

Chapter 16

My arm was buried up to the elbow, and the part in question was well out of sight. I closed my eyes, heightening the awareness of all sensations in my fingertips. I was absolutely focused on feeling the rotation of the fuel line coupler until the threads on the small part finally caught.

The swoop bike I had picked up at the parts store wasn't that old, but had been treated roughly and had been in dire need of some basic repairs and maintenance. I tightened the piece down by hand and then reached for the coupler wrench to finish the job. When it was firmly in place, I pulled my arm out of the small space in the engine compartment.

As I wiped off the thick, black lubricants that were smeared across my forearm, Holder came running into the courtyard, closely followed by Falker and Topolev. All three crossed behind the Sentinel and looped back around to the loading dock where I was working.

Winded, and barely able to form the words to speak, Topolev leaned against the dock with his head hung low, gasping in breaths, "Not bad, Holder. You're showing some improvement."

"Improvement my ass." said Holder. "I ran both of you guys until you could barely keep up. I'm fine. I haven't felt better than this in a long time."

"Yeah." wheezed Topolev, "Me too. Never better."

Falker laughed, his chest heaving also, "I don't think there's much more we can do to help you, Holder. It looks like you're back in pretty decent shape now." His last words were strained and forced out as his breath ran out. The astromech that had been assisting me with the swoop bike beeped and whistled as it completed the system check on the swoop's electronic systems.

"Deck, how much more do you have to do to this thing before It'll work?" asked Holder.

I disconnected one end of the data cable from the 'droid and the other from the bike. "There are still some minor adjustments needed on the thrust bias to smooth it out some, but it should run now. Actually, I guess it's ready for a test."

The 'droid moved away as I stood up and rolled one leg over the saddle. I silently mouthed a phrase about breaking someone's knees if this didn't work, and switched the power on with the grip activator. As I did, the displays winked on showing thrust sequencing and power cell readings. The engines stuttered once as the air bubbles in the repaired fuel line worked their way through. When the engine finally kicked in, it kicked in strong and then calmed to a steady and constant whine.

Holder nodded his head approvingly, "Sounds good, man. You going for a test ride?"

I suddenly remembered that I still had the coded directions to Kenobi's home in the tracking device in my belt pouch. It had been a couple of weeks since I had found the site, but had not been fortunate enough to have the time to return. "Yeah, I might take it out of the city and run it out into the Dune Sea. I can really open it up and see what she'll do out there."

"Sounds good. I'll tell Rogue you're gone for a while."

I reached over to the loading dock and grabbed the tools and an extra power cell, tossing them into one of the saddlebags just in case I might need them. I clipped my forearm and hand armor back on and pulled my bucket securely down on my head. With everything in place, I rolled the

bike into a slow turn out through the narrow alley into the street out front. Dust and sand sprayed up as I stepped down on the accelerator pedal and headed out across the city in the direction of the Dune Sea.

The little `droid had rolled up the loading dock ramp and through the open bay door. Holder grabbed Topolev's hand and pulled him to a standing position, "C'mon, brother, let's go."

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The sand and stone on the floor of the canyon I was in streaked by as I opened up the throttle. I had been able to breathe life back into the damaged bike, and it felt good to get more life out of it. I noted a tall spire of stone atop the right cliff face. I knew I was close to the right area as I approached where it opened out to the edge of the Dunes.

The tracking unit had me located almost on top of the mapped coordinates. I noticed something ahead, so I cut back on my speed, and slowed down considerably. As I drew closer I could see it was a ship draped in very effective sand-colored camouflaging nets. The swoop slid up alongside it as I cut the engines off. The bike coasted to a stop and I dismounted, pulling off my helmet.

The ship had a long, narrow fuselage whose nose protruded from beneath the netting, which had been rolled back by the dry gusting winds. There was a quad-pack of engines clustered in the rear; two on either side of the cockpit. It had a broad wingspan with wingtip cannon armaments. I glanced around quickly as I recognized the fighter. It was one of two preferred fighter craft currently in service by the Alliance. It was the lethal T-65 X-wing fighter, but its pilot was nowhere to be found.

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The golden metallic chance cubes dangled at the end of a delicate chain firmly gripped in the Wook's left hand. He wasn't sure about Solo's reasons for not wanting them in the *'Falcon's* cockpit. Maybe the cocky Corellian had a hidden superstitious streak in him. Whatever the reason, he had a definite disliking for them. Chewie draped them over the control lever that jutted from the overhanging bulkhead and grinned with a mischievous woof-woofing that could only have been the Wookiee equivalent of laughter.

He reached back in the leather pouch at his waist pulling out a rag and some small tools for cleaning the bowcaster that lay across the console in front of him. Gripping it underneath and holding it up, he carefully wiped it down and was preparing a small tool for cleaning out the firing mechanism when a warning indicator flashed on the wall panel beside his head. The system scan had uncovered something.

He set the bowcaster down and flipped off the warning. Then he turned, shaking his head, toward the system monitoring display to see what had been detected. The *'Falcon* had so many custom upgrades and modifications that system scan "anomalies" were not always a bad thing.

The data on the screen scrolled past at a dizzying rate until the screen locked onto a highlighted row showing a slight electrical pulse wave in the hyperdrive motivator core. He had spent more than his fair share of time down in the drive pit working on the engines on this ship, and had run countless monitoring sweeps on the drive system until it was tuned to near perfection. This pulse wave didn't belong.

He stood up sharply and stepped out of the cockpit headed to the rear and the drive engines. The air in the ship was still and quiet. All the systems except the scan had been shut down. The

large, furry Wookiee hands gripped the gridded deck plate as strong arms lifted the panel aside, exposing the heart of the *'Falcon*.

Chewie placed his hands on both edges of the pit and suspended himself as he swung his long legs over the edge, groaning slightly. Gently he lowered himself down to the pit floor and let go. The crisscrossed metal rods of the alluvial dampers, hydrospanners and the lower central core of the motivator cluster were still and lifeless and quiet. As he visually scanned the pit, looking over the parts, peering back into the shadowy recesses, he reached into his leather pouch again and withdrew a small handheld sweep scanner.

The tiny screen winked on as he calibrated it for a specific search. Then he initiated the device, which began emitting a popping ping sound as it searched for a detectable electrical pulse pattern. Almost immediately the display indicated a yellow triangle to his right. He moved the scanner in that direction and the yellow triangle centered itself on the screen as he brought it around to the power cable bundles that fed the motivator cluster stack.

Leaning closer, he realized that it wasn't coming from the stack, as the triangle moved off-center. He pulled back a bit and moved the scanner up a bit to a panel that covered the branching wiring harnesses. He pressed the flush release latch, opening the small durasteel hatch. Inside was a rat's nest of wires, and nestled in the center, bolted to the bulkhead at the back of the panel was a silver device about the size of a thermal detonator.

Chewie's eyes narrowed. It was definitely not part of the ship. Solo had removed a device similar to this back in the temple hangar on Yavin IV. He had only heard of twin-core transponders, but had never seen one until now. The Empire was playing for keeps this time, and this was a little too close to home for his liking. The Wookiee's furry lip curled back and Chewbacca growled angrily as his incredibly strong right hand ripped the device from the bulkhead.

With it firmly in his grip, he climbed out of the pit and raced off to the boarding ramp. He was about halfway down to the landing pad when he threw the transponder out to the duracrete and drew his bowcaster up to fire. A double-tap of crimson flashed from the weapon, disintegrating the Imperial tracking device as it tumbled over the ground. A small curl of smoke rose up from what was left of it. Chewie lowered the bowcaster as he turned to head back to the cockpit, not seeing the smoking trails streaking across the sky as Imperial landing craft and deployment pods made their way to the Naboo surface.

He slipped into Solo's chair and held down the comm key, barking into the microphone in a series of angry howls and throaty hollers.

*

One of the devices clamped onto Solo's belt buzzed as he looked out over the water from beneath the trees that shaded the courtyard. He put down his drink and reached for it, pulling the comm from its holder and flicking it on. Wookiee howls and barks spewed out as soon as the channel opened. He looked up into the sky noticing rolling clouds as he responded, "Calm down Chewie, slow down. Start over, pal. You know I can't follow you when you get all worked up talking fast like that."

The Wook began again, trying to control himself as he relayed his discovery to Solo. Concern washed over the Corellian's face as his copilot continued. Then as he continued to listen to the howls and groans, his eyes darted back up toward the sky as a chest-crushing, rumbling sound rained from above. The ground was shaking, and across the lake, the rapidly gathering clouds seemed to be spontaneously forming across the skies above Theed. Yane came running from the

lake house across the courtyard toward him "What's going on? What's happening?"

She ran up to the stone railing beside Solo, looking out across the water as small dark shapes began to emerge, falling out of the rumbling clouds. A few seconds later, the unmistakable scream from the twin ion engines of Imperial TIE fighters reached them. As it did, the frothy clouds parted, revealing the sloping bow of an Imperial Star Destroyer emerging from concealment with another behind it.



As they watched, Imperial all terrain walkers advanced down the main boulevard, terrorizing the masses gathered there to honor their royal dead. Han's eyes were wide and his mind raced trying to figure a way out of this one, "Chewie, get her fired up and hidden somewhere nearby. Don't try to get to me. It's too much of a risk to try and get away twice. You can't afford to be seen until we're ready to go. I'm already on my way back."

He turned to Yane as he secured the comm back on his belt, "I've gotta get back to the shipping terminal, what's the most hidden way?" She was still staring across the water at the horror unfolding before them. "Yane!" She jumped and turned to him, as if startled from a dream, "What do they want?"

Solo stared back at her, "They want me and my ship, for helping the cause that Bria gave her life to support. Right now, I need you to focus and honor her memory. What's the best way back to the terminal?"

"I . . . I know a way that will hide you from these searching eyes." she stammered, and began to run toward the upper terrace, Han running after her.

"Hurry, I have an airspeeder. We need to make it to the royal hangar before the troops get there. Beneath it are water tunnels that were once used for power generation. They should be deserted."

* * *

The expansive ceiling of the sparkling blue sky overhead stretched from one horizon to the other, unobstructed by anything but the occasional wisp of thin clouds. Sunlight glittered across the pristine frozen landscape, and the endless snowdrifts of this beautiful but brutally unforgiving place muffled all echoes; swallowed all noise but the bitter, wailing wind. A spray of ice crystals, caught in the swift, frigid breeze, blew in a thin fog just above the ground.

The rebel scout, lying on his belly at the crest of the snow ridge pulled his scarf tighter across his mouth and raised the macrobinoculars to his goggle covered eyes. He was sure there had been movement in the next valley. The electronically enhanced image flickered slightly but showed nothing. He swept the lenses back and forth trying to confirm what he thought he had seen. It appeared there was nothing. He switched them off and slung them back under his left arm.

As he turned his attention away from the valley and back to securing an anchored hook at the mouth of the ice cave he was about to explore, he failed to see an enormous creature covered in frost-white fur rise from its still, crouched position in the valley. It ran in a standing posture, taking huge strides, and quickly disappearing over the crest of the hill on the far side of the valley.

The shaggy animal with the saddle just behind the soldier sniffed at the air and shifted uneasily from one leg to the other. It turned its head sharply to one side, exhaling with a loud, strained whine followed by a shudder that started at its head and worked its way through the rest of the body. The scout glanced back at his ride, and then back to the work at hand. He fed his line through the secured hook, gave an abrupt tug, then dropped his legs over the edge of the opening and lowered himself inside.

Although a cave to be used for the main hangar and base of operations had already been located and was actively being carved out for use, there was still the matter of where to locate the main power generators for the site. This cave was already proving to be very promising for that purpose. He slid down the line a bit, digging the spikes on his boots into the face of the wall just inside the cave mouth and looked around.



This cave was narrow, but would allow most of the power generators to be hidden underground with only the top half revealed for venting purposes. He drew his left forearm up to his face and pressed the comm button, "Echo one to echo base, location confirmed. Send the cutters and engineers to my mark."

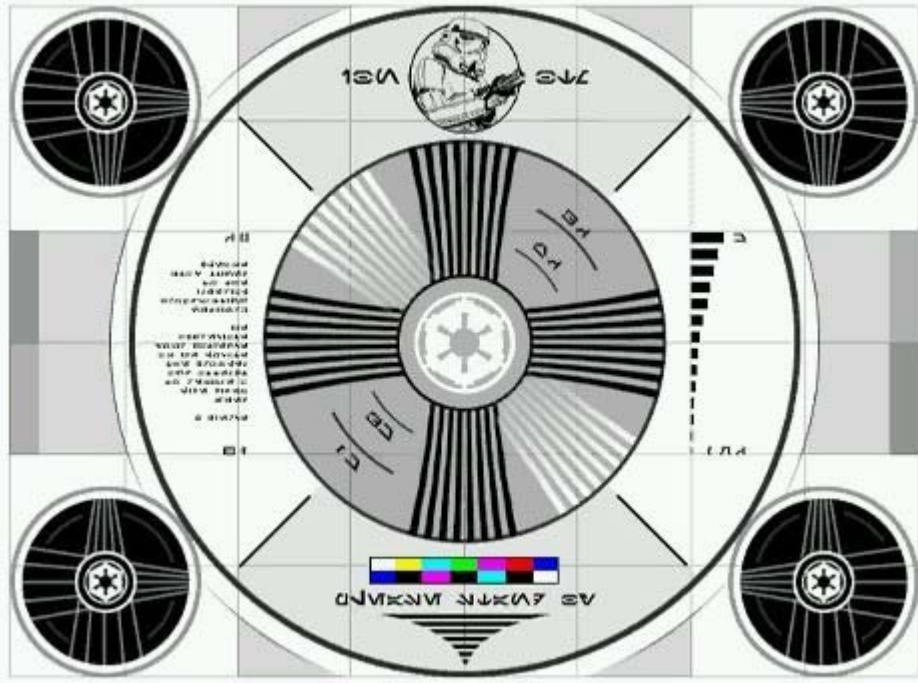
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Flashes of lightning tore through the clouded, darkening sky over Theed as deadly static discharges from the hull of the Destroyer arced to the ground. A strong wind whipped over the speeder, shaking it violently, as cool air rushed in to replace the superheated air boiling up and away from the massive ship's steaming hull.

Han was eyeing the silenced monitor on the instrument cluster. It showed a live news feed of AT-ATs advancing on the downtown plaza, firing into the crowds. People were running frantically as several of the monuments were destroyed under fire from the mobile cannons. The feed abruptly switched over to the broadcast center showing Stormtroopers swarming into the smoky building. Han reached over to increase the volume.

A reporter was yelling to be heard over the explosions and blaster fire behind him, "I repeat, the Empire has taken control of the palace and all royal hangars. I advise everyone to take

immediate cover!" The video feed jumped through several views of the royal plaza and then to a view of the hangars with Stormtroopers pouring in through the open doors, assuming control. As the image flickered and jumped back to the reporter, Stormtroopers had advanced on his position, showing no hesitation in blasting a wide hole through him as he continued his broadcast. He slumped to the floor, and as several troopers took over his position, the monitor suddenly cut to a static test pattern and tone.



Yané raced across both rivers and through groves of huge, lush trees heading for the hangar. "It's just ahead", she shouted.

"Can't go that way" yelled Han pointing at the monitor, "They're already there."

She looked at the monitor momentarily and cut her eyes away quickly as she responded, "They're shutting things down in a hurry. What'd you do?"

Han grinned, remembering the role he had played in reducing the Death Star to a debris field. "I don't know . . . I might have broken something of theirs."

Remembering the time she had spent doing research for the queen in the archives, she abruptly changed course, veering to the right and gaining altitude. The airspeeder climbed quickly and was headed straight for a cluster of tall, domed towers that rose up along the banks of the river.



As they came around, Han saw stone bridges connecting the towers and spires reaching up from their domes, with the rushing river water far below. Then he saw the grassy landing pad on the roof of the tower they were heading for.

"This isn't as direct as going through the hangars, but there's another connecting entrance to the water tunnels beneath the archives in the bowels of these towers. Let's just hope they aren't here yet."

* * *

The small holocron, pulling at his insides, had successfully led the young Rebel Commander away from his landing site at Kenobi's hermitage. Luke's tendency to doubt was definitely being tested, as the cube had delivered him deeper into the stony cliffs where caves now littered the rock walls. With foresight, he had shed his flight jacket, leaving it with the poncho inside Kenobi's home, and had now rolled up the sleeves and unfastened the top few buttons of his crisp officer's shirt.

He climbed carefully over the sharp stone outcroppings further and further up into the deep crevasse, heading toward the summit which overlooked the canyons below. As he approached the top of the ridge, a very large opening, hidden from anyone below this treacherous point came into view as he reached this obscure vantage point. It was a heavily weathered opening, leading into the cool darkness of a large cave.

Beneath this opening was a spillway of small rocks and stone slabs. The lonely calling of the wind was all he heard as he drew closer, kneeling to examine one of them. It had been carefully dumped with all the others to either side of the path leading toward the cave, but did not appear to be a natural deposit of broken stone. The flat surfaces of the slabs were perfectly flat, while their stone edges appeared to have melted, oozing out over the edge before re-solidifying. He ran his fingers over the smooth, rounded mounds of stone along the edges as he looked around at the many similar slabs.

He stood up, wiped his face and carefully headed up the path into the opening ahead. As he stepped into the inky darkness, his vision was suddenly shrouded with a dark green patch where the glaring sunlight outside had temporarily stained his retina. The green color slowly faded away as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. He could now see that the ceiling of the enormous cave was nearly ten meters above. The lowest level here was small, with the gouged out remains

of a stone water collection pool in the floor, most likely fed at one time by Kenobi's vaporator.

This lowest level had not been opened up as much as the levels above, but was open completely to the roof above. Ben had probably left it in its' natural state to avoid calling attention to himself. Luke walked to the back wall of the cave. Curving steps had been hewn from the stone here; carved right into the wall. He ascended them, circling around to a second level.

Here, an assortment of small hand tools, electronics and flimsy documents, bound in some type of animal skin leather, sat exactly where they had been left behind on a stone workbench. It too had been carved right into the stone of one of the side walls. He stepped closer, running his hands over the smooth, flat surface of the bench and out to the same melted, oozing edges he had seen on the slabs outside. Obi-Wan must have carved out portions of this cave with his lightsaber, slicing through the stone and leaving smooth, rounded, molten edges behind. He walked away from the bench over to a half wall which provided a view to the level below.

After a brief look down, he turned away, scanning the rest of the room, which was empty. He made his way back to the steps and ascended to the third and final level of the cave home. This was a very small room that had been hollowed out just beneath the top of the ridge line. A small overlook afforded a view to the lower levels of the cave and a narrow slot, also pierced by a lightsaber, allowed an amazing view of the canyons and Dune Sea as well as the path which twisted its' way up to the cave.

This small space was most likely where Kenobi had slept, protected and able to see anyone or anything approaching. Luke sat down, crossing his legs and closed his eyes, feeling the lingering energy in the stone around him. It clearly resonated, even now, with the undeniable presence of Ben Obi Wan Kenobi. As he sat with his eyes closed, the small cube began rearranging its' inner structure once again, ending with a slight click, and the flickering image of Obi Wan appeared again.

"Hello again, young one. If this portion of the recordings have been triggered, you have successfully found my cave. This was my first, temporary home. It was rough, but served its' purpose well enough. There are a few things I have left behind that you will need to know about, and I will explain them to you but first, I want you to understand a bit more about Jedimaster Sifo Dyas.

My master, Qui Gon Jinn, Sifo Dyas and Count Dooku were all close, lifelong friends and held similar beliefs, especially those regarding the failings of the Republic and the erosion of the Jedi Order. While they were all Jedimasters, each defied the council in their own small ways when they felt the path chosen by the group was leading them astray as individuals.

Qui Gon felt the Jedi were losing touch with the Force, and routinely ignored the council's wishes if he felt the Force guiding him elsewhere along a different path.

Dooku was obsessed with collecting and studying Sith antiques and artifacts, and kept a private collection of his found treasures.

Sifo Dyas held many thoughts similar to those of Qui Gon, and was a student of lightsaber combat, both Jedi and Sith forms. He allowed himself to second guess the council when he deemed it necessary, but also felt very strongly that the Republic was worth saving and could be reformed.

When the Sith revealed themselves to Qui Gon on the sands of Tatooine, Sifo Dyas sensed the growing power of the elusive Sith Lord, and foresaw a great conflict that would tear the Republic

apart. When Qui Gon and I escorted the Naboo queen back to her homeworld, Sifo Dyas and Dooku carefully constructed a view of what they felt was happening, that a Sith lord was manipulating the guilds of the Trade Federation into beginning a war.

Distraught over their conclusions, it was decided that Sifo Dyas would secretly meet with Kaminoan cloners and begin construction of an army that would be totally loyal to the republic and assist the Jedi in turning back this threat. Dooku, with his in-depth knowledge of Sith artifacts, would seek out and hunt down the Sith Lord.

It was the death of my master, Qui Gon, that sent Dooku over the edge. I killed the Sith apprentice, Darth Maul, but the death of his friend boiled over in his emotional search for the Sith Lord. Allowing his emotions to steer his course, he opened himself up to manipulation and control, and was lost to the seductive power of the Dark side, becoming the Sith Lord's new apprentice.

The first act Dooku performed as a Sith was to return to the Jedi Temple, erase Kamino from the archives and murder Sifo Dyas, thereby erasing all evidence of the army that was being cultivated. Dooku lied to the council, saying that Syfo Dyas' death had been an accident, caused by a heated argument between them over Qui Gon and the state of the Republic.

Although the exact circumstances of the death were never revealed, Dooku was expelled from the Order.

It is important that you understand what led to the formation of what is now known as the Empire. Those who do not learn from history are destined to repeat it."

The image of Obi Wan flickered a bit, and he lowered his head, catching his breath and regaining his composure before continuing.

"The tools and stones you found in my home, when combined with the parts and instructions found on my workbench will allow you to create your own lightsaber. Yes, you have your father's, but part of the Jedi journey is crafting your own, as a final test. You will not need these items now, but should something happen to your father's blade, these items will take on immense value to you. If you take them with you, you run the risk of them being lost or captured. Leave them here in the cave and no one will find them or bother them here. When you need them, you'll know just where they are.

This place, along with my home, are yours to do with as you see fit. They will serve you well should you need a temporary home here on Tatooine, far away from the reaches of Vader. You do not need to fear him coming here. He lost something of great value here, and will most likely never return. This holocron will activate when certain triggers are met, when you need me most. May the Force Be With You, young one." The Jedimaster smiled, and the hologram retracted into the cube, leaving Luke alone in the dark.

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Sand crunched on the flat, stony slab beneath my boots as I pushed against the cool metal of the curved handlebars. The swoop slid silently on its repulsor field as I guided it back into the shadows of the low, narrow slot in the stone wall of the canyon. When I felt it was sufficiently hidden, I turned my head to check the line of sight from here, and could not see the X-wing fighter. Propping my helmet on the saddle, I drew my blaster, and walked off with the locator in the other hand to find Kenobi's home.

The lighted blip on the small screen indicated that I was very close. I watched carefully for the rebel pilot as I climbed the rocks of the hillside, sweeping my blaster back and forth across the terrain. As I drew closer to the top of the ridge, I could see the top of a moisture 'vaporator sticking up into the cerulean sky. The stone outcroppings I climbed over were blistering from their exposure to the blazing suns' glare all day.

I felt the small rippling of the capillaries in my body glove opening to accept the cooled fluids from my backpack. Unfortunately, I wore no pack, and had no cool fluids to fill it with. I continued my climb, eventually arriving at a clearing on the hillside. I swept the immediate area for signs of life, both visually and with my scanner, but there were none to be found here.

Placing the deactivated locator back on my belt, I crossed the sandy clearing to a small, time-weathered building situated just beyond the 'vaporator. It was square in shape with a center dome on top, and had an amazing view in one direction out into the Dune Sea, and down the canyon in the other.



As I entered the cool shade inside, I noticed there was one large room with supporting columns spaced throughout. It was subdivided into small living areas, with only one small hallway to the private bedchambers in the back. Sweat rolled down my face from the blistering heat outside, as I cautiously looked around. The old Jedi had certainly led a sparse existence. A single plate and cup sat neatly arranged near what appeared to be a food preparation area.

I lifted the lid on a chest and rifled through some articles of clothing but found nothing of interest. A sudden wind gust blew open the unlatched front door, slamming it into the stone wall behind. I whirled around, leveling my blaster at the opening, my heart racing. Only the wind entered. I lowered the weapon and looked around a bit more as I moved to close and latch the front door as I had found it.

The rebel could return at any time, I had to be careful. As I thought about that, I decided that I didn't want to kill him. He could very well uncover valuable information. I was better served by observing him and allowing him to depart thinking Kenobi's home was both undisturbed and a secure place. I moved into the living space where there were several beautiful statues on a low table. The rebel's flight jacket lay beside a tan cloak on a nearby bench . . . he would definitely be returning.

I looked around for a place to secrete myself, somewhere out of sight where I could scrutinize him. Memories of a children's game from my childhood swept over me, along with the very real, very rich smell of the large evergreen tree I used to hide in. It was my best hiding place, they never found me there. I smiled at the vivid recollection as the turned up corner of a small rug caught my eye. I walked over to it and knelt down, pulling the rug back, exposing a hatch of some sort.

Lifting it open revealed a small, dark, stone-walled room with steps leading down to a power generator. I descended into it, lowering the trap door over my head until only a narrow slit remained open; just barely enough for me to see through the fringe edges of the rug on top.

I sat in the darkness for some time, eyes closed, slowing my breathing and waiting for the rebel to return. I focused on being as still and quiet as possible. In the darkness, my eyes flew open at the sound of the opening front door.

* * *

Yané ran from the speeder across the tended grass courtyard atop one of the looming towers. She headed for a small, moss and vine-covered stone and block structure ahead that housed the top of the stairwell that would wind them down to the surface. Han raced after her, drawing his weapon to be ready just in case, "Why did you land us up here?"

Her hand wrapped around the cool, metal handle on the door and she pulled hard, leaning her weight back to pull open the heavy entrance, "I could have set us down on the ground, but there is a key that unlocks access to the water tunnels, and another that sets the rotation of the waterway door."

The Corellian followed as she stepped through the door and hurried down a spiral stone staircase. Bria's necklace and pendant jumped wildly around her neck as she ran, "The huge circular doors rotate, revealing a cored opening in the door, which allows water to pass through for only three minutes until the rotation is complete, concealing the opening once more, and locking the retaining door again."

"It was designed to rotate open and stay open, diverting water from the river above to generate power. Because the system is now offline and non-functional, the waterway doors have been left in a mode that only allows a single, early-morning rotation per day to maintain the equipment. The key I need in this tower will allow us another rotation."

Han nodded, glancing out a small window as they raced down the steps. The Naboo countryside was deceptively peaceful. There were no visible signs of troops here . . . yet.



Abruptly, Yané exited the stairs through an archway and raced through a dimly lit maze of tall shelves, each filled with scrolls and ancient texts. As he ran, Han noticed the stale smell of mildew and rotting flimsy, "What's with all the old papers and books?"

She answered, turning a corner, not looking back to him, "It's the Royal Archives. Historical papers, texts, treaties, doctrines and agreements from our history are stored and studied here."

Han raised an eyebrow as he raced after her.

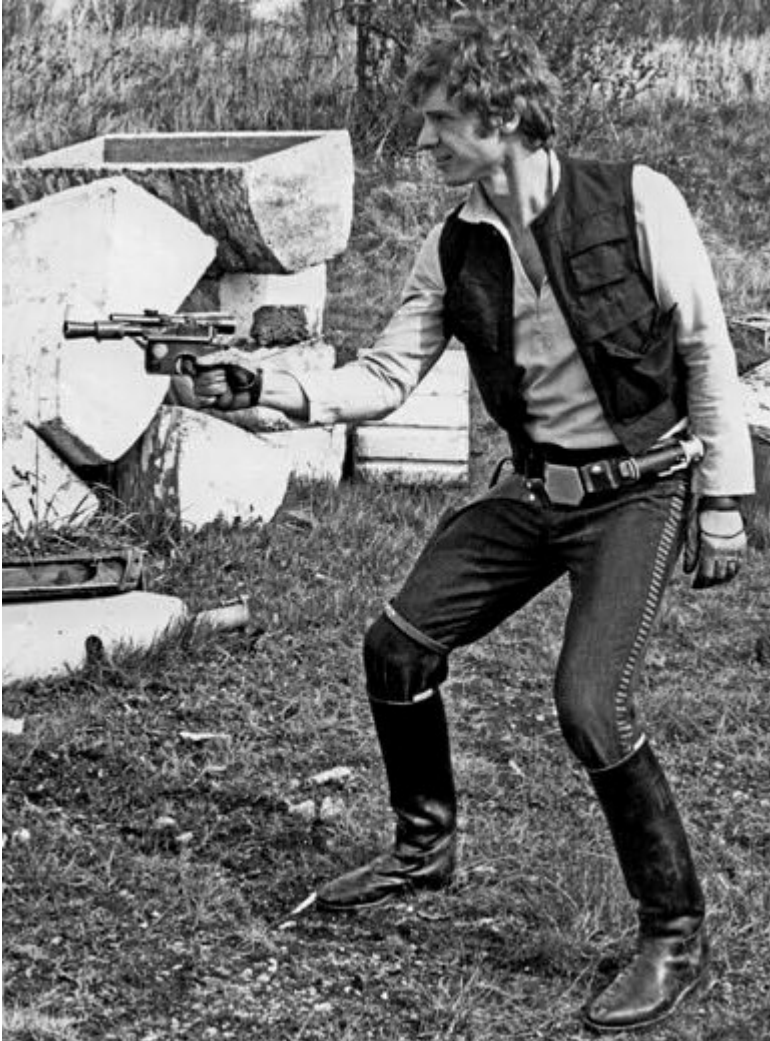
"Up ahead, we're almost there" she said, approaching a large door. She wrapped her hands around a heavy metal ring that hung from the front of the massive wooden door, "I need your help!"

Han holstered his blaster and grabbed the ring alongside her, pulling as hard as they could. Slowly the door gave way and opened. It was dark inside, but she needed no light. Her memory was amazing, and she pictured the inside of the chamber in her mind from the last time she worked in here. Her hands ran over shadowy stacks of small boxes, containers and flimsy in the blackness until they came to lie on the small metal box she saw so clearly in her head.

She grabbed it and pushed past Han into the light, placing it on a table. Opening the lid revealed several bound stacks of flimsy along with schematics and plans. She lifted these out of the way, revealing two medium sized keys. She lifted them out of the box, "Come on, let's go. We have to get to the courtyard below and follow the alleyway to the next tower." She hurried away with Han following.

They raced back through the tall shelves to the stairwell and descended. The clattering of Han's

boots on the stone steps echoed loudly as they finally reached the bottom. Yané led him out of the tower into the grassy courtyard. Stone columns flanked them on both sides, and as they headed along the grassy walkway toward the stone alleyway ahead, blaster fire erupted from across the courtyard, toppling a column to their right, the stone blocks falling to the ground in a pile. Han tried to find the source as he pushed Yané behind the rubble and drew his blaster, returning fire.



Several of his shots hit the top of a small stone wall, behind which he had seen at least one trooper. He saw the dome of the trooper's head begin to rise up again and discharged another blast, this one searing through the Impervium helmet between the eye lenses, cleaving the trooper's head inside.

He fell like a stone, sprawled across the top of the wall as another of the Empire's finest stood and fired a repeating rifle at them. Han fired back, forcing the trooper to cover behind the stone barricade as he grabbed Yané's arm and ran toward the alley ahead, blasting with each step, covering their movements.

They raced down the narrow stone alley, Han watching behind them as they came to an intersection. The wall before them had a round window at street level and two rectangular ones above, with curved tops.



"The Pilot's quarters! Those are the Pilot's quarters." she said, getting her bearings. "This way! The secondary tunnel is located beneath them. Hurry!" She took off running down the narrow stone path to the right. "We aren't far from the Royal Hangar."

Blaster fire erupted once more from behind them, riddling the stone wall where they had been standing, shattering the round window as they turned the corner. The retired handmaiden raced up to a doorway in the stone building and pulled it open as several crimson and cobalt beams seared past them. Han turned and fired off several shots as Yané disappeared inside.

Several troop transports appeared overhead as he jumped up the steps, catching the door, and took out two pursuing troopers before pulling it closed behind him. "Cover your eyes" he yelled, turning his head. A bright red flash erupted in the darkness between his blaster and the door latch, fusing it together. "That oughta hold them for a while. Where's this tunnel? We've gotta

get through before the boys in white catch up to us. Have you still got the keys?"

She nodded, holding them up, "Come on, it's this way".

*

Outside the ground troops bounded up the stairs, attempting to open the door as one of the transports landed in the alley behind them. "He's fused the lock. Blow the hinges!"

The troopers stepped back and all took aim at the hinges. "Now!"

They all opened fire simultaneously, blasting through the ancient door pinnings, dropping it from the hinges in a cloud of smoke. They raced over it into the darkness with the new reinforcements joining them now, "This way!"

*

"I can see where Bria got her fire" yelled Han as they stepped off the last of the stairs. Yané smiled as she activated the door controls, sliding open the multiple layers of a blast door, "Her Father taught her to shoot, and both her Mother and I taught her to be strong, the rest was all her."

She stepped through into a cold, duracrete room. As soon as Solo was through, she activated the door controls. They slid closed behind her as she spoke, "There's a long corridor over there. It was used as an access tunnel, for getting equipment in and out while the power plant was being built."

She watched as the last of the multiple layers of the blast door came together, and locked it, "I hope this door holds." She turned to look across to the tunnel Han was already looking into, "We'll be exposed with no place to hide or take cover."

A scowl crossed his face, "We sure will."

The tunnel was wide enough to fly a snubship through and twice Chewie's height, with a curved ceiling.



He turned and blasted the door controls twice, metal parts from the blown control clanging on the floor, "C'mon. We need to get to the other end of this before they get through or we're dead." The pair took off running into the darkness of the passageway.

* * *

Having successfully passed through the treacherous, chaotic asteroid field which occupied the erratic, outer orbital fringe with little damage, the rebel cruiser sailed smoothly toward the 6th and outermost planet of the Hoth system.

Under the ever watchful eyes of her bodyguards and personal aid, Alia, the leader of the rebel forces, Mon Mothma, returned to her seat as turbulence began to rattle the transport ship upon entry into the upper atmosphere. She peered out the port window as storm clouds far below raged across the ground with blizzard force, blasting fresh snow and ice across the frozen rivers, mountains and valleys on the wasteland of the planet below.



While the five planets closer to the Hoth sun were lifeless and primarily made up of toxic gases, Hoth VI was marginally hospitable for humans. Its axial tilt, orbital position and atmospheric makeup allowed life to exist, but was also cause for constant subzero temperatures. While the daytime temperature high hovered around -32 degrees standard, at night, those temperatures often plunged as low as -60 degrees, with gale force wind chills far surpassing that.

As much as she hated to admit it, this location for a base might just be crazy enough to work. While Snowtrooper units were plentiful in the Imperial forces, even the Empire never bothered with an outpost here, and for good reason. Any minerals that might be found here could be found elsewhere across the galaxy without the environmental hassle.

Two heavily armed Y-wing escort ships flanked the slow-moving transport as it began its descent into the atmosphere, following the transmitted glide path route toward ground coordinates somewhere on the inhospitable surface below.

She turned away from the window, thoughts racing through her mind. Touching Alia's arm, she leaned in closer to whisper, "Has anyone heard from Garm Bel Iblis?"

The aid dropped her gaze and shook her head, "No, milady. Admiral Ackbar had a long meeting with him regarding his concerns for your leadership, but he has not been heard from since that time."

The rebel leader closed her eyes and leaned back into the seat cushions. She turned again to the window, looking out across the stars and planet below. "You know, his accusations are unfounded. I have no interest in removing Palpatine only to replace him with myself. Bail Organa was my counterpart, co-leadership for what has become the Alliance. His murder along with the loss of Alderaan was shocking and tragic to the Alliance as a whole as well as to me personally, and left me with few options. I took over leadership control of the rebellion in a move to unify it and hold it together, not to seize personal power, and certainly not to alienate anyone, least of all Garm Bel Iblis."

She turned to her aid and stared in her eyes as she spoke now, "I need you to know and believe that . . . feel that."

Alia replied, "I have known that from the start, and do not question your dedication or intentions."

Mon Mothma nodded slowly, smiling.

The crisp view outside the port window suddenly clouded over stark white, and the ship violently bucked as it descended into the heart of the storm's wrath.

*

The newly-added rubber treads on the bottom of the fussy protocol 'droid's metallic feet fell silently on the duracrete planks of the hastily laid floor as he made his way through the rough ice corridor. Illuminators hung from wires wrapped around spikes that had been hammered into the ice walls to light the passage. Ahead, it opened into what was scheduled to become a central hangar for speeders and snub fighters.



These uneven walls of the narrow hallway had been carved from a solid wall of beautiful deep

blue ice, and at any other time might have interested the easily-distracted golden `droid, but non of this concerned him as he searched frantically for Princess Organa, muttering to himself, "If only R2 hadn't gone with master Luke. He would know where to find mistress Leia. Dear, oh dear, I can feel the oil in my joints thickening. Whoever had the brilliant idea for coming to an ice planet must have never . . . Princess Leia! Oh, thank the maker!"

The familiar image of the Princess stood several meters ahead of him reviewing plans for the hangar with the crew chief of the ice cutters. She heard Threepio approaching behind, but maintained her focus on the page, "This looks fine" she said, "but see if you can add a connecting corridor here to the command center, and small alcoves for the T-47 airspeeders we have on the way."

"Airspeeders?" questioned the crew chief. "Princess Leia I've worked with those Incom speeders before and in this environment . . ."

She cut him off as quickly as he had started, "Yes, I know, they aren't designed for this type of climate. I'm assured, though, that with slight modifications we can adapt them to work quite well."

The crew leader rolled up the plans and headed back toward several massive shearing machines and his crew, "Alright everybody, we've got a lot to get done, and there are some new changes to the design, gather `round here so we can discuss them before we get started." The men climbed down out of the cutters as he spread the plans out on a small ice shelf.

Leia watched him go and then turned around, "Yes Threepio, what is it?"

"The transport ship is on final approach."

Leia looked away from the `droid as she answered, "Mon Mothma. Threepio, have a mid-sized, heated troop transport dispatched to the landing coordinates to meet her and her staff. Inform the pilot to bring them here and escort them to my chambers. All other supplies can remain in the ship's hold until needed."

"Yes, mistress Leia."

* * *