

## Chapter 28 – The Taste of Truth

As the running Corellian and the Handmaiden came to the end of the man-made tunnel, the opening narrowed; the walls now those of a jagged, raw cave in the cliff side.

“This is the original cave, it’s not far now.” She smiled.

Faint echoes of raucous squawks and blaster fire erupted from behind them in the cave.

Han looked around as they hurriedly splashed through the shallow water and over irregular stones, “Good. They’re getting closer . . . and I think they just stomped through that nest of Peko-pekos we avoided.” He hurried over the stone floor, following her, “I thought this place was man-made for controlling water diversion, what’s with the cave all of a sudden?”

She paused, resting against an upward thrust stone in the floor, “Engineers left the last bit of it in its natural state so as not to interfere with the cliff wall behind the falls. Only one problem . . .”

He closed his eyes, “And that is?”

She paused, then continued “It leads to a sheer drop where it ends.”

He laughed in agony, slowly twisting away from her, “Ha ha ha, son of a . . .”

“There’s quite a bit of room between the cliff face and the actual falling water, though. We could climb down.” She offered.

Suddenly he turned back to her . . . a glint of mischief in his squinting eye and his face curled up in a grin that stretched from one ear to the other as he shook an index finger in the air, “That just might work”. He unclipped the comm from his belt and clicked it on once more, “Chewie, scrap that first plan, pal. I thought we were going to be coming out down closer to the platform.”

The Wook barked a response.

Han keyed his comm again, “I know you can do this, buddy. This is what we’re going to do. I want you to go open the top hatch . . .”

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A blast of white vapor blew from the shuttle’s release valves across the ramp. The Dark Lord slowed his pace slightly, taking the last steps off to the cobblestones of the lakeside courtyard. He had not been here since . . . well, those long ago days of his youth and innocence, when so many things had seemed to happen all at once; Qui-gon’s death, his introduction to Palpatine, becoming Obi-Wan’s padawan, and seeing his angel in her stunning white ceremonial gown . . . his angel.

The heart beneath his armor, squeezed in beside cybernetic respirators, ached more with each step he took. Even the air of this place weighed heavily on his shoulders, pressing down on his mechanical legs with a weight that threatened to crush him . . . again; haunting the very core of him with memories of those first, early days with her, those early feelings of his love for her; a child's love, but love nonetheless.

Smoke and dust lingered in the air here from the initial invasion. His troops had raced in on swoops and All-Terrain walkers dispersing the crowds from their tributes. Debris littered the ground surrounding the monuments. The bust of Queen Jamila had been toppled from its stone pillar among those of her Senators and lay in several pieces, a powdery mark stained the ground where it had fallen and split apart; her face cleaved down the center and across the forehead.

Vader stepped over the stone pieces, moving forward in search of the one that honored her predecessor, Queen Amidala.

In addition to the official tributes to past royalty, small private shrines, honoring those lost on Alderaan, littered the courtyard. Flickering lamps illuminated photos of, and letters to, loved ones lost. Flowers reverently positioned in memory of lives shattered alongside personal effects that had been carefully placed and arranged now lay in scattered disarray; all of them broken, painful reminders of where his twisting dark path had led him.

The near-silence of the courtyard was broken only by the cold sounds of his cycling, mechanical respirator sucking air in, and releasing with deep exhales. The daylight was fading and all but gone as he wound his way through the rubble searching for her. The broken, graffiti-covered bust of Senator Palpatine appeared, but he did not see his queen. Just as he began to fear her likeness had been destroyed, he saw the gentle lines of his beauty's face emerge from behind a curtain of smoke. The stone had captured her beauty with amazing detail; the graceful curve of her cheek; hair spilling over delicate shoulders; her long neck. The white stone carving captured her beauty, her spirit just as he remembered.

He stepped around the statue of Palpatine and moved closer. The last of the day's light revealed the subtle nuances and highlights of the polished stone bust as the man who had fallen from grace, right hand to the Emperor, destroyer of the Jedi and countless lives and worlds in his wake, bent his cybernetic leg and knelt among the flowers laid around her monument; knelt before the ghostly image of his lost beloved. The idea of her giving birth to their son in her last moments without him raced through his thoughts as his tired, helmeted head lowered before her timeless beauty.

It was in that heart-wrenching moment on his knee, with burning, damaged eyes that no longer formed tears that he connected the pieces together, realizing how his fears had been used against him all those years ago. Searching his thoughts deeper, it became clear that in those first hazy moments when he had asked about her with a new, enhanced voice that was not his own, and stepped awkwardly away from that ghastly operating table . . . that altar . . . that dark threshold he had crossed; Palpatine had lied to him about his wife's death, and his role in it.

The self-inflicted guilt and agony in that moment and every moment to follow was the skillful handiwork of his master, sculpted to be the perfect control mechanism for his new Sith apprentice.

His mind raced and the deeply raging Force currents contorting through and around him were agitated to the point of near illumination.

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The sound of rushing water had now grown much louder, and ahead, Han saw light from beyond the jagged cave mouth which, mere steps ahead, opened to a sheer drop down the cliff face. He and Yané walked as far as they could along the stones at the base of the cave walls, then Han stepped down into the shallow water, helping the handmaiden do the same. As they moved through the calf-deep water they could now see the last remnants of the fading daylight glowing from the far side of the furious downward-blasting wall of water ahead. A cool misty spray hung heavy in the air, escaping from the torrential waterfalls downpour. Yané tried to yell to Han, asking him how he planned to move ahead, but the roaring sound was so deafening she couldn't even hear her own words.

A rough wind, which raced down the cliff face, tugged at the Corellian pilot's hair and shirt violently as he held on tight to the rocks with one hand and leaned out to peer down the cliff. The rushing air was heavy with a fine mist. He felt it on his skin and tasted it as he whispered to himself, "Come on buddy".

As he did, the protruding front forks of the Millennium Falcon appeared, rising slowly up past the mouth of the cave. The jutting cockpit slid into view as his ship inched its way further up the cliff. The Wookiee, seated inside facing skyward, shook his head, bared his teeth and roared in the cockpit as he fought the straining controls to maintain this inverted, near hovering attitude. It took every ounce of his incredible strength and piloting skills to balance repulsor fields pushing to keep the 'Falcon away from the rocks of the cliff face yet not out far enough to be caught in the thundering power of the falls, and control the drive thrust to hold a semi-steady vertical position.

Even the straining roar of the Falcon's main drive engines were drowned out by the heart-pounding concussion of the falling water barricade which just barely skimmed and sprayed across the underbelly of the 'Falcon on the far side.

As the ship inched higher, the top hatch came into sight. As soon as he saw it opened and waiting, Solo turned and grabbed Yané, holding her ear close to his mouth as he yelled to be heard, motioning to the open hatch with his free hand, "We're going in there."

She looked around him, then nodded her head.

Chewie, straining to lean his head back and watch the top hatch as it moved into position just opposite them, stopped his climb, holding the ship steady as it slid into place.

Han held one arm as Yané stepped from the rocky cliff to the small opening. She half jumped and half fell into the small port, landing on the rungs of the internal ladder. Grabbing onto the rim of the opening, she turned herself around and began her descent into the ship. He watched her go as the ship drifted up and down. His first mate fought to hold her still. He held the comm tight in his hand, ready to give Chewie the OK once onboard.

Yané finally reached the bottom and Han reached out with his free hand grabbing the rim of the hatch opening. In an eruption of flashes, several crimson blaster bolts impacted the hull beside him, scorching the metal. He snapped his head around to see Stormtroopers advancing on him. He squeezed down on the comm as he dove headfirst into the open hatch port, “Chewie get us outta here now!”

Another round of fire pelted the hull as he pulled his feet inside and slapped the control panel, sealing the hatch.

Chewie howled, throwing several control levers straight forward. As he did, the front forks of the ship sharply pitched outward, falling away from the cliff, into the crashing water, which instantly flipped the ship over violently, jerking the controls from the Wookiees hands, sending them tumbling down the cliff side.

Yané was thrown across the floor into the bulkhead and Han, inside the ladder tunnel, fell one way toward the deck, then was flung back up into the upper hatch, then down again toward the deck, only to be thrown back into the hatch as the ship was rolled over and over, “OW! Chewie!”

The ground below was rising up fast as the plummeting freighter continued to roll. Finally the skilled Wookiee was able to get his bearings enough to time the firing of the main drive engines. In a momentary flash, the dark waters of the huge falls lit up a brilliant white-blue, and shipyard workers on the landing pad below, turned to watch as the *Millennium Falcon* burst out of the falling water just above them. Water sprayed from her gleaming hull across them, her main engines snarling like a singing buzz saw.

Luckily Chewie had judged correctly, throwing the ship out into the air, and not the other direction, accelerating into the cliff. He followed his initial instincts, setting an escape course toward the dense forests and open fields here below the falls, away from the direction of the capital city and the star destroyer stationed in the airspace just above it. Without warning, from among the dense trees below, several rounds of fire unexpectedly pummeled the ‘Falcons’ underbelly.

The Wook flipped the ship up on its side and came around hard right, taking more jarring fire. Amidst the foliage, he was able to see dozens of scattered Imperial all-terrain transport walkers, their guns tracking to lock on to the moving target. Without thinking, he immediately initiated a climb, away from the walkers, but immediately noted the faint, hazy outline of a second destroyer, high up in the atmosphere.

With bared teeth, he reluctantly banked away, rolling the 'Falcon over twice, climbing through an inverted arc that took them up and over the top of the falls heading toward Theed. He rolled the ship back to a normal attitude as he switched on the nav' computer and keyed in a destination code. His mind raced through the rapidly escalating situation. A destroyer down here, in-atmo, was a lot less threat than one that could quickly lock on, giving chase off-planet.

Han fell head-first out of the ladder tunnel to the deck plates with a solid, metallic thud; the comm in his hand skittering away across the metal panels on impact. Yané moved in quickly to help him up. In the cockpit, his co-pilot threw the ship up on one side as they banked away, avoiding a barrage of blaster canon fire coming from several all-terrain walkers, tearing over the waterfront plaza where, far below, Vader knelt on one knee in the middle of the crumbled remains of the memorials.

As the already angered Sith Lord raised his head, he saw the object of his search slip away yet again. The already aggravated and volatile Force currents boiling around him now violently exploded outward, blasting all flowers, memorials and debris away from where he knelt in the epicenter.

In an unleashing of rage, he threw himself to his feet, his cape and robes billowing in the wind as he drew his lightsaber, ignited it with an angry snap of his wrist, and threw himself at the bust of Palpatine, slashing the stone likeness to shreds with blurring, hacking strokes of the snarling blade. Smoke curled away from the pieces of molten stone now lying on the ground, as he regained his composure. His cycling mechanical respirator raggedly sucked air in, and released it with deep exhales.

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Above the sprawling gardens and courtyards of the Royal Palace complex, a dozen TIE fighters abruptly broke patrol formation as their lead ship unexpectedly splintered into a ball of expanding, superheated gases and vaporized debris. The blurred shape of the *Millennium Falcon* throttled up as it charged headlong through the shimmering fireball that had been its target; exploding from the licking flames, unpredictably pitching this way and that.

The broken, charred remains of the vanquished Imperial pilot had become entangled in the struts supporting the large radar dish mounted on the ship's upper hull. The '*Falcon* rolled over several times narrowly avoiding the deadly blasts of heavy fire now coming from the main guns of the Star Destroyer, *Intruder*, just ahead. As it did so, the body of the dead pilot worked itself free of the radar dish assembly, tumbled and slid back across the hull of the ship and was vaporized in a flash by the main drive engines, leaving nothing more than a brief streak of black smoke in the sky.

The scattering Imperial fighters streaked away from the disintegrated ship, and each other, in large sweeping arcs. Their adrenaline-pumped pilots pulled each of their ships around, abruptly changing direction and re-grouping into a ravenous pack, racing through the skies above Theed,

their twin Ion Engines howling like a hungry, animal symphony pursuing the fleeing *Millennium Falcon*.

Yané held her scarf pressed against the slice on Solo's scalp. Blood soaked the sheer cloth and ran down the side of his head. Somehow she had managed to drag him over from the stairwell and strap them both in at the gaming table before the rolling had begun again. Han reached back, pressing a wall-mounted comm unit which broadcast into the cockpit. "Chewie, turn on the grav-stabilizers!"

In the cockpit, the Wook looked up as he heard Solo's voice. He reached up to check the control lever, only to discover that the swinging chance cubes he had hung there had disengaged it. He quickly removed the dangling charms and re-activated the stabilizer. As he did so, the pursuing TIEs fired again, forcing him to roll away sharply. This time however, Yané and his captain would not be thrown around in the back of the ship, The Imperial fighters stuck to him closely as he rolled through the sky. Then he cut a hard left, breaking straight for the looming forward edge of the destroyer.

Chewie edged back on the throttle slightly, allowing the TIEs to get a bit closer as he skimmed over the hull of the *Intruder*, her cannons firing at him. The luminous, jade-colored energy bolts sizzled past, narrowly missing their mark as he adjusted the shield energy allocation forward. As the cannons squarely ahead fired again, he rocked the ship up on its side, allowing the blasts to blaze past, destroying two of the fighters on his tail. He veered suddenly, heading straight for another gun tower, rolling in a tight spiral as the fighter jocks on his tail fired, their attack streaming past, destroying the surface-mounted gun instead.

A panel indicator for the nav' computer began to flash and beep; the hyperspace route had finally been plotted. Another cannon quickly acquired the Corellian ship, blasting away. Chewie pulled back hard on the controls, throwing the *Falcon* into a steep climb as the blast slammed bluntly into the shields, rocking them violently. The TIEs clumsily attempted to follow, as the gun tower began spitting energy, tracking up away from the Destroyer's hull. The Wook, then threw the controls forward to center, stalling the drive engines, stopping all forward thrust and allowing the ship to slide into a full 180 degree rotation to the left. The TIEs all overshot him, flying past before realizing their error.

As soon as the grey, leading edge of the Destroyer's hull appeared against the black outside the cockpit window, Chewie slammed the controls forward with one hand, bringing the drive engines back online at maximum throttle, as he reallocated the shields to the rear with the other. There was a short blast of blue light from the main engines and the *Falcon* lunged toward the grey durasteel skin of the *Intruder*. The gun turret opened fire, spitting a non-stop barrage at the Corellian ship. As Chewie dove below the edge of the Destroyer, the blasts from the tracking gun turrets continued to follow, trailing repeated blasts into the skin of the Destroyer, searing holes through the durasteel of their own hull before stopping.

The second, orbiting destroyer was now moving into position to help. A flashing, yellow warning lamp blinked on the console in front of the Wook. He bared his teeth and growled angrily from far back in his throat. They were gaining, and readying their tractor beams.

Chewie rolled into a straight climb, heading for the edge of the atmosphere. The friction associated with a sudden acceleration to hyperspace here would incinerate the ship. As he aligned the ship with her pending nav' computer heading, a loud tone filled the cockpit, indicating all was set for the jump. Once they passed beyond the last fringes of atmo into the chill of space, his furry arms reached over for the three hyperdrive throttle levers. The two remaining TIEs were firing on their target as the *Millennium Falcon* suddenly accelerated into a blurred flash and was gone. The streaming, green energy bolts flung from the fighters now merely sizzled into the empty space left in her wake.

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A thick hazy veil of dust fell from the shelf above as Topolev threw open one of the numerous plastoid containers in the racks of the cache. Holder sneezed loudly once, then again and again in rapid succession. He wiped his face, then sneezed again a fourth time, clutching his chest. Danz spoke up, lightly touching his own chest briefly, then his forehead in a sweeping motion, "Gods of Eislely bless you" and continued working on the shelves across the aisle.

Topolev bent to one side and looked down to the lower shelf where Holder was, "You OK?"

Danz turned around to check on his new Sandtrooper brother, "What's wrong?"

The ex-Commando wheezed and clutched at his chest, "My lungs are burning."

Felth spoke up from across the room without turning his attention from the holo-viewer, "Carbon freeze . . . especially those of a long duration, create a heightened sensitivity in the lungs to dust and pollutants." Now pushing his chair back a bit, he turned to face the others. "The coughing and sneezing won't last long. The acquired sensitivity will go away in time, but based on how long you were in, I wouldn't expect it to be anytime soon."

Holder's breaths began to calm down as the dust dissipated and settled again. He looked up, then cocked his head around to Danz, "The Gods of Eislely?"

Danz looked back, "What?"

Topolev now peered over the shelf at Danz.

"Oh, you mean the Gods of Eislely thing?" said Danz. "Sorry, it's almost subconscious. It's something we said growing up as kids." He looked back at the others who were staring at him blankly now.

Topolev blurted out, "You grew up here?"

Danz burst out laughing, "Hell no! Eislely is a sacred temple complex where I grew up on Bestine IV, but . . . it *is* tied to this place. Colonists from Bestine came here almost a century ago in search of a new place to settle."

Topolev cocked his head and squinted his eyes in disbelief, “Really.”

“Yeah, really. You know that hotel in the middle of town, *The Dowager Queen*”

They nodded.

“That was their starship. When they crash landed here, Mos Espa was pretty much the only settlement in the region. The survivors of the crash built this city, originally calling it *Eisley*, for the sacred city back on Bestine. They added the prefix name *Mos* later to blend in with the already established Mos Espa and to keep with local naming traditions. They also built the capital city, *Bestine*.”

Topolev rested his arms on the edge of the plastoid container, “So, what is Bestine IV like? I’ve never been there.”

The lift mechanism in the adjacent room activated and rose to the upper level as Danz paused a moment, remembering his homeworld, “Well, most of it is covered with water. The little bit of land that is available, is very rugged. Volcanic islands mostly, not much more than mountains and beaches. It’s very beautiful, just not very hospitable. Our ancestors figured out long ago how to build on the cliffs and live in harmony with the jagged mountain spires.”

As the cargo lift descended back to their level, Topolev listened, slightly nodding in agreement, “Hmmm, sounds great. I could use some time by a lot of water. It must be hard coming from a place like that to a place like this!”

1265 stood in the doorway flanked on one side by Blade, and on the other by me, both with our helmets and packs off, perspiration gleaming on our faces. “I wish I was in a place like that right about now” said 1265. Blade wiped his face as he leaned against one of the racks, “Me too brother. That trip around the spaceport was hotter than flying through the five fire rings of Fornax!”

Felth swiveled his chair around to face the group, “I just got a message from Rogue. It was a bit garbled, and broke off before he was finished. Anybody else get it?” He glanced around the small room, but everyone shook their heads no. “I guess I’ll go topside and see if I can get better reception. This bunker must have some shielding in place.”

Blade whipped his head around as Felth walked through the door to the lift, “Where is Rogue anyway?”

Felth looked back over his shoulder as he walked past them out of the room, “He and 0600 went over to Darklighter Water . . . something about Tusken unrest or a break-in or something.”

Holder, now sitting on one of the lower shelves, looked up as they entered, “Hey Deck, how’d the swoop do?”



I crossed the floor, stepping down the one step into the slightly recessed area in the center of the room, "It worked well . . . smooth and pretty strong -"

He interrupted me, "You were gone a long time." Blade took note of the comment, his eyes darted over to me.

"Yeah, well I had to stop out in the dunes and make a few adjustments. It took a little while to locate the problem."

"Think you got it all worked out now?" asked Holder.

"I think so." I replied.

Etz shot a glance to Holder, "You feeling any better now?"

"What's wrong with him?" I asked, looking back over to the Commando.

"Nothing a twenty year sentence inside a metal slab didn't give him." said Danz.

"Yeah, it's a little easier to breathe now." Holder replied.

Topolev pulled out a handful of items from the plastoid container he was leaning on and began sifting through them. Something on one of the items in his hands caught Holder's eye, and he stood abruptly, grabbing one of the holo cards from Topolev's hand.

"Hey!" said Topolev as the other items fell away to the metal, grid of the floor below.

Everyone turned toward the two, watching.

The small black and white logo on the upper right-hand corner was exactly what he thought he had seen; the dark circular center, the ring of outward facing rays. Small flashing images and sporadic bursts of rapidly streaming and disjointed incomplete memories flooded in from the still-murky recesses of his mind as creases of concern furrowed his brow, perspiration forming.

His mouth moved slowly, as if speaking to himself only, carefully forming whispered words that gave substance to the revelation he was having.

"Black Sun."

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