "This place is creepy and I want to get out of here as quickly as possible."

"Sure thing Laz." Carek answered. "Just remember, the 'creepiness' that you feel, is just your own fears being amplified by the Force. The only thing in here is what we brought in. The only thing out of place here, is us."

The rebels carefully and respectfully searched the rest of the cave. Ardent checked beyond the holographic wall and found the Jedi living quarters. The only thing that that the search yielded beyond personal effects was a sealed metal box, that Ardent took charge of. Confident that they had overlooked nothing, the rebels left the cave and headed back to the Bantha.

The trek back to the spaceport was in near silence with each of the rebels deep in thought from the revelations of the Jedi cave.

Upon returning to the landing field and signing for their checked weapons, they were informed by the Alderaan customs agent, that an Imperial customs team had gone through the ship.

"Why did you let them do that!" Carek exclaimed and began running for the ship.

"What's with him?" Said the customs agent. "An Imperial customs team has the right to go just about anywhere it wants to."

"When did the team go through?" Said Kyle hastily strapping on his blaster and checking the charge.

"Not long after you left, so a little over three days ago."

"Thanks. Can you advise Depature Control that we will be leaving immediately." Said Rex hurrying to catch up with the rest of team Bantha in running for the ship.

Rex was the last one aboard. Kyle met him at the top of the boarding ramp. "They got to the weapons locker. Leland and Laz are getting the ship ready. Ardent, Roberts, and Carek are checking the rest of the ship for any other surprises they may have left us."

"I'm going to join Leland. You help search the ship, but I want you and Ardent in the turrets when we break orbit."

"I'm on it."

They split up and joined the frenzy of preparations.

It was with a heavy heart that Carek approached his cabin, for he knew what he would find, or actually what he wouldn't find. A quick search verified his assumption, his lightsaber was gone.

"One minute to realspace." Said the Navigator.

"Capture team shuttle standing by." Added Lieutenant Rahos.

"Tractor beams online. Turbolasers spun up and manned. All fighters ready to launch." Captain Gellen said, finishing the litany of checks that were standard operating procedure for a star destroyer about to exit hyperspace with a mobile target, that had to captured intact, waiting for it.

When the message that the Jedi cub had been sighted, the Predator was still prowling the F'ek'tok sector. Maldamon had driven the Engineering crew beyond reason to reach Alderaan in time.

As the Predator roared out of hyperspace, greatly upsetting the near space traffic controller, there was a series of coded messages waiting for Maldamon. The Communications officer handed the datapad over and stepped back. Maldamon scanned the messages, his brow ridges rippling with agitation.

"LAUNCH FIGHTERS NOW!" He howled at the captain. "We're too late They've already departed the surface!"

The ready launch TIE flight left the hanger before Maldamon finished speaking. The rebels detected the Imperial fighters and accelerated. The TIE flight leader heavily damaged the freighter, but not enough to prevent its escape.

The bridge crew tensed and waited for the inevitable eruption. Instead Maldamon actually chuckled. This was something completely beyond their collective experience.

"Communications. I want you to send out a omniburst signal based on the frequency that Lieutenant Rahos is about to give you. Sensors. You will soon be receiving a pulse code signal. You are to begin constant monitoring of this signal. Once you have locked in on this signal, you are to feed the course information to the Navigator. If this signal is lost the entire sensor crew will answer to me personally. Captain, you have the con. I will be in my ready room."

The bridge crew blinked in confusion, then began implementing their orders. The Predator recovered her fighters and lept back into hyperspace, again greatly upsetting Alderaan's traffic controller.

The departure from Alderaan was, from Carek's point of view, just a haze. He knew that they were nearly intercepted by a Victory class Star Destroyer. He was also aware that a flight of TIE fighters hit them and caused heavy damage before they could jump. But all of that seemed to be inconsequential compared to the loss of his lightsaber.

Once in the relative safety of hyperspace, Ardent opened the box from the Jedi cave and found that it contained a pair of lightsabers. He raced to Carek's quarters and showed him what he had discovered.

"Here you go Carek, A replacement and a spare." Said Ardent trying to cheer up his heartbroken friend.

"Thanks Ardent. I know you mean well, but a lightsaber isn't like a blaster. Each one is hand made and is a major component of a Jedi's early training. Those are beautiful, but they're not the one that I made."

"What should I do with them then?"

"Leave them with me. I'll take them apart so that they don't fall into the wrong hands."

You're going to destroy them? When you need one of your own, you're going to destroy two perfectly good ones?"

"You'll just have accept that it is the Jedi way. Once these have been unmade, I will began assembling the components to replace the lightsaber I lost on Alderaan."

"I'll never understand you Carek. Never."

"Well, where I'm from, your people's concept of warriors enslaved to a clan leader would be considered barbaric. So it's just a matter of perspective."

"I'll have to think about that one. Good night Carek."

"Good night Ardent."

After he was alone, Carek again thanked the Force that his master had deemed him worthy enough to show him the virtually lost art before he had been killed. He disassembled the two lightsabers, walked to engineering and slowly fed the pieces into the mass energy converter.

He returned to his quarters after scavenging various nonessential components from engineering to build his new weapon. "I now know how wrong I was to have misled my friends." He mused. "I paid a fearsome cost to relearn that a Jedi does nothing for personal gain and that a Jedi should know no fear. I also know how badly I failed at the cave. Master Havsoltek told many times, that a Jedi learns more from a failure, than he can from any success. And today, I have had much to learn from."

Carek sat quietly for a moment. "By the Force that's maudlin." He said shaking off his melancholy. "Tonight, I must meditate on today's failures, but for now, I've got a lightsaber to build." He then smiled for the first time in hours and went to work.

Three days later while Carek was putting the finishing touches on his new lightsaber, there was an explosion that shook the ship from end to end. Simultaneously the proximity klaxon started sounding.

"What the blazes." Carek muttered and rolled up off the deck. Fighting the wild pitching of the ship, he staggered out of his cabin and promptly collided with Rex, who was heading for the bridge, both men going down in a tangle of flailing limbs.

"Move you Danarian Goon Ox!" Rex fumed as he untangled himself and lurched to his feet.

"What happened?" Carek asked regaining his feet for the second time.

"That's what I'm trying to find out."

"How can I help?"

"First get out of my way. Second get to engineering and report."

Enroute to the engine room. Carek could hear angry shouts from the other cabins as the rest of the crew struggled to recover from the double shock of being rudely thrown out of bed and from being rudely awakened from a deep sleep.

Reaching engineering Carek slapped the door control. As the door opened, a blast of heat and flames rolled out and drove him back. He dodged clear of the raging fire and grabbed a nearby extinguisher. Pulling his jacket up to shield his face, he thrust the extinguisher out in front of him and began spraying fire retardant on the worst part of the flames.

Squinting to see through the heat distortion, he saw that most of the drive systems had already sustained heavy damage. "We must have misjumped and come too close to a planet's gravity well, causing the hyperdrives to overload. This is bad. Really bad."

Long before Carek reached engineering, Rex had come to exact same conclusion. The controls were offline and to make matters worse, they were not only on a collision course with a planet, they were already entering the planet's upper atmosphere. There was no time to effect repairs of any kind, there was only one course of action. The rebels had to man the escape pod immediately.

"Abandon ship! This is no joke!" Screamed Rex. "Get to the pod now, it's our only chance!"

There was a mad scramble as the rebels fled for their lives. Kyle, Leland, Ardent, Roberts, and Lazarus were waiting in the pod when Rex and Carek dived aboard. As soon as Rex landed, Leland fired the explosive bolts that sent them rocketing free of the stricken Bantha.

"I'm never going to get used to that." Said Carek recalling the far more costly escape from the Tigershark.

"It's never easy to have to standby helplessly, when something that means everything to you is destroyed" Replied Lazarus remembering an equally grim moment in his life. Once Leland had the pod stabilized, they all watched the Bantha make her re-entry. Rex took over the controls and steered the pod as close to where the Bantha went down as he could before they landed.

"What a flaming dump!" Leland said disgustedly, looking at the sere landscape. "Does anyone know where we are?"

"Near as I can figure, the Kiosk system." Rex replied wearily.

"How far to the ship? I'm not really constructed for long walks in the sun." Said Lazarus his pale skin already showing a hint of red.

"Twelve clicks." Said Carek. "Do you think that will be a problem?"

"I should be okay. Well, lets get a move on, the ship's not going to get any closer with us jawboning."

"Laz is right. Let's go." Said Rex, gathering up his portion of the survival gear and starting for the Bantha.

"What do we think we're going to find at the ship?" Kyle asked Carek when he was sure that Rex couldn't hear.

"Your guess is as good as mine, Kyle. I don't see how anything on the ship could have survived crashing at the speed that the Bantha was going when we lost sight of her."

"I'm more worried about how Rex is handling the loss of his ship."

"I guess time will tell on both of those questions."

They found the Bantha half buried at the end of a sixty kilometer long furrow in the desert. She was in surprisingly good condition, good in that externally, she still could be recognized as a ship. Internally, every system was offline and the hull had been breached in several places. A quick check told them that the repulsor lift and hyperdrives were completely wrecked and beyond their ability to repair. Their only hope was to try to get the communications back online and call for help. As this was their only option, they scouted the area, set up their survival shelters and began trying to put the comm unit back into some semblance of order.

The soft susurrations of terse query and answer that issued from the crew pit of the Predator's main bridge was broken by a strangled gasp from the sensor officer. Captain Gellen turned from where he stood on the command walkway and saw the young officer blanch, his eyes wide with panic. The Predator had been holding position one parsec from where they had abruptly exited the Alderaan system for the last three days. Waiting for their prey to reach their, as yet unknown, destination. The crews of the Imperial star destroyer had settled into the long wait and the sudden break in the dull rhythm that had developed startled everyone.

"Lieutenant Manda, what is the meaning of this outburst?"

"It...It's n-not my fault!" Manda stammered and rose shakily to his feet to face the captain. "The signal cut off at the source. There was nothing I could do!"

Before Gellen could respond, the blast door that lead to the ready room opened and the tall, black and white furred Maldamon entered. He walked to the edge of the crew

pit. His huge yellow eyes stabbed Manda with a bone chilling stare.

"Am I correct in the belief that you have lost the homing beacon?"

Manda wilted before those huge, awful eyes until it seemed as if he would shrink away to nothing. He nearly lept off the deck when Maldamon spoke again.

"Explain."

The word was spoken quietly, but it echoed across the bridge like a blaster bolt.

Somehow Manda found his voice.

"Sir, the signal stopped transmitting. The rebels must have located the beacon and shut it off."

Maldamon focused that blood freezing stare at the captain.

"Is this an accurate portrayal of what occurred?" He said.

To his credit, the captain met that baleful gaze without flinching. "According to the sensor logs. Lieutenant Manda is correct. The signal was not lost. It was the beacon that stopped transmitting."

"Very well. Correlate all sensor data with navigation and match the location of all star systems within five parsecs of the beacon's last known position."

There was a flurry of activity, as the command crew complied with Maldamon's orders. In less than five minutes the navigator, Commander Thelnek reported his findings.

"Sir, the rebels entry into hyperspace was erratic, but, their basic course line is consistent with a destination somewhere on the rim. The beacon's signal was lost in the Haltek sector, which is an unusually barren area of this region of space. This is due to the gravitic disturbance caused by the triple gas giant cluster of the Cypryn system. There are two other systems within the designated five parsec sphere. The only system that fits in with the time frame of the beacon's signal delay to the sensor's detecting the loss is the Cypryn system."

"That doesn't make any sense, the Empire maintains a large orbital repair station in that system. The rebels wouldn't go there." Said Gellen.

"Normally that would be correct sir. However, I believe that based on their already observed erratic entry to hyperspace and the sudden loss of the beacon's signal, that the rebel pilot failed to account or the system's gravitic fluctuations and their stop there is an unplanned event. I have taken the liberty of plotting a course for the Cypryn

system. Our travel time is one hundred and four hours." Thelnek concluded.

"I can contact the system patrol and have them try and locate them." Said Gellen.

"NO! These rebels are mine. I mean to have them and I have just the plan in mind." Maldamon looked at Thelnek appraisingly. "Good work Commander. Very good work. Execute plotted jump immediately."

Maldamon dismissed Thelnek and motioned for Gellen and Rahos to join him in his ready room. He started speaking as soon as the blast door sealed.

"Now here's my plan..."

"Okay Laz, We're ready on this side." Kyle said, adjusting his makeshift syntherope harness so that it didn't quite bind his shoulders so much, then glanced at Roberts who nodded that he was ready.

"Ardent and Leland are ready too. Stand by for my signal. Carek?"

"Ready."

"Rex?"

"As I'll ever be."

"Alright then everybody, you know the plan. We only get one chance at this."

Lazarus cast one more critical look at the crude, but sturdy, tripod that the rebels had built from I-beams cut from the Bantha's hull with Carek's lightsaber and slipped into his own harness. The Bantha's subspace transmitter had survived the crash in good shape, but both the primary and backup emitters had been completely torn from the hull.

Not willing to accept that they were trapped, Lazarus had hit on the plan of using the main sensor's parabolic dish as a crude replacement. However, the battered ship had come to a halt on her left side in a nearly inverted attitude, pinning the sensor dish underneath the hull.

Undaunted by the setback, the rebels had taken two days to construct the tripod and rig syntherope pulleys to the hull. They were now ready for the most dangerous part of the plan. As the Bantha had skidded, a section of the Bantha's upper hull had peeled back and was now jammed against the sensor dish. Fate had again dealt the rebels a cruel blow in that, it was a support member from the damaged section of the hull that was all that was keeping the Bantha from rolling over completely.

The only way to free the dish would be to hoist the Bantha slightly, cut the I-beam, and move then it enough for someone to crawl down and remove the bolts holding down

the dish. The rebels had been unable to figure out how to cut the I-beam in a way that would free it and yet leave it long enough and strong enough to keep the crawl way open.

Ardent, Leland, Kyle, and Roberts would provide the brute strength that would support the Bantha by means of the hoist and pulleys, while Carek cut, and Lazarus shifted the I-beam. Rex had volunteered for the dangerous job of freeing the dish. If anything went wrong, Rex would be killed and the dish would be crushed as well, leaving the rest of the rebels stranded. Lazarus was not exaggerating when he said that they would only get one chance.

"Okay we do this on my mark." Lazarus grunted and got a good grip on his harness. He looked toward the heavens and silently beseeched whatever diety that watched over the desperate. As his gaze fell back toward the task at hand, he noticed a plume of dust on the horizon. "The heat must be getting to me again." He blinked hard and shook his head. The plume was still there.

"Hey Laz! What's the hold up?" Leland's shout, broke Lazarus' revelry.

"We've got company."

There was a chorus of "What!" As the other rebels slipped off their harnesses and scrambled to where they could see the distant riders approach.

"What are they riding?" Asked Leland, who after shielding his eyes with his hand, had finally gotten a good look at the bipedal beasts the unknown men were riding.

"Cracian thumpers. They're like tauntauns without the smell." Kyle replied, his eyes never leaving the riders.

"How do you want to play this, Rex?"

"As peaceful as possible. I don't want any misunderstandings, these guys are our ticket out of here."

The riders approached slowly. As they got closer, the rebel's hopes of a quick rescue were dashed by the rider's appearance. All their clothing and equipment showed a decidedly primitive motif.

"I'm going to go out on a limb and bet these guys don't have a subspace transmitter in those saddle bags." Rex muttered.

The lead rider chuckled and approached closer. "Hello, my name is Dalen Nolu. My companions and I are Followers of the Natural Way. We voluntarily reject the technological trappings of modern society. We came to see if there were any survivors and to see if we could help." Dalen glanced at the tripod and pondered for a moment. "Lost both your Mossfield wave guides?"

"Yes torn right off the hull." Lazarus blurted. "I was going to jury-rig our sensor dish to... Hey wait a minute, if you followers of the Natural Path."

"Way. Natural Way." Said Dalen.

"Whatever." Snapped Lazarus not to be deterred. "If you reject 'technological trappings.' How is it you know so much about subspace transmitters." The tension in the air was suddenly as thick as a pall of smoke, as both the rebels and the locals reacted to the edge in Lazarus' voice.

"You are again allowing appearances to deceive you." Dalen replied slowly, choosing his words carefully in an effort to prevent a potentially deadly misunderstanding. "I was not raised as a Follower. I was First Assistant Technician at Holo relay substation Delta One Gamma.

"That's in the Haldeen sector." Said Roberts.

"Right. And it's the busiest station in that sector. All of it major corporation and Imperial military traffic. Six years of that, and I'll bet you that your opinion on technology changes too. My wife stumbled onto the Natural Way while visiting her sister. I was so stressed, that I was an easy convert. I located their nearest colony just as soon as I could find one. I resigned and booked passage to the Cypryn system. I hired a shuttle to bring me here to Tosca. I met with the Followers and liked what I saw. I gave a message to the shuttle pilot for my wife to join me. She never showed up. I love the Natural Way, however..."

"As a Follower, you no longer had the means to follow up on what had happened to your wife." Said Carek, finishing up when Dalen trailed off.

"Very perceptive." Smiled Dalen. "When your ship's rather spectacular re-entry drew my attention, I thought I would find an operation transmitter when I reached your escape pod."

Rex looked sheepish as Dalen and the rest of the rebels fixed him with a curious gaze.

"I, uh, removed the transmitter to disable it's auto broadcast function."

"I see." Dalen replied with obvious disapproval.

"Okay, okay. I admit it was stupid. It's just that I've carried cargo into areas that are best avoided. If something went wrong, I didn't want the ABF to bring in unwanted assistance. I had planned to modify the transmitter and put it back, but then I had to replace a bearing in the port alluvial dampner. After that, the primary heat exchanger coil had to be repaired. One thing lead to another and I just forgot about the transmitter."

"Now I see why you're trying to salvage your sensor's parabolic dish." Said Dalen. "I hate to have to tell you this, but the throughput from a subspace transmitter is way too high for a parabolic to handle."

"I know that. I was going to reduce the signal strength." Lazarus replied defensively.

You would have to reduce it so much, that the background noise from the triple gas giants would completely drown out your signal."

"So you're saying we're trapped?" Rex said dejectedly.

"That depends on how badly damaged your Bantha is. Do you have any drives at all?"

"The sublights are at about thirty percent. The repulsors and hyperdrives are slagged."

"All right then. Let's get to work."

"On what?" Said Lazarus incredulously.

"On getting out of here. I may be being optimistic, but this is the closest thing to an operational ship I've seen in four years. I was hoping to hitch a ride to Cypryn four on the first ship leaving Tosca. Since you've got sublights, it's my intention that this wrinkled warrior here, be my ride. So lets get to work." Rex smiled for the first time since the Bantha went down and turned to his fellow castaways. "You heard the man. Lets get to work."

Maldamon stood in the center of the command walkway, exactly in the spot that Captain Gellen had favored. "I don't think the good captain will mind much." He smiled evilly, thinking back to the events that had transpired immediately after he had revealed his plan to capture the rebels stranded in the Cypryn system.

After sending a message to an ISB agent already in the system, there came the revelation that the Predator's hyperdrive coils had failed as the ship tried to jump to lightspeed.

"If you didn't insist on driving the engines over the rated maximum in the pursuit of those gundark spawned rebels, they never would have failed!" Gellen had spat, his vaunted composure breaking at last, Maldamon had ordered the chief engineer be brought to him in binders and Gellen had taken exception. "Commander Ropnar is one of the finest engineers in the fleet. I will not stand by and sacrifice an officer of Ropnar's caliber to one of your infantile tantrums. This time you are going to have to own up to your own mistake!"

The silence that had followed Gellen's outburst was as eternal and as cold as the vacuum of the space just beyond the bridge's main view ports.

Maldamon's smile spread as he remembered how the look of indignant outrage had turned to one of raw agony, when the unyielding invisible bands of the Force had shattered both of Gellen's knees. Crushing them as surely as if caught in a hydraulic vise.

"I have to give it to him though." He reflected. "He never grovelled as I crushed his vertebrae one by one. By the Dark Side he did scream, but there was fire in his eyes right up until his neck snapped. You've got to admire that kind of courage."

The chief engineer arrived just as the fire left Gellen's eyes. He stared aghast at the gruesome sight and then came to attention before Maldamon.

"The captain advised me prior to his passing that you are one of the best engineers in the fleet. Is this true?"

"I...Yes sir!"

"Skipping the details and the excuses, answer this one question. How long until the drives are repaired?"

Ropnar took on the look of the doomed.

"Sir, the damage can not be repaired outside of a spacedock."

"Are you telling me that we will have to be TOWED?"

"No sir! The drive is funtional. It's efficiency has been reduced, but it will get us to the Cypryn system."

"It would seem that Captain Gellen was correct in his assessment of your abilities. How long to the Cypryn system?" Maldamon's huge eyes narrowed.

Ropnar noticed and swallowed reflexively. "Twelve days sir."

"TWELVE DAYS!"

"Sir. When the primary coil shorted, the feedback from the overload killed seventeen crewers, including Lieutenant Kiefen, who sacrificed himself to shut down the hyperspace field generator. If he hadn't, the overload would have destroyed the ship."

"That's very commendable. Commander, but that doesn't answer why our travel time has just quadrupled."

"Sir. Although very localized, the damage to the drive was quite extensive. We had to use the emergency backup coil to stablize the primary coil's phase induction matrix. The emergency coil is just not designed to handle the stress of a class one hyperdrive. It is a testament of the engineering department's dedication, that we don't have to be towed in. I am prepared to accept my fate, but it is a miracle that the ship can move at all."

Maldamon looked long and hard at the man before he finally answered. "I will review the security log and see

how much of what you have just told me is true. If what you say is fact, I will recommend your Lieutenant Kiefen for the Imperial Star of Coruscant." He turned to face Commander Thelnek. "You have your course and we have lost enough time already. Jump when ready."

"Yes sir!"

Maldamon turned back toward Ropnar, as the viewports lit up with the brilliant flash of starlines.

"Commander, I have one final question for you."

"Yes sir."

"What caused the primary coil to fail in the first place?"

Ropnar again took on the look of the doomed.

"Our recent sustained overloading of the drive caused the coil to microfracture internally. I ran a level five diagnostic yesterday, but it failed to detect anything. Sometimes a coil's lattice structure can cause a harmonic feedback that can fool the diagnostic scanners. The good news is, the orbital facilities at Cypryn can fully repair the drive in less than two days."

"Very good. Dismissed."

Maldamon slowly walked over to where Captain Gellen's tortured body lay in a twisted heap.

"Captain I guess I owe you an apology."

He then stepped over the remains and headed for his ready room.

Commander Thelnek waited until the blastdoor closed, before motioning for the on duty stormtroopers to remove the captain's body.

The repairs to the Bantha had taken longer and had required more work than even Dalen had feared. The first order of business had been restoring power. The Bantha's fusion reactor survived the crash with only moderate damage. It's output had been reduced to eighty-five percent and even that fluctuated under load, but it was a start.

After the power had been restored, the rebels, Dalen, and his fellow Followers, had to free the Bantha from the crevasse that she had created during the crash. Getting the Bantha on an even keel could only be done by back breaking manual labor. It took six days before the Bantha was as level as they could get her.

While the others leveled the ship, Dalen showed himself to truly be a technical wizard. He impressed everyone, including Lazarus, with his ability to repair, or jury rig even severely damaged components. The hyperdrive and repulsor coils had been wrecked beyond his ability to

repair, but the rebels still considered themselves extremely lucky to have his assistance.

"Hand me the number four hydrospanner." Said Lazarus from under the Pilot's console, his feet the only part of him visible.

"You got it." Leland answered and glanced over to the navigation station where Dalen was fine tuning the main positional logic array.

"Hey Dalen."

"What can I do for you?"

"Are you sure you were only the First Assistant Tech at Delta One Gamma?"

Dalen laughed as he answered. "Yes I was only the First Assistant. It was one of the main reasons that I was able to accept the Natural Way so easily. The Chief Technician was a real kludge. I had to learn how to repair a wide range of technologies just to keep the station running. Chief Stapunch was a magician with a datapad, but he hadn't had his hands inside an access panel in years.

"Well, I'm glad you're here." Said Lazarus as he crawled out from under the console. "I thought I knew my way around a starship, but, you've shown me how to do things I didn't even know were possible."

"Glad to help." Dalen closed the access panel and turned to face Leland. "That my friend, is the last of it. We are ready to try to lift."

Leland was not quite ready to trust his ears after waiting to hear those words for so long. "Are you serious?" He asked with a wide grin.

"As a rancor with a tooth ache."

"What's a rancor?"

"Trust me, you don't want to know."

Leland moved to the co-pilot's seat and strapped in. "Laz? Would you tell Rex to come up here and have everyone else strap in back there. Lifting on sublights is never pretty and this take off is going to be uglier than most."

"I'll let them know. Just remember, that this time if it goes bad, we don't have an escape pod."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Just keeping you on your toes."

"Right."

Chapter Six

"Cypryn Approach Control, this is free trader Wandering Bantha. Request docking instructions over." Carek said and hoped that he had managed to keep his voice professionally neutral.

"Bantha this is Control. If you don't mind me asking, what happened to you?"

"We ran into a problem getting past Tosca."

"Problem? "What problem?"

"We ran into Tosca."

"Hyperspace misjump?"

"That's it in a Grandel nut shell."

"Understood Bantha. You're not the first. You are cleared to dock in repair bay twelve. Control out."

"Copy bay twelve, but, we will require a tractor as our repulsors are offline."

"Frankly Bantha, I'm amazed that you're moving at all. Stand by for tractor."

"Roger Control."

"Well that sure went a lot easier than I would have guessed." Said Rex. "I guess we must look worse than I thought."

"Let's just count our blessings for once and get her docked. The starboard lateral thrusters are not responding, and the primary heat exchanger is about to shut down from trying to compensate for the reactor's power fluctuations." Said Leland, who was obviously weary from struggling with the barely functioning flight controls.

"Roger that." Rex replied.

The battered ship gave a slight lurch.

"There's the tractor. We've made it." Rex could not hide the joy he felt at the prospect of reaching a place that could restore his beloved ship to its former glory.

The flight from Tosca had taken eighteen hours to complete the three hour trip. The take off from Tosca had been far uglier than Leland had dreamed possible. Rex and he had had to use every piloting trick that they knew to get the crippled Bantha into orbit.

The worse moment had been when the port sunlight engine had imploded from the strain. For a moment Leland was certain that they were all going to die. However, in a brilliant piece of improvisational flying, Rex fired all the starboard thrusters and wrenched the Bantha into a tight corkscrewing turn, using the ship's centrifugal force to sling shot the faltering Bantha out of Tosca's gravitational field. Once she broke orbit, the Bantha had,

more or less, cooperated and had limped slowly towards Cypryn four.

The Bantha gave a final shudder and landed with a heavy thud in the cavernous repair bay. Carek looked at his chronometer, did a quick calculation, and realized that it had been twelve days and six hours since they fled from the Alderaan system. He unbuckled his safety harness and stole a glance at Dalen, who leapt to his feet and clapped Lazarus on the back. The rest of the rebels joined in on the round of backslapping and bear hugs that their deliverance had engendered. Carek used the celebration as a cover to grab Dalen in a bear hug and while they were slapping each other on the back, He reached out with his rudimentary abilities with the Force to try and find a reason why Dalen made him so uneasy. Carek was not normally the suspicious type, but there was just something about how Dalen carried himself that had put him on his guard.

"The Force has not been kind enough to show me a solid premonition, and I just can't sense anything substantial, all I've got is a hunch and that's not enough. I'll keep my theory to myself for now, but, I'm not letting Dalen out of my sight."

Rex had burst out of cockpit and was the first one off the ship. He raced over to the group of techs that had gathered around outside, and were staring at the Bantha with open mouthed disbelief.

"I would not have believed it possible for a ship in that condition to be capable of getting the reactor to stay online, let alone fly." Said a tall, thin man wearing a set of coveralls with the sleeves cut off.

"I'm seeing it. But I'm not believing it." Replied an older stooped man with an unlit cigarra clamped between his teeth.

"Well sir, seeing is believing. I'm Rex, owner of the Wandering Bantha.

"What she 'wander' into. A partially operational trash compactor?" One of the other techs shouted, causing the rest of the techs to burst out laughing.

"Yes she's seen better days, but I'm certain that among you esteemed gentlemen, that I can find someone capable of restoring my Bantha to showroom condition." Rex insisted.

This was met with silence, until the man with the sleeveless cover-alls spoke up. "I can fix your Bantha, but it's going to cost you."

"And you would be...Mister?"

"Saldane."

"Ah yes, Mister Saldane. Just what would your fee be?"

"Twenty thousand."

Rex blinked not quite sure he had heard correctly. "I could buy a ship for that."

"You're absolutely correct Mister Rex. I know I speak for all the rest of the local techs. You have pulled off the closest thing to a miracle that I've ever personally witnessed by getting here in that thing. I know how attached to your ships you free traders get, but you have to face facts, your ship will never fly again."

The rest of the techs nodded their heads in agreement to what Saldane said, and several of them started to leave.

"Wait! It is not hopeless. The Bantha will fly again!"

"Only if you've got twenty kay. Otherwise, I'd suggest that you sell her for scrap and book passage back to wherever you call home and try starting all over again." Saldane looked at the Bantha again and shook his head. "I don't mean to sound cruel, but it is over." Saldane and the other techs then turned and left.

Rex stood in silent rage until, the rest of the crew joined him.

"They said she was done for. They want almost as much as she cost when I first bought her to put her back together." He said softly.

"We obviously don't have that kind of money with us," Said Lazarus. "so I suggest that we pool what money we do have and book a flight to Her-"

"To see our wealthy aunt." Carek interrupted, mindful that Dalen was with them. "She may be a tough customer to bargain with, but I think that she'll front us the money."

Lazarus gave Carek a funny look, then nodded his head in slow comprehension. "Yes our wealthy aunt might just do that. Does anyone else have a better idea?"

"I think you've hit on the best course of action." Said Kyle.

"So where do we book passage?" Asked Leland.

"I think I may be of help there." Dalen replied. "I can look up the pilot that flew me out to Tosca. He should know if there's a ship for hire. I can also find a subspace transmitter and send a message to my wife."

"It seems that we owe you another debt of gratitude. Mister Nolu." Carek smiled gravely.

"You don't owe me anything, I'm just glad to be able to help."

"Where will we meet you?" Said Leland.

"As I recall, I met my pilot friend in a nice little place called the Vinos' tavern. It's in Atnos, that's the capitol city, on Melbar Road. I suggest we meet there at eighteen hundred, that should be plenty of time for me to locate a ship."

"Excellent. See you at eighteen hundred." Carek smiled again.

The rebels waited until Dalen was well out of earshot before anyone spoke.

"Okay Carek what gives?" Said Lazarus.

"I don't trust Dalen."

"What? You saw how hard he worked to get us here. What makes you think you can't trust him?" Lazarus snapped, having worked with Dalen more than anyone, Lazarus had gotten fairly close to him and didn't like the way the conversation was going at all.

"I'm with Carek." Kyle answered. "I can't put my finger on it, but I don't trust him either."

"Very well. What's the plan?" Lazarus replied, still unconvinced.

"We book our own passage out of here." Said Carek.

"I'm staying with the Bantha." Said Rex, coming out of his revelry.

"Are you sure? I don't know if that's a good idea."

"I don't care what you think Carek. This is my ship and I will not abandon her." Rex all but snarled.

"What about Dalen? Are we going to meet him?" Said Leland.

"If he's not to be trusted, then, we will almost certainly be walking into a trap." Said Ardent, speaking for the first time since they had left the ship.

"I agree. I think we should book a ship and slip out before Dalen even knows we're gone." Said Carek after a moments thought.

"I disagree with the last part." Kyle added. "I think it will be a trap too, but I want to see who Dalen is working for."

In the end, after hours of, at times, vocal arguments, it was decided that, Rex would indeed stay with the Bantha. The others would book their passage independent of Dalen, and they would meet with Dalen.

Booking passage turned out to be easier than they thought. Lazarus tapped into the local newsnet and found a ship that was for hire. The six rebels then caught the shuttle ferry down to the Atnos starport. There they met with and paid the captain of the free trader Carthesian Hawk a fifty percent deposit to insure that the ship would

be available for immediate departure. After securing their escape, the crew of the Wandering Bantha caught a robohack and headed for Melbar Road.

"Message from Cypryn four sir." The communications officer said to Maldamon.

"Go ahead."

"Approach Control confirms that the target has just docked. Their ship is a hopeless cripple and is not hyperspace capable."

"Excellent. Dismissed. Commander Thelnek, have my shuttle and the capture team shuttles prepared for immediate launch."

"Aye sir." The Predator's acting commander spoke softly into his comm pickup issuing the necessary orders.

"Lieutenant Rahos."

"Sir!"

"I want you to remain here on the bridge. You are to execute your hyperjump into the Kiosk system in exactly two hours. I want you on the ground with the interrogation teams within ten minutes of exiting hyperspace."

"Aye sir."

"Commander Thelnek, you have the bridge."

"Aye sir."

The tall Dark Jedi swept the bridge with his huge yellow eyes, then strode into the turboshaft. When the doors closed, an almost audible sound whispered across the bridge as the crewers relaxed for the first time in nearly two weeks.

"Helmsman start your timer from Commander Maldamon's mark."

"Already started. Your course is plotted and laid in."

"Good. Well Lieutenant Rahos, this time the enemy is ours."

"And after the trouble they have caused us, I can't wait to introduce them to the interrogation droids."

The two men shared a smile at that thought, then turned to watch the timer's relentless countdown.

The rebels exited the robohack a few blocks from their destination. They cast an experienced eye all around the area looking for signs of an ambush. The pedestrian traffic was very heavy, but, the streets were otherwise clear.

Lazarus led off by taking point. Kyle, Ardent, and Roberts spread out; far enough to cover Lazarus, and to

keep an eye on their flanks. Leland and Carek let the others move out, then took up rear guard.

Lazarus had taken point for the simple reason that he was convinced, that for once, the others were being paranoid. Dalen was okay. And he was going to prove it. "I can't believe the guys are letting a little pressure get to them like this." He thought, moving through the crowd. His eyes alert, even though the larger part of his consciousness was wrestling with trying to reconcile his own opinion of Dalen with that of his normally reliable best friends.

It was that small portion of his consciousness still keeping track of his progress, that caught the flash of white. The screaming alarm shut down the Dalen debate and caused his blood to run cold. "Great Deity! Stormtroopers!" He choked. He managed to send his fellow rebels the hand signal for enemy in sight, but he took too long to find cover himself. "Oh I don't need this!" He thought, when he saw the troopers snap their weapons up into firing position. Lazarus rolled behind one of the plascrete planters that lined Melbar Road and began to return fire. The ionic charge from the blue concentric stun bolts making his hair stand on end.

The sudden exchange of fire caused a near stampede among the large group of pedestrians that found themselves caught in the crossfire. Roberts, Kyle, and Ardent each used the distraction to find cover and began hammering the trooper's left flank with a relentless stream of fire.

When Carek saw Lazarus' signal, he crouched low and circled to the left. The team's fire, had killed three troopers and forced the others to shift their positions, leaving the right flank unguarded and allowing Carek to slip past. Carek had felt a familiar tremor in the Force just as Lazarus signaled, and was determined to reach Vinos's tavern.

Leland made the most of the panic stricken crowd and found cover behind a row of parked land speeders. "Holy Hopping Horndogs! What a mess! Man what I wouldn't give to have my hands on a starfighter right now." He thought. "Carek's Force was right on the credits this time. Not that I would admit that to him."

Leland was as brave as any of the rebels assigned to the Bantha, but he knew all too well, just how limited his skills with a blaster were. He non-the-less popped up from behind the stylish Hyperfoil 1000 that he was using for cover and snapped off a quick shot, missing badly.

The shot was enough to draw the notice of the troopers and Leland was forced to take cover by the flurry of return fire.

The Stormtroopers were hampered by their orders to take the rebels alive, and by the rebels vastly superior skill. The two squads that had initiated the ambush had been decimated. The surviving lieutenant, stunned by how quickly the tables had been turned against him, lost the last of his professional demeanor and screamed for reinforcements.

The brief distraction caused by Leland, was all Carek needed to reach the door to Vinos' Tavern undetected by the harried troopers. As he approached, the door flew open and Carek found himself face to face with Dalen, four Stormtroopers, and, the familiar tremor in the Force that he had noticed moments ago, Maldamon the Dark Jedi.

"I knew you for what you were Dalen. A zebok can't change its spots. No matter how well groomed it is." Said Carek, his lightsaber at the ready.

Dalen deferring to Maldamon's presence, did not answer.

Maldamon leaned his head back and slightly turned towards the stormtrooper sergeant. "Stun only on this one."

Carek chose that moment to attack.

Maldamon, expecting the attack, ignited his lightsaber and parried. What he was unprepared for, was the speed and precision of the strike.

"Join the Dark Side young one." Maldamon crooned.

Carek ignored that and continued his attack. The angry humming of his lightsaber offering his only commentary.

Dalen's expression rapidly changed, from smugness, to fear, to raw agony as the blade struck him, then finally going blank as his bisected heart, beat for the last time.

The Dark Side Adept struck back. Carek parried easily and used the momentum of Maldamon's attack to spin out of the Dark Jedi's reach, and cut down two of the Stormtroopers. He feinted to the left, leapt over Maldamon's counter attack, rolled past the Imperials, springing to his feet behind them. The troopers pivoted desperately, but neither man completed his turn before Carek cut them down as well.

"Very impressive young one." Said Maldamon. "I am gladdened by your progress, but now it time for you to embrace the Dark Side and join in the service of the Emperor."

"I will not serve evil." Carek shot back, his voice utterly calm.

"Then I will kill you."

"You're going to have to work for that!" Carek then launched into a complicated series of attacks.

Maldamon parried each attack, but, he knew he was only just barely turning the attacks. "Sith Darkness! This young one has improved!" And for the first time, he began to know fear.

"You have improved, young one." Said Maldamon, frantically trying to distract Carek's timing.

Carek remained completely focused. "The better to fight evil with." He replied through clenched teeth.

Carek felt completely at one with the Force. He remembered his failure on Alderaan and, in an instant, he knew how that mistake had prepared him for this moment. Reaching deeper into the Force than he ever had before, he slashed low, feinted lower, and then reversed his strike in mid-swing and struck upwards.

"Foolish young one, I have you now!" Maldamon hissed, after seeing the classic double low strike. He readied a riposte that would end this fight in one blow. So intent on his counterstrike, that he failed to see the second half of the double low strike curve upwards until it was too late. His parry was a fraction of a second too slow in coming. He felt the blade slice deeply into his side, just above his left hip flexor joint.

Maldamon's world exploded into a multicolored kaleidoscope of blinding agony. He crumpled to the ground and tried to focus his rage in a desperate attempt to remain conscious, but there was too much pain. He felt his primary heart loop shut down and then every thing went black.

When Maldamon dropped to the ground, the only thought that crossed Carek's mind was pity. He looked down at the being that had dogged his trail for so long, and could only feel sorry that the Emperor had managed to cause the death of yet another Jedi.

The lightsaber duel had taken all the concentration that Carek could muster. As the adrenalin from the battle drained away, He became aware of the sounds of the battle raging around him. Carek looked around and saw that only a half a dozen of the original troopers still remained. He took one more at the body at his feet and saw Maldamon's lightsaber roll free from the Tauntaran's grasp. He reached down and clipped the Dark Jedi's lightsaber to his belt. As

he did, he realized that his failure at the Jedi cave on Alderaan, had come full circle.

A flash of motion in the corner of this eye caught his attention. He saw a squad of reinforcement Stormtroopers, approaching in two groups of four racing in behind his comrades. He wasn't worried until he saw how heavily armed the troopers were. Each of the new troopers carried a light repeat blaster mounted in a stabilized harness.

"I know trouble when I see it, and these guys are major trouble." He muttered. He broke into a sprint, in the hope of cutting the troopers off before they could reach his friends.

The reinforcements spotted him and opened fire. Carek soon found himself pinned down, dodging wildly and deflecting the bolts that he was unable to dodge.

Leland had also seen the troopers approaching. "Burning stars! Look at the size of those blasters. I'm not going to try and draw that kind of fire. This Hyperfoil 1000 wouldn't withstand two hits from..." His voice trailed off as he got an idea. "I know the Hyperfoil won't stand up to them, I wonder if they can stand up to the Hyperfoil?" He fished through his pockets for something to over ride the speeder's security. Finding nothing, he used the only tool he had. He shot the lock off with his blaster. "Not exactly the way a booster would do it, but I don't have the time to be delicate."

Leland slid in, ran the speeder through it's power up sequence, and soon had the engine just below redline. It turned out that the Hyperfoil 1000 relied entirely on the complexity of the door locks. The main ignition was unguarded.

"I'll have to drop a line to the good people of Tion Industries and let them know about a serious flaw in the 1000's anti-theft package." He grinned and punched full power to the hover engine lifters.

The Hydrofoil 1000 was a mixed drive speeder, using standard repulsors and hover generators. The hover drives allowed for silent operation, and enabled Leland to catch the nearest quartet of troopers completely by surprise.

The Leland plowed though the troopers at a hundred and fifty KPH, killing three troopers outright and shattering both legs of the one trooper that came closest to dodging. The impact caused the speeder's nose to dig in and flip over in a bone jarring stop. Leland shook his head for a moment to clear the ringing and crawled out the shattered windscreen of the now thoroughly ruined sports speeder.

The spectacular crash of the speeder gave Carek the chance he needed to close in on the remaining fire team. Once in contact, he felled two of the troopers before they could react. The two survivors motivated by a higher than normal self preservation instinct, and blessed by an extra four meters of distance from their fallen comrades, swung their repeat blasters around and fired point blank at the young Jedi. Carek managed to deflect one of the bolts, with a last ditch desperate parry. The second bolt however, struck him squarely in his lower right side. Carek fell backwards into absolute blackness. "By the Force, I'm still alive." Was his last clear thought, before the darkness engulfed him.

Ardent saw Carek fall and was consumed by anger. In a blind rage, he broke cover and charged, firing with the same blind rage. The troopers stood their ground and returned fire. Unclouded by raw emotion, the two Imperials began covering each other. One kept the remaining rebels pinned down, and the second, calmly hit Ardent with a well aimed burst of blaster bolts.

"NOOOOOOO!" Leland raged from beside the speeder wreck. "Laz, Kyle, Roberts! Cover me!" He yelled.

"You got it! You get Ardent! I'll take care of the Jedi!" Kyle yelled back.

Roberts opened up with a furious barrage at the last three of the initial ambushers. Lazarus did the same at the two troopers with the repeat blasters. The Stormtroopers, who had been emboldened by felling of two the rebels, were not ready for the sudden volley of fire. The two rebels firing in perfect counter point, sent fire scything through the troopers. killing three of the five remaining almost instantly. By the time the Kyle and Leland reached the two downed rebels, the last of the troopers were dead.

As soon as he heard the coving fire, Leland started his sprint. He covered the twenty meters of open ground, snatched up the crumpled Ardent and dashed back to cover, his face choked with grief. He had gotten a good look at the extent of Ardent's injuries and he knew that his friend was going to die.

Likewise, when Roberts and Lazarus began firing, Kyle ignited his jet pack. Kyle flew in a graceful arc and landed next Carek. "Don't you even think about dying on me Carek!" He said, quickly checking for a pulse. Finding a thready heartbeat, he turned to fire his jet pack again. Just before he lifted, he noticed his friend's lightsaber.

"I've been meaning to learn how to use one of these," He said to himself. "I don't think the Jedi will mind."

Leland was only seventy meters away, but he might as well have been back on Tosca. He had seen a pair of scout walkers in the distance, and he knew he could never reach Kyle and the others before the walkers arrived. The last thing he wanted was to be caught in the open carrying a grievously wounded man. The approaching walkers had forced him to take Ardent back to the shelter of the twisted speeder.

"Come on you tattooed freak. Stay with me." Leland said, placing the medpac on the worst of Ardent's wounds, but the damage was severe, too severe for one medpac to handle. The LEDs all strobed red, as the auto injectors worked overtime cycling and firing dose after dose of pain killers, coagulants, and stimulants.

Leland glanced at the patient status LEDs again and saw them all indicate a steady red.

"No. No. No. NO! NO! NO! You won't die! I WON'T LET YOU! I WON'T LET YOU." Leland gathered up his friend's mangled body and ran to find help. Any help.

When Kyle was at the top of his return arc, his mouth dropped open in shock, when he caught sight of the scout walkers. He landed next to Lazarus and passed him the wounded Jedi.

"We got trouble" Said Kyle.

"Tell me something I don't know!" Lazarus snapped back, applying his medpac to Carek's still smoking wound.

"I am telling you something you don't know. There's two AT-STs headed this way. We've got to clear out!"

"Scout walkers! We've got more than trouble, we got no chance." Roberts wailed.

"We've got a chance, because, I'm going to make us a chance. Get the Jedi to cover and stand by. Wait for me to make my move, then I need you to hit the walkers with everything you can." Kyle said with grim determination.

"How much time do we have? I've got to get Carek stable before we try to move him." Said Lazarus, adjusting the medpac, so that the auto injectors could work more efficiently.

"Less than a minute."

"We've got to move." Said Roberts.

"Not until I say so!" Lazarus snarled.
"I've...almost...There!" The status LEDs all blinked green.
"He's ready!"

Lazarus and Roberts each grabbed an arm and lifted the Jedi in a smooth motion. They placed Carek out of the line of fire, then found decent cover for themselves and waited for Kyle's signal.

Leland ran through the streets of Atnos, eyes wildly searching for any sign of a medical facility. He could hear the faint sounds of blaster fire and the heavier, deep throated reports that marked the walker's weapons, fading in the distance.

"Help me! This man was a bystander wounded in the fighting. Please help me!" He shouted to a stunned group of pedestrians.

The citizens of Atnos had lived under the shadow of the Empire for far too long. They all kept their distance, or closed and locked their doors as he approached.

Leland had stopped at an intersection, when he heard the medpac give a strident warble, then shut off. "No, Ardent No." He half whispered.

Leland stopped and lowered his comrade to the street. He didn't need to see the readouts to know it was over. Ardent's rib cage was damaged enough for Leland to see that his friend's heart had stopped beating.

"Ardent...I...I..." Words failed Leland and he could only weep at the passing of his friend.

When the walkers reached the small city square, they stopped at the edge of the trees that lined Melbar Road. It was that hesitation before entering the open, that Kyle had bet on and was waiting for.

"That's it my little pretties, come to papa Kyle." He leered as he applied full power to his jetpack and flew at the closest walker.

The covering fire from his fellow rebels was right on time, allowing him to land on the top of the walker unharmed.

"Like I said. I don't think the Jedi will mind if I borrow this for a minute or two." Said Kyle, activating the fallen Jedi's lightsaber. The coruscating blade sliced through the lock and hinges of the walker's access hatch, before the occupants had a clue what was going on. Shorn of their protection, like an oyster out of its shell, Kyle calmly blasted both of them, then dropped inside of the walker.

"Now lets see, this should be a breeze." Said Kyle, unstrapping the body of the driver and taking his place at the controls.

The second walker had been so distracted by the storm of fire that Lazarus and Roberts had laid down, that it's operators didn't know something was amiss with their partner, until Kyle opened fire.

Lamed by that first shot, it was never a contest. Kyle fired twice more and blasted the second walker to pieces. Kyle moved over to where the other rebels had taken cover and waited for them to board.

"Where's Leland and Ardent?" Asked Kyle.

"I'm over here." Leland replied as he boarded the walker.

"Great Deity!" Gaspd Lazarus. "Look at all that blood!"

As soon as Leland had climbed aboard the now very crowded walker, Kyle got the walker moving for the spaceport.

"Ardent is dead." Leland rasped. "I tried to save him, but I just didn't know what to do. He was hit so bad." He then buried his face in his hands and wouldn't say anything more.

The rest of the rebels were too stunned to say anything either.

An Imperial walker, even an otherwise lowly scout walker, demanded respect. Enough respect, that the lone walker went unchallenged by local authorities. It wasn't until the AT-ST strode on the flight line of the Atnos starport, that someone made an inquiry.

"Sir, I've got a perimeter violation in sector four." Said the lead sensor officer in departure control.

"What kind of violation?" The tower director Kennian Tosk replied.

"An AT-ST sir."

"Oh now that's just too much. get me the Imperial ground commander."

"Yes sir. Colonel Helpac is on the line."

"Colonel. I understand that your security requirements supersede my own sir, but I protest this detaining freighters right on my active flight line."

"What are you talking about Tosk? I'm very busy right now." The Imperial colonel snapped.

"One of your scout walkers has just come across my security perimeter, strolled onto my flight line and has

started an impromptu inspection of a stock light freighter. Have you initiated a new policy without tell-"

"Listen to me closely Tosk." Kennian interrupted.

"Both our careers depend on this. Stop them! Do anything within your powers to stop them now!" The base commander shouted, but it was too late for ground based forces to do anything for the stock light freighter in question, had just lifted without authorization.

The look on Tosk's face told Kennian what had happened.

"We can only pray that the Predator stops them before they reach hyperspace." Kennian muttered and blanked the comlink.

Chapter Seven

"...pain...pain...and more...pain." The tortured entity groaned. "There used to be...some...thing...I used to do at...at...AHHHH!" The man, he remembered that much, had moved slightly and the resultant wave of pain had broken off all other thoughts.

"Lets try this...again." The pain wracked man breathed deeply and gathered his thoughts. "There is no emotion...there is...there is... peace? Where do I know that from?" He took a deeper breath and concentrated on a half formed memory. "A Jedi knows no fear! I am a Jedi! No wait. No, no I'm not. I'm a Jedi in training. A Jedi can find strength in the Force. The Force is with me and I am its servant."

The pain was just as intense as it was when consciousness found him, but, now that he remembered his powerful ally, the pain began to fade. His breathing evened out, as he no longer had to fight to breathe. He began to remember recent events and his eyes snapped open. He was in a cabin on a starship in hyperspace, but not the cabin he remembered. He sat up and saw his lightsaber on the room's small counter and the rest of his memory flooded back.

"I am Carek of the House of Argonaut!"

The door to the tiny cabin opened. "Well, look who's finally rejoined us." Said Lazarus, grinning from ear to ear.

"How long?"

"Thirty-two hours."

"What ship is this? Where's the Bantha?"

"We're aboard the ship we chartered, the Carthesian Hawk. As to the Bantha...you need to follow me."

Carek rose slowly and followed his friend out into the hallway and to the ship's small lounge. Kyle, Roberts, and Leland, all jumped up and all tried to embrace him at once.

"Whoa fellows, one at a time." He smiled and hugged each of his comrades in turn. "Where's Ardent and Rex?"

The silence that followed answered his question for him. Carek felt the room spin for a moment, as the shock caused him to lose control of that portion of the Force that held his pain in check.

"Carek..." Leland started, but stopped when the young Jedi waved him off.

It took him a few moments to regain control, of both the Force, and of his feelings. "There is no emotion, there is peace. There...is...no...emotion,

...there...is...peace." He said aloud, focusing the Force and reestablishing his center. "How?"

"When you were hit," Leland said softly, agony in every word. "he charged the troopers that shot you. He...He couldn't have been thinking clearly. He didn't tell anybody what he was doing, or even wait to get any covering fire..."

"He didn't make it twenty meters." Kyle added, shaking his head. "He took an autofire burst right across the chest."

"I...tried, Carek. I tried..." Leland choked and couldn't continue.

"This is all my fault." Carek said almost inaudibly.

"It was the Empire's fault, Carek. Never forget that!" Lazarus hissed.

"No it is my fault. I have a confession to make." Carek said slowly, searching for the words that would somehow convey what he had to say, and yet, not cost him his best friends in the entire galaxy. No test that his master Havsoltek had ever given him, had been harder than the task before him now. "When I said that Commander Challis had told me to deliver information to Alderaan, I wasn't telling the truth."

"What exactly do you mean Carek?" Said Lazarus, steel edging his voice.

"When the Bantha was hijacked, we got enough of a fix on your course that we were able figure out that you were enroute to Tatooine. We met with Dag Caltare to see if he had any information on the Bantha, or the loan shark that Rex owed." When Carek said Rex's name, his blood suddenly ran cold. "Wait a minute you never told me what happened to Rex. Please don't tell me he's dead too."

"We don't know." Said Leland, his eyes boring into Carek's. "When we blasted out of Atnos, our original intent was to head for the orbital platform, grab Rex and jump to hyperspace. But, when we broke orbit, we were intercepted by our old friend the Predator and a flight of TIE fighters. Captain Hawk wouldn't risk his ship any more than he already had. He could have just shut it down, turned us over, and claimed that we hijacked him. The bounties on us are enough to make anyone at least think about turning us in, but he didn't do that. He just dodged the TIEs and got us out of there."

"So we don't know what happened to Rex. He may have been killed, or may the Force spare him, he may have been captured." Carek said, hanging his head in abject sorrow.

"Right. And we've lost the Bantha for good." Said Lazarus. "Now if you don't mind, would you go back to the point that you lied to us."

"While talking to Dag, he mentioned that he knew of a Jedi enclave on Alderaan and I figured--"

"--That you could get free Jedi training. I thought you were an honorable man Carek, but this is beyond contempt. If we hadn't suffered so much grief already, I'd kill you where you stand." Lazarus raged. His hands clenched tightly into fists.

The other rebels stepped back from Carek, the anger in their eyes smoldering at the betrayal.

"No wait! For the love justice, please hear me out!" Carek implored.

"Make this good Jedi." Leland said, twisting the word Jedi around as if it was the vilest epithet he knew.

"I admit that I desperately want to complete my training, but I did not just want to find those Jedi for selfish reasons only. We all know how badly the Alliance needs help, and I thought that nothing could be of more help, than a group of fully trained Jedi.

"I beg your forgiveness for having misled you. I was wrong not to have trusted you with what Dag told me. I can never repay, or atone enough, for what I have done."

Carek trailed off as words failed him. He looked to his friends, in the hope of finding a glint of something other than contempt. Lazarus' eyes were twin pits of blazing ice. Kyle's eyes held a deep sorrow and something akin to pity. Roberts, who hadn't known Carek as long as the others, couldn't meet his stare. Leland met Carek's gaze for a moment, then, he looked away.

"We can't blame Carek for everything, I'm the one who screwed up the jump out of Alderaan. If anyone's responsible for what happened to the Bantha, it's me." He rasped, joining the misery that was all too abundant at that moment.

"I think, the only person to benefit from all this fault finding is the Emperor." Kyle said gravely. "We have just suffered our worst set back ever. Emotions are running high and we all need a breather before something gets said that can't be unsaid."

"That's very profound for a bounty hunter." Said Carek.

"There's nothing in the bounty hunter's handbook that says a hunter has to limit his study to weaponry." Kyle replied. "I'm by no means a philosopher, but I do understand human nature. We're all shaken by the loss of

two of our friends. We can either, pull together and become stronger from the experience, or we can pull ourselves apart and make the Empire stronger."

"I for one, do not wish to do anything that helps the Empire." Lazarus added. He turned to Carek and extended his hand. "Carek, I apologize."

"As do I my friend, as do I." Carek replied, first returning the handshake and then pulling his friend into a crushing bear hug.

The rebels reconciliation was interrupted by a man unknown to Carek. He was of medium height, with sandy brown hair, high cheekbones, and a friendly smile. He wore spacer's coveralls with a belt full of tools and an oversized datapad.

"It's good to see you vertical Mister Argonaut, I was beginning to wonder if you were going to sleep through the entire trip. You've been sleeping for almost two days." He said.

"Oh, I forgot that you two never had a chance to meet. Carek this is Rathbone Loegin, he's the engineer of the Hawk." Said Leland.

"From what I hear, we owe you a tremendous debt of gratitude." Said Carek shaking hands with Loegin and noting the firm grip.

"You don't owe me anything. It was the Captain's call."

"Well, I thank you anyway." Carek turned as he heard movement behind him. The master of the Carthesian Hawk and a young boy of about twelve standard years, entered the now crowded lounge. "Captain Hawk. I don't know how to thank you."

"My friends call me StJohn. And since my ship and crew are now wanted for aiding and abetting the Rebellion, I guess you and your friends are the only friends I have left."

"We've gone over this before Hawk," Leland started.

"I know, I know. You're going to set me up with a steady cargo run for your base. You'll have to forgive my lack of enthusiasm at having to run cargo for the most wanted people in the galaxy."

"Aw come on StJohn, it'll be a challenge, you're always complaining how bad business is." The young man said, he then noted Carek's attention. "Hi, I'm Andre Trelldouwegan."

"Nice to meet you Andre, I'm Carek."

"Is that really a Lightsaber?"

"Yes it is. I'm impressed that you could identify lightsaber, that's very unusual for someone so young."

"Andre is my ward," Said Hawk. "his parents were arrested for sedition. They were educators who refused to delete the history of the Jedi from their curriculum. Ernst Trelldouwegan and I went to first school together. When I heard he and his wife had been arrested, I managed to get to their home and escape with Andre, before COMPNOR could get hold of him and brainwash him. I'm no professor, but I've tried to give him the best education I could. And that included as much information on the Jedi as I could remember."

"You seem to have done a fine job." Carek replied, smiling at Andre.

"Carek? Will you show me how to use your lightsaber?" Said Andre.

"Lightsaber training is only taught after an apprentice Jedi has had the time to learn the awesome responsibility that comes with being a Jedi. As you know, the Empire has tried very hard to destroy the Jedi. My own master was killed by the Empire before completing my training. I'm afraid I can't train you, until I can find someone to train me. I'm very sorry Andre."

"I understand. You think I'm too young."

"No. In fact, you're the age that proper Jedi training is supposed to begin. I just don't have the skills necessary to train you, even if you were sensitive to the Force."

"Can you at least let me watch you use your lightsaber?"

"That you may. Next time I practice, you may watch."

"Thank you very much. I have to go now. StJohn gave me some physics homework. If I don't get it done, I won't be able to watch anything."

"Nice kid." Leland muttered after Andre left.

"You don't have to worry about Andre, Archimedes. Your opinion about children aboard starships has been noted." StJohn snapped.

"What's our ETA to the Candotti system?" Carek asked, changing the subject.

"Five days sixteen hours." Rathbone said without looking up from his datapad.

"Do you think you lost the Imperials?" Said Carek.

"We'd better have!" Leland said sharply. "We made three full changes of heading before setting course for Heracles. There's no way the Imperials know where we are, or, where we going."

"After what happened in the Kiosk system, it will be a long time before I underestimate the Empire again." Carek said, a wistful expression crossing his face.

On the bridge of the Predator, silence reigned. After spending two days in a bacta tank recovering from the wounds given to him by the rebel Jedi's lightsaber. The Dark Jedi had become an unholy terror upon returning to duty. He had executed the four TIE fighter pilots that had failed to stop the escaping rebels, as well as the TIE wing commander, and the only Stormtroopers officer to survive the rebel's deadly fire. The already hushed crewpit commands had become curt and monosyllabic, as none of the bridge crewers wanted to be the next to feel Maldamon's wrath.

Maldamon stood at the main viewport and stared at the dock workers busy repairing the Predator. He turned when he heard the turboshaft doors open. Lieutenant Rahos entered the bridge, spotted Maldamon, walked over, saluted and began his report.

Rahos didn't waste time with pleasantries. Ever since the rebels eluded him, Maldamon had dispensed with all conversation beyond the minimum required to conduct business.

"Sir. Commander Ropnar reports that the repairs will be completed in twenty three hours. The ship is otherwise ready to depart."

"The Collector?"

"She departed an hour ago."

"Prisoner status?"

"Already aboard your shuttle and awaiting transit to Rezick's Loft Detention Facility."

"I want you to accompany the shuttle and oversee the interrogations personally."

"Sir?"

"You have your orders Lieutenant. Dismissed."

"Yes sir!" Rahos turned to leave, stopping when Maldamon unexpectedly continued to speak.

"I have felt a stirring in the Force and I know that the young one is at heart of it." The Dark Jedi said grimly. "It is well for me that Lord Vader is otherwise preoccupied with the Death Star project and the interrogation of Princess Leia, or I might be the one enroute to Rezick's Loft in binders."

"The Dark Side has spared me and given me another chance to pursue this Jedi pup. Capturing him is not enough

now, I have failed twice in a row and one Jedi will not be enough to appease Lord Vader this time.

"After having seen him in action twice, I am convinced that he has a Master. He showed too much control this time, to have faced me without having had additional training. I will track him to this disturbance, capture him, and though him, his Master. I will then present both of them to Lord Vader. In this way I will atone for having twice underestimating my foe.

"Now that the Death Star has gone operational, we will soon see the end of these mongrel rebels. I want someone I can trust conducting the interrogations. Dalen failed me. If he had succeeded in gaining the trust of the rebels, they never would have escaped. You are now the only member of my web that I have any faith in anymore. I need you at Rezick's Loft. Go. Report when you arrive."

"Yes sir! I will not fail you sir!" Rahos saluted and reboarded the turboshaft.

Maldamon watched Rahos leave, then turned back to the viewport and the silent ballet of the dock workers.

The Carthesian Hawk dropped out of hyperspace at the boundary of the Candotti system. The five rebels that comprised her passenger list, could barely contain their excitement at returning home. A quick sensor scan showed them that, for a change, there weren't any surprises waiting for them.

Captain Hawk brought the ship into the docking bay smoothly and shut the ship down. "Well, for better or worse, we're here." He said to Leland who had co-piloted during the six day trip from Cypryn four.

"Don't worry StJohn, we'll get you set up with the Commander. You'll have a steady run in no time." Said Leland.

"I'll believe it when I see it."

As the rebels and the crew of the Hawk disembarked, they were met by Ra'gnayrr, the Quarren civilian administrator of base station Heracles.

"I guess the reports of your demise were a bit premature." He said, his facial tentacles wavering in the Quarren equivalent of an open mouthed disbelief.

"What are you talking about, Ra'gnayrr?" Lazarus replied, his own eyebrows arched in surprise.

"Haven't you heard? Alderaan has been destroyed. It was presumed, when there was no contact from you for so long, that you had been killed there."

Ra'gnayrr's news was like a physical blow, shocking them all deeply, but, it was Carek who seemed the most effected by the report. His face blanched completely white and his hands trembled visibly.

Kyle noticed his friend's distress. "Are you going to be alright Carek?" He said, moving closer to the stricken Jedi.

"I-I'm o-okay. It's just that I've realized the significance of a tremendous gasp in the Force that occurred two days ago. It was if a great wrongness had taken place. Now that I know what it was, it overwhelmed me for a moment."

"How was a whole planet destroyed?" Said Rathbone speaking for the first time. "Nobody has that kind of firepower."

"The Empire has deployed a massive new battlestation called the Death Star." Ra'gnayrr replied. "It apparently has more than enough."

"Where is Commander Challis?" Asked Leland. "I've got someone she needs to meet."

"The Alliance is in great disarray. She and the others have all fled, I don't know where."

"I knew a steady run was too good to be true." Lamented StJohn.

"Why no forwarding address?" Said Kyle.

"You can't be forced to tell what you don't know. Besides, as I mentioned earlier, we thought you were dead. Which leads to a question of my own. Where have you been for the last three weeks?"

"I'll field that one." Said Carek. He quickly related the events that the rebels had had to endure during their absence, and ended with the introduction of the crew of the Hawk.

"It's very nice to meet all of you. I am sorry that I can not offer you the cargo run that you desired." Said Ra'gnayrr.

"You don't need to apologize, I didn't expect it to happen." StJohn replied dejectedly.

"I think the biggest question before us, is what do we do now?" Said Leland.

"I have a suggestion, but considering how my last suggestion went, you may not like it." Said Carek.

"We don't have enough choices for you to be cryptic Carek. What have you got?" Replied Lazarus.

Carek pulled a data disk out of his pocket. "Commander Challis gave me this prior to our departure to Tatooine.

She said she had been Farseeing with the Force to foretell what might be."

"What might be?" Said Lazarus.

"The future is not set until it happens. Trying to accurately judge the future is unreliable at best."

"And you want us to rely on this?" Lazarus insisted.

"I said up front that you might not like it. She said the disk holds coordinates for an area of disturbance in the Force."

"If it's a disturbance, why do you want to go there?" Leland added.

"Challis seemed to think it was important, it is also the only place I can come up with for us to start looking for her."

"There's something you've all overlooked." Said Roberts. "How are we going to get there? We used all our credits getting here?"

"You don't have to worry about transportation, or credits. I'll take you at no charge." Said StJohn, his jaw set in a firm line.

"You don't have to do that StJohn. You've fulfilled your obligation already." Said Carek.

"No I haven't. At least not in the big picture I haven't. I have always steered us clear of the Rebellion, figuring it was none of our business. But, Alderaan changes everything. I know I speak of Andre and Rathbone as well. The Emperor has finally gone too far." He looked to each of the rebels. "Which one of you is the senior officer?"

Carek started. "I hadn't thought about it, but with Rex gone. I am."

"Well then Mister Argonaut, I formally request to join the Alliance against the Empire. I further offer you the service of the Carthesian Hawk." StJohn said extending his hand.

At a loss of words, Carek decided on the simplest answer. "Welcome to the Rebel Alliance." He replied as he clasping StJohn's hand in his own.

"The first thing we have to decide is, do we have any choices other than Carek's mystery disk." Said Lazarus.

After two hours of intense debate it was decided that the datadisk was the most logical starting place. The debate also gave Ra'gnayrr's support staff time to refuel and restock the Hawk.

As soon as their course had been decided, the eight rebels reboarded the Hawk.

When all was in readiness, StJohn began inputting the information on the disk into the Hawk's navcomputer. He immediately ran into trouble. After four tries, he gave up in disgust. "Are you sure the data on this disk good? The navcomputer won't take these coordinates."

"Can you display the data on the disk?" Said Carek, trading places with StJohn at the astrogation station.

"Sure."

Carek stared intently at the jumbled readout, then closed his eyes. After a few moments he smiled. "StJohn, I'm going to have to ask you to trust me." He said, his expression thoughtful.

"I've already offered you my ship, what else could you possibly want?"

"Go ahead and get us undocked. I'll have to do the astrogation."

"This will probably be the only time you ever hear me say this, but you're the boss."

Once clear of the station, Carek closed his eyes and began entering commands into the navcomputer.

"How does he do that with his eyes closed?" StJohn said staring unbelievably.

"I stopped trying to figure out how he does stuff like that a long time ago." Laughed Leland. "I don't really believe in this Force he's always talking about, but he's got to be using something to succeed in the stunts he pulls."

Carek sat in silence for several minutes, then he opened his eyes and said. "Now."

StJohn looked at Leland uncomprehendingly.

Leland understood what his friend wanted and casually he reached over and activated the hyperdrives.

The Hawk leapt into hyperspace with the familiar burst of starlines. There was a moment, or two of normality, then the ship began to shake. StJohn and Leland each ran through their checklists to see what had happened.

"Something's wrong. We're going too fast!" StJohn exclaimed. "I'm going to abort the jump." He threw a look at Carek that could melt reactor plating. "What have you done to my ship?"

"I know this is new to you, however, you have to trust in the Force. I don't exactly know what's happening, but I do know we're not in any danger. There aren't any alarms on the status board and I know Commander Challis would not steer us wrong."

StJohn looked closely at the indicators and could not dispute that fact. The only thing that was out of place was the reading on the hyperspace velocity indicator, which was indicating that the Hawk was moving through hyperspace at fifteen times her rated maximum. Yet, there was no sign of engine strain, or reactor overload. Somehow, the ship was violating the laws of physics.

"I don't like this, I don't like this at all."

"The Force is more powerful than you can know. We will be okay."

"I'll hold you to that Jedi!"

"I expected you to. I'm absolutely certain that I plotted our course correctly, even if I don't know our destination. All we can do now is wait."

The Carthesian Hawk soared through hyperspace, blithely unaware that she was doing the impossible. In fact, she continued to accelerate right up to the point that she dropped back into realspace fourteen hours later.

StJohn, Leland, Carek, and Lazarus were in the cockpit when the Hawk exited hyperspace. There was a collective gasp as first, the reentry wasn't accompanied with the comforting burst of starlines, then, there was the shock of seeing the reddish colored mist outside, instead of the familiar black starscape.

"Carek. Where are we?" Leland finally managed to say, after a long pause.

Carek unbuckled his safety harness and stood up, clearly as stunned as the others. "I don't know!"

After the initial shock wore off, his years as a tramp freighter captain took over. StJohn began issuing orders to prepare the ship for a jump back to Heracles. After he was certain that the ship was ready,

he stood up and moved over to the astrogation station.

"You'll excuse me if I prefer to plot our return course myself." He said, a little sharper than usual.

"Not at all StJohn. In fact I'll go to the back so you'll have more room to work."

"Thank you."

Carek had only taken three steps, when he heard StJohn begin a long string of inventive curses.

"What's wrong?" Leland said, reaching the livid pilot before Carek.

"The thrice flamed navcomputer has been erased!" StJohn fumed.

"Excuse me?" Leland replied.

"The galactographic database is gone! And since there are no stars outside to plot our current location, we have no way to figure where we are. If this is where your Commander Challis has gone, we'll have to run into her to find her."

StJohn stood up and shook his head in disgust. "Trust in the Force he says. If Ernst Trellidouwigan didn't swear by the Force of yours, I would have you spaced!"

"Now look here StJohn..." Leland began.

"It's alright Leland. I think StJohn has a right to be upset." Said Carek, trying to prevent a major confrontation.

StJohn spun around to face Carek.

"Upset! You don't know the half of it. You want to explain what we're going to do now?"

"I don't want to sound facetious, but I guess we're going to have to try the 'run into her to find her' plan. We should start a concentric active sensor search."

"As you have left us with no other choice, I agree."

"What's the...Burning comets! Where are we?" Rathbone said as he entered the cockpit and had noticed the red nothingness outside.

"We were just on our way to the lounge to explain the situation. Follow me." StJohn replied.

Once the rebels were together, Carek and StJohn briefed them on what they knew and the plan to search the mist for Commander Challis. Short on alternatives, the rebels agreed that Carek's plan offered them the best chance of success.

It turned out that their search lasted less than six hours.

All during the search, StJohn had been steadily fuming at the turn of events that had lead to their current situation. His steady stream of curses showed no sign of losing steam, until Leland yelped from his post on the sensors and began feeding power to the ship's sublight drive.

"What?" StJohn exclaimed when he saw the sensor read out. "How in all the moons of Nal Hutta did an Imperial customs frigate get out here?" StJohn exclaimed when he saw the sensor read out.

"I have no idea I..." Leland began and changed in mid-sentence.

"Blast it all, they've seen us!" He toggled the intercom.

"Kyle man the turret. We've got unwanted company. Everybody else strap yourselves in, it's going to get rough."

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?" StJohn thundered, still too stunned to have moved from beside the sensor display. "We can't outrun a customs frigate, or have you forgotten that they were built specifically to chase down and destroy stock light freighters?"

"You better sit down, shut up and fly!" Leland snarled back, never taking his eyes from the sensor read outs. "We've done this before."

"Not on my ship you haven't! We don't stand a..."

WHAM! WHAM! WHAM! WHAM!

The Carthesian Hawk had tried her best, but she simply wasn't the Wandering Bantha. The salvo of lasers slammed the Hawk sideways and into a violent spin. Leland, and StJohn, who had heeded Leland's advice to sit down, managed to cancel the spin. However, the frigate had succeeded in crippling the Hawk's sublight drives. The rebels watched helplessly as the frigate rapidly closed.

"Are all rebels insane?" StJohn raged in frustration. "First, that half-baked Jedi dumps us in the middle of nowhere, and now you think you're Ridge 'Never Die' Aramnon or something! I might have been able to talk to them. Now we're in it for sure."

"Unidentified freighter, standby to be boarded. Any further resistance will result in your destruction!" The Comm panel offered uninvited.

"Aramnon is only a holovid myth and you know it!" Leland spat, completely ignoring the Comm panel. "It's not my fault this tub maneuvers like a ruptured garbage scow!"

"HOW DARE YOU INSULT MY SHIP!" StJohn replied, his eyes flashing in pure, undistilled fury.

"I'm glad to see you're both okay." Said Carek from the cockpit entrance.

"We're just fabulous!" Snapped StJohn.

"Save that head of steam you've built up for the Imperials StJohn. We've only got thirty seconds to prepare for boarding."

"Prepare what? A nice bottle of fuzzyglug on ice?"

Leland drew his blaster and checked the charge.

"That's not what he means." He said sharing a grim glance with Carek.

StJohn's had a sudden insight into what the rebels had planned and his jaw dropped open before he could stop himself. "You can't be serious."

"Welcome to the real Rebel Alliance." Said Leland.

When StJohn reached the main airlock he was still in a daze. There was a heavy thump as the docking ring engaged.

He found Kyle, Lazarus and Roberts already under cover, blasters at ready. The airlock begin to cycle and he watched in total fascination as Leland and Carek took up positions on opposite sides of the airlock. Then he noticed Andre and Rathbone hovering to one side. Andre's eyes wide with awe as he watched the rebels prepare to defy Imperial authority.

"They're going to do it. They're actually going to fight." StJohn thought, half flushed with excitement, half weakened by fear. He noticed Rathbone waving frantically to get his attention. StJohn glanced at the airlock's timer and used the remaining few seconds to dash over to his engineer.

"Captain, these lunatics are going to get us all killed." Rathbone whispered, his eyes glued to the timer.

"I know Rath. But, I guess when you're a member of a rebellion, it's kind of expected that you fight the representatives of the government that you're rebelling against."

Rathbone's reply was cut off by the airlock opening.

"In the name of the Emperor. You're under..." The customs officer never finished, as both he and his companion were cut down by a brief hail of fire. Leland and Carek rolled out from behind their cover and were in the airlock before the two Imperials had hit the floor.

"Leland. Kyle. Roberts. You secure the bridge." Barked Carek. "Lazarus. Rathbone. Follow me, we'll take engineering. StJohn. Andre. Stand fast. Guard our backs and this airlock."

Rathbone hesitated, his eyes darting from StJohn, to Carek, to the bodies, and back to StJohn.

"Go Rath, its our only chance now. We're in this for the full measure."

"Right."

Carek turned right as he exited the airlock and headed aftwards, Roberts following close behind. Rathbone shrugged and ran to bring up the rear.

On reaching the hatch that led to engineering, Carek signaled for his friends to halt.

"I'll go first." Carek said tersely. "You two use the frame of the hatch for cover. If they don't surrender, don't hesitate, shoot."

On hearing that last part, Rathbone looked up a found Carek staring directly at him. "I know what to do. You don't have to treat me like a child."

"Sorry Rathbone, I'm just as tense as you are."

"You wouldn't know it to look at you."

"This never gets easy Rath." Carek said with a quiet intensity that Rathbone has never seen. "And if it does, you are in deep trouble. Okay let's do this."

Carek tightened his grip on his lightsaber and slapped the control that opened the hatch. Leaping though as the hatch opened Carek landed directly in the middle of the small elevated platform used by the engineering crew.

"In the name of the Rebel Alliance you are all under arrest!" Barked Carek stealing a page from the now deceased customs officers.

Five of the Imperials recognized a hopeless situation and started to raise their hands. However, the sixth Imperial, Carida born and bred would not accept defeat. As he drew his blaster, Rathbone and Lazarus opened fire. The remaining Imperials thought, with good cause, that they were being summarily executed, decided to die fighting and drew their weapons.

Carek, caught in the middle of the sudden crossfire, found himself in a desperate fight for survival. Closest of the Rebels and with the poorest cover, he was the target of choice. With his initial attack, he slashed through two Imperials and saw Lazarus drop another before they could finish drawing their weapons.

Carek's attack turned him away from the Carida Imperial and blocked Lazarus' line of sight, giving the Imperial time to draw his blaster.

"Carek behind you!" Lazarus shouted as he blasted a second Imperial.

Carek pivoted instantly, but it was too late. Carek could already see the blaster bolt heading for him. He tried to parry the bolt, but he was slightly off balance from his pivot and could not get the blade up in time.

"Only one thing left to do." He thought and reached deep down into the Force. He imagined the bolt as just an intense form of sunlight, he waved his hand and easily batted the bolt away. Both the Imperial and Carek stood opened mouthed, dumbfounded by what they had just witnessed, giving Lazarus time to clear his field of fire and stun the Imperial.

"If I hadn't seen it, I wouldn't have believed it. How in all the flaming suns did you do that?" Said an incredulous Rathbone. "That's just not possible."

"Er...it actually was a first for me too." Carek replied slowly. "I... uh... well it was a variation on something I have done before. We should check on the others." He said moving absently for the bridge.

"Come on Carek. What gives?" Added Lazarus. "I haven't even seen that trick before. Are you telling me you can now block blaster fire at will?"

The rebels moved quickly through the frigate, finding the violent evidence of their fellow rebels passage in the form of crumpled bodies in Imperial uniforms.

"N-no Laz I can't. The ability to block excess energy is a basic Jedi skill, but normally it's only used to reduce the effect of sunlight and that sort of thing." Carek seemed to lose his train of thought for a moment. "I had to reach very deep into the Force to shield myself. It was a selfish and unworthy use of the Force."

"Are you nuts?" Lazarus exclaimed. "You mean it would have been better to have taken a bolt straight to the chest? I'd give just about anything to be able to protect myself like that"

"It's hard to explain. the Force is supposed to be used to advance others. I was the only one to benefit from my actions, so it was selfish. I don't expect you to understand-"

"Did you guys get lost?" Leland called from the hatch leading to the bridge.

Thankful for the interruption, Carek changed the subject. "How are the others?"

"Kyle and Roberts are locking the four survivors in their own brig. You know what a wiz with a blaster those two are. The crewers never stood a chance. I think it was the helmsman that got off that shot." He chuckled and pointed to a blaster burn on the overhead above main entrance to the bridge.

"Great news." Carek grabbed his comlink. "StJohn? You and Andre can join us on the bridge. We've got to decide what we will do next."

The crew from the Hawk entered the bridge and found most of the boarding party standing around Roberts, who was checking the ship's log.

"Well according to this," He said after several tense minutes. "this is the Imperial Customs frigate Collector and they were sent here ten days ago were told to look for a specific energy pattern. They'd been searching for a week when they spotted us." He scrolled to the next log entry, abruptly gasped, then jumped up and let out a vile oath in Huttese. "They are supposed to rendezvous with the Predator in three days!"

Leland rolled his eyes. "Don't they ever give up? We're outside of known space and they're still after us."

"No time for whys, the question is what are we going to do?" Kyle asked as he pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to shake off the fatigue he suddenly felt.

"I don't know about what the rest of you are going to do." Rathbone replied as he turned to leave the bridge. "But at least it looks like I have enough time to get the Hawk operational again."

"Wait a minute Rath." Carek snapped. "Since you're the one that pointed it out, we have time to make a plan. Is there anything else in the log Roberts?"

"No. The last entry is 'We have detected a freighter.'"

Leland smacked his forehead. "Holy hopping horndogs! How stupid can I be? I've got a great idea! We can use this ship to reprogram our galactographic database!" He moved quickly to the navigator's station and activated the navicomputer. "Damn it. Damn it. DAMN IT!!!"

"Let me guess..." Carek started.

"...their computer is blank too" Leland finished.

"Moving to sector one-oh-four" Said an obviously weary Lazarus.

"Oh joy. I'm sure this will be just as exciting as the last hundred and three sectors." Replied an obviously even wearier Leland.

"I'm up for suggestions flyboy." It's been two days of this and I'm about fed up with the red mist too."

"Don't you think if I could think of one, I would have by now? This blind charting is about to push me over the edge."

"It's getting to the whole crew." Kyle added from the entrance to the Collector's bridge. "I think even Carek is starting to get frustrated."

Kyle walked to one of the view ports and stared at the blank red void in front of him.

"If it would change I guess it wouldn't be so bad."

"Kyle would you spell me at the helm?" Asked Leland. "I need to hit the fresher and I'm sure you can handle the stressful maneuvering we're doing."

"It just frosts you to no end that after capturing this thing, we haven't had a chance to fight something with it, doesn't it?" Chuckled Lazarus.

"Yes it does!" Leland shot back. "Look the whole idea when we decided to leave the Carthesian Hawk hitched to the docking ring and mount our concentric search from here in the frigate, that the better sensor's would get us out of

here faster, so we could turn this thing over to the rebellion."

"With you as captain no doubt." Lazarus added, barely able to contain his laughter at how red Leland's face got.

"Yes with me as captain!" Leland fumed. "I'm the best qualified. Look at it this way, it's either use this ship which can fight, or wallow around in the 'Hawk, which has already proved herself to be no combatant?"

Lazarus raised his hands in mock surrender. "I yield. I yield. I was only kidding Leland."

"I know Laz, but it's so infuriating to finally have a ship that we can really stick it to the Empire with and not be able to use it."

Before Lazarus could answer, the sensor panel emitted a soft beep. Everyone was so stunned, that no one moved for so long that the sensor panel beep again louder. This time the three rebels almost knocked each other over moving to read the display.

"I don't believe it we actually found it!" Leland exclaimed as he triple checked the read outs to make sure he they had really found the correct energy pattern.

Kyle moved back to the Collector's viewport and pointed off the port bow. "I see it! It almost looks like a Denarian Thundercloud."

Lazarus joined Kyle, frowning as he peered into the ever-present red mist. "Kyle my friend you have amazing vision. Even looking where you are looking I can only just see that thing. What do you think it is?"

"I don't know. I only hope it will get us out of here."

"All hands, this is the bridge." Leland spoke excitedly into the shipwide intercom. "We have found the energy pattern. I suggest the rest of you get up here so we can figure out what to do next."

"Hey look it's moving!" Lazarus shouted.

Carek was halfway to the bridge when he felt a powerful shiver in the Force. He had to catch himself as the tremor knocked him off his stride.

"Flaming stars and comets th-that g-got my attention." He stammered and shook his head. "It was strong, but it doesn't seem like a threat." He thought as he tried to analyze the experience. He hadn't really come to a conclusion when what seemed like a cohesive portion of the Void's red mist entered the hull. The mist coalesced for a moment and there was now a man-sized hole in the outer hull of the ship.

"YIPE" He exclaimed and leapt back from the bulkhead he was leaning against, his right hand was still flailing behind him for the control that would seal the corridor from the breach, when it dawned on him that the ship wasn't decompressing.

"Now there's something you don't see every day."

Puzzled he moved closer to the breach. He closed his eyes and opened himself to the Force. He immediately sensed the approach of several of his comrades, but caught in the grip of this almost physical manifestation of the Force, he ignored them and stepped forward into the mist.

"Such power!" Carek gasped. "I've never felt a place so strong in the Force. I can sense others so easily here, which is good because I otherwise can't see or feel anything."

He suddenly noticed he wasn't alone. He saw there were thousands of tiny lights that flitted freely throughout the cloud. He reached out to try and contact the lights as he floated in this non-corporeal realm, but try as he might, the ethereal lights ignored him.

Resigned to not being able to communicate with the mysterious lights, Carek began focusing on his surrounding. He could clearly sense that Roberts; Lazarus; and Andre had followed him into the cloud, and that they were beginning to panic from sensory deprivation; all except for Andre.

"Andre actually seems more fascinated than distressed." He thought as he reached out to reassure his friends. Carek concentrated on his young friend and recoiled thunderstruck. "Sweet merciful bantha droppings. Andre has got Force potential!"

Astounded by this revelation, Carek fell silent and floated for weeks, days, years, hours, or millennia in that place without time. There was no way of knowing how long it had been before one of the lights approached and resolved itself into a kindly-looking old man.

"I was once known as Obi-wan Kenobi." Said the man.

"General Kenobi!" Blurted Carek. "Jedi knight and hero of the clone wars? Where are we and what do you mean 'Was known,' sir?"

"This place is for those of the light that have crossed over from mortal form and it is not for the living." Obi-wan explained. "It is not your yet your destiny to be in this place. Go and do not return until it's your proper time. Return to your friends that need you, for evil has come here and it must be expunged."

There was a sudden sensation of motion and the drifters found themselves aboard the Carthesian Hawk.

"What was that place Carek?" An awestruck Andre whispered once regular space/time reasserted itself.

Carek simply looked at Andre, his left eyebrow arched, his expression unreadable.

"We're drifting." Shouted Lazarus as he leapt to his feet.

"Drifting on what?" Roberts replied slowly as he contented himself by simply sitting up. "Man, I never knew how wonderful gravity was until I spent-" His voice trailed off as he shook his chronometer. "This thing can't be right."

"Never mind what time it is, we're on the 'Hawk and it looks like the other are in trouble." Rathbone replied from the starboard viewport.

"What kind of trouble?" Asked Roberts rolling to his feet and joining the engineer at the viewport. His jaw dropping open once he saw for himself.

Despite the omnipresent red mist, Roberts could see the Collector flying full evasive from a dozen TIE fighters. Further back the Predator loomed out of the mist, visible only due to the mass of explosions wracking the entire length of her hull.

"I'll take engineering." Lazarus gasped and raced aft.

"I'll pilot." Roberts responded, racing forward.

"Strap in Andre." Said Carek sharply.

"But Carek I can help."

"Do it!"

The young would-be rebel stood his ground for a moment, then lowered his head. "Yes sir." As he strapped in muttering. "I never get to have any of the real fun."

Carek raced forward and jumped in the co-pilot's seat. "What have we got Roberts?"

"Which do you want? The bad news or the bad news?"

"Roberts we don't have time for you to be coy."

"When we first got here, the Collector was running from a dozen TIE fighters. In the time it took us to get strapped in, the Predator launched its second squadron. The Collector is holding it's own only because the Predator seems to self destructing."

"What in the moons of Nal Hutta could be causing that? Leland's good, but he's not good enough to shoot up a Victory class star destroyer with just a customs frigate."

"Let's ask." Said Roberts as he punched the comm unit. "Hawk to Collector. Hawk to Collector."

Leland's withering reply scored though the comm unit's speakers in a steady, creative stream of curses in fourteen languages.

"Look!" Carek interrupted before Roberts could reply.

Outside the view port the tortured Predator suddenly lurched to a halt, rolled to starboard, and vanished in a brilliant explosion that caused the view ports to go completely opaque from the actinic glare. Only three TIE fighters survived the destruction of their mother ship and they were easily picked off by Collector.

"WOW!" Was all Roberts could say.

"Let's head for the Collector. Hopefully Leland's had a chance to cool off." Said Carek.

"I don't know how much of what he said earlier you understood, but you'll have to excuse me if I ask you to board the Collector first."

"I guess it's just going to have to be one of those sacrifices I have to make on my road to becoming a Jedi." Carek grinned sheepishly.

The two ships docked quickly and true to his word, Carek was the first one through the docking ring. StJohn, Kyle, Rathbone, and Leland met them at the ring. Leland had his fists on his hips and his eyes blazed with fire.

"And just where in the south side of Kashyyyk did you all run off to? AND HOW?" Leland fumed.

"As to how, I'm not too clear on that one. Short answer is that cloud breeched the hull and we just stepped through the breach." Carek faltered at this point. "Um... er... as to where, well that's even less clear. We... um... um... were one with the Force."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"How about you tell me what happened to you. Maybe by the time you've finished I'll have an answer."

"What happened to us? Well after finding four of our crew missing, we stayed on station and wrung the sensors dry trying to figure out what happened to you. You see we were so concerned about you guys, we ended up losing track of time. We realized that when we were hailed by the Predator. We prepared to fight, but..." He smacked his forehead. WITH HALF OUR CREW MISSING WE WERE TOO SHORT HANDED TO FIGHT!"

"Uh maybe I should tell the rest of it Leland." Said Kyle stepping between Leland and Carek. "We didn't have enough people to man both ships and well you know how attached to the Collector Leland is, so we cut the Hawk loose and ran for it. Rathbone ran engineering, Leland and

StJohn took the bridge, and I manned a turret. Leland punched it and we were off to the races."

"The Predator didn't have the speed to keep up with us and since the Imperials didn't have an idea what was going on, they hailed us again." Added StJohn speaking for the first time.

"You know the typical 'heave to and prepare to be boarded' stuff, which was pretty normal. What about spun me for the final jump was that it was Maldamon that hailed us." Leland joined in, in a far more restrained tone.

"Maldamon!" Carek hissed. "You mean I didn't kill him?"

"Guess not." Said Leland. "I can tell you I about jumped out of my skin when his face showed up on the screen."

"Okay so far, but what happened to the Predator? Asked Roberts. "You said you only had one turret manned and were running away. What took it out?"

The four men that did not enter the cloud shook their heads as one.

"We don't know." Kyle said very softly. "I was in the best position to see from the aft dorsal turret and I still don't know what happened. One minute I'm laying down suppressive fire, more to make me feel better than for all the effect it was having, and the next minute explosions started all over the ship. Maybe two seconds later you hailed us."

"Yeah, right after Kyle told us about the explosions, you guys called." Said StJohn.

"And speaking of you guys, let's get back to where you guys went to and how you ended up on the Hawk. Carek?" Leland stared pointedly at the would-be Jedi.

"Like I said Leland, somehow we stepped into the Force and became one with it. That cloud was the most powerful manifestation of the Force I've ever encountered."

"You may have become 'one with the Force' Carek." Roberts interrupted. "All I know was I floated in total nothingness for what my chronometer says was a year."

"A year! That can't be right. You were only gone for about eighteen hours." Said StJohn.

"Look at your chrono Carek." Roberts replied, his arms crossed, his jaw set.

"It says he's right."

"Mine does too." Lazarus added looking at his timepiece as if it had turned unnoticed into a Rodian Pit Viper.

"Only one way to know for sure." StJohn offered. "The med bay scanners can tell us who is right."

"Let's do it." Agreed Carek.

"That thing needs to be recalibrated." Lazarus said with finality.

"We've checked it six times Laz." An exasperated Rathbone replied. "There's no mistake. You have all aged a full year."

Lazarus scratched his head. "I know what the scanner says, but it just doesn't seem possible."

"Well going by all the things we've seen in the week, this is actually pretty tame." Roberts added trying to be philosophical. He turned to face Carek. "Do you have any answers?"

"I wish I had an answer for you." Carek replied after a long pause. "I just wish Master Havsoltek would just explain it to you. I... I..."

"What's wrong Carek?" Said Lazarus jumping down from the sick bed.

"What do you mean?" Leland started, then stopped cold when he saw how pale Carek had gone."

"Th-th-th-that's n-n-not possible!" Carek gasped.

"What's not possible?" Demanded StJohn. "I'm getting damned tired of hearing 'That's not possible.' Half the things I've seen since we jumped from basestation Heracles have been impossible. What's so special this time?"

Carek swallowed hard and took several deep breaths before being able to speak.

"I..." His voice cracked and he had to try again.

"I saw my Master in that cloud."

"Didn't you say the Empire killed him?" Lazarus asked quietly.

"Yes." Carek answered even quieter.

"Didn't you say the Force shows you glimpses of the future? Isn't it possible it showed you a glimpse of the past?" Asked Kyle.

"No you don't understand." Carek answered his voice finally steady. "I didn't just see him. I trained with him again. Just like on Chandlot before... well, before they killed him."

"Oh please." Rathbone rolled his eyes. "You're trying to tell me you've been communing with a dead guy for a year?" He turned sharply and said over his shoulder as he departed. "I've heard enough. I'm going back to engineering and do something constructive."

"Don't pay him any attention Carek." Kyle spat. "He hasn't known you as long as we have. He hasn't seen the things we've seen." He motioned for his friend to continue.

Carek's face frowned as he tried to pull back the wispy tendrils into actual memories. "I don't know how I could have forgotten seeing Master Havsoltek. He taught me..." Carek blanched white as a ghost again.

"Holy Hopping horndogs Carek get to the point." Leland snapped. "You're acting like a Tenellian Courtesan on her first night in a Hutt's palace."

Carek's eyes flashed for a second before he put Leland's comment's out of his mind.

"He taught me the final stage of Jedi training."

"And what does that mean? You're a Jedi Knight now?" Leland said impatiently.

"Jedi training covers three distinct phases." Carek continued unfazed now by Leland's sarcasm. "In the first phase you learn how to control how the Force interacts with your own body. Master Havsoltek taught me this back on Chandlot. The second phase teaches the student how to sense the Force and how it interacts with all life. Commander Challis taught me this at basestation Heracles."

"I'm with you so far and this third part?" Asked Lazarus.

"The third phase teaches the student how to actually alter how the Force interacts with others."

"Really?" Said Leland his voice dripping with sarcasm. "I'm about ready to join Rathbone in engineering. What sort of proof do you have of this new talent of yours?"

Carek closed his eyes and concentrated on Leland's blaster. "Calm now. Find your focus or you're going to look like an idiot." He thought. Then slowly Leland's left his holster.

"Wha-?" Leland grabbed for his floating weapon.

Carek reached out and caught the weapon and joined the rest of his beaming companions. All beaming that is, except for Leland, whose mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water.

"Y-Y-You never... well... I... Well how about that."

They all laughed at Leland's embarrassment until he joined in, releasing the pent up tension that none of them were even willing to admit was even present.

Leland walked over and slapped Carek on the back.

"Okay my friend. What do we do next?"

"I met a-another Jedi Knight in the cloud."

"Who was this guy? Darth Vader's uncle?" StJohn chuckled.

Carek was about to snap back when he saw StJohn's smile. "Er... No. His name was Obi-Wan Kenobi and he was a great leader during the Clone Wars. However, that's not important for the moment. Who he was isn't as important as what he said."

"And that was?" Leland quipped his head canted in mocking inquiry as Carek returned his blaster.

"He said we don't belong here and we had to leave."

"Well there's a newnet flash. That's what we've been trying to do since we got here." Lazarus responded sardonically. "And just how are we going to do this.?"

"Don't worry. Obi-Wan told me the way." Carek then turned for the bridge. "Secure the Hawk. We're going back to basestation Heracles."

"Why there?" StJohn asked as he joined in along side Carek.

"Ra'gnayrr the base administrator is a friend of ours and is the only person I know that would allow an obviously hot Imperial ship to dock and make repairs without asking questions.

"Good enough for me."

Once the rebels were all strapped down, Carek moved to the navcomputer. He placed his hands lightly on the keyboard and let the Force guide his hands across the keys.

StJohn leaned over and whispered to Leland. "You do know it was that trick that got us into this mess. Are you sure we should trust him again?"

"He's changed somehow. I can't quite put my finger on it, but yes I do trust him."

Before StJohn could reply the ship leapt into hyperspace. StJohn let out a breath, that he hadn't realized he was holding. He slowly opened his eyes, that he hadn't realized he had closed and beheld the mottled effect of a ship in hyperdrive.

Carek smiled with a satisfaction he had never known before. A cheer went up around the bridge as he closed his eyes and thought. "Master Havsoltek, I am by no means a Jedi Knight, but now that you have given me the means, I will make you proud sir. I will make you proud."

Chapter Eight

"I know you gentlebeings are very busy, but may I have a moment of your time?" Asked Ra'gnayrr from the brige entrance of the Rex's Revenge.

Leland and StJohn looked up wearily from the astrogation computer and sighed simultaneously. "Sure we could use a break." StJohn answered. "This reprogramming is more tedious than I remember. It's been years since I've had to cold program a galactographic database."

Leland stood and stretched, then noticed that Ra'gnayrr wasn't alone. "Who's your friend?"

Ra'gnayrr stepped aside to let a golden furred Wookiee onto the bridge. "The closest a human can get to his name is Halasa and he is why I needed to speak to you. You'll need to call the others of your group."

"Sure Ra'gnayrr." StJohn replied his eyebrow raised in an unanswered question.

If the Quarren noticed StJohn's expression, he ignored it and waited for the rest of the crew of newly renamed captured imperial customs frigate to assemble on the now crowded bridge.

"I'd like you to meet Halasa." "As you all know, I have a soft spot for lost causes." He said indicated his silent companion his tentacles curling in the Quarren equivalent of a smile. "Halasa escaped from a rather stupid slaver and has been taking refuge here at Heracles. He would like to join you on your quest to find the Rebel Alliance."

The eight would-be rebels looked from one another not quite sure how to respond. Before the silence could become awkward, Carek spoke up. "Does anyone speak Wookiee?"

"I know a bit." Replied StJohn.

"Me too." Rathbone added.

"I'm more than willing to act as interpreter." Said Ra'gnayrr.

"I'm sure you can Ra'gnayrr, but I'm thinking of what will we do after you're no longer available." Said Carek turning to face his comrades. "I'm fairly sure you all know what the Empire thinks of aliens and what the Empire is doing on Kashyyyk. I will put it to a simple vote, but I find it hard to believe any self respecting Wookiee would be an Imperial spy."

Halasa snarled at this, startling everyone.

"He said he's not a spy." Ra'gnayrr answered.

StJohn chuckled. "Er... he said it a little more colorfully than that, but that would be the polite translation."

The vote was unanimous to let Haslasa join team Bantha. On seeing that the rest of the group felt the same as he did, Carek walked over to offer his hand to Halasa. "Welcome to our group Halasa, we look forward working with you."

Halasa let loose a long stream of growl in response and Carek turned to Ra'gnayrr.

"He asked 'When do we start breaking Imperial skulls?'"

Lazarus smiled. "I like the way this guy thinks."

"I have one more bit of information that Halasa asked me not to mention until you made your decision. As he wanted to be accepted on his own, rather than the simple expediency of having a skill you happen to need at the moment." Said Ra'gnayrr.

"Spill it squid face." Laughed Leland.

Ra'gnayrr shook his head in obvious delight. "Mister Archimedes let it never be said you don't know how to get to the point. Halasa was a student at the University of Kashyyyk before the Empire enslaved his world. He majored in astrophysics and cosmology and would be the perfect person to reprogram your navicomputer." "Thank the Great Diety!" StJohn shouted. "When can you start?"

A short grunt and Halasa moved to the navigation console.

"Even I understood that one." Said Leland as he moved out of the way. "Ra'gnayrr I don't know how to thank you."

"Find your friends and kill the Emperor is thanks enough."

"We're working on it friend, we're working on it."

"Ready to undock." Said Leland from the helm of Rex's Revenge.

"Clear skies and good hunting." Ra'gnayrr replied from the control station of Heracles.

"Thank you again Heracles, one day we'll actually be able to pay you back for all your assistance." Carek replied.

"We'll be here."

"Okay where to next?" Asked Leland from the helm of Rex's Revenge.

"Same place we always go for information. Tatooine and Dag Caltare." Said Carek. "He's always had the straight story."

A short growl from Halasa at the Navigation console let the rest of the bridge crew know the course was plotted and layed in. The ship jumped to Hyperspace and her crew finally had the luxury of relaxing. The laborious reprogamming of the navigation computer had taken four long days and this was the first full test of the system.

A long sigh drew Carek's attention and he walked over to it's source. Hawk. "We'll get her back, don't you worry." He said slapping StJohn on the back.

"I wish I had your confidence."

"I know its tough on a captain to be away from her ship, but once we hook back up with the Rebellion, we'll need her."

StJohn ran his hand through his hair and sighed again. "I'll take your word on that on Carek."

"If we had more..."

"I know the argument Carek. We don't have enough people to man both ships and this frigate is 'worth more and the Hawk is no combat vessel.' I was there for the whole debate and even though I accept the argument, I still don't like having my ship out of my control."

"Okay StJohn, I'll let it be. However, you'll see I'm right. I KNOW we're going to see her again."

"I'm never going to get used to those Force."

Carek grinned before he answered. "It's taken me my whole live to feel comfortable with them, so I don't expect you to be ready yet."

"Thank you for that reassurance." StJohn replied sarcastically.

The trip to Tatooine passed quickly and rather than have to bluff their way past the small Imperial garrison, the rebels used the cover of a sand storm to approach Mos Eisley undetected. Landing at night in a remote area to minimize chances of discover, Kyle and Carek hiked into the infamous space port.

"This is impossible!" Dag Caltare exclaimed before hugging both of his dust covered friends. "You were on Alderaan dying."

"Well it was a close run thing, but dead we are not my friend." Carek replied and then moved to a darker corner of the cantina. "Once again, we need your help Dag."

"Have it you have. What are you needing?"

"Directions." Said Kyle in his typical to the point way.

Dag's lekku twitched at this. "To where?"

"As embarrassing as this sounds, we've lost contact with the rebellion. It seems you aren't the only ones that thought we were dead. When they left Heracles, they didn't leave directions on how to find them."

"Don't know." Dag shook his head sadly. "Where those of Heracles are to be going I was not informed. However, I am knowing an Alliance corvette will be making a visit to Dantoonie in..." He looked at his chronometer and did some mental calculations. "Fifteen hours."

"Fifteen hours!" Both Carek and Kyle exclaimed.

"We'll never make it." Said Kyle.

"We don't have a choice, some how we'll have to get there." Carek said grimly and turned to the Twi'lek. "Thank you once again Dag, as you know we've got to get moving."

"Luck to you my friends."

"May the Force be with you." Said Carek quietly.

The two men raced back to the Rex's Revenge and quickly briefed their friends. Leland, Halasa, and StJohn almost knocked each other over darting to the navigation computer.

"It can't be done." Said StJohn gloomily.

"If you can't help get out the way!" Leland snapped. "Halasa?"

A series of non committal growls.

"Then let's get working. This is going to be close. Rathbone I'm going to need your help."

"How?"

"We're going to have to push the hyperdrive pretty hard and you'll have to keep a close eye on them." Said Leland.

Rathbone turned to Lazarus. "I'm going to need your help then. These engines are more complex than the Hawk's and there's supposed to be a crew of four back there.

"Let's do it then." Lazarus replied over his shoulder as he headed for engineering.

Rathbone looked a bit surprised and then rushed to follow Lazarus. "Do you think he can do it?" He asked once they were out of earshot.

"Leland's a typical cocky full of himself space jockey, but he is good and going by what StJohn told me about how good Halasa is, I think we better be ready."

"Then we will be."

"I'm ready with the coordinates, have got the calculation?" Asked Leland the whole bridge could feel the tension in his voice.

Halasa emitted one sharp growl in response.

"We're as ready as we'll ever be Carek."

"Bridge to engineering, full power,"

"Full power aye." Answered Lazarus.

Carek at the helm, accelerated the sleek customs frigate to it's maximum sublight speed and smiled when it held at five percent over it's rated maximum.

"When you're ready Leland." He said.

Leland mumbled a short plea to what ever deity watched over spacers and activated the hyperdrive. The ship fairly lept into hyperspace and after opening his eyes he saw the mottled tunnel that was the signature effect of a stable hyperspace field.

"Piece of cake." He exhaled.

"You'd never admit it if it wasn't would you Rammer?" Said Kyle his eyes sparkling with mirth.

"DON'T CALL..." Then Leland saw Kyle's expression and started to laugh. "I fall for that one every time it seems."

"Yes you do." Kyle laughed along with the rest of the crew. The tension released, the rebels could only wait for their arrival at Dantoonie to see if they would re-establish contact with the Rebellion.

Deep in the Imperial archives on Coruscant, a man in an Imperial Security uniform was escorted to a secure terminal.

"Here you go Lieutenant. Your clearance has been verified and the files you requested transferred to here. I must remind you that you are not authorized to download anything from this terminal." Said the archive clerk.

"Thank you for your assistance." The lieutenant replied. Once the clerk departed he activated the surveillance scrambler to ensure his privacy.

"It took me three weeks to locate Maldamon's backup copy of his personal files and I'll be a sithspawn if I know how long it will take me to slice the encryption on them. But I will crack them and hunt down those responsible for the loss of the Predator and my mentor." At that Lieutenant Rahos and made himself as comfortable as he could as he knew this was going to take awhile.

Chapter Nine

The newly renamed Rex's Revenge dropped out of hyperspace exactly on target and on time in the Dantoonie system. Her sensors reached out and found the Alliance Corvette Apocalypse right where it was supposed to be.

"This is Alliance special operations team Bantha. Please acknowledge. Over." Said Carek from the communications station, his voice controlled but tense.

There was an ominous pause as they watched the Corvette bring her main battery to bear.

"If they don't respond soon, going to go evasive. I'm not getting this ship shot up." Leland hissed.

"We know Leland we know." StJohn replied wearily pinching his nose bridge in an effort to quell the headache that had suddenly started pounding between his eyes. "Are they even listening?"

"As near as I can see. I'm sure they are checking up on the status of team Bantha." Carek replied.

"Imperial vessel stand down your weapons and engines. If you resist in any way we will open fire." A no nonsense voice barked over the comm.

"Great they think we're Imperials." Snarled Leland.

"What did you expect? The ship's ID is still registered as an Imperial ship. We're lucky they aren't shooting already." Said Kyle as he entered the bridge.

"Look at that." Said StJohn pointing at the viewscreen. Everyone on the bridge saw two B-Wing fighters launch from the Corvette, then two more. The four fighters took up over watch around the captured ship, then the Apocalypse moved in closer to dock.

"I've never seen a Corvette configured as a carrier before." Lazarus said slowly as he and Rathbone entered the bridge. The stand down order had been piped through the ship and to prevent any accidents, the entire crew assembled on the bridge to make it as clear as possible that they were not resisting. Everyone heard the muted clang of the Apocalypse's docking ring connecting to the frigate's airlock and the sound of footfalls.

Four Alliance security men entered the bridge by twos.

"Blink and you'll die in the dark!" The sergeant growled as they moved to cover the would-be rebels. Four more security entered the bridge and quickly disarmed the members of team Bantha. Once they were disarmed and in binders, a pair of officers joined them on now impossibly crowded bridge.

"I am Captain Arkin of the Alliance Corvette Apocalypse. Team Bantha was lost on Alderaan. You really should have invested more time in your cover story. Who are you? ISB? COMPNOR?"

"Carek spoke first. "Sir I am Sergeant Carek Argonaut. I know our last known whereabouts was Alderaan, but we escaped four days before it was destroyed. We had a hyperspace mishap and crashed in the Cypryn system. We were tracked and fought our way out of a vicious ambush losing two members of our team and our ship--"

"A convenient explanation for you being on board an Imperial ship." Arkin said sarcastically.

"-we booked passage on another ship, encountered this ship, then turned the tables on the crew when they tried to board us."

"I see. Do you have anyway to prove this fantasy?"

"Are you always this big a jerk?" Asked Leland heatedly.

"Excuse me?" Arkin's voice dropped to absolute zero.

"You'll have to forgive Leland sir, he's not much on formality." Kyle deadpanned.

"Are you all trying to get spaced? I have no patience for levity or infiltrators. I don't know who you fools think you are but, I've got the perfect place for you to cool your heels while I sort this out. Take them!" Arkin snarled, spun on his heel and left abruptly.

The rebels were unceremoniously dumped in the Apocalypse's brig and left to ponder their fate.

"Listen." Rathbone hissed.

"To what?" Andre replied.

"The ship is firing." Lazarus answered his head canted to one side as he concentrated on the faint sounds. "We've stopped firing. That was quick. What do you suppose that was all about?"

"I don't know but I have a bad feeling about it." Said Leland.

Before anyone could reply, they all felt the ship jump to light speed. Team Bantha got no answers to their questions and had no contact with the Apocalypse's crew except for a droid that had obviously been programmed not to talk to them that brought them food twice a day. It was three days before they saw a living member of the crew when Captain Arkin himself visited them.

"As much as I don't like it, medical scans verify you are who you say you are. Except for you three." He said indicating StJohn, Rathbone, and Andre. "There's no record of you. So you will have to stay in the brig."

"Hey these guys saved our bruallee on Cypryn!" Said Lazarus. "They joined the rebellion and even offered us the use of their ship. We can all vouch for them."

"And where is this phantom ship of theirs? It amazes me how you manage not to have any hard evidence of your story."

"It's stored at basestation Heracles. Our base of operations before we got separated from Commander Challis." Lazarus replied a little too sharply.

"Again it amazes me how convenient it is that Heracles is too far from our destination for me to verify that."

Carek sighed deeply and used the Force to calm his mind from the exasperation he felt at Arkin before he replied.

"Sir these are good people that have given up everything to join the rebellion. It is our recommendation that you accept them as not being Imperial agents."

Arkin's eyes narrowed and hardened into flint. "If anything happens to my ship because of them or you. I will have you flayed."

"Thank you for your support sir."

The rebels were shown to austere quarters and pretty much told to stay out of the way. Few of the ship's regular crew would speak to them, but through careful questioning of the droids, team Bantha found that the Apocalypse was going to conduct a fighter raid on the Kiosk system.

"Now's our chance to show them what we can do!" Leland exclaimed as soon as he heard the news.

"I'm pretty sure they have all the pilots they need Leland. What makes you think Arkin will trust you on this mission?" StJohn replied in the same glum voice he'd had since leaving Heracles.

"Because I'm the best pilot on this tub and I'm going to prove it!" Leland answered hotly and stormed toward the hanger deck.

The rest of the team followed to see how far Leland would get before he got thrown back into the brig. He cornered the officer of the deck and began his pitch to go on the raid. To his credit the office let Leland finish before he started to laugh.

"I have to admit you've got a lot of nerve thinking you can pilot one of the horsemen." He chuckled. "I suggest you get off the flight deck and let professionals do the flying." He then turned and went over to make sure his fighters were ready.

Leland was so dumbfounded that he couldn't reply. Kyle walked over and led him to an observation that the rest of team Bantha had congregated near.

"I don't think anyone's ever laughed at me like that before." Leland said quietly.

"It's pretty obvious that Arkin has never smiled in his life and flat doesn't trust us. I don't know what we are going to do to gain his trust either." Lazarus said sadly. "I think I prefer being shot at to being consigned to oblivion."

"I agree." Kyle added.

Team Bantha stood and watched the raid unfold from the view port. The four riders of the Apocalypse: Death, Famine, Pestilence, and War launched as soon as they exited hyperspace.

Their target was a lone Imperial Nebulon-B escort and they'd caught it completely by surprise. The heavy fire power of the modified B-Wings stripped the target of her shields and sub light drive on their first pass. Crippled and unable to avoid the ravaging fighters on the second pass, a string of protons gutted the escort and left it a burning hulk. The third pass completely destroyed what was left.

"Well that was brutal." Said a stunned Carek.

"Guess that's the point." StJohn replied.

"See I told you I was better than those guys." Said Leland pointing out the two fighters that were limping back damaged. "The other two guys seem to be okay, but I'm still the best."

"Do you ever get tired of telling your self that?" Asked Lazarus.

"Why should I when it's true?"

The fighters were recovered quickly and the Apocalypse jumped back into hyperspace. The team was still at the view port when Captain Arkin entered the room. He looked the team up and down, then spoke without preamble.

"I've gotten word from Alliance headquarters. They would not tell me when this Commander Challis of yours is located. Instead, they told me I could use a special ops team and that I was stuck with you. I know this pleases you about as much as it pleases me, which is to say not at all. Since I wasn't given the choice, I want you to stay out of my way until I can figure out what to do with you." He then spun on his heel and left without looking back.

"And to think I thought Challis was hard to get along with." Said Leland dejectedly.

"For once Leland, I think we all agree with you."
Replied an equally dejected Carek.

Chapter Ten

"My first command." Thought Carek as he went to talk with his friends. "I know that Captain Arkin doesn't think much of my friends and I, but its time he learned what we are capable of doing." Carek Argonaut was one of half-a-dozen castaways of a rebel cell that had been based out of base station Heracles. While the team was on a mission to Alderaan, base station Heracles had had to evacuate. The cell was thought to have been killed when Alderaan was destroyed, thus the base commander left the cell no clues as to where they had relocated.

The cell-after a long roundabout way-had managed to reestablish contact with the rebellion by contacting a ship of the Alliance fleet. The commander of the Corellian corvette Apocalypse, Captain Arkin was of the old school when it came to how his ship was run. Arkin considered Carek and his friends little more than brigands; they were undisciplined, disorganized, and completely unacceptable.

Once Captain Arkin was certain that the cell members were not Imperial spies, he had to find something for these "ragmuffins" to do. Captain Arkin had received information that the Empire had taken over a botanical research facility in the Lahara system. Figuring the cell to be expendable, Captain Arkin called Carek to the bridge.

"You wanted a chance to lead, now you've got it.
Assemble a strike team and report to the hanger bay. The

Empire has taken over a botanical research station and I need to know why."

When the strike team met in the hanger bay, it included: Leland Archimedes, Halasa, and StJohn Hawk as the team's pilots, Kyle, Lazarus Maxenties, and Roberts as the team's weapons specialists. Rathbone Loegin as the team's engineer. Carek even allowed twelve year old Andre Trelldouwigan to come along in a specially designed R2 shell that Andre could hide inside. Carek wasn't exactly sure what function Andre would perform but it seemed to be all too ingenious an idea to let it go to waste. When Captain Arkin questioned the wisdom of allowing a child to be on a strike team.

"One never know's when a skifter in the hole can come in handy." He answered, for Carek was determined to show Captain Arkin that everyone in the cell and the three shanghaied smugglers were a force to be reckoned with.

Captain Arkin's briefing was short. "The Apocalypse has just rendezvoused with a stock light freighter, the Spectre. The Spectre has been modified and does not have any known affiliations with the Alliance this should enhance your chances of success. The Spectre is carrying holocrystals, foodstuffs and other trade items to provide you with a plausible cover. The Apocalypse will wait here in the sun's shadow until you return." Turning to Carek, Arkin continued. "Here is a comlink and a set of coordinates. The comlink has our command frequency and has been modified so that you will be able to contact us even while we are in the sun's shadow. The coordinates are to our rally point in case you have to bug out in a hurry. Good luck. You have fifteen minutes before you depart."

The team boarded the Spectre.

"Well at least Arkin was right about the 'modified' part." Said Rathbone after a five minute check of the ship's systems. "This ship has got better guns, better speed, better maneuverability, and has armor and shields to boot."

"Armor and shields?" Said Leland. "I hate to say it," He continued quietly. "but this ship is even better than the Bantha."

There was kind of an awkward silence for a moment before it was shattered by the PA.

"One minute to launch."

"Well lets show them how they do it at Heracles." Said Carek, turning to the ship's communication panel.

"Acknowledged Apocalypse. Spectre standing by."

One minute later, the Spectre pulled away and entered the system's asteroid belt from a direction that would protect the Apocalypse's position. When the Spectre broke through the belt, Carek began hailing the station.

"Free trader Spectre to Lahara station. Request landing instructions. Over."

There was no answer. Carek began scanning frequencies.

"Spectre to Lahara station, come in please."

Still no answer.

"I don't like this," Said Leland. "it smells like a trap."

"I'll check what the sensors can tell us." Said StJohn.

The sensors were as empty as the comlink.

"The sensors show no signs of life!" Said StJohn.

"That can't be," Responded Leland. "there's got to be somebody home."

"It may not make much sense but the sensors are showing no signs of life." Said Carek from over StJohn's shoulder. "We might as well make the most of it, cause we'll never get another chance this good."

The station had a simple central command section with three arms that enclosed the landing pads. As the Spectre approached, the hanger doors on pad one opened.

"At least the automatic docking program is still working." Said Leland as he landed in between two full squadrons of TIE fighters. Rathbone who had come to the bridge started suddenly.

"Those fighters are TIE/ins, they're the Empire's latest design. I had heard that the Empire was starting to deploy them..." Rathbone's voice trailed off while he was thinking, finally he continued. "The Force only knows what the Empire is doing here, but if they've put TIE/ins here they consider this to be a very important piece of property."

Once the Spectre was down, the whole team fanned out to try and find what was happening. Passing through decontamination the team found itself in center of the station. There were three doors leading to the three hangers, three doors leading to the officer's quarters, the enlisted quarters, and to the arms/training room.

A search of the hangers found a total of sixty TIE/ins and an Imperial interplanetary shuttle. The living quarters were all empty, but yielded a personal diary of one of the Laharan scientists. The locals were working on gene altering and bioengineering. When the Empire arrived and took over the project, the focus was redirected into bioweapons. The arms/training room contained a dozen suits

of stormtrooper armor, and three dozen blaster carbines. There was however no sign of life or even a struggle.

"I'm going to put on one of the suits." Said StJohn as he began suiting up. "If we run into any Imperials, I'll pretend to have captured you."

While the team was searching the lower level of the station there was a major power fluctuation. The emergency lighting came on for a few seconds, then the main power came back on. The team split up when they took the turbolift up to the upperdeck. Leland, Halasa, StJohn, and Roberts took one lift and found themselves in main engineering. Carek took the rest of the team in the other lift and found that it opened on the main bridge.

The bridge and engineering were as deserted as the rest of the station.

"This is starting to get spooky." Said Andre, who had climbed out of his R2 costume.

Rathbone tapped into the main computer and found that every thing was in order.

"This shows that the Empire took over twelve days ago, the last entry was three days ago and it sheds no clue as to where the station's crew had disappeared to."

Rathbone tried to get specific information on the bioweapons, but the computer stated that, "That information was only available in the laboratory."

Rathbone was able to call up a schematic of the station. Once the team had this information they split up to check out the rest of the base. While the team searched for clues there were three more power fluctuations.

"I've run a diagnostic of the main power," Said Rathbone. "according to the computer, there's nothing wrong with the core. In fact the computer isn't even logging these power swings."

Leland in main engineering went to open the door the power core, and jerked his hand back from the access panel.

"Youch!" Cried Leland. "That door must be 500 degrees. Lets get your lightsaber over here Carek."

"I doubt if that is a good idea, if its 500 degrees in there, that door is probably the only thing containing the heat, so lets just leave it for now." Carek then went to check the main sensor array.

"That ought to do it." Said Kyle, as he over road the security lock out to the sensor bay. "I'm going over to security to see if there are any monitors. If I can tap into the stations's monitors, maybe I can find out where everyone's gone."

Carek entered the sensor bay and found the body of a crewman. Carek spoke quickly into his comlink.

"Roberts, StJohn report to sensors on the double."

While waiting for his friends, Carek examined the body. The human was about forty, was wearing engineer's coveralls, and there was an empty canister of liquid nitrogen lying next to the body. When Roberts and StJohn arrived, Carek said. "Take him to sick bay and see if you can see what killed him."

As the body was being taken to sickbay, Carek turned back to examine the sensors and the main communications station. Carek found that the station was sending an automatic distress signal. Carek went to shut the signal off, but misreading the label in the local language, he boosted the signal from one narrow band signal to a broad band all channels signal.

"Oh brother," Thought Carek. "now I've really done it." Grabbing his comlink "Rathbone. On the double to sensors. I need some help here."

Rathbone arrived and shut the signal off.

"You know I never try to act like a Jedi," He said. "Why is it you think you can act like an engineer?"

"I'll try and remember that." Said Carek sheepishly. "Uh, while your here, do you think you can take a look at the sensors and see if they tell you anything."

Rathbone grinned and said. "Sure Carek, no problem." Rathbone's fingers flew across the controls.

"Sensors show no signs of life beyond the nine of us. I also took a look at the communications logs as well, and they don't show anything out of the ordinary either. I want to try and isolate that narrow band frequency, as the rebellion could use that information."

"Do what ever you can, I'm going to sick bay to see if they've found out anything."

When Carek reached sickbay, Roberts and StJohn were just finishing up their examination.

"Looks like he died of an old fashioned heart attack," Said Roberts. "there's nothing else out of the ordinary. Nothing."

Before Carek could respond, Kyle reported in from security.

"You can tell that the Empire hasn't been here long," He said. "there are no monitors on the station at all. We still have no clue where everybody went."

"Well that leaves the lab." Said Carek. "I want everybody together when we go into the lab, if they were trying to make bioweapons here, maybe they got more than

they bargained for and I want to be as prepared as possible."

"I think I know of a way to even things up a bit." Said Kyle. "I saw something in security that might be of help," Kyle turned to Halasa and continued. "but I'm going to need your help." Halasa growled his consent and they both departed. Five minutes later they returned. Kyle had discovered a tripod mounted medium repeat crowd control stun blaster-normally a crew served weapon for humans-that Halasa could carry like a sidearm.

The team sent up in front of the door to the lab. StJohn in his stormtrooper armor stepped up to the panel and unlocked the door. The result was an anticlimax. The lab was vacant too. The team searched both physically and with the Force, aside from two lab animals in cages there was nothing to be found. Rathbone tapped into the lab's computer and down loaded his findings to his R2 unit. There was a log entry by one of the Laharan scientists that alluded to an experiment that showed so much intelligence that he thought it might be sentient, but there were no other clues. The station's crew was gone and that was all there was to it.

Once the files from the lab were down loaded the team mission was complete. Carek said. "I know this isn't part of our mission, but opportunity as giving us a chance we can't pass up. Rathbone I want you to set the station to self-destruct. We can eliminate sixty TIE/ins as well as what ever they tried to do here. Everybody lets prepare for departure."

"I think that we can make the more of this opportunity than you realize," Said StJohn. "you're over looking the fact that we can take one of the TIE/ins and fly it out to the Apocalypse."

Halasa growled something. "You can take that shuttle too." Leland translated.

"We can take their blasters too." Kyle added.

Overwhelmed by this logic Carek said. "You have as long as it takes Rathbone to program the self-destruct to grab whatever you think is important."

As StJohn, Kyle, Leland, and Halasa took a turbolift down to begin gathering equipment, there was another power fluctuation. The lift lost power and began a free fall down to the lower level, fortunately it was only a one level drop and no one was injured. Rathbone had his R2 begin programming the self-destruct sequence as he went to check the station's brig. When the doors to the brig opened, Rathbone found his way blocked by a pair of security

droids. Rathbone impatiently pulled his blaster and took a shot at one of the droids.

Unknown to Rathbone the station was equipped with a rapid response program that was backed up by four additional security droids. One of the conditions that activated the response program was if the droids in the brig were fired on. While the droids in the brig were returning fire at Rathbone—who had decided that he was in over his head and had turned to run—the four security droids were bearing down on the four team members that were in the process of extricating themselves from the damaged turbolift.

When blaster fire was heard from the brig, Carek, Roberts, Lazarus, and Andre all ran to see what was going on. Rathbone almost bowled everyone over as he ran from the droids.

"What in the blazes is going on." Demanded Carek.

"Security droids in the brig." Said Rathbone.

"Lazarus. Roberts. Follow me." Snapped Carek.

Lazarus and Roberts opened fire as soon as the door to the brig opened. One droid was destroyed immediately, the other was only damaged and managed to return fire and stun Roberts. Carek leaped over Roberts and cut to second droid in half.

The rebels in the lift were in a fierce firefight with the four security droids.

"Security droids have us pinned in the turbolift." Said Kyle as he tried to hold a droid at bay with the lightsaber that had once belonged to the Dark Jedi Maldamon.

"We're on the way." Responded Carek as the rebels on the upper deck raced to help their comrades. Rathbone decided that he had done enough damage and that he would be better utilized by staying behind to free the prisoner.

By the time Lazarus, Roberts Carek, and Andre arrived at the top of the turboshaft, there were only two droids left. The droids were programmed to fire stun blasts until they were able to close to melee range then subdue their target physically. This program did not include what would happen if one of the targets happened to be a Wookiee. Halasa showed the droids that while they might be perfectly capable of subduing a human, they were sadly lacking in tensile strength to go toe-to-toe with an enraged wookiee. Halasa had disabled two of the droids, when Carek dropped down the shaft and cut the last two droids apart.

With the station's security subdued, the rebels began prepping for departure. Rathbone continued to program the

computer. Kyle and Roberts began loading blasters onto a repulsor lift and loading them on the Spectre. Leland and Carek prepped the Spectre, StJohn prepped a TIE/in, Halasa prepped the shuttle, while Andre, Lazarus, and the freed rebel from the brig searched the Spectre to make sure that whatever had wiped out the crew of the station had not hidden aboard the Spectre.

The Spectre and the TIE launched at the same time. Halasa was standing by to pick up Rathbone after the self-destruct was activated. Carek was the first to see the two Imperial customs frigates as they exited the asteroid field. Leland accelerated away in hopes of drawing the frigates away from the station and Halasa's shuttle which had just launched. StJohn signaled the lead frigate.

"I am the sole survivor of the station in pursuit of the rebel freighter."

This ploy seemed to work for the next signal was from the lead frigate. "We are responding to a class one distress call. State the nature of the problem."

Before StJohn could respond, the station self-destructed. The frigates then decided to take the initiative by splitting up, the lead followed the shuttle, the second followed the Spectre. The second frigate signaled.

"Stock light freighter shut down your engines and prepare to be boarded."

Carek hoped that the smaller ships would be able to evade the frigates in the asteroid field, but the frigates were apparently used to chasing smugglers through asteroids and easily closed on both the Spectre and the shuttle. With no choices remaining, Carek contacted Kyle and Roberts in the gunner's seats.

"Fire at will." He then signaled the Apocalypse. "Mayday. Mayday. Spectre pursued by two customs frigates. Friendlies in TIE/in and Imperial shuttle. Mayday. Mayday. Mayday."

The fight was on.

The Spectre lived up to her name as Leland ghosted between asteroids and the frigate's fire.

"How do you want to play this." Leland shouted to the gunners.

"Let them get close," Said Roberts. "we've got a big surprise for them."

Leland slowed enough to allow the frigate to get into short range, then Kyle and Roberts sprung their surprise. The frigate never knew what hit them, one second all was as it should be: the freighter was trying to run, but had no

chance of escaping the massed fire of an Imperial customs frigate, the next second, the freighter began spewing laser fire like they had a strobe setting. The frigate was so severely damaged by the sudden burst of fire from the Spectre, that they were forced to break off their pursuit and signal the lead frigate that they were out of the fight. Halasa and Rathbone however were in trouble, the shuttle had been heavily damaged and despite the frantic maneuvering of Halasa through the asteroids, they could not shake the frigate.

Rathbone signaled the Spectre. "Guys, we need some help here."

"On the way." Carek responded tersely from the astrogation station where Carek was plotting the course to the rally point. "Halasa needs our help Leland."

"The only problem with turning directly towards the shuttle is we'll have to go right through the damaged frigate to get there."

"How long if we attack off the parabolic plane?"

"About twenty seconds, which is about fifteen more than they have."

"All right then, that decides it," Said Carek. "we go right through them. Kyle, Roberts, Look alive, it's about to get real bumpy. StJohn, I think that TIE's a little too tender for you to risk getting too close to a frigate. I want you to head straight for the Apocalypse."

"Roger your last! Good luck, StJohn out."

The frigate made things easy for the Spectre by deciding that they had had enough. There was a token exchange of lasers as the ships passed, but the frigate made no real attempt to impede the Spectre. The lead frigate detected the Spectre's intercept course and broke off pursuit of the shuttle to turn and fight.

Halasa yowled something that sounded triumphant. "Yeah they got them off us," Rathbone responded. "I just hope they haven't gotten themselves in too deep. Lets get out of here, I won't feel safe until we're aboard the Apocalypse."

When the lead frigate turned away from the shuttle, Leland yowled something that sounded triumphant too, as he pulled the Spectre around in a tight loop and headed for a dense section in the asteroid field. The lead frigate however, was the Surveyor. She was the flagship of this sector's customs fleet. It was heavily modified with massive shields, increased speed and maneuverability, and it had the best crew in the sector. It

closed on the Spectre with the same confidence that the first frigate did, knowing that a stock light freighter could not be a threat to the flagship of the sector.

When the Surveyor closed into medium range, Kyle and Roberts unleashed the same storm of Force guided laser fire that had broken the first frigate. The surveyor was a much better ship and was able to absorb the withering fire. Leland used the Force to frustrate the gunners of the Surveyor. Only one shot managed to find the Spectre and Andre was able to get the shields up in time to prevent any damage from getting through.

Kyle and Roberts freely used the Force to continue the steady pounding of the Surveyor, by the time the ships had cleared the asteroid belt, the Surveyor was as severely damaged as the first frigate. The Surveyor was unable to keep up with the undamaged Spectre due to engine damage, allowing Leland to accelerate away and break contact.

Carek completed the instinctive astrogation plot and-as soon as he heard that Halasa, Rathbone and StJohn had been picked up by the Apocalypse-jumped to hyperspace. The Spectre rendezvoused with the Apocalypse at the rally point. Captain Arkin met them in the hanger bay of the Apocalypse. Carek came to his best parade ground salute and barked.

"Sir! Team Bantha Reporting: Mission accomplished! Sir!"

Captain Arkin was a little stunned when he read the team's debriefing. The team had a full copy of the original research of the station, why the Empire had taken over and what the Empire had done with the original research. They had rescued a rebel POW, and had taken advantage of the absence of the station's crew to destroy the station and all of its accumulated data. They had crippled two Imperial customs frigates and they had captured a TIE/in fighter and an interplanetary shuttle. And all this had been accomplished with a nine man team that had not even taken any casualties. The only piece of the puzzle that was missing, was what had happened to the station's crew. There was no answer, and there would be no answer.

"I have clearly underestimated these people." Thought Arkin as he closed the report. "My only question is what am I going to do with them now?"

To that Captain Arkin had no answer.

Later that night Andre asked to speak to Carek privately. "I'm not sure how to say this but, the time in

the cloud has really effected me. I learned that I could see the Force and I want to know if you will teach me to be a Jedi?"

"I do not know if it is right for me to try to teach someone how to use the Force when my own training is so incomplete," Said Carek. "but I can sense that you are serious Andre, and I will watch you during our next few missions. If you can learn to live by the Jedi code, I will teach you."

Andre beamed. "Thank you Carek, I will not let you down."

After Andre departed, Carek lay in his bunk, thinking. "I hope I know what I'm getting into, I have to find a way to keep him from the Dark Side. If I can do that, he may actually earn that which I desire most, the title of Jedi Knight." With that last thought Carek went to sleep.

Chapter Eleven

The early morning chatter of the briefing room ceased when the severe woman with the rank tabs of a commander entered the room. The lights dimmed on cue when she reached the podium.

"Your mission will be a supply run to Tatooine." Said Commander Challis.

"Tatooine again," Muttered Carek. "I had hoped I would never have to see that dust ball again."

Commander Challis's head snapped toward the sound. "Is there a problem Lieutenant?"

"Uh, no sir. No problem at all." Carek said aloud, to himself he thought. "And to think what we went through to find this woman." Carek used a Jedi meditation technique to absorb the commander's briefing subconsciously while allowing the greater portion of his mind to wander over the events of the last few weeks.

After investigating the Imperial presence at the Lahara station, the team from Heracles continued to operate with the Alliance corvette the Apocalypse. The team, less Carek had been sent to find an exotic dancer that was a Force sensitive and in extreme danger from the Empire. The team posed as the retinue of a pair of ambassadors while they were aboard a passenger liner. The ambassadors turned out to be working for the Empire and the team narrowly escaped with the dancer by stealing the liner's shuttle.

Carek missed out on this mission because he had been promoted to Lieutenant and had to attend the Alliance officer's course. Captain Arkin insisted on following the book when it came to his men's training. So while the team was out looking for the dancer, Carek was busy learning Alliance regulations. When the team departed they had been given a set of coordinates to a rally point once they had found the dancer. When the Apocalypse went to meet the team, they found that the coordinates were to an inhospitable world named Planeris, that it also was the main headquarters of the Rebel Alliance.

The team and the Apocalypse found that this was where the rest of base station Heracles had fled to. After reporting back in and being debriefed, the team was reassigned to Commander Challis. The base was in a jubilant mode as the battle station that had been responsible for the destruction of Alderaan had been destroyed, and the victory at Yavin had encouraged many more planets to join the Rebellion. The Empire was reeling from the loss of the Death Star, but it now considered the Rebellion to be a

threat and was bearing down hard, which had forced the Alliance fleet into hiding.

"Are there any questions?" This last from Commander Challis who was just finishing up her briefing, brought Carek back to realtime. "Good. You depart in one hour. Dismissed." As the team started to disperse. "Lieutenant Argonaut, I would like to speak to you a moment." Carek cringed for he knew that whatever Challis was going to say, it would not be pleasant. "During your separation from us you have grown in the Force Carek," She said. "but you seem to have forgotten everything you ever learned about military discipline. If I catch you not paying attention to one of my briefings again, I will personally see that your next assignment is cleaning the Tauntaun pens. Is that clear Lieutenant!"

"Yes Sir!" Barked Carek. "Perfectly clear Sir! No excuse Sir!" "Good," Challis then came as close to a smile as she could get and said. "I would hate someone with your potential not being utilized properly. Dismissed."

The team met aboard the Spectre which they were still using since the loss of both the Wandering Bantha and the Carthesian Hawk had left them without a ship, Challis having made the necessary arrangements for the Spectre to be assigned to the team.

"We thought you were bantha bait." Said Leland the team pilot as Carek arrived. "I know she's on our side, but she gives me the creeps."

"Challis is hard to get to know," Agreed Carek. "she has so much rage, I only hope we don't lose her to the Dark Side."

"That 'Dark Side' thing is really a problem for you Jedi-types isn't it?" Said Lazarus Maxenties one of the team's weapons specialists.

"The Dark Side is seductive, and once on that path it is hard not to fall astray. A large part of Challis's personality is because she is constantly fighting the Dark Side."

"If you guys are finished with your wiffordil out there, we're ready to go." Said Rathbone Loegin the team's engineer leaning out of the Spectre's airlock. "Andre and Kyle are already aboard, I just got word that Challis is sending Roberts, Halasa, and StJohn to the officer's course, so it'll just be the six of us."

"Great, there'll be some extra room for a change." Said Leland.

The Spectre lifted and jumped to Tatooine without mishap. The arrival and landing were equally without

incident. The team unloaded their cargo at Mos Eisley and Kyle went shopping for droids to replace the ones lost on the Bantha, finding an EMD-1 Med droid to replace Ohonebeenine lost on the Bantha, a EMD-1 was a poor replacement for a O1B but it was a start. Kyle also picked up a modified protocol droid named SM3PO ("Please sir you may call me Sam.").

While Kyle was shopping, Carek went to look for Dag Caltare just to see if he had any interesting information. The team was waiting to meet with Dag in a seedy tavern that was one of Dag's favorite haunts, when four hardcases walked up to the table and after casting a contemptuous look at the team the thug's leader spoke.

"You named Kyle."

"Who wants to know?" Replied Kyle.

Without further debate the thugs went for their weapons. Kyle seemed to be the only target they were interested in, and that was their last mistake. Leland dove for cover as Lazarus, Andre, and Kyle returned fire, while Carek deflected the thug's shots. All four were down before they could hit anybody.

From the bar there came the sound of one person applauding. The team turned and saw a stylishly dressed man of indeterminate age. "Bravo. Well done. You will do just fine."

Leland was on his feet and across the room before anyone else could move.

"Just who the hell are you? And what in the hell is going on here?"

In an infuriatingly calm voice. the man said. "My name is Barr, and I was just testing to see if Kyle would make a worthy contestant."

"What kind of contestant," Said Kyle. "I don't know you and I have no idea what you are talking about."

"But I know you Kyle," Said Barr. "and that is the only thing that is important.

"Have you ever heard of the Game of Death Kyle?"

"No."

"That's not surprising. The game is relatively new here in Mos Eisley and I don't think its had a chance to migrate off planet yet-never the less-the Game of Death is a sort of chess, you might say the ultimate game of chess. Each of the 'Kings' chooses his pawns to do battle with the opposing players and..."

"What do you mean 'play-ers' there should only be one other king." Interrupted Rathbone.

"Ah, that's what makes the Game of Death so interesting my inquisitive friend, there can be any number of kings in the Game of Death. In fact if there aren't at least four kings then the game loses most of its appeal."

"You still haven't told me what all this has to do with me." Said Kyle, who was starting to get visibly angry.

"I was getting to that part when I was so rudely interrupted by your friend here." Barr said as he fixed Rathbone with a evil stare. "Once the pawns have been chosen, the kings inform the pawns who the other kings pawns are and then sits back to see if his pawns can defeat all the other pawns. Whichever king's pawns eliminates all the other pawns is the winner. If you should win Kyle, I will pay you five thousand credits."

"I'm not interested." Said Kyle. "Lets go."

The team headed for the door.

"You don't have a choice." Said Barr with a wicked grin. "I have already informed the other kings who my pawns are and the game has already started. If you walk out that door you will be fair game to the other pawns and you won't even know who is trying to kill you."

This last brought the team up short. Leland was the first to reach Barr. "What do you mean 'trying to kill you.'"

"Its not called the Game of Death for melodramatic reasons my hot tempered young friend, the pawns fight to the death, the survivor is the winner."

"I'm nobodies pawn and you are nobodies king." Raged Leland. "You are dead buddy, absolutely dead." Leland made a move to unholster his blaster.

"I would take a look around the tavern before I tried that my friend." Leland did look around and found that there were at least thirty armed men training their weapons on the team.

"This is my establishment and these are my men," Said Barr. "Now, if you would like to see who is going to be trying to kill you, belly up to the bar. The drinks are on me."

With no room to maneuver or to negotiate, the team recognized a fait accompli when they saw one. Leland however was still fuming. "This is not over, not by a long shot buddy. Not over at all."

"Be that as it may these are your opponents." Said Barr as he activated a small holocrystal. "The first pawn is named Darekk. He is a human bounty hunter, he wears special body armor and is considered to be very formidable. The second pawn is named Filberrg. He is a Gammorian, long on

brawn, short on brains. The third pawn is named Wutega. He's a Wookiee, enough said. The fourth pawn is named Irwin Scratch. He is human and a wizard with droids. The fifth pawn is named Kali Whisper. She is a human exotic dancer, you would do well not underestimate her.

"That's the lot of them. If you win bring their bodies back here to collect your five thousand. Good luck. Now if you excuse me I have some business to attend to." Barr rose to leave.

Leland spoke again. "I will be back and you will answer to me."

"I'll try and keep that in mind." And Barr began to laugh. Leland lunged for Barr with murder in his eyes, but Carek managed to intervene.

"I know exactly how you feel Leland, but let it go for now, just let it go." Leland relaxed and the team departed.

"I refuse to take part in any blood sport." Said Carek as team Bantha left the bar. "Even if I weren't a Jedi, I would not kill just to amuse somebody else, its just wrong."

"I've seen and caused my share of grief," Returned Kyle. "but even though I get paid to hunt people, I have never taken a contract that required I hunt someone down and kill them just for fun. As you said its just wrong."

"The only way to beat Barr is to just not be his 'pawns' and leave immediately." Said Lazarus. Leland jumped on the thought. "Yeah, Lazarus come with me, we'll go and get the Spectre ready for take off."

As Leland and Lazarus left, Carek Said. "We'll be there in a few minutes. I still want to check in with Dag to see if he's heard anything and if he knows about this Barr character."

The team found Dag in the famous Mos Eisley Cantina.

"Carek! Over here." Dag shouted to be heard above the din of the crowded cantina.

Carek spoke without preamble. "What do you know of a thug named Barr, and have you ever heard of the 'Game of Death.'"

The Twi'lek's tentacles coiled into knots and Dag choked on his drink.

"Ba...Barr? He's about as dangerous as you can get. He doesn't have Jabba the Hutt's off planet resources, but he's a serious threat here in Tatooine. Don't tell me he's got you involved with the Game of Death?"

"It wasn't our idea," Said Carek. "and we aren't going to play. We're leaving as soon as we finish talking to you."

"That's a good idea."

"Before we go, what do you know about these people?"
Asked Kyle as he showed Dag the holos of the 'pawns'.

"I've never heard of Scratch, Filberrg, or Wutega. Darekk is supposed to be bad news, but that's all I know. The woman Kali Whisper works at a club five blocks from here, but I don't see how she can be involved in the Game of Death."

"This guy Barr said not to underestimate her." Said Kyle.

"That's all I know for certain Kyle, but its not uncommon to have non-combat types mixed in with the combat types just to keep you guessing. However I do know this: if your going to skip out on Barr, you are making a fearsome enemy and I would advise against coming back to Mos Eisley anytime in the next millennium."

"Thank you as always Dag, I'll see you next time lets go guys."

The team bade Dag farewell and departed for the hanger. When Dag was sure that the team was gone, he added quietly. "If there is a next time."

While the team was taking leave of Dag, Leland and Lazarus were arriving at the hanger where the Spectre was parked. "Barr is not going to get away with this." Said Leland.

"Yeah, I know Leland, 'He can't do this.'" Replied Lazarus. "You've got to get...Look out!"

Both the rebels dove for cover as the whip-crack of laser fire smote the stillness of the hanger.

"There he is over by those crates." Said Lazarus as he returned fire on the dimly seen form of their attacker.

"Cover me." Said Leland and ran for the Spectre. The attacker cut Leland's rush short with a burst of accurate laser fire. Leland pinned down reached for his comlink. "I've got to get some help, this guy is bad news." Fumbling his comlink open, he screamed. "Carek! Carek! We need help here!"

Carek and company were two blocks away when Leland's frantic call for help came over the comlink, before Leland finished speaking, Carek was already sprinting. "Lets go guys, Leland needs our help."

While Andre, Austin, Kyle, Rathbone and Carek were running to help, the hanger was alive with blaster fire. The attacker had moved to where Lazarus could see him

clearly. "Darekk!" Hissed Lazarus, recognizing the bounty hunter from Barr's holocrystal and as he snapped off another shot. "I know I'm hitting him, but it looks like that armor he's wearing seems to have some form of force field that not only absorbs energy, it redirects it to that laser he's firing. I've got to find a way to take that laser rifle out of the picture."

"Give me an X-wing and point me at a dozen TIEs any day." Thought Leland as he worked his way towards the hanger door. "If I can get to a vehicle, any vehicle. I might be of more use." Searching around the immediate area, Leland spotted a group of teenagers crouching for cover by their swoops half a block away. "A swoop! That's just what I'm looking for."

At that moment, Lazarus found a way to neutralize Darekk's laser rifle.

"Take a deep breath." Thought Lazarus as he braced for what was going to be a difficult shot. "Let half of it out..."

Lazarus had spotted a cable that ran from Darekk's armor to his laser rifle, and had guessed that it was the power conduit. Reasoning that the laser would be useless if the cable were cut, Lazarus decided to try and cut it with a well aimed blaster bolt, thus Lazarus had slipped into an old marksmanship technique.

"and squeeze!"

Darekk was targeting the pawn by the doorway when a blaster bolt severed the power lead from his armor to his laser. "What the..." Thought Darekk as the power lead arced and shorted out. "Oh yes, I'm going to enjoy killing this one." As Darekk reached for his heavy blaster pistol, Leland used the distraction to make his break for the door.

Running at full speed Leland reached the swoops just as Darekk began firing furiously on Lazarus' position. "Hey buddy how much for your swoop?"

"You want to buy my swoop? Now?" Stammered the thoroughly confused teen.

"Yes now. Look, I'm a little busy right now, I'll give you two thousand credits right now for the swoop."

"You'll give me two thousand creds, for this swoop, no questions, right now?"

"Yes for Deity's sake, have we got a deal?"

"Done."

Leland shoved the credits in the gaping teens hands and roared off for the hanger.

"That was one disturbed individual." Said the now recovered teen. "Come on let's get out of here before he can change his mind."

When Carek and company turned the last corner to the hanger they were nearly run down by a group of celebrating swoop riders.

"That's all we need," Thought Kyle as they reached the hanger with weapons at the ready. "is to be killed in a traffic accident." When they looked into the hanger, they saw: Leland dive a swoop at Darekk, Darekk dodge to one side, Leland careen off of some crates and crash into the landing gear of the Spectre. Leland went flying across the hanger and slammed onto the loading ramp of the Spectre.

Kyle shocked at Leland's crash none-the-less opened fire on Darekk. Andre and Rathbone ran for the Spectre, while Austin and Carek closed on Darekk. Darekk turned to fire on the newcomers, but before he could fire Carek used his newly learned power of telekinesis to snatch Darekk's blaster from his hand. Disarmed, Darekk ran for the Spectre. Leland stunned by his spectacular crash saw Darekk running straight for him, staggered to his feet and tried to block Darekk's bid for the Spectre.

"Not on my ship you don't!" Slurred Leland as he tried to shake the stars dancing before his eyes.

Darekk extended knifeblades from the forearms of his armor and took a stab at Leland. Leland dodges the attack and grabbed Darekk from behind. Before Darekk could break free, Carek arrived.

"We don't want to harm you idiot!" Said Carek as Darekk turned to fight the greater threat of a lightsaber at his back. "We want to stop this madness!"

Darekk stabbed at Carek, who neatly parried and his counter strike cut the blades from Darekk's armor. Now completely unarmed Darekk blasted clear of the Jedi with his jetpack, landing on the catwalk ten meters overhead.

Rathbone had reached the turret of the Spectre just as Darekk landed on the catwalk.

"Now I've got you!" Said Rathbone as he fired. "Then again maybe I don't." As the shot missed Darekk and blasted away a ten meter section of the catwalk. Darekk staggered back from the turret's shockwave and was hit from behind by the bolt of a bowcaster. Darekk was knocked form the catwalk and hit the ground with a heavy thud. Andre ran over to the stunned bounty hunter and began pushing buttons on his armor in an attempt to turn Darekk's force field off. Kyle seeing that hand weapons were of little use against Darekk's field, he ran aboard the Spectre and

grabbed the medium repeat blaster that had been captured from the Lahara station. Kyle could not fire the weapon without the tripod as Halasa the wookiee could, but with Carek providing telekinetic help he could just barely manage the awkward weapon.

Before Andre could switch the field off, Darekk managed to sit up and take a swing at Andre. Andre's little pet lizard leaped from Andre's shoulder and wrapped itself around Darrek's head. Carek raced over and slashed at Darekk, but found that his saber could not penetrate the field. Before Darekk could take any action he was hit square in the chest by a medium repeat blaster bolt and finally knocked out.

"One down, four to go." Said Kyle as he swung the repeat blaster around to fire on the wookiee that could only be Wutega.

When Wutega appeared and fired on Darekk, Leland and Lazarus ran out the door to try and out flank the wookiee by coming up the outside stairs. Wutega heard them coming and stunned Lazarus as soon as he entered the door. Lazarus was knocked backwards and fell down the stairs to the first landing. Leland managed to dodge the falling Lazarus and return fire. Lazarus crawled back up the stairs and hit Wutega while he was firing on Leland. Wutega lost his balance and fell off of the catwalk. As he lay stunned, Kyle knocked him out with the repeat blaster ending the fight. As he powered the repeat blaster down, Kyle said. "Two down three to go."

"We've got to get out of here." Said Leland "If we hang around, we'll just end up having to fight the rest of them." The team was loading the two captured pawns onto the Spectre while Rathbone patched up Austin with a medpac, and were arguing about Carek's decision to try and talk to Kali Whisper.

"I don't like this anymore than you do," Replied Carek. "but, I still want to try to talk to this Kali woman, maybe I can stop this insanity."

"Your not dealing with people who are used to talking Carek." Added Kyle. "They have been set to do a task that I believe they enjoy and they're not about to stop the game to talk about how immoral it is."

Rathbone appeared in the hatch. "Looks like he'll be okay, he was very lucky. Kyle, I took a look at your droids and that 3PO had got some interesting modifications."

"What sort of modifications?"

"Hard to say exactly. Carek, while you out looking for this Kali woman, I'm going to stay here and find out exactly whats been done to that droid."

"I'm staying right here and keeping this ship ready to lift," Said Leland.

"I'm going to help Rathbone." Said Lazarus.

"Good, I don't want all of out on the street anyway. Said Carek after hearing the concern in his friend's voices. "Kyle, I want you to come with me."

"I want to go too." Said Andre.

"No this..." Started Carek.

"Is exactly what you leave me out of all the time. How am I ever going the learn anything about the Force if you leave me behind every time you go into a situation where you might use it? Stumped by this logic Carek replied. "I guess your right. All right then Kyle and Andre will go with me to talk to Whisper."

The three rebels arrived at Club Cosmos fifteen minutes later. The front door had a large bouncer and a weapons detection sensor grid guarding the front door.

"I think I can shut the grid off," Said Carek. "Give me a minute." The bouncer was looking the rebels over when the grid powered down. "Whats going on with this thing." Said the obviously non-technologically inclined bouncer. When the bouncer turned to inspect the grid, Kyle used the moment to try to enter.

"Wait I have to search you manually the grid just went down."

The bouncer may not have known much about the grid but he did know a lot about hiding weapons and quickly turned up Andre's and Kyle's blasters and Carek's lightsaber.

"What's this?" Asked the bouncer.

"Small cutting torch. I don't mind checking it. Tell me my good man, has Kali Whisper started yet?"

"You better hurry her numbers just about over."

"Kali Whisper is why we came." Said Kyle as they rushed to find seats. "Thank you very much."

The bouncer never even noticed Kyle's holdout blaster nor did he notice when as the three patrons walked away the "Small cutting torch" floated out from behind the counter to rejoin its owner.

The woman known as Kali Whisper was just taking her bow and heading backstage when the rebels entered.

"I guess we go back stage." Said Carek.

"I guess." Replied Kyle as they headed for the stage door.

"No Patrons allowed!" Said the thick necked bouncer.

"It's okay, Kali Whisper wants to see us." Said Carek in what he thought was his most reasonable voice.

"Everythingling and his gentlesire thinks Miss Whisper wants to see them sir. No patrons allowed."

Kyle jumped in. "Say there what does a bouncer make in this sector? I'll bet they don't get anywhere near what they're worth. In fact I'd go so far to say that, if shown how much a doorman gets tipped at a fashionable club in...lets say Imperial City on Coruscant, he would be kind enough to allow some of Miss Whisper's biggest fans to have a few minutes to talk to her."

Kyle fanned out three hundred credits. The bouncer's eyes tried to move independently for a second or two before he palmed the credits and unlocked the door.

"Thank you good sir," Said Andre as they slipped through the door. "who said good help is hard find?"

Carek stopped his companions short of the door. "That was rather easy," He said. "lets make sure that this isn't a trap."

Carek used the Force to sense for lifeforms in the room, and detected one human. "Well she's alone, but remember Barr said not to underestimate her."

Carek knocked on the door. A tall lithesome woman with waist length black hair and mischievous green eyes opened the door. She slowly looked the three men up and down and spoke in a breathy voice.

"Tell me fellas, when did you fall off the repulsor truck?"

Carek spoke. "Look we know about the Game of Death and that you're a pawn just like us. We have no intention of playing this stupid game and if you are as smart as you look you won't play either. I think the only way to end something as immoral as this twisted game is to turn the tables on the so-called "Kings" and either not play or go after the kings directly."

"I have no idea what you are talking about."

"Fine have it you way. We tried to warn you." Carek turned to leave. Kali watched them walk down the hall.

"Talk about your amateurs" She chuckled and closed the door.

Rathbone pulled back from the open access panel. "I wouldn't have thought that you could put that much detonite in a 3PO."

"Detonite? Oh dear my previous owner was such a flamboyant human." Wailed Sam. "I don't think I can stand

knowing that there is a bomb inside me. What are you going to do master Rathbone?"

"I am going to remove it."

"Are you sure that's a good idea," Said Lazarus. "Challis will not be very happy with you if you get the Spectre blown up."

"I am not going to 'get the Spectre blown up,' I should think that you know me better than that Lazarus."

"Okay. Okay. Lets do it."

Rathbone was correct about not blowing up the ship. It took him and Lazarus only fifteen minutes to disarm the booby trap. Once the bomb was defused they found two data chips hidden inside Sam.

"What sort of work did your previous owner do, Sam?" Asked Lazarus.

"I'm not exactly sure, he never really tried to be very friendly you know, he just had me talking to various people and machines, without so much as a by your leave or thank you. I remember once I was..."

"Never mind Sam, it isn't that important. What's on those chips Leland?"

The team's pilot was hunched over the main computer and looking over at the nav computer every couple minutes. "One chip is a set of coordinates to someplace that's not listed in the nav computer. The second one is coded and will take some time to break. Oh well," He sighed. "I guess we've got the time."

Just then the Spectre's comm board lit up.

"Spectre, we got big trouble and do we need a lift!"

"On second thought it looks like we're going to be a little busy."

"You know she could be telling the truth Carek," Said Andre as they exited the backstage area. "Dag said that they sometimes put non-combat types in the game."

"You might be right young Andre let's watch the show and see just how harmless this woman is."

Kyle whooped. "That's the best idea you've ever had during a mission Carek, I don't like to say this but you usually are little stiff when it comes to having fun."

"Well this isn't 'fun' Kyle we are staking this woman out just in case she is in danger."

"Yeah Carek, whatever you say."

The rebels found a seat just before the show was about to start. Kali Whisper and three other girls wearing nothing but strategically placed veils, began their seductive dance. Kali Whisper pulled loose one of her veils as she danced over to where the rebels sat and tossed the

veil so that it looped around Kyle's neck. She then looped the veil around Carek's neck and then Andre's. There was something about her that warned Carek to ignite his lightsaber and cut the veil before she could pull it tight.

With her monofilament veil severed, Kali dropped all pretenses and screamed. "Attack!" She attacked Andre, while one of the other dancers attacked Kyle, and despite the glowing lightsaber, the other two dancers attacked Carek. Kyle stunned his attacker then came to Andre's assistance and stunned Kali. Carek interposed his saber between himself and the two dancers in an attempt to ward them off. The dancers attacked from two directions at once, forcing Carek to parry their vicious kicks.

"NO!" Screamed Carek as one girl pressed her attack right into the coruscating blade. As Carek watched the girl die from massive injuries, the second girl kicked him savagely knocking him to the ground. The dancer grabbed a chair and swung, but the chair was sliced in two when Carek managed to parry. Kyle saw Carek fall from the corner of his eye, wheeled, fired and stunned the last dancer.

Carek staggered to his feet. "I'll get Kali." He said as he put deed to word and slung Kali onto his shoulder.

"I'll guard the rear." Returned Kyle as they started to head for the door. Andre grabbed his comlink.

"Spectre, we got big trouble and do we need a lift!"

The bouncer and the bartender slow to respond drew their blasters.

"Stand where you are!" Yelled the barkeep.

"Freeze or we'll shoot!" Said the bouncer when the rebels kept moving. "Alright, have your way." He added as he opened fire.

Kyle's return shot at the barkeep went wide, but both the bouncer's and the barkeep's shots were right on target. Carek tottering under the load of Kali and from having been kicked, knew that neither he nor Kyle would be able to dodge the incoming blaster bolts. "There's only one thing left to do."

Carek's lightsaber flashed twice, guided by the Force he deflected the bolts away from their intended targets and back at the shooters. The bouncer was caught off guard and was hit square, going down hard. The barkeep was forced to dive behind the bar to avoid a similar fate. With the path now clear, the rebels ran out the bar and almost collided with Leland, Lazarus, and Rathbone crowded in a beat up two seat landspeeder.

"Well Carek when you finally decide to break down and go pick up a girl," Laughed Leland. "you really go out and pick up a girl."

"Very funny Leland, do you by any chance intend to crash this into the Spectre too?" Returned Carek as he loaded Kali in the now very crowded speeder.

"Hey that's not funny. It was a good idea, it worked on Cypryn 4 you know."

"That's all well and good Leland, but it doesn't solve the current problem of how we're going to get seven people in a speeder designed to carry two.

"I have a solution," Said Rathbone as he hopped out of the speeder. "but it might offend your Jedi code."

"What is it?"

"I see that there happens to be an unattended speederbike parked over there. I'm sure that the owner won't mind us 'borrowing' it for a few minutes."

"We don't really have a choice. Go ahead."

Rathbone quickly hotwired the bike.

"Now who's going to ride where!"

"I'm on the bike." Said Kyle.

"Can I go with you?" Pleaded Andre.

"No choice Kyle, someone's got to ride with you and Andre is the smallest"

"Good enough. Lets go."

The heavily overloaded speeder groaned and slowly headed for the hanger. "This thing is a real pig," Leland groaned as well. "I wouldn't want to have to evade someone in this."

"You mean like that T16 Skyhopper that's been tailing us for the last three blocks? Said Lazarus. Leland snatched the speeder's rearview mirror and turned to see in the direction in question.

"Yeah exactly like a T16 Skyhopper. Hold on guys we got company!" Leland gunned the speeder and took off at best speed.

The Skyhopper pilot now certain that he had been spotted, swooped down and open fire. Leland had to use all of his abilities to evade the Skyhopper's fire. Outrunning the airspeeder was impossible, and Leland was running out of room and ideas. When the airspeeder opened fire Kyle and Andre veered down the first available side street.

"What are we going to do Kyle?" Asked Andre.

"We are not going to do anything. I have an idea for something that I am going to do, so shut up so I can concentrate."

When the Skyhopper passed by Kyle's hiding place, Kyle gunned the speederbike and came up along side the blind side of the airspeeder. Kyle, pulled his lightsaber and a grenade from secret compartments of his armor and trusting to the Force, he sliced a hole into the side of the Skyhopper and tossed in the grenade. He slammed the speederbike into reverse to get as far away as he could from the impending fireworks. The pilot never really knew what happened as the Skyhopper was completely consumed in the resulting fireball.

Leland bearhugged Kyle fiercely after The team arrived safely at the Spectre. "Good job Kyle!" He said. "That looked like something I would think of!"

"Now that scares me," Kyle laughed at the crestfallen look on Leland face. "I must have been around you too long."

"That goes without saying." A friendly voice added.

The team whirled on the sound and found Dag Caltare standing on the Spectre's loading ramp. "I must say that whenever you come to call it takes Mos Eisley a couple weeks to pick up the pieces."

"What are you doing here?" Said Carek.

"I have located the one known as Scratch, and I thought that you might like to know where to find him."

Kyle spoke first. "We've taken down four out of five without meaning to. We might as well finish the game. It might give us a chance to talk to Barr again."

"I have already told you what I think about Barr, and will not offer any more advice on that topic." Dag handed Carek a data chip.

"This is where you will find Scratch. Dag turned down the ramp.

"Good Luck." He added over his shoulder as he strode away.

Kyle said. "Well, let's end the game."

The address that Dag gave the rebels was to as nice an apartment complex that could be found in Mos Eisley. Lazarus, Kyle, and Carek rode over in the 'borrowed' landspeeder. The building had an old door droid that asked. "Good day, gentlebeings. Whom do you wish to see?"

Kyle turned to Carek. "I think the time for subtlety is over, let's just knock on this guy's door and get it over with."

"Normally I would say that we should still be subtle, but I'm tired of this stupid game and trying to convince even stupider opponents that we mean them no harm, go ahead Kyle tell him who's come to call."

Kyle addressed the droid. "Tell Mister Irwin Scratch, that Kyle is here to see him."

The droid turned to his internal switchboard for a second. "Mister Scratch says to come on in, apartment number three two seven." The rebels dismounted the speeder and entered the turbolift.

"I still want to try to take this guy alive." Said Carek. "Just because we've given up on being subtle, doesn't mean this guy has to die for our impatience."

The turbolift opened, the rebels crossed the foyer and found the corridor that lead to Scratch's apartment. when the rebels turned the corner they saw a concussion missile flying straight for them.

"Challis found out the hard way that you can't deflect one of those things with out it detonating!" Thought Carek as he ignited his lightsaber. "I've got to do something!"

Thinking furiously Carek tried a desperate ploy. "This has got to work!" He said as he called on the Force to telekinetically deflect the missile.

Irwin Scratch watched the missile close with lightning speed, then just before it's terminal homing program could lock-on, the missile deflected away from it's target and continued down the corridor for another fifteen meters exploding against the foyer wall, showering the three men with debris.

"A man portable particle shield?" He said. "That's impossible!"

When the missile suddenly missed them and continued down the hallway, Kyle found that he was holding his breath.

"And to think that I didn't believe in the Force," He said as he spotted the two assassin droids that were the source of the missile and watched Carek leap into contact with the droids.

"When we get back to Planeris, I'm going to have check into this Force thing more closely."

"There is no fear," Thought Carek as he cut through the first droid and turned on the second. "There is the Force!" He said as his lightsaber cut into the second droid leaving it severely damaged, before he could hit again, a blaster bolt destroyed it. Carek spared a quick glance back and saw Kyle's wink. Turning to face Scratch's door, Carek realized that he had been wounded when the missile hit the foyer.

"Well, it's better than being hit by a repeat blaster."

There were two more assassin droid in the room with Scratch. Carek dodged a second missile which went on to blast a large hole in the corridor, he rolled onto he feet

and destroyed the droid that had fired on him. Kyle and Lazarus dove into the room avoiding the missile as well and blasted the last droid apart. Stripped of his droids, Scratch surrendered.

With all the pawns now neutralized, the rebels returned to Barr's watering hole. The rebels entered the bar with weapons at the ready.

"Oh you've won." Said the bartender as he eyed the group's weapons.

"Where is Barr?" Demanded Leland. "I would like to speak with him about life and the joy of helping your fellow man."

"Barr is not here, nor is going to be here anytime in the immediate future. You can dump their bodies over there." Pointing to the dumpster in the alley behind the bar.

Carek spoke up. "You seem to be confused. These people are not dead. We told you we would not kill for you and we haven't."

"Tell that to Filberrg."

"We regret that, we did the best we could to take him alive, but he was too well armed."

"Doesn't matter one way or the other. It was a good game, here's your money."

Pulling a stack of credits from behind the bar and pushing them toward Kyle. Leland snatched the credits and yelled at the barkeep.

"You tell your boss that we will be back! And don't forget the name is Archimedes."

"I'll be sure to tell him the next time I see him. Good day."

"Let's go Leland," Said Carek. "there's nothing we can do now, but I agree with you, this is not over and we will be back." Leland hesitated for a second and said. "Yeah, let's go."

The team lifted for and jumped to Planeris without incident, but for the first time everyone was hoping that somebody would try and start a fight.

"Now I fully understand why the Dark Side is so seductive," Thought Carek as the Spectre entered hyperspace. "I don't think I've ever met someone so devoid of humanity as Barr. It would be easy to try and justify giving into the rage, if it was to exterminate so evil a being. It's a good thing that I've had a chance to meet Challis and see first hand what its like to have to resist the temptation of the Dark Side after having tried it."

Later when Carek was laying in his bunk in his cabin, he smiled to himself as he thought of what Leland had said about Challis.

"She may be creepy now, but that's nothing compared to what she would be like if she ever decides to continue on that path."

Chapter Twelve

The team's next mission was to investigate the coordinates on the data chip found inside SM3PO. Rathbone had cracked the code on the second chip and discovered that it was the log of Sam's previous owner, Terris Occam. The log described Occam's encounter, after a misjump, with an alien lifeform that he called a space whale. The team immediately recognized the creature as the subjugated aliens used as spacecraft by the race of slavers encountered by the team, also after a misjump and again on the zombie planet. The team was authorized to take three Y-wings and the Spectre during their investigation, as the chip implied that the Empire was aware of these coordinates and would probably investigate the space whales as well.

As the team prepped the fighters, an Imperial shuttle with a two X-wing escort landed in the hanger bay. The shuttle was carrying a defecting Imperial naval captain and some rebel POWs that the captain had rescued during his escape. The team assisted in securing the bay, just in case it was a trick. The shuttle's airlock cycled open and out came the Imperial captain and the rebel POWs. The POWs limped into the open and team Bantha got a good look at them, men were Rex the smuggler and most impossible of all Ardent Belial Mo'duaglozen!

The team stood open mouthed for a few seconds, until Carek let loose a whoop of pure joy, leapt up the shuttle's loading ramp, and bearhugged Ardent tightly. Carek was so overjoyed, that he swung Ardent around and around the hanger bay, all the time laughing like a mad man.

It took nearly half an hour to re-establish decorum, the members of team Bantha had a million questions, but time was pressing and they had to wait. There was no question that Ardent and Rex were going on the mission. Andre, however was too young, and had to remain behind.

The trip to the Occam's coordinates was straight forward. Halasa, Leland, and StJohn piloted the Y-wings with Carek, Ardent, and Rathbone as tail gunners. Rex and Melia piloted the Spectre, while Roberts, Kyle, and Lazarus manned the Spectre's guns. The system had a high level of background radiation that obscured sensors, but did not hide the Nebulon-B frigate that held the space whale in a tractor beam.

The team had to fight through the frigate's two TIE squadrons to reach the ship. When the last of the TIEs were destroyed, the frigate dropped the tractor and tried to run. As the frigate fled, StJohn fired a perfectly aimed

proton that completely destroyed the frigate. The space whale escaped the second the tractor was dropped. Once again the team had failed to establish contact with the space whales. However they had prevented the Empire from turning the space whales into ships, which was a victory enough. After returning to Planeris, the team celebrated long into the night; celebrating the return of Rex and Ardent, StJohn's amazing shot, and the miracle of Ardent's survival.

Ardent explained that he had been saved by Imperial intelligence. The Imperials wanted a member of the Wandering Bantha so badly, that they had Ardent put in suspended animation until cybernetic replacements for his damaged organs could be fabricated and Ardent revived. Survival was no blessing for Ardent as he was tortured daily for information about the team and the Rebel Alliance. Ardent resisted the interrogations, but the ordeal had changed him. Ardent somehow managed to retain his sense of humor, he was now cynical and driven to destroy the Empire. However changed he was, the team rejoiced at his return.

The next morning the team was assigned to the Apocalypse.

The Rebel Alliance fleet had been forced into hiding by an enraged Imperial Navy furious over the loss of the Death Star. The Empire was leaving no stone unturned in its attempt to locate and destroy the upstart rebels and their fleet.

The Rebel Alliance High Council however, would not accept a purely defensive role in the fight against the Emperor. The order went out that small raiding forces would conduct raid and fade attacks wherever they could do maximum damage and escape before Imperial forces could respond.

As a part of the ordered raids on the Imperial trade lanes, the Apocalypse and her Four Riders: Death, War, Famine, and Pestilence. The four heavily modified B-wing fighters that formed the core of the Apocalypse's firepower had been behind Imperial lines for twenty-six tense but uneventful hours, when after dropping out of hyperspace the Apocalypse was rocked by heavy thudding against the hull. A quick sensor scan showed that the Apocalypse was moving through the debris of two Victory class and an Imperial class star destroyer.

"What in the twin purple moons of Nimbus could do that to three star destroyers?" Asked Lieutenant Elias the ship's navigator.

"I don't know," Said Captain Arkin commander of the Apocalypse. "but sensors also show that there's an unusual power source on the fifth planet in the system and I've got just the people to go find out what it is." Arkin toggled the PA system and said. "Team Bantha to the briefing room. Team Bantha to the briefing room."

Five minutes later the loosely organized team was assembled. On this mission the team would consist of Carek Argonaut, who had been newly promoted to Major, Lazarus, and Kyle as the team's Marine contingent, plus StJohn and Rathbone as the team pilot and engineer respectively.

Leland Archimedes the team's usual pilot had finally gotten his wish to be assigned to an X-wing, however he had been sent on raid and fade attack and was not available. Halasa had been sent on detached duty as a personal pilot and bodyguard to an Alliance official, while Rex had been sent to officer's school. Andre had left the Alliance after discovering that his older brother had survived the Imperial raid that had killed the rest of his family.

"What do you think took out those destroyers Carek?" Said Lazarus.

"Your guess is as good as mine, but I'm certain that we'll be the first to find out." The door opened. "Here's the Captain."

"Your mission is threefold," Arkin as usual, spoke without preamble. "One, I've got to know what that power source is on the planet. Two, how it destroyed those three ships. And three, can we establish communication. If we can get these people to join the Alliance, considering their obvious firepower, we will finally be able to meet the Imperial fleet on equal terms. I have decided to have Commander Skeror shuttle you to the surface in the Spectre, as I can not allow there to be any chance of them capturing the Spectre and learning the location of the Empire or the Alliance.

"They have shown the ability to destroy the best the Empire has to offer, if they prove to be completely hostile, or if they seem inclined to ally with the Empire, then the Alliance must be protected and the destruction of the power source is to be considered an 'all costs' objective. You will contact us by coded comlink when you know something. Any questions?"

Kyle raised his hand.

"Yes Lieutenant?"

"What do we do after lunch?"

The Spectre dropped down through the overcast. The PA barked. "One minute to LZ." Said Commander Skeror the diminutive pilot of Death, the lead B-wing of the Four Riders of the Apocalypse. Team Bantha waited by the loading ramp as Skeror flew low over the verdant landscape.

"One last thing before you all go," Said Skeror. "I hate all of you. I just wanted you to know that in case you don't come back."

The team looked at each other.

"What's with him?" Said Rathbone.

"Haven't a clue." Said Carek as he adjusted his pack.

Skeror continued. "I think you're all a bunch of over rated windbags. We did just fine without you, and with any luck you won't be coming back from this one." The Spectre settled and the ramp opened. "Now get moving."

The team dismounted in a small clearing in what was otherwise a huge forest that seemed to go on forever. Kyle had been given a positional tracker that kept track of where the team had been dropped in relationship to the power source they had to investigate. They had been dropped only five kilometers from the source, but that was through very heavy forest on a planet rated at 1.3G.

"Come on," Said Lazarus. "lets get this over with."

As the team climbed a slight rise near the top of a small gorge, Kyle spotted something. "Hey guys, there's someone caught under that rock slide down there."

"I'll go with you." Said Carek. "Ardent you better come too."

The three rebels descended carefully, trying not to cause another slide. When they reached the bottom, they found a severely injured female pinned from the waist down. Her skin was so white that it was translucent and she appeared not to have any body hair, but she was otherwise human.

Kyle said after checking the woman's pulse. "She's still alive, quick move these rocks."

As the other the rebels started down the gorge, the three that were already there, attempted to move the rocks pinning the young woman, but with the higher gravity they couldn't make any progress.

"I have a better idea," Said Carek. "You two keep lifting and let me concentrate." Slowly with the aid of the Force, the key rock that pinned the woman started to move,

by the time Rathbone and StJohn reached them the woman was free.

"She's hurt pretty bad," Said Rathbone. "but this medpac will fix her right up."

After a few minutes Rathbone said. "Well, she's stable but she's still out of it, there's nothing more I can do."

"I think I can help." Said Carek as he bent down and put his hands on her brow. Less than a minute later the woman's eyes fluttered open.

"Wh...Who are you?" She croaked in a non-Basic language that was surprisingly close to Ardent's native tongue.

"We are friends," Ardent answered. "where do you live?"

"Who saved me from the land of the dead?" She insisted.

"That would be me." Said Rathbone shyly.

"Then you are a wizard of great power, the chief will want to meet you."

"Which way to your village?" Asked Carek. The woman pointed in a northwesterly direction.

"That's on the way to the power source Carek." Said Kyle after consulting the positional tracker.

"Okay then, we'll be glad to meet your chief. Please lead on." Said Carek.

It took only an hour to reach the woman's village, which was built on platforms in the trees. The woman called for the elders and explained that she had been gathering berries when the rockslide had "killed" her and sent her to the lands of the dead. Then the next thing she knew, the great wizard called her back from the lands of the dead and restored her to the lands of the living. The tribesmen seemed to take heart in the story and cheered loudly. That was until the woman announced her decision to perform the Ma'tu'ath ritual with the wizard.

The Ma'tu'ath ritual was explained by the chief as a ceremonial mating of a great honor.

"What did he say?" Cried Rathbone.

Ardent clearly enjoying his friends embarrassment, chuckled. "He said that it looks like your about to get lucky with yon fair skinned, and I do mean fair skinned, maiden."

"Now just a minute I am not going to mate with someone I don't even know." Said Rathbone.

The chief spoke to Ardent briefly then Ardent turned to Rathbone. "He says that if she is rejected, it means that the wizard has found her unworthy and that to appease the

great wizard for being so insulted the tribe will stone her to death."

Rathbone stood silently for so long that Ardent was about to nudge him, when Rathbone turned to the chief and said in a fairly passible rendering of the local language.

"I fine this one to be perfectly acceptable and am greatly honored by her invitation to participate in the Ma'tu'ath ritual."

The chief grinned broadly and announced the wizard's decision to the crowd, who were delighted and began to chant and dance.

Ardent continued to translate for the members of the team that could not follow. "The chief says that there is to be a feast while the two prepare for and perform the Ma'tu'ath." Suddenly there was a commotion in the crowd as a small man pushed his way through the crowd. "Uh oh, it looks like the little guy is the chief's son," Ardent continued. "and he wants to challenge the wizard for the right to participate in the Ma'tu'ath."

"That little guy?" Asked Rathbone. "I admit I'm nobodies brawler, but I think I can take him."

"There seems to be some misunderstanding, not the little guy, that guy over there." Ardent pointed to a man that was so muscular that even Kyle cringed when he saw him.

"That's not just one guy is it?" Said Lazarus.

"Yes it is," Said Rathbone. "but I think I can appeal to the man mountain in his own tongue." The chief's son listened, and when Rathbone was finished speaking, he smiled broadly and walked away. "There you go," Said Rathbone. "he actually seemed rather reasonable."

"Uh, I got bad news for you," Said Ardent watching the crowd clear a space and the chief's son begin to limber up. "you don't speak the language as well as you think you do. You just accepted his challenge and wished him good luck."

"Wh..Wh.. What!" Stammered Rathbone.

"You have just accepted..."

"I know what you just said. I meant I can't fight him."

Ardent shook his head sadly. "Yes you can. Its not like you have a choice, the way you accepted was a ritual acceptance that binds your honor and his. Now you had better get ready."

Rathbone looked around him desperately and for a second looked like he would bolt, when he bowed his head and seemed to accept his fate.

"I'll give what help through the Force I can." Said Carek as Rathbone moved into the clearing.

"Gee thanks Carek," Said Rathbone not trying to hide the sarcasm in his voice. "I don't know what I would do without you."

The chief clapped his hands and his son rushed Rathbone. Rathbone tried to dodge, but in the heavy gravity he didn't stand a chance. The chief's son punched Rathbone square in the face and knocked him out in one punch.

"Oh brother, I better do something." Thought Carek as Rathbone folded to the ground. When the chief's son turned to the crowd and raised his arms in triumph, no one was watching the wizard or his friends. Carek reached out with the Force to bring Rathbone back to consciousness and telepathically said. "You know your going to have to learn to duck better than that, if you plan on winning this thing."

"I'm working on it," Slurred Rathbone. "he's just faster than I thought he would be."

"Don't forget that the gravity is no hindrance to him and you'll be alright, now get in there and keep your guard up."

The crowd and the chief's son stood with slack jaws when Rathbone staggered to his feet, and renewed the challenge. This time, Carek aided Rathbone and after a couple minutes of sparring, they were able to coordinate their attack and throw the chief's son hard enough to knock him senseless. The reputation of the 'wizard' was now set, there would be no further challenges to the Ma'tu'ath ritual.

As locals took Rathbone and the rescued woman to the special chamber, a large curtained room carved into a tree, while the chief himself hosted the feast on the main platform built between half-a-dozen of the largest trees in the village.

The meal was of roasted lizard meat and was surprisingly good. The feast was festive with many a crude gesture and comment pointed both at the Ma'tu'ath chamber and at the chief's sulking son.

The feast was well on its way, when the nonoccupied members of the team heard a sound approaching that was impossible for the stone-age natives to understand.

"Those are repulsor lifts!" Said Kyle as he jumped to his feet and tried to see deeper into the forest.

StJohn grabbed his macrobinoculars and Carek used the Force to magnify his vision giving both the same view.

"Four armed grav sleds." StJohn said tersely. "Non-Imperial."

"Each has four lizard-like crew," Said Carek as he shut down the Force magnification. "and they're headed straight for the village."

The team cleared for action as the sound got louder. Soon the sound was plain to all and the chief spoke to Ardent.

"He wants to know what's going on." Before anyone could answer, the sleds burst into the clearing and opened fire. The chief may not have comprehended by what means his village was being attacked, but he understood enough to call for his warriors and organize the defense of his people.

"What's that the chief keeps saying?" Carek asked Ardent as the team opened fire on the lizard men.

"He's talking too fast, I can't understand much, but he keeps calling for the warriors to bring 'firestones.'"

At that moment, the lizard men grounded their sleds and dismounted. Eight of them-detecting the high tech weapons-engaged the team, the rest of them began searching the village. The lizards did not carry any weapons and rushed at the team to get into melee range. The team found out two things right away.

First, the lizards were hard to stop with blaster pistols. Kyle unleashed a storm of fire that cut down three of them as they rushed the common platform, but had to fire on them twice each to do so. StJohn following Kyle's lead fired twice to stop the one rushing him.

And second, their blood was corrosive. Lazarus discovered this when fired on his attacker at point blank range, was sprayed by the lizard's blood, and fell to the ground mortally wounded.

"What the..." Carek's half formed thought of Lazarus' psychic scream was interrupted by a pair of lizards rushing him simultaneously. Trusting to the Force, gave Carek the fraction of a second he needed to glance at the lizard standing over the fallen Lazarus. "If I don't get to Lazarus in the next few seconds he's not going to make it."

Unfortunately, the lizards were fast enough to take advantage of Carek's distraction and forced him onto the defensive. Carek's lightsaber flashed twice in parry and both lizards fell. Carek was doused in the acid of both of them but thanks to the Force he was unharmed. "One more to go." Said Carek as he leaped and cut down the lizard that had felled Lazarus. "Hang in there buddy," He said as he

placed his hands on Lazarus' brow. "help is here." Carek reached deep into the Force to tap into the energy that surrounds everything and transferred some of that energy into Lazarus to put him into a form of suspended animation, thus stabilized, Lazarus could hold out until somebody could get to him with a medpac.

When Carek looked up from Lazarus, he saw Ardent fighting the last lizard with his vibroblade. As he watched, he saw the lizard slip under Ardent's guard and rend him severely. Ardent was knocked from the platform to fall to sure death.

"NO!" Carek cried as he used the Force to catch Ardent and pull him to land safely near where Lazarus lay. Kyle saw Ardent fall and blasted the lizard, thus finishing off the eight that had attacked the team.

Meanwhile in the Ma'tu'ath chamber, Rathbone had struggled to his feet and his pants as soon as he heard the blasters. Before he could find his boots, the curtain was thrown open and a lizard man entered the room. Armed only with a hold-out blaster, Rathbone tapped some unknown reserve to fire on and hit the lizard three times. The lizard folded up and dropped from the tree.

The seven remaining lizards sensing that the tide of battle had changed, began retreated back towards the sleds. From his position, Carek could see that the locals seemed unsure of how to advance.

Leaping to his feet Carek called to the locals. "To me. To me. They are beaten and can be routed if you keep up the pressure. Be not of faint heart, they can and will be routed." His words had an electric effect on the locals and did lead to a rout of the lizards.

The lizards made it to their sleds and began blasting the supports of the common platform, but before they could escape one of the warriors fired a sling at a sled causing it to burst into flames, killing the three lizards. "So that's what the chief meant by fire stones." Thought Carek as the weakened platform shook and dumped both him and StJohn towards the forest floor below. Carek managed to catch himself and he used the Force to steady the wounded. StJohn landed heavily and was wounded in the fall.

The last four lizards tried to use the confusion to escape. Kyle and Carek ran for one of the sleds and took off in pursuit. The sled was armed with a crude blaster. Carek missed with a couple shots before turning to Kyle. "Get us in close and I'll take care of them."

"You got it Carek." The lizards now aware of pursuit, fired their blaster as they dodged through the trees.

The team members had an encounter of the too close kind when to evade one of the lizard's shots, Kyle scraped a tree.

"Save the bark collecting for another day Kyle." Said Carek through clinched jaws as he deflected another blaster bolt.

"If you think it's easy to dodge these trees, their fire, and your bloody lightsaber, then you're welcome to try it."

Eventually Kyle managed to get in close enough for Carek to hit and the lizard's sled disintegrated in a ball of flame.

"Let's hope that's all of them," Said Kyle as they landed in the village. "we got pretty beat up, for fighting guys without blasters."

"Well, considering that they bleed acid, are fast as blazes and know how to use those claws of theirs," Carek returned as they walked to where Rathbone was waiting. "I think we got off fairly lightly."

"Lazarus and Ardent are inside," Said Rathbone. "they'll be fine but they aren't fully healed yet. StJohn was only lightly wounded so he's okay now. The Chief said he had never seen anything like these lizard guys before so no info there. Our biggest problem is a lack of medpacs if anyone else gets hurt."

"We'll just have to set a guard in case they return before Roberts gets here tomorrow." Said Kyle.

"The chief's already set that and a couple other things up already."

"Now what?" Said Carek.

"Nothing bad Carek, we have to participate in another ritual. Our defense of the village has made us members of the village. However in order to consummate our status as a villager, we have to consummate with a villager.

"You don't mean..."

"You got it, we all get to do the Ma'tu'ath."

"Well, When in Imperial City. Do as an Imperial. I guess." Said Kyle.

The next morning, the Spectre landed just long enough for Roberts to off load, and then it was gone. Roberts looked the village up and down.

"Typical, typical."

"Any word from our loving leader?" Said Lazarus still recovering from his acid bath.

"Nothing beyond the 'I want a report from those boneheads by sundown or they'll all answer to me.' sort of stuff. What happened to you."

Lazarus updated Roberts on the status of the mission as the team was preparing to leave the village. The chief had decided to give his 'darkskinned brothers' a guide to aid them find the Wyrms' Maw where a mountain had dropped from the sky two days ago. The location of the Wyrms' Maw and the power source coincided and was only three kilometers away. The biggest disappointment came when Roberts reported that he only had two medpacs, this meant the group would only have three and considering the lethality of the aliens encountered the day before, team Bantha was-for the first time-worried. However having no real choice they set off to explore the Wyrms' Maw.

Team Bantha reached the Wyrms' Maw with the help of the guide and the positional tracker in only three hours, which was unheard of by local standards. The Maw was a huge gouge a hundred kilometers long ending in a large clearing. It looked like a knife had been drawn across the planet's surface and was very reminiscent of the scar that the Wandering Bantha had left when it crashed on the planet Tosca. What set the Bantha's crash site and the Worm's Maw apart was the hundred meter tall stone spire in the center of the clearing. The team's guide became very excited and began to speak rapidly.

"What's he on about?" Said Lazarus.

"He said, 'That is the mountain that flew through the sky two days ago.'" Translated Ardent. "He remembers what it looked like exactly, because while most people in the village fled or cowered from the great flying mountain, he was rooted in place by his fear and saw it clearly as it passed over the village and that if he lives to be a thousand he will never forget what the mountain looked like."

Kyle consulted the positional tracker. "That spire is the power source we're looking for and to make the sabacc pot sweeter, that clearing is the best landing spot for hundreds of kilometers."

Carek had been standing quietly during this exchange, for he had been using the Force to examine the stone spire. "Look near the top, He said. "there are four repulsor sleds with our lizard friends flitting around the and it looks like they're doing something to the spire."

Before anyone could respond to Carek's observations, they all heard the now familiar sound of an approaching sled.

"Quick take cover!" Shouted Kyle.

The team spread out into the available cover, but not fast enough. Ardent tarried too long making sure that the guild was hidden and was spotted by the crew in the sled. The sled's crew was so intent on Ardent, that Kyle and Roberts were able to blast both of them so quickly that they didn't have time to call for help. The sled heavily loaded with barrels landed on its own roughly fifteen meters from the team.

"Quick Roberts get the to the sled and get it out of sight." Said StJohn.

"On the way." But before Roberts was more than half way to the sled another sled appeared. "Typical, typical." He said as he dove for cover.

The team fired on the second sled, but this time the gunner lasted long enough to try to get his weapon to bear. Kyle killed the gunner before he could take an aimed shot, but this caused the gunner's shot to go wide and hit the barrels of the first sled. A massive explosion ripped through the forest as the cargo and the sled burst into flames. This proved to be too much for the guide who took this moment to flee.

"So much for the quiet diplomatic approach." Said Carek as he watched the four sleds peel away from the spire and race toward them.

"Rathbone!"

"Over here."

"When the team opens up, make a break for that little gully. We're going to work in close to the spire and check it out."

"Why do I get the feeling this is a bad idea?" Muttered Rathbone as the team began firing and he followed Carek down the gully.

"Okay Roberts," Said StJohn as Carek and Rathbone waited for their cue. "on three we blast the sled on the right."

"Is that their right, or our right?"

StJohn found himself turning to look at his comrade to see if he had suddenly taken leave of his senses, and found Roberts grinning ear to ear.

"Got ya."

"It's a good thing we're busy right now, like I said on three."

Roberts and StJohn were the first of the team to fire. The lizard's sled proved to be of relatively weak construction as StJohn's fire brought the sled down, killing one lizard and wounding the other three. Two sleds

flew past the team to disappear into the ever present woods, the fourth sled landed and unloaded its crew of four.

"I'm not in the mood for an acid bath today fellas," Said Roberts. "so I guess there's only one way to handle this."

Trusting to the Force and taking careful aim, Roberts proceeded to blast all three of the lizards that survived the crash of the sled as well as the four that landed safely. However the lizards had already proved to be very hard to kill, and three lizards survived the combination of crash and blaster bolts to rush Lazarus and Roberts.

Roberts blasted the one lizard heading for him, as Lazarus took out one of two lizards rushing him. Kyle jumped in and blasted the second. Which had unfortunately gotten close enough to Lazarus that he was splashed with acid again and incapacitated. Roberts caught in the act of moving to support Lazarus, was close enough to be wounded by the spray.

"That was what I was hoping to avoid." Groaned Roberts as rolled to his feet.

"Sorry," Said Kyle. "that's what I was trying to avoid too. I..."

Kyle stopped in midsentence, and snapped off four shots from his heavy blaster. Roberts wheeled around and saw Kyle's fire had killed two and wounded two of the eight lizards now approaching. Taking advantage of the lizards momentary distraction, Ardent with vibroblade at the ready engaged one of the lizards, which in turn bared its formidable claws and the two joined battle.

"I'm going to try and get one of those sleds." Said Roberts as he limped forward hampered by the painful acid burns and the heavy gravity.

"Start from the right, our right, and work your way in." Said StJohn as he moved up to help Kyle.

Kyle had just spotted the first lizard to be wearing something other than a blue vest and tool belt. "Fine with me, but I've got the guy in gold."

"Fair enough."

Both men trusted to the Force and easily cut down the five blue vested lizards advancing on them, but the gold lizard continued to advance despite being hit three times.

"I think we've got a problem." Said StJohn.

"This is one time I wish the Jedi were here." Replied Kyle.

Meanwhile Ardent had finally broke through the lizard's guard and wounded him. The lizard grunted sharply and laid Ardent low with a vicious backhanded slash.

"Not again!" Kyle groaned as he saw Ardent fall from the corner of his eye. he ignited his jetpack, blasted the lizard twice while on the fly, landed next to Ardent and slapped a medpac on him to stabilize him, and fired twice on the gold lizard to boot.

The gold lizard stood his ground and responded by firing blue bolts of energy at Kyle. StJohn found cover and joined Kyle in firing on the gold lizard.

While StJohn and Kyle fought the gold lizard, Roberts had just reached a sled when the gold lizard noticed him and hit him with one of his bolts of energy. Unlike Kyle who was protected be the energy shield captured from Darekk, Roberts took the bolt square and was incapacitated.

As the rest of the team fought with the gold lizard, Carek and Rathbone finally reached the base of the spire.

"We've got to find a way inside this thing." Said Carek as he scanned the spire looking for an entrance.

"Are you really sure you want to do that?" Responded Rathbone. "I don't think they're just going to let us waltz aboard their ship."

As Carek considered this, the crew of the spire let it be known that Carek and Rathbone had been detected during their approach by extending half-a-dozen laser turrets.

"I knew this was a bad idea."

"Never mind that, run for it!"

Carek and Rathbone only covered half the distance to the woodline before the spire opened fire. Fortunately capital ship weapons are not designed to engage man-sized targets and the lizard's weaponry was underpowered by Imperial standards, but nothing could save them from the fact that they had been very nearly hit by a weapon designed to punch through shields and heavy armor. Both men considered themselves lucky that they got away with only being wounded by the near miss.

As Carek and Rathbone beat a hasty retreat from the deadly spire, StJohn and Kyle had finally found a weak spot in the gold lizard's defense. A lucky break had caused both Kyle's and StJohn's to hit the lizard in the same leg at the same time which had finally wounded the gold lizard.

"Did you see that," Said Kyle as he recoiling from the lizard's energy bolts. "Did you see the way Goldies' shielding wavered for a second when we both hit him in the same place."

"Yeah, I caught that. On three."

Kyle and StJohn fired simultaneously and hit the lizard in the already weakened leg. The result was immediate and catastrophic, the lizard in gold exploded.

When the gold lizard exploded, the spire apparently had no further reason to remain on the planet and took off with a thunderous roar that stunned everyone on the ground. Team Bantha struggled back to their feet and began to patch up the wounded. Carek was moving through the wounded doing what he could to control his comrade's pain when his comlink call tone sounded.

"Lieutenant Argonaut."

"This is Lieutenant Elias, I am inbound to your location, ETA two minutes. That energy source of yours has attacked the Apocalypse and things are jumping. If you all aren't aboard the Spectre two minutes after I land, you better like it here, because you'll be a resident. Elias out."

"Doesn't anybody on that tub have a sense of humor." Muttered Carek. "Okay everybody, we got us a quick dustoff coming. Kyle grab Laz. StJohn get Roberts. Lets look lively, the Spectre will be here in two minutes."

The Spectre landed exactly two minutes later and to Lieutenant Elias' surprise, took off less than one minute after that. The Spectre pulled three Gs during Elias' full power liftoff. When the ship made orbit, the rebels found the Apocalypse and her riders fully engaged with the lizard's ship and taking a severe beating. The Spectre raced in to assist, but it was too late for the B-wing known as Famine, which exploded from a direct hit.

"Apocalypse to Spectre! Apocalypse to Spectre! Request ETA!" The comm panel of the Spectre barked, Mott Davies, the Apocalypse's communications officer's, voice had the strident sound of a man on the ragged edge of panic.

"Elias to Apocalypse. ETA fifteen seconds to rendezvous. Hang in there Mott, we've got you covered."

"You don't intend to fight that thing do you?" Said Carek.

Elias turned to Carek, but the Spectre's course never wavered. "I intend to assist my shipmates in any way I can, is that a problem? You pathetic excuse for a Jedi!"

"No sir." Said Carek as he left the bridge. "I have complete confidence in the gunner's of this ship to assist the Apocalypse."

When Carek was certain that Elias was too preoccupied to notice he Lazarus and Rathbone began loading the wounded into the escape pod.

"I just don't have as much confidence in you," Said Carek to no one in particular as he loaded Ardent into the pod. "and there may not be enough time to save the wounded if we get hit later."

In the fifteen seconds it took the Spectre to reach the Apocalypse, the B-wing Pestilence was destroyed and the Apocalypse took three solid hits causing severe damage. The Apocalypse and the two surviving B-wings, Death and War scored several hits of their own that left the spire just as severely damaged. StJohn, Kyle and Roberts opened fire during the Spectre's approach in an effort to draw the lizard's ship away from the now reeling Apocalypse.

The spire curved away from the badly battered Apocalypse, giving her a much needed respite, to engage the remaining fighters and the Spectre. Lieutenant Elias took advantage of the now widening gap between the spire and the Apocalypse, to press home the attack. Kyle and Commander Skeror in the B-wing Death, bracketed the spire with a well aimed series of hits that left the spire dead in space. Commander Skeror then fired all his remaining protons and blew the spire apart.

As the crew of the Spectre began to relax there was a desperate call over the comm panel.

"Apocalypse to all ships we need immediate assistance!"

"By the twin purple moons of Nimbus!" Said Elias as turned toward the Apocalypse and saw the reason for the distress call. "The spire had dropped antimatter mines before she turned to fight us! So that's how that one ship managed to destroy three Star Destroyers." Activating the PA he said. "Gunners, new targets bearing 143 mark 19. Fire at will."

The two surviving fighters and the Spectre managed to destroy the mines before they could make direct contact with the Apocalypse, but could not prevent the ship from being crippled by the mines that exploded in close proximity from the rebels pinpoint fire.

"Bridge to Engineering, damage report!" Said Captain Arkin from the smoke choked bridge.

"Not good Captain." Said the Chief Engineer. "Any system you care to name is either offline or completely destroyed. We're running on reserve power for the life support."

Captain Arkin surveyed the damage he could see and said. "This may just be the Apocalypse if we can't get the drive online."

"I'll call you back when I know more. Engineering out."

A crewman approached the captain. "Casualty report sir."

"How bad?"

"Thirty-six KIA, twenty-two WIA, only seventeen able, sir."

"Doesn't anyone have any good news?" Muttered Arkin.

"Team Bantha was recovered with three WIA and four able, sir." The crewman offered.

"I said good news, not more bad news." Arkin pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes, to the crewman he said. "Very good son, dismissed."

At that precise moment Death, War and the Spectre docked in what was left of the ship's hanger bay.

"Don't just stand there," Said Commander Skeror. "there's too much work for you to be standing around looking anymore stupid than you already look."

The team and the rest of the crew snapped out of their shock and split up to assist wherever they could be of the most use. Rathbone, Kyle, and StJohn went to Engineering. Ardent, Lazarus, and Roberts went to sickbay as patients. Carek went to sickbay with the wounded to apply the Force to control pain and to accelerate healing.

After three days of twenty hour shifts the Apocalypse was still not ready for hyperspace travel. The sublight drive was back online to provide power and mobility. Three of the ship's weapons were functioning, but only the port side shields were online.

Most of Team Bantha was working in Engineering to splice a by-pass to the starboard engine's hyperspace motivator. StJohn was working in the hanger bay trying to patch up some damage to the B-wing Death, when the general quarters klaxon sounded.

"Red alert! Red alert!"

The Apocalypse lurched to her now greatly reduced top speed, but no further commands came from the bridge. In fact the ship did not seem to be maneuvering or firing.

"What are they doing up there?" Said Kyle as he walked over the intercomm. "Engineering to Bridge. You want to give us a clue what you're doing up there?"

There was no answer.

"I'm not sure what's going on, but something is very wrong." Said Carek. "Rathbone you take charge of Engineering. The rest of you follow me."

Carek and company reached the bridge and found a charnal house. The entire bridge crew was dead at their

stations, burned beyond recognition. Arkin, Skeror, helmsman, navigator, everyone. Out the viewport, coming around for another pass, was the ship that had killed them.

"Saurian raiders!" Yelled Carek as he manned the helm. "Laz help me on the bridge. Kyle, Roberts, Man the guns." Turning to the intercomm. he said. "Rathbone bring the shields online we've got company."

"Don't you mean bring the shield, as in singular shield, online?"

"You know bloody well what I mean. Get that shield up now!"

The Saurian raiders lanced in for the kill, the Apocalypse turned like a drunken tauntaun, but somehow Carek was able to get the shielded side turned toward the attackers. When the raider's ship flashed past the Apocalypse, there came the comforting sound of turbolasers firing.

"Good work guys!" Thought Carek as the Saurin ship shuddered from a direct hit.

The door to the bridge opened and StJohn entered.

"What in the blue blazes is going on here?" He said.

"Saurian raiders, here take the helm."

"Got it, where are you going?"

"There's one more turbolaser back there that needs a gunner. Keep the port side towards them."

Carek ran back to the port midship turbolaser, and quickly eased the weapon through its start up sequence. By the time the targeting screen was up, the Saurian ship was right on top of them. Carek had no time for anything other than a snap shot. The half aimed shot struck the Saurian raider squarely in the engine room, there was a small flash as the atmosphere superheated, then the Saurian's ship exploded.

The casualties from the Saurian attack had reduced the Apocalypse to thirty, with only twelve of them able. The worst losses had been among the officers. The senior officer was the Weapons Officer, but she was too seriously wounded to command. Carek and StJohn had to take command of the Apocalypse. Rathbone now the senior engineer, was able rig the hyperdrive enough that he was reasonably sure that they would take them to Planeris.

Carek-by virtue of the Force-was the most qualified astrogator and it was he who laid in the plot. It took the Apocalypse forty hours to limp back to Planeris. Once the crew was debriefed, team Bantha was summoned to fleet headquarters.

"Do think they found some secret memo from Arkin ordering our execution?" Said Lazarus as the team walked to headquarters.

"I wouldn't be surprised if they did," Responded Kyle. "The Force knows, he didn't like us."

"'Didn't like us' is putting it mildly at best," Said Roberts. "I got the feeling that we were pretty lucky he didn't dump us out the airlock the first time he saw us."

"I don't think he would have actually thrown us out an airlock,"

Added Carek. "but his dislike for us was immistakable. Well here we are." Carek came to his full height before the admiral's aide-de-camp and said. "Team Bantha reporting as ordered."

"The admiral is finishing a briefing," The aide said. "he will be with you in just a moment. Please have a seat."

Five minutes later the intercomm buzzed. The aide spoke briefly and turned to the team.

"The admiral will see you now."

The 'admiral' turned out to Fleet Admiral Ackbar himself.

"Good to meet you all at last." He said. "Your most recent exploits have reached the attention of the Alliance High Council. To get right to the point, you are all to be decorated, promoted, and when the Apocalypse clears the repair dock, you will be reassigned to her command crew under her newly promoted Captain Challis. May I add my personal congratulations for a job well done. If you continue to display the kind of heroism, and results that your record shows here, you might just find yourselves commanding one of our star cruisers. Dismissed."

The team walked back to their quarters in silence, they were that dumfounded.

Chapter Thirteen

The Apocalypse was finally free of the repair dock. Six weeks after her near fatal battle with the spire, Alliance engineers had declared her spaceworthy again. The crew of the Apocalypse had also suffered in what had almost been her last battle, of an original compliment of seventy-five crewers, only twenty-eight would join her out of the repair dock. Furthermore, only two of the modified B-wings known as the four riders of the Apocalypse, survived their last ride. The destroyed B-wings having been replaced by a pair of standard X-wings.

As a result of the high number of casualties among the officers of the Apocalypse, her command staff had to be almost completely replaced. The late Captain Arkin had been replaced by the newly promoted Captain Challis ex-commander of base station Heracles. Other key personnel that had been recently promoted included: Executive Officer Commander StJohn Hawk, Chief Engineer Ensign Rathbone Loegin, and Marine Commander Captain Carek Argonaut.

The team would however no longer include Rex and Roberts, for they had decided to leave the Alliance. Rex had decided that after attending officer's school, that he would rather return to his first love, that of tramp freighter captain. He and Roberts pooled their credits and purchased an old stock light and left the day before the Apocalypse left the repair dock.

The Apocalypse's first mission since clearing the repair dock would be to conduct negotiations with the Mon-Calamari. The meeting would be held in a remote area of the Empire and would concern the Mon-Calamari desire to further assist the Alliance.

During the outbound trip to the rendezvous, the Apocalypse responded to controls well and the trip was accomplished without problem. The Mon-Calamari had arrived ahead of time in one of their beautiful passenger ships that had been converted into a warship.

"Signal our guests that we will be docking in fifteen minutes." Said Captain Challis. When she received acknowledgment from the communications officer, she turned to face her staff. "We are about to begin very important negotiations. None of you, nor I are experienced diplomats. We have however been trusted to do what's best for the Alliance. We will meet in dress uniforms in ten minutes. Any questions? Very well, dismissed."

"Dress uniforms in ten minutes, has she lost her mind?" Said Rathbone as the members of Team Bantha that had been assigned to the crew of the Apocalypse, rushed back to their quarters to change.

"Have you forgotten that she's a Jedi?" Responded Lazarus.

"Or do think that she's so bedazzled by your technical abilities that she doesn't mind a little insubordination?" Added Kyle. "I think you're the one whose lost their mind. Now get a move on!"

The team and select members of the crew of the Apocalypse, met with the Mon-Calamari aboard the Mon-Cal cruiser Hope. The meeting was drawn out as each clause was covered in meticulous detail. After eight hours of negotiations, Captain Challis pulled StJohn aside.

"This is going to take several more hours to conclude," She said. "and I had wanted to contact the mining cartels on the planet De'lamar while we were in the area. I want you to get team Bantha on the Spectre, get to De'lamar, and see if you can negotiate mineral rights for the Alliance without letting them know that."

"You got it Skipper," Said StJohn. "anything to get out of that meeting and out of this monkey suit."

The Spectre launched twenty minutes later with StJohn Hawk, Rathbone Loegin, Carek Argonaut, Ardent Belial Mo'dugalozen, Lazarus Maxenties, and Kyle on board. It was only a two hour hyperjump to the De'lamar system from the rendezvous point, and the jump was accomplished without mishap.

"De'lamar Traffic Control," Said Carek from the co-pilot's seat. "this is the free trader Spectre requesting landing clearance. Over"

"Free Trader Spectre assume parking orbit alpha alpha niner two four and state your business here on De'lamar."

"We have to tell Traffic Control why we're here," Said Ardent who always came up to the bridge to observe landings and departures. "what kind of planet is this anyway?"

"A busy one, going by the number of bulk transports both in system and in orbit." Said StJohn. "I guess they don't have time for ships that just want to engage in idle chatter."

"So they screen them in orbit. Very efficient." Added Carek. "Well we have to tell him something soon or he is going to get suspicious."

"Let me talk to them," Said StJohn. "De'lamar Traffic Control, we are here to establish a trading contract for high grade copper and tungsten ore."

"Free trader Spectre, understand your wish to negotiate a trading contract. State whom you are negotiating for."

StJohn looked at Carek. "Now what do I say?"

"Uh..." Carek thought furiously. "Bespin! Tell him the Bespin Trading Cartel."

StJohn turned back to the comm panel. "We represent the Bespin Trading Cartel, and we would prefer not to discuss any further business details on an open frequency. If you get where I'm coming from."

"We understand Spectre. You are clear to land docking bay one ninety four."

When the Spectre touched down, a group of security men met the team as they walked down the loading ramp.

"Welcome to De'lamar." Said Security Chief Robinson. "It is our policy that no weapons are allowed. You may leave your weapons on board your ship or you can turn them in to security."

"Why do I feel that I've heard this song before." Thought Carek as he recalled the team's visit to Alderaan.

"We will leave our weapons on the ship. Thank you." Said StJohn. "We would speak to the head of your mining cartel to setup the contract we talked about."

"The Director is not on planet, he is inbound from Bespin and will be here in a few hours. I can take you on a tour of our facilities and then you may wait in the foyer of his office if you like."

"We would like that very much." Said Ardent. "Lead on good sir."

The tour lasted thirty minutes, it consisted of a view of the mines themselves, the smelting plant, the storage facilities, and as they returned to where the tour had started, the Admin building. The team was then shown a comfortable conference room.

"The Director will be here in a little over an hour, please make yourselves comfortable." Said their guide Robinson.

"Thank you again Chief Robinson," Said StJohn. "we look forward to meeting the Director."

When Robinson left, StJohn turned to the team. "Impressions?"

Before anyone could speak Carek staggered as if struck and gasped. "Something's wrong...I just felt a strong disturbance in the Force. I think we're in trouble."

"Do you have any clear ideas as to the nature of the disturbance?" Asked Lazarus.

"No, but I will try to see if the Force will give me a clearer impression."

"I don't know anything about the Force," Said Rathbone. "but our hosts have been nice enough to put us in a room with a computer terminal, and I think its time to let our fingers do the walking. Come on Kyle you're mister security by-pass and I'm going to need your help."

"Sure thing Rath, I want to know what's going on too."

Thus they began traveling two completely different paths to learn the truth. Kyle and Rathbone took the more mundane path of breaking through the computer's security to sift through their host's files. Carek took the path less traveled, by searching with the Force to see what was to be, or since the future is always in motion, what was likely to be.

Carek sat stiffly and concentrated. He then closed his eyes, when he spoke again, he spoke slowly with a dream-like quality to his voice. "Danger! Three-emm move the ship closer! Blasters everywhere! ARRGH! I'm hit!"

Carek slumped in his seat and Lazarus rushed to his side.

"Carek are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine I guess." Carek exhaled heavily. "At least I'll be fine until I get hit."

"You yourself said that you would be seeing only a possible future. You said that actions taken now can change that future."

"You keep very good track of what I say don't you?" Smiling now Carek turned to the team.

"We've got to get out of here guys. I saw extreme danger for us if we stay."

"Do you know what the danger is?" Said StJohn.

"I've got a good idea," Rathbone said from the computer terminal. "it looks like our hosts have been sending large amounts of ore to Coruscant, so it's a safe bet that the danger you sense is an Imperial ambush."

"So then let's bug out while we still have the chance." Said Lazarus.

Ardent walked over to the door and found it locked. "Looks like our hosts like us so much that they don't want us to leave." He said.

"I think I can fix that." Said Kyle as he went to work on the lock.

Fifteen seconds later the door opened, surprising the two men guarding the door.

"Wh..Where do think your going?" The brighter of the two men asked.

Carek responded with an imperious voice that he had been taught by both his noble father and by the Alliance Command and Staff school that he had just attended prior to being promoted to major.

"My associates and I are returning to our ship to obtain the copy of the Bospin Trading Cartel's perspectus to show your Director when he arrives. You don't want to keep the Director waiting do you?"

"I..Uh, No sir!"

"Good. Mister Hawk and Mister Loegin will stay here while we're gone."

"Uh, sir?"

"What is it now?"

"You have to have an escort, sir."

"Very well get a move on."

Carek, Kyle, Lazarus, Ardent, and the now thoroughly confused guard headed for the Spectre. While the rest of the team were headed to the ship, Rathbone and StJohn continued to search the computer for information.

"Well look at that." Said Rathbone.

"Oh bloody great," Responded StJohn. "a pair of Imperial shuttles and a Victory class Star Destroyer. Those guys better hustle or we'll get a close up look at the Imperial facilities at the Kessel spice mines."

"I can signal them and let them know what's going on."

"Go ahead, they've got to know."

Ardent's comlink beeped softly.

"Go ahead." He whispered.

"It looks like a couple of old friends are on their way to visit you." Said Rathbone hoping fervently that Ardent would understand what he was trying to say without being so obvious that the guard would understand.

"Friends?"

"Yeah friends, and they've got their big brother looking over their shoulder."

"Ohhh those friends, don't worry we'll handle it."

The group had just reached the blast doors to the hanger, when Ardent pulled out his holdout blaster, shot the guard and grabbed the fallen blaster carbine.

"We got a couple of what I guess to be shuttles inbound and a larger ship in orbit." He said.

"Well then, I better get this door open." Said Kyle as opened the blast door's access panel.

"Now it's time for us to get out." Said StJohn.

"I had hoped you would say that," Said Rathbone. "and I have just the plan to get past the guard." He entered the office's fresher and pulled out his holdout blaster. "This ought to get his attention." He thought as he fired a bolt at the bowl of the toilet.

The muffled 'WHUMP' followed by an indignant, "What kind of place is this!" Brought the guard running into the room and right into a blaster bolt.

"Lets go!" Said StJohn as he scooped up the guard's blaster.

"How come you get the carbine? It was my idea."

"Why should I deny you the use of that holdout blaster, when you obviously have so much skill with it?"

"Oh never mind, let's get to the ship."

"Ready when you are Carek." Said Kyle.

Carek felt a touch of deja'vu as he took Ardent's comlink. "Three-emm bring the ship as close to door as you can."

The familiar, albeit muffled sound of blasters could be heard even over the repulsor drive of the Spectre and the frantic beeping of Three-emm.

"What's wrong with him?" Asked Lazarus.

"He keeps saying, 'They're shooting at me. They're shooting at me.' I guess this is the first time that he's ever been shot under fire." Into his comlink Carek said. "When your as close as you can get, set down with the ramp facing the blast door and give us two long and two short beeps."

More frantic beeps and then what Carek hoped was the binary equivalent of an okay. Kyle sat waiting with the two wires that would open the blast doors.

"I'm ready when you are." He nervously repeated.

Carek's comlink beeped with the required two long two short signal from Three-emm.

"Do it."

Kyle touched the two wires together and the huge blast doors sprang open. The sound of the blasters of two full platoons of stormtroopers no longer muffled was deafening.

"By the Force the blasters are everywhere." Thought Carek as the four rebels ran for the loading ramp ten meters away.

Kyle and Lazarus dodging wildly managed to make it across the open space and into the ship. Ardent and Carek followed also dodging madly but this time the troopers were ready.

"Ardent break right!!" Screamed Carek as a squad of stormtroopers popped up from behind some crates.

Ardent wheeled to face the new threat, and a bolt grazed him across the left shoulder, as Carek turned toward Ardent he was hit himself. Ardent stunned by the shock of the near miss, still managed to reach the ship.

"ARRGH I'm hit!" Thought Carek fighting against the darkness trying to surround him. "I can't blackout!" He said as he staggered on and reached into the Force to tap the energy that surrounds every living thing and to use that energy to keep himself moving, basking in the glow of the Force, Carek used that energy to block away the pain and ran onto the ship with blaster bolts spattering all around him.

Kyle, Lazarus, and Ardent had reached the gunner's seats of the Spectre and had begun to engage the stormtroopers who had set up heavy repeat blasters in the hanger. Carek ran forward to the bridge and activated the navigation computer to begin plotting their course back to the Apocalypse.

"Lazarus."

"What? Kyle."

"Look behind that cluster of stormtroopers at eleven o'clock."

"You mean those barrels?"

"Yeah. Those barrels are marked 'Flammable handle with care.'"

"So what's the plan?"

"When I give the signal, you unload on those repeat blasters and I'll handle with care."

Kyle nudged Ardent to clue him in on the plan and the turrets of the Spectre shifted slightly.

"Now!"

The guns of the Spectre spoke as one catching the Imperials completely off guard. Lazarus trusted to the Force and destroyed all four heavy blasters that had been causing the most trouble. Ardent concentrated on crippling the two shuttles and managed to cause heavy damage to both.

Kyle's shots to the causal observer seemed to be way off target, until the palletized barrels of chemicals began exploding. The two shuttles were caught in the blast and left severely damaged, a third of the stormtroopers were also in the blast radius, which markedly reduced the volume of fire on the Spectre.

While the stormtroopers were recovering from the effects of the secondary chemical explosions, Rathbone and

StJohn reached the blast doors. Unfortunately, three stormtroopers managed to reach the boarding ramp ahead of the two rebels and before Rathbone or StJohn could fire, they boarded the Spectre.

StJohn reached for his comlink as he and Rathbone raced for the ship.

"Hawk to Spectre. Intruder alert. You've got three bogies entering your six."

"Roger Hawk." Said Carek. "I'll handle them."

Carek hopped out of the pilot's seat and ran back toward the loading ramp, pausing long enough to run past his cabin and call his lightsaber to him with the Force before engaging the two troopers advancing on the bridge. Two lightning fast strokes and the two troopers were down. Carek then moved aft, where he met StJohn coming up the ramp. Rathbone was bringing up the rear from where he had trusted to the Force to lay down covering fire during their run for the ship.

"I got two. The other one must have headed for engineering." Said Carek.

"Rathbone quit showing off," Said StJohn. "there's one more in engineering and the Force only knows what he's doing there."

The three rebels found Ardent had reached engineering before them. He had his vibroblade drawn and was sneaking up on the lone trooper that was busy wrecking the control panels of the Spectre with his blaster rifle. Ardent caught the trooper completely by surprise and ran him through before the trooper could react.

"YAAAAHOOO!" A triumphant Ardent bellowed. "That's the first time I've dropped somebody with this thing."

"We're all proud of you, Ardent." Said Rathbone through clinched teeth. "But, if you would spare a moment from your wardance, you'll note the sea of red lights on the status board indicating that, WE'VE GOT BLOODY LITTLE TO CELEBRATE! YOU BACKWATER BONEHEAD!"

"Backwater bonehead? I'll give you a backwater bonehead!"

Carek could see where this would lead. "BOTH OF YOU SHUTUP! We've got too many problems and not enough time for this nonsense. Rathbone you get on the damage. Ardent man your turret. StJohn let's go."

The team taken aback by the power in Carek's voice, immediately moved out to their designated posts. The trooper had damaged the sublight drive and the lateral thruster array enough that StJohn would have no additional maneuverability and precious little speed.

"This thing handles like a cargo barge." Said StJohn as the Spectre lifted on it's repulsor drive.

"Rathbone's on it StJohn," Carek Replied from the co-pilot's seat where he was beginning the astrogation plot. "just stay low and do the best you can."

The guns of the Spectre however were undamaged. Kyle firing the heavy laser blasted an opening through the hanger door as Lazarus and Ardent kept up the fire on the now disorganized stormtroopers. When the Spectre cleared the hanger the miners decided to get in the act.

"Ground based laser turrets tracking us!" Said StJohn as he yanked the lumbering Spectre into a tighter turn.

"We see them," Said Kyle. "Laz, Ardent get the one on the left."

The three turrets of the Spectre spoke once and the laser turrets were gone.

"Nice shooting." Said Carek. "but we got more trouble. Sensors show a squadron of TIE/Ins inbound at four o'clock."

StJohn began whipping through the best evasive course that the damaged Spectre could handle. The TIEs closed in easily, but then the gunners of the Spectre opened fire. The TIEs never really had a chance, all three gunners used the Force to guide their opening shots and the result was six TIEs destroyed and three more crippled. The TIEs, to give them credit, still pressed home the attack and managed to cause heavy damage before being wiped out, of the squadron's original twelve TIEs, only three crippled fighters escaped the relentless fire from the Spectre.

The rebels were just beginning to relax, when the proximity alarm went off and the Spectre was bracketed by turbolaser fire.

"What in the blue blazes!" Snarled StJohn as he forced the protesting Spectre away from the Victory class Star Destroyer that had sneaked up on them while they had fought the TIEs. "Carek how much longer for the plot?"

"Too long! I'll have to take us in on a partial!"

Carek activated the intercom. "All hands stand by for unplotted hyperjump." Turning back to StJohn.

"Go."

The Spectre leapt into hyperspace just before the Star Destroyer's tractor beams could lock on. The Spectre had escaped.

"When the Spectre dropped out of hyperspace," Said Carek into the debriefing log terminal in the conference room back on the Apocalypse. "I used the Force to replot

the correct course back to the Apocalypse. Total travel time: seventeen hours.

"One final report. While on the planet, I sensed a disturbance in the Force that had a distinctively evil aspect. During our escape I again felt this disturbance emanating from the planet's surface. I can only speculate on the nature of the disturbance, but it is my opinion that we were being shadowed by a Dark Jedi."

Carek finished his debrief and closed down the terminal. He then rose from his seat and headed for his quarters.

"The last thing in life I need is to have to face another Dark Jedi. Maldamon was better trained in the Force when I met him for the first time and despite everything I've learned in the last year, I get the distinct feeling that this new threat is going to outclass me again. At least Challis's negotiations with the Mon-Calamari were successful and we can look forward to their full support."

Carek reached his quarters and sat on his bunk.

"I understand the temptations of the Dark Side and why some Jedi fall down that path, I only wish that I could find a Master that I might be able to combat the Dark Jedi on a more even setting."

Carek sighed. "Well, who knows, the Force is mysterious, after all I met Obi-wan Kenobi a week after his 'death' so in my book that leaves anything possible."

Carek then reached out with the Force, turned out the lights in his cabin and went to sleep.

The most notable thing about the Apocalypse since Captain Challis had replaced the late Captain Arkin, was the laughter that once again graced her corridors. The Apocalypse had, under Captain Arkin, a reputation as the most miserable ship in the fleet and even though Captain Challis was a severe commander, she was far livelier than Arkin ever was. Add to that fact, that a great many of the Apocalypse's crew were new and never had to serve with the brutal Arkin, a man-who had he not been killed-would have in all likelihood been tried for war crimes, gave the Apocalypse a whole new outlook.

In conjunction with the new found joie de vivre of the ship's crew, the recreation room had become the ship's social gathering place again.

Captain Carek Argonaut entered the Rec room hoping to find some of the members of team Bantha, instead he found Captain Challis painting.

"Good afternoon Captain, I didn't know that you painted."

"Actually this is my first attempt," She said. "I've had dreams of this thing for the last few nights, and I wanted to try and copy it down while it was still vivid. Here take a look."

"Well, that's certainly evil looking," He said as he sidled around to see what she had done. "you said that you've been dreaming of this thing?"

"Yes, actually it was almost like being contacted telepathically. I don't know what it means, I've never seen anything like it before."

"I have." Said a voice from behind them.

Turning, they found Sharra Aurora the Seleian light dancer standing behind them with her head tilted to one side as she inspected Challis's work.

"There are a few minor differences in the face and shape of the wings, but I'm sure I've seen this before."

"Where?" Demanded Challis.

"Uh...It's a Ma'olrin priest idol, from Ma'olrin four in the Kiosk system."

"The Kiosk system is under Imperial occupation." Said Carek, now uneasy as he remembered the last time they visited the Kiosk system and the cost to team Bantha.

Challis looked thoughtfully at Aurora for a few moments before speaking.

"Are you certain about this idol being from Ma'olrin four?"

"Absolutely."

"Captain Argonaut."

"Sir?"

"I'm now very curious about this Ma'olrin priest idol. I want you to get your team ready and see if you can track this idol down. I have the distinct impression that this item is Force related and I don't want it falling into the Empire's hands."

"We'll be ready to go in twenty minutes."

"Carry on."

As promised the Spectre departed twenty minutes later. Team Bantha on this occasion would consist of Carek, Lazarus Maxenties, and Ardent Belial Mo'duaglozen as the Marine detachment. The flight crew of the Spectre would consist of Leland Archimedes, reassigned back to the Apocalypse when the two X-wings were assigned, and Rathbone Loegin as engineer. Kyle was in officer's school and would miss this mission.

StJohn Hawk had found his true calling as exec of the Apocalypse, he had requested and had been granted that transfer.

The trip to Ma'olrin four was delayed for two hours, by a close call in hyperspace that dumped the Spectre back into realspace and caused some damage to the hyperdrive.

"ARCHIMEDES!" Bellowed Rathbone. "What have you done this time!"

"Okay, okay, I was off by point two seven on the X axis when we left. I'll replot and we'll be there in nine hours."

"You pilots never learn," Said Rathbone shaking his head. "excuse me, I have to realign the port hyperspace motivator, Try and get the plot right this time.

"You bet Rath, I'll get right on it."

When Leland was sure that Rathbone was gone he turned to Carek. "What a grouch."

"He's not the only one who's getting tired of you constantly misplotting Leland. If you will recall we are going to the Kiosk system, it was a misplot on your part that cost us the Bantha, and that in turn resulted in Ardent's and Rex's capture. Ardent may forgive you the torture he endured and the bionics that he had to have implanted, but I don't think Rex will ever forgive you for losing the Bantha." Carek fixed Leland with a piercing stare. "And I will not accept any more excuses. You screw up one more simple plot, and I will see you assigned to cleaning the Tauntaun pens back on Planeris. Is that clear?"

"You've changed Carek," Responded a saddened Leland. "You've changed a lot, but I get the message.

Rathbone got the motivator aligned in record time and when he returned to the bridge, Leland was ready.

"Course plotted and laid in." He said.

"Laid in to where?"

"I've handled that Rathbone," Said Carek. "if Leland says the course is ready, I believe him."

True to Leland's word, the course was plotted correctly and the Spectre arrived at Ma'olrin four without any further mishap. Ma'olrin four was a very primitive planet with no navigation aids in system. Leland was forced to pick his way slowly through the outer planets, while Carek scanned the sensors to avoid any surprises, natural or manmade.

"I'm getting a Mayday!" Said Carek as he reached for the comm panel to boost the gain on the signal. "High signal strength, low output. They're close."

"Can you pick anything out?" Said Ardent who had as usual come up to the bridge for the landing.

"The signal's badly garbled, all I can get is 'free trader Piety.'"

"Well, lets see if we can find them." Said Leland.

The Spectre accelerated through the system and homed in on the Piety's signal.

"There." Shouted Ardent as he pointed out the roman candle of a ship starting its fiery re-entry.

"We're too late." Added Leland.

"No wait," Said Carek. "I'm picking up the transponder of an escape pod. Leland course 234 mark 6."

The Spectre banked sharply and dove down in pursuit through the thick and mildly corrosive red tinged atmosphere, landing no more than thirty meters from and thirty seconds after the pod touched down.

"Sensors show the atmosphere to be non-breathable," Said Carek after a quick scan. "but the rest of the environment seems safe. Looks like breather masks are in order."

"Okay Carek, who's going outside?" Asked Leland.

"I'll go, just in case the sensors missed something."

"I want to go too." Said Ardent.

"Okay get a mask and met me in the airlock."

The airlock cycled open to the view of a wide dry inhospitable looking plain.

"Almost like Tosca, except worst." Said Ardent.

"Sensors didn't show anything poisonous in the air did they?"

"No just four percent oxygen, eighty seven percent nitrogen, and nine percent trace gasses." Replied Carek.

"If they had twelve percent more oxygen we wouldn't need these breather masks."

"Looks like we have company."

Carek looked to where Ardent was pointing and saw that one man had exited the escape pod and was walking toward the ship.

"I don't know who you are," Said the stranger. "but I can say that I'm very glad your here. Ma'olrin four is not a pleasant place to be stranded. Marcus Childers at your service."

"You'll excuse me if I ask what happened to your ship before we engage in pleasantries."

"I can understand that. I was attacked by a ship that was shaped like a bird of prey." Childers chuckled at this point. "They caught me in the fresher, the sublight was wrecked on the first hit and I never had a chance to recover. I sent the distress and headed for the pod. Now you know as much as I do."

Carek looked at Childers intently, but he did not use the Force to search through Childer's mind, but he did use the Force to talk to Ardent telepathically.

"Take his weapons."

"You'll understand if we take your weapons before we let you board."

"Under the circumstances, Yes I do."

As Childers handed over his weapons Carek reached a decision.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance. I'm Carek, this is Ardent, welcome aboard the Spectre."

"Gods, I was hoping you'd say that."

Childers climbed into the airlock and stood quietly as the lock cycled.

"So, if its not being too nosy, what where you doing in this Gods forsaken piece of space."

"Going to Cypryn to do a little speculative trading," Answered Ardent smoothly. "just happened to come out of hyperspace a little too soon and picked up your distress."

"Spec trading? That's tough on an Imperial planet."

"Uh...is there anything we can do to help besides giving you a ride?" Said Carek.

"I'd like to see if there's anything left of my cargo."

"Cargo?" Asked an incredulous Ardent. "What could you possibly been carrying that could have survived a flaming re-entry?"

"Actually what's left of my ship can replace my cargo."

"Okay, I think you've lost us both now." Said a now equally incredulous Carek.

"Ma'olrin four is very poor in metals. The natives pay in high grade petrochemicals for any kind of metal. I was carrying a cargo of scrap metal to trade. I guess my whole ship meets that discription now."

The airlock opened and Carek made introductions all around. Since Childers knew the locals, the team wanted to use him to make contact with the priests, so it was agreed to fly him over to the wreck of his ship. It only took ten minutes to reach what was left of the Piety, which had crashed seven hundred kilometers to the southwest.

"Well it looks like I've got enough left to make a decent cargo, if I can just get it to them." Said Childers after exiting the Spectre.

"I think that we can help you with that," Said Ardent. "after all when you're doing speculative trading, it doesn't matter where the cargo comes from. We'll take this cargo to your dealer, and we'll take whatever cargo you trade for, to wherever your going to."

"Now that sounds like a deal! I'll give you ten percent of the cargo's value when we get to Bespin."

"Thirty percent."

"Twenty."

"Done!" Smiled Ardent as he shook Childers' hand. "Now lets get this stuff loaded."

When the Spectre was loaded, Childers guided Leland to the nearest village. The Mal-ori were an amphibian race that possessed large deep chests, long thin limbs, and huge frog-like eyes. The village was a ragged cluster of huts that looked as primitive as was possible for a race that was considered sentient to build.

"I'll talk to them first," Said Childers. "I know they look very primitive, but they're smart enough to know this isn't the Piety and I don't want to spook them out of a sale."

Childers made contact with the chieftan and then motioned for the crew of the Spectre to come forward along with SM3PO so that all could follow along. Childers began talking to the chieftan and Sam translated.

"These are starmen just like me, they will cherish your ancestor's memory as I do."

The chieftan spread his long arms, then crossed them across his chest and bowed to each member of the team. Carek caught on and repeated the movement, the rest of the team followed Carek's lead and each member of the team mimicked the gesture completing the ritual of greeting to the chieftan's satisfaction.

"Fellow starmen of Friend Childers, what may I do to help you?"

Leland asked Sam to find out if the locals had seen a large metal bird in the skies recently.

"The sky thundered with the crossing of a great starbird two hands of days ago."

"The locals only have three fingers," Said Childers. "thus the guys that bushwacked the Piety have been here for six days."

"Ask him if there is a tribal elder that we may speak to." Said Carek."

"The Gifted One would be honored to meet with starmen. Please come with me."

The chieftan took them across the village to a hut that boasted a skull of some insect-like creature. The chieftan stopped before the hut and called out in a warbling whistle. The Gifted One was a wizened Mal-ori wearing a tattered cape and leaning heavily on a staff made from an old repulsor sled linkage. The elder stood before the chieftan until the chieftan bowed low and turned toward the human visitors. The elder looked upon the humans for the first time and Carek sensed a wave of kindness radiating from the old Mal-ori. He smiled and Sam began translating.

"You have traveled far to learn of the one known to us as the Ravisher. The Ravisher is an evil representation of a vision from an ancient obelisk that I saw in my youth. The idol that was carved long ago by the Gifted One of my youth, lies many plaktans from here. The chieftan must lend you grillas for your journey. Come I will chant the rite of discovery for you, so that you will be shielded from the evil that will plague you on your journey."

The Gifted One hobbled into his hut and the rebels followed. Each was given a small carved stone and asked to drink from a mug of steaming herbs. To complete the rite the Gifted One called to each member of the team and rubbed a fragrant oil onto their head. As he finished each member he bade them farewell.

Once Carek, the last to be anointed, exited the Gifted Ones's hut, the chieftan led them to the grilla pen. Grillas turned out to be a very large grasshopper-like insectoid riding beasts.

"You've got to be kidding." Said Leland.

"Don't offend the chieftan," Snapped Childers. "he is giving you a great honor by lending you these things. I know it's not the same as a repulsor sled, but it's all he has and you're just going to have to learn to like it."

"But why can't we take the Spectre?"

Childers began to get irritated.

"The locals do not have any means of unloading cargo except manually, they can't work around repulsors, the frequency of the repulsors resonations damages their hearing. It will take them at least three days to unload the scrap metal and reload the minerals that we negotiated, I have to stay and supervise, so your ship is simply unavailable."

"Come on Leland," chided Rathbone. "since when are you going to let someone say they can drive something that you can't drive?"

"I can drive anything."

"Well now's your chance to prove it." Said Childers.

The rebels entered the grilla pen and where given a quick demonstration on how to control them. Once everyone was comfortable with their mount, the rebels headed out of the village and toward the low lying hills just barely visible in the distance.

The trip dragged on through the day and into the next and into the next. The rebels had entered the low lying hills hours ago, but they were still several hours away from their goal.

The monotony of the march was suddenly broken by a piercing shriek from above. Reacting to the sound the rebels spotted half-a-dozen reptilian flying creatures diving from the down from the nearest crag.

"I'll start from the left!" Ardent yelled as he jumped free from his grilla.

"I'll start from the right!" Answered Laz, as he too rolled off of his mount.

Blasterfire ripped into the beasts from two sides, and when two of them fell smoking to the ground the rest broke off their attack for food that was easier to catch.

The last few miles were up a very steep incline. The grillas were able to climb the grade with no problems at all. The riders however had to cling for their very lives to remain atop the wildly rocking beasts.

"This is worse than one of Leland's astrogation plots." Muttered Rathbone.

"I heard that!" Leland shot back. "If you kept the motivators aligned right I wouldn't have to compensate for them and maybe, just maybe, we wouldn't go on so many..."

"I keep those motivators aligned four percent beyond factory specifications!" Interrupted Rathbone. "Don't you dare try and blame your incompetence on me!"

"WILL YOU TWO IDIOTS SHUT UP!" Lazarus thundered. "We're almost to the top, or would you prefer to just fire off a few flares so that everyone on the whole flaming planet knows where we are."

"Who are you calling an idiot!" Shouted Rathbone and Leland simultaneously. They paused, looked at each other and began to laugh. The rest of the team also short on

patience, but long on respect for each other, saw the humor and soon the entire group, gave into the good hearty laugh.

"I guess this trip has got us all on edge." Said Lazarus as his anger vented itself through laughter. "Sorry. However we are still near the top of this rise and I would recommend that we dismount and continue on foot."

"Agreed." Leland chuckled. "I'll be glad to get back on my own two feet after riding these blasted beasts."

The rebels dismounted and approached the rise on foot. The landscape at the top of the rise was a smoldering and blasted mesa that stretched on for kilometers through the hazy smoke caused by venting lava and steam.

"Look there, just to the right of the obelisk." Said Laz.

"Looks like repulsor sleds." Said Carek as he used the Force to enhance his vision. "I've never seen that model before. Okay everyone lets stay sharp."

The rebels crossed the open field without sighting anyone.

"I've seen this model before," Said Rathbone. "it's Aavian. They're an avian race, and..." Rathbone smacked himself in the forehead. "I guess I am an idiot! Aavians always design their ships to look like birds."

"So that means that these are the guys who jumped Childers." Said Leland.

Carek had been standing with his eyes unfocused while Rathbone berated himself. His eyes lost their glaze and he began to speak rapidly.

"I've been feeling ill at ease since last night, I now know the source of that feeling. This place has a very strong sense of evil about it. I am certain the idol is still inside."

"Okay that's good enough for me," Said Leland. "it's been three days, Childers should be finished loading cargo. I'm calling Three-emm to bring the Spectre."

The rest of the team agreed and in less than two hour the Spectre was sighted. Three-emm set the ship down forty meters from the obelisk, which was as close as he could get due to the unstable ground on the mesa.

The team entered the cave and was forced to return to the Spectre for oxygen tanks. The oxygen levels in the underground cavern were just too depleted by the sulphur and lava fires for simple breather masks. The team reentered the cave and found a rough hewn corridor that eventually led to a counter balanced spiked gate bearing the grisly remains of four impaled Aavian raiders.

"I guess they strayed too far from their element." Said Lazarus to no one in particular.

"The gate is still pivoting freely, we we'll have to be very careful, or we'll end up like they did." Said Rathbone.

"I think I can help," Said Carek. "I will telekinetically stabilize the gate and everyone should be okay."

"Uh...Carek," Rathbone started gently. "I don't pretend to know anything about the Force, but who do you think is going to be the first to try your new theory?"

Ardent spoke right up. "I'll go. I don't know anything about the Force either, but I'm fairly certain I can get through and if Carek thinks he can help, well then I say lets do it." Ardent dropped to the floor and began worming his way through the spikes and although Carek seemed to be completely absorbed in maintaining his concentration, he smiled when Ardent reached the other side.

"Okay, no longer a theory. I'll go next."

Leland followed Carek, then Lazarus and finally Rathbone.

"Forgive me if I remain skeptical."

"Not at all."

Rathbone passed through easily, until there was a tremendous tremor that rippled through the caverns throwing Carek to the floor.

"I can't hold it Rath, hurry."

"Hurry? Is he kidding? I am...ARRRGH!"

The gate swung free and sliced deeply into Rathbone's left leg. Rathbone crumpled from the shock and passed clean out.

"I got him! I got him!" Yelled Leland as he pulled Rathbone free of the spike. "Quick, Laz get a medpac on him the damned thing got his artery."

"I'm on it! The medpac isn't working. He's going to bleed out."

Ardent added his medpac to the vicious wound to try and stop the fountaining loss of blood.

"Hang in there Rath," Said Ardent. "I will not lose another engineer!" Slowly at first, then just as quickly as it started, the bleeding stopped and Rathbone started to stabilize.

"He's still out, but he's going to make it." Said Leland.

Carek reached out with the Force and nudged Rathbone awake.

"I'm so sorry Rath, I just couldn't hold it stable with all that shaking."

Through a drug induced smile Rathbone said. "You'll excuse me if I remain skeptical."

"Yes Rathbone, I'll understand."

The team regrouped and began following the corridor that now showed signs of advanced stone work. The corridor spiraled down three times to a depth of at least fifteen meters, before it ended in a rounded water filled cul-de-sac.

"You aren't going to tell me that I lost ten percent of my total blood volume for nothing."

"Just hold it Rath, there has to be a hidden room down here somewhere." Said Lazarus. "We just have to find it."

"Yeah, that may be easier said than done." Added Leland. "Okay Carek you're the one who said the idol's still here. Where is it?"

"The idol is beyond the far wall."

"Oh great is passing through solid rock one of the Jedi tricks you've been hiding from us?"

"I...I...know the idol is here. Please give me a minute to concentrate."

Carek stood before the pool and opened his mind to the Force, reaching well beyond the five senses to see what had remained hidden for so long.

"Of course. Of course. It's right in front of us."

"And where might that be Carek?" Asked Rathbone.

"Watch this my skeptical friend."

Carek again reached out with the Force this time he concentrated on the water before him and with the rumbling of heavy gears, the pool lowered itself three meters, exposing an open corridor in the far wall of the pool.

Rathbone stood quietly for a few seconds then turned to Carek. "I have to admit that you got me that time. Lead on my friend. Lead on."

The corridor traveled on for twenty meters before opening on a huge vaulted chamber. In the center of the room the stood the idol, it's eyes winking grimly from the glow rods. The idol was just over a meter in height carved of some black obsidian like rock that seemed to drink in all available light. The eyes were made of multi-faceted gemstones that defied any specific color.

"And I thought the painting was ugly." Said Ardent.

"That pretty much sums up all I was going to say." Said Lazarus. "Lets get it and go."

Lazarus started toward the idol.

"I think I have a better idea." Said Carek. "I have a feeling that it would be bad to touch this thing. I'll just float it along and that way no one will be put in needless danger."

"You and your Force," Harrumphed Rathbone. "The thing is a rock of Diety's sake. Look."

Before anyone could intervene, Rathbone stepped up and lifted the idol above his head, where upon he began to stagger. He quickly put the idol down, and seemed none-the-worse for his encounter.

"It's a lot heavier than it looks, I guess it was blood loss that made me so dizzy."

"Look Rathbone, I would never try to tell you how to align a hyperdrive, will you please leave things that pertain to the Force to me?"

"I have to admit you got me again. Lets try it your way."

The rebels easily made it back through to the cul-de-sac and from there, back to the spiked gate. Carek lowered the idol and again stabilized the gate. This time there were no tremors and everyone cleared the gate without harm. Carek then floated the idol through the gate. The team then headed for the Spectre.

Leland was the first to hear the approaching speederbikes. "Run for it! Three-ymm prep for take off and see if you can bring the Spectre in closer!"

The sound of the approaching speeders was clear to all, as was the fact that the speeders would over take them before they reached the Spectre, whose engines were just beginning to spool up.

"I've got your backs!" Lazarus shouted above the Spectre's engines.

Lazarus then snapped off three quick shots that dropped one of the Imperial scouts from his bike, the rest then split up taking to whatever cover they could find.

The rest of the team reached the loading ramp and Ardent ran straight for the laser cannon. Just as Carek went to board, something powerful telekinetically ripped the idol from his control.

"By the Force what was that?" Thought Carek, as he reached deep within himself to try and regain control of the idol. Carek grabbed the idol and felt the idol torn from his grasp again. Thinking quickly he reached for his comlink.

"ARDENT! TARGET THE IDOL, NOW!"

Ardent had been keeping the Imperial forces pinned down and had destroyed another speeder and crippled an AT-ST. As

soon as he heard Carek's call he swung on and blasted the idol into shards.

The pieces of the idol were still falling, when Leland got the Spectre airborne. The Spectre easily shrugged off the fire from the remaining AT-ST and speeders and quickly reached orbit.

Carek stood by the loading ramp as he tried to understand what had happened, when he sensed something familiar. A tremor in the Force that he recognized. "That's the same tremor as when we were escaping from De'lamar! Now I'm sure there's another Dark Jedi trailing us and this one is even stronger than Maldamon. I don't know if I'm ready for this."

A flight of TIE/ins swooped in on the Spectre before she could clear the gravity well of Mal'orin. Childers destroyed one and left another crippled. Ardent and Lazarus each left one crippled. Carek got to the bridge while the TIEs were being dispatched and used the Force to jump to Bespin. The team sold Childers' cargo and as agreed received their twenty percent, which came to five thousand credits.

The Spectre was ready to lift and her crew were all aboard except for Leland who was standing in the docking bay with Childers.

"Well it's been interesting." Said Childers.

"That it has, if we're ever in the neighborhood we'll look for you." Said Leland.

"I'll hold you to that. Clear skies."

"See you later."

Leland moved up the ramp as it closed. The Spectre then lifted and departed for her rendezvous with the Apocalypse.

Chapter Fourteen

The Apocalypse was doing what all good strike carriers do, hitting the Imperials hard and then fading away before any reinforcements could arrive. All through the Valorin sector, the fighters of the Apocalypse were making themselves felt, to the chagrin of the sector Moff. The only problem was she was doing too good a job, the sector Moff had dispatched as much of his force as could spare to flood the sector with recon fighters and scouts to hunt the Apocalypse down.

However the commander of the Apocalypse, Captain Ehrinn Challis was far too smart a raider to be caught by such heavy handed methods, Challis simply moved on to the adjacent Makasia sector. This time Challis decided to tone down the scale and scope of her raids to extend the amount of time the rebels could operate in the sector by setting up in the uninhabited Toridis system's oort cloud.

The Imperials would be on the look out for a fighter base and would scour the sector's planets, they would not however be looking for a carrier and would never think to search an oort cloud for a fighter base. In order to make this plan happen, Challis needed hard data on the Toridis system's oort cloud. Not wanting any mistakes, she sent her best special operations team in the Spectre, along with four reconnaissance Y-wings under the team's command to find the perfect hiding place.

"Explain to me again how we chosen to fly though this junk?" Said Leland to his co-pilot Carek Argonaut after avoiding yet another asteroid, which seemed like the thousandth one in the past hour.

"I don't know Leland, I guess if we failed in more of our missions, Captain Challis wouldn't give us the difficult jobs."

"Are you telling me that all we have to to is screw up more and we get the cushy runs?"

"What ever you're thinking of, it would be a good idea to forget about it and concentrate on avoiding that rock at 236 mark 14."

"It was worth a thought."

"Gold one to Gold leader. Gold one to Gold leader." The comm unit crackled with static and distortion caused by the ever present debris.

"This is Gold leader, go ahead Gold one." Said Carek pulling double duty as communications officer.

"I've lost contact with Gold four."

"What are the coordinates of his last known position?"

"435 by 177 by 34."

"Okay, you continue your sweep and we'll go see what's going on."

"Wilco Gold leader. Gold one out."

"Trouble?" Asked Leland as the Spectre turned towards where the lost fighter was last seen.

"Possible, I'm going to wake up everybody, just in case."

"Good idea."

The Spectre's passive sensors beeped softly, bringing Leland and Halasa, who was co-piloting now that Carek had joined Ardent and Kyle in manning the turrets of the Spectre, around to face the sensor read out.

"Low level power source, too weak to be a ship." Said Leland.

"Grarowa?" Whuffed Halasa.

"Sure, there's enough distortion in the oort cloud to risk an active search."

The powerful sensors of the Spectre quickly isolated the power source, and a large mass of refined metal as well. Leland sorted through the debris and identified just what was hiding in the oort cloud.

"I don't believe it, it is a ship. It's in real bad shape."

"Waoorugha?"

"I'm not sure what type yet, the power curve is very low for the amount of mass I'm reading."

Leland initiated a focused scan on the derelict hidden among a concentration of large asteroids.

"Okay, getting solid telemetry now, I'm picking up a transponder code. The Pan Galactic Frigate..." Leland adjusted the main sensor array for more gain. "Mystic. Pan Galactic? Who are they?"

Halasa's non-committal grunt meant he didn't know either.

Lazarus who had been monitoring the conversation from engineering spoke up. "I think I vaguely remember that twenty some years ago, this sector tried to go independent during the height of the Clone wars and formed an experimental coalition of planets, called the Pan Galactic Federation."

"Are you trying to tell me that hulk has been here for...**HOLY HOPPING HORNDOGS!**"

Leland broke off in mid-sentence to dodge fire from the Mystic. The Spectre rolled out of the turbolaser's field of

fire and pulled into a blind spot caused the same asteroid the Mystic was using for cover.

"Okay, okay that hulk's not only a relic from during the Clone Wars, it's a relic with some teeth. What's the plan Carek?"

"Only one gun fired and I only see three undamaged turrets, I guess their power reserve is too low for more than one shot at a time. If we target the turrets, we can knock out those teeth and then we can board to find out just what exactly is going on."

"Okay, let's hope he isn't playing lame just to lure us into a trap. On my mark." Leland rolled out from behind the asteroid and broke from cover directly above the Mystic.

"MARK!"

Kyle and Ardent fired as soon as they heard Leland's mark and both blasted turrets apart. Carek held fire as he reached out through the Force to the other ship to try and get a read on the hostile derelict.

The remaining turbolaser unaturally tracked the Spectre all the way through its evasive roll and fired before Leland could react. However instead of a cohesive beam of light, the Mystic heeled sharply as the turbolaser's capacitor bank burst, leaving the Mystic unable to continue the fight.

"Graragha rhuffga trah."

"Yeah, I know Halasa. If that old cap bank hadn't failed they would have had us. It's hard to believe that old wreck could stay with me."

Halasa added a low growl as the Spectre prepared to dock with the Mystic.

"What do you mean, maybe I'm not as good as I think I am? I can fly rings around you any day of the week. You overstuffed escapee from a carpet factory."

Halasa was still laughing when Carek and Ardent reached the bridge.

"What's he laughing at?" Said Ardent.

"He's suffering from delusions." Leland shot back over his shoulder as he examined the docking ring of the Mystic through the cockpit viewports.

"We got trouble."

"What's wrong?" Asked Carek as he crowded in for a look. "They couldn't have gotten one of those turrets back on line. Could they?"

"No it's not that bad, their docking ring looks damaged. Unless it's repaired we can't dock."

"I knew we shouldn't have left Rathbone on the Apocalypse." Said Ardent.

"He still was low on total blood volume from that spiked gate on Ma'olrin four. He just wasn't ready to go out so soon. We'll have to just make do for ourselves."

"I know Carek, it's just that...Hey, where's Three-Emm? He should be able to repair that ring easily."

Halasa had finally stopped laughing enough to half growl, half chuckle a question.

"Laughing boy here, wants to know how we're going to get Three-Emm across to the Mystic?"

"I'll suit up and float him over."

"I guess when you don't have an engineer," Said Leland. "you've got to make do with a Jedi and a R2."

"Okay Three-Emm that's got it. Leland, you can dock whenever you're ready."

Carek waited until the Spectre was about to dock then jumped across the remaining distance and gently pulled Three-Emm after him. The repaired docking clamps mated and sealed with a heavy thump, then the airlock cycled. When the airlock finished, Carek and the rest of team Bantha were ready to board the long lost ship.

"I'm reading an atmosphere," Said Leland. "that always makes things easier. I hate wearing a vacc suit when there's the possibility of combat."

Halasa scanned the Mystic and gruffed.

"No power." Leland translated.

As Halasa went to manually open the hatch, Kyle noticed a blinking light on the inside of the hatch portal.

"Wait Halasa, I thought you said there was no power? If that's true then what's that light?"

Halasa focused a scan around the entire hatch, then growled deep in his throat and pushed the team back into the airlock of the Spectre.

"I have got to learn more Wookiee, Leland what did he say?" Asked Lazarus as Halasa cautiously approached the hatch.

"He said the blinking light was a bomb. It looks like Kyle just saved our hides from an unpleasant surprise."

The booby trap was a crude one relying on surprise and not on sophistication, and Halasa was able to quickly disarm the trap. He then applied his massive frame to the manual release and carefully opened the hatch, which led to an empty cargo bay.

The Mystic's artificial gravity was offline forcing the rebels to move slowly in freefall. The team moved past empty crew quarters and signs of severe deck-by-deck fighting as they headed for the bridge.

"Stay on your toes and spread out. Something just doesn't feel right. Kyle, Lazarus, you better stay with the Spectre."

"A 'Disturbance in the Force' Carek?"

"I know you don't understand the Force Leland, but I would think you've seen enough of the Force in action not to dismiss it so lightly."

"You're right about not understanding the Force, but I guess you've been right enough not to ignore it completely. You heard him, look alive, somebody was manning that turbolaser and I don't want to have to explain how you got killed by some ghost."

As Leland was speaking, Carek was reaching out with the Force to try and better understand what was troubling him. It was then that he heard the sound of heavy blaster fire. Carek wheeled about with his lightsaber drawn looking for a target.

"What's wrong with you?" Said Leland. "Have you gone space happy or something?"

"Don't you hear those blasters?"

Ardent looked around with his head tilted to one side as he listened intently. "I can almost hear something, but it's too insubstantial to be sure what it is."

Halasa growled that he too could hear the sounds of battle and he tightened his grip on his bowcaster as he too scanned for enemies in the old ghost ship.

"I still don't hear anything and I think you're all going space happy and I don't see why I have..."

"I think emotions of the crew have left a psychic residue on the Force from when the ship fought its last battle." Interrupted Carek. "I think those sounds are twenty years old. We should be safe, but let's keep a sharp eye out. Something is still not right."

"And I know what it is, you have all lost your minds."

"Leland that's enough," Said Ardent. "Carek feels there's something to be concerned about and his feelings have saved our collective hides before, so let's get this done."

"Right. Let's."

The team moved out and Halasa took point. The team was in the main corridor that led to the bridge, when there was the blinding flash of a magnesium flare. As the team struggled to react, they came under fire from someone on the bridge.

"All squads advance on my signal!" A voice called from the source of the firing. "Watch the cross connect Hardlin! They've set up an ambush."

Disoriented by the searing brightness of the flare, Carek, Ardent and Leland stumbled into cover, but Halasa, on point, was the closest to the flare and farthest from cover.

"HALASA, GET DOWN!" Screamed Leland as he drew his blaster and fired at the blur that was firing at the helpless wookiee.

"Waraaghra!" Howled Halasa as he was hit.

"That flare is going to get us a killed, unless..." Thought Carek as a blaster bolt splattered against the bulkhead he had taken cover behind, as he tried to calm his mind to open it to the Force. "Unless, I can find a way to take it out of the equation."

The flare quivered for a second, then spun back toward their half seen attacker. The ambusher, now visible as a single bedraggled human, broke cover and fled.

As soon as the corridor was visible, Halasa in a pain-induced Wookiee rage, charged after the humanoid form.

"Fall back! Fall back! We're being outflanked. No hope, make for the bridge! We'll make our last stand there!"

"Oh no you don't!" Said Carek as he switched targets and the escaping man found himself hanging in mid-air, despite all his flailing. "Ardent, I don't think this guy is lifting with all repulsors. See if you can stun him."

"Good plan. Leland see if you can calm Halasa down, he's in the way."

"I'll try, but he's...HALASA!"

Halasa, who had been charging down the corridor, bounced against something and crumpled, floating limply in the lack of gravity. The reason for Halasa's fall became obvious as he fell, a monofilament net had been strung across the corridor, leaving it impassible.

The attacker took advantage of the confusion to reach into his ragged tunic and throw something at the rebels.

"THERMAL DETONATOR!" Yelled Leland as he dove for cover.

Carek maintained his hold on the mad crewman and focused on the spinning orb. The deadly package stopped and began to reverse course, then Carek felt the detonator ripped free of his control and it once again headed for the rebels.

"Ardent!" Cried Carek. "Quick, take my lightsaber and cut that net! I'll try and hold him off. Hurry, this guy is strong!"

Ardent caught the lightsaber, ignited it, and sliced through the net. Now that he was free to move, Ardent drew his vibroblade and lunged at the insane crewer, who was struggling with Carek to maintain control of the detonator and failed to see Ardent approach.

"YAH BRIN DAGA!"

The war cry of clan Mo'duaglozen burst from Ardent's lips as he struck with a vengeance, slashing the man from just above his left hip and ripping upward until the vibroblade hung up on his rib cage. The mad crewman dropped limp, allowing Carek to throw the thermal detonator down a side corridor just before it exploded violently.

Ardent sheathed his vibroblade and bent down to examine the fallen Halasa.

"He's still alive! Leland, bring a medpac!"

Leland rolled out from his hiding place and swam for his comrades, while Carek turned to retrieve his lightsaber still floating where Ardent had left it. Behind Ardent, the mad Jedi's eyes flickered open. He turned his head slightly and found the man that had killed him, he spun around and lashed out with the Force.

Carek felt the Jedi's rage through the Force, but not in time to voice a warning. Ardent twisted backward from the mad Jedi's attack until he too dropped limp. Carek grabbed for his two friends and pulled them back toward Leland, who was waiting to assist with medpacs.

"ABANDON SHIP! ABANDON SHIP!" The mad Jedi screamed as he somehow managed to pull his savaged body toward the bridge and seal the blastdoor.

"All hands this is the captain, boarders have taken over! Self destruct sequence activated. ABANDON SHIP! ABANDON SHIP!"

An alarm klaxon began to sound and a computer generated voice began to the count down. Leland worked feverishly on Halasa, as Carek did the same with Ardent.

"We've got to get out of here!" Said Leland as he slapped the stimpac on Halasa, who began to moan and slowly regain consciousness. "That maniac is serious about blowing this wreck-and us-to bits."

"Tell me something I don't know. Come on Ardent wake up."

Carek placed his hands on Ardent's forehead, used the Force to bring Ardent around. He put his arm around Ardent and began swimming for the Spectre. Leland did the same with Halasa, but couldn't move nearly as fast with the much heavier load.

"Ship will self destruct in thirty seconds. All hands to the escape pods." The computer continued to intone.

"We'll have to free the docking clamps while we're in the airlock, if we're going to have any chance of getting clear." Said Leland as the team struggled to the blast door that lead to the Spectre.

"Ship will self destruct in Twenty seconds." The ship replied.

"Oh shut up already! Clamps free! Carek can you get them strapped in by yourself?"

"Go! I've got them. Lazarus full power to aft shields. Kyle start moving us away now! Leland's on his way!"

Leland now under the Spectre's artificial gravity, took off for the bridge at a dead run. Carek in the meantime struggled to move the wounded rebels out of the airlock.

The Spectre was pulling slowly away, when Leland dived into the pilot's seat. He slammed full power to the sublight drive, just as soon as his hand could reach the throttle.

On the Mystic, the once proud flag ship of Pan Galactic Federation Patrol Division Six, the dying man who sat in the captain's chair and who had at one time had been the ship's executive officer, watched the self destruct timer and his own lifeblood run out.

In engineering, main power relays closed and all core safeties opened. However the flood of raw power that would create the hellstorm of energy that in turn incinerate the Mystic and anything within a thousand meters, which at that second still included the rapidly accelerating Spectre, failed to ignite.

The madness that allowed her commander to see and speak to a crew long dead, also blinded him to the damage that had wrecked the Mystic so many years ago. Instead of sublight engines bristling with power, the Mystic was running off of solar powered batteries. The self destruct protocol tapped into the only active power source available to meet the imperative from the bridge. The solar batteries fed all their power into the central power core and from the viewport of the Spectre Leland saw a feeble electrical discharge run the length of the Mystic, and then the crippled ship began to drift.

On the bridge of the Mystic, her captain saw the feeble lightning and gave in to the darkness that had been waiting twenty-three years to consume the last survivor of the Pan Galactic Federation.

"After the self destruct failed, we then linked up with the Y-wings and returned to rendezvous with the Apocalypse." Carek spoke softly to the officer debriefing him, his mind far from the task at hand. "The oort cloud hid the Mystic for more than twenty years, it should make an excellent hiding place the Apocalypse. I guess that just about covers everything. Am I free to go?"

"Captain Argonaut, I feel that you're not telling me everything, what is bothering you?"

"It's just sad to think that another Jedi has gone. I know he was insane from being alone for all those years, but each Jedi lost is a victory for the Dark Side."

"At least in his warped mind, he died defending his ship. That is the best that he could have hoped for. You may go it's almost 1500."

"Thanks, that will leave me just enough time to change into my dress uniform."

"Dress uniform?"

Carek paused at the doorway.

"Yes, the Captain agrees with you and has decided to bury him with full military honors. And that, is the least we could do for him."

Chapter Thirteen

"Team Bantha to the briefing room." The intercom intoned. "Team Bantha to the briefing room."

"That won't be good news." Said Lazarus rising from his seat in the rec room where he had been watching Carek practicing with his lightsaber.

"We'll find out soon enough," The would-be Jedi answered as he shut down his lightsaber. "but you're probably right, there is nothing scheduled for the next two weeks."

The two marines continued their conversation as they headed for the briefing room.

"So, that means it's 'Team Bantha to the rescue again.' Sometimes I wish that there was an easier way." Said Lazarus.

"It's been my experience that there's never an easier way."

"More Jedi wisdom?"

"No, just the result of having been beat up everytime I tried to find the easier way."

"Yeah, that's the truth. So, tell me Carek, since you're learning to be a Jedi Knight on your own, how will you know when you've completed your training?"

"That my friend, is a good question, but I have so far to go, that it will be a while before I have to worry about it."

They reached the briefing room and found that they were the last to arrive. Leland, Halasa, and Rathbone; who served as pilot, co-pilot, and engineer respectively were waiting along with Ardent and Kyle, who filled out the team's marine contingent. Captain Ehrinn Challis, commander of the Apocalypse was waiting as well.

"Good work out?" She asked.

"Excellent, we got here as fast as we could." Carek responded.

"I know, it's just that time is short. Now to the business at hand." Challis activated the room's holoprojector, which displayed seven one-foot tall images.

"These people, are for one reason or another, all political refugees. The Alliance is moving them to a safe haven on the planet Fnalla in the Druaazi sector and you are to be their escort."

"Your pulling us out of deep penetration raids and sending us on an escort mission?" This from Leland. "Have we become baby sitters?"

Challis fixed Leland with a piercing gaze and Leland subsided.

"Each one of these 'babies,' has important information about the Empire. Each alone does not have enough information to be significant, however, properly debriefed, they can give us a very in depth picture of Imperial movements in this entire sector, they have agreed to talk in exchange for our protection. And that is all you need to know Lieutenant Archimedes."

"If there are no further questions about the need for the mission, I'll move on to a discription of your passengers."

"The first, is Nia Glasion," Challis indicated a fortyish human female. "She is a noted historian, who worked for the Imperial Archives at the University of Coruscant." Challis then highlighted a group of three hard cases, a human couple in their mid-twenties and a short, furred, monkey-like alien male. "The man is Revv, the woman is Tara and the Yazirian is K'rigg. They are the only survivors of a pirate crew that had been ranging, rather boldly I might add, through the core systems, until cornered and destroyed by an Imperial anti-piracy patrol.

Challis shifted the highlight to a bedraggled Wookiee. "This is Merrg, he was the personal slave of the sector Moff, Merrg has seen much and has been ill used for it."

She then focused on a very high brow human that Challis, based on her expression, had nothing but contempt for. "This individual is Philst Anond, he was a sycophant now out of favor with the Emperor, you would do well to keep your eye on him at all times, I for one do not trust him or his motives.

"The last of your passengers is a Humma," The holoprojector showed a bi-pedal marsupial. "Tem here, was an ambassador until the Empire decided they needed his home world more than he did. That's the lot of them, they are each very important and while I don't expect you to be a 'baby sitter', I do expect you to take every precaution to get them to their destination safely. Are there any questions?"

"Sir," Rathbone spoke of the first time. "there is no way we can fit fourteen people in the Spectre.

"Very observant, Ensign Loegin, you will not be using the Spectre, you will be using a modified personal yacht that does not have any known connection with the Alliance. You will leave here on the Spectre and rendezvous on Bepin with an Ensign Trilsk, who will fly the Spectre to your pick up rendezvous. Once you've dropped the refugees at the haven, you will link up with Trilsk, exchange ships again and return here."

"How well is this ship armed?" Asked Kyle.

"I know you have amassed quite an impressive combat record, Lieutenant Kyle, but your mission is one of stealth, not combat. The Long Wind Sally has only token weaponry. If there are no further questions, you leave in one hour. Dismissed."

"What in the south side of Nar Hutta was that?" Rathbone exclaimed as he picked himself off the floor of his cabin and ran for engineering. "Bridge, this is Loegin what's going on?"

"Roawara!" Halasa bellowed back.

"Whoa, I didn't do anything, all I know is we're showing heavy damage to the sublight and repulsor grids. The hyperdrive's offline and going by the smell of charred circuitry, it's in bad shape."

"This is not the most pleasant way to wake up. What have you got for me." Said Leland who had just reached the bridge.

The Long Wind Sally bucked and rolled as Halasa fought with the controls, he growled back at Rathbone and again in relief as Leland staggered into the pilot's seat.

"You weren't at Tosca it's not like that at all, we've still got some control and we're not in the atmosphere yet."

"What did he say Leland? I still can't follow him when he gets excited." Said Rathbone.

"Oh, to you he said, 'Full power to repulsors we're going to crash.' and to me he said, 'It's about time you got here.'"

"Full power to repulsors, you got it, I'll also channel as much excess power from sublight and hyperdrive as the grid will hold."

"Thanks Rath, I'll get back to you when I know more."

"Tell me what you know now." Said Carek, who, along with Lazarus, had taken their places in the astrogator's and communication's seats.

"Hyperdrive cut out. I know it's not my fault, I had that plot perfect." Said Leland.

"I know you did, I always practice an instinctive plot whenever we go anywhere, just to stay sharp and your plot was right on target."

"Fault is academic at this point," Said Lazarus after a quick scan with the sensors. "We're already entering the stratosphere. We're just going to have put reasons on hold and make the best of what we've got. I suggest we get the passengers strapped in, cause this is going to be a rough one."

"Good idea Laz." Said Carek as he activated the intercom. "Ardent. Kyle. Get everyone strapped in and brace for impact."

"We're already working on it." Kyle responded tersely.

Leland, Halasa, and Rathbone each pulled the maximum from the stricken ship, as it shuddered though the lower atmosphere and into a blanket of thick fog.

"Altitude one hundred meters. Speed two fifty KPH." Said Lazarus.

"Still can't see a thing." Leland responded. "Can you see any sort of clearing through that mush?"

"I'm reading heavy vegetation all around. Altitude fifty meters. Speed two hundred."

"Carek, can you do that 'Force thing' and find us a safe spot? I'm about out of altitude, airspeed and ideas."

Before Carek could answer, the Long Wind Sally emitted a gut wrenching shriek as they smashed through the first of many trees that lay in the ship's path.

"Halasa, shunt all power to repulsors, I..."

Leland never finished what he was going to say, as the yacht plowed into the tallest of the low mossy trees that

they had been just barely skimming since they dropped into the fog. The ship tried to dig in nose first, but Leland, augmented by twice normal repulsor power, courtesy of a total safety limit over ride by Rathbone, kept the nose out of the ground.

The Long Wind Sally ground to a bone crushing halt. Lazarus' safety harness failed throwing him forward into the back of Halasa's seat violently. Carek leapt out of his seat to go to his aid.

In engineering, the fire suppression system activated and snuffed out blaze caused by a massive short circuit in the hyperdrive. Rathbone crawled out of the fire with second degree burns on thirty percent of his body.

"Are you guys okay?" Choked Ardent to the refugees, while Kyle tended to Rathbone.

"I was supposed to be receiving sanctuary," Thundered Philst as he staggered to his feet in the main cabin. "not made to travel with third class humans and aliens and suffer the ignominy of being killed by a group of half trained savages, unfit to fly a landspeeder let alone a starship!"

"We love you too," Ardent responded, his fists clenching and unclenching. "but the question before you is, ARE YOU OKAY?"

Philst taken aback by the tattooed merc's obvious implied threat, stepped back unable to respond.

"We seem to be none the worst for the experience." Said Nia Glasion to break the tension. "However, I would not like to try that again, I find that studying about great deeds is much easier than surviving great deeds."

"I'm sorry about the landing ma'am," Said Ardent. "I don't know what happened, but if you're all alright, I intend to find out."

Ardent moved slowly across the tilted deck to the cockpit. When he arrived he found Carek cradling Lazarus' head, while Leland applied a medpac to his severely injured comrade. Halasa was running a ship wide diagnostic and obviously didn't like what he was seeing.

"Leland," Ardent sighed. "that was not one of your better landings, still it was better than Tosca, at least we didn't have to use the escape pod."

"Ardent shut up, and if no one needs help, go away." Said Leland never looking up from Lazarus.

"Is everyone okay?" Asked Carek.

"Rathbone got a little toasted, Kyle is patching him up. The children are okay, but that Philst won't be if he

doesn't drop that high and mighty attitude of his. Does anyone know what happened?"

"R-R-Rogue com-comet." Groaned Lazarus, just coming around from Carek's assistance. "I got a sensor sca-scan just before we entered the atmosphere of where ever here is."

"Halasa what shape are we in?" Leland asked as he moved back to the pilot's seat.

Halasa's forlorn howl said all they needed to hear and a lot more that they didn't want to hear.

"He's right," Said Leland shaking his head from his look at the read outs. "The hyperdrive is totally slagged. The main cooling coils cracked when we crossed the comet's tail, they failed completely when we hit, causing the fire in engineering, the extinguishers kept it from spreading, but not before both motivators melted. The upshot is, we've got forty percent of sublight and sixty five percent repulsors, but no hyperdrive, period."

"Do you know where we are?" This from Rathbone who had limped in with Kyle to hear the news. "I mean being wrecked is bad, but being wrecked and lost is just too much."

"Laz only got a partial scan, it will take me awhile to reconstruct exactly where we are, but as a guess, I would say we are somewhere in the Delfarra system, less than halfway to Fnalla."

The silence hung for a few seconds as they contemplated the repercussions of being stranded on an unknown planet that was, at sublight speeds, centuries away from help.

"You said we still had sixty five percent repulsors," Said Kyle. "can we use the ship to scout the planet? There might be somebody living here and we might be able to get repairs, or book passage, or anything other than being stranded."

"I'll have to reroute main power to compensate for that 'full power to repulsors' trick I pulled to get us down." Said Rathbone. "It will take at least two hours to put that mess back there into something that resembles an engine room again."

"That will give us time to verify the atmosphere and to take stock on the rest of the ship." Said Carek. "Until we can prove there's no one else here, we're not stranded."

"Okay Leland, give it a try." Said an obviously tired Rathbone. "We've done about as much as we can without seeing the drive under load. The starboard grid is beyond help, but with the patchwork we've run with the remaining grids, you should be able to compensate."

"Okay, everybody brace yourselves. Carek one quarter power."

"Outstanding!" Leland whooped, as the Long Wind Sally shuddered and groaned, but held steady. "It's about time we got some good news."

The team had had their hands full. Rathbone and Halasa had been very busy repairing the heavily damaged repulsors and sensor array. Ardent and Kyle had been even busier inventorying the ships stores, keeping an eye on the still incapacitated Lazarus, and keeping the refugees in line. Carek, due to the main sensor array being offline, could only use the external hull sensors to conduct an examination on the mystery planet, finding it to be a dense jungle with almost perpetual fog and an atmosphere tainted by metallic compounds unbreathable without breathmasks. Leland through the laborious task of manually calculating their location from the partial sensor scan and from plotting the few stars visible through the fog, confirmed his hypothesis that they were in the Imperial held Delfarra system. On an uninhabited planet that hadn't even rated a name, just the numeric designation L7-438-H4, given by the scout that discovered and then promptly forgot the nearly useless planet.

"Rathbone, did you get the sensors online?" Asked Carek moving to the communications/sensors station as Halasa took cover as co-pilot.

"Yessss, in a manner of speaking."

"And what manner of speaking is that?"

"Look, when the hyperdrive blew, it took most of the circuitry back here with it. I had to pirate parts from the few remaining systems to get the repulsors online. The sensors do work, but only at ten percent of normal."

"Ten percent! That's only slightly better than macrobinoculars."

"If you think you could do better Jedi boy, you're welcome to come back here and take over at anytime."

"No Rath, I know you did the best that you could."

"And my best, is as good as it gets."

"Now don't go getting a big head, we've got enough problems already."

"Are you two through with your love fest?" Leland interrupted. "As you said we have enough problems, let's start solving them."

"True enough Leland. Said Carek sheepishly. "Good work Rath. Initiating scan."

The nearly blind sensors reached out to scan the portion of the electromagnetic spectrum they could still detect.

"Leland, try a slow three sixty to port."

Carek coaxed the sensors for as much of the spectrum he could get. Leland had just completed two full circles and was about to give up.

"I'm not reading anything. I think we...wait! Go back to heading 147 mark 6. There it is! Range four hundred eighty klicks."

"THERE WHAT IS?" Yelled Leland, who up until that point had been unaware that he had been holding his breath.

"Active neutrino emissions! We've got a power source out there. It looks like the Empire has set up some form of outpost."

"And an outpost has to be resupplied. We got a way out of here."

"It's a good thing this fog is here, we should be able to get in close without being seen."

"There's that Jedi optimism again."

"Just drive Archimedes, just drive."

The Long Wind Sally settled down within a kilometer of the unknown power source. During the slow lumbering flight the team held a war council to decide the best course of action.

"I am not staying cooped up in this hulk anymore! K'rigg shrieked in his unfortunately shrill voice. "I have gone along with this 'asylum' thing long enough. I've been fighting Imperials since I was a cub and I will not cower like a frightened Tauntaun, when there is fighting to do."

"K'rigg." Carek tried again to calm the agitated Yazirian. "We have been given the job to get you to Fnalla..."

"HANG YOUR JOB!"

"Carek, if he wants to go with us why stop him." Said Kyle, who was about at wits end with the Yazirian's voice which was so shrill now that it actually rattled teeth. "It's his life to do as he chooses, who are we to stop him?"

"I guess you're right. I yield. Does anyone else wish to go with us?"

"Tara and I will stand by our mate." Said Revv to no one's surprise.

"We've hung together this long, if this is our last run then we'll not let him go down alone."

"I want to go too." This from Tem and this did surprise everyone.

"Are you sure ambassador?" Said Rathbone. "This is no cake run, it could get nasty."

"I have been on the run since the Empire seized Hummas Prime. I want to start making the Empire pay for what they did to my homeworld."

"I can respect that, the Empire cost me my entire family." Said Revv. "If you think you're up to it I say let him go."

"The Empire only uses force when it is merited." Said Philst.

"You would do well to keep your mouth shut," Said Revv rising to his feet. "unless you would prefer to swallow those ceramically bonded teeth of yours. You arrogant blowhard."

"People, we will have no fighting among us." Rathbone said as he stepped between the two men. "We put our energy into defeating the Empire, not each other."

"Well said Rath," Carek added. "I can see what your preference is Philst, How say you Merrg?"

Merrg only shook his head. Nia looked decidedly uncomfortable.

"I...I wish I could go with you, but I'm no combatant, I would only get in the way."

"Ma'am, sometimes the wisest course of action is knowing when you should not take any action." Said Kyle.

"Merrg?" Said Carek, trying to break the thousand meter stare that the battered Wookiee adopted when no one was talking directly to him.

Merrg turned his sad brown eyes to meet Carek's and waited for him to continue. The Moff that had owned Merrg had spent years breaking his will and despite the fact that Merrg knew the Moff was dead, Merrg would still not speak without being commanded to do so.

"We need someone to stand guard here on the ship while we're out scouting, will you do it?"

The play of emotions on Merrg's face was plain to see. He was still very much the broken slave, but Carek's kind words allowing him to decide for himself, had reached where there was still a spark of hope and that spark won out over the fear, he first simply nodded, then he surprised everyone by uttering a long rumbling roar that came from somewhere deep inside him. Merrg then smiled for the first time, he had taken that first step toward recovery.

They had reached the last of the cover overlooking the site of the unknown power source. The heavy jungle gave way to a clearing fifty meters wide that lead to a series of boulders. The clearing either had a drainage problem or the entire open area had been deliberately allowed to flood, leaving a fifty meter wide band of half meter deep sludge.

"Whoever these people are, they aren't too smart." Said Ardent as they moved slowly through the mud.

"Well there's a brilliant observation." Leland answered, none to happy at having to ruin his boots in the gooey mud.

"Will you two be quiet." Kyle hissed. "We'll be sitting gundarks if you draw any attention."

"Right. Sorry." Said Leland.

The clearing sloped gently upwards and they were able to reach the high ground at the edge of the boulders without incident. Here they could see that the boulders had been identically cut and that the boulders surrounded twenty-odd stone buildings, which in turn were built around a metal building in the center of the compound. Inside the ring of boulders the rebels found that the planet's .98G gravity had been artificially increased to 1.3G.

"Yah brin daga." Ardent whispered his clan battle cry in awe when he recognized the lizard like aliens that were tending crops inside the compound. "Those are the..."

"Lizards with the corrosive blood." Finished Carek who was equally stunned to see the deadly unnamed aliens.

"How did they get here?" Asked Rathbone. "I mean, we ran into these guys more than a thousand parsecs from here."

"The Force only knows how, all that's really important is that, if this is our power source, we're still stuck." Said Carek.

"They don't look so tough to me." Said Leland clearly unimpressed by the stories he had heard from his comrades. "Yeah, they look pretty strong, but they just don't look that tough."

Kyle spoke up for the first time since seeing the aliens. "You weren't there. These guys are bad news. Hey Carek, these guys are wearing grey. The other one's were wearing blue."

"And don't forget that Force using gold guy." Added Rathbone.

"I would like to try to contact these guys peacefully." Said Carek.

"Peacefully?" Asked an incredulous Ardent. "Just how are you going to do that?"

"We have to try and talk to them. We're in too bad shape to try and force the issue." Insisted Carek.

"These guys aren't the 'let's sit down and have a talk' type." Ardent was also insistant.

"I'll go." Said Leland. "They never met me, and thus, just in case word got to these guys somehow, they won't be as inclined to fight someone they don't know."

"They didn't know us last time and that didn't stop them from almost killing half of us." Said Ardent.

"I still say it's worth a try. If they attack then we'll have to take what we need." Said Carek.

"Then it would be a good idea for you to go." Ardent still insisted.

"It's your idea and you're supposed to be our team leader. you should be the one to make contact.

"Ardent quit being so difficult." Said Kyle. "I think Carek's point about not provoking them while our ship is so beat up is valid."

"I'll go with Leland." Said Rathbone. "Carek should be here to lead the reinforcements if it comes to that. I think I can handle an initial contact."

In order to stifle any further debate, Rathbone started walking toward the two aliens in the field, forcing Leland to run to catch up. They cleared the boulders and walked toward the aliens with their hands in plain sight.

"Hello! Hello! We mean you no harm." Said Rathbone in the most calming voice he could use and still be heard thirty meters away.

The aliens jerked around at the sound, gestured wildly, then screamed and ran. Leland and Rathbone ran after them with Rathbone still trying to talk to the frightened aliens.

"Hey slow down we just want to talk for Diety's sake will you stop." Rathbone yelled after the rapidly retreating lizards.

The aliens ran into the nearest building. Rathbone and Leland were halfway across the field, when Rathbone grabbed Leland's arm and pointed off to his left. Two blue robed aliens had appeared and were leveling blaster rifles on them.

"I knew this wouldn't work!" Snarled Ardent as he opened fire with his pistol, putting three shots into one of the aliens. Kyle blasted the second alien before it could even draw a bead on the two would be emmissaries.

Rathbone had advanced to where the aliens had fallen with Leland providing cover as the rest of the rebels broke cover to join their comrades.

"Carek. Kyle. Ardent. Look at this!" Called Rathbone, who was very upset about something.

"What have you got, Rath?" Gaspd Kyle winded from his dead run.

"Look at these blasters!" Said Rathbone.

"So what. They're standard Imperial rifles," Said Ardent. "Big Deal."

"IMPERIAL!" Carek cried. "Ardent think this through, either these guys took these weapons from some Imperials who didn't need them anymore, or..."

"The Imperials gave them the rifles! YAH BRIN DAGA!" Exclaimed Ardent using his clan battle cry as an oath, when he realized that the one thing that had scared the late Captain Arkin-an alliance between these aliens and the Empire-had very likely come to be. "We got to report back to the Alliance, this is too hot to wait."

"That may be very true," Said Rathbone. "but that doesn't change the fact that our hyperdrive is still wrecked and we still haven't found a replacement."

"Right, first things first." Said Carek. "Everyone fan out. Stay alert and if you see any aliens in blue or gold, shoot first. The further away the better, these aliens are deadly with their claws and they bleed a corrosive inchor that's just as deadly. Let's move."

The team and political refugees moved carefully through the compound. They met no further resistance. The only aliens found wore grey robes and cowered in abject terror whenever anyone came near. The metal building in the center of the compound proved to be a large fusion power generator for the artificial gravity. They did find three hoversleds, each capable of holding six people.

"Any luck with the locals?" Asked Rathbone who was running a systems check on the hoversleds.

"None at all." Carek replied. "They're completely unresponsive and I'm not just good enough to contact them with the Force."

"Hey what's this?"

"What's what?"

"Look," Rathbone motioned Carek over to look at what he had discovered. "it's a positional tracker and there's a map loaded in memory. There's an Imperial base less than two hundred kicks from here!"

"Excellent! I'll get everyone rounded up."

"What about the generator?"

"What about it?"

"Well I could rig it to self destruct. Whatever the Empire and these lizard guys are doing can't be good for Alliance."

"Go ahead. How much time do you need?"

"Five minutes."

"You got it."

Five minutes later, they were moving toward their ship at full speed. One minute after that, the sky was lit by a huge explosion. The next sound was a pair of TIE fighters screaming in on an attack run. Caught by surprise, the sled piloted by Tara was heavily damaged on the first pass.

"How in blazes are they tracking us?" Kyle screamed to be heard over the din of explosions, TIE engines, and the straining hoversled engine.

"Tracking?" Carek repeated. "Tracker! They're using the signals from the positional trackers to find us in this fog. Quick turn off the trackers!"

As the TIEs came about they powered the sleds down completely. The TIEs made three sweeps over head then banked away.

"027 mark 4. That's the direction of the Imperial base." Said Leland. "Good call Carek, let's get out of here."

"I guess once we get Laz, Nia, that jerk Philst, Merrg and the droids we'll head for the base?" Asked Leland.

"That's about as far as I've thought ahead to." Replied Carek, who was very much short on ideas and was about to say so, when he noticed the sled carrying Ardent, Halasa, and Leland vere sharply off to the right. "Kyle, Ardent's seen something!"

Ardent was standing over the hoversled's windscreen with his blaster rifle lighting up the fog with a long burst of rapid fire. Kyle was just catching up when, the AT-ST that Ardent was firing on, heeled over from a well aimed hit that severed the hydraulic lines, causing the walker to fall over and explode.

"Nice shooting Ardent." Kyle said when he pulled up along side Ardent's hoversled."

"I can't take credit for that last shot although I wish I could."

"If you didn't do it, who did?" Asked Carek.

There was an ear splitting howl, that sent half of the team diving for cover before they realized, it was just Halasa congratulating Merrg for his excellent shooting Wookiee style. Merrg, very much embarassed by the whole thing, simply whuffed a question.

"Nothing of any use except for these hoversleds was at the power source," Answered Carek. "but we did discover an Imperial base and we're going to steal a shuttle from them to get out of here."

"What are we going to do with the refugee from a junk heap?" Asked Rathbone as he indicated the battered yacht, displaying an engineer's concern for a ship even if he didn't like the ship. "We aren't going to let the Imperials have it are we?"

"I think we'll be better off in the hoversleds." Said Leland.

"I agree with that, but what are we going to do with the ship?" Said Carek. "Rath is right, we can't just leave it here, they'll be able to gather all sorts of intell if it's taken intact."

"I can rig a self destruct that we can trigger remotely via a pulse code sent from a comlink." Rathbone said.

"Good plan. Okay everybody you have..." Carek turned to Rathbone with a raised eyebrow.

"Fifteen minutes."

"You heard the man. Let's get movin'."

It took nearly seven hours in the slow hoversleds to cover the two hundred kilometers to arrive at the Imperial base. The long trip had an advantage, in that they arrived at dusk and would not have to wait long for nightfall to begin their attack. The Imperial base was the standard pre-fab design and it was very obvious that it was not fully manned or fully operational.

"This is too easy," Said Kyle. "it looks like a trap. A half manned base with a Lambda class shuttle setting on the landing pad just waiting for us to grab?"

"Kyle, why don't you lighten up and be grateful that we've got it easy for a change." Leland said as he shifted his macrobinoculars to scan the base once again. "I've gone over every centimeter of that place ten times and I don't see anything other than what it looks like: a unfinished pre-fab Imperial base."

"I agree that it seems a little easy," Carek added. "but I haven't been able to sense anything out of the ordinary either."

"Okay then, how are we going to do this?" Asked a still skeptical Kyle.

"We bum rush them." Said Leland. "Anything fancier than that will just give them time to react. Those heavy turbolasers on the top of the base are operational and if we let them get into play that will be end game."

"Don't you know any other tactic other than frontal assault?" This from Rathbone who had run out of patience with the conversation.

"I don't like the frontal assault plan either," Said Carek coming to a decision. "but I think Leland is right for a change, with the hoversleds we'll be able to get inside those turbolaser's firing arc before they can get their servos up to speed. We land right next to shuttle, pop the rear hatch, get our passengers on board, and blast out fast and low before those turbolasers are ready to fire."

"Your optimism is an inspiration to us all." Rathbone sneered in a voice just dripping with sarcasm. "If you're all committed, and believe me, you all should be committed, let's get this done."

The rebels returned to the hoversleds. Leland, Ardent, and Halasa, with Nia and Sam were running block for the refugee's sled. Kyle, Carek, and Rathbone, with Merrg and Three-emm were also running block. K'rigg, Tem, Revv, Tara, Philst and the still semi-conscious Lazarus were in the screened sled.

On Leland's mark the three sleds burst out of cover at maximum speed, rushing headlong for the landing pad and the all important shuttle. The rebels cleared the open area to the base and roared over the perimeter fence with weapons at the ready. The Imperials responded as quickly as their training allowed, it was however virtually unheard of for anyone to stage a frontal attack an Imperial installation, and the few seconds of hesitation were enough to allow the rebels to dodge the two AT-STs on patrol and reach the landing platform unscathed.

"I knew it would work!" Howled Leland as he slewed the hoversled to a halt two feet from the shuttle's loading ramp. "So much for caution Rathbone, now you do your part and get that hatch open."

"Shut up Archimedes, even morons are right sometimes." Said Rathbone acidly as Kyle brought his sled in next to Leland's. Rathbone vaulted out and began trying to open the shuttle's rear hatch.

The rest of the rag tag band began firing on the two scout walkers that were closing in on them. Ardent poured withering fire into the walker trying to flank them, and was rewarded by the walker being completely destroyed. Halasa, Leland and K'rigg combined their fire and took out the second walker. Just as the second walker collapsed, Rathbone found the right combination and the shuttle's hatch swung open.

Halasa, anxious to reach the flight deck, jumped aboard before the hatch was halfway down. The rebels were stunned by a full fledged Wookiee battle cry as Halasa slashed into the two squads of stormtroopers that he found waiting in ambush. The stormtroopers were frozen by the rampaging wall of fur before them and three of them were down before any of them could respond.

"I knew this would never work." Rathbone screamed over his furiously barking blaster. The stormtroopers, disorganized by Halasa's brawny assault, were easy targets and two more fell without a fight.

When the hatch of the shuttle began to open, Carek saw the main entrance of the Imperial base began to rise, without thinking he threw his lightsaber at the control panel on the outside of the massive blastdoor. Guided by the Force, the coruscating blade struck true and the blastdoor ground to a halt after only opening a meter. "That won't stop them, but it will slow them down." He was in the process of calling his weapon back to his hand, when six of the blue robed lizards began emerging from under the partially obstructed entrance.

"Now that's the last thing we need." He thought.

The landing pad was alive with blasterfire as the rebels hammered at their attackers. Leland, always more comfortable behind the wheel than behind a blaster, dove behind the controls of his hoversled. "I've got just the thing for these jokers." He thought as he hopped back into the hoversled and gunned the engine. Kyle guessing Leland's intent jumped aboard as well.

Ardent let loose a virtual firestorm into the first two lizards out of the base, dropping both of them. Carek used the Force to grab the next two lizards and hold them floating in the air. Two more lizards rolled out and rushed for the shuttle. K'rigg popped out from behind the hoversled where all the refugees had taken cover and put four blaster bolts into one of the lizards dropping it square in it's tracks. The single remaining lizard dodged past him and closed on the shuttle.

"Get us in close!" Said Kyle as he readied a pair of grenades. "I've got just the thing to even the odds!"

"You got it!" Leland managed to answer through gritted teeth as the hoversled, banked at forty five degrees and moving fifteen percent above design speed, raced toward the base's entrance. Kyle using the hoversled as cover, threw both grenades perfectly into the partially open blastdoor. He was ducking back, when he saw the two grenades come flying back out, exploding harmlessly in the open.

"What?" Carek spun around as he sensed the powerful tremor in the Force. "That's the presense I've detected before. He's here. This is a setup."

On the shuttle, Halasa under fire by the second rank of troopers, avoided their fire by grabbing one of the troopers and swinging him directly into the other troopers return fire, killing the trooper instantly. Rathbone took advantage of their pre-occupation with the enraged Wookiee to cut down five of more of them from behind, however one of his shots went wild, hitting the loading hatch controls causing it to start to slowly close.

Carek saw the ramp start to close out of the corner of his eye. "Stormtroopers. Acid lizards. A Dark Jedi. And now we're about to get locked out of our escape ship." He thought. "This just can't get any worse. Three-emm! Hang on we're going for a ride." Carek still holding the two lizards, floated them upward eighty meters to the top of the base's parapet and out of the fight, he then grabbed the fiesty little droid and floated him into the shuttle. Carek tried to keep the ramp from closing, but it was just too much of a stretch for his fledgling abilities. "There's only one way to correct this mess." He thought as he leapt through the still partially open ramp.

Rathbone was standing on the shuttle's ramp and when it began to close, he had to stop firing and shift his position. As he moved, he stumbled over one of the dead troopers and found himself in desperate hand to hand combat with a live trooper. When Carek entered the shuttle, he found that, Halasa had felled two more troopers and was holding the last two survivors at bay. Carek grabbed the trooper brawling with Rathbone from behind and Rathbone laid him out. They both turned to help Halasa, and saw the last of the troopers crumple to the deck.

"Outstanding Halasa!" Carek started, when suddenly, Halasa bellowed out a thunderous roar and pushed past the young Jedi to engage the lizard that had jumped aboard behind him. Halasa evaded the lizards raking claws, grabbed the lizard and in an impressive display of Wookiee strength, threw the lizard out of the shuttle just as the ramp closed.

"Thank you Halasa," Said Carek. "you just saved our hides. I never would have believed that anyone could wade into that many troopers and live to talk about it."

"He did have help you know." Said Rathbone.

"Sorry Rath. Excellent job, even if it was one of your shots that caused the ramp to close. Do you think you could do something about fixing that?"

"Uh, I'm on it." Rathbone said sheepishly.

"Halasa tie up these troopers and take their weapons. Three-emm follow me to the bridge."

Outside a half a dozen more lizards had charged out of the base. Leland whipped the hoversled about and plowed right through them killing two outright and leaving a third wounded. Never one to leave a job half finished, Leland cut power to the repulsors and belly flopped the hoversled onto the wounded lizard killing it instantly. However, the downside was the lizard's acid wrecked the hoversled.

Inspired by K'rigg's success, the rest of the combatant refugees opened fire on the three surviving lizards and although their fire lacked the precision of the team, they made up for in volume and the three lizards were cut down easily.

"This is getting real old." Muttered Leland, who while climbing out of the wrecked hoversled, had noticed a dozen more blue robed lizards exiting the base. "Don't these guys ever quit?"

"You weren't there the last time we fought these guys." Responded Kyle. "If you had been, you wouldn't ask that question."

Back inside the shuttle, Carek cautiously approached the bridge, paused just before the blast door that led to the bridge, took a deep breath to center himself on the Force, then vaulted onto the bridge. Despite having been poised to fire, the Imperial pilots were still caught off guard by the somersaulting Jedi. Three of them never had a chance to recover. The last pilot only got off one shot that Carek easily dodged, before he too was dropped by the flashing lightsaber.

"Okay Three-emm, the shuttle is secured. You get the ship ready to go. I'll go back and man the aft turret." Three-emm gave a somewhat lukewarm warble. "Now I don't pretend to be able to follow everything you say, but things aren't that bad. Now go on, get started." This time Three-emm's whistle sounded much more upbeat.

When Carek reached the aft turret, he was stunned to see that things had indeed gotten worse. Checking the turret's readouts, he found that it was completely cold. "Three-emm, I need power to the aft turret immediately, the team's in trouble. A dozen blue lizards and this time they've got one of those Force forsaken gold robed lizards." He noticed a human wearing a black skin tight suit, grey gloves and boots, and with a black helmet that

completely concealed his face. "And that will be the Dark Jedi that's been dogging us for so long.

While Carek waited helplessly for the turret to power up, Kyle took steady aim, then unleashed his heavy blaster. The lizards, known to be able to absorb large amounts of damage, were none-the-less staggered by Kyle's onslaught and four of the lizards fell. The gold lizard lashed out randomly with a bolt of Force lightning that hit Tara directly in the sternum, dropping her like a stone.

"TARA!!" An anguished Revv cried out scrambling for a medpac from one of the stormtroopers thrown from the shuttle by Halasa.

"Not like that! You'll kill her!" Leland yelled to Revv who obviously had no medical training what so ever. Leland holstered his blaster and crawled over to find Tara in full arrest. Neither of the two men noticed the lizard that had flanked them, until Kyle snapped off a quick shot that killed the horrid alien before it could strike.

On board the shuttle Rathbone and Halasa struggled with the badly damaged ramp. "Try cross phasing the environmental decontamination coupling to the ramp's hydraulic motivator Halasa, we're running out of time." There were a few snarls from the access panel as Halasa finished the repair, then a single bark. Rathbone punched the open ramp switch and finally, the ramp started to open.

"All aboard that's going aboard." Rathbone yelled as soon as the ramp was open wide enough to get his head through. "'Got it easy for a change.' my foot. I don't want to see what he calls difficult."

"We've got to get her to Rathbone, it's her only chance." Said Leland after a quick look at Tara.

"You can't let her die!"

"I don't intend to, quick help me carry her."

Revv and Leland carrying the dying Tara, with Merrg providing cover fire, were the first ones aboard. "Rath, I've got to get to the bridge." Said Leland as he turned Tara over to the engineer.

"Go. She's my problem now."

Outside, three lizards made a break to rush the shuttle. Kyle, his blaster close to thermal shut down, only managed to stop two of them. Halasa roared to Merrg to cover him, then launched himself at the lizard in a perfect flying tackle.

The lizards had gotten into contact with the refugees and despite a flurry of last second blaster fire, the blues cut down Tem and K'rigg.

Ardent using a stormtrooper's blaster rifle, managed to break the charge of the blues closing in on him and the non-combatant refugees, killing two and wounding another.

Halasa rolled free of the lizard he had been brawling with, after managing to break it's neck. He saw the two unconscious refugees and scooped them up with the intent to carry them to the relative safety of the shuttle. The gold lizard lashed Halasa with Force lighting and if it had been anyone else, they would have fallen where they were hit, however the lizard underestimated the strength of a Wookiee and although wounded, Halasa continued onward and reached the shuttle.

Carek witnessed this attack and at that moment his turret finally came online. He engaged the targeting system and began tracking the gold lizard and Dark Jedi. Down in the main cabin, Rathbone had managed to stabilize the mortally wounded Tara. While Leland had joined Three-emm on the bridge. Between the two of them they had the shuttle ready to lift, they just needed word that everyone was aboard and they could go.

Outside Kyle cut down the last two blues, while Ardent laid down heavy suppressive fire, that allowed the remaining refugees, Nia and Philst to reach the shuttle. With all the refugees aboard, Ardent and Kyle grabbed Lazarus and made their own move to get aboard. The gold lizard was about to unleash more Force lightning, when he saw the rear turret lock in on him. In the turret, Carek could only watch in frustration, as the heavy laser gouged out a section of landing pad as the lizard dove out of the way. The Dark Jedi didn't even flinch.

Ardent hit the intercom as he boarded. "GO LELAND GO!"

The shuttle was airborne before the ramp was completely up. Leland easily evaded the fire from the base's turbolasers. As the shuttle clawed for altitude, Ardent took over the rear turret, while Halasa and Kyle manned the other turrets. Carek ran forward to assist on the bridge.

"How bad?" Asked Carek as he strapped in and began the astrogation plot.

"Well, right now I'm only reading four TIEs inbound.

"By the Force! Isn't anything going to go our way?"

"What's wrong?"

"The blasted navicomputer is encrypted!"

"Three-emm do you think you can slice this thing?"

Asked Leland. Before the droid could answer, there was the

sound of the rear turret firing, followed by the sound of the rear shields being hit. Leland whipped the shuttle through a series of maneuvers so violent, that while the TIEs all missed, none of the gunners could hit either.

"Leland you're going to have to ease up or will never be able to hit them." Said an exasperated Ardent.

"Okay, whatever you say, but you guys better hit them first!" Snarled Leland.

"You can bet on it."

On the next pass, Leland took a second to scan with the sensors and detected dozens of TIEs, backed up by a pair of star destroyers. And despite Ardent's claim to the contrary and his destroying two of the TIEs, the shuttle was hit and heavily damaged.

"ARDENT!" Raged Leland while putting the shuttle back into the violent maneuvers that had been the only thing keeping them from being destroyed. "Carek do that instinctive thing! It's the only way, I can't keep this up too much longer. The engines are already red lining."

"I...okay, give me a second."

"That's exactly how much time you do have!" There was a wrenching series of hits and when Leland glanced at the shield readout, it confirmed what he feared, the rear shield had failed. "Now! Carek Now!"

Carek sweat beading on his forehead, tried to center himself in the Force, but the noise and vibration of the turrets firing, the violent maneuvering and most of all, the fear that was fighting the calm he was trying to center on, wouldn't let him "see" the course in his mind. "I've got to center!" He thought desperately of the most calming thing he could think of, the meditation stone in the Jedi temple of Master Havsoltek. After a moment of concentration, Carek saw a ghost of a plot trace and he engaged the hyperdrive, just as the starlines formed, the plot trace vanished. He had failed, they were hopelessly lost in hyperspace.

Chapter Fifteen

"Holy hoppin' hells, Carek what did you do?" Gaspd Leland as he fought with the wildly spinning controls.

"I thought I had it, but I was wrong. I have no idea where we're going. Can you abort the jump?"

Halasa growled low and sharply then tightened his grip on the co-pilot's seat. "I know it's not a good idea, I don't like running out of control anymore than you do, but aborting a jump as almost as dangerous as running out of control." Said Leland.

Before Carek could respond, the intercom squawked with Rathbone's barely contained fury.

"ARCHIMEDES! What have you done this time?"

"I'll have you know, you pompus windbag, that this time, it's not my fault." Leland snapped back.

"He's right Rath, it's my fault this time." Said Carek before the situation could get any worse. "I blew an instinctive jump. We were discussing whether to risk aborting the jump."

"You may have decided to become one with the Force, or whatever it is you Jedis do, but I'm not ready to go yet."

"Rathbone," Carek interrupted. "We are completely out of control. If you have a better idea, start talking."

There was a long pause before he answered. "Alright, give me five minutes to get set back here. An aborted jump will cause a shipwide power surge, I need to get the power core prepped, then I'm going to strap in the main cabin, And that will give you time to get everyone else ready too."

"Call us back when you're ready, will have everything set by then." Said Carek.

"Roger. Engineering out."

"This is not going to be pleasant." Said Leland.

"That is a monumental understatement," Carek replied. "I'll get everyone ready."

Halasa's plaintive wail was like a dirge.

Exactly five minutes later Leland pulled back on the hyperspace control, dropping them back into realspace. The shuttle shuddered and then began to tumble violently, the shuttle was then wracked by a series of explosions when several control panels began to burst from the intense power surge induced by their unscheduled exit from hyperspace. Leland was riddled by shrapnel from his exploding panel and crumpled, forcing Halasa to fight for control of the shuttle alone. In the main cabin, an

overhead conduit burst, spraying Kyle with super heated coolant, leaving him mortally scalded.

After what seemed an eternity, the shuttle responded to Halasa's feverish attempts to regain control. As soon as the ship spun to a halt, Carek unstrapped and ran to Leland who was bleeding profusely from a large piece of shrapnel in the center of his chest. As he pulled a medpac from the emergency stores, he happened to glance outside the ship.

"What have I done?" He said awestruck, as he looked out the cockpit and into the inky blackness that should have held the starry comfort of realspace, but this time the rebels had reappeared in an area of complete blackness with no stars, no matter how dim, to offer the slightest light, bearing, or hope.

Carek forced himself back to the more pressing task of trying to stabilize Leland. "Halasa, get Rathbone up here quick. I'm losing Leland!" Halasa bellowed out a full throated Wookiee battle cry as he raced aftwards. "Come on Leland hang in there help is on the way, and I'm not going to let you die!"

Halasa burst onto the bridge carrying the loudly, and ineffectually, protesting engineer. "For the last time put me down, you over grown simpleton!" Halasa put Rathbone down with an amazing amount of gentleness for someone so large and so clearly agitated.

"Great Deity!" Cried Rathbone when he saw the extent of Leland's wounds. He continued to speak as he worked. "I had no idea he was hurt so bad, Halasa was nearly incoherent back there. When I didn't understand, he just snatched me up from where I was working on Kyle..."

"Kyle? How bad is he hurt? Is anyone else hurt?" Carek interrupted.

"Kyle's the only one. He sustained critical burns, fortunately I had just got him stable, when Halasa came charging in like a rampaging bantha and carried me in here."

"Only two wounded, that's pretty good considering how bad the jump went." Said Carek.

"'Only two wounded' He says," Snarled Rathbone. "those two wounded were very nearly killed, and they are not out of the woods. And I haven't even gotten to the what's left of the shuttle yet. Sometimes I think you Jedi's spend so much time communing with the Force that it effects your brains. On the more practical side, I think I've got Leland stable enough to move."

"Okay your point is taken and just for your information, things are even worse than you think. Have you had a chance to look outside yet?"

"No I haven't. I...I..." Rathbone had obviously lost his train of thought when he looked up from working on Leland to view the total void outside the ship. "Where are we?"

"We don't know yet." Said Carek shaking his head slowly. "Halasa and I will start working up a plot, and since no one else is in need of your medical skills, I guess it would be a good idea for you to begin checking on the ship's status."

"Yeah, ship's status. I'll call you when I know something."

"We'll do the same."

The rebels found that the blast door to engineering had sealed itself, cutting them off from most of the systems shut down by the surge. Rathbone had to reboot the main computer, which had also shut itself down to protect itself from the surge, in order to begin repairing the crippled ship. It took them three hours to restore main power and reroute the sad remnant to maintain life support and to activate the sensors.

"I've done all I can on this side of the blast door." Said a weary Rathbone. "I've got to get into Engineering to do any more."

"Okay Rath you're the engineer. it's your call." Said Carek. "The sooner we can get clear of this darkness the better."

"Come on Three-emm. We've got more work to do." Said Rathbone as he headed for engineering. The little droid beeped and trundled along to catch up with his master. When Three-emm reached to door to engineering, he found Rathbone struggling with the access panel.

"It looks like the hydraulics have fried too, Three-emm, I can't over ride the lockout. Will you give it a try?"

Three-emm beeped an affirmative and extended his interface probe. He beeped again when the blast door snapped open. Before Rathbone could congratulate him, Three-emm's triumphant beep turned into a shriek of electronic pain that was abruptly cut off by the plasma storm that erupted from engineering. Three-emm's blackened hulk fell to one side when Rathbone, who had been saved from the same fate only because he was not standing directly in front of the door, crumpled to the deck over come by the intense heat. The raging backdraft was more

than the damaged life support could handle and the available oxygen was sucked up in seconds. Ardent, Kyle, Leland, Halasa and all of the refugees were felled before they could even react.

"I've got to get that door closed," Thought Lazarus who, by sheer force of will, managed to remain conscious and was crawling his way toward engineering. "the life support system will replenish the oxygen mixture if I can just remove the heat source."

Forward, Carek was trying to focus on the Force-which had kept him conscious-to close the blastdoor. "I will not feel fear," He thought through heat blurred eyes. "I will channel my thoughts to seeing that door closed." Sweat beaded on Carek's forehead that had nothing to do with the searing heat that was bathing the shuttle, as he struggled to find the control necessary to manipulate the hatch from ten meters away. "I...can't..." Where his last words as the lack of oxygen over powered his Force driven ability to remain conscious.

"Close you thrice damned reject from a junkyard." Lazarus stammered as he too fought with the blastdoor, from the corner of his eye he saw Carek fall. "It's just me and you now, AND I INTEND TO WIN!"

Lazarus took as deep a breath as the oxygen starved atmosphere would allow, using this last breath to reach down deep to the very core of his soul, and with a all-or-nothing burst of energy he managed to find the right combination of inputs that closed the blastdoor just before passing out from anoxia.

As Lazarus had predicted the life support system, freed from the massive heat of the plasma fire, quickly recycled the atmosphere to the proper oxygen nitrogen mix. When Lazarus' eyes fluttered open, he was looking into the soft green eyes surrounded by silver black fur that could only be Halasa. When the Wookiee saw that Lazarus was awake he let out a joyous roar that brought the rest of the team running.

"I...guess...it...worked." He managed to croak.

"And it's a bloody good thing it did," Said Rathbone. "another few seconds and we would have become another permanent addition to the graveyard."

"Graveyard? L-Look Rath, I'm s-s-still not altogether here. Wh-what are you talking about?"

"While you were napping, Rath had time to stabilize the power core and get the sensors back on-line." Said Leland, who was wearing an unusually grim expression. "Once we had sensors, I ran a full spectrum scan. We are sitting in the

middle of a roughly twenty kilometer circle that contains over seventy ships..."

"Some date back over three hundred years!" Interrupted Ardent.

"I was getting to that, if you don't mind, this is my story." Leland glowered. "In the center of all these relics, is a sphere one hundred meters in diameter. Sensors detect no emissions of any kind from the sphere. When we tried to move closer we found that we were held in a tractor of some kind. The ship wouldn't move and the more power we fed into moving, the faster our power reserve started to drop. We had to shut the engines down before we sucked ourselves dry. The only thing the sensors can tell us about the sphere is its diameter. It's the most bizarre thing I've ever seen."

Carek sensing the pilot's exasperation, continued for him. "And to make things even more interesting, according to the star charts, we are in the middle of a black hole."

"That's impossible." Said a stunned Lazarus.

"Don't you think we know that!" Said Leland. "Carek and I worked up a crude fix based off of the length of time we were in hyperspace and a whole lot of guesswork. The charts have this area clearly marked as a hazard to navigation. I can't explain it. It just is."

"It's possible that we're the first people to survive entry into a singularity." Rathbone added.

"Singularity my foot!" Roared Leland. "We are not in a black hole. I don't know where we are, but I do know that no one survives entry into a black hole. So you're going to have to come up with something better than that!"

"Leland try and calm down," Said Carek. "the last thing we need is to turn on each other. I can't explain what's going on either, so the only course of action is to check out that sphere. We've only got two suits so who's going to go with me?"

"I'll go," Said Kyle immediately. "I've just about had it with being cooped up in here anyway."

"Good, let's suit up."

"How are you planning on reaching the sphere? It's more than a kilometer away." Asked Rathbone.

"My jet pack should get us there with no trouble." Answered Kyle.

"How are you going to get a jet pack to operate in a vacuum?"

"My pack has a mount for a small oxygen tank. It won't have the same range or speed as in an atmosphere, but it's more than enough for two clicks."

"Okay it's your lives. I'll help you suit up." Said an obviously skeptical Rathbone.

The rebels were finishing up with putting on their bulky space suits, when there was an ear piercing shriek that could have come from only voice.

"What's K'rigg's problem?" Said Kyle as they started running aftwards to investigate the disturbance. When they reached the aft turret, they found Tara and Revv trying to reason with the Yazarian, who was obviously, going by the distinctive whine of the charging power capacitors, powering up the aft weapons.

"K'rigg stop this." Said Revv as he pounded on the sealed hatch.

"He's gone enclosure mad." Said Tara. "Yazirians can't take being indoors for long periods of time, when they reach their limit they sometimes become violent."

"That's a wonderful character flaw for a starship crewman!" Raged Kyle. "I guess Challis didn't think that we needed to know that little detail."

"He's never had the madness before." Said Tara sharply.

"This was not a good time to start."

"Rath, get to engineering and cut power." Snapped Carek over his shoulder as he realized what K'rigg was trying to do.

Rathbone was still turning around when he heard the lasers fire. Less than a second passed before the shuttle was rocked by massive explosion that sent him sprawling to the deck.

"I wonder what I have to fix now?"

Rathbone had no sooner completed that thought, when the explosive decompression klaxon sounded and the blast door that separated the aft turret from the rest of the ship started to close. Fighting the explosive decompression, everyone in the companionway had to dive free of the guillotining blastdoor. Rathbone was still scrambling to get clear when the door slammed down on his left hand. Screaming in raw agony, he blinked stupidly as he stared at his mangled hand, then mercifully blacked out.

When the aft turret exploded, it sent shrapnel ricocheting down the companionway. Tara and Revv were closest to the turret and both were critically wounded. Acting without thinking, and almost simultaneously, Kyle and Carek each grabbed one of the falling ex-pirates on the fly and dove to safety.

"Ardent we need medpacs!" Yelled Carek as he checked Tara's vital signs.

"I'm not sure a medpac can save Revv. He's in real bad shape," Said Kyle. "is there anything the Force can do to save him?"

"Yes, but let's give the medpacs a chance.

Ardent slid to a stop next to his comrades with three medpacs. "These are all that's left." He said breathlessly.

The medpacs proved to be all their manufacturers claimed they were and both Revv and Tara were stabilized on the first try. Leland entered the main cabin as Rathbone, Tara, and Revv were carried in. "As you probably expect, the blast came from the sphere." He said as he helped to make the wounded comfortable. "How bad are they?"

"Tara and Revv are going to be out of it for a while." Replied Ardent. "Rathbone has lost all the fingers on his left hand."

"Lost? Couldn't the medpac do anything?"

"The fingers were completely splintered," Said Carek. "there just isn't enough left to save. A med-droid in a full capital ship sickbay might be able to do something, but the damage is just too extensive for a medpac. On a completely different subject, it looks like an EVA is going to be needed afterall."

"Yeah, it looks like." Leland replied.

"Let's get this over with." Said Kyle. "I want out of here."

Since the two rebels were already suited up, they headed for the airlock. Once they entered and the airlock completed its cycle, Kyle hit the button to open to outer hatch. Nothing happened.

"Now what." Carek said shaking his head in total disgust.

"I don't know. There's power, but it won't open." Kyle said as he tried to activate the manual release.

Carek activated to intercom. "Lazarus."

"Go ahead."

"Have you been monitoring us?"

"Yes I have. I'm on my way to engineering now."

"Thanks." Carek released the intercom switch and turned to Kyle. "You know what Kyle?"

"What's that?"

"This 'simple escort mission' is turning into the most convoluted mission we've ever been on."

Before Kyle could respond the intercom squawked.

"Carek, this is Laz, you're not going to believe this one."

"Try me."

"I checked all the circuitry, relays, and power feeds to the airlock and it looks like all the outer hatches are magnetically sealed from the outside.

"And let me guess what that 'outside' source is."

"Using that Jedi farseeing trick, Eh?" Said Kyle.

"Kyle, not now." Returning to the intercom. "We're coming out. Meet us on the bridge."

"Okay Carek, you're supposed to be the brains," Leland started. "what's the plan?"

"You know I'm not a tech, Replied Carek. "What can you tell me about defeating a remotely powered magnetic seal?"

"Sirs if I might comment?" Said SM3PO from the corner of the bridge.

"Go on Sam." Said Carek.

"Oh great, now we're reduced to the wisdom of a protocol droid." Interrupted Leland. "We're never going to get out of here."

"Let him talk." Said Lazarus sharply. "We need all the help we can get, organic and mechanical."

"Thank you sir. The only way to deactivate a locally powered seal, is to short the magnetic pulse with a positive power coupler."

"Brilliant, tin man," Leland interrupted again. "We all appreciate that excellent escape trick, however we are facing a remotely powered seal. How exactly do you think we're going to manage shorting the pulse, when the source is a kilometer away?"

"You can't." Replied the flustered droid.

"EXACTLY!" Leland roared. "Now answer me a simpler question. Why are we wasting our time with this bucket of bolts?"

Lazarus rose slowly to his feet. "Leland, what we are doing, is 'wasting our time' with your constant interruptions. If you don't shut up, I am going to knock every tooth from that pompus mouth of yours. Now, if you know what's good for you, you'll let Sam finish."

Well aware of the amount of tension between the two men, Sam used that moment to try and defuse the situation. "Thank you sir. As I said the seal can not be shorted, so we have to use the one exit that is not sealed."

"Wait a minute Sam." Said Lazarus. "I checked myself. Every hatch on this ship is sealed."

"Not the blast door that is closing off the wrecked turret."

The team sat stunned for a moment, then they all tried to talk at once.

"Of course..."

"I must be getting senile..."

"Well what do you know, the tin man's right..."

Then for the first time since they dropped out of hyperspace they began to laugh. First Leland, then Halasa, then the rest, all broke into a much needed honest laugh.

"Thank you Sam," Said Carek wiping tears from his eyes and still chuckling. "You have helped us twofold. You've found a way out of the shuttle and you've broken the tension. Your programmer would be proud."

"Glad to help, Sir."

The rebels had to close off the aft section of the ship before they could open the blastdoor to the turret. While the others prepped the ship, Kyle pulled Carek aside.

"Carek, I think someone with technical abilities makes more sense on the EVA than me." He said. "I can show Laz how to use my jet pack while he suits up."

"You okay Kyle?" Asked Carek gently.

"Yes, of course I am. I'm not afraid or anything, you should know that. It's just that I didn't have an idea of how to get that hatch open and I don't think that just because I own the jet pack, that it makes me the most qualified to go.

"I agree with you completely. I was just about to bring that subject up myself."

"I think you should take Sam too, he's proved his usefulness."

"Yes he has. Let me help you out of that suit."

Lazarus got suited up, while they both listened to Kyle's crash course in jet pack operations. The two waited for the aft section of the shuttle to depressurize. Once ready, Lazarus hit the open button and this time the hatch opened.

"I think our first order of business is to see if we deactivate the magnetic seal on the airlock." Said Carek.

"It's worth a try," Replied Lazarus. "but Sam is right, there just isn't anyway to defeat a remotely powered magnetic seal. Isn't that right Sam?"

Sam didn't answer. The two rebels turned to find Sam just outside the wrecked turret with his optical lights very dim. "Sam! What's wrong?" shouted Lazarus as he moved to the droid's side.

"I...am...losing...power..."

"Quick Carek help me get him back inside!"

"Stand clear Laz. I've got him." Responded Carek as he used the Force to lift the ailing droid back into the shuttle.

"Maxenties to Archimedes."

"Go ahead Laz."

"Something's wrong with Sam. Carek is moving him back into the ship. See if you can help him."

"I'll look at him, with his diagnostic routines I should be able to manage."

"Rathbone? "I'm glad to see your back in the picture."

"Fortunately I'm right handed, otherwise I doubt if I could be of much use."

"Contact me when you know what's wrong with Sam."

"Will do." Lazarus then moved to rejoin Carek.

"Laz, have you taken a look at your suit's power reading?"

"No. I...what? I'm down to forty percent and falling."

"Mine too. I looks like that sphere is not only keeping us tractored in place, it's also slowly draining away any power source that it comes in contact with."

"The power drain won't effect our air supply, but we will lose communications and our heaters."

"I can maintain my body temperature. I'm worried about you."

"As long as we're not out for more than an hour, I'll be alright."

"That will leave us fifty-six minutes."

"What do you want to try first?"

"I think we should head for the sphere."

"Okay then, hang on and I'll pulse the jet pack."

The two men oriented themselves and began moving slowly toward the sphere. They were less than halfway there when they received a badly broken transmission from the shuttle.

"...rek. Laz. Don't...sphere. Head...rest...freigh..."

Lazarus placing his helmet against Carek's in an old survival trick. "Can you make that out?"

"Only part of it."

"I don't have enough power left to transmit."

"I don't either, but I can try something else."

On the shuttle, Ardent suddenly started.

"What's wrong with you?" Asked Kyle.

"I think I'm in contact with the Jedi."

"Can he hear our transmission?" Added Leland.

"Something about no power. He wants me to concentrate on the message we're trying to send."

"They're doomed." Said Leland.

After a few minutes of very deep concentration Carek said. "They want us to go to the nearest freighter and check it's computer."

"How are we going to find a freighter in this darkness?"

In answer to Lazarus' question, a very low power laser bolt lit up a small portion of the eternal night.

"That looks like our new course." Answered Carek. "Let's go."

It took them just under five minutes total flight time to reach the long dead ship. They got around the sealed airlock by entering through a large breach in the hull. They made their way to the bridge and found the main computer, like the rest of the ship, had no power.

"Carek give me your blaster's power pack."

"Good thinking Laz," He responded handing over his blaster. "How long to you think a blaster pack will power that computer?"

"Too many variables to say for sure."

Lazarus worked for several minutes before being rewarded with a dim flickering on the console. Lucky for the rebels the computer was in Vrusk, the language of an insectoid race that they understood. Lazarus had to work quickly for he was unsure how long the computer would function.

"There's a lot of damage to the core memory. They were caught some sixty-five years ago. Carek look at this."

Carek moved in for a closer look, which wasn't easy due to their space helmets. "They had a Jedi on board!"

"Yeah, sixty-five years ago Jedis were still pretty common."

"What's that part after 'losing power rapidly?' Vrusk isn't one of my stronger languages."

"It says: 'Trandu tried to mind-touch the sphere and now his mind is gone. I have no choice now, but to hope that by feeding all remaining power to the weapons that we can destroy the orb.' That's the last entry."

"Well it's obvious that that didn't work." Said Carek. "I had been entertaining the idea of trying to mind-touch the sphere myself, it looks like it's a good thing I didn't after all. By the way, how are you holding up? You've been without heat for close to fifteen minutes."

"I'll manage as long as I keep moving. Let's try the next ship."

"Let's see if we can reach the ship closest to the sphere."

"Any reason?"

"Nothing I can put my hand on. Just a feeling."

"We have nothing else better to try. Contact the ship and tell them to do that laser pulse thing again."

The two rebels reached the next ship in only four minutes. As they approached they could see that the ship had also tried to fight its way free of the sphere. The hull was rent in several places, but despite all the damage, it was clear that this ship was no freighter. The ship sported several weapons mounts, most destroyed, but two proton torpedo launchers were still undamaged.

"The Misfit." Said Lazarus reading the faded nameplate. "That sounds familiar."

"It should, there was a whole series of holos made about the Misfit and the notorious smuggler Ridge 'Neverdie' Aramnon."

"Of course! I remember now. I always thought that Captain Neverdie Aramnon was just a story."

"I did too. Let's see if there's any information left in her computer, after a hundred and twenty years."

They boarded through one of the many hull breechs and made their way to the bridge. Lazarus tried for close to ten minutes to hot wire the computer, but it had been too long. The computer was blank.

"Carek, I think I'm good for one more ship then we'll have to go back."

"Okay I'll contact the ship now. We'll stop at one that's on the way back."

Once again Carek concentrated and the low power laser pulses began illuminating their path. The chosen ship turned out to be a Sullustan scout ship. The bridge of the small ship had been wrecked by an internal explosion.

"There's no point in checking the computer here." Said Carek as poked through the remains of the bridge. "Are you up to a quick search of the rest of the ship?"

"As long as we make it quick. My toes are starting to go numb."

The search had been fruitless until Lazarus opened the hatch to engineering. Lazarus' frantic waving brought Carek over at the best speed he could manage in zero G.

"What have you got?" Said Carek as soon as he could touch his helmet to Lazarus'

"We've hit the jackpot!" Said an ecstatic Lazarus pointing to a large case he had opened that contained four unremarkable blocks. "These are dry fusion blocks! Each one of these could power the ship for a week! This one crate

alone is worth a severe case of frostbite, which is what I'll have if we don't get back soon."

"Okay Laz, if you say so. I'll contact the ship now."

This time when Carek reached out to the ship, there was an obvious delay in response. And when the laser pulses started, there were fewer pulses of shorter duration.

"Something's wrong I can feel it." Said Carek.

"I can too. I'm going to use up all of the jet pack's auxiliary oxygen to increase speed. We should get there in less than three minutes."

"Good idea. We can recharge the jet pack when we get back."

Concern for their friends and concentration on following the faint laser pulses, caused neither of the two space walkers to notice the large object that was moving across their path until it was almost right in front of them.

Lazarus twisted the controls violently, nothing happened. "I can't maneuver! There's no oxygen!"

"Ardent! Light up the object bearing 426 mark 9 now!" Thought Carek to his distant friend. The next pulse splayed across the unknown object, painting it in an eerie ghost light. The object in the split second that it was illuminated looked like a large spider. Five meters in diameter with multiple legs dangling below the large central disk-like body.

"It's a probe droid!" Said Carek calming his fear and reaching out with the Force to nudge the droid out of their way.

"I thought that was it Carek." Said an obviously shaken Lazarus as they reached the shuttle. "I thought of every space legend I had ever heard had reached out to swallow me whole."

"I have to admit that that laser pulse made that probe droid look like a living space legend alright. It's been a long time since I've been so completely caught off guard."

When the two space walkers re-entered the shuttle, they were met by Ardent who was sporting a broken nose. "It took you long enough, things have gotten a little out of control here."

"I felt that something was wrong the last time I contacted you, what went wrong?"

At that moment an alarm klaxon sounded and the emergency lights snapped on.

"That would be life support failing." Said Ardent. "Right after you left, we started losing power rapidly and

had to shut down everything but life support. Those laser pulses have just about wiped what was left."

"You can tell us the rest in engineering," Said Lazarus pulling one of the fusion blocks out of the crate. "We've found something that will help."

"Well as I was saying," Ardent continued when they reached engineering. "The laser pulses were a great idea, however by the time you contacted me the third time we were just about drained. Rathbone wouldn't leave you guys stranded, so he routed just enough power to keep one laser firing so guys could get back, but that drained the last of the power."

"Thanks Rath, you're a wiz." Said Carek.

"No you guys are the wizards. If you hadn't found these fusion blocks, nothing that I did would have mattered in the slightest." Responded Rathbone from behind the power core where he and a partially repaired Three-emm were hooking up the fusion block.

"That doesn't explain the nose job Ardent." Said Lazarus.

"One thing at a time Laz." Answered Ardent. "When life support started to fail, Merrg lost it."

"Lost it is putting it mildly." Added Rathbone. "I was working on Three-emm here, when there was this Deity awful howling from the main cabin.

I ran forward to find Halasa already laid out and SM3PO in pieces."

"He destroyed Sam?" Blurted Lazarus.

"Not destroyed, but he needs a lot of repairs." Said Ardent. "Sam was prattling on about something and Merrg just snapped. He grabbed Sam and smashed him over Halasa's head. A protocol droid is not designed to take that kind of punishment and neither is a Wookiee's head, they both went down with their lights out."

"I didn't see that part," Rathbone interrupted. "by the time I got there, Leland and Ardent were trying to keep Merrg from wrecking the rest of the ship. Ardent baited Merrg, but I guess he misjudged how fast a mad Wookiee is, and took that punch that left him with the altered beak you see now. When Merrg took the bait, Leland stunned him with a blaster rifle."

"Going by your discription Rath, it sounds like a broken nose is a small price to pay." Said Carek. "Where was Kyle during all this?"

"Keeping Nia company." Answered Rathbone with a snort.

"You're kidding?" Gaspd Lazarus.

"You should have see him come stumbling out of her quarters with a blaster in one hand and holding a towel around himself with the other." Rathbone couldn't contain himself any longer and began to laugh.

"Why is all the interesting things happen when I'm not around." Said Lazarus.

"We have got to get out of here." Muttered Carek.
"Rath, have we got enough power for the sensors?"

"Only for a few minutes. Why?"

"I want to try and find that probe droid we ran into. There's a good chance that it might just have the key to getting out of here. And based on how everyone is acting, we can't get out of here soon enough."

It took Leland less than a minute to locate the droid with the sensors and it took Kyle less than five to retrieve it. Lazarus and Rathbone examined the droid and were able to remove the memory core in less than twenty, however it was when they tried to access the droid's memory was when they ran into trouble.

"I realize there's no rationalizing with a berserk Wookiee Ardent," Said a thoroughly disgusted Carek. "but Merrg picked the worst possible time to wreck Sam, that memory module is in a completely unknown, ancient language and this is one time we really could use a protocol droid."

"I understand that, but as I said earlier, there was no way anyone could have prevented Merrg from wrecking that droid. I should know I'm the one who got a broken nose trying to stop him. I don't pretend to know that much about droids, droid technology is completely unknown on my world, but is Sam a total write off?"

"That's what Lazarus is checking on now. As long as Sam's brain and vox-synth box are intact, we can get a translation fairly quickly. If not then we a back to square one." Just then the intercom beeped.

"Carek great news. Can you come to engineering?" Said Rathbone.

"On the way."

When Carek reached engineering, he found Sam, with only his upper torso and left arm still attached, hooked directly to one of the dry fusion blocks. Rathbone and Lazarus were still fine tuning a set of jury-rigged controls that had been connected directly to the droid's open head.

"We've managed to get Sam functional!" Said a weary Lazarus. "I'll work on the rest of him later, but for now, we have access to his translation abilities and he can start cracking those files. Isn't that right Sam?"

"Yes sir." The battered droid responded with a tinny voice.

"Don't worry Sam as soon as he can, Laz will finish putting you back together."

"I understand Master Carek. I will begin working on those files now, based on their size it will take me approximately three hours."

"Approximately Sam?" Said Rathbone.

"I'm sorry for being so imprecise, but I am only functioning at seventy-four efficiency and I am simply unable to be more accurate."

"You have nothing to be sorry for Sam," Said Lazarus gently. "we all understand the conditions that you've been forced to deal with, you just do the best you can."

"Thank you sir."

"What do we do now?" Asked Carek.

"We wait." Snapped Lazarus. "Sorry Carek, I'm a little on edge."

"I can tell, why don't you get some sleep while we wait."

"The starboard phase inducers need aligning."

"I can handle that, you go now." Rathbone said as he pushed Lazarus toward the main cabin.

"Thanks Rath, let's go Laz, there's nothing more to be done until Sam's ready. Something tells me you'll need to be fresh when he's finished."

"I don't know if I would like getting those unsolicited Jedi insights all the time."

"It's something you learn to live with just like anything else."

It took Sam three hours and twenty-eight minutes to translate the contents of the probe droid's memory. There were two large files, the first was an extensive description of the sphere, the alien's sensor technology was apparently able to scan the sphere far better than the shuttle's, which was identified as organic metal. The second was a theoretical explanation of how to disrupt the sphere's tractor net with a series of widely dispersed high energy pulses in conjunction with a subspace radio pulse directed at the sphere's organic skin.

"Who ever designed that probe knew what they doing." Said a very impressed Rathbone as team Bantha discussed Sam's findings.

"I guess it's the ultimate irony that the only thing in this graveyard with sensors capable of scanning the sphere was also unable to test its theory due to being unarmed." Said a grim Kyle.

"That's unusually philosophical for you Kyle." Said Leland.

"Considering that we're surrounded by the hulks of over seventy ships, it's real easy to get philosophical." Kyle insisted.

"That's very true," Said Carek. "but now that we have a plan, there's no need to begin contemplating our mortality. Rathbone you and Leland begin working on that subspace pulse. Laz and I will use Kyle's jet pack to take one of the fusion blocks over to the Misfit and set those proton launchers to fire a wide dispersion pattern. Ardent, Halasa and Kyle will rig the last fusion block to power the hyperdrive for a quick hyperspace jump and keep a close eye on the passengers to prevent any more rampages. Any questions?"

There were none and the rebels set about to there assigned tasks. They were ready to go in just under an hour.

"Okay Carek, We're as ready as we'll ever be." Said Leland from the pilot's seat. Halasa from the co-pilot's seat, growled his agreement.

"Is everyone ready?" Carek asked over the intercom.

"Engineering Aye. Laz will trigger the relay to fire the protons and I will engage the hyperdrive on your mark." Responded Rathbone.

"Main cabin Aye. All passengers and loose items secured for jump." Kyle added.

"Okay Leland, subspace pulse in five, four, three, two, one, Mark!"

The subspace array had been augmented by a jury-rigged waveguide pointed directly at the sphere to concentrate the full power of the transmitter into the tightest beam possible. The proton launchers of the Misfit had been timed to fire just as the full force of the pulse lashed sphere.

When the subspace pulse hit the sphere, Carek was assaulted by a powerful psychic scream of pain. "By the Force! It was alive!" Was his last thought as he blacked out from the magnitude of the dying creature's anguish.

When the protons exploded, everyone could feel the shuttle lurch. "We're free! Now Halasa, full power!" Yelled an exultant Leland

They shot forward with such an acceleration that it actually over came the shuttle's inertia dampeners. Leland had pre-plotted several courses based on a conjectural plot he had worked up, his fingers were flying across the navigational computer as he tried to firm up their location, now that the field of blackness had collapsed and had revealed the stars for the first time since they had been trapped.

The effect of the subspace pulse and proton bursts far surpassed the long dead probe's expectations and the shuttle was rocked by a violent shockwave as the sphere burst asunder. The resultant blastwave began consuming everything in it's path and was gaining on the slowly accelerating shuttle. Desperately Leland punched in the last entry and pulled back on the hyperspace control just as the blastwave caught up with them, the stars stretched into starlines and became the comforting mottled effect of hyperspace, they had made it.

Chapter Sixteen

It had been a long twelve days. The captured Imperial shuttle carrying team Bantha and six refugees had been badly damaged escaping Imperial forces and then further damaged when caught in an unknown space anomaly. The primary hyperdrive was not functioning, forcing the rebels to limp along on the shuttle's hyperdrive backup. The slow trip to the planet Fnalla, where the refugees would be granted their asylum, had frayed everyone's nerves and everyone was looking forward to their imminent arrival.

"I still say it was an ancient trap," Said Rathbone Loegin to an obviously unconvinced Leland Archimedes. "it was probably set up millenia ago to interdict travel, like mines channel movement on the battlefield."

"It's always the same thing with you engineer-types, everything has an technological answer." Leland replied his voice dripping with contempt. "What makes you so sure that that beast didn't evolve naturally?"

"Well, why is it flyboys seem to have an endless supply of bravery, but you all seem to have to share the same brain?" Retorted Rathbone.

Before Leland could reply the five minutes to realspace alarm beeped, causing both men to look up and smile, argument forgotten.

"Finally!" The two men said simultaneously.

"I was beginning to think that Challis had used some Jedi trick to trap us with those cry babies for all eternity." Said Leland as he began preparing the ship for realspace.

"That would be quite a trick," Replied Rathbone. "but for a change, I'm inclined to agree. This escort mission has turned into the most drawn out fiasco we've ever been involved with."

"Well, we'll be done baby sitting in fifteen minutes." Added Leland as he toggled the intercom. "All hands prepare for realspace in four minutes."

A cheer went up in the main cabin and Carek Argonaut came forward to join the two rebels on the bridge.

"I have never been so grateful to arrive at a planet I've never been to before in my life." Said Carek.

"So, I see it is possible to crack that vaunted Jedi calm after all," Chuckled Rathbone. "that's made the whole trip worth it for me."

"Rathbone, a Jedi is..." Began Carek.

"Save it for later Carek," Interrupted Leland, his hand lovingly curling around the hyperdrive transition control. "we hit realspace in, five, four, three, two, one. Now!"

The shuttle dropped back to realspace with a vivid burst of starlines into the Fnalla system. An area that, when the rebels had been briefed what now seemed like eons ago, was a secure place for the refugee's asylum. The rebels didn't even have time for a collective sigh of relief, when they were interrupted by the comm unit beeping from an urgent hail.

"The system patrol is really on the ball." Said Rathbone. "I'll answer." However, before he could reach the transmit button, Carek intercepted his hand. Rathbone turned toward the would-be Jedi and saw that his face was clouded, as if he were in deep concentration.

Leland uttered a long string of curses, in an impressive number of languages, from where he was performing a quick sensor scan of the system. "I thought this was supposed to be a secure system! You're right about the system patrol being on the ball, the only problem is: they're IMPERIALS!"

"Halasa to the bridge! Kyle, Ardent, man the turrets; something's wrong and we got TIEs inbound." Said Carek into the intercom from where he was strapping himself in at the navigator's console. "Rath, you better get to engineering, this may get a little sticky."

"Will this farce never end! We'll never get rid of those...those... those Tiberion life leeches!" Rathbone raged through clinched teeth as he exited the bridge.

Halasa barrelled onto the bridge and growled fiercely.

"I don't know what happened!" Leland snarled back. "All I know is we got a flight of TIE/ins on an intercept vector and this tub is only putting out seventy-eight percent of rated sublight speed!"

"Hra rolfgha chak?"

"That's a good question." Answered Carek. "I guess our best course will be to head for Tatooine. Dag Caltare should be able to tell us an alternate hideout. Leland, while I'm doing the plot for Tatooine, can you run a full sensor sweep of the system?"

"All ready done." Snapped Leland. "I'm picking up a Strike cruiser and two squadrons of TIE/ins, lifting from Fnalla Prime where the starport just reeks with Imperial wave band power sources. And in case you're interested, those TIE/ins will be in range in ten seconds."

Just then, as if to confirm Leland's report, the shuttle's turrets began to fire. Halasa corkscrewed up and

to the right evading most of the TIE fighter's fire, however the ship shuddered from several hits and the shield's status display flickered briefly from green to amber before returning to green.

"We can't take too many more of those." Muttered Leland.

"That's it, just a little closer..." Said Kyle from the starboard turret as he coaxed the lead TIE fighter. "NOW!" The twin streams of fire converged with the Imperial when Halasa rolled the shuttle to the right and the lead TIE fighter spun away with its port wing shattered and on fire.

"First blood!" Kyle yelled across to Ardent in the port turret.

"That's only because we rolled right. I..." The rest of what Ardent was going to say was drowned out by the sound of the port turret's twin lasers. "Yah brin Daga! First kill!" Whooped a triumphant Ardent as the TIE he was tracking blossomed into a fireball. "A hundred credits says I'll get the next kill!"

"Don't let one lucky shot go to your head. I'll take that bet! Here they come!"

Kyle never even had a chance.

The shuttle executed a deadman's shuffle to the left and Ardent's fire swept through the lead TIE. The Imperial desperately tried to avoid the twin streams of death and swerved directly in front of his wingman, who was caught with his attention locked on the near helpless shuttle. The motion in the corner of his eye brought the wingman's head around, but it was far too late. The TIEs collided and both spun away wrecked.

"Pay up Hunter!" Ardent yelled to Kyle.

"No deal Merc." Laughed Kyle. "The bet was 'next kill' and neither of those TIEs looked 'killed' to me."

"Why you slick..." Responded Ardent hotly, then he began to chuckle.

"You got me that time. It was on a technicality that only a son of a Hutt would use, but you got me."

"You would have claimed the same 'technicality' if I had left you the same opening and you know it."

"You got me there too."

"Well my targeting scope is showing a two full squadron of TIEs closing in and another squadron launching from that Strike cruiser, I'll bet you a hundred credits per kill and fifty per cripple."

"You got a...hey! No fair!" Ardent cried as he saw the starlines that announced the shuttle was jumping to hyperspace. "I guess the bet's off."

"That goes without saying, let's go see where we're going."

"I have no way of knowing how the safe haven was compromised," Said Carek to team Bantha and the refugees, who had gathered in the shuttle's main cabin to hear the latest information that the displaced rebels had. "but, Leland's scans of the system left no doubt that the system was completely in Imperial hands. While Rathbone and Lazarus jury-rigged the backup hyperdrive for one last jump, I had time to prepare for an instinctive astrogation. I choose the nearest planet on the Rim where I knew we could find a rebel contact and that just happens to be Tatooine."

"Are you sure that's wise?" Asked Kyle. "After all, we didn't exactly make any friends the last time we were there."

"I agree Kyle, but I didn't have that much time to choose and we don't have any choice now. When I mentioned that Laz and Rath had rigged the hyperdrive for one last jump, I wasn't being dramatic, when we reach our destination the entire hyperdrive will have to be replaced. I can only hope that Dag can help us find where the Alliance is hiding."

"That's if he knows." Said Lazarus. "You all remember how long and roundabout it was to recontact the Alliance the last time we got separated."

"Captain Argonaut?" Nia Glasion asked timidly.

"Yes?"

"What will you do about a home for us?"

"At this point Nia, I just don't know. When we re-establish contact with the Alliance, we'll have to find you a another haven."

"I'll never know why I let myself believe that I would be safer with the Rebellion." Muttered Philst Anond.

"It's not to late for you to rejoin the Empire pretty boy." Snarled Revv through clenched teeth.

"Now see here." Philst snarled back and lurched to his feet. "I've had about enough of your attitude, you unwashed brigand!"

"ENOUGH!" Roared Carek. "I've had more than enough of the lot of you! It will take four days to reach Tatooine and it's anybodies guess as to how long it will take to

find a secure safe haven. Until then you will find a way to get along and I better not have to repeat myself again!"

A murmuring growl followed the awkward silence.

"No Merrg," Said Carek softly. "We're not going to leave you stranded. I'm sorry everyone, I lost my composure for a moment there. However I am serious about every one having to get along, we just don't have a choice. Rathbone, how are we set shipwise?"

"Power is only at seventy-one percent. Sublight and hyperdrives are a write off, we'll have thrusters and repulsors to land with. Shields and weapons are marginal. I know that sounds grim, but don't worry, we'll reach Tatooine just fine. We just won't be leaving without a complete rebuild. Also, the ship trap drained every power pack on the ship; blasters, comlinks, everything."

"And to think," Said Leland. "we were complaining that this mission was going to be too easy."

Rathbone had been absolutely correct about the shuttle reaching Tatooine safely. Aside from a violent shudder coming out of hyperspace, the trip had been uneventful. Not wanting a repeat of the spectacular crash that claimed the Tigershark, Carek had vetoed trying to avoid sneak past approach control via the desert. A lethargic approach control didn't challenge the rebels and Leland was able, with Halasa's help, to nurse the battered shuttle down into an equally battered docking bay.

With a last gasp that could not be completely attributed to pressure equalization, the shuttle wheezed to a halt and the rebels all but stampeded out into the unrelenting heat of the twin suns, grateful to finally able to set foot on a planet, even one as inhospitable as Tatooine.

"This place just never gets any better." Said Kyle, who along with Halasa had won the lottery to be first out of the now much hated shuttle.

Halasa sniffed the air and then whuffed his agreement.

"Enough of the chit-chat for Diety's sake already." Snapped Leland. "No one's shooting at you, so get out the way so we all can bask in all the glory 'Dustball' has to offer."

The rebels all disembarked with obvious relish, despite the oppressive heat and moved into the nearest shade.

"That will be five hun'ert credits." Said a begrimed man that had wandered out from the docking bay's office. "Up front and in cash."

"Five hundred credits!" Blurted Rathbone. "Do you think we just fell off the repulsor truck an hour ago? That's out and out piracy!"

"Goin' by the shape that there Imperial shuttle is in, you should'na go 'round sayin' that there word Pie-racy too loud, young feller."

"You sir, are obviously a man of the galaxy, my name's Kellen." Said Kyle slipping his arm around the man's shoulders and steering him back toward his office. "I bet you know where some...travellers, that are...down on their luck might be able to trade in a...previously owned shuttle for a less conspicuous ship with no questions or bureaucratic involvements?"

"If'n you ain't got the nerve of an Ewok tryin' to crash a Wookiee family reunion." Smiled the grizzled mechanic. "My name's Parn, an' I might just know someone, who might know someone, that's willin' ta trade wid ya, but you better have some cold hard creds to go with that warm heart an' smooth tongue."

"May I speak with my companions for a moment? I need to see just how big a contribution to your employer's pension fund we can make."

"Employer's pension fund? Oh, I got ya. Sure go ahead."

"He's willing to deal," Kyle said as soon as he rejoined the group. "but it has to be in cash."

"Okay guys," Said Carek. "what are our critical shortages, besides blaster packs?"

"I've got to have at least five hundred credits if I'm going to be able to repair that med droid, Three-emm, and Sam." Said Lazarus.

"The blaster packs should run us about two hundred more." Added Ardent.

"And just to be safe," Said Leland adding furiously. "three hundred more to cover all other expenses. So let's call it an even thousand."

"You heard him." Said Rathbone counting out his meager supply of credits. "Are we going to be reimbursed for this?"

"Sure Rath, I'll make sure I get a receipt." Growled Kyle. "This isn't the time to start worrying about itemized deductions."

"That's it?" Muttered Leland after seeing the depressingly small total that the rebels had scraped together.

"We haven't been to pay call since we started this farce," Said Kyle. "how much do you think we're supposed to have?"

"Never mind." Responded Leland. "Is that going to be enough?"

"It's going to have to be." Said Kyle over his shoulder as he headed back to Parn's office.

"Cut to th' creds. I've taken a liken to ya, but I ain't got much use for being buttered." Said Parn before Kyle could open his mouth.

"Okay that shuttle is worth a quarter million credits new, give me fifteen percent of that and I can throw in two thousand credits."

"Now who fell off of the repulsor truck an hour ago. I'll give you five percent an' I want ten thousand."

"Fourteen and twenty-five hundred."

"Six an' nine."

"Give us a break Parn. I can go twelve and three."

"That thing's as hot as the Dune Sea an' you know it. Seven an' seven."

"Ten and thirty-five."

"Eight an' six. That's my last offer."

"I can accept eight percent," Said Kyle pulling out the rebels entire fortune. "but I can only go thirty-seven fifty."

The play of emotions on Parn's face wasn't easy to read, but Kyle had been making a living by judging people's faces for years and it was plain to Kyle that Parn wanted to help.

"Th' Imperials will toss me in the spice mines if'n I get caught with that thing, but I ain't gonna send you packin'." Parn said after a long thoughtful pause. "I got an old scout ship out back, it's a Vangaard Pathfinder that's had most of its cargo bay converted to crew quarters. It's got room for eleven an' twenty tons o' cargo. I can give it to you for that there hulk an' thirty-seven fifty. That's the best I can do. Deal?"

"Deal." Said Kyle as he shook the old man's hand.

"Ship's in docking bay seventy-three. You take good care of her."

"That I will."

Two hours later a dispirited Carek, Halasa, and Leland were sitting in a small tapcafe poking at the remnants of their lunch after failing to find any trace of Caltare. Rathbone was aboard the new ship, that Kyle had named the Misplot, giving it a complete inspection and keep-

ing an eye on the refugees. Lazarus had gone to find his much needed droid parts, while Ardent and Kyle went for the equally needed blaster packs.

"I don't understand," Leland grumbled. "we went to every one of Dag's hangouts and nobody would even admit to knowing who he is."

Halasa growled out a short reply.

"I know he's got a price on his head," Leland replied a little too sharply. "or are you forgetting that I was there when the Imperials first tried to capture him, lo those many centuries ago. I'm telling you, this wasn't someone covering for a buddy, this was actual fear."

"I have agree with Leland, Halasa." Said Carek looking up from his cup of wortleberry juice. "I could sense fear everytime we mentioned his name, fear and something else I've been trying to put a name on all morning. I'll be spaced if I can..."

Carek's voice trailed off when he noticed that the tapcafe had gotten quiet. Turning he saw why, three toughs; a Human, a Rodian, and oddly enough, an Ithorian had bulled their way into the tapcafe. His fledgling ability to sense other's emotions, for once, clearly alerted him to their intentions.

"Bounty hunters!" He yelled as he jumped to his feet.

Halasa reacted instantly by swinging their table in a wide arc that caught the Ithorian off guard and knocked the hammerheaded alien cold. The other two bounty hunters responded by hitting Halasa with a hail of stun bolts that sent the raging Wookiee to the ground as well.

Leland took full advantage of the hunter's natural inclination to concentrate on a Wookiee and pounced on the human, the two falling to the ground in a tangle of limbs, each trying to gain control of the blaster. Leland managed get a solid grip on the human's blaster and wrenched it away. When the human lunged at Leland he ran directly into a stunbolt and dropped like puppet with it's strings cut.

As Leland struggled, Carek paused to reach out with the Force and return Halasa to the waking world. The Rodian, thinking the motionless human was of no danger, closed into hand-to-hand range with what he thought would be an easy target. Carek sensed his approach and began trading blows with the Rodian. Halasa looked up from where he had come to and saw Carek struggling with the stronger alien. Springing to his feet, Halasa snatched the Rodian off his feet and bodily slammed him into a table, ending the fight.

"Let's boost before anyone thinks to call security!" Leland yelled from over his shoulder as he made his way for the rear exit.

"Good idea," Carek said following Leland's lead.

"Halasa grab one of those hunters. We need answers!"

The rebels ran through the back alleys of Mos Eisley for several blocks, only stopping when they had found the unoccupied, battered remains of an abandoned docking bay.

"Gra-rahaargh?" Huffed a winded Halasa

"How am I supposed to know 'what that was all about.'" Gaspd Leland, between ragged breaths. "I'm just as in the dark as you, but your little bundle of joy there is going to provide the light."

Leland kicked the still groggy human in the ribs, taking great satisfaction in the hunter's croaked curse.

"As a matter of fact, my parents were legally married when I was born." Said Leland. "However my ancestry is not the issue here, I want to know what you and your obviously amateur buddies were trying to pull."

"AMATEUR!" The man snarled. "I'm Thag Pierson and I've bagged twenty-seven marks! Don't you dare call me an amateur!"

Leland snatched Pierson by the scruff of the neck and pulled his face close to his own. "Look pal, if you don't pipe down and answer my question. The only 'bagging' your going to be doing is taking a tour of the inside of a body bag."

"Halasa can you look after Mr. Pierson for a minute?" Interrupted Carek stepping between the two men. "Leland and I need to talk for a moment."

"Leland," Said a grim Carek once they had moved out of earshot. "since we haven't had time to find power packs for our comlinks, I'm going to have to try and contact the others through the Force. I know we need answers, but I will not stand for any brutality while I'm occupied. Is that clear?"

"Don't worry, I won't do anything to offend your dainty little Jedi sensibilities." Said an equally grim Leland. "You go ahead and work your Jedi magic while I sweat this guy, like I said he's an amateur it won't take much to get him to crack."

"I hope your right, I'm getting tired of being clueless."

"You and me both."

Twenty minutes later team Bantha had regrouped aboard the Misplot and were in a heated argument over what Thag the would-be bounty hunter had revealed.

"I refuse to believe it." Said Lazarus for the fifth time.

"Laz, I don't understand it either," Responded an exasperated Rathbone "but I ran a full chrono check as soon as Leland got back to the ship, what that bounty hunter said checks out. Even though to us we were trapped for only twenty-two hours, somehow two years passed for the rest of the galaxy."

"But that just can't be." Lazarus insisted.

"Look Laz," Added Leland. "I've re-synchronized our ship's chrono with approach control three times, there's just no way to get around it, two years have passed and in that time the Empire has been cracking down on the Alliance hard. According to Pierson, Dag was arrested a year ago and there's a standing bounty on anyone asking for him."

"I can get that last part verified." Said Kyle. "I can check the official Imperial bounty postings."

"I think Kyle has an excellent idea," Said Carek, speaking for the first time since the debate began. "besides, keeping busy will take our minds off of recent events. Laz, how much progress on repairing the droids have you managed to complete?"

"Uh, I've got them all functioning after a fact."

"'After a fact.' What does that mean?" Asked Ardent.

"Well, Sam's lower leg servos are still seizing up; Three-ymm's graspers only have sixty-seven percent range of motion; and the med droid needs programming, aside from that, they're okay."

"How much programming?" Said Carek.

"The only thing left is the hardwired core medical functions. That droid doesn't even know its serial number. I'm guessing eighty plus hours of programming to bring it online."

"Good work Laz," Said Carek. "keep me updated. Leland, Rathbone, you stay with the ship and the refugees, we may need to boost out of here fast and I want the ship manned and ready."

"We'll be ready." Chuckled Leland. "You know how I feel about Tatooine, the best part of the visit is leaving."

"That is an attitude, I can concur with wholeheartedly." Kyle added.

"Let's get this done."

"Carek?" Asked Ardent when the rebels were halfway to the regional government office which was where bounties were posted in Mos Eisley.

"Yes?"

"You've mentioned this 'Dark' and 'Light' side of the Force several times. Does that same concept of good versus evil apply to non-Jedis as well?"

"I'm not sure I follow your question."

"It seems to me that we have fought for the 'good' side for what seems like centuries and despite all our hard work, 'evil' is just as strong as it ever was, if not stronger. We have willingly stood against evil, even when we had nothing personal to gain. We have all suffered immensely in the defense of the greater good. And we have never wavered in fulfilling our half of the bargain. So then, tell me why, what should be by all indications, such an easy mission is turning into such a impossible quest?"

Carek had to pause for several moments before he could answer.

"Ardent, I guess if had had the opportunity to finish my training with Master Havsoltek I could answer that question with all the wisdom it deserves. As it is, I can only answer with what my own personal experiences have taught me."

"This ought to be good." Said Lazarus.

"Shut up!" Kyle responded. "I want to hear this."

"I agree that, under normal circumstances, we should have been able to finish this mission without all this extra effort. However, even though we have done more than what the average person, maybe even more than what most people, would do in the service of the greater good, evil also has allies that never take a break.

"Our only advantage over Evil is, that Evil can only inspire its minions through fear. Evil rewards success by granting dominion over others. Failure results in being dominated by someone more successful. It is the fear of being dominated that causes the followers of the darker path to be willing to do anything, to both enemy and friend, to avoid that fate. Thus, there can be no trust, as that gives dominion to someone else, without trust there can't be any sharing of goals or true cooperation. There can be alliances, but those can only be temporary or else you risk being dominated, instead of being the dominator.

"It is this fear that is Evil's weakness. Evil can only be as strong as the single most dominating person. This individual at the top of the pyramid, by the very nature of how he or she got there, must always spend a large portion of their time and energy guarding their position, for if they falter at any point, they will no longer be the most

dominating person. It is my belief that, this lack of cooperation is what gives Good the strength to defeat Evil.

"Good, rewards success by sharing whatever bounty there is amongst all. The followers of the path of light, are thus willing to do anything for their comrades, for by doing good, all benefit. Since there is no fear, we can trust and that trust is the backbone that allows us to form a true alliance that is far stronger than anything built on fear. So, I guess it's true that the basic concept of Light and Dark does apply to non-Jedis as well as Jedis. Does that answer your question?"

"That was pretty profound for someone who doesn't have the training of a Master." Ardent replied after a moments thought. "I don't know if I agree with you or not, but does give me plenty to think about."

"And on a more practical note, it killed the time it took for us to reach the regional office. After you. Oh wise and beneficent Leader." Lazarus added as he opened the door to the dreary building. "Good is stronger than evil, what a load of Rancor fodder. If that were true, the Old Republic never would have collapsed, my family would still be alive, and my shoes wouldn't be full of this delightful Tatooine sand. So, why don't you do me a big favor and space the philosophy so we can get this over with."

"As you wish Laz," Said Carek looking thoughtfully at his troubled comrade. "but even if I weren't a Jedi, I can see that blazing anger is choking the life out of you."

"At least it keeps me warm at night."

Inside, the dreary building was occupied by a dreary man whose face was set in the perpetual scowl that only a lifetime of civil service can produce.

"May I help you gentle...ahem...men?" He sneered without even bothering to try and hide his contempt for the group.

"I'm a licensed hunter and I'm trying to verify a posting." Kyle sneered back not bothering to hide his contempt for the overbearing little bureaucrat.

"And which posting is that? Mister...?" Said the clerk retreating from his initial attitude, since it obviously wasn't working.

"Just call me a loyal and concerned citizen of the Empire. I'm looking for more info on a Dag Caltare and the standing bounty connected to him."

"I see, if you'll just wait a minute while I call up the dormant files from the archive, I'll be able to tell you everything you need to know."

There was just something in the way he said that last part that instantly put Kyle on guard. "This guy is stalling!" He thought, lashing out with a blindingly quick strike to the man's nosebridge. The nameless little bureaucrat crumpled to the floor without a sound.

"Have you lost your mind!" Snapped Lazarus drawing his blaster and moving to where he could cover the entrance.

"He was on to us." Kyle shot back as he grabbed the clerk's datapad and started downloading information as fast as the station's computer would process. "I don't know how, I just know he was stalling us."

"Well, is he right Jedi?" This from Lazarus.

"I've told you before Laz, there are extreme limits on my ability to read the thoughts of others. I didn't have time to get anything."

"Great. The next time remind me to stay and prep the ship and let Rathbone deal with this Jedi nonsense."

Just then the building was pierced with an ear-splitting alarm and an automatic voice recording blared out from the computer's speaker.

"UNAUTHORIZED ENTRY DETECTED! SYSTEM LOCK DOWN INITIATED. LOCAL AUTHORITIES CONTACTED!"

"Kyle, what did you do?" Asked Ardent from where he was trying to get the rear door unlocked.

"Tripped a watchdog program." Said Kyle sheepishly. "I'm not sure how much data I got."

"Tell us something we don't know." Said Lazarus. "Half the bloody city knows you tripped an alarm. Can't you shut that infernal racket off?"

Kyle drew his blaster and silenced the alarm with one well placed bolt. "Are you happy now laughing boy?"

"I'll deal with you later." Said Lazarus to Kyle, to the rest of the group he said. "We got company. Four speeder bikes, local police. I'll take the two on the left."

"Wait. If they're only locals, we should be able to bluff our way out." Said Carek.

"Whatever." Lazarus responded tersely. "Just remember, I got the two on the left."

The four officers entered with weapons drawn. As Carek moved forward, he found all four weapons pointed at him. Undaunted the Jedi apprentice continued on with his plan.

"Freeze where you are! You're under arrest!" Barked the lead officer. "And don't any of you others try anything either."

"Officer, I guess central screwed up again and failed to notify the watch sergeant that we would be testing the

system today." Said Carek, careful not to make any sudden moves.

"That was no test. You're all under arrest. We'll straighten this out at..."

The officer never finished his sentence, as first Lazarus and then the rest of the team opened fire. The local police just weren't prepared to handle the level of resistance that an Alliance special operations team was able to dish out. Despite being on guard and having their weapons already drawn, none of them managed even a single shot before they all fell stunned.

"Good shooting guys," Said Carek as he headed for the front door with the team close on his heels. "they sure weren't buying my story."

"You got that right." Laughed Ardent. "I hate to be the one to tell you this, but that Jedi code of yours makes you stink as a con man. On the other hand, your lack of fast talking ability did induce them to provide us with transportation." He said indicating the speeder bikes.

"By all means." Carek said with a chagrined look on his face. "I have no problem with adapting to what providence has provided."

The Misplot lifted less than three minutes later, leaving a highly incensed departure control to deal with her unscheduled and, by now, highly unauthorized violation of Tatooine's airspace. Again the local police was too slow in reacting to the rebels and took too long to contact Imperial forces allowing the Misplot to jump to hyperspace without being intercepted.

The rebels had had to depart without any real destination in mind and ended up choosing the site of the destruction of the first Death Star, the moon of Yavin as a rally point, since it was known that the system had been abandoned after that momentous event and was unlikely to be monitored.

Lazarus sat down with the ship's main computer and began the laborious task of reprogramming the med droid. It took seventy-three hours to bring the med droid, now know as 2-1-B-TED, back to full sentience.

TED's certification test was replacing Rathbone's shattered fingers with bionics. Rathbone was not happy being the test subject, but that opinion changed once Two-onebee-Ted successfully built him a fully functional set of fingers.

Once the anesthesia wore off, Rathbone put Sam, Three-Emm and his new fingers to use to decode the partial data

dump retrieved from the computer on Tatooine. It took the engineer and the two droids slightly over twelve hours to break to code and read the information they had captured.

The news recovered was not good. The Alliance had been driven from a frozen planet called Hoth in full retreat and had gone even deeper into hiding. And to make matters worse, Captain Han Solo, one of the heroes of Yavin had been captured by a bounty hunter working for Jabba the Hutt.

The only bit of information that was of any use to team Bantha, was the name of the prison that Dag Caltare had been sent to: Rezick's Loft. Ardent was all too familiar with the name, as it was where he had been taken after being captured at Cypryn.

After spending two days orbiting Yavin the rebels had finally decided on a course of action.

"So it is agreed then?" Carek asked the assembled team and refugees.

The group nodded their assent without comment. All debate had taken place during the time they had been orbiting Yavin.

"Okay then, flight crew prepare for hyperspace."

The rebels would return to base station Heracles to try and find a safe haven at their old base for the refugees, once the refugees were secure, they would then go to Rezick's Loft to free Dag Caltare. It was hoped that once Caltare was freed, he would have some way of recontacting the Alliance. It was thin, but it was the best plan that all could agree on.

The flight time to Heracles was forty-two hours in the Misplot, and with the tension onboard, it was going to seem much longer.

"Heracles approach control this is the independent scout Misplot requesting permission to dock." Said Leland. "It's been a long time since we've been here. Are Shrellian drum fruits still in season?"

Leland turned to face Carek. "You know this is not going to work, that recognition code is more than two years old now. No one is even going to remember it, let alone approve it."

"Base station Heracles to Misplot..." The speaker finally squawked.

"Here it comes." Said Leland.

"Give it a chance." Was Carek's response.

"I don't know anything about drum fruits," The tired voice continued. "but you are ordered to assume orbit at Lagrange point three, pending inspection of your ship."

"Understood. Has there been any sign of those repo specialists that were working this area?" Leland added in desperation.

This time there was a long pause before approach control answered, and when they did it was a different voice.

"Independent scout Misplot, are you returning from the Corporate Sector?"

"That's the response!" Exclaimed Carek and Leland simultaneously.

Leland toggled the microphone. "Negative. We're just passing through and needed to get our phase inducers adjusted."

"Roger Misplot. You are clear through to docking ring D."

"Aye aye Heracles, see you in five. Misplot out."

Halasa growled to Leland.

"Yeah, I recognize the voice too. I just don't remember the name that goes with it."

"Ra'gnayrr." Said Ardent entering the cockpit. "He's the Quarren that took over after the Alliance pulled out the last time we got separated."

"Right." Said Leland snapping his fingers. "I never could pronounce that name right. So, do you think we're still welcome?"

"That, my friend is the sixty-four thousand credit question." Responded Ardent.

When the boarding ramp of the Misplot lowered, Ra'gnayrr was waiting to meet them.

"Greetings, my long lost friends." Said the Quarren. "I had figured you all had made the final jump, when word reached me that you were missing and presumed dead two years ago."

"The story is longer than you would want to hear and longer than we really have time to spare." Said Leland leading the team and the refugees down the ramp.

"It's still a story I would like to hear later when you do have the time." Said Ra'gnayrr looking the eclectic group over. "How can I help you now?"

"Hello Ra'gnayrr," Said Carek bowing at the waist with his arms crossed across his chest in the way of the Quarren. "to get to the point, we have five political

refugees in need of asylum. Our original destination was compromised by the time we got there."

"Two years late." Ardent interjected.

"We were unable to deliver them to an alternate location," Carek continued with a glare at his comrade. "as we have again lost contact with the Alliance. We have a plan to regain contact, but it will require going further into harm's way than I am willing to risk with them with us, so we would be greatly in your debt, if they could stay here until we return."

"It isn't going to take two years is it?" Asked Ra'gnayrr.

"Before this mission started I would have said of course not," Carek replied. "but at this point, I can only promise to return as soon as we can."

"Fair enough, not only can I can put your friends up, I can return something you left here so long ago."

"The Carthesian Hawk is still here?" Exclaimed Rathbone.

"Yes my friend, still here and I might add that she's in better shape than your 'Misplot' here."

"Carek, we can sell the scout, then we can use the money to pay for the refugees, buy a cover cargo, and refit the 'Hawk.'" Rathbone said excitedly. "We can transfer the laser cannon from the scout to augment the Hawk's firepower, we can..."

"Slow down Rath, we don't want you to getting too far ahead of yourself," Leland laughed. "Ra'gnayrr, is what Rathbone suggested within your powers to make happen?"

"As base administrator, I have pretty wide latitude." Responded Ra'gnayrr. "I can arrange everything."

"Thank you once again. I don't know what we would do without you." Said Carek.

"You haven't seen the bill yet."

It took the rebels two days to get the Carthesian Hawk fully ready for the mission ahead. The majority of that time was integrating the laser turret from the Misplot into the Hawk's power grid and then reprogramming the fire control computer to handle the added load.

The refugees were assigned fake IDs and set up in a little used sector of the station. None of the refugees were happy with the arrangements, but all understood just how dangerous rescuing someone from an Imperial prison would be and except for a few grumbles from Philst, they all moved into their new quarters quietly.

The rebels made their goodbyes and jumped for the Dorthandis system and their rendezvous with Rezick's Loft.

Chapter Seventeen

"This is free trader Carthesian Hawk to Rezick's Loft approach control, requesting landing permission. Over." Said Leland in what he hoped was a neutral tone of voice to the microphone, to Halasa he said. "You know this is never going to work."

Halasa whuffed out a short growl.

"No. I don't have a better idea."

There was a fairly long pause before there was a response and when the it came it was not in the usual no nonsense manner that was typical of an Imperial installation.

"Uh, whatever Hawk...you're cleared to...uh land. Just follow the beacon and park it where ever you can. Uh...over."

"What was that all about?" Said Carek from where he was sitting at astrogation. "Are we in the right place?"

"You're the one at astrogation. You tell me." Leland replied.

"Sounds like a trap to me." Said Ardent over the intercom from the newly installed ventral turret.

"I disagree," Said Kyle from the dorsal turret. "a trap would have sounded perfect, to lure us in, not that pathetic transmission we just heard."

"I have to agree with Kyle." Said Leland. "A con job would have been smooth as synthsilk. What do you say Carek?"

"I think Kyle is right on target. Leland take us in."

The rebels followed their instructions and parked in the first docking bay they could find, all the time expecting the worst, but not meeting with any trouble. The landing area consisted of a dozen docking bays, four occupied by TIE fighters, in a huge hanger and an administration building. There was also a landing platform just large enough for a single landspeeder or cloud car off to one side, that was the only means of reaching the actual prison two kilometers away.

The customs inspectors were every bit as cursory and half-hearted as approach control had been. After a quick check of their cargo with a weapons scanner and an admonishment not to even think of exiting the ship with a weapon, the psuedo-traders were given free reign of the landing area.

Dumfounded by the lack of security, the rebels pressed on with their plan. Leland and Lazarus would sell the cover

cargo, while Carek and Kyle, led by Ardent would try to find Dag.

Entering the prison's information center the three rebels found the uard missing. On the desk they found a poorly scrawled note stating that the guard was "out to lunch" and would be back by 1330 hours.

"Well it's 1500 local time." Said Carek taking a quick look at his chronometer. "It looks like we have us a window of opportunity. Get cracking Kyle."

"Here, let me." Said Ardent slipping behind the computer console before Kyle could respond.

"But Ardent." Began Kyle.

"But nothing. I was held here for three weeks and when they weren't torturing me, I used every scrap of time I could scrounge to figure a way out of here. When that Imperial captain sprung Rex and me, I got a chance to see the passwords he used. I can get the info you want without you having to risk breaking into the system."

"What makes you so sure that they haven't changed the passwords." Said Kyle.

"He told me that during the two years he worked here, he had time to slice his way into the system and leave a transparent backdoor slicer code that no one knows about."

"Okay Ardent, go ahead." Said Kyle stepping back from the console. "But if you trip an alarm, I swear that if I'm alive to see it, I will break every bone in your body one bone at a time."

"Anytime you want to go one on one with me you're welcome to try, but you better bring a lunch. I'm telling you, this is a sure thing."

Ardent punched in the slicer code and allowed it to work it's digital magic, there was a pause, then the prison's main computer burst to life.

"I told you it would work." Said Ardent smugly. "Now what's the plan?"

"First find Dag." Replied Carek. "by the time you've found him, I should have a plan."

Ardent began stepping through the computer's menus and in less than a minute he had discovered what he was looking for.

"Got him! D ring. Block six. Cell one fifty-seven. Now, tell me this rilliant plan." Said Ardent with undisguised sarcasm.

"Can you alter a release date?" Asked Carek.

"With this code I can cause the reactor core to self destruct."

"Hopefully that won't be necessary. I want to do this a quiet as possible."

Ardent tapped in a few commands.

"When do you want him free?"

"Tomorrow at 0800."

He typed in a few more commands.

"Done. Now what?"

"Okay, shut it down."

"What! We have full access. We can..."

"I know what we have the potential to do, but if we push our luck too far, we won't do anyone any favors if we end up in a cell ourselves. Now shut it down." Said Carek steel edging his voice.

"This had better be one hell of a plan."

Ardent logged out of the system and the rebels returned to their ship without incident. Leland and Lazarus had already unloaded their cover cargo leaving the rebels with no real reason to stay at the prison. Which, for a change, was picked up on by the guards fairly quickly and for the first time since arriving at the prison, the rebels found someone was telling them that they had to do something, and that something was to leave. True to form Leland slipped the concerned individual a few credits and permission to remain over night was granted until 1000 hours in the morning.

The following morning, 0800 hours came and went with no sign of Dag.

"Your plan stinks." Said a thoroughly disgusted Ardent.

"You're the one who said they had full access to the system." Carek shot back. "Why don't you explain, since you know so much, why Dag hasn't been released since a valid release order has been issued and logged by your precious system?"

"I find myself in the unusual position of peace keeper," Interrupted Kyle. "but why the plan failed isn't what's important here. The issue at hand is how do we free Dag in..." Kyle glanced at his chronometer. "one hour and forty-two minutes?"

"You're absolutely right Kyle." Carek replied shaking his head. "I'm sorry Ardent, I allowed myself to get a little frustrated there."

"No problem Carek. I guess being back at Rezick's Loft has just got me on edge. However, I do have a plan."

"Times a wastin' man, spit it out." Said Kyle.

"I know the prison lay out like a Jervan musk wolf knows his own den, if we can capture the prison access cloud car without an alarm, I can get to D ring, grab Dag and we can boost."

"Simple yet elegant." Kyle replied.

"Well, it's not as reckless as one of your usual plans and we just don't have time for a debate, so may the Force be with you."

"Just have the ship ready to go when I get back."

"Wait a minute. You don't think you're going by yourself do you?" Said Kyle.

"Yes I am."

"In a rancor's eye you will. You have no way of knowing if anything has changed or what condition Dag is in and I don't care how well you know this place, someone has got to watch your back and that someone is me."

"I can..." Ardent began.

"No Ardent, Kyle is right. Either you both go, or we have to come up with a different plan."

"Well what are you waiting for?" Said Ardent moving out for the cloud car platform.

Less than two minutes later Kyle was at the controls of the cloud car and Ardent was pulling on the now unconscious driver's uniform. Taking the car had been simplicity in itself. The landing area guards were far too complacent from prisoners being forbidden in the landing area and the simple fact that no one ever tried to break into an Imperial prison. Kyle and Ardent approached the cloud car from opposite sides, Kyle then stepped into the open to draw the man's attention, then Ardent sprang up from behind and knocked him out with a spanner.

As the cloud car lifted from the platform, the rebels aboard the Carthesian Hawk were completing their power up sequences. Leland and Halasa had taken over as gunners, while Carek and Lazarus took over as flight crew. Rathbone and Three-Emm were in their usual place in engineering. When the call came, the ship would be ready.

"How many guards?" Asked Kyle as they neared the landing platform of the prison proper.

"Always three. Stay in the car, I'll try and bluff them."

"Fat chance of that. When it comes to it I'll start from the right and meet you in the middle."

Kyle landed and Ardent hopped out.

"Hey there. I got orders here for a prisoner release. It's thirty minutes overdue, guy named Caltare in D ring."

"Release?" The sergeant laughed and made a quick gesture to his partners.

"Just who, are you?" The sergeant stopped laughing and the guards went for their blasters. "No one is released from D ring."

Ardent rolled to the left just barely evading the sergeant's fire and drew his own blaster. Ardent, driven by the rage he had held in check since his capture, whipped out from where he had taken cover with blinding speed and put a shot square in the chest of the sergeant before the man could even realize he was in danger.

Kyle, as promised, fired at the right most guard just as the man fired, which caused the man's shot to go wild and blow out the overhead glow panel. The remaining guard was shot by Ardent as he tried to flank Kyle.

"So much for bluffing." Said Kyle turning towards the now furiously beeping intercom. "What next?"

"Guard post one respond!"

"I've got everything under control." Ardent answered as he moved to respond. "Guard post one."

"What in the million worlds is going on up there? I heard blaster fire."

"Uh sorry sir, the new guy had an accidental weapons discharge and just found out what happens when you fire on a magnetic seal. He's just earned himself ninety days of P and P."

"Make it six months, and if anything else goes wrong you'll earn sixty days restriction to quarters."

"Yes sir. Guard post one out."

"What is P and P?" Asked Kyle when he found that he could breathe again.

"Pots and Pans. The local jargon for manual kitchen duty. It's the worst job on this rock."

"I'll take your word for it. While you were talking to laughing boy, I located Dag's cell."

"You know the way, you take point."

"Let's move."

Kyle led them into the turbo shaft that took them down to D ring and over to block six. When the doors opened, the two rebels found the way blocked by a gleaming all black interrogation droid.

The droid's primary logic array took less than a millisecond to scan through it's database and realize that the two humans it faced were not authorized to be on this level. The logic array decided in less than twenty

milliseconds total time that the proper course of action was to signal an intruder alert.

However when it's optical sensors detected blaster fire, the logic array which was designed to extract information and not intended for the rigors of combat, could not create an emergency evasion subroutine fast enough to prevent the logic array and indeed the whole droid from suffering what the now shattered array would have called a complete system shut down.

None of this internal processing was visible to Ardent and Kyle, who simply noted a threat, fired and watched the droid clatter to the ground in pieces.

"Cell one five seven is to the right." Said Kyle moving through the wreckage of the droid. "We go through that blast door, then we turn left, Dag's cell will be on the right."

"How far?"

"About fifty meters. Why?"

"You know yourself that the exit is always harder than the entry and I wanted to know how far our fighting retreat would be."

"Right. I've still got point."

When the two men reached cell one five seven, the silence they had been operating in was shattered by an alarm klaxon.

"I knew we would have to fight our way out of here." Said Ardent trying to cover both corridors at the same time. "How are you going to get that cell open? We don't have time for anything fancy."

There was the distinctive snap-hiss of Kyle igniting the lightsaber Carek captured from the Dark Jedi Maldamon so long ago, working quickly, Kyle cut the lock out of the door.

"Well that answered my question." Said Ardent entering the cell. "Come on Dag your ship is ready to leave. Yah Brin Daga!" Ardent recoiled back in horror.

Kyle pushed past his comrade and found what had rattled him so badly, their Twi'lek friend was sitting on his bunk with a thousand meter stare.

"Ardent you take point." Said Kyle through clenched teeth. "I'll carry Dag. Move out."

When the alarm klaxon sounded, a squad of guards entered the hanger bay and started advancing on the Carthesian Hawk. Halasa in the lower turret noticed them first and let loose with a long burst of fire that sent them diving for cover. Leland took over, when Halasa

shifted his fire to the fighters in the hanger. Leland raked the guards position with withering fire until the last two guards routed from the relentless fire. Leland then added his fire to that of Halasa and the two of them made short work of the four TIE fighters.

As Kyle exited the cell, a pair of guards appeared. Before Kyle's weapon cleared the holster, Ardent's blaster spoke twice and both guards crumpled.

"Nice shooting!" Kyle grunted under the load of the limp Twi'lek.

"Can you still shoot carrying Dag?" Ardent said over his shoulder as they turned the corner that lead to the turboshaft.

"DOWN!" Kyle roared and Ardent obeyed without hesitation. Kyle put four blaster bolts over Ardent's head and into the two guards that had tried to get the drop on Ardent while his back was turned.

"That answered that question." Ardent said sheepishly as he rolled back to his feet.

"Keep your eyes forward, point man. I'll guard the rear."

"Now don't go getting a big head on me, Kyle."

"My head could never compete with that Abondaga melon of yours."

Before Ardent could reply, they reached the first of the two blast doors that lead out of block six. Fearing that the alarm would seal the way out, they cautiously approached the security panel. Kyle punched the open sequence and the door snapped open.

The security droid that was waiting on the other side of the door, opened fire just as soon as it obtained a target lock, but the targets were just as ready and were motivated to a fever pitch that only a living being can feel, when a friend has been hurt. The droid never really had a chance and was left a smoking ruin.

There was another security droid behind the second blast door, but it faired no better against the two rebels. What had been done to Dag had touched them with the kind of rage that focuses a person into a foe of terrifying lethality that the security droids were just not designed to handle.

When the rebels reached the turboshaft, they found that the alarm had shut down power to all turboshafts. Undaunted the two men began climbing the four flights of stairs to the cloud car landing. Enroute they were set upon by two more droids and they both of them fell before the killing

rage of Ardent and Kyle. One on B level, the last just as they reached the cloud car.

They met no further resistance. Kyle gently put Dag into the rear seat, then when Kyle slid into the pilot's seat, Ardent jumped in and sealed the canopy. Kyle lifted and made for the Hawk at best speed.

Carek caught the main docking bay door's movement from the corner of his eye. Hearing the hydraulics of the large door would have been impossible, the firestorm from Leland and Halasa had stopped, but the secondary explosions from the destroyed fighters were still reverberating through the docking area. From his vantage point in the Hawk's cockpit, Carek could see across the docking bay to the control booth of departure control. And for the first time since they arrived, Carek could see that the booth was manned.

"Departure control this is the free trader Carthesian Hawk. It would be in your best interest to keep the bay door open." The doors continued to close. "Departure control. OPEN THE DOOR NOW!"

"Carthesian Hawk, you've got a lot of nerve trying to tell us what to do." The comlink responded. "What makes you think you give the orders around here? Power your weapons down and prepare for boarding."

By the time departure control stopped talking, the docking bay doors had closed.

"Departure control. If you don't open the doors now, the two turrets that are locked in on you will blast you to ribbons. This is your last chance."

"Carthesian Hawk, this is your last warn..."

"Fire."

The two turrets fired as close to simultaneously as two non-fire linked guns could manage, and the effect was incredible. The departure control booth first imploded as it tried to absorb the excess energy, then exploded when it failed to do so. When the smoke from the secondary explosions cleared, departure control just didn't exist any more.

"Okay guys, new target." Said Carek. "Make a hole. Make it wide."

Leland and Halasa unleashed a fearsome fusillade, but this time the target was far more substantial. It took them almost two minutes of combining their fire and pushing both weapons close to thermal shut down, before the stubborn bay doors finally collapsed and blew outwards.

Carek had the ship moving before the last of the fragments had finished falling.

The second the cloud car exited the prison, they were set upon by a pair of TIE fighters.

"Try and contact the ship!" Kyle managed to spit out as he rolled the cloud car out of the way of the fighters initial attack.

"No need, they're already on the way." Ardent howled triumphantly, then pointed out the right side of the canopy. "Try heading one eight five degrees."

Kyle stood the cloud car on its right side and pulled four gees as he took up Ardent's suggested course. As the cloud car rolled out, Kyle finally spotted the Hawk and smiled. "I think I can come up with something special for these jokers."

"Leland. Halasa. Kyle's in trouble!" Carek shouted as he exited the docking bay and saw the TIE fighters all over the cloud car.

"We're on it Carek just get us in range."

Kyle, still inspired by what had happened to Dag, skillfully evaded the TIEs and kept them so preoccupied, that they never even noticed the Hawk until Ardent and Halasa opened fire. The port ion panel of Halasa's target shredded and the crippled TIE spun away out of the fight. Leland managed to damage his target, but just as he got a firm lock on, his turret seized up and lost power.

"RATHBONE!" Leland thundered. "What in the galactic void happened? I had him and now I can't fire."

"One of the couplings we modified to work the second turret into the power grid just fried." Rathbone shot back. "I had to vent the charge capacitors to keep the overload from frying you. You might as well come up out of there, because it's going to take me at least two hours to reroute the grid."

"We don't have that kind of time!"

Leland was absolutely right. In the time it took Rathbone to explain what had happened, the remaining TIE had turned to attack the Hawk. The TIE pilot had had the perverse luck to approach from below, which took it out of Halasa's field of fire, in the split second before the TIE could fire, Carek had to make a difficult decision.

"I don't believe I'm doing this." Carek gritted as he pushed forward on the control stick slamming the belly of

the Carthesian Hawk down on top of the fighter. There was a violent shudder as the impact bounced the ship up and into the clear. The fighter however, was not so lucky and rebounded from the collision downward into the surface of the planet exploding violently.

"Have you lost your bleeding mind?" Leland slurred as he staggered onto the bridge.

"What happened to you?" Asked Carek alarmed by his friends appearance.

"I was on my way here when you pulled that little bit of insanity. The impact bounced me off the overhead."

"I just took a page out of your high impact school of flying, wise guy." Carek retorted. "You've tried to ram everything you've ever flown at one time or another, so don't you dare try and get sanctimonious with me."

"I guess that's true enough, old friend. Um...Do you mind if I take over? You're coming along fine as a pilot Carek, but I don't think you're quite ready, and I know the ship isn't ready, for any more tricks from that particular page."

Before Carek could respond the intercom crackled.

"Bridge. This is engineering." Said Rathbone. "If you're quite through wrecking the ship, Three-emm and I would to try and start putting it back together."

Carek moved out from behind the controls and moved to the navigation station. "Go ahead Rath, it should be smooth sailing from here."

"Uh, Carek?" Said Leland.

"What now Leland?"

"I just ran a scan of the system and I've detected a Nebulon-B frigate launching more TIEs."

"Time to intercept?"

"Well, that's the good news, they're responding to a frantic call from Rezeck's Loft and it looks like the frigate captain blew it and launched too soon. ETA is more that two minutes, that gives you plenty of time to complete the astrogation plot."

"Well then, I suggest you stop talking and let me start plotting."

"Roger."

Leland was again absolutely correct. The frigate captain had come out of hyperspace too far out and then compounded the error by launching his fighters too soon as well. The TIE fighter is renown for it's prodigious speed, but physics are physics and the distance was just too great. The Imperial reinforcements had only closed half the distance between them and the battered freighter, when the

Carthesian Hawk gave a flicker of pseudomotion and vanished into hyperspace.

The frigate captain winced when he saw the escapee's ship enter hyperspace. "There's going to be the devil to pay for this one." Then the captain then shuddered involuntarily when he thought back to what happened to the previous prison commandant when there was a successful escape from Rezick's Loft. "Even though it was an inside job by a traitorous defector, they still stripped him of his rank and put him in his own prison, he hadn't lasted six hours with the general prison population.

"Thank the Fates that standard Imperial procedure for entering any system reporting an emergency is to stop at the edge of the system and scan for possible ambushes, which is exactly what I did, so they can't blame me for the escape. I might end up assigned to a mynock infested customs frigate in the most repugnant backwater in the Empire, but at least I won't be sharing a cell with that poor fool down there."

The captain turned to his helmsman.

"Helm. Standard approach vector." To his comm unit he added. "Keep the TIEs in inverse echelon formation and prepare to launch the assault shuttle. The raiders may have left a few surprises around and I want to be ready."

The captain knew that from this point on, he would be blamed for any mistakes made and it was his fervent intention not to do anything that would draw the sector commander's attention and legendary wrath.

"No, my dear commandant." The captain mused. "I'm going to follow the book on this one. You're not going to have the pleasure of my company when you meet Lord Vader."

The Carthesian Hawk was fifteen hours into a hundred and sixty hour trip. Their initial jump had only been two hours in length so that they could change direction to throw off any pursuit the Empire tried to set up based on their escape vector. When the rebels dropped back into realspace they had to decide on a new course of action, their original plan had been, once Dag was free, go to where he said the Alliance was hiding. However, when Dag was found in a vegetative state, the original plan had to go out the airlock. The team argued for two hours then with a lack of any other suitable destination, they decided to return to Yavin.

The newly reprogrammed med droid Two onebee Ted, examined Dag and found that a neural inhibitor had been inserted to the Twi'lek's brain. Since Dag was still their

best hope to recontact the Alliance, the team had no choice but to trust the droid to perform the delicate extraction surgery. The team had gathered in the Carthesian Hawk's lounge to await the surgery's outcome.

"How long?" Asked Lazarus.

"Eight hours, fifty-four minutes." Rathbone answered. "I don't think he's going to make it."

"They only put neural inhibitors in prisoners they can't break." Said Ardent solemnly. "That bespeaks a strength you'll never know."

Rathbone's acid retort died when the med droid entered the lounge.

"The patient is resting comfortably, the extraction was successful. He will require at least a week before he regains all of his higher motor functions, but he will fully recover."

The exuberance of the team's response was only limited by the dimensions of the size lounge. Carek was the first of the team to break free and follow Two onebee Ted to Dag's cabin.

"You friend, are very hard person to get an appointment with." Said Carek.

"I...I knew you weren't d-d-dead." Dag managed to croak when he finally found his voice and could see who had spoken.

"We seem to have lost our way again do you think you can help us?"

"I've been out of circulation for a bit, but considering what I owe you people right now, I'll make it the focus of my existence just as soon as I can keep my eyes in focus."

"Fair enough, you rest easy." Carek smiled and turned to exit.

"Carek?"

"Yes?"

"Thank everybody for me."

"I will Dag. I will."

Carek then dimmed the overhead glow panel and allowed the hatch to close.

"I knew if I was going to be rescued, it would be team Bantha that would do it." Dag said wearily as he drifted off to sleep. "The only problem is, considering how badly the Empire had been beating the Alliance recently, would there be anything left to rejoin."

That was a question that they would all have to find out the hard way.

Chapter Eighteen

The brilliant burst of starlines announced the Carthesian Hawk's return to realspace and to the Yavin system. In the Hawk's makeshift sickbay, Dag Caltare had noticed the starlines and began trying to struggle into his clothes. The long trip had given Dag the much needed time to recuperate from the ordeal of his major brain surgery and to regain most of his major motor skills.

Dag was nearly beside himself at the prospect of gaining his freedom from the tiny sickbay that he had been confined to by the orders of the med droid Two onebee Ted during the six days since his deliverance from darkness.

"Mr. Caltare, you should still be in bed." Said Two onebee Ted. "I haven't given you a clean bill of health yet."

"Look Ted, I've taken about as much grief from a droid as I'm going to take," Dag responded not even looking up from his still clumsy efforts to get dressed. "those people all risked their lives to rescue me and now they need my help and no med droid is going to stop me."

"Very well," The droid gave the mechanical analog of a sigh. "if you insist, I'll allow you to move from your bed, however you can't remain out of bed for more than a half an hour. The synapses in your frontal lobe still haven't knit sufficiently for you to exert yourself in any way. Until your primary synapses have had a chance to reknit, you're just going to have accept these limitations. It's going take you at least three more days to fully recover."

"Thank you for being so concerned Ted, I do appreciate you saving my life and I will be very careful not to do anything to cause a relapse, but I've got to get to the bridge and help these people get back in contact with the Alliance. You understand that don't you?"

"I understand, just please be careful."

"Ted, I'm always careful."

"Well look who finally had enough sleep to be sociable." Said Leland when he saw Dag enter the bridge.

"Leland, I'm not really up for any witty repartee just now," Dag replied as he sat heavily at the navigation station. "how about, we try concentrating on rejoining the Alliance instead?"

"Sounds like an excellent idea to me." Rathbone said from the co-pilot's seat. "So, where is the Alliance hiding."

"Carek briefed me on your encounter with that time dilation sphere, so the first thing I have to remind you is that I was arrested a year ago. You know standard operating procedure when a cell has been penetrated is to sever all communications and escape to the nearest safehouse. All my rebel contacts have gone underground. I will have to try get in touch with some of my personal contacts and see what they can come up with."

"Are you telling me that after all the trouble we went through to rescue you," Rathbone gasped his jaw dropping open. "that you don't know where the rebellion is?"

"'All the trouble we went through?'" Said Kyle from the entrance to the bridge. "I don't seem to remember seeing you during most of our stay at Rezick's Loft."

"You bloody well know I was in engineering putting the final touches on the Hawk's new weapons mount." Rathbone shot back clearly stung by Kyle's comment.

"The same new weapon mount that failed the first time it was used, almost getting us killed?" Added Leland enjoying the engineer being on the defensive.

"Now that's not fair. I..." Rathbone broke off and turned to face Dag who had begun to laugh with gusto. "What's so bloody funny?"

"I...uh...hee hee hee...It's just good to...hee hee...find out that team Bantha hasn't changed at bit."

"Well, I'm glad that we amuse you so much. If you'll excuse me, I have things that need my attention in engineering. " Rathbone said as he exited the bridge.

"Don't mind him, he's always been a little high strung." Said Kyle taking the co-pilot's seat.

"However, his basic gist of 'where to next?' is still valid." Said Lazarus taking Kyle's place at the entrance to the bridge.

"Before you answer that Dag, why don't we move to the lounge so we all can have a little room?" Said Leland.

"Good idea." Kyle seconded.

When team Bantha had gathered in the Hawk's lounge Dag took a deep breath before replying.

"I will get straight to the point, I do not know where the rebellion is currently hiding." He said without preamble. "I do however, have a very good friend in the cloud city of Bespin in the Anoat system that should be able to narrow the field of hiding places."

Halasa barked a short question.

"A little less than two days in this tub." Answered Leland.

"How likely is your contact to be willing to help an escaped felon?" Asked Ardent.

"Honis is a fellow Twi'lek. And more important than that, he owes me his life five times over. He will help us."

"I guess that settles that. Leland plot a course for Bespin." Said Carek, rising from where he was sitting on the deck and heading for the bridge.

"Wait a minute Carek. Aren't we going to talk about this at all?" This from Lazarus.

"To what end?" Carek replied with uncharacteristic shortness in his voice. "We're short on choices here, Laz. Ardent and Kyle took a tremendous chance when they entered Rezick's Loft to get Dag, a decision that we all agreed on, because we figured that he would have the best chance of hooking us back up with the Alliance. Now Dag has told us where we need to go to accomplish that very goal, what is left to talk about?"

"When you put it that way, nothing."

Dag's hunch about his friend was right on target. Entry to Bespin had been complicated by the presence of an Imperial occupation force, but once the rebels eluded the single patrol ship, Honis had greeted them with open arms and had given them what scant information that he had. Exactly where the Alliance had gone to ground was unknown, however Honis was aware of an interesting piece of information, the Empire had withdrawn from the Kiosk system. That little bit of information excited Dag tremendously, for with that system no longer under Imperial control he now had access to his old friend Arcturus.

Arcturus was heavily cyborged from injuries sustained during his gun running days. He had retired from gun running and had become a broker of information based out of Cypryn four. Team Bantha had met him only once, which although it seemed to be an eon ago, was in actuality only six months prior to the destruction of Alderaan. Arcturus had been the go between on a gun running deal aboard the passenger ship the Mystic Lady during that mission so long ago.

Dag had flatly stated that if team Bantha wished to rejoin the Alliance, it would be Arcturus that would provide the lead, presented with an a fait accompli, team Bantha had headed for the Kiosk system. The trip to Cypryn had been uneventful and Dag found Arcturus exactly where Honis had said he would be, running the upscale Master of Flasks tapcafe.

Arcturus took one look at the eclectic group and ushered them to a private booth.

"We can talk here, I've had this booth rigged with voice scramblers for my most discrete customers." Said Arcturus taking a seat.

"Arcturus my friend, you've done very well for yourself." Dag said taking in the impressive surroundings.

"And so have you, your little stroll from the 'Loft has boosted the bounty on you to twenty thousand creds."

Arcturus shifted his view to the others at the table.

"Kyle, unfortunately they got a good ID on you, your new bounty is fifteen thousand. The rest of you got off lucky, the bounty is ten thousand for 'the persons' responsible for aiding in the wanton attack on an Imperial 'detainment facility.' I hope you're taking the appropriate precautions."

"Well, since our presence here is a threat to you," Said Dag. "I'll get right to the point old friend, we're trying to find out where the rebels have gone into hiding."

"You never did know when to leave well enough alone did you? If I were any of you, I would find the nearest black hole and pull it in after me. Instead you want to link up with the most wanted people in the galaxy. I thought I learned you better than that Dag."

"Yes you did, but that still doesn't change the question before you."

"You're right Dag, a broker's job is to find the answers to questions, he doesn't debate the relative merits of the question. It appears to me that time is a critical factor here, so to be blunt, I don't know where the rebels are hiding."

A chorus of groans met that response, but Arcturus continued before anyone could actually say anything.

"However, I do happen to have a bit of information that I know the Empire doesn't want to become common knowledge, the star destroyer that was assigned to this system, rendezvoused with a full sector squadron and..."

"A sector squadron is six ships!" Blurted Rathbone. "The Imperials almost never form sector squadrons."

"Rathbone, let the man finish!" Lazarus hissed.

"Thank you my pale young friend. As Lazarus was saying, a sector squadron is almost never formed. What would you say if I told you that my source can confirm that the Imperials are forming a territorial fleet?"

"A territorial fleet?" Gaspd Carek. "That's twenty-four star destroyers. The last time a fleet that large was formed was during the Clone wars."

"Correct." Said Arcturus. "And more importantly, I know where they are headed."

"For Diety's sake man spit it out." Leland shouted, too stunned to be tactful.

"Endor."

"Where in the bleeding suns is Endor?" Said Lazarus.

"It's only a days trip from Tatooine. The only problem is the Imps have got the system sewn up tighter than the web of a Caruskan devil spider. I lost a good man finding out that last part." Said Arcturus, his expression turning grim. "My source was able to launch a message probe before being burned down. No questions. No attempt at capture. Just blasted. So, I don't exactly know how you're going to put that information to use."

"It just so happens that I have a plan." Said Dag after a few moments of deep concentration. "I'll have to prevail upon you once more, dear friend, then I promise we'll be out of your jump path."

"I shudder to ask, but what is this idea?"

"Zent Arruke."

Arcturus made a living on keeping a sabbac face, but this time the shock was plain for all to see. "Why you betentacled genius! That might just work."

"Excuse me, could one of you be so kind as to explain what 'Zent Arruke' means?" Carek asked still reeling from the territorial fleet revelation.

"Sorry people," Said Arcturus breaking away from the rampant train of thought that Dag had started. "Zent Arruke is an Imperial ship's graveyard. Most decommissioned Imperial ships are broken up for scrap, but a few are put into storage pending transfer to some wealthy family for use as yacht escorts or sometimes as yachts. I know that there are at least a half a dozen customs frigates at Zent Arruke right now."

"What sort of security do they have?" Asked Kyle.

"Minimal. The Imps rely the secrecy of the graveyard's location, an occasional patrol, and the fact that the ship's have their power cores drained. I can get the reactor fuel and meet you at your ship in two hours."

"Meet us?" Dag said incredulously. "You're going to get involved personally?"

"I owe it to my source to find out what's going on in that backwater that's so important that the Imperials have shoot on sight orders."

"Good enough for me." Said Ardent sliding out from the booth. "If we're going to be leaving in two hours we better get crackin'."

"Well said." Arcturus replied as he made for his office. "If you'll excuse me gentlemen, I've got a few loose ends to tie up before our rendezvous."

"Maybe this time we'll get to keep this frigate." Leland said as he exited the tapcafe.

"You'll never get over Arkin not letting you command that customs frigate we captured will you?" Laughed Kyle.

"No. No I won't."

The Carthesian Hawk departed for the Zent Arruke system exactly two hours and five minutes later.

"It just doesn't seem right, that something so illegal should be so simple." Thought Kyle from the communication's station of the Carthesian Hawk, his mind subconsciously taking note of Leland's exit from hyperspace and skillful insertion into the graveyard's geosynchronous parking orbit of Arruke five. "You know Leland, Arcturus' knowledge of the Imperal's patrol schedule has taken all the challenge out of this." He said to break the boredom.

"Stand by to fire those braking thrusters Halasa." Said Leland not taking his eyes off the small dot that was slowly resolving itself into the targeted customs frigate floating three kilometers ahead.

Halasa grunted out an question.

"My point is...well I..." Kyle stumbled for an answer. "All I know is this is too easy."

"I'm a little curious Kyle, what would you have preferred, a company of stormtroopers?" Asked Carek from the navigation station.

"No, of course not. I just know that something's not right."

There was a muted clang and slight bump as the ships docked.

"Well, with twenty plus star destroyers waiting for us, I think that we'll have more than enough excitement for you when we reach the Endor system." Said Leland unbuckling from the pilot's seat. "Come on what are waiting for, an autographed holocrystal from Palatine himself?"

"Lead on hot shot, just don't be surprised when this trip turns out to be more exciting than you thought it would be." Replied Kyle.

The ex-Imperial customs frigate, hull number four three eight seven six six one nine, had been in mothballs for slightly over four months. Previously to that, it had been attached to the twenty-sixth Imperial customs fleet serving the Empire for more than sixteen years. The ship's name had been obliterated by the impact of micrometeorites from those long years of service, but the menacing potential of the sleek hull was undiminished by the carbon scoring that marred the surface of the once proud warship.

The first step of the salvaging process had been for Rathbone, in a vac suit and assisted by Three-emm, to jump start the frigate's life support using a power tap from the Carthesian Hawk. It had taken two tedious hours to recycle enough heat and atmosphere to make the frigate habitable enough for the rebels to begin the serious portion of the refurbishing.

In an effort to bring the ship's most critical systems back online in the shortest amount of time, the rebels split into three teams: engineering, weapons, and bridge.

Rathbone and Three-emm had returned to engineering and started the slow process of refueling the ship's fusion plant with the fuel that Arcturus had supplied, then moved on to recalibrating the main drive controls.

Kyle and Ardent took on the task of restoring power to the weapons systems. Normally when a ship is decommissioned, the weapons mounts are disabled and would require a full repair dock to reinstall, however since the ship's at Zent Arruke were to become the playthings of the wealthy, the weapons had been deactivated by the simple means of removing their primary charge capacitors from the power grid. Reversing this deactivation would take several hours as they had to find and re-link a dozen power couplers on each weapon.

The majority of the rebels had gone to the bridge, even though it was going to take six hours before the frigate could move on it's own, the fusion plant was providing enough power for the terminals that were needed to re-establish control of the ship's major functions: helm, shields, navigation, sensors, communications and the central computer.

"I'm going back to engineering to see how Rath is doing." Said Lazarus after two hours of hard work. "I need to stretch my legs before I go cross-eyed."

"I will go with you." Arcturus said stiffly. "I too need a break."

"Don't take too long," Leland called from across the bridge. "we all need a break and unless someone has a problem with it, I want to take mine next."

"Sure thing Leland," Lazarus replied from where he had stopped to stretch. "I'm only going to check on the reactor and hit the fresher."

Arcturus had continued walking when Lazarus had stopped to answer Leland, when Lazarus turned to follow, he found that Arcturus had already moved out of sight.

Before Lazarus could comment he heard an odd thumping.

"What was that?" He thought to himself as he picked up his pace. "It sounded like it was coming from the midship airlock."

On the bridge, Carek snapped his head around sharply enough for Dag to notice.

"What's wrong?" Dag Asked.

"Did you hear that noise?" Carek replied, head cocked to one side.

"Actually yes. It was so faint that I thought I was just imagining things." Said Dag.

"What noise?" This from Leland who had finally noticed the activity going on behind him.

"Quiet for a minute Leland, Halasa did you hear it?"

Halasa whuffed a sharp affirmative.

Carek was reaching for the ship's intercom when Rathbone's frantic cry came over the shipwide channel.

"Intruder alert! Spacetroopers at the portside airlock!"

Carek punched the comm unit's over ride. "Hang on Rath, we're on the way!" Carek then vaulted from the raised platform of the bridge proper drawing his lightsaber as he landed. "Halasa. Dag. You try and flank them. Leland follow me."

"Lead the way sword slinger."

The rebels moved out, expressions grim and weapons ready.

Kyle had just exited the aft upper laser turret, when he heard Rathbone's warning. "Spacetroopers! Those guys are bad news." He thought as he whipped his blaster from its holster and checked the charge before taking a quick look around the corner that lead to the port airlock. He saw Arcturus standing, unmoving, next to the airlock controls and a pair of lumbering spacetroopers entering the ship.

"It looks like it's up to momma's little boy Kyle to slow these guys down." He said wheeling around the corner

and pouring bolt after bolt into the massive armored figures. The first two were caught totally off guard and despite their superlative armor, crumpled to the deck in a clatter.

"Take that! You clanking buffoons!" He shouted triumphantly, however the element of surprise was now gone and the third trooper launched a grenade at the source of the barrage. "HOLY..." Kyle didn't have time to finish the thought, he desperately tried flinging himself to cover, but the trooper had allowed for evasive maneuvers and the blast wave rolled over Kyle, slamming him into the far bulkhead. He lay there fighting the blackness that threatened to enfold him.

Lazarus approaching from the opposite side, could see into engineering and could also see that Rathbone was feverishly trying to reseal the airlock. Lazarus could also see a pair of spacetroopers trying to clear a path around two the fallen troopers. "Looks like Kyle's work." He said surveying the now crowded corridor. "I've got to reach engineering before they do. And there's only one way to do it." He took a deep breath, then taking advantage of the trooper's distraction, he dodged across the corridor and slid into engineering.

"Success!" Rathbone shouted at the terminal as he finally got the airlock sealed. There was a heavy grunt behind him, causing the rebel engineer to spin around with blaster drawn, he had nearly fired when he suddenly recognized the source of the sound. "Lazarus Maxenties are you trying to scare me to death!"

"Shut up and point that bloody thing at Imperial target, there are enough of them around you know."

"Don't I know it." Said Rathbone shifting his point of aim. "I heard noises outside the ship and I just knew it would be spacetroopers, so I pushed the panic button. Do you know who opened the airlock?"

"Arcturus." Lazarus spat. "He sold us out."

"It's not the first time that's happened and it won't be the last."

"As soon as I get a clear shot, it'll be the last time that Arcturus double crosses anyone."

"Your shot at Arcturus is going to have to wait, can't you hear the troopers are on the move again!"

Lazarus risked a quick peek down the corridor and immediately wished he hadn't. Rathbone was right, the two

troopers that Lazarus had seen earlier were indeed on the move and to make matters worse, two more of the juggernauts had made it through the airlock before Rathbone had managed to get it secured.

"Okay Rath, this is where it gets real ugly. Take cover." Said Lazarus as he too moved to the best cover he could find. "Not that there's any cover that can stand up to the firepower these guys are packing." He added silently.

"Kyle!" Leland shouted when he saw his friend struggling back to his feet. "Has engineering been taken?"

"N-N-Not yet." Kyle slurred. "Any s-second though."

"Not if I have any say in the matter, you two watch my back." Carek yelled back over his shoulder just as he leapt around the corner and charged the Imperial shocktroops.

The spacetroopers were just not accustomed to being charged and that made them hesitate, even though their training allowed them to recover in less than a second, the damage had been done. Carek felt the Force flowing through him and in that split second that the Imperials hesitated, Carek's lightsaber felled two of the troopers and wounded another. Leland and Kyle added in a fusillade of blaster bolts to Carek's onslaught and the two remaining troopers, already disoriented by the fury of the Jedi's attack, folded to the deck, overwhelmed by the two phase assault.

"Now for you." Kyle said holstering his blaster and turning to face Arcturus, who was still standing woodenly in front of the airlock controls. "I'm going to break every bone in your body."

Arcturus slowly began to draw his blaster, but he never even came to close to finishing the motion. A blaster bolt threw him against the bulkhead leaving his chest a smoking ruin before his weapon was even clear of its holster.

"Lazarus! Explain yourself." Carek said quietly.

"He betrayed us, he was the one who opened the airlock. I saw him do it!"

"Good enough for now, but we will talk later." Carek responded after a full five second pause.

"Sooner. Later. What's the difference. And by the way, what took you so flaming long?" Lazarus snarled in reply.

The sound of a furious exchange of blaster fire, punctuated by the higher pitched discharge of a bowcaster, interrupted the growing confrontation.

"That came from the cargo bay!" Rathbone shouted to make himself heard above the din. "Carek, can you handle them without me?"

"Why?"

"I've got to see if there's any chance of getting this relic moving with the power that's available now."

"Good idea Rath, run with it. Kyle you take point."

"Fan out!" Said Kyle. "Those guys are packing concussion grenades and believe me, you don't want to know what one of them feels like. I only caught the edge of one's blast and it knocked me loopy."

"You heard the man. Let's move." Carek added as he moved to join Kyle on point.

The sounds of blaster fire ceased abruptly and was replaced by the rapid tattoo of someone running for their life. Clued by the speed and lightness of the approaching footsteps, the rebels held their fire, as first Dag and then Halasa raced into view."

"Spacetroopers in the cargo bay! At least a dozen. We tried to hold them, but there were just too many of them." Dag said breathlessly. Halasa nodding his agreement.

"A dozen!" Leland exclaimed. "We can't fight that many with these little pop guns we're packing."

"That's where you're wrong, Leland," Carek replied taking a deep breath to clear his mind to tap into the Force and the boundless energy that was available there. "As long as I can count on you, Dag, and Halasa to provide cover fire, I'm certain that Kyle, Lazarus, and I can take care of the Imperials. Are you with me?"

"I'm probably going to be sorry I said this, but let's get this done, before I change my mind."

"We'll make a soldier out of you yet."

"That's the one thing that truly scares me. That, and where in the blazes Ardent has gotten himself to."

"He was working on the forward upper turret. We should have heard from him by now." Kyle responded. "It's not like him to miss a chance to kill Imperials."

"We don't have time for that," Said Lazarus. "Here come the spacetroopers!"

Since Carek had been denied completing his training as a Jedi, his abilities with the Force were severely hampered. However there were times, usually during the time of greatest threat to his friends, that he felt as if the very soul of the galaxy were at his command.

When Carek saw the slow moving leviathans, he simply let the soul of the galaxy guide him through the task of stopping the Imperials. From his friends point of view, Carek became a blur of motion and when he stopped moving,

five of the spacetroopers were down and another was wounded.

Kyle was also aware of the threat posed by a dozen spacetroopers and unknowingly, he too reached out to the Force to help him stop their attack. Kyle would forever be unable to explain how he did it, but he somehow, for a brief few seconds, was able to sense Carek's movements. Guided by a force he didn't fully understand, he fired his blaster in perfect counterpoint to Carek's attack and placed exquisitely aimed blaster bolts into the remaining six Imperials. The troopers were so completely unprepared for the rebel's deadly assault, that four more, of what were supposed to be the Empires finest soldiers, fell before Kyle's fire.

The armor of a spacetrooper was indeed the finest that the Empire could produce, and that fact allowed two of them to survive Kyle's deadly marksmanship. One of them was too stunned to react, but the last trooper managed to trigger off a poorly aimed concussion grenade that even though it burst wide of Kyle, it's intended target, it succeeded in stunning Lazarus and Halasa.

Carek's return swing cleanly bisected the only trooper to survive his initial attack. He was about to congratulate Kyle, when he suddenly sensed something very wrong in the Force. He turned slowly and from the corner of his eye, he saw Kyle finishing off the last two troopers, but what held the center of his attention was the fact that Ardent had finally shown up and the look on Ardent's face.

Before anyone in the cargo bay could speak, two things occurred almost simultaneously. First, Rathbone's voice crackled over the intercom. "Engineering report. Insufficient power on hand to break orbit, or to charge weapons. Recommendation: abandon ship!" Second, Ardent opened fire on Lazarus.

Lazarus was too shocked to react and took the stun bolt full on, he staggered back, but managed to keep his feet. Halasa avoided the same fate only by being strong enough to shrug off the attack.

"He's under some form of mind control. Stun him!" Carek said as he activated his comlink. "Rathbone, get the Hawk ready for departure. We'll be there in thirty seconds."

"On the way!" Rathbone answered then broke the connection.

Ardent stood blocking the exit with a blaster in each hand. As Kyle and Leland reset their weapons to stun, Ardent fired and hit Leland with a stun bolt from the heavy blaster pistol in his right hand. Leland emitted a startled

yelp, then folded over and fell to the deck. Kyle returned fire, but Ardent just ignored the hit.

"I don't know who's controlling him, but we've got to get out of here!" Thought Carek as he tried using the Force to pull away Ardent's weapons. Ardent managed to hang onto his weapons, but the struggle prevented him from firing. Kyle took full advantage of the distraction and hit Ardent with a flurry of bolts, which finally had the desired effect of knocking Ardent out.

Halasa grunted a suggestion.

"Good idea Halasa. You better get going now," Said Carek. "Rathbone will need help on the Hawk and with Leland out, you're the best we have."

Halasa bounded out of the cargo bay at full speed.

"What got into him?" Said Kyle as he disarmed Ardent.

"I would guess the same thing that got into Arcturus." Carek replied with a grim expression aimed at Lazarus.

"I didn't know." Lazarus whispered from where he had grabbed Leland, unable to meet Carek's eye.

"Well, now you do. I've always told you that your anger would be your downfall Laz, I hope this has taught you something."

"Yes it has." Lazarus replied his voice choked with emotion.

"Then let's get moving."

When Halasa turned down the corridor that lead to the Hawk, he found Rathbone walking toward the cargo bay.

"The Imperials beat us to her, they've exposed her to vacuum." Said the heartbroken engineer. "We're trapped."

Halasa bared his fangs and roared his fiercest battle cry.

"That's all well and good that you feel that way, but the fact is this time they've won."

The rest of team Bantha raced into view, stopping short when they caught sight of their fellow rebels standing forlorn in the corridor.

"What gives Rath?" Said Leland still a little shaken from being revived by Carek.

"The Hawk is in hard vacuum."

"Burning stars, this just keeps getting worse!" Kyle exclaimed.

"Quick to the bridge. We've got to see what we're up against." Carek said reversing course, the rest of the rebels in pursuit. "And you're certain we can't get this ship moving? What about escape pods?"

"There is no way to get this ship moving in less than five hours." Rathbone said glumly.

"Escape pods are no good either, Zent Arruke five is uninhabitable." Said Dag. "I guess I'm going back to Rezick's Loft."

"WE ARE NOT GOING TO SURRENDER!" Exploded Leland. "We've managed to find a way out of every jam we've ever been in and this time is no different."

"Yes it is my friends." A deep resonant voice said amicably.

The rebels whirled to face the sound and found the way to the bridge blocked by a pair of spacetroopers flanking a man dressed in a black form fitting suit, grey gloves and boots, and a helmet that completely obscured his face. "I have pursued you for a very long time and this time, there is no escape."

Lazarus reacted in the only way he knew how, he drew his blaster and began hammering both of the spacetroopers with a flurry of well aimed blaster bolts. Halasa lunged forward at the man in black, howling a fearsome Wookiee battle cry that chilled the soul of all who heard it.

The man in black, however had seen and done things that would terrify a rancor and was unfazed by the on rushing Wookiee. He simply pointed at the raging wall of fur and waved his hand as if he were shooping a fly, the seemingly innocuous motion caused Halasa to not only come to a bone jarring halt, but to slam backward into the bulkhead hard enough to be wounded.

The man in black then turned his attention to Lazarus who had managed to wound both of his escorting spacetroopers, he spread his fingers as if he were clutching a fist sized sphere, then closed his fingers into a ball. Lazarus was caught halfway through shifting targets, when the bones of his forearm snapped with resounding crack, both radius and ulna piercing his flesh. The agony of the injury overwhelmed Lazarus sending him to the deck and into the blissfully painless realm of unconsciousness.

"Cover me!" Carek yelled to Kyle as he ignited his lightsaber and charged the Imperials.

Kyle could only get off one shot in the time it took Carek to close. The bolt hit man in black dead center of his chest, but instead of the usually fatal effect, the bolt just faded away as it hit.

Carek's attack slashed through all three man in one sweeping stroke. The two spacetroopers crumpled mortally

wounded, but just as Kyle's blaster bolt, the man in black just faded away.

"What in the burning stars?" Kyle blurted, clearly shocked by the dark Jedi's disappearance. "Where did he go?"

"Doppleganger!" Carek hissed as he recognized the dark Jedi's trick. "Quick Leland, Dag, get Laz. We've got to get to the bridge before he really boards us."

The team reached the bridge and Halasa ran a quick sensor sweep, but that only confirmed what the rebels could clearly see through the view ports, a pair two Nebulon-B frigates were less than a kilometer away and both had their forward turbolasers pointed at the helpless customs ship.

The communications panel then blared to life with the image of the man in black. "I am Lord Ky Vacendik. And in the name of Emperor, I order you to surrender."

"Never! You twisted sideshow freak!" Leland raged back.

"Hmmm. I guess you don't understand just how helpless your position is. Allow me to demonstrate." Vacendik motioned to the frigate's captain and the lead frigate fired one of its turbolasers. The customs frigate rocked violently and the bridge's emergency lighting flickered to life, casting eerie red shadows on the already unreal scene.

Halasa whuffed out a series of sharp growls.

"Close all bulkheads!" Rathbone snapped, instantly joining Halasa at the console. "That last shot ruptured engineering! Carek, where I come from there's no shame in surrendering when the situation is hopeless."

"I would listen to your friend, young Jedi. I will give you ten seconds to turn your lightsaber over to my emissary." Said Vacendik, waving his hand casually and causing Ardent to regain consciousness.

"NO! Carek, don't do it." Said Leland. "We can get out of this!"

Carek looked from the team to the viewscreen and back to the team.

"I'm sorry everyone." He said at last, his shoulders slumping. "I just don't see any way out of this one." Turning to face the viewer he pulled himself up to his full height. "Lord Vacendik. As commander of team Bantha, I formally surrender and request proper treatment as prisoners of war." Carek then handed his lightsaber over to Ardent.

"I WILL NOT SURRENDER!" Leland thundered. "It will take a lot more than a crippled ship to get me to give up.

What's the matter with all of you? Have you been baby sitting so long that you've forgotten how to fight?"

"Leland please don't make this any harder than it has to be." Said Carek gently. "I've already surrendered, don't make me have you restrained."

"Just because I go along with this captain, sergeant, colonel nonsense, don't think that you have a right to speak for me."

"Kyle." Carek spoke so softly that the bounty hunter almost didn't hear it.

"I'm sorry Leland," Said Kyle as he drew his blaster. "I really am."

Leland saw the motion and tried to dive out of the way, but Kyle's stun bolt took him down before he could even finish his second step.

Chapter Nineteen

The rebels processing was accomplished with standard Imperial efficiency. First the spacetroopers assault shuttle docked with the customs frigate, then with a heavy overwatch, the rebels were searched, cuffed, and forced aboard the shuttle.

The flight to Vacendik's frigate took less than two minutes. Still under heavy guard, they were led down the shuttle's loading ramp. When they entered the docking bay, Lord Vacendik was waiting and for the first time he was not wearing his helmet. He seemed to be around forty with shoulder length blonde hair. He had aristocratic features and would have been considered a handsome man, if not for the sneer that twisted his features and set permanent furrows around his cruel brown eyes.

He looked them up and down, his sneer somehow getting deeper before he spoke. "I have long awaited this moment, team Bantha is at last in my grasp." His thin smile was cold as it swept over them. "You'll find that the rebellion has a tremendous surprise waiting for them when they reach the Endor system and you will be there to witness their complete and final destruction." Vacendik then turned to leave. "Captain, get us under way immediately. I will begin in an hour."

"Yes my Lord."

The rebels, except for Ardent, were searched again and then placed in separate featureless rooms. Ardent was last seen heading aft in the company of the ship's captain. Exactly an hour later, Vacendik began his interrogations.

"I don't understand," Said Kyle from the cell the rebels had occupied in the hours since the interrogations ended. "I don't pretend to know what an Imperial 'questioning' is supposed to be like, especially when the questioner is a dark Jedi, but I just didn't get the impression that Vacendik was really trying all that hard. Don't get me wrong, I've never been in more pain in my life and I hope I never see a pain induction table again, but he stopped long before I thought he would. Does anyone know what I mean?"

"I do." Replied Rathbone. "I think I was more afraid of facing Vacendik than all of the rest of you put together. I'm just not like the rest of you. Leland has his ego to protect him, Laz has his rage from the loss of his family, Kyle, you're a hunter, Halasa's a Wookiee, Carek's a Jedi

and Dag's been through this before. I'm just a simple engineer. I don't have anything in my background to provide the kind of focus you need to resist a serious interrogation, but like Kyle said, Vacendik just stopped. I can't explain it."

"He had to be toying with us." Said Lazarus rolling off of the bunk deliberately designed to be uncomfortable and for Lazarus it was even more uncomfortable with the pain in his arm. He had been treated by an Imperial med droid, but had not fully healed.

"I have to agree with Lazarus." Added Dag shuddering as he thought back to his time at Rezick's loft. "I was subjected by the Imperials to several interrogations, so I knew full well what to expect. I don't know what Vacendik called himself doing, but that was not a full interrogation."

Just then the blast door to the detention area opened.

"Good morning friends." Vacendik said with false cordiality. "I've come by to return something to you." With a contemptuous wave, Three-Emm and Sam entered the room, restraining bolts fixed solidly to their chests. "We will be arriving at Endor in less than twelve hours and I wanted you all to be together."

"That's touching Vacendik." Said Leland as he tried to spit upon Vacendik, however the dark Jedi simply used the Force to bat the spittle away.

"I think I will make it my personal business to teach you some manners you heathen space trash. I will however postpone your re-education until you can see the death of your beloved little rebellion."

Vacendik then spun on his heel and departed.

The rebel's hopes for escape, buoyed by the arrival of the droids, soon faded when they found that the restraining bolts didn't even allow the droids to speak. Team Bantha could only wait and hope that they would find a means of escape when they reached the Endor system, but with an Imperial territorial fleet waiting for them, those hopes seemed very dim indeed.

Rathbone was the first to notice the change in the sound of the engines. "We just dropped out of hyperspace." He said rousing the members of the team that had managed to get to sleep on the Imperial bunks. "What ever the Empire has in store for us, it won't be long now."

"Okay everyone look alive," Said Carek looking intently at his comrades trying to gauge their emotional state without resorting to invading their privacy by using the Force. "I want everybody alert, we will only get one chance

to escape and we have to make the most of it. However, I don't want you so keyed up that you end up throwing your life away on a something that wasn't really there."

"We know the drill Carek. We'll be ready." Said Lazarus stretching out the kinks. "I never intend to sleep on one of those things again."

Vacendik arrived with two squads of stormtroopers soon after the ship exited hyperspace. As the rebels were being escorted to a waiting shuttle, Vacendik gestured out the hanger bay to allow the rebels to see what was so important about the little known Endor system. High in orbit of a beautiful green world was the unfinished form of a Death Star.

"I knew the looks on your faces would be priceless and here you go and exceed my wildest expectations." Vacendik chortled at the rebel's awestruck response to the terror of actually seeing a Death Star with their own eyes. "I have some more news that you might find upsetting, especially you young Carek, it would seem that Luke Skywalker has seen the error of his ways and has allowed himself to be taken prisoner."

"This can't be!" Carek's mind roared as he fought desperately to calm himself. "The last trained Jedi would not just surrender without a reason."

"Ahh young half-trained welp. It is true and soon, you too will join the ranks of those who serve the Emperor."

The rebels were pushed aboard the shuttle and remained under heavy and vigilant guard.

The shuttle was on it's final approach when one of the flight crew came back and delivered a message to Vacendik. As Vacendik read the message, he smiled, and it was an awful, soulless, Death's head of a smile.

"It has begun." He said after a moment. "I have just been informed that the entire rebel fleet has just exited hyperspace, and is closing in to attack." He instantly noticed the look of hope on his captives faces. "Oh, I wouldn't get my hopes up if I were you. As it is now too late for you to warn them, I guess I can let you in on the Emperor's brilliant plan. Despite it's appearance, this Death Star is fully operational."

Vacendik actually laughed when he saw the effect that his announcement had on team Bantha. The team felt the shuttle land and then they were hustled out into the cavernous hanger of the Death Star.

"For you see," Vacendik continued to gloat. "The location and timetable of the Emperor's visit, along with

the location of the planetary shield that is protecting the 'helpless' station was allowed to leak, to draw the your fleet out of hiding and into a battle of the Empire's choosing. A rebel team attempted to sneak in and destroy the shield down on the planet below, but they have just discovered that it was all a trap and have been captured.

"Caught between a territorial fleet, augmented by interdicator cruisers to prevent the rebel fleet from withdrawing, and the Death Star's superlaser, your little rebellion is quite done for."

Vacendik had escorted the rebels to one of the mag-lev sleds that were used for transportation on the massive battle station.

"I now must report to Lord Vader. These men will be taking you to a holding cell to keep you out of mischief. I will rejoin Mr. Argonaut and Mr. Archimedes to begin your proper education later. The rest of you wretches will be sent to the spice mines of Kessel as soon as I can arrange transportation. Except for Mr. Caltare, for whom the sentence for escaping from an Imperial detention facility is death. You can take heart in knowing that your execution is a major event during tomorrow's celebration of the end of the Rebel Alliance"

Vacendik executed a mock bow at the dispirited rebels and departed.

The stormtroopers shoved the rebels and the two droids onto the sled and six of the troopers boarded as well, carefully keeping the rebels covered. Once the sled was in motion, the troopers finally relaxed.

"This looks like the best chance we're likely to get." Thought Carek when he noticed the change in the trooper's stance. He sought for and found the center of calmness that would provide his link to the Force.

"I guess my entire life boils down to this moment." Was his last conscious thought before he calmly tapped into the Force and used the power he found there to grab the blasters from the two rearmost troopers and to drop them into the hands of Kyle and Lazarus.

Long accustomed to Carek's displays of the Force, neither man wasted anytime trying to figure out how the weapons ended up in their hands, they simply began firing.

The stormtroopers, however were not used to blaster rifles leaping from the hands of their owners and into the hands of prisoners and were too shocked to react.

Kyle mowed down three troopers and wounded the only one that even attempted to evade his fire. The wounded trooper

was knocked almost completely from the sled, hanging onto the guard rail with one hand.

Lazarus' fire was slowed by the injury to his firing arm, but he was still able to kill one trooper and wound the last one. Halasa ended the fight by reaching out and throwing the wounded trooper from the sled.

Kyle was about to finish off the trooper hanging from the rail when he could hear the man calling his name.

"KYLE DON'T SHOOT! IT'S ME ARDENT!"

"You're going to have to give me a better reason not to shoot than that." Kyle snarled back.

"It was something called a post hypnotic suggestion." Ardent wailed as the walls of the mag-lev sped by at three hundred KPH. "I didn't know anything about it. The Empire must have done it when they put me back together after you left me for dead on Cypryn four!"

"I allowed myself to prejudge a friend and it cost him his life." Said Lazarus pushing Kyle's weapon aside. "Don't make the same mistake I made with Arcturus."

Kyle looked hard at Lazarus, then reached out and grabbed Ardent's arm. "Okay you've just explained, more or less, why you doublecrossed us." Kyle grunted as he lifted his friend into the sled. "You want to explain how you ended up here, in control of your own faculties and in stormtrooper armor no less?"

"The last thing I clearly remember, was working on the forward turret of the customs frigate. I had finished replacing the primary power couplers and was about to start on the secondary, when I could hear this voice clearly in my head saying 'Son of Grandel, you are mine.' After that, everything went hazy. I have only the merest hints of what occurred next, the next clear memory I had, was fighting my way out of a terrible dream that I couldn't recall. I was in a cabin on a starship and at first I thought I was on the Apocalypse. I knew something was wrong with me, so I headed for the infirmary.

"I couldn't find my way, so I asked the first guy I ran into, he just ordered me to return to my quarters or be sedated. That kind of jolted me back to reality. So I punched the jerk right in his pompous nose and dragged him through the nearest door, It was just my luck that the room was occupied by some technical geek. I managed to put him to sleep before he could call for help.

"Fortunately for me the second guy had a blaster pistol, because after I ditched the two techs, I ran right into four stormtroopers. I'm still not sure what came over me, but somehow I managed to drop all four of them before

they could raise an alarm. I dragged them into the same room as the other two guys. I knew with my tattoos I was going to have to come up with a disguise, so I mixed and matched the four sets of armor until I could make a full set without any carbon scoring. I managed to get the door locked and then went looking for you.

"I overheard some of the troopers say when the prisoners were going to be moved and just waited until I had a chance to join in. I got very lucky and no one noticed when I jumped the rearmost guard. I took his place on the sled and I was planning to surprise them, when Carek pulled his little stunt. Kyle fired so fast, that I was hit before I could let him know it was me. Considering what you guys must have thought about me, I guess I was lucky that I was only wounded. I don't know what else to say, but I'm very sorry."

"Who told you it was a post hypnotic suggestion?" A shaken Dag asked, worried that he himself might be bearing a hidden surprise from the Empire.

"I was dimly aware of what was going on around me and I heard the captain and Vacendik discussing how Arcturus and I had been made to do Vacendik's bidding."

"I hate to intrude on your little reminiscence," Said Rathbone from where he had taken over driving the sled. "but what's our escape plan going to be Carek?"

"Find a hanger bay and get out of here. I don't care how brilliant the Emperor's plan is, something keeps telling me to get out and get out now."

"You don't have to be a Jedi to figure that one out." Said Leland. "I just came to the same conclusion myself."

"We're all agreed then." Said Ardent removing the stormtrooper's helmet and throwing back down the tunnel. "I'll never understand how they fight in those things."

"They can't, that's why they're so easy to defeat." Laughed Kyle.

"Quiet! We're coming up on a check point!" Rathbone hissed.

The rebel's sled reached an area where the tunnel opened to a large platform. The rebels could see that a squad of stormtroopers were in the middle of deploying and would have a clear field of fire when the sled exited the tunnel.

"This exposed sled is going to provide absolutely no cover." Thought Carek who, with loss of his lightsaber, was now unarmed and searching desperately to find a way to arm himself. "I've got it!" He exclaimed when he noticed that the troopers on the platform were carrying grenades on

their utility belts. He reached out with the Force and activated a grenade on one of the unsuspecting troopers as the sled began to take ranging shots.

The stormtroopers were uncharacteristically bunched up in order to fire down the tunnel, so when the grenade exploded it's effect was far greater than normal. When the smoke cleared and the sled burst into the open, only two of the stormtroopers were still conscious and they were in no shape to fight, quickly falling from the rebel's fire.

The rebels raced through the open area and soon they could hear another sled approaching from the front.

"You think you can pull that grenade trick again?" Ardent asked as Kyle, Halasa, Lazarus, and he moved to the front of the sled and took up firing positions at the front of the sled.

"I doubt it. I can't see their grenades in my mind." Carek replied.

"Then we do this the old fashioned way."

The stormtroopers could see the escapee's sled clearly through their helmet's low light vision enhancement. The sergeant in charge of the squad was halfway through giving the order for his men to fire, when the tunnel lit up with the light of what appeared to be at least a two dozen blasters.

"What? There's only supposed to be seven of..."

The sergeant never finished. Team Bantha's fire lanced through the sergeant and the rest of the stormtroopers like a full grown rancor through a herd of tauntauns. The stormtroopers returned fire, but were simply no match for the rebels.

"We've got to get off this thing!" Said Leland, looking back toward where the stormtroopers sled was burning brightly. "It's only a matter of time before they box us in."

"We've got to find a data terminal." Rathbone added. "If I can get the restraining bolt off of Three-ymm, he can find us the nearest hanger bay."

"Let's stop here and back track, that should throw off the Imperials for awhile." Said Carek.

"I can go you one better than that," Rathbone said bringing the sled to a near halt. "you guys jump clear. I'll hot wire this thing to keep going, maybe that will buy us a few more minutes."

The rebels jumped from the slow moving sled and began running full speed back toward the platform they had just passed.

"Are you sure you're ready for this?" Said Leland as he made ready to jump. "I mean...I can do it if you prefer."

"I've got it under control. While you were running on at the mouth, I finished rigging the sled. You better jump now!"

Leland hesitated only a second, before he followed Rathbone from the sled. Leland hadn't even straightened out from his jump, when he saw the sled accelerate up to its maximum speed and disappear from sight.

"I figured the Imperials would be expecting us to be moving at high speed, so I gave them high speed."

"Nice work."

"I like to think so."

"Hey Rath, you're in luck! Get a move on!" Ardent called from the platform where he was waiting with the other rebels. "This platform is labeled 'Engineering transfer subsector twelve.'" We should find the terminal you're looking for close by."

"It better be, I'm not ready for all this running." Rathbone Grumbled and ran to catch up with his friends.

Team Bantha spread out and headed down the main corridor leading away from the platform. They had gone less than a hundred meters when they came upon a blast door marked "Engineering subsector twelve".

The rebels rushed the door and found eight very surprised technicians. Despite being completely surprised and obviously out of their league, the technicians tried to resist. Lazarus, Kyle and Ardent took them out of the picture so fast, that not one of them even managed to get his weapon clear of his holster.

Rathbone quickly found the tools he needed to remove the restraining bolts from the two droids and soon Three-emm had jacked into one of the Death Star's data ports.

"The nearest hanger bay is for TIE fighters," Said Rathbone rapidly scanning the schematic that Three-emm had found. "and it's down three decks. That's all we needed thanks, Three-emm."

The little droid let out a burst of beeps and whistles.

"He said that the planetary shield is still in place and that the Death Star has begun to fire on the fleet." Sam translated. "In response the rebel fleet has closed to point blank range with the Imperial fleet."

"WHAT! Has Ackbar lost his mind?" Leland exclaimed. "Mon-Calamari star cruisers are good ships, but they can't go toe to toe with Imperial class star destroyers!"

"I hate to say this Leland," Said Carek with a pained expression on his face. "but there's nothing we can do to

help right now. We'll just have to trust that the Force is with them. Now let's move."

"Uh, right. The turboshaft is this way." Said Rathbone leading the way.

Enroute to the turboshaft, the rebels found four stormtroopers trying to block their path.

"Nobody can stop a raging Bantha!" Leland howled over the roar of battle as he added the roar of his blaster to that of Lazarus' and Kyle's. The stormtroopers collapsed in a smoking pile and the rebels jumped into the turboshaft. When the rebels exited three decks down, they found more stormtroopers waiting in ambush. Leland's boast that "nobody can stop a raging Bantha" proved prophetic and these troopers were decimated too.

"Kyle?" Said Dag as the rebels jogged the short distance to the next transport sled.

"What can I do for you?"

"Are you aware how many troopers the team has eliminated since we've started our escape?"

"I never keep count. The only thing I keep track of in a firefight is the status of my weapon's power pack and since the Imperials are being kind enough to leave so many laying around, I haven't been keeping too close a count on that either."

"Twenty-five, plus those eight technicians and all without taking a single casualty."

"Yeah so?"

"I'm sorry. It's just that I've never seen anyone manhandle stormtroopers so easily."

"If you're impressed by what you've seen so far, you should see what would happen to them if Carek had his lightsaber."

Dag didn't know how to respond to that so he kept his thoughts to himself.

"All aboard." Leland yelled as the transport sled raced away from its platform.

It took less than a minute to reach the hanger at the redline speed that Leland managed to wring out of the sled. The rebels dismounted and ran the last hundred meters to the hanger. Kyle had an uncharacteristic flash of leadership and began setting the rebels battle order.

"Laz, Halasa, you take the right side and work toward the center. Ardent and I will take the left. Leland and Rath you cover our back's. Dag and you two droids, keep your head down. Carek, I can trust that you'll to find some way to be of assistance."

When the team entered the hanger they found, that despite the intruder alert, the hanger was only guarded by a squad of stormtroopers and a dozen or so TIE fighter ground crew.

It was not that the commander of the stormtroopers was failing to take the proper precautions to contain the escapees that were rampaging through the station, it was just that the team was moving far faster than he thought possible. He had already given the order that would assign a full stormtrooper platoon to each hanger bay, but even with soldiers as well disciplined as stormtroopers, it would take time to reinforce the troopers already guarding the Death Star's one hundred TIE fighter bays and almost five hundred additional bays scattered all around the surface of the massive station.

Team Bantha sliced into the Imperial's with a virtual wall of blaster fire. Halasa and Ardent howled fierce battle cries as they fired shot after shot from their rapidly overheating rifles.

"A shuttle!" Carek exclaimed when he spotted the hoped for escape route. "Laz, Halasa, make for the shuttle, everybody else cover them."

The rebels shifted their fire and the two designated rebels made their break.

"Kyle above and to the right!" Carek said dodging an intense crossfire that burst from an overhead catwalk that half-a-dozen techs were using for cover.

"I've got them!" Kyle answered and responded by blasting out the supports to the catwalk, which teetered and came crashing down with the deafening screams of the tortured metal and the falling techs.

Ardent tried to maintain covering fire while Kyle handled the threat from above, but the stormtroopers took advantage of the decrease in fire and Ardent was hit, staggering back, stunned from a ricochet.

"Stay with us Ardent!" Carek cried out as he used the Force to keep Ardent conscious.

There were only three stormtroopers and four techs remaining when the rebels made their move for the shuttle. Dag and Rathbone went first, followed by Ardent and the two droids. The volume of Imperial fire had dropped far enough for Dag and Rathbone to easily reach the workbench that Lazarus and Halasa were using for cover.

Enroute to the workbench, the Death Star's superlaser fired again.

Ardent spotted a data port and got an idea. "Three-emm can you tap into that data port and pull up information on that superlaser?"

The droid gave an enthusiastic whistle.

"Okay then, let's go. Ardent said changing directions for the data port. "you guys go ahead, I've got something I want to check on."

"I hope he knows what he's doing." Lazarus muttered.

Halasa murmured his understanding and fired again, knocking out one of the remaining techs.

"Leland, you thinking what I'm thinking?" Said Carek eyeing a row of dagger winged TIE fighters that he had never seen before.

"It's unlikely. Why?"

"Look at those new TIE fighters up there." He pointed to the indicated rack. "If we were to fly out and join up with a squadron, we could give them one Empire-sized headache."

"Carek, that is the most devious thing I've ever heard you say."

Leland grinned. "Which for a change, means I'm all for it! Kyle come with us. Carek's got a great idea."

"Hold on Leland, don't you think we should wait until the guys are actually on board the shuttle before we stop giving them cover fire?" Reminded Kyle.

"Oh yeah. Right." He replied, to the rebels waiting for the signal he called out. "When ever you guys are ready!"

"Three-emm reached the data port and began searching for the requested information.

"Make it quick shorty we don't have much time." Ardent said snapping off a series of rapid blaster shots that succeeded in taking out one of the stormtroopers.

Three-emm beeped back and data began flying across the read out far too fast for any human to follow.

As soon as they heard Leland call out, Rathbone and Dag broke cover and sprinted for the shuttle. Halasa and Lazarus followed as soon as their friends reached the shuttle. Unable to match the Wookiee's long strides, Lazarus was a good two meters behind Halasa and at least ten meters short of the shuttle, when one of stormtroopers that had been wounded earlier in the fight, rolled out from where he had taken cover and put a blaster bolt right into Lazarus' side.

Lazarus was caught completely by surprise and never saw it coming. The bolt shattered five ribs and collapsed his lung, Lazarus only managed a strangled gasp, then fell end over end coming to a stop well short of the shuttle.

The other rebels reacted to Lazarus' ambush with a wave of fire that silenced all of the remaining Imperials. Halasa used the covering fire to double back for his friend. He scooped up Lazarus and wailed a mournful moan when he saw the extent of his injuries. He raced up the shuttle's loading ramp and handed him to Rathbone.

"BURNING STARS!" Said Rathbone when he saw Lazarus.

"Rwawra grugh dhak."

"No, Halasa. I won't let him die. Quick get to the bridge. You've got to get the shuttle ready to go."

With one last sad look at Lazarus, Halasa turned and ran to the bridge.

Outside the shuttle, Leland, Kyle and Carek stood aghast.

"Did you see how bad that wound looked?" Said Leland softly.

"Lazarus is strong and Rathbone is excellent with a medpac. He will make it." Carek said reassuringly.

"Come on, Carek's right." Added Kyle. "Laz has walked away from far worst. And besides, we've got to get suited up."

Kyle's reminder was enough to get the shaken rebels moving again. They ran over to a rack of flight gear and began pulling on the form fitting flight suits.

"The Empire sure doesn't waste any credits on creature comforts." Said Leland searching for a suit that would fit. "I haven't been in an unpressurized ship in fifteen years."

"I know Leland I don't like it either," Carek replied. "but you know as well as I do that the Empire considers fighters and their pilot's to be expendable."

"Just because I know something, doesn't mean I have to like it."

"That is very true. Is there a size seven and a quarter helmet over there?"

Three-*emm* beeped again and withdrew his data probe.

"He said he has the required data, Master Ardent." Sam said dutifully.

"That's our cue. Let's move."

When Ardent and the two droids were slightly over halfway to the shuttle, they came under heavy blaster fire from a dozen reinforcement stormtroopers. Ardent dodged

wildly and escaped into the shuttle safely. However the two droids, who were not equipped to handle combat situations, were both heavily damaged before the managed to limp up the shuttle's loading ramp under Ardent's covering fire.

As the droids pushed their servomotors to the limits to reach the shuttle, Rathbone was working feverishly to save Lazarus, who was in very real danger of dying.

"Close that flaming hatch!" Rathbone yelled when spill over from the stormtrooper's fire began to ricochet around the edge of the hatch that Ardent was using for cover. "Laz will die if I can't stop this bleeding and I can't concentrate with all that noise!"

"But what about the other..."

SPANNGG! A blaster bolt narrowly missed striking Ardent, but coming close enough to splash him with the bolt's backwash of heat.

"Okay. Okay, you've convinced me." Said Ardent slapping the control panel. "Leland and the others looked like they're planning to steal in TIE fighters anyway. Yah brin daga! Is that his lung?" Ardent gasped when he saw how badly Lazarus was wounded.

"Yes! Now shut up and get over here and help me!"

Outside the shuttle, the three rebels in full TIE flight gear had managed to sneak past the stormtroopers, who were intently concentrating their fire on the shuttle, and climb up the catwalks that lead to the TIE fighters.

"I wonder what they call these beauties?" Said Leland lovingly admiring the sleek new fighters.

"Look! The bay door is closing!" Said Carek pointing toward their escape route, not hesitating for a moment, he focused on the Force and sent Halasa a simple one word message. "Launch!"

In the main cabin, Rathbone felt the shuttle lurch slightly, but he did not have time to comment, instead he continued to spread syntheflesh onto Lazarus' side. "Come on you purple haired boob. LIVE!" He raged at his friend for having the nerve to try and die.

"Rath! I'm getting a pulse!" Ardent shouted when the medical diagnostic read out finally shifted from a flatline. "You did it!"

Rathbone moved to look at the med scanner himself. "By Deity you're right. Let's move him to one of the seats and get him strapped in. I just know this is going to be an unpleasant ride."

The stormtroopers tried increasing their firestorm at the departing shuttle in a forlorn hope of stopping the escapees, but the Lambda class was designed to be resistant to light ground fire and the shuttle, rolling slightly to get it's tall center wing through the rapidly closing doors, roared out of sight.

"Well at least they won't get all of us." Said Carek as the doors slid the rest of the way shut.

"I don't know what you have planned, but they aren't getting any of us." Replied Leland, who stiffened and pointed. "Uh oh. They've spotted us."

"I've had just about enough of this." Thought Carek, blocking out the anger that hung at the edge of his mind and begged for release. Carek found the strength to keep his anger at bay and used all the power of the light side that he could muster at that moment, to wrench the weapons from two of the stormtroopers. The weapons flew upward and into the waiting arms of Kyle and Leland, who then sent fire scything through the stunned troopers.

"This is the coolest trick you've pulled yet." Yelled Leland over the din of the blasters.

"Three-emm. I need you to show the data you have on the superlaser to Rath." Said Ardent as he strapped into the co-pilot's seat. He had seen the hanger doors close and was trying to focus his mind on helping the living and not on the loss of his friends. "Halasa, I've got an idea. It's dangerous and I'll understand if you refuse to do it, but that thing is tearing the fleet apart and we have got to do something to stop it. I know this will sound crazy, but with the hull of the Death Star being unfinished, it leaves parts of the interior that would normally be invulnerable, exposed to attack from the inside."

"You have lost your mind." Said Rathbone looking up from the communications station, where he was examining the captured data. "You want us to fly inside that thing and try to disable the superlaser from the inside. Don't you?"

"The short answer is yes."

Halasa whuffed out a long series of grunts and barks.

"He said that too fast, I didn't follow all of it." Said Rathbone.

"The Death Star's shield is down and there is a group of over twenty X-wings, trailed by a least twice a many TIEs heading this way." Sam replied.

The remnants of team Bantha watched breathlessly as several squadrons of X-wings, led by a battered YT-1300

freighter and pursued by a swarm of TIE fighters rocket past and dive into the unfinished superstructure of the Death Star.

"I know, I know. If they can do it, so can we." Said Rathbone shaking his head. "I don't believe I'm saying this, but it looks like if we can damage enough of the power capacitors, it will throw off the alignment to the amplification crystals. I don't know if that will destroy the superlaser, but it will definitely weaken it's output far enough for those Mon-Cal star cruisers to have a fighting chance."

"You heard him Halasa, follow those TIE fighters at best speed. I'll gun. Rath, you use Three-emm's data to guide us." Said Ardent, his mind drifting to Leland, Kyle and Carek. "I hope this will make up for what happened at Zent Arruke." He mused silently. "What was that Halasa?"

"Master Halasa said that the Death Star seems to be rotating toward the planet." Said Sam.

"Hurry Halasa, hurry."

Halasa wailed and took the shuttle into the Death Star.

Eleven of the twelve troopers had fallen from the rebel's fire, when the blasters that Kyle and Leland were using leaped from their grasps.

"Hey! What gives?" Said Leland.

"It's not quite so amusing when it happens to you is it?" Said Vacendik from the floor of the hanger bay. "I have been pursuing you for more than two years, you didn't think I was just going to let you escape did you? You are very fortunate that Lord Vader and the Emperor are, at this very minute, occupied with turning Skywalker to the dark side and are not free to handle you personally.

"Lord Vader does not accept excuses or apologies, so you may consider yourselves very lucky that it was I who got the report that you had broken loose and not him."

"Well, this still isn't over. You've got to catch us first!" Said Leland making a break for one of the fighters.

Kyle and Carek followed suit and took off racing to reach one of the many waiting TIEs before Vacendik could climb the catwalk.

Carek had reached a fighter and was in the process of boarding when he felt a virtual shock wave of hate hammer him through the Force. He half felt and half heard Vacendik's bloodcurdling scream of pure rage.

"NNNNNOOOOOOOOO! YOU CAN'T BE DEAD!"

Buffeted again by Vacendik's anger, Carek pulled himself through and sealed the TIE fighter's hatch. "By the Force!

What was that! I've never felt anything so malignant before in my life." Carek shuddered at the memory, then tentatively felt with the Force sensing for the source of the huge disturbance. "Something big is going on, every time I tapped into the Force here, I could sense this malevolent sense of order all around me." He reached out a little deeper. "It's gone now. All I can sense now is fear and confusion." He shook his head. "Snap out of it man you've got a job to do." He got the fighter powered up and moving just as Vacendik changed directions and dropped to the hanger floor.

The hanger bay was large enough to handle a full wing of fighters and that gave the three rebels plenty of room to maneuver in. The only thing preventing their escape was the sealed bay doors.

"Kyle. Carek. Form on me." Said Leland carefully maneuvering on the fighter's repulsors. "I think that if we concentrate our fire at one spot, we should be able to punch a hole large enough to escape, like we did at Rezick's Loft."

"Sounds like a plan to me." Carek responded as he shifted his fighter into gracelessly into position. "Uh, sorry. I never claimed I was an expert at this."

"The doors of the Death Star are far stronger than they were at Rezick's Loft little man!" Vacendik's voice boomed across the hanger. "Come down and fight like men, instead of the cowering little fools that you are!"

"What's the hold up Kyle?" Leland said testily, when he noticed that Kyle was dropping toward the deck.

"I've got an idea, but it requires landing. Keep an eye on Vacendik will you?"

"That's it come and face me. I have no reason to keep you alive now. I will make your death's quick, it will however be quite painful I'm afraid."

Kyle set his fighter down as close to the hanger bay controls as he could. Kyle unsealed the hatch, dropped down and began trying to over ride the doors.

"Oh no, I wouldn't think of you leaving, my friend." Vacendik said as he used the Force to crush the terminal that Kyle was using.

"That's it! I'll take care of this guy myself!" Leland fumed when he saw Kyle roll away from the shattered terminal and put a blaster bolt into Vacendik, who just absorbed the hit. Leland adjusted the fighter's comm unit to broadcast externally. "You like to absorbing blaster energy so much, THEN ABSORB THIS!"

Leland stood the fighter on it's nose at let loose with a fearsome burst of fire. The dark Jedi was forced to dodge, using a Force assisted leap, Vacendik barely evaded Leland's initial path of destruction by rolling into a small room.

Leland, anticipating the dark Jedi's move, shifted his fire and the TIE's quad lasers, forcing Vacendik to close the blast door, which was the maintenance storage room's only exit. Leland's fire savaged the blast door, jamming it hopelessly.

"Now with laughing boy out the way, I might just be able to get those doors open." Said Kyle, looking for and finding another terminal. He had only been working a few seconds, when the entire Death Star actually shook, there were several distant explosions that followed the initial vibration. "That's the way to give it to 'em, whoever you are!"

"Turn right at the next side vent, the next capacitor should be on the left." Rathbone yelled holding on to the terminal in front of him for dear life. Halasa and Ardent both acknowledged with the near simultaneous firing of the ship's blaster cannons. So far they had destroyed two of the huge capacitors and Rathbone was terrified. "This is insanity. I have allowed myself to be seduced by madness."

"Whrwa nhe jhwa?" Halasa had turned to face his reluctant co-pilot.

"Yes. I can think of a better way to die! And please keep your eyes on where you're going. What was that?"

Rathbone had noticed the Death Star shake for the second time.

Three-emm squealed loudly and began beeping frantically.

"Master Halasa! Three-emm says we have to leave immediately, something has happened to the Death Star's main power core! We have only twenty seconds to escape!"

Halasa wrenched the controls so hard turning the shuttle around, that he actually managed to bend the yolk. Rathbone rerouted all power from weapons and shields and fed it to the engines, driving them fifteen percent over maximum.

"Oh Deity this is going to be close!"

"Outstanding work Kyle!" Leland shouted when he saw the bay doors start to open, He was about to add that it took long enough, when he saw movement out of the corner of his eye. "Kyle! Stormtroopers! Carek help me hold them off!"

"Roger."

The two TIE fighters swung around and sent a deadly stream of crackling energy into the platoon sized unit of troopers, that had entered the bay.

Kyle jumped into his fighter and was still resealing the hatch, when he saw the bay doors begin to close again. "Won't this ever end." He moaned and activated his comm unit. "Launch without me! I'll be okay!"

"No, we all go together!" Carek responded as he brought his fighter around for another pass at the few stormtroopers that remained.

"There isn't enough time. Don't make my sacrifice be in vain. GO!"

Carek sagged in his harness at the implications of the situation. "You heard him Leland. Launch." He murmured.

"You know I'm a better pilot than you are, I'll follow you. It will give me time for one more pass at those troopers." Leland didn't wait for a reply and finished off the troopers.

Torn by his duty as a leader and the truth of Kyle's and Leland's words, Carek hesitated.

"Go Carek, you can't help me now. It's been an honor serving with you." Kyle then spun the fighter around and flew out of the hanger bay down the corridor still smoking from Leland's strafing.

Stung by the loss of his comrade he still hesitated, until he felt a deep bass rumbling coming from somewhere deep in the Death Star. Carek then accelerated toward the rapidly closing doors.

"If this were a regular TIE fighter I would never make it." He said to himself as the short dagger shaped fighter narrowly cleared the doors. Once clear, he immediately began searching for the shuttle that carried the majority of team Bantha.

Leland waited until Carek was clear, before he slammed down on the acceleration control, for a moment it looked like he would make it, then he heard the TIE fighter scream as the wings scraped on the edge of the bay doors.

Halasa let loose with an ear-splitting war cry, when the shuttle left from the Death Star's superstructure.

"We're still too close! Head for the fleet!" Said Rathbone. "I'll get on the comm and try and let them know we're friendlies."

"Any sign of the others?" Ardent asked softly.

"I'll check the sensors."

"Hold together you piece of junk." Leland yelled at the wildly corkscrewing fighter. It was a tribute to Leland's skill as a pilot that, he was able to keep the severely damaged fighter under control and still moving away from the stricken Death Star.

"Stay with it Leland! I'll cover you." Said Carek shifting his fighter into an overwatch position. "Where are those guys?" He thought as he scanned for the shuttle. "I've found them! Leland steer 126 mark 8 as best you can."

"Yeah right. With the way this thing is flying, I'll consider myself lucky if I don't run into a planet."

"I've got them!" Rathbone exclaimed. "No, wait, there are only two of them."

"Which two?" Said Ardent heartsick.

On board the Death Star, Kyle had finally spotted what he was looking for. "It's about bloody time!" He cut power to his repulsors and let his TIE fighter skid to a halt. He popped the hatch and jumped clear, running the last twenty meters and dove head first into the escape pod. He triggered the launch sequence and blasted clear of the doomed battle station.

Also on the Death Star, Lord Ky Vacendik was still trapped in the maintenance storage room, the blast door was still jammed and he knew he was running out of time. He felt the deck plates began to shake. "I refuse to die this way." He raged and reached down to darkest part of the dark side of the Force. The blast door trembled then flew back off its track, ripped asunder by the raw hatred that was the dark side.

Vacendik ran to an intercom. "Open TIE fighter bay thirty-six." Then ran for one of the fighters, not even waiting for a response. He was less than halfway up the catwalk when he sensed the approaching end.

"NOOOOOO!"

Then the hanger and indeed the entire Death Star flared as bright as a nova, purging the galaxy of Vacendik's evil in the same mammoth funeral pyre that marked the passing of the Emperor.

Carek and Leland were close enough to the explosion, that the shock wave hit them very hard, with his fighter still functional, Carek was able to ride out the worst of the effects undamaged. Leland however, was at the mercy of

the blast. When his battered fighter finally stopped spinning, it had lost all power and he was left floating helplessly.

"Rathbone to Carek. Rathbone to Carek. Report." The engineer said suddenly very tired.

"Carek here. I'm okay. Rath. Leland needs an immediate pick up."

"What happened to Kyle?"

"We got separated. I don't think he made it." Replied Carek, his voice choked with emotion.

"Understood. We'll be there in three minutes."

Once Leland was safely aboard the shuttle, team Bantha was ready to fight Imperials. The only problem was, there weren't any Imperials left to fight. The loss of the Death Star had broken the back of the Imperial's resistance and the territorial fleet had retreated with heavy damage. Team Bantha had a hard time convincing the captain of the assault frigate that had detained them, that they were the long lost team Bantha.

"Is the Apocalypse here and did her captain. Ehrinn Challis survive the battle?" Asked an exasperated Carek.

"That just proves that you are Imperial spies." The captain insisted. "Challis is an admiral."

"With all due respect, sir. If we were spies, don't you think our information would be better? All I am asking, is for you to patch us through to Admiral Challis. She knows us by sight and she is a Jedi she will be able to detect if we're fakes or not."

"Alright. I'll patch you through and if you aren't exactly who you say you are, I will personally lock you in my own brig, because in case you haven't figured it out by now, there's a new day dawning and there's no room in it for Imperials."

"Fair enough."

"Challis." The admiral did not look up from the damage report she was reading.

"Sorry to bother you Admiral, but I have detained a shuttle and a TIE interceptor." Said the captain of the assault frigate. "The crew of the two ships claims to be members of a special operations team that disappeared more than two years ago."

"Team Bantha?" Challis said damage report suddenly forgotten.

"Yes sir, that's the one. You've heard of them?"

"I was the one who sent them on the mission that lead to their disappearance."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"Send them to me immediately."

"But Admiral."

"You have your orders, I take full responsibility."

"Yes sir." The captain said still unconvinced.

Five minutes later Halasa and Carek had landed in the familiar docking of the Apocalypse.

"I never expected to see this place again." Said Leland waving to Carek who was just exiting his TIE fighter. "It's good to be back."

"Yes it is." Ardent replied.

"It's good to have you back." Said Admiral Challis from the bottom of the ramp.

"Will you guys get out of the way?" Said Rathbone making way for the towering form of the Wookiee cradling the wounded Lazarus.

Challis spoke into her comlink. "Med team to landing bay. How bad is he?" She said concern etching her face.

"Pretty bad, Cap...uh Admiral." Replied Rathbone. "I thought we were going to lose him."

"I can't wait to hear your debrief. There's one thing that I am curious about, what happened to the refugees?"

"Let me field that one." Carek said as he joined the group. "We lost the Yazirian K'rigg, but the rest are with Ra'gnayrr at..."

"Base station Heracles." Challis finished. "I might have known."

"Where is Kyle?"

"He didn't make it off the Death Star, sir." Carek said with a pained expression. "He sacrificed himself, so that Leland and I could escape. I would like to put him in for a posthumous star of Alderaan."

"There's no need for that Captain."

"Admiral. With all due respect, there is a need. That was the bravest thing I've ever seen." Said Leland anger creeping into his voice.

"I don't doubt Lieutenant Kyle's bravery, it's just that there's no need for the medal to be posthumous."

"What are you saying Admiral?" This from Carek.

"I'm saying that, since I agreed to take responsibility for personnel claiming to be in team Bantha, prior to your docking, I received a transmission from the commander of our forces on Endor. Lieutenant Kyle managed to find an

escape pod in time. It was a close run thing, but he is uninjured and safe with General Solo's team on the planet.

The team stared open mouthed for a moment, then exploded with joy. It took the arrival of the med team to restore order to the overjoyed team.

"We'll take good care of him, sir." The lead med tech said to Challis as his team led the hover gurney away to sick bay. "You did good work on him Lieutenant Loegin, we should have him at the party in less than six hours."

"Thank you." Said Rathbone thoughtfully. "Party?" He said with one eye brow raised.

"It's a huge celebration of the victory here and the death of the Emperor." Challis said with the hint of a smile. "You are planning to attend aren't you?"

"With as long as we've been waiting for this? Are you kidding? We wouldn't miss it for the world." Said Carek still beaming with the news that Kyle had survived.

"We can use your shuttle. We leave in an hour. Dismissed."

An hour later the shuttle was enroute to Endor. Leland and Halasa piloted around the squadrons of X-wings that were using modified practice torpedoes to give off a beautiful display of fireworks. The team could not believe the size of the massive trees that give the moon the well deserved nickname of the forest moon of Endor, even Halasa was impressed and reminded of home.

Joining the party proper. The rebels watched as the native Ewoks cavorted with their new found friends. The heroes of Yavin and most of the rebel alliance leadership, joined in caught up in the unbelievable joy of the event.

"Captain Argonaut, uh...Carek, may I have a word with you in private?" Challis said after several hours when the party began to break into smaller, more intimate groups.

"Certainly Admiral." Said Carek guardedly.

They moved from the clearing and out of earshot. "First, please call me Ehrinn." Said Challis unpinning her hair and smiling nervously. "Second, I'm going to say something that I've wanted to say for a long time and I thought I was never going to get a chance to say." She took Carek by the hand and took a deep breath. "I love you."

"What! I never knew you had any sort of feelings for me."

"I knew you were special when I first saw you, but I was your commanding officer and it wouldn't have been right."

"Well, this is the second pleasant surprise I've had today.

"Second?"

"Kyle's survival was the first. And I didn't think anything could have topped that one." Carek smiled and took her into his arms. "But you've found a way." He looked deep into her eyes and felt the tentative touch of her mind through the Force. "With the way this day started, this was definitely not how I thought it would end."

He opened his mind completely to hers and their minds intertwined in a connection that only the Force could provide. They stood there lost in each other's eyes for an endless amount of time, then their lips met in a tender kiss that lasted even longer.

"I could learn to like this." Carek said at last.

"So could I."

They embraced again and watched the dawn break. The first day of a galaxy free of the Empire.