

Chapter 10 – A Wretched Hive

Blade and Ddraig had moved Windy, Deak and Camie out of the office and had them sitting on rocks, leaning against the stone retaining wall on the back side of the Power Station as they waited. Falker, Danz and Taka completed the search inside with Tyrell. Camie seemed to have shed her fear and become amused with the whole invasion. She sat apart from the others and was laughing when she spoke to Ddraig as he passed by in front of her, “You won’t find anything. Fixer doesn’t have anything that belongs to you, and if the ‘droid he bought has something of yours, take it and leave us alone.”

Ddraig grinned beneath his bucket as he leaned closer to Blade, “She’s a feisty one.” Falker appeared above them, peering down from the courtyard above the wall, “Bring ‘em in. Danz just finished scanning the ‘droid, there’s nothing here. Tyrell is done. We’re headed back to the city.”

Camie stood up with Deak and Windy, “See. I told you.”

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The Corellian YT-1300 coasted on her repulsor-field above the spaceport of Mos Eisley as the harbor master granted Captain Solo clearance to land. The ship rolled to the right, then leveled off as she silently disappeared down into the pit of docking bay 94. In the Captain’s chair, Solo began shutting down the systems as the Wookiee sitting beside him began updating the ‘nav computer files. He stood to leave the cockpit and a dangling pair of metallic chance cubes hanging from the overhead instruments struck him squarely on the forehead. “OW! Chewie, Take these things down, will ya?” This time it was the Wookiee that woofed a laugh at his friend. An annoyed Solo rubbed his head as he turned and walked out.

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We had been cruising toward Mos Eisley in silence for some time when Rogue unbuckled and stepped across the aisle sitting in the jumpseat between me and 0600. “I just received word from Captain Tyrell. Their group is wrapping things up in Anchorhead. They’ve completed their investigation of the machinist ‘droid sold to the Toshi Station. He says the manager, a repair mechanic, told him he just bought the ‘droid yesterday and paid in full with Imperial credits.” Rogue flipped on his holonet field pack and showed us an image of the Anchorhead site as he spoke. Felth and Topolev leaned in to see.

“The mechanic, his girlfriend and several local kids were hanging out in the station when our troops arrived. The ‘droid in question was fully scanned, but our missing data was not found. Tyrell and our troops tore the shop apart, scanning and looking for it, but they found nothing. All of the occupants of the shop were questioned thoroughly. The owner and his friends seemed surprised when the Lars' place was mentioned. They said the old guy was a bitter old tightwad, and hadn't bought anything from the Jawas in several seasons.

The mechanic, *Fixer*, said *Wormie* had to work constantly to keep the old, broken-down 'droids and 'vaporators on the Lars place running. He also said *Wormie* was overdue to pick up some

refurbished power converters he had stripped off several wrecked Landspeeders. After further questioning it came out that *Wormie* was Lars' nephew, Luke. I told him that checked out with what we found at the Lars place.”

He paused a moment, taking a breath. “We have to keep that missing data from making it off-world, and I think the missing nephew, *Luke*, is the key”.

We all nodded in agreement. Rogue stood and keyed on his commlink as he walked back to his seat, calling our snitch to alert him.

“So Luke is the nephew, not a farmhand after all” said Etz.

O600 went back to cleaning his rifle, as I leaned my head back on the vibrating bulkhead and thought, if I were a young farmboy and wanted to make it off-world with two 'droids, I would be looking for a ship and a pilot. I would have to be looking in Mos Eisley. According to Rogue, as sparsely populated as Tatooine is, there's no other major spaceport to be found. We were going to need strategic roadblocks and patrols monitoring the spaceport docking pits closely, and we'd need it quickly. That was the only way we would have a chance at locating the missing boy before he slipped away with one, possibly two 'droids and information so sensitive that it unnerved even Lord Vader.

What the hell kind of information was that 'droid carrying?

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We marched through the streets of Mos Eisley in the mid-day sun as I went over and over the events of the busy morning we had had. The flight back from the moisture farm had been a quiet one. Nobody had spoken of what had happened. The 104th Moisture Farm Patrol, or *MFP*, had been assembled from troops posted all over the known galaxy and sent here to enforce Imperial law without the backing of the Empire or the Legion, and keep the peace among the low-life 'citizens' so the moisture farmers could bring in their harvests without fear. It was their job to keep the planet supplied with the water it needed to continue on. To continue on so the Empire would still have a connection to the low-life 'citizens' when they needed certain services. It was a sick cycle. Keep the scum in check, cultivate it and allow it to grow until you needed it, until it served your purpose.

A ragged old man sitting in the sand with his back resting against a wall looked up at us as we passed. He wore tattered wraps and his face was covered in flight goggles and a layer of loose fabric to keep the sand out. He reached out a hand, begging for money. His left forearm was covered in tattoos of women and starships that disappeared up under the loose sleeves of his garment.

We ignored his plea for help and kept moving.

This morning at the Lars' place had been an exercise in how things shouldn't go, and yet, not one of us could have predicted that lunge for the detonator, that fear that drove the old woman to rise

up against us, to die so horribly while protecting another. We had arrived on this planet in the midst of something far larger than some stolen intelligence recordings. I could feel it, deep down in my core. There were forces at play here that went far beyond the scope of a few missing 'droids and some stolen data.

I tried to put it out of my mind as our formation came to a stop. We were at the crossing of the main road into town, and the one leading to the spaceport. Captain Tyrell turned to Rogue, "My troops are going to set up several scattered roadblocks. A few of them will set up stations on the side streets heading to the spaceport. I'll man the checkpoint here and question everyone entering the city. You take your men and start a door-to-door search for our missing farmboy and his 'droid. Hopefully we can keep them from slipping by."

Rogue responded, "I agree with the roadblocks, but I was going to have our troops stationed out in the corridors leading to the spaceport. We have developed a working relationship with a local that may be a very good source of information for us. He suggested that we position ourselves there to be most effective. I don't think a door to door search would prove to be . . ."

Tyrell ripped off his helmet and spun back to Rogue, stepping in close to our CO, "Let me make one thing painfully clear to you. I'm not impressed with your group of outcasts and the dirty gear you don't bother to clean. Yes, I know where most of you have been called in from, and I have never understood the Sandtrooper mentality. You can bet after my troops return to the Devastator, they'll be cleaning their gear before returning to their normal assignments. I am in command of this search and recovery mission, and report directly to Lord Vader. We don't need to drag the local scum into this. At least I speak for my troops when I say we don't need any local help. I'm keeping the troops I have from your unit to help man my roadblocks. Felth, you fall in with my group too. Get on with your assignment, 1009."

Rogue slowly nodded once, his dislike for Tyrell growing; wishing this encounter had occurred in one of the dark mineshafts on Kessel where no one would have heard the screams he was imagining and the good Captain would have disappeared without a trace, "Yes sir".

Tyrell and several of his men walked to the opposite corner of the street and stopped a merchant with an aging Treadwell 'droid. Rogue nodded to Danz, Blade, Ddraig, Taka, Falker and Felth as they followed Tyrell. The rest of us continued on to the next side street and began inspections of the shops and residences we found. We searched one quickly and moved along to the next.

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We had just finished our sweep of a fairly tall building and were on the roof, taking a moment to catch our breath and sip some distilled water from our packs. It was scorching hot and we had been searching without a break for some time.

Rogue, disgusted, pulled off his bucket as he took out his commlink and called out to Garindan. There was a crackle of silence for a moment or two, and then the voice of our snitch, "I am your eyes and ears, sir, what can I do for you?"

The CO thought for a second and then spoke into the tiny commlink microphone, "The Captain has ordered us to perform a door-to-door search. We won't be able to patrol the spaceport as we discussed. I want you to position yourself in that general area and inform me if you see any new faces, or anyone that appears out of place. The boy we're searching for will be accompanied by a 'droid or two. Definitely a bi-pedal protocol model and possibly an astromech model and will be looking for passage off-world."

"As you wish, sir" came the reply. Rogue clipped the commlink back on his belt and pulled his bucket back on as we left the roof to continue our search sweeps.

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A gigantic Ronto strode through the sandy streets under the beating sun as a battered old landspeeder came around a turn and into view. Tyrell held a hand up, motioning for the young male driver to come to a stop. Davin Felth moved to the rear of the speeder and the captain stepped up to the driver as he eyed the two stowed 'droids riding in the back . . . a protocol 'droid and a blue astromech.

"How long have you had these 'droids?"

The boy responded, "Bout three or four seasons."

The old man sitting beside him turned to face Tyrell and chimed in now, "They're up for sale, if you want them."

Tyrell, completely wrapped up in his self-importance, continued, pressing the occupants for more information, "Let me see your identification".

The old man leaned in closer, across the cockpit, now staring intently at the captain and making a small circle with his fingers as he spoke, "You don't need to see his identification".

Tyrell seemed dazed as a moment passed, and then he slowly and very deliberately repeated the old man's words, "We don't need to see his identification".

The Cloaked and hooded old man spoke again, "These aren't the 'droids you're looking for".

As if drugged, Tyrell looked up and spoke now to the members of the 104th working with him, "These aren't the 'droids we're looking for."

Playing a mental game, and manipulating the feeble-minded captain, the old man spoke again, "He can go about his business . . ."

We couldn't believe what we were hearing. The old man was not only avoiding Tyrell's questions, he was telling him what to say! Felth stared at his captain now with complete disbelief as again Tyrell echoed the old man, "You can go about your business."

The old man spoke once more, now finished with the minor annoyance of Captain Tyrell, and looking away, down the street, expecting to be forgotten within several moments, ". . . move along."

Again, the stunned Captain Tyrell chimed in, wrapping up the encounter and sending the speeder on its way, "Move along . . . MOVE ALONG."

The boy complied, and the well-worn speeder pulled away, heading deeper into the city. The troopers of the MFP stared at each other in disbelief. TD-8733, Danz, was the first to break the long silence and speak, "What are you doing?!? Why would you let them go? They're the strongest match to the profile so far, and you just let them ride away without so much as a second glance, much less a questioning."

Tyrell became terribly indignant as he rubbed his aching head, "What are you talking about? I didn't do any such thing." The MFP troopers standing around the speeder glanced at each other in disbelief as Tyrell moved to stop the next vehicle. The old man, the boy and the two 'droids had now disappeared into the city.

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Chalmun's Spaceport Cantina, or the Mos Eisley Cantina as it was better known, was situated near the heart of the marketplace and a short walk from the spaceport. When the current proprietor, Chalmun the Wookiee, took ownership, there were Imperial Troopers from the old squad crawling all over the place. It seems that the previous owners, the Vriichon brothers, had been running an illegal spice den on the site and for some time had been burying the bodies of those who got in their way in the basement. The frenzy surrounding the scandal eventually died down, and Chalmun had completely renovated the place in an effort to help people forget.

Since then, Chalmun's Cantina has always been considered to be *the place* in Mos Eisley to hire or be hired, for pretty much anything one might be interested in. It was a shadowy, cool Oasis from the relentless heat of the desert and a haven for locals and pilot regulars with downtime to burn while in port.

The worn, brown landspeeder that Tyrell had mysteriously allowed to pass into the city skimmed down the street and floated to a stop adjacent to the front entrance of the cantina.

The old man and the boy climbed out and headed inside as the protocol biped lowered the squat body of the astromech unit to the ground and followed the humans toward the door.

Inside, the Bith band was pumping out their rhythmic sound over the low roar of dozens of conversations, filling the smoky bar with an upbeat ambience.

The old man knew the cantina well, having frequented numerous times over the years. He slipped into the crowd, heading for the bar as the farmboy was directed by Wuher, the bartender, to leave his 'droids outside.

The youth turned and addressed the issue with the gold protocol 'droid, sending both mechanicals back out to the speeder. Turning, the boy stepped down into the main room and approached the bar. Wuher felt a tugging at his shirt, and turned around to face the young man. Without changing his vacant, gruff gaze, he filled and served the drink order without a word. Then he moved away, leaving the boy standing with his drink beside the Aqualish regular, Ponda Baba, and his companion, Dr. Evazon, a human with a horribly disfigured face.

Garindan, our informant from the planet Kubaz, sipped cool water and sat at a table watching the room as the new arrivals settled into the smoky den. He knew that anyone looking to get off-world quickly would most likely come here to hire the ride. His sensitive eyes rolled left and right beneath his protective dark goggles. He watched as the boy that had entered with the 'droids took a sip of his drink. The old man that came in with him was talking to a pilot at the bar with his back to the youth.

Evazon tapped the boy on the shoulder, and started a conversation. The boy didn't seem interested in talking, but Evazon persisted. Garindan swept his eyes over the bar, settling on Mamaw Nadon, the Ithorian hammerhead in one of the rear booths with the locals Muftak and Kabe. His eyes darted back to the boy as the old man turned and took control of the conversation with Evazon. The good doctor howled, shoving the boy out of the way as he drew his blaster and stepped toward the old man. As the youngster fell backward, he crashed into a table, knocking it over in a spray of spilled drinks and gaming chips.

The band stopped playing, and all eyes were on the scene at the bar. Wuher yelled, "No Blasters! No Blasters!" and dove behind the bar away from the two. Evazon squeezed off a shot which was deflected when suddenly the dim light of the room was shattered as a meter-long shaft of blue energy sprang from a grip in the old man's hand. Then the shimmering, humming blade flicked down and up in a series of precise, controlled strokes, severing Evazon's hand and the arm of Ponda Baba as he rushed to help his friend. They both slumped, howling to the floor, leaving the old man standing alone at the bar. He held the blade defensively before his face as his eyes swept over the room, giving a brief, momentary glimpse of the warrior he once was.

He extinguished the blade, returning the handle to a clip on his belt as he moved to help the boy up from the ground. Wuher gave the band a glare, and they began playing again, as if nothing had happened. An intrigued Garindan took another sip of his water as the old man and the boy followed a towering Wookiee to an alcove table in the back of the bar. The Kubaz spy stopped a human patron passing his table. He handed the human a few credits and sent him out the front door of the bar. He watched him leave, then turned to keep an eye on the aging warrior, the boy, the Wookiee and the Corellian pilot with the red blood stripe on his trousers.

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Outside the bar, the human patron counted the credits in his hand as he walked out into the street and approached us. "Hey! There's been a scuffle inside there. The hermit just took out two guys at the bar with a lightsaber! Crazy Jedi wannabe." They spoke for a few moments more and he

gestured once again back toward the cantina as across the street, the farmboy's 'droids watched from their position beside the battered, brown speeder.

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A few moments later, Etz and I walked through the front door of the cantina, rifles at the ready, stepping down into the main room, pushing past several regulars lounging on the steps.

We approached the bar, the crowd parting as we drew near. Etz spoke to Wuher, "We heard there was a disturbance in here." Wuher gestured to the back of the room, pointing to the old man. We saw who he had indicated, and I replied, "Alright, we'll check it out."

We both stepped around the end of the bar, wading through the scum clientele and past both dismembered arms on the floor toward a small recessed booth in the rear of the room, where Wuher said the old man and the kid had gone after the incident. The pilot I remembered from our first day at the docking bay sat there with his Wookiee companion, alone now. No old man, no kid.

I led the way past the table, Etz followed, stopping momentarily to lock eyes with the cocky Corellian pilot and the Wookiee.

We worked our way past them, as there was no sign of the others, and continued on toward the rear door, exiting to the street outside. They were nowhere in sight. "I don't like this", I said, "I feel like we're really close, and I think they just hired a pilot. Let's go let Rogue and the others know what we found. No commlinks. I don't want Tyrell in on this."

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It was now well past mid-day and the troops at all of our posts were growing restless. The crowds on the streets above the marketplace were filled with people, making our search efforts all the more difficult.

TK-1138, one of Tyrell's men, meandered away from his post, following a side street, then down a series of steps into the partial shade, and was checking the area surrounding the central marketplace, as the others continued with their interrogations. Satisfied with his quick look around and the nice break from the direct sun, he turned around to head back and rejoin his group when he saw a young man, an old man and two 'droids; one bi-pedal protocol and an astromech coming toward him.

They stopped dead in their tracks as his gaze moved from the 'droids back to the humans and he locked eyes with the smiling old man.

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The sudden static burst broadcast over our comm channels was almost deafening. I dialed down the volume as my helmet display showed that it was originating on a frequency from one of the Devastator's troopers, TK-1138. Rogue clicked on his chin mic and paged the trooper. When he got no response, our little group double-timed it through the streets, following the signal source indicator. We made our way down several flights of stairs that led through a terraced marketplace.

There were twisting corridors and alleys lined with citizens and merchants. We passed a small 'droid sale lot, a used speeder lot and wormed our way through the crowd as the beacon indicated we were almost on top of it.

Suddenly Rogue stopped dead in his tracks; 4120 and I almost colliding with him from the abruptness. He turned and backtracked several steps, peering down a side alley.

There, a few steps into the shadows, in the center of the path was the source of the comm static. The missing trooper was lying face down, neatly cut in half. His torso lay to one side of the path, his lower body and legs to the other side, the wound cauterized from some great heat. His helmet had been thrown loose as he hit the ground and had rolled up against one of the stone walls. His E-11 had been sliced down the center from front to rear. A hand and several fingers lay beside it in the sand. We all stared in disbelief for a heartbeat, then jerked our eyes upward, scanning the rooftops and alleyways to see if we could catch a glimpse of someone that might have committed this crime, or someone who might have seen who did. There was no one to be found.

We fanned out to search as Rogue knelt down and picked up the helmet. He pulled his own off, and reached inside TK-1138's, flipping a tiny switch. The information display flickered with static for a moment, and then Rogue was able to see what 1138 had seen in his last moments . . . a few alleys, some stairs, a used 'droid lot, a speeder salesman, a few citizens scurrying to get out of his way. Then he stopped walking, turned to the left and looked down an alley, then back to the right to check the other direction.

The silent image flickered on the tiny screen inside the dead trooper's helmet. It showed him turning around to go back up the stairs, and then, in center frame was an old man in a hooded robe, a young man and two droids . . . a bi-ped and an astromech. The old man was smiling as he raised his empty hand from beneath his cloak to wave, but instead, thrust his palm out forcefully toward the camera as his stance lowered and centered, feet planted wide. The trooper and his camera were then thrown into the air and back several paces across the alley into a wall. A flash of white light blipped across the screen from the jarring impact to the camera and then the image returned, white levels recalibrating as its' owner fell to the ground.

1138 rolled and stood up quickly, the dirt of the ground rushing across the little screen. He looked up at a wall as he regained his feet and whirled around toward his attacker, E-11 drawn and held out in the lower portion of the video frame. An energy bolt flew from the barrel of the blaster toward the old man's head. In a blur of motion, a blue energy blade flicked up and into the path of the red bolt. There was a flash as the shot collided with and ricocheted off the

shimmering blade, inches from the old man's head. The protocol 'droid shrank in fear, and the boy stared in disbelief. The trooper involuntarily glanced to follow the blocked bolt.

Rogue's brow furrowed with concern as he continued to watch the recording. 1138 looked back to the man in brown just as a sweeping arc of blue energy flashed down through the blaster in his hands, splitting it in two, taking off the fingers that were wrapped beneath the muzzle and the hand on the grip as well. He looked at his severed fingers on the left hand and the smoking wrist-stump on his right arm, then looked up as the blue blade blurred once again, slicing through the air and down toward his waist, then there was static.

Rogue switched off the recording and looked back over to the two sections of 1138's body and the assorted hand parts. "A Jedi? Here?!? I thought they had been exterminated long ago?" His mind reeled with all the possible implications stemming from this discovery. He pulled his bucket back on and clicked the comm with his chin, "All members of the MFP, report to the main corridor leading to the plaza in the lower marketplace immediately." Then he keyed his handheld and paged Garindan.

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All of our men heard the message over their comm sets, turned to look at each other and took off running down the main street toward the plaza. Tyrell yelled at the top of his lungs for them to stop, spewing various threats about what happens to troopers who desert their posts.

They never looked back.

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Rogue, 0600, 4120, 1265, Etz and I were waiting in the open plaza next to the used speeder lot when Danz, Falker, Taka, Ddraig and Blade appeared out of one of the hallways. 0600 waved them over as he spoke to Rogue, "The guy running the speeder lot says he just bought this brown, junker landspeeder from a young kid and an old man. He didn't see any 'droids, but the description he gave fits the two we're looking for. These two are very dangerous."

1265 laughed, turning to Danz.

0600 turned to face him, "The old man took out 1138 and left pieces of him scattered all over the alley over there if you have any doubts." The laughter stopped immediately.

Rogue stepped forward, "The snitch doesn't have anything yet, but he's working on it now. I want us to stay together and move through the corridor leading to the docking bays. If they have bothered to come this far dragging two 'droids, they're going to be trying to leave on a ship from one of these bays. We need to be nearby and ready, I don't care what Tyrell says."

As he said this Tyrell stepped off the bottom step from the streets above and walked over to us. "You and your men are all going to find yourself in the brig for deserting your posts and . . . "

Rogue interrupted, "I've had enough of you. 1138 is dead. An old man traveling with the farmboy left him in several pieces down that alley." Tyrell had no memory of the old man and young kid from the street. "Your roadblocks aren't doing the job, Tyrell, they're already here! And I don't care if you DO report directly to Lord Vader, this city is now OUR jurisdiction and you are a guest in it. We're officially operating *outside* the Empire. I suggest you remember *that*, Captain, or you might find yourself the victim of an unfortunate accident."

Danz moved closer to Rogue, "You said it was an old man and a kid. Was the old guy wearing a hood?"

Rogue nodded.

Danz turned to the others that had been with him at the roadblock and then over to Tyrell as he pulled off his bucket, "The Captain here stopped that old man and the kid out on the road earlier today. He was asking for the kid's identification and then the old man spoke up saying we didn't need to see it. Tyrell kept repeating everything the old guy said and then told them they could go about their business and let them go!"

Tyrell glared at Danz, "I did not! We never stopped an old man and a boy!" The rest of the roadblock crew pulled off their buckets, "Yes you did, you don't remember?!? You let the guy talk back to you and then LET HIM GO! How can you not remember?"

Rogue pulled off his bucket and glanced over to 0600 and on to me, "Based on what we saw on 1138's holo-recorder, as incredible as it seems, I would say it was a Jedi mind trick." I slowly nodded thoughtfully in agreement.

Tyrell spewed, "Jedi mind trick? The Jedi are extinct!" and pushed his way through us to find his troops, "Lord Vader will not find this little joke amusing."

Rogue held up the dead troopers' bucket and played the holo recording again for the others to see firsthand what had happened. As the entry ended the others looked back at the broken body of 1138.

Rogue's commlink crackled on his belt, "I have something for you, sir." Garindan had been busy watching, that's what he did. He was a people-watcher, a silent observer from the shadows.

Rogue unclipped the mic "Yes, what do you have?"

The electronic voice squawked back, "They're on their way to one of the docking bays. Meet me in the main hallway. I am at bay 85." Then the line went dead.

I had been standing close enough to hear the exchange. "The Wook and the Corellian" I whispered quietly as I glanced over at 0600.

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The veranda of the Palace was richly bathed in an orange glow as Bail Organa stood at the railing watching the sun setting far out on the horizon of his beloved Alderaan.

His mind was filled with thoughts of his daughter, her safety, and of her new, secretive involvement in the growing Rebellion movement against the Empire. He was overrun with memories of the destruction he had seen unfold across the galaxy during the Clone Wars and how it had nearly destroyed this place.

At the close of the Clone Wars, he and the other leaders of Alderaan had gathered every single weapon on the planet and loaded it onto a huge armory ship aptly renamed *Another Chance*.

He remembered setting the nav' computer coordinates to have it continually jump through hyperspace on an elliptical course around the galaxy until such a time, if ever, that the Council of Elders decided the weapons were needed. From that day forward, Alderaan became known as a peaceful, art and technology-loving world with no weapons. He hoped his beautiful planet would stay that way, and that the royal involvement with the Rebellion would not create a need for them far sooner than anyone could have thought possible.

His gaze wandered across the darkening sky, taking in the incredible view. He was turning to re-enter the palace when something caught his eye, making him turn back to look closer. Something was moving in front of the setting sun. It wasn't a ship, in fact it wasn't even anything within the atmosphere.

Something of enormous size moving through the heavens, slipping between Alderaan and her star was eclipsing the setting sun as he watched.

His mind raced as he watched. None of the small moons orbiting Alderaan had the size to do what he was seeing, and those moons were flattened, irregular rocks, more like asteroids. This obstruction was round, perfectly round.

He rushed back to the railing, clenching it tightly as starlight finally broke around the edge of the obstruction.

His eyes grew wide as the realization of what was happening washed over him, "After all these years of . . . how could they . . . how could we not have known that they . . . Oh my God . . .they actually built it!"

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Garindan's message had given us a target. We all pulled on our buckets and headed off down the hallway toward the spaceport and the docking bays.

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Tyrell had re-grouped his men and had them patrolling the street just outside the docking bays, watching for 'droids. Davin Felth was turned away, listening to something on his comm, something that sounded important. He thought about sharing the information with Tyrell, then thought better of it, and slipped away from the main group heading toward the docking bays. Tyrell saw him leaving, and followed.

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0600 looked up as Felth joined us. He caught up to us as we headed through the narrow alley. "I've been monitoring your frequency since Tyrell let the old man and the kid go. I don't trust him, haven't since I got transferred to his division. I figure you know more about what's going on here than he does."

As he fell in with our formation, several others from Tyrell's group appeared as well, weapons on and ready. They wanted a blood payment for 1138's death.

We all marched with a purpose now through the city, people scurrying to move out of our way as we struck an imposing image bearing down on them. Captain Tyrell followed a few moments later.

We came around a corner to find Garindan leaning against one of the shadowy walls. Rogue stepped up to him, "Which way?"

Garindan squawked "Bay 94!"

Rogue turned to us, "Alright men, load your weapons."

Felth sprinted to the front of the pack, hurrying past Rogue as we headed toward bay 94. He must really feel the need to prove himself to someone, I thought, as we marched; maybe it was to himself.

I thought sure we would have been heading back to bay 85, to that battered YT-1300 freighter, the Corellian and the Wookiee. I had a very bad feeling about this. It was all wrong. I know that old man and the kid talked to the Wook in the bar, unless they were passed off to another ship?

We all hurried down the dark, narrow steps toward the bay. I could hear sand being ground beneath our boots on the stone stairs and the high pitch of our blaster power cells cycling up toward full and ready.

Felth and Rogue spilled out into the dim recesses of the entry to the bay. The freighter from bay 85 was in here now. Etz and I *had* been right!

I could see the Wookiee in the cockpit removing something that was hung from the overhead instruments. The Corellian human was uncoupling fueling lines and closing the access hatch when Rogue gave his order, "Stop that ship . . . blast 'em."

As he spoke, time seemed to slow and barely move at all. The Corellian pilot's eyes grew wide as Felth and Rogue fired on him, narrowly missing.

With a lightning-quick reflex, he had drawn his thigh-holstered blaster and returned their fire. Taka shoved Rogue forward to the sandy floor, saving him, as the wall above them both exploded, blowing a fueling line wildly through the air. It slammed into Taka's back and burst out through his chest, spraying blood across his white armor and the sandy floor. Topolev and Danz ran across to find cover behind some supply crates. Rogue dove into a tucked roll and came up firing.

Tyrell's men pushed ahead of us, wanting revenge for the death of TK-1138. Several were cut down by the wild blaster fire of the cornered Corellian. Etz, 0600, Ddraig, 4120, Blade and I poured into the open space along with them, all firing at the fleeing pilot as he quickly retreated up the entry ramp into his ship, firing back at us as he ran. Tyrell raced off the steps behind us and opened fire as well.

Several of the bolts flew past us, Etz whirled away just in time, falling to the ground, as 4120 and I ducked behind the cover of the stone walls. We were no good to the Empire dead. There was a flash of light as another violent volley of blaster fire was exchanged from the Corellian and both Felth and Tyrell. Somewhere during the exchange, Tyrell was hit and went down.

1265 grabbed Taka's arm and dragged his body back to the bottom of the steps as Ddraig covered him, firing on the Corellian.

The ship's inner airlock door slammed down and sealed as the boarding ramp was hoisted and locked, sealing the ship. I glanced up at the cockpit again as we charged forward, firing at the hull. The Wookiee was now seated there working furiously to get the ship ready to lift off, as his human companion burst into the seat beside him. The deafening drone of the customized engines drowned out all other sound as they energized. All energy moorings fell away from the freighter, and her shields came online, absorbing our blaster fire.

The invisible push of the ships' anti-grav repulsor field thrust down hard on the floor of the bay, slamming into our chests and throwing us all back several steps as suddenly the ship unceremoniously and unsteadily rose up over the rim of the docking bay pit.

She pivoted sharply and her main engines fired as soon as her front forks cleared the rim, in direct violation of the surface-proximity replusorlift restrictions set by the spaceport authority.

Alarm claxons were now blaring as I fired one last shot toward the ship that was tearing away in an upward arc over the city and heading rapidly for the stars. All we could do was watch it go.

Falker was trying to reach the port master for information on the escaping ship. Danz cursed and blasted one of the scurrying pit 'droids in frustration, as I pulled off my bucket and rubbed my throbbing forehead, then raised my blaster and destroyed the wailing alarm claxon on the wall above us.

Rogue and 0600 moved past Ddraig and 1265 at the base of the steps to see to Taka.

*

On the streets above, Tyrell's men whirled from their checkpoint duties in time to watch a beat-up Corellian stock light freighter blast its way out of the docking bays below and climb rapidly out of sight into the cloudless, pale-blue Tatooine afternoon sky.

*

Rogue watched the 'Falcon racing skyward. Tyrell, lying face up in the sand also saw the escape. He closed his eyes. Through the pain he slowly realized that he had most likely allowed the data he was searching for to slip from almost within his grasp, to well beyond his reach.

Rogue ripped off his helmet and knelt beside the injured Captain, spewing furiously, "They're gone, Tyrell! They just tore out of here heading offworld. Three of your men are dead and so is Taka. You've got a lot of explaining to do. Your checkpoints didn't work exactly as you had planned, sir." With that he stood up and went to see about Taka.

As Rogue finished, Tyrell lifted his bucket to his face and clicked his chin-activated comm switch, hailing the command deck on one of the Star Destroyers blockading far above. "***Tyrant***, come in ***Tyrant***, this is Captain Tyrell." His comm crackled a moment before a response came.

"Captain Tyrell, this is the ***Conquest***. ***Tyrant*** is resetting their communications grid. What can we do for you?"

Tyrell grimaced in pain as he continued, the helmet shaking in his hands "***Conquest***, the package we have been searching for is on a freighter heading your way." Under the intense heat of the Tatooine suns he felt a cold sweat trickling off the top of his head, "I need a clear channel to the Death Star. Put me through to Lord Vader."

A moment of silence passed, then the communications officer responded, "I'm sorry sir, he's on his way to a meeting with the Grand Moff Tarkin and a prisoner at the moment, but I assure you, I will have him speak to you as soon as he is free."

* * *

Princess Leia Organa had witnessed the end of her homeworld, and had been escorted away,

back to her cell on the detention level. Tarkin had returned to his private chambers to go over the status reports coming in from around the station on the performance of the Superlaser units. Only Vader had remained behind, to speak with a Sandtrooper on Tatooine.

The Death Star communications officer switched off the comm, silencing the gurgling, gasping sounds of a dying Captain Tyrell lying on the sandy floor of docking bay 94 in Mos Eisley. The dark form of Darth Vader seemed even darker as he stood motionless, fist clutched tight, deep in thought. He was rolling over in his mind what the inept Tyrell had just said with his dying breath, something about a surviving Jedi.

He turned to the communications officer again, "I want that helmet recording showing the fugitives the moment it arrives." He turned and exited the room, heading deeper into the heart of the station, toward his private chambers as currents of anger radiated away from him, rippling through the force.

*

In this remote, inner area of the battle station most of the corridors were empty. His footsteps echoed as he walked, and the dark Jedi beneath the black mask thought back over the years to the first time he had ever used the force to choke someone, accidentally killing his beloved Padme for siding against him with Obi Wan.

He remembered how it felt to be the new apprentice to his Sith Master. He had been dubbed *Darth Vader*, and was to become the proud Lord of his new Empire. The dark side coursed through him so freely then, so savagely uncontrolled.

In his rage, he had destroyed the one he loved. He had given himself over to the teachings of Darth Sidious in the hopes of keeping her alive, to alter the shadowy future he had foreseen in a premonition of her death. Somewhere along the way in his ever-increasing lust for power, he destroyed all for which he had fought and suffered.

He entered a security code and the blast doors to his chambers slid open. As he stepped inside, they quickly snapped shut, locking behind him. It was a dark, cold place, as cold as the dark knight's heart. Situated on the far side of the room sat his pressurized meditation chamber. The top half of the octagonal sphere was raised, the external steps lowered for his entry. He silently ascended them and settled into the cushioned seat in the center. He sat silent for a moment, replaying events from long ago in his mind.

He remembered standing face to face with General Grievous, unknowingly staring into his own dark future, living as half man and half machine. He remembered an exhilarating and draining lightsaber confrontation with his former master and friend, Obi Wan. He remembered attempting to gain a better position from which to end his master's life, and the instant the searing energy blade lopped off both his legs and his last remaining human arm, dropping him into the scorched obsidian and ash on the banks of the Mustafar lava flow.

He had reached out with every ounce of hate, still trying to fight, as he slid backwards further and further with each attempt to crawl away from the searing heat of the lava flow, still fighting to face his master. He remembered the intense pain as his clothing and hair had burned from his body, severely charring and blistering his skin and disfiguring his face and what remained of his body.

He touched a small switch in the armrest beside him and the top half of the black sphere lowered, sealing him inside. The hissing of the pressurized airflow ceased, and a mechanical armature lowered from above him, clasp around the polished, black dome of his helmet. It tripped a magnetic release mechanism inside the helmet, and raised back out of the way, taking the dome with it. Vader then manually released a lock on either side of his head.

There was a hiss of escaping air as he rocked the facemask forward, separating it at the jawline, pivoting forward on pins near the twin silver tusks at the corners of the “mouth”. Once clear of his head, he lifted the mask off of the pins and set it aside on the ledge that ran around the inside of the chamber.

He remembered very little of his flight back to Coruscant in the medical pod.

He tried very hard to forget the work the med ‘droids had done to him, the pain had been excruciating.

Then they sealed him inside this helmet, and much of the laborious effort to breathe fell away.

He was raised to face his new master, only to learn that in his rage, he had killed his beloved Padme. He closed his eyes in that agonizing moment, fighting back the pain of his loss. It was then that Sidious had told him that not only was the bio-regenerating suit and breath mask keeping his body protected, but his twisted manipulation of the dark side of the Force on his apprentice’s behalf was also keeping him alive. Without that, the suit would fail him and he would die.

So long as Sidious was able to convince Vader that this lie was true, he never had to fear that one day his power might be in jeopardy; that he might be murdered in his sleep by his apprentice, the way he had murdered his own master so many years before. With the secret that Sidious kept, the tragedy surrounding the *death* of Anakin Skywalker and the birth of Darth Vader was complete and fierce. The very motivation behind Anakin’s fall to the dark side, was dead and gone, and once again he was a slave, at the mercy of his dark master. His pain had come full circle.

He drew in a deep breath, eyes closed as he thought more about what had transpired on Tatooine.

Tatooine.

He wondered why the late Bail Organa’s daughter had bothered to go there with the Death Star plans. It held no military significance that he knew of. It had once been his home, but that was long ago, before his mother’s death.

He opened his eyes slightly, staring off into nothingness as images and emotions from the past surfaced.

He remembered his mother's funeral, but could only picture himself there as he now was, disfigured and trapped behind his mask.

He glanced over to a clear container filled with the Tatooine sand he had scraped from atop her grave so long ago. He missed her.

Tarkin's effective demonstration had most certainly sent shock waves through the galactic community, as worlds from the Core to the edges of populated space were surely learning of the obliteration of Alderaan.

His scarred brow furrowed as he rolled over the events of the past few days. The convoy carrying the Death Star plans had been attacked and the plans stolen by Bria Tharen and other members of the Red Hand. They had been eliminated on Toprawa, but not before they had transmitted the plans to Senator Organa and destroyed the master data card.

Leia Organa had been cool enough under fire to send the plans off with a 'droid. The jettisoned mech had made it to the surface of Tatooine and managed several days later, with the help of someone or something, to smuggle them off-world, but who? Why? And where would they head now? The Dark Lord searched the Force for answers.

A light flashed on the console panel before him. He pressed and held the comm button, "Lord Vader, the helmet recording has been received and has been forwarded to your chambers, sir." He lifted his finger from the button and turned to a small screen. He opened the awaiting file and began watching the images. He saw routine traffic stops and the inspections of several 'droids. Then, the trooper recording the images wandered away from the roadblock down a shady hallway. The hall led to stairs that took the trooper to a lower level of the busy marketplace as he watched the images of places familiar, Vader could now smell with his memory that which his destroyed nostrils could not, the hot sands and dry winds of his youth.

Then he leaned forward, inspecting the images closer. The trooper had just caught sight of an old man, a boy and two 'droids. The old man's face was nearly covered by a deep hood, on his flowing cloak. A cloak that was all too familiar. The figure raised his hand and the recorded image rolled wildly as the trooper was thrown backward to the ground. The trooper raised his blaster as a sweeping blue flash cut across the screen top to bottom and then side to side, as the old man killed him . . . with a lightsaber.

As the helmet rolled over in the sand, the camera captured a few seconds of the old man and the boy. The man looked around as he and the others hurried away. As they did, Vader caught sight of something hanging from the boy's belt . . . another lightsaber.

The lightsaber his former master had stripped from him so long ago, lifted from the scorched banks of the molten Mustafar lava flow. The last lightsaber he himself had built as a Jedi

Padawaan.

The anger and hate was swelling in him now. Obi Wan Kenobi was alive, and he had a new apprentice!

* * *