

Chapter 6

Data intensive status reports scrolled rapidly across several large illuminated screens, but Wilhuff Tarkin sat swiveled 'round, staring out the large portal behind his desk. His face was coldly emotionless . . . his thoughts were not of his precious statistics, but of the power that was now under his control . . . the power to simply wipe planets from the heavens if they dared resist the Emperor.

He had worked long and hard to finally be seated here watching Imperial history unfold around him. Many had died to bring this station and his new command to life . . . not nearly enough of those dirty Wookiees, he thought.

The stars slipped silently past as the Death Star advanced on the Yavin system. Vader's little plan had worked. He had successfully located the Millennium Falcon and set course for the fourth moon in the system. Although his grand creation lacked hyperdrive, it was tracking along quite nicely at sub-light speeds. It had left the debris field that had been Alderaan in its wake, slipped silently past Phindar, and was now bearing down on the Giant, gaseous planet of Yavin.

The moon in question was in mid-orbit, on the far side, and would soon be in range of the main Superlaser. Tarkin amused himself as he thought of the Rebels hidden somewhere among the jungle forests and the abandoned temples of the once-proud Massassi, scurrying to find a way to escape the deadly shadow cast by the monstrous station. He stood, straightened his tunic and exited his chambers, heading for the Superlaser observation deck . . . he wanted a good view of the end of the Rebellion.

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While "**Ben**" Kenobi had returned nothing from earlier holonet queries, 4120 thumbed the controls of his holo-pack scrolling through the many entries highlighting the exploits of Jedi Knight and General, Obi-Wan Kenobi. The hooded old man that had skillfully eluded Tyrell with a casual mind trick on the sweltering streets of Mos Eisley had been a major player during the Clone Wars. Not only had he been the Jedi to uncover the origins of the clone army and the battle 'droid manufacturing facility on Geonosis, but he battled Count Dooku and General Grievous with his Padawaan during their rescue Senator Palpatine. His Padawaan killed Dooku onboard Grievous' starship, the *Invisible Hand*, while Kenobi himself later caught up with and killed Grievous on Utapau, just prior to the issuing of Executive Order 66.

Every holo entry abruptly ended there . . . with the issuing of Order 66. One report from Commander Cody and his men on Utapau, stated that they believed they had delivered the killing blow to the Jedi when his Boga was blasted out from beneath him, and both fell from the rocky cliffs overhead into the deep, icy waters below. Although a body was never recovered, it was believed that he must have been killed in the fall from such a height . . . until now.

4120 switched off his pack as Rogue reappeared from out of the darkness, "All the data we have so far has been sent. Where is everyone?" 4120 stood and slipped his holo-pack back in its belt pouch as he replied, "Ddraig and Danz have gone ahead deeper into the ship with the Hammerhead to scout around a bit. 0600, Deckard and Felth are checking out the crates and supplies over there", he said, gesturing to a dim area near the upward-curving walls of the ship. Rogue sat down, exhaling. "Now we wait. Vader has the information . . . hopefully it's enough to help somehow", he said rubbing his forehead. 4120 silently nodded his agreement as he glanced over at us.

0600 broke the seal on one of the crates and Felth and I forced the lid open. I bent down and

picked up one of the illuminators from the sand, holding it over the opening. Inside were ten or so rolls of fabric. Half were a light material of a sandy color. The remaining rolls were darker and heavier. 0600 reached in and dug beneath the fabric, revealing several pairs of boots in varying sizes, each with a leather belt tucked inside. There were no weapons . . . simply the materials and supplies to clothe the weapons he hoped to raise and train in this crude facility . . . hopes that had never been realized.

Disgusted, Felth moved to the next crate, breaking the seal and throwing open the lid. Inside were a dozen large, square cushions. "Cushions?" he yelled. "There are cushions up here too", called Falker from under one of the Bafforr trees on one of the durasteel catwalk landings above. "Looks like a perfect place for a Jedi to sit and meditate."

"I'm going to get some air", snarled Felth as he crossed the sandy floor heading for the exit hatch. I watched him go, sporadically appearing out of the black darkness as he passed by each of the five illuminators lined up between us and the durasteel ladder leading up to the hatch we had entered through.

"Let him go", said 0600. "He's used to starship duty . . . he wants action, not fabric."

I watched him as he disappeared through the hatch, "He has a lot to learn about what **action** involves."

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Felth emerged from the stone tunnel into the cool night air. Millions of stars pierced the darkness of the sky as he circled around behind several large rocks. He set down his helmet and looked around, waiting . . . listening. While he was fairly certain no one had followed him, he had to be sure. Finally, convinced no one had trailed him, his irritated demeanor melted away as he quickly unsnapped one of his belt pouches, pulled out his holo-pack and flipped back the cover.

As the small screen flickered to life, he keyed in a brief description of the training arena we had discovered and its coordinates, as well as a few lines about having just missed General Kenobi at Mos Eisley as he left on the Millennium Falcon. Once finished with his entry, the device prompted him for a transmission password. He entered the sequence he had received from his Bothan friend on Kothlis. He exhaled sharply as the code finally authenticated. He glanced over the top of the rock to make sure he was still alone as the screen flashed a request for the name of the recipient to whom he wrote.

He took a breath, entered the name . . . **Base One - Jan Dodonna** . . . and pressed the transmit button.

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A squadron of X-wing fighters raced across the surface of the massive space station, strafing gun turrets and towers with crimson blasts from their wingtip cannons as they streaked past. They pulled up and re-grouped high above the surface, only to cut sharply across the axis, drawing the fire from the turret cannons as a formation of Y-Wings dove into the man-made canyons of the Death Star's equatorial trench. They twisted and rolled as strategically placed drive system defense gun turrets along the rim of the trench blasted away at them to no avail.

An Imperial officer, standing by a monitor in one of the many tech stations, studied the green letters and numbers of the battle reports. They scrolled past on the monochrome screen as the station's computers compiled damage reports and hit/miss ratios.

He suddenly realized that although the Death Star could easily blast away an entire planet, it was having a difficult time defending itself against the swarming rebel snubship fighters. A bead of sweat formed on his brow, as he studied the reports from the turbolaser towers . . . they were almost completely ineffective. If they were able to get past the guns and get to the exhaust port . . .

He had to find Lord Vader . . . quickly.

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A final dot of light faded to black in the center of the screen as the Dark Lord switched off the data terminal and sat back in his padded chair. Cool air hissed in through vents in the pressure chamber as he began sifting what he had just read. He rested his bare head in his gloved hand, eyes closed, remembering his wife, and the child that he thought had died with her, by his hand. Chaos churned in the twisted recesses of Vader's brain as his fingers traced the thick, deformed skin of the scar that ran across his scalp. His mechanically-assisted heart raced. Palpatine hadn't foreseen this, and neither had he.

Luke Skywalker . . . Luke.

He had a son . . . a Force-sensitive son that had been hidden and protected by his former master. "Obi-Wan was wise to hide him from me" he thought to himself. Emotions that Anakin had not felt or even remembered existed were now dimly lit within him. Somewhere out there was the last piece . . . the last connection he had to his Padme. He slammed a fist down on one of the control buttons and his facemask and helmet lowered into place, locking and sealing on his head as the giant faceted sphere split apart in the center with the rush of escaping air.

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Swarming Rebel fighters continued to strafe the surface of the station. The young officer looking for Lord Vader rushed through a corridor as it exploded around him, throwing him to the floor. Walls buckled, smoke and sparks filled the corridor as a trooper helped him up. He quickly checked himself for injury, then raced off in search of the Dark Lord.

He had almost reached the next monitoring station when he saw the dark figure of Lord Vader pass by in the intersecting hallway ahead. "We count thirty Rebel ships, Lord Vader. But they're so small they're evading our turbo-lasers!"

Vader stopped and turned to him, "We'll have to destroy them ship to ship. Get the crews to their fighters." As he turned to walk away, he felt a small wave in the Force. A sensation he had not felt before. It was a feeling of recognition . . . like he had felt in the presence of Kenobi, but much fainter, like a whisper in a driving wind.

Somewhere deep inside, he could feel that his son was near, and the sensation was doing nothing but growing. Luke was just a boy, and Kenobi was dead . . . he could no longer mentor the boy. Abruptly, he turned and walked away toward the turbolift. Tarkin would be expecting him on the Superlaser observation deck.

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Danz and Ddraig climbed down off the tall rubble pile of stone and twisted durasteel girders, illuminators held high. Nadon stopped to catch his breath, "There's a small breach in the hull just

ahead, and an opening in the stone behind it that we must pass through in order to proceed.”

“What’s in there?” asked Ddraig. The Ithorian high priest blinked his eyes slowly, turning them to Ddraig, “I could tell you, but it won’t even come close to capturing all that awaits. You need to see this with your own eyes to appreciate it.” Ddraig shot a look to Danz who shrugged his shoulders,

Their tired guide stood and moved past them into the darkness ahead, carefully moving around the sharp, jagged edges of the durasteel hull skin that was peeled back from the sheared opening. They followed him into the stony opening beyond the hull and walked on several yards, navigating through the narrow crack in the rock until they stepped out into a much larger chamber. “Wait!” said Nadon. “You must be very careful here. There’s a long drop to either side of the path we’re on. You can see it more clearly in the day, as some light filters in through openings above.”

Both troopers, having left their helmets behind, stood very still until their eyes slowly adjusted, and the dim chamber became more visible. The enormous space was larger than they could have imagined. Nadon went ahead, crossing the stone bridge and through twin carved columns situated on either side of an ornately carved arch which led to another chamber ahead. Danz and Ddraig followed slowly, taking everything in. The room opened into a common area, connecting all of the bridges like the hub of an enormous wheel. In its center were massive stone stairs, spiraling up and down to all levels.

Danz and Ddraig moved past, heading for the stairs and were about to descend when Nadon stopped them and sat down on a stone block, The stairwell passage has collapsed that way. There is no way down from here, only up.” The two troopers looked at each other and turned to head back to the bridge.

Danz knelt and was staring down to the bridge below, “So how far down would you say it is to the next level?” Ddraig was trying to estimate the distance as Danz pulled a small folded grappling hook from a compartment on the rear of his belt and fished out some line. “It looks like a good fifteen to twenty meters. Why?”

Danz stood up and passed the grappling hook around one of the stone columns that flanked the archway they had passed through to reach the steps. He wrapped it completely around and locked the hook around the cable. “I’m going down to see if the steps are clear from that point down. If they are, we can repel down to the next level and then walk down from there.”

Ddraig didn’t much care for the idea, but knew there was no other way down. Danz stepped back off the bridge and had begun walking down the face of the stone wall toward the bridge below as Nadon caught up to them, “That is not the best of ideas. Dangerous this is. Old are these stone carvings, and delicate, fragile even.”

As he spoke, the stony column shifted with the crunching scrape of stone on stone. Ddraig dove toward the stone, pressing his shoulder into it “No, No No . . . don’t you do it!”

Nadon turned to help, lowering his shoulder and straining with his powerful legs. Try as they might, they could not stop the stone from sliding off its base and begin dragging toward the edge of the bridge, **“DANZ! The stone is going over the edge! Get down to that bridge, GET OFF THE CABLE!”** As he yelled, Danz hurried to reach the bridge, and as he was about to step foot on it, the column stone slid over the edge and into the darkness.

Draig screamed into the blackness below, **“UNHOOK FROM THE LINE! UNHOOK”**

The stone dropped and slammed into the bridge below with a huge thudding sound that echoed loudly in the still, silent chamber . . . bouncing off the stony walls. The column shifted to one side as Danz fought to unclip the grappling assembly from his belt, but the stone toppled and fell over the edge of the lower bridge before he could release.

It jerked him hard, off the lower bridge and into the blackness below with the huge column falling again to the second bridge down. He grabbed for his holstered E-11 as he fell, far out of sight and deep into the darkness of the chasm. There were several flashes of crimson light and the sound of blaster fire, followed by a final bone-shattering crash as the column hit bottom . . . then nothing

"DANZ!" yelled Ddraig. But there was only silence returned from below.

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Troopers rushed through the hallway as Lord Vader addressed two TIE pilots, "Several fighters have broken off from the main group. Come with me." Turning, he led the way down a corridor toward the TIE hangar bay that housed his modified fighter, "An analysis of the plans for the station have presented a potential weakness in its design. It could possibly be exploited if the Rebels have also managed to arrive at a similar conclusion."

He stepped through an open blast door onto a gantry leading out into the mammoth hangar. As he arrived at the opened canopy hatch for his fighter, he turned once more to his accompanying pilots, "Stay close to me. You are only to fire when I say so . . . and obey my every command." With that, he turned and slipped into the seat of his fighter as droids moved in to secure and prep him. The pilots walked away toward their own standard TIEs.

Vader strapped himself in as his mind raced . . . he had to be very careful. He wanted to strip away all support, all wingmen, all friends from Luke and disable his ship enough to force a landing in a secured bay. If he could manage this . . . perhaps the boy could be swayed to join him, and his days of bowing to Palpatine might become numbered. He and his son could rule the galaxy . . . leading the Empire he had forged so many years ago. Quickly he cleared his mind. Palpatine was very powerful. He could not risk the Emperor sensing his true intentions.

Overhead mechanical arms securing his fighter released as his repulsors and engines came online. The other two TIEs were also released moments later, and he maneuvered carefully toward the magnetic shield at the bay door as his wingmen formed up on either side. He throttled up, pushing through the magnetic membrane into the cold of space outside to join the battle, his wingmen in close proximity. "Stay in attack formation" he commanded over the comm as he banked his ship to the right.

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Rogue was in full gear running across an open courtyard as a deafening crack of lightning split the night air and heavy rain began to pour down. Several explosions rocked the ground as he ran, lighting up the thick smoke in the air behind him. He paused momentarily as O600 and several others came running up to join him, and squeezed off several shots at those advancing from behind. "There's one shuttle left on the pad, we've gotta get over there if we want any chance of surviving this."

The ground exploded behind them, spewing dirt and small bits of duracrete debris through the air, instantly flung on the concussive shockwave. It blasted into their armored plates like a giant

fist, knocking them all into the mud. "They're getting closer, let's go!" Another slash of lightning tore through the sky, accompanied by a chest-pounding clap and the disturbing roll of the moody thunder that followed.

As they ran through the smoke and rain, Rogue turned his head catching sight of his Squad leader, across the quad, pulling off his helmet, grabbing a T-21 repeating rifle from the hands of one of the dead troopers on the ground, and charging to the top of a pile of rubble. He cocked the rifle and began blasting away at the shadowy mass that was rapidly gaining on them from the far side of the complex.

The fence had been breached, and the shuttle was their only way out now. His squad leader was firing non-stop, dropping bodies left and right, but still they advanced, swarming over him, beating him with their fists and clubs. Then, he disappeared in the swarm surrounding him, as if he were drowning.

They ran toward the landing pad as other troopers in their squad blasted away at the oncoming flood of Ithorians, covering their hasty retreat from a landing several meters above. Rogue and 0600 reached the bottom of the stairs that led up to the flight deck.

They were about to take the first step when another powerful explosion rocked the structure of the landing platform and ground beneath them, throwing them to the dirt. The troopers on the landing above were flung over the railing as a large, twisted mass of the durasteel structure folded in on itself and came crashing down around Rogue and 0600 . . . broken, bloodied bodies burying them.

Something had shattered his leg armor and pierced his thigh . . . he could hardly breathe under this tangled pile of dead troopers . . . he felt a cold chill run up his spine and passed out, slipping into darkness.

Suddenly, he was floating above, watching the battle unfold from high above his unconscious body. Thousands of Hammerheads came streaming across the base as he watched, washing around the pile of unmoving armored bodies he was beneath like water around a rock . . . as they advanced on the command center beyond. Rogue's floating presence then felt 0600 shaking his body on the ground below . . . pulling him out of the pile of the dead. Lightning flashed brightly above as 0600 shook him, trying to rouse him, "Rogue, wake up!"

"Rogue, wake up!" said 0600, shaking him more violently now. Sweaty eyelids flew open and he instinctively reached for his blaster. He was staring up at 0600, who was blocking the E-11 from his reach . . . the cables of the Jedi arena criss-crossing the interior of the dim starship cargo bay behind him, overhead. "It's OK, we're on Tatooine, remember? You were dreaming. Danz is in trouble, we've gotta go . . . now."

Rogue sat up and 0600 grabbed one hand, Ddraig grabbed the other and they pulled him to his feet. The others were hurrying past into the darkness following Nadon.

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Somewhere up above the dark chamber she was sitting in, there was the sound of a monstrous impact, and the shattering of stone as small rocks rained down through the twisting, sloping crevasses into the cathedral chamber she now rested in. A wave of dust followed, spreading across the open room. A furry hand reached for the Illuminator, which she dimmed slowly.

Cautiously, she cocked her hooded head to one side, listening to the silence that followed the

crash. She glanced with gleaming eyes down to the Gaffi sticks and pouches she had scavenged off the dead Tusken from the ridge outside the cave as she chewed her small mouthful of desert scurrier.

Curiosity got the better of her and as she swallowed her mouthful, she began to climb over the rocks, up the sloping stone grade into the darkness where the small rocks had spilled out. The rocky passage was narrow here, but as she crawled, it eventually widened just enough for her to squeeze out into a larger cavity above. There was no light here at all.

She pulled out her illuminator and switched it on revealing the incredible size of the chamber she was now in. "Ohhhh" she whispered as she leaned her head back, holding her hood and straining to see the top, then she lowered her gaze and looked around. In the center of the room, wrapped up in a tangle of cable, lay what remained of a huge stone column, now split down its length. She reflexively jumped behind the corner of the giant stone as a shower of small stones rained down from the darkness of the bridge span above . . . something was moving up there.

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"I am aware of the rebel snubships, Bast, but quite honestly they do not concern me in the least. I am only interested in acquiring a targeting lock on the fourth moon. We have almost cleared the curvature of the planet . . . once we do, the rebellion will cease to be of concern to anyone." Tarkin exhaled shortly through slightly flared nostrils as he turned back to the wall display. Bast closed his eyes, wishing he could convince the Grand Moff that there was indeed reason to be concerned. Even Lord Vader had taken the information under advisement and was now personally engaging the fighters in his modified TIE.



He swallowed hard and stepped up behind, and slightly beside Tarkin, almost whispering in his ear, that others might not hear what he had to say, "I've analyzed their attack, sir, and there is a danger. Should I have your ship standing by?" Tarkin's eyes widened slightly in amazement as he turned to face Bast once again, "Evacuate? In our moment of triumph? I think you overestimate their chances."

Bast bowed slightly, stepping back from Tarkin, then turned and left the observation deck as the Grand Moff and master statistician fumed at the idea that his incredible weapon, his Death Star, might possibly be in any danger from a small band of well-worn rebel fighters. Bast couldn't be concerned with whether or not Tarkin believed him now. He hurried away toward the hangar bay and the small supply ship he had waiting.

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Red Leader pressed the earpiece tighter to his ear as a crackling communication came through from Yavin IV, "Red Leader, this is Base One. Keep half your group out of range for the next run."

All remaining pilots heard Red Leader acknowledge General Dodonna, "Copy, Base One. Luke, take Red Two and Three. Hold up here and wait for my signal to start your run." As he finished issuing his order, he and two other X-wing fighters broke away from the main group and dove toward the trench and their shot at the exhaust port.

As they rolled into the trench, Red Leader called out to his wingmen, "Keep your eyes open for those fighters." The reply from Red Ten came back almost immediately, "There's too much interference. Red Five, can you see them from where you are?"

Biggs Darklighter and Wedge Antilles flanked Luke in a tight formation as he looked up, then strained his neck to the right as he began to reply, "No sign of any . . ." Then he looked out to his left, "Wait, they're coming in point three five."

Red Ten replied as Red Leader prepared his computer to gain a lock on the target. "I see them." High above the Death Star, Luke, Wedge and Biggs watched as the attacking group skimmed through the trench across the surface of the station, and could see TIEs closing in on them.

The odd TIE in the center of the formation pulled ahead of the wingmen and fired on Red Twelve, vaporizing the ship in the flash of a fireball. The TIEs flew through the flames holding steady on the tail of Red Ten, who continued to cover Red Leader.

"Almost there . . ." Red Ten responded in a panic, "I can't hold them!" as Vader lined up his crosshairs on the rear of the rebel fighter. Green flashes of energy spit from the lead TIE, and Red Ten screamed momentarily into his comm as he and his ship vaporized into cosmic dust and were sprayed across the trench wall.

Red Leader yelled into his comm, "It's away!" and pulled back hard on his stick, climbing out of the trench, still pursued by the triangular formation of TIEs. Red Nine yelled back, "It's a hit?" A moment of silence passed and Red Leader responded, "Negative. Negative. It didn't go in . . ." it just impacted on the surface." As he finished his comment, Vader fired on him, bolts of energy slashing through one of the four engines on his X-wing.

Luke spoke into his comm, "We're right above you, turn to point oh-five. We'll cover for you."

Red Leader knew he was no longer able to stay ahead of the TIEs, and cautioned Luke's group away, "Stay there, I just lost my starboard engine. Get set up for your attack run." As he finished his sentence, Vader's sight found its target and the Dark Lord opened fire, energy beams ripping through the ship, crippling it. He screamed as his fighter raced in an unrecoverable dive toward the stark surface, and he was gone in a brilliant flash of flaming fuel scattered across the skin of the beast they fought.

Antilles and Darklighter watched the fireball from the impact of Red Leader's ship as they raced past when Luke's voice came through on their headsets, "Biggs, Wedge, let's close it up. We're going in. We're going in full throttle, that outta keep those fighters off our backs."

Wedge kicked up his throttle as he responded, "Right with you, boss." Biggs had a few concerns about the end of the trench and the space needed to pull up safely after dumping the torpedoes, "Luke, at that speed will you be able to pull out in time?"

Luke felt a warm energy coursing through his body as he fought to center himself the way Obi-Wan had instructed him, "It'll be just like Beggar's Canyon back home."

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