

## Chapter 23 – Trust and Escapes

The smooth floor plate slammed shut as Chewbacca let go of the durasteel panel. He reached for the last plate and slid it into place, over the hidden compartments beneath which, at the moment, were packed full with cases of money, paid in full by the Rebel Alliance Government. He didn't agree with accepting money for the rescue of the Princess, but he knew Solo needed the money to set things right with Jabba, if it wasn't already too late.

The Wook reached into his leather satchel as he walked toward the cockpit. He pulled out a small chain with two golden chance cubes dangling from it. He slipped through the narrow door, glancing back once to make sure he was alone. Then he moved between the co-pilot and pilot's chairs and reached up to reattach the chain to an overhead lever. "Chewie!" howled Solo, walking down the corridor toward him.

The Wook jumped and turned to look over his shoulder with a scowl at the Corellian pilot walking toward him and 'WOOFED' a response. "I thought we've been through this. No chance cubes in here. If you want them hanging over your bunk, be my guest, but not in here." Chewie bared his teeth slightly, but restrained from responding again, as he put them back in the bag at his hip. Solo raised his eyebrows in a scolding manner as the Wook pushed past him out into the ship.

The Wook walked off toward his bunk and Solo walked out past the holo chess table and main cargo area and wandered down the boarding ramp where he stopped and sat down, knees bent and his arms resting on them. To his right, technicians were working to install a new engine on a Y-wing fighter. He turned his head to the left and watched as several mech 'droids were screwing down new access panels along the fuselage of an X-wing that had been damaged in what was now being called the 'Battle of Yavin'.

'The Battle of Yavin', he thought to himself. A major Rebel offensive, and he had ended up smack in the center of it. How had he gotten himself here? He was looking straight ahead now, staring off into nothingness as he wondered how much the price was on his head. Jabba surely had bounty hunters looking for him by now. As soon as they were all safely away, he would settle his account with Jabba. His eyes focused on the here and now as across the hangar, the Princess entered with a small group of Rebel Commanders and Generals. She had amazing eyes. Wait! What was he thinking? Bria's death had really shaken him. He swore he wouldn't get that close again. His thoughts drifted back to that night on Tatooine . . .

*He had been sitting in the bar for hours; sipping drinks and watching the people come and go as he tried to figure out a way to get Jabba off his back. He had bought himself some time, but it would probably not be enough, unless his luck changed drastically. The Yavin Vassilika contest had taken a lot out of him and his first mate. Chewbacca had long since called it a night and returned to the 'Falcon. Dash Rendar had kicked back a few drinks with them, boasting about the Outrider and how he was still in good graces with the Hutt before also calling it a night, leaving Solo alone.*

*Wuher was now herding people toward the door, and he shot Han a glance. Solo nodded, downed what was left of his drink, and stood up, walking for the door. One of two Jawas in front of him tripped and fell on the steps. Han stepped on the hooded little creature and kept on moving out the door. He was on his way back to the spaceport, turning into the long hallway that led to the 'Falcon when Boba Fett stepped out of the shadows. Han's body shook as he sobered immediately, reaching for his blaster. "Take it easy, Solo. There's no price on your head . . . yet." A look of relief washed over the Corellian's face as he blinked in the moonlight, "If you're not after me, what are you doing?"*

*Fett stood silent for a moment, "I once made a promise to someone I was hunting, someone I almost captured onboard the Queen of the Empire. In my pursuit, I promised that if she died, I would get word to her father. I am many things, but I don't make promises lightly. Unfortunately, she got away and never had the chance to tell me who her father was." Han was looking confused now, "Who? Whose father?"*

*Fett exhaled lightly, "Bria Tharen is dead."*

*Han was stunned, and leaned against the wall for support as Fett grabbed his arms, holding him up with gloved hands. "How did it happen? When?"*

*Fett's helmet moved slightly as he spoke, "Two days ago. She and her group were killed on Toprawa by Stormtroopers as they stormed a holonet tower and transmitted stolen Imperial data." Solo noticed the many dents and scratches worn across the surface of the mandalorian helmet, now so close to his face.*

*"Solo, if there had been any other way I would have taken it. I didn't know who else to tell. I trust that you know how to reach her father?" Han shook his head slowly allowing the words to sink in. "Yeah. I'll get word to him."*

*Fett stabilized him against the wall, "Thank you." He turned to go, and then stopped, turning his helmet around to look at Solo, "I wouldn't keep the Hutt waiting for his money. You know how . . . irritable he can get." Han nodded as Fett walked away into the Tatooine night. Bria was dead.*

He watched as Leia and her entourage inspected the repairs that were underway. He hadn't planned to get caught up in all of this. He still had to make a trip to Corellia to find Bria's father and let him know. He certainly didn't plan on a princess with brown eyes working herself into the equation.

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"I saw one, I don't know if there are more" yelled BoShek as he held tight to the hatch wheel. "This is a medium duty blast door. It'll hold against fire, but it has no lock from the inside." As he finished his sentence, the door was pelted with blaster fire from the other side accompanied by high-pitched pings as the bolts were deflected away.

“Is there another way out of here? Maybe we can circle around behind them and take them out” said Rogue. BoShek nodded, “Over there, but it doesn’t loop back.

Rogue resisted “We’re not going to run from these guys, even if there are more of them, we’re not . . .” BoShek cut him off quickly, “I’m not suggesting that we turn tail and run, but if there are more of these guys, and we stay put, we’ll get pinned down here, there’s only two ways in and out. Let’s head down that way.” They were all staring at him now. “I’ve seen what some of these pirates are capable of, and I for one don’t want to be on the receiving end. I’ve run into some of these guys before. They’re spacer pirates that hang out here; ‘stim junkies most of them. Some have gotten lost in the mazes down here and gone mad trying to find their way out. There’s no telling what they might do. Surviving to continue your search only makes you smart. This is not the place to have a stand. We need a place more to our advantage but we have to hurry!”

More blaster fire began banging against the hatch and leaving superheated, orange ovals glowing on their side. BoShek pulled his knee away from the door as more searing rings appeared. The troops made their way through the doorway into the corridor beyond. Rogue tucked the lightsaber and crystal into the long pouch on his belt and buckled it shut. BoShek followed after the troops, closing the second hatch as sparks showered from the door on the opposite wall followed by a violent explosion that rocked the room. Loose rock and sand rained from the corridor ceiling as the shock waves rocked this lower level. They raced along the corridor past several robotic diggers still waiting to be switched on to complete their tasks.

In time, they could hear and feel cool rushing air and the tunnel opened up into a vast and noisy ventilation shaft. “There’s no stairway on this end”, yelled their guide, trying to be heard over the rushing air. “We’ll have to climb out” he said, pointing up and showing the wall-mounted ladders. “We only need to go up one or two levels. Then we can get off the ladders and make our way back to the stairs.”

“Start climbing” yelled Rogue.

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“Hurry up, Blade.” yelled 4120 from the top of the ladder, “This is the last one, Rogue. Let’s get moving.” The corridor was small and dark, but there was light coming from up ahead, and they wasted no time heading for it.

BoShek was in the lead, sprinting down the hall toward the light when a shadow cast from a crossing hallway revealed its source as Boba Fett stepped out into the middle of the corridor, leveled his blaster rifle at them and fired several shots.

The blaster bolts ripped past them, missing everyone. BoShek and Rogue had drawn their blasters and were preparing to fire on Fett when they heard cries from down the hall behind them. They turned to see several pirates dead on the floor of the dark hall. Fett raised the muzzle of his rifle, pointing it away from them as he checked a small handheld tracking device

with a sweep display, “Come with me. Quickly! There’s far too many of them down here.” He turned and disappeared back down the hall he had emerged from.

All in the search party followed him down the passage. It was a long, narrow access tunnel with huge pipes running along the right wall, held back by large, vertical durasteel retainer beams. A small ventilation duct ran along the low ceiling with cables and another large pipe along the left.

BoShek was running down the passage directly behind the Bounty Hunter, “Fett, what are you doing here?” The man in the Mandalorian armor answered as he ran, “I’m looking for Solo. He skipped out on a debt to the Hutt. I warned him not to let it go unpaid too long. I’ve checked all the usual spots but haven’t seen him or the Wookiee. Sometimes pirates hang out here when things heat up. We don’t have much time. I set several charges around this site, and was going to blow this part of the dig. Hurry up, over here.” He ran to the right, up a wide set of stone steps.

We raced beneath dozens of power cables strung over the arch and steps. When we reached the top, Fett turned a quick left and raced into a very dark, narrow hallway and up a set of steep steps.

We raced out of the arch at the top of the steps and found ourselves in a naturally formed crevasse in the rock of the surface. Fett checked the sensor in his hands, noting the blips that were following closer than he would have liked. We rounded a corner in the smooth cave tunnel and saw a beam of light streaming down from the surface, illuminating the cavern.

Blade watched our backs as we raced along, following the Bounty Hunter through twists and turns in the air-carved chambers on our way closer and closer to the light of day on the surface of this forsaken planet.

Fett barked at us as he ran out through an opening in the rock into the streaming, blinding sunlight, “We have to cross this access pit to another cavern on the far side. Once we get across, there is a set of stone stairs leading up to the surface.” We were all standing at the edge of the bridge now. A suspended bridge spanning the dizzying height of an access pit that cut down into the surface parallel to the main pit.

“Let’s go!” yelled 0600 as he charged out onto the swaying span. The others filed after him, trying not to look down. Fett held his position at the mouth of the cavern until all were on their way across the bridge.

He turned to run and the stone by his head exploded as a blaster bolt sheared through it, throwing small pieces into the air, showering him in sand and small rocks. He raised his rifle behind him as he ran and fired a burst round down the steps into the darkness without looking. The suspended span was shaking and rattling now as Fett took the last few steps on it before reaching the far side.

He stopped just short of the cavern and pulled out several more charges, attaching them to the connecting beams and supporting cables that were anchored against the stone. He keyed the

timer to ten seconds and switched it on before turning to run into the cavern as a dozen pirates, from various worlds, raced out onto the bridge from the other side, blasters blazing at him.

Fett ran through the crevasse toward the steps as far behind, the charges began to blow.

The ground beneath him shook violently, pitching this way and that dropping more sand and stone on him. Above, he could see the last of the troopers stepping off at the surface. He threw himself into the air as his jetpack roared to life, the flames illuminating the narrow hallway in a deep amber glow as he was propelled up the stairwell.

He was almost to the top when the charges on the bridge supports went off, its force blowing sand and stones at incredible speeds on a concussive wall of air up through the corridor and steps, snuffing out the jets and hurling Fett headfirst into the sand on the surface near where we stood. The detonating explosives shredded the cables and the stone mounts supporting the bridge, which moaned and creaked as that end tumbled away from the pit wall and fell away into its depths, tumbling all the pirates off to fall to their deaths, blasters firing all the way down.

Fett rolled over to a crouch and stood as another shock wave rocked the ground beneath his feet, as a swarm of startled Skettos circled in the smoky skies nearby.

He steadied himself and picked up his rifle, "Come with me. My ship's this way."

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The sand spray kicked up by the departing ship blasted across them all as Slave I lifted from the ground and rapidly accelerated away, climbing steeply through the glare from the twin suns heading for space. The roaring echoes of its engines bounced back several times from the nearby hills and the skettoes that had keenly watched us arrive scattered once again. The smoke from the burning dig site had begun to disperse, carried away by the now-gusting midday breezes.

Many of the sublevels of the site would now be caved in from the blasts, cutting off further exploration of the Carbon Freezing room and its surrounding facilities.

The men stood gathered in a small group, discussing Fett's search for Solo. The Corellian must have cost the Hutt a fair amount for him to dispatch multiple bounty hunters to hunt him down. IG-88, Dengar Roth, Bossk and Fett were all well known for their tracking and hunting abilities.

Fett now knew that Solo had helped rescue Princess Leia Organa from the Death Star before its obliteration, and that he may very well be concealing his whereabouts by lying low with the Alliance. It became apparent to the troops that not only were the old man and the boy of interest in this whirlwind they had stepped into; Solo now shared the spotlight with them. Most likely a spotlight the Corellian and the Wookiee had spent years skirting.

Their guide lay back prone on the boarding ramp with his eyes shut, catching a small nap in his black pressure suit. While the exchange between the troopers and Fett regarding Solo and the 'Falcon had been of considerable assistance to the bounty hunter, all BoShek could think about

was stealing a few moments of sleep. He breathed in the hot air as he rolled their conversation over in his mind. Solo was good. Not that Fett wasn't, but from what BoShek knew of the Corellian pilot, his entire life had been spent making sure he was at least one step ahead.

Rogue, leaning against one of the shuttle's landing gear flaps, pulled the damaged lightsaber hilt from his belt pouch and rolled it over in his hands; his gloved fingertip tracing the blackened hole that pierced it as he listened to the others talk. He dropped the saber back in the pouch and closed it as he walked to the ramp, kicking the sole of BoShek's boot, "Let's head back to base. I think we've found all we can here."

He was walking up into the ship as the others stopped talking and turned their heads as O600 yelled out to his friend, "I think it would be worth our time to have Holder take us to the place where he and the others encountered the Jedi. There may still be artifacts there to help us corroborate his story."

Rogue paused a moment, nodded and disappeared into the ship.

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I secured the pulse suppression unit inside the body cavity of the little astromech and attached the power leads to the main batteries. The little 'droid stood lifeless in the sand of the rear courtyard, at the rear of the Sentinel ship. It was now late afternoon and as I secured the domed head onto the body of the little 'droid, Holder emerged from the narrow alleyway, holding onto the walls for support, "You up for some company?"

I rose from my kneeling crouch and walked over to him, helping him to the loading dock where he could sit down. "You look like you're feeling better. You've been out of it since I gave you the sedative."

"Yeah, the muscles spasms and cramping have stopped for now, thanks. How's it coming with my 'droid?"

"Your 'droid?", I said looking him in the eye.

He nodded his head slowly; eyes squinting in the bright light, "Yeah, he was mine. What was wrong with him? I always kept him in great shape." I stepped back, allowing Holder a complete view of the little 'droid, "It looks like there was some kind of energy pulse or flux that destroyed his power supplies and many internal systems. There were couplings hanging out of him too."

Holder nodded, "Sounds like someone created that energy pulse and ripped out the wiring packs on purpose to hide something. It was probably Slicer covering his tracks. What about the memory? Did it survive?" I gently wiped the blue and silver dome with a rag, "Unfortunately no, it was crisped up right along with the other systems in the direct vicinity of the power circuitry." Holder nodded thoughtfully. "What about the redundant memory loop?"

I stopped wiping and looked back at him, “Redundant memory loop?” Holder was grinning now as he rocked back a bit on the loading dock, feet dangling, “Yup. I installed a custom-made redundant memory loop in a, how should I say this, out of the way place.” I laughed, “You’re kidding.”

“Nope”, he nodded. “Open the sealed system for the center leg deployment. On top of the main leg drop/lift drive system, you’ll find a moderately sized memory system. It was designed as a necessary hiding place for data and secrets about our missions. ‘HOLDER’, remember? HOLDER of secrets?”

I pulled the head off the little ‘droid and opened the cover of the central leg mobility system. Attached to the inside of the lid and wired into the main data junction plate was a redundant memory loop. “Nice work”, I said.

Holder smiled, “If the thing worked as it was supposed to, you should have a recording of everything I’ve told you about. That little ‘droid was working with us on the ridge the day we were breaking down the survey equipment. I had him chronicling the tear-down procedures for some follow-up reports I was working on.”

He smiled and closed his eyes to feel the sun on his face, “It’s nice to be getting more pieces of my memory back.”

Excited, I replaced the dome, activated the fusion furnace and switched the ‘droid on. As before, the domed head rotated to the right with a whirring sound as the Process State Indicator displays on the front and rear lit up as the little astromech’s brain came back online.

“You know, it was the pulse wave from this little guy that released you from the carbonite. We were deadlocked about what to do with you, or if you would have survived the containment at all.”

Holder eyed me as he turned that remark over in his head. His eyes flicked down to the ‘droid, “I programmed that pulse wave into him in case any of us were ever taken hostage or prisoner and held in a holding cell. The pulse wave was designed to knock out any restraints or barricade doors used in a standard holding cell, allowing for our escape. I never actually thought it would be used. Where’s everyone else? Felth is crashed out inside, but I didn’t see the others.”

I nodded my head, “They’re all at the dig site, trying to find any evidence they can to support your story. We have to be able to trust you. You could have been telling us the truth, and then again you might have been the one that resisted fighting the Jedi. We had to know for sure.”

“Of course. I understand completely. If I’m ever to cover your backs, you want to know I really have it covered. I would expect nothing less.”

“If I can retrieve the recording of the ridge fight, that’ll be all they’ll need. I’m assuming that you have a personal voice command lock on your hidden files?” Holder laughed, “Right again. I like the way you think, Deckard.” He turned his attention to the ‘droid, “Initiate Command

Voice Override.” The little mech turned his dome to face Holder and bleeped a small series of whistles and beeps, awaiting the next command. “Initiate holographic playback mode, last encrypted recording.”

The blue and silver dome rotated to the left a bit as the process indicator lights winked a little faster as it recalled the hidden memory and the recording contained in it. We watched as the front holoprojector lit up and a recorded image of several troopers working on some equipment appeared. Holder and I both watched as things unfolded as he had described: the appearance of the Jedi, the others in his group turning on him. Then Slicer loaded him and the ‘droid onto a transport back to the dig site.

“I think this little guy just bought you a lot of credit”, I said as I watched Slicer return to the transport with the carbonite-frozen Holder. He proceeded to reach over to the camera. A burst of static followed and the recording ended. “That must have been when Slicer fried the little guy” said Holder. “Thanks for working on him Deckard, I owe you.”

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Luke knew they were pressing their luck. It had now been a little more than five months since the Death Star was destroyed, and although no one had spotted Imperial ships, they were being watched, he could feel it. He knew the Empire would never let the Rebel victory at the Battle of Yavin go unanswered, nor would they allow them to just slip away into seclusion. They needed to leave this place and do it soon, or they would fall victim to the ground assault that was surely coming.

If they needed to evacuate quickly, they were now in a position to do so, but every day that passed put them at greater risk. The search teams had found a location for the new rendezvous point, and as soon as all personnel and equipment could be loaded from the base here, they would begin efforts to ready their new location. Contracts for cold weather gear and supplies were being quietly sought through various trusted channels, but it would require funds they didn’t have, and it was taking time, which they certainly didn’t have. Until money could be secured, they would need to leave this place and meet up with the rest of the fleet, staying on the move until everything began to come together for the new base.

It would certainly not be a quick process. A normal relocation of this scale would take a year, maybe two, but moving into a harsh environment and literally having to carve out the space needed? It could take three years to have a fully functional base of operations again. He already had plans for that time, though. If he was to have any chance against Vader, he needed to try to find more about Obi-Wan and his teachings. The only place he knew might yield some information, and the best place to begin his search was in the Jedi’s old home. As he thought of returning there, he remembered his naïve comment to his mentor about selling his ‘speeder, “That’s OK, I’m never coming back to this planet again”. Tatooine seemed so far away and so long ago to him now. The one place that he couldn’t wait to leave was now the one place to which he must return. “Never say never” he thought to himself, as the transport speeder full of pilots pulled away into the underground corridor heading for the hidden fighter hangar far out in the jungle.



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A shadow crept silently across the *Lusankya* and the other clustered Star Destroyers of the forming Imperial Blockade, as the *Executor*, arriving out of hyperspace, eclipsed the light of Yavin's sun and slipped effortlessly into place above the fourth moon. The Dark Lord stood motionless and deep in thought, staring out the central portal on the bridge of the enormous craft. He knew the rebels would be trying to evacuate soon. Reconnaissance missions had revealed isolated ships leaving the moon, but there had been no mass exodus of alliance personnel and craft yet.

Unbeknownst to Vader and the Empire, most of the Rebel fleet, including the Mon Calamari Star Cruisers under Ackbar's command and the refugee ships containing the Alliance government, had not been present during the Battle of Yavin and were now scattered throughout the galaxy, awaiting transmission of the rendezvous beacon signal and coordinates to their next hidden base.

As he watched five Immobilizer-418 class Interdictor Cruisers emerge from hyperspace and assume their textbook blockade positions, his thoughts drifted back to another blockade set up long ago by the Trade Federation around Naboo. As the last of the key ships fell into place, he knew that the waiting game they had been playing with the rebels was nearly over.

Landing craft would soon be deployed to the surface coordinates provided by their spies. Each would be loaded with mechanized A5 Juggernaut, AT-AT and AT-ST divisions as well as ground troops. Members of his handpicked 501<sup>st</sup> Legion would be spearheading the attack, anxious to avenge the troops lost in the Death Star explosion. Although nearly six standard months had passed since the station's obliteration, the loss was still fresh enough that anger would more than fuel their vengeful assault.

Deep in the bowels of the Imperial ships, troops were gathering, checking their gear and grabbing extra power clip bandoliers as they loaded into their assigned deployment vehicles. AT-ATs were being loaded, legs folded, into surface deployment pods and lifted into the overhead deployment racking systems with the awaiting TIE bomber squadrons. The scout units had landed on the moon under the cover of darkness two days ago and had made their way through the jungle to the planned perimeter around the temple.

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The silent, empty screen he had been watching was suddenly alive with activity, small blips appearing. "General, Imperial ships are appearing out of hyperspace and taking up perimeter positioning as you said they would."

Dodonna stood up from his seat and came over to the console, looking over the young rebel's shoulder. He studied the screen for a moment, seeing still more blips appear, "They're readying the blockade. Troops and bombers will be here soon. Send out the alert. A ground assault is now imminent. Send a scrambled signal to Ackbar. Have him jump some empty fleet tankers to coordinates near the Vallusk Cluster to see if he can lure some of these Imperial ships away."

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Luke ascended the orange durasteel ladder attached to the side of his ship, looking around the empty hangar at the other fighters. X-wings and Y-wings sat silently awaiting duty. Their pilots were the lucky ones. All had seen action against the Empire and made it back to fight another day. Soon they would be called upon to provide safe cover away from this place.

He grabbed the dangling control box that hung from the catwalk overhead and used it to maneuver R2 up to the level of the astromech socket behind the open canopy. He was busy securing him when the relayed alert from the temple base was broadcast through the hangar. Looking up from his work to listen to the blaring announcement, he felt a shiver move up his spine and an icy cold darkness tugging at his insides. He realized it must be Vader. They didn't have any time to spare. As he finished securing the little 'droid, other pilots came running into the hangar, helmets under their arms, to ready their ships.

Wedge Antilles ascended the orange rack ladder of the fighter beside him, "Looks like this is it. Support and escort! Time to fold up and head out!" He stepped down into his cockpit and flipped on the main power to his ship's reactors, grinning as he pulled on his flight gloves, "You know, if you hadn't gone and blown up their station . . ."

Luke grinned as he stepped around the canopy and down into his own cockpit to begin his pre-flight check, "I know, we wouldn't have been invited to THIS little party." Wedge was still grinning as he connected the chin strap on his helmet and adjusted the amber visor.

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At the fringes of the moon's jungle forest, a trooper lay on the ground behind the massive trunk of a fallen tree, peering through the eyepiece of his monoculars at his scouts across the huge clearing ahead. They had made their way across the expanse and were positioned at the edge of a broad stone terrace that led to the immense stone temple, now shrouded in a light fog. The Massassi were a larger, stronger branch of the Sith race, and had populated the bulk of it's military. While the Massassi had originated on Korriban, there had been a fragmentation of the Sith people, and many had emigrated here to Yavin IV seeking a safe haven. During the Sith War and Exar Kun's reign, most of the Massassi perished. Today, only their ruins stood as testimony to their existence.

The all but forgotten stone temples rose out of the wilds of the lush jungle, catching the first rays of sunlight as it streamed across the canopy of the treetops. Silently, the lead scout turned and motioned back to the trooper on point for the remaining troops to proceed to his location. He, in turn, lowered his monoculars and motioned to the troops behind him. The task force of the 501<sup>st</sup> Legion rose to their feet and double-timed it across the clearing. Once they reached the scouts, all proceeded toward the long, low entrance that extended across the foundation of the temple.

As they crossed the stone courtyard, the trees out of which they had just come began to tremble, and the ground shook. The lush, green limbs were pushed aside and the trees splintered and

pushed over as Imperial AT-AT Walkers ripped their way through the dense foliage and out onto the stone courtyards that surrounded the temple.

It was a coordinated effort, as AT-ATs emerged from the trees on all sides, blocking any avenue of escape. TIE's and TIE Bombers screamed in from the distance, strafing the treeline behind the grouped AT-ATs, and dropping bombs, perfectly timed for the attack, blocking escape by air, and clearing away the foliage that could provide cover for fleeing Rebel troops. The Rebel's base that had eluded destruction by the Death Star would now fall.

Blaster fire erupted from out of the darkness, glancing off some of the polished Impervium armor before finding weak spots, cutting down troops across the front line. Those behind the fallen advanced through the smoke and mayhem of the dead and dying, sporadically tripping hidden thermal mines, set by the rebels, which simply materialized when triggered, vaporizing three or more troops at once within the spherical reach of the pulsed white disintegration orbs. The smoke drifted on the slight breeze as the sights and sounds of battle once more unfolded around the base of the ancient temple that had seen this kind of fighting many times throughout its history.

TIE's engaged the small, fleeing Rebel transports ships, crippling and downing some into the surrounding jungle. Troops strategically situated in the foliage took care of any crash survivors trying to escape into the jungle. Some of the smaller ships were able to slip by and make their way out of the atmosphere. Rebel troops finally retreated, running into the darkened bowels of the temple and across the huge hangar bay to the last transport ship.

Jan Dodonna watched carefully for a break in the onslaught. During a slight lull, and using the smoke as cover, he slipped out of the temple, making his way into the center of a squadron of TIE Bombers that had landed in the courtyard. He rolled under the belly of the ship in the center, planting and activating a small sonic charge. As soon as the timer began counting down he rolled out from under the ship and ran back into the temple, once again behind enemy lines.

A suffocating silence washed out over the jungle as the charge absorbed all sound waves around it, immediately followed by the ear-shattering blast of the sonic charge wave ripping vertically down into the courtyard and up through the center ship, causing it to explode, triggering a chain reaction, destroying the formation of bombers in a massive explosion. With hands clasped tightly over his ears, he turned and ran toward the transport, hoping he could slip past the troopers already inside the dark hangar.

Two rebel squads of X-wings and Y-wings, having launched from a remote location, streamed in from the distance joining the fight. Skywalker was among them, giving the TIEs a run for their money. A third squad of ships remained behind at the remote launch site guarding camouflaged personnel carriers. Leia was already safely on one of them with C-3PO. Solo and his Wookiee co-pilot had confirmed she was onboard and were preparing to raise ship. The unit of AT-ATs fired simultaneously, ripping into the temple, rocking it with explosions as the last of the personnel transports lifted off, flanked by Rebel fighter escorts.

As they moved clear, the Millennium Falcon rose from the mossy stone courtyard on its repulsor field. Chewbacca brought the main engines online as they rose up past the tree line. Before he or Solo could react, the 'Falcon shuddered and pitched as she came under fire. Solo grabbed the throttle levers and pulled them all back together. The ship leaped forward as Slave I dove over the treetops, spitting blaster fire across the courtyard at them, ripping up the stone.

The Wookiee howled something unfavorable as he fought to re-energize the rear shields. Solo took his fast hunk of junk into a straight upward climb into the blinding Yavin sun, followed by a twisting rollover into a dive heading straight back toward Fett and Slave I. As he swung his ship recklessly around, one of the rebel commanders catching a ride to the rendezvous point had made his way up the main tunnel ladder and strapped himself into the upper quad gun array seats.

Fett rocked Slave I to one side and unleashed a hailstorm of blaster fire stabbing through the air and burning across the Falcon's shields. Solo rolled the 'Falcon over a quarter turn as he raced past Slave I, narrowly missing a midair collision. At the bottom of his dive he pulled up hard and rolled over once, racing out over the green canopy of the jungle moon. The gun turret swiveled quickly to the rear as Slave I executed an inverted loop and rolled in behind the 'Falcon. Solo pitched the ship back and forth, left and right, accelerating as the commander in the gun turret opened fire.

All four barrels of the quad cannon fired at once in a blinding, pulsed flash of energy which Slave I took as a hit head on. Her shields absorbed most of it as Fett wound her around, trying to avoid more blaster fire. Solo climbed to avoid a taller grove of trees and abruptly threw the 'Falcon up on end to narrowly avoid slamming into one of the tall stone Massassi monuments that thrust up through the trees.

Fett corrected also, but Slave I's starboard outrigger slammed into the giant stone pillar as they raced past at breakneck speed. The ship spun hard to the starboard under the force of the impact as part of Fett's rudder on that side sheared off and hurtled away into the trees. He fought to maintain control, looking for a clear place to set down as the Millennium Falcon rolled over several times and climbed straight up into the overhead sky. He watched through his tinted visor until he could no longer make out the Corellian ship against the deep blue.

"Another time Solo, another time."

The last of the slow-moving transports and her fighter escorts continued their ascent through the atmosphere, 'nav computers on standby with the pre-loaded coordinates encoded. Finally, they joined the other alliance ships and headed into a certain battle with the Imperial blockade as the Falcon joined the mix.

Vader watched the battle's progress and the small group of Rebel ships heading his way, when suddenly Admiral Griff's squadron of Star Destroyers dropped out of lightspeed, squarely on a collision course with his ship. Aggressively evasive maneuvers were attempted by the crews, but the destroyers collided with the newly commissioned *Executor* with amazing force.

The rebels seized the opportunity during the confusion that followed. As soon as the last ship cleared the atmosphere, and the first ship was beginning to come under fire from the blockade, all 'nav computers were activated, aligning them all in formation for a synchronized jump to lightspeed.

In a flash, all the rebel ships disappeared in a mass hyperspace jump. Only a lone X-wing remained momentarily behind. Luke adjusted his own 'nav computer settings manually as R2 voiced his protest in a series of whistles. Moments later his ship also hyperjumped, following a slightly different course from the others.

Vader was furious. His ship had been damaged and the rebels and his son had slipped through his grasp. As Griff's hologram apologized profusely to the dark Lord, the invisible pressure of the Force's dark side crushed his airway. Vader clutched his fist, shaking it at the forward viewport on the Executor's bridge until the impetuous Admiral's life had left him, and his holographic form dropped to the deck.

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Imperial troops poured throughout the darkness of the empty hangar bay, stepping over Rebel and Imperial corpses where they lay. Fueling hoses hung from overhead gantries, haphazardly tossed aside. Several small repulsor transports had been abandoned near the entrance, and the smell of damp stone and starship lubricants hung heavy in the silent, still air of the stone temple.

More troops now flooded in now, advancing deeper into the temple, down darkened, winding hallways, weapons drawn at the ready, searching every room until the command center was finally discovered. All personnel had successfully evacuated, and although most of the equipment had been removed, it had been done hastily. There were pieces of small hardware still lying about.

As the team moved through, sweeping the command center for anything of value, one trooper dropped a blaster charge pack during his reload. He bent down to pick it up when he noticed a small datacard on the ground, stuck in the crack between two of the metal floor grates. The smeared label read "Base One". It appeared to have been stepped on and crushed . . . fractured in a splintered, spiderwebbed pattern, but could prove useful if the data inside could possibly be retrieved. He tucked it in his utility belt and rose to catch up with the rest of his unit.

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The blood pounded through what remained human of the dark Lord as he stood motionless, watching the patch of stars toward which the rebels had jumped into hyperspace, eluding him and his blockade. The lenses in his breath mask fogged slightly as the heat poured from the top of his head.

Tiny fans on either side instantly switched on to clear his view as he turned away from the viewport and headed for the turbolifts. He wanted to see the damage to his new ship personally. With a slight wave of his hand, his reluctant officers fell in line behind him.

Sweat was forming under their high collars as they hurried to keep up with Vader's large stride. "Commander, where was the damage to my ship sustained?" One of the officers opened a datapad, "Damage reports are still coming in, milord, and it is spread across several levels, but it appears that the majority of the damage occurred in bay 117." Vader listened, then turned, stepping into the waiting turbolift alone. As the doors closed, his officers scrambled for another lift pod.

The Stormtrooper guards on either side of the entrance to the bay stiffened their stance a bit as Lord Vader stepped through the passageway into the bay. He stopped momentarily, taking in the initial view of the damage as he folded his cape back on both sides, revealing his gleaming upper chest and shoulder armor.

He leaned his helmeted head back, looking up at the twisted durasteel scar that ran the full height of the enormous bay and continued to both the decks above and below. The magnetic shield would hold back the vacuum of space until they could return to Fondor shipyard for repairs.

Thoughts of Kenobi and his son ran through his mind now as his officers silently approached through the access hall behind him, hoping not to be heard or noticed. For some reason he couldn't shake the echoing words Kenobi had uttered during their final confrontation aboard the Death Star, 'Anakin, you perceive the power of the Force as little as the spoon perceives the taste of the food.'

Without turning his head he spoke, "Commander, alert Fondor shipyard to have the necessary components prepared for immediate repairs to my ship." The officer opened his datapad to send the message as he replied, "Yes, Lord Vader."

With that, Vader whirled around, cape flying as he walked toward the hall. His men quickly parted, making a path for him. He stepped into the corridor beyond and headed back to the turbolift. His men remained several paces behind, waiting for him to leave the area before they stepped forward. They were all thankful for their lives and didn't want that to change.

As he stood waiting for the lift to open, Vader felt the slight, cool ripples he had been feeling in the Force fade away and vanish entirely. His son had definitely been on Yavin IV and was now gone.

"Commander, I want probes searching every corner of this galaxy. I don't care how many it takes. I want thousands dispatched immediately and thousands more lost as they pass beyond the fringes into unexplored space. I want mountains of data returned and analyzed. I want the Rebels found!" The datapad flew open once more as the officer replied, "Yes, Lord Vader."

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