

Tales from the BATTLEFRONT

By: Laser921 and WodiQuix



A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away

It is a period of civil war. Across the galaxy, the GALACTIC CIVIL WAR rages, an explosive conflict between the evil forces of the GALACTIC EMPIRE and the freedom fighters of the ALLIANCE TO RESTORE THE REPUBLIC. Striking quickly and decisively, the ALLIANCE has managed to win a decisive battle on the volcanic planet of SULLUST, shutting down the mighty factories driving the powerful Imperial war machine.

But the EMPIRE is far from defeated. Retaliating with awesome force, the EMPIRE has driven the ALLIANCE into the farthest reaches of known space, determined to crush their foe once and for all. Barely managing to evade their pursuers, the rebel ships have temporarily bought time for the brave leaders of the ALLIANCE to plan their next move.

Aboard the rebel star cruiser INVINCIBLE FAITH, the brave soldiers and leaders of the ALLIANCE hatch a daring plan to cripple the EMPIRE even further . . .

Dramatis Personae:

Jevin Corso, Human male: Hailing from Carida, Corso made his mark early in the galaxy. In his late teens to early twenties, he had a stint as a bodyguard, eventually having lucrative contracts protecting high-level executives of corporations like BlasTech, Sorosuub, and Kuat Drive Yards. During a job, he received word his parents were brutally murdered by the Empire during a peaceful protest on Carida. After this, he joined the Rebellion, becoming a captain in Leia Organa's Honor Guard.

Wodi Quix, Human male: An orphan from Brealta IV who saw his parents killed in a pirate attack, Wodi Quix started out in a local resistance group, eventually making his way to the Rebellion. Here he would show promise as a special forces soldier and would eventually end up in a squad along with his friend Amminius Sinan commanded by a soldier of some repute, Jevin Corso. Wodi received his nickname "Wishbone" after banging his head on a Y-wings jet engine.

Amminius Sinan, Human male: Born on Dantooine, Sinan worked as a freight hand at a local spaceport. After discovering a cache of supplies and a crate of BlasTech E-11s, along with several suspicious characters, Sinan followed them to a secret rebel base on the planet, where he learned of the Rebel Alliance. Joining their ranks, Amminius would soon befriend Wodi Quix and later serve in a special forces squad alongside him commanded by Jevin Corso.

Cade Valdarin, Human male: A child from Chandrila and the son of two survivors of the Jedi Purge, Cade Valdarin was raised by his Jedi parents until shortly before the Battle of Scarif, when Vader tracked them down and killed them. Cade was secreted away by a Bothan friend of the family and eventually found his way to his aunt, Mon Mothma, Chancellor of the Rebellion. A powerful Force user, Cade trained himself to become the Jedi his parents wanted him to be.

Sid, Sullustan male: Joining the Alliance with his fellow gun runner, Nien Nunb, Sid would realize his passion for being a chef and serve a special forces squad as its cook. A soldier and gifted chef, Sid would be instrumental to the morale of Jevin Corso's squad.

Jevin Corso - Aboard the Alliance MC80 star cruiser *Invincible Faith*, Outer Rim Territories

We've done it, we've taken Sullust. The battle was long and arduous. Many friends were lost along the way, but the galaxy burns brighter for their sacrifice. Princess Leia personally fought on the field and as squad leader of Honor Guard Unit Alpha, we were in the thick of the fighting to take the Imperial hangars. Our other forces targeted the factories and barracks, trying to keep the stormtroopers off balance.

Now that we've taken a key manufacturing planet from them, the Empire is all the more determined to root us out. Our fleet barely managed to evade their Star Destroyers. We've lost them near the Salin Corner hyperspace route when our captain took a clever detour. We're regrouping inside a large asteroid cluster, restocking on supplies. Our officers are expecting a coded transmission to come in any day now from High Command, giving us our new orders. I've heard rumors of the Imperials tightening their grip on Tatooine and Daxam IV, Outer Rim worlds near the Rimma Trade Route.

. . .

Command has told us that Tatooine is first up on our list. Soon, Admiral Ackbar will launch a strike on the Imperial ships over Tatooine, while Alpha Unit and the Forty-First Fury Battalion rush in and storm the planet

groundside. We've reached a turning point in the war, I can feel it.

Jevin Corso - Aboard the Alliance MC80 star cruiser *Invincible Faith*, Outer Rim Territories

Alpha Unit has returned from their recon on Bespin. It's worse than we thought: the bounty hunter Dengar is with the Imperials there. He's leading them in some gas siphoning operation. For now, High Command is having us wait on the intel.

The next big push in the war is being aptly named: Operation Wookiee's Fist. The goal is to punch a big hole in the Imperial lines at Tatooine and Daxam IV in order to have access to the Rimma Trade Route for our transport ships before further pushing into Imperial space. Being closer to Tatooine, Alpha's being moved there. We are to move in along with the Fourth Army, the unit that helped us secure Sullust.

Several other notable soldiers are joining the assault. Vresrei, a Zabrak and excellent soldier and able tactician, will be heading recon. One of our ace pilots, Kaelara Starlight, is leading our fighter support: Blue and Green Squadrons, in the skies. Another top soldier in the Fourth Army, Wodi Quix, is going to lead a commando team, Rancor Team, to give us fire support. There are many others, far too numerous to name, but they are all heroes, every one of them. Chancellor Mothma is about to deliver the briefing as we speak . . .



Jevin Corso - Jundland Wastes, Tatooine, Outer Rim Territories



We've been cut off from Rancor Team. The Imps have an amazingly brilliant tactician among them. Rumor from the ranks is it's a Shadow Guard, an elite royal guard and Force user, no less, if the rumors are to be believed. A portion of the Imperial forces managed to pin us down at Mos Espa. All looked lost until one voice stood up among us. Through the dust and blaster fire, we heard a determined shout: "Our friends are counting on us! Push them back!"

And there she was, Princess Leia, standing tall among the soldiers. And seeing her fierce determination, we joined her. As captain of Alpha Unit,

I ordered the men to move forward no matter the cost. Wodi Quix was counting on us!

We managed to push the Imps back and into a retreat. Then we began moving out towards the Jundland Wastes, where the bulk of our forces were. Along the way, Commander Starlight and the remains of Green Squadron came just in time to bail us out of trouble.

TIE interceptors were harassing us as we fought. Green Squadron, combined with Blade Squadron's B-wings gave us heavy cover; they even managed to take down a Star Destroyer by knocking out its engines! After that, we came into the Wastes and joined up with a cluster of ragged-looking soldiers holding off stormies with a couple of turrets and E-webs.

I got on the comm as fast as I could: "Sergeant Quix, this is Captain Corso, come in!" Nothing comes back but static. I lower my comlink in mild annoyance.

Seeing my expression, Leia smiles. "What? You want to live forever? Let's go get 'em!" And with that we join in the fray, finally meeting up with Rancor Team, together pummelling the Imperial lines . . .

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix – Jundland Wastes, Tatooine, Outer Rim Territories



What's left of our division has just landed outside of the strike zone. The Imps threw their big guns at us right off the start. Heavy armor: AT-ATs, AT-STs, and TIE interceptors, plus a full battalion of stormtroopers.

Their heavy turbolasers knocked out one of our troop transports before it even broke atmosphere. It crashed somewhere in the Dune Sea. I heard garbled transmissions about survivors, but I can't be sure. Blue Squadron is being sent on a rescue mission.

Our reconnaissance force went dark at 09:00 hours. Before the transmission cut off, I heard someone yell something about black-armored stormtroopers. Green Squadron took a pretty bad hit, with most of their Y-wing bombers out for the count.

Thankfully Kaelara Starlight made it out. Her and Green Three are back at base along with the remainder of their pilots, restocking supplies and

dressing their wounds. Me and my guys are holed up in our depot, fending off sandtroopers. Luckily, we have a few E-webs at our disposal that aren't damaged.

We had to fall back from the uplinks due to superior numbers. The Imps have most likely destroyed them.

It's relatively quiet now; the only constant sound being the Imperial walkers' thunderous footsteps a few kilometers away. *Kriff*, it's dislodging dust from the ceiling. I fear that they may be massing for another attack.

I'm scared, but also grateful for the peace and quiet, at least for now. Jevin said help was coming, but I haven't heard anything from him since. We lost three of Rancor Team to snipers during the fighting. Kriffing scouts. My best friend Amminius took a round in the shoulder from an E-11. He's shaking it off, but I know it must hurt like hell. A bacta patch from the medics and he'll be good as new.

I listened to some Imp transmissions, and it seems that some hotshot in black royal guard armor is calling the shots. Force user, too. Our only hope now is for the heavy troops to delay the chicken-walkers, AT-ATs, and bucket-heads, and for Jevin to arrive with the Princess and the rest of our backup.

On the positive side, we have enough rations to hold out for a little while. We had plenty more, but the Imps lobbed a gas grenade into our

stock house. We had to quarantine the area and seal off the blast doors, but the good news is we managed to save some supplies.

Our company cook, Sid, is at work making my team's favorite: blue milk flatcakes. Nothing like flatcakes to take your mind off a bad day. And *kriff*, has our day been bad.

Sid just came in with the flatcakes. I'm going to end this transmission here. May the Force be with us . . .

Jevin Corso - Jundland Wastes, Tatooine, Outer Rim Territories

We slam into the Imperial lines, Princess Leia taking out stormies left and right. All of a sudden, we see an X-wing above us burst into flame, but nothing hit it! We see the pilot eject but moments later she is snatched out of the air, like magic. Leia murmurs an expletive, and when that happens, you know something's going down.

Right away myself, Sergeant Kals and Lieutenant Vons rush over to the crash sight, only to find the pilot dead, blaster bolt to the forehead. Then we see Quix . . . Quix just flying through the air headfirst into a wrecked B-wing.

Then we see *him*; a nightmare come to life.

A sinister Royal Guard, only in black armor with a red visor, with a lightsaber pike to top off the horror. Looks like the rumors are true! He sees

us and starts coming toward us, a mocking laugh emanating from that mask . . . a laugh that makes my blood run cold.

Leia, bless her heart, starts blasting the freak, putting him on the defensive. Thanks to her, we're able to rush to Wodi's aid. "Sergeant!" I yell, putting a gloved hand behind his helmeted head, "Wodi!" With a bacta pad, and a good slap to wake him up, Wodi comes back from the brink. He insists he's combat capable and we rush back to Leia's defense. There's no way she can take out the Shadow Guard on her own, but with combined blaster fire, we're able to drive him back. That is, until a trio of AT-ATs come out from behind the mountains, blaster cannons pointed directly at us.

All looks lost now . . . and all I can say is where is Kaelara Starlight when you need her?

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix – Jundland Wastes, Tatooine, Outer Rim Territories

Our backup has arrived! Alpha's got our back, and the rest of the Fourth Army is pushing up. We have them now. The air is hot with blaster bolts and flying shrapnel going in all directions. A TIE goes down in a ball of fire, hit by one of our X-wings, taking out a chicken-walker as it skids across the sand, trailing debris. I let out a whoop of excitement and continue to press forward with Rancor.

Ahead of us, leading the charge, is Princess Leia. She sure is a sight to behold, taking down stormies left and right. I flank left with two of my men, blasting a trooper manning an E-web with my A280C.

An X-wing swoops by over our heads . . . and then I hear the ear-piercing sound of screeching metal. I look up to see that . . . it's being torn apart, but nothing is hitting it! What in the blazes?

The pilot ejects from her doomed fighter, but is literally torn from the air almost immediately afterward, as if by an unseen hand. She lands by us, still strapped to her chair by its crash webbing, screaming in terror as she clutches her temples.

My men and I run to her, looking for injuries. There are none. She screams at us to get it out of her head. "Get it out, get it out!" She yells frantically, her eyes wild and scared. Get what out? Then one of my men falls to the ground, spasming violently. I rush over to him, elevating his head with my hands, thinking he's having a seizure, but no, he's clutching his head and screaming, too. My remaining teammate goes to get a medic, but he doesn't get far when . . . a pike erupts from his chest.

Standing behind him is what I can only describe as a demon, flanked by two shadow troopers, dressed in black Royal Guard armor and helmet with a red visor. He slowly turns his helmeted head to look at me.

I go cold, suddenly sweating all over. I'm unable to move. I hear a cold, dark voice inside of my head, whispering things to me.

I try to fight it. It asks my name, and what our plans are. I'm shaking from head to foot. But I keep my mouth and brain on lockdown. Bad move.

The black guard points at me, and I'm suddenly lifted into the air and hurtling towards the wreckage of a B-wing, head first . . . The last thing I see before it all goes black are the two shadow troopers silencing the pilot and my spasming buddy.

Jevin Corso - Jundland Wastes, Tatooine, Outer Rim Territories

Well we did it. We won the Battle of Tatooine. For a second, it looked like we were going to die.

That shadow guard, Lord Xander, I think I heard a trooper call him, had captured what was left of us. We were all lined up for execution. Just when all looked lost and the order to fire was given . . . there was a cannon blast. I opened my eyes, and to everyone's surprise, the rear AT-AT was firing on its own!

As soon as our would-be executioner, a stormtrooper captain, had his back turned, I rushed him, snapping the trooper's neck. Wodi, Leia, and the rest grabbed their rifles and had the stormies at their mercy.

Xander, it seems, is not a fan of having his plans foiled. He let out this enraged howl. I will never forget that sound, like a wounded animal and an extremely vicious predator in one. He commandeered a speeder bike and

sped off. I glance at Wodi and we both share a look: we know he'll be back, like the monsters from horror stories, the ones that always come back and never seem to die, no matter how many times you hit them.

But for now, we head back to our new base on planet 5251977 for a quick respite. Leia takes to celebrating with the men. Wodi and I, along with the remains of Rancor Team and Alpha unit, sit back and enjoy our drinks and blue milk flatcakes, thanks to our company cook, Sid. As the night goes on, my thoughts wander back to Tatooine and Xander.

I can't help but shiver.

That Xander, I just have a feeling that he will be back, again and again. The celebration is interrupted by a trio of smartly-dressed officers.

Our next orders have come in: we're to backup Commander Tek and his forces on Daxam IV, and we're heading out tomorrow. And guess what? Our spies in the area reported seeing a modified *Lambda* shuttle heading there . . . and it was matte black. A bad feeling in my gut starts. "Well that's perfect," I say, shaking my head. Getting up with the others, we start to head back to the barracks to turn in for the night.

Looking around, I pull one of the guards over and ask, "Where's Chancellor Mothma's nephew, Cade, I think his name is?" The guard says he left and the flight information points only to one place: Daxam IV. Again, I look to Wodi, and to Sid as well.

Cade is a strong Force-user no doubt; fighting with the Force for five years straight will do that. But he's also only eight years old. That monster Xander will destroy him.

"Going off to sleep," I say to Sid and Wodi before jogging off back to my room. Better get some sleep if we're leaving first thing in the morning. As I make my way back, I think of Cade. Cade may be just a boy, but he may be extremely valuable and vital to the Alliance once the Empire is destroyed. I hope nothing bad happens to him.

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix – Jundland Wastes, Tatooine, Outer Rim Territories

Jevin had pulled me back from the brink of death . . . only to have landed me in a far worse situation. The stormies have taken a toll on our forces, cutting us down to about twenty-five soldiers, plus the Princess. We fought on though, determined to push through their lines. . . until from behind the mountains lumbered three AT-AT walkers, their thunderous footsteps shaking the ground, kicking up sand. Seeing them stopped us dead in our tracks. The stormtroopers, seeing their backup force, pushed us back until they had us all in a tight group, huddled together. The black guard laughs, a horrible sound that puts my teeth on edge. A commando beside me starts to raise his hands in surrender, and I give him a jab in the ribs. If we're going out, it's not as cowards. We will face our enemies showing no

fear. "Drop your weapons, scum!" Orders a stormtrooper sergeant, his voice amplified through his helmet speakers. We do as he says. Our blasters hit the dirt, kicking up a cloud of sand. Our next orders are to get in a line. Again, we do as we are told. A commando stumbles as he is being pushed, falling to the dirt. He attempts to get up, but is yanked off his feet again, brought hovering in front of the black clad guard. The thing inspects its catch, turning the commando in the air as if on a display. With a laugh, he jerks his hand, and I hear the man's spine crack. I wince as he falls to the ground with a thud, dead. I turn a fiery gaze on the figure, willing him to drop to the sand. He returns my gaze. I'm frozen in place. Then I'm abruptly shoved backwards, as if pushed by an invisible hand, falling into the arms of my comrades. The black guard turns away and motions several stormtroopers forward. A firing squad. "Maybe they'll miss." Amminius whispers next to me. I chuckle. "You wish." I whisper back. My thoughts drift to my parents. A feeling of calm envelops me; I'll be with them soon. I stare at the troopers, into those soulless faceplates. They raise their rifles, and I close my eyes . . . ready. I hear the shots. BAM! BAM! Those aren't blaster shots! I open my eyes to see . . . an AT-AT toppling to the sand, its command cockpit destroyed. The stormtroopers whirl around, as confused as I am. The rear AT-AT fires again, hitting the other remaining walker first in the knee joint, then in the head. It then focuses its laser cannons on the Imps, blasting about thirty troopers into nothingness. Am I seeing this right?

Maybe I hit my head on that B-wing a little harder than I thought. The Imps are scrambling, trying to get out of the blast zone. They fire on the walker, which continues its course toward our position. The black guard is standing there tense . . . he has no idea what's going on. Then he lets out a bellow of anger! Next thing, he's kicking a fleeing scout trooper off his speeder bike, wrenching the scout off and disappearing into the dunes in a cloud of sand and grit. Turning tails and running. Typical high-up Imp. The remaining troopers, with their leader gone, and who are heavily outgunned, literally, have no idea what to do. So we help them decide. "Get on your knees and drop your blasters!" I order, picking up my A280C. The rest of my team follows suit, training their weapons on the remaining troopers. The stormies obey. The walker, finally reaching us, kneels on its massive legs, putting its cockpit a few feet from us. "I figured you could use a hand!" Says an all-too familiar voice. I laugh, seeing an orange flight suit-clad Kaelara Starlight climbing down from the cockpit. She gives us a huge grin, and claps me on the shoulder. "You're late, Starlight!" Amminius says, smirking. "What kept you?" "Oh, you know," Kaelara laughs, "I couldn't find a walker I liked, the usual thing." Our whole group bursts out laughing. "Now let's get off this dust ball!" Our whole group cheers, giddy with happiness and relief. "What about that black guard?" Jevin asks. "Who, Xander? Oh, he'll be back. I would have loved to see the look on his face once he sensed me in the walker!" Replies Kaelara, grinning. We're headed off to Daxam IV . . . one

dust ball after another, to reinforce Commander Tek and his forces. But for now we're back at our newest headquarters, planet 5251977, a small, obscure place no one even bothered to give a name. Since the planet rotates so slowly, days and nights here are the equivalent of several weeks on most other planets. It's hidden pretty well, though. Sid has made his customary blue milk flatcakes in celebration of our victory. I can already smell them. I'll update the log once we reach Daxam. I do have to wonder where that Xander character went off to though. I have a feeling we'll be seeing him again real soon. But this time, we'll be ready.

Jevin Corso - Preparing to leave planet 5251977, Alliance

Headquarters

We leave early, not even halfway through the planet's rotation. Several Mon Calamari MC80 star cruisers, fighter squads, and a couple of Nebulon-B's join up with us halfway. Just as we enter the Daxam system, alarms blare all over the *Sentinel*, the task force flagship.

Right away, Sid whistles and says, "Hey boss, we entered a real gundark nest."

I walk through the bridge, looking out at space, where several imposing Star Destroyers sit, backed by two heavy cruisers and a Super Star Destroyer. Tek's ships are still putting up a fight against them.

I'm a soldier, not a spacer. I don't belong up here. "What're you doing here?" Our Quarren admiral, Kerex, hollers at us, as if reading my thoughts,

"you only get one drop window. Get to your transport, the escort is ready!" With that, Wodi, Sid, and I, joined along the way by several other commandos, rush to the waiting transport.

I'm used to fighting, been doing it for a long time throughout my bodyguard career. On the ground, you can see the enemy shooting you. You rely on your own wits to get you through. In the cramped cabin of a shaking troop transport, unable to shoot back at whoever's shooting you, that's another thing. You have to leave it up to the pilot to make sure you don't end up as frozen meat floating in space.

On the way down, Sid cheers us up by saying if we survive, next breakfast is all you can eat flatcakes. Everything is going smoothly, for the most part when . . . *BOOM!* We've been hit!

The shuttle took a TIE fighter cannon blast to the engines. Our shuttle was going down!

"Brace for impact!" Yells the pilot as the sandy ground outside our viewport grows closer and closer. We hit the sand with a tremendous lurch, sending supplies and bodies flying about the cabin. I feel something slam into the back of my head. Then everything goes silent. The next thing I know, I see Wodi pulling off a sheet of metal; one of the transport doors, the sun glaring behind his head, a gash across one cheek. "Welcome to paradise," he says sarcastically as he helps me out onto the dunes. About a

dozen other soldiers are out there with him. The rest lie dead inside the wrecked transport.

I look out at our surroundings. Debris is strewn everywhere, scattered across the sand dunes. A downed Corellian Corvette lies in the distance, a furious firefight going on underneath it. The Super Star Destroyer sits in atmosphere pummeling our ships, and several AT-ATs are harassing our ground forces. "Well, let's move out," I say. We gather what little we can salvage and set out across the sand. I have a slight limp from the crash but walk it off.

Suddenly, two shuttles fly over our heads in formation, touching down on a sand dune in the distance. I hold out my hand to a sniper, "Binocs, *now!*" Peering through the binoculars, I see two Imperial *Lambda*-class shuttles, one a standard light gray, the other a matte black version.

Then I see their passengers disembark. Down the ramp of the standard shuttle comes a compliment of shadow troopers. Out of the other shuttle walks the shadow guard, Xander.

Wodi and Sid look at me and Sid, ever the optimist, declares, "Well this should be fun. Fifty flatcakes to the one who can get that guard's armor!" We chuckle and head out, our scanner homing in on Commander Tek's radio signal.

Just then, a trio of TIEs blasts the Corvette and we see a wave of dust from underneath. That's where the signal was coming from! Fearing the

worst, we double-time to the wreck. I signal to Kerex as we move, "Have General Rieekan send Derlin and the rest of the Fourth, *now!* We'll need them!" Every now and then I check behind us for Xander, every time sure I'll see his black form enveloping us.

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix - Daxam IV, Outer Rim Territories

"Watch out!" A wrecked TIE fighter, flames spewing from its whining engines, smashes into the sand dune a few feet from us, kicking up a huge whirling cloud of sand and debris. Our group is immediately blasted with stinging grains and hot flak. I'm knocked down, sprawling face first into the sand. My ears are ringing and my vision goes foggy. X-wings and TIE fighters roar over our heads. I notice something white in my cloudy peripheral vision. I turn my head groggily, looking at it. A half-buried stormtrooper helmet. Its exposed eye lens seems to be gazing at me. I shake my head and take Jevin's hand, allowing him to hoist me up on my feet. I grab my A280C from where I dropped it and we keep going, Jevin constantly checking his locator. "We gotta keep moving," he shouts, "that signal is close." We sprint across the sand, trying not to get blown to shrapnel. Another TIE goes down, its engine making a horrible screeching sound. I shield my eyes as I run, looking up at the sky at the battle that continues to rage above Daxam. A group of stormtroopers tries to flank us from the left, but a pair of A-wings head them off, blowing them skyward. My A280 is burning in my hands, but I don't stop firing. I blast a trooper in

the chest, burning a black hole in his white plastoid armor. He screams, his E-11 flying out of his hand, and falls to the sand in a heap. Another trooper tries to lob a detonator at us. Amminius puts a smoking hole in his helmet before he can toss it. The thermal drops to the sand and goes off at the trooper's feet, blasting him into oblivion. My legs are on fire, a sensation I know I am not alone in feeling, but I keep sprinting, fueled by adrenaline, lighting up stormtroopers as I go. We finally take a break behind an outcropping, all of us breathing hard. We all look to Jevin, who slaps his locator in his gloved hands. "The signal is weak, but it's definitely coming from a position near that Corellian Corv-". At that moment, a cannon blast from a TIE fighter hits the downed corvette's engines, turning the ship into an inferno. "Bloah!" Jevin curses, bringing his locator up to his face. The screen is dark, but then . . . *blip, blip, blip*. "A signal, they're alive!" Shouts Sid excitedly. "Then let's go!" A commando yells excitedly, starting to move out from our outcropping. The very next moment, he's knocked off his feet, a sizzling hole in his chest. "Sniper!" Another commando yells. We drop to the sand, just as a green bolt arcs over our heads, striking a piece of shrapnel jutting out of the dunes. "Where?" I yell. A second bolt whizzes by us, hitting the sand next to me. "Get to cover!" Jevin shouts, gesturing toward another hunk of twisted metal sticking out of the sand. We run for it, flattening ourselves against the hot surface. "All here." I report to Jevin. "Binocs!" He says, gesturing impatiently. A commando hands him a pair.

Jevin quickly peeks out, scanning the terrain. "Over there-" he starts to say, just as the pair of macrobinoculars are blasted out of his hands, landing in the sand, a chunk missing from them. "Aaaagh!" he screams, yanking his hands back. "Kriffing sniper!" "Maybe we can try to flank him." A commando suggests. One thing was clear, we couldn't stay cowering behind cover. "We have to get to that signal!" Jevin affirms, tapping his locator for emphasis. I'm about to offer a suggestion when my wrist comlink chirps. I activate it and a high-pitched child's voice comes over the channel: ". . . odi, Jevin, Sid, are you out there?" "Cade!" I shout excitedly. "Wodi?" The voice asks. "Yes!" I shout in answer. "Thank the Force you're alive. Are you alright? Where's Tek and Ralen?" "*Here.*" A gruff Ishi Tib voice says in answer. "Commander," Jevin interrupts, not in the mood for idle talk, "we're pinned down by a sniper in quadrant zero-three, can you give us a hand?" "*Don't worry Jevin,*" Cade says. "*I'll take care of him.*" "Fine," Jevin says into my wrist comm, "just make it quick!" I peek out from our cover, peering out of my A280's scope just in time to see a scout trooper, a smoking hole in his chest armor, fly off the edge of a debris riddled sand dune. An Ishi Tib and a Weequay walk out after a small boy in sandy robes, who grasps a Tusken Cycler Rifle in his hands. "He's a better shot than you are!" I jokingly tell Jevin. "Not bad . . . for a kid." He replies. "*You're all clear Rancor.*" Tek's gravelly voice comes over my wrist comm, giving us a wave. We sprint out from our cover, running for the debris-pocked dune where Tek, Ralen, and

Cade wait. In the distance, AT-ATs continue their relentless march toward the Fourth's position . . .

Jevin Corso - Daxam IV, Outer Rim Territories



We've managed to rendezvous with Commander Tek and his team. Captain Solo does good work, keeping them alive. For now, we're on the move, all carrying heavy packs with scavenged supplies; even Cade is keeping up. I guess a Jedi can use the Force to fight down exhaustion. A Weequay, Ralen, is leading the way, his expertise in scouting being put to good use. In the distance, the AT-ATs are still coming toward us.

"We've got to make it to base camp," Solo says. We all grunt in agreement, too tired to say anything. Then Cade suddenly perks up and looks behind us, like hearing something none of us can. He scans the

horizon where he took out the sniper . . . and stops cold. "Uh guys, take a look."

Tek hands me a pair of binocs and I look through them to see Xander standing on the cliff edge, his gloved hand raised to the sky. He had removed his cloak and helmet, revealing short black hair and a nasty looking scar going diagonally across his whole face, most likely caused by a lightsaber or vibroblade. But it was what he was doing that worried me. Wodi grabs the binocs from me and looks as well. "Sith's blood!" he shouts. "We've got to move!" Lafco goes ahead to find a position to cover us from.

Worried what having his arm upraised meant, I take the cycler rifle from Cade's pack, line up the shot, and aim directly for that nasty scar. With a *thud* I fire the slug. What happened next is something I'll never forget. The slug was about to hit Xander when all of a sudden, it stopped! Right in front of his face! I peer through the scope, looking at him, baffled. Xander, with his right arm still outstretched towards the sky, was pointing a crooked finger at the slug . . . almost effortlessly stopping it from hitting him. And then he makes a flicking motion with his finger, and the slug comes flying back. "Cover!" I shout, and we all duck left or right. *Thwack!*

We all hear a moan and I look behind me. Sid had taken the slug to the knee.

"I'm fine," he says, his large eyes narrowed in pain. "It just stings!" We set him down and examine him. The knee isn't broken, the slug just grazed the skin, leaving a bloody mark, but nothing too bad.

I glance back at Xander and see his body is physically struggling with something, the exertion causing his body to tremble. Peering through the scope again, I see two stormtrooper officers leading men down the cliff and then we hear it . . . a massive, scraping sound, like metal being torn apart.

This sound is so loud, I feel as if my head is being split in two. I look again at Xander and see him now pulling his hands down. Cade, being the Jedi he is, suddenly gasps and looks at me, a grim look on his face that belies his youth; he looks nearly thirty years older. "Jev, look up." "What?" I say, and he just repeats, "Look up." Teeth grit against the noise, we all look skyward, and see the unbelievable . . .

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix - Daxam IV, Outer Rim Territories

"Look up," Cade says. I gaze skyward to where he points. Our eyes fall on the MC80 cruiser *Sentinel*. A horrified gasp ripples through our group. The cruiser, at the head of our reinforced fleet, begins to plummet toward the planet. The engines moan and whine, fighting the force of gravity, creating a horrible groaning sound loud enough for my teeth to rattle and my ears to hurt. Frantic radio chatter bursts over our comms as the flight crew and techs aboard the *Sentinel* struggle to keep their star cruiser in the air. "He's

pulling down the ship!" Shouts Jevin frantically, gesturing wildly at the guard, Xander, who stands on a sand dune with his arm outstretched.

A commando raises his T-21B, prepared to squeeze off a shot at the creep. I stay his hand, reminded of the slug pellet he deflected earlier.

We sit there, helpless, watching the doomed cruiser getting closer and closer to the dunes. Suddenly, shiny round objects begin to jettison from the ship. Escape pods! They don't get far.

TIE fighters swoop in, tearing apart the pods with their cannons before focusing on the *Sentinel*. With one last burst of static, the comms aboard the *Sentinel* cut off, sparing us from the screaming of her lost crew. As the cruiser hits the dunes, she scrapes one of our command centers, demolishing some of the structure. An immense cloud of sand is kicked up, engulfing the command base before being sent flying away from the point of impact.

"Look out!" Amminius shouts, and we dive for cover as the newly created sandstorm rips over us. When it all settles, we look back out over the sand dunes.

The *Sentinel* lies slightly on its side, largely intact, smoke billowing from its super-heated exterior. I look to the spot where Xander was standing . . . he is no longer there. All I see is the half-buried form of the dead sniper on another dune a few meters away. A feeling of anger mixed with sadness wells up inside me.

A gloved hand touches my shoulder: it's the Weequay, Ralen. "We should go." He says softly to me in his gravelly voice. I look to see that the rest of our group has already moved off. Ralen and I jog to catch up.

"He'll pay for this!" Jevin seethes, gripping his A280C hard. "Yes, he will," Tek soothes in a surprisingly calm voice, "but our chief concern is to clear the way for the rest of our forces to move in." He points a green, three-fingered hand in the direction of the lumbering AT-ATs.

"Right," Sid grunts, "let's go. The best way to grieve, I think, is to cover the ground with dead stormtroopers." I give him a small smile, and all the commandos nod in agreement.

"Is it wise to have *him* with us?" A commando hikes a thumb at Cade. "We aren't baby-sitters." Cade glares at her, retorting, "I'm not a baby!"

Before anyone can reply, a sharp chirp sounds from Tek's wrist comlink, and a bubbly Quarren voice begins to speak: "*. . . can anyone hear me, this is Admiral Kerex of the star cruiser Sentinel, we require aid immediately. I have thirty-five injured crewmen and twelve in dire need of medical attention, . . . we have crashed in quadrant . . . kshhh . . . multip . . . kshhh. . . mtroopers headed . . . kshhh . . . way.*"

"Admiral!" Tek shouts into his comm, "this is Commander Tek, do you copy?" "*. . . I repeat; this is Admiral Kerex of the star . . . kshhh . . . entinal . . . we require . . .*"

Our signal wasn't getting through to them! "Bloah!" curses Jevin. "They're sitting mynocks out there!" "Jevin, Wodi, lead the rest of the group on," Commander Tek tells us, "myself, Donir, Solo, Malogaan, Kelrian, Glam, and Endel will go to the crash site and assist the Admiral. " We nod in understanding. Before he leaves with his rescue force, Tek takes me, Jevin, and Sid aside.

"Protect Cade. Please. Make sure no harm comes to him. He is a strong boy but I fear the effects of the war on him." With that, the commander and his team move out, sprinting between cover, moving towards the far-off cruiser nestled in the sand dunes. "Right," I say to the remaining commandos, "we have a job to do, let's go!" With that we move off toward the rendezvous point . . .

Jevin Corso - Daxam IV, Outer Rim Territories

There it is. He's brought down the *Sentinel* with the Force. I've seen plenty of ships go down in my time, but never while they were perfectly functional. We split off from Tek's team; they're going to the remains of the *Sentinel* to get Kerex and his crew. We can't afford to lose a tactician like Kerex. He might be the best fleet officer we've got, besides Ackbar, of course. Our team is heading on to the rendezvous site, where Commander Skywalker is coordinating a counterattack. Everyone seems to be in a daze.

Watching a ship crash, especially one of the beautifully created Mon Cals, is hard to see.

Everyone's keeping a good pace. Farani is leading the group through the canyons. Cade is slightly falling behind; it's hard to tell if he is tired or just in shock. I shout at Cade to kick into high gear. Wodi comes over to me and murmurs, "Lay off just a tad Jevin, we just saw a lot." I ask "Why, if he's going to be a soldier, might as well start now." "Well, aside from the fact that he is *not* a soldier," Wodi says in a disapproving tone, "he's Mothma's nephew. He's just a kid. Not that I'm saying he wants special attention, but he's strong with the Force. And think about it, if the Force lets him feel all this chaos out here," he gestures out at the debris pitted dunes with his arm, "imagine what he's going through now."

Feeling suddenly regretful, I backtrack to Cade. "I'm sorry for that. How are you holding up?" Cade replies "Holding. Wodi's right you know. I can sense Luke feeling the same thing. All this death." We carry on in silence.

It's quiet. Too quiet. All of a sudden, TIE interceptors rush overhead, lasers striking the dunes very near us. I yell for the others to dash to cover, desperately wishing we had air support. As we are in cover, Cade reaches into my pack and grabs a portable rocket launcher. "I said stay in cover!" I say in protest.

In response, Cade holds up a hand to shut me up. He brings the launcher up . . . and closes his eyes! Wodi glances at him, alarmed. "What are you doing? You're out in the open!"

Cade then fires, the rocket blast kicking up sand. We watch the rocket clip the Interceptor on the wing, causing it to spin out of control and into another passing TIE fighter, destroying both craft in a ball of fire. We all look back to Cade with faces of awe. He gives us a small smile and says, "Let's move on." There are more TIEs and a *Sentinel* shuttle coming straight toward our position, however. Right when it seems we are all dead, a group of Y-wings fly in, led by one of our best pilots, Tan Gua'arsh.

They zoom in, and in brilliant flashes, the shuttle bursts into flames, crashing into the dunes along with the other TIEs. "*You're all clear Captain Corso. Good thing we were passing through.*" "Acknowledged," I reply, "thanks."

We keep going toward the rendezvous. We're nearly there when we hear another engine shriek. Just then, we see the matte *Lambda*-class shuttle heading toward the base. Cade suddenly whispers, "Xander is on that shuttle." I look to Ralen, Wodi, Sid, and the rest. Sid, ever optimistic, says, "Let's move it! I've got to get back to my blue milk flatcakes!" And with that we move out. I say, in a gruff voice, "For all these near-death encounters, we all deserve promotions." Everyone grunts in agreement . . .

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix - Daxam IV, Outer Rim Territories

Sid, Cade, and three commandos have elected to stay behind from our group to make sure that Commander Tek and his rescue team have returned safely with the Admiral and his crew. They will meet up with us at checkpoint kappa. The remainder of our group, including myself, Jevin, Amminius, Ralen, and the five remaining Rancor commandos: Rast Makinen, Marcus Farlander, Janev Tomax, Tanner Bendix, and Orin Langley have continued onward toward the Fourth's position. It's midday, and Daxam's twin suns are high in the sky burning down on us, making our trek all the more taxing. I remind my team to ration their water supply, making sure to make stops under the bits of wreckage that litter the landscape for re-hydration and rest breaks. It's eerily quiet in this area; the battle that took place here has moved elsewhere. If I strain my ears, I can hear the faint echoes of blaster fire in the distance. Even so, we must be cautious; the ground is littered with corpses and wreckage that strews the sand dunes. One misstep could end in sprained ankle, or worse. Comms are patchy at best this far out. I hear a curse and look back to see Jevin recovering from stumbling over the half-buried form of a stormtrooper. He glares at it angrily before moving on. "I suggest we take another rest, Wodi." Ralen advises me a few minutes later. I agree, and we take shelter behind the metal carcass of an AT-ST. I lean against its metal surface, and quickly retract my burning hand and arm. *Smart move, Wodi*, I think to myself as I unhook my water

bottle from my belt and take a swig. After our quick respite, we trek onward. I pass by a downed TIE interceptor, still smoking from its crash, and pause when I hear a faint banging noise. I look to the TIE, and hear the noise again. I walk over to it, peering into the grimy viewport. I wipe away some of the grit to get a better view of the interior when . . . a black-gloved fist pounds against the inside of the viewport. I reel backwards, tripping over my legs and landing in the sand. Makinen pulls me to my feet, and carefully, the rest of the group approaches the downed fighter to stand beside me. "Looks like the pilot survived the crash," Bendix comments. "Pity." Langley replies, making the others snigger. He, along with the rest of my group, starts to move away from the TIE. "Hey," I yell to them, "what are you going to do, leave him here to bake?" "He's an Imperial," Jevin says bluntly, "he deserves no better. Besides, if his kind came across one of our pilots in distress, they'd just blast him in the face before moving on." His words roll around in my head for a moment. "Well," I reply, making up my mind, "we aren't Imperials." With that, I take the butt of my A280 and slam it against the TIE's viewport repeatedly until cracks spider web outwards and the transparisteel shatters. Using my blaster's barrel, I make a hole large enough for me to climb through. Tangles of exposed wire hang everywhere. Moving carefully into the wreckage, I lay my eyes on the pilot. He sits slightly sideways in his seat, part of his crash webbing still holding him in place. He turns his helmeted head a fraction to look at me before turning it

away again to rest on the back of the seat. Holding my hands up to show him I mean no harm, I sling my A280C by its strap over my shoulder and carefully untangle the rest of his body from his crash webbing. He offers little resistance, but gasps and cringes visibly when I move him from his seat. Bracing against his weight, I carefully help guide him out of his fighter's ruined cockpit. My group watches me as I position him against the cool side of his fighter's wing sticking out of the sand a few feet from the cockpit. I bring my hands back to find that my gloves are slick with crimson blood. In his dark fighter, I could not gauge his injuries, but now that it's lighter I see the full extent of the damage. I try to hide my horror. A particularly large piece of shrapnel juts out from his abdomen. The surrounding torn black flight suit is smeared in red. "Medic," I yell back to my group, gesturing at the pilot. When no one moves, I yell frantically "Medic! Where's the kriffing medic?" Tomax, being the medic, hastily steps from our group and comes to my side, examining the Imperial, making sure to first take the pilot's blaster out of its holster and throw it off into the sand. I glare at him. The pilot resists Tomax's touch at first, but soon relaxes. After a while, Tomax looks at me and shakes his head, silently mouthing 'no'. The pilot fumbles with his helmet, trying to remove it. I assist him, taking off his mask to reveal a man not much older than me. He has short black hair and dark skin that is deathly pale due to the amount of blood loss. A thin line of blood runs out of his mouth and down his lips. I

suddenly realize that Amminius and Ralen have joined me and Tomax. The pilot struggles to focus on us, coughs, and then speaks: ". . . Please, in my flight suit . . . pocket, there's a round holo . . . projector. Get it for me." I locate the pocket on his thigh and extract the holoprojector and hand it to him. He depresses the button and a blue image flickers to life, showing a beautiful young woman and little girl smiling and waving. Tears well in his eyes as he gazes at them. The pilot's eyes flick up to us before focusing on me. "There is a code cylinder on my . . . belt. Give it to them . . . please. I recorded a . . . m-message." "What's your name?" I ask him. "Travar . . . Luss." I retrieve the cylinder from his belt and place it in my flak jacket pocket securely. He nods a silent 'thank you' and looks at our group before giving us all a weak smile. "You . . . rebel scum aren't so bad after all." His eyes return to his family, continuously smiling and waving. He lets out a contented sigh. It's the last sound he ever makes. Amminius reaches over and replaces his helmet on his head before gently turning off the air supply hoses that connect his life support chest piece to his helmet. I sit there on my haunches, trying to process my emotions. Finally, I say to nobody in particular, "I want to bury him." I stand up and notice my whole group has gathered around the fallen pilot, heads bowed. Ralen takes a large piece of shrapnel out of the sand and hands it to me, touching my arm gently. With my makeshift shovel, I dig a hole in the soft sand deep enough to lay Travar in. With Amminius' help, we gently lay the pilot, his gloved hands grasping

his holoprojector over his chest, into the hole. Ralen replaces the loose sand and compacts it, creating a little grave. Using the sharp end of a piece of shrapnel, I inscribe Travar's name on a piece of metal before sticking it in the sand at the head of his grave. We stand there silently for a few moments before Jevin taps me on the shoulder, speaking softly. "We should go. The others should already be at checkpoint kappa." With that, we move off, leaving the smoldering wreckage of the TIE interceptor behind us . . .

Jevin Corso - Daxam IV, Outer Rim Territories

We leave the smoldering TIE Interceptor behind, a solemn feeling over the rest of the group. I walk on, still showing a visible frustration. "You know," Wodi says, "if there were more Imperials like Travar, this war would be over a lot sooner." With that, I spin around, a slow anger boiling inside of me. How could Wodi say that? I was born in the last years of the Republic and had been fighting this war longer than any of them. "No, if it wasn't for Palpatine and his sycophants, we wouldn't be fighting this war. His troops are just as bad as he is!" With that, we trek on silently through the cold desert climate, heading to Kappa checkpoint and toward Gamma base. Ralen chimes in, "That distress signal is still going. What do you think it is? I thought the Imperials were still concentrated elsewhere." "Who knows?" I reply. "But we'll soon find out. I have a bad feeling about it."

We finish our march through the sand and there it is, Gamma Base. Odd thing is though, the base looks untouched. No blast marks, no missing pieces of building, no signs of explosions. "Rifles up," I say in a low voice. We cautiously walk in through the open door to the base's interior, and are met with . . . nothing. "Tek," I say into my wrist comm. "*Tek here. Whatcha got?*" Comes back the response. "The kriffing base is empty." "*What? That's not possible. The distress signal said they were under heavy attack?*" "I know," I say. "We'll check it out. Make sure Kerex and his men live, otherwise this will all be for nothing." "Affirmative, Donir is heading over your way with some guys we crossed paths with. May the Force be with you, old friend." He clicks out. We continue through the deserted base until we hit

the personnel quarters, a nasty stench filling our noses. Looking in, we see bodies, lots of bodies . . . dead bodies. But there are no blaster marks. They look like nothing hit them. Wodi goes over to examine one. "Check this out, lightsaber marks." "Well great, that narrows it down. Xander must be in here." Amminius speaks up, "We'd better disable the beacon, or someone else might come looking for these guys." "You and Langley find the command center and turn off the signal." "Got it." He and Langley head off back down the corridor. Wodi, myself, and the rest continue on. The amount of dead keeps growing, a pit growing in my stomach at the same time. One man did all this? Then again, I shouldn't be surprised. I saw holos of what Vader did on his own to unfortunate rebels. Finally we come to the medical ward of the base.

There, sitting cross-legged and facing away from us, is Xander. More rebel bodies are strewn about him. "Welcome," he says in a gravelly voice. His cloak and helmet are back on, giving him a slightly modulated voice. "I assume you came looking for these?" He says, gesturing to the bodies around him. Wodi grabs my arm, trying to pull me back, but I shrug him off. Turning around and whispering to him I say, "Take the others, get that signal offline, and get off planet. I'll cover you." Slowly, the look of realization shines in his eyes. "No, oh no, there is no way we're leaving you here with that . . . *that thing!*" Looking Wodi directly in the eyes and grabbing his shoulders, I tell him, "That's an order Sergeant, my time is done." Wodi protests but when it's evident I'm set on this, he gives up. I give him my rifle, bandoleer, and pack. With one last look at me, he says "Force be with you Jevin," and leads the commandos back down the hallway.

With that, I turn to Xander, still sitting there, silent. "Xander, you and me," I yell at him, "hand-to hand, no Force, no lightsaber!" He stands, taking off the cloak and helmet and turns, smiling. "Very well, if you wish death so much, my nemesis, then I will oblige." He throws his pike in a corner and we charge. The next events are too fast to describe. I managed to land a blow on him. Thanks to years of training under the Battle Masters of Espirion and experience from the Galactic Civil War, I had learned a few tricks. I was managing to fight Xander evenly. That is, until a hard open-palmed hit to the face. My vision going blurry, I pull out a military issue combat knife. Through the blood in my eyes, I can see him smile, his yellow eyes burning

in my vision. We tumble again and going for a desperate move, I somersault past him and jam the knife in his right thigh.

I roll away from him and stand back up, combat ready. He just stands there, the knife in his leg. He regards it for a moment before lightly taking it out and throwing it aside. If there was any pain, he did not show it. We charge again, but I make a mistake. He jams a foot into my ankle, causing me to trip forward, then grabs my neck and, with the momentum, slams me back into the ground.

Spitting blood out while looking at him I yell, "Finish it!" determined not to go out like a coward. He smiles, those yellow eyes still burning. "As you wish." He summons the lightsaber pike to him with a flick of his hand and walks slowly toward me, smiling with relish.

Jevin Corso - Gamma Base, Daxam IV, Outer Rim Territories

I close my eyes and see my parents. *Hiss*. The lightsaber ignites. I listen intently to hear the motion of the pike. And at the last second, I roll to the right, springing to my feet, my ankle on fire. I hear the enraged snarl of Xander at the denial of an easy kill, but he just stands there and says, "Run, little tooka." I'm wobbling my way through Gamma Base, my only thought being that Wodi and Cade made it off this pit of a planet. I risk a glance behind me to see that Xander intends to make a game of this. He's following, but walking at a leisurely pace. "Sithspit!" I say as I trip over some wiring. A dark laugh emanates from behind me.

I keep wandering through the base, looking for the command center. If I can't take him down the old way, I'll just blow him to Malachor. I enter the command center, Xander still slowly following. I slam the blast door shut and barricade it, hoping it'll give me some time. I look for it, where is it? *Rap Rap*. A polite knock? I hesitantly glance towards the door. Xander's on the other side, not even trying to open the door. He clearly wants me to try what I'm planning, if only to show that he is unstoppable.

"You know, even if you kill me," he says, "my master is still here. He will destroy your friends and end this insignificant Rebellion." "Kriff it!" I yell at him, hearing a slight chuckle in response. I find the self-destruct command

terminal and prime it for a voice activation, using my authentication codes and back up toward a wall. Many rebel bases were built with secret escape hatches that were specially sealed to protect the occupants from anything short of a Star Destroyer.

Just then, the blast doors are wrenched open, Xander clearly having lost his patience. Hissing at me he says, "You will not stand in the way of my destiny! I will be ruling by my master's side!" Glancing at him through bloodied eyes, I say in a hoarse voice, "Did you forget about Vader?" He just chuckles again, a deep, sinister sound. He advances, clearly missing the activated terminal, his focus solely on me. But he stops when he sees the smug expression on my face. Looking up, he says, in a half threatening, half nervous voice, "You wouldn't." Glaring at him, I think of all the atrocities committed by the Empire, and more importantly, by the Sith who ruled it. I see my parents corpses strewn on Carida, Alderaan's destruction, the enslavement of thousands of beings . . . and with a snarl I respond, "You kriffing bet I do!" And with that I say, "Corso Alpha One!" "*Code acknowledged, base self destruct in five seconds.*" With that I dive into the escape hatch, sealing the exit to the base . . . "*one.*" The next few seconds are all a blur. All I remember is seeing a lightsaber jam through the hatch and the *BOOM!* I black out, thinking there's no way he survived but with that nagging feeling that he'll be back.

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix - Daxam IV, Outer Rim Territories

After our team disables the signal in Gamma Base, we get out of there, rendezvousing with Tek and his team before heading to our extraction point on the other side of the dunes. 'It's a mess out there', I'm told by a Duros lieutenant when we arrive at the extraction point, his blue head covered in sweat and grit. The Imperials have been relentlessly pushing our guys back, coming at them with walkers, TIEs, and heavy weapons. Our numbers are being relentlessly cut. *Kriff*, it's Tatooine all over again. The Imperials continue to dominate the sky, and it's by sheer luck that one of our MC80s managed to send three GR-75 medium transports to our location. About twelve dozen battered rebel troops are shuffling into the transports, some being helped by their comrades and others wheeled up the boarding ramps on hover-gurneys. Bendix, Tomax, and Farlander separate from our little group, aiding in the loading of troops and what's left of the supplies. A small

squad of X-wings sits by the transports, ready to take off and defend the retreating troops. We wait another two hours on the hot dunes as more rebel troops get to our position and are put on the transports. A small band of medics and droids assist the most critically injured. I keep checking my chrono, watching the minutes drag by. Ralen, Amminius, Langley, Makinen, and I help the worn-out troops and commandos that come to the checkpoint, giving them water, encouragement, and comfort. Even though none of us say it, we are all waiting in anticipation to hear from Jevin. Tek and I make eye contact a couple of times, and each time, he shakes his green head. Nothing. Our whole team is anxious. Sid gets my attention while I'm lifting a crate, giving me an inquiring look. I shake my head. The stream of troops outside our transports gradually thins, until it's just me, Ralen, Amminius, Lafco, Sid, Tek, Malogaan, Endel, Kelrian, Glam, Makinen, Farlander, Tomax, Bendix, Langley, and Cade standing out in the sand with the Duros lieutenant. He taps Tek on the shoulder, saying to our group "That's it. Anyone not aboard the transports didn't make it. I'm sorry." He ascends the boarding ramp. "Well . . . *kriff*," says Malogaan after the Duros has gone, "maybe Jevin's on his way and just forgot to check in." Our group remains silent. Cade stands absolutely still with his eyes closed. *Poor kid*, I think to myself. "It's . . . extremely unlikely." I eventually say. I motion to the others. It's time to go. "Come on!" I prompt my team. "Let's get on the transport." We start to head toward the last GR-75 when Cade yells, "We can't just give up on Jevin!" Sid kneels down, grunting as he places pressure on his injured knee, to Cade's level and says sympathetically, "Look Cade, we'd all like to believe that he's alive, but-" Cade interrupts Sid, saying with intensity, "I *know* he's alive! I can feel him!" Our whole group turns toward Cade, hopeful. Could it be? "Are you sure, son?" Inquires Tek. "Yes," Cade nods assuredly, "I can feel his life through the Force. It's faint, but it's there." "Back at Gamma Base?" I ask him. I suddenly hear booted feet rapidly approaching our group and turn to see Kaelara Starlight with Admiral Kerex. "Yes," she answers, "I can feel him as well. The Admiral gestures over a dune with his webbed hand: "We have a stolen *Lambda* shuttle and are at the ready to assist you. Myself and Starlight can get you there. Just say the word." "Well then, what are we still doing here then?" Shouts Sid excitedly. "Let's go!" We all race after the eager Sullustan, with Tek speaking into his wrist comlink: "Yes, you heard me right, take off now. We have some business to attend to and will meet up with the fleet at the rendezvous point." Behind us, the ion engines of the GR-75s and X-wings

roar to life, kicking up sand. We board our rescue shuttle with Kerex and Starlight at the controls. We all strap ourselves in. With a soft whine, the engines come to life and we're off, headed back towards Gamma. "Hang on Jevin," I say softly to myself, "we're coming." . . .

Jevin Corso - Unknown planet

It's cold. The last thing I remember before the excruciating pain and darkness was the explosion in the command center on Daxam IV. It actually worked as I had planned. Xander, of course, survived. How, I don't know. The Force sure is something. I open my eyes. I'm in a lab of some kind, strapped to a cold table. The walls look like they are made up of some kind of jet black rock. I look around. To my relief, there aren't any tubes or wiring in me. Thank the Force I'm not being experimented on. "Ah, finally my prisoner awakens," says a dark, ominous voice. "You were out for quite a while there." Xander is standing right next to me.

"Kriff you!" I yell at him. "What do you want?" He gives me a look and responds with a gesture to my forehead. "I want what's in here. You are a Captain in Princess Leia's honor guard, that means you are entitled to some big secrets of the Alliance." I gaze at him with a straight face, "There's nothing in there that'll be of use to you." Laughing lightly, he just says, "Let's find out." Little does Xander know, but I had a cybernetic implant that I received before Tatooine. It was an idea by Alpha unit and Rancor Team, in case of capture. Unfortunately, due to limited funds, I was the only one able to get the implant. While Xander gets secrets out of me, the implant transmits my location. I only hope he doesn't sense the implant. Xander raises a hand and places his fingers on my temples. They're cold as ice. Then, the pain starts. First as an unpleasant feeling, then a full-on force of unending tendrils of twisted fire. I cry out, the sound echoing throughout the cavernous room. A long time passes.

"Your friends will come," Xander says after an eternity, "but I have...methods for intruders." He displays a devilish grin. "I will destroy you and your little *Rancor Team* in one fell swoop, finally ridding the Empire of another thorn in its side. And then we will crush the Rebellion, Skywalker, and your precious Princess Leia!" He walks away to check on his personal ship, a one-of-a-kind TIE Hunter. I can see him on a nearby monitor. I glance around, trying to see if there is some way I can break free, but the

restraints are rock solid. My only hope now is that the implant is transmitting to the *Falcon*, a secret deal Han and I agreed on. In the meantime, I'll practice the meditation techniques Cade taught me and bide my time until there's an opening. I glance out a window in the lab, to a jungle scene. A storm is raging outside. Hurry guys, please, I hope you are getting the information from the implant. I don't know how much more mind probing I can stand.

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix - Planet X8656367, Unknown Regions

"There's your planet," Han Solo remarks to our small rescue team, assembled in the confined cockpit and interconnecting hallway of the *Falcon*, looking at the freighter's main computer screen. "X8656367." We all look out the viewport to see a planet almost entirely covered in green. Even the atmospheric tint looks to be of a forest color. "Looks like intel *was* correct," Amminius remarks, clipping his E-11 to his belt, "It's almost entirely a jungle world." I smile at this. We had researched the planet Jevin's signal had been coming from before making the voyage to the Unknown Regions. The results were next to non-existent. "There's no telling what'll be waiting for us on the surface," I say, turning back to my team, "so be extra careful. We'll be wearing Roamer-6 breath masks, just in case the planet's atmosphere is poisonous, given that it's Type II." I clip my mask to my belt while checking the oxygen gauge on the small tank. "Should we risk open comms once planetside?" Asks Malogaan, tapping his wrist-comlink. "No," I say, "keep them scrambled and on a separate frequency. On my mark, scramble and set to channel three . . . Mark!" We all scramble and set our comlinks to channel three. A two-beep tone sounds to confirm the change. An alarm sounds on the *Falcon*'s control board, alerting us that we have breached the planet's atmosphere. "Here we go." Han says. I strap on my helmet and slip my trusty EC-17 scout pistol into its small holster. "Ready?" I ask my team. Heads nod all around. We look out the viewport again to see giant, towering trees obscuring much of the forest floor. A grayish mist covers the entire area, making the scanners all but useless. "Looks like we're flying blind." Han mutters, easing the *Falcon* over a break in the foliage. I nod to my teammates, who strap their breath masks over their faces. Blasters are primed with full charges, and equipment is given one final check. "I hope Tek and the others on Elara are alright." Says Endel. "Last I heard, the Empire was planning to send a particularly nasty assault force their way."

"They'll be fine." Says Sid, sheathing a long vibroblade. "Tek's a good leader. He and Lafco will look after the others." A soft bump reverberates through the ship. We've landed. We gather around the closed boarding ramp, ready. Han joins us after powering down the *Falcon*, strapping his own breath mask to his face. "Let's hope this planet smells a little nicer than that space slug, huh?" He says to us, his voice a little muffled from the mask. I don't know what he's talking about, but shrug and nod, pressing the button to lower the ramp. The ramp descends and we cautiously file out. My first reaction as I step out is to gag. This planet smells worse than a waste disposal unit. "Ugh," Glam retches, "it smells awful." "Well, what do you expect a planet that's harboring a crazed Sith to smell like?" Amminius jokingly replies. I grin. His humor never fails. As we stand there, surveying the jungle, another thing becomes apparent. It's hot. Really hot. The humidity doesn't help things either, making the heat and smell even more unbearable. I gesture to Endel, who takes a pair of green painted macrobinoculars from around his neck and hands them to me. I look through them, scanning the terrain. "See anything?" Han asks me at my shoulder. "No, all I can really see from here are leaves and fog." I reply. I adjust the magnification. Still nothing. I hand the binocs back to Endel. "Before we set off on your wild bantha chase, help me camouflage the *Falcon*." Han says to our group. We all grab giant leaves and ferns to cover the ship. Once that is accomplished, we set off, Ralen off to my right checking his scanner. The trek is something else. Roots and dead branches constantly threatened to trip us up, with slick, bluish moss covering about every surface. I have to catch Sid's arm so as not to have him fall flat on his face. Apart from the normal sounds in a forest, everything is eerily quiet. Our footsteps on the dead twigs and underbrush sound like cannon blasts. We see a clearing ahead in the forest and head for it. "Maybe we'll have a better sense of the surroundings if we go through-" I start to say when we enter the clearing and I stop talking. The clearing we just entered, while not particularly large, is strewn with bodies in dirty white armor. I walk over and examine one of the white-armored figures. The armor is decorated with faded orange paint, with black lines running down the torso and lower body. A symbol adorns the mostly orange shoulder armor of each figure: a starbird. The knee and elbow armor is segmented, bringing to mind clone troopers. But these fallen soldiers are definitely not clone troopers. The helmet, while having a T-shaped visor, does not have a fin on top. The visor appears broader than that of a clone's as well. I look to the soldiers' armored thighs, where a

large, capital H adorns the side of the grimy white belt spats. Strewn around the orange troopers are pieces of ancient debris and rusted and corroded shrapnel of droids, models I don't recognize. The droids are black. "This battle happened *long* before the rise of Palpatine's Empire," says Ralen softly, "I doubt even *he* was even alive when this happened." I nod, staring in awe at this ancient carnage. I notice a scrap of droid at my feet. A red symbol covers much of the surface. I pick it up and examine it more closely. The symbol reminds me of the Imperial insignia, but in the shape of a hexagon instead of a circle. I drop the fragment and motion to my team to keep moving. We exit the clearing and continue on through the jungle, Ralen checking his scanner. *At least it's not below freezing here*, I think to myself, my thoughts drifting towards the others stationed on Elara . . .

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix - Planet X8656367, Unknown Regions

"Do you hear that?" Malogaan asks our group suddenly. We all stop dead in our tracks, listening intently. All I can hear are the sounds of the jungle. I am about to tell Malogaan so when *CRACK, CRACK, CRACK*. "Something's coming!" Amminius says in a hoarse whisper. Without a word, I gesture to my team to take cover. Han and I take cover behind a massive, mossy tree trunk while the others do likewise among other jungle foliage. More cracks can be heard. I see Endel cautiously scanning the terrain with his macrobinoculars. "*Maybe it's an animal.*" Sid suggests, his voice coming through softly on my comm. Either way, we all have our blasters at the ready, waiting. Endel is still scanning the terrain when, slightly off to our right, five metallic forms make their way through the underbrush. I catch my breath. They're droids. And by the looks of it, three of them are the exact kind we saw dismantled back in the clearing. The droids stand on four legs, low to the ground. A pair of arms jut out from their torsos, each sporting a nasty looking double-barreled blaster cannon. The head is large and boxy, with a menacing red photoceptor at the front. They remind me of Separatist droidekas from the Clone Wars, but of a much older design. The other two droids are unmistakable however. Tall and humanoid looking, painted black, red, and gray, with two red photoceptors, complete with head cowls and knee-length tattered capes. Magnaguard droids. Each Magnaguard carries a long staff. "*Kriff*", I mutter under my breath. The droids continue forward, seemingly unaware of our presence. I carefully pull a thermal detonator from my belt, waiting for them to pass our position. Once the clanking of the

droids' limbs fades, I peak out of cover to see . . . a pair of red photoceptors gazing at me. "Bloah!" I yell, falling backward. The action saved my life. The magnaguard punches the area of tree where my head just was, splintering the bark and leaving a dent in the wood. Han shoots the droid in the head with his DL-44, sending up a shower of sparks. The droid falls to the ground. The other droids are coming, hurrying back to our position. Han pulls me to my feet and we take cover behind the tree again. The droids crash through the foliage, shooting off a volley of red lasers. We duck back in cover, the lasers splintering the tree bark. Malogaan and Ralen lay down covering fire as I prime and lob my detonator. It bounces off one of the four-legged droids' heads before exploding, sending out a wave of heat and destruction. Two of the droids fall to the ground in a pile of melted metal and circuits. That leaves one magnaguard and the last droideka-like droid. The others pour fire into the last four-legged droid. It's tough, but it eventually falls to the forest floor. I quickly unhook my MPL-57 grenade launcher from my belt and fire off a volley at the last droid, but it dodges my grenades easily. It jumps and vaults off of a tree trunk, using its momentum to slam into Glam and Sid. An "oof" issues from both Glam and Sid as they are knocked to the ground. Endel fires on the magnaguard, but quickly ducks back into cover when a trio of red lasers comes his way. Looks like the last "droideka" still has some fight left in it. Han shoots it right in the photoceptor. The magnaguard is on top of Glam now. It ignites its staff, and I see purple electricity emanating from its tips. Without thinking, I charge forward, determined to knock the droid off Glam. I tackle the thing, pinning it against the ground. Sid quickly helps Glam to his feet. With surprising strength, the magnaguard throws me off it, sending me flying into a rotting log. I hit it and immediately get the wind knocked out of me. The droid walks toward me, its staff raised for the kill when a volley of blaster fire hits it right in the chest. The droid comes to a halt, and then falls to its knees. Sid runs up and jams his vibroblade into the top of the droids' head. The magnaguard's photoceptors go dark. It then topples onto the log beside me. Sid retrieves his blade, wiping off the oil from the tip. He heaves me to my feet, saying "You owe me one Quix." We survey the destroyed droids before Amminius says, "These bolt bags must have been sent by Xander." I nod and look around before my eyes come to rest on a tall black tower I hadn't seen before due to the mist and trees. I point at it, remarking, "If I had to guess where Xander was hiding, I'd wager it'd be there." "I wonder if Xander can see what's happening through the droids' eyes" Sid says. He walks over to a

droid head, picks it up, and gives a very inappropriate hand gesture in front of its photoceptor. I roll my eyes, suppressing a smile. "Come on, let's go!" We move off, heading towards the tall black tower framed by fog and foliage in the distance. I can't shake the feeling that we are being watched, however . . .

Jevin Corso - Planet X8656367, Unknown Regions

"Your friends are resourceful, I'll give them that." Xander says as he walks back into the room. "Several of the Sith droids, they managed to handle. But I have a new surprise for them." He smirks. "In the meantime, let us resume the interrogation." He presses a button on a remote, and I scream.

. . .

Several hours later, Xander is gone. Quickly, I fidget with my hands, still shackled. Suddenly, they release! It was too easy, the restraints weren't even loose. But, knowing time was of the essence, I get out and stumble into the dark hallway. Little did I know, I was playing into Xander's trap. I wobble myself to an armory. There's a fully charged RT-97C sitting on a cluttered table. I grab it, along with several spherical detonators, and exit back into the corridor. Suddenly, I hear a roar. A ferocious roar that shakes the walls. And I see it. A giant, mutated Rancor heading out into the jungle from the base of the tower. They're real!? I thought Sithspawn were only a bedtime story to scare children. I hope Rancor Team stays out of its way. That thing looks like it's impervious to anything short of a lightsaber.

"Well done, my friend." Xander laughs over an intercom. *"Now let's see how a lone, wounded man fares against my droids."* And with that, several slots on the walls open and out come droids that look like Separatist Magnaguards. Throwing a detonator and falling back, my only hope is that Rancor Team will make it in time to help. Xander's right on one thing: A lone fighter against these things has no chance.

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix - Planet X8656367, Unknown Regions

The heat and smell from the alien forest seems to grow more unbearable and foul as the blue sun rises higher in the sky. Perspiration runs down from

my forehead, drenching my face and making my eyes sting. My clothes are drenched from sweating and my equipment seems to weigh one hundred kilos. I look back to my comrades. They don't seem to be faring any better than I am. I give them all an encouraging thumbs up sign and a cheerful "We're almost there!" As we trek closer to the looming black tower, the air grows clammier. There are more breaks in the trees and ground cover now, and debris from the ancient battle that occurred here grows more numerous. We pass by destroyed starfighters, droids, and many more soldiers clad in filthy white and orange armor. The trees here are still scarred from blaster bolt burns and explosive marks. Chunks of flak are buried in the ruined bark, and long black horizontal slashes frequent the surface. We step carefully around the carnage, but apparently not carefully enough. With an "oof" Sid falls to the ground next to a rotting corpse wearing a tattered black cloak. Amminius helps him to his feet, Sid muttering curses at the object that tripped up his feet. He picks it up. "This blasted shiny cylinder . . ." Sid hits the long cylinder with his free hand. With a *snap-hiss*, a crimson blade comes to life from one end. "Whoa, that's a lightsaber." Says Endel in awe. Our whole group gathers around Sid, but not too closely, to admire his find. "Careful with that thing, you'll lop your hand off." Han says to him. With a shrug, Sid deactivates the saber and clips it to his belt next to his vibroblade. "Let's move on" I say to our group, "we have to find Jevin." I take a step forward, and the ground shakes. "Whoa Quix, you gotta lay off the nerf steak!" Jokes Sid. Another shiver through the ground causes some debris off to our left to clatter to the ground. "What the?" Glam remarks when a terrifying roar shatters the silent forest. "What the kriff is that?" We all back into a defensive circle, blasters primed and at the ready. "I'll tell you one thing" Han replies, his DL-44 sweeping the trees, "it isn't a grazing bantha." Amminius starts to say something witty when a gigantic beast crashes through the trees. "Rancor!" Shouts Ralen. We scramble out of the charging animal's path, taking cover behind wreckage and foliage. The rancor, like the surrounding trees, is green in color. Its gaping maw contains hundreds of sharp teeth, and its short tail slams the ground angrily. Its beady eyes scan the forest, searching for its prey. Us. "That's like no rancor I've ever seen." Says Amminius in a whisper. He peers out from behind a gap in some branches with his E-11, looking at the beast through his scope. He's right. The rancor's body is covered in needle spikes and other strange grafts. Its eyes burn with a fierce intelligence uncommon in the species. It is also considerably larger than what is considered normal. I gaze at the

creature, in a mix of fascination and fear. I adjust my footing, and my boot snaps a twig. The beast's monstrous head turns our way, and I stop breathing. With a bellow, the rancor charges toward our hiding spot. "Scatter!" I yell. We dive out from our cover just as the rancor makes contact with it, splintering the trees and metal. Immediately, we begin to pour blaster fire into the beast. The rancor shakes its head and lets out an angry howl. "We're just making it angrier!" Yells Malogaan. Even so, we continue to blast the creature. I pull out my MPL-57, launching a volley at the rancor. The detonators explode, shattering some of the spikes, but otherwise having no effect. The rancor turns toward me, an enraged gleam in its eyes. It swipes a clawed hand at me, but I duck out of the way. "Aim for the eyes!" Han yells at us. We follow his advice. The rancor bellows in pain, slamming its fists against the ground. Glam and Endel fall to their knees, knocked back by the shock wave. They get up, but Endel isn't quick enough. The rancor grabs him in its talons, lifting Endel off the forest floor. Endel screams, beating the rancor's clawed fingers with his A280 stock. Ralen uses his jump pack to rocket up, firing a volley into the monster's head. The rancor bellows, letting go of Endel, causing him to fall to the forest floor, thankfully into a bed of moss. Glam runs to Endel and helps him up. The enraged rancor swipes at Ralen as he lands, making contact with the Weequay, sending him flying into the trunk of a tree. Amminius and I begin to run to his position, but are swiped off our feet by a giant raking hand. We tumble into the brush. A moment later, three rotting white and orange armored troopers land on top of us, sent flying by the rancor's fist. Their ancient weapons land with them. An old heavy blaster lands next to me. I shove off the dead troopers with difficulty and pick up the heavy blaster, firing it at the rancor. With a loud *ka-chunk*, a blue plasma bolt rockets toward the beast, hitting it in the side of the head. The rancor bellows and lumbers toward us, its footsteps shaking the ground. Amminius is still pinned under two armored corpses. I attempt to drag them off when a howl deafens me. Stunned by the noise, I fall over into the brush once more. The rancor lowers itself until its head is directly in front of us. Its eyes glitter with malice and its mouth opens wide, its dagger teeth dripping with saliva. Amminius and I close our eyes, waiting for the needle-sharp teeth to sink into us. We hear a *snap-hiss* and smell the acrid odor of burning flesh. We open our eyes to see Sid with his arm in the creature's mouth, his lightsaber's crimson blade embedded into the beast's throat. The rancor lets out a gargled howl, and then falls silent. The spark of life leaves its beady

eyes, and the lifeless corpse topples sideways, loudly thudding to the ground. "Well . . . that wasn't so hard." Han remarks as he and Sid pull Amminius and I to our feet. Our whole group gathers around the dead rancor, Malogaan supporting a limping Ralen. We are all panting. We stand there for a moment, catching our breath. I lean on my new heavy blaster. After a few minutes of silence, we move off again, coming out of the jungle to face the tall black tower to where Jevin is being held, and where Xander is waiting . . .

Jevin Corso - Planet X8656367, Unknown Regions

All I feel is searing pain in my shoulder and back. I had taken two electrostaff hits there. Hard enough to draw blood. I've been steadily falling back, shooting down the droids when I can. I even took one on hand-to-hand, managing to take its electrostaff and jam it the the photoreceptors. When, without warning, the ground shook. A massive death knell followed by a massive quake. The sithspawn must of been taken down somehow.

"Your friends are quite resourceful," Xander says again over the intercom, his voice like silk. "They managed to take down my pet, with a salvaged lightsaber no less. No matter, they still cannot save you." More droids enter and then it hits me. They aren't hunting me, they're pushing me to a certain spot. Looking back, I see what looks like a command room. Glancing in front of me again, I see the Magnaguards just standing there. Too tired to worry if it was a trap, I rush to the room, sealing the door behind me. Putting my ear to the wall, I hear mechanical footsteps growing fainter. The droids left? I turn around and stop cold. No, that's not possible. There's another one! I was looking at schematics for a new, bigger, badder Death Star and a manifest. Parts were being sent through a secret hyperspace lane to some place called the Sanctuary Moon. I quickly grab a nearby datacard and download all the information I can. Intel or the Bothan Spynet can use it. I open the door again to see all the droids have left. I walk down the hall to find what looks like a communication area. I can't figure out how to activate it. Must be powered by Force energy or something. Then I see flimsi files compiled on a desk. They are records on all of us, with one in particular being blank with only a name: Cade Valdarin. Xander, for some reason, seems fixated on Cade. Maybe since he's a Jedi, he is seen as a threat? Doesn't matter at this point. Grabbing the files, I make way to the ground

floor. My one thought being where did Xander go? Did he purposefully make me find these schematics?

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix - Planet X8656367, Unknown Regions

We enter the structure cautiously through a set of ancient stone doors, moving into the tower in a defensive circle, backs pressed against one another. As we move further away from the entrance, the air becomes significantly cooler and the available light wanes. The organic smells of the alien jungle are replaced with a musty smell, as if this place had not seen fresh air in decades, maybe even centuries. We move down the dim corridor, our footsteps echoing in the eerily silent tower. Ralen checks his locator, but the signal is patchy, making the screen break out in static. He mutters a curse and hits it. We continue down the hallway, the dark volcanic walls appearing to change shape and texture. Eerie sculptures and carvings line the walls, depicting shadowy figures locked in combat. A little further down, I order my team to turn their blaster flashlights on. Lights flicker on, making our immediate area bright. All of a sudden, I hear a stifled scream, and quickly turn to see Malogaan standing in place staring at the wall. Hanging there, impaled by a metal spike, is one of the white and orange armored troopers we had seen outside. The spike had gone clean through the chest armor, pinning the corpse in place. I sweep the walls a little farther down to see three other suspended figures, each with a spike protruding through the chest. The corridor ahead of us thins out considerably, only a few feet wide. "I've got a bad feeling about this." Han softly remarks. I nod. "It's a trap," I tell my team, "wander too close to the walls, and you're done for." To prove my theory, I pick up a blaster the impaled trooper closest to us must have dropped and hurl it at one of the three other corpses down the hallway. It strikes the armored figure, making the trooper fall sideways. With a *clang*, another spike shoots out of the rocky wall, impaling the corpse through the armored shoulder. I turn back to the rest of my team. "Move through the corridor in single file on your stomach, as close to the center as possible." I instruct them. We all get down on our stomachs and begin to move slowly down the narrow corridor. The whole way I'm sweating. I want to look back to see my team's progress, but don't dare to turn and raise my head. Finally, the corridor widens considerably. I get up from the ground and crouch by the wall, waiting for the others to join me. Glam is the last one to join us. Even though we are all present, I do a headcount anyways. Once

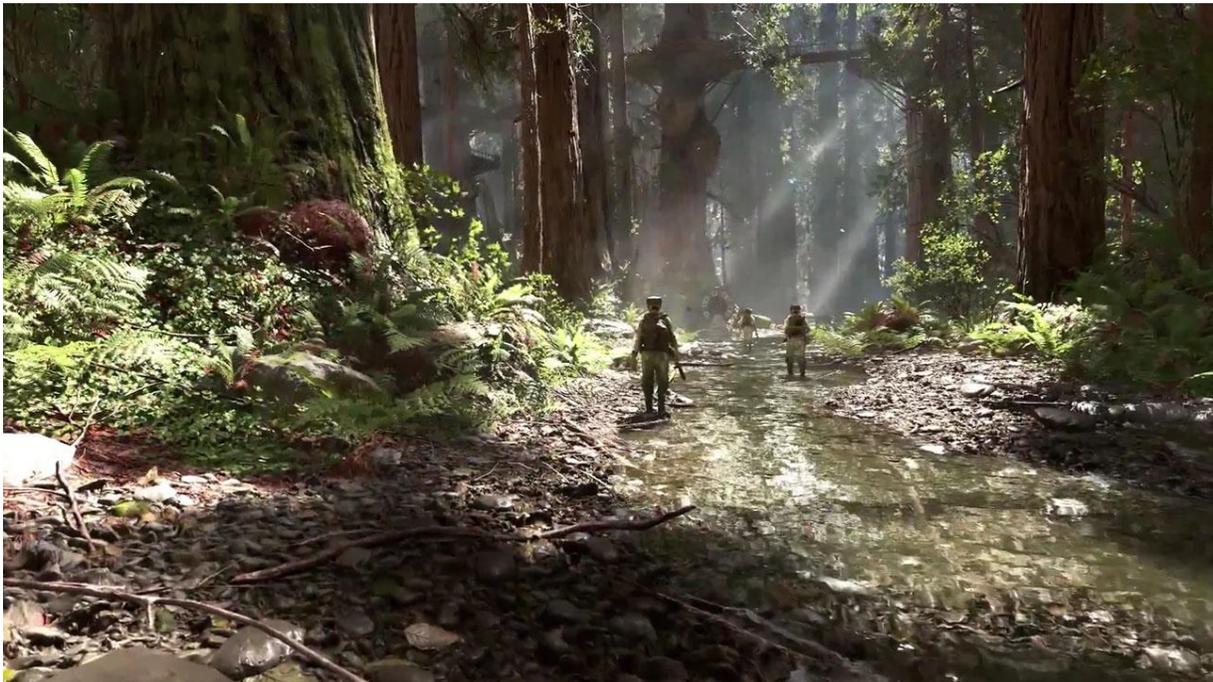
completed, I motion with my hand for us to move on. We continue forward, stepping even more carefully than before, eventually reaching a long flight of stairs. We climb them to find another corridor. "Oh great, now what?" Han says sarcastically. The ground is covered with more armored bodies, with a few brown cloaked corpses among them. "This is starting to dark me out," Endel says, "whoever ran this place obviously didn't like intruders." We step carefully over the bodies, the smell of rot and decay making my throat constrict and my eyes water. Suddenly, we hear a soft *hiss* coming from above us. We all freeze and look up. A green mist is coming down from the ceiling, slowly descending toward us. "Poison gas!" Sid shouts. "Check breath mask seals!" I frantically shout to my team. My gloved hands fly to the small tank hooked to my belt, checking the small readout display. Sealed. I give a thumbs up sign to my team, indicating that my mask is sealed. Thumbs up from the others confirms their masks are working as well. Just then the gas reaches us, alighting on our uniforms and equipment. We all stand unmoving, frozen in place, waiting. A few seconds pass. Then a few minutes. "Did they work?" Han inquires, checking his tank again, then looking to the green coated floor. "I . . . think so." I reply hesitantly. "Well, we're not on the floor, so that's a good sign." Says Amminius, surveying the corpses, also coated in the toxic green mist. After a few seconds, we continue onward, stopping first to clean our gear and clothes, before climbing the flight of stairs at the end of the corridor. We repeat this action until we are halfway up the tower, the dimness slowly growing brighter. Surprisingly, no more traps snap out to kill us. On this floor, we are met with a different sight. "Those are destroyed magnaguard droids." Says Sid. Strewn around the corridor are several magnaguards, each one in various stages of dismemberment. "Jevin must have been through here," I say, "these droids are still smoking." We scan the area, looking for signs of more attackers. There are none. Suddenly we hear rapid footsteps coming from around a bend. I make a motion with my hand, and we all crouch down, our blasters primed. I gaze through my A280's sight, ready to blast the next thing that moved from around the bend when . . . Jevin comes running around the corner at a dead run. "Hold!" I yell to my team. We stand up and I approach my friend. He is out of breath, his eyes a little wild. His hair and beard are unkempt, and his forearms and face are covered in bruises and scratches. In his hands he clutches an RT-97C heavy blaster and a stack of vanilla flimsi files under his arm. "Jevin," I shout, unable to control my excitement and relief, "it's so good to see y-" "Not now," he barks

agitatedly, interrupting me, "you have to see this!" He shoulders his blaster and takes a datacard from the stack of files. Activating it, he holds out the image for all to see. "This was in a room along with the files. It's another Death Star!" We all gasp in astonishment and horror. "That's . . . that's not possible." Says Glam disbelievingly. "It *is* possible!" Jevin affirms angrily. "We have to get this to Alliance High Command. To Mothma, Madine, and Ackbar!" I nod. "Alright Rancor, we got what we came here for. Let's get off this planet!" "This place is full of traps; probably some we haven't encountered yet," Sid reminds us, "how are we going to get out of here without tediously working our way through to the exit?" "There's a secret exit," Jevin says, "I saw Xander use it when he left with a company of shadow troopers." "Xander left?" I ask him. "Where did he go?" "I don't know, but it doesn't matter, we have to deliver these plans." Jevin says. I nod once more and we make our way down the tower and through the jungle towards the *Falcon*. Once we clear the foliage disguise and step onboard, Han primes the engines and my team settles in the crew hold for the long journey home. I send a transmission to Commander Tek and Commander Lafco, updating them on the situation. Lafco gives me their own situation. We all listen as he tells of the losses on Elara. "We need you here!" Lafco finishes, his voice full of urgency. "But, sir, the plans!" Jevin says frantically. "I have arranged for the Bothan Spynet to rendezvous with your ship. They will get the plans and deliver them to Mothma." Lafco assures him. "May the Force be with you all. We'll see you on Endor." Says Tek in his gravelly voice, and the transmission ends. Amminius and I join Han in the cockpit, telling him our newest assignment. "Here we go again." Says Han with one of his lopsided grins. He pushes a lever on the control panel, and the *Falcon* jumps into hyperspace . . .

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix – Forest Moon of Endor, Outer Rim Territories

"Shuttle Tydirium, deactivation of the shield will commence immediately. Follow your present course." The crisp military voice of the Imp technician comes over the *Tydirium's* comms again, and I audibly sigh in relief. "I thought that outdated code would do us in for sure." Says Amminius next to me, equally relieved. I nod and look around the crew cabin of the shuttle. The blue lights of the shuttle's interior bathe us in a cool blue hue, and I see each one of my team's faces relaxing as the built-up tension of a few moments ago dissipates. We made it. "See, I told you it was gonna work."

Says Han from the cockpit to the others. Malogaan grins across from me. I grin as well, shaking my head. I bring my battered A280 up to eye level, checking the power pack. Full. Satisfied, I shoulder my weapon and settle back in my seat, my backpack frame digging into my back. A few seconds later, a light strobos, letting us know that our shuttle is making its landing. I nod to my team. A bump reverberates through the cabin. We've landed on Endor. Everyone gets up, gathering at the closed boarding ramp. We are joined shortly by General Solo, Chewbacca, Princess Leia, Commander Skywalker, all in forest gear, and the two droids. "Here we go." Says Han as he lowers the ramp. We exit cautiously, checking our surroundings. We make our way through the forest, following Han and the others single file.



The gigantic trees dwarf us, and the sun lances down through the gaps in the leaves, bathing us in golden light. "Beautiful, isn't it?" Jevin says, walking next to me for a moment. "It is." I agree. Birds fly high overhead us, singing a pretty melody. I look up at them, and my eyes are drawn to the giant, mostly finished gray orb in the sky. The Death Star. I shudder despite the warmth and lock my eyes straight ahead. We continue to trek through the knee-high grass and ferns until Han gives a motion with his hand. Stop. We immediately halt and crouch down in the foliage, our green camo making us all but invisible. Han, Leia, Luke, and Chewbacca creep up to a fallen log, peering down at a little clearing in the trees. I creep forward as well and look down. Four white-armored figures stand by speeder bikes, unloading gear from the saddles. Scout troopers. I see the others by the log

moving down towards the scouts, ready to deal with them. Han and Chewbacca get behind a tree directly behind the four troopers. Han steps forward, his DL-44 out, and his boot snaps a twig. I wince. The scout in front of him turns around and reacts instantly, immediately knocking Han back into a tree with his arm. But Han is not going down without a fight. He grapples with the trooper, slamming him against the tree trunk. "Go for help. Go!" Yells the scout to his partners. One scout jumps on his bike and takes off, but is soon dispatched when Chewbacca fires a bolt from his bowcaster into the engine of the speeder bike, sending the speeder and its rider smashing into a tree trunk. The other two troopers get on their bikes and gun the engines, roaring off into the trees. Luke and Leia jump on the remaining bike, riding after the escaping troopers. "Hey, wait!" I hear Han yell. The scout takes advantage of the distraction, grabbing Han, but Han flips the scout on his back. Chewbacca then runs to Han's side, firing a bolt into the stunned trooper's chest armor. The two make their way back to our position. "My bet was on the scout." Amminius jokes to him when they arrive. Han gives him a look before leaning back against a tree. He stands there for a minute before turning to us. "We'd better wait here in case Luke and Leia come back. Wouldn't want them to get lost." "Good idea." I agree. "Alright everyone, take five." We all sit down and remove our packs. I take out some rations and my canteen from my belt. Jevin, Amminius, and Sid move over to sit beside me, also taking out their canteens. We sit and talk for a while, enjoying the rest. Sid and I are just getting into a debate regarding how thick a stormtrooper's skull is when the golden protocol droid, 3PO, suddenly exclaims, "General Solo, somebody's coming!" We all stop what we're doing, put our packs back on, and crouch in the brush, waiting, our blasters primed. Suddenly Luke comes through the foliage. Jevin, who is hiding behind a tree trunk, comes out and gives a signal. We stand down, getting up from our positions. Han walks up to Luke. "Luke, where's Leia?" He asks. Luke, looking confused, replies, "What, she didn't come back?" Han looks a little miffed. "I thought she was with you." "We got separated," Luke says, "we'd better go look for her." Han nods and turns to me. "Take the squad ahead, we'll meet you at the shield generator at 0300. I nod and motion with my hand, and our team moves off through the forest. "I hope the Princess is alright." Says Jevin to me. "I hope so too." I say. We continue towards the shield generator. I check my sides constantly. It feels as if we are being watched . . .

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix – Forest Moon of Endor, Outer Rim Territories

Our group meets up with Han and the others at the rendezvous point at precisely 0300. Accompanying them, barely coming up to Han's knees, are two little Ewoks. They slip through the foliage as silently as ghosts, leading us to a ridge overlooking a bunker. Guarding the entrance are four scout troopers. Nearby are four speeder bikes. The troopers stand in a group by the door, conversing with one another, their blaster pistols holstered. Amminius clicks the safety off his E-11, lining up his scope on the nearest scout. I quickly put my hand on his blaster barrel, pushing it down lightly, silently mouthing 'no.' We move stealthily down the ridge to a position off to the right of the bunker entrance and the four scouts. We are hidden by a thicket of bushes and a few trees. I am contemplating how we should take out the troopers without causing a loud racket when 3PO speaks. "Oh my, Princess Leia . . ." Leia quickly places a hand over the droids' mouth to make him talk quieter. 3PO continues: "I'm afraid our furry companion has gone and done something . . . rather rash." We all look to see one of our guides creeping toward one of the speeders. Chewbacca lets out a soft rumble. "Oh no." Leia sighs. "There goes our surprise attack." Han mutters. The Ewok climbs up on the bike, grasping the steering handles, and starts the engine. With a roar, the speeder comes to life. The scouts immediately whirl around toward their bikes. "Look, over there! Stop him!" One yells as three of the scouts start running towards our guide. The Ewok guns the throttle and the bike shoots off into the trees. The three scouts jump on their speeders and quickly race after the Ewok, leaving the last trooper alone at the bunker. Han turns back to our group, grinning. "Not bad for a little fur ball, there's only one left." He turns to the remaining Ewok and the two droids. "You stay here. We'll take care of this." Han leads our group to the side of the bunker. "Watch this." He grins and sneaks around the back of the bunker. Amminius gives me a questioning look and I shrug. "Hey!" I hear the remaining trooper yell. A moment later Han comes running around the front of the bunker back to our position. The scout charges around the corner after him, but stops dead in his tracks when he sees our group. Before the scout has any time to react, Glam and I jump him, knocking him out. I quickly remove the armor and black body glove of the unconscious scout, turning to one of our team scouts, Nik Sant. "Here, put this on. If those scouts come back, they won't suspect anything." Nik nods and suits up. Jevin, Amminius, Malogaan, and myself move to the bunker entrance with Han, Chewbacca, and Leia, leaving

the others to watch the unconscious Imperial. Han takes out his DL-44 and shoots the door lock, causing it to slide open. Our group cautiously enters. Nik positions himself in front of the bunker as the doors close back up. We move silently through the halls toward the control center, Jevin and I carrying the boxy containers holding the charges slung across our shoulders. We come to the control room door, with Solo entering first. We enter to see four Imperials in black tunics and navy helmets at control consoles with one officer, also in a black tunic, standing at a monitor. They turn, most likely expecting their comrades. How wrong they were. "Up!" Han yells in an authoritative voice, gesturing them into a corner by some orange barrels, "Quickly, quickly." The Imperials eye us and Chewbacca warily, but do as they are told. Once the Imperials are herded into the corner, Chewbacca keeps guard, making sure they won't try anything funny. We take out the charges, moving around the room. I start to enter an adjacent room where a catwalk lines some generators when another Imperial officer steps out from around the corner. Immediately my fist goes up, punching the officer square in the jaw. He goes down. I stick the charges to the walls and framework of the bunker. When my box is empty, I go back to Han and the others. All of a sudden I hear "Freeze!" I turn to see the officer I had knocked down earlier. Han throws the remaining charge box at him, hitting the Imperial square in the chest. With a cry, the man goes over the railing of the catwalk. I suddenly hear booted feet charging over the metal floor of the bunker. Half a dozen stormtroopers and an officer charge into the control room, blasters aimed at us. "You rebel scum." The officer scoffs at us. He and the stormtroopers quickly collect our blasters and remaining charges and lead us out of the bunker. We exit to find a frightening sight. The clearing where the bunker sits is completely infested with stormtroopers, scout troopers, and other Imperial personnel. An AT-ST stands in the middle, its head turning to look at us as we exit. Also in the middle of the clearing is the rest of our strike team, their green uniforms in stark contrast in the sea of white and black uniforms. They stand in a tight circle with hands above their heads. Nik is still dressed in his stolen scout trooper armor. The stormtroopers roughly herd us into the circle as well. *Kriff*, I think to myself, as I stand with my hands above my head, *it'll take a miracle to get us out of this one . . .*

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix - Forest Moon of Endor, Outer Rim Territories



"Stormtroopers incoming!" Amminius shouts, bringing up his E-11 blaster rifle. He crouches behind a fallen tree and squeezes a shot off at an approaching stormtrooper. The bolt hits the trooper in the chest, causing him to scream and crumple to the forest floor, his blaster flying out of his gloved hands. "Good shot!" I yell to him. Our unit is entrenched behind fallen logs, engaging a steady flow of Imperials trying to break through our lines. So far, they have been unsuccessful. We crouch in a shallow stream, in a large clearing ringed by tall trees. The stormtroopers' white uniforms have made them almost too easy of targets. Suddenly, more troopers come at us from the tree line. "Change positions!" Yells Jevin off to my right. Commandos run around behind me, taking up new positions. Mud splatters my face and jacket.

How we had gotten here, I can only marvel at. The Imperials had had us all rounded up in a circle, ready to do us in. There must have been more than a hundred of them gathered in the clearing, blasters pointed right at us. Our chances were next to none. All of a sudden, up on a ledge, the two droids C-3PO and R2-D2 had appeared, momentarily distracting the stormtroopers. Unfortunately, their distraction didn't seem to be working. The troopers were preparing to bring the droids back into our clearing when, all of a sudden, a piercing trumpet call had echoed from somewhere high above us in the trees. Another one answered. And then, from out of the foliage, high up on tree branches, and right behind the Imperials, emerged Ewoks. Hundreds of them, all brandishing spears and bows and arrows. Then all hell broke loose. The Ewoks attacked! Stormtroopers fell left and right, arrows and spears sticking out of the gaps in their armor. Our group took advantage of the

chaos and took out our closest guards, grabbing dropped blaster rifles from the forest floor and joining the fray, chasing the remaining stormtroopers back into the forest.

A blaster bolt whizzes above my head, striking a nearby tree, sending up a shower of sparks and splintered wood. "Whoa, that was close!" Yells Malogaan. He directs his DH-17 blaster pistol at an incoming trooper, blasting the Imperial in the helmet. Only a few more stormtroopers are left to engage us. As I'm picking off a stormtrooper popping up from behind a tree stump, I hear a roar of vehicle engines. A scout trooper whizzes toward us on a speeder bike, lasers arcing from the blaster cannon. "Look out, speeder bike!" I yell. A commando brings up her rifle, firing off a volley at the scout. It hits the trooper right in the chest, sending him flying with a cry off his bike. The riderless speeder continues forward, smashing into the trunk of a tree behind us, sending out a wave of heat and shrapnel. We all duck, avoiding the metal shards. Sid and another commando, who are closest to the tree, cover their faces and dive out of the way. The remaining stormtroopers start to retreat. "Whooh, we're pushing 'em back!" Sid shouts. Glam laughs. Suddenly, an AT-ST walker stomps out from behind a tree. We all freeze. The walker's head turns to look at us. "Move!" I yell frantically. We scramble out of the way as the walker fires. Sid and a commando take cover behind a log near the walker. The commando lifts a portable shield generator out from her pack and slams it onto ground, activating it. The blue shield envelops their position. "Shield in place!" She yells to Sid, clapping him on the shoulder. "Laying down some heavy fire NOW!" Sid shouts. He rockets out from the shield with his jump pack, jumping over the walker. As he descends, he fires a rocket into the side of the walker's head. It explodes, and the AT-ST topples sideways in a shower of smoke and sparks. "Walker destroyed, walker destroyed!" Endel shouts, pumping his fist in the air. Sid nods, smiling. He drops his empty rocket launcher to the forest floor, its ammo spent. "That showed 'em!" A heavy thud causes the surrounding trees to shake. Our celebration stops. We turn to where the stormtroopers fell back... A huge, metal foot crashes through the trees, followed by the armored head and body of an AT-AT walker. I stare up at the giant machine in horror. Jevin starts to say something when the walker fires. Three of my team are sent flailing in the air. "Take cover!" Yells Amminius. We scramble behind the trees and logs. Stormtroopers advance ahead of their walker, also firing at us. The walker fires again, taking out two more soldiers. Jevin

and I flatten ourselves against a tree. "We gotta call in the bombers!" He shouts at me. I raise my wrist comlink to my mouth. "Take 'em out!" I peek out from behind the tree. I see Amminius taking cover behind a rock. He sees me and gives me a shaky thumbs up. We fire on the stormtroopers, taking out a few. Then I hear a familiar sound, ion engines roaring in from above. "Y-wings inbound." A rebel technician's voice comes over through my comm. I grin. A torpedo hits the walker directly in its head. More torpedoes are launched from the attacking bombers, striking the walker in the side and the jointed knees. The cockpit of the AT-AT explodes in a shower of fire and sparks. With a mighty groan, the thing starts to topple forward. All of us, Imperial and rebel, scramble to get out of the way of the doomed walker. Amminius, Jevin, and I run together, sprinting for the tree line. With a mighty *crash*, the walker falls to the ground. I'm knocked down by the shock wave. Debris and dust fly from the point of impact. I cover my face with my arms. A few seconds pass. I slowly get up and survey the scene. Other members of my unit are also getting to their feet, checking themselves over. Near me, I hear a groan. I look to see Amminius struggling to his feet. I run to help my friend. "Everyone alright?" I hear Jevin inquire. A chorus of 'yeahs' and 'I'm goods' follow. About twenty of us are left. We pick around the clearing, stopping to check fallen comrades. "Looks like that's all they could throw at us!" Sid says. "Yeah," Bendix agrees, "I think we're in the clear!" We let out a "whoop!" of joy and relief. "My friends . . . I'm afraid your troubles are just beginning!" Says a chilling voice from the far treeline. Out from the foliage comes Xander, clad in his black armor, his crimson lightsaber humming . . .

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix – Forest Moon of Endor, Outer Rim Territories

Xander steps into the clearing, his black armor glowing from the light of the brush fire created by the toppled walker. The smoke seems to part for him, swirling around his black combat boots and cape. The color drains from my face. A female commando, one of the first to recover from the shock of our new guest, raises her DH-17, ready to blast the creep in his face mask. Xander turns to her with an outstretched arm, his gloved hand forming a fist. The commando lets out a surprised yell, which quickly turns into choking. Her DH-17 falls to the ground as she clutches her throat, gasping for breath. Veins stand out on her neck and forehead. A few seconds later, I hear a sickening *crunch*. Xander lowers his arm, and the commando falls

limply to the forest floor. I wince, as do several others. I don't remember raising my rifle, but suddenly, blaster fire pours from our weapons at the demon. Seemingly unphased, Xander charges. "Watch ou-" Langley starts to yell, but is abruptly cut off. Cut is the right word for it. With one sweep with his lightsaber, Xander cleaves him and Farlander in half. We continue firing, backing away from his blade. With a howl of insane delight, Xander lifts Bendix off his feet. Bendix screams, flailing his arms and legs. Blue lightning shoots from Xander's fingertips, electrocuting poor Bendix. His screams of fear are transformed into hideous screams of anguish. Xander flings his body into two other commandos with such force that I hear the splintering of bone. "You kriffing monster, I'll kill you!" Jevin screams, and before I can stop him, charges Xander's exposed flank. Xander steps out of his path with ease, sending Jevin crashing into a clump of ferns. "Bloah!" Yells Engel, our scout. He curses, firing blindly at Xander's chest. Xander goes on the defense, his crimson blade whirling a defensive pattern around his body. Our blaster bolts whiz back at us; I dive out of the way as one comes at me. It's a miracle none of us got hit. "Watch your cooldown Engel!" I yell at him, but Engel continues to fire. Smoke rises from his blasters barrel from the overheated galven circuitry. He suddenly drops his rifle, gripping his burned hand. Xander, sensing the opening, strikes, sending a force blast so powerful Engel's way that the man literally disintegrates. We stop firing, backing away from Xander, staring disbelievingly at the spot where Engel once stood. My vision narrows, and all I see is the demon marching toward us with confident strides. "For the murder of my lord, Emperor Palpatine, I sentence you all to death!" Hearing those words kick starts my brain into action. I raise my A280 and fire, my team doing the same. Xander deflects a shot back at me, the bolt hitting my blaster. It explodes, the shrapnel peppering my face. "Agghh!" I shout, dropping the ruined rifle. Another bolt whizzes toward me, but I roll out of the way, bringing my arms up to cover my face. Amminius, standing next to me, squeezes off shot after shot from his E-11 at Xander, trying to penetrate his defenses. He dodges incoming bolts reflected at him, continuing to suppress Xander. Xander steps forward, seeming to teleport right next to Amminius and sweeps his blade across Amminius' thigh. The acrid smell of charred flesh singes my nostrils. Amminius falls to the ground unconscious, his leg thankfully still attached to his body. I want to run and help my friend, but realize that if I do, it'll be death for the both of us. Instead, I retreat into the dense foliage with Sid, Malogaan, Kelrian, Glam, Endel, and the two remaining commandos, our green camouflage rendering

us nearly invisible. We run through the trees, twigs and leaves whipping past us. Breathing hard, I finally slow down. We stop at a large tree. I brace myself against the large trunk, panting. I then turn to look at the surviving members of Rancor Team. Sid speaks up first. "We should go back and get Jevin and Amminius. No telling what Xander will do to them." I nod in agreement. "How?" Malogaan inquires. "Xander's gonna have the whole area under lock down." "We have to try," I say to him, "how would you feel if-." I stop talking. I hear the rustling of foliage and boots crunching twigs. Kelrian, closest to me, hears it too. "It's Xander," he says, his eyes wide, "he's come to finish us off!" I motion down with my hand. We crouch down behind the large tree, blasters ready. I pull out my scout pistol from its holster, leaning out ever so slightly, training the pistol's mini scope on the foliage. The sound of running through trees grows louder. My finger hovers over the trigger, my eyes fixed on the cluster of leaves and ferns opposite us. They part suddenly, and through them emerges . . . "Cade?" I say a little too loudly. I quickly motion with my hand, and I hear the click of blaster safeties being reengaged. We immediately stand up and move towards the young Jedi. He smiles at us, saying "I bested Xander. Hurling him right into a tree. We should go back for the others." "We were just discussing that." I say to him. I walk up next to the young boy and ruffle his hair. "Get off!" He complains, barely suppressing a grin. I turn to the others. "Let's go! Rancor, form up!" We move back toward the clearing, Cade chattering excitedly about his victory over Xander and the destruction of the Death Star.

. . .

I stand in the medical ward of our flagship *Home One* with my hand flat against a bacta tank, palm touching the cool transparisteel. In it floats Amminius, a rebreather connected to his face. A steady stream of bubbles rises from the mask to the top of the tank. "You did well today." I tell him, although I'm positive he can't hear me. "I'm proud to call you an ally and a friend." I clip his E-11 to my belt, patting it with my free hand. "You'll get this back as soon as you're out." I stand there for a few minutes silently, listening to the whir of the medical droid and the bubbles from the blue bacta. I glance over at the tanks next to Amminius, where Bendix and another commando from our group are similarly suspended. I rub my eyes. The celebration on Endor lasted longer than I expected. But I wasn't complaining. The happiness from our victory was still inside of me. Those little Ewoks sure knew how to throw a party. Our boys in the sky had put on

a dazzling display of fireworks, and an Ewok band had performed a musical concert on scavenged stormtrooper helmets, using them as makeshift drums. A hand touches my shoulder. I turn to see Commander Tek, Lafco Donir, Jevin, and Ralen. Tek offers me the equivalent of an Ishi Tib smile, saying, "You did well today Wodi, I am very proud of you." Lafco nods in agreement. Ralen speaks up. "Chancellor Mothma is holding a meeting in the briefing room. Don't want to be late." "Right!" I say. I gaze upon Amminius and the others one last time before walking out of the medical ward with everyone. Sid waits for us in the hallway, bouncing excitedly. "Let's go Wishbone. Chop chop. Don't want to miss out on all the shiny medals they'll give us!" Tek chuckles and Jevin rolls his eyes, smiling. We head toward the briefing room, chatting with each other, ready for our next assignment . . .

Jevin Corso - Forest Moon of Endor, Outer Rim Territories

We did it. We won Endor. The battle was intense, to sum it up in one word. After being knocked out of the fray by Xander, the next thing I remember is hearing a large thump against a tree. When I came to, Xander was gone and Cade and Wodi came through the foliage. Walking away as the ruins of the battle station fell in the distance, I ask Cade, "You didn't kill him, did you?" He looks at me, regret in his eyes. "No, and I should have. He's an evil that must be purged. But that look of pure fear . . . I just couldn't." Staring down at him, I say, "Cade, it takes a strong man to know when to offer mercy." He looks at me pleadingly, "Jevin, the Force has destinies for us all. I can't tell the future but I know he will be in mine, me in his. And whatever it is it'll be big . . ." And with that we head to *Home One*, where Mon Mothma is having a celebration.

Onboard the MC80a star cruiser *Home One*

The celebration is in full swing aboard the ship. Before the festivities begin, a eulogy is given by us commanders. Myself, Ackbar, Kerex, Wodi, and Tek, to name a few, say a few words. We honor our dead and look forward to the future. Afterwards, Mothma promotes Rancor Team up on stage. Myself to Major, Wodi to a Lieutenant, Amminius to a Sergeant, and so on. Also, a new unit is created, Vanguard Battalion. A new, semi-independent unit that will serve as both special forces and as supplements to larger army units. As Major, I am commanding officer and Wodi is the commanding field officer. Next is a surprise to the troops. Mothma calls Cade to the stage. It looks odd, seeing a little kid up there, but he earned it as much as we did. Mon

Mothma hands him a green kyber crystal, some kind of family heirloom crystal. The room ripples with awe and applause. "With this crystal, may you and Luke Skywalker be the burning beacons that restore hope to this galaxy." With that we all disperse. Mon Mothma and Colonel Bel Iblis, who will be my superiors in Vanguard Battalion, come over to me and Wodi. "So," the gruff Corellian says, "have you decided on an emblem yet?" Looking to see Cade and Luke conversing by the viewport, I reply, "Yes sir, I think I have." The next day, we have it, an image of two green lightsabers crossed over each other, as a symbol of the new Jedi and their bond with us. And then we have our orders. Vanguard Battalion is going to move on Bespin and hold out until the rest of the Fourth Army can arrive.

Cade Valdarin - Anoat System

We exit hyperspace. The mottled white fades and the star lines return, eventually forming into dots again. And there in front of us through the canopy is the orange world of Bespin. Colonel Iblis hovers over the comm board. "All ships, check in." The three YT-2400s all report; Jevin is on the *Firebird*, Wodi on the *Ghost*, and myself and Garm on the *Warhawk*. Flying escort is the newly formed Black Squadron, a New Republic fighter group meant for special missions. Jevin asks, "Do we know if New Republic Intelligence's trick to incite a rebellion worked?" "Affirmative Jevin," Garm replies. "Intel shows that several fringe elements have risen up against the Imperial occupation of Bespin and the Anoat system under the control of Governor Adelhard and Dengar. We should have an opening. There's a grunt from Jevin over the comm, followed by, "*Should* being the operative word." Garm looks at me, "You sensing anything?" I shake my head. There's too many people on the planet. I'm not *that* well trained yet. "Well, we'll just deal without intel then. We've done it before." He smirks and returns to the display. I sense a change in his emotions. Perking up, I ask what's up. "I'll be dipped. We have two friendlies joining the party." Over the comm comes static and then . . . "*Colonel Bel Iblis? This is Lando Calrissian. Myself and Captain Han Solo respectfully request permission to join your assault.*" There's the roar of a Wookiee in the background and then Han Solo's agitated voice, "*Of course that means you too, Chewie!*" Garm asks, "What about Skywalker?" Lando sighs heavily, "*He's unable to, still recovering from his fight aboard the Death Star.*" I grimace, remembering having felt the surge of power when Palpatine started torturing Luke. "Understood," Garm says, and clicks out. Through the viewport, the *Falcon* and Lando's personal

ship, the *Lady Luck*, a luxury yacht, come into view. Brandishing my lightsaber in my hand, I relish the warm power coursing through me. The Valdarin crystal in the hilt reflecting my presence in the Force, feeling neither warm or cold, like a Jedi or Sith, but rather in between, like something else. Jevin puts on a blast helmet and dons a green tunic aboard the *Firebird*, Wodi brandishes a BlasTech Industries EE-4. Garm himself lugs a T-21 heavy blaster. He always did like the roar of the gun. "We're ready Lando, let's do it!" And with that we enter orbit. The view is breathtaking. In the briefing, we had all seen what Bespin looked like: clouds colored orange in the sunset, and a pearly white floating city, but in person it was another thing entirely. It was beautiful. I can see why Lando wanted to take this place back. Well, that and the fact that we needed Tibanna for the fleet. Especially with reports of the Imperials consolidating their presence over Jakku.

As soon as we break orbit, local TIE fighters engage the *Falcon*. "Chewie and I will deal with these kriffers, Lando, do your thing. Good luck buddy." With that, the yacht speeds off towards a landing pad while the Falcon goes evasive and begins blasting TIEs near one of the gas platforms.

The *Warhawk* lands with *Lady Luck*, and Garm and I exit the same time Lando does. Garm pulls up his wrist comm, "Major Corso, Lieutenant Quix, report in." "We're here," they both reply. Lando reaches for his own comlink, "Lobot, patch me in through the communications system, all frequencies." "*Attention Bespin, the Empire is attacking the city.*" As TIEs wheel overhead, two Destroyers show up in orbit. Our ships race towards a landing platform overlooking a parade ground, where our forces are already fighting stormies. We all jump out and gather on the platform, where several of Lando's blue-uniformed Bespin Wing Guards stand, waiting. "And I've got a score to settle," Lando mutters to himself, smirking. And with that, we run off with Lando towards the Administrator's Palace, in order to turn off the system jamming our bombers, allowing the New Republic Third Fleet to enter the system to even the odds. "Careful," I warn Garm and the others through the comlink, "I sense the bounty hunter Dengar is close by." We enter the main courtyard and charge down the ramp, Lando using his specially modified X-8 pistol to take out a damaged AT-ST walker. The Liberation of Bespin has begun.

Amminius Sinan - Dac, Outer Rim Territories

"All hands, this is Admiral Kerex. We have exited hyperspace and are

preparing to orbit Dac." The Admiral's bubbly Quarren voice notifies us through the *Perseverance's* overcoms. I make my way through the MC80 cruiser's crowded hallway, heading toward the hangar deck, helmet tucked under one arm. I finger my rank badge attached to my flak jacket, smiling to myself. Sergeant. A furry hand touches my shoulder, and I turn to see Tor Ponith. The Bothan General offers me a smile, showing off his canine teeth. 'Good luck down there, Sergeant. We're sending you in along with Blue and Black Squadron, so you'll have plenty of cover fire.'" I nod in understanding. "This could be the key to beating the Imps," he continues, "Make sure you get there first." Ponith claps me on the shoulder before moving off down the hallway, stopping to converse with a passing technician. I enter the hangar to see my squad already assembled, waiting for me. They stand by our battered GR-75 transport, flanked by two X-wings with blue trim, leaning against fuel crates. Arix Glam sees me approaching. He gives me a casual salute, directing the others attention. Immediately, they form a semicircle. "What's the word, Sarge?" Asks Teris Darksword as I walk up. "Are we a go?" I look to her and the others assembled. I grin. "We have a green light! Operation 'get the plans and get back in time for supper' is a go!" The others let out an excited 'whoop!' I unhook a small holoprojector from my belt. Thumbing the activation switch, I hold it at arm's length for all to see. A small image flickers to life of a Mon Cala factory. "As you know, Mon Calamari Shipyards has begun fabricating schematics for a new type of cruiser in secret: The *Mediator*-class. They planned on giving us these ships to combat the remains of the Empire with. Unfortunately, the bucket-heads somehow got this intel, and are planning on raiding the shipyard for the plans. Our job, is to get them first." The others nod. "They've set up several garrisons across the planet, and are attempting to siege the factories where the plans were developed." A section of the factory in the hologram strobes red. "The Imperials have overrun this portion of the facility and are pushing farther in." A small yellow dot strobes near the outside of the factory in the projection. Pointing to it, I continue. "This is our insertion point. We'll be deployed close to the dry docks. The rest is relatively straightforward." Otara Menuk, a blue Twi'lek, smiles at me. "Straightforward. Right!" She teases. I return her smile, a funny, fluttery feeling starting inside of me. I stare at her for a few more seconds than necessary before Rubis Zione addresses me. "Sergeant!" I start, quickly turning to look at him. "What?" The Ishi Tib nods his large green head towards a woman walking quickly toward us, followed by a Rodian and a small squad of soldiers. "Sergeant Sinan, " says Colonel

Elisa Daru, "I'm glad I caught you in time. This is Neero, our technician." She gestures to her Rodian companion. "He'll be accompanying you on your mission. Along with a team of my best." She offers me a wry smile. "So, don't louse it up." "Thank you m'am! Holding my hand on this mission too, eh?" I say, grinning. Daru smiles and shakes her head, herding us all aboard the GR-75. Eeth Brangwin and Leadra Nuwest are the last to enter. "Here we go!" I say to my team. Outside, I hear the X-wings ion engines roar to life. Flight technicians scramble around the hangar, making last minute checks. Our boarding ramp closes, and we take our seats. I sit next to Otara. "Ready?" I ask her. She gives me a grin. "Of course!" I smile, looking around at Rancor Team. The smile leaves my face. "Something wrong?" Otara asks me. I turn to her. "I just hope I can get them all back in one piece." A slight bump reverberates throughout the ship as it takes off from its landing struts. Otara smiles at me again. "Don't worry. You'll do alright! Drinks on me tonight if we make it back in one piece!" I grin. Kerex's voice comes over my wrist comm, as well as through the onboard speakers: "*Good luck teams. May the Force be with you!*" . . .

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix - Bospin, Cloud City, Outer Rim Territories

I'm starting to really hate Cloud City. "*What's your progress, Lieutenant?*" Garm Bel Iblis's gruff voice comes over my wrist comm. Firing my EE-4 with one hand, I shout into the comm, "Not good, sir. The Imperials have this area and the last uplink locked down pretty good!" A stormtrooper attempts a charge at our position. I line up my EE-4, firing a quick burst into the trooper's chest. He goes down. I turn my attention back to the comm. "We're pinned down in the courtyard, and the opposition is getting tougher!" Jevin peeks out from our cover, a wrecked TIE/LN starfighter, hosing a group of Imps with his DH-17. A stray blaster bolt hits the duracrete ground near me, sending up chunks of the stuff. I cover my eyes as bits of it rain down on us. Out of the corner of my eye, I spot a black shape moving in towards us from a position off to our left. I whip around and squeeze off a burst in that direction. With a cry, the flanking shadow trooper falls to the ground in a heap. "Nice one, Wodi!" Shouts Malogaan next to me. He raises his DLT-19, spraying it at the balcony of a circular building. I see white helmets duck down behind the balcony's low wall, avoiding the laser fire. Red bolts come back at us as the stormtroopers take pot-shots. "Lob a grenade their way!" Jevin yells in my ear. I unhook one from my belt, arm it,

and hurl it at the balcony. A few seconds later, several charred white-armored bodies fly into the air. "Good one!" A glint of green catches my eye. "Pulse Cannon! Get down!" We bite the duracrete as a green bolt flies toward our position, striking one of the TIE's ruined wings. "We've got bigger problems!" Yells Endel, next to Jevin, pointing. I look to see an AT-ST walker making its way toward us. "Kriff!" I spy a disruptor rifle near a fallen rebel soldier and snatch it up, aiming it at the walker. "Look out!" Glam yells. I'm suddenly hit by a wave of heat and debris from the sky. I look up, shielding my eyes. The walker stops its advance to look up as well. BOOM! A blue Cloud Car, in flames, smashes into it, turning the AT-ST's cockpit into a hunk of twisted metal. The thing topples to the duracrete, making the ground shudder. Two orange Cloud Cars fly in formation above our heads. They split off from each other, targeting the stormtroopers on the balconies and in the courtyard. We let out a cheer. "Way's clear Lieutenant!" Glam shouts excitedly. "*Shift it Quix, that opening won't last long!*" Garm barks through my comm. I motion with my hand toward a ramp leading to the circular building housing the last uplink. "Go, go, go!" We sprint for the ramp, charging up it and into the building. "That walker is causing our landing party some trouble, activate that last signal to call in Y-wing support!" We are in a clean, neatly furnished circular room, a turbolift in the center, a bar ringing the inner wall. "I don't like the looks of this." Says Jevin. He motions with his blaster at the four blast doors leading into our room. "Vanguard, watch our flank." I instruct. The others nod, training their blasters on the four doors. I walk to the uplink, ready to activate it. The door off to my right hisses open, and I hear Endel let out a surprised gasp. I bring up my EE-4 and look to see . . . the bounty hunter Dengar, flanked by five shadow troopers carrying T-21s. "Looks like it's your unlucky day, scum," he grins, hefting a DLT-19 into firing position, "you're done for." . . .

Cade Valdarin-Bespin, Cloud City, Outer Rim Territories

The cloud cars swoop overhead. *Thud Thud*. Garm is with me, firing off his T-21, having to flush its heat every few seconds. "Shift it Quix, that opening won't last long!" Garm yells into a comlink as an AT-ST is destroyed. After more blaster fire, Jevin and Wodi's group charges into a circular building. "They made it Garm, I think we'll be okay." I should have known, you never, ever say that. At that moment, out of the shadow of the Administrator's Palace comes an AT-AT, pummeling everything in its path. Garm swears,

shouting a particularly offensive Corellian expletive. "Our troops have no cover from that thing!"

Handing Garm my DH-17 side arm, I grip my lightsaber, the Valdarin crystal inside coursing its power through my veins. "Cade, what are you doing?" I look at Garm, smiling. "If I'm going to be a great Jedi like my forebears, I must sacrifice myself for others." And with that, I Force-leap toward the walker. I land slightly in front of it, its fire still aimed above and away from me. Several troopers see me and start in surprise. "It's a Jedi!" one says, raising his blaster. "But Skywalker isn't here!" another cries. "Blast him!" a third says, but it's useless. I activate the blade, the white-green light reflecting off of their white armor.

In the distance, Jevin and Wodi run out of the building with some Vanguard soldiers, with Dengar hot on their heels. Tapping into the Force, I grip the stormtroopers closest to me and fling them in Dengar's direction, the troopers slowing him down. I return to the task at hand, weaving into more troopers, my lightsaber a blur. One tries to use a jetpack to flee but isn't fast enough; I slice through his leg, causing him to lose balance and crash into the ground.

As I'm cutting through the troopers, the AT-AT turns its head toward me, finally. Hearing my father's voice in my head, "*Trust the Force Cade, it'll will protect you,*" I deactivate the saber. The AT-AT fires a full power blast from its chin cannons. I hold up my hands. Using the ancient technique of Tutaminis, the art of absorbing energy, taught to me by my father, I absorb the full blast. Feeling the huge surge of energy, I channel it outward, the wave blasting away the stormtroopers near me. I next turn my attention to the AT-AT. Grabbing it with the Force, I concentrate, slowly beginning to close my grip. The sides of the walker start to cave in, a massive groaning sound coming from it. With a final gesture of my hands, I slam the walker to the ground, a huge wave of dust emanating from it.

"Holy Malachor!" Garm exclaims in amazement as he comes up to me. I just nod, the concentration and Force technique having exhausted me. "I just need . . . to catch my breath." I say. Far off in the distance I see Jevin and Wodi leading their group toward the Bioniip laboratories. "Well, we won't live forever, let's move!" Garm commands to the men and women gathering

around us. The man loves his troops and loves to fight alongside them. He'll be a great military leader. I swear I can see a ship land at the labs. Just barely in my peripheral vision, it looks almost like a . . . TIE Hunter. . . .

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix – Bespin, Cloud City, Outer Rim Territories

"Quix, move to secure Bioniip. Myself and the rest of my unit will join you shortly." I look back at the toppled AT-AT to the group of figures gathered in the courtyard, dwarfed by the mammoth walker. They stand in a tight circle around Dengar and the three surviving shadow troopers. "Copy that, sir." I acknowledge over my wrist comm. "Good luck with that bounty hunter. I hear he's a handful!" *"Noted."* The Corellian general replies. In the background, I can hear various Huttese curses being shouted. I smile. Clicking off my comm, I motion with my hand to our small group for us to move. We walk carefully through the deserted city courtyard, looking around. "This place gives me the creeps." Malogaan says in a low voice, nervously toying with his DLT-19's safety switch. "Yeah," agrees Endel, "where is everybody?" "If they're smart, far away from here." Says Jevin bluntly. I nod, offering no comment. All my senses are on high alert, my EE-4 sweeping the buildings and alleyways we pass. The duracrete in this area is charred and cracked from explosions and blaster fire. White-armored bodies lie sprawled everywhere, along with Rebel commandos in blue and gray. "What's at Bioniip again?" Glam asks. "Why is it so important?" "Tibanna generators." I reply. "And they're not just at Bioniip. There are generators located in the Administrator's Palace and Carbon Freezing Chamber as well. For our job to be done here, those generators must be destroyed." "Intel suggests that there are three generators at each location, so a total of nine." Jevin adds. "The Imps are using the generators to power tractor beams, preventing our transports from leaving. So as long as those generators are up and running, we're not getting off this planet." "That is correct, Jevin." We all jump as Garm, Cade, and a handful of commandos merges with our small group. "Kriff, General," I say, "a little warning next time." My heart's still beating fast. The man grins, slapping me on the shoulder. "How long were you following us?" Demands Jevin. "For the past few minutes." Cade chimes in. "I was using a Force technique to shield us from your eyes and muffle our footsteps on the ground." Jevin gives him a glower. Cade just shrugs. Garm gestures with his T-21 towards a cluster of circular buildings, largely undamaged from the fighting. "There's Bioniip.

Let's go." I'm about to say something when a blue cloud car shoots over our heads, turning back around for a strafing run. "Move!" I shout and we scramble out of the way. The cloud car throttles for us, when, suddenly, a burst of blue light hits it on one of the engines. The cloud car shakes visibly, and hurtles into the ground. BOOM! I dive for the ground, covering my face with my hands as chunks of duracrete and metal debris rain down. I hear a laugh from my wrist comm, followed by: *"Amazing piece of tech, this ion neutralizer!"* Garm brings his comm up to his mouth, angrily saying: "Next time, try not to flatten us, Sid!" *"Roger!"* The Sullustan replies. I hear the sound of a jump pack, and a few seconds later, Sid lands in front of our group. "Let's go!" He says. Garm rolls his eyes, but follows after the Sullustan. Our group, now thirty-two strong, follows the general towards the labs . . .

Cade Valdarin - Bespin, Cloud City, Outer Rim Territories

We meet up with Jevin and Wodi's group and now, with thirty-two soldiers, are moving through the facility. "I don't like this," Jevin says, the place being deserted. "General, this place is too quiet. And congrats on the field promotion by the way." Garm peers around a circular building, his trigger finger twitching, " Thanks. Cade, you sensing anything?" I look around, close my eyes, and open again. "I got nothing Garm, this place is empty."

We walk on when Wodi runs off towards alcove. "Lieutenant, what have you got? Garm asks, the authority in his voice clear. "Don't know sir," Wodi replies. We come over and there we see it. A Bioniiip worker, slain, with a hole clean through his abdomen. "Now I'm no expert," Sid says in a sarcastic voice, "but I'm pretty sure the only thing that can do that and not leave a massive amount of blood is a lightsaber. I shudder and Garm notices. "Cade, what is it?" I glance around, trying to sense something but oddly enough, something is blocking me. "I saw, that is I think I saw, a TIE Hunter on the way here." Jevin perks up. "When Xander took me to Takara, he had a TIE hunter." "Sithspit!" Garm curses. Wodi looks to me, "How possible is it that Xander is here?" "Well," I reply, "I don't think he is. Xander wouldn't reveal himself until he's ready and it's only been a few months since Endor. No, this is someone else."

We continue on to what must be the actual lab where the cybernetics are created. And once there, the buzzing Force presence is even louder. Instinctively gripping my saber I warn, "Something's here," and as if on cue, a roar sounds through the deserted building, making us jump. With that we rush towards the sound. "Sounds like a Wookiee," Garm says, "I would say young adult male by the sound of it." Igniting the saber I add, "And it sounds like he's in trouble." We rush into the building, ready to help. There is nothing to be seen at all. "Strange," one of our group mutters.

"Alright, General, I suggest we split up into teams, take the separate hallways. Quix and I will take a team toward the processing area." Jevin suggests and with that we split. It's a few hours before we hear anything on the comlink, but the first to call is Malogann. "*General, it's Malogann, we need help!*" "Son, calm down, tell me what it is!" Garm replies over the comm, the worry clear in his voice. "*There's something in here! It took Endel and Sid!*" I split off from my group, following the Force signature I had sensed earlier. It feels strange. Like a warped presence of a trained Force user; it feels unnatural.

Then, over the comm, Malogann screams. "Private! Private report, what is going on?" Jevin shouts. Then Wodi cries out. "There's something in here with us!" Garm responds first. "What is it Quix?" "I don't know! One second I'm here with Maskin, the next he's gone! And I'm seeing something in my peripherals but when I turn it's gone." "What's it look like?" Quix seems to hesitate and then responds, "A bluish shade maybe, I don't know." Our resident sniper, a Weequay named Moro, chimes in. "Could be a personal cloak device." "Don't be absurd," Jevin responds, "cloaking devices that powerful are theoretically impossible." The Force presence is a lot stronger now. I say into the comlink, "Jevin, Moro's right, something is in here, I can feel it." And with that I start hunting, like a Vornsk hunting ysalamiri, I use the Force, following the warped presence until I come to a peculiar sight. There stands the Wookiee we had heard earlier, young by Wookiee standards, staring at a bluish shade. The Wookiee snarls and without warning a lightsaber activates from the shade. That's all the warning I need. Igniting my own green blade, I Force run in front of the Wookiee, holding the blade in a low ready position. And suddenly the shade materializes into a black form. The black armor, ebon black, is a stark contrast to the white walls. In the chest of the armor sits a green crystal; I can only guess a

kyber crystal or something similar. The Wookiee rumbles something and, with the Force, I'm able to understand and tell him to stay behind me. And with that the black form lunges at me. I parry the strike and launch my own offensive, our sabers tearing through wall and building components, causing sparks to fall everywhere . . .

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix – Bepin, Bioniip Laboratories, Outer Rim Territories

"What do you think killed him? That Bioniip worker?" Asks Vrieska in a low voice to no one in particular. We move in a tight group down the deserted hallways of the labs, Kelrian and Linaki sweeping the empty rooms with handheld scanners. I can hear Malogaan nervously toying with his safety switch again. "Not sure," replies Endel, "but whatever it was, it still might be here, so keep your fingers on the trigger." "Great, that's comforting." Says Nosh Ker Raisuun, hefting his DLT-19 heavy blaster in his webbed three-fingered hands. We continue, the steady beep of the scanners breaking the eerie silence. A whir from inside a room off to our left makes us all jump. Immediately, all weapons are trained at the closed doorway. I motion for everyone to stack up on opposite sides of the closed door. I count down on my fingers, and when I reach 'one,' I toggle the panel switch on the wall, causing the door to slide open. We rush inside, blasters up and ready for trouble. The occupant of the room starts at our sudden appearance and raises its arms. Kelrian lets out a relieved chuckle. "It's only a medical droid." The 2-1B stares at our group with its white, unblinking photoceptors for a few moments before moving off further into the room to continue its tasks, muttering something in droid speak. I shake my head and chuckle. "Move off." We exit the room and continue on our way towards the processing area. "You know," says Linaki, "when the war is over I might settle down here. Cloud City is a pretty nice place." "It is," agrees Mentel, "very beautiful. Very different from what I'm used to, though." I look to the Twi'lek and smile. "Ryloth's not as pristine as this, eh Loysia?" She grins back at me. "Right you are, Lieutenant!" "This city is a little too dry for my taste." Chimes in Raisuun. "Flood the place and I'm in." We all laugh. As we walk further through the labs, the hallway dips down, creating a slight incline. "We must be close to the processing chamber." Jevin says. "If my hunch is correct, I believe we'll find the first Tibanna generator there."

"Good!" Vrieska grins, palming a proximity charge.

We continue downward until we enter the processing chamber, and, sure enough, a small generator sits in the middle, letting out a soft hum. I take my scout pistol from its small holster, sweeping the room. Cautiously, Vrieska and two of Garm's unit, Maskin and Calhuu move to the generator, sticking their charges to its metal surface. "Now we wait for detonation." Says Jevin. Sid, having been silent for most of the trip, suddenly turns his head toward a dark corner of the room leading off to an adjacent corridor. "Hold on. I think I saw something over there." He and Endel move toward the area, blasters up. They enter the adjacent corridor. "See anything?" I call softly. No answer. I raise my voice slightly. "Sid. Endel. See anything?" Silence. "Why aren't they answ-" I start to say to Malogaan next to me when a piercing shriek cuts me off. Everyone starts. "Sid! Endel!" I yell. Our group immediately gets up and charges into the dimly lit corridor, forgetting about the generator, coming face to face with . . . nothing. We scan the corridor. All my senses are on high alert. I take a step forward, and my boot catches on something. I look down to see Sid's A280C. I pick up the weapon, giving it a look over. Continuing down the corridor, we enter a large circular warehouse. "Spread out and look for them. Be careful. Whatever got Sid and Endel could still be in here." I motion to Malogaan to send off a message. He speaks nervously into his wrist comm. "General, it's Malogaan, we need help!" We move off in groups of four. Myself, Maskin, Calhuu, and Raisuun take one side of the warehouse. Large boxes and dusty pieces of machinery lie scattered everywhere.

Malogaan's scream cuts through the air. "Malogaan!" I yell. I hear Jevin yell something frantically over the comm. I look to the others next to me. "We need to move!" All of a sudden, Maskin vanishes right in front of my eyes. "Bloah!" I shout in surprise. Raisuun lets out a curse in his native Quarren tongue. Calhuu gasps. We sprint and dive behind some shipping crates. "There's something in here with us!" I yell to the others throughout the warehouse. Garm's voice comes over my wrist comm: "*What is it Quix?*" I raise my wrist comm to my mouth: "I don't know! One second I'm here with Maskin and the next he's gone!" Something catches my eye, moving quickly around the equipment. I try to track the moving shape with my EE-4, but to no avail. I speak into my comm again. "And I'm seeing something in my peripherals but when I turn it's gone." "*What's it look like?*" I squint, trying to

catch a glimpse of the shape again. There! "A bluish shade maybe, I don't know." I hear running footsteps and turn to see Garm, Cade, and the rest of the group enter the warehouse. A few moments later, the lights are turned on. We get up from our position and look to see Cade with a large Wookiee. It must have been the one we heard earlier. But what holds my gaze is the bluish shadow shape. It holds a shimmering crimson lightsaber. Cade charges at the thing, his own green blade activated, clashing with the shape. The thing materializes into . . . a shadow trooper, but like none I've ever seen before. "Go! Arm the other generators!" Yells Cade, locked in combat with the trooper. I nod. "Let's go! Hurry!" Shouts Garm.

. . .

"Move! Move!" Jevin yells, diving behind a piece of lab equipment. The last Tibanna generator explodes, making my ears ring. The blast knocks the attacking group stormtroopers off their feet. We jump from behind our cover, dispatching them before exiting the room. "We have to get to the platform!" I yell to my group. "The GR-75 is already there." We sprint through the white hallways, dodging laser fire. I blast a trooper with my EE-4, causing him to wheel backwards into two of his fellows. Sid sprays them with his A280. "I can see the transport!" Shouts Raisuun excitedly. "The others are already there." "Good!" Shouts Vrieska. "Let's move!" Yells Garm, laying down fire with his T-21. Several stormtroopers try to cut us off from an adjacent hallway. Cade and his new Wookiee companion turn their way. The Stormies don't stand a chance. I grimace as a bloody stump of an arm, still encased in white armor, flies past me. I almost retch when a helmet hits the wall next to me, its contents bouncing down the hall, leaving a red smear. We run through the doors to the landing pad where the GR-75 sits, the other saboteur teams laying down fire with E-webs under it. "Make way!" A commando yells as our group runs past. "Here they come!" Another one shouts. The pursuing stormtroopers pour from the doorway, firing their E-11s. The teams board the waiting transport. I turn back and fire my EE-4 into their ranks. "Come on, Wodi!" Yells Garm. He helps a wounded commando into the transport. I run up the boarding ramp, the door closing behind me. "All here!" A pilot says over the intercom. I can hear laserfire hit the hull of the GR-75 as the stormtroopers attempt to shoot us down. With a roar of ion engines, the transport takes off. I can hear a WHOOMP as our escort of X-wings bombs the landing platform. Everyone in the transport breathes a collective sigh of relief. "That," says Garm, "is how we get it

done! Good work everyone!" A cheer rises up. I feel a thump on my shoulders and look to see Jevin, smiling at me. "Good work, Wishbone. We got 'em." I nod, too exhausted to speak. "Time for the sanisteam and a drink!" Someone shouts. We all laugh and cheer! I catch Cade's face in the crowd. He gives me a grin. I grin back. I look through the crowd to see the faces of those who disappeared when in Bioniip. All are back now, safe and sound. We made it. That's two strikes against the Empire!

After the Liberation of Bospin

Jevin Corso - Chandrila, Core Worlds, Jakku briefing

All the top brass are gathered here in the military command center where Republic Command is discussing how to deal with Jakku, "We have to strike the Empire now, while we still have the momentum!" Ackbar says loudly. "This is our only chance to finally break the Empire." General Ponith, his coarse fur rippling, speaks up. "Yes, but let's not forget that the Imperial Fleet is still very dangerous, Admiral." Ackbar swivels his salmon-colored head toward the Bothan, "That is why the full Second and Fourth Fleets will launch the attack." He looks to Kerex, who takes his cue.

"We are also going to provide cover for the Third and Fourth Army, under High General Rieekan, General Iblis, and General Ponith, to get their forces on the ground. You up for that Carlist?" Rieekan steps forward. "Absolutely sir. We're ready to bring the pain." Colonel Tav Voren, a tall Chagrian male, of the Forty-Second Land Division, a large unit of the Third Army, chimes in. "The Forty-Second is ready for anything sir." "That goes for Vanguard Battalion as well," I pitch in. The officers over the other land divisions also voice agreement. It'll be something to see. The land division is the largest New Republic Army unit, consisting of 40,000 soldiers plus light and heavy armor units with both repulsorcraft and walkers, and reconnaissance units. And with the full Third and Fourth Armies, that means eight land divisions in total, attacking Jakku.

High General Madine, head of New Republic Special Forces, steps forward. "A volunteer has come forward and offered to lead a strike team to take the star destroyer *Inflictor*. His intimate knowledge of their construct will make

him invaluable." And with that Thane Kyrell, a crack pilot, steps forward. "I will only take volunteers, there's a chance this will be a one way trip." Amminius, looks at Thane, grinning. "Rancor has your back, Kyrell. Always wanted to take a Destroyer!"

"Major Corso, is Vanguard ready?" Ponith asks me. Tor Ponith is well on his way to becoming the greatest army commander we have. There's talk that the Senate is debating creating a wartime position to be equivalent to Grand Admiral; the position of High Marshal. But of course we are too busy to worry about that right now. "Yes sir!" I reply crisply. Looking to the other majors in the room, and to Colonel Voren and the other higher up officers, they all nod and I look to General Ponith and Fleet Admiral Ackbar, "We're ready."

Ackbar looks to Cade, the nine year old boy looking even smaller with his new Wookiee bodyguard Salurra standing behind him. "Master Valdarin, will you assist us in this battle?" And I can see on Cade's face a pained look. "Sorry Admiral, I can't. I'm going to look for something." A murmur again goes through the room. "But Cade, even one Jedi, no matter the age, can turn the tide of a battle," High General Rieekan says, "We could use your help." "I realize that sir, but that shadow trooper we ran into on Bespin a year ago is still on my mind. I can't explain it but I could feel Xander's presence when I fought the trooper. Xander is alive and somewhere out there, waiting to strike back at the Republic. And with Xander's power and influence with the empire, he'll most likely have amassed a huge force by now. I have to try and find him and eliminate him now. You understand." Ackbar grunts but replies, "Yes, I do. The Force directs all of our destinies. All I can say is may the Force be with you Master Valdarin." Smiling, Cade turns and he and Salurra exit, moving towards their YT-2400 transport, the large Wookiee's huge Ryyk Blades catching the light from an overhead light.

"Very well, we will have to do this without Jedi help. It'll take good old fashioned ingenuity to win this battle. Lieutenant Quix, your team and Aurek Team will be the first ground units planetside. Your job is to establish a beachhead until Corso can get the rest of Vanguard there. You'll then clear the way for the Forty-Second and Fifty-Fourth Divisions. Quix salutes and replies crisply, "You got it Admiral. I will do everything I can to ensure our success."

"Alright, you have your assignments. Commander Antilles, are the fighter squadrons ready?" Antilles straightens, a confident aura about him. "Yes sir, all commanders report their squads are ready, and assignments have been given for transport escort." "Understood Commander. Alright, you all know the mission and what is at stake, but I want you all to know that there isn't anyone else I would want to fight beside. May the Force be with us all."

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix - Chandrila, Hanna City military complex, Core Worlds

"May the Force be with us all." Concludes Admiral Ackbar. The Mon Calamari nods his large head to everyone assembled in the briefing room. Immediately, quiet discussion breaks out. A chime sounds, letting us know that we have been dismissed. "We're gonna need more than the Force to be with us this time around." Mutters Tyros Voddher, dressed in his orange flight suit, standing next to me. I nod. We walk out of the briefing room together and down the crowded hall. "I can't believe the Empire's making their last stand on Jakku." I say, shaking my head in amazement. Tyros grins. "Yeah." He frowns, blowing out a puff of air through his cheeks. "Can you believe the size of the fleet gathered over Jakku. I'd reckon not even Ackbar and Kerex combined have seen that many Destroyers." I nod again. "It's gonna be a tough one. We routed them at Endor and Bespin, and now they have one last card to play." I see Amminius a little farther down the hall, chatting with Otara Menuk, both dressed in their tan combat uniforms like me. Tyros and I make our way over to them. Amminius sees us and gives a little wave. Otara turns and smiles. "So, you're going to get up close and personal with Captain Cienna Ree and the *Inflictor*, huh?" I say to them. Both nod. "It's pretty low on the list of things they'll expect us to do." Otara says. "If we catch them off guard, that's our first step towards winning Jakku." "Just imagine the look on the Imperials faces when the *Inflictor* turns on them!" Amminius says, grinning. He stands up a little straighter, stroking an imaginary beard. "I always wanted to captain a ship!" We all laugh. Amminius imitates the clipped tone of an Imperial officer, pretending to give orders to passing troops. Most who pass us by give him a strange look, but a few play along, saluting him before rushing off again. I brace my gloved hand on the wall, wiping my streaming eyes. My sides hurt from laughing. Amminius finishes his imitation and bows. We all catch our breath.

Amminius turns to Tyros, grinning. "I'm trusting you and the rest of Zerek to get us in and out in one piece. Can you do that, Voddher?" Tyros smiles. "Of course! After we deal with the endless stream of TIEs!" Amminius' comlink chirps. He looks at it. "It's Kyrell. He'll be wanting to brief us about our mission." Amminius looks to Otara, who smiles at him. "After you!" She gives him a playful kick with her boot. "Let's go!" The two give us one final wave before jogging off. "Good luck!" I call after them. Amminius gives a thumbs up. Tyros chuckles. "He's something else, isn't he?" I laugh. "You said it!" I check the chrono on my wrist. "Kriff, I gotta get ready! Lots to pack." Tyros grins, indicating my holstered scout pistol. "Well, you're halfway there! I hear you're pretty handy with that!" I smile. A technician's voice comes over the complex intercom: "*All pilots report to hangar bay three for pre-flight inspections. All pilots report to hangar bay three for pre-flight inspections.*" Tyros turns to me. "Gotta go! Good luck, Wodi, I'll see you on the other side." He gives me a casual salute and jogs off, catching up with Orin Brintt and Tendra Keller, also in orange flight suits, further down the corridor.

...

"Ready, Wodi?" Asks Jax Malogaan, strapping his backpack on. He gives his DLT-19 one more look over. I peer through my A280C's scope, checking the calibration. "Yep. Let's get this done!" Aurek Team and I sit in our barracks, getting our equipment ready. I check my bandolier and belt pouches, going through a mental list of necessary items. Laid out on my bunk are my DH-17, RT-97C, MPL-57, and bowcaster, along with my backpack, filled to the brim with items. "Hey Raisuun, got any extra ration cubes?" The Quarren looks up from his own pile of equipment on his bunk, and tosses me a pack of the stuff. "Of course! Wouldn't want you to starve, Lieutenant!" He replies in his bubbly voice. "Thanks!" I tuck the extra rations into a pouch next to my canteen. I pick up each of my weapons in turn, giving them one final check. Satisfied, I pick up my helmet, sitting next to me, wiping the tinted blast shield at the top with a rag. I notice a few extra scratches in its surface than before. A few bunks over, Crix Vrieska says "I hope Amminius and the others aboard the *Inflictor* will be alright." "They will be." Affirms Malani Linaki. "They've got Zerek Squadron and Thane Kyrell watching their backs." "Let's hope that's enough this time." Chimes in Lannik Endel. He switches out the power pack for his E-11, exposing the galven circuitry. "The Imps are desperate." "Good!" Says Loysia Mentel. The Twi'lek stands up, clipping

extra pouches to her belt. "That means we'll be able to break them easier." She turns to Crix Vrieska. "Hey Crix, toss me a couple extra thermals." Crix grins, tossing two thermal detonators her way. Antar Kelrian covers his head, pretending to be frightened. "Watch it!" He says, laughing. Loysia catches them in midair, adding them to her stash. Nosh Ker Raisuun hefts his DLT-19, pointing it at the ceiling. "Why couldn't the Imperials have made their last stand on a planet with at least a *little* water? I'm gonna have dry skin for months!" His remark makes us all laugh. I clip my MPL to my belt and shoulder my backpack. Malogaan helps me fasten the straps in the back. Next, I shoulder my RT-97C by its strap. I stand up, all my gear on. I pick up my helmet, holding it in my gloved hands, "Everyone ready?" Each of Aurek Team stands, fully dressed for combat. I look at each of them in turn. "I just want to say that it's been an honor and a pleasure serving with every one of you. I expect to see you all back here for Corellian spirits and blap biscuits. Is that understood?" "Yes Lieutenant!" I grin. "Let's get this done!" Everyone gathers around me. I place my hand in the middle, and the others do likewise. "One, two, three, Aurek . . . ready?" "One, two, three, *AUREK!*" We raise our hands in the air, cheering.

. . .

Exiting hyperspace: Jakku space aboard the *Perseverance*

"All hands, we have exited hyperspace and are making our approach towards Jakku. Make your way to your designated landing crafts." Aurek and I run through the crowded hallways past soldiers, technicians, and droids, making our way to hangar bay eleven, where our GR-75 and fighter wing escort sit. I look through a large viewport off to my left to see Jakku. And the large blockade of Star Destroyers. Great. "This'll be fun!" Shouts Malogaan, also glancing out the viewport. We make our way to the hangar to see it bustling with activity. Soldiers and pilots are everywhere, running under the three GR-75 medium transports sitting in docking bays, their boarding ramps down, admitting soldiers and the last caches of supplies and equipment. Droids make last minute repairs to starfighters, fixing welding seams, adding to the noise. Out of the corner of my eye I see Jevin Corso standing by himself at a viewport, away from the activity. I turn to my team. "Get to the transport. I'll be with you shortly." The others nod and continue

further into the hangar towards the waiting GR-75s. I run over to Jevin, dodging droids and pilots. "Hey, you ready Blastzone?" Jevin turns to me, grimacing. He puts on a brave face, offering me a small smile. "Nearly. I'm just thinking about what this battle is going to mean for us. But I'm good to go." Down a small hallway, I see Colonel Tav Voren making his way towards us. I offer the Chagrian a crisp salute, and he nods. Jevin turns away from the viewport, facing the Colonel. "Major Corso!" Voren says loudly to be heard over the din, "Your battalion is giving the Forty-Second Division backup." Jevin nods in understanding. "I assume we are hitting the Imps' main line?" Voren smirks. "We're in the thick of it." He motions us toward the GR-75s.

. . .

Our transport rocks back and forth from the turbulence of entering Jakku's atmosphere. My teeth are rattling inside my head. The GR-75 creaks, its shields taking a hit, and I hold on to my restraining strap a little tighter. The overhead lights flicker. "I'm beginning to doubt this transport's ability to get us to the surface in one piece," says Crix next to me nervously, looking up at the ceiling. I nod, gripping my restraining strap. I look to Jevin, sitting across from me. He gives me a thumbs up. I return the gesture. *"There's a lot of ground fire."* The pilot's voice comes over the intercom, his voice crackling with static. *"It'll be tricky finding a safe landing zone."* The lights flicker again, momentarily throwing the cabin into darkness. More creaking. I can hear the rush of wind whipping past the outer hull. A new voice comes over the intercom: *"This is Thane. My team and Rancor are moving in on the Inflictor. We'll take that ship for the Republic."* "Good luck boys." I hear Voren mutter. I silently offer up my luck to them as well. A bump reverberates through the crew cabin. "All right grunts, this is it!" Yells Voren. *"Transport is down."* Yells the pilot. *"Go. Go. Go!"* The boarding ramp descends, letting in the harsh Jakku sunlight. I squint, covering my eyes. Sand blows through the opening, flying around about the cabin. Voren and Jevin bark out orders as the troops prepare to disembark. I yell orders to Aurek. "Move towards the rally point. The downed Corellian Corvette!" We rush out of the transport and into the hot desert wind, sprinting for the Corvette. In the distance, I see other transports offloading troops, their unit commanders undoubtedly giving the same orders. Sand whips around my boots. We run in tight formation, the wind and flying sand making it difficult for us to advance. A commando trips and almost face plants into the dunes,

but I grab a hold of his arm, lifting him back on his feet. I can see small white-armored figures around and beneath the Corvette scurrying around. "Imperials!" I yell, pointing. Endel takes out his macrobinoculars, peering at the Corvette. "And lots of 'em!" He adds. Red laserfire begins to whiz past our heads as the stormtroopers attempt to suppress us. "Watch that laserfire!" Yells Jevin, firing his A280C. I fire my own weapon, the barrel quickly heating up. I see some white-armored figures topple to the ground, but more quickly take their place. A T-47 scores a hit on an AT-AT off to our right, tripping up its legs with a tow cable, causing the mighty walker to topple. We take cover inside the skeletal frame of a bombed-out walker, laserfire pinging against its metal surface, popping back out to down stormtroopers. A thermal detonator thrown inside at our feet makes us frantically dash out. The dunes around us are already littered with debris from the sky battle. We take cover again behind fallen crates and twisted hunks of metal up on a ridge, continuing to fire upon the Imperials. A Rodian corporal goes down, a smoking hole between his large glassy eyes. Another commando wheels backward, her chest blackened. A pulse cannon shot lifts a commando off his feet, sending him flying backwards. "Sniper!" Yells Malogaan next to me, spraying the ground beneath the Corvette with his DLT-19. "Make way!" I hear someone shout. Two rebel soldiers lug an E-web repeating blaster up to the front, quickly setting it up. Jevin leaps on the repeating blaster, immediately beginning to fire. Kelrian kneels next to him, calling out targets, as well as monitoring the small power generator, making sure it doesn't overheat. "Do you think we'll make it to the rally point?" Yells Crix, dodging a blaster bolt flying past him. "We might!" I yell. "If we're smart and stick together!" I chance a look up at the sky. Destroyers are everywhere, exchanging fire with our MC80s, corvettes, and Mark One Starhawks. Thousands of red and green lasers crisscross the sky, looking like a light show. A deadly light show. Rebel and Imperial fighters, seeming like small pinpoints, zoom around the sky, dodging and weaving as they meet one another; a deadly dance. Capital ships engage each other from a distance, explosions dotting their gigantic metal surfaces as laserfire connects with them. A Star Destroyer, its engines in flames, falls from the sky, doomed to crash in the Goazon dunes. A Nebulon-B cruiser soon follows suit, breaking in half with the sheer force of gravity. Many more like it already dot the barren landscape. I return my focus to the encroaching stormtroopers, blasting a few more into oblivion. Suddenly, I hear a

tremendous groaning sound and look up again. Uh oh! . . .



Jevin Corso - Battle of Jakku

"Hey, you ready Blastzone?" Wodi yells as he runs into the hangar. I stand there, looking out the viewport at the dust bowl of a world, seeing all those we have lost during this war. Grimacing, I reply, "Nearly. I'm just thinking about what this battle's going to mean for us. But I'm good to go." "Major Corso! Your Battalion is giving the Forty-Second Division back up!" Colonel Tav Voren yells down the hall at me, his Chagrian head tails bobbing. "Got it. I assume we are hitting the Imps' main line?" I reply. Voren smirks at me, his forked tongue flitting at me. "We're in the thick of it."

"Attention all New Republic forces, this is Admiral Ackbar. Commence the attack, and may the Force be with us all." With that, the whine of engines starting up fills the hangar. Most of the Forty-Second Division and Vanguard Battalion board the GR-75s. One of Wodi's troopers, Malogaan, mutters, "Too bad both our Jedi friends aren't here." "Cut the chatter," Wodi chimes in. He glances at me, then at Voren. "Major, Colonel, Vanguard is ready. We'll win this thing." And with that, the transport exits the hangar.

"All ships, this is Admiral Kerex," the Quarren's bubbly voice comes over the comm, "watch it out there. We're picking up a Super Star Destroyer, the *Annihilator*. Zerek Squadron, move in with the *Guardian* and *Liberator* and take it out." "Copy, Admiral."

The ride planetside is full of turbulence, the shield of the transport buckling under enemy fire. Several times the lights in the transport buzzed, the transport making creaking sounds. "This is Thane. My team and Rancor are moving in on the *Inflictor*, we'll take that destroyer for the Republic."

Finally we touch the ground with a *thud*. "All right grunts, this is it!" Voren yells over the noise. The blast shield doors open, letting the blinding Jakku sun peer through. After the flash goes away, Voren and I bark out orders and the troops began racing towards our objective, Sunspot Ridge. We can use that as a rally point as we make a major push against the imperial line. Across the desert, multiple transports are landing and disembarking troops, the unit commanders barking out orders to their troops.

The Battle of Jakku has begun . . .

Jevin Corso - Battle of Jakku

"Turbolaser fire, move!" I yell as a torrent of green falls from the sky like a deadly green rain. We scatter away from the ridge, the orbital strike reducing it to nothingness. Wodi hefts me up from the scorching sand saying, "We're not doing good here, Blastzone!" "I know! But we aren't giving up!" We scramble out of our positions, running across the desert. There's an Imperial communications center that is coordinating their forces. If we can take it out, it'll throw them in disarray.

"Malogaan! Get on the comms and get a strafing run on the comms center!" I yell out and in the next few minutes, a wing of B-wings swoop in, blasting the center's defenders, an AT-ST walker and several E-webs, allowing us to move in. Moving up to the doors, Wodi and I pull out our bowcasters. Malogaan pulls the doors open and in we go, blasting the defenders to bits.

"Charges set sir!" Wodi yells out. "Alright, let's move it!" I yell. We exit the building just in time to see it erupt in flames. "*Attention all ground forces,*

this is General Ponith. The Annihilator has been taken out. It's current trajectory is the Goazon Badlands, quadrant three. All forces in that area, clear out of there now!" Even before the transmission ends, we see it, the massive ship slowing falling from the sky, chunks missing here and there; our ships still pummeling it with turbolaser fire. "Here it comes!" Endel yells out and with a crash that is ear splitting and a massive wave of sand, the Star Destroyer hits the planet.

I pop up from our hiding position, "OK, it's clear, let's push the Imps back." "All forces, move in!" Ponith says over the comm. Looking to our right, we see AT-ATs bearing down on our position, cannons aimed directly at us, and all looks lost. In that moment, a YT-2400 appears in the sky, a familiar emblem of the old Jedi order symbol on it. "No . . . it can't be. Cade?" I ask out loud. And then out of the ship three beings jump; a Wookiee, Skywalker, and Valdarin, ryyk blade and lightsabers out. The three land on top of the head of one of the walkers, cutting into it. All of a sudden, its cannons turn on another walker, blasting its side into crumpled metal. "Now's our chance," Voren yells, "Move it!"

Meanwhile, in orbit . . .

"All ships, this is Kyrell, we've made it aboard the Inflictor, standby." The cruisers *Perseverance* and *Guardian* swoop in over a Star Destroyer, blasting its shields away and causing it to break apart from withering turbolaser fire. Kerex peers out the viewport, directing ship movements from a tactical holomap when the *Inflictor* begins falling to the planet. "Kyrell what's going on over there?" No answer. "All ground forces, this is Kerex. Thane's mission did not go as planned, the ship is falling from orbit, clear the blast zone!"

Back on the ground . . .

We meet up with Cade and Luke after they blasted the other AT-ATs to slag. "I thought you two weren't going to make it?" Luke and Cade look at each other, "We weren't." Luke replies. ""But Cade came back from his mission to find Xander, saying that being here was more important at the time."

"All ground forces, this is Kerex. Thane's mission has not gone as planned, the Inflictor is falling from orbit. Clear the blast zone!" And we see it, the

massive ship slowly falling, an unbelievable sight. "You heard the man," Cade says, "Let's go!" We hightail it out of the area, rushing towards the designated evac sight. All across the planet, firefights still rage. "Here it comes!" And with a massive ground quake, the *Inflictor* hits the ground nearly on top of us, waves of sand and debris flowing out from it.

"Wishbone! Where are you?" I yell, my voice hoarse with grit. "Here, sir!" Wodi relies, pushing over a sheet of metal that had pinned his leg. The rest of the troops are more or less fine, a few burns and scrap here and there but no casualties from the impact. "Good, lets-" I begin saying when my wrist locator starts pinging. "There's a distress signal coming in. And it's coming from under the ground . . . *here*. Help me dig!" And with that, Wodi and I start digging through the dirt, eventually hitting the metal of an Imperial escape pod. We prop the door open and our medic, Jobin, asks Thane, the pods occupant, if he needs assistance. "I'd take care of her first." Thane says. We all aim our blasters as soon as we see her. "What the?" Thane says, alarmed. The woman with him is Ciena Ree, commander of the *Inflictor*.

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix - Jakku, Graveyard of Giants, Outer Rim Territories

The Star Destroyer *Inflictor* hits the Goazon dunes with a massive thud and sound of screeching metal. Sand and debris is sent flying in all directions in a giant whirlwind of sand. I'm peppered with flecks of hot metal and stinging sand as I sprint away from the mutilated Destroyer. I run on unsteady legs as the shock wave ripples over me. Several times I almost stumble, but keep going out of pure adrenaline. My calves are on fire from the exertion. Suddenly, I trip over an object buried in the sand and do a faceplant into the dunes, the barrel of my shouldered RT-97C smacking against the back of my helmet. Groggily, I look to see what my boots caught on. A half-buried stormtrooper helmet. Its exposed eye lens seems to be staring at me. I shake my head to clear it and attempt to get up, but my leg is caught under a piece of metal. "Wishbone! Where are you?" I hear Jevin call. Pushing the sheet of metal off with an effort, I stand up. "Here sir!" Jevin runs over to me, caked in dust, but no more worse for wear than I am. Looking around, I see the other troops getting to their feet, checking for any injuries. I see Nosh Ker Raisuun getting unsteadily to his feet. I move to help the Quarren.

"You alright?" I ask him. Raisuun nods. "It'll take more than a Destroyer to put me out of action, Lieutenant!" I grin at my friend. We move through the stream of dazed and dust-caked troops together, helping where we can. While I walk, I do a silent headcount of my team. *Raisuun, Malogaan, Vrieska, Kelrian, Mentel, Endel, and Linaki. All here.* I let out a small sigh of relief. Unclipping my canteen from my belt, I take a much-needed swig of water. Raisuun goes off to join Kelrian and Vrieska, and I walk back to Jevin. Nearby, Voren is already shouting orders, his voice clear and crisp. Jevin gives me a thumbs up. "Good, let's . . ." he starts to say, but is interrupted by the chirp of his wrist locator. "There's a distress signal coming in." I lean over and look at the indicator. A small red blip pulsates on the mini screen. "And it's coming from under the ground." Jevin walks a few paces to my left, stopping at a sand dune. "Here. Help me dig!" Getting on our hands and knees, Jevin and I dig until we uncover the hatch of an escape pod. A few soldiers gather around the pod, watching as we pry the door open to expose . . . "Thane Kyrell!" I shout. Thane peers at our group from inside the cramped pod, shading his eyes from the harsh sun. "Do you need assistance, sir?" Our unit's medic, Olan Jobin, asks, a medpac already in his gloved hand. "I'd take care of her first. She needs immediate medical attention." Thane replies, maneuvering an unconscious dark-skinned woman out of the pod. She is dressed in an Imperial officer's tunic. Cienna Ree. Immediately all blasters, including mine, are brought to bear on the unconscious Imperial. Jevin walks forward towards the unconscious Ree, snapping a pair of magnetic binders around her wrists. Thane's face is one of anger, then understanding. Without a word, our group moves off towards the rendezvous point.

. . .



We gather on a ridge overlooking a vast expanse of debris-ridden sand. In the distance, I see several Imperial AT-ATs, and at least one full battalion of stormtroopers. Not good. I spy Amminius in the crowd of soldiers already there. I race to my friend. He sees me coming and rushes to meet me, his face breaking out in a grin. "Wishbone! Still here are ya?" I grasp his gloved hand. "Wouldn't want to miss the final push!" I gesture out at the Imperials. He nods, gripping his E-11 a little harder in his gloved hands. "I hear things didn't go as planned on the *Inflictor*." I say. "What happened?" Amminius shrugs, smiling. "I guess I need a bit of practice piloting a Destroyer!" I laugh, cuffing him good-naturedly on the arm. Colonel Tav Voren makes his way to the front of the crowd, followed by Jevin and General Bel Iblis. "Alright, listen up!" The Chagrian begins. "I know many of you are wondering when this war will come to an end. I come before you to say it ends NOW!" A cheer erupts. "Long have you fought against the mighty Imperial war machine. You have all fought hard, with bravery and courage. You have sacrificed much. It is time to see this thing to the end!" Voren raises his rifle into the air, yelling: "For the Rebellion!" "FOR THE REBELLION!" We cry out. Amminius gives me a thumbs up. I return the gesture, my heart pounding against my ribcage. Here we go. "Chaaaarge!" A commando near me yells, brandishing an E-11 rifle and pointing towards the Imperial lines across the expanse of debris-littered sand. Our troops rush forward, ready to meet the Imperials head on.



Blaster fire is everywhere. A Sullustan next to me goes down, hitting the sand face first. "We've got Imperials approaching!" Yells Endel, firing his DH-17. "*Stand together! Take 'em down!*" I hear over my comm. The stormtroopers rush to meet us, their forces bolstered by an AT-ST. I yank out my MPL-57 ion torpedo, aiming it at the head of the walker. The torpedo strikes the walker just above its chin cannon, turning the AT-ST into shrapnel. "Nice one!" Yells Amminius, blasting a stormtrooper in the chest with his E-11.



X-wings fly overhead, engaging the wings of TIE fighters. I see Tyros Voddher in his custom X-wing with green trim, blowing away a TIE interceptor. I let out a whoop and continue on, lighting up stormtroopers with my A280C. "This is it!" I hear Jevin yell. He runs next to me, blasting troopers left and right. *"Flank left! Flank left!"... "Watch your tail!"... "Fire in the hole!"... "Man down!"... "Chicken-walker taken out!"... "Hold for support!"... "All wings, this is it!"... "We have 'em now!"*

...



The last AT-AT topples to the sand with an almighty crash, its drive motor destroyed. The ground is littered with white-armored bodies of fallen stormtroopers. Near me, a dozen commandos guard a battered group of Imperials, magnetic binders over their armored wrists. Up in the sky, the last few Star Destroyers slowly fall planetward, belching smoke and fire. We let out a cheer that shakes the stars, brandishing our blasters in the air in victory as X-wings fly over us. We've won! Jakku is ours! The Galactic Civil War is over! Soldiers everywhere are clapping, hugging, and crying. I see Otara Menuk rush into Amminius' arms, planting a large kiss on his lips. I grin. I find Aurek and the rest of Rancor Team. We get in a huge group hug, laughing. A tap on my shoulder makes me turn around. Zerek Squadron, Cade, and Jevin stand there. "Come here!" I grin, bringing the lot of them into our big, sweaty hug. I don't think I've been happier in my life. Or more caked in grit.

Epilogue, Wodi "Wishbone" Quix, Coruscant: Two years after Jakku

I run my fingers over my old combat helmet, feeling each scratch and burn

mark. Its tan surface and black blast visor are full of them. Taking out a rag from my pants pocket, I carefully wipe it down. Next to me on my bunk are my old A280C rifle, RT-97C heavy blaster, and DH-17 pistol. On the floor is my old field backpack. I give each weapon a thorough cleaning, taking them apart and carefully swabbing out the small parts inside. "Having fun, Wishbone?" I turn to see Amminius standing in the doorway, dressed in his New Republic Special Forces Infiltrator uniform, grinning. "You bet!" I smile at my best friend. "You look quite dapper!" Amminius bows. "Courtesy of New Republic R&D!" He walks over and sits next to me, picking up and reconfiguring my RT-97C. "You did it wrong!" I tease him. "The barrel's supposed to go on THIS end!" Amminius laughs and tosses it back to me. We sit in silence for a few moments, enjoying each other's company. Eventually, Amminius breaks the silence. "I'm going out on a date with Otara tonight to some fancy restaurant." "Yeah?" I say, attaching the sight back on my A280. "You and Amara are more than welcome to come. I've got something special planned." He says, smiling. I put down my blaster and look at him for a few moments before a huge grin breaks out across my face. "No way!" Amminius grins back, holding up a small hinged box. "Picked it up this morning at the jewelers!" "Finally!" I yell, cuffing him on the arm and lightly tussling his hair good-naturedly. "Took you long enough." Amminius loses his grin, looking a little nervous. "Do you think she'll say yes?" He asks, wringing his hands together. "Of course!" I say. "She loves you!" Amminius nods. "I'm just nervous is all." Lannik Endel suddenly peeks his head into the room. "Wodi, Lady Ordo wants us all for another training session." I smile. "Tell her I'll be along in a minute." Endel grins. "If I have to cover for your absence one more time . . ." I shoo him off, laughing. "You won't! Now go!" Endel gives me a casual salute. "Yes, Captain!" I turn back to Amminius. "It's only natural to be nervous. You can't be any worse than me! *Kriff*, the first time I asked Amara on a date, I could barely stand!" Amminius laughs. "Yeah, I remember that!" He nods in affirmation. "If I could handle Jakku, then I can *definitely* handle this!" I clap him on the shoulder. "That's the spirit!" I look at my chrono. "I better be off." I grin at him, shouldering my weapons. "I'll see you tonight!" I give Amminius one final salute before exiting my quarters and walking off down the hallway. "Hey, Wishbone!" I turn back to see Amminius walking out after me. "Don't forget this!" He grins, tossing me my EC-17 scout pistol. "And this!" He hands me my new weapon, an X45A. I smile at him. "Always watching my back!" "Just like old times," he grins back, "now get going!"

The GALACTIC CIVIL WAR has ended, but our heroes' stories are far from over. A new threat against the NEW REPUBLIC has risen, and it will take every ounce of courage and daring to defeat it. Read on!

STAR WARS: The Imperium War
By: Laser921 and WodiQuix

Dramatis Personae

New Republic:

Tor Ponith, Bothan male: The first High Marshal of the New Republic. Ponith is on equal terms with Fleet Admiral Unath Kerex as leader of the military arm of the New Republic and is a veteran of the Galactic Civil War.

Unath Kerex, Quarren male: Unath is a veteran of the Galactic Civil War. During that war and the beginning of the New Republic, he served as Gial Ackbar's protégé and succeeded him as Fleet Admiral shortly before the outbreak of the Imperium War. He serves along with his comrade Tor Ponith as the leader of the New Republic military.

Garm Bel Iblis, Human male: Garm, like most members of Republic Command, is a veteran of the GCW. This gruff Corellian used to be in politics but discovered his true calling when the war claimed his wife and daughter. Rising through the ranks to General in the Alliance, he won many victories against the Empire, including the liberation of Bespin following the Battle of Endor. Upon transitioning from the Rebellion to the New Republic, Garm became one of the four High Generals of the Republic, one of the highest ranks possible.

Jevin Corso, Human male: Jevin is a veteran of the GCW, where he cemented his reputation as a terrific soldier, a feared combatant, and a loyal

friend. Jevin rose the ranks from captain of Princess Leia's bodyguard to Colonel. Jevin is close friends with both heroes, Wodi Quix and Cade Valdarin, and would serve the Republic valiantly.

Wodi Quix, Human male: Wodi, like, his good friends Jevin and Amminius, is a veteran soldier and exceptionally gifted Special Forces operator. Wodi fought alongside Jevin during the Civil War, both having started out with the Forty-First Fury Battalion. Upon the transition to the New Republic, due to his exceptional skills as a soldier and leader, Wodi was made one of the first SHARCs, or Special Hazards and Reconnaissance Commandos.

Vanessa Clarke, Female human: Vanessa is a remarkable woman of strength. Hailing from Alderaan, she is just like her kinsman, Leia Organa; tough, charismatic, and relentless when she needs to be. Vanessa holds the rank of Lieutenant General and serves the Republic as the Deputy Director of Special Forces, aiding High General Hiram Drayson, Director of Special Forces, as they fight their unforgiving foe.

Geelo, Rodian male: The lesser known brother of the Rodian bounty hunter, Greedo, Geelo decided to serve the Rebellion and the Republic. Geelo's natural tendency to take risks led him to join the elite Republic Jumper Corps, soldiers trained to use powerful jetpacks and who partake in some of the most daring and dangerous missions.

Cade Valdarin, Human male: Cade Valdarin is one of the last Jedi, the only two known at the moment are him and Luke Skywalker. The child of two Jedi from the Clone Wars, his parents were killed by Darth Vader shortly before the Battle of Scarif. His aunt, Mon Mothma, decided to take the boy in and raise him as her own son. Thus, he was involved in many battles of the Galactic Civil War and would grow his tremendous Force potential and become a master swordsman with a lightsaber. He is fifteen years younger than Luke but the two share a bond of best friends, rivals, master and student, student and master, and comrades in arms.

Amminius Sinan, Human male: Amminius, like his good friend Wodi Quix, is a veteran of the Civil War. Sinan is very adept at infiltration and sabotage. He served as team scout for his unit in the Civil War and upon the transition to the Republic, Amminius would become the first of the Infiltrators, an elite

group of soldiers. These elite agents served New Republic Intelligence as master spies and assassins, removing threats to the Republic and keeping out of the limelight.

Tav Voren, Chagrian male: The lean, mean, Chagrian is a veteran soldier. He serves as General of the Republic alongside his peer Jevin Corso. This man is the one who led the final ground charge at the Battle of Jakku, the death knell of the Galactic Empire. He is a valiant warrior who like Tor and Jevin, chooses to fight on the front lines with his soldiers, creating a near indestructible bond with those under his command.

Fringe:

Salurra, Wookiee male: The Wookiee, Salurra, is a mighty warrior of Kashyyyk. Around half the age of the mighty Chewbacca, Salurra, or "Sal" by his friends, became entangled in galactic affairs when he was kidnapped by the Empire and sent to the Bionip facilities on Bespin. During the liberation, he was rescued by a young Cade Valdarin, to whom he pledged a life debt and has served ever since as a trusted friend and bodyguard. Salurra's father is the head of the Wookiee Defense Force.

Gerik Ordo, Human male: Gerik Ordo is a fierce warrior, a Mandalorian. Nearly the same age as Cade Valdarin, the two share a brotherly bond. Gerik's mother was the commandant of the Mandalorian Protectors and eventually, Gerik would become Commandant himself. He was also asked by the Republic to help train the SHARCs, leading the NR Special Forces unit to become one of the most highly trained military units in the galaxy.

Sid, Sullustan male: The ever jovial Sid is a veteran of the Rebel Alliance. Following the conclusion of the Galactic Civil War, he chose to follow his dream and became a chef, owning a successful cafe on Coruscant. However, when the Imperium War broke out, he was asked by his old friends to join the war effort. Grabbing his meat cleaver, a near infinite supply of blue milk pancakes, and his secret recipes, he joined the war effort . . . and never divulged his recipe for the flatcakes.

Sonya Ravenclaw, Human female: A thrillseeker woman, Sonya is an excellent pilot and a treasure hunter. She once had an infatuation with the

hero Cade Valdarin that simmered into a mutual respect and good friendship. Sonya would be asked by High Marshal Tor Ponith to aid the Republic time and again due to her piloting skills, and more importantly, her skills at evasion.

Black Nova Pirates, Graal Imperium: Two of the Imperial Remnants that survived past the fall of the Empire, these two factions were among the more powerful remnants to exist. These two groups have managed to eke an existence in the dark spaces between the stars but would soon find a new purpose thanks to a man named Xander Verush.

Imperium:

Xander Verush, Human male: Shadow Guard of the Empire, Emperor's Voice, Palpatine's true apprentice; Xander Verush's position as Darth Sidious' secret apprentice granted him a high position as the Emperor's Voice in the Empire, an exalted military position. Groomed to become the next Dark Lord and Emperor, fate would have different plans. After being defeated by an eight year old Cade Valdarin on Endor, he fled to Wild Space. Here, after years of toils, he would create the Imperium, deemed the true successor of the Empire.

Darth Ferus, Trandoshan male: Shadow Hand of the Imperium, Darth Ferus was Pravus's apprentice and second-in-command. In the Imperium, there are a total of nine powerful Sith lords under the Emperor; eight Praetors and Darth Ferus. Like the Praetors, Ferus has a unique ability in the Force; his being the ability to completely disappear, both physically and in the Force.

Xellius, Human male: The third-in command of the Imperium, Xellius is a human male that has always had an ability for surviving and being a nuisance. Xellius serves as the leader of the Praetors, the sith lords of the Imperium.

Sheratan, Human male: Sheratan comes from the graveyard world of Malachor and serves as the fourth leader of the Imperium. Like all Praetors, he shares the esoteric technique of Force teleportation. Sheratan serves as

the second-in-command of the Praetors and, wearing a somber mask, he strikes fear into his masters' enemies.

Praetors: The Sith Lords of the Imperium, the Praetors come from the Sith cults that make up the majority of the Imperium's people. Several, like Xellius and Sheratan, were well-versed Force-users before their association with Pravus, while others were hand-trained by him to become killing instruments. There are always eight Praetors, along with Darth Ferus, thus making the the Dark Lord's Council, a circle of ten Sith Lords, including Darth Pravus himself.

Utres Daigen, Human male: Utres Daigen was a former colonel of the Imperial Storm Commandos of the Empire. Following the conclusion of the Galactic Civil War, and evading Imperial Hunters, he was recruited by Darth Pravus to serve as Grand Moff of his Imperium. Unlike Tarkin, he has a more hands-on role, serving as the head of the Imperium's army.

Introduction: It is fourteen years after the NEW REPUBLIC'S decisive victory over the last remnants of the GALACTIC EMPIRE on JAKKU. Since that time, peace has been restored to the galaxy, helped along by a historic treaty, the GALACTIC CONCORDANCE. The NEW REPUBLIC keeps the peace with a watchful eye, on the lookout for the slightest hint of unrest. However, a shadowy threat looms in the Inner Rim, and an old enemy resurfaces, bent on the destruction of the NEW REPUBLIC and its heroes . . .

Fourteen years after the signing of the Galactic Concordance

The New Republic has seen peace for over a decade. The Empire has remained true to its word and has not caused hostilities; the only conflicts being small skirmishes with pirates and slavers. Jedi Knights Cade Valdarin and Luke Skywalker have spent the last few years in the Outer Rim, looking for potential Force-adept candidates to create a New Order. Jevin Corso, Wodi Quix, and Amminius Sinan have all remained in the military and in fighting trim, the most recent action being the routing of the Black Nova slavers at Nilkon. The citizens of Coruscant and beyond enjoy a life of calm. But little do the people of the New Republic know the chaos yet to come . . .

Coruscant, current capital of the New Republic -- Republic Command Complex, Landing Pad Aurek

Major Wodi Quix steps down the permacrete stairs of the Republic Command Complex toward the now-occupied landing pad, his back still hurting from the beating the sprier Mandalorian Commandant, Gerik Ordo, had given him during their training session. But that was nothing compared to the excitement he felt. In the hangar, a black and blue X-wing had landed; the colors of the planet Chandrila. This fighter was a New Republic prototype T-85 Incom Corporation X-wing, and only one person in the galaxy had that starfighter. The canopy hisses open to reveal a young man in blue flight suit, unstrapping his helmet and flicking switches on his console, a huge grin across his face. Even at a distance, Wodi knows who it is. Jedi Knight Cade Valdarin. Cade had spent the last five years in the Outer Rim with barely any communication, continuing his Jedi training with Luke Skywalker. Even though Cade has grown, Wodi still saw the enthusiasm of a child in him.

"Well, well, if it isn't little Cade. You're all grown up." Wodi says to me. I smile, stepping down from my cockpit to face my friend. "Hello Wodi, it has been a long time. How have you been?" He stares at me, no doubt shocked at how much I had grown. Then he smiles. "Well, aside from your friend Gerik kicking my butt in training for the SHARCs, pretty good. I like the ship, is it new?" I glance back at my fighter. "Yep, this is the new T-85 model X-wing. Still a prototype, but Fleet Admiral Kerex is planning to replace the T-70." Wodi whistles in appreciation. We walk out heading toward the command room. "So, any trouble with the Empire?" Wodi snorts at my question, smirking slightly. "Not really. The Concordance seems to be keeping them in line. There doesn't seem to be any fight left in them, which is music to my ears. We're honestly getting a little bored of mopping up slavers and pirates. There is one concern though: Amminius' Infiltrator team found a splinter group calling itself the First Order. A group of goons wanting to relive the *glory days* of Imperial prestige and play dress-up. Nothing really, not even a threat, but Amminius was ordered to keep tabs on them. And best of all, nothing about Xander. Not a word."

. . .

"So, no sign of our missing friend Xander in the Rim? That's a shame." Admiral Kerex sighs. I nod. "Luke and I decided to take a detour Admiral, we found nothing out there." Then at that moment I sense a tingle in the Force. Wodi and Jevin burst into the Command Complex, looks of shock on their faces. "Turn on your holonet projector," Wodi says, rushing over and slapping on all the projectors in the room. And suddenly, we see why they were so horrified. A man of forty some years appears, a distinct scar running from his left temple diagonally across his nose to the right cheek. And it clicks. "By the Force." I mutter.

"Citizens of the New Republic, I am Darth Pravus, Emperor of the Imperium and Dark Lord of the Sith. For too long have you sat unopposed. For too long have you grown arrogant and in that arrogance, complacent and corrupt. For your crimes, you shall be punished. Your worlds will fall, your armies will be crushed, and your leaders made to bow. Hear me, followers of the Republic. In the name of Palpatine and the Sith, *you will be destroyed*. Destroyed and replaced by the Imperium as was meant to be." Then the face turns and he says, "Valdarin, I know you are seeing this. Challenge me if you dare." And then static. For a few minutes we are all silent, looks of terror and shock on all of us. Then Chancellor Jerim Mervis, a Soccoran male, barges in. "We just got word from Intelligence. Damaria has been attacked. Admiral, Master Valdarin, we need an expeditionary unit sent there to see what exactly we are dealing with." And just like that, the galaxy is thrust into chaos yet again

. . .

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix - Damaria, Inner Rim, aboard the MC80 star cruiser *Bright Hope*

Damaria. The Jewel of the Inner Rim. My mind races to horrible conclusions as Pravus' holonet broadcast plays over and over in my head. *Your worlds will fall, your armies will be crushed, and your leaders made to bow*. I shiver despite the temperature in my cabin. To calm my mind, I begin disassembly and cleaning my X45A, laying each part out on my bunk, working my cleaning rag into every nook and cranny. After I finish and reassemble my weapon, I unstrap my old field backpack, painted reddish orange from our trip to Sullust during the Galactic Civil War, and line up my equipment in

neat rows, taking stock of each item. Four thermals, two flash grenades, emergency flare, three weeks dry rations, water purifier, med kit . . . A knock on my door makes me look up from my work. "Come in." The door hisses open to reveal Amminius, dressed in his black Infiltrator uniform. He gives me a smile with a casual salute and enters my cabin. "How you feeling, Wishbone?" Amminius glances down at my bunk, covered in equipment. He grins. "That bad, huh?" I shake my head, clearing some room for him to sit. "Just because I'm taking inventory of my supplies doesn't mean . . ." Amminius rolls his eyes, sitting next to me. "Riiight, and Tatooine isn't covered in sand." I give him a glare. Amminius continues to look at me. After a few seconds, we both break out in laughter. I sigh, shaking my head again. "Fourteen years of peace. Not a peep from the Empire. And now this." Amminius nods, his expression turning grave. "I'd hoped we'd seen the last of that slime." I hear booted footsteps outside my room. My door opens, seemingly of its own accord to reveal a dark-blond, bearded man in his early twenties, dressed in a brown robe, black undershirt, pants, and brown combat boots. Hooked to his utility belt is a lightsaber. I smile. "Cade. Come to join the senior's club?" The young Jedi grins. "Not today, Wodi. Rear Admiral Vanice requests both of your presences on the bridge. We're coming out of hyperspace in a few minutes." Amminius chuckles. "Come to make sure we don't get lost again? So thoughtful of you!" Cade smiles, raising his hand. Immediately, my equipment rises into the air, sorting itself before floating back into my pack. He beckons with his free hand. "Come on, let's go!" I shoulder my pack and weapons, smiling, following Cade and Amminius out of my cabin, flicking off the light before shutting the door.

. . .

The *Bright Hope* exits hyperspace, orbiting a purple world ringed by three blue suns. Immediately, alarm klaxons begin to blare, bathing the command bridge in red, strobing light. "Enemy contacts!" shouts a Bith junior lieutenant. Staring out the viewport, I see multiple leviathan wedge-shaped capital ships, their green turbolasers lancing down, laying waste to Damaria. "Destroyers! Not *Imperial*-class!" Shouts another officer. "Arrowhead formation!" Yells Vanice, all business. "Engage those Destroyers!" The on-board comm is going crazy. Beings and droids are running everywhere. Cade stands next to me, in the middle of all the chaos, his eyes closed, a look of deep concentration on his face. He suddenly gasps, staggering backwards as if physically hit, his eyelids snapping open to reveal troubled grey eyes.

"What is it?" I ask him, concerned, putting a gloved hand on his shoulder. "I sense no life on Damar." Cade says, reeling from shock. "It's as if the living Force itself has been ripped from its surface!" I stagger as our shields take a hit, bracing my hand against the transparisteel. "This is not a good situation!" Amminius yells. Fighters streak by overhead, pounding our hull with missiles and green laserfire. "TIE Hunters!" A deck officer shouts. "Launch Blade Squadron *now*! And get me Captain Biabru!" Orders Admiral Vanice. Our three MC80 cruisers rush to meet the flotilla of mystery Destroyers, cannon batteries letting loose a barrage of laserfire. X-wings, B-wings, and A-wings maneuver to engage the TIEs. "Our cannons are having no effect!" Yells the Bith junior lieutenant. "Are their shields up?" barks Vanice. "No, ma'am!" Replies the Bith. "I'm getting no reading on shield strength!" A worried look crosses the Chadra-Fans' face. She turns to an officer on her right, about to give an order, when a huge explosion causes everyone to fall to the deck. I bang my head on the bulkhead, my vision and hearing going fuzzy. "We've just lost the *Liberty*!" The muffled voice of an officer frantically yells. Cade and Amminius pull me to my feet. Their expressions are grave. I look out the viewport again to see the starfield on fire, remains of the MC80 *Liberty*, in several large pieces, venting debris, oxygen, and bodies. I resist the urge to empty the contents of my stomach onto the floor. The Destroyers continue to pound the wreck with laserfire. With a brilliant flash of light, the *Liberty* disappears. "The *Spirit of Kenobi* is taking heavy fire! Blade Squadron has sustained heavy casualties!" The reports pile in, none of them good. "What should we do, Admiral?" Yells an officer . . .

Massacre at Damar - Cade Valdarin

"What should we do, Admiral?" An officer yells. The bridge of the *Bright Hope* is in a panic. These mammoth Star Destroyers, shaped in such a way the sensor officer nicknamed them Predators, are pounding the reconnaissance fleet. "Aurek Squad, get to your ships!" I suddenly yell. Wodi stares at me, "You're not going out there!?" "I have to, a Jedi's life is sacrifice." I run into the corridor and bump into a female Zeltron. "Kiara!? This isn't a good time." Kiara and I just got engaged. "Cade, don't go!" she pleads with sapphire eyes. I shake my head. "I have to, this is all my fault. I didn't kill Xander when I had the chance." I give her a quick kiss and embrace, then run for my T-85 X-wing berthed in the hangar, dodging scrambling pilots and crewmen.

. . .

We enter Damarian space with a measly force; a prototype advanced X-wing, several A-wings and B-wings. Flying out towards the battle in space, Aurek Seven yells, "*Sithspit!*" "Aurek Seven, whats wrong?" I ask. "The power those Destroyers are generating is enormous! If I'm reading this right, they're using hundreds if not thousands of kyber crystals!" "That's impossible," Aurek Eight chimes in. "There aren't that many crystals in known space." "None, Aurek. What about unknown space?" I ask. I reach out with the Force, trying to see if Pravus is out there. . . Nothing, but there are smaller Force signatures out there. "*We need to cover the transports as they gather survivors!*" Vanice yells. "Copy, Aurek squad, form up, Beta formation." I say. A wave of TIE Hunters bears down on us. "Break formation!" a pilot yells. Too late. Her ship is engulfed in laserfire, her cries crackling off the comm. "What are we doing Cade!?" Wodi yells, his voice loud in my headset. "*All hands, prepare to repel boarders!*" Vanice's voice cuts through. Imperium boarding ships have attached themselves to the *Bright Hope*.

"*Admiral, they're in the cargo bay! Mother of moons, these men are cut to shreds. One of the hostiles has a saber!*" I hear over the comm. "*There's a-ahhhh!*" "Wodi, help them out!" I yell. Reaching out with the Force, I sense a strange feeling, a somehow warped Force presence. "Wodi be careful! They aren't strong in the Force but they are well trained with a saber!" Just then a TIE screams towards me, causing me to drop into a sharp turn and somersault behind the daring pilot. The TIE pilot attempts to shake me off, maneuvering his small fighter wildly. After weaving through the debris of the cruiser, I get a clear shot and blast him to bits. "Admiral, are all transports aboard?" "*We got 'em! Let's get out of here!*" I sigh in relief. I relay the retreat order over my comm. And with that, Aurek retreats back to the *Bright Hope*. Our first engagement with this Imperium; our first failure.

. . .

Back on Coruscant, Admiral Vanice and Wodi gave their report to Chancellor Mervis. The next few days threw the New Republic into a frenzy. The Galactic Concordance, the treaty that ended the Galactic Civil War and downgraded the military, was lifted, temporarily, to fight the Imperium. In addition, the Right of Conscription was enacted, allowing Republic forces to

conscript local system and sector defense forces into the Republic military. As part of the military buildup ordered, the Bothan High General, Tor Ponith, was voted in as the first High Marshal of the Republic for his tactical genius and innovation on the field. Republic Intelligence has pinpointed a planet where valuable intel on the *Predator* Destroyers can be obtained. Rhen Var. They aren't sure what is so important on a frozen ice ball like that, but the point is a fleet of the Imperium is there, refueling for another attack. Fleet Admiral Kerex and High Marshal Ponith give the go-ahead for a stealth mission to Rhen Var to gain this intel, under the cover of a major attack.

. . .

I finish shaving, put down my razor, and look in the refresher mirror at my reflection. Have I always had dark bags under my eyes? Kiara enters the room, her face creased with worry. "Cade, I'm worried. Not just for you but for the Republic. We never anticipated this." I put on a brave face, turn, and embrace her. "That's what you and Senator Trill are for. You can help him help the people stay calm. Besides, Luke and I are here, with the Jedi, the Republic will stay strong." She smiles, then gives me a kiss. "I believe in you and so do the others. The door slides open and Wodi walks in, looking at his datapad. He glances up, and a look of embarrassment crosses his face. He flashes me a sheepish grin. "I hope I didn't interrupt anything." I shake my head and say, "Wodi, you sure about this?" I ask. "Never been surer in my life. This is what Jarael and Gerik trained us for, the SHARCs are ready." Speaking of Gerik, in he comes, dressed in his green and black Mandalorian armor, helmet held at his side. "Cade, Wodi, I figured you'd need good old Protector ingenuity to get this fabled intelligence, so I brought a few friends with me." And from behind him steps out Lafco Donir, a former soldier of the Rebellion and a friend. "Lafco you old spacedog, how have you been?" Wodi remarks, grinning. "Good, all things considered. It's good to see you all." "*Alright, all troops board your ships!*" Admiral Gelhard, an Ishi Tib, says over the comm. " I look at Wodi. "Ok, I'm joining your SHARC team. Jevin and his Forty-Fourth division are going to hit planetside and hold off the Imperium ground forces. We'll pull out once we get the data. And with that, the Republic Second fleet, still at a third of its full strength and several mandalorian vessels enter hyperspace en route to Rhen Var . . .

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix - Rhen Var, near the Galidraan System

"All ships, scramble fighters and landing craft. Incoming Imperium fighters!" I hold on to my safety harness a little tighter as the pilot of our modified Mandalorian *Aka'jor*-class landing shuttle jukes and jinxes to become a hard target. The lights of our shuttle blink and flicker several times. The hull creaks. "Alright there, Wodi? You look a little green!" Comments Ikko Dass, grinning, sitting next to me. The Mandalorian Protector slips a pair of pistols into small holsters on his armored thighs before donning his orange painted helmet. He turns to regard me again, no doubt still grinning behind his black T-visor. I give him a pretend glare, saying, "Shut it, *di'kuut*," attempting to insult him in his native tongue, and failing. The man laughs, the noise sounding distorted through his helmet speaker. "It's pronounced *di'kut*, you *di'kut*!" His comment gets a laugh from the other Protectors riding in the shuttle with us, including the pilot. "*You New Republic soft shells need to man up!*" He says with a chuckle. I glance at Nom Carver sitting across from me. He gives me a shrug. I shake my head, grinning to myself. Mandalorians. I see Cade sitting a few seats away from me, next to Nom and Gav Pulastra, shaking his head, smiling to himself. Salurra, his Wookiee companion, grunts. Ata Noulku, dressed in her purple Mandalorian *beskar'gam* and *kama* starts humming a war chant, absentmindedly twirling her twin Westar-34 blaster pistols. I check my bandolier and belt pouches again, going over the list of items I packed earlier, patting my holstered EC-17 scout pistol. Glancing out the forward viewport, I see the icy world of Rhen Var getting closer and closer. And the blockade of Imperium frigates. Great. Chank Skirr's helmeted head turns to the viewport as well, his T-visor staring out at the planet and opposition. "This'll be fun!" He comments. The blue-armored Protector raises his gauntleted fist in the air. "Here's hoping they don't surrender! *Oya!* Let's hunt!" "*Oya!*" Everyone echoes. Salurra yowls a war cry. Weapons are given one final check. I slip on my helmet and tighten the straps on my pack, then look to the members of my SHARC team on-board, spread out across the cabin. *Nom Carver. Devon Goldam. Dax Olesa. Ben, Nom, and Gav Pulastra.* Each gives me a thumbs up. Nad Kunch, Xirr Pyl, and Thriz Saist slip on their *beskar* helmets, becoming faceless enforcers once again. Xirr attaches a pair of long vibroblades to his black gauntlets. "Careful with those *shabuir!*" Jokes Ata. She shouldered a T-21 repeating blaster. "I could say the same to you, *vod!*" Laughs Xirr. "Wouldn't want a repeat of Ord Cestus!" A pair of *Kom'rk*-class starfighters come up on either side of us, followed by Ordo's *Aka'jor*. "*Race you to the Citadel, Quix!*" He yells over our

on-board comm. "Last one there babysits the *Jetti!* Jedi!" "Hey!" Objects Cade. I grin at him, shrugging. "You're on, *di'kut!*" I yell back. "I hope you and the others aren't scaring Endel, Malogaan, and Raisuun over there!" Ordo laughs. "*Trust me, they're not scared. Not yet!*" The fighters fly ahead of us, punching a hole through the blockade. "Hey," says Ikko, tapping my shoulder, "I bet I can get more kills than you!" I grin at him. "Really?" Our shuttle shakes with turbulence as we enter Rhen Var's atmosphere. The hull groans. Wind howls past, sounding eerily like screaming. Our on-board comm comes to life, full of static. "*If Intel is correct, the plans for the Predator Destroyer should be in the lower levels of the Citadel. Corso and the Forty-Fourth could use a hand, though.*" A bump reverberates through the hull as our shuttle touches down. Immediately, I hear the sounds of blaster fire and wind buffeting against our outer hull. "*Good luck out there vod!*" Yells the pilot. Ikko offers me a fist bump. I bump fists with the Mandalorian, un-shouldering my X45A. "Here we go!" I shout, wrapping my face with a cloth and putting my green tinted goggles over my eyes. The doors open, letting in a torrent of bright light and snow. Cade dons a thick wool hood and goggles, mostly hiding his features. He ignites his lightsaber. We step out . . . into an icy hell.

Battle of Rhen Var - Cade Valdarin

BOOM! The shuttle behind us disintegrates in a fiery explosion. "Pilot!" Wodi screams, muffled through his head gear. I look at him, "We have to keep going, Jevin is counting on us!" And with that, we rush towards the Citadel across the icy tundra. The large, old ruin once served as the main center of the ancient Jedi temple here. Getting to the stone steps, we rush up. "The intel we're looking for is in the main room of the complex!" Gerik tells us from orbit, "We're having a blast up here!"

Continuing up, we come to a flat level overlooking the vast icy valley before us. The sight before us chills the bone. Massive black AT-ATs, what I can only assume are advanced walkers, with better armor and weaponry, are in the distance. Closer to the citadel, the Forty-Fourth and Forty-Fifth Divisions are battling Imperium stormtroopers, decked out in white cold assault gear with red markings, clearly visible on the icy tundra. But what takes my eye is the site of several red lightsabers in the field. The Imperium, it seems, has Sith acolytes, those who are not powerful in the Force but well trained with a saber. Suddenly my danger sense goes off, "Behind us!" I whip around and,

peridot-colored lightsaber flashing, dissect the would-be attacker, a shadow trooper, like back on Bespin. Salurra, in his Wookiee might, grabs the other attacker, hurling him off the stairs and down to the icy valley. Letting out his Wookiee battle cry, he goes with Wodi's SHARCs and the Mandos to find the intel. I glance back at the battle field. There is an odd sense out there, that of a fully trained Force wielder. I have not felt that type of presence since Vader and the Emperor fifteen years ago. Reaching out, I close my eyes. No . . . it's not him, not Pravus, but someone just a deadly. Looking back, realizing Wodi would take care of the mission and get the team out of this ambush, I leap off the side stairs, straight into the fray. Slicing left and right, I take out two troopers, and then parry and saberlock with an acolyte, easily bypassing his defenses and performing a *Shiak* through his leg, incapacitating him for a Republic soldier to blast him in the face. Then I see the person causing the disturbance. Walking toward me is a cloaked figure, encased in black ebon armor with black robes on top. In his hand, he holds a double lightsaber, its bloodshine blade bathing the ice and snow in a red light. "Jedi!" The muffled voice calls, "Lord Pravus knew you would come! Now we fight!" Well, now my theory that this was a trap is confirmed. Pravus must now be able to use foresight. Falling into the Force, I leap high. Channeling the energy into my hands, I slam them into the ground as I land, sending out a force wave, knocking down the troopers and acolytes around this Sith Lord. Then, igniting my weapon, I slash at him, the green and red blades crackling with the heat. I can only hope Wodi can find the data and get his team off the planet. This was a trap and we walked right into it . . .

Battle of Rhen Var - Jevin Corso

"Incoming! Move it!" I yell. A torrent of green fire falls from the sky. Republic Command ordered the Fourth Fleet, along with the Forty-Fourth and Forty-Fifth Divisions, to Rhen Var in order to hopefully acquire a tech readout of these new Predator star destroyers. But it was a trap. As soon as the fleet dropped out of hyperspace, they pounced on us. Imperium frigates and waves of TIE Hunters and *Scimitar* Assault Bombers pounded our MC80s. Unfortunately, we didn't have a *Mediator* battleship assigned to us so we lacked heavy firepower. Only through the quick thinking of Admiral Gelhard was the fleet able to move into the defensive positions in time.

"Colonel Voren, what's your status!" I ask, coming back into the present, seeing the white, icy hell before me. "The Imperium's bringing in walkers.

Looks like some kind of advanced AT-AT!" He responds. "We're getting a demolition team ready. Look out though, a large infantry unit is heading straight towards the Citadel and I saw some Jedi too!" One thing we've found out the hard way is that the Imperium, unlike the Empire, has Sith acolytes, not just dark jedi. Lightsaber wielders who, while not strong force-wise, are extremely trained in lightsaber combat.

"That data better be worth it!" I yell over the comm. I look back to the bulk of the Forty-Fourth Division, all of us huddled in the ice caves. "Listen up Forty-Fourth, this is your moment! I don't expect to win this fight but I promise you all, I will do my best to make sure we all get home alive." Raising my X-45 I yell out, "For the New Republic!" and letting out a battle cry, we exit the cave. The wind immediately whips at our faces. A Sullustan combat engineer next to me takes a blaster bolt to the face. An Ishi Tib heavy gunner tried to use a jump pack to get to higher ground but a stray bolt hit the pack, causing him to fall to his death.

We finally make it to the front of the citadel, using its walls and the hills of snow and rock in front of it as cover. "Voren, we're directly in front of your position! Between both Divisions, we should be able to last long enough for Cade and Wodi to find that data." Blaster bolts whip the snow around us, turning it into smoke with the intense heat. I return fire, taking down an Imperium trooper to the face plate. My second-in-command, Major Garan, a male Iridonian, hunkers down next to me. "Where's our back up, Colonel! I thought the Fleet Admiral was coming!" I take another shot, taking out a sniper trying to get a bead on us. "Kerex will come Major, Ponith too! They should be bringing some friends along with them." Speaking of, a shout rings out from behind. A tech, Captain Mason, reports that ships are exiting hyperspace, Republic ships. I grab his 'binocs and peer up at the sky. It's a beautiful site, a massive Mon Cal Mediator Battleship, the namesake of the class in fact, the *Mediator*, current flagship of the New Republic Navy. It begins pouring out laser and ion cannon fire and waves of B-wings, T-70 X-wings, and A-wings launch and the black space lights up with red and green fire. Here's a surprise, a *Kandosii* dreadnought, that ship belongs to the Mandalorian Protectors... "Colonel Corso, this is Protector Commandant Gerik Ordo, you alive down there?" I look at Garan again, we exchange looks of surprise. "Gerik, this is Corso, am I glad to see you guys." "Listen up Jevin, your friends Cade and Wodi are planetside with a team of SHARCs and

my Protectors, they'll back you up. I'll be joining you as well." I lift my rifle again, taking aim, "Understood, we'll hold position until that data is acquired, then we get off this ice bucket. Hear that Voren!" And from inside the Citadel, I hear what can only be a Chagrian battle cry. Looking in the distance, I see the matte black AT-ATs marching towards us but then see a GR-80 troop transport behind them. I've never been more relieved in my life

. . .

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix - Rhen Var, near the Galidraan System: Citadel caverns

"Turn here." Our group moves through a narrow tunnel cut into the jagged rock, boots crunching through the layer of snow and ice covering the tunnel floor. My breath comes out in quick puffs. I shiver involuntarily. Using my wrist control, I up the temperature in my snow jacket. It's definitely colder down here. And darker. We walk in rows of two, blasters primed and ready for trouble, small flashlights attached to the barrels. I look back at the Mandalorians, their armor and visors beginning to accumulate intricate patterns of frost. Their helmets, with sophisticated built-in auditory sensors, are fine tuned to detect the slightest alien sound. The lights from our blasters sweep the tunnel ahead, making the shadows come alive, jumping and dancing around in the enclosed space. I look up, imagining the layers of rock above us, hoping those big black walkers don't cause a cave-in down here with their thunderous footsteps. Suddenly I hear a metallic *clunk* followed by "*Fierfek!*" and look back to see Ikko shaking his helmeted head. The Mandalorian sees me looking at him and gestures at a hanging icy stalactite. "Hit my *buy'ce*, helmet, on that *shabla* thing." I grin, turning back around. "Nice going *di'kut!*" Says Xirr softly. We continue through the tunnel, at some points having to duck to avoid hitting our heads on the low, rocky ceiling. "What's that?" Inquires Gav Pulastra suddenly, motioning with his X45 off into an adjacent tunnel. Our group stops, all shining our lights into the tunnel. The beams glint off something gunmetal gray. I motion forward with my gloved hand, and we cautiously enter the tunnel, coming out into a large cavernous room. In the center of the room is . . . "A shuttle?" Says Devon Goldam disbelievingly. Our group circles the boxy three-winged shuttle, checking it over. "This model just came out a few months ago," Observes Dax Olesa, "a 500-X. Wonder what it's doing down here?" "It's unmarked," says Nad Kunch, running his green gauntleted hand over its surface. He stops suddenly. "Wait, there's a logo here. Imperium

insignia. I say we put a tracker on it." I nod. Xirr moves and places a small device under the left wing. "There." He says, satisfied. "Now we'll know where this *chakaar* is going." I motion with my hand. "Let's continue on." We eventually come to a staircase, rising into the darkness above. Nom Carver shines his light up, trying to penetrate the darkness with no success. I take out my datapad, checking our route. I nod to myself, exclaiming aloud, "This is it. Ordo and the others should be waiting for us when we get up." "Well, best start climbing!" Says Ata, motioning with her T-21.

A few minutes later, our group comes to the top of the staircase, directly below a wooden trapdoor. Thriz Saist puts his gloved hand to the side of his helmet. After a few seconds, he nods at us. "Ordo called in. They're waiting for us on the other side." I push the door open and we exit to see Gerik Ordo kneeling there . . . with a rifle barrel pressed against his head. Holding the rifle is an Imperium trooper. Immediately, a large group of troopers surrounds our group, weapons trained. "Hands in the air! Weapons on the ground!" One barks. "Now!" I look to see in the corner the other Mandalorian Protectors and members of my SHARC team, rifle barrels to their heads as well. "I'm sorry, Wodi." Ordo says, his voice strained. "It was a trap. These *chakaar* knew we were coming. *He* knew we were coming." And then off to my right a door opens. "Welcome," says a distorted male voice. Walking into the room is a menacing figure, encased in black ebon armor, features hidden behind an ornately decorated silver mask with red trim. Fiery yellow eyes peer out from horizontal slits. "I am Praetor Sheratan." Following the figure are several Sith Acolytes, dressed in heavy black cloaks. "We've been expecting you."

Cade Valdarin - Rhen Var Tundra

"Who are you?" I yell over the wind as our blades meet again, crackling. The unknown Sith remains silent, meeting my every move and launching his own counterattack, both of us even. Finally, he stops. "That is enough for now." An eerie voice says, coming from the Sith. "I am Xellius, Praetor of the Imperium and I bring you a warning. Your Republic is doomed." And with that, he teleports through the Force. If these Praetors can teleport, that shows how strong they are as force-users. My blade still humming as I wonder why he left, the comlink on my wrist blares to life. "Cade, it's Kerex. We just received word from the naval station at New Alderaan. An Imperium force has taken the planet. They knew exactly when to launch key strikes,

we're getting reports of attacks at various places in the Outer and Mid Rims. What's your condition?" Looking around and reaching out with my sense I reply, "Not good. I just had a scuffle with a "Praetor", I'm assuming they are like the Sith Lords of the old Sith Empire." "That's not good. What about Major Quix's team?" "I don't know, I'm going to go look for them. I have a bad feeling about this." Running back to the Citadel and force leaping over Jevin and the Forty-Fourth, I land back on the Citadel, the ever-faithful Salurra waiting there. "Let's find Wodi and the others." With a roar we set off, Salurra using his tracking skills to navigate through the maze that is the Citadel, eventually taking us down into the caverns below the building.

Roar. "No, I didn't run into Xander, just a lackey of his. But if those lackeys have the power to warp through the Force, that must mean Xander himself has gotten pretty powerful." *Roar.* "What is it, Sal?" We come to a halt in the dark caverns, hearing muffled voices ahead. "I am Praetor Sheratan. We've been expecting you." . . .

"Sith's blood!" I curse. Looking to Salurra, he readies his dual ryyk blades and dons a pair of IR goggles while I heft my lightsaber. "On three, ready? One, two . . . *three!*" With a burst of Force energy, I make the cavern completely dark, making it so only myself and Salurra can see. I telepathically tell Wodi and his group to not move until I say so. With a hiss, my lightsaber ignites, filling the darkness with an olive-green light and then we go to work. Salurra weaving through the Imperium stormtroopers with ease while I take on the acolytes. Within minutes, they all are slain with Sheratan still standing. By now, a little light has returned to the cave and he stands there. He looks at us with the elaborate mask. "Even now, the Imperium is attacking your borders. We cannot be stopped. The master has a secret that will be the end of your *New Republic.*" With a cackle, he too teleports.

"Sithspit! I ever tell you how much I hate Force users sometimes?" Wodi looks at me, a look of anger, humiliation, and fear on his face.

**Wodi "Wishbone" Quix – Rhen Var, near the Galidraan System:
Citadel caverns**

"Sithspit! I ever tell you how much I hate Force users sometimes?" I look at Cade, a complex series of emotions running through my head. On the one

hand, I was glad he had come to our rescue. Had he not arrived, things might have turned out a whole lot different. I was also angry that I had failed to see this trap coming and humiliated that I had not reacted quick enough. I was scared too. I had never seen anyone disappear into thin air like that before. Cade walks up to me smiling, putting a hand on my shoulder. "Don't be so hard on yourself, my friend. It's not your fault this happened." I nod, gripping my X45 tightly in my gloved hands. "This whole situation has got me darked out." "I agree." Cade says, glancing around the room, his expression turning grave. "What Sheratan said before he scurried off has me worried. What secret could Pravus possess that spells doom for the Republic?" I shrug. "Beats me. But knowing Pravus, it can't be good." By now, everyone had gotten to their feet and gathered their gear. Gerik Ordo looks to Cade. "We need to move. NOW! Those *shabla* Destroyers are tearing through our fleet." Cade nods. "Things on the surface aren't looking too good either. The Imperium ground forces have wiped out most of our division." We all stand there quietly, letting the news sink in. Cade sighs, his face pained. "There's more. Admiral Kerex just commed a few minutes ago. New Alderaan has fallen to an Imperium attack force." A collective gasp ripples throughout the cavern. "*Fierfek*." Mutters Xirr Pyl. "Were there any survivors?" Whispers Gav Pulastra. "So far, unconfirmed." Replies Cade. "The naval station orbiting the planet took a pretty bad hit. Their sensor and planetary scanners were knocked offline when the attack began. There have also been confirmed attacks on Outer and Mid Rim planets." Ben Pulastra curses. "Any good news?" Asks Nom Carver in a hoarse voice. Cade is about to respond when Nad Kunch interrupts him. "That 500-X shuttle we tagged earlier is taking off!" We all crowd around the green-armored Mandalorian Protector, who holds out a small datapad. "There." He points to a small, red, pulsating blip on the screen. "I'll bet it's that *chakaar* Sheratan!" "Keep me posted on where that shuttle goes, Nad." Says Gerik. "You got it Ordo." Responds Nad. Suddenly from far above us, a massive rumble sounds. Cade glances up. "Let's head to the surface. Jevin and the others could use our help." He says, gripping his lightsaber hilt. We make our way over to the exit when my boot suddenly strikes something, sending it skittering over the rocky floor. We all stop and I walk over to the object and pick it up, examining it. "It's a data chip!" I exclaim, turning to the others. Immediately Cade rushes over, taking the chip from my grasp. He looks it over before dropping the chip into a pouch on his utility belt. "Good find, Wodi!" He says to me, clapping me on the shoulder.

. . .

We emerge out of the catacombs to find a horrifying sight. "Kriff," I say. It's all I can say. Charred bodies of New Republic soldiers lie sprawled everywhere across the tundra. Crashed starfighters and airspeeders litter the snow, spewing smoke and sparks. "*Haar'chak!* Damn it!" Yells Gerik, kicking the snow with his armored boot, creating a small flurry, "we came too late," laments Nosh Ker Raisuun, lowering his DLT-19. Ben Pulastra raises his arms in an exasperated gesture. I turn to Cade. "What now?" Cade stands motionless, his eyes closed, breathing slowly. *He is meditating,* grunts Salurra. I nod. I look around the icy tundra, shielding my eyes from the harsh light. No sign of those giant black walkers except for massive footprints in the snow. Suddenly, my comlink chirps. I remove the handheld device from my belt and hold it to my mouth. "Yes?" "*Wishbone! Is that you?*" A voice replied, crackling with static. "Amminius?" I say, excitedly. "*Yeah. Oh man, Wodi, is it good to hear your voice!*" I smile despite the sight around me. "Likewise. What do you need?" "*Things went a little awry up here. The Imperium has destroyed most of our capital ships and fighters. My team was unable to find any intel aboard the Predator we raided.*" By now, my conversation had attracted the attention of the whole group, minus Cade, who still stands stock still. "Have you heard about New Alderaan?" "*Yeah. Kriffing shame. But we'll get 'em though!*" I smile at my friend's optimism. "*How are things going on your end?*" I glance around at the carnage, unable to bring myself to answer. "*That bad, huh?*" "Well," I say, "we did get our hands on a data chip." "*Is it the technical readout of the Destroyer?*" "Is that Amminius?" I jump at the sound of Cade's voice. I turn to see him standing behind me. "Y-yeah. It is. The situation's not going well on his end either." Cade nods. "I know." I speak into my comlink again. "We're not sure. We're hoping to get it analyzed once off-planet." "*Good. anyway, the reason I commed you was to relay a message from Admiral Kerex. He's going to order a retreat soon. A transport is trying to get to your location, but it can't punch through the Imperium defenses.*" "Ok," I reply, "is there anything we can do to ensure it gets here?" *Well, Kerex and I might have an idea. But for it to work, you need a bigger assault force.*" Cade pipes up." I sensed that Jevin and some others were still alive, holed up in the far northern section of the Citadel." "*Great!*" Amminius says, "*what we were thinking was that you could raid a ground-to-space cannon battery and*

temporarily take control of it, blasting apart the Imperium ships blocking the transport's access to the surface." Immediately, protest breaks out in our group. "What?" "Is he serious?" "That's a *di'kutla*, foolish, plan!" "Shab! No!" I voice the general consensus: "That's got to be the craziest plan I've ever heard of!" "*Then it's right up your alley!*" Amminius says humoredly, "*and it's the only one we've got. We're running out of options and assets fast!*" "Well then," says Ikko, hefting his Z-6 rotary cannon, "we're wasting time!" "Oya!" Yells Lafco Donir, brandishing his E-11 rifle, "Let's hunt!" I nod in affirmation. "We're gonna do this!" "Let's go kick some Imperium *shebs, ner vod!*" Yells Gerik Ordo. "*Excellent!*" Says Amminius, "*I knew you'd warm up to the idea! Good luck!*" With a click, he signs off. "Let's go find Jevin and the others," says Cade. With that we trudge off through the snow, taking care to step over bodies and debris . . .

Battle of Rhen Var - Cade Valdarin

"Let's go find Jevin and the others." I say. We exit the caverns back to the frozen tundra and what we see chills our veins more than the icy wind. Dozens of bodies slain, most of the New republic soldiers, their furry coats and grey armor standing out amongst the snow. "This is my fault." I murmur as we trudge through the snow. "What's that Cade?" Wodi asks, concern in his voice. Looking around, I say again. "This is my fault. I had a chance to kill Xander fifteen years ago but I didn't take it. I showed him mercy and this happens." He slaps me on the back, "This isn't your fault Valdarin. You said it yourself, the Force has destinies for us all. Maybe Xander's wasn't to be defeated then but now. " I mournfully smile at him. We keep trudging on when Salurra lets out a low rumble. Gerik looks up, "We're here!"

"Admiral, we've made it to the ground-to-space cannon. Stand by!" Wodi shouts in his wrist comm over the wind. Gerik pulls out the holo he took of the cannons operations room through a spy cam. "All right listen up *vods*. He looks at me and Wodi, the glint in his eyes letting us know he considers us as his brothers as well. "They have the room looked down tight, stormtroopers all over the place. " Ikko checks his charge on his Z-6, "What's with all the sittin' around, let's blast some plastic boys!" I cast a sharp look at him, "Only a fool charges into a well fortified position blindly. No, we need a good plan for this one. Wodi, Salurra, come over here." The plan is relatively simple: Salurra and several Protectors, including Commandant Ordo, will enter through the upper levels, cutting through the

plasteel walls with vibro cutters and then lobbing in smoke grenades. With luck, the helmets of the stormtroopers won't filter it. Wodi, myself, and several SHARCs, who are trained precisely for this kind of lightning strike, will enter through the main door, using my saber to cut through. With luck, we can take the station, punch a hole through the aerial defenses, and make our way toward either New Alderaan or Onderon. Either location is a strategic location as they are both gateway planets to the Inner Rim and Core.

"And in three, two, one. Go go go!" Gerik yells. We hear the sharp whine of vibro cutters and then *poof* of the smokes. Then I get to work, the green blade plunging into the door. And several seconds later, it falls inward and we see that the smoke has filled the room. For a minute, it looks like we were right: the viewplates of these new troopers don't filter smoke. Then a red blaster bolt comes through, hitting Ben Pulustra square in the face. Wodi is the first to respond, "Take cover!" We all dive left or right. The command room fills up with light, the red and green highlighting the smoke. *OYA* we hear, seeing a black and red armored stormtrooper plummet off the upper balcony, a *Beskade* mark clear through his torso. Gerik looks at us, "What are you waiting for *aruetii*, get going!"

I leap up to the walkway, deflecting several shots back at troopers and slicing diagonally down a stormtrooper's chest plate. Down below, the tech of the group, Ben Carver, is being covered by Sal and Wodi while he tries to start up the gun. Meanwhile, Gerik and I end up back to back, lightsaber and Mandalorian saber held up high as two sith acolytes jump up to the catwalk. Swinging with the ferocious movement of the Juyo form, I completely overwhelm the acolyte on my side, parrying the saber several times then swatting away her saber performing a *shiak* through the torso. On Gerik's side, the complete resilience of the *Beskar* saber shocks the Acolyte. Gerik takes advantage of this by performing a quick flip over the acolyte and using his wrist blade to decapitate his foe. He smirks at me when we hear, "Sir, I can't get the cannon to work," followed by a roar over the noise. "Go, I'll clean up here," Gerik shouts as I leap down. "What's the matter Carver?" Wodi rushes up as well. "Sir, they cut the power," Ben says, pointing to the darkened display, "and made sure it would stay cut before we entered. I can't fire a shot." "*Fierfek!* That's our only shot to get a transport in and save Jevin's group!" I look up at the exterior of the cannon out in the cold. "I

can do it," I say. "What? You can?" Wodi asks. "Yes, I can get up there, charge the gun, and direct its fire. Hopefully long enough to hit something important." He looks at me, at Ben, and back at me. "Do it. We'll cover you." With that, Salurra jumps up to the catwalk with me and stands guard at the window, making sure no one takes a pot shot at me. I leap up to the top of the bulb of the cannon, where most of the power conduits are. Using the Force to channel lightning into my hands, I grab the base of the actual cannon and with a tremendous amount of concentration, I channel the lightning into the gun and start firing shots at the closest Imperium frigate, a smaller *Victory*-class destroyer. Several broadside hits from a force charged cannon causes a hole in its hull, causing it to lose altitude and eventually crash into a frozen mountain.

"All right, path clear for now," the pilot of a GR-80 transport calls over the radio, *"heading in now. Get your butts to the rendezvous, we won't get another shot at this!"* The command room clear, we blast a hole in the north wall the get out onto the tundra. Jevin's group is nearby, the fighting obviously having taken its toll. We rush to them, blasters blazing from our side and the incoming transport. After a few tense minutes, the transport lands and we all get on on. "By the force, am I glad you guys showed up." Jevin lets out an exasperated sigh. "No problem, Blastzone." Wodi smirks at him. It's funny, even though Jevin outranks Wodi, they both treat each other on a friendly basis. Salurra is carrying wounded soldiers around like babies, setting them up where they'll be comfortable. Gerik returns from the bridge. "Well looks like the fleet is on the run, but we got the data and are transmitting to NRI now. Hopefully this was worth it." He looks at me and ask, "What next, Jedi Master?" I close my eyes, " I'm going to Nam Chorios. I sense something is . . . strange there. I contacted Luke through our telepathic link; he's going to meet me there." Wodi and Jevin exchange glances, "You're not coming with us?" Jevin asks, disappointment in his voice. "Jevin, I'm not military, the big battles, those are for you and Wodi and the rest of the brave men and women of the Republic. I'm not going to be away forever, but Luke and I have sensed something wrong from Nam Chorios and NRI's scout teams sent there haven't reported back." Wodi looks at me for a moment then shrugs and asks, "Any suggestion then on where we should go?" Again, I close my eyes, using the Force to see shatterpoints of this war. "Go to Onderon, Wodi, tell Fleet Admiral Kerex a force needs to go to Onderon. The planet is a nexus of several hyperlanes. It's a gateway

to the Inner Rim and Core. Jevin, High Marshal Ponith needs to send the Forty-Fourth Division to New Alderaan." I look over to Salurra, a nudge from the Force telling me we will need the Wookiees soon. "Sal, I need you to return home. Talk to Choral and tell him to mobilize the Defense Force. I have a feeling we'll need it soon.

As soon as we rendezvous with the rest of the Outer Rim Fleet, I head to my prototype T-85 X-wing, blasting off into space heading for the dark world of Nam Chorios as the rest of the fleet jumps to its destination . . .

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix – Rhen Var, near the Galidraan System, Imperium Outpost

Our whole group gazes in pure awe as Cade, his body shaking with concentration, channels energy into the cannon battery. His skin seems to be glowing. Superheated sparks fly in all directions, intensifying the brightness. I shield my eyes with my hand, squinting to see. With a loud jarring groan, the outpost cannon slowly moves until the barrel is lined up with its target: an orbiting *Victory*-class Destroyer. With a yell, Cade channels more energy into the battery. The cannon fires with a *ka-chunk*, hitting the Destroyer broadside.

Several more shots are fired in quick succession, all hitting their mark. The crippled Destroyer, a large hole in its outer hull, slowly falls planetward, crashing into a mountain in a truly magnificent explosion. Cade leaps from the high balcony, tucking and rolling to land in the middle of our group. "Latch on to something!" He yells. I grab hold of a nearby piece of machinery, bracing for the shock wave. It hits the outpost like a charging rancor. Full force. Loose articles in the outpost command center are lifted into the air. Data terminals and other pieces of tech are ripped from the floor. Many of the transparisteel windows blow out, sending flying shards everywhere. Armored bodies are thrown into the air like rag dolls. After the dust settles, I look around. "Everyone alright?" I call. "Yep." "Fine." "Still here, sir!" I look to Cade, grinning from ear to ear. "Now *that* . . . was impressive!" Cade grins back, doing a small bow. "Thank you, Wodi!" I shake my head. "There's something I don't get though." "What is that?" Cade asks. "Those transparisteel shards should have shredded us like flimsi.

How come we're still here?" Cade grins again. "One of the many perks of being a Jedi. You have access to awesome abilities that mere mortals dream of having! That's a joke, I deflected the incoming shards with a Force shield." I chuckle. "So kinda like a Squad Shield?" The young Jedi laughs. "You could call it that!" Gerik saunters up to Cade, placing an armored gauntlet on his robed shoulder. "That was some show, *Jetii!* You'll have to teach me that one!" Cade grins at the Mandalorian. "In your dreams, bucket-head!" We all laugh.

A burst of static sounds from my comlink. "*All right, path clear for now! Heading in now, get your butts to the rendezvous, we won't get another shot at this!*" Looking out and up through the shattered viewport, I see the oblong shape of a GR-80 transport break through the lower atmosphere, heading towards our planned extraction point. "You heard the man!" Shouts Lafco. "Let's go!" Gerik nods his helmeted head at Ikko, who lines up a rocket launcher on the north wall of outpost. BOOM!

. . .

"There!" Shouts Malogaan, pointing out in the tundra. In the distance, not far from us, I spy a battered group of New Republic soldiers fighting off attacking Imperium troops. "Looks like Jevin still needs our help!" I yell to the others. "Let's lend them a hand!" We sprint for the group of soldiers, firing our weapons at the advancing white and red armored troopers. "Concentrate fire! Take 'em down!" We join the worn-out members of the Forty-Fourth, who are overjoyed at our appearance. "There they are!" "It's the SHARCs and the Protectors!"

. . .

It takes about half an hour to load the wounded members of Jevin's unit onto the waiting GR-80. It's hard and dangerous work, but we pull it off, all the while fending off Imperium troopers. With the last member of our team on board, Nom Carver, the boarding ramp of the transport quickly ascends, and it blasts off. It's cramped inside the transport, with moans and grunts from the injured. Jevin maneuvers his way over to Cade and I, letting out big sigh of relief. "By the Force, am I glad you showed up!" I smirk. "No problem, Blastzone! Just saving your butt again for the umpteenth time!" Jevin shrugs, smiling. A few minutes later, we dock inside the waiting MC80 cruiser. We exit to find a crowd of medical staff, droids and soldiers alike. They quickly take charge of the injured, taking them away on repulsorlift stretchers and gurneys to the medical bay. I go with Tan and Gav Pulastra to

give moral support, who follow their wounded brother, Ben, on a gurney.

. . .

A couple of hours later, I emerge from the medical bay, the droid doctor there saying Ben will make a mostly full recovery. I order both Tan and Gav to get some rest, reassuring them I would check back on Ben in a few hours. After they head off to their quarters, I make my way to the bridge of our cruiser to join Jevin and Admiral Kerex. The Quarren admiral smiles, placing a webbed three-fingered hand on my shoulder. "You did well today, Wodi. I'm proud of you." I smile, nodding politely. "Thank you, sir. All thanks to your plan!" The Admiral waves me off. "Nonsense, my boy! You would've come up with something a thousand times better!" A door off to my right opens, and in walks Amminius. Upon seeing me, he grins broadly, giving me a wink and a salute. I run over to my best friend, giving him a bear hug. "Ha ha, that was brilliant!" We break apart and I hold him at arm's length, grinning. "Ah, it's nothing! I knew you'd somehow pull it off, Wishbone!" Amminius says, smiling. "This'll be a story to tell the kids about, eh!" I laugh. "You bet!"

Jevin walks over to us, shaking his head. "Hey, lovebirds, snap out of it. Wodi, Cade wants a word with us in the hangar." Amminius nods. He looks to me, grinning. "I'll catch you afterwards Wishbone! We'll get a drink later in the mess and I'll tell you all about my exciting time inside that *Predator*!" I grin back. "I'm in! See you then!" Amminius jogs off.

Jevin and I join Cade and Salurra in the near empty hangar. Cade offers us a nod as we walk up. "We're just waiting on Gerik now. He's coming from the bridge." A few minutes later, Gerik joins us in the hangar, helmet tucked under one arm. "Well, looks like the fleet is on the run, but we got the data and are transmitting it to NRI now. Hopefully, this was worth it." Gerik looks to Cade. "What next, Jedi Master?" Cade closes his eyes. After a few moments, he opens them and speaks. "I'm going to Nam Chorios. I sense something is . . . strange there. I contacted Luke through our telepathic link; he's going to meet me there."

I exchange a look with Jevin. "You're not coming with us?" He asks, his tone of voice a little disappointed. Cade smiles. "Jevin, I'm not military. The big battles, those are for you and Wodi and the rest of the brave men and women of the Republic. I'm not going to be away forever, but Luke and I

have sensed something wrong from Nam Chorios and the NRI scout teams sent there haven't reported back." I look at Cade for a moment before shrugging. "Any suggestions then on where we should go?" Cade closes his eyes again. I let him think. "Go to Onderon, Wodi. Tell Admiral Kerex a force needs to go to Onderon. The planet is a nexus of several important hyperlanes. It's a gateway to the Inner Rim and Core." I nod in understanding. Onderon. Should be fun.

Cade continues, addressing Jevin. "Jevin, High Marshal Ponith needs to send the Forty-fourth Division to New Alderaan." Cade next turns to his Wookiee companion. "Sal, I need you to return home. Talk to Choral and tell him to mobilize the Defense Force. I have a feeling we'll need it soon." Salurra grunts his understanding. "We'll be rendezvousing with the Outer Rim fleet in a few hours. Best grab what little down time we have left!" I nod, checking my chrono. We walk out of the hangar together, splitting off from one another down separate hallways. I go to my cabin and immediately comm Amara. After talking to her for about an hour, a blissful hour, I hear a knock on my door. I hang up and put away my comlink. "Who is it?" I call. "It's me, Wishbone!" A welcome voice answers. I open the door to see Amminius standing there, smiling. "Ready for that drink?" I grin. "You bet. Let's go! I'm dying to know about that *Predator* raid!" I exit my cabin, making sure to flick off the lights before closing the door and walking with my best friend down the hallway towards the mess area. "Looks like we're going to Onderon together, Wishbone!" "Really?" I ask him. "No joke?" "Yep," Amminius laughs, "Kerex took me and my group aside. We're to accompany you and the fleet there!" "That's awesome!" I grin at him. "Looks like we'll be in it together again!" "Ha, wouldn't have it any other way!" "It can't be any worse than Sullust!" "Now *that* was a time!"

Imperium War (Part Two) **Cade Valdarin - Mission to Nam Chorios**

Space. Cold, dark, full of wonder and yet full of nothing at the same time. It's been three days since we left Rieekan Station and Luke and I have had a dread feeling ever since leaving. What will we find on Nam Chorios? I look to the picture attached to the inside of my X-wing canopy. A picture of a Zeltron female, Kiara. My wife if this war ever ends. "Cade, come in." A loud voice rings in my ear.

"Yes Luke, I'm here." I look over at his X-wing and can see him through the canopy; he's smiling. "I can sense your thoughts you know," he says smirking. "You know, that's probably why people don't trust us fully yet, they are afraid of misuse of power." "Cheer up, just a bit of fun. Besides, Kiara will be fine. She's the Chancellor's aide, no harm will come to her with the security she rates." I nod. "Besides, we're coming up on the planet now."

Nam Chorios. The planet is one big sphere of swirling brown. I look at the stream of words and coordinates on my monitor readout that my R2 unit, Ratchet, is sending me. We can see the storms raging across the surface. "Ratchet is picking up signals from the north continent. We'll start there. I can feel it already, Luke. This place, something dark has happened here." Luke voices agreement and we speed of toward the signals. Then a flash of green fire rips through the sky. "We're hit. Brace for impact!" The sound I hear next is that of metal screeching on rock.

The next thing I hear is Ratchet's beeping. "I'm fine buddy, I'm fine. How are Luke and R2?" He beeps an affirmative. That's good. It looks like we have to trek our way to the facility where the signals were coming from. "Cade, you awake yet?" Says Luke, standing atop a small rocky hill. "We were shot down by surface to air turrets, we've definitely found something here."

After hours of walking and using the Force to lift the droids over obstacles, we come to it. A research station of some sort, but it looks more like a prison. The planet did see use as a penal colony by the Empire so it looks like the prison was converted for research. Luke and I scout the place with macrobinocs when we see a man run out of the front entrance screaming. "Help me!" He yells to no one in particular, before a black-clad figure warps in front of him, slicing through him with a red blade. The black figure walks back inside. "Well Luke, we have a reason to shut this place down. Let's go." And with that we jump down and levitate our droids to us and maneuver our way through the electronic security. What we see when we enter we were not prepared for. . . .

Jevin Corso - New Alderaan, On board the *Intrepid*

We're in the mess enjoying a nice meal when the alarms blare off. "*All ships, we have entered the New Alderaan system, brace for contact.*" Sullustan Admiral Iphigh shouts over the comm. Sid enters the mess as we drop out of hyperspace, the mottled blue fading to black. "So that's New Alderaan, huh? It's not as pretty as the original." I give him a glance and say, "Get to the MAATs, we're going groundside." We both run to the hangar. GR-80s are slowly prepping for takeoff, carrying the brunt of our ground assault forces. The smaller MAATs, a legacy of the LAAT gunships of the Old Republic, are for our smaller, fast moving teams. Sid stands in the bay of the transport, a hot stack of blue milk pancakes on a plate next to him. "Come on, come on, get 'em while they're hot! You only live once!" And with that, we take off. The space around New Alderaan lights up with the engine flares of multiple transports. At the same moment, purple laser fire comes up from the planet. "We got AA incoming!" The pilot shouts as he pulls the transport into emergency maneuvers. "Pilot, get us down there! We got to take that cannon out!" I yell.

. . .

We finally land, after some insane maneuvering. The door slides open and we see the lush green of New Alderaan. The planet is beautiful, almost like the original Alderaan. The only thing marring the scenery is the sight of a massive ground-to-orbit cannon, its' size making it ugly among the greenery. "Ok, we have our objective, let's move it out Forty-Fourth! We have to take Alderaan back. With luck the Fourth fleet will be able to take Onderon as well." We charge forward when chaos ensues. "Sniper fire!" A soldier yells as the green lasers of pulse cannons hit the ground around us. "Take cover, over there!"

"In here, there's cover!" Sergeant Cavanah says as we enter a forested area. "With luck, the trees will block any sniper scopes." "Colonel, what do we do now?" A fresh faced human Private asks me. I haul him off the ground and say, "Son, we finish the mission, for the Republic." An hour or two later, we enter the cannon control center. "Toss smokes." Smoke fills the control room and after a deadly crossfire, the operators are dead. "Sergeant, set those charges, this place is going to be a crater."

"Charges set, get out of here!" We run out to the forest before setting off the charges. In a spectacular flash, the cannon blows up, the whole foundation falling into the gorge it sat on. "Yeah, that's what I'm talking about!" I yell. "Now let's move to the primary spaceport, we take that, our GR-80's can land"...

Nam Chorios - Cade Valdarin

We enter the research facility. It's dark, the lights dimmed. "Well, this is not what I was expecting," Luke remarks. I nod in agreement. We walk on through the darkened hallways, passing living areas, medical bays, even a mess hall with no sign of life. "Luke, this place is deserted. So where did that escapee come from?" "Depressing answer? They're all dead," Luke replies ruefully.

We forge on, coming to a sealed doorway. The scanner will only recognize a certain ID chip. "Let's look through the mess hall, maybe it fell there." After about twenty minutes of scanning the room, we find the chip. It was just sitting on a table, no blood or anything to indicate why it was there. Either its owner forgot about it or it was left on purpose. I collect the chip and insert it into the reader next to the door and wait. After a few seconds, a cool female voice says, "*ID code accepted. Welcome Praetor Zhorok.*" "This is definitely it. If a Praetor was here, something big was going on." The door slides open and what we see is revolting beyond measure.

As soon as the door slides open, we see multiple chambers, single-person prison cells sealed off by force fields, each with a slumped body in it. The occupants range from Human to Rodian, Bith to Bothan, and everything in-between. I feel the discomfort in Luke and he looks around, "By the Force, this is worse than anything the Empire did." "Agreed" I say, "Ratchet, plug into that console over there, see if you can find files about this place and the research done here." Beep! While Ratchet and Artoo plug into the data terminals, Luke and I walk around, observing the cells and seeing if there's anything we can discover through a visual scan. So far it's nothing. The bodies look almost as if they were shocked before death, their veins extremely visible. "Cade, over here!" Luke calls from the far corner of the room. I rush over to see Luke kneeling besides a Mon Calamari male who

had escaped confinement only to die on the floor. However, Luke is holding a datapad. "He recorded a message, hoping someone would find it and hear his last words," Luke says remorsefully. "Let's hear it." I say.

All I hear is static for a couple of seconds, the gravelly voice of a Mon Calamari begins, slowly at first, to speak. *"Please, if anyone hears this . . . must shut down this . . . Imperium performing . . . trying to use Kyber and Artisian crystals to . . . infuse . . . Force into us. They're trying to make Force sensitive soldiers, instead of waiting to find Force sensitives. Many of my friends have died in agony; I feel I'm about to join them. The Force is truly something we cannot comprehend. I guess some of us just aren't meant to have a connection to it. Please, if anyone sees this, destroy this place, destroy the Imperium. They have something even worse than these Force-sensitive super soldiers. An ancient . . ., capable of . . ."* The message fizzles out and the datapad screen goes dark.

Luke puts down the datapad, closing the Calamari's eyelids. "He died trying to save others with this knowledge. Let's make sure his sacrifice isn't in vain." We nod at each other when Ratchet beeps again. "The files are downloaded? Good, let's get explosives from the ships so we can-" when all of a sudden we hear a roar; not a battle roar but rather a scream of intense anger and pain. The noise, and the aura of whatever it is is casting through the Force, makes my hair stand on end. "You feel that, Luke?" "Yeah, a badly warped Force presence. Some of the subjects must've survived and were left here, but to wait for us or because they couldn't be controlled?" At that moment, the plasteel wall in front of us bursts open by way of a telekinetic blast. "Guess we'll have to find out later!" I yell as we ignite our sabers, the green light illuminating the walls. "Ratchet, you and Artoo get to a safe spot and stay there until I contact you!" Luke and I rush toward the muscular figure writhing in agony, a human whose veins are bulging as if being constantly under immense pressure. Bringing up our lightsabers, we slash at the thing. . . .

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix - Briefing Room, aboard the MC80 Voyager

After Amminius and I catch up and have our drink at the mess, we head back toward the briefing room of the *Voyager*, located just aft of the main bridge. The corridors are bustling with activity; techs headed to different

parts of the cruiser, fleet officers on errands, and various types of droids going who knows where. On more than one occasion, Amminius and I have to flatten ourselves against the bulkhead in order to avoid a collision. I have to grab Amminius' shoulder and haul him backward to prevent him from slamming into a Rodian communications officer coming out of a doorway. "Thanks Wishbone!" He grins sheepishly. "Kriff," Amminius remarks, running a hand through his hair, "it's more crowded than a Coruscant pedwalk in midday!" I laugh. "You said it! We'll be lucky if we make it before they close doors!" "Then let's pick up the pace!" "Want to get a face full of Rodian again? This time I might not be so quick to grab you! My reflexes aren't what they used to be!" We both look at each other before bursting out laughing, getting a couple of odd looks from passersby, and continue weaving our way through traffic until we reach the briefing room. The door is still open. Phew! We walk quickly inside to find the room already packed. I look around and spy an opening on one of the middle benches. I point in that direction and we hurry to claim the spot. As soon as we sit down, a two-chime tone sounds, indicating that the briefing is about to begin. Amminius blows out a puff of air through his cheeks. "Just in the nick of time." I hear someone slide into the small space beside Amminius and look to see Otara. She gives us both a smile and an eye roll. "I was beginning to think you two weren't coming," she mutters. "No way," Amminius quietly replies, giving her shoulders a squeeze, "and miss out on this this riveting briefing? Wouldn't dream of being anywhere else!" I chuckle. The room quiets down as the attention shifts to the front, where a large holoprojector sits. A red R5 astromech waits at the projector data port, ready to begin the presentation. I hear multiple pairs of booted feet entering the room and turn to see Admiral Kerex, dressed smartly in his crisply pressed white uniform. Accompanying the admiral are several officers, among them Tav Voren and Lando Calrissian. They walk to the holoprojector and stand behind it. Kerex nods his angular head at those assembled. "Welcome friends," he begins in his bubbly Quarren voice, "I wish I were speaking to all of you on more pleasant circumstances, but unfortunately that is not the case. The Imperium forces have attacked both New Alderaan and Onderon, which, as you may know, those systems contain several critical nexus hyperspace routes leading to key areas of the New Republic." Nods of understanding ripple through the group. "We cannot allow our enemy to possess such resources. A contingent of our fleet is being sent to Alderaan as we speak. R5 if you please?" Kerex gestures at the droid, who activates the

holoprojector. Instantly, a magnified image of an impressive walled city appears. Admiral Kerex indicates the holo. "This is Onderon's capital, Iziz. It is the center of life on the planet and home to many key imports and exports valuable to our cause. It is also home to a garrison of our troops, the Twenty-Second Battle Group. According to recent reports, the city has been under attack for the last two weeks." Everyone assembled gasps. I turn to Amminius and Otarā, mouthing disbelievingly 'two weeks?' "How is that possible?" An officer seated near me asks. "Wouldn't we have known of such an attack?" Kerex blinks his deep blue eyes and shakes his head, his tentacles rippling. "The Imperium sieged an outpost outside of Iziz, turning on the all-clear signal there and keeping it activated. Any attempts made by our soldiers to shut it down resulted in horrendous casualties. Communications traffic was also monitored. Any message for help, whether it be from a ship, base, or personal comlink would have been quickly intercepted. We received *this* message at 03:00 yesterday. We determined that it had been sent from one of the outpost's non-monitored hypercomm stations. How the sender managed to enter the outpost to relay this message is unclear." "How many members of the Twenty-Second are left?" I ask, raising my voice to be heard. "The sender of the message put our estimated troop strength at a few hundred." Kerex replies. The Quarren admiral cringes, tapping a key on the side of the holoprojector, and a man's recorded voice plays out. "*This is lieutenant Kyp Pencron. The voice sounds exhausted and terrified. "Twenty-Second Battle Group. We are under attack. The all-clear signal is a lie! They've wiped out most of our main line. Only reserves are left now. They have these . . . things! Twisted lab experiments imbued with . . . Kriff!"* In the recording, I hear a door sliding open. Kyp's voice drops to a hoarse whisper. "*Please, if you are receiving this message, send help to . . . OH NO! STAY AWAY! AHHHHHHH!"*" I jump involuntarily at the inhuman shriek playing out. Muffled thuds and cracks follow, a few gargles, and then silence. The recording cuts off with a *pop!* The whole room is deadly quiet. I stare at Amminius. His eyes are as wide as mine. No one says anything for several minutes. Admiral Kerex lets this newest piece of information sink in. "What . . . what was that?" Asks a visibly shaken X-wing pilot. "We don't know." General Calrissian says, a deep frown on his face. "But one thing's for sure. I don't think we'll be hearing from Kyp Pencron anytime soon." General Tav Voren steps up, taking the lead. "The Imperium have most of Iziz under siege, with only a few blocks left under our control." The Chagrian points to a strobing green section of the hologram. Voren nods

at R5, who zooms the hologram out, revealing a vast jungle along one wall. "Now, the only official entrance to Iziz is across this central bridge, here." The bridge strobes blue. "But, we're not going in officially. We are to insert into the Onderon jungle along western wall of the city. Major Quix and Captain Sinan will lead that force." Amminius and I nod. "There is a drainage system that leads right to the heart of Iziz. You are to lead your forces through the underground tunnels until you reach this point." A section of the tunnel strobes green. "This is directly under the main square of the city. Place detonation charges all throughout. We'll create a cave-in, enveloping much of the Imperium presence there. Myself and General Calrissian will lead the Jumper Corps. Our job is to distract the Imperium forces, leading many of them to the square, where you'll be waiting. The rest of the Ninth Army will take back the city and the surrounding area, bolstering the reserves as well as overseeing the evacuation of citizens to the safe zone." A small area off to the east of the city outlined with a dotted line strobes green. "The Fourth fleet will provide aerial defenses, taking out the Imperium cruisers with Blue and Green Squadron standing by to assist you. We take back Iziz, we take back Onderon!" Tav Voren concludes, nodding his horned head. The holoprojection fades. "Any questions?" An A-wing pilot dressed in green, his helmet resting in his lap raises a hand. Voren nods his way. "Any idea what kind of power they're packing above Onderon?" Admiral Kerex speaks up. "Our scout droid we sent to the Japrael sector has come back with that very information. The Imperium has sent *Predator*-class and *Victory*-class Destroyers, as well as five wings of TIE Hunters to blockade Onderon." The pilot nods. "Should be easy enough." A chuckle ripples through the room. I lean over to Otara and Amminius, muttering "I admire his bravery." Both nod. Admiral Kerex raises a three-fingered hand for silence. "We are about to enter our last of a number of randomly calculated hyperspace jumps. Once completed, we will head to Onderon. May the Force be with you. Dismissed!" The lights come back up, and we all get up from our seats. The last part of the recorded message plays over and over in my head. What could have caused that soldier to emit such a cry of fear and anguish? I shudder, figuring I'll find out that bit of information soon enough. "Let's head back to my cabin." I say to Amminius and Otara. "We'll have a group meeting with everyone." "You got it Wishbone!" Amminius says, smiling. "Family reunion!" He looks at me, losing his smile, concern showing in his brown eyes. "You alright?" He whispers, leaning in close so only I can hear. "Shaken is all." I reply. Amminius nods his understanding. Lannik

Endel, my second-in-command, makes his way over to us. I nod a greeting. "We're headed back to my quarters for a group meeting. SHARCS and Infiltrators." Endel nods in understanding. "I'll have everyone there in five." He hurries off. I look to my two friends. "Well, here we go again." Otara smiles. She puts a hand on my shoulder. "Drinks on me once we get back!" I laugh, releasing all the built-up tension in my body. It feels great. Amminius laughs. Otara laughs. No matter what happens, we'll all be in it together.

Mission to Nam Chorios - Research facility - Cade Valdarin

"Hrrrk!" Another super soldier screams as it telekinetically flings a heavy crate past us. "More are coming!" Luke says. "We've got to find the control center and destroy this place!" "Agreed!" I yell as I plunge my saber into an advancing soldier's head. "Keep moving!" We run down a long corridor, the sounds of inhuman shrieks echoing down the halls.

"There! It's the control room!" Luke says as the plasteel wall next to him suddenly bursts open, a super soldier knocking him over with a remarkably strong Force push. "Luke!" I turn around as two more land in front of me. Luke's down, saber knocked away as the soldier brandishes his gauntlet cortosis blade. Just as he is about to stab Luke, a serrated kitchen knife lunges through his abdomen. A guttural grunt ensues and the hulking mass falls to its side, dead.

"Well, that could have been bad!" Sid the Sullustan says in a sarcastic tone. He helps Luke up as I decapitate the two soldiers in front of me. "Sid, what in blazes are you doing here?" I ask. He picks up his knife, cleaning the blood off of it. "Well, I felt like ever since the Civil War ended, I haven't seen any action and wanted to get some. I asked Jevin where you were going. Heh, he was tight lipped about it, something about "extremely classified" or something." I smile at the Sullustan. "What about the restaurant?" "Please Cade, I'm a chef. We know how to handle these things. Now, I don't like the looks of these things and this place. I assume you have a plan?"

We hurry on, hearing those shrieks every now and then. "The droids are checking in," Luke says. "Artoo says he found an old Sentinel transport. We can use that to rendezvous with the Fourth on Onderon." We enter the control room looking around. "Okay Sid, Luke, look for the self destruct,

every facility has one somewhere." I say. *SHRIEK!* Several of the mutant soldiers telekinetically blast through the wall of the room.

"Kriff! Sid, find that destruct, we'll hold them off!" Luke says before force-dashing across the room, taking off an arm and hand of two soldiers. I throw my saber through two more before grabbing the sword and getting into a duel with another soldier using his blade. Luke and I easily cut through the soldiers but they keep coming. One falls, another comes through the ceiling. That one falls and another bursts through the wall. We keep cutting our way through them, having to use Force-enhanced speed and even enhancing our physical strength to punch and kick at them as they come closer and closer.

"Got it!" Sid yells as he throws a meat cleaver, hitting a mutant soldier that I had been grappling with square in the face. "Alright, destruct sequence is activated! Let's get to the hangar!" I yell. We enter the long corridor again. The walls are now echoing loudly with inhuman shrieks. As we run, several mutants try to jump on us but Luke and I are able to Force-push them back, slamming them into the walls. "Get in, get in!" I yell as we enter an archway. As soon as Sid and Luke are through, I reach out with the Force, seizing the walls around the door. The walls begin to groan with the sound of cracking permacrete as the mutants rush down the corridor. Just as they begin launching themselves off the ground, I pull my arms together, causing the walls to rip free of their foundations and slam together, the mutants caught in the middle. The sound from the the two chunks of crumpled wall hitting each other is enough to cause a headache. "Alright," I sigh with effort, "that should hold them, at least for a while. Let's get on the shuttle and get out of here."

We run to the hangar, Ratchet and R2-D2 and next to the *Sentinel* transport, the loading bay door open. "Come on, get on!" Sid yells as we hear the mass of crumpled metal flung apart. "Strap yourselves in, this will be close!" Luke yells as he takes the pilot's chair, being the best pilot among us, myself being the better swordsman. The shuttle takes off, myself and Sid in the passenger seats as the droids are in the cargo bay. At the same moment, the door to the hangar is blasted open, a horde of mutants behind it. "Blast the doors Luke!" I yell as quick as I can. In a flash of green fire, the large hangar doors are blown apart and we blast off. As soon as we clear the facility, the self destruct timer hits zero. I look through the rear viewport as

the research facility explodes in a spectacular flash of orange mixed with blue from the Force energy of the imbued mutant soldiers. "Good, hopefully that will be the last of those things," Sid sighs with relief. "We can hope Sid. Now we have a date to meet. Ratchet, punch in the coordinates to Onderon. The battle there is a shatterpoint. If it's lost, many others will be as well." The stars outside the cockpit contort to blue lines, and then the mottled blue of hyperspace takes over. "I have a feeling that Onderon and Alderaan will lead to a major event . . . and what I foresee about it is troubling." I murmur as Sid is tweaking with a busted panel on Artoo and Luke is focused on piloting. *We're coming Wodi, watch your back.*

Mediator battleship Vortex, flagship of the 3rd Fleet - Jevin Corso, New Alderaan

The mottled blue gives way to black as our ship drops out of hyperspace and an idyllic planet comes to view. New Alderaan. After the original Alderaan's destruction at the hands of the Empire, the refugees of the planet became homeless, wandering the stars. Some settled on Espirion while most of the others joined us. A few years after the Empire's defeat and the establishment of the New Republic, a massive monetary effort was made to colonize a perfect garden world to match the original Alderaan. What was made was a near perfect imitation of Alderaan and in another few short years, the planet became a jewel in the Mid Rim, trade bustling and its location became a guard to the Inner Rim. The planet's coordinates were a closely guarded secret; no one wanted a repeat of Alderaan's destruction. However, with the advent of the Imperium War, that secrecy was broken and the garden world shattered.

"Colonel Corso!" High Marshal Ponith draws my attention away from a nearby vidscreen overlooking the demolished capital city of Faroe. I turn around to face the veteran warrior. "Marshal Ponith, how can I help you?" I ask. "Aren't there battle plans you should be formulating, we're about to launch the assault?" He gives me a look. "Yes, but there's two things we need to clear up. First, we just received word, the Imperium is taking us hard in the Outer Rim. Rodia has fallen; the dome cities have been demolished to crumpled glass. The Sixty-Seventh Division has been

reallocated from there, what's left of it. From what the survivors tell me, some kind of super soldier unit was partly responsible for the fall, plus some Praetors." I sigh, "And the second?" He looks at me, suddenly standing at attention. Raising his voice for the whole flight deck to hear, "Colonel Jevin Corso, in light of exemplary leadership and combat abilities and for your dedication to the ideals of freedom and democracy, I, High Marshal Tor Ponith, hereby promote you to the position of Brigadier General and all the responsibilities therein." The bustle on the deck stops and everyone begins cheering and clapping. I give him a startled look, "A promotion sir? Why now?" He chuckles, "Well, aside from your battle on Rhen Var, the troops need some good things to lighten their moods. We're losing the Outer Rim son. Besides, you've proven yourself countless times over and I want you to eventually succeed High General Iblis as commanding officer of the entire Third Army." I salute, "Thank you sir, it's an honor sir." "At ease. And don't worry, I'll make sure Cade and Wodi are notified of your promotion. Now General, follow me and we will devise a battle plan."

...

"Alright, Alpha group, listen up." I say in the briefing room. "This is Faroe, once capital of New Alderaan, now smoking ruins. From what our scout teams have reported, there are civilians still trapped in the city and Imperium forces are moving street by street trying to snuff out any resistance. That's where we come in. Thankfully, we have a section of the elite Jumper Corps here to assist with that. While they work on saving trapped civies, the bulk of the Forty-Fourth will move on the city. Meanwhile, elements of the Forty-Third Division, namely armor and infantry divisions, will create a defensive perimeter around the city. If we take Faroe, we stand a chance. From what we can tell, the Military Command Center for New Alderaan is still intact but is under attack." "Thank you General. Now I know what some of you have heard," Ponith steps in, "about these new super soldiers. I may be older but I have ears still. I have heard the rumors that we cannot win against this foe. They follow the Sith way absolutely and crush anything that does not bow to them. Well I'm here to tell you that stops today. We are the New Republic; we succeeded in toppling one of the most powerful governments in galactic history, we have seen the return of the jedi, and we will defeat this foe!" A roaring HOOYAH sounds in the command room. "Alright then, you all have your assignments, dismissed."

Get to your transports and standby." Everyone begins leaving to the hangar. "Oh and General?" I turn, "Yes sir?" "You're to be there, on the ground with your men." "Sir, I'm sorry, I thought I was a general now, don't you want me to coordinate the troops?" He scoffs, "Jevin, I have watched your career from when you were kidnapped by Xander all those years ago. You lead your troops by example; they follow you because you don't ask them anything you wouldn't ask of yourself. They look up to you, Jevin. And I feel your troops would follow you into the gates of Malachor if you asked them to. May the Force be with you." Nodding, we part ways.

Boarding the MAAT, the troops bundled inside look at me with questions in their gazes. They are in their battle uniforms; white chest armor, elbow pads, and knee pads with grey trousers and tunics, as am I. I look at the closest one. "Private, what's your name?" "Emel, sir," the Ishi Tib replies. "Emel, I wouldn't ask you to risk your life unless I'm risking mine. This fight, no this war is as much yours as it is mine. Now let's get some Imperium tails." He nods, as do all of them gathered. And with that, the MAAT takes off, joining hundreds of transports, from MAATS to GR-80s to older, captured *Sentinel* transports. The battle to retake New Alderaan has begun. . . .

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix - Onderon, aboard the MC80 *Voyager*

"How much junk can you pack for one trip, Wodi?" Our two teams are bustling around the barracks, getting ready to land on Onderon in a couple of hours. Weapons are given a careful scrubbing, packs are loaded with essentials, helmets are fitted with night optics, and banter is exchanged. I look from a grinning Amminius to my bunk, the bottom half of the sheets barely visible due to the amount of "essentials" I had deemed necessary to bring along. I look back to him, shrugging. "Enough to annoy you!" I pick up my scout pistol from the top of the pile and twirl it in the air, catching it and pointing it at him, it's safety engaged, grinning back. Amminius puts his hands up in mock surrender. "Alright, you win this one! Just don't expect me to fish you out of the mud when all your equipment brings you down!" He smirks, making a slow sinking motion with his hand. I laugh, hitting him in the arm. Turning back to my bunk chuckling, I resume packing my items.

Once everyone is finished, we all congregate to the middle of the room. I can feel nervousness as well as excitement buzzing in the air; the normal mix of emotions before its boots on the ground. Standing in my SHARC uniform, my green painted combat helmet tucked under my arm, I run a gloved hand through my hair, checking my wrist chrono. We still have an hour to go. I raise my hand, indicating that I wish to say something. I walk to the center of our group and stand facing them. "This is an important mission," I begin, "and the stakes are pretty high. If Onderon falls, it means those hyperspace routes leading to our heart will be in enemy hands. It means that our loved ones will be put further into harm's way. It means that the enemy will be one step closer to snuffing us out." "Thanks for the uplifting pep talk, Wishbone." Amminius calls, getting a few stifled laughs. I smile at my best friend, rolling my eyes. "I'm not finished yet Sinan." "Take your time, Wishbone!" "Anyway, what I was *going* to say was that even though we have all the odds stacked against us, I believe firmly that we will be victorious. Onderon will *not* fall." I see nods of affirmation from my fellow teammates. "I believe this because I know we have the strength, the courage, and the will to ensure success. We've proved many times over that the underdog can take the lead and win!" I raise my hand in the air, forming a fist. "Let's see this to the end! For Onderon! For the Twenty-Second! For the New Republic!"

Everyone cheers, raising their fists, stomping their boots, and clapping furiously. I smile, keeping my fist in the air. Amminius herds everyone in, creating a group hug. We all stand there for a few moments. "Alright," Endel says, "break it up, people. My boots are getting waterlogged!" Everyone laughs, breaking off. I go to sit on my bunk, composing a message to Amara on my datapad. Just as I finish, the comm system of the *Voyager* crackles to life. "Attention all troops. We are about to exit our last hyperspace jump. Please make your way toward the hangars to your designated landing craft." "Alright!" Amminius holsters his E-11, clapping his hands. "Let's get a move on!" We file out into the hallway, already crowded with soldiers moving to the hangars. "Ooh, great." Malogaan grumbles. "Rush hour!" "Don't you just love it?" Calls Amminius. We make our way through the bustling corridors. Up ahead, I spy a few members of the Jumper Corps, one of them, a green skinned Rodian male, looking very familiar. I smile. "Hey Geelo!" The Rodian looks over his shoulder, scanning the crowd until his large starry eyes see us. He waves, falling back from his fellows to match pace with us.

"Wodi, Amminius. It is good to see you both!" I nod. "You as well." Amminius smiles at the Rodian and whistles, gesturing at Geelo's uniform. "Just look at that fancy getup! Almost makes me wish I had a tank of flammable liquid strapped to my back!" Geelo smirks at him. I smile to myself, rolling my eyes. "So what have you been up to?" Geelo stands a bit straighter. "Well, I've been training. It's a brutal regimen, but it really prepares you." I nod, my thoughts going back to my basic training as a Rebel soldier. It was tough, and physically and mentally demanding, but never brutal. "Do you think we can take back Onderon?" Geelo nods energetically. "Of course we can. And I'm counting on running into plenty of Imperium personnel along the way." The Rodian's starry eyes burn with anger. "They will pay for what they have done to my species." He says, more to himself than us. I shudder, the tone of his voice sending shivers down my spine. Geelo recomposes himself quickly. "I must hurry to the hangar. Lieutenant Underso will want everyone present for final inspection. I'm sure I'll see you planetside." Both Amminius and I nod. "Good luck!" "And to you as well!" Geelo rushes off. Amminius looks to me. "Remind me to never get on his bad side." I nod, watching our Rodian friend catch up to the other members of his unit. "Can you blame him? Think of how you were after Corellia." Amminius looks down, frowning. "I try not to." I put my arm around his shoulder, shaking him back to his old self. "Hey, no matter what happens, we're in it together." "Great." Amminius quickly grins. "That's comforting." I suddenly feel a slight jarring sensation. I look out a nearby bulkhead viewport. We've exited hyperspace. "Better hurry." I advise, indicating the viewport. Amminius laughs. "Always late. Some things never change!" With that, we hurry with the rest of our group towards the hangar, taking the flight of stairs down two at a time. "There's our ride!" Malogaan shouts, gesturing at a matte black GR-80 transport, its ramp lowered. "Better hurry if we want good seats." "We'll be the only ones riding, laserbrain!" Nom Carver says, laughing. "I know that. Just trying to make a joke." Malogaan responds, shrugging. I laugh, motioning towards the waiting transport. "See, Wodi thought it was funny!" "Wodi will laugh at chipping paint!" I grin, shaking my head. "I will not!"

Battle of New Alderaan, Third Army - Brig. General Jevin Corso

"Get inside, now!" I yell. The first few hours after landing on New Alderaan were torture. Everything was fine until the loading doors of the MAAT opened. Then, out of nowhere, a torrent of blaster fire riddled the transport, taking Emel and two others right there. We ran to Faroe, now within running distance, as the fighter wings opened up on the anti air positions. It was a terrible sight; the beautiful white buildings of Faroe, reminiscent of old Alderaan, now are charred by blasterfire. We made it to the Military Command Center after cutting through several back alleys and now are holed up in the building.

...

"General Corso, are you there? This is Admiral Iphigin, please respond!" I pop my head up to look through a blasted open door, ducking just in time to dodge several potshots taken by Imperium stormtroopers across the way. "Iphigin, I'm here! Intel dropped the ball, the Imperium was much more entrenched than we thought!" I take several shots with my X45A rifle, dropping an Imperium sniper off his perch. *"I know, the fleet ran into trouble, too. As soon as we had entered orbital positions, Predator Star Destroyers jumped in the system, we are completely cut off and can't escape."* I look around, seeing the scared faces of new recruits and the grim, hardened faces of veterans. Looking at a certain group, I say, "Jorgan, Gradlin, Meera, you're coming with me. There should be a surface-to-orbit cannon nearby. If we can lighten the pressure on the Third Fleet, we may be able to pull this off. Meera, an Iridonian female and captain, begins barking out orders for covering fire as the trio make their way to me. "Alright, Iphigin, listen up!" I yell into my wrist comm while donning my blast helmet, the kind worn by Rebel Navy Troopers but with the New Republic Phrik weave, making it extremely durable, "I'm going to take a small team and retake the orbital cannon. We may be able to take out some of their support ships, allowing your *Mediators* to focus fire on the star destroyers." *"I don't know, it sounds risky. But then again, that's what you're known for. Good luck, General."*

...

"Alright. Three. Two. One. *Go!*" We dash out of the building, heading for the orbital cannon close by. A hail of fire erupts from the openings of the center

as my troops there give us cover fire. All is going well until we get close to the cannon. A deafening roar, no, a shriek, as if someone in unimaginable pain sounds out. Gradlin, a male Cathar, suddenly is thrown into a wall and then something lands on the ground where he was so fast that dust picks up, obscuring the form. Jorgan, being the veteran he is, runs to check on Gradlin while strafing the thing as Meera and I train our rifles on the dust. As it clears, what we see disgusts me. It's a human but he or she looks like their body is under constant pressure, as if they are in constant pain and all of their muscles are tense. It wears stormtrooper armor like Imperium soldiers but in a bigger size. Meera curses in her native tongue and opens fire, getting three direct hits on the monster. It just stands there as the blaster bolts connect with its body, then lets out a roar and charges at Meera, pinning her against the wall of a bombed-out building. "Meera! Hold on!" I yell as I pour fire into the mutant's back. It isn't having any effect. Seeing Jorgan helping a limping Gradlin into the cannon control center, I discard the rifle. I pull out a short sword, the distant laserfire reflecting in the blade. This isn't just any blade but a gift from Cade. The blade has a Phrik weave in it, like my helmet, giving it a much harder edge and greater killing power. I charge forward, sinking the blade into the soldier's back. It howls in pain but doesn't die. Instead, it thrashes about, swinging me with it until I lose my grip, flinging me into the plasteel wall of the command center. The mutant soldier then leaps up, apparently having a jetpack built into its large armor. Meera is choking but okay and gasps, "Sir . . . grenade." Kicking a rifle to me with her flailing boot. The great thing with the X45A is it has an under-barrel grenade launcher, shooting small, cylindrical thermal detonators. They have less kick than normal detonators but are easier to target vital areas with. I glance up as the mutant is hovering in the air, reaching desperately for the blade in its back. Raising the rifle, I look through the scope. The mutant sees me and with another howl, it drops Meera and starts flying toward me. Thinking quickly, I fire off a grenade, hitting the mutant directly in its stomach and causing a blinding explosion. In addition to the explosion from the grenade, there is a blast of blue gas. I sit there panting after the gas dissipates, confused at what I just fought. Then, making me jump, the sword falls blade first next to me in the ground. Pulling it up and collapsing it into its carry position, I walk over to Meera and help her up. "Come on soldier, you've been through worse. We got a job to do." Looking back as we enter the building, I can't help but hope

Wodi doesn't run into any of those things. I wish Cade were here right now, we could use a Jedi.

Battle for New Alderaan, Faroe Military Command Center - Brig. General Jevin Corso

We enter the command building after our tussle with the super soldier, finding the building to be deserted and looking like a bombed shelter. Debris is strewn everywhere, dead bodies litter the ground. Meera is the first to call out, "Gradlin, Jorgan, where'd you get too!?" Jorgan is the first to come out, his bushy mustache easy to identify through the haze. "Here sirs. Gradlin is upstairs, working to get the defense systems for the planet back online. It's amazing; a Cathar is a tech expert, you'd expect otherwise." I set Meera down on a chair and move to the window. "Iphign, this is Jevin, we got to the command center, what can you tell us?" Static, then, *"Jevin, the command center is revolutionary for any planet. Each world in the Republic has a sophisticated defense network but New Alderaan is by far the most advanced. Alpha Blue, the Republics' black-ops division, installed heavy ion cannons in the moons of Alderaan. These cannons have high-tech tracking systems, they'll tear apart enemy ships while avoiding friendlies."* I walk over to the stairs, "Gradlin, get those turrets online, we may be able to assist our naval forces immensely." "Got it!" he yells back.

Several hours later . . .

Meera groans, her wounds still bad. "So, what the heck was that thing? It looked like an Imperium stormtrooper but, well, bulkier. More muscular." "I don't know," I reply. "I heard Cade and Luke were investigating something strange on Nam Chorios. Something about strange Force presences, maybe this is it?" "What, you mean now they have Force-powered super soldiers?" Jorgan scoffs, "That's just great, anything these guys don't have?" Gradlin shuffles down the stairs, "Yeah, no Death Star. Good news is the turret system is online again. Shall we observe?" We all move outside the building, taking cover in the rubble of a nearby building. White-blue lights begin to show up in the sky; the ion cannons are blasting away at the *Predator*-class Star Destroyers.

"General, this is Iphigin, you've done it! The cannons are already tearing apart the Destroyers. All hands, light 'em up! How are things on the ground?" I look at my wrist chrono, "It's time for us to move. All Republic forces near Faroe, this is General Corso, I want this city and planet taken back within the day, move in on the city." All the units within the Forty-Fourth and Forty-Fifth divisions check in. Behind us, we hear the rumbling of tank treads on the ground. Looking back, we see several T4-B's rolling down, along with several ACC-4 hover tanks, the Thirteenth Armored Brigade. As the sky above us is filling up with the light of red laser blasts and white ion cannon blasts, the city starts to fill up with smoke, laser blasts, rockets, and grenade launchers all sounding off.

After several more hours of intense street-to-street fighting, we make it to the Faroe capital building. The scars of battle are very present on it, several sections bear carbon scoring and others are completely blown out. "Captain Reegar!" I yell out and promptly, a young human male of maybe twenty four years, short cropped black hair, appears. "Sir?" "Listen up son, we need to take this building, the other Divisions on the planet are reporting that the Imperium is falling back, this is their last stronghold planetside so we need to take it. I want you and your Jumpers to get behind enemy lines, we'll take them from both sides and catch them in the crossfire. He gives a crisp salute, then yells some orders to several troopers. Then, with a high-pitched whine, their jump packs come on, and off they go to the bombed away sections of the building. "Alright, let's move! Watch your corners and watch for civilians. Roll out!" I say a quiet prayer of my own, hoping Wodi and Amminius are doing fine on Onderon. "Marshal Ponith, we are moving in on the capitol building now." *"Good luck Jevin,"* Tor replies.

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix - Onderon

After an exchange off our broadside with an Imperial *Victory*-class cruiser, the *Voyager* techs clear us for departure. Strapped into my safety harness beside Malogaan and Carver with my TL-50 heavy repeater, I gaze out the forward viewport as our battered GR-80 transport leaves the hangar with our escort, blasting out into the starry vacuum of space. Ahead of us is Onderon. And a blockade of Imperium Predator Destroyers. Starfighters zip by ahead of us, lasers lancing out at one another. A blue trim X-wing scores a hit on a TIE hunter, its quad laser cannons shredding the TIEs left solar

wing, sending the fighter careening. The thing explodes in front of us, showering our transport with debris. I can hear each individual scrap of shrapnel hitting our cockpit viewport with little metallic pings. Many of our cruisers have gotten into an exchange position, trading turbolaser fire with the defending Destroyers. Off to our port and starboard, other GR-80 transports come into view, speeding toward Onderon's surface.

I look around the large crew cabin at our two teams. All are strapped in, gazing out viewports, checking the calibration on their blasters, or engaging in conversation. I turn to Nom Carver, saying "How you feeling?" Carver offers me a grin. "All good here, Major. Loaded and ready to go!" I nod, smiling. I next turn to Malogaan. "Feeling good, Malogaan?" Malogaan smiles, hefting his TL-50. "With this baby, I'll be just fine sir!" I grin, clapping him on the shoulder. Outside, Onderon looms closer. "Entering the atmosphere." The voice of the pilot crackles over the comm. "Prepare for a bumpy ride!" I check the strap of my safety restraint, tugging it a little tighter, just in case. "This is where the fun begins!" Says Amminus, sitting a few seats over from me. Our transports break the planetary atmosphere, one by one. Directly ahead of us is the capital city of Iziz. "There it is." Says Gav Pulastra, pointing. "*Kriff*, is it in bad shape!" He's right. Even from this far out, I can see the extent of the damage. Much of the walled city is smoking, and a few sections are ablaze. "Alright," I begin, "when we tou-" BAM! A transport to our right falls out of the sky, trailing smoke and shrapnel. "Anti-aircraft!" Yells our pilot. A shot from a ground cannon flies past, barely missing us. The transport to our left is not so lucky. "Kriff!" Yells Gav Pulastra, staring out after the doomed GR-80. "We're sitting mynocks here! Where's our escort?"

As if in answer, a trio of Y-wing starfighters roars past us, splitting off from each other to drop their payload. A brilliant plume of fire rises up from the jungle. "This is Epsilon Three. Way's clear!" "Just in time." Remarks Nosh Ker Raisuun. I breathe a sigh of relief. The remaining transports touch down in a jungle clearing a few clicks from Iziz. A bump reverberates through the crew cabin as our GR-80 touches ground. "Ok, here we go!" I yell, unstrapping myself and switching off my TL-50s safety switch. Outside, I can hear the sound of blasterfire against our outer hull as the stormtroopers take shots at our transport. "Everyone ready?" "HOOYAH!" Is the resounding answer. "Boarding ramp descending!" Shouts the pilot. "Good luck out

there!" Light pours through the widening crack of the descending ramp. A red blaster bolt shoots through the crack, hitting the upper bulkhead, creating a shower of sparks. "Kriff!" Yells Glam, jumping in surprise. With a THUNK the ramp hits the ground, and we're out, sprinting through the foliage. "Left! Watch your left!" "Laying down heavy fire!" "Grenade out!" We run alongside the bulk of the Ninth Army, pushing up to the capital city.

My boots are kicking up mud and leaves as I sprint with my group, charging the Imperium main line. Leaves and wet branches whip at my face. I'm breathing hard, sweat pouring down my face and neck. I launch my TL-50's secondary fire at a group of stormtroopers taking cover behind a large tree stump. Direct hit! "Nice one, Wishbone!" Calls Amminius, spraying his own weapon at a trooper manning an E-web. The bolts catch the trooper square in the chest plate, throwing him off the tripod-mounted repeating blaster and into the brush. "Thermal out!" Yells Gav Pulastra, hurling a detonator. The thermal lands at the feet of two Imperium troopers. They scramble to get out of the way, but are too late. "We can do this! Push up, push up!" Suddenly the soldier running next to me jerks and falls face first into the mud, his blaster flying out of his hands. Another soldier cries out, a volley of bolts hitting him in the chest, sending him flying backwards. "It's coming from up there!" Malogaan shouts, pointing. I squint my eyes to see . . . three mounted heavy repeater cannons up in the tree branches, spitting laser fire down at us. "Take cover!" I yell. "Troopers up in the trees!" The heavy cannons cut down four more of our soldiers as we duck behind trees, rocks, and fallen logs. One soldier takes a volley to the leg, severing it just below the knee. The man screams in pain, hitting the ground, dropping his weapon. A soldier and I immediately jump out and grab his outstretched arms, dragging the groaning man behind our cover. "It's alright," I soothe him, squeezing his shoulder, "you're gonna be fine, buddy." I gesture for a medic. "Come on, take 'em out!" One of Amminius' soldiers, Aran Nomante, shouts. "We can't hide behind here forever!" The medic finally arrives, and I make my way over to where Nomante and a Ninth scout crouch. "How many men did we lose?" I ask him, shouting to be heard over the din. "Thirteen so far, Major! Five from the E-web fire! And three are hurt too bad to continue!"

I hit the stock of my TL-50 in frustration. We aren't getting anywhere with those troopers suppressing us. As soon as we peek up to try to take out a gunner, a volley of blaster bolts comes our way from another E-web. At that

moment, my comlink vibrates, indicating an incoming call. I unhook the device from my belt and press the 'talk' button. "Yes?" *"Wishbone! Glad to see you're still with us. Those troopers are sure putting a crimp in our day!"* It's Amminius! "You're telling me!" I respond. "Any ideas on how to get past 'em?" *"We could always ask them nicely!"* "Really?" *"Sorry, just trying to lighten the tone. Anyways, we have one smart rocket over here with us with a couple of shots. You have any?"* I scan the soldiers taking cover by me. I spy two rockets. Catching the attention of the soldiers carrying them, I gesture for them to come over to me. "I've got two!" *"OK. Toss out a few flash bangs and we'll do the same over here."* The cannons start up again, sending up a shower of splintered wood and rock. I cover my face, closing my eyes tightly. "OK," I turn to Nomante and the scout, "flashbangs out on three! When they go off, you two," I gesture to the soldiers with the smart rockets, "fire your rockets at the E-webs. We'll provide cover fire!" I get over the unit comlink and relay the plan to the other soldiers pinned down farther away from us. Confirmations come flooding back in. *"Got it sir!" "Let's do it!" "Ok!" "Affirmative, Major!" "Copy, Wodi!"*

"Ready?" Amminius comes over the comm again. "Ready!" I respond. *"Let's do it! On three!"* "Got it!" I hold up a gloved hand, counting down with three fingers, holding the comlink to my mouth so Amminius can hear my countdown as well. "Three, two, one . . . Now!" The scout and Nomante hurl their flashbangs, and I hear them go off. *POW!* "OK! Rockets!" The two soldiers bring up their rockets, aiming through the sights. I bring up my TL-50, perching it on top of our cover, firing randomly at the treeline. I see multiple bolts from the other soldiers doing the same. The rockets go off . . . and hit their marks! Yes! "Yahoo! Good work!" We all get up from our crouched positions and converge in a small clearing, doing a headcount. In total, four soldiers were lost in the flashbang diversion. I make my way to the front of the knot of soldiers and shout to be heard. "Alright, good work everyone. The rest of you are to make your way to the city and meet up with what's left of the Twenty-Second. Others from the Ninth are already on site. My SHARC team and Captain Sinan's Infiltrators will take the route through the sewage system to the city square. Good luck!" The soldiers from the Ninth move off towards Iziz, leaving only SHARCs and Infiltrators in the clearing. "Alright," I say to them, "the drainage grate should be on the lower part of the eastern wall. Let's go!" And with that, we start off through the now silent jungle. Well, silent save for the echoes of explosions and blaster

fire in the distance. As we walk, the sky grows progressively darker. Night is approaching. I shudder, thinking of the horrible scream from the briefing. Hopefully, we won't run into anything before we get to the grate. We still have a ways to go.

Battle for New Alderaan, Faroe Capitol Building - Brig. General Jevin Corso

BOOM! A chunk of the wall next to us explodes in a fiery burst. "General!" Meera calls out over the din, "I don't think we can make it, the hallways are too well covered!" I glance around, seeing Meera, Graadlin, and others hunkering down in the smoke. It's been nearly a day since the Republic forces on Alderaan closed on the capitol building and we've barely made it halfway up the skyscraper. "Got it!" I yell, "Tank Commander, I need a missile volley on the building at these coordinates, NOW!" I say through my wrist comm as I select certain areas on the holo map projecting from my dataglove. "Got it General, danger close!"

BOOM. BOOM. BOOM. The walls shake with a fury, the concussion missiles rocking the building. Colonel Jerome Carr, my new second-in-command, looks at me, "You sure about this sir? What if this takes the building down with us?" I look back, "It'll be fine Carr. This building's tougher than it looks." The rocking stops. I stand up, brandishing X45A rifle, "Captain Reegar, this is Corso, are your Jumpers in position?" "Yes sir, give the word!" We get to the doors of the main atrium. "Now!" And with that, the sound of jetpacks roar, followed by the sound of Atlas Repeater Cannons. "Okay everyone, three, two, one," I say, ending with a nod to Carr, who sets a detonation pack on the door.

The door bursts open in a fiery explosion and we charge in, blasters peppering through the smoke of the explosion. Carr takes down a stormtrooper on a balcony, causing him to fall off the edge and land with a hard crack on the polished marble floor. I aim my rifle at a stormtrooper about to aim at the now exposed Carr, hitting him dead in the faceplate. Graadlin, the massive Cathar, takes a bolt to the arm. I learn that you never want to do that. With a fury as scary as a Wookiee, he charges the trooper that hit him, causing the trooper to drop his rifle in fear. Graadlin grabs him and hauls him out the closest window.

After at least an hour of fighting in the atrium, taking cover, aiming, firing, and repeating, the atrium is cleared. Carr stands, "Atrium cleared, where next sir?" "All that's left is the Governor's Chamber" I say, moving next to the massive ferrocrete door. "We know that these Praetors are the high-ranking members of the Imperium, second only to Pravus. That being said, they must be in charge of high level operations like this." Glancing back at my troops assembled in the atrium, "This is it, we take this guy out, the Imperium forces on the planet will lose leadership." Jorgan stands at the door control, looking at me for the signal. Hefting my rifle, Graadlin his TL-50, Gerome his DH-24 carbine, I give a quick nod. The door slowly opens, adding to our frayed nerves.

The room is completely dark and nobody's there. But all of a sudden . . . "AARRGGHH!" Three of those mutant soldiers jump out at us with incredible speed, blasting from their wrist-blasters as they hop around. Several soldiers are hit, causing us to roll around to cover. Graadlin, with his incredible musculature, actually jumps up and catches one, slamming it to the ground and engaging it in a fist fight. Meera and Gerome take the other, engaging it in hand-to-hand with their standard issue vibroblades. The last is shot down in a hail of blaster bolts followed by a slugthrower shot directly in the stomach. Before long, the three mutants fall. "Ok, that wasn't what I was expecting. You two, grab that thing, we're bringing it back to NRI for analysis." After giving my orders, I hear the all too familiar snap-hiss of a lightsaber. In the dark room shines a single, yellow lightsaber. And this is no simple Sith Acolyte, for her robes are much more intricate, the dark black of the robes completed by the red symbol of the Imperium, a triangle within a circle.

"Greetings General, I am Praetor Skrella. And I am your doom." She says as she Force-dashes into the middle of our group. Before we can act, she slices down two soldiers, their cries of pain quickly end as they die hitting the ground. She moves again, cutting her way through my men. Carr, bless his heart, actually parries her saber with his vibroblade. Carr smirks a little, to Skrella's amusement. She lifts her hand and blasts him toward the wall, causing the wall to crack a tad. Graadlin, the big feline, lifts the body of the dead mutant soldier and flings it at Skrella, who just bisects the body in a clean swipe. She lifts her hand as she deflects fire from the others, choking

him. Seeing my friend in pain, I grab my vibroblade and rush her, swinging with all my might and, using the close quarters advanced training I received, I actual manage to hold my own. That is, until I miss one parry, letting Skrella slices my leg. It's searing pain but luckily, it's only superficial. But the pain was more than enough to make me fall over. As I glare at her, those violet eyes emotionless, the saber humming, the main window breaks open. A MAAT gunship is there, pointing straight at Skrella. "Now!" I yell with an effort. I roll as far as I can to my right as the rest of the troops jump out of the way. The MAAT, with a clear line of fire, opens up with its blue laser cannons and concussion missiles. In a brilliant flash of color and a scream, Skrella disappears. After the dust clears, all that remains is a blackened lightsaber hilt. Limping over, I grab it, "We need to figure out how many Praetors there are and keep track of how many we take down." Limping over to the window, Graadlin's big arm helping to support me, I wave at the MAAT pilot, who turns the ship and speeds off to the closest city to assist in combat operations there. In the distance, several MC80s can be seen above the planet along with CR90 Corvettes and Nebulon Assault Frigates moving into position. The Republic doesn't believe in orbital bombardment, at most bombarding with ion cannons, but desperate times call for desperate measures.

"Admiral, this is Corso, Get a message out, New Alderaan is ours again."
"Great to hear General, you okay?" Glancing down at my grey trousers, I see a huge bloody gash where the lightsaber cut my leg. "I'll live, thank the Force. Do me a favor, send a message to Marshal Ponith at the Mid Rim Command Station, we've taken the planet and will leave adequate defense forces to prevent future attack." I look back at my soldiers, bloody scars and burn spots all over them. Smiling at them, "While the Republic is in danger, we will fight to the end to defend her. We're taking our forces to Onderon, Iphigin. If the Imperium is now using these super soldiers," I say as I kick a dead mutant in the arm to make sure it's dead, "then Wodi and the Ninth will need all the back up they can get. We'll retake Onderon if we can, then on to Belkadan per Cade's vision." Hold on Wodi, we're coming and with luck, Cade is too.

New Alderaan - Brig. General Jevin Corso

We've taken New Alderaan. The battle lasted several days but we've done it. After taking Faroe, the Forty-Fourth spread out around the world, taking down stragglers. It was quite a site, Mon Cal cruisers in orbit overhead, launching precise orbital strikes on Imperium targets, T4-B battle tanks rolling over the plains. Before long, the remainder of the Imperium forces surrendered and were taken into custody. As I'm sitting in the capitol building, I receive a distress call, from Wodi nonetheless.

"Come in, any New Republic forces in the area, this is Major Wodi Quix . . . we are on Onderon but the mission has gone awry . . . some type of super soldier . . . pummeling our forces. Send assistance if you can." I stand up, looking around. "General Iblis, do you copy?" *"I'm here Corso."* "Sir, I'd like to take the Forty-Fourth to Onderon to assist the Ninth Army." The comm's silent, then Garm replies, *"Granted, the Third and Fourth Army can manage this sector."*

I look to Colonel Carr, "Colonel, recall the Forty-Fourth, we're heading to Onderon." He gives a curt nod and moves off to the communications room. Meera comes up beside me as I grab my rifle from a rack, the pain still sharp in my leg from my encounter with the super soldier causing me to limp slightly. "General, begging your pardon but how are we going to get to Onderon? All of Iphigin's ships are needed in this sector; the Imperium still has a presence on nearby Holstice." I sigh, "Honestly, I hadn't thought that far ahead." With a grimace I sit down on a crate overlooking the main street of Faroe. At that moment, we hear the sonic boom of a large ship exiting hyperspace overhead.

Meera, myself, Graadlin and the others are staring up in awe when my comm crackles, *"General Corso, are you down there?"* A familiar bubbly Quarren voice sounds. "Admiral Kerex? That's a whaladon of a ship you got there!" He laughs on his end. *"I'll explain once you're on board. I'm sending transports down for your division, we've already picked up several others and are headed to Onderon to reinforce Colonel Rimta's Ninth Army."*

. . .

After getting onboard the huge ship and navigating my way to the bridge, I find Unath Kerex, Fleet Admiral of the New Republic, looking out the frontal

bridge viewport. "Admiral, where did this ship come from? I thought we didn't have any dreadnought-scale vessels.?" He smiles at me, an odd looking thing for a Quarren. "You're right, we didn't. But ever since Jakku, when we had to fight against the *Ravager*, R&D has been working nonstop to make a compatible ship to fight Super Star Destroyers." We walk over to the ready room, complete with a very large holotable. "Mon Cal engineers and Republic R&D have been working in secret to fulfill our need for a heavy hitting, dreadnought-scale warship. Work was around the clock, and the knowledge that powerful former Imperials were out there, like Rae Sloane and Xander Verush, only confirmed that this ship was needed." He gestures with his arms to encompass the ship, "General Corso, welcome to the *Viscount*, namesake of the *Viscount* star defender line. All the technology onboard this ship: computers; offensive weaponry; shields, are all state of the art and much greater than anything onboard an *Imperial*-class Star Destroyer. Of course, since we haven't captured a *Predator* yet, we don't know how it'll fare against those." He turns to me, "But we do know the Imperium has several Super Star Destroyers of their own, hidden for fifteen years. Mon Cal Shipyards is hard at work getting the *Viscount's* sister ships made. There, now that we've made introductions, let's get to Onderon and give the Imperium a good thrashing with our newest ship." Kerex gives the order to jump to lightspeed and the black of space changes to mottled white and blue. . . .

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix - jungle, Onderon

The jungle at night time can be a pretty intimidating place. Alien sounds and smells permeate the organic air, and the clouds that pass over Onderon's moon create menacing shadows on the ground. We've been walking for about an hour now, with the most eventful thing that has happened being when a Dalgo, a four-legged creature with a large cranium ridge native to the planet, jumped out of the brush, practically trampling Gav Pulastra. Apparently, our passing had startled it. I can tell you for sure it startled us. After that incident, I had Malogaan take out his handheld life-form scanner. The echoes of blaster fire are getting louder, which means we're closing in on Iziz, or, what's left of it. I look skyward ahead of us to see a large plume of black smoke steadily rising, not dispersing even in the wind. I tap Amminius on the shoulder and point at it. He nods and turns back to the others. "We're almost there. Get your gear ready." As I walk a few more

paces forward, a fuzzy outline appears for a brief moment in my peripheral vision by a cluster of purple ferns. I turn my head to look at the spot, but there's nothing there. *Must be tired*, I think to myself. *Or I'm losing it*. I shake my head and continue walking. Then I feel a slight rush of air past my right shoulder. My heart skips a beat. Is it one of those horrible creatures? I look up at the trees to see the leaves blowing gently in the breeze. *It's the wind*. *Focus on the objective*, I instruct myself. *Stop being so paranoid*.

"Kriffing thing." I turn to back to see Malogaan hitting the side of his handheld scanner. "What's the problem?" Asks Fin Ulrand, walking next to him. Malogaan glares at the scanner, hitting it again. "This piece of shrapnel. It's glitchy. It keeps saying there's a life-form near us. But when I try to pinpoint it, the thing goes haywire." I frown, holding up my hand for a stop and walking over to him. "Maybe the power source is low, or the signal is scrambled." "Maybe." Malogaan sighs. "Anyways, we should keep moving." "Yeah," says Thrak Gorshun, grinning, "wouldn't want to miss-" His sentence is abruptly cut off as he loses his footing, falling on his back with a loud thud. "Whoa! Slip in some mud?" Asks Tighe Bodalla. Amminius, Bodalla, and I move towards Gorshun. "Hey, you okay th-." I stop mid sentence as my eyes fall on him. Thrak Gorshun's eyes are blank and staring. A thin trail of blood trickles from his mouth. "He's dead." Bodalla says, disbelievingly. "How? Did he break something important when he fell?" Amminius places a hand on Thrak's chest, looking for a sign of injury. He pulls it away to reveal his glove is slick with blood. "Look here." Amminius says, parting Gorshun's matte black flak jacket and armor, lifting up his undershirt to reveal a bloody hole in the abdomen. "He's been impaled by something." Suddenly from behind us, I hear a gargled cry. I whip around to see Teris Darksword falling to the ground face first, her weapon clattering down beside her. I quickly get to my feet, followed by Amminius and Bodalla. "Get in a defensive circle!" I say loudly. We circle up around the fallen Teris, our weapons scanning the trees. "Looks like your scanner wasn't lying!" I call to Malogaan. "There's definitely something here!" I repress the feeling of stupidity and guilt for not mentioning what I had seen earlier and squint down my barrel, looking for the slightest hint of movement. There! I unleash a torrent of bolts at a fuzzy blur. The blur jumps, and I lose it as a cloud goes over the moon, throwing the surrounding area into momentary darkness. "Can you see anything?" I ask as I look around me, my night vision goggles activated. "No." "I don't see anything, sir." "Nothing." Several seconds of silence pass. "Damn it!"

yells Ben Pulastra. "Where are you!?" "Here" A voice responds, close to me. I jump and Ben screams. All of a sudden he's lifted off his feet, being held in the air. "Aggh! Help me!" He yells, his voice cracking. Amminius opens up at the space underneath Ben's flailing body. I see the bolts connect with something. A low groan turning into a snarl comes from the space below Ben. "Continue firing!" I shout. As I say this, I hear a loud sickening crack. Ben stops flailing and hangs limp. "*Kriff!*" Screams Gav. Ben's body is then hurled at us. It knocks me and Endel to the ground. "Oof!" I roll the body off and jump to my feet, pulling Endel up too. "Go to Iziz! Go, go!" We break the circle and sprint for the walled city, Bodalla and Ulrand carrying Teris Darksword. "What the hell is it?" I run, checking behind me. "No kriffing clue!" shouts Amminius.

We crash through the tree line to see . . . "The wall!" cries Carver in relief. "Go!" Shouts Otara, running next to Amminius and grabbing his arm. Amminius is out of breath and panting hard. I fall back to him and grab his other arm, helping him along to the wall. At the bottom of the structure is a durasteel grate, about as wide as a human being. "Cut it open!" I say to Carver. He produces a fusion cutter and begins to cut a hole in the grating. The rest of us form a protective circle around Carver while he works, weapons primed. "Almost there!" Calls Carver. "Just need to cut this last section." I look through my sights, waiting for that damned blur to show itself again. It appears all right. But not as a blur. "There! Is that . . . a Trandoshan?" Shouts Glam. The lizard rushes at us, its' red eyes only slits, its' clawed hands clutching a pike weapon. The tip is covered in blood. We open up on the beast, slowing it down as it defends itself. "Carver?" I yell back at the wall. "We're through!" Carver yells back. I hear him grunt as he lifts the section he had just cut free. "Get inside!" Yells Amminius, firing his E-11. "Teris goes first!" Bodalla and Ulrand ease Teris Darksword inside the opening. "Ok. She's through! Next" One by one, we retreat into the drainage system grating. Carver and I are the last ones through. Inside, a small tunnel heads off into three separate directions. I turn back to see the Trandoshan nearly on us! "Here!" Carver yells as I help him put the grate back into place. The lizard is just outside the grate now, and we scramble in our small tunnel to get away from the barred opening. I didn't doubt for a second it couldn't rip off the heavy durasteel bars we had struggled to lift back into place. The thing peers at us through the grate with one red slit. Then it speaks. "I will ssee you ssoon, vermin." Then it backs away. Silence,

except for our labored breathing. "That . . . was close!" Huffs Nosh Ker Raisuun. The Quarren looks to me with his turquoise eyes. "What do you suppose that was, Major?" I shake my head. "Heck if I know." "Sir!" I turn around to see Bodalla bringing Amminius over to where Teris Darksword lies. "She's fading fast. I applied some medpacks, but I don't think they're doing the job. She needs a proper medic, soon." "Ok." Says Amminius, looking to Otara. "Otara, I need you to go with Bodalla and Ulrand and take Teris to the Fourth's position." Otara nods, her lekku bobbing. "Got it. I'll see them safely there." She leans over and kisses Amminius. "Good luck, everyone." "You too." With that, she disappears with the others down the leftmost tunnel. I turn to everyone that's left, gesturing with my TL-50 down the center tunnel. "Let's go. We have to reach the city square!" I turn back one last time to look at the grate. I shudder, knowing for sure that we would be seeing that lizard again soon. "Hey." I stop and turn to see Amminius placing a hand on my shoulder. "We need to go." I nod, weakly smiling at my friend. "Right. Just promise me one thing." "Hmm?" "Don't go wandering off by yourself. Please." Amminius nods, clapping me on the shoulder lightly. "We're in this together, brother. And that's how it's always gonna be. You're stuck with me." I smile again. "Stuck with me." I look down at my hands to see my right one shaking. "Come on, let's go."

Cade Valdarin - Onderon, aboard a *Sentinel*-class shuttle

"Here we are, we've reached Onderon." Luke says with Artoo and Ratchet, designation R2-A6, beeping over at the sensor station. "Looks like the battle is in full swing. Look up there." He points, "That must be Admiral Teradon's ship, the one with the huge New Republic symbols on the hull." Artoo beeps out a worried tone. "What is it?" I ask. My journeys with Ratchet have given me a slight understanding of droid speak. Luke goes over to the station, "Looks like Iziz is in big trouble. I'm seeing Imperium land forces converging on the city."

He walks back to the pilot station, looking back to see me in deep thought. "You know, you shouldn't try hiding things, not from me at least." I look at him sharply, "Are you reading my mind old man?" He gives me a look, "I'm only fifteen years older than you, that hardly makes me an old man. Besides, we're both Jedi. Well, Jedi and grey Jedi, if you want to get technical. You and I share a mental bond remember?" I sit down and pat

Ratchet on his dome. "I don't know, just something I sensed just now. I felt a Force presence. Not like those of those mutant soldiers but one of a fully-trained Force user. And it wasn't a warrior for the Light side." He gives me a quizzical look, "I thought you didn't believe in the Light side and Dark side?" I give Luke a stern look. "I believe in the Light side and Dark side, all grey Jedi do, or did I guess. Until I train more at least. I just see them differently than you do." He nods, clearly interested. "Traditional Jedi and Sith believe the Force has two distinct sides, Light and Dark. And that certain abilities draw you to one side or the other." "My belief, I say, "is that it is the intention of the wielder; it's how you use them that determines your allegiance." Luke replies, smirking good-naturedly, "Sounds almost convenient." I give him another look, knowing what he might be implying, "Hey, I still fight for peace, for justice, and for the light. There can be no good without evil, but evil must not be allowed to flourish. Emotion, yet peace. Ignorance, yet knowledge. Passion, yet serenity. Chaos, yet harmony. Death yet the Force."

"The code of the Grey. My family bloodline has yielded Jedi since the Hundred Years Darkness, thousands of years ago. Of course not directly. It was uncles to nephews to cousins. Until my grandfather secretly sired a son. Who married my mother, who also was a Jedi." "I see," Luke replies. "It's a very interesting viewpoint and from what I've seen, it works for you. I've never seen you fight with hatred or anger, at least to a point it overwhelms you-" A voice comes over our intercom, cutting Luke off. "*Unidentified Sentinel shuttle, this is the NRS Allegiant, you have entered New Republic protected space and a warzone. State your business.*" "NRS Allegiant, this is Luke Skywalker, authentication Bravo Epsilon Five-Five-One. Cade Valdarin is with me as well." A moment of silence as the codes are checked. "*Authentication checks out. Welcome Commander Skywalker. How may we assist?*" I look to him. "For now," Luke says, "I just want you and Admiral Teradon to focus on the space battle. Our last communication with General Corso indicates that Fleet Admiral Kerex is on the way with a new ship. As for us, we are heading to the surface." "*Understood, good luck sirs.*" And with that, Luke takes the shuttle into orbit.

As soon as the clouds clear way, we see a desperate pitted battlefield, spreading out in all directions. Blaster bolts are flying across the ground going in all directions. There are crashed troop transports and gunships all

over with more flying to hot zones in the battle. "Take us to the city, the majority of the Ninth is fighting in the jungle. Besides, if I know Wodi, he'll take his SHARCs to Iziz," I say as Luke nods in agreement.

An hour later we come within eyesight of Iziz and I stare in shock. The great walls of the city Iziz, walls that have protected the city from the dangerous wilderness for generations, have been nearly shattered. Laser blasts are flying all over the city. Many of the buildings are in ruins. "There, take us in!" I say, pointing to an intact landing pad. But as we fly in, the alarm klaxon goes off. "Incoming missile, taking evasive action!" Luke yells as he pulls us into a spinning maneuver. But we are in a *Sentinel* troop transport; not exactly an X-wing. Before long, the engine is hit, rocking the ship, and we begin a sharp descent downward towards the fastly approaching tarmac below. "Hang on!" I yell as Luke and I tighten our crash webbing and project Force fields around the droids. "Here it comes!"

BOOM! . . .

Cade Valdarin - Iziz Commercial Spaceport, Crashed shuttle

All is black, my head is throbbing. The last thing I remember is shouting "Hang on!" and then nothing. The first thing that I hear is the nervous chattering of astromech droids. With a jolt, I wake myself up. "Uhh, Ratchet, Artoo, you still with us?" Both chirp a shaky affirmative. Looking around I gauge how hard we hit the ground. Everything is busted. Panels are dangling from the ceiling, pilot chairs are flipped over; not a pretty sight. Sitting up a little straighter I yell, "Sid, you okay back there?" to the cargo hold. "Fine!" comes a muffled yell back.

Looking back to the droids, I ask, "What about Luke, have you seen him?" Both tweet a negative. Sighing I lean back. "Great, I might've just gotten one of the biggest heroes in the galaxy killed. Oh if only Sonya Ravenclaw were here." At these words, a muffled voice comes out from under me, "Oh, now who's Sonya? A new lady friend?" Shifting over to the left, I lift the rubble and out comes Luke, his hair all tousled and clothes covered with dust. "What happened to Kiara, the Zeltron woman. I thought you two were happy?" "Kiara and I are still together, yes; she's administrative aide to the

new Chancellor, Krellik. Sonya is a *friend*," I say with emphasis, "that I met a few years back. Remember when we were investigating that rumor of a Force-user on Arkanis? Well I met her there." He reaches into the survival packs we brought and grabs two nutrient bars. "So what's she do?" He asks between eating his bar. "Think of a young Han Solo, like how Han was when you met him, only female. Now what she does instead of spice smuggling is smuggle artifacts: rare, priceless artifacts and pieces of art. And also, like Han, she's a terrific pilot and one heck of a gunslinger." Luke looks at me, "So what happened between you that you are now friends?" I shrug, "I saved her from some not-so-happy customers. She felt extremely grateful and gave me a favor to call in. That was three years ago." "I see," says Luke. "Hopefully you won't need to call on the favor yet. Now let's try to get out of this mess."

"No, no, no!" Exclaims Sid, walking in with flatcakes lading his arms. "That is no proper breakfast, have these. They're a new recipe using spices from Hosnian Prime." They hit the spot. The aroma eases away the pain of the crash. We finish up our meal in record time then get ready to move. "Ok," Luke says, "If I remember right, we landed in the middle of the spaceport." He ignites his lightsaber and cuts through the side of the shuttle and into blinding sunlight. We jump out to see the city on fire, ships littering the skies above us, and blaster flashes throughout the jungles outside the walls.

We begin walking when I remember another bit of information. "Wait, Wodi is in the city." Luke looks at me, "You're sure?" Nodding I start heading back toward where I feel his presence. A snarl, a guttural sound, stops me. Luke and I draw our sabers, the green color illuminating his black tunic and my brown robes. Sid pulls out the meat cleaver. A form materializes on the concrete. A tall humanoid, a dark brown Trandoshan, in the black robes of a Dark sider. "I bid you greetings." It says in its serpent-like voice. "I am Darth Ferus, the Shadow Hand of Darth Pravus, Dark Lord of the Sith and Emperor of the Imperium." He tilts his bright orange predator eyes to me, "And he bids you welcome, Cade Valdarin. He can't wait to finally meet you again." I smirk, "The feeling's mutual. Now why don't you tell him to meet me face to face?" Ferus chuckles, a dark sounding laugh, "All in time. For now, I am to test you and see how strong you've become." And after that, he pulls out a double-bladed lightsaber, igniting it so its blood red colors illuminates the ground around him. Luke looks at him, "You realize it's three

on one pal?" Ferus smiles a toothy grin and three super soldiers fly in on jetpacks, zooming past me to attack Sid and Luke, who are drawn away dodging and swinging their respective weapons when they can. "Well, it's just you and me Ferus." His reptilian eyes narrow and a cold smile comes across his scaly face, "I've always wanted to fight a grey Jedi, one who doesn't hold back based on sanctimonious beliefs." We charge at each other, the green and red blades crossing each other diagonally. A few more parries, thrusts, and leaps and we land on the lower platform. Charging at me again, I side-step Ferus and charge up a Force blast with my left hand. I blast Ferus, but he holds his own hand up. Shutting off the lightsaber, I add my right hand to the blast, adding much more power to it and knocking Ferus through a grate and into the Iziz sewer system. Looking back to see Sid and Luke handling their own battles, I leap through the now busted grate. I wince at the smell and the thought that Force knows what is touching my boots, igniting the lightsaber again. This Ferus seems to be like the other Praetors I've met so far; he has some special talent in the Force. Xellius seems very adept at escaping, namely teleporting. Ferus' talent seems to be stealth, no surprise given he's a Trandoshan. I keep sloshing through the muck, following his Force presence when it disappears. What? How is that possible, unless his stealth skills are that advanced. Makes sense given that he is the right hand of Xander Verush, who is the undisputed Dark Lord of the Sith. However, at that moment, I hear the sounds of battle, a more conventional battle, with blasters and grenades. Then I hear Wodi's faint voice shout something followed by the horrible shrieks of super soldiers. I guess Ferus will have to wait for later. I run off towards the sound, hoping I'm not too late . . .

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix - Iziz drainage system, Onderon

We move into the center tunnel single file, hunching down to avoid scraping our packs and helmets against the duracrete ceiling. I head in second after Amminius, bringing my TL-50 in close to my body. I wrinkle my nose at the stench and try not to focus on the wet sounds my boots are making sloshing through the grime. I hear more sloshes behind me as the others enter. Up ahead is darkness. I put on my night vision goggles, looking past Amminius further into the tunnel. Nothing. I shake off my mild annoyance and activate my helmet's mic. "Everyone good back there?" "All good here, major." "Yes sir." "Affirmative." I nod. Above us, I can hear the faint sounds of blaster fire

and explosions. After a few minutes of making our way through the tunnel, the walls and ceiling begin to widen. I internally sigh in relief. Finally, my back was killing me! "Tunnel's widening," calls back Amminius, letting the others know. "That's good to hear," Says Nosh Ker Raisuun, his voice echoing slightly, "I don't think I can take much more of this!"

We eventually come to an area large enough to stand up in, a room of sorts, with four points of entry. I remove my pack, leaning my TL-50 against the duracrete wall, and stretch out my back while the others emerge. "How far are we into the city?" Asks Carver, once everyone is out, looking to me. "We should be pretty close to the square." I take out my personal holoprojector and activate it, bathing the space in a soft blue light as the image of the network of tunnels appears. I point to a section of tunnel. "Well, we just passed this point he-." A sound makes me stop. The hair rises on the back of my neck. "Did you hear that?" I ask. Amminius looks to me, confused. "Hear . . . what?" He smiles, placing a gloved hand on my shoulder. "You sure you're alright, Wishbone?" I glare at him and motion with my hand for complete silence. We stand there, unmoving, our ears straining to hear. SLOSH. SLOSH. SLOSH. "There." I whisper. I see Amminius' eyes widen. He brings up his E-11. I snatch my TL-50 from its resting place against the wall. "Maybe it's just debris falling from the street grates." Whispers Malogaan nervously. "Yeah, sure." Glam whispers back. "Debris that sounds like footsteps."

Something else becomes quickly apparent. "Sounds like, whatever it is, there isn't only just one." Gav Pulastra whispers hoarsely. I peer into the tunnel behind of us, my goggles activated. I can't see anything! I grit my teeth. I flip them up and peer into the tunnel again, staring into the inky blackness. A pair of pale eyes stare back at me, unblinking. I jump about a meter into the air. "Gah!" Everyone whirls around, reacting to my cry. Too late. The pair of eyes rockets from the tunnel, and what those eyes are attached to is like something out of a child's nightmare. It's a human. But like no human I've ever seen. It's skin is deathly pale, with bulging black veins. Its muscular arms are covered in small, thin scars. It wears black, form-fitting armor on the chest, abdomen, and upper legs. And it's rushing at me. "Look out!" I hear someone yell. My brain locks up, and I find myself unable to lift a finger. Next thing I know I'm knocked to the ground, with the thing on my chest, pinning my arms to the duracrete. I stare into the

soulless eyes, a pale color with floating flecks of black particles in the whites and the irises. It gets in closer to me and it . . . smiles. A grotesque grin. It reaches into a sheath and draws a vibroblade. Suddenly, I see several pairs of hands grab hold of the creature, wrenching it off me. The thing is writhing, trying to break free. "Wodi!" A faint voice calls. My ears are ringing. I shake my head. "Wodi! You alright?"

Amminius comes into my peripheral vision, his outstretched hand grabbing mine, yanking me to my feet. "You OK, Wishbone? We need you here!" We run over to where Glam, Carver, Raisuun, and Malogaan struggle to hold down the creature. "Argh. Hold it!" Amminius and I join in, grabbing hold of the writhing form. Suddenly, we're all thrown back against the wall. "Oof!" The human form gets to its feet, its hand pulsating with blue energy. "Uh, anyone know that it could use the Force?" "Fire on it!" We open up on the thing. It screams, an ear piercing sound, and furiously leaps at the nearest of our group, Toma Farelle. "*Kriff!*" She doesn't stand a chance. Her wails are mercifully cut short when the creature crushes her larynx. I blast the creature in the head, downing it for good. "Sir!" Carver screams, pointing. "There's more!" I look to the tunnels ahead and to the side to see more creatures fast approaching. I unclip a thermal, hurling it at a knot of figures emerging. "Go! Run!" Gesturing wildly at the only tunnel not occupied by demons. I unleash a torrent of bolts with my TL-50, charging up my secondary fire and launching it. Two of the figures, a disfigured Mon Calamari and another human, lurch to a halt and crash to the floor, multiple blaster holes burned right through them. I have no time to celebrate my victory, as more are coming. Luckily, the tunnel we charge into is big enough to stand up in.

"So I guess the city square is a no go?" Amminius yells, running next to me. "No!" I yell back. "We can't abandon the mission now! The others are counting on us!" "I don't know if you haven't noticed," Amminius shouts, gesturing behind himself, "but we're currently being pursued by a horde of Force using soldiers!" As if to prove his point, a guttural shriek echoes through the tunnel. "I'm working on it!" "Malogaan! Trip mine!" "You got it, Wodi!" Malogaan yells back. A few seconds later, I hear an explosion and look back to see a portion of the duracrete tunnel caving in. Yes! "That won't hold 'em for long! Another trip mine, go!" "Wodi, I only got two more!" Malogaan warns. I take out my comlink and frantically yell a message:

"Come in, any New Republic forces in the area, this is Major Wodi Quix! We are on Onderon but the mission has gone awry. Some type of super soldier is pummeling our forces. Lots of 'em! Send assistance if you can to these coordinates!" Amminius looks at me, shouting, "Think that got through!" "I hope so," I yell to him, "or else there'll be not much left to assist!"

Brig. General Jevin Corso - Onboard the *Viscount* **15 ABE**

"*Entering the Onderon System now!*" the navigation officer says over the intercom. We stand aboard the *Viscount*, the first ship of the *Viscount* Star Defender program. Sitting at the command chair is Fleet Admiral Unath Kerex. "Good, all hands to stations," he orders authoritatively. The sensor officer then emits a startled gasp. I look at him, worry on my face. Kerex stands up on edge, "Lieutenant, report." We walk over to the sensor station to see what exactly had him spooked. When we see the displays showing the orbit around Onderon, we understand. In the days since the battle started, Imperium and Republic ships had poured in, and as the mottled white turns back to star lines, eventually to black, we see that all hell has broken loose.

In the space around Onderon are dozens of *Predator*-class Star Destroyers, along with at least hundreds of smaller support vessels and thousands of TIE Hunters in between them. The Ninth Fleet, under Admiral Torov, has taken the fight to the Imperium at point-blank range. It's like Endor all over again. To the right off the viewport, we see an MC80 and Nebulon-B floating only a slight distance above a *Predator*, laser fire pounding all three ships' hulls. In the middle is one of the most intense dogfights I've seen. From what I can tell, it's mostly T-65B X-wings and A-wings. But I can see from the sensor station that the Ninth brought some B-wing Mark II's and the newer T-70 X-wings. I look to Kerex, "Admiral, we need to get in there!" He nods resolutely. "Time to debut the *Viscount*. All forward, batteries may fire when ready."

The ship begins creeping forward and the space in front of the viewport lights up as thousands of turbolaser cannons and ion cannons began firing at their targets. The ship is extremely impressive: a *Victory* Star Destroyer creeps toward us, all of its fire directed at us. But it stands no chance, after

a hail of fire from our cannons, the ship breaks in half. Kerex resumes his position looking out the viewport, giving orders to the various captains of the fleet as the Fleet Admiral supersedes even the Admiral of a given fleet. "CAG, launch wings Alpha, Beta, and Gamma!" and with the faint sound of ion engines kicking off, we see several waves of X-wings, B-wings, and A-wings launch. "General, I believe Major Quix's team will need assistance on the ground." I nod and give orders to the the commanders of the Forty-Fourth Division to get to their transports.

The hangar decks are a flurry of activity, what with ships incoming for in-field repairs. Even the small deck at the back of the ship, one which actually builds ships to send into the fight, is overtaxed. I spot Colonel Carr in his ever-spotless battle armor, donning his blast helmet. "Carr, I want your team hitting the Commercial Spaceport. We've got activity down there and I want you to find out what." He acknowledges and runs off. I give several other majors their orders then walk over to a Multiple Altitude Assault Transport, one that has been personalized with a custom paint job. I look to a lieutenant standing next to it in the full body specialized armor of the SHARCs, "Gavin, how are we looking?" Gavin salutes and replies, "General, it's a mess down there. Major Quix's team hasn't responded to our hails and the rest of the ground forces are too busy to do search and rescue." I smile and pat him on the shoulder, "Then we get the fun part." He grins at me. "Aye, sir!"

After a harrowing trip through the space between the *Viscount* and Onderon, we finally touch down at Wodi's last location, next to a sewer grate. Gavin and his SHARCs fan out and secure the area in record time; I'm proud to say they are indeed professional soldiers. After he gives me the acknowledgement that we aren't in immediate danger, I pull up a comlink, "Major Quix this is General Corso, please respond." No answer. I repeat myself again, and again. Nothing but static. "Well Gavin, we're getting our feet wet. I brandish my X45A rifle, he his RT-80 heavy blaster rifle. It's slow going at first; the stench is powerful and the slosh slows our movement. We keep the slow pace until we hear an all too familiar shriek. "*Kriff*, let's move it, SHARCs!"

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix - Iziz drainage system, Onderon

My lungs are on fire! I'm panting hard, guck splashing up to coat my pant legs as my filthy boots pound through the refuse at the bottom of the drainage tunnel. I chance a look behind me to see everyone else hoofing it just as hard. Another shriek echoes through the duracrete tunnel, the sound making me flinch involuntarily. "Those things just won't quit!" Yells Amminius, running next to me, keeping pace. "Maybe if we stop and ask them nicely . . ." I grin despite the situation. "I don't think they're prone to that sort of sentiment!" "Wodi!" Carver shouts, his voice raspy. "Those things are going to catch up to us pretty soon! What's our plan?"

"Place another trip mine!" Amminius shouts back. I hear the familiar *clunk* as the mine attaches to the wall. "Wodi, you got anything?" I rack my brains for an idea, anything to help us out and buy some more time. My thoughts are interrupted when I hear rapid footsteps approaching from the bend several meters in front of us. "*Kriff*," I groan. Amminius hears it too. He shakes his helmeted head, repeating my sentiments. "*Kriff*." They're boxing us in. That's just what we need!" I nod, slowing down slightly until I come to a complete stop. "What's up?" Glam asks. "Why'd we stop?" "They're coming from in front of us." I say, gesturing with my TL-50. "Blast it!" Rasps Endel. "Those creeps may not look it, but they're actually intelligent. What do we do now?" I look ahead to the bend again, then behind us, and then up, desperate for a plan. Up. An idea hits.

"Malogaan, you have any proximity charges on hand?" "Sure, Wodi." He replies, quickly unstrapping his pack. "What's your thinking?" I point to the duracrete ceiling of the tunnel. "We're going through the roof." "Good thinking, Wishbone!" Amminius grins. "But we'll need to be fast!" Malogaan tosses me two charges and I catch them, jumping up to place both on a durasteel strip running the width of the ceiling. "OK," I say to the others, "here we go. Stand back!" We all flatten ourselves against the wall as I take aim with my blaster. *BOOM!* The explosion kicks up dust as chunks of duracrete rain down from the newly created hole in the ceiling, splashing into the refuse below. "Ok!" I yell, gesturing towards the hole. "Let's get out of here!" Amminius and I are about to give Raisuun a leg up when a form charges from around the bend in front of us. "Here they come!" Endel yells. "Look out!" I fire my TL-50 at the charging figure, hoping to suppress it. A lightsaber ignites with a *snap-hiss*, batting the bolts aside. A green lightsaber. "Wodi, it's me! Hold your fire!" "Cade!" I yell, my voice cracking

with relief. "*Kriff* am I glad to see you!" "Likewise," the young Jedi replies, "now how about getting out of here!" He gestures with his saber at the hole in the ceiling, bits of duracrete still falling. "I'll give you a hand." Just as Raisuun safely climbs through the hole, I see the first of the pursuing super soldiers running full force at us, the thing's pale eyes burning, its mouth grinning. Here we go. "Incoming!"

General Jevin Corso - Iziz Sewage System, Onderon

"Gavin, what do you see?" I yell down the dark tunnel. Silence. "Nothing General, they aren't here. There's a hole cut through the ceiling." I sigh, that must mean Cade or Luke caught up to them. I comm Kerex aboard the *Viscount*. "Admiral, good news is Cade and Wodi are alive, bad is that Iziz is now almost completely overrun. Those super soldiers are tearing our forces to shreds. Silence. "*Understood. Jevin, I need an honest answer, is Onderon lost?*" I look at Gavin. Seeing the young man's hardened resolve spurs my own. "No Unath, we can turn this around." I shut off the wrist comm. Donning jetpacks, we shoot through the ceiling, landing in the center of the Iziz Commercial Starport. I glance around, seeing a crashed *Sentinel* transport on the starpad. We glance around and find a trail of bodies leading toward the Iziz palace. The bodies range from a small Chandra-Fan soldier to the massive, veiny body of an Imperium super soldier with a saber gash across the faceplate. Junno, a Mandalorian and a bit of a smart-aleck, remarks, "I think they went this way." "OK, let's get to the palace. One way or another, Onderon's fate will be decided there." We begin the long haul to the palace, the sounds of intense fighting ringing through the city. In the distance, we can see AT-ATs marching through the jungle, trees on fire, and MAAT and U-wing gunships zooming overhead.

. . .

Several hours later, we are at the stairs of the palace, the beautiful mosaic walls now covered with carbon scoring and craters from missiles. Gavin starts up the long staircase when we hear, "General! General Corso wait!" I turn around, X45A primed in my hand to see a Rodian flying erratically through the sky, his jetpack obviously damaged. "Geelo! Get down here before your pack gives out!" Landing, Gavin helps the Rodian take his jetpack off. "Geelo, it's good to see a friendly face here. Where's Wodi and

Cade?" Geelo shakes his head agitatedly. "We fought here, but those super soldiers just kept coming. Wodi ordered a retreat back to the jungle, to find a gunship and get offworld but Cade argued against it." "Geelo, did Cade or Luke say why they needed to go to the palace?" He shakes his head again and snorts, "Heck if I know. These Jedi, I don't get how Republic Intelligence dealt with them, they *"feel"* things we don't. Cade just said that there was someone here he needed to face, and that was it." I nod, looking around. All of a sudden, we hear a sharp whining through the sky and see a U-wing careening out of control, engines on fire, heading straight for the palace wall. Gavin is the first to move. "Incoming, move it!" *BOOM!* The dust clears and I see that all of us are still here. Looking behind me, I see the crash created a huge, gaping hole in the palace wall. "Well Gavin, we have our entrance now, let's go." However, as we start entering the gap, blaster fire rings out of the building. A bolt catches me in the knee while Gavin takes one on his armored shoulder pad. Another soldier of our group, however, Junno, is caught dead in the face, the poor kid collapsing dead on the stairs. I hustle to the part of the wall still there, Gavin to the other. "Sir, this is bad! They're entrenched in a good defensible position and it looks like they are sitting on an ammunition dump!" Gavin shouts over the sounds of gunfire. We trade some blaster fire then duck in cover again. "Any suggestions!" I yell. Geelo pipes up, "I have my MPL, still has some rounds in it!" I move for him and after a second of careful aiming, he launches three grenades into the palace atrium, the grenades landing by the ammo stockpiles. The resulting detonation evaporates the super soldiers and Imperium stormtroopers that were pinning us down. We move in and inspect the area. "OK, let's find Wodi and Cade, get whatever the Jedi *feel* they need, and leave." I move toward the elevator when I hear the all too familiar *snap-hiss* of a lightsaber and glance up to see two green blades reflected in the ceiling, followed by the shine of a blood red lightsaber and hearing the snarl of a Trandoshan amongst the sounds of blasterfire. Gavin shouts, "We know where they are, let's get up there!" And we charge up the cracked stairs, hoping to get there fast enough to turn the tide. . . .

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix - Iziz Commercial Spaceport, Onderon

Zing! Another volley of bolts whizzes above my head as I take cover again behind a broken pillar, covering my face with my TL-50 as bits of duracrete rain down from the point of impact. I pop back up a few moments later,

squeezing off a burst shot at the sender, an upright Imperium soldier not in cover. The bolts catch the trooper squarely in the armored chest, causing him to stagger backwards before tumbling over the edge of the upper balcony, bits of his chest armor still on the carbon scored floor. "Nice shot!" Amminius says crouching next to me, clapping me on the shoulder. He unclips a thermal from his utility belt, arms it, and with a grunt, hurls it with all his might at a block of duracrete debris where several Imperium troopers crouch. *Boom!* Amminius grins. "Blowing up stuff never gets old!" I nod, smiling. I look to my left and right to see the other members of our team also in cover several meters away, trading fire with stormtroopers on the balcony and the ground floor. "You know that ammo dump on the ground floor could pose a problem!" Amminius yells in between shots from his E-11. "I know!" I yell back, hurling a detonator at a trooper rushing between two durasteel crates. "But we can't do anything about it now! Those *karks* aren't going to let us get down there! As long as we don't let them scurry off towards the square with it, we're good!"

"It's a shame we couldn't punch a hole in the Imperium lines through the underground drainage tunnel! I would've loved to see the look on those goons' faces when the ground collapsed, bringing them down with it!" Amminius says, glancing my way. "We still can!" I reply. "This is just a side trip!" Amminius suddenly ducks down, putting a hand to his comlink earpiece. He nods a few times, and then breaks out in a grin. A moment later he whoops with joy and relief, pumping a fist in the air. "O tara just commed," he says, looking up. "Her, Teris and the others are all safe at the medic's station! Teris is in a bacta session." I smile. "That's good to hear! It sure took them awhile to get to friendly forces." I squeeze off a few more shots and down three more troopers before I hear the chirp of my comlink over the din. "*Hey Wodi?*" Carver's voice crackles over my comm. "*This is all good fun, but what are we doing here? The Imperium presence is two clicks north, at the city center. These guys are just clean-up crew to take out any stragglers! And besides, our guys need all the help they can get!*" I bring up my wrist comm to my mouth, pressing a key, trying to put down my mild annoyance. "Cade and Luke said this spot was important, so that's why we're here!" "*Yeah, but what if they're wrong?*" I chuckle. "Jedi are never wrong!" I respond. "They have a knack for sensing the future." "*Oh yeah, can they sense my future-*" His words are cut off by a loud explosion. "Whoa!" Amminius cries out. The whole palace shakes. Dust rains from

above. I turn to see sunlight pouring through a section of wall below us, the smoldering wreckage of a blue-trim U-wing transport visible on the outside. Seeing it reminded me again of the mess of trouble we were in. I again suppress the annoyance at our current location and resume firing. "It looks like the troopers below have some trouble outside," Glam reports. "A lot of them are moving towards that hole, firing at whoever's outside!" A few minutes later, another explosion rocks the palace, this one much more forceful. I brace myself. Amminius falls to his knees. *"Well, looks like we don't have to worry about that ammo dump anymore!"* Endel says over the group comm. No kidding. I chance a look down to see a huge blackened crater through the thick smoke in the palace floor where the ammo dump, and the troopers, used to be.

"You still good over there, Cade?" I say over my comm. No answer. "Cade? You good?" I repeat, fighting the growing panic in my chest. *"He's here,"* comes the eventual response. I then hear the *snap-hiss* of lightsabers activating. Oh no. "Great," Amminius shouts sarcastically. "It's our scaly friend again!"

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix - Iziz Commercial Spaceport, Onderon



Sure enough, I spot our Trandoshan adversary, grasping a crimson blade. Even from this distance, I can see his fiery eyes burning with malice and blood lust. "Company!" Hollers Aran Nomante over the comm. "Focus fire!" I order. We pour fire at the Trandoshan, but the thing bats our bolts away with ease. He barely even acknowledges our presence. His eyes are locked solely on his true targets: Luke and Cade. Suddenly behind the Trandoshan, a hole is smashed through the duracrete wall, and the outline of the troop bay of a *Sentinel* shuttle appears, its hatch doors already opening. Stormtroopers pour out from inside, blasters up and firing. "Bloah!" Amminius yells. "We've got incoming!" "Give it to 'em!" I shout, firing my TL-50 at the oncoming troopers, sending a few sprawling. "This situation is getting seriously out of hand!" Yells Malogaan. With a snarl, the dark Trandoshan leaps up to the above platform where Luke and Cade are. I hear the clash of lightsabers, humming and crackling. "Major, behind us!" Shouts Gav Pulastra over my comm. "Watch your fire, friendlies moving up the stairs!" I hear behind me. I turn with relief and a huge smile to see Jevin, Geelo, and another SHARC team charge up the stairs, led by lieutenant Gavin Skyes. "Fan out!" Gavin instructs his team. He, Jevin, and Geelo run to kneel by Amminius and I while the others run off to reinforce the others.

"*Kriff!*" I say, grinning at them. "Am I glad to see you guys!" "Likewise," Jevin says, bringing up his X45A. "But let's save the tearful 'thank you' until after, ok?" "Fair enough, Blastzone! How'd you find us anyway?" "Natural talent! And the fact that Gavin used your suit locator may have helped too!" He replies, smiling. "Ah." I say, feeling foolish. Geelo launches a volley of explosives with his MPL-57, braced against his shoulder. "Ba-boom!" The Rodian yells as the grenades go off, blowing away four troopers. "Nice!" Yells Gavin, spraying bolts from his RT-80 heavy blaster. He pauses to throw a sonic imploder, the blast causing a number of troopers to stagger and fall. "Showoff!" Yells Amminius, grinning. "How're things looking on the outside?" I ask Jevin, almost afraid to hear the answer. Jevin compresses his lips into a thin line. "Not good. Those super soldiers are doing a number on our forces, and our U-wings are getting shot out of the sky like mynocks by those AT-ATs. Aurek Squadron is being deployed to deal with them." I look at him. "Tell me honestly, are we going to lose Onderon?" Jevin is silent for a moment. He fires a few shots with his X45 and ducks back down again. "We're still in this." He says, conviction present in his voice. I nod, his conviction giving me hope. Amminius nods too. "We can do this!" "Besides,"

Jevin says, a smile spreading across his face. "We've got a new asset on our side." Gavin nods at Jevins' words. With a final burst from his RT-80, the last Imperium trooper topples to the ground. Amminius looks to me, his expression confused. "What asset?" He mouths. I shrug. "Good work everyone!" Jevin says loudly. Slowly, we all congregate at the center of the balcony. I suddenly hear a shout from above us followed by more clashing of sabers. I look up. "Sounds like they need help!" Says Nosh Ker Raisuun. The Quarren hefts his DLT-19, looking to the rest of us. "Let's go!" Jevin shouts, gesturing up with his rifle. We don jump packs and rocket upwards, landing on the above balcony.

Luke and Cade are engaged with their Trandoshan foe, sparks flying from their locked lightsabers. They maneuver and jump with skill, matching and countering the blows from their attacker. As soon as the scaly jumps free of a duel with Luke, we unleash a torrent of bolts at the Trandoshan. He goes on the defensive, his saber a spinning whirlwind of red. Bolts begin to fly back at us. "Watch it!" Amminius cautions. A bolt catches a nearby SHARC soldier in the seam of his armor. The man lets out a pained gasp and topples to the balcony floor. I unhook a thermal and lob it at the feet of the Trandoshan. He leaps away just as it goes off, and Cade and Luke attack again. They are locked in another duel when a huge explosion rocks the entire palace, throwing many of us off our feet. The Trandoshan looks out through the hole in the wall and snarls, his eyes ablaze. He detaches his blade from Cade and Luke's and acrobatically jumps to land just a few meters away from all of us. He then speaks. "Sso, you have a new toy. No matter. It will not ssave your precious Republic. Your annihilation is inevitable. The Imperium will crush you!" He smiles a toothy reptilian grin and . . . disappears. "Whoa!" I yell. A few other soldiers let out surprised gasps. "Where'd he go?" Cade and Luke walk over to us, both looking a little tired. "It doesn't matter." Cade says. "Ferus is a coward, just like Pravus. His only purpose here was to test my skills." "Ferus?" Amminius echoes. "Yes," Luke answers. "You just met Darth Ferus, shadow hand of the Imperium and second hand to Pravus himself." "Hmm," I say, grinning, "what a swell guy. I'll bet his disappearing trick makes a killing at parties." Everyone laughs. Another explosion rocks the palace, again coming from outside. "What is that?" Asks Glam. "Is that our 'asset?'" Chimes in Amminius. Jevin grins. "Come see for yourself." Geelo looks to us. "Hold onto your helmets!"

We make our way down until we stand outside, bathed in Onderon sunlight. "Gentle beings," Jevin says with a flourish of his hand, "I give you our asset, the *Viscount*!" I stare up at the sky in pure awe. It's a ship. A massive ship. "Manufactured by Mon Calamari Shipyards." Gavin says proudly. "Isn't she a beauty? And she's our ticket to winning Onderon!" A barrage of lasers arc from the *Viscount*, tearing apart a nearby Star Destroyer. "Alright, show's over!" Jevin says, all business. "Let's make our way to the city square. It's time to end this!" I look to Cade and he smiles. "Come on," I shout, "let's give our guys a hand!" With that we rush off towards the center of Iziz, ready and now able to turn the tide.

Belkadan, Imperium Shuttle *Tyrant* - Grand Moff Utres Daigen 16 ABE, several weeks later

The stars revert to normal, the effect of exiting hyperspace. Utres Daigen, the only Grand Moff of the Imperium, simply because of its current size, is aboard a *Tyrant*-class shuttle. The world he left is Malastare. Over the past three months, a protracted battle had been waged there for its precious fuel resources, enough to fuel at least two Imperium fleets! And they won! But his heart is also saddened by the fact they lost Onderon. The jewel of the Mid Rim was close to theirs but it appears the New Republic has a new toy, a Mon Cala ship nearly as big as a Super Star Destroyer. At least we have a few of our own Super Star Destroyers, he thinks. Especially the *Insidious*, named for Pravus' lord and Sith master, Palpatine, or his alter ego Darth Sidious. That ship is the pride of the Imperium; advanced technology, a hybrid of both Imperium and Sith tech, along with advanced, matte black stealth armor, makes it extremely powerful. At the thought of that he smiles to himself. To think, nearly fourteen years ago, he was a Colonel and commanding officer of the Imperial Storm Commandos. He was a soldier for the Empire. Following the disastrous Battle of Jakku, foolishly handled by Admiral Rax, he was rudderless. No Empire and no leader.

After the battle he had gone wandering and more importantly, into hiding. Over the months that followed, Utres had heard tales on the holovids of New Republic teams, hunting down former Imperials and trying them for war crimes. Now most, if not all, of the Imperials were given life sentences. The death penalty, it seemed, was something the Republic was hesitant to do but there were some. It was saved for only the most heinous war crimes

committed. And he would have been one of them. The Storm Commandos were the elite hand of the Empire, along with the SCAR troopers. And he was the leader of the Commandos; what crimes hadn't he committed in the name of the Empire? But one day everything changed. They found the cantina he had holed up in on Nar Shaddaa, or so he thought, but the man who came through that door that day was...

"Moff Daigen, we have arrived," the crisp voice of the pilot says over the comm, shaking Daigen out of his thoughts. The world in front of them is much more green and vibrant than the one he left. Malastare was a brown-gray world, with very sparse plant life, making it unappealing from space. He wishes he could have traded place with Lord-General Saizen, who led an Imperium force to take Kashyyyk . . . but remembering that the unit was crushed by a combined Wookiee/Mandalorian Protector force, with Saizen being killed aboard the *Relentless*, he thinks better. No, this world was Belkadan, a planet deep in the Outer Rim. This world was a vibrant green and blue marble, its tropical climate easy to see from space. The world is a major foodstuffs supplier to worlds in the Outer Rim, which is part of why they took the world. Cripple supply lines, and you cripple morale, Lord-Emperor Verush, or Darth Pravus, had told him.

With a *hiss* the boarding ramp lowers and he steps down into a storm. It's raining, hard. But the rain can't dull the pride he has when he sees two Imperium stormtroopers standing guard on either side of the ramp. Their armor is visually identical to that of Imperial stormtroopers with two major differences. Like the New Republic in its fifth year, the Imperium, founded deep in Wild Space, found major caches of resources that, due to the nature of Wild Space, were virtually untapped. The armor, like the New Republic soldier, is plastoid yes, but with a weave of cortosis, as opposed to Phrik for the New Republic, giving it much greater durability under fire. The second difference is the color scheme. Their armor is white, like the troopers of old, but with red markings, as well as the symbol of the Imperium. Again, he flashes back to years before . . .

The door to the cantina bursts open after the sounds of struggle outside. Daigen, a broke former Storm Commando, fears that the Rebels, or "Republic" as they call themselves, have found him. But instead, in walks a man with short, black hair. Spiked up in the front. His eyes are a watery

blue and across his face, diagonally from left temple to right lower cheek, a nasty scar that looks like a vibroblade cut across his face. He wears ebon black armor, almost reminiscent of the Royal Guard...and it hits him. He has served with this man, years before. *The Shadow Guard*, he nearly mouths the words as he stares in awe. Suddenly, the figure raises his hand and all the patrons in the cantina fall fast asleep, or dead, it matters not.

The man comes to him. "Utres Daigen, former commander of the Storm Commandos?" Daigen nods shyly, unsure what this is. "My name is Xander Verush. I am the Dark Lord of the Sith, Darth Pravus. I have a proposition for you, one I believe you can't refuse."

Back to the present

"An empire formed within an empire," he says, seeing the red emblem of the Imperium on the stormtroopers' left chest plate. As Pravus had been a loyal follower of Palpatine, his left hand, he chose to modify the symbol of the old Empire. The emblem is the old Empire symbol, but a triangle is inside the circle, symbolizing what the Imperium began as, an empire within an empire, formed from the crumbling remains of one to become the new. The stormtroopers offer a crisp salute that Daigen returns, their e-15 rifles hanging at their side. He continues on to the Belkadan-Ruuria Food Transport Co. Center, or what is now the capital of the Imperium on this world. As he walks, he thinks to himself. He is continually amazed at their progress, even 15 years after the Imperium's creation. Pravus had convinced large swaths of former Imperials of his righteousness to rule. Those who had seen him in action and use the Force, like Daigen had, acknowledged him as the Heir of Palpatine, the Scion of the Empire, and the Dark Lord of the Sith. In a few short years, Darth Pravus had managed to attract many former Imperials, a good deal being like himself, former special ops; storm commandos, SCAR troopers, even some Inquisitors in there too. He also drew in people from Wild Space itself. There were and are many sith cults out there and many, upon seeing Pravus' power, flocked to the Imperium, bolstering both its military and civilian population. Now out of these sith cults, the most powerful Sith adepts were chosen, by Pravus, to become lords of the Sith.

Unlike Palpatine, who firmly believed the rule of two and was wary of too many Force wielders, Pravus believed in a different path. His was the Rule of Few. A small number of powerful Sith lords, all under the uncontested will of a Dark Lord. Thus, his ruling circle is himself, his apprentice the Trandoshan, Darth Ferus, and eight others to make ten. Seven of these ten are powerful adepts from the multiple sith cults that joined the Imperium's banner; Pravus completed their training and named them Lords. The three other "Praetors" as he called them, were former Inquisitors. Also unlike Palpatine, who kept the Inquisitors weak by not fully training them, Pravus trained them to their full potential, thus making his Ruling circle. Now Xander Verush was no fool, he knows the allure of power corrupts even loyal followers. So through the Force, he exerts his will through them, ensuring their loyalty. And he has crushed a few to make examples to their successors what defying Darth Pravus means.

As for Daigen himself, he is Grand Moff of the Imperium. This position, unlike under the Empire, has much more power. The Imperium is rapidly gaining ground in their war with the Republic, and a weapon, lost thousands of years ago but found by Darth Pravus, will bring them to dominance. Grand Moff Utres Daigen comes to the doors of the complex, here his blood chills. The power of the Sith is awesome, it has created his Imperium and he is proud of it, but is still scared by that power as well. Standing guard at the doors are not more stormtroopers but rather, the Sith Acolytes. You see, for in Pravus' Rule of Few, there can only be a handful of powerful Sith, lest they fight amongst themselves and destroy themselves from the inside, as the old Sith Empire did. However, one cannot ignore the combat advantages when one has Jedi or Sith on their side. So to that end, Pravus has taken Force-sensitives from amongst the Imperium's citizens and has them trained, ever so slightly, in the Force and heavily in lightsaber combat. Already, Daigen has seen the Acolytes in action. The Phrik weave armor of the New Republic soldier does protect them, somewhat, from the blade but they definitely have a hard time fighting this mobile, close-quarters foe. They still give him the chills...

Garbed in dark grey pants and tunics, wearing ebon black armor over that, and finally a large black hood that covers most of their face, these acolytes are downright creepy at night. Daigen walks up to the doors. One of them, a human female, just looks at him with dark brown eyes. The other, the

shorter one, is a Rodian, obvious by his bulbous eyes. The Imperium has done away with the foolish xenophobia of the Empire. The Rodian says, in his accented Basic, "Darth Pravus has been expecting you, Grand Moff." Daigen just nods and enters as they open the doors. Inside, the hallways are darkly lit. He walks on.

Halfway through the complex, he hears it. That moaning and shrieking that he still has yet to grow accustomed to. Ever since his pilgrimage to Moraband, Pravus has created these . . . *things*. These super soldiers. They are incredibly powerful yes, but the process to make them is, well, horrifying to think of. Through Sith alchemy, the being is irreversibly changed, they lose their mind, their body becomes feral, and they become enslaved to his will, being absolutely loyal to death. He suppresses a grimace. He was utterly loyal to Xander Verush. The Shadow Guard of the Old Empire. This man nearly single handedly created the Imperium from nothing, drawing in thousands upon thousands of disillusioned Imperials and giving them purpose. If he had to do things he didn't like, he would deal with it. The power of the Sith brought him to Darth Pravus, saved his wife, Lena, and had given them the Praetors. The Imperium had flourished under the guidance of the Sith and now they had powerful *Predator*-class star destroyers, powerful E-15 rifles, updated and modified Imperial tech, thanks to the hybridization of ancient sith and modern technology. Xander Verush saved the Empire, there is no doubt about that. Of course there are other legacies; the First Order, the Graal Hegemony, and several others. Daigen can't help but wonder why Pravus doesn't just take them all into his Imperium. With that much power, the Republic would be crushed.

He enters the room that has been appropriated as the throne room. There, seated upon a high back, black stone chair, is Darth Pravus, Dark Lord of the Sith and Xander Verush, Lord Emperor of the Imperium. His eyes are closed, sleeping? Daigen starts to turn when he hears Pravus' voice. "Ah my dear friend Utres, back from Malastare? Tell me how the front is going?" Daigen turns to him, standing at crisp attention. "My lord-emperor, we have secured Malastare and the surrounding system. Even now, the massive fuel reserves are being used to bolster our fleets in the Mid Rim." Pravus nods, as if an impatient child. Just like Palpatine, he foresees events and then doesn't act surprised when they happen how he saw them. "And, pray tell me, what of Onderon?" He asks." Daigen fidgets, he hates bringing bad news. "My

emperor, we lost Onderon. Our forces were close to winning the battle but Lord Ferus was forced to retreat." Pravus gives him that wicked smile again, "So, Valdarin has finally stepped up to play hero of the Republic, so be it. Kashyyyk was lost as well but all is as I have foreseen. Soon, an armada will come here, to Belkadan. The Republic will win this battle, they must. We must let them become overconfident. And when that overconfidence is ripe, we will show them just how powerful my Imperium is." Daigen nods. He knows what Pravus means. Several years ago, Pravus ventured into the black void of dark space after his pilgrimage to Moraband. What happened on that planet, he does not know. Ferus, the Trandoshan, told him once. He absorbed the spirit of a long dead Sith, Kronus. One of the first, an instigator in the Hundred Years Darkness, the schism that created the Sith in the first place. After gaining the knowledge and power of this old specter, he journeyed to Dark Space. What he brought back with him both filled him with vigor and chilled his bones.



Gorukar, it is called. Black Star, in the ancient Sith tongue. This ancient space station was created by Kronus and the other Dark Jedi during the Hundred Years Darkness. The mighty Death Stars, which while technological marvels, they were crude in nature. *Gorukar*, on the other hand, did not destroy planets. Rather, it harnessed the Force from a planet. The Force being created by living things, this act of draining the Force destroyed all life on a planet, leaving a hole in the Force. This is useful against force-users as it affects them on a different scale. Unfortunately, Kronus, the creator, was killed by the Jedi before he could unleash the weapon. Ironically, he was killed by an Argus Valdarin, the ancestor of the young Jedi Cade Valdarin. Argus and the other Jedi at the time did not find *Gorukar* as Kronus had

already hidden it before his death and took the secret with him to the netherworld of the Force. And soon, very soon, the Imperium will use it to crush both Cade Valdarin, the mortal enemy of Darth Pravus, and the Republic which destroyed both Palpatine and the beloved Empire.

Daigen clears his throat. "Lord-Emperor, I did have a question." Pravus nods, "Of course my dear Moff, ask away." Daigen is visibly nervous, he did not fear retribution from Pravus like he did Vader. Darth Pravus is different; cooler, calmer, collected. Instead of unbridled rage, it is focused. "My lord, I was wondering . . . there are many surviving fragments of the Old Empire. The First Order, the Graal Hegemony, even the Black Nova pirate gang. Why do we not pull these assets into our fold. With their strength we could easily crush the Republic?" And this, Daigen tells, angers Pravus. He closes his eyes and Daigen can feel the dark power this man has, he is as strong if not stronger than even Palpatine. Pravus opens his eyes and they are pure black; a normal sith, in the depth of the dark side, has yellow eyes. Pravus, with essentially two force presences in him, two minds, although his thoughts are his own and all that power, has ebon black eyes that forever haunt Daigen. And when Pravus speaks, it's as if he is speaking with the power of the Force behind his voice. "We do not need them. The First Order is weak; Snoke is a fool to disregard the power of the Force and restrict the Order's use of it. The Graal Hegemony is a sham, led by a man who was once a captain, now calling himself High Admiral. The Black Nova is honorless, having forgotten themselves and given in to piracy. No Grand Moff Daigen, we do not need them. I am the heir of Palpatine and the Sith, I am the scion of the Old Empire. I will crush the Republic. And then I will destroy those who do not submit to my rule. This is my destiny as laid out by Palpatine." His eyes go back to their normal sith yellow. Daigen shudders and salutes; the Imperium salute is to kneel, and put your right fist on the left side of your chest. "Of course Lord-Emperor, what is your will?" Pravus pulls up a galaxy holomap, "You will leave this planet, as I said the force Valdarin will no doubt send to come here will win. They will keep winning until we unveil *Gorukar*. And then the Republic will learn its place, that the Empire did not die but grew stronger. And Valdarin, Skywalker, and all who follow the foolish Jedi ways will learn the true strength of the Sith. You and I will return to Xauvis where we will plan for the eventual battle at Atrisia. There, I have foreseen, the Republic will believe itself on the verge of victory. And there, we will show them how wrong they are." Daigen and

Pravus journey back to the *Tyrant*. Before boarding, Pravus turns and before him comes one of the Praetors. A Talz, of all things. Darth Jehavin, or Brudda. Like all of the Praetors, he has a unique ability and blade. His is the ability to use someone's fear or doubt to cloak himself and become nigh invisible. As for the blade, he uses a strange crossguard blade. He kneels, speaking his strange language. "Rise" Pravus says, "You will remain here, Lord Jehavin. Wait for Valdarin to come with his precious forces. You will fight and you will lose. I have foreseen this. It is necessary. Do you understand?" The great Talz nods. It amazes Daigen how the Praetors are so loyal that they will willingly give their lives for the cause of the Imperium and Darth Pravus. As they board the shuttle, Daigen can't help but smile at the thought of crushing the New Republic, the people who destroyed his life years ago.

Mytaranor System, Kashyyyk - Cade Valdarin, onboard the *Viscount*

I look outside one of the many viewports on the *Viscount* at the destruction that took place here. Not two weeks ago, there was a massive battle for Kashyyyk. The planet has both strategic and symbolic importance to the Republic. Home of the hero Chewbacca, the planet was a major supporter of the Republic, and so on. Thus, a massive force was created to repel the Imperium here. That force was comprised of the Republic Sixth Fleet, the Wookiee Defense Force, and the Mandalorian Protectors under Gerik Ordo. The battle was a long, protracted one but mostly in space, although there was some ground combat. The battle was won though and now I look at the remains of the Predator Star Destroyer, *Relentless*, flagship of a Lord-General Saizen. The skeletal remains drift there in space. I can't help but feel responsible for all this death. Years ago, on Endor, I had the chance to destroy Xander Verush. I didn't and he escaped, created the Imperium, and now is waging a galactic war that will possibly cause more damage than the Empire ever did.

Two Protectors jog past, snapping me out of my thoughts and I see a familiar face coming toward me. "Well well, if it isn't little Cade!" Wodi Quix says. He is practically beaming, coming back from a promotion ceremony.

Jevin Corso, due to his efforts on Onderon and Malastare, had been promoted to General. Jevin turned around and promoted Wodi, Amminius, and Geelo. Wodi is now a Colonel and is the acting commander of the SHARCs. Amminius is now a Major and high ranking officer in the Infiltrators. Geelo was promoted to a Brigadier General and now is one of the three generals for the Third Army, the command structure going Geelo, then Jevin, then High General Garm Bel Iblis. The ceremony was quite big, even High Marshal Tor Ponith was there. The Bothan was getting up there in years but still looked tough enough to take on everyone soldier there in hand-to-hand.

"So," Wodi says beaming, "how's it feel? The big 24?" My birthday came up recently and I had hoped to avoid any notice but I failed. Aunt Mothma, having much prestige in the Republic for her role as the first Chancellor, arranged a large party for me . . . onboard the *Viscount*! I roll my eyes at Wodi, "Fine, I guess. I just wish it was under happier circumstances." Wodi nods and joins me in gazing out the viewport. We watch in silence as several ships drop out of hyperspace. They are the ships of the Protectors, Dreadnaught heavy cruisers. They join formation with several of our MC80s. Alongside them come several of the brand new Nadiri Mark Two Starhawks. The ships are like their predecessors, the Mark One, in that they are New Republic ships built solely for combat. Next to them are the massive Wookiee capital ships, complete with Wroshyr wood trimming along the hull.

Wodi glances at me, seeing the discomfort I'm trying not to show. "Cade, what's the matter? You're not your usual self." I shake my head, "It's the Senate. I just came back from Chandrila, visiting Aunt Mothma." He asks, "How is she?" "Good, all things considered. The chancellorship took a toll of course on her health but she's doing good." He sighs, "That's good to hear. So why is the Senate bothering you?" My turn to sigh. "Did you know there's already talk of disarmament following the war?" Wodi grunts, "Yeah, it's been going through the ranks. They think the end of the war is near don't they. No, this isn't over by a long shot. Who's calling for it?" I look at him, "You know who. Senator Lanever Villecham. I agree peace is an admirable goal. I'm a Jedi, I fight for peace. But I'm a Grey Jedi, we know that there can be no good without evil. To disarm the government that could be the road to peace in a galaxy where evil exists is folly." Wodi grimaces, then shoves me a little, "Knock off with the philosophical stuff, buddy." I grab his

arm and look him in the eyes. "Wodi, there's a favor I need to ask." Ever his sarcastic self, he says, "Cade, this is a weird way to propose," but he stops when he sees how serious I am.

And here, I remember the vision I had the night before, of stormtroopers slaughtering civilians on a desert world, of red beams of energy destroying a star system, the absence of myself and Luke from the visions . . . "Wodi, I had a vision, a premonition of the possible future. And it was not good." He is listening intently, clearly picking up on the seriousness in my tone. "I don't know how, I don't know why, but some time off in the future something happens. Darkness was creeping back into the galaxy but I couldn't see why. All I could see was that evil was coming back and Luke and I were gone. There weren't even Jedi around!" Wodi stares intently, "Well, maybe you and Luke just never had time to train any?" I look at him, incredulous, "Wodi, the galaxy needs the Jedi. It's what we plan to do once Pravus and the Imperium are taken care of. So something can happen in the future that prevents that . . . or ends that dream. Here's where the favor comes in." We walk a little bit to one the the meditation rooms; the Viscount Star Defenders are equipped with these rooms mostly to help calm frayed nerves of navy personnel but I have found they work to a Jedi's purposes as well. "Wodi, have you heard of the planet Tython?" He scratches at a stubble of a beard, "Deep Core right?" I nod, "You've got it. The planet is strong in the Force, with its abundance of life. However, there are few settlers there. It's remote, hard to navigate to." "Ok, but why do you ask?" Wodi says. "Wodi, in that possible future I saw, something . . . happens to either Luke or me. Either we die or go away. My request is this. I want you to use your access as head of the SHARCs to erase Tython from all Republic registries; make the planet non-existent. If something does happen and Luke and I leave, that will be where I go. The life force there will cloak me and I can keep an eye on the galaxy without interruption. Promise me Wodi." He stares at me, somewhat dumbfounded but then grabs my arm resolutely, "I promise you Cade. You can count on me." He lets go and we see Luke coming down the hall with two Wookies flanking him. On the left is Chewbacca, hero of the Rebellion. On the right is a younger Wookiee, almost a century younger than Chewbacca. This is Salurra, or Sal, the Wookiee I saved on Bespin years ago and who in turn pledged a life debt to me and now is one of my best friends and bodyguard. You can tell he's younger due to the fact he's shorter and that there is a circle of black fur on his chest

while the rest is a light brown. Clearing his throat again, Wodi says, raising his voice so Luke can hear, "Cade, enough with this depressing business. I've always wondered, who is stronger between you two . . . "

General Jevin Corso - Kashyyyk's orbit, onboard the *Viscount*, flagship of the Republic Navy

I walk down the sterile white hallway, looking out of the viewports. To think nearly a year ago the Republic had been demilitarized and not ready for a war. And now, the Republic was a force to be reckoned with. I see three of the newly made Mark II Starhawks, the hulls gleaming with the shine of newly made vessels. "General!" I hear behind me. I turn to see the Bothan, High Marshal Tor Ponith, walking my way. "Marshal Ponith! How can I help you, how was the hololink with Coruscant." He slows down and matches my pace.

Sighing he remarks, "Not good Jevin. These blasted fools in the Senate are getting to me. We knew the Centrists and Populists were bad news but Chancellor Mothma was always able to rein them in. After her term ended though, no one has been able to make them work together. Blast, the only thing making the Senate work together right now is the "Imperium War" they're calling it." He shakes his head, the years of his service showing in gray patches in his fur, "Did you know there's already a committee to process demilitarization once the war ends?" I stop, looking at him, "How can they think the war will be over soon. The Imperium is spread out and possibly more dangerous than the Empire!" He sighs again, "I know. And Senator Villecham is the one calling for it. The fool." We continue on towards the hangars. "Marshal, Tor, there's something more, what is it?" He puts a hand on my shoulder, "Jevin my boy, it's this war. I have been serving the Alliance, the Republic, for two decades. I'm old and tired. I joined the Rebellion as a commando in the Bothan Spynet and was made a captain. I saw the Rebellion from its earliest days to become the New Republic. But there comes a time when one tires of war and death." Shaking my head I say, "But Tor, you are one of the greatest military minds the Republic has, we would have lost this war if not for you."

He shakes his mane again, "Corso, you know the position of High Marshal is a wartime rank only. Besides, I've been grooming High General Iblis as a

replacement. If another intergalactic war breaks out, Republic Command would be smart to vote him as the next High Marshal. Maybe it'll be you someday! As for me, I'm thinking of going into politics." I look at him, dumbfounded. "Marshal, you hate politics." "I know, but someone has to rein in the foolery."

"So, thinking of going for the chancellorship?" Tor shakes his head, "Oh no. I'm thinking a military advisor position, to help make sure the Republic has the defenses it needs to stay safe. Enough about that though. The military will be fine, there are plenty of fine officers; you, Tav Voren, Garm, Wodi. All of you are the finest of the Republic and you make me proud."

We continue walking until I see two tall Wookiees. The one on the right is the mighty Chewbacca, war hero of the Rebellion. The one on the left is the younger but just as mighty Wookiee Berserker, Salurra, friend and bodyguard to Cade Valdarin. With them is Colonel Wodi Quix. As we come around the bend, we hear Wodi say, "Enough with this depressing business. I've always wondered, who is stronger between you two?" He stops when he sees me and Tor and salutes. "General, High Marshal." "At ease Colonel," says Tor. "Please continue," I say to Wodi. "I'm plenty curious myself." We all look at Cade. He squirms a little, "Well the point is Luke and I are a team, a pair to fight against the dark side. But in terms of strength in the Force? That's Luke hands down; he's the son of the Chosen One. Out of the two of us, I am the better duelist." Luke butts in, "And he's nearly as strong as me with the Force."

We all walk on toward the hangar deck. "So, Marshal, what's the plan with Belkadan?" Tor clears his throat, "Well, we have a dilemma. Mon Calamari is under siege. General Voren and Admiral Rogen are currently holding the planet and Mon Calamari Shipyards but we've all seen how deadly the Imperium is. To that end, we are sending a portion of the Third Fleet there." He pulls out a holocube that enlarges to show the planet Belkadan. "As for the battle here, you'll be transferring to the ship *Guardian*. We want to gain surprise here so the *Viscount* won't be present at first. Jevin, once their orbital defenses are down, you'll get groundside with the use of U-wing and MAAT gunships; focus on retaking the capital city and the Belkadan-Ruuria company headquarters."

Wodi interjects, "What about me and the SHARCs?" Tor gives him a smirk, "Colonel, you and Gerik will take a SHARC unit and infiltrate this vessel here," he points to a needle shaped Star Destroyer on the projection. "This ship, according to our recon drones, is serving as a communications ship for the Imperium. We take it out, we throw them in disarray for a while. As for Cade and Skywalker, well, you two are Jedi. You aren't military so go where you please I guess." We all enter the hangar and stop short. The hangar, a huge cavernous room, is filled with beings. Soldiers of the Republic in their gleaming armor, Wookiee warriors of the Defense Force, and Mandalorians of the Protectors are all gathered. We even see Gerik Ordo, commandant of the Protectors and practically Mandalore, twirling his dual DT-39 pistols. Tor ushers us to a spot alongside the Republic personnel and takes a podium, beginning a motivational speech before the Combined Fleets jump to Belkadan.

Onboard the *Guardian* - General Jevin Corso

High Marshal Tor Ponith finishes his speech. It rouses everyone in the hangar with cheers. "Alright, Wodi, Cade, Gerik, Salurra, over here," I yell over the raucous. We gather around a holotable showing the space around Belkadan. "NRI agents have reported back. There's a problem." Highlighting a large red blip, "This is a Super Star Destroyer. What's worse is it wasn't showing up on scanners because of one thing, it has highly experimental stealth armor." The image materializes into a picture of an immense, matte black SSD. Cade, looking as if spooked by a ghost, suddenly chips in, "*Insidious*." "What is Cade, the ship?" Wodi asks. "No, *Insidious*, that's the name of the ship. Think about it, who is the one person that Xander Verush respected more than himself? Palpatine, or Sidious." I regard Cade, "If that's the case, then it's the Imperium's flagship, which'll complicate things. But to the matter at hand."

Clicking an icon on the holotable, an image of a smaller, normal star destroyer comes up. "This is the *Wasp*. It's acting as a communications hub for the Imperium forces here. Wodi, Salurra, and Gerik will lead a boarding party to take the ship and knock it out; hopefully this will cause some confusion, giving us an edge. Cade, you and Luke are free to do whatever, you aren't military." Luke speaks up, "We'll head to the surface with the

troops, there are internment camps there and the citizens of this world are prisoners." "Good, one last thing." I look at Cade, "I have a present for you, young jedi." Turning around, I hit a switch on the holotable and a bulkhead door slides back, revealing a sleek starfighter, with a cockpit like a T-70 x-wing but with bent wings, causing it to look like an E.

"This is a gift from Incom-Freitek, Cade, in recognition for saving their world a few months back. They call it the *Vanguard*, due to its speed, heavy armor and shields, and impressive weaponry. They requested it be given to you." Cade walks toward the ship, examining it with his droid Ratchet. He turns, a grin on his face, "I like it." "Good, then might I suggest a name for your group, Task Force Vanguard. We all agree and tense up for the situation we



are about to enter.

Several hours later . . .

We hear the commander of the Star Destroyer *Guardian* over the comm, it's Rear Admiral Wedge Antilles, a hero of the Rebellion and New Republic. "All ships, prepare to enter combat zone." The fighters in the hangar all whine up with the sounds of engines and repulsorlifts coming on. The ground shudders as the massive ship reverts to realspace, revealing through the force field a massive battle in space. Out there in the distance, we see the massive *Insidious* completely vaporize an MC80 cruiser before entering hyperspace. Salurra rumbles something and Gerik says, "Agreed, hairball. That's not retreating, they know something we don't." Wedge comes over again, "All fighter wings, launch!" and the space around the *Guardian* and several other capital ships suddenly buzz with fighters and bombers, from

the new T-70 X-wings to the powerful B-wing to the fast and nimble A-wing. I give Cade a nod and enter my own transport, a GR-80 troop transport. Donning a headset, I hear Cade say in a crisp voice, "Attention Task Force Vanguard, this is Vanguard One. Let's get in there." "*Vanguard One, this is lead, we're all set, see you on the ground after we hit the ship.*" "*Oya!*" a gruff Mandalorian yells. A Wookiee growls an affirmative. Cade's new E-wing lifts off and zooms away, followed by Luke in his X-wing and other X and B-wings, Blue and Blade squadrons, and head toward the green planet of Belkadan while three MAATS, one carrying Wodi, Gerik, and Salurra, lift off and head off into space towards the *Wasp* with three GR75s and a heavy fighter escort covering them. While my own transport heads toward the surface to reinforce Cade, I can't help but smile. Even though this is a war and war is terrible, the New Republic is finally the strong, democratic force it was meant to be. Equally powerful diplomatically and militarily, and this battle will prove it. I open up the comm, "To all Coalition forces, may the Force be with us."

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix - Belkadan, Outer Rim Territories

16 ABE



I tighten my helmet chin strap with one gloved hand while gazing out the forward viewport of our MAAT at the massive wedge-shaped Destroyer hanging in space ahead of us. Despite seeing these durasteel monoliths on numerous occasions during the Civil War, they still evoke a cold feeling of

dread mixed with blind panic in me. The thing is enormous, blotting out the surrounding star field, its dark hull silhouetted by turbolaser fire as it engages our forces. "Looks like the fleet has their attention." Nom Carver says seated next to me, gripping his safety harness. "Let's hope our cruisers can keep 'em occupied long enough for us to do our job." "Getting inside won't be the hard part." Replies Gav Pulastra, opposite Carver. "Blending in once we're inside will be the hard part." I mentally force myself to look away from the capital ship. "Are you kidding me?" I say, cracking a smile and turning away from the viewport to look at everyone seated in the transport's troop bay. Nine commandos, including myself, decked out in stealth armor, a Mandalorian gunslinger, rocket pack and all, and a large Wookiee. "We'll blend right in!" Lannik Endel reaches over, clapping me lightly on the armored shoulder. "I hope you've been practicing your snobbish Core Worlds accent, sir, you're gonna need it once we're in!" His quip brings a round of chuckles and stifled laughter from everyone aboard, including our pilot, who turns back from his controls to look at us saying "I hope you laser-brains know what you're getting yourselves into!" "Trust me," Jax Malogaan replies, adjusting the calibration on his DLT-19, "we get into this stuff every day. We're experts!"

More laughter. Gerik Ordo turns his helmeted head and regards me for a second. "Just try not to get in my *shabla* way this time, Wodi." I can tell by the tone of his gruff voice that he's joking. "Hey," I reply, shrugging, "what happened on Kashyyyk wasn't my-" Ordo cuts me off, chuckling and thumbing me a rude gesture. "Sure it wasn't, you *di'kut*!" I shake my head and activate the holoprojector in the middle of the floor space, bathing the compartment and its occupants in blue. The projected image is an interior map of the Star Destroyer *Wasp*. Touching another button on the console, a lower section of hallway and a hangar flash green. "Alright," I say, looking to everyone, "just to recap everything that was mentioned in briefing, this is the route we are to take once we're inside. It's a maintenance hallway that branches off from one of the lower hangars. Our former Imperial sources can confirm that these maintenance corridors are seldom busy. Only a few guards, droids, and engineer personnel are stationed there at one time, and they cycle in shifts every four hours." Everyone nods. I scroll the holoprojection to the left, showing the same highlighted tunnel. "We follow this corridor until we reach this set of turbolift doors." The indicated turbolift strobes green. "We ride up the lift to floor three, where we will exit and

breach the communications center here." I touch the communications room, which flashes green. "We knock it out using sonic charges," the comm room strobes a bright orange color, "and then we proceed to exfil here," I point to an adjacent hallway, which is labeled exfil in green letters. "Everyone good?" Nods all around. "Good, then let's get this done. The others are counting on us." I deactivate the holoprojector and get up from my seat to talk to the pilot.

"How's our escort?" I ask him once I reach the cockpit. The pilot looks to me and displays a thumbs up. "All good sir. We've just about reached our checkpoint. Fighter wings will bail out, followed by the GR-75s." I nod my understanding. "Excellent. How are our shields doing?" "Still at one hundred percent sir. I've been cycling them so as to not overheat the generators. The Imps haven't spotted us yet. They're still too focused on our cruisers." I smile. "Perfect." An automated ping sounds throughout the cockpit and crew area. "Checkpoint reached." The pilot informs us over the intercom. On cue, our fighter escort performs a wide turn past our MAAT and begin heading back to their designated cruisers. The two GR-75s soon follow. "And then there was one," mutters the pilot. I pat him on shoulder and head back into the crew compartment, where the others are already getting prepped. "*One minute till infiltration,*" our pilot's voice crackles over the comm after several seconds of silence, "*I hope you moofers don't miss.*" "Don't worry." Ordo responds. "We won't." The other SHARCs and I activate our visors, which slide shut over our helmets. Salurra dons an oxygen mask and portable tank, slinging his heavy bowcaster over his hairy shoulder. The hiss of recycled air sounds throughout the cabin. A light near the aft of our MAAT strobes. We all head that way. "Aft doors opening." Our pilot says. "Good luck!" I feel the tug of space as the doors hiss open, revealing an unobstructed view of stars. "Pretty." Remarks Nosh Ker Raisuun. I look to Endel, who stands next to me. We nod together. "Alright SHARCs," I say over my helmet comm system, "fall out!" And with that, we jump out and embrace the cold vacuum, heading towards the lower hangar of our target.

General Jevin Corso - Belkadan

16 ABE



"All ships, focus fire on the *Victory* now!" I shout over the comm. It's only been an hour since the *Guardian* jumped into the system. I hope Wodi and his crew are alright, the last I saw was their MAAT heading towards the *Wasp*. I can't help but feel like I'm neglecting Cade and Luke. They headed straight towards the surface, something about the Force feeling "murky" on the planet. But they're Jedi, I shouldn't worry so much, they can handle themselves. As for me, I'm also heading planetside with General Voren but not to where the Jedi are going, toward the Belkadan/Ruuria Foodstuffs factory, verified by NRI as a production site for the aptly-named Imperium Juggernauts or the Imperium super soldiers.

Voren crosses the deck of the GR-75, offering words of comfort to the young men and women, which for many this is the first real action in the war. "Jevin," the Chagrian says, "How do we look? Wodi and his assault team just reported in, they breached the Destroyer and are now working their way up." I pull up a holomap from my wrist device, "We land here. Our objective

is to draw off forces from the factory, thus letting the Jedi and Gavin's strike team destroy it, hopefully knocking out a good deal of their Juggernauts." He smirks at me, "Reminds me of Jakku, sitting in a cramped troop transport as we try to make it planetside."

. . .

"One minute to groundside," the pilot's voice comes over the comm. "All right troops, get ready. Now when those doors open, run for cover, then return fire, I don't need any heroes today, just soldiers!" I bark. "Jevin, Tav, this is Bel Iblis, may the Force be with you both. Marshal Ponith and I are attacking nearby Ruuria and we'll try to keep them from sending reinforcements to the battle. Bel Iblis out." "Acknowledged!" Tav looks at me, "You know, scuttlebutt says Tor Ponith is grooming Garm to become the next High Marshal of the Republic." I laugh, "Who better than Garm Bel Iblis?" He nods, returning the laugh. In the next few minutes, the transport vibrates with the sounds of landing struts touching the ground.

The doors open and after blinding light comes red bolts. I take a hit on my chest armor, the Phrik weave in it causing the blast to easily deflect off the armor but still delivering some force. Hefting my X45A rifle, I yell, "Roll em out!" and Tav, myself, and the rest rush for the cover of a crashed Nebulon B frigate. *"Jevin this is Wedge. We're going to try to lay down some orbital strikes to soften their forces, danger close!"*

The next thing I see is blinding green light from the sky and then a massive cloud of dust raised from the earth.

Cade Valdarin - Surface of Belkadan

16 ABE

The one of a kind E-wing glides easily through the atmosphere. Incom Freitek created it as a gift for me when we saved Fresia, the homeworld of Incom, a few months back. To my right is Red Five, Luke's X-wing. He's flying as my wingmate and behind us, two fully-loaded GR-80 transports, filled with SHARCS under the command of Lieutenant Gavin Skyes, Wodi's student. As we descend further towards the surface, I can't help but feel worry about Wodi, Gerik, Jevin, Salurra. All of them are the greatest friends

a guy could ask for and yet here they are, throwing themselves into the fire. We had all fought in the Civil War and I thought after Jakku, things would be better. Then my mind drifts to Kiara, a Zeltron female, aide to the Chancellor, and my fiancée. I promised her I would marry after this war, after I dealt with my failure to stop Xander Verush when I had the chance but that's starting to seem farther and farther away.

You know I can feel your thoughts right? Luke's voice comes in my mind. Luke and I share unique bond. Even with fifteen years between us, I being twenty-four and he thirty-nine, we are the closest friends and allies. Our bond is that of Master-Apprentice, Apprentice-Master, best friends, rivals, and brothers-in-arms. This allows the bond to be so powerful, we can telepathically communicate. *What, don't tell me you don't have anyone special Skyguy?* Luke smirks through his cockpit, *Well, there is my nephew Ben, and Han, Leia, and Chewie, so I guess we both have someone,* I smile. Even in the midst of a war that is shaping up to be more destructive than the civil war, we still find good things to cling to.

"Vanguard Lead, this is Vanguard One, we have made it planetside, repeat, we are boots on the ground and-" Static. "Stang, the *Wasp* is still blocking any Republic comms in the system." I touch the E-wing down and see Luke land next to me, his loyal astromech R2-D2 already hopping out of his socket. I land and my astromech, Ratchet, follows suite. Then the large transports come in flying fast and low to avoid anti-air. As soon as the loading bay doors open, out comes Gavin Skyes, a younger SHARC but definitely worthy of the position. Even though he's young, he has proven himself to be Wodi's equal in terms of combat and leadership ability. In fact, I think Wodi is grooming him as a potential replacement as commanding officer of the SHARCS. Next to him is Aleeta Krall, a Rutian Twi'lek who, despite her alluring features, is just as likely to blast you in the eyes for staring. "So, we're here, now what?" Gavin asks, hefting his bowcaster, a gift from the Wookiees for the defense of Kashyyyk. "Well," I say, "we get in, place the charges, kill whichever Praetor is in charge of this place, and go. Simple." Gavin smiles. Luke on the other hand, looks sick. Aleeta looks concerned. Like many of the newer members of the New Republic military, she grew up on stories and legends about people like Luke, me, Jevin, and Wodi. "Master Skywalker are you alright?" "I'm fine," he puts a hand up. "It's just this place. The Dark Side is strong here." "I sense a strong

presence," I say. "Xander?" Luke asks. "No, it's not him, he's multitudes stronger than this one but it is still powerful. Must be a Praetor. Let's get in this nightmare factory and end its evil."

**Cade Valdarin - Belkadan, inside former Belkadan/Rurria FoodCo
Factory
16 ABE**

"Incoming!" Gavin yells as a thermal det is tossed into the room. We vacate to escape the explosion. Ever since we entered the former factory, we discovered horror after horror. The factory was re-purposed by the Imperium into a factory for the creation of the now called "Sith Juggernaut." Luke and I were nearly knocked unconscious by the dark energy here and the pain and agony of those being turned. Hiss! A saber turns on and Luke saber rushes into the hallway I jumped into. "Cade, we have a problem!" "I know we do!" I yell back as I deflect three bolts back into several Imperium troopers. "We have to find the Praetor in charge here, then we can leave!"

Gavin and Aleeta rush into the hall with the five remaining SHARCS out of a full complement of twelve plus Gavin and Aleeta. Gavin is panting hard, "Jedi, we need to do something and now!" The Twi'lek turns, "Way ahead of you sir," in her hands a control pad for detpacks. Gavin smirks, "I ever tell you I love it when you do that?" "Maybe once or twice," she coyly smiles back. "Blow it," I say and the next noise we hear after Gavin closes the blast door is a deafening thud. "Ok, if I know anything about how the Imperium designs their buildings, the throne room is in the middle of the building, not the highest level. Let's move while we can."

Several hours later . . .

Gavin holds up a hand, open palm, the universal signal for stop. He charges up his bowcaster and unleashes a full payload of five explosive blasts into the room, taking out two troopers and three Juggernauts in one fell swoop. Then Aleeta tosses a smoke grenade in the mix, letting Luke and I wade in and ignite our sabers, the emerald green shining in the gray smoke. Swoosh swoosh. A devastating cross-weave of the green sabers and the room is clear. As the smokes clears, we see we are in the throne room but no Praetor in sight. "This is the throne room. Guess we just missed the party."

Gavin sighs. All of a sudden, I feel a tugging sensation through the Force. I look at Luke, he replies, "I felt it too, the Praetor is on the roof, calling us." I turn to Gavin, who being a year younger than I, has become like a brother. "Gavin, you and the rest of the team plant the detpacks where we planned. Luke and I will handle the Praetor and then we're getting out of here." "Got it, and may the Force be with you two."

Crack! Crack! Lightning flashes all around and thunder booms as we step onto the roof. It's an open area, with a landing pad designed for a small transport. Standing there, its head covered in a black cowl, is a Sith Praetor. The figure lifts up its hands and pushes the hood back, revealing itself to a Talz, of all things. It begins to speak in its odd language. I stand there puzzled; I know many languages but Talzzi has never been a strong point. Luke, however, understands. "He says his name is Jehavin, or Darth Beerus. His master bids us welcome." We both shake our heads in disappointment. "You know Pravus is just using you right!" I yell as the rain begins to pick up. "You are a pawn!" The towering Talz responds back in his strange language. "Fine, if you won't see reason, then we have no choice." The black ground shines iridescent as Luke and I ignite our sabers, the green blades sizzling as raindrops hit the blades. Darth Beerus' own saber ignites, a strange looking blade. A crossblade actually, if our studies over the years into the ancient history of the Jedi and Sith were accurate. A design from the great battle of Malachor in fact. "You go left I go right?" Luke asks in his sarcastic voice, "Or you go right I go left?" I just reply, "Yes," and we Force-charge at Jehavin, blades weaving through the rain and sizzling as we parry and thrust over and over. Jehavin telekinetically grips me and slams me into the wall as Luke jumps and tries an overhead slash at the head. He dodges and kicks Luke in the back of the leg. I jump back up and send a concentrated telekinetic blast of concussive energy at the giant Talz, staggering him. Luke launches another that pushes him into the wall.

He gets up quickly and launches at us, beginning another round of parries and cuts. After what seems like hours but is, in reality, only about twenty minutes or so of constant back and forths, parries and small cuts here and there, the fighting stops. Luke, myself, and Jehavin are all tired, blood gushing from cuts we each received from a glancing blow; a part of Luke's tunic was burned off thanks to the saber of Darth Beerus. "Well, what now?" I yell but it comes out as an exasperated sigh. "It's two against one, sooner

or later, you'll lose and then you die. That's all you'll get belonging to the Dark Side. It's not too late to renounce Pravus and his Imperium. You can use the Force for good and.." The Talz speaks again, the tone of his beeping voice needs no interpretation. This thing is so loyal to Pravus it is willing to die for him. I begin to tap into a wellspring of anger. Anger for Pravus, for what he's done with the knowledge he gained from long dead Sith secrets. Unlike Luke, the more traditional Jedi, I don't fear using my anger because I know I can control it. I launch a flurry a saber strikes against the Talz, my use of the Juyo form taking him by surprise. Luke comes in from behind, forcing the Talz to defend on two fronts. After forcing him to the edge of the roof, he blasts Luke with a torrent of lightning, sending him flying toward the other side. He begins to turn his hand toward me and in a split second, I launch my own torrent. For a while the air becomes acrid as the lightning crackles and burns. Finally, I let go of the force lightning, mentally preparing a Tutaminis shield to absorb the lighting from Beerus' attack. The lightning cascades over me as I zoom toward the white alien. Right before I bring my emerald blade across his neck, the big Talz closes its eyes. The next smell is the acrid odor of cauterized flesh and of death. Luke comes back from where he landed. "Cade, I ever tell you you are one heck of a fighter? We start up a new Jedi order, you are definitely becoming the new Battlemaster." I chuckled without mirth. "He was willing to die for Pravus and he didn't need to." Luke claps me on the shoulder, "Don't let it worry you too much. Pravus, most likely like all the other tyrants, is mind controlling these Praetors, keeping their loyalty, etc etc." We start to leave the roof as a deafening explosion sounds across the sky. Looking up, we see an explosion right where the *Wasp* was. "They did it, they actually did it!" Luke exclaims in wonder. I on the other hand, am more frantic. I can't feel Wodi or Gerik or Sal in the Force; it's like something is blocking their presence. If they were dead, we would feel it. "Wodi, Gerik, Sal, please respond!" I yell into the wrist-mounted communicator. "Repeat, Vanguard Lead respond!" Nothing but static. I begin to comm Ratchet to bring the E-wing, now dubbed the *Vanguard*, to the roof when all of a sudden several escape pods hit the ground at the foot of the palace.

We jump down, using the Force to slow our descent. The rain begins to clear as we enter the landing site, a cliff overlooking a river. Gavin and his team show up momentarily, Gavin ordering his men to pry open the escape pod doors. After some prying and even blasting of the doors, they finally break

open, revealing some very cramped passengers. "Thank the stars you guys are alright!" I exclaim. Wodi is the first to come out, looking ragged and extremely tired. "We barely got off that ship, they were everywhere." I see a blaster burn on his shoulder. Noticing my concern he shrugs his other one, "We're fine Cade, thanks to Gerik's gunplay and Salurra's muscle." We begin to call in for evac when that dark murky presence crops up again. It's coming from behind. As we all turn at the sounds of approaching footsteps, I feel a blast of lightning knock me off my feet and the last thing I see is all of our combined team on the ground, alive but smoking from the lightning hit. Just before I lose consciousness, I see something I hoped to never see again. The visage of a black royal guard helmet, a long flowing black cape, a crimson red saber. It can only be one person; Xander Verush, former Shadow Guard of the Empire, Palpatine's Voice, and now Emperor and Dark Lord of the Imperium. As he removes his helmet to show his short, spiky black hair and yellow eyes, the last thing I see is that huge diagonal scar running from his left temple to right jaw. He begins to laugh as I fade out of consciousness . . .

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix - Belkadan, Outer Rim Territories

16 ABE

"Seven meters to the lower hangar." I relay to my team through my mic, the amplified sound of my voice mixing with the hiss of recycled air through breathing tubes in the closed confines of my helmet. "Reduce thrust on your repulsor packs." "Copy, Colonel." Nom Carver's voice comes back crackling with interference. "This is where the fun begins." Muttering Dax Olesa, his tone suggesting humorous sarcasm. As we near closer to the opening of the hangar, a bright rectangular opening at odds with the dark hull of the destroyer, I can feel the pull of its artificial gravity. It's strong. On my interactive HUD, I monitor the other members of my team, checking the diagnostics of their individual suits, small icons in the upper right corner of my peripheral vision. Each suit is outlined in green, indicating no problems. So far, so good. I begin kicking my legs, the action propelling me slowly closer to the hangar opening. "Here we g-- AGGH!" Jori Carver starts to say when he lets out a shriek, the noise ringing loudly in my ears. "Jori, what's wrong?" I ask, quickly flipping back to his suit, now outlined in red and

flashing. I don't need to. A second later, Jori rockets forward past me, the repulsor pack on his back trailing sparks and escaping fuel. "Pack's malfunctioning!" Jori yells, his voice cracking in panic. "I have no control!" He continues his careening path, his acceleration quickened by the force of gravity. A second later, his body slams full force into the side of the *Wasp's* durasteel hull. "Jori!" I yell. I can hear the other members of my team cry out as well. I furiously kick my legs, attempting to get to our fallen companion. Gerik Ordo gets their first and slowly maneuvers Jori around. His limbs are completely limp, and his helmeted head lolls to one side. The Mandalorian announces the obvious truth, turning his helmeted head to look at me. "He's dead. Broken neck. I'm sorry, *ner'vod*." "Stang!" Curses Lannik Endel. Nosh Ker Raisuun emits an expletive in his own tongue. Salurra lets out a growl.

I close my eyes, sadness welling up inside me. Jori Carver was only just two weeks out of trials, eager to prove himself. And to go out like he did . . . I shake my head, attempting to clear it, forcing myself to focus. There would be time to mourn for him later. "We need to keep moving." I say looking around to everyone. "We can't do anything for him now." Everyone else nods. Ordo gently pushes Jori's body away and we continue for a short distance until we reach the glowing opening. I grip the lip of the hangar with one gloved hand, holding up the other one, palm facing out to my team. Stop. Wait. The others sit tight as Ordo, Salurra, and Endel come forward, gripping the lip of the hangar as well. Together, we carefully peer over the edge and look into the opening. A lone shuttle is docked in the middle of the hangar. I take out a small long-range scanner. I hear the click of Ordo's periscope rangefinder as he brings it over his visor, scanning the cavernous interior. After a few moments, he gives a thumbs up. "I'm not getting any activity in there. But that doesn't mean that there isn't anyone home." I nod. "My scanner isn't picking up anything either." Salurra lets out a growl ending in a question. "No," I reply, "the scanner doesn't detect droids. So if there are any in there, we'll have to deal with them quick before they alert any troopers." The Wookiee nods his shaggy head. "OK," I turn back to everyone else, "the hangar looks clear, but stay on your guard. Malogaan, keep your EMP charges ready in case we run into any tinnies." Malogaan nods, putting a gloved hand to his belt pouch. As a group we carefully maneuver ourselves into the hangar. The effects of its artificial gravity are instantaneous. We made it. I flip up my visor to get my first whiff of non-

recycled air. It's far from sweet, smelling slightly of engine fuel and grease, but I'll take it. With weapons at the ready, we quickly make our way to the rear of the hangar, taking cover behind large crates and other pieces of equipment where we can. I'm about to step out to move to the next piece of cover, a tall yellow and black-painted crane when Gav Pulastra grabs my arm. "Look," he says, pointing with one finger. I look more closely and spy a black R6 astromech unit slowly moving on its treads near the base of the crane. I motion for Malogaan to come forward. I point to the droid and he nods, bringing from his belt pouch a small silver sphere. I watch as he carefully rolls the EMP device toward the droid. It lands next to one of the droid's treads. With a slight pop, the device goes off, shorting out the astromech, stopping it dead in its tracks.

I pat Malogaan on the shoulder and we all move forward. "Let's get this guy set up." I whisper. Dax Olesa maneuvers forward and places a small cam on the droid's domed head, nearly invisible to the naked eye. After this is completed, he checks a small readout on his wrist. "Signal's live," Olesa says. "If anyone walks through the hangar, we'll know about it." I nod. We proceed further into the hangar, drawing closer to the large, imposing dark shuttle, its boarding ramp raised and probably locked. "I don't like the looks of that thing." I whisper to Ordo. The Mandalorian nods. "Neither do I." He pats his holsters, where his twin DT-39 Mark Two pistols rest. I put a hand on his gauntleted wrist. Our group takes cover behind a large unmarked crate next to the shuttle. I gesture with two fingers at the shuttle. "It may have scan dampeners," I whisper once everyone is gathered close, "so there might be someone or something aboard that our handheld didn't pick up." "What should we do?" Nom Carver asks, shifting his rifle in his hands. All eyes look to me. I think for a moment. "It's tricky," I eventually say. "We're already on the clock, and we can't afford to be on this tub any longer than necessary. But if there are techs and troops aboard that shuttle, we don't want them telling whoever's in charge about us." Nods all around. "I say we board it and take out whoever may be inside," Dax Olesa says, "It'll be one less group of enemies we have to deal with later." Nosh Ker Raisuun nods in agreement. "It's better to be sure than to regret it later." More nods. "Alright, let's do it." I say, gesturing to the shuttle's boarding ramp. I take out a specialized tool similar to a fusion cutter. Activating it, I trace the outline of the ramp. With a slight click, the ramp slowly descends. Nom and Gav catch it and slowly ease the ramp to the rest of the way to the deck. I

point to Ordo, Salurra, Malogaan, and myself, twirling my arm, ending in a fist up the ramp. Those I pointed to nod in understanding. I look to the rest and make a fanning out motion with my arm. Quietly, Ordo, Salurra, Malogaan, and myself move up the ramp. It's dark inside. But not so dark that my vision is obstructed. The shuttle looks completely empty.

We split up and move through the interior. It's oddly chilling inside. Using a low-light flashlight, I sweep each room I enter. A small galley, quarters, refresher. All empty. I meet back up in the main quarters with the others. I shake my head. Nothing. The others do likewise. We exit the shuttle. Nom and Gav come back, easing the boarding ramp back up. "She's clean," I say to our group. "Let's keep moving." With that, we move to the rear of the hangar, and I put the shuttle's presence in the back of my mind as unimportant. We reach a hallway at the back leading further into the ship. "This is the hallway," I confirm. We stop outside the hallway and I take out my holoprojector, taking one more look at the plan. "Now we just need to get to the turbolift." We start moving into the hallway when a set of blast doors at the far end hiss open. Two Imperium troopers walk out. They stop walking as they sight us. It seems that time stands still. One raises a hand to point to us. I react instantaneously, my mind not even aware that I have brought up and fired my rifle. An instant later, the pointing trooper is knocked back against the closed door, a sizzling hole in his plastoid chest armor, his weapon clattering to the floor. The second trooper raises his blaster, but soon joins his comrade, in a heap on the ground. I look to Ordo, who lowers the muzzle of his thankfully silenced DT-39. Without saying a word, we make a move toward the two corpses, dragging them away from the blast doors and into a side room. "Well that was entertaining," Ordo remarks dryly after our task is complete and the door is closed. I nod, smiling. We join the others who stand waiting at the designated turbolift. Carver presses the "call turbolift" button. A few moments later the turbolift arrives, its doors sliding open to reveal an empty drab interior. "All aboard," Endel says, herding everyone inside. The doors slide shut, and we begin our descent into the bowels of the *Wasp*.

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix - Belkadan, Outer Rim Territories
16 ABE

"Level two, lower hangar Eighty-Four G," the cool automated male voice of the turbolift, with a hint of a Core accent, notifies its passengers, us. One more level to go. I pull out my modified DH-17 from its holster and check the charge. Satisfied, I re-holster the weapon. Instead of continuing its ascent to our destination, though, the lift stops, and its doors begin to open, painfully slow, ready to admit more passengers. Uh oh. "Not good," Endel whispers hoarsely. Waiting on the other side of the lift is a communications officer in a white tunic, his nose buried in a datapad. Behind him wait two engineers clad in black, who both gasp at the sight of us. The officer looks up from his `pad at the sound and emits a small gasp of his own, his eyes widening. "Oops," I chuckle aloud, breaking the silence, "wrong level." Instantly, our party jumps the surprised crewmen, yanking them inside the waiting turbolift. A few punches later, all three lie on the floor, knocked out cold. The doors have already slid shut. The steady hum of the turbolift starts up again. Behind me, I hear someone nudge one of the engineers with their boot. "Hopefully, nobody was expecting these guys," Gav Pulastra says quietly.

Several seconds pass in silence. Then abruptly, our turbolift screeches to a halt. "Whoa!" Dax Olesa cries out, falling to the lift floor with a thud. I brace my hand against the wall to keep from joining him. Malogaan holds onto my arm firmly to balance himself. "What happened?" The interior lights of our turbolift flicker several times before going out completely. "Looks like our fly-boys knocked out something critical," Nom Carver remarks. "Looks like," I agree. I rummage in one of my pants pockets and bring out a small flashlight, flicking it on to illuminate our darkened lift. Several other flashlights wink to life. I maneuver my way through to the front of the turbolift, careful to step over our recent guests, to examine the control panel mounted next to one of the doors. Usually flashing, its buttons are dark. Even the one the authorities say you're supposed to press in case of an emergency isn't lit. I suppress memories of stories where beings had gotten stuck on turbolifts and were unable to be rescued for hours. Already I was beginning to feel hot. *Get a grip, Quix.* I take a moment to think. "Someone hand me a fusioncutter," I say, gesturing back with a gloved hand. A second later, I feel the weight of the familiar cutting tool in my palm. "We're getting out the old-fashioned way." Depressing the button, the flame jumping to life, I begin to cut a large hole into the side of the turbolift. "You really need to work on your craftsmanship," Ordo remarks sarcastically, looking over my

shoulder at my progress. I roll my eyes at his remark and continue my work. Once I'm finished, Ordo, Raisuun, and I heave the loose piece of durasteel out into the open shaft, sending it falling.

"Lemme have a look outside," I say to the group. "There's got to be a maintenance tunnel we can use to get up to the third level." "I'll accompany you," Ordo offers. Carefully, we move up onto the roof of our lift to survey our surroundings. Sure enough, about two and a half meters up, I spy the opening of a maintenance tunnel. Just out of reach. I relay my findings to everyone else inside. Salurra grunts. "Good idea," I say, "you can offer us a boost up to the shaft." Salurra soon joins us on the roof, lowering his hairy arms to allow me to put my boots in his meshed hands. With no effort on his part, the Wookiee lifts me up to the level of the tunnel. Grabbing the lip, I hoist myself inside. "Looks clear!" I yell down. In response, I turn to see Endel's head and upper torso come into view. "Good thing we have Sal with us," he remarks as I help him in. I look back down to see the other members of our group climbing out. I give them a thumbs up and duck back in. With a nod, Endel and I move through the low-ceilinged tunnel toward the area marked with a 'three' in Aurebesh.

. . .

The last being to exit the maintenance tunnel is Salurra. I had already instructed the others to secure a perimeter in the small hallway we came out on. Now back together, we move as one down the hallway toward the heavy set of blast doors where our target waits: the communications room. Just outside the doors, I stop, taking out my handheld scanner, adjusting the calibration. With a sweeping motion, I move it across the length of the wall and door. The screen remains dark. No life-forms detected. I refine it to detect droids. Again, the screen is dark. Weird. "This is it," I say. We enter the large room to find two whole walls taken up by data terminals. Various other pieces of important looking communications equipment stand in the center of the room. "It'd be a shame if any of this stuff was damaged," Ordo remarks chuckling. "Let's get to work," I say, clipping my blaster to my utility belt, "our cruisers and ground troops need to be able to coordinate with one another." Methodically, we move through the room, attaching sonic charges to terminals. I'm about to attach one of my final charges when I hear a gurgling sound. It echoes through the room, seeming to sound from

everywhere. I stop dead in my tracks, my hairs on my neck rising. I know that sound. Onderon. I'm about to shout a warning when I'm jumped from behind. I hear the others cry out in fear. Blasters are fired. Two screams of agony. I struggle to break free from many strong hands grasping at me. I get a fist to the side of my head. My vision goes fuzzy. I'm getting turned every which way. On the floor lies Dax Olesa and Nom Pulastra, their eyes blank, sizable chunks missing from their necks and other limbs. Before I succumb to blackness, I hear a cold voice come over the Destroyer's intercom, colder than the chill on Hoth. "Bring them to me."

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix - Belkadan, Outer Rim Territories
16 ABE

Ugh. I feel as if I've been hit by an airspeeder full throttle. The side of my head, not to mention my whole body, is throbbing, but I can't remember why. Where am I? I can hear several pairs of voices, sort of muffled, against the ringing backdrop in my ears. I keep my eyelids shut and my head bowed, not wanting whoever they were to know that I had come to. I can feel several pairs of strong hands grasping my forearms. I am aware that I am kneeling on the floor. Groggily, I try to discern who's talking. No good. My brain is still moving too slowly. I try to recall what had happened, mentally forcing myself to concentrate. A few seconds later, the fuzz clears, and it all comes rushing back. The ambush in the comm room. All those things. Nom and Dax dead on the ground. "Welcome back," the cold voice, the one from the intercom says, close to me, interrupting my thoughts. I don't open my eyes. For some reason, I recognize that voice. Who does it belong to? "Oh come now," the voice continues, a little lighter, chastising, "you're fooling no one with your act. What do you hope to gain by pretending? Now *open* your eyes! Let the light in." My eyelids open involuntarily and my head is forced upward, although I feel no hand on my chin. I let out a gasp as pain shoots through my temples. I fight the pain, taking in my new surroundings.

We're still on the star destroyer, that much is clear. The bridge, if my knowledge of these metal monsters is correct. Next to me on either side, I see the other members of my group, looking battered as hell. Flanking each member are two of those creatures, their pale skin and bulging black veins as disgusting as ever, clad in black form-fitting armor. On the end, I see

Salurra, being held by eight creatures. He must have proved to be quite the captive. Gurgling from behind me tells me there are more of the things. Opposite me, amidst a complement of stormtroopers and naval crewmen, stands a figure clad in black ebon armor and cape, his dark helmet sporting intricate carvings, the long hilt of a lightsaber hanging from his utility belt. A Sith Praetor. I squint my eyes at him, the spark of recognition growing brighter in my mind. "Yes," the Praetor replies, "we have met before. Rhen Var." Hearing the name of the planet I had encountered him on finally lets the name surface in my mind. "Sheratan," I say hoarsely. "Praetor Sheratan." The helmeted head nods. "Yes, that is my name. I am glad that I have not been forgotten." A few inches from me, I hear someone start to whimper. Sheratan glances that way. "Do not be afraid Jax Malogaan of Alderaan. There is so much left to fear in the galaxy for you to waste it all now." He walks forward and kneels in front of the whimpering Malogaan. I can hear him cry out as Sheratan touches him. He must be wounded. "Tell me," Sheratan purrs, his voice like a sand panther, "what is it you fear most?" I see him get right up close to Malogaan. And then the screaming starts. Malogaan howls in terror, his shrieks echoing through the cavernous bridge. They hammer against my ear drums, forcing me to close my eyes. "Stop it!" I yell at the Praetor. My cries are lost.

An eternity later it seems, Malogaan's shrieks die off. He crumples to the floor, blood trickling from his parted lips. His eyes stare glassily at nothing. "You *karking* monster!" I yell at the Praetor, my blood boiling. "What'd you do to him?" Sheratan moves over to me and kneels, gripping my chin tightly in his hand. "I entered his mind and manipulated it to my liking. Just like I will do to all of you. Fear is such a powerful tool, when used as it should be. It was quite amusing, don't you think?" I'm shaking in anger. Amusing? I manage to spit out three words: "Go to hell!" A few others echo my sentiment. Sheratan gets to his feet, laughing mirthlessly. "Your statement is flattering, but I'm afraid it is not I who will be passing into the beyond today." He walks to the large viewport of the bridge, the stormtroopers parting to allow him passage, and gestures at the battle raging outside. "Your friends, in their ships and on the surface, are who you should direct your statement to." "Why?" I ask, my anger giving way partly to confusion. Sheratan shakes his head, as if the matter is too unimportant. He walks casually back to our group, inspecting a speck of dried blood on his glove. "Really, the bridge of a relic as renowned as a Star Destroyer shouldn't be

tainted by the presences of non-humans. Why, just the mere thought of their filth has commanders of the Empire turning over in their graves." The next instant, he rushes forward so fast that I can barely see him, igniting his crimson blade and stabbing it into the chest of Nosh Ker Raisuun. The Quarren lets out a gasp and then falls to the floor, a smoking hole in his chest. I hear several members of my group gasp. My mind locks, unable to come up with a response. Sheratan deactivates his blade and walks slowly down the line of us until he reaches where Salurra kneels. "This one here is attached to Cade Valdarin. I shall make a coat of his hide and present it to my master."

BOOM! A gigantic explosion rocks the bridge of the Destroyer. Many stormtroopers fall to the ground, losing their balance. Sheratan stabilizes himself. *Were those our charges?* I think to myself. "Sir," a tech officer yells frantically, "our engines and stabilizers have been critically damaged by Republic batteries!" Another explosion rocks the ship. Outside the bridge viewport, I see the outline of a B-wing fighter, coming in for a strafing run. "Brace!" Sheratan shouts. I look to Endel a few feet from me. His eyes burn with intensity. It's time to leave. With a scream, I wrench free of my captors, grabbing a blaster that had skidded my way. Just then, the B-wing unleashes its payload. Bodies fly. I hear a mighty roar and look to see Salurra fling his guards across the room, some in several pieces. We attack the recovering stormtroopers and creatures stationed behind us, grabbing weapons and firing. In the chaos, I lose sight of Sheratan. "Get off the bridge," I yell to the others. Ordo gets behind me, his back against mine, firing wildly, attempting to clear a path. I grunt as a blaster bolt hits me in the shoulder. I barely feel it, my adrenaline pumping hard into my system. Several minutes later, we're sprinting full force down a hallway leading away from the bridge, cutting down any Imperium troopers in our way. "I'm guessing our exit transport is a no-go?" Wheezes Nom Carver, keeping pace with me. "Right," I confirm. "Then how are we getting out of here?" I stop at a door and open it to reveal, "Escape pods!" Yells Gav Pulastra. "Get in!" I shout to the remainder of our group. I clamber inside one as the others do likewise. It's cramped, but at this point, I don't even care. Pieces of the destroyer are falling to the deck with loud clatters. Fires blaze unchecked. Bodies of fallen crew lie sprawled everywhere. I close the hatch of our pod on the doomed vessel and hit the release, and with a loud *SHOOM* our pod begins its descent toward the planet of Belkadan.

Cade Valdarin - Belkadan, Outer Rim Territories
16 ABE

I suddenly jerk awake. The last thing I remember is prying the escape pod door off and hauling Wodi out. A small reunion ensued, embraces and handshakes, congratulations on a job well done. And then I remember why I blacked out. He was there, Xander Verush. Xander, or by his Sith name, Darth Pravus, was there. I heard his devilish cackle and then lost consciousness as lightning cascaded over me. Suddenly, I see Luke Skywalker face down next to me, alive but still unconscious. I start searching frantically looking around for Wodi and the others, where could they be?

"Oh don't worry," says an evil, all too familiar voice. "Your friends are fine," says Xander, pointing to a shuttle headed into orbit." He turns around, the Belkadan sun shining on his ebon black armor, reminiscent of the old Royal Guard armor with a flowing black cape and red and black helmet similar to a Mandalorian. Suddenly, Luke wakes up, reaching for his saber when both of us feel a strong telekinetic grasp seize our arms. "Now, now, let's not ruin this little reunion shall we?"

Luke is the first to speak, "Why? Why do all this?" Xander gives him a sardonic look. "Please Jedi, try to think. Have you never wondered how that day was supposed to happen all those years ago above the Sanctuary Moon?" We look at each other, I say, "We don't deal in what-ifs." Xander gives a sigh, "Of course you don't. Why do all this, you ask? Why create an interstellar empire, gather Sith Lords, and attack your Republic. Let's think about that. Because *you two* stole my destiny." He begins to pace back and forth. "What was to happen that day, young Skywalker, was you would take Vader's place at Palpatine's side. Then, I would kill you and finally take my rightful place at Palpatine's side, no longer hiding in Vader's shadow. In time, I would take my place both as Emperor and Dark Lord of the Sith, ensuring that strong leadership was maintained." Here, Xander pauses, giving me a death stare, "But we all know the Force can make events play out very differently. You caused Vader to become weak and embrace good again and kill my master and then, this eight year old *boy* managed to stop me in my tracks. Such power in the Force from a child, I did not think it was possible.

Here, I begin to move ever so slightly, trying to angle myself for a leap at Pravus. But almost as if he has some unique clairvoyance, Xander turns to me and holds up a finger and *boom*, I'm forcibly pushed back down. "Na ah, we aren't done yet." Suddenly Luke gets a puzzled look on his face, "Your power, why does it feel so warped?" Again, Xander walks to the edge of the cliff, "I'm glad you asked. Tell me, you two have done your homework about the ancient Jedi, yes?" We both nod. "Good, then I won't need to explain the nuances. Long ago, as you know, there was no Sith Order, there was only the Jedi. One lone Jedi, however, rebelled against the edicts of the Order, feeling that the Force was much more than a shield to protect the weak and innocent but a weapon for the strong to rule. His rebellion eventually led to the Hundred Years Darkness, the great schism that created that Sith Order and was the starting point for the never-ending war between the two factions." My turn to speak, "Enough! If you are going to kill us just do it!" Xander makes a tisk noise. "The history lesson has much to do with the current situation. Now where was I . . . ah yes, following a century of conflict, the Jedi and Republic rallied, decimating the Sith armies and forcing them into exile. You know the rest of the story, the Dark Jedi found Moraband, homeworld of the Sith species, eventually creating the Sith Order

and beginning millennia of war with the Jedi and Republic who banished their ancestors." "So," Luke interrupts him, "you created your little Imperium to relive history?" At this Xander sends a jolt of lightning at Luke, "My Imperium is far more powerful than the Sith ever were, even more powerful than the Empire. During one of the many smaller wars that were part of the Sith Wars, a powerful Lord and scientist rose to power. This Sith was named Kronus. Kronus was more intelligent than his fellow Sith: he knew that the power to destroy worlds, even whole star systems, was insignificant next to the power of the Force." Here, he pauses for dramatic effect. "If you recall, during these wars, the Sith had many super weapons with kyber crystals at their heart. Kronus had an idea: the Force is created by life and touches all living things. So, what would happen if you drained all the Force energy from a world?" He stops, looking at me as if he wants me to reach the conclusion for him. Realization dawns on me, "Take the Force away from a world . . . and you drain all life from that world." "Precisely," Xander remarks, "what better way to fight a Force-wielding enemy than by taking away their power?"

"That's impossible!" says Luke. "If the Sith had a weapon like that, they would have won and we would all be slaves right now." "Correct, if the Jedi had not stopped them." Xander looks at me again, "In fact, it was Argus Valdarin who defeated Kronus and prevented this weapon from destroying the Republic. And now, that very same weapon will be used to destroy his descendant.

"But that doesn't explain why your power feels so strange." Luke says again. And here, Xander utters a sinister chuckle and closes his eyes. We grimace at this for we feel a surge of warped power, twisted Force energy so strong it visibly affects us. He opens his eyes. Unlike the normal Sith, whose eyes are yellow from exposure to the Dark Side, Xander's are pure black, his skin taking on a charcoal gray color. His voice sounds as if the full power of the Force is behind it. "The Jedi weren't the only ones to learn how to remain after death." . . .

Cade Valdarin - Belkadan
16 ABE

"The Jedi weren't the only ones to learn how to remain after death." Xander says, his black voids of eyes staring directly at us. "You see, Kronus, and Argus in fact, were of a different breed. While mainstream Jedi and Sith see the Force in a polarized view, Kronus and Argus were the first of the Grey theory of the Force; the thought that it is not the Force that is good or evil but rather how you use it. This theory is what allowed them to retain consciousness after death." The telekinetic grip on us lessens and we stand, still feeling the forceful presence of Xander's new power.

All of a sudden, two black armored figures appear alongside Darth Pravus. They wear ebon black armor and wear demonic masks, almost like they emulate Pravus. Pravus turns, "Behold, two of my finest Praetors, Xellius and Sheratan. I trained them myself. Before me, they were just leaders of Sith cults. Now they are among the most powerful warriors in the galaxy; the Imperium's future." He turns to the figure on the left. "Sheratan, go to *Gorukar* and await my command." The figure kneels and crosses his right arm across his chest, "Yes, Lord Emperor. Today will be a day long remembered by the galaxy." And like that he disappears.

"*Gorukar*? What is that?" Luke asks. Xander utters that maniacal laugh again. I chip in, "*Gorukar* . . . Black Star." He turns to me and gives me a quizzical look, "I'm impressed, you have studied some of the Sith language. Yes, *Gorukar* is the terrible weapon Kronus created, the weapon which will allow me to ascend to my rightful place as Emperor of this galaxy. I will do what Sidious failed to; your worlds will burn, your people will lose hope, and your leaders will beg for death before the end." At this he speaks into a wrist comm in his armored gauntlet and says one word, obviously in the Sith tongue, "*Charak!*"

Luke and I sense a massive disturbance in the Force. We look up to see the silhouette of a massive space station enter orbit, like nothing we've ever seen before. The alien shape is of strange blue hue and looks alive, clearly designed to inspire fear and dread in the Sith's opponents. Xander turns to the other Praetor, Xellius, the one who always seems to escape justice. "Xellius, return to the *Insidious* and take a fleet to Minos Korva, begin your assault." "Yes Lord Emperor, as you will it." The shadow of *Gorukar* looms over us now and suddenly my comm link crackles to life. "*This is General*

Corso to all Coalition forces, execute Evac Order Alpha! Repeat, get off-planet now!"

The sky lights up a bright blue color as a beam lances put from *Gorukar* at a Republic ship, one of the formidable Starhawks. The beam hits it and it explodes in a brilliant flash of orange and blue lightning. Xander laughs again, "*Gorukar* does not only drain the Force but can discharge it as well in a destructive form, as you have seen." Admiral Antilles comes over the comm, "*All Republic forces, evac the Belkadan system, head for the rendezvous!*" "It won't help them" Xander says. "Soon, with my new power and the power of *Gorukar*, your Republic will fall." After this he raises a hand, palm faced skyward. We can't see it but we feel him generate a force field around us. What can he be doing? "*Noroch!*" He says again in the Sith Tongue. And from *Gorukar's* giant emitter on the bottom of the station, a giant pillar of energy shoots down toward the planet, the beam the color of Force lightning. It hits Belkadan and creates a spectacular blue dust cloud on impact. But that is not the worst of it. We see a wave emanating from the impact site, heading out in a 360 degree wave, hugging the terrain of the planet. "Do not worry, you are quite safe from the effects because I will it." Darth Pravus says. Luke and I visibly recoil; the wave is draining the Force as it goes, instantly killing all living things from sentient beings to plants and trees as it passes them. So much death, so much of the Force just . . . gone. No wonder this weapon could have wiped out the Jedi. We see that the Imperium forces are not affected. Kronus, and by proxy, Xander, must have a way to shield himself and his forces from *Gorukar*. "Stop this!" I scream through the now massive headache I have. Xander just smiles his wicked smile, those black eyes betraying no emotion. A few more minutes and the wave completes the circumference of the planet. From what I can see, a good deal of the Coalition forces made it off world, but there was still at least one-third of the assault force groundside. All that death . . . Another massive shape arrives in orbit, this one I've seen before, the *Insidious*, flagship of the Imperium. It begins pouring purple turbolaser fire into Coalition ships.



The comm comes to life with frantic distress messages and orders for retreat. "I'm afraid I have to cut our reunion short. I will not kill you, yet. You still have a large part to play in this Valdarin; our destinies are intertwined. However, I will show you just how doomed your precious Republic is." He lowers his hand, the force field disappearing. Suddenly, the pain and anguish and ultimately, the void left in the Force by *Gorukar* floods our senses, knocking Luke and I unconscious. The last thing I hear is strange, I hear a voice telling me to go to Tython but it isn't Xander's voice. Who can it be? My vision goes black.

The next thing I see is the sterile white of a med bay.

Cade Valdarin - Belkadan

16 ABE

Several days later . . .

I awake in the sterile white room of a med bay. A Star Destroyer by the look of it. The last thing I remember is feeling the pain of the loss of all life and Force energy on the planet and losing consciousness. I get out of bed and walk to the transparisteel window. Even though we are far from Belkadan now, I can still feel the void that the station created. I begin to ponder just how the ancient Jedi fought that thing, how did Argus Valdarin defeat it and its creator?

"Ah good, you're finally awake," says a familiar voice. I turn and see Jevin standing there, his battle armor completely singed by blaster fire. "Good to

see you up kid, you had us all worried." He joins me overlooking the stars. "How bad was it?" I ask even though I know the answer. "Not good. A little over two-thirds of Coalition forces were able to get offworld but still, that's one-third of an army large enough to take several worlds gone in the blink of an eye. What the *kriff* was that thing?" I exhale a sigh of exhaustion. "That was *Gorukar*, or the Black Star. An ancient Sith weapon developed by one of the more powerful Dark Lords of the Sith and it nearly conquered the Jedi in the ancient wars." Jevin thoughtfully strokes his beard, "Well I'll be, talk about the past haunting you. What about Xander? I was on a shuttle when we saw him capture you; I saw his eyes . . . looked like a demon out of the old stories." I turn to face the older man, noticing for the first time how much he has kept himself in shape despite being near twenty years older than me. Even as a General he's able to maintain his physique. "Jevin, Xander has . . . taken the essence of *Gorukar's* creator. He's, for lack of a better word, taken the power and knowledge of Kronus, the ancient Sith Lord whose specter lived on after his death millennia ago." "Ah, so Force mumbo jumbo?" Jevin says in his characteristically sarcastic way, causing me to chuckle a little. I glance over to the other bed, where Luke still remains out cold.

"We've met up with Admiral Kerex's battlegroup and are headed to Malastare. The world has become a strategic strong point to keeping the Imperium out of the Mid Rim." We walk out of the med bay towards the bridge. As we walk, I see New Republic naval personnel rushing everywhere, a heightened sense of alert present in everyone. Jevin, as if seeing what I'm seeing says, "After the battle, the Senate finally realized the full extent of the threat the Imperium poses. The Populists finally agreed to work with the Centrists; the Galactic Concordance has been repealed, temporarily at least. Recruitment drives are at an all-time high, the training academies all across Republic territory are working in overdrive to get the best people to us, and contracts have been signed with all the highest arms, tech, and ship manufacturers. It was a bad way to finally get the Republic to see the danger but now we are committed. Either we'll die or they will."

We reach the bridge, where Admiral Antilles, Fleet Admiral Kerex, and High Marshal Tor Ponith are gathered around a holo-projection of a galactic map, no doubt talking strategy and fleet/troop movements. I overhear Kerex and Ponith talk about how they are going to retire after this war, they're both too

old for this. They all stop when they see me. "Cade, you're awake!" Tor exclaims, his fur ruffling slightly as he says it. I walk up to the map, "Is this getting as bad as I think?" "Yes, it is," Antilles says, "but with the Republic entering full war status, hopefully we'll start to push them back. Just because they have an ancient weapon of mass destruction doesn't mean we have to roll over and die." I nod my head and turn to see Luke enter the tactical room. "Good, Luke's here. There is something I want to tell you all." I say. "The massacre at Belkadan made me realize the necessity of this . . . I'm leaving the Republic for a while." Silence, the command staff in front of me stares at me, some with mouths agape. "Leave?" Kerex says in his bubbly voice, "why would you leave, especially now?" I look at him then at Jevin and finally to Kerex's second in command, Illa Nari, a female Mirialan, who by the sounds of it will be the next Fleet Admiral of the Republic. "I need to do this. I need to find a way to destroy *Gorukar*; you saw what it did to our ships and army. We need every advantage we can get and where I'm going, there's ancient knowledge stored away, and maybe I can find how it was stopped the first time." Jevin scoffs, "That's a lot of maybes Cade, what if you're wrong?" I smirk at him, "Jevin I thought you would have learned by now, I'm never wrong." Tor's turn to chime in, "Enough General Corso. Cade isn't military. We can't order him to do anything. And if it means finding a way to stop *Gorukar*, I'm all for it. You do what you need to, Master Valdarin, and we'll make sure there is still a New Republic for you to come back to." Jevin shakes his head, muttering a Corellian provocative while I shake Tor's furry hand. "Thank you Tor, I won't let you, any of you, down." The command staff is dismissed and all leave except for Luke, who is giving me a critical eye. I look away from him. "You know you can't hide anything from me Cade. Our telepathic link lets me hear your thoughts and I know there's something you are very skeptical on, spill it."

"Walk with me." I say. We begin walking towards the hangar. "Tell me, you've heard of Tython right?" Luke draws a breath, recalling old knowledge he had acquired. "Tython is one of the lost worlds; very few references to the world are left." "Yes," I say, "it's also possibly the birthplace of the Jedi Order, as is Ossus, Jedha, and the mysterious world Ahch-To." We reach the hangar bay. It's a bustling hive of activity. I see transports and fighters that had been in the space around Belkadan undergo repairs, the mechanics working overtime to get these fighters repaired. We take the elevator down to the deck and walk to my personal ship, the one-of-a-kind E-Wing that

Incom-FreiTek gifted to me. "So you think you will find some kind of ancient archive there?" Luke asks.

"No. You want to know how Argus Valdarin defeated Kronus, who was empowered by the stolen Force energy, and stopped *Gorukar*? He did something that only two other Force-users in the history of the galaxy had achieved." I stop and turn to face Luke, letting him see the seriousness in my eyes. "He achieved oneness with the Force while living, becoming a pure manifestation of Force energy and becoming exponentially more powerful in the process. Luke nods in agreement. Before the war started, we had gone on separate pilgrimages to find ancient Jedi lore, he heard of these legends before. "But why Tython, specifically?" He asks. "Because," I reply, "Argus' resting place is there. Not physically, of course, like most Jedi of his time the secret to becoming one with the Force after death was not a secret. I believe I can commune with his spirit and train with him, learning how to achieve oneness." Luke lets out a whistle, "That's going far on what may be a lark, but you're right, it is necessary, there's no other choice." I grab his forearm, "Luke, while I'm gone I need you to make sure the Republic is strong." He returns the embrace, "Of course but it's not just me they need. I don't know if you have noticed but we have become heroes to the New Republic. I overheard Wodi and several others while we were in the medbay. They called us "The Last Knights" saying how the citizens see us as heroes. The last lights of a light gone out; we are symbols Cade, symbols of hope and valor so you better come back more powerful and with some trick up your sleeves."

We release each other's forearms and he backs up as I enter the E-wing, callsign Vanguard. "Ratchet, you all set back there?" I ask my R2 unit. He beeps in acknowledgement. We lift off, the last I see of Luke is him waving and telepathically he tells me, *May the Force be with you brother*. The last thing I see before entering hyperspace for the Deep Core is several ships entering the fleet buildup: Nadiri Starhawks, MC80s, and even a *Mediator*-class battlecruiser. I have high hopes for the Republic. Now that the true threat has been realized, the Republic will enter full war status and devote itself to the protection of its people and the defeat of the Imperium. May the Force be with us all . . .

7 Months Later

Cade Valdarin - Fondor Station, in orbit of Fondor 17 ABE

"All right, security check confirmed. Welcome aboard Fondor Station," the bright-eyed Ensign says, a young human boy with shoulder-length blonde hair. "I've notified the command staff you're here. They'll be with you when they can." "Thank you," I say. "Come on Ratchet, we'll wait for Jevin in the observation deck. "Oh one last thing Master Jedi" the boy says in haste. I turn back to him, "Call me Cade, titles make my skin crawl. What is it?" He gets an embarrassed look on his face, "Well, it's good knowing you're back to fight, Last Knight. I was one of the rescued prisoners from Belkadan. Knowing you and Master Skywalker are in this fight, well it's comforting. Have a pleasant stay sir." He walks off to a newly arrived transport. Ratchet and I move to the observation deck overlooking the massive orbital dockyards of Fondor.

I've been here many times before but every time, the size of the shipyards always surprises me. They are big. No, massive in size, rivaling those of Kuat or Mon Calamari. The Republic, since having entered full war status, has changed doctrines. The Republic has designated battlegroups; tactical units that number in hundreds of ships, thousands of soldiers and fleet personnel. These battle groups each have a headquarters planet; a strategic location in the Core, Mid Rim, Colonies, etc. Fondor happens to be the headquarters of the Fourth Battlegroup, the Republic's largest and most powerful battlegroup. It also has seen the most success as it is personally commanded by Fleet Admiral Kerex and High Marshal Ponith. Granted, they command the whole fleet and army, respectively, but personally command the Fourth battlegroup. "*Alert, enemy presence reported on Akiva,*" an intercom says. I check my wrist chrono; Jevin and the others should show up soon. Just then I see ships drop out of hyperspace. And what I see surprises me.

I see a *Viscount* Star Defender drop into realspace. And it's not the *Viscount*? The Republic must have been busy to get a second ship of the massive, powerful, and expensive ships off the production line. Alongside it are several Nebulon-B frigates and several hatchet-headed battleships; the Nadiri Starhawk Mark Two. Between the capital ships is what looks like

swarms of flying insects; hundreds and hundreds of starfighters fill the space between ships. They join the marshalling area around the bigger Star Defender, *Viscount*, floating near the docks. "All right, jets up in ten, let's move," I hear a distinctly Coruscanti accent say and a troupe of ebon-black armored troopers jog past me, the red visors giving me a little chill. I feel a familiar presence from one and say out loud, "Skyes?" The armored figure stops, looks me over, and pulls his helmet off, and I see the blonde hair and piercing blue eyes of Gavin Skyes, a man who, being a year younger than me at twenty-four, looks older thanks to war. "Cade, you're back!" He exclaims as he hugs me. "Oh man, I wish we had more time, my unit is moving out soon to Akiva." I laugh, "Don't worry, plenty of time for that later," gesturing to his armor, "so what's all this then?" He makes an embarrassed look, like when someone is praising someone else, "Deputy Director Clarke's idea, a new special forces unit trained for boarding operations. After the Battle of Belkadan and Colonel Quix's mission to board a Destroyer, Command felt a unit specially trained on zero-g and shipboard action was needed, hence the Rancor Assault Troopers." He looks behind him and dons his helmet, its red visor hiding his eyes, "Got to run, we'll catch when I'm back!" He runs off to the loading area.

"Ah, so you have met the Rancors and seen the Starhawk Mk II's," a female human voice says. I smile, knowing that voice. I turn around and see the familiar raven-colored hair at the height of my chest. I look down and see the familiar face of Sonya Ravenclaw. Sonya reminds me of a younger Han Solo, before his Rebellion days. An able pilot with a YT-2400 transport, a talented pistol jockey, and skirting the law, she is also a smuggler. Only instead of contraband and spice, she is a treasure hunter, sometimes hunting lost lore on some forgotten planet, sometimes breaking into museums to steal treasure for the highest bidder. "Sonya, great to see you" I give her a gentle hug. We used to have a romance but that passed and we resolved to be friends only. "How's the treasure hunting business, I imagine the war has affected it greatly." We begin to walk towards the command area of the station. "Oh, it has. I'm not running treasure hunts anymore. I was actually asked by your friend Tor Ponith to assist the Republic." I turn to her and give her a look, "What? He knew I was an expert pilot with the *Phoenix* and the Republic needs a good pilot to get past blockades, deliver supplies to besieged soldiers . . . you don't approve?" I shake my head, "No it's not . . .I mean I don't-" She shushes me and places a finger on my lips.

"Cade darling, we called it off and now the only woman you need to protect is Kiara. Speaking of, how is the Zeltron beauty?" I remove her finger, "She's busy, being the Chancellor's aide during war, it's constant busy work but she likes it." The door hisses open. "So tell me, what all has changed since I left?" She pulls me over to another observation window, this one overlooking the huge fleet that makes up the Fourth Battlegroup's naval complement.

"Well, ever since the Belkadan massacre, the Republic has been focusing completely on the war. Starship production is at an all-time high, the training academies are working overtime, and as you saw, new specforce types are being authorized." I point out at a ship in the buildup, "Tell me about those Mk II Starhawks." "Well those are a new ship; Republic Command realized the need for a semi inexpensive but powerful warship. The Mk II is just like the Mk I, made from disassembled ships, both Imperial and Imperium. They also were made in conjunction between Nadiri Dockyards, Sorusuub, and Mon Cal Shipyards. As such, it has upgraded armor, shields, and weapon systems, the ship is a beast meant for combat."

She turns and looks at me with a discerning eye, "So tell me, what happened to you?" "What do you mean?" She blushes a little here, "Well, I mean . . . you look like, I don't know, different. You seem calmer, at peace even." I smile here. "I've been training rigorously for the past seven months on Tython. I trained under the guidance of my ancestors' spirit." She nods her head, "Yes, Jevin told me the story, it's amazing and creepy at the same time. So did you learn how to achieve this 'oneness'?" "Sadly, no," I reply, "I came close but was unable to. But Argus assured me that when the time comes, I will be able to achieve oneness, the same as he did during the Scourge of Malachor. But I have increased my power and am ready to fight again."

She smirks, "So Tython . . . any good treasure there?" I shake my head, "Yes but it is not for you, it's the heritage of the Jedi. I even learned where the Grey Jedi subsect came from. Argus Valdarin, one day during the Ancient Wars, was shot down over the planet Atollon. There he met the enigmatic being Bendu, who claims to represent the "middle" aspect of the Force." We gaze out the window again at the two massive Viscount Star Defenders when I hear an all too familiar voice cry out, "Well, if it isn't little Cade all grown up!" I turn to see Jevin Corso at the other side of the room, with the

more diminutive Bothan, Tor Ponith, to his left, the Corellian High General Garm Bel Iblis behind him, and the Quarren, Unath Kerex to his right. Jevin comes up and tousles my hair; he has always seen and treated me like a little brother, ever since Mon Mothma formally became my guardian. "So," Jevin says, "let's hear all about your training on Tython and tell us everything." I begin to recount the tales of my arduous training in the mountains and forests of Tython. As I'm telling them my tale, I notice two other Generals enter the room, along with a familiar face, the Infiltrator, Amminius Sinan.

Cade Valdarin - Fondor Station

17 ABE

"Sinan!" I exclaim and walk toward him, holding my hand out to shake hands. Instead, he bears hugs me, "Great to see you again, kid." He lets go and clears his throat. "Jedi Knight Cade Valdarin, allow me to introduce you to High General Hiram Drayson, Director of Special Forces, and Flag General Vanessa Clarke, Deputy Director of Special Forces. They have a mission for you." I give him a bemused look and walk back toward the viewport, seeing one of the captured SSDs joining the naval complement of the Fourth Battlegroup. "Well whatever it is, it must be big since you're gathering such a big fleet. What is it?" Amminius gestures for Drayson to come forth, the older man has all the distinctions of a Core-born man and his accent is thick. "First off, may I say welcome back Master Jedi, you've become quite a hero to the Republic." He holds his hand out, "Command table, authorization Drayson Alpha 4," and a holo-table emerges from the floor, a holomap of the galaxy projects out of it. On the map are massive colored areas; areas where either side is dominant or a heavily contested zone. He points to an area in the part of the map that represents the Outer Rim. "For the last few months, the Imperium has been licking us good. After Belkadan, the win-tempo has gone up for them. Rhen Var, Nervast, and more have been lost." I look at him and he lets out a deep sigh, "The Imperium has used *Gorukar* on two more worlds, Cade. On Tatooine and on Axxila." I ask him, "Why those worlds? Tatooine has little strategic value and Axxila was an Imperial supporter even after the Battle of Jakku?" Shrugging, Drayson replies, "Who knows with Darth Pravus at the helm. Intel feels that Tatooine was more of a symbolic attack; many of the galaxy's heroes have come from there. As for Axxila, we think it was more of a punishment, an attack against

those who switched loyalties." I remember the losses at Belkadan were massive. "How bad was it?" He points to a button on the table and a statistics report comes up. "Tatooine was always sparsely populated so the loss of life there wasn't catastrophic. Axxila was worse; it's always been a 'Coruscant of the Outer Rim'. We had advanced warning and a fleet of Republic and freelance personnel managed to evacuate a majority of flora, fauna, and sentients, but still a third of Axxila's population was decimated." I feel the pain in his voice; he was there and saw the decimation of life. He looks up, "Cade I hope you have a plan. Did you learn how to destroy that thing and stop Pravus?" I shake my head no, "Unfortunately I didn't. But I'm confident that when the time is right, I will achieve oneness and stop them both." "One can hope. For now, we need your help on a crucial mission."

Again, he touches the holomap and it goes back to a galaxy map mode. "As I said, the Republic has been losing more than winning; The Imperium is pushing on all sides. We know that they are based in Wild Space. Unfortunately, we don't know anything about the area of space; no one does as it's uncharted." Here he gestures to Amminius. "Thanks to Major Sinan's Infiltrator team here, we managed to find this planet," he highlights a world on the map. "This is Terminus, a planet on the edge of Republic space and sees traffic from known space, the Unknown Regions, and Wild Space. As such it is a major nexus of trade. More to the point is this:" the map zooms in, showing large shipyards and *Predator* Destroyers.

"The mission we want you to aid Major Sinan with is infiltrating this shipyard complex, steal information vital to the war effort and, if possible, destroy it and help a portion of the Fourth take Terminus for the Republic." I shake my head, "Seems awfully risky and possibly rewarding. But why do you need me?" Now Jevin comes over and slaps me on the shoulder, "Come on Cade, you can't tell me you haven't seen it! You and Skyguy have become heroes, no, legends to the people of the Republic. A major victory, in Imperium territory, by a champion of the New Republic . . . I can't think of a more symbolic victory to raise morale. That and the fact that you are an incredibly powerful fighter and the mission will definitely benefit."

It is a good chance to boost the morale of the Republic and Coalition forces and a chance for me to increase my powers further. "I'll do it." I say and

Amminius tosses an ornate knife in his hands, no doubt a gift from Gerik Ordo, "This'll be fun," he says with a grin.

Sinan and I enter the hangar where Coalition forces are prepping for battle at Terminus. I see Protectors, Wookiees, and . . . Espirions? I look to Amminius. "They joined a few months ago," he explains, "lending their Defense Forces to the Republic war effort." We walk over to a transport, a heavily modified and upgraded UT-62D transport, modified for stealth, complete with matte black sensor scrambling paint, electronic countermeasures, and the works. Onboard is Amminius' partner; the Infiltrator units are always in pairs. There's also a second unit as well as some of these new Rancor Assault Troopers. One of the ebon-black armored figures holds an arm out, "Welcome aboard sirs," a female voice says through vocalizers. I sense her presence, a Togruta. "Captain Navi at your service, we're your backup in case things get rough." We give our acknowledgements and the loading doors seal shut. Amminius puts a finger to his ear piece, "Tower, this is Echo Team, we are ready for launch." The message comes back, *"Echo team, this is Marshal Ponith, you are go for launch. The rest of the fleet will jump in as soon as the orbital defenses are shut down and we'll get troops to support you as fast as we can."*

"Understood, may the Force be with us." I say into my wrist comm.

The U-wing enters the black of space, passing along the enormous, tadpole-like shapes of the *Viscount* and her sister ship, the *Vigilance*, and at least a dozen Starhawks blink into hyperspace, jumping to their rallying point to wait for the success of our mission. Amminius slides the Mandalorian knife into a custom-made sheath on his Infiltrator FlexArmor, "This'll be a riot Cade, I can't wait."

Cade Valdarin - Outskirts of the Terminus System

Shuttle Echo-7

17 ABE

"Here we are," the pilot says over the comm. Amminius, Navi, and I look out the viewport at the planet. It is almost like Coruscant in a way; a city world. You can see the hive of activity beneath the cloud layer, skycar after skycar zooming to and fro. The space around the planet is even more hectic. The Imperium shipyard, designated Target Alpha, is massive. At present, there are at least three Predators in drydock with at least a dozen more patrolling

space around the shipyards. And what's this? There are fighters of a new design on patrol as well. Amminius logs information on his wrist device and checks his NRI-created Needler rifle, a gun that instead of bolts or slugs, fires needle projectiles made of a strong metallic compound that are silent and can puncture most personal armors.

"Well," Amminius says looking up from his wrist computer, "this is bad." Navi shakes her head, the movement causing her head tails to sway a little. "What is it?" I ask, peering at the device. "If the Battle Estimation Computer that R/D developed is accurate, any head-on battle here would be costly; we need to find a way to even the odds before sending in the cavalry." Looking to the pilot, he orders, "Take us in and activate all stealth and counter-detection measures." "Amm, there's a new fighter model out there." I say while putting on my zero-g armor, courtesy of Captain Navi and her Rancor Troopers. "Yeah I know, looks like a mean one, but I'd bet on our T-70s." He stops to look at me as I don the ebon-black armor. "What?" I ask him. "Oh nothing, I'm just remembering that little boy who helped us on Endor. "You've grown up into such a responsible young man and a terrific warrior. I'm proud of you Cade." I blush, "Thanks Amminius." The intercom comes on, "We're nearing the target, ETA five minutes." Navi and her Rancors finish suiting up. X45As click with the sound of full charges. "All right, take us in nice and slow." Amminius says, brandishing his Needler Carbine.

Five minutes later . . .

The bays of the stealth-oriented U-wing open, revealing the vast star-riddled black of space. "*Countermeasures active. Go, go, go!*" The pilot says. Navi is the first through the door; the other Rancors follow suit, then Amm and his Chiss partner, and then me. We all gather near a bulkhead, looking to Amminius to get us in. Thanks to his being an Infiltrator, elite agents of N.R.I, he has access to some pretty nifty tech. "Guess knocking is out of the question," he says, pulling out a circular device that he attaches to the metal. A few lights turn on and then the airlock opens. "And we are go for entry. Ensign, get to a safe spot and wait for my signal." "*Roger,*" the black U-wing then silently goes off towards the asteroid belt. We step inside; the walls are sterile grey, typical of the old Empire. The Infiltrators check their wrist units for life signs. "All clear," the Chiss says. "Ok, here's the plan," Navi says. "My Rancors and I, we're Bravo team. We'll go take out station

defenses and communication, that way when the rest of the fleet gets here, they won't get jumped. Major Sinan, you two will be Echo Team, set charges in the docks. We need to prevent them from reinforcing their fleet. Master Valdarin, you do what you need to." Navi says before she and the ebon-black armored Rancor Troopers slink off down the left hallway. Amminius dons his recon helmet and he and his partner go right towards the drydocks. I reach out in the Force and feel a slight tug. There's a Praetor in charge here, one of the weaker ones by the feel of it. I unhook my saber and head off in the direction of the presence.

Amminius Sinan – Terminus, Outer Rim Territories

17 ABE

Our cloaked UT-62D takes us in towards the target nice and slow, weaving in and out slightly, just in case high frequency sensor probes are lurking out in the star field. I whistle softly, marveling at the sight. Intel was right. Terminus *is* a busy place. And not in the good way. It definitely wasn't this busy when our guys stumbled on the shipyard there a few months back. I wonder how all the traders and other beings have kept quiet about it. Terminus sits at the intersection of the Corellian Trade Spine and the Hydian Way; a major socioeconomic center. Probably under pain of death, or something much worse. Maybe the planet's inhabitants are barred from leaving. We silently pass underneath a flight wing of TIEs in formation, no doubt on patrol for would-be troublemakers. I smirk, giving the unsuspecting crafts a little wave out the viewport as they fly over us. I return my attention to the station, where three *Predator* Mark II-class SD's sit in dry dock. Several more patrol the station perimeter and the planet below, mixed in with a couple of older *Praetor* Mark II Battlecruisers.

As the station draws nearer, I begin donning my specialized suit, good for up to half an hour in the vacuum of space. Navi's Rancor Assault Troopers do the same, checking the charges on their X45As. Cade suits up as well, his space suit an ebon-black color, like mine and the others. I look to my partner, a blue-skinned Chiss named Zuze'atuli'lotthir, or Zeatuli, for short, and grin. "I see you're up to date in the latest of fashions! I hear that the bloated Imperial pilot look is all the rage on Coruscant." He grins back. "Not too shabby looking yourself, sir!" One of the Rancor troopers lets out a chuckle. The other Infiltrator fireteam, commanded by Eeth Brangwin,

laughs. "It won't win any beauty pageants, but it's functional," Captain Navi remarks, slipping on her helmet. "You'd think NRI would have some credits to spare on making it look nice," I comment to the others, getting chuckles all around. Zeatuli rolls his crimson eyes. I shove him good-naturedly and continue to get ready, slinging my GE-26N, an updated version of the Alliance Needler Carbine, over my shoulder by its strap. I toss my vibroblade once, an ornate hunting blade given to me by Gerik Ordo, before sheathing it near my shoulder on my FlexArmor. Zeatuli hefts a dangerous looking Merr-Sonn Munitions SWS-1013 Projectile Launcher. Just in case we need some extra firepower. Or half the shipyard destroyed. But that comes later. Wordlessly, we line up in two rows in front of the bay doors. I quickly check over my rifle one last time. With a whir, the bay doors open, revealing an unobstructed view of the starscape. "Pretty," one of the Rancor trooper's comments.

"Countermeasures are active," the pilot informs us. "Go, go, go!" With that, we fall out towards the station, Navi and her guys taking the lead. Zero-g always feels weird, even after training in it for months. We use our thruster packs to maneuver and gather near an outside bulkhead. "Guess knocking is out of the question, with this being a stealth mission and all," I comment, my voice sounding loud through my helmets' speakers, removing from a utility pouch a circular security bypass device, planting it on the bulkhead hatch. The device beeps and whirs, its lights going from red to green. System bypassed. We're in. "And we are go for entry," I comment aloud. "Ensign, get to a safe spot and wait for my signal." "Roger," the pilot responds, and the UT-62D silently slips away, heading for an orbiting asteroid belt. He'll be safer there than here.

Zeatuli and I put our shoulders against the hatch and push until the door opens. We gather inside the outer airlock. Brangwin's fireteam closes and seals the hatch. "A bit drab in here," he comments, "but then again, this is the Imperium we're dealing with here." The gray interior reminds me of a Star Destroyer. Brangwin's team and I check our life form scanners mounted on our wrist gauntlets for activity on the other side of the hatch. Nothing. "All clear," Zeatuli reports. Captain Navi takes charge. "Ok, here's the plan," she relays in a hushed tone, "My Rancor's and I, we're Bravo team. We'll go take out station defenses and communication. That way when the rest of the fleet gets here, they won't get jumped. Major Sinan, you and Brangwin will

be Echo Team. Set charges in the docks. We need to prevent them from reinforcing their fleet. Master Valdarin, you do what you need to." Brangwin and I nod in understanding, as does Cade. We carefully unseal and open the last airlock, emerging into a wide empty hallway. Navi and her men go left, and Brangwin, his partner, Zeatuli, and I go right. I look back to see Cade standing motionless for a moment before heading off to follow Navi. I raise a hand in a silent good luck. He nods and does the same. "Let's go crash a party," I say, un-slinging my needler carbine.

We move stealthily down the drab, viewport-less hallway towards the drydock, constantly on the alert for security personnel or troopers. Several minutes pass without a disturbance. We emerge from another side room we had checked and continue down the main corridor. "Maybe they're all on a caf break," Brangwin's partner comments quietly. "That's probably it," I affirm, looking around. The silence is giving me the shivers. Are there Sith Juggernauts here? Those disgusting monstrosities engineered by the Imperium. Eventually, we reach the end of the corridor and come to a heavy blast door. Intel says that this door leads to an overseer platform above the drydocks. We stop outside and scan for lifeforms. Our reading shows us that there are at least twenty beings on the other side. This'll have to be quick. We don't want them alerting anyone. I signal the others with my hand, and then press the button to open the door. As soon as the doors part, we're inside and firing our silenced blasters with expert precision. I take down two troopers with my needler, the metallic compound rounds piercing their armor easily. I hear the slightly muffled *whoomp* of Zeatuli's SWS going off. It all happens within thirty seconds. All enemy personnel are down. We move their bodies into a maintenance closet and proceed to the turbolift that will take us down to the dry dock.

. . .

With a metallic *thunk* the last charge is set. I twist the lever on the top to set the detonation time. *Phew*. "This explosion will be truly magnificent!" Brangwin says with a grin. "Oh yeah," I agree, "not even magnetic tape will fix these boys when we're done." I raise my wrist commlink to my mouth. "Bravo Team, this is Echo Team. Objective complete. Charges are set to go off in twenty standard minutes, or whenever I feel like pressing the remote. Heading to the rendezvous." I turn to the others. "Let's make ourselves scarce!" We move along a small catwalk underneath the drydocks, the giant

frames of the Destroyers looming above us. Our entire time here, we only ran into slight resistance from security and other personnel. I hope the others are alright.

Cade Valdarin - Terminus System, Imperium Shipyard: Target Alpha 17 ABE

Six hours later . . .

The journey to the pinnacle of the station has been eerily silent. There hasn't been a soul the whole way here. One would think security forces would be here, at least dockworkers. That can only mean one thing, that this whole thing was bait. Pravus let the Infiltrators find this place; he wanted us to come here. But why, if the data here can point to a weakness in the Imperium, why would he want us to find it? In order to be a challenging opponent? I stand outside a heavy durasteel door. On the other side, I sense a Praetor, a Dathomirian I think. She's one of the weaker ones but like all Praetors, a seasoned warrior who no doubt has some hidden strength. I gather the Force around me and unleash it on the door, blasting it off its hinges into the room. I walk into the resulting dust cloud and hear the hissing of several Juggernauts.

There she stands. Like all other Praetors, she wears armor that mimics that of her master, Darth Pravus. Her armor is more of a deep red and purple than black; the mask looks like it mimics a Reek creature. "My master bids you welcome, I am Praetor Sheva." The woman says with an icy voice. I decide to forego the theatrics, "Let me make this simple: you lay down your weapon, you live. If you fight, I will kill you." She utters a mirthless chuckle. "Oh, Lord Pravus did say you aren't the typical Jedi." She backs up, letting the three Juggernauts shield her from view. Then she says the Sith word for attack, "*Charak!*" They lunge at me, howling their feral howls. To an ordinary soldier, this may be cause for panic, but not for a seasoned warrior of the Force. I hold up my hand, palm open to the threat, and reach out with the Force. Telekinetically seizing all three of their throats, I slam them hard into the permacrete floor, the helmets cracking open with the force of the blow. Sheva begins to pull her lightsaber out. "You can still surrender Sheva. I can sense your apprehension. You're scared, scared that you've been sacrificed like a pawn in a game of dejarik." That last comment got her attention. Like

all "dark" Force users, she gives in to her anger. Unlike the more experienced ones, however, she gives in with wild abandon, letting the rage blind her. She telegraphs her attacks. She lunges at me, parries, and then riposte. She comes at me again and again I parry the blow. We go back and forth exchanging blows, the electronics in the room getting cut to pieces by the duel. Finally, I lose patience. I launch a powerful barrage of Juyo-inspired strikes, the form fitting well with my belief that the "Dark" side is not of the Force but of sentient beings' creation.

Finally, it ends when I swing the blade hard right, she blocks but the strength of the blow, enhanced by the Force, bats her saber away to the wall. I swing my emerald blade back left to swipe diagonally from the right shoulder to the hip. It's a clean cut; the lightsaber leaves cauterized flesh at the shoulder. She lets out a death rattle and falls to the ground. I look down at the slumped body, shaking my head. Such a waste, Pravus will pay for this. He has these Praetors and Acolytes all worshipping him and willing to die for him. "Amminius, this is Cade. I'm done here. What's your status?" Nothing but white noise is the response. "Blast," I say out loud. That's when I hear it or to be more accurate, feel it. I look out the command viewport of the "late" Praetors' office, a large rose-red blossom of an explosion. "Jedi, come in! This is Captain Navi, we've set our charges here, moving to rendezvous site, have you heard from the Major?" I start for the door, "No Navi, I can't raise him on the comm. I'll meet you there." I attach my saber to my belt and take off down the hall, using the Force to augment my speed.

Several hours later . . .

I finally get to the rendezvous site and see the mess that has happened. Navi and her Rancors are being overrun, using shipping crates for cover. I enter the hangar on the second floor, overlooking the scene. I see the trooper in charge, his maroon-black armor and black cape a sharp contrast to the sterile gray walls, barking orders. *Zzoom*. I activate the blade and make the long leap down, straight into the middle of the Imperium troopers and begin to swing my blade left and right. An arm cut here, a leg cut there, even a decapitation. However I see the problem, we're like fish in a barrel in this hangar. "Navi, we can't keep this up!" I yell after cutting through a trooper's melee weapon. "I know!" She responds, after pelting a trooper with fire from her carbine. My danger sense flares and I turn around. A

Juggernaut has launched himself at me and I bring up the blade almost too late, but just then, a Cortosis composite needle strikes it dead in the face. I look to my left to see Amminius, his partner, and the two other Infiltrators exit a maintenance shaft, Needlers drawn. Amminius sees me there and they jump, I use the Force to slow their descent and they join us behind the crates. "We have to go now! Pilot, we need a pickup!" The acknowledgement comes back and soon enough, the black U-wing comes up to force field. As the updated U-wing was made with certain thoughts in mind, it has a device to breach force fields and shields with its forward mandibles. The pilot sets down, "Alright, ride's here and we've got to go before the Fourth Battlegroup shows up!" Amminius, being the commanding officer here, orders everyone in. I stand in front of the transport, blade swinging back and forth deflecting bolts from a renewed assault.

I see down the hallway a large group of security forces charging at us. The U-wing starts taking heavy fire on the hull, the pilot yelling obscenities about his baby getting hit. The incoming fire is getting too great for me to deflect and I feel some bolts singe my legs and arms. Navi, still in cover behind the crates looks at me and Amm, "You guys get out of here and we'll hold them off long enough for you to get out of here!" "That's a no go Captain, we are all leaving!" Amminius yells over the din, firing off several more needles. She fires a few more bolts and flings a grenade at the charging onslaught, "We won't make it! You have to get that data to Republic Command! We die in the name of the Republic." She and her Rancors charge up to the door, putting up a spectacular fight. The transport takes off and the last we see of the Rancors is Juggernauts swarming over them, impaling them with vibroblades. "May the Force guide them in the afterlife" I quietly say. Amminius is less reverent and punches the door, "Emperor's black bones, we could have saved them! We could have-" Zeatuli cuts him off by placing a hand on his shoulder, both knowing there was nothing that could have been done. It was either them or the data; the ruthless calculus of war. "Amm, you know there was nothing that could be done, all things are done by the will of the Force. Their sacrifice will not be in vain." "*Fleet incoming,*" the pilot says over the comm and we look out the viewport to see a massive fleet drop out of hyperspace; dozens of Mk II Starhawks, Nebulon-Bs, CR-99s, thousands of X-wings, A-wings, and B-wings, and Mon Cal Cruisers, at the head of the fleet is the massive *Viscount*, flagship of Admiral Kerex and the New Republic Navy. "*Major, did you get the data?*" Kerex's voice comes

over the comm, "Yes sir, we got it, heading to dock now." Amminius replies. Just then we feel the shockwaves emanate from the shipyards and we turn to see massive explosions rip through the station. I hear High Marshal Ponith begin ordering troop transports to the surface, the Starhawks taking their positions overhead and beginning to take on the *Predator*-class Star Destroyers that were on patrol. Amminius places a hand on my shoulder, "We've done well kid, Operation Wookiee's Fist was a success and the Republic has a foothold in Imperium territory now. We have a chance." The black of space gives way to the metallic walls of a hangar on the *Viscount*. As we exit the transport to upload the data, we see the massive space battle unfold through the force field. The New Republic finally has taken some Imperium territory for a change. The last thing Amminius says is, "This data will change the pace of the war. It implicates the other Remnants in aiding the Imperium and also, we believe, it has the location of the Imperium's capital. But it'll take time to decrypt. But we've done good kid."

Cade Valdarin - Fondor, headquarters of the Fourth Battlegroup

Four months later, near the end of 17 ABE . . .

I exit the transport, wearing robes inspired by my father, a Jedi swordsman. The robes resemble the traditional style on the tunic but ends at the waist, with a drape going down, partially covering the right leg . The only difference is I changed the color to black underneath while the primary color is grey, to show my commitment and faith in the Grey Force. "Alright, you're clear to enter sir," the private says after completing a security scan. "Welcome back Master Valdarin, High Marshal Ponith is expecting you." I thank him and head on my way. For the past month I've been involved in heavy fighting on the resource-rich lava world of Minos Korva, a planet vital to the Republic's ship builders. I find the command center and enter, immediately feeling a sense of depression, of spiraling courage. I look across the room to see the ever-familiar Bothan, Tor Ponith. The man is a mentor of mine, having been a father-like figure since I was a boy and raised by my aunt, Mon Mothma, after my Jedi parents were killed by Vader. He is currently reviewing a tactical holo when I walk over to him. "Tor, what's wrong?" He sighs, "I should've known I can't hide anything from you my boy. It's this war, I'm old confound it! I've been fighting for near over two decades you know. I'm thinking I'll retire after this war. If we win that is." I

shake my head, "Retire, you, the perpetual military man? Come on Tor, you are the father of the New Republic Army; you oversaw a weak military become a large, flexible, and powerful fighting force that is on par with any of the great military powers of galactic history, you can't just leave your legacy." He gestures me over to the viewport, "Ok, maybe not retire completely. I'm thinking of joining politics." This causes me to lift an eyebrow at him. He laughs, "Not a senator or chancellor or anything but a military aide to the Chancellor. I don't know if you've noticed but the Populists are gaining majority in the Senate and you know their stance. They believe in weaker central government and a weaker military and we all know how that has gone. Just look at the Old Republic right before the Clone Wars, they had no armed force to deal with the Separatist Crisis, or a year and a half ago, when Darth Pravus began his attacks, the army was barely able to keep up." I nod in understanding.

"So wait, what brought this thought on, something has you down, I can sense it." I tell him. He shudders, "It's Kashyyyk, Cade." I straighten up, "What happened, tell me Sal is okay, what about the Defense Force?" He places a furry hand on my shoulder, "Don't worry son, the Wookiee Defense Force is fine. But the rest of the Wookiees . . . Pravus attacked Kashyyyk with *Gorukar*. And I've seen Kashyyyk many times Cade, a lush green marble with beautiful beaches and rich forests. But after *Gorukar* attacked, it was horrible. The waters were still, dead Wookiees and animals on the ground, the majestic Wroshyr trees dead . . ." I look at him in horror, "Tell me some of them made it off-world in time." "Yes, they did, thanks to a civilian group calling themselves the Smuggler's Alliance we got two-thirds of the sentient population off-world, along with a good deal of animal life as well as flora and fauna samples. The Wookiees are natural gardeners so once they find a new colony world, hopefully they can rebuild a semblance of Kashyyyk. Poor Wodi, he was on the frontlines of Kashyyyk before we had to retreat off-world, and he went back to the surface after the attack, even though the after-effects of *Gorukar* are severely debilitating to non-Force-sensitives, not to mention deadly to Force-sensitives. He's been taking it hard so if he seems agitated, don't take it personally."

I sense a very familiar presence enter the room and turn to see Jevin Corso in his dress uniform, the rank insignia not showing Lieutenant General but Flag General, the mid-tier rank. "Jevin, you've been promoted!" I exclaim.

He gives me a bear hug, "You know it kid, I guess Command has finally realized my tactical brilliance," he says smirking at Tor. Jevin and I were in the major battle for Minos Korva and it was his unorthodox strategies that won the day. "So, Marshal Ponith, what's this I hear about retirement?" Tor chuckles, "Easy boyo, the next High Marshal will be Garm, you're after him and besides, you-" he is cut off by the sound of alarm klaxons. Wodi rushes into the command center, "Marshal, you need to see this." He inputs a code on the holo map and a threat projection comes up. Tor's aide, a female Dathomirian, exclaims, "It's the threat satellite system. There's a massive force heading for the Core Worlds."

Tor turns to me; his military face is on, "Cade, threat assessment. Let's say Darth Pravus uses *Gorukar* on the Core Worlds, what would we be looking at?" I shrug, "Best case, he just gains a lot of Force energy and becomes more powerful. Worst case, he becomes near invincible, able to crush fleets and armies in a thought, destroy whole worlds in the blink of an eye." Shaking his head, Tor punches a code onto the holo, this code affects a direct communication to the Chancellor. A blue holo pops up of a Soccoran male, Chancellor Hassan. "Chancellor, sir, a massive Imperium force has broken through all our blockades and is heading for the Core. On the recommendation of Master Valdarin and Skywalker here, I recommend we send a force to their likely target: Atrisia." The Chancellor agrees and states he will communicate with the leaders of the Coalition; with Choral, Chieftain of the Wookiee Defense Force, with Gerik Ordo, Commandant of the Mandalorian Protectors, and with Respin, General of the Espirion Navy. Luke lays a hand on my shoulder, "The Force will have to be with us now, if Pravus takes any Force energy from the Core...well it's the most populated area of the galaxy, even a fraction of the energy would make him immensely powerful." Tor looks up from briefing his subordinates and looks to Flag Generals Jevin Corso and Tav Voren, both the executive officers under their respective High Generals for the Fourth and Second Battle groups. "You two, come with me, the Fourth and Second are going to Atrisia. Cade, Luke, meet us in the hangar when you're ready, the Rapid Assault Force is already mobilizing, it'll take a while for the full force to get there but we need defenders there now."

. . .

We get to the hangar and I see an eye-opening site. Hundreds of people are gathered there: Mandalorians, Wookiees, New Republic Soldiers, Espirion naval personnel . . . and at the middle of it all is High Marshal Tor Ponith, supreme commander of the New Republic Army. Unath Kerex, Fleet Admiral and supreme commander of the Navy is there as well. "Soldiers of the New Republic, members of the Coalition, listen up. Not too long ago, we detected a massive Imperium force heading to the Core World of Atrisia. Now according to our Jedi friend, Cade Valdarin, if *Gorukar* attacks Atrisia, that means the end of the New Republic and the return of tyranny and oppression." He makes a gesture behind him as a massive shape exits hyperspace. It's not the *Viscount*, flagship of the New Republic fleet, but it's a Super Star Destroyer. "This is the former SSD, *Ravanok*, sister ship of the *Ravager*. Now she is the *Salvation* and she'll be leading this assault. Your commanders have all been given their orders, report to them for your individual assignments. Now let's move out!" There's a loud chorus of cheers and roars. We all begin to board our respective ships, most of the Republic personnel board the *Salvation* and the Starhawks but some join Mandalorian forces or the Wookiees and Espirions. As it turns out, Jevin, Wodi, and I board a Wookiee Assault Cruiser. "Well, together again at last." Wodi says, his hand trembling, it must be his post-traumatic stress acting out, seeing all these Wookiees, but he seems to be working through it. "Too long if you ask me, Colonel," says Jevin. As Flag General of the Fourth Battle Group, Jevin is one of the overall commanders of this assault force, being under only Kerex, Ponith, and Bel Iblis. We walk into Choral, Chieftain of the Defense Force, and Salurra. "Sal!" I yell, the massive carpet giving me a bear hug. The group laughs. I cross my arms and say the blessing of *May the Force be with us*. The Coalition Fleet jumps to hyperspace to fight the war on the homefront.

Flag General Jevin Corso - Atrisia

17 ABE

Six hours into the Battle of Atrisia

Well, the situation at Atrisia de-escalated quickly. It started when the fleet dropped out of hyperspace; the Imperium force was massive and surrounded the planet. The Atrisian Assault Corps is a competent force and has won many battles against larger foes but the Imperium is relentless. The

good news, Gorukar isn't here. The bad news is the Imperium's flagship, the *Insidious*, is. That SSD has been pounding the Coalition fleet; already several ships were vaporized by its long range guns. Gerik and his Protectors have been taking the brunt of the battle, acting as vanguards while the NR forces fight their way planetside. I see Cade standing there with his eyes closed.

I touch his arm, "Cade, you alright?" With his eyes still closed, he says in a hushed whisper, "He's here." Luke nods his head, "Pravus is on the surface and is calling us through the Force, he's challenging us." I nod my head.

Choral walks over to us and hands me a holo-device. "Thanks Choral, let's see what the plan is." Wodi comes over from the viewport, "Better have a good plan boss, it's a mess out there and the *Insidious* is tearing our forces to shreds." I place the device on the floor and out pops a hologram, life size, of High Marshal Tor Ponith and Fleet Admiral Kerex. This battle should be a good one; two of the greatest tacticians in the Republic are here, plus the legendary Choral and the fearless Gerik Ordo. Static. "General Corso, do you read me?" "I read you Marshal, what's the plan?" More static and white noise, "We need boots on the ground; Jevin, you're going to lead a ground assault. You and the Forty-First Battalion will take the Atrisian Palace. We need to save the Atrisian Emperor." Cade steps up, "Sir, that's also where Darth Pravus is." Tor nods, "Then the palace is the focus of our attack. The rest of the assault force is coming, along with the *Salvation*; the fleet will focus on the *Insidious* while the Thirty-Second Guard Division and Twenty-Seventh Armored Cavalry will join your forces planetside." I look to Cade, "I really hope you can do your "oneness" thing here, we are going to need it." "I'm ready," he says with a fierce gaze.

. . .

We stand in the hangar, several Wookiee snubfighters around us, intricately crafted ships with Wroshyr wood finishing, and the last of the Wroshyr wood until the Wookiees find a new world and grow more trees or they reseed Kashyyyk and rebuild their world. Wodi and his SHARCs finish gearing up and he slaps a fresh power pack into a Z7 rotary gun and a sling of detonators over his shoulder, "You sure you up for this, old man? It's been awhile since you've been in the field." Wodi is the only soldier under my

command who can talk to me like that; we've been through a lot together. "Don't worry, Wishbone. I'm always ready for a fight." Gavin Skyes walks over to us, his black Rancor Assault Armor gleaming under the lights, "Hah, "Blastzone" is back!" Jevin shakes his hand, "Lieutenant, I'm expecting you to take down some ships today." Gavin smiles and puts his helmet on, heading to a boarding shuttle, designed to cut through starship hulls and insert the troopers into the ship. We enter our own transport, a GR-80 troop transport.

"We are go in five, four, three, two, one. Lift off." I step on top of a crate, using Salurra as a balance. "Alright, listen up! Today we fight not only for Atrisia but for the New Republic itself. Never before have we seen an enemy like the Imperium but never before have they seen soldiers like you. I would be honored to fight beside any of you anytime or anywhere. With you on our side, and the Jedi, we will win this battle and this war. Long live the New Republic!" A rousing HOOYAH sounds on the deck, Salurra gives a mighty roar and our guest of honor, the mighty Chewbacca, lends his voice to the roar, making us all feel like we are invincible.

The transport makes its way towards the ancient Core World which, according to Cade, is permeated with the Force so it's strange why Pravus didn't bring *Gorukar* here. But I'll take whatever good news I can get. I slap on my chest armor and strap my blast helmet on, loading a fresh power pack into my X45A rifle. Looking out the blast-protected window, we see the silhouette of the *Insidious* pass us by, the purple colored laser fire from it lighting the black of space. The ship, like all of the Imperium vessels, is a hybrid of technology, a marriage of reverse-engineered Sith tech and Imperial tech, the hybrid being something much more powerful. Even the *Resurgent*-class ship plan that was found during the raid at Terminus a while back wasn't as powerful. Speaking of the data, ever since we discovered that the other Remnants; the First Order, Graal Hegemony, and Black Nova Pirates, were helping the Imperium on the sidelines, they have now began openly fighting us. A swarm of Black Nova ships swoop by on an intercept course for our ship. "*This is Blade Leader, we've got your back!*" A trio of B-wing fighters blast their way through the ships, leaving nothing but fused metal in their wake.

A few more tense minutes and the shuttle touches down on the surface of Atrisia. Already we can see the damage the Imperium has caused; buildings in smoking ruins and charred grass, bodies lying on the ground. Everywhere, U-wings are touching down, disembarking troops as they land. From another GR-80 come several of the new T5-B tanks, heavy battle tanks that are even a match for the advanced AT-AHT the Imperium uses. Wodi cheers, "That is what I am talking about! Finally, we get to bring in the heavy hitters!" I see Cade again looking like a stoic Jedi in his Grey robes, looking like he's lost in thought. "Cade. Cade?" He looks at me, "I'm ready to fight Pravus. But I will warn you all, Darth Pravus has reached a level of power that not even Sidious had reached; if I can't stop him, it will fall to Luke, if Luke can't, you're screwed." We all begin marching toward the Atrisian capital and palace, some of us hitching rides on top of the T5-B tank. In the distance the sounds of a tense ground war begin, explosions visible here and there. A flight of Mandalorian fighters swoop by and out of one of them, Protectors jetpack toward our army, led by a green and black clad warrior, Gerik Ordo. This will be a defining moment for the New Republic in this war.

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix – Atrisia, Core Worlds

17 ABE

Day Two of Atrisian campaign

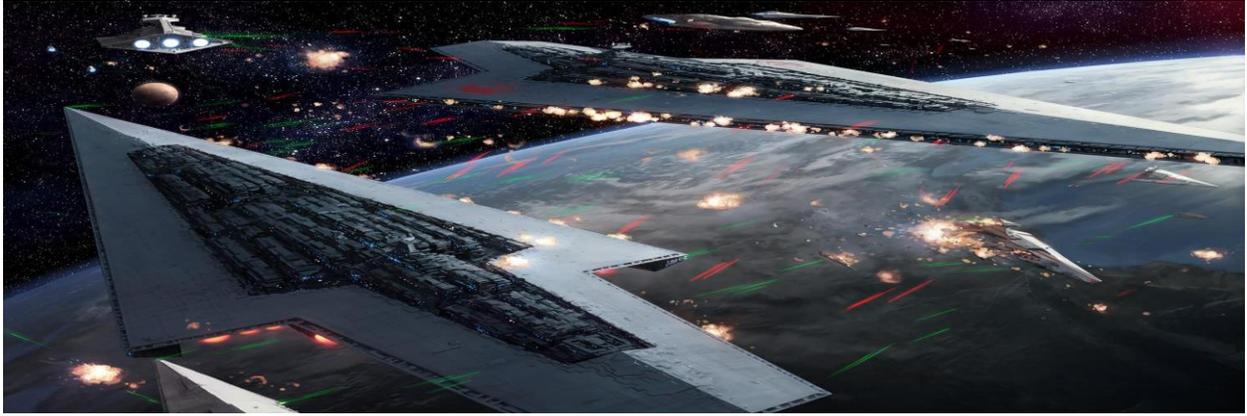
"Brace!" A high intensity mortar round goes off near a blackened duraplast building on a street corner a few meters from our entrenched position, sending chunks of pulverized duraplast flying in all directions, pelting us with white dust, mixing with the haze. I throw myself to the hard ground, covering my head with my arms, my ears ringing. A few guys from the Twenty-Seventh are sent careening. "Come on, shake it off! Get back in it!" Blaster bolts whizz through the air, striking all manner of objects, creating even more dust and smoke. Several find their mark. "Soldier down! Get a combat medic here! Deploy that FX-7 med droid!" Fighters shoot by above us, a trio of X-wings by the sounds of their thrusters, firing their laser cannons at an escaping wing of TIEs. A few seconds later, I hear the tortured whine of a damaged TIE engine followed by the noise and heat of an explosion. Mark down. I duck down, reload a fresh power pack into my blaster and continue firing.

After our miracle landing on Atrisia, given the size of the Imperium fleet stationed there, not much has improved. We've been holding this position, barely, for at least two days against a relentless Imperium defense. Our casualty numbers are rising by the hour, and as far as I can tell, we haven't even run into Pravus or any of his Dark Side cronies. I've heard further down the line that things aren't going as well. Many of our heavy tanks were taken out even before they reached their targets, and our starfighter wings are dwindling. I haven't heard from Jevin or his guys since the attack started. A battered lieutenant makes his way down the line over to me and touches my arm, bringing his mouth close to my ear, his beard stubble tickling slightly. "Sir, Imperium forces are still holding at blocks three, eight, ten, twelve, and nineteen. Reinforcements are pouring into the junctions at one and fifteen. We can't get past their heavy cannons and blaze a way to the palace. Our guys are being cut down left and right! The T5-B tanks are having quite a time with the walkers, and our Mandalorian friends aren't having much luck either. They're reporting many casualties." He winces as a blaster bolt sails by particularly close to his helmeted head. "Kriff!" "Any good news?" I shout, lining my sights up on an Imperium stormtrooper not in cover. BAM! "Corso and his troops are making their way towards our position to reinforce us. They've captured and held several city blocks, but can't break through to the palace either." "When do you think they'll get here?" Asks Nom Carver, ducking down beside me, breathing hard, his face and uniform caked in dust. "Not sure," the lieutenant replies, "but if they don't get here soon, there'll be nothing left to reinforce!"

A detonator blast throws several of our guys off their feet screaming, arms and legs flailing. The lieutenant hurries off towards them, a portable medkit in his hand. Carver and I make way as two soldiers quickly maneuver a portable hover-gurney with a badly wounded man strapped to it. I avert my eyes. "Come on, push harder!" "Aagh!" I trade fire with a stormtrooper, sending him crashing to the ground in a heap. His comrades take pot shots at me, but they too are quickly eliminated. "Get those mortar launchers up here!" Three men to my right are sent flying backwards, smoking holes in their chests, from an unseen E-web cannon up in a shattered window. "Watch that turret," I yell, arming and lobbing a thermal at the trooper manning it. More of our guys are cut down by blaster fire. "The right flank is on the verge of collapsing! We need reinforcements!" I duck down again, checking my chrono impatiently. Where is Jevin?

Cade Valdarin - Atrisia
17 ABE

Three days later





"Heads up!" I hear a soldier yell as an AT-AT lumbers into view. "Jevin, we need to move!" I yell. The grizzled vet grunts as he pulls a vibroknife out of a Juggernaut, "I know, let's move out" The soldiers begin filing into the trenches to avoid laser fire, all the while mortars are hitting left and right. I see Luke jump towards our position, back from his scouting trip to the palace. Jevin replaces the clip on his X45A, "What have you got, Skyguy?" He deflects a laser away from Jevin, "You want the bad news or the worse news first?" The three of us make the end of the column, going into the trench, the occasionally T5-B tank rolling over the trench, slowly moving to the front to provide heavy fire support.

"What's the worse news?" Jevin says, having to cup his hands to be heard over the treads of the tank overhead. "Well, we may be doomed" Luke yells back, "As I left, Pravus exited the Palace, and I think he's coming this way!" I hear Jevin make an audible sigh, "What's the bad news?" Luke chuckles a little, "The bad news is the palace is being torn apart by the fighting." We keep moving in the trench when we hear the sharp whine of a TIE fighter losing control. I look up and see one of the new TIE Stalkers falling towards us, the engines shot out behind it. I lift my hand and grab the falling wreckage with the Force. Unfortunately, it has too much velocity to stop and so Luke raises a hand, telekinetically pushing the troops in front of us

forward. The wreckage smacks the ground in a fantastic explosion of fire, refuse, and dirt.

Jevin's aide-de-camp, Major Barkley, jumps over the wreckage, coming over to us. "Sir," he yells as the thumping sound of the MPTL's launching their torpedoes sounds. "The division is in position, but Colonel Quix and the SHARCs are slowly losing ground." Barkley pulls Jevin up after being knocked down by the impact. "Good, get the snipers in position and tell Colonel Avis to get her troops ready for close-quarters combat, we're getting in close." Barkley nods and runs off toward the top of the hill overlooking Wodi's position. We round the bend and see the snipers setting up, their pulse cannons set on durasteel tripods set into the ground for stability and some pulling out slug throwers. A bit down the hill, we see the soldiers attaching vibro-bayonets to their rifles or drawing vibroswords. Jevin gets to the hill in and gives targets to the snipers while giving Avis a hand signal that she repeats to her group. Suddenly, the troops hop the trench wall rushing towards the SHARCs' dwindling line while green pulses from the snipers flash around us. Several soldiers fall to Imperium blasters, a Rodian next to me takes a bolt to the face, instantly falling towards the ground. Overhead, we can vaguely see the silhouette of the renamed SSD *Salvation* going broadside with the *Insidious*, the sounds of the turbolasers can be heard faintly over the sounds of the ground battle. The *Viscount*, under Kerex's command, is leading the charge against the Orbital Defense Stations that the Imperium manage to take control of. I hope Admiral Antilles can either keep the *Insidious* engaged or take her out.

Jevin throws his knife towards an oncoming Juggernaut, so expertly thrown it hits it dead in the face, the vibrations of the knife chewing through the armor. I deflect several blasts back to their sources while hopping into the trench Wodi is in. I can feel the tension of the troops, the adrenaline rushing through all of them as the intensity of the fight continues. Wodi unleashes a full clip with his Z7 rotary and then turns, "Glad you could stop by Blastzone!" Jevin nudges in next to him, taking aim with his rifle and blasting a Sith Acolyte in between the eyes. "Wodi, we've got to move! Pravus is coming here, to our position. We need to fall back!" I jump down next to them, sheathing the lightsaber, "No, if we let Pravus win here, he has a foothold in the Core; if *Gorukar* is used in the Core, then Pravus becomes even more powerful." Jevin gives me a look that screams he hates

losing people but agrees. He pulls his wrist up, activating the comlink on his wrist device, "Blade Wing, we need a bombing run at these coordinates!" A few seconds later, the roar of B-wings and Y-wings fill our eardrums and we see the flight group screaming towards the ground. Next we hear Captain Avon say, "*Danger close, repeat danger close!*" and the fighters let loose their proton bombs, the blue orbs almost gracefully falling towards the advancing line of Imperium troops, their black armor glistening in the sun. The bombs hit dead center of their line and we hear a whirlwind of fury.

In the distance, we can see a troupe of Protectors and Berserkers advancing into the palace grounds; the absence of Pravus must have taken away some of its defenders. I can faintly see Gerik engage three Juggernauts in combat with his *Beskad* and easily dispatching them. If only he was Force-sensitive, he'd make a terrific Blademaster. I also see Salurra, his bowcaster firing almost non-stop as he slams into trooper after trooper. Good, if they can make a hole in the palace defenders, we can dig in. The bombs kicked up a cloud of smoke and the soldiers at the front of the defensive line jump the wall. One of them, a bald human with a singed chest plate, looks back to us and yells, "Come on!" before a blood red saber strikes right through his abdomen. Suddenly two sinisterly armored figures appear through the smoke, one in dark blue-back armor with a demonic face mask and the other in steel gray armor with a more somber mask.



And then Luke and I feel it; that gnawing headache, that queasy feeling we felt when Pravus was nearby. And the smoke clears and we see him unmasked; his armor taking clear inspiration from Vader. His skin is charcoal gray and his eyes as black as night. Pravus has tapped into the stolen Force energy that *Gorukar* has taken. Deactivating the saber, the soldier begins to fall forward, still gasping for breath. However, mid-fall, Pravus flicks a finger and the body goes flying off into the distance. When he speaks, it's a gravelly sound, like the weight of the Force is behind it. "Finally, you have come. And you have increased your power, very good." He slightly nods to the left and right, "Lord Sheratan, Lord Xellius, take them." The two armored figures warp, using their distinct Force power and disappearing in a blink of an eye. We activate our lightsabers and warn everyone to stay back. It's hard to sense where they are. The good news is Pravus seems content to stay back and watch his students at work. Luke swings the green blade swiftly behind him, catching the red blade of Sheratan and preventing what would have been a decapitating strike for me. I raise a hand and blast force energy, knocking Xellius out of his warp. And an incredible duel ensues between Luke and Sheratan while I march towards Xellius, blade held low in the Juyo ready stance, held loosely and pointed towards the ground, ready to launch a ferocious offensive and to bring the blade up swiftly in a quick defense. I feel Xellius reach out to the Force again and he warps directly at me, blade held high. A quick move of the blade and I parry the blow, redirecting his momentum to the right. "You cannot win, Jedi," he says through his distorted voice. "It's sad Xellius. You can't see that you and all of the Praetors are pawns in his game." He laughs as he launches a flurry of strikes that I manage to block. "That does not matter. We fight for Pravus because he is the way to a true, ordered galaxy." A strange belief that an all-powerful Sith Lord, a follower of the Dark Side who uses his power not to protect and guide but to lord over others, is what is best for the galaxy. I launch my own flurry of strikes, using the ancient technique of Battle Mind, learned from my training on Tython, to constantly rejuvenate my stamina and remove the stress and fatigue of a continued duel. He slowly is losing ground.

Luke's duel with Sheratan is much less intense. Xellius is the higher Praetor after all, being the leading Praetor besides Ferus. I see Luke duck and roll out of the way of the red saber and turn to launch a force blast at his

opponent which is easily dodged. Sheratan warps again. But he doesn't go towards Luke, instead, he appears right next to Wodi. Luke starts to run towards him, hoping to block the blow but is too late. The red blade swings and slices through Wodi's left leg, severing it from the knee down. He lets out a howl of pain, a howl that makes me furious. I bat Xellius' saber to the right and launch a telekinetic blast at him, a blast so powerful that a non-Force user would have been sent careening into the distance. I hear a voice in my head, "*Inner peace, find the medium of your emotions.*" The voice belongs to my ancestor, Argus Valdarin, one of the only three Jedi to have experienced oneness with the Force while living and who taught me for six months on Tython. I can feel something from within, a power like no other that's rising to the surface. I turn and look at Sheratan and launch myself with a boost of Force energy towards him, only to feel a strong pull against me. I strain to turn my head and see Darth Pravus holding his hand out slightly and making a "tsk tsk" sound. Suddenly the hand moves and I go flying into the dirt near where Xellius landed. I glance up and see the two at it again in their duel, the green and red making an intricate mesh of color as the blades dance; Luke just can't seem to break his defense. But then something happens that it seems near impossible. A blaster volley rings out and hits Sheratan in the vulnerable spot of his armor under the shoulder; somehow, despite massive pain and shock, Wodi managed to upright himself and shoot his Z7. Sheratan stops cold, dropping the saber out of pain and surprise. Luke doesn't hesitate; he brings the blade into a horizontal sweep that cleaves Sheratan's head from his shoulders, the armored body falling to the ground. Meanwhile, I'm locked in a ferocious duel with Xellius, the fight going back and forth. He launches straightforward strikes at me that I manage to block and finally he swings his saber straight down from overhead; I move my blade to act as if I mean to parry the blow but when the blades almost connect, I deactivate the saber and side step quickly to maneuver behind Xellius. The move shocks him, the momentum of his swing causes him to be unable to quickly maneuver out of it and as soon as I end up behind him, I press the black metal hilt to the center of his back, activating the emerald green blade. He gasps and then falls silent and I pull the saber out, letting the armored body hit the ground. "Good, good," Pravus says in that eerie voice, before launching a red fan of lightning at Luke and the others.

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix – Atrisia, Core Worlds

17 ABE

Blast it, Jevin. We can't hold here forever! The Imperium, desperate to break our lines, have started throwing Sith Acolytes and Juggernauts at us. I dive to the ground as a volley of blaster bolts sails over my head, getting a face full of pulverized duracrete, trying to suppress my growing frustration. The air is thick with the throat rasping smell of discharged blasters, sweat, and singed flesh. Two soldiers from the Twenty-Seventh to my left get back up, bracing their rifle stocks against their armored shoulders. It's the last thing they do. Both are cut down near instantly in a storm of red. "Man down! Man down!" A soldier manning a blaster turret takes a volley to the head and slumps over, his head banging into the turret's durasteel frame. Three mortar men further down the line are sent sailing, their shells and weapons detonating, incinerating nearby troops in a white-hot fireball. A female soldier lets out a scream as she's jumped by two charging Juggernauts. Other soldiers attempt to pull them off, but they too are soon pounced upon. The tormented shrieks ring in my ears. I redirect my fire to take the creatures out. Blasted things! A combat medic rushes over to their position, kneeling to tend to a mauled soldier writhing on the ground. One of our guys arms and tries to toss a detonator. A second later, a blackened hole is singed clean through his blast helmet, melting the plastoid alloy. The grenade drops to the ground, still armed, near the dead man's boots. My eyes go wide. Kriff! "Grenade!" I shout, diving to the dirt covering my face with my hands. I hear the grunts of soldiers around me doing the same. BOOM! I'm pelted with pieces of stinging shrapnel. Stang that was close. I get back up and resume firing. "Where the kriff are our reinforcements? We can't hold out much longer!"

Suddenly, a green laser flies through the air, hitting a stormtrooper in the faceplate, sending his helmeted head snapping back. What the? More green bolts hit their mark, and more stormtroopers and juggernauts bite the dust. "Where's that coming from?" Shouts Nom Carver, looking to me. "Behind us," a soldier nearby yells excitedly, gesturing with his blaster. "It's the reinforcements! Corso's arrived!" I look behind me, and a wave of relief and joy crashes over me. Jevin's division rushes toward our position, their rifles up and firing, cutting down our opposition. Some fall to laserfire, hitting the

ground hard. The rest jump into our trench, filling in the gaps the Imperium troops had created, many brandishing vibroswords and bayonets. A familiar soldier quickly maneuvers his way next to me, his X45-A blaster rifle gripped tight in his gloved hands, his face caked with mud. I unload a volley with my rotary, ducking back down to grin at Jevin. "Glad you could stop by Blastzone!" Jevin nods, bringing up his rifle to take out a charging Sith Acolyte. "Clean hit," I compliment him, giving him covering fire as he reloads. Jevin grabs my forearm and squeezes, hard. "Wodi, we've got to move! Pravus is coming here, to our position! We need to fall back!" I freeze, my mind locking. Cade jumps into our trench, joining me and Jevin, his grey robes singed and dirty, batting away bolts with his lightsaber. He deactivates his weapon and clips it to his utility belt, leaning in close so he can be heard over the din. Nearby, I see Luke and Salurra jump into the trench as well.

"No," Cade says, shaking his head, "if we let Pravus win here, he has a foothold in the Core. If *Gorukar* is used in the Core, then Pravus becomes even more powerful!" "Then what are we supposed to do?" I shout, gesturing with my hand at the chaos around us. "We can't stand up to this onslaught!" As if to prove my point, a nearby soldier cries out, falling to the dirt, his helmet flying off his head, his weapon landing near Cade's boot. Jevin echoes my sentiment, giving Cade withering glare. Then, to my surprise, he nods to Cade. He agrees with him? "Blade Wing," Jevin says, bringing up his wrist mounted comlink, "we need a bombing run at these coordinates." He rattles off our position on the grid. I look at him incredulously. He shrugs, smirking slightly. "*Copy ground. Marking your position. Make sure you don't gaze up too much in awe and go blind!*" Soon, we hear the roar of ion engines as a combined flight of B-wings and Y-wings screams toward the target area. "Danger close!" One of Jevin's captains, a woman named Avon, bellows. "Danger close!" I cover my ears and brace myself. The fighters unleash their payload, proton bombs, and streak away, the onboard gunners providing covering fire. A second later, a wall of heat and noise washes over us, completely obliterating the advancing Imperium line. "Yahoo!" "Yeah!" "Go get 'em boys!" "Targets eliminated!" The proton bombs have kicked up a thick cloud of gray smoke and dust, but I can already see several stormtroopers attempting to push forward. "Come on! Let's get 'em!" As one, the soldiers at the front of our defensive line jump up

and over our trench, rallying. "Come on," one man turns back to shout at us, brandishing his blaster rifle.

I watch as a crimson lightsaber blade erupts from the man's armored abdomen. He stops, dropping his weapon, a mixture of pain and confusion on his face. Out of the smoke step two armored and masked figures, one in steel gray armor, the other in blue, both holding lightsabers at their sides. Praetors. And one of them I know all too well. My mouth goes dry. Our charging line stops dead in their tracks, the dust still settling from their thundering footsteps. A third figure, also in armor, steps out of the smoke, cape billowing, gripping the hilt of the saber that is through the body of the unfortunate soldier. "Pravus," I hear Cade whisper softly, slowly unhooking his lightsaber. A cold sensation washes over the battlefield. I'm sure everyone can feel it. Dread tickles the back of my spine, running up and down. I feel clammy. My mouth feels like Tatooine. I resist the urge to vomit. Pravus looks strange, as if he's bathed himself in the ashes from a fire. That's how gray his skin is. His soulless black eyes burn with an intensity I haven't seen before. No one moves but Pravus, who regards the soldier he has skewered with his dark gaze. My mind flashes back to Tatooine, where I first encountered Pravus, seeming a lifetime ago. With a hiss, he deactivates his weapon, making the soldier start to fall forward. Before the guy can fall flat on his face, Pravus lifts a hand, stopping the soldier's forward momentum before telekinetically tossing aside the dying man. Then he speaks, his voice sounding gravely and ominous. "Finally," he says, gesturing to all of us with a grand sweep of his gloved hand, "you have come. And you have increased in power. Very good." He nods to his two cronies, gesturing to us with the hilt of his lightsaber. "Lord Sheratan, Lord Xellius, take them."

And then they're on us. Sheratan and Xellius disappear from Pravus' side, but it's not too hard to figure out where they are. Screams of agony and surprise ring out as our advance force out of the trenches is hacked to pieces with strokes of crimson and magenta. Legs, arms, and heads fly. It all happens in a random blur. Too late for us to save them. My stomach churns at each new scream. Luke and Cade activate their lightsabers, the blades humming as they take their respective stances. "Stay back, unless you want to find yourself in several pieces." Luke warns us. Cade issues his own warning. "You don't need to tell us twice," Lannik Endel says near me with a

mixture of fear and awe, his rifle hanging at his side. A few agonizing seconds later, both Sith blades deactivate, and silence follows. There's a stretch of open ground where our troops had previously occupied. I have no doubt that the two Praetors lie there, waiting for the opportune moment to strike. Luke and Cade stand ready, blades up, scanning the surrounding area intently. Vzzzm! Suddenly, both Luke and Cade are locked in combat, with Luke fighting Sheratan, and Cade fighting Xellius. The rest of us stand dumbfounded, watching the scene unfold. Cade is an expert swordsman, excelling in both offense and defense, steadily wearing down his opponent with his speed and power. I whistle in appreciation. What I wouldn't give to learn some of those. Then blaster fire begins to come toward us, knocking down a few of our soldiers. Looks like the Imperium forces are mounting another attack. "Fire!" While I unload on the enemy with my Z7 rotary, I keep an eye on Cade and Luke. Both Jedi are holding their own, despite the Praetors attempts to put them off balance with their disappearing and reappearing. It appears Cade has been given the more skilled opponent. Lucky him. I blast a stormtrooper in the chest and lay down suppressing fire as Jevin lobs a sonic imploder. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Luke roll out of the way as Sheratan disappears, and reappears, only not next to Luke. I cry out in shock as Sheratan appears directly next to me, his crimson blade reflected in his dark mask. And then my leg bursts into white hot tendrils of pain. I scream, dropping my weapon and stumbling to the ground, my vision narrowing. My ears start to ring. Loud. Through the pain and noise I hear Cade and several soldiers cry out in shock and anger, although it appears distant, from far away. I look up to my attacker to see Sheratan hurtling away from me uncontrollably. Jevin and Endel are at my side, supporting my weight, shouting words of encouragement, that everything will be fine, but I barely feel their hands or hear their voices. My eyes are locked on something else. On someone else. Sheratan. He's fighting Luke, hammering him with attack after attack. My mind is beginning to go fuzzy. Slowly, I drag myself to the edge of our trench, hauling my Z7 along, the effort nearly sending me into unconsciousness through the pain. My mind clearing just enough to aim my heavy blaster, I depress the trigger. I stay upright for a few more seconds, watching Sheratan halt in his tracks, his saber falling from his gloved hand before I fall backwards onto the dirt, my vision going completely black and my body succumbing to the white fire.

17 ABE

Right before he hits the ground, Xellius warps away. He must have been about to teleport as I killed him. But he isn't the focus anymore. I turn my attention to Pravus; his visage is terrible, the charcoal grey skin and black eyes. "Well well, it seems you have increased your skills" he says. I begin marching toward him, green blade humming. He raises his voice, "Corso, keep your soldiers back, this fight is between me and Valdarin." I don't know if Jevin registered the command, his focus torn between laying down heavy fire and moving Wodi. Poor Wodi, hopefully he doesn't bleed out, I see a medic desperately applying a bacta band to the stump where his leg used to be. "Ok Pravus, you and me, the fate of the galaxy at stake!" I say as I raise my blade in salute. He returns the salute and then smirks and says, "You cannot win, you know."

And he rushes at me with such tremendous speed I barely have time to react. Our blades lock, sparks flying. He growls with anticipation at the fight. I duck and weave as the blades dance through the air. All around me, blaster bolts sail overhead. I see Jevin and Avon hauling Wodi toward the back of the defensive line as Wookiee berserkers begin to file into the trench, massive ryyk blades gleaming with the sunlight. Parry, thrust, riposte, parry, and spin away. The duel feels like it is taking hours but in reality only minutes. I hear the voice again in my head. *"Find your inner peace, calm your emotions. Only then will you experience oneness."*

We continue our duel, spinning and weaving our blades, when I feel a sharp pain in my leg. Pravus managed to cut my thigh, not deep enough to reach the bone but just enough to cause a superficial wound that burns like no other. I use the Force to shut out the pain, using the ancient technique of Battlemind and focusing solely on Pravus. I can feel the darkness radiating from him, the power of the tainted energy he has taken feeling like a nasty headache at the back of my mind. I manage to inflict several small cuts of my own against Pravus but the blows do nothing to slow him down.

"Back up!" I hear Jevin order. "Fall back, we're losing too much ground!" The Republic forces begin to fall back, while laying down an impressive amount of fire. Suddenly Pravus lands a hard hit on my saber, causing me to lose my footing. He seizes the opportunity and blasts my saber away with a force

push. Then he kicks me in the ankle, causing me to fall to me knee. Again, I hear the voice of my ancestor, Argus, in my head. Pravus maneuvers for an impaling strike but as soon as the blood red blade almost reaches my chest, I grab the saber; I literally grab it, using the ancient energy absorbing technique of Tutaminis. So this is what oneness feels like; I feel like a blind man seeing for the first time. The power is intoxicating and wonderful, yet terrible and disturbing at the same time. I look up to see Pravus with a look on his face that shows both astonishment and annoyance. He sheathes the blade, launching a fan of force lightning at me. This I absorb too, simply holding a hand up towards the lightning. Behind us, the tide has turned.

The Protectors forward line has reached Jevin's people and their combined firepower is too much for the Imperium troopers. Pravus spins away from me. "Good. Good, you have grown powerful. But you have not reached your full potential. I will not kill you yet. I sense your part in this war is not yet over, grow your power and continue your training. Soon, our paths will meet again and this war will be decided." He begins to turn, "But I will leave you with a parting gift." He raises a wrist, speaking into a comm, "Admiral Falen, move into position." Then he teleports, disappearing in the blink of an eye as the *Insidious* overhead begins to move. Then the SSD jumps into hyperspace, leaving a handful of *Predator* Star Destroyers in orbit. Four of them converge on a location and begin maneuvering for a base delta zero. Jevin hauls Wodi onto a nearby speeder. "Cade we need to move now! Those ships are prepping to bombard this position!" The soldiers are running away as fast as they can but they won't make it in time. "We have too many wounded, we can't get out of position in time!" I hear him yell.

When the time comes, you will achieve oneness. I close my eyes and just stand there, raising my hand. "Cade, what are you doing?" Wodi manages to yell despite the massive shock he is in. I picture the Star Destroyers in orbit, hulls glistening with the light of the system's star. Kerex and his Viscount Star Defender are too far away to intervene. Suddenly green fire rains from the Destroyers, hurling towards the planet. I reach out with the Force and begin to absorb the energy. My body immediately begins to ache; the power beginning to overload my senses. Even though the strikes are not aimed all at the same spot, I use the Force to make the lasers all come towards me, saving the troops behind me. I feel my body nearly begin to give out so I

release the absorbed energy into a massive telekinetic burst. The blast is so powerful that the ground around me becomes a crater. The burst hits the star destroyers, hitting them with such force that they roll over as if made of tissue paper. I seize them with a force grip and hurl them into the nearby star, the destroyers melting upon impact.

My arms drop to my side, my body is shouting in pain. Jevin runs up to my side along with Luke, "You all right kid? That was amazing! And the Imperium forces on the planet are in full retreat, we did it!" Luke is more concerned, "Cade, you okay?" I can't even respond the pain hurts so much. Before I know it, all turns black and I feel my body slam onto the ground.

Several days later . . .

I wake up with a jolt to a strange sight. I open my eyes to see a majestic forest, a clear sky with a purple tint. I look down and instead of the gray battle-worn robes, I'm wearing the traditional tan robes. "Welcome, young Valdarin," an echoey voice says. The image of Argus' spirit materializes in front of me. "We're on Tython," I say incredulously, "but that can't be right, I'm on Atrisia." Argus nods as we begin to walk towards Mount Veldan, into which the Second Jedi Temple was created. The temple was a major base of operations for the Jedi during the ancient Sith wars. "I'm not really here, I'm dreaming." I say. Argus takes a seat on an ornate stone bench overlooking the entrance to the temple. "I brought you here to tell you that a great moment is upon you. Soon, you will reach a power that very few others have ever known and even fewer have held. And with that power will come great temptation. You must hold true to yourself when that time comes. Soon, your war will end. You and Pravus are the shatter points; the fate of your nations and the fate of the galaxy will rest upon the victor." I look at the ghostly image, "Is there anything else you can teach me, ancestor?" "No, I have taught you all I can. Now it is up to you. Trust in your training, but more importantly, trust in yourself and in your friends. Now, wake up."

My eyes flash open to see an ornately decorated room. A stately hospital room, I must be in the Atrisian palace, I see portraits of Atrisian life on the walls. I hear the clicking of a metal prosthesis on hitting a stone floor. A familiar face pops through the doorway. "Cade, you're awake!" Wodi exclaims. "Wodi, I'm so sorry about what happened." He shakes his head,

"None of that Cade, I knew the risks when I signed on all those years ago. Besides, this won't keep me out of the action, I've already calibrated it for maximum combat capability. But let's talk about you. Was that your "oneness"?" I smile a little, "Yes, it was. Uncontrolled, but it was. And I can only get stronger from here on out." He nods his head in understanding. "So, you ready to get back out there?" I get out of bed, seeing the Atrisian gifts that were placed at the foot of the bed. The people must have given them as thanks for saving their world. "As luck would have it, I am. Sometime soon Wodi, this war will come to a head. And it boils down to me and Pravus; one of us wins, one dies and the war will be decided by that."

8 Months later...

Cade Valdarin - En route to Ringo Vinda

18 ABE

I watch the black of space roll by. I'm onboard the Mk II Starhawk *Warbird*, brand new off the assembly line. Ever since the battle at Atrisia, the Republic has been winning more battles. Independent worlds and systems that were content to remain on the sidelines joined the war on the Republic side. Although the Republic's win ratio has increased, the fighting has intensified. Worlds like Minos Korva, a Mid Rim lava world that generates a substantial amount of geothermal energy for many Mid Rim worlds, have seen a prolonged campaign that has lasted almost a year. Malastare has changed hands several times, falling to the Imperium, then being reclaimed by the New Republic. As for my training, I have increased my power to new levels and nearly achieved total control when I experience oneness.

I just turned twenty-six a few days ago. But there was no celebration as news came in that *Gorukar* had taken life away from three more worlds. Tangrene, Uuqbar, and Gamorr have all fallen, all life taken from them. All those species are now endangered thanks to Pravus. The war has been going in our favor though. I had just returned from a mission on Malastare that resulted in the liberation of the planet when the order came in. Republic Command contacted me with an urgent message; the Imperium had launched a daring attack on the Outer Rim world, Ringo Vinda.

Ringo Vinda is home to one of the few shipyards of the Republic capable of manufacturing the advanced *Viscount* Star Defenders. Other worlds include

Sullust, Kuat, Fondor, and Mon Calamari. Orbiting the world is a massive ring; a ring that serves as both a massive shipyard and a defensive space station. Of course, Republic Command wasn't going to lose one of its primary shipyards but all battlegroups were engaged at the time. So, the Rapid Assault Force, or RAF, was ordered to go to the world's defense and hold it long enough for reinforcements to arrive. I joined up with the RAF in order to help ensure the shipyard remains intact. Meanwhile, Jevin, Wodi, and the Fourth Battlegroup are engaged at Minos Korva. If the world is lost, that means a significant loss of energy for many Mid Rim worlds. Jevin told me he'll come to Ringo Vinda as soon as he can with all the reinforcements he can muster. For now, it's just me, Commodore Adail, and the lightly armed RAF.

Several hours later...

"All hands, brace for boarders!" I hear blaring over the intercom. The battle started out well, the RAF had managed to surprise the Imperium forces and attack them from behind. But then they focused their attack on us completely, leaving their own force of boarders to deal with the station. The RAF isn't meant for protracted fights, only swift engagements and we have already lost several corvettes and gunships. The Starhawks, of course, have managed to hold on despite massively being outnumbered. They truly are amazing warships, built to withstand punishment and dish out some too. *"Valdarin, report to the bridge."* A voice says out of my wrist comm. I don a light armored jumpsuit and run down the white scalloped halls towards the bridge, seeing navy security troopers running past me, X45s primed for a fight. Entering the bridge, I see through the viewport a trio of Starhawks moving to take a defensive position in front of the ring. But these battleships, while they can take a lot of fire, are not indestructible. I rush over to the Commodore at the holotable. "Cade, thank goodness you're still with us. We have intruders on decks six through twelve and they are moving through the ship." I look over the table; a holo-image of the ship is displayed with the boarded sections highlighted in red. "I can assist in repelling them." I say. Adail shakes her head, "No, I need you on that station; your skills will be much more useful there. We can handle the ship. Captain Skyes and his Rancors are standing by in the hangar. You'll take a *Katarn*-class boarding shuttle to the ring. Fight to the control center of the ring, from there, you can turn the ring's defensive systems on the Imperium

fleet. We'll do what we can to hold off the enemy until General Corso's reinforcements get here. Good luck."

I meet Gavin in the hangar, the man shakes my hand. "Good to see you again Cade. You ready for this? It'll be close quarters fighting all the way through the ring." His Rancors are equipping themselves appropriately, vibroblades, DH-24 carbines, and concussion grenades to avoid undue damage to the station interior. The Rancors, with their vacuum-sealed black armor, all file into the shuttle as I walk aboard. The shuttle takes off and heads toward the ring, dodging and weaving to avoid green fire from the Predators.

"All right Rancors, listen up!" Gavin says, his voice electronically distorted through the helmet. "The Republic has been increasing in victories ever since Atrisia but we can't give up now. This shipyard is a large producer of Starhawks and more importantly can create the behemoth Star Defenders. They have been working to complete the third Star Defender, the *Warhammer*. We can't lose it. Once we are onboard, we *do not* stop until we take that command station, understood?" A rousing HOOYAH sounds from the soldiers. I gaze out the cockpit to the edge of the system, hoping that Wodi comes soon, we can use the SHARCs onboard the ring and the Fourth fleet to mop up the space forces.

The shuttle reaches the hull of the ring without taking undue damage. The shuttle is meant for placing its nose against a metal hull, then using plasma torches to cut through that hull and creating a vacuum seal to allow the soldiers within to enter the station or ship. The shuttle takes off again, the pilot giving us a thumbs up before turning the shuttle back towards the *Warbird*. Brandishing my saber, Gavin and another Rancor place a breach charge upon the blast door. Gavin silently counts off with his fingers: three, two, one. *Boom!* We enter through the resulting smoke and the Rancors open fire as I deflect several red bolts back at Imperium soldiers. Several Juggernauts leap at us as the smoke clears; their presence here indicates that a Praetor is here as well. One of the last ones too, as we have killed nearly all of them. We enter a cargo bay area when Gavin shouts, "Grenade, get down!"

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix – Minos Korva, Mid Rim

18 ABE

This heat is really starting to get to me. But that's all Minos Korva is: unending waves of heat and lava. Our battlegroup had landed on the world's volcanic surface almost one standard year ago to reclaim an important energy refinery the Imperium had seized. The higher ups had informed us in the initial briefing that the refinery was a key component in delivering geothermal energy to several planets across the Mid Rim. They even explained the whole process to us. The energy is harvested from several thermal vents across the planet's surface, where it is then transported to and refined in the Korva Thermal plant via pipework and infused with a special concoction of chemicals before being sealed in giant durasteel tanks and shipped out in special barges. The number of confused looks and blank stares in that briefing room . . . The moment I stepped off the boarding ramp of our transport, decked out in red, brown, and orange magma gear, I was transported back to the Sullust campaign during the Civil War. Ash and smoke floated on dry drafts of volcanic air, coating our uniforms in a matter of minutes. I remember I broke out in sweat almost instantaneously. It was dripping down my back and underneath my blast helmet, running down my face and stinging my eyes. Volcanic landforms of all types dotted the barren landscape. The only thing missing were giant Imperial AT-AT walkers. We only had a couple of hours to establish a base camp and do reconnaissance before the Imperium struck. And then it all went downhill from there. Months of near-continuous fighting. Both their fleet and their infantry forces greatly outnumbered ours. The Korvan fields became littered with blast craters and debris. And bodies, so many of our own. But despite insurmountable odds,

we managed to turn the tide and reclaim the refinery, with a little help from sorely needed reinforcements and the Korvan natives. The Imperium is floundering. We can all feel it. They threw hell at us but we came out on top. Despite this obvious fact, however, our foes are not done. Not by a long shot.

"Wodi? You with us?" Jevin's voice brings me out of my thoughts, back to the present moment. I shake my head, grinning a little sheepishly. "Yeah, I'm here." I'm standing on the Korvan lava plains, watching the last of our forces pulling out. Troop transports come and go, taking with them grimy and weary groups of soldiers. I look on as a platoon of guys from the Fourth lead a column of shackled Imperium soldiers and officers to an awaiting GR-80. Their faces are dirty and downcast, their eyes locked on the ground they tread on. The ones who do look up have blank and hollow stares. Several New Republic soldiers standing near them laugh and jeer, brandishing their rifles and hurling insults. The Imps don't react. "Hey," Jevin says, cuffing me on the shoulder lightly, "you sure you don't need to get a psych eval?" I grin, shoving him off. "Are you kidding me?" Amminius says, sauntering over to place an arm around my shoulder, rapping my helmet lightly with his knuckle, "Wishbone here is in the best mental shape of his life! I bet he could even beat Lando Calrissian at a game of sabacc! You know what they say, 'wisdom comes with age.'" I laugh, stooping over and pretending to use my X-45 as a cane. "You just watch it sonny! You're not too young yourself!" Amminius gives me a questioning look, pointing to himself. "Me? Old? Ah, you're full of *poodoo*." Our group bursts out laughing. Jevin shakes his head, smirking. "It must be nice to get a seniors discount at the officer's bar!" Nom says, grinning. Gav tips back his head and mimes drinking. We continue to joke as we head over to one of the last transport ships. I walk up the boarding ramp, unclipping and removing my helmet, wiping away a trail of sweat. We seat ourselves and buckle our crash webbing. After a few moments, I feel the shudder of the ion engines firing up and look out the viewport to see the terrain of Minos Korva getting smaller and smaller.

Several hours later . . .

I sit in the temperature-controlled spacious briefing room of the New Republic Mark Two Starhawk *Accolade* along with Jevin, Amminius, and some of the Fourth, listening to the situation report on Ringo Vinda being

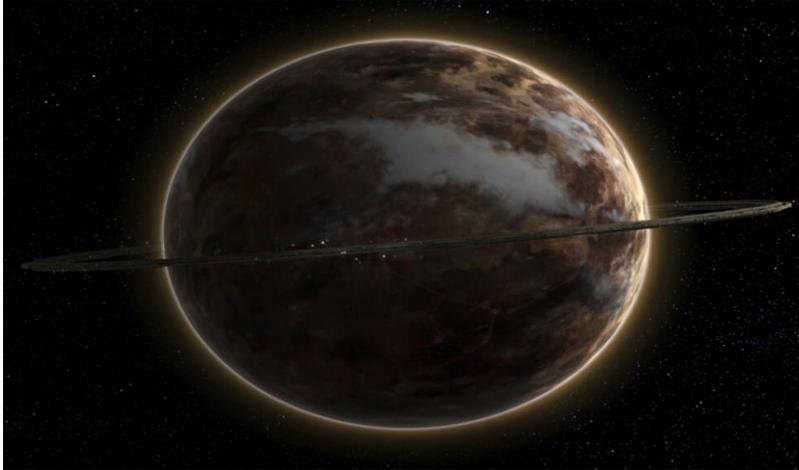
given by a tall, smartly-dressed Bith captain flanked by several officers, aided by a holographic display of the planet and the station. “. . . The Imperium forces boarded the orbiting defense station at exactly 09:00 and have taken control of decks three through eight, destroying factory components as they go with heavy weapons.” The corresponding decks in the hologram strobe red. “They now hold the ring’s control center. Our Rapid Assault Force, spearheaded by Jedi Valdarin, has engaged them and have managed to push back the Imperium fleet. However, the situation de-escalated quickly, and they are in dire need of reinforcements. I need not remind you, ladies and gentle-beings, that this station is key to the production of our Star Defenders. Once you are inside the station, push towards the control center hub, here.” The control hub strobes blue. “Once there, you will activate the ring’s defense capabilities, which will destroy the remainder of the Imperium fleet stationed there.” The holographic image of the surrounding Star Destroyers strobe orange and wink out. “To avoid unnecessary damage to the station, you are to go in using DH-24 carbines and concussion grenades.” I hear several murmurs of protest. Amminius leans in close and whispers in my ear. “That’s like using stun bolts against an array of turbolasers.” I nod in agreement. “Compared to Minos Korva, this will be a walk in the park.” I tune back into the briefing.

“. . . Your secondary objective is to ensure that our Star Defender *Warhammer*, still in construction, is not destroyed. We cannot afford to be set back.” The captain presses a button and the hologram disappears, the lights coming back on. “Any questions?” A pilot in a green flight suit raises a gloved hand. The captain nods to him. “Sir, what is the current strength of the Imperium fleet stationed around Ringo Vinda?” “When the attack started, the Republic security force stationed onboard reported five Star Destroyers, plus a compliment of light cruisers and fighter wings,” the captain says, folding his large hands behind his back, “as of right now, I cannot say how many remain. Our attempts to contact the Commodore of the Assault Force have been unsuccessful.” “Five Destroyers?” A female pilot sporting the insignia of Zerek Squadron pipes up, smirking. “What do they think we are? Amateurs?” A ripple of laughter rolls through the room. Amminius jabs me in the ribs and grins. I grin back. Once the laughter dies down, the captain continues. “Any more questions? The room is silent. “Alright,” the captain says, folding his hands behind his back again, “briefing over. Get to your ships and fighters. We are about to enter our last

hyperspace jump. I suggest you make ready. Dismissed." The room breaks out in small discussions as everyone gets up and files out of the briefing room. "This should be fun." Amminius remarks as we walk out with the crowd, swinging his arms and clapping his hands together. "Yeah," I agree, "DH-24s against heavy weapons? Brilliant!" "At least we have the element of surprise." Jevin says, weaving his way through a trio of hurrying flight technicians on their way to the hangar. "They're bound to expect that someone will come to assist our guys," I say, "so it's not much of a surprise." Jevin shrugs. "It's something."

We make our way through the crowded corridor towards the barracks and armory. "Hey fellas," a voice calls out from behind us. We stop and turn to see Captain Ethan Hawthorn and Lieutenant Allan Coates, the younger Coates working to keep stride with Hawthorn, making their way towards us. "Hey Hawthorn! Hey Coates!" The two are abruptly forced to flatten themselves against a bulkhead to avoid a collision with a group of jogging X-wing pilots. Amminius chuckles. Once the pair reaches us, handshakes are exchanged. "Some briefing back there," Hawthorn remarks, shaking his head. "Oh yeah," I reply, "this'll be a piece of cake." "Are you all recovered from Minos Korva?" Coates asks. "Mostly," Jevin replies, running a hand through his hair. "Although I'm still washing ash off my skin!" We laugh. We chat for a few minutes about random topics: the newest landspeeder model, the best ale at the bar, who said what about who, stormtrooper armor, starfighter pilots, the latest New Republic droids and ships. Our conversation is interrupted by the onboard intercom: "*Attention troops and pilots, attention troops and pilots. We have entered our last hyperspace jump. Estimated time of arrival will be in one standard hour.*" "Well," Amminius says, patting his personal comlink hooked to his belt, "I have to go comm Otara and let her know what's going on. I'm dying to hear the sound of her voice!" I smile. I'm just as eager to hear Amara's voice. "I'll comm Amara," I say, "and then I'll be down in the hangar to join you guys." "Drinks when we're through with this one?" Hawthorn calls after us, smiling. "Only if you're buying!" I shout back. Amminius grins. "See you two in the hangar," Jevin says, "and don't be kriffing late this time!" Amminius turns around and puts on a hurt expression. "Now Jevin, when have we ever been late?" I laugh. Jevin rolls his eyes in response and taps his chrono.

One hour later . . . Ringo Vinda



The *Accolade* exits hyperspace and starts its approach toward Ringo Vinda. Even from here, things look bad. Debris floats everywhere, and flames jut out of many of the Assault Force cruisers. And there are a lot of Imperium ships. I'm hurried into the transport by a flight officer. "Alright," Jevin says when we're all seated and the transport boarding ramp closes, "I don't need to remind you of what was said in the briefing. Let's get this thing done. Once we're aboard, we'll rendezvous with Valdarin and Skyes." Everyone aboard nods. With a 'go' from the flight officer, our transport exits the *Accolade's* hangar along with its escort and moves toward the orbiting station, dodging turbolaser fire. Other ships slip out of the bay. Starfighters streak by overhead laser cannons screaming, engaging one another, some exploding in brilliant balls of flame. "Target approaching," our pilot informs us. "Three minutes." I check the charge again on my DH-24, a nervous tic of mine. Full. Good, I'll definitely be needing it. Here we go. Hang on Cade.

Cade Valdarin - Ringo Vinda Station
18 ABE



"Fall back, fall back!" Gavin shouts through the helmet. "Sir, our reinforcements are here!" One of the Rancors shouts over the sounds of blaster fire. "The Fourth Battlegroup is here!" I look across the way to Gavin, "Then let's move up!" I throw my green blade into a group of Juggernauts, dicing them to pieces. I summon the blade back just in time to meet two Sith Acolytes' blades. We all parry each other, the two of them seething at me. The one who seems to be in charge speaks, "Finally, we meet the famous Valdarin. Master Pravus speaks highly of you." We shove each other away and they come in swinging at me like wild men. I'm able to easily block each blow and bob and weave between their blades. My powers have been increasing ever since Atrisa. Sidestepping out of the way of the leaders' blade, I cut a horizontal strike across his stomach, instantly letting out a death rattle and the body slumps to the ground. The second backs away; she's just a kid, thrown into this war without understanding her part in it. Even as bolts are flying all around me, I sheathe my saber. "Run and I will not kill you," I say in a somber tone. The girl is a fool, though, and launches herself in a wild acrobatic move to land behind me. She thrusts the saber right where my back was but I move fast, using the Force to augment my speed. Gavin takes the hint and fires his bowcaster dead into the small of her back. Even at only twenty-five, Gavin has become such a powerful figure on the battlefield, being one of the youngest to ever become a Captain in the New Republic. "Deck clear, move up!" He orders the squads.



We move closer to the command station for the whole ring when the corridor in front of me sounds with a loud bang and then a blinding explosion. Through the smoke, like some heroes of an epic tale, I see three figures emerge. I can easily sense the presence of Jevin, Wodi, and Amminius. Their group, including Ethan Hawthorn and Allan Coates, two soldiers of some repute, quickly gun down the Imperium troopers in their path. Jevin turns towards me, "You alright, kid?" I walk over to him, shaking his hand, "You made it, I knew you guys would come." Gavin hooks his bowcaster to his bandoleer, "Glad you could make it General. We've made good progress; the other Rancor squads report they have taken their target areas, all that's left is the command station." Wodi comes back from making sure the troopers are dead, "So, we have this almost wrapped up? That's a bit anticlimactic," he says with an exaggerated sigh. Allan, being the youngest of the group at the ripe age of twenty-four, pipes up and says, "Speak for yourself! This is the first time I've ever fought on a station." Gavin gives a hearty laugh; the Rancor Assault Troopers are specifically trained for combat on ships, on stations, and zero-g. "We'll make a Rancor of you yet!"

Amminius, in his slick black FlexArmor, returns from reconnoitering with his Chiss partner, Zeatuli. It's amazing how the man can talk in a jovial way, joking around with superior officers like Jevin and even High Marshal Ponith but when on a mission, all jokes fade away and he is deadly serious. "Way to the command sector is clear, sir, we have a straight shot, which I don't trust one bit." Jevin nods, "Agreed, it's too easy. Go with Zeatuli and take the engineers to the *Warhammer*, protect them and get that thing running. We get it behind the Imperium battle line, we'll be able to hammer them from both sides." He offers a crisp salute and slinks off with the Chiss, their FlexArmor designed in such a way that their movement makes barely any noise.

"Meanwhile, Hawthorn, take Coates and Johnson and go with Gerik and his Protectors. Focus on clearing the main hangar." Hawthorn, even though he is a hardened soldier, has never fought with a Protector. Jevin sees the slight shock on his face, "Don't worry, Gerik doesn't bite, and he'll teach you the ways of a warrior." Hawthorn nods and jogs off with the Mandos, the last we hear is an "Oya!" before they round the corner. Jevin looks to Wodi and they nod in agreement. Ever since Jevin became his commanding officer during the Galactic Civil War, they have become steadfast friends and where others call Jevin by rank as is normal, Wodi is one of the few in the military to call him by his callsign and nickname, Blastzone. "Cade, we're with you. Let's retake the command station and turn those turbolasers away from our ships and against theirs!" "HOOYAH," Gavin and the Rancors shout and we advance our way to the command station.

Meanwhile, the battle in space . . .





Admiral Antilles stands on the bridge of his new Mk II Starhawk, *Accolade*, his SSD having been destroyed during the most chaotic part of the nearly year-long battle for Minos Korva. He overlooks the viewport at the battle raging in space, the massive ring of the station in the background. Seeing a YT-2400 reminds him of the old days flying alongside the *Millennium Falcon* at Endor, only this transport is the *Phoenix*, the ship of the treasure hunter turned New Republic Specialist, Sonya Ravenclaw, a close friend and one-time romance of Cade Valdarin. "Sir, shields are at sixty percent! We aren't making any headway!" Wedge looks down at the holo-table, carefully examining the position of the ships of the Fourth Battlegroup and RAF. "Move the *Abolisher* and *Liberator* to position Aleph and Starhawks *Megador*, *Jackhammer*, and *Spirit* to position Bravo. We need to move our cruisers to block fire from hitting the station." "Yes sir!" Wedge smiles. He hasn't seen a space battle like this since, well, since Endor actually. It's funny; the New Republic was declining militarily, with crime on a rampant rise. But when the Imperium showed up and it was revealed Xander still lived, the Republic got

its act together. The many member worlds, where once they were more focused on their own worlds and people, joined together in a true union and the New Republic Military has now become one the most powerful and adaptive militaries in the galaxy. *Shoom.* A blue holo of the Quarren, Fleet Admiral and Supreme Commander of the Fleet, Unath Kerex, comes on, the image jumpy and staticky with interference. "*Wedge, how are you holding up?*" "Good Admiral, the Imperium is putting up a good fight but Corso just reported in. The groups have split up with the Infiltrators and engineers moving to the *Warhammer* while he and Valdarin lead the main group to retake the command station." More static, then, "*Good, the fight goes well on Mon Calamari, it looks like the Imperium is trying to take out our ability to create Star Defenders. I'll be expecting an update once the station has been secured.*" "Understood Admiral, may the Force be with you." Wedge turns back to the battle, inspecting the massive ships as if they were pieces on a dejarik board. *Cade, I hope you, Jevin, and Wodi can take the station, we'll need the firepower to take out the enemy fleet.*

Back on Ringo Vinda Station . . .

I finish cutting through the massive bulkhead door with the lightsaber and Force push the door into the room. We enter and a hail of blaster bolts fly toward us . . .

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix – Ringo Vinda, Mid Rim

18 ABE



We scrape by the flaming bridge of a Super Star Destroyer formerly in a blockade position, pieces of the durasteel giant breaking off and flying past our darkened viewport, some of them impacting our hull with dull thuds and clangs. Bodies and debris vent out of gaping holes on drafts of escaping oxygen. "Shield's holding." Our pilot informs us. We move through more debris fields, closer to the orbiting ring station. We pass by drifting husks of starfighters, their cockpits cracked open and their wings charred stumps, pieces of droids, sections of blackened hull from cruisers and corvettes, and the vac-suited forms of pilots, their exposed skin a bluish color, their lifeless eyes bulging. I try not to stare at the carnage and instead focus my attention on the rapidly approaching station. "One minute." I nervously tap my boot against the floor grating and hold on extra tight to my crash webbing. I look to Amminius seated next to me. His jaw is set, but he cracks me a smile and gives me a thumbs-up. I return his gesture and focus again outside. Nom taps Gav's arm and points out the viewport at the giant frame of the *Warhammer*, still in drydock. The Defender's outer hull appears undamaged, apart from some carbon scoring across several large hull plates. Good. That's one item on our checklist crossed off. Now we just need to make sure it stays that way. "Pulling alongside," our pilot says, his voice a little crackly with static, "extending docking ring in five." We all unbuckle our crash webbing and file over to the outline of the docking ring, priming our carbines. Jevin moves to the front of our group, shouldering his DH-24 by its strap. He takes out from his pants pocket an NR military-grade fusioncutter and hands it to me. I palm the familiar weight of the handheld cutting torch and hold it at the ready. "Docking ring extending." With a whir of machinery, the docking ring extends outward and attaches to the outer structure of the station, magnetically sealing itself with a high-pitched whine and hiss. The noise always sets my teeth on edge. The ring is tall enough for a soldier to stand up in. Jevin motions inside with his carbine, all business. "Let's get in there. Quix, up front with that cutter."

I nod and move forward with Jevin, Amminius moving in next to me, the rest of our group filing into the lighted docking ring behind us. Crouching down once I reach the station exterior, I depress the button on the fusioncutter's hand grip, a blue-orange plasma beam jumping to life. "Here we go." Jevin and Amminius step back, and I move the cutter's beam in a wide circle across the durasteel surface, making it large enough for us to clamber through. Amminius looks over my shoulder to admire my handiwork. "You

really need to work on your craftsmanship!" He says with a grin. I pause to look at him and roll my eyes. "You stole that line from Ordo!" "No, I did not!" Finished with my work, I flick off the plasma beam and lightly bang the fusioncutter against Amminius' matte black helmet, smirking. I hand the tool back to Jevin, who replaces it in his pocket. "Alright," Jevin says, "let's push it through." He, Amminius and I move to either side of the circle I had just cut. "On the count of three. One . . . two . . . three." On three, we push against the circle, grunting with the effort. After a few seconds, we stop. I look to where there should be a hole leading into the station. There isn't one. "Blast," Jevin curses, hitting the side of the docking ring with his fist, "the outer skin of the station is too thick. We can't cut through it." "We can always go in the old-fashioned way, sir." Allan pipes up from the back. "Perfect," Jevin says, his eyes lighting up, "Carver, get out a proximity charge." Nom moves to the front of our group, producing from his pack the explosive device, handing it over. Jevin attaches the charge in the middle of my circle, setting the timer. "Timer set for ten seconds. Get clear!" We quickly shuffle to the back of the docking ring. Even though my helmet is supposed to lessen loud noises, I know from experience that it isn't always great at its job, so I move my hands under my blast helmet and cover my ears, turning my body away from the proximity bomb. WHOOMP!

Smoke billows from the newly created hole in the metal surface of the station. "Go, go, go!" Jevin shouts. Our group swiftly climbs through the hole, emerging in a long clean corridor lined with teal tubular lights. A red blaster bolt whizzes by my head, striking the wall near the hole in the wall in a shower of sparks. "Stormtroopers!" I shout, bringing up my DH-24 and returning fire, sending a stormtrooper careening into the corridor wall, a blackened hole in his plastoid alloy chest armor. "Friendlies up front!" I hear someone yell behind us. We crouch down and take cover in the recesses of the walls, trading fire with the nine stormtroopers stationed outside a set of thick blast doors set at a junction. In a matter of minutes, all stormtroopers are down and out for the count. Just to be sure, I cautiously move forward and check each armored body. "You alright, kid?" I hear Jevin say, concern in his voice. "You made it," Cade responds, his voice full of relief, "I knew you guys would come." Glancing over at our assembled group, I spy Gavin Skyes and his heavily outfitted Rancor Troopers, along with Cade and five Vinda engineers in blue jumpsuits, clutching stolen blaster rifles. Standing a few feet from them are Gerik Ordo and a compliment of his Mandalorian

Protectors in colorful *beskar'gam*. Amminius and his Chiss partner Zeatuli move away from the group to do recon and intel gathering. "Glad you could make it General," Gavin says, "we've made good progress. The other Rancor squads report that they have taken their target areas. All that's left is the command station." I check the last stormtrooper, dead, and jog back over to everyone. I sigh in relief, saying, "So we have this almost wrapped up? That's a bit anticlimactic." Others in our group nod in agreement. "We head all the way out here, psyched up on defending Ringo Vinda, and all we're left with is cleanup." Nom says with a chuckle. "Anticlimactic is the word for it." "Speak for yourself," Allan says, shouldering his carbine, "this is the first time I've ever fought on a station!" Gavin laughs and claps Allan on the armored shoulder. "We'll make a Rancor out of you yet!"

Amminius and Zeatuli return from their scouting mission, flipping up the visors of their helmets, clipping their carbines to their utility belts. "Way to the command center is clear, sir," Amminius says, addressing Jevin, "we have a straight shot . . . which I don't trust one bit." Jevin nods, his brow furrowing. "Agreed. It's too easy." He pauses for a moment, thinking. Finally, he says "Go with Zeatuli and take the engineers to the *Warhammer*. Protect them and get that Defender up and running. We get it behind the Imperium battle line, we'll be able to hammer them from both sides." Gavin nods. "That's right. Their ships won't be able to fight a battle on two fronts." Amminius nods in understanding. I grin at him, shaking my head. "I hope your piloting skills have improved since the *Inflictor*, "Captain" Sinan!" Amminius grins back. "You just wait and see, Wishbone! I was just honing my skills on Jakku. This is the real deal! I'll fly better than Admiral Antilles himself!" I laugh, waving him off. Jevin rolls his eyes. "Go!" Amminius offers Jevin a salute before he and Zeatuli, along with the five engineers, move off down the corridor. *Good luck, Amminius*, I say silently, watching them go.

Jevin next turns to Ethan. "Hawthorn, take Coates and Johnson and go with Gerik and his Protectors. Focus on clearing the main hangar." Ethan looks a little shaky, his expression nervous. He's never fought with Mandos before. A few of Ordo's Protectors chuckle at Ethan's appearance. I stifle a grin and a chuckle myself, mock coughing into my flak jacket sleeve. It is quite comical. Jevin smiles, putting a hand on Ethan's arm reassuringly. "Don't worry, Gerik won't bite." In response to this, Gerik waves his gloved fingers in a spooky motion, rolling back his helmeted head. His Protectors play

along, waving their fingers and laughing. Jevin rolls his eyes, muttering something inaudible under his breath before continuing. "He'll teach you the ways of a warrior." Ethan nods determinedly. "Understood, sir. We'll have that hangar cleared in no time." "Oya!" The Mandalorians shout, hoisting their weapons in the air, "Let's hunt!" Together, they move off down the corridor, turning down a side passageway leading to the main hangar. I silently wish them luck as well. Jevin turns to me and nods. I nod back. We have the most critical mission. The command center hub. Those turbolaser battery arrays need to be redirected or else our fleet won't stand a chance. Like Gavin said earlier, it'll be very difficult fighting a battle on two fronts. "Cade, we're with you. Let's retake the command station and turn those turbolasers away from our ships and against theirs!" Jevin says, hefting his carbine confidently. "Doesn't sound too hard!" I chime in. Cade smiles. "HOOYAH!" Yell Gavin and his guys. Together, we advance down the long corridor towards the station command center.

. . .

We stack up against the command center door, blasters primed and ready, concussion grenades in hand. This is it. We had only encountered light resistance on our way, which was strange. Where were all the stormtroopers? They couldn't all be down in the main hangar. I look to Cade, standing behind Gavin, lightsaber unlit, clasped in both hands. He had been unusually quiet for most of the trip. I push the thought out of my mind as Jevin pushes in an explosive device in one of the cracks of the heavy alloy blast door. Five seconds to detonation. We brace ourselves for the big bang. *BANG!* "Get in there!" Jevin shouts, tossing in a concussion grenade, "Go! Go! Go!" We rush in blasters up . . . straight into a trap.

Cade Valdarin - Ringo Vinda Station, Command module 18 ABE

"Get in there!" Jevin shouts, tossing in a concussion grenade, "Go! Go! Go!" We rush in blasters up . . . straight into a trap. As soon as the smoke fills the room, Jevin, Wodi, and the troops storm into the room, blaster bolts flying through the smoke. And then that noise comes back; we hear the hissing of the Sith Juggernauts and before we know it, they leap on our group. Several Rancors are taken down and I hear Wodi grunt as he slams a

vibroknife into its throat, causing it to croak a death rattle. "Keep firing!" Jevin says between blasts from his DH-24. Even though he is in his early forties, Jevin Corso is still a beast in battle; a Juggernaut launches at him and he deftly dodges the attack, bringing a vibrodagger out in the sidestep and lodging it into the Juggernaut's back, the thing falling with a hard thud on the floor. I'm deflecting bolts and cutting down Juggernauts as they come in close with their wrist-mounted blades when I feel a whisper in the Force, similar to the feeling I feel when Pravus is close and I look toward the other end of the module to see him.



A Praetor stands at the other end, an Umbaran. He doesn't look like the others; where they had armor emulating that of their dark master, Pravus, he wears simple dark blue robes with gold facial markings. He looks at me and ignites a red blade, no monologue this time. As Jevin, Wodi, and the others take cover where they can, behind upturned desks, peering above consoles, their DH-24s start to overheat and smoke, the Praetor launches himself in a forward jump, spinning tightly in a circle and uttering an inhuman battle cry and I bring up my blade to meet his, the red crackling against the green. Finally he speaks, "You have destroyed our order, Valdarin! Only myself and Lord Ferus remain!" I shove him away, crouching and spinning with my blade held outward, bisecting two more Juggernauts that had come in to protect their commander. I stand up, holding my blade aloft, "You threw your lot in with Pravus, you deserve no less!" I raise my hand and he holds up his blade, expecting to counter a lightning assault but he gets a surprise instead. An ancient technique the Jedi of old knew was called Pyrokinesis, the ability to create and manipulate fire. In many ways, this power gave one the ability of creation; they could create and destroy with the flame. The torrent of blue flame launches at the Praetor and he

holds up a hand, barely managing to stop the flame with the Force. I hear a high pitched yelp as his skin heats up, several of the Imperium Stormtroopers yell "Protect Lord Etrian!" and begin to shift fire to me, a bad mistake on their part. Releasing the flame torrent, I summon the Force and launch myself at them, bringing the emerald blade to bear on the poor troopers. A broken faceplate here, shattered E-15 rifle there, an arm gets chopped off. The beauty about being a Grey Jedi and using the Juyo form, the most ferocious of lightsaber forms, is that you aren't held back by ideology.

The whisper comes back, I whirl around just in time to duck, a few seconds more and Etrian's lightsaber would have beheaded me. I roll away to see Wodi and Jevin back to back, DH-24s firing so fast that the smokes guzzles out of them. They almost seem like the heroes of an epic; against an endless tide they stand, determination set on their faces. I parry Etrian again, locking ourselves in a saberlock. "Lord Pravus was correct, you are a worthy adversary." "Oh, you have no idea" I say in a grim voice. Suddenly, I deactivate my lightsaber as I spin away; the loss of an opposing blade causes him to stumble forward and I activate again, launching a set a strong power swings that ultimately knock him off balance. He lands a desperate vertical swing to meet my blade but it isn't enough. I force the blade down and with a quick, seamless motion, I jump over him, spin, and quickly plunge the blade into his chest as I face away from him.

The last I hear is "Lord Pravus, help me!" Wodi does a quick check of the bodies, "Room clear!" he says, looking to Jevin for further orders. Jevin raises a wrist, "Major Sinan, report." There is some static, "All set here sir, the *Warhammer* has been secured and the engineers are finishing up now. ETA three minutes to full operation." Jevin acknowledges an affirmative, hearing from Wodi's comm that Hawthorn's group managed to secure the main hangar, letting more U-wings board the ring. "Wodi, Carver, man those turbolasers controls, start picking your targets." They hustle to it, calling out targets, the guns visibly moving outside the viewport, taking aim at the called targets, some aimed at the engine bank of a *Predator*, some aimed at a *Cutlass*-class corvette. The smaller anti-starfighter turrets also take spin up, ready to wave off the inevitable wave of TIE Stalkers when then the shooting starts. "We're ready whenever you are!" Jevin says to Amminius over the comm. "*Warhammer launching!*" We hear back and see a powerful

sight. The enormous bulk of the *Warhammer*, once inert and sitting in drydock unfinished, now moves straight toward the rear of the Imperium fleet and then it begins. The Viscount Star Defenders are massive ships, shaped like tadpoles actually, and bristling with weapons. Armed with conventional weaponry, they use turbolasers, missile launchers, torpedo launchers, and ion cannons and, being made to match an *Executor*-class, they are easily able to overwhelm any ship less than a super star destroyer.



The massive bulk of the *Warhammer* begins lighting up with the flashes of fire, the rear of the Predators begin blossoming with explosions. Jevin gives the order, "Fire everything!"

**Wodi "Wishbone" Quix – Ringo Vinda, Mid Rim
18 ABE**

The last of our ambushers, a stormtrooper captain, collapses to the floor with a clatter, multiple burn holes in his charred plastoid armor. All hostiles are down, including the Umbaran Praetor, his pale skin even paler, his blue eyes glassy and unseeing. While Gavin and one of his guys takes a head count, carefully attending to wounded Rancor troops with portable med kits, I move about the command room carnage, making sure that none of our enemies will jump back up for a round two. I place my thumb and forefinger on the neck of each target, feeling for the slightest pulse of life. Some forms I purposely skip over. I don't think a stormtrooper with both his arms and his head lopped off will be living to fight another day. We sure got 'em good. When I confirm that the last target, a mutilated Juggernaut, won't be getting back up, I stand up and shout to the others, "room clear!"

Jevin nods and raises his wrist comm to his mouth, depressing the button to activate it. "Major Sinan, we're all clear in the command center complex, report." Silence. My insides go cold. Did something go wrong? Are they alright? Then Amminius' voice comes back, crackling with static. I let out a breath I didn't realize I'd been holding. "All set here, sir. The *Warhammer* has been secured and the engineers are finishing up with the internal systems and targeting computers now. ETA three minutes to full operation." "Confirmed, three minutes. We'll be ready," Jevin replies and clicks off. My own comlink suddenly beeps. "Yes?" I say, raising the device to my mouth. "*Wodi, it's Ethan. We've secured the main hangar of the station. Imps put up a hell of a fight, but they didn't stand a chance. Your Mandalorian friends sure know how to get down and dirty!*" I smile. "Glad to hear it. We've mopped up here as well." "*Great. U-wings have been offloading more troops, and they're clearing out the last bit of Imperium resistance inside Vinda station. Now that just leaves the blockade outside.*" "That problem will be dealt with soon. Keep your eyes peeled for the fireworks," I respond, smiling a little smugly. "*Can't wait! Hawthorn out.*" Jevin turns to me and Nom, indicating a row of turbolaser array control chairs with his hand. "Wodi, Nom, man those turbolaser controls, start picking your targets." Nom and I nod and move towards the chairs, shouldering our carbines. "This'll be interesting," Nom says to me, grinning, sitting in a chair, moving his fingers over the console. "I've never played gunner before!" I nod, smiling back, picking the seat next to him. "Well, you can't be any worse off than me. We'll be just like Imperial stormtroopers! Won't be able to hit a thing!" We both laugh. I shift my focus to the readout panel on my console, sifting through the available targets, outlined in red; data readouts strobe over highlighted areas, informing us of critical information such as shield strength and system and hull damage. I spare a glance outside the large viewport at the battle that continues to rage, lighting up the starscape with brilliant flashes of light. I set my jaw. Time to even the odds. I call out my first target: A *Predator*-class Destroyer venting atmosphere from its lower decks, one of its engines on fire. I confirm my choice on the control panel, and the defensive turrets swing into position, letting loose their payload, green lasers slamming into the Destroyer's hull. "Target is history!" Nom lets out with a whoop a few minutes later as the Predator, belching flames, breaks apart. He calls out another target, a *Cutlass*-class Corvette. Once that target is gone, I call out another. Out in the starfield, I see multiple fighters moving fast toward us, green lasers lancing out to hit our shields. A bright flash

splashes across our viewport, temporarily blinding me. "Bloah," Nom curses, slamming his fist into the durasteel frame of the control panel. "We've lost a turret!" "TIEs incoming! I think they've noticed us!" I relay to the others. "About time!" Jevin says, raising his comlink. "Sinan, we could use some help! We're ready whenever you are!"

"*Warhammer* launching!" Comes Amminius' reply. A thunderous rumble shakes the forward viewport off to our right. We all stop and gaze out the viewport to marvel at the sight. With a roar of its ion engines, the *Warhammer* unhooks from dry dock and moves past our viewport, blocking out the space battle, throwing our control room into temporary shadow. Everyone cheers. "Yeah!" "Go get 'em!" "Woohoo!" "The big guns have arrived!" "Now it's a fight!" All at once, the weapons bristling from the *Warhammer* activate, firing a hail of deadly laserfire at the rear of the Imperium blockade. Destroyers are sent planetside in twisted flaming wrecks. "Fire everything!" Jevin orders over the Vinda station comm. "Let them have it!" Our cruisers obey, adding their withering firepower to the *Warhammer's* and the station's. The seemingly impenetrable blockade slowly crumbles. "Look," Gavin shouts, pointing out the viewport. "They're turning tail and running!" The remaining Destroyers and cruisers are turning towards open space, attempting to flee into hyperspace. Most don't make it, but one of the Destroyers, heavily damaged, and three light cruisers manage to jump. The turbolaser fire comes to a halt. "*That's it!*" Admiral Antilles says over the comm, his voice thick with emotion, something he doesn't display often. "*The Warhammer is safe, and Ringo Vinda is ours once again! Good work everyone. Return to your capital ships. A debriefing will commence shortly.*" I let out a sigh of relief and slump into my chair, totally exhausted, watching fighter squadrons and gunships returning home. I give Nom a huge grin. I turn to see Cade beaming. After congratulating us all, Jevin orders us to rendezvous with the other New Republic forces inside the station and wait for exfil in the hangar. Once aboard the U-wing, more congratulations are exchanged. I find Amminus in the cramped and sweaty troop bay and give him a huge hug, the both of us laughing. "You're one heck of a starship captain!" I say to him, patting him on the back, grinning. "What can I say, Wishbone, I'm a born natural!" Amminius says, grinning back from ear to ear, cuffing me lightly on the arm. Our gunship slips into the hangar of the *Accolade*, landing with a slight bump. We disembark, still coming off the

adrenaline high of victory. A senior flight officer quickly organizes the troopers and pilots in the briefing room.

We are again addressed by the Bith captain. "This is a major victory for the New Republic, and you should all be very proud," the Bith says, nodding smartly at us. "We have secured Ringo Vinda station, and our newest starship, the *Warhammer*, is ready for conflict. And, it looks like we won't have to run test trials on the weapons systems!" Laughter ripples through the room. I elbow Amminius in the ribs, tousling his hair. He shoves me, smiling. "But we cannot celebrate yet, as our enemy is relentless. We are to rendezvous at Chandrila with the rest of the fleets, where High Command will discuss our next move. Get some rest and some grub! You all deserve it! Dismissed." Quiet discussion breaks out in the briefing room as everyone gets up and files out. I walk with Amminius, Jevin, Cade, Allan, Gavin and Ethan down the crowded hallway. "I don't know about you guys, but I could sure use a drink at the officers bar." I say. Ordo suddenly pops up from the crowd, putting a gauntleted arm around me and Cade. "Wodi, vod, you're speaking my language." We all laugh. Nom, Lannik, and Gav pop up as well, keeping stride with us. "Hey, Wodi? Think you can get us in?" Nom asks grinning. Gav gives me a thumbs-up. Jevin rolls his eyes. "The bar is for officers only." Nom's face falls. Jevin gives him a small smile. "But I guess you'll all be officers at some point. Come on." Gav lets out a whoop. I smile, leading the way with Jevin and Amminius. Cade shakes his head, smiling at us. I look at him and shrug. "What can I say? As the captain said, we all deserve this!"

4 months later

Cade Valdarin - Chandrila Near the end of 18 ABE

I wake up to the sounds of birds, the crisp smell of Chandrilan morning filling my senses. It has been four months since the battle at Ringo Vinda. The Imperium is on the decline, we can all feel it. Ever since Atrisia, they have been on a losing streak but we can't become complacent, after all a cornered beast is unpredictable. Sadly there was news some months ago that another planet had been drained of all living things. Deralia, a fortress

world in the Mid Rim, was attacked by *Gorukar* and now, like Belkadan, Kashyyyk, and the others, it stands there in space, devoid of any living things.

I board the Chandrila Maglev; a fast, eco-friendly way to traverse through the capital of Hanna City. I had received a summons in my Hanna City apartment, Jevin has asked me to meet him at the Republic Command Complex, the “heart” of the New Republic military, if you will. The request was rather vague; all Jevin had said was to meet him there and that something big was going down. I step onto the maglev and suddenly stop, all the passengers are New Republic personnel; soldiers, navy crewmen, I even spot a few members of NRI and (despite the fact they try to hide it) members of the ultra-secret Black Ops group, Alpha Blue. Jevin must have asked a lot more people than just me to come to the complex. I look around seeing if I know anyone when I see Wodi Quix in the back of the room along with Amminius Sinan and Gavin Skyes, they must be talking shop as Wodi leads the Special Hazards and Reconnaissance Commandos, Sinan is an Infiltrator, an elite agent for NRI, and Skyes leads the Rancor Assault Troopers. Amm sees me and waves me over and as I make my way, I over hear the various conversations that the other troops are having. Talks over the latest action in the war, notably the rousing defeat of the Imperium at Malastare (and the fact we kept a good deal of fuel), the loss of Deralia, the latest stormtrooper armor material the Imperium is using, and I even hear a few gasps from some of the younger soldiers when I pass by; “the Last Knights” people are calling Luke and myself. I make it over to the trio, “Wodi, Gavin, Amm, did you guys get a message from Jevin too?” “Yep, we all did. Didn’t say a lick about what is going on but he said it was going to be big. All we can do is be patient. So how has your little break on your homeworld been?” Gavin asks.

Ah, my homeworld. It actually has been years since I’ve been here, the first time being when I was little more than three years old and Vader tracked down my parents, both of whom were Jedi. I was spirited away by a Bothan, an old family friend, and it wasn’t until a year later, shortly before the Battle of Yavin, that my aunt, Mon Mothma, formally adopted me as her ward. Even then, we weren’t able to come back thanks to the Empire. After the civil war ended, I did make my way back once; I came here to the ancestral Mothma home after the civil war, which as it turns out my father had a

secret chamber built deep beneath the home that housed Jedi artifacts, holocrons, even ancient handwritten teachings, and it was here that I trained myself further in the Jedi ways.

“It has been nice being back, even though the war seems to have entered its most destructive part.” I say, looking down. “I spent time with Kiara too, any celebration was shadowed by the news about Deralia. We spent time together, talked about what to do when the war is over, and so on. She wants to leave politics and start a humanitarian project for the planets devastated by *Gorukar*.” The men all give their blessings and offer to help if the plan comes to fruition; they’ve all seen the devastation the Imperium has wrought, they’re worse than the Empire ever was. And we converse more about war strategy, how the Imperium, even though on the losing side of the war, still has some bite and this year has seen some of the most destructive battles of the war, and so on to pass the time.

Twenty minutes later . . .

The maglev arrives at the Command Complex, a large building that resembles a half-moon. Running through the “crescent” are training rooms, offices for Command personnel, briefing rooms, armories, you name it. At either end of the crescent are two large, octagonal briefing rooms, rooms named in honor of Rebellion heroes. The Madine Room and Rieekan Room serve as briefing rooms for major situations. On the opposite side of the middle of the crescent lies a flat, rectangle of a building that serves as barracks for the NR forces stationed here. We exit the maglev to meet another famous soldier standing in the front courtyard, Colonel Jon Grissom, a decorated soldier whose record is nearly as impressive as Wodi’s. In fact, he’s credited as the reason Malastare remains in Republic hands (and more importantly, the massive fuel resources therein). He crisply salutes when Wodi, Amm, and I are the first to step out of the train, “Colonel Quix, Master Valdarin, Major Sinan, it’s an honor to see you again.” The two salute back, I slightly bow my head in a nod. We begin walking and as we do, we see personnel all over the place. As we head to the Madine Conference Room. Wodi asks Grissom what’s going on. All he says is that it is something big and we have all been looking forward to it.

We enter the conference room to see what must be the largest assembly of Republic Command officers I have ever seen. At the center back of the room, where a podium and large holo projector sit, I see Fleet Admiral Unath Kerex and High Marshal Tor Ponith, the supreme commanders of the New Republic military, along with Flag General Jevin Corso, Tav Voren, and Geelo, High General Garm Bel Iblis, and several other army officers and admirals. The High Generals are the highest rank one can reach in the NR military outside of Fleet Admiral and High Marshal and each commands two battle groups, of which there are eight. The Battlegroups themselves number in thousands of ships and thousands more soldiers. The fact that Garm is here, and Jevin, Geelo, and Voren are all the subordinate officers under him, tells me that the Third and Fourth Battlegroups, Garm's command, are being sent somewhere, which is saying something as the Fourth is arguably the most well-known and successful of the Battlegroups. Ponith comes to the podium.

"Soldiers of the New Republic, before we begin, let me just say how proud I am, of all of you. You have served with bravery, courage, and dedication to the ideals that this New Republic was founded on. The brave sacrifices we have all made will be chronicled in the history of the Republic. As you know, a little over a year ago, a raid was launched at one of the most fortified Imperium locations we've seen. The raid at the Terminus Shipyard, led by Major Sinan and Master Valdarin, and the subsequent battle was costly but gave us much needed information. That information was undeniable proof the other Remnant factions, the Graal Hegemony, First Order, and Black Nova pirates, were secretly supplying the Imperium, a clear violation of the Galactic Concordance. Now, you can argue that this backfired because the remnants began fighting us openly on the Imperium's side, those of you who served at Malastare know this first hand, you've fought the "Legionnaires" of the Hegemony. But the most important bit of information we unearthed at Terminus was a heavily encrypted file; a file that holds the exact location of the Imperium's capital." Wodi leans over to me and says, "Jevin was right, this *is* huge."

The holo behind him changes to a large green and white world. "Ladies, gentlemen, and non-gendered beings, it took a year but NRI has successfully decrypted the data file and located the Imperium capital world." He moves to the left so everyone can see. "This is Xauvis, a world located deep within

Wild Space. Now, because of the obvious dangers of performing recon on the enemy stronghold and the fact we know next to nothing about Wild Space, the only information we have comes from limited recon from Prowler-Reconnaissance ships and the data file. Now the data points to Xauvis being an exceptionally strong source of kyber crystals; as you know these crystals are the power source for lightsabers." I raise my voice, "And during the Ancient Wars, the Sith used massive kyber crystals to power their super weapons, that would explain how they got *Gorukar* powered up." Tor nods. "Now, we have pinpointed several locations on the planet, as well as on the moons and surrounding planets, which will be key targets." The holoprojection goes to a northern region on Xauvis.



"This is the Sith Palace, the headquarters of the Imperium. The focus of the invasion of course will be here. Now, as far as the limited recon can tell, the throne room is here, in the middle of the palace, and it is protected by an energy shield that can stop anything short of a Death Star laser, so we need to get boots in there." Amminius leans forward and whispers to us, "I wonder what sorry snobs they got to do that job." As if on cue, Tor asks, "Master Valdarin, I assume I don't have to guess this is where you'll be going?" I nod. "As for backup, Colonels Quix and Grissom, you will be leading a joint SpecForce and Army unit to assault the palace. Now your goal will not be to take it but to buy time for Luke and Cade to find and kill Pravus." Wodi looks at Grissom and smiles, "Just like Malastare, eh Jon?" he smiles back. "Your unit will be an ad hoc team, a mix of SHARCS, Infiltrators, Pathfinders, and Rancor Assault Troopers along with regular Army soldiers. Due to the fact that this the capital of the Imperium, I expect

nothing less than a very determined defense. To that end, Admiral Kerex and I will be commanding this battle as well." The map shifts again to show a city with both old style homes and new-age high tech buildings. "This is the capital city of Kessia. We will be launching a large offensive here as a means to draw off some heat from the palace.

General Corso has opted to lead the Thirty-Ninth, Forty-Second, and Forty-Fourth Tactical Divisions in the battle here. General, I will be assigning heavy armor battalions to join you as well." Jevin nods and begins typing on a datapad, no doubt individual assignments for units under his command. "There are three more key targets on the planet: a kyber refinery, Juggernaut production center, and the main spaceport, all of which our victory will depend on. General Voren and his divisions will assault and destroy the refinery; our analysis has shown Imperium technology, notably their ships, are largely powered by refined kyber crystals, we take this out, we knock out that advantage. You will also take out the Juggernaut facility. As for the spaceport, General Geelo, you and your Jumper Corps have the honor. Ground-penetrating radar shows thousands of the new TIE Stalkers berthed underground, ready to take off at a moment's notice; I need you to take their air advantage." Tor goes on the address the rest of the admiralty and command staff of the Battlegroups, about leading assaults on the heavily occupied moon bases and Xauvis's sister world, Xawin. We also have a large coalition force joining the assault; Choral himself as brought a large number of Wookiee ships and his famous Wookiee Berserkers, along with my faithful companion Salurra. Gerik and his Protectors are here, always gunning for a fight, and an Espirion fleet, led by Commodore Rayus, will also join. I turn to Wodi and Gavin, "This is it guys, the defining moment of the New Republic, this war will finally end after three and a half years." They acknowledge their agreement and go off to dish out last minute assignments to their respective groups.

I begin walking down the hall towards the main hangar where a transport will take me, Skywalker, Wodi, Jevin, and the others to the *Viscount* while their respective units board their GR-80 troop transports. Along the way, I see Kiara and break off from the parade of soldiers to the transport. We embrace and she gives me a look that tells me everything I need to hear; that she loves me and wants me to be safe. I hold her again and promise that after the war, we can finally be together. We kiss and I walk off while

she heads to Hanna City. I longingly look back at her, wishing this war was already over, but time to make that happen now. The transport shuttles us to the *Viscount*, where preparations for hyperspace are already underway. Tor and Kerex are on the bridge, making last minute preparations and battle strategies. This will either be a great day for the New Republic or a disastrous defeat; the Xauvis system is their capital, in the heart of Wild Space which is uncharted and unknown, and to top that off, they fervently believe in the sith way. As we depart, I can't help but feel that Pravus wants this, I've been feeling a strange call ever since Atrisia, a call to achieve my higher power. I feel like he has something more in mind than simply galactic conquest but we'll find out soon enough. The ship enters hyperspace, the black of space turning to mottled white. Soon, this war will end and it will come down to Pravus and me. One will live and one must fall.

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix – Hanna City, Chandrila, Core Worlds 18 ABE

After several months of preventing Imperium assault forces on Malastare from stealing caches of Malastarian fuel and taking over the refineries, Chandrila's Hanna City is a much-needed change of atmosphere, for all the Fourth. The air is warm and clear, and it doesn't carry the nauseating stench of fuel. I can still faintly smell the stuff on my clothes and in my hair, despite attempts to wash it out of both. On Malastare, the Imperium had attacked and seized an important refinery that harvested fuel from the planet's core, using the fuel to power their ships and fighters, as well as converting it into a dangerous aerosol biotoxin and enslaving the native Dugs and Gran, using them as laborers and test subjects. When word of this had reached the Republic higher-ups, our fleet, along with the Ninth, appropriately equipped, was sent in to drive the Imps off the planet.

When we got there, things quickly went from bad to worse. The first wave of our guys died in swirling clouds of green mist directed at us from across the battlefield, choking to death, despite wearing protective equipment. We had to immediately fall back, poison gas and blaster fire following us the whole way. I was carrying a choking soldier on my back, and when I finally put him down, his mask and my shoulder were completely soaked in crimson . . . Our breath masks were old issue and weren't fielded to siphon out the newer version of these toxins, so we had to hole up while the techs back at home

scrambled to produce new ones with better filters. That took two and a half months. Kriff. I can't tell you how many soldiers I saw stumble and fall, desperately clutching at their blistering throats. The Imperium forces wouldn't let us get away that easily.

Finally, we were sent in what we needed, and with a little help from the Dugs and Grans' underground resistance, "spectacularly turned the tide," in the words of High Marshal Tor Ponith, taking back the refinery and driving the Imperium out of the sector. A very plucky defense. We slept well that night. With Malastare secured, our wounded were transferred to a nearby medical fleet, and the rest of us were ordered back to the New Republic's current capital, Chandrila, for an important briefing.

We arrived a few days before the briefing with High Command and the other fleets, offloading supplies and troops at Docking Platform E-22, so the soldiers of the Fourth were granted down time. Hanna City is a beautiful place to explore. Its buildings are tall and regal with tasteful architecture, its shops are filled with wonderful things, and its pedwalks and sky lanes are not what you'd find on Coruscant. Its restaurants and bars are also top notch, if I do say so myself! We had had a very fine lunch at a restaurant in Old Hannatown Market. I breathe in deeply, enjoying the freshness and smell of foliage. I'm in the well-lit Hanna City art installation at the city's circle with Amminius, Gav, Nom and Gavin, looking at an exhibit of various Imperial stormtrooper helmets on display painted with Alliance sigils, starbursts, and other various colors. "We'd better comm the Empire and tell 'em that we've found their missing trooper helmets," Amminius had said, grinning. We had all laughed. I closely examine one painted a bright purple, with tiny orange letters reading out across the helmet's surface the entire Galactic Concordance. I nod, thoroughly impressed. How had the artist managed to fit all the writing onto the helmet? I point at it, calling out to the others. "Come and look at this one!" They gather at the helmet I had been admiring and Gavin leans in close, squinting, starting to read a section. "The Galactic Empire will hereby remain within its predetermined boundaries set in the Core and Inner Rim and shall not attempt to expand its holdings. The Galactic Empire shall be reorganized into the Imperial remnant. The Galactic Empire will no longer attempt to recruit or mobilize, in any form, stormtrooper forces for its use in planetary or system conquest . . ."

A bearded Pantoran male dressed in a bright suit standing nearby walks over to us, smiling, interrupting Gavin's reading. He indicates the helmet with a wave of his blue hand. "An impressive piece that one is, isn't it? The artist who painted it was a veteran of the Galactic Civil War. Eeyan Vlahos. It took him two standard years to paint and it was completed in seven ABY." "It is impressive," I say, smiling. "You know, we helped to bring about the Galactic Concordance, so this helmet has special meaning for us." "You are veterans of the war yourself?" "You bet!" Amminius says, grinning, putting an arm around my shoulder. "All of us." The Pantoran's smile deepens, and he offers us a crisp salute. "Thank you for your service, gentlemen." I smile and nod back. "You're welcome. We're proud of it. But unfortunately, our service is still ongoing." The Pantoran loses his smile, and his expression darkens, his voice scornful. "Ah yes. The *Imperium*. Just when peace had started to blossom, that *Pravus* and his cronies rose." Gavin speaks up. "Well, we're working on that problem now, so you won't have to put up with him much longer." "I wish you all the best of luck," the Pantoran says, and with one final bow, walks toward another exhibit where other soldiers stand, admiring a stained transparasteel render of the Battle of Hoth. We walk around some more before we take an airspeeder over to the Chandrilian-recommended skygarden before heading back to the New Academy barracks. The next day we spend at the now-rebuilt Old Gather-House in Eleutherian Plaza, walking through the multitude of rooms. The following couple of days are back to business as more New Republic fleets and battle groups arrive. Down time becomes scarcer.

Beep! I wake up to the sound of my comm chirping. I groggily lift my head from my pillow and reach for my comlink on my stand, flicking the strobing button, wanting sorely to turn over and go back to bed. I briefly glance at the chrono on the wall. 06:00. A message from Jevin plays out. All thoughts of sleep instantly go out of my head. I've been summoned to the Republic Military Complex. The briefing. I quickly get up and get dressed in the refresher. I'm not the only one to have been summoned. Inside the refresher, brushing his teeth, is Gavin, matting down his hair. "Hey Wodi," he says through a mouthful of paste. "Jevin sure picks his moments." "That he does," I reply, smiling, blinking the last bits of sleep from my eyes. Amminius walks out of a stall fully dressed and grins at me, walking over to lather his hands. "Hey, Wishbone! I see you've also been summoned by Jevin at this lovely hour." I nod. "You bet! My guess is the briefing."

Amminius chuckles. "My guess is that he's going to tell us he's finally getting a girlfriend!" We all laugh and walk out of the refresher, walking together down the corridor. "Wow," Gavin says, surveying the crowded hallway. It's bustling with New Republic soldiers and personnel, all going towards the New Academy maglev train station. I whistle. "Early day for everyone, isn't it?" We maneuver our way through and eventually board the packed maglev. It's a bright and clear day, even at 06:45. Gavin, Amminius, and I sit together, talking with the other soldiers and looking out the wide viewports at the beautiful city. I look to the front of the crowded train and see a robed figure making his way toward us. "It's Cade," I say, tapping Amminius and Gavin on the shoulder and pointing in his direction. The young Jedi finally makes his way over to us, a bright smile on his face. "Morning, sunshine!" Amminius says, grinning. Cade nods, acknowledging all of us. "Wodi, Gavin, Amm. Did you guys get a message from Jevin too?" "Yep," I say. "We all did. Didn't say a lick about what was going on, but he said it was going to be big." I wave my hands for dramatic effect, grinning. Cade chuckles, and Amminius and Gavin grin. "All we can do is be patient," Gavin chimes in. "So, how has your little break on your homeworld been? We've been really enjoying it!"

. . .

Our maglev arrives at the Republic Command Complex and we disembark. "Jevin said the 'big event' will take place in the Madine Conference Room," Gavin says, checking his wrist chrono. In the main courtyard, a few meters from the maglev station, stand several New Republic officers, greeting troops as they pass by. One stands out to me. Colonel Jon Grissom. Tall and bearded, with fierce green eyes. Upon sighting us, the colonel offers a crisp salute. "Colonel Quix, Master Valdarin, Captain Skyes, Major Sinan, it's an honor and a pleasure to see you all again." "Hello, Colonel," I smile. "It's good to see you again. I hope you're all recovered from Malastare." Jon smiles. "Almost. I'm still smelling Malastarian fuel in the mess hall." Jon joins us as we all head to the conference room. "Busy day today," he comments, surveying the scene. "You have any idea what's going on?" I ask him. "I got the same message you did," Jon replies. "But I can promise you that it is indeed something big, and it's something we all have been looking forward to for a long time." I nod. He surely knows more than he's letting on.

We reach the double doors of the conference room and enter to find it already packed. "Sheesh," Amminus says to me, gesturing at all the congregated beings. "Think we can get seats?" I shrug and we make our way through the packed room, looking for available seating. "Think you can use the Force to float a couple of chairs over to us?" Amminius asks Cade, winking. I look to the center back of the room, where several officers and technicians are getting things ready. Two move a high podium into position, while a trio of technicians accompanied by a green astromech test a large holoprojector. Standing off to one side, looking out at the sea of faces, are Fleet Admiral Unath Kerex, High General Garm Bel Iblis, High Marshal Tor Ponith, and Flag General Tav Voren. I also spy Jevin and Geelo. We finally locate a free bench, and quickly claim it. We talk for a couple more minutes with each other and with the guys around us. At 08:30, a chime sounds, and the conference room quiets down, all beings turning to face the podium where Tor Ponith stands. The graying Bothan clears his throat before beginning, smiling at all assembled. "Soldiers of the New Republic, before we begin, let me just say how proud I am, of all of you. You have served with bravery, courage, and dedication to the ideals that this New Republic was founded on. The brave sacrifices we have all made will be chronicled in the history of the Republic. Now, as you know, a little over a year ago, a raid was launched at one of the most fortified Imperium locations we've seen. The raid at the Terminus Shipyard, led by Major Sinan and Master Valdarin, and the subsequent battle was costly, but gave us much needed information. That information was undeniable proof that other Remnant factions: the Graal Hegemony, First Order, and Black Nova pirates, were secretly supplying and supporting the Imperium, a clear violation of the Galactic Concordance. Now, you can argue that this backfired because the remnants began fighting us openly on the side of our enemy; those of you who served at Malastare know this first hand. You've fought the "Legionnaires" of the Hegemony. But the most important bit of information we unearthed at Terminus was a heavily encrypted file; a file that holds the exact location of the Imperium's capital." Gasps fill the room. Quiet discussion breaks out as the soldiers and personnel excitedly chatter and speculate with one another. Amminius jabs me in the ribs, excitement on his face. I jab him back, equally excited. I lean towards Cade and say excitedly "Jevin was right. This *is* huge!"

With a nod from Tor, the green astromech droid extends its data arm and plugs into the data port on the holoprojector. The conference room lights dim, and the holoprojector comes to life, showing a colored image of a green and white world, rotating slowly. A description of the world along with a string of coordinates appear. "Xauvis." I say slowly, reading. "Never heard of it," Amminius says. "That's the point," Gavin says, rolling his eyes, but smiling. "What'd you expect? Damaria?" Tor waits for the discussion to die down before continuing. "Ladies, gentlemen, and non-gendered beings, it took us over a year to gleam this information, but our crack team at New Republic Intelligence has successfully decrypted the data file and located the Imperium capital world." He moves to the side so everyone can see clearly. "This is Xauvis, a world located deep within the regions of Wild Space. Now, because of the obvious dangers of performing open reconnaissance on the enemy stronghold, coupled with the fact that we know next to nothing about Wild Space, the only information we possess about Xauvis comes from our limited droid-piloted Prowler-class reconnaissance ships and the data file. Now the data points to Xauvis being an exceptionally strong source for kyber crystals; as you know, these crystals are the power source and at the heart of all lightsabers." Cade raises a hand and comments. "And during the Ancient Wars, the Sith used massive kyber crystals to power their superweapons. That would explain how they got *Gorukar* powered up." I nod. Kyber crystals at the heart of ancient Sith super weapons like *Gorukar* makes sense. My knowledge on kyber crystals isn't that extensive, but I know enough to understand how they work. The crystals focus energy sent into them and amplify its intensity. Tor nods and continues. "Now, we have pinpointed several critical locations on the Xauvis, as well as on the moons and surrounding planets, which will be key targets." The holo image of Xauvis magnifies, zooming in on the northern region to show a grainy stilled image of an intricate stone palace surrounded by what appears to be wooden buildings, probably dwelling areas, all nestled in a ring of mountains. Amminius leans over to me and whispers "Looks like a pretty peaceful place. Why do all the crazies have to inhabit the most beautiful worlds?" I nod, equally impressed with the image shown. "No idea. I'll bet that once we get there, it won't be as tranquil."

...

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix – Hanna City, Chandrila, Core Worlds



18 ABE

"This is the Sith Palace, the headquarters of the Imperium," Tor continues, indicating the holo with one hand. "The focus of the attack will, of course, be here. Now, as far as our limited reconnaissance droids can gleam, the throne room is here, in the center of the palace." The middle of the palace strobes red for a few seconds. "Our droid units picked up a very high-reading energy source emanating from this spot. Based on our previous knowledge and experience, we have determined that the throne room is protected by an energy shield, and no ordinary one at that." The throne room strobes red once again, this time bordered by a thick blue line, also strobing, indicating the shield. "If our calculations are correct, with the shield generating that much energy, nothing short of a laser blast similar in strength to that of the Death Star will be able to penetrate it." Several soldiers around the room whistle, including me. "Imagine if we had something like that on Hoth," I lean over and say to Amminius. "It would have been so much easier." He nods, shaking his head, grinning. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say Pravus fears us! He's probably shaking in his boots right now." "Sir," a soldier near me interrupts, putting down his hand after Tor acknowledges him with a

nod, "we don't have that kind of firepower, even with heavy turbolasers. How do you expect us to take that shield out?"

Tor smiles and nods. "Endor, son. Just like Endor. We get boots on the ground and take it out from the inside. With the generators putting out that much power, they'll be prone to overheating and exceptionally volatile. Timed explosives and heavy weapons should do the trick. The blast might even take Pravus with it. Just make sure that you're far enough away when you detonate." Around the room, I see heads nodding in understanding. That's right. We took out the Death Star's shield generator the same way! How could I have forgotten. Amminius leans over to me and Cade, muttering "I wonder what poor souls they got to do that job?" Tor turns to Cade. "Master Valdarin, I assume I don't have to guess this is where you'll be going?" Cade nods resolutely, his jaw set. "As for backup," Tor says, "Colonels Quix and Grissom, you will be leading a joint SpecForce and Army unit to assault the palace while Master Valdarin sneaks in with Master Skywalker to achieve our ultimate goal: the death of Pravus." I turn to Amminius and smile. "Well, you have your answer! We have all the honor." I tune back in to Tor. "Now, your goal will not be to take the palace, but to buy time for Masters Valdarin and Skywalker to locate Pravus. Your secondary objective will be to knock out the shield generator." I turn to Jon, sitting next to Gavin and Gav, smiling. "This'll be fun. Just like Malastare, eh Jon?" Jon returns my smile, nodding back. "Your assault unit will be an ad hoc team, a mix of SHARCS, Infiltrators, Pathfinders, and Rancor Assault Troopers, along with regular Army soldiers. Due to the fact that this the capital of the Imperium, I expect nothing less than a very determined defense. To that end, Admiral Kerex and I will be commanding this battle as well." A round of applause ripples through the conference room. Once it dies down, Tor motions to the green astromech droid, who changes the holo image, this time magnifying it to show the surrounding city, a mix of older and newer architecture and technology. "This is the capital city of Kessia. We will be launching a large offensive here to draw off some heat from the palace." Amminius leans over. "Coruscant would swallow that city whole." I agree. The city is large, like Onderon's capital of Iziz, but not on par with Coruscant.

"General Corso has opted to lead the Thirty-Ninth, Forty-Second, and Forty-Fourth Tactical Divisions in the battle." Jevin perks up, standing a bit

straighter. I give him a mock salute from the crowd, grinning. Jevin doesn't react, but I can almost feel his eyes rolling. A trademark look for him, practically. "General, I will be assigning some heavy armor battalions to join you. You'll also be supported by our latest toy, the T5-B Battle Tank, which is outfitted specifically for this engagement." Jevin nods in understanding and unclips a datapad from his belt, tapping away the necessary information and no doubt, individual unit assignments. Tor addresses the rest of the assembled again. "There are three more key targets on the planet: a kyber crystal refinery, a Sith Juggernaut production center, and the main spaceport. Knocking out these targets will make achieving victory that much easier." As Tor mentions each target, a corresponding area of the city map strobes red, then orange before darkening. It looks like that the Juggernaut center and the kyber refinery are at the western side of the city, several blocks closer to the palace than the main spaceport, which sits near the city's circle. "General Voren and his divisions will assault and destroy the refinery; our analysis has shown that much of the Imperium's technology, notably their ships, are largely powered by refined kyber crystals. General Geelo, you and your Jumper Corps have the honor of the spaceport. Ground-penetrating radar shows thousands of the new TIE Stalkers berthed underground, ready to take off at a moment's notice. I need you to take their air advantage." Geelo nods his understanding. Tor details more targets to ground units, the holo map highlighting each in turn. Our allies are also given mention and tasked with their assignments. The Wookiee Coalition Force, the Espirion Fleet, and the Mandalorian Protectors all accept them with grim determination. Cade turns to Amminius, Gavin, and me and nods affirmatively. "This is it, guys. The defining moment of the New Republic. This war will finally end after three and a half years. We will finally be able to rid the galaxy of Pravus and his Imperium." "Good riddance!" I say, clapping my hands once. "Finally, I was thinking I would be at this until the day I die!" Amminius says, grinning. "Fighting all powerful Sith daily is quite tiring!" "It's about kriffing time!" Gavin says. With a chime, the lights come back on, and we get up. I move off towards my unit to give them additional orders. Amminius and Gavin do likewise. *One way or another*, I think to myself, *this'll all be over*. Like Gavin said, 'It's about *kriffing* time!'

The next couple of days are organized chaos. Starfighters are prepped. Cargo and supplies are loaded onto the frigates and cruisers, and units go over practice drills. I pack my necessary equipment and head down with my

own unit to practice and run through the operation. We set up makeshift targets to represent the shield generator and surrounding city buildings. The next few days will be eventful, to say the least! The last night before we head out, our units tour Hanna City one final time and have a large dinner in Old Hannatown Market.

. . .

Aboard the Star Defender *Viscount*, three days later . . .

To say that the hangar is crowded is an understatement. Every available space has been utilized in some form or another. Hordes of pilots and soldiers hurry to their transports, and droids and technicians make final checks of ships, making last minute fixes and supply runs. When we exit hyperspace, my knees almost buckle at the sight of the Imperium flotilla hanging in space above Xauvis. Most everyone around me stops and gawks. But there's no turning back now! Before boarding my gunship, and after a final briefing of our motley force of SpecForce troops with Jon, I had taken a few minutes and located all my friends and given them final farewells and well wishes. Amminius had given me an overly dramatic speech and a crushing hug, but I could feel him shaking, and could feel the tears run down his face and onto my neck. I'll admit, I cried a little too. We must have been some sight. Jevin is the last one I talk to. I find him standing outside his gunship, one hand on the boarding ramp, surveying the hangar. I flash him a grin. Jevin returns it, his eyes bright. We clasp hands tightly. "So, what is this, the third time we make galactic history?" I ask him, laughing. Jevin laughs too. "Something like that. I'm just sorry I won't be joining you in the palace. Sounds like it'll be a lot of fun!" "Oh, but you get to lead the assault on the capital, I'm sure you'll be more than adequately compensated in that department!" We laugh some more before turning to look out the large viewport at the field of stars. I turn to him. "We've been at this for what, twenty years, Corso? It has been a trip. Looking back, I wouldn't change a thing." Jevin gives me a fist bump. "Nor would I, Wishbone, nor would I. I'm proud to have served with you. There's no one else I would rather fight a galactic war beside." I grin at him, my eyes getting slightly misty again. "Or two, in our case." Jevin chuckles. We grasp forearms one more time before the klaxons blare, alerting all personnel to get to where they're supposed to be. "Good luck out there, Wishbone!" Jevin calls after me. I turn and give

him a final salute. "You too, Blastzone!" With that, I board my gunship with Gavin, Cade, and Jon. Amminius pops out of his own transport to give me one final wave. "See you planetside!" After a few more minutes of instruction and encouragement from Jevin over the intercom, our boarding ramps close, overhead lights dimming, and our gunships, transports, and fighter wings slip out into the Imperium's cold embrace. Just how cold it was, we'd soon find out. The explosions, laser cannon storm, and turbolaser fire should have alerted me sooner.

Three days later

Flag General Jevin Corso - In the *Viscount* hangar 18 ABE

The fleet that jumped from Chandrila is the largest force the New Republic has ever assembled; two full Battlegroups along with a massive, combined fleet of Wookiees, Mandalorian Protectors, and the Espirion Navy. There are eight GR-80s ready to take my forces planetside: the Thirty-Ninth, Forty-Second, and Forty-Fourth Divisions, along with several armored cavalry columns and recon groups. The other drop bays, of which the *Viscount*-class has several, are chock-full of ground forces, ready to launch as soon as the fleet drops into the Xauvis system. I look across the way to see five U2 gunships spooling up, Wodi and Jon briefing their small army of Special Forces and Army soldiers on their assault on the Palace. I see Cade and Luke sitting cross-legged on the floor, no doubt meditating and preparing themselves to fight Pravus. Wodi walks over to me, smiling that usual grin of his.

We shake hands and he laughs, "So what is this, the third time we make galactic history?" I laugh as well, "That sounds about right, I'm just sorry I won't be joining you in the palace, sounds like it'll be fun." "Oh, but you get to lead the assault on the capital, I'm sure you'll be more than adequately compensated in that department." Another few laughs and then we turn and look out of the force field to the stars and the ships, and the conversation takes a somber turn. "We've been at this for what, twenty years now Corso? It has been a trip. Looking back, I wouldn't change a thing." We bump fists, "Nor would I Wishbone, nor would I. I'm proud to have served with you, there's no one else I would fight a galactic war beside." "Or two, in our

case." He chuckles. We grab each other's forearm, an acknowledgement of the trust and friendship we share. Wodi runs off to his gunship and I raise my voice, "Good luck out there Wishbone." "You too, Blastzone."

I'm waiting onboard the GR-80 when a soldier behind me, a Togruta, Major Kira, my new aide-de-camp, says, "Marshal on deck!" All of us stand at attention and salute. "At ease, soldiers," Tor says as the somewhat diminutive Bothan steps onto the deck. "Marshal, you're joining us?" I ask. He points to an area on a holomap, "We're going to set up an FOB here, a small ways outside of Kessia. I will command the battle from here, so I'm joining your group on my way there." He looks around and asks, "So no last minute briefing, no motivational speech?" I also look around, "Well sir, you are the ranking officer, I figured I'd leave it to you." Shaking his furry head, he says, "No I already have son, this is your time. You are going to become a great leader in the New Republic. *Kriff*, you may become High Marshal someday, so consider this your last test."

I walk forward a little, keying a code on my wrist device that connects to the comlinks and HUDs of all the NR personnel aboard our transports. "All hands, check your HUDs, be briefed or be sorry. This battle will be the last of this terrible war, in order to win we all need to play our roles." Highlighting in red the area where the FOB and Tor's command station will be, I say, "This is where our command station will be. My forces will guide the Marshal to this zone along with the prefab base." Highlighting the image of a U-wing, I direct the conversation to Wodi across the hangar, "While the bulk of the attack force heads to Kessia, Colonels Quix and Grissom will divert their gunships east and head towards the palace. As they do that, Major Sinan and General Voren's forces will head towards the crystal refinery center and destroy it, thus depriving the Imperium a good deal of energy." Highlighting a GR-80 image in yellow, I continue, "General Geelo, meanwhile, will take his Jumper Corps and assault their main spaceport and airfield. Scans show thousands of the powerful TIE Stalkers in underground berths. If those ships take off, we're in trouble. Now the rest of the assault force hitting the moon bases and garrisons on the surrounding planets have been briefed." I look to the faces of the soldiers on our transports, seeing some younger ones, just kids really in comparison to vets like me, Wodi, even Ethan Hawthorn and Allan Coates. "I know some of you are scared. For many of you, this is the first major battle you have been in, the first major battle that will determine

the fate of the galaxy. Look to those on your left, now to your right. These are your brothers and sisters; we are a family. Trust each other, protect each other. Stand fast, stand strong, and stand together, Corso out."

Turning off the inter-ship comlink, I look to the soldiers on my own transport, looking inspired, and Tor gives an approving nod. "Everyone know where they're going?" "Hooyah!" "Everyone know what they're doing?" HOOYAH! "Then let's get it done!"

All hands brace for impact, entering Xauvis space. A holoscreen shows us what the *Viscount's* scanners are picking up. The massive NR-Coalition fleet enters the system and immediately the black of space lights up with red and green laserfire. I even see the dark dagger shape of the *Insidious* hanging out there, with its ebon-black heavy stealth armor, purple bolts lancing out from it. We hear Admiral Kerex begin issuing orders to various Starhawks and Mon Cal cruisers and then separate fighter and bomber wings. Then he says, "*Ground forces, depart now! You won't get another chance!*" Tor picks up the comm, "All ground assault forces, this is High Marshal Ponith, we are a-go, I repeat, we are a-go for launch."

With that the transports take off and leave the bustling alongside the U-wings of the palace assault force. Immediately we begin taking flak, but all transports are still flying strong. "General, Marshal, we got a problem!" the pilot says not long after. Tor and I walk up to the cockpit, "What's the problem?" I ask. As the pilot, a Sullustan, concentrates on flying serpentine to avoid laser blasts, he points to a scanner on the main console, "TIE Stalkers inbound and we have no fighter screen to protect us." Stang, the TIE Stalkers are a new-gen fighter. True to their name, the Stalker is a ship focused on stealth. But at the same time, it is one of the most heavily-armed snub fighters in the galaxy, the access to kyber crystals that the Imperium has given them an advantage over other ships. "Any NR squadrons, this is General Corso, we have Stalkers inbound on the assault force, we need assistance!" No answer, I bang my fist on the wall when I hear a familiar voice. "*Rogue Squadron coming in to assist!*" Through the viewport we see the wave of Stalkers heading toward us erupt into flames as a wave of T-70 X-wings fly by. "*You're all clear, assault force. Good hunting!*" says Rogue Leader, Tycho Celchu. The rest of the way is a lot less stressful, the pilots doing a magnificent job of keeping their cargo safe. We

break the atmosphere and more flak erupts from the surface. I see a large structure on the ground, just before the snowy peaks of Xauvis' mountains. "There, that's the palace! Wodi, we are taking the brunt of the flak, divert your gunships now. Good hunting." "*Acknowledged,*" he replies. The U-wings divert eastward as our GR-80s head to the landing site in front of Kessia. "Voren, you and Sinan divert to the refinery, Geelo, you have the green light to take the airfield," Ponith orders. The GR-80 reverberates as the landing gear touches down on the surface.

As the bay door descends, stray bolts hit the wall, the city's defenders already taking potshots at us. "Let's move out!" I yell. "Armor units, roll 'em out!" From the small fleet of GR-80s that make up the ground assault force stream thousands of soldiers, from engineers to snipers to common grunts, alongside columns of the MPTL (mobile proton torpedo launcher) artillery and the new T5-B Main Battle Tank. "Armor, take up your designated positions and lay down suppressing fire on the city, all infantry follow your assignments. Forty-Fourth, you're with me. We are taking the city, specifically the administrative building. The Imperium has fortified it and set up a SAM site, it'll take out our birds in the sky until we can eliminate it." A round of acknowledgements sound off and the grunts and I start jogging off towards Kessia with T5-Bs running as cover for us from snipers. All I can hear is the clicking of rifles as soldiers check the charges on their X45s and load fresh clips, the charging of DL-56 blaster pistols, and the power-up sounds of X92 sniper rifles and Z-7 rotary cannons. The fire from the city outskirts intensifies. Luckily, R&D created a smokescreen specifically for the technology of the time; the smoke actually interferes with any tech that would normally see through it. "Smokescreen!" I order and the T5-B tanks launch smoke canisters in front of the army for cover. I see Tor and his group set up the FOB and he starts issuing battlefield commands over the comm. The Battle of Xauvis has begun. As we move towards Kessia and the administrative building, I see the U-wings in the distance touch down near the palace. Good luck Cade and Wodi, you're going to need it.

Cade Valdarin - Xauvis, Sith Palace

18 ABE

"There, that's the palace! Wodi, we are taking the brunt of the flak, divert your gunships now. Good hunting." "Acknowledged," Wodi replies through his comlink. The gunships touch down at the palace landing pads, Wodi and Gavin, who has taken up his old role as Wodi's second-in-command, are gearing up and loading fresh heat sinks into their X45-As. "Alright listen up," Wodi says, "we do not stop the attack until Pravus is dead, understood?" Hooyah is the reply. The bay doors drop and we all storm out. Luke and I have our blades drawn and immediately our danger sense kicks in and we deflect several bolts back to their place of origin. Like clockwork, Juggernauts launch themselves at us. I sidestep one and dissect the thing in half with my emerald sword. Luke saber-dashes through a horde of them on the right side as the troops blast the rest. Before long, the outer cordon of guards lie dead and we stack up next to the stone wall of the palace. Wodi looks to Gavin, nodding, "Do it." Gavin pulls out a detpack, attaching it to the wall at one point as Wodi sets the other. A timer counts down from three and *BOOM!*

The wall implodes and Luke and I roll into the ornate hallway, sabers poised for a fight. Wodi, Jon, Gavin, and the rest file in and we are at a loss, there is no one around us. "Alright, gather around," says Wodi. He holds up his wrist and out from his device pops a holo of the palace. "Alright, we should be here," the far left section of the outer wall is highlighted blue. "Cade and Luke need to get here, to the throne room. Meanwhile, Jon will lead a group here, to the shield generator. Gavin and I will head here, to the barracks. We don't want them sending reinforcements to Kessia." The holo closes and we head off in separate ways, Luke and I heading down the north hallway to the throne room while Wodi, Gavin, and a small squad head westward towards the barrack while the rest head eastward to the shield generator. Wodi cocks back a look at me, "Good luck Cade, may the Force be with you." I nod.

The hallways of the palace are ornate and stately, an exquisitely crafted material borne from the stone of this world. We see carvings in the stone, images of a great battle years past, almost like on the world of Mandalore; ancient depictions of battles between Jedi and Sith. A voice in my head speaks, *"This is where I fought the Dark Lord, Kronus. Where I destroyed him but failed to stop his machine of death."* I look to Luke, "This is a tapestry of an ancient battle Luke, one our Jedi ancestors fought millennia

ago." He nods, "Yes, and it looks like *Gorukar* was created here. This is where it all started, Cade, and this is where it will end." The mural goes on to depict the final battle that took place, showing a Jedi fleet bombarding the planet and sith and jedi fighting in hand-to-hand. We pass near a room where the stench nearly knocks us back. Peering into the room, we see several Sith Acolytes overseeing a current victims' suffering. Using our powerful telepathic link, we decide to save the poor man from his fate. I telekinetically reach out and grab the light in the room, taking it away and making the room pitch black. The green blades are activated, the green illuminating the dark. The acolytes turn around in confusion; they're well trained in the ways of a saber but are only minimally trained in the ways of the Force in accordance with Pravus' Rule of Few. We make quick work of them and I light the room again. Freeing the poor souls, we help them up and send them towards the gunships. Static, then "*Cade, it's Wodi, what's your status?*" I raise my left wrist and speak into the comm device, "Wodi, we've freed some prisoners who were about to become Juggernauts, they're headed to the gunships. We're coming up now onto what looks like a processing center of some kind." "*Understood, Quix out.*"

Several hours later . . .

Luke and I walk into what must be the smelliest room in the galaxy. It's a long rectangular room with vats lining the floor and, small one-person carbonite chambers along the walls, and operating tables in-between, covered with blood stains. This must be where the Juggernauts are actually made, the previous room being a preparatory center for Juggernaut production. "Luke, I have a bad feeling about this." "Yeah, me too, it almost feels like-" *SHRIEK*, "a trap, it's always a trap." With a *snap-hiss*, our lightsabers turn on and we move into action as several of the mutant soldiers launch out of the recesses in the wall. I bring the hilt down hard onto the lead soldier's helmet and place my left hand against the small of its' back as it falls, slamming it into the ground with a powerful Force push. Ducking and spinning at the same time, I swing horizontally to the left, cutting through the stomachs of two more Juggernauts. Luke flips high onto the upper walkway, several of the beasts following him. He makes an intricate weave with his saber, making a shimmering wall of green, lopping off arms and heads, even causing one to go careening over the railing. "These guys are tough!" He says through our telepathic link. Another

launches itself at me and I sidestep to the right, bringing the blade up through the gut, cutting the monster in half mid-flight and I raise my hand to face another, projecting lighting and electrocuting the Juggernaut to cinders.

I look outside through the ornate window to overlook the battle of Kessia, seeing flashes of orange and red blossoming in the sky, I can even see Jevin's army moving into the city and T5-B tanks trading fire with AT-AHTs. "Luke, we need to wrap this up, it looks like the ground forces are taking a beating!" "Agreed, let's go!" Luke replies as he snaps the neck of a stormtrooper that tried to take him by surprise. We exit the long room back to the ornate hallway and begin to run at Force-elevated speeds.

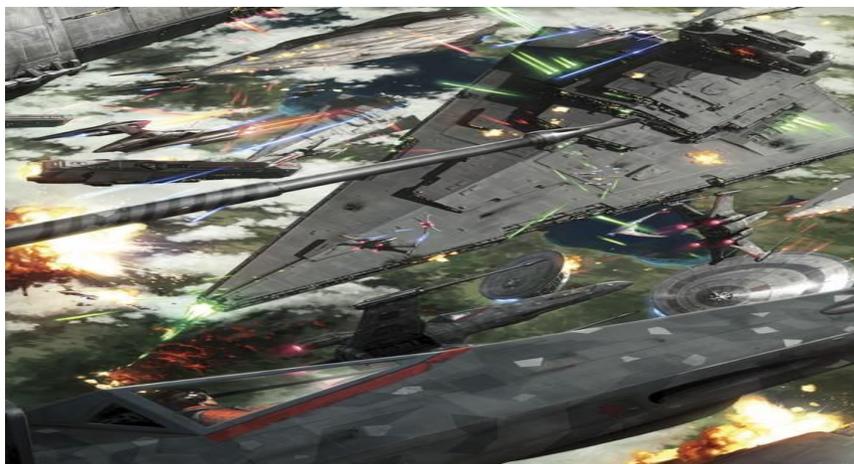
Finally, after cutting our way through swaths of stormtroopers, the inner guardsmen, we come to the heavy black-stone door that leads to the throne room. "Wodi, this is Cade, come in." Static, "Wodi, come in, over?" The comm sounds with blaster fire, "*Cade it's Wodi, we've made it to the barracks and are holding them off as long as we can, get in there and do what you need to!*" His voice is drowned out by more blasterfire as the signal dies. I get up against the wall on the right side of the door as Luke does the same on the left. With a nod, we place a hand on the door, channeling the Force into the door and causing it to go flying backwards in a spectacular fashion. As we enter the room, I hear a familiar snarl from the shadows.

Tycho Celchu, Rogue Leader - Xauvis' orbit

18 ABE

"All ships focus fire on that nearest Star Destroyer!" The space battle began as soon as the fleet dropped out of hyperspace nearly twenty hours ago. It was then that Admiral Kerex gave the order for the capital ships, namely Mk II Nadiri Starhawks, to engage in close-quarters with the Predators. The Imperium was waiting for us at Xauvis, the largest fleet we have ever seen yet in the war. Rogue, Blade, and Scimitar Squadrons were ordered to fly cover for the ground assault force, led by General Corso and High Marshal Ponith. It looked like a wave of TIE Stalkers was about to take out the convoy when I saw a break in their defenses and Rogue Squadron swooped in and saved the day. After seeing the transports to the outer atmosphere of the planet, we redirected our efforts to the nearest Predator, its daunting size temporarily blocking out the light of the star.

"Rogue Squadron, Blade Squadron, focus fire on the engine banks, we'll sink that behemoth!" Our T-70 X-wings and B-wings perform serpentine maneuvers to dodge incoming fire, ever moving slowly towards the closest *Predator*-class Star Destroyer. I take a moment to glance over the rest of the space battle; the *Viscount*-class Star Defenders are truly magnificent. Huge, tadpole-shaped ships, they are the most heavily armed and armored ships in the New Republic fleet. One Star Defender alone is enough to overpower four Predators outright. Those ships, coupled with the Mk II Starhawk, which like its predecessor touts extreme power in a compact design, are allowing us a slight advantage against the two Super Star Destroyers the Imperium has here. The *Warhammer*, fresh off the assembly line from the battle at Ringo Vinda is leading the space battle over the sister world, Xawin, while the *Viscount*, the flagship of the Republic and Admiral Kerex's personal ship, as well as the *Vigilance*, the second Star Defender made, lead the attack on Xauvis. The Imperium has been able to hold the line so far due to the sheer number of Imperium Star Destroyers and the two SSDs, the *Insidious* and the *Daemon*, which have much longer range and have been able to hit our fleet from a distance.



"Blade Squadron, this is Rogue leader, we'll provide cover, bomb those engines now!" "Copy Rogue Leader! Blade Squadron moving in!" We move in and take to dog-fighting with the enemy TIE Stalkers. Those *kriffers* are tough ships, built for heavy combat. They are armed and armored appropriately. We lost Jenkins to fire and Tenzin is ordered to bail out; his stabilizer took too much damage. "Hang on Rogues, Accolade is moving in!"

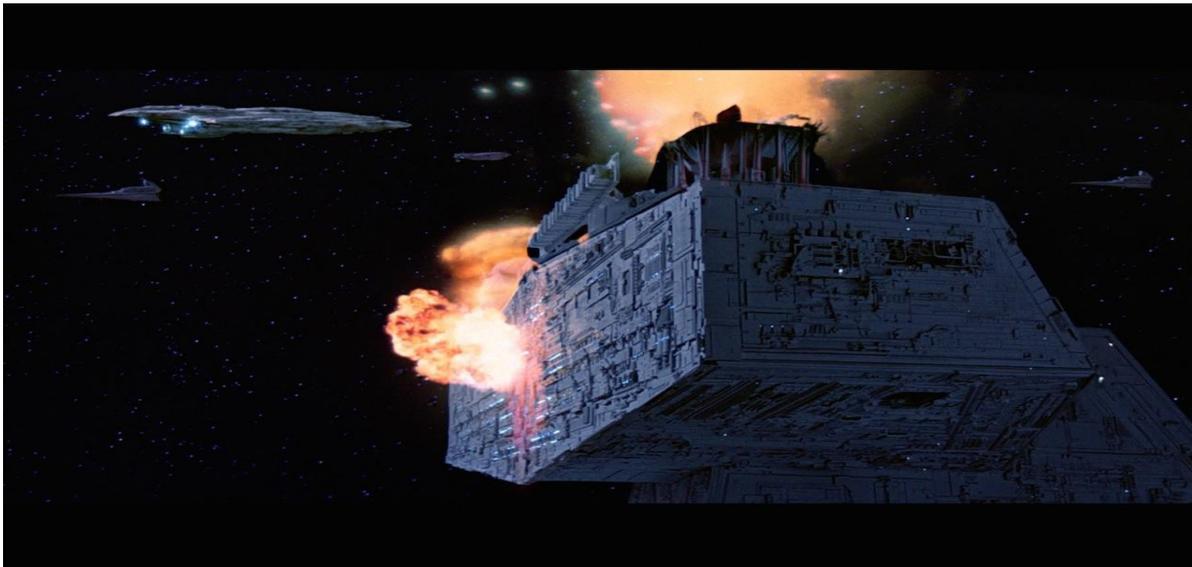
Admiral Antilles says over the comm, the hatchet-headed ship taking up a position above the Star Destroyer. It begins bombarding the vessel with a hail of turbolasers and ion cannon fire, the concentrated fire obliterating the Destroyer's shields. The attack gives Blade Squadron an opening to launch a concerted bombing run on the star destroyers' engines, causing them to erupt in a brilliant flash of blue and orange. The explosion sends out a shockwave that causes nearby ships to jolt slightly. "*Woohoo, did you see that Rogues? That's how-*" "Blade Squadron, cut the chatter, orders coming in from up top," I curtly say, cutting the Blade Squadron pilot off. "*Rogue, Blade, Scimitar Squadrons, this is Admiral Kerex. We need to take out the Insidious before we lose more of the fleet, the Protector's dreadnaughts can't take much more. Concentrate fire on that ship; Viscount, Accolade, Vigilance, Remember Tangrene, and Adjudicator will provide covering fire, take that thing down no matter what the cost!*" "Understood Admiral. Alright Rogues, you heard him. Buckle in and pray, we're going in!"



We swoop in, moving across the city-like hull of the *Insidious*, flagship of the Imperium. The thing is hard to see against the black of space; its heavy stealth armor is matte black, giving an advantage in both physical and electronic stealth. The black hull is currently being lit by the purple flashes of the Imperium's Kyber-powered lasers. Several Scimitars are taken out by flak while the Starhawk *Adjudicator* succumbs to the Super Star Destroyers' fire. "*Tycho, this is Anarin, we see an opening. Blade Squadron moving in, cover us!*" "Copy that, good luck Blades! Rogues, attack pattern Omega-Alpha five!" Our fighters begin moving in intricate weaves, dodging incoming fire and returning fire, dropping Stalkers onto the hull of the *Insidious*. "*Admiral, this is Antilles, we're taking too much damage and we can't keep*

this up! "To hell with it, I'm using the EM resonance torpedo!" yells Blade Leader. The electromagnetic resonance torpedo is a device created by Research and Development, essentially an enhanced EMP device that is exponentially more powerful, and unstable. I see in my periphery a bright light launch from a B-wing, a blue-yellow object moving at high speed towards the Destroyer. It hits the hull and in seconds, the point of impact erupts in a flash of blue. "Shields are down, concentrate all fire on the bridge!" orders Kerex.

The space between the Republic cruisers and the *Insidious* becomes engulfed with the red light of lasers and proton torpedoes, the blue of ion cannons, and the particle trails of missiles. The concentrated fire is so great, the bridge erupts in flames.



The ship begins falling from its position, implosions dotting the hull. "All Republic forces, the *Insidious* is down, I repeat, *Insidious* is down. Concentrate fire on that remaining Super Star Destroyer. Ground forces, what's your status?" says Kerex. There is a great deal of static; the Imperium is trying to interfere with comms. Eventually a reply comes back. "Admiral this is Ponith, we've taken Kessia, the airfield, and the Juggernaut facility. No word on the palace assault yet, comms have been faulty, stand by."

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix – Xauvis, Wild Space



18 ABE

Our U-wing rocks to port forcefully as its shields absorb a stray cannonbolt, causing me to slam painfully hard against my safety harness, my armor's edges biting into my abdomen. Ouch! The interior cabin lights flicker several times, casting us into temporary shadow. My helmet's display flickers to night vision for a moment. I flip my visor up in mild annoyance. I look out the shaking viewport to gaze in awe at the battle raging across the starscape. Massive, wedge-shaped Destroyers, of all makes: *Victory*, *Imperial*, and *Predator*-class in blockade position around Xauvis, furiously trade turbolaser fire with our MC80 cruisers, Mark Two Starhawks, and Nebulon-B frigates, while starfighters wings maneuver through the capital ships and floating debris of all sizes, blasting away at one another, sometimes careening away on a random trajectory in flames. The intense battle, with turbolaser fire lancing in all directions, gives the appearance that the starscape is on fire. "There's a lot of flak ahead," our pilot relays over the onboard intercom, his voice crackling, "don't be surprised if you feel a few bumps." A retrofitted and heavily modified GR-75 comes into view on our starboard side, the *Deliverance*, accompanied by a trio of B-wings flying escort. I check my X45A blaster rifle over, patting the power pack more

firmly into place before cinching the strap tighter around my shoulder. Suddenly, our cabin is filled with blinding hot light, and I'm reeling from the shockwave of a very close explosion. A string of expletives comes over the comm. The *Deliverance* is no longer flying level with us. Pieces of twisted hull plating fall away from a massive breach in its side, still flaming and smoking, venting the transport's interior. I squeeze my eyes shut, but not in time to see a landspeeder-sized chunk of hull impact with a B-wing, sending it smashing into its partner. "That's not good!" a soldier yells.

"*Blast it, brace for impact!*" Our pilot shouts over the intercom. Flaming chunks of hull slide past our viewport as the *Deliverance* breaks apart, some of its debris the size of large asteroids, others the size of snubfighters, still venting bodies and supply crates. We hear several dull thuds and scrapes that reverberate throughout the crew cabin. The noise sets my teeth on edge, and I grip my restraining strap more tightly in my gloved hand. Suddenly I'm thrown forcefully against the back of my seat, alarm klaxons shrieking throughout the gunship, bathing us in iridescent red light. Several soldiers cry out and curse. Others stare straight ahead silently, eyes wide. "*Damn it,*" our pilot yells, "*we've attracted some attention. Blasted TIE fighters! Rear cannon's jammed! Where the kriffs our escort?*" He maneuvers the gunship erratically, tossing us around in our harnesses. "At this rate, we'll be lucky if the S-foils of our U-wing reach atmosphere!" Nom, seated next to me, says shakily. Other soldiers voice similar concerns. The TIE fighters shriek by overhead, getting ready to come at us again. Gavin nervously taps his foot against the deck plating. Jon appears slightly pale. I don't answer, looking to Cade, seated opposite me, all the while flicking my blaster's safety switch back and forth. The young Jedi closes his eyes. Luke, seated next to him, does the same, folding and clasping his hands in his lap. Suddenly, a strange calm comes over me, and I feel a surge in confidence. We can do this! I sit up straighter, looking around the cabin to see others doing so as well. Nervous and terrified looks transform into ones of confidence and reassurance. That calm is dampened, but not broken when our viewport lights up again with green as several laser cannon blasts from the pursuing TIEs splash against our shields, rocking the gunship more. Several of us cringe. I shake my head, seeing sparkles in my vision. "*Hang on,*" our pilot shouts, his voice free of panic, "*let's see if we can lose them! These guys are persistent!*"

Our pilot maneuvers more strategically through flak as we pass underneath a fierce broadside battle between a Predator Destroyer and one of our *Starhawk*-class battleships, attempting to shake our tail. Explosions blossom across both hulls as the turbolaser crews find their mark, sending more debris careening off into space, making our already bumpy ride even more so. "This flak is thick!" A soldier shouts. The thunder of the cannons is deafening, even from inside the cabin. "These guys are good, but we're better. Hang on in there," the long-awaited voice of an X-wing pilot relays over our comm. I break into a wide grin. Several of us laugh and cheer in relief. "Glad you didn't forget about us, escort," our pilot says with more than a little sarcasm. Three X-wing fighters come into view and break away to deal with the pursuing TIEs. "*Haha, back to the junk world Lotho Minor you go!*" "*Taking some fire, lead.*" "*On it.*" "*Woohoo, that one blew up good!*" "*Yeah, we sure taught him a lesson!*" I look out the viewport to see the lead X-wing blast the last pursuing TIE to bits. Other transports and gunships have broken through with the help of fighter escort, and together we rush toward Xauvis. But many small sleek dots are rushing up from Xauvis to meet us. *Karabast*. "Watch it," another transport pilot says, "*Stalkers inbound from the surface.*" "*Open fire with heavy ion cannons and forward batteries. See if you can knock 'em into their comrades!*" "We aren't in range!" "We can't deter all of them! Where's Celchu?" "Bulk of escort's back mopping up a pursuing TIE wing harassing the Spirit of Kenobi." "All of them?" Jevin's voice comes over the intercom: "*Any New Republic fighter squadrons, this is General Corso, we have Stalkers inbound on the assault force. Our current fighter support can't deal with all of them. We need assistance!*" We wait for several tense seconds. Nothing. I curse. "They're almost within range!"

All of a sudden, the wave of incoming TIEs begins to wink out of existence, some careening into their fellows. A new voice cuts in over our comms. "*Rogue Squadron coming in to assist! Hold it together!*" Rogue X-wings roar in from the side, laser cannons blazing, cutting through the solar wings of the incoming TIE fighters, now attempting to maneuver and engage their new targets, causing more collisions and explosions. Soon the only thing between us and Xauvis is a wave of TIE debris. We let out another cheer. The intercom erupts with cheering and laughing too. "*You're all clear, assault force. Good hunting!*" Tycho Celchu says over our comm before the squadron of fighters bank and race back toward the capital ships. Rogue

Squadron is quickly replaced by Green Squadron. *"Assault force and Blue Wing, be advised, we're your escort now. It's your lucky day! We'll push forward towards the landing zone and soften up the resistance force. Blue Wing, stay with the transports and gunships."* "Copy."

We break atmosphere, our gunship riding waves of turbulence, anti-aircraft flak and clouds rushing past our viewports. Droplets of water streak upwards on our canopy, distorting our view slightly. Below, a Y-wing unleashes its payload, an entire city block of Kessia disappearing in a wave of orange fire. I can feel the aftershock of the bombing in my boots and my teeth. *"Watch that cannon fire, Swift Liberation!"* "Affirmative. Adjusting heading." *"Looks like our landing zone is clear."* "Copy that, Liberation." *"Green Squadron heading in for another pass. Hang on to your restraining straps!"* I listen to the comm chatter, allowing it to clear my head. Gav taps my arm and points out the viewport at a line of snow-capped mountains, where a very large and imposing stone structure sits at their base: Pravus' palace. I nod and heft my rifle. "The hologram doesn't do it justice, does it?" Gavin yells, indicating the palace. "It's a shame we're gonna have to blow it up!" "Ah, it'll look better that way!" Jon pipes up, grinning. We laugh. *"There, that's the palace,"* Jevin says over our intercom, *"Wodi, we are taking the brunt of the flak, divert your gunships now. Good hunting."* "Acknowledged." I respond. "Good luck, Jevin. Tell Voren to keep an eye on Sinan for me! And don't worry, we'll save some marks for you boys!" Our two U-wing gunships break off from the main group and head towards a large stone courtyard in front of the palace spanning several blocks. "Touchdown!" A bump reverberates through the hull. We've landed. As one, we unfasten our restraining straps, unhooking and priming our X45A, EL-16HFE, and A280C rifles. "Opening bay doors on your go, Colonel. Good luck out there, guys," our pilot shouts, peeking his flight helmeted head back through to the troop bay. I nod his way and then raise a hand, indicating that I wish to speak. I look into each face staring back at me; some older, many young. I press a button on a nearby console, broadcasting my voice to the other gunship. "Alright, listen up. We've made it this far, but that doesn't mean it'll be a walk in the park from here. Be on your guard, and watch each other's backs. Remember, this is a Sith Lord and his fanatic cultists we're dealing with here. We're on his doorstep, so that means his cronies will be giving it their all. We'll just have to give more! We do not stop the attack until Pravus is dead, understood?" "Hooyah, sir!" comes the resounding reply. I give a thumbs-up to the pilot,

who opens the bay doors, bathing the bay in green light. "Go, go, go!" Gavin shouts, making a pinwheeling gesture with his arm out the door. I'm out third behind Luke and Cade, who activate their lightsabers, bringing them up in a defensive pose.

All twenty of us are out and on the courtyard flagstones, blaster rifles up and sweeping the area. "Where is every-" Luke and Cade suddenly whirl, their lightsabers repelling sudden blaster bolt volleys flying towards us. We scatter, diving for any possible cover. I take cover behind a high stone archway with Lannik and a Twenty-Seventh Infantry soldier cradling an SWS-1013 Projectile Launcher. "Return fire!" We pop back out, firing at our opposition: Sith Juggernauts and a complement of stormtroopers. "Tossing a grenade! Watch yourselves!" Several stormtroopers reel from the explosion, some falling to their armored knees, blaster rifles skidding away. We ground them for good. My rifle is hot in my gloved hands, but I continue to fire. Luke and Cade acrobatically twirl and bat back blaster bolts, sometimes sending Juggernauts and stormtroopers careening with the Force. The Twenty-Seventh soldier next to me sends stormtroopers flying with his launcher, their armor charred and smoking. More Juggernauts charge, many popping up seemingly from thin air. "Whoa!" "Don't let those things get close, they'll tear you up!" "Got one!" "Mark down!" "Cover your ears!" Soon, our opposition, riddled with smoking blaster holes, all lie sprawled on the courtyard stones, down and out for the count. A Twenty-Seventh sergeant does a quick sweep of downed targets with a scanner just to be sure, putting another blaster hole through anything that sets off the device. Some forms he purposely passes over. I don't think a stormtrooper with his arms blown off will be getting back up for a round two!

We all gather at the center of the courtyard; Jon doing a headcount of soldiers. Remarkably, we didn't lose a single guy in the attack. My sense of joy quickly dissipates when I look up at the palace. The cold black stone gives me the shivers, and reminds me of what will be waiting for us on the other side. Trying to shake a growing feeling of dread creeping up my spine, I, along with Gavin and Jon, lead the others to the palace wall, where a Twenty-Seventh soldier determines the best place for a proximity charge. "Here's the best spot sir," he says, patting the center section of the wall with his gloved hand, "the wall is weak at this point." We stack up on opposite sides of the wall, ten soldiers on each side. I nod to Gavin, positioned first

opposite me. "Do it." Gavin nods back and produces a proximity detpack from his belt, fiddling with the timer before placing it securely on the stone surface. Once he's finished, I set my own charge next to his. We hunker down and wait for the explosion. Any second now. BOOM! My helmet's audio dampeners quiet the sound of the mini blast, but I can still feel it in my stomach and chest. Flecks and chips of pulverized stone rain down around us. Luke and Cade are in first, lightsabers igniting as soon as they step inside, holding them in a defensive stance. We rush in after them, blasters raised and ready to fire at . . . nothing. "Well," Lannik says quietly, lowering his X45 slightly, "that was easy. No welcome party?" We sweep our rifles around the room, prepared for the slightest hint of hostile movement. When no one jumps out at us from the shadows, I motion everyone towards me. "Alright, gather round." I tap three keystrokes into my wrist gauntlet holoprojector and a small holoimage of the palace comes to life, giving us a birds-eye view of the building. "We should be here, in the lower west corridors." The corresponding corridors I indicate with my finger in the holo strobe a deep blue. "Cade and Luke need to get to here, the palace throne room." The center of the palace strobos orange. "While they locate Pravus, Colonel Grissom will lead a group to the shield generators, here." A large room near the east wing of the palace strobos red. "Captain Skyes and I will lead a group here, to the barracks. We don't want them sending reinforcements to Kessia." I see heads nodding as I go through the plan. Once finished, I deactivate the holoprojector and we separate into our groups: two teams of nine, and Luke and Cade. Before we head off, I turn to the others one last time to give a final message: "Do your jobs, and take care of each other. I can't remind you all enough how cautious you must be from this point onward. Just watch your backs. May the Force be with you." Everyone nods silently in understanding. I look to Cade one last time. "Good luck Cade. Give him hell." Cade nods. With that, we head off, Gavin and I cautiously leading our small squad further west towards the barracks, ready, hopefully, for anything.

Jevin Corso - Xauvis, city of Kessia
18 ABE

"General, we got a big problem!" a soldier yells, rousing me back to consciousness. We had made good progress to the administrative complex. After a volley of proton torpedoes from the MPTLs, all ground forces moved

in. Seeing our soldiers fight made me proud, they have such courage and valor. Moving street to street, building to building, we traded fire with the Imperium troops, both sides taking heavy casualties. We even ran into a new type of soldier;



it looks like the Imperium has perfected its Juggernaut creation process. Instead of barely controlled, monstrous killers, they are now silent machines, towering over their counterparts at about eight feet tall, their heavy blaster cannons tearing through our Phrik-weave armor with much less difficulty than the normal F-6 rifle used by the Imperium's stormtroopers. The streets were alight with blaster fire all the while, missiles are streaking overhead from our T5-B tanks and in the sky, we see our T-70 X-wings and B-wings dodging and weaving with TIE Stalkers. We head inside the administrative building and immediately take positions at the windows, X45A rifles at the ready. We begin pouring fire across the street, taking down stormtroopers left and right. All of a sudden the wall to my right explodes, one of the new Juggernauts standing in the dust. The blaster cannon it wields shreds through two soldiers until a hail of blasterfire hits its white armor. The soldier drops the cannon and out of a wrist gauntlet a long and lethal looking vibroblade appears. It quickly strikes two more soldiers, slicing across a human's face and stabbing a Quarren in the gut. The soldier next to me, Private Marks, drops his rifle, "Grenade, get down!" He tosses a

thermal detonator that lands directly at the Juggernaut's feet. Everyone dives away from the area and we hear a deafening boom, the sound of the blast reverberating throughout the hallways of the building. All that remains of the Juggernaut is the discarded blaster cannon. Marks lets out a sigh of relief and offers me a hand, hauling me up. "Thanks for the assist, Marks, now let's get set up. Get those AA guns set up on the roof!" Captain Meera, who leads a team of combat engineers, nods and heads off with her engineers. A burst of static comes through on the intercom. It comes again, ". . . sir? General Corso, do you read?" "This is Corso, go ahead." Static. "Sir, it's Lieutenant Mason, you have trouble incoming, looks like an AT-AHT."



"Understood, the objective remains, Corso out." I look out across the street and see two of the mammoth sized walkers lumbering towards our position. The All-Terrain Assault Heavy Transport is an advanced AT-AT; it's slightly bigger and much more heavily armed than its Imperial predecessor. The heavy laser cannons begin pounding the sides of the building, causing a massive cloud of dust to form. "Everyone alright?" I ask after a fit of coughing and after I get confirmation from the group, I look to the group's demolition squad. "Launcher!" One tosses me a Havoc Missile Launcher, the newest in New Republic ordnance technology. I take a shot, the missile streaking towards the walker. It's a dead on hit on the "head" but nothing happens. I discard the launcher to the ground, "*Kriff*, we are out of options!" All of a sudden, I hear the familiar sound of B-wings, "*General Corso, this is Commander Navette, we are coming in for a run on those walkers, danger close!*" The B-wings swoop in and the lead fighter fires several torpedoes at

the behemoth, causing it to stumble until two legs blow out, the massive thing falling hard to the ground. The other stands to its full height and shoots a B-wing with its heavy cannon. The fighter is clipped on the lower wing and begins to dangerously spin out of control. The fireball of a ship heads directly for the walker, hitting it with a force strong enough to cause a massive explosion and that walker too falls to the ground in flames, destroyed. "Hooyah!" The soldiers say, I smirk and raise my wrist comm, "Tav, it's Jevin. How are things on your end?" "*Good, charges are set, the refinery is about to blow.*" Good, everything is going to plan. We hear the rumbling noises of the AA guns going off on the roof and several TIE fighters drop out of the sky. "Wodi, Cade, come in?" There's nothing in response. "Quix, this is Corso, what's your status?" There's a response but there's too much static to make it out. *BOOM!* There's a large explosion off in the distance, the second assault force has destroyed the refinery center. We're on schedule, that's good. I look towards the palace, hopefully Cade and Wodi are alright, but we have our own problems. Come on Cade, kill the *kriffer* Pravus and let's go home. I raise my rifle and began firing at an advancing horde, this time with Juggernauts leading the charge. I take aim and fire, hitting a stormtrooper square in the face plate. I take out two more in the next volley, seeing the advancing Juggernauts who, true to their name, are able to storm their way through blaster fire. Their armor must be like ours, made with a weave of some indestructible material, possibly even just like ours and using Phrik. The nice thing with the X45A rifle is that the standard model comes with an underslung grenade launcher, using special, cylindrical shaped thermal detonators. I aim the grenade launcher and fire a detonator in between the two Juggernauts, the power of the explosive and due to the fact they are literally on the spot, they are vaporized. An Imperium repulsor-tank hovers in from an alley and I groan; our heavy ordnance is dry. We lower our rifles in surrender and the tank all of a sudden explodes, a T5 at the opposite end of the street having blasted it. The battle rages on.

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix – Xauvis, Wild Space
18 ABE

We cautiously move in formation down the twisting, shadow-filled corridor, rifles up and slowly sweeping for trouble, our boots making soft footfalls on the hard stone floor. The hairs on the back of my neck are prickling, and I can feel a cold sweat running down my back, making me shiver slightly. The air is colder here. My skin feels clammy under my uniform. The cold is not only on the surface, it's also inside me, wrapping around my organs like a clamp. I shiver again. The shadows seem to take on a life of their own as we pass, dancing across the stone walls and intricate carvings, many depicting ancient battles, figures locked in brutal combat, and torture. What is it with Sith and pain? I try to ignore the statues and carvings. They're really starting to dark me out. As we continue, I can hear as well as feel in the pit of my stomach the occasional *WHOOMP* of explosions taking place outside in the city. My mind briefly drifts to Amminius and Jevin. I hope they're alright. Come on Wodi, focus on the task at hand. Now's not the time to daydream. Gavin, walking next to me, catches my eye and gives me a concerned look. I nod to him, indicating that I'm fine. Gavin nods back, giving me a smile that does not reach his eyes. He's scared too. I glance at the other soldiers walking around me. All appear alert, but extremely edgy, eyes darting around. We walk a little way further before I put up my hand, closing it to form a fist. *Stop*. I silently motion everyone to gather around me. Once everyone is crowded around, I say in a low voice "We're on course toward the barracks. Remember: shoot first, ask questions later. It's either us or them." Nods all around. "How are you all feeling?" The Twenty-Seventh soldier lugging the SWS-1013 looks around at the others before speaking: "Fine, sir, but this place is really starting to get to us." Nom nods. "This is Pravus' last fall back, and so far, we're waltzing right on through. Something's not right."

Other helmeted heads nod in agreement. "It seems only logical that this place would be swarming with the Imperium's finest," Lannik pipes up, "but it's not. I don't have to be a Jedi to sense a trap, here." "The other's outside are counting on us to secure this position," Gavin says, motioning at the outer wall with his X45, "so trap or no trap, we have to continue." "Gavin's right," I say, nodding, "we have to-" A noise further down the corridor makes me stop mid-sentence. Footfalls. Moving toward our position. Instantly and silently, our group moves and takes up positions behind stone outcroppings and statues, blasters trained at the far end of the darkened hallway. I peek out from behind a bust of a hooded and cloaked humanoid

Sith, my X45's scope pressed to my eye, stock braced against my shoulder. Just then, my comlink chirps. I must have jumped about a meter high, barely suppressing a yell. The footfalls falter. I hear a high-pitched whimper of terror. The noise unsettles me, gooseflesh breaking out across my arms under my gauntlets. I motion for everyone to hide back behind their cover. Wait for them to come closer. The footsteps resume, sounding unsteady. I cautiously peer out again, barely revealing my face. Out from the darkness walk three silhouettes: one bulky, and two slim. The figures walk shakily into a patch of light. My eyes go wide. One is an Ithorian, the other two human, one female and one male. All three look terrible. No, worse than terrible. Blood-stained rags barely cover their emaciated bodies, and their exposed skin is raw and covered in filth. Clumps of hair are missing from the two humans' heads. Long thin scars run across all their bare arms, many of the wounds still weeping. The skin of their faces host many scars as well. In short, they looked like refugees in a war camp. I had seen the like too many times. Still, for them to show up right where we were heading. I step out of my cover, blaster raised and pointed. My team does likewise. The three beings stop, frozen. "Who are you?" I say in a surprisingly harsh sounding voice. The three stand speechless, shivering all over. Suddenly, my comlink chirps again. Without taking my eyes off our friends, I take it out and depress the button. "Quix here." "*Wodj, it's Cade,*" comes the reply. "Cade? What do you need?" I say. "*Wodj, we've freed some prisoners who were about to become Juggernauts. They're headed to the gunships.*" I stare at the Ithorian and two humans. "Is that true?" The woman nods, her eyes huge. I motion everyone to lower their blaster rifles. With a click, safeties are reengaged. "*Can you make sure that they get there safely?*" "Will do," I reply, "how are you and Luke?" "*We're coming up now onto what looks like a processing center of some kind. We're going to check it out.*" "Understood, Quix out." I hook my comlink back on my belt and motion for the prisoners to join us, my expression softening. "Let's get you to safety." I nod to the Twenty-Seventh sergeant, a Rodian, who sends two of his men forward. "Get them medical treatment and some food." The two soldiers nod and carefully escort the prisoners back the way we had come. I watch them for a few moments before turning back to everyone. "Let's keep moving. The barracks shouldn't be too much further."

...

I down the single stormtrooper guard silently from behind with a knife, embedding it in the trooper's neck seal. I catch his deadweight in my arms and move the armored body into the shadows, nodding to my team. We're at the entrance to the barracks. And with only light resistance to keep us from our goal. Never a good sign. "Stack up." I say. We stack up on opposite sides of heavy double-wide blast door. I nod to one of Gavin's guys, positioned across from me, who produces a magnetic detonator from his belt. "Let's go in loud. They already know we're here." The man nods and places the detonator. We hunker down and wait for the explosion. Whoomp! "Go, go, go!" The plan is to keep the troopers' focused on us inside the barracks. We rush into the room, blasters raised. There are a lot more stormtroopers than we thought there would be. A lot more. "*Kriff!*" A Twenty-Seventh soldier is cut down by a storm of blasterfire, helmet and blaster flying. "Take cover!" Gavin shouts. We dive in all directions, firing madly. Gavin crouches next to me, screaming in my ear. "This isn't a barracks, this is a damn armory!" Blaster bolts scream by overhead. "Yeah, I noticed! Lock down their escape, we need to keep 'em contained here!" I shout back, downing a trooper with a shot to the faceplate. More pour in. "More coming!" "Return fire! Return fire!" "Gah, I'm hit!" "Grenade going out, watch it!" "Juggernauts incoming!" The noise of blasterfire ricocheting off metal and stone is deafening. The room is soon filled with smoke and flying chips of debris. I see rather than hear my comlink light up. I wrench it off my belt and click the button, firing with one hand, holding the comlink close to my ear. "*-odi, come in! Over?*" Cade's signal is patchy and full of static. "Cade, it's Wodi," I shout back, ducking as a volley of blasterfire strikes the wall behind me. "We've made it to the barracks and we're holding them off as long as we can. They were gearing up to come get you. Get in there and do what you need to do!" Cade attempts to reply, but the comlink fizzes and pops, cutting off his words. Lost the signal. I jam it in my pocket and continue firing. Hopefully, our antics are buying Cade and Luke time.

Cade Valdarin - Xauvis, Imperium Palace throne room
18 ABE

The snarl reveals itself and turns into a black shadow that lands on the ground and stands to full height. Based on the stench and the height the

shadow reaches, I easily determine it to be Darth Ferus, the Trandoshan apprentice of Darth Pravus. "Where's your master, apprentice?" He makes a slight hiss, a laugh of sorts. "My master is not able to join us. He hopes you'll understand." We all activate our lightsabers, Luke with his green blade and my peridot blade casting an olive green glow on the floor, and slowly start to move in a circle, always facing Ferus. "If he isn't here, where is he?" I demand. "Lord Pravus is preparing to make a final strike, a strike that will leave his mark on both you and the Republic, that will forever emblazon his image into the heart of the galaxy, and that will show the galaxy how truly weak the New Republic is." Luke and I enter ready stances and at the same time, the far door opens. It reveals several stormtroopers and two armored, hooded figures. They wear black capes and black tunics, with a grey-silver helm. "Behold my master's latest creation. Until now, the Force has only been able to be used by those sensitive to it but now that has changed. Lord Pravus has found a way to infuse the Force into non-sensitives, these new Shadow Knights. With them and my masters aweing power, we will crush the New Republic in one fell swoop. *Hachak!*" And the Shadow Knights activate their red blades and leap towards us.

Luke immediately launches a powerful telekinetic blast that hurls them to the upper walkway and slams the troopers into the wall with great force. "You handle the overgrown lizard, I'll handle these two!" He jumps up to the upper catwalk. I hope he's careful, these Shadow Knights may not be full Praetors but definitely are stronger than the average Acolyte and their power is definitely warped. It isn't natural to them. I turn towards Ferus, now that I can focus my full attention on him, he snarls again and we rush towards each other. His saber is not a standard hilt, rather it is a pike. A long weapon customized to his liking, a lightsaber on one end and on the other, a sharp blade. I guess the Sith idea of actually cutting through flesh, the feel of steel rendering it never goes out of style. The pike is actually perfect for the Trandoshan, his height and reach are put to great effect but over the course of this war, I have increased my skill exponentially. Our blades meet, sparks falling to the floor. He swings left, I duck and spin to the right, bringing my blade up to meet his return swing. I launch a ferocious set of attacks, forcing the lizard on the defensive, eventually knocking the blade away and kicking him straight in the stomach, using the Force to put extra oomph into the

kick, sending him backwards. He rolls in midair, feet landing on the wall and kicks off again. I jump up to meet him in midair, blades sparking again. We land and get into a vicious set of parries, every attack meeting one another.

Meanwhile, Luke is fighting on the upper walkway with the Shadow Knights. Ferus was right, their power isn't natural to them, and it feels so warped, making them stronger than the average Acolyte. Spinning his blade in a defensive pattern, Luke blocks all of their attacks, and ends the buzzsaw action with a backwards somersault to avoid a horizontal swipe of red saber. At the end of the somersault, Luke uses the Force to pull one of the knights towards him, spinning at the same time, his sword slicing through the knight's stomach as he flies by him. The other knight rushes in to enter into a fierce set of parries with Luke, blades cutting through railing and wall in the enclosed area. Finally, Luke ends it by meeting the knights' blade in a saberlock and, before the knight has a chance to do anything, shoves him with the Force through the large window of the throne room, launching the warrior to his plummeting death.

Luke reaches out to me in our telepathic link and tells me he is going to help Wodi and I see him jump out of the window towards where the armory and barracks are. I also see the raging battle for Xauvis through the broken window, the sky alight with falling debris from the ships in orbit, giving the appearance of a meteor shower. I focus my full attention on Ferus, clearing my thoughts and using the ancient technique of Battle Mind to focus solely on the battle. I raise my saber in a high guard and launch a vicious series of overhand strikes, pummeling his saber each time he raises it to block the attack. Finally, I see a break in his defenses and at the last second, pivot my blade at an angle, bisecting the pike in half, the loss of its weight causing him to stumble backwards. While he's stumbling, I telekinetically grab the severed end of the lightsaber pike, the spiked end, and with a great force, launch it straight towards him. The spike goes straight through his chest. The lightsaber end deactivates and Ferus falls to a knee. "Now, Ferus, where is he!" I say forcefully, peridot-colored blade held to his throat. Through a gurgle of blood, he replies. "Lord Pravus is on his way to making his mark on the galaxy, to laying a wound that will be forever etched into the New Republic and on you." He looks up at me, smiling through bloodied teeth, "You know of what I speak." he says as I feel a dark presence in my mind. My wrist-comm lights up with chatter, most prominently that of Fleet

Admiral Kerex, *"Repeat all ships break off, we are picking up a massive force dropping out of hyperspace!"* Following that, *Gorukar* and a large flotilla of Predators, the largest ever seen, drops out of hyperspace, immediately opening fire and taking down multiple Starhawks. A pale blue purple beam lances out from *Gorukar* towards one of the *Viscount* Star Defenders, the *Warhammer*, and pierces its tough armor, causing the massive ship to break in half. That's one of only three Star Defenders we have gone. Almost as soon as they arrived, the massive Imperium fleet, complete with *Predator*-class Star Destroyers and *Gollum*-class Land Assault Transports along with *Gorukar*, jump to hyperspace again.

. . .

I meet up with Luke after exiting the palace, his tunic torn and having some cuts and blast marks along his skin. I look at him and Wodi with worry, "We're fine," he says, Wodi voicing in agreement. Luke looks up at the sky as the space battle slowly starts to wind down, "So, that was Pravus, where was he going?" I look at him, not saying a word out loud but transmitting my pain and anger through our bond. He just nods and raises his hand, "Artoo, Ratchet? Bring us the ships, we're leaving." Wodi and Jevin stare dumbfounded and it's Jevin, who has always been like an older brother, to speak first. "You can't be serious. You're going after them alone!" I nod, "Jevin, I have to, he's going to Chandrila, to make a point to me. And if he succeeds in draining the life from Chandrila, he'll become immensely more powerful and go on to destroy the Core Worlds. Jevin, it's my home and where Mon Mothma lives, the woman who raised me and is basically my mother. More importantly, it's a symbol to the galaxy that the New Republic can survive something even as terrible as the Liberation Day attacks. I have to go." Wodi walks up and begins to speak in rebuttal when we hear the crisp voice of Tor Ponith. "Now that's enough, Colonel, you know Cade is right." Wodi turns, "How so?" Tor shakes his head, "We just got word, while we were fighting here, the Imperium launched major attacks against Volik, Takodana, and Arkanis and we're busy mopping up here. Someone needs to go to Chandrila and rally the defenders until reinforcements can arrive. Cade, you have a go." I nod in thanks and place a hand on Wodi's shoulder, "I'll be fine, you'll be right behind me." I wink and run off towards the X-wings with Luke. I overhear Tor say to Wodi and Jevin that he and Kerrex

will take the full force of the Fourth Battle Group to Chandrila, leaving General Voren and Admiral Antilles to mop up on Xauvis.



We fly through the remaining Republic, Mandalorian, and Wookiee fleets to the edge of the system, entering hyperspace. While traveling through the mottled blue, Luke reaches out to me in our link, "*So, what's the plan here?*" "Well, we enter the system, fight our way to *Gorukar*, get onboard, and kill Pravus before he can use the weapon." He chuckles, "Simple, I like it." The systems chirp that we are about to exit hyperspace, and in three, two, one. The black of space appears and we see a massive storm of activity around my home. Thousands of ships; Republic, Imperium, Mandalorian, Wookiee, and Espirion all in close proximity to each other, some battling at broadsides, cannons taking out chunks of the opposing ship. We angle toward *Gorukar* and accelerate to attack speed.

Tycho Celchu - Core Worlds, Chandrila **18 ABE**

After the Battle of Xauvis the two Jedi, Skywalker and Valdarin, raced off to Chandrila to aid the defenders. It was a little risky but I guess Cade had a personal stake in it; after all, Chandrila is his homeworld and the first capital of the New Republic. Shortly after, the order came from on high from High Marshal Ponith and Fleet Admiral Kerex that the Fourth Battlegroup would head to Chandrila while the Third stayed and cleaned up on Xauvis. It was

spectacular, in a way, seeing the entirety of the Fourth Battlegroup leave the Xauvis system. The centerpieces of the fleet were the two remaining Viscount Star Defenders, the *Viscount* and *Vigilance*, massive tadpole shaped ships that are the most advanced in the Republic fleet, complete with state-of-the-art armor, shields, and weapons. Unfortunately, they are prohibitively expensive and thus only three were made, with the *Warhammer* having been destroyed at Xauvis. Following the two mammoth ships, there's the *Lusankya*, one of the *Executor*-class star dreadnoughts captured during the fighting against Imperial holdouts, and hundreds of *Starhawk*-class battleships, Nebulon-B frigates, and dozens of Blockade Runners. Stored aboard the Star Defenders, the SSD, and several dedicated carriers are thousands of fighters and bombers, ready to launch as soon as we hit the system.

. . .

Once we enter the system, chaos ensues. The most glaring thing is the presence of *Gorukar*, an ancient Sith space station that the Imperium discovered that, according to Cade Valdarin, absorbs Force energy on a planetary scale, meaning that it wipes all life from a planet, leaving a dead hulk in its wake. The monstrosity looms there over Chandrila, just sitting there and not firing its main weapon. Seems Pravus is content to just have it wait there and use conventional weaponry. Alongside *Gorukar* are hundreds, no, thousands of Imperium vessels. From *Predator*-class Star Destroyers to *Corvus*-class corvettes, all engaged in heavy fighting with the planet's defenders. Thank the Force for our allies in the Coalition; the Espirion, Mandalorians, and Wookiees. As soon as Chandrila detected the incoming fleet and sent a distress call, they answered almost instantaneously. A massive fleet of allied ships, from the slender Mandalorian *dreadnought*-class cruiser to the massive Espirion cruisers and Wookiee *Kataran*-class battlecruisers rallied to Chandrila's defense, it truly is a site to behold all these groups together, fighting a fierce fight to protect a symbol of the New Republic.

"Squadron leaders, this is Admiral Kerex," the bubbly voice of the Quarren comes through the headset, "you all know the mission and what is at stake. We need to do everything we can to prevent that station from firing its main weapon on the planet." I start my T-70 X-wing up, bringing shields to max,

running checks on power systems, and preparing to launch. I'd much rather fly a T-85, they run much smoother but are still in the prototype stage of development. I see outside of the hangar force field the bulks of the *Starhawk*-class battleships, slowly becoming the ship of the line for the New Republic, moving to take positions. We take off; Rogue, Blue, Grey, and Blade squadrons all moving out towards their assigned areas. Blade Squadron, complete with the upgraded B-wing Starfighter, has been assigned to launch bombing runs on the Super Star Destroyer *Daemon*.

Rogue Squadron, meanwhile, moves to intercept enemy starfighters. Rogue Three, a young rookie pilot compared to the rest of us gets clipped on the wing and spirals into a fiery explosion. I grimace; the poor kid had so much potential. "*Boss, there's too much flak!*" Riz Dellso, a Rodian who serves as second-in-command of Rogue Squadron says. "Stay the course; we need to end the Imperium here and now, no matter the cost!" Then there's static over the comlink, "*Rogue Leader, this is Kerex, come in.*" I respond, "Admiral, this is Celchu, go ahead." More static, the Imperium forces must be trying to jam communications. "*Colonel, I have a Priority Alpha assignment for you.*" Priority Alpha can mean two things, either something specific needs to be taken out or someone important needs to be escorted. "Send traffic Admiral." He responds, "*Our Jedi friends are telling us that the station cannot be destroyed from the outside and they need to get aboard it to take it down. We are sending a contingent of SHARCs under Colonel Quix and General Corso to assist them on the station.*" My console highlights a blip on the radar and I see two U-wing gunships following two T-85 X-wings. "*Those ships must make it to the station, do what you can to protect them.*" We move into position around the gunships and do what we can to pick off TIE Stalkers as they come. Weaving through the black of space, I hear the chaos of the battle from panicked voices through the comlink. The most distressing is from the captain of the *Dawn Of Tranquility*, one of the new MC85 heavy cruisers. They have Imperium forces boarding the ship. I hope someone can help them out.

We get within range of the station, dodging purple laser beams from it. The T-85s and U-wings accelerate and disappear into the dark blue-purple superstructure of the station and Colonel Quix's voice comes over the headset. "*We made it in, thanks for the assist Rogues, we'll take it from here.*" We turn back towards the battle when a Starhawk Battleship is

vaporized by the Super Star Destroyer. *"Rogue Leader, this is Kerex."* I place a hand on my transmitter, "Go ahead Admiral, Priority Alpha has been successfully delivered, standing by for new tasking." He responds, *"Excellent. Good work. Blade Squadron has been tasked with delivering their payload to the SSD, I need you to provide escort."* I accelerate to attack speed, "Alright Rogues, follow me and angle deflector shields."

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix – Chandrila, Core Worlds

18 ABE

Aboard the Mark Two Starhawk *Accolade*

I stand alone in a near-deserted corridor, staring silently out the viewport at the mottled blue lines of hyperspace. *What do we do when this is all over? What do any of us do? What if we can't stop it? What if we lose them?* A ruffle of fabric next to me brings me out of my head. I glance over to see Amminius standing next to me, hands clasped, equally silent, staring out at hyperspace. He notices me looking at him and offers a small smile. "Hey, Wishbone. Contemplating the marvels of hyperspace travel?" I smile, shaking my head, my spirits lifting momentarily. "No," I admit, looking back out the viewport again. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Amminius nod. We stand in silence together for a few more moments before Amminius asks, "So, what are you thinking about?" After a few seconds of deciding what to say, I blow out a puff of air in my cheeks and turn to him. "I was just thinking about all *this*." Amminius nods, saying nothing. I continue.

"We've been at this for nearly three and a half years. What happens afterward? What do we do when this is all over?" My question, despite its weight, doesn't seem to have taken him that off guard. Maybe he'd been wondering the same thing. "We . . . rebuild, I guess," Amminius says after a slight pause. "Just like the Galactic Civil War, the galaxy will bounce back. There'll be a lot to fix, but . . . over time, things . . . will go back to normal." I nod, mulling over his answer in my head. "What do you define as 'normal,' Amm?" Amminius looks up at the ceiling for a few moments before answering. "I guess, I would define normal as the ability to choose your own fate, to be able to live your life as you see fit." He cracks a grin. "Definitely without the influence of goons like Pravus and Sidious." "Yeah," I reply, smiling. "Me too. But seriously, how does hyperspace work?" I laugh,

jabbing him in the ribs. Amminius shrugs exaggeratedly and laughs too. "I think I missed that part at University. Must have dozed off. That, or I was staring at Leoni Garamin over in the next row." We look at each other for a moment before we both burst out laughing. It feels good. Tears stream down my cheeks as I brace my hand against the bulkhead. A chirp from my chrono brings us out of our laughter. I clear my throat and lift my arm, tapping the chrono's face. "We're twenty minutes out from Chandrila. We'd better go get everyone assembled." Amminius grins, slapping me on the shoulder. "Only twenty minutes? Wishbone, the slacker!"

. . .

We walk together towards the main barracks, dodging personnel rushing through the congested hallway. The whole ship seems to be buzzing with activity. Even the droids whir about excitedly. We reach the barracks and walk in to find them already full. Fourth soldiers mixed in with colorful Mandalorians hurriedly sort through pieces of neatly assembled kit. Organized chaos at its best. "I need an extra thermal over here." "Here ya go." "Anyone got a spare power cell?" "Got a proximity charge here. Any takers?" "Here, help me with this, vod." "Hebsley, got your medipack and bacta salve?" "Yeah, got 'em here." "Impact grenades?" Amminius and I stand there for a moment, taking in the scene. A Nikto looks up from his assortment to gaze at us. "So, this is it, isn't it Colonel?" The room goes quiet as everyone stops what they're doing to look at us. I nod, meeting their gazes with newfound confidence. "That's right. This is the big one." The soldiers break into applause, cheers, and grins. I cheer with them. Amminius grins, clapping. I hold up my hand for quiet. "I want to say something before we do this." The barracks go quiet once more. All eyes and T-visors are on me. "We've been at this for nearly three and a half years," I begin, looking around the room at each face and helmet, "and we've had our fair share of victories, as well as losses. We've saved countless lives, and have come back from the brink of defeat on many occasions, but we've also lost many good soldiers. Friends and family." I see heads nodding in affirmation. "Worlds have been devastated and stripped of life. Of hope. The galaxy has been shattered. All because one man had an idea. An idea that, left unchecked, will surely spell doom for us all. That man now sits above our capital, ready to unleash his weapon of terror on millions and thrust the galaxy into darkness once more. We're not going to let that happen. I say

it's time to let the galaxy breathe once more!" I pump my fist into the air to cheers and applause, even louder than before. Amminius brings his fist into the air too. "Yeah!" "Let's get 'em!" "Oya!" A clap on my shoulder makes me turn around to see Sonya Ravenclaw and a small cadre her Hunters standing behind me along with Gerik Ordo, clad in his forest green battle armor. "You sure know how to give a motivational speech Wodi," she says with a smile. Gerik nods. "Thank you," I smile at them, "it's good that you'll be joining us for the final push." "Oh, I can't let you men have all the fun," Sonya replies, grinning. "Killjoy," Amminius jokes, laughing.

. . .

"Attention all personnel, we are five minutes out from Chandrila. Get to your designated craft and standby." Our motley assault team heads toward the hangar at a brisk jog, jostling for room in the even more crowded hallway. We reach the hangar just as the *Accolade* exits hyperspace to see an impressive sight. Hundreds and hundreds of ships, of all makes, sit above Chandrila, fiercely trading turbolaser fire with Imperium cruisers, lighting up the stars with explosions. And directly in the middle of it all sits, "*Gorukar*," Nom breathes quietly. The name sends a chill down my spine and bad memories to the surface of my mind. I repress them. "Get to the gunships. Go!" I yell, pointing to a pair of blue-trim U-wings with their boarding ramps down. Pilots and soldiers scramble around the packed hangar in earnest among technicians, boarding ships and fighters, lugging weapons and supplies. We run through the maze of beings, droids, ships, and supply crates to the U-wings, where standing there waiting for us are Jevin and Salurra, Jevin with his hand on the ramp. "Come on," he shouts impatiently. We split up, eleven of us boarding one gunship, twelve the other. I pick a seat next to Amminius and my Mandalorian friend, Ikko. The orange-clad Mandalorian grins at me before sliding on his helmet. "Long time no see, *ner'vod*." I smile and nod in agreement. "*Boarding ramp closing*," our pilot informs us, his voice crackling slightly. "*Strap yourselves in, ladies and gentlemen, things are going to get a little rough*." I strap in and stare out the viewport at the techs and droids scrambling to make last minute checks on fighters. "*Standby for launch*." I grip my safety strap tightly in my gloved hands. Amminius turns to me in his seat, giving me a thumbs-up. I nod silently. Here we go. A few more seconds pass by. Then, "*All wings, we are go for launch. Launch!*" All around us, ion engines roar to life; the noise a

deafening crescendo even from inside the crew cabin, droids and crewmen retracting refueling hoses on the floor. The X-wings, A-wings, and Y-wings are out first. I wince as a few immediately are reduced to shrapnel, barely clearing it out of the bay. *"Alright, here we go!"* Our pilot yells, and our gunship lifts off, flying out into the chaos, closely followed by the other. *"Watch that debris field, Quiller."* *"Affirmative Wex."* We streak by one of our cruisers in a fierce broadside with an Imperium Destroyer, turbolasers firing madly at each other. *"Watch out for projectiles. That thing's taking a pounding."* Our escort, two green-trim X-wings, adjusts their heading and we move away, our viewports still shuddering from the shock waves. Next instant, multiple fast-moving dots fill our forward canopy, heading towards us on an intercept course. The cockpit targeting computer emits a series of tones. *"TIE Stalkers, incoming!"* *"I see 'em! Open fire!"* Our cabin shakes as our shields take a hit. *"With all these fighters,"* Amminius yells to me, hitching a thumb out the viewport, *"one might think we're not welcome!"* *"One would think!"* I yell back. Rogue Squadron, accompanied by Zerek Squadron, roar in from our port and light up the enemy TIEs with their laser cannons and ion torpedoes. *"Showoffs!"* Ikko grunts next to me, tracking their movements with his helmet rangefinder. I look away from our fighters to gaze on the station, growing larger and larger as we approach. *"Look at the size of that thing,"* Gav marvels. Endel nods next to him. *"We're about two minutes out from the station. Get ready,"* Jevin relays over our onboard intercom. *"Acknowledged,"* I respond, unstrapping my X45A from my shoulder. The others in the cabin do the same. *"Here we go, vod,"* Ata Noulku says, hefting her T-21 and donning her purple Mandalorian helmet. As we get closer to the station, it begins firing purple turbolaser fire at us. Several of our escort are hit and disappear in flames, comms going out in static. *"Things are getting a little bumpy! Hang on! Angle deflector shields!"* I grip my harness tighter, resisting the urge to squeeze my eyes shut. *Kriff!*

Amminius taps me on the shoulder and points to my locator, attached to my wrist comlink. *"Cade and Luke's transponders should be active. Are you getting a signal?"* I bring my wrist up to my eyes and stare at the small holo, where an image of Gorukar is displayed, showing our entry point, an empty fighter hangar, in orange. Two dark blue dots also appear. *"There they are,"* I say, relaying the holo to everyone's HUD, *"three levels up from where we're set to enter."* *"Copy that,"* Jevin replies over the comm. We reach the hangar and decelerate, touching down with a thud inside the cavernous

space. As one, we unstrap our harnesses and stand, weapons held at the ready. I bring up my wrist comlink. "We made it in. Thanks for the assist Rogues. We'll take it from here!" "*Copy that Wodi, good luck.*" "You too, Tycho." I nod to our group. "Alright everyone, let's go stop a madman!" Our boarding ramp descends, and we rush out, blasters raised and ready for trouble.

Major Gavin Skyes - Core Worlds, Chandrila, closing on the *Dawn of Tranquility*

18 ABE

The Battle for Chandrila rages on. The space battle is pure chaos but the land battle is worse. The last I heard from Colonel Grissom on the ground was that they were taking heavy losses in and around Hanna City. But I can't worry about that now. As Colonel Celchu and Rogue Squadron escorted Valdarin, Skywalker, and Quix's group to *Gorukar*, I received orders from up top. During the midst of the battle, one of our heavy cruisers, the *Dawn of Tranquility*, came under heavy attack and was boarded. The cruiser is a heavy hitter, one of the first MC85 heavy cruisers. The ship also possesses experimental shield technology, its shields able to sustain much more punishment than a MC80 battlecruiser. The plan is relatively simple; myself, my XO, Lieutenant Darro Xenarri, a male Kyuzo, and a detachment of Rancor Assault Troopers, soldiers trained specially for zero-g and ship-board combat will insert into the ship at different sections and work our way to the bridge and get the ship back under the control of the Weequay captain, Ralen Falani, and get the ship back in the fight.

...

Our U-wing pulls up near the port-side hangar, a second U-wing near the starboard hangar, and a third at the rear near the engines to prevent sabotage to the engines and sinking the ship all together. "Groups two and three, this is Skyes, we are in position, report." I say through the filtered black helmet. "*Group two in position at the starboard hangar,*" says the electronic sounding voice of Darro, "*Group three reporting in,*" says Sergeant Nival, a Soccoran male. "All groups execute boarding maneuvers," I reply through the headset. Our U-wing then pulls alongside the hull so that we are parallel with the *Dawn Of Tranquility*, then my tech expert, a Togruta female

named Shila, dons her helmet and pulls out a military-grade fusioncutter. We all don helmets and seal off the drop bay from the cockpit. The nice thing with the Rancor armor is it's vacuum-sealed and a soldier can survive for up to half-an-hour in the black of space or in an environment without oxygen. She lights the cutter and begins cutting into the hull into what should be the access corridor to the hangar. The other teams report their successful insertion into their respective target zones, Lieutenant Xenarri's group into the starboard hangar and Nival's into the engine section of the ship.

. . .

We stack up on either side of the blast door leading to the portside hangar, Shila on the right and myself on the left. She and the other Rancors wield DH-24 blaster carbines, a weapon that essentially takes the frame of the popular DH-17 pistol and adds a rifle stock. As for me, I wield my ever trusty bowcaster, a gift from Valdarin's Wookiee friend, Salurra. This bowcaster is unique in the fact that it has Wroshyr wood furnishing along the stock. Ever since *Gorukar* attacked Kashyyyk and drained it of all life, Wroshyr wood has become extremely scarce and until the Wookiees regrow their world, it'll remain so. I raise my wrist, "Xenarri, Nival, report," I say through the filtered helmet. Xenarri responds, "*Group two is ready boss, say the word.*" "*Group three ready,*" the strong voice of Sergeant Nival reports. "All groups execute," I say after hearing their acknowledgments and I give a nod to Shila who proceeds to attach an electronic override device to the door; we wish to avoid unnecessary destruction to our own ship. The device glows blue, a sign the bypass is complete. The door slides open and Shila tosses in a smoke grenade. In three, two, one, "Go, go!" I charge in, taking cover behind the fuselage of a T-70 X-wing and charge my bowcaster. There! I pop up and release the charge, sending a powerful quarrel wrapped in plasma energy at my target, a white-armored Imperium stormtrooper. His armored body is sent flying when the bolt hits him. Shila and the others, a full squad of six, take cover behind various crates and barrels, using them to steady their aim. Pop, pop, pop, their targets are taken down during the confusion caused by the smoke grenades. Several stormies retreat inside their boarding vessel, "Kheuren, take it out!" I yell to our squad's demolition expert. The black-clad trooper brandishes an SWS-1013 munitions launcher, a multi-purpose launcher that can carry anything from simple grenades to heavy proton missiles. The launcher shoots a blue-orange object that zooms

straight into the exposed main deck of their boarding shuttle. In a brilliant orange flash, the shuttle explodes, leaving debris scattered on the flight deck. I launch another quarrel at a trooper on an overhead walkway, the blast sending him flying off the way and plummeting to crack on the hard metal floor. "Hangar secure," Shila reports. "Xenarri, Nival what's your status?" Nival reports that the engines have been secured, the *Tranquility* engineers having gotten back into the deck and are stabilizing the ship. Good, that's one objective down, two to go. "Xenarri . . . Darro come in!" *"We're having a small bit of trouble boss, but we're making progress, hangar will be secured momentarily."* I gather my squad back together in the center of the hangar, "Alright objective one is complete, now we make our way to the bridge to rescue Captain Falani. Sergeant, bring your squad up the rear and meet us there." He replies an affirmative.

. . .

The way up to the bridge is relatively uneventful, seems the Imps were content to take only key areas on the ship. We free Navy personnel along the way and rescue the ship's marine contingent, bolstering our strength. We get to the blast doors to the bridge, white doors with intricate designs on them. The Mon Calamari truly do wonderful work. "Admiral Kerex, this is Gavin, we are preparing to breach the bridge, standby." The Quarren gives an acknowledgement and wants a sitrep when we're done. I give Shila a nod; she places another electronic bypass device while I ready a flash grenade. As soon as the doors slide open, I toss the grenade in and we turn our heads, the grenade goes off and we hear the gasps of the stormtroopers inside. With a simple hand gesture, we file into the bridge, blaster blazing...

Colonel Jon Grissom - Chandrila, Core Worlds
Hanna City, Republic Command Complex
18 ABE

The Battle for Chandrila has been going on for nearly half a day now. The last I heard from space, Quix and his assault team had boarded the station following the Jedi. The fighting on the ground has gone from bad to worse. Before the Fourth Battlegroup arrived, the local defenders were being pushed back by the Imperium. They attacked Hanna City in a blitzkrieg fashion, *Gollum*-class landers touching down with blasters ablaze. AT-AHT

walkers soon came next, the scene reminiscent of Hoth; massive walkers on an unstoppable march. Their ground forces pushed in as far as the Republic Command Complex, the heart of the New Republic military. There, the defenders managed to hold back the tide. As soon as the Fourth arrived in the system, Marshal Ponith ordered all ground forces to land near the complex, to regain the command center and then repulse the Imperium out of Hanna City. At first things had gone well, a majority of our U-wings and GR-80 landers had touched down safely. The Imperium has made repeated attempts to clear us out but to no avail. For now we remain within the complex, several walls have been bombed to dust, the once pristine white walls now covered in carbon-scoring and soot.

. . .

I lower my X45A rifle from its perch, looking down the battle line. I can see the hairy mass that is my aide-de-camp, the Grigorian Major, Malakai. He sits there holding a Z7-rotary cannon. The Grigorian's strength nearly matches that of a Wookiee; I marvel as he lays down suppressing fire on a group of white-armored stormtroopers as they tried flanking our line. The rest of our group is a motley collection ranging from Humans to Kyutzo and there are even some Kage amongst us. Seeing a break in the fighting, I lean to my right towards a Private, Nemitz. "Give me cover, I need to talk to the Marshal!" He hurriedly nods at me and raises his X45A and begins peppering the opposing stormtroopers with blaster fire as I stay low and run towards the graying Bothan. I slide into position next to him as he raises his own rifle to fire a thermal grenade, vaporizing a Juggernaut and several troopers. "Marshal, what's the plan?" He crouches back into position, "We need to push into the city and take it back but those walkers present a problem!" I see him glance down the line, "Jon, take Malaki and a small squad and flank around their line, we need one of those walkers!" I stare at him dumbfounded and then realization dawns on me. Of course, those walkers pack much more firepower than the old AT-AT and can really punch a hole in the Imperium line. I nod at my commanding officer and rush back over to Malaki's position. Beckoning several others to huddle around me I say, "Listen up, we need to commandeer one of those AT-AHTs, their firepower will give us the boost we need!" "Boss, are you sure we can do that? They're bound to have those things on lockdown!" says the metallic voice of Malaki through his translator. A Kage male wielding a Valkyrie sniper rifle loads a

fresh energy pack, "It makes sense, I've seen what those walkers can do, and they pack serious heat." Kratos, a Kyutzo who serves as a Pathfinder, voices his agreement in his alien tongue. "Ok, we go in three. Three, two, one, go go go!" We make a break across the courtyard to the bombed out right wall of the complex. When we get there, we look out to see an AT-AHT lumber down an alley. Looking to Kratos and our resident sniper, Neggi, I give them their orders. "You two, you are the most nimble of our group; scale the walker and use this to get in," I say handing them a magnite crystal-powered fusioncutter, strong enough to cut through the tough armor. "Malaki, Nemitz, and I will lay down covering fire for you." The two warriors nod and slink off, waiting for my signal.

. . .

The walker lumbers ever closer, the sounds of the battle all around us. I gander a little at the pristine white of Hanna City, now marred by warfare. I can't wait until this war is over so we can start rebuilding. There, an opening! Tossing a flashbang in the center of a group of troopers flanking the walker, I give the signal to the Neggi and Kratos and they begin to creep ever closer to the massive walker while the three of us lay down covering fire, resulting in the white walls of the surrounding buildings taking stray bolts, turning the white to charred black. Watching the two scale the walker as we shoot troopers who lean out of hatches to shoot them off is spectacular, the only other people I've seen able to move like that are the two Jedi, Valdarin and Skywalker. I hope they are ok, Wodi and Jevin too. Before I know it, Neggi is aiming from the top of the walker with his sniper rifle while Kratos uses the fusioncutter and they are in. When the coast is clear, they lower the loading elevator from the "belly" of the walker and we join them.

Once inside, Marshal Ponith sends me coordinates in the city where the Imperium is thickest. We lumber off towards the closest, where a small group of walkers have pinned down a squad at a Hannatown café. At first, there is no trouble; they assume we are on their side. But when I give Malaki the order to fire the heavy cannon on the closest walker, a large firefight erupts, the pinned squad now fighting with renewed vigor. Finally, a soldier peers out of a second-story window with a SWS-1013 Munitions Launcher, firing a blue-yellow object towards the walker. The object is an electromagnetic-resonance torpedo, only scaled down from the one that took down the *Insidious*. The flare hits the walker dead on the head, a cascade of

blue lightning falling over the walker, causing its lights to falter and burn out, leaving it vulnerable. A heavy blast from our walker causes the head of the walker to erupt in flames. "Marshal, we've cleared the market area, we are now heading for City Hall, standby." The Battle for Chandrila rages on.

Darro Xenarri – Chandrila, Core Worlds**18 ABE****Nearing the *Dawn Of Tranquility***

The gunship holding myself and my soldiers pulls up a few meters from the starboard hangar of the Mon Cala star cruiser *Dawn Of Tranquility*, the pilot adjusting readings on his terminal and control board to ensure our stability. I glance out the window at the massive cruiser, seemingly undamaged from the outside. It's internal workings, I am unsure. My soldiers, much like my original clovoc fighting order, but different in other regards, unsling their DH-24 carbines from their shoulders, at the ready. We wait while the other gunships maneuver into position, their progress relayed through my modified helmet's communications link. The battle in space grows ever more hectic. Massive leviathan ships jockey for control as smaller starfighters zip by. The large space station also sits, like a giant asteroid, seemingly inactive, save for occasional dark violet turbolaser blasts emanating from its surface. They say that honor and justice will return to the galaxy at large when this Pravus and his Imperium are defeated. I can only hope so. Our unit leader, Gavin Skyes, a strong Human male, radios in for a check. I confirm our position at the target hangar, the standard basic of my electronic translator mask sounding strange in my head. Sergeant Nival, a Soccoran male, also reports his successful positioning." All groups, execute boarding maneuvers," Gavin orders. I nod to the pilot peering at us through the cockpit divider. "Take us in." He returns my gesture. I magnify my helmet's heads up display to show an enlarged image of the interior. Inside, I spy two Imperium *Gollum*-class landing craft, with several stormtroopers spread out throughout, thirty in total. Our gunship enters the hangar, concussive missiles firing. Several troopers are lifted off their feet, flailing their arms and legs.

Our gunship touches down, its bay doors opening, and we rush out onto the deck to a storm of blaster fire, taking cover behind large containers and firing our carbines at the remaining stormtroopers still standing.

Approximately four minutes later, all stormtroopers are out of the fight. One of my unit stands up to look around to confirm we are alone again. He is sent flying backward as a green blaster bolt hits him in the chest, bits of his armor falling to the deck. "More stormtroopers!" Another of my squad cries, as stormtroopers rush in from side doors, firing at us. I order my troopers to throw concussion grenades and pick their marks. A large door opens at the rear of the hangar, and out comes a bipedal AT-DP, an All Terrain Defense Pod, prominent during the reign of the Galactic Empire. I curse in my native tongue. We may be here awhile.

. . .

Once the hangar is clear again, I instruct our demolitions expert to rig the two Imperium landing shuttles. While he works, I go to my downed squad member and retrieve his ID tag, placing it securely in my flak jacket pocket. I silently say a few words in his honor. Once this task is completed and we are all assembled, I instruct my team to stay on their guard, and we cautiously head towards the main hangar door, located opposite of where we entered. The pitted deck is covered with the charred bodies of stormtroopers. I glance at a few as we pass. May they find peace. Smoky haze lingers in the air, and flames still lick at the destroyed AT-DP. One of my soldiers produces an electronic bypass device from her belt and attaches it to the wall keypad of the door. After a moment, the device glows blue, indicating that the security measures put in place by our enemy have been successfully bypassed. I hand the device back, and produce a life-form scanner from my own belt, fine tuning the device to detect any signs of life in the corridor ahead. I adjust the device to also scan for IFF codes; Identification Friend or Foe. When the device reports that nothing lies immediately ahead, I open the door, my team of five slowly entering the large corridor, blasters up.

. . .

Our path to the main bridge of the *Dawn Of Tranquility* has been mostly clear, save for pockets of troopers on decks three, seven, nine, and thirteen. We cleared them without incident. We also have freed ten marines from captivity in cell blocks, giving them salvaged F-22 blaster rifles. Our unit finally reaches the designated rendezvous: the heavy blast doors of the main

bridge. After ten minutes, Gavin appears with his unit thankfully intact, bolstered by five more freed marines and an assortment of Navy personnel. Nival and his group appear shortly after. Gavin relays a message to Admiral Kerex. Once finished, he nods to one of his soldiers, who produces another bypass device. The door unlocked, Gavin tosses in a flash grenade inside and we enter the bridge at his command, blasters spraying the enemy positions.

Cade Valdarin - Chandrila, Core Worlds

Onboard *Gorukar*

18 ABE

End of day one

Shwoom. The peridot-colored lightsaber comes to life, bisecting armored limbs as I swing the saber back and forth between stormtroopers. The battle for Chandrila has been going on for a full day since the reinforcements arrived, two days altogether. Luke and I headed straight for *Gorukar* when we entered the system, bypassing enemy Destroyers and fighters along the way. I had heard the *Dawn Of Tranquility* was under attack but we had to put that out of our minds, focusing solely on dodging the intense defensive net around the station. Finally we managed to dock on the station, landing in a cavernous docking area, the walls the same sickly blue color that is the rest of the station. It was pure chaos the minute we opened the canopies, blaster fire from all angles and lightsabers, lots of lightsabers, both red and yellow and belonging to Acolytes and Shadow Knights. Immediately we fell into our battle stances, Luke holding his blade in a vertical high guard, myself holding the blade low. It was a terrific fight, Luke and I able to sync our minds through a battle-meld, coordinating without speaking. After a flurry of weaves, parries, and thrusts with lightsaber and several blasts of force energy, we cleared the room, the floor littered with blood and the severed limbs of stormtroopers. From there our mission was clear: we could sense the tainted energy of this place emanating from the observation deck. Pravus is undoubtedly there as well, so we speed off, meeting heavy resistance all the way. In our wake, more bisected armored limbs of troopers litter the floors.

. . .

We entered one of the armories for the onboard security forces and the troopers there were waiting, an ambush. Jedi are incredibly effective against a trooper, even several. But against a horde, a lightsaber can only block so much. "Fall back!" I yell to Luke, the two of us falling back to a defensive position, deactivating our lightsabers and picking up Imperium TL-99s, an upgraded version of the popular TL-50 repeater, and firing wildly behind the cover of upturned tables and benches. "This is bad," yells Luke, stating the obvious. "Keep firing, we can't give up now!" While we are busy firing, a Shadow Knight lands to the right of us with two Juggernauts flanking him, red blade held high. I turn to meet the new threat when from far down a corridor, red bolts lance out from smoke, several taking down the knight and a hailstorm of bolts take down the two Juggernauts as they turn to return fire.

"Move in, protect the Jedi!" I hear a familiar voice yell. I see Jevin emerge from the smoke, X45A firing non-stop as he runs forward. I also see Wodi and Gerik come in, Wodi placing his rifle on top of a crate for stability and launching a thermal grenade from his underslung launcher and Gerik's twin DL-56 pistols starting to smoke from repeated use. I see several Mandalorians, SHARCs, and Infiltrators move into the armory and I even see Sonya Ravenclaw, of all people. Amminius brings up the rear, firing a Cortosis-compound needle from his Needler that hits its mark dead in the faceplate. Before long, the armory is cleared; the fallen bodies of stormtroopers and the Shadow Knight litter the floor. Wodi and Jevin walk up to us, Wodi shaking my hand. "Great to see you again kid," he says as he surveys the room. "We ran into your handiwork a few times you know, very impressive." I chuckle a little and then I see Salurra, the big oaf giving me his bear hug. Sonya walks up to me with a pouty face, "What, I don't get a thank you?" I smile at her and hug her as well, "Thank you for coming at the last minute."

"So, how's the battle going?" Luke asks, directed towards Jevin. "From what we last heard before docking, the *Dawn* had been boarded and Gavin was taking his guys to retake the ship." "The *Daemon* is still giving us trouble, and Jon has relayed from the ground they've retaken the Command Complex." Amminius pops into the conversation, "So all-in-all, not all that

well. We need some fancy tricks up our sleeves." I nod, hefting my lightsaber, "I need to get to the observation deck, that's where Pravus is and also the kyber crystal powering this place. Everything will be decided there." Wodi looks at me and then at Jevin, a determined grin on his face. "Then let's end this, move out!" He says as he looks around at the assault group. We move on, leaving the armory and heading down the corridor.

. . .

Entering a long hallway, we see stormtroopers lining the walls, taking cover in small alcoves, F-22 rifles primed and ready. Amminius, being an Infiltrator, an agent of NRI and thus aptly equipped with flash, smoke, EMP, and concussion grenades, hands off several to members of the group as Jevin and Wodi peer around the corner. Wodi gives a hand count; three, two one, and makes a fist symbol. Two soldiers, a SHARC and Mandalorian, toss in smoke grenades as Salurra lobs a concussion grenade. Donning IR goggles, Jevin shouts, "Go go go!" Red bolts rip through the smoke and we hear several grunts as stormtroopers are hit. Luke and I dash into the room, green and peridot-colored blades illuminating the smoke. I notice that several stormtroopers are wearing First Order-issue armor; ever since the discovery that the other remnants were assisting the Imperium, the First Order, Graal Hegemony, and Black Nova pirates began openly assisting our foe. After a brief skirmish, I impale a white-armored stormtrooper through the abdomen. "Alright, this should be it," Wodi says, checking a technical readout he had downloaded from a terminal during his trek. "Based on the readouts, there's a reactor here," as a holo of *Gorukar* pops up from his gauntlet, a bottom section is highlighted in red. "Amm, take half the unit with you and set charges on the reactor, hopefully that's enough to knock this thing out of orbit. Sal, take some men and go back to the hangar, we need to keep our escape avenue open." With a confirmatory roar, Salurra lumbers off with several SHARCs in tow and Amminius takes Gerik and his group. I stand at the blast door, standing resolute. "Cade, he's behind there isn't he?" Jevin asks. I simply nod and look at Luke, he nods back. We place open palms on the heavy door and infuse Force energy into it, blasting it into the observation deck. And there he stands, overlooking the battle through a large panoramic viewport wearing simple black robes with red Imperium symbols. As we enter, lightsabers at the ready and blasters primed, he turns around, revealing the distinctive diagonal scar on his face,

a mark from a training session with Vader during his time as an exalted Inquisitor. But what are more distinctive are his eyes; he is deep within the tainted energy of this place. His eyes are as black as black holes and his skin grey and charred looking. Just like Palpatine before him, the tainted energy he commands has a necrotizing effect on his body, only his is far greater, the energy he has, thanks to this station, is on a scale that no one should have. "Finally, you have come." Pravus says to me, memories of our first real encounter on Endor going through my mind. "We won't need these, they will only slow us down," Pravus says as he casually flicks a finger towards Jevin, Wodi, and their portion of the assault team, his power being so great that a simple gesture sends them and Luke flying into the previous corridor. As soon as Luke goes through the door, a force field activates, its red shine contrasting with the sickly blue walls. I turn around wanting to help my friends but stop when I see Wodi get up and blast the field several times to no effect. "Your friends cannot help you now, boy. We are of a kind, you and I; we have the ability to wield power that few others have ever dreamed of and fewer still have ever obtained, they will only get in our way."

I reach out to Luke in our bond; *Luke, stay with them and protect them.*

There should be gunnery station nearby, try to lend assistance to our fleet.

He gives an acknowledgement and replies with the old saying, "May the Force be with you." I turn to Pravus and ignite my Peridot-colored blade, the olive-green illuminating the floor. I close my eyes and focus on my breathing, reaching a state of pure calm and I feel it; the feeling of oneness with the Force, of pure power and understanding. I open my eyes and my senses are enhanced a thousand-fold, I sense everything, from the tainted energy of this station to the frightened children on the planet below. I can feel Wodi's presence along with all the others. So this is what oneness with the Force feels like, it's invigorating. I see Pravus flash a wicked grin, "Good you have reached your potential. Perhaps you are worthy." An odd statement but I can't worry about that now. "Let us see your new power." As he says this, he raises a hand, firing red-colored lighting at me. I raise a hand and generate a blossom of fire, blocking the lightning all together. Next he nods and objects around him; chairs, crates, and shredded pieces of the durasteel floor come flying at me. Again, holding my hand out, palm outward, the debris hits an invisible force field and hits the floor behind me. Lowering his hand, he smiles again, brandishing his own lightsaber. The hilt is a long silver cylinder, with a black hand-grip taking up most of it and crowned with four spiked emitter guards. Activating the sword, he says to

me, "So this contest will not be won through skill with the Force, but what of skill with the blade?" At this we both dash at each other, the sheer power we are both wielding would make our movements appear as blurs to non-Force users and untrained force-sensitives. We meet each other head on and clash in a saberlock. He cackles as we force each other away and bring blades up for another clash.

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix – Chandrila, Core Worlds

18 ABE

The hangar interior is hazy, clouds of smoke from small fires still crackling wafting through the air, the only continuous sound in the cavernous space. I take a whiff and wrinkle my nose, suppressing the urge to cough. The smell of singed flesh and discharged blaster bolts burns the inside of my throat. "Looks like we missed the welcoming party," Amminius comments quietly next to me. "I'll say," I nod, looking around, taking in the scene. The walls and deck plating are covered in blaster burn marks, and charred white-armored bodies lie sprawled everywhere, many missing various limbs. Xyrr Pyl whistles softly, the noise distorted through his helmet speaker. "These *Jetti* sure know how to use a saber." "Stay alert," I remind everyone, "there could still be more. Set up a perimeter until Ravenclaw arrives." Several soldiers and Mandalorians move off further into the hangar, blaster flashlights moving about as they look around. I worriedly check my chrono on my wrist. *Where is she? Did something happen?* Approximately three minutes later, my worries are put to rest as Sonya's YT-2400 light freighter *Phoenix* touches down a short distance from our U-wings. Sonya and three of her Hunters walk down the boarding ramp and toward us, all dressed in black military vests and light armor plating, EL-16HFE rifles, Heavy Field Editions commonly carried by our guys, slung over their shoulders. When the group reaches us, Sonya gives me a smirk, indicating the downed stormtroopers and debris with an outstretched arm. "This your boys' handiwork?" "No," I reply, "it was like this when we got here. Looks like they put up a hell of a fight. What kept you?" "We had a *very* persistent tail." Two of her guys nod at her words. I recall our guys on perimeter through my comlink and step to the front of our motley assault team. "Alright, Cade and Luke's transponders still say that they're on the third level of this station. Let's get there and give them a hand!" Turning around, I gesture forward, and we move towards the rear of the hangar at a brisk walk, where I see a

set of heavy blast doors, a large circle cut through them. Off to our left, two X-wings sit with their canopies still raised, the Jedi's Astromech droids, Artoo and Ratchet, beneath the red trim one, repairing a damaged S-foil. The droids beep a greeting at us as we pass.

"Looks like the Imps tried to contain them by locking them out," Lannik remarks when we reach the doors, running a gloved hand over the melted surface of the hole. He examines the blackened console set into the wall before turning to me. "The door controls are fried. Good thing our Jedi friends created an opening. It would have been a shame to waste ordnance." One by one, we duck down and maneuver through the hole into the corridor beyond. I'm third to go through behind Jevin and Amminius. I hug my X45 close to my chest as I squeeze through. Straightening, I move away from the blast door and survey our surroundings. Like the hangar, the strangely iridescent dark blue walls and floor of the corridor are riddled with blaster burns, and armored corpses of stormtroopers are everywhere. Several smoking frames of blaster turrets still stand. "They sure are pulling out all the stops trying to keep Luke and Cade away," I say, shaking my head. Salurra, grunting in mild annoyance, is the last one through, having to hunch down considerably to fit through the human-sized hole. We pass through the corridor in relative silence, the same sights meeting us at every junction. We board a maintenance turbolift and ascend to level three.

As we exit the turbolift, I pick up the distinct sound of blaster fire. "You hear that?" Jevin says. "Yeah," I reply, starting to break into a run. "Let's move!" As we run down the corridor, the blaster fire grows louder and louder. "It sounds like quite the firefight!" A soldier behind me yells. We round a junction to see red blaster bolts pouring out of a large room further down the corridor labeled 'Armory'. "Let's get in there and give them a hand!" Yells Jevin, rifle stock braced against his shoulder. "I see an Acolyte and two Juggernauts by Cade," yells Gerik, rangefinder down, "right side!" "I see 'em!" I yell back as we draw closer. The Acolyte, his profile partially obscured by smoke, has his crimson saber held high, ready to bring it down on Cade's shoulder. We take out the Acolyte first before concentrating fire on his two bodyguards. "Move in, protect the Jedi!" Jevin shouts. He heads in first, firing as he goes, followed closely by me and Gerik. Cade and Luke are hunkered down behind two upturned tables, TL-99 rifles clutched in their hands. The far end of the armory is occupied by a horde of stormtroopers

and Sith Juggernauts. I take cover behind a large gray supply crate for a moment, blaster bolts flying over my head, before popping back up, launching a grenade at the troopers with my underslung launcher. *BOOM!* Five troopers and one Juggernaut are sent careening. I duck down for a second before coming back up again, firing a volley of bolts at a pair of stormtroopers not in cover. "On the left, on the left!" "Get down!" "Woah, that was close!" "Lobbing a grenade!" "Take this, di'kut!" "He's down!" Ten minutes later, all Imperium soldiers are down and out for the count. Thriz Saist and our team medic, Hebsley, check to make sure. "We're clear!" Hebsley shouts back after the last trooper is pronounced dead. Everyone stands up, shouldering their weapons, some removing their helmets. Thriz and Hebsley make their way back to the group, maneuvering through charred bodies and debris. Jevin and I walk over to Cade and Luke, who stand smiling at us all. "You came just in time," Cade says. I grin at him and shake his hand. "We have our moments. It's great to see you again, kid. We ran into your handiwork a few times, you know. Very impressive." Cade chuckles, and is soon lifted off his feet by Salurra in a Wookiee hug. He's next targeted by Sonya. I smile and look on.

"So, how's the battle going?" Luke turns to Jevin and asks. "From what we last heard before docking, the *Dawn Of Tranquility* had been boarded and Gavin was taking his guys to retake it." Jevin nods. "The *Daemon* is still giving is trouble, and Colonel Grissom has relayed from the ground that they've retaken the Command Complex, but the rest of the Fourth is struggling to maintain ground. Casualties are mounting." "So, all-in-all, not all that well," Amminius says, stepping to my side. "We need some fancy tricks up our sleeves, and *fast*." Cade nods, unclipping his lightsaber from his utility belt and flipping it over in his hand. "I need to get up to the observation deck. That's where Pravus is, as well as the kyber crystal powering this place. I believe that killing him and putting this station out of commission will be the key. Everything will be decided there." Our group stands in silence for a few moments, taking in the gravity of Cade's words. I look to him, then Jevin, then Amminius, then the rest of our assault force gathered around us and smile determinedly. "Then let's end this. Move out!"

. . .

We board a large turbolift and ride it all the way up to the floor where the observation deck is. It's a silent trip. The tension in the turbolift is almost palpable. I nervously flick my blaster's power setting switch. We finally reach our destination and exit to find ourselves in a long corridor. After a brief skirmish with more stormtroopers, it's decided that Amminius will take his Infiltrators and Gerik and his group to knock out the main reactor of *Gorukar*, located on the lower levels. Salurra, accompanied by six of my men, will head back to the hangar to make sure our escape avenue remains open. After good lucks are exchanged and both groups go their separate ways, that leaves myself, Nom, Lannik, Jevin, Sonya and her Hunters, and Luke and Cade standing in the now-empty corridor. We cautiously walk to the set of heavy blast doors and stop. I look to Cade, a mixture of emotions running through my head. "Cade," Jevin says quietly, "he's behind there, isn't he?" Cade doesn't answer. He doesn't have to. Giving Luke and the rest of us a nod, he places his open palm on the door. Luke joins him. A few moments later, the metal crumples, and the door is blasted inwards. We rush in, blasters raised, and lightsabers ignited. My gut clenches. There Pravus stands, alone, dressed in a simple black tunic, his back to us, gazing out a giant panoramic viewport at the battle in space. A moment later he turns. I stare, unable to look away. His skin is a charred gray color, like burned firewood, and his eyes are like soulless pits, black as space. His body looks haggard, but coursing with energy at the same time. A small smile flickers across his face. "Finally," he says, his voice seeming to echo through my head thousands of times over, "you have come." I clutch my temples, the effects of a pounding headache coming over me. The others do the same, some squeezing their eyes shut in pain. Cade and Luke seem unaffected. "We won't need these, they will only slow us down," Pravus speaks again, flicking a hand in our direction. My mind screams at me to react, but before I can do anything, I'm lifted off my feet and hurled out of the room, slamming into the corridor wall with such force that I momentarily see stars. I hit the floor in a heap with the others, my whole-body aching. A crimson ray shield activates in the space where the blast doors used to be. *No!* Panic envelops me. Ignoring my pain, I get to my feet and pick up my fallen blaster, putting a few rounds into the shield to no effect. I frantically look to Cade, desperately wishing to get back inside and help him. Cade closes his eyes momentarily. Behind me, I hear the others getting to their feet. Luke steps to my side and nods to Cade, his eyes also closed. "May the Force be with you," he says. I look to Luke, who offers a small smile. "Cade

will be fine. Let's give our fleet a hand. There's a gunnery station near here." Taking one last look back at the ray shielded observation room, I follow Luke and the others down the corridor towards the gunnery station.

Amminius Sinan – Chandrila, Core Worlds

18 ABE

"Good luck Amm," Wodi says to me, grasping my forearm and squeezing tightly. "You too, Wishbone," I reply, giving him a wink and a smile. "Give Pravus my regards." Wodi grins and nods. I nod to Cade, giving him a wink as well. Cade offers a somber smile in return. With that, I turn with my assorted group and head back toward the large turbolift, accompanied by Salurra and Wodi's guys. We board and begin our descent, letting Salurra's group off at the level leading back to the hangar where we had entered. "Good luck, guys," Hebsley says as he steps off. "We'll be waiting for the big boom." The doors close and it's just us and the Mandalorians in their brightly colored armor. We descend further into the station, the constant soft whir of the turbolift seeming to press in on my eardrums. "I wonder what's happening out there," one of the Mandalorians, Chank Skirr, says, toying with his blaster carbine, breaking the silence. The sounds of the space battle outside are next to nonexistent down here. "Hopefully, our fleet is kicking the Imps right up their armored-" Ata Noulku begins to say when our turbolift comes to a halt. "Looks like this is our stop," Gerik remarks, maneuvering his way forward. I bring out a life-form scanner attached to my gauntlet and peer at the screen. "Getting anything?" Gerik asks. "No, nothing so far," I reply, lowering my arm and un-slinging my GE-26N Needler Carbine from my shoulder. We cautiously make our way out of the turbolift and scan our surroundings, rifles up and ready just in case. The corridor here is made from the same dark blue iridescent material as the hallways above, but somehow it looks murkier. The lighting panels embedded in the walls and ceiling are sparser, too, making the far end of the corridor lost in shadow. If I thought the silence in the turbolift was pressing, it's nothing compared to this. I stare into the silent dark corridor ahead, listening for the slightest hint of enemy movement. My ears begin to ring from lack of noise. "Cozy," I exclaim quietly, trying to break the tension, "add some drapes and carpeting and it'll be perfect." No one laughs. "Right," I say, squaring my shoulders, "let's go find that reactor."

As we move further down the corridor, I start to notice strange carvings etched in the walls. Alien symbols and letters are scrawled across the surface, ranging in size and quantity. All appear to have been etched by desperate hands. "I wonder what they're saying," Zeatuli, my Chiss partner, says quietly next to me. Nad Kunch runs his green gauntleted hand over one of the markings. "What I wouldn't give to study this," the Mandalorian comments. "This in an alien tongue that I'm not familiar with. I don't think anyone is." We continue, our footfalls echoing eerily, the sound bouncing off the walls. So far, we've had no encounters with any enemies. "Where is everyone?" One of my soldier's voices aloud. "This place is beginning to give me the shivers." *No idea*, I think to myself, *maybe they're smart and avoiding this level altogether*. Further down, what seems a lifetime later, we come to a halt outside a large, heavy looking door. "This must be it, the door to the reactor," I say to the others. Next to the door on the right, inset into the wall, is an ancient keypad, coated in grime. "Let me have a look at that," Nad says, and kneels, putting his helmeted head close to the panel. Gerik and I kneel next to him. "What're you thinking, *vod*?" Gerik asks after a few moments, putting a gauntleted hand on Nad's green shoulder plate. "I think this door is only going to open if we input the right word," Nad replies after a pause, resting his hands on his haunches. "And I think that word is on one of these walls." He gestures to the wall writing around us. I look around at the walls, covered in etchings. *Great*. "Well, that really narrows our possibilities down," I remark. We spread out along both sides of the corridor, small glow rods lighting the carvings, searching. Up close, the carvings make even less sense than they did before. *What language is this?* "Look here," Thriz Saist exclaims, pointing up at the ceiling. We all stop and look. Illuminated by his glow rod, there's one carving that's larger than all the others, four characters long. We all turn to Nad, who inputs the characters into the keypad. The tiny screen on the keypad lights up orange. With a soft *ka-chunk*, the door begins to rise. "That did it!" With the door fully raised, we cautiously enter the reactor room.



My eyes go wide. The room is huge, dimly lit by a sickly green light filtering through from giant grates in the ceiling. The walls themselves, held up at intervals by massive pillars, seem to be pulsing with energy. But that's nothing to what is dominating the center. Two giant reactors sit in the center of the room, their interiors humming ominously with a blue crackling light that makes my eyes hurt when I look at it. The reactors are connected to the ceiling by two large metal arms ending in multiple tendrils, also coruscating with blue light. A large yellow orb sits near the top of each reactor by the "arms", blinking periodically. Near the base of the reactors, a thick pipe runs between them, connecting them. The whole thing is closed off by a small gate, with a railed staircase leading down to the base of the reactors." This is surreal," Ata remarks breathlessly. I nod, whistling, the sound reluctant to come from my dry lips. Gerik, seeming to have recovered from his awe quickest, says, "Charges, base of the reactors and around the room. Now!" I shake my head and clutch my bag filled with high-power detonite charges, putting on a brave smile. "Time for the big boom. Not even magnetic tape will be able to fix these boys when we're done." Moving quickly down the stairs, we set to work, moving about the huge room to set our charges. I nod to Thriz next to me before moving off.

...

Thunk. I set my last charge onto the metal base of the second reactor, depressing the button on top to prime the detonite. I mentally sigh in relief, removing my helmet momentarily to wipe my forehead. It's been more than a bit creepy down here. I haven't seen any of my group in the past half hour, bits of short chatter over the comlink from a few guys being the only indicator I'm not alone in my task. I bring up my comlink to my mouth, keying in the group code. "I've set my last charge," I relay, "heading back up the stairs." "Good to hear," Gerik's voice comes back. "I'm already up here with Chank, Ata, and your Infiltrator friend Zeatuli. Waiting on the others." I reach the stairs and begin to climb when the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. Was that skittering? I turn around and peer into the inky darkness with my glow rod. Nothing. I flip on my helmet's night vision. Nothing. I'm about to resume climbing when something shiny off to the left of the staircase before the shadows catches my eye. An empty Mandalorian helmet, painted black and white. Xyrr Pyl's helmet. "Xyrr?" I call out with a little uncertainty into the gloom. No answer. I wait a couple of more seconds before rapidly ascending the staircase. I run over to where Gerik and the others are waiting. "Something's wrong," I tell them. "I saw Xyrr's helmet lying off by the staircase, but no Xyrr."

Gerik immediately un-holsters his twin DL-56 pistols, holding them at the ready. Ata, Chank, and Zeatuli bring up their rifles as well. Gerik is about to reach for his comlink hooked to his belt when a blood curdling scream sounds from below us, followed by blaster fire. "That's never good!" Chank yells. Charging up the steps moments later comes the orange-clad Mandalorian Ikko Dass, several plates of his armor missing. In his arms, Ikko cradles a writhing Nad, his ragged jumpsuit between the green leg armor of his left leg soaked in crimson. "Giant *shabla* things," Ikko roars as he approaches us at a dead sprint. "Run!" A second later, two nightmares emerge from the darkness below. I stare, transfixed at their horrifying appearance, unable to move. Time seems to slow down. Two enormous arthropods, many jointed legs writhing, eyes blood red, spikes jutting out at all angles, as pale as corpses, with jagged mouths gaping. On one of the creatures' spikes is an impaled human in an Infiltrator outfit, the spike going clean through the chest. "Run!" Gerik repeats frantically. Kicking my mind and body into action, I turn tail and run with everyone else, sprinting out of the reactor room as fast as I can. With Ikko in the lead, we dash madly

down the corridor, crazed etchings flitting by, toward the turbolift. Behind us, growing louder, is the skittering of thousands of pairs of legs.

Suddenly, Ikko slips and crumples to the ground, Nad writhing even more violently. "Ah hell," Ikko curses, jumping to his feet. "Help me with him!" I leap forward, putting one of Nad's arms around my shoulder. Behind us, I hear blaster fire as the others cover us. Hideous shrieks tell me that the creatures aren't too happy about being shot at. Too bad. I can barely hold onto Nad, but with Ikko's help, manage to brace him between the two of us. "Go!" I shout. We continue running. "The turbolift's ahead!" So close!

And then a tendril reaches out and takes hold of my leg. I scream and fall to the floor. *No, no, no, no!* "Sinan!" Ikko shouts. Gerik rushes over to me and begins to hack furiously at the tendril with a long vibroblade. Ata, Chank, and Zeatuli turn, pouring fire at the approaching creatures, who shriek louder. "Get the door!" Gerik screams at Ikko in between swings. With one last swing, the tendril separates, and I'm showered in viscous pink fluid. "Come on! On your feet!" Gerik yanks me to my feet, the tendril still wrapped around my leg, and we sprint for the open turbolift, Ikko and Nad, slumped against the wall, already inside; Ikko gesturing furiously at us to hurry. We reach the turbolift and hurl ourselves inside, followed closely by Ata and Zeatuli. Chank is about to do the same when one of the monsters spits green fluid at him, hitting the blue Mandalorian and causing him to freeze in place. Chank lets out an inhuman shriek of terror. Gerik curses and fires a grappling hook at Chank from his gauntlet, piercing the thick chest armor. "Pull!" Gerik orders. As one, we yank. Hard. Chank breaks free from the goo and comes hurtling into the turbolift, slamming into us. Ikko pounds the turbolift controls, and slowly, the doors begin to close. The creatures barrel closer, tendrils outstretched, mouths open. The doors close. *Wham!* The creatures impact with the metal. The doors groan, but don't cave. I let out a hysterical short laugh and sink down the wall to the floor as the turbolift rises, closely followed by the others, no one saying a word. I look on as Gerik moves over to Nad, removing the man's helmet to give him some rank, but fresh, air. Ata administers a bacta salve and a shot from a portable medkit. The sound of my comlink chirping makes everyone jump.

Fumbling with the device, I depress the trigger and wait, too exhausted to speak. *"Amm, it's Wodi. Have you set the charges? We're heading back to*

the hangar now! We have to get out of here!" The only word I can manage is, "Yes." Having said that, I drop the comlink, my head rolls back, and I pass out.

Cade Valdarin - Chandrila, Core Worlds**Onboard *Gorukar*****18 ABE**

Pravus and I have been dueling non-stop. To anyone not trained in the Force, we would appear as blurs, our power so great that only a trained Force-wielder would be able to see our movements. Our blades crash again and we back away from each other, parts of our robes burned away and multiple cuts on our skin. Neither Pravus nor myself have been able to break the other's defense, only scoring glancing blows here and there. The battle outside has only intensified through the viewport; the *Daemon* was destroyed in a concerted attack by the *Viscount*, Rogue Squadron, and several *Starhawk*-class battleships, the explosion coloring the window with a faint fiery tint. We lock blades again and he smirks, "Come now, Valdarin! You are better than this!" Pravus suddenly jumps backwards, landing near the viewport, and sheathes his saber. He gives a simple nod and doors on either side of the room open, revealing four masked and robed Shadow Knights.

"If you are not willing to use the full power available to you, then you are not worth my time," he says. The knights rush in at me, all four red blades bathing the floor in a blood red shine. I fall back into my Shien form, blocking as much as I can and retaining the ability to launch strong counter-attacks. But there's too many, they keep getting through my defense although none land a critical blow. Ever since I became one with the Force, all pain and fatigue has been shut out. Parry, parry, thrust, duck and spin. I start to walk backward as I parry their blades, thinking of a way to defeat them. But then I remember a technique Luke showed me shortly after Jakku, when we started our trek for ancient Jedi lore. Force Repulse, it's called. Essentially one gathers the Force in their hands and releases it in a powerful 360 degree wave. Letting them close in once again, I deftly maneuver away from several blades, shutting mine off, and fold my arms in so that my right and left hands face the opposite direction. And then I extend both arms straight out to the sides, releasing the charged energy.

The repulse is normally very powerful but due to my oneness with the Force, that power is increased exponentially; the knights are sent flying into the walls of the room, the power being so great I can easily hear bone crack and their bodies slump to the floor.

"It's over, Pravus." He smirks, igniting his sword once more and I follow suit. We charge at each other and I fall into my preferred saber method, a mix a Djem So and Shien for strong, overbearing offense and a solid defense. I also use Battle-mind to focus on nothing but Darth Pravus. I land several straightforward heavy blows against him, overhead, now to the left, to the right, and spin away for another round. As he moves in again, I can see it, a small break in his technique that I can exploit. He is maneuvering so quick, a sudden stop to the momentum should throw him off balance. We begin parrying blades again; overhand strike, from the left to the right and back to the left, back to the right. Finally, I bring my blade low, aiming for his right knee; he moves to meet my blade. Blades connecting, I move his blade towards my right and disconnect. In a quick spin of the wrist, I knock his saber even further down and move in for a killing Shiak through the chest but he's able to regain his footing and blocks again, locking us into another prolonged parry. With a great shove of Force energy, I move him backwards slightly and charge, launching strikes characteristic of Djem So; powerful, long blows that batter away defenses. He meets my blade with a vertical deflection but I hit him with a force so great he loses his footing. Seizing the break in momentum, I bring my blade back from the right, batting his saber away to my left. And in a quick, fluid motion, I bring my blade down, cutting off his weapon hand, lifting the saber and cutting right across his face, the cut being deep enough to cause damage but not sever the head. And lastly, as my blade leaves his face I spin and when my back is towards Pravus, I flip my saber so it's in a reverse grip and plunge it backwards, impaling the Dark Lord of the Sith through the abdomen. He lets out a gasp.

I remove the saber and walk away a little, turning around and deactivating my lightsaber and look upon my once mighty foe, now with his right hand missing, a freshly cauterized scar running horizontally across his face, and gaping hole in his abdomen. I look to see the battle outside; the momentum our forces had gotten has fallen, the Imperium forces are moving to surround the fleet once more. I hear a few hoarse cackles and look again at Darth Pravus. He smiles at me through bloodied teeth. "You can save them.

You are truly worthy of the power you now wield." I look at him in confusion. He laughs, a speckle of blood hits the floor. Even with the gaping hole in his body, he still manages to hold on. Having the spirit of an ancient Sith Lord in him must give him a greater tolerance for pain. "Think about it, you have reached a power that few others have ever dreamed of, and fewer still have ever obtained! You could be what Palpatine was not, what I never could have been: an all-powerful sovereign, not a tyrant like he was but a stalwart defender. You could bring order to this chaotic galaxy." A Starhawk ramming into a *Predator* Destroyer catches both our attention. He starts again, "All wills subject to your own, all dissension would be silenced by your thoughts. You can be a truly immortal emperor." I stare at him, wondering why a Sith would talk like this. As if on cue he says, "Come now Valdarin, you and I are the same, we call ourselves Jedi and Sith but are really more. We do not believe, truly believe, in the Dark and Light. You are no Jedi, you do not believe the Force is only just a shield to protect the weak, but that it is also a tool, a weapon for the strong to take their rightful place. You could finally bring order to the chaos that is organic life, be what no Force-user before you has been."

I look through the viewport at the massive space battle again, Pravus' words echoing in my mind. *I could end all war, all chaos.* A voice echoes in my mind as well, that of Argus Valdarin, my ancestor whose spirit taught me to achieve oneness. *A great test will befall you and choice will be made.* I deactivate my lightsaber and can hear an impatient sigh from Pravus. "You're right, Xander. I am no Jedi. I am a Warrior of the Gray. There is emotion, yet peace, ignorance, yet knowledge, passion, yet serenity, chaos, yet harmony, death, yet the Force. There will always be evil in the galaxy for without evil we would not know good but evil cannot be allowed to flourish. And what you propose would be a great evil, to deny a sentient being their right to live the way they want, their right to self-determination. Their will subject to my own, that is an evil I will not abide." I clip my lightsaber to my belt. "You would squander this power then, based on *philosophy*?" Pravus says through a now hoarse voice, his life-force is draining. "Pravus, there is a difference between you and I; I don't need a position of power to know my place. I have become one of the most powerful Jedi in history and I will be a sentinel of the galaxy, a vanguard of the return of the Jedi but I do not need to become the emperor of the galaxy to do that." He laughs, "Your Republic is doomed then. Even now, my last command still stands, there are more

like me; soldiers of the fallen Empire who wish nothing more than to see your Republic fall." I look down at him. Being so enveloped in the Force gives me an almost perfect clairvoyance yet because of Pravus' power, I can only read murky thoughts. "*Gorukar* wasn't the only Sith secret in Wild Space, was it?"

He lowers his head and chuckles for a moment. "Now you die!" He yells as he lunges at me with the remaining hand, coruscating red lightning down his arm; a makeshift lightsaber, if you will. I ignite the Peridot-blade again and sever his left hand as well then grab his head with my hands. There is a technique the ancient Jedi used that was forbidden due to the destructive ability and the potential for Jedi to fall to the Dark Side, but for a Grey Jedi there is no worry. A Jedi can sever ones connection to the Force. The result is so extreme that is usually ends in death. Imagine having your sight taken away after years and years of using it. I close my eyes and will there to be an invisible wall around him. The result is instantaneous; without the Force to shut away the pain, the added effects of both hands being lost, severe pain from the cut across his face, and the gaping hole in his abdomen are too much and he gasps one last death rattle, and then slumps to the ground.

Finally, after three-and-a-half years of torturing the New Republic, of taking life and hope away from entire worlds and not to mention making those systems nigh-unlivable for Force-sensitives, Xander Verush lies dead. Dark Lord of the Sith, Lord-Emperor, former Emperor's Wrath; all of these things and now he lies dead. My vision goes a little blurry for a second, the strain of holding oneness this long, I now understand why Pravus appeared the way he did; mortals are not meant to have power like this.

I hear the force field shut down and feel the familiar presence of Wodi, Jevin, Luke, and the others. Wodi, Jevin, and Luke rush over to me and stop when they see Pravus on the floor and then stare at me. Wodi is the first to speak, "Cade we caught the end of that fight. I couldn't see anything, just blurs, but Luke said you were brilliant!" I simply nod my head but let out an exasperated sigh. Jevin, being the older brother he has always been to me, rushes to stabilize me. "What's wrong," asks Wodi. Luke chimes in, being able to sense my thoughts and pain through our bond. "He is feeling the effects of having power that no Force user should have access to. Cade you

need to let go." I shake my head, "I can't, not yet. I need to destroy the Imperium."

"You've done enough!" shouts Wodi. "No!" I yell, surprising everyone, including myself. "If the Imperium isn't destroyed here, today, they will come back. And then we'll be right back where we started!" I stand, letting Jevin know I'm fine. "We have the charges set so let's go." Jevin tells me. I shake my head, "Not possible. Explosives won't cripple *Gorukar* nearly enough. The Sith built this place, so nothing short of the Force will be able to destroy it. Completely." Wodi stares at me but stops when he sees how resolute I am. He looks a little crestfallen. I take out a chip from my belt and hand it to him, "This is a locator, use it to find me planetside." "It's suicide Cade." I respond somberly, "A Jedi's life is sacrifice." He, Jevin, and Luke all look to the floor. I place my hand on Wodi's shoulder and give him a smirk, "But I'm no Jedi, am I. I have no intention of dying here today." Luke asks me how I will take the station down. "I'm going to send this monstrosity careening into the Xalena Ocean, the largest on Chandrila, and destroy the station piece by piece. I'll bail out before the crash, with luck landing in the ocean. You use the locator to find me and we all live to fight another day." Luke nods at me, we grasp forearms in a traditional Jedi salute, "May the Force be with you, brother." "And with you, now go." They begin a brisk jog back towards the hangars.

I turn and look at the fallen body of Darth Pravus and then to the battle outside, his words echoing again. *An immortal sovereign, order to chaos.* I shake my head. No, even though I believe in the Force a little differently from Luke, there are lines I will not cross. A choice lies ahead of me; I can't bring life back to the worlds devastated by the Imperium but I can make sure those tragedies never happen again. I leap over the railing to a floor below, the housing chamber for the massive Kyber crystal powering the station. Faint booms echo through the walls, the explosives going off. The crystal is a sick blue color, like the station exterior. Even looking at the crystal is difficult, the tainted energy nearly causing me to double over in pain.

I can feel the station about to fire; Pravus must have had the station ready to attack and made a contingency to have the station fire should he perish. I look out at my homeworld, all those people would lose their lives. Without

thinking, I place my hand on the massive crystal and begin to absorb the energy. The energy is so tainted and there is so much it causes me to drop to my knees in fiery pain. Closing my eyes and concentrating on my breath, I stand again and open my eyes. The crystal is now a milky grey; I completely absorbed all of the tainted energy. It feels so intoxicating, all the power. I can feel everything, can sense everything. Looking at the battle, it's as if time itself is slowed to fractions of a second. I walk towards the viewpoint, tendrils of lightning coruscating from my feet with each step. Once there, I see the Imperium fleet, even after a day since the reinforcements from Xauvis arrived, they still are a formidable size, there's even a Super Star Destroyer still in the fight. I see a cluster of seven Destroyers pounding a cluster of Starhawk battleships. I hold out my left hand and slowly make a fist, the result being the Destroyers crumpling as if made of tissue paper, caving in on themselves until they explode. I look to see another group harassing the *Viscount*, *Accolade*, and several other cruisers. Closing my eyes, I hold out my right hand, pointing with the index and middle fingers and will lightning. Opening them again, I see, as if lightning from the heavens, a bolt appear out of nowhere, going back and forth through the nine Destroyers, each time ripping straight through the hull and causing massive explosions until the ships blow apart. I fall to my knees; the pain of holding in this much power is taking its toll. Even though I am using the Force to shut out the pain, I can still tell my limbs are on fire and my vision goes black. *Is this it?* Suddenly faces of my friends and family flash; of Wodi and Jevin, of Luke and Kiara, of all the others who have helped me become who I am. I can't let them down. I stand again, with pain, but I stand. I see another group of Destroyers and the dreadnought hammering a flotilla of Starhawks and Mon Cal cruisers. Summoning a good deal of energy, I cup my hands and turn slightly to the right. Then I extend both arms straight in front of me, palms open, unleashing a powerful telekinetic burst of energy. The ships are flung violently, flipping in invisible air and some are destroyed while others manage to right themselves and flee the system. Let them run. At this point, the power I wield is taking a toll, I can see my hands shaking, and my vision is blurred. I can't give up, there is one last thing to do. Seeing the U-wings of the assault team and Sonya's *Phoenix*, I raise both arms above my head. I reach out as if grasping a bar, immediately feeling resistance due to the size of the station. Then, I force them down towards the ground, launching the station towards the planet. As we make our descent, I reach out again

and begin using the Force to tear the station into pieces, the largest being the deck I am on. I see the viewport light up with the heat of re-entry, that's my cue. Charging the Force in my hands, I create a shield around myself and place a hand on the window. As soon as we break atmosphere, I destroy the viewport and launch myself outside and to the side of the falling observation deck, watching the mass of debris fall by in a brilliant fireball. The journey is fast and before I know it, I hit the water, hard. The shield protects me but the impact is still extremely rough. With great pain, I turn over in the water to watch the remaining pieces of *Gorukar* fall towards the planet in a brilliant meteor shower. I can vaguely make out Imperium ships being destroyed, the explosions coloring the sky. I even see some ships jump away but for all intents and purposes, the Imperium is finished. I activate the beacon on my belt and hope that someone finds me before I drown. As my vision fades to black, the exhaustion of holding on to so much power for so much time has drained all energy from me. I hear the sound of an engine and hear a familiar voice say, "We've found him."

Wodi "Wishbone" Quix – Chandrila, Core Worlds
18 ABE



Boom! Another Imperium TIE disappears in a fiery explosion outside the expansive viewport, my lasers having hit it directly in the center of its bubble canopy. "TIE down!" I yell out in victory to the others, spread out around me in the smoky gunnery room. "Nice one, Wodi!" Nom yells back through the haze, blasting away fighters at his commandeered gunner station. Another down, I think to myself, millions more to go. My eyes flit across the ongoing battle; the huge capital ships, explosions dotting their surfaces, locked in broadsides with one another, heavy cruisers and transport ships mixed in, and starfighters racing about all of them, blasting away at one another. I quickly adjust the targeting computer on my own gunnery turbolaser with a few keystrokes and fire at a nearby Sentinel shuttle, no doubt filled with stormtroopers, accompanied by an escort heading towards one of our crippled MC80 security cruisers, the *Swift Liberation*. The lasers shear off the shuttle's top wing, sending the boxy *Sentinel* spiraling out of control and into one of its escort TIEs, causing both to explode. I next focus my fire on the remaining fighters scattered throughout the debris field.

After we had been separated from Cade by the force field, Luke had led our group to a nearby gunnery station, telling us that we would be of better use to our fleet. After a short battle with the gunnery crew, now all sprawled on the floor riddled with blaster holes, we had each climbed onto one of the massive turbolaser batteries and selected targets. It hadn't taken long for the Imperium craft outside to figure out their own station was firing at them after their fighters started to go. After taking out two bomber wings attempting to disable us, a third bomber group had managed to evade our fire, destroying two of the arrays with proton torpedoes, killing two of Sonya's guys manning them in the resulting detonation.

I down another TIE. "*Wodi,*" Luke's voice crackles over my comm. "*I think it's time to head back to Cade. The fleet can handle themselves for now.*" "Alright Luke," I acknowledge, taking my hands off the control yoke and keypad. "I'll get everyone together." I look one last time out at the space battle over Chandrila continuing to rage before hopping off my turret. I bring up my wrist comlink and key in our group frequency. "Fun's over, everyone. We're heading back to Cade."

. . .

We jog swiftly down the corridor back toward Pravus' throne room. My heart sinks slightly when I see the glow of the force field still active and keeping us locked out. *Kriff!* I then see something else that puts the force field clean out of my mind. Inside the room, two blurs seem to fly about, streaks of color, lightsaber blades; one crimson, the other an intense green, clashing with one another. "Look at that!" Lannik says in awe, pointing inside. "It's Pravus and Cade." Luke says, a small smile cracking across his face. "And Cade is holding his own more than well!" I look at him questioningly. Luke just smiles. I turn back and stare, transfixed, at the fight inside the throne room that I can barely see. "Unbelievable," Jevin breathes quietly. He and the others gather around, equally mesmerized. And then, in an instant, the fight is over. Both combatants stand still; one battered, but resolute, and the other broken. Pravus teeters unsteadily, a gaping hole in his abdomen, both his hands lopped off at the elbows, and a cauterized gash across his ashen face. His mouth opens in a pained gasp, his soulless eyes staring disbelievingly at Cade with a mixture of fear, confusion, and anger. Then he

crumples to the floor. The shield deactivates. We enter the room almost cautiously, barely believing our eyes. Pravus is dead! Cade regards Pravus for a moment before looking to us, appearing many years older for a brief instant. "Cade," Jevin says, at a loss for words, switching his gaze between the young Jedi and Pravus. "Cade. It's . . . it's over." "Cade," I say, a grin spreading over my face, shaking my head in amazement, "you did it. We only caught the end of the fight. I couldn't see a blasted thing, but Luke said you were brilliant!" Cade doesn't respond, but merely nods before letting out an exhausted sigh, swaying slightly on his feet, his face pale.

Jevin, having recovered from his shock first, rushes forward to stabilize Cade before he falls. We move forward too. "Cade, what's wrong?" I ask, scanning him for injuries. "Are you hurt?" "No," Luke replies, resting his gloved prosthetic hand on Cade's shoulder. "He is feeling the effects of having power that no Force user should have access to. Cade," Luke says, speaking directly to him, "you need to let go." Cade shakes his head, saying in a slightly raspy voice, "No. I can't, not yet. I need to destroy the Imperium."

Anger and frustration flare up inside me. "You've done enough! Killing yourself won't destroy the Imperium!" I shout, exasperated. "No!" Cade yells, straightening, putting a hand on Jevin's arm for a moment. He begins to pace. "If the Imperium isn't destroyed here, today, they will come back. And then we'll be right back where we started!" My anger falters. I know he's right. "We have charges set on the reactor," Jevin says, "Amminius and Gerik brought enough with them to blow this station all the way to the edge of known space. Let's go!" But Cade shakes his head. "Not possible. Explosives won't cripple *Gorukar* nearly enough. The Sith built this place, so nothing short of the Force will be able to destroy it. Completely." I stare at Cade in disbelief, realization dawning on me on what he plans to do. I open my mouth to protest his decision. Cade looks to me, his expression kind and understanding, but resolute. He removes a small device next to his lightsaber from his utility belt and holds it out to me. "This is a locator. Use it to find me planetside." I take the device numbly. "It's suicide, Cade," I whisper quietly, "what you're planning to do."

"A Jedi's life is sacrifice." Cade responds simply. I look to the floor, sadness enveloping me, a burning sensation starting in my throat. I feel Cade's hand on my shoulder and look up. Cade is smirking. "But I'm no Jedi, am I. I have

no intention of dying here today." I smile back, his smirk giving me hope. "What's your plan?" Luke asks quizzically, smiling. "I'm going to send this monstrosity right into Xalena Ocean, the largest on Chandrila, and destroy it piece by piece through the Force," Cade says, looking out at Chandrila from the viewport. "I'll bail out before the crash, with luck landing in the ocean. You use the locator to find me and we all live to fight another day!" He finishes with a grin. Luke nods. "Reckless, but noble. I like it!" He grasps Cade's forearm. "May the Force be with you, brother." Cade grasps Luke's forearm in return. "And with you. Now go!" Jevin and I nod to Cade one final time before we turn with the others and rush out of the throne room and towards the hangar.

As I run, I look out at a viewport at the space battle. I key in the code to Amminius' comlink. "Amm, it's Wodi," I shout into my own comm, "Have you set the charges? We're heading back to the hangar now. We have to get out of here!" "Yes," comes Amminius' short reply, sounding completely out of breath. I place the device back on my belt. We stop at the turbolift, Lannik slamming the button. "Come on!" He says, irritated. Finally, the lift doors open, and we're hit with a horrible smell. Ignoring it, we jump in. "Hopefully Amminius, Gerik, and the others made it back to the hangar," Sonya says. "Judging by the smell in this lift, looks like they were just in here." We descend rapidly. Around me, I can feel the walls of the turbolift shuddering. "Something's happening." Jevin says uneasily. The turbolift doors open and we rush out, heading down the corridor. The deck is shuddering beneath our feet, and small pieces of debris are beginning to fall. I look out another big viewport as I pass, and almost trip over my feet in shock. "Look at those Destroyers!" Nom yells, as he screeches to a halt. We all stop and look. The Destroyers, several standard and one Super, are rippling and buckling, slowly imploding on themselves. "Our cruisers couldn't have done that!" "They didn't." Luke replies, his voice full of wonder and admiration. "Cade." I say, awestruck. "Keep moving!" Jevin yells, tearing his gaze away from the scene outside. We run once more, finally bursting into the hangar. I let out a relieved laugh when I see the others outside of our two U-wing gunships and Sonya's *Phoenix*.

We rush to them. Amminius' group appears in bad shape. I grab Amminius in a tight hug. "You're okay!" He hugs me back. "More or less." He begins to excitedly tell me about the reactor situation as we hurriedly board the

transports with the others, Luke getting in his X-wing with Artoo, Ratchet getting into the astromech socket of Cade's fighter, and Sonya and her Hunters boarding their freighter. "*Let's get out of here!*" Sonya's voice comes over the comm. "You don't have to tell me twice!" I shout back. Our engines come to life, and we slip out into space, closely followed by the other transport, the *Phoenix*, and two X-wings. As we head away from *Gorukar* and toward our fleet, we're met with another extraordinary sight. Several Star Destroyers are drifting aimlessly upside down, their lights darkened, pieces of debris breaking off their hulls. "*Cade's handiwork.*" Luke says over the comm. "We sure missed quite the show," our pilot says in awe from the cockpit. We reach the fleet and are about to dock when the pilot lets out a cry of shock and tells us to look out the rear viewport. We all clammer near the viewport and I watch in complete amazement as *Gorukar*, beginning to break apart, falls towards Chandrila. No one says a word.

Later . . .

"I'm *telling* you, there's no one down there!" The annoyed Sullustan captain of the rescue shuttle *Merriam* repeats, gazing out the open bay doors of the shuttle at the debris-ridden ocean. "I have to get back to the triage center. Our fleet is still mopping up the last of the Imps." Amminius, Jevin, Salurra, and I had boarded the rescue craft almost half an hour ago to find Cade, his locator having pinged. "We stay until we find him, that's an order!" Jevin says, glaring at the man. "One more pass. Try over there. It's a wide debris field." "That's what you said last time." The captain mutters. Salurra growls threateningly. I hold up the locator to show the Sullustan. "This device isn't lying. Cade *is* down there." "The signal is just a little patchy because of all the interference." Amminius adds. Just then, the device pings louder than it had ever done before. We all excitedly cluster at the bay door opening to gaze down at the ocean as the pilot lowers the craft slightly. After scanning through the debris, my eyes fall on a human form bobbing in the water next to a large chunk of metal. "There!" I shout pointing. The captain signals to the pilot, and we begin descending towards the water. "We've found him!" I say, relief flooding through me. "We've found Cade!"

. . .

In the large medical unit of the Command Complex, I stand next to Cade, who is fast asleep under a white bed sheet on a white gurney. Around us, in beds and bacta tanks, are many other soldiers being attended to by nurses and medical droids. More are being brought in regularly. I feel someone walk up next to me and place a hand on my shoulder. I look to see Amminius, smiling broadly at me. I smile back, reaching up to tousle his hair. He shakes his head, grinning. Pulling up chairs to Cade's bedside, we both sit silently and wait. A feeling of calm serenity comes over me. Through an overhead viewport, the sun is shining.

Cade Valdarin - Chandrila, Core Worlds

18 ABE

Hanna City Hospital, Private Ward

I wake all of a sudden, the last thing I remember is floating in the ocean, watching the destruction of most of the remaining Imperium forces and the sky filled with the burning remains of *Gorukar*. I lost consciousness just as the engine of a ship sounded and heard someone say, "We found him." But what I woke up to is something I didn't expect. A fine grey mist covers the ground and the sky is also grey. I look down and see that the grey robes I was wearing during my fight on the station are gone, replaced by more traditional brown robes of the old order. I look around some more and think to myself, *am I dead?* As if on cue, a deep voice responds, "No you aren't dead, not yet anyway." In front of me a spirit materializes, that of Argus Valdarin, my ancestor and the one whose spirit taught me how to achieve oneness with the Force.

"Argus, where am I?" I ask, "If I'm not dead, where am I?" He looks at me, the faint white of a Force ghost surrounding him, "You are in the Netherworld of the Force. I wanted to thank you, for doing what I failed to do millennia ago." Suddenly the grey mist shroud is replaced and we are in a beautiful wood, the planet Tython. The sky is colored with a lavender tint and the crisp smell of Force trees fill my senses. We walk to a bench in front of the Jedi Temple, partially built into a mountain, and still in pristine condition despite millennia of abandonment. As we sit, Argus speaks again. "I am proud of you, my boy. As are your parents; you had the key to ultimate power and yet you had the will to turn away. You truly showed the

spirit of a Grey Jedi, to know power and not be tempted by it; you have made the Valdarin line proud." I stand up and close my eyes, letting the sounds of the forest fill my ears, "So will this be the last I see you?" I ask him, an honest question as I have come to rely on his guidance and teaching. He stands to join me. "It is, my boy. My time to join the Force completely has been a long time coming, but do not fret. The Force binds all things, it surrounds us and connects us together; as long as there is the Force, I will be with you, as will your parents and all those you care about." I nod, "Thank you, Argus, for everything." He smiles, "Thank you my boy, for correcting a mistake I made so very long ago. May the Force be with you, always." As he says this, his spirit fades to mist and I truly wake up this time.

My eyes open to see a warm light coming from the ceiling, a hospital room. I gingerly look around, my body still exhausted from becoming one with the Force and maintaining that form for so long. I can see three familiar figures at a table in the corner; Wodi Quix, Amminius Sinan, and Jevin Corso. All dear friends and all in dress uniform; a clean white tunic, black pants, and a large New Republic emblem adorning the left shoulder. Using the Force to enhance my hearing, I overhear them talking about the status of the New Republic, how there is already talk about the Populists pushing to demilitarize the Republic, how Tor kept good on his word and retired from active service, and how there are Republic fleets chasing down the remnants of the Imperium that fled the battles at Chandrila, Gantheim, Carida, and several others. To my right, sleeping in her chair with her hand clasped around mine is my Zeltron fiancée, Kiara, whom I promised when this war was over I would be with her. I gently squeeze her hand back, causing her to wake up. She sees me awake and the look in her eyes I wouldn't trade for the world. She kisses me gingerly and then says to the group at the table that I'm awake. They stand, with Amminius saying into a wrist comm, "He's awake."

Wodi walks over to the bed and lightly taps my shoulder, "Well kid, you've done good. The Imperium is well and truly defeated." Jevin nods, "What you did there, I don't think anyone will forget that." I lift myself out of bed, Kiara holding my arm to give me support. Once fully standing I nod to her, letting her know I have the strength to stand. "So what happened after the station was brought down?" Wodi rubs his hands together, "Well, the station was

brought down, like you said you would. As the station was falling to the planet and falling apart, the Imperium fleet just . . . broke. Their ships became disorganized, Admiral Kerex gave them the option to surrender but they didn't take it. We demolished most of the fleet but some ships did manage to escape. And they weren't the only forces; the Imperium launched attacks at the academies on Gantheel, Carida, Dac, and several others. Luckily, the assaults were repulsed as well and now the war is, for all intents and purposes, over, with small clean-up operations here and there." Amminius walks over, "They're ready sir." Jevin nods, "Come on kid, everyone is waiting." I shake my head at him, knowing I've told him a dozen times over I don't like ceremonies or titles, but it's time for celebration. We exit the room and I stop in my tracks; there lining the walls are New Republic Honor Guards, white armored soldiers with plumed helmets, used for ceremonious occasions. When they see me, they stand to attention and we walk through the tunnel they make with their rifles.

We come to the first corner; I see three armored figures there. My good friend, Gerik Ordo, and two of his armored Mandalorians. Gerik stands there in his usual green and black armor, helmetless, and with a beautiful kama and a sash from left shoulder to right hip. One of the helmeted warriors nods and Gerik turns, "Ah, *vod!* You're awake!" We grasp each other's forearm, a symbol of mutual respect amongst his culture, "You had me worried there for a while. Three days you were out!" We laugh a little. "I thought you would have been on Mandalore to help rebuild?" He smiles and shakes his head, "I came because there is something you need to hear." He says something in Mando'a to one of the guards, who brandishes a well-crafted case. Opening it, he removes a beautifully crafted scabbard and Gerik pulls the sword out of it. The sword has a jewel-encrusted hilt and is adorned with runes along the blade. "This is the blade of Mandalore the Ultimate, perhaps the greatest hero amongst my people. He was a wise leader, a strong warrior, and a humble man. Because of you, Cade Valdarin, the Mandalorian people remember the way of honor." He sheathes the sword and takes the blade and holds it horizontally in front of me. "The Mandalorian people have unanimously declared you a friend and thus, bequeath this gift to you, a show of our admiration and everlasting respect." I take the sword and I'm at a loss for words. "Gerik, this is . . . I can't take this." He shakes his hand at me, "Now none of that. You deserve it." I take the sword and attach the strap over my shoulder, Gerik smiling. "Oh! I almost forgot. Cade, you have

caused the Mandalorians to do something that has not been done for years. The Council of Chieftains has decided to hold a democratic vote for the position of Mandalore, the warrior who will lead our people." I point to the sash, "So I imagine you are in the running for this?" "Yes I am, and it's thanks to you. Because of your trust in us, the Mandalorians are now seen in a better light than simply the fading memory of marauders; we are now heroes and so, with a new role in the galaxy, the chieftains feel the position of Mandalore is needed once more. I shake his hand, "Well you are a great choice and you are a truly courageous leader and a terrific warrior." He places a hand on mine, "And Cade, know that House Ordo considers you blood kin; no matter where you are in the galaxy, no matter when. If you need assistance, House Ordo will answer the call." Smiling at me, he claps me on the shoulder, "Now go brother, enjoy your victory. I have to run, the votes are about to be tallied." He and the guards turn and walk off. We continue on through the hallway, more honor guards lining the hallways.

At the next turn, we see three hairy giants, three Wookiees who have reached legendary status in the Republic: Salurra, Chewbacca, and Choral of the Wookiee Defense Force. "Sal, come here you hairy carpet!" I exclaim. He wraps me in a bear hug. "What brings you three here?" Salurra grunts and roars, telling me in Wookiee speak that he has been made the new head of the Wookiee Defense Force. "That's great Sal! You'll make a good leader." Some more roars, affirming that he will forever be friends with the Republic and plans to only strengthen those ties further. Choral sifts up to me; he wears a translator around his belt, giving his voice an autonomous tone. "We also came to honor you, Cade Valdarin. The Chieftains have elected you an honorary Wookiee; you will always be welcome among our people and we will always lend aid if you shall require it. As well, we come to gift you this." He looks to Chewbacca who produces a rich medium-brown tunic, styled in the traditional Jedi Robe look, the sleeves ending in light tan rings at the end and intricate markings going down the tabards. "This tunic was made by the finest Wookiee artisans with now rare Wroshyr wood fiber." Taking it, I can feel the Force flowing through the fibers in it, "Choral, I can't take this. Your world is gone; I can't take what remains of the Wroshyr." He holds up a shaggy hand, "Nonsense, my people are master gardeners. We will create a new world and grow new Wroshyr trees and will, eventually, reclaim Kashyyyk and reseed the world anew. I take the tunic and put it on over the white shirt, standard hospital garb on Chandrila. "Thank you, all of you, for

everything. And before you go, Salurra, you have been with me for eighteen years because of a life debt given on Bepin. You have more than adequately served that debt. Therefore, I release you from your debt." He utters something that even I don't understand and Choral has to translate. "He says that to follow one so honorable, no life debt is needed." I tear up and hug Sal again. "We will see you at the ceremony," Choral says. As they lumber off, we continue onto the reception room before the exit.

At the reception area, we see more honor guards along with familiar faces; Tor Ponith, Unath Kerex, Gavin Skyes, Geelo, Tav Voren, and several others. "Ah, the guest of honor has arrived!" Tor says. Gavin gives on order, "Company, attention!" They stand to crisp attention and we walk over to Tor, I stop along the way to shake hands with Gavin. Tor extends a furry hand and I take it, shaking hands with him and we both laugh. "Well, we both have seen the first true test of the New Republic to the end." "That we have, Tor, that we have. So I hear you retired?" He chuckles, "Yep, Kerex and I both. Although I'm not leaving the military entirely. Beginning tomorrow, I will be starting my tenure as Military Aide to the Chancellorship, I need to ensure that this military that I have overseen for so long is not reduced to a shell of its' former self. Luke joins the group, wearing tan brown robes instead of the normal black. He takes my forearm as I take his, "You're looking much better, how do you feel?" he asks. "Good Luke. We did it." He smiles at me when Amminius chimes in, his ever jovial self, "So, now that Cade has become, what was the way you put it Skywalker? He became 'an extension of the Living Force itself,' so now that that has happened, who's the stronger Jedi?" Luke and I look at each other and start laughing. Amminius looks hurt, "What, it's an honest question." He says sheepishly. "Amm, it doesn't matter who's the strongest. Cade and I are a team; we work together to fight evil and injustice, we are brothers-in-arms." Luke says. "Besides, we'll need to work together to rebuild the Jedi," I tell him. "And I don't think I can do that again, not without completely exhausting my body, no one should have that much power."

"You know I don't like ceremonies, Tor." "I know son, but it wasn't my idea. The Chancellor felt that we can capitalize on this momentous occasion and that having an emblem, a symbol of the New Republic's victory, would be a good thing, so here we are." I sigh, "Well, let's get it over with then." Jevin, this time, gives the order to fall in formation. Wodi goes to the door and

places a hand on it and turns towards me, smiling and offering a wink, "Well kid, you ready for another adventure?" I look to Kiara, taking her hand in mine, Jevin places a hand on my shoulder, Amminius smirks at me, and Gavin winks at me. "Well, as luck would have it, I am." He opens the door to the bright Chandrilan sunlight and the sounds of millions of people clapping and cheering, the Chancellor saying into a microphone, "And now, citizens of the New Republic, I give you the hero of the Imperium War!"

FIN

Epilogue

And it was over. The New Republic had faced its greatest test and survived. Indeed, even after the destruction of the Hosnian system, Republic officials and historians would remember the Imperium and its dark master, Darth Pravus, as the greatest threat the New Republic ever faced. Following the clean-up efforts against the remainder of the Imperium forces, the New Republic shifted its focus. The Senate, now controlled by the "Populist" faction; a group that felt the individual worlds deserved more say and less central government and didn't believe in a strong standing military, voted to demilitarize and focus on rebuilding those worlds ravaged by the war, particularly those that had been attacked by *Gorukar*. However, thanks to the efforts of the heroes of the war, the military was partially saved. While funding would stay the same and access to the best academies and manufacturers was obtained, the military was downsized to about a third of the strength it had achieved during the Imperium War, although this was still a formidable size. With Wild Space now relatively safe now that the Imperium was gone, the New Republic leadership saw an opportunity to be had. Wild Space was plentiful in resources that were virtually untapped. It was and is home to thriving worlds that had no sentient populations and several worlds that would serve well as fortress worlds. To that end, a new branch was formed, the New Republic Scouting Service, or known by its more popular name, The Expedition. This bureau would act as a proxy government for the New Republic in Wild Space; the face for the Republic to those who live in Wild Space. The Scouting Service's main goal was to help those species whose worlds were now uninhabitable, thanks to the Imperium, find new worlds. At the head of this project were the Wookiees who survived *Gorukar's* attack on Kashyyyk. The Wookiees are master

gardeners; they even began to reseed their homeworld while other affected worlds; Damaria, Belkadan, Tatooine, Axxila, Tangrene, Gamorr, Uuqbar, and Deralia, remained barren. To meet its other goals, the Expedition appointed political administrators, civilian leaders, and military veterans at its service. While the Imperium was gone, there was still a myriad of dangers in Wild Space; warlords commanding armies comparable to any intergalactic force, hostile species, and according to Cade Valdarin, other hidden Sith secrets. In that light, many veterans of the Imperium War would join the powerful Scouting Service Military, which was comprised of a powerful fleet and army. The fleet, called the Expeditionary Fleet, was given many advanced, combat-oriented ships due to the fact they would see crisis on a more frequent basis. Its army contingent was given the most advanced combat vehicles, like the T5-B heavy battle tank and the 3A Mobile Proton Torpedo Launcher. The "Scout Soldiers" as they were called, would in time become known as some of the most elite warriors of the New Republic. Compared to most New Republic troops, these soldiers would see action and combat on a much more frequent basis. As for the heroes of the war, their stories will take them all across the galaxy.

Cade Valdarin - Warrior of the Grey

Grey Jedi, honorary Wookiee, blood-kin of the Mandalorians. Following the Imperium War, Cade was lauded as not only a great hero and savior, but a legend, especially to the people of his homeworld, Chandrila. Stories already spread of how he became one with the Force, defeated Darth Pravus, and used the absorbed energy of *Gorukar* to destroy it. Valdarin has now become one of the most powerful Force-users in history, along with his ancestor. Both having received the highest honor possible, the Alderaan Medal of Valor, he and Luke were welcomed as heroes all across the Republic. After creating the new Jedi with Luke, fulfilling their dream, Cade was offered a position. Luke, in his unofficial but publicly accepted role as Grand Master, offered to Cade the role of Battlemaster, head lightsaber instructor. Cade declined, citing that he needed to travel to Wild Space and help the newly formed New Republic Scouting Service. The New Republic created this branch to colonize Wild Space, take advantage of the vast resources therein, and build to military fortifications. Cade also traveled there often due to insidious hint Pravus gave him that yet more Sith secrets were there. Thus,

Luke gave him a different title, Jedi Vanguard, as Cade would be the first representation of the Jedi to new species in Wild Space. It was on one of the return journeys that Luke asked Cade to train his personal apprentice, Ben Solo, in the ways of the lightsaber; of course Cade wouldn't teach Ben everything in the ways of the lightsaber. However, Solo would attack the New Jedi while Cade was in Wild Space, knowing he couldn't take on the master duelist. Cade would then fake his death and retreat to the Deep Core until after the Battle of Starkiller Base.

Wodi Quix - Tireless Soldier

Following the War, Wodi would remain in the NR military as commanding officer of the Republic's premier Special Forces unit, the Special Hazards And Reconnaissance Commandos. He would remain here for half a decade, leading the SHARCs on clean-up duty against holdouts of the Imperium and various crime syndicates and pirates, like the Black Nova and Zaan Consortium. Eventually, he would leave the New Republic military after the threat the First Order posed was disregarded. The other Imperial Remnants had fought openly in the Imperium War and still the Republic did not take them seriously. Thus, when Leia Organa made her Resistance, High General Jevin Corso asked Wodi, one of his closest friends, to join. Wodi's mission was to help protect the New Republic while working with the Resistance and doing whatever he could to help Leia's group. He would always remain loyal to the Republic and during his time with the Resistance, would do anything to help protect it. Shortly after the destruction of Hosnian Prime, General Organa would give Wodi a crucial mission: to find the Warrior of The Grey and bring him back to the Republic.

Tor Ponith - Father of the New Republic Army

The old Bothan was true to his word. Following the cessation of the war, he retired his military commission. However, the perpetual soldier could never leave the military and so became the chief military aide to the chancellor. In this capacity, he worked to prevent the naïve Populists from dismantling the military entirely. Along with the other heroes of the war, like Wodi Quix and Cade Valdarin, he argued for the military with some success. This group managed to argue for continued funding for the military, including the best contracts money could buy. The end result was a compromise; the military

would be taken down to a third of the strength it had achieved during the War. However, it had contracts with the best weapons, tech, and starship manufacturers as well as access to the top academies. Even though the military would be significantly downsized, the military would have the best people, the best ships, and the best weapons available. When the Republic would again see crisis against the First Order and the newly discovered Praetorate, Tor, as the highest ranking government official left after the destruction of Hosnian Prime, would become Acting Chancellor. Tor Ponith would go down in history as the first (and greatest) High Marshal of the Republic as well as the Chancellor who permanently disbanded the Galactic Concordance. During this new conflict, his protégé, Garm Bel Iblis, would succeed him as the second High Marshal of the Republic.

Jevin Corso - Stoic Defender

Corso, following the war, would eventually be promoted to the highest position in the army outside the war-time only rank of High Marshal, High General. His actions during both the Civil War and the Imperium War made him one of the heroes of the New Republic and his command ability earned him the respect of his soldiers and the fear of his enemies. Along with Tor Ponith, he would argue on behalf of the military when the Populist-controlled Senate wanted to disarm the Republic. He would order Colonel Wodi Quix to leave the military but join the Resistance and defend the Republic from the outside when it was clear the Senate would block their attempts to curtail the First Order. When the threat of the First Order was revealed, Jevin would again see action leading his soldiers against both the First Order and the newly revealed Praetorate. He would forever remain close friends with Cade Valdarin, the Jedi hero whom he saw as a little brother.

Unath Kerex - Naval Legend

Following the war, Kerex, like his dear friend and counterpart, Tor, retired from active service. Kerex would remain in touch with the navy though, as his student, the Mirialan, Illa Nari, succeeded him as Fleet Admiral of the Republic Navy. He would also argue for continued support for the Republic military and when the threat of the First Order was revealed, he, like his teacher, Gial Ackbar, would lend his naval expertise to the fledgling Resistance.

Xellius - Legacy of Darkness

The former Praetor, who always seemed to be able to escape death, would eventually make his way to the Unknown Regions. Instead of perishing at Atrisia, he went into a death trance, escaping the noticing of his enemy, Cade Valdarin. He vowed revenge on the Republic and more importantly, Cade Valdarin. Gathering survivors of the Imperium to him, he would form the Praetorate, named in honor of the position Darth Pravus had given him. Shortly after, he would receive a summons to a conclave. The conclave was a meeting of the heads of the most powerful Remnant factions: Snoke of the First Order, Superior General Teradon Graal of the Graal Hegemony, Natasi Daala, self-proclaimed Pirate Empress of the Black Nova Pirates, and now Xellius, leader of the Praetorate. The meeting was to discuss the future of the Remnant groups. The largest and most powerful of them had gone up against the Republic and lost. The hero Cade Valdarin had been the catalyst for its destruction and the faction leaders knew that they could not hope to defeat both he and the Republic and also knew none of them would be able to reach the power that the Imperium had reached. However, Snoke would propose they work together, to work to fulfill Darth Pravus' dream of destroying the Republic. Thus he proposed they pool their resources into a weapon that, although not nearly as effective at demoralization or sheer loss of life as Gorukar was, this weapon would nonetheless be a weapon of mass destruction. The weapon he would name in honor of Darth Pravus, who had become a teacher of sorts to him. He would name the weapon after a codename Pravus had used during his tenure as Shadow Guard of the Empire; this weapon would be called "Starkiller".

Gerik Ordo - Mandalore the Reviver

After the war, Gerik would return to the adulation of the Mandalorian people. The clan chieftains unanimously voted for the first time in centuries to name a warrior Mandalore, leader of the Mandalorians. They voted Gerik Ordo, who was hailed as not only a great warrior but a savior of not just the Mandalorians but of the Republic, to the position. In his new role, Gerik would write the SuperCommando Codex, a writ detailing the Mandalorians new role as honorable warriors-for-hire. He would revive old traditions as

well as keeping some of the ways of the New Mandalorians. Also, he would start efforts to rebuild war-torn Mandalore, which saw major success and Mandalore began to become habitable again. As such, due to his warrior skills and his revival of the old warrior ways and their planet, the people declared him Mandalore the Reviver. He would forever keep strong ties with the Republic and more importantly, his adopted blood brother, Cade Valdarin.

Gavin Skyes - Jedi Friend

Skyes would remain in the military for a time following the Imperium War and eventually be promoted to Colonel. However, the Senate's refusal to allow military action against the First Order, which had fought against them openly in the war, was too much for him. His good friend and mentor, High General Corso, persuaded him not to leave the military altogether but rather, to join the New Republic Scouting Service. This scouting service was based solely in Wild Space, where essentially it was a proxy government, complete with its own military and political structure. Officially, the "Expedition" as it was colloquially called, was formed to scout for new worlds for the refugees of those lost to Gorukar, to tap the vast natural resources of the region, and to establish military outposts and fortresses in key strategic areas. Unofficially, its mandate was to help Cade Valdarin find the Sith secrets that Pravus had hinted about; anything as bad as Gorukar needed to be found and destroyed immediately. Gavin would take the news of Cade's supposed death hard but five years later, following the Battle of Crait, he would find Cade alive and serve by his side once more as The Expedition fought the newly formed Praetorate.

Geelo - Lightning Warrior

Following the war, Lieutenant General Geelo would remain in command of the elite Jumper Corps and revolutionize the use of jetpacks and would serve the Republic faithfully. Along with his commanding officer, High General Corso, he would remain in the New Republic Army, using his expertise to make the army a competent fighting force despite the fact that it was decreased in size. A common nickname he earned from the men and women under him was "Crazy Green" a tribute to his reckless, but effective, tactics

with a jetpack. He would again serve the military valiantly when the Imperial Remnants declared war following the destruction of Hosnian Prime.

Amminius Sinan - Wrath of the Republic

Sinan would go on to be promoted to Colonel himself and receive several commendations for his actions behind-the-lines during the War. He would become a member of the New Republic's Black Ops group, Alpha Blue, having a part in several black operations. However, after learning that the Senate had disregarded the First Order, the Graal Hegemony, and the Black Nova, he decided to resign, eventually joining Leia Organa's Resistance as one of its chief intelligence agents. Like his friend, Wodi Quix, he would remain extremely loyal to the Republic, so much so that he would drill into his subordinates the loyalty and love he had for the nation he had helped to create.

Salurra - Loyal Bodyguard

Salurra would succeed his father as the leader of the Wookiee Defense Force, earning a great deal of respect from his people. This force would be of tremendous help to the clean-up efforts of the New Republic military against the remains of the Imperium. In the years after the war, Salurra would work occasionally with Cade Valdarin, the man to whom he pledged an eternal life debt due to his honor and courage, and with the other heroes of the Imperium War. News of Cade's death would hit him hard but following the Battle of Crait, he would be contacted by none other than Cade Valdarin, asking him to help the New Republic Scouting Service fend off the Praetorate while the Resistance took on the First Order.