

Chapter 17 - Darkness and Light

"By all that's holy, I hope its GOOD AND COLD somewhere in the galaxy!" spewed Blade, sweat dripping from his brow as he removed his helmet. "This pack can't be working. I'm not cooling down at all." Holstering his E-11 and unsnapping the straps that held the pack against his back, he walked over to a low, stone wall that skirted the upper edge of one of the docking bay pits. He set it down on the wall as 1265, who had been walking ahead of him, stopped and circled back.

Blade had several small compartments open, trying to figure out the cause of the problem. He traced over the braided, snake-like wiring harnesses with his finger looking for burnouts, but found none. He glanced over a bank of fuses which were all still intact, and kept looking as 1265 leaned in closer, looking over his shoulder, "What's wrong with it?"

"I'm not sure" he said frustrated, "It just stopped working." He closed the compartment covers and flipped the malfunctioning environmental pack over on its' side, pressing a status button just below several cylinders mounted up near the top. The indicator panel adjacent to it did not light. He raised his hand up and gave the cylinders an abrupt whack, then tried the status button again with still no results. He exhaled sharply, "Damn power cells are dead. I just had new ones put in three months ago!" He pressed the status button again; nothing. "I guess I'll have to replace them."

1265 Shook his helmeted head, turning away, glancing down the street ahead of them, "Only the finest Imperial gear for us hardworking troops, huh?" He turned his head in the opposite direction to look back the way they had come, "We just passed the little parts shop Deckard used for his 'droid parts. They've probably got some power cells that would work. If you want to go back and see, I'll do the marketplace loop and meet you back here."

Squinting his sweat-filled eyes in the bright afternoon sunlight, Blade looked back toward the parts shop, "Yeah, OK" he said nodding his head, "I'll see you back here shortly."

*

With a soft click, the transparent holo-card ejected from the slot in the reader. Felth retrieved it, placing it on the stack of others he had already scanned through. He documented the contents on his datapad, and inserted the next card as the sound of the lift, lowering to this lower cache level, broke the near-silence.

Moments later, the noise subsided. Danz and Topolev entered the room, followed by Holder. Topolev, not seeing Felth yet, walked ahead of the others toward the rows of racking that held supplies, crates and equipment, "Down here. This is where we found you."

Holder followed him over to the dusty shelves where he crouched down, surveying the contents of the shelf. A few power cells remained, sitting next to several long rolls of cloth, tied with a cord. The shelf above held a rations crate that Etz had unloaded upon their initial arrival, alongside a small crate of blasters and energy clips.

Felth began the scan of the new holo-card, "Now it's a party."

Danz twisted his head around to see Felth seated before the reader, his face bathed in blue light from the menu screen of the reader, "Anything interesting on those things, Felth?"

Not looking away from the advancing images on the screen, Felth replied, "Not really. There's some surveillance, some arrest records, some testimonials and depositions; pretty boring, actually."

Danz nodded, turning his attention back on Holder.

The thawed Republic Commando stood up from his crouch, a scowl across his face. "I know I should remember all this, but it's just a big blank."

Topolev slapped him on the shoulder, "I'm sure it'll come back eventually. Still a little foggy up there?" he said as he tapped his temple.

The Commando smiled a bit, nodding, "Yeah. You could say that. Some things are crystal clear . . . others like they never existed."

Danz began pulling the power cells off the racking from the opposite side, "OK, Rogue wants these racks stripped down and gone through. It's time we found out exactly what's down here."

As they began removing the stored items and stacking them on the floor, Felth spoke up, "Now that you mention it, where is Rogue?"

Topolev looked over as he placed a small case of sonic charges on the growing stack, "He and 0600 went out to the Darklighter estate; seems 'ole Huff has had some Tusken activity. They went to talk to him and check out the crime scene."

"Oh, OK", said Felth returning his attention to the reader's small screen and the recorded holo-image of Garindan in the densely-packed murk of Jabba's court. The darkly-shrouded Kubaz in the holo received a small pouch of money and what looked like several wrapped sticks of spice. His eyes narrowed a bit as he watched, thinking to himself, 'He's getting paid. The snitch's playing both sides.'

* * *

The Naboo sky, which had been afire with bold, flaming orange light, was now growing dark. The sparse clouds were highlighted with bold pink and purple strokes along their edges as the sun receded below the horizon. Imperial troops stood guard in the Capital Square, along the lakefront and the open expanse of the closed riverfront.



The dark Sith Lord stood rock solid on the bridge of the Intruder watching his troops and ground assault vehicles below, wreaking havoc in the streets of Theed. As they had arrived, the transponder signal had been snuffed out, obviously making the search more difficult. However, a small group of his troops had made visual contact with someone matching the description of Captain Solo and were in pursuit.

He surveyed one of the royal courtyards and the ruinous remains of the monuments to the past monarchs. If Solo had been spotted, the Wookiee and their ship would not be far removed. Somewhere deep in his brain, far beneath the shiny surface of his forbidding black helmet, he remembered standing in that very courtyard with a trailing padawaan's braid, at a ceremony of peace, eyeing his angel in far happier times.

He felt a sharp twinge in the passages of his nose and damaged glands trying hard to produce tears as he recalled the image of her, the smell of her. He was already turning and striding from the room as he barked out his command, "Captain, have my shuttle readied. I'm going down to the surface."

*

The Corellian pilot and the Royal Handmaiden raced through the near darkness of the long tunnel. The faint light they had seen in the distance was now growing larger and larger.



Yané was running ahead of him and he quickly turned to look back. No one had followed them . . . yet. "Where will this tunnel empty out?"

She kept running, replying as best she could between panting breaths, "There's . . . a blast door . . . at the other end. Puts us in . . . the water spillway tunnel. Not far from there. Eventually the spill tunnel empties out just behind the Western falls".

Han pulled the commlink from his belt as he ran, "Chewie?"

There was a moment of silence followed by static, then his co-pilot barked a response. He keyed the comm again as he ran, "This is what I want you to do . . ."

* * *

Blade squatted, rummaging through the power packs in the container on the bottom shelf of a rack as the shop owner watched for a moment, and then returned to his work behind the counter.

"Vibroblade . . . nope. Repulsor lift . . . nope. Swoop . . . nope. Loadlifter . . . nope. Vaporator . . . nope. Ahhh, what's this?" He held up a small set of cylindrical power cells, wrapped in shrink-seal. A flat ribbon of wires hung from the bottom of the pack with a small connector at the end. Placing it on the ground, he turned to his pack and pulled off the faulty power cells and laid them beside his find. "Looks like a match to me."

As he spoke, a shadowy drape of a figure slunk from a dim corner of the shop looking left and right, then coming to stand behind him. Blade noted the shadow on the ground a moment before he felt the gloved hand on his shoulder armor, and stood abruptly, dropping the battery pack as he whirled around. He drew his blaster in a fluid motion and grabbed the dark character by the

neck, slamming him back against the rack of small parts on the opposite side of the aisle, blaster muzzle firmly beneath his jaw. "What can I do for you, friend? That's a quick way to find yourself dead with a smoking hole through your head."

The shop owner jumped up from behind the front counter, straining to see down the aisle at what was happening, "Everything OK back there?"

Blade kept his eyes locked on the dark figure now in his grip as he replied, "We're fine back here . . . all fine." Sweat ran down his nose and dripped to the floor.

The owner scrutinized them both with tired, worn eyes, finally throwing up his hands and reluctantly returning to his work, looking back every few moments.

Blade's eyes narrowed to slits, "Wait a minute . . ." his brow furrowing as he concentrated harder, memories scrolling at a blazing pace through his mind, "I've seen you before . . . just never this close, am I right?"

Every part of the figure's face was hidden beneath black wraps and cloth, save a slit, from behind which wide eyes stared. Blade pulled away the wraps, revealing the creature's face. She was human, and shaking, flicking her eyes down to his hand still firmly wrapped around her throat. He loosened his grip slightly. "I was hired by your father to trail you . . . move you out of areas that were likely to fall, reassign you to more stable beats."

Blade's mind reeled, "You work for the Empire? For my father?"

The woman nodded her head nervously.

"So it was you I saw on Dantooine, Anzat, Troiken . . . and on the Devastator . . . as I was boarding the drop ship?"

Again she nodded, small beads of perspiration forming across her face.

"How long have you been watching me?"

He loosened his grip more, removing his hand completely now, but keeping the muzzle of the blaster pressed under her jaw. Turning her head a bit, she slowly and cautiously raised her hand, rubbing her throat as her other hand slipped the draped hood wraps off, revealing a fair-skinned face and long, thick auburn hair.

Her quivering red lips parted and she spoke in a soft voice, "I've been following you since the incident in the bar on Coruscant." She watched carefully for his reaction.

He closed his eyes tightly, listening as she continued.

"My involvement with your father, however, began several years before that. I was his personal assistant and liaison for private business dealings throughout the core systems as well as branching out to some of the fringe worlds."

Blade opened his eyes slightly, "Private business dealings?"

She looked past him now, as she relayed her story, "Although he was an officer, he still maintained a very quiet, very civilian business. Your father sent me from our assigned post on Balmorra to attend a mining guild trade show on a new low-orbit platform city above Bospin. It

was a long journey in a sub-light military ship, but I had been made as comfortable as possible. It was a cargo shipment, so aside from the crew, I had most of the ship to myself. My private quarters even had a large viewport.



The final approach to the city was amazing. The ship was shaking; being rocked by strong crosswinds as we flew through billowing white clouds. Finally we broke through a cloudbank revealing the expansive skyline completely in silhouette, with the setting sun behind them.

When we landed, I was escorted directly to the trade arena where I met with many representatives of the Mining Guild. We ate and drank and talked late into the night, and the more intoxicated they became, the more flirtatious they became. A bit too flirtacious and "hands on" for my liking. While that was the one aspect of the job that I hated, it was also the one aspect of the job that did the trick. I wrote several lucrative contracts at my table that night between drinks and dances, securing huge contracts of work for your father.

The sun was coming up as the party was ending, but I headed off to sleep nonetheless. Exhausted, I found the way to my room and let myself in. I was too tired to fully appreciate it, but the room and the views from it were breathtaking. Your father had spared no expense to make sure I was comfortable on the trip.



Blade interrupted her, "I don't understand what any of this has or had to do with me."

Her beautiful eyes flicked over to meet his, "I was coming to that point. It was during the timeframe of that trip that you had your altercation in the bar on Coruscant, and your unit leader died. I was immediately recalled from Bespin, and your father reassigned me from my previous duties to the full time detail following you and your assignments."

Blade's head hurt as he shook it slowly, "You've been watching me from a distance for this long . . . so, why are you approaching me now?"

Her eyes stared squarely into his as she took a deep breath and responded, "One standard week ago your father sent me an urgent communiqué regarding a recent discovery. Imperial Intelligence intercepted a portion of a garbled transmission that has now been linked to suspected rebel activity. The transmission originated here, on Tatooine and contained sensitive information. Your father knows you were assigned here and wanted you to be alerted to a possible spy and rebel sympathizer among those in your group."

Blade stepped away from her, switching off the power to his weapon, holstering it. She knelt, picking up the power supply he had dropped, "Is your pack malfunctioning?" Her eyes were sympathetic and sincere.

He was pulled out of his daze by her comment, "What?"

A wiring harness dangled from the shrink-sealed part, "New power cell for your pack?" she asked.

He stared out the window to the street outside, absently responding to her question as he rolled her revelation over in his head, "Yeah. My pack's dead . . . won't cool my . . . won't cool my body glove."

She grabbed up the replacement power cell and walked to the front counter, pulling out a small bag of credits and purchased the cannibalized part. The shopkeeper spoke up as he took her money, shooting a glance down the aisle to Blade and his environmental backpack, "This cell wasn't made for that pack specifically, but there were several design generations that all took the same core cells. Your friend's is one of them."

She picked the power cell up from the counter, "Thank you."

Blade uncoupled the old wiring harness, removing the dead cells as she handed him the new, "Thanks."

He took the new cell and firmly pressed the cable connector into the socket on the back of the pack, slipped the cells under the restraining clip, and flipped the switch. Instantly needles on the power meters pegged over to the full indicator.

He connected the leads to his body glove and slipped one arm through a shoulder strap, pulling the pack on, "Did your emergency communiqué happen to mention who the potential traitor was?" He pulled his other arm through and adjusted the pack on his back.

"No", she began, "there was very little information to go on, but we know it originated here, and based on the knowledge of Imperial operations, it had to have been one of the troopers in your unit."

Blade saw 1265 approaching from the direction of the marketplace. "Cover your face back over, one of the other troopers is coming, and almost here." He nodded in the direction of the street. She turned to see the other trooper heading their way.

"Did you just arrive, or have you been staying somewhere?" asked Blade

She pulled the black drapes back over her face, "I have a room at the Dowager Queen, number nine."

He nodded, "Keep the room. I'll meet with you sometime in the next few days. Hide."

She nodded and slipped toward the back of the room, suddenly becoming keenly interested in a bin of thrust bias sequencers.

1265 entered the shop, "You slacker, I did the whole loop AND waited for you. What took so long? You find what you needed?"

Blade nodded once, "Just getting it powered up and working now."

"OK, let's get moving, we still have the rest of the spaceport to do, and I'm beat. You're doing the storage bays."

"No problem. Let's do it.", Blade responded following the other trooper back into the blazing heat in the streets. He felt the cooling waves in his body suit spring to life properly as he watched the dark-shrouded woman slink out of the shop heading the other way toward the Dowager Queen. Was it 1265 who was leaking information? It could be any one of them, he had no way of knowing who he could trust. He thought back to his earlier conversation with them out in the desert:

"In the guard you're trained to watch everyone, even each other. Being a trooper in the field, your unit is all that you have. You have to depend on each other. That's the way it should be, just bear in mind, nothing personal, but until I'm more comfortable, I'm watching each of you . . . closely. We all must have reasons we were assigned here. It certainly isn't the best post in the Empire."

Blade beat himself up for lowering his guard too readily. He watched 1265 walking just ahead of him . . . it was a mistake he would not be duplicating.

* * *

Yané kept her grip tight on the two keys as they drew near to the end of the access tunnel. As expected, the blast doors here were locked tight. She moved to the control panel and withdrew the first key, inserting it into the lock. It turned halfway and refused to go any further. She halfway turned her head to Han, "See if you can . . ."

He had been watching and stepped up before she could finish, grasping the key, twisting it with all his strength. The stubborn key slowly yielded as he continued intense pressure on it. Finally it gave way and finished its rotation. He pulled the key out as the massive, first layer of the doors opened. When they had retracted fully, a second lumbering set began opening, followed by a third and fourth finally revealing a dark passageway beyond.

Yané darted into the darkness. Han followed through the doors, eyebrows raised as he examined the black space beyond, hearing and smelling water. Once through, he used the key and used it to initiate the closing and locking of the doors behind them. The handmaiden had moved from his side and moved along a metal railing toward the enormous circular water spillway door. She put a hand out, running it down over the stone to find the keyhole. Once located, she inserted the second key, turning it with ease.

As she withdrew it, a thundering sound issued from the wall before them as the gargantuan stone door began to rotate slowly. As soon as the opening came into view in it, they heard water rushing through below the railing, down in a canal below them. Once the opening had revolved enough for them to pass, they both slipped through as it continued to turn.

The grinding sound continued for a total of three minutes until the door had completed a full revolution and locked securely. The water ceased to stream through, and what had come through now flowed away from them, down the tunnel ahead of them. The darkness of the channel was broken by lights several hundred meters ahead.

"We better get moving. Even with these doors in place, if they want to follow us, and they do, they'll find a way.

The two took off running toward the lights, the sound of their footfalls echoing in the circular passage.

* * *

I closed my eyes, silently breathing shallow breaths in and out as I waited for the sound of the closing door. I could hear the faint swishing and rustling of clothing as the pilot moved around somewhere above. There was a clinking sound, presumably as he gathered up some of his new belongings, and then nothing. Finally I heard the door close and latch securely. As I sat in the

darkness beneath the trapdoor, knowing the young rebel had gathered his things and gone, the nagging idea of letting him go kept twisting itself over and over in my mind.

I didn't really consider it backing down, as I felt very strongly that we hadn't seen the last of our Rebel visitor, and I was allowing him to leave. If he was comfortable coming here, my keeping watch on Kenobi's home could ultimately pay off more in the long run by not arresting or killing the young farmboy turned activist pilot.

There was only silence as I remained still, listening. I had to be sure he was gone, and not been deceived into thinking he had.

*

The transparisteel canopy of the snub fighter lowered into place, securing airlock seals as the power plants for the four main thrusters came online with a throaty hum, blasting a fine spray of sand away from downward facing ported exhaust vents. As they did, monitoring instrumentation in the cockpit flickered on, and the little astromech that had been in sleep mode while charging, came back on line. Its dome swiveled left and right back and forth as a string of tones, beeps and whistles issued forth, followed by a sort of electronic belching before it fell silent.

"Okay R2", said the pilot as he lifted the helmet from his lap and fitted his head inside snugly, adjusting the chinstrap, "Now I know how you feel about being switched off while charging. It won't happen again, but that just means a slow-trickle charge in the future, you know."

Several beeps flew back in response and the insolent little blue `droid swiveled his dome around to face the rear of the craft as its weight gently lifted from the landing gear on the invisible cushion of increasing repulsor intensity.

*

Still and silent in the dark recess, I heard drive engines firing in the distance, signaling the young rebel's departure. I threw open the trapdoor and climbed up the few crude stone steps, moving quickly to the front door. Opening it slightly, I could see thin, white, vaporous trails left by the engines of the disappearing X-wing in sharp contrast against the deep azure of the crystal clear Tatooine sky.

* * *