

Chapter 8

The ground crew, freedom fighters, pilots, officials, leadership and his new friends had all cleared out of the Ceremonial hall, and Luke Skywalker sat alone on the stone steps, looking down at the hero's medal around his neck. His life had accelerated beyond his wildest imaginings and thrust him squarely into the center of the conflict with the Empire. Like it or not, he was now part of the Alliance and prominently displayed on the Empire's hit list.

His thoughts dissolved into images of his life back on Tatooine . . . a life that was now lost forever, scattered on the winds like the smoke from his ruined home. Since the death of Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru, he had been caught up in the unfolding of events beyond his control.

He had been running on adrenaline and the desire to help the beautiful princess avoid execution. With all that now behind him, he realized that while he had learned a bit from Ben in the short time they had traveled together, it would not be nearly enough to become a Jedi Knight and face Vader.

The whirring of R2's motors brought him back into the moment as the little droid rolled to a stop behind him. Threepio ambled in behind him, "R2-D2, can't you see Master Luke wants to be alone?"

The little astromech threw together a string of sounds in a retaliatory comment, as Threepio reacted, obviously offended, "You watch yourself or I'll have maintenance remove your filthy little audio processors! Why I must endure the the displeasure of your company is beyond me."

"It's alright Threepio . . . I was just thinking about Ben."

"Oh . . . as you wish, Master Luke." R2 rattled off a small sentence of burps and whistles, and the protocol droid translated, "R2 says you have known Master Kenobi for some time. We are both very sorry for your loss, sir."

Luke looked off down the stone aisle as he spoke, "I've known OF him for a long time. My uncle and the other farmers all thought he was some kind of magician or wizard. He doesn't come out much. He traveled the Jundland Wastes on foot, no one else did that. I saw him a few times headed toward Mos Eisley, but never in Anchorhead.

About 5 seasons . . . umm . . . 5 standard years ago, my friend Windy and I rode out into the wastes on a Dewback. We were fed up and just wanted to get away for awhile and blow off some steam. The Dewback we were riding got spooked by the cry of a Krayt Dragon echoing toward us from the distant hills. It threw us off in one of the canyons and ran away. We wandered around for the rest of the afternoon trying to find our way out, but we were hopelessly lost and the suns were almost down.

We sat down, trying to figure out the best place to spend the night, when a voice spoke to us from the rocks above and called MY name . . . it was Ben Kenobi. He guided Windy and me back to our farm and made sure we were safe. Uncle Owen was furious, but not with Windy and me, with Ben!

He ordered Ben off our farm and told him not to come back. The old wizard hesitated, eyes locked with Uncle Owen. Then he glanced over to me and opened his mouth momentarily as if he wanted to say something, but he cut his eyes back to Uncle Owen briefly and walked off into the night.

I wonder if he was trying to tell me about my father even then? I also wonder why Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru wouldn't want me to have known. They had to know how important it was to me to know him . . . anything about him."

As he paused, an officer stepped into the chamber at the other end of the long aisle, "Commander Skywalker, General Dodonna needs to see you right away."

Luke looked up, "I'll be right there." He stood up and pulled the medal from around his neck and handed it to Threepio, "put this with my things, I'll be back soon." He turned and walked down the steps, polished boots clacking slightly on the stone floor as he walked away down the aisle and disappeared through the giant doors.

"Come on R2, let's go" said the gold protocol droid to his squat counterpart.

"Ahh, Commander Skywalker . . ." General Dodonna opened a file on his datapad and set it on the large table as the Luke neared the table. The doors closed behind him and they were alone. "Intelligence reports are indicating that Darth Vader's ship did not rejoin the Imperial Fleet following the destruction of the Death Star.

It is assumed his ship was damaged in Captain Solo's unorthodox assault and that he has made his way to a nearby system. I want patrol missions launched to find him before he can rejoin the Emperor. If we can remove him from power, that's one less we need to contend with."

Luke nodded "Vader is very dangerous. We'll find him, General."

"We also need to begin preparing for an evacuation of this base. The Death Star is gone, but the Empire will be here in force soon to deal with us in a ground assault. We have several locations being scouted as we speak."

He put a hand on Luke's shoulder, "I know the loss of General Kenobi has been hard on you, son. I am dealing with it myself, now for a second time. I thought he was dead once, long ago . . . now he really is. I have some information in my chambers on a datacard from one of our spies embedded within the Empire . . . about a hidden Jedi training facility that Kenobi pieced together during his years of seclusion. I'll make you a copy, it may prove helpful to you in your journey to become a Jedi."

"Thank you, sir. I would be very interested to see that."

* * *

Behind the polarized lenses of my armored helmet, my eyes burned and watered from the long day's activities and the long night that had followed with no sleep. It had been hours since Rogue submitted his report to Vader with no response yet.

That could either be a good sign, or a bad one . . . I couldn't decide which I thought it might be. Either Vader had located the passengers from the Millennium Falcon onboard the Death Star, or perhaps the ship was a decoy, and he was involved in an intensive hunt for them. If the latter were true, he would be contacting us sooner or later for any additional information we had uncovered.

Rogue would have plenty to tell him about the discovery of the training arena. He and 4120 had secured Danz in his bunk to allow his shoulder a day to recuperate. He had fought them, saying he was fine, but in the end gave in and accepted the downtime.

Suddenly, I came back into the moment. I leaned against a stone wall and looked across the courtyard of the open marketplace . . . people were gathering and heading this way. The moisture farmers had obviously gotten the word about our meeting. I watched as they walked closer. They were a seasoned group, worn down by season after season working in the beating suns and the stinging, blowing sand. They gathered in a small group and talked amongst themselves as still more began to file in.

Rogue paced slowly a few yards away from me, as the farmers filled in and moved a bit closer. All eyes were on him, but he was waiting, watching the corridors . . . watching those who were still filing in. These were the people we were here to serve. Their lives were difficult enough in this harsh region without fearing Tusken attacks as well.

I tried again to connect to the holonet through my helmet with no luck. It had been out all night. I walked out of the courtyard and over to Blade as Rogue and 4120 began speaking with the crowd. "Hey Blade, you been able to connect to the `net?"

He shook his head, "Nope. I've been trying since last night. When we get back to base I'm going to check another channel, maybe the signal booster through the Death Star is down."

I nodded, "Good idea. I don't know what was in those stolen plans, but something big is going down. Those stolen plans got Vader so riled up that he came all the way out here in person to capture the princess himself, not to mention that he and Tarkin used the Superlaser to Destroy Alderaan. ALDERAAN! That's not some Outer Rim dustbowl, that's a Sovereign planet in the core . . . a high-profile strike."

Blade nodded, "I know, now with the `net down, I wonder if a relay station was destroyed or something?"

"I don't know" I responded. We turned our attention back to the conversation being had with the Farmers . . .

"I for one am glad you're here . . . if you'll do what you say you're going to do. I put a `droid out working on one of my `vaporators last week and came back to pick him up once the job was done, only to find a near-empty shell of a `droid surrounded by little footprints in the sand. Those Jawas must have picked it clean right before I came back!"

Another farmer stepped forward, clearing his throat, "Yeah! I've had the same problem with those blasted Jawas scavenging parts, and the Raiders are beginning to rig the machinery with booby-traps. I lost two men last month. One of my condensers exploded when they opened the panel to work on it."

Another spoke up beside him, "They've been getting bolder in their attacks, all right, raiding the supply sheds and hydroponic gardens not 20 meters from my home!"

They all began to speak at once, "Makes you wonder how much the Hutts are behind this! It would be just like them to instigate this kind of warfare using the local talent. Their turf wars and the resulting impact on pricing have all but driven many of us out of business."

A short and bent, leather-faced man pushed through the crowd to the front, "They took my son! Three seasons ago my son was taken while he worked on some units on the edge of the Dune Sea. We mounted a search party, but he was never found. I don't know if he's alive or dead! Please help us!"

"That's why we're here" said 4120. "We'll do everything we can to drive the Tusks and Jawas back in line. I think the Hutts have been part of an ongoing investigation for some time now, from what we've uncovered so far. We'll continue monitoring them and try to find a balance that works for everyone."

Rogue stepped up beside 4120, "It won't happen overnight. We're new here and it will take some time for them to respect the authority that we bring to the fight, but they will respect it or face the consequences."

A rush of murmurs and whispers passed through the crowd.

* * *

Chirps, croaks, whistles and cries came from the thick forests, as high atop the stone temple of the Massassi, Luke scanned the horizon with macrobinoculars, watching for signs of the first patrol that was currently out trying to locate Vader. There had been no contact for some time. They were now overdue for return, and there was still no sign of them. He had a bad feeling about this.

The device's small screen winked off in a flash-blip as he lowered them from his face to scan the skies above the outstretched tree canopy with squinting eyes. His chest heaved a bit as he breathed . . . he was a farmboy from Tatooine and was still adjusting to all the moisture and high humidity levels in the air on Yavin IV.

Two heavy transports under escort rose from the cover of the trees and slipped into the clear sky. He watched them until he could no longer distinguish them from the sky. The preliminary evacuation was well underway now. They had enough time for several more patrols, but if the first one didn't return, the Empire might already be closer than they had expected. He turned and descended the stairs into the temple, heading for the ground level and the hangar bay.

General Dodonna slipped the duplicate datacard out of the replicator in the command center and quickly into his inside jacket pocket. The original card then ejected. He took it and went to drop it into his outer breast pocket. Instead of falling safely inside, the small card missed the pocket and fell to the floor as the General walked away and out the door into the hallway. The small card labeled "Base One" was now face down on the ground. It slipped into the small crack between the metal floor grates as a technician walked by.

It was in the hallway to the main hangar that Dodonna ran into Luke. "Here's that copy I promised you" he said, holding out the datacard. Luke took the small card, hoping it would help guide him to a starting place, give him some direction back to what he needed from Ben . . . from Obi-Wan, "Thank you, General."

Dodonna turned to walk away, then turned back, stopping Luke, "Commander, First Patrol is gone. We just received word from a reliable source that a sizeable debris field has been located along the path of their search trajectory." Luke's eyes widened, "What?! What happened? Did they run into Imperial fighters or Destroyers?" "We don't know yet son. I'm sorry, I know some of them were your friends." He turned and somberly walked away down the corridor.

Luke solemnly turned and walked into the hangar. Far across, on the other side, crews were packing containers for the transports, but this side was quiet. He stepped out into the aisle between the rows of X-wing fighters with canopies open, hardly able to believe that he was here at all, much less a Commander in the Alliance!

He quietly walked between the still, silent craft . . . all were comfortably broken in and showed signs of wear, but had been tuned to peak efficiency by the Rebel ground crew. There were precious few left after the assault on the Death Star, and this lonely, silent row represented them all.



He moved past the front of his ship, designated Red-5, and climbed the ladder to the cockpit. Stepping into the opening and settling into the seat, he smelled the presence of the ship itself. The cockpit and controls had been broken in during numerous dogfights and battles, long recon missions and escort service to larger ships under the control of others, but he had flown in her only once. He came back into the moment, clearing away the thoughts of Biggs' ship vaporizing at the hands of Vader.

He leaned forward a bit and inserted the small datacard Dodonna had given him. Help was desperately needed if he was ever going to find a way to grow as a Jedi and hopefully stop Vader, or die trying. He stared intently at the screen as Davin Felth's secret holonet report began to display across the screen.

* * *

It was late afternoon when Danz finally opened his eyes and sat up in his bunk. I was in my flight suit sitting across the room on my bunk with my arms buried up to my elbows down inside the burned out astromech. The radar eye on its blue and silver dome looked up blankly from its place on the floor grates beside me as I worked.

Ddraig had his hands inside the rear hatch to support power cells I was unscrewing down in the cramped cavity. Once free, I slid them out of their mounting sleeves and out the open top of the body for examination. I could smell the stale, burnt damage as I pulled them out into the light. Just as I had thought . . . they were completely fried. It looked like they had taken some massive power surge while recharging.

A closer inspection showed that the wiring harness terminals were all blackened. I glanced back inside the 'droid . . . the insulated wiring harness that attached to them had been scorched as well, and was the one hanging out of one of the side panels. There were several logic boards adjacent to the wiring harness that were damaged as well, but it appeared that the memory chips, located just beyond a fuse panel, had been spared.

"Good luck finding those parts here" said Ddraig, wiping his hands on a towel, "this place has a lot for starships, but I don't know about astromechs." I reached back inside the body and unscrewed the fuse panel, removing it and the damaged wiring harness, "Yeah, you're probably right, but someone might have something I could modify and use.

I'll head back out to the burned out Sandcrawler and see if there's anything useful there. The Jawas have probably already stripped her down, but I'll check it out. If I can't find anything there, or in the local shops in Anchorhead or here in Mos Eisley, I may have to take a few days leave and make a trip offworld for some parts."

I knelt down beside my bunk and pulled out my gearbag, "I'm going to put a probe on this thing and make sure these are all I need."

* * *

Etz walked in pulling off his helmet, and dropping it on his bunk, began to slip off his armor as we continued to work on the little astromech. He looked over at Danz, who had dozed off again as he pulled off his forearm gauntlets. The collection of problematic parts was growing, as the diagnostic systems probe completed its sweep of the 'droids internal workings. I watched the pulsing patterns on the probes display screen as it worked. Ddraig walked back in with 2 containers of water as Etz pulled off the last of the armor plates and zipped up his flight suit.

Several more wiring harnesses, a motor controller and the audio processor had already been pulled out and laid beside the batteries and fuse block. The pulsing stopped and a tone finally indicated that the sweep was now complete. At least now I knew what I needed to get the little guy going again. Etz lay back on his bunk and closed his eyes as I switched off the probe and disconnected the leads down inside the main body cavity.

"Here" said Ddraig, handing me the water, "So is this everything you need?" I looked over at the pile as I wound up the probe wires, "As far as I know. Thanks." And I took the water from him. "I hope we can find the parts to get this guy going again. Then he can tell us what happened and how long he's been sitting dormant down there."

Etz sat up on his bunk, opening his eyes wide, "In all the confusion, I totally forgot!" and he jumped up and ran into the rear storage room. I looked over at Ddraig as I swallowed my sip of water, "What's up with him?" He stared back at me, shrugging his shoulders, eyes wide, finishing his drink.

We could hear the lift moving in the back room as I dropped the probe to my bunk and we walked into the back. Etz had lowered himself down and disappeared into the room beyond. I pulled the lever down, calling the lift platform back. It slowly rose back to ground level as we heard Etz rummaging through the racks below. I threw the handle back down and we stepped onto the lift.

When we walked through the door, Etz was on his knees between two of the racks, ripping things off the bottom shelf and tossing them into the floor. We moved closer, walking down the aisle toward him as he pulled out a large, dusty tarp, throwing it aside. Then he grabbed what

was hidden under it, straining to slide it out into the light.

There was a loud metal-on-metal scraping noise as he pulled the corner of a large metallic slab off the shelf. As he shoved it into the light and moved aside, we could clearly see now that it was a block of silvery metal with small dials and knobs set into the edges. It was a Carbonite prisoner hibernation slab . . . a slab with the raised features of someone sealed inside . . . someone wearing Commando Armor.

* * *

Ddraig glanced over at me, and although I could see him in my peripheral vision, I couldn't take my eyes off the carbonite slab on the floor with the commando staring blankly up out of the metal. Etz looked up at us, "When I came in to get the transport, I needed a couple of new power cells. I came over here to the racks to look for some, and when I found them, the power cable was caught on this hand thrust up out of the metal" he said, pointing to one of the hands protruding up from the smooth surface. "With everything that was going on, I totally forgot about it until now."

I heard the lift activate just outside the room as the roof doors on the landing bay slid open and the troop transport pushed through the shield, and descended, settling onto its repulsor field just above the stone floor. Felth, Falker and Blade hopped off the tailboard. Topolev slipped out of the cockpit, walked out through the open rear and jumped down off the tailboard, following them and pulling off his helmet.

Rogue, Danz, 4120, 0600 and 1265 walked through the door from the lift as the others filed in from the bay. Danz and Rogue were talking, "I don't know what happened, he just jumped up and raced out." Rogue turned toward us as they all walked over toward the racks where we were, "What's going on? Danz said Etz jumped up like somebody shocked him with a Dewback prod." I looked over to Etz, then to Ddraig and stepped aside, so that all could see past me to Etz and his discovery.

"What the . . ." was all Rogue could manage as they all stepped closer. Felth and Topolev circled around the backside of the rack and came up the aisle from the back wall for a closer look. 0600 pushed past 1265 and knelt down beside the slab, examining the settings on the side panels. "There's no freezing date coded here." He turned and looked back at Rogue, "but I would bet he's been in this thing for a very long time."

Topolev knelt down as well, tapping a finger on the surface, "Is he still alive in there?"

0600 raised his eyebrows as he responded, "He should be . . . but carbon freezing was adapted from its initial industrial origins and pulled into service as a means of secure prisoner transfer. Freeze the prisoner and send them either to be judged, or to the prison facility where they were then released to serve out their sentence."

Etz was looking over the control panels as 0600 spoke, "Hey, there's a dial here for a built in repulsor. Stand back a little." Everyone moved back as he rotated the dial. The slab rose from the floor and hovered a few inches in the air. He rotated the dial more until the carbonite was hovering at about waist height.

Rogue stepped closer, a hand resting on the edge of the metal block, "With no formal record apparent, there's no way for us to know who put him here, or why. We're going to need to discuss what to do with him. Bring him upstairs."

* * *

"We've been round and round about this, and we're no closer to an answer. It comes down to one point. Do we have the right to release this trooper?" Rogue looked around the room, into the eyes of each man standing around the floating carbonite block. The room was silent . . . each of us looking to the others. Etz had his hands on the edge of the block looking down at the frozen face staring up at him . . . feeling responsible for the trooper's fate.

Felth shifted his weight from one leg to the other. 0600 began a reply as he looked around the room, "True, we don't know what he did, or why he's in there, but carbon freezing was designed for short-term use. It was never intended to be used for a long-term incarceration tool. I think we owe it to this trooper, whoever he is, to release him and find out for ourselves what his story is and then deal with him." He glanced back to Rogue, "Have you forgotten the time we served on Kessel for something we didn't do?"

Rogue lowered his eyes and exhaled. Shaking his head slightly he replied in a low tone, "No. I haven't. And if I were him I would probably want to be released too. I just question whether or not we have the authority to do so." Topolev stood up from his place on his bunk, "The way I see it . . . it doesn't appear that anyone's missing him. He's been down there for who knows how long. This base station was closed up for years! No one in the Empire would ever know if we let him out or not." There were nods of agreement around the room, and a few raised eyebrows. "Hell, he might not even be alive once we did. We might be releasing a corpse. In either event, he deserves to be released. He's one of us. If he did something awful, it was a long time ago, and we can deal with that when it comes to light."

Falker stepped back from the circle and walked around toward Rogue, "I understand what you're saying, and believe me, I want to do what's right here too" looking at Rogue and then shooting a glance to Topolev, " I think we all do." Rogue nodded as he continued speaking, "Based on his armor, this trooper was clearly encased sometime during the Clone Wars era, for reasons unknown. IF he survived the freezing and encasement, not only will he be dealing with his hibernation sickness, he'll be dealing with catching up on the events of almost twenty years."

Falker glanced around the room as he continued, "And don't think of hibernation sickness as a small side effect, it's nothing to be taken lightly. His organs will be quick-thawed from a deep freeze, which is incredibly painful. Then, he'll experience any number of additional side effects during his recovery period such as blindness, deafness, muscle atrophy, hypersensitivity. His unusually long encasement may result in dementia or even insanity." The room was silent.

He continued, "Let's sleep on it, and talk about it more in the morning. Deckard, why don't you take Etz and Danz on the last sweep patrol of the spaceport, and we'll call it a night. Things may be a little clearer in the morning. While you're doing that, Topolev, you and Felth and I should go down to the cache with the others and see what else might turn up regarding this guy. If there are arrest records, there may be a file on him."

Rogue nodded, "Good plan, Falker. There are a lot of things down on those racks that we haven't been through yet. We should know a little more about what's down there."

"I'll help out with the spaceport sweeps. I could use some air" said Blade, pulling on his bucket. "I think I'll join you guys too" said Ddraig.

Etz slid the carbonite block into the corner and grabbed his bucket from me. I thumbed the power switch on my E-11 and pulled my bucket on as well, "Let's go guys." The five of us that were on patrol duty filed through the door into the front office and spilled out into the darkened

streets as the others headed down into the cache.

* * *

The streets were all but deserted. Etz and Falker had gone in one direction toward the East end of town to circle back through the spaceport to the barracks, while Danz, Ddraig and I had gone toward the West side of the spaceport, to also end up at headquarters.

We were finished with our inspection of the bays, and aside from removing several Jawas from number 34, had seen nothing that seemed out of place. A number of ships were being loaded by night crews, preparing for early-morning departures, but most were sealed up and deserted for the night.

Ddraig broke the silence as we walked out the main corridor toward the streets, "Danz, how's the shoulder?" I looked over to Danz as he looked to Ddraig, and then me, bending his arm and rolling his shoulder, "It's much better now, still not quite 100%, but close." I looked over at Ddraig, then stopped and pulled off my helmet, looking at Danz, "Was one of those little guys in bay 34 your Jawa?"

The others pulled their helmets off as well. Ddraig smiled as he also asked, "Yeah, where's your Jawa?" Danz glared at us "There WAS a Jawa down in the cave with me . . . with us! It ripped open the Sketto webbing and allowed me to pull myself free. After that I was kinda' coming and going in and out of consciousness, but I know I remember it wiping my face. Then, it disappeared while you guys worked on me and then came back once more before we were hauled up. Are you sure you didn't see it?"

We looked at each other and Ddraig answered, "No, we didn't see any Jawa. You sure you didn't bang your head harder than we thought?"

"I know what I saw" he said as he pulled his bucket back on and stepped out into the moonlit street. Ddraig and I pulled our helmets on and followed him, walking along in silence toward HQ.

It was late, and although the spaceport never closed, most of the businesses we were passing around it did. Chalmun's Mos Eisley Cantina was no exception. As we drew near, the last of the regulars of the popular bar were being herded into the street as Wuher closed the door behind them. He activated the security sensors and returned inside to clean up after the long day. The intoxicated patrons staggered away into the cool shadows to sleep until it re-opened again in the morning.

As the other patrol approached from down the street, we could hear them discussing the Commando. As they drew nearer, we could hear Etz answering back about the trooper in the carbonite back at base, "He needs to be released."

We walked over to them and Danz spoke up, "It won't happen tonight. Let's get some sleep and see what everyone thinks in the morning. He's been down there a long time. One more night won't make any difference." Everyone agreed and we walked off toward the barracks, our armor glinting in the moonlight until we disappeared into the dark shadows of the alley.

As we disappeared from sight, the Kubaz that had been watching and listening, slipped back into the shadows across the street.

* * *