

STAR WARS

Rising Stars

By Brendon J.Wahlberg

The fires of revolution sweep across the galaxy, calling all freedom fighters to stand against the Empire. Alliance agents Tank Boma and Shally Edrin are ready to embark on a mission to save vital new starships for the Rebellion.

But there are other, darker calls to be answered. For too long, the Order of the Sith has lain dormant. A voice from the past summons Darth Vader to resurrect the ancient evil.

Above the ocean world of Calamari, the stage is set for the confrontation between the forces of freedom and the students of darkness...

PROLOGUE

The vast arrowhead shape of the Super Star Destroyer Executor hung in space above the verdant moon of Yavin, its cityscape hull glittering with thousands of lights. One tiny light detached itself from the rest and fell away towards the cloudy jungle world below. The tri-winged shape of the Imperial Lambda-class shuttle gave it the aspect of an improbable bird, hunting for metallic prey in the misty trees blurring past beneath it. The shuttle's destination was a large clearing next to a cluster of towering stone ruins. The predatory ship cleared the last of the great trees and gently drifted down among an orderly group of assault shuttles and TIE fighters. The clearing was a hive of activity, full of stormtroopers and officers hurrying to pick up the pieces of the recent Imperial fiasco. The ancient temple which hulked above all of them had been the main Rebel base from which a successful attack on the Death Star had been launched. By all rights, it should have been the Rebels' tomb as well.

After the battle of Yavin, an Imperial blockade commanded by Admiral Griff had pinned the Rebels down while the Executor was completed. It had suited Lord Vader to annihilate them personally with his impressive new flagship. But the Rebels had had two strokes of good fortune. First, the planet of Calamari had gone into open revolt and attacked Griff's blockade while Yavin base was evacuated. Second, Griff had obstructed Lord Vader's attack on the Rebel fleet, seeking to win the

glory for himself. The Admiral had paid for his foolishness with his life, but the Rebel fleet had escaped from Yavin.

The Executor had proceeded to the Yavin system to sift the ruins for some clue to the Rebels' destination. Stormtrooper boots now echoed in the stone hallways and empty hangars of the Massassi Great Temple, where once alien feet had walked. A signal alert suddenly brought the soldiers to attention and sent them moving briskly out of the Temple and into the clearing, where they lined up in a precise formation. The ramp of the shuttle that had just landed lowered with a hiss of steam that mingled with the ground mists. Out of the billowing whiteness strode a figure of absolute blackness. Darth Vader, Dark Lord of the Sith, stood at the bottom of the ramp in silence, looking not at the ranks of troopers, but over their heads at the enormous ruins. He was pensive. Something stirred in him at the sight of the huge stepped pyramid. There was a sense of familiarity to it that disturbed him.

The approach of General Veers distracted Vader. Veers was an eminently calm and practical man, who felt that as long as he did his duty efficiently, he had nothing to fear, not even the angry Sith Lord whose will had been so recently thwarted. Veers stepped up to gaze dispassionately at Vader's black breath mask.

"My Lord, the Rebel base is completely deserted," said Veers. "The computer banks have been swept clean of any information, and we have found no clues as to the destination of the Rebel fleet." Veers gestured at two stormtroopers who were holding a filthy, aged human slumped unconscious between them. "We found this survivor in a smaller temple across the river. He evidently stayed behind to set off concussion charges that destroyed a TIE bomber flight as it came in. We found him barely alive in the rubble of the building."

Vader looked closely at the bleeding, gaunt old man in question, and felt a surprised recognition. "This is Jan Dodonna, one of the most important military commanders in the Alliance. There is a standing order for his execution. No doubt the Emperor will wish to speak with him. See that he remains alive, General."

Veers saluted. "Yes, My Lord."

Vader strode past as Dodonna was taken to a waiting assault shuttle. He was focused on the ruins again. There was something familiar about them. He could pick out vast carvings, eroded with time and barely visible amongst the crawling vines on the steep walls. Vader's eyes widened behind his polished mask. The carvings were old Sith symbols. But Vader had not heard of a Sith outpost existing in the Yavin system. The troops moving around him were unaware of their Commander's astonishment. Nor did they hear it when a low voice, sounding like the rumblings of a distant storm, spoke Darth Vader's name.

Vader looked up sharply and reached out with the Force. He immediately pinpointed the source of the call, a long rectangular palace ruin across the river, its fallen stone blocks buried in the undergrowth. The Dark Lord left the clearing and the Imperial forces behind,

and walked decisively into the jungle. The lush plant life parted before him at a touch of his mind, revealing the choked, muddy river just ahead. Before even a smear of mud could soil his gleaming boots, the Sith Lord rose silently into the air and glided over the meandering watercourse, settling in front of the foreboding palace entryway. He hesitated at the absolute darkness beyond, but something within it knew him and was calling to its own.

Soon after he entered, he left the light behind. He found himself in a cold chamber, the great size of which was only felt. The small lights of his life support controls did nothing to illuminate the space around him. For a moment, there was only the slow sound of his mechanized breathing, then a bleak voice intoned, "Welcome, Lord Vader." There was a ripple in the darkness, and a purple glow was born there. The light grew, and condensed into a detailed human shape. It was a large man in archaic armor. His majestic face bore three parallel scars, and an odd symbol was on his forehead. The shimmering apparition regarded Vader with a hint of disdain. "So, this is what has become of the Dark Lord of the Sith," he said, staring at Vader's armor. "A cyborg, a cripple, kept alive only by machines. You're as much of a prisoner as I am, forced to exist in these four thousand year old ruins."

Vader's lightsaber ignited at the same moment as his anger. The crimson blade pulsed hotly in front of the cold mocking spirit, dimming the figure's radiance with its own. "Who are you!" Vader demanded, his deep voice full of danger.

"I warn you, Lord Vader, do not think to attack me with that weapon in this place. I can channel enough power back through it to destroy you. This structure does more than maintain my existence; it is a focus for Sith magic that I myself constructed four thousand years ago, when I was Dark Lord of the Sith."

Vader lifted his blade away. "You are Exar Kun."

"Yes, it's good to be remembered," Kun smiled darkly. I have been wanting to speak with you about the order of the Sith, Lord Vader." The smile became a frown. "In particular, why it no longer exists!"

Vader shut down his lightsaber. The purple light thrown off by Exar Kun glinted on his highly polished helmet as he stood immobile, his stare fixed on the accusing face before him. "They are all dead," he began, "killed in battle with the Jedi during the Emperor's purge--"

"Not killed," interrupted Kun sharply, "sacrificed by Palpatine for his own ends! And that left you alone, Dark Lord over no one!"

Vader recoiled, offended at Kun's words, then collected his own dark dignity. "History teaches that your own defeat left nothing of the Sith either. The survivors went into hiding and their descendants lost much of your fabled knowledge and power. When I came to them, they were merely an order of monk archivists, keeping the remaining books of Sith lore...do not speak to me of failure, Exar Kun."

Kun looked sullenly at Vader. "I know what happened to the Sith. I watched events transpire over the millennia, while I was trapped here. I know how far my followers fell. But because they didn't forget their former glory, they still had farther to fall. They had a prophecy that one day, a new Dark Lord would come to lead them to triumph."

"They believed I was the one foretold," Vader said. "When I was saved by my Master and given a new body, they helped me to recover." He touched his mask. "They created this, in the image of the helm of a great Sith Warlord of the past."

"That was Sar Maland, long before my time," said Kun impatiently, "a name to conjure lost conquests with. I am aware of what they hoped you would be. The problem was that some of the Sith became impatient for the prophecy to be fulfilled. Before you ever arrived, they went out from their monastery on Horuz and followed the guidance of the Force to find a young boy named Espaa. They took him, raised him, and trained him in the ways of the Sith." Kun paused, looking closely at Vader for any hint that he already knew this, and finding none. "That boy was not the one they had hoped for," Kun said flatly, turning away from Vader. "He surpassed the Sith quickly, but his goals were never to lead them. In some real way...the Force chose Espaa as the agent it wanted to work through. He became the greatest Master of the dark side. After that, he wanted no competition while he conquered the galaxy. He decided to use and destroy the Sith. You know I'm talking about Palpatine, don't you," demanded Kun, facing Vader once more.

Vader struggled with what he was hearing. It was mostly a revelation to him, but it made a horrible kind of sense. The Emperor's powers had to have come from somewhere. What Vader could not accept was the accusation that his Master had coldly betrayed the Sith. "He is my Master," Vader insisted, "he sent me to the Sith to learn from them. He gave me all that I have. You can keep your lies, Exar Kun--"

"He knew about the prophecy," Kun cut in. "He sent you to them as the first step in his manipulations. He wanted them to think their days of power and glory had returned. Then, when the time came to crush the Jedi, he used the Sith as his weapon. But the Jedi were too strong, and they were forewarned by your old Master, Kenobi. Many Jedi died, yes, but all the Sith died except you, and the Monastery was ruined."

Vader felt the pain of those memories. He had faced Kenobi on Horuz, and the Jedi Master had nearly killed him. Kenobi had left him to die, forced to flee by attacking Sith adepts. Kenobi had known about the Sith after that, and he could have prepared the Jedi.

Exar Kun pressed on relentlessly. "You were not even present for their final defeat, called to the Emperor's side so you could not save them. What did he tell you? That the Sith were taken by surprise? That it was too late to help them? He probably foresaw the entire chain of events. Then he had you to help him destroy the weakened Jedi order, you, the last Dark Lord of the Sith, now the Emperor's servant. When your title was mine, it was a station of power. Palpatine has made it a

mockery. You believe all of his lies," sneered Kun, "and he uses you most of all."

"The Emperor is my Master!" Vader raged, pushed over the edge. "I will not hear you heap scorn upon his name!"

Kun's light form blazed, matching Vader's anger. "The Emperor is a dead thing, like me! He has misused his power, and it has killed him! But like me, he found a way to cheat death."

Vader backed down, confused. He recalled that his Master had regained his youth after the destruction of the Death Star, but he had not imagined that it had involved dying and being reborn.

"Yes," Kun continued, "you must learn what kind of creature he is. He is not fit to bring a final end to the Sith. You are still the Dark Lord. I charge you to restore the order. Pass on what you know, and the Sith will be reborn."

Vader struggled for control. Kun probably had him right where he wanted him. His beliefs were being challenged, and he felt vulnerable. "My Master would not allow it, if what you say is true," he grated.

"I will show you how to hide your thoughts from him, as you seek out and train the first of the new Sith. It will only require a few. In my time, the order was restored by four people." Exar Kun held out his spectral hands in a gesture of peace. "We should not be enemies, you and I. We can help one another."

Vader still trembled slightly with repressed hostility. "Then I know who the first of the new Sith will be. I am searching for my son, and when I find him, I will train him in the Sith ways."

"I felt your son's presence, on this moon," said Kun. "His actions preserved my existence. I even tried to deliver him to you, but circumstances beyond my control led to my failure. However, even if you don't find him, you must still rebuild the Sith. There will be others who will be suitable. You will know them for what they are."

"And what will I teach them?" Vader rumbled.

"I know you retain only a few books and artifacts of Sith power, which you hide from Palpatine. But I have some help to give you in that matter. Lift the stone at my feet."

Vader bent and grasped the edge of a dimly lit flagstone. With a smooth effort of his cyborg strength, he cast the stone aside. In a shallow hole beneath, he found a small cube that glowed softly with a purple light. He lifted it out, cradling it in his gloved palm.

"What is this, Exar Kun?" he demanded.

"A gift for you, my successor. My own Sith Holocron." The glowing face of Exar Kun held a look of deep satisfaction.

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Bast Castle was Darth Vader's private refuge on the barren world of Vjun. It rested atop the flat surface of a huge tower of rock, surrounded by a sky full of violent acid storm clouds. The great up thrusting spire had been sliced horizontally, creating a lofty plateau, reachable only by flight. The dark side stronghold was made of both stone and gleaming metal, a reflection of both Vader's ancient heritage and his current physical nature. Vader had designed it as a shell-like enclosure with a central tower, a replica of the lost Sith Monastery where he had become Dark Lord.

The halls of Bast Castle were empty and echoing as Vader strode through them towards the central audience chamber. Waiting for him there would be the first two of the new Sith, just returned from their artifact quests. He had required both initiates to seek out and rediscover pieces of Sith lore as a final test of their abilities and commitment. Now he was going to meet them and pronounce their acceptance into the order of the Sith.

He entered the large dome-shaped room, glancing briefly at the murals on the ceiling that depicted the long history of the Sith. Images of Dark Lords of the past formed a majestic parade high above. Among them was Exar Kun, whose final resting place, Vader now knew, was a moon of Yavin. Kun seemed to meet his eyes for a moment, telling him, good work. This is a start.

Waiting in the center of the room were two people, a man and a woman, both young and both highly unusual in appearance. The woman was named Shira Brie, and Vader had known of her all of her life. She had been raised on one of Palpatine's estates and had been part of COMPNOR's adolescent indoctrination program. An impressive Academy record had led Shira to work in Imperial Intelligence. She was biologically altered to reject pain and accelerate healing, and Vader had selected her to infiltrate the Rebel Alliance. Shira went into deep cover after the battle of Yavin, posing as a Rebel and waiting for a chance to damage the Rebel cause without wasting her own life. She had joined a small base on the planet Kulthis in the Belderone system, a starfighter base where her piloting skills made her a valuable recruit. The planet Belderone had been the site of an AT-AT factory, which was soon discovered by the Rebels on Kulthis. Such an important target drew the attention of Luke Skywalker and his newly formed "Rogue Squadron". Vader had received news from a minor official that his son had been spotted on Belderone, and had gone there at once with the Executor. He had also made sure that the AT-AT factory was prepared for the inevitable Rebel attack. When the Rebels struck, they were violently pushed back. Vader's fleet arrived in the system, and Kulthis base was driven to use a clever tactic to delay the strike fleet while they evacuated. The Rebels had a number of TIE fighters that they equipped with hyperdrives. Rebel pilots had flown them among the Star Destroyers and caused a great deal of damage. One of

the pilots had been Shira Brie, another, Luke Skywalker. Shira had planned to shoot down Luke's fighter, depriving the Rebels of a valued Commander. In the chaos of battle, with so many TIE's firing, her act would go unnoticed. Vader felt it was fortunate that she had not succeeded, despite the consequences to Shira. His son's fledgling skill in the Force must have been enough to reveal Shira as an enemy, and he shot her down before she could fire. Luke had escaped into hyperspace, and Kulthis had been evacuated successfully. Shira's damaged ship had drifted among the Star Destroyers while her bio-augmentation kept her alive. Her life signs were detected, and she was taken aboard and placed into a Bacta tank.

Vader had gone down to Belderone to investigate the sighting of his son. There, perhaps led by the Force, he had come upon the other person who now stood before him as a Sith initiate. His name was Flint, and his Jedi father had been killed in the Emperor's purge. Flint had lived with his mother on Belderone, running a small tavern. The place had burned when the Rebels had been forced to retreat through town, fleeing the AT-AT's. When Vader found him, Flint was kneeling over the dead body of his mother, stricken with grief. He had faced the Dark lord bravely, and Vader had told him that he could sense Flint's potential in the Force. Flint's main desire had been for power, to become someone who mattered, never again to be as helpless as he was at that moment. He blamed the Rebels for his mother's death, and agreed to come with Vader and be trained by him. Vader had begun to see the unfolding future described by Exar Kun.

Upon returning to the Executor, Vader had been surprised to learn of the presence and fate of Shira Brie. He decided that it was necessary to cyborg her to save her life. In close contact with her for the first time, he had sensed her Force potential as well. Vader was aware of the workings of destiny, and decided to train both Shira and Flint as the first new Sith.

His task contrasted sharply with his memories of his own conflict-filled training in the dark side. With his new students, there was no influence of the light side to break free from. Lumiya smoothly followed her anger along the path of power, and Flint's desire for strength made his road clear as well. Using the Holocron and working away from the eyes of the Emperor, Vader had educated them in the lost Sith powers of Exar Kun's day. They became adept at the use of illusion, and penetrated secrets of alchemy and transformation. Both had been open to the use of anger to unlock and unleash power, and both learned how to broadcast their emotions to influence others. Their final test had been to recreate a Sith artifact, in keeping with the ancient use of artifacts to focus and multiply power.

The new Sith gave Vader their full attention as he entered. Shira was partly masked with an angular helmet that left only her eyes visible. She had a gaze like sharpened steel. Sleek, smooth gray metal armor covered most of her exterior, with some areas modular in appearance like a circuit board. Her slim hips supported a small control belt. Her cyborg body was far more sexual than Shira's had been before; she looked like a mortal threat, contained in an incongruously attractive package.

Vader was far beyond any concern for physical attraction, but he sensed that Flint was interested in her. Flint was a somber-looking man with a large, strong face, neat, short brown hair, and cool blue eyes. He wore a suit of heavy plate armor like something out of legends, complete with a cape. He held a horned helmet with a mirror like surface in one gauntleted hand, and a lightsaber hung at his side.

Flint and Shira went to their knees and waited for Vader to tell them to rise. The Dark Lord regarded them for a long moment. They gave him a feeling of pride. Exar Kun had been right. The Sith should not perish, no matter what his Master wanted. These were his students, his creations. They gave his life more meaning than it otherwise would have had. Flint seemed to Vader to be a younger version of himself, in his old life, when he had just begun to explore his power in the dark side. Shira was more like what he had become later, part machine, a creature less connected to life than to death, and stronger in the dark side as a result. Both of them were his children.

Deep within, on a level just below awareness, the bonds of servitude that made him Palpatine's creature began to loosen.

"Rise, my students," said Vader. "Are your artifact quests now complete?" He looked at Flint first.

"Lord Vader," said Flint with evident satisfaction, "I have rediscovered a kind of metal called Mandalorian Iron, that resists the blade of a lightsaber. I have built this suit of armor from it."

Vader nodded in approval. "And you have constructed a lightsaber. Your skills are complete. I pronounce you to be Flint of the order of the Sith."

Flint bowed deeply. Vader turned to Shira.

"My Lord," she said tensely, "I have rediscovered a Sith weapon called the light whip." She held up a cylindrical hand grip bearing a single activation stud, attached to a long coil of metal strands. "When I activate it, it channels energy along the physical strands. It was a weapon created to defeat the Jedi lightsabers of long ago." She waited, holding something back, coiled like her weapon.

Again, Vader showed his approval. "Your skills are complete," he intoned. "I pronounce you to be Shira of the--"

"My Lord," she interrupted firmly, "I ask to follow one Sith custom, and change my name. I feel it is fitting, because my old self, Shira Brie, died at Kulthis, killed by Luke Skywalker. In her place, another was born. I take the name of Lumiya, the creator of the light whip, to show that I am a weapon for the destruction of Skywalker and his Rebellion."

Vader moved in on her, towering over her and radiating a sudden threat. "You may take whatever name you wish, Lumiya, but you will not

destroy Skywalker. He is mine to deal with and mine alone. You may do what you wish to the other Rebels, but you will not seek him out. He may one day become one of us. If you disobey me...I will destroy you."

Lumiya had backed up a few steps, and she tried to recover her composure. It was clear that she bore considerable hatred for Luke, and that she was repelled by the idea of him joining them, but that she would obey him for now. "My Lord," she stammered, "I meant no disobedience. Now that I know your wishes, I will carry them out. In service to you, I will lay down my life for the destruction of the Alliance."

Flint had been watching the confrontation with concern, divided by his loyalty to Vader and his attraction to the beautiful cyborg. When Vader relented, Flint seemed relieved that the moment had passed. "I will tell you how you will both serve me," said Vader. "As you know, your existence is not known to the Emperor, but you cannot be hidden forever. When you finally go before him, it will be necessary that he sees you as his servants in the dark side, like High Inquisitor Tremayne is. To that end, you must be able to show that you have served the Empire. Otherwise, he may destroy you or claim you for his own. You do not want his full attention upon you...he is an unforgiving Master. Your first assignment will be to lead the new blockade of the Mon Calamari shipyards. They have openly rebelled, and are attempting to produce capital ships for the Alliance. This must not be allowed. The Emperor feels he cannot spare the forces necessary to completely overwhelm the Mon Calamari. One day, he will punish them, but not yet. They are too unimportant to him, but I see it differently. I have persuaded my Master to create a blockade, which you will command. Do not disappoint me, and we will face the Emperor when the time is right."

Vader sensed the firm connection between his students, created by the new assignment. He sensed a mutual attraction as well, but in Lumiya, it was blended with pain, a reflection of the self-loathing he knew lurked within her. He felt their loyalty to him, and decided that he trusted them. Once again, he looked up at the painted image of Exar Kun, and imagined that the spirit of the old Dark Lord was pleased. The Sith lived again.

* * *

Biggs really should have been here, thought Tank sadly, as he waited to get married. He stood in the front of the briefing room of the Alliance Frigate Mercy, thinking about his one time father figure, oblivious to the happy little group of Rebels relaxing in chairs as they waited for the ceremony to start. It was nearly three years ago that Biggs had died, leaving Tank alone and forcing him to find his own direction in life. Fortunately, a new life had been there for the taking. Biggs had led him to Yavin Four, where Tank had fought against the Empire's Death Star. Biggs had been killed in that battle, but Tank had lived to decide to stay with the Alliance and carry on the important struggle that Biggs had sacrificed himself for. As an Academy trained

gunner, Tank was a valuable recruit, and furthermore, he was surprised at the notoriety and respect he earned simply by being one of the very few survivors of the Battle of Yavin. The Alliance had been very willing to accept him, and Tank had been very willing to accept the Alliance, largely due to the young woman who had piloted the Y-wing with Tank as gunner in that battle, the woman who was about to become his wife.

Shally Edrin, known to her fellow field operatives in Alliance Intelligence as "Slaughter", was a formidable person. Tank had met her on the way to Yavin, and had fallen in love with her right away. To his great surprise, she had returned his interest, showing it by sharing her tragic story and trusting him to be her gunner and partner. Shally's father had been forcibly made into a stormtrooper in a radical indoctrination program aimed at producing soldiers who would blindly follow the most sadistic orders. She and her sister Genta had hunted across space for him, finding him only in time to see him commit suicide as his conditioning failed. During their flight from the city their father had helped to destroy, Genta had been killed by Imperials, and Shally had nearly died herself. Rebel medics had saved her life, and she had joined the Alliance to deal out some measure of revenge on behalf of her family. She had taken on the name of Slaughter as a self-reminder of the purpose of her new life, and in large part, she had put the spirit of her father to rest at Yavin. Such was her subsequent reputation, however, that the name Slaughter had stuck firmly among the Rebels with whom she served. But to Tank, she would always be Shally.

"Excuse me," said a slightly squeaky, officious voice. "Perhaps we could get started? We have a schedule to meet, and we are running distressingly behind it. Even if you organics do not care about efficiency and your other duties, I, as an astromech droid, am very much concerned. There is a mission to prepare for! There are a thousand technical details to coordinate and confirm! I personally am responsible for the maintenance of--"

"Beesix!" said Tank sharply. "I know you have work to do. So do I! But this is an important occasion. Have a little patience, will you? Besides, shouldn't you be checking on the bride, and not rolling around complaining, holding things up even more?" Tank frowned at the short green cylindrical R2 unit that was moving agitatedly at his side. A gray box had been mounted on top of its dome, where it resembled a sort of metal hat. This object was an astromech voice box, a new device that translated the electronic language of the R2 series into basic. Tank had bought it for Shally's droid as a wedding present, knowing how much she cared for the little machine, with the idea that it would make her happy to be able to communicate with the loyal unit more easily. He had ignored several warnings that the R2 series had never been meant to talk, and that their headstrong personalities were best left to beeps and whistles that one could ignore when they got argumentative. Too late now, he thought, sighing.

Artoo Beesix seemed chagrined at Tank's reprimand, and he scooted off to find his Mistress. I shouldn't be so hard on the little guy, thought Tank. He did save me from making the biggest mistake of my life. After the battle of Yavin, Tank had fallen under the influence of an evil

entity, which caused him to believe that Luke Skywalker had sacrificed Biggs to save himself. Tank had been about to turn Luke over to something called a Sith Lord when Shally and Luke's friends had caught up with him. Working with Luke's R2 unit, Beesix had forced Tank to see that belief as a lie. Tank had surrendered Luke and was grateful for the Rebel hero's forgiveness afterwards. Tank had grown up on Tatooine knowing Luke, but they had disliked each other. Biggs had stood between them, caring for each of them very much and trying not to let either one get hurt. But Tank had been all too willing to believe the worst about Luke, and was easily controlled by the dark entity he had encountered in Yavin's ruins. After Tank had reconciled with Luke, they had looked for evidence of that malevolent spirit, but had found nothing.

Tank had left Luke on Yavin, and had gone with Shally to serve on an Alliance starfighter base on the planet Kulthis. He didn't see his fellow Tatooine native until after the evacuation of Massassi base, when Luke had brought his Rouge squadron to Kulthis to help attack an AT-AT factory on nearby Belderone. Tank and Shally had discovered the factory on their first mission for Airen Cracken. When Tank briefed Luke about it, the two of them had managed to work together without much discomfort. Then, in a whirlwind series of events that amazed Tank, a huge Imperial strike fleet had arrived in the system and forced the evacuation of Kulthis. Luke had gone up in a TIE fighter to delay the Imperials, and Tank hadn't seen him again. He had, however, heard that Luke had survived. Which was lucky for Luke, because other good people hadn't. Like Shira Brie, a young woman at Kulthis base whom Tank had admired. She had given her life to delay Darth Vader's fleet while he and Shally escaped. Shira should have been here at the wedding too, he decided. She had helped to make this day possible. She could sit next to Biggs, and Genta, and Shally's father. Dead people didn't take up any space at weddings. It was, in fact, the empty spaces where they should have been that were so painful.

An excited murmur from the gathered Rebels drew Tank back to the present. He glanced up at the entrance to the briefing room, and suddenly his breath was taken away. His bride walked gracefully in, preceded by Artoo Beesix, who was emitting small showers of flower petals from one of his portals. Tank swallowed hard. He had never seen her looking more beautiful. Certainty that she was the one for him filled him completely. Shally was wearing a floor-length green gown, according to the customs of her homeworld, Balfor. Her long brown hair was tied in a simple knot and crowned with green flowers. Her feet were bare. Her usual severe expression was replaced by a gentle smile below sparkling gray eyes. Tank smiled back helplessly. For his part, he was dressed in a simple, unadorned green robe, and he was also barefoot.

The gathered Rebels cheered as their comrades, Tank and Slaughter, met at the front of the room, while Beesix rolled off to one side. The bride and groom clasped tightly to each other, holding close for a long moment. They had come through fire and death to reach this day, and both felt like it was an incredible gift.

"You look wonderful," said Shally, admiring how neat Tank's black hair was for a change. His dark eyes admired her in turn, looking up at

her from several inches below. Tank was a short, thin man, and Shally had greater stature and was seven years older than him. To one another, these things didn't matter. They were equals.

Shally grinned. "Tank, I have a surprise for you. We're going to be able to do this ceremony in the old Balforran way after all."

Tank's eyes widened. "But doesn't that require a Jedi Knight to officiate?"

"Well," she replied, looking back to the entryway, "I was able to get the next best thing."

Tank was amazed to see Luke Skywalker walk in, to the renewed cheers of the crowd. A big smile was on Luke's boyish face. He strode up to Tank and Shally, then faced the room.

"I didn't know Luke was a Jedi," hissed Tank out of the side of his mouth.

"He's sort of in training," whispered Shally. "It'll be enough, now be quiet."

"Are you two ready?" asked Luke quietly.

"Are you kidding?" said Tank, eyeing Luke uncertainly. "I was born to do this."

"All right then," said Luke loudly. "We can begin. I've been told that the Balforrans invited a Jedi Knight to conduct their weddings because through the Force, the Jedi are in touch with all life. Today, we're celebrating life, and how it has joined these two people. Marriage is highly valued on Balfor. Their belief is that a person who lives alone is imprisoned in bonds of loneliness." Luke turned to Tank and Shally, and brought out two green cords. "These cords represent those bonds." He looked at Shally questioningly, and she nodded, raising her hands. Luke proceeded to tie them loosely together, leaving her hands about fifty centimeters apart. He turned to Tank, who held up his own hands after a reassuring look from Shally, and tied them in the same fashion.

"True freedom in life," Luke continued, "comes when the bonds of loneliness are cut and one is free to reach out and grasp the loving hands of another."

Tank jumped as Luke suddenly produced and ignited his lightsaber. Luke carefully dipped the humming blue energy blade between Shally's outstretched wrists, burning through the cord in an instant. He turned to Tank.

"Uh...Luke? No hard feelings about that time I kidnapped you, right?" Tank asked nervously.

Luke looked out over the audience, catching the eye of Wedge Antilles. His lightsaber, meanwhile, drifted dangerously close to Tank's green robe. Then, not looking at Tank at all, Luke smiled mischievously and brought down the lightsaber, slicing the bonds at Tank's wrists blindingly fast. Tank yelped and looked wildly at his freed hands. They were unharmed.

"No hard feelings," said Luke, still smiling.

Shally quickly stepped in and firmly took Tank's trembling hands in her own. "I take your hands in mine," she said, "as I accept you into my life. I give myself to you freely. Take these words as my gift to you. Tank, I love you for who you are and what you are to me. When you came into my life, I was alone in the universe. After I lost my family and nearly died, I saw my remaining life only as a last chance for revenge. You helped me to see that there was something better to live for. I want everyone to know that finding you was enough to make up for all my losses. You were all I had then, but now you're all I'll ever really need."

"I take your hands in mine," Tank replied, "as I accept you into my life. I give myself to you freely. Take these words of mine as my gift to you. Shally, I finished growing up with you. You came into my life just as I was losing Biggs, who was like a father to me. You helped to shape the man that I am, and so you're a part of me now. The only one I could imagine sharing my life with is you."

Still holding hands, they faced the gathering with Luke, who then finished the service. "All of you are witnesses. Join me in cheering for the new married couple, Tank Boma and Shallnestra Edrin Boma!" Luke held up an encouraging hand, but instead of cheers, he was faced with an incredulous silence.

Wedge Antilles was the first one to break it. "Shallnestra ?!?" he said loudly.

Tank caught the swift change from happiness to furious dismay on his wife's face, even as the room began to fill with hoots and snickers from the Rebel soldiers and pilots.

"Shallnestra!" someone said. "That's our Slaughter!"

"Shallnestra, deadly enemy of the Empire!"

"Another Death Star? Call in Shallnestra!"

Shally's expression had passed dangerous and was nearing critical. She finally managed to squeeze out a strangled yell. "Who told !?!"

Luke and Tank backed off slowly. "I just asked Beesix what your proper names were," whispered Luke, "and he told me."

"I think it's kind of a pretty name, myself," said Tank.

"You know," said Luke, "I was jealous a minute ago, wishing it was me up there with Leia, but now I'm not so sure."

"Thanks Luke," said Tank, eyeing his wife as she went after Wedge. "Thanks a lot."

* * *

One wedding guest remained seated after the rest had left, some of them limping. General Cracken regarded Tank and Shally seriously. He brushed his graying hair away from his lined face and quietly said, "Well, you two, I hate to remind you about the mission briefing, but as a rule, the Empire doesn't give us much time for celebrating. Shall we get down to business?"

Tank looked up from where he was tending to a few of his wife's bruises and nodded reluctantly. "Leave it to you to get into a brawl at your own wedding," he said to Shally as she stood, wincing.

"Those people insulted me," she insisted. "You should have been there defending me."

"It was just your name," protested Tank.

"You know I hate my name," she replied sullenly. "Besides, it was the way they said it."

"All right, all right," prompted Tank. "We have a mission briefing to go over now, and this is one we might not come back from."

She took him by the shoulders. "I know. But at least I'll know I was married to you," she said softly, leaning down to kiss him gently.

They joined General Cracken by the large tactical holodisplay center across the room. He activated it, and the image of a planet shimmered into view in the air above the powerful computer.

"The Mon Calamari need our help, if they are going to help us," the General began. "As you may know, the Empire attempted to take possession of Calamari when they first discovered it, but the inhabitants rose up and drove them off. They were an artistic, peaceful people, but the Empire taught them war. They intend to see to it that the Empire regrets doing so." Cracken began entering information from a datapad file into the holodisplay computer. "The situation reminds me of my own homeworld of Contruum. The Empire invaded us, too, and my people turned to guerrilla warfare, hiding in the mountains. We resisted the Imperials for years, until finally, it was too costly for the Empire to stay. Sadly, there are no mountains to hide in on Calamari. If the Empire launched a full scale attack on their world, the Mon Calamari could survive in the deep oceans, but their surface cities and their space going civilization would be destroyed. Now, because they're in open

rebellion, they will eventually suffer such an attack. The Emperor hasn't gotten around to it because he sees the need to use his forces elsewhere. The growing Rebellion has created that need, and the Mon Calamari know it. They see their only chance of long term survival in joining us and helping us to try to win the war. The Emperor, in his disdain for non humans, doesn't care if they join us or not, but that is because he does not yet realize what the Mon Calamari can give us--Star Cruisers that can match Imperial Star Destroyers in battle."

"He'll never allow that to happen," Shally protested.

"The first of the new ships are already under construction," said Cracken with a grim little smile. "The Mon Calamari outmaneuvered the Empire by building cruisers out of converted deep space explorer ships, and used them to fight off the Imperials. The Alliance moved in right away and set up an orbital shipyards, protected by Golan III defense stations." Cracken made six blue spheres appear next to the holimage of Calamari, representing the Golan stations surrounding the shipyards.

"Currently, there are three brand new cruisers under construction, powerful enough to serve us in a fleet to fleet confrontation. Admiral Ackbar wants one of them to be the Alliance flagship." Three elongated orange shapes appeared above the computer, within the space protected by the defense stations.

"The Imperials have responded by setting up a blockade, consisting of five Interdictor cruisers and a Victory II-class Star Destroyer." Six red wedge shapes appeared in the hologram, pointed at the shipyards that floated between them and the planet.

"The Mon Calamari system is crowded, and there is only one window for a fast hyperspace escape. That window is here." He touched a control, and a pale green cylinder extended away from the planet. Contained within it were the shipyards, the Mon Cal cruisers, and the Imperial ships.

"The situation as it exists now is a stand-off. The shipyards are too heavily defended for the Imperial forces to attack without risking great losses. On the other hand, the cruisers can't leave the shipyards and the protection of the defense platforms without risking destruction themselves. If they did, it would be a ship to ship battle, six against three, with the outcome uncertain. Frankly, we can't afford to lose those cruisers the moment they're finished, so we can't risk it. The Interdictors are blocking any chance of hyperspace escape with their gravity well projectors. So, as I said, a stand-off. But sooner or later, an Imperial strike fleet will be spared by the Emperor to come and erase the Mon Calamari annoyance. It's a stand-off we can't win. That's where you come in."

Tank and Shally looked at each other, sharing determination and support.

"We need you to infiltrate the Victory Star Destroyer as part of a supply ship crew," said Cracken. "Once inside, you'll take your

astromech droid and slice into their main computer. The droid has been equipped with the latest programs for that purpose. You'll have to sabotage their weapons systems in a way they won't detect until it's too late. I have faith in you both. You've proven your bravery at Yavin and your infiltration skill at Belderone. I want you to know that, as dangerous as this sounds, you can do it. I also want you to know you're not alone. Five other teams will be going aboard the Interdictor cruisers on similar missions. I won't tell you who they are, in case you get captured, but with any luck, all the missions will succeed, and you'll be able to get out safely. With the blockade neutralized, we can remove the Star Cruisers before more Imperial ships arrive. Full information on the mission is included in your briefing materials. Technical information concerning Victory II Star Destroyers is included, and has been loaded into your R2 unit. A ship has been prepared to smuggle you to one of the supply points feeding into the blockade, and identification has been created for you as well. Intelligence has done its usual amazing job, rest assured. Any other questions I can answer, Tank...Slaughter?"

Tank raised his hand. "Just one, boss. When we get back, how about a honeymoon for us on the Kuari Princess?"

* * *

Commander Romodi stood at attention in the docking bay of the Victory II Star Destroyer Guardian, watching as an Imperial shuttle carried his new superiors into his life. He followed the stately progress of the craft as it drifted down on its repulsors to settle on the gleaming deck, feeling a mixture of resentment and fear.

The resentment stemmed from how far his career had fallen. Just three years ago, Romodi had been an Admiral. It had been the summit of his long climb, his greatest satisfaction. He had survived against long odds to reach it, and he had deep scars on his face to prove it. On the far side of middle age, he had expected to end his career in honor. That was before he became a strong supporter of project Death Star at the urging of his close personal friend, Willhuf Tarkin. At the time, Romodi had felt the threat of the Rebellion to be minimal. He believed it would continue only as long as the cowards had a sanctuary to retreat to, and he said as much to Tarkin, Motti, and Tagge during a meeting on the completed Death Star. Romodi thought the battle station would deprive the Rebels of their hiding places, and thus end the Rebellion. He had left the station before it traveled to Yavin. Thus, he wasn't on the Death Star when it was destroyed, but he hadn't escaped all the damage done by that fateful explosion. The Emperor had been furious, and had ravaged the military command structure in his need for scapegoats. Romodi had been punished for his association with the project by demotion, in a personal meeting with the Emperor himself. That meeting was what Romodi's fear stemmed from.

He had never before come face to face with Palpatine. After all, the Empire was huge, and the Emperor was very reclusive, relying on Sate Pestage and Ars Dangor to communicate for him. So he was unprepared for what he found. Romodi had met Darth Vader already, and unlike General Tagge, he found the Dark Lord's 'sorcerer's ways' to be frightening. But, like many others, Romodi had believed Vader to be an aberration, a curiosity, a unique, if dangerous relic of the past. He assumed the Emperor had been lucky to find such an unusual and powerful servant. But when Romodi came before Palpatine, he was forced to conclude that the Emperor had, in fact, created Lord Vader. He sensed, for the first time, the power of darkness lurking within that shadowy hood. He realized that the Force was no dying religion, but the center of Imperial power.

The Emperor had listened to Romodi's politely phrased argument as to why he bore no direct responsibility for the loss of the Death Star, then he had raised one hand slightly from the arm of his throne. A sudden bolt of energy had leaped from his fingers and struck Romodi, filling him with the horrifying sensation of his life being drained away. It had stopped quickly, but Romodi had cowered where he had fallen.

"You are now Commander Romodi," the Emperor had said quietly, then left the terrified man alone on the floor.

Now, three years later, Romodi had not told anyone of his experience. The Emperor must have known that he could not. The fear, born on that day, remained locked within him.

His assignment to the Calamari blockade had seemed at first like an undesirable, low-prestige posting designed to perpetuate his punishment. If only that had been the worst of it. Standing watch over an insignificant non human shipyards was bad enough, but in addition, Romodi's ordeal with the Force was coming back to haunt him. His new superiors were of Vader and Palpatine's kind--Sith adepts out of legend.

As the shuttle ramp lowered, and Lord Flint and Lady Lumiya came into view, Romodi's worst fears were realized. These were indeed the children of Darth Vader. Like Vader, Lord Flint was completely armored and helmeted, with a flowing midnight blue cape. The shiny plate armor was styled like something out of an old tale, but modern control panels and electronics were located at Flint's belt and on his gauntlets. Lumiya, too, was covered in metallic surfaces, but they were too form-fitting to be armor. Romodi realized she was a cyborg, and wondered how much of her was human besides her glaring eyes.

The Sith walked purposefully up to Romodi, and Flint removed his mirrored helmet. The well-groomed face beneath gave an impression of somber strength, easing Romodi's fears a fraction. Here was a man who could be reasoned with, he decided. One glance at Lumiya's focused, angry stare, however, told Romodi that she was quite the opposite.

"Commander Romodi," said Flint in a deep, rough voice, "we're here on behalf of Lord Vader to take command of the blockade. You can show us to the bridge, and then, our quarters."

"Yes, my Lord," said Romodi. "Welcome aboard." He turned and bowed slightly to Lumiya. "My Lady."

"Your pleasantries are not welcome, Commander," Lumiya snapped, her voice filtered through the angular mask covering her nose, mouth, and forehead. "We're here to do an important job. All I need from you is your cooperation. If you can give me that, I won't have to hurt you." She gestured with one smooth metallic hand at the stars beyond the magnetic field. "As I understand it, the Rebels are building warships out there, and this blockade is designed to prevent those ships from escaping. A stand-off, Commander, is not the goal I have in mind. We're going to find a way to destroy those ships, using the resources we already have."

Lumiya's eyes narrowed in concentration, and without warning, miniature Rebel cruisers shimmered into being in the air above her. She unhooked her light whip and let its coils unroll, then flicked on the activation stud. Searing tendrils of energy coursed out along the coils, and she struck high and fast with them, slashing through the images of the cruisers. All three Rebel ships broke apart in bright little fireballs, scattering flaming wreckage that winked out of existence before it touched the polished deck. "That's what we're going to do to the Rebels and their Mon Calamari allies," said Lumiya, deactivating her light whip and coiling it up efficiently. Then she strode off towards the turbolift, expecting the two men to follow her immediately.

"She takes a little getting used to," said Flint, as Romodi swallowed dryly.

* * *

"You certainly went out of your way to intimidate the Commander," accused Flint as he relaxed in Lumiya's quarters. "He was already very much afraid of us, even without such a display."

"He needed to be reminded of his purpose," she replied sternly. "He's weak, like everyone else on this ship. They think this duty is boring and unimportant. Unimportant! Any blow that can be struck against the Rebels is important. A success here could gain us the Emperor's favor. Maybe he would let me go after Luke Skywalker, even if Lord Vader won't."

"You still want to go against our Master's wishes?" asked Flint incredulously. "I heard you promise him you would leave Skywalker alone-"

"What was I supposed to do, with him threatening me like that? I can't let go of my hatred that easily. I owe Luke Skywalker a great deal for giving me this...this existence in place of my life. Our Master can have what's left of him when I finish paying him back."

"Lumiya," Flint cautioned her, "this is a delicate time for us. We have power now, you and I, but it could be taken away by Lord Vader or his Master, the Emperor. We have to be very careful not to attract the wrong kind of attention. Let's take things one at a time. Right now, our mission is to turn this blockade into a military victory."

"You're right," said Lumiya after a few moments. "Skywalker can wait. I don't want to lose my chance at him by moving too fast. And winning here does matter to me. We can't let the Rebels have those capital ships. I've lived with the Alliance. I know what kind of impossible things they could do if they got their hands on them." She leaned gracefully against the wall. "Right now, I'm tired...too tired to plan any strategies." She reached behind her helmet and unfastened it, removing it wearily.

Flint moved a chair next to her. He knew that her cyborg systems, strong as they made her, also exerted a great deal of stress on Lumiya's organic parts. The strain was evident on her face, and as Flint looked there, his eyes were drawn to the mass of scar tissue that marred the left side of her face and forehead. It was normally concealed by her mask, and Flint strongly suspected it was the reason she wore one. As was the case with Romodi, some scars were just too deep to heal completely.

Lumiya sank gratefully into the chair, leaving Flint standing next to her. He watched her for a minute as she brooded, then hesitantly reached out a gauntleted hand to brush her long red hair away from her scars. "Lumiya," he said tentatively, "I've told you before that I feel a connection to you. It goes beyond being Sith adepts together. I feel something for you...these scars...they don't take away the rest of your beauty." Her felt her stiffen, and he tensed, removing his hand. She looked directly into his eyes, and he felt cold inside.

"Don't do this, Flint. You have no hope with me. You don't know who I am. You think you're interested in Shira Brie, but you've forgotten, she's dead. Lumiya can't be close to anyone."

"I'm talking about my feelings for you," Flint said. "I never knew Shira Brie. I know who you are, Lumiya."

She stood up, facing him eye to eye. "I'll have to show you how wrong you are," she said flatly. Placing one slim hand on Flint's armored chest, Lumiya shoved. Unprepared for her cyborg strength, he staggered and collapsed on his back. Lumiya stood over him, looking down with a scowl.

"This body has nothing to give you but pain," she said. "It's a mockery of life. You think you see a beautiful woman, but she's not real. I made them make me look this way so everyone could see what I'd lost. I'm only half a woman, kept alive by a machine!" She slapped the gleaming metal of her breast with her artificial hand, producing a sharp ringing sound. "I only want to have to tell you this once, Flint. I can never be what you need me to be. I've known how you felt about me for a

long time. Shira could have returned those feelings, but I can't. You have no hope with me."

She walked away, and Flint got up slowly. He stared at her rigid back for a minute, then turned to leave. "Then I'm sorry," he said without anger. "I wish it could have been different."

Flint went out, not seeing the tear that rolled over Lumiya's scars and past her gritted teeth.

* * *

Shally hadn't been this scared since the Battle of Yavin. She was surrounded by the power of the Empire. It gleamed from the polished decks of the Star Destroyer Guardian, marched in step with its naval troopers and stormtroopers, and hummed within the contained energies of its turbolaser arsenal. At any moment, should their subterfuge fail, she and Tank would be overwhelmed by that power. This deep inside enemy lines, they wouldn't have a chance. But she didn't regret being there. As their supply ship had been tractored towards the Guardian's hangar bays, her eyes had been full of the distant sight of the Mon Calamari shipyards and the tiny, vulnerable points of light that had to be the desperately needed MC-80 cruisers. They had to be safeguarded. The conviction of her mission enabled Shally to live with her fear, but that fear was still considerable.

More than anything else, she feared losing Tank. She had come to love him so much that it was hard to go on these missions and face that risk. She was afraid to be alone again, and perhaps no Alliance victory was worth that to her. The past three years had been a struggle to put her painful past behind her. Tank's companionship had been both guiding and healing to her. When they had been just Y-wing pilot and gunner together, somehow that had seemed less dangerous than the intelligence missions they had begun to undertake for General Cracken. Usually, she tried not to think of the danger, but when they had heard about this mission, that had become impossible. So she did the only thing she could. She asked Tank to marry her, so that if this was their last time together, at least she would have given as much of herself to him as possible. And, if by some miracle they survived, she knew he would make a great husband for life. If they made it...

Tank must have been hiding his fear as well. She glanced at him across the huge repulsor cart they were guiding and was rewarded by a quick smile. They were both wearing the gray coverall uniforms of the Support Fleet's Supply Division, and they were guiding the floating platform, piled high with boxes, down narrow corridors towards the Crew Living Section. Such was the width of the cart that they had to squeeze past one annoyed officer after another. Despite the fact that they were bringing needed supplies, none of the crew liked to be in close contact with manual laborers of obviously lower intelligence. Beesix rode quietly at the back of the cart, patched into the simple control panel.

Tank and Shally made a show of confusedly consulting datapad corridor maps, griping at the complicated ship's layout, and arguing over which way to go next.

Just as one particularly disgruntled Star Destroyer Trooper was trying to squeeze past the cart, the ponderous vehicle lurched, bumped the wall, and lost the repulsors along one side. One corner slammed onto the deck as the entire contents of the cart slid and tumbled off, clogging the corridor. The Trooper backed off, cursing and stumbling, as Tank and Shally stood frozen, aghast.

"What do you think you're doing?!" shouted the Trooper.

"Oh no!" stammered Shally. "This is such a mess! Some of this stuff needs to be refrigerated, too, or it'll spoil. I'm so sorry! Ohhhhh--how are we going to get this back on the cart?"

"The blasted cart is the problem!" Tank broke in angrily. "The lousy equipment they give us--no wonder these things happen. I say we go back to our ship and let our boss handle this. I told him this floater needed repairs, and he ignored me. Let him clean it up."

"No--we can't just leave," Shally protested, "We'll get in trouble. We have to call for maintenance or something--maybe they can fix it..." She bent and struggled ineffectually with one of the heavy boxes. "Ohhhhh," she groaned. "I don't want to get fired. I need this job." She turned to the disgusted Trooper. "Can you find us some help? Please? Maybe we can get this fixed and deliver these supplies and not have to tell our boss about this at all..." She looked hopefully at him.

The Trooper glared at the blocked corridor. "Wait here," he commanded in a clipped tone, and turned on his heel. As he walked briskly away, he could be heard speaking in his comlink. "Deck 37, Corridor 155 is closed until further notice. Reroute all foot traffic to corridors 154 and 156."

The moment the Trooper was out of sight, Tank and Shally were all business. "All right Beesix," snapped Tank. "Get down from there and tell us which room in this hallway has the computer terminal."

"Gladly," piped up Beesix from behind the pile of boxes. "I was made for bravely piloting a Starfighter in battle, not for driving a stupid, ungainly binary load lifter."

"Yeah, well you're going to be just as dead as you'd be in a battle if you don't hurry up!" Tank said, shoving boxes aside. They lifted the droid into the clear, and the indignant Artoo unit rolled directly to one of the heavy blast doors.

"Locked," Shally said, pounding once on the door. "Tank, how are we going to get inside?"

"No problem," said Tank snappily, reaching into his coverall pockets. He produced a dozen key cards, of a variety of colors and patterns.

"How did-" Shally began, then she grinned. "All those people you bumped into along the way."

"Old habits die hard," said Tank, hurriedly shoving cards into the slot.

"Are you referring to your past as a miscreant and a street thief?" accused Beesix. "Frankly Mistress, I find your taste in life companions to be somewhat morally ambiguous. A childhood spent on the wrong side of the law cannot be overcome so easily. Why, the first time I met Tank Boma, he stole your ship with me inside it!"

Tank clapped his hands once in satisfaction as the door suddenly slid up and open. "You want to stay out in the corridor and debate morals with yourself," he said, leaning over Beesix, "that's fine with me."

The droid sped into the room after Tank and Shally, not saying another word. The blast door hissed shut behind him, and he rolled over to the terminal. Beesix extended his information retrieval arm and plugged into the Imperial equipment.

Shally leaned over the small terminal screen. The exhilaration of their deception had quickly faded away, leaving only worry and tension. She forced herself to stay calm and focus only on her task. "Okay, we're going to slice into the network, starting with a real entry code--the one we picked up back on the supply ship." Numbers and letters began to scroll rapidly across the screen. "That's it. We're into the data files on inventory. All right, Beesix, here's where your Intellex IV computer comes in. I need you to find me the entry codes for connected systems until we get into the Gunnery Computer. And you have to do it fast enough not to trigger a system alert."

"You can rely on me, Mistress Shallnestra," said Beesix.

Shally shot Beesix a dark look, but didn't correct him. "From Supply Inventory, we need to link to Personnel, Shifts, and then Duty Stations."

The droid's interface arm twisted in the socket, and the display screen came alive with numbers. The flow of data was too fast for Tank to follow, and he passed tense seconds watching the closed blast door. How long did they have? The Trooper would bring others to the disabled floater, but they wouldn't immediately check the rooms nearby, assuming the inept laborers had gone back to the hangar and their ship.

"Great," said Shally, "we're in. Now go to the subshell on Gunnery Personnel files, and access Gunnery Computer passwords."

A minute passed, and Shally began to look worried. "Beesix, hurry it up! If you take too long, the system will be alerted to your presence, and then we've had it."

"This system is rather large and cumbersome, Mistress. I am working to the best of my abilities--wait--there. That was a very devious bit of code. But I am now able to access the Gunnery Computer."

"Okay, Tank, this is where you come in," said Shally.

"Right, we have to get into the Sensor / Firing Parameters program. Then I can input a new parameter linking the Firing computers to the gravity well proximity sensors. If the Star Destroyer comes in close to the shipyards to attack, their guns will just shut down from Calamari's gravity well, and they won't know it until it's too late. We send the finished ships planetward, the Imperials chase them, and that's it. Good-bye Star Destroyer."

"Accessing that program will require a separate password," said Beesix. "I'm computing it now...Oh no! They're doing a periodic entry code change on the Firing computers. I'll have to wait for them to finish before I can get in all the way."

"How long will that take?" demanded Shally.

"I don't know Mistress! I can't get fully in, and I can't get out either."

"Then the system's going to detect him any second!" cried Shally, fear rising in her throat. Suddenly, the display screen blanked out and the terminal shut down.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," said Tank.

Shally crossed to the blast door. "It's locked!" she shouted, beating her fist uselessly against it. "We're trapped here!"

"Zurrt!" grunted Beesix. "We were so Zarking close! Why the Flarrsh did this have to happen now?!"

Shally stared at the little green droid in shock.

"It's a cursing module," Tank explained. "It came with his new voice box. It sort of takes over in times of heavy stress."

"Well, this certainly qualifies," Shally groaned. "All right. Let's not give up yet. We need a story for when they get here."

"I don't think we can con these guys," said Tank. "All we can do is wait." He put his arms around Shally.

They didn't wait for long. Within minutes, the blast door opened, revealing an older, scarred Imperial Commander, and a squad of stormtroopers. Blaster rifles were leveled at the Rebels.

"Oh, thanks," said Shally, "we came in here looking for a broom to clean up that mess outside, and the door locked behind us."

Tank gave her a look only slightly less disbelieving than the grim Commander's.

"I had to try," she said, gripping Tank's hand as her fears became reality all around her.

* * *

Flint and Lumiya stood at the end of the command walkway on the Guardian's bridge, looking out the main viewport at the distant Rebel shipyards. They were engaged in a strategy conference, focused on their assignment, neither one acknowledging their recent conflict.

"Those Golan stations are the main problem," mused Lumiya. "The Golan III Nova Gun has heavy shields, fifty turbolasers, twenty four proton torpedo launchers...each one of them is more heavily armed than this ship."

"Yes, a frontal assault won't work," said Flint, crossing his arms. "If they direct all their firepower at us at once...no. But what if we could divide their arsenal, force them to shoot at a lot more targets?"

"Illusory ships?" asked Lumiya. "The tactic hasn't been used since the Sith War. They might be taken by surprise, thinking the Empire has already sent reinforcements..."

"And there is another Sith power we can use," said Flint. "We can broadcast fear and despair to the crews of the defense platforms. It might give us the edge we need."

"We have to think carefully about this," said Lumiya. "There's a lot at stake for us. If we win, but take heavy casualties at the same time...it could end up hurting our future, as Lord Vader warned."

"But we don't have a lot of time," replied Flint. "It's hard to tell on those lumpy alien ships, but our sensors indicate they're nearing completion. Then this could turn into a pitched battle."

"No," said Lumiya. "They don't want that. They-" A comm signal on her belt interrupted her. "What is it?" she demanded.

"This is Commander Romodi. We've captured a couple of Rebel saboteurs trying to damage the main computer. We have them in the detention area. Do you wish to see them?"

"Rebels!" said Lumiya. "On this ship! How dare they!"

"It's in their nature to be daring," said Flint, frowning. "Come, let's see who they've found."

* * *

The harsh simplicity of Tank's prison cell was more than enough to remove any traces of bravado or hope. He was alone in a small chamber with a flat metal bench and no windows. The only sound was a dull vibration that told him the detention block was located near the rear engines of the ship. He hadn't seen Shally for hours, and he was desperately worried for her safety. He knew he might never see her again, and that was even worse than knowing they had failed their mission. By the time the cell door opened again, Tank was ready to say anything that would let him see his wife again.

The person who entered was in no way what he expected.

"On your feet, Rebel," commanded Lady Lumiya, stepping over the threshold. Tank wearily obeyed, gazing at her shapely metallic form. "You know what's going to happen here, don't you?" Lumiya said. "You are a Rebel prisoner of the Empire, and you were captured in an attempt to sabotage this ship. I'm going to ask you some questions, and you're going to tell me--"

"I'm going to tell you whatever you want to know," interrupted Tank. "All right, I know the drill. This is just like when I was picked up by the police when I was a kid in Mos Eisley, except here you have torture droids. But you won't need them. I just want to see my wife again. I'll give you any information you want. Only I don't know a whole lot. I'm not that important in the Alliance."

Lumiya stood for a minute, glaring at Tank. "You seem to have a lot of confidence for someone in your position," she said finally. "But then, Tank Boma, you did when I knew you on Kulthis, too."

Tank was startled. "You know me? Who are you?"

"Why don't you figure it out for yourself, Rebel?" said Lumiya.

Tank looked hesitantly at the only visible part of his captor, her eyes. "There's something familiar...and your voice..." Tank stepped suddenly towards her. "Shira? Shira Brie? But everyone thinks you're dead!"

Before he could come any closer, Lumiya swiftly grabbed Tank and tossed him painfully onto the bench. Stunned, Tank looked up at her. "It can't be. You're not Shira."

"No Tank, you were partly right. I was Shira Brie, but now I'm Lady Lumiya. Shira died at the hands of Luke Skywalker." She paused. "Not so confident now, are you?"

"What happened to you? What did they do to you?" Tank stammered. He was badly shaken by this unexpected reunion, not quite able to accept that a respected comrade could be his deadly enemy.

"I was always part of the Empire, Tank. When you knew me, I was in deep cover as an Imperial Major in Intelligence. And the only thing the Empire did to me was to save my body when Skywalker nearly destroyed it. He shot me down before I could kill him, and then they turned me into a cyborg."

Tank stared at her, losing any thoughts of resisting her physically. He began to feel a growing fear. "Listen Lumiya," he said, "I meant what I said before...I'll tell you anything."

"Yes," she said, her eyes narrowing, "you will. Starting with your mission here on my ship."

"All right," Tank swallowed. "We came here to try to sabotage the Gunnery Computer system. We were trying to allow the Calamarian Star Cruisers to escape the blockade. I know you'll only torture this out of me, so I'll tell you right now. There are other teams on the other ships. I don't know who they are, or what their missions are. They might even be finished by now, and gone. That's all I know." He paused, slowly standing back up. "I ask that I have a chance to say good-bye to my wife...before..." He trailed off.

Lumiya regarded him silently, removing a cylindrical object with attached metal coils from her belt.

"What are you doing?" Tank asked, his voice rising. "I told you everything I know--"

"What you have told me voluntarily" said Lumiya coldly, "is a good beginning. But it's only a beginning. You and I will have much more to talk about." She let the coils of her light whip unroll onto the floor. "Before, it was all just a dangerous game to me, fooling all of you, playing at being a Rebel. Now, it's deadly serious. Now, it's about retribution. Although I owe a particular debt to Luke for taking my old life away, that debt is shared in some measure by the entire Rebellion. Especially by Rebels from Kulthis." At the touch of a switch, curling tendrils of energy began to flow down the light whip. "And the currency I'm repaying that debt with...is pain."

She drew back her metallic arm, and Tank saw a searing cascade of bright strands arc towards him. Then he took his first steps into a new universe of agony.

* * *

Lumiya left the cell as a medical droid entered it to tend to the prisoner. Tank would be healed enough to survive another round of interrogation. He had indeed been able to supply a good deal more information, but Lumiya was still not satisfied. Frustratingly, the Rebel seemed to be telling the truth about other Rebel missions to the blockade. He knew of them, but little else. In any event, a fleet-wide search was now underway to root out more of the Rebels before they could carry out their brazen schemes. Lumiya was disturbed by the thought of all those agents. She knew what a hidden Intelligence operative could do, having been one herself. The Alliance's reputation for foolhardy Commando missions was now legendary. After the Death Star disaster, it seemed there was nothing they might not be capable of. At least she had captured these two before they could harm the flagship. But she needed to know much more before she could feel secure.

As she was leaving the detention area, Lumiya spotted the Rebels' droid, sitting off to one side of the security station, deactivated. She paused. While she and Flint interrogated the prisoners, could there be something that they were overlooking? She strode over to the silent R2 unit and contemplated it. Perhaps there was something more to be learned here, after all. Lumiya activated her comlink and summoned a technician.

* * *

"Of course, we both know that this interrogation droid is capable of inflicting a great deal of pain," said Flint reasonably. "Electroshock, sound waves, heat, and the like. But I'd prefer to avoid all that. The interrogation drug I've injected into you should help you to answer all of my questions without pain. It doesn't take long to start working."

Shally lay slumped on the metal ledge as the drugs coursed through her system, infusing her with a vast lethargy and weakness. "What have they done to Tank?" she mumbled.

"Don't be concerned for him right now. He is still alive for the present, answering questions like you are. Now, let's start with your name."

"Shally Edrin...just got married...Shally Boma," she said, her words slurring. She peered at Flint as if through a fog. "What are you...some kind of Knight?"

"I created this armor from an ancient drawing," he replied patiently, "but not one you would ever have seen. So, Shally, what was your exact goal in slicing into our computers?"

"We had to...fix it so the firing computer would shut down...close to Calamari gravity well," she said slowly.

"I see," said Flint. "So we would be unable to attack the shipyards, is that it?"

"Yes."

"And were you responsible for designing this strategy?"

"Yes."

"You must be a valued member of the Rebellion, Shally, with skills like those. Let's discuss your fellow Rebels and superiors back at your base. I'd like to know who they are."

"Base...evacuated," she murmured, leaning her head on the cold wall.

"And where was the base before it was evacuated?" asked Flint.

"Kulthis...Belderone system."

Flint's calm was ripped from him. "Belderone? You served in the Belderone system? What...what were your duties there?"

Unable to see his agitation, Shally continued, "Tank and I served in Field Operations... Alliance Intelligence...we found a factory on Belderone...making Walkers. Helped plan attack but somehow..." Her eyes fluttered and she groaned.

"The attack on the factory," pressed Flint, shaking her shoulders.

"They knew...we were coming. Super Star Destroyer showed up in system...Commander Skywalker said...looking for him. Poor Luke..." She gave a little choking cry. "He was...hero at Yavin. Now they want to make him pay..."

She slipped into unconsciousness from too high a dosage, but Flint didn't notice. He was turned completely inward, his thoughts racing. The Rebel attack on the AT-AT factory had failed because the factory had been forewarned and able to deploy Walkers in its own defense. The resulting battle had spilled over into the neighboring village. His village. A fire had burned down his mother's tavern and claimed her life during the battle. The battle had gotten out of control because the factory had been prepared. The Rebel attack must have been based on the element of surprise. And who had alerted the factory? The answer was obvious; the Commander of the Imperial strike fleet that had been on its way to the Belderone system, Lord Vader. And Lord Vader had only involved himself for the chance to capture Luke Skywalker. How had he discovered that Luke was in the Belderone system? The answer to that question was obvious to Flint as well, and with the realization, a sickened flush came over him. The memory returned vividly, and took him away...

...Flint ran recklessly through the marketplace on the outskirts of town. He felt free on his day off, a rare feeling on an isolated Imperial factory world where most of the population toiled away for the sake of a distant Emperor, slaves in all but name. The work was hard, and he didn't even know exactly what kind of machines he was making. Once every two weeks, he was allowed the illusion that he was a free man. On this day, he had decided to use his spare money to buy his mother a bright scarf, to cheer her up. She had become a shadow of her former self, living on Belderone, running a grimy tavern for the grimy workers in a grimy little village. A long time ago, she had been happy. Her husband, Flint's father, had been a Jedi Knight, and they had been well-to-do. But then, word had come that the Jedi were being hunted, and Flint's father had left them on backwater Belderone while he went off to fight. It had been for their safety. They had never seen him again, and Flint's mother, Zana, had never forgiven her husband for abandoning them. Eventually, the Empire had come, and Belderone was no longer a place of safety, if indeed anywhere was. Zana had slid into a seemingly permanent depression. Flint knew he couldn't really fix things for her, but he tried to lift her spirits whenever he could.

Just as he was nearing the clothing shop, Flint saw another young man walking past, sandy haired, serious, and wearing nondescript spacers gear. He was almost unnoticeable, save for one detail. At his belt hung a lightsaber. Flint was almost sure of it. He had very early memories of his father's weapon. This man was a Jedi Knight! Excited, Flint abandoned his destination and ran up to the other man. The other looked startled and quickly searched the marketplace with anxious eyes. His hand moved to the hilt of the lightsaber.

Flint hastily tried to calm the stranger. "Hello, I'm Flint. Listen, you don't know me, but I wanted to talk to you. I noticed your lightsaber. Don't worry, no one else saw it. You're a Jedi Knight, right? Listen, my father was a Jedi. Do you know where to get training? I think I might have the potential. If I was a Jedi, I could get my mother and me off this rock. Maybe you could train me?"

The other man's face softened, and he said gently, "Was your father killed, Flint?"

"Yeah, how did you-"

"Because you remind me of myself. My father was a Jedi, too, and he died a long time ago. But I'm not one. There are no more Jedi left. I had a teacher for a while, but he was killed, too. My father left me this lightsaber as an heirloom. I'm sorry, Flint. I can't help you."

Flint's heart sank. "But you do know some things, right? Can't you teach them to me?"

"I'm no teacher. And I have important things to do here. I really am sorry." The other man turned from Flint and hurried away. Flint made no move to stop him. He stood there full of bitterness, his day off ruined.

During the walk back to Zana's tavern, Flint's disappointment turned into resentment. When he told the story to Zana, she echoed his feelings. "I've always tried to tell you Flint, the Jedi don't care about other people. They look out for their own, and that's all. Hey, maybe you should see if there's a reward for turning this man in? Now that the Jedi are outlawed...we sure could use the money."

Flint had gone straight to the local Imperial government office and spoke to a bored-looking official.

"Jedi sightings?" the bureaucrat had asked doubtfully. "Well, there is a law against their order, has been one for a long time. Are you sure you saw his lightsaber?"

Flint was sure. The official had tiredly looked in his computer records, no doubt trying to finish with this dubious case and get back to his real work. Flint was surprised when the man gave a low whistle. "Maybe you did see something. There's an Empire-wide notice for the capture of a Luke Skywalker, posted by Lord Vader himself! Came up when I cross-referenced the word lightsaber with the wanted files. This Skywalker is supposed to carry one...Sons of Jontor! There's a reward of 500,000 credits for him! Perhaps your sighting should be brought to the attention of someone higher up. Hmm. Better make sure. I'll call up some images, and you pick out the man you saw."

Flint easily identified Luke Skywalker.

"All right, all right..." the official said nervously. "Look, there could be a lot of money in this for both of us, if we keep this between you and I. I can transmit the sighting directly to Lord Vader's fleet. I'll list both of us as the finders. There's enough of a reward to make us both rich. Do we have a deal?"

"We have a deal," said Flint, smiling. Let that arrogant Jedi have what was coming to him. And let the reward for turning in a criminal go to Flint and his mother, so they could have the better life they deserved. His good mood was coming back, after all...

...Lord Flint of the Sith stood in the cell with an unconscious Shally Boma, focusing on the present once more. He felt just as tortured as the Rebel before him. He himself had set in motion the events that led to the destruction of his village and the death of his mother. Full of petty resentment, he had naively summoned the raging Civil War to his very doorstep. He had not imagined the terrifying power of Vader's forces, nor predicted the ferocity with which the Rebels fought against it. Once begun, events had spiraled out of control at a mortifying rate. The ground battle had been beyond anything Flint had experienced before. The Rebel fighters had been brave, but unprepared for the huge armored Walkers. Could they really be blamed if their desperate retreat had taken them over Flint's village? Was it really the fault of the Alliance that the Walkers pursued them, crushing buildings and starting fires all through town? The more Flint thought about it, the more he found only one person to blame.

Himself.

And there was one final fact to face, he realized. The events that he had set in motion had also led to the forced evacuation of the Rebel base on Kulthis, and the 'death' of Shira Brie. He was responsible for the creation of the tortured Lumiya.

Now that Flint was unable to blame the Rebels, he found himself facing complex issues of personal responsibility for his and Lumiya's future. He needed time to meditate on these matters, but the sudden opening of the cell door seemed to steal away any chance for that.

"Are you finished here?" asked Lumiya impatiently.

"For the present," Flint replied, not looking at her. "There was an overdose. She'll recover in several hours, perhaps, but for now..."

"Then come with me. I've learned something very important. It's time to make a battle plan. The Calamari shipyards are ours for the taking." Lumiya seemed afire with purpose.

Flint didn't move right away. He closed his eyes and tried to focus. Despite the questions swirling through his mind, the fact remained that they had to neutralize the threat of the Emperor. He must see the Sith as his servants, not as something to be destroyed. Flint turned and followed Lumiya out of the cell, leaving Shally slumped motionless in the corner.

* * *

By the Five Fire Rings of Fornax, thought Commander Romodi, the Rebels have a lot of guts trying to pull off a bluff of this magnitude! Their formidable defenses had an enormous weak spot that he hadn't even suspected. But Lady Lumiya had discovered it by chance while sifting through the memory systems of the captured R2 unit. Now the shipyards would fall.

It was poetic justice, in a way. Information hidden in an R2 unit had led to the destruction of both the Death Star and Romodi's career. Now such information would allow Romodi a measure of payback. For the critical piece of data was this : the Rebels were critically short of personnel, and lacked the necessary 880 people to fully man each of the Golan III battle stations. The Rebel R2 unit had recently been used for repairs on the stations, and the memory records of that assignment strongly indicated that half of the stations were almost entirely automated. This made all the difference. An automated station was no match for a skilled human crew, and was also more vulnerable to ion cannon attacks. Furthermore, the droid's records indirectly revealed which of the stations were automated. Repairs on those Golan III's involved a great many more operations that were carried out by the droid

independently. It turned out that the three stations closest to the planet were automated. This made sense; the blockade had been arrayed on the other side of the shipyards. And, there was the interrupted sabotage mission that would have left the Guardian helpless close to the planet. It was a clever way to compensate for the weakness in the shipyards' defenses, but now the secret was out. The Imperials could attack and easily overwhelm the automated stations, then fly in and destroy the cruisers.

Flint and Lumiya had a plan to neutralize the other three stations as well; an illusory attack of several Imperial Star Destroyers would fully occupy them. In addition, they would confuse all the Rebel gunners by broadcasting fear into their minds. Commander Romodi smiled. His new allies made him nervous, but they certainly knew how to take care of a Rebel problem.

He faced the main viewport, and spoke loudly to the bridge crew in the pits to either side. "Start main engines. Advance on the Rebel position." The huge engines of the Guardian roared to life as it began to move massively against the starfield. The five companion Interdictor cruisers took up formation surrounding it in a rough circle, and the former blockade fleet went swiftly and fiercely on the offensive. Romodi felt alive for the first time in years. He hadn't faced battle for a long time; his duties in the Admiralty had taken him far from the shriek of turbolasers and the roar of proton torpedoes. Perhaps his demotion hadn't been an entirely negative thing.

As the shipyards began to grow in the viewport, Romodi turned back to look into the Aft Bridge. Flint and Lumiya were there, kneeling motionless on the deck. Flint was completely armored and helmeted, and Lumiya's fierce eyes were tightly closed. Every crew member gave them a wide berth as they passed by. The Sith were deep in a potent communion with the Force.

At Romodi's command, the fleet swung gracefully around the shipyards as one unit, keeping out of firing range of the Golan stations. Soon, the enormous water world of Calamari filled the viewport. Flickers of pseudomotion filled the space recently vacated by the Imperial ships. Despite being forewarned, several of those in the Crew Pit cried out in surprise as their scanners showed eight Imperial-class Star Destroyers emerging from hyperspace facing the Rebel shipyards. Romodi spared an admiring glance at the Sith.

"Turn the fleet," he ordered. "Prepare to attack the automated Golan Stations. Launch TIE fighters. All ships, attack!"

Two TIE squadrons streamed out of the Guardian's launch bays, forming an angry cloud around the point of the wedge-shaped Star Destroyer. Then the entire attack force shot forward and ran full against the Rebel defenses.

In the chaos of battle that followed, Romodi's experienced mind was able to pick out critical details. He could see that the firing patterns of the Golan stations matched those expected for a computer controlled

attack. Gratified that their analysis had been correct, Romodi turned to the Crew Pit. "The stations are automated as we predicted," he said crisply. "Prepare to fire all ion cannons at their central computer housing. Fire!"

Pulses of ion energy leaped away from the Guardian and struck a critical section of the nearest station. This was the location of the computer that fire-linked the turbolasers in the absence of live gunners. Had the station been manned, the damage could have easily been overcome by using manual controls, but not so here. As the Interdictor cruisers continued to hammer away at the other two sluggish and imprecise automated stations, Romodi watched with pleasure as the first station's enormous arsenal fell into an ineffective random firing pattern. Now it could do damage to them only by chance.

Romodi peered through a cloud of explosions and darting TIE fighters at the far distant side of the shipyards. The Golan stations there were firing steadily at the impressive illusory force that threatened them. There were even illusory explosions simulating damage to the Star Destroyers. The illusions could do no real damage to the Golan stations, but between the firepower of a TIE squadron left behind in that location, and the fear being broadcast by the Sith, their crews should feel as if the threat was real. It seemed to be working perfectly, as none of those stations were firing in the Guardian's direction.

Soon, the second automated station was disabled, and the blockade fleet roared through the gaping void in the shipyards defenses. "We're through!" he cried. "All ships, move up to attack the Mon Calamari shipyards. Target the Rebel Star Cruisers under construction. All guns fire on my command!"

There ahead, floating in the void of space, he saw them. A vast orbital scaffold had been constructed, and nestled within kilometers of support beams and access tunnels were three gigantic elongated hulls. Each one was unique in appearance, covered with pods and bulges that contained sensors, weapons batteries, and shield generators. But most of those systems would be unfinished. This would be a total victory for Romodi. In his moment of triumph, he even dared to hope that his career might be revitalized through the grudging admiration of the Emperor.

Leave it to the Rebels to rely on ships that look like Drexellian Sea Cucumbers, he thought to himself. Then, relishing the moment, he loudly said, "Ready...Fire!"

The blockade fleet spread out to surround the Rebel cruisers. Then they released a punishing barrage of weaponry at the vulnerable targets. Bursts from quad lasers shot from the interdictor cruisers, and the Guardian unleashed its turbolasers.

"Commander," called a voice from the Crew Pit. "I'm getting strange readings from the Rebel cruisers. They seem unusually dense, Sir."

"What?" snapped Romodi, not wanting to take his eyes from the main viewport.

"Ships that size should register as mostly empty space inside, especially when they're under construction. My sensors show all that space as full. It's as if they're packed with some dense substance--"

That got through to Romodi. He jumped down into the Crew Pit and quickly verified the readings. A sudden deadening sensation began to spread outwards from his heart. Facing the viewport and its image of the burning, fragmented Rebel cruisers, he suddenly saw it as a scene of horror. "All ships, fall back!" he screamed. "It's a trap!"

But it was too late. Far too much planning had gone into the elaborate snare for its victims to win free now. As the first Rebel cruiser began to split apart, it erupted like a supernova, its enormous cargo of explosives transformed into unimaginable force in an instant. The other two cruisers exploded a moment later, creating a triple starburst of expanding light in the middle of the shipyards.

The scaffolding was consumed in the first second, and then the energy waves hit the blockade fleet. The smaller, more weakly shielded Interdictor cruisers fared the worst, buckling and tearing apart into billowing clouds of burning ship fragments. TIE fighters were seared out of space in an instant, snuffed against the blossoming eruption filling the former shipyards. The Guardian's shields held for a few more moments, but the ship was sent tumbling away like a leaf in the wind. Romodi had time, in his final moments, to grasp the ease with which they had been fooled. His respect for the Rebels went up a grudging notch for their incredible strategy. Perhaps the Rebellion would not be as fleeting as he had once thought.

Then the shields failed, and the main bridge was broken open to space.

Far below, the endless ocean surface of Calamari began to heave. Vast objects were rising from the depths, creating a great surge of water ahead of them. With a glorious tidal burst, they emerged from the waves and began to rise into the sky, shedding huge waterfalls from their surfaces. With a sudden roar of sublight engines, the three Mon Calamari War Ships thrust away from the churning, boiling sea and climbed for space.

They passed the conflagration of the false shipyards, unmolested by Imperial fire. No Interdictor cruisers remained to prevent their jump to hyperspace. The Rebel cruisers gracefully swept past the remaining Golan stations, which now floated alone in space, abandoned by the strange Star Destroyers that had suddenly winked out of existence. Then they began to dwindle against the starry heavens, climbing away like rising stars in the night. With a triple flash, they shot into hyperspace and vanished.

Flint and Lumiya sensed the coming explosion moments before it happened, as a disturbance in the Force. They struggled out of their meditative states and staggered to their feet as the main viewport lit up with a blinding flare and the deck tilted under them. When the vacuum of space shrieked in upon them, pulling the bridge crew out into the midst of the energy storm, Lumiya was able to grasp the wall next to the turbolift with her machine strength, holding Flint to her with her other arm. She nearly lost her grip on Flint when a terrified crew member swept past and smashed into the armored Sith, but her cyborg body prevailed. Flint's armor was environmentally sealed, and Lumiya's mask allowed her to breathe for the moments it took her to force open the turbolift doors and heave both of them inside. Within the temporary safety of the lift, they descended to a lower deck of the Command Section. The turbolift dropped unsteadily, as power fluctuated and the artificial gravity began to weaken. Lumiya braced herself and fought for balance. The fire and vacuum of the bridge still filled Lumiya's senses and strongly reminded her of the death of Shira Brie. That had been a terrible experience. One moment, she had been lining up her targeting computer on Skywalker's TIE fighter, filled with a sense of triumph. The next, her world had exploded, shattering her body with her ship. She had felt herself die, as her torso was pierced by large shards of her viewport and her legs were crushed by the collapsing hull. After a few moments of indescribable pain, darkness had taken her, but that hadn't been the end. Even as her mind surrendered, her bio-augmented body refused to give up. It imprisoned her soul during its long, grim struggle. The fear and horror she had felt upon awakening in a crude cyborg frame surged up in her memory, and she instinctively clutched at Flint. She carefully removed his helmet, and cursed as she found him to be unconscious. Perhaps it had been a concussion or even feedback from the Force. Whatever the cause, she needed him, but couldn't have him. She was alone. Alone, but not helpless. Not as long as the Force was with her.

Fear was a way to reach the dark side. Especially if that fear could be channeled into anger. She focused her emotions and let them fill her with power. The rage came easily, flowing from her hatred of the Rebels and their victory over her. It seemed impossible even now, but the Rebel shipyards had been a trap designed solely to destroy her fleet. The Rebels had taken her old life, and now her new command as well. They had tricked her personally. She had found and believed the information that lured them into the trap. Information carried in the droid belonging to the two captured Rebels. The same Rebels that had been at Kulthis, where Shira had died. Tank and Slaughter.

A new certainty filled Lumiya. She may have lost her fleet, but she could still have revenge. The two Rebels responsible for her losses were still her prisoners. She was going to find and kill them both.

* * *

When Flint regained consciousness, he found himself in Systems Control, lying on his back and looking up at a haggard Lieutenant. "What's happening?" he groaned. Flint couldn't recall how he had gotten from the doomed bridge to this lower deck. "Where's Lady Lumiya, Lieutenant..."

"Lieutenant Yoff, Sir. Lady Lumiya brought you here, and told me to watch over you."

"How long ago?" he demanded, getting slowly to his feet.

"Ten, maybe fifteen minutes, Sir. She left you here and said she was going to kill some prisoners."

Flint grimaced. Kill some prisoners...it must be those two Rebels they had interrogated. "What is the status of the ship?"

"Not good, Sir. The Rebel trap took out our shields and weapons systems. Power is down to twenty percent. Artificial gravity is sporadic, and we have over a thousand dead. We lost the other ships in the fleet...no survivors." Yoff hung his head.

"Do we know what happened?" asked Flint.

"Most of it, Sir. As far as our sensor logs show, the Rebel ships were decoys of some kind, loaded with powerful explosives. Detonite, or perhaps Mego-nite. The explosion destroyed the Interdictor cruisers outright, and crippled us."

"But why?" Flint scowled. "It doesn't make sense. Why build those ships, only to destroy them? I thought they needed them desperately."

"Sir," said Yoff hesitantly, "as I said before, the ships appear to have been decoys. Just after the explosion, we received fragmentary readings from our aft sensors--the only ones that weren't obliterated. They seemed to detect three capital ships emerging from the oceans below and flying past us into space. They went to hyperspace before we could get a clear image, but..."

Flint looked at the display indicated by Yoff. The signals were consistent with ships similar to the Calamarian cruisers they had been blockading. Suddenly, everything was clear. "Those were the real ships," he said somberly. There must be another shipyards underwater. But they couldn't get those cruisers past the Interdictor cruisers either. They knew we wouldn't be thinking in alien terms, just human ones. They gave us a human style orbital shipyards to focus on, but they had to get past us in the end. We were guarding the only window for a fast hyperspace escape. Those Rebels...they weren't here to sabotage the ship, they were here to bring information to us, to lure us into their trap, to make it look like we figured out their weak spot by ourselves."

Flint fell silent. He found himself admiring the two captured Rebels. They had risked their lives, faced terrible odds, and why? So

that they could become...someone who mattered. Which was only what he had wanted when he became part of the Sith. The question was, in what way did he want to make a difference, now? He had forgiven the Rebellion itself, so he must also extend that honor to the prisoners. They had fought with great cunning, and Flint decided he had been beaten fairly. If the Rebels were still alive, they should be released. There was no longer any point to their captivity. The battle was over. Then he remembered. Lumiya had gone to kill them.

Something hardened inside Flint, filling him with resolve. His defeat had brought him to a new understanding of the path he had to follow. He had to convince Lumiya to follow that path as well, in order to fulfill his responsibility to her. For, the path she was on now could only lead to her destruction.

He had to find her, before she found the Rebels. It was a race, and Lumiya had a head start. He picked up his mirrored helmet and settled it onto his shoulders. "Thank you for your help, Lieutenant," came his filtered voice. "Send out a distress signal and get this ship evacuated as best you can. I have something...personal to attend to."

With that, Lord Flint left the shaken Lieutenant and strode into the smoking corridors, grasping his lightsaber.

* * *

Immediately after the explosion, the lights in Tank's cell went out, and the artificial gravity ceased. A deep thundering sound vibrated through the walls, and Tank woke up. It took him a moment to figure out that he hadn't died, but once he oriented himself in the weightless blackness by finding his sleeping ledge, his wits returned. Fighting the lingering pain of his lacerations, he pushed off towards the cell door. If the power had gone out, then the magnetic seal on the door would have broken. Without artificial gravity, he might be able to push it open. He found the door ajar, with a small crack opened at the bottom. Tank wrapped his fingers under it and pushed against the floor with his feet. Despite the ministrations of the medical droid, every wound seemed to be raw and open just below his skin. He strained, and the door slid up a meter with surprising ease, then jammed. Tank pulled himself under it and floated out into the darkness of the angular detention corridor. He supposed he could thank whatever disaster had struck the ship for his being alone in the cell block. He had no idea what had happened, but he felt that the Imperials had probably gotten what they deserved. In any case, he was free, and now he had to get his wife out.

Tank was troubled by a memory of dozens of cells in the immediate vicinity, but he decided to trust to good old, boring Imperial predictability. He reached for the door release for the cell to the immediate right of his own. The door didn't budge. Tank cursed. Of course, the power was out. He tried to shove the door open, but he couldn't get any leverage. There was no crack open at the bottom this

time. Tank thought hard for a long minute, but came up with nothing. Still, he wouldn't leave without Shally, even if it meant becoming a prisoner again. He pulled himself out into the detention block control room, feeling blindly at the dead consoles. Suddenly his floating foot bumped something low to the floor. His questing fingers discovered the familiar shape of Shally's R2 unit, distinctive for the voice box on its dome.

"Beesix!" he whispered. "Are you activated?"

There was no response. Tank felt around the droid's front and found the protruding shape of a restraining bolt, probably set to maintain the droid's deactivation. With no time for subtlety, he pulled off his boot and used the heel to batter the bolt off. The seal finally broke, and the little green droid's dome lights awakened to a steady glow. Beesix suddenly threw off a blinding spotlight into Tank's face, forcing him to shield his eyes.

"Would you point that thing someplace else?"

"Thank the Maker! It's you," piped Beesix. "How did you escape? Where is Mistress Edrin?"

"Mistress Boma," snapped Tank. "And by the way, I'm your Master now, too, and don't you forget it. You have to help me get Shally out of her cell. We don't have much time."

Beesix magnetized his treads and rolled towards the corridor Tank pushed off into, brightly lighting the way. Tank helped him with the stairs, and soon they reached the cells.

"I need you to feed power to the door mechanism. Let's try this one to the right of mine first."

Beesix extended an instrument arm and plugged into the control panel. Small colored lights blinked on, and the door slid upwards. Beesix's spotlight revealed the cell to be empty.

"All right, now the one to the left. Try this one."

Beesix rolled over and complied. This time, Tank felt relief and joy when the bright light revealed Shally lying on the ledge in the rear of the cell. His happiness quickly became concern when he saw she wasn't moving. A hasty inspection showed she was still alive, but she wasn't responding to anything. He decided she was drugged. Tank pulled her to her feet and supported her limp body with his own. He felt her weight and wished he was larger. Then he realized the artificial gravity had returned, and he jumped a little when red emergency lighting came on.

"Oh, sure, now they turn the power back on," muttered Tank. Then he realized that it could mean the Imperials were on their way back. They had to get out of the cell block, fast. Beyond that, they had to get off of the ship itself, which meant crossing more than half the

length of the vessel, past who knew how many stormtroopers, to reach the hangar bays, and steal a ship. And somewhere, Lumiya might be waiting.

"Beesix, we have to get off this ship," said Tank. "You have the schematics in your memory. Can you find us a way to the hangar bays with a minimum of exposure? Service tubes? Air ducts? Anything like that?"

The droid turned itself to the analysis as they started down the corridor. At that moment, Shally began to stir. Tank set her down gently and held her face. "Shally, it's me, Tank. Can you hear me?"

She focused on him, and her eyes filled with tears. She reached for him, and they held tight for as long as they felt safe. Tank quietly explained what was going on, and finished by helping her to her feet. "We have to get out of here. Can you walk?"

She nodded.

Beesix rolled gently against her. "I am so pleased to see you improving, Mistress Boma. If you were lost, I would have missed you a great deal, especially because I would then only be the property of Master Boma--"

Tank swatted the droid. "Give it a rest, will you? How are those calculations coming along?"

"I have projected a route comprised of turbolift tubes, lesser corridors, maintenance chutes, and droid access corridors. It can take us to the hangar bays, but it will take more than an hour, and we may be hunted, once our escape is discovered. It is also possible that some areas of the ship are damaged, including the escape route, and may be impassable."

"Wait," said Shally weakly. "Why go to the hangar bays? There are only three of us. We can find an escape pod a lot closer..."

Tank turned on Beesix. "You're supposed to be a smart droid. Why didn't you think of that?"

"I was only solving the problem you assigned to me, Master Boma. If you wanted other information--"

"Shut up Beesix," grumped Tank.

* * *

Lady Lumiya stormed into the deserted detention block control room. The emergency lighting gave her metallic body the illusion that it was soaked in blood. Her light whip was in her hands and uncoiled. Her fury was honed to a razor edge. All during her slow journey to the detention center, hampered as she was by the loss of artificial gravity, her anger

had been growing. Lord Vader had shown her how to use it to unleash the power of the Force. Now, it was uncertain how she would destroy the prisoners first, by slicing them to ribbons, or crushing their hearts with the power of the dark side.

Lumiya vaulted up the stairs and ran to the Rebel cells. She was shocked to find them empty, her quarry fled. How? How had they escaped? Could it be the work of the other Rebel agents? Despite an intensive search, no other Rebels had been found, but that didn't mean they weren't here, somewhere. No matter. If Tank and Slaughter had help, she would simply destroy all of them together.

Closing her eyes, Lumiya reached out with the Force, her extended senses questing for the Rebels' life energies. She sensed wounded people all around, as well as others helping them in a disciplined way. The Imperial minds had a certain feel, a sense that they were in their natural environment. Lumiya disregarded them, reaching out further. There! She had them. Three decks up, and heading aft, were a pair of minds that were full of desperate fear. There was an overwhelming desire to escape. One of the minds was dull, drugged perhaps. They had to be the Rebels, and they were alone.

Lumiya whirled and leaped into the control room, plunging towards the door. Her cyborg legs sped her on her way. They would not escape her, she vowed. Their lives belonged to her.

* * *

Tank, Shally, and Beesix ran, stumbled, and rolled through the smoke filled corridors of the Star Destroyer. Now it was obvious to them that the ship was severely damaged. Dead and wounded were scattered about, and in the confusion, the fleeing Rebels in their dirty Support Fleet uniforms were not noticed or stopped. Beesix guided them towards the nearest bank of escape pods, but twice their route was blocked by collapsed corridors, and they had to retrace their steps. A call went out for the evacuation of the ship, and they soon found themselves traveling with a few limping, bleeding officers and Naval Troopers. They spoke no words to the Imperials, but simply helped them along.

Finally, weary and choking, the small group reached a long room that was lined on one wall with access hatches to escape pods. Tank tried to breath a sigh of relief, but he ended up coughing spasmodically instead. When he raised his eyes from the floor, they met the glaring eyes of Lady Lumiya, who was standing directly in front of him. She had been waiting for them.

Lumiya spoke commandingly to the Imperials who came in with Tank and Shally. "Get to the escape pods. These Rebels are mine to deal with." The confused Imperials were too weak to argue, or perhaps they just didn't care. They slowly climbed into some of the pods as Lumiya faced her prey.

Tank and Shally backed up against the wall, stricken with sudden terror from the Force, as Lumiya activated her light whip. The deadly strands burned through the air as the cyborg swept them grandly over her head. Suddenly, Beesix rolled straight at the Dark Lady, his laser cutter, circular saw, and shock prod all extended. But before he could close with her, she extended one hand towards the droid, palm outwards. Beesix was hammered by an invisible force and flung backwards against the wall. The droid hit hard, and crashed onto the deck, where he lay still. His dome lights flickered and went out. Lumiya faced Tank and Shally again, raising the whip.

There was the sudden humming vibration of a lightsaber igniting.

Lumiya faced the entryway, and stiffened in surprise. It was Flint. He was fully armored, and his horned helmet covered his head, hiding his expression. All she could see in its mirrored surface was her own face with her rage-filled eyes. "Flint," she called out uncertainly. There was something about his sense that felt threatening. "I have the Rebels that escaped. The ones that caused this to happen to us."

"No, Lumiya," said Flint, his rough voice mechanically filtered through his helmet. "We did it to ourselves. They simply gave us the means to defeat ourselves. I can't let you kill them. You have to let them go, and give up your hatred of the Rebellion. They're not the ones who destroyed your life. I did that. But I can save your life, if you let them go, and come with me now."

Lumiya angrily pointed at Flint's crimson lightsaber blade. "Are you going to fight me to stop me from killing these two?" she demanded.

"If you force me to, Lumiya," Flint said calmly. He took off his helmet and looked at her steadily.

"So be it, Flint."

They stared at each other, not moving. Lumiya locked her gaze with Flint's. Long moments of indecision passed. Then Lumiya's eyes narrowed suddenly with chilling violence, and Flint's eyes lit up with angry disbelief.

Lumiya swept the light whip up and around, forcing Flint to leap backwards to escape the searing lightning strike. The Sith circled each other warily, even as Tank and Shally cowered in the corner, trying to stay out of range of the fight. Lumiya attacked with frightening skill, the light whip seeming to come alive in her hands. Its electric and metal strands were everywhere, striking at Flint like a whirlwind of fiery serpents. They struck sparks off the walls and ceiling, screaming through the air as Flint was forced to retreat. He was quickly coming to understand how her ancient weapon had been able to defeat the Jedi lightsabers of old. Each time he tried to fend off her blows, his saber blade was tangled in the chaotic energy tendrils of the whip, while the metal coils lashed against him, staggering him and nearly making him lose his grip on his weapon.

Finally, Flint could retreat no further. Behind him were the wall and the two helpless Rebels he had tried to save. He held up his lightsaber, sweat beading on his face.

"Just remember, Flint," grated Lumiya, "you gave me no choice in this." With inhuman speed, she struck, ripping Flint's lightsaber out of his grasp and slicing his exposed face, dazzling him. The lightsaber clattered to the deck, deactivated and out of reach.

But Flint wasn't finished. As the punishing coils slashed into him, he grasped as many of them as he could and wrapped them around his arms. Then he threw himself at Lumiya, spinning as he charged. The energy strands arced wildly against him, but his armor was made of Mandalorian Iron, a metal capable of deflecting the blow of a lightsaber. He wrapped himself in the strands of the light whip, coiling it around his armor until he ran full into Lumiya. Suddenly the destructive fire of the whip threatened her, too. Shocked and surprised, she instinctively deactivated her weapon as she and Flint fell to the floor. Before Lumiya could recover, Flint reached out a gauntleted hand and his lightsaber flew into it. He switched on the humming red light blade and held it across Lumiya's throat.

"You Rebels!" he shouted. "Go, now!"

Tank and Shally needed no urging. They staggered over to their droid and lifted it up. Struggling with the burden, they opened an escape pod door and dumped the droid inside. Then they climbed in and shut the hatch. Soon, there was the sound of explosive bolts firing, and the pod was gone. Lumiya lay very still. The violence had been shocked out of her by Flint's sudden victory, and the object of her anger was now out of reach. And still Lord Flint held the lightsaber blade at Lady Lumiya's throat, because her cyborg body itself was a weapon. Their eyes remained fixed on each other's. Finally, Lumiya spoke.

"What next?"

Flint's expression was tense. "Now you listen to some things that I have to say."

She nodded, carefully.

"We're on the wrong path, Lumiya," said Flint. "We don't belong as part of this conflict between the Rebels and the Empire. We're the new Sith, and we're outside all of that. If we try to be a part of it, you, and I, and the Sith will die."

"What are you talking about, Flint?" Lumiya retorted. "Why did you stop me from killing those Rebels?"

"Lumiya, I need you to hear what I'm telling you. We are the keepers of the Sith power. Now, think about what Lord Vader said about how the old Sith power was sacrificed for the Emperor's political power. Lord Vader never learned anything from that. He's trying to recreate the

Sith, but he still thinks in terms of political power. He placed us within the Imperial command structure, under the Emperor, even though he knew we could attract the wrong kind of attention from Palpatine. It was the only way he could think. In the end, he's the Emperor's servant, and he can't see past that. But I can."

"Go on," said Lumiya quietly.

"Lumiya, the Rebels weren't responsible for what happened to my life on Belderone. I brought Luke Skywalker's presence in the system to the attention of Lord Vader, and everything followed from that. Even what happened to you." Flint looked in her eyes for a hint of anger at his admission, but found none. Encouraged, he went on. "Once I couldn't blame the Rebels any more, I was able to see that I was free to choose my own path. Being a Sith and being part of the Empire aren't the same thing. We don't have to concern ourselves with this Civil War. In fact, I see it as destruction for both of us. Either Palpatine will enslave us, or the Rebels will get just a bit luckier than they did today. I know better than Lord Vader how the Sith have to go on. It's not a matter of politics. It's a matter of the Force."

Lumiya knew Flint spoke the truth. After their defeat at Calamari, she and Flint would stand no chance with the intolerant and unforgiving Emperor. Flint was right, there was really no choice, but his interference with her desire for vengeance still rankled. "And those Rebels we captured?" Lumiya asked coolly.

"I had to let those Rebels go, because there was no reason to kill them. They beat us, and they deserve to live. I wanted to force you to let them go, to make you give up your hatred of the Alliance. It's a trap...that's all it is. And I want you to come with me, away from the Empire, and recreate the Sith. We're not meant to be the Emperor's pawns. The true future of the Sith is with you and I together." Flint finished, and waited.

Lumiya let out a long breath. She was moved by his words. Flint made a lot of sense. Perhaps he was right. Her life as a Major in Intelligence had meant a lot to her, but she was a Sith now, and that should be most important to her. Her personal war against the Alliance could be a trap. And what were those two Rebels to her, anyway? They were nothing. Now that the distraction of vengeance was removed, she was able to see just how close she had come to dying for her political beliefs. And, she suddenly wondered, how much of it had been her choice, really, considering the long indoctrination of her youth? It was very hard, but she found she could begin to let it go, after all. There were better things in the future Flint described.

One thing, however, she could not let go. Flint had been kind to try to take responsibility for her pain, but there was really only one man who truly was responsible. One day, she knew she would settle her score against Luke Skywalker. Nothing could change that.

She let the handle of her light whip slip from her hand, and said, "I've said over and over again that Shira Brie is dead. It's time I started acting like it. All right, Flint, I'll go with you."

Flint deactivated his lightsaber, and Lumiya slowly sat up next to him. The anger had drained out of her eyes, and the violence had left her. She reached out a metal hand and slowly caressed Flint's scored, blackened armor, so like her own cyborg body. Their earlier confrontation came back to her, when her loathing for her physical state had reduced her to tears. Now, she could see that they shared a purpose that could unite them in ways above and beyond the physical.

"Perhaps, Flint," she said quietly, "we're more alike than not, after all."

Flint stood, and held out his gauntleted hand. She took it in her cyborg one, and gracefully rose, clipping her light whip to her belt. Then she reached up and peeled away her face mask, revealing her scars and letting her long red hair fall free. She let the mask fall to the deck.

"Now I'm ready," she said.

Lord Flint and Lady Lumiya of the Sith turned together and went back into the dying Guardian. On their way through the Star Destroyer, the Sith cloaked themselves in illusion, and they were not seen by any crew member. They entered the main hangar bay and claimed a Gamma class assault shuttle, which they also cloaked in invisibility. Piloting the shuttle to the rear of the defenseless Star Destroyer, Lumiya waited patiently until no more escape pods remained to be launched. The enormous vessel was finally empty. Then she fired her full complement of concussion missiles at the unprotected main engines. As Lumiya and Flint accelerated away in the shuttle, the Star Destroyer Guardian was annihilated in an awesome detonation that marked their departure from the Empire and the uncertain beginning of their new life.

* * *

Tank and Shally were picked up, along with the surviving crew of the Guardian, by a Rebel Escort Frigate a day later. The Imperials were taken into custody, and, after questioning, they would be released somewhere out on the Galactic Rim. Meanwhile, the Frigate was cruising serenely through the empty reaches of space, flanked by three enormous Mon Calamari MC-80 cruisers. Shally gazed at them through the viewport of her passenger quarters on the Frigate. Tank stood beside her, his arm draped across her shoulders.

"I feel the worst about Shira," said Tank. "I trusted her. We all did. Then she turns out to be someone like Lumiya."

"She's a tortured individual, from what you told me," said Shally. "She nearly died, and that has a way of changing a person. Believe me, I've been there. But I had you to help me to avoid making my life one big act of vengeance. I don't know. Maybe Flint can help her. I'd like to think so. I still think he's an honorable man, after he saved our lives." She moved even closer into his embrace. "I don't know what I would have done without you. But this mission made me think about having to face that. I began to question whether the cause I was fighting for was worth it, if it meant losing you. Now, after all this, I'm still not sure. I just hope it never comes to that."

"I know how you feel," said Tank. "I was ready to put your life before the Rebellion, too. I think maybe there's nothing wrong with that. Part of what we're fighting for is to preserve a world for people like us to live in. So we matter as much as the cause."

"What matters is, we made it," sighed Shally.

"And they made it," said Tank, looking at the proud new capital ships. A vast feeling of relief was all he felt. They had survived against all odds, and succeeded in their mission, although Tank still wasn't clear on how. As far as he could tell, they had failed.

There was a gentle knock on the door behind them, and when Shally opened it, there was Admiral Ackbar, with a fully repaired Artoo Beesix trundling brightly behind him.

"May I come in?" rasped the Mon Calamari leader, rotating his huge eyes at Shally.

"Of course," she said, smiling down at her droid. "That was a brave thing you did, Beesix, trying to save our lives."

Tank came over and gamely offered his own thanks. "Yeah, good job, little guy. I didn't think you had it in you."

Beesix beeped and blatted in reply. Tank was surprised to see that the voice box had been removed. Admiral Ackbar had it in his large flipper like hands.

"The techs wanted to give this back to you," he said, "for installation at your own discretion. I came by to thank the both of you for what you did. The new ships will be crucial to our cause. One of them is going to be my flagship, Home One."

"Look," said Tank, "there are a few things we don't understand yet...like what happened."

"I'm sorry you haven't been debriefed yet," said Ackbar kindly. "For now, I can explain some of it to you. We built the ships you see in an undersea shipyards. At the same time, we constructed decoy ships in space, and set six mostly automated defense stations to guard them, predicting that the Imperials would set up a blockade to prevent the cruisers from escaping. We gambled that the Empire wouldn't send an

attack fleet, based on the disdain we know they feel for us. But we still had to get our cruisers past the blockade. That's what your mission accomplished. We felt that the Empire would be fully willing to believe you were there on a dangerous mission of infiltration, while your real purpose was to smuggle in false information inside your R2 unit. Your sabotage mission had a real chance of success, of course, but we knew you might be captured." Ackbar looked uncomfortable. "There were no other Rebel agents, just the two of you. I just want you to know that either I or General Cracken would take the same risks."

"It's all right, Admiral," said Shally. "We still knew what we were getting into."

Ackbar bowed slightly to her. "In any event, the Imperials found the information, and it led them to believe they had found a weakness in our defenses. But when they were lured in, the decoys exploded, taking the Star Destroyers with them. Our real cruisers escaped, and thankfully, we were able to rescue you afterwards. However," Ackbar said sadly, "this victory might be what finally turns the full attention of the Emperor to my world. We can only hope that it will have been worth it. I'll leave you alone now. I understand you need some rest. But General Cracken wanted me to give you these when I saw you, with his deepest thanks." Ackbar passed them a slim box. "May the Force be with you."

After the Admiral left, Tank opened the box. "Look at this--medals of honor! Now I'm just as good as Luke, right?" Tank grinned widely.

"Better than Luke, darling," said Shally, admiring her medal. "Biggs would have been so proud of you."

Tank pulled out a data card next. "This is a notice of promotion. We're both Lieutenants, now."

"Just so you remember who's the boss, no matter what," said Shally. "Wait, something fell out of the box." She bent to retrieve two plastic cards from the floor. "Okay, Lieutenant, want to go on our next mission on the Kuari Princess? These are two tickets!"

"Yes, Sir," said Tank, stepping into her arms. Beesix beeped and whistled at them, but they were too caught up in one another to pay him the slightest attention.

EPILOGUE

Darth Vader, Dark Lord of the Sith, stood on the bridge of the Executor, gazing out at the movements of his fleet and brooding. He had just received some unpleasant news. The Calamari blockade had been destroyed, and it seemed that Flint and Lumiya had not survived. His Sith disciples were gone, and the loss troubled Vader. For a brief time,

he had felt like his own person, instead of a servant. Now that time was over.

If only he could find his son. That could bring back the feeling he craved. There was a good chance of that happening, too, due to the massive Probe Droid project now under way. If he could find his son, he might still fulfill the destiny envisioned by Exar Kun, or perhaps find an even greater one...

Vader felt an unaccustomed pain at the loss of Flint and Lumiya, but the story of the Sith was not over. As long as he remained Dark Lord, he felt certain that the Sith would rise again.

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