

## Chapter 32 – Inchoation

Sand was held out by the magnetic shield as the overhead bay doors drew together, sealing out the dark sky and wailing winds. Topolev was waiting for us, and as our speeder settled to its repulsor-field hover cushion, he popped open a small port in the hull, securing the charging cables.

Etz cut power and those of us that had been riding in the exposed rear portion of the transport pulled off helmets and shook sand from beneath our armor plates in the still, dank air of the bay. Topolev hollered back to us as he returned to his work in the adjacent cache supply room. “How’s Holder?”

Danz pulled off his gloves and hand armor, stuffing them inside his helmet, looking around at the rest of us, “Is it just me, or was that wind actually a little bit cold?”

“You turning into an old woman, Danz?” laughed Blade.

I laughed a bit too as I pulled off my gloves and watched for a reaction.

Felth jumped in before Danz could respond. “No, he’s right. Some of the locals on the street the other day were talking about getting the harvest in before winter hit. It must almost be here.”

“What do they grow here anyway, this place is one big sand pit” said Etz, jumping down off the tailboard.

Felth began explaining to them about hydroponic crops as I looked across to Danz. “I don’t know about you, but I could stand some cooler weather.” He nodded his silent agreement.

In the cache room, Topolev sat down next to 4120 and went back to cataloguing the holocards. “I guess nobody heard me.”

4120 stood up as Topolev returned to their desk in the main cache storage room. “I heard you.” He walked past me to Rogue as he re-wrapped the synth-skin at the wrist of his cybernetic hand. He repeated Topolev’s question. “How’s Holder?”

Rogue, preoccupied in semi-deep thought replied rather mechanically. “Recovering . . .” He hesitated a second, staring off into space, then turned to 4120. But we have a bigger issue.” He looked up, locking eyes with 4120. “What do you know about the death ritual of the elderly, indigenous Bantha?”

4120 looked a bit puzzled at this random and bizarre question, and was at a loss for a reply. We were all listening now.

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“Exactly” said Rogue. “Not one of us knows anything about it. So . . . we’re going to need the insight and guidance of a local in addition to the scientific approach of that group of kids on the archaeological team. They’re not from here either. They’re from Balmorra.”

“Archaeological team?” asked 4120.

“It’s a long story. I’ll explain, but we need all troops recalled from their patrols and duties. Based on the players already looking for this thing, there’s a good reason it was hidden, and probably an even bigger reason to find it, and find it first. We’re going to need everyone’s help. Call them back to base, and get Garindan in here. I need to put our snitch to work.”

4120 nodded. “Right away.”

Rogue pulled Blade aside. “You need to have a conversation with your shadow. We don’t need any friendly fire accidents” Blade nodded.

Felth watched 4120 as he headed for the upper level comm center. He couldn’t help but wonder who else Garindan might already be helping.

\* \* \*

The still quiet of the darkened med lab was broken only by the occasional whine or flutter of a machine or ‘droid. Holder lay in his bed thinking. Kaird was here, now on this planet again, and while it was likely that he didn’t even remember about the tracker in his head, for Holder, the elapsed twenty years since the implant was fired into the back of his head only seemed like days.

He stared at the ceiling, with half memories still flashing and falling into place in his head, keeping sleep just out of reach. He gave up trying to get rest and instead, slid a hand under his pillow, retrieving a sheathed knife. As he turned off the bedside monitors, he ripped off their leads and pulled out his IV lines. Rolling to a sitting position on the edge of the bunk, he allowed himself a moment to adjust to being upright. He stood up, feeling the cool stone floor under his bare feet and the ID tags around his neck sliding back and forth across his chest as he walked silently toward the ‘fresher.

Once inside he carefully closed and locked the door. A lone luminary winked on as the door closed, its intense light streaming down from just above a wall-mounted mirror. Silently, he stepped in front of it and locked eyes with his reflection. He hadn’t aged at all, but felt incredibly lost. Twenty years gone in a flash. He didn’t really belong in this time, and yet he no longer belonged in the past either.

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He closed his eyes and raised his left arm to his head, running the tip of his index finger slowly back across his scalp; over the top and toward the base of his skull. He was almost to the soft tissue of the neck when he felt the slight bulge beneath the skin, sitting up just above the bone. His eyes opened slightly as he slid his fingertip back and forth several times across the bump to ensure it was the right spot.

Once convinced it was, he held his fingertip on it as he slid the knife from the sheath with his right hand. Carefully, and with a firm grip, he raised it to his head. The blade slowly pushed through his hair until the sharp, pointed tip came to rest on the bump as he saw the scene in his mind's eye. Sliding his left finger out of the way, he firmly pressed the blade into his skin just below the knot. He slid it slightly so the blade sliced through the taut flesh, which split open under the sharp edge and parted cleanly.

Blood instantly welled up in the crude incision and began to flow freely and in great abundance. With the sharp tip of the blade he probed the bloody opening, scraping through the tissue and bone until it found the edge of the small metallic tracking implant.

Sliding his left hand around to brace his forehead, he forced the tip of the knife between the small, tubular implant and the bone of his skull and began carefully prying it out with short jerks of the blade.

His hand glistened with blood now as he worked, dripping from it down his back in a steady, near-constant flow. Finally he felt the tiny cylinder dislodge from the bone. Carefully, he pulled the knife away, bringing it around under the lamp for a look. On the bloody blade sat a narrow cylinder about two centimeters long. He rolled it slowly with his stained fingertip. It was still intact and still transmitting.

“Perfect.”

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It was nearly morning when Chewbacca rolled out of his modified crew bunk aboard the Millennium Falcon and noted that Solo's bunk had not been slept in. The gentle giant stepped out into the main walkway that encircled the ship. As he stepped onto the smooth deck panels, he raised the strap of his bandolier with attached satchel over his head and situated it properly on his shoulder.

Powerful Wookiee hands pushed one of the thick metallic erg clips back into its secure, centered position in the leather bandolier as he took a quick look into the cockpit. Solo was not there either.

He gathered up the tool kit and welding set he had left on the gaming bench and headed for the main boarding ramp.

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The segmented, circular hatch rotated up into the ship, revealing the ramp, as the Wook stepped out onto its frigid, inclined surface. Once out, he closed the hatch, sealing in any heat to be found inside the 'Falcon.

It was very early and activity was sparse within the hangar. A few technicians worked on repairs to Wedge's fighter and the ice cutting crew was assembled in a meeting huddle discussing the layout of the lower levels. Everyone wore thermal gear. Even in the relative protection afforded within their ice base, temperatures were still cold enough to cause damage if you weren't properly insulated. Being a Wookiee, he didn't have to worry about such things.

A young rebel ran past with an armful of Tauntaun harnesses and waved to the hairy Wookiee.

"Good morning Chewbacca."

Chewie woofed a pleasant grunted reply as the young woman continued running toward the corral. If Solo wasn't around, this might be the perfect time to work on that faulty central landing claw. As he stepped off the ramp and crouched to move beneath the ship, his eyes peered under toward the claw . . . only to see Solo, in his parka with the hood up, sitting atop a supply crate with his head resting against the extender hydraulics of the claw, fast asleep.

A woof of frustration escaped the Wook's lips as he turned away, quickly deciding instead to work on upgrading the ancient cooling lines that snaked across the upper hull.

Only moments later a claxon screeched once, and the shield doors began to retract, opening up to another Hoth morning. The noise awakened Solo, who rolled his head to watch the doors open. The morning sky that lay beyond didn't look any different than the dark, stormy sky he had flown through returning to base the night before. Winds whistled and groaned, blowing snow and fog inside the huge cavern.

A blast of the cold air streamed through the hangar and across his exposed neck. Shivering a bit, he secured his parka up to just beneath his chin and pulled the furry hood nearly closed across his face.

Mercifully, the haunting images of the nightmare he'd been having of his childhood on the streets of Corellia were fading rapidly as he began to fully awaken. Like shadows hiding from approaching light, they fell away from him. As they did, a new set of nightmarish thoughts slipped in to take their place; thoughts of Jabba The Hutt and how he must be hunting him over dumped cargo.

It was something that needed to be taken care of, and soon. His reward money would more than cover the payoff and Fett was temporarily out of the picture until he could have the outrigger on Slave I remounted and repaired.

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His eyes darted to the edge of the hangar as a small group entered. Mon Mothma and Leia, flanked by Alia and Yane' made their way slowly across the hangar, looking at the ships and discussing various plans and strategies.

The base was still rough, but slowly beginning to come together. He decided to wait until the recon flights were completed and some sort of perimeter defense system was in place. He didn't want to leave Leia behind until at least that level of protection was up and running.

Leia.

Thoughts of her raised a whole other set of issues. What about Bria? He had just learned of her death. Had she meant nothing to him? And what about Jenny back on Tatooine and all the others strewn across the galaxy? Was he ready to give them up for her?

His eyes moved to the two techs working on Wedge's ship and the empty space beside it. Why would Luke just disappear like that without any warning? The kid definitely had skills, but he also had a knack for needing a safety net. With Kenobi gone, he somehow felt compelled to step up and provide the backup as he had in the Battle of Yavin.

Did he feel some kind of obligation to help this kid? His thoughts drifted away to another kid in another time; one whose face had haunted him in the murk of his dreams mere moments ago.

He had been one of many street kids that night, out scavenging for food. All were too cocky for their own good; all were that way to hide the bottomless fear that threatened to consume them. On that particular night he'd found himself stuck watching out for that younger kid. What was his name?

The shifting images of years long blurred began to coalesce, slowly revealing unpleasant and untidy memories of that ink-black night in the forgotten alleys of Corellia. Memories of that older gang member with the drawn blaster, accusations about them being in the wrong sector.

Han was just a boy, but he had tried to be the honorable man. He had a small makeshift blaster, cobbled together from spare parts found in the scrap heaps near the shipyard.

As terrified as he had been, with the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end, he kept it holstered on his hip. He was just a street kid, but he still understood the concept of honor. He never revealed his fear, and he promised himself he wouldn't kill on a hunch or a gut feeling.

How utterly wrong that naïve little boy had been.

It was here that the memory remained fuzzy. Time had seemed to slow that night in the alley. The older kid drew on them, followed by a flash from both the muzzle and rear of

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his gun. It discharged a bolt, but the energy coupler in the discharge chamber had exploded in the process, temporarily blinding the boy holding it.

The smell of ozone rushed over him as he covered his eyes reflexively. As he did so, the youngster in his care crumpled to the street, having been hit at close range.

In the confusion following, Han ran, as fast as he could away into the night, the sound of his heartbeat slamming against his eardrums. He hadn't stopped running until he saw that small, dark space under the naval loading dock and scrambled inside.

Ever since that night, whenever those neck hairs stood on end from a hunch, that life or death, knotted hunch in his gut . . . he took care of himself and those with him.

He didn't hesitate or think. He shot first, and worried about the details and the mess later.

\* \* \*

The small belt hook ring on the lightsaber trembled, but would not rise. The weapon rested alongside Luke's holocron atop a small bench. Luke sat on Kenobi's bed, focusing intently on the lightsaber. His arm was extended toward the hilt, calling it, willing it into this hand.

Obi Wan's voice spoke again from the holocron. "Feel the Force push and pull like a great wind or the absence of air. Like water washing in and away from the shore. Feel the object's energy and merge it to your own. Become one with it."

Still the belt hook merely trembled. Luke relaxed his arm. He was exhausted.

Master Kenobi spoke again. "Do not think of the Force as a tool to be wielded. Think of it as an extension of your own energy, extending and BECOMING the tool. It will obey your commands just as your arm or your hand would because it is part of you, and you are part of it."

Luke took a breath and raised his hand again, relaxing this time and visualizing what he saw in Kenobi's instruction. He imagined his own reach extending out to the hilt. The belt loop trembled again, a bit more agitated this time. He relaxed further, breathing evenly, envisioning his fingertip raising the loop.

Across the room, the tiny ring snapped up to face him just as R2 rolled whistling through the doorway. His concentration broke, and the ring dropped. He exhaled, clearly frustrated. "Yes R2, we're leaving soon."

As R2 rotated to leave, one of his outer feet struck the base of the bench. Both the holocron and the lightsaber were jarred and fell. Luke lunged forward making the split-

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second decision to grab the holocron, allowing the saber hilt to fall to the stone floor with a loud clattering.

“R2 be careful!”

He put the holocron on the bed and knelt down to pick up his lightsaber. When he picked it up, several small pieces of clear glass fell to the floor. He rolled it over to see that the ancient glass sensor eye had shattered.

Shielding his eyes and holding the hilt as far away from his body as he could, he pressed the activation button. Instead of the normal, meter-long energy shaft, a small needle-thin shaft of barely twelve centimeters appeared.

Sparks popped and fell from inside the shattered lens as the blade suddenly stretched out to full length. Just as quickly back to the short length, and began cycling between the two length settings.

Disgusted, Luke switched it off as he shot R2 a look. The little droid rotated his dome away, avoiding eye contact.

“Great. The length adjustment is shot. Now what am I going to do? You broke it R2!”

Suddenly, above the holocron, the image of Kenobi flickered and disappeared, replaced with a display of schematics; lightsaber schematics. Luke leaned in close, studying them as Kenobi’s voice whispered.

“You will need the tools and parts from my home and the cave, and then . . . you will need to take them to one final place. Find those pieces and I will guide you the rest of the way.”

\* \* \*

The calm of the empty street was broken as Etz, Danz and Blade stepped out of the barracks into the still morning air. Though ambient sunlight now filled the sky, the gleaming twin suns had not yet arisen beyond the horizon.

As the door slid shut behind them, a cloaked shape walking their way hastily slipped into the shadows of an alleyway further down the street. Etz and Danz slipped on their helmets and set off for the morning patrol loop of the spaceport, having missed the figure’s quick retreat into the darkness.

Blade stood in his black flight suit, watching as they walked away. Then he turned sharply, heading off in the opposite direction, making his way toward the center of town.

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He was preoccupied, having promised Rogue he would speak to the shadow; the incredibly attractive shadow woman that waited at the Dowager Queen.

For the upcoming mission, he would need her to stay behind and not trail him, for her own safety. The search for the lost security recordings could be very dangerous, and he needed to be sure that anyone tracking his group was a target, not a friend. He shook his head; he didn't even know her name.

Holder peered from beneath the deep cloak as Etz and Danz disappeared onto an adjacent street. He watched silently, deep in thought, as Blade moved further away. Should he follow him, or the other two? He looked down to the small cylindrical transmitter in his palm, and then back in the direction the others had taken. Having made his decision, and when he felt comfortable with the distance between them, he pulled the thick cloak in closer around his face and cautiously stepped out into the empty street to follow Blade.

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The vivid people and situations that fleshed out my dreams began to evaporate into darkness as I mentally ascended toward consciousness. In those last few moments of sleep, I could hear the sounds of morning in the barracks before my eyes ever opened.

When my brain was fully functioning at a level that told me what I was hearing was real, my eyelids slowly parted, letting reality in. The still dim room was fairly out of focus, so I blinked again. This time I opened my eyes to crisp detail.

Topolev, 1265 and Falker were carrying supplies from the front office through to the storeroom in the back.

4120 was sitting on the bunk adjacent to mine. He had the small metal case containing his cybernetic replacement hands open, and was unwrapping the synth-skin at his wrist. "Finally decided to join us, eh Deck?"

My eyes fell shut again and I rolled onto my back, feeling the bones in my neck crack as they realigned. I exhaled slightly. "Yeah, and lucky me, the first thing I see is your sorry ass."

We both grinned without seeing the other do so, and he continued. "You know, you snore like a dying Bantha."

He shot a look my way as the artificial skin came loose from his arm revealing the implanted metallic stump and the attached modular hand. He looked back to the gleaming joint as he moved the hand around. Rogue and Felth walked past discussing supply needs for our search party.

I was still grinning a little as I lay a forearm across my eyes. "Well, I guess that's better than taking after you; looking and smelling like the other end."



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Again we both grinned.

I moved my arm off my eyes and sat up. “What’s wrong with the hand?”

He scratched at his real skin where it disappeared beneath the stump cap. It was bright red and looked swollen.

“It’s been irritated for a week or so now; it itches something fierce. It’s giving me a banging headache and the synth skin won’t stay attached.”

I leaned closer for a better look. “It looks like it might be infected. You should have the doc look at it before we head out. We may be gone a while. You don’t want that thing getting any worse.”

He attached the sticky end flap of a new roll of synth-skin to the back of the cyber hand and began wrapping the joint. “If I have time to, I will.”

I looked around; making sure the others had emptied from the room before turning back to him. “Do you get a weird vibe from Felth, or is it just me?”

He kept wrapping. “What do you mean?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. Something just seems off about him. I can’t put my finger on it specifically, but there’s something about him. Things I’ve seen him do or not do, messages he’s sent over the holonet. Maybe just keep an eye on him?”

He looked over to me as he kept wrapping and nodded slightly, “Yeah, sure.” I nodded back as Felth and Rogue walked hurriedly through again, heading for the rear storeroom.

We both silently followed him with our eyes.

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The elusive shadow of Garindan slunk almost invisibly through the streets. He knew where to find the pack Eopies needed for the journey, and was running through a mental list of people who could possibly lead the troops and scientists on their search as he walked. There were several crusty old scrap dealers he knew that had crisscrossed the Dune Sea in search of salvageable parts. On any given night, after a few drinks, they spun elaborate tales of an immense boneyard out in the ‘Sea. No one had ever taken the drunken fools seriously, until now.

As he was nearly to the first of the parts shops, another person suddenly came to mind with a flash. He stopped short in his tracks, his mind reeling. It baffled him why he hadn’t

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thought of the 'Sandman of Tatooine' sooner. Delighted with the recollection, he disappeared into the shop to interview the first of the parts men on his list. His questions would reveal if they were promising, and a good fit for the team, or merely a drunken cantina storyteller.

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Doc Shurte held a hand up before his face, deflecting the fine sand spray thrown up from the departing 'speeder. He watched it accelerate away across the flats as his Rodian assistant headed for home.

Holder's bed was empty and he was gone, as was the swoop bike that had been chained up out back. The aging doctor sighed. He'd have to call Rogue and let him know the Commando was missing.

A slight wind carried on it the distant wailing of womp rats as Daegan approached him from behind.

"Uncle, it's time."

Shurte looked from the horizon down to his feet. "The clinic is locked up, are all the supplies ready?"

"Everything's ready. All supplies are packed and on the repulsor sled. It's nearly midday and the crew is irritated enough about having to go to the troops instead of them coming here. They're anxious to head out so we can make it to Mos Eisley before nightfall. It's going to be slow going dragging that overloaded sled behind your old speeder."

The older man nodded silently, his brow furrowed with unspoken concern.

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A mixed roaring of new energy blades and older mechanical cutting claws rebounded from the frozen walls and ceiling as the crews scraping the base layout from the ice continued their work. The newer digger models used energy blades that vaporized the ice on contact, but there were only two of those and funding wasn't there for more.

The older diggers were far cheaper and easier to come by and were equipped with long rows of spinning durasteel blades which ground deeper and deeper into the ice walls as it advanced. All the while, a fine spray of ice shards was ejected from beneath them until the repulsor bins attached below were sufficiently loaded. When they were, a small sensor within the bin activated an alarm on the operator's datapad console as the cutter

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was automatically disengaged and the digger shut down.

Once released from the main vehicle, the robotic bins wound their way through the tunnels and hangars of the slowly growing rebel base to the outside. As they traveled, the container full of ice shards was slightly heated and compressed, and then allowed to re-freeze in the frigid Hoth air, creating large ice blocks. These were then deposited for ground crews outside the base before the bin returned to its digger. The blocks were then used for creating ice walls around lookout posts and along the fronts of the defensive trenches.

This small piece of Hoth was slowly and begrudgingly giving up the shelter and storage they needed to house the rebel forces. Leia watched as one of the robotic bins returned from the main hangar level above, reattaching itself to its digger which immediately resumed cutting.

“Progress is being made Mon Mothma, but perhaps not as fast as we might like. The crews are working nonstop in shifts, but most of the equipment is outdated. They can’t go much faster.” The Princess was nearly shouting to be heard over the noise.

Mon Mothma’s aide, Alia, who had been standing quietly between the two women, took a step back so as not to block the eyeline between the leaders. The slightly greying, more mature rebel leader responded slowly, carefully selecting her words.

“I have no doubt they are working as quickly as they can, Leia, and I’m sure the base will be completed soon. However; my time here grows short. I must soon return to the rest of the command fleet. Admiral Ackbar has quite a task trying to keep a group of ships that large from being discovered, and there is work still to be done bringing new systems and resources to our cause.”

Leia was watching Mon’s face as she spoke. “There’s something else. Something you’re not saying. What is it?”

The older woman cut her eyes quickly away to the ice shredding machines. “Walk with me, Leia.” She turned to her aide, raising a gentle hand in the air. “A private moment please, Alia? This will only take a moment.”

Alia bowed her head and stepped back, “Of course, milady.” Her eyes followed them as they turned to walk out into the privacy of the hallway.

Thankfully the dim corridor was a bit quieter, affording them a calmer exchange. Mon glanced back into the room to see Alia taking an interest in the cutter machines and talking with the crew. The noise level in the adjacent room was sufficient to cover their conversation anyway. She turned to face Bail Organa’s daughter.

“I hear Commander Skywalker has disappeared again.”

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“Mon, I’m aware of this as is General Riek . . . .”

“I know Leia, I know. I do not question your ability to lead, but I am quite concerned with our newest Commander. There is no debating that his actions at the Battle of Yavin saved us all, and the Rebellion. And yes, I know he has left us to further his understanding of the Jedi way.”

Leia cut in, “In order to be a more effective opponent of the Empire.”

Mon Mothma took a few steps away, looking off down the corridor, far away as if looking into another time. She took a moment to draw in a slow breath from the frosty air, and then exhale deeply.

“What troubles me is not his current absence; it is the ghosts of the past that he and his antique Jedi weapon have resurrected within me. It could be brought to bear on us as it once was many years ago against the members of another group. He wields his lightsaber for good, but that weapon has caused more agony, anguish and turmoil than you may realize. Seeing it on our young Commander’s belt raised the hair on the back of my neck, Leia. That name, that weapon; we must be certain. We must be certain of his intentions, and he must be watched closely going forward.”

“His name? Why do you fear him so?” asked Leia. “He was led to us by Obi-Wan Kenobi. Surely he knew what he was doing and was a powerful enough Jedi to see a favorable future with Luke on our side.”

“I have known General Kenobi for many years, and I am confident that he had only our best interests in mind where Commander Skywalker is concerned, but . . . it wouldn’t be the first time he put too much faith in a pupil.”

She dropped her gaze to the ground, again choosing her words very carefully as she danced around the painful truth and past she and Leia’s parents had fought so hard to keep hidden. She mentally worked to bury her thoughts, her emotions. They could be read all too easily.

“Leia, for all that you know of the birth of the Empire and the Rebellion, there is much that you do not. There are only a handful who knew all the entanglements and complexities surrounding the descent of the Republic into the darkness cast by the Empire. Most of those who do are now dead, leaving only myself and one or two others. Trust me when I say it is neither a weight that can be shared with you at the present time, nor a mantle you would want to be burdened with. As a bit of a Force-sensitive myself, I can tell you that the ebb and flow of the Force can pull strongly to dark areas we may not wish to go. Vader and his Emperor are both ruthless and must be stopped at all costs. We cannot risk losing young Skywalker to that dark path. Watch him closely. He could be our salvation, but if he turns . . . he could also be our undoing.”

The last of Mon Mothma’s comments lingered in the air, increasing in weight as the

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moments passed. Suddenly that silence was interrupted by a hideous roar, immediately followed by screams and blaster fire coming from the room they had just left. Both women turned abruptly to look.

Bright flashes and the sound of more blaster fire was immediately followed by first one, and then several from the ice cutting crew running out of the room into the corridor toward them. Another loud howl echoed off the walls.

The running troops stopped just short of where Leia was standing and turned, dropping to one knee, leveling their blasters. One of the ice cutters ripped off his goggles and turned his red face to the startled women as he powered on his blaster, "There's ice creatures in there! One of the cutters broke through into a natural ice cave behind one of the walls. When it pulled back to take a look, they came pushing through!"

"Let's get you both out of here" insisted one of the troopers, attempting to herd Leia and Mon Mothma away to safety.

"Where is Alia?" screamed Mon, wide eyed. "Where is my aide?"

The trooper turned to her grimly, "One of them took her; back into the cave. We tried to stop it, but it grabbed her and was gone. It all happened so fast."

More howls rolled down the corridor as one of the beasts made its way into the hall. A flurry of blaster fire erupted, bright crimson flashes illuminating the dim space, as the creature howled louder before stumbling to his knees and crashing dead, face-first to the durasteel floor grates.

A second of the huge beasts burst through the opening, followed by a third.

"Retreat!" yelled one of the cutting crew as they stood up and turned to run.

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