

Chapter 3

Vader closed the file from the Inspection Team. Tyrell and a small band from Zeta Squad had been destroyed. The sole survivor from the unit, TK-1023 - Davin Felth, was still on-planet with the newly formed Moisture Farm Patrol. The missing plans had been carried overland by maintenance and protocol `droids who had somehow managed to deliver them to Obi-Wan, who had escaped Tatooine with plans for the Death Star along with a young moisture farmer named Luke. Luke. That was the name he had heard his Padme utter in his vision as he had seen Obi-wan holding an infant. What did it all mean? His child had died with Padme. Who was this Luke? It was all very unclear.

What was clear to him now was why the traitorous Princess from Alderaan had traveled to Tatooine . . . to seek the help of the hidden Jedi Knight and former General of the Republic Army. When the Devastator followed her ship through hyperspace from Toprawa, and her scheme for a personal visit and appeal to Obi-Wan for help fell apart, she entrusted the future of the Rebellion with two service `droids.

She was desperate to reach him and coax him from seclusion and into service once again. Her desperation must have been vividly conveyed to him by the `droids for him to leave the safety of the hiding place that had protected him all these years. He must have sensed the urgent need to deliver the plans to someone in the Rebellion who could use them. But, if there was such a dire and urgent need to get offworld with the plans, why would Obi-Wan have bothered to bring along a young farmhand?

Anakin had seen his master's dislike for pathetic lifeforms many times on their missions together. His master was near, of that he was certain. All these years thinking he had been robbed of dispatching Obi-Wan . . . and now . . . that act he had dreamed of so many times was close at hand.

The silence of his open meditation chamber was interrupted by sporadic reports on the open communication channel he had left open. He had been scanning helmet communications for any indication that the passengers of the Millenium Falcon had been located. He wished members of the 501st were still onboard the station, but with its completion, they had been reassigned. Even though his personal group was not present, the station's troops would find them, it was just a matter of time.

"Base, we're entering detention block AA-23 to inspect camera malfunctions and reports of a reactor leak." "Copy that." The information was followed by a short burst of static from the helmet of the reporting trooper, then silence as the Dark Lord pondered Obi-Wan's involvement, and the pathetic lifeform he had dragged along.

The silence was again broken by a short flurry of communications over the comm . . . "We're taking heavy fire . . . Watch out! . . . Step over him and get out there! Send more troops, we've got them cornered, they've retreated down one of the cell bays." Vader turned his helmeted head toward the comm. "More troops dispatched to your location . . . watch it, they're good . . . several officers down, send med `droids. Wait . . . the firing's stopped . . . 'lotta smoke in here . . . switch to infrared and thermal imaging . . . advance . . . check all the cells, the Princess' is open and she's gone. Wait . . . what the . . . they blew a hole in the hatch covering . . . whew . . . what a smell . . . it's the garbage chute to the economy level . . . the trash compactors."

Vader keyed in the location on a small console, bringing up the spot on a schematic of the station. He noted the location of Leia's cell and accessed the grid for the economy unit assigned to that bay. The screen flickered and then returned a number, 326-3827. He opened the

scheduling screen for the trash compactor and keyed on the comm, "Good work. I have them from here." The trooper replied, a bit startled to hear Vader in his headset, "Yes, sir. Recall troops dispatched to the economy level."

Vader initiated the COMPACT sequence for the unit . . . a step usually reserved for dumping garbage before high-speed travel on the station, or a hyperspace jump on a Destroyer. The screen flashed an indicator note COMPACTING . . . he would soon be done with Obi-Wan, the boy and the crew of the *Millenium Falcon* and the plans would once again be under Imperial control. Vader stood and exited his chamber, walking across his private room and disappearing into the corridor outside . . . his cape billowing behind him.

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"Secure this area until the alert is canceled." The trooper receiving the order nodded, "Give me regular reports." The rest of the group left two troopers standing on a narrow gantry, guarding access to the power generators that control the station's tractor beams. "Do you know what's going on?" The other shook his head, "Maybe it's another drill."

They failed to see the cloaked form of the elderly knight on the opposite side of the generator on a walkway no wider than his feet, high above a deep chasm. His old hands held on firmly to the structure as he deactivated the generator and found his thoughts drifting back over the sea of years to another energy generator . . . to the day he lost his master to the blade of a Sith. He remembered bursting through the dropped energy barrier to avenge Qui-Gon's death, and in doing so had decisively stepped into the darkness, embracing the anger and rage that had welled up and uncontrollably poured from him in a blinding flurry of chopping, hacking aggression.

In the moment, they had felt right . . . powerful and fulfilling. As he had lived with the memory of those actions over the years, he had come to realize that while the outcome was achieved, he had overstepped the line and felt the seductive pull of the dark side. He saw how easily someone could crave more and more of the intoxicating power, as Anakin had by embracing the mantle of Darth Vader.

Methods he had learned over the years of communing with Qui-Gon under the Bafforr trees and the Ysalimiri on Tatooine would serve him well this day. The future was always in motion, but he felt deeply in his core that his ultimate purpose, his meaning . . . his part in the final correction of his failure would come as he sacrificed himself so that Luke might escape. While he knew this to be true, it was incredibly dangerous ground. He had lived and felt everything Luke would feel, seeing his master taken from him. A calm came over him as he watched the power level indicator slide steadily toward empty.

He trusted that his own control of the Force would allow him a brief moment to reach and calm Luke enough to allow for his escape. If he could not pass this final Jedi trial, all would be lost. Luke could very easily wallow in the hate he would most definitely feel for Vader. The memory of a larger than life Jedi father he loved simply for being his father had already been lost to the Dark Lord . . . losing the only remaining tie he had to information about that man might be more than he could stand. I cannot lose him the way I lost Anakin, he thought . . . I will not.

He drew in a breath, continuing to feel the presence of his former Padawan, and worked his way around the rest of the narrow foot path to make his exit, stopping to eye the troopers. Motioning with his hand, he called on the Force to create a distracting sound in the corridor beyond them, toward which they turned to investigate, "What was that?" asked one of the troops. Kenobi slipped from his cover and out of sight completely unnoticed as they looked the other way. "It's nothing . . ." said the other trooper guard ". . . hard chassis, don't worry about

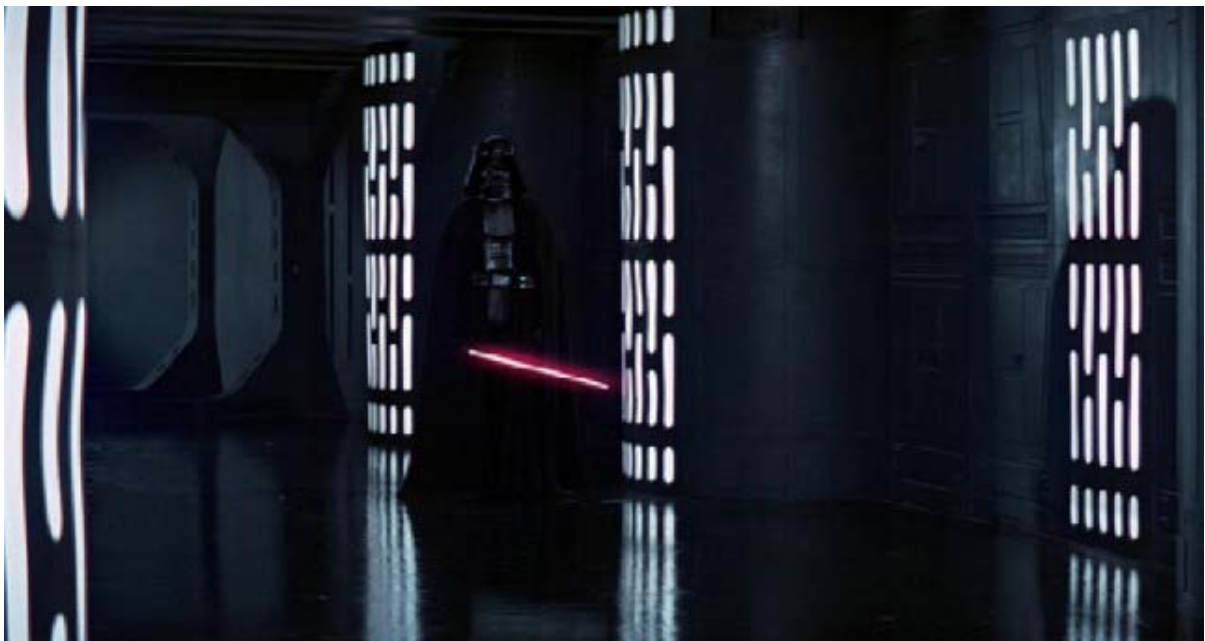
it.”

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An Imperial aide was walking toward him as Vader neared the compactor cluster on the economy level. “They’ve escaped, mi’ Lord. Only their concealing armor was left behind.” Vader erupted, the Force shock waves flinging the officer against the wall. He fell to the ground grabbing at his throat, gasping for air as the Dark Lord whirled away heading for the turbolifts. He had to make his way to the bay that held the smuggling ship before they did. His old master would not elude him again.

His mind raced as he entered the lift . . . they’re trying to get the Princess and the plans out of here. The lift pod he was riding in was whisked away toward the docking bay level. When it stopped, he stepped out into the empty hallway. He turned and briskly walked until he could see the Millennium Falcon through the open blast doors ahead.

His troops were still guarding the ship . . . he had made it in time, but Obi-Wan was very near . . . the sensation was growing stronger and stronger. He removed his lightsaber from his belt clip and ignited it with a snap-hiss . . . the hallway was deserted and he stood alone silently waiting . . . accompanied only by the hum of the energy blade held still in his grip, and the repetitive mechanical breathing that was the legacy of his last encounter with his old master . . . it was almost time.



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The last of the large stone pieces was moved aside, and Rogue was finally able to slip through into the dark corridor beyond, “That’s it. It’s open from here on.” The others grabbed their buckets and followed as Danz turned back to check on the Moisture farmers. As he walked along, the only sound he heard in the narrow hallway was that of the wailing winds above and the slight clatter of his boot heels hitting the uneven stony floor.

Darklighter and the gathering of kids were sitting on the stone floor, waiting silently for the winds and the destructive flying sand to pass. Huff glanced over at Danz as the trooper stuck his head around the corner, then looked toward the ceiling of the alcove nodding, "It's starting to die down a bit now . . . we won't be here much longer. It'll take a short time to find the other graves, but then we'll bury them and be gone", he said, indicating the wrapped figures on the floor. Danz looked from Deak and Windy over to Huff, "Other graves?"

"Owen removed the markers from Cliegg and Shmi's graves . . . years ago now for some reason . . . they were his father and step-mother. I remember approximately where they used to be. I promise once we find them we'll finish up quickly and leave you to your investigation." Danz nodded as his electronically-enhanced response issued from his helmet, followed by a short burst of static, "Alright." Satisfied, he turned and disappeared down the dark hallway toward the living quarters.

Blade and Felth were busy rummaging through the room that had been Luke's as he walked past, while 0600 and Rogue were pouring over the private chambers of Owen and Beru just down the hall. Danz continued on and joined them while the others tore through Luke's room. There was a small sleeping area, a small storage area for clothing and a workbench with a stool.

There were various parts strewn across the workbench along with flimsies containing design ideas for adding extra thrust to a landspeeder, 'droid modifications, 'vaporator schematics and a partially completed application packet for the Imperial Naval Academy. Felth was rifling through the storage area as Blade picked up the application, turned it over in his hands, then continued searching, holding on to the flimsies. There did not appear to be a connection to Luke and Ben Kenobi . . . at least in this room.

0600, Rogue and Danz were in a similar, albeit larger room and had already strewn the contents of several small containers and those found on the top of a desk tucked back in the corner. It was a small desk, and judging by the manner in which it was neatly kept, it was Beru's. Rogue was sorting through the bound flimsies and records as 0600 poured yet more on the pile before him. Danz joined in, helping to sift through the information, looking for something they could use. As they searched for meaningful information, 0600 returned to the desk, and was pushing one of the empty drawers back in when it jammed and would not go in the rest of the way.

Kneeling down, he took off his bucket and pulled the drawer back out, then leaned over to look inside the opening. It was dark inside . . . he reached for his belt, opening a small compartment, retrieving a small black and silver handlamp. He switched it on, shining the beam into the darkness of the desk. There, jammed up against the back was a stack of flimsies, bound in Ronto leather.



A narrow strip of the leather was attached to one side of the cover and wrapped several times 'round to secure it.

0600 reached inside and pulled it out, turning it over in his hands, gently wiping away the fine dust. He switched off the handlamp and returned it to his belt. Then he began unwinding the leather strip, until he was able to open the cover to the first page of faded, aged flimsy. It was written in a woman's neat handwriting in journal format, although the entries were not dated, and judging from the content, were not recorded every day. The pages revealed insight into the daily lives of these moisture farmers, but 0600 was looking specifically for content of interest, scanning the pages superficially when he happened across mention of "the new arrival" and of Kenobi . . . he began to read

Our world will never be the same following the events of this day. Living out here in the barren expanses just shy of the Dune Sea has proven an enormous test for my endurance and spirit. Owen works hard to afford us a fine life, even more so after his father's death, but for a girl from Anchorhead, the absolute isolation is overwhelming at times. Much of my time has been spent keeping our home, feeding and tending to the crops growing in the hydroponic gardens, and having meals prepared and ready when he returns home each evening. I sometimes talk to myself, the droids and the plants just to hear the sound of a human voice . . . with Owen out working all day, the silence is suffocating at times.

He's been on edge ever since our first meeting with Ben. We were told there was nowhere else to turn . . . everyone he knew and trusted had been killed or was missing and he urgently needed help to protect an infant, to protect a new hope for the future . . . our help. He said he would return soon with the child, the son of Owens deceased step-brother Anakin, and asked

that we keep him safe. Although he will never admit it, after all the struggling we've endured trying to have one of our own, this new arrival, this little bundle from the stars has rescued Owen and me as much as we have him. At long last, I have a child to raise as my own.

We argued at dinner about the whole arrangement. He knows we are family and are obligated to take the child in . . . I think it hurts him to know that we were not the first choice. He also knows Kenobi will want to train the boy, teach him all the mystical ways of the Jedi the way he did Anakin. He left our conversation quite distraught . . . as we left the homestead entryway and stepped out into the sand, he let go of my hand and walked away to stand at the edge of the pit, staring out into the fiery molten setting of the twin suns. His thoughts were clouded with anger and resentment. He had only met Anakin once . . . his step brother had lived far away, in the temple, following the teachings of his master, only to be killed in the wake of these horrible, turbulent Clone Wars.

It was then that Kenobi appeared, just before dark, slowly riding in over the sand on his Eopie. Owen saw him coming and turned away, searching for a way to do the right thing. The animal settled to the ground near the techdome as I watched. Ben dismounted carefully, carrying the child over to me. I took it from him, unwrapping his covering a bit to see a little face staring up at me. Kenobi smiled and backed away, as if his presence were endangering the child somehow.

The infant's tiny hand wrapped around my finger tightly as I walked with him to join Owen. Kenobi rode slowly away into the night . . . looking back several times, as if questioning his decision to leave the child behind. I know this baby, Luke, will be safe here . . . I will keep him safe . . . I am a simple woman, but I clearly understand the importance of that. Luke Skywalker . . . there hasn't been a Skywalker in this house since his grandmother died . . . I wish that she were still here. . . I wish that he could have known her, and his own parents. There's plenty of time to figure out how to deal with that . . . tonight I'm just enjoying the innocence of him and the quiet we share.

0600 looked up from the page, "I think I've got what we came for."

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