

## Chapter 26 - Pursuits

The small holocron, pulling at his insides, had successfully led the young Rebel Commander away from his landing site at Kenobi's hermitage. Luke's tendency to doubt was definitely being tested, as the cube had delivered him deeper into the stony cliffs where caves now littered the rock walls. With foresight, he had shed his flight jacket, leaving it with the poncho inside Kenobi's home, and had now rolled up the sleeves and unfastened the top few buttons of his crisp officer's shirt.

He climbed carefully over the sharp stone outcroppings further and further up into the deep crevasse, heading toward the summit which overlooked the canyons below. As he approached the top of the ridge, a very large opening came into view. It was a heavily weathered opening, leading into the cool darkness of a large cave, hidden from anyone below this obscure, treacherous vantage point.

Beneath this opening was a spillway of small rocks and stone slabs. The lonely emptiness of the blowing wind was all he heard as he drew closer, kneeling to examine one of them. It had been carefully dumped with all the others to either side of a path leading toward the cave, but did not appear to be a natural deposit of broken stone. The flat surfaces of the slabs were perfectly flat, while their stone edges appeared to have melted, oozing out over the edge before re-solidifying. He ran his fingers over the smooth, rounded mounds of stone along the edges as he looked around at the many similar slabs.

He stood up, wiped his face and carefully headed up the path into the opening ahead. As he stepped into the inky darkness, his vision was suddenly shrouded with a dark green patch where the glaring sunlight outside had temporarily stained his retina. The green haze slowly faded away as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. He could now see that the ceiling of the enormous cave was nearly ten meters above. The lowest level here was small, with the gouged out remains of a stone water collection pool in the floor, most likely fed at one time by Kenobi's 'vaporator.

This lowest level had not been opened up as much as the levels above, but was open completely to the roof above. Ben had probably left it in its' natural state to avoid calling attention to himself. Luke walked to the back wall of the cave. Curving steps had been hewn from the stone here; carved right into the wall. He ascended them, circling around to a second level.

Here, an assortment of small hand tools, electronics and flimsy documents, bound in some type of animal skin leather, sat exactly where they had been left behind on a stone workbench. It too had been carved right into the stone of one of the side walls. He stepped closer, running his hands over the smooth, flat surface of the bench and out to the same melted, oozing edges he had seen on the slabs outside. Obi-Wan must have carved out portions of this cave with his lightsaber, slicing through the stone and leaving smooth, rounded, molten edges behind. He walked away from the bench over to a half wall which provided a view to the level below.

After a brief look down, he turned away, scanning the rest of the room, which was empty. He made his way back to the steps and ascended to the third and final level of the cave home. This was a very small room that had been hollowed out just beneath the top of the ridge line. A small

overlook afforded a view to the lower levels of the cave and a narrow slot, also pierced by a lightsaber, allowed an amazing view of the canyons and Dune Sea as well as the path which twisted its' way up to the cave.

This small space was most likely where Kenobi had slept, protected and able to see anyone or anything approaching. Luke sat down, crossed his legs and closed his eyes, feeling the lingering energy in the stone around him. It clearly resonated, even now, with the undeniable presence of Ben Obi-Wan Kenobi. As he sat with his eyes closed, the small cube began rearranging its' inner structure once again, ending with a slight click, and the flickering image of Obi Wan appeared again.

“Hello again, young one. If this portion of the recordings have been triggered, you have successfully found my cave. This was my first, temporary Tatooine home. It was rough, but served its' purpose well enough. There are a few things I have left behind that you will need to know about, and I will explain them to you but first, I want you to understand a bit more about Jedimaster Sifo Dyas.

My master, Qui Gon Jinn, Sifo Dyas and Count Dooku were all close, lifelong friends who held similar beliefs, especially those regarding the failings of the Republic and the erosion of the Jedi Order. While they were all masters, each defied the council in their own small ways when they felt the path chosen by the group was leading them astray as individuals.

Qui Gon felt the Jedi were losing touch with the living Force, and routinely ignored the council's wishes if he felt the Force guiding him elsewhere along a different path.

Dooku was obsessed with collecting and studying Sith antiques and artifacts, and kept a private collection of his found treasures.

Sifo Dyas held many thoughts similar to those of Qui Gon, and was a student of lightsaber combat, both Jedi and Sith forms. He allowed himself to second guess the council when he deemed it necessary, but also felt very strongly that the Republic was worth saving and could be reformed.

When the Sith revealed themselves to Qui Gon on the sands of Tatooine, Sifo Dyas sensed the growing power of the elusive Sith Lord, and foresaw a great conflict that would ultimately tear the Republic apart. When Qui Gon and I escorted the Naboo queen back to her homeworld, Sifo Dyas and Dooku carefully constructed a view of what they felt was happening, that a Sith lord was manipulating the guilds of the Trade Federation into the beginnings of war.

Distraught over their conclusions, it was decided that Sifo Dyas would secretly meet with Kaminoan cloners and begin construction of an army that would be totally loyal to the republic and assist the Jedi in turning back the looming Sith threat. Dooku, with his in-depth knowledge of Sith artifacts, would seek out and hunt down the Sith Lord.

It was the death of my master, Qui Gon, at the hands of the Sith apprentice, Darth Maul, that sent Dooku over the edge. The death of his friend boiled over into an emotional search for the Sith

Master. Allowing his emotions to steer his course, he opened himself up to manipulation and control, and was lost to the seductive power of the Dark side, eventually becoming the Sith Lord's new apprentice.

The first act Dooku performed as a Sith was to return to the Jedi Temple, erase Kamino from the archives and murder Sifo Dyas, thereby erasing all evidence of the army that was being cultivated. Dooku lied to the council, saying that Syfo Dyas' death had been an accident, caused by a heated argument between them over Qui Gon and the state of the Republic.

Although the exact circumstances of the death were never revealed, Dooku was expelled from the Order.

It is important that you understand what led to the formation of what is now known as the Empire. Those who do not learn from history are destined to repeat it."

The image of Obi Wan flickered a bit, and he lowered his head, catching his breath and regaining his composure before continuing.

"The tools and stones you found in my home, when combined with the parts and instructions found on my workbench will allow you to create your own lightsaber. Yes, you have your father's, but part of the Jedi journey is crafting your own, as a final test. You will not need these items now, but should something happen to your father's blade, these items will take on immense value to you. If you take them with you, you run the risk of them being lost or captured. Leave them here in the cave and no one will find or bother them. When they are needed, you'll know just where they are.

This place, along with my home, are yours to do with as you see fit. They will serve you well should you need a temporary home here on Tatooine, far away from the reaches of Vader. You do not need to fear him coming here. He lost something of great value here, and will most likely never return. This holocron will activate when certain triggers are met, when you need me most. May the Force Be With You, young one." The Jedimaster smiled, and the hologram retracted into the cube, leaving Luke alone in the dark.

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Sand crunched on the flat, stony slab beneath my boots as I pushed against the cool metal of the curved handlebars. The swoop slid silently on its repulsor field as I guided it back into the shadows of the low, narrow slot in the stone wall of the canyon. When I felt it was sufficiently hidden, I turned my head to check the line of sight from here, and could not see the X-wing fighter. Propping my helmet on the saddle, I drew my blaster, and walked off with the locator in the other hand to find Kenobi's home.

The lighted blip on the small screen indicated that I was very close. I watched carefully for the rebel pilot as I climbed the rocks of the hillside, sweeping my blaster back and forth across the terrain. As I drew closer to the top of the ridge, I could see the top of a moisture 'vaporator sticking up into the cerulean sky. The stone outcroppings I climbed over were blistering from

their exposure to the blazing suns' glare all day. I felt the small rippling of the capillaries in my body glove opening to accept the cooled fluids from my backpack. Unfortunately, I wore no pack, and had no cool fluids to fill it with. I continued my climb, eventually arriving at a clearing on the hillside. I swept the immediate area for signs of life, both visually and with my scanner, but there were none to be found here. Placing the deactivated locator back on my belt, I crossed the sandy clearing to a small, time-weathered building situated just beyond the 'vaporator. It was square in shape with a center dome on top, and had an amazing view in one direction out into the Dune Sea, and down the canyon in the other.

As I entered the cool shade inside, I noticed there was one large room with supporting columns spaced throughout. It was subdivided into small living areas, with only one small hallway to the private bedchambers in the back. Sweat rolled down my face from the blistering heat outside, as I cautiously looked around. The old Jedi had certainly led a sparse existence. A single plate and cup sat neatly arranged near what appeared to be a food preparation area.

I lifted the lid on a chest and rifled through some articles of clothing but found nothing of interest. A sudden wind gust blew open the unlatched front door, slamming it into the stone wall behind. I whirled around, leveling my blaster at the opening, my heart racing. Only the wind entered. I lowered the weapon and looked around a bit more as I moved to close and latch the door.

I moved into the living space where there were several beautiful statues on a low table. The rebel's flight jacket lay beside a tan cloak on a nearby bench . . . he would definitely be returning, possibly at any time, I had to be careful. The more I thought about that, I decided that he could very well uncover valuable information. I was better served by observing, and allowing him to depart alive, thinking Kenobi's home was both undisturbed and a secure place, rather than killing him.

I looked around for a place to conceal myself, somewhere out of sight where I could scrutinize him. Memories of a game from my childhood swept over me, along with the very real, very rich smell of the large evergreen tree I used to hide in. It was my best hiding place, they never found me there. I smiled at the vivid recollection as the turned up corner of a small rug caught my eye. I walked over to it and knelt down, pulling the rug back, I exposed a hatch of some sort. Lifting it open revealed a small, dark, stone-walled room with steps leading down to a power generator. I descended into it, lowering the trap door over my head until only a narrow slit remained open; just barely enough for me to see through the fringe edges of the rug on top.

I sat in the darkness for some time, eyes closed, slowing my breathing and waiting for the rebel to return. I focused on being as still and quiet as possible. Suddenly, my eyes flew open at the sound of the opening door.

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Yané ran from the speeder across the tended grass courtyard atop one of the looming towers. She headed for a small, moss and vine-covered stone and block structure ahead that housed the

top of the stairwell that would wind them down to the surface. Han raced after her, drawing his weapon to be ready just in case, “Why did you land us up here?”

Her hand wrapped around the cool, metal handle on the door and she pulled hard, leaning her weight back to pull open the heavy entrance, “I could have set us down on the ground, but there is a key that unlocks access to the water tunnels, and another that sets the rotation of the waterway door.”

The Corellian followed as she stepped through the door and hurried down a spiral stone staircase. Bria’s necklace and pendant jumped wildly around her neck as she ran, “The huge circular doors rotate, revealing a cored opening in the door, which allows water to pass through for only three minutes until the rotation is complete, concealing the opening once more, and locking the retaining door again. It was designed to rotate open and stay open, diverting water from the river above to generate power. Because the system is now offline and non-functional, the waterway doors have been left in a mode that only allows a single, early-morning rotation per day to maintain the equipment. The key I need in this tower will allow us another rotation.”

Han nodded, glancing out a small window as they raced down the steps. The Naboo countryside was deceptively peaceful. There were no visible signs of troops here . . . yet.

Abruptly, Yané exited the stairs through an archway and raced through a dimly lit maze of tall shelves, each filled with scrolls and ancient texts. As he ran, Han noticed the stale smell of mildew and rotting flimsy, “What’s with all the old papers and books?”

She answered, turning a corner, not looking back to him, “It’s the Royal Archives. Historical papers, texts, treaties, doctrines and agreements from our history are stored and studied here.”

Han raised an eyebrow as he raced after her.

“Up ahead, we’re almost there” she said, approaching a large door. She wrapped her hands around a heavy metal ring that hung from the front of the massive wooden door, “I need your help!”

Han holstered his blaster and grabbed the ring alongside her, pulling as hard as they could. Slowly the door gave way and opened. It was dark inside, but she needed no light. Her memory was amazing, and she pictured the inside of the chamber in her mind from the last time she worked in here. Her hands ran over shadowy stacks of small boxes, containers and flimsy in the blackness until they came to lie on the small metal box she saw so clearly in her head.

She grabbed it and pushed past Han into the light, placing it on a table. Opening the lid revealed several bound stacks of flimsy along with schematics and plans. She moved these aside, revealing two medium sized keys, which she quickly lifted out of the box. “Come on, let’s go. We have to get to the courtyard below and follow the alleyway to the next tower.” She hurried away with Han following.

They raced back through the tall shelves to the stairwell and descended. The clattering of Han's boots on the stone steps echoed loudly as they finally reached the bottom. Yané led him out of the tower into the grassy courtyard. Stone columns flanked them on both sides, and as they headed along the grassy walkway toward the stone alleyway ahead, blaster fire erupted from across the courtyard, toppling a column to their right, the stone blocks falling to the ground in a pile. Han tried to find the source as he pushed Yané behind the rubble and drew his blaster, returning fire.

Several of his shots hit the top of a small stone wall, behind which he had seen at least one trooper. He saw the dome of the trooper's head begin to rise up again and discharged another blast, this one searing through the Impervium helmet between the eye lenses, cleaving the trooper's head inside. He fell like a stone, sprawled across the top of the wall as another of the Empire's finest stood and fired a repeating rifle at them. Han fired back, forcing the trooper to cover behind the stone barricade as he grabbed Yané's arm and ran toward the alley ahead, blasting with each step, covering their movements.

They raced down the narrow stone alley, Han watching behind them as they came to an intersection. The wall before them had a round window at street level and two rectangular ones above, with curved tops.

"The Pilot's quarters! Those are the Pilot's quarters." she said, getting her bearings. "This way! The secondary tunnel is located beneath them. Hurry!" She took off running down the narrow stone path to the right. "We aren't far from the Royal Hangar."

Blaster fire erupted once more from behind them, riddling the stone wall where they had been standing, shattering the round window as they turned the corner. The retired handmaiden raced up to a doorway in the stone building and pulled it open as several crimson and cobalt beams seared past them. Han turned and fired off several shots as Yané disappeared inside.

Several troop transports appeared overhead as he jumped up the steps, catching the door, and took out two pursuing troopers before pulling it closed behind him. "Cover your eyes" he yelled, turning his head. A bright red flash erupted in the darkness between his blaster and the door latch, fusing it together. "That oughta hold them for a while. Where's this tunnel? We've gotta get through before the boys in white catch up to us. Have you still got the keys?"

She nodded, holding them up, "Come on, it's this way".

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Outside, the ground troops bounded up the stairs, attempting to open the door as one of the transports landed in the alley behind them. "He's fused the lock. Blow the hinges!"

The troopers stepped back and all took aim at the hinges. "Now!"

They all opened fire simultaneously, blasting through the ancient door pinnings, dropping it from the hinges in a cloud of smoke. They raced over it into the darkness with the new reinforcements joining them now.

“This way!”

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“I can see where Bria got her fire” yelled Han as they stepped off the last of the stairs.

Yané smiled as she activated the door controls, sliding open the multiple layers of a blast door, “Her Father taught her to shoot, and both her Mother and I taught her to be strong, the rest was all her.” She stepped through into a cold, duracrete room. As soon as Solo was through, she activated the door controls. They slid closed behind her as she spoke, “There’s a long corridor over there. It was used as an access tunnel, for getting equipment in and out while the power plant was being built.”

She watched as the last of the multiple layers of the blast door came together, and locked it, “I hope this door holds.” She turned to look across to the tunnel Han was already looking into, “We’ll be exposed with no place to hide or take cover.”

A scowl crossed his face, “We sure will.”

The tunnel was wide enough to fly a snubship through and twice Chewie's height, with a curved ceiling.

He turned and blasted the door controls twice, metal parts from the blown control clanging on the floor, “C’mon. We need to get to the other end of this before they get through or we’re dead.” The pair took off running into the darkness of the passageway.

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Having successfully passed through the treacherous, chaotic asteroid field in the outer orbital fringe of the system with little damage, the rebel cruiser sailed smoothly toward the 6<sup>th</sup> and outermost planet of the Hoth system.

Under the ever watchful eyes of her bodyguards and personal aid, Alia, the leader of the rebel forces, Mon Mothma, returned to her seat as turbulence began to rattle the transport ship upon entry into the upper atmosphere. She peered out the port window as storm clouds far below raged across the ground with blizzard force, blasting fresh snow and ice across the frozen rivers, mountains and valleys on the wasteland of the planet below.

While the five planets closer to the Hoth sun were lifeless and primarily made up of toxic gases, Hoth VI was marginally hospitable for humans. Its axial tilt, orbital position and atmospheric makeup allowed life to exist, but was also cause for constant subzero temperatures. While the

daytime temperature high hovered around -32 degrees standard, at night, those temperatures often plunged as low as -60 degrees, with gale force wind chills far surpassing that.

As much as she hated to admit it, this location for a base might just be crazy enough to work. While Snowtrooper units were plentiful in the Imperial forces, even the Empire never bothered with an outpost here, and for good reason. Any minerals that might be found here could be found elsewhere across the galaxy without the environmental hassle.

Two heavily armed Y-wing escort ships flanked the slow-moving transport as it began its descent into the atmosphere, following the transmitted glide path route toward ground coordinates somewhere on the inhospitable surface below.

She turned away from the window, thoughts racing through her mind. Touching Alia's arm, she leaned in closer to whisper, "Has anyone heard from Garm Bel Iblis?"

The aid dropped her gaze and shook her head, "No, milady. Admiral Ackbar had a long meeting with him regarding his concerns for your leadership, but he has not been heard from since that time."

The rebel leader closed her eyes and leaned back into the seat cushions. She turned again to the window, looking out across the stars and planet below. "You know, his accusations are unfounded. I have no interest in removing Palpatine only to replace him with myself. Bail Organa was my counterpart, co-leadership for what has become the Alliance. His murder along with the loss of Alderaan was shocking and tragic to the Alliance as a whole as well as to me personally, and left me with few options. I took over leadership control of the rebellion in a move to unify it and hold it together, not to seize personal power, and certainly not to alienate anyone, least of all Garm Bel Iblis."

She turned to her aid and stared in her eyes as she spoke now, "I need you to know and believe that . . . feel that."

Alia replied, "I have known that from the start, and do not question your dedication or intentions."

Mon Mothma nodded slowly, smiling.

The crisp view outside the port window suddenly clouded over stark white, and the ship violently bucked as it descended into the heart of the storm's wrath.

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The newly-added rubber treads on the bottom of the fussy protocol 'droid's metallic feet fell silently on the duracrete planks of the hastily laid floor as he made his way through the rough ice corridor. Illuminators hung from wires wrapped around spikes that had been hammered into the ice walls to light the passage. Ahead, it opened into what was scheduled to become a central hangar for speeders and snub fighters.



These uneven walls of the narrow hallway had been carved from a solid wall of beautiful deep blue ice, and at any other time might have interested the easily-distracted golden 'droid, but none of this concerned him as he searched frantically for Princess Organa, muttering to himself, "If only R2 hadn't gone with master Luke. He would know where to find mistress Leia. Dear, oh dear, I can feel the oil in my joints thickening. Whoever had the brilliant idea for coming to an ice planet must have never . . . Princess Leia! Oh, thank the maker!"

The familiar image of the Princess stood several meters ahead of him reviewing plans for the hangar with the crew chief of the ice cutters. She heard Threepio approaching behind, but maintained her focus on the page, "This looks fine" she said, "but see if you can add a connecting corridor here to the command center, and small alcoves for the T-47 airspeeders we have on the way."

"Airspeeders?" questioned the crew chief. "Princess Leia I've worked with those Incom speeders before and in this environment . . ."

She cut him off as quickly as he had started, "Yes, I know, they aren't designed for this type of climate. I'm assured, though, that with slight modifications we can adapt them to work quite well."

The crew leader rolled up the plans and headed back toward several massive shearing machines and his crew, "Alright everybody, we've got a lot to get done, and there are some new changes to the design, gather 'round here so we can discuss them before we get started." The men climbed down out of the cutters as he spread the plans out on a small ice shelf.

Leia watched him go and then turned around, "Yes Threepio, what is it?"

"The transport ship is on final approach."

Leia looked away from the 'droid as she answered, "Mon Mothma. Threepio, have a mid-sized, heated troop transport dispatched to the landing coordinates to meet her and her staff. Inform the pilot to bring them here and escort them to my chambers. All other supplies can remain in the ship's hold until needed."

"Yes, mistress Leia."

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