

Chapter 11 - Departure

Falker paced back and forth across the floor of the open bay pit looking up at the melted metal pipes hanging from the smoking, sooty wall as he *finally* received the name of the departing ship from the port authority. The top rim of docking bay 94 had been blackened and burned by the main engines of the departing *Millenium Falcon*. He confirmed with the crews of the Star Destroyers *Conquest* and *Tyrant* that the ship in question had run from them and escaped into hyperspace before they could acquire a good fix on the target.

0600 and Rogue carried the lifeless body of Taka out of docking bay 94, leaving the corpses of Tyrell and his troops lying in the sand. They knew there would be an inspection team here soon, but Taka deserved a better fate than to be picked apart in the official investigation process. Ddraig found a cargo repulsor sled in the upper hallway and met them at the top of the stairs. The bloodied, broken body of their comrade was gently lowered to its surface. Everyone stood silent for a moment, staring down at what could easily have been any one of them. Without a word, the sled was slowly and reverently moved down the hallway, past a silent Garindan, toward bay 98.

Any thoughts Rogue and 0600 may have had about Taka buying his way out of prosecution alongside them for the Belliran V Massacre were now gone. In the darkness of our shuttle flight from Kessel, he had said he thought they were dead in the med lab when he was released. Even if he *had* bargained his way out, he had now sacrificed his life for Rogue, repaying any debt he may have had, real or imagined. Felth walked behind a bit, and seemed to be somewhat preoccupied.

4120 fell back beside him, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I’m just going over what just happened, you know, making sure I did what I should have.”

4120 reassured him, “I’m sure we all did the best we could, given the circumstances. I’m sorry about your friends.”

Felth was going over the firefight in his head, “Oh, they weren’t really my friends. I had just transferred in, and I didn’t know anyone yet except Tyrell, and I couldn’t stand him.” He was glad that no one in the group had seen him shoot his own squad leader in the back during the last exchange with the Corellian. It had been a gut-wrenching decision, made in a millisecond, and one that had absolutely surprised him, but he now felt that the Rebellion was doing the right thing.

In his heart he felt the Empire was wrong, oppressing worlds across the entire expanse of the galaxy. He had worked so hard to locate the missing data and prove himself, and now, he knew he was trapped in that role of dedicated Stormtrooper. He knew the Empire would find him if he deserted and jumped sides. He knew he could now be of much more value to the rebellion by remaining within the Empire, and funneling information to their cause.

This newly assembled unit seemed to be a smart group though. He would need to be vigilant at all times until he was allowed, by the inspection team, to be reassigned.

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The interior lights of the sealed meditation chamber were dimmed to near absolute darkness. Its occupant in a deep meditation. The obscure layers of consciousness slipped elusively by as the human brain, of what had once been Anakin Skywalker, fed on the energy attracted by the Midichlorians coursing through what was left of his bloodstream. He felt the warm pulse of his human heart in his upper arms and the trunk of his body. His heavy cybernetic limbs, however, still felt foreign and cold.

At first they had been ungainly and awkward, forcing him to re-learn standing and walking all over again. During those hazy, dark days following his defeat at the hands of his Jedi master, he had worked endless, grueling hours in his private chambers; practicing with one, and building to several seeker remotes and assassin droids to master his new limbs.

His ravaged body and blistered, deformed skin ached and burned beneath his suit and helmet, but not nearly as hot as the hatred that burned in his heart for his former master. He repeated painful motions over and over again, learning the new subtleties of moving through fight stances on his cybernetic legs, and regaining the dexterity and masterful control of his dominant lightsaber hand. He allowed himself to feed off the intense pain, focusing it, channeling it, bringing the Force around him to a constant, controlled boil.

Cloudy thoughts now mingled with the energies of the dark side as Vader lost himself in its inky, warm liquidity seeking answers to questions that had plagued him since discovering Obi-wan still among the living. He allowed himself to slowly drift closer to the light side Force energies than he had since yielding to the Sith teachings of Palpatine, so long ago. He needed to sense others from his lost order in his quest for his former master. Suffering cries of the Jedi he had helped decimate echoed in his ears. He heard the urgent, pleading warning from Qui-gon calling out to him, **“Anakin, NOOO!”**

In spite of all that could have distracted him he remained focused, searching for answers, awaiting clues to be revealed to him. He was open to any sense or feeling of a reason why Obi-wan might possibly have been on Tatooine with a new apprentice. Obi-wan hated Tatooine, and would not have been there willingly.

He remembered the stories he had been told about the damaged, leaking hyperdrive engine forcing that fateful emergency landing, forever entwining his destiny with that of Qui-gon, Obi-Wan and the Queen, his fragile beauty, Padme. He had been concerned that they might have been stuck on the desert planet for a very long time. It made no sense that he would have willingly returned.

Perhaps that was exactly why he did so.

As his meditative trance became more focused, images began appearing in the mind's eye of the dark Lord. He saw an emerging asteroid field; planetoids tumbling silently. One of them shifted and became master Yoda, tumbling off into a gathering fog.

He calmed himself and became even more centered in the Force. In his vision, there were clouds, rain and mud with the cries of unseen animals hiding in the shadows of colossal trees draped with vines. Then, as the cloudy haze parted slightly, he saw Obi-wan holding an infant in his arms and heard a voice call out, "**Luke**". It was the shallow, but unmistakable, sweet sound of his wife's voice.

His heart beat increasingly faster, pounding in his ears now as the images became disjointed, fast-morphing flashes in his mind as he abruptly ascended from his unconscious state too rapidly. He saw Padme lying on a table, speaking to Obi-wan, then falling silent as the life drained from her face. Her still body transformed into a mound of sand, blowing off the table in a wind across an emerging Tatooine skyline at sunset. A hooded Obi-wan now stood amidst the blowing sand with the child, walking into the sunset.

Then, the blowing sands consumed him and gave way to careening, colliding asteroids which became two combatants engaged in a furious lightsaber battle. He was fighting someone dressed in black whose movements were aggressive, attacking and Sith-like. He continued to ascend as intermittent, hazy images surfaced of himself throwing a dark-robed figure over a balcony amidst tangled streams of Force-lightning raining down on him, killing him.

Suddenly, he emerged from the trance. His eyes fluttered open wildly in the darkness of the dim meditation chamber, lacking the ability to form tears, but filled with the pain and grief of his loss all over again. His chest heaved and he gasped as his mechanical lungs quickly adjusted, cycling air in and out at twice their normal pace.

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4120 piloted Tyrell's shuttle out across the sand waves heading toward the heart of the Dune Sea. Captain Tyrell and his men were dead, they wouldn't be needing it anytime soon. The members of the 104th MFP were seated silently in the jumpseats along both side walls.

Taka was the first to fall in the line of duty in this new post, and Rogue now prepared him for his final resting place. We all watched as he drained the energy clip, snapped it in the magazine well, and placed Taka's E-11 in his hands, carefully positioning one hand on the grip, the other under the barrel, laying it across his chest as if he were standing at the ready.

Etz nodded knowingly, "You can have my blaster when you pry it from my cold, dead hands."

Rogue turned to him, nodding, "Exactly."

It was a cocky phrase that had been uttered by virtually every trooper, in every session on Carida when sidearms were issued to a new class.

The main engines were cut as braking thrusters fired and the ship began slowing, finally coming to a hover over the ridgeline of a large dune. 4120's hands moved over the controls as he lowered us carefully to the ground. Topolev and Blade opened the rear hatch and extended the boarding ramp as the rest of us unclipped. A warm wind whipped past us as we pushed the sled down to the blowing sand.

The afternoon light was fading fast, bathing us in a dark orange glow as the twin suns sat just above the horizon. 0600 walked away from us in silhouette, facing the two giant fireballs, then stopped and looked down at his feet, kicking at the sand a bit, "This is a good spot."

We moved the sled over to him and lifted our dead from it, placing him gently in the sand on his back, blaster held up to his chest, staring up into the stars. We all stepped back a pace and respectfully removed our helmets. Only the sound of the wind blowing past us was heard.

Blowing sand began to collect around Taka's body, mounding up against it as we watched silently. Rogue spoke, "He gave his life to save mine, this new Sandtrooper. And as a Sandtrooper, we offer up his body to be returned to the sand . . . to become one with it." He knelt down and grabbed up a handful of sand, and tossed it across Taka's chest, "Pleasant journeys, my friend; pleasant journeys" then turned and walked away silently with his helmet in hand as the wind continued to whip around us.

We all observed a moment of silence, then one by one dropped a handful of sand on Taka's body. The evening winds were picking up now, drifting even more sand around the one we were leaving behind as we all silently returned to the shuttle. Topolev and I were the last to board, taking a final look back at Taka as we ascended the sloped ramp. We had all seen troopers fall in battle, many of them friends. I just didn't think it would be happening this soon after arriving here.

The white of his Impervium had almost been swallowed entirely by the time we lifted off.

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The bluish-white haze of the afternoon sky had given way to the amber and bronze tones of the early evening which had now yielded to the suffocating blackness of a moonless Tatooine night. 4120 had bypassed the spaceport protocols and set our shuttle down in the open courtyard behind our new barracks. We all moved quietly out of our seats and headed for the fresh air outside. I stepped off the bottom of the ramp into the now-cool sand and ran through the events of this very long day as we all walked toward the back of our building.

Rogue opened the rear armored door of the barracks and we entered through the storage area, stepping around our supplies, still piled high on the repulsor sled. I secured the door after Topolev and Etz came through, and was about to make my way through to the bunkroom out front when I noticed something behind a storage crate. It was a lever on the plates of the armored wall. There were no labels as to its function.

I looked around. No one was hanging back, so I reached over and pulled on the lever. It resisted a bit, but then rocked to one side. As it did, I felt a slight rumbling under my feet and the supply sled began to lower into the floor. The entire recessed center of the room was a lift system that was now lowering to a sub-level. I watched as it slipped out of sight below the floor and came to stop several meters below.

I leaned over the edge to look down as lights flickered through a doorway leading away from the platform below. The others were now standing in the doorway behind me. I looked back over my shoulder. "Check this out".

With buckets off, 4120 and Rogue were first through the door to inspect my discovery, closely followed by the others. Topolev whistled as 0600 and Ddraig walked to the edge.

Falker spoke up, "It looks like a supply cache. We used something similar on Talasea while I was there training on their orbital platform."

Rogue turned to me, "I see another control lever down there. Call it back up. Let's see what's down there."

I nodded. "Sure" and stepped over to the lever, giving it a pull in the opposite direction. The floor shook again as the lift rose until it docked once again with our level. Everyone stepped on, crowding around the supply sled. I threw the lever and stepped on as once again it descended.

We came to a stop on the lower level, and the open doorway ahead revealed a dark room with a flickering, malfunctioning luminary. We all stepped through the door into the relative darkness of the next room. The air here was stale and the only working luminary hung from a wiring harness, flickering and swinging as we moved past it, sending sporadic, rocking shadows across the room and up the walls.

It was very hard to make out what was here with the light strobing as it was. There were more supply crates, several items draped in large canvas tarps and large bay doors on the opposing wall.

Etz was looking under the edge of one of the tarps when Blade stepped up from the other side and pulled it off. Dust flew off, swirling up in a cloud and hanging in the still air. In the dim light we could see several tripod-mounted cannons. Etz grabbed the next tarp and pulled it off as Danz and Topolev pulled off the remaining two.

By now we were all coughing as the air was thick with very fine dust particles. I noticed the outline of a deactivated astromech droid squeezed between the cannons, and moved in for a closer look. Topolev ran his gloved hand over a full rack of what appeared to be hundreds of transparent holo-cards.

He pulled one out and leaned toward the swinging light, gently wiping the years of dust away. "Jabba's Court – 22413". He reached over and pulled out several more. The labeling was the same, but with ascending numbers. "I'm not sure, but I think these may be surveillance

recordings of The Hutt's Palace." He handed the cards to Rogue as the others moved further into the darkness checking out what else had been waiting silently in the shadows.

Rogue held them up and looked over to the full rack of similar cards, "These may prove very helpful. What else is back there?"

Danz and Etz walked between racks of weapons. Each of them lifted out a rifle, turning them over, examining them as 4120 and Falker broke the seal and lifted the lid on a container resting against the stone wall.

As Rogue continued looking over the card with 0600, I pulled the astromech from its tight squeeze between the cannons and knelt down to look it over. It was a little the worse for the wear. Several panels were missing and a blackened wiring harness protruded from one of its side panels, but it didn't appear to be anything some repair work couldn't take care of. A few parts and a refreshing of its internal power cells, and we might have ourselves a working maintenance droid.

As he inspected the rack of cards closer, the comm unit on Rogue's belt chirped an alert. He pulled it off and stepped back through the door to the lift to answer, and the rest of us began to talk amongst ourselves.

Falker reached down into the deep container in the back of the room. "Check these out." It was dark where they were, in the back of the room. He handed the item to 4120, who walked out between the crates and held it up to the light.

It was a twenty-plus year old, dust-covered helmet. Its blue markings were chipped and stained from duty in the harsh Tatooine sand. "I remember seeing these as a kid", said 4120. It was a battle-worn Republic Commando helmet from the Clone Wars era. Ddraig and Felth were checking out the cannons.

The latter looked over at the helmet and spoke up as he returned to his examination of the large guns "Everyone our age remembers those guys. They stormed the Temple and caught those Jedi traitors off guard. They were the foundations of the Empire we know today, those first troopers of the 501st." Falker stiffened a bit, reminded again of his own intimate family connection to the Jedi purge.

I reached up to 4120, "Let me see it?"

He handed the helmet over to me as I stood up. I rolled it over, examining the interior, the visor rocked back on top. Not a great deal had changed since then. Some things were smaller now and incorporated into the interior lenses. There was no longer a need for an external visor, although incorporating the zoom features of our macros that way would be nice; one less thing on our belts.

Etz was standing beside the bay doors thumbing through another rack of holo cards. *Chalmun's Cantina, Vriichi Brothers, Tusken Disturbance P-3871*, "Arrest records."

He looked up from the cards and reached for the lever on the wall above the rack and was about to swing it down, opening the bay doors for a look at what lay behind when Rogue stepped back into the room, clicking off his commlink. "Inspection team's here. Let's go. We can look more in here later."

Etz took his hand off the lever, started away, then glanced back at the doors wondering what lay just on the other side. Slowly he walked away, back through the dim room as I set the Commando helmet down on top of the astromech. We all headed back toward the lift. 0600 threw the lever handle down and the lift rose back up to the surface, sealing the lower room once again.

Rogue spoke as we walked through the bunkroom and headed for the front port, "Leave your packs; just buckets and blasters tonight boys. Hopefully this won't take too long, I'm ready for a little shuteye" and he walked out the front door onto the darkened streets of Mos Eisley.

"I'll take a little of that myself" I said, pulling on my helmet and switching on my holstered blaster.

"Buckets and blasters" said Topolev.

"Buckets and blasters" repeated Ddraig as he grabbed his E-11 and holstered it.

Blade was the last one out the door into the cool night air. "Buckets and blasters" he echoed as he pulled on his helmet and locked the door as our new unit headed off for docking bay 94.

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The local port authority guard stood at attention, staring off into nothingness as he secured the stairs leading down into docking bay 94.

Down in the bay, we were going over the chain of events surrounding the *Millennium Falcon's* hasty departure with the inspection team from the *Tyrant* for the 6th time.

The lead Incident Inspector cursed as he handed Rogue's helmet back to him, "This is no good to me! The helmet recorders were wiped clean by the massive energy wave that washed over you from the modified repulsors on the *Millenium Falcon.*"

Felth, who had been hanging back and sweating like it was midday, breathed a small sigh of relief. He would not be discovered. Not yet. Tyrell's murder would be deemed as a casualty of battle.

Rogue took his helmet back, looking inside, "Do we need to replace the datacards or will they simply restart on a blank slate?"

The Inspector spoke as he turned away, distracted; watching the others from the *Tyrant* tossing the bodies of Tyrell and his troops onto a repulsor sled, “Switch them off and when activated again they’ll start fresh. TD-1009, we’ve been over this a number of times with you and your men, and the story seems to be consistent from everyone involved. It appears that you and your men did everything you could to prevent the *Millenium Falcon* from escaping. Captain Tyrell there seems to have done nothing but hamper your efforts” he said gesturing to the body on the top of the stack.

“The Port Authority for this pathetic place has little or no records other than the ships’ name. No destination, no manifest, no anything. Let’s wrap this up. We have all the physical evidence we can gather here. We’ll be in touch with the command crew of the *Conquest* as well as the *Tyrant*. Hopefully we can try to project a possible hyperspace flight plan based on their last known trajectory. Lord Vader won’t leave this alone for long. Of that I can assure you. The data is too sensitive.”

“Does that mean we can go?” asked Ddraig.

The inspector flashed a look his way, then turned and nodded to Rogue and headed over to load the sled onto the lift.

Rogue turned to Ddraig and the rest of us, “OK guys, let’s go get some rest. It’s been a long day.”

Buckets in hand, we all ascended the sandy stairs out of the bay pit, all eyes silently noticing the bloodstains on the lower steps to which Taka had been dragged.

As we made our way down the cool, dark streets toward headquarters, I rocked my head back, staring up into the blackness of the Tatooine night and the huge expanse of the galaxy above us. It had been almost seven standard hours since the *Millenium Falcon* ripped out of here. Traveling through hyperspace, they could be almost anywhere out there by now.

“Does that mean we can go?” mocked Falker, elbowing Ddraig, who grinned and laughed back at him, amusing us all as we walked along.

I drew in a deep, even breath as 4120, walking just ahead of me, leaned over to Rogue. “In the morning we need to go back out to Anchorhead and question those kids again.”

Rogue nodded, staring ahead, “Agreed.” Then he turned to 4120 “I smell another long day coming on.”

4120 smiled slightly “Another glorious day in service to the Empire!”

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The last of the TIE fighter patrols continued its sweep along the fringes of the newly created Alderaan asteroid field, taking radiation readings for submission to Grand Moff Tarkin and watching for any evidence of ships that might have been on approach when the planet was destroyed. So far, radiation detected was minimal and several vessels, that had not been damaged or destroyed, had been spotted and drawn into the Death Star.

This last pilot was on his way out of the field returning to his hangar bay when another ship slipped out of hyperspace and appeared on his scope, amidst the tumbling rocks. He watched and thought to himself as the other ship fought to avoid the uncharted obstacles. *They must have been en route when the destruction occurred.*

The whine of the twin ion engines increased as he increased his speed, changed his course heading and came around fast, approaching the ship from behind and firing several warning shots. His ship's proximity to the freighter decreased dramatically as the TIE screamed by, nearly scraping the upper skin of the ship beneath him. He passed directly over the cockpit window, hoping to persuade the pilot to follow him.

The hand guiding the worn, Corellian freighter did just that, locking on and giving chase, all the while being led squarely into the path of the invisible, gripping tractor beam reaching out powerfully from the station ahead that shone brightly . . . like a small moon.

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Thin, cold fingers on the bony hand protruding from the sleeve of the tailored officer's uniform depressed a small comm button set into the deeply polished black surface of the long table, "Yes?"

Wilhuff Tarkin was not a patient man today by any stretch of the imagination. Detailed schematic plans for the Death Star station, his project for more than 20 years now, had fallen victim to infiltration by a band of rebels and was now missing. Somehow, somewhere along the line, someone relaxed just enough to allow this breach of security.

A tinny, electronically-enhanced voice came back from the speaker in the table-mounted comm unit. "We've captured a freighter entering the remains of the Alderaan system. Its markings match those of a ship that blasted its way out of Mos Eisley."

Tarkin stared at the comm button under his fingertip as Vader moved closer, the dark Lord's mind churned to fit this new wrinkle into the equation, "They must be trying to return the stolen plans to the Princess. She may yet be of some use to us."

The aging Technical Specialist who had risen through the ranks to become a Grand Moff, overseeing all of the Regional Governors, turned his head ever so slightly toward Vader, staring off into nothing for several moments. "Keep her on the execution list . . . but delay it long enough for another round or two with the mind probe." A slight smile crept onto his face. "That

should provide sufficient time for the ship to be thoroughly searched. Providing she survives two more rounds, she may prove useful if something is uncovered.”

Vader bowed his head once, “As you wish” and walked out the door. The ship that had eluded Tyrell was now sitting in docking bay 2037, many levels below. The Dark Lord’s pace was a bit faster than usual and as he headed for the turbolift tubes, a mouse droid happened to wander into his path. He gestured slightly and the squeaking little ‘droid was scooted to the side of the hall, out of his way.

As the doors to the lift opened and he entered, there was an almost imperceptible rippling in the Force . . . a tingling deep in his brain that trickled down his neck, over his shoulders and made him shudder slightly. In that tingling, there was an instant moment of recognition. It was the implication of that recognition that enraged him. The doors closed and the lift whisked away, rapidly shuttling him toward his chosen level. The sensation grew stronger, as if the Midichlorians in his blood had suddenly become electrically charged. It was the presence of his old master.

The doors to the lift opened and he exited out into the stream of personnel walking through the corridor. A small group of TIE Pilots was just ahead of him heading toward a hangar, arguing about a known issue with the design of the Ion engines on their fighters. Several officers walked behind, and had fallen silent as his looming presence had entered the walkway.

He pushed the sensation back, focusing on the ship he now saw in the docking bay before him. A voice blared over the hangar loudspeaker as he walked out into the large bay, “Unlock one-five-seven and nine. Release charges.” He heard the sound of pressure venting from something inside the hangar as he made his way to the detachment standing at attention, and the officer awaiting his arrival.

The young officer stepped forward as he came to a stop, “There's no one on board, sir. According to the log, the crew abandoned ship right after takeoff. It must be a decoy, sir. Several of the escape pods have been jettisoned.”

Vader turned his head away, looking the ship over, “Did you find any droids?”

The officer immediately replied, “No, sir. If there were any on board, they must also have jettisoned.”

Had this been just a decoy? Had Obi-Wan, his apprentice and the ‘droids jumped to hyperspace momentarily and then perhaps changed ships, sending this one along to buy themselves some time? The sensation pounding in his veins told him otherwise, “Send a scanning crew on board. I want every part of this ship checked.”

“Yes, sir” replied the officer, as Vader looked back toward the ship once again.

“I sense something. A presence I’ve not felt since . . .” He allowed his words to trail off as he turned and walked away.

A presence I've not felt since Obi-Wan left me for dead, lying in the black volcanic sand and ash, he thought to himself as he walked.

First he accidentally discovers that his former master is alive after years of believing him dead, and now Obi-Wan simply delivers himself?

Why? And why now, after such a long, long time?

He barely heard the officer behind him "Get me a scanning crew in here on the double. I want every part of this ship checked!"

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As all the members of the MFP slept; while winds blew outside, drifting the sand this way and that in the dark of the Tatooine night, the holonet indicator beacon on the command center console blinked on and flashed silently, waiting for a message to be checked.

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I had awakened early, before the dual sunrises for some reason. I had taken the time to quietly clean up and was slipping on my armor plates. We all could have used a bit more sleep, but the late meeting with the inspection crew had robbed us of that. The streets were now filling with people and the activity of a new day awaited us.

Danz, Rogue and 4120 were busy out front in the command center and Topolev was taking his turn in the 'fresher, under the sonic shower. Here on Tatooine, water was far too precious a commodity to be used for something as lavish as a shower, so sonic cleansing was the local practice. The sonic showers actually worked fairly well and cleaned you more thoroughly than water, once you got the hang of using them properly.

Personally, I still preferred standing under hot streams of water for cleaning and relaxing after a long day, but it is not to be. Not here, not now.

My black-rimmed ID tags hung around my neck as I slipped my chest armor over my head. I tucked them inside the front plate and strapped it down snugly. Danz was in the front command center and passed by the open door as he yelled out, "Ddraig! Wake up. You've got a holo message."

Ddraig's eyes opened slightly as he sat up and swung his legs out over the edge of his upper bunk. He yawned and took another deep breath, letting it out slowly as he squeezed his eyes shut tight, then opened. A small groan escaped his lips as he jumped down to the floor. Stretching a bit, he walked out front, sat down at the holonet console, and keyed his personal account entry code. The screen went blank for a moment. He wiped his eyes and yawned again, then the

screen flickered as a text display opened. It was from his friend, TK-1999, in Internal Security, back on Coruscant.

“Ddraig, I can’t stay on this channel long, but I wanted to let you and your men know that the ship that escaped Tatooine yesterday, the Millennium Falcon, was just recovered when she re-entered normal space in the Alderaan asteroid field. Sorry, I forgot, you might not have heard. Tarkin and Vader used the Death Star superlaser on Alderaan. It’s all over the holonet news. The entire planet is gone, there’s nothing left but an asteroid field of planetary fragments.”

Ddraig’s eyes darted a bit faster over the text, “One of our TIE pilots coaxed the ship to give chase, although initial reports now show no passengers. It was thought the controls may have been slave-rigged to respond to other traffic. Once it was brought aboard, at Lord Vader’s request, a scanning crew was brought in to search the ship top to bottom. The initial walk-through turned up nothing. The passengers seemed to have ejected with their cargo. But, just a few moments ago, TK-0421 and another trooper were found stunned, lying naked in the engine compartment of the captured ship. A search has been mounted as it is possible the fugitives may still be onboard the Death Star. Thanks for the efforts you and your unit made to stop these rebels. I just wanted to update you. I’ll fill you in more as information trickles through from the station. I handle all the official communiqués to Imperial Center and the Palace. I’ll know about it before the Emperor does. Enjoy the sand, buddy. TK-1999 out.”

The screen faded back to darkness, and Ddraig sat motionless for a moment. Then he stood up, “Tarkin and Lord Vader tested the Death Star on Alderaan . . . the planet’s completely blown away . . . there’s only an asteroid field there now.”

“What!?” said Rogue. 4120 looked around, stunned, as did Danz. Ddraig continued, “He also said the Millennium Falcon was captured by the Station. It must have been heading to Alderaan when it was captured. None of the passengers have been recovered yet, just the ship . . . the message was from my friend back on Coruscant. He works in Internal Security, and receives all inbound communications to the Emperor. We probably got this before his Excellency.”

Rogue nodded, “Thanks for letting us know . . . well, we won’t need to head back to Anchorhead now” he noted, glancing over to 4120, “The Inspection Team will be filing their report with Lord Vader soon. They have all the information detailing our search and the Anchorhead interrogation, as well as the bits of information we discovered about the missing nephew farmhand, Luke, and the old man accompanying him. If they can tie that to something aboard the ship, maybe they’ll have a chance of finding them . . . it doesn’t sound too promising though. If everyone jettisoned in the onboard lifepods early in the flight, they could be anywhere. It’s beyond us now. What a pity about Alderaan, they had such beautiful works of art there.”

Ddraig nodded slowly, then slipped back into the bunkroom to tell the rest of us as 4120 spoke up, “I can’t believe Alderaan is gone!” Rogue nodded, “We need to place a notice for the Moisture Farmers . . . organize a meeting so everyone knows we’re here . . . start a dialogue with them to hear some of their concerns. That’s why we’re here.” 4120 nodded, “Yeah, I’ll get right on it. You know . . . Lord Vader is going to have nothing but more questions about the

origins of the flight and the outcast Jedi once the inspection crew files their report. We should pay a personal visit to the port authority to see if we've gotten everything they know."

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After a brief, morning meal of field rations, Falker, Ddraig, Felth and 0600 headed out to the port authority office to see if more information could be obtained about the Millennium Falcon and her crew. Rogue, Blade, 4120 and Danz were out on the streets putting up public notices about the meeting with the moisture farmers and Topolev, Etz and I had gone back down into the storage cache in the rear room to finish going through the inventory.

Etz stood on a repulsor sled, as he worked on the luminaries in the ceiling. He finished his wiring and closed the overhead panel, then lowered the sled to within a foot of the ground. "That astromech doesn't look that bad . . . you think you can fix it Deckard?" He activated the wall-mounted switch, and the overhead lighting flickered on, brightly lighting up the room. "Much better", said Topolev, as he finished opening a few more crates in the back of the room. I thoughtfully looked the little 'droid over as I strained to scoot the heavy mech out to the lift, "I think so . . . but I'm definitely going to need a few parts". I positioned the burned out 'droid in the center of the lift, next to a crate of blasters, "We can check out some of the local shops when we're done here. They should have what I'll need . . . this little guy's been around a while . . . and outdated parts seem to be a specialty around here."

Topolev laughed as he kept working. Etz put down his tools and walked over to the bay door he had been ready to open the night before. He stood there, looking at it for a moment, then reached up and slid the lever to one side. The lights he had just repaired overhead flickered slightly and there was a deep rumbling in the floor as the large bay doors began to slide open. Topolev stepped out from where he was, and I walked over to Etz, standing next to the shelf of arrest records as the doors parted.

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"There has to be more!" demanded Falker, slamming his fist down on the desk of the Harbor Master. "This Port Authority office is a joke" said Ddraig, disgusted. 0600 moved closer to the desk as Falker walked away to keep from strangling the bloated, reptilian officer seated behind it. Felth watched the door as 0600 pulled off his bucket and leaned in close to the officer, "Show me the flight records for the past 72 standard hours . . . or you won't live long enough to receive another payment from Jabba the Hutt to keep those records secure", and he flipped on the power cell on his holstered E-11.

Beads of sweat formed on the officer's brow, as 0600 held his locked stare. The sweat beads began trickling down the scaly face of the officer as the high-pitched whine of the power cell cycled up to full. 0600, still locked in his stare, thumbed loose the holster snap, freeing the blaster. "You win! I'll get you the records", said the officer, "but Jabba won't be very happy with you". 0600 leaned even closer, "Do I look like I care what Jabba thinks of me?" The officer shook his head quickly. "Get them now" said 0600. The officer stood, moving to the back room, under the watchful eye, and trained blaster muzzle of Falker. 0600 had lost his

brother to one of Jabba's henchmen years ago, and now Taka was dead. The Hutt was hiding information he needed to find a rebel killer . . . perhaps it was time for the crime lord to be disposed of.

Felth shifted a bit in the back of the room, taking everything in as the Harbor Master returned with several data cards. "You'll find the records you're looking for on these. The crew of the YT-1300 Corellian ship, the *Millenium Falcon* is Han Solo, and his first mate, Chewbacca, the Wookiee . . . they're regulars here. They come and go for long stretches, but eventually they always end up back here. You might also want to track down Dash Rendar. He's Captain of the *Outrider*, a Corellian YT-2400 and a friend of Solo's . . . and he was in town until yesterday. He raised ship a few hours before the 'Falcon. They both have worked for Jabba over the years. That's all I know, I swear. The rest of the details are on the cards".

0600 took the cards and walked out, followed by the others. The Harbor Master closed his eyes in relief, breathing a bit easier now that they were gone. Then he turned to his holonet port and opened a direct line to Jabba's court.

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Blade posted a notice on the wall of the marketplace as Rogue worked the other side of the courtyard. Even this early in the morning, the marketplace was filled with farmers and merchants, peddling their wares, services and crops, and with others buying or just trying to get under the draped overhead canopies and out of the direct rays of the suns. Danz and Blade spoke with several of the farmers who were voicing their concerns about recent increase in activity from the Sandpeople. "I've had water stolen from six 'vaporators this week alone . . . and they vandalized the repair 'droid that was out there working. They don't much bother the units out in the dunes, but the ones that skirt the Wastes are always being raided." "I heard the Sandpeople raided a farm yesterday, killing the owners!" Danz nodded, "I understand your concerns and frustrations . . . this is exactly what we want to hear from you . . . but at the meeting. We're here to help make sure you can get your crops harvested without interference of any kind."

"About time" said one of the older farmers, as the crowd dispersed and they went back to their work. "The meeting is tomorrow morning here in the market area. We'll all find out more then. Spread the word to the outlying farms", said 4120. Danz shook his head, "Rough crowd". 4120 laughed "Yeah". As the troops regrouped on the far side of the square and headed off to post more notices, a figure watched them go, then flipped open a commlink and began speaking in Huttese.

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I could hear sand being crushed and ground down as the large doors slid all the way open . . . and then there was silence . . . absolute still silence. Topolev walked over to us and the three of us stepped through the opening into the cool darkness that lay beyond. Etz reached for a luminary control on the wall, but there was none.

Slowly, our unaided human eyes adjusted to the dim light stolen from the adjacent room behind us. The darkness ahead was basically an empty room, save one large object in the center. As our eyes adjusted further, we were able to make out the rounded, sloping body of what appeared to be a transport-type vehicle. We all stepped closer to the craft. It was a very sleek troop transport.

Although the end we were facing appeared to be the rear thrusters, as we walked around, it became clear that it was actually the front, and the thrusters were for close, tight maneuvering . . . open-air cockpit seating was situated just above them.

As we continued around, we saw that the rear of the transport was low and open, with a wide tailboard for easy deployment and quick, retreating dust-offs. There were benches down both sides of the open-air, rear troop compartment, with hooks on the walls and the deck plates for securing prisoners. An array of armaments were built-in and flush, beneath the skins of the ship to maintain its' unbroken curving surface.

Etz walked around the left side, as Topolev and I walked around the right. Several fueling lines were draped over hooks on the rear wall. I followed the lines of the stony walls up to the ceiling overhead. There was a seam running down the center of the ceiling, appearing to be the dividing line between a set of doors that would open to take the ship out. Topolev and Etz saw what I was looking at, both looking up. Etz reached for another lever on the wall, "This must open the upper doors" as his hand wrapped around the handle.

"WAIT!" yelled Topolev. "Think about where we are right now. Those doors must open up in the courtyard behind the barracks. At least one of the shuttle's landing gear assemblies is probably on top of them . . . if you open that up, the shuttle comes crashing in". Etz removed his hand from the lever. "You're right . . . good call." Topolev exhaled heavily, "That was close." He looked over to the ship "This thing's a prototype, I saw plans similar to this when I was stationed on Kashyyyk, but I never saw one make it to production." I walked a little closer, running my hand over the smooth, curving metal "It's pretty slick whatever it is."

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As he walked behind his men up the narrow stairs from the marketplace toward the crowded streets above, Rogue unclipped his commlink and keyed the transmit button, "Garindan, meet us at the building across from the Cantina. I repeat, Meet us at the building across from the Cantina." There were a few moments of white noise static from the tiny speaker and then "Of course". Rogue snapped off the comm and returned it to his belt.

The crowds parted as they spilled out onto the street. No one wanted to make eye contact for fear they might be dragged into something. The elders here remembered living through the Clone Wars and the troops from that time. The armor was a bit different and there were no longer clones underneath, but the mission was the same, loyalty to the success of the Empire and suppression of the people to make it so, forcefully whenever necessary.

The group marched in formation through the blistering sand, thankful for every slight breeze that managed to blow under the armor plates and lower edges of their helmets. The shimmering twin suns were now almost directly overhead, blasting everything that dared venture into the open with punishing heat. A narrow sliver of the largest of Tatooine's three moons was barely visible out over the Dune Sea as it prepared to slip below the horizon, and the sky was clear . . . no clouds, but then there were hardly ever clouds on Tatooine. With only 1% surface water, a total population of around 200,000, and Moisture Farmers constantly coaxing the little water they could from the atmosphere . . . well . . . clouds, in any large abundance, were definitely a rare occurrence.

As the small group drew closer to the Cantina, they could see the darkly-robed figure of Garindan in the distance, working his way through the crowded street, heading their way. Rogue activated his bucket's comm chin switch, "Falker, any luck with the Harbor Master?" A brief moment of silence was broken by Falker's static-laden reply "Yeah. I think we've got some good information to check once we get back to base."

"Great news." said Rogue "We're at base now, we'll see you soon . . . 1009 out". His sign-off was immediately followed by a slight burst of static. He flipped the chin switch from comm mode back to broadcast mode. "Blade, go on ahead inside and get the data card reader ready for us. We'll be inside as soon as the snitch arrives. I want to see what he knows about our mysterious, exiled Jedi". Blade nodded and walked off the main road down the alley to our front portal and entered. Danz leaned a little closer to Rogue and 4120 as he moved his head side to side, watching the passersby on the street "Do you think he knows anything?"

4120 looked to his CO, but Rogue kept a watchful eye on his dark Kubaz spy as he drew closer "If he knew the other troops stationed here, he's been here a long time . . . hopefully he's as connected as he says he is . . . I just hope he isn't working both sides."

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The disturbing images of TK-1138's violent death at the hands of the hooded and robed old hermit came to a close, and we saw the final, sideways images of the boy and old man walking past the helmet camera. The display screen on the card reader flashed to static as the recording came to an end. Rogue pulled the helmet data card out of the slot as Garindan settled back in his seat, silent for a moment, in thought. He had seen the old man many times over the years in the cantina, drinking silently at the bar, but never paid him much attention. He was just a quiet loner that lived somewhere out in the rocky hills of the Jundland wastes, who rarely ventured into town. Blade, Danz and 4120 stood around him with Rogue, as I entered the room from the barracks in the back, wiping a power coupling from the damaged 'droid on a dirty rag.

Garindan shifted in his seat and turned his goggled eyes to face Rogue, "I have seen this man before, but know nothing of him", which was of course, only partially the truth. "There are two others that have spent time in Chalmun's Cantina that may know something of him. Over the years I have seen the old man speaking with the pilot BoShek and the Ithorian, Mamow Nadon . .

. the Hammerhead. He has spent more time with Nadon, and only recently did I see him speak with BoShek. The hermit goes by the name Ben Kenobi.”

As he finished speaking, Falker, Ddraig, Felth and 0600 entered from the street. Falker spoke, “We’ve got all the flight records for the past 72 hours right here” holding up the data cards “. . . now we just have to go through them to find the information we’re looking for. It turns out the Harbor Master is on the Hutt’s payroll, and he was hiding flight records, until 0600 . . . explained . . . to him how badly we needed them. I think a visit to Jabba the Hutt is definitely in order after we complete the business at hand . . . just to touch base and let him know we’re here.”

Rogue turned slightly at the waist, shaking the helmet data card at him, “If the Harbor Master’s on the payroll, you can be sure the Hutt was notified about us the moment we first touched down. We’ll see him . . . when the time is right.” He stepped away, pacing across the room a bit as Etz and Topolev joined us in the command center and I spoke up, “If both of these other contacts were known to frequent Chalmun’s, we need a sweep of the bar to locate them. If Bo Shek is a pilot, he could leave at any moment.” Falker leaned in a bit toward Garindan, “The Harbor Master mentioned another pilot named Dash Rendar . . . said he was a pilot and friend to Han Solo, the Captain of the *Millenium Falcon*. Do you know anything about him?”

“Rendar . . . Rendar and Solo are competitive rivals when it comes to the speed of their starships . . . the *Outrider* and the *Millenium Falcon* . . . but, then again, so is BoShek. As far as I know, Rendar and Solo are friends, but BoShek has been boasting recently that he beat Solo’s time on the Kessel Run . . . which he did, but he did it with no cargo loaded onboard his ship, *Infinity*. Solo wasn’t happy about the grand claims and quickly set BoShek straight as to the rules of the game. They’re all free-lance spacers, and have flown for Jabba the Hutt over the years. BoShek has also flown for the B’Omar Monks on occasion. Rendar has been in town for about a week, but raised ship just before Solo did. I’m not sure where he was headed, but I do know he had a recent meeting with the Hutt.”

“The records we just got our hands on should give us more information about that” said 0600, and he grabbed the cards from Falker. He motioned for Garindan to get up, and the Kubaz spy complied. Rogue spoke to us as his friend sat down, “Deckard, take Etz, Topolev, Falker and Ddraig over to the Cantina . . . see if our targets are in there. If not, find out more about where we can find BoShek and Mamow Nadon”. 0600 sat down at the reader and inserted the first card to begin pouring through the records in search of something that might help. “0600, let 1265 take over that reader and do the searching . . . I want you to come with me, Danz, 4120, Blade and Felth” said Rogue. “We’re going to head back to the Lars place to see if there’s anything left behind that ties Luke to old Ben Kenobi. If we don’t find anything there, we’ll head back to Tosche Station in Anchorhead and press Fixer and his friends for more information. Let’s move, people, it’s already almost midday.”

We all moved to the bunkroom to gear up as Garindan moved toward the door . . . Rogue followed, stopping at the doorway. “We need everything we can find on this *Ben Kenobi* and his involvement with Luke, Owen Lars’ nephew. Time is of the essence . . . Lord Vader will

have questions about them both very soon . . . we need to have answers ready. Keep in touch, and let me know what you uncover.” Garindan nodded his large head and beak and disappeared outside, heading toward the main street. Rogue grabbed his pack and pulled it on, closely watching the dark-robed spy disappear into the crowds, “My team, let’s go! Everyone in the shuttle out back . . . 4120, you’re flying.”

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