

STAR WARS

Shooting Stars

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The whole galaxy is about to learn about the young hero, Luke Skywalker. But a champion rests on the shoulders of other unsung warriors.

Biggs Darklighter and Tank Boma share Luke's destiny, their lives intertwined with his. The fates of all three have come together at the planet Yavin, for an encounter with the Empire's most fearsome weapon.

And if they survive the assault on the Death Star, there is another challenge to face...thee lurking evil of the ancient Sith...

The soft rose and gold light of the giant planet Yavin touched the melancholy face of Luke Skywalker. The young Rebel's eyes restlessly searched the four broad stone stairways that gave access to the flat summit of the Massassi temple on which he stood. He had been there since the days-end rain showers had soaked the lush jungle, leaving behind the sound of leaves dripping all around while alien wildlife emerged into the night. Deep within the towering trees, Luke could hear grunts, sighs, squeals and high-pitched jabbering. Occasionally, there was a brief shriek as some hidden prey met an unseen end.

Luke paced the stone platform, his feet avoiding the cracks and holes that were scattered across the partly ruined surface. Across the lazy jungle river, he could see the imposing bulk of the Great Temple that concealed the Rebel base. Also visible was another palace-like ruin, currently infested with Woolamanders, whose chattering carried from across the river in the misty air. Luke sat down on what might have been a low stone altar, reflecting for a moment on the vanished race that had left behind such enigmatic monuments. The temple on which he was perched was the smallest of the three. The main decorative motif on its faded, crumbling stones was the blueleaf cluster, a carving of the cobalt-blue plants that formed a dense ground cover all around the temple. A spicy fragrance rose up from the blueleaf, making Luke feel stifled. He gazed at the over-arching sky, now free of clouds and glittering with stars. The translucent, softly glowing gas giant Yavin filled half the sky. Somewhere up there, in an orbiting graveyard, were the remains of countless Imperials, as well as those of Luke's closest friend. "Biggs..." Luke breathed.

The sound of hesitant feet on broken stones made Luke turn to the farthest set of stairs. A younger man stepped up onto the platform and

slowly walked over to Luke. Luke could see the emotions chasing each other across the other's face--shame, grief, and the remains of a recently deceased hatred. The other had a short, thin frame, on which hung a spare flight suit, a size too large. His eyes and unkempt hair were both very dark. His skin was tough like Luke's, having been baked in the same desert oven. He sat down on the platform cross-legged, near enough to talk, but no closer.

"Tank," said Luke, trying to sound welcoming, "I was afraid you wouldn't come." There was a long silence between them. Tank met Luke's eyes, finally, and spoke with a little catch in his voice.

"I was too ashamed. I needed to be alone, to think it over...I didn't tell you before, but I'm sorry for what I did to you. I wanted you to know that. That I was sorry."

"Tank," said Luke, putting up a hand, "I didn't ask you here so you could apologize, or so I could apologize. I'm not angry any more. The things I've been through lately...It kind of puts kidnapping into perspective." Tank looked chagrined, but didn't reply. "I asked you here because we've both lost someone. I've lost a lot of people. My Aunt and Uncle, murdered by stormtroopers, Ben Kenobi, killed by Vader...and Biggs. You might not feel the loss of the loss of the others, but we both share the loss of Biggs. He meant a lot to both of us. I've always thought it helps to share the loss with somebody. I know it helps me. And despite our problems, I hoped we could remember Biggs together, the way he was. So he can never really be gone."

Luke gave Tank a little time to digest this. He hadn't been sure what the younger man would do. Turn around and leave, maybe. But now, watching him, Luke could see a maturity in Tank's face that hadn't been there when he had known him on Tatooine. It was with a sense of gratification that he heard Tank say, "Yeah--I want to remember him. I really need to remember him." Tank looked steadily at Luke.

Luke decided to begin, to give Tank time to get settled, and because it was his idea. There were a lot of stories to tell, and the memorial in the sky Luke had planned would be visible before the night's end.

"I met Biggs in Anchorhead when I was fourteen," said Luke, settling back. Images of Tatooine came easily to him, seeming more real than this dark jungle with its wet stones. "I was in Anchorhead with Uncle Owen, tagging along while he did some business or other for the farm. He thought I might pick something up, learn to be more like a farmer. He really wanted that...I guess I disappointed him. Anyway, I didn't want to hang around while he discussed selling crops, so I whined and complained until he got mad and told me to get out of his sight and let him work..."

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Luke wasted no time in scampering away from his gruff Uncle, and dashed out into the sun. Anchorhead lay at the center of a farming community of some seven hundred people. It was just a cluster of buildings--a trade center, a single restaurant, a transport station to Mos Eisley (Luke had never been there), and little else. Luke set his sights on a grimy mechanic's lot, full of spare parts and half-assembled vaporators. It wasn't the farming equipment that made him catch his breath and run forward as fast as he could, desert shawl flapping around his arms--it was what sat in the burning sun at the edge of the lot. A Skyhopper.

He reached it, panting, and immediately began to study its every detail. It was just like the model he had built, but so much more exciting. He caressed the Incom T-16 identification plate and gazed up at the high central fin. Luke knew that this airspeeder could attain a speed of well over a thousand kilometers per hour and still nearly turn right angles. He tried to get high enough to see into the triangular window, to check out the tactical holodisplay panels. Just peering over the edge, Luke was startled to see another face looking into the window on the other side of the Skyhopper. He ducked down and backed away, as an older boy with thick black hair and a long straight nose came around the front of the craft and walked confidently towards him. He was wearing clothes of a finer cut than Luke's, and looked to be about seventeen. He smiled beneath the scruffy beginning of a mustache and laughed good-naturedly.

"Did I scare you? Sorry. My name's Biggs, Biggs Darklighter. What's yours?"

"Luke Skywalker," said Luke guardedly. "So...you like Skyhoppers too, huh?"

"Yeah! My father's going to buy me a new one this season, and I wanted to check this old one out, see what kind of modifications it has."

"Your Dad is buying you a Skyhopper?" asked Luke, trying to keep the jealousy and disbelief out of his voice.

"Oh, yeah. My Dad's Huff Darklighter, the food magnate. He can certainly afford it. He owns dozens of farms. So, you're getting one, too?"

"Actually, my old one just got too beat up, tearing around Beggar's Canyon," Luke lied. "It's cheaper just to get another used one than to fix mine. I was just checking this one out for damage."

"Oh," said Biggs, with a hint of skepticism. "So, you're one of those gully jumping hotshots I heard about."

"What else is a Skyhopper for?" Luke asked, once again going over to caress the wings.

"Well, my Dad's getting it for me so I can get used to piloting--he thinks I'd be good Academy material in a few years."

"What, you're going to the Academy?" Luke exclaimed, this time unable to hide his envy.

"I don't know. It's what the old man wants. His son in uniform. Out of his hair is more like it. Way out of his hair."

"I'd give anything to leave like that, someday," Luke said quietly. "My Uncle will never let me go, though. Whenever I talk about it, it always puts him in a bad mood."

"Well at least he wants you around, right?" Biggs gestured towards the trade center. "My father's in there, making deals. I just strolled away from his side, and he never even noticed." Biggs took a good look at Luke, sizing him up frankly, then grinned suddenly. "Hey, what am I telling you this for? Listen, when you get your new 'Hopper, why don't we go flying together? I could use some pointers on getting started from a real Hotshot."

Luke was taken by surprise. This near-adult wanted to go flying with him? Yet, he was finding Biggs very hard to resist. Something in the older boy strongly attracted him. Forgetting for the moment that he didn't really have a Skyhopper, Luke smiled eagerly. "I'd like that. I'd like that a lot. Do you think-" Suddenly, Luke was interrupted by the bellow of Owen Lars, who had emerged from the trade center and was standing impatiently by the family landspeeder.

"Luke! Get over here! We haven't got all day for wasting time. There's work to be done back home."

Embarrassed, Luke gave Biggs a look of apology. "I have to go, but I do want to see you again."

"That Uncle of yours doesn't seem like the most easy going person," observed Biggs, as Luke turned to leave.

"No," said Luke simply, "he's not." Luke hurried over to the big landspeeder and climbed into the passenger seat, closing the door. "Sorry, Uncle Owen," he said dutifully. Then, the image of Biggs' confident grin still fresh in his mind, Luke spoke up over the whine of the engine. "Uncle Owen, there's something I want to talk to you about buying..."

* * *

Luke sat back against the Temple stonework, smiling at the memory of simpler times. He had been so very eager to get out into the Galaxy. He and Biggs had always imagined themselves as heroes of the spaceways, defeating pirates and winning the affections of their beautiful captives.

They had both planned to go to the Academy, serve their time, then get a ship together. What they would do next, they didn't know, but it was destined to be something daring.

Tank spoke up from where he was still sitting at a distance. "Biggs was right, you know. You were lucky you had your Uncle around. At least he was there for you. After my parents died, I had nobody, until Biggs came along."

"I know," Luke replied, "your friends always find things about you to envy, that you wouldn't wish on your worst enemy. The way Biggs' father always gave him everything but real love...I can kind of see how it looked to him, my Uncle watching over me all the time. It was a tough love, but I guess it was love. Now that he's gone, I can even find a few things about him that I'll miss."

"So, did he buy it for you then?" asked Tank. "The Skyhopper?"

"At first," Luke replied, "he said no, absolutely not. I felt more fed up with him then than I'd ever been. That night, I think Aunt Beru talked it over with him. I guess she told him that having the Skyhopper would keep me happy, content to stay on the farm. So he decided to buy it for me if I did extra work to help pay for it. I had to set up some more vaporators close to the Jundland Wastes, and use the Skyhopper to check on them. I ended up getting the same Skyhopper I saw in Anchorhead. I took to it right away, and when Biggs and I got together, look out! Biggs was number one around Anchorhead, and Fixer didn't call me Wormie when Biggs was around. Biggs always seemed to make things happen. He and I really stuck together...he was like an older brother to me. But that didn't mean I held back from trying to beat the pants off him when we were flying."

Tank seemed to be interested so far, so Luke decided to tell him about a particularly cherished memory. "In fact, there was one time, about nine months after we met, we were flying over the Wastes, when we had a little adventure I'll never forget..."

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Biggs and Luke shot out of the narrow opening in the rock wall with Biggs just slightly in the lead, Luke pounding his control panel in frustration. He was still fine-tuning his older, second-hand engine, while Biggs' had been brand new. That gave the older Darklighter the edge in the straightway, though Luke was more daring in the twists and turns. "Come on, come on, give me a little more," Luke pleaded, but it was no use. Biggs managed to cut him off and get ahead of him. Luke veered sharply down to avoid Biggs' engine exhaust, diving directly under Biggs' Skyhopper from behind. Biggs lost sight of Luke for a moment, then he felt the smallest scraping impact on the underside of his airspeeder. Thinking he had accidentally touched the canyon floor, Biggs pulled back on his stick, gaining altitude. An instant later, he was

stunned to see Luke swoop out from underneath him, skimming less than a meter above the blurred rocks of Beggar's Canyon. Luke hurtled past and looped once around the Stone Needle, ending the race.

"Nice move, Hotshot," came Biggs' grudging congratulations over the comm. "But you're paying for my new paint job, farmboy."

"When was the last time you ever cared about your paint job?" Luke retorted, and Biggs laughed. Both their vehicles had seen so many scrapes, it was no longer obvious which had been recently purchased new.

Luke looked at his chrono in dismay. "Oh no, look how late it is. Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru are going to kill me. I said we'd both be there for supper by nightfall." Tatooine's twin sunset had begun.

"Let's burn it for home, then, Hotshot," said Biggs, coming about. The two Skyhoppers raced the sunset out of the Wastes and over the desert.

"Hey, Luke," Biggs called suddenly, "what's that over there, where the Wastes come to an end?"

Luke squinted in that direction, and spotted a group of distant vehicle shapes in the diminishing light. A multitude of tiny lights were visible among them. "I think it's a big Jawa camp," said Luke. "I've heard of them, but I've never seen one..."

"Neither have I," said Biggs. "Think maybe...?"

"Well..." Luke hesitated, glancing at the time.

"Live for the day!" said Biggs, and veered off towards the distant camp.

"Hey!" protested Luke, but his hands were already steering after his friend. He was curious, and they were already late. What difference could a few more minutes make?

Luke was used to seeing just one Sandcrawler at a time. As he neared the camp, he was a little awed to see eight of the enormous mining vehicles lined up on the desert plain beneath a high cliff face. The sunset picked out hundreds of Jawas in its orange glow, gathered around fires and artificial light sources. Luke and Biggs hovered quietly on repulsors near the edge of the camp, but the Jawas below seemed to care little for their presence. Many Jawas were engaged in animated trading of scavenged machinery, while others seemed to be simply enjoying the sunset. The ore loading ramps of the Sandcrawlers were wide open, revealing cavernous interiors, with Jawas scurrying in and out.

Luke knew that such gatherings were rare, for the slow wanderings of the Sandcrawlers ranged far and wide across the temperate zone. Perhaps this was a gathering of Jawa clans. As the suns dipped lower, many of the Jawas began to congregate in the center of the camp, until it became apparent that this was to be some sort of ritual gathering. Luke

was glad they weren't down there, because he doubted he could have braved the smell of that many Jawas in one place. A rather tall Jawa climbed on top of a heap of machinery and began to wave its short arms dramatically to the crowd. Luke couldn't tell if it was a religious ceremony or a seminar on how best to swindle the moisture farmers. Maybe it was both.

Luke had just decided to tell Biggs, Look, this is interesting, but we really ought to get home, when he spotted something that froze the words in his mouth. Moving along a winding crevasse that opened out near the camp was a long column of Sandpeople on Banthas. The fierce raiders were visible from the air, but the Jawas out on the plain wouldn't be able to spot them. The Sandpeople came on in single file, so any lookout might see only a few of them, but there didn't even seem to be a sentry. The Jawas were oblivious, and focused on the ceremony in the center of the camp.

"Biggs," Luke snapped, "We've got Sandpeople, coming towards the camp--a lot of them, there, in that canyon. We've gotta do something! Those Jawas are defenseless--they need time to get to the Sandcrawlers." Luke knew that if the Tusken Raiders did too much damage to the Jawas, the survivors might decide to change their trade routes, and the local moisture farmers could suffer.

"I'm right with you, Luke," Biggs said. "Those Banthas look kind of sleepy from up here. Let's go down and wake them up!" Biggs' Skyhopper roared off towards the canyon. Luke followed, his tactical display helping to target the column of Sandpeople snaking between the rock walls. The raiders spotted the oncoming ships and sent a volley of blaster bolts skyward from their crude rifles. A few shots splashed across Luke's windows, momentarily dazzling him and sending a jolt through his Skyhopper. Then he was above the Banthas, stun cannons firing. Long practice shooting Womp Rats had honed his marksmanship, and he easily landed several shots on the broad backs of the beasts. The huge hairy creatures weren't stunned, but they were terrified. The twin roars of Luke and Biggs' engines sent them into a heaving frenzy, clogging the canyon with chaos. On the plain beyond, the Jawas had taken full notice of the threat and were scattering in all directions, scampering into the safety of the Sandcrawlers.

Luke and Biggs soared up and away from the enraged raiders and put the setting suns at their backs. Luke was whooping with excitement. "Biggs! We really showed 'em, didn't we!"

"We sure did, Hotshot, we sure did."

"We're a couple of shooting stars, Biggs, and we'll never be stopped!" said Luke happily.

"You said it, Luke."

* * *

Tank watched Luke tell the story with an unexpected feeling of warming to the young hero. It was very strange to feel that after hating him so recently. It was finally sinking in that Luke was really the good person he claimed to be, that he had not betrayed Biggs to his death, that he had loved Biggs for many years, too. Perhaps it was the tale of preventing the Tusken Raider attack. Tank's parents had been killed by the Sandpeople, and he still loved to hear about any suffering they might undergo. Tank slowly got up and drifted a little closer to Luke, who had fallen silent. An expression of profound sadness had taken over Luke's features.

"It's...it's only really just now hitting me," Luke said, "He's really gone. Just gone, forever." He looked at Tank, clutching his padded orange jacket close around him. "That was what I thought of when he died, that we were a couple of shooting stars, and that we couldn't be stopped. I used to say that, years ago, playing star pilots behind the buildings of Anchorhead. Now...I'll never say it to him again."

"I know how you feel," said Tank, sitting down, this time close by. "He was everything to me, too. He was my father, really, because I didn't have one. You know, almost from the moment we met, he was trying to protect me. He was good at it, too..."

* * *

Biggs strolled lazily through the cramped streets of Mos Eisley, taking in the alien sights and sounds of the decadent starport city. Under the baking sun, Humans, Rodians, Jawas, Gammorreans, Duros, and many more rubbed shoulders and other appendages. Or, in the case of the Jawas, avoided rubbing altogether. He was on business for Huff. Lately, Biggs called his father by his first name more and more. The elder Darklighter saw it as a mark of respect and adult camaraderie, but it was really just that Biggs had trouble thinking of the man as 'Dad'. Huff had sent him into the spaceport to look through Market Place for any struggling single farmers who might want to work for his growing business. Biggs was in no hurry, having the carefree attitude of his eighteen years. Before going to Market Place, he decided to stop at the rough and tumble cantina, in hopes of hearing some stories from smugglers and other spacers. But as he entered the heart of the central sector, an odd sight distracted him.

Across the street from the entrance to the cantina was a large pile of wreckage, the remains of an old colony ship that crashed there long ago, mixed with a free-for-all clutter of cast-off parts of all kinds. Perched precariously atop a gutted engine cylinder was a wild-haired, sun-browned robed man. He was gesturing widely, and seemed to be preaching. Biggs didn't exactly think of Mos Eisley as a haven for the religious, and he couldn't resist a closer look. He couldn't picture the scum of the city as being interested in religious messages, and so it was no surprise to see that the preacher's audience consisted of exactly one

person, a slight figure entirely cloaked in the same sort of woven hair robe as the preacher. The listener was bowed, sitting cross-legged at the feet of the odd holy man, swaying from side to side. The passing crowds were completely ignoring the pair.

Biggs threaded through the moving throng, giving lots of space to a huge brown Wookiee walking past, and found himself next to the preacher.

"Welcome, my son!" said the holy man without looking at Biggs. The preacher continued his litany. "The way of the Bantha is to live in peace with other creatures. It gives of itself for food and transportation. It does not ask us for anything in return. So, too, should we treat our fellow sentients. Look--all around at this evil place! All you can see is conflict between beings. Smugglers against the authorities, buyers against sellers, thieves against their victims, bounty hunters against their quarries. And what does it all bring them? Death and Misery! The humble Bantha can show us the way to better things. The Bantha is present on so many worlds in order to show us that way. We must follow in their broad footsteps, join one another in the great circle of their horns. Build a better future on their strong, giving backs..."

As the preacher went on, the other listener stood up so suddenly that he bumped full into Biggs. The two of them stumbled, and the cloaked figure steadied Biggs, telling him, "My apologies, Brother, may you walk in the way of the Bantha." With that, he stepped into the milling crowd and was gone.

Biggs stared after him, while his hand made an automatic check of his pockets. In an instant, he realized his credit voucher was missing.

He spun on the preacher. "Did you see that? He robbed me! Is he from your Monastery?"

The preacher spread his hands in confusion. "I've never seen him before in my life, my son."

Biggs choked off a yelling reply, and elbowed his way into the crowd. He knew he had little hope of actually catching the thief, but his determination to try was fierce. The great variety of life forms around him was to his advantage. He wouldn't have to waste his time chasing after a Wookiee, or a Squib, or anything with more than two arms. Suddenly, he spotted a robed figure across a slow-moving landspeeder, headed away from him. With a yell, he was after it. ducking around a Barabel and two Corellians, and vaulting over the hood of the speeder, to the anger of the Humans inside it. The cloaked form was hurrying towards docking bay 94, past Spaceport Speeders, and Biggs pelted after it. As he caught up, he demanded, "All right, give me back my money, or I'll beat it out of you, you hear?"

The figure turned to face him, and Biggs was suddenly staring into a pair of small round goggles above a huge, leathery snout. The creature squeaked at him in outrage, or maybe fear--it was hard to tell. But

Biggs immediately knew he had blown it--this one clearly couldn't speak Basic.

"Sorry--my mistake," he said, running away from the bizarre alien. Now what? The robe had seemed like a good lead, but what if the thief had the smarts to take off the robe and throw it away? Then, he could be any of the shorter humanoids in the crowd. Or, he could have ducked inside a building. It was rapidly beginning to seem hopeless.

Then, a commotion arose at Spaceport Speeders. The owner, an agitated Arcona, was yelling at someone in his lot. "You! Get out of that speeder! You don't look like you have any money--none of you Bantha preachers do! Now go on! You'll chase away my customers, smelling like a Bantha, stinking up my merchandise!" The Arcona was chasing a small robed humanoid out of an XP-38 speeder, and with a start, Biggs realized it was his thief. He'd been hiding in there! Biggs backed into the shadows of a building, hoping the thief wouldn't see him. The robed and hooded being ran away from the angry salesman, then, taking a few looks around him, set off down the street at a jog. Biggs decided he hadn't been spotted, and began to follow at a distance.

The thief headed north, brazenly passing the Mos Eisley Police Station. Biggs followed right past the station. He wanted to take this thief by himself, by surprise, and on his own terms. On they went, past docking bays and one-or-two story houses, the thief moving briskly along, checking around himself occasionally, Biggs following, trying to avoid being seen. Eventually, they reached a more run-down section, and the thief went into an old building. Biggs waited for a minute, then went in after him. The doorway lacked a device for repelling sand, and was partly clogged. Inside was an abandoned home, stripped of furniture and belongings. The thief was nowhere to be seen.

Biggs took out his blaster, and checked each of the rooms, finding nothing. He was baffled, until he spotted tracks on the sandy floor leading to an overturned table. Behind the table was a square shaft, leading down, a ladder mounted in it. Biggs hesitated, listening. Then he climbed down into the silent, dimly lit hole, unwilling to give up. At the bottom was an old mining tunnel, from the days when Mos Eisley had been the headquarters of Republic miners. The tunnel was cool, carved out of the evaporated sea bed, and shored up with durasteel supports. Biggs again looked for tracks, and thought he saw some heading off to his left. The tunnel floor was a filthy jumble of stones and garbage, and it was hard to tell for sure. Trusting his instincts, Biggs followed the left-hand direction, touching the wall as he moved into darkness, his blaster in his other hand. Ahead, he saw a faint glow, and he slowed down and moved as quietly as he could.

The tunnel opened into a large room, the junction of several more tunnels. A portable lamp supplied a little light, showing a littered floor, a small table and chair, and a mattress in one corner. His thief was in the middle of the room, handling the credit voucher Biggs had brought to show prospective workers that he meant business and could afford to offer them jobs. Biggs stepped into the room, blaster pointed squarely at his thief. "I see you found my credit voucher. I'll thank

you to return it to me, now," he said firmly. The thief jumped like a scared Womp Rat, and started towards one of the tunnel exits. Biggs placed a blaster bolt a few feet in front of him, lighting up the dim chamber with a sudden glare. "Sorry--you're not going anywhere. Now put the voucher down and take off that hood so I can see you." The thief complied, moving carefully, and Biggs was amazed to see beneath the hood the face of a young Human boy.

The boy looked steadily at Biggs. He had a shock of black hair and dark eyes. His coloration was that of a Tatooine native. He looked to be about twelve years old. "You don't have to keep that pointed at me," he said with defiance, "I'm not going anywhere. You can take your money back. I needed it for food, and you looked rich, like you could afford to lose it."

Biggs was dismayed at the thief's age and living conditions. As he picked up his money, all he could think was that when he was this boy's age, he had been living with his mother and father in a well-kept home with good food. He looked around, noting the dirty old mattress, the chill of the place, and the darkness of the tunnels. Small mechanical items were piled on the table, probably all stolen. A vibroknife was among them, but the boy wasn't making a move for it.

"You live here?" asked Biggs. It was a stupid question.

"I do, unless you kill me," the boy replied sarcastically.

Biggs looked at the blaster in his hand, and finally lowered it. The two of them stared at each other, Biggs trying to think of something to say, the boy just hoping Biggs would leave him alone. Biggs' mind was racing as he adjusted to the situation. He had been expecting a hardened thug, who might put up a fight. Someone he might have had to shoot. It had appealed to his desire for adventure, he realized; he hadn't even thought of the danger. And now, he was facing this boy. Biggs was the kind of person who acted quickly. He was also basically a good person. He almost surprised himself with the speed of his realization that he had to do something for this boy. He couldn't just walk away.

"Listen, kid," he began, thinking as he spoke. "You're a thief, right? But you're just a kid. You can't live like this."

"I'm doing okay," said the boy defiantly. "I manage on my own." He evidently viewed the accommodations differently than Biggs did.

"No, kid, this is no life. Don't you want anything better than this? Don't you have parents? Do they know you're here?" Biggs protested.

"Look, rich man, I don't know why you're talking to me. You got your money. Why don't you just leave? And you want to know? I don't have any parents--they're dead. They were like that crazy preacher up there, and the Sandpeople killed them. I've been here in Mos Eisley for years, on my own. I can take care of myself just fine."

Biggs cut in, "I was just concerned, that's all. I mean, you're just a kid. Why don't you come with me? You don't have to stay down here. If you come with me, I can get you a place to stay that's a hell of a lot better than this."

"What--you think just 'cause I'm a kid, I'm stupid? I go with you, you turn me in to the police. The only thing keeping me from leaving by those tunnels is that blaster. So you either use it, or I'm out of here."

"Oh, yeah? You think you're so smart? Well, let me tell you something you don't know, kid. You think you can be a freelance thief around here? You may have escaped any one's notice up until now, but there's more to worry about than the police. Jabba the Hutt runs Mos Eisley. I don't think he wants criminals running around that don't work for him. Sooner or later, his goons will catch up to you, and that'll be that. You come with me, you've got a chance. Who else is going to give you that? Maybe I'm crazy, but I'm not the police. I just want to help you out, that's all. Okay, I'm putting the blaster in my holster. It's your choice, kid. What do you say?"

Biggs waited. The boy looked at the dark tunnel, and at Biggs. Then, his streetwise exterior seemed to crumble. The twelve year old boy beneath said, "My name's Tank, not kid, and yeah--I'll come with you. Anything's going to be better than this."

What am I getting myself into, thought Biggs. And what was he going to tell his father? Huff, I want you to meet Tank. He's a thief I brought home. What's for dinner?

Biggs remembered the credit voucher and his reason for coming into the city. "Listen, kid--Tank--I think I may have some honest work for you, too, if you're interested..."

* * *

Luke caught himself staring open-mouthed at Tank, and looked away. "That's how you met," he said neutrally.

"That's how it was," said Tank, also looking away. "'Course, that was a long time ago. I've...come a long way since then."

"Well," said Luke, hesitantly, "It does explain what was going on the first time we met..."

"No," protested Tank, with unexpected intensity. "That's not what was going on. You think you know, but you don't. You think I was just a thief, but you were as wrong about me as I was...about you."

Luke looked down. "Well, I'm sorry about all that. It was a long time ago, and you have to admit, you didn't get things off to the best

start. I mean...all I meant was, I understand, it was your old habits, hard to break--"

"Luke, you just don't get it. You think I stole because I wanted to. I would think you, of all people, would understand. Didn't your own parents die, too? Imagine if you didn't have your Aunt and Uncle--if you had nobody. We're not that different. I think you'd steal, too, if you had to."

"I said I was sorry," Luke insisted. "I guess, what's hard for me to understand, is how you couldn't find something else to do. There's always work to do, if you look hard enough. I couldn't get away from working. You did get a job, with Huff Darklighter. Before I met you. Even if you didn't have a choice in Mos Eisley--"

"I didn't."

"--then why did you have to steal from me?"

* * *

Luke completed what repairs he could to the aging vaporator and sighed with resignation. What he wouldn't give to have new equipment instead of this junk-heap surplus. It was as if Uncle Owen favored vaporators he knew the Jawas would turn their noses up at.

The Treadwell droid nearby made an electronic noise of sympathy, perhaps trying to avoid the abuse Luke usually heaped upon it in his frustration. Turning towards it with a frown, Luke said, "I don't want to hear anything from you, either. You break down more often than this vaporator."

An approaching sound, recognizable as a Skyhopper, distracted him, lifting his spirits. It must be Biggs! Sure enough, when the craft had settled on its repulsors, the irrepressible Biggs Darklighter climbed down the short ladder. But someone else was exiting the passenger side. It was a boy, younger than Luke, dressed similarly in a floppy hat, glare goggles, and a shawl. Biggs and the stranger walked over to the rise where Luke, Treadwell, an old landspeeder, and the tall vaporator were the only objects breaking the sandy monotony.

"Hey, Luke!" called Biggs. "There's someone I want you to meet." Now Luke could see the boy in detail, and his first impression was that he didn't want to be here. There was a furtive quality to the way he stood behind Biggs and avoided Luke's eyes. Biggs said, "Luke, this is Tank Boma. Tank, Luke Skywalker. Tank is working for Huff, helping with the underground gardens in Bestine. He's from Mos Eisley. I, uh, found him living on the streets last time I was there. I saw he just needed a good environment, you know?" Biggs watched Tank wander off a bit, then looked apologetically at Luke. "He's not really used to people. He doesn't mean to be rude."

"Yeah, I guess not...Biggs, it's good to see you. What brings you out this way?" asked Luke.

"Actually," said Biggs, "it was so I could introduce you to Tank. He's just two years younger than you, but he's five years younger than me. I sort of thought you two might hit it off, being closer in age. He could work with you, even learn to fix vaporators. Huff would continue to pay him, and pay you for your time. Then Tank would be more useful, and if you did become friends..." Biggs smiled his winning smile.

"Well, I don't know," said Luke. "It would be good to have some extra money, and it does get kind of lonely out here. I'd have to ask my Uncle, I guess." Luke peered at Biggs. "Wait a minute. What's really going on here? Are you trying to get him off your hands, or something?"

Biggs' eyes revealed the truth. "Okay, Hotshot, you got me. My father did suggest that deal, but..." He made sure Tank was out of earshot, and lowered his voice. "Tank was a little more than I bargained for. He seems to have taken me as a kind of father figure. And I'm only eighteen. I don't mind it altogether, but I need a break sometimes. So I suggested this to Tank. He wasn't happy. I see him getting too attached to me...his world shouldn't be that narrow. What do you say?"

Luke was thinking, when he noticed that Tank had been messing with the droid patch-in unit near the vaporator. "Hey, be careful with that stuff if you don't know what you're doing." He moved in on the boy, who backed off quickly. Luke gave the unit a once-over, and immediately had a sinking feeling. He turned to Tank.

"Okay, give them back."

Tank, wide-eyed, turned on Biggs.

Luke was firm. "There were two restraining bolts stored there. I need those. You took them. So give them back."

"I didn't take anything," Tank said, scowling. "He's a liar, Biggs. I wouldn't take anything from him."

Luke didn't back down. "We can't afford to replace things like Biggs' family. I need those bolts. Now I asked you to give them back. Or do I have to take them?"

Tank's young face hardened. Biggs stepped in to defuse the situation. "It's okay, Luke, I'll handle this. Tank, this isn't the streets of Mos Eisley any more. If you took something, apologize and give it back."

Tank's face fell. "So, what, you believe him? I guess he's your real friend, then!" He yanked two small objects from his pocket and hurled them into the sand at Luke's feet. They were the missing bolts. Tank ran to the Skyhopper and climbed in.

"That little thief!" said Luke. "I was right. Biggs, you really have got more than you bargained for."

"I'm sorry Luke," Biggs sighed. "I'll see you later. I've got to go deal with this."

Speeding over the sands in the Skyhopper, Biggs was silent all the way back to Bestine. Tank was equally silent. As they landed near Biggs' home, Tank jumped out and started to walk away.

"Hold on Tank," Biggs demanded. "I'm not done with you. I think I know what that little scene was about, back there. You were trying to sabotage the thing with Luke, weren't you?"

Tank looked sullen. "And what if I did? I don't want to be with him, I want to be with you."

Biggs felt his control slip a little in the face of Tank's defiance. "Tank, what you did was wrong! Luke is my best friend! I was trying to help you by setting you up with him. And you had to ruin it!"

"Luke's not so great. He was looking down at me--the moment he heard I was from the streets. Like I wasn't as good as he was. And I don't want to fix vaporators in the sun all day. I want...I just want to be with you. You're all I've got, Biggs. Don't you see that? I need you."

Biggs' hands dropped to his sides, and he exhaled noisily. "I guess when I took you out of those tunnels, I was taking on the responsibility for you. That's not an easy thing, for anybody. I don't even have a good role model, to show me how."

"I can take care of myself, Biggs, but I need you to show me what to do with my life. I want to go where you go. For now, at least."

Biggs frowned. "That might be to the Academy, Tank. I can't put off going forever, not with Huff pushing me. How would you feel about that? Would you follow me to the Academy, if you got in?"

Tank looked around. "I don't mean to sound ungrateful, but there's not a whole lot to look forward to here, is there? If you're gonna take me out of Mos Eisley, why not take me way out of Mos Eisley?"

* * *

Luke and Tank were quiet for a while after that. There was little need for words. The grudges between them had begun to heal, naturally, as a result of getting those things out in the open. The night around them was full of distant animal sounds. Somewhere, there was the loud report of what Luke guessed was one of those exploding fungi another

pilot had told him about. Luke could hear the Woolamanders across the river fighting with one another. The heady fragrance of the blueleaf was really starting to get to him, and he imagined that the Woolamanders were his Uncle Owen, yelling about Luke's application to the Academy. He burst out laughing. Tank looked sharply at him.

"I'm sorry--it's just...something I was remembering," Luke said. "It's nothing..." After a minute, he said, "You know, I wanted to go to the Academy more than anything. I asked Uncle Owen for the first time when I was sixteen, the earliest you could get in, after they lowered the age. But of course, he said no. The year after that, he said no, too. But I didn't give up. I had this recruitment tape, and I played it to death, hoping that someday...but it was always, 'It's just one more season', and 'The harvest is when I need you the most'". Really, he just wanted to keep me there where I was forever, going nowhere. I wonder..."

"You wonder what?"

"...how it would have been different, if I had gone to the Academy. Where we'd all be, now..."

"I guess we'd all be dead," said Tank.

Luke felt a shadow pass over his heart. "Or maybe...worse."

"So, maybe it was that Force of yours, keeping you out of the Academy." Tank smiled. "I bet you've wondered how I got in, haven't you?"

Luke's eyes narrowed. "Yeah, I have. And about that time, I want you to know that I realize I was unfair to you when you and Biggs left. I was very jealous, and I took my anger at my Uncle out on you."

Tank frowned. "Oh, yes. I remember. I hated you that day..."

* * *

Tank ran breathlessly up to Biggs, who was tapping a printout in one hand, his face expressionless. "Is that it? Is that the reply? Come on, Biggs, did we make it?"

Biggs suddenly had a crestfallen look as he turned to Tank. "Tank, I have some bad news for you."

Tank stopped, cold. "No. Oh, no. Not after we tried so hard." An abyss had opened up inside him.

Biggs put a comforting hand on Tank's shoulder. "I hate to be the one to tell you this, but...you'll never get to enjoy my mother's cooking again! We both made it! We're in!"

The sun came out on Tank's face, and he whooped suddenly with delight. He grabbed Biggs by the hands, and danced a circle around him. Biggs laughed, his false sadness evaporating.

"Then the bribes went through, and my fake history held up," said Tank, wonderingly.

"Well, it helped that the local recruiter owed my father a favor. And the Outer Rim Academy on Ord Nardell isn't exactly Carida. The way they're expanding the commercial space lanes, they want all the warm bodies they can get. Even a couple of Tatooine boys with sand still in their ears."

Tank was reading the letter excitedly. "Biggs, it says we leave in two days! We've got to pack! And what's this? It says here they've accelerated the program. The course of study is only going to be one year."

"I know. I asked around about that." Biggs grew more serious. "It seems that it isn't only the commercial space lanes that are expanding--it's the military, too. They rush you through, and when you graduate, they offer you a pile of credits to go into the Imperial navy. But you can still request a non-combat post. We're going to stick together and keep our eyes open, okay?"

"I'll stick to you like a Gundark's tongue," said Tank, smiling slightly.

"Okay, there's a lot to do, but first I want to take care of something. We have to stop and say good-bye to Luke."

They found Luke in his garage at the Lars homestead, hard at work on his Skyhopper. As Biggs and Tank walked into the shadowy, cluttered room, they could hear some banging and cursing coming from underneath the tri-winged craft. "Son of a jumpin'--blast this stabilizer!"

"Hey! Hotshot!" Biggs called.

Luke crawled out and blinked at them. He was filthy with lubricants. "Biggs ! I didn't hear you come in."

"Of course not, with all that banging going on. What are you doing? Trying to get this sorry hunk of junk into good enough shape to outrace Fixer?"

"This 'hunk of junk' can beat yours nine times out of ten, and Fixer's anytime," said Luke, rising to the bait. "Want to try me?"

"Sorry Luke, no time, or else I'd show you that you really mean one time out of ten, if the wind was in your favor. No, I stopped by to tell you I got into the Academy. We leave in two days."

Luke put on a brave face. "Congratulations. I guess you know what my Uncle said about my application."

"Yeah," said Biggs sympathetically. "'Not this year Luke, we don't have enough droids, we finally stand to make a profit, I need you here, I promise, it's just one more year.' I know the drill. But Luke, one day you're going to see that he may have raised you, but he doesn't own you. He uses your sense of obligation to keep you here. I know how you feel; I grew up here too. To make it out here, you put family and the community ahead of your own needs. But you're better than this, Luke. You belong somewhere else. I know you'll get there someday, too."

"Thanks, but for now, it looks like I'm going nowhere. I'm going to miss you, Biggs. It just won't be the same around here without you. Keep in touch, all right? So, you leave in two days? What did you mean when you said 'we leave'?"

"Tank is coming with me. He got accepted, too."

"What?" Luke's face darkened. "You're kidding, right? They let him in? Boy, when they lower the admission standards, they really lower them. So now they accept common thieves and street trash? That's all I needed to hear."

Tank took two angry steps towards Luke. "What did you say? Who do you think you are? Listen, Luke, just because you're not good enough to get in--"

"I'm better than you'll ever be," grated Luke. "At least I have a sense of responsibility, and integrity. Does the Empire know what it's getting, or did you lie all over the application?"

Tank scowled; that was too close to the truth.

Luke's hands balled into fists. "And for your information, I am good enough to get in. I just don't want to leave my family stranded. But you wouldn't know about that, would you? If you don't have anybody, it doesn't matter where you go."

For a moment, Tank looked like he was going to fight, then, containing himself, he turned to Biggs. "I don't have to listen to this! Biggs, I'll see you outside." He looked at Luke. "Have a nice harvest," he sneered, then marched out into the sun.

Biggs stared from one to the other, helplessly.

Luke stared fiercely at his feet.

Finally, Biggs said quietly, "Take care of yourself, Luke. I will stay in touch." And he walked out after Tank, regret in every step.

Luke took the tool he was holding and hurled it against the wall. It clanged loudly as it chipped the surface, and fell into the oil bath where it sank out of sight.

* * *

It was an older and wiser Luke who recalled his angry words with chagrin. Tank sensed that, and gently said, "I know you're sorry. I should have forgiven it a long time ago. I do forgive it now. I mean, what I did to you last night, that makes a few bitter insults pale by comparison."

Luke said, "Well, we're both here, alive and well. It could be worse. And we're not here to talk about blame. I want to hear how it was with Biggs on Ord Nardell. He wrote me some letters, but they didn't say much about what was really going on there, about what happened to change him..."

"About what led him to come here," Tank finished. "I can try, Luke. The problem is, Biggs kept on trying to protect me, and that included keeping certain things from me. When he found out how rotten the Empire was, he didn't want me to know, so I'd be in no danger of getting taken in for questioning. He came this close to leaving me behind 'for my own good.' But let me start from the beginning. A year ago, we left Tatooine, and I was pretty glad to leave that place behind. If I'd been in my parents' place, I just never would have settled there. A short hyperspace jump later, and we were in another system. It felt strange at first, to finally be away...I hadn't believed it was real until we got there.

"The Academy was built on the site of an Old Republic military base. There were classrooms, hangars, flight simulators, target ranges...I remember Biggs said the place looked like it was designed to crank out military pilots, and forget the merchant fleet. But we knew there was still that way out, I mean, they still needed freighters to haul rare metals, medicines, replacement parts, and everything else an expanding military needs.

"We got settled in okay, and after that, it was hard work, all the time. They tested us at the beginning, and they decided Biggs would make a good pilot, and I would make a better gunner. So Biggs and I didn't see much of each other. But we bunked in the same place, and we looked out for each other.

"I really did learn a lot. They taught me the basics of flying anything from a TIE fighter to a Corvette, and I took to gunnery like I was made for it. But we had to swallow a lot of propaganda at the same time. Stuff like, how the New Order is the way to true order in the Galaxy, and how the Emperor will protect and preserve us all. They insisted the Rebels are terrorists, too. Well, we know how much of that's true, and to tell the truth, I could tell then, too. Something didn't add up. We heard reports of things that various Imperial Governors had done, and if you thought about it, it started to seem really wrong, even if the Rebels were terrorists. Those reports just

seemed so...proud of what they described, like Rebel suspects being rooted out, rounded up, and executed. Someone, actually a lot of someones, seemed to enjoy all of that.

"But we realized we had to support that mentality, or else draw attention to ourselves. We had one scandal in our class--a bunch of students were rounded up, right out of the classroom, and taken away. We were later told they were Rebel spies. I don't know if it was true, but we never saw them again. Biggs and I learned to stay very quiet, after that."

Tank paused for a rest. Luke produced some water, and they drank while gazing at the beautiful planet hanging above them. "Biggs tried to keep things from me, but I think he knew one of the ones who disappeared. A month before the scandal, I walked in on a conversation he was having with one of the students. They quieted down right away, and the other student left. Biggs looked troubled, but he wouldn't talk about it. He spent the night in the library, going through recent holovids and news reports. When I woke up, I found him sitting on his bunk, still in uniform. He hadn't slept..."

* * *

Tank rubbed his eyes and looked groggily at Biggs. "Wha's wrong," he yawned.

Biggs looked at Tank with a hint of pain in his eyes. "Get dressed. We're going to log some flying time today, just the two of us."

Tank did as he was told, sensing the grim mood of the morning. After a brief meal, they went to the hangar and signed out a combat airspeeder. Biggs took the pilot seat, and Tank took the gunner position. Saying very little, Biggs took them out of the hangar and flew towards the target range. The airspeeder dipped down into the narrow artificial valleys of the range, causing the always-open channel to base to crackle with interference. Biggs chose that moment to begin talking rapidly.

"Keep firing at the targets as we come to them, Tank. Act naturally."

"What's this all about?" Tank demanded, anxious. He put a laser shot dead center into the first target as they banked past it.

"Tank, I've been hearing things...things I didn't want to tell you about. It isn't safe to know too much about this. About the Rebellion."

Tank took in a sharp breath, and barely managed to hit the second target as they shot over it.

"But I finally realized I had to tell you. I've heard stories of massacres and atrocities...Ghorman, Atrivis--places where planets were beaten into submission for political resistance. Innocent people killed, ships wiping out cities from orbit. At first, I didn't want to believe it. But I did some checking on my own. There are enough facts in the official reports to support the stories I heard. The people in charge of the Empire are corrupt. Maybe only the threat of rebellion keeps them from doing even worse things. Tank--the Rebels aren't terrorists." Biggs pulled a hard left to make it around a difficult obstacle. "Quiet for a minute," he warned. The interference blocking the open channel stopped suddenly as they soared high over the center of the course. In another moment, it resumed, as they swooped down into another canyon. "The Rebellion is an organized resistance to the Emperor's rule. It's being supported by some of the Senate, and there's even a formal declaration of rebellion. I've seen a copy. Tank, I'm not sure we're on the right side any more. I think...I think I'm going to try to find the Rebels and join them."

Tank gasped, and completely missed the next target. "What do you mean? You weren't going to tell me about this?" he demanded, his voice getting a little panicked. "You were going to leave me behind? You wouldn't do that! You couldn't!"

"Hold on! Tank, this isn't like on Tatooine. These are life and death matters. I could be captured or killed, or I might not make it to the Rebels...I've raised you from a situation where you had no future to one where you do. I don't want to see you throw it away just to get killed somewhere. But the thing is, knowing the Empire is rotten, I can't just let you be a part of it without having a choice. But you have to make a real choice. Not just to follow me. You have to do what you believe in, because this is going to have serious consequences. I don't want to hear a knee-jerk reaction. I want you to think about this, really hard."

The airspeeder reached the end of the course, and Tank fired his last shot directly into the target. A voice came over the open channel. "Good flying, Cadet Darklighter. Cadet Boma, you'd better watch that shooting score. It'd be too bad if we had to delay your graduation to send you back to remedial gunnery."

"Base Command, we're coming in," Biggs said. He and Tank said nothing for the rest of the flight.

* * *

"I did think hard about it," said Tank, his eyes shut. "I wanted to make an idealistic choice like Biggs was making...to do the right thing. But in the end, I chose based on selfish reasons. I'd been following Biggs so long, I really didn't know what I'd do on my own. And I was afraid that, knowing what I knew, I might be rounded up myself, and disappear. I didn't want to vanish. That student I told you about? The

one who was taken in? Biggs found out he died in interrogation. I had nightmares about it. So I told Biggs I wanted to go with him and look for the Rebellion. He didn't question my reasons; he just accepted it at that point. The Rebels here didn't question my reasons, either. You're the only one I've told."

With kindness in his voice, Luke said, "The reasons don't matter. People end up in the Rebellion for all kinds of reasons. Some are noble, but others have no choice. What matters is what you do when you get here."

"Well, I guess I blew that..."

"No, not really. There's still a decision for you to make. There are still choices. You followed Biggs to get here, but what matters is, you arrived. Yes, you made some mistakes, but you can make amends for them. I think you'd want to do something that would make Biggs proud of you. Something that would give meaning to the sacrifice he made. I got to talk to Biggs about his choices, just before he shipped out. He stopped by to say good-bye, knowing he might never see home again. I remember everything he said. Maybe it'll help you to hear it..."

* * *

Luke and Biggs left Luke's noisy, so-called friends in the Power Station, and walked along the nearly deserted, hot streets. They were a study in contrasts. Biggs was wearing a white uniform jacket over a blue shirt, brown pants with high boots, and a snappy black cape. Luke was dressed in a worn white tunic. The older man was serious and well-groomed, the younger, excited and bragging about his latest daring feats in his old Skyhopper.

"You ought to take it a little easy, Luke," Biggs cautioned. "You may be the hottest bushpilot this side of Mos Eisley, but those little Skyhoppers are dangerous. Keep it up, and one day, whammo, you're going to be nothing more than a dark spot on the down side of a canyon wall."

Luke still hadn't picked up on his old friend's changed demeanor, caught up in the happiness of having his ally back. He took Biggs' comments as only half-serious, and scoffed, "Look who's talking." He poked at Biggs' insignia. "Now that you've been around those giant starships, you're beginning to sound like my Uncle. You've gotten soft in the city."

"I've missed you, kid," said Biggs, giving in to Luke's playfulness a little. Luke sighed. "Well, things haven't been the same since you left, Biggs. It's been so...quiet."

Biggs seemed to come to a decision, and leaned in close to Luke. "Luke, I didn't come back just to say good-bye. I shouldn't tell you this, but you're the only one I can trust..."

Luke noticed the exclusion of Biggs' parents.

Biggs finished, "...and if I don't come back, I want somebody to know."

Luke, serious now, asked, "What are you talking about?"

"I made some friends at the Academy," Biggs began, then faltered, as if hesitant to say more. He swallowed, then said instead, "When our freighter goes to one of the outer rim systems, we're going to jump ship, and join the Alliance."

Luke was incredulous. "Join the Rebellion? Are you kidding? How?"

Biggs replied, somewhat defensively, "My friend has a friend on the planet Bestine who might help us make contact."

"You're crazy," Luke said. "You could wander around forever trying to find them."

Biggs stood his ground, the old rivalry rising up in him to mix with his new feelings of responsibility. "I know it's a long shot, but if I don't find them, I'll do what I can on my own. It's what we always talked about."

Luke was going to disagree, to say that what they talked about wasn't running with outlaws, maybe terrorists for all anybody knew, but Biggs pressed on earnestly.

"Luke, I'm not going to wait for the Empire to draft me into service as a fighter pilot. The Rebellion is spreading, and I want to be on the right side, the side I believe in."

Listening to the intensity of his old friend's voice, Luke could almost believe in the Rebellion really being out there. It was enough for him to dredge up some self pity as well. "And I'm stuck here."

Biggs half-heartedly tried to lift Luke's spirits. "I thought you were going to the Academy next term. You'll get your chance to get off this rock."

"Not likely," Luke interjected bitterly. "I had to cancel my application. There's been a lot of unrest among the Sandpeople since you left. They've even raided the outskirts of Anchorhead."

Biggs frowned skeptically. "Your Uncle could hold off a whole colony of Sandpeople with one blaster."

"I know," said Luke lamely, "but he's got enough vaporators going to make the place pay off. He needs me for just one more season. I can't leave him now..."

Biggs put his hand on Luke's shoulder. "I feel for you, Luke, but you're going to have to learn to tell what seems important from what really is important. What good is all your Uncle's work if it's taken over by the Empire? You know, they're starting to nationalize commerce in the central systems. It won't be long before your Uncle is merely a tenant, slaving for the greater glory of the Empire."

Luke stared at Biggs, unable to believe that this was his old carefree companion talking. "You've changed, Biggs..."

"Things always change," said Biggs, flatly.

"It couldn't happen here," Luke said, looking away into the desert. "You said it yourself, the Empire won't bother with this rock...I wish I was going. Are you going to be around long?"

"No, I'm leaving in the morning."

"Then...I guess I won't see you again," said Luke, a catch in his voice keeping him from saying more.

Biggs refused to be so morose, and summoned up his old, live-for-the-day smile. "Maybe someday...I'll keep a lookout."

Luke tried to smile too. "Well, I'll be at the Academy next season...after that, who knows? I won't be drafted into the Imperial Starfleet, that's for sure." He looked longingly at Biggs. "Take care of yourself, you'll always be the best friend I've got."

Biggs nodded, slowly. "So long, Luke." He turned back to head for the Power Station where the noisy crowd of Fixer, Camie, Deak, and Windy awaited their more shallow good-byes.

Luke couldn't bring himself to follow.

* * *

"...And before I knew it," said Luke, "I was caught up in the Rebellion myself. I didn't even have time to think about it. Biggs was right. Things always change."

Tank absently began to toss stones from the top of the Temple, into the dark, dripping foliage below. "He wasn't crazy, Luke, about finding the Rebels. Because by the time he talked to you, there was already a plan in motion. We didn't have to go looking for the Rebels at all. They came looking for us.

At Luke's questioning glance, Tank explained, "That friend of Biggs in the Academy was a Rebel sympathizer. He looked for other students who might share similar views, watched them closely, and gave their names to the Alliance. Academy graduates can make good Rebel pilots. Biggs'

friend sent the information on our new commission, and the merchant ship's schedule, to someone on Bestine, who was supposed to set up a time and a place where we could jump ship. We signed onto the Rand Ecliptic, and hoped for the best. Needless to say, Biggs was nervous as hell, and I was scared silly..."

* * *

Space was deadly, thought Tank. Deadly dull. For all the Outer Rim tales of pirates, deep space monsters, and the like, Tank's maiden voyage on the medium freighter merchant ship Rand Ecliptic consisted mainly of the tedium of hyperspace travel. He had plenty of time to stare at his weapons console and sweat it out. Despite the boredom of the trip, the foreknowledge of their rendezvous with the Rebellion made Tank unable to think of anything else.

Tank had been picked up by the freighter at the Academy on Ord Nardell a few days ago. He'd been officially welcomed aboard by Captain Oxus, an Imperial who had been demoted out of the military for his ill-controlled temper and sullen disposition. Oxus didn't consider the Rand Ecliptic to be a pleasant or satisfying command post, and in truth, it was not. But he had learned to internalize his anger so as not to get booted out of service altogether. Oxus had put on a reasonably civil display, curtly commending Tank for his high marks in the Academy, and 'confidentially' telling him that from here, there was no way to go but up. When asked why he hadn't chosen service in Starfleet, Tank had lied that he preferred a quieter life.

Tank had been shown his quarters, a tiny bunk off of the crew lounge, and was given a tour of the ship. The Ecliptic was a blocky craft, built around four cubic cargo holds. Cargo supervisor Den Roth had been proud to point out that, unlike the common Corellian YT-1300 stock light freighter, the HT-2200 had four separate cargo environments, each able to present different life support conditions. The HT-2200, therefore, held eight times the cargo of a YT-1300. Tank was bored. He simply tried to stay out of the way of the four cargo workers, who gained his sympathy by looking as bored as he felt. The Ecliptic's engines were tended by one Trent Rummox, who, like all engineers, seemed simply to want to be left alone to work. Lastly, Tank was shown his gunnery station, which was positioned in back of the small bridge. The station controlled the two pulse laser cannons, one atop the freighter, one below. It was a very light arsenal, but then, one hoped one wouldn't have to go into combat with a medium freighter. The extra cargo space came at the price of losing maneuverability, making the ship a likely loser in a fight. They depended on extra heavy shielding to give them time to escape.

The ship had stopped at Tatooine to pick up the new first mate, Biggs Darklighter, who, Tank said, he had known in passing at the Academy. Biggs had come aboard and gone straight to work, ignoring Tank until mealtime. Then, he had subtly managed to tell Tank that the

rendezvous was a go. Since then, Tank had manned his station, which was not strictly necessary in hyperspace, worrying and picturing the worst. Maybe they had already been discovered, and were being taken to a prison planet right now. Maybe the desertion would go badly, and one or both of them would be killed. Maybe the Rebels wouldn't be there at all, having changed their minds... Unfortunately, worrying only made the time pass more slowly.

Finally, after what had seemed like days, Biggs and Captain Oxus began to make preparations for coming out of hyperspace. Biggs worked efficiently, looking sort of dashing in his caped uniform. He spared a discreet glance at Tank, nodding once. Tank swallowed hard. This was it. He turned in his chair and looked ahead at the bridge viewports. As Biggs pulled a lever, the pearl-colored, hellish clouds of hyperspace were replaced by star-filled normal space. The freighter had emerged into the emptiness of the Outer Rim Leisure Corridor for its rendezvous with the luxury liner Culroon Minstrel. The Ecliptic's holds were full of expensive supplies for the liner, but after that delivery, they were due to pick up TIE fighter sensors and capital ship navigational software from Fabritech, for transport to the Core.

Captain Oxus' voice was clearly audible from where Tank sat. "Where is the Minstrel? She should have been here an hour before us. I can't detect her on any of our sensors. Darklighter, are you getting anything on the trade frequencies?"

"No distress calls, Captain, nothing from the Minstrel," said Biggs, and waited for Oxus to issue an order.

The captain stood, thinking. "There haven't been reports of pirates in the Corridor recently, and no other hazards have been reported...I wonder what could be keeping that blasted pleasure boat. We've got a schedule to keep." He looked at Biggs, sternly. "Send out a long range message along the Minstrel's last known course. Tell them we're only going to wait an hour. Then they can find someone else to deliver their supplies. The Empire has better things to occupy itself with than-"

Oxus was cut off by the sudden flash of an explosion near the ship. His hands flew to the scanners as he checked the shields. "Darklighter! Boma! I think it might be pirates, after all! Four starfighters have just come out of hyperspace, and they're firing proton torpedoes at us."

"Got them, Captain," said Biggs, "four ships, X-wing class, coming up behind us. I think that last shot was just a warning. Maybe they want to take us alive, capture our cargo. Could be they hit the Culroon Minstrel and got our coordinates."

But Oxus seemed to be thinking suddenly along different lines. "X-wings...then it could be Rebels. But what would they want with Corellian Whiskey and holovids? No matter, we've got to get out of here. Maybe the shields will hold up while I program in the coordinates for Fabritech. Boma! Let's see how good you are! Target those Rebels, or pirates, and destroy as many as you can. Darklighter, I want maximum

speed, straight ahead, and angle the deflectors where they'll do the most good. Tell Rummox I'll need all he's got." Oxus' chubby face was grim as he watched two more torpedoes flare close by.

Biggs looked at Tank and nodded. "You heard the Captain, gunner. Now do what you're supposed to do."

Tank faced his laser cannon controls. The X-wings appeared on his scopes as bright symbols, darting around the Rand Ecliptic. Tank glanced at the Captain, who was tensely working at the navicomputer. He braced himself, and pressed the controls that vented all the blaster gasses into space as an emergency measure against overheating.

Oxus noticed the warning lights immediately. "Boma!" he shouted, whirling on Tank. "What are you doing? We'll be defenseless ! What in the name of the Emperor are you thinking--"

Oxus stopped talking as he saw Biggs' blaster pointed at him. He looked with dawning hatred at his two crew members. "So it's mutiny, then, is that it? Are you with the Rebels? Is that what's going on?"

"I'm sorry, Captain," Biggs said firmly, "there's nothing you can do. I've shut down the shields and put them into a diagnostic cycle. They can't be raised for an hour. Please give me your blaster, sir."

Oxus glared at Biggs, toying with the idea of making a play for his weapon, but then seemed to decide it wasn't worth it. Tank sympathized. It was two against one, and what was Oxus' command worth to him, anyway? He owed little to the Empire, and certainly not his life. The Imperial surrendered his blaster.

"Please open a channel to the Alliance X-wings, and tell them you surrender," suggested Biggs, his blaster unwavering. Oxus did as he was told, but he was clearly past being polite.

"This is the Rand Ecliptic, Captain Oxus commanding, calling the Rebel scum in the X-wings. I surrender my ship to you, but I want you to know that if I had a real crew on board, and not these traitors, you wouldn't be getting my cargo intact. Either you or I would be dead. But the joke's on you. You obviously knew my schedule, but you were apparently ignorant of my cargo manifest." Oxus let a sneer enter his voice. "All we're carrying is Corellian Whiskey, Cassandran Choholl, new holovids, and frozen meats. Unless you're planning to throw a fancy party, I don't see what good those things will do you. If your intelligence had been a little better, you'd have known we'd be picking up TIE fighter scanners and navigational software for Star Destroyers on our next stop. As for this ship, you're welcome to it. If this is your idea of a fine addition to your military forces, then good luck to you in your eventual defeat." Oxus flipped off the channel and sat down in the Captain's chair, stubbornly unmoving.

Soon, the teardrop shape of a big Rebel transport moved across the viewport as it docked with the freighter. Biggs motioned to Tank, handing him the Captain's blaster as he approached. "All right, Tank,

let's go. We don't want to take up any more of the Captain's valuable time. Captain. it's been...decent, serving under you. This is nothing personal. And don't worry about our pay, we don't have a forwarding address."

Biggs and Tank backed to the airlock, still covering Oxus with drawn blasters. The Captain looked dumbfounded. "What, you're leaving me with my ship?! What's going on here?"

As Tank opened the airlock, Biggs took one last look at his first duty assignment. He waved a final salute at Oxus. "You may not be able to understand this, Captain, but these Rebels are just here to pick up Tank and I."

Oxus sputtered, "You two? You sorry excuses for crewmen? I knew the Rebels were crazy, but this beats all! By all means, go!" He laughed meanly. "I'd even throw in a few bottles of Corellian Whiskey for those terrorists to take you off my hands!"

"Well," said Biggs, "I didn't think you'd understand." And he shut the airlock door.

They crossed over to the transport and entered their new lives. Waiting to greet them was a severe-looking woman in a flight suit. Her brown hair had a streak of white in front, and her flinty eyes and disciplined smile flashed them a respectful welcome. "Okay, Wedge," she said into her comlink, "We've got them. Let's head for Massassi Base." The young woman held out a gloved hand. "You're Biggs Darklighter and Tank Boma, right? Welcome aboard. I'm Slaughter."

Biggs shook her hand, looking relieved, the stress finally melting from him. Tank found himself smiling foolishly at the oddly attractive pilot before him, but he didn't care. Things were looking up, at last.

* * *

"Thank you," said Luke, "for telling me that story. Biggs and I had so little time before the battle, we didn't even get to tell each other how we got here. I'm really starting to understand how much Biggs had changed. He really had grown up. I only hope I can be like he was."

"You keep at it, Skywalker, and you'll get there," teased Tank.

Luke felt relaxed at last. He knew their talk was doing both of them a world of good. There were still some difficult things to sort out, some painful things, but Luke knew they would see it through. He might never have Tank's friendship, but neither would they be enemies. Luke noticed that Tank was looking suddenly downcast, and dared to go over to where he was standing at the edge of the platform. He put a hand on the rumpled, oversized shoulder of Tank's borrowed flight suit.

"That brings us to recent events, doesn't it?" said Luke gently. "Now it gets hard to talk about. But we have to. There's quite a bit I don't understand about what happened last night, and I really have to know."

Tank didn't try to escape Luke's hand, and he sighed, staring out into the planet-lit mists. "My last times with Biggs were too short, too. I didn't use them the way I would have...if I'd known." Tank kicked a large stone fragment over the edge, sending it bouncing down the steps and crashing into the blueleaf carpet far below, where it vanished. "Instead, I was chasing after a woman..."

* * *

Tank had listened to as much of Biggs and Wedge talking about the Empire and the Rebellion as he could. They talked over an open channel from the transport to Wedge's X-wing, Biggs an eager listener, the youthful Wedge Antilles an eager talker. Tank learned that they were on their way to the main Alliance base on the fourth moon of Yavin. Although there were smaller bases scattered across the Galaxy, the greatest need for personnel and pilots was at Massassi base. If it was lost, the infant Rebellion could well die out, and now there was a real threat of that happening. According to Wedge, Princess-Senator Organa had been on a mission to retrieve the stolen technical readouts for a new Imperial battle station, more destructive than anything built before. But instead, she had been captured and most likely interrogated. And she knew where the main Rebel base was hidden. Any time, now, that battle station could be on its way. Massassi base needed all the people it could get, as fast as possible, should the need for an emergency evacuation arise. Biggs and Tank, Slaughter and Wedge, and a handful of other pilots and soldiers were chewing up hyperspace in a desperate race to throw themselves into enormous danger. At least, thought Tank, it wouldn't be dull.

Which was what the conversation between Biggs and Wedge eventually became. Tank could only absorb so much information about Imperial crimes, Rebel cells, fighter combat, and politics, while Biggs seemed to thrive on it. Biggs and Wedge became fast friends, but Tank finally wandered away from Biggs' side and went looking for Slaughter.

He found her hard at work on her Y-wing, in a cramped bay barely large enough for the two-seated star fighter. Engine components were scattered about, and Slaughter was perched atop the ship, repairing the heavily damaged canopy. She noticed him the moment he walked in, giving him a sharp, attentive look that went straight to his teenage heart. p; "Tank," she said, "Glad you could come. Grab a hydrosponder and get up here. I could use another pair of hands."

Tank climbed up quickly, his interest in the older woman flaring up. No woman had shown interest in Tank before, and while this wasn't exactly interest, for Tank it was close enough. He stole a glance into

her gray eyes, admiring how her shoulder length brown hair framed a strong-boned face. Her thin lips smiled a greeting, and Tank was suddenly conscious of his small frame and vaguely messy hair. Then she spoke to him in a way that made him even more conscious of his youth; she probably had about ten years on him, and to his dismay, he was inspiring a maternal response. "Are you scared, Tank, about what we're heading into? Maybe this is more than you bargained for." She rubbed a greasy hand across her already grease-stained forehead. "Next stop is a hidden base in the middle of nowhere that might become space-dust any day now...You don't have to tell me, but I'll tell you--I'm scared. I'm scared a lot."

Tank found himself unable to lie, looking into her frank gaze. "Um, Slaughter, I think maybe I should be scared, but I don't know enough about all this to know how much to be afraid. I've really just been following my friend, Biggs. He's the one who knows what he's doing. I've clung to him, like a father I guess, for years and years. I followed him to the Academy, and when he decided to join the Rebellion, I followed again. And here I am, and I don't even know enough to be terrified."

Slaughter nodded, and directed Tank's eyes to the burned, shattered Y-wing canopy she was removing. "Let me tell you how scared you should be, Tank," she said, a little of the coldness of space in her voice. "My...partner died in this ship, and I came very, very close to joining her." She turned her head and lifted her hair. Tank could see a thin tracing of scars all along her neck. "The medical droids did what they could with synthflesh, but even they can't hide all the traces of someone nearly losing their head."

Tank was silent, staring.

"Do you want to hear the story of how I came to be here?" asked Slaughter softly.

Tank nodded, still not speaking.

"Best to begin at the beginning, then," she said, making herself comfortable. "My sister and I grew up with my father on a small planet called Balfor. It was a pretty nice place, as planets go." She smiled thinly. "But I guess nice places don't stay that way any more, these days. When the Empire found us, they let our government continue as it was. They established a military base, of course, but it was a low-key operation. No resources to exploit, no alien races to enslave--there wasn't much on Balfor to hold their interest. Then suddenly, young men started to disappear. Over the course of a year, over a hundred were lost. The Imperials made a show of investigating, but of course, they didn't find anything. It was a complete mystery. We didn't think too much about it, because it was always happening to someone else, in some other city...Then, one day, my own father vanished. We woke up one morning, and he was gone. My sister said she'd heard him get up to check out a noise outside, but she'd gone back to sleep. We were terrified. No one knew anything, no one could help. I decided to find out what was going on by myself."

"I had a lot of skill with computers, thanks to a slicer who taught me everything he knew. The first place I thought to investigate was the Imperial base. For some reason, I just didn't trust their claims. I began to obtain documents from their files. I figured that if the men who'd vanished weren't dead, they might have been taken off world. So I began to study records of outbound space vessels. I found that on a few ships, more supplies than usual were taken aboard, and there were a number of supposedly empty crew quarters, making the excess conspicuous. Imperials don't usually waste space or supplies. The departures of these ships coincided with the disappearances of men from Balfor. So there it was. The Empire was taking people from my planet in secret. But why? I decided to go off-world and find out. If there was a chance my father was still alive, I had to help him. I found someone...who hated the Empire as much as I did. We managed to buy this Y-wing together, Genta and I, and we set out to follow the trail of the suspect ships. They all had the same destination, the Riosh system.

"Riosh was an out-of-the-way planet in the Outer Rim, with an Imperial base and a population of near-humans. Genta and I went into a town near the bases where we posed as vagabond spacers, down on our luck. We found a couple of Officers, drunk in a bar, on leave from the base. They were starved for female companionship, and it seems they found the appearance of the local inhabitants distasteful. Something about the nose slits, I think. We lured them to our rooms, promising a good time, and slipped them some drugs that encourage the flow of information, so to speak."

Tank was completely absorbed in the story so far. Now the subject had turned to matters closely matching his own interest, and he became even more intent. "What did they tell you? And did you--did you..."

"Yes, we...gave them their good time. We needed them to remember it that way instead of remembering the questioning. But it was worth it. The officers liked to brag. They told us that their base was selected for a special stormtrooper indoctrination program. It was still experimental, but it was very important work. The Empire needed troops who would carry out any orders, no matter what. There had been problems with some of them balking at some of the more distasteful tasks involved in pacifying rebellious populations, and it was very necessary that this be done. The indoctrination would fix all that. Men were being brought in from several planets to be subjects. But the officers assured us that those men wouldn't be of interest to us, because they were only at the base for a short time, for the indoctrination, then they were shipped out. They never came into town looking for a good time..."

"We put my slicer skills to work again, and we were able to trace the path of personnel from Balfor to Riosh to another system called Felshesst. And off we went. The Galactic NewsNets gave us a good idea of why troops were being sent there. Felshesst was in the middle of an uprising against the Empire. It didn't say that explicitly, of course, instead they reported a small problem with a dissident faction of the local government having staged a tax protest. But when we entered the Felshesst system, we found a Star Destroyer in orbit around the planet.

The Felshessti were under martial law, and a city had been blasted from orbit. We were too late to do anything about it, even if we could have.

"We avoided the Star Destroyer and landed on the outskirts of the destroyed city. There was a lot of traffic going in and out, bringing supplies, evacuating the wounded. We weren't noticed, especially. We wandered around the ruins for a while, and it was pretty horrifying. Somebody grabbed us aside and stopped us at one point, warning us not to go into one section where a special detachment of stormtroopers was interrogating Rebels. The Rebellion really had been there, and they'd miscalculated badly. They hadn't expected the Empire to use so much force against them. And the Felshessti paid the price. The Rebels were rounded up by the Felshessti themselves, and delivered to the Imperials. Those Rebels were being publicly executed in a square ahead of us. Despite the risk of becoming suspects ourselves, we had to investigate the story of the special stormtroopers. So, we crept closer to the square, and there was a raised platform with a few filthy-looking men and women on it, surrounded by stormtroopers. As we watched, they said something about how these Rebels had been responsible for the destruction of the city. They had been stockpiling extremely destructive weapons, and were planning to take over the planet's government. When the Imperials arrived to restore order, several of these devices had exploded prematurely, leveling the city."

"Was any of it true?" asked Tank.

"True?" said Slaughter bitterly. "What does it matter if it was true? The Empire creates truth to suit their purposes. And don't look for this story on the Galactic NewsNets. It's a big Galaxy, Tank, and atrocities can be hidden in it without too much trouble. You either don't hear about it, or worse, you hear their lies. And it just doesn't matter. What matters is, people died. They were innocent, and they died horribly. without knowing why."

After a pause, Tank ventured, "And what about your father? Did you find him?"

Slaughter's grief was plain as she replied, "Yes, I found him. As they were burning the Rebels with blasters on low settings, one of the stormtroopers suddenly ducked out of his group and stepped into a back alley. I told Genta to stay put, and I snuck after him, my small blaster in hand. I found the trooper in the alley, his helmet off, tears on his face. It was my father. We were equally shocked to see each other, even though I should have expected it. He tried to explain, but he didn't fully understand it himself. His conditioning had been effective for a while, but it hadn't fully taken hold of him. During the massacre of the Felshessti, he had come fully back to himself. And he hated himself utterly for what he had become. He told me that what he had done was a slaughter of innocents, no less. There had been a Rebel cell on Felshesst, but it had been promoting nonviolent resistance through the withholding of taxes. They hadn't guessed that the Emperor wouldn't tolerate even that. And so he had helped to slaughter a city. He...he begged me to restore honor to his name, and to slaughter Imperials in

return, until the scales were balanced. And then he-" Her voice caught and she looked away. "He shot himself before I could stop him."

She shook slightly, crying dry tears. Tank did his best to comfort her without touching her, afraid of what inappropriate feelings that might create. "I found Genta, and we made it back to our Y-wing. I was hardly aware of what I was doing. We lifted off and climbed for space, and that was when we really got into trouble. It seems the Imperials cared a lot more about who got off planet. We were spotted by a TIE fighter patrol, and when we tried to escape, they fired at us. I'm a good pilot, and Genta was good with the ion cannon, but there were too many of them. One of their shots broke through our shields, and hit the canopy. Genta was killed instantly, and I was unconscious."

Tank looked at the canopy in front of him, shuddering. He could picture the explosions, the burning, the rush of escaping air. "How did you survive?"

"The Rebels had sent a small force to rescue anyone from the cell they could find. They were too late for that, but they found me, floating and left for dead. My suit was full of blood, and I was on the last of my oxygen. When they picked me out of this ship, it looked like I wasn't going to make it. But they were curious as to who I was, and why I was there, so they put me in a Bacta tank and took me to a nearby base. They fixed me up, as best they could, and luckily, in spite of some serious neck wounds, I made it. They were very interested in what I knew about the indoctrination program. I told them everything I knew, to repay them for saving me, except for two things. I didn't tell them about my father's death, and I didn't tell them my name. I told them it was just 'Slaughter'. The old me was dead, after what happened. It was my new name, so I wouldn't forget what to do with the second life I'd been given. When the call came to go to Yavin, I answered it. I left Genta's body at that base, where I buried it. And so here I am."

She looked directly at him. "Tank, you've got to have your own reason to be in the Alliance. It doesn't matter what it is, so long as it's your own. You'll need it to keep you going..."

"Genta was your sister," said Tank, hesitantly.

Slaughter looked sharply at him, but this time, there were real tears in her eyes. And this time, Tank held her hand while she cried.

"Look," said Biggs, standing in the doorway, "I don't mean to interrupt, but there's something you should both know."

Slaughter neatly hid the fact that she'd been crying and turned to Biggs. Tank let her hand slip from his.

"The battle station we heard about has been used, in one of the primary systems. The planet Alderaan has been totally destroyed. That's Senator Organa's homeworld. I thought you ought to know..." Biggs turned and left, his face ashen.

Slaughter asked Tank, "Now, do you know how terrified to be?"

* * *

"Then, she asked me if I would be her new partner. I didn't know what to say. It seems Biggs had told her all about me, and how good I was as a gunner. With her sister dead, she wanted someone to fly with. It was why she told me all those things about herself. She wanted me to be able to trust her, to know who she was, so that in combat..." Tank paused. "I hate it, Luke. I had her trust, too, and last night, I destroyed it."

"What happened, Tank?" asked Luke. "What happened to make you do what you did?"

Tank put some physical distance between them, to make room for the hard feelings that had to be taken out and examined. "It's hard to explain. You wouldn't think I'd still have hated you, after all that time, but I did. So when you arrived at the base, a day after I did, I was surprised myself at how I felt."

"I didn't even know you were there," protested Luke.

"I know, and I wanted it that way. The last time I saw you, we weren't exactly on the best of terms, and it bothered me that Biggs went all the way back to Tatooine to see you. He missed his graduation ceremony for that, and I honestly didn't think you were worth it. Then, totally without warning, you show up here. What a scene! There was Senator Organa, rescued right from the Death Star, this pair of smugglers, one of them a Wookiee, and you, of all people, with everybody saying you were a big hero for rescuing the Princess and bringing back the technical readouts of the Death Star! I felt like no one but me really knew you for the nobody you were. I just couldn't believe it. So I certainly couldn't let you see me. The base is a big place, and it wasn't hard to stay out of your way. During the briefing I just stood in the back with Biggs. You should have seen his face when you said that thing about Womp Rats back home, and he realized you were there! He took me outside and asked me if I'd known, and why I hadn't told him, but I just didn't want to talk about it. I think he understood. Afterwards, Biggs went to find you in the hangar. Meanwhile, I was still trying to come to terms with the fact that our evacuation had suddenly turned into a fight. I thought it must be all your fault, somehow. I did understand later that it was Leia Organa's idea, to stay and take a chance on the Death Star's weak spot, rather than allow any more worlds to be destroyed. Enough of those and we'd have to give up anyway. But mostly, I just didn't want to die."

Luke frowned, digesting all that. It was hard to see himself in a negative light, but he tried. "I did meet Biggs in the hangar," he said after a moment. "It all happened so fast. We needed more time, but we didn't have it. Not with the Death Star coming..."

* * *

Luke carried his helmet across the crowded hangar towards his waiting X-wing fighter, his heart heavy. Loss was very much on his mind. He had just said good-bye to Han, and it hadn't gone well. Then Leia, his dream girl, had said good-bye, and he'd gotten maybe his last kiss from her. And he'd already lost Ben, and everybody he knew on Tatooine was light years away... Luke felt someone grab his arm and spin him around.

"Luke!" cried Biggs. "I don't believe it! How'd you get here? Are you going out with us?"

Luke's heart leaped. It was as if he had conjured his old friend out of thin air. "Biggs! Of course, I'll be up there with you! Listen, have I got some stories to tell..."

Red Leader's arrival interrupted him. "Are you...Luke Skywalker? Have you been checked out on the Incom T-65?"

Biggs stepped in hastily to cover his friend, who hadn't. "Sir, Luke is the best bushpilot in the Outer Rim territories." In truth, Luke's practice with his Skyhopper had prepared him to fly an X-wing better than some of the other inexperienced pilots going up.

Red Leader surprised Luke by patting him on the back. "I met your father once when I was just a boy; he was a great pilot. You'll do all right. If you've got half of your father's skill, you'll do better than all right." A thrill went through Luke. He knew so little about his father, and here was someone who had met him. Ben, too, had said his father was a good pilot. Luke wanted to stop his wing leader and question him, get all he knew, but sadly, there wasn't time.

All Luke said was, "Thank you Sir, I'll try." Red Leader hurried off to his own fighter.

Biggs smiled fondly at Luke. "I've got to get aboard. Listen, you'll tell me your stories when we come back. All right?" The moment stretched out. Neither man allowed himself to think that they might not come back.

"I told you I'd make it someday, Biggs," said Luke.

Biggs started towards his ship. "You did, all right. It's going to be like old times, Luke. We're a couple of shooting stars that'll never be stopped!" That brought a clear, happy laugh out of Luke, who could recall that long-ago day shooting Sandpeople in their Skyhoppers as if it were yesterday.

Tank saw Biggs leave Luke and approach the Y-wing where he and Slaughter waited. Biggs stopped in front of them and gave Slaughter a snappy salute. "Here's to beginner's luck," he said. She smiled and gave him a thumb's up, then walked away to give Biggs and Tank a moment to themselves.

"Biggs, I--"

"Tank, we don't have much time. And there's something I need to tell you."

"There's something I want to tell you, too--"

"Tank, it might be that we don't make it back. I want you to know, I'm very, very proud of what you've become. You've become a man I'm proud to call my friend." He took Tank by both shoulders and gripped him firmly.

Tank wanted to say, I haven't become a man, I haven't become anything, I've just been following you, but he didn't let those words come out. "Biggs," he said, "You've been a father to me, and I know it hasn't been easy. But if I'm a good man, it's thanks to you. I--"

A loud voice over the speakers cut him off. "All flight troops, man your stations! All flight troops, man your stations!"

Slaughter came back and began climbing into the cockpit. Tank reluctantly climbed into the seat behind her, giving Biggs a long look as the canopy slowly lowered. Biggs returned it steadily until Tank's face was out of view. As the Y-wing canopy sealed, the sounds of the hangar were suddenly muffled, and Tank could hear his own breathing again. A crawling feeling suddenly inhabited his stomach as he realized he might die without ever getting out of his seat again. Then he looked at Slaughter's battered helmet with its cascade of brown hair escaping the back and he felt better. At least he wouldn't be alone. Then the ship's comm crackled to life and the cockpit was filled with the voices of the other pilots, reassuring each other, doing final checks, and wishing each other luck. Biggs' voice could be heard over the others for a moment as he said, "Luke, Wedge, Tank, Slaughter, may the Force be with you all!"

No, not alone. Not by a long shot.

"All right partner, here we go," said Slaughter, and the Y-wing rose gently on its repulsorlifts. Tank switched on the visual scanners and the targeting computer as the ship drifted across the hangar to the lift platform, settling there with a whine next to several other ships. The lift took them up to the launch bay, where they were surrounded by the original stone of the great Temple. In front of them, a wide exit to the jungle glowed with morning light. Tank gripped the firing sticks with sweaty hands and began to review in his mind what he and Slaughter had studied all through the night. They had gone over the Death Star plans diligently, something that surprisingly few other pilots were doing. Slaughter had even loaded a copy of the plans into her Artoo

unit, R2-B6; in case the attack failed and she survived, there would be a chance to save the information for the Alliance.

Slaughter accelerated forward, and they shot out of the Temple with three other Y-wings. The misty jungle blurred beneath them for a few moments, then they were climbing into the thick cloud cover. Massassi control sent a message, "Stand-by alert. Death Star approaching. Estimated time to firing range, fifteen minutes."

"Fifteen minutes !" cried Tank, gulping air.

In moments, they were in space, a universe of stars shining steadily all around. Tank could see the rest of the fighters gathered in a flock around him. There were thirty ships in all, twelve of the rare X-wings, and eighteen Y-wings. The battle plan was simple. Three Y-wings would make the first trench run at the thermal exhaust port. If they failed, then two flights of X-wings were prepared for the task. There wouldn't be time for any more tries. The other twenty-one fighters had the task of distracting the Imperial battle analysts from the true purpose of the attack for as long as possible. While the real attack was made on the equatorial trench, the others had to draw the TIE fighters away towards the poles.

Gold Leader, a man named Dutch, spoke crisply over the headsets, "All wings report in."

One by one came the confirming replies as the fighters hurtled around the giant planet Yavin towards the Death Star.

"Gold five standing by," said Pops.

"Gold two standing by," said Tiree.

"Gold four standing by," said Slaughter, and Tank had the totally inappropriate question in his mind of what it would have been like to kiss her.

"Gold seven standing by," said another pilot, and Tank tuned the others out as they checked in. It was a crazy time to be thinking about relationships, but he couldn't help it.

"Slaughter," he said tentatively, "I want to thank you for taking me on as your partner...and I want you to know...even though I'm younger than you, and I haven't really been around or anything, um, I like you a lot. I really do. And I wish I was older."

"Thanks for telling me that, Tank," Slaughter said. "I sort of knew you felt that way already. You can't see it, but I'm smiling. I like you, too, and maybe age isn't that important. I hope there'll be time to find out."

Tank grinned foolishly, and his heart felt like it had come home after a long absence. "Slaughter, what was your name before...you know?"

She was quiet for a moment, then she said softly, "Shally. But it's Slaughter today... Tank! There it is!"

Tank checked his visual scanner. Ahead of them was a moon-shaped object. It grew steadily, and as they approached, Tank could pick out details on its surface that destroyed the illusion that it was a natural satellite. He saw straight lines that intersected at right angles. One hemisphere was dominated by an enormous laser dish, the "Eye", and the equatorial trench became visible. Next, Tank picked out lights everywhere, like cities seen from high above. There was an impression of giant artificial mountains and valleys. Tank was overwhelmed. It was exactly as if they were attacking an entire planet. He let out a groan of dismay. "We're all going to die..."

"Hey!" said Slaughter, "Keep it together! Remember what we studied. That thing is supposed to make you afraid. That's its purpose. But we're not going to let it get to us. It's just a big machine, and we're here to destroy it."

Or die trying, thought Tank.

Red Leader's voice came over their headsets. "Accelerate to attack speed. This is it, boys!"

"Boys indeed," Slaughter muttered. "I'll show him what a girl can do." She poured on the velocity and the fighter entered a terrifying nose-dive towards the battle station's planet-like surface.

"Red Leader, this is Gold Leader."

"I copy, Gold Leader."

"We're starting for the target shaft now."

Tank saw three Y-wings peel away from the main group. Then Slaughter hurtled over the equator and sped towards the pole, accompanied by a crowd of fighters that began to break up into small groups and seek out predetermined targets. They flew low, as huge structures blurred dizzyingly close below them. Space above the station was suddenly filled with the glare of explosive charges and the bright green streaks of turbolaser bolts, as the Imperials struck back as best they could against the tiny, darting fighters. One X-wing, above and to the right of Tank, wasn't flying low enough, and became the battle's first casualty, bursting into a fiery shower of fragments that rained down onto the surface.

"Remember what we planned, Tank," called Slaughter. "Those turbolasers won't fire below a certain angle, to avoid hitting the station. We stay low and fast, and we take apart one of those city sprawls. It's time to fulfill my promise to my father."

Tank thought back to the night before, when they had been poring over the technical readouts of the Death Star. "Tank, look at this," Slaughter had said, pointing at the complex schematics. "The surface is

covered with 'city sprawls' . They're like self-contained cities...Each one has hangars, barracks...there are turbolasers and shield projectors, though. Tank, this is my chance to pay the Imperials back for Felshe'st, for my father. If I can figure a way past those defenses, they're going to know what it feels like to be in a city in flames."

Now they were streaking towards the city sprawl Slaughter had chosen. It bordered on the great superlaser dish. She had learned from the plans that the shields were weakest at the edge of the "Eye". They shot over the edge of the Eye, and dove down along its metallic slope. It looked like it stretched out before them for kilometers. A chill coursed through Tank as he imagined the fearsome blast of the superlaser emerging close by and incinerating his ship like a leaf in a forest fire.

A sudden warning from Massassi base came over Tank's headset. "Squad Leaders, we've picked up a new group of signals. Enemy fighters coming your way."

There weren't any TIE's in the area of the Eye yet, but the comm was suddenly full of pilots reacting to the attackers. "My scope's negative. I don't see anything," came the voice of Luke Skywalker.

"Keep up your visual scanning," warned Red Leader. "With all this jamming, they'll be on top of you before your scope can pick them up."

A moment later, Tank's heart constricted. "Biggs! You've picked one up," cried Red Leader. "Watch it!"

"I can't see it!" shouted Biggs, panicking. "Where is he? He's on me tight, I can't shake him...I can't shake him!"

Tank writhed in his seat, his entire body wanting to go to Biggs' defense. With a jealous relief, he heard Luke say, "Hang on, Biggs, I'm coming in." A few hellish moments passed, then Luke cried, "Got him!" Tank relaxed his grip on his firing sticks.

Slaughter called out, "We're coming up on our target...get ready, Tank!" The Y-wing now sped along the upward slope of the laser dish and sailed over the rim. Tank had a moment to target the operations station that lay at the base of three towering shield projectors, then he let loose with two proton torpedoes. They streaked towards the structure, and, as Slaughter had predicted, the weaker shields allowed the missiles to penetrate. The Y-wing soared clear as a tremendous fireball billowed out between the three towers. As secondary explosions flared, the three towers began to topple ponderously in towards each other, descending in arcs of blazing destruction. Slaughter had swung wide around the conflagration, racing low past the communications dome towards the trio of turbolasers protecting the city sprawl. Searing turbolaser bolts lanced above them, as Tank took the ion cannon controls. The swivel-mounted guns atop the Y-wing flared to life, and blue-white pulses of energy quested for the base of the first turbolaser tower, where the tracking and targeting computers were housed. The ion bursts splashed into the target, and a few moments later, the more heavily protected upper portion of the tower ceased to rotate and fire.

Coming rapidly about, the excitement of victory filling both of them, Tank and Slaughter proceeded to put the other two towers out of action.

Their headsets crackled again, and Tank picked out Gold Leader's words, "This is Gold Leader. We're starting our attack run."

"I copy, Gold Leader. Move into position," called Red Leader. The first trench run had begun.

"All right Tank," said Slaughter, "Let's do some personal damage before they blow this whole station." She soared over the now-defenseless city sprawl, and cut across the open hangar bays. With great satisfaction, Tank let loose a proton torpedo into each one, engulfing the personnel and TIE fighter pilots scrambling for launch in an inferno.

"The exhaust port is marked and locked in!" came Gold Leader's voice. "Switch power to front deflector screens."

Tank and Slaughter listened anxiously, even as they unleashed a storm of laser cannon and ion cannon fire at what they knew to be the city sprawl's command center. It exploded quite satisfactorily. "That's for you, father," said Slaughter.

"How many guns do you think, Gold five?" asked Gold Leader on the headset.

"I'd say about twenty guns. Some on the surface, some on the towers."

"Death Star will be in range in five minutes," said Massassi control.

"Switching to targeting computer," said Gold Leader.

"Computer's locked. Getting a signal," said Gold two. "The guns...they've stopped!"

"Stabilize your rear deflectors. Watch for enemy fighters," said Gold five.

"They're coming in!" shouted Gold Leader. "Three marks at two ten."

Tank's heart sank. He could picture the Y-wings, shooting down the trench, with their maneuverability so limited, and TIE fighters coming at them from behind. That meant their plan had been discovered. There was little time to worry, though, as Slaughter came up fast on the next target, a huge structure that housed over a thousand troops. Part of it was already destroyed by the falling shield towers, and Tank finished off the rest with a proton torpedo. The communications dome went up last, taking their last two torpedoes. The city sprawl was now completely

ravaged, its atmosphere rushing out into space, fueling a sea of flames across the station surface.

"And that's for the Felshessti," said Slaughter with a grim laugh of triumph.

"Uh...Slaughter?" said Tank, his eyes going wide. "Maybe we shouldn't stick around." His visual scanners had just shown him a force of ten TIE fighters heading their way. "I think we made them angry..."

Slaughter cursed as she accelerated away from the burning city sprawl. No doubt, she was recalling the unbalanced odds that had led to her sister's death over Felshesst. And they were cut off from the main group of Rebel fighters, having broken away to pursue Slaughter's revenge. It was a novice's mistake, and they were about to pay the price for it.

Gold Leader's trench run wasn't doing much better. His panicky shouts came over the headsets, "I can't maneuver!"

Gold five was somehow calm. "Stay on target."

"We're too close!" cried Gold Leader.

"Stay on target!"

"Loosen up!"

There was the sound of two explosions, and the sad voice of Gold five, the veteran known as Pops, reported, "Lost Tthree, lost Dutch."

"I copy, Gold five," said Red Leader.

"They came from behind..." There was the sound of another explosion as Pops was hit, then nothing. But Tank and Slaughter didn't have time to mourn the passing of their comrades, not when death was screaming towards them at that very moment. They flew at top speed back out over the Eye, where there were no turbolasers to worry about. The destroyed city sprawl dwindled quickly in the distance, making it depressingly clear how little real damage had been done to the world-sized battle station.

"I'm sorry, Tank," Slaughter said, choking on the words. "This is my fault. If I hadn't wanted revenge, if we'd stuck with the others-"

"Take us up!" he interrupted her, "Take us straight up!"

She pulled up instantly, and shot tangentially away from the surface. Half the TIE's reacted in time, and followed closely behind. "Look, I trust you, but what's this going to-" She checked her scanners. "Ah! We're letting the station's rotation bring us over the rest of our forces!"

Slaughter waited until she could see the lights of explosions from surface dogfighting, then she put the Y-wing into an equally sudden dive. They found themselves heading straight for one of the TIE's, and Tank's fingers hit the firing buttons. The Y-wing's forward-mounted lasers turned the Imperial into an expanding fiery cloud that they flew straight through. Now the turbolasers began to reach up towards them, as they spiraled down towards the surface.

"Red Leader, this is Base One," came the voice of General Dodonna over the headsets. "Keep half your group out of range for the next run."

"Copy Base One. Luke, take Red two and three. Hold up here and wait for my signal to start your run."

As the Y-wing banked crazily to avoid the laser fire, Tank had a moment to scoff at the idea of Luke leading a trench run. They'd have to be pretty desperate...Then they reached the surface, and he had no time for thought. It became a simple fight for survival. Slaughter's piloting skills were pushed to the limit, and Tank worked the ion cannon feverishly, but at least now they had the cover of a few ships from Red and Gold flights. Still, there seemed to be no end to the screaming TIE fighters.

The brave attack run of Red Leader formed a tense background for the harrowing dogfight. Tank listened, but he felt like the situation was light years beyond his control. At least Biggs was still all right.

"Keep your eyes open for those fighters!" called Red Leader.

"There's too much interference!" protested Red ten. "Red five, can you see them from where you are?"

"No sign of any...wait!" said Luke. "Coming in point three five."

"I see them," said Red ten.

"I'm in range," said Red Leader. "Target's coming up! Just hold them off for a few seconds."

"You'd better let her loose," yelled Red ten.

"Almost there!"

"I can't hold them!" Red ten yelled, then his scream of anguish was drowned out by a horrifying explosion.

"It's away!" shouted Red Leader.

A moment later, Red nine shouted, "It's a hit!"

"Negative," said Red Leader flatly. "Negative. It didn't go in. It just impacted on the surface."

"Red Leader," said Luke, "we're right above you. Turn to point...oh-five. We'll cover for you."

"Stay there," came Red Leader's grim voice. "I just lost my starboard engine. Get set to make your attack run."

Tank shuddered at what followed. There was the sound of a laser hit, and a long, long hopeless scream, ending in an explosion. Tank fought the urge to look at his chronometer. There must be no more than a minute or two left. He wondered, if the Death Star really destroyed Yavin Four in the next minute, would Slaughter take them out of there, to try to escape into hyperspace as planned, or would she fight to the death?

"Biggs, Wedge, let's close it up. We're going in. We're going in full throttle," said Luke.

"Right with you boss," said Wedge.

"Luke, at that speed will you be able to pull out in time?" asked Biggs.

"It'll be just like Beggar's Canyon back home."

"You better hope those two friends of yours from Tatooine are very, very good," said Slaughter. "Everything's in their hands, now."

Tank started to say, Luke's not my friend, but instead, he decided to pray for all three X-wing pilots, even if one of them was a jerk.

"We'll stay back, far enough to cover you," said Biggs.

"My scope shows the tower, but I can't see the exhaust port!" said Wedge. "Are you sure the computer can hit it?"

"Watch yourself! Increase speed full throttle!" said Luke.

"What about the tower?" Wedge insisted.

"You worry about those fighters! I'll worry about the tower!" said Luke. Typical Luke Skywalker, thought Tank.

Seconds ticked by. Tank and Slaughter had fought clear of the TIE fighters, but to their dismay, they saw that they were the only Rebel ship in sight. The little drama they were listening to was taking place just ahead, on the battle station's horizon. Slaughter took her bearings and began to fly towards the trench.

"I'm hit! I can't stay with you," shouted Wedge.

"Get clear, Wedge. You can't do any more good back there," ordered Luke.

"Sorry!" said Wedge. Tank and Slaughter saw his X-wing, tiny in the distance, climb suddenly out of the trench, marking the position of Biggs' desperate flight.

"Hurry, Luke," said Biggs worriedly. "They're coming in much faster this time. I can't hold them!" Tank listened, frustration filling him. Why was Biggs flying the dangerous cover position? Why wasn't he in the lead? "Hurry up, Luke!" cried Biggs. Then Tank heard his oldest friend and mentor give one fearful cry, "Wait!" and a thundering explosion filled his headset and turned his heart to ice.

When he could speak, he screamed.

"Biggs! NO!"

Tank's thoughts spun out of control. The next thing he heard was Massassi base, "His computer's off. Luke, you switched off your targeting computer. What's wrong?"

"Nothing," came the clipped reply. "I'm all right...I've lost Artoo!"

"The Death Star has cleared the planet. The Death Star has cleared the planet."

That's it, thought Tank. We lost. Biggs lost. And I lost Biggs. He felt a bleakness through his entire soul. Up ahead, something was happening, but Tank was only partly aware of it. A light freighter was diving out of the sun and down at the trench where Luke was. A few bursts from its quad laser guns lit up the artificial canyon, and sudden explosions bloomed. A TIE ship came flying out of the trench, out of control, and spun away from the Death Star.

"You're all clear, kid," came a confident voice. "Now let's blow this thing and go home!"

"We're getting out of here, right now," said Slaughter, decisively. "I've got a feeling about this one!" The Y-wing shook with the force of her accelerated climb away from the station. She overtook Wedge Antilles, who was turning his X-wing away from the battle station as well. Far below, barely visible against the surface, Luke's fighter blurred out of the trench and began to climb. In a rough formation, Wedge, Slaughter, the freighter, and Luke raced away together. Tank's eyes were on his scanners, riveted on the battle station, expecting to see the superlaser roar out at them.

Small flashes dotted the surface of the station. Without any other warning, the Death Star erupted into an all-consuming supernova. Tank shut his eyes and turned his head away from the stabbing glare. Moments later, a violent shock wave buffeted the Y-wing, but they rode it out. Tank slumped in his seat, dazed. He rode back to Yavin Four, unaware of his surroundings.

The first thing he saw was Slaughter's face, bending over him in concern. He thought it was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. For a moment, he drifted. All around was the sound of cheering, laughing, and shouting. Tank sat up.

Not far away, he saw Luke Skywalker climb out of his X-wing and step into a cheering, adoring throng. Senator Organa rushed past, and flung herself at Luke. The smuggler also ran up, and the three of them embraced, deliriously happy, slapping each other on the back.

"Hey! Hey!" the smuggler shouted.

"I knew you'd come back! I just knew it!" said Luke.

"Well, I wasn't gonna let you get all the credit and take all the reward," said the smuggler.

Tank's vision blurred, as swift, angry tears welled up. What about Biggs? How could Luke be laughing? How? Impossible! But he was laughing! Tank felt rage awaken in him, and he vaulted over the side of the fighter, intending to go deck Luke. Suddenly, the crowd of cheering Rebels moved their way, led by Wedge Antilles. Slaughter climbed down, and catching a glimpse of Tank's face, asked with sudden concern, "What is it? What's wrong? Tank?"

But he ducked out of reach of the revelers and ran into the shadows. Slaughter attempted to follow, but Wedge suddenly had her in a huge hug, and Commander Willard was pounding her on the back. Disturbed, she searched the shadows for some glimpse of Tank, but it was to no avail.

* * *

Five minutes of silence followed between Tank and Luke.

"I think I can explain," said Luke, finally, struggling for words. Tank was huddled into an unmoving ball, crouched on the rough stone. "I didn't...I wasn't aware of the loss, at first. What I've been through in the last few days...I was going nowhere, and all of a sudden, I was in the middle of something I wouldn't have dreamed of. It happened so fast. I found the girl of my dreams, I found a teacher who showed me I could use the Force...then I lost him. I went from nobody to...to being somebody. And I almost died quite a few times. I think maybe...maybe I grew up some, too, and Biggs wasn't my older brother any more. I was still hurting from the loss of Ben, and Biggs' death, it just didn't hit me at first.

"Tank, I'm sorry that the way I acted caused you to hate me. Was that why you thought all those things about my betraying Biggs to his Death?"

"No," said Tank, his voice muffled. "It was a lot more than that." When he looked up, Tank's dark eyes seemed like bottomless pits.

* * *

Tank left the Great Temple, and went out into the jungle, putting as much distance between the sounds of celebration and himself as possible. Soon, he was alone, surrounded by towering trees, mist, and distant animal noises. He was full of pain and anger. Why had Biggs died? Why hadn't Luke died instead? Everything was all wrong. Tank went to his knees on the wet ground and wept.

"Tank..."

He looked up sharply. Someone had whispered his name.

"Tank..."

He hadn't imagined it. It was real. He stood up and looked around.

"Tank...across the river."

He stumbled towards the sound, and came out of the trees by the wide, slow jungle watercourse that meandered past the Great Temple. Across the water, half-devoured by jungle growth, was a long rectangular stone ruin, shaped roughly like a palace.

Tank, only half-aware, slogged into the mud and clumsily swam the murky, weed-choked river. Clambering out onto the muddy far bank, he heard the voice again.

"Tank..."

He shook his head to clear it, but it didn't help. A woolly haze had enveloped his mind.

"Tank...inside." This time, the voice was insistent.

Tank trudged over to the ruined palace, compelled to follow the voice. He threaded his way around gigantic stone blocks, fallen thousands of years ago, and entered the cold, dark interior. He found himself in a black chamber. There was an impression of large spaces, but he could see nothing. The usual noises of the Woolamanders had stopped. He stood still, shivering in the mid-day heat.

Before him, a purplish light had begun to glow. There was a ripple in the air, and slowly, the light coalesced into a roughly human form. The body was indeterminate, but the face was clear. It was Biggs, exactly as Tank remembered last seeing him. Biggs wore an expression of stern sorrow.

"Tank," said Biggs.

"You...who are you? Biggs is dead," said Tank, shivering.

"I'm not fully dead, Tank," said Biggs, in a chilling monotone. "The Force exists, and through the Force, I exist. I've come to tell you of the betrayal that led to my death. Only you can punish the one responsible, and allow my spirit to rest. That one is Luke Skywalker."

Tank felt a shock of rage as his own anger suddenly increased in intensity. He shook with it.

"Yes, feel the anger. With that anger, you will punish Luke Skywalker as he must be punished. He cannot be allowed to betray a friend and escape punishment. In the final attack in the Death Star trench, Luke Skywalker, Wedge Antilles, and I were chased by the Dark Lord of the Sith. Antilles' ship was damaged, and Skywalker told him to leave the battle. It was so that no one would see his treachery. He had placed me behind him, to protect him as he neared the target, and as the Sith Lord tried to shoot him down, Skywalker flew very close to my ship, using it as a shield. I couldn't maneuver, or escape, and the Sith Lord was forced to destroy me. He wouldn't have bothered, otherwise, and like Antilles, I would have been able to get clear. The Sith Lord wanted Skywalker, and as my ship was destroyed, Skywalker accelerated away. Skywalker only had to purchase a few seconds, while his smuggler friend approached, as they had arranged. The smuggler removed the threat of the Sith Lord, and Skywalker destroyed the Death Star. Even now, he is relishing the glory he so coveted, taking the credit and the reward. And no one but you knows how he sacrificed me to save himself."

Tank reeled. A rushing wind had arisen, and it threatened to drown Biggs out.

"You must punish the traitor."

Tank nodded loosely.

"He cannot be allowed to remain with the Rebels. He will contaminate the purity of their cause. Luke Skywalker must be taken to the Empire, and given over to the Sith Lord. And so he will be punished."

Tank stared at the specter of Biggs, tears streaming down his face.

"Now go. You know what you must do."

With a shimmer, the image dissolved, plunging the room into darkness. The voice lingered for a moment as a hollow echo, then it, too, was gone.

Tank collapsed on the stone floor.

* * *

Night fell on Yavin Four. Luke stumbled into the stone bedchamber that had been provided for him, and collapsed onto the bed. He was exhausted. It had been a day to end all days. The celebration had lasted long into the evening, but finally, Luke managed to get away from Han and Leia, and creep off to bed. Once in bed, he fell asleep immediately. A little while later, he began to dream.

He was flying his X-wing down an endless trench. Except there was a ceiling, too, so that he was speeding down a sort of claustrophobic corridor. His scopes were blank, as were all his instruments. He couldn't control or slow the ship. Behind him, Darth Vader was firing at him, again and again. Each shot carved away a piece of his ship like a knife slicing meat. He couldn't do anything to stop it. There was no stopping at all.

Luke felt a sharp pain in his arm, and he shuddered awake in the dimness of his room. A figure was silhouetted against the doorway, standing over him. Luke shook his arm, and he saw a syringe land on the floor in a pool of light from the hall. He tried to sit up, but couldn't. Unconsciousness came like a heavy rubber blanket pressing tightly against his face.

This time, he dreamed about Ben. Ben was trying to tell him something. Ben needed him to know. But Luke was asleep. He had to wake up. He had to get up, so he could hear what Ben had to say...

When he awoke, he found himself with a pounding headache. He was tied by the hands and feet, and propped in the gunner's seat of a Y-wing starfighter. He was in space. In the pilot's seat was someone with thick black muddy hair. Luke groaned.

The pilot startled, and turned to look at Luke with a scowl. Luke blinked in astonishment. "Tank?! Tank Boma?!" Luke gasped.

"Yeah, that's right, Skywalker. I didn't expect you to come around until after we were in Imperial space, but it doesn't matter. This way, you'll know who's taking you to get the punishment you deserve." Tank grated out the next words. "How could you do it, Luke? How could you sacrifice Biggs, just so you could get all the glory? I thought you were his friend! Biggs thought so! But you let him die!"

Luke was dumbfounded, and still groggy. "I don't know...what you're talking about--I don't know how I got here. I don't know how you got here!" Luke was unable to clutch at his throbbing head, because his hands were tied behind him. He fruitlessly checked for his lightsaber.

"Don't pretend you don't know, Luke. I know what happened. The Sith Lord was going to kill you, and you used Biggs as a shield until that smuggler could get there. Biggs could have gotten away, but you didn't let him. The Rebels don't know, and they don't have to. As long

as I deliver you to the Empire, I'll be saving them from having a traitor in their midst."

"Deliver me to the Empire?! Tank, what's going on? Where are we? Look--you've got it all wrong! I didn't betray Biggs. Vader shot him down, and would have killed me, too, if Han Solo hadn't unexpectedly shown up."

"Of course, you'd lie to save yourself. You've been doing it all day," Tank sneered. "I knew there was something rotten about you the first time I saw you on Tatooine. I just never knew how rotten. You're a murderer, Luke, and I'm taking you in."

"Wait, can't we talk about this? I really don't know what you're talking about. It wasn't that way at all. You've got to believe me. Look--Tank, if you take me to the Empire, they'll kill me. Then it'd be you who'd be the murderer, Tank. Don't do this--you don't have to do this..."

Tank turned away angrily. "Enough of this stupid talk! I'm trying to program this thing for the jump to hyperspace. It's hard enough with that droid refusing to cooperate and help me."

The angry sounding beeping of an Artoo unit sounded over the cockpit speaker.

"Shut up, droid. You can't do anything about it. And neither can you, Skywalker." Tank worked for another minute, then sat back in triumph. "Done! Time to put Biggs' spirit to rest." He reached for the control lever to make the jump to hyperspace.

A woman's voice came over the comm, stopping his hand. "Tank! Tank, can you hear me? It's me, Slaughter. I know you have Luke, but I don't know why. Will you talk to me, Tank?"

Tank hesitated, then slapped at the comm. "Stay out of this! It isn't any of your business! You don't know what Skywalker did!"

"I'd know if you tell me," she said cautiously.

"He-" Tank turned and glared hatefully at Luke. "He killed Biggs. He used Biggs' ship as a shield when the Sith Lord fired at him. He sacrificed Biggs so he could live a few more seconds until his smuggler friend could rescue him. He did it to get the glory! Biggs...he could have survived if Luke hadn't trapped him like that. Now leave me alone! I'm taking Luke to turn him over to the Empire."

Luke craned his neck to get a look out the window. The sight of the Millennium Falcon cruising alongside filled his heart with bright joy.

Another voice, Han Solo's, came over the channel. "Look, this ain't workin! You said you could talk this kid out of it. That's Luke

in there with that crazy person! I say we blast his engines and put a stop to this kidnapping right now!"

Tank shouted, "You just try! I'm one second away from a jump to hyperspace--"

"It's an open channel ,," came Leia's angry voice. "He can hear you, laser-brain!"

"Well you're the high and mighty diplomat, your royalness--you think of something to say!" shouted Han.

Chewie's roar of impatience rumbled over the channel, followed by a few beeps and whistles.

"Excuse me," came a polite metallic voice. "Artoo Detoo here says he has an idea. Frankly, I don't place much confidence in his ideas lately. I've made the mistake of going along with them a few too many times, and it has only brought me misery!"

Artoo blatted loudly.

"What do you mean, 'don't talk that way to a hero'!" exclaimed Threepio.

"Threepio! Shut up, will ya?" said Han. "Tell us what his idea is!"

"Oh. Well, Artoo says that he can transmit a message to the Artoo unit on that fighter, and that that will clear everything up."

"Go ahead Artoo," said Leia, "and hurry!"

The cockpit of the tiny Y-wing was suddenly filled with an electronic string of noises. The Artoo unit on the Y-wing rocked back and forth in excitement, and plugged an arm into a socket. Its dome spun around, once.

Tank jumped back as his control panel suddenly became the miniature stage for a holofilm. Before his eyes, tiny holographic representations of the trench battle appeared. A trio of TIE fighters was coming up behind an X-wing, fast. The point of view was from a second X-wing's droid socket, looking back at the other ships. There was a gap of about ten ship lengths between the X-wings. The distant X-wing was trying desperately to interpose itself between the TIE fighters and the nearer X-wing. Laser fire suddenly emerged from the TIE with the curved wings, and the distant X-wing exploded in a ball of flame. The images ended, and with a flicker, they repeated in a short loop.

Tank gaped at the display. Over and over, the glowing miniature ships asserted their truth. But ever since his encounter in the palace, a rushing sound had constantly filled Tank's mind. Sometimes, it sounded like wind, sometimes like a multitude of voices. It made it very hard to think. Tank shut his eyes against the holoid images, one sweaty hand

grasping the hyperdrive lever. He was awash in a sea of confusion. If the droid's hologram data were telling the truth, then the spirit of Biggs had lied.

I've come to tell you of the betrayal that led to my death. Such a cold and ponderous voice. Not like Biggs at all. Another time, another conversation swam into his consciousness. 'Luke is my best friend!' Biggs had told him, once. And during the battle, Luke had saved Biggs' life. Hang on Biggs, I'm coming in! Got him! But the chill voice continued to insist on its justice. He cannot be allowed to betray a friend and escape punishment. You know what you must do. Luke Skywalker must be taken to the Empire, and given over to the Sith Lord.

Tank let go of the lever and put his head in his hands. Instead of feeling right, this still felt all wrong. Biggs didn't know anything about any Dark Lord of the Sith, whatever that might be. Then, Slaughter's worried voice came over the comm.

"Tank! Please don't do this! Talk to me. You're not yourself-- you're not the person who just risked his life against the Death Star! That Tank wouldn't turn someone over to the Empire. Tank, listen to me..."

Tank lifted his head. Her clear voice was driving away the shadowy whispers in his mind. He watched the holodisplay flicker before him. Biggs veered from side to side, trying to hold off the Imperial fighters. He couldn't, and he died. The meaning of it finally sank in. He had been wrong. Whatever that thing was in the palace, it had lied to him. Luke hadn't sacrificed Biggs. Biggs had sacrificed himself for Luke. Biggs had loved Luke that much. His dying wish had been to see Luke safe, and now Tank was betraying that wish.

Tank crumbled. With a weak hand, he shut down the hyperdrive, and wearily said into the open channel, "I surrender."

* * *

"So now you know everything," said Tank. "I wouldn't blame you if you hated me, just like I hated you."

"No," said Luke, "I couldn't hate you, because Biggs wouldn't have, either. And I think I can forgive you, for everything. I don't really understand what happened yet, but..."

"I don't understand it either, Luke," said Tank. "Maybe I never will."

There was another quiet period between them, but it was a peaceful silence. Suddenly, Tank stood up and pointed to the sky. "What's that?" he exclaimed.

"A little memorial I arranged for Biggs," said Luke. "I went up in my X-wing today, and blasted apart some of the wreckage from the Death Star. I had planned for some of it to fall just like this."

The sky above the two figures atop the ancient stone Temple was full of glorious streaks of light. Meteors by the hundreds were falling into the atmosphere. Everywhere Luke and Tank looked, there were shooting stars. Tank gazed at Luke, his breath taken away. A tear was rolling down the young hero's face, golden in the light of Yavin.

"We're a couple of shooting stars, Biggs," Luke breathed, "and we'll never be stopped..." Luke raised one hand, holding a silvery cylinder high. A moment later, his lightsaber blade blazed blue-white against the starry sky, burning as brightly as his memories of his best friend.

* * *

The chill of the dark interior of the palace of the Woolamander got a little colder, as an ethereal figure shimmered into being. It was the image of a big man, with long black hair and archaic armor. He had a black, sun-shaped tattoo on his forehead, and below his sharp, glittering eyes, his face bore three parallel scars. His name was Exar Kun, and four thousand years ago, he had been the Dark Lord of the Sith. But the Jedi had defeated him during the Great Sith War, leaving his disembodied spirit to cling to a shadow of life. The Massassi ruins were ancient structures for focusing Sith magic, and by inhabiting them, the Dark Lord had survived.

Exar Kun was disappointed now. His plan had failed. The young man, Luke Skywalker, had not been delivered to Darth Vader, the new Dark Lord of the Sith. It disturbed Exar Kun that the current Dark Lord was totally subordinate to Emperor Palpatine. Oh, how the Sith had fallen. Luke Skywalker was the son of the Sith Lord, and shared his potential for the dark side Sith magic. Together, Luke and his father might continue the Sith, strengthening them, creating a future in which they might rise again. It was not to be, at least not for the present. But there was time. Time to try again. He need only wait.

Exar Kun had become very much accustomed to waiting...

Tank walked slowly through the Rebel base, towards the turbolift. The other Rebels he saw didn't seem to recognize him, which was fine with him. He stepped reluctantly into the lift, and descended to the hangar level. As he sank, he thought his heart could sink no lower. A while ago, Wedge had found him, and told him that Slaughter wanted to see him in the hangar. Tank supposed she wanted to chew him out and tell him she never wanted to see him again.

His footsteps were heavy as he approached her Y-wing fighter. No one else seemed to be in the hangar, and his boots echoed.

"Tank," Slaughter called to him. "Come on over here."

She was waiting by the ladder to the Y-wing's cockpit, her face stern. Tank stopped a few feet from her.

"No--closer," she told him.

He stepped right up to her, but couldn't look her in the eyes. Suddenly, Slaughter grabbed Tank by his clothes with both hands, spun him, and slammed him against the fighter. She looked directly into his eyes, commanding him with her angry ones. "Don't ever," she grated, "steal my ship again."

Then she kissed him full on the lips.

"As long as you can manage not to do that, we'll get along just fine, partner." She gave him a wide smile, even as he stared at her in shock. "Luke told me all about it...if he can forgive you, I guess I can, too."

Tank finally found his voice. "I...I...thanks! Uh...could you put me down?"

Grinning, she let his feet fully touch the floor again.

"Slaughter? I've been thinking. About what you said about how I have to have my own reason to be in the Alliance...Well I do. All I have to do is think about two things. One is that Death Star, and the evil people who built it. They can't go on doing that kind of thing and get away with it."

"And the other thing?"

"I'm looking at her. Slaughter, I want to stay in the Alliance and be your partner, if you'll have me."

"Tank, with you and me together out there, the Empire doesn't stand a chance!"