

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



Four years after the Battle of Endor, the struggle against the remnants of the Empire continues. With the New Republic struggling to liberate Imperial worlds, rogue Imperial leaders have turned to ever more desperate tactics to hold power.

In the distant Kathol sector, a New Republic task force attempts to defeat Imperial warlord Moff Sarne. As Imperial and New Republic starships battle in orbit, a small New Republic infiltration team, Page's Commandos, leads the assault on Sarne's stronghold ...

# THE SAGA BEGINS

BY TIMOTHY ZAHN

It had been a remarkably easy military insertion, as such things went, and for a while Lieutenant Page had actually dared to hope they might make it in without so much as scratching the paint on their borrowed Ghtroc 720. But combat luck—or the Force, or whoever was in charge of these things—invariably liked to remind the participants who the boss was here, and at the last second an Atgar 1.4 FD P-Tower on the Imperial Government Complex's perimeter suddenly seemed to notice that one of the freighters scurrying for cover from the massive New Republic orbital attack wasn't scurrying anywhere near the properly designated landing field. Syla Tors had just enough time to yell "Incoming!" before the laser blast scored through the starboard repulsorlifts, and the Ghtroc went tumbling to the ground. It skidded along the manicured grassland, demolished a pair of decorative shrubberies, and with a brilliant shower of sparks drove through the edge of the perimeter death fence. Half in and half out of the enclosure, the fence still arcing furiously around its stern, it finally came to a lopsided stop.

"Nice job, Tors," Page grunted, popping his restraint harness as he peered through the cockpit canopy. Not exactly a model landing, but it had gotten them pretty much where they'd wanted to go. For a Special Ops team, that was rather more than one could expect.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Syla said. "You weren't wanting this thing to fly again, were you?"

"Apparently not," Page said, pulling himself out of his now canted seat and looking back at the other four commandos similarly extricating themselves from their restraints in the cargo bay behind the cockpit. "Anyone hurt?" he called.

"No, sir," Sergeant Keleman Ciro answered for all of them. "I wish you'd teach Tors how to land these things."

"I've never been good with loaners," Syla countered dryly. "Booby-trap is set."

"Good," Page said, unlimbering his blaster and stepping to one side of the hatchway. Kaiya Adrimetrum was already at the other side, her own blaster held ready, her free hand resting on the hatch release. Humorless even at the best of

times, her face was set in unusually grim lines.

"It's a mission, Adrimetrum," Page reminded her quietly. "Don't start taking it personally."

"I won't, sir," Kaiya said, just as quietly. But the grim lines stayed where they were.

The rest of the team was in position now. Page nodded to Kaiya; and with the screech of a mechanism warped out of true by the crash, the hatchway ground itself open.

Page was out before it finished its movement, dropping into a crouch with blaster ready as Kaiya and the rest of the team followed him down. About three hundred meters straight ahead the slender administrative officespires and squat military structures of Moff Kentor Sarne's government center rose from the hills around them, the silver metal and white stonework sparkling in the starlight and the reflected sputterings of light as nearby turbolasers and ion cannon fired furiously at the New Republic assault force arrayed against it.

A force that didn't have much choice but to sit there and take it. Moff Sarne had turned Kal'Shebbol's only continent into a minor fortress, with an energy shield protecting it from above and an abundance of anti-assault weaponry at its shores protecting it from ground-level attack.

Given time, there was no doubt the New Republic could wear the defenses down. But with the war against the Empire still hanging in the balance in a hundred different sectors across the galaxy, time was a commodity they couldn't afford to waste. Especially not in a backwater locale like Kathol sector.

Hence, the energy shield had to come down. Hence, Page's Commandos.

Whether by skill or luck, Syla had picked their landing/crash spot well. Nestled in between two hills, the freighter seemed to be out of the immediate sight of any of the complex's perimeter defense stations. No vehicles were bearing down on them, nor were there any groups of outraged Imperial troopers charging in to complain about the damage to their death fence.

They had some breathing space. Maybe ten breaths' worth of it.

"Where in blazes is she?" Ciro murmured at Page's shoulder.

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"Give her a minute," Page said, giving the area a quick sweep with his macrobinoculars. No one. "We weren't exactly on target, you know."

Ciro hissed softly between his teeth. "I hate when this happens."

"You need to cultivate your sense of adventure," Page admonished him mildly, sweeping the area again. Lilla Dade was probably the best Pathfinder in the entire Special Ops division, and if there was a back door into this complex she certainly would have found it for them.

If she hadn't been nabbed in the three days since they'd slipped her onto the planet.

If there was indeed a back door to find.

"We'll give her ten more seconds," he told the group. "If she doesn't show, we do it the hard way."

"You are Lieutenant Page?"

Page was on the ground, rolling away to his right, before the voice had even completely registered in his conscious mind. A deep, unfamiliar voice, spoken from his left.

From no more than a meter to his left.

He came out of the roll into a crouch, his blaster and Vandro's A280 blaster rifle pointed in the direction the voice had come from. Gottu flicked on a shielded glowrod—

Nothing.

"What in blazes?" Vandro muttered under his breath. Gottu swept the beam around, probing the area around the crackling death fence, piercing the shadows surrounding the crumpled underside of the freighter. Page threw a quick look over his shoulder, wondering if the voice had been some kind of trick to give the Imperials a chance to sneak up from behind. But there was no one there; and anyway, Kaiya and Syla were watching their back.

"You are Lieutenant Page?"

Page turned back again. Apparently, whoever was out there really wanted an answer. "Yes," he said. "You?"

"I am Kl'aal," the voice said.

And to Page's astonishment one of the shadows peeled itself away from the freighter's hull.

Vandro cursed, feelingly. "Agreed," Page said, frowning into the blackness that seemed to simply be absorbing the beam from Vandro's glowrod. Now that he was focusing on it, he could see in the shadow the silhouette of a broad-shouldered creature a little over a meter in height, with two reddish glints just about where eyes should be. "What do you want?"

"She awaits you there." The silhouette extended an arm-shaped shadow, pointing behind itself. "The Pathfinder."

Page cocked an eyebrow. "Is that all she said?"

"No," the shadow rumbled. "She also said to say, 'With songs tripping lightly over the forest green.'"

Page glanced at Ciro, got a microscopic shrug in return. It wasn't unheard of for Lilla to recruit local assistance in these little reconnaissance missions of hers. But finding a Defel on a backwater planet like Kal'Shebbol was definitely one for the files. "Take us to her."

Following a walking shadow was just about as tricky as Page had expected it to be. But they managed it; and two minutes later they rounded one final hill to find Lilla waiting for them.

"Thought that was you coming in," she murmured, rising from her concealment in another of the decorative shrubberies. "Tors managed to splat another one, I see."

"All the great artists have a signature style," Page reminded her, eying the hill beside them. It didn't look any different from any of the other ones in the area. "So where's this back door?"

"You're not going to believe it," Lilla said. "It's right here."

She led the way toward the side of the hill. Page followed, wondering what she had up her sleeve.

And suddenly, to his astonishment, a section of the hillside vanished; and there, running underneath the ground in front of them, was an armored tunnel.

Or rather, what was left of one.

Ciro gave a low whistle. "I'll second that," Page agreed, gazing dumbfounded into the darkness. The walls, ceiling, and floor of the tunnel had been sliced completely through, leaving a meter-wide gap in the thick metal. The hillside had suffered even more extensively; the hole extended several meters in all directions from the gap. "Dade?"

"No idea," Lilla said. "The rumors say Sarne's personal guards were trying some kind of experiment here and that something went wrong."

Page nodded, feeling an unpleasant tingle on the back of his neck. In the light from Gottu's glowrod he could see that the edges of the tunnel had been blackened and twisted, as if melted or burned. But only the edges. The rest of the tunnel seemed untouched.

What kind of cutting torch could burn through that kind of heavy armor and yet not even distort the metal two meters away?

For that matter, what sort of impossible hologram or camouflage had the Imperials used to hide it the way they had?

Abruptly, the sky to their right lit up, and the thunderclap of an explosion rolled across them through the night air. "Sounds like they've found

the freighter," Page said, stepping to the edge of the gap and bracing himself for the jump down. "Let's get moving."

The tunnel was pitch black, its lights and other power sources apparently cut. The group headed inward, their silenced boots making nearly inaudible thuds on the metal floor, their glowrods turned down to bare minimum. Page kept his eyes on the few visible meters of tunnel ahead as they ran, alert for the inevitable traps or alarms that must certainly be here.

But to his mild surprise, they reached the complex without springing any traps. Nor had they tripped any alarms, if the belated and ineffective reactions of the five Imperials on duty in the nexus control room at the end of the tunnel were anything to go by.

"Check those doors," Page ordered as the last echo of the commandos' blaster fire faded away. "Ciro?"

"I'm on it, Lieutenant," Giro said, hunching over one of the panels. "Okay. There's the main energy shield control room."

Page looked at the schematic he'd pulled up. That was the control room, all right: halfway across the complex, with Moff Sarne's whole Imperial garrison between them and it. "I was hoping for something a little more convenient."

"Working on it," Giro grunted, his hands playing across the keyboard. "Got to slice into the more private secret classified floor plans of the place ... there we go. Well, well—looks like Sarne has his own private bolthole."

"Imagine my surprise," Page said dryly, looking where Giro was pointing. The exit consisted of a narrow, slightly curved tunnel with secret entrances in both Sarne's chambers and office, the tunnel leading to an equally secret hangar set in the hills a kilometer or so outside the governmental complex. "Looks like a pretty standard Imperial bolthole."

"Right, but here's the interesting part," Giro said, tapping the hangar. "Moffs usually have a landspeeder or shuttle at the end of their rat hole. Just something to get them to wherever they've got their real starship stashed. Looks like Sarne went ahead and cut out that middle step."

Page frowned at the schematic. Giro was right: that was a full-sized *Carrack*-class light cruiser in there. Heavily armed, heavily armored, all set for a quick fade out of here.

And if Sarne had set up his exit route pointing straight into space ... "Which means he has to have a cutoff for the energy shield down there," he said. "Either in the tunnel or in the cruiser itself."

"Right," Giro said, sliding a data card into the slot and keying for a copy of the schematic. "Of

course, the tunnel's undoubtedly infested with Sarne's best guards."

"That's all right," Page reassured him. "Vandro and Gottu hate it when they have to lug the heavy armament along and don't get to use it. That's our target. Adrimetrum?"

"Sir?" Kaiya said, stepping to his side.

Page tapped another spot on the schematic. "There's yours: Sarne's private detention center. If your friend Lofryyhn's still alive, odds are that's where he'll be."

"He's still alive," Kaiya said, her voice tight.

She started to turn away; Page caught her arm and turned her back to face him. "If he's not," he warned, gazing hard into her eyes, "don't take it personally. All that'll do is get you killed along with him."

For an instant Kaiya's eyes blazed with fire. Then the fire vanished, and the stolid, humorless facade was back in place. "Understood, sir."

"Then get moving." Page glanced over at the others guarding the room's two exit doors. "Gottu, Dade—go with her."

"And me?"

Page started; he'd almost forgotten the ambulatory shadow standing quietly in the corner. Here in a brightly and evenly lit room the Defel was easier to see, but no less bizarre for all that. "Dade?"

"We'll take him with us," Lilla said, pulling out her spare blaster and handing it to the creature. "I'll take point, Kl'aal; you backstop me."

She slid open one of the two doors, glanced through, then slipped out into the corridor beyond, the Defel, Kaiya, and Gottu moving out behind her. "Timer's running, commandos," Page said, taking one last look at the schematic and gesturing to the remainder of his team. "Let's go."



It was all going to hell. All of it. The Rebel assault force was battering away at the capital's inadequate defense fleet, the antique energy shield generators he'd been saddled with were crackling with the strain; and now word had come that a Rebel Special Ops team had penetrated the complex.

It was high time, Moff Kentor Sarne decided, for him to be leaving.

"Maintain all defenses," he ordered, stepping down from the raised observation platform in the situation room and heading for the door. "And tighten security around all critical operational centers. I want that Rebel team found and neutralized."

"Yes, sir," the captain in charge said, barely glancing away from the status boards to acknowledge the order. A competent enough Imperial officer, dedicated if unimaginative. It was almost a shame to have to leave him behind.

But then, someone had to be here who could be relied on to fight this battle to the death. Or at least to the destruction of the capital and any DarkStryder modules that Sarne might not be able to collect before he left. The Rebels had already heard rumors; Sarne had no desire for them to get their hands on the actual devices, as well.

Four of his personal guardsmen were waiting outside the situation room door, along with two stormtroopers on door warden duty. "You two —" he jabbed fingers at two of the guardsmen — go to the main database computer. Omega order five, and watch out for the Rebels. Then meet me at the *Ambition*."

"Understood, sir," one of the guardsman said as the two headed off at a loping run.

"The rest of you come with me," Sarne ordered, turning toward his chambers. "You stormtroopers too," he added, gesturing to them. Stolid Imperial officers were a glut on the market; stormtroopers were in precious short supply. Not a commodity a man in his position could afford to waste.

Two more of his personal guards were flanking the door to his chambers. "Open up," he ordered them. "Then come with me."

The escape route was through the back of a floor-to-ceiling library case built into the wall beside his bed. "Get those data card boxes off of there," he ordered his guardsmen. "Never mind about neatness. You two—stormtroopers—pick up that chest over there."

A minute later the library case was empty, its contents strewn across the floor. Manipulating the hidden catch, Sarne swung the back panel open and flicked on the tunnel's lights. "No noise," he warned as two of the guardsmen headed in. "The rest of you, follow me."

The entrance was a tight fit, especially for the chest the two stormtroopers were carrying, but the tunnel widened out somewhat beyond it. Still, it was decidedly claustrophobic, and Sarne found his heart racing as they approached the side tunnel which led off to the secret door in his office. If the Rebels had located this private exit route and were waiting in ambush for him ...

But no one fired or leaped out at them as they passed the side tunnel; and ahead was nothing but empty corridor until they reached the underground hangar and the cruiser *Ambition* waiting there for them. Prepped and ready, crewed by

his finest and most loyal officers and men, loaded with all the DarkStryder technology those men could get aboard in the brief time they'd had.

"Sir!" the guardsmen at the rear hissed. "I hear someone coming up behind us."

"Defense positions," Sarne hissed back, looking around him. Nothing but flat tunnel wall all the way from here to the hangar. Nowhere to go, nowhere to hide.

But maybe he could do something about that.

The stormtroopers had set down the chest and joined the four guardsmen setting up the rearguard defense. Keying the lock, Sarne lifted the lid.

For a moment he pawed furiously through the contents, searching through the brightly colored modules for the one he wanted. That red tetrahedron? No; not the right size. That one? No; that was a square-base pyramid, not a tetrahedron. That one?

Yes; that one. Sarne lifted it out of the chest, feeling the usual tingling in his fingertips and wondering distantly if this was really such a good idea. Their first test with this particular DarkStryder module had gone horribly awry, destroying part of the labyrinth of defense tunnels that honeycombed the grounds around the governmental complex and killing two of his men in the process. Perhaps he should just keep going and trust his guards to hold off the Rebels long enough to make his escape.

No. Better to try the module again here, where he didn't really care about ancillary damage. Besides, if he left the guards and stormtroopers to deal with the Rebels, he'd have to abandon the chest here with them. He couldn't possibly carry it the rest of the way by himself.

The guardsmen and stormtroopers had arranged themselves in classic two-by-two-by-two sitting/kneeling/standing defensive posture, their blaster rifles pointed back along the smoothly curving corridor. Another of the modules in the chest caught Sarne's eye, a dark green trapezoidal solid he'd had successful practice with. Stuffing it into his tunic, he closed the chest and stepped a few paces back down the corridor. Holding the red tetrahedron out the full length of his arm, he pointed its tip down the corridor toward the guardsmen's backs. Bracing himself, he squeezed the base.

And abruptly the tip erupted in brilliant blue-green flame.

Sarne bit down on his tongue as a rush of heat rolled over his hand, fighting against the reflexive urge to jump backward away from the fire. That was what his two men had done, and the move had pulled the whole inferno rolling over

them. Instead, he stood his ground, holding the tetrahedron steady as the fireball expanded up, down, and to both sides, filling the corridor and forming a meter-wide wall of flame. There was a sudden cascade of yellow-white sparks as the leading edge of flame reached the ceiling; a moment later the walls and floor were similarly burning as the flame began pushing through them.

The tingling in his fingertips ceased, and as it did so the module's bright red color faded to black. Dead, or depleted, or whatever it was that invariably happened to these things after a single use. The techs had taken over a hundred of them apart; so far, no one had found a way to recharge them. Or had figured out what made them work in the first place.

Now, cautiously, Sarne tried taking a step back. The gamble worked: with the module dead the fiery wall stayed where it was, inexorably eating its way into the ten-centimeter-thick armor plate like a cutting torch slicing into packing plastic. The flame burned through, and the smell of vaporized dirt filled the corridor.

And then, as suddenly as it had appeared, the flame flickered and vanished.

Sarne stepped forward again, peered at the meter-wide gap in the walls, ceiling and floor. Excellent: there was now enough room on each side for two men to fire from concealment. "Back here," he called softly. "All of you—back here."

A few seconds later the four guardsmen were ensconced in their new protective firing ports. "Hold them off," Sarne ordered them. "Stormtroopers, bring the chest and come with me."

But too late. Even as the stormtroopers slung their blaster rifles and picked up the ends of the chest, the pursuers appeared around the distant curve of the corridor. Four of them, three men and a woman, dressed in camouflage jumpsuits, loaded down with weapons and combat gear.

Rebels.

"Fire!" Sarne snapped. "Get them!"

The order was unnecessary. But it also was too late. Showing a flagrant disregard for their own skin, the two leading Rebels had stopped dead in plain sight in the middle of the tunnel, lifted their blasters in two-handed marksman's grips, and fired. Even as the guardsmen began returning the fire, the Rebels' blaster bolts splashed and ricocheted off the armored walls—

And two of the guardsmen grunted and spun out of their partial concealment, falling limply in and across the flame-dug trench at their feet.

Sarne cursed viciously as he snatched the green trapezoidal DarkStryder module from his

tunic. His other two guardsmen were still firing, but the flailing of their comrades' death throes had knocked their aim off, sending their shots wide of the enemy. Close enough to scare back normal opponents, to be sure, but this enemy was hardly normal. They were insane Rebels, determined to capture or kill the Imperial Moff of this sector.

And unless Sarne did something fast, they were going to succeed.

The stormtroopers had dropped the chest and gone to their knees, trying to unsling their blaster rifles before the Rebels shifted their fire direction. They left Sarne exposed, but for once that was exactly the way he wanted it. Pointing the DarkStryder module down the tunnel, he squeezed the base.

A pale, eerie mist blasted out, flowing outward from the end like some impossible hybrid of wood smoke and the conical light beam from a glowrod. The edge of the flow missed the impromptu firing ports and kneeling stormtroopers, widening to fill the entire tunnel. It spilled at blinding speed toward the far end—

And with a satisfying suddenness, the Rebels' blasters fell silent. In an eerie sort of slow motion, they toppled forward to lie twitching on the tunnel floor. Sarne kept his grip on the module; perhaps if he gave them enough mindwarping it would kill them ...

The flow ceased, and the trapezoid turned black. Cursing, Sarne threw it on the floor. "Come on," he ordered his men.

"What about them?" one of the guardsmen asked, nodding toward the Rebels lying helpless in the thickening fog.

"Leave them," the Moff snapped, gesturing impatiently at the chest. It would be most satisfying to burn the Rebels where they lay, but it would waste time Sarne wasn't at all sure he had. The Rebellion forces high above his world were already pounding his fleet. The longer he delayed his escape, the less there would be of that fleet to escape with him.

Besides, there might be more Rebels coming up behind this first batch. Best to leave the mindwarper field undisturbed for them to run into. "Pick up the chest and get moving."



A distant sputtering screech filtered through the thick door of the detention cell, jolting Jessa Dajus out of the latest episode of her recurring nightmare. For a moment she lay motionless on the thin mattress, the last images of the giant

hungry spider fading slowly from before her eyes, trying to identify the faint crackling noise filtering into her cell.

And then she got it. Blaster fire. Lots of it.

She swung her legs onto the cold metal floor and stepped to the door. Blaster fire, all right; and here in Moff Sarne's private detention center it could mean only one thing.

The Rebellion had finally come to Kal'Shebbol.

The firing stopped. Jessa pressed her ear to the door, straining over the thudding of her heart to hear the muffled sounds coming from the other side, wondering which side had won. There was a single shot, from a heavy blaster, then a pause; then a second shot from the same weapon, and another pause. The Imperials had won and were summarily executing the losers? Ridiculous—Sarne would certainly run interrogations first. No, the Rebels must have won and were blasting open the detention cells. Searching for a specific prisoner, or else setting everyone free to add to whatever pre-invasion chaos they were here to create. Unless the invasion had already taken place, in which case—

Jessa caught her breath, her line of thought shattering in the sudden surge of almost-fear that flared through her mind. Another of those strange hunches that sometimes came to her; uninvited, unwanted, but always right.

And if the intensity she was feeling was anything to go by ...

"Hey!" she shouted, banging on the door. "Hey—out there! I've got to talk to you. Now!"

There was a pause. Jessa was just taking a deep breath to shout again when the door beside her reverberated with the sound of a blaster bolt and slid open.

A man and woman stood there facing her, dressed in camouflaged jumpsuits. She held a BlasTech DL-56 blaster pistol; he was cradling an A280-K blaster rifle. "It's all right," the woman said, her voice firm but with a soothing undercurrent to it. "We're friends."

"It's not all right," Jessa retorted, straining to crystallize some detail from the sensation still twisting through her mind. "There's danger here. Terrible danger. Something ... I think it's something you're going to cause if you keep doing what you're doing."

The two Rebels exchanged glances. "Can you be a little more specific?" the man asked.

"I wish I could," Jessa said, taking half a step out of the cell and looking both directions down the corridor. Another armed and jumpsuited woman was visible to the right, talking earnestly with a red-brown Wookiee, her free hand holding tightly onto his arm. Lofryyhn, Jessa seemed to

recall the Wookiee's name: a tech-skilled prisoner Moff Sarne had bought from slavers and put to work in the docking bays and on that Corellian Corvette he was having modified. A handful of other prisoners were also standing at the doors of their freshly opened cells, mostly looking dazed at what had just happened. "All I can tell you is that I first felt it when I realized you were blasting open the cell doors."

The male Rebel gestured to the woman and Wookiee. "Kaiya?"

"What is it?" the woman—Kaiya—asked as she and the Wookiee joined the little group.

"Prisoner claims there's some kind of danger in the cellblock," the man said.

"Yes—it's called Imperial reinforcements," Kaiya agreed dryly, studying Jessa's face. "You know of some other danger?"

"I don't *know* anything," Jessa said, starting to get annoyed. "I get these hunches—"

The Wookiee Lofryyhn growled something. "He wants to know who you are," Kaiya translated.

"My name's Jessa Dajus," Jessa said, watching the Wookiee out of the corner of her eye. It was just possible he knew who she really was ... "Lieutenant Jessa Dajus. I was a shuttle pilot for Sarne."

Kaiya's eyes flicked over Jessa's shoulder at the cell she'd just been released from. "One too many rough landings?"

"One too many loyalty purges," Jessa countered. "I ended up on the wrong side of the last one."

The Wookiee rumbled under his breath and headed suddenly back down the corridor. Jessa felt her muscles tense; but there was nothing she could do with three Rebel blasters pointed in her general direction. "I sometimes helped fly combat ships, too," she added. "Usually with Sarne's personal patrol. I know how he thinks."

"And how exactly does he think regarding his detention center?" Kaiya asked.

"Kaiya, we don't have time for a discussion," the other woman put in before Jessa could answer. "The timer's running down fast on this."

"I know," Kaiya said, her forehead furrowed with thought. "You two had better head out and link up with the others. Lofryyhn and I can release the rest of the prisoners and catch up with you."

"Not a good idea," the man insisted. "If Dajus is right about an ambush or something waiting for you down the road —"

He was interrupted by a triumphant Wookiee roar. Jessa spun around, to see Lofryyhn standing at one of the unopened cell doors waving a

massive arm at the lock mechanism. "What is it?" the male Rebel asked.

"Verification," Kaiya said, a sort of grim satisfaction in her voice. "Lofryyhn says that cell door is booby-trapped. Designed to bring the entire ceiling down, in fact, killing everyone in the cell block."

She looked back to Jessa, a speculative glint in her eye. "Must be some very important prisoners here for Sarne not to want to give them up."

"He's not what you'd call a good loser," Jessa said.

"I guess not." Kaiya looked both ways down the corridor. "Well, we definitely don't have time to check each cell for traps. We'll just have to leave the rest of the prisoners for later."

"We're heading for Sarne's bolthole," the male Rebel added, eyeing Jessa. "Maybe you'd like to come with us?"

Jessa smiled tightly. The invitation wasn't because they liked her company, of course. What they wanted was to make sure she didn't trot off to the nearest comm and call reinforcements down on them.

But the reasons didn't matter. What mattered was that if this commando group was part of an all-out Rebel invasion, Moff Sarne would indeed be scampering down that bolthole of his by now, heading for his escape ship and the safety of deep space. If Kaiya and her people were fast enough, they might still be able to beat him there.

And Jessa wanted to be in on the kill. Wanted it very much.

"I'd love to come along," she told the Rebel. "There's a hidden door in Sarne's office. Come on; I'll show you where it is."



It was odd, Page thought, how interesting the wall and floor of this tunnel were.

Absolutely fascinating, in fact. And that edge where the wall and floor actually intersected—utterly spellbinding.

But there was something he was supposed to be doing, wasn't there? Something associated with that floor and wall, perhaps? Or was it something having to do with the rustle coming from behind him?

The rustle coming from behind him?

With an effort, Page lifted his head and turned it, regretting as he did so the disappearance of the wall and floor from his view. But there was floor over here, too, and wall, and Sergeant Ciro pulling himself slowly along the floor.

That was exceedingly interesting, more inter-

esting even than the floor and wall by themselves. For a long time Page watched Ciro's movements, admiring the coloration and shifting pattern of wrinkles in his jumpsuit and noting how the light glinted off the edges of the blaster gripped in his hand.

Something caught his eye. He lowered his gaze toward the floor, discovering to his surprise and amazement that he too was holding a blaster. Cradled in his hand, it lay mostly on the floor, pointing away from him, and he could see his forefinger curled around the trigger. He moved the finger, watching in fascination as it wiggled there in the trigger guard. He wiggled it some more; and with a dramatic crack of sound, the tip of the blaster erupted in a burst of light.

And suddenly the whole thing collapsed like a dream shattered by a raid alarm.

"Cover!" he snapped, leaping up into a crouch and slamming his back against the wall. He looked both directions down the tunnel, fully expecting to see five squads of stormtroopers bearing down on them.

But there was no one. No stormtroopers coming to take advantage of whatever in blazes Moff Sarne had just done to them. No Moff Sarne, either, for that matter, or the guard contingent they'd been shooting at.

"What happened?" Vandro hissed. He was on his knees, pressed against the other wall, trying to point his A280 all directions at once. "Felt like a stun gas."

"Sure didn't behave like one, though," Page said, checking his chrono. At least he could explain why no Imperial reinforcements had shown up yet: what had felt like hours of helpless stupor had actually been less than two minutes. "We'll figure it out later. In the meantime, Sarne's only two minutes ahead of us. Let's get moving."

They hurried down the tunnel. But more cautiously this time. Page had never been accused of being the overcautious type, but there had been something about that experience that was still sending warning chills running all directions across his back. Maybe the rumors coming out of Kathol sector about some exotic new technology hadn't been as exaggerated as he thought.

They reached the firing ports Sarne's men had been shooting at them from: another of the burned sections of tunnel like the one the team had entered the complex through. No holograph or mirage protecting this one from sight, though. Page kept moving, wondering what Sarne would throw at them next. The tunnel curved again, and he lifted his blaster a little higher in anticipation.

And suddenly they were there. Not ten meters ahead the tunnel opened up into a cavernous

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hangar carved out from one of the hills around the governmental center. The *Carrack*-class light cruiser from the schematics was still there, its hull flickering with reflected light.

Page got another step before the tunnel around them abruptly exploded in a deluge of blaster fire.

His blaster was returning fire before he'd consciously located their attackers: a pair of Imperial troopers standing at opposite sides of the tunnel mouth. Beside him, *Ciro* was laying down fire of his own; behind him, Page could hear the click as *Vandro* armed the *Viper* grenade launcher mounted on the underside of his blaster rifle. There was a barked warning, and he and *Ciro* threw themselves flat as *Vandro's* grenade flew over their heads, *Syla* picking up cover fire duties without missing a beat. Page squeezed his eyes shut —

He saw the flash even through closed eyelids, the thunderclap of the explosion louder than usual in the confines of the tunnel. The sound was still ringing in his ears as Page scrambled to his feet, sprinting ahead and peering through the smoke for signs of further opposition. But no troopers appeared to take their downed com-

rades' spots as he and the others raced down the last few meters of the tunnel. No one was visible. Nothing was visible.

Not even the *Carrack* cruiser.

They broke out of the tunnel into the cavern. Or rather, into the long artificial ravine which had been a cavern thirty seconds ago. The roof was gone, blown off to allow the *Carrack* to escape. The cruiser itself was still visible, in fact, its rapidly ascending hull glinting with the reflections of starlight and the turbolaser blasts of the orbital battle raging above.

Beside Page, *Vandro's* A280 spat a volley of parting fire. "Forget it," Page advised him. "He's long out of range."

*Vandro* lowered the weapon, cursing under his breath. "We were this close, Lieutenant. *This* close."

"He'll keep," Page said, forcing back his own emotions as he turned away from the cruiser. *Sarne* had escaped; but they could still do the job they'd been sent to do. Maybe. "*Ciro?*"

"Found it, sir," *Ciro* called from a control board built into a sheltered alcove near the tunnel entrance. He and *Syla* had the top of the board open and were peering inside. "He's got the shield set to come down, all right."

"For how long?" Page asked, motioning Vandro to stand guard at the tunnel entrance as he joined the other two at the board.

"Not long," Ciro had a beam drill out of his tool kit now and was poking it delicately through a maze of wires. "A couple of seconds, maybe. They've obviously got this thing carefully timed out. The trick's going to be—"

There was a sudden click. "There it goes," Syla said, peering at the indicators on the top side of the panel. "Shield's down."

"I know," Ciro grunted. "Here goes ..."

The beam drill flashed once, then twice more in quick succession. Page listened to his heart-beat as it counted off the seconds. One, two ...

Three, four five. "Should there be another click?" he asked.

"There should," Ciro acknowledged, grinning tightly up at him. "But there won't. I've got the whole circuit frozen down. With the shield in the 'off' position."

"Good job," Page said, nodding to Syla. "Okay, Tors: whistle up the admiral and tell him the front door's open."

"Yes, sir," Syla said, pulling out her comlink. "Page's Commandos have done it again."

Page looked up at the starlit sky. "Not yet we haven't," he murmured. "Not quite yet."



"I'm sorry, Lieutenant," the voice from the comm was saying as Jessa was ushered into the small office/apartment complex Lieutenant Page's people had taken over as their command post. Page was seated behind the command desk, tapping a data card gently against his knuckle. "I know how much you want to get this guy," the voice continued, "but I simply can't spare you any ships at the moment. Some hotshot Imperial Moff or admiral is stirring the pot way over in Bozhnee sector, and Ackbar's been shuffling forces like crazy to try to box him in somewhere. We've got just three days to finish up here before we're supposed to head back to the Minos Cluster, pick up Virgilio's group, and head back in."

"I understand all that, Admiral," Page said, acknowledging Jessa's presence with a glance and microscopic nod of his head. "But this isn't just about tracking down one more fugitive Moff. Sarne has gained access to a highly unconventional new technology—"

"Yes, I've heard all the rumors," the admiral cut him off gruffly. "If you ask me, the whole story sounds like standard Outer Rim nonsense. Or else deliberate Imperial misinformation."

"It's not misinformation, sir," Page said. "I've seen the weapons in operation."

"Maybe," the admiral grunted. "Maybe not. Look, if you can find a ship on your own I'll see if I can scrape together some of my people to help you crew it. But that really is the best I can do. I have to go now; keep me informed."

"Yes, sir. Page out."

Page keyed the comm off and shifted his attention to Jessa. "Lieutenant Dajus," he nodded in greeting. "All finished with your debriefing?"

"For the moment," Jessa said. "They said they might want to ask more questions later."

"Get used to it," Page advised. "You're one of the few Imperials who hasn't been killed or chased off into the hills. Makes you very valuable property."

"Oh, there are plenty of other Imperials around," Jessa told him. "They're just not admitting it."

"I don't blame them," Page said, glancing at the window and the crowded cityscape outside. "From what I've seen out there, the general populace seems eager to track them down."

"Sarne wasn't exactly beloved by his public," Jessa agreed, glancing around the office. "Actually, I'm surprised they haven't torched this place already. It was a pretty open secret that the Ubiquitorate ran some of their internal security operations out of this building."

"That's why I set up shop here," Page said dryly. "I wanted to get to any records they might have left behind before the locals got busy with their igniter sticks. You just come in for a little chat?"

"I came to ask what you were going to do about Sarne," Jessa said. "From that last conversation, it sounds like not much."

"You have some special interest in the Moff?"

"Very special." Jessa pulled up her left sleeve, wincing at the lingering pain in her arm. "He had me in for a little chat of his own."

Page's expression didn't change. "Interesting burn marks," he commented, leaning forward for a closer look.

"Fire whip practice," Jessa told him bitterly, lowering the sleeve again. "I guess I'm lucky he hadn't gotten around to turning me over to the real interrogation specialists."

"I guess you are," Page agreed soberly. "For what it's worth, Lieutenant, I want to find Sarne as much as you do. The problem is we don't have any idea where to start looking."

Jessa pursed her lips, wondering how much she should tell this man. He was a Rebel commando, after all. But at the moment he was also her best hope of getting her vengeance on Sarne.

"If I were you, I'd start with something called DarkStryder. That's where he got these strange-tech modules from."

"Is DarkStryder a person or a system?"

"No idea," Jessa said. "The whole thing was top secret—I don't think more than a handful of Sarne's top aides ever even heard the name."

He cocked an eyebrow. "Yet you did."

Jessa shrugged, trying to keep her expression casual. "Shuttle pilots overhear things. Anyway, that's the name. You want more, go dig it out of the computer."

"I'd love to," Page said sourly, "if there was anything left there to dig in. Sarne was thoughtful enough to flash-clear everything before he left."

Jessa frowned. "What do you mean, everything?"

"I mean *everything*," Page said. "All proceedings of his administration here; all personnel and operational files; all records of military and civil installations and posts. He even cleared the data from a hundred years of Kathol sector surveys—we don't even know the names of the systems out there, let alone what's in them. We're starting raw."

Jessa nodded. She should have guessed Sarne would find a way to implement his Omega order five before escaping. Scrambling his track behind him like the coward he was. "That's why you need a capital ship. You're looking at a long-term hunt here, not just a quick search-and-strike."

"You've got it," Page confirmed. "Sergeant Lofryyhn told us Sarne had him working on a Corellian Corvette that he was having secretly modified. But he was always taken there in a closed shuttle and has no idea where to find it."

Jessa clenched her teeth. She was taking an awful risk here, letting Page know how much she knew about the Imperial operation here. But she had no choice. Not if she wanted to get to Sarne again. "It's in the Sorbiss Valley. I can show you where."

"Really." If Page was surprised, he didn't show it. "You shuttle pilots really do overhear things, don't you? Well, let's go see if it's still there."

They left the building and headed out onto the crowded street, Page making travel arrangements via comlink as they walked. Pedestrian and vehicular traffic swirled all around them, defying the conventional wisdom that civilians usually cowered in their homes for days after a major battle. Clearly, the populace was welcoming the Rebel invaders with open arms.

"The shuttle will pick us up over there," Page said, pointing toward one of the quaint village squares the original settlers had constructed. He took a step in that direction—

Abruptly, a figure in a gray tunic and black hooded robe loomed in his path. "A word with you, Lieutenant Page, if I may?"

Page didn't even twitch, but suddenly there was a small blaster in his hand. "Yes?"

"I am called Loh'khar." The figure lowered his hood to reveal the glittering eyes, pale skin, and wraparound head-tails of a Twi'lek. "Loh'khar the Finder. I am an independent trader whose means of transport was unfortunately destroyed in the rather noisy proceedings of last night."

Something brushed against Jessa's leg. Startled, she looked down to see a pair of waist-high, red-scaled aliens snuffling up at her. Involuntarily, she took a step backward, bumping into one of the pedestrians passing behind her. "Sorry," she muttered, grabbing for his shoulder to steady both of them as she turned to look.

It was a short figure in a hooded gray robe, his face averted from her. Hooded robes seemed to be a popular attire out here today. He grunted something unintelligible in return as he regained his balance and scurried away. Jessa's hand, still on his shoulder, slid down the back of his robe as he moved—

"Hold it," she said, taking two quick steps and grabbing his arm. Her probing fingers confirmed it: he was wearing a shoulder-slung weapon. Spinning him toward her, she slapped open the sides of the hood.

To find the multifaceted eyes and green snout of a Rodian looking back out at her. "Well, well," she said darkly, pushing him firmly back out of the traffic flow and up against a convenient wall. "If it isn't Gorak Khzam, shoulder-slung shock rod and all. I don't think Kal'Shebbol's new owners would approve of civilians carrying weapons through the streets."

Khzam hissed a snort of contempt. {And who would tell them?} he snarled in Rodian. {You, Jessa Dajus, who is herself an Imperial officer?}

"An ex-Imperial officer," Jessa corrected, keeping the alien's arm firmly pinned down over his concealed weapon. Shock rods were strictly for short-range anti-personnel application, but within their limited range they could be nasty. "I've resigned my commission."

The Rodian hissed again. {And you would seek to ingratiate yourself with the New Republic by turning me over to them?}

"I'd consider it part of the common effort to beautify the galaxy," Jessa retorted.



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{Comenow, Dajus. There's no need to play games here. Or shall I call Lieutenant Page over here and tell him a secret?}

Slowly, Jessa let her hand fall from Khzam's arm. "I don't suppose there's any need to bother him."

{Of course not,} the alien assured her, his ears curling around again.

Jessa grimaced. To let someone like Gorak Khzam run around loose ... But there was nothing she could do. "Get out of here," she growled. "Just go."

Without another word he slipped past her and disappeared into the crowds. Jessa turned back, to find that Page had finished his conversation with the Twi'lek. "Friend of yours?" he asked, nodding the direction Khzam had gone.

"Hardly." Jessa gestured at the departing Twi'lek. "Let me guess. His ship got damaged and he wants reparations."

"More or less," Page said. "Seemed rather put out that we can't pay him anything."

"Get used to it," Jessa advised. "They'll all be coming out of the scrollwork soon."

"They've already started," Page said. "Come on; the shuttle should be waiting."



The access hatch to the deep engine access crawlway darkened, and with a grunt Lofryyhn appeared, his red-brown fur stained with grease and dirt. "Well?" Page asked.

The Wookiee rumbled the mixed news: Sarne's modifications to the Corellian Corvette's sublight drive were still incomplete, but at least the Imperials hadn't had time to sabotage anything before they left. "Could have been worse," Page said. "Okay. Better go take a look at the hyperdrive now."

There was a step behind him, and he turned as Syla Tors and a civilian in stained coveralls came into the room. "How's that add-on hangar look?" he asked them.

"It could be better," Syla said. "The hangar was designed for TIE Interceptors, but they never got around to putting in the racks. We can fit five X-wings inside but it'll be a tight fit. We can also use the docking tubes to dock nine more externally. Tofarain checked over the support equipment and says it's fully functional."

Page focused on the civilian. Pudgy and gruff, Bropher Tofarain had latched onto Syla and Lilla Dade yesterday as they toured the damaged starport, loudly demanding reparations for his wrecked starport repair facility. Lilla's new friend, the shadowy Defel Kl'aal, had threatened to shred the man's face if he didn't leave the two women alone; Lilla, always the practical sort, had suggested instead that Syla bring him here to the Sorbiss Valley and put him to work. "That true, Tofarain?" he asked.

"True enough, Lieutenant," the mechanic said. "Course, it's still got some work left to do on it. Whole ship does."

"I know," Page said. "Question is, can Lofryyhn keep the systems up and running while that work gets done."

"By himself?" Tofarain snorted. "Not a chance. Sorry, Wook', but not a chance." He lifted a finger, cocking his head to the side. "But the Wook' and me—well, now, that's another story. Besides—" he thumped his chest, pointed his finger at Page "—with me you also get an expert shuttle pilot. And a dash' fine shuttle."

Page looked at Syla, lifted his eyebrows in question. "I saw his shuttle at the starport," she confirmed. "It looked at least flyable."

"It's beautiful," Tofarain protested in a tone of wounded pride. "Got lots of mod'fications—put 'em in m'self. Flies like a dream. Hire me along, and it comes for free with the package."

"I'll take the offer under advisement," Page said dryly. The cold, hard truth, of course, was that he really didn't have much choice. The Corvette was going to need an absolute minimum of a hundred crewers, and there was no way the admiral was going to let him have that many people. If the ship was going to fly, they were going to have to recruit heavily from Kal'Shebbol's civilian population.

They weren't going to get all the X-wings and pilots Syla wanted, either. Eight, maybe, if they could catch the admiral in a good mood, and possibly a couple of those non-hyperdrive Defenders.

His comlink beeped, and he thumbed it on. "Page."

"Vandro, Lieutenant, up in the Number One turret," the other's voice came. "The turbolaser looks fine except for the power capacitors. There

are four missing, and two of the others are in rotten shape."

"That's about median for the curve with this ship," Page told him. "I'll put power capacitors on the list—all the admiral can do is say no."

"Or laugh hysterically," Vandro said wryly.

"More than likely," Page agreed. "Ciro and Adrimetrum still checking out the sickbay?"

"Last I knew. Want me to call them?"

"No, I need to talk to them in person. Go ahead and check out the other turbolaser turrets, then scrounge around a little. Maybe Sarne had some spare power capacitors stashed away somewhere."

"Right."

He found Ciro and Kaiya going over the medical facilities with a Mon Calamari named Akanseh who'd been one of the prisoners in the Moff's detention center. "How's it look?" Page asked them.

"Reasonably complete," Ciro said. "The operating facilities are a little skimpy, but Doctor Akanseh says we can make up a lot of that with his medical droids."

"If they still exist," Akanseh added, his gravely Mon Calamari voice surprisingly gentle. "Moff Sarne confiscated my entire mobile surgical suite when he placed me in detention."

"What were you charged with?" Page asked.

The Mon Calamari's huge eyes blinked uncomfortably. "Moff Sarne seldom needed anything so mundane as a charge."

"Understood," Page said. "I'd like you to start on the medical lab now, Doctor. Ciro, Adrimetrum: come with me to the bridge."

Minutes later, the trio emerged on the bridge. "Here's the situation," he said when the three of them were seated in the well-worn operational chairs on the bridge. "In roughly twenty-eight hours the task force will be leaving. Question: can this ship be ready to fly by then?"

"I don't know what the task force leaving has to do with it," Ciro grunted. "Up to now the admiral hasn't exactly been showering us with equipment and personnel."

"No, and he's not likely to start any time soon," Page said. "Actually, the timetable's really more mine. I want you out looking for Sarne before I leave Kal'Shebbol."

They got it simultaneously. "Us?" Ciro asked carefully. "As in Adrimetrum and me?"

"You got it," Page confirmed. "You as captain, Ciro; you, Adrimetrum, as first officer."

The two exchanged glances. "With all due respect, sir," Ciro said, "neither of us is exactly qualified to command a capital ship."

"Corellian Corvettes hardly qualify as capital ships," Page said, waving the objection away.

“Just think of it as a big yacht with weapons.”

Kaiya snorted. “That’ll certainly scare Sarne when we catch up with him. Can’t we wait until the New Republic can spare a real warship?”

Page looked out the forward viewport at the valley floor. “I don’t think we can afford the time,” he said quietly. “You both saw what this DarkStryder technology can do. Sarne’s got it; but I don’t think he quite has it under control yet. We can’t let him have any more of a head start than he’s already got.”

“But me as captain?” Ciro asked, clearly still stuck back there. “Adrimetrum’s had more experience—at least she ran her own resistance group for a while.”

“But you’re the one who kept moving in that mind-numbing field Sarne threw at us,” Page reminded him. “Not fast—you were just crawling—but you *were* moving. That tells me you’ve got a better than average resistance to these things; and in a tight situation, that might make the difference. Regardless, my decision stands.”

“Yes, sir,” Ciro said. “What about a crew?”

“I’ve started a list,” Page said, handing over his datapad. “I’m afraid you’re going to have to make do with a lot of civilians.”

“Not to mention former Imperials,” Kaiya said, reading over Ciro’s shoulder. “Lieutenant Jessa Dajus has already admitted she was one of Sarne’s pilots.”

“And Doctor Akanseh has admitted he did some sort of unspecified medical work for the Moff,” Page nodded. “But don’t forget both of them were in his detention center.”

“What about that Defel, Kl’aal?” Ciro asked. “He wasn’t a prisoner.”

“No, but he’d been with Dade for two days before we got here,” Page reminded them. “He didn’t betray her, and he didn’t betray us. Bear in mind that working for a man like Sarne doesn’t necessarily mean you wanted to do it. My guess is that all his genuinely loyal people took off when he did.”

“Let’s hope so,” Ciro said, forehead wrinkled as he studied the list. “Who’s this Gorak Khzam you’ve got slated for ship-board security?”

“He’s a Rodian trader who claims to have been flying around Kathol sector for the past ten years,” Page told him. “There are some large and suspiciously convenient gaps in his employment history; but given our total lack of information about the systems you’ll be running into, I think he’s a gamble worth taking.”

“So Khzam’s here to tell us where we’re going,” Kaiya said, “at which point Dajus will tell us what Sarne might be doing there?”

“That’s more or less it,” Page said.

forget those hunches Dajus gets.”

“That, or else she knows more than a shuttle pilot should about Sarne’s activities and is using the hunches as a convenient explanation,” Kaiya said.

“That’s certainly possible,” Page agreed. “One other thing: it appears that Dajus and Khzam know each other. Not necessarily on a friendly basis.”

“This just gets better and better,” Ciro said dryly. “I see you’ve got Kaiya’s Wookiee friend on the list, too.”

“And that civilian mechanic Brophar Tofarain,” Page nodded. “They’ll be the core of your main-tenance group.”

“It’s a start, anyway,” Ciro said, handing back the datapad. “We’d better get the word out back in the city that we’re taking applications.”

“I’ve already got it started,” Page said. “I’ve also got the admiral’s people sifting through crew lists seeing who they can make do without.”

Kaiya grimaced. “That should certainly get us the top of the crop.”

“I know,” Page conceded. “You’ll just have to do the best you can with what you get.”

Ciro cleared his throat. “I don’t suppose he’ll be able to spare us any X-wings.”

“I’ve already asked him,” Page said. “He says that if he can, your brother will definitely be at the top of the list.”

Ciro smiled lopsidedly. “Thank you, sir.”

“No problem.” Page stood up. “I’m heading back to the city to supervise the crewer applications. You two had better get back to work. It’s going to be a busy twenty-eight hours.”



Like a fever dream, full of agony and confusion and frustration, the twenty-eight hours passed.

And it was time to go.

Kaiya stood on the bridge, standing well back out of the way, watching as the hastily thrown-together crew worked furiously to bring each of the newly christened *FarStar*’s reluctant systems on-line. The bridge buzzed with conversation, punctuated by orders and considerably more under-the-breath cursing than she was used to hearing aboard a New Republic ship.

Still, in some ways it was almost like going home again. Her first challenge to the Empire had been on Siluria III, with an attack force that had consisted entirely of her relatives and friends. Here, at least, the civilians aboard presumably had some proficiency and experience in what



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they were supposed to be doing.

"Adrimetrum?" a tall, pallid man called from the *FarStar*'s ops station. Lieutenant Darryn Thyte, if Kaiya had gotten the name right: a former X-wing pilot who had abandoned the cockpit after losing an arm at Vaenrood. "I've got a hovertruck coming up the road toward us. We expecting someone?"

"Not that I know of," Kaiya said, stepping over behind him and looking at the display. It was a civilian-type hovertruck, fairly ancient, its vent ports covered by unmarked side panels. Reaching over Thyte's shoulder, she keyed for the hangar bay. "Ciro, it's Adrimetrum. We've got company."

"I know," *Ciro*'s voice came back. "Lieutenant Gorjaye spotted him a minute ago while running a balance check on her X-wing."

"Why didn't she tell me?" Thyte demanded before Kaiya could respond. "Blast it all, Captain, I'm ops officer here—and that means comm, nav, and sensors. If Gorjaye thinks she can do my job, she can just come up here and try it."

"No one thinks they can do your job, Lieutenant," *Ciro* soothed him. Not even off the planet yet, and already he sounded tired of dealing with

Thyte's abrasive attitude. "Adrimetrum, meet me at the portside hatchway and we'll see who it is."

The hovertruck had pulled to a stop by the time Kaiya reached the hatchway. *Ciro* was already waiting; beside him, lurking almost invisibly in the entryway shadows, was the Defel Kl'aal. Overhead through the trees, Kaiya caught a glimpse of Lieutenant Ranna Gorjaye's X-wing, flying high cover for them. The hovertruck door opened—

"Ah—Captain *Ciro*, I presume?" the Twi'lek called cheerfully as he climbed out onto the dusty ground. "My name is Loh'khar. I'm called the Finder."

"Yes, Lieutenant Page mentioned you," *Ciro* said, not even trying to hide his annoyance. "I don't mean to be rude, Loh'khar, but we're running a tight schedule here. Unless you've acquired some new skills in the past twenty hours, we still can't use you aboard the *FarStar*."

"Ah—but perhaps you can," Loh'khar said, smiling broadly as he stepped to the side of the hovertruck. "Or at least, perhaps you can use these." With a flourish he unfastened the side panel and let it flip open.

Kaiya caught her breath. "Are those—?"

"Fifty brand-new turbolaser power capacitors," the Twi'lek confirmed, still smiling. "Never even out of their cartons."

"Where on Kal'Shebbol did you find those?"  
Ciro demanded. "We turned the whole planet inside out looking for them."

Loh'khar waved a long-nailed hand. "It's a talent, Captain," he said airily. "A skill, as it were. Not easily acquired ... but perhaps useful nonetheless?"

Ciro sighed and shook his head. "No perhaps about it," he conceded. "I guess we can squeeze in one more. Come on aboard. I'll get some people down here to carry those in."

"No need." The Twi'lek whistled; and three short, red-scaled aliens bounded from the cab. Twittering like excited children, they each

grabbed an energy capacitor and scampered up the ramp. Setting their loads down against the wall, they headed back to the hovertruck.

Ciro looked at Kaiya. "I guess we can squeeze in *four* more," he corrected himself. "I hope you're ready for all this."

Kaiya looked out at the Twi'lek and the three small aliens. No, not really, she had to admit. There was too much happening too quickly with this whole mission. Civilians, New Republic regulars, former Imperials—the whole ship was a volatile mix right from the start. Throw in some personal animosities and dark secrets on top of it, and you had a civil war just begging to happen.

But it had to be done. And the *FarStar* had to do it. Because waiting out there at the far end of this voyage was Moff Sarne.

And DarkStryder.

"Sure I'm ready," she told Giro. "Let's do it."

# AND SO IT' BEGINS ...