

## **Chapter 4**

Falker disappeared into the hallway leading to the docking bays as Etz and Topolev watched the activity of the street. Topolev pushed one of the Dewbacks away and turned to Etz, "We'll make a Sandtrooper out of you yet, Etz" and pointed to the sandy-colored dust clinging to what had been the stark white Impervium of Etz's legs. Engedi looked down, nodding "I guess so. Who would've guessed that a street kid from Corellia would end up a Sandtrooper on Tatooine." Topolev turned to him "I'm from Corellia too . . . what part are you from?"

Etz looked up momentarily, then back out to the street "Well, I'm not really from Corellia that I can be sure of, that's just the earliest memory I have." He adjusted the pouches on his belt, "My parents were probably indigents, traveling planet to planet looking for a chance to work . . . I don't really know for sure. As an orphan I grew up living on the streets in and around the Naval shipyards . . . there were a lot of kids living on the street there. I remember one day watching a squad of Stormtroopers arrive, assigned to oversee the construction of a huge Super Star Destroyer. I was completely taken with the polished look of the troopers in formation. Over the years during the construction, I ran errands and helped with equipment and armor repairs, earning their trust along with fresh food and water. By the time I was old enough to do so, the troopers I had come to know encouraged me to enlist, and here I am . . . how 'bout you?"

Topolev thumbed off his E-11 and slipped it snugly in his holster, snapping it firmly in place as he spoke, "My old man was an Army recruiter. I was pretty much expected to be a soldier. Don't get me wrong, it's not something I didn't want, but the huge footsteps for me to follow in were several generations old by the time I was ready for my turn at filling them. I attended a private military academy until I was old enough to ship out to Carida." Etz pulled off his bucket and grinned, "Don't worry . . . I won't hold that against you."

Topolev removed his helmet, smiling and continued, "I did my basic training and was assigned to a security detail at an Imperial prison on Dathomir. After several attempts to transfer out of that boring post, I was finally assigned to Desert Combat training on Dantooine . . . quite a change from the jungles I had grown accustomed to surrounding the prison. My armor has never been the same since. On one of my training exercises we pulled off a raid against several spice smugglers . . . worked with Special Ops. I must have done a good job . . . they gave me a black pauldron when I headed out to my new post on the Leviathan, where I trained recruits for the next year or so."

Etz looked over to him "Sounds like a pretty solid path . . . how'd you end up here?" Topolev grabbed a loose saddle strap on one of the Dewbacks and cinched it a bit tighter, "An officer I knew was engaging in inappropriate conduct with one of the female trainees. On one of the training missions that we were providing support for, the two of us were arguing about what was going on, and there was an accident.

Several trainees were injured and the officer died. Although it was never formally declared my fault, that was the aftertaste that lingered once the hearings were concluded. The next thing I knew I was reassigned and put on a shuttle. I got picked up from the Leviathan . . . in the Talus sector a few days ago and ended up here, just like you. If they only knew they were doing me a great favor . . . I always enjoyed my desert assignments."

Falker walked up to the other side of the corral wall as Topolev finished speaking, "Transponder's planted . . . we'll know exactly where he is." "Great . . ." said Etz, pulling on his bucket, "let's go find Ddraig and Deckard. . . see what they've found out from the Hammerhead.

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Ddraig and I sat on several of the discarded intoxicant crates littering the alley as we listened to the story of Ben Kenobi. Falker, Etz and Topolev came around the corner and walked up behind us. Nadon looked up at the additional troops, but continued his tale, not missing a beat . . . "I knew of several places that might possibly work for what he had in mind, but the location we finally decided on was within the wreckage of the B'Omarr starship. One of the cargo bay outriggers that was deeply embedded in the sand seemed to be a perfect location. It would provide the much needed shelter from the suns and winds, and protect the site from the damage inflicted by sandstorms. Aside from being sheltered it also afforded Kenobi the necessary mounting points for securing cables and enough expansive area to set up an effective Bafforr tree perimeter. You see . . . he was creating a training arena . . . a secure, secret spot from which to impart the knowledge he had gained as a knight in the Jedi Order. The dozen Ysalimiri and their Bafforr tree nutrient hosts were my contribution to the scheme . . . .

*Nadon and Kenobi climbed over the stone and sand of the slope as they made their way up the hillside, noting the protruding starship thrusters of the ancient, ill-fated B'Omarr starship.*



*Finally, they reached a slight leveling of the terrain, and stopped a moment to catch their breath. The edges of the Jundland Wastes were nearby, with the edges of the great Dune Sea, lapping at the base of the rocky formations.*



*Nadon turned away from the amazing view and walked over to small pile of crumbling ruins they were looking for.*

*Kenobi followed, and they both stepped up to the remnants of what had been a stone archway . . . an entrance created long ago by the surviving B'Omarr monks leading into a first, primitive shrine in which to meditate. Nadon waded through the rubble, moving toward what had been the rear of the small room. "The B'Omarr that survived the crash built this not only as a place to meditate, but a way to protect the entrance to their supplies" said Nadon as he lowered his shoulder to a stone slab and pushed with his incredibly strong legs, sliding the stone aside, revealing an opening with uneven stone steps leading down into cool darkness. Kenobi stepped up, putting his hand on the edge of the opening and leaning his head inside, looked around and asked, "How far down is it?" Nadon pulled out and lit a handlamp, "Not far" as he moved past Ben and began the descent.*



*He was careful to step over the remnants of a rope lying across the uneven, narrow stone steps and point it out to Kenobi. On any other planet, this carved tunnel might have been damp, but not here. Sandy dust rose with every step they took, curving deeper and deeper beneath the sand of the hillside until the descending tunnel finally led them down to a small hollowed out alcove alongside the exterior skin of the starship. Nadon moved to the right, running his hands along the durasteel skin until he found a small, recessed latch.*

*He pressed it in with his hand, grabbed the center handle and twisted slightly. Gears could be heard slowly turning within the door followed by a hollow thunk as the latch released. The door pushed in and slid to the side with a scrape. Nadon turned back to look Ben in the eye, "Welcome to your new temple, Master Jedi" motioning for Kenobi to enter. He followed Ben through the opening, feeling and tasting a change in the air.*

*They emerged on a small landing, surrounded by a durasteel railing on the edge of a huge space. Ben stepped up to the rail, wrapping his hands around it, staring into the stillness of the dim chamber, raising his head to take in the enormous tubular structure they were now inside.*



*To the left, the floor inclined slightly, angling toward the surface. Light streamed through openings in the skin of the starship's ceiling that was still above ground. A number of the skin panels had ripped off during their fiery descent through the atmosphere and headlong crash into the sand and stone of the wastes. To the right, the massive bay grew darker and sloped down into the sand where it had come to rest all those years ago . . . after falling from the stars. It was here, in the darker, more protected areas that we would set to work.*

*The pair turned away from the railing and traced the catwalk along to a ladder which we descended down to the floor. "There are several levels of walkways, ledges and overhead framework and rigging that we could use to place the Bafforr trees and the Ysalimiri on. Each tree location will shield approximately a ten meter sphere around itself. If we place them out correctly, you can have a good sized training room in here with no worry about stirring the Force at all" said Nadon.*

*Kenobi nodded, looking off up to the ceiling as he twisted the hair of his beard, deep in thought. He was seeing himself training young Luke, showing him how to use the Force to balance himself on the stretched cable as if it were a wide walkway. He saw a small swarm of remote seekers buzzing around the young, blindfolded boy . . . saw him moving through the room, balancing on the wire and wielding his father's lightsaber to deflect all of the energy bursts like the skilled younglings that were slaughtered with it.*

*He envisioned Luke meditating and centering himself in the Force enough to control any anger against his father he would have. "This could work" said the Jedi. "When will the trees and Ysalimiri be ready to bring out here?"*

*Nadon scratched his arm, "About three months to grow to a size that will begin to afford you the veiling you require." Kenobi nodded as Nadon continued, "Come, I have more to show you" and he took Kenobi by the arm, leading him deeper into the wreckage.*

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A small group of troopers hurried through the Death Star hallway searching for the fugitives. Kenobi slipped out of the shadows, feeling the presence of his old Padawaan much stronger now as he watched the troops disappear down the passageway. With a swift motion, he unclipped the lightsaber from his belt, drawing it up as he cautiously looked around . . . leaving it deactivated, but in readiness for the confrontation he knew was about to occur.

Silently he hurried along the dimly lit tunnels of the enormous battle station, slipping unnoticed toward the hangar that housed the Millennium Falcon. A deep concentration enveloped the old Jedi Master as he walked, envisioning the escape that Luke and the others must be allowed to make if there was to be any chance of undoing the tragedy of Vader. Centering himself in the Force, he made his way closer and closer to the ship. He was almost there . . . perhaps his visions had been incorrect, perhaps it might be possible to make it off the station alive . . . to continue the beginnings of Luke's training on Dagobah with Yoda. As he rounded the slight curve in the hallway that emptied into the hangar, his visions of that possible future path dissolved as he came upon the still and silent form of Vader . . . shimmering red saber drawn . . . waiting for his old master.

Ben stopped, taking in the view of the man that was once his Padawaan . . . his brother . . . his friend, as the dark Lord began moving slowly toward him. He saw the horrible, grotesque angles of the breath screen and helmet that encased the many faces of Anakin Skywalker. Kenobi saw past the protective blackness to the face of the young boy who had raced pods . . . who had fought alongside him . . . who had engaged him on Mustafar as an enemy, embracing the dark side of the Force, falling from the grace intended for the chosen one. Obi-Wan reluctantly depressed the activation switch on his lightsaber, remaining perfectly still . . . in his defensive stance, breathing the stale air.

"I've been waiting for you, Obi-Wan. We meet again at last. The circle is now complete . . . when I left you, I was but the learner . . . now I am the Master." Kenobi stared at him, hearing the ego of his old padawaan echoing through the deep tones of his new, simulated voice . . . he had learned nothing. "Only a Master of evil, Darth" acknowledging the Sith before him . . . Anakin Skywalker was dead and gone.

Vader, enraged by the comment, lunged at Kenobi, who moved to block the strike. Obi-Wan's body pulsed from the flow of the Force racing through him, illuminating him, binding him to the knowledge and strength of all those that had gone on before him . . . he felt every one of their hands on his saber hilt. The old knight had worked hard over the many years on Tatooine, hiding in the darkness of the wrecked starship . . . training amidst the Bafforr trees and Ysalimiri that had been intended to shroud the training of Luke. He had fought to remain in top form, knowing that this day would come. He also knew that he needed to toy with Vader . . . give the illusion of a tired, weak old man . . . occupy him and his attentions so that Luke might escape unnoticed . . . allowing the small ripples the boy was beginning to make in the Force to be overlooked by his father. Ben sensed Luke nearby, and knew that once the guards were distracted, Luke and the others would be clear to board and escape . . . he felt the presence of Qui-Gon behind him . . . the large hands of his master gently resting on his shoulders like a proud father . . . "Keep your thoughts centered on the here and now, Obi-Wan." He relaxed, and defended a flurry of slashes and attacks from Vader as they moved rapidly, searing the walls in a shower of sparks as they circled each other.

"Your powers are weak, old man" said Vader, pausing . . . wishing to continue toying with this feeble old knight a bit longer.

Ben confidently held his ground, eyes locked on the tinted lenses of the black mask, "You can't win, Darth. If you strike me down, I shall become more powerful than you can possibly imagine."

Vader slashed at him again, locking sabers . . . energy flashes illuminating the hallway as the hum of the lightsabers crackled in the silence "You should not have come back."

There was a flurry of motions, sabers screaming and hissing, protesting the fury with which they were being slammed against the competing energy of the other. Ben and Vader moved toward and then apart from each other, whirling to avoid the deadly blade in their opponent's hand . . . switching sides in the hallway. As they did so, the troopers that were gathered at the entry ramp of the Millennium Falcon noticed the fight and double-timed it around the cargo lift to get a closer view of what was going on.

As he stepped back, noticing the troopers closing in on the other side of the open blast doors to watch the fight, Ben felt a small wave in the Force, deep down beneath the coursing and churning on the surface . . . a very subtle movement . . . Luke had seen them. He turned his eyes to the hangar, spotting Vader's son. His mind flashed over the many years he had spent protecting this boy, keeping watch from just out of sight . . . in silent agony. Leia was being helped to safety by Solo and Chewbacca, and the `droids were already boarding. His gaze drifted back to Vader . . . trusting in the Force that the long-concealed boy would turn the tide, would restore all that had been lost . . . would redeem one, if not two damaged knights. He closed his eyes as he reached deep into the Force silently repeating his final warning to Luke as he raised his lightsaber up before his face and stood silently awaiting his fate.

Vader was not sure what to make of it at first. Then, the anger engulfed him . . . he was finished with the toying. He was enraged at the man who had turned against the Republic, turned his Padme against him and left him for dead. A wide, sweeping red arc of light cut through the air as he swung his saber sharply around, slicing through Obi-Wan at the waist. Kenobi felt no pain, only the explosion of his physical body transforming instantly . . . merging with the pure, warm, fluid energy of the Force . . . he was immediately overcome with the feeling that he was home once again. The others that had gone so savagely before him at the hands of the clones welcomed him. His tattered Jedi robes fluttered for an instant in the air and settled to the floor, his deactivated lightsaber dropping on top.

Having seen Ben cut down by Vader, Luke screamed "NO!" The transfixed troopers whirled around at the noise, firing on the group escaping toward the Millennium Falcon. Numbled by what he had witnessed, Luke finally raised the E-11 in his hands and returned their fire. He cut through several of the troopers before they had a chance to retaliate. The others in the group fired back, throwing bright red energy bolts sizzling past him.

Wary of a trick, Vader stepped on the piled fabric of the old man's cloaks with one his black boots several times . . . making sure that he was finally rid of the thorn that was Obi-Wan Kenobi.

Solo blasted one of the troopers and yelled at him over the noise, "C'mon!"  
Leia yelled also "C'mon . . . C'mon. Luke it's too late!"

Solo screamed at him "Blast the door, kid!" He managed to fry the blast door control panel and continued firing as the doors closed, sealing Vader in the hallway and trapping the remaining troopers. Solo and Leia retreated up the ramp into the ship under heavy fire as Luke continued to blast away at the troops.

The Living Force was churning with the focused energy of the newly received Jedi Master . . . his life energy was determined and focused to fulfill his one final task, pass his final trial . . . pass on a final warning. He had trained and meditated and followed the guidance of Qui-Gon for years. All of his learned discipline and patience converged in this moment of his passing. Somewhere . . . deep down in his core, Luke felt a momentary calm wash over him and he sensed the

unmistakable presence of Obi-Wan . . . and felt the urgency and emotion in his words "RUN Luke, RUN!" Without thinking, he obeyed . . . and began his journey toward a deeper understanding of the Force as he ran to the safety of the Millennium Falcon.

Solo and Chewbacca jump-started the cold engines of the Corellian smuggling ship and recklessly lifted off, slipped backwards out of the hangar, careened around to an attitude of escape, and fired the main engines, blasting away from the station.

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Crossing the voids of space, sweeping worlds the galaxy over, waves of change radiated through the Force from the epicenter onboard the Death Star. For most of the living, there was no indication that anything had changed . . . life went on as it always had.

For Force-sensitives throughout the galaxy however, a momentary tugging at their insides was felt as the energy equilibrium was upset followed by a slow, steady calming . . . just as a disturbance caused by a rock thrown into a still pond eventually ripples back to stillness.

As the wave raced through the galaxy, the tugging sensation washed through a small creature seated in the warm, flickering firelight of a small, dark room. It grabbed at the cloak around its shoulders with a small, three-fingered hand as the thunder rolled and heavy rains poured outside. Eyes that had been held shut in meditation opened wide in the dim light as the realization of what had happened settled within.

\* \* \*

The Hammerhead stared off past us as if he were watching the events he was relaying unfold before him. "Having surveyed the darkened areas for constructing the Jedi training area, we moved to the extreme front of the huge storage bay and stepped through and over a gaping wound in the crumpled skin and twisted frame of the ancient starship to find ourselves in another stony corridor littered with rocks and debris. As we moved further into the depths, the darkness was closing in around us when finally we began to see a faint light from somewhere up ahead. The huge chamber of the starship we had left behind was completely dwarfed by the immense opening we spilled into at the end of the tunnel.

I watched as Kenobi came through behind me and took in the view for the first time as he planted the soles of his seasoned boots on the monolithic stone bridge that spanned a dizzying drop into the darkness below. I watched as he placed a hand on the stone wall and leaned back, tipping his head to take in the sheer size of the cavern we were now in. Light filtered down from an opening far up in the hillside somewhere, but the stillness and pressure of the air here was suffocating. As we moved out onto the bridge, we could see several others to our left, similar to the one we were standing on . . . one at the same level and others at varying depths, both higher and lower.





The starship had impacted into the sand and stone of the hillside and broken through into an enormous underground complex carved from the stone of these caverns . . . .”

*“What is this place?” asked Kenobi as his eyes washed over the intricate carvings in the stone bridges and arches. “I’m not sure” replied the Ithorian, I stumbled into it some time ago when I was first exploring the wreckage. However, from what I can make out from the carvings and primitive symbols, whoever it was that built them pre-dated even the Tusks and the Jawas.”*

Topolev spoke up as Nadon paused momentarily in his narrative, “We’ve seen the wreckage, but haven’t been inside. You’re going to need to take us there and show us everything . . . we need to see it all and check for more information, it’s all important at this point.” I nodded, “Exactly what I was thinking. C’mon old timer . . .” I said as I took the Hammerhead by the arm, “We have some exploring to do.”

“Rogue and the others have the shuttle . . . it’ll have to wait until they get back” interjected Ddraig. I looked over at Etz, “Wanna see if your discovery from earlier works?” He nodded and stood up, “I’ll go see if I can bring her online, you guys head for the courtyard behind the barracks . . . I’ll meet you there soon.”

I nodded and began moving Nadon away as Falker looked at Ddraig, “What discovery?” Topolev pulled his bucket on as we spilled out onto the street, “You’ll see.”

Etz walked through the command center toward the barracks and the rear storage room as he pulled off his helmet. He grabbed the metal lever, pulling it down as he stepped away onto the center lift platform. As the lift settled to a stop, he stepped off through the open doorway into the underground cache and walked toward the bay doors they had left open.

The transport sat waiting to be used as he advanced across the stone floor toward it. He jumped up onto the rear tailboard, moved forward into the cockpit area and set his bucket down as he looked over the controls.

They were a little unusual, but not too far out of the realm of his training. Several switches were

flipped, dials adjusted and then he pressed a rocker switch forward to bring the engines online. As he did this, he heard a slight clicking sound and a small indicator meter in the panel lit up and flashed, showing that the batteries were depleted.

He stood up and moved to the tailboard, jumped off and headed back to the other room. The luminaries overhead flickered and came on as he flipped the wall switch. The cannons were still in the way of the equipment racks, so he squeezed between them, looking the supply shelves over for another power cell. His eyes moved quickly over the contents of the racks . . . rifles, rations, blaster power clips. He bent down to look over the lower shelf . . . a thick metal slab of some kind, on top of which were more power clips, a few miscellaneous mechanical parts, and finally two power cells. Pressing the indicator tab on top of both showed they were at full capacity. As he grabbed them and went to pull them away, the wiring harnesses caught on something, some protrusion from the thick slab on the bottom.

He unwrapped the wires and pulled away the twin cells revealing a human hand, thrust up from within the cold metal. He fell back across the aisle into the rack behind him, then raised himself to one knee and leaned forward to look at his new discovery. The hand was human, but encased within the metal of the slab. He looked left and right . . . taking note of the size of the slab as he stood and made his way back to the transport to install the new power cell.

Topolev, Ddraig, Falker and I took our time as we moved Nadon to the courtyard behind our barracks. "Let's move up here and wait for Etz" I said, leading Nadon up to the loading platform. As we all filed on, the sand began to shake in the open courtyard, vibrating, leveling out. "What the . . ." said Falker as a mound of sand began to rise in the middle of the open space before us.

As the sand dome rose higher still, the loose sand began to slide to either side until the fine sand rained down on both sides revealing the smooth surface of a magnetic shield being pushed skyward by something beneath it. Finally, the magnetic membrane barrier was breached by the upper hull of the transport, pushing through the stretched shield, rising up from our underground hangar bay and slipping into the air. Now we could hear the faint whine of the engines as Etz brought her to a still hover above the shield as the bay doors closed beneath it, "Everybody In."

\* \* \*

0600 and Rogue were in the cockpit bringing the engines online as the others filed in and found their seats. Danz was about to board, when he turned and walked over to Huff Darklighter, "What were the names of the other dead . . . the unmarked graves?" Darklighter was watching Fixer, Deak and Windy operate the sand disrupters to dig deep enough in the sand to properly bury the dead.

He spoke without removing his watchful eye from them, "Cliegg and Shmi Lars. They were Owen's father and step mother." Danz nodded and turned to go, when he stopped and turned his head back, "What was Shmi's name before Lars?" Darklighter tensed a bit as he sensed even more danger for his son's friend, Luke, than the boy had already managed to find on his own, "Skywalker."

Danz nodded and moved away toward the shuttle. Darklighter turned his head slightly, watching the trooper go. What had Luke gotten himself caught up in, he thought to himself. The shuttle ramp stowed as the ship lifted from the sand and throttled away from the farm, leaving the small group of locals and their dead behind.

Our troops were well on their way back to Mos Eisley when they were suddenly swarmed with flanking swoop bikers and small speeders. The lead swoop rider motioned for them to set down. 4120 glanced over to Rogue who cautiously said, "Let's see what they want." He unbuckled and called down the small flight of stairs into the troop area, "Weapons on and drawn . . . we're making an unscheduled stop." As he powered on his own weapon, a communication from Topolev came over his bucket commlink, "We're en route to the B'Omarr starship ruins, just checking in on your current position."

Rogue responded, "We've left the moisture farm and are on course back to Mos Eisley . . . we're currently stopping to see what a group of local swoop riders wants with us. Lock into the beacon I'm sending out and head our way . . . you can catch them off guard and come in behind . . . just in case things turn sour." "Roger that . . . beacon received . . . we're about 5 minutes out and throttling up", replied Topolev.

The shuttle settled into the sand and the swoop riders circled around several times, then came to a stop just beyond their speeders, several meters from our extending boarding ramp. Rogue stepped down from the cockpit, talking over his shoulder to his pilot as he descended the stairs to the troop area, "Keep her idling and warm . . . just in case." 4120 replied "You got it."

Rogue slipped past the troopers on his way to the ramp as they unbuckled, his E-11 drawn, "0600, Blade come with me . . . Danz, you and Felth cover us from the ramp."

Topolev crackled in his headset as he stepped down the ramp, "ETA to your position, 2 minutes." He stepped off the ramp with his weapon lowered but drawn. 0600 and Blade stepped off also, flanking him. The lead swoop rider switched off his engine and casually dismounted, slowly crossing the remaining gap to meet Rogue. Several leathery-faced Weequay watched attentively from the speeders, weapons at the ready.

The dirty, Ronto-leather bound rider looked at the troops on the ramp for a moment, then over to Rogue's crew, "Jabba the Hutt has been watching you and your men since you arrived. He requests a meeting today . . . now . . . at his palace. We've been sent to escort you to his chambers."

As he finished his sentence, our troop transport slipped in behind the Hutt's men. Everyone turned to look as Etz allowed the rear of the transport to slide around, exposing Topolev, Falker, Ddraig and me standing on the tailboard, weapons trained on each of Jabba's speeders and swoops. Falker called out, "Everything OK here?"

Rogue locked eyes with the man before him, then replied, "Everything's fine here" he called back to Falker, "It seems that Jabba's ready to meet us . . ." he said looking over to the transport, ". . . I knew it wouldn't take long." He shifted his attention back to the swoop rider, "We'll follow you. Etz, fall in behind the shuttle" and he turned to re-enter his ship passing Danz and Felth "Here we go."

\* \* \*

The superheated engines of the Outrider gave up some of their heat to the dry, blistering afternoon winds in rippling, vaporous waves as Dash Rendar released the Rancor's stun collar from its bulkhead mounting. The dazed, semi-responsive beast slumped to the repulsor sled floating just above the deck beneath it, nearly knocking Dash over. He knelt down and adjusted the settings on the collar to ensure his continued safety. His last-minute decision to take a slight side trip to Corellia had taken longer than he would have liked. By the time Jabba decided he wanted something, he was already impatient for it to be delivered.

He pushed the sled down the extended boarding ramp into the heat. Stepping foot into the sizzling sand, he breathed in the hot air as he scanned the edge of the Wastes behind his ship. He had spent a great deal of time on this next-to-forgotten planet, but he was always struck by the untamed, rugged, stark beauty of the Jundland Wastes. The repulsor sled glided easily over the sand as he maneuvered it toward the base of one of the plate durasteel ramps just ahead.



One of several large access hatches in the stone wall behind it had been opened by one of the crime lords many minions. He knew it led into the lowest level of the maze-like bowels that snaked beneath Jabbas palace . . . he had been through each of these hatches at one point or another over the years making various deliveries. He paused, leaning back to look up the almost vertical cliff face toward the summit where the domed turret of the main palace entrance was located.

Nysad, the Kajain'sa'Nikto guard that had opened the hatch, now pressed himself into the shadows, up against the stone wall as the sled with the Rancor slipped past him. Rendar paused and looked back over his shoulder as a swarm of speeders and swoops came rushing past followed by an Imperial shuttle and a final, large speeder. The group of ships raced past . . . the swoops and speeders snaking along the winding path the led toward the summit . . . the shuttle throttled up and ascended the cliff . . . something unusual was up. Rendar shook his head and pushed his delivery inside as the large hatch coarsely ground closed behind him.

Our transport silently approached the massive durasteel main chamber entry, pulling up behind the shuttle which had just lowered its extended gear into the sand with wings locking in the upright position. The swoop riders had dismounted and were awaiting Rogue and the others as the entry ramp began lowering from beneath the jutting cockpit of the elegant ship. Etz cut the thrusters and we slowed to a halt. Topolev grabbed his helmet and pulled it on as he stepped off the tailboard "This prototype gets my vote."

Falker agreed "Yeah, I'll take a ride like that any day . . . I like that it's open to the air . . . how

does she handle, Etz?" Engedi climbed out of the pilot's chair and slipped through the narrow corridor to the open rear section "It's Cygnus Spaceworks . . . pre Siemar Fleet Systems merger . . . older technology, but very smooth . . . like a cross between the control sticks of a T-16 Skyhopper and a TIE fighter, but with the power of a TIE interceptor." I slipped my bucket on and powered up my E-11 as I stepped off the rear deck following Etz, "T-16s are nicely powered with twin DCJ-45 repulsorlift engines for liftoff and an impressive Incom E-16/x ion engine for thrust, but they're definitely no match for the interceptor." "Very true Deckard . . . very true" said Ddraig, securing Nadon to the floor of the transport with restraints.

Under the watchful eyes of Jabbas men, our group circled around the transport heading for the rest of the 104th. The Weequay from the speeder closest to the huge entrance gate was checking in with the weathered sentry 'droid. The bulbous, lighted eye darted to us and back again, then retracted abruptly into a small portal. A few moments passed when the massive gate lurched with the shrieking scrape of unlubricated metal on metal as the giant locking teeth of the lower edge disengaged from their recessed receptacles and the huge gate slowly retracted upward.

Under the glare of the twin suns, the cavernous space behind the entrance was shrouded in darkness . . . the imaging sensors in our helmets had not yet activated, and were useless for seeing what lay ahead, as we were still in the light. One of Jabbas men stepped into the darkness and another motioned for us to follow. I stepped between two of the recessed receptacles on the threshold and into the darkness. The others followed.

The heads up displays in our helmets immediately flashed on as we moved out of the light. What had been hidden in shadow was now revealed . . . we were walking back into a huge entry hall. The high stone ceiling above us was spanned by heavy support ridges every fifteen feet as if we were inside the ribcage of a mammoth animal . . . we were quite literally entering the belly of the beast.

We were herded across the sandswept stone floor toward an archway leading off to the left. Several spider walker 'droids silently ambled out of our way, each with a clear brain canister hanging below the body . . . fluid gently sloshing this way and that with a monk's brain suspended inside. Etz kept a wary eye on them as we passed through a dim shaft of light streaming through an open port near the ceiling. A pair of Gamorreans stood guard, one on each side of the arch.

The pungent, stale odor of Gamorrean body odor radiated from their stained, well-worn leather armor as we passed between them and stepped beneath the arch. We were led into an empty, medium-sized room and our Weequay guide indicated that we should wait behind for a moment. He left us in the still silence as he stepped outside and spoke with the guards. They told him that Jabba was not yet ready for the Imperial visitors. He had dispatched his men to intercept these new troops and bring them to him. Tatooine was Hutt-controlled, and while he felt his authority was not in question, he was determined to make sure there was no room for doubt. Then, one of the guards was notified of Jabba's return to his throne in the main audience chamber.

Several moments later our escort returned, leading us out of the room and across the courtyard to another arch. We all stepped through the opening, beginning our descent down a staircase that lazily spiraled downward. A tall, male Twi'Lek entered the staircase from the bottom and made his way several steps up to meet with the Weequay leading our group. They spoke in hushed tones, and the Twi'Lek looked our way several times, then turned to head back down.

The Weequay motioned for us to follow, as the Twi'Lek pushed his way through the crowded room, clearing a path toward the raised stone dais on which Jabba was stretched out. He was

relaxing . . . smoking his pipe and conversing with several well-known bounty hunters. I recognized the Mandalorian armor of Boba Fett. Dengar Roth, IG-88, the execution droid, and several other low-life guns for hire all seemed to hover around the crimelord like a group of vultures, perched and waiting for their meal to finally die. Smoke curled from his flared nostrils as Jabba spoke, "Mel wanta chim en Wookiee, jee Nolata tah da po nikee pa poonoo . . . gee nula sotta." (I want him and the Wookiee, but I want them alive . . . I want them to pay for what they've done to my business . . . I can't afford to appear soft.)

I stepped off the bottom step behind the Weequay as did the rest of the group, filling into the space that had been created in the crowd of shadowy onlookers as the Twi'Lek made his way up beside the reclining Hutt. The air was heavy with the thick smell of spice and a mixture of fragrant smoke. As we pushed closer we saw what had captivated the rest of the audience . . . they had all been gathered around a large grate in the floor. As I stepped over it and moved to the front of the Hutt's stone platform, I saw down into a deep cavern beneath the chamber floor . . . the sandy floor about forty meters below. Several men were removing a collar from a stunned animal. My eyes drifted up from the scene far below and scanned the faces in the room as the rest of the 104th filed in around me. Minions from several dozen races encircled us.

The Twi'Lek stepped off the dais before us, catching the eye of the beautiful green-skinned female Twi'Lek dancer that sat, feet dangling in front of the mass that was the Hutt. As he passed, he ran a hand lightly over her lekku, making her shudder, eyes closed . . . repulsed by his touch. She turned away . . . it was then that I saw the heavy chain that connected to a band around her neck, the other end trailing up to and passing through Jabba's hand to continue on to an anchored fitting on his throne.

"Chowbaso!" thundered Jabba. "Welcome!" echoed the Twi'Lek, glancing back to Jabba, waiting on his next words. "Kee chai chai cun kuta? Kee madda hodrudda du wundee, della Tatooine." "What are you doing here? Tell me why you are here on my planet, on Tatooine?" said the Twi'Lek.

Rogue took a step closer to the Hutt, "We've been sent here to reactivate a presence in the city . . . in Mos Eisley. We've been charged with ensuring safety for the moisture farmers and the harvesting of their crops . . . we fully acknowledge that Tatooine is Hutt-controlled and we have no interest in your business, holdings or dealings, so long as they don't interfere with our official agenda."

Jabba's eyes narrowed a bit as he looked us over. Topolev and I were scanning every corner of the room searching for the concealed cameras that had supplied our predecessors with their datacard recordings. Jabba snorted a bit and laughed in a deep, rumbling laugh, "Ho ho ho ho" and waved a hand at us as he looked away, finished with us . . . and just like that, the conversation had ended. The Hutt's attention was now on to his dancing girl, Oola. "Da eitha!" (Sit by me now!) She cried out, "Na chuba negatorie. Na! Na! Natoota..." (No, No . . . please, no!) The Hutt's voice thundered in the small room as we were being led out, "Boscka!" Topolev looked over to me . . . I shrugged and kept walking up the stairs toward the grand hallway above. Something didn't feel right . . . it was too easy. The Hutt would be watching, that much was certain.

The tall Twi'Lek moved to the center of the room as we left, speaking to Fett and the others, "And now the matter of the reward offered for the . . . shall we say, disappointment . . . bounty hunters, come with me."

Someone coming down the stairs pushed past me on his way down toward the throne room. . . it was the human that had been unloading the animal in the pit. I heard him burst into the room,



talking to Jabba . . . "I'm glad you like him . . . he is young, but should grow to a nice size for you in a few years. Malakili seemed happy to finally have something to train. He's been far too long down there without a pet." Jabba laughed deeply and ran his hand down the his dancer's back, licking his lips as the man continued, "What would you say if I told you I could get you a pleasure ship . . . a sail barge complete with . . ." The voices of the throne room trailed off and were now overtaken by the sound of our footsteps on the stone stairs as we slowly made our way up to the main hall. Jabbas men escorted us past the Gamorreans, through the echoing entry chamber and just outside the main gate.

One of the guards was waiting for us to pass outside into the fading sunlight. He turned away from us, retreating inside with the others as the gate began to slowly scrape down. It rumbled closed, sealing the palace, and we were left alone, standing in front of our ships, with the late afternoon wind blowing. "Where did this come from?" said Rogue as he walked toward the transport. "Etz found it", I said. Topolev joined in, "When we diverted to meet you, we were on our way to follow up on a lead from information supplied by Nadon . . . there's something we all need to check out . . . a possible lead for more information about Ben Kenobi . . . at the B'Omarr starship wreckage. Rogue looked back at him, then over to 4120 and 0600. Topolev continued, "It seems our outcast Jedi was working on a scheme to secretly train new Jedi."

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