

Chapter 2 – Journey Toward Destiny

Coruscant. The bustling, shining beacon in the center of the known galaxy, once home to the Jedi Temple and the Galactic Senate of the Old Republic, was a planet that had been developed and cultivated over the millennia into one all-encompassing city.

It was here, beginning with the slaughter of the unsuspecting Temple Jedi by Darth Vader and our troops of the 501st Legion, and continuing with the rise of Emperor Palpatine, the Old Republic crumbled and fell away under the weight of the crushing new Galactic Empire. The last remaining decent members of the Senate were removed, and the integrity of its offices breached as they were quickly overrun with beauraucrats, fat from their business associations with the Emperor's New Order.

Many years had passed since those last days of the Clone Wars, and the first days of turbulence and transition that followed under the Empire. Much that was valued had been lost. The innocent grandeur and the stability of power and reason within the Republic had been splintered into a million ruined shards, scattered to the four corners of the galaxy. The Jedi were mercilessly sought, hunted down and exterminated.

It was believed that when the blasters were silenced on the fourth day following the enactment of Order 66, every last one had been killed, master and youngling alike, save the Emperor's new Sith apprentice Darth Vader. He once had been a great Jedi warrior and hero of the Republic before his turn to embrace the darker teachings of the Force.

Coruscant weathered the storm silently, like tall grass in a strong wind, yielding to the revolution, the transition of power. The city lights winked and shimmered like stars across the planet's surface as a lumbering freighter requested clearance to set down in the Imperial shipyards just outside Imperial City.

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Sparks erupted from the welding tool and rained down over gloved hands as Taka attached the scope rail to the barrel of his custom rifle. He switched off the welder and pulled his safety goggles up onto the top of his head as he rolled in his chair over to check the crackling request coming through on the comm station. He glanced to an adjacent screen for clearance code transmission. It was the *Resolute Servant*, inbound heavy freighter from Muskree. He then checked docking availability and keyed the comm to respond, “*Resolute Servant*, you are cleared for approach to landing pad sector 138011. A ground team will be readied and awaiting your arrival.” He keyed off the comm and logged them into the appropriate slot. Then he moved back to his rifle. He screwed the new scope securely in place; it fit down perfectly over the freshly attached mount.

The grounding clips pulled loose from the gun with a jerk of his hand as he unclamped the long barrel and wiped away several curled metal shavings. The scope flickered to life as he inserted the power cell clip. He raised the new gun to his shoulder and looked into the eyepiece. The

reticle imaging floated over a rusted bolt head protruding from the wall on the far side of the room.

He flicked off the lock and fired a single blast of crimson. The bolt head and two centimeters of the rusted metal plate on either side was instantly vaporized in a bright flash. A small stream of smoke rose from the blast point as he lifted his eye from the scope to inspect the damage, "Now that's more like it!"

A voice called out from the hallway, "HEY! Don't shoot, I'm just looking for my shuttle assignment!" A dirty, armored trooper stuck his head through the door, gearbag over his shoulder and E-11 blaster drawn and held out.

Taka lowered his rifle, "Sorry, just testing some new sight modifications. Who are you? Where are you headed?"

"There are a couple of us here. I'm Ddraig Masnachwr, TD-3195."

Two other troopers pushed through the door behind him, "Folson Danz, TD-8733 here and TD-1265 as well."

Danz looked at 1265 and asked, "Wasn't the new guy, 1344, supposed to be heading out with us too?"

1265 nodded his head. "Yeah, he'll be here, he's tying up some loose ends regarding his transfer. He said he would meet us at the ship."

Ddraig looked over his shoulder, then spoke in a hushed tone, "You know, I heard something from a friend that works in Internal Security, at Imperial Center. Danlin Falker, TD1344, was a Captain and Commander of a covert Recon and Assault unit until he got busted down to Stormtrooper and reassigned."

Danz asked, "What'd he do?"

Ddraig shook his head, "I'm not sure. My friend said when he went looking for more details, all that information was marked classified. Whatever it was, he made the wrong person angry. He's shipping out for his new assignment on this flight with us."

Taka looked them over a bit as memories of his own reassignment after Belliran V resurfaced in his thoughts. "OK, let me see your ID holo tags." They all leaned in closer and pulled out their dog tags. As he scanned them, he realized they were all assigned to the same flight he had been scheduled for. He was getting a new post assignment, very hush-hush, no information offered as to destination, but a new destination nonetheless.

A new assignment would be a welcome thing. This office was definitely a dead-end. "Looks like we'll be flying together for awhile. You guys are on the same ship out as me. Unfortunately it won't be a shuttle. We've been bumped to a small cargo ship. Let me grab my things and we can

walk out there together, my shift here is just about over.”

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Danlin Falker, with gear and rifle slung over his shoulder, raced out of the front of the administration building adjacent to Imperial Center. He ran through the crowds across the open plaza toward the loaded air taxi as it rose from its boarding stall and slipped into the congested lanes of traffic in the late afternoon sky. It had been that kind of day to be sure, he thought, as he threw off his gear bag and sat down, bucket in hand, on a bench to wait for the next taxi.

He closed his eyes and rubbed his temples as the events of the past few days replayed over and over in his head and faint memories of the past crept out. He barely remembered being here so many years ago as a child, before the truth about his uncle had been exposed and his family had paid the price for it. When he was eight, his mother had entrusted him with the information that his uncle was a Jedi Knight. He idolized his uncle, and was eager to become a Jedi himself. Unfortunately, a low midichlorian count had prevented him from joining the order.

It was during the failed Jedi attempt to seize power of the Republic and overthrow his Excellency, Chancellor Palpatine, that his uncle was killed while trying to assassinate a group of senior Clone officers. He was stunned by the news and both saddened and angered that his dead uncle was a traitor against the Republic. Between this and the bitterness he felt from being denied his own entry for training, he lost all faith in the Jedi and their ways.

The family business was seized, and all privileges stripped from them. His mother swore it was not because of their association with the Jedi, but he knew in his heart that his uncle had betrayed them. Indeed, all of the Jedi had betrayed the very people they were sworn to protect. It had become a very dark time to live in the Republic, and darker still if you were associated in any way with the Jedi.

He remembered attending the schools here on Coruscant, before his family had been forced to move to Nar Shadda, and a life far away from their ties with the Jedi. Life was hard on Nar Shadda, but he somehow managed to secure a decent education and was ultimately accepted into the Imperial Naval Academy on Carida, under an assumed name. He worked hard and displayed a sharp mind and a keen sense of both military and unconventional tactics. Following his uneventful graduation, he had been assigned to the 35th Planetary Assault Squadron.

Following a promotion, he became a detachment leader specializing in recon, boarding, and neutralization of orbital defense platforms. It was not until just a standard week ago, when during a background inquiry performed by his CO, that his true name was discovered.

He had lied to the Academy entry board, his troops and his superiors, and his family had known ties to a traitorous Jedi. Still, his service record was exemplary and his loyalty to the Empire unswerving. Senior Command agreed, following a passed Internal Security Bureau loyalty test, he would be allowed to continue serving, but would be demoted, stripped of his command and reassigned to the ranks of the Stormtrooper corps. Now, just days later, he sat in the dirty armor he had trained in, waiting for an air taxi to take him to a ship that would connect him to his new

assignment. He took a deep breath and opened his eyes as he heard another taxi approaching.

He gathered his gear and moved closer to the edge of the boarding platform as the large vehicle slowed and settled alongside the gated stall. There were no others waiting as the gates opened, and he made his way into the crowded lower level. With barely even standing room available there, he decided to go up the stairs to the open, upper deck. There were only a handful of others up there; a few couples enjoying the cool air and the romantic sunset.

There were many comfortable seats there, and he found one along the handrail of the outer edge, put down his things and sat. There was the familiar sounding of the two low tones, and the entry gates closed as the taxi glided away from Imperial Center. The air was cooling off a bit, after a hot day, and the sun was setting in a beautiful tapestry of color and light that painted the Coruscant sky. The wind lifted his hair and made him squint as the large vehicle slipped through the travel lanes and headed a bit further out toward the shipyards and the large waterfront estates of the rich beyond them.

The cool air and silence was just what he needed to clear his head before he shipped out. Ahead, a tall, narrow docking tower rose up to the travel lane from the shipyards below. He pressed a small button on the handrail, indicating a stop there was needed, grabbed his gear and made his way down the stairs again. The air vehicle slowed and glided to a gentle stop alongside the tower. The two tones sounded and the gates opened. He stepped out to the durasteel platform.

The tones sounded again, the gates closed behind him and the air taxi moved away, leaving him in silence, except for the whipping of the wind. The view from this height was both dizzying and amazing. The tall structures of Imperial City had been left behind, and the massive, open expanse of the shipyards now stretched out beneath him, filled with ships arriving, departing, boarding and unloading.

He felt the tower sway somewhat as he stepped into the turbolift and selected the button for the ground-level of the shipyard below. The lift dropped quickly toward the duracrete far below, as there were no stops along the spindly tower. He closed his eyes, drawing in a slow breath; held it for a few seconds, then let it out slowly. Another tone sounded as the lift stopped. The doors opened and Falker stepped out onto the wide expanse of the Imperial Shipyards.

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I was awakened by the clattering of Impervium on the deck plates. I jerked my head up and squinted in the direction of the noise. A tall trooper was clipping his rifle into the center rack at the back of the row on the opposite side from me. His dropped bucket was slowly rocking on the floor at his feet. It was scarred with a single blast mark singed across the left eyepiece. I closed my eyes, squeezed them tight and opened them again as they adjusted to the light streaming in the rear hatch.

We were in a hangar bay somewhere. The DL-997 Cargo-Loading 'Droid switched off its' shoulder-mounted flood lamps as it finished securing a supply crate further back in the hold. It

then retreated down the inclined ramp into the hangar bay outside. It was then that I noticed a modified version of a 2-legged AT-ST just outside.

I lifted my bucket up and flipped on the chin switch for the navigational pane as the new guy stowed his gear. The tiny display showed a rotating Star Destroyer schematic and flashed the name, *Leviathan*.

Immediately to the right of that display, a star chart snapped on and rotated, then closed in on the Talus sector. I had only been sleeping a short time. The Talus system was not very far from Anoat. I glanced back at the new guy and nodded in his direction as we momentarily locked eyes. He nodded back as I spoke. "I'm Deckard, TD-2187. Welcome aboard."

"TD-6829, Topolev Mayevkin", he said as he shoved his bucket back under the jumpseat beside his bag. He sat and fastened his restraints as I had, with a heavy breath and closed his eyes. Desert trooper, I thought, as my eyes slowly drifted shut once more. The boarding ramp raised and the hatch sealed. I was spiraling back into my dreams as the engines roared to life and we streaked away from the *Leviathan*.

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After comm-linking to the Harbormaster, Falker finally found his ship. It sat dwarfed between two enormous ships; on one side by a Super Star Destroyer that was being gutted and refitted and on the other by a Heavy Freighter, a new arrival that was busily being unloaded. He had been on some small transports before, but this was probably the smallest, and definitely not the shuttle he was expecting, but rather a small cargo transport, already loaded down with caged livestock and farming supplies.

Taka, Ddraig, Danz and 1265 were all focusing their attentions around the Resolute Servant and a squad of intriguing Twi 'Lek dancers from Rhen Var. They stood amongst crates and supplies, playing with their Lekku and smiling as they talked with the eagerly assembled troops.

The ground crew was busy unloading the rest of the ship's cargo. There were crates and livestock everywhere. Among the deliveries were several caged Ysalimari for delivery to the office of the Emperor, along with hundreds of Ch'hala Trees to be planted in the main chamber of the Grand Corridor at the Imperial Palace.

"Hey guys, I'm TD-1344, Danlin Falker. Is this thing my transport?"

The others laughed and the Twi 'Leks smiled as Taka spoke up, "Hello 1344, I'm TK-2953, Taka, and yeah, this little thing is our ship; looks like we got the aromatic section."

Falker shook his head and closed his eyes as the pilot walked down from inside, "Is this the guy?"

Taka looked up at him, "Yeah, this is the guy we were waiting on. Let's get the rest of this gear

loaded and get out of here.” He turned back to the dancers, “Sorry ladies, it’s time for us to head out.”

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It was dark and quiet where we were, in the cargo hold, save the constant high-pitched whine of the engines. I was unstrapped and watching our slow approach to a small planet with several moons in close orbits. We had navigated around the fringes of a moderately sized asteroid field and now finally we were passing through a thin, vaporous cloud band of cosmic dust. My helmet navigation panel flickered to life, throwing off a bluish glow inside. I turned and glanced over at it in the darkness, sitting on the floor in front of my gear bag.

The blue glow was reflecting off the metal deck plate from under the black-trimmed edges of the bone-white, armored helmet. There was also a faint glow visible through the dark eye lenses creating an eerie, ghostly appearance. I slid out of the gunner’s seat and knelt on the cold deck, lifting it up to see what it had to offer. As I rolled it over and peered inside, the information display screen was populating. Ralltiir was the name of this place. I glanced into the back of the hold. Topolev was still asleep.

I moved back to the gunner’s chair, holding my helmet and looking once again through the port. We followed a path that carried us through bright bands of warming light reaching out from the central star in this system; silently streaming through the heavens to finally filter through the translucent veil of dust which surrounded us.

Our approach eventually moved us beyond the reaches of the orange starlight and into the eclipsing shadow thrown by the planet itself, high above the portion of the surface that was covered in the liquid darkness of night. Then, like a stalking predator in the shadows, the lights of a silent, circling, darkened Star Destroyer suddenly appeared out of the camouflaging darkness of the endless starfield as we cruised past heading for the base on Ralltiir.

Faint lights on the planet below flickered, twinkled and grew brighter as we entered the atmosphere. Immediately, the smooth ride of the shuttle was interrupted by the jarring turbulence of the air, now buffeting against the wide flat wings and the hull of our craft. From the direction of the cockpit I heard a crackling request for security code clearance.

There was a lot of interference, as if someone else was transmitting on top of our military frequencies. There were moments of coarse static bursts, and then garbled words and electronic tones streaming over the ground crew transmission. The pilot complied, sending out the ship’s electronic signature. As he did so, an information screen appeared on the other end of the comm line in front of the ground crew member at the base displaying our ship type and specifications.

Moments later as the static disappeared from the comm channel, we were cleared for landing at the base. The pilot switched on the forward-projecting approach lights and adjusted his thermal sensor settings as our ship descended blindly into a thick fog. I could see nothing, just swirling clouds. Then faintly, I saw a few lights and finally, the barest of outlines of several buildings and towers. They were only visible as slightly darker shades of grey against the white mists of the

dense fog. The extended gear touched down in a small designated landing zone near the southern perimeter of the expansive spacefield.

Topolev was awake now too, and we both unclipped our harnesses as the pilot powered down the reactor and the engines fell silent. “We must be staying here for a while”, I said, standing.

Topolev responded, looking around the hold as the wall-mounted, battery-powered lights kicked in, “It certainly looks that way”, as he leaned over and grabbed his bucket. I picked mine up too, and walked the corridor toward the rear ramp and the spacefield outside.

Topolev stepped into the aisle in front of me as the pilot came down from the cockpit, “Hey Deckard, how’s the ride so far?”

I laughed, “Not too bad, Riggs, if you like the smooth, core-system refinement of a snobby commercial-liner pilot.” I ducked as he threw his gloves at me, laughing. I had known Riggs since I had been assigned on Anoa. He was flying the shuttle that had delivered me and the others to that swampy, mudhole of a planet. It was fitting that he was the one flying me out of it.

He jokingly shoved me into Topolev as he spoke, “Oh, I’m so sorry.” He backpedaled and pulled away as I took a mock swing at his head.

Topolev laughed and moved out the hatch, stepping onto the ramp. There was a deafening blast and a violent rocking of the shuttle as an expanding fireball washed over us and we were thrown backwards to the deck. The lowered portion of the ramp we were on had exploded, shredding and twisting the plank into a mangled ruin. We were under attack! Suddenly we weren’t laughing, we were scrambling for our clipped-in rifles, and pulling our buckets on. My ears were ringing from the blast and my heart was racing, “Topolev, you OK?”, I yelled.

“Yeah, I’m fine. I’m going to need a new chestpiece, though”, as he indicated a hand-sized piece of shrapnel from the ramp partially embedded in the Impervium.

Riggs reached up, pulled a DLT-19 from one of the crates and powered it on. Smoke poured into the ship and sirens blared as another, stronger explosion rocked it, throwing us across the hold into the wall and scattering us on the deck. One of the main rear landing gear assemblies had been hit, and the heavy shuttle groaned and listed to one side as the damaged gear folded and collapsed beneath us in a tangle of bent, stressed metal.

The wing-mounted dual repeater cannon on the damaged side spewed a shower of sparks and suddenly opened fire, spitting non-stop, repeating blasts of energy beams horizontally across the landing area, sawing through the tops of the grey tree outlines on the fringe of the clearing beyond.

The adrenaline was coursing through each of us as we tried to get an assessment of what was going on. None of us could see through the smoke or the fog for that matter. I yelled to be heard over the explosions and blaster fire occurring outside, “If we stay in here much longer, somebody’s gonna be pulling spare armor parts off our dead bodies by morning.”

Topolev switched on his thermal imaging and scanned the spacefield outside. "You're right about that! There are no nearby targets, though, must be snipers. The firing is coming from beyond the edge of the field. There's a troop transport speeder we can take cover behind just outside and to the right, if we can just get to it. Switch on your thermal imaging."

A blaster shot from across the field vaporized a hole through the twisted surface of the ramp just in front of Riggs' un-armored leg, and he yelled, "Well, we can't stay here any longer, let's go!" The three of us charged down the remnants of the ramp and leaped to the duracrete deck, blasters firing. We stayed clear of the repeating cannon blasts, still firing into the darkness of the trees. Several blasts crisscrossed in front of us from the cover of the thick, mist-laden foliage.

Troops now streamed out of the base buildings on the far edge of the field, running across the paved surface firing red, blue and green blasts of superfocused energy through the fog. I heard the moisture in the air vaporize as I squeezed off several shots. We all threw ourselves back-first against the armored transport, as several waves of troopers joined us, firing on an unseen enemy out there in the mist. "Who's shooting at us?" yelled Topolev.

One of the base troopers took cover with us behind the transport, blaster rifle raised up beside his head and breathing heavy from his sprint across the field. "They're rebels. They've been under surveillance since we arrived here. We suspected that sympathizers were gathering here with friends on the High Council. Now we know." and he fired off several shots around the rear of the transport. "I'm 4120, welcome to Ralltiir." He stood and ran off the edge of the landing pad into the grass, joining a group of other troopers, his repeating rifle blasting away at anything that moved.

Topolev and I looked over at Riggs. He was armed, but not armored. "Riggs, you need to stay here, you have no armor, no protection", I said.

He nodded and waved us on. I went around the rear, Topolev around the front of the transport, firing as we ran to catch up with the base troops, with Riggs providing covering fire. We jumped over the corpses of several troopers that had been cut down in the charge as another explosion rocked the shuttle behind us. I glanced back as I ran. She was now lying completely over on her side.

When we reached the edge of the trees that lined the clearing, many of the troops were pursuing the fleeing rebels into the dense, foggy forest. 4120 was following a group of about six rebels that had broken off from the main group and had disappeared down an embankment. We broke left, following him through the tall, damp grass down the slope to a dry creek bed. The scurry of footprints in the dirt led away to the left, and we ran to catch up.

We came around a bend in the miniature ravine just as 4120 blasted a gaping hole through the torso of one of the rebels, throwing her to the ground in a lifeless heap. There were several others lying on the ground with similar wounds. The two remaining fugitives fled wildly into the woods trying in vain to escape their deaths, yelling at each other, "Where was he? He was supposed to be on that shuttle!" We blasted into the darkness at them. Topolev took one out, and when his

comrade turned to look back at his friend, I took him out too. Then there was a moment of silence, and the thick smell of ozone.

Faint blaster fire could be heard echoing through the woods and then silence. 4120 set down his rifle and then pulled off his bucket, as he turned to examine his injured left hand, which was dangling from the end of his armored forearm gauntlet. I pulled off my bucket, "Are you OK?"

He cursed in Iridonian and then answered, "Yeah, I'm fine. A shot just grazed me", as he grabbed the spinning hand and pulled it off with a quick jerk.

"GRAZED you?" said Topolev. 4120 held it up for us to see closer. Thin metal guides and wires protruded from the charred black "skin" surrounding the wound.

"It's OK, it's cybernetic." He saw the question on our faces, and stopped us, "It's a long story. Suffice it to say I got a, uh, nasty infection and had to cut off my own hand before it spread."

We slowly nodded and spoke at the same time, "Yeah, OK, Sure."

He slapped Topolev on the shoulder, "Come on, let's head back."

Smoke rose from the corpses lying in the sandy creek bed as we turned to make our way back to the base. It was beginning to grow lighter as we stepped out of the thick grass onto the landing pad. A group of 'droids were extinguishing the fires on the shuttle. Other maintenance 'droids working on the ship must have disconnected power to the rogue cannon, as it was now silenced. As we drew nearer, we saw Riggs sitting on what remained of a wing, being attended by a medical 'droid.

"You OK? What Happened?" asked Topolev.

The injured pilot looked up, "I'm OK, but won't be flying anytime real soon. The cannon must have overheated. The 'droids are telling me the firing mechanism jammed, causing an explosion. I felt something slap me across the back and knock me off me feet. I tried to reach up to the transport to help myself up, but I couldn't raise my arm. When I looked over at it, part of the red-hot gun nozzle was sticking through my shoulder. That's it there." He said, pointing with his good arm. The medical 'droid raised one of its' arms, showing us the discolored metal pipe held tight in the pincers. "Luckily, the thing was so hot, it cauterized the wound immediately, otherwise, I'd be dead."

I knelt down beside him, "Take it easy, Riggs. They'll fix you up and you'll be flying again before you know it." He nodded as I stood, and the medical 'droid continued its' work. Topolev and I stepped past them and climbed over the twisted metal into the hold. The ship now lay on its side, everything blackened from the smoke. We climbed over the bulkhead, which was now the deck. Our gear had been thrown toward the sloping nose. I moved forward and grabbed a bag and a pack, checked them, threw them to Topolev and then grabbed mine.

"MU-40 there'll take good care of you. Good sedatives, huh?" 4120 was saying to Riggs as we

made our way out of the wreckage. "After he looks at you, I'm gonna need a tune-up myself" he said, holding up his severed hand.

The med 'droid's head servos swiveled his optical sensors around to inspect the damage, then it spoke, "Again, 4120?"

The dirtied base trooper laughed, "Come on guys, I'll find you a place to stash your gear until we get a new transport. I'm outta here with you when you leave. My transfer came through 2 days ago, and I think you guys are my ride."

The MU, medical unit, and another 'droid were loading Riggs onto a repulsor sled as we headed toward the base. It was almost light now, and through the light mist, running along the far side of the base, I saw a river. The waters were quiet and calm, flowing along as if nothing had happened; completely unaffected. Great, I thought to myself, more water. "I can't wait to get outta here."

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Tiny wisps of white smoke curled up from 4120's wrist as the med 'droid carefully removed the cauterized remains of the charred, synthetic 'flesh' with a low powered energy beam. 4120 watched closely as the 'droid cleaned the wrist stump with a jet of water, until all traces of the cybernetic hand were gone, save the guide rods, ball joint and multiple flexor-cords sticking out from the durasteel cap that covered the end of what was left of his arm.

The 'droid swiveled to face him, "4120, soak that in this container of bacta while I prepare the new prosthetic."

The trooper complied as the 'droid swiveled again to a case on another bench. It released the small clasps on the front of the small, metallic crate and lifted the hinged lid. Inside were six compartments for identical synthetic hands. One of the compartments was empty, most likely for the one that had just been destroyed. The 'droid gently retrieved one of the remaining five hands and closed the lid of the case, securing the clasps.

It swiveled around to 4120 and brought the hand up before his face, "You only have five left, including this one".

The trooper chuckled, trying to keep a straight face and not knock over the bacta.

"I'm not joking, 4120. I won't be there to fix you from now on. Your record shows that you are transferring out to another group. You will need to watch me carefully as I reconnect these fittings and wrap the synthetic flesh, so you can do it in the future the next time you do this to yourself. And yes, I know there WILL be a next time!" The trooper laughed again, as the droid put down the hand and raised the soaking stump out of the bacta.

A jetted appendage extended from the shaft of the 'droid's arm and air was blown over the stump

to dry it thoroughly. Once finished, it lifted the hand and positioned the socket over the ball joint on the stump. A release pin was pulled out slightly, and the socket slipped down over the ball. When it was confirmed to be in place, the pin was released, snapping back into place as a retainer, keeping the socket from slipping out of its' new, seated position. The droid then set to work attaching the flexor-cords to the tiny connectors on the structure of the hand. 4120 was watching closely. He knew all too well that he would be doing this to himself someday.

I turned away from the transparisteel panel and walked out of the doorway, down a small corridor and lay back on my assigned bunk. Topolev was asleep in the one beside it. I closed my eyes as I waited for 4120 to be finished. Riggs was undergoing surgery, and would most likely be fine, but he wouldn't be taking us on the rest of our flight, that's for sure. We would need another ship as well.

My head was pounding. I couldn't stop thinking about the rebels who had attacked us, wondering what their objective had been. They had expected someone else? Had we gotten in the way of something? Our shuttle arrival, with two troopers of no consequence would hardly warrant an attack the likes of what we had just seen.

4120 walked in as I sat pondering the events of our arrival. He was rubbing his wrist, and flexing the new hand. "I just heard that our task force leader, Lord Tion, has arranged for another shuttle. He's pulling a pilot familiar with some of the destination ports from field duty now to take us the rest of the way on our flight. Lord Vader will be arriving soon to inspect the Interrogation Camps"

That was it! The rebels must have been expecting Vader instead of us to have been arriving on the shuttle. We had walked into the middle of an assassination attempt. Sever the head of the Rancor and the body dies. But surely they couldn't have thought the Emperor would have been traveling with Vader. I realized 4120 had continued talking as I had drifted deeper into my thoughts, drowning him out. I had missed most of what he had said, but he was still talking.

". . . and Tion has just received new intelligence that shows a dignitary will be arriving later today for a meeting with the High Council. They were eliminated when we stormed the council chambers. I'm sure Tion will want the visitor brought here and detained for search and interrogation."

The MU-40 'droid moved past 4120 and placed the case of cybernetic appendages on his bunk along with another case of medical supplies and tools. "Take Care, 4120, take care", and it turned and left.

4120 shifted his eyes from the new hand to me, "I'm hungry. Let's go get something to eat." I nodded; it had been a while since I had eaten real food. I roused Topolev from his sleep and we followed 4120 out of the barracks and down a corridor to the mess.

We each grabbed a tray and began selecting food as we spoke. "So how long have you been here?" I asked.

4120 spoke without looking back, "About 45 of the local standard days. We were brought in when it was discovered that members of the High council were rebel sympathizers and allowing rebels to assemble here, gathering their forces. Ralltiir is a technology-driven society." He put a hot plate of steak on his tray and licked the thick sauce he had spilled on his finger. "We were given specific instructions to strip their technology from them and leave their world in ruins, begging for the mercy of the Empire. Tion was all too eager to comply, to the very letter of our orders."

We sat at a table facing a large pane of transparisteel overlooking the landing deck. I had followed 4120's lead and taken a plate of the meat. It was very good and tasted like a dish I had once tried on Cicarpous IV, near Mimban. Topolev had a large plate of exotic-looking, multi-colored vegetation, well-steamed. I could see troops patrolling the perimeter of the deck, watching the woods, blasters at the ready.

Our shuttle wreckage had already been cleared from the field. Topolev spoke with a mouth full, "How's the hand?"

4120 nodded as he chewed and swallowed a mouthful of steak, "Perfect, see?" he said as he flexed the fingers in and out twice. On the deck outside, a shuttle similar to our own landed as we continued eating. Several of the ground crew attended to various points along the undercarriage as the front ramp lowered to the ground and a passenger walked down and exited; a passenger in a black helmet, black armor and robes. Lord Vader had arrived on Ralltiir. I continued eating and watched as he was escorted into an armored speeder, being taken to review the interrogation camps.

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Above the surface of Ralltiir, a consular ship was making her approach when TIE fighter escorts appeared from the far side of the planet and intercepted her. They surrounded the ship as communication was finally achieved with the lead TIE pilot.

"TIE Squadron leader, this is Captain Raymus Antilles of the *Tantive IV*, acting on behalf of the royal house of Alderaan. We are en route to Grallia Spaceport on a diplomatic mission for a meeting with members of the High Council and are not to be detained."

The TIE pilot responded, "Captain, you will not be proceeding to Grallia Spaceport, as it now exists only as ruins, as does the High Council. You will follow us to a newly established Imperial base for search and interrogation. This system is now restricted, immunity or not, by Order of Lord Vader and Lord Tion."

The TIE fighters crossed the nose of the diplomatic ship as she adjusted her course headings to follow their lead toward the new Imperial beacon being sent out from the impromptu military spaceport below. Antilles worried about the cargo they were secretly transporting for the High Council. They were loaded down with field surgical units, medipaks, medical 'droids and more. If the ship were to be searched . . .

*

4120 secured his personal items and medical equipment in the large, standard issue gearbag like mine. Topolev was making a few adjustments to his new chestplate when a scout entered the room, "Your new shuttle's ready, guys; outside, ready to go." Topolev grabbed his bag and bucket as did I, and 4120 made one last sweep of his bunk area before he slung the bag over his shoulder and the three of us made our way down the corridor, past the communications room and out to the flight deck.

It was almost dark. The local days were a lot shorter than what I was used to. We boarded the shuttle and secured ourselves and our gear as a duty-scarred Corellian corvette prepared to set down on the far side of the deck. Her TIE escorts had left her now, as she lowered herself to a landing.

None of us even noticed her arrival as the rear hatches on our shuttle closed and pressurized. The new pilot lifted off and we climbed once more toward the massive expanse of the stars above.

* * *

Our new pilot, Lt. Tank, hadn't been very forthcoming with any details of our extended flight plan. About the only thing he had said was that our course was being dictated by Imperial Command on Coruscant as we flew, so there was no hope of using the hyperdrive engines. We had to remain in contact with them. He was very young, a recent recruit that, for whatever reason, hadn't made the cut as a fighter pilot.

The kid had skills, or he wouldn't be flying a shuttle, he'd be cooking in the mess. He had plenty of time to grow into a fighter pilot. Flying this shuttle was earning him good flight time experience, even if that training meant we spent a lot more time in flight than necessary. We had been en route at sub-light speeds for what seemed an eternity now.

Tank came over the comm with an announcement, "We've just been directed to make a course change and head to Denon Station. It's only a small deviation. There's a freighter on its way there from Coruscant with five troopers that need to connect with this flight."

4120 rolled his eyes and Topolev shifted uncomfortably in his seat as I rubbed my temples, "This flight just kept getting better and better."

* * *

Denon Station turned out to be quite a beautiful place. It was situated in a sparse belt of asteroids orbiting near the planet Denon, not far from Corellia, not far from where the Corellian Way and the Hydian Way intersect. The series of stations had been constructed around a central core of asteroid.

Having docked some time ago, we grew impatient as we waited on the freighter from Coruscant.

4120 and I sat with buckets off at a small table overlooking our shuttle and the landing bays below as Topolev waited at a window for our food. 4120 put down his drink and stared out at the adjacent station and the darkness of the stars beyond. I put my drink down and asked him, "So, are you going to tell me about cutting off your hand? What really happened?"

He shifted a bit in his seat, and then spoke as he rubbed his left wrist, "It's been quite a few years now. It started with a trip to visit my Twi'Lek girlfriend's uncle. He had been called in to help decipher ancient Iridonian artifacts unearthed on a dig expedition near the great pyramids there. I had been called in to recover a specific piece for the Hutts."

Topolev walked over with our food. I turned to him, "He's explaining how he lost his hand. Please go on." We started to eat as we listened.

"We made it to Iridonia without incident, and located her uncle. I was amazed at the items they had recovered, ancient battle armor, early vibroblades, several jeweled bowls and an odd-looking book of flimsies which pre-dated even holocrons. Her uncle had identified it as an early Sith writing, a book bound in Rancor hide and written in blood. It detailed burial rites, funerary chants and other Sith rituals used for laying slain masters to rest. As we all know, with the Sith, there are only two.

The ancient Sith order were many in number and were narrowed by greed and their quest for power to only two, a master and an apprentice. This book chronicled the lives and deaths of the ancient Sith masters and contained many of their secrets. We were in the main tent of the dig one evening. My girlfriend and I were looking at the artifacts as her uncle read through several passages he was translating. As he carefully opened the yellowed pages, he uncovered a small compartment buried in the center of the book, but as he opened it, he was consumed in a white light.

Without thinking, my Twi'Lek rushed to grab the book away and help him. She was caught up in the blaze. I reached out to stop her and it started into me as well. I let go of her and watched helplessly as they were both incinerated and turned to dust. It was only then that I realized it was eating into my hand. I grabbed one of the ancient vibrocutters on the next table and severed my hand at the wrist to keep the reaction from spreading up my arm and avoid dying. With the vibrocutter I closed the book and the reaction seemed to be stopped."

I noticed a small cargo ship landing below on the platform not far from our shuttle as he spoke, but I kept my attention on him.

"I cinched my wrist and gathered the book into a small container, sealed it and fled. I wasn't sure what to do. I knew I had to get rid of it, but it was a power far too dangerous for gangsters like the Hutts to wield. I located an elder in a neighboring settlement. His med droids fixed my hand and he helped me undergo an ancient rite, one that involved reading of ancient texts, burning incense and ritualistic body tattooing. At the end of the week-long process, I was rendered a spiritual messenger, free to transport the book without fear of its horrible power. I had paid my

respects to the source from which it had come.

The Hutt, however, was furious. He thought I had fled the planet, keeping the book for myself, and put a contract out on my life. I joined the Empire and became a nameless, faceless Stormtrooper, evading capture. I journeyed to Coruscant and was granted a meeting with Emperor Palpatine. It was there that I turned the book over to him. As a reward, I was offered a place in the 501st Legion to serve Lord Vader; my loyalty having already been proven. What started as a way to hide turned into a love for what I do. I've been on the front line ever since, and have gone through a few incarnations of cybernetic hands. The one you saw is the most recent and most realistic one so far."

Topolev finished the last of his food as 4120 finished speaking, "Pretty amazing story. How much of it is B.S.?" and he laughed.

4120 laughed as he drank, "Laugh if you like, that's the truth."

I swallowed the last of my drink, "I think the others are here", and I pointed to the bay below as I gathered up my trash. Several troopers were emptying out of the cargo ship. We all grabbed our buckets and headed for the lift.

*

The new troops were unloading their gear as we came walking up. "So you guys are joining us, huh?" said Topolev.

1344 leaned toward him and grabbed his hand, shaking it as he responded, "That's right. Let me tell you, your shuttle looks great after the flight we just had, shoved in with cargo and livestock." Ddraig, Danz, Taka, 1265 and Falker all shook hands with us as we helped them haul their gear into the hold area. Tank brought the engines online and prepared for lift-off as we all strapped in. He lifted us off the deck and set a course away from Denon Station that would take us through Hutt space.

* * *

We had all been talking a bit, exchanging some stories of past missions and assignments to break the ice and the monotony of this flight. I closed my eyes, as more thoughts from the past churned through my mind; vivid, overlapping images from Dantooine, Mimban and Anoat. I was wondering if my old detachment members had found Moff Rebus yet. Rebus was an eccentric weapons specialist that had been working for the Empire since the Clone Wars.

After designing the Superlaser for the secretive Death Star project he had disappeared. Many thought he had suffered the same fate as the battle stations chief design team, but recently, Intelligence intercepted information indicating he had constructed a hidden stronghold located deep beneath the sewage systems of Anoat City.

While our primary mission had been to infiltrate and take control of the planet and its capital

city, we were also part of a much smaller group searching for the elusive Rebus. Memories and images washed through my mind of the dark, foul-smelling caverns and sewers. Searching for a way into Anoaat City, a way to surprise the inhabitants and quickly overtake them. And thoughts of even darker missions . . . grisly rescue missions, exploring amidst the dead for survivors inside starships that had crashed into the vast oceans, casualties of the numerous battles above the planet.

The worst were the missions searching for Rebus, beneath the sewers, deep in the caves in complete darkness working with infrared bucket visor panels and the swarming lizard-ants from that one mission, all over us; inside our armor. I awoke with a start, realizing I had momentarily drifted off.

The ship rocked as something struck the hull with a hollow, wrenching sound. We all unclipped and moved forward for a look. The pilot lifted the nose to avoid more of the small floating debris. As he lowered it back on course, we were all amazed at what lay ahead. Volumes were spoken in our silence.

Ahead was the final resting place of three dead, imploded stars. We were on the edge of a place each of us had heard of since childhood as a place to avoid.

We were approaching . . . the Maw.

For centuries, folk stories had been told throughout the galaxy, in millions of languages, about the lost ships and their crews that were pulled into the powerful, spiraling vortex whose gravitational pull sucked in even light if it dared venture too close. The chain reaction death of three stars in close orbit around each other had created this treacherous navigational nightmare.

The navigation panes in all of our buckets simultaneously blipped on as we passed within transmission range for the settlement ahead. Not one of us bothered to look at it, we knew where we were. There was a medium-sized moon, just outside the pull of the gravity well and quite devoid of life, save an Imperial base and its' inhabitants.

It had been left in that desolate state after the cataclysmic supernova explosions, subsequent implosions and the howling solar winds from a thousand generations ago ravaging across its surface as they were sucked down into the bottomless black pit of the Maw. We, however, were not heading for the dead moon, but rather the smaller, frozen asteroid that now lay between us and it.

We were headed for Kessel.

An equal number of folk stories existed about this place, but for reasons far, far darker. The Kessel moon was the site of an Imperial base that once housed an entire Garrison to oversee the nearby asteroid mining facility and one of the most feared and brutal Imperial prisons in the known galaxy. For all condemned, a trip to the containment facility at the spice mines of Kessel was a one way affair.

In most posts, you saw the good, the bad, and the horrific. The inmate population on Kessel was

the collected masses of the truly horrific from every corner of the galaxy. Most every known violent, anti-social and deviant behavior was well represented here. Guards were generally rotated around the prison after two standard years to keep the staff sharp and unforgiving.

The asteroid, on which the prison was built, was too small to possess even enough gravity to hold on to anything but a very thin atmosphere, too thin to sustain life. Imperial engineers had installed numerous atmospheric generator facilities which endlessly blasted out streams of breathable air across the surface of the lifeless rock. It slowly slipped away from the surface, venting out into the vastness of the stars like life-support gases streaming from a crippled starship with a breach in its hull.

As a result, the surface air was breathable, barely, but the miner-inmates and their Stormtrooper guards down in the mine shafts had to wear re-breather masks and oxygen cells at all times to keep from passing out. Inmates and guards alike were issued only one mask and one cell per day, to ensure no hoarding of oxygenation equipment.

Distant starlight broke around the edge of the nearby Garrison moon as we began our approach, skimming the lifeless surface of the asteroid.

We had received the transmission from the identifier beacon, but as far as I could tell, there had been no communication with anyone at the facility. The cockpit had been quiet. The shuttle flew low over the alkali flats and climbed abruptly to avoid a low mountain range. It was then that we saw the only surface evidence of inhabitants; an empty landing deck, starkly jutting out from the steep walls of the mountains ahead.

We maneuvered around to line up with the deck below as the lower wings folded up and the landing gear lowered. Slowly, we descended through the magnetic Atmospheric Retention Shield to the landing pad beneath us on the dark side of Kessel. As the engines wound down, we prepared to disembark. We all had buckets in hand as the airlock seals at the rear hatch depressurized. Taka said he was going to stay behind and work on his rifle.

The access ramp lowered as Topolev turned to me joking, "You can go down the ramp first this time!" and he rapped on his new chest armor plate.

Our pilot left the cockpit and followed us down to the outside deck. The silence was absolutely deafening. We all looked around for other troopers, some sign of life, and there was none. I looked up the side of the mountain to the stars beyond, then down to our shuttle and past it to the expansive Alkali flats we had crossed on our approach. Further in the distance, like a waiting trap, lay the swirling Maw with the Garrison moon orbiting somewhere in between.

After glancing around, we crossed the deck heading for the shield doors that led inside the facility. No one seemed to know or care that we were there. Danz spoke up, "They probably don't get too many visitors. I guess few, if any people voluntarily come to Kessel."

"Yeah", said Ddraig as he looked around. We had almost made it to the doors when another small craft gently pushed through the magnetic membrane of the shield above us and set down

beside our ship. It was a small craft, a 'droid-piloted Payload Retrieval ship with spider-like arms encircling its hull. They were designed for recovering any cargo floating about after a ship was damaged or destroyed. As we watched it touch down, the shield doors behind us opened and several troopers walked through followed by a slower, portly Rybet who ordered them to unload the 'droid ship's cargo.

They moved a floating repulsor sled alongside the small craft and opened several well-concealed hatches, exposing the recovered items inside as the Rybet turned, looking us over. In a slimy, guttural voice he demanded, "Who are you?", his nostrils flaring. Lt. Tank pushed past us, taking the Rybet by the arm and turning him away from us, speaking quietly, "I have been directed here by Imperial Command on Coruscant to pick up two troopers for reassignment. Who are you?"

"I am Moruth Doole, prisoner trustee and the most powerful person in this system beside the Warden, Commander Kluskine." There was a crash as a small crate fell to the deck. Doole whipped his head around, "Be careful with that, you know it can't be exposed to the light or it's useless to me!" He slowly turned back to our pilot, "The only thing I like better than making a killing by selling Spice, is making another killing by selling it again a second time! Ha ha ha! One of the last starships out dumped her shipment when one of my ships in the blockade threatened to board her."

His voice trailed off, and he stared off into the darkness of the empty hallway as if he were speaking only to himself now, "I know a special customer who will not be so very happy with Captain Solo." The small band of duty-worn troopers pushed the full sled away from the small ship toward the open shield doors.

Our pilot handed Doole a small, thin data card, "Here are the reassignment orders."

"Come inside", said Doole, "everyone, come inside while I locate these men." The ground shook hard beneath our feet.

4120 looked around, "What the . . . "

Doole spoke up quickly, "Just tremors from the deep core blasting . . . nothing to worry about. We're directly above the prison and mining operations. They're several levels down, through a number of security checkpoints. This is the way we bring in new arrivals. You'll get to see firsthand what it's like so you can tell others how you survived a stop at the Kessel Spice Mines", and he waddled off through the doors.

"I'll alert Commander Kluskine and let him know you're here. Ever been to Kessel, boys?" We all shook our heads no as we followed him further along the corridor.

The stony walls which had been smooth near the shield doors were now uneven and jagged and blood-stained. As I walked, I noticed fingernails and claws stuck in the discolored rocks from the hands of those who had been dragged in, screaming and fighting.

"The evil and darkness that lives in the hearts of the inmates here have robbed this place of any warmth, any soul. It gets to you after a while", he chuckled, "I should know. I worked the darkness of the deepest mineshafts for over twenty years."

I suddenly felt that if these dark, stone corridors could speak, they would scream in horror as they told the tales of the countless numbers that had passed this way to their fate, and the few, if any that ever came out alive.

Doole went ahead of us, stepping out onto a metal catwalk that crossed over a pool of an undetermined green liquid. The two trooper guards at the doors on the other side stepped out, glancing our way to see who was coming with him.

We all advanced around the room and came to the doors on the far side. Doole stepped up to the security plate and pressed his right hand to it at the same moment he entered a code number with his free hand. The doors opened, and we all stepped through, leaving the guards behind as the doors closed.

No experience in any of our lives could have prepared us for what lay in the darkness beyond the second set of blast doors. The roar of thousands of voices flooded out as the doors parted. We stepped through onto another gridded, metal gantry suspended from the stony ceiling of the cavern by thick cables. It swayed slightly from our movement as we crossed the open prisoner's common area far below. We heard screams and yelling and as I looked down I could make out an undulating living sea of inmates whose actions had brought them to this hellhole that was Kessel.

We walked through another set of blast doors and followed a small, dim corridor that opened onto an enormous mezzanine, half encircling an expansive labor pit below. I stepped up to the transparisteel and looked out into the surface mining operations facility. 'Droid workers were busy removing rock in the never-ending quest to find yet more Spice.

Doole stepped forward, "And this is only the very top of the operation. The tunnels where the Glitterstim is mined are worked by the inmates in complete darkness, far, far below us. It has somewhat of a depressing effect on them, and tends to add a bit of claustrophobia and paranoia to their already abysmal working conditions, but it must be completely dark. The light activates the Spice, so it has to be carefully mined and wrapped in sheathing before it is brought to the surface for sale. Sit here a moment while I identify the troopers you're looking for. I won't be long."

He turned and disappeared down a narrow hallway. The pristine landing deck outside was definitely no indicator as to what the inside would look like. The area we were in now was damp and musty with the stale smell of an aging, heavily-worn government facility. The only signs of current technology were found in the security systems and atmospheric shielding. The 'droid loaders working in the pit were hopelessly outdated and showed signs of heavy wear and minimal repair or upgrade, just enough to keep them running.

Topolev walked to the transparisteel panel beside me and looked down in to the pit, "I've heard stories about this place my whole life. I never thought I would be here."

"Yeah", I said, tapping the transparent pane as the others walked up beside us, also looking down into the yard below, "just be glad you're on this side of the security doors."

Doole waddled back into the room, "C'mon, follow me. One of the troopers you're looking for is a drilling foreman on a platform several levels below us." We all turned and followed him a short way to a turbolift. He handed each of us an oxygen mask and gas cylinder. "The air is a little thin as you go down further. It might be uncomfortable for you, so use these to help." We all pulled on the masks and dialed on the cylinders as we entered the lift. Doole unlocked the lower level with a security code and the doors closed. The floor of the lift vibrated and shook as we passed silently beneath Kessel's stony exterior skin.

When it stopped, the doors parted, opening out into a noisy, dimly lit area with a metal gridded floor. We all stepped out, and Doole led the way down the tall, open hallway between huge machines toward the increasingly loud whirring sound that filled this level. He deactivated a yellow energy shield, allowing us all to pass as we moved further ahead toward the sound.

As the shield re-activated behind us, I noticed there was now a fine mist hanging in the air and as we came to the end of the hallway, water and bright light showered from above, splashing away from the enormous spinning drill shaft that ran from floor to ceiling. The water was being sprayed onto it to keep it cool as it burrowed deep into the dark heart of Kessel. Doole tapped the foreman on the shoulder, who turned around to face the group assembled behind him.

Seeing them, he reached over to a large control arm on the giant machine beside him and pulled it down, cutting power to the main drilling system. The raining water stopped falling and the spinning shaft slowly wound to a halt as did the loud whirring, and again the masked foreman turned to face us.

He drew back his synthetic, waterproof hood and pulled the re-breather mask from his face. "Doole, what can I do for you?" He eyed us all warily.

"You've been reassigned, you and 0600. You're outta here", said the Rybet.

The man looked irritated, "I'm not in the mood for your jokes, Doole. I don't need your sick psychological games."

Lt. Tank stepped forward and activated his holocron showing the orders, "TD-1009, these troopers and I are here to pick you and TD-0600 up. You've been reassigned. The orders come directly from Imperial Center on Coruscant."

1009 shot a glance over to Doole, through the holographic image. The Rybet laughed, "I bet you guys never thought you'd see anything but the belly of this stone beast for the rest of your life, huh?"

“This is for real?” asked 1009, water dripping from his cloak and hood.

Doole snorted, “Do you really think I would waste my time dragging troopers down here and faking a holo just to play a trick on you? I have spice to sell and better things to do”. Our pilot nodded in agreement as he snapped off the holocron. 1009 exhaled and closed his eyes a moment, as if an enormous weight had been removed from a tired beast of burden at the end of a long, arduous journey.

He unclasped the front of his wet gear and the hooded, waterproof cloak fell away to the ground revealing his heavily worn armor beneath. He stepped over to a small shelf beside the drilling control panel and grabbed his bucket. Turning back to Doole, he looked the Rybet squarely in the eyes, "Let's go. I've been here long enough."

*

Kessel had rotated, and now their side of the asteroid was facing the Kessel Star, the fourth and last remaining sibling of the three that had perished so long ago. Stone flew in every direction, thrown high into the light streaming down from the opening overhead and the ground shook as explosives were detonated on the floor of the pit, opening the entrance to a new mineshaft.

TD0600 maneuvered his large cutter into the opening even before the debris had stopped falling. He switched on the mechanism and was busy watching over it when Doole, 1009 and our group entered the freshly blasted wound on the surface of Kessel, several minutes later. We moved inside the dark hole and followed the burrowed path for a few meters. The roar from the cutter was overpowering.

Doole led the way as we advanced into the space directly behind the cutter. Our shadows fell across the rotating blades as we blocked the light filtering in from the surface. 0600 noticed the shadow and turned to see us coming. He caught sight of Doole and switched off the giant digging machine. It ground to a halt as he grabbed his T-21 and turned back to face us, unsure as to why the Rybet was confronting him down here in the tunnels with a trooper escort.

TD1009 stepped forward and pulled off his bucket, “I’s OK. We’ve been reassigned! We’re getting out of here.”

0600 pulled his bucket off, “What?”

“We’re getting out of here. They haven’t given me the destination, but the orders came from Imperial Center on Coruscant, I saw the holo myself.” 1009 slapped a hand down on 0600’s shoulder, smiling wide, “We’re leaving on a shuttle with these blokes as soon as we assemble our gear. Say your goodbyes to this awful place.”

0600 had much the same reaction as 1009 had, his face relaxed, and you could almost feel the weight lifting from his shoulders as he smelled the faintest hints of freedom. He and 1009 walked out of the mineshaft past one of the tall, groaning atmosphere generator towers and

headed for the lift.

*

Neither Rogue nor 0600 had any personal belongings to speak of. They had gathered what little gear they had collected over the years, tossed it in their bags and now were waiting on the landing platform with the rest of us for Doole to return with their approved transfer orders.

We had packed their gear and were talking when the Warden's admin 'droid came through the sliding blast doors and over to Lt. Tank, "Inmate Trustee Doole", the 'droid incorrectly addressed him as it continued to malfunction, sparking with white smoke streaming out of it's logic unit, "Commander Kluskine has 'officially' approved the transfer orders for 1009 and 0600, but also feels they know too much about his personal spice operations to be let go. You are to detain them until troops arrive or inform the blockade to destroy their ship as they depart Kessel."

Tank swiftly drew his sidearm and destroyed the malfunctioning 'droid in a shower of sparks and yelled, "LOAD UP. We're already on our way out of here!", as he raced into the shuttle.

The rest of us ran in after him, strapping in as Topolev quick-sealed the hatch. Rogue and 0600 threw themselves into two empty seats and were buckling their harnesses as Tank powered on the engines. "Rogue?" said Taka, clipping his rifle into the rack, "is that you?"

Tank sharply pulled back on the controls and the ship shot up off the deck and was passing through the magnetic shield as Doole and his troops poured through the blast doors onto the duracrete landing pad. "Taka?!" said Rogue as he clicked his last harness in place.

0600 leaned over and grabbed Taka's arm, "Been a long time. Here we go again, another hasty exit."

Doole's troopers raised their blasters and fired on us, but we had already pushed through the shield membrane. Their blasts bounced back at them. "CEASE FIRE!" yelled Doole, "The blockade will have to take care of them now."

Tank was calculating coordinates for a short hyperspace jump as the wings lowered and locked into position. "This has to work, or they'll follow us." An aging Imperial Cruiser moved in behind our shuttle, her guns training on us. She fired, and Tank rolled us hard to the left, as the blasts shot past us. The cruiser then fired missiles at us, but he accelerated to stay ahead of them until the hyperdrive 'nav computer sounded a tone, locking in the data for a secure jump.

He dumped several concussion bombs behind us without activating them to act as countermeasures. The missiles mistakenly destroyed them in a blinding flash just as Tank activated the hyperdrive jump and our shuttle slipped away into hyperspace as the fireball dissipated, covering our escape.

The Cruiser's gunner made his report, "Target destroyed. Advise Commander Kluskine that the

ship and her crew has been eliminated.”

*

The ship shuddered and we were shaken as Tank abruptly reverted from hyperspace after a short cruise at light speed. The streaking brilliance of the starlines slowed to stationary points of light. He checked his ‘nav computer. We had passed through the heart of Hutt Space and were now near Lannick.

He made a slight course change which would take us past Moonus Mandel and Leritor, skirting the Outer Rim and the wild space of the unknown regions beyond. We kept this heading for several days’ time, passing near Bothan space and approaching the Arkanis sector and the outer leg of the Corellian Run.

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