

Chapter 30 – Crossing Paths

Holder rocked back off his knee and sat in the sand. He lowered the commando helmet in his left hand to the ground beside him as he stared into Watcher's face, flashes and bits of memories racing before his eyes. He blinked twice and shook his head to clear them away.

“Who the hell is *Watcher*?” asked Rogue.

All eyes turned to Holder, whose eyes had now rolled back in his shaking head with a frothy foam forming on his lips.

“DAMN” yelled 4120. “He's convulsing!”

Hessio tore off his leather belt and quickly forced a section of it between Holder's clenching teeth as Rogue and 4120 fought to hold his arms down.

“Grab his legs” said 0600. He and I each grabbed one, struggling against his flailing limbs, but holding them down firmly.

“What's wrong with him?” asked Huff.

Felth replied, turning to him, “Extended carbonite containment. Whoever Watcher is, seeing him must have triggered memories or something that was disconnected along the way.”

Suddenly, the clenched jaws relaxed and Holder began babbling something. Hessio pulled the leather strap out of his mouth and we tried to listen.

His eyes were now looking up at the sky, glazed over as he spewed his nonsense.

“08-02A1138 to 08-02A1450. Get rid of it all, no mistakes. 08-02A1138 to 08-02A1450. Get rid of it all, no mistakes. Into the belly of the beast we go, only to be revealed by the sands of time. Eroding sands of time. Belly of the beast. Belly of the Beast.”

Holder's eyes were wider now as he continued his incoherent rant. **“08-02A1138 to 08-02A1450. Get rid of it all, no mistakes. No mistakes.”**

Rogue turned to Etz, “Get the med kit from the transport and sedate him now that the seizure is over. We need to get him back to the doctor in Bestine.”

Etz nodded, turning and racing toward the transport.

“I have a staff physician back at my home. I would be more than happy for him to see your man” offered Huff.

“Thanks, but the doc in Bestine is the one who treated him when he came out of carbon freeze. He knows the history and has the medical records. We need to get him back there for evaluation” said Falker.

As Etz returned and began preparing the sedative injection gun, Rogue turned to Topolev, “Bag that other guy. We’ll need to look him over closer and see if the doc can use him to trigger more memories and try and make sense of these ramblings.”

Topolev nodded, motioning to Danz and Ddraig for help. “Come on, let’s get this guy loaded.”

The man who had been standing guard over the body moved out of their way, as did Hessio and Vehuji. Hessio was busy staring at the bite marks that almost went completely through his thick belt.

Topolev went back to the transport and circled it around between our ‘vaporator and the neighboring one, backing the tailboard in closer to where the body lay. He, Ddraig and Danz lifted the body and placed it gently on the floor in the speeder.

When they turned back to the group, Etz was re-capping the sedative injection gun, putting it back in the med kit. A moment later, holder’s eyes slowly closed and his body went limp.

Rogue looked up to the rest of us. “OK, let’s get him loaded. Easy!”

We all helped lift him into the back of the transport, lowering him to one of the bench seats.

Darklighter, Hessio, Vehuji and the guard all boarded as well. Once they were settled, Topolev throttled up and headed back to the Darklighter estate.

A wisping wind kicked up as our transport headed for the horizon. Sand was sprayed lightly in small gusts against the base of the ‘vaporator where Watcher’s body had been.

As our speeder disappeared from sight, a small mound of sand near the adjacent condenser shifted slightly, moving and draining away revealing something hidden beneath. It peered out through twin lenses, watching us go.

When it felt we were far enough away, it lowered the macrobinoculars. An old man rose up from his belly where he had been lying, appearing from beneath a sand-covered fabric wrap.

He eyed the ground near the ‘vaporator where we had been, and then turned his head in our direction as he sipped a bit of water through a tube from a small, collapsible bladder.

One ice blue eye squinted in the afternoon's last blinding rays of sunlight as he stared in the direction we had gone.

“Into the belly of the beast we go.”

* * *

The words of the last reply still hung in the frigid air of the hangar between them. Mon Mothma thought carefully, selecting the words for her response. “While that may be true, these two things must occur simultaneously. First, mock recon flights over densely vegetative planets similar to Yavin must begin immediately to divert attention away from our true location. Second, *real* recon flights must also be under way to locate the next rendezvous point and base location.”

“I’m sure you’re right, but in the immediate future we have a number of trials to overcome before we can even finish this base. We don’t have the resources” stressed the Alderaanean Princess.

“Leia, so often when we speak, I see your father in your actions, and hear him in your words. Believe me, I know and understand your concerns. They are the same concerns he would have raised with me. This course of action will absolutely take resources we do not have to spare, and yet it must be done.”

The leader of the Alliance paced away a few steps, passing her quiet attendant, Alia before speaking again. “The bitter truth is that no matter how secretive or how careful we are, sooner or later the Empire will find us. When that happens is not the time to be scrambling looking for an escape route. It will be precisely at that moment that we need an emergency evacuation and rendezvous scenario in place that all personnel understand intimately and are ready to activate.”

She stopped a moment, looking over the plans for the ice base, her fingertip scanning across the page, coming to stop at a remote cavern removed from the base. “How are the permanent power generators coming along?”

Alia stepped aside as Leia moved closer. “Commander Skywalker is overseeing their installation. All components have finally been purchased and all but the final pieces have been transported here. I’m told if all goes well, and the shipments are on time, they should be online and functional within several days.”

Mon Mothma closed her eyes a moment, and smiled slightly, turning her head to Leia as she opened them. “Ahh yes, Commander Skywalker. We were certainly lucky to have him at Yavin; and a Force-sensitive as well.”

A surprised Leia turned to look her in the eye. “You know? We made a point not to tell anyone. If he is to be the first of the new Order”

“Yes, I know, and no one told me anything. His secret is safe with me. Truthfully though, if what I’ve felt is accurate, he’s far more than a sensitive. Trust me, Leia, I’m no Jedi and my interests and undeveloped dabblings are far from mastery, but Force sensitivity has run in my family for generations. I feel Commander Skywalker has a great potential to lead us out of the darkness shrouding the glory that was the Republic. I feel he can lead us back to what we once were.”

Leia sighed. “I hope you’re right.”

As she spoke, the forward-mounted floodlights of the *Millennium Falcon* appeared out of the darkness as the YT-1300 freighter slipped past under the curving, natural ice arch into the enormous cavern and set down on her landing gear alongside several transport ships.

Mon Mothma drew a shallow breath. “I have faith that he will.”

But even as she had faith in his naïve purity, Mon Mothma was terribly troubled and concerned as well. If her memory of his family name, and her intuition regarding the worn lightsaber hanging on the young Commander’s belt, and the dark history and lineage behind it was correct, Commander Skywalker was someone to watch closely.

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“No.”

The Wook growled a throaty response.

“I know they need the work, but not right now.”

Chewbacca quietly grunted his disagreement from the co-pilot’s chair as he watched his captain shut down the Falcon’s various systems and leave the cockpit rubbing the bandage on his forehead.

The warm leather seat beneath the Wookiee’s furry body squeaked a bit as he shifted his weight. The hydraulic lines to the landing gear needed work badly. Even if the others didn’t need the repairs, the central landing claw was losing compression on a regular basis. He would have to steal the time to do the work when Solo was otherwise preoccupied.

He stood up as he saw Yané pass by. He fell in behind her and they silently followed Solo to the open main hatch and lowering boarding ramp. Han stepped out on it as it lowered, holding on to the framing, riding it down to the icy ground outside with a bump.

His frosty exhale floated in the crisp air as he noticed the chill and how underdressed they all were for the cold.

Leia Organa walked over from across the hangar. She was dressed in thermal gear, her hair in braids woven across the top of her head, her arms crossing as she stopped in front of him. “Security must be asleep. They’re letting anybody in here.”

A cocky, sarcastic Han wrinkled his brow up faking pain from the impact of her comment and locking eyes with her. “Whoa, your worshipfulness! Nice to see you too, princess.” He noticed the wisps of hair at each of her temples; her dark brown eyes.

Chewbacca howled a greeting and slipped past, grabbing the princess in a furry hug, lifting her off the ground slightly. Leia released the Wook as she noticed the woman stepping off the boarding ramp behind Han.

Yané stepped up beside the Corellian, dipping her head slightly. “I am Yané, retired royal handmaiden from Naboo.”

Leia’s eyes cut from Yané to Solo, then to Chewbacca and back to Yané as she dipped her head slightly in response. “Welcome.”

Han rolled his eyes. “It’s a long story.”

“I bet. Why are you here? I thought you were off to take care of an old debt?” Her eyes questioned his presence here as much as her voice did.

He grinned a moment, then it faded. “So did I.”

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As the tissue on the slide plate gradually came into focus, the frosty, rigid skin of the desert corpse finally began to give up its secrets. Doctor Shurte’s strong, thick fingers gently adjusted the knobs on the magnifier back and forth a bit as he peered in through the eyepiece, bushy eyebrows hanging wildly over the top. His nose whistled slightly as he breathed in and out.

To look at him out of this setting, one might have thought him to be a hermit or recluse. His nails were long, however well maintained; his beard was thick and bushy; his graying hair was long and pulled back in a braid running down between his shoulder blades.

Absently, he looked up from the eyepiece, scribbling a brief note on the sheet of flimsy beside him before returning to his scrutiny of the flesh sample, half whispering to himself. “Mirroring of cell structure, intact genetic code sequence, but with extra components, additional markers . . .” He looked up from the sample, staring off across

the room at nothing in particular, his mind rolling thoughts over slowly, carefully. More notes were hastily scrawled out before he stood from his stool and walked into the next room where the patient was.

More than a week had passed since Holder's seizure at the condenser, and although he had briefly been lucid in the desert after spewing what seemed to be nonsense, he had unfortunately lost consciousness prior to his arrival here. He lay motionless on the bed, monitors silently supervising his vital signs.

Blade walked through the doorway from the front room, removing his helmet. "Doctor Shurte, how's he doing?"

There was no response as the doctor scraped a small tissue sample from Holder's arm.

"Doc?"

The physician looked up this time, glancing over to Blade as he emptied the collected tissue on a slide tray. "Hello."

He looked back to Holder as he spoke. "Oh, him? He's been through a lot, but I really expected him to be awake by now."

He walked past Blade to the magnifier, exchanging the corpse's slide with that displaying tissue gathered from Holder. Once again, his thick fingers moved over the adjustment knobs as he peered through the eyepiece, bushy eyebrows hanging wildly over the top.

Blade stepped closer. "So doc, got any idea why the corpse was so important to Holder, or what might have caused the convulsions?"

The physician stood up straight, looked him briefly in the eye and without a word, crossed to the far side of the room, to the morgue trays set into the wall. He passed four of the shiny metallic doors, opened the fifth and slid out a narrow metal tray with a draped body on top.

He pulled back the drape to reveal the body of the man Holder had identified only as *Watcher*. He looked down at the frozen body of the ragged, scarred old man as he spoke.

"I'm at a loss for the cause of the seizure. Given his history with the unusually long carbon freeze, it could be just about anything. There's just no research on carbonite restraint of that length."

At that moment a group of young men and women entered the room through a back door carrying small bags of equipment and supplies, shaking sand from their feet, unwrapping their heads and removing goggles and drapes from their faces. One of the woman was arguing with one of the men.

“All the evidence in the artifacts we have found so far points to a civilization going back several thousand years. If we have any hope of finding the graveyard, we need to move on it now. The Harvest is almost here, and then it’ll be Winter. If there was in fact a meteorite involved in the great Death we should be able to . . .”

All conversation stopped as they suddenly realized they weren’t alone. Doc Shurte stepped away from Blade to speak to them.

“I know you’ve not been here, but please use the front door from now on. I have a patient in here now.”

They nodded, quickly slipping through the door to the front part of the building. The doctor moved back to where Blade was.

“My apologies, they’re part of an archeological expedition I’m hosting. Now, where was I.”

Blade watched as the doors swung shut behind them. “You were talking about his containment duration.”

He wagged his index finger in the air. “YES, of course, his containment! The seizure could truly have been from a number of things, but . . . what I do know is . . .”

He paused momentarily, making sure they were alone. He held a hand out, motioning at the corpse. “This man is a genetic duplicate of Holder. *Watcher* was a cloned Commando just like Holder, and from what I can tell, was from the same generation and incubation vat.”

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Wedge Antilles briskly marched through the dimly-lit ice hallway toward the hangar bay. His pilot’s helmet was tucked firmly under one arm. His left boot was slightly tighter than his right; a little too tight for his liking, and he could feel the pulsing of his heartbeat in the leg where it cut into his skin. The day had just begun wrong, as it seemed to most every year on this date.

Distracted by his own thoughts, he quietly slipped through the crowd of technicians and pilots. The loud whirring and hum of ice cutters filled the massive room, mingling with the sound of voices and droids, all echoing off the frozen ice walls, but didn’t seem to penetrate Wedge’s ears. He was listening to the sounds of his memories.

His brow was furrowed in a thoughtful scowl as he walked across the grid plate pathway lying atop the ice floor, his mind racing with thoughts of his parents. He could vividly see the tanker pulling away from their starship depot with the fueling lines still attached. He felt the rocking blast concussion of the resulting explosion and saw the look of terror

on their faces; their screams silenced by the blast door that separated them. He saw them burning . . .

Suddenly he resurfaced from the images projected in his mind's eye as he reached his ship, stopping momentarily beneath the wide wings of the X-wing fighter, steadying himself against the extended landing gear.

He turned his attention to his ship, running a gloved hand over the durasteel skin of the wing overhead. He squeezed his eyes shut briefly, exhaling forcefully as he opened them again, as if he could blow the memories and pain out with his expelled breath.

As he looked up, he caught sight of Luke and Captain Solo just entering from a corridor on the far side of the hangar, walking his way. He couldn't make out who it was, but someone followed closely behind them.

He watched them as they threaded their way through the busy crowd, crossing the wide hangar, busily discussing something as they walked. Luke was dressed out in his pilot's gear. Captain Solo wore the familiar, relaxed look Wedge had come to expect from him with the addition of a long-tailed thermal coat. The man who walked behind them also wore a flight suit and followed several steps behind Luke, careful to match the speed and gait of other man's walk.

As they drew closer, he caught the tail end of their conversation.

“ . . . online as of this morning. The power distribution grid two levels down should go live within several days.”

Han nodded. “That's great, kid. So as soon as the grid is hot, we can power the shield doors and seal off this place, right?”

Luke nodded, then looked over to Antilles. “Wedge, I have a new recruit for the Recon flights. He's been assigned to Rogue Squadron – Biggs' slot.”

Wedge rolled this over in his mind as he twisted his left foot around, trying to loosen his boot some. “I hear you two have been paired up for this one too, huh?”

Luke grinned and Han rolled his eyes as he replied. “Yeah. Somebody's gotta keep an eye on this kid.”

Luke stepped out of the way, moving over beside Wedge. “Here's your new recruit.”

The young pilot behind him quickly stepped forward, putting his hand out to enthusiastically shake Wedge's. “Dack. Dack Ralter. I heard you're going to be running some Recon missions and don't have enough pilots to cover everything. I just want a chance to prove myself to you.”

Wedge looked him over, then over to Luke, then back to Dack. “What kind of experience do you have, Ralter?”

“I trained with the pilot corps on Tierfon and I’m new to the Rogue Squad.”

Wedge nodded. “OK. You and I will be flying together until I feel more comfortable with your abilities.”

He looked back to Luke as a small cargo ship entered through the main hangar door, floating in on her repulsor field, settling to the ground behind Dack.

“Missions are set to begin tomorrow. Briefing is at daybreak, right here. Dack, your ship is that one there, next to mine. Make sure you’re assigned an astromech from the labor pool.”

“Thank you, sir” replied Dack.

Wedge, Luke and Solo walked off discussing the upcoming flights as Dack stepped away, walking over to his ship; HIS ship! He could hardly contain his excitement as he grabbed the rail of the ladder mounted on its side and climbed up to the cockpit.

He was getting the feel of the instruments when a soft voice called out from down below, a voice he hadn’t heard before.

“Hello?”

He leaned over the rim of the cockpit, peering down. A beautiful young girl stood at the base of his ladder looking up at him.

“Hello. I’m sorry to bother you, but I just arrived on that ship and have no idea where I’m going or who to talk to. I’m a communications expert recruited on Talasea. My name’s Toryn Farr.”

Dack stared at her for a moment too long before he realized it. “I’m Dack. Dack Ralter. If you’re in communications you probably need to go to what will be the Command Center.”

He stood up, throwing a leg over the side of the ship and descended the ladder twice as fast as he had climbed it, jumping over the last few rungs to the ground.

“I’ll make sure you find it.” He said, smiling at her.

She smiled back at him. “Thank you, Dack”

His smile widened as he walked with her across the busy hangar. His day was definitely looking up.

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As Han and Wedge split away from Luke heading toward the command center, Carlist Rieekan calmly approached the young rebel. “Commander Skywalker, a moment?”

“Of course.” Luke followed him into a dark, unfinished branch passageway off the main corridor.

As he activated the datapad in his hands, the glow from the small screen revealed the troubled mask Rieekan’s face wore. He spoke to the young Commander, not taking his eyes off the device as he worked. “I want you to see something.” He tapped a few commands into the screen, opening the sensitive information he wanted to share. “I want you to understand the importance of your upcoming missions. I think this may help.”

Luke took the datapad, turning it around so he could see the screen. It was the transcript from what looked like a field intelligence report. His eyes scanned the screen, reading every aurabesh word as Rieekan watched for a reaction. He saw Luke’s eyes widen a bit as he read.

The frigid temperature of the hallway felt absolutely balmy in comparison to the chills running up Luke’s spine as he continued to scan the scrolling screen. “Vader is dispatching . . . thousands of probe droids to look for us?” He looked up.

Rieekan nodded gravely. “I received that information from an embedded source that had been feeding information to codename ‘BASE ONE’.

Luke looked up. “Dodonna?”

Rieekan nodded. “That’s right. The information says the scale of probe ‘droid deployment is unprecedented in the history of the Empire. Vader wants us found. I’m betting the Emperor is leaning on him to deliver something after the failure of the Death Star. Whoever is on the other end of these reports didn’t realize Dodonna was dead. I have assumed the ‘BASE ONE’ codename so that we might keep receiving the intelligence, but I have no way of validating it. Whoever this person is, they’re in a very sensitive spot and from what I can make out, and he’s just a grunt, a Desert Stormtrooper in a unit somewhere in the Outer Rim most likely.”

Luke looked up and over to the General. “Just before the Empire invaded Yavin IV, Dodonna gave me a datacard filled with information from an embedded informant. It must be the same source, and if it is, I can vouch for the information, it’s very real. I’m also pretty sure they’re stationed on or near Tatooine.”

“Tatooine?” asked Rieekan. “That’s pretty far off the beaten path. What makes you think the Empire would even bother having troopers out there?”

Luke looked back down to the datapad. “Well, sir, I grew up on Tatooine, and the information given to me spelled out very specific landmarks leading to a place that Ben, uh, General Kenobi, constructed while in exile there. I spent my fair share of time racing skyhoppers all around the wastes and canyons near most of the inhabited parts, and I recognize the areas mentioned, just from his words.”

Rieekan nodded as Luke continued.

“I was able to return to General Kenobi’s home, but ran out of time and was unable to visit the site mentioned. With your permission, General, I’d like to return there while conducting our first round of recon flights.”

Luke cleared his throat and stood up a bit taller, straighter. “And while I’m there, I need to inform Biggs Darklighter’s father of his death. He and I grew up together. He was my best friend. I owe him and his father that.”

Rieekan exhaled as he weighed the request. “How much time are we talking about, Commander?”

Luke thought about it for a moment. “I only need a day or two, three at the most on-planet, but it could be beneficial, and who knows, I might possibly be able to make contact with our source. Can you reply to him, let him know I’m coming?”

Gentle creases deepened at the corners of his eyes as the General smiled slightly at the younger man’s impulsive, naive nature. He looked at the datapad, thinking about his question. “I believe so. If you can meet him, you might be able to relay some of our specific informational needs, and see if he can help us. Just remember Commander . . .”

He dropped his eyes and pursed his lips as the possible darkness beneath the surface was exposed. “This could be a wonderful break for us. But it could also be an elaborate setup designed to lower our guard and draw us out.”

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