

## Chapter 29 – Echoes From the Past

With her face pressed against it, she could see, if not believe, that on the opposite side of the transparisteel of her third story window, life went on. Her breath fogged a small portion of it as she took notice of the sun losing its firm hold on the afternoon and lazily slipping into early evening. Across the courtyard, a stand of trees swayed gently in the wind. Straight down on the walkway below, several pieces of trash caught up in small whirlwind spun in tight circles, dancing on the vortex of air. She watched it spin uncontrollably, like her life, until the wind calmed and the trash settled once again to the ground.

Staring blankly out what remained of the day, Toryn Farr drew in a deep breath, followed by a labored exhale, as if it hurt to do so. There was no emotion, no expression and no reserves within to draw from. What day it was she didn't know, and didn't really care. She had stopped caring and lost track of what, where and when today and now was.

Tears gathered, welling along the lower lid as her green eyes stared blankly at the outside world. Nothing held meaning. The wrenching heartache in her chest felt as if it would drain the very life from her, emptying through the gaping hollow in her heart. So many people had been lost. In her mind, she pictured her family and friends, going about their business, as the entire planet was suddenly ripped apart in a blinding flash. Everyone and every place she had ever known . . . all vaporized in an instant.

Tears finally fell, trailing down her cheeks. The only thing surpassing the bottomless ache and despair was the very primal, burning human need to find a way of striking back at the Empire. Through the pain and depression, a vision was coming into focus. She now knew what her direction was, what path had been laid out before her. She would heal herself here and now, and seek out the growing rebel alliance. In the wake of this very public, horrific display, she would not be the only one looking for a way to serve against the Empire.

It was sheer chance that she had been en route to nearby Talasea when Alderaan was destroyed. She wondered why that was. Why had she been spared? Her mind raced with too many thoughts; more than she could listen to all at once. Of them, none had been of suicide, but the attendants monitored her every move and came by to check her regularly. No, she would not take her own life. If her life was to be lost, it would be lost taking as many Imperials as possible with her. She pulled off the wrap that had been draped around her shoulders and stepped over to the intercom beside the door; she pressed the CALL button. A moment passed and a voice came on the line, "Yes Miss Farr?"

She composed herself and lied into the screened area. "I'm feeling quite a bit better now. I've been here long enough, and am ready to be released."

\* \* \*

Unable to sleep, Carlist Rieekan quietly walked the darkened ice halls of the steadily enlarging Rebel Base under his command. He mentally took stock of cargo crates and equipment as he passed by in the dim corridors. Even in the still, quiet of the early morning hour, the energy in the air was as palpable as the chill. All who had come together here to fight for freedom now had

a common, more imminent direction. Survival.

It was his responsibility for their survival that kept sleep elusive. Much of the equipment from Yavin IV had been salvaged and would be put to use here. He nodded silently to the armed guard he passed as he turned and stepped through sliding blast doors into the main ground-level hangar. The pain in his knee was worse here, in all this cold and he stopped to rub the stiffening joint a bit before continuing on.

The battle-worn X-wing fighters of Rogue Squadron lined the left wall; each of them individual, distinctive and unique, like the pilots who flew them. Far too many of both had been lost in the Battle of Yavin. Those ships and pilots that had returned to base safely, or limping and shattered, now led the squadron. The wall of the right side of the hangar sported only empty alcoves waiting to house each of the many Incom T-47 airspeeders on order.

Shaking his head in frustration, he crossed through the majestic silence of the cavernous room, heading for the other side, watching the icy ground below through his fogging breath. Even the simplest of purchases seemed to take forever to complete. Many layers of people had to be in place to buffer the manufacturers from their true customer. At this stage of the game they couldn't be too careful.

He noted the jaggedly cut openings for the turbo lift cluster, and walked over to inspect them. There were two small lifts for personnel, and a much larger one for moving small ships and supplies to what would become the lower levels of the base. Placing a gloved hand on the ice of the rough door frame, he leaned out, taking a look down. Twenty meters below, an ice cutter sat motionless at what was currently the bottom of the shaft. It silently waited for its operator and the task of burrowing ever deeper into the solid ice.

As he pulled his head back out of the shaft and walked out into one of the many hallways snaking through the ice, he thought of the reactor that would soon reside far below. The base itself would require a huge power generator to be located somewhere jut outside the ice fortress. The reactor that would go below was needed to power the two V-150 Anti-Orbital Ion Cannons they had "liberated" from the Empire. The Intelligence had been absolutely accurate, and they had been very, very lucky. A smile crossed his face as he thought of the strike team that hijacked the Imperial transport ship just outside the Kuat Drive Yards.

A second team had been working on the reactor issue. Scoring free Ion Cannons was great, but if you didn't have a power source, they were all so much durasteel and permacite.

In the wake of Alderaan's destruction, many ships were destroyed or damaged as a result of the new, uncharted debris field. Shortly after securing the cannons, the intelligence sources located a damaged and abandoned Praetor-class battle cruiser adrift amidst the asteroid field which was slated for salvage. With the help of multiple technical teams, the ships' reactors had been removed for the sole purpose of powering the new Cannons.

He would feel much better once their defenses were up and running. Having Mon Mothma present was a huge boost for the morale of the troops, but a huge security risk at the same time.

Keeping the majority of Alliance command constantly moving on the ships of the fleet was the best idea for now. Her being in one place was risky.

The dark corridor he was in finally emptied into a huge natural cave in which several transport ships floated on their repulsors. He made his way to the command ship and entered through a port in its belly. As he did, he saw his aide rushing toward him.

“General, I’ve been looking for you.”

“What’s wrong?” asked Rieekan.

“Nothing immediate, sir, but we received a piece of intelligence from one of our Bothan spies that you need to see.”

The aide produced a datapad. He entered a security code, opened the image and handed the pad over. “Apparently we didn’t get everyone we had hoped at the Battle of Yavin.”

Rieekan looked down at the image of Vader’s damaged ship being guarded and undergoing repairs.

“Damn.”

\* \* \*

*Through thick fog that saturated the jungle-like vegetation around them as well as any exposed skin, Luke and Leia pushed onward through the darkness. As they passed through a dense twenty foot tall barrier of thick grasses, they found themselves stepping out onto gridded durasteel plates lining the main street of a small collection of buildings.*

*Luke grabbed Leia around the waist, covered her mouth and shoved her back into the thick grass, a finger to his lips, motioning for her to be quiet. A second later, the dark form of a man wandered past them, staggering a bit. His boot landed unevenly on the edge of the durasteel plate, half on and half off, and he stumbled and fell into the thick mud of the street.*

*The man, now laughing at himself for falling, wore a heavy jumpsuit. He picked himself up, wiping at the mud a bit before giving up and wandering off into the night.*

*When he had been gone some time, Luke loosened his grip on the Princess and uncovered her mouth. “That was close.”*

*She rubbed her mouth and adjusted her clothing. “That guy’s a miner of some sort. Did you see his suit? Standard issue mining gear.”*

*Luke glanced over to her. “Spending a lot of time in the mines, Princess?”*

*She threw a handful of the mud at him, which he managed to duck away from. "My father took me on trips when I was a little girl. He had business dealings with many mining colonies across the galaxy, and those are standard mining pressure suits."*

*Luke looked down the deserted street as he rolled her comment over in his head. "I wonder what they're mining here, on Mimban?"*

With a start, Luke awoke in the cockpit of his fighter. Through the canopy, he saw the swirling multi-colored vortex of hyperspace streak by. With R2 in control of the hyperspace jump, and the whistling whine of the engines he must have dropped off to sleep. His little astromech gave a whistle through the comm and sent a message to the screen on the panel before him. Luke rubbed his eyes and looked at the small display.

### **On Course - Approaching the Hoth System**

The details of his dream were already slipping away, and he had to fight to recall even the smallest of things about it. "Mimban? Why would I dream about Mimban?"

As he pondered the bizarre dream, R2 reverted to sub-light speed. As the ship slowed to normal space, Luke saw a band of asteroids orbiting ahead, with several planets beyond.

R2 dispatched another message:

**Asteroid field course plotted.  
Scanning assigned frequencies for Echo Base signal**

A tone sounded in the cockpit and another panel winked on showing a course leading to the sixth planet in the system as well as a scrolling loop of the ground coordinates.

Luke yawned. "R2, get us through the asteroids, and then I'll take it back on manual for the approach."

The little 'droid beeped several times as the snub fighter raced into the asteroids.

\* \* \*

Buried deeply in the bowels of Imperial Center, Emperor Palpatine, his ravaged face obscured by the deep hood of his deathly black robes, slowly moved along a lengthy, secured corridor flanked by his two most trusted Imperial Guards.

As he neared the end, both crimson-armored guards stepped to the side, shouldering their Force pikes, and assumed flanking sentry positions at either side of the locked blast door as they had done many times before.

The warped and bent figure of the Emperor entered a private code and straightened up a bit as the heavy doors slid open. He stepped through into the musty air of the darkness beyond, leaving his guards behind as the doors slipped shut. Lights flickered on as he entered the large room; the air here was still, unmoving as the air of a tomb. There was absolute silence.

He slowly made his way across the illuminated frosted-white floor, moving this way and that between numerous suspended carbonite slabs that made up his garden. Silently he moved past the many grotesque metallic faces, frozen in silent screams of anguish, pain, surprise and disbelief and made his way to the throne situated in the center of the room. It was here that he came to meditate, ruminate and peer into the murkiness of the future. He sat slowly into the low, swiveling chair and took in a breath, closing his eyes. Everything was proceeding as he had foreseen.

Lord Vader had once been one of the most powerful Jedi that ever lived, but with his defeat on Mustafar, and subsequent surgeries to replace human limbs with cybernetic appendages, his grasp on the Force had been diminished. The short-lived time he spent in those first few hours as Lord Vader were the heady, power-filled moments that Palpatine had envisioned for him.

He knew now that while Lord Vader was indeed still powerful, there was another that would eventually take his place. One whose existence he had already sensed buried deep within in his Sith apprentice.

This would take careful manipulation, but if played properly, Lord Vader would believe he had concealed his feelings for his son, and eventually, young Luke would be the powerful apprentice Palpatine had hoped for in Vader. The Dark Lord must not yet be allowed to know that he was aware of Skywalker's existence. That would come soon enough. For now, Vader must be the one to relentlessly dispatch probes and tear the galaxy apart, tirelessly searching for his son, all the while believing that one day they might destroy his master and rule the galaxy together.

As the hideously disfigured Emperor opened his eyes, he pressed a small switch in the armrest of the throne. The electric charge in the frost-white electrostatic floor suddenly fell away, and the thick transparisteel panels became clear. Palpatine stood, taking a few steps forward, peering down through to the uneven, rocky floor beneath. It was littered with Jedi corpses as far as the eye could see. Every Jedi that had been rounded up and executed by his men and bounty hunters through the years had been brought here. It was an amazing rush for him to peer down at them, literally lying vanquished beneath him.

An evil smile crept into the corners of his mouth, exposing his rotting teeth, as he wandered this way and that, surveying the price they had paid for their lack of vision

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Both Yané and his first mate slept in the two crew bunks as Solo monitored their flight path from the relative comfort of the pilot's seat. He adjusted the course heading slightly to avoid the wide band of dense asteroids ahead. The muffled roar of the 'Falcon's engines was usually a

comforting sound for him, but did little to reassure him as they entered the Hoth system. He glanced to the side, out the cockpit window.

There was now enough money now to pay off the Hutt, and he was anxious to do so. He knew Jabba. He wasn't patient. There would be bounty hunters and lots of them, along with all manner of unpleasant things awaiting him if he didn't make the payoff soon. His words to Luke echoed in his ears. "What good's a reward if you ain't around to use it?"

The one thing that calmed him at all was the fact that he was headed for a rendezvous on a planet that was about as far away from hospitable as he could imagine. Bounty hunters would be looking for him in his familiar haunts along the established trade routes that stretched from one side of the galaxy to the other. Never in a million years would they even think to look on Hoth.

After his involvement at Yavin, and whether or not he believed in their cause or was just intrigued by a beautiful Princess, he was now definitely on the Imperial radar, most likely with a death mark on both his and Chewbacca's heads. For the moment, it seemed, Jabba was the least of his immediate worries.

They would have to lay low for a while, help out if they could, and stay hidden among the rebels until he could figure out a way to get the money to Jabba without getting himself killed along the way. Maybe he'd be able to get some time with her worshipfulness. He wasn't positive, but he felt deep down that although she wouldn't admit it, she liked him, in a perverse, cat and mouse, moth to the flame kind of way.

There was always something.

An amber indicator on the panel winked intermittently, showing that they were in the upper fringes of the atmosphere on Hoth 6. He reached up to the overhead control panels and switched on the beacon responder, the repulsors and hull de-ionization as he took the forward and lateral controls in his hands, flying his custom ship down toward the darkened surface rendezvous coordinates. The Hoth star was on the far side of the planet; it was early morning on the ground as they raced through the rocking winds. The metal skin of the ship groaned as the extremely cold air clashed with the heat of their re-entry.

Han leveled off just shy of the ground, skimming along the snowy, frozen landscape beneath. He flew by instruments now, as it was too hard, even with the forward floodlights on, to make out where the ground was. Just ahead on the port side, a small meteor with a crimson tail flashed by, slamming into the icy ground beneath.

Chewbacca wandered into the cockpit with a small growl, settling sleepily in the co-pilot's chair and pulling on his headset. He tried to raise the base communications officer as he stretched his arms out overhead. He grunted at Solo as the base acknowledged their approach. Yané walked in a moment later, quietly slipping into the seat behind Solo's and pulling a wrap around her shoulders as she peered out into the darkness and the ice-covered ground below.

From the ground, a rebel scout rider, out on his morning patrol, reined his Tauntaun mount to a stop as he monitored the base-to-ship communications and silently watched the warm glow of the Millennium Falcon's engines slip slowly by in the frigid darkness.

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Everyone in the room was silent for a moment as Holder stared off blankly into space.

"Black Sun?" asked Topolev.

Holder nodded slowly, still staring at the logo. "Yeah."

Topolev took the datacard from Holder's hand, examining it as Etz and Danz moved closer to look also. "I've heard of them, but what's the big deal if your squad had dealings with them? They're into everything, legal and otherwise. Given the smugglers and spacers that hang around here, it's not all that surprising they would be on Tatooine."

Holder was in a bit of a daze. Memories were flashing by so quickly he couldn't seem to get them to gel into a cohesive thought. He closed his eyes. "Yeah, I know. But there's more to it than just a deal, I just can't put my finger on what it is yet. Were there any other cards in there marked Black Sun?"

Topolev looked back into the container, reaching a hand down inside, sifting through the few cards at the bottom of the bin. "No. That looks like the only one."

"Let me see it again?" Holder asked.

Topolev handed it over.

He took the small card between his thumb and index finger and walked over to the holo card viewer where Felth had been sitting. He inserted it in the reader slot and waited for the automatic index scan to finish. A moment passed and the Black Sun logo finally flashed up on the small screen. As it faded away, the first page of what looked like a business invoice began to appear on the screen, and then froze, pixelating into cubes; the image jumping and stuttering.

Topolev had dumped the last of the items in the container out on the shelf and picked through them, and was now glancing over to Holder. "Is there anything interesting on it? Anything that jogs your memory?"

Holder grabbed the protruding edge of the card and wiggled it a bit in the slot to make sure it was properly seated, "Looks like it's either corrupted or damaged. I can't see much." He stared at the flickering screen, trying to make out something, anything. He pulled the card out of the slot, rubbed the strip of metallic contacts, looked them over closely, and slid the card back into the reader.

Blade and I walked over to stand beside him, watching the screen. The others in the room followed, hoping to perhaps be able to make out anything intelligible.

The index scan ran a second time and the Black Sun logo appeared again. Once again, as the page appeared, it froze; pixelating into distorted cubes. Blade leaned forward, touching the lower portion of the screen with his gloved hand, "It looks like this part says something about a project bid of some kind."

The lift out in the hallway began its' descent down to where we were as Etz noted, "This area at the top shows the recipients." He leaned even closer. "That first name looks like Masall or Matall, but the rest of it is garbled."

"Matalla the Hutt." said Holder, calmly and quite matter-of-factly.

"Matalla the Hutt?" asked 1265.

Holder nodded slowly. "Yup. I have no recollection of who that is yet, or why I remember it, but it's significant. I can feel it." The rest of us exchanged silent glances as Holder continued staring at the flickering name on the screen.

Just then, Felth stepped through the door, "Hey. We've got to get moving. Rogue's message said he needs us all out at Darklighter Water. There's been an incident. A body was found near one of their perimeter condensers with multiple stab wounds to the abdomen."

Etz rolled his eyes, "Why does he need all of us?"

Ddraig appeared in the doorway and stepped up beside Felth, "There's a murdered body, but there' no blood. It was deliberately moved and placed there."

I shot a glance to Topolev, who was already climbing down off the racks, "Can you get the transport fired up?"

He nodded, "Already on my way."

Blade pushed past me heading for the lift, "OK, let's get our gear. Topolev, we'll meet you out back. Etz, comm over to 4120 and Falker at the Dowager Queen working that domestic call. Let them know where we're going"

"I'm on it" replied Etz. "4120, do you copy . . ."

Danz slapped a hand on Holder's shoulder as the others filed out to the lift, "You coming?"

Holder looked up at him, then away at the dingy stone wall. "Yeah. It's been a while, but it'll just take a second to gear up."



\* \* \*

Just outside the entrance to the ice hangar, in the darkest, still hour of the pre-dawn, Luke Skywalker sat cross-legged on the deck of one of the snow-covered ice diggers. He was one of only a handful awake at this hour. Security guards monitored every entrance to the base and several mounted riders patrolled the perimeter.

Despite the bite of the cold, beads of perspiration formed across his brow as he concentrated intensely with eyes closed, listening to the calm voice emanating from the small holocron in his lap, "Feel the shape, texture and energy of each object. Now feel the energy in every particle of the air and the ground, as well as that of your own body. Remember to breathe, young one." The image of a young Obi-Wan flickered above the small cube.

The boy took in a small breath, eyes clenched shut.

The crisp morning air became unnaturally still as the flurry of falling and blowing snowflakes swirling around him halted suddenly in midair, hanging on all sides. They sparkled and glistened in the brilliant moonlight of the morning, hanging in the clear air as Luke opened his eyes slightly. He closed them again as he reached out with the Force, feeling each flake with his mind.

A solid roof of snow was now collecting above him, as the still-falling snow began piling up on top of the small space he had rendered stationary. The weight of the collecting flakes began to increase. It pressed against his fledgling Force energy, increasing with intensity, like additional weight testing the strength of a tiring muscle. He took another breath as the hovering flakes began to tremble in the air. Clenching his teeth, he pressed outward and upward with all of his Force energy. The Midichlorians in his veins burned as he reached out through them to feel and manipulate this tiny portion of the Force.

It was at that moment that the Corellian stock light freighter appeared out of the snowy darkness, passing by on its way to rendezvous with the other ships of the fleet.

The suspended snowflakes and the collected layer of snow above suddenly came falling down over him as Luke lost concentration. He brushed the loose snow off his head and out from around his collar as his eyes followed the bluish white light of the engines on Han Solo's *Millennium Falcon*.

"That's another one I owe you" he muttered.

\* \* \*

There was a crowd of shabbily dressed, weather-worn men and women pushing and shoving around the base of a lone 'vaporator out by the garage as we drew closer to the main building at Darklighter Water.

Topolev slowed the transport to a smooth stop, and we all jumped down from the open tailboard. Holder stood behind me, looking over at the small assembled group as he adjusted his very dated and ill-fitting commando armor on his now-smaller frame. I stopped a condenser mechanic walking by to ask about the crowd. "What's their story?"

He looked over to them, then back to me. "Them? They're outcasts, vagrants. They live in the caves over there beyond the ridge" he said, squinting and pointing "in *Beggar's Canyon*. They have no money and need water, so old man Darklighter lets them work small day jobs in exchange for it."

Some movement behind me caught his eye, and he looked away for just a moment, then back to me again. "Sorry, I have to get to work." And he walked away, throwing a heavy tool belt over his shoulder.

As he did, Holder and I turned to see what his distraction had been. Darklighter and a small entourage were descending a steep set of stairs from the main house. It was a sprawling, bleached-white complex of buildings in sharp contrast against the dark blue sky.

Rogue stepped out in front of us as Huff Darklighter waved off his followers and closed the distance between the bottom step and us. "Thank you for coming so quickly. One of my workers discovered the body when he went out to reset an alarm on the condenser."

"You said it's not one of your men?" He nodded his helmet slightly as the tiny speakers issued a slight burst of static.

Now it was Huff's turn to nod, "That's right."

"One of them?" asked Rogue, turning and dipping his head in the direction of the crowd collecting water.

Huff shook his head, and turned to move away from the main building with Rogue following. "No, it's not one of them. Not one I've ever seen anyway."

The rest of us followed a few steps behind, keeping an eye on the vagrants and Darklighter's men.

"We'll need to see the body."

Huff nodded. "Of course. It's been undisturbed, and is being watched where it was found at the condenser out near the perimeter of our collection fields."

“We have plenty of room in our transport, if you’ll just have one of your men help with the navigation.”

Topolev turned and double-timed it back to the transport. The rest of us followed, with two of Darklighter’s men joining us.

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The main buildings of Darklighter water had long since disappeared beyond the rippling waves of heat along the horizon as Topolev finally let up on the thrust and steered us toward the next condenser.

With the afternoon now rapidly fading, we all jumped from the tailboard of the slowing transport.

Huff Darklighter and his men stepped down once it had come to a full stop. As he approached Rogue he turned and spoke to them. “Vehuji, Hessio. Show them.”

A slight wind blew a light haze of sand across the ground as the two men walked ahead toward the ‘vaporator. Both wore coverall jumpsuits bearing the Darklighter Water company logo. One had black hair, the other brown. Rogue, 0600 and 4120 followed as Topolev stepped down to the sand, joining the rest of us.

Vehuji and Hessio, now a good ten meters ahead of the group, reached the draped body first. The man standing guard stepped back a few paces as Darklighter, Rogue and 4120 approached. Vehuji and Hessio were both now kneeling in the sand in the long shadow of the condenser. They gently pulled back the covering, exposing the victim.

The sprawled body was face down, and that of a simple man wearing loose-fitting desert clothing common to the region. A bloody stain scarred the cloth wraps. He wore a hood and face drape in an attempt to block exposure to the damaging suns rays.

Darklighter nodded, "Vehuji?"

The black-haired man beside the body reached down under and rolled the corpse over onto its back, then pulled aside the face drape. Although closed, the victim’s eyes were noticeably deep-set and recessed. He had a leathery, weather-worn face full of pronounced creases, and a full, snow-white beard. His wrists had each been tied with leather straps and his arms crisscrossed over his impaled belly. The straps continued from each wrist around behind him and were tied tightly in back to the strap from the other wrist.

4120 dropped to one knee in the sand to get a closer look. He pulled back the face wraps a bit more, revealing an old, healed scar that ran from the man’s ear down across his neck to the collarbone on the opposite side. It was a horrible looking thing, from what must have been an equally horrible injury.

He inspected the stains on the loose clothing just below the old man's rib cage. They indicated the location where the stabbing thrusts had been repeatedly plunged through the victim's abdomen.

Vehuji had been looking at the man's belt. "All of his belt pouches are open and empty. Whoever did this removed any identification. That doesn't sound like a Tusken Raider."

Rogue knelt down beside the body, noting the injuries. "These do look like they could be Gaffi stick thrust wounds . . . but Tusken wouldn't bother to move bodies."

He reached out, gently rolling the head to one side as he examined the man's face, "Damn that's a mean scar. I'd love to know the story behind how he got that one!"

The rest of us were standing behind, gathered in a group looking down at the unfortunate victim. Holder was beside me still working on adjusting a stubborn strap when he glanced over and caught sight of the old man's face. "Let me see that scar?"

Rogue turned his head to Holder and stood, moving to one side.

Holder bent down, dropping to one knee, his eyes staring intently. He reached out with his finger and traced the path of the scar from the ear to the collarbone across the wrinkled old skin. "Can you untie him? I need to see his left hand."

Vehuji nodded as he went to work on the knot of leather.

Holder was perspiring a bit more than the rest of us as he leaned a little closer, and cut his eyes to 4120. "If I'm right about this, he's missing the index finger from his left hand."

The knot finally came loose, and Vehuji unwrapped the bindings from both hands. "There's a scar on his left hand across the base of the index finger, but it's still intact."

Holder reached out and touched the finger, then grabbed the skin of the digit tight and yanked hard away from the hand. In a flurry of movement, 4120 grabbed holder's wrist and Rogue grabbed his shoulder struggling with him. "What the hell are you doing?"

There was a horrible ripping sound as the skin tore at the scar line, and slipped off the finger. All three fell back into the sand, still gripping Holder. In the fiery glow of the late Tatooine afternoon, the detached skin revealed a gleaming mechanical prosthetic finger sticking out of the weathered hand.

Rogue and 4120 let go of the Commando and stared at the hand.

Holder's eyes grew wide.

"Watcher!"

\* \* \*

Earlier in the day, Toryn Farr had wandered aimlessly through the city on Talasea for some time trying to locate a likely rebel contact and had little luck. In a moment of doubt, just as she began to fear she would never make the contacts needed, a flyer for a protest had blown across her path on the street. COME PROTEST ALDERAAN!! had been printed in bold across the top of the flimsy sheet.

In the dark evening air, she clutched the folded flier in her hand as she moved through the gathered masses. The huge crowd now moved as one undulating entity. It flowed like running water as they tried to avoid the sudden flurry of uncoiling blue-ringed stun rays and tear gas fired by several squads of Stormtroopers that poured out of an adjacent alley in full riot gear. Toryn, in the middle of everything, turned and ran with the crowd.

Coming tonight had been a long shot, but she hoped to find someone to connect her with the Rebellion; a contact, a beginning, a stepping off point to begin her journey. She vehemently protested Alderaan's destruction and figured kindred spirits, if not rebels, would be present tonight.

Crimson blaster fire exploded out of the crowd now, firing back at the troopers, dropping several of them to the ground. The crowd in the darkened square erupted in a frenzy of screaming people scattering in all directions, dropping their lanterns and signs. The stakes had just been raised. One of the Stormtroopers fired up his backpack in the middle of the crowd, lifted several meters into the night air and began firing indiscriminately into the crowd with a repeating rifle. Those who were hit fell and were trampled by the stampeding crowd.

In the violent pushing and shoving of the bodies, Toryn felt someone grab her wrist, pulling her out of the way just as a volley of blaster fire took out several people where she had been standing. She pushed a woman out of her way as she fought to see who had grabbed her only to see . . . no one. Looking quickly down to her hand and saw a young boy pleading with his frightened face and eyes for her to continue following him out of the square.

A blaster bolt sizzled past, and the man running behind her was hit in the shoulder, falling with all his weight into her. He grabbed at her shoulders and clothing, trying to keep himself on his feet. She was terrified as she looked back at him and the smoking blaster in his hand. Her terror quickly shifted to resolve as several more blasts burned by. Toryn reached down, grabbed the wounded man's good arm, threw it around her neck and lifted him up, grabbed his blaster and ran with her added burden as best she could, following the boy.

Suddenly, from out of the sky, a trooper with a backpack landed in front of the running child, his weapon drawn. The running boy skidded to a stop, falling down and backpedaling on the ground, looking up in terror at the stormtrooper. Without thinking, Toryn raised the blaster in her free hand and squeezed the trigger several times, blasting the trooper dead center in the chest, throwing him off his feet to the ground. Smoke curled from his chest as she moved forward to help the boy up.

They quickly made a sharp turn into a darkened side street just as a blaster bolt crashed into the corner of the building, shattering it and spewing dust and debris across their backs. They ran, making their way down the winding street, until the boy beckoned for them to follow him into a tavern. He pushed open the heavy door and disappeared inside as the injured man finally lost consciousness, his weight now pulling harder on Toryn, threatening to pull them both down to the street.

She fought to drag him closer to the door as two men appeared in the opening and hurried over to help. They lifted his weight from her, and rushed Toryn inside, quickly closing the door behind. It was a small place, with only one patron quietly sitting at a table with his drink. As he saw them burst through the door, he jumped to his feet and hurried ahead of them, opening the door to the back room.

The boy raced back to the front door, locking it as the bartender shut off the lights and hushed the group, "SHHHH! Don't make a sound."

Toryn, the wounded man and the others slipped into the back room followed by the boy. The bartender now stood at the front door, his ear pressed to it listening. He heard the clambering footsteps of others fleeing the square as they raced down the street and the ZING of several blaster bolts sizzling past. Then, there were a few moments of silence followed by the clattering of the trooper boots, running after them.

"They went that way. Move it!"

A short burst of blaster fire cut the silence of the street outside.

"They're getting away. Squad two, move in. We're going to corner them two blocks over, in the alley. Roger that. Coordinate efforts to . . . ."

The sounds began to fade, and finally silence returned on the dark street outside.

The bartender stepped cautiously away from the door and walked behind the bar into the back room. The boy sat watching the three men as they worked in flickering candlelight on the injury. Toryn sat in the corner, shaking and looking down at the blaster now cradled in her lap. "When will this kind of thing stop?"

The boy looked to the bartender, who moved next to her, sat down and put an arm around her. "Not soon enough for any of us, that's for sure. Are you fed up too?"

Toryn looked over at him, nodding shakily. "I lost my entire family on Alderaan."

He thought for a moment, watching his friend being worked on. "Are you prepared to sacrifice and do your part to make a change?"

Again she nodded, still catching her breath. “That’s why I was there tonight.” Still trying to be vague about her intentions.

He nodded, watching her. “You saved my friend. For that I’m grateful, and it’s clear you have no love for the Empire.” He dipped his head, indicating the blaster.

He looked in her eyes, sizing her up as he stroked his beard. “I have a friend that might be able to help you. He’ll need to talk with you more to make the final decision, but if you’re looking for a way to make a difference with the resistance, tonight missy, is your lucky night.”

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