

Chapter 25 – Thundering Forward

As the Wookiee descended the lowered entry ramp from within the 'Falcon, both he and Captain Solo now felt the chest-pounding concussive sound of the twin waterfalls they had seen on approach to the shipping terminal. They had been directed to set down in the center of the huge terminal yard's landing platform, which was situated at the base of an enormous cliff, over which these twin falls coursed.

The domed buildings of the Royal Palace could be seen through the mist atop the cliffs. Theed, the capitol city of Naboo, was located far above them, on the stony banks of the river which fed the waterfall to their West.

Solo slapped a fully charged erg clip into his blaster and shoved it back in his holster. He walked away from the Wook to speak to the nearest port officer about securing a personal transport to the city above. Chewbacca stood transfixed, staring at the raw power of the incredible falls. He breathed in the smell of the mist that hung in the air and was momentarily reminded of the similar intense beauty of his homeworld, Kashyyyk.

Solo walked up behind, and tapped his co-pilot on the shoulder, "Chewie, I've set up a transport that'll take me up there." he said pointing to the top of the Western Falls. "There's a small waterfront area there where I can get a water taxi out to the royal lake house, so I can deliver this." He opened his palm, revealing the pendant. The necklace was wrapped around his open hand twice.

"I need you to stay here, pal." He looked away scanning the cliffs above as clouds floated through the expansive, blue afternoon sky. Chewie barked a short response. "I don't know why. There's no reason. I've just got a bad feeling about it." The Wook growled a bit in response, raising his furry arms. "I know nobody knows we were coming here, but I want to be ready to get outta here fast if we have to." Chewie whined softly as he looked back to the powerful waterfalls, then turned to re-enter the ship as he watched Solo walk off toward the small transport.

He knew there would be no time for him to make any real repairs, but he could keep busy running diagnostic scans on the ship. The idea of Solo without someone watching his back was not a comforting one. Chewbacca took his life-debt to the Corellian pilot very seriously. As the huge Wookiee entered the cockpit, he watched as Solo's transport lifted away. Turning his attention back to his tasks, his fingers moved quickly across the instruments as he initiated a deep system scan.

*

Solo watched the familiar shape of his ship growing smaller below as the transport rose up the steep cliff, headed toward Theed. The transport finally emerged above the stone wall only to find the waterfront area empty and no water taxis in sight. "I'll take you passengers over closer to the palace. I forgot. The waterfront area is closed this afternoon in observation of our fallen past queens."

The transport pilot maneuvered the small craft into the courtyard outside the palace grounds, where many had gathered to pay their respects to the lost monarchs. For a place of such amazing beauty, and such a sizeable gathering, there was the inescapable crushing weight of silent reverence, sorrowful reflection and genuine mourning from the masses as they lay wreaths and flowers at the base of the monuments here.

The small transport vehicle continued well past the solemn gathering and beyond more official Royal buildings that encircled the palace before it eventually came to a stop, touching down on the stone street of the lakeside walk and landing. Even here there was a sizeable gathering of people, watching the beauty of the lake and reflecting on those they had lost. Han stepped out quickly, eyes moving across the crowd, one hand hovering above his sidearm as he made his way through the masses toward the stone railing on the far side of the expansive courtyard. He placed a hand on the smooth stone rail that overlooked the magnificent lake and leaned over, peering down to the water's edge below. Several water taxis stood ready for their next fare. A slight grin crept over his face as he looked left and right, searching for a way down to the lower level.

He moved right, following the gently curving stairs down to the walkway that skirted the water's edge. As he approached the first taxi, he looked the old oarsman in the eyes, "I need to go to the royal lake house. I have a delivery for one of the royal handmaidens." The old man shook his head and blocked Solo from entering his tiny craft. A younger oarsman called to him, and waved him over. "Sorry about that. Some of the old timers take today's meaning a bit to extremes. Where did you say you needed to go?"

Solo eyed the younger man carefully as he stepped down into the small boat and sat down, "The Royal lake house."

"Sorry mate, they're closed to the public."

Han grinned, "That's good to know, but I'm not going as a tourist. I'm making a personal delivery to one of the retired Royal Handmaidens that lives there now. Her name is Yané, and the delivery is from her niece."

The boy looked up sharply at the name. "If my history is correct, she was handmaiden to Queen Amidala, one of the queens we're honoring here today. I'll take you over and announce you. It will be up to the handmaiden whether or not she receives you, today of all days."

Han nodded as he settled back against the seat, "Fair enough."

*

Yané's thick hair blew back away from the dark features of her face as she hurried across the veranda. Her feet noiselessly padded along the footpath of half-buried stone slabs as she circled around to the stairs which lazily wound down to the water's edge.

The delivery announcement was unexpected, but when the voice on the intercom mentioned her niece, Bria, she dropped everything. The warm lake waters lapped rhythmically at the stone retaining walls as she came around the final turn and could see the oarsman standing in the water taxi.

She slowed her pace a bit as she closed the remaining gap between herself and the bottom of the landing, "It's all right. Let him pass." The oarsman dropped the arm that held Solo back. Han stepped out of the small boat onto the stone step, eyeing the woman, "Yané?"

She nodded slowly, her eyes locked on his, "Yes, I am Yané. Who are you?"

"Renn Tharen sent me to deliver this." He extended his hand as Yané opened hers. The necklace and pendant slid from his hand into her palm. The metal was still warm from his grip, but a chill went through her as she realized what it was. Her eyes flew open wide as her gaze darted from the pendant back to Han's eyes, "Where is she? Is she all right?" She frantically looked to him for an answer as he searched for a delicate, but elusive way to word his devastating message. In the end, he could find no easy way, "I'm sorry . . . Bria is dead."

A curtain of white, sparkling points of shimmering light abruptly lowered before her eyes, and she almost passed out completely as her legs buckled beneath her at the news. She recovered quickly as Han reached out and grabbed her, steadying her and lowering her slowly to the stone steps. The oarsman jumped over to help, fanning her face a bit.

"How . . . did this happen?" was all she could manage, tears welling in her dark brown eyes as a breeze caught the delicate strands of hair that now fell across her face. Han raised her back to her feet slowly, "Let's get you to a more comfortable place, and I'll tell you all I know." She nodded slowly and steadied herself as they turned to ascend the steps toward the courtyard and veranda above.

"Let's go out over there, under the trees." She said as they passed by the hill that sloped up to the veranda.

"There's a nice breeze coming off the water this afternoon. We can talk there." Tears slid down her strikingly beautiful face as the impact of the loss ripped through her again. There was ample shade beneath the canopy of trees, and the veranda sat in a perfect spot overlooking the lake.

Yané stepped away from Han, her feet crunching in the bed of small stones as they approached the intricately carved railing. She reached out, clasping the stone rail with her right hand as her left held up the necklace. She brushed her thumb over it as flashes and images from the day she had placed it around her young niece's neck surfaced in her thoughts: "Whenever you wear this, Bria, think of me and how much I love you. You're the daughter I could never have, sweetie. I love you as if you were my own."

The mental images and memories of the smiling child faded away and the biting pain of reality came crashing down on the royal handmaiden once again. She cupped a hand across her mouth,

and tears fell freely as spasms of grief tore through her again and again, shaking her. “How did it happen?”

The sweet smell of the flowers along the rail wafted across them as Han stared out across the lake at the distorted, rippled reflections in the waters. “Have you ever heard of the *Red Hand*?”

* * *

The small flashing beacon illuminated the tech’s face as he searched the database to identify its origin. The search results splashed across the screen and his eyes grew wide as he reached to depress the comm key, “Lord Vader! Lord Vader!”

*

The comm channel opened and a tone sounded as Vader sat in his private chambers, “Lord Vader! Lord Vader!”

The dark Lord motioned briefly, channeling the Force to activate the comm. “Yes? What is it?”

The tech on the other end of the line cleared his throat and spoke up, “We’re picking up a transponder signal, sir. We have identified the signal as the one assigned to the Millennium Falcon, milord.”

Vader thought a moment, “The strike team on Yavin IV recovered that transponder already. Captain Solo discovered it and left it behind in the Massassi temple. This isn’t news.”

The line went silent for a moment before the reply came, “MiLord, the transponder on the Millennium Falcon was a dual-core twin transponder. Captain Solo may have found the first transmitter, but the secondary unit’s timer mechanism was tripped when the first was removed. It has waited the programmed amount of time to avoid detection, and is now signaling. The scrambled beacon we’re receiving is definitely that of the second twin, planted on the Millennium Falcon. It’s a strong signal, and it’s coming from Naboo.”

Vader leaned close to the comm and replied, “Have the crew of the Intruder prepped. I’m on my way and will be on their bridge within the hour.”

“Yes, milord.”

* * *

My arm was buried up to the elbow, and the part in question was well out of sight. I closed my eyes, heightening the awareness of all sensations in my fingertips. I was absolutely focused on feeling the rotation of the fuel line coupler until the threads on the small part finally caught.

The swoop bike I had picked up at the parts store wasn’t that old, but had been treated roughly and had been in dire need of some basic repairs and maintenance. I tightened the piece down by

hand and then reached for the coupler wrench to finish the job. When it was firmly in place, I pulled my arm out of the small space in the engine compartment.

As I wiped off the thick, black lubricants that were smeared across my forearm, Holder came running into the courtyard, closely followed by Falker and Topolev. All three crossed behind the Sentinel and looped back around to the loading dock where I was working.

Winded, and barely able to form the words to speak, Topolev leaned against the dock with his head hung low, gasping in breaths, “Not bad, Holder. You’re showing some improvement.”

“Improvement my ass.” said Holder. “I ran both of you guys until you could barely keep up. I’m fine. I haven’t felt better than this in a long time.”

“Yeah.” wheezed Topolev, “Me too. Never better.”

Falker laughed, his chest heaving also, “I don’t think there’s much more we can do to help you, Holder. It looks like you’re back in pretty decent shape now.” His last words were strained and forced out as his breath ran out. The astromech that had been assisting me with the swoop bike beeped and whistled as it completed the system check on the swoop’s electronic systems.

“Deck, how much more do you have to do to this thing before It’ll work?” asked Holder.

I disconnected one end of the data cable from the ‘droid and the other from the bike. “There are still some minor adjustments needed on the thrust bias to smooth it out some, but it should run now. Actually, I guess it’s ready for a test.”

The ‘droid moved away as I stood up and rolled one leg over the saddle. I silently mouthed a phrase about breaking someone’s knees if this didn’t work, and switched the power on with the grip activator. As I did, the displays winked on showing thrust sequencing and power cell readings. The engines stuttered once as the air bubbles in the repaired fuel line worked their way through. When the engine finally kicked in, it kicked in strong and then calmed to a steady and constant whine.

Holder nodded his head approvingly, “Sounds good, man. You going for a test ride?”

I suddenly remembered that I still had the coded directions to Kenobi’s home in the tracking device in my belt pouch. It had been a couple of weeks since I had found the site, but had not been fortunate enough to have the time to return. “Yeah, I might take it out of the city and run it out into the Dune Sea. I can really open it up and see what she’ll do out there.”

“Sounds good. I’ll tell Rogue you’re gone for a while.”

I reached over to the loading dock and grabbed the tools and an extra power cell, tossing them into one of the saddlebags just in case I might need them. I clipped my forearm and hand armor back on and pulled my bucket securely down on my head. With everything in place, I rolled the bike into a slow turn out through the narrow alley into the street out front. Dust and sand sprayed

up as I stepped down on the accelerator pedal and headed out across the city in the direction of the Dune Sea.

The little 'droid had rolled up the loading dock ramp and through the open bay door. Holder grabbed Topolev's hand and pulled him to a standing position, C'mon, brother, let's go."

*

The sand and stone on the floor of the canyon I was in streaked by as I opened up the throttle. I had been able to breathe life back into the damaged bike, and it felt good to get more life out of it. I noted a tall spire of stone atop the right cliff face. I knew I was close to the right area as I approached where it opened out to the edge of the Dunes.

The tracking unit had me located almost on top of the mapped coordinates. I noticed something ahead, so I cut back on my speed, and slowed down considerably. As I drew closer I could see it was a ship draped in very effective sand-colored camouflaging nets. The swoop slid up alongside it as I cut the engines off. The bike coasted to a stop and I dismounted, pulling off my helmet.

The ship had a long, narrow fuselage whose nose protruded from beneath the netting, which had been rolled back by the dry gusting winds. There was a quad-pack of engines clustered in the rear; two on either side of the cockpit. It had a broad wingspan with wingtip cannon armaments. I glanced around quickly as I recognized the fighter. It was one of two preferred fighter craft currently in service by the Alliance. It was the lethal T-65 X-wing fighter, but its pilot was nowhere to be found.

* * *

The golden metallic chance cubes dangled at the end of a delicate chain firmly gripped in the Wook's left hand. He wasn't sure about Solo's reasons for not wanting them in the Falcon's cockpit. Maybe the cocky Corellian had a hidden superstitious streak in him. Whatever the reason, he had a definite disliking for them. Chewie draped them over the control lever that jutted from the overhanging bulkhead and grinned with a mischievous woof-woofing that could only have been the Wookiee equivalent of laughter.

He reached back in the leather pouch at his waist pulling out a rag and some small tools for cleaning the bowcaster that lay across the console in front of him. Gripping it underneath and holding it up, he carefully wiped it down and was preparing a small tool for cleaning out the firing mechanism when a warning indicator flashed on the wall panel beside his head. The system scan had uncovered something.

He set the bowcaster down and flipped off the warning. Then he turned, shaking his head, toward the system monitoring display to see what had been detected. The Falcon had so many custom upgrades and modifications that system scan "anomalies" were not always a bad thing.

The data on the screen scrolled past at a dizzying rate until the screen locked onto a highlighted row showing a slight electrical pulse wave in the hyperdrive motivator core. He had spent more

than his fair share of time down in the drive pit working on the engines on this ship, and had run countless monitoring sweeps on the drive system until it was tuned to near perfection. This pulse wave didn't belong.

He stood up sharply and stepped out of the cockpit headed to the rear and the drive engines. The air in the ship was still and quiet. All the systems except the scan had been shut down. The large, furry Wookiee hands gripped the gridded deck plate as strong arms lifted the panel aside, exposing the heart of the 'Falcon.

Chewie placed his hands on both edges of the pit and suspended himself as he swung his long legs over the edge, groaning slightly. Gently he lowered himself down to the pit floor and let go. The crisscrossed metal rods of the alluvial dampers, hydrospanners and the lower central core of the motivator cluster were still and lifeless and quiet. As he visually scanned the pit, looking over the parts, peering back into the shadowy recesses, he reached into his leather pouch again and withdrew a small handheld sweep scanner.

The tiny screen winked on as he calibrated it for a specific search. Then he initiated the device, which began emitting a popping ping sound as it searched for a detectable electrical pulse pattern. Almost immediately the display indicated a yellow triangle to his right. He moved the scanner in that direction and the yellow triangle centered itself on the screen as he brought it around to the power cable bundles that fed the motivator cluster stack.

Leaning closer, he realized that it wasn't coming from the stack, as the triangle moved off-center. He pulled back a bit and moved the scanner up a bit to a panel that covered the branching wiring harnesses. He pressed the flush release latch, opening the small durasteel hatch. Inside was a rat's nest of wires, and nestled in the center, bolted to the bulkhead at the back of the panel was a silver device about the size of a thermal detonator.

Chewie's eyes narrowed. It was definitely not part of the ship. Solo had removed a device similar to this back in the temple hangar on Yavin IV. He had only heard of twin-core transponders, but had never seen one until now. The Empire was playing for keeps this time, and this was a little too close to home for his liking. The Wookiee's furry lip curled back and Chewbacca growled angrily as his incredibly strong right hand ripped the device from the bulkhead.

With it firmly in his grip, he climbed out of the pit and raced off to the boarding ramp. He was about halfway down to the landing pad when he threw the transponder out to the duracrete and drew his bowcaster up to fire. A double-tap of crimson flashed from the weapon, disintegrating the Imperial tracking device as it tumbled over the ground. A small curl of smoke rose up from what was left of it. Chewie lowered the bowcaster as he turned to head back to the cockpit, not seeing the smoking trails streaking across the sky as Imperial landing craft and deployment pods made their way to the Naboo surface.

He slipped into Solo's chair and held down the comm key, barking into the microphone in a series of angry howls and throaty hollers.

*

One of the devices clamped onto Solo's belt buzzed as he looked out over the water from beneath the trees that shaded the courtyard. He put down his drink and reached for it, pulling the comm from its holder and flicking it on. Wookiee howls and barks spewed out as soon as the channel opened. He looked up into the sky noticing rolling clouds as he responded, "Calm down Chewie, slow down. Start over, pal. You know I can't follow you when you get all worked up talking fast like that."

The Wook began again, trying to control himself as he relayed his discovery to Solo. Concern washed over the Corellian's face as his copilot continued. Then as he continued to listen to the howls and groans, his eyes darted back up toward the sky as a chest-crushing, rumbling sound rained from above. The ground was shaking, and across the lake, the rapidly gathering clouds seemed to be spontaneously forming across the skies above Theed. Yané came running from the lake house across the courtyard toward him "What's going on? What's happening?"

She ran up to the stone railing beside Solo, looking out across the water as small dark shapes began to emerge, falling out of the rumbling clouds. A few seconds later, the unmistakable scream from the twin ion engines of Imperial TIE fighters reached them. As it did, the frothy clouds parted, revealing the sloping bow of an Imperial Star Destroyer emerging from concealment with another behind it.

As they watched, Imperial all terrain walkers advanced down the main boulevard, terrorizing the masses gathered there to honor their royal dead. Han's eyes were wide and his mind raced trying to figure a way out of this one, "Chewie, get her fired up and hidden somewhere nearby. Don't try to get to me. It's too much of a risk to try and get away twice. You can't afford to be seen until we're ready to go. I'm already on my way back."

He turned to Yané as he secured the comm back on his belt, "I've gotta get back to the shipping terminal, what's the most hidden way?" She was still staring across the water at the horror unfolding before them. "Yané!" She jumped and turned to him, as if startled from a dream, "What do they want?" Solo stared back at her, "They want me and my ship, for helping the cause that Bria gave her life to support. Right now, I need you to focus and honor her memory. What's the best way back to the terminal?"

"I . . . I know a way that will hide you from these searching eyes." she stammered, and began to run toward the upper terrace, Han running after her, "Hurry, I have an airspeeder. We need to make it to the royal hangar before the troops get there. Beneath it are water tunnels that were once used for power generation. They should be deserted."

* * *

The expansive ceiling of the sparkling blue sky overhead stretched from one horizon to the other, unobstructed by anything but the occasional wisp of thin clouds. Sunlight glittered across the pristine frozen landscape, and the endless snowdrifts of this beautiful but brutally unforgiving

place muffled all echoes; swallowed all noise but the bitter, wailing wind. A spray of ice crystals, caught in the swift, frigid breeze, blew in a thin fog just above the ground.

The rebel scout, lying on his belly at the crest of the snow ridge pulled his scarf tighter across his mouth and raised the macrobinoculars to his goggle covered eyes. He was sure there had been movement in the next valley. The electronically enhanced image flickered slightly but showed nothing. He swept the lenses back and forth trying to confirm what he thought he had seen. It appeared there was nothing. He switched them off and slung them back under his left arm. As he turned his attention away from the valley and back to securing an anchored hook at the mouth of the ice cave he was about to explore, he failed to see an enormous creature covered in frost-white fur rise from its still, crouched position in the valley. It ran in a standing posture, taking huge strides, and quickly disappearing over the crest of the hill on the far side of the valley.

The shaggy animal with the saddle just behind the soldier sniffed at the air and shifted uneasily from one leg to the other. It turned its head sharply to one side, exhaling with a loud, strained whine followed by a shudder that started at its head and worked its way through the rest of the body. The scout glanced back at his ride, and then back to the work at hand. He fed his line through the secured hook, gave an abrupt tug, then dropped his legs over the edge of the opening and lowered himself inside.

Although a cave to be used for the main hangar and base of operations had already been located and was actively being carved out for use, there was still the matter of where to locate the main power generators for the site. This cave was already proving to be very promising for that purpose. He slid down the line a bit, digging the spikes on his boots into the face of the wall just inside the cave mouth and looked around.

This cave was narrow, but would allow most of the power generators to be hidden underground with only the top half revealed for venting purposes. He drew his left forearm up to his face and pressed the comm button, "Echo one to echo base, location confirmed. Send the cutters and engineers to my mark."

* * *

Flashes of lightning tore through the clouded, darkening sky over Theed as deadly static discharges from the hull of the Destroyer arced to the ground. A strong wind whipped over the speeder, shaking it violently, as cool air rushed in to replace the superheated air boiling up and away from the massive ship's steaming hull.

Han was eyeing the silenced monitor on the instrument cluster. It showed a live news feed of AT-ATs advancing on the downtown plaza, firing into the crowds. People were running frantically as several of the monuments were destroyed under fire from the mobile cannons. The feed abruptly switched over to the broadcast center showing Stormtroopers swarming into the smoky building. Han reached over to increase the volume.

A reporter was yelling to be heard over the explosions and blaster fire behind him, "I repeat, the Empire has taken control of the palace and all royal hangars. I advise everyone to take immediate

cover!” The video feed jumped through several views of the royal plaza and then to a view of the hangars with Stormtroopers pouring in through the open doors, assuming control. As the image flickered and jumped back to the reporter, Stormtroopers had advanced on his position, showing no hesitation in blasting a wide hole through him as he continued his broadcast. He slumped to the floor, and as several troopers took over his position, the monitor suddenly cut to a static test pattern and tone.

Yané raced across both rivers and through groves of huge, lush trees heading for the hangar. “It’s just ahead”, she shouted.

“Can’t go that way” yelled Han pointing at the monitor, “They’re already there.”

She looked at the monitor momentarily and cut her eyes away quickly as she responded, “They’re shutting things down in a hurry. What’d you do?”

Han grinned, remembering the role he had played in reducing the Death Star to a debris field. “I don’t know . . . I might have broken something of theirs.”

Remembering the time she had spent doing research for the queen in the archives, she abruptly changed course, veering to the right and gaining altitude. The airspeeder climbed quickly and was headed straight for a cluster of tall, domed towers that rose up along the banks of the river.

As they came around, Han saw stone bridges connecting the towers and spires reaching up from their domes, with the rushing river water far below. Then he saw the grassy landing pad on the roof of the tower they were heading for.

“This isn’t as direct as going through the hangars, but there’s another connecting entrance to the water tunnels beneath the archives in the bowels of these towers. Let’s just hope they aren’t here yet.”

* * *