

Chapter 19 – Crash and Burn

Nearly a week had gone by since Etz' revelation of the Carbonite-contained Commando in the cache, and we were still stuck, divided about what to do with him. Rogue had conceded the point that no one would know or care if he were removed from the block, unless he decided to tell someone once he was out. We were now in a much darker place where the trooper was concerned. It was no longer a question of authority to remove him . . . we now existed outside the Legion, outside the Empire. The question had now become what would the repercussions of doing so be? What had he done to warrant being frozen in the first place? What would he think of being released? Would he be able to think at all? Was he alive? We had the spare gear to assemble a set of armor and assimilate him into our group if necessary, but then he had his own armor that he may prefer to keep. These questions kept circling around and around, and we found ourselves no closer to resolution.

The work on the 'droid was coming along nicely, although the astromech still needed a fair number of parts to even approach being functional. Ddraig and I had located some of the supplies in the small shops near the spaceport, and although they were not a perfect match, we were able to make some minor modifications to suit our needs.

We had all been extremely busy. In addition to the daily city beat and the patrols around the spaceport, Rogue and 4120 were working on a roster and schedule for extended patrols further out into the outlying areas, closer to the moisture farmers and their problems. 0600 and I had made a sweep of the perimeter of the farms and homesteads to gauge the area and time needed to properly patrol it.

In the course of our travels, we noted that the Jawas seem to have been spooked by the destruction of one of their Sandcrawlers and had been laying low, leaving the moisture gathering equipment alone and not even bothering to return to salvage from their own ruins yet. I had remembered kicking aside the dome of a damaged R5 unit in the 'crawler when the skirmish had occurred, so I poked through a bit of the wreckage in the cargo bay until I found what was left of the 'droid body and brought it back to cannibalize parts.

Falker and Etz had just left, heading over to speak with Wuher, or someone else in the Cantina to find a local willing to act as a scout for locating and dealing with the Tusken. So far, even Garindan had turned up no one for us. It was beginning to seem that the best way to deal with the Tusken was with a fully charged blaster.

I sat on my bunk, quietly continuing to clean the contacts on one of the new battery harnesses with a rag as Felth walked through the room. He was absorbed with what was on the screen of his holonet pack and didn't see me. He silently scrolled through his messages and then appeared shaken when he looked up and realized I was in the room.

"What's up Felth?" I said, as I leaned over the 'droid body and reached inside, snapping the harness terminal's connector pack into the main power board. He stiffened somewhat and then responded, "Nothing. The message was garbled. I haven't gotten a decent transmission on this thing since the night we had to get Danz out of that downed B'Omarr starship."

“Yeah, I haven’t seen any message showing credits transferred to my account, and payday was yesterday, according to local time. Granted, we don’t make much, but I need every little bit I can get, especially for these parts” and I gestured toward the ‘droid.

“Right” replied Felth absently, and walked away, slipping the holonet pack back into its belt pouch.

Topolev and 1265 had been searching through the datacard records down in the cache to see if there was any reference to our Commando. So far, they had found none. I found myself wondering just why there had been a Commando on Tatooine in the first place. I mean, Jawas and Tusks were one thing, but in those days, there were bigger otay to fry with the tracking of Jedi Knights and the wrap up efforts of the war in the smaller systems. If he had been stationed here prior to the end of the war, why?

I was lost in thought and the memory of the historic images of the Clone Wars we had all seen on Carida when something going on in the command center brought me back to reality. I stood up and walked through the door to the front room as Falker and Etz, both with buckets off, were talking over each other to Rogue, 4120 and Felth. Etz conceded and Falker spoke again, “The DS-1 station has been destroyed.” 4120 whipped his head around to Rogue, “The Death Star?”

My jaw dropped, as Rogue nodded incredulously, “Who told you this? How?”

“The whole Cantina is buzzing about it” said Etz “Some spacer just made port last night and said that’s why the holonet has been offline, because the rebel forces have destroyed the station. Reports are also saying that Senator Organa is alive, and was the supplier of the data responsible for the destruction.”

4120 broke in “What about Vader?” Falker shook his head, “He hasn’t been accounted for yet. This all happened the night we were rescuing Danz. We’re in such a vacuum out here that we didn’t know about this for A WEEK!”

4120 shook his head, “The data they’re talking about is probably the same information that was taken from here by the Jedi and the boy. Pray that Lord Vader is dead, or this could come back on all of us.”

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There was a moment of heart-stopping silence, followed by a flash across the display of the diagnostic tool as the ion engines finally came back online and powered up properly. Lord Vader’s prototype TIE fighter was functional again at last. The mechanic pulled the leads of the diagnostic tool off the engine’s power terminals and leaned his dirty face out of the access panel in the belly of the ship. Sparks rained down from overhead, where he saw another technician securing the last of the solar panels he had fitted into place on the new wing frame. They were nearly done.

He slid out onto the gridded gantry, wiping off his hands and winding up the tool leads as he stood. He stretched his back and walked off down the gantry, happy to have finished ahead of schedule, avoiding the Force-hold, strangling death that so many others had met with over the years. He hurried away to locate the Dark Lord.

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As a youngling watching and mimicking Qui-Gon, he had learned much about the way of the universe, and how many times reason, and the will of the Force, took a different path from that of popular conviction. He had spent his life, from before he could remember, studying the binding power that pulsed in all living things . . . feeling it, sensing it in others, drawing on it and allowing himself to be the conduit through which the channeled, focused power of the Force flowed.

It was the fruit of this lifelong study that had allowed him to whisper in young Luke's ear in moments most critical, at times of absolute need. As the crimson blade of Vader's lightsaber slashed through him, his physical body had been offered in sacrifice, allowing the necessary escape of Vader's children and allowing the hope for a reversal of the darkness that had infected the systems now under control of the first Galactic Empire. The energy that had coursed through him as his Force core was stripped from his physical body, pounding him with electrifying wave after wave of warmth and light had subsided. Now there was darkness, and the ebbing, rippling waves of the energy he was now a part of.

Now, his study must begin again anew. He would learn from Jedimasters that had gone on before him, and learn more about communing with the living. Years of study with his own dead master in the dim light of his Jedi training arena, through meditation and extreme concentration, had allowed Qui-Gon time to teach him to whisper to the living. Appearing to the living would require much more control and a deeper understanding. He now sensed his own master here, himself one with the Force, anxious to once again teach his apprentice.

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Rogue and 0600 stepped off the tailboard of the troop transport into the blistering sand. Undulating waves of heat rippled up from the sea of tiny stones, distorting the view of moisture 'vaporators dotting the horizon in the distance. The cooling elements in their body gloves rushed coolant across their torsos as they walked toward the main dwelling of this modest moisture farm.

A kneeling farmhand, working on a nearby condenser unit, raised his tool in a wave as the troops walked past. 0600 nodded his bucket once at him, acknowledging the welcome. The apparent owner of the farm appeared at the entrance dome that led down below ground level. He was wiping a worn metal 'vaporator part with a filthy shop rag, watching them carefully as they approached.

0600 turned his head slightly, looking back to the farmhand, who had returned to his work inside the access panel of the condenser. He kept walking, and turned his attention back to the moisture farmer as he flipped on the power selector in the grip of his DLT-19.

The farmer was staring at the part in his hand, which he still rubbed although it was already clean and gleaming in the sunlight, "I didn't expect to actually see any of you. I know there was a lot of talk at the town meeting, but I never actually expected to see any action come from it."

The sound-activated voice processor in his helmet clicked on as Rogue responded, "We're here to make a preliminary assessment of the situation at each of the farms in the region. There are several teams like ours visiting other farmers such as yourself right now. Do you grow plants and food, or just harvest water?"

The voice enhancer clicked off with a small burst of static as the farmer's lips parted in a wide grin revealing crooked, untended teeth beneath, "There's only two farmers crazy enough to gamble the future of their farms on moisture collection AND hydroponic crops, and one of them is dead now."

He pushed the back of his dirty hand across his mouth and nose in a wiping motion. "All the years I knew him, Owen Lars always worked twice as hard as anyone else out here to make sure he wrapped up the season owing nobody nothing. He worked his nephew just as hard." He rubbed a bit more on the part within the folds of the rag, "The other one is Huff Darklighter."

Rogue thought a moment as he turned his helmeted head, looking across the small homestead and asked, "Have you had any trouble from the Tusken, or the Jawas?"

The farmer squinted a bit in the glaring sun, as he pulled his hood up over his head, shielding him from the brilliance of the reflected Tatooine suns. His tunics and robe flapped in the light, hot breeze, "I had 3 tanks siphoned dry last week, I don't know who did it, but it stinks of Raiders. Jawas mainly go after hardware . . . droids, machinery. Every once in awhile the little buggers steal some water, but not as a rule. They have their own 'vaporators, pieced together from all the scrap they collect and cart around selling. One of the farmers on the other side of the next canyon had two hands killed when a booby-trapped 'vaporator exploded."

0600 looked at Rogue, then back to the farmer, "If the Tusken steal water from you, why destroy the 'vaporators, that doesn't make sense." The worn farmer screwed up his face as he thought about what 0600 had just said "I never thought about it like that before. If it wasn't them who would it be? Darklighter has more business than he can handle and sells to most of the markets in Anchorhead, Mos Eisley and Bestine.

He has a few dealings in Mos Espa, and between you and me, I think he wants to expand in that market, but he wouldn't do something like that. He's had his own share of thieving and vandalism." Rogue nodded, glanced at 0600 and then back to the farmer, "We'll pay Mr. Darklighter a visit and see what he can tell us."

He turned away, and headed back toward the transport with 0600, laying the weight of his rifle across his left elbow, “Who stands to gain from moisture farmers suffering?” They stepped up to the tailboard of the transport and settled on the bench as 1265 brought the engines up and the craft slipped away from the farm.

“1265, did you monitor what was said?” asked Rogue. The pilot’s voice came back through his helmet comm, “Every word, sir. We’re on our way to the Darklighter residence now.” On the horizon, unnoticed by the team as they raced across the sand, black smoke rose in a column from the canyons of the Jundland Wastes.

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Etz listened to the absence of wind, and the whirring of the ‘vaporators as they walked away from the moisture farm toward the drop ship. All three were about to file onto the sentinel’s ramp when Topolev spotted something coming toward them from deeper in the canyons, a cloud of sand billowing out behind it. The others stepped back off the ramp for a better view. Etz snapped on his macros and took a look. “It’s someone on a swoop bike.”

He lowered the macros and clicked them off. The rider streaked toward them at top speed, and as it drew closer, the pilot turned slightly, heading straight for them. At the last possible instant, the power to the main thrusters was cut and switched to the brake thrusters and the bike skidded to a halt alongside them, spraying sand up from the push of the brakes.

The pilot leaped off the bike in the middle of a dust cloud and pulled off her helmet, it was Camie, the young girl from Tosche Station in Anchorhead. Falker stepped over to yell at her when she began screaming at them, wild-eyed, “Get help! Come with me, there’s been an accident!” She was panting for air and shaking . . . adrenaline and fear was rushing through her.

Topolev stepped over to her, putting a hand on her shoulder, “Slow down and breathe. What happened?”

The moisture farmer they had been speaking with, and his wife, was running out of their home toward them as Camie coughed and fought to speak. Her chest heaved as she wiped her hair away from her dusty face, “The guys were out in Beggar’s Canyon on a speed run . . . in their T-16s. They were on the straightaway approaching the Stone Needle when a downdraft pushed Fixer into Deak and Windy. They both crashed.”

The farmer’s wife raised her hand to her mouth. Falker was eying the horizon, noting the black smoke rising against the sky as she continued.

“I was watching from the rim and was trying to warn them about the wind shift I had picked up on my scanners but they couldn’t hear me. There must be a strong solar wind from the suns today breaking up my signal. I couldn’t get down to where they were in the canyon, so I decided to go for help. We have to get back there now!”

Topolev turned to the others “Etz, take her swoop and go get medical help in Bestine Township, I think we’re closer to it than the other settlements” Camie nodded, “We are.”

Etz nodded and ran to the swoop, mounting up and powering it on as Topolev yelled out to him, “Watch for the sentinel signature when you head back to find us.”

Sand sprayed up from the sudden wash of the main engines and Etz was gone in a cloud of dust, racing out across the flats. Falker was already on his way into the sentinel’s cockpit to bring the engines online. The moisture farmer ran to one of his nearby ‘vaporators and ripped the collection tank from it as he ran for his parked speeder “Get inside and see if you can raise Bestine to be ready for that other trooper!” His wife nodded, and ran down into their home.

Topolev and Camie ascended the ramp as the sentinel lifted from the sand and headed out into the canyons.

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The hot winds blowing in from the Dune Sea buffeted the swoop and sprayed fine sand across Etz’ armor in waves as he raced toward Bestine. Beneath the rim of his helmet, the wind roared in his ears as he watched the heads-up thermal imaging that now overlaid the landscape ahead, showing hot and cool air drafts. He slipped the bike to the left slightly, avoiding a thermal updraft. When updrafts and downdrafts clustered and became intertwined, a serious sandstorm could be born.

The roaring wind reminded him of the thunderous sound of the waterfalls on Corellia. He remembered hiking with friends, as a boy, into the mountains to the falls and sleeping under the stars with that roar in his ears and the fine, cool water mist in the air.

As he came back into the dry heat of the moment, the domed rooftops of Bestine became visible above the horizon. He stomped down on the accelerator pedal, increasing his speed toward the town, and help.

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The weight of my question pulled on the Ithorian arborist like an invisible weight hanging around his neck. He closed his eyes as if my very words had caused him pain. The roar of the crowds here in the crowded marketplace seemed to fall away into silence as he opened his eyes and turned slightly to look at me, "He never took me there" was his response.

"We came to know each other fairly well over the years, but he never shared the location of his home with me. He was protecting something of great value, and could not compromise its safety. He said he had made a deal with the Sand People in the place where he lived. He allowed them water from his 'vaporator in exchange for being able to live in their territory without having to fear raids or harm."

I shifted a bit on my feet, "I've seen the leftovers the old man leaves behind when he draws his

lightsaber, both in the cantina and in the alleys of this city, and I don't think he would have been living in fear."

Nadon nodded, "True, he was a master of his sword, and did not need to fear them, but perhaps he tried to choose a path that held less destruction and more good will? If I had to guess, I would say that his home is somewhere out in the cliffs of the wastes somewhere. I know that isn't much help; however it is the best response I can offer you."

I nodded silently, thinking for a moment as we walked on through the crowded market to the streets beyond. "How long have you been on Tatooine", I questioned further. He took a few steps, thinking "The better part of thirty standard years, I suppose." I nodded again, "Do you remember ever seeing Republic Commandos stationed here?"

We took a few steps further along the sands of the busy street. He eyed a small parts shop and stepped inside out of the beating sunlight, "Republic Commandos you say? Now there's something I've not thought of in a long time. If my memory serves, there was a group of Commandos in charge of the dig site."

I looked at him as he picked up a small repulsor motivator and rolled it over in his muscular hands. "Dig site?" was all I could manage in response. He nodded slowly as he put down the part, "Yes, the dig site on the far side of the planet. There was a group of them overseeing the dig operations . . . less than a Garrison, but definitely more than a Squad. I would say about twenty of them altogether. Most of their time was spent at the dig facility itself, but they came here to relax and drink between shift rotations. They had a small barracks across from Chalmun's Cantina, but they were almost never there."

He picked up a power flux coupling as I responded, "OK, back up. What was the dig facility for?" He glanced back at me, "No one really knew. It was all kept very quiet. Crews were brought in from off-world to work the dig. None of the locals were allowed to work there. Darklighter Water grew immensely in those days, supplying water to the crew and troops at the dig site. It caused a lot of tension and resentment toward the troops and Huff Darklighter. What would make you ask about them? They left here about . . . oh, twenty years ago."

I picked up a redundant isolator and walked toward the owner of the shop, who was seated behind a small counter. He was busy re-wiring the instrument cluster console of an X-32 landspeeder, but he laid down his tools as I approached holding up the part. He rubbed his chin, "Ten credits." I pulled out two coins from the belt pouch and laid them on the counter.

Nadon followed as I stepped back out into the street and turned back toward him, "We're using the barracks you spoke of as our headquarters, and we found . . . something of interest that raised a lot of questions about that time period." I stopped and turned, looking to both sides for any potential listeners, then faced him, "We found a Commando sealed in Carbonite. Stashed and forgotten, probably for at least twenty years, possibly longer."

The Ithorian's eyes opened wide in disbelief. "It's true." I continued, "We found him, and we're not quite sure what to do with him." As I finished my sentence, a video window opened in front

of my left eye, and static-laden audio crackled in my left ear. It was Topolev, and he was urgently calling the rest of us to his location, "Follow the shuttle's signal until you find us, out in the wastes."

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The reptilian Harbor Master let out a breath of relief as 4120, Felth and Blade left his office. He stood up from his chair, taking great care not to step in the puddle he had created under his desk.

"Rendar has already raised ship again" said Felth, reading the report to 4120 as they walked away from the office. Blade looked back to the open doorway they had just left, half expecting to see the Harbor Master leaning out, watching them. 4120 flipped off the power switch on his E-11 as Felth continued, "He's raised ship, but this report shows he's reserved a larger private docking bay out on the fringes of the spaceport when he returns. It says that he's flying for the Hutt."

4120 considered the information as they walked back toward base. The sounds of incoming and departing ships layered themselves in with the low roar of the marketplace, and the occasional whine of a passing swoop. Felth clicked on his internal comm system and selected 4120 only as the recipient of his call, "4120, I've been thinking . . . we don't have an intelligence officer in the group. I have the background and wanted to know what you think about me taking on that role?"

4120 kept walking, then responded only to him, "Let me speak with Rogue. I can't imagine a reason why you shouldn't be allowed to assume that position, but let me run it past him for his thoughts." Felth nodded slightly, moving further away and falling back in step. Beneath his helmet, his lip curled into a slight smile as he thought of the damage he could do with the information he could begin funneling to the Alliance. Dodonna had been appreciative of his last reports, and was now sharing information with other high-ranking Alliance Commanders and Generals.

Suddenly, 4120 stopped dead in his tracks, "There's an urgent message coming through from Topolev." He waited, watching the holo-display before his left eye. Blade and Felth moved closer, anticipating the news about to come.

"There's been an accident out in the canyons. We've gotta get back to base and get the transport. Blade, comm over to Deckard, we're going to need him to go with us."

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Falker raised the nose of the shuttle and lifted away from the rock formations they were skimming over, pulling up higher into the air. Late afternoon shadows now filled the canyons below, and the horizon was shrouded in a purple haze as the twins suns descended. Topolev noticed the other T-16s circling nearby.

Camie leaned over past Topolev to look out the port, “They’ve been waiting for their turns at the speed run route. I guess when the guys from the previous run didn’t come back to the start position, they came up here to get a better view of the course”, tears welled in her eyes as she thought the worst of what had happened.

Falker was busy on the comm, hailing the smaller ships and directing them away from the airspace. “T-16 pilots, leave this area at once and set down on the canyon rim.” The other pilots were local kids, all refusing to evacuate the area. “I repeat, evacuate this airspace now!” They continued to circle until Falker fired a warning shot dangerously close to one of the small craft. They all broke formation and rolled away, heading for the canyon rim. Falker shook his head, “Kids.”

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Rays of brilliant afternoon sunlight streamed into the entryway of the dim medical building as Etz burst through the heavy, crude doors, flinging sand into the air, “We need help now out in the canyons!”

The female Rodian seated at the admitting desk jumped up and raced around the counter to calm him, “Chunktau uhm gompacta fehr de gumptau duhn chanka.” A short, human male doctor ran through the doorway from the back room, “She says we got a garbled message about an accident, but the transmission broke up before we got any details.” The Rodian nodded emphatically, pointing to the doctor.

Etz caught his breath, “There was an accident in the canyons. Several kids in T16s racing a speed run . . . three hurt that I know of.” As he listened, the doctor was already grabbing several cases of gear and supplies, “I have a medical transport speeder ‘round back” he said. “You lead the way, but don’t lose me” he said, wagging a finger toward the front door, “I don’t think I can keep up with your bike.”

Etz nodded, already turning around and heading out the front to the swoop as the doctor disappeared down the rear hallway. He threw his armored leg over the saddle of the bike and raised the engines from idle standby to maximum power. The doctor’s transport speeder slipped around the low, stone wall into the front courtyard as Etz prepared the bike. He rolled the handgrip down, throttling up the main thrusters. The bike leaned slightly left on its’ repulsor field and roared away in a cloud of dust.

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Blade’s voice came over my helmet’s comm set as I stepped off the lift into the cache, “Deckard, there’s been an accident, and we’re needed out in the canyons of the wastes. We’re on our way back to HQ, meet us there.” The sound of my boots on the floor echoed in the silent room as I ran across the open storage area toward the transport, “Got the message . . . I’m already there.” I pulled down the lever to open the upper bay doors and stepped up onto transport’s tailboard.

A glance skyward at the shield showed patches of sunlight streaming through small mounds of settled sand on the outside of the energy barrier. I moved forward into the cockpit, "Meet me in the courtyard out back, I'll be waiting for you."

"Copy that" came his response as I pulled off my helmet, switched the comm to broadcast mode, and tossed it on the seat beside me. I flipped on the power, bringing the engines online as I clipped into the restraint harness. The transport rose from its hovering position as I eased back on the main controls, pushing through the shield barrier overhead, and out into the courtyard. Felth, 4120 and Blade spilled out of the alley as I emerged into the afternoon sunlight, "Let's go!"

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The sky over the jungles of Yavin IV had grown dark grey and clouded over menacingly. Commander Skywalker sat high atop the Massassi Temple in the cool air, trying to calm himself . . . to let go his conscious self, and act on instinct, as Obi-Wan had taught him. His eyes were closed as he concentrated on his breathing. He felt his heart slowly beating in his chest as his lungs drew in air, and exhaled it away. These were natural rhythms and were the center point of his focus as he began to feel something. It was something new. It wasn't the same rippling sensation he had felt on the *Millennium Falcon* while training with Ben and his seeker remote. It was . . . wet!

He opened his eyes to witness the most bizarre and amazing event he had ever seen. Naturally occurring water was freely falling from the skies in tiny droplets. He closed his eyes again and leaned his head back, allowing them to splash on the exposed skin of his face. The farmboy from Tatooine, turned Rebel Commander, had never experienced rain before, and he was amazed. He was taking in the exotic rainstorm when Leia emerged from the dark stone stairwell. "Come on, flyboy, it's not safe up here." Luke opened his eyes, turning to look her way, "Why not?" She reached down and grabbed his hand, pulling him to his feet "When it rains like this there's usually a discharge of . . ."

As she spoke the words, a slash of lightning ripped jaggedly through the dark sky, illuminating her face and was immediately followed by a heart-pounding crash of thunder. As the crash rolled into a rumble she finished her sentence, "Lightning". Luke stood and followed her down the dark stairs, "I'm sure where you come from that happens all the time, but where I come from, I had to work hard every day of the season on broken down 'vaporators to get a fraction of the water that just spontaneously dropped out of the sky!" She stopped, taking in his words "Well, if the location we're hoping for in a new rendezvous point works out, you'll get the chance to see another form of water falling from the sky, only this kind comes down frozen! I came looking for you because I need your help. Dodonna's busy in a strategy meeting and I need your thoughts on how best to proceed. We have a force of combat-ready T-47 airspeeders, but the techs say they won't hold up in the temperatures we could potentially expose them to."

He blinked away his vacant stare, as if he had been visualizing her words, and looked at her, "What location did you have in mind?" She looked around, then back to him, lowering her voice "Very cold temperatures. Hopefully a place the Empire would think we'd avoid. Any thoughts

on the speeders?” He looked away a second, then back to her, “You said T-47, right? Incom?” She nodded. He thought more for a second “I remember hearing Fixer talk about a friend of his who worked in a shipyard. The T-47 was designed as a civilian airspeeder, for cargo handling, and was used on the loading platforms. This friend rebuilt and modified one of the older de-commissioned speeders to fly in a race in cold temperatures. I know he added de-icing gear to keep the stabilizers and flaps clear, and I think he put in heater coils near the drive units. It ended up racing fine, so I know it can be done.”

She nodded again, “Thanks. I’ll get that information to the right people.” He smiled, “How long before we evacuate this place?” She began her descent down the curving spiral stairs once more as she spoke, “We’re negotiating a deal now to get the necessary ice-cutting tools so our crews can begin carving out the new location. It’ll take a while to get everything ready for us to use it. We’ll need to set up the facilities and power generators, but we can’t stay here long. A few months maybe, but after that, the Empire will have re-grouped its forces and be on our doorstep ready for some payback. We may need to move in prematurely and build it up as we go.”

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