

## Chapter 17 - Recovery

The little Jawa backed away from the sound, moving to a safer position behind the large stone column. As she moved around it, she found herself stuck to fine strands of thread wound around the column. She pulled away and the threads pulled with her, sticking to her robes. Winding her hand around the webbed strands, she pulled away with a jerk, severing them.

Sketto webs were common on Tatooine, especially in the cool shade of the cliff caves. Cautiously, she scanned the dim cavern above for any sign of the four-winged, blood-sucking reptomammals. Tatooine legend told that a swarm of Skettos could suck a sleeping Dewback dry overnight. She knew it wouldn't take nearly that long to drain her little body. There didn't appear to be any flying about, and the sound she heard was coming from the bridge above. Several small stones fell from the bridge, as she heard movements and a scraping sound . . . like a tied animal struggling to free itself.

There was a muffled noise followed by a loud scrape as a shower of stones fell to the ground and a large sack of Sketto webbing, tangled up in many web filaments slipped off the edge of the bridge and fell toward the ground. The tangled webbing pulled hard against the powerful strands it was tangled in, and stopped its fall suspended several feet above the stone floor in a vertical attitude.

The webbing moved and stretched from inside, and the frightened Jawa moved further behind the large stone. It was then that a leg pushed through the top of the tangle of strands and thrust out into the dim light. Turning her head to the side to get a better look around the stone, she saw that the leg was encased in white armor. This was no Sketto.

Moving slowly out from behind the shattered column, she walked over to the undulating silky bundle. Reaching up to the webbing, she grabbed it and abruptly pulled it apart. Danz pushed his sweaty, upside-down face out the hole she had made into the air and drew in a deep breath, scaring the little Jawa, who instinctively jumped back and slipped on the loose stones, falling backward to the darkness of the floor.

A black-gloved hand slipped out under Danz' chin and pushed the webbing further away from his head, stretching the strong fibers up toward the ceiling of the enormous cavern until his chest armor was visible. He worked a shoulder through the opening and with his weight now over the opening, it pushed open wider as he squeezed through the narrow opening and fell to the hard rock below. He heard a muffled roar in his ears and although it was dark, he began to see an increasing white light as he slipped into unconsciousness.

He felt the little Jawa kneel beside him and begin wiping the blood from his eyes on her robe. Neither heard the muffled voices of the other members of the 104th as they descended toward him on cables from out of the darkness above.

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“Artoo, that stabilizer's broken loose again. See if you can't lock it down!” The little astromech opened a port in his dome and extended an arm to begin repairs as Luke Skywalker's X-wing

fighter raced through the trench of the Death Star. Biggs and Wedge followed behind in close formation to watch his back. He was running out of time . . . they all were. He adjusted his targeting computer to re-center it, compensating for the energy flux that would most definitely be surrounding the thermal exhaust port.

Several green energy blasts sizzled by, scorching the surface of the station, as the Imperial fighters fought to lock on. The center TIE with the bent wings adjusted its attitude slightly and fired again hitting Wedge's ship. The pilot from the crippled ship called out into his headset, "I'm hit. I can't stay with you." Skywalker replied, "Get clear Wedge, you can't do any more good back there." Wedge managed a response as he fought his controls to climb out of the trench, leaving only Biggs and Luke, "Sorry!"

Moments before it occurred, Vader sensed one of his pilots unconsciously reacting, "Let him go! Stay on the Leader." The dark Lord began to feel the ripples that Luke was making in the Force. He easily read the boys' emotions . . . he felt the concern and worry for his wingmate, Biggs. He sensed the deep friendship there, and he moved in closer to exploit that friendship to his advantage.

Biggs was getting concerned, as he was all alone covering Luke's back, "Hurry, Luke, they're coming in much faster this time. I can't hold them! Hurry up, Luke! Wait!" Vader locked on and expertly squeezed his controls, firing through the X-wing ahead of him as Biggs' ship burst into streaming bits of flaming debris. As he passed through the cloud of burning gases that was Biggs' ship, he could feel the anger rising in his son. "Good . . . good."

A control voice sounded over his comm, "Rebel Base thirty seconds and closing." He noted the wingmen beside him and announced, "I'm on the leader." He tried to get a lock on a non-critical portion of the X-wing ahead to cripple the fighter, but couldn't seem to hold onto one, as the boy slid left and right. He could feel the Force strengthening his son, and then the familiar tingle that accompanied Obi-Wan's presence. He spoke in to his comm, "The Force is strong with this one . . ." trailing off to continue his thought in his mind, "but Obi-Wan can no longer help him. Old Master, you have now doubled your failure. Soon my son will join me. After all your clever hiding and waiting, my son will still join me." With that, he fired on the ship, blowing a flaming hole through the dome of the astromech mounted behind the cockpit.

Luke whipped his head around, saw the smoking 'droid, and called out into his comm, "I've lost R2!" As he did so, Princess Leia, along with the rebel Commanders and Generals gathered in the map room on Yavin IV, heard the final warning, "The Death Star has cleared the planet. The Death Star has cleared the planet."

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Topolev raced out under the starry night sky, past a startled Felth fumbling with his holonet pack, and down the hillside, sliding on the loose sand and stone. He shot glances left and right as he slid the last few meters down the hill, making his way toward the moonlit shuttle below.

The clanking of his footsteps echoed off the surrounding rocks of the canyon in the cool, still air as he bounded up the entry ramp. Tearing open a recessed gear locker in the bulkhead he pulled out a field medi-pak and headed back to the wreckage of the B'Omarr starship.

From the stone of the bridge, Falker was on his knees with his infrared scanners, peering into the darkness. He couldn't seem to get the angle needed to see straight down to the bridge below without risking going over the edge himself. Blade and 4120 were also sweeping the darkness for any possible sign, but were having similar difficulties.

0600 and Rogue continued to let out more cable as they lowered Ddraig further into the darkness below. Etz and I had our E-11s drawn and were on full alert against possible threats from any of the other unexplored portions of the caves as Ddraig's boots finally touched down on the bottom.

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"Rebel Base in Range", came the announcement from one of the controllers behind him. With absolute calm, Tarkin casually replied, "You may fire when ready." The controllers' hands flew over their workstations, pressing buttons and changing the light in which their faces were bathed from green to red. Protocols were activated and being carried out at the other Superlaser unit locations to ready the station and its operators for a second blast of destructive power in less than a day.

A small supply ship lifted clear of its landing bay and slipped away from the station until it disappeared in the glimmer of a hyperspace acceleration. Three TIE fighters moved closer to the lead X-wing as it screamed through the equatorial trench and headed for the thermal exhaust port. The young rebel in the cockpit was focusing on the voice of his mentor, feeling only the very fringes of the Force, and yet it felt warm and comforting like the twin suns of Tatooine, or the love from a Father he had never known. It would have to be enough. He sensed the convergence of many cosmic timelines, lives and careers, all in a single moment . . . a moment he was born to be in.

Vader moved in a bit closer, trying to find the perfect, crippling shot that would allow his son to survive . . . and then his targeting scope locked on to a non-critical portion of a wing, "I have you now". He fired. As the green energy beams flashed through the void of space and tracked closer to their intended target, his wingman flashed into an expanding fireball. Luke looked around to see what happened, only to discover one of the TIE's had been destroyed.

Vader snapped his head up from his scope "What!?" His wingman's helmeted head swung around trying to locate the source of the blast, only to see the Millennium Falcon diving down on a collision course from above, "YAHOOO!" screamed the Corellian pilot into his open-channel comm. The sight of the Corellian ship bearing down on them caused him to overcompensate on his control stick, clipping the wing of Vader's TIE, "Look out!", he screamed, as he glanced off Vader's ship and was obliterated along the canyon wall.

Vader was thrown clear of the trench, his ship rolling away toward deep space with a badly damaged wing and Ion engine. Alarms sounded in his cockpit as the damaged ship limped away from the battle. Turning Luke would have to come later.

“You’re all clear kid, now let’s blow this thing and go home!” Luke closed his eyes and wiped the sweat from his face, centering himself in the cockpit, feeling the Force, allowing it to guide him, to make him stronger. There was a loud rushing sound in his ears, like a powerful wind through trees. He opened his closed eyes, realizing that his torpedoes had been fired. Pulling back hard on the control stick, he and his X-wing climbed out of the trench just before it ended abruptly. The four remaining ships, two X-wings, a lone Y-wing and the Millennium Falcon broke away from the gravitational field of the station and streaked away as the proton torpedoes raced and tumbled down the shaft of the two-meter-wide exhaust port seeking out their target.

Tarkin stood watching Yavins’ moon from the observation deck. Behind him, his Superlaser Fire Control Officer threw the last switch to fire on the Rebel base. There was a moment of silence where there should have been a blinding flash. The Fire Control Officer swiveled to check the reactor core monitor, which was flashing red and white as the deck beneath the command station began to rumble and shake. Tarkin turned and saw the monitor’s warning signal flashing as everything was instantly ripped apart on a molecular level and the energy released by the meltdown in the central core erupted through the skin of the Death Star in a Supernova explosion that mimicked the intensity of a real star. Shock waves were flung out into space, rippling away from the intense blast, slamming across Vader’s ship, rolling it over several times and shredding the one good remaining wing. He finally recovered and expertly maneuvered what remained of his TIE on a course for the relatively nearby Imperial base on Korriban. He carefully tucked the small vial of sand from Tatooine into the folds of his tunic, and tapped the hilt of Kenobi’s lightsaber, clipped beside his own.

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Ddraig had explored many such caverns during his Zero-G training on the cold, dead moons of Bogden. It was close to Carida and offered a perfect environment for mastering the bulky Zero-G suits. Unclipping from the cable, he pulled his bucket off and knelt beside Danz. He pulled the glove off his right hand with his teeth as he grabbed the luminary from his belt with the left. It cast a dim glow across his friend’s bloody face.

Ddraig slipped two fingers under the edge of the ribbed black neckseal feeling for signs of life. His fingertips felt the slow but rhythmic pulsing . . . Danz was alive.

Slowly, he rolled Danz on to his back and brought the luminary closer to further inspect his friend. The right shoulder bell armor plating lay draped across the chest, lower than it should have been. Ddraig went to slip it back in place when he realized the arm beneath it was not where it belonged either. He moved the armor aside and could easily see that the arm had been pulled out of its socket.

He moved the luminary, scanning the legs, which seemed to be all right. It was only then that he noticed the severed cable just below Danz’ holster. As he brought the luminary around for a better look, he noted that the cable had been sheared clean through and heat-sealed. The bottom edges of the holster just above it had been blown away. The bottom was all jagged and rough. He tried to pull the E-11 out, but it had been jammed down in tightly. He tugged harder, finally

freeing it enough to slip it out slightly. The power was still on. It looked as if Danz had fired several shots through the holster to sever the cable as he fell.

“Ddraig, did you find him?” questioned Rogue through his helmet’s comm. He grabbed the bucket and keyed the chin switch, “Yeah, I have him. He’s a bit banged up, but he’s alive.” The little jawa shifted slightly behind the stone, trying to see, but also trying to keep herself concealed. “That’s good to hear. We’re sending Deckard down with a field medi-pack and a harness.” Ddraig shook his head and keyed the comm again, “Negative. That won’t work. His shoulder’s dislocated, we’re going to have to find another way to get him out of here.”

On the bridge above, Rogue squeezed his eyes shut, trying to come up with an alternate idea. He turned to the rest of us, “Any ideas?” We all looked around at each other, then Etz spoke up, “We could do one of two things. We could rig a basket of some kind to the cable to lift him up in, or . . . we could go back to base and get the repulsor sled.”

Rogue nodded. “OK. Let’s see if we have anything we can use for a basket. Topolev, go back and check the shuttle for a cargo crate lid or something along those lines.”

“I’m on it” Topolev responded, and turned to head off the bridge back through the Jedi arena and starship wreckage toward the shuttle. “Falker, you and 4120 check around out in the cargo bay of the B’Omarr ship. Look at those crates General Kenobi had back at the training area. And has anyone seen Felth?!”

Ddraig looked back over to Danz, as the injured trooper began to regain consciousness and stir. “Hurry up whatever you do, we need something to get him out of here. We need to reposition his shoulder and get some Bacta into the cuts on his head.”

I clipped in to the cable as Rogue replied, “Deckard’s on his way down with the medi-pack and we’re trying to figure out something to use for a basket to haul him up. If we can’t find anything, we may need to bring the repulsor sled from back at base.”

Ddraig shook his head. “Great. At least with the medi-pack we can make him comfortable and allow him to rest while we wait.” I nodded at 0600 and Rogue as they let out some slack on the cable and I stepped back off the edge of the bridge into the blackness.

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Several of the twisted, black solar panels along the framework of the wing were peeled back and ripped off in fiery streaks as the crippled TIE fighter entered the atmosphere high above the desolate surface of Korriban.

This remote planet was known primarily as the indigenous home to the original Sith people. They had been a simple, red-skinned race that were easily dazzled by the God-like Force powers of Dark Jedi castouts . . . Knights that had fled into exile from the Jedi Order during the Hundred Year Darkness.

The primitive Sith raised them up and held them in the highest regard, as rulers, or “Lords” of the Sith. Over the years, many Sith Lords were laid to rest here, in tribal burial grounds alongside the ancient Sith dead. As their reign came to a close, elaborate burial temples would be erected to honor them and serve as a final resting place. Interbreeding between the humans and the Sith ultimately resulted in a merging of the races and a spreading of the darkness.

Vader’s badly damaged ship slipped through dark clouds and the rain that fell from them. He limped past jagged stony mountain spires thrust up from the surface by angry ancient volcanoes and the shifting and colliding of surface plates. He continued on into the hills, seeking out a small cavern just past the Valley of the Dark Lords, in the cliff face on the far side of the mountains. While there had been no official Imperial base established, he had insisted on a presence on Korriban. A presence that sought ancient Sith writings and artifacts. A presence that existed to plunder the temples in search of sources for even greater knowledge, understanding and power.

He felt the ship lurch as the tractor beam locked on and slowly pulled him into the cave. He would need time to plan his next move. Tarkin was dead, and Palpatine’s toy was gone. The Emperor would surely want Luke dead and the Rebellion crushed for destroying the station. He had to work quickly. Locating, seducing and turning his son must now become his primary objective. He could not fail.

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I had made it to the bottom of the dark shaft, and was now with Ddraig assessing Danz’ injuries. I was no med ‘droid, that’s for certain, but his arm looked pretty painful. On the bridge overhead, Rogue switched his helmet’s comm switch with his chin and walked into the darkness of the corridor leading back to the Jedi training area. Using the head’s up display on his left lens, he selected TD1265 and initiated the communication.

Far across the sands of Tatooine, in our barracks building, 1265 slid one last crate onto the lift before acknowledging the inbound communication, “1265 here”. Rogue responded, “1265, are you still at base?” An affirmative reply sounded in Rogue’s earpiece. “Yes, sir. I finished going through the records from the Port Authority for the Millennium Falcon and the Outrider, and have been moving our supplies to the lower level since completion.”

“Excellent” replied Rogue. “There’s been an accident. I need you to gather up the repulsor sled, load it into the drop ship and bring it out to us. I’m transmitting the coordinates of our location to the base holonet terminal. You’ll find the drop ship in spaceport bay 88”. “I’ll be on my way shortly, sir. 1265 out.”

Danz was coming around as we finished cleaning the blood off his face. There were scrapes on his face and two fairly deep gashes on his forehead and scalp. Ddraig pulled two small pouches of Bacta from the medi-pack and threw one toward me as he opened his.

Danz was disoriented and asking something about where the Jawa was. We shot a glance at each

other as we tried to keep him still, “I didn’t see any Jawa . . . did you Ddraig?” He shook his head, “No, I didn’t see any Jawa. Danz, your shoulder is dislocated, try to lie still. There don’t appear to be any fractures, but we’re going to have to put the arm back in the socket.”

I worked some of the bacta into the two deeper cuts as Danz lay his head back down on the stone floor, sweat rolling off his forehead. He laughed slightly, “That oughta be fun.”

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1265 stepped off the lift, pushing the floating repulsor sled. He walked through the blast doors, out of the storage room and between the rows of bunks. Giving the sled a shove, he turned away as it floated across the floor and bumped to a stop against the frame of the opening that led to the command center.

Pulling off his helmet and tossing it on his bunk, he squeezed his eyes shut and rubbed the short hair on the top of his head vigorously. The lifeless Radar eye and holoprojectors of the burned out astromech ‘droid beside Deckard’s bunk stared coldly back at him as he gathered some supplies and stocked his utility belt.

He withdrew two E-11 energy clips from his gear bag and slipped them into the ammo pouch mounted on his belt, shooting the ‘droid one last look as he grabbed his bucket and rifle.

It was relatively cool on the streets as he slipped out the front door with the sled. He secured the base and walked off toward the spaceport.

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“Whatever you do, don’t let go” said Ddraig, looking at me. He repositioned his boot to get a better footing on Danz’ chest as he gripped the right hand and forearm. I looked over to him as I firmly held Danz’ right bicep in my left hand and had my other hand free, “I won’t. You sure you know what you’re doing?”

Danz turned toward him, “Yeah, you sure you know what you’re doing?” Ddraig nodded, “I had to do this for one of my fellow Zero-G trainees. If I can do it in one of THOSE suits, I can do it in this gear. Just close your eyes and relax Danz, so you don’t know when it’s coming.” He looked up at me and silently mouthed ON THREE as Danz shut his eyes tight.

ONE – TWO – THREE!

As he said three, he jerked the displaced right arm away from Danz’ body, firmly pressing down with his foot on Danz’ chest. I felt Danz tighten up, but the arm pulled out away from the socket and I slammed the tightened fist of my free hand into his upper arm, feeling it pop back into place. Danz howled and rolled over in pain as Ddraig and I let go of him.

Ddraig pulled the handheld comm off his belt and keyed it on, “He’s back in one piece; angry and sore, but back in one piece”. Rogue’s voice crackled back through the tiny speaker, “That’s

good news. 1265 is on his way with the sled, we'll let you know when he gets here. Felth, where've you been? We were looking for . . ." and the comm went silent again.

Ddraig snapped off his comm and sat down on the stone floor, leaning back against the column. The little Jawa, who was now painfully close to Ddraig, quietly moved further behind the massive stone. I pulled a tranquilizer gun out of the medi-pack and unwrapped it. I placed the tip of the gun against the black bodysuit at Danz' hip and fired. The needle deployed, injected the medication and retracted. As Danz settled a bit, I pulled out the spent tranq cartridge and placed the gun back in the medi-pack.

I slid over and leaned my back against the broken column, trying to get comfortable. "So what's your story Deckard? Tell me about yourself, how you ended up here." I began relaying the story of my youth to him, about working in the shipyards, but my mind was elsewhere.

The old man we had narrowly missed apprehending in Mos Eisley had been a Jedi, of that I was certain. What was a farmboy doing with a Jedi Knight on Tatooine? I had hunted a few Jedi early in my career. When those that survived the initial wave of the Great Purge had fled, running away into hiding, it took us years to flush them out and exterminate them.

Vader had even trained several small units of the 501st to carry lightsabers for engaging the Jedi refugees. Mine had been put away for a very long time, and I was under the impression that all the Jedi had been killed . . . that our own Lord Vader was the last remnant of that ancient Order.

If General Obi-Wan Kenobi had lived on Tatooine for the past 20 years, he had to have lived somewhere and possibly left behind clues as to where he had gone. I would make it my business to find General Kenobi's home, and I would be questioning Nadon about it first.

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There were intricate, detailed carvings of the sublime Dunes and the suns on the walls, even all the way down here. Tiny stone Banthas littered the hand-shaped landscape in small herds. The now-shattered column had destroyed a shallow stone pool that appeared to have once been filled with a combustible liquid and ignited to give off light in this huge space during the dark hours of night.

In both directions, the room gently curved around the center stone hub. I had walked far enough from Ddraig that I could barely see the luminary and had seen nothing but another pool and gentle curving of the massive stone wall.

I retraced my steps, drawing closer to our dangling cables, hanging from up above. Ddraig looked up as I walked past, "He's out for awhile, mind if I join you?" I shook my head and reached out a gloved hand to help him to his feet. He drew his blaster and switched it on as we walked off in the opposite direction from where I had just been exploring. He looked back once at Danz, then hurried to catch up with me.

From around the edge of the column, amber eyes watched as we walked off. Quietly, she turned



and walked over to Danz and reached down to touch his forehead. He stirred, eyes opening slightly, staring up at the little Jawa, “You’re the one from outside . . .”

He blinked and she was gone, scurrying over to the small crack through which she had entered. She took one look back over at Danz, one glance in the direction we had walked and dove headfirst into the tiny, dark opening. Danz swept his drugged eyes back and forth once more, looking for her before he slipped back into unconsciousness.

“I know we met you on Denon Station, but where were you before there?” I asked as we walked.

“I’m originally from a small industrial town on Corellia where my father runs a profitable droid and weapons production facility. I began my Imperial service by joining the Academy shortly after my older brother, Gwreng. I excelled in my classes and was assigned to TIE Interceptor Patrols in the Corellian System shortly after graduation.

I was then transferred to piloting an Assault Gunboat. I performed well, but didn’t feel it suited me. Working with the troopers led me to put in a request for transfer and I was reassigned to basic training for infantry combat. I did well in extreme conditions training and this is where I decided to focus my attentions. Artic warfare, Desert Warfare, and Zero-G Combat Training made me very versatile and allowed me to choose my next assignment.”

My eyes caught something coming up in the wall ahead as he talked and we continued ahead into the darkness.

“My last assignment was captain of a small squad on Dantooine where I was assigned to Desert Warfare, and Mounted Infantry training. I continued that training for the past two years.”

“So how’d you end up here?” I asked.

“I was just recently called back to Coruscant for redesignation and classification along with a battery of Loyalty tests, which I passed.

It seems the Empire discovered that my older brother had not only left their ranks some time ago, but had recently become a high ranking officer in the Rebel Alliance. The next thing I knew, I was given orders to report to my transport, and that’s when I met you.”

“Sounds like a busy life so far. Looks like Tatooine has slowed things down a notch for you. You sure you know where your loyalties lie?” I asked.

“Yeah” he replied, "I'm sure."

Nodding thoughtfully, I gestured with my left hand, “I spotted an archway up there while you were talking . . . let’s check it out.” We continued on leaving Danz further and further behind.

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In the darkness of the cave, several troops stood at attention on the gantry alongside the TIE fighter as Lord Vader inspected the damage. One engine destroyed, one wing sheared nearly off, and the rear edge of this wing was crumpled from the collision with his wingman.

Disgusted, he turned to the closest trooper, "Repair that ship. Use whatever resources necessary. I want it ready as soon as possible. Until that time, I will be accompanying the search team in the temples."

"Yes sir" snapped the trooper sharply in response as the newest Dark Lord of the Sith walked away down the gridded planking. The trooper then hurried off to begin locating parts and mechanics, leaving one guard behind.

Across the cave, in a shadowy recess, a tiny camera snapped an infrared image.

The person behind the camera then silently slipped from his hiding place and quickly made his way out of the caverns' mouth and into the undergrowth of the hillside.

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The Sentinel skimmed low across the desert floor, throwing a cloud of sand up in its wake. 1265 watched the small display of instruments before him as he locked on to the signal beacon from Tyrell's shuttle. He watched out the front visor . . . the light brown sand appeared almost white now in the moonglow. The rise and fall of the sparkling dunes beneath the ship as it passed was rhythmic in its pattern. The shuttle's flashing beacon signal blip disappeared into his own signal on the instrument panel, indicating that he was drawing near to his destination. Through the cockpit window, he could see that it was almost morning; the pre-dawn glow of the suns emanating from below the horizon.

Falker slid down the hillside to the floor of the canyon outside and stood beside Blade as 1265 banked up and over the rim of the canyon. The wings folded upward and he lowered the drop ship to rest beside the shuttle. Rogue stepped out of the cave mouth into the moonlight as 1265 descended the ramp pushing the repulsor sled. He watched as Blade and Falker helped 1265 push it up the hill toward where he was standing, "Come on . . . let's get it inside so we can get Danz out of here."

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I adjusted a small dial in the handle governing the repulsor and the sled lowered to the ground. Danz sat up in the dim light of the luminary and we slid him on, sitting upright. I returned the dial to its original position and the sled lifted and hovered 2 feet off the ground. "Take him on up, I'll clip in to one of the cables and meet you up there."

"See you topside", said Ddraig as he took the control on the handle and stepped onto the corner of the sled. I clipped in as they lifted into the darkness above and made it to the level of the first bridge, then the second, climbing slowly higher toward the others who waited above. I flipped the chin switch inside my helmet "All set here, bring me up."

Etz, 0600 and Nadon pulled on my cable lifting me off my feet.

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