



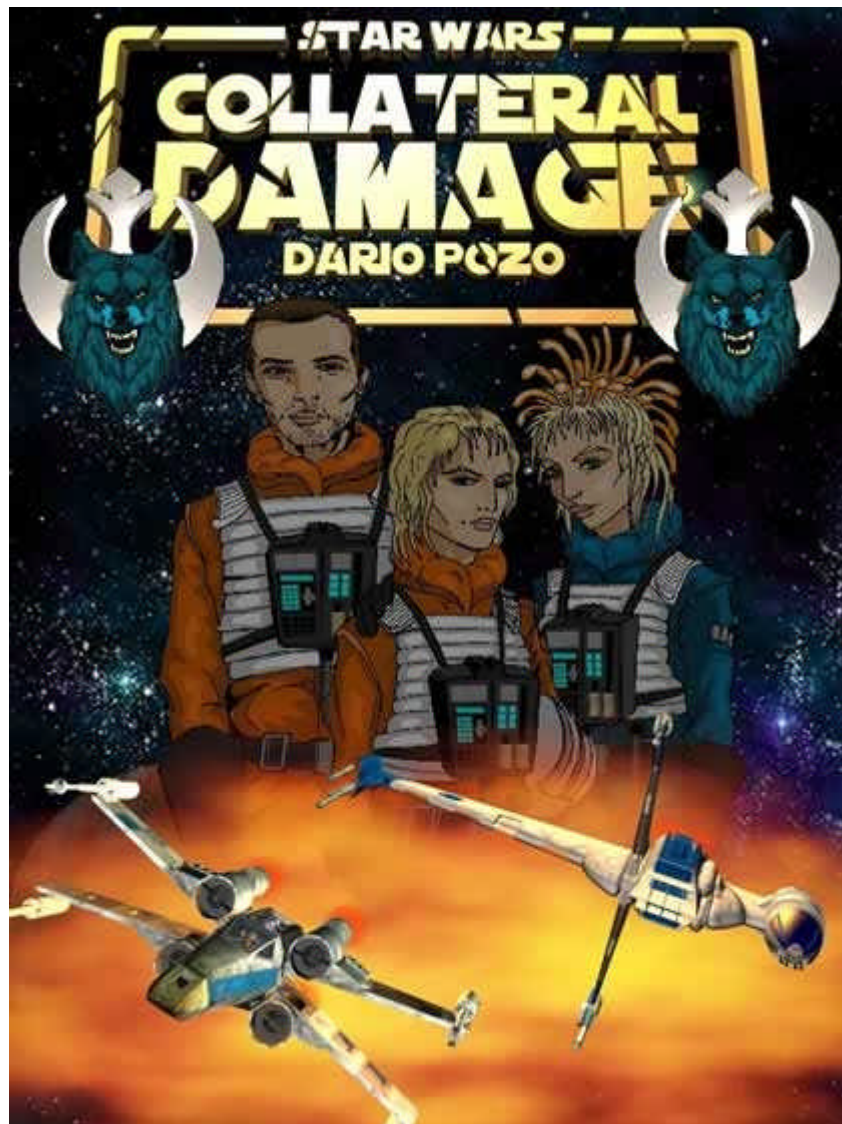
Reading Room

StarWars FanFiction

POV: Collateral Damage

By Dario "Ibero" Pozo

Pictures by Dario "Ibero" Pozo



Foxfire, still wearing her orange flight suit, stepped into the turbolift that would take her to the deck where the

Captain's quarters were located. At this precise moment she would kill for a shower and a good lap, but the summons – that also included the other four pilots occupying command positions in her fighter squadron – indicated that this was urgent. *As usual, when the Captain calls.* Foxfire sighed, and waited, resigned, for the turbolift to stop. When the door opened she found her partners there. Moose, the Operations Officer, winked at her, and part of the tension she felt softened.

"Let's go see what we've broken this time," she joked.

"Besides my fighter, you mean." Torpedo, the Tactical Officer said.

"Yes, besides that," she said making a face, and causing everybody to laugh. That made her feel good. Foxfire had gotten to consider Vyper, Ibero and Torpedo as close friends, and Moose was more, much more. They had been flying together for years, contributing with their effort to force the Empire to withdraw a bit more everyday. They had shared unnumbered dangers battle after battle, the wild joy of the victories, the grief, impotence and despair of the defeats, the tears for the fallen friends, the laughs in those precious moments of comradeship they had enjoyed... All that created perdurable bonds that seemed unbreakable. With work, courage and sacrifice, Foxfire had climbed positions until being in command of the squadron, and she ambitioned no more. It was a privilege to be commanding these people. It was a pleasure to live among them. Here and now she felt complete. There was nowhere else where she wanted to be, nothing else she would like to be doing instead.

Foxfire loved being Wolfshead Squadron Commander.

She was going to lose it all in the next thirty minutes.

A Navy soldier had opened the door for them, and closed it as soon as they entered. Colonel Gen'yaa, captain of the New Republic Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*, stood at the centre of the room, between her desk and the conference table, where several officials of her own staff waited. She narrowed her grey eyes, composing the expression her subordinates had learned to associate with extreme annoyance. Everybody considered it highly recommendable not to be in the same room with her, if you could find a legitimate reason to be somewhere else, when she was wearing that expression. Foxfire was bothered, terribly bothered, by the fact that she was not immune to the Captain's killer glance. She knew that if she tried to look Gen'yaa back in her eyes, she would inevitably be defeated in that contest of gazes, no matter she could not find any rational reason to explain it – besides being subordinate in rank. Instead, she stood looking forwards in her best martial stance. Foxfire didn't need to look around to be certain that all those who had been summoned with her to the Captain's quarters were adopting similar attitudes, waiting for the Captain to explain what was this all about. She also didn't need Jedi powers to anticipate that they were not here to receive praise or hear good news.

Foxfire noticed that the Captain looked more unmistakably Bothan than ever before. She had allowed her eyebrows to grow thicker these last months, stretching over her temples before merging with her abundant pale blonde hair. This change, obviously deliberate, made it harder to mistake her as a human. Today, human and Bothan species were considered genetically incompatible, but that was not entirely true a generation ago, as Vyper, the squadron second in command, had explained to Foxfire when they first meet Colonel Gen'yaa – more accurately, he had explained it right after meeting her for the very first time. There was a time, forty years before, more or less the age they attributed to Gen'yaa, when the high class Bothan families had paid generously for the services of the best Imperial genetic engineers to make that combination possible. With Emperor Palpatine's intense xenophobic policy, this was the only way for Bothans to make sure their offspring would climb to the power and privileges they had been accustomed to for generations. Paradoxically, this was also what, less than a year before, had allowed the Bothan spies – always chosen among those with the most human features – to betray the Emperor and participate actively in the events that led to his destruction. Now things had changed drastically in Bothawui and its colonies, and being a pure Bothan was a very good thing if you were looking for a fast and profitable career in the military or in politics. Foxfire realized that the ship Intelligence officer, Lieutenant Commander Mesch Dey'jeaa, with his short height, black fur and long hair, flat nose and sharp ears, was surely a constant reminder of this for Colonel Gen'yaa. Foxfire wondered morosely for a second if the Captain would ever admit, not even to herself, how much she was worried about how Bothan she looked.

Gen'yaa indicated to all of them with a vague gesture to take a seat around the conference table, staring absently at the parabolic focus of the holoprojector installed at the center. She pressed a key on the small panel placed at her section of the table, bringing the projector to life. It showed a frozen image of a shuttle flying against a starfield, and a red and blue icon on a corner. On Foxfire's left, Ibero, the squadron Intelligence Officer, murmured "Give us ten minutes, and we'll give you the galaxy."

"This was transmitted by the Coronet City Holocaust News half an hour ago. For those of you who may not have seen it, this is the most popular current events programme of the Corellian media." Foxfire realized that Ibero's previous comment meant that he had recognized the floating icon. *Maybe I should watch holovision a little more.* Gen'yaa continued. "Don't doubt that, even now, Imperial News services will be giving as broad a coverage as they can to this, not to mention what the Seibergians will be doing with it." Gen'yaa kept silent for some moments, to let the significance of all this to reach everybody, even before seeing the holo. The New Republic depended almost entirely on the image of justice and democracy they were trying to create for themselves, in order to attract pacifically new planetary systems, which would otherwise remain true to the Empire. The attacks against that image were constant in the Imperial media, and even in non-aligned sectors like Corellia. They were bad enough when they were constructed on top of lies, that the New Republic had to work hard to prove false. Were it to be revealed that there was a kernel of truth behind one of these campaigns, though, the damage could be disastrous and maybe irreversible. Foxfire felt a sense of urgency, fearing what they were about to see. Gen'yaa continued. "It has been ten minutes since Admiral Ackbar sent this recording to me, with orders to call him back as soon as I had taken a look at it and started an investigation." The emphasis she gave to the words Admiral Ackbar was a key that none of her reduced audience could ignore. If the Mon Calamari admiral in command of the New Republic fleet personally contacted one of his captains, the matter could only be one of the highest importance. Taking that into account, the word investigation, which Gen'yaa had almost spat, was even more serious.

"An invest-...?" Foxfire started to say. She knew better than to ask Colonel Gen'yaa anything before being invited by her to do so. But something in her tone, her even-more-than-usual stern attitude, or the damned five degrees colder that this room seemed to be in comparison with the rest of the ship, pulled Foxfire to talk on an impulse. Colonel Gen'yaa interrupted her with an impatient look while she activated the hologram.

"I'm the one who has questions to be answered, Lieutenant Colonel. But first this will illustrate you about the kind of mess you and your men may have put all of us into."

Foxfire took a puzzled look at Vyper, seated across the table, but he just shrugged, indicating he had as little idea about what was going on as her.

"These images had been sent to us by our special reporters covering the conflict in the system of Seibergia," a news reader started saying, "and show what Corellian search and rescue teams found in the area of the most recent catastrophe." Wolfshead Squadron, along with several other New Republic fighter units, had been operating in the Viayak cluster, and particularly in the Seibergia system, for nearly three months now. Foxfire studied the pattern of stars on the background of the image, where it could be clearly distinguished the presence of Seibergia, the only inhabitable planet of the system and equally named. She realized that this could actually be the region of space where their last mission had taken place. She stiffened as an alarm was triggered deep in her mind.

"As we have been reporting for the last three weeks," the reader's voice continued, "the Rebel Alliance has maintained one more day its campaign of terror in the space of Seibergia system, under the excuse of protecting the Balanish population of the planet from their Seibergian neighbours." Moose snorted when he heard this. The Corellians were not happy at all about their loss of influence over the Viayak cluster when the Empire had withdrawn from this sector, two months ago, but this version of the present situation was contemptible, to say the least. Foxfire squeezed his hand under the table in sympathy. She suspected the worst was still to come. "This masquerade has been conclusively exposed today when Rebel fighters attacked those whom they pretend to defend. We warn our viewers that the images we are about to show are not pleasant to see." *All right, now nobody will move from his seat,* Foxfire thought, forgetting for a moment that this had been transmitted several hours before. The holo-camera stopped following the shuttle and the view expanded as the ship slowed down at its destination, the darkened remnants of what had been a bulk freighter. Smaller pieces of debris floated around the twisted hull while the shuttle matched speed and rotation with it, and its rear hatch opened. Several people in space suits emerged, using propulsion units to manoeuvre between the pieces, bright orange lights marking every one's position.

The image changed to a closer view, surely taken by a camera mounted on one of the rescuers' space suits. Some of the pieces of debris took more defined shapes, some of them corresponding to human bodies, in different states of destruction. Foxfire struggled to not show her disgust. What they were expecting to find? This was a war, and people die in wars. Those transports – Foxfire didn't doubt anymore this had to be the Seibergian military convoy they had intercepted that same day – were carrying deadly weapons, and not only they had ignored the orders to lower their shields and stop their engines, but they had opened fire against Wolfshead Squadron's ships. Hell, Torpedo, seated besides Vyper, could consider himself lucky being here now. Had he be piloting something less sturdy than a B-Wing, they would be mourning him now.

Foxtire forgot it all when she saw something that shouldn't have been there.

"This was a civilian ship, coincidentally of Corellian manufacture, occupied by Balanish citizens, many of them children." Two gloved hands, belonging to the rescuer carrying the camera, carefully recovered a little body, trapped between two fragments of hull. It could still be recognized as that of a girl, no more than five years old, although the explosion of the ship, then the decompression, and finally the hours exposed to vacuum and cold had largely destroyed any beauty she once surely had possessed. Foxtire heard a stifled gasp, and could see with the corner of her eye that Ibero had paled. He was father of a girl, too, only six months old. It was easy to understand the effect this was having on him. And the effect it would have on every sensible being who could see this holo, and not necessarily only those who had children of their own.

Colonel Gen'yaa stopped the holo and turned the projector off. Suddenly the space over the table was very empty. "It only gets worse," she said. "By the way, at the end of the report they were speculating with the possibility of the pilot actually being a Corellian." Nobody ignored the fact that the Corellian Diktat was looking for a reason to take a more active part in the conflict, and this might be it. "The fact is that if we are able to prove that the Seibergian were carrying civilians on a military convoy, specially if they were Balanish, we'll find a way to turn this against them." Some of those present nodded. "Otherwise, we'll be in deep trouble. So, what I want to know now is whether there could have been a civilian transport out there, one that coincidentally or not was at the worst place and the worst moment, and you shot it down." Gen'yaa stared at the five pilots, and this time none of them could avoid the visual contact. "I don't need to recall you of the fact that you were ordered to scan any ship's contents before opening fire against it, do I?"

Foxtire felt cold, very cold. On her right, Moose had his eyes wide open, the same sudden realization reaching his mind. The time seemed to stop while everybody's looks fell on them. Gen'yaa insisted, her voice an octave too high-pitched because the anger she was starting to feel: "Might you have destroyed a civilian transport, Lieutenant Colonel?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Foxtire answered very slowly, "I think we might."

II

Sdermila dropped the wooden spoon she was using to taste the kalashiri stew. That last explosion had sounded closer than ever, making the glass of the window tremble and startling her. She cursed angrily between her teeth, and recovered the spoon with trembling hands. She had to admit she was starting to worry. "Don't be a fool, old woman," she muttered to herself, "scared is what you are."

Talking to herself was something that Sdermila did often since his husband, her dear Taigor, died fifteen years ago. It was an stupid accident. Their kalahorse was bitten by an insect while they were harvesting the grain and got nervous. Taigor tried to calm it down, and made the fatal mistake of approaching it from behind, something he always taught the kids not to do. It kicked him plain on the chest, before Sdermila's eyes. She and Taigor used to talk to each other all the time when they were together. Those first months without Taigor, Sdermila had started to talk to herself when she was alone. She didn't even pretend to be talking to him, it was just that, some times, she could not bear the silence any more. It finally become an habit for her, although she took care not to do it when someone could hear it, especially one of her sons. None of them were here now. She looked at the window with apprehension, and said aloud what she had onlythought so far. "Had you not been so damn stubborn, you would be with Jeiran, Voeda and the kids, visiting your ancestors' home in Balania by now. But no, you had to be stronger, more valiant than any one."

Three days ago, her son Jeiran had come to tell her to come with him and his family. They had arranged passage to Balania on a freighter that would depart in two days from Nurtina spaceport. She had asked him what was he so frightened of, and he had asked back if she had not seen the news about what the Seibergians were doing on the frontiers. "No, I haven't seen them," she had lied, "what do they say that can be of importance here, in the countryside?" Then Jeiran had started to tell her about the atrocities their people were suffering at the hands of the Seibergian paramilitary, until she had refused to continue listening. Sdermila tried to solve the matter, saying "that's pretty far from here." Jeiran had answered "two hundred kilometers is a long distance if you have to walk, or even ride that old beast you still use to labor the ground, but it's nothing for a bomber or a speeder-tank." He had continued explaining that, even now, regular troops were being sent by the Seibergian planetary government – which of course had not a single Balanish among its members. Those troops were supposed to mediate and end the "incidents" in the

Balanish Region, as they called the murders, the rapes and the house burning, but they were actually supporting the paramilitary groups. In more and more small villages, the Balanish population was being driven out of their homes, with no place to go, or killed, if they dared to resist. "That won't happen here, Jeiran," Sdermila had said, "we and our Seibergian neighbors have always lived in peace. Do you imagine the Kilovich, the Sirilenki, or the Torsken, trying to set fire to our house? Oh, please, Jeiran, you and your brother Lania have played with their children!" She had immediately regretted mentioning her other son in this context. Her son's expression hardened. "Yes, we played with them!" Jeiran exclaimed angrily. "But we grew up, mother. Lania, despite graduating at the top of his class at the Technical University, had to travel to Commenor to find a job worth his capacity, a job that here he only would have gotten had he been named Kilovich, Sirilenki, or Torsken, for instance!"

Sdermila could not answer to that. What Jeiran had just said she had thought, too, but she had never said anything to him. The old wound still hurt. When Taigor died, things were not easy for their family. She had needed to make adjustments in their economy and take difficult decisions. Instead of buying a used harvester, as she and Taigor had planned, Sdermila had kept working with that damned kalahorse, and used the money that they had been saving to send Lania, her older son, to the university. He was so promising! And she had not been wrong about him. Physics Engineer at twenty two, specialized in magnetic fields. That was what the official certificate said, which Sdermila guarded with pride. But, since he was gone, she and Jeiran had gradually lost contact with Lania. Sdermila didn't blame him. She constantly told to herself that Lania was too busy, and had to travel too often. And Holonet connections were terribly expensive. Normal mail was very cheap, though, but Sdermila tried to ignore that fact. On the other hand, Jeiran had never seemed envious of his brother, although Sdermila was sure that Jeiran could have done well in the university, too. He appeared to understand that, when his turn had come, there was not enough money. His petition for a grant had been rejected, not unexpectedly. Not many Balanish obtained one. Nevertheless, Jeiran had refused to work in the fields with his mother, and had preferred a job as mechanical operator in the new fibroplastic factory, twenty kilometers from home. He had worked hard, terribly hard, for years, but now he was the first assistant of the plant supervisor and, the best of all, he had a wonderful family of his own. His wife, Voeda, a cheerful clerk who pretended to be a writer in her scarce spare time, poor dreamer, had become a daughter for Sdermila. And the kids, Drivan and the little Mila, were new life for their grandmother. Sdermila was no less proud of what Jeiran had achieved than she was of Lania. Maybe even more, she had to admit.

But Jeiran had come to tell her that he was going to quit his job, throwing away the work of years, to sell miserably his house and furniture, and worst of all, take her grandchildren away, just because he and Voeda were frightened of what they saw in the news. Sdermila just could not understand that, but she had failed to convince him. That boy was as stubborn as her and then some. What Sdermila would never do is to follow him, as painful as seeing all them leave and stay alone would be. At least, they would have a home to return, hers, when they realized how wrong they were. She had said "I will never leave the land that your father and I worked so hard, and where he is buried now." A moment later her younger son was gone, too, and she hadn't even had a chance to say goodbye to Voeda and the kids. She had thought that Jeiran would have to beg to be forgiven for that.

But now, Sdermila was starting to think that the wrong one had been herself.

She tried to concentrate on the stew, but it was not easy, not with the sound of not-very-distant explosions. "What is happening out there? Are the Seibergians really coming?" She couldn't stop thinking of the things Jeiran had told her. "Heavens, Sdermila, when have you become so easy to scare? It's probably some fool trying to blow the old Kerevinia mine open again. Who will be the dumb town jerk that bought it this time? Nothing was ever found there, and nothing will be. This land is good for grain and beasts, but there is not a single kilogram of anything valuable under it. If Taigor were here, he would be rolling on the floor unable to stop the laughter..." Another explosion, even closer this time, made her lose the spoon again. Something had broken upstairs. Now she didn't care to recover the spoon and put the flame control at the lower position. Sdermila headed to the outer door. She had to see what was going on in the village with her very eyes.

The first thing she noticed was the smoke. The weather was cold enough to have the windows closed, and that had prevented her from smelling it. Now she could see it. The thickest column came from the other side of the village, more or less where the Volodir farm was located, but there were other places in flames. One of them, Sdermila realized, horrified, was the primary school. "Have everybody gone crazy? There must be children there!" Suddenly, a speeder roared along the road coming from the village, quickly disappearing

from sight. It was followed by two more, and then nothing. Usually, Sdermila would have wondered where the occupants were going to be such in a hurry, but now she didn't doubt they were not going, they were escaping. People had come out from the scattered houses surrounding Sdermila's before she did, and many of them were looking at the route. Now she could distinguish a crowd abandoning the village, walking or even running. There were also a couple of kalahorses and even a small harvester. The whine of blaster bursts could be heard in the distance.

"We've got to get out of here, Sdermila!" Her neighbor Redina cried out at her, her voice revealing how close she was to hysteria. A couple of men took rifles and waited near their houses, but most people were simply running away, using the fastest way of locomotion they had at hand. In many cases that was on foot. Sdermila refused to panic. There was probably no reason to leave their homes. If the Seibergians came, they would see they were nothing but farmers. They were not a danger for anybody so they would not be bothered.

Sdermila stayed where she was for some moments, watching the route. She was about to return home again when she spotted two military vehicles approaching. As they advanced, people were forced to move away from the route to avoid being rammed. Not far from where Sdermila stood, one of the men carrying a rifle exclaimed "bastards!". Sdermila knew him well, as she knew all her neighbors. "I wonder what that stupid Divanian and the others are expecting to do with their old rifles against a speeder-tank", she muttered. Kaliga, Divanina's wife, was trying to convince him about dropping his weapon and escaping like almost everybody was doing. Her husband simply ignored her and aimed at the closest vehicle. Kaliga looked at Sdermila, silently pleading for help.

"Divanian," she called, "take that weapon down, you fool! All you're going to do is get yourself killed!" He didn't seem to have even heard her. "Taigor always said you were an idiot and he sure was right." That comment made Divanian toss an angry look at her, but he didn't reply. The man stayed where he was, following the armored vehicle with the cannon of his rifle. "I just can't believe he is so stupid..." Sdermila muttered. She started to move away from him and closer to her house. Kaliga also made two steps back, but she didn't dare to leave her husband alone. The Seibergian were no further than a hundred meters now. Divanian shouted at them not to get any closer.

One of the vehicles shot a high energy burst.

The shockwave made Sdermila fall to the ground. She felt like a giant, hot hand, had smashed her in the face. When she was able to lift her head, she saw what remained of the Divanian house. There was no trace of its owners, but Sdermila knew they had to be dead, literally disintegrated. The two speeder-tanks had stopped fifty meters away, waiting for a group of soldiers to catch up with them. Sdermila's ears were buzzing, and her nose was bleeding a bit, but otherwise she was not wounded. She ran towards her house and took her coat, although she was sweating intensely, and wiped the blood away from her nose with the handkerchief that she found in the pocket. "Think, Sdermila, think," she whispered. Sdermila knew that she could not carry too many things. Her old kalahorse, the same that had killed Taigor but that she could not afford to sacrifice, as her sons had asked her to do, could not carry too much weight, not now. She tried to decide what was the most valuable thing she could take with her. Shouts in Seibergian and Basic were heard through the now broken windows. She had no time.

Sdermila put the stew in a plastic container and came out through the kitchen door.



Colonel Gen'yaa watched distractedly as the technician worked, programming a virtual link from the *Wolf's Lair's* main computer to the holoprojector banks. The recordings taken from all the ships that composed Wolfshead Leader's last patrol, including not only the flight cameras but every instrument that stored a

record on the onboard computers, would be available for immediate recovery and revision. Gen'yaa wouldn't allow anybody to leave the room before she had some questions answered, and they knew it. She hoped to find something in the data to explain what had happened. Something besides the fact that at least one seasoned pilot had ignored - with or without reason, that was what had to be found out - the instructions they all had received for their mission and had opened fire against a civilian vessel. She was not optimistic.

The Bothan woman mentally considered some scenarios about what could happen next, concentrating on the worst ones. Like most of her race, she had been educated to prepare herself for anything, and look for the possible benefit to be obtained from every situation. If that was not possible, the goal was to minimise any losses. In this case, that probably meant that she would have to destroy the careers of some of the people present in this room, in order to free the New Republic - and herself, too - from any responsibility for the death of innocents. She would gladly do that if she found no better options, but even so, she doubted this incident would pass without serious consequences on the political stage.

To understand what was at stake, it was necessary to study the history of this region of space, one of the most contentious in a galaxy always in turmoil. Gen'yaa had read everything she could find about the Viayak cluster, even before the *Wolf's Lair* was included in the New Republic task force sent to this area a month and a half ago. She would have given half of her medals to avoid this mission. From her point of view, there was very little benefit to be obtained here, and a big deal to lose on the other hand.

The conflict that had brought them here actually started almost two thousand years before, when one of the then-richest planets of the cluster, Balania, had tried to invade Seibergia and failed. When the Balanish military understood that they had fatally underestimated the resistance the Seibergians were able to offer, and the support that they would obtain from the Republic, especially from the nearby system of Corellia, they pulled their forces out. *Almost* all of them. The first contingent, several thousand men and women, had already been deployed into Seibergian territory, but they could not be recovered. Had they reached their objectives as quickly and cleanly as planned, Balania would expect that the Republic would accept the consummate facts. Now, to save the face and to avoid paying astronomic reparations, Balania argued that these troops were mutineers who had acted without the support of their government, which had never intended to invade Seibergia. That should have been the end of a short war, but the sound of lasers and grenades was still heard on Seibergia. The Balanish soldiers, betrayed and abandoned to their own luck, were equipped and armed well enough to defend themselves and keep the possession of the little piece of territory where they had established their provisional camps, at least for a time. After several bloody but failed attempts to eradicate these offending remnants of the Balanish invasion on their planet, the Seibergians accepted a negotiation. The subsequent treaty, signed with the pretended indifference of Balania and the blessings of the Republic - which had never believed the official Balanish version of events, but longed to stop the bloodshed once and for all -, allowed the survivors of the Balanish expeditionary force to stay if they wanted to, keeping a certain autonomy in the region they had taken, mountainous, poor and isolated nevertheless. They had little chances, if any, of returning to Balania. With no external help or supplies they were condemned to death anyway, so this was the best treaty they were able to get, under the compromise of not fighting the Seibergians again.

They had to work hard to survive, but they quickly adapted themselves to their new reality. They soon changed the weapons for the instruments of agriculture and shepherding, and their offspring was pacific. Those lands they cultivated with so much sacrifice were called, proudly by them, scornfully by the Seibergians, the Balanish Country. With time, some contact with Balania was recovered, but things had changed drastically in this sector. Seibergia didn't waste the opportunity offered by their new buoyant relations with the Republic and the help of Corellia - which found in Seibergia an excellent market for their products, especially starships and machinery -, and prospered. On the other hand, Balania started a slow decadence that led it to lose all of its external colonies, becoming a backward planet in barely a millennium. The heirs of the old invaders, the inhabitants of that Balanish Country, were not feared any more by the Seibergians, but scorned at first, exploited later, and always hated. They stayed there, though, because they had no other place to go.

With the fall of the Republic and the beginning of the Empire, Seibergia reached its peak, being one of the first worlds that openly supported Senator Palpatine when he took the power. For several decades, Seibergia was the politic and administrative head of all the inhabited planets and colonies of the Viayak cluster. The Seibergian president, Doinos Somolovich, found himself appointed as the local Moff, what saved him from the bothering obligation of convocing new elections, and allowed him to stay in the power long after the legal period was over. Unexpectedly, the Seibergian-Balanish found in the Empire an

unsuspected protection, because Palpatine would not tolerate too many abuses against human populations – had the Balanish been other than human, the Seibergians could have exterminated them without the Empire moving a single stormtrooper to defend them -. Nevertheless, they were never more than third class citizens in Seibergia, socially excluded, and rejected whenever any of them dared to leave their mountains.

That was until barely months ago.

After the defeat of the Empire at Iberyia, and its forced retreat from the nearby planetary systems, Seibergia had seen how the Imperial garrisons on the Viayak cluster had been progressively moved to other places, strategically more important for Coruscant's interests. Sate Pestage, the visible head of the council ruling now the somehow decaying Empire, had given the Seibergians many reassurances of his undying support and sympathy, but had taken the troops and ships away anyway, leaving them defenceless against the advance of the New Republic in the sector. Before the last Imperial ship had departed from the Viayak cluster, several worlds declared their independence from Seibergia, like Eslivan, Balania, Corotaria or Vina Bosolia. Somolovich tried to retain them by all means, including brute force, but he failed nevertheless. One after another, all these worlds managed to break their bonds with Seibergia, but not before some bloody combats were sustained in some of them. The fight was especially terrible in Vina Bosolia, and ended only three months ago. This planed had called for the New Republic assistance, but they had been unable to provide any. Still recovering from the losses suffered at Endor and Mon Calamari, while fighting the Empire's strikes to recover the control on several sectors, the former Rebel Alliance had watched with impotence how Seibergia practiced scorched ground policy on Vina Bosolia.

The Corellian Diktat was now Somolovich's best ally, but he was in a very uncomfortable position here. Corellia had never joined Palpatine, although it had signed a treaty of friendship and mutual co-operation with Coruscant. Its declared neutrality during the civil war between the Empire and the Alliance had resulted to be very profitable – the respective fleets were equipped with Corellian ships, for instance – but it had also divided its population. There were Corellians fighting for both sides. They were more numerous with the Empire, but the Rebel ones – Solo, Antilles...- were more famous. Although still supporting the Empire, the Diktat preferred to avoid a direct confrontation against the New Republic that could even lead to a civilian war in his own planet. As Pestage before him, he ignored Somolovich's calls to help Seibergia in its military adventures.

Seeing in this complicated scenario an opportunity to improve their own situation, the Balanish community on Seibergia decided to ignore Vina Bosolia's recent example and asked for the New Republic help to set themselves free from the Seibergian oppression, tighter than ever now that the Empire was not there to protect them. They demanded that the Balanish Country was considered a part of Balania, which had recently joined the New Republic. Even with the insistence of this planet's ambassadors, who fervently defended their relatives' cause before the Provisional Council, the New Republic did not take the petition too seriously at first. "Independents from their own planet?" "A region of a planet being a part of another one?" These were the answers that the Seibergian-Balanish had to hear every time. In Seibergia almost nobody laughed, though. As remote as the odds of they actually succeeding could be, the only possibility of having the New Republic camping on their own planet was enough to make most of the Seibergians take very seriously the Balanish Country pretensions. In the opinion of many - including Doinos Somolovich and his staff -, the time had come to finally throw the Balanish off the planet. The old hates and resentments, along with an incomprehensible xenophobia – incomprehensible for non-human beings – soon derived in the more or less spontaneous appearance of Seibergian paramilitary groups in and around the Balanish Country, decided to solve the problem in their own way. The Seibergian government officially ignored, and even denied, the existence of these bands, although it was actually giving them material support – weapons, supplies and military trainers -. Somolovich expected to use the paramilitary to obtain his goal without causing a military intervention from the New Republic - which had timidly threatened to do so in the case of Vina Bosolia -, but that was precisely what they got. The Balanish were in a desperate situation – they were being forced out of their homes and literally massacred – received too much attention from the media for the New Republic to pretend they did not know what was happening there. They were already paying a high price for not helping Vina Bosolia. Several star systems, candidates to join the New Republic, had cancelled their negotiations since then, fearing they would receive no help either in case they were the objective of Imperial reprisals. Mon Mothma, the New Republic president, had seen how the old Alliance dream of a free and united galaxy could never become true if they do nothing for the Seibergian-Balanish and other like them. She found the opposition of those who insisted that they must concentrate on the war against the Empire, and even some voices claiming that the Seibergian had all the right to fight those who pretended to divide their planet. After many internal pressures and endless discussions, an agreement was reached among the members of the Provisional Council. A fleet was sent to help the Balanish, although an actual

invasion of Seibergia was not in the immediate plans.

For the first weeks, the New Republic limited its actions to help protect the convoys of starships carrying Balanish people to Balania, Corotaria or other destinations. Many of these ships were not even hyperspace capable, and considering there were two years light from Seibergia to Balania, the attempt was almost suicide, but the Balanish people were *that* desperate. The *Compassion* – *Wolf's Lair's* search & rescue shuttle - for instance, had made so many trips that several Wolfshead pilots had been taking shifts to fly it, relieving her absolutely exhausted Lumi pilot before she ended up crashing the ship into something. The shuttle itself had seen her engines replaced once to prevent accidents caused by possible fatigued components. At the same time, in the Balanish Country, camps were being established in the mountains to attend the numerous refugees who could not or would not leave the planet. To do that, unavoidably, New Republic ships had to violate the Seibergian air space. Several Seibergian fighters - standard TIE model - were shot down when they opened fire against the New Republic freighters and its escorts. The obstacles put by the Seibergian armed forces to the New Republic operations, and especially the deployment of mines in several routes out of the system, forced Mon Mothma and the Provisional Council to adopt a more aggressive policy. Five weeks ago, the *Wolf's Lair*, along with several other warships, was ordered to start a blockade against any non-New Republic military traffic through the Seibergia system, that including any civilian ship transporting weapons, ammunitions or military-grade fuel. Now that she thought about it, Gen'yaa wouldn't have minded if media ships had been added to that list. Things became even more complicated when, after the first appearances of the Balanish guerilla, Seibergian regular troops invaded some areas of the Balanish Country. Gen'yaa received instructions then to send Wolfshead Squadron in search & destroy missions on the planet surface, not only against the paramilitary groups, but against any Seibergian military objective in the Balanish Country. These actions brought angry protests by the Corellian government. At an official level, the New Republic was not at war with Seibergia, but the relationships with its main and most powerful ally, Corellia, were worst than ever before. Many politic analysts thought that the Corellian Diktat was already on the edge, pressed by a growing segment of the population, who accused him of allowing the New Republic to attack unpunished their friends the Seibergians. If that was not enough reason, the blockade was causing economic losses of some importance to the Corellian trade fleets operating in this system, and more seriously to the several ship construction companies with pending orders from the Seibergian Navy.

Gen'yaa could see clearly the hand of the Imperial Intelligence in all this from the very beginning. She would have bet both hands on the assumption that there had been several of their agents infiltrated not only in the Seibergian government, but among the Balanish people. She could easily imagine some of them suggesting the idea of the independence from Seibergia in the first place. She had not the slightest doubt that more of these agents were working to encourage the dissatisfaction in Seibergia and Corellia. Besides eroding the support of the New Republic cause in the galaxy, they pursued another objective, even more obvious, and Sate Pestage seemed closer to it than Emperor Palpatine had ever been: to force Corellia to declare the war on the New Republic, and as a direct consequence, to join the Empire once for all. That would definitely give the Imperial side the strength it needed to beat the New Republic and recover the complete control on the galaxy.

The Diktat was only waiting for - and at the same time fearing - a provocation, an excuse to take an active part in the conflict short of declaring the war at the New Republic. Now Wolfshead Squadron could well have given him one.

Gen'yaa noticed that the technician had finished her work, and that everybody was waiting for her order to play the first recording. She nodded to the technician, and immediately the holoprojector showed the image of two A-Wings and a B-Wing, taken from a second B-Wing. The last tactic used by the Seibergians to disrupt the New Republic efforts was the deployment of spatial mines at several points of the route from Seibergia to Balania. Several New Republic ships had been damaged or destroyed by this cause, and High Command had ordered to all of the starfighter units in the area to deal with this threat as a priority. Following *Wolf's Lair's* and Wolfshead's Intelligence Officers' analysis, two thirds of the squadron were scattered in a wide area around the planet trying to intercept the Seibergian ships carrying mines, while the other third was reserved to escort the *Compassion* in its rescue missions. All the craft and pilots available, including the high officers, were being used. This patrol had been composed of the Operations Officer – Moose – and the Tactical Officer – Torpedo – piloting the B-Wings, and Wolfshead Leader – Foxfire- and Gandalf in the A-Wings. The recording they were seeing now was that of Moose's fighter, the one that had shot the fatal torpedoes. The voices of the pilots were clearly audible in the room.

"Leader, this is Five." Torpedo's voice was heard. His B-Wing had been recently refitted with new sensor and communications equipment that would allow it to operate as a command centre. The rest of the patrol was relying on him to detect and identify any new ship entering the area. "I've got four unidentified ships coming from the planet at three-zero-seven."

"Roger, Five." Foxfire's reply sounded. "Tell me when you can distinguish the types."

"I copy, Leader. It's soon to confirm anything, but I would say they are medium size freighters."

"Anyone want to bet they are what we are looking for?" Moose said.

"That I hope," Gandalf commented, "we've been here for so long that I don't know where my butt ends and where the seat begins."

"Leader, this is Five. Correction, there are five ships, I repeat, five ships, coming from three-one-seven."

"All right, Three, Five, lock S-Foils and arm your ion cannons. We might have to disable a couple of them before the rest decide to cooperate. Two-One, you and me are covering the Bs. Be ready to inspect those freighters at any moment."

Several "Aye-aye"s were heard. In the projection area, the A-Wings disappeared in the upper portion of the image, while Torpedo's B-Wing opened its central wings and the cockpit rotated ninety degrees to obtain a better visibility.

"Leader, Five. Confirmed five freighters, no marks, neutral IFF codes."

"Neutral, eh? Let's see how neutral they are. Unidentified ships, this is Wolfshead Leader, from the New Republic. We must verify your cargo and destination. Please, collaborate with us and we won't make you lose more than a couple of minutes." The answer came some seconds after, a human male voice with an unmistakable Corellian accent. Gen'yaa grimaced.

"Wolfshead Leader, we are civilian ships in route to Balania, carrying refugees from the Balanish Country. We are not armed. Please, don't shoot."

"We don't see too many ships carrying refugees these days, Foxy." Moose's voice said. The indicator on the lower left corner of the projection indicated this transmission had been made in the combat channel used by the patrol, so the incoming ships would not hear it.

"Yes. I suppose that almost everything that could fly and that could be bought, rented or stolen by the Balanish tried the journey in the first weeks. Although we can never be sure. All right," the indicator changed indicating that Foxfire was using a broadcast channel again, "slow down to 40 MGLTs and we'll take a scan of your contents. If you're carrying refugees we'll gladly escort you out of the system."

"Negative, Wolfshead Leader. We can't reduce our speed. We think we'll have Seibergian fighters chasing us in no time. Please, if you want to help, then take care of them."

"Seibergian fighters?" Moose exclaimed. "How I would like that for a change! Anyway, I think he is trying to fake us."

"I tend to agree with you." Foxfire answered. "Five?"

"No trace of new ships, Leader."

"That I thought. Civilian ships, this is Wolfshead Leader. We don't detect any fighters in the area. Please, slow down so we can scan your contents and avoid any trouble."

"That's a negative, Wolfshead Leader. I don't care if you can't detect them yet, we are not going to wait for them."

"They are about to enter in our range, Leader." Torpedo informed. "If they stay on their present course, I calculate that we have three minutes to intercept them before they reach a valid jump point."

"Then we won't be discussing it for that long. I'm assigning them provisional numbers on my computer. Transmitting now. Two-One, you and me will inspect target One, Two and Three. Five, Three, targets Four and Five are yours. Close on them, and disable them if they are not carrying what they say."

"As ordered, Leader."

"Civilian ships, this is Wolfshead Leader again. We're going to inspect you with or without your collaboration. Don't make any brisk manoeuvres if you don't want to find a concussion missile in your exhaust port."

"Wolfshead Leader, please, don't do it. Some of these freighters are very battered and their thrusters are not completely reliable. If you approach us too closely we could crash accidentally."

"Good attempt, Corellian, but I'm not biting. If you want to prevent any danger, reduce your speed to 40 MGLTs as indicated and we'll do this smoothly."

"I have visual contact, Leader." Gandalf informed. "I'm almost there."

"Negative, Wolfshead Leader," the freighter pilot insisted. "I repeat that we can't afford to lose that time, or the Seibergians will be able to catch up with us. Please, we..."

"Mines!" Gandalf's voice cried out. "Leader, target One is carrying mines!"

"Closing on targets Four and Five, Leader." Torpedo informed. "Four is the one that is transmitting."

"Target Two is loaded with mines, Leader," Gandalf continued. "I'll give them a pass to soften their shields up a bit."

"Affirmative, Two-One." Foxfire said. "Target Three is carrying mines, too. What a surprise. Three, Five, we'll neutralise the shields of these ones for you. Come and disable them as soon as you finish with yours."

"Roger, Leader." Moose said. "Five is about to reach target Four. I'll pick..." Moose's voice was suddenly interrupted. In the middle of the image an explosion and a row of green bolts illuminated Torpedo's B-Wing's silhouette for an instant before Moose changed his course, with the reflexes of a very veteran pilot, to avoid being hit too.

"I'm hit!" Torpedo exclaimed, although his voice revealed the pilot had his nerves under control. "Target Five has a camouflaged warhead launcher and at least two laser turrets. My shields are out and I've lost engines two and three."

"Get outta there, Torp!" Moose said. "I'll take that son of a rancor for you."

"Negative, Two." Foxfire said. "Disable targets One to Three while Gandalf and I shoot down that one."

"All right, Leader." A hint of anger and frustration could be detected in Moose's voice, and Gen'yaa had no trouble to notice it. She bit her lower lip anticipating what was coming next. The assembly saw how Moose had quickly disabled the first three ships, and changed the projection to Foxfire and Gandalf's points of view to see how they chased and finally destroyed the armed freighter, which had been transporting mines as well. Meanwhile, Torpedo had retreated from the engagement area, while his onboard computer tried to repair as many systems as possible. It was he who gave the alarm call.

"This is Five, Leader. Don't worry about me, but target Four is making a run for it."

"Confirmed, Leader." Gandalf said. "I fear we'll never get him before he reaches his jump point..."

"Negative, Two-One. I'm a lot closer than you." Moose's voice was heard. The female technician operating the holoprojector didn't wait to be asked before changing the view back to Moose's craft. "I still can hit him with proton torpedoes."

"Were you able to inspect it?" Foxfire asked. At that same moment the voice of the Corellian pilot was heard again on the public channel.

"New Republic fighters, please, don't shoot at us. We were not part of that convoy, I repeat, we were not part of that convoy."

"This is Wolfshead Leader. If that were true you wouldn't be running now."

"Negative, Leader, I had no chance."

Moose's reply came through. "Do we need that now? There's no time for more chat, it's an hostile target and we're going to lose them!"

"All right, you don't need to convince me. Light them up."

"Glad you give me your approval, 'cause I shot two seconds ago." Gen'yaa and all the officers present in the room had seen the twin blue trails appearing from the lower corners of the images and now approaching the centre of the hologram, where the target sight had appeared coloured in red since the targeting computer had gotten a firm lock on the escaping freighter. The Captain looked with the corner of her eye at the pilot who had shot those torpedoes some hours ago. His face showed no expression now, while he watched the projection, but his fists were clenched on the table. It was hard to tell in this dim light, but Gen'yaa thought that, on the pilot's side, Wolfshead Leader was paler now. She returned her attention to the projection.

Nobody made a sound while an explosion briefly illuminated the centre of the image and then faded.

"Whoaaaaa, just in time!" Moose's voice exclaimed in the recording.

"Yes, fortunately you didn't wait for me," Foxfire answered, "or that damned Corellian would be spreading his mines within the hour."

"He was all an actor." Gandalf commented. "I'll give him that much. I almost believed him."

"That was because you're not as experienced in this work as Moose and me, and have not known as many Corellians either." Foxfire chuckled. "Ah, and that Diktat of theirs say they are not helping the Seibergians to massacre those Balanish fellows..."

"Stop this." Colonel Gen'yaa said harshly. "I think we've seen and heard enough for now."

IV

Arachnoid disengaged the hyperdrive as the counter on his panel reached zero. The A-Wing returned smoothly to normal space, five clicks away from the *Wolf's Lair's* position. Almost at the same time Iceman's starfighter came out from hyperspace, two hundred meters to starboard. Arachnoid mentally counted to ten while checking his scanner, but no more signals appeared. He started to tap on the scanner.

"Come on, Roo..."

He had repeated his count twice and started to get nervous, when the onboard computer emitted the blip he was longing for. The New Republic pilot could see how a new green dot materialized at last, about three clicks to port, and all that far from the point where it should have been. The Search & Rescue Lambda Class shuttle of the squadron, the *Compassion*, was out of her route for the second time today.

"Sorry, boys," Rooster's voice came through the intercom. "I almost missed the reversion point this time."

"Are the engines giving you problems again?" Arachnoid asked. He knew that the flight controller on duty on the *Wolf's Lair* was probably listening, waiting for them to announce their arrival. Although the technical problems on the battered shuttle were not discarded, he rather believed that her pilot was just too exhausted to be flying. He was tired too, and he had not pulled a doubled duty shift like she had done. Ignoring

Foxfire's orders to not do it again, too.

"I can't be sure right now," the answer came after a short delay. "I'll have to check it out with Lieutenant Hanniuska when we board the Lair, but it will probably be something else." Arachnoid smiled. Even as fatigued as she undoubtedly was, Rooster had realized that he was trying to give her an excuse before the mothership's bridge crew, undoubtedly monitoring them by now. Nevertheless, she had avoided blaming the *Compassion's* engines for her lack of control, and so implicitly suggesting that the maintenance crew were not doing their work. *There is always something to learn from that girl.*

"All right, *Compassion*, maintain your present course. We're approaching you now. "

"Roger, Wolfshead Nine, thank you. *Wolf's Lair*, this is the *Compassion* and her escorts reporting in."

"This is the *Wolf's Lair*. Welcome, *Compassion* and Wolfeyes." The quick reply confirmed Arachnoid that he was right in his assumption that the controller was waiting for them. Arachnoid noticed with satisfaction that the controller was up to date with the new combat designations for the different groups of the squadron. Being a multi-role unit, Wolfshead Squadron was equipped with several starfighter models. Depending on

the nature of the mission, the ships of a particular type could operate in a semi-independent way. The pilots themselves had suggested designations for every one of these groups. The names that had finally been chosen were *Wolfeye* for the A-Wings, *Wolfgang* for the X-Wings, and *Wolfclaw* for the B-Wings. Arachnoid was the senior officer in the A-Wing group, what unofficially made of him *Wolfeye Leader*.

"Thank you, *Wolf's Lair*," Rooster continued. "We've finished our round in the designated sector. This time we're carrying no passengers." There was almost joy in Rooster's voice. 'No passenger' meant that they had spent five long hours looking at the void and searching between scattered asteroids for nothing. On the other hand it meant that they had not found any more broken down freighters carrying starving and frightened refugees. That was when they were still alive. Some times they were not. There were other times when the New Republic teams would find only some pieces of scarred hull and the vanishing energy readings left by a Seibergian mine. *From that point of view, I should be as glad as Rooster.*

"Request permission to land," the Lumi pilot said.

"Roger, *Compassion*. You may head to the main hangar, port bay. Wolfshead Nine, you and your wingman must wait for further instructions. I'm sorry, *Wolfeyes*." Arachnoid grimaced when he heard the last part.

"Don't worry, *Wolf's Lair*, we flyboys are happy to be in our cockpits as long as needed, you know." Arachnoid tried not to sound too ironical, but he was only partially successful. It seemed that he and Iceman were going to double-up after all. He sighed. "*Compassion*, have a nice landing." *And have some sleep, too.*

"Thank you, Nine, and thank you two for the ride, too."

"Our pleasure always." Arachnoid said.

"Just call us when you want another one." Iceman added.

The two A-Wings kept escorting the *Compassion* for another two minutes. When the shuttle was reaching the *Wolf's Lair's* bay, they started to fly in wide circles around the Strike Carrier.

"How much flying time do you have, Iceman?" Arachnoid asked while checking his own instruments.

"I'd say six hours without refueling. Five, if we had to enter in combat."

"Not a big chance of that, I fear." Arachnoid chuckled. "Nobody has seen a Seibergian TIE almost since this all began."

"I guess that is because those who engaged our Fleet when we entered the system didn't last too long."

"Yeah, that must be."

"Wolfshead Nine, this is First Officer Wumb." Arachnoid stiffened in the cockpit. The controller had left his place to *Wolf's Lair's* second in command, the Sullustan Nil Wumb. If their orders were going to come directly from him, that proved things were serious.

"Yes, sir," he hastily answered. Wumb had got all his attention.

"Colonel Gen'yaa has commended me to tighten up our perimeter. The rest of the A-Wing group is already patrolling under the command of Lieutenant Commander McKay. I want you to join them in coordinates ten-eighteen-fourteen from our present position. Once there you will retake the command of your wing and give us as good a fighter screen as you can." Arachnoid grimaced. That didn't sound as routine.

"Are we to expect any problems, sir?"

"I hope you don't have to, Wolfshead Nine. Let's say that the political situation is getting complicated, and we've decided to be cautious."

"I understand, sir." Arachnoid was far from being satisfied, and his natural curiosity was urging him to ask for more detail, but he had spent enough time in the Starfighter Command as to know this was not the best moment or situation to interrogate a higher officer. "Should I send my pilots in pairs to have their ships refueled, sir?"

"Not yet, Wolfshead Nine. A tanker craft will be sent to you in four hours. Once we can coordinate our patrols with other New Republic units, you'll be allowed to do that, but don't expect to put your feet on the flight deck before seven or eight hours." Wumb made a short pause before adding "Be careful out there."

"Thank you, sir, we will." *Oh, no, my friend. This is not routine in the very least.* "Wolfshead Nine out."

The two small starfighters moved away from the Strike Carrier and headed to the indicated coordinates at cruiser speed. Half a minute later, Arachnoid heard Iceman's voice in his headphones. His communication unit indicated his wingman was sending a short range transmission, intended to be received only by him.

"Would I sound a little unoriginal if I said that I have a bad feeling about this?"

"No, not original at all, mate, but those are exactly my thoughts, too."

Flight Officer Hank "Spook" Chiu was waiting on the flight deck for the *Compassion's* arrival. He had been ordered to see that the S&R shuttle was refitted for another flight, and stay close to it for the next eight hours, ready to take off at any moment if the *Compassion* was needed. The rest of the pilots who were not flying were in the briefing room, waiting for news about what was happening inside Colonel Gen'yaa's quarters. He had heard only rumors, but it seemed that someone was in big trouble. It sure had something to do with the B-Wing that was being attended to now by a group of Verpine technicians. Spook easily identified it as the Tactical Officer's. The dome added under the cockpit, containing extra equipment, made it unmistakable. Judging by what he could see with the bare eye, the starfighter had been seriously hit. His thoughts were interrupted when the hangar's speakers warned all the personnel to move away from the magnetically sealed entrance, announcing a ship was making its final approach to the hangar. Spook looked outwards in time to see the landing lights of the *Compassion* to detach themselves from the starfield, and a moment later the silhouette of the shuttle could be distinguished, its long wings folding upwards to allow the ship to enter the hangar. The ship drifted a bit to starboard before being caught by the tractor beam that would lead it to its parking place. Spook shook his head. Definitely, the Lumi was not a superb pilot. He started to walk towards the *Compassion*. Lieutenant Hanniuska, the chief technician in charge of the maintenance of Wolfshead Squadron's ships, joined him in front of the shuttle once the tractor beam made it land smoothly.

"Hi there, Flight Officer."

"Lieutenant," he answered politely. He thought about something else to say, but the cute technician seemed to have forgotten already that he was there. Spook mentally sighed. The shuttle's ramp was lowered and the

Lumi descended slowly.

"Hi, Mar." Rooster saluted when she saw Lieutenant Hanniuska. "The engines are fine. I'm sorry if..."

"I know, I know," Hanniuska interrupted her. "That's not what worries me in this moment. May I say that you look horrible?"

"Why not, everybody else does." Rooster stirred her blonde hair, what made Spook notice her brain extension receptors. He had been told that these electrically charged organs -the most remarkable characteristic of Lumi race, completely humanoid by everything else- gave the Lumi their improved senses, and they also allowed people to guess their owner's mood by their continuous changes of color. The usual amber and emerald tones made them almost impossible to miss, especially the one in the front, but in this occasion they were a pale brown. Spook wondered what this color meant, but Mar Hanniuska seemed to know.

"I could mention your crumpled flightsuit, or the bags under your eyes, but in your case I'd say the brown of your receptors is definitive."

"Yes, I know. And yes, I'm tired. Very tired. Teeeerrribly tired." There was a very slight trace of irritation in Rooster's voice, while the end of her receptors adopted a tone a bit closer to white. Spook watched them change, fascinated. Rooster avoided Hanniuska's look. "What do you want me to do? I can't sleep knowing that another group of refugees can be out there, even now, waiting for help. Her reddened eyes reflected pain when she finally looked at the other woman.

"I know, Roo, that's very much like you," Hanniuska's tone was smoother now, noticing how close to break down the generous Lumi was. "But as I know Foxfire told you, it won't be a big help if you end crashing the *Compassion*." Spook immediately regretted his recent thoughts about the Lumi's piloting abilities. "Has she not ordered the rest of pilots to help you?" Hanniuska gestured towards Spook.

"Ah, Spook, hi," Rooster gave him a brief smile. "Yes, but this turn was going to be covered by Granite..." The mention to the craziest – and for that same reason, dangerous – pilot of Wolfshead Squadron made the two women burst into laughter.

"Well, I suppose that explains it." Hanniuska said. "Do you think that Spook here is trustworthy enough for your dear *Compassion*?"

"Yes, of course," she winked at Spook. Amber was gradually returning to her receptors. "Consider her as yours."

"Thanks, Rooster," Spook smiled. "I think I'll start getting accustomed to her."

"Very good." Suddenly, Rooster noticed the battered B-Wing not far from they stood. "Mar, are all the guys OK? What has happened?" Hanniuska didn't need to turn her head to know what the startled Lumi was looking at.

"Don't worry, nobody is harmed. Not here, anyway..." Hanniuska seemed to doubt whether to continue or not.

"Not here?" Rooster repeated. Her receptors were turning white very quickly now. Spook interpreted Hanniuska's hesitation as she didn't want to talk in his presence. After all, he was the newest pilot in the squadron and Rooster and Hanniuska had only known him for a few weeks. Although he was longing to

know more details, he decided it would be better to leave the two women alone. He would learn what was going on sooner or later. Politely, the pilot started to climb the ramp towards the shuttle's cockpit.

"I'll tell you what I know," Spook heard Hanniuska to say, "but you're not going to like it."

Spook entered the *Compassion's* cockpit and sat on the pilot's seat. After adjusting the seat itself and the controls to suit him, he ordered the computer to run a status check on several systems. While the results were being displayed on the main screen, he couldn't stop thinking of the conversation that was being held outside. Things were serious, there was no doubt. Perhaps he had misunderstood Lieutenant Hanniuska's attitude and she didn't mind if he listened too. Although he tried, the nose of the shuttle didn't allow him to see the two women. He had not seen either of them leave, so they must be still there. His anxiety grew until he could not resist any more. He abandoned the cockpit and walked towards the ramp. From the top, he heard Rooster exclaiming, "They did WHAT?" When he showed up, Rooster was walking hastily towards the next turbolift. Her receptors were of an intense blue, brightening over her hair. Spook would have sworn that he actually could see the electricity charges jumping from one receptor to another.

"Roo, it had to be an accident...!" Hanniuska started to say, but Rooster had already taken the turbolift. "Oh my, why in the hell did I have to say..." She noticed Spook standing on the *Compassion's* ramp. Her look convinced him it would be better to return to the cockpit and run another check.

Colonel Gen'yaa dismissed most of the people present around her conference table, but not before ordering everybody to keep silence about what they had seen and heard in that room. Only her Intelligence Officer, discretely standing in the background, Foxfire and Vyper had been asked to stay behind. When the doors closed, she looked at Foxfire gravely for some moments before to talk.

"Lieutenant Colonel Schroeder," she started. Her voice showed no inflexions, her face was a mask. "I must relieve you temporarily from the command of Wolfshead Squadron." If this surprised Foxfire it didn't show. The pilot held Gen'yaa's look without even a blink. "You and Commander Gregory are suspended from flight status, and will be confined to your quarters until further orders. "

"Are we under arrest?" Foxfire limited herself to ask.

"No, but don't force me to do that." After a brief pause, she stared now at Vyper. "Major Stauber. From this very moment, you will be acting as Wolfshead Squadron's commander. If you need an Executive Officer, select one among your people. You are dismissed."

"Yes, ma'am," they replied at once and left the room. Gen'yaa turned towards Lieutenant Commander Mesch Dey'jeaa, who took a step forward to join her besides the conference table. The Captain motioned him to take a seat and began to speak without preamble.

"As you've not even mentioned the issue, Lieutenant Commander, I must suppose that my request to interrogate the pilots of the three disabled ships didn't get any positive result."

"It was too late, I fear. Following the standard procedure, once their cargo of mines was confiscated, they received help to restart their engines and were allowed to return to Seibergia. We are not at war, you know.

Gen'yaa dismissed Dey'jaa's last remark with a wave of her hand. "But they were military, weren't they?" .

"The pilots, yes. The transports were listed as civilian freighters, like every ship they use to try to break our blockade."

"We catch them red-handed, and we're not even allowed to interrogate them properly before sending them back in their ships with our excuses." The Captain allowed her irritation to show through in her tone and in her expression, providing Dey'jeaa with a view of her clenched fangs in a very Bothan gesture. She inhaled deeply and returned to her even, businesslike tone and manners. "Your estimation of the present situation, Lieutenant Commander?"

"This is a snowball." Dey'jeaa answered with a sigh. "With or without orders, even now, rumors more or less founded in fact will be spreading throughout the ship."

"I know. That wouldn't happen with an entirely Bothan crew." Gen'yaa didn't show irritation or scorn. She was simply exposing what she considered a proven fact.

"I do agree." Dey'jeaa shrugged, the gesture indicating there was nothing they could do about it. "The real problems, though, will come from outside the *Lair*. I'm more worried about the pre-conceived opinions that the members of the commission sent by Admiral Ackbar will undoubtedly have."

"We'll deal with that. In the presence of the facts, we'll find a way to convince them that, in a combat situation, our pilots did what they had to do with the information they had available." Dey'jeaa did not answer. He was far from feeling that sure about this point. "Leave that to me," the Captain added, noticing the other Bothan's hesitation. "Please, continue."

"We sure are going to lose support in many worlds because of this misfortune." He didn't need to remind the Captain of how much harm the lack of response in the *Vina Vosolia* conflict had made to the New Republic. "Nevertheless, the worst part will come from Corellia." The Intelligence Officer consulted some data in his datapad. "I've been revising the indexes. Predictions are that a thirty-two percent of the population would support the Diktat if he decided to open hostilities against the New Republic now. The Empire will use this incident to increase that percentage. Ysanne Isard's people are very good at that, and be sure they are very close to the media."

"Our campaign against the Seibergian paramilitary has not been enough to get Corellia involved." Gen'yaa argued, forcing her Intelligence Officer to prove his arguments. "Why the slaughter of a group of Balanish refugees would be so unforgivable for them? Or do you think it will be because of the pilot?" Dey'jeaa shook his head.

"It will be both, but the key will be the refugees."

"Explain."

"The Corellian Diktat can be a dictator, but he has not kept his position for so long being stupid. He is not willing to lose a good part of the power at the hands of the Empire, although if the pressure ever gets high enough, he will take the step. So far, he has increased the hostility towards the New Republic in his public locutions, hoping that will be enough to save the face in front of the pro-Imperial side of the population."

"A dangerous game."

"It is, indeed. Nevertheless, if that's not enough and the support to the war grows up beyond, let's say, a fifty percent, he might try something else as a last resort. Under the claim of help for the Balanish, whom the New Republic has proven not to be actually defending, but just using them for its interests, and the innocent Seibergian, whom are so intolerably being attacked, the Diktat could order the Corellian Fleet to take an active role in this conflict. I guess we would be talking of a certain number of freighters carrying food and medicines, and a heavily armed battle group to escort them."

"An exhibition of force." The Captain didn't seem surprised. Dey'jeaa was sure that he was just confirming her own thoughts. "Yes, I've been working with that scenario in my mind since this all started, and I've given instructions to Lieutenant Colonel Wumb."

"That would have been my advice, ma'am."

"Any possibility of a frontal attack without the show part?"

"As you know, that would be the point of no return for the Diktat."

Gen'yaa nodded. "Call me paranoid, but I'd say that, by now, Ysanne Isard has already offered the Diktat all her support *if he is tragically forced to a war against the criminal Rebellion*." There was no trace of humor in the Captain's expression. She stared at Dey'jeaa and insisted. "Any possibility?"

Dey'jeaa left the datapad on the table. "Yes and no. I don't think they will attack us openly. Nevertheless, with so many pro-Imperial officers among the Corellian military, we can expect more or less serious provocations. Sooner or later, someone could get nervous and press a trigger... and a minute later Isard and Pestage would be celebrating an historic party." Gen'yaa looked at the ceiling and sighed noisily. Dey'jeaa grimaced. He could use the fingers of one hand to count the times he had seen the Captain to show her thoughts like that, ever since the times when he had served under her command on the spy Corvette *Curious Cat*. There would be fingers to spare.

"There's another part we are not counting with," the Intelligence Officer suggested. "The response of the Provisional Council."

"If there has ever been a diplomat, that is Mon Mothma." Gen'yaa shrugged. "I must give her that much. But she will need *something* to refute the Corellian's arguments, and convince the rest of the galaxy of our goodness, by the way. We'll have to give it to her."

"And that will be?"

"For starters, definitive proof that our refugee freighter was being forced by the Seibergians to fly in formation with their convoy. Then something to justify our attack, a lot more solid than a pilot's assumption that if four ships are carrying mines, the fifth one will be carrying mines too. Ah, and simultaneous heart attacks for Ysanne Isard and the Corellian Diktat would be handy." Again, it didn't seem as the Captain was making a joke.

"And if we can't get any of those?" Gen'yaa took some moments before answering, and when she did, Dey'jeaa was taken aback by the hardness in the Captain's voice.

"The heads of two pilots on a golden plate."

V

The door hissed closed behind them. The muffled sound seemed to elongate in Foxfire's perception, repeating itself again and again, and every time increasing her sensation of unreality. *This can't be happening*. She had the clear feeling that the door had severed a part of herself, so she had to be mutilated. *My wings, it has cut my wings off*. She grimaced, feeling stupid for that thought. However, she looked back,

somehow expecting to see feathers and blood between the door joints. *The things you think when someone throws you into the trash recycling unit.* Perhaps it was just the method the mind uses to avoid asking some questions. Like *what am I going to do now?* Yes, that was a good example. She could feel Vyper's presence on her left, and his stare with the corner of his eye.

This can't be happening.

Foxfire heard a comm-link beeping. She looked at her wrist but it was not hers.

"It's Ibero," Vyper said, already moving his comm-link away from his left ear and keying it back to the passive mode. "They're waiting for us in the briefing room."

Foxfire acknowledged the information with a nod and they started to walk in that direction. Their steps echoed in the deserted corridor. Foxfire wondered why Ibero had called Vyper instead of her. He couldn't know that she had been relieved of command, could he? Perhaps it was evident for everybody but herself what the Captain was going to do, but she nevertheless felt annoyed with Ibero. *Even if he has guessed, oh, how smart, that Gen'yaa was going to kick me out, he should wait for a confirmation, damn it.* She glanced at Vyper, but he was wearing a neutral expression. Foxfire's annoyance had to do with him, too. He had not even said I'm sorry. Vyper the Perfect. The one who could never be wrong. He was probably longing for a chance like this to take the command and do things in his own way. *Oh, he would never make the same mistakes as me. I wonder what he'd have done in that situation.* Foxfire realized that she was waiting for him to say "I'm sorry" just to reply with a retort, a cruel one. Maybe a sarcastic remark about the Imperial officer who became a Rebel commander. Who knows, that could have been his plan since the beginning. Now he could at last betray them all to the Empire... *Come on, Avery, that's ridiculous!* She looked again at her former Executive Officer, as if fearing that he could have heard her thoughts. It was not really his fault nor Ibero's. Nor hers. Yes, it was a tragedy what had happened with those refugees, and she was really sorry about it, but they had done only what they must. Even Colonel Gen'yaa, that pretentious and self devoted

Bothan, had to understand that. The investigation committee had to understand.

But what if they did not? Or even worse, what if they just wanted someone to bury in order to minimize the political consequences? *Oh, how I hate politics. It was easier when it was just us or the Imperials.*

There was no point in keep wondering. She had always been gifted with a practical mind. *Let's solve the immediate problem, and that is to explain the rest of the squad what is going on and then move out of this stage.* She sure could do that. The briefing room was in front of them. The door was open, but there was no one waiting for them outside. Foxfire felt tempted to ask Vyper to inform the pilots while she went directly to her quarters. After all, that was what Gen'yaa had ordered her to do. She stopped a meter before the door. Vyper looked at her questioningly, but before she could say anything, she saw the faces of those who were occupying the briefing room turning to look at her. The conversations she had barely heard for a second died suddenly. She saw real concern in their looks. Foxfire reminded herself that she had spent years fighting beside some of these people. They deserved to hear from her and not from anyone else what had happened. Maybe to listen her version of things, too, before there was an *official* version. She owed them that much. The moment of weakness fell behind and Foxfire entered the room.

Moose was occupying a seat on the first row, with Torpedo and Ibero, but he seemed to be lost in his own thoughts. Foxfire wondered if he had even noticed that she had arrived, but then his look rose to meet hers. Foxfire felt appalled for the pain she saw in his eyes. She realized with regret that she had only been thinking about herself for the last few minutes. *He is the one who actually shot the torpedoes. For him it must be as if he had murdered those people, knowingly or not. And you're thinking about your career...* Foxfire resolved to have a long conversation with Moose when they were done here. She would make him see he had nothing to feel guilty about. They would comfort each other, sharing it all, and surely after that they would feel a lot better. She looked forward to have that chat. That positive thought reassured her to do what she had to do now and walked without further hesitation up to the orator position. She noticed that not all the pilots were there. Gandalf was the only pilot from Wolfeye Group, watching her from his seat, apparently ignorant of all that had went wrong in their last mission. The other two groups were almost complete, though. Most pilots were wearing their whole flight equipment, looking almost as weary as she felt. Some of them had been part of the other patrol looking for Seibergian transports – *the ones who had the luck of not finding them*, she thought ironically – while the rest had flown a mission over the Balanish Country, trying to force

the paramilitary groups to retreat as far as possible from the sites where the refugees camps were being placed. She was longing to debrief this last group, commanded by Groznic, the Wookie pilot who usually led Wolfclaw Group, to see if they had been able to confirm the presence of regular Seibergian troops in the area, but she forced herself to remember that it would be Vyper, who would now do that. She waited for the Executive Officer – now acting Commander - to take a seat beside Ibero and took a deep breath. *Let's go for it.*

Before she could say a single word a female voice was heard at the back of the room.

"Please, Foxfire, tell me that what I've heard is not true." Rooster's request sounded more as a demand, her tone an octave higher pitched than usual and barely short of a yell. It startled Foxfire, but she was even more taken aback when she spotted the owner of that voice. Rooster was standing up in a corner, her pose suggesting that she had kept herself isolated from the rest of the pilots on purpose. Foxfire had never seen her brain extension receptors so blue. The light they projected on her face had a strange quality, almost scaring, taking away from the Lumi her usual kind look. Foxfire wondered how it was possible that she had not noticed Rooster before.

"Roo..."

"Please, tell me that it is not true!" Everybody was looking by now at the Search & Rescue pilot, as surprised as Foxfire was of hearing her talking in such a rage. *I had sworn that Rooster was unable to feel rage at all.*

"Rooster, I don't know what you've heard but..."

"All right, here you have it. Tell me that it is not true that your patrol has shot down a freighter carrying Balanish refugees!"

The room was filled with *ohs* and *what!s*, and one after another all faces turned to look at Foxfire again. She saw the astonishment in them, and Rooster's anguished request reflected in everybody's eyes. *Tell us that it is not true.* Vyper and Ibero exchanged a puzzled look. Nobody was supposed to know of this yet. Foxfire took a glance at Gandalf, but the A-Wing pilot shook his head in denial, evidently as surprised as everybody else was. He had not been in Gen'yaa's quarters, so he couldn't know that one of the transports they had destroyed during the mission was not what they thought it was. Well, it didn't really matter how or from who Rooster had learned in advance about the accident. It would be somebody else's work to discover where the information leak was. An accident. The word seemed so appropriate... *It was an accident, Roo.* Foxfire didn't say it aloud. She knew that she had to explain it better, if she was to convince Rooster about her point of view. Foxfire would be glad if she was able to convince those present in this room, even if the whole galaxy condemned them after that. She looked at Moose. He appeared even more sunk in his seat. *No, dear, don't think you've done anything wrong. You do know it was an accident, don't you?* And suddenly, without warning, a more frightening thought invaded her.

Do I?

Foxfire realized that it was none but herself who she had to convince in the first place. When had she started to doubt? *Ah, that's too bad.* With an audible sigh, Foxfire abandoned any attempt of pretending she was calm. She lowered her head for a moment and gave up the fight to prevent her own feelings from showing up at the surface. Her initial approach to this situation had been the wrong one. She should not even try to convince anybody. She had to tell them what had happened, at least what she had seen of it, and leave everybody to reach their own conclusions. *And their own judgements.*

"I'm sorry Rooster," she said at last. "I wish I could tell you it's not true, but I can't."

The silence that followed this declaration was worse than the previous exclamations. Even Rooster seemed

too shocked to say anything. One of the B-Wing pilots, Parody, stood up and took two steps towards the Lumi before she lifted a hand to stop him.

"Stay where you are, Parody!" Her tone left no doubt about how serious she was about it. Parody stopped his tentative approach. "And don't even *try* to touch me. *Nobody* must touch me now." Parody nodded and returned to his seat, wearing a pained expression. Foxfire knew that he and Rooster had known each other for several years, since they both, along with Groznik and Moose, had served on board the Calamari Cruiser *Liberty*. It was not hard to guess that Parody had never seen Rooster so mad about anything, nor was he accustomed to be treated so rudely by her. Seated besides Parody, Groznik growled his uneasiness. The don't touch warning was easily understood by all but maybe the newest pilots on the squad. Under such unusual excitement, the Lumi's brain extensions could react to any contact as a threat, lashing the theoretical attacker with an electrical discharge. Foxfire remembered an occasion when, while playing a stupid game suggested by Ibero and Granite, Rooster had fried all the lights in a storage room, as well as the door mechanisms and the com-links of the three pilots, leaving them locked inside and unable to call for help until somebody found them. The memory now lacked any humor. Even without any instrument to confirm it, it was obvious that Rooster's appendages had reached an unprecedented charge level. Perhaps not enough to kill a human being, but surely it would send him directly to the infirmary for a couple of days. The hint of fear in Rooster's eyes showed Foxfire that the Lumi was fully aware of that possibility, hence the violence of her reaction.

"Maybe we all should allow the commander to explain what has happened." Solo, the senior officer in Wolfgang group, suggested. *Commander? I'm not the commander any more*, Foxfire thought bitterly, but she acknowledged the Corellian pilot's help with a faint smile. She couldn't help but remember that the pilot whom they had killed, along with his ship and his passengers, was probably a Corellian, too. When she had asked him, at the beginning of this assignment, Solo had admitted that he had been to Seibergia several times, and even to the Balanish Country, in his days as a freighter pilot. He nevertheless didn't seem to be disturbed by this campaign. *Maybe you will be now*.

"Thanks, Solo," Foxfire said. "That's what I would like to do if nobody else has any objection." She left a trace of calculated coldness in her voice, while staring at Rooster. The Lumi returned her look for some moments and finally shrugged. Although Foxfire could understand her feelings, she couldn't allow Rooster nor anybody else to break discipline like that. Even in Wolfshead Squadron, where discipline was not precisely top in the list of priorities, no one yelled at a superior officer. Period. Vyper nodded, silently agreeing with her way of re-taking control of the situation. Under other circumstances, she wouldn't have found a second meaning in that gesture, but now it triggered a resurgence of her previous annoyance at Vyper. *As if I needed him to tell me if I'm doing well or not*. She knew this was not Vyper's intention, but she couldn't help but feeling that way. *All right, enough of being paranoid and let's get on with this*.

Rooster tried to calm down. It was the only way her brain extensions would dissipate the excess of energy that they had stored. The Lumi could not forgive herself if she accidentally harmed anybody. She forced herself to breathe more slowly and deeply, closing her eyes for a second. The itch in her head smoothed only slightly. What was wrong with her? Rooster couldn't remember a time when she had let herself get so carried away. Not even when the Empire invaded the Lumi moon and she had to run away. There had been fear then, fear, anguish and desperation, but nothing like this... wrath. On the stage, Foxfire began to talk, slowly and dispassionately, about the events of their mission.

Twenty minutes before, when Hanniuska told Rooster that Foxfire's group has successfully intercepted the Seibergian convoy they had been warned about, her first reaction had been of joy. Only three days ago she had flown with the *Compassion* to help the crew of the New Republic Corvette *Mashado*, severely damaged by a type B mine. The *Mashado* had been attending a distress call sent by an unidentified freighter, likely carrying Balanish refugees, when they ran into the mine field, directly in the exit vector of the most direct route between Seibergia and Balania. *Mashado's* laser batteries had destroyed the closest ones, barely in time to avoid being killed, but they had been forced to shut down their main reactor, which had a breach in its shielding. Several crewmen had been exposed to dangerous levels of radiation before being able to seal the reactor chamber. The veteran Frigate *Redemption* had its medical facilities overflowing with evacuees from the Balanish Country, so they had asked the *Wolf's Lair* to take care of the *Mashado's* people. After Wolfclaw's B-Wings cleaned what remained of the minefield, Rooster was allowed to approach the crippled

Corvette. Before initiating the docking maneuvers, Rooster had been about to ask *Mashado's* captain if they had been able to find and assist the unknown freighter. Suddenly she found out that the answer to her still unspoken question was a "yes and no". *Yes, we found them, no, we could not assist them.* There were only some drifting pieces of what had once been a ship. And only some drifting remains of what had once been people. It was not the first time it had happened and would probably not be the last one. It was just the time when Rooster had been closest to watch. Oh, yes, she was looking forward to see her squad-mates catch those who were doing that. She would even applaud if they had to shoot them out of space. What she could not even imagine was that, while doing so, they would kill yet another bunch of innocents. How could that happen? How could they had done that? Her comrades, her dearest friends... That; that was the problem, Rooster realized, the cause of this unknown feeling of rage. She felt betrayed in her inner self by those whom she trusted the most. Rooster had never been so naive to think that all the Imperials were devils and every Rebel an angel, but she had always believed that there was a difference, that she had chosen the right side, and not just the side of those who opposed those who had invaded her home. No, it couldn't be so. The Empire was evil and corrupt beyond any reasonable doubt, so the New Republic's war against it had to be fair. But what if the New Republic was only the next Empire? What if there was not a wrong and a right cause after all, but just a never ending struggle to take the power? What if those whom she called friends were no better than those whom she called enemies?

Rooster tried fiercely to concentrate on Foxfire's words. It was of a vital importance for the Lumi to understand what had really happened, and how. As bad as it felt, maybe if there was an explanation, something that made those deaths unavoidable, she would be able to live with it. Probably. Hanniuska had not had much information, and she had only told what she knew after Rooster had insisted strenuously. She listened to Foxfire's tale more intently. At some points, Foxfire asked Gandalf or Torpedo to provide additional details, whenever she considered that they could have a more complete view from their perspective. It didn't took Rooster too long to notice that Foxfire never asked Moose, though. She wondered why for an instant, but as Foxfire was reaching the climax of her story, Rooster understood it all. A shiver ran down her spine. It was Moose the one who had shot against the transport. Foxfire admitted that she had ordered him to do so. Without taking a scan of it first.

"Are you satisfied, Foxfire?" Rooster almost shouted, fighting to not lose her hardly regained self-control. "No targets escaped, mission accomplished, effectiveness a hundred percent? Was that what you wrote down in your report?"

Rooster thought for a second that Foxfire was going to call her to order again, but she didn't. Actually, she looked rather dismayed. *Of course you feel bad, ma'am. You've killed fifty innocent people for breakfast.* When it seemed that Foxfire was about to answer, someone else's voice was heard from the first row of seats.

"Enough of punishing her, Roo." Moose said, standing up slowly. "The only detail Foxfire has omitted in her tale is that I actually shot my torpedoes before she gave me the order."

"I *did* order you to shoot." Foxfire protested.

"Only because I talked you into it, and my torpedoes were on the way before you did." Something in the way he said it, or maybe his sunken shoulders, made the Lumi know that Moose was not lying to defend Foxfire. What he had just declared was the truth. The murmurs filled the room again. Before Rooster could say anything, Raiven, one of the X-Wing pilots, spoke first.

"Did you shoot without confirmation?" He asked in disbelief. "Against an unarmed transport?"

"What is worse for you, square-head, the shooting part or doing so without orders?" Granite took his part in the discussion rudely. His deliberate use of the term *square-head*, the way most Rebels used to call the Imperials, was very close to the offence. By addressing Raiven in that way, he reminded this pilot and the rest of his comrades of his past allegiance to the Empire. Considering that at least a third of the New Republic pilots, and even more in the first days of the Rebellion, were former Imperials, and knowing how most of them felt about it, that topic was usually kept out of any *polite* conversation. Indifferent to the protests of some of his partners, the Caldanian pilot continued voicing his opinions. "Those were the guys

that were mining all the space from here to Balania!"

"No, they weren't." Raiven stayed seated, trying not to answer to Granite's blatant provocation, although he had visibly blushed. "They were just refugees caught in the middle of a crossfire. The orders were to scan any ship *before* commencing any offensive action."

"You're right, of course." Gandalf said, talking for the first time. "But the other four ships we had just scanned were carrying mines, and one of them had almost killed Torpedo. Under those circumstances, any of you could have made the same mistake."

"Speak for yourself, Gandalf." Sacart, another X-Wing pilot, said. "I'm for one who wouldn't have shot without positive confirmation."

"To play by the book is very commendable, Sacart," Granite said ironically, "and will have you or your squad-mates killed sooner than later! What's wrong with you, Wolfgang guys? If that's the way Solo makes you think, I don't want any of you as escort next time we go out there!"

"Granite," Solo said, putting a hand upon Drake's shoulder, who was about to jump in defense of his group's honor. "You're starting pushing things a bit too far, aren't you?"

"Yes, he is." Vyper interrupted. "Granite, when we are done here I want you to have a chat with me. You'll have your chance to tell me what you think of us, the square-heads in this unit." Granite raised his hands theatrically but didn't argue. "Please, Foxfire, continue."

She looked at him for an instant with an unreadable expression on her face and finally nodded.

"Thanks, Vyper. There's not much else to say, but one thing." Foxfire stared at Moose, who stood close to her. "I'm sorry, Moose. Colonel Gen'yaa has ordered you and me not to fly until an official investigation absolves our responsibility for the destruction of that freighter and the consequences of this action." Moose limited himself to shrug. A tense silence fell on the room. Foxfire kept her look for an instant and told him something in a low voice that nobody else could hear. *Words of consolation*, Rooster thought. The Lumi watched the scene with mixed feelings. She was furious with them, more than she had ever been with anybody, but nevertheless she was sorry for them. She was quickly reaching the conclusion that they had been caught in a situation they were not prepared to deal with. As this discussion was proving, probably more than a half of the squad would have shot without thinking twice. She was not less sorry for them. Even deploring the results, many of them wouldn't find anything wrong in Foxfire's and Moose's actions. *So many years of war and misery and you've not learned anything*. But most of all, she was sorry for those wretched refugees. Not only for those who had died in that transport. Not only for the Balanish, but for every innocent victim of the eternal state of war in the galaxy. Those who made her steal hours to the sleep so she could go out with her old shuttle one more time. Sometimes, when she got depressed, she couldn't help but feeling that it was all for nothing. There was just too much insanity in the universe to fight against. Maybe she was the crazy one. If only there were more *Compassions* and less Star Destroyers and Battle Cruisers... Sadness and disappointment were slowly prevailing over her initial wrath. On the stage, Foxfire had turned to look again at the rest of the pilots.

"From this moment," she continued, "and until further orders, Vyper is taking charge of the squadron. I've been relieved of the command." Now exclamations were heard again, while the now ex-commander started to move hastily towards the door. She didn't reach it, though. Moose took her by the arm and asked her to wait. The pilot looked at Rooster.

"I'm sorry for those refugees," Moose's eyes were full of pain, but his voice was firm. "but I'd do it again if I were in the same situation. If that ship was carrying mines as we firmly believed at the moment, and I allowed it to run away, I'd be risking the lives of many, many people." He didn't say *more people than I killed*, but Rooster thought that was what he meant. The Lumi shook her head vigorously, making her brain

extensions to dance over her head, although nobody laughed as it was usual.

"Now you listen to me," she said. The rage had finally abandoned her, and only the bitterness remained in her voice. "All of you fighter jocks, listen to me." She looked over the faces staring at her. "We are *not* in the old times any more. Now, we are *not* the poor and outnumbered Rebels, always fighting for our lives, shooting before being shot at. We are the New Republic, and we have a higher responsibility than we had back then. Not everything is justified to reach our tactical goals, not even *to keep the peace and order in the galaxy*." Her recital of one of the favorite quotations of the dead Emperor was not missed by anybody. Nevertheless, no one seemed offended. Many of her squadmates were looking at her almost with pity, as if she was talking like that only under the effects of her proverbial tiredness. *How blind you are*. The first tears in her eyes, coming out at last, didn't allow her to see the understanding in some faces, though. Had she been able to do so, she may have found somehow ironic the fact that all the former "square-heads" were among them. But now she could only talk aloud her frustration and let the remains of her tension vanish in the air. "We are not risking only our own lives, sacrificing ourselves for an abstraction, the hope of freedom in the universe, as we all like to think, and Mon Mothma, Leia Organa and others like them reminded us in their speeches. What we are risking now are the lives of real people, their homes, their ways of life, and we can't decide for them. We can't decide who can die for the good of the majority and who not. How many *potential* lives are worth the loss of a *real* life? Can you answer to this simple question, Moose? You say that many could have died if you had let that freighter get away. You killed some fifty real people. They died to avoid... how many possible but uncertain deaths? Five hundred? Five thousand? Fifty thousand? How many, Moose?"

"Roo, I couldn't know there were other people in that freighter beside the pilot."

"Exactly, you couldn't know, although that pilot claimed that was what he was carrying, you didn't believe him. You couldn't know because you had not scanned the ship as you had been ordered to do, so you had *no right* to shoot!"

"I know that now, Roo," Moose said, but his voice lacked conviction. His face, too, was paler now than when he stood up a minute before. "But in those moments, all my instinct was screaming at me to shoot down that transport."

"Then you should not trust your instincts ever again. They kill people."

Rooster couldn't resist it any more. She felt that her strength was abandoning her. The stress had drained her already exhausted body, and the rise of adrenaline that had kept her up had already been consumed. She didn't want to collapse in a hysteric cry or even pass out in front of everybody. Not now. The Lumi ran towards the exit and passed besides Moose and Foxfire without looking at them. Nobody tried to stop her.

Nobody touched her.

Vyper covered his face with his hands for a second when everybody but Torpedo and Ibero had left the briefing room. Of all disasters he had seen since he joined an Alliance squadron this was the worst one. He had watched friends die in balls of fire too many times. He had mourned them with the survivors, and their spirits had been low for a time, but they were able to get over it. Together. There had been some nasty discussions in the last days of White Squadron, yes, but nothing like this. Somehow, Vyper knew that the wounds were deeper now. There was Granite, to start with. As violent and rash as the Caldanian could be, he had a noble background. Granite had just overreacted trying to defend his old friend Moose, but his example had been a warning for Vyper. He had to work *hard* to prevent the pilots taking two sides in this discussion. And there were Moose and Foxfire, of course. The latter, and he was particularly sure of this, had gotten somehow to think that he may be glad with this situation. He *had* to talk to her, make her know that, as far as he was concerned, she could have the command back right now. But first he needed to face the most urgent problems, and there were a lot of them to deal with. *Oh, my. How are we going to solve this mess?* He thought what it had been like in other bad moments, how they had to find a way out of the crisis. It didn't take him long to get the answer. *We had a common objective, a common enemy to unite us against. I wonder if we still have it.* He moved his hands off of his face and shook his head. *Rooster is right. We are*

not in the old times any more.

"This is not good." Ibero said with a stern expression.

"No, not good at all." Vyper sighed loudly. "Well, we'll have to deal with it, we like it or not. By the way, have I mentioned that you're my Executive Officer now?"

Ibero shrugged. "Not yet, but I saw it coming." The Iberyian pilot allowed himself a brief smile.

"And that means of course that between the three of us we must cover Intelligence, Operations and Tactics." The other two pilots didn't look surprised. Torpedo said "aha..."

"I wouldn't expect less of you." Vyper grinned without humor. "Any of you know where the Wolfeye people are?"

"Yes," Ibero answered. "Solo told us. First Officer Wumb has ordered us to reinforce our defense perimeter, so Arachnoid and rest will be practically living in their fighters until further instructions."

"It seems that Gen'yaa actually thinks that we may have to fight it out with the Corellians, eh?" Vyper lifted an eyebrow. Ibero returned an I told you that would happen look and nodded slowly. "And I thought you were the optimistic man in this squad. All right, transmit Wumb's instructions to Gandalf as soon as he can get some rest."

"I'll do. What about Wolfgang and Wolfclaw?"

"We'll keep our present mission profiles, at least while we don't receive new orders. Wolfgang is to scan and intercept any suspicious traffic to or from Seibergia. Wolfclaw must continue the harassing the Seibergian paramilitary, in order to help Lynx commandos to establish a safety area around the refugee camps in the Balanish Country."

"Easier said than done." Torpedo commented. "Those parties know their way very well in those grounds, and they move fast. Starfighters are not effective weapons against this kind of enemy."

"Right. That's why I want you to study with Groznik what's the better way to do this, as soon as we have his report of their last entree." Torpedo nodded and made an annotation on his datapad. "And don't forget that we must coordinate our actions with the rest of squadrons. That's your work now, Ibero."

"I wasn't going to ask."

"The next thing in our agenda," Vyper continued, "is to find out where did Rooster hear about the incident." The incident actually sounded as a good term to call it. "I wanted to ask her, but..."

"You didn't feel like it, did you?" Ibero said sympathetically. Vyper shrugged.

"I have my guess about that." Torpedo said. "The only person that left Gen'yaa's quarters once we had begun was that female technician, the one that programmed the holoprojector."

"Ah, yes. Do you think she may be a friend of Rooster's?"

"I don't discard it, but I'd think of someone else. The only recording package the technician couldn't get from the computer was my fighter's one, so she surely went down to check it out with Lieutenant Hanniuska, who was working on it."

"And Hanniuska definitely is one of Rooster's closest friends outside the squadron." Vyper nodded thoughtfully. "You might pay a visit to our Chief Technician and talk to her about this."

"I'll go with you." Ibero said. "I've got some questions for her too." Vyper looked at him quizzically.

"I saw you talking to Moose before he left. Something we should know?"

"Maybe. I've been turning something over in my mind since we saw those recordings. Do you remember when Moose said *it's a hostile target and we're going to lose them?*" Vyper and Torpedo looked at each other and nodded. "Well, I've asked Moose what exactly he meant with hostile. If it was just what he believed at the moment, or if his onboard computer marked it as such." Vyper felt his heart jump.

"What did he answer?"

"Both. He shot under the belief that the transport was carrying a full load of mines, like the others, but furthermore his computer painted it with a red dot in his sensor displays..."

"How does he explain it?" Torpedo asked intently.

"He doesn't. Nevertheless he gives it no importance. He says he didn't even think about which color the computer was using when he decided to squeeze the trigger."

"Does that mean that he hadn't manually assigned it an hostile code?" Vyper couldn't hide completely the anxiety in his voice.

"I asked him directly. No, he didn't." Ibero looked at Torpedo. "And that's why I'm going with you to see Lieutenant Hanniuska."

"If there was something wrong in Moose's computer..." Torpedo left the rest of the sentence unspoken.

"Go to the hangar." Vyper said. The other two pilots waved a good bye and parted hastily. Vyper watched them leave and mentally crossed his fingers. If there was a way out of this mess, no matter how thin or how small, he would hang on to it with both hands. And maybe with his teeth, too.

VI

It was cold in that shed. Had it been not so crowded, the low temperature would have been unbearable. Sdermila calculated that there were around two hundred people packed in the shed now, what had the positive consequence of mitigating, if only barely, the intense cold. Sdermila's clothes were still a little wet,

although she had tried to dry them the best she could at the little bonfire they had made on the middle of the shed. The refugees had been taking turns around it, but Sdermila had had to let her place to someone else before getting completely dry. She hoped not to catch a cold or something worse, but there was not too much she could do about it. At least, she thought, for the last two hours of march it had stopped raining. The old woman tried to wrap herself even more in her coat, but it was not enough to make her feel even minimally warm. The smell of kalahorse didn't help to comfort either, but at least she was accustomed to that. Last but not least, there was the snoring. Although, like Sdermila, almost nobody in the group of refugees was able to sleep, there were a couple of exceptions, and they seem to be coordinating their efforts to make them count. Many of the people around her were from her village. Sdermila was almost certain that one of the "night singers" was Fioderenos, the butcher, and the other his cousin Gordelos, one of the shepherds. She had heard them talking a while ago, and the snoring had started barely half a minute after they were quiet. Sdermila couldn't help but remember her husband, Taigor, who had been one of those happy souls who could sleep well in any situation. He always said that you could face anything being hungry or even sick, but not being sleepy, so the worse the things went, the more need you had to have some hours of sleep. Taigor had no problem doing exactly what he had preached. *And he snored, too. Oh, how he snored...* Sdermila felt her lips curving in a melancholic smile. At such times, she used to get angry with him, wondering how he could be able to just close his eyes and be placidly snoring an instant later, while she was completely and helplessly sleepless. Amazingly enough, it was that same snoring what always made her nervousness vanish slowly and drove her to sleep at last.

Now Taigor was long gone. The realization of that fact hit Sdermila as it always did, and made her timid smile to disappear. Laying there in that shed, cold, hungry and frightened, surrounded mostly by neighbors, some few strangers, but not a single relative, she missed her husband even more than ever before, if that was possible.

"Ah, Taigor, if only you were here with me..." Sdermila moved her lips, although she didn't actually speak. The old habit might help her to calm herself down, and maybe then she would be able to sleep a bit. She knew that Taigor was right, and that she had to rest now when she had the chance. Today had been bad enough, but who knew what could happen tomorrow...

They had been lucky in finding this farm, isolated enough but not far from the route to the pass through the southern mountains. The family who owned it would leave the next day, joining the refugees. They were *that* frightened after hearing that the Seibergians were near. They had been so kind to offer not only the shed, but also their house to the group, at least until there was no place for anybody else. Sdermila had preferred to sleep in the shed, though, so she would be close to her kalahorse. The beast, with other seven of its species, two of them belonging to the farmers, was tied at the entrance. Sdermila was sure that, after so many years of hearing it, she would recognize its growling if someone tried to take it away. She turned her body to lay on the other side, looking for a more comfortable position. When she did so, her stomach growled. *You better get used to light meals*, she thought, as if her stomach could understand her. At any case, it seemed to resign and ceased protesting. It was too bad that their hosts had not had more food to share with their hungry guests. Or maybe they had, but they were saving it for themselves. Sdermila could not blame them if they were doing that. Her kalashiri stew had been the dinner for at least a dozen people, a more than lean meal, after dividing between so many people what had been cook for so few - actually, only for herself, although she had made enough to freeze the remaining and have a couple of meals ready for another day.- She nevertheless had kept a short ration apart, so she would have something to eat tomorrow if things went no better. "It's good to be generous," Taigor used to say, "but not to be stupidly generous."

Sdermila heard a creak and a dim light entered the shed for some instants, allowing her to see that the doors had been opened to admit still another little group of people. *They won't find enough space to lie down*. Sdermila supposed that was the reason why almost everybody pretended to sleep: to keep the piece of ground they were occupying for themselves. She lifted her head a little, just enough to look over the bodies of the people around her. Before the doors closed and the shed plunged again into darkness, Sdermila caught a glimpse of the newcomers, silhouetted under the doors frame. Children. All of them were children. That meant that the adults who traveled with them had to stay outside. *Poor creatures*, Sdermila thought, feeling her heart sink a bit more. Forced to leave their schools and their homes, probably under the threat of weapons, walking all the day and part of the night, to sleep now, if they could, surrounded by strangers and without the consolation of a relative. *If we are so terrified, I can't even imagine what it is like for them*. She mentally pictured her grandsons among those children, and she was barely able to contain the tears that suddenly came to her eyes. "No, they are not here, Sdermila," she half whispered. "Little Drivan and Mila are safe on Balania, with Jeiran and Voeda. They will be warm, they'll be neither hungry nor frightened." Sdermila wiped the tears off her face and turned again on the ground to lay on her back. She

thought of the portion of stew she had saved and sighed. If one of those children just looked at her, she would give it away.

There was a little hole in the roof. It was not exactly over her, but if she turned her head slightly to the left, she could see a star shining up there. Sdermila watched its light until it suddenly disappeared. It was getting clouded again. Like many other Balanish, she had spent her whole life looking at the skies, always trying to guess the changes of weather even before they were announced - Taigor used to say that the Seibergian meteorologists could be as trusted as the Seibergian politicians-. She knew that if it continued being so cold, it might snow before dawn. Just what they needed. It would be at least two days of march to the place where they had been told that the New Republic camps were, although nobody could be sure about that. Therefore, they had no better options. If someone still had thought that the Seibergian would allow them eventually to return to their homes, the party they had found that afternoon should change his mind.

They had been walking for hours when they spotted the Seibergian. There were ten of them, at least that she could see. They had crossed a cart on the middle of the route, and two of them were sat on it defiantly. They wore some parts of stormtrooper armor, not the immaculate white of the Imperial Navy - Sdermila had never seen one of those but in her son Jeiran's holoivid receptor -, but the gray, green and brown pattern of the Special Units and the Seibergian military. There was a dead kalahorse in ditch to the right of the road. Sdermila had to take a firmer grip on the reins of hers, which was walking sluggishly behind her. The old animal snorted in fear, but did not try to escape. A man whispered, somewhere at her back, wondering what they could do. He was answered to shut up and keep walking. They were still fifty meters from the cart when they heard the Seibergian laugh. Sdermila inclined her head, as the rest of her group was doing, and avoided to look directly at the Seibergian. Their pace slowed down noticeably as the people leading the march doubted about which side of the cart to take, and finally chose the left side. It was more narrow, but they wouldn't have to walk near the corpse of the kalahorse. That would fright their own animals, and of course the children. They were only twenty meters from the Seibergian when Sdermila noticed that they had ceased to laugh. She risked a glimpse at them between the heads of those who preceded her. Most of the Seibergian were very young, teenagers with lethal weapons in their hands. Sdermila saw the anticipation in their eyes, barely concealed under more or less casual postures. There was something evil in the way they watched the approaching crowd. Predators watching their prey walking into a trap. Sdermila shivered, but it was not for the cold. She had just understood that they weren't going to let them through. She looked at her feet, suddenly fearing that her curiosity could have been noticed. The tense silence was only broken by the sobs of fear of a little child, whom his mother was unsuccessfully trying to calm down. The Balanish kept walking, although every step they made was imperceptibly shorter than the previous one, expecting to be stopped at any moment now. A light rain had begun to fall, but nobody seemed to notice. The head of the group was about to reach the cart when the first shot was heard.

There was a collective scream and the Balanish dropped themselves to the muddy road. Sdermila lost her grip on the reins of her kalahorse. She covered her head with her arms, knowing that it would be no real protection if the animal hit her with his hooves. For a few terrible instants, she didn't dare to move, hearing the panicked cries of people and beasts, the shouts in Seibergian, and the shots, many shots.

Sdermila couldn't tell how much time had passed when she realized that the screams had ceased, and the weapons were silent. She nevertheless didn't dare to move, although she could hardly breathe with her face semi-buried on the mud. The rain was heavier now, and the sound of the drops falling on the puddles, and on her own clothes was the only she could hear. She wondered if everybody else was dead. If the Seibergian had noticed that she was alive. If there would be one of them, in that same instant, walking towards her with his blaster ready, about to shoot at her head. Then she heard a kalahorse snorting very near, probably hers, and another one farther away. There was someone crying, too. And then she heard the laughs, stronger and closer than they were before. She tried not to move even more intently, although her body was trembling, both for the fear and the cold this time, soaked as she had got by now.

"Come on, you lambs," someone exclaimed in Seibergian, a language every Balanish understood well enough, although not many were fluent. "Stand up and look at me!"

Sdermila failed in her first try to obey, as her legs seemed to be numb. Terrified of being shot if she didn't obeyed immediately, she frantically looked for something to help herself to rise. Her hand clutched on what resulted to be the reins of her kalahorse. The old animal had not moved from her side, probably paralyzed by the fear, but she chose to think it was loyalty. She caressed its thick neck thankfully, managing to quiet it down a bit. Other people were standing around her, and she found out with surprise that no one seemed to be badly hurt. No one but a kalahorse, younger than hers, which apparently had tried to escape and had been shot repeatedly. There was a Seibergian already searching the saddlebags, and discarding most of its contents. Sdermila realized that they were not going to be killed, at least not before being robbed.

"Let's make this easy," the young man said in a mocking tone. "You're in Seibergia. We're Seibergian and you're not. You're using a Seibergian route and so you must pay the travel charges to the Seibergian authority. That means *us*." Some of the other men laughed again. "I want to see the contents of your bags and your pockets neatly put on the ground beside you, and we decide what the correct fare is for any of you. Those of you who don't collaborate or try to save part of the quota will be punished in the act. Have I been clear enough?" As nobody answered, the man shot a burst at the air, causing some people to launch themselves on the ground for the second time, and the Seibergian to laugh again. "Have I been clear enough?" he repeated. This time a chorus of "yes" and "yes, sir" seemed to satisfy him.

Ten minutes later it was over. Those who were carrying money – Imperial or Seibergian -, or any valuable item were efficiently stripped of them. Evidently, this gang was getting a lot of practice robbing defenseless people. The youngster who inspected Sdermila's possessions opened the food container and, after discovering with visible disappointment that it was food what it actually stored, spat inside and closed it again. When they were done, the frightened group of refugees was allowed to resume their march, not without being said good bye with a new series of blaster fire, for the delight of the Seibergian and the panic of the refugees, who feared being murdered now that their attackers had gotten what they wanted of them. A muffled sound was heard, far over their heads. Sdermila didn't dare to look at the skies, but she heard how a Seibergian told to another "a B-Wing." "Are you sure?" "Yes, use my binoculars. We better move away from the route." "Why, you don't think they would attack us, do you?" "Haven't you heard the news? Yesterday they shot down a freighter carrying Balanish just to be sure it was not one of our ships..." Sdermila couldn't pick any more before being too far from the Seibergian. She was not sure of having understood them correctly, and in that moment her only thought was to get as far of them as possible, and the sooner the better.

Sdermila had not forgotten the face of the Seibergian boy who had spat on her kalashiri. Fortunately he had not decided to let it drop to the mud. A gob wouldn't kill anybody, although she had preferred to omit the incident to the fellows who had shared the stew for dinner. It made her furious just to think of it, but not as much as to starve. Nevertheless, others could be more fussy and there was no need to ruin the meal to anybody. Sdermila moved uneasy on the ground. How old that kid could have been? Eighteen? Even less? She wondered how someone so young had come to be able to do something so contemptible just for the fun of it. What had she or any of the other people done to deserve that kind of hate? Under other circumstances, she would have slapped the brat and had dragged him by an ear to see his parents. "Under other circumstances," she whispered bitterly, "I might have actually known him and his parents. Under other circumstances, a boy shouldn't be carrying a weapon."

For the very first time, she wondered if her son Jeiran and his family would have made it to Nurtina spaceport without trouble. The mere doubt gave her the shivers. Suddenly, the shed seemed a lot colder than a minute before. What if they had been intercepted too? They could have been robbed and been left without means neither to take their flight nor to return home. The could have been hurt. The children... "Please Sdermila," she muttered angrily, "stop thinking nonsense or you will go mad. Of course they took their ship and are now on Balania, waiting for you to learn to be less stubborn and join them." Why had she followed the crowd to the mountains, in the first place? She might have taken all the money she had at home and escaped towards Nurtina, and not in the opposite direction... *Don't be a fool, Sdermila. The Seibergians that were setting fire to the village came from Nurtina route.* Three days. Jeiran, Lania and the kids had left three days ago. Maybe there were not Seibergian bands on the route three days ago. One day is the most they should take to arrive to Nurtina. "It had to be safe by then. I'm sure they made it. They did..." She stopped whispering, afraid of being heard by someone. She concentrated again on the hole on the ceiling, struggling to move away all the dark and unproductive thoughts from her mind. Her son, her daughter in law

and her grandsons were safe. Her only mistake was not to go with them when she had the chance. This morning was just too late. Had she tried to go to Nurtina, she would have been stopped. Had she carried any money, she would have been robbed. What she had was all she was going to get right now, so there was no point in keeping wondering, fearing and regretting. Little by little, she recovered the calm. Perhaps she still would be able to sleep. For an instant she could see a white dot coming through the hole up there. A snowflake. Then there were another. It was starting to snow.

The door opened again. This time she didn't try to see the newcomers, and limited herself to wait for the door to be closed. There was a draught of cold air. Why didn't they close the damned door? She was about to look when an authoritarian male voice was heard.

"I am sorry to disturb you in your rest, my friends, but I need your attention. Please."

It had sounded more like an order than a plea. She sat up with some effort and looked at the man. Around her, most people was doing the same. She couldn't distinguish his features well under that faint light, but the oversized blaster he was carrying on his shoulder was visible enough. A step behind him, there were other two armed men. Only the fact that he was talking in Balanish helped Sdermila and the rest of refugees to not get frightened, or at least, to not panic. After some half contained exclamations and nervous whispers, a complete silence was made on the shed.

"Thank you very much," the man said. "My name is Ciric Baranka. I'm a member of the Balanish Liberation Army." This caused a torrent of murmurs. These men belonged to the guerillas. Sdermila remembered what she had been told about them. They had formed up recently, as a response to the incursions of the Seibergian paramilitary in the Balanish Country. In several locations some men had armed themselves – as best as they could, what was not much at first – and proclaimed to be soldiers of the Balanish Country Army – known by no less of seventeen different names -. Besides defending their villages from the paramilitary, they were involved in several incidents with the Seibergian authorities, but nothing serious happened until they killed two Seibergian policemen in a small village called Rideria. Police forces had been sent to dissolve a concentration of villagers who had interrupted the traffic on the highway to Nurtina - the only highway that entered the Balanish Country-. As they wouldn't leave peacefully, the police had been ordered to open fire with their stunners. There were some armed men among the Balanish, but unfortunately they carried nothing as sophisticated as a stunner. What they had were some old energy weapons, antiques from the Clone Wars bought in the black market at scandalous prices, but still lethal nevertheless. Nothing was said in the Seibergia media about what happened later – quite a slaughter – when the police used their blasters indiscriminately to repel the aggression. The bodies of the two deceased policemen, though, their funeral, and the distress of their families appeared in every news channel and magazine for several weeks. The traditional distrust that the Seibergian population felt toward their Balanish neighbors, which had rose to unprecedented levels after their declaration of independence, descended rapidly to blind hatred. Before the suspects – those who survived the immediate fight and the following persecution - were brought to the Court, Somolovich's government had used this incident as the justification for sending troops to the Balanish Country, supposedly to protect the Seibergian citizens living there - who had been undisturbed so far -. It was then when the several Balanish armed groups, now facing not only more numerous and better equipped Seibergian paramilitary, but the Seibergian Army, joined in a common organization they called the Balanish Liberation Army. They were supported by a majority of the Balanish population. Those who didn't, were very careful not saying so aloud, fearful of attracting reprisals upon themselves. The word collaborator was the worst insult these days, and even a sentence of death when it was if only half confirmed. After so many humiliations, many Balanish were proud of what the guerilla was doing.

Sdermila's son, Jeiran, was one of those few who thought that the Balanish Liberation Army was the source of many of their present problems, although that didn't make of him a sympathizer of the Seibergian. "Whether we like it or not," he used to tell to Sdermila, who most of times limited herself to hear him in silence, "we're living on their planet. The only way for us to gain that freedom they all talk about, is leaving this place, as my brother did." Those words hurt Sdermila, but she preferred not to argue against her son when he started to talk like that. "Two don't fight if one doesn't want to," was other of Taigor's sayings. Better to swallow her opinion in that particular matter than giving her son more reasons to wish to leave. *At the end he left all the same, Sdermila. Why you didn't...?*

She obliged herself to interrupt that recurrent line of thoughts and pay attention to the man speaking, that

Ciric guy.

"As you have experienced today, the Seibergian won't leave us live in peace. We have been working in this land they thought was worth nothing for two thousand years. Since our ancestors changed their weapons for laboring tools we have never been a threat to the Seibergians. Some of them have even come to live among us, although they never pretended to be our equals, but our masters..."

"That's not true," a man who Sdermila didn't know said. "I'm married to a Seibergian woman, and that make of my children half Seibergian. Not all Seibergian are bad."

"Don't tell me that your wife has not tried to be your master." Ciric replied with a smile, seemingly not bothered at all by the interruption.

"Well, she is a woman nevertheless." This comment was celebrated with laughs by many of the present men, and even by some of the women. Ciric looked at the man with sympathy.

"What is your name, my friend?"

"Kalemos Berideni."

"Nice to meet you, Kalemos. Is your wife with you now?" Kalemos was visibly taken aback by this question.

"No, she isn't. She took the kids to stay with her family, in Senovia Sal. We both thought that was the best thing to do, given the circumstances."

"I must agree with you, Kalemos, that they will be safer in Seibergia than here. Safer, but not safe." Ciric ceased to smile.

"What do you mean?" Kalemos seemed suddenly worried.

"You have just said that your children are half Seibergian. In Seibergia, they will be treated as half Balanish. And your wife won't be able to protect them, because she will be treated as someone who had married a Balanish, that is, a kind of prostitute of something worse."

"How do you dare...?" Kalemos stood up with his hands clenched in fists, but his eyes were fighting the tears.

"Forgive me, my friend, I didn't mean any offence with my comment, but you know that what I've just said is true. Are your relationships with your family in law good?" Kalemos didn't answer. Instead he let himself drop on the ground again, and covered his face with his hands. Ciric shook his head. "I bet they're not. Yours is a sad story, Kalemos, but not one of the worst I've heard. I've been told that the group you found today limited themselves to steal your valuables, is that correct?" Several voices answered affirmatively. "Then you must know you're lucky. Here with me there are some of my comrades. Fenner, this young man on my right, was taken out of his home at midnight. He and his family. He and his father were forced to watch how his mother and his older sister were raped. The same was happening in other homes of his village. Then, all the men older than fourteen years were driven out of the village, and forced to dig a long trench. Fenner, here, hit a Seibergian with his shovel and ran towards the forest. The darkness helped him, that and that the Seibergians were mostly drunk, and their aim was not too good. But it was good enough to shoot at all those who, unlike Fenner, didn't dare to escape, or didn't want to, maybe hoping to still being able to help their relatives." The young man made a step forward and looked around menacingly, as if retaliating those presents to call him coward for having run away. Nobody would. Ciric made a long pause before resuming

his narration. "Fenner was hidden for all that night, seeing the flames, hearing the shots, and the screams and cries of the women and the children. Next morning, when he went down to the village after the Seibergians left, he found the half buried trench he had helped to dig, where the bodies of all the men of the village laid. When he arrived to his home, he found the corpse of his mother, but no trace of his sister. What had happened there, I can only imagine. But believe me, Fenner thinks of it every second." Ciric put a hand on Fenner's shoulder. "After wandering for several days, on the edge of madness, he ran into one of our patrols. He told us what had happened and immediately decided to join us. Following his lead, we caught up with the Seibergians that did that to his family and neighbors. We were able to rescue some few young women that had been taken away by those beasts so they could continue using them for their depravations. I'm proud to say that two of those women are now fighting beside us. Unfortunately we found no trace of Fenner's sister. For those of you who are wondering, we killed all the Seibergians. Some of you could call this revenge. Other will call it justice, and justice it is, but I call it self defence. Yes, self defence, because those Seibergians would be visiting more villages. Maybe yours was on their list." Ciric stood there in silence for a while, allowing the horror of what he had just told to fill the minds of the refugees, and prepare them for the second part of his speech. Sdermila shivered under the vivid images the man's words had evoked. She saw Fioderenos's wife, Drula, begin to cry, while her husband cursed between clenched teeth. Nobody could be untouched after hearing such a tale. Added to all they had had to go through today, even she felt an urge to make the Seibergian pay for all the atrocities they were committing against her people. Most of all, she wanted to make them pay for making her sons and grandsons to leave. She looked at Ciric Baranka and how he watched them in return. The man sure know how to make people follow him. Because, what else could he want of them? *What a soldier you would make, Sdermila*, she thought. As she observed him, the man lifted a hand, getting everybody's attention before speaking again.

"I could tell you a hundred stories like this of Fenner, but we have no time, nor I think that you need to hear any more. As I was saying at the beginning, the Seibergians won't let us live in peace. I'm not saying that every Seibergian is evil," Ciric looked at Kalemoss Berideni, "nor that we should kill them as we did with the murders of Fenner's family. But we sure *must* fight those who invade our land, this land where our ancestors fought two thousand years ago, and which we had earned with our work. We will fight until our last breath against those who come to throw us out of our homes, to torture and kill us and those whom we love. The Empire somewhat protected us, but they wouldn't really help us. Don't forget that the Seibergians still consider themselves as Imperial citizens. The New Republic won't be different. Their fighters are making life miserable for the invaders, and that is good. But their blockade is against us, too, because it prevent us from receiving the weapons we need to survive. They are here to save themselves from the shame they had to face when they allowed Vina Bosolia to be shattered without them moving a finger. They won't risk the lives of their soldiers coming down here to bring down the murderous government of that criminal Somolovich, and of course they will flee before being involved in a war against his Corellian friends. In the best of cases, they will leave when the reporters find a more interesting place to go with their cameras, and then we'll be worse than before they appeared."

"We were heading to one of their camps," a female voice said. Sdermila saw it was her neighbor Redina who had spoken, and judging by the look that her husband, Dimeter, directed at her, he would had preferred her to keep in silence.

"That's good," Ciric said. "We have no way to house and feed you all. We have no quarters, only the mountains and the forests, and that is not for everybody, I admit it. Go to the New Republic camps and accept their help while they are willing to give it. But some of us must renounce to it and stay to fight, or you will have no place to return when the New Republic pick their tents up and go elsewhere. But those of you who have the strength to endure this kind of life *should* come with us. I can't give you too much, but you will receive training and a weapon to fight for what is yours." Some people stood up immediately. Sdermila saw Gordelos, Fioderenos and other of her neighbors, including some young women, rise with their hearts inflamed by the desire to follow Ciric Baranka wherever he wanted them to go. Kalemoss Berideni got up, too. But many others stayed seated on the ground, their faces showing the doubts they felt. They were mostly peaceful people, who had never taken a weapon of any sort in their hands, and even now they were not looking forward at the perspective of embracing the ways of violence. Some few may even not trust completely this Ciric and his motivations. It was Dimeter who finally decided to voice the question that was in the minds of many.

"And what if we decide not to join you?" This got him angry stares of those around him who had been fully convinced by Ciric's oratory, and even some boos. Ciric rose both hands to ask for silence, and looked at Dimeter with a stern expression.

"You are free to make your decision," he said. Besides him, Fenner stared at Dimeter with a barely concealed scorn. "We don't force anyone to fight. But we won't help them either. If we don't die in the attempt, the time might come when we will reach our goals and push the Seibergians out of our land. United with Balania or not, the Balanish Country will be, *must* be, ruled by those who risked their lives for it. I'm certain that, before we can elect our leaders, the provisional governments in the country, and in the towns and villages that make it up, will be members of the Balanish Liberation Army. When such elections can take place, I have no reason to doubt that many of those whom people will choose will be ex-combatants. Of course, we will remember and take into account who was with us, and who was not. Other than that wouldn't be fair with those who have died and those who will in this battle." Those standing up celebrated these words with an ovation. Many faces turned to watch Dimeter's reaction. He looked at his wife tenderly for a second and told her something that only she was able to hear, but that made her burst into tears. Although she tried to avoid it, Dimeter got up with resignation painted on his face, returning Ciric's look. This nodded in silent approval. Dimeter's gesture was received with applause, while Fioredenos approached to clap his back. Some others followed Dimeter's example, and soon an improvised recruitment office was set at the entrance of the shed with a table and a chair. Ciric shook hands with every new recruit, and consoled those who were rejected because they were too young, too old or too weak to resist the life of the guerilla.

In spite of Ciric's arguments, Sdermila couldn't help but feel that there was something extremely unfair in all this. What kind of nation were they going to make up, if you had to be a soldier before aspiring to be a citizen? She was too old as to sign up, of course, but she wouldn't do even if she could. Now the only thing she wanted to do was go to that camp and see if the New Republic people would help her to go to Balania to join her son Jeiran, her daughter in law and her grandsons. She didn't mind if that made her selfish or a coward. In her own way, she had been courageous and unselfish all her life. Now she only wanted to be with her family. A day had been enough to make her realize that home was wherever they were.

VII

Foxfire was alone in her quarters, seated at her console, not really seeing the text displayed in front of her eyes. Unable to sleep, she had intended to read some reconnaissance reports, but she was too distracted as to make any sense of it. She tried a novel that she had downloaded some time ago from the Reading Room databanks, but which she had never had the time to read beyond the first chapter. She thought that some light reading could help her to calm her mind a little, but she couldn't concentrate either. When she found herself reading the same paragraph for at least the tenth time, she shut the console off angrily.

She had been eluding contact with other members of the squad since the disastrous meeting the day before. She had rejected their calls, and had her meals served in her cabin, instead of going to the common dining room. The only time she had gone out in the last sixteen hours was to be interrogated by Colonel Gen'yaa's private investigation team about her last mission - she couldn't help thinking that it would remain her last mission for a long time, maybe for her whole life - and found Vyper there. He had been appointed by Gen'yaa as a member of the team. Foxfire had to admit that he didn't seem to be enjoying it more than her, but nevertheless she had avoided looking at him in the eyes more than strictly necessary. Although she believed that she had got over her initial resentment towards him, she didn't want to test herself. Not so soon. Foxfire had been asked to tell them all she could remember about the mission, down to the last detail. She had included it all in her written report, so the investigators didn't get anything new from her, and had returned directly to her quarters as soon as she was allowed to.

Moose was the only person she had talked to besides the investigation team in that time, but they didn't seem to be comfortable being together. That hurt her, and she had no doubt that Moose didn't feel better about it. The truth, though, was that what had happened was somehow between them. She couldn't help but wonder if Moose was blaming her for it, at least partially. Had she ordered him not to shoot in advance, nothing of this would have taken place. She had tried to talk about it with him, but he had not given her the chance. Foxfire's hope of sorting things out with Moose after the meeting had vanished. When they reached their quarters - they had managed to have contiguous cabins since their relationship had begun on board the *Joan d'Arc* -, Moose just said that he was not ready to talk about it yet, and had locked himself inside his cabin. For all Foxfire knew, he could still be there, although he probably had been called to be interrogated too. She was surprised when her door chimed and heard Moose's voice on the other side, and even more

when she hurried to open it and saw him wearing a flight suit, carrying his helmet under his arm.

"Hi there," she said, although there were a hundred of things she was longing to say instead. *Maybe later.* Moose acknowledged her with a nod and entered the room. "We have been forbidden to fly, you know," she added after several seconds. Seeing Moose with his complete pilot equipment made her fear that he could have run into even more trouble by disobeying Gen'yaa's explicit orders.

"We haven't been forbidden to use the simulators." Moose answered. That explained it. Maybe Moose missed flying even more than her. The idea was not bad. Making a few dozen virtual Imperial eyeballs burst into flames could actually relax her nerves, but somehow she didn't feel in the mood for it. Nevertheless, something in Moose's expression gave her the impression that he had not been in the simulation room calming his mind down, but rather the opposite. She watched him while he let his helmet drop on Foxfire's bunk and sat beside it, his eyes looking at something that was not in the room. Suddenly she understood. Moose had been reconstructing their mission, trying to find out if things could have been different. For several years, he had been the instructor of every new pilot who joined White Squadron. He could program the flight simulator to reproduce any given mission with his eyes closed in no time. But for what? In Foxfire's experience, that was a futile exercise, and even an unadvisable one. For a pilot as veteran as Moose, there wouldn't be too much to learn from possible mistakes, but it might make him get more depressed than he was. She didn't need to run a simulation to think of several things she could have done instead of what she did, but there was no way to change the past. Moose had to know that too, but it seemed that he had been unable to resist the urge to make the test anyway. The look in his eyes confirmed her guesses.

"I screwed it up, Avery," he said. "When the armed freighter shot at Torpedo, I could have flown beneath it, or even along its port side, and make a scan pass on the Corellian ship."

"Sure you could. And I could have ordered you to take that scan before disabling the other three transports, and not the other way around." She had not finished to say it when she was already feeling bad for it. *Of course I could have done that, and this sensation is exactly what I'd like to avoid.*

"I forgot all about what our mission was," he continued as if he had not heard her. "When Torpedo got shot at, the only thing I wanted to do was to blow those guys away."

"That's nothing more than combat reflexes, and they actually save our lives very often." Foxfire sat beside Moose and put an arm over his shoulders. He didn't do anything to prevent her from doing so. That, at least, was a good sign, she thought.

"You heard Rooster. It also kills people."

"You shouldn't take her literally. You know Rooster, she'd scream, horrified, if she saw you smashing the most insignificant of insects." This got a hint of a smile from Moose, but he soon resumed his pained expression.

"You know, I still think that at that last moment, shooting was what I had to do. But if I had done my work better before, I'd have that freighter scanned and I wouldn't have to take odds."

"Don't blame yourself for that. Gandalf and I had the chance to scan it but none of us did it either. I suppose we were too busy at the moment taking the other ship's shields down, but one A-Wing should have been enough for that. I just didn't think clearly." Moose looked at her suddenly worried.

"Hey, dear, I'd never suggest that. What happened was not your fault."

"Perhaps," she admitted, "but that doesn't make it yours." Moose sighed and let himself drop on the bunk.

He clenched his hands under his head and stared at the ceiling.

"You must think I'm a masochist for going at the simulator to torture myself like this, don't you?"

"Sort of."

"I suppose I am. If only we could do something..." *We are making progresses*, Foxfire thought, *now it's 'we' instead of 'I'*. Foxfire laid beside Moose and mimicked his posture.

"How did you do with Gen'yaa and her investigation team?" Foxfire didn't think he would have too much to tell about that, but at least it would mean a change on the course of the conversation.

"Sometimes I hate that woman, you know," Foxfire let a short laugh escape, "but I must admit she is damn good at this kind of thing. She doesn't mind if I'm a fool or a murderer. The only thing she cares about is how is she going to minimize the impact of this in the political scenario. They insisted on knowing how I explained the fact that the doomed freighter was identified as hostile by my flight computer. I'm as certain as I can be that I didn't do it myself, although it meant no difference for me when it came to shooting or not. Ibero asked me the same after the meeting." Foxfire leaned on her arm and rose to look at him.

"So they are looking for a technical failure to blame?"

"That's the obvious conclusion, although it didn't seem to me as if they had found any yet."

"Better blaming a computer than a New Republic officer," Foxfire reflected. "Especially if there is any remote possibility of that officer being herself."

"I bet she doesn't want this on her file." Moose shrugged.

"Well, if that can save our careers," Foxfire continued thoughtfully, "I fully agree on that approach."

"In this precise moment, I don't care that much about my career," Moose said. Pain was back in his voice.

"Don't keep torturing yourself." Foxfire took a glance at her console, now blank and mute. "I've been doing some reading until barely seconds before you came in. It has helped me," she lied, "maybe you should try.

You can use my console if you want to."

Moose sighed deeply. "Who knows, it could work." He sat up, looked at the console, and then he seemed to think otherwise. "But I'll better go down to the Reading Room. The walk will do me good. Do you mind if I leave the helmet where it is?"

"Of course not. Do you want me to go there with you?"

"Thanks, but no. I'll rather be alone for a while." Foxfire tried not to show her disappointment, but she couldn't hide it from Moose. His stern expression softened a bit, and he added "but I'll be back later. Will you be here?"

"Sure. I think I'll take a nap, but I won't be angry if you wake me up."

Moose smiled and leaned over her to give her a short kiss. "That's a deal. See you later."

"See you." Foxfire said to the closing door. *It could have gone worse*, she consoled herself.

Moose discovered that he really wanted to have a walk, so he didn't take the most direct route to the Reading Room. Instead, he chose those corridors that ran parallel to the *Wolf's Lair's* outer hull, and bound by this reason to have viewing screens. He stopped at one of them, which was unusually big, stretching from the deck level to almost the ceiling, and something like six meters wide. He imagined that the Mon Calamari engineers who had designed the Strike Carrier, as in love as most members of this species were with space, had wanted to provide those crewmen not posted on the bridge with a couple of spots where they, too, could admire the greatness of universe. Now that he thought of it, he remembered having seen Lieutenant Boradelis, the chief engineer, standing in this same place with her big eyes lost in the infinity of the star field surrounding the ship. Those times he had been in too much of a hurry to enjoy the view, but now he decided to grant himself a pause. Beyond the curve of Seibergia below, which was now showing its daylight side, he could see a big part of the Viayak cluster. Stars concentrated in a wide strip that ran diagonally across his point of view. It occurred to him that they seemed to have been put there with a big brush by a sort of cosmic painter, who had later placed the three brightest ones apart with a finer brush, artistically displayed two above and one beneath the biggest set, so they would not be unnoticed amongst the multitude. It was pretty. Moose remembered his awe the first time he saw the stars like this, from space, far from the excessive illumination and pollution from the cities, and even without an atmosphere to filter even a little of this wonder. It had been his father, who had been a pilot of the first generation of TIE Bombers in the first days of the Empire, the one who had taken him in a training ship when he was barely three years old, "to see his daddy's work site". He smiled when he evoked the memory. In spite of his early age, he had never forgotten that day. It was the day when he had decided that he would grow up to be a pilot like his father. The space seen from Alderaan's orbit had had nothing to envy this view. The remembrance of his father and his home planet, none of which existed any more, made him feel sad, but he kept looking nevertheless at the stars for a while. He startled when he noticed a hand over his shoulder.

"Sorry, Moose," Raiven said, "I didn't mean to disturb you."

"You haven't," he answered politely. "Is there something I can do for you?"

The younger pilot shrugged. "Well, I was looking for a chance to tell you that I didn't intend to criticize you back in the meeting for what you did..."

"It sounded like you did," Moose replied. He immediately regretted it. That had not been too encouraging for someone who was evidently trying to apologize. He couldn't help it, though. He had felt almost surrounded in in that meeting, and Raiven had been one of those who had made him feel like that.

"I suppose that's right," said Raiven, a bit taken aback, "but that was before knowing all the facts. Now I know how it all happened. Torpedo told us the details, although he was supposed not to do that."

"It's hard to keep secrets on this ship of gossip lovers."

"I guess so," Raiven grinned, "but I'm glad Torpedo briefed us. I've been looking for a chance to tell you that, had I been in your shoes, I'd have shot too. I just wanted you to know."

"Thanks, Raiven. I really appreciate that." Moose offered a hand to the other pilot, and he shook it visibly relieved.

"I'd love to buy you a drink, but I'm supposed to be airborne in fifteen minutes. Vyper is having some of us helping Arachnoid's people to patrol our back courtyard."

"Are we waiting any unwelcome visitors?"

"It looks like Corellian tourism in this system could experience an unprecedented flourishing."

"I see. Don't be late then."

"See you soon!" Raiven said before starting running down the corridor.

Moose resumed his walk towards the Reading Room with mixed feelings. While Raiven's sincere apologies had made him feel better, he was worried by the news the other pilot had let escape. If tension in the area had grown enough to have the Corellians involved because of this incident, the lives of the refugees he had killed weren't going to be the only ones he'd have on his conscience. *Maybe there's a squad-mate who won't think I'm a murderer, but millions in this galaxy will curse my name.* He had almost forgotten why he was heading to the Reading Room when the door opened to admit him.

The pilot approached a reading console and sat heavily in front of it. The Reading Room was not big, a rectangular space of barely fifteen square meters, with six niches besides the wall in front of the entrance, and three on each of the other two sides. Every niche had a seat, a reading console connected to the Wolf's Lair databanks, and a button to activate the soundproof field, in case one wanted to isolate oneself from the conversation of other readers. There were half a dozen holographic posters covering the otherwise bare walls, and nothing more. Actually, it was unusual to find more than one or two persons there, because practically all pilots and crewmen quarters were equipped with reading consoles with access to the same stuff. That was what made it the perfect place to be alone, unless you were ranked somewhere over commander and had been lucky enough to have been granted a room for your own, like in Moose's case. He was so lost in his thoughts that he didn't notice that he was not alone until he heard a "Hi Moose" coming from somewhere on his right. He turned to find Ibero occupying a niche in the right wall. Several texts and what seemed to be a couple of maps were displayed floating over his console. A hand holo-projector on the desk showed a picture of a charming young woman holding a baby of less than a year in her arms. From where he was, Moose had no problem identifying the woman as Ibero's wife, whom Moose had met months before, when he and the rest of the squad had stayed on Iberyia for two weeks after the battle that liberated the planet from the Empire. The baby had to be their daughter Lucia - Ibero repeated her name so often that it was impossible not to remember it - who was born barely seconds after the sound of the last shot had vanished.

"She has grown up a lot since I last saw her," Moose said with a smile, lifting his chin towards the picture.

Ibero didn't need to look to know whom Moose was talking about. "She hit six months last week," he said grinning proudly, the very image of the father losing the ground under his feet every time his daughter is mentioned.

"Six months already. She sure is pretty, with those big eyes and that so female smile." Ibero laughed delighted and took a glance at the picture. "Yes," he said as the only answer, evidently agreeing with Moose's appreciation of Lucia's beauty. After that, they both remained silent. Moose had gone to the Reading Room intending to be alone, but now it would seem rude to leave just after finding Ibero there. He could also notice the other pilot's discomfort. Maybe he didn't want to be bothered while he worked. *Or maybe it's because it's me.* He couldn't expect all of his colleagues to have such a positive reaction as Raiven's, at least not so soon. Ibero had been silent back in the Meeting Room, not taking any part in the discussion, but that didn't mean he didn't have a opinion of his own. Moose remembered the Iberyian pilot almost choking in Gen'yaa quarters when he learned what had happened and saw the images. *That little girl, shattered and floating in space.* He looked at the picture again. Ibero followed his look and took the little device in his hands. He half suppressed a shiver and turned the holo-projector off. *He was remembering that, too.* Moose was about to ask the Iberyian directly what his thoughts were, but suddenly he didn't want to hear them. *I had more than enough with Rooster.* Ibero looked at his console with the corner of his eyes, as if wondering whether Moose would mind if he resumed his work. Moose decided to ask him politely what he was working on and leave after that.

"I hope I've not interrupted you. May I ask what you are up to?"

"Oh, this," Ibero smiled briefly, thanking the chance to break the uneasy silence and start a conversation. He pressed a key on the console to increase the size of part of the stuff he was consulting so Moose could see it from where he was. "I'm documenting a report about the Balanish Country people. Rooster is going to fly Dr. Al Saruff down to the Balanish Country tomorrow, with supplies for one of the camps. We're installing a campaign hospital, and while there's not much need for his services up here, Dr. Benny will be attending those refugees who need it. He asked me to provide him with additional information about the Balanish, in case he may need it, and that's what I'm doing."

"Something more to add to your already overweighed duty list," Moose said in an apologetic tone. He didn't ignore the fact that, with he and Foxfire relieved from service, the other three members of the Command Wing must do the work of the five. Ibero dismissed his concern with a wave of a hand. "I'm actually enjoying this one," he said, pointing at the floating items with a thumb. "The history of this people is amazing. You wouldn't believe the things they did to survive in those empty mountains."

Moose had read the memorandum that had been given to every pilot when the *Wolf's Lair* was sent here. Besides navigation cards for the regions they would be flying through, maps of Seibergia, and the New Republic estimations of the opposition they could expect to find, it included a general description of the political situation and its precedents.

"I read about the invasion attempt two thousand years ago, and it was mentioned that the Balanish survivors had to work hard after it, but I don't know too much of the details. About the mountains, for what I've seen of them from the air, I wouldn't say they are precisely empty."

"They aren't *now*," Ibero said with an enigmatic smile. "When they landed there for the very first time, it was all snow and rocks."

"All right," Moose said leaning forward, suddenly interested in the issue for his own surprise. "I've got some spare time."

"You see," Ibero began with no little content, "Balanish had very carefully prepared their assault on Seibergia, and the spot for their first landing on this planet was not chosen casually. Balania is a cold world. Their weapons and machines were perfectly prepared for working under conditions of extreme cold, but the intelligence they had gathered about their enemies told them that they would be in disadvantage if they were forced to fight with bad weather. As long as they were able to obtain the aerial supremacy, they would be able to establish bases, or even whole colonies, in the mountain areas of Seibergia with a relative impunity. They were not fools to pretend they could dominate otherwise a planet so big without an immense army."

"The Empire didn't need to use such a strength either on most of the planets they took," Moose observed.

"That's because they could rely on the power of their Star Destroyers. They placed a couple of them orbiting the planet and, if the local armed forces didn't surrender immediately, they started pounding their major cities."

"Correct," Moose agreed, realizing what Ibero's point was, "but two thousand years ago battleships didn't have such a fire power."

"You got it." Ibero nodded in approval. "The technology to produce laser cannons powerful enough to destroy buildings from a planet's orbit, in spite of the energy that gets dissipated in the atmosphere, the diffraction of the beam, and other technical difficulties - like those of recharging the weapon quickly enough and keeping it from getting overheated -, was not available until less than a thousand years ago." Moose, who knew already most of that, was about to suggest Ibero that atomic bombs were available even before

travel faster than light was possible. They were successfully used mining big asteroids, and they sure would destroy a city from orbit. Then he answered himself . *Who would be so fool to use atomics on a planet where they intended to live later?. Actually, until the Empire started constructing the first Death Star, he considered, nobody seemed to think that so destructive weapons could be of any use.*

Ibero continued. "As far as we know, orbital laser bombardments were used for the first time by the Bretalian, eight hundred years ago."

"Until our old friend Joan d'Arc made them stop." Moose said with a smile.

"Right." Ibero smiled in return. Everybody on the squad knew of his interest for that historical character, and Moose had actually read *twice* his essay about her. "But let's return to *this* story. As I was about to say, Balanish had the first part of their invasion plan perfectly executed. With surprise as their ally, the first contingent of troops landed exactly here." Ibero showed Moose the place on a tri-dimensional map generated by the console, featuring a high terrain surrounded by mountains that made the access quite difficult from the low lands, although not impossible. "These highlands are the core of what we know today as the Balanish Country. They took the position and installed their provisional camp almost without opposition. Their first attempt to advance down to the closest cities, though, was successfully rejected by the Seibergians. That was not completely unexpected. The main objective of this first assault was to establish a base in an easily defensible place, where new troops and equipment could be disembarked unimpeded, provided they could prevent their ships from being intercepted in space. The secondary objective was to test the defensive capacity of the enemy, evaluating the strength that would be needed to overwhelm it. They had accomplished both. So far, so good. But when the ships carrying the second and more numerous wave entered the system, they found a combined force of Seibergian and Republican vessels, most of these last from Corellia. They had already captured the cruiser that had brought in the first troops. The Balanish admiral had no other option than ordering his fleet to run back home with their tail between their legs."

"So there was not even a space battle?"

"Not a single shot. Balanish government could not even believe, and even less understand, how had the Seibergian gotten the Republic support so soon. There had been only three days from the first wave to the second, and yet the Republic ships were there. You must take into account that the reaction time of the senate in this kind of situations was usually measured in months, and it was never less than three or four weeks."

"What happened then?" By now, Moose was absorbed by Ibero's tale, to the delight of the other pilot.

"An incredible coincidence, and Corellian sales marketing at work. At the same time the Balanish were making their first landing on Seibergia, several Corellian shipyards were holding a big exhibition of their latest battleship designs, for the benefit of the senatorial commission that would decide which companies would get the contract for the renewal of the Republic Fleet. Three Republican admirals, in the role of advisors to the commission, were assisting with the show of their ships. By indication of their government, the Corellian Navy had gladly offered several of their brand new vessels, belonging to some of the candidate classes, to take a part in the exhibition. After all, this was going to be the contract of the century, and a lot of Corellian enterprises would take direct or indirect profit from it."

Moose almost laughed. "So we have a powerful fleet, composed of the newest and more powerful ships ever constructed, playing war games a few light years from the Viayak cluster..."

"... just when the Seibergian call for help was received. You can figure out the rest yourself."

"Corellia found an unexpected and incredible chance to impress the senate representatives with the performance of their wonderful ships, and score a big political point, all at once."

"Exactly. Surely some anonymous Balanish bureaucrat wrote a report informing of the senatorial visit to Corellia, with a side note indicating that an exhibition would take place, but that report was filed away without a second read."

"They evidently underestimated Corellian salesmen." Moose pointed out.

"Who, of course, got the contract and Corellian starship industries definitely took a leadership position in the galaxy, only contested by Kuat shipyards. But that's another story, too."

"Fascinating." Ibero's enthusiasm was contagious, and Moose had forgotten momentarily his deepest concerns. "What happened then with the Balanish forces on Seibergia?"

"Just picture them. Their own government had sacrificed them to avoid a confrontation with the whole Republic, and they had no way to return home. They were around five thousand men and women trapped on a world that wanted them dead. Nevertheless, their positions at the mountains were almost inexpugnable, even after they lost the last of their bunch of atmospheric fighters to the defenders. The Seibergian Army tried again and again to blow them off their planet, failing every time. Only from the air could they be successfully attacked, but the Seibergian pilots had to fly quite low between treacherous hills and rocky formations if they wanted to hit their targets. Between accidents and the Balanish gunner's aim, the casualty level was vicious, and Seibergia could not afford such losses. When they finally accepted negotiations, they didn't know how reduced the Balanish forces were, or they would have insisted on the military approach. Only a fourth of the initial Balanish contingent resisted, and after obtaining the right to keep their mountains and a safety area around them, they found themselves with three hundred square kilometers of nothingness, and food for a year in the best of cases. Actually, the Seibergian government expected them to slowly die by starvation, but they were a lot better than that."

"You've got all my attention." Moose said while crossing his arms on his chest.

Ibero closed the map that had been hanging over the console and made several pictures appear in its place. They showed different views of what could be easily identified as medical facilities. There were different laboratories, surgery rooms, intensive care units, several therapy theaters and hospital rooms. Human beings using white and green coats were working in several of these stances. Moose was not a medic, but none of that struck him as unusual or remarkable, save for a couple of details.

"These are from an old hospital, aren't they?" Moose asked, a bit confused by this apparent change of issue.

"Yes. All these images belong to Balanish hospitals of two thousand years ago. They were very similar to other hospitals in a thousand human inhabited worlds in and out of the old Republic, and seemingly not that different from what we know today."

"I guess human medicine has not changed too much in that time."

Ibero laughed. "Probably most doctors would be horrified by that comment, and could give you and me a six month conference just to start illustrating us with all the medical advances that have appeared since then. But honestly, looking at these pictures, I must agree with your first impression. Nevertheless, you've correctly deduced that they corresponded to an old hospital, and not to a current one. What has made you find that out?"

"In the first place, there are only human personnel working in these installations. There is not a single medical droid. Today, is easier to see the opposite."

"That's right. I remembered from my robotic science course, when I was still at university, that medical droids

droids are quite recent. While computers had been used in medicine since the most remote times, droids were not trusted for medical work until some hundred years ago. There were no technical reasons for this, but very extended prejudices against the use of machines as doctors. This is a very interesting issue for me, but one with not much to do with our present conversation." Ibero smiled sheepishly. *The man is enjoying this*, Moose thought amused. "Tell me more things you find odd in the pictures."

"Hmm, I don't know what many of these devices are for, but specially these urns," Moose pointed at one of the images featuring some kind of lab, "or containers, or whatever they are, seem strange to me."

"Well spotted," Ibero said nodding. "Before I tell you what they are, there is anything more you want to point out?"

Moose scratched the back of his head. It was not what there appeared in the pictures, but rather something that was not in them. There was something missing somewhere, and he almost had it, but somehow the answer escaped him. He saw Ibero grinning, waiting for him to give up, when suddenly he knew it.

"Bacta tanks!" Moose almost yelled, "there are no bacta tanks anywhere! It's so evident that I can't understand how I couldn't see it before."

Ibero clapped his hands. "Very well. I was unable to see it myself until I started to read the texts. While the uses of bacta as medical therapy were known at that time, it was not by far as widely extended as it is today. Balania was one of those worlds where it had not been brought yet in those times."

"It's hard to imagine medicine without bacta." Moose said shaking his head.

"Yes, it is. And that drives us to your previous comment." Ibero selected an area in one of the images and made it bigger. "Those urns, as you've called them, are the ancestors of Spaarti cylinders..."

"Cloning devices?" Moose exclaimed a bit taken aback. Like everybody else in the galaxy, he had heard to talk about the instruments used by the enemies of the Old Republic, half a century ago, used to create the millions of clone soldiers that almost destroyed it in the conflicts that were known as the Clone Wars.

"Technically yes, although they were used to grow organs and tissues for transplants. They fell in disuse because of bacta, the improvements in bionic and synthetic organs, and of course, the Clone Wars. But they were very common two thousand years ago, and the medical personnel included in the first Balanish contingent invading Seibergia had several portable units among their equipment." Ibero made a pause before resuming his tale. Moose considered what Ibero had just said. The horror of the Clone Wars had made the cloning technology all but forbidden in the galaxy. Maybe something of the sort had happened with atomic weapons in remote times, and that explained why they had been eradicated from every army's arsenal. *Seemingly, only the greatest disasters make us learn something.* He could almost hear Rooster saying something like that. He had to make an effort to concentrate on Ibero's narration again.

"As we were saying a while ago, the most urgent problem of the Balanish was the lack of food. Well, among the frozen tissue collection their military doctors had brought with them, there were some animal and vegetable. They were carrying a wide range of bacterium and virii, kept in store in case they were attacked with biological arms and had to develop antidotes as fast as possible. When they realized they were not going to be evacuated, and while the soldiers were still busy fighting the Seibergian Army, medical and scientific personnel were commanded to find solutions for their most compelling and immediate necessities."

"Did they make their own food?" Moose asked in astonishment.

"As incredible as it sounds. They hastily designed bacterium to increase the fertility of the almost sterile

ground. The next thing were digestible vegetables that would be able to grow in that soil, and others which only purpose was to erode the rocky ground, producing new terrain for the future plantations. Finally, they genetically modified some of the few Balanish animal species present in their inventory of issues, so they would eat part of those vegetables and would become a source of food, natural fertilizers, and a substitute for the farming machinery they didn't have. As soon as the truce was signed, they used their last remnant of explosives to blow away the largest rocks and obtain even more usable ground. This was of the utmost importance. A hundred of years later, their descendants started to occupy the safety area accorded in the treaty, once they ceased being harassed by sporadic Seibergian attacks, but in these first years they only could count on the mountains."

"It was not an easy task," Ibero continued, "and only their superb training and their furious desire for survival allowed them to succeed where others would have inevitably failed. You must take into account that they were the best among the best of the Balanish armed forces. They had been betrayed and abandoned there to die, and that fact, instead of making them surrender and accept their fate, pushed them to fight even harder for life. Their cloning equipment was not intended for producing living beings, and at best, only about ten percent of the attempts got a viable animal as a result. Of those, a considerable part didn't make it to adult age. Vegetables were easier to create, and that allowed them to have a first harvest shortly before their military rations were finished forever. It would need many years before they could count on their animals. The Balanish had just a limited number of cloning devices, and they were very aware that they wouldn't last forever. Their genetically manipulated species must reproduce themselves if they were to grow in numbers. To make this easier they designed them all to be hermaphrodite. In spite of their efforts, at the beginning they could afford to sacrifice almost none for food. Even worse, their vegetable production was not enough at first. Many died that second year, too weak to fight disease or recover from accidents. The third year, they were barely six hundred people, and their equipment was starting to fail. Without spare parts that would allow them to make adequate repairs, they had to be amazingly imaginative to keep what remained working. Finally, the lack of energy cells condemned most of it to become raw material for the making of improvised tools. Ten years after, they had lost almost every piece of modern technology, although some few items lasted for decades."

"It's hard even to imagine it," Moose said, deeply impressed. His look fell on a new set of pictures Ibero was producing. "Those are their animals, aren't they? I've seen some vids of people working with them, but I always thought they were local species."

"Now you know their real origin. They concentrated on three designs. Here you see a kalashiri, their first success. It's a cross between reptile and bird, a reptile trying to become a bird, or a bird that never ceased being a reptile. Choose the definition that fits best for you." Ibero tossed a wink at Moose. "It's around the size of a chicken, and it's basically walking food."

"There, you've got the kalagoat. While its flesh is digestible, too, the best parts of it are the milk and the wool. The composition of the milk is so well balanced that a man could live off it alone. Had they been able to produce enough kalagoats before the second year ended, many of those who died would have been saved." Ibero shrugged with sadness. The man had to admire those people. "Well, about the wool, it never stops growing, and it does really fast. With it, the Balanish make a whole variety of fabrics."

"Amazing. And that?"

"A kalahorse. It was their third and last design. Obtained from a sub-species of horse that can be found only in Balania, it was created for brute strength. It's a working machine and a locomotion way, although they are way too sturdy to run."

"Their names begin all with 'kala'," Moose pointed out.

"It means 'modified' in Balanish," Ibero answered with a smile. "I checked it out."

"Ah, should have been obvious..." Moose laughed.

Ibero continued with his explanations for almost half an hour, telling Moose how the Balanish had made of the mountains a place to live, from those first years to the present days, when their survival was threatened once more. When he finished, Moose stayed some moments in silence. His mind was full with the images that Ibero's tale had pictured in it. His thoughts about the Seiberg-Balanish people had changed completely. The vids he had seen of them lately showed peaceful fellows laboring their fields and shepherding herds of those furry mammals -*kalagoats*-. Their houses were rustic, most of their routes were not paved. There were almost no towns, with the exception of the capital, Nurtina, but hundreds of small villages scattered all over the place. Statistics said that almost a twenty percent was illiterate, while only a scarce one percent got to obtain a high degree. Poor, ignorant and defenseless countrymen. *They may be poor, not their fault, but they are not ignorant, and they were not always defenseless. They are people who have survived against all odds, and they still do. Those are the kind of people I've killed...* Moose noticed Ibero staring at him in respectful silence, but with an eyebrow lifted in mild puzzlement. Moose wondered how much time had he been absent-minded.

"Hmm, Ibero..." He started. An idea had occurred to him, but he first had to find out if it was possible.

"Yes?"

"I've been told they're looking in the fleet for volunteers willing to help in those camps."

"That's right." The pilot half closed his eyes, looking at Moose as trying to read his thoughts. "There's a million of things to do, and very few hands. All personnel not indispensable to their units are encouraged to take a ride down there and join, temporarily, the aid effort."

"Do you think they might want to have a couple of pilots?"

"Foxfire and you can't fly, Moose," Ibero seemed slightly disturbed. "You know that better than I."

"We can't pilot, but no one has told us not to fly. The members of the committee will be here tomorrow, but they will need at least one or two days to study all the information Gen'yaa and her people are putting together. They won't be needing us in the next two days."

"I suppose you're right, but..." Ibero tapped on the desk for some instants, looking at Moose but seemingly not actually seeing him. Suddenly he seemed to take a decision. "All right, I'll talk to Lieutenant Commander Dey'jaa about it. It will be easier to ask for his opinion first than addressing directly Colonel Gen'yaa." Moose knew that Ibero, in his role as Intelligence Officer, used to share and comment information with his colleague in the *Wolf's Lair's* crew. They seemed to get on well enough, although he was not certain whether that made of them friends or not. "Dey'jaa is a good guy," Ibero explained, as if guessing Moose's unspoken question, "as straight as a Bothan can be, you know." The Ibery pilot shrugged, neither granting nor denying anything. "I'll talk to you when I know anything."

"Thanks." Moose stood up, preparing himself to leave. "Ah, there's something more. That report of yours, is it on a need-to-know basis?"

"Nothing of the sort. After all, everybody can find most of it on a public database. I'll send you a copy when I'm done with it, if you like."

"That will be great. Thanks again for the class, Ibero."

"You're welcome." Ibero waved good-bye to Moose and watched him leave the room. With the corner of his eye, Moose saw him turn the little holo-projector on again with the picture of his family. His deep sigh was

confounded with the hiss of the door closing.

Mouse found it odd that Ibero had not asked him about his reasons for wanting to go and help the Balanish refugees, as he had expected him to do. Maybe he found it all too obvious, or maybe he was not interested in arguing with Moose about it. Maybe he didn't care, or maybe he cared too much to bother Moose with his questions. *I'm now discovering that I actually don't know many of my squad-mates. We laugh together and we discuss many things. We fly together and we risk our lives to save each other without questioning. But when we go down to the person inside, to whom we really are, there is a gap.* Moose had a more intimate relationship with those members who, as he did, proceeded from the old Blue Squadron or had been serving on board the Mon Calamari Cruiser *Liberty*. Hardrive, Sparks, Groznic, Rooster... and of course Foxfire, who was a different case of her own. But somehow he had avoided intimacy with the newest pilots. That was not uncommon among seasoned pilots, because the last ones to join a fighter unit were very often the first to leave it... *In a coffin, or just in the middle of a ball of fire.* It was strange to think of Ibero as new, though, when he had been flying with him for three years. Most of he knew of him was because of Foxfire, who had got a better acquaintance with the Iberyian. *It's a shame.* Moose made a mental note to invite him to a round in the Bomb Shelter and have a friendly talk when all this mess was over. It was not until some time later when he realized that, if he was not cleared by the committee, he may not have that chance.

Lieutenant Commander Dey'yaa had been looking for Colonel Gen'yaa at her quarters, but she was not there. After consulting the *Wolf's Lair's* computer, he found her on the bridge, conferring with Lieutenant Colonel Wumb besides an unoccupied navigation console. He spotted the Navigation Officer standing up on the other side of the bridge. The Twi'lek was stretching his lekkus over his back and having some beverage on a cup. *Probably one of those strong smelling teas he likes so much.* The Bothan wrinkled his nose at the thought and approached the Captain and her Second.

"Colonel Gen'yaa, Lieutenant Colonel Wumb. If I'm interrupting something important I can wait down there with the Navigation Officer."

"No, Lieutenant Commander, you may stay," Gen'yaa said while the Sullustan nodded to Dey'yaa. "What is it?"

"Just a couple of things. I've been at the hangar checking out how the work on Commander Lewis' fighter is going."

"And?" Gen'yaa used an even tone, not betraying any anxiety or concern behind it. The *official* investigation committee was expected to arrive tomorrow, and so far, Gen'yaa's own team had very little to show them, besides the crude reality of the recordings taken from the starfighters.

"Nothing, I fear. Lieutenant Hanniuska and her people have not found any problem neither on the onboard computer nor in the sensor devices. The ship has been linked to the *Lair's* computer and they have run several simulations. The suspected failure has not showed up."

"What means that there was not any failure at all." Gen'yaa said in the same tone, as if she had been expecting these news. Dey'yaa knew better. The Captain was not someone to hang on hopes, but only on certainties. The technical failure would have come very handy, but she wouldn't consider it as an option while it was not confirmed as a fact. No hope, no disappointment, was a very well known Bothan saying, which Dey'yaa agreed wholeheartedly.

"They have not discarded it completely. They would like to run simulations with all the ships involved at once. Analysis of its computers' memories had shown that they all had the downed freighter identified as hostile."

"That should not be a surprise, Lieutenant Commander. Those pilots have been flying together for years, and are of similar customs. They all might have instructed their computers to mark that ship as an enemy at

the beginning of the combat, and not to give it a second thought. I won't have four starfighters inoperative for Hanniuska to run tests, while we might be needing them all out there at any moment." She tossed a side glance to her Second, who took the hint and instructed Dey'yaa about the last news.

"We have just received another recording from the Corellian news services. The Diktat has addressed the citizens of the three Corellian worlds in a public locution to give them the point of view of his government about what is happening here. There was a mention to this incident. Although he doesn't give anything away, he suggests that Corellia may take a part in this conflict at any moment, so people should be prepared for a state of war." Dey'yaa found hard not to show his commotion.

"It seems that your predictions are proving true, Lieutenant." Gen'yaa added almost casually. In her eyes Dey'yaa could see what she was meaning with that sentence. *My next prediction was a Corellian armed fleet fleet entering this system.*

"Not that I'm glad of it, ma'am."

"Nor am I, but being prepared in advance is even more useful in the worst situations." Dey'yaa caught in this a new hint for him. *So I better start working counting with war as a matter of fact.*

"It will be terrible having a new front opened," Wumb commented somberly, "and a new declared enemy, when the Empire is still out there ready to make us lose at the slightest chance all we have so hardly won even before Endor."

"You said you've got a couple of things to tell us, Lieutenant Commander," Gen'yaa said. "What's the second?"

"Officers Schroeder and Lewis have issued a petition to be allowed to go in the next trip to the Balanish Country camps."

"As volunteers?" Gen'yaa allowed a trace of surprise showing through in her voice. "Guilty consciences, have they?"

"I don't know, ma'am. I don't see anything bad in it. I mean, I don't think they will try to escape or anything like that..."

"Of course, Lieutenant Commander. But?"

"But your comment about guilty consciences shows what people would be lead to think if it goes public. It might ruin our efforts to prove they are innocent."

"You've hit the right key there, Lieutenant. We are being observed by billions, since the media is giving such a wide coverage to our presence here. Things here have nothing to do with the information blackout of many of our past and present battles against the Empire. Now, before taking any step, we must take public opinion into account."

"That was my point, ma'am," Dey'yaa said, a bit confused by Gen'yaa's remarks, whose intention he was far from seeing. "If any reporter gets a clue on this, there will be thousand of lines written about the pilots who are trying to clean away their guilt by helping, or making it seen that they help, other refugees like those they just killed. Or even worse, about those in their command, who would be pressing them into such a farce."

"Only if they learn that they offered themselves as volunteers *after* killing them." A corner of Gen'yaa's mouth lifted upwards in response to Dey'yaa's evident startling.

"Are you suggesting...?"

"Yes, Lieutenant. Change the date of their petition so they figure as weeks before the incident. In case someone notices those pilots there, we can have those petitions casually and conveniently leaked, so we can use the media in our benefit."

"Are you sure of that, Colonel?" Lieutenant Colonel Wumb seemed barely short of being scandalized.

"Of course I am, Lieutenant Colonel," she answered, her half smile being replaced by her usual stern expression. "The rules of our work have changed since we must look at the enemy with one eye, and the opinion polls with the other, especially those from potential enemy worlds," she added, in a clear reference to Corellia. "If cheating is what I must do to accomplish my duty, then I'll cheat." She stared at Wumb as if defying him to disagree. Finally it was the Sullustan who broke the visual contact, giving up any arguments he could have against Gen'yaa's assessment. *After all, she has a point here*, Dey'yaa thought.

"I'll tell them to back up us in this, if they are ever asked about it," the Intelligence Officer suggested.

"If they know what's best for them, they will. Before you're dismissed, Lieutenant Commander, there's something I wanted to commend you with, now that you've come here."

"Yes, ma'am?"

"We have agreed that knowing the supposedly Corellian pilot's identity," Gen'yaa didn't need to clarify whom Corellian pilot she was referring to, "and why was he flying along with four Seibergian transports, apparently lying to us so we would allow them to avoid our blockade, would be very useful for our purposes."

"That is right, ma'am."

"I was about to share with you some ideas I've got, so you can give me your opinion about its feasibility."

"I'll do my best, ma'am."

"As always, Lieutenant Commander."

VIII

Rooster brought the *Compassion* gingerly through the magnetic containment bubble protecting the *Wolf's Lair's* main hangar. She disengaged the repulsorlift coils and pushed the throttle forward to one third of the sub-light engines power. A glance to both engines status screens confirmed that they were running smoothly. With an almost automatic gesture, she shifted a switch over her head and the Lambda Class shuttle's wings unfolded and locked at the flight position. She applied the etheric rudder to make the ship turn to starboard, toward the rendezvous point with her escort, already marked as green dots on her main

sensor screen. At a safe distance from the Strike Carrier, she spotted the two X-Wings dispatched by Vyper to accompany the search & rescue ship to its landing point on the planet.

"Good morning, Roo." Drake's cheerful voice came through the intercom. "Want to join Raiven and me for a ride?"

"How could a girl say no to such fine gentlemen?" the Lumi pilot chuckled back, trying to sound a lot more light-hearted than she really felt. Although she had been able to sleep for several hours, and her eyelids were not fighting to close for the first time in weeks, she had not recovered in spirit. It had not helped to find Moose and Foxfire waiting to boarding her ship. Of all the people who served on the Strike Carrier, they were the last ones she wanted to see today. Since the bitter discussion in the meeting room, the time she had not been sleeping Rooster had spent thinking about the death of the refugees at the hands of her friends. While intellectually she could understand, if not to share, the reasons that made them do what they did, deep in her heart things were far from being that sorted out. She had been looking forward to this assignment, to drive the *Wolf's Lair's* chief medic to one of the refugee camps on the Balanish Country, along with equipment and supplies that would help those wretched people to improve their present life conditions. Among other things, that would give her a chance to have a long talk with Dr. Al Saruff during the flight. The Ithorian, or *Hammerhead*, as many humanoids preferred to call his species, was such a sensitive being, that his presence always comforted Rooster. He was good at hearing other people's problems. He considered this a part of his work as a doctor. And talking was what Rooster needed the most.

The meeting had not done her any good. She still got the shivers when she remembered what tension, anger and disappointment had made of her. Her brain extensions had been so electrically charged that she could have easily caused an accident. She couldn't allow that to happen again. It would be good to talk to the kind and wise doctor, the only person on board the ship who was probably even more of a pacifist than her, and by that reason, the only one who could understand her and give her some comfort. It sure had been a hard blow for him, too, when he learned about what had happened, but his species had a serenity to accept the disgraces that she could only wish for herself. But how were they going to talk with precisely Moose and Foxfire seated there? She knew she had to forgive them. *At least, their will to work for some days at the camp means something, does it not?* A part of her realized that they couldn't be blamed for those deaths, or at least, not as the only guilty. It was the Seibergians who were forcing that people to leave their homes and run away. It was the Seibergians who were sprinkling mines all over the system. And that stupid Corellian pilot... Why had he tried to escape? *Foxfire and the guys would have escorted him out of the system, for all the stars!* On the other hand, she still thought they should have never opened fire if they couldn't be sure whether or not the Corellian was speaking truth. She bit her lower lip, trying to break the chain of thoughts she had been trapped with since the day before.

The silence in the shuttle's cockpit was only broken sporadically by the intercom. On her right, Foxfire occupied the co-pilot seat, while Moose and doctor Al Saruff had the seats behind them. Under the present circumstances, she rather would have made the trip alone in the cockpit, but the entire passenger compartment was packed with material, so the four seats of the main cabin were the only available ones. Rooster decided to concentrate on the flight, although there would be not much to do until they approached Seibergia's orbit.

Damn it. If not for the gloves I'd have my nails eaten to the root, Arachnoid thought. His limbs still ached because the long time he had spent the day before enclosed in the cockpit of his A-Wing. Today he had been there only for a couple hours, but it felt like a lot longer than that. Nevertheless, the worst part was the waiting. Everybody knew that something big was about to happen, but the exact moment and place were unpredictable. When they were not hanging out there, jumping every time the computer beeped, and with the only exception of the time strictly needed to refresh themselves and sleep a bit, Vyper had had them practically locked in the simulation room. The fact that all the situations they had been training for involved Corellian fleets of several compositions left very little room for imagination. The brass thinks that Corellia is going to get involved in this mess, and we are the reception committee.

In the remote times of travel through hyperspace, this had been only possible by the use of natural wormholes. These were irregularities in the very essence of the universe, like seams in the subtle fabric composed by time and space, where neither time nor space were ruled by the same laws that were unmovable out of them, and which received the name of hyperspace. Some of them could actually be used like doors that connected different areas of the galaxy. Which ones lead to some place, and which were

deadly traps where ships would enter to never go out, that was a quest for adventurers, desperate, or fools, who would pilot their vessels toward their mouths, and would try to govern them intact to other end. Those who managed to survive, coming out in the vicinity of star systems with inhabitable - or inhabited - planets, would return to become incredible wealthy people, because dozens of governments and private corporations were willing to pay astronomic rewards for the coordinates and travel parameters of new usable wormholes. Those others who survived, too, but found themselves in the middle of nothingness, usually kept trying, until they get ruined in the search, or found another wormhole to try with. Finally, there were those who just disappeared forever and engrossed the statistics. If they had communicated their position before the attempt, the wormhole would be marked in the charts as unsafe. If not, what was the most common case by fear of others claiming the discovery - and the reward - for themselves, the wormhole would stay there waiting for its next victim.

In those ancient times, thousands of years before the Republic, when virtually every spacefaring species traveled through these wormholes looking for new worlds to found colonies, opening and exploiting mines or installing industries, competition for the best places was feral. In those times, most battles took place at the end of a wormhole. Providing they were aware of an imminent attack, the defenders just had to wait for the enemy ships to drop out of the wormhole, one by one, and there was no way they could arrive undetected.

Since the invention of hyperspatial motivators, capable of opening an artificial wormhole around a spaceship, and hyperengines, that kept it opened and stable, growing with the ship toward its destination, space wars had changed forever. The only limitation to where an enemy ship could appear was given by the gravitational influence of black holes, stars, planets or other astral bodies that made impossible the same existence of a wormhole, artificial or not. The routes to connect a place with another, that is, the imaginary lines over which a ship could travel through hyperspace, changed every millisecond. The movement of every object along the way with a mass big enough to affect the trip because its gravity, made impossible to repeat the same route twice. Actually, without the help of sophisticated navigational computers, which performed incredibly complex calculations including equations for every object mass and trajectory, it would be materially impossible to make a safe jump. This caused that the spots where a ship could enter a certain region of space from hyperspace, and especially inside a star system, changed continually, ranging from infinite possibilities to very few. They depended also of the type of ship, whether it traveled alone or as part of a fleet, and the will to take risks of her captain in the election of the safety parameters feed to the navigational computer.

All this, which Arachnoid had studied as part of his training as a pilot, was painfully true now, when a bunch of starfighters, coordinated from their motherships, were struggling to cover all the possible places where a Corellian force could appear at any moment. It was a virtually impossible task to accomplish, unless one had thousands of ships to spare, which was not the case. Actually, very few worlds in the galaxy could pretend to have such an impenetrable protective screen, being Coruscant, the Imperial capital, one of those few. With any less than that, it was not impossible to surprise a defender fleet. With the war against the Empire requiring most of the New Republic military resources, there was no way more ships could be summoned at the Viayak cluster. Lieutenant Colonel Wumb was conducting the operations to protect, as best as possible, the area assigned to the *Wolf's Lair*. From time to time, new coordinates were presented to Arachnoid in his main screen, and he instructed his pilots to shift their surveillance patrols accordingly. In addition to Wolfeye A-Wings, some of Wolfclaw X-Wings were being used as reinforcement. No more searches for mine ships were being conducted now, since the Corellian threat was the main and almost only priority. At any moment, a minimum of four Wolfshead Squadron fighters was flying, while the rest were being revised and refitted to take off as soon as their pilots were rested. Nevertheless, and despite the efforts of Lieutenant Hanniuska and the rest of technicians, if they were forced to keep this rhythm of operations, machines *and* pilots would start to be less and less reliable.

"Nine," the voice in his headphones startled Arachnoid and interrupted his thoughts. "This is Twenty." That was Hawk's unit designation. "I have an incoming in my sector. He has just dropped out of hyperspace and is coming from two-six-eight, twelve clicks from my current position."

"Have you got an identification?" Among his duties for this turn, Arachnoid had been warned of the arrival of a New Republic shuttle carrying the members of the investigation committee sent by the Provisional Council. He must provide them escort to the *Brave Soul*, the veteran Dreadnought that was serving as the flagship for Admiral Sinensis, the human that had received the command of the New Republic task force operating in the Viayak cluster. For all he knew, Colonel Gen'yaa was already waiting on board the *Brave Soul*.

"Not yet. My computer is having problems to match the input of the sensors with a known type. Size is that of a light freighter, probably Corellian, but that's all I can give you right now."

"All right, it doesn't look like an invasion force anyway." Arachnoid relaxed his fingers, clenched around the flightstick. It was just another false alarm. "Keep your eyes open and inform as soon as you can tell what kind of ship it is."

"Acknowledged, Nine."

Arachnoid resumed his flight plan, which would lead him now some clicks closer to Seibergia. His sensors provided him with data about the scarce traffic coming in and out of the planet, along with the signals from the several Seibergian ships stationed in low orbit, constantly under the supervision of New Republic vessels. Nothing struck him as conspicuous or merely unusual, and soon he found himself immersed in his own thoughts. He was fed up with this place, with the eternal patrols that seemed to last forever, and with being stuck the rest of the time on board the *Lair*. He was desperate to go down to a planet's surface and stretch his legs for a while. He had grown up surrounded by forest, and although he liked the life on board starships, from time to time he needed to walk again on real soil, to breathe real air and to feel real gravity keeping his feet on the ground. But more than anything else, he was sick and tired of politics. The New Republic military knew the Seibergians were the bad guys here, but they were limited to minor punitive strikes against the paramilitary. They couldn't do what had to be done because the Corellians would get angry and that would be serious trouble for the New Republic. *If we were not going to be allowed to do anything, why did they send us here in the first place?* Even so, now the fears of the politicians were about to become true, simply because a pilot had accidentally hit a freighter that shouldn't have been there. From what Arachnoid had seen so far, the best thing the politicians could come up with was to blame that pilot and his commanding officer for it all. At the end of the day, Seibergians would have massacred the Balanish with impunity, the New Republic would be at war with Corellia all the same, and two good pilots would be court-martialled so the politicians could think they had done something.

"Emperor's condemned soul!" Again, Arachnoid was brought out of his thoughts by Hawk's voice. The exclamation and tone in which it had been made brought him quickly back to a fully alert state.

"What is it, Twenty? Report."

"Damn Corellian reporters, that's what it is! I've approached them to identify and scan them, and suddenly they have accelerated, tried to evade me and place themselves on my tail. I've been about to light them up with a concussion missile, and the stupid nerds were just trying to have a fancy take of me!

The things they'll do... It's the fourth time this week! "All right, Twenty, no harm has been done." He paused for a moment, remembering something Vyper had warned him about. "They have not caught you making obscene gestures at them or something of the sort, have they?" *They would be just happy coming back home with a holo of a New Republic pilot insulting the Corellian audience...*

The answer took a second before getting through. "No, boss, I haven't done that, but thanks for remind me of. Right now I'm smiling at them and saying hello with my hand. Now I see them waving back."

"Well done, Twenty." *Please, give me a wing of TIE Advanced with linked lasers blazing at me, instead of these... people.* "Warn them to keep at a safe distance of our ships to avoid..." *being shot down*
"...undesirable accidents."

"Aye-aye, Nine." Hawk's acknowledgment sounded like a grunt in Arachnoid's ears.

People is getting more and more nervous over here, and I can understand why.

Foxfire watched in silence how Rooster matched the *Compassion's* trajectory to that indicated by the on board computer for the descent toward Seibergia. On her right, a hundred meters forwards and above the shuttle's plane, she could see Drake's X-Wing through the viewport. The three ships would complete three quarters of an orbit before entering the atmosphere over one of the planet's oceans, crossing the coast line two hundred kilometers from the Balanish Country border. The route was carefully plotted to avoid as much as possible flying over the inhabited continents, and they would only descend under the level of forty thousand meters when they were well over the Balanish Country. Although an attack from the Seibergian missile batteries was not expected, it was better not to take risks. Foxfire took a look at the Lumi pilot, and saw how the concentration made her forehead fold and draw several wrinkles. Other than that, she kept a neutral expression, but the changing colors of her brain extensions dismissed the impression of calm she was pretending to transmit. She glanced back at Moose over her left shoulder, and found him looking through the viewport down towards the approaching planet. Foxfire had heard, bemused, his proposal for the two of them to volunteer for some days in a refugee camp. Then she had been indignant when she learned that they would have to lie about the date of their request by Colonel Gen'yaa's order. Finally she had accepted for different reasons of those she supposed were Moose's. *The squadron will work better if we are not around to constantly remind them of the mess we are in, and feeding the division among the group.* Beside that, she was not sure about whether this trip would help them to get over the recent events or whether they would return even more depressed.

"Everybody check your safety belts." Rooster said, the first time that she had addressed them since they had boarded the shuttle. "You sure would do better," she tossed a glance at Foxfire, "but I won't be able to prevent the ship from shaking up a bit when we enter the atmosphere."

"Thanks, Lieutenant Commander." Dr. Al Saruff said with his low but strong voice. "I have no doubt that you will bring us to our destination safely, and as comfortably as the conditions make possible."

Rooster acknowledged the doctor's kind words with a brief smile. Foxfire knew that, under different circumstances, Rooster's comment would have been made in a self-mocking tone, but in this occasion it was tainted with an edge of bitterness that hurt her. She would have liked to answer in similar terms to those used by the doctor, but Foxfire knew that, from her or Moose's mouth, it would have sounded as condescending. She knew that time and a long conversation with Rooster were the only things that could help to start recovering the binds that had united them for years. *Now, it will be better just to let it be.*

Outside the shuttle, the atmosphere of Seibergia gradually thickened, and the increasing friction against the shields made them glow intensely. The viewports darkened automatically to protect the passengers from being blinded, while the refrigeration systems started to work to isolate them from the elevation of temperature in the outer hull, although much of the heat was dissipated by the shields themselves. As Rooster had just announced, the ship began to jump and shake due to the turbulence and the changes of pressure as the shuttle flew through different layers of the atmosphere. In Foxfire's opinion, Rooster was doing a good work keeping the flight as steady as possible, but she didn't voice it. Two minutes after entering the atmosphere, the viewports started recovering their usual transparency, but the cotton-like cloud bank they were flying through didn't allow Foxfire to see too much of the landscape. When they finally got beneath it, the continent line was clearly visible in front of the *Compassion*. Beyond it, the ground rose quickly over the sea level, until it was hidden from view by mist and a new layer of clouds, these ranging from dark gray to almost black.

"We're almost there," Rooster informed her passengers, "Ten minutes more and we'll be able to distinguish the first peaks." She moved her look up from the instruments panel and seemed to repair on the clouds for the first time. "Well, we would if weather were a lot better over the Balanish Country."

"Don't tell me I've brought along my swimsuit and the solar protection pills for nothing." Foxfire said in a tone of anguish. Her humorous outburst actually made Rooster smile, although she didn't get as far as laughter.

Nevertheless, tension seemed to vanish if only a little inside the cockpit.

As Sdermila had feared, snow was almost half a meter high after dawn, and it was still falling when the considerably reduced group of refugees abandoned the shed that had given them shelter for the night. Two young kalahorses had been placed at the top of the column, dragging along a flat blade that had been once part of a harvester, now tied to the animals as an improvised snowplow. The morning was dark and very

cold. The location of Seibergia's sun could not even be guessed at, behind the impenetrable blanket of clouds. The guerillas had left two hours before, taking with them their new recruits. They had spared only one of the younger partisans, almost a boy, to guide the refugees toward the New Republic camp. Women and children had been left behind weeping. For Sdermila, who had watched the pathetic scenes of good-byes from a distance, it had been like experiencing the departure of her family again. The difference was that her loved ones were going to a safer place, and Sdermila had all the hope to see them again, while those who had joined the Balanish Liberation Army might well be gone forever. Among the people who struggled around her to advance through the snow that the leading kalahorses were unable to remove completely, she saw only pained and depressed faces. There was not a single person there who had not lost, or feared to have lost someone in the last days. Maybe she was fortunate among them, because those she loved were now far, far away from this land. In front of Sdermila, her friend Redina was walking in silence. Sdermila had tried to give her consolation, but Redina didn't want to talk. *I can't blame her*, the old woman thought, *after seeing Dimeter go and her life torn apart in the same day*. Beside Sdermila, a still young woman whom Sdermila didn't know carried a child in tow with each hand. The coat she was wearing, although thick, was not enough to hide her advanced state of pregnancy. Sdermila looked at her with the corner of her eye, not desiring to disturb her with her curiosity. The woman was fighting the tears that were about to escape from her eyes. One of the children, a girl around five years old, asked her mother why was she crying. She answered that she was not really crying, it was only that some snowflakes had hit her in her eyes. The girl asked her where her dad had gone. The woman said that he had returned home to pick something they had forgotten there. The girl insisted, asking why had they not gone with him. Was she not due to go to school today? Sdermila supposed that the children's father had departed with the guerillas, for his own will or more probably pressed by its leader, that Ciric Baranka, and his half concealed menaces. *The same as Dimeter*. Very few men in age of fighting had stayed behind when the guerillas left. Of those, many seemed handicapped by injuries or body harm. Sdermila didn't know how much of that damage was real or pretended. Even now, they avoided the stares of other people, especially those whose relatives had joined the guerillas. Those stares carried annoyance and envy, scorn and hate. *Even now, Ciric's menaces are starting to become true*. On her side, the woman's anguish trying to answer her daughter's questions without betraying her own fear and pain strangled Sdermila's heart. Similar scenes repeated again and again all throughout the column of refugees. *What have we done*, Sdermila wondered, *what have we done to deserve this?*

When Sdermila lowered her look, she discovered the other child of the woman, a boy barely four years old, *like my Mila*, staring intently at her with his big gray eyes, showing up between the hook of his coat and several turns of a scarf made for an adult. Sdermila felt compelled to return the look, smiling at the little boy.

"What's your name?" The boy's voice, although muffled by the scarf, sounded clear and fearless. *Too young to understand what is happening here, poor children*.

"My name is Sdermila. What's yours?"

"Sderrrrmila." The boy spelled, ignoring her question. "What are you carrying there?" His little hand, covered by a glove several numbers too big, pointed at the travel bags carried by her kalahorse.

"Don't bother this woman, Figor," the boy's mother said, interrupting for an instant her dialogue with her older daughter.

"Don't worry," Sdermila said still looking at the boy. "He is not bothering me at all. So, your name is Figor, isn't it?"

He nodded to Sdermila before turning his head towards his mother. "I just want to know what there is inside the bags."

"I want to know, too," the girl almost cried, for the desperation of her mother.

"I fear they are practically empty." Sdermila said with a shrug. "Had I know I would meet you, I would have

put some cookies there." Sdermila noticed the boy's desolation by this information and then she understood.

"You are hungry, yes?" The boy nodded again, quitting his look from Sdermila in disappointment.

"Well, there are some remnants of a stew..." She started, remembering her thoughts of the last night. *How could I keep this food for me when these little ones are starving?*

"A stew?" The boy turned his face toward her, illuminated by hope. "Kalashiri?" His older sister asked in turn.

"Kalashiri, yes, but I bet you've never had one so good." Sdermila tossed a wink at the children's mother.

"Oh, please, don't listen to them," the mother shook her head, a bit embarrassed. "These two are shameless."

"They are children, no more and no less," Sdermila said sympathetically. "I've brought up two myself, just not mentioning the hours I've spent with my two grandsons. Sdermila took a glance to the woman's belly, and after a pause she added "I see that you're waiting for one more."

"Yes, she is due in two weeks." The woman smiled for a moment, but her expression became sad when she seemed to wonder where and how they would be in two weeks. What would be made of she and her children, what of her husband. Sdermila could read all that in her face, and resolved to do her best to help her to not dismay.

"So you've already been told that it is going to be a girl?" The woman nodded. "In my time you had to wait for them to be born, at least here in the mountains."

"We live near Nurtina." The woman said as explanation. Those who lived close to the only important city of the Balanish Country had access to better and more modern medical services. *Near Nurtina...* Sdermila thought with sudden apprehension. She saw confirmed her fears. If this woman and her family had been forced to leave their home, that meant that the situation in Nurtina and its surroundings was no better than here. *Stop thinking about yourself, Sdermila.* She continued talking, decided to not allow this woman and her sons to think about what they had left behind.

"Then you're not used to these mountains of us, are you?"

"You're never too used to walk on the snow dragging two children," the woman answered a bit defensively.

"Not mentioning the one you're carrying inside," Sdermila said, smiling at the woman even more intently, to avoid any offence she might have taken from her previous comment. This seemed to relax her a bit. "I was wondering if you would like to ride my kalahorse. It's old, but it is not too much loaded, anyway." *Time for you to work, old beast.*

"Oh, I..." The woman seemed without words for an instant, and an embarrassed smile blossomed in her face. "Thank you very much. I'm fine, really, but the children..."

"I'll help them to climb." Sdermila grinned openly at the boy. "Are you ready, Figor?"

"Yes!" The boy exclaimed very excited, almost forgetting his hunger. Sdermila pushed Figor on the saddle, and she made sure he wouldn't fall from it before addressing his older sister.

"And you, young lady?"

Suddenly shy, the girl looked up at her mother searching for confirmation. "Lania, her name is Lania" the woman said with a grin. Sdermila felt like a wall had fallen apart. "Ah, and mine is Deveralia. I'm sorry for not mentioning it before. And you said yours is?"

"Sdermila." Figor answered for her from his comfortable position on top the kalahorse. While she helped Lania to take a position behind his brother, Sdermila took a glance at the children's mother. She looked more relaxed once the distrust and the discomfort that talking to a stranger caused on her had vanished. Actually, Sdermila considered, she looked even relieved, although the stress of the last hours, along with the long walk had left marks of fatigue in her face. Now that she thought of it, in the hours they had been walking together, Sdermila didn't remember Deveralia talking to anybody beside her sons. They must have joined the group during the night, and they probably didn't know anybody there. The departure of her husband had to be traumatic, added to the rest of things. Sdermila felt her heart aching in sympathy for this family and their grief. Her own concerns seemed now diminished by the dimension of their pain. Sdermila realized that, the moment she had seen them for the very first time, her decision was taken. *You were alone, but now you have me.*

They started to walk again after the short pause. Almost unavoidably, the conversation focused on issues related with children. Sdermila heard amused Deveralia's tales about Figor and Lania, finding a secret pleasure in the fact that growing up a child seemed not to have changed that much since her time, not even in Nurtina. From time to time she took a glance at the children, almost happy riding her old kalahorse. They had already devoured what remained of her stew. By Sdermila's insistence, Deveralia had taken some bites, too. Sdermila had lied and said that she had had a good ration for breakfast, and that she wouldn't be able to eat any more of it. *Surely, Taigor wouldn't mind.*

An hour later, conversation had decayed, and even Figor and Lania seemed to be in a more somber mood. Snow had never ceased to fall, and a sharp wind was harassing the column of refugees. Because of it, it took Sdermila some time to realize that she was hearing a distant sound, something like a buzz. At first, she could not identify what caused it nor where it came from. It rebounded on the mountains and the echoes returned it back, strangely amplified, from several places. It grew louder and louder, until most of the refugees directed their looks at the sky, trying to find what was making the noise. It didn't sound familiar to Sdermila, but Figor and Lania were more used to it.

"A ship is coming." The girl said. Sdermila turned in time to see Figor pointing at a place among the gray clouds. She looked in that direction, and at first she couldn't see anything there. Deveralia took Sdermila by her shoulder and indicated where she had to look. There it was. Three lines converging on a central dot, defining themselves better and better every second, until the shape of a three-winged ship was clearly visible. Sdermila felt a burst of fear that almost stopped her heart. When she turned to look at Deveralia, she found the same fear reflected in her eyes.

"Children, go down," Sdermila said. Deveralia was already helping Figor and Lania to descend from the kalahorse. *Oh my, what now?*

Rooster pushed the *Compassion* into a gentle descent in the final stage of her flight. The camp was only thirty kilometers away now, and the shuttle's sensors were already receiving the beacon signal that would allow her to approach the landing area from the safest route. The mountains rose menacingly around them, although she couldn't see too much of them. Visibility was limited to one hundred fifty meters at best, and crosswinds tried constantly to push the ship out of her route. Thick snowflakes hit the shields constantly, a meter beyond the canopy, distorting the view into something almost unreal. If not for the navigational computer aid, Rooster didn't think she would be able to pilot the shuttle through these valleys.

"If you ever hear me complain about how boring deeper space can be," Drake's voice was heard, "please, remind me of this trip."

"My thought, too." Rooster agreed. She couldn't see the two X-Wings any more, although she knew where they were by the shuttle's sensors. Drake and Raiven had adopted a more open formation, that would give them some reaction time if they had to break to avoid an unexpected obstacle. Flying here was dangerous enough as it was, without the risk of a collision with a friendly ship.

"Why," Raiven said, "back at the Academy, we were forced to fly through worse places with our unshielded TIE Fighters. An error and boooom! You were history."

"You mean in simulations, do you?" Rooster asked.

"Not half of the time, mate. Our instructors firmly believed that if you got nervous because the flight conditions, you were bound to panic in the presence of the enemy."

"That makes some sense, I admit," Drake said, "but there are better ways to discard mediocre pilots than killing them."

"You know, that's not how the Empire thinks. If it did, all TIE fighters would be equipped with shields, wouldn't they?"

"Boy, you had to be crazy to join those guys."

"Crazy to fly and go everywhere in the galaxy, yes."

Drake laughed. "Is that from an Imperial Recruitment campaign?"

"How did you know?" Raiven chuckled.

Rooster shook her head. The Empire didn't value life too much, not even that of those willing to serve it. It was not surprising that people like Raiven, Vyper and many others had abandoned it and entered the Rebellion. She moved her look up from the control panel and struggled to see something outside the shuttle, but the snowstorm made that almost impossible. While she had her nerves under control, she was far from feeling comfortable. *I guess I'd never had made it as an Imperial pilot, supposing they would allow me to get any near the Academy with this colorful and unmistakably alien crest of mine.* She was about to return her attention to the instruments when she caught a hint of movement on the ground in front of her. On her right, Foxfire too seemed to have noticed it.

"There are people down there." She said. "It looks like a column of refugees."

"They probably are heading the same camp that we are." Moose commented behind Rooster.

"But it will take them one or two days to get there on foot," Rooster replied, "while we'll cover that distance in five minutes more." She left unsaid what worried her the most. *With this weather, some of them may not make it.*

"As soon as we unload the shuttle, we could return here and give some of them a better trip." Moose proposed.

"Yes, there are a couple of places flat enough for us to land." Foxfire agreed.

"We'll do that, yes." Rooster said relaxing a bit. Foxfire and Moose were right, and she had to admit that they had scored a point with that proposition. "We can carry up to fifty or sixty people in the *Compassion*. That should be enough to help those in the worse condition." She looked down through the left viewport at the people struggling to advance in the snow, mentally calculating how long it would take them to unload the shuttle's cargo and be back here. She felt anxiety growing up inside her. It was always the same, every time she thought there were people waiting for her to help them. She had to make a notable effort to resist the temptation to increase their speed, so they'd make the rest of the flight as fast as possible. *As everybody tells me these days, I won't be able to help anybody if I crash this bird.*

Suddenly, she saw something more moving to the front. The almost invisible route the refugees were following turned to right to avoid a rocky formation before returning to its previous direction, and then it disappeared from view between two almost vertical walls. On the other side of the pass, she spotted something for the briefest instant, barely distinguishable between the rocks covered of snow. She had no time to feel fear, and even less to warn her escorts nor her passengers. She changed course briskly to port and pushed the throttle all the way forward, forcing the shuttle's engines up to its full power. What she had just seen was an Imperial AT-ST, an All-Terrain Scout Transport, with its twin deadly cannons aiming directly at her.

The *Compassion* was shaken up by a direct impact. Rooster didn't have to look to know that she had lost the right wing. She was already fighting to recover if only a portion of control on the crippled shuttle, now spinning towards the ground and trembling as violently that the Lumi was sure it was about to disintegrate. She cut the engines and engaged the repulsorlift at full power, in a desperate attempt to reduce the speed of their fall. Around her, the shouts of Moose and Foxfire, and the deep lament that Dr. Al Saruff was emitting with his two mouths, reached her as if coming from a great distance. When she at last cried out, it seemed to her as if it was other person who did.

"MAYDAY, MAYDAY!"

IX

As was common in every military vessel of a certain size, the activity level on the bridge of the New Republic Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair* never slowed down. There were always officers and technical personnel on duty attending the different consoles: monitoring the flights in and out of the hangar, the traffic in the nearby space, the reports from the fighter patrols, the performance of the ship itself, and a thousand other things. People were constantly entering and leaving the bridge, and, generally, nobody had the time to enjoy the splendid spectacle provided by the large transparisteel viewport that dominated the place. Since Colonel Gen'yaa had declared a pre-alert status for all operations, the tension on the bridge was so solid that it could almost be cut with a vibroblade. People could feel the invariably stern look of the Bothan woman fixed on them from her elevated command chair at the back of the compartment. That sensation was more than enough to make everybody avoid any distraction and stay focused on their task.

Neither did anybody relax when, like now, it was Lieutenant Colonel Wumb commanding the ship. Instead of being seated back there, his habit was to pace the bridge constantly, frequently stopping behind someone's position to watch. He usually stayed there for a few moments, rarely more than five or ten minutes, and only occasionally asked questions or made suggestions. Often, he took a seat at an unoccupied console and browsed a little. Everybody was conscious by now that he didn't do this deliberately, in order to make them feel his presence and somehow to stimulate them to work more intensely. Although he now occupied a command position, the bridge officers commented in whispers that the Sullustan would never completely stop being a crewman--that is, one of them. They appreciated him for that and didn't respect him any less than Colonel Gen'yaa.

Ensign Proteys, the Mon Calamari male currently assigned to the control of the fighter screen, was fully aware of the Sullustan standing at his back but didn't allow that to distract him. The conversations of the

fighter pilots, far from the relaxed exchanges of only a week ago, were loaded with anxiety. Every new contact on the scanners could mean the all-but-announced arrival of the Corellian fleet. Intelligence reports discussed unusual movements by the Corellian Navy. Even before the Diktat's now famous allocution had ended, several warships had abandoned their previous orbits around Corellia, Selonia and Centerpoint. Others, which had been watching the wide commerce routes commonly known as the Corellian Run, had been relieved by less powerful vessels but had not returned to their bases. The destination of all those ships was unknown, but predictable. Sooner or later, they were coming to the Seibergia system. Proteys had all their technical data available at his console. In case a Corellian armed force entered the system and Wolfshead Squadron units were the first to detect them, his work would be of the utmost importance. His would be the task of matching the sensor readings against known Corellian ships so Admiral Sinnessis and the captains of every New Republic ship had as much information as possible about what they had to face. He couldn't fail.

Lieutenant Colonel Wumb watched as Ensign Proteys revised again the profiles of several Corellian ships. *This is at least the third time in the last hour. He must be able to identify them by sight by now.* Wumb was not foreign to the nervousness of the young Mon Calamari, but his greater experience allowed him to keep it well under control. The Sullustan was a veteran of a more than a dozen major struggles between the Alliance and the Imperial Navy, including the battle of Endor. Yes, he knew very well what a space battle was like. And, being a Sullustan, Wumb's memory was darn good.

At Endor, the ship on which he was serving--the *Tannia*, ironically enough, a Corellian Corvette--had been severely damaged by the explosion of the Calamari Cruiser *Liberty* when she was hit by the Death Star's super laser. With the bridge literally vanished and more than half of the crew dead or injured, the *Tannia* drifted uncontrolled towards the *Home One*, Admiral Ackbar's flagship. Then a First Lieutenant, Wumb managed to recover control from the secondary bridge barely seconds before *Home One's* gunners would have been forced to blow it apart before it crashed against their own ship. As crippled as the *Tannia* was, Wumb and what remained of the crew were able to return to the fight and make their contribution to the historical victory of that day. For this action he had received the Kalidor Crescent and had been promoted to Commander.

A year later, his next ship, the Nebulon-B Frigate *Wolf's Den*, was lost in the battle of Iberya. That was the second time in his career he had believed he was going to die. Mortally hit, the ship fell in flames toward Iberya's atmosphere. The evacuation pod located on the bridge section was damaged and unusable. Doomed as the few survivors were, still Gen'yaa ordered them to fire the few operative weapons against the Imperial orbital defenses. Wumb managed a battery himself. Suddenly, the *Compassion* appeared from nowhere and they were rescued at the last moment. The battle was won and Iberya was liberated. The *Wolf's Den* and Wolfshead Squadron had helped, decisively, to save the day for the young New Republic.

That was only six months ago. Gen'yaa received the Rebel Heart for her proven courage, and Wumb was promoted again, this time to Lieutenant Colonel. *Medals and promotions come fast in these times of endless war*, he reflected. *Almost as fast as the increase in the victim count.* Wumb shifted his look from Ensign Proteys's screen to the viewport. Space always seemed so peaceful a place, but he knew better. Those stars he was seeing now had been the silent witnesses of countless episodes of violence, destruction and death. And they still were. *For all goodness, may we not see the beginning of a new war today, when we're still fighting in another.* The Sullustan suppressed a sigh and turned towards the next console on Proteys's right. This was attended by Ensign Sarago, a human female, whose main task at the moment was to oversee the *Wolf's Lair's* search & rescue shuttle's flight to the Balanish Country.

"Have the *Compassion* and her escorts reported their arrival at the camp?"

"Not yet, sir. They are delayed by about ten minutes due to the weather conditions in the area. There's a terrible snowstorm down there."

"All right. Inform me as soon as they do."

"Yes sir."

Wumb resumed his pacing up and down the bridge for several minutes until A-PD5, the advanced protocol droid in charge of the communications, called his attention. "Sir, I have a request for a holographic transmission from the *Brave Soul* for you," the droid announced. "It's Colonel Gen'yaa."

"Very well." Wumb walked towards the command chair, where he would be inside the area covered by the

holo-tricorder installed on the bridge. "Open the link, A-PD5."

"Receiving now, sir." Immediately Colonel Gen'yaa's figure, a quarter of her real size, materialized in front of him.

"At your orders, ma'am."

"Has the committee's shuttle arrived yet?" the Bothan asked without preamble.

"Not yet, ma'am. I've given instructions to our fighters to escort them directly to the *Brave Soul* as soon as they enter normal space."

"Very well. Everything is ready here for the first session. I'll return to the *Lair* as soon as I've reported the results of our preliminary investigation." *Results you've not shared with me, by the way*, Wumb thought. "Did our pilots change their minds at the last moment?" Gen'yaa didn't need to clarify which pilots she referred to.

"No, ma'am. They boarded the *Compassion* and are on their way..."

"Sir," Ensign Proteys said turning to look at Lieutenant Colonel Wumb. The Sullustan felt his body tense suddenly. The Ensign would not have interrupted a conversation with Colonel Gen'yaa, of all people, unless he had a very good reason. The Mon Calamari's bulging eyes seemed about to jump from their orbits. "What is it, Ensign?" He kept his voice even, fully aware of Colonel Gen'yaa's look fixed on him.

"Sir, you should hear this." Without waiting for confirmation, he turned on the speakers so Wumb could hear the transmissions sent by Wolfshead Squadron's pilots. The Sullustan nodded to A-PD5, who made the needed adjustments on the transmission unit, so Colonel Gen'yaa would also be able to hear them clearly through the link opened between the *Wolf's Lair* and the *Brave Soul*.

"... got three more signals," the voice of one of the fighter pilots was clearly heard on the bridge. "Correction, there are six. They've exited from hyperspace at twelve-two-seven."

"Boy, that one is big." A second pilot commented.

"Five more, flight leader."

"Heads up, people, this is getting serious." Arachnoid's voice was heard. "*Wolf's Lair*, this is Wolfshead Nine."

Lieutenant Colonel Wumb pressed a key on the command chair's arm. The small monitor installed on it informed him that he could now talk directly to the pilots on the pre-arranged combat frequency.

"Wolfshead Nine, this is Lieutenant Colonel Wumb. We are receiving you."

"Sir, this is bad. We've got three Corellian capital ships, including one I've not seen before. The computer identifies it as a *Nova Class Cruiser*. The other two are *Pulsar Class Cruisers*. There are several anti-starfighter Frigates, and a whole squadron of latest generation Corvettes, combined with a few Gunships. They have trailing behind what appears to be a convoy of medium freighters. Sir, the *Nova* is deploying fighters. We are still too far away to tell the types."

"We've identified the *Nova Class* as the *First Citizen*, sir." Ensign Proteys informed. With the corner of his eye, Wumb could see that Colonel Gen'yaa was talking to someone outside the projection field.

We won't be able to stop them. That was Wumb's most immediate thought. At last, the predictions had come true and Corellia had made its movement. And what a movement this was. Those cruisers were representative of Corellian shipyards' newest designs for battleships. Angular lines, distributed control and shields, and impressive weaponry. Some months ago, the New Republic had started negotiations to purchase a certain number of both ships, but the political situation had complicated badly before any agreement could be reached. The Diktat had explicitly forbidden any sale of military equipment to the New Republic, not even through third parties. Wumb had read about these types, and what he remembered made him frown with concern. For all he knew, a single *Pulsar Class* could face the *Brave Soul*, the most

powerful ship the New Republic had in the area, in superiority conditions. Although smaller than Republic Dreadnoughts, the *Pulsar Class Cruisers* were more advanced in all fields, especially maneuverability and shield strength. If that was not enough, they had brought two of them, and with them a *Nova Class*, the very pride of their fleet. Wumb hastily consulted the *Lair's* computer, looking for the most recent reports distributed by the New Republic Intelligence. If the data were correct, only two of these ships were operative with the Corellian Navy, with a third undergoing final field tests before delivery. Intelligence estimated that a *Nova Class Cruiser* vessel would be a serious match for an *Imperial II Class Star Destroyer*, and it was definitely superior to *Mon Calamari Cruisers*, maybe with the exception of *Home One*. *What the hell, even without that Nova, they have more firepower than what they need to beat us.* Wumb watched the data appearing on the bridge tactical screen, as the sensor inputs sent by the fighters resolved into ship profiles, with increasing uneasiness. There were six CC-9800s, the Corellian equivalent of the *Nebulon-B2 Modified Frigates* in use by the Empire. They were specially designed to track and destroy starfighters in the middle of a battle. Operating cooperatively, several of them could overpower a capital ship like the *Brave Soul*, and a medium ship like the *Wolf's Lair* could be put out of combat by just two of them. The *Corvettes* were evolved from the *Blockade Runners* still used by the New Republic, and they were considerably better.

Considering the numbers and the quality of the ships they had summoned, the Corellian Navy was disposed to break the New Republic blockade on Seibergia by brute force. Wumb mentally revised the composition of the New Republic fleet. Besides the *Brave Soul* and the *Wolf's Lair*, they had four veteran *Nebulon-B Frigates* and half a dozen *Blockade Runners*. The *Brave Soul* carried an *Y-Wing* squadron and two of the *Frigates* contributed with their own fighter complement. More than enough for the blockade, but by all means inferior to what they had now in front of them. The Sullustan clenched his fists on the chair arms. *We have not a single chance.*

"We copy, Wolfshead Nine." the Sullustan said, concealing his concern. "Send us all the sensor data you can collect, especially from the capital ships. You will receive reinforcements as soon as possible." Wumb accompanied that sentence with a gesture of his hand directed to Ensign Proteys. The *Mon Calamari* acknowledged his understanding with a nod and keyed a code on his console. Alarms started to sound, warning the crewmen that the ship was about to enter combat. Within the next five minutes, all personnel must occupy their stations, and all the operative fighters had to be airborne in ten. While the bridge officers issued orders, Wumb continued giving instructions to Arachnoid. "Right now you're all we have to contain the Corellians. Keep your distance and don't reply to provocations. That means don't open fire unless fired upon. Is that clear enough?"

"Yes sir."

"Very well. *Wolf's Lair* out."

"I've informed the admiral." Colonel Gen'yaa said with a neutral voice as soon as Wumb cut his communication with the front line fighters. "His instructions for you are to move the *Lair* in an interception course. Even now, the *Brave Soul* and the rest of the fleet are heading your present position at top speed. Ignore the fighters and the medium vessels, but if one of those capital ships try to get through, use the ion cannon."

"I understand, ma'am." *And you do, too.* A direct hit from the *Wolf's Lair's* ion cannon could put one of those cruisers out of combat for a while, provided they could get close enough, but the *Strike Carrier* wouldn't have a chance of standing the response fire from the other two. *If we ever get to that, we are doomed.* Nevertheless, tactically the sacrifice of the *Wolf's Lair* would make sense. If they were able to stop, if only temporarily, one of the three biggest enemy ships--Wumb realized that, for the first time, he used in his thoughts the word *enemy* to refer the Corellians-- the odds would be better for the rest of the New Republic vessels.

"Good luck, Captain." Gen'yaa's tone seemed warmer for an instant. "I know that the *Lair* is in the best hands. *Brave Soul* out."

"Thanks, ma'am," Wumb answered to the vanishing hologram. It was easy to imagine that Colonel Gen'yaa was not happy being so far from her ship just when she was about to enter combat. The Sullustan could sympathize with her for that. At the same time he was mildly surprised by the fact that, apart from transmitting Admiral Sinensis' orders, she had not given him the slightest suggestion about what he had to do. *She doesn't trust my judgement about political matters, but she does completely when it comes to the military. I don't know if I should feel angry or flattered.*

"Sir, the *Pulsar Class* ships are the *Independent* and the *Sovereign*." Ensign Proteys recited.

"I remember the *Sovereign*," Wumb muttered for himself. That was the ship that had intercepted an Imperial Star Destroyer that had entered Corellian space without previous warning some months ago. The Destroyer's name was, ironically, the *Unstoppable*, and her captain seemingly thought that Corellia was just like another part of the Empire. His mistake almost cost him his ship, and forced Sate Pestage to present formal apologies to the Diktat. The *Unstoppable's* captain surely paid for that with his stripes, and maybe with something else, too. The incident was the favorite gossip among the New Republic Navy officers for a long time. Wumb consulted on his monitor the information available on the *Wolf's Lair's* databanks about the *First Citizen* and the *Independent*. Just as he expected, he found that their captains and crews were reportedly combat experienced too. *There's no doubt. They are throwing their best at us.* Wumb took a deep breath and closed his rodent-like eyes for a second. In that time, he heard again in his mind the cries of the wounded on board the *Tannia* and the *Wolf's Den*, but Wumb silenced those terrible memories. They could not do any good in this moment, when he was about to risk the lives of yet another crew. Even with his eyes closed, he could feel the looks on him of those present on the bridge. Some of them would unavoidably reflect the fear of not seeing their families, their friends, their homes, or their planets again. He had to shield himself against those looks, which he could not afford to notice. He also put aside his personal thoughts and concerns, his own fears and hopes, and everything else that could distract him from the task ahead. When he opened his eyes again, his mind was absolutely focused on his present mission. There was nothing else for him now.

Maybe there never would be.

Wumb addressed the Navigation Officer with firm and controlled voice, forcing himself to pronounce every consonant correctly and not cluck like many Sullustans did when they spoke in Basic. "Lieutenant Vaiwehannen?"

"The course is already plotted, sir." The Twi'lek reported.

Wumb nodded in approval and pushed another key on his command chair, opening communications with the Engineering section. "Lieutenant Boradelis, are you there?"

"Yes sir," the Mon Calamari's voice came through the intercom.

"We're facing off with three big cruisers. Once we enter in combat we won't need as much speed as we'll need shield strength."

"Understood, sir. We'll do our best."

"Well. Another thing is that we might need to use the ion cannon, so be ready to compensate for the energy drain it will cause."

"I see, sir. It will be useful if you can give us a two-second warning before firing."

"I'll give you that, Lieutenant. Bridge out. Ensign Sarago, tell the *Compassion* to stay on the surface until ordered otherwise. Order her escorts..." Wumb paused, reading new and serious trouble in the woman's expression. "Ensign?"

"I've just received a distress call from the *Compassion*, sir."

"What has happened?"

"I don't know yet. One moment, sir. Wolfshead Fourteen is now reporting." Sarago made a pause while she listened intently to her headset. Wumb used the time to toss another look at the tactical screen, where all the Corellian ships were now displayed. The Frigates were already maneuvering to the front line of the formation, while the modified Corvettes and the Gunships had split in two groups covering both flanks. Classic and effective. He noticed Ensign Sarago turning to look at him. She had mentioned before that the *Compassion* was flying through a storm. If the shuttle had suffered an accident, there was no way they could send a rescue party precisely now.

"Ensign?"

"Sir, the *Compassion* has been shot down."

That was unexpected. "Shot down?"

"Yes, sir. That's what Wolfshead Fourteen has just reported."

The Sullustan leaned back in his chair. On the tactical screen, the ship symbols continued to move. Ensign Proteys announced every new positive identification over the voices of the frontline pilots, about to make contact with the Corellian fighters. The *Lair's* bulkheads vibrated slightly as the ship accelerated to its maximum sub-light speed. Armament officers worked on fire solutions against the capital ships. *This could not have happened at a worse moment*, Wumb thought with despair. He knew all the people on board that shuttle. The good doctor, the pilots, and above all the Lumi, the one her squadmates called Rooster. The same who had risked her life to rescue both Gen'yaa and himself off the *Wolf's Den* before it became a torch in the skies of Iberyia. To lose her and her passengers would be a tragedy, but he could not allow his feelings to affect his judgement. *As much as I hate it, there is only one thing that can be done now.*

"Let me talk to Wolfshead Fourteen myself, Ensign."

Don't open fire unless fired upon. Of course, Arachnoid knew well what Lieutenant Colonel Wumb meant. If they opened fire against such an overwhelming force they would be vaped. Period. If the Corellians were the ones who shot first, they would be vaped exactly the same, but at least they could not be blamed for starting a war. *Not a big consolation for us if things come to that point, though.*

"Look, people," he said through the intercom, "we are here to buy time for the rest of the fleet, and that's what we are gonna do. Form in pairs and when their scout fighters reach our position try to fly around them. If they continue toward our fleet, we follow them and keep their tails in our sights. If they maneuver to engage us, we break contact and see what happens. Is that clear?"

Several affirmative answers were heard. They were four A-Wings and two X-Wings against how many potential enemies? His sensors were already showing two full squadrons of Corellian fighters, quickly reducing the distance that separated them from Wolfshead Squadron patrol. Not to mention the whole armada that was coming behind. His onboard computer identified the fighters as X-Wings. Corellian Navy had adopted the Incom Corporation's most famous craft almost at the same time the Rebel Alliance did, although in smaller numbers. The reputation of their pilots could not be more impressive. The top ace lists of both sides in the Galactic Civil War had many Corellian names in the upper positions, including some living legends like Wedge Antilles or the imperial top ace Baron Soontir Fel. Fortunately for Arachnoid and his partners, none of them would be at the flightstick of any of those X-Wings. Nevertheless, if those who left Corellia were that good, one had to wonder how good those who stayed at home were. *Outnumbering us four to one, they don't need to be any good to vaporize us.*

"This is Ten. Have you noticed anything curious about their formation?" That was Solo, the only Corellian pilot in Wolfshead Squadron. He and Sacart were piloting the X-Wings. Solo held the same rank than Arachnoid, but the A-Wing pilot was nominally in command of this group, at least until Vyper or Ibero showed up. Like almost every pilot in the squadron, Arachnoid was concerned about how Solo would react in case they had to fight against his own people. He realized that the answer to that unspoken question might be terribly important in the next few minutes, but this was not the best moment to ask him. *Oh, damn it...*

"Their formation?" Arachnoid had been paying more attention to Solo's tone, looking for a hint to find out what his mind condition was, than to his words, but then he saw what the other pilot meant. *This is just too much...* "A parade! They're flying like they're showing off for a parade!"

The two Corellian squadrons were approaching one beside the other, adopting a double diamond formation, every one composed by four smaller diamonds with four fighters each. Every ship was flying at a different level so the effect could be appreciated from all directions. Had the situation been different, Arachnoid would have applauded. Now he felt offended and furious instead. *But, who do these clowns think they are?*

"I'll save you the effort to check it out," Solo continued. "The media ship that Twenty had to shoe away a while ago is back. They sure are enjoying this."

"Yes, I bet they are," Arachnoid muttered between gritted teeth. All the tiredness, boredom and frustration he had felt in the last weeks condensed now into wrath against the Corellians. For an instant the only thing he

wanted to do was to put all of his concussion missiles into the middle of their formation. He felt sweat drops rolling down his forehead and his neck. His head itched under the helmet, and suddenly he realized how quickly he was breathing. *They said there would be provocations, and they were right. I can't allow this to blind me.* He had to remind himself of the orders he had been given and above all that there were real lives at stake. His and his squadmates', to start with. *Keep it cool or you will screw it up.*

"By the way," Solo added, "my R2 unit says those X-Wings are a different version than ours. One more recent. If his data are correct, they are about five percent faster, and can be armed with advanced concussion missiles instead of proton torpedoes."

"Great."

"New Republic fighters," a baritone voice was heard on the New Republic standard frequency. "This is Commander Baler, from the Corellian Navy. We're escorting a cargo convoy to Seibergia. Clear the area or we will consider you as hostiles."

Of course you will. "This is Commander Somarriva, from the New Republic. Pretty, that exhibition of yours." Arachnoid checked his HUD display. The Corellian X-Wings were only ten clicks away. Even at this moderate speed, in less than a minute the New Republic fighters would be inside their missile range. "Is this what you call an escort? I wonder what your idea of an invasion force is."

"We are not invaders. Seibergia is our friend and ally, and we're here invited by the legitimate government, which can't be said of you. I won't repeat this again. Clear the area or we will consider you as hostiles."

"Well, it is not our intention to disturb you." *Six clicks.* "Our mission here is to protect the civilian traffic in the area and to prevent the delivery of weapons to *both* sides in the conflict."

"I've been told you have a curious way to protect the civilian traffic. Coronet and Helibia Squadrons, lock S-Foils in attack position." The Corellian Commander had given that order deliberately on the same open frequency. *Damned conceited Corellian. Does he think they're going to scare us away so easily?*

"Don't get nervous, Commander. We are just supposed to scan your freighters and verify that they are not carrying weapons." *Three clicks. Now we see how serious they are.* "After that, we will be pleased to escort them ourselves."

"Coronet and Helibia Squadrons, choose targets at your discretion." Arachnoid didn't have to check the distance again. His threat indicator started blinking in yellow and three seconds later it changed to red. The computer emitted an insistent warning tone. He shivered against his will. At least three fighters had obtained a missile lock on him.

"*Compassion*, this is Wolfshead Twenty-Two." Raiven's voice sounded in Drake's headphones. "Please, acknowledge."

There was no answer. Either the shuttle's transmission unit had been damaged by the impact, or her passengers were not in condition to answer to their calls. Drake hoped with all his heart that it was the first. Five hundred meters below, his partner was performing his second pass over the smoking remains of the *Compassion*, looking for a signal, a hint of movement, something that suggested that there had been survivors.

"Can you see anything?"

"Negative. The hull doesn't look very bad, but what remains of the left wing has fallen on top of the cockpit, concealing it from view. Damn, if only I could slow down a bit..."

"Maybe later." Under other conditions, Raiven could cut his engines and hang the X-Wing on its repulsorlifts over the crippled shuttle to have a better look of it. For the moment he could not even think of it. Not with whatever that had hit the *Compassion* still around, maybe even now aiming at the escort fighters. They had not seen anything, besides that column of refugees they had flown over seconds before Rooster's distress call. Drake thought that the attack had not come from that direction, but there was no way to be sure. *Might*

one of them be carrying a portable launcher? The pilot bit his lower lip. That didn't make sense. He had spotted children in the group, and he was not inclined to think that the Seibergian paramilitary would be traveling with children. And if they were Balanish, as they appeared, why would they shoot at a New Republic ship? Unless they had shot before knowing they were from the New Republic. *This place makes you paranoid.* He wondered how it was possible that there had not been other accidents here before Moose killed those refugees. *Who knows, maybe there have been more incidents like that one, but no one noticed.* Drake frowned. That was not a comforting thought. In any case, he didn't believe that the attack on the *Compassion* could have been an accident. There was an enemy out there, but where? Drake watched his sensors intently and with growing anxiety. Nothing. The snowstorm was creating echoes and interference all around them, making it all but impossible to obtain reliable readings. He was certain enough that there were no other fighters in the area, but in this terrain and under such weather conditions, a dozen ground batteries could be hidden between the rocks and he wouldn't spot them for his life. *Or for my friends' lives.* He had hoped that Raiven's descent to inspect the *Compassion* would make their hidden enemy move, but his X-Wing's instruments failed to detect anything.

"*Compassion*, this is Wolfshead Twenty-Two," Raiven repeated. "Please, acknowledge."

"Wolfshead Fourteen, this is the *Wolf's Lair*."

Drake blinked. That had been Lieutenant Colonel Wumb's voice. "This is Fourteen. I copy you, sir."

"I've been informed that the *Compassion* has been shot down. Are there any survivors?"

"We don't know yet, sir. We have localized the shuttle, but we can't see the cockpit's real damage from the air. So far they are not answering our calls. There's no way we can land here, even without hostiles in the area."

"Have you identified the *Compassion's* aggressor?"

"Negative, sir. Our sensors don't detect any other ship in the area beside ourselves, so I think they must be camouflaged on the ground. We are having problems to localize them because the snowstorm."

"I see. Transmit the coordinates of the crash site to our camps. If we have commandos operating nearby, maybe they'll be able to do something. Immediately after, you are to abandon the planet and join the rest of Wolfshead Squadron as fast as your ships allow it."

"Sir, repeat the last order, please."

"You understood it all right the first time, Lieutenant. Transmit the coordinates and leave. A Corellian armed force has entered the system. You and your fighters are needed to help defend the fleet. Ensign Sarago will provide you with new flight data. Wumb out."

Drake was shocked. Seemingly, the fleet was about to be attacked by the Corellians. What they all had feared these last days had actually happened. By Lieutenant Colonel Wumb's words and tone, things were as bad as to need up to the last available fighter. He took a glance towards the ground. Down there, the *Compassion* was a gray spot quickly covering with white. Should they leave their friends and partners to their luck? Drake hit the side of the canopy with his gloved fist. He had never felt so bad, but he and Raiven could not be in two places at the same time. Here, they didn't know if they really could be of help. For all they knew, there might be nobody alive inside the wreckage of the *Compassion*.

"Drake?" Raiven called. Drake knew his partner had reached the same conclusion as him. As terrible as it was, they had no options and no time to lose.

"I know, mate, I know. I'm transmitting the damned coordinates in this moment."

Ibero felt momentarily disoriented when the alarms woke him up, abruptly. He had to repeat the order to turn the lights on twice, because the first time the computer was unable to understand him. That was not strange, considering his sleepy voice and the fact that he had spoken in Iberyian instead of Basic. With a mechanical gesture, he reached for his flightsuit and started to put it on even before understanding what was happening.

The last mist of sleep had vanished by the time he closed the seals of the boots and fastened the life support unit onto his chest. *So, here we go again.* When he took his helmet from the closet, he accidentally activated his hand holoprojector. He had left it right beside the helmet. His wife and his daughter smiled at him as they had done at the exact instant when he had taken that picture. Ibero's heart seemed to stop for a second, when he once more realized that he might not see them again. In his wife's eyes he could see the eternal question, that one she never said aloud but that didn't need to be spoken. *Why don't you leave it?* Since the battle of Iberyia he had received several offers to work on his home planet, ranging from a project leader position in his former engineering company to a commission as flight instructor at the Military Pilots Academy. Temptation was strong. He only had to send his resignation to the Starfighter Command Headquarters and take a seat on the first ship to Iberyia he could find. His wife would be happy, and he would be able to see their daughter grow up. That would not happen if he ended up being killed somewhere, incinerated in his cockpit or frozen in space. The thought of his wife fighting the tears every time Lucia asked about her father terrified him. Sometimes he considered that he had already done his share in the war against the Empire and deserved the right to recover his own life. Some of those times he had been about to start writing that resignation letter, the contents of which he had often organized in his mind, but he had always prevented himself from doing so. He knew that if he ever wrote it, he would send it. In those moments, he thought of the look of his squad-mates when he went to say them good bye, and an immense sense of shame filled him. Many of them had been fighting long before he put his feet on a combat ship for the first time. Some didn't have a life of their own to be returned, not any more. They would surely understand his reasons, but Ibero just didn't feel able to let them down. He had tried once to explain that to his wife, but she didn't want to hear it. "There are things that are better not to try to explain," she had said, and she was right. *This is becoming harder and harder every day.* Ibero cursed and opened the door of his quarters, joining other pilots who ran along the corridor toward the *Wolf's Lair's* main hangar. Inside the closet, the holoprojector still showed the frozen image of his family.

The four elevators of the *Wolf's Lair* were working at their full capability, taking ships from the hangar deck of the Strike Carrier to the flight deck below. The A-Wing ahead of Spook took position on the closest platform and immediately disappeared below. He was the next. While he waited for his turn to be launched, Spook started the X-Wing's four engines and checked each one's status, feeling a strange knot in his stomach. This was not an exercise. Lasers were going to be fired fully charged and proton torpedoes would be launched for real. The last time Spook had had to fight for his life, his A-Wing was hit by an ion cannon bolt shot by the Imperial Star Destroyer *Indomitable*. Minutes later his disabled fighter was dragged in by a tractor beam and he was captured. Spook had spent nearly three years in a concentration camp until shortly after the battle of Endor, when he and some of his fellow prisoners were able to fight their way out. He had found that the Rebel Alliance he had known had become the New Republic, and he immediately knew where his place was. Less than a year after his escape, he was again serving in a fighter squadron. So far, all of his missions had been practices and patrols, and even a couple of trips with the search & rescue shuttle. But now it was for real again. His heart beat with the anxiety of combat as it did that last time, what seemed an eternity ago, when he drove his fighter out of the Calamari Cruiser *Intrepid's* hangar to never come back. Spook had a strong *deja-vu* sensation when he flew through the *Wolf's Lair* magnetic containment field on board his brand new fighter. *This time I'll be back for lunch. I promise.*

The elevator in front of him returned to its position. When the green lights turned on, he engaged the repulsorlifts and taxied the X-Wing smoothly to the platform, touching down right in the middle of the yellow ring. In a matter of seconds the elevator stopped at the flight deck and Spook received the go signal. He closed the canopy and directed power again to the repulsorlifts. On his right, the X-Wing piloted by Ibero started to move forward, toward the starboard exit. On his left two B-Wings, Sparks's and Parody's, initiated the take-off maneuver. They were the last ones to leave. One after another, from right to left, they went out through the magnetic containment field. On the other side a million stars surrounded them, but this was not a time to enjoy the view.

"All fighters," Vyper's voice sounded loud and clear through the intercom, "acknowledge by numbers and follow me."

"This is Two-Four," Spook answered when his turn came at the end of the list. "Ready to go, Wolfshead Leader."

"Wolfshead Squadron, don't engage the Corellian X-Wings!" Arachnoid ordered, using the open frequency like the Corellian Commander had done. He hoped that this would prevent him from ordering his pilots to open fire. *Unless they've decided to shoot no matter what we do.* "Change course to allow them a safe

passage." He pushed the flightstick to make his A-Wing dive smoothly beneath the Corellians. Firestorm, flying as his wingman, followed him closely. Hardrive and Hawk maneuvered to port while Solo and Sacart turned to starboard. The warning tone ceased as the Corellian fighters reached Wolfshead ships' previous position and continued on a straight course. Arachnoid looked up in time to have a glance at the white and green craft before they disappeared from view. He puffed, momentarily relieved. *All right, what are they going to do now?* The Corellians had not altered their formation in the very least until that moment, but now they broke into elements of four and turned 180 degrees to pursue the New Republic fighters.

"It seems they are going to stick with us, Nine." Solo said.

Arachnoid took a look at his rear sensor screen and frowned. "If they want to play, we'll have to play."

"Not a good idea, Nine. For the time being we should limit ourselves to fly evasive. Any aggressive movement on our side, and there won't be any way to stop the butchery."

"Maybe you're right." *Or maybe you're just trying to avoid the unavoidable. If we're forced to defend ourselves, will you be able to shoot at your fellow Corellians?* Arachnoid grimaced. He could not ask Solo that now, in the middle of this mess, and with the rest of the pilots listening. *As if we didn't have problems enough.* In front of him, Arachnoid could see the bulk of the Corellian fleet approaching, lead by three CC-9800 Frigates. "Let's try to keep them busy for a while without starting any fire. Don't get too close to any of those Frigates."

Five clicks were heard through the intercom, as every pilot acknowledged Arachnoid's instructions. A second second later, his threat indicator was blinking again. His rear sensors showed four X-Wings following him.

"New Republic fighters," Commander Baler's voice was heard one more time. "Retire immediately to a ten klick radius from our ships. Comply with the order or we'll open fire against you."

"I'm sorry Commander, as I've said, we have orders to scan your freighters first."

"You're not going to take any scan today." Without any other warning, Arachnoid saw orange bolts flash by both flanks of his A-Wing. He had no way to know if the pilot who had shot was that Commander Baler, but he felt the blood boiling in his veins. "I don't know how this is going to end," he muttered for himself, "but I've got to teach that stiff-neck some manners."

"Commander Baler," Arachnoid said in a harsh tone, "I must warn you. Don't force us to take any offensive action." He felt almost sick. For an instant, he wondered if it could have something to do with his problems to sleep lately, or maybe with the meatballs the squadron's Wookiee cook had prepared for the last lunch, but Arachnoid discarded it all. *It's these Corellians and their prepotency what it's giving me nausea.*

"Don't force *us* to do that." Baler answered. Immediately after the first shot, Firestorm had increased the distance that separated his fighter from Arachnoid's. That would allow him to threaten Arachnoid's pursuers, but also left himself defenseless before another quartet of X-Wings now taking positions on his tail. *Damn it! They're shepherding us out of here as if we were a herd of stupid Banthas.*

"Nine, give me the order and I'll light the bastard up." Firestorm said.

"And then the others fry you. Not yet, Two-Three." *Although I'm dying to do exactly that.* "Lieutenant Colonel Wumb told us not to shoot unless we're fired upon, so we wait until we're hit."

"Lovely."

On the main bridge of the New Republic Dreadnought *Brave Soul*, Colonel Gen'yaa could hardly contain her impatience. Nobody would have guessed her uneasiness seeing her, though. She looked like an ice block, standing discretely beside Admiral Sinessis and the *Brave Soul's* captain, a male Duros called Odicri. Admiral Sinessis had ordered the communications officer to contact the Corellian command, but they were still waiting for a reply that never came.

"It seems that they don't want to talk to us." Sinessis said sourly. As many other high officers in the New

Republic, he had begun his career in the Imperial Navy. That had been twenty five years ago, long before the appearance of the Rebellion. He worked loyally for the Empire for eighteen years. In the last two, the light cruiser he commanded transported workers to military construction sites all over the galaxy. Nothing remarkable in times of peace, except for the detail that the workers were actually alien slaves, mainly Wookies and Mon Calamari. Sinessis was so disgusted with this kind of mission that, after seeing several petitions for a change of destination rejected, he had almost decided to resign from the Imperial Navy and start a new life in the merchant fleet. It was then when he was approached by an old classmate from the Naval Academy who recruited him for the Alliance. Now, after seven years combating the Empire he once served, Sinessis still felt a certain embarrassment every time he met a member of the species he had helped to enslave. His knowledge of the Viayak Cluster came from his days in the Imperial Navy and had been key for his designation to command the New Republic operations in the area. Gen'yaa knew all this because she had seen a copy of his service file, provided by her contacts in the Bothan Spy Network. It was good to know who you work for.

"That shouldn't come as a surprise, sir," she answered to Sinessis' last comment. "They won't start any conversation with us before gaining control of the system. That will give them a decisive advantage in a hypothetical negotiation with the New Republic."

Odicri shook his head. "The only thing that will be negotiated then will be how fast we must get out of here."

"They count on the power of the armada they've sent to dissuade us from presenting them any resistance." Sinessis pointed out. "But we can't just stand here watching how they take the system and then negotiate a political surrender. If the New Republic shows that weakness barely a year after its foundation, many will see in it the proof that the Empire will beat us at the end, no matter the victories we've gotten so far. The New Republic will be dismembered in less time than it took to declare its creation."

"*Brave Soul*, this is Lieutenant Colonel Wumb from the *Wolf's Lair*."

The admiral nodded to the communications officer. "This is Admiral Sinessis," he answered. "We're copying you, Lieutenant Colonel."

"Sir, our screen fighters are being shot at. There are no casualties yet, but I don't know how long they will be able to resist."

Sinessis frowned with concern. "Have the Corellians used torpedoes or missiles against your people?"

"Negative, sir. Just lasers, but they don't seem to be really trying to shoot them down. I'd say that they don't have permission to do that yet."

"Good." The admiral seemed to cheer up a bit. "That at least proves they are not looking for a direct confrontation. We've sent our Y-Wings to help you. They should be there in... twelve minutes, maybe less."

"The rest of Wolfshead Squadron is in its way, too. They will reach our perimeter in two minutes, but the fighters alone won't be enough to stop them, sir."

"I know. What's your estimated arrival time to the combat area?"

"Considering that the combat area is advancing toward us, we calculate ten minutes."

"I see." At a sign from Captain Odicri, one of the bridge officers made the estimations for the rest of the fleet to appear on a screen, so the admiral could see them from where he was standing. "Four of our Corvettes will be there in fifteen minutes. The *Arvel Crynyd*, the *Bedannis Fey'lya*, and the *Bria Tharen* will be arriving shortly after that. I've had to leave the other two Corvettes and the remaining Frigate behind. In case the Seibergian ships docked on their orbital station decide to help the Corellians, we must have something to cover our rear. On the other hand, the *Brave Soul* will need almost half an hour yet to catch up."

"I know what we have to do, sir."

"Good luck, Captain."

"Thanks, sir. *Wolf's Lair* out."

Admiral Sinensis nodded solemnly, although Wumb could not see the gesture. Colonel Gen'yaa did, but she didn't say anything. What Wumb had to do could mean the loss of the *Wolf's Lair* and her crew, including Wumb. She had been in situations where she could have died with her ship several times, and it had almost happened with the *Wolf's Den*. What was new for her was the sensation of fearing for her crew and her ship but being away from them, unable to help, and unable to share their luck. She would change places with Wumb in this same moment if she had that chance. The admiral looked at her, and she saw understanding in his eyes. Then Gen'yaa did something that she had done very few times in her life. She avoided someone else's direct look.

Arachnoid took a quick look over his shoulder and saw two of the X-Wings on his tail shifting places to keep him covered. One of them shot another salvo, which passed a meter and a half above Arachnoid's head, making his shields glow. *The son of... How long will we have to stand this?* He started to perform evasive maneuvers trying to keep an eye on the closest Frigates, only six clicks away now. *If we don't do something soon they're going to get through. But what can we do against that?* Sweat had already soaked the neck of his flightsuit and was running down his back. The physical discomfort joined with his growing anxiety. He caressed the main trigger on the flightstick with two fingers, wondering if he would be able to shoot down at least a pair of his pursuers before they had a chance to react. Almost without thinking, he switched the weapon selector to concussion missiles and shifted to dual mode, so his two warhead launchers would shoot at the same time.

His onboard computer beeped. A new ship had exited from hyperspace, transmitting a New Republic identification code.

"Nine, this is Seven!" Hardrive called. "It's the committee's shuttle. They have entered normal space between the Corellians and us!"

"Between...?" He had no time to finish the sentence. The leading Frigate shot a burst that caught the shuttle full on target, collapsing its shields instantly. A second shot barely a tenth of a second later blew it out of existence. The crew and passengers never knew what hit them. Arachnoid felt a mad fury rising inside of him.

"*Wolf's Lair*, this is Wolfshead Nine!" Arachnoid called, taking another look back at the Corellian X-Wings after him. He repeated the call twice, but there was no other answer than a burst of static. The Corellian capital ships were now running interference on all the New Republic frequencies. Their fighters' transmission units wouldn't reach anywhere beyond two or three clicks. He almost smiled. *Nobody will be able to accuse us of not asking for confirmations.* New green dots appeared in the boundaries of his sensor displays. They came from the *Wolf's Lair's* position. *The rest of the squadron is almost here. There's no more waiting.*

"This is Nine, that was one of our ships and it has been definitely fired upon." His voice sounded raspy. Arachnoid cleared his throat before speaking again. When he did it, he felt suddenly calmed, almost at rest. "Now we shoot down as many of theirs as we can."

"Nine, wait!" Solo called.

"On my signal," Arachnoid ordered, ignoring his partner's call. His mouth's corners twitched up in a feral grin. "One, two, NOW!"

X

His first semi-conscious sensation was surprise. Moose vaguely remembered having been told that this sensation was common when someone escaped what seemed certain death. Moose had experienced the anguish of being shot down before, but it had always been in space. Last time it happened he had needed to spend a day in a bacta tank with freezing symptoms of his hands and feet. That was terrible, no doubt, but

nothing compared with the terror of seeing the ground coming quickly to you, spinning wildly before your eyes until nothing could be recognized anymore. The gravity pulls your entrails in a hundred different directions, even with the ship's inertial compensator working at full power, while your heart tries to come out through your mouth. And all that time you think you're going to die. His mind still tried to sort all that out, wondering what had happened in the first place. Something had hit the shuttle hard and a second later they were falling out of control. *We were hit?* He struggled to remember more. There was the snow, a big rock, the sound of metal being torn apart around them. Moose blinked several times before completely opening his eyes. The first thing he saw were the thick snowflakes splashing against the front viewport, which was crossed by a breach that ran diagonally from the upper left corner to almost the other side of the canopy. Beyond, he could appreciate very little of the landscape, hidden by a long section of what had been the shuttle's left wing. What he could see was all rocks and snow, everything almost vertical from his point of view. That, and the way the restraints squeezed his body, told him that the ship was overturned on her right flank. Moose felt like a Bantha had fallen flat on his head. He had a salty taste in his mouth. From the way his tongue ached, he must have bitten it, probably in the moment of the impact. Other than that, he was unharmed. Moose shook his head and, suddenly, like if a powerful light had just been turned on in his mind, he completely recovered consciousness. With the realization, a horrible thought frozen him. *Am I the only survivor?* And then, *Oh my, Avery...*

"Are you all right?" His own voice seemed unrecognizable in his ears. He looked around. The cockpit itself was a complete mess, although the structure had resisted the crash well enough. In front of him, the two forward seats prevented him from seeing Rooster and Foxfire. No, that was not right. He could see part of Foxfire's left arm and leg, motionless on the padded armchair. That view terrified him the most. *No, no, she can't be dead, she just can't, not her, oh please.* Without taking his eyes from Foxfire's arm, Moose struggled to unlock the restraints, but he seemed unable to open them. "Are you all right?" he repeated. For some terrible moments he thought nobody was going to answer. Suddenly he noticed movement on Foxfire's left. Rooster's right hand was barely visible, hanging between her seat and Foxfire's. Moose saw that hand rise and disappear behind the seat back.

"I'm...here," the Lumi said in a barely audible tone.

"Can you see... how's Foxfire?" Moose asked, still fighting with the restraints. With the corner of his eye he saw doctor Al Saruff motionless, but now he could only think about Foxfire. *Avery, please, please...*

"She is passed out," Rooster answered after an instant, her voice a bit firmer. "But I think she is all right."

"No, I'm not." Foxfire's voice was heard at last, although pain turned it higher-pitched than usual. "My head is spinning and my arm hurts like hell."

"If it hurts then you're alive," Moose said, relief showing through in his voice. He heard a click and almost fell over the doctor. His safety belt was open. Only then he realized that, in his nervousness, he had been pulling the lock instead of pressing it. He almost laughed aloud.

"I guess I am," Foxfire grunted. "But remind me later to break something of yours for that comment."

Rooster turned her head to see Ben Al Saruff. "Doctor? Are you well?"

"He's unconscious," Moose said. Now that he had managed to get free of the restraints, he could take a better look at the Ithorian. He had his eyes still closed, but his wide breast moved rhythmically as he breathed. "There are no injuries that I can see."

"Can you lift one of his eyelids and see if his pupil dilates?" The Lumi had followed several basic medical courses, before and after becoming a search & rescue pilot. Moose knew that she was very competent in first aid and emergency treatment of burns, fractures and damage caused by exposure to vacuum.

"Give me a second." Moose reached out and carefully lifted Al Saruff's left eyelid with two fingers. "Yes, it does."

Rooster opened her restraints lock with ease and turned on her seat as much as she could without falling over Foxfire. "I can't reach him from here. Try to check his pulse."

"On his neck?" Moose asked dubiously while he let the Ithorian's eyelid to close again. He touched the Ithorian's thick neck, but it was almost like touching solid rock.

"No, I think you can do it better on the wrist."

Mouse put two fingers under the doctor's wrist. He soon noticed the strong heartbeats. "It's very quick."

"I think that's normal in Ithorians. I'm not an expert on them, but I'd say the doctor has a concussion. A big one. If that's all, he'll recover. How are you?"

"I'm fine enough. Can you do something for Foxfire?"

Rooster watched the doctor for some moments and finally nodded. "Yes. Let's see that arm, Avery." She leaned on Foxfire's seat and touched her right arm. That made Foxfire yell.

"There's a swelling above the wrist." Rooster said, passing a hand with extreme care upon Foxfire's arm. "You've got a broken bone, Avery. The cubit, the radius, or more probably both. We'll do something about it as soon as we can get out of here." She reached into her breast pocket and produced a pair of small pills. "These are painkillers," she informed, putting them on Foxfire's lips. "Swallow them."

Foxfire obeyed. "Thanks."

"You're welcome." Rooster took a glance through the viewport and then inspected the communications unit. "The comms are as fried as everything else, I fear." She turned to look back. "Moose, we really should get out of here."

"Do you think the ship can still explode?"

Rooster shook her head. "No, I don't think so. But there's something else worrying me."

"Did you see what hit us?"

"Yes: an Imperial AT-ST."

Moose choked. "I'll try to open an exit."

"While you do that, I'll see what I can do for the doctor," Rooster said. She moved to try to get to the unconscious Ithorian through the space between her seat and Foxfire's.

"Where did you see the AT-ST?"

"Southwest, following the path. Beyond a narrow pass on the mountain."

"Understood. I'll take a look with the macrobinoculars."

Moose crawled with difficulty over Dr. Al Saruff's seat and reached the hatch that led to the intermediate compartment between the cockpit and the passenger and cargo cabin. It was there where the access to the exit ramp was located. The hatch's right frame, now on the lower side, was twisted upwards. The hatch itself was completely blocked up, but fortunately it was semi opened. Leaning on his stomach, Moose managed to squeeze his body through the gap. *We'll have to open the hatch a bit more for the doctor to get through.* The emergency lights had failed, so it was all dark on the other side. Moose took a pocket lantern from his fatigues and illuminated the compartment. There was a fall of almost four meters to the right bulkhead. There were small handles every half a meter along every bulkhead, installed to help movements in zero gravity. Moose put the lantern between his teeth and used them to descend safely.

"Are you OK, Moose?" Rooster called from the cockpit.

"Yes," Moose answered when he could liberate a hand to hold the lantern. "I'll see if I can open the ramp."

"If you can't, try the emergency exit on the upper side."

"All right."

Moose put his feet on the locker attached to the right bulkhead, which had become the floor now. It had broken open in the crash, and most of its contents were scattered throughout the compartment. All over the place there were pressure suits, thermal overalls, coats and boots for arctic climates, energy cells and several toolkits. Moose reached the ramp controls, located on the rear bulkhead beside the access to the passenger cabin. He pressed the ramp open button, but it didn't work. *What a surprise.* He looked for the emergency opening mechanism. There was a yellow label near the damaged controls, indicating that there was a panel below. Moose opened it and next broke the seal that covered the lever inside. He pulled it. There was a muttered sound when the micro-explosives installed in the ramp joints detonated. The ramp opened a few centimeters, but nothing more. The space was barely wide enough for Moose to pass a hand through, which he did. He touched something cold.

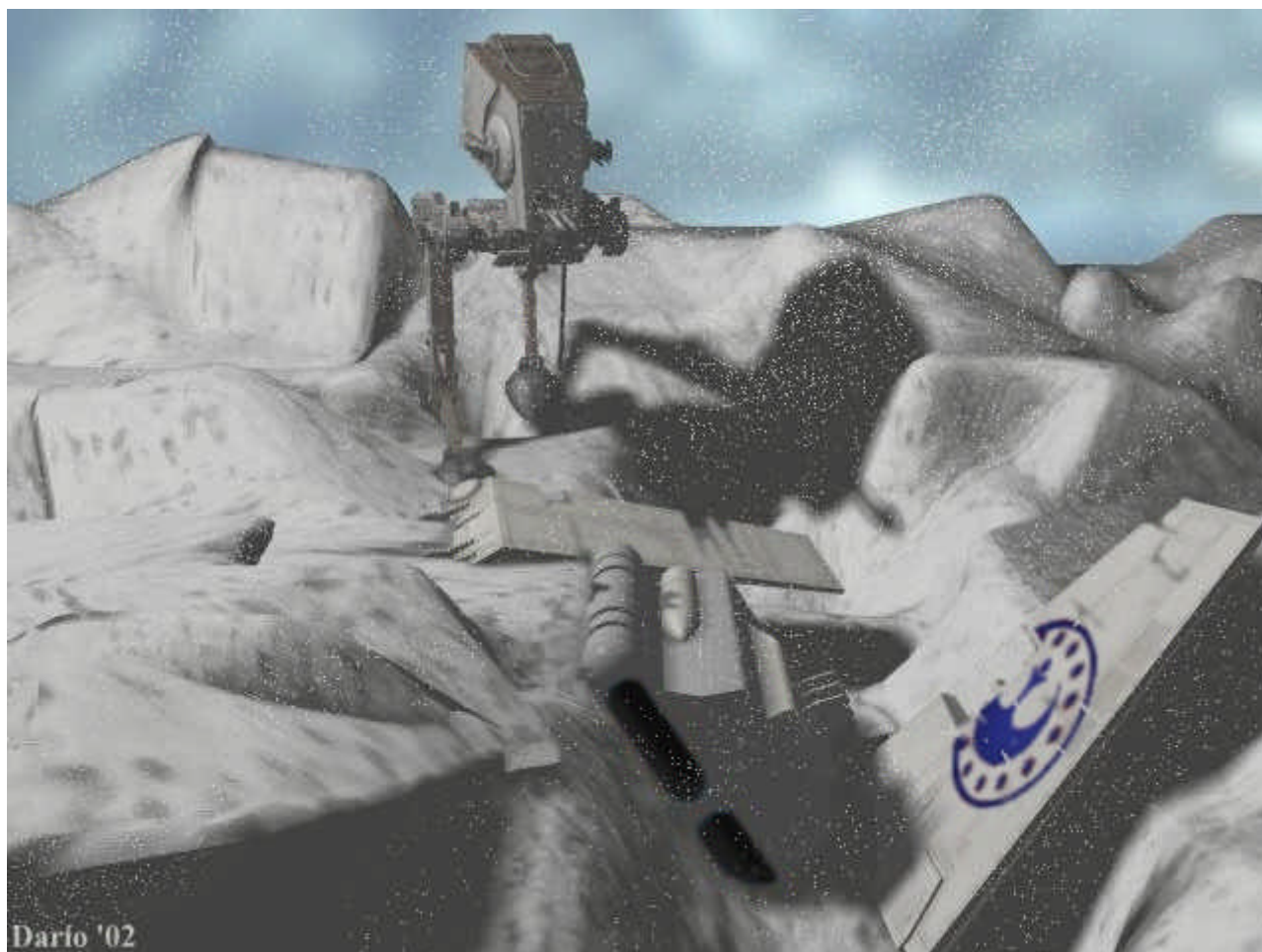
"Damn, we're half buried in the snow!" Moose kicked the ramp several times as hard as he could, but soon he was convinced that he wouldn't be able to open it. "Let's see if we have better luck with the upper hatch." Moose walked to the shuttle's ceiling, now converted into a wall, and used the handles on that side to climb to the hatch. There was another panel there, identical to the one he had used to force the ramp. This time, when he pulled the lever the hatch opened with a bang. A frigid wind slapped him in the face, and snowflakes invaded the shuttle's interior. The light blinded Moose for a second. He put away the lantern and stuck his head out, protecting his eyes with his hand. Snow reached up to less than a meter beneath him, quickly covering the furrow made by the shuttle's crash. The opening was oriented to the north, so he considered it safe to come out. The *Compassion's* hull would conceal him from their attackers, in case they were watching the place looking for possible survivors. He entered the ship again and spent half a minute equipping himself for the cold with the thermal clothes piled up around. Then he climbed back to the hatch and went out carefully. When he leaned his weight on the ground, his legs sank up to the knees in the snow. Advancing with care, Moose took some steps away and turned to inspect the shuttle.

The biggest part of the left wing rested on the cockpit section, but he could see some of the rest scattered around a huge rock one hundred and fifty meters to the northeast. Although he was looking at it from the opposite side, he didn't doubt that was the rock he remembered. If he was correctly interpreting the damage suffered by the shuttle, they had hit that rock with the left wing, which made the shuttle overturn to the opposite side before crashing on the ground. Before breaking as well, the upper wing had prevented the ship from turning completely upside down. The hull itself looked relatively intact, although the worst of the hit had been absorbed by the right side, now buried in the snow. The snow had saved them, but only because Rooster had managed to control their descent, at least until they hit the big rock. It was almost unbelievable that she had been able to make an emergency landing in a storm, with a missing wing, using only the repulsorlifts and not get smashed against the mountain. Moose shook his head. *And she says she is a bad pilot.*

He heard the sound of X-Wing engines fading in the distance. He looked up, but he couldn't see anything but clouds. *Are they leaving? They must have seen where we went down. Well, maybe not, with this snowstorm, but they sure can detect the Compassion with their sensors.* Moose considered his comm-link but thought it better that he didn't use it. If there was an Imperial walker somewhere nearby, it was better not to announce that they had survived the crash. "They must have a good reason to leave us here," he muttered to himself, wondering why Drake and Raiven would have departed. The thought was not comforting. *We are shot down and there's still something more urgent to attend? I hope things are going all right up there.*

Moose walked back toward the shuttle. Hidden under the remnants of the left wing, he took his binoculars and started to look for the place where Rooster said she had seen the AT-ST. The path they had spotted from the air, which was being used by the refugees to reach the New Republic camp, was not easily distinguishable from the ground, but he found the pass anyway. It was almost six kilometers away. Rooster had been able to put all that distance between them before being hit. At first he couldn't see anything there, but suddenly the shape of a chicken walker, a shape he knew all too well, appeared through the closest end of the pass. The first time he had seen one of those machines he was on a world called Ten'see IV. That was his first and only destination in the Alliance Infantry, some months before he was cleared by the Alliance Security to receive training on starfighters. The vision of the Imperial walkers devastating what remained of his base after the TIE Bombers had flattened it was something Moose would hardly forget. He followed the AT-ST's advance with the macrobinoculars with growing unease. "There's no doubt: it's coming." Moose shivered. During the desperate escape from Ten'see IV's base, he had managed to destroy an AT-ST with a mortar gun, shooting almost at point blank. He had considered himself very fortunate then.

Now he had only a light blaster.



"All fighters, scramble!" Vyper practically shouted the order, suddenly feeling sick. He had just seen several explosions, illuminating the space for a brief instant, in the area where Arachnoid's patrol had engaged the Corellian fighters. For the yells he heard through the intercom, now that they were near enough to not be affected by the enemy interference field, some of those explosions had been the ships of one or more of his pilots. He dismissed his concern with a self-conscious effort. *We'll care about our losses later. Now it's time to care for the living.* "Hardrive, Gandalf, follow me. We'll try to help Arachnoid and the others. Groznik, your wing's priority is to soften up the shields of some of those frigates. See if you can disable at least one. Ibero, you and Spook stay with Wolfclaw Wing and do your best to cover them. From this moment we only use unit identifications." Everybody's acknowledgements were heard through the combat channel. A moment later, there was not time to think any more. There was only to fight and survive to keep fighting.

"Sir, we've just re-established contact with our fighters," A-PD5 informed, its even tone belying the tension felt by the organic beings with whom it shared the space on the *Wolf's Lair's* bridge. The modified protocol droid had his left hand directly plugged into the main communications unit, making hard to discern for the naked eye where one ended and the other began. A-PD5's internal multifunctional machine-to-machine interfaces allowed it to operate the ship's systems at a speed simply unthinkable for living beings. "They are attacking the enemy Frigates, but things don't look good for them. Wolfshhead Leader reports casualties."

"That's not unexpected," Lieutenant Colonel Wumb said sourly. "Sensors, how far we're from entering the leading Frigates' range?"

"Less than five hundred kilometers, sir."

"We're almost there." The Sullustan turned towards the Intelligence Officer, who had just entered the bridge

and stood now beside his command chair. "Look, Lieutenant Commander. Look what the Corellians are doing. They're covering the cruisers. They know what this ship can do and they are keeping their big fish behind."

"So it seems." The Bothan's expression didn't change. "Given the regular exchanges of information between the Imperial Intelligence and their Corellian counterparts, it is not surprising that they have news about the *Wolf's Lair's* baptism of fire in the Mantara Sector."

Wumb nodded. "And they sure have detected the *Brave Soul* coming. They'll want to save the three cruisers for dealing with her. A-PD5, patch me through the *Brave Soul's* Y-Wings. By now they must be close enough for a direct transmission."

"At once, sir." Almost immediately the voice of the bomber squadron's commander was heard through the bridge's speakers.

"This is Lancer Leader, *Wolf's Lair*. We're waiting for your instructions."

"Lancer Leader, this is Lieutenant Commander Wumb. Do you have the Corellian frigates in your scopes?"

"Yes, sir. What do you want us to do?"

"As soon as you can get a lock on them, launch *all* your proton torpedoes against the three closest ones. Don't save anything for later. Wolfshead units have already gave them a pass, so you should be able to cause some damage if they don't move out of the way."

"Copied that, sir. Lancer Leader out."

"Helm, be ready to move up or down at my order. Full power." *They know about the ion cannon. Let's see if they know everything about our speed too.* "Fire Control, as soon as you have a firing solution on one of those cruisers, we'll shoot the ion cannon." Wumb heard as his orders were acknowledged. "A-PD5, give me our Corvettes now."

"The captains of the *Gyndine*, the *Ord Mantell*, the *Dubrillion* and the *Ithor* are copying you already, sir."

"Very well. Captains, this is Lieutenant Colonel Wumb, on board the *Wolf's Lair*. In front of us are several modified Corvettes and Gunships. They'll try to fly around the *Wolf's Lair* and catch us in a pincer between them and their Frigates. I want you to prevent them from disturbing us at all costs. Is that clear?"

"Clear as Mon Calamari's waters, sir," answered the captain of the *Ord Mantell*, in representation of the four addressed commanders.

"All right. May the Force be with you all."

Doctor Al Saruff moaned before opening his eyes. Rooster sighed relieved. "Doctor, are you well?"

"Oh, Lieutenant Commander, it's you?" The Ithorian seemed to have problems focusing his gaze. Actually, his eyes were looking in different directions. "Have we crashed?"

"Yes, doctor. You've suffered a concussion. Can you move?"

"Is everybody else all right?" Al Saruff asked, as if he had not heard Rooster.

"We're all well enough, how are you?"

Al Saruff closed his eyes. Rooster feared that he was about to pass out again, but she noticed that the

Ithorian was trying to move. He let a cry of pain go out with his lower mouth, while he gritted his upper mouth's teeth.

"My hip. It hurts. Much," the doctor said re-opening his eyes. Rooster, alarmed, started to raise Al Saruff's loose clothes so she could examine him, but the doctor rose a hand to make her stop. "No, Lieutenant Commander," he said, using his lower mouth. "That won't be necessary. It's broken. Probably my right leg is damaged, too." He moaned again. "And I'd say there's some internal injury."

"Don't talk any more, doctor," Rooster said in a calming tone, although she was far from feeling as confident as she pretended. Actually, she was starting to feel very, very worried. "I'll give you a strong sedative as soon as I can reach our medical supplies. For the time being, you'll have to settle for basic painkillers." She put four pills on her hand's palm, and then decided to add four more. *He must weight some good one hundred seventy kilos, if not more.*

"That will be fine, thanks." The doctor mustered strength enough as to smile at Rooster reassuringly.

"Don't worry, doctor," she said while Al Saruff swallowed the pills. "Help is coming," she added, more hoping than lying.

Foxfire, who was starting to notice the painkillers' effects, looked with concern through the viewscreen, although not much could be seen. "We should take him out, Roo."

"I know. I can't do anything here." *And not much when we get out.* Rooster winced. Evidently her initial diagnostic of the Ithorian's condition had been too optimistic. Now she feared for his life.

A noise made them look back. Moose's head showed through the hatch. "You were right, Roo. There's a chicken walker coming this way," he informed sternly. "We better get outta here right now."

"What about our escort?" Foxfire asked.

"They are nowhere to be seen, I fear. Chances are they have their own problems up there." Despite of the seriousness of the moment, Moose's eyes smiled for an instant. "I'm glad to see you up, honey."

"Moose, the doctor is badly injured." Rooster interrupted, before Foxfire could reply. "He won't be able to get out by himself, and in any case we must be extremely careful not to cause more harm when we move him."

"Damn it." Moose glanced at the Ithorian with concern. "This hatch is jammed. I thought it would be hard enough for him to get through, provided he was not handicapped. But now...."

"Leave me here," Al Saruff groggily whispered while his eyelids descended. "Save yourselves."

"Heroic words, doctor," Rooster hurried to answer, "but that's not going to happen."

"You better listen to her, doctor," Foxfire added.

The Ithorian didn't answer. Rooster checked his pulse and his breath again, missing the meaningful exchange of looks between Moose and Rooster. "He's unconscious already."

"Better that way," Moose said. Rooster arched an eyebrow. Suddenly, Moose looked awkward, almost abashed. "I hate to say this, but we can't be here when that walker arrives."

"But you've just said that the hatch is blocked." she started, looking at Moose and then over at Foxfire, feeling heat coming to her face, while her brain extensions charged with electricity. *No, I can't believe it. He can't be suggesting what I think he is suggesting.* "Moose, you don't mean....You're not saying that we must leave the doctor behind, are you?"

"I'm sorry," he answered lowering his look. "I don't see any other option."

"But....We can surrender. We would demand assistance for the doctor."

"Rooster, you don't understand."

"Of course I do! It's you who...."

"Rooster!" Foxfire exclaimed interrupting the Lumi. "Now listen to me. Surrender would mean sure death for the doctor. You can bet that whoever has shoot us down, Imperial or Seibergian, they won't care to evacuate evacuate him to a place where he can get the medical aid he needs."

"They can't be so...." Rooster stopped short of ending the sentence. Foxfire was right. Knowing the Empire and their allies' prejudices against all non-human species, there were very little chance they would help a New Republic Ithorian doctor. Especially not when they had available another three human officers if they wanted to take prisoners. *Or, better said, two. Who knows how they will classify me.* "I'll stay with him," she said stubbornly.

"Don't even think of it," Foxfire replied categorically, rising a hand to stop her protests. "Moose, is there any possibility that we can defend ourselves?"

"With our blasters? That thing's got a very serious armor. We could throw snowballs at it and cause the same damage.

"What about the shuttle's cannons?"

Moose looked at Foxfire with his mouth half opened in surprise. Rooster held her breath, hanging to the splinter of hope that Foxfire had just provided. A standard Lambda Class shuttle was armed with six laser cannons, two installed on the main hull, behind and under the cockpit, and another two under each wing, beside the folding axis. The *Compassion* had seen the removal of almost all of her offensive firepower, except for one remaining cannon under each wing. These modifications had allowed them to reinforce the shield generators, something vital considering that she could need to perform rescues under enemy fire. Nevertheless, the two remaining cannons were B-Wing grade. "I hadn't even thought of them," Moose said, frowning. "We lost the right one when they hit us, or maybe during the landing. But I think I've seen the other one still attached to what remains of the left wing. If the power line is not severed, we might still have some good shots."

"Go back out there and see if it can be done. Rooster and I will be going after you. If nothing else, at least we can try to draw their attention far from the shuttle." She accompanied the last sentence with a look at Rooster, who lowered hers and nodded, giving up her resistance. Foxfire was right again.

Without more words, Moose disappeared through the semi-opened hatch. "We're not going to let the doctor down, Roo," Foxfire said. "Is that clear?"

"Yes, it is."

"All right." Foxfire took a grip on her seat back with her undamaged arm and started to move toward Moose's now empty seat. "You'll have to help me a bit to get out of here."

"Of course, wait." Rooster put a foot on the twisted right bulkhead and other on the instruments panel, and once balanced used both arms to aid Foxfire. The Lumi was astonished at her companions' calm and cool thinking. She had been through a lot of emergencies so far, but in this precise instant she simply wouldn't know what to do. For Foxfire and Moose, though, this seemed to be just another one of the situations they had to face daily. Rooster pursed her lips. *I thought I knew them, but how many things do I ignore about them?*

"How much time will he be sleeping?" Foxfire asked while she climbed over Moose's seat to reach the hatch.

"It's hard to say. No less than an hour, in any case."

"We'll have him out before then. You'll see."

Rooster nodded. She knew that Foxfire was not as optimistic about their chances of success as she pretended with that affirmation. *She tries to encourage me, Rooster realized. Or more probably to prevent me from doing any stupid thing. I won't. Our odds are slim, but Moose and Foxfire seem willing to take any*

risk while there's any hope. I'll have to remember that if we get out of this one. She took a last look at the unconscious Ithorian and followed Foxfire through the hatch. "Wait, Avery, it will be easier if I go first!" But Foxfire was already on her way down.

"Fifteen is hit!" Torpedo exclaimed. Vyper turned his head and saw Sparks' B-Wing trailing smoke in the distance. Things got worse with every passing second. When they had reached the perimeter patrol, Sacart had already been shot down, and Hawk was forced to abandon the combat area before his A-Wing fell to pieces. Now it was Sparks.

"Are you in trouble, Fifteen?" Groznik asked. Behind the synthesized voice generated by his translator unit, a part of Groznik's Wookiee filtered from time to time when he spoke through the intercom. Once more, the limited device couldn't suggest any translation for his grunt of impatience while he waited for Sparks' answer.

"I think he has no comms, Wolfgang Leader."

"Fifteen," Groznik insisted in spite of Parody's warning, "if you can copy me, get out of here and return to the *Lair* as fast as you can!"

"We'll cover him," Vyper said. "Two-One, follow me."

"Negative, Leader!" Gandalf's answer came. "I have two on me!"

Vyper checked the readings provided by his A-Wing's scanners. Effectively, there were two Corellian fighters trying to place themselves behind Gandalf's ship. His evasive maneuvers were driving his wingman away from him. Actually, Gandalf was already too far for Vyper to help him in time. Vyper cursed in silence not for the first time. "Can someone help Two-One?"

"Seven here," Hardrive replied, "Eight and I will. Hold on, Two-One."

"Hurry up! My left engine is screwed. I'm losing speed by the second..."

"Eight. I have a lock on the wingman," Iceman said.

"Perfect, the leader is mine. Two-One, break left when..."

"I can't, they've just hit my ri...!"

"Gandalf!" Hardrive cried out, despair and frustration showing through in his voice. "He has punched it, Leader. We couldn't do anything."

"Have you seen him eject?" Vyper asked while he tried not to lose Sparks from his sight.

"Negative, but we weren't close enough to see properly."

Damn, damn, damn....

"Two-Three and I will help Sparks, Leader!" Arachnoid suggested hastily.

"Negative. I'll do it myself."

"But..."

"I said *negative*, Nine. You and the rest of Wolfeye try to keep the Corellian fighters busy and far from the *Lair*. She is less than thirty klicks from here already."

"Roger that."

Vyper tried to concentrate on covering Sparks' retreat and ignored the shouts and exclamations that nearly saturated the intercom. They gave him information about what every pilot was doing and who was in trouble, but he knew from his own experience that they could mean a dangerous distraction, too. In any case, he couldn't afford to disconnect the communication unit. The voices of his people kept coming out from his helmet's headphones, echoing in his mind like ricocheting laser bolts.

"This is Three. Ten, where are you?" Vyper saw two X-Wings chasing Sparks' B-Wing, looking for an easy kill.

"Right behind you!" Sparks changed his course noticeably, although the maneuver looked somehow sluggish from Vyper's perspective. At least that meant he was conscious.

"Two-Three here. I got one! Nine, that's yours." Both X-Wings were close enough to the damaged B-Wing as to blow it up with a pair of concussion missiles. The Corellian pilots had to notice that the bomber and its pilot were not in shape to evade a warhead.

"Eleven, this is Wolfclaw Leader. Don't get that close to the frigate! Oh, why do I tell you anything?" The Corellians didn't open fire yet. Whether they were being overconfident or they had orders to save the warheads for an eventual attack against the New Republic capital ships, their insistence on shooting down Sparks only with lasers might give Vyper a chance to prevent them from getting the kill.

"Was worth it, Leader! Her shields are under twenty percent." Vyper took a brief look at his rear sensors, checking that no enemy fighters were after him. He switched the weapon selector to dual missiles and waited for the last possible instant before having his targeting computer to track the X-Wing closest to Sparks.

"All right, all right. Now we'll finish it off. Eighteen, Five, are you with me?" The targeting reticule turned red and the computer sent a warning tone through his headphones. The A-Wing's computer had a lock on the enemy X-Wing. At the same time that the Corellian pilot started to maneuver, undoubtedly warned by his thread indicator, Vyper squeezed the trigger and saw the twin concussion missiles arcing toward its designated target.

"Affirmative." Without giving a second look at the fleeing X-Wing, Vyper turned to follow his partner. The Corellian had Sparks already in his lasers range and opened fire on him. The B-Wing shook violently under the barrage. Its starboard stabilizer tore off cleanly from the fuselage. Two of the four engines died.

"Shoot your torps on my mark... Three, two, one, NOW!" Vyper launched a second pair of missiles against the fighter chasing Sparks. Unlike his flight leader, this pilot decided to trust his shields and stay after his prey. His shots tore another few metal chunks off the hull and the control surfaces of the crippled bomber.

"Direct hit, Wolfclaw Leader! They are leaving." Both missiles hit the X-Wing's rear. The enemy fighter spun wildly for a second before its pilot recovered the control. With the shields energy completely redirected to reinforce the engines, Vyper managed to get close enough to his adversary to use his lasers to finish him off. Momentarily at least, Sparks was free of pursuit. Only then Vyper was really aware of what Wolfgang and Wolfclaw pilots had been saying. They had managed to force one of the Corellian frigates out of combat.

"Good work, people," he said. "Ignore that one and look for another target. Nine, I'm turning back to help you." There was nothing more he could do to help Sparks. His threat indicator showed him that he had his own problems, and, in any case, it soon would become more important to protect the *Wolf's Lair* than the lives of his pilots. While he performed an evasive maneuver, he took a last look at the damaged B-Wing, which flew too erratically, even for having a missing stabilizer. Either its thrusters were affected or the pilot was injured. Probably both. *We're four pilots down already, and the worst is still to come.*

Foxfire and Rooster went out through the emergency hatch, also wearing thermal suits and boots. Foxfire advanced with difficulty toward the place where Moose stood, stepping carefully on the snow. Rooster

followed her closely. With the corner of her eye, Foxfire saw her looking in awe what her ship looked like from the outside. Rooster was visibly impressed, but she didn't say anything. Holding her damaged arm against her chest, struggling simply to take a step after another, Foxfire felt terribly exposed and vulnerable. At the flightstick of a starfighter she always felt at ease, confident in her craft and her skills to get it out of the most terrible of combats. But now she was in the middle of nowhere, with nothing but a couple of blasters to defend her and her comrades from the attack of an Imperial walker. It seemed easy when she said it inside the ship, but now, watching Moose as he carefully inspected the *Compassion's* left laser cannon, she doubted. She tried to conceal her hesitation when she got beside Moose and talked to him. The least he needed now was to notice that her confidence was starting to fail.

"What about our friends?" she asked.

"The AT-ST? Still coming. Even for them it can't be easy to advance on this ground, with a meter and a half of snow, but we don't have much time anyway."

"It looks pretty decent, doesn't it?" Foxfire commented about the cannon.

"Yes, it seems intact, although we'll have to detach it from the wing frame if we are to aim it at the AT-ST."

"Can you do it?"

Moose kicked tentatively the wing near to one of its linkage points to the weapon, which looked a bit loose. One of the rivets broke. "Fortunately for us the wing is a real mess. Let's see if..." He hit the wing again, this time harder, but with no apparent effect. Moose cursed and looked around. There were several pieces from the landing gear scattered near them. Moose took one to use it as a crowbar. He introduced an end into the gap between the cannon and the wing's surface and pushed with all his strength onto this improvised lever. The cannon rotated slightly on its latches, but that seemed to be all that Moose could get on his own.

"Can you two lend me a hand?" he asked without giving up in his effort. "Two in your case, Roo. If we can't tear it off completely from the wing, we should at least make it point upwards."

Both women did their best helping Moose. He hanged himself from the lever and pushed with his feet against the wing. Suddenly, with a metallic screech that made their ears ache, the cannon started to separate from the wing frame.

"Steady now! We don't want to damage the power line." Moose exclaimed, letting himself drop on the snow. "Nor shoot it accidentally," he added as an afterthought. "That would give away our little surprise."

The back side of the cannon broke loose. That section was where the weapon's capacitor was installed. A thick, black, fibroplastic-covered cable ended there. That was the line that fed the weapon from the ship's energy generators, attached to the twin engines. The rest of the cable disappeared inside the wing. "Good work, ladies." Moose let the cannon's back end rest on the snow with extreme care.

"How are you going to make it shoot?" Rooster asked with concern. "You've seen the cockpit. It would be a miracle if the weapons control still worked."

"That's the easy part," Moose answered. Now he was working on the forward section of the cannon, still linked to the wing. "I can shoot it manually opening and closing the capacitor's safety lock. It's that switch over there."

"But will it work without the engines?" Rooster insisted. "I don't think we could start any of them up."

"I know, but there should be enough power stored in the generators for a dozen shots." Moose explained. With a grin of satisfaction he managed to set the cannon free from its last linkage. Only the power line connected it now to the ship.

"We surely wasted a lot of that power in the landing." Rooster shifted her look from Moose to Foxfire. "I had to overtax the repulsorlifts a lot for us to make it down in one piece."

Moose leaned the cannon's forward section on a shattered plate that was firmly stuck in the snow. When he turned back, Foxfire saw that he had paled. "There goes our great plan," she snorted. Rooster gasped.

"Maybe not," Moose said recovering himself. "Did they keep working all the time?" Foxfire looked at him in disbelief. *Surely he won't try to do it anyway, will he?* "Try to remember, Roo."

The Lumi thought for a second. "Y-Yes, they did. I didn't notice any power failure up to the last moment."

"Then let's hope there is still enough for one or two shots, between the generators and the capacitor itself."

"What?" Foxfire couldn't believe what she had just heard. She wanted to save the doctor as much as Rooster, but she wouldn't die nor let anybody else die for nothing. Not Moose, of all people. "You can't seriously intend to continue with this." She looked the man she loved directly in the eyes, struggling to keep her mind clear. "If this fails, you won't have a second chance. What the heck. Even with full power, it wouldn't be easy to damage that thing! Remember the recordings we've seen from Hoth."

"I don't need any recording to know what we're against," Moose said without returning her look. He took the macrobinoculars and turned his back on her. Foxfire watched him walk toward his observation place, the narrow space between the fallen wing and the shuttle's cockpit. "I saw Imperial walkers in action from close enough at Ten'see IV, remember?" No, Foxfire had not forgotten what Moose had told her about Ten'see IV. That only reinforced her determination not to allow him to commit suicide. She turned to look at Rooster. If she tried to object she would shoot a stunning discharge at her with her blaster, and then she would drag her out of here by her feet. But the Lumi was not going to protest. She seemed to have just realized, in this very moment, how real the danger was. *Moose must have told her the Ten'see IV story too.* Rooster's brain extension receptors, some moments before of a pale blue that expressed her uneasiness and concern, were rapidly changing to an unusual brilliant white. Foxfire remembered well Rooster's explanations about the different meanings of Lumis' receptors colors. White meant fear. That was not strange. Foxfire noticed how that feeling was starting to catch her too. She was frightened *now*.

Frightened for Moose, above all.

The tough moments they had lived these last days crossed her mind in a flash. The deaths of those refugees had affected Moose harder than her. His words the night before took a new meaning. *He really feels guilty. He does believe that he must do something to redeem himself, even if he is not fully conscious of it. He thinks that sacrificing himself to save us could be the right thing to do.* Foxfire shook her head. *I just can't allow it.*

"We don't have to do this cannon thing," she insisted, talking to Moose's back. *How I regret having suggested this idea in the first place, damn my big mouth.* "We can still distract them, to run down the path so they follow us far from the shuttle."

"That won't work and you know it," he replied harshly. "We can hardly run on the snow. The walker would catch up with us even sooner than it would on clear ground, and then the doctor would lose his only chance to survive."

Foxfire could not answer to that. Moose lowered the macrobinoculars and returned beside her. This time he stared back at her. "Even if I can't damage it, I sure can get their attention so Rooster and you can escape and call for help. If I get captured, I can try to convince them that I was the only one on board the shuttle. I'll buy you the time you need." Foxfire was about to ask *And what if they just kill you?*, but she realized that it only would reinforce his point. If their attackers didn't want to take prisoners, then all three would be killed once the AT-ST reached them. And it would. Moose was not wrong about that. She understood that all her arguments would be useless to convince him, once he had taken his decision. They had been through this before.

Moose knew her too well, also. He could see somehow her surrender in her eyes. He pursed his lips and put his hands upon her shoulders. That made a bolt of pain run down her damaged arm, but she ignored it. When Moose spoke his voice was a lot more tender than an instant before. "There's no time for arguing. Last time I looked, the walker was less than three clicks from us. We're already under its batteries' reach."

"Moose...." she started to say.

"Later," he smiled. "Tell me *that* later. Now just run away and hide behind those rocks over there." Foxfire looked back to see the place Moose was pointing at and nodded. "Wait until the walker is practically stepping on me. Then shoot at it with your blaster."

"I'm right handed, you know. My aim is not good with my left hand."

Moose laughed briefly. "I don't intend for you to destroy it, honey, just to draw his attention away from the shuttle before they see me. I'll shoot the cannon then."

"And immediately after that you run. Whatever happens."

"I promise." Moose gave her a short kiss and, without a second look, walked back to watch the AT-ST's approach.

"What do we do?" Rooster asked.

Foxfire took a deep breath and turned toward her. "Exactly what he has just said. Let's leave."

Sdermila had seen the biggest ship fall and disappear from view. The little ones stayed flying circles for a while and then parted. "There must be people wounded on that ship," she said.

"We can't do anything," Deveralia answered. The younger woman was very frightened. She covered her children protectively under her arms, keeping them lying on the ground. Little Figor was willing to take a better look at the downed ship, but his mother wouldn't allow him to raise his head over the rock they were hidden behind. "We'd better not move from here. There could be more coming. We don't know whether they're friends or not."

"You stay with your children. I'll go and see if I can help."

"Are you crazy? Don't go, Sdermila! They might kill you!" But Sdermila was already on her way, pulling her kalahorse by the reins.

"Where is she going, mum?" Lia asked almost in a whisper.

"She...she is going to try and help the passengers of the ship that has crashed."

"Couldn't we go too?" Taigor asked.

"No!" Both children looked at her mother in surprise. They had never heard her speak in that tone. They realized that Deveralia was scared, like all the adults that surrounded them, with the seemingly only exception of the old Sdermila. In their short experience, the adults rarely got really scared. That was for children like them. Adults told you always why you shouldn't be frightened, because they were wiser and knew that there was nothing to be scared of.

Now their mother was trembling.

For Lia and Figor, it was suddenly a lot harder to keep seeing this as an adventure. The two brothers desired to be back at home. They wanted their father back. Maybe he wouldn't be scared. Maybe he would know what to do.

Deveralia watched Sdermila moving away and prayed like she had not done since she was her sons' age.

"Sir, Wolfshead Squadron has neutralized a CC-9600. It is retiring from the combat area."

"The others are closing the gap, though," Wumb said, frowning in concentration, "but if Lancer Squadron's

torps get to open us a hole in that formation...."

"Sensors here, sir. The Y-Wings have just opened fire."

"Well, Lieutenant Vaiwahannen, be ready to make our move."

"Up or down, sir?" The Twi'lek was not only the *Wolf's Lair's* Navigation officer, but probably the best ship pilot on board. Without being explicitly ordered so, he had personally taken the helm to drive the Strike Carrier through the combat to come. Wumb had noticed the fact and accepted it without comment.

"Wait." Dozens of blue streaks passed over the *Wolf's Lair* heading toward the Corellian Frigates. Their gunners started to try to shoot down the warheads, but they could not get them all. If only one of those ships detoured from its present course and heading, then the *Lair* might be able to reach a position from which they could open fire onto the big cruisers. "Wolfshead Leader, this is Lieutenant Colonel Wumb. One or two of those frigates are going to be hit hard. Have any of your people got torps remaining?"

"Negative, sir. They've used them all."

"Too bad. Then have your B-Wings open fire with ion bursts on the ship that gets pounded the worst. I need at least one of them out of our way."

"But we won't be able to keep their fighters away from the *Lair* any more, sir...."

"Lancer's Y-Wings will protect us, Major. Now comply with your orders."

"Roger, sir. Wolfshead Leader out."

"Ten seconds to impact," Ensign Sarago informed, watching intently the readings appearing on her screen. "Nine, eight, seven..." *Come on, Corellians*, Wumb thought anxiously, *move, move...* "three, two, one, hit!"

There was an impressive series of explosions in the first rows of the Corellian fleet. When the clouds of fire left behind by the last wave of proton torpedoes dissipated, all the enemy ships were still there. They were apparently undamaged, although Wumb reasonably doubted that their shields were *that* good. "They keep coming..." Dey'jaa said after a moment, echoing his own thoughts.

"Then it's up to our pilots. Let's wait a bit more." The amplified image taken by the *Wolf's Lair* holocams showed Wolfshead Squadron's four remaining B-Wings and the three X-Wings attacking one of the CC-9800 frigates. Ensign Proteys confirmed that this vessel had lost almost all of her shields under the proton torpedo barrage. Dey'jaa and Wumb watched the scene closely, almost not daring to breath. In spite of the coverage provided by Wolfeye A-Wings, one of the X-Wings was hit by a pursuing Corellian fighter. Her pilot managed to keep it flying, though, and along with his partners fired his laser cannons on the frigate, vaporizing one of her defense batteries. The B-Wings applied their ion cannons on that spot immediately after. The leading fighter-bomber was caught by the fire from one of the frigate's remaining towers and exploded, but when the other three split in different directions past the enemy ship, her hull was covered by blue lightning.

"Wolfshead Leader here. The frigate is disabled, sir."

"So it won't be able to counter-maneuver us. Lieutenant Vaiwehannen, it's down... NOW!"

The ships in front and the starfield moved up briskly beyond the bridge's viewport as the *Wolf's Lair* dove. The whine of the engines was audible through the bulkheads as they pushed the Carrier's speed up to her maximum. Suddenly, under the keel of the now drifting enemy frigate, the hull of one of the Pulsar Class Cruisers was faintly visible.

"Fire control, sir, we have a solution on the *Sovereign!*"

"Engineering, this is your two seconds warning!" Wumb exclaimed, and two heartbeats later he gave the definitive order.

"FIRE!!!"

The giant ion cannon mounted on the *Wolf's Lair* came to life, while the bridge lights blinked and lost power visibly. Burst after burst of blue energy flew towards the Corellian cruiser. The *Sovereign's* shields collapsed quickly and her electronic systems were saturated an instant later. The captain of the cruiser ordered to shut them down before they got unavoidably fried, saving his ship from getting disabled, but leaving it out of combat for a while. Provided she was not attacked again, the *Sovereign* would need a few precious minutes before her systems were restored. Against all predictions, the *Wolf's Lair* had reached her goal, but now it would be time for the Corellians to pay back. Even now, their X-Wings were opening fire against the New Republic Strike Carrier, while the Y-Wings from Lancer squadron were decimated. Two of the operative CC-9800 frigates and the cruisers *First Citizen* and *Independent* maneuvered to join their starfighters' onslaught.

"PULL BACK, PULL BACK!!!" Wumb cried out, knowing that all the ship's speed wouldn't be enough to save them, now that they were under the enemy's guns.

The last minutes seemed to stretch on forever. Moose had ducked behind the wing's remains, avoiding the urge to look over it to check how far the AT-ST was yet. No doubt the crewmen were watching the shuttle's wreckage intently, looking for any signs of possible survivors. All too late, Moose wondered if they would notice Foxfire's and Rooster's footprints in the snow. His only real chance of causing any real damage to the AT-ST depended completely on shooting at it from very close. He had expected them to approach the New Republic ship to inspect it. But if they saw those footsteps, they might go around the shuttle to chase the two women. In that case everything would be lost. It was still snowing, although not as hard as it had been moments before they crashed. Maybe that would make harder for them to spot the footsteps. Moose silently prayed for it. The time passed slowly while he waited. Little by little, the familiar whirring of the machine's engines, mixed with the screeches of its legs' joints, became audible, carried by the wind. This sent a chill running down his spine. *Here it comes, damn it.* That sound seemed to penetrate him to the bone, loaded as it was with the memories. He wondered for a moment if the Imperials kept their walkers poorly lubricated on purpose so they kept making that noise. It sure had a psychological effect on the enemy. *At least, it is getting on my nerves.* Moose waited patiently until it seemed to be very, very close. Then he risked a look over the pieces he was hidden behind. The AT-ST was almost over him, with the Seibergian rosette clearly visible, painted on the hull's side. Moose grimaced. That was one question answered. *Here we have the perfect proof of the Seibergian Army's activities on the Balanish Country. If I can get out of this one, that's a report I'll gladly write.* Moose remained completely motionless now, not even daring to breathe, fearing that the walker's crew could notice his presence. Lying on the snow face up, he could see the AT-ST rising overwhelming at barely fifteen meters from him. Its head turned slowly from left to right, slightly inclined downwards, searching for targets. Its twin cannons' muzzles seemed like big, evil and deadly mouths, eager to kill. Moose felt suddenly weak, a blow of fatalism preying on him. *This isn't going to work. Foxfire, Rooster and the doctor are counting on me, but it's all useless.* For an instant, he was again at Ten'see IV. His old wound on his left shoulder itched in remembrance. In Ten'see IV it had not been so cold, but his friend Peyga, who was on his side that day and lived to tell, had found his death months later on Hoth. *Maybe this was the last thing he saw. Maybe this cold was the last thing he felt.* Somehow he found the strength he needed in that thought. *Don't worry for me, Peyga. I blew away that chicken walker at Ten'see IV, didn't I? I'll do it again. For you and the other boys.* He considered that for an instant and almost smiled. Foxfire wouldn't be pleased if she knew that what may be his last thought had been for a bunch of infantry soldiers, her being so close. *Take it easy, sweetheart. You know everything I do, I do it for you.*

Moose started to move. He leaned with all his weight on the back end of the laser cannon, making its muzzle lift and aim at the lower side of the AT-ST. A laser burst was shot from somewhere behind him. The AT-ST's head rose to aim at this threat, exposing the articulation of its neck, where the armor was not so thick and some mechanisms were exposed. *Well done, honey.* He embraced the cannon and pulled it. With a supreme effort he managed to put it vertical on the snow. With a last look at his target, Moose kicked the lever. Although he closed his eyes, the bolt almost blinded him and he was unable to see if the shot had caused any important damage, even if he had taken the time to look. Moose dropped the cannon and threw himself on the ground. He crawled on the snow as fast as he could, trying to keep the remains of the *Compassion* between him and the AT-ST. The only thing he could hear was the beating of his own heart pounding in his ears at an impossible speed. Suddenly, he heard a muffled sound at his back, like a heavy tree trunk falling on the snow after a woodcutter droid had finished its work. Moose stopped and raised his head. He had recovered his vision already, although he could still see sparks dancing in front of his eyes. Twenty meters further he saw Foxfire kneeling. She had her right arm folded over her chest, but she still held the blaster with her left hand. Beside her, Rooster slowly stood up, snow patches falling from her flightsuit. Foxfire

stared at him. Rooster was looking at something beyond. *A trunk falling on the snow....* He looked back.

The AT-ST had collapsed on the ground with its head aiming forward. A thick column of black smoke surged from its neck.

"Three, are you all right?" Solo asked. With the corner of his eye he had seen how Ibero's X-Wing was hit before they finished their pass on the Corellian Frigate.

"A bit stunned, but yes," Ibero answered. Solo heard him curse in Iberyan before returning to Basic. "But the bloody frigate got Five before it was disabled..."

"This is Eighteen," Parody said. "I was right beside Five when it happened. I'm almost sure that he ejected in time." Solo felt only half relieved when he heard this. Ejected was not the same as alive, specially in the middle of a space battle, but at least Torpedo would have a chance. *This shouldn't be happening*, he thought thought with growing rage and despair, *we should have avoided any direct confrontation, but Arachnoid had to....*

"Nine here," Solo was startled to hear Arachnoid's voice precisely when he was thinking of him. "The *Wolf's Lair* is being hit by concussion missiles. There are just too many X-Wings to deal with!" Solo was about to ask Arachnoid if that didn't make him happy when Vyper's sharp reply came through.

"We'll have to try nevertheless." Solo nodded in silence. That applied to himself too. It didn't matter who had started this, nor what could have been done instead. Now the only important thing was to defend the New Republic ships, the lives of their crews, and prevent the enemy from taking the control of Seibergian space. Even if that demanded up to the last fighter pilot's sacrifice. He preferred not to think now, not yet, about the fact that the enemy was his own people.

After seeing the X-Wing he was following was already damaged, Vyper allowed him to escape and flew directly beneath the *Wolf's Lair* to help Arachnoid and Hardrive to repel a new attack on the Strike Carrier's port side. While he did that, he had a brief but clear view of the main hangar. It was on fire.

"This is the *Ord Mantell*. We request urgent assistance. We've lost all our defenses and two enemy Gunships are chasing us..."

"This is Lancer Two. We'll do what we can, but we have no torps remaining. Wolfshead Leader, what about your people?"

"Negative, Lancer Two." Vyper winced. Lancer Leader and more than a half of his squadron were already gone. "We don't have any torps either..."

"This is Wolfshead Fourteen, Leader." Drake's voice was suddenly heard. "Two-Two and I are coming. Just tell us where do you want our torpedoes."

"Glad to hear you two!" Vyper exclaimed almost cheerfully. Considering how bad things were, Drake's and Raiven's arrival meant a significant improvement of forces. "Put a pair on those two Gunships pursuing the *Ord Mantell*. That will help Lancer Squadron to try and disable them."

"Roger, Leader."

Vyper saw with no little satisfaction how the blue trails of the torpedoes ended abruptly against the hulls of the two Corellian ships. The *Ord Mantell* moved to retire from the combat while three Y-Wings sprayed the Gunships with ion blasts. "Fourteen, reserve the rest of your warheads for the *First Citizen*. Maybe if you...."

"This is Eight!" Iceman suddenly cried out. Vyper couldn't see where his A-Wing was. "I have no shields and... noooooo...!!!"

"Huttspit!" Firestorm exclaimed. "Eight is gone!"

"Can't be...."

"Seven, watch out! Now you're on your own!"

"Blast! I'll try to get closer to you two!"

Vyper felt his heart sink a bit more. With Torpedo and Iceman they had already lost four pilots, and two more had been forced to flee. Now that he thought of it, he didn't know for sure whether or not Hawk and Sparks had reached the relative security of the *Lair's* hangar.

"Leader, Two-two here. We're in position to launch our torps..."

"Lieutenant Colonel Wumb here. That's a negative. Wolfshead Leader, any attack on the *First Citizen* or the *Independent* is useless. Their shields are just too strong. Order your pilots to concentrate the fire on the remaining Frigates."

Vyper acknowledged the order, feeling that they were about to perform the last act of this drama. "You heard that, people! Regroup on me while I choose a target."

"Roger that."

"*Wolf's Lair*, this is the *Arvel Crynyd* joining the fight with the *Bedannis Fey'lya* and the *Bria Tharen*. Any chance of you using that ion cannon of yours again?"

"Negative." In Vyper's ear, the Sullustan's voice sounded stressed now. *This battle is lost, and he knows it.*

"Understood. We'll do what we can then to contain the cruisers."

It won't be much.

"How long to the combat area?" Admiral Sinensis asked impatiently on board the *Brave Soul*. Relayed by the *Wolf's Lair*, the communications between the Strike Carrier, the fighter pilots, the remaining Corvettes and the three Nebulon-B that were now joining them could be heard on the bridge, even with difficulties. Although it allowed the Admiral to have a picture of how the battle was going, it didn't help to keep the nerves under control.

"Ten minutes, sir," answered Captain Odicri.

"My ship will be blown to pieces long before that," Colonel Gen'yaa said.

"I know, and I'm sorry, Colonel. We've already lost the *Gyndine* and the *Dubrillion*, but at least they have given us an opportunity to do our job."

"We won't stop them, Admiral. You know that."

"Yes, I do, but it'll cost them dearly. They won't be able to keep the control of the system."

"Perhaps not. But in that case, the Seibergians will reclaim it with ease..."

"Colonel, I know how you feel," exploded the Admiral at last, "but we have no other options! If you don't agree with my judgement, at least you will comply with my orders. And my orders now are to be quiet!"

"Yes, sir." Gen'yaa's white fur was standing on end and her eyes seemed to burn, but she crossed her arms

on her chest and said no more. An ominous silence fell on the *Brave Soul's* bridge, only broken by the every time more urgent transmissions from the front ships. Suddenly the sensors officer turned toward Captain Omicri and signaled a point that had appeared on his screen.

"Sir, another capital ship has just entered the system!"

"Can you identify it, Ensign?"

"Yes, sir. Give me a second..." The young man paled visibly. "Sir, that's an Imperial II Class Star Destroyer..."

"What?"

Colonel Gen'yaa breathed deeply, but somehow air seemed not to reach her lungs.

XI

The snowstorm was fading slowly, but the wind was still strong. It froze Moose's face, but he practically didn't feel the cold. He remained crouched, with his blaster aimed at the upper hatch of the downed AT-ST expecting for it to open. If any of the occupants came out armed, he would find himself with a shot between the eyes. Moose waited for almost five minutes before deciding it was safe to lower his weapon. From where he was, he couldn't make out any sign of life in the walker's cockpit, but that didn't mean there were no survivors. He'd have to inspect it closely, but that could wait. Now he needed to embrace Foxfire more than ever. He got up slowly, barely conscious of the new aches that had just been added to his already pained body. Turning his back toward the smoking remains of the AT-ST, Moose holstered his blaster and walked toward his friends. Foxfire now sat on the snow, while Rooster immobilized her arm and improvised a temporary bandage and a sling. She saw Moose approaching and smiled faintly. Moose returned the smile, but, before he could cover the short distance that separated them, a laser bolt passed barely ten centimeters over his head. Moose ducked instinctively, and that saved his life. The next shot came half a meter lower.

"Who's shooting, Avery?" he shouted.

"I don't know!"

"It came from up there!" Rooster shouted. "Somewhere behind that elevation."

"All right! You two stay where you are and don't show your heads!"

"Haven't you been the hero enough for today?" Foxfire cried out.

"It was you who said that your aim's not good with your left hand, remember? And Rooster won't shoot!"

"I'll do it if I must!"

"I appreciate that, but I bet that your aim will be even worse with both hands!" Without waiting for an answer, Moose drew his blaster again and started to slither on his stomach, advancing slowly toward their invisible attackers.

Sdermila saw two people on the ground, leaning on a rock half covered by snow. She hurried her pace and forced the kalahorse to follow her. "Come on, old beast, we might be needed. Don't protest any more and be warned, you might have to carry some weight, so..." The sound of what she had learned too well to recognize as laser weapons startled Sdermila and made her stop. The two people she had just spotted took cover behind a rock, although one of them seemed to be struggling with the other to rise. Sdermila considered if it would be prudent for her to duck on the ground. She couldn't see any of the shooters from where she stood, so they probably were on the other side of this crest. "What do I do? What do I do? Old beast, what would you do? No, don't tell me, you sure would flee as soon as I loosed the reins. But any of

those people might be injured or something."

One of the two people, a woman for her voice, shouted in Basic in Sdermila's direction. "Hey, you, take cover right now!" She saw how the woman accompanied the words with insistent gestures of a hand, indicating her to crouch down. "On your knees, old beast, on your knees! Oh, Taigor, why am I doing this?"

Ignorant of the arrival of the Balanish woman, Moose was busy enough just avoiding having his head ripped off by a laser bolt. Spouts of snow rose at his back where the energy discharges hit, barely half a meter behind his legs, which he contracted as much as he could. Part of the vaporized snow froze almost immediately and fell upon him like a myriad of gelid drops. Moose was starting to think that he had run out of luck when he noticed a pause in the shower. However he kept hearing the persistent hum of the blaster shots. *They are shooting at someone else*, Moose thought with sudden apprehension. That couldn't be other than Foxfire and Rooster. Clenching his teeth and hardening the grip on his weapon, he risked a look toward the place Rooster had indicated. He did it right in time to see someone else opening fire against their aggressors, somewhere to his right and closer to them. The presumed Seibergians started to shoot in return. Moose was momentarily confused. Could Foxfire have reached that position in so little time? But no, there she was, behind the same rock he had seen her and Rooster before being forced to duck. Whoever it was, the help was more than welcome. Moose used this opportune distraction to run to a new position where he could help his unknown ally. Before he had to launch himself on the snow again, he caught a brief look of the enemy: three or four stormtroopers in winter armor, some eighty meters from where he had taken cover. A long shot for a blaster, but not an impossible one. He counted to ten and then jumped forward, shooting repeatedly towards the place where he had seen the stormtroopers. He rolled on the snow to avoid the response fire and shot again. This time he managed to hit one of them. His hidden friend shot down another, before his companions made Moose take cover. In that moment new laser bolts passed two meters over Moose's head, homing in on the enemy's position. *Foxfire's left hand*, Moose thought, almost amused in spite of his concerns. An instant later a whine was heard. When Moose rose his head, he saw a speeder bike disappearing in the distance, rode by two stormtroopers. *I'd say that being shot at from three different sides is not their idea of controlled situation*. Moose got up and shot at the fleeing soldiers several times, but they were too far away already.

"Huttspit!" he exclaimed aloud. "I think I'm starting to understand why so few people choose Seibergia as a holiday destination."

"Are you OK?" Foxfire shouted from behind him.

"Yes, I am. Someone has been helping us!" Although he couldn't be sure about it, his guess was that it was only one person. Moose believed that he had not heard more than one weapon shooting at once. He looked in the direction he supposed his rescuer should be, but he could not see anybody. Maybe he or she was trying to hunt down the Seibergian. *Or maybe there are still enemies around, and doesn't want to show up yet*. Moose went back cautiously, not daring to walk fully upright, and keeping the blaster in his hand. He reached Foxfire and Rooster half a minute later, just as an old woman joined them. She was pulling what seemed to be the living version of an AT-AT, only not so big--by a long distance--and a lot more hairy. Moose recognized the species from the images Ibero had shown him.

"Moose, this is Sdermila," Rooster said. The Lumi was fastening the bandage on Foxfire's arm, which she had not finished when the shooting began. She applied a spray on both sides of the bandage, which made it become rigid to prevent the bone from moving from its place. "Sdermila, this is Moose."

Moose took a look at Foxfire, who reassured him with a wink. *I'm fine*, her glance said. "Glad to meet you, Sdermila," he said to the old woman.

"I'm glad to meet you too," Sdermila answered in a decent standard Basic. The Balanish woman tried to smile, and Moose immediately liked her. She was obviously frightened and tired, but she was forcing herself to be courageous. Moose deduced that the old woman was traveling with the refugees caravan they had spotted from the air. But, what was she doing here alone? Rooster answered his unspoken question.

"Sdermila saw the shuttle fall and came to see if she could be of help." Moose opened his eyes widely. An old woman, probably just thrown away from her home, alone, disarmed. And she still came to help unknown people, under a snowstorm and in the middle of a lightfight. *Extraordinary*. Moose decided that he liked her even more.

"Maybe she can actually help us," Foxfire said from the ground, "or more exactly, that beast of hers."

"It's a kalahorse," Moose said, getting a mild surprised look from Rooster and Foxfire. Sdermila on the other side didn't react to Moose's knowledge exhibition. How could anyone not know what a kalahorse is?

"It's old," she said, "but he sure could carry you. You don't seem to be too heavy a load."

"It's not for me," Foxfire said. She couldn't help a half amused smile when she heard herself described as a "not too heavy a load". "Our doctor is still inside the ship. He is trapped."

"I don't think a kalahorse could move that thing," Sdermila answered looking dismayed, "not even a young one. But let's go down there and see what we can do."

"Wait," Moose said. He directed his macrobinoculars toward the place where the Seibergian troopers had been shooting from. "I can't see anything, but that doesn't mean we're safe yet. Not to mention the AT-ST over there, which we haven't inspected yet."

"The doctor," Rooster urged. "He can't wait for us to be certain that there's no more enemies around. We'll have to take the risk."

"We'll keep our eyes open," Foxfire said getting up. "You and me."

"All right," he accepted unwillingly. "But you all take cover immediately if you hear just a single shot."

The *Wolf's Lair's* gunners did their best to defend the ship using all the means at their disposal. Their quad laser batteries and warheads launchers shot incessantly, mainly against the enemy X-Wings. Occasionally, their effort was rewarded by the vision of one of the starfighters retiring damaged from combat or blowing into pieces. But one after another, the Strike Carrier's weapons were being hit and destroyed, some times along with the lives of those who manned them. More and more the Corellian pilots found breaches in the defenses that they could use to launch their concussion missiles unimpeded.

"Brace for impact!" Ensign Proteys warned not for the first time. The bridge was shaken by a new explosion, far stronger than any of the precedent ones. Although the viewports were covered by their durasteel shutters since the beginning of the combat, Lieutenant Colonel Wumb didn't need the view to know what had happened.

"There it goes our ion cannon," he said aloud, and nobody was surprised. It was a question of time. After the temporary disabling of the *Sovereign*, the enemy had concentrated their fire on this weapon, with the hangar as secondary objective. "Now the *First Citizen* and the *Independent* will come for us."

"Why have they waited for so long?" Lieutenant Commander Dey'jaa asked, leaning on Wumb's command chair to get up. His long black beard was stained with blood. The explosion had made him fall on the deck, and he had involuntarily pierced his lower lip with one of his fangs. "They should know that we wouldn't be able to shoot a new burst with the cannon without turning our bow at them, and not without sacrificing what remains of our shields. It would be suicide."

"You're the Intelligence Officer and psychological analyst here--you tell me."

Dey'jaa seemed puzzled for an instant, but then the understanding came to his eyes. "The Rebel Alliance has made a lot of sacrifices in the past. They must think we might be willing to die if there's a chance to neutralize another of their cruisers along the way."

Wumb nodded. "And I'd order exactly that if I thought that we have such a chance." If that affirmation startled Dey'jaa, the Bothan didn't show it, which earned Wumb's secret approval. "There's no way we could recharge the cannon's capacitors so soon, not even redirecting to it *all* the ship's energy, not only our poor shields. We'll have to keep fighting with the rest of our weapons, although this ship was never designed for this kind of close combat."

"They never are," Dey'jaa said with a half smile. Wumb looked at him with curiosity. *No, he is not frightened at all, although you can never know for sure what these Bothans are thinking. Our situation is desperate, and he knows it almost as well as I do. After all, he was onboard the Wolf's Den, too.*

"Sir, two of their frigates are about to surround us!" Ensign Proteys exclaimed, his salmon skin visibly darkened by the stress.

Before Wumb could check for himself the enemy vessels position on the tactical screen, he felt another blast somewhere on the middle side of the hull. A second impact followed, this time closer to the stern. Dey'jaa took a grasp on Wumb's seat to avoid falling again. An alarm sounded.

"We can't run any more", Wumb said. "Maybe you should go to a place where you can strap yourself, Lieutenant Commander." Without pause, the Sullustan continued giving orders. "Lieutenant Vaiwahannen, drive us between the *First Citizen* and the *Independent*. Let's see if we can make them shoot at each other while they try to crush us."

"That would make being crushed a bit less disgusting, sir," the Twi'lek snarled. Nobody laughed.

"I'm fine here," the Intelligence Officer answered courageously to Wumb's previous suggestion.

"If that alarm means what I fear, we might lose the artificial gravity at any moment. Fire control, prepare to open fire against their cruisers. We'll show them that we can bite, too."

"At your order, sir!"

"I think Lieutenant Vaiwehannen won't mind if I take his position while he is busy piloting the *Lair*." Dey'jaa said, reconsidering his position.

"Very well, Lieutenant Commander. Engineering, this is Lieutenant Commander Wumb. Tell me the bad news."

"Engineering here," Lieutenant Boradelis' voice was heard. "You sure have noticed, sir. We've just lost the starboard upper engine, and we'll probably have to shut down the port one before it blows up by itself. Furthermore, there are several breaches in the outer hull at decks three, four and... Oh, what now?"

"The shields have fallen!" Someone shouted on the bridge. Wumb closed his eyes for an instant.

"Sir, we just..."

"I know, Lieutenant Boradelis. Keep that engine working while you can, that's all I ask you. Wumb out." While he saw the space turn as the *Wolf's Lair* changed course for what probably would be her last attack, the Sullustan wondered how it was possible to feel as calm as he felt, knowing with certainty what was about to happen. It was like being on board the *Tannia* or the *Wolf's Den* again, but without the anxiety nor the fear. *Maybe you can get used to this sensation, after all. Perhaps that means this time is going to be the one. No save in the very last moment. No more rescues. Well, I'm ready, and here we go.*

"New readings, sir," Ensign Proteys said. "It's..."

"A STAR DESTROYER!!!"

Vyper felt his blood freeze in his veins when he heard the cry on the intercom coming from half a dozen throats. *Just when I thought things couldn't be worse...*

"Wolfshead Leader, this is Lieutenant Colonel Wumb, can you copy me?"

"Yes sir."

"Choose two of your remaining pilots and send them in different directions. I want them to jump out of the system and fly as fast as they can to New Republic space. With the Corellians' interference field I don't think our messages are getting through. It's of vital importance that someone knows what's hap..."

Suddenly a new and amazingly potent signal overpowered the transmission coming from the *Wolf's Lair*, making it impossible for Vyper to continue listening to Lieutenant Commander Wumb. The incoming broadcast was unencrypted, and, as Vyper hastily verified, it was being sent through a wide range of channels. Every ship in the area, New Republic or Corellian, was forced to receive it. Soon a human female voice was heard with perfect clarity, a voice that conveyed peace and serenity, but also command. The voice of someone accustomed to giving orders and having them accomplished. Even if she had not identified herself, Vyper and surely many others would have recognized her. His mouth opened widely in astonishment.

"This is Councilor Leia Organa of the New Republic, aboard the Star Destroyer *Liberator*. All New Republic ships, cease hostilities *now*. Corellian commanders, order your crews and pilots to cease the fire too. I'm commissioned from Mon Mothma, the President of the New Republic, to start immediate negotiations with you here and now. I repeat. All New Republic ships, cease hostilities now. Corellian commanders, I'm waiting for your answer. Don't reject my offer to talk: there's been enough bloodshed today."

Arachnoid leaned on his seat, closed his eyes and allowed a sigh of relief to escape from his mouth. He had never felt so tired. The battle had come to a stop in less than a minute after Princess Leia's and the *Liberator's* arrival. Then the survivors of the squadron had followed the indications to approach the hangar using the starboard entry. The port one was out of order. From the thick smoke that he had seen during the landing, it was not hard to guess that one or more warheads had penetrated through the exhausted shields and exploded inside the hangar. But the smoke had also prevented him from appreciating the real extent of the damage. The sound of powerful turbines coming to life made him open his eyes. Black dots clouded his vision. *Why, what's this?* He blinked several times and shook his head. For an instant, he had felt as if he was about to pass out, but the unpleasant sensation had disappeared already. The noise came from the compressors that were now infusing clean air into the hangar at their maximum capacity. The smoke cloud was clearing slowly before his eyes, revealing the mess that the missiles had made of a third of the flight deck. The port side was where the transports and shuttles used to be parked. For all he knew, Rooster had taken the *Compassion* out to Seibergia, on a mission to the Balanish Country. But the Lynx Commando's ships had been less fortunate. A pile of wreckage was all that remained of the *Unicorn*, one of the two Delta Dx-9 transports. Its twin ship, the *Bear*, seemed affected too, although at least it was in one piece. The Lambda Class shuttle, the *Troubadour*, seemed deceitfully intact, seen from her port side. A second look allowed him to notice that the starboard and upper wings had more holes than a Sullustan cave. Plates had been torn off from big sections of the ceiling. Burned conducts, power lines and communication cables hung everywhere, some of them still producing sparks that rained on the deck below. Everything looked scorched, except those places covered by foam.

"What a disaster," Arachnoid said aloud while he opened the cockpit. There was no one there to bring him a ladder, so he jumped to the flight deck. Through the sole of his boots he felt the heat. Suddenly wearing the flight helmet seemed unbearable any more, so he removed it hastily and threw it back into the cockpit. The first person he saw was Hawk, although he had to look at him twice before recognizing his partner under the layer of ash that covered him from feet to head. It blackened not only his supposedly orange flight suit, but every piece of exposed skin and hair. The pilot was sat on a crate, still holding an empty chemical fire extinguisher.

"Hawk, it's that you?"

"Guess so," the other answered without looking, obviously not willing to talk. Arachnoid heard quick steps on his back and turned in time to see Solo approaching him.

"What were you thinking?" the Corellian pilot yelled stopping merely centimeters from Arachnoid's nose. His usually kind expression had disappeared. Instead, Solo's face was a mask of fury when he took his flight suit in his hand and pulled Arachnoid toward him. His next sentence was more spat than spoken. "Sacart never had a chance."

"I'm sorry for him," Arachnoid said sincerely, but bothered nevertheless by Solo's tone and the accusation implicit in his words. "What did you want me to do?"

"To wait for the rest of the squad to support us, that's what! Not to start a battle on your own, that's what!"

"You're crumpling my flightsuit."

"I'm going to crumple more than that, you stupid hotshot!"

Arachnoid prepared himself to evade Solo's punch and respond with one of himself, but someone took the Corellian's arm from behind.

"Enough of this, Solo," Vyper said in a cold tone. "We've suffered enough casualties today, don't you think so?"

"And he's the one responsible for that," Solo replied, trying to liberate his arm.

"Let him try if he likes," Arachnoid said.

"Don't make things worse, and don't make me think you're as stupid as he seems to believe," Vyper snapped. Arachnoid went quiet, taken aback by Vyper's retort.

"That's better. Now you listen to me. Both of you. Maybe if Arachnoid had waited for us to get there, Sacart and the other would be here with us, or maybe not. Maybe the Corellians would have decided to shoot you all down while they could, instead of waiting for you to get any aid, or maybe not. This is not the time nor the place to decide that, and at any case others will do that for us."

"Had we kept a tighter formation, we'd have been able to protect each others a lot better." Solo insisted, although less violently. "But you had to order to break in pairs."

"That was the only way we could fly evasive and win some time. In close formation they'd have pushed us out of there even more easily."

"You were dying to start the shooting--don't try to deny it. To make the Corellians pay for all the...."

"I said enough of this," Vyper interrupted Solo. "Now go and take a cold shower. That applies to the rest of you, too," he said to the bunch of pilots who had come following the shouts and now surrounded them. "We don't know when we'll have to go out again, but it could be soon. I'll talk to you all later. Dismissed!"

"A shower will be good," Solo agreed, and turned toward the only operative turbolift, not without a last bitter look at Arachnoid.

"Yes, a shower will be good," Arachnoid repeated, feeling how his last strengths were about to abandon him. He saw the black dots again, but he stubbornly ignored them. *It has to be the tiredness.* There was something worse than this sensation of physical weakness, though: Solo's words piercing through his anger and his pride to make him doubt.

Vyper watched Arachnoid and some other pilots leave. Among them he saw Spook, who had returned apparently unharmed from his first combat mission with the squad. Others could not say the same. Vyper took a mental note to talk to him later and commend him for his performance, but that had to wait. Now there were a whole lot of urgent things he had to do before granting himself a single second of rest. First, he needed to know how bad the situation was and how many pilots had been lost. For obvious reasons, communications had been restricted to a minimum since the end of the combat. Let the Corellians guess what the New Republic losses were. But now Vyper needed that information, and not only for its military interest: there were friends out there.

After that, and as bad as he probably would feel, he'd have to work hard to keep the squadron as operational as possible. For all he knew, a new war had started. In spite of the momentary truce Princess Leia had just gotten, they could be ordered to go out and fight again at any moment. Vyper panted. He rose a hand to his forehead, wiping sweat off with his sleeve. The task ahead seemed tremendous. *I don't even*

know where to start from, he thought. Morale is low and that is bad enough. Some pilots look depressed, and others too aggressive, especially Arachnoid. I can understand them. How couldn't I, as I feel like them? But if we're not able to get over all this, we're as good as dead already. I'll have to talk to them, but what can I say? Foxfire is a lot better at this kind of thing. Why did she and Moose have to go to ground? They could be useful here, even if they can't fly. If Gen'yaa doesn't object, I'll call them back. And Rooster. Just when we needed her and the Compassion the most. Damn, our luck is definitely rotten. In front of him, several fighters were being hastily loaded on the elevators to the storage area. Most of them showed visible damage. Vyper snorted. *Now that was something to be handled first of all. Repairs and refit must start as soon as possible. Virtually every one of their remaining ships needed the hands and expertise of Mar Hanniuska's team.* The noise made by a B-Wing stabilizer falling to the deck echoed through the hangar bay. "Some desperately," Vyper said aloud, and then he froze. *Mar had to be in the hangar when the concussion missiles impacted.* He hoped that she and her crew were all right. Vyper looked around, but he couldn't find the chief technician nor any of her group. Then he noticed Hawk, still sat where they had found him, seemingly too tired even to simply stand up.

"Hawk, are you all right?"

"Yes, Boss," the pilot nodded. "I'm not injured, just dirty."

"Glad to know. Have you seen Lieutenant Hanniuska?"

"Hmmm, no. That is, I don't know. Things have been confusing here."

"What about Sparks? He came more or less after you. With all this chaos I can't find his fighter."

"That's because the tractor beam brought it in to land on the port side." Noticing Vyper's dismay, Hawk hurried to finish his sentence. "No, well, they had already evacuated him to the medical bay when we were hit."

"To the medical bay? Is he injured, then?"

"I suppose so, but I didn't see him closely. I'm sorry."

"Are you asking about Sparks?" Ibero asked approaching. He came accompanied by Raiven, and both of them looked deadly serious. Considering the present circumstances, that didn't surprise Vyper. He remembered that the X-Wings had been the first craft to enter the hangar.

"Do you know something?"

"Yes. I've called to the medical bay. Sparks suffered a sort of heart attack."

"A heart attack?" Vyper asked in disbelief, while Hawk summoned at last the strength to get up.

"Yes, that's what the droid I talked to told me. It seems that his fighter received a heavy ion blast. The shields absorbed most of it, but some residual charge penetrated the cockpit, and he was almost electrocuted. He is out of danger now, though. This is all I know."

"Oh my. What about the others? Have you talked to the bridge, too?"

"I tried, but nobody answered my call. Michael."

"They must have their hands full up there. Let's try again and see if there's any good news." Vyper took his comm-link, raising a hand to ask Ibero to wait. "Bridge, this is Major Stauber, calling from the hangar. Do you copy me?"

"Affirmative, sir," an exhausted female voice answered this time. "This is Ensign Sarago."

"Can you tell me if any of my pilots has been recovered?"

"Negative, sir. The *Brave Soul* launched several search and rescue shuttles, but they were late. The

Corellian boats arrived first. If there were survivors, they are now in their hands."

"Copy that, Ensign," Vyper snorted. "Stauber out. You heard that?"

"Yes, Michael."

"So we can't know for sure who was killed and who was not. Damn."

"Michael, there's more."

"Maybe all of them survived," Vyper continued, while Hawk nodded in agreement. He had heard Ibero adding something, but he was not really listening any more. He couldn't think of anything but the pilots who had not returned. *I hope they all ejected in time. That they are safe onboard a Corellian ship. The four might be dead, though. Damn, damn, damn... There must be casualties here too. I should have asked the Ensign. This fire, and the impacts on the hull...* Vyper shook his head. He had to keep his cool. Gen'yaa and Wumb would care about the *Wolf's Lair* and her crew. He had to focus on the squadron. "Exactly, how many pilots are missing? Sacart, Gandalf, Torpedo, Iceman... Someone else?"

"Yes," Raiven said. "Moose, Foxfire and Rooster, along with doctor Al Saruff."

"What?"

"That's what Ibero here was trying to tell you. The *Compassion* was shot down over the Balanish Country. Drake and I didn't even see what hit them. Drake is now reporting directly to Lieutenant Commander Wumb. That's why he's not here." Now Vyper was all ears. He waited in silence for Raiven to continue. He looked at Ibero, and this nodded. "We could detect no traces of life from the air. We were ordered to leave before being able to take a closer look, but they're probably dead."

Vyper felt his stomach turn upside down. Almost half the squadron had disappeared in the last hour. Among them there were practically all his oldest living friends, with the only exception of Granite. *Now he and I are all of what remains from the old times.*

"Michael, are you OK?"

"Err? Ah, yes, don't worry about me. Our first priority is our comrades, so let's see....Yes, Ibero, no need to tell me. The Admiral has just forbidden flights into Seibergian space, but I don't care if....Damn, we don't even have any transport available." Vyper made a gesture toward the smoking ships near the port exit.

"The *Brave Soul* and the frigates have shuttles;" Ibero proposed. "We'll make sure that one of them goes looking for the *Compassion* as soon as possible."

"I'll get that organized. You two go and get some rest. It's what I've said to the others as well. I'll stay for a while and will see if I can find Hanniuska."

"You sure?"

"Yes, yes." *Go and leave me alone, please.* "I'll call you later, Ibero. Hawk, pay a visit to the medical bay. You've probably breathed too much smoke, even with the mask."

"I will," Hawk promised.

"Michael, if you need me...." Ibero started.

"Later. I'll call you later."

"All right. Raiven, Hawk, let's go."

Vyper waited until the three had left the hangar, then he walked to the crate where Hawk had been sitting before. Putting all his frustration into the move, he hit it with his hands and feet until he was gasping for air. He winced at the pain in his knuckles, but another kind of pain, more subtle and twisted, was just starting to

burn through him. It was the pain caused by a sense of loss and failure, of grief mixed with self recriminations, while the faces of those who were probably gone - still he insisted on using the word 'probably' in his thoughts - came to his mind, on and on.

Solo was in the medical bay when Ibero and Raiven arrived. They had come accompanying Hawk, expecting to have a chance to see Sparks, but the medical droid in charge wouldn't allow it. "This is a mess," Solo explained. "There are dozens of wounded here, mainly from the hangar, but also from other parts of the the ship. Decks three and four had been seriously affected. There was a breach on the outer hull and several people were sucked out. And you would never know who had just been brought in. Arachnoid," he said without pausing. "He fainted in the turbolift. I've heard one of Al Saruff's assistants saying that it seemed a clear case of extreme exhaustion. And I was about to give him a punch down there...."

"I saw it," Ibero said.

Solo shook his head. He had to recover some self-control before accusing anybody else of losing his nerves. "Drake has been here, too, just a moment ago. He came after talking to Lieutenant Commander Wumb, when he learned that Sparks was here. He's told me about the *Compassion*. Raiven, please, go and see that he is alright, will you?"

Raiven nodded. "Of course, mate. I think I know where to find him."

"How much time has it been?" Ibero asked after Raiven left. "Five months since Razor's death?"

"Something like that," Solo agreed. "He saw how her girlfriend was murdered in front of his eyes and couldn't do anything to prevent it. Then the prison camp. What wouldn't he see there before escaping? And now this. A shuttle with some of his good friends aboard is shot down, not a hundred meters from him, and again he can't do anything." The Corellian pilot sighed. "Well, Raiven is his best friend here. He'll know how to cheer him up."

"I really hope so. How are you?"

Solo blinked at the unexpected change of focus in the conversation. *Yes, how I am?* "Not bad, I guess," he said after a short pause, trying to sort out his thoughts and feelings. He had feared this was going to happen for weeks, and had tried to guess how it would affect him, what he would do. Now he knew. He had behaved in combat as if the enemy in front were Imperial pilots, not possible friends from his childhood. And he had tried to guess what he would say if someone asked how he felt. Still he didn't know very well how to put it in words. "I suppose that when I left Corellia for the first time and started to fly everywhere, I became a sort of citizen of the galaxy." *Bullshit*, Solo thought. It had sounded like an essayed answer, and that was what it was. "I mean, I'm a Corellian, I feel like a Corellian, but I wholeheartedly believe in the New Republic. If I'm forced to fight against other Corellians, I can manage it. But I don't like it a single bit, of course."

"Of course."

What he had just said was true, but it didn't really answer Ibero's question. Probably nothing he said would. Solo couldn't tell from his partner's expression whether he believed that this was all about it or not, but at least he didn't seem inclined to keep asking questions. *Or more probably he has his own concerns. And I think I know what they are.* "What about you?"

"Me? What do you mean?"

"You were hit during the battle. I can see you're not injured, but...."

Now Ibero was the one who looked surprised for an instant, but then he nodded. "I didn't know you were such a mind reader."

"Your look. It gets lost from time to time, for the briefest instant. Like if you were thinking of something else, but tried hard to push it out of your mind."

Ibero arched an eyebrow. "I thought Drake was the ex policeman here, but you're a fine observer, too."

"I just like playing sabacc."

Ibero let a short laugh escape, but his expression remained serious. "Yes, they gave me quite a fright. I've been hit before, you know, and I even had to spend a few days in a bacta tank after Mon Calamari. But," Solo nodded, encouraging Ibero to continue, "it's not the same since my daughter was born. Only to think that I might not see her nor my wife again, that Lucia would grow up without a father--I have to fight constantly to not get frozen by *that* fear." An involuntary shudder accentuated Ibero's last sentence. Solo pursed his lips. He could understand that. Having a family of his own was a luxury for a fighter pilot in times of war, and most of them didn't even seriously think of it. Ibero was the only exception in the squadron, and Solo could see now that it was not easy for him. If going out to combat was always terrible, it had to be a lot harder if you had someone waiting for you at home. That was what Solo imagined, but he couldn't be certain. He didn't even have a place he could call home. When he joined the Alliance, he was implicitly renouncing returning to Corellia, at least while the Galactic War continued. Ibero lowered his gaze, and Solo felt suddenly uneasy. He now regretted asking.

"You manage very well," he said, just to break the silence. "I guess that...."

"Lieutenant Commander Tengroth?" A voice sounded at Solo's back. The Corellian turned to find Lieutenant Commander Dey'jaa's hairy face in front of him. "Ah, Ibero, I'm glad to find you here, too."

"Hello, Mesch," Ibero said with a nod, returning quickly to his more usual self-confident attitude. "Can we be of help?"

"Yes, you can. I was looking for Lieutenant Commander Tengroth, but I don't object if you're present." Solo got immediately tense. Ibero and Dey'jaa talked to each other with familiarity, but the Bothan had addressed him formally, using his rank. Even Ibero looked suspicious. *I saw it coming. I've become a security problem in their eyes. I've just shot down two Corellian fighters, but that won't prove anything. I'll be lucky if I'm confined to my quarters instead of being sent directly to a cell, just in case.* "Counselor Organa will be meeting the Corellian Admiral within the hour, on board the *First Citizen*." Dey'jaa continued, seemingly unaware of Solo's concerns. "Negotiations will start immediately, and I don't need to tell you how serious things are. Before she departed, Colonel Gen'jaa talked to me about an idea she had, and I promised her I'd work on it. The present situation has made it of the utmost importance to put her plan into practice. For that I need you, Lieutenant Commander Tengroth."

Solo was astonished, but he answered without hesitation. "Of course. What is it all about?"

"We'll talk more comfortably in my quarters..." Dey'jaa seemed to notice the two pilots' appearance for the first time, still wearing their flight suits and their life support equipment. "Not immediately, of course. Can you be there in ten minutes?"

"You bet," Ibero answered. With that, both men raced out of the medical bay.

Mar Hanniuska stood on the flight deck regarding the destruction that surrounded her with unseeing eyes. A lonely tear rolled down her cheek, leaving a clearer streak on her blackened face. Hanniuska's look was fixed on a Verpine, as covered by grease as she was, working industriously on a crippled A-Wing. That was how Vyper found her.

"Mar? Are you all right?"

"No, I'm not." Vyper followed her look to the busy Verpine, who seemed not even to notice the presence of the two humans. Vyper remembered the names of the four Verpines who worked in Hanniuska's team, Phasx, Meggo, Detrs and Klips, from a stupid song someone invented, probably Hardrive or Drake, around the woman's most obvious charms. The chorus was catchy, virtually impossible to forget once you had heard it once.

....look at Hanniuska, she doesn't mind,
the girl is the prettiest you will ever find
but if you try to have a taste of her lips,
yours will be broken by Phasx, Meggo, Detrs and Kllips.

There it was again, and now it would be hard to get rid of it. Vyper would have laughed at himself if the situation were not what it was. Venting his frustration against the crate had helped, but he was far from feeling good. Nevertheless, the silly verse kept repeating in his mind while he watched the Verpine. Phasx, Meggo, Detrs and Kllips. Yes, he knew their names, but that didn't help him to distinguish one of the Verpines from another, something that seemed so easy for Hanniuska. *It would be easy for me, too, if I had been living with them for years.*

"Where are the others?" He had not finished his question when he understood the mistake he had just made.

"Detrs and Kllips are dead. Meggo is in the medical bay, seriously injured. He is waiting for his turn in the bacta tank, but he may not live to see it. Of the rest of technicians, seven are dead and five more are injured, although not as badly as Meggo."

Vyper bit his lower lip. "I'm sorry."

Hanniuska nodded. "Phasx has decided that work is the best thing to do, provided he can't do anything to help his brothers nor his friends. These Verpines are so practically minded... He is probably right, but, I don't think I could..." Hanniuska interrupted herself, as if she had suddenly remembered something. "I saw Sparks. How is he?"

"I've been told that he will make it."

Hanniuska looked at him, probably noticing the bitterness in his voice. "And the rest of the guys? Not all the fighters are here..."

Vyper returned the look. "We've lost Torpedo, Sacart, Iceman and Gandalf. We don't know for sure if any of them survived. The Corellians recovered all the ejected pilots. And I've just learned that the *Compassion* was shot down on Seibergia with Rooster, Moose, Foxfire and Doctor Al Saruff on board."

"What? The *Compassion* too?" Dismayed, Hanniuska lowered her look. "I had to imagine. Things out there must have been tough, too."

"A real hell. And it may not be over yet."

The woman nodded in silence. A new tear traced a second streak on her cheek. She got along very well with the pilots, and some of them were close friends for her, especially Rooster. Vyper regretted having come looking for Hanniuska so soon, without finding out first what the casualties among her crew were. He had just made her grief worse with his news. He waited, expecting Hanniuska to break down crying at any moment, but that didn't happen. Instead, the dark-haired woman took a hydro-spanner from her tool belt and climbed to the ship adjacent to the one Phasx was working on. "I'll see that these cans are back in combat condition when you need them," she said, "but Vyper?"

"Yes?"

"Next time shoot down a couple of those bastard Corellians for me."

Vyper left without answering, feeling his uneasiness grow. Hanniuska's reaction had proven something that worried him the most, now that he thought of it. Before the recent battle, the immense majority of the New Republic people would have said that they didn't want a war against the Corellian worlds, and they would be sincere. Those same people, at least on board this and the rest of the ships that had taken a part on the fight, were now thirsty for revenge. *It's easy to assume that it will be the same among the Corellians. We all*

have suffered losses today, although ours have been probably worse. I don't imagine how they are going to keep that from ruining any attempt of negotiation. Vyper took a deep breath. Good luck, Princess Leia. You sure are going to need it. And if there's actually such a thing, may the Force with you.

"I don't know how we are going to get him out of here." Moose shook his head coming out through the emergency hatch. "The access to the cockpit is definitely blocked. We'd need a laser torch to cut it open."

"There must be some other way," Foxfire said. "We can't leave him here. Who knows when help will come."

"If it ever does," Moose replied. Noticing Foxfire's admonishing look, he decided to elaborate more. "I mean in time. Another of those chicken walkers could come, and we sure wouldn't be so lucky. Those troopers we saw, they must be calling for reinforcements right now."

"Do you think they are part of a Seibergian offensive? We had never detected Seibergian heavy vehicles this far from the frontiers before. We've got to get access to a communications unit..."

"Please, think of something," Rooster pleaded appearing behind Moose. "I think the doctor was right. There must be some kind of internal damage. I think he's about to slip into a coma."

Sdermila watched the New Republic people coming in and out of the crippled ship wondering how she could be of help. More of the refugees had been arriving since the shooting had ended, although most of the group stood on the path. She saw Deveralia and her sons there, and waved at them to make them know she was there and that she was safe. Deveralia answered raising timidly a hand, which she lowered immediately. Sdermila turned toward the spacers. For what she had heard and seen, it seemed that they were unable to take their doctor out. She walked around the ship with her kalahorse in tow, trying to have a look at the cabin. It was then when she noticed the damaged windscreen.

"Excuse me, ma'am," she called the woman with the arm in a sling, the one who had introduced herself as Foxfire. "Have you tried to break the windscreen?"

"The windscreen?" Foxfire repeated. "It's made of transparisteel. Even fractured as it is, there's no way we can break it. Moose there has already tried in vain."

"But if there were a way, wouldn't that harm the man trapped inside?"

"We could cover him with some blankets... Why, do you have an idea?" the woman asked suddenly, disbelief and hope mixed in her voice.

"Maybe. Or maybe not, if that thing is as tough as you say."

"How?"

"My kalahorse could do it. I believe."

The woman didn't stop to ask details. She ran towards her partners and told them something. They both entered hastily the ship again. When they came out, less than a minute later, the woman went back.

"Do you need something? We have some tools..."

"No, no, just stay behind me." Sdermila pulled the reins forcing the kalahorse to move. "Come on, old beast. Let's see if there's still some of your bad temper inside that ugly body." She made the animal to turn until its rear quarters were in front of the damaged viewscreen, less than a meter from the place where its right side sank in the snow. Then she let the reins drop and walked back some steps. The kalahorse now seemed calm enough. Sdermila crouched down and took some snow in her hands. She got up rounding the snow into a ball, and then launched it at the kalahorse's rear side. The startled beast kicked back with all its strength, hitting the viewscreen with both hooves at the same time. The transparisteel cracked almost

without noise. The kalahorse made an attempt to run, but already Sdermila was recovering her grip on the hanging reins. An old man approached her, limping, and helped her to hold down the animal.

"It will be enough!" The big spacer, Moose, exclaimed with satisfaction. "Rooster, help me out here!"

"Sshhh. Calm yourself, old beast," Sdermila muttered close to the kalahorse's ear while she caressed the fur on its neck. "You've done a good work. I'm glad with you."

"It's still a good kalahorse," the old man commented in Balanish.

"Thank you very much, Sdermila," Foxfire exclaimed. "That...kalahorse? Yes, that kalahorse of yours may have saved our doctor's life."

Sdermila nodded, feeling a tear fighting to roll down. Foxfire said, "I'm sorry, have I said something wrong?"

"No, you don't," she answered recovering the composure. "And you're welcome."

Foxfire smiled and walked back towards the ship.

"You see, Taigor," Sdermila said to herself, in a barely audible tone. "The old beast has redeemed itself. It killed you, but know it has saved a man's life." In that moment, Moose came out through the broken windscreen, pulling a blanket with considerable difficulties. Rooster held as best as she could the other end, her face red with the effort. Two Balanish women went to help them. Sdermila first thought that the New Republic doctor had to be very big, very fat, of both things at once. But when she had a better look at the body that laid on the blanket, she gasped. "Maybe not exactly a man's life, Taigor," she corrected herself, "but someone's life anyway."

Doctor Al Saruff was accommodated as best as possible on a floating stretcher, which Moose and Rooster had managed to remove from the shuttle's cargo compartment. Evidently, these Balanish had never seen an Ithorian before because his appearance caused no little sensation. The first person to recover from the surprise was that old woman, Sdermila, who was now helping Rooster to apply bacta patches on several places on the doctor's body. Under Foxfire's direction, some of the sturdiest women had made a human chain to recover as many things as possible from the *Compassion*. Most of the containers had resisted the crash without suffering serious damage, but some of the most valuable items, like the two food processors and the first-grade energy generator, couldn't be extracted through the narrow emergency hatch. They had no time to try to dismantle them, and even if they did, they couldn't carry too much stuff with only a handful of kalahorses. They had to content themselves with what they could get. It would be much better than nothing.

While Moose watched the surroundings, dozens of sealed boxes of food and medicines, packed tents and other various supplies were passed from hand to hand, from the interior of the shuttle to the exterior, where Foxfire classified them. Moose lowered the macrobinoculars and took a look at the piles of stuff recovered already. Soon they would have all that they could carry. Moose hesitated. He wanted to inspect the AT-ST before leaving, but on the other hand he didn't like the idea of lowering his guard. So far, he had been unable to find any trace of more troops around, but that didn't mean there weren't any. There were a hundred places where a pair of stormtroopers could be hidden with an E-Web or a portable launcher. But if that was the case, what they were waiting for before attacking them? He called Foxfire's attention and pointed at the walker. She nodded and patted the holster of her blaster. Moose smiled. Sometimes he still was amazed at how well they understood each other, even without words. He started to walk towards the AT-ST.

He opened the upper hatch with the utmost care, ready to shoot his blaster at the first sign of movement. His caution proved to be superfluous: the two occupants of the walker were dead, as he had already suspected. One of them had his skull broken. His helmet was sunk above his forehead by the impact against the viewport. The man had been careless or stupid enough to not correctly fasten his restraints. The other puzzled Moose at first. He didn't wear his helmet, which rested in front of him on the crippled control panel. His head fell lazily on his chest, giving him the look of a deactivated droid, but there were no blood nor signs of fatal injuries. Moose moved his face looking for a clue, and then something fell from his mouth. It was a small jewel, hanging from a necklace the man was wearing under the armor. When Moose, intrigued, inspected it, discovered that the jewel concealed a little compartment under its rear face. It was open and empty. "Poison," he said aloud, "it had to be some kind of poison." There was no way he could be sure, though, without an autopsy of the corpse or an analysis of the jewel's interior. There might be some

microscopic remains of what it had contained. He decided to check if the other man carried his own necklace, too. Removing carefully the helmet, and getting his hands soaked in blood in the process, he confirmed his suspicion. Moose passed the necklace with its unopened jewel around the soldier's smashed head and dropped it into one of his pockets. Before getting out of the walker's cockpit, he searched the soldiers' armor. He took their blasters and their personal datapads, which might store some valuable data. When he finally came out, he thanked the cold blow of wind that greeted him. It cleaned away the smell of death from his nostrils.

Meanwhile, Rooster and Sdermila had tied the floating stretcher on which doctor Al Saruff lay to the old woman's kalahorse. The things they had salvaged from the *Compassion* were now carried by the remaining kalahorses and the refugees themselves. The column was ready to move.

"We'll be travelling with them," Foxfire explained. "They are heading to our camp, so we can give them some protection."

"And we can conceal ourselves among them," Moose said in a low voice, so Rooster couldn't hear him, "in case there are any undesired observers along these mountains."

Foxfire nodded. "That too. What did you find in the walker?"

"The pilots are dead. One of them by the crash, the other committed suicide." Foxfire looked at him, arching her eyebrows. "He poisoned himself. Both of them wore one of these," Moose said showing her the collar. "The jewel conceals the poison. At least I'm sure it's not a condiment for their lunches."

"Why do you think they'd be so fearful of being captured?"

"I don't know. Perhaps they've done so many atrocities that they think the Balanish will torture them if they're caught."

"Can you imagine these women, children and old people torturing anybody?"

"No, I can't, but maybe the local guerillas are another thing."

"Maybe. One of the refugees has mentioned that they encountered them last night. They recruited all the non incapacitated men and parted. They left a young boy behind to serve the remaining refugees as a guide."

"A guide boy? Where is he?"

"He went ahead to explore, I've been told. Maybe he was the one who was shooting at the Seibergians a while ago."

"That would explain it. Without his help, I doubt we'd have been able to make them flee. But why he didn't show up after?" Moose stopped at mid sentence. For Foxfire's look, the same thought had occurred to her. Moose ran toward the place where he believed his ally had been hidden.

And there he found him. A laser bolt had penetrated his throat and destroyed most of the boy's neck, almost tearing apart his head. He couldn't be more than fifteen years old. Moose felt suddenly very sick and very angry.

"There's nothing we can do," he said to Foxfire and Rooster, who had come at Foxfire's request carrying a salvaged medpac.

"Poor kid," Foxfire said. Rooster winced and looked at the other side.

"Now that we're here, I may as well take a look," Moose said. "I'll be back."

Foxfire shook her head and returned with Rooster, while Moose walked, not without caution, toward the elevation from which the Seibergians had been shooting. There he found a dead stormtrooper and a speeder bike, with the engine pierced in two places by blaster impacts. Half buried beside it, there was a sniper

blaster, which Moose took. The weapon had a thermal sight installed. The snow had no doubt being confounding the device, attenuating the readings it could get and preventing it from acquiring targets. That had probably saved Moose's life. *That and the boy there.* Moose noticed then uneven footsteps moving away. Some stains of blood, almost swallowed by the snow but still visible, sprinkled the ground here and there. *One of them was injured. He couldn't use the speeder bike, so he had to escape on foot.* Moose took some steps following the prints. Some meters away, their owner had fallen. From there the footsteps were more irregular. *He is half crawling. Can't be too far.*

Holding the sniper blaster at ready, Moose followed the footsteps as fast as the snow layer allowed.

XII

Colonel Gen'yaa had just been informed about the losses and damage suffered by the *Wolf's Lair*. She longed to return to her ship and take charge of the situation, but Admiral Sinessis had forbidden all but the most indispensable trips. Even if that had not been the case, there were no shuttles available on the *Brave Soul*. All of them were scattered on the recent combat area, looking in vain for extravehicular pilots and evacuation pods. So far they had recovered only the burned corpse of one of Lancer Squadron's pilots. *Point for the Corellians*, she thought.

While she waited for more news and a chance to abandon the *Brave Soul*, the Bothan woman analyzed the new situation with the calm and the coldness she applied to almost everything. The Corellians had bet on a single and definitive strike, a blow that should have given them a quick and bloodless, for them, strategic victory. But the sudden arrival of the *Liberator* had ruined their chances of succeeding, reducing considerably the disadvantage of the New Republic fleet. With the Star Destroyer here, the Corellians wouldn't take the control of the system without suffering important losses, and Gen'yaa didn't believe that they were willing to risk that. They could ask for reinforcements, yes, but the New Republic would do that too, and now they knew it. By sending one of their most capable battleships to Seibergia, Mon Mothma had given a clear message to the Corellian Diktat: *we'll fight if that's what it takes.* She had managed to force a negotiation and buy some time, but the Corellians still had the stronger position. In case the firepower of their cruisers was not enough to grant them a strength position, they had another valuable card to play with: they had prisoners, and the New Republic did not.

At least the *Lair* had survived the battle. It was almost incredible. Wumb had managed to temporarily disable one of the enemy cruisers as he was ordered, but the Strike Carrier had not been destroyed like they all had expected and feared. That would have happened at the end, had the battle continued, but instead of allowing her ship to be destroyed while trying to escape, Wumb had chosen to fall fighting. Had he been able to put the *Lair* between the two Corellian Cruisers, as he obviously intended, both capital ships would have received some extra damage. Now that she thought of it, they could have been forced to use ion cannons to avoid damaging age other; in which case the *Lair* would have been disabled, but not destroyed. Gen'yaa wondered if that was what Wumb had actually been looking for with that apparently mad attack. The Sullustan was good, even better than she acknowledged, and courageous, too. She felt a little punch of envy when she thought of how her second in command had gotten to perform an action that would bring him glory and prestige, but she immediately suppressed it. Gen'yaa was proud of her second and her crew, and, all things considered, a part of the merit of their success in the battle would fall on her shoulders because she was their captain. How ironic. Before the *Wolf's Lair* was sent to the Viyak cluster, her race to the ranks of generals and admirals promised to be quick and short. And she would have made it--not because her contacts, but mainly because of her work. But now everything was compromised. Not only her career, but the very future of the New Republic.

She had seen it coming. An accident like this had to happen sooner or later, it was just a question of time. But she wished it had not been one of her pilots who had shot down that damned transport. Her investigation had not produced any results so far. The only option to save the New Republic's face remained throwing all the weight of military law on the heads of Commander Gregory and Lieutenant Colonel Schroeder, but the harm might be already done. It was uncertain if that alone could prevent the confrontation with Corellia now that things had gone so far. Unless Counselor Leia was really the negotiation genius that many believed, the New Republic could be forced to retire in shame from the Viyak cluster before giving

the Empire what they wanted. Or to stay and fight, which could only benefit the enemy. Nobody could tell what would be worse for the New Republic's future in the long run. As for the people of the Balanish Country, they would be doomed in any case.

Even if what now seemed impossible actually happened, and the war against Corellia was somehow avoided without sacrificing the New Republic's image, all this could still affect her personally. In the same way she benefited from the heroism and good performance of the *Wolf's Lair's* crew, the actions of Wolfshead Squadron were also related to her, the one who gave them their orders. She participated in their successes and their failures. She had just learned that Gregory and Schroeder were probably dead. Poetic justice, many would call it. Without a trial, there wouldn't be public humiliation for the two pilots, but no chance of their being declared innocent either. Damn it. Her name would appear in the History records beside the names of those who caused, or could have caused, a war between Corellia and the New Republic. Gen'yaa frowned with disgust. A part of her mind rebelled at her lack of consideration for the lives of those pilots who, up to this date, could have been considered heroes of the New Republic for their past actions. They had actually been decorated several times. Did she lament their deaths only because she wanted them to be publicly judged? A trial would have been good. Whatever the verdict, it would be better than this poetic justice, that is, the public assumption that they were guilty of a negligence that killed innocent people. *In any case, they didn't have to die for that.* Gen'yaa grimaced, mildly surprised by her own feelings. She wondered if that was her human side speaking. But no, not exactly. Dey'jaa was completely Bothan, and he didn't show a boundless ambition like others of their species. Was *hers* boundless? No, not quite. She didn't want to be the President of the New Republic, like Borsk Fey'laa sure did. Not even to be a councilor or a senator, when the Senate was reconstructed as Mon Mothma had promised already. Gen'yaa knew very well where her place was, and if her getting to it was good for the Bothan people, the better. Was there something bad in hoping that those pilots had survived for something more than their usefulness for her private interest? She had already answered herself a moment ago when she reflected about Wumb's exploits. She respected her crew and the members of Wolfshead Squadron as much as she wanted to be respected by them. She didn't usually recognize it, but she wanted the best for all of them. Neither death, nor defeat, nor humiliation. After all, she was their captain. Gen'yaa smiled without humor. *So I'm not such an ice floe like everybody, myself included, believes, am I?* But she didn't deceive herself. Supposing that those pilots had survived, if the choice ever were between them and her own career, she would help herself. After all, Gregory had disobeyed her orders, and Schroeder had allowed it.

Her mind returned quickly to the problems facing her. Maybe not everything was lost. She wondered if Dey'jaa had put her plan into practice. If it got the results she had hoped, she could prove what her intuition told her: that the presence of that transport beside a Seibergian mine-deploying convoy was not casual. And if that could be demonstrated, then Schroeder and Gregory could be absolved, even if the last had shot without a positive identification. She wanted them alive and flying again, if that was possible. That would be good for everybody, including herself.

Colonel Gen'yaa," captain's Omicri voice said behind her. "I have a transmission for you from the *First Citizen*."

"The *First Citizen*?" *The admiral has not flown to the First Citizen, has he?* Sinensis had abandoned the *Brave Soul's* bridge immediately after the battle ended, supposedly to go to the Tactical Room to plan his strategy in case the truce was interrupted by another explosion of violence. "Who may that be?"

"Counselor Organa." The Duros' big red eyes showed no trace of being joking. Gen'yaa stiffened and nodded, following him to the holoprojector area. The illuminated cylinder above the device showed already the image of a dark-haired human woman, wearing a New Republic military flightsuit without rank marks. Counselor Leia Organa. Princess Leia in person.

"Your Highness, I'm Colonel Gen'yaa, captain of the *Wolf's Lair*."

"Glad to meet you, Colonel, but you better call me Counselor." Without making any perceptible pause, Leia Organa continued. "Although my Corellians hosts had assured me that this is a private and not scanned line, I prefer you not reveal any strategic detail in this conversation."

"I understand, Councilor."

"Well. Before today's disaster, the incident headed by pilots of Wolfshead Squadron had become the entire focus of this crisis. The Corellians still consider it the point of no return."

"What about them blowing up the shuttle carrying the committee investigating that same crisis?"

"Good point, Colonel," In spite of her words, Leia Organa's holographic image frowned at Gen'yaa while she shook her head almost imperceptibly. That was a matter not to be commented in this conversation. "They say that was an accident, caused by the fact that the shuttle coincidentally entered normal space too close to one of their ships, and the automatic defenses reacted considering it a threat. I believe them, Colonel." *Me too, but that should make our position a bit stronger, shouldn't it? Everybody can cause an accident, they and us both.* "But the question of the destruction of the Balanish transport remains. I've been told that, before these last unfortunate events, you had conducted your own investigation with your personnel. Did you obtain any results?"

"Not yet, Counselor, although we've not finished yet. We..." Gen'yaa got quiet for some instants. She had to tell the Counselor that a serious complication had arisen. But how? If this conversation was being heard as Organa suspected, she could not even mention it. If the Corellians learned that the pilot who killed the refugees and his commander were on Seibergia, dead or alive they would hurry to capture them.

"Yes, Colonel?"

Gen'yaa took a deep breath. "It's something I must ask you. Maybe you can help."

Leia Organa stared at her. She had to be wondering what Gen'yaa was up to, but her expression remained the same. "I hear you."

"Several of my crewmen presented themselves as volunteers, for a period helping in one of our refugees camps on the Balanish Country."

"That's very praiseworthy." The Counselor's tone was completely neutral. Gen'yaa had no way to know whether Organa was informed or not about the fact that the two pilots involved in the incident were going to travel to the Balanish Country. If that was the case, she might take the hint and realize what Gen'yaa was talking about. She had the impression that Organa actually knew. An idea occurred to her and, for the briefest instant, Gen'yaa doubted. She had heard that Leia Organa had Jedi powers, like her supposed brother, Skywalker. While she didn't believe in the Force, Gen'yaa was certain that all the Jedi had paranormal powers. Would Organa be able somehow to read her mind? What if she found out that this volunteering thing had been her fabrication? Gen'yaa dismissed this concern. Organa was a diplomat. If a little deceit helped to avoid a war, she would support it. Nevertheless, it was too late to go back.

"Their shuttle was shot down on the Balanish Country in the first moments of the battle. Four people were aboard, including the *Wolf's Lair's* chief doctor. I've just learned it myself."

Leia Organa looked sincerely alarmed. "Are they well?"

"We don't know yet. They have told me that the Corellians have warned that any ship entering Seibergia's space again will be considered like an act of war, and the end of the truce."

"That's correct, Colonel, but I don't think they will deny us the permission to send a rescue party. I'll talk to their admiral."

"Thank you very much, Counselor."

"Your concern for your people is well understood and shared, Colonel. Meanwhile, go back to your ship and see if your investigation staff have reached any new conclusion. In that case, contact me immediately through Admiral Sinassis. I'll do the same if we find your people alive."

"Again, thank you, Counselor."

"You are welcome, Colonel. Ah, and on my behalf, congratulate your crew and pilots for their excellent work. If my hosts are casually listening to me, I don't think they should be bothered for me saying this. Organa out."

The image disappeared before Gen'yaa could say thank you for a third time. That last line had sounded like a sort of provocation to the Corellians, in case the transmission was being monitored. There it was another

hidden message for the Corellians: *Don't abuse of your position. A considerably inferior fleet has been able to put you in trouble and compromise your advance. Now that forces are more balanced, if you try to make your points by violence again, you will have to face the consequences.* Gen'yaa had to respect that woman. Her praise of her subordinates also warmed her, whether that was her intention or not. Seemingly, she was not the only one impressed. Duros' facial expression were hardly readable, but when she turned toward Captain Omicri his tone was full of consideration.

"I'll call back one of our shuttles, Colonel. You will be on board your ship in no time."



Night had fallen on the Balanish Country. Rooster couldn't tell when exactly it had happened, because the thick cloud layer allowed very little light to get through. She had never had a clue about where the local sun was, but now darkness was complete. Seibergia had no moons that could illuminate its skies at night, supposing they were clear, which they weren't. With not even a single lantern lit, for fear of betraying their passage to possible Seibergian troops, the refugees advanced in complete obscurity. With the darkness, the cold had become even worse. Rooster didn't complain aloud for shame, although she had to grit her teeth to prevent them from clattering. She was wearing thermal clothes and boots, while the Balanish refugees had only vulgar coats and capes to protect themselves from the chilling wind. This echoed between the cliffs like if the mountain were a sort of giant organ, playing an ominous symphony that brought notes of irrational fear out of her soul. Children, women and old men kept walking, one after the other, carrying their scarce possessions and the packets rescued from the *Compassion*. Not even a single moan escaped from them, although she saw tears on the faces of some of the women when there was still light enough to distinguish them. Feeling so much grief and suffering around her, and being unable to do anything to help, filled her heart with unbearable anguish. The only people whose pain she could relieve were the wounded ones.

Now there was a second stretcher, tied to the rump of a kalahorse like the doctor's was. The Seibergian stormtrooper was unconscious when Mouse brought him, and Rooster had taken steps to keep him so. The

sedative she had applied him would accomplish the double goal of helping him to rest and prevent him from causing any trouble. He had a clean wound on his left armpit caused by a laser bolt that could have burned him to his heart or torn his arm off, but which did neither. The man, young enough judging by his face, had lost a large amount of blood, but Rooster thought he would recover soon. The bacta patches would work better for him than what they did for the poor doctor. The Ithorian needed a surgeon. The exam she had performed on him with the help of a medical scanner had confirmed Al Saruff's self-diagnosis and her worst fears. He had suffered two broken ribs, and one had partially penetrated one of the Ithorian's breathing sacks. Furthermore, the bone splinters had caused critical damage in the surrounding tissues. The internal bleeding seemed to have eased now, but that was only a part of the problem. There was also a breach in his hip and an open fracture in the left leg; but, after immobilizing the limb, reducing the fracture and applying the patches, Rooster believed that Al Saruff wouldn't have any complications. If he survived his internal injuries.

Foxfire had taken leadership of the refugee group as naturally as Moose had adopted the role of guide and escort. Rooster almost envied them. She hated the weight of the blaster they had given her, hanging now on her waist and rubbing her thigh at every step, but understood the need for it. If they ran into another Seibergian group, they'd have to defend themselves. Confronted with the reality of war, Rooster had been forced to accept that some compromises should be taken. Such as carrying a weapon, and even using it if the time came. She preferred not to think of it. She once had shot down a couple of Imperial TIE Fighters that got too close to the *Compassion*, ignoring the danger that her cannons posed; but that seemed a different thing. She didn't see the faces of the pilots, only their machines, and she could always hope that the automatic ejection mechanism would have saved them from actually dying at her hands. That self-illusion wouldn't work if she had to shoot at somebody and saw the blood emerging from the wounds. Her mind traveled back to the day when the Lumi moon was invaded, and she had to run for her life. The Imperial stormtroopers didn't respect anybody. Many people she loved died that day. They killed Ros'ty, her couple, although he was unarmed. He insisted on staying behind to reason with them. Rooster had seen him fall from the distance. She would have shot back at the Imperials had she had a weapon then. Maybe she'd have to force herself to remember that more often.

Foxfire's voice interrupted her thoughts when she called for a stop. Rooster looked around. It was hard to say, but they seemed to be more and less at the middle of the pass. On both sides, rock walls protected them from the worst of the wind, and the sensation of cold was not so strong. After so many hours of climbing, the ground was almost flat, announcing the descent that awaited them from this point to the boundaries of the camp. But that would wait until the sun rose again. Now it would be far too dangerous to continue downwards in the darkness. If that were not reason enough, these people had to be exhausted; although, no one complained. She for one couldn't take another step, and she had not been walking for so long as they had. She was hungry, as well.

"Rooster," she heard Foxfire again, "help me to distribute the rations. That'll have to be all for tonight. Moose thinks we can't risk making a fire, and I'm of the same opinion."

"What you say. I don't want to see another walker coming after us, nor a group of stormtroopers shooting at us."

"Me neither, that I can tell you. Talking about the devil, what about our uninvited guest? It might be a good idea to interrogate him a bit--he must know if there are more troops around."

"I could give him a stimulant to counteract the sedative, but it would be best to wait a bit more. With the blood he has lost, he's probably still too weak. I'd give him another synthetic blood bag, but we have so few that..."

"If he is not dying, don't spare any more with him," Foxfire agreed with Rooster's unfinished sentence. "Use that stimulant when you think he will be strong enough to talk."

"All right. How is your arm?"

"Better, thanks to you. It itches a bit, but I guess that's normal."

"Yes, it is. In a bacta tank you would be cured in six hours. With patches it will take a while longer. I'll remove the bandage in three days, and your arm will be like new in a week."

"Great. And the doctor?"

Rooster bit her lower lip before answering. "Bad. I'm really worried about him, Avery. Without some serious medical assistance, he could die soon. I don't know how much time he has. Ithorian are sturdier than humanoids in some ways, but more delicate in others."

"Can't you do anything?"

"No!" Rooster all but cried, attracting some looks from the closest Balanish. "No," she repeated in a calmer tone. "I'm sorry, Avery, I know you didn't mean..."

"You know I didn't."

"Look, we have nothing like an operating theater, and I'm not even remotely a surgeon. You've seen today practically all I know how to do. Applying bacta patches and set broken bones, provided there are only open fractures."

"Don't be too modest, Roo. What you've done today, including that incredible emergency landing, makes you my greatest hero for the rest of my life."

Rooster almost smiled. "Thanks. I'm just afraid it won't be enough. Not for the doctor; not for these people."

"I'm sorry, Rooster?" It was Sdermila the one who approached tentatively in the obscurity. "You are the doctor's assistant, aren't you?"

"Sort of, it seems. How may I assist you, Sdermila?"

"My friend Deveralia. I think she is about to have her baby. Now."

"Oh, my. Are you really sure?"

"Mostly. I had two myself, but she is going for the third one. She says she is coming, and she must know how it feels like."

Foxfire sighed. "I don't think I've actually seen all you know about medicine, yet, Roo." She didn't make it sound quite like a joke.

"We need sterilized water. Avery, you know which containers--find them, then you can distribute those rations. None for me, I'm not hungry any more. Sdermila, you've just said you had two sons. You probably know a lot more than me about what has to be done. Will you help me?"

"Oh. Yes, of course, of course I will."

Three hours later, Sdermila rested at last in one of the salvaged tents. Figor and Lania slept deeply beside her, sharing one of the sleeping bags they had also taken from the downed ship. The two exhausted children had been here since they camped. When they woke up they would learn that they had a new sister. Deveralia and her baby were all right. There they were, near the tent's entrance, the woman silently nursing the child. She wouldn't have any milk until tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow, but as Sdermila knew well, the sucking would contribute to accelerate the first rise of milk. Besides it helped to console and calm down the newborn. Sdermila smiled. Rooster was almost paler than the mother when the baby's head showed up, but she composed herself very well. Sdermila had watched, enthralled how those strange appendages that were scattered on her head changed color while she followed the instructions provided by that little talking device she called an autodoc. She had never seen such a thing before. Rooster had asked her to cut the umbilical cord while she made the knot. Deveralia, poor child, had cried when she saw the little girl's face. Tears of joy and grief, because her husband was not there like he had been when her two older sons were born. Sdermila had stayed with Deveralia, giving her the slight consolation of her company, while Rooster went out to watch the doctor. What a strange being he was. Rooster had said he was an Ithorian, and she had called herself a Lumi. Sdermila had never met aliens in her life. She had heard that some of them

visited Nurtina's spaceport from time to time, but she was not too curious. She had enough to think about with her sons and her modest plantation, the only source of incomes for the family, which demanded of her full attention. Now, at her age, she discovered that there actually was a whole universe beyond this world filled with interesting people like Rooster and amazing things like an autodoc. She wondered whether she would have been able to help her dear Taigor herself, the damned day when the kalahorse kicked him, had she been provided with one of those devices. But no, even with its help, Rooster had told her that she couldn't cure the Ithorian doctor. Internal damage, she had said. That was the same that the Seibergian doctor said then, after arriving way too late, when Taigor was already dead. He suffered much. One day and a half of agony waiting for a medic that never seemed to come, while her neighbor Kaliga took care of Jeiran and Lania. Kaliga. Now she and her husband were dead too, disintegrated along with their house, because Divanian thought he would be able to stop the Seibergians with his pathetic rifle.

Sdermila wiped a tear off from her face. She cried for Taigor, as always, but also for Kaliga and Divanian, for Deveralia and her sons, for all the suffering she was seeing these days. She hoped that, in spite of what she had said, Rooster would be able to save the doctor. He had come to assist them, and he didn't deserve to die like that. It was the first time she saw her people well treated by complete strangers. When she came out of the tent where Deveralia had given birth to her baby, she found Foxfire there, waiting with a box of energy biscuits, that was how she called them, which Sdermila devoured, surprised to discover how hungry she was. The other man, Moose, was somewhere outside their improvised camp, organizing watch turns with volunteers. Yes, these bizarre people, who preferred to use the names of animals she had never seen instead of their real names, were really here to help. This increased Sdermila's faith on the New Republic they belonged to. She would ask Rooster tomorrow if, after they reached the camp, there could be a way for her to go to Balania. Maybe they could take her with Jeiran, Voeda and the kids. Yes, they would do that. Sdermila smiled in the dark. Suddenly things seemed a lot less desperate than the night before. Sdermila closed her eyes and succumbed to sleep. She dreamt of her family.

Inside the tent he shared with Foxfire and a dozen Balanish, Moose was unable to sleep. Foxfire seemed uneasy, too, tossing and turning. She let a moan escape every time she leaned her weight on her right arm. The insomnia was not surprising, he thought. As hard as all these last days had been, this one had definitely won first prize. They had been shot down, they had crashed, had being attacked by an AT-ST, and then shot at by stormtroopers. The hours that followed those episodes of danger and fear had not let them stop to think about what had happened. Rescuing the doctor, pursuing that wounded stormtrooper who slept sedated in the next tent, walking and walking on the snow, through narrow passes where a new ambush could be waiting at every second, and then organizing the night camp, had all consumed his strength. Even after all that, he still couldn't sleep.

The danger was not over yet. While this was probably the safest place to pitch the camp, on the highest part of this mountain path, there were dozens of ways they could be attacked. It wouldn't be impossible for another AT-ST to get there, although it sure would be spotted by his volunteer watchers with time enough for....For what? Well, to give the alarm and run, if nothing else. Other more subtle approaches wouldn't even allow them that. The rocky walls that surrounded the camp offered plenty of hiding places, from where a whole platoon of stormtroopers could be watching them, even now. One or more snipers could climb through one of the numerous natural chimneys and shoot without impunity at them. A small group of commandos could approach in the darkness, silently slice the throats of the women and old men who now held their few weapons, and then take the rest of the camp by surprise. None of the watchers had any experience with weapons, with the exception of the old crippled man who had taken charge of the sniper blaster. He had introduced himself as Anderas. He addressed Moose as captain since he learned Moose's rank. Anderas had been the first of the Balanish who offered himself to stand watch, informing Moose that he had been recruited by the Empire as local guide forty years ago and received military training. He spat on the snow after spelling the word *Empire*. That gesture puzzled Moose a bit. For Ibero's explanations, he had understood that the Balanish standard of living had experienced some improvement under the Imperial domination, but obviously not all the Balanish shared that opinion. Anderas explained that he had tried to join the guerilla the night before, but he had been rejected because his crippled leg, not because his age. Anderas seemed so willing to assist that Moose had accepted him as one of his watchers, putting him in the third and last turn. But now he was starting to regret it. Moose remembered that it was Anderas who helped Sdermila to calm her kalahorse, after she had got it to break the *Compassion's* viewport. When Moose climbed out of the downed walker, there he was, watching intently the AT-ST remains and seemingly containing his urge to inspect it himself. And then again when he returned dragging the body of the stormtrooper, looking at the Seibergian with an infinite hate sparking in his eyes. *Damn, I wouldn't be surprised if he was now on the wounded's tent aiming that blaster at his head and caressing the trigger.* That

thought made Moose finally stand up and get out from the tent, taking the utmost care not to disturb Foxfire's Foxfire's fitful sleep.

But Anderas was not there. He saw only the two stretchers where Ben Al Saruff and the Seibergian soldier rested and Rooster, curled up beside the doctor. She opened an eye, as if inspecting him, but Moose indicated to her with a gesture that everything was alright and went out. He visited, one after another, each of the five watch positions he had established, intentionally leaving Anderas' for last. None of the young and middle age women were asleep. They took their role very seriously. Prudently, Moose whispered a warning every time he approached any of them. He didn't want to startle them and find himself with a shot on the chest. No, they haven't seen nor heard anything strange, beside the wind blowing between the rocks. Moose thanked every one of them and followed his tour, until he reached Anderas' post. It dominated the beginning of the descent to the other side of the pass, the path they should take to go to the nearest camp. The darkness was so intense that Moose hardly could see anything beyond Anderas' lonely figure.

"At your orders, captain," the old man said in a low voice, when he warned him of his arrival. "Nothing to inform, sir. This has been an uneventful watch."

"Thank you, Anderas," Moose answered, remembering that the man had asked him to call him simply Anderas, and not Mr. Anderas, although he had stubbornly insisted on calling him captain or sir.

"If you don't mind me to point this out, sir, you should be having some rest now. You've been awake for the other two watches."

"How do you know that? No, don't tell me. You were awake too." *And dying to have your turn at holding the sniper blaster, I guess.*

"We Balanish don't sleep too much, sir." Anderas half smiled. "It's in our genes. Beyond a certain age, we barely need to sleep at all. But you're young enough, captain."

"I slept a lot on the trip here," Moose lied, "before we were so rudely invited to land."

"They made their last mistake, captain. You showed them." Admiration was clear in the old man's voice.

"I was incredibly lucky, that's all."

"God helps His best men."

"Perhaps you're right, thanks." Ibero had included in his report a paragraph about the Balanish' religious beliefs, but even without it, Moose wouldn't have been too surprised at Anderas' wholehearted comment. He had met monotheist believers many times before. The New Republic was such an amalgam of diverse species, cultures and religions, and, after several years of serving on different posts and ships, he had become acquainted with all kinds of beliefs. While the cult to the Force had been the largest in the days of the Old Republic, the Imperial relentless pursuit of the members of the Jedi Order and its supporters had made other religions gain in strength.

"You're welcome, captain," Anderas said, pleased with Moose's apparent acceptance of his beliefs. "It's a honor for me to have a chance of helping a representative of the New Republic. May the day come when the Balanish Country will be admitted in its world brotherhood?"

Why, the man is quite a devoted. Moose didn't want to start a discussion so he didn't say what he thought about that question. That their cause was lost since the beginning. He didn't believe that the Balanish separatists would ever get what they wanted. They would never be citizens of the New Republic, unless their Seibergian neighbors decided to join too, abandoning their Imperial allegiances and their own imperialist dreams. No, Anderas' people would never be independent from Seibergia unless they left Seibergia, and they could hardly do that. Anderas respected his silence, maybe misunderstanding it as agreement, and accompanied him watching the black cliffs, scarcely silhouetted against the slightly less dark dome of the sky. But it was practically impossible to distinguish anything between the shadows that surrounded them.

Something is wrong, Moose thought, although he was unable to decide what. *It's probably that I'm getting nervous because I can't see a damned....* Suddenly he remembered the sniper blaster now in Anderas'

hands, with its thermal sight. Without a storm falling on their heads, the snow that covered the ground would make for an excellent background of cold, over which any presence of heat would be easily caught by the device.

"Anderas, please, give me the blaster."

"Of course, captain," the Balanish said, although he didn't seem precisely happy giving away the precious weapon.

"Thanks." Moose put his right eye on the sight and closed the left. Now he could see more of the world around them, although it was painted in unreal colors, most of them different shades of blue. He moved the blaster slowly in a 180 degree arc, and then back to the initial position. Moose stopped at mid movement. Had he seen a brown spot moving for the briefest instant, or was it only his imagination? There was nothing now. "Anderas, are there any kind of living beings on these mountains?"

"Not this high. Some wild kalagoats can be found in the valleys, feeding on the bushes that grow there. But here, no, I don't think so." Moose nodded. If he saw something hotter than the stones, chances were that they had visitors. He aimed at the bluffs that they had at both sides, at the chimneys concealed between walls of rock, perceived as black vertical breaches in the middle of extensions of dark blue. Nothing. He spent a quarter of an hour scanning the surroundings without seeing a single touch of a warm color. On his side, Anderas had passed from the excited nervousness of the first minutes to evident boredom. He even yawned once, in spite of his declaration of not needing to sleep. Moose himself was starting to feel drowsy, and a bit stupid for his excessive paranoia. The dawn was close now. He considered the idea of going back to the tent and try to rest if only one hour. And then a male voice that was not Anderas' left him frozen where he was.

"Drop the weapon. Now."

"All right, all right," he said, cursing himself. With the corner of his eye, he saw Anderas rising slowly his hands. "I'm dropping it, don't shoot."

"Moose? Are you?"

It can't be...."Cheetah?"

"Hah, the people you find in these mountains!"

Moose almost jumped for joy, to old Anderas' surprise. They had been found by Lynx Commando, the only friendly force on this world. Cheetah was its captain.

Imperial Center, the world known as Coruscant when it was the capital of the Old Republic, shone in all its splendor before Sate Pestage's eyes. He leaned on the balustrade surrounding the terrace of his private quarters in the Imperial Palace and smiled. The repairs after the revolts that followed the death of Emperor Palpatine had been finished, at least here, in the Imperial District. Only one detail remained: the public inauguration of the reconstructed statue of the late Emperor. Under its base there was the blood of those who dared to tear it down. Two platoons of elite stormtroopers, aided by a phalanx of the Imperial Guard, had massacred them before the dust from the destroyed monument had hit the ground. Wretched idiots. How could they think, if only for an instant, that by killing the Emperor they killed the Empire? Well, the Rebels had his personal gratitude for *retiring* the old crow, although the only reward they could expect from him was their persecution and extermination. The New Republic they had so happily declared had become stronger in this year, but it was all appearance. The Rebels knew how to fight. That was beyond any doubt, despite all the nonsense he had to hear in meetings and receptions from self-conceited admirals and generals who had never seen what a real battle was like. What the Rebels had no idea about was how to rule a galaxy with thousands of inhabited worlds, all with their local governments and their private disputes. Without an iron military control and an efficient bureaucracy, everything would soon collapse and fall on their heads. It would be nice to hear Mon Mothma talking about freedom and democracy when that happened. Yes, the Rebels would have exactly what they deserved. He would be waiting to give them the coup de grace and reclaim every last system now in their hands. All those blind and stupid peoples, all those

despicable aliens, would become a lot more docile after the chaos created by one or two years of New Republic rule.

"Everything will be ready in five minutes, milord."

Sate Pestage turned, startled. Ysanne Isard stood a step behind him, looking at him with her unmatched eyes, one cold blue, one fierce red. Those strange eyes always puzzled him. Isard wore an Intelligence Officer's black uniform without rank marks. The white streak in her long dark hair was the only trace of color besides her eyes. Pestage knew that she had a strident red version of that uniform, which she used to impress her subordinates. He might not be as well and quickly informed as she was, but he was still the Emperor. Everything that happened, not only on Coruscant but in every place of the galaxy that mattered, sooner or later came to his ears. So far Isard had worn only the standard black in his presence. Pestage deduced from that fact that she still didn't consider him a subordinate. How kind coming from her. If he didn't need her so badly, he would order her immediate execution without a second thought. Even without proof, he had no doubt that hers was the hand behind the fall in disgrace and later the death of her father, the previous Director of Imperial Intelligence. But Pestage realized that this woman's privileged mind was probably his best weapon against his enemies, as far as they were her enemies too. The plot she had plotted to put Corellia practically in his hands was brilliant--another show of her unquestionable talent. He had no problems using that talent to his benefit, provided he had always half a dozen of his selected Crimson Guards around every time she was near. With the corner of his eye he saw two of them with their energy spears at ready. He didn't doubt of their loyalty, but he would have some words with their captain about admitting visits in his quarters without a previous announcement. Not even if it was the Director of Imperial Intelligence. Better said, especially not her.

"Madame Director," he said in a controlled tone, concealing his initial surprise at her arrival. More than likely, she had noticed and enjoyed it, though.

"I'm sorry if I've disturbed you, Excellency."

"You have not." *Bitch*. "What is the last news from Seibergia?"

"Organa is still on board the *First Citizen*, but the tension is nothing but increasing by the second. The Diktat has sent another squad of Gunships escorting the *Missionary*, his other operative Nova Class Cruiser. They're racing to have their third one ready, but that won't happen any time soon."

Pestage arched an eyebrow. "And that's why?"

"Our agents sabotaged it. Don't worry, the Corellians will never find out, and in case they did, all evidence will point out to the New Republic." Pestage nodded, pleased. Ysanne Isard continued. "Without their Novas, Corellia is now relatively defenseless, Excellency. You could take the system now if you wanted."

"You're not suggesting..."

"Of course not, Excellency," Isard hurried to say. Pestage wondered whether it was his imagination, or he had really seen her smile at his sudden agitation. *Bitch*, he thought for the second time. "I'm just mentioning a possibility, but I think we both agree that Corellia is more useful for us as an ally than as a scornful and defeated servant."

"Not to mention how many Corellian officers there are in our Armed Forces."

"Yes, Excellency. Some of them are among our best."

"Well. What about the New Republic? What's Mon Mothma doing?"

"The have pulled a M-80 Mon Calamari cruiser from the front, the *Rescuer*. It is now racing toward the Viayak cluster. The Star Destroyer *Borrasca* has just arrived."

"*Borrasca*?"

"It used to be the *Black Storm*."

"Ah, the one on which the crew mutinied at Iberyia."

"And that was the key for our loss of that planet. Yes, Excellency."

"Correct me if I'm wrong but, was not that ship *damaged beyond repair*? That was what your people wrote in their final report of the battle."

Ysanne Isard arched an eyebrow, but that was the only external sight of her annoyance at the Emperor's suggestion of inefficiency. "We underestimated the resources of the Iberyans. They've proven to be masters at improvisation..."

Sate Pestage dismissed the Intelligence Director's explanations with a gesture, conscious of how that bothered her. "I'm not interested on the details. I'd like to see the *Borrasca* smashed, along with the so called *Liberator*. I don't need your help to remember where that one came from." The *Liberator* had been the *Adjudicator*, one of the two Imperial Deuce Class Star Destroyers the Rebels captured at Endor. The other one was the *Accuser*, still under repair in Mon Calamari shipyards, if the most recent reports sent by their agents there were to be believed. *That was another 'beyond repair' case*, the Emperor snorted. The Rebels were going to rename it *Emancipator*. If there was something Sate Pestage hated was seeing the Empire's most representative tools stolen and turned against their legitimate owners. It was like a joke in bad taste, an obscenity. But also a warning, one he didn't want to hear: *what has been yours, can be turned on you*.

"Your wish of seeing those ships destroyed might well be fulfilled, Excellency. Although not without taking with them some of the Corellian's most valued jewels."

Pestage laughed in spite of himself. "That would make the Diktat all that more willing to negotiate his new alliance with the Empire."

"Corellia will join us, Excellency. And as an additional prize, we'll recover the Viayak cluster without shooting a single burst."

"Excellent, Madame Director. Excellent, indeed. And now, tell them to proceed with the ceremony. It's time to pay homage to our mourned Emperor Palpatine."

"For the greater glory of the Empire, and yours, Palpatine's worthy sucesor."

"Thanks, Madame Director." Was there a trace of mocking in the way she had pronounced the word *worthy*? Already Isard was leaving the room, swinging her hips almost imperceptibly as she passed between the two guards. None of them moved, but it was impossible to know where their eyes were looking, under their mirror like visors. Was it not for her inhuman eyes, Isard could be considered a gorgeous woman. Pestage wondered morosely if, the next time they meet, she would be wearing the red uniform. Or not wearing anything at all. *Bitch*.

XIII

The *Lair* looked worse than Colonel Gen'yaa had expected, in spite of knowing in advance what damage her ship had suffered. While the armed shuttle that brought her from the *Brave Soul* approached the hangar's starboard entry, she winced at the look of the blackened and scorched hull, the breaches where technical crew in pressure suits were already working, or the melted remains of destroyed weapons and sensor arrays. She was tempted to ask the pilot of the shuttle to circle around the Strike Carrier to inspect the damage in the engine section, but she thought better of it. She wanted to be on her bridge as soon as possible. When she finally arrived, she found another call waiting for her, this time from the *Liberator*. She saluted Lieutenant Colonel Wumb and walked directly to the communications unit, where someone's face and shoulders were already featured by the holoprojector.

"Colonel Gen'yaa, my name is Winter. I'm Counselor Organa's assistant."

"I hear you, Winter." The woman looked strangely alike to the Counselor, but instead of the long black hair that gave the former Alderaanian princess much of her beauty, Winter's was completely white, and she wore it cut short. *This woman is not a simple assistant*, was Gen'yaa's most immediate thought, although she couldn't tell what gave her that impression.

"The Counselor had reached a compromise with the Corellians about the rescue of the shuttle carrying your personnel. They won't allow us to send our own search & rescue team, but they will take that task on themselves. They have promised to inform us as soon as they find them."

Gen'yaa frowned deeply. "Do they know who exactly they will be rescuing?"

"No, Colonel, they don't." In her look, Gen'yaa saw that Winter knew exactly what she had meant with that question, and that she understood the implications. So Leia Organa had realized what she had tried to tell her. *That, or she really can read minds from the distance.*

"We'll make sure that they send a rescue ship," Gen'yaa said, "and only a rescue ship, of course."

"Of course." Again, Winter seemed to understand perfectly what Gen'yaa had left unsaid. A rescue ship, and not a heavy troop transport, for instance. The Corellians would be probably aware of the presence of New Republic operatives in the Balanish Country. They would be willing to send down their own commandos to neutralize them and help their Seibergian friends, but that would mean that the war, stopped for the time being in space, would soon continue on the planet.

"Very well, Winter. Please, pass on to the Counselor my gratitude."

"I will do that. *Liberator* out."

As the holoprojector deactivated at the end of the transmission, Gen'yaa saw her second in command approaching. Lieutenant Colonel Wumb had been waiting respectfully aside while her conversation with Winter took place. The Sullustan's greenish skin had acquired an ashen paleness, and he had big sacks under his black rodent eyes.

"Welcome back on board, Colonel."

"Thanks, Lieutenant Colonel. Congratulations for your excellent performance during the battle." As she said that, Gen'yaa wondered for the briefest instant if she would have been able to do it better. Maybe she would have managed to disable the Corellian cruiser all the same, but without suffering such serious damage to her own ship. *But it also could have been the other way around*, she thought, when already Wumb was answering. *I also could have lost it like I lost the Wolf's Den.*

"I can hardly be congratulated, ma'am. Some fifty people have died, and the *Lair* is considerably crippled."

"You know as well as I do that you might have lost a lot more than that," she replied with conviction. "Admiral Sinensis was sending you and the *Lair's* crew to death when he gave the orders I transmitted to you."

"I must confess that that was what I thought at the time." Wumb avoided her look for an instant, and Gen'yaa knew he was sincere. "But one always thinks that something more could have been done when people die at one's command."

"I agree. But a moment ago I was wondering myself whether I could have done it better than you," she said, deciding on a impulse to be honest too, "and my answer was no."

"Thanks, Colonel. Thank you very much." Gen'yaa saw with curiosity how her words affected Wumb. *Sullustans are not that different from Humans*, she thought, *brilliant at times, often insecure, and always receptive to praise*. Then she wondered *How different are we Bothans?* With a prick of pain, she answered herself *you will never know. You're mixed*.

"Now you get some rest," she said, her expression unchanged in spite of the bitterness of her thoughts. "I'll take charge of the *Lair*."

"The ship is yours, ma'am." Wumb saluted militarily and left. Gen'yaa turned and looked over the bridge. Apparently everything was intact here. Beyond the now uncovered viewport, the damage on the hull dismissed this impression, especially in the area where the ion cannon had been. Only the shell of the weapon remained, blackened and deformed. On returning her attention to the inside, she discovered the presence of her Intelligence Officer on the bridge, discretely sat at an unmanned console.

"Lieutenant Commander," she said getting to his side. Dey'jaa stood up and saluted. An already healed wound was visible on his lower lip. "I see you've tasted your own blood in the struggle."

"That was nothing. How did you do on the *Brave Soul*?"

"I would see myself burned up before again straying, again, so far from my ship when there's a battle. And now tell me. Did the Corellian pilot survive?"

"Yes, he did." Gen'yaa didn't need to clarify which pilot she meant. "He and Rovardi are already on their way to Sullust."

"Very well. Rovardi, eh?"

"Yes, ma'am. Is that a problem?"

"No, not at all. He we'll do fine. But I find it ironic."

"What's that, ma'am?"

"That we're trusting our luck, now of all times, to a Corellian and an ex-Imperial, of all people."

"These can hardly be considered ordinary times, ma'am."

"I wonder if they ever will be. Well, while we wait, let's revise everything we've got from the incident with the refugee transport. Leia Organa herself has called me to assist on taht effort."

"We've found nothing so far."

"I know, but there might be something we've missed somewhere."

Solo and Raiven had needed almost fifteen hours to reach the orbit of Sullust in their X-Wings. This was not the first visit to Lieutenant Commander Wumb's home planet for either of them. Since the days immediately before the battle of Endor, the Alliance Starfighter Command had maintained one of its main bases there. It was a well known fact that many of the New Republic fighter squadrons used to send their ships to Sullust for regular revisions, hardware and software upgrades, and any repair that couldn't be done aboard their motherships. In case the Corellians were able to trace the two X-Wing's destination, which they had not made any attempt to conceal, they wouldn't find anything strange about it. Nothing less conspicuous after a battle than a pair of starfighters going urgently to pick up spare components, for instance.

What the Corellians were probably ignorant about was that the New Republic starfighter base on Sullust included among its installations Wolfshead Squadron's private depot. The storehouse was a wide storage area, constructed underground like practically everything on the inhospitable planet. Considerably bigger than the *Wolf's Lair's* main hangar, it was equipped with a mobile section of the ceiling that connected it to one of the base's docking areas, one level above. This section could retract itself quickly to permit the landing and take off of light transports and tugs. A large assortment of materiel, anything conceivably necessary to the the squadron's missions, was kept under guard there. The arsenal included several ships captured by the squad during its operations and sent there after being carefully inspected by the experts of the New Republic Intelligence. One of them was what the two pilots had gone to find as the first step of the plan engineered by Colonel Gen'yaa and Lieutenant Commander Dey'jaa.

After leaving their X-Wings in the hands of the two replacement pilots who would return them to the *Wolf's Lair*, Solo and Raiven descended to the depot using a cargo turbolift. They headed directly to a Corellian YT-2000 light freighter, parked between an Imperial TIE Bomber with a missing solar panel and an unmarked Y-Wing, which had belonged to a pirate cartel. The *Al'yin'ia* had been recovered by the *Wolf's Lair* five months ago in deplorable conditions. The first repairs had been performed by Mar Hanniuska's team, Granite and Solo himself. He, Raiven, Drake and Hawk had used it to hunt down Sledgehammer, an Imperial spy and saboteur who had managed to infiltrate Wolfshead Squadron. Among other things, Sledgehammer murdered Razor, one of the squadron's pilots and also Drake's girlfriend, but that was his last action. When the four pilots returned after their successful covert mission, the *Al'yin'ia* was flown to Sullust, where it was put again in full operating conditions.

When they approached the YT-2000, Raiven and Solo were met before the access ramp by a Quarren wearing a technical coverall.

"Commander Tengroth and Lieutenant Rovardi, I suppose?"

"Yes, we are," Solo answered.

"Sergeant Bunido at your service. The ship is ready and refitted. The transponders have been modified to disguise her as a Corellian civilian transport called *Nomad Merchant*."

"Weapons?" Raiven asked.

"The quad battery upside and the other downside are fully functional. Also, we've installed two new laser cannons on the forward section. It's not the *Millenium Falcon*, but it's not defenseless in any case."

In Raiven's opinion, the freighter looked a lot better than the last time he saw it. Solo took his time to inspect the ship from the bow to the stern before nodding, apparently satisfied. "And the cargo?"

"A dozen and a half of full crates. To find and collect the stuff was the hardest part, and I'd dare to say the most expensive. I hope you can justify it."

"Here's the approval chit, signed by Colonel Gen'yaa, captain of the *Wolf's Lair*." Raiven looked at his companion without understanding, but he didn't say anything. The explanations could wait.

"Very well. Not that I distrust you, sir, but it wouldn't be the first time that some of you pilots try to seize this kind of stuff, hmmm, for your own purposes."

"It's not in our case," Solo hurried to answer.

"Are you not from Wolfshead Squadron? I've been told that some of you once assaulted an Imperial shuttle which carried this..."

"Sergeant, we really don't have the time for this," Solo was starting to get visibly heated by the second. Raiven had to make a considerable effort to not smile.

"Take it easy, Solo," he whispered to his partner, but the Quarren had better ears than he had expected.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said. "Now I think about it, it was people from White Squadron who did it. Has the Lieutenant here called you Solo, sir? I thought your name was Tengroth."

"It is Tengroth. Solo is just my nickname."

"Ah, that. I was wondering if you were somehow related to General Solo, you know. From your accent, I think you're a Corellian, too."

"No, we're not related, Sergeant. And I repeat that we have no time to lose chitchatting. We'll leave immediately."

"Are you in a hurry, sir?"

"Are you all Quarren so curious, *sergeant*?" Now Solo seemed really mad. Seemingly enough for the gossip technician to decide this was a good moment to stop.

"Nope. I just intended to be kind, sir. Being the only Quarren in this so dry place is not easy. Everything are caves and more caves. No sea, no sky on your head, no...."

"Well, very well. Come on, Raiven. We're leaving."

"You're the boss here." Raiven climbed the ramp after Solo, waving a hasty good-bye at Sergeant Bunido. The Quarren returned it and moved aside. Before the hatch closed behind him, Raiven believed he had heard Bunido laughing, although he didn't know for sure how a Quarren's laughter was supposed to sound. "I definitely want to know what those crates contain," he said to himself. "Although I think I can guess."

"We're almost there, Lieutenant Colonel," said one of the Lynx commandos, a massive black man whom their partners called Midnight, to Foxfire. "After the next turn you will be able to see Camp One. The other two are southward from this one. They're called Camp Two and Camp Three."

"What else." She took a look back. The column of refugees stretched along the track they had already left behind. The figures of the kalahorses stood out here and there, so loaded with bundles and crates that they seemed about to collapse at any moment. Beasts and people were visibly exhausted after a whole day walking on this dangerous and treacherous path, with constant climbs and descents, and abrupt turns over ravines and cliffs. The ground was slippery. The snow had frozen at those shadowy places that the timid sunrays that filtered through the thick clouds could not reach. One of the Balanish, a woman older than Sdermila, had suffered a bad fall and had a twisted ankle. Moose had been helping her ever since, some times literally carrying her on his shoulders. Most people had slipped once or twice along the way, adding little bruises and painful scratches to the tiredness. Foxfire was one of those who had fallen to the ground more times, making her feel clumsy and angry with herself. She was not used to walking on this kind of ground, or more exactly, on any kind of ground. She had been born a spacer, grew up among spacers, and had spent most of her life on board space ships. Foxfire couldn't help but feeling insecure when the soil under her feet was irregular, or suddenly soft, or miserably slippery. Having an arm in a sling didn't help either. A week, Rooster had said. She just couldn't wait to get rid of the darn sling and recover the use of her arm. If that weren't enough, the gravity was a bit too high for her taste. Only for that reason, her back and legs were by now a tortured collection of aches. She was amazed when she noticed that Moose was actually enjoying the walk, even in spite of having to carry the old woman. But Moose had lived on planets most of his life. For him, this had to be almost like being at home, from a certain point of view. Most of the Balanish didn't feel particularly uneasy with the terrain either, although it was easy to distinguish those who came from Nurtina, the only place in the Balanish Country worthy of being called a town. Some of those urban fellows seemed *almost* as awkward as she was. In any case, whether they were used to this kind of ground or not, all of them looked tired. "These people will be happy to finally reach a place where they can get some rest and have a decent meal."

"I guess so, ma'am."

Foxfire thought that the commando seemed to be keeping something to himself. Maybe he had preferred to bite his tongue before commenting that she would probably be the happiest one. The man had helped her to get up three or four times so far. None of those times had she caught him even smiling, though. She had to give him that much. "I'm worried about the communications blackout," she said stepping over the issue of her tendency to slip or to trip every ten steps. "To not know what's going on off the planet is killing me. Our escort flew away before we were able to get out of the shuttle. I wonder if that has something to do with the satellite's failure."

"Maybe. I heard that things were getting tense up there."

"They were, but so far the Seibergians were mostly avoiding us. We were expecting the Corellians to show up at any moment, though."

"We'll know more soon. Once we have the camp in sight, we will be able to contact our people there directly with a low energy laser link. The problems with the satellite only affect our communications ground to

ground, so at the camp they should know what has happened, if anything."

"And they will be able to inform them about us, too. On the *Lair*, they must think we're all dead."

"Not for long, ma'am."

They finally reached the point where the rock wall they had on their left side turned briskly in that same direction, allowing Foxfire to have a look at their destination, at fifteen or twenty kilometers of an easier descent. Up to this moment, Foxfire had thought that she had seen everything, but now she realized how wrong she was. *So this was what Midnight had decided not to mention.*

Camp One, the place she was so eager to get to, was a dirty and huge gathering of tents, spread on around seven or eight square kilometers of more and less plain ground, centred around a flat communications antennae. And barely anything more. Foxfire asked Midnight to lend her his macrobinoculars. Meanwhile, another commando, whom Foxfire knew as Short Circuit, started to mount the focus for the laser link.

There were fires lit in front of some of the tents, more smoke than flames. People was crowded around trying to warm themselves, while they drank directly from metallic bowls what, from this distance, looked like a simple soup. She saw others queuing with their empty bowls, filled by a pair of refugees like them. At the boundaries of the camp she spotted some of the commandos keeping guard. The only vehicles she saw were a couple of speeder bikes parked near the antennae. On the other side of the esplanade she noticed an empty zone marked by red flags. That was surely the shuttle's landing area, although there was only place for one at once a time. Some refugees walked there in circles, probably trying to find the warmth the few fires couldn't provide them.

"There seems to be too many people to fit in the available tents," she said aloud, dismay getting through her voice.

"You don't know how right you are," Cheetah said, catching up with them. He shrugged, looking almost embarrassed, the same as Midnight. This latter's look seemed to say sorry for not warning you, but you had to see it with your own eyes. Foxfire returned the macrobinoculars without comment. "We were waiting for the *Compassion* with impatience," Cheetah continued. "The tents you were to bring us, besides the food processors and the energy generator, would have helped us to improve the refugees' situation, but now...."

"No food processors, no energy generator, and barely tents enough to house the refugees who come with us."

Cheetah nodded. "Not to mention that we don't have enough aid personnel. Just a bunch of volunteers for every camp and my own men. Less than fifty people to attend eight thousand, and that number increases every day."

"I knew this was bad, but I just couldn't imagine...." Foxfire left the rest of the sentence unsaid, noticing that Short Circuit seemed to have finished his work.

"The link is ready, ma'am," the commando said. "What do you want me to tell them?"

"Only that you've found us, and that they must transmit it to the *Wolf's Lair*. Tell them that we'll need urgent evacuation for our doctor. We can wait to hear the news until we get there."

"All right, ma'am."

"It looks horrible," Moose said, arriving at her side. The expression of the old woman leaning on him didn't change, as if new disgraces were all she had expected, and she was not surprised seeing the confirmation of her thoughts.

"Yes, it does." Foxfire sighed. "Oh, Lewis. Only now I really realize how much help these people need."

Since the head of the column reached the turn on the path, Sdermila had been hearing murmurs, whispers and even exclamations of despair coming from the people in the front rows. *We're near the New Republic camp*, she thought. *They should be glad, shouldn't they?* But then she got to the turn herself and saw it. Her eyes didn't allow her to make out too many details, but what she could distinguish was more than enough to understand what caused all those signs of discontent. Sdermila gasped. Her previous night's optimism vanished like smoke, taking her back to the anguish and insecurity of the first day after leaving her village.

"What is it Sdermila? What's happened?"

Sdermila turned her head to look at the younger woman, not knowing what to say. Deveralia laid on the edge of the floating stretcher where the massive body of the alien doctor was carried, tied to her kalahorse. A blanket covered Deveralia and her baby. The little creature slept now in the comfortable warmth of her mother's arms. Taigor and Lia walked silently at her side, seemingly too tired as to feel any curiosity for the view. Deveralia had rejected the offer to go on the other stretcher, the one occupied by the wounded Seibergian, although it would have offered her double the space. She had said that she wouldn't get any closer to the stormtrooper if she could help it and, above all, didn't want to see him any closer to her children, especially the defenseless newborn. Since the New Republic commandos found them, Rooster had allowed the Seibergian to regain the consciousness. Under the vigilant stare of one of the soldiers, the Seibergian seemed calmed enough, but Sdermila understood well the younger woman's caution.

"Tell me, Sdermila, what is it?"

Sdermila sighed. The bulk of the kalahorse and the people around impeded Deveralia's view of what everybody was looking at. Maybe that was a fortune for her. "We're getting to the New Republic camp," she answered at last, hesitating whether she should elaborate more or not. *Taigor used to say that there's always time to receive the bad news. The longer one ignores them, the longer one cannot worry about it.* She had never been able to decide whether she agreed with that or not. If something bad had happened to one of her family, for instance, she would want to know. *But if you're unable to do anything*, Taigor would have answered, *wouldn't it be better to ignore it?* She had to admit that, from that point of view, Taigor's saying made sense. It probably would be better for most people, although she kept believing that she would like to know nevertheless. But what would be better for Deveralia? *She has suffered enough*, Sdermila reflected. *Why should I force her to anticipate the new concerns to come? She will see it for herself soon.* She decided to keep quiet for the time being, but then Deveralia's next question made it a lot harder.

"Can you see the hospital? Is it big? They must have an hospital there. I'd like a doctor to take a look at the baby. Well, and at me, too. I'm still bleeding a bit."

Sdermila winced. "Rooster said that...."

"That woman is not a doctor, Sdermila, although she does all she can. The doctor is here with me, remember, and he needs another doctor even more than us. Tell me, can you see the hospital?"

Sdermila sighed for the second time. She handed the reins of the kalahorse to the children. They took them without the joy they had shown before. The old woman took a deep breath and approached the floating stretcher before answering. "No, Deveralia. There's no hospital that I can see."

"But... There must be one. What kind of aid camp is this, if there's not even a campaign hospital?"

"It looks even worse than the shed we slept in the other night."

"Oh, that bad." Deveralia seemed about to cry. Sdermila bit her lower lip. She had to say something to make Deveralia think of something else.

"I wouldn't worry too much, Deveralia. The baby looks healthy enough. And she is really, really pretty."

"Yes, she is." The woman smiled for an instant, although already a tear rolled down her face. "She came three weeks early. I had been told that at week thirty seven they are ready, but I was very afraid nonetheless."

"So many hours walking must have precipitated the birth a bit, but that doesn't mean it's necessarily a problem. Three weeks is not much."

Deveralia pursed her lips. "Maybe you're right. She looks fine, yes, but I wanted a doctor to see her to be sure."

"Maybe there's a doctor, even if they don't have an hospital." She had not finished saying it, when Sdermila realized that there wouldn't be any. Rooster had told her that the objective of their trip was to bring to the camp some of the things they needed the most. She was certain that the doctor was one of them.

"Perhaps." Deveralia seemed more calmed, so Sdermila preferred to stay in silence now. She caressed affectionately the woman's hair. Then she heard her saying. "If only Sante were here."

Her husband. Who knows where he is now. He and all the others who went with that Ciric and his guerrillas. The wife of the man who had argued with him, the one called Dimeter, walked near them. Sdermila had not talked with her, so she didn't know what her name was. Sdermila saw her wiping a tear from her cheek. She seemed to be thinking the same thing as Deveralia. *Where, where are they?* In spite of the fact that Deveralia had barely whispered it, Taigor and Lia heard their father's name and turned their faces, but they didn't say anything. They had asked too many times where he was, but her mother seemed unable to answer. Some times the question even made her cry, although she always pretended that it was the wind or a speck of dust in her eye that caused it. Sdermila watched the two brothers and realized that they were learning to keep their thoughts to themselves, instead of voicing them immediately as children used to do. Sdermila pitied them. They were being forced to mature too quickly.

"Come on," one of the New Republic soldiers said. "We'll be at the camp before the night fall. Then you will have soup and a place to rest."

People scarcely reacted to the soldier's announcement. They all seemed depressed by the vision of what the refugee camp actually was, although the murmurs had practically died. Sdermila sighed again and nodded slowly. She forced herself to smile and spoke to Deveralia, but high enough to be heard by the other people around. "My husband always said that one must see the bottle half full, and not half empty."

"In this case we can say that there's still some wine on the bottom," another woman replied, "instead of saying that there's almost nothing inside."

"Wine?" Someone else, a crippled old man, asked aloud. "Give me only a few drops and I'll call that camp the paradise!" The comment made them all laugh, including the soldier who had spoken first, and the children, who had not probably understood the joke, but were glad to join the adults in their sudden joy.

"Thanks, Sdermila," Deveralia said in a low voice, still smiling.

"Thanks? Why, my child?"

"For everything. For trying to cheer me and my sons up. Well, and everybody else."

"That's nothing."

"Yes, it is. Listen to me, Sdermila. It has been only two or three days since I met you, but I already love you as one of my own family. I wanted you to know." As soon as she finished saying it, Deveralia blushed. Touched to her deepest, Sdermila took the younger woman's hand and answered "and I love you and your children too. Don't worry, my child. Everything will be fine."

"Check that your weapons have the safety lock in the off position," Fenner whispered, "but don't shoot until I give you the order."

Sante took his blaster, trying to find the switch in the darkness. He wanted to see it before touching anything, afraid of doing anything wrong. The weapon could shoot itself and harm somebody, probably himself. He cursed in a low voice, feeling how his forehead covered with sweat drops in spite of the cold of the night, very intense although this dawn it had not snowed yet. He squinted with the blaster's side at scarce centimeters from his face, but there was no way he could see anything, and even less to read the

small labels printed above or beneath every button, switch or lever scattered on the damned thing.

"It's this one," one of the veteran guerrilla men said in a low voice over his shoulder, reaching out and moving the switch downwards.

"Thank you."

"Didn't we teach you how to use a laser weapon?"

"Well, you did, but there was light then. I thought that I always should be able to find everything reading the labels, but...." Sante left the rest unsaid, feeling stupid.

The partisan didn't laugh, and when he spoke his tone didn't show annoyance either. Sante deducted that the man was used to this kind of thing, which had to happen to people like him, who had never put his hands on a weapon. "You must practice a lot, to get used to handling your blaster without looking at it. To mount and dismount it, replace the energy cells, everything. If you're unable to do this, or you're not fast enough at it, your inability can cost you your life and the lives of others who depend on you. Your partners. Your closest friends. Your family. Think about it."

"I'll do, and I'll train, I promise."

"Well. Be quiet now. You are about to shoot at living targets for the first time. Let's see how you do at that."

Sante swallowed hard, feeling suddenly sick. These people seemed eager, happy with the perspective of killing. That Fenner, the one who led this small party, was the worst one. As young as he was, his look was enough to make older men to pale and look at the other side. Sante shivered just remembering his face when he instructed them about how to slice an unaware guard's throat from behind. Fenner had smiled as if that was his greatest pleasure, and the only goal in his life to murder as many Seibergians as he could. Nevertheless, if what Ciric Baranka had told in the shed when Sante was recruited was true, the young man couldn't be blamed for having become the bloody assassin he seemed to be. Sante didn't hate the Seibergians enough yet, he thought, in spite of having been forced to flee in the night from his home with his family, carrying practically nothing but their clothes. His family, his poor family. Oh, God, how he missed them. He thought of the children and his wife almost constantly, although he tried to avoid the memories of their terror when they escaped, the moans of Taigor and Lia, the silent tears of Deveralia. Now they must be somewhere on the mountains behind him, hopefully in one of the New Republic camps. The baby should be born in three weeks or so. He had asked to Fenner if he would be allowed to go to the camp in time to be there for the birth. The lad had answered that if Dante was able to kill every last Seibergian in the Balanish Country in that time, he could go.

That had been cruel. It put him closer to hating Fenner and the guerrillas than he was to hating the Seibergians. Ah, but they were working on that. Yesterday they had been taken to a ruined village, one of those picturesque places he had visited with Deveralia a couple of times, before having Lia. He remembered well their excursions to villages very similar to the one they were spying on, apparently intact. But in the one they had been to yesterday, all the houses, even the grass around them, was burned to ashes. The smell of scorched wood had mixed in his nostrils with the smell of rotting flesh. The corpses of some twenty people, all males, remained unburied, piled up at the center of the village like a deadly warning to every living Balanish. Some of his new companions couldn't avoid throwing up, and Sante's stomach proved to be just as delicate. Many swore there and then to take revenge, and all kind of insults and menaces against the Seibergians were heard in furious voices. Sante shouted, too, but when they left the place, not before digging a common grave and burying all the bodies, he couldn't help but feel a strange sensation. That what they had just seen had been somehow prepared precisely for them to see it. He didn't believe for the briefest moment that it was the guerrilla who had killed those people. No, it was not that. But he thought that his group had not been the first who had discovered the massacre. But instead of burying the corpses themselves, the partisans who found them would have left them there on purpose. Maybe they, and not the Seibergian paramilitary, were the ones who had collected the dead house by house, and piled them up to create a more dramatic and horrible scene. It would be perfect to make the new recruits' blood boil, and give them the warrior ardor they'd need to fight the enemy in his own field and with his own tactics. And it had worked. Around him, most of the newest partisans seemed almost as anxious as Fenner to start the shooting. They caressed the triggers and gripped their weapons with eagerness to use them. All but Dimeter, the one who had questioned Ciric in the shed. Although he could barely distinguish his features in the darkness, Sante realized that Dimeter was looking at him. *We're the last sane people here*, he thought, imagining that Dimeter could be thinking something like that, too. *We don't want to kill, nor do we believe that this can ever be the solution for our present misery and the injustices our people has endured over a*

thousand years. But here we are nevertheless. Oh, Deveralia. Will I be able to look at you in the eyes like I used to do, when I return to you with my hands dirty with blood? Will I be able to hold our children, Lia and Figor, and the little one whose name we had not decided yet? I think this has to change me. Will you love me the same? Oh, God, I've never been a firm believer, but now I want to believe. Help me to not become a murderer, because I know that when the time comes I'll shoot and I'll kill like the others. Help me to keep being the same person I was in the middle of this madness. But above all, oh, please, allow me to return beside my family.

"Fenner, I'm back," someone who Sante couldn't see whispered. It must be the veteran Fenner had sent as scout half an hour before, and who had just returned.

"Have you spotted their guards?" Fenner's voice answered. "I can't see them from here."

"Yes. There are only two. One is half asleep behind that first house. The other is on the other side of the village. If you want I can go around and take care of that one."

"All right. I'll take the closest one myself. All of you, the recruits, listen to me. Before taking this village as temporary quarters, these Seibergians threw the people who lived here out of their homes. Those who resisted were killed on the spot. Many of you know what I'm talking about from your own recent experiences." Sante saw some men nodding in silence. "Well, now you're about to have your vengeance. We're going to kill them all. We take no prisoners tonight, so don't hesitate. Even if some of them try to surrender, shoot them. Is this clear?" Fenner lifted a hand to prevent them from answering aloud. Sante nodded like the others, including Dimeter. "All right. Viallic, give Vasha and me two minutes and then follow us with the rest of the group."

"Understood," the man who had helped Sante replied.

With that, Fenner and the man called Vasha vanished down the slope, using the rocks and the bushes to hide their advance from the two Seibergian guards, in case they were looking in that direction. Sante and the others waited in tense silence until Viallic told them to move.

They were still at the middle of the descent when the light of powerful floodlights, suddenly lit on the other side of the village, dazzled them.

"Stop, stop here, damn it!" Viallic whispered. "They must have discovered Fenner and Vasha. I haven't heard shots. If they're still alive, we might still rescue them."

"Pull back!" Fenner's voice came in that moment.

"What's happened?"

"It's a trap! The guard was just a puppet. As soon as I've touched it, those bloody lights turned up. Come on, you all, run!"

"What about Vasha?"

Before Fenner could answer, they heard a terrifying sound that seemed deafening in comparison with the previous silence. Sante saw the partisans looking at the lights, wondering what that might be, but he knew. He had seen them, and heard them, watching Nurtina's spaceport years before, and he had not forgotten them.

"Walkers!" He yelled instead of whispering as they all had been doing till now. The noise of the machines' joints and engines would have silenced anything short of a shout. All faces turned to him, still not understanding. Only Fenner and Viallic seemed to know what Sante was talking about, but they had no time to plan a methodical retreat nor anything else. The lights focused on them and then the hell fell on their heads.

Sante dropped his weapon and launched himself to the ground, covering his head with his hands, trembling with the purest fear he had ever felt.

He didn't know how long it lasted. Eventually, the racket of the turbolasers faded and the silence returned,

soon broken again by the noise of the walkers starting to move and a chorus of orders shouted in Seibergian. He thought that he should run, but his body seemed as paralyzed. That saved him, because others who tried to escape were shot down without mercy. A filtered voice upon him shook Sante out of his stupor.

"You, stand up with your hands well raised over your head. Try something and I kill you."

Sante did as he had been told, and then turned slowly. A whole platoon of Seibergian stormtroopers were surrounding the only survivors of his group, he and Dimeter. The rest of his companions were now scattered on the slope. Torn apart, mutilated, burned, most of the bodies were not even recognizable. Five or six meters from where Sante stood, Viallic seemed to look at him from the ground, with an expression both of pain and rage frozen on his face. There was practically nothing below his chest, but a big dark stain marked the soil. Sante struggled to contain the nausea.

Ibero saw a blue signal appear on his sensor screen, between the green dots indicating New Republic ships, and the violet assigned to the Corellians. Another ship had entered normal space less than a thousand clicks from his position. He waited until the computer provided him with a possible identification of the profile, and nodded when it displayed the schematics of a YT-2000. The two Sullustan pilots who had brought back Solo's and Raiven's X-Wings had arrived almost a day ago, carrying an encrypted card with the light transport's new identification, the route they would follow and their estimation of arrival time. On board the *Wolf's Lair*, besides Captain Gen'yaa and Lieutenant Commander Dey'jaa, only he and Vyper knew of the covert mission the two pilots were carrying out. Some of the others had asked them where Solo and Raiven had gone more than once. Drake had been especially insistent, but both Vyper and Ibero had limited themselves to answer with the proverbial "need to know." It was hard to keep secrets in their reduced group, but Ibero fully understood the necessity of it. The slightest leak could potentially get to the Corellians' ears, and if they learned about the attempt of penetration they would surely do anything to prevent the two pilots from getting anywhere near Seibergia. Ibero had made sure that it was Spook and no one else who flew with him today, because he was the only member of the squadron who had not been there when they recovered the *Al'yin'ia*. Any other pilot might recognize it, and suppose that the sudden appearance of the freighter and their two partners' absence could hardly be a coincidence. From that, it would be everybody's guess what they were up to. Ibero had even considered the possibility of taking one of the Sullustans as wingman, but they too could have seen the *Al'yin'ia* on Sullust. People could talk, rumors could start, and even if there were no Corellian spies in the fleet, which Ibero didn't discount, there were reporters on board several of the New Republic capital ships. There was too much at stake to take any risk of a leak. As a consequence, he and Vyper had agreed that no other Wolfshead pilot but he and Spook had to be around when the *Al'yin'ia*, or rather, the *Nomad Merchant*, showed up.

"Sancho," he said to his R2 unit, "send an interrogation code to the incoming ship. Let's see who their transponder says they are."

The droid emitted an affirmative sound and complied with the order. Almost immediately after the answer appeared on his screen. *Nomad Merchant. It's them.*

"Two-Four, follow me."

"Aye-aye," Spook replied. Looking to his right, Ibero saw the other X-Wing mirroring his own maneuver with ease. Two clicks further, their Corellian shadows, also two X-Wings, came after them as expected. Ibero practically ignored them, by now used to their presence. It had been the same since the hours that followed the battle. The arrival of the *Liberator* had been followed by the *Missionary*, another of the Corellian's impressive Nova Class Cruisers, along with a whole squadron of Gunships. Then the *Borrasca* came to increase the New Republic's numbers, and the *Rescuer* arrived not too long after. Both of them had their hangars full of starfighters. Cargo ships had kept coming almost constantly to support both fleets. The present situation was explosive. Every ship's movement had its immediate counterpart on the other side, and although no new incidents had taken place, there were plenty of chances for one to happen at any moment. The New Republic maintained the partial blockade on Seibergia, but it was only to keep the appearance, and both sides knew it. Many attempts to scan ships headed to Seibergia were impeded by the Corellian fighters or by their Gunships, especially if the ship to be intercepted was Corellian, which were of course the most heavily suspected of smuggling weapons for the Seibergians. At those times, tension reached its highest. The New Republic operations over the Balanish Country had ceased completely, as

demanded by the Corellians but, on the other hand, none of the transports included in the Corellian's original convoy had been allowed to continue toward Seibergia yet. The New Republic side had put the line there, insisting on scanning *those* ships before granting them the passage, and the Corellians were not forcing their hand, now that the fleet they faced was threatening enough. So far, everybody seemed to be controlling the urge to squeeze a trigger, but that could change at any moment, with or without negotiations.

Here we are, everybody hanging around until someone get too nervous and opens fire, or until both sides find a way to take the negotiations out of the deadlock they are in. The odds are that the former will happen first. Ibero had noticed it among the squadron's pilots, just listening to their conversations. At first it was only Granite, but now there were others who also wondered what they were waiting for. Since the arrival of the *Borrasca* and the *Rescuer*, they were sure that the New Republic fleet could give the Corellians a beating at any time. It was not easy to keep discipline. Granite was a lost cause, but Ibero suspected that the Caldanian was not the only one who was just looking for a good excuse to open fire, with or without the truce. Ibero had tried to talk to some of the most apparently discontented pilots and put some sense into their heads, but the response had been cold, even hostile in some cases. The worst of it all was that he was not having too much help from Vyper. Often he was distant and lost in his thoughts, irritable at times, and his tendency to shout the orders was on the increase. Ibero didn't think that Vyper really agreed with the arguments of the most belligerent members of the squad, but some times he doubted. *The Force help us if even our best start to lose the faith in peace's possibilities.* Ibero pursed his lips. *And I was glad we were sent here. How foolish to think that this would be almost like a vacation compared with fighting the Imperials.* Almost unconsciously, he prayed that Solo and Raiven found something of what they had been sent to look for.

"Incoming freighter," he transmitted, "this is Wolfshead Three, from the New Republic. Be ready for inspection."

His only concern now was that Spook could recognize Solo's or Raiven's voices when they contacted, in spite of knowing them for only a short time. Ibero was wondering whether the two pilots would have thought of using a filter, when he heard the transmission coming from the *Nomad Merchant* and realized that he had been worrying in vain. Solo was exaggerating his Corellian accent so much that even for himself it was almost impossible to recognize his squadmate.

"This is the *Nomad Merchant*, a Corellian ship piloted by a Corellian. There's no one around who can prevent these New Republic jockeys from bothering us?"

"*Nomad Merchant*," a new voice sounded in the same frequency, "this is Captain Vian from the Corellian Navy's Starfighter Corps. Keep with your business. The Rebels won't disturb you."

Rebels? Ibero thought. *Perfect. Here we have your typical representative of the Corellian pro-Imperial faction.* "Captain Vian, this is Wolfshead Three. We don't want to disturb, just to check that they are not carrying weapons."

"That is not of your concern, Rebel. Don't get any closer to that ship, and there won't be trouble."

Ibero almost smiled. The Corellian pilots were following their unwritten script practically word by word. "I have my orders, Captain. I make sure that there's no weapons, and then I won't mind if they are loaded with all the glitterstim spice of Kessel."

There was a little silence after that. A pro-Imperial officer was bound to dislike spice smugglers almost as much as he disliked the New Republic's people, whom he insisted on calling Rebels. "If they're carrying spice, Kessel's prison will be precisely their next destination. We'll scan them, you stay aside."

"Whatever you say, Captain. Just send us a warning if you detect weapons or explosives, will you? In that case, we'll accept your help to send them back to where they came from."

The Corellian pilot answered with a single insult, which made Ibero grin. *That's you, your father and your grandfather*, he thought, amused.

"We're not carrying spice, Captain," Solo's voice said. "We are honest traders."

"We'll scan you nevertheless," Vian replied. Ibero saw the two Corellian X-Wings approach the YT-2000 freighter and give it a close pass. What their sensors told them must satisfied them, because Vian allowed

them to resume their trip without more questions.

"You can continue, *Nomad Merchant*."

"So there were no weapons?" Ibero insisted. "Would you mind if we make our own scan now?"

"I've said it once and I won't repeat it. Don't get any closer to that ship or we will stop being friendly."

Were you being friendly? Glad to know. "All right, all right, we don't want to start a new war from an excess of suspicion. I'll take your word that it's not weapons what they're transporting."

"Do what you want, Rebel, but don't get any closer." *He wasn't going to repeat, and he has said it three times already. Hah.*

"Thank you very much, Captain," Solo's voice was heard. "*Nomad Merchant* out."

Good luck, Ibero mentally wished, cheered up by this little success. He turned away from the YT-2000, followed by Spook's X-Wing and, some seconds later, also by the two Corellians.

"I'm sorry, Three," Spook said after a while. "Were you provoking the Corellians on purpose or that was just my impression?"

Smart guy this Spook. "Provoking? No, not at all. Why would I?" *Just to make them the more determined to let our friends pass, but I can't tell you that.* "Enough of chat. We have still two hours of patrol and a lot of space to cover."

"Aye-aye." Ibero almost could hear Spook shrugging in his cockpit.

"Nurtina Flight Control, this is the Corellian freighter *Nomad Merchant*, requesting permission to land."

"*Nomad Merchant*, this is Nurtina Flight Control. Transmit your identification and cargo manifest."

He has not said "please", Solo thought. The controller's accent was clearly Seibergian, as he had expected, but his tone was dry, full of suspicion. Solo had exaggerated his own Corellian accent, hoping to get the Seibergian's immediate sympathies and maybe be able to skip part of the entry protocol, but evidently the trick was not going to work. "Transmitting now, Nurtina." He tossed a glance at Raiven, sat behind and to his right, in the copilot seat. His partner just shrugged. They'd have to wait patiently for Nurtina spaceport's answer.

Solo tapped with his fingers on the control panel. It had been difficult to recognize Ibero's voice and not ask if he had any news about the missing comrades. Maybe they had been able to rescue Foxfire and the others. Maybe the Corellians had already provided a list of prisoners. *Or maybe some corpses have already been found.* Solo shivered and immediately discarded that terrible thought. At least things were not much worse than when they departed. The YT-2000 had brought Solo and Raiven back to Seibergia following an indirect route that took them double the time of the outbound trip. It had been almost two days since they left the Lair, one since they took off from Sullust, and all that time the two pilots had feared finding only the scattered remnants of a new and more deadly battle. Their worst fears had not been confirmed by reality, but their relief was far from being complete. The two pilots had noticed with alarm how the two confronting fleets had received significant reinforcements in the form of capital ships. While the negotiations continued, both sides were clearly preparing themselves for an open war. If it ever began, the previous battle would probably seem a simple skirmish, a rehearsal before the real show.

"We better be successful with this," Raiven commented. Solo simply nodded. What could he say? Avoiding that war was what he wanted most for a thousand different reasons. This mission had somehow meant liberation for him. Since the involvement of Corellia in the Seibergian crisis started to seem more than probable, he had noticed how people on board the *Wolf's Lair*, even his own squadron mates, had begun to

look at him in a different way. Not exactly with suspicion, but with a kind of curiosity. Some grimaced when crossed with him on a corridor. They pursed their lips, arched an eyebrow or shrugged, as if they wanted to express their solidarity, pitied of him, or wondered what it would be like to be in his situation. Or how he would react if the possibility of a fight became certainty. There were other Corellians among the *Lair's* crew. In them Solo found a look of recognition, but that was all. They never stopped to talk about it. It was as if admitting they were worried would suggest that they wouldn't be able to carry out their duty when the enemy in front was their own people. Or was there an unconscious fear to look conspicuous in the eyes of other crewmen? Two Corellians talking on a corner under normal conditions meant nothing--fellow countrymen sharing the last news about home. With a war against Corellia on the horizon, could they look like conspirators?

It became worse, a lot worse, in the few hours he stayed on the *Lair* after the battle. That Arachnoid didn't fully trust him when the fight was about to begin had been evident for Solo, and had bothered him the most. Of course he would have done things differently, but that didn't mean he wouldn't have fired when the time came. He had presented his oath to the New Republic, had he not? That oath didn't include a clause that invalidated it in case of confrontation against his home planet. But could he blame them for doubting? Yes, *I can, damn it*, Solo thought bitterly. He had proven his loyalty a hundred times, even during this last battle. Arachnoid had gone into the infirmary victim of exhaustion. Maybe that had made him overreact; Solo would grant him the benefit of doubt. They had got on well till now. But it was not only him. The rest of the crew looked at him now with the open suspicion that had not been there before. Some of them even with barely suppressed hate. Had he not be sent out of the Strike Carrier almost immediately, he could have wound up fighting with someone because the way they stared at him.

Raiven, on the other hand, seemed immune to the anti-Corellian sentiment that had spread out so quickly across the *Wolf's Lair's* decks and corridors. But, of course, Raiven had been an Imperial. He was more than used to being looked at with suspicion. He, Vyper, and all those who wore the stigma of having been, at one time, on the wrong side. They would carry that weight while the Empire still existed, no matter the courage they had showed to break their past bonds and fight side by side with their old foes. No, Raiven or Vyper would never prejudge him nor anybody else because the origin and the circumstances. They had learned that lesson very well in their own skins, and they kept doing so. *Maybe I'll learn something from this, too..*

"*Nomad Merchant*, this is Nurtina Flight Control."

"I copy you, Nurtina," Solo hurried to answer, putting his personal concerns aside.

"We have a question for you. Your cargo manifest say that you're carrying crates of Whyren Reserve. Is that true?"

"Of course it is. The best of Corellia's two-year-old vintage."

"And why are you bringing Whyren Reserve to Nurtina, of all places, and why precisely now?"

Solo had expected this question and was prepared to answer. "Why? I've been told that there are more good Seibergians on Nurtina now than ever before!" Solo knew he was not inventing anything. It was nobody's secret that Nurtina was occupied by Seibergian armed forces, although they pretended to be reinforcements for the local police, supposedly overwhelmed by the riots caused by the Balanish population. The controller didn't laugh at Solo's comment, but his tone sounded more relaxed when he spoke again.

"All right, *Nomad Merchant*. You're cleared to land on parking area C, hangar Two. Don't get off the entry vector we're transmitting you now, or you will risk to be shot down by the ground defenses."

"Understood, Flight Control, thanks for the warning. Vector received."

"Well. Prepare to be inspected as soon as you land. Obey the inspectors' orders and you won't have any problem."

"All right. Thanks again. *Nomad Merchant* out."

"What do you think?" Raiven asked.

"It went well enough. Have one of the crates open, though. Those inspectors are bound to be Seibergian

soldiers. They might be a lot more friendly if they see a chance to return to their quarters with a couple of these bottles under their jackets."

"Good thinking. Was the whiskey Dey'jaa's idea, too? Gen'yaa's?"

"No, this was my contribution, besides proposing you for my partner."

"Great. Maybe we'll be able to save another pair of bottles for ourselves. For when this all ends."

Solo smiled. "Good thinking by you, too."

Solo smiled "I see I chose well."

Raiven stood up and left the cockpit, leaving Solo alone momentarily. While he initiated the descent to the planet, he couldn't help a *dejà-vu* sensation. Here he was returning to Nurtina on board a Corellian cargo freighter as if the last two years had never existed. As if the time spent piloting a fighter for the Rebel Alliance, and later the New Republic, was just a strange dream he'd had on a lap in the cockpit of his old YT-2100, so similar to this one, during a particularly long transition through hyperspace. He had been here only twice in his times as independent cargo pilot, but he remembered the place well. In those days, the Empire still had a strong presence in all the Viyak cluster, but especially on Seibergia. The last time he approached this world two TIE Fighters had intercepted him and scanned the contents of his cargo bay at close distance before he was given an entry vector to the planet, and they escorted him until he was well into the atmosphere. All ships headed to Nurtina received that treatment, although back then it was not uncommon for the small civilian spaceport to receive the visit of light transports like his. They were mostly piloted by Corellians, who didn't want or didn't dare to initiate a considerably more profitable career as smugglers, for instance, and contented themselves with honest but also safer trips. The big cargo cruisers completely ignored the Balanish Country when they came to Seibergia, so the little exterior commerce and travelling to or from this region was in the hands of people like him. On his second trip he had wandered alone along the unremarkable but animated streets of the town of Nurtina, looking for a place to have a decent meal instead of the unsavory menus offered by the spaceport's cantina. He ended up having something called kalashiri, which seemingly could be found under very different appearances and cooked in different ways. He didn't like it much, but he found that Balanish people were nice enough. Hospitable and kind, many of them were willing to give conversation to a stranger, a spacer like him, which could not be said of the inhabitants of many of the places he had visited. Solo had seen recent images of Nurtina in the holonet news, but he hardly recognized it. It had become a phantom town of deserted streets and empty shops in spite of the Seibergians' efforts to demonstrate that everything was normal.

Now there were no TIE Fighters swarming around, but as the *Nomad Merchant's* concealed military sensors told him, they were being tracked by ground-based missile batteries. The controller had not lied.

"Well," Raiven said returning to his seat. "Everything is ready for our visitors. Do you know where we start from?"

"Yes, at the spaceport itself. We'll spread out the news that we've got some Whyren Reserve to sell. That should give us plenty of opportunities to talk with people who might know something. Furthermore, I have taken for granted that Seibergians like sabacc almost as much as we Corellians do."

"I had to see it coming," Raiven snorted.

"Eh, there's nothing wrong in playing a few hands," Solo protested, unable to help the involuntary grin that suddenly illuminated his face. It was curious how he had cheered up just thinking of playing sabacc a bit. *Old habits die hard*. "No, really. People talk a lot without thinking when their attention is focused on the cards. You wouldn't believe it."

"I'll take your word for it, but try not to make the same mistake. All right, we sell whiskey and play sabacc. Let's see where that leads us."

"They are landing, ma'am."

"Well. Now we can only wait." Colonel Gen'yaa looked to the outside through the main viewport of the *Wolf's Lair's* bridge. The massive hulk of the Mon Calamari Cruiser *Rescuer* hid most of the space beyond, while it slowly moved away from her ship. Lieutenant Colonel Wumb was directing the undocking maneuver once the supplies and components brought by the *Rescuer* were all on board. The Mon Calamari semi-organic panels would allow them to decently patch the damage on the hull. Once they were conveniently attached, and provided they were given time enough, they would weld perfectly with the original sections and no additional repairs would be needed. All Mon Calamari ships were constructed using the same type of basic panels, cultivated and shaped in the seas of that aquatic world, and combined later around the frames of buildings or vessels alike. The *Rescuer* had also brought them the components demanded by the chief engineer to bring the shield generators, overworked during the battle, back full operational status. Two of the five lost laser batteries had already been replaced with similar ones provided by the *Borrasca*, and the hangar's port entry was about to be reopened again. But that was all that could be repaired without visiting a dry dock. Neither the ion cannon destroyed by the Corellian X-Wings, nor the engine burned out by the *First Citizen's* blasts could be substituted in open space, even if they had the adequate parts and materials. The strike capability of the *Wolf's Lair* had all but disappeared, and they were limited to defense if a new combat situation arose.

Winter had called three hours before. The Corellian rescue party had returned without results. They had found the *Compassion's* wreckage on the coordinates provided by Wolfshead Squadron's pilots, but there was no one inside, dead or alive. At least that was what the Corellians said, and Winter's tone had insinuated that she for one was not completely sure about their sincerity. It had taken them too long to report, considering they knew where to find the downed shuttle. Although Winter had not said it, the time they had spent on the planet, carefully monitored from several New Republic ships, suggested that they had been thoroughly searching the surroundings for survivors. Would they have been found and now retained under custody? Gen'yaa frowned, worried by that possibility. If they somehow found out that they had caught the material author of the Balanish refugees' death, without forgetting the presumed Corellian pilot, the consequences could be unimaginable. If nothing else, reporters from several worlds had been admitted on board the *First Citizen*, where they waited for news about the course of the negotiations. *Look at the face of the assassin and his commander*, the titles would say. And then the image of Gregory and Schroeder would follow, of course wearing uniforms of the New Republic.

"Colonel Gen'yaa, please," the communications droid said approaching, "may I talk to you?"

Gen'yaa arched an eyebrow, almost thankful for the interruption. "Of course, APD-5. What's it?"

"We've just decrypted a transmission from one of the refugees camps on the Balanish Country, ma'am. Units of Lynx Commando found the passengers of the *Compassion*. They all survived the crash, although doctor Al Saruff is badly injured. They ask for his immediate evacuation."

She almost laughed in relief, only partially caused by knowing that the three pilots and the doctor were alive. But this last was seriously wounded, the droid had said.

"Open a line to the *Liberator*, now."

"Do you want to talk to the Captain, ma'am?"

"No. To someone called Winter. Do it."

The droid plugged two of its right hand's fingers on the communication unit and turned its head toward Colonel Gen'yaa.

"Line opened, ma'am. Should I send a reply to Lynx Commando's message?"

"Not yet. Wait until I have an answer myself, but you can inform Wolfshead Squadron's acting commander. He will be glad to know that three of his missing pilots have just risen from the dead."

"Pardon, ma'am? Ah, oh, I understand, Colonel. I'll do that."

XIV

While they waited for a lean appetizer to be served, Leia Organa watched the man sit in front of her on the other side of the long meeting table. She was careful to not keep her eyes on him more than two or three seconds. One of the unwritten rules of diplomacy was not to stare at your opponent when he or she is not talking, unless you've got already an advantage. Admiral Bren Sellman was not speaking, and she was far from having an advantage in this game. He didn't stare at her, either, but Leia knew that in his case it was not because the Corellian considered that he was at a disadvantage, not by a long distance, but as a courtesy. It was not the kind of attention that one would dispense to someone considered as an equal, but the consideration that men from some particular worlds used to show in front of women in general. Corellian men were of this kind, as Leia knew well. Even Han, the man most people knew now as General Solo and the same man who would be only Han for her always, pretended to be a rogue without manners, but he couldn't avoid showing some in the presence of women. Sellman's were not only correct but exquisite, considering he was military. That proved that he proceeded from a high class family, although Leia already knew that from his file, which she had read aboard the shuttle that brought her here.

The Corellians were avoiding the word "negotiation" for the moment, but it didn't seem like a coincidence that the man chosen to talk to her, no doubt by the Diktat himself, was precisely the admiral who commanded their armada. For all she knew, he had not hesitated to order his forces to attack the New Republic ships, although he could not ignore that with such an order he was pushing his people to a war of incalculable consequences. On the other hand, he had accepted quickly enough her offer of a truce--he didn't have enough time to consult with Corellia, so the decision was his. Nor did he seem eager to reopen the hostilities. A military man who didn't seem to mind renouncing the glory of a potential victory when there was a chance to reach his goal in a peaceful way was not as common as Leia, for one, would like. The fact she was seated at a table with one of those men fed Leia's hope she was not here in vain.

The Admiral reminded her of another illustrious Corellian. Not Han, but someone she had known years before, Senator Garm Bel Iblis. Memories were surprisingly fresh in spite of the time passed. In the days when she, barely eighteen years old, took the position of her father, or rather the man she had always thought of as her father, as representative for Alderaan in the Imperial Senate, Bel Iblis occupied that same charge on behalf of Corellia. Garm Bel Iblis was a brilliant man, like Sellman obviously was, and a honest politician in times when those qualities, brilliance and honesty, were extremely rare to see combined in someone of his profession. In spite of being considerably younger than her father, he and Bail Organa had become good friends long before Leia got to meet him personally. Along with Mon Mothma, Senator for Chandrila, they worked in secrecy for years to construct what half of the galaxy would come to call the Rebel Alliance and the other half call Rebel Scum. But then, shortly after Leia succeeded her father, Bel Iblis fell prey to a terrorist attack. Nothing was ever proved, but it was clear that Palpatine's was the hand behind the attackers. The bomb killed many, including Bel Iblis' wife, but the rumor was that the Corellian Senator had survived. The same rumor said that he had been somehow involved in the recovery of the Death Star's stolen plans, making possible that they got to her hands and changed her life forever, and probably the destiny of the whole galaxy. Whether or not that was true, the fact was that Garm Bel Iblis had all but vanished. Leia suspected that Mon Mothma knew more than she admitted, but that was one of the few issues that the President of the New Republic refused to talk about, even with her.

Many, Leia included, had once believed that Bel Iblis was destined to be the next Diktat of Corellia. It was not uncommon that Galactic Senators became, with time, the Chiefs of State of their planets or confederations. Had Bel Iblis reached what the political analysts prophesized for him, the Corellian worlds could be now members of the New Republic, and, quite possibly, Bel Iblis himself could have been the provisional President and not Mon Mothma. But with his unexplainable disappearance, an important change of direction had taken place in Corellian policy.

While the Civil War exploded all throughout the galaxy, a more moderate candidate than Garm Bel Iblis was elected as Diktat. Showing a mastership of political science that few had granted him before, Cisco Francmonde made his debut declaring the Corellian worlds not belligerent, ignoring Mon Mothma's urgent calls and Emperor Palpatine's insistent pressure. Not belligerent, but not exactly neutral. To avoid becoming the objective of Palpatine's wrath, Francmonde had smartly voiced sympathy to his cause, and offered the Empire Corellia's logistical support when needed. For years, Francmonde had to make concessions again and again to the Emperor, but he managed to keep Corellia out of the war, nevertheless. Not unlike Drassen Somolovich, his Seibergian colleague, Cisco Francmonde used the galactic conflict to justify his decision to suspend indefinitely the next elections until the situation was again stable enough. The Corellians accepted this extreme measure without protest, because a majority were convinced that Francmonde was the only

man capable of keeping their present state of peace and prosperity, and that was something they didn't want to renounce. Years passed, but the war didn't appear to be close to an end, and the elections issue was permanently delayed in spite of the efforts of the weak opposition. With time, Cisco Francmonde was referred to less and less by his name--he became, simply, the Diktat.

Would the Diktat be able to keep his policy of neutrality with the Seibergian crisis? That had to be his hidden intention, Leia reflected, or he would have chosen another man to conduct these conversations. Leia couldn't help but admire the wisdom and astuteness that the Diktat's election proved. Admiral Sellman resembled Bel Iblis not in his features, and of course not in the way they thought, but in his personality. Although she had not known why, Leia had always been able to read people very well. Actually, Bail Organa used to ask her to accompany him when meeting delegates from other worlds whose real purposes he wanted to know. Now she knew the source of that ability. Luke had told her that strange night on Endor's Moon, more than a year before. She and Luke were brother and sister, and their father had once been a Jedi Knight. He was not Bail Organa, but Anakin Skywalker, the man who had brought terror to the galaxy under the name of Darth Vader and whose masked face and mechanical breath were present, even today, in many of Leia's nightmares. She and Luke had inherited from him their sensitivity to the Force, and that same sensitivity allowed her immediately to realize, even though the acceptance came much later and only progressively, what her self-declared brother had just said was true. More recently, Luke had explained her that reading people was one of her natural gifts, and the only one she had unconsciously trained. Now, that ability told her that Sellman was both smart and honest, like Garm Bel Iblis had been, and his determination to do what needed to be done was almost the same, in spite of defending different ideals. If Leia was able to prove to Sellman that the present situation had been fabricated by the Emperor and his agents, then he might ignore the opinions of the most recalcitrant pro-Imperials of his staff, some of whom were sat at this same table, and look with her for a reasonable solution to this conflict.

For the time being, she was still very far from that point. No proof--all she had were suspicions and theories. And she would need solid proof to change the Corellians' minds about an incident that, in their eyes, proved the New Republic didn't care about the Balanish and was using them only to reach their presumed objectives: to remove Somolovich from the power, first; to force Seibergia to join the New Republic, later; and then take control of the Viyak Cluster and the whole sector.

The waiters left the meeting room once they all were served. Leia tasted the Corellian tea, almost as good as their coffee but not as stimulating. Admiral Sellman studied with curiosity her evident delight.

"Do you like our tea, Counselor?"

"I love it, Admiral. Senator Garm Bel Iblis used to provide my father with leaves of this same tea."

"Ah, Bel Iblis." Sellman frowned slightly. "I forgot--you probably knew him."

"Those were other times."

"Indeed. Well, Counselor, maybe now we could return to our previous point of discussion: your refusal to permit our transports to reach Seibergia. There's people there who need them very much."

Here we go again, Leia thought. She left the tea cup on the table and used a napkin to clean her lips. "As I've explained before, our only objection is your refusal to allow us to scan their cargo."

"And as I've also explained before, we simply can't accept it."

"Admiral, from what you said an instant ago, that there are people who need very much what your ships are carrying, one would think that you're talking of food and medicines. I don't know what harm there is in allowing us to perform a simple scan of the transports' cargo. We do it; verify that, effectively, there are no weapons; and the transports continue. End of the problem. If it is a question of principles, we...." Leia interrupted herself when the door opened behind her with an almost inaudible hiss. She turned her head to see a young Lieutenant to show up.

"I'm sorry, Admiral. We've just received a transmission request from the *Liberator*. It's Counselor Organa's assistant. She said it was important."

"She wouldn't call for something trivial, Admiral," Leia said. That was true, and Leia wondered if it would be good or bad news.

"Of course you can take the call, Counselor. The lieutenant will lead you to the same room that you used before for your private transmissions."

"No, Admiral, that won't be necessary. If you don't mind, I would rather talk from here, if that's possible. That way, we won't have to interrupt this meeting, and we'll also be able to take a decision together if that's what the situation requires."

The Admiral displayed one of his rare smiles. "Of course it is possible, Counselor. Thank you for your trust." The center of the table retracted to the sides and a holoprojector disc showed up, rotating until the recording focus was aiming at Leia. She noticed a soft warm on her face when the light illuminated her. Seconds later, the tridimensional image of Winter's head and shoulders appeared over the table, looking at Leia.

"Counselor."

"Winter, Admiral Sellman and his staff are listening to you, too." *A warning shouldn't bother the Admiral.* "What has happened?"

"It's about the *Compassion*, Counselor, the search & rescue shuttle that your hosts agreed to find for us."

"As I told you, Counselor, we found no trace of the crew," the Admiral said.

"That's because they were able to reach one of our refugees camps by their own means, sir," Winter explained. "The fact is that one of them, a Ithorian doctor who was sent to attend the refugees, is seriously injured. They have asked for his urgent evacuation."

"We will do that," the Admiral hurried to say. "We must have medical personnel who have assisted Ithorians before." He keyed something on a small panel located under his section of table. "Bridge, this is Admiral Sellman."

"Bridge here, Admiral. This is Captain Borleis."

"Captain, I want you to send one of our rescue shuttles to Seibergia, to the coordinates I'll give you." Leia nodded to Winter and she proceeded to transmit the position of Camp One. "Look for a doctor with experience with Ithorians."

"All right, Admiral." Sellman copied the digit series provided by Winter and retransmitted them to the *First Citizen's* captain. "I've got the coordinates. I think we have a problem, sir. This location is in the Balanish Country."

"And?"

"I've been informed that weather over the Balanish Country is going to be terrible for the next twelve hours. Too bad to send a shuttle through those mountains."

"I see. Prepare everything and send the shuttle as soon as you consider it prudent."

"Affirmative, Admiral. I'll do that."

"I'm sorry, Counselor," Sellman said with a look of honest concern. "I hope we won't get there too late for your doctor."

"Some things are not in our hands, Admiral. Thank you very much for your help and your interest." *Another point for him, Leia thought. Now, denying him the chance to assist Seibergian people would seem almost criminal, and he knows it.* She nodded to Winter, who ended the transmission from the *Liberator's* end.

"It's the least we can do. Life should be always above political interests. And now, we were discussing the matter of our envoys to Seibergia..."

"Seibergian people are not starving, Admiral," Leia said, trying to sound as respectful and understanding as she could. "Although I must admit that our partial blockade has truly caused supply problems." The Admiral

nodded. Leia detected in him something close to joy. *He thinks that he is about to get a concession, and for only the price of a shuttle trip.* Leia decided that the time had come of actually making such a concession, but it would be she who put the price. "I know that the New Republic involvement in this crisis has been cause of deep concern for your people, and that voices have been heard on Corellia accusing us of using the Balanish population only as a means to get Seibergia." Sellman didn't make any attempt to deny or to confirm Leia's words. He crossed his arms upon the table and waited. "Admiral, we have invaded Seibergia's space and skies with only two objectives: to help the Balanish refugees sheltered, or marching towards, in our provisional camps and to defend those same refugees from the attacks by paramilitary forces. Their well-equipped troops have been throwing people out of their villages, and, at the same time, they have sprinkled the spatial routes that the Balanish follow to flee from the planet with mines. All of this has been done with the complicity of the Seibergian government."

"Counselor...." Sellman started to say, with irritation showing through in his voice. Leia rose a hand to stop his protest.

"Please, Admiral. I'm getting to my point. We understand that we can't continue attacking the paramilitary any more. Not without a serious risk of causing more collateral damage, or a confrontation between our two fleets, with terrible consequences. You can see that we have suspended those activities completely."

"I take for granted that the second risk is the one that worries your military the most, Counselor, but continue."

That is: don't play the saint with me, Counselor. Leia almost could hear the Admiral's thoughts, and that had nothing to do with her inherited abilities. At the same time, she had noticed the fact that he had said *your military*, and not *the New Republic* or simply *you*. He was still giving her a chance to prove the honesty of her intention. "Thanks, Admiral. What I was about to say is that we *do* intend to keep realizing the first type of missions, that is, to help the refugees who, every day in larger numbers, are reaching our already saturated camps. And yes, I understand that you can't allow us to keep invading Seibergian air space to do that, because we still would be able to perform offensive actions, even in a reduced scale."

"All your ships, even your search & rescue shuttles, are armed or can conceal arms."

Leia took a deep breath. "A sign of the times of war in which we live."

"And furthermore you could supply the Balanish guerrillas with weapons, ammunition and all kind of things," now it was Sellman who rose his hand, mimicking Leia's previous gesture. "Although you're going to tell me that you've never helped the guerrillas, the truth is that their military equipment comes almost exclusively from worlds of the New Republic."

"You're right on everything, Admiral, although I'd like to point out that since we established our blockade the guerrillas have had more problems than ever in getting weapons. Well, what I intend to say is that we understood your position, and that's why I want to propose an alternative to you."

"I'm listening." The irritation had disappeared from Sellman's tone, along with his eagerness. He could anticipate that Leia's proposal was not going to be a bargain, but he couldn't help feeling curiosity.

"I'll accept *your* word that your supplies don't include weaponry and that, at any case, they won't be used to support the paramilitary groups acting on the Balanish Country." With her use of the personal pronouns, Leia Leia was suggesting that this would be an agreement not between Corellia and the New Republic, which had interests and necessities that could force, impede or twist any arrangement, but between them, Admiral Sellman and Counselor Organa. Two people. Two beings who, in spite of having to respond to their respective governments, could put their personal honor on the table and accept a compromise. Their governments could suspend them and their pact could be repealed, but it wouldn't be *them* who would betray it. *And now I read the fine print.* "Provided that a part of your convoys will be sent to *our* camps, as soon as the weather allows it. This way, all the population will benefit from your help. The Seibergians, of course, but also the Balanish."

Admiral Sellman remained quiet for a whole minute, looking Leia directly in the eyes. She returned his look--to hell with unwritten diplomacy rules--and waited in suspense, almost not daring to breathe. The other high rank officers present were silent, too, every one keeping to themselves their own opinions and emotions, knowing that they were mere witnesses in these moments. If there were actually an agreement, they all would participate in the discussions for the details. But the essence was to be decided only by this man and

this woman.

"Yours also," the Admiral said at last, startling some of the congregated. "The supplies you were about to send to the Balanish," he explained, noticing disconcert in the faces turned at him. "I don't care about tents and that kind of stuff, but food and medicines will be shared also by the Seibergians who live in the Balanish Country. And everything will be carried only by *our* ships."

Leia didn't think even for an instant of arguing that those Seibergians were suffering even a tenth of what the Balanish were enduring. She opened her mouth and spelled a single word.

"Yes."

"Counselor Organa," the Admiral said very slowly. "Now I know that your reputation was not unearned." Sellman stood up and reached his right hand toward Leia. She stood up too and took that hand between hers. Some of the assistants applauded timidly. Even as she smiled and nodded at the Admiral, Leia's mind was already thinking of her next step: to insist again on having a list of the prisoners taken by the Corellians during the battle, and permission to have them visited by New Republic personnel, previous to their release.

"We've got an answer to your request, ma'am," a soldier told to Foxfire when she and Moose got into the prefabricated shelter where the camp's communication unit had been installed beside the big antennae.

"Well. How long it will take them to send an evacuation ship?"

"It's complicated, ma'am..."

"Explain it to us all, corporal," Cheetah said entering in that moment.

"While you all were out, a battle took place up there." Foxfire and Moose exchanged alarmed looks. Cheetah just nodded. One of his lieutenants had told him a little before he reached this tent. "A powerful Corellian armada showed up and our people did what they could to contain them. Then the *Liberator* appeared to balance things a bit and a temporary truce was reached. Summarizing things a lot, the Corellians won't allow any New Republic ship to descend on Seibergia, but they will perform the evacuation themselves as soon as the storm passes away."

"Storm? What storm?" Foxfire asked, still trying to assimilate all of what the commando's few sentences contained.

"The one that is about to fall on our heads."

Rooster's head appeared through the entrance to the already crowded tent. "What's happening, Foxfire? When are they going to come for the doctor?" Seeing the expression on the faces turned at her, she paled and said "They aren't going to come, are they?"

"Not yet, Roo. Another storm is arriving," Foxfire decided to omit the rest of what she had just learned for the time being. Right now, nothing could be as important for Rooster as Ben Al Saruff's life. "There won't be any evacuation until the weather gets better."

"But he won't survive for much longer. He might not live till dawn."

"There's nothing more you can do?" Foxfire asked, although she had already posed that question before, and the answer would hardly have changed.

"Yes," Rooster replied to her surprise. The Lumi's brain extensions had turned as white as her face. Exactly the color they were when she, Moose and Foxfire were waiting for the Seibergian walker to attack them. "I can take the risk and give him a strong stimulant to force him to wake up. Then I'll ask him what to do next."

Colonel Gen'yaa had retired to rest after a very long duty watch, and now it was Lieutenant Colonel Wumb who again had command of the *Wolf's Lair*. Coincidentally, the bridge crew was composed by practically the same officers who had been there during the battle. The *Lair's* repaired sensors tracked the Corellian transport ships and their escorts as they headed to Seibergia, after their almost three day long enforced stop. In the silence that prevailed on the bridge, the sound of the small receptor installed near the command chair was heard. A-PD5 had tuned it to receive the Corellian news services, exploiting the fact that they were being broadcasted for the Corellian fleet.

"... the pressure exerted by Admiral Sellman has at last borne fruit. The New Republic has renounced its intention to scan our freighters and has retired their ships to allow them proceed to Seibergia. The spokesman of the Ministry of Defense, Mr. Jondl Misharra, has explained to Coronet News that the aid is going to be distributed also among the Balanish population, and it will even reach the refugee camps illegally installed by the New Republic. This way Corellia's government demonstrates with facts that its policy remains that of neutrality and the defense of peace, wherever it is put in danger. The Diktat has issued a call today to other worlds that could be willing to help by also sending supplies to this afflicted region of the galaxy. This call is already being answered by..."

Wumb grimaced and turned the device off. He stood up and walked to the transparsteel viewport. The Corellian convoy couldn't be distinguished with the naked eye, but for the occasional start of one of the freighters' thrusters or the sudden acceleration of any of the X-Wings that escorted them. The space was illuminated then for a brief instant in the distance, resembling fleeing comets that disappeared almost before one had noticed them. What Wumb could see perfectly was the arrow shape of the *Liberator*, whose upper hull was now completely lit by Seibergia's sun. It was not easy to get used to having Star Destroyers on your side. Their deadly silhouette still triggered twinges of fear in the hearts of many of the beings who served in the New Republic fleet, like himself. Wumb had seen the *Liberator* before, but back then its name was *Adjudicator*, and her cannons brought death among the Alliance ships trapped at Endor. In front of him, the twisted remains of what had been the *Lair's* ion cannon reminded him how close he had been, once again, to meeting that death he kept barely escaping.

He was not unhappy at this abrupt change of the situation, even though some of the ships that crossed the sensor screens from side to side towards Seibergia were the same ones he had fought to stop barely seventy-two hours before. Only on this ship, dozens of people had given their lives to prevent them from crossing the blockade lines, and many others were still suffering because their wounds. Some would never get on board a battleship again. But the passage of the Corellian transports, under the conditions imposed by Counselor Organa, meant that another battle like that one was that much more unlikely to happen. That was something to be celebrated, although they could not drop their guard. Wumb for one was aware that the danger was still there, present and menacing.

"Lieutenant Colonel Wumb?" A-PD5 said. "There's a new transmission request from Camp One. It's Lieutenant Colonel Schroeder."

"Patch her through. Lieutenant Colonel, this is Lieutenant Colonel Wumb. Can you read me?"

"Affirmative, sir. There's a serious storm beginning here. I don't know how that will affect the quality of the transmission."

"Your voice sounds a bit distorted and there's some background noise, but, other than that, we copy you well enough. I'm glad to hear you again. How is the doctor's status?"

"Bad, sir. Lieutenant Commander Rusti is going to try some desperate actions to save his life. But that's not why I'm calling you. Is the line secured?"

"As much as our newest encrypting codes allow it, ma'am," APD-5 said although he had not been directly asked. "I calculate that the probabilities of the Corellians or the Imperials having them broken so soon is less than one in a thousand."

"Thanks, APD-5," Wumb said. "You heard that, Lieutenant Colonel. Now I'm listening to you."

"Sir, I don't know what you know about our crash."

"Your escorts reported that the *Compassion* had been shot down, but they couldn't see how nor by who. I supposed that the paramilitary are to be blamed for that."

"Negative, sir. A Seibergian Army AT-ST did it. Commander Gregory was able to destroy it using one of the *Compassion's* cannons."

"That's unexpected, Lieutenant Colonel. And also very worrying. Was that AT-ST alone?"

"It was accompanied only by a few stormtroopers riding speeder bikes, sir. Commander Gregory managed to take one of them prisoner. He is not answering our questions, sir, but our theory is that they were scouts who had gotten lost, and they ran into us before they had a chance to return to the rest of their forces."

"So do you think that the Seibergian Army is invading the Balanish Country?"

"Affirmative, sir. When we learned of the space battle, my first thought was that the Seibergians knew that the Corellian armada was on its way, and coordinated their entry in this region with their estimated time of arrival."

Wumb's expression darkened. *And I believed that things were starting to change for the better.* "A Corellian search & rescue ship tried to rescue you at our request. We gave them the *Compassion's* crash coordinates and I'm certain that they were there, although you had already left. But as far as I know, they didn't mention a crushed AT-ST."

"They had to see it, sir. It was practically over the *Compassion's* remains."

"So they're hiding that fact, or the AT-ST's wreckage was removed by the Seibergians before the rescue party arrived."

"They'd need some serious repulsorlift transportation to do that, sir, but I think is possible. Without a closer inspection, the smaller pieces could be mistaken debris from our shuttle's crash."

"Maybe. Do you have any proof of the presence of the walker or the troopers on the Balanish Country?"

"Affirmative, sir. We took the dead soldier's military ID cards, some personal datapads, and their suicide collars."

"Repeat that last, Lieutenant Colonel. I understood suicide collars?"

"That's what I said, sir. Every one of the Seibergians wore a collar with a small jewel, hiding a certain amount of poison. One of the pilots of the AT-ST used it to kill himself before we could inspect the cockpit."

"I see." *This is looking worse by the second.* "Do you have any other information for us?"

"Yes, sir. The refugees' situation, at least in this camp, is becoming desperate. We need to replace the stuff that was lost with the *Compassion*, more tents and more food, above all."

"The Corellians have accepted to send some supplies to the camps. I'll try to ensure that your request is attended, but I can't promise you anything."

"I understand that, sir. I have nothing more to report."

"Thank you very much, Lieutenant Colonel. Don't lose any of the items you took from the Seibergian soldiers. Expect some help when the storm ceases, although it will be the Corellians who will send it. Don't let them see your prisoner, or, under any circumstances, accept an offer to take you off the planet, do you understand?"

"Affirmative, sir. We came here to help, and there's much to do before we can afford to return."

"Very well. Take care of yourself and the rest of the people there. And say good luck to Lieutenant Commander Rusti, whatever she is going to do. *Wolf's Lair* out."

Wumb took a deep breath. "APD-5, I want a line to the *Brave Soul*. I want to talk to Admiral Sinensis. And wake up Colonel Gen'yaa."

"Doctor Al Saruff, can you hear me?"

Outside the storm raged violently. A vociferous wind threw huge snowflakes against the walls and ceiling of the tent, the biggest one they had salvaged from the *Compassion*, which Rooster had hastily converted into a provisional hospital with the help of Moose and a pair of commandos. The rest of the tents had been erected in every available place, barely in time to shelter everybody before the storm started to discharge all its fury upon the exposed camp. Rooster tried to put out of her mind the deep impression that the vision of this place had caused in her. The eyes of the Balanish showed so much despair that looking into them hurt. The children, above all, made her feel like crying. They could not understand what was happening around them, nor why their lives had become so miserable. Fibroplastic tents and watered down soup. If that was all they could offer to these people, the New Republic was a long way from being a real hope for the most wretched among the peoples of the galaxy. So much effort and resources were spent in the war. Was war so unavoidable? Palpatine was dead, wasn't he? Couldn't Mon Mothma and her legion of diplomats and ambassadors reach a durable peace with the Empire? The worst of peaces is better than the best of wars. She had heard that before, but only now she realized how much truth was hidden under those few words. She couldn't help but wonder if freedom was worth this suffering. The Balanish, for instance, had lived better when they were under the yoke of the Empire.

Rooster shook her head. These thoughts wouldn't lead her anywhere, and, furthermore, the reality was far from being that simple. She had begun to understand that when they were still in the shuttle. Yes, the Balanish might have lived better before, but that was only because they were human. That single fact was more than reason enough to keep the fight on. *But try to explain that to those crying and hungry children.*

She better concentrate on the task before her. That would be hard enough. *Maybe my thoughts are wandering so much because I'm frightened to thinking about what I intend to do. Scared of trying and failing.*

"Doctor? Can you hear me?"

Still nothing. Ben Al Saruff already seemed more dead than alive. Every breath seemed to require more effort than the previous. Rooster looked around, more than anything else to move her eyes for some a few moments from the Ithorian's grayish features. Beside her, Sergeant Daboro waited in silence. The thin but muscular man, expert in explosives--his partners had given him the nickname "Fuses"--was the only one of the Lynx commandos here who had received some medical training, although he had practiced a lot less than Rooster. Against the back wall, the Seibergian soldier laid awake on his stretcher, his right hand, the one opposite his wound, tied to the header with a pair of shockcuffs. Moose and Cheetah had interrogated him once after their arrival to the camp, but he had not even given them his name. Rooster had asked them to leave it for tomorrow, and they had understood. She didn't want anybody to distract Daboro and her. If the Seibergian made a single noise she wouldn't hesitate before sedating him again.

"The stimulant should have taken effect by now," Daboro commented.

"Do you know much about Ithorians and their reaction to stimulants?"

"No, I'm sorry ma'am."

"Call me Rooster like everybody else does, or I won't know who are you talking to." Rooster took a deep breath. "Forgive me, I'm nervous."

"I can understand that, Rooster. I'm nervous too."

Rooster nodded and concentrated her attention on the Ithorian doctor. Perhaps she should apply a new

dose, but stimulants were dangerous if one didn't know how to use them. An overdose could put the patient in a coma, or even to kill him.

"Doctor? Can you hear me?" *There's still time to turn back. What do I think I will be able to do? Perhaps I'm wrong, and he will resist until the storm passes and he can be evacuated. If I try to operate on him I'll probably kill him, and maybe without my intervention he could still survive. This is too much for me. I'm just a shuttle pilot, a bad one, although Moose and Foxfire seem to believe that I've improved somewhat. I can set a fracture and apply bacta patches. Well, now I know something about human births, but this? No, I won't do it. What I've done so far is the best I can. I won't operate.*

"Lieu-Lieuten-nant Co-Commander?" Al Saruff's voice sounded weak and faltering, but he was conscious. Rooster approached him a bit more.

"Doctor, how do you feel?"

"W-We are getting de-desperate, aren't we?"

Rooster winced. "Yes doctor, we are. One of your ribs is broken, and it has penetrated your right breathing sack, I don't know what you call it."

"B-Breathing s-s-sack describes them ve-very well."

"That wound, and the damage caused by the bone splinters in other tissues, produced several internal hemorrhages, besides your breathing difficulties, which are getting worse. You've lost too much blood already, and I don't know how much damage the clots can cause. I fear you could suffer an embolism at any moment, a respiratory or heart failure, or everything at once. You need some urgent surgery, doctor."

"A-a-and you're t-the c-closest I have to a s-s-surgeon."

"That's right." Rooster felt an urge to cry, but she controlled herself.

"W-w-well, it-t w-won't be hard. Just o-open my breast, t-take the r-rib out of the s-sack, s-s-stitch the w-wound up, fix t-the rib..." Al Saruff coughed before being able to continue. "R-r-remove the s-s-splint-ters, clean out t-t-the clots, a-and c-c-close ever-rything."

"You must be kidding, doctor. There's no other option?"

"I-I c-can ha-hardly jo-joke about this. M-my life is a-at s-stake."

Rooster knew that. She also had known, before Al Saruff confirmed it, what she would have to do. But up to this moment she had kept a very small hope that the doctor would say that she wouldn't need to operate. And now she felt that she was unable to do it.

"The autodoc is not programmed for Ithorians," she said, although her mind yelled that this couldn't excuse her for not doing anything. "I won't know how to do everything. I'll probably kill you."

"I'll have to be my own autodoc," he answered without stuttering.

Rooster opened her eyes wide. "How?"

"What have you used to awake me?"

"Stimil 500, fifteen milligrams."

"S-Stimil... T-that will have to be. Inject me t-t-ten milligrams more, and then twenty m-more every half an hour or so. Every t-time you see I'm about to p-pass away."

"But that can...."

"Sssh, I-let me t-talk. In-inject me a-also f-forty, no, f-fifty m-milligrams of Nervioxol. D-do w-we have t-that?"

"Yes, we have more than enough," Daboro answered before Rooster could check it out.

"T-that w-will n-n-neutralize the pain centers but w-won't counte..." Another cough attack interrupted him. Rooster saw blood mixed with saliva escaping from the doctor's two mouths. There were some little bubbles on the blood. It came directly from the breathing sacks. She cleaned it with gauze, trying to control her hands' trembling.

"The Nervioxol won't neutralize the Stimil 500's effect," Daboro explained. "I know something about neural suppressors."

Rooster took a brief glance at the commando. She reflected that in a commando's medical experience strong painkillers were probably the most important part.

"T-that's it," the Ithorian said recovering himself. "C-come on. D-don't l-lose a-any time. L-lieut-lieut..."

"Yes, doctor?" Rooster asked. On her side, Daboro was already opening a Stimil 500 pack, seemingly more calmed than she was. For an instant Rooster felt tempted to ask the sergeant to take her place.

"Y-you w-will be m-my e-eyes a-and m-my h-hands."

Rooster took two deep breaths. She looked at her hands. To her surprise, they had ceased trembling. Daboro had injected the stimulant into the doctor already and was about to do the same with the neural suppressor. "Tell me what to do first."

"L-laser sc-calpel at t-three centimeters long. C-cut o-on my r-right breast, d-directly over the b-broken r-rib."

Without a second thought, Rooster did what she had been told. Nearly black blood started to come slowly through the wound, but Rooster didn't even blink.

Arachnoid opened his eyes feeling terribly confused. Where was he? The medical facilities? Why? He was not injured in the battle, was he? He remembered only feeling exhausted and dizzy. But now he felt rested, more than he had been in a long time, although a bit stunned. Perhaps he had slept too much. But how could that be?

"Commander Somarriba?" Arachnoid turned his head toward the voice, finding one of Doctor Benny's medical droids. This one was not the usual 2-1B model, but the newer SY-S series, more commonly known as "Scissors". "I am pleased to see you conscious," the droid continued. "I'll perform some quick tests and you will be able to return to active duty. Please, keep your eyes open while I take a scan."

"Why was I hospitalized?"

"Exhaustion." The Scissors passed one of its four specialized hands over Arachnoid's face. He had a brief sight of a group of lenses moving in two of the fingers. Then it placed a different hand on his forehead. "You can close your eyes now, if you want. "Had you had sleep difficulties lately?"

Arachnoid almost laughed. "And who wouldn't, after several weeks in pre-alert status, and another one in full alert?"

"But didn't you sleep properly in your resting periods? Doctor Al Saruff distributed relaxation pills among the pilots to help you. Turn your head to your left please."

"I didn't take them," Arachnoid admitted. "I've never wanted to take drugs of any kind."

"Those hardly could be considered drugs, Commander. To your right now, please. The fact is you had so many toxins accumulated in your body that you could have passed out at any moment. It was a real luck that it didn't happen to you in flight. Did you feel nervous, overexcited, angry or too aggressive?"

"Maybe. But there was a battle, you know?"

"I know. You were also on the edge of seeing hallucinations, or confounding reality with your own imagination. Human beings need to dream almost as much as to eat."

"I've heard something of that, I think. Hallucinations, you say?" Arachnoid was starting to feel very worried.

"Yes. Did you have any?"

"Err....No, I don't think so." *Did I?*

"Well. Major Stauber, you can now talk to him. He can leave when he wants. I declare him fit for flying again."

"Thanks, SYS-0," Vyper said. Arachnoid had not seen him until that moment. He must be waiting out of his vision field. "How do you feel, flyboy?"

"Very well, boss. Actually, almost too well. How much time have I slept?"

"Three days."

"Three days!"

"That's right. Evidently you needed it, and amazingly enough we could afford it. But now we're again in pre-alert."

"Pre-alert?"

"Since fifteen minutes ago. Listen to me, Diego. Next time you decide to be your own doctor, think twice. If you didn't want to take the pills, you should have consulted doctor Al Saruff. He no doubt could have offered you an alternative. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I do." Arachnoid blushed. Vyper's tone had suddenly become too serious even for him.

"Good, because next time I'll kick you out of the squadron. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Don't call me sir, you big mouth. Now dress yourself and go directly to the Briefing Room. I'll inform you there about all that has happened while...." The shouts coming from another cabin interrupted Vyper. Arachnoid looked in that direction, but the screen was unfolded so he couldn't see anything. He thought that one of the voices was Sparks.

"I'll see you later," Vyper said, and then he left, heading towards the other cabin. Arachnoid wanted to ask Vyper for news about their missing squadmates, that was the first of all, but also to tell him some other things. That he had not suffered hallucinations. That, exhausted or not, he had done what he thought he must. That he was not the one who had started the battle. He expected to have the chance to explain all that to him, and to the rest of the guys, too. To Solo, above all.

First, though, he'd have to meditate a lot and maybe view the recordings of the battle.

Vyper entered the cabin in time to see how Sparks launched a half-empty food tray at the medical droid.

"What's going on here?"

"Vyper, I'm glad to see you! This oxidized collection of circuits, screws and nuts is telling me that I can't fly any more! Where's doctor Al Saruff? I want to talk to him!"

"He is in the Balanish Country, probably in pain."

"What? The boys told me that...."

"The boys didn't tell you everything so as not to complicate your situation. The medical droid said that you should now be able to receive bad news, but it seems it was wrong about that particular news."

"It is wrong about a lot of things, you see. A technical revision would sort it out...."

"It could be, but the Scissors' diagnosis is correct. I've personally sent the result of the tests to other doctors, human doctors. One on the *Rescuer*, and another one on the *Liberator*. They fully agreed with the droid. Your heart is not well. There was a previous lesion there, one you didn't know about or which you didn't want to declare. No, don't tell me--I don't want to know. That fact is the ion discharge you received complicated it. You suffered a minor heart attack in the cockpit, and another one while they were bringing you here. It was that same Scissors that saved your life, by the way. Now you're well enough. You can have a normal life, but not as a fighter pilot."

"I could have my heart removed and replaced by a cyborg device," Sparks replied coldly. "I know a guy who did."

"That's your decision, my friend, and your money also, because the New Republic wouldn't pay for it. Not if your life is not in jeopardy. For the same reason, you won't get a transplant either. I asked. "

"It's unfair, damn it, it's unfair! I've given them all my life and now they will limit themselves to shake my hand and send me home. What home? I haven't had one for years except for the military ships and bases I've served on. You know what? I did declare that I had a heart lesion, years ago. Before Yavin and the Death Star, when the Alliance was running desperate for experienced pilots. Do you know what they told me? That they would take me even if I had no hands and no legs, that they would steal the prosthesis if needed."

"Things are different now," Vyper said, feeling embarrassed and ashamed, as if he were the one responsible for the New Republic policy and Sparks's more than justified protests were directed at him.

"Yes, they are. Rooster was right about that. These are not the old times any more."

"Is this a bad moment?" a mechanical voice said behind Vyper, covering what seemed a grunt. He turned to see Groznik at the cabin's entrance, accompanied by Parody and Granite. "We could come back later."

"No, Groznik," Vyper said, relieved as if the Wookiee and the others had come to rescue him and not to visit their wingmate and friend. That made his embarrassment worse, but he moved to leave nevertheless. "I've got things to do. Sparks," he started to say, looking again at the man lying on the bed. The three days beard made him look older, but not as much as his expression of depression and disappointment, so different from Sparks's usual good humor. His eyes didn't sparkle any more.

"Leave, Vyper. Do what you must. I understand." Sparks lifted his hand and waved a tired goodbye. Vyper nodded and went out. Hearing Granite's and Groznik's first angry shouts, he approached the medical droid and recommended that it look for something to do far from there, maybe on another deck.

"It's not your fault, SYS-O, but there's a Wookiee and a lunatic in there who could make you kick the bucket."

"Is that a human expression, sir?"

"Yes. One that means that you better leave for a while, if you want to keep working for a long time."

"Thanks, sir. I appreciate your concern."

Vyper abandoned the medical bay with long strides. The immense joy he had felt barely some hours before when he learned that Foxfire, Moose and Rooster were alive was momentary forgotten along with the concern for the still missing and the wounded ones. For a moment of weakness his only thought and wish was that Foxfire were here again and he were not the acting commander of the squadron any more.

"Perfect Sabacc," Solo declared putting his last card face up on the table. The random field had turned the Eight of Coins into the Idiot. The other four players, all of them Seibergian, had been certain that his was a loser hand, because his other cards already added up to twenty three. But the Idiot's value was zero, as even children knew, and so it gave the pilot the hand. The *Nomad Merchant's* leaving room suddenly filled with the Seibergians' shouts of rage and disappointment. One of them came as far as to say that he didn't remember having seen the Idiot in a long time, implicitly suggesting that Solo might have had that card hidden somehow, waiting for the moment it would become usable. Watching the scene from the cockpit, Raiven opened the holster of his blaster. He and Solo had agreed that it would be better if he didn't join the game and kept his eyes open in case any of their guests turned out to be a bad loser. Now, the precaution no longer seemed to be excessive. *First game, first trouble*, Raiven thought making a face.

"You seem to have a poor memory, buddy," Solo said without losing his calm and his smile. "Your friend here had the Idiot all the time in the last hand, although it didn't do him any good."

"Yeah," the one referred to admitted grimly. "I received the Idiot and the Two of Swords from the beginning. I was waiting the whole game for a darn Three to get an Idiot's hand, but none of them ever came."

"All right, I was just kidding," the first Seibergian said, emptying his glass of its last remains of Whyren Reserve. He let escape a short laugh as to prove his sincerity. Probably encouraged by the generous doses of the Corellian Whiskey they all had consumed since their arrival, his companions joined him in the laughter. Solo laughed with them until they all were crying, coughing and patting each others' backs. Raiven relaxed a bit, but kept his hand close to the blaster's butt. *Drunk people change moods almost at light speed*.

When the Seibergians departed, carrying surprisingly steadily the two crates they had purchased, Raiven stood up and joined Solo at the gaming table.

"For a moment, I thought that I'd have to rescue you before they decided to fry you."

"Things weren't that serious, mate. No, really. They were not as angry as they wanted us to believe. They will easily recover the money they've just lost reselling part of the whiskey. Our price is a bargain for them."

"Well. How'd it go?"

Solo displayed a big grin. "Greeeeeat. I've won almost five hundred Corellian credits. They're a lot more changeable than the local currency, so I insisted that it was Corellian credits or nothing."

Raiven snorted. "I don't mean the game, you pirate. Did you get any useful information?"

"Did you not record it?" Solo asked suddenly serious.

"Of course I did, but I couldn't hear them well from the cockpit, and I don't want to listen to three hours of recording if you can give me an abstract. Are you sober enough?"

"Now you're offending me, you know? I only had two glasses, but I made them last to appear that I was drinking as much as they did. It's an old gambler trick."

"I see." Raiven was amazed at how Corellian Solo seemed since he had adopted this role, and not only because of the heavy accent he was talking with. Not that he didn't seem to have one before, but now

Raiven would have mistaken him for one of the Corellian adventurers who appeared in many of the holomovies he had seen when he was a kid. They all drank whiskey and played sabacc almost all the time. They were bold, impudent, charming and deprecated odds the same when they played games as when they risked their life. It seemed that the plots, then, were not that far from reality. He wondered how much of that was in their genes and how much was a learned attitude. In any case, Solo seemed to be enjoying this mission more than he had expected. At times he became deadly serious, almost introspective, when they spoke about the events of the last weeks. But now, after two hours playing sabacc, he seemed to have practically forgotten about all that. *I'm starting to understand some of the things his file reads.* "OK then, what did you get?"

"Not much, I must admit." Solo shrugged. "I mentioned that we would be more than happy if we could get an extra money ferrying Balanish refugees out of here in our return trip. They told me that we're a little late for that--most of those who could pay have already left, and the rest won't dare come to Nurtina now that it's full of Seibergian soldiers. Besides, the news about the destruction of that transport is spreading. I asked as discretely as I could if any of them knew the pilot of that ship, taking for granted that he was a Corellian, but none of them did."

"Or none of them want to tell."

"Maybe, although I've always believed that the Whyren Reserve performs miracles in loosening tongues. Well, don't despair yet. This was only our first try. Next customers may be better informed or be more willing to talk."

Raiven sighed noisily. "I really hope you're right."

The light of morning surprised Rooster when she tried to leave the tent. The Lumi covered her tired and reddened eyes with her hand and emerged not without difficulties. The snow piled up outside reached up to her thighs. Foxfire and Moose sat on two empty boxes beside the tent in front, apparently waiting for her. Around them the camp was full of activity. New Republic personnel, Lynx commandos and Balanish refugees were busy repairing the damage caused by the storm and cleaning paths between tents and shelters. Moose and Foxfire jumped to their feet as soon as they saw her coming. Moose took a shovel.

"Wait, Roo," he said. "We'll help you."

"When did the storm end?" Rooster asked, feeling her mouth dry.

"Maybe an hour ago," Foxfire answered. Her right arm rested on the sling Rooster had made for her the day before. "You've been there in almost eight."

Rooster nodded. Eight hours. It had seemed a lifetime, and it could be that for doctor Al Saruff. The Ithorian had forced Daboro and her to keep him conscious until they were about to close the wound, probably no more than half an hour before. After that....

"How is he?" Moose asked.

"He is in a coma. The blood he lost, an overdose of stimulant, or something I did wrong. I don't know. Probably all at once."

"So he is still alive." Foxfire said in an encouraging tone.

"Not for long, I guess," Rooster answered, unable to share Foxfire's wishful optimism. She felt exhausted and hollow, as if the hours spent fighting for the doctor's life had emptied her of everything but the tiredness itself. Foxfire and Moose looked at her with concern, and Rooster thought that they were expecting her to say something more, but she didn't know what else she could tell them. She, Daboro, and the doctor himself, more than anyone, had tried it. Yes, Al Saruff was alive, but many things could have gone wrong. He might die at any moment. Or never recover from the coma. Or come out of it with irreversible complications--physical, neurological or both. Suddenly a noise startled Rooster. She recognized it as the

sound of a ship engaging its repulsorlifts. Bewildered, she looked up, toward the place Moose was pointing out already.

"There," he said. "It's a Corellian shuttle. Help is coming."

Rooster turned her back on them and almost fell trying to reenter the tent as fast as she could. She almost rammed into sergeant Daboro, who came out to see if the sound he had heard was what it seemed. "They're here," she said, "the Corellians! Quickly, activate the stretcher's repulsors and let's take him out!"

"Cover him with some blankets," Foxfire said behind her. "It's cold out here!"

"Yes, yes! Do that, sergeant! Come on, come on!"

"Moose, you and I will take the Seibergian somewhere else."

Less than five minutes later the shuttle elevated again toward the sky, disappearing almost immediately behind the clouds. Rooster felt someone's arms, probably Moose's, holding her beneath her armpits. Only then she realized that her legs were failing her. She noticed her eyelids falling on her eyes, but she thought that closing them now wouldn't be bad. The Lumi didn't notice nor think any more the rest of the day.

XV

"I'm sorry, Colonel," the holographic image of Admiral Sinensis said, "but I can't grant you the permission to send a reconnaissance patrol to the Balanish Country. That only would mean the restart of the hostilities with the Corellians. We can't afford that risk."

Talina Gen'yaa bit her lip from the inside. This had been a waste of time. Sinensis had made clear the first time that for him Lieutenant Colonel Schroeder's report was not a reason enough to do anything. Her hope was that Counselor Organa would be of a different opinion, but that was either not the case or the Admiral's speech would have changed something in the last hours. *Damn it.* In spite of the Admiral's caution, Gen'yaa was starting to wonder whether the Corellians would now be so eager to enter combat or not. Now they'd have two Star Destroyers and a Mon Calamari Cruiser in front, beside the respectable firepower of the *Brave Soul*. Would they endanger the *First Citizen* and their other capital ships for a question of national pride? Those vessels were the Diktat's best guarantee to keep Corellia's present status of independence, both from the Empire and the New Republic. He couldn't afford to lose them. Gen'yaa knew for sure that the Corellians would protest fiercely if the New Republic invaded Seibergia's space again, yes, and probably the negotiations would suffer a temporary recession. But she suspected that they wouldn't go beyond the angry words provided that no Seibergian objectives were attacked. She had tried to point that out once, but Sinensis wouldn't hear it. It wouldn't do her any good to insist on her opinions. If there were a sure way to stop her supposedly still rising career, it would be to earn a reputation for questioning the orders of her superiors. But it was hard for her to keep her silence.

"We have no other means to find out what is happening in the Balanish Country, sir. Not since the Seibergians shot down our survey satellites while the Corellians kept us busy, and our rear-guard ships were ordered to abandon the planet's orbit."

"Those orders came directly from Counselor Organa, Colonel." In spite of Gen'yaa's best attempts of being considerate, it was evident that the Admiral was starting to get angry. "That was a gesture of good will and, sincerely, I share the Counselor's prudence. We must prevent a new confrontation with Corellia by any means."

"And what of the reasons that brought us here in the first place, sir?"

"I don't forget them for a single moment, Colonel. But we don't know for sure that the Seibergian Army has advanced a single meter beyond Nurtina. If the paramilitary have put their hands on some old AT-STs, that's bad news, but it doesn't mean that every Balanish village is in danger. I must remind you that none of our

camps has been attacked, although the Seibergians have had plenty of opportunities to do so."

"Yes sir." Gen'yaa declined to say more. Nothing would convince the Admiral. Of course the camps were not attacked. Somolovich *did* want all the Balanish population to run to the refugees camps. When the situation in them was finally untenable, and with the New Republic's hands tied by the presence of the Corellian armada, they more likely than not would be forced to evacuate the camps. The surviving Balanish would then be taken to the already overcrowded Balania and to every other New Republic world willing to accept them. And then then the only Balanish on Seibergia would be the dead ones. Objective accomplished. She mentally shrugged. *Nobody can say that I didn't try. The failure and the humanitarian catastrophe won't fall upon my shoulders.*

"I appreciate your concern, Colonel Gen'yaa," Sinessis said, seemingly calmed by her acceptance, "and I'll make sure that the High Command knows how well the *Wolf's Lair* and Wolfshead Squadron had behaved in in this crisis, in spite of the unfortunate incident with that civilian transport." *He couldn't help but say that, could he?* "But we all must accept what our priorities are here."

"I fully understand that, sir. You can count on us."

"I know that, Colonel. *Brave Soul* out."

Colonel Gen'yaa stared at the now inactive holoprojector for a few seconds fighting the frustration that Admiral Sinessis's, and above all Counselor Organa's, shortsightedness and excess of prudence had caused her. Behind her, Lieutenant Colonel Wumb had witnessed the whole conversation in silence. He walked to her side before speaking.

"Should we cancel the pre-alert status, ma'am? No other ships in the fleet have adopted it."

"No, Lieutenant Commander. Sooner or later, the evidence of what is going on down there might come to us. When that happens, I want us to be the first in condition to act, is that clear?"

"Yes, ma'am. Although I hope we don't have to enter combat again. In spite of the emergency repairs, the *Lair* is crippled."

"I don't need you to remind me of that."

"I'm sorry, ma'am. Not my intention to be impertinent." Gen'yaa had immediately regretted her burst of bad temper, but she didn't excuse herself. Wumb knew her well enough to not feel so easily offended. From time to time, it did no harm to remind people what their place was. *Exactly what Admiral Sinessis did to me a moment ago.*

Nobody spoke for a while, until the flight controller on duty called Colonel Gen'yaa's attention half an hour later.

"Ma'am, an X-Wing coming from the *Liberator* is asking for permission to land. The pilot has requested to talk to you."

Gen'yaa arched an eyebrow. "How strange. Has that pilot identified himself, Ensign?"

"It's a female voice, ma'am, or at least that seemed to me. And no, she had not said her name nor her rank. Should I...?"

"No. It won't be necessary. Send her to the main hangar. I'll see her there."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Take the bridge, Lieutenant Colonel," she said to Wumb. "This won't take long."

"Well, ma'am."

Gen'yaa arrived at the flight deck in time to see how the X-Wing was directed by a tractor beam to an

unoccupied parking place. After the battle, there were several to choose from. The pilot descended from the ship using the ladder a technician had fitted to the fighter's side and came directly to her. She was rather short and lean, and she walked with agility and economy of movement. Gen'yaa had watched the Lynx commandos train many times. That woman, which she was supposed was a human, knew how to use her body. While all combat pilots used to keep themselves in good shape, very few of them would resist an assault against one of the commandos. Gen'yaa had the impression that this lady could.

"Colonel Gen'yaa," she said stopping a step from her and removing her flight helmet. Her white hair fell upon her shoulders.

"Winter."

"Yes, Colonel. I'm sorry for the secrecy, but Counselor Organa wanted me to be as discrete as possible."

"What's so important that you have to come here to tell me?"

Winter didn't look troubled by Gen'yaa's relative rudeness. "Nothing, actually. But I rather wanted to meet you face to face better than via hologram. That's what Counselor Organa would do, if she had the chance."

Gen'yaa started to walk towards a deserted office, protected from the curious looks of the technicians and pilots present on the flight deck. In spite of Winter's pretension of discretion, they were calling a lot of attention. The enigmatic young woman followed her without questions. As soon as the door closed behind them, and without offering Winter a seat, Gen'yaa said "You seem to have the Counselor's confidence, don't you?"

"Yes, I do," Winter admitted.

"Does she listen to you, too?"

"Yes, she does." Winter smiled for a brief instant. "Although she makes her own decisions, not always following my, or others', advice."

"I see. Please, be seated." Some people tended to get nervous when they were made to stand up, but evidently Winter was not of that kind. Gen'yaa was not surprised to find that out.

"Thanks. You surely have many other things to do, so I won't steal too much of your time."

"Take what you need. I've left the *Lair* in good hands."

Winter nodded. "Your crew is very competent, Colonel." Gen'yaa accepted the praise with a single nod. The other woman continued. "I'm aware of your recent conversation with Admiral Sinensis. He informed the Counselor."

"Is she still on board the *First Citizen*?"

"No. The Counselor is back on the *Liberator*. A new meeting is scheduled for tomorrow, though, when the Corellian transport ships have all returned. She is now with Admiral Sinensis and other high ranking officers, discussing how the situation can evolve from here. But that report of yours can change things a lot. Do you really think that the Seibergians are exploiting the coverage the Corellians are giving them to claim total control of the Balanish Country?"

"Yes, I do. If only I could send a single ship to take some aerial shots, I could also prove it."

"That wouldn't change the Corellians' attitude, Colonel, although it could force us to move. Maybe it's lucky that we can't verify your suspicion for the time being."

"Why do you say that?"

"If it's known that the Seibergian government is actually using its army to perform an ethnic cleansing on the Balanish Country, all the citizens of the New Republic would expect us to be true to our promise of

defending the Balanish population. We would have to attack Somolovich's troops with all the forces at our disposal, with or without Corellians."

"Not necessarily. We could keep it quiet for the time being. We'd use the evidence to force a change in the Corellian policy."

"We can hardly keep something like that as a secret here. There are reporters everywhere, trying to scan our frequencies, offering bribes in exchange for information and watching closely everything we do, making guesses and publishing them, without proof, as opinion articles. We do as much as we can to keep them from interfering with our operations, but we can't just throw them away, not even if the Corellians decided to do the same with their own media. We're a democracy and there's freedom of speech."

"I know all that."

"Then you must agree with me that, sooner or later, there would be a leak and the press would learn about that hypothetical reconnaissance, especially if the results were what we expect." Gen'yaa pursed her lips. Winter was right. She for one had taken as many precautions as possible to prevent her little operation in Nurtina from being discovered. "Even if we were able to keep it hidden from the public domain, it wouldn't work to convince the Corellian military we're dealing with. For them, the Balanish Country is a part of Seibergia, and so the Balanish crisis is an internal Seibergian problem. They consider that the Seibergians have every right to send troops wherever they want on their planet's surface." The white-haired woman let a sigh escape before continuing. "The only use of a reconnaissance mission is to provide targets for an immediate attack. But the moment we shoot a single burst against the Seibergian Army, the Corellians will turn on us to help their allies."

Gen'yaa snorted. She and Dey'jaa had spent hours talking about this, and reached similar conclusions, but she still insisted. This was an invaluable opportunity to find out what Counselor Organa's intentions were, and have a guess at what their conversations were worth. "They can't win. This fleet of theirs is powerful enough, but ours is too. The losses would be terrible for both sides."

"And no-one can afford them. At the cost of leaving some other places undefended in case of an Imperial strike, we could call for reinforcements and beat the Corellians here. But then the Diktat would swallow his pride and would call for the Emperor's help he has rejected again and again until today."

"Don't you think that the Diktat could well take a step back in order to save himself from such a tough time?"

"Not if he intends on remaining the Diktat. A significant part of the Corellian population would withdraw their support if he shows any weakness in front of us. He would be forced to invoke new elections, and these would be won by a pro-Imperial. In the long run, the end is the same, and Cisco Bahamonde won't renounce his position, take that for granted. Even if that means to lose his precious fleet."

Gen'yaa frowned. "Would the Emperor want a Corellia without ships? No, don't answer. It is a rhetorical question. Of course he would. With so many Corellians in the New Republic armed forces, the psychological blow would be worse for us than a dozen armadas like this one."

Winter nodded. "Exactly. Not only Counselor Organa, but Mon Mothma and the majority of the Provisional Council, think that this battle can't be won by the force of arms, but the time for preventing that is dwindling. After learning about your report, the Counselor is worried that while we wait and delay what might be unavoidable, the Balanish are losing their homes and maybe their lives."

Gen'yaa crossed her arms over her chest. Now they were starting to speak the same language. *So Leia Organa is not blind nor insensitive to reality, like many politicians use to be.* "And how may I be of help?"

"Since the *Wolf's Lair* was sent to the Viayak Cluster, whatever happens here of importance, you or your people are involved. Let's see. First, one of your patrols was responsible for the sadly famous incident that threw us all into this mess." Gen'yaa made an attempt to talk, but Winter didn't allow it. "Please, Colonel. My personal opinion is that something like that had to happen at any moment, but the fact is that it happened to pilots from Wolfshead Squadron. Well, then the Corellian armada comes and your pilots are the first ones to detect them and the first also to open fire in this still undeclared war. The *Wolf's Lair* was, however, the first New Republic vessel that entered in combat and it was of vital importance keeping the Corellians busy. Your ship and your crew saved the day. Amazingly enough, and practically at the same time, your search & rescue shuttle becomes the first ship we lose on Seibergia, and not by an accident, but presumably shot

down by a Seibergian walker. That's the first evidence we have of Seibergian regular troops' activity in the very heart of the Balanish Country. Against all odds, your pilots survive and they are able to reach one of our camps to inform us of what they saw. Impressive, isn't it?"

"Maybe. Where are you going with this?"

"Another two of your pilots were on Sullust three days ago. They left with a Corellian YT-2000 light freighter, seemingly the same ship that one of Wolfshead Squadron patrols intercepted yesterday. Just to let it pass, I think, with the involuntary help of a pair of Corellian flyboys."

And she pretended that her visit was just a courtesy. "You're very well informed for being an assistant," Gen'yaa said, finding no reason to deny Winter's last affirmation. Evidently she and Counselor Organa had darn good sources.

"True. Now tell me what's going on."

Gen'yaa decided that she had nothing to lose if she put all her cards face up on the table. If things went wrong, Counselor Organa could be an invaluable friend. For that, her best chance seemed to be to get Winter's sympathies. *What the hell, for all I know she might be Organa herself with some make-up and a white wig.* "We have two operatives on Seibergia, looking for evidence of the Empire's hand in all this crisis, and especially in, as you have called it, the famous incident."

Winter frowned for an instant, but she didn't look too surprised. "Where exactly are they?"

"In Nurtina."

"The New Republic Intelligence has several agents on Seibergia trying to do the same. Why do you think yours would succeed where others have failed so far?"

"One of them is a Corellian. He has been to Nurtina before and knows his way among cargo pilots, smugglers and the kind of people you'd find on a backwater world like that one's spaceport. The other is a former Imperial pilot with some experience in covert operations. I thought they could have a chance."

"I hope they're also lucky enough, because we won't be able to give them any support. Furthermore, if they screw it up and things get worse because of their intervention, you're going to receive all the flak."

Gen'yaa pressed her lips together. *So much for the Counselor's help.* "So it was this what you've flown here to tell me?"

"No. That's only a part of it. The Counselor needed to know what exactly you were up to, and whether it could help us to solve the crisis." Gen'yaa didn't answer. Winter stared at her for some instants, and then she took a deep breath. "I'll tell her to wait for a few days and see if your men are able to give us what we need. May the Force forgive us if we wait for nothing, and people die because we didn't act when we should have."

"Let's hope that."

"I wanted to hear your other ideas too."

"Other ideas?" Now Gen'yaa was genuinely bewildered.

"You seem to have ideas for everything, Colonel, and you usually come out with good from all kind of situations. That's what your file reads, and what Counselor Fey'laa said when he was asked."

Gen'yaa swallowed hard, starting to feel uneasy. She didn't like at all where this conversation had lead to. In a second, the responsibility of saving the future of the New Republic had been laid upon her shoulders and upon the two pilots she had sent looking for miracles, and now she learned that she had become the object of scrutiny from Counselor Organa and her staff. Nevertheless she could not help but find the fact somewhat ironic. *This is the weird part of being together under the same flag for so much time. Now humans start to act like Bothans.* "I'm happy to be of use," she said, "and I would like if what you've just said were true. But I

have no magic solutions for this situation or I'd have already shared them with Admiral Sinensis and Counselor Organa."

"I see. Then I'm done here."

"Wait. There's one thing that my Intelligence Officer and I have been talking about."

"I'm listening," Winter said.

"Actually, you've mentioned the issue already. It's about the media. Their cameras have been present in all this mess from the beginning. All things considered, the report in the Corellian news was at least as responsible of the consequences that the destruction of that freighter is having as my pilots were. As you've pointed out we can't get rid of the journalists but, couldn't we use them in our favor?" Gen'yaa knew that this was going to be a long shot, but she had nothing to lose. *Whether it works or not, it may help to cause a distraction. And it will give the Brass something else to think about besides me and my people.*

Winter arched her eyebrows. "How would you do that? Reporters from several worlds visited our camps weeks ago, trying to make the public aware of the Balanish people's suffering. It only helped to tie our hands here even more, preventing us from pulling our forces from Seibergia under any circumstance without shattering the New Republic's credibility."

"Maybe, but the reporters are not there now, when the camps are saturated beyond its capability and people are starving. We didn't want them to be there to take holos of our B-Wings chasing Seibergian paramilitaries, paramilitaries, did we? So we did our best to keep the media far from the Balanish Country and concentrate on the space activities instead."

"We didn't attract all of them. The main channels pulled their people from the Balanish Country and accepted the invitations to come to our capital ships, but there are still independent media on Seibergia. Probably most of them are in the capital, trying to get an exclusive interview with President Somolovich, but a few freelancers must be still in the Balanish Country."

"But if they're not in our camps, where are...? Oh, of course. They're with the guerillas."

"Some of them. Others have probably been detained by the Seibergians."

"That's an interesting idea. Tell the New Republic Intelligence to use their contacts. Send someone to two or three news offices. Go around saying in a low voice that now that the blockade is broken thanks to the Corellians' efforts, it's a lot easier to get to the Balanish Country. There where the news is hot and every picture is a potential award winner. After all, the public is already saturated with two weeks old images from the battle. Where we can't go without causing the Corellian to react, the media might get relatively undisturbed."

"The Corellians won't stop them, but the Seibergians will. If they're invading the Balanish Country, they won't be willing to have witnesses. Especially not reporters and cameras."

"Let's them try anyway. The negative pictures of the Seibergian authorities preventing the journalists from visiting our camps will be news also, and it will bring part of the media pressure against Somolovich and the Diktat. And don't underestimate the reporters. Maybe some of them will get through and reach their goal. It won't do us any harm if they take some pictures of the suffering Balanish women and children leaving their burned villages. Maybe they will run into some Seibergian walkers like the one that shot down our shuttle, devastating everything on their pass. *That* would be an exclusive."

Winter seemed to consider this. "I see your point, and don't think we've not considered this before. But the reporter's lives would be in serious jeopardy."

"Those people live taking that kind of risk. Everything for an exclusive, is that not what they say? And there will be Corellian reporters, too. I'd like to hear what they'd say if a single cameraman is harmed by the Seibergian troops."

"True enough. All right, I'll talk about it with Counselor Organa. I don't think she will like it, but she might agree with your point of view." Winter stood up. "Before I leave, I've got something more for your." She

produced a datacard from one of her flightsuit's pockets and handed it to Colonel Gen'yaa.

"What's this?"

"The list of the Corellians' prisoners."

"At last."

"At last. It has been needed this short period of good relations for them to accept giving us this list. I must warn you, this is not good news."

"Thanks anyway."

Gen'yaa didn't accompany Winter to her X-Wing and returned instead directly to the bridge. The presumed assistant's visit had cleared some doubts, and made Gen'yaa aware of the attention she had attracted to herself. On the one hand, she had seen confirmed that neither Corellia nor the New Republic was going to soften its position. As a consequence, now that the Seibergians had made their move, the definitive confrontation seemed only a matter of time unless Rovardi and Tengroth, or any of the New Republic agents in Seibergia, could find something that changed things significantly. On the other hand, the discovery of her covert operation had increased her chances of becoming a scapegoat at the end of the story. She damned herself for being so naive and arrogant as to think that she could do something like that without New Republic Intelligence noticing. By the moment she entered the bridge, however, her irritation had given way to the acceptance of circumstances. The harm was done already, she reflected, so there was no sense in regretting. If Tengroth and Rovardi succeeded, though, she was going to score a very big point. That thought helped her to live with the uncertainty. In spite of the Bothans' natural aversion to taking uncontrolled uncontrolled risks, Gen'yaa had long ago reached the conclusion that nothing big is achieved without taking some serious risks. She told Wumb that everything was all right and retook the command of the *Wolf's Lair*, sending her second to rest. Provided that no fighter pilots, New Republic or Corellian, screwed it up and started the shooting in the next few hours, this watch was bound to be a quiet one. She'd have plenty of time to think and make plans in advance. She sent a short message to Lieutenant Commander Dey'jaa and turned the holocast receiver on, keeping the volume low. When she started to hear the latest Corellian news, she took a mental note for something she wanted to do later. Winter had managed to prick her curiosity. As soon as she had the chance, she had to ask *her* sources about Winter. *Let's see what the Bothan Spy Network can tell me about her.*

Night had fallen by the time Rooster woke up. After almost eleven hours of sleep, a two year record for her, she felt sluggish and completely disoriented. Instead of the ceiling of her quarters on the *Wolf's Lair*, or the *Compassion's* upper instrument panel, her eyes found the dark green fibroplastic fabric of a military tent. Her thoughts cleared slowly. Yesterday--had yesterday been the last time she had slept, or was it the day before yesterday?--she had awoken with the same vision. They were camped on a mountain pass, and she had been attending a birth before changing bacta patches to doctor Al Saruff and a Seibergian soldier. Coming out from her bewilderment, Rooster fought to liberate herself from the sleeping bag and stood up quickly, looking at both sides, trying to find her patients and see how they were. There was nobody beside her, and suddenly the empty tent seemed to turn in circles around her. *Ooooh, I shouldn't have stood up so fast.* She waited until she recovered her balance before trying to get out of the tent. She took a glance outside. The refugee camp didn't look as bad as she remembered it, although her first impression of their arrival there was now somewhat blurred in her memory. About that morning, she only remembered snow.

Rooster put on her thermal coat and went out, closing the entrance to the tent. There was a hand-made sign nailed on a post in front of the bigger tent on her right side that read "Medical Tent". She winced when she recognized it. That was where she had spent the night before with Sergeant Daboro trying to save Ben Al Saruff's life. Rooster started to walk, feeling an urge to know about him. She would have to return later and take a look at the Seibergian's wound, but now she had to find Foxfire or Moose. Maybe they would have news.

The snow was still high, but paths had been cleared throughout the whole camp, including the accesses to every tent. The damage caused by the recent storm had been repaired, for the most part, although here and there it could still be made out. Rooster saw fabric patches hastily but decently sewn to the sides of several

tents, broken guy ropes reattached with thick knots, and damaged poles reinforced with pieces of wood kept in place by ropes or even rags. At first she wondered where everybody was, but soon she started to find people, walking in the opposite direction she was, carrying their evening soup. The look of those persons made her heart ache. They were shrunken and dirty, with pale, thin faces but thick shapes because most of them wore all their clothes at once trying to shelter themselves from the cold. They had bags under their eyes, from nights without sleep, concern and weeping. Many wore improvised bandages, covering half-cured wounds or even mutilations. Some used thick sticks to walk. Others needed the help of relatives. Rooster would learn later that falls and cold had caused more of that damage than the Seibergian weapons. Some had lost fingers, or even a whole foot, to frostbite from their trek to the camp. What Rooster had perceived when she first saw Camp One, in those scarce minutes before she shut herself in the medical tent, had not been a macabre mirage caused by her nervousness and the anxiety she felt at that moment. The refugees' condition was as bad as it had seemed to her. But now there was something strange in them that had not been there before. Some of the Balanish saluted Rooster on her pass, raising chins and waving hands as if they knew her. A boy around seven years old said "Hi doctor." *Doctor?* Rooster was puzzled at first, but then she understood. Obviously her brain extensions, not completely covered by her cap, made her easy to recognize by all those who had been told about her. And somebody, probably one of the refugees who came with her group, had been saying that she was a medic. Some of those people even smiled, with their lips chapped by the cold. If they all did not look so miserable, Rooster would have thought that they were almost glad. When she reached the center of the camp, she saw Foxfire and Moose helping to serve the dinner, along with another woman Rooster didn't know. Around two hundred people were still waiting, more or less patiently, for their turn. Foxfire turned her head and saw Rooster approaching.

"Did you sleep well, Roo?" she asked cheerfully, while holding a ladle with her good arm. Moose waved a hand too, but the Lumi didn't answer their greetings.

"You know something about the doctor?" she asked hastily instead.

"Nothing, I'm sorry. Maybe during the next communication with the *Lair* they'll have something to tell us. That will be tomorrow in the morning," she added anticipating Rooster's next question.

"Ah. Thanks." *Tomorrow.* Rooster felt momentarily dejected, but Foxfire didn't seem disposed to allow her to get depressed.

"You came in time to have your ration. You won't find a better restaurant in these mountains!"

Rooster smiled briefly. "Now that you mention it, I am hungry." The Lumi looked with distrust at the contents of the big pot where Foxfire introduced her ladle again and again, filling the bowls that the refugees held in front of her. In that moment a middle age woman took a sip from her bowl and said in a low voice, "A lot better, yes." Her smile was the same Rooster had seen in the refugees she had crossed with in her way. "It seems they like it," she commented.

"Yes," Foxfire answered without ceasing in her work. "It's thanks to our friend Sdermila. This is the basic protein, fibre and grease mixture we usually put into a food processor, dissolved in boiled water. Edible, yes, but its taste...." Foxfire wrinkled her nose. "After having that for breakfast and lunch, Sdermila came and told us that the soup could be improved, and we asked how. She said that the leaves of the dwarf bushes that grow around here, well crushed, could be used as spice. She said also that there should be late growth of wild grains, which would add some additional taste."

"Wild grain?"

"The ancestors of this people cultivated these mountains a long time ago," Moose explained. "Do you see those terraces? There we found the grain. Many of these refugees helped to dig the snow and take as much grain as they could carry."

"That and the bush leaves made the difference. Look at them now." Foxfire shook slightly her head. Yes, Rooster thought, *I think that I know what you mean. How little it takes to make wretched people a little bit happier.* "Most of the refugees here knew that it would be there," Foxfire continued, "but they were happy enough having a shelter and more and less regular, although scarce foods. Until Sdermila came."

"That woman has initiative," Moose said with unhidden admiration. "And also a sort of personal charm that makes people love her. Only one day and a half here, and she has practically become the soul of the camp. The poor dear looks a bit embarrassed about that popularity."

"Where is she now?"

"She went to take Deveralia her dinner," Foxfire answered. "Her children accompanied her. They have adopted her as a sort of grandmother."

"Oh, Deveralia," Rooster hit her forehead with her open palm. "I must go and look how she and her daughter are doing."

"I've been there a while ago myself. They are fine enough. Some of the other women have been taking care of them. Everybody helps each other here."

"I see." Rooster smiled again, now more openly. Foxfire and Moose seemed to have adapted quickly enough to this place. If she had ever been told that she would see Moose serving meals, she would have laughed. "All right. I'll go to the end of the row."

"You don't need to wait," Foxfire said. "I can give you a bowl right now."

"No, you better not." Rooster grew serious and lowered her tone. "Another way of helping this people is showing them that we don't consider ourselves better than them."

Foxfire nodded. "That's correct."

"Furthermore," Rooster added, fearing that her rejection to accept Foxfire's offer could have bothered her, "the best part is on the bottom of the pot."

"Really?" Foxfire giggled. "We're glad to learn that, eh Moose?" Moose laughed. Rooster turned her back on them and blushed while she started to walk beside the double row of refugees. Only then had she realized that Foxfire and Moose were actually waiting for *all* the refugees to be served before eating themselves. *And what else was I expecting from them?* she thought ashamed. *So much for your pretended moral superiority, Roo.*

Half an hour later, with her stomach full, Rooster went back to the medical tent. She found the Seibergian stormtrooper awake, accompanied by Cheetah. The commander of Lynx Commando had made another try at interrogating the prisoner, but from his expression the Seibergian was not exactly collaborating. For an instant Rooster feared that Cheetah could have mistreated the prisoner, but when she got close enough she saw no signs of it. Although she tried to be subtle in her inspection, Cheetah noticed what she was looking for.

"Don't worry. I haven't touched him. Not yet."

Rooster avoided the commando's look. In spite of Cheetah's threatening tone, she had the impression that his last comment was intended to make the Seibergian hesitate, and maybe talk the next time to avoid a hypothetical beating. Rooster wondered if Cheetah or his men would continue to keep from using the violence to break the prisoner's resistance, but she forced her mind's little voice to shut up. *I have to stop doubting about the ethics of people around me. Not only do I not have the right to judge them, but also I'm finding that my suspicions are wrong many times.* When had she started to do that? Consciously, only after learning that Moose had shot down a transport carrying refugees. But unconsciously, probably since she left the Lumi Moon and started to meet people from other species. People whose real feelings she couldn't tell, because they had no brain extensions changing colors accordingly with their emotions. With time, Rooster had learned to read human and some other beings' expressions decently enough, but she could never be certain. At some time or another, she had reached the conclusion that, unlike the Lumi, most intelligent beings didn't always say what they thought. They hid their real motivations and usually pretended to be better than they really were. Or simply different. But now she realized that she had become a little like them. Was she not trying to conceal her unease from Cheetah?

The young soldier looked at the commando leader uncertainly, but if he was impressed by Cheetah's more or less subtle warning he did his best to hide it. Rooster reconsidered her position and thought that she well

could help Cheetah in his purpose. After all, this young soldier had been shooting at Foxfire, Moose and her, obviously trying to kill them. Maybe he had also helped to throw those poor Balanish out from their homes and villages. "Just try not to cause him wounds that we can't cure. Remember that neither Sergeant Daboro nor me are real medics."

Cheetah tossed her a glance, and Rooster believed to detect a trace of amazement in the man's eyes. It could have been only her imagination, but, in any case, Cheetah took the hint and followed her.

"You know how to treat broken bones, don't you?"

"Yes, I do, provided the fractures are clean enough."

"They will be, I promise." Cheetah handcuffed the Seibergian's unwounded arm to the stretcher again and left without any more comments. The prisoner seemed to relax a bit while Rooster removed the last bacta patch from his wound to inspect it closely. She was startled when she heard the Seibergian's voice for the very first time.

"So much effort for an alien?"

"A-an alien?"

"Last night. The thing with the hammer head."

Rooster frowned with disgust. "Doctor Al Saruff is an Ithorian. It's not a thing, but a being, like you or me. Although I'm not so sure about you." Apparently taken aback, the soldier didn't answer. Rooster realized that her retort had been a mistake. After all, the Seibergian had started to talk. That was more than what Cheetah had seemed able to get. She tried to correct herself. "I take for granted that you don't get to see many Ithorians on Seibergia, do you?"

The soldier looked up at her but didn't reply for almost half a minute. Rooster thought that he was going to fall into his stubborn silence again when he seemed to decide the opposite. Maybe he needed to talk after all, no matter with whom, provided that he was not being interrogated. "No, we don't," he said. "The only aliens I've ever seen were Neimodians and Rodians." Rooster didn't find that strange at all. Neimodians and Rodians were among the few non-human species that used to collaborate with the Empire. "Are you an alien yourself?"

Rooster looked him in the eyes, but now the Seibergian avoided her look. She decided the man had asked the question only out of curiosity and that he didn't mean to offend her. *So he is not shameless.* "I'm a Lumi."

"Lumi? Never heard of. You look almost human. All in you seems human, but those."

"They're called brain extensions. We Lumi use them as a way to communicate our feelings to each other. They change of color depending on our mood."

"Really? I wouldn't like if everybody around could know what I think."

"Not what you think, but what you feel."

"And what do you feel now?"

Rooster would not answer that. There were too many people around who knew how to interpret her appendages' changes of color. Definitely she didn't want to give away that advantage to a stranger. An enemy, as far as she knew. *And furthermore, how have we ended up talking about me?* Rooster decided to give up for the time being. Interrogation didn't seem to be her strongest point. "You're practically cured now," she said. "The wound is closed and new skin has covered almost all the burned area. I'll tell the Commander that he can continue interrogating you."

The man's face shadowed. "I won't tell him anything."

Rooster shrugged, walking back toward the tent's entrance. "That's for you to decide. My responsibility

towards you has ended."

"Unless he breaks a bone."

"Yes, unless he does that."

Vyper looked at the few pilots assembled in front of him in the Briefing Room. They were all that remained of Wolfshead Squadron now, at least until they were able to pick up Foxfire, Moose and Rooster on the one hand, and Solo and Raiven on the other. The two Sullustan pilots were out patrolling, but Vyper still didn't consider them a part of the squadron. Actually, he had barely exchanged a few words with them upon their arrival, although that was hardly their fault. In spite of Ibero's help, commanding an understaffed squadron in a pre-alert condition gave Vyper too many things to do and too little time for anything. Theoretically, the two replacement pilots were only going to stay temporally, until Raiven and Solo were back, but, considering what he was about to announce, chances were that he would be forced to retain them for a time. They were going to need more than those two pilots to be back at the squadron's usual numbers. Vyper sighed. All in all, he more than welcomed the Sullustans' presence, among all the obvious things, because giving them this patrol turn had allowed him to gather all the veteran pilots together. It was going to be hard enough to say this once, much less repeat it later to the absentees.

Where do I start?

He had been about to tell everybody to go to the Bomb Shelter, the pilots' more and less secret lounge. There was room enough, and it would be make for a less cold environment than the Briefing Room, but he had finally decided that it wouldn't be such a good idea. Actually before coming here he had gone to lock the access to the bar, making sure that it couldn't be reopened without his voice's signature. The last thing he needed was one or more pilots, or maybe all, getting drunk after hearing the news.

He caught Ibero's look, on the first row. The squadron's provisional Executive Officer was deadly serious. The Iberyian, whom Vyper used to call Optimistic Man, seemed now the very image of fatalism. He and Vyper had been discussing for more than a hour whether it would be convenient or not to tell everybody what Colonel Gen'yaa had just transmitted to them. Ibero defended that they should keep it in secret for as long as they could. He argued that it would be a lot harder to control the pilots' revenge impulses if they knew for sure what had happened to their, so far, missing comrades. It would only take one of them to shoot against his or her Corellian shadow during a patrol to open the chest of the thunder again. Although Vyper partially shared that concern, he saw that uncertainty was wreaking havoc on everybody's morale. At the end, and against Ibero's opinion, he had decided to tell the pilots the truth. He hoped that this would help them to be more focused on their work, and the more disposed to do it well so that no one else got killed.

It was time to begin. Vyper coughed to call everybody's attention. The members of Wolfclaw Wing, all of them sat together two rows behind the rest of the group, were the last ones to notice. Vyper didn't need to understand every word they whispered to each other to know what they were discussing about: Sparks and his exclusion from active duty by medical reasons.

"First of all," he said when the silence was finally made, "we know already what shot down the *Compassion*. It was a Seibergian AT-ST." Murmurs erupted everywhere, like Vyper had expected. "Be quiet, please! It was Foxfire herself who transmitted this information. You will be glad to know that Moose alone somehow managed to destroy it." Now there was a spontaneous applause. Vyper allowed it. This was the only good thing he had to say. "Well, you'll pat Moose on his back when they all are back. Doctor Al Saruff was evacuated by a Corellian shuttle, after Rooster practiced an emergency operation on him. If the good doctor survives, Rooster is to be given most of the credit, but it's too soon to know if he will make it." Silence now. For the pilots, Ben Al Saruff had become one of the most loved members of the *Wolf's Lair's* crew. How else, considering that he had saved many of them more than once? If the doctor survived, Rooster's feat would be celebrated as much as Moose's. On the other hand, if Al Saruff finally died, although nobody would blame Rooster for it, she was going to need everybody's help to get over it. Vyper knew her well enough to know that. *But that will be another day's problem.* "Now let's go back to that AT-ST, because it's part of the reason for our pre-alert status. We believe that the Seibergian Army is going into the Balanish Country in big numbers. They're probably using all their heavy equipment. Since we're not a threat for them any more, they could have aerial support also."

"How is it we're not a threat to them?"

"You know it as well as I do, Granite. We have been expressly forbidden to enter Seibergian space so as not to provoke the Corellians into another battle."

"And what if we do that? Now we have Star Destroyers on our side!"

"Enough is enough, Granite! You interrupt me again, and you're out of here. Those orders came directly from as high as Mon Mothma herself, so don't...." *Calm yourself, man. You know Granite, don't you?* "Don't bother me with stupidities, all right? Very well. The fact is that those orders were given before we learned what we know now. That's why Colonel Gen'yaa put us on pre-alert, and yes, we are the only ones. No questions on this issue, please. Now these are your instructions. Groznik, I want your wing prepared to resume your flights over the Balanish Country. If that happens, you'll be shooting at walkers and speeder tanks, not the usual paramilitary groups, so take your people to the simulators and train on that while you can." Groznik acknowledged Vyper's instructions with a happy growl that his translator tentatively interpreted as, "Thanks a lot," which caused some laughs. Probably Groznik was the most civilized Wookiee of the New Republic, but he was a Wookiee nevertheless. There was nothing better to calm a Wookiee's frustration than the perspective of some violent action. "When and if that happens, the rest of us are bound to be giving them cover, both from the Corellians and the Seibergian fighters. This means more training for everybody. Ibero and the two Sullustans will fly with Wolfgang and I will be with Wolfeye. Questions? No? Then...."

"Vyper?"

"No and again no, Drake. I can't tell you where Solo and Raiven are, nor what they're doing." Some of the pilots laughed.

"I was not going to ask that. Well, not just that." More laughs. Drake smiled too, but he became serious before speaking again. "What I wanted to know the most is whether or not you have any news about our missing comrades?"

Vyper nodded solemnly, and suddenly everybody got quiet. "That's the other thing I've got to communicate you. The Corellians had given us their list of prisoners." Vyper took a deep breath before continuing. *Damn, it's even harder than I believed.* "They have Torpedo. He has spent three days on board the *Sovereign* on a bacta tank, but that has done him little good. His life support unit was damaged when he ejected and he ran out of air supply prematurely. The Corellians resuscitated him, but his brain was affected already by the lack of oxygen. They are going to return him so he can be evacuated to a New Republic hospital. There is little hope, but you never know." There were gasps, curses and expressions of distress. Vyper intended to wait a bit before continuing, so the pilots had time to digest this before giving them the worst news. But the echo of his last words had not yet vanished when Drake asked "What about the others?"

Vyper lowered his look for an instant. "Nothing. They didn't recover any other pilot from this squadron. Probably they disintegrated along with their ships." A collective "no" came out from several throats. The already pale faces of most of the assembled pilots showed incredulity at first, but soon it was replaced by a mix of rage and grief. Vyper didn't hear a single exclamation, just some whispers and the guttural lament that escaped between Groznik's gritted fangs. The confirmation of what they had all been afraid to hear fell like such a blow that the assembled pilots seemed unable to find words. Some, like Drake or Parody, seemed almost as touched as to cry, but they didn't. They had learned long ago to fight the tears. Vyper didn't remember having seen Drake crying, not even when Razor was murdered, although he certainly had mourned her deeply in privacy. Others, like Granite or Hardrive, were strangely silent and motionless, but their eyes seemed on fire. Most kept looking at Vyper, as if waiting for him to add anything, but, unfortunately, he had nothing else to tell them. The memories of similar occasions came easily to his mind. They were more used to this in the Imperial Navy, where TIE Fighter pilots came and went at an amazing speed in the front line units, but for that same reason the dead were not as mourned: one hardly had the time to get to know them. Only when a veteran about to finish his tour or duty fell there was some commotion. Since he joined the Alliance, he soon found out that the relationship among the pilots got to be a lot more intense some times, especially in those cases where a group of pilots had been together for as long as years. He remembered scenes as pathetic as this one, but this was the first time he was on the stage announcing the bad news. As commander, his would be the task of recording condolence holos, that the Starfighter Command would send later to the closest friends or relatives, provided that the disappeared pilots had declared any and they lived on New Republic or neutral worlds. Definitely, that was a duty he was not looking forward to, but it was one he couldn't escape, nor would he were it possible to. With such a sad perspective in mind, and deciding that the sooner they all started to move the better, he was about to finish the meeting, Arachnoid raised his hand asking for permission to talk.

"What if they're still there, floating on vacuum? Their location buoys could get damaged, like Torpedo's life support. It has happened before."

"True, but I rather prefer not to think of it as a possibility." Vyper shook his head slowly. "By now they would be dead all the same, but their agony would have been a lot worse. Not unlike Torpedo's, but much, much longer." The silence that followed this sentence was as terrible as it was complete. It lasted until Vyper dismissed the assembly with a last reminder about the new mission profiles and his recommendation to spend as much time as possible on the simulators. To vent anger and frustration firing against wave after wave of virtual enemies would be good for everybody, including himself. The depressed pilots started to leave, with sunk shoulders and bowed heads. No one seemed willing to say anything, but then Ibero's voice was heard. Vyper noticed that he had not moved from his seat yet.

"There are other alternatives. The Corellians could be lying, or they could have been caught by a third party, or who knows what."

Vyper frowned. "That's...." *nonsense*. "Where are you headed?"

"We have no corpses, do we?"

"No, we don't."

"Then I'll keep calling them missing, not dead." Some pilots, who had stopped in their way out to hear what Ibero was going to say, nodded in agreement. Vyper stared at the Iberyan, ready to order him to stay and explain himself, but Ibero didn't stand up nor showed any intention to leave. Vyper waited until everybody else abandoned the Briefing Room and then he approached Ibero. He took a seat beside him, and struggled to control his anger before talking.

"What has been that about? I thought we had finally agreed that we should tell them the truth."

"And that's what you've done." Ibero shrugged. "What I've said doesn't change that. Even without the bodies, we're certain that Sacart, Iceman and Gandalf are dead. There's no way they could have survived if no one picked them up before six hours after they ejected, and no one did. We all know that, so we stop waiting for news. But by pointing out the lack of bodies, I make harder for everybody to think of them as dead, and hopefully that will temper the wrath and the wish for revenge. It's the same you've done suggesting that it's not impossible that Torpedo could recover in a hospital."

Vyper considered that for some moments. "That was not my intention. I hadn't thought of it from that point of view."

"Nor did I until you gave me the idea." Ibero smiled sadly.

"Definitely we make a good team," Vyper snorted.

"I liked it better when it was you and Foxfire."

Vyper sighed. "Believe me, I know what you mean."

XVI

It was their fourth day in Nurtina, the seventh after the battle, when Solo and Raiven received a call from the spaceport administration. Their request for a meeting with the spaceport director had been accepted. He would see them that same morning, if they could make it. Raiven accepted without hesitation, wondering if their luck was about to change. By then Solo had organized a dozen card games with their customers and the ground personnel of the spaceport, but not much had come from them besides their cash. Actually, the Corellian pilot had amassed a small fortune at the expense of their mostly Seibergian visitors. Raiven had observed this, amused at first, but now he was starting to get impatient. He seemed to be the only one here

who was worried about their lack of results. For all he could tell, Solo was enjoying himself more than a Jawa with the keys to a droid construction facility. Raiven couldn't say that he had not been warned in advance. Before leaving, Ibero had showed him a certain paragraph extracted from Solo's file, which Lieutenant Commander Dey'jaa had copied for him: *He has shown to be quite resourceful even under pressure, but his compulsive gambling behavior has raised some doubts on his reliability. Alliance Intelligence therefore recommend that "Solo" is not to be sent out on missions without a senior officer present, and that precautions need to be taken when operating in areas where gambling is allowed.* Only now did Raiven understand how accurate those words were. The problem was that Solo was the senior officer here.

With two of their last bottles of Whyren Reserve under his arms, walking with long strides on the ferrocrete walkway that lead to the offices sector of the spaceport, Solo seemed cheerful enough. "This is the opportunity we were looking for, you'll see. If there's someone here who knows something, that's got to be the director himself."

"I hope you're right," he grunted. *How many times have I said that since we're here?* "So far all we have is gossip. Nothing that can prove anything. And you've seen the Seibergian holocausts. Tension is growing a lot up there."

Solo shrugged. "They say what their public want to hear. The Seibergians are upset because of the truce. They had hoped to see the Corellian armada blow us out of the system."

"It's not what they say what worries me the most, but what they don't say. We've seen considerable troop movement in the military area of the spaceport. Something's going on, but the news doesn't say anything about it."

"Maybe we'll find out about that, too. Look, that's the main building. The director's office is there, on the first floor. Do you remember your role?"

"How could I forget?"

Solo tossed him a look and smiled. "Yes, I guess it's not easy. There's something more. Seibergians are distrustful people, you know?"

"I have noticed, by now."

"I thought you would. Well, you can bet that there will be armed guards inside, and they will scan us for concealed weapons before admitting us. The director wouldn't receive us otherwise."

"I'll be adequately indignant."

"Good. Be ready for a fight if something goes wrong."

Raiven pursed his lips. "Going with you, I always have to be ready for fights and things going wrong."

Ten minutes later, their best hope watched them with squinted eyes from the other side of his desk, where the two bottles of Whyrens Reserve now rested.

"So you want to know if there's any work you can do for us, is that correct?"

"Correct." Solo smiled politely at the director. The Seibergian was an unremarkable man of middle age, the very image of a not particularly ambitious clerk, who had climbed to his present position just with the pass of years and not causing trouble to his superiors. He seemed more interested in Raiven, who stood beside the door looking intently at the framed two dimensional pictures that decorated the walls of the spacious room, than in the man sat in front of him. Solo hoped that the director didn't realize that Raiven was actually watching the door. "I'll be honest with you. We've heard of people who have made good profit here because

of the blockade. I thought your call was about that."

"You'll be honest, eh? Then why don't you tell me plainly what do you want, CorSec?"

"CorSec?" Solo had expected the Seibergian manager to take him for a member of the Corellian Security. That was one of the possibilities Deyjaa had anticipated, and one that Solo and Raiven had favored. A Seibergian with a certain position could tell things to a Corellian policeman that he wouldn't tell anyone else, except, perhaps, a Seibergian policeman. Although Solo was good with languages, Seibergian was not one of his strongest, which left the CorSec cover as his best option. Nevertheless, the director's open question almost left him breathless. Evidently there was more to the director than what could be seen with the eyes.

"That's what I said. Some of my subordinates have mentioned you, your Whyrens Reserve and the sabacc games in which your partner never takes part. That, and the more and less subtle questions you've been making." Solo tried to put on a blank face, as if he didn't know where the director was heading, or more exactly, as if he were pretending not to know. The Seibergian smiled briefly. "I wanted to take a glance at you to be certain, and now I am. Look, you might have fooled me, but your partner..." The man made a gesture toward Raiven, who in that moment was turning his back on them. "I've been told that he caused quite a scandal at the main door, when my security personnel asked you to turn your blasters over. For all the stars, he is even wearing the statutory boots!"

Solo tossed what he expected to look as a convincing angry stare at Raiven. His companion stared back, seemingly without understanding anything. It was amazing how well he was performing. The director continued. "I've been told that CorSec always travel in pairs with their Imperial liaisons these days, is that true?"

Solo snorted. "You can see it with your very eyes. I told him not to wear those boots, but he wouldn't hear me." Solo looked at the other man and smiled with resignation. The other laughed briefly. "All right, I give up. You caught us, although that doesn't take too much." Solo grinned and the other laughed again. Time to show him the bait. "It's about the freighter the New Republic shot down some days ago." The director limited himself to nod, inviting Solo to continue but not revealing anything.

"We're not interested in the ship itself, but in the pilot. We've got reasons to believe that he is, was a sneaky and slippery smuggler whose track we lost six months ago. He was bound to get a three to five year sentence on Kessel once he could be judged. But if the pilot of that freighter was really our man, we could cancel the search & capture order, for all it's worth."

"You need only a name?"

Solo shook his head. "No. The man we're talking about wouldn't be using his real name, so we'd need something more."

"For instance?"

"A retina scan would be the best thing, but I don't think you could give me that. Probably his voice pattern would be enough to confirm his identity."

"His voice? And how do you think I could help you with that?"

"Come on. If nothing else, you must have a recording of his conversation with the flight control."

The director stiffened visibly. "That's impossible."

"Why?" Solo stared at the man. His reaction suggested that he knew something about that flight. Something that could be revealed by a recording of the transport's transmissions registered at the spaceport. *We're on target.*

"I don't have to lie to you." *Of course you will*, Solo thought, but he didn't interrupt the director while he explained himself. "We're under military control here. I have no access to those recordings, assuming that they actually exist. I can give you the name, at least the one he used to register his ship on this spaceport, but that's all."

"Maybe I should go directly to the military authorities, identify myself and tell them what I want."

The Seibergian was quiet for some moments before replying. "Try that if you want. I can't guarantee that you'll get anything from them, though." The man seemed somewhat disappointed, almost angry. *Like a little shop owner who sees a potential customer going out of his locale without buying anything, and announcing aloud his intention to visit the shop on the opposite side of the street.* Solo imagined that the salary of the director wouldn't be impressive. Not here, in Nurtina. He wouldn't be the first to have made some extra money easing the bureaucracy for the merchant pilots, and looking the other way to avoid seeing any irregularity. Solo had paid such bribes himself in his days. *And he has taken the two bottles without a second thought.*

"Maybe not," he said, thinking as fast as he could. *That they're subordinated to military could be true. But I don't believe for a single second that he can't access the flight records. If I can make him access the main computer from here.* "And furthermore, we were supposed to conduct our investigation without revealing ourselves." Solo directed a new look at Raiven. "Funny, isn't it?"

"Maybe," the director answered, but he didn't return Solo's smile this time. Suddenly he seemed suspicious. "Is there a special reason for that discretion? I mean, you could have come here from the very first moment, tell me who you are and ask what you've just asked."

Solo bit his lower lip. His own comment about identifying himself before the military had made the director wonder. He improvised. "We think there are New Republic agents operating on Seibergia. Now forget that I've told you this."

"Of course, of course." Now the director seemed impressed, for Solo's relief.

"Well, now would you please give me the pilot's supposed name, and every bit of data you have registered about his ship and the cargo he brought in? If we can't identify the man, maybe we'll be interested in the ship after all. One thing could lead us to another."

The director nodded. "That I can give you." He leaned on his chair with a predatory smile that he showed for the very first time. Definitely Solo's first impression of him was wrong. "How interested would you say the Imperials are? And Corellian Security?"

And I thought he had no ambition. "We'll give you two thousand Corellian credits, provided that your information is usable." That was almost Solo's entire profits from the sabacc, but he couldn't keep the money anyway. In case his good conscience was not enough to make sure he would give away every last credit at the end of the mission, Raiven would be there to remind him of that particular issue.

"Two thousand? Why not *five* thousand Imperial credits?"

Now I've got you. "Hey, don't try to abuse us. I said *Corellian* credits. Let's admit it. You won't find a big use for Imperial credits here, not any more. Under the present circumstances, I think two thousand Corellian credits are worth five thousand Imperial ones."

The other man shrugged. "Put four thousand before my eyes and I'll give you what you need."

"I'll put *three* thousand, and you'll give everything to me," Solo became suddenly stern. He had no need to pretend. Among other things because that amount was *all* he had won, including the amount he had saved to pay for the Whyrens Reserve.

"All right, all right, CorSec. No need to get so serious. We're all friends here, aren't we?"

"Of course we are." Solo answered without smiling. "Is it a deal?"

"Deal. Show me the money."

Solo produced a credit chit from his pocket and lent it to the man. He introduced it in his personal datapad and consulted the figure that appeared on the screen. A half smile betrayed him before he composed his grim face again. "I don't know. This is hardly enough considering...."

"It'll be enough," Raiven said coming suddenly to the desk. "And you'll only have that money if the information is worth it, is that clear?" The menace in his tone and in his fierce look almost startled Solo, who knew that it was a fake. The spaceport manager took it for certain. Solo noticed that the hand he had used to take the chit didn't return to the desk. He could have an alarm button there, or even a concealed weapon. Solo prepared himself to jump at the Seibergian's throat at the first sign of movement of that arm.

"It's clear," the man said with conciliatory manners. "I've always considered myself a loyal *citizen*." The way he enunciated the last word and the wink directed at Raiven suggested he had meant to say *Imperial citizen*, but that didn't win him the supposed Imperial officer's sympathies.

"The data," Raiven snapped.

"I'll take printouts for you," he said, turning his chair to face the old fashioned computer terminal and put his hands on an even more ancient keyboard. Solo relaxed a bit. The Seibergian was now entering the system. "I would transfer the data to your datapads, but that would be registered by the computer, you know. It's against the regulations and it could..."

"Very well," Raiven interrupted him. "Let me see that." He rounded the desk to stand behind the man and look at the screen over his head. Solo could see the main menu of the spaceport administration database. He was in. The director looked at Raiven, surprised to find him there, but the supposed Imperial officer didn't pay him attention, focused as he was on the screen contents. The director seemed uneasy for an instant, but then he decided that there was nothing wrong in allowing the Imperial to take a look. *You have to earn the money, remember*, Solo thought intently. Raiven himself picked up the first piece of synthpaper as it came out from the printer device. Solo shrugged at the director, as if apologising for his partner's manners.

"That's it," Raiven said putting a finger on the screen. "Print me that."

The director nodded and selected the item indicated by Raiven. The printouts kept coming, but he allowed them to fall on the tray. Raiven put a hand on the director's chair's back. "He had a diagnostic made on his engines, eh? I want that too." The man started to comply, but then Raiven moved his hand quickly to the Seibergian's neck and pressed. The man collapsed with a sigh.

Without words, Solo stood up and went to the other side of the desk. He took the director by the armpits and eased him onto the floor unceremoniously. Raiven put back in his pocket the tiny drug dispenser he had kept concealed in his hand and sat in front of the computer. The program and the database itself were easy to handle: they were common in many of the Imperial installations he used to know.

"And he said he had no access. Everything is here, although I'd need some time to find what we need. There's a lot of stuff."

"Download everything you can and as fast as you can," Solo said while he inspected the desk, "we'll revise it later". As he suspected, there was a blaster in the space between the table board and the first drawer, and also a control panel. He looked around. "There must be cameras hidden somewhere. I think he could turn them on and off at will from here."

"Do you think we're being watched?" Raiven asked alarmed. He plugged his high capability datapad to the computer terminal and already terabytes of data were being transferred.

"No. I'm sure he disconnected them when we arrived or shortly after. If he was willing to take a bribe, I don't think he wanted to be recorded while doing so. But someone could notice that the cameras are not working, showing a pre-recorded loop or something. Or one of the guards out there could come for whatever reason. You better hurry."

"I'm ready," Raiven said coming out of the system but leaving the terminal switched on, as the director had had it. He also collected all the printouts from the tray. "Help me to put him back on the chair. If someone shows his head through the door, they can think he is having a nap, or passed out or whatever. It will buy us some time."

"Good thinking." Solo noticed the director's datapad still on the table. "I'll take the credit chit back. He doesn't deserve....Ah, the pirate!!!"

"What?"

"He has already transferred the money to his account!"

"Let him have it. Now let's get out of here."

"The bastard. The dirty, cheating bastard...."

They went out walking calmly and conversing casually. The administrative personnel they passed on their way out didn't give them a second look. At the entrance, the guards returned their blasters to them without questions. They started walking towards the hangars area, getting further from the offices and closer to their ship with every step.

"I can't believe we're doing this so easily," Solo said, cheerful again in spite of his return to poverty.

"Don't even mention it. We're not out yet."

They avoided the urge to run on their way to the ship until they heard a strident alarm sound. The hangar where the *Nomad Merchant* rested was barely five hundred meters in front of them. Raiven looked around, and then up to the sky. That alarm could mean anything, an accident, a little fire, a sort of drill. But he had not lived through a year long tour of duty piloting unshielded TIE Fighters for the Empire by ignoring his sense of danger. He exchanged the briefest look with Solo. Then they both started to run.

Raiven drew his blaster when they had covered a half of the distance. He saw that Solo had already his weapon on his hand. A hundred meters yet. He felt a sudden pain on his side. Too much time on space ships was not good for physical shape. His breathing was labored. Raiven promised himself that, if they got out of this one, he would pay a visit more often to the *Lair's* gymnasium. He and Solo were reaching the half opened doors of the hangar when he heard a "Halt!" shouted on his side. Without thinking twice he jumped forward while opening fire to his right, almost without looking. He fell badly on his chest and stomach, slipping a couple of meters before stopping on the ground, fortunately inside the hangar. A laser burst ricocheted behind him, on the exposed section of the door. When he tried to get up, Raiven realized that he had momentarily lost his breath. Solo helped him to get on his feet and together they resumed their run towards the boarding ramp of the freighter. Solo stumbled when he crossed the hatch and fell on his knees, failing to hit the ramp closing button. Raiven punched it just in time. New shots were heard hitting the ramp from outside, although none entered the ship through the gap.

They reached the cockpit at the same time. With his forehead covered by sweat, Solo let himself drop into the pilot's seat and engaged the *Nomad Merchant's* repulsorlifts. Raiven raised the shields while the ship started to float half a meter from the ground. The ship was already oriented to the exit. There, half a dozen guards shoot at them with their blasters. The bolts harmlessly struck the shields, a meter and a half in front of the transparisteel viewport. While Raiven started the engines, Solo activated the ship's weapon systems and squeezed the trigger on the flight yoke. The guards launched themselves to the ground when the *Nomad Merchant's* forward cannons came to life. Some of them managed to get out of the way when the doors blew out, others did not. Solo pushed the throttle a quarter forward. Burning pieces of the doors fell around them as the freighter exited the hangar. Raiven felt smashed against the seat's back when Solo pushed the throttle to the stops. The engine exhaust set the hangar alight behind them, among the cries of the Seibergian guards who had not been able to get out in time. The YT-2000 gained speed quickly enough, but Solo didn't pointed her nose upwards. Instead he kept a flight parallel to the ground, maneuvering to avoid hitting the spaceport buildings. Raiven knew that they wouldn't escape Seibergia with ease. The sensors showed half a dozen fighters taking off in their pursuit from the military area of the spaceport. Without a word, Raiven stood up and ran to the upper gunnery station.

"Quads active and ready," he transmitted through the intercom. His breathing was almost back to normal, something that could not be said of his heartbeat. "How do you see it?"

"Bad. This ship is fast, but not quite as fast as the TIE Fighters that are chasing us. If we try to ascend, we'll make a perfect target for them. Our only chance is to keep ourselves close to the ground."

"We won't loose them either way."

"But at least you will be able to light up one or two of them if they insist on following us. That should give them something to think about."

"But more fighters will join these at any moment. Man, our odds are close to nothing."

"Don't talk to me about odds! Have you not learned anything about us Corellians?"

Once more on board the *First Citizen*, Counselor Leia Organa allowed herself to be ushered to the by now too well-known meeting room. Concealed in her loose fitting tunic she carried the light saber her brother had given her. She had barely started to train with it, and only at Luke's insistence. She would prefer to carry a common blaster, to which she was a lot more accustomed, but the weapon of the Jedi had a virtue that firearms lacked: it was undetectable by most security scanners. Winter accompanied leia this time, walking on her left. Her hands were all the weapons that her Alderaanian bodyguard, agent and close friend needed. This was the first time that Leia had decided to take the risk of coming to the Corellian flagship armed-- Winter had insisted, and Leia was used to taking her advice very seriously. Although she kept meeting with Admiral Sellman every day, negotiations were all but broken since the suspicions of the Seibergian Army entering the Balanish Country arose. The Corellians had done everything they could to impede them in confirming these suspicions, but now it was an open secret that it all was true. Why else would the Corellians themselves and the Seibergian authorities be denying the civilian reporters permission to descend to the planet? Those already there were kept under surveillance in different towns of Seibergia, with visits to the Balanish Country, Nurtina included, expressly prohibited. Rumor was that several foreign journalists had been arrested around the unofficial border lines. Protests came from two dozen worlds, but that was all the idea of looking for the involvement of the press had been worth so far. Leia had consulted Mon Mothma, but the President of the New Republic had limited herself to telling Leia to do what she considered the best. Leia winced inside. It was hard for an Alderaanian when the best thing to do seemed to be to declare war, but she had run out of alternatives. She couldn't continue to allow the slaughter of Balanish on Seibergia, so she had come here to present an ultimatum to Admiral Sellman.

Winter feared that if things got that far, the Corellians could decide to retain Leia aboard the *First Citizen* as an involuntary guest under the guise of continuing the conversations. That, theoretically at least, would delay the New Republic actions while they couldn't be certain about whether or not Leia was really there by her will trying to reach an agreement. Even then, it could force the military to be prudent in their decisions to not risk her life. Leia was hard pressed to believe that Admiral Sellman could fall so low, but she could not say the same of the Diktat. Just in case, she had given specific instructions to Admiral Sinensis to proceed with the worst case scenario in thirty hours, whether or not she was back on the *Liberator*. The light saber was to grant her at least a possibility of escaping if Winter's fears became true. She counted more on its psychological effect, the Corellian people having always held much respect for the Jedi Order, than on her actual ability to use it. Winter had argued against coming here, but this was a message Leia couldn't transmit by hologram. She needed to look at Sellman in the eyes and perceive what he felt. That was the only way she could know what to expect from him after she told him what she had decided to do. Unable to convince her, Winter had insisted on accompanying her, and Leia's protests wouldn't make her change of mind. If they were alike in their physical appearance, they were more alike in stubbornness. Now that she was here, surrounded by soldiers armed to the teeth, Leia couldn't deny she was glad Winter was around.

Admiral Sellman didn't greet them when Leia and Winter entered the room. His attention was upon the officer that was whispering something in his ear at that moment. For his expression, Leia noticed how the tension grew in the Corellian military. She felt it even better through the Force.

"I thought we had made something clear, Counselor," Sellman said turning to look at her. "None of your ships was to violate Seibergian space any more."

What? "I don't know what you're talking about, Admiral. I'm pretty sure that none of our ships has abandoned abandoned the fleet."

"Really? It seems that one did, although your intention was obviously to hide that fact from us. Seibergian fighters are chasing down an armed freighter over Nurtina. Saboteurs, spies, or both, who crossed our lines

four days ago pretending to be Corellian traders."

Colonel Gen'yaa's men, I had to see it coming. Winter didn't move a muscle, but Leia knew that she was prepared to act. The two guards who had escorted them to this room were at her back, between them and the only exit. She wondered how fast she would be able to draw and activate the light saber. *No, Leia, fighting's the last option. Try talking first, it's what you do best.* Leia thought quickly. The easiest thing, whether she liked it or not, would be to lie and deny any knowledge about that ship and its occupants. So far she had played fairly with Admiral Sellman, and he knew. He would have to grant her the benefit of doubt. On the other hand, what if those two pilots had succeeded on their mission? On that ship could be the proof that was needed to solve this crisis once for all, and if it was captured or shot down, they would be worse than before. Leia took a deep breath and nodded slowly.

"You're right, Admiral. Those are probably New Republic agents. They were sent to investigate the truth about the destruction of the civilian transport that carried the Balanish refugees."

"Your people shot it down. That's the only truth."

"No, not the only. We think that it was a trap prepared precisely to precipitate the Corellian intervention in the the conflict. We suspect that...."

"I don't want to hear what your suspicions are, Counselor. That freighter is not going to escape Seibergia, and if any of your ships breaks the truce to try to help them, we'll consider the hostilities reopened."

Leia forced herself to not lose her nerve. "You know as well as I do that none of our fighter patrols is close enough to Seibergia as to do anything. But on behalf of the truth, and the peace that the truth can bring, I demand you to call the Seibergian authorities and tell them to allow that ship to leave. Then you can intercept them on their exit, and I personally will order them to give you all the data they have been able to get. In their hands can be the solution to this crisis. So it's in your hands, too."

"I will not do that, Counselor Organa. If you want to contact your spies to order them to surrender, I'll allow you to use this ship's communications facilities. That will be all."

"The Seibergians will destroy any proof they can have gotten, and you know it."

"Enough of this, Counselor! You had better return to your shuttle now, before I'm ordered to do otherwise."

Leia held the man's stare and didn't say anything for some moments. The Admiral was being honorable with her, and she had not forgotten his gesture agreeing to provide help to the refugees sheltered in the New Republic camps, or evacuating the Ithorian doctor to this same ship. At the same time, he refused to hear anything against the Seibergians or to admit that President Somolovich and his government could be--could be--responsible of conducting, or at least supporting, an operation of ethnic cleansing against the Balanish population. There was only one thing to do, although she had spent a whole week trying to prevent this moment from coming.

"I'll leave, Admiral, if you still allow me to do that after what I'm going to say. I come here today to warn you. With or without your consent, in the next thirty hours we're going to send reconnaissance ships to check out if the Seibergian Army has entered the Balanish Country as we believe. If this suspicion is confirmed, we'll be true to our promises. We will defend the Balanish people with all the means at our disposal. Thirty hours for you and the Diktat to decide whether we work together, or we fight as enemies. Thirty hours for you to decide if you want to keep being independent, or you want to become servants of Emperor Pestage."

The Admiral blushed violently, but nevertheless he kept his tone even and under control. "Now let me warn you, Counselor. This is what you can tell to your *Provisional* President. When the first of your ships try to cross the perimeter we've imposed around Seibergia, the Corellian worlds and the New Republic will be at war. Now, please leave this vessel."

Leia turned her back on Admiral Sellman and left the room with Winter, who had not said a single word, following her closely. Now she knew what she wanted to know. What she had felt through the Force could not be mistaken. Admiral Sellman would do as he had told, so her hope of finding a breach in his resolution had vanished. All that remained was the firepower of the battleships, and two pilots who might have in their hands the only key to keep the cannons silent. Two men who could be about to die in these very moments, and with them the last possibility to prevent a tragedy. Leia's breath was still quick, almost as much as her

heartbeats and the pound of the blood in her temples. The sound of their escorts' boots hitting the metallic floor echoed along the corridor, while the menacing shadows of the blasters they carried changed constantly as the illumination rosettes installed every two meters on the ceiling passed over their heads one after another. *May the Force help Gen'yaa's pilots to escape*, Leia thought wishfully. *May they have found what we need. May this galaxy not become an even worse place than it is already because of something we did, or something we did not do.*

As soon as they left Nurtina behind, Solo took a erratic course toward the Balanish Country's rural areas. In the brief instants he had to take the decision, he estimated that the possibilities of running directly into a Seibergian missile battery were less there than if he headed to Seibergia, or even to the ocean. Furthermore, the mountainous terrain would provide him with natural obstacles that would prevent him from offering a clear shot to their pursuers. Once on the mountains, he'd try to lose the Seibergians. Provided that it was overcast enough, he'd have at least a chance, even considering that the clouds wouldn't fool the enemy sensors. This all was theory. Reality was proving to be a lot more complicated--so much so that Solo was starting to think that they were not going to make it. To start with, he could barely distinguish any detail on the ground below. Everything was blurred by effect of the almost suicidal speed at which the *Nomad Merchant* was flying. He could not plan his next move, limiting himself to piloting by pure instinct, reacting always at the very last moment to avoid smashing the ship against the tree tops, the rocks, or the occasional building. This would be hard enough in an X-Wing or even an A-Wing. On a freighter, even one as maneuverable as an Y-2000, Solo was fully aware that he was playing with death. He didn't dare to either slow down nor to ascend to a safer altitude. That was what the Seibergian fighter pilots were waiting for, but he had decided to not give them any advantage. He didn't want to think of what would happen if he made a mistake when calculating distances to any of the irregularities of the terrain. If the ship simply brushed against anything at this speed, not even the shields of a cruiser would be enough to save them.

"You know what?" Raiven's voice came through. "These guys are so sure that we're gonna crash that they're barely shooting at us!"

"Really?" Solo was as concentrated on piloting that he could hardly think to construct a sentence to answer his partner. "You hit any?"

"Negative. It will be a miracle if I hit any of them. Not only can I not center them in my sights but I'm also getting sick, with or without inertial compensator!"

"Good. Same for them, surely!"

As if belying that last remark, the *Nomad Merchant* trembled from bow to stern by the effect of a laser burst that hit her right upper side. Although the shields absorbed most of it, Solo was about to lose the control of the ship. The Corellian pilot shivered involuntarily. *We're going nowhere. Sooner or later I'll fail to avoid one of these rocks, or the Seibergians will shoot us down.* The sound of the upper batteries reached his ears, as Raiven tried to keep the enemy fighters at bay.



"What are you doing?" Raiven yelled. "Don't fly over clear areas, or these guys are going to fry us!"

"Hah! I'll look for a mountain for you!"

"No, no, try to keep her steady for a second." Again the sound of the quad lasers, followed by Raiven's triumphant shout. "Yes! I've scratched one! He's leaving!"

"How many?" For Solo, to take a single look to the sensor screens now was a risk way too high.

"There's a whole squadron out there, but only four of them are really attacking us. The rest keep themselves high over our heads, so don't try to go up." The ship was shaken by a new hit. Somewhere an alarm started to bleep.

"Compensating shields!" Solo yelled. "What you doing?"

"Not my fault!" Solo heard the batteries shooting unceasingly. "They're getting more daring by the second. Can you fly a little lower?"

"No!" Being in the upper turret, Raiven couldn't see most of the time how close to the ground they were already, but Solo could not afford the time to explain that to him. This was getting more dangerous every instant. With the proximity of the mountains, the terrain was more and more uneven. Precisely what he had been looking for when he took this direction, but now he was not so sure whether it had been a good idea. The ground they were flying over was now covered by snow, and that made harder for Solo to distinguish the obstacles in front of him. Everything was white. He saw green laser bursts passing above the cockpit and raising spouts of evaporated snow three hundred meters ahead of the freighter's nose. The Corellian pilot winced. *Even if I could fly like this forever, how exactly am I going to lose the Seibergians? There's not enough clouds, and they're still too high, damn it...* On the other side of a hill he ran into a small village, which suddenly filled the viewport in front of him. Solo screamed while he made the ship turn on her axis to avoid crashing against the tallest building, and then he had to counteract that maneuver to not hit the trees on the other side of the houses.

"For all the...!!! Solo, can you rotate the ship again so I can have a view of our three?"

We're about to die and he wants to see the landscape! Nevertheless, Solo did what Raiven had demanded.

"Enough! Turn to port now!"

"What's up?" Solo inclined the ship in that direction, escaping from whatever Raiven had just seen.

"There are walkers out there, many, mostly AT-STs, but also AT-ATs!"

"An invasion?"

"That's what it looked like... Wait... WATCH OUT!!!"

Solo heard an explosion somewhere behind him, muting for an instant the noise of the quad lasers. The *Nomad Merchant* jumped to her starboard side as if something had hit her hard on her rear port side. He saw a tongue of fire arching beneath the ship while he fought to prevent her from losing altitude. Raiven cried out, almost deafening him. When he looked to his right, Solo found himself yelling too. They were about to hit the rocky wall of a ravine that rose some fifty meters over them. With a brisk inclination of the yoke, he forced the ship to turn her belly toward that side, among a howl of thrusters. Then he engaged the repulsorlifts at full power. The *Nomad Merchant* rebounded wildly off the ravine's wall without actually touching it. Ignoring the sensation of nausea caused by the violence of the maneuver, the Corellian pilot disconnected the repulsorlifts and recovered the horizontal flight. He immediately felt it. Something was wrong. Several red signals illuminated the control panels, but he didn't see them, nor did he need them, to know that the port engine was failing.

"What was that?" he asked.

"I've just vomited up breakfast, damn it!"

"What was that????!!!"

"One of the TIEs. It appeared from nowhere and hit us full on the port side. Then I managed to hit him just by chance, and the eyeball blew apart barely ten meters behind us." Raiven went quiet for a few instants. Solo heard once more the sound of the quad batteries shouting before Raiven spoke again. "Solo, we're trailing smoke....Yes, I see fire! Must be the engine. Can you do something about it?"

Solo shook his head in despair, although Raiven couldn't see it. Even if he were able to extinguish the fire, without one of the two engines they wouldn't go too far. The first mountains were in front, a big forest to the left and the Seibergian Army to the right. Their only hope was to surrender, unless... "Raiven, hang on! I'm gonna try to make an emergency landing!"

"You kidding? Where?"

"In a forest!"

"WHAT???"

"Keep shooting and shut up!"

Solo didn't think twice. He headed directly to the green and white horizon and completely ignored his instruments. He trusted his own senses more for what he was about to do. The faltering engine forced him to make constant course adjustments, but that was not hard. He still heard the uncoupled whining of the two sets of thrusters and the repeated fire of the upper battery but he banished them from his mind. Without moving his eyes from the continually closing forest he locked the lower quad lasers to the forward cannons and linked the fire mechanism so they would shoot at once with a single squeeze of the trigger. Then he put his right hand on the twin throttles and waited for a few seconds. When he calculated that he was roughly five kilometers from his target he slammed the engine into reverse thrust. The forest now occupied almost the whole of the front viewport. The sudden deceleration almost made him pass out, while the restraints tensed up and the inertial compensators tried to balance the gravitational forces inside of the ship. Solo

gritted his teeth and fought against the nausea that momentarily clouded his vision. A couple of TIE Fighters passed screaming over his head, the pilots caught off guard and unable to reduce their own speed to keep after their prey. There was a third craft, but that one exploded into a myriad of fragments when Raiven hit one of its ion engines. At the same time, Solo redirected the shields to the front area, engaged the repulsorlifts and extended the landing gear. Then he pulled the trigger with two of his right hand's fingers and kept them there. The six cannon mouths spat laser fire into the big trees. The massive trunks erupted in fire and exploded violently. The tops of perennial leaves flew in all directions, among a vapor cloud of melted snow. Solo didn't stop firing when torn apart trunks and branches started to fall, first against the bubble of the shields then over the hull itself when the shields started to fail. He kept firing when the forward section of the landing gear hit the ground violently and broke. He didn't cease shooting with the front cannons even when the main landing gear broke too, the repulsorlifts faltered, and the lower quad battery was smashed by the weight of the ship, among the unbearable scratching noise caused by the hull plates dragging along the ground. He moved his fingers from the trigger only when he noticed that the ship had stopped and the cannons, firmly buried on the soil, were not shooting any more. He disconnected the engines and every other system with trembling hands, panting from the exertion. For an instant, Solo wondered if he was deaf, the silence was so complete. Maybe he was dead. It was easier to think that than believing that they had been able to make it in one piece.

I shouldn't play sabacc again, he thought while wiping the sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his tunic. *I sure have used all the luck of the rest of my life in this landing*. Then he heard Raiven's voice behind him.

"Man, I'm glad I'd thrown up already. Next time I pilot and you shoot. Are you OK?"

Solo looked at his partner over his shoulder, trying to decide how to answer to that, but he forgot it when he saw the bloodstained face of Raiven.

"Mike! You're injured!"

"No, I'm not. Am I?" Raiven seemed a bit stunned.

"Your face...."

"My...?" Raiven brought a hand to his face. When he removed it he felt the blood. "Holy Force!"

Solo set himself free from the restraints and stood up. "Wait, wait, let me help you!" With still shaking hands, he opened the medical kit stored in the cockpit and took a sterilized gauze to clean Raiven's wound.

"No, let it be," his partner protested. "It can't be that serious and we need to get out of here."

"Wait." Solo dropped the stained gauze and took another. Then he smiled relieved. "You won't die from this one. It's only a cut above your eyebrow. Just three or four stitches and that will be all. It'll only take me a second." He closed the wound with the index finger and the thumb of his left hand and used the right one to carefully handle the suture device. At the same time it stitched the cut the instrument injected a powerful disinfectant under the skin.

"Ouch..."

"Done." Solo took a last satisfied look to his work and closed the medical kit. "Now we need to leave."

"Thanks for the stitching." Raiven raised his hand toward his wound but stopped himself in mid gesture. "I'd better not touch it. Alright, you open the upper hatch, and I'll go grab the speeder bikes."

"It was a good idea to bring those along, eh?" Solo commented while he started to fill two backpacks with survival kits.

"Yes, but we better use them only to get away from here," Raiven answered as he headed toward the storage area. "Before getting out of this forest we'll have to abandon them and walk."

"Walk?" Solo was puzzled for an instant. "Why should we? Oh yes, they can be tracked. The sensors of a TIE could do it quite easily." Solo opened the upper hatch. A rain of snow and half burned leaves fell on his

head and shoulders.

"That I can tell you. Good, the bikes are not damaged. Now, do you have any idea about where to go?"

"Booof..." Solo shivered as the air from the outside penetrated the ship. It was a lot colder here than in Nurtina. "If we can't escape Seibergia, we at least must transmit all the information that you downloaded at the spaceport director's office."

Raiven came through the corridor dragging the two bikes, which floated after him with their repulsorlifts activated. "But we won't have the time to do that from here before they catch us. Where are we supposed to find a communications unit? Ah...."

"Yes. The camps."

XVII

It was the middle of the day at Camp One. Another storm had hit two days previous, although not as violent as the one they endured their first night here. Foxfire was starting to get tired of the snow. It looked beautiful in holomovies, but not nearly as much when you had to live half buried in it. But today the sun had appeared between the clouds and it felt almost warm in comparison with the coldness of other days. Foxfire had just finished her lunch--she was starting to get tired of the damned soup, too, in spite of Sdermila's efforts to give it some flavor--and she felt like walking a bit. She headed to the landing area, the only clear place in the every day more and more crowded field. There were already around eleven thousand refugees distributed between the three camps, and more kept arriving at an alarming rate. The New Republic relief personnel wouldn't have had anything to give them if not for the supplies the Corellians had brought three days ago. Actually, they all would starve in another three if they didn't receive more help. Nobody talked about it, but everybody knew that they would have to sacrifice the kalahorses if they wanted to have something to eat. The most recent arrivals told terrible stories. The Balanish were being expelled mercilessly by Seibergian troops from every village from Nurtina to the mountains--not paramilitaries any more. Those who resisted were killed. Those who were suspected of being members of the Balanish Liberation Army, which was apparently every male from fourteen to seventy years old, were separated and taken away. Some talked of concentration camps, others of indiscriminate slaughters. The tales often included descriptions of speeder tanks and walkers. Foxfire snorted. *And up there they still consider the Seibergian offensive as unconfirmed.* If the Balanish Liberation Army were not causing the Seibergians so much trouble, they could already be at the gates of the camp.

Since their arrival at Camp One, Foxfire had been gathering as much information as possible from the refugees, and transmitted everything to the *Wolf's Lair* regularly. It was frustrating to see how the days passed when nothing was done. It put her in a semi-perpetual state of anger, especially since, in one of the daily contacts with the mothership, they had received the news about the painful losses both in the squadron and among the *Lair's* crew.

It had been quite a shock. Sacart and Gandalf had been with the squadron for less than six months, although she had known them well enough in that time for the loss to hurt. But most of her grief was caused by the loss of Torpedo and Iceman. They were not just two of her pilots. They were friends. Iceman had been one of the first members of White Squadron. He was there already when they faced their first mission, the desperate rescue of the colonists of KS-31. Foxfire winced. She had always believed if they survived KS-31, they would survive everything; but she was wrong, and Iceman was gone. Torpedo had arrived immediately after that operation, and he had been the squadron's Tactical Officer almost since he put his feet aboard their old Frigate, the *Joan d'Arc*. They say that he could spend the rest of his life in a hospital for veterans, being little more than a vegetable. Foxfire kicked a pile of snow with fury, attracting several looks. She couldn't help but think that if she and Moose had been there, piloting their fighters against the Corellians, they could have made a difference, and their partners might still be alive and well. And there was also Rooster. If she had been flying in circles around the battle area with the *Compassion*, as she usually did, she might have got to Torpedo in time... Foxfire shook her head absently, muttering a curse. To keep turning

all that over in her mind again and again was useless, and she knew it. When the battle took place, Moose, Rooster and her were here, and not there. No one could change what was done already, as no one could return their lives to the people who were on board the transport they shot down.

"Enough for now," she said aloud. She didn't want to think about the deaths of her friends and squadmates, about the dead refugees, about how desperate their present situation was and how much worse it could get. Not for a few minutes, at least. She needed to give her mind some rest, and also her body. That was what this short walk was supposed to do. She reached the path that descended to the open area, wondering whether she would be able to get down without slipping as usual, but she stopped mid way. To her bemusement, she found out that the improvised landing pad was almost as crowded as the rest of the camp. So much for her desire of being alone, but nevertheless, when she watched the scene that was taking place below she decided to stay. Deveralia's older sons and many other children of different ages were engaged in in a tremendous fight with snowballs, and evidently they were having a very good time. Foxfire smiled. The sound of their laughs transmitted a part of their joy to her, and she felt her dark spirits lighten considerably.

Not far from where she stood, Foxfire noticed the presence of another spectator. Their Seibergian prisoner was sat on a flat stone that came out from the snow on a side of the path, outside the last of Lynx Commando's shelters. They had chosen that one to keep him in believing that it wouldn't be good for the morale of the refugees to see him too often, nor good for his own safety, all things considered. Cheetah, Moose and herself had taken turns at interrogating him, but so far he had kept a stubborn silence. They knew his name and rank, Sub-Lieutenant Arvan Milhavic, from the identification chip he carried when Moose found him, but that was all. The only time she had heard Milhavic speak was when she questioned him about the suicide collars. "If you faced the possibility of being captured by torturers and assassins, you would wear one, too." He didn't explain whom he referred to, but Foxfire imagined that he meant the Balanish guerrillas.

Milhavic didn't seem to notice that she was watching him, or maybe he just didn't care. The prisoner wore shock cuffs on his wrists, but not on his ankles. By Rooster's suggestion, and provided that there was nowhere he could go in the improbable case he could dumbfound the commandos' vigilance, the Seibergian was allowed to walk in a limited area around the shelter. His eyes seemed fixed on the children and their games. Every time Foxfire had talked to him, or tried to, those eyes shone with hate and resentment, but that fury was absent from his look now. That didn't surprise her. Who could look with hate at the children playing? Only a monster, she reflected, and the young sub-lieutenant didn't seem to be one. *Although one never knows*. Would Milhavic have helped to throw children like these out from their homes? Would he have killed some kid's father, only because he could potentially be a member of the much-feared guerrillas? If so, it was not strange that he was so frightened of being caught by them.

She turned her gaze from Milhavic. After all, she had just decided to think about brighter things for a while, as a sort of therapy to endure another day here. She returned her attention to the children's games. The snow battle seemed to be coming to an end. Someone had proposed making a snowman and all the children collaborated with enthusiasm in the task of making the big ball for the body. All but Figor, she observed. Deveralia's son kept himself apart of the group, apparently on purpose. His back was turned to Foxfire, so she couldn't see what was wrong, or what he was doing. Suddenly he turned toward the other children and started to launch one snowball after another. The naughty kid had been making a good stock of them while his friends were busy with the snowman. In a matter of seconds the snow battle had broken out again with double the intensity. Foxfire let a laugh escape. She heard someone else laughing, and she discovered with surprise that it was the Seibergian. Noticing that she was watching him, Milhavic returned quickly to his usual somber expression, although he kept looking at the children nevertheless.

Foxfire had to agree with the Seibergian on this. The children were the best thing you could look at here. They retained the capacity to ignore the crude reality around them and play as if the only real world were that of their imagination. They could laugh when there were a lot more reasons to cry instead. She envied them for that, and she was sure that Milhavic did, too. *If we all never stopped being children, war would be nothing more serious than that, a funny fight with snowballs*. How easily she could remember her own childhood. The endless pursuits with her friends through the zero gravity corridors on the nomad colony's spaceships. The hide and seek games in almost complete obscurity. The songs they sang. Amazingly enough, she realized that she hadn't thought of all that with nostalgia. Actually, what she experienced watching these children was a very different kind of feeling. She wouldn't be able to put it down in words, but they made her think about things she had never considered before, or not seriously at least. Things like having a family of her own.

She had never used to think about that kind of thing. It might have something to do with the kind of life she led. A continuous adventure, always breathless, one day and then another and another, in a perpetual dance with danger and death. Some times she felt very young, as if life were going to last forever. Other

times she felt that the end was about to come, the next hour, or the next minute. She had never made plans, not even after starting to go out with Moose. There was always something urgent to do, a new fight, another rescue, a planet to liberate. Children had always belonged to that nebulous and shapeless place called the future, which she might not live to see after all. But she was not a young girl any more. If it was going to happen, it had to happen soon, in a few years at the most. Was she prepared for that? Her, a mother. The mere thought was terrifying. Moose had not mentioned the issue either. What would he think? Was he the would-be father of her would-be sons? Damn, they had never talked about getting permanently engaged, about marriage or anything of the sort. Now that she thought of it, Moose probably shared her aversion to thinking of the future. *We're alike even in that.*

With the corner of her eye she saw someone coming to her side. She turned to find Rooster, with her hands buried inside her coat's side pockets, smiling at her.

"Do you mind if I accompany you for a while?"

"Of course I don't."

"How's your arm?"

Foxfire looked at her right arm, free of the sling for the very first day, although she kept the bandage on and tried to use it with extreme care for the time being. "It doesn't hurt any more. Now it only itches."

"That's a good sign. Nothing about the doctor?"

"Not yet, I'm sorry. There's a new communication scheduled for tonight. I'll ask again."

"Thanks." Rooster winced. "I can't stop biting my nails. We don't know anything since the doctor was evacuated."

"You know the old saying: no news is usually good news. After all we learned alright about our fallen comrades."

Rooster nodded sadly. The two women watched for some time the games taking place on the landing area until Rooster interrupted the silence with a big sigh. "It makes me feel good to see the children, you know. We don't have too many chances of seeing them aboard the *Lair*."

"You've rescued quite a lot of them."

"It's not the same. In those cases they're stunned, scared, crying, or in shock. Sometimes they're injured. The worst of all is when they've just lost their parents or their relatives. You don't even know what to tell them to console them. They don't train us for that, you know." Rooster shook her head. "It's very different to look at them when they are playing like this. To hear them laugh."

"I know what you mean. You only have to mention the issue to Ibero, and he will spend hours talking about children in general, and his daughter in particular."

Rooster laughed. "Who could blame him?" The Lumi remained silent for a while. Below them, the second snowball battle of the day had ended, but the snowman project had not been recovered. Some of the older kids, none of them more than twelve years old, had brought the upper half of a discarded supplies container. Inverted, and with the addition of reins from a kalahorse, it had become a sort of improvised sledge, which had immediately attracted everybody's attention.

"Have you considered having children?" Rooster asked suddenly.

Foxfire smiled, feeling that she was starting to blush. "That was exactly what I was thinking about when you came."

"And?"

"And I'll have to keep thinking." Foxfire laughed, a bit embarrassed. "No, really, it's quite a serious decision

to bring children to this galaxy. We've not known anything but war in the last decade."

"Yes, but, what else are we fighting for, if not for the future of our children?"

Foxfire nodded. "I guess you're right." She took a deep breath. "And yes, I'd like to have them." It was the first time she said that aloud. And it made her feel good. And frightened, also. She added, "When the time comes."

"I understand you. Not here and not now."

"Here and now I would catch quite a cold, not to mention the public scandal, don't you think so?" The two women laughed. "What about you?"

"Do you see any male Lumi around?" Foxfire bit her lower lip. Lumis were normally paired shortly after being born. Their parents were able to find their sons' and daughters' natural empathy toward others and choose correctly who their future couples should be. It had something to do with their brain extensions, but Rooster had never explained to her how exactly it worked. But Rooster's would-be husband had been killed when Imperial troops invaded the Lumi Moon. Being so far from home, it wouldn't be easy for her to run into others of her species. To find one with whom she could pair again would be a lot harder, if not impossible.

"I'm sorry. I've always wondered, though, whether you could...."

"Engage a human, for instance? I can have sexual relations with one, if that's what you're wondering. A loving relationship is a different issue. The lack of brain extensions would be a serious impediment for a real and complete communication between us. It would be terribly frustrating for us both. I don't know, maybe we could get over it with time. But I could never conceive a child with a human. That's biologically impossible."

"I see." The two women watched the children in silence for some time after that. The commando that kept watch on that side of the field had forbidden them to use the sledge slope down, out of the boundaries of the camp. The next best option was to pull it to the place where Foxfire and Rooster stood, and use the path that lead to the landing area as launch pad. Here they came, debating with big shouts who would be the first ones to try it.

"I think our peace is over," Foxfire commented. Some of the smallest children were already sobbing, realizing that their chances of using the sledge were scarce, at best, while their older companions were not tired of it. The first two adventurers, the creators of the sledge, of course, launched themselves forward, screaming and laughing like crazy. "This is fun!" one of them cried out from the place where the sledge had stopped. This made the discussion grow in intensity, while some of the children headed downwards to help to recover the sledge and hence claim the right to be the next to try it.

"Maybe we should do something." Rooster said.

"But what?"

The answer took the shape of Moose, who appeared suddenly carrying half a dozen container shelves and some cords. "Who wants to help me to make some sledges?" he asked aloud. The shouts of "Me! Me! Me!" threatened to deafen the few adults present. Moose turned his head to wink at Foxfire and Rooster, and an instant later he was the center of a frenetic construction activity.

"Moose saves the day," Rooster said.

"That's very like him," Foxfire answered with a grin.

"He would be a great father."

"Of that I don't have the slightest doubt."

"Avery...."

"Yes, Roo?"

"I've been looking for a chance to talk to you both since we arrived here, but I never seem to find the right moment."

Foxtire nodded. "We've all been busy. You in particular, Miss Doctor."

Rooster smiled. "Don't call me that. If only we could have a real medic. What I wanted to tell you, to you and Moose, it's that I've been thinking a lot about the things I said back at the Meeting Room."

"You were right."

"Maybe. I still feel what I said. But I was not fair with you, and especially not with Moose. It's not only that you've saved my life since then."

"Moose did that, and first you saved us with that incredible emergency landing. For all we know, you also saved Doctor Al Saruff."

"Let me finish. What happened took place in a matter of seconds. You had to decide fast, and you did it best you could. I've seen it over the past few days. You're not simple hotshots looking for a spot in the New Republic's top ten pilots with more kills. Maybe such pilots exist, but you're not like them. You do what you do trying to help, and to save as many lives as you can. I was kind of a bastard suggesting otherwise."

"Don't torture yourself, Roo." Foxtire put a hand upon the Lumi's shoulder. "We both know that your intention was not that at all."

"Do you? Does Moose?"

"Of course we do."

"Maybe you can forget it, but I'm not so sure about Moose. He seems hurt."

"He is, but not because of anything you or anybody else could say. It's because he has not forgiven himself for the death of those people. Look. Moose lost his whole family, his friends and everybody who meant something to him, all gone in a single blow when Alderaan was destroyed. Since then, he couldn't help but keep some distance between himself and the new friends that came with the years." Foxtire shrugged. "He probably is not fully conscious of it, even now. The Alderaanian disease, they call it. He was a clinical case until he met me." She smiled sourly. "Somehow, this tragedy had made him return to the old habits."

"I have to talk to him."

"Do it. Sometimes I think there is anything we can do that will help him very much until he decides to grant himself his own absolution, but he sure will appreciate hearing what you've just told to me." Foxtire sighed. "You know, at first I thought that he wouldn't blame himself. He shot those torpedoes with the conviction that it was the right thing to do, but when we saw the images of the corpses at Colonel Gen'yaa's quarters he literally shrank. He doesn't care about being court martialled, but he feels responsible nevertheless. I hope he will find a way to get over it."

Rooster made a gesture toward the crowd of children. Moose was there helping the little ones to ride a pair of sledges he had reserved for them. "Perhaps he has just found his way."

"Perhaps."

A woman's voice was heard after them. "Rooster, can you come?" It was Redina, Sdermila's friend. She had started to help Rooster in her work when Sergeant Daboro was not available.

"Yes, Redina?"

"A new group has just arrived. There are some sick and injured."

Rooster nodded gravely. "Send them directly to the medical tent. I'll be there in a minute." Rooster turned to Foxtire when Redina left. "I have to go."

"Do you want me to help?"

"Redina will lend me a hand. Tell Moose that I want to talk to him, will you?"

"Of course, Roo. Thank you very much."

"No, thank you. See you later!"

Foxfire remained there for some minutes, until Moose returned. Behind him, laughs were all that could be heard. The children had found entertainment for a long time.

"You've had a lot of fun with the kids, haven't you?"

Moose grinned. "Sure. And you've had quite a chat with Rooster meanwhile. I'm glad to see you as friends again."

"She wants to keep being your friend, too."

"She never stopped being that."

"Nor you for her. That's part of what she told me, although she wants to say everything to you in person."

Moose nodded in silence. He offered his arm to Foxfire and she took it. Together they went back to the main part of the camp. They had a lot of work to do before dinner: enabling shelters and helping the newcomers to get settled.

"Lewis, have you ever thought about having children?" Moose looked at her for an instant as if he had not understood the question, and then he seemed startled. Foxfire had asked that question following an impulse, but she already regretted it. She suddenly didn't want to hear Moose's answer, whatever it was. "No, no, forget it. Don't answer, all right?"

Moose choked. "Avery, I...."

"I said don't answer, and I meant it. Please." Moose closed his mouth, leaving unsaid whatever he had started to say. Foxfire realized that whatever his answer was, it could hurt her in a hundred different ways, and she neither wanted to be hurt, nor to hurt Moose. It was unfair to ask him such a question now, in this place, with all what had happened in the last two weeks still so fresh in their memories. She looked at Moose with the corner of her eye. His expression was a haunted one, with his lips pursed and his eyes fixed to the front, as if he was looking at something that was not really there, but only in his thoughts. Something that her question had somehow brought in. He winced, absent, and suddenly Foxfire knew what was what he was seeing in his mind.

A four year old girl, broken and frozen, floating alone in the void of space.

Moose struggled to think of something else for the next few hours. Being busy helped some. He joined New Republic relief personnel, some off duty commandos and several Balanish volunteers, and together they constructed five decent shelters with materiel from the damaged tents that they had discarded after the first and most violent storm. These shelters wouldn't be enough to house the seventy three people who had arrived during the day, but they solved the situation distributing some families between other tents. One of the Balanish women had asked whether it would be possible, in case more refugees kept coming, to use explosives and lasers to dig some underground caves. After the first instant of bewilderment, the commandos agreed that it was not such a crazy idea. It could be done. At that moment, Moose had thought for himself that they seemed more and more like the first Balanish military who were left on their own in these mountains so long ago.

It was almost midnight when they finished their work. The rest of Moose's group went to have a late dinner,

but he decided not to accompany them. In spite of the long hours of hard labor, he was not hungry. The knot he felt in his stomach since his interrupted conversation with Foxfire wouldn't allow him to eat anything. He had barely seen her a couple of times after that afternoon, always going to and from, and they had not stopped to talk ever since. Foxfire had spent all that time talking to the newcomers, collecting fresh information about the advances of the Seibergian offensive. Now she would probably be in the communication tent, transmitting another report to the *Wolf's Lair*. Moose had intended to wait for her in their shelter, but he changed his mind mid-way. They shared the limited space of the tent with a dozen more people, and being alone was what he needed the most now. He wandered around the camp, with his hands in the pockets of his coat, trying to sort out his thoughts. The darkness was broken here and there by the small fires lit in front of every few tents. Provided it was not snowing, every night the families sat around them sharing the heat and the consolation of being there together. It was in those moments when the absence of the missing friends and relatives became the most unbearable. During the day, the difficulties of mere survival kept everybody's mind busy, but when the dusk came, the inactivity and the silence brought back the fear, barely alleviated hunger and concern. Moose had to pass near some of the circles people made, trying to not disturb anybody and answering with nods to the occasional greetings. He saw very few men, with the exception of the elders, but the reason was not a mystery for him any more. He had heard it more than once since he was here, from several different people.

The most fortunate of the absent men would be with the Balanish Liberation Army. Hungry, frozen and desperate, fighting the Seibergians day and night with every available weapon, sometimes with their bare hands. It was not uncommon that one or two of them, usually very young, came escorting a group of refugees. Sometimes they stayed in the camp for a couple of hours, time enough to have a bowl of soup and answer, when they could, the questions of the residents who about their relatives or about the villages they were from. They also gave Cheetah information about their skirmishes in exchange for news about the situation in the space, and even of the war against the Empire. Above all, they were very interested on knowing whether or not the New Republic planned to resume their raids against the Seibergian invaders, as they called them, and looked disappointed when he told them that he simply didn't know. Cheetah had explained to Moose that the guerrillas ambushed the enemy wherever they could, taking no prisoners partly because they could not afford to take them, partly because their hatred of the Seibergians had become so huge that there was no room for mercy in their minds, and partly also with the intention that the fear of them would make their foes think twice before walking another meter inside the Balanish mountains. The truth was that this strategy was getting them no results. They lost ground every day, and their bloody attacks only made the Seibergians all the more willing to exterminate them. In spite of the fact that many of those men had been recruited without their consent, there had been few desertions from the guerrillas. Those who tried to drop their weapons and follow their families were killed without compassion if they were caught.

The rest were presumably prisoners of the Seibergians, or, more likely, dead. The tears Moose saw some of the women and children crying in silence were not shed in fear for their loved ones' destiny, but with the complete certainty of having seen them die, executed before their very eyes. Others preferred to cling to hope, no matter how remote it became with every passing day. Actually, from time to time, a miracle happened. The name of every refugee was written down as soon they arrived at any of the camps, and these data were exchanged daily between the three of them. This way, someone who had been separated from his or her family and had been missing ever since could be found alive in another of the camps. This communication had been broken for several days after the destruction or disabling of the New Republic satellite, but a new laser link had allowed to reestablish the contact. Cheetah and his men had finished the deployment of the visual relays only two days ago. Today there had been no luck, but maybe tomorrow some of these people Moose was looking at would recover a husband or a wife, a father or a mother, a brother or a sister, a son or a daughter. He couldn't help but thinking that, perhaps, there was somebody here waiting for someone who was on *his* freighter. Someone he had killed. A husband or a wife, a father or a mother, a brother or a sister, a son or a daughter.

Moose shook his head in despair. Sometimes he thought that he was starting to get over it. Being here, assisting the refugees and such, helped him to feel better with himself, reinforcing in him the belief that it all had been an accident, something that unavoidably had to happen. He had been the unlucky one who had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. But there were other times when he found himself thinking, again, about those few seconds, remembering every detail with absolute clarity, and lamenting not having done something he would later do in the simulations. Damn those simulations--their only worth had been to prove that he could have taken a scan of that ship and not placed himself in a situation where he was forced to shoot it down. How easy many things seem to us when they're done already. How right Foxfire was about that.

Foxfire. Why had she asked, precisely now, about the children thing? He had imagined it sometimes. The war was over and they both were living on their own, together, in some beautiful place, maybe on a colony. Perhaps flying around very often, to calm their shared love for space travel. Of course they would have

children. It came in the same pack, in the same vision of an as yet only dreamed of future. But every time he tried to bring that dream back it came like a nightmare. One where their sons were killed by someone. Someone who had his same face, and who claimed with his same voice that it had been just an accident. Only an accident.

"Moose, wait!"

He turned and saw Sdermila approaching with short but quick steps, holding a steaming bowl between her hands. "They said you didn't want to have dinner, but I told them that no one can be working for so many hours and go to bed with his stomach empty."

"I hardly could go to bed," Moose said with an attempt of a smile. "Not here, I mean."

Sdermila looked at him, puzzled for an instant, until she understood what his little joke was. "Oh, yes, not to bed, you're right. Well, to bed or to sack, it doesn't matter. You've got to eat, will you?"

"For you I will. Or else you will follow me all around the camp with that bowl of soup."

"That I would do. My two sons were such bad eaters, you know. The things they'd do to try to skip their lunches! But they never escaped me. Warm or cold, they ate sooner or later. My patience was bigger than their resistance." Moose laughed and took the bowl. "The spoon," Sdermila said handing it to him. "Now try it."

"All right, Sdermila, you win. Hey, it tastes different, again. What have you made this time?"

"One of your friend soldiers managed to hunt a wild kalagoat."

"A kalagoat? That's great, but... We're some three thousand people in this camp. A single animal's meat can't make such a difference..."

"The meat, no, although I've used all of it. It's the bones, ground until they're dust, what makes the miracle."

"That's exactly what it is," Moose said with his mouth full, "a miracle." For his surprise, he discovered that he didn't lack appetite after all. "But let's move, or we'll get frozen standing here. I can eat while we walk."

"Don't let anything drop, or I'll get angry with you. And now tell me, why are you walking alone? Is something worrying you? No, don't tell me if you don't want. I make too many questions."

Moose smiled. "I don't mind if you ask, Sdermila. Your company is more than welcome."

"I'm glad to hear that. I feared that you would think I'm an old gossip." Moose laughed. "I've seen Foxfire going to your tent. Is something wrong between the two of you?"

Moose looked at her, startled. "No, no, nothing's wrong."

"Young couples use to have their differences. Taigor, my husband, and I used to discuss about *everything*, you must believe me. Above all when we were as young as you are, you know? It takes much time to get accustomed to the other's points of view, to listen before you talk, to try to understand before trying to convince. And never, never, to go to bed, or to sack, being angry. That's what Taigor always said."

Moose had heard from Rooster that Sdermila was a widow, but not a recent one. Her husband had died years ago, in an accident at work or something. "That sounds wise."

"It is indeed. Things must be settled down before sleeping. Otherwise, you will probably spend the whole night arguing in your mind, regretting this and that, but still preparing cute answers for the other's arguments. That is, planing for another fight, and not for reconciliation."

"We've had not a fight," Moose said. Sdermila waited in silence for Moose to continue. He hesitated a bit, but finally he confessed. "She asked me if I've ever thought about having children."

"But that's wonderful."

"Look around, Sdermila."

"I don't need to. But you won't be here forever. Things won't be always this bad."

"A part of me will never leave. Something....Something happened."

"Want to talk about it?"

Moose shook his head. "I can't."

"Sometimes, talking about it helps."

Moose stayed in silence for a while. How could he tell anything of it to this old woman? The only thing she could possibly understand would be that he had killed people like her, like these poor people who sat around the fires. Like these children. She would be horrified, so much that she probably wouldn't talk to him again. No, talking about it definitely wouldn't help Moose to feel better.

"Not in this case. I'm sorry, Sdermila, it's nothing to do with you."

Sdermila nodded. "I understand, really. Don't worry about me, Moose."

"Call me Lewis if you want. That's my name. Moose is only a nickname."

"I supposed so. It's hard to believe that you all are called like strange animals. Moose, Foxfire, Rooster, and the soldiers, Cheetah, Hyena..."

Moose laughed. "In the first days of the Rebel Alliance we used those names for security above all. The Empire often intercepted our transmissions. Mentioning our real names could put our families and friends in jeopardy. It was not my case, though, because I had no family nor friends alive."

"But that's terrible. How can that be?"

"I was born on Alderaan. The Empire destroyed my home planet and every living being on it."

Sdermila winced. "I heard about it, but I couldn't believe it. How can something as big as a planet be destroyed?"

"They used a monstrous space station called the Death Star. The Alliance managed to destroy it later, and a second and bigger one later, at Endor."

"Whole planets being killed. Compared with that, what's happening here is nothing."

"No, that's not true, Sdermila. The evil is the same, always. It's only the scale that is different. Fortunately, not every tyrant or warlord can afford to construct something like a Death Star. But let's not talk about tragedies. You've mentioned your two sons."

"Yes." Sdermila's face brightened. "Lania and Jeiran. Lania is the older one. He studied and became an engineer, you know? But he couldn't find a good work for him here, so he left. Last time he called he was on Commenor."

"Commenor. That's a long way from home."

"Yes. That's what he says whenever I ask him when is he going to visit us. But he will come. Some day he will, I'm sure of it."

"Of course he will. What about... Keiran?"

"Jeiran. He lives here, with his wife, Voeda, and his two pretty sons, Drivan, the boy, and Mila, the girl. They're my family since Taigor died and Lania left. Voeda is actually like a daughter for me. And the kids are wonderful. Deveralial's sons remind me a lot of them."

"And where...?" Moose stopped at mid sentence. To ask for any of the refugees' absent relatives had only one answer in most cases.

"They took a ship to Balania." Moose almost sighed of relief. "Jeiran tried to convince me about going with them, but I was too stubborn to hear him. At least they're well now. Do you think I'll ever be able to join them?"

"Yes, why wouldn't you?"

"I lost everything when I abandoned my house. I don't know what I'll find when I return to the village. People here say that the Seibergians use to loot every empty house they find on their way. I don't know if I'll have something left to pay a flight to Balania."

Moose tried to find something to say. Sdermila was right. Foxfire had collected dozen of tales from refugees who had witnessed how they were robbed almost as soon as they were pushed out of their homes. "I'll tell you what. We're pilots, the three of us. Rooster, Foxfire and me." Sdermila nodded, she knew that. "We have a lot of friends who pilot transport ships, and trips to Balania are frequent these days. As soon as we can return to our ship, we'll find someone who can take you there. For free."

"You're serious?"

"Of course I am." Actually, Moose was convinced that the New Republic would gladly take all the Balanish population from Seibergia to other worlds. The Balanish Country would never be independent. When this conflict ended, the situation of these people was bound to be worse than it used to be. Balania was not a rich planet, and they had received more refugees than they could accept without problems, but at least they would be safe there. Most people were reticent to leave their homes but, what if they had no home any more when they tried to return to it?

"That would be wonderful," Sdermila said with visible enthusiasm, before her smile became a bit sadder. "I used to be happy here, in this land. Life was hard, yes, but we had all we need. Not even after Taigor's death did I have the desire to live anywhere else. Lania is different, and probably Jeiran is, also, but he finally found happiness here." Sdermila shook her head. "But after all that has happened to us in this place, I don't think that any of them will be willing to return. Home is where your family is, don't you think so?"

Moose nodded. He realized that he understood very well what Sdermila meant. He had been a man without a home for too long, not because his planet didn't exist any more, but because he had no family either. But now he had one. Foxfire was his family, he saw that clearly now. She and the friends he had made on the way. Rooster, Granite, Vyper, Sparks, Hardrive, Iceman, Torpedo... He felt a twinge of pain when he thought of the last two. He had still to get used to the idea of having lost still some more friends, while he was not there to try to prevent it. But it was time already to think of the living, and that was what he would do from this moment forward. He made a decision. Enough mourning the past. Foxfire talked of future already, that was what children meant. And as bad as things were now, they both were alive. Yes, he would speak to her later. They had a lot of things to talk about.

"Yes, I think so," he finally answered to Sdermila. "You are right."

"I'll go with you. To find my son, my daughter in law and my grandsons. Taigor's body is buried here, yes, but he is coming with me wherever I go. I...I now realize that."

Moose noticed that Sdermila was starting to weep. He passed a hand upon her shoulders. "Don't cry, Sdermila, please. Or I'll cry too. And I'm a bit too grown-up for sobbing like a toddler, am I not?"

Sdermila laughed, wiping her tears off with her coat's sleeve. "Yes, you are. Your parents made quite a good work feeding you."

Moose laughed with her. "Everything is going to be all right, I promise you. We'll help you to find them."

"Will you? Thank you very much, Moose. Lewis."

"You're welcome Sdermila. It's the least I can do to pay you for these daily banquets. Look, I've eaten everything."

Sdermila smiled. "Good boy."

Together, they returned to their area of the camp. Their respective tents were close enough. From what Sdermila had said, Foxfire would be there already. Moose couldn't wait to see her now. And tomorrow, when there were not a dozen people sleeping around them, they'd have a long conversation.

It had to be around midnight, but it had been long since the last time Raiven and Solo had bothered to check their clocks. They were bruised, half frozen, hungry, and, above all, dead tired. Poorly equipped and in constant fear of being captured, the two pilots had been walking and running, climbing and crawling for practically the whole day. The survival course they had been forced to pass before being accepted for the active duty, in Raiven's case his second course, as he had followed a similar one at Carida's Imperial Academy, had proved to be invaluable. Solo took a mental note to send a message to his instructor when he had the chance. That was if they finally got out of here alive.

Their escape aboard the *Nomad Merchant* seemed almost easy when compared with what came afterwards. Before leaving the relative coverage of the forest where they had abandoned the freighter, Solo and Raiven had sent their speeder bikes in different directions controlled by their automatic pilots, which they had hastily programmed to follow an erratic course always inside the forest. That trick bought them some time, but not much. Had the ground been different, with less irregularities, vegetation and hiding places, they would never have made it to the mountains. The Seibergian TIE Fighters had passed screaming over their heads many times, forcing them to duck and hide almost constantly. Often, they heard the sound of the armed speeder bikes used by the riders sent to pursue. They sounded closer every time before vanishing, suggesting that the Seibergian were searching in circles around the crash site, broadening the pattern at every new repetition. Two or three times they believed to hear engines noise ahead, and that gave them something more to worry about. Enemy units could be waiting to intercept them anywhere along the way. They didn't ignore the fact that the same natural features that allowed them to hide from their pursuers could also conceal an ambush. Their limited knowledge of the terrain was entirely based on the three dimensional maps of the Balanish Country that they had studied on their trip to Seibergia. They consulted them often on Raiven's datapad, to check where they were. Of course their route was a twisted one. They had to avoid crossing any open places, not only because they could be spotted from the air, but to prevent the footprints they unavoidably left on the snow from betraying them. They did what they could to erase their trail by dragging broken branches behind them, but that trick wouldn't deceive a close observer, especially if it was an experienced searcher.

Finally, although at times it had seemed almost impossible, the two pilots somehow managed to reach the first foothills undetected. Once there, they avoided the most passable paths until after the dusk. They didn't dare stop, not even then. The intense activity shown by the Seibergian fighters, besides the evidence that a large scale ground operation was underway, made them agree on the fact that they couldn't afford to rest. If the Seibergians felt as confident as to forget any caution and invade the Balanish Country in daylight, it could only mean that things were a lot worse than when they left the *Wolf's Lair*.

Solo looked back for the umpteenth time. Slope down, only the sharp silhouettes of the rocks, the bushes and the increasingly scarce trees could be distinguished in the darkness. Mist covered the ground up to their waist, giving the mountain a ghostly aspect. There were no lights he could see in the distance, and the only sounds were those of the wind and their own breath. Panting, he turned toward Raiven. "It's been a while since the last time we heard them."

"That doesn't mean we're not being followed. I don't think they'll give up."

"Hope you're wrong. We must still be forty kilometers from the first of the camps."

"Maybe more."

"You're always so optimistic."

"Shhh, did you hear that?"

"What?"

"I don't know." Raiven drew his blaster and indicated the nearest rock. Solo nodded and followed him.

"I can't see anything." Solo said, looking along the barrel of his blaster. "What did you hear?"

"A whisper or something. It sure was the wind, but..."

"Well. I could use five minutes of rest."

"Me too, I admit it."

"Just that, five minutes. We don't want to get cold."

"Solo."

"Yes?"

"There is someone down there. Now I'm sure. I've seen movement behind those bushes over there."

"Damn it. Do you think they've seen us?"

"Maybe not, but we better move. They could be surrounding us even while we speak."

"All right, let's go. If we stay crouched enough, the mist should give us some cover."

"Wait." Raiven searched in his pockets and produced several chipcards. "Take these. While you took off from Nurtina I copied a part of the stuff here. It will be better if we split. If one of us is caught, at least the other will have a chance to escape with half of the data."

Solo took the chipcards reluctantly, although he understood his partner's logic. "I don't like it. We don't even know if this is what we need."

"There's no time to disc...."

The sound of a blaster shot, coming from behind them, silenced the rest of Raiven's sentence. The bolt finished on a spot somewhere to the left of the bushes where Raiven had believed to see someone move. A single cry was heard. Suddenly the darkness illuminated with green and red bolts of laser fire coming from several positions at once, while the buzzes of the shots echoed in rocks and logs all around them.

"Emperor's dark blood, who is who here?" Solo had to shout so Raiven could hear him.

"How do you expect me to know?"

A blast hit the upper side of the rock they were hidden behind, forcing them to duck while the shards fell upon their heads. A moment later the shooting was over. It all had happened in a matter of seconds.

Hesitantly, the two pilots started to get up. Four men and a woman wearing unmatched pieces of camouflage uniforms appeared behind them. They held their weapons at ready, but they were not aiming at them. Solo and Raiven holstered their blasters, which they had not had to use.

"My name is Ciric Baranka," one of their supposed rescuers said. "We're members of the Balanish Liberation Army. Who are you?"

"Nice to meet you," Raiven answered before Solo could do it himself. Suddenly his companion's Corellian

accent didn't seem appropriate at all, even if he didn't exaggerate it any more. "We're Lieutenant Rovardi and Lieutenant Commander Tengroth, from the New Republic."

"You don't look like commandos. Nor move like them."

Raiven shrugged, bothered in spite of himself for the man's last comment. "We're fighter pilots."

"Fighter pilots? That explains it. What are you doing here?"

Raiven looked at Solo. His companion nodded. They had nothing to lose trusting the partisans. Maybe they could help them to reach the camp. "It's a long story, but here we have information that could help to prove that the Seibergian are responsible for an incident with a freighter carrying Balanish refugees."

"Do you mean the one you shot down?"

Raiven swallowed. "Have you heard about it? Well, then you know how important this can be. This data could help to convince the Corellians that their Seibergian friends are actually the bad guys here. If they stop interfering with the New Republic activities, we'll be able to help you."

Baranka snorted. "We sure need that. How could we assist you?"

"We must get to one of the New Republic camps as soon as possible."

"Can you handle a night march? You look tired."

"We'll handle whatever," Solo said. "And yes, I'm a Corellian. There are a lot of us in the New Republic."

The guerilla leader looked at him with suspicion but finally he nodded. "All right. You will be there by the morning."

The Balanish partisans stripped the corpses of the Seibergian soldiers, roughly a dozen, of any valuable item. Food, weapons, ammunition, boots and several pieces of armor were distributed quickly among the five members of the guerilla before the group started at a good pace. Maybe a minute after they departed, a shot was heard behind them.

"What was that?" Solo asked turning his head. None of the Balanish answered. It was then when he noticed that there were only four of them. The woman was missing.

"That's got to be her," Raiven whispered to Solo's ear. "She must be finishing off the Seibergians."

"Damn, I think you're right."

The sound of a second shot echoed for an instant, and then there was only the silence.

XVIII

"Moose, Foxfire, wake up!"

Foxfire opened her eyes immediately, waking from a troubled sleep and quickly forgetting what her nightmare was about. While her left hand searched in the dark for her blaster, she turned her head toward the source of the whisper. She saw Cheetah through the half opened entrance, apparently wearing his combat armor. Foxfire didn't need anything more to know that there was trouble.

"What's up?" she asked. Moose was on his feet already, holding his own weapon parallel to his leg. Foxfire joined him beside the entrance to avoid bothering the rest of the people sleeping in the tent. Outside it was still dark.

"We've just received a warning from the *Wolf's Lair*. There's an aerial attack underway. Although we have no confirmation yet, the Seibergian troops have probably taken the plains, and the politicians have finally given their approval for military action. We're to secure all the passes to the three camps, and make sure that the surrounding areas are clean of marauders."

"I'll go with you," Moose said.

"Me too," Foxfire added. "My arm is almost back to normal now."

"Thanks, but I need both of you here. We can't afford to leave the camp unprotected. The rest of the relief personnel have very little military experience, but if you two stay here I won't have to leave any of my troops. There are too many places to cover and not enough of us. Of course I can't force you, Foxfire. You clearly out-rank me, but...."

Foxfire shook her head. "I understand. We'll take charge of the rear. Moose?"

"She also out-ranks me," Moose said with a shrug.

"Alright, now I'll leave untroubled." Cheetah produced a card from one of his pockets and lend it to Foxfire. "This opens the armory. I've left some serious stuff there in case you need it."

"All right, count on us." Foxfire said. "Good luck," she added, while Moose patted Cheetah's back.

"To you, too," the man answered, already turning his back on them.

"I'll go round up some volunteers," Moose said while Cheetah's figure melted with the darkness and disappeared. "We'll need a few good pairs of eyes to watch the approaches."

"Yeah, but you better get completely dressed before you do," Foxfire answered. "Stepping on the snow without boots is bad for your health, you know."

Moose looked down at his feet. "Damn it. Guess I'm nervous."

"It's the same for me, Moose. Now we care a lot about these people, and we don't want any of them to be hurt."

"It's not like we didn't care before, but...."

Foxfire nodded. "Yes, but."

Three hours after dawn, the partisan who had been acting as scout returned. Exhausted beyond what words could explain, Raiven and Solo heard the scout and Ciric Baranka exchange a few words in Balanish. Then, to their surprise, the guerilla leader sent the scout back on the path they had been following until now.

"Svenica has just reported that he has contacted New Republic commandos," Ciric Baranka explained in Basic. "Five kilometers ahead. He has told them that we're escorting two fighter pilots, and that they're not in a good condition."

"And it's true." Solo said, dismissing with a gesture of his hand any possibility of feeling offended.

"Don't feel bad," Baranka said. "You've made an extraordinary effort, marching for a day and a night without rest. Any of my people would get tired after that."

"Thanks." Baranka had sounded sincere enough, even respectful. Solo supposed that coming from him, that had been high praise.

"Well. Your commandos will be here in minutes, so this is where we depart. I hope that what you've told me is true and that the New Republic will help us."

"Help will come," Raiven said, trying to ensure that no trace of hesitation showed in his voice.

Baranka shrugged. "There's no way we can fight the Seibergian walkers with our poor means, but with or without help, we'll try." Displaying an ironic smile, he added "Let them come here for us."

Solo nodded and with the corner of his eye he saw that Raiven did, too. They knew that Baranka didn't talk for the sake of talking. The walkers wouldn't be able to reach most places in these mountains. If the Seibergians ever wanted to get rid of the Balanish Liberation Army, they'd have to rely on ground troops, but their soldiers would always be at a disadvantage. The guerillas knew their way on this difficult and craggy terrain a lot better than any Seibergian could. They had plenty of places to hide and from which to ambush the enemy almost at leisure, as Solo and Raiven had seen them to do that night. Even if they devastated every last village, only inside an armored walker could a Seibergian soldier feel safe in the Balanish Country.

"One more thing," Baranka said. He took off his backpack and searched inside. He produced a small square packet, carefully enveloped in plastic. "About two weeks ago, three foreign journalists ran into us. A woman from Chandrila, a man from Bethalia and a Devaronian male. They came with us for several days, puffing like you are, taking holos of the burned villages we found on our way, interviews with my men and with some of the refugees we helped, and recordings of several skirmishes. The two humans fell together when we had to flee from a group of stormtroopers that almost surrounded us. They were too tired and they were unable to keep up with us. We saw how they were shot from behind. The Devaronian died two days ago, along with three of my people, when a pair of TIE Fighters surprised us crossing a river. I took his bag, and these are the disks he carried. I'd like to think that he and the other two journalists didn't die for nothing."

Solo wondered if those reporters would have recorded also how Baranka and his men finished off the wounded Seibergian soldiers, but he doubted that they had been allowed to do so. This was bound to be a partial view of the situation, but he was not one to judge anything. Of one thing he was certain: Whatever evil the guerrillas could be doing, the Seibergians were returning it, multiplied. Those three journalists had given their lives to make sure people knew it, and although Baranka's interest in the issue could hardly be exclusively personal, he was right about that particular issue. If their work was never seen and heard by the public, their sacrifice would have been a waste. Solo took the packet in his hands and placed it carefully inside his backpack. "We'll make sure that this reaches its destination."

Ciric Baranka shook their hands and a moment later all the partisans had vanished. The two drained pilots leaned on a rock and waited in silence, trying to recover their breath. Barely two minutes after the departure of Baranka and his people, two commandos, a lean woman and a diminutive man, appeared. They wore white clothes and helmets that allowed them to blend in with the snow covered ground almost perfectly, so Raiven and Solo didn't see them until they were in front of them. They raised their hands slowly under the scrutiny of the blaster rifles the two commandos aimed at their faces. Solo thought that it was ironic that the partisans had not found them dangerous enough to do the same when they had found them. Soon a third man showed up behind the other two.

"Holy Force, it was true," said Hyena's well-known voice when he saw them. "Are you dead or alive? Arrow, TimeKeeper, lower your weapons. These are Wolfshead pilots."

"Hi, Hyena." Raiven said still breathless. "Has the fight started already?"

"Up there, you mean? Not yet, but we've been warned that the sky could fall upon our heads at any moment. We were looking for Seibergian scouts, just in case."

"Then don't bother," Solo said. "We had some of them hot on our heels, but the guerillas managed them very well. Now listen, we have here data that could...." Solo started to cough and couldn't continue. "R-Raiven, please...."

Raiven took his datapad and removed the storage unit, which he lend them to Hyena. "Colonel Gen'yaa must have this stuff. Now."

"Nomad, Pac-Man, go for the speeder bikes. Keep the unit, you will transmit it yourselves. What is it?"

"Hopefully," Raiven coughed too, "a war-stopper."

The order had come, at last, to every New Republic ship in the area. The waiting was over, and a new chapter was about to be written in the history of the Seibergian conflict. Vyper frowned in the cockpit of his A-Wing. As usual, Wolfshead Squadron would play a leading role.

Spook piloted the squadron's unarmed reconnaissance RY-Wing. In this mission, his experience as a pilot for Explorations Unlimited was invaluable. Not in vain had he spent more hours flying that type of ship than any other pilot in the fleet. Wolfgang Wing covered him at a short distance. Drake was the only pilot from the original X-Wing group. He looked to his right wing to check his Sullustan wingman's position, who piloted Raiven's X-Wing, and pursed his lips. He didn't like tackling a mission as dangerous as this one promised to be flying with someone for the very first time. Not that there was anything he could do. At least they had given the Sullustan a brand new R2 unit, he thought, or he would be of little help. In spite of his uneasiness, Drake had to smile when he remembered the Sullustan's face when he descended from his borrowed X-Wing, after fifteen hours enduring the company of Raiven's insufferable R2 droid, Arpin.

On Drake's left, Ibero and the other Sullustan completed Wolfgang Wing's numbers. The Iberyian commanded the wing in Solo's absence. His R2 unit, Sancho, and Drake's, Ledner, were linked with Spook's droid, ready to start receiving data. They would work as additional processing units, filtering and interpreting the information registered by the RY-Wing's sensors before re-transmit it to the rest of the New Republic attack force.



Several clicks behind the X-Wings, Vyper and Wolfeye Wing formed the second line of protection for the vulnerable reconnaissance ship. Arachnoid, paired with Firestorm, retained the command of the A-Wing group, while Hardrive and Hawk occupied the third and fourth positions in the formation. While things didn't demand something else, Vyper would keep himself apart, trying to have a general picture of the situation and assign objectives to the two fighter wings through Arachnoid and Ibero. Once things got really complicated, he would fly as free man, adding his twin cannons' firepower wherever it was needed the most.

This time, Groznik and his Wolfclaws had been separated from the rest of the squadron as they formed up as part of the New Republic main bomber force. Dozens of Y and B-Wings, escorted by a similar number of A and X-Wings, waited near the capital ships for the reconnaissance data that Spook's sensors would provide before launching their attack. The entire fleet advanced toward Seibergia, following Wolfshead Squadron's leading fighters. The Corellian cruisers moved with them, while their fighters swarmed around like birds of prey, ready and impatient to open fire. It looked as if they were just waiting for the confirmation that the New Republic craft had crossed the invisible line marking the beginning of Seibergia's inner space.

Vyper looked uneasy over his shoulder. An X-Wing squadron, armed with concussion missiles, kept after them, so close that Vyper could see them with the naked eye. *This one is going to be nasty. Even worse than the first time. We lost four pilots then, not to mention Sparks. How many will fall today?*

"Two-Four," he transmitted, "this is Wolfshead Leader. What's your estimated time of arrival?"

"This is Two-Four, Leader." Spook's voice came through. "About eighteen minutes."

"Roger Two-Four," Vyper acknowledged. "Give me a warning when it gets to five minutes."

"I copy."

He felt a certain fatalism start to dominate him, but he couldn't help it. The sensation was familiar. It reminded him of how he felt every time he went out for a mission in his past and darkest days, before he had defected from the Empire. Anguish, self-deprecation and guilt also ate at him from inside. Those were the days when he always expected to die in the next battle, and death was what he came out looking for. Now he didn't wish to die any more, but he thought that it could well happen today. Some of them would die, in any case. Maybe not him, but one, or two, or more of his squadmates. They had run more than a dozen simulations in the last day and a half. Vyper had been the one who had been killed the least number of times, only twice. On the opposite side of the ranking, Spook had been shot down in all but one. The simulation parameters had always included the RY-Wing as the Corellians' priority target, as it would certainly be in reality. The efforts of Wolfgang and Wolfeye pilots had allowed him to survive long enough to finish the scanning of the Balanish Country surface three out of every four times. One in every two times he was shot down, he had managed to eject safely. So, according to the simulations, Spook's odds of completing his task were of a 75%, and his chances of surviving were around 50%. *But he has still volunteered to pilot the damned thing.* Vyper grimaced. It was hard enough to lose squadmates on a mission, but he had realized already that it was a lot worse when you were the one in command, when the responsibility of doing things in one way or another was yours, and your mistakes in choosing the best action could be the cause of those deaths. He had learned this difference in the worst possible way, in his first mission as commander, and he had been unable to stop questioning himself ever since if he was fit for the command. No, not exactly that. He was a good fighter pilot, probably the best of the squad, and he had a clear mind both in combat and out of it. He could lead a fighter squadron, but he didn't like it. As if that mattered at all. Whether he liked it or not, there was no option. He had to accept the responsibility and to make sure that the mission's objectives were accomplished and bring back as many of his pilots as possible. He would do his best, and he hoped that it were enough. If death surprised him on the way, at least may it not be because he had been distracted or had flown beneath his skills. If one or more of his pilots died, may it not be because he had underestimated a threat or failed an easy shot. That was all he dared to ask for.

Nevertheless, here, in his very element, a part of himself didn't really doubt his chances. Corellians could be superb pilots as they were, but they had not been fighting for years like he had. The most amazing thing was that he was eager to enter combat again, that he couldn't help but feeling a bitter and somehow evil delight at the thought that he was about to have his own revenge. The Corellians would pay for every friend they had killed and for the ones they would kill. He remembered what Mar Hanniuska had demanded him after the previous battle and made her wish his own. *I won't forget your two Corellians, Mar. For Detrs and Killips. And some for Torpedo, Iceman, Sacart and Gandalf.*

"Ma'am," A-PD5 said calling Colonel Gen'yaa's attention. "We're receiving a request for an encrypted transmission from Camp Two."

"Encrypted?" Gen'yaa frowned. "What can be so important?" She had barely voiced her question when she realized what that could be. *Tengroth and Rovardi.* "Accept the request and patch me through."

"*Wolf's Lair*," Solo's voice was heard, strangely clean of static, "this is Lieutenant Commander Tengroth at Camp Two."

"This is Colonel Gen'yaa. Inform, Lieutenant Commander."

"Ma'am, I think we've got it. The storage unit of our high capacity datapad is filled with all kind of stuff. Mainly transmission recordings and database registers, millions of them. We don't know where what you're looking for is, but it must be here."

"Initiate the transmission of the data. Now."

"Receiving already," A-PD5 confirmed almost immediately. The several diodes located on the droid's neck blinked, indicating that he was collecting data.

"A-PD5, Give me a line to the *Liberator*. Hurry up. Tengroth, I need a clue. Can't you tell me anything? Not even the ship's name?"

"I'm sorry, ma'am..."

"The *Fool's Hand*!" Raiven's voice said. "That was the name, ma'am!"

On the bridge of the *Liberator*, which had replaced the *Brave Soul* as the flagship, Leia Organa and Admiral Sinensis watched the movements of both fleets intently. If nothing prevented it, and she didn't know what that could be, soon those giant ships would be shooting at each other with all their immense firepower. People would start to die from the first moment. "I hope we're doing the right thing," she heard herself saying.

"Only time will tell that," the Admiral answered.

"We did all we could to prevent this from happening, didn't we?"

"I think so."

"It's hard to be sure, though. Anyway, it's too late for regrets. Now it's time to act, and may the Force be with us all."

"Amen, Counselor."

Leia felt someone's hand touching softly her shoulder. She looked back to find Winter. Her face was as neutral as always, but through the Force Leia noticed that something made her assistant feel strangely anxious. *That's not like her.* "Yes, Winter?"

"It's Colonel Gen'yaa on the *Wolf's Lair*. Her two agents have just showed up."

Leia's heart skipped a beat. "What does she have?"

"Only rough data so far. She asks for time to revise it."

Leia sighed, feeling how her sudden explosion of hope died as quickly as it had been born. "Time is the only thing I can't give her," Leia said. "Tell Colonel Gen'yaa to call if she discovers something that we really can use."

Winter frowned. "Aren't you going to delay the attack?"

"I could order the fighters to wait," Admiral Sinensis proposed. "One more hour shouldn't do any harm."

Leia shook her head. "I won't have more Balanish slain because we decided to wait even a little more before doing something for them. Enough is enough."

Aboard the *First Citizen*, Admiral Sellman and his staff had before their eyes a similar scene to that their New Republic counterparts were watching. Through the bridge's speakers, the voice of Coronet Squadron's commander informed them about the progress of the enemy fighters toward Seibergia's inner space.

"If they keep their present speed, they will cross the border in twelve minutes."

Captain Ganfini, the captain of the *First Citizen*, approached the communication unit. "Coronet Leader, how many reconnaissance ships do you see?" he asked.

"Only one RY-Wing, sir, escorted by several standard A-Wings and X-Wings."

"Then that RY-Wing is your primary objective, Coronet Leader. He will probably wait to deploy its scan pods until the last moment. You've got to shoot him down before that."

"It won't be easy to hit the RY-Wing before vapping a significant part of the escort, sir."

"Do what you have to do, Commander."

"As ordered, sir. It will be my pleasure."

Admiral Sellman snorted. His men were too anxious to enter combat, and they shouldn't be. Sometimes, he seemed the only one who understood the consequences of what was about to happen here. After today, nothing would be the same again for Corellia. They would be at war who knows for how long. Thousands, maybe millions would die, and one way or another the Corellian people would lose. The New Republic might be crushed, yes, but they wouldn't be free any more. First allies, then citizens of the Empire. *That is, servants of the Emperor. This might well be the last time I command a fleet of my own. Next time we all will be obeying the orders of some Imperial Grand Admiral.*

"Warn the Seibergians," he said to Captain Ganfini. "They better be ready to deal with the fighters and bombers that manage to get through and help us to protect their own space."

"Alright, Admiral."

"Also tell the *Sovereign's* captain to lag ten kilometers further behind. That way he'll be able to threaten the *Rescuer* when they maneuver to face us."

"That leaves us more vulnerable, if the *Borrasca* or the *Liberator* try to surround us," Ganfini's second observed.

"Maybe, but we can't expect to avoid every risk if we're to win this battle. Anything new from Corellia?"

"No, sir," the communications officer answered. "The Diktat has just asked to be kept informed about the situation."

"Very well."

"Ten minutes to the border," Coronet Leader's voice announced. Sellman noticed how everybody tensed around him. The time was coming, the point of no return. A week of negotiation to this end. He didn't want to think that it had been a mistake to accept Organa's proposition of truce, but now it almost seemed like it. He had expected her to understand what his position was. For an instant, he had almost believed that they could reach a final agreement, but it had been only an illusion. He remembered how they had shaken their hands few days ago, Organa's open smile and his own satisfaction, but soon the memory was replaced by that of the Counselor menacing him. He felt how the anger returned. "She is going to do it," Sellman

muttered between his teeth. "I warned her, but she wouldn't listen."

"Did you say something, sir?"

"Nothing, Captain." *Most of us Corellians are not too good with words. But Leia Organa and the New Republic are about to learn what our strongest traits are.*

Colonel Gen'yaa struggled to keep a clear mind under the circumstances. She could have in her hands the proof of the Seibergian involvement in the incident, the key to defuse this crisis, but she couldn't use it because she didn't know where to find it and she didn't have the time to look for it. Unless....

"A-PD5, how much have you received so far?"

"Eighty five percent, ma'am," the droid answered without turning its head.

"Can you decrypt *and* analyze all that data in less than... nine minutes?"

"I'm sorry, ma'am. I don't have enough processing power."

"What if I lend you the all the ship's computer's resources?"

"Then it could be possible, but that would temporary disable many of the ship's systems."

"I know that." Gen'yaa approached a computer terminal and introduced her identification card. As fast as she was able, she completed a series of security procedures, including the input of two series of pass codes, a retina scan and a micro-tissue reading. Near her, Lieutenant Commander Wumb watched the process in silence, not questioning what she was about to do. Without the computer, the *Wolf's Lair* would be practically practically useless and defenseless, right before a battle started. But they had to try it.

"Do it, A-PD5." Gen'yaa said. "Now."

"What am I looking for, ma'am?"

"Data about a ship called *Fool's Hand*. Something that link it with a military operation. No, wait. Concentrate on the voice transmissions to and from that ship with recording date of eight days ago. Look for expressions in Basic or Seibergian including the terms New Republic, Rebel, fighter, blockade... missile, mine, Balanish and refugee."

"Processing." In front of Gen'yaa, the tactical screen froze for an instant and then became blank like many of the instruments and consoles. Wumb explained briefly to the bridge officers what they were up to and his instructions were efficiently retransmitted to the rest of the ship. Everybody should wait for the return of the computer signal and restart the systems as soon as possible. For the time being, the gunners would have to handle and aim their weapons manually, without the help of their instruments. Gen'yaa heard how Wumb talked to Lieutenant Boradelis, on the Engineering section. The Mon Calamari technician would have the shields operating from a static configuration. If they were attacked before the restoration of the computer processes that automatically compensated them when they were hit, concentrated fire on any vulnerable spot would destroy the ship in a matter of seconds. Colonel Gen'yaa realized that, once more, the lives of all of her crew were at stake. *But at least this time I am here by their side.*

"I'm done," Raiven announced. He and Solo were alone in Camp Two's communication tent. The commandos that had brought them here had hastily left on their speeder bikes to return beside Hyena and the rest of their team. "They've already cut the transmission."

"It seemed to me that Gen'yaa was quite nervous."

"Yes. I hadn't believed it was possible."

"It can only mean one thing." Solo shook his head, suddenly depressed. "Damn, to get so far just to be too late."

"Don't even say it." Raiven put a hand upon his partner's shoulder. "Gen'yaa will know what to do."

Solo just nodded. It had been almost easy to forget about it while they were on Nurtina playing spies. Now the reality of what was going on somewhere over their heads fell on him like a hammer on a glass. Solo shuddered, feeling sick. He had been forced to shoot at his own people once, and had been fired upon by them. He prayed that there were not a second time.

"Five minutes to the border line," Spook reported. He revised once more the status of his instruments. It would be more than frustrating if something failed now. His sensor screens displayed the signals of several dozens of ships. Too many of them were violet. *If only they could have got me an RX-Wing I wouldn't feel so exposed, damn it.* At least the RY-Wing had strong shields and armor. It would take quite a pounding before disintegrating. Spook shook his head with annoyance. He better concentrated on his task rather than waste time calculating what his chances of survival were.

"New Republic fighters," a human male voice with Corellian accent said in every pilot's headphones, "This is Commander Baler, Coronet Squadron Leader. I think you know, but, just in case, I'm warning you that you're about to enter Seibergian space. We have orders to open fire as soon as you reach the border."

"This is Wolfshead Leader," Vyper answered in the same frequency. "You're most kind, Commander. I also warn you that we will defend ourselves. Wolfshead Leader out."

In his A-Wing's cockpit, Archnoid grimaced. Even if that Commander Baler had not identified himself, he would have recognized his voice. *The guy of the bloody parade.* He took a deep breath. *It has to be my destiny or something.* He asked the flight computer to locate the ship that had been the origin of the last transmission. One of the violet dots that appeared on his screen started to blink. Archnoid smiled and selected that signature in the first slot of his targeting memory. He wondered why he had not done that the other time, as eager as he was to teach that guy a lesson. Now that he thought of it, he realized that he didn't feel as sick as he felt back then. Not as anxious, not as tense, and not nearly as furious. *So was the Scissors right? Did I overreact because I was not getting enough sleep?* Archnoid snorted. *Enough of this. It only means that now I'll fly better, so watch your six, Baler.*

"Four minutes."

APD-5 turned abruptly its head towards Colonel Gen'yaa, getting out of its immobility. "I think I've got it, ma'am."

"Liberate the computer! All stations, restart your systems."

Gen'yaa went to the droid's side, took a headset, and handed another to Lieutenant Commander Dey'jaa, who had just arrived, attending her call. She didn't want the rest of the bridge officers to be distracted right now, when they had to hurry to restore the ship's computer dependent systems to their full operational status before they were under enemy fire. Less than four minutes left, it was going to be tight. Lieutenant Colonel Wumb bowed at her and took the command of the *Wolf's Lair*. On her sign, APD-5 played a recording of the transmissions from and to the *Fool's Hand*, seemingly right before it was intercepted by Wolfshead Squadron patrol. The two Bothans listened to it intently, concentrated on not missing a single word. They wouldn't have the chance to replay it to be sure. If this didn't prove anything, there wouldn't be time to keep looking for something else among the Terabytes of information APD-5 had stored on the ship's databanks.

Gen'yaa and Dey'jaa missed the three and the two minutes warning transmitted by the pilot of the reconnaissance ship. Suddenly they looked at each other, and Dey'jaa nodded. Gen'yaa removed the headset and let it drop carelessly to the deck.

"APD-5, patch me through the *Liberator* right now!!!"

"Leia, it's Gen'yaa again!" Winter exclaimed from one of the consoles of the Star Destroyer's bridge pit. "She says she's got it!"

Leia looked at Sinensis and jumped down to the pit beside Winter and the technician that operated the communication console. "Connect the speakers."

"This is Counselor Organa, Colonel Gen'yaa. What do you have?"

"Counselor, the Seibergians threatened the pilot of the downed freighter with shooting him down and forced him to try to cheat us. I have the recording of the transmissions."

"Holy Force..."

Admiral Sinensis spoke from the bridge's deck. "We have no time, Counselor. In half a minute the reconnaissance ship will cross the border."

Leia forced herself to keep her nerves under control. "Colonel Gen'yaa, transmit it *directly* to the Corellians. I'll try to convince Admiral Sellman to hold back his forces. Admiral Sinensis, call Wolfshead Leader. Tell him to wait."

Through the main speakers, they heard the voice of one of Wolfshead pilots, reporting that they were being fired upon. Winter looked at Leia. "Too late."

"All right, people," Vyper transmitted. "You all know what to do. Three, two, now!"

On Vyper's signal, the four A-Wings performed a 180 degrees turn and engaged the enemy X-Wings, firing concussion missiles at their pre-selected targets without waiting for a lock. The Corellian formation broke in a tenth of a second while the pilots maneuvered to avoid the warheads launched at them. Spook pushed his throttle forward, which he had kept at the three quarters position until now, and redirected a half of the shield power to the engines. The RY-Wing jumped forward followed only by Ibero's and his wingman's X-Wings. Drake and the other Sullustan kept their present course and speed, but increased considerably the distance between them, preparing themselves to attack any enemy fighter that tried to cross through the gap in pursuit of the RY-Wing.

"Deploying the scanning pods in thirty seconds," Spook informed.

The rear was complete madness. Even now one of the Corellian X-Wings exploded into a million fragments, while a second one lost its upper starboard wing. Hardrive managed to shoot down a third one just before being hit on his port engine by a concussion missile. The alarm klaxon almost deafened him, while he activated the ejection mechanism. Pilot and seat were launched away from the crippled A-Wing just when another warhead pierced its hull and detonated inside. Hawk hit the X-Wing that had launched those two missiles and cursed himself for having reached him three seconds too late. For an instant he believed he saw a blurred orange spot a hundred meters over his head. The blinking signal emitted by an emergency buoy appeared briefly on his sensor screen, confirming his impression.

"Seven has ejected! I think he's OK!"

"Turn twenty degrees to port and I'll cover you," Vyper said. "Everybody, don't let anyone pass through!"

"Bad news!" Arachnoid exclaimed. "Four of them are on their way already!"

"Copied that, leave them alone. Fourteen, this is Lead. Four bandits are heading your way."

"Roger, Lead," Drake answered coldly. "We're ready and waiting for them."

"Pods deployed and activated," Spook reported. "Transmitting data."

"Sir, we're receiving a transmission from a New Republic ship on an open channel."

"What ship?" Admiral Sellman asked.

"The *Wolf's Lair*."

"The *Wolf's Lair*?" Sellman repeated. He had expected to hear that it was the *Liberator*. It would be like Organa to call now, when there was nothing to say, and try to convince him again about not supporting the Seibergians. But the *Wolf's Lair* was that amazing Strike Carrier that had tried to lock horns with his entire fleet upon their arrival to the system, managing to disable the *Sovereign*. "Be careful, Ensign. It could be a trick."

"Analyze the transmission, Ensign." Captain Ganfini ordered. "It may contain a kind of virus to confound or disable our computers."

"Negative, sir. It's a voice recording."

What now? Sellman thought bewildered. "Play it on this console, Ensign. Captain Ganfini, be ready to counter maneuver their capital ships as soon as they start their move. Order two thirds of our fighter force to advance a hundred kilometers toward Seibergia and wait there to intercept the New Republic bombers, far from the cover of their Destroyers."

"As ordered sir."

"...*Fool's Hand*, this is Milkman One," the recording started. "That was a concussion missile, fired without really targeting you. That's the only warning you will receive...." Sellman frowned. *What the hell is this?*

"Sir," the Ensign called his attention. "I've got a transmission request from the *Liberator*."

So there she is. "Accept the transmission. Counselor Organa, is that you?"

"Yes, Admiral Sellman. Have you received the recording?"

"I'm listening to it now. Can you explain me what are you up to?"

"That recording *is* the proof you demanded. The Seibergians used the refugees' transport to set a trap, both for the New Republic and for Corellia. They wanted us to shoot down that ship to discredit us and at the same time to force Corellia to finally take a part in the conflict."

"That makes no sense, Counselor. You're just trying to buy time, but you won't get anything."

"Nothing she can say will convince him," Admiral Sinessis said in a low voice, but not so low that Winter

could not hear it.

"Do you want to bet, sir?" she asked, but as much as she trusted Leia's talent for negotiation she couldn't help but thinking that the Admiral was possibly right.

Leia had heard him too, but she didn't want to admit that she was defeated already. Not now, when she at last had what she had been looking for since the beginning of this crisis. She couldn't help an involuntary shudder when she wondered, only for an instant, if the Diktat could have surrendered at last to Sate Pestage's pressure. If that was the case, then what Admiral Sinensis had just said was true and the New Republic had a new declared enemy. One that could destroy from the inside what they had constructed with so much effort and so much blood, when the thousands of Corellians that served in the New Republic armed forces and in the administration started to wonder to whom they should be loyal now. But the more she heard of the recording, the more certain she was of being right. The Seibergians had caused all this, probably with Imperial support. But how to make Admiral Sellman see that it was true? *He probably thinks that we're trying to deceive him with a faked recording, just to delay him, as he has just said. Eventually he will find out that the recording is authentic, but then it will be really too late to change anything. If i could only make him doubt his preconceived ideas; to accept the possibility of being wrong on this. Think, Leia, think!* Instead of letting herself be carried away by despair, she relaxed and looked in the Force for the steadiness she needed. She knew that everything was in her mind. All the data about the whole conflict, the precedents, every fact that mattered, every clue. When everybody else would have succumbed to the nervousness that came from having barely seconds to find the word that could stop the approaching catastrophe, Leia Organa was more calm than ever before. Time seemed to stop around her. The bridge officers cried out warnings and orders, but she didn't hear them. The tactical screens filled with data as Admiral Sinensis deployed the fleet for combat, but she didn't see anything. It was something that Winter had wondered aloud, in the first hours after they learned about the incident and Mon Mothma told her to be prepared to go to the Viayak Cluster at any moment. She had repeated that same question to Admiral Sellman in one of their first sessions, but he had not answered and the question had been forgotten. *That's it, she thought, that's it!* Suddenly she knew what to say.

"Admiral, do you know who told Coronet News where to find the remains of the transport?"

The recording ended in that instant. Despite also talking to Organa, Admiral Sellman had not missed a single word of it. If that transmission was what the Counselor said, and supposing that it was not a fake, it could actually prove that the Seibergians were not innocent about that incident in particular. But did that change anything at all? The Seibergians were their allies, and they were in their right to use any trick that allowed them to break the blockade that the New Republic had put around their world. Filling space routes with mines was not a very clean tactic, but considering their inferiority to the New Republic's Navy, that was the best option they had in their hands to obstruct their enemy's activities. Sellman was about to cut the transmission without even bothering to reply to Organa, when suddenly he realized what the New Republic Counselor meant. The answer to her question was the answer to his own questions. Did it matter who had given the information to the media? Yes. It mattered. Did it change anything? Yes. It changed everything. He had read it in the Intelligence reports. Coronet News received the information and the coordinates from an unrevealed *Seibergian* source, hours before the transports disabled by the New Republic fighters were rescued. That was why they got there so soon. *They knew where it would be, and what was on board that transport. They wanted those Corellian reporters to be the ones who found it. We knew that all the time. We all admitted that the images that Coronet News broadcasted were what increased the public pressure and forced the Diktat to agree to the military intervention. It all worked very well for the Seibergians... They simply omitted to explain that they had actually put that ship under the New Republic fighters' cannons. Who knows if they had tried it before already...* Admiral Sellman discovered that in spite of what she had just said to Counselor Organa, she made a lot of sense.

"Damn Somolovich and every Seibergian I've ever met," he said aloud. "Captain, order our fighters to disengage the New Republic fighters."

"Sir?"

"You heard it all right, Captain! Counselor Organa, are you still copying me?"

"Yes Admiral, I am."

"You can make your reconnaissance, but hold your bombers back or you won't have gotten anything, is that clear?"

"Does that mean that you know already what the reconnaissance data will show?"

"Your bombers, Counselor." Sellman said, avoiding to answer this particular question. "Give me fifteen minutes, only fifteen minutes before we start destroying each other again."

Aboard the *Liberator*, Leia hesitated. The first data sent by the RY-Wing was being received and decrypted by the computers. She could see the data right before her eyes. There were traces of walkers barely fifty kilometers from the New Republic aid camps. There were fighters flying over the mountains, and signals of fighting in several places. The thermal readings showed a village on fire already. In fifteen minutes more Balanish could die, but if she had correctly read Admiral Sellman, in those same fifteen minutes the war between Corellia and the New Republic could be avoided. *Once more I've got to decide about life and death for other people.*

"All right, Admiral. Fifteen minutes," she said at last. "*Liberator* out. Admiral?"

"Yes, Counselor?"

"Tell the bomber squadrons commanders to wait for your orders. Just for fifteen minutes."

"They're retreating?" Vyper transmitted, unable to understand what was going on. "Hold your fire, everybody!"

Arachnoid looked at the X-Wing that, a second before, had been centered in his sights. He still could hit him with his last two concussion missiles, but he moved his finger from the trigger without launching them. The pilot puffed, not knowing whether to feel relieved or angry. *Good bye, Baler, keep training those cute parade formations.* "Roger Leader, we're holding fire."

"This is Two-Four," Spook's voice was heard through the intercom. His satisfaction was more than evident in his tone. "I'm done here."

"All right, people, good work. *Liberator*, this is Wolfshead Leader."

"We copy you, Wolfshead Leader."

"The Corellian fighters have just left us alone. The reconnaissance is finished, but two pilots have gone xtravehicular."

"The rescue shuttle is on its way already, Wolfshead Leader. Estimated time of arrival is seven minutes."

"Thank you, *Liberator*, we'll wait for them here. Wolfshead Leader out." Besides Hardrive, Drake's wingman had been also forced to eject; but Drake had already located him and the Sullustan seemed to be in good condition. Another five pilots reported different damage to their ships, but they all would be able to return to the *Wolf's Lair* by their own means. Vyper followed the signal of Hardrive's buoy. Hawk's A-Wing was already there, maneuvering to keep his relative position twenty meters from the downed pilot. Hardrive had been able to significantly reduce his drift using the micro thrusters installed on his seat, which would considerably ease the recovery operation. Vyper calmed his nerves. That meant that he was conscious and probably unharmed. Fortunately he wouldn't have to wait too long for the rescue shuttle. In spite of the energy field, projected around him by his life support unit, and the protection of his flight suit, Hardrive had to be starting to feel cold. Nevertheless, he evidently had not lost his sense of humor, because he waved greetings to Vyper and Hawk as if he had gone out to have a pleasant space walk. Vyper laughed and

shook his head in disbelief. He was going to end his mission report with "zero casualties" after all.

Meanwhile, Admiral Sellman didn't waste his time. He took five minutes to have the recording analyzed by experts while Corellian Security sent him all the information they had about the *Fool's Hand* and his pilot, who resulted to be a wanted smuggler. That explained a lot of things. When the technicians confirmed that the voice pattern provided by Corellian Security coincided with the recording, Sellman called the Diktat and informed him about the situation.

Less than ten minutes after Sellman's conversation with Leia Organa, Cisco Francmonde, Diktat of Corellia, was pacing with impatience in his quarters of the Government House at Coronet City. He stopped mid-stride when an assistant informed him that the communication he had demanded was established and ready. The Diktat sat in front of the holoprojector and composed himself briefly before nodding to the assistant. The man pressed a button on the holoprojector console and left the room as he had been instructed. The tridimensional image of a white haired man, more or less of his age, materialized before him. Dieter Somolovich smiled politely, maybe exaggeratedly.

"Diktat, I'm honored," he said.

"You've lost, Somolovich."

"What do you mean?"

"You'd better order your troops to leave the Balanish Country."

"What?"

"It was a smart move, I have to admit. Too smart for you, actually. It looks more like something Imperial Intelligence would have engineered."

"Diktat, with all respects, you better explain yourself, or I...."

"Or you what, Somolovich? For the cost of a small ship and its crew, and the lives of a bunch of refugees to add to the others you've killed, you *almost* made us declare the war to the New Republic, just so you could get rid, undisturbed, of your troublesome Balanish. But now we've discovered everything, so the game is over. Withdraw your troops from the Balanish Country, Somolovich. Now."

As the Diktat spoke, Dieter Somolovich paled. His expression had turned deadly serious when he opened his mouth to answer. "You can't give me orders, Diktat. The Seibergian Army can go any place in Seibergia, what you insist on calling the Balanish Country included. Nobody is concerned about this. Neither the Empire, nor the New Republic, nor even you."

The Diktat allowed that a part of his irritation showed through in his voice. "Were our fleet not in your system, the New Republic would be falling upon your soldiers' heads with all its power. You can't seriously oppose them. You tried before, and you failed, didn't you?"

"I must admit that, but we've not asked for your military help, although we of course thank you for it. Withdraw your ships if that's what you want. Avoid becoming involved in the war against the New Republic. Maybe they will annihilate us or maybe not, but in either case none of your precious vessels will be harmed."

The Diktat felt his rage growing while he listened Somolovich's words, heard the challenge in his tone and saw it in his look. He knew too well what Somolovich left unsaid. *Take your ships away and the Corellian people will withdraw their support for you. Allow the New Republic to bomb us and you will be hunted by the pro-Imperials until you are forced to resign, and maybe not even that will save your world from a civil war.* But the Diktat knew that that reasoning had ceased being correct ten minutes ago.

"Stop that, Somolovich!" he yelled. For an instant the Seibergian chief of state seemed to shrink, as if he

realized that he had gone too far with his provocation. The Diktat enjoyed his reaction, but didn't allow himself to get carried away by the fury. He knew better than that. "Listen to me. You must stop killing Balanish right now, because we won't defend you any more. The Corellian people will understand my decision when they hear in the news the recording of your men threatening the pilot of that freighter to march to his death with his passengers so you could force us to assist you. But because of the past friendship between us, I'm offering you a chance to save something from this. Call your Army back, and we'll talk to the New Republic so they suspend the attack they're about to launch on your forces. I'll even keep my ships there for a time and will help you to negotiate the end of the blockade. Think about it, Somolovich, but think quickly. You must understand that, soon, keeping your Army intact will become your only chance to keep yourself in power, at least for a time."

Somolovich seemed to hesitate. "The Balanish guerrillas are still a threat for us. We can't retreat while they...."

"We can talk about the guerrillas another day. Now we don't have the time. Good bye, Somolovich."

"Counselor Organa, this is Admiral Sellman."

"I hear you, Admiral." Leia took a glance at her wrist chrono. Exactly fourteen and a half minutes.

"I've just talked to the Diktat. He says that he is conversing with the Seibergian government to persuade them to withdraw their troops from the Balanish Country. He also asked me tell you that you could help him to boost his negotiation by launching a symbolic attack against the frontmost Seibergian troops."

Leia looked at Winter and Admiral Sinnessis, who seemed unable to believe what they had just heard. "A symbolic attack? Define symbolic, please."

"Let's say three or four bombers with their escort, just to convince the Seibergians about the wisdom of listening to the Diktat's offer."

"I think I understand, Admiral. We'll do that, but tell the Diktat that we will attack with more forces if we don't detect that they're starting to retreat in the next few hours."

"Very well, Counselor. You may also call your Balanish contacts, and tell them that everything will be a lot easier if the guerrillas keep themselves from harassing the Seibergians while they leave."

"Fair enough, Admiral. Organa out." Leia sighed with relief. She had been about to thank Admiral Sellman for his help, but under the circumstances he could have interpreted it as a jibe. Maybe some day she could tell him.

"Congratulations, Leia," Winter said in a low voice. "It seems that you did it again."

Leia considered that for an instant. This conflict was far from being over, but the worst cause of concern for the New Republic actually seemed to be falling behind. There wouldn't be war against Corellia, the Empire had failed in winning such a decisive ally for its cause. Nevertheless, the reason that had taken the New Republic here still remained. If, at it seemed, the Seibergians had reduced to ashes the homes of those they had come to protect and had actually killed many of them, they had failed at their task. Even Winter seemed to be forgetting that fact, and that worried her, although under a certain point of view it could be considered as a good sign. Like her, the rest of the galaxy was bound to see this as a new major triumph for the New Republic, so they would keep collecting sympathies and more and more star systems would request to join. The irony made her feel utterly sad, but Leia had long ago stopped believing in victory as an absolute term. Everything was relative, and what one perceived as failure others would call success. She wondered what her father would have thought of this. She would ask Mon Mothma, who had known him so well, when she had the chance. Now she had to keep herself moving. She turned to Winter and nodded once. "So it seems," she said. "We've avoided a certain catastrophe both for Corellia and the New Republic, thanks to Colonel Gen'yaa and her men. Admiral, call the *Wolf's Lair*. I think it would be appropriate if Wolfshead Squadron's bombers performed our little show of force, but look for another unit to escort them. Their wingmates have seen more than enough fighting for today."

"Very well, Counselor."

"All right, here we go," Groznik said. Four B-Wings peeled away from the New Republic bomber formation, followed closely by one of the *Liberator's* X-Wing squadrons. In his satisfaction, it took Groznik almost five minutes to notice that there shouldn't be four, but three. Once he was aware of the fact, it took him only a second to check his sensors to find out that the fourth ship was Moose's, and even less to guess *who* was piloting it.

"Fifteen, is that you?" he asked, "If it's you, I'd like to talk to you privately."

"Yes, my hairy Leader," Sparks answered. How he had managed to take off from the Lair unimpeded and join the formation was a mystery for Groznik. "This transmission won't reach beyond a hundred meters, so nobody else beside you and the guys are hearing this."

"Great. And now tell me, are you aware of the trouble you're getting yourself into, and *me*, by the way?"

There were some seconds of silence. "You're right about that last," Sparks said finally. "I just wanted to do this for a last time, but I'll return to the *Lair* right now if you want."

Groznik growled. "Is your heart or your brain the part of you that is not working properly? If you go back now Gen'yaa sure will notice."

"Right again."

"Well. Try not to get shot down or to have any other heart attack, will you?"

"I've taken my pills like a good boy."

"You idiot."

"Don't take that into account, mate," Granite said. "The Wookiee loves you."

After receiving the news from the *Wolf's Lair*, Solo and Raiven contacted the other two camps. For their surprise and joy, it was Foxfire who took the call at Camp One. Up to this moment they didn't know that she, Moose and Rooster were alive. Solo had just cut the transmission when they heard the unmistakable noise made by B-Wing engines on atmosphere. The two pilots raced out of the tent just in time to see the bombers and their escort of X-Wings descending towards the other side of the pass they had reached on foot during the night. They cheered for a whole minute before deciding that they were way too exhausted to jump like that in the snow. As soon as they returned to the tent, Raiven started to search into his backpack. Solo watched him with curiosity. He was about to ask him what he was looking for when he saw it. Solo opened his eyes wide.

"A pair of bottles for ourselves, remember?" Raiven said with a smile of satisfaction.

Solo laughed. "We don't have glasses."

"It's the first time I've ever heard a Corellian would need them."

"Good point. Give me one of those bottles. You can keep the other."

"For you, mate," Raiven said raising his Whyren Reserve.

"For you too. We did it."

"Yes. Wow, this stuff is strong. I had forgotten how much I like it."

"As a Corellian, I like to hear that. Thank you, my friend. Thank you very much."

"For liking your national whiskey?"

"No." Solo became serious. "For helping me to prevent a war against my people."

"If you start crying now I'll tell everybody, I promise."

"Bah. Drink and shut up."

A rare silence ruled outside the Presidential Palace in Seibergia's capital. No demonstrations of support for the government were scheduled for today, and the cold of the starting winter kept the streets almost devoid of people. Those who passed hurried to their destinations, neither dedicating even a single, quick look at the luxuriously decorated facade of the building constructed two hundred years ago, nor to the flags of Seibergia and the Empire--still the Empire--that hung from the balcony and flapped heavily over the black roofs. Above, leaden clouds completely filled the sky, threatening to cover the city with snow, probably tonight. Even fewer vehicles crossed the immaculate asphalt of the wide and elegant avenue since the New Republic blockade had brought severe restrictions in energy consumption for private purposes. Inside the Palace, the ministers and military advisors talked nervously in whispers, which were heard and reproduced immediately after by their aides to the legion of lower ranking officers, administrative personnel, waiters and so on.

Half sank on the same massive sofa where Imperial Moff's and Generals, several Corellian Diktats and ambassadors from a hundred worlds had made themselves comfortable, Dieter Somolovich watched the latest-generation holo projector in disbelief, deaf to the murmurs that traveled across the corridors outside his chamber. The quality of the image was not up to the sophisticated device that reproduced it, but it was clear enough. Before the eyes of Somolovich and three of his most trustworthy counselors - the ministers of Defense and Economy, Godan Tantalovich and Helenia Ivonidev, and the Armed Forces' supreme chief, General Ilian Bodislov -, several New Republic bombers went quickly in and out of the tridimensional panoramic view of the snowed country land, with the impressive mountains as background. On the ground, AT-ST and AT-PT walkers, speeder tanks and other vehicles were shaken by the explosions of the proton torpedoes accurately shot by the enemy pilots. While the voice of a Lieutenant Colonel called frantically for aerial cover, the image ascended to show what was happening on the clouded skies. A TIE Fighter with a severed solar panel fell spinning toward the ground, flames erupting from its ion engines. Suddenly its upper hatch blew out and a blurred dark shape was launched out of the cockpit. Somolovich followed the trajectory of the ejected pilot until he disappeared from view on the boundaries of the projection cube. In his mind, for an instant, he saw himself as that same pilot, escaping from the collapsing frame that surrounded him. He suppressed that mental image with anger. His government was far from collapsing yet, but, as if belying that impression, another TIE was hit at the very center of the image, and this time it exploded without giving its pilot time to do anything to save his life. The triangular shape of an A-Wing was seen briefly as it evaded the debris expelled in a hundred directions. Another voice, different to that of the Lieutenant Colonel still crying out in despair, announced that additional aerial support was on its way, and that they would be there in two minutes; but even now the New Republic craft climbed and vanished above the cloud ceiling, leaving the smoking remains of their victims behind. Not even one of the aggressors had been shot down.

This was only a warning. Somolovich realized this before General Bodislov said it aloud. The Minister of Defense agreed with a grunt, while his colleague at Economy probably calculated in her mind what the losses would cost to National Treasury. He was not surprised when his personal aide swiftly entered the room and whispered in his ear that there was a new transmission request from Corellia. Somolovich nodded slowly, and soon the image of the battle field was replaced by the face and shoulders of Cisco Francmonde, the present Diktat of Corellia.

"I take it for granted that you've been informed about what has just happened in the Balanish Country, haven't you?"

"I've seen it with my very eyes, Diktat," Somolovich answered with scorn. "It's a shame that you've allowed them to do this."

"A shame, you say? The shame is that you tried to deceive us and force us to enter a war that was not ours."

"Not yours? How easy, how profitable, is it to pretend to be neutral when others do the fighting for you. Were the Empire not containing the New Republic, how long would Corellia's independence last?"

The Diktat allowed himself a smile. "I've heard that same argument several times from Sate Pestage's mouth, and you don't sound any more convincing. I'll repeat it one more time. Withdraw your troops from the Balanish Country and prepare yourself to negotiate an agreement with the New Republic. And show some good will in the meantime. For instance, you can start opening the gates of your concentration camps..."

"What concentration camps?"

"...and feed and clean those wretched devils before they go out, because I bet there will be cameras waiting outside. And please, leave the reporters alone. Now you need them more than ever before."

The image vanished abruptly, and Somolovich found himself looking at the void. The silence was not broken for the next five minutes, while he thought what to do now. He didn't hear a single piece of advice from his staff, who this time seemed to have decided to leave the decisions entirely to him. One of first ones would be to replace them, with maybe the exception of the minister of Economy. He was going to need that woman as much as he needed the favor of the media. The Diktat was right about that in particular. But before he could think about the composition of his next government, he had to decide what his next step would be.

"General?" he said suddenly, startling the two ministers, the General himself and the aide, who still waited for instructions near the entrance.

"Yes, Mr. President?"

"Call your staff and initiate an immediate general retreat from the Balanish Country. Orderly but without pause. And tell your men to be careful to not get ambushed by the guerillas on their way out."

"Very well, Mr. President."

"Minister Tantalovich, order them to open the camps, and do as the Diktat has so kindly suggested."

"Yes sir."

"Minister Ivonidev, send a message to the New Republic President on my behalf informing her that I'll meet her delegates here, when she estimates it is most appropriate."

"Isn't that something that the Minister of Foreign Affairs should do, Mr. President?"

"You're the only woman in my cabinet, and Mon Mothma is a woman too. Everything counts, Minister."

"Yes, Mr. President."

"Thanks for being so understanding." The President of Seibergia noticed the amazement in his subordinates' looks. Seemingly, his calm reaction was unexpected for them, but that was because they didn't really know him. If anything, Dieter Somolovich was an expert survivor. If surrender was what he had to do for that, he would surrender. That would allow him to buy time to study his options and plan his future moves. Perhaps it was time to renounce to his past dreams of grandeur and retire himself, but, if that was the case, he wouldn't leave with his hands empty.

Cisco Francmonde asked his staff to give him half an hour alone. He needed that time to sort his thoughts out before the next meeting, which would take place in half an hour in spite of the fact that it was past midnight. Whether he liked it or not, Corellia would still have a significant role in the negotiations between Seibergia and the New Republic. As soon as those recordings Sellman had talked about fell in the hands of the media--and they would, as he had given the order already--Somolovich and his government would become discredited, and the citizens of Corellia would fully support his decisions. Nevertheless they wouldn't forgive him if he stopped helping the Seibergian people, so he had to continue with this masquerade for a while yet. The Diktat moved a chair in front of a window and opened it, but not before turning the lights off. His security personnel would go mad if they learned that he had done such a thing. They would say that, without the protection of the anti-blaster transparsteel, a sniper could hit him from as far as five kilometers. Of course there was the energy shield that protected his residence even underground, in a perfect sphere of two hundred meters around his quarters, but they would argue that the shield could fail, or be disconnected by a saboteur. The Diktat sat before the window and snorted. He admitted that the security personnel had to be completely paranoid to do their work properly, but sometimes they were completely insufferable. At least every so often he had to breathe the clean air of his planet, which he loved so much. It was almost summer; the heat was not too bad yet, which it rarely was in Coronet City; and the breeze of the night was pure delight. At the city gardens, the late *narsedae florensis* were in the last stage of their flowering, and their unmistakable aroma penetrated his nostrils, evoking in his mind memories of his youth. The lights of the town, carefully designed and placed so they illuminated the streets just enough without spoiling the view of the stars, reflected on the water spurts of the several artistic fountains disposed in the government district composing a constantly and subtly changing view. Those lights allowed him also to recognize the profile of the main buildings and monuments of this city he was so proud of. All of Corellia was this beautiful. Francmonde didn't share the love other Corellians had for space travel. There was nowhere in the galaxy that could be compared with what he had before his eyes. While the war raged all throughout the galaxy, people here were happy and prosperous. Why should they wish to join either the Empire or the New Republic? If anything, the Seibergian crisis had reaffirmed his belief that the Corellians were better alone. Others, like the disappeared Garm Bel Iblis, had failed to understand this truth, and so Corellia had been involved in every important struggle since the ancient days of the Old Republic. He had put a stop to that, and people recognized him for that with their support. It has been a long while since the election issue was ever mentioned by anybody that mattered. The Diktat grimaced. Soon he would receive a new call from Sate Pestage, asking for explanations about Seibergia. He knew already what he had to answer, but he'd have to prepare the forms so the Emperor could not pretend to be offended, even if that was his intention. No, what Palpatine had not gotten Pestage wouldn't have either, although he had to admit that he had been close enough. That bastard Somolovich. He deserved to be judged for war crimes or something.

Dealing with the Empire would continue to be an inconvenience for years, but he was used to it. "Let Pestage call," he said to himself in a low voice, "but even he will take the time to prepare himself. These moments are too precious to waste them thinking about him." The Diktat leaned back on his chair and kept enjoying the view and the fresh air. Slowly, his mouth curved into a placid smile.

Ysanne Isard, Director of Imperial Intelligence, turned off her private communications unit and cursed between her teeth. Almost a year of preparation, and her great plan for pulling Corellia into the war was dismantled at the very last second. Some of her agents at Seibergia would pay for this with their lives, like the greedy director of Nurtina's spaceport had done already. Isard had been told that every New Republic operative on the planet was identified and put under surveillance, and she had believed it. But two simple pilots had been able to get where none of their real spies could. Organa, that twisted witch, had made the rest. She was a true daughter of her father, the *real* one. If only he had killed her when he had the chance. But Ysanne Isard only worked with facts, and the fact was that she had failed. The Emperor would be mad at her, but at least that was something that would go as planned. Only he knew what her activities at the Viayak Cluster were, and what the objective was. The discredit for the loss of Seibergia would be entirely his, and that put him that much closer to his end. Only one who really believed in the Empire and was willing to do *everything* for its success deserved to have the power to rule it. Pestage was a bureaucrat, as corrupt as many of his class, whose only merit had been not to have made himself too many enemies while Palpatine lived. He had some now, though, and Isard was not the least dangerous of them. Pestage would lead the Empire to disaster if no one prevented it. Sooner rather later, and if there was nobody else worthy of it who could claim the it, she would take the throne for herself.

Actually, she couldn't think of anyone more worthy.

Isard stood up and, after making sure that her appearance was as impeccable as usual, she headed to the Imperial Palace followed by her discrete escort. For the time being, she must still report to Pestage and endure his unavoidable scolding.

XIX

Foxfire felt the ground trembling under her feet for the third time that afternoon. The efforts to construct several underground shelters were advancing at a respectable pace. Moose had joined the project with all his strength, as soon as the good news was confirmed. Foxfire suspected that something was troubling him and that his display of energy was an attempt to hide it, but the enormity of the task they had just initiated made her forget about it for most of the day.

Even if the Seibergians started to retreat immediately, the Balanish people would need a lot of help to reconstruct even a fraction of their villages before they could return to them. The New Republic could not even think about dismantling the camps yet because they would certainly be needed for months to come, maybe for more than a year, and that was too much time to live under these conditions. Hopefully, supplies would arrive soon, but the more Foxfire thought of it, the better the idea of constructing underground refuges seemed. Although the Lynx Commandos remained on alert, Cheetah had allowed Daboro and Double O to help with the necessary expert work. They decided where to put the explosives and the exact amount to be used in every spot. Meanwhile, Foxfire and Moose had organized a group of volunteers to perform the difficult task of disposing of the pile of rubble and debris generated by every explosion. A couple of portable antigrav lifters were all the tools they had available, so most of the labor had to be done by hand. Nevertheless, the Balanish were working with great enthusiasm, and there were plenty of hands to carry sacks of rubble out of the growing caves. Not a small amount of their joy came from the fact that they had been told that Moose and Foxfire's squadmates had destroyed several Seibergian walkers before returning to their mothership.

After what those walkers had done to their villages, Foxfire couldn't blame them for being glad about it. She had been spared the worst of the task because of her arm, her injury too recent risk suffering a new break. She was helping Sdermila and another woman to prepare the dinner soup when she heard the sound of one or more speeder bikes. Leaving the big shelter where they were working to see who was coming, she saw two bikes entering the camp from the south path. There were two persons riding each vehicle. She recognized Hyena driving one of them and waved at him. The two speeder-bikes stopped near the communications shelter and she approached.

"Look what I've brought to you," Hyena said. "Are there many more of you wandering on these mountains?"

Foxfire's mouth parted in a big grin. "Solo! Raiven!"

"Hi, Boss. Glad to see you." Solo tried a smile, but he winced instead when his chapped lips protested the abuse.

"I almost cried with happiness when I heard your voice this morning," Raiven said, "and you said that Moose and Rooster were alive too."

"I was no less surprised than you. All this time nobody had told me that you two were on the planet, in spite of the fact that I contacted the *Lair* at least once every day."

"Security reasons, need to know and all that stuff," Solo said.

"Yes, I know. By the way, and if you don't mind me pointing out, I must say that you two look horrible!"

"Then you should have seen us when Hyena found us," Raiven answered. "Nevertheless, not everything is due to our numerous misfortunes."

"That's true," Hyena said, laughing. "These two morons were sloshed when I returned to pick them up. They've had a bottle of Whyren's Reserve *each*."

"Burying our heads in the snow was not very kind of you," Solo said. Foxfire let a laugh escape.

"That's the least you deserve for not sharing the stuff," Hyena commented with an evil grin.

"I must admit it was good for the headache," Raiven said with a shrug.

"It wouldn't have gone to our heads so quickly if we'd had full stomachs," Solo said. "And now that I mention the issue, when do you have dinner over here? We hoped to have something more decent than the damned energy bars."

Foxfire laughed. "In a hour or so you will meet our chief cook, Sdermila, and her universally famous Balanish energy soup. And now, are you going to tell me the whole story? No, wait," she said looking around. She made a signal to a group of Balanish children who were wandering around. "First I'll get Rooster and Moose."

The children ran to look for them, happy to be trusted with such an important responsibility. Rooster came first, as the medical tent was not far from there. She hugged both pilots and had a good chuckle when Hyena reported the treatment he had used to shake the drunkenness out of them. Then Moose arrived, with his head and shoulders still covered by dust, displaying a big smile that only Foxfire noticed was a little odd, although she didn't say anything at the time. He greeted Solo and Raiven and shook hands with them. After reporting to Cheetah, Hyena and the other commando departed to return to Camp Two on their bikes and the five pilots entered the tent where Moose and Foxfire slept. Foxfire lit a lamp and they all sat on the sacks to talk. They had time enough to exchange their respective stories before the dinner.

Solo and Raiven took turns telling Foxfire, Rooster and Moose what had happened after they left the *Lair* aboard the *Compassion*, beginning with the tale of the dramatic battle against the Corellian armada. The two X-Wing pilots had parted to Sullust before there was news about Torpedo, Iceman and the others, and they were deeply distressed when Foxfire told them what their fatal destiny had been. While Moose listened in silence, Foxfire explained how they had escaped from the *Compassion*, the fight against the AT-ST and the Seibergian stormtroopers, and the walk to the camp beside the refugees. Rooster told them about Ben Al Saruff, from whom they had not heard anything since he was evacuated. Raiven and Solo resumed their own tale, from their trip to Nurtina to the interview with the spaceport manager. They were about to start with their escape from Nurtina when Moose interrupted them.

"What exactly did you find?" Moose asked it as casually as he could, doing his best to conceal his anxiety. Foxfire looked at him, and Moose knew that she was not deceived by his apparent calm. Actually, his question had allowed her so finally see what he had been turning over in his mind since that morning, when they both had attended Solo's and Raiven's call from Camp Two. Moose had been waiting for this moment with impatience. He couldn't wait to know if someone or something, beside their bad luck and his own mistake, was the real reason for the refugees' death. Maybe then he would be able to start to forget about that terrible instant.

"We don't even know," Raiven answered, and Moose couldn't help but show his disappointment. Raiven was momentarily confounded until he realized that Moose had a personal interest on whatever they had discovered. "We downloaded a lot of data from the spaceport's databanks," he explained, "but we never had the chance to take a look at it. We just...Wait a minute." Raiven started to look into his pockets. "I had some printouts, useless most of them. See, a probably faked cargo manifest, a turbine diagnostic, a register of the food the pilot ordered while he was in the spaceport, a...what's this? Ah, a list of," the pilot looked up at Moose, suddenly looking very awkward, "passengers."

Moose gulped. "May I take a look at that list?"

"Why?" Solo asked with a frown. "I don't think it will do you any good."

"It won't do me any harm either. Don't be worried. It's only that...I'd like to see their names, that's all."

"Are you sure?" Foxfire asked. She put a hand on his and looked at him in the eyes.

Moose took a deep breath before answering. "Yes, dear, I'm sure. Raiven, please?"

"I'm with Foxfire," Raiven started. "I don't think this is a good idea."

"Don't do it, Moose," Rooster said too.

"I've said please," Moose insisted staring at Raiven. "I'll take it from you if that's what it takes."

Raiven exchanged a glance with Solo. The Corellian grimaced and finally he shrugged. Raiven nodded. "All right, here you go."

Moose took the flimsy synthpaper and started to read. Slowly, he looked over the alphabetically ordered list of names, feeling a bit stupid. They were all right. Why was he doing this? He didn't know those people, and their names actually didn't mean anything to him. He had killed people before, during the war, but he had never wished to know their names. It was not that he had never wondered, but... Suddenly, he stopped. There were three consecutive names that were not unknown to him. The three shared the same second name. Tedanian, Drivan. Tedanian, Jeiran. Tedanian, Mila. Jeiran, Drivan and Mila. Those were the names of Sdermila's son and grandsons, he remembered them well from the previous night's conversation. Moose felt heat coming up to his face.

"What is it, Moose?" Foxfire asked concerned.

Her son's wife is not here. Maybe these names are common amongst the Balanish. It could be a coincidence.

"Moose?"

Furthermore, Tedanian is not Sdermila's second name, is it? No, it is Fungoniv, now I remember it. "Uh, I'm sorry. It's nothing. I just..." *Do Balanish women keep their maiden names after marriage, instead of taking their husbands'?* He read the list again from the beginning, concentrating only on the first names column. At the tenth row his heart seemed to stop. Candelli, Voeda. "Oh, no. No, no, no, no."

"What? What?" Foxfire sounded really worried now. She looked at the flimsy without understanding.

"It's Sdermila. Her family was on board the freighter. I killed them."

Ibero woke up bewildered. For an instant he thought that the alarms were sounding once more, but what had awoken him was just his quarters' console beep. Muttering a curse he reached out and pressed a button. The flat screen came to life and the communications droid's expressionless face appeared.

"Yes, APD-5?"

"I'm sorry, sir. There's a transmission request for you."

"Damn it. Who can that be?"

"Captain Gregory from Camp One, on the Balanish Country. I wouldn't have bothered you in your sleep time, but he said that it is urgent."

"Moose? All right, I'll take the call here."

"All right, sir."

The screen turned blank and immediately Moose's voice was heard. "Ibero?"

"Yes, mate. What's up?"

"I need you to do a search for me on the Holonet. I've got to find someone."

Ibero frowned. *What kind of urgency is this?* "I'll do what I can," he said, trying not to sound annoyed. "Tell me the name and any other data you have."

"Lania Tedanian, human male, native from Seibergia, more exactly from the Balanish Country. He is an engineer, I don't know the specialty, and the last known place of residence was Commenor."

"But Commenor is an Imperial planet. It won't be easy to get any information."

"I guess so. But I take it for granted that you're a fine code slicer, aren't you?"

"Yeah, but only when I'm fully awake." Ibero closed his eyes and tried to correct himself. "Forget it, I'm joking. Do you know where exactly in Commenor that Tedanian guy was? A city, a company, something?"

"No, I'm sorry."

"Great. All right, I'll do what I can, but I can't promise you anything."

"I understand that, but do your best, will you?"

Ibero was in silence for some instants. "Is this very important for you?"

"Yes, very important."

"All right. I'll use *all* the means at my disposal, but now you're going to owe me one of the *big* ones, mate. *Wolf's Lair* out." Ibero revised the data he had noted down and shook his head. "Commenor, of all places. Why not Coruscant?" A glance to his chrono told him that he had been sleeping for less than two hours, and that he had roughly another four before having to return to duty. With a very long sigh, he started to open connections to several public and not very well-protected databases. He promised himself that he would perform a simple search in the most obvious of these places and then he'd go to sleep. If he didn't find anything, tomorrow he'd try to slice into the military information resources, private Imperial corporations' databases and other sources, with the help of his R2 unit. This was strange, indeed. It was not like Moose to ask for this kind of favour. Actually, he didn't usually ask favours at all. Ibero tapped a finger beside the console while, one after another, his first queries returned negative results. Tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, they would pick up Moose and the others from the camp, and hopefully he and Foxfire would be flying again within the week. Dey'jaa had allowed him to hear a part of the recordings sent by Raiven and Solo. He was now sure enough that the charges against Moose and Foxfire would probably be dropped, now that it could be easily demonstrated that the accident had been incited by the Seibergians. Even the Corellians agreed on that, or else they wouldn't have interrupted the hostilities. Moose had to imagine by now that his problems were about to become history. Why, then, should he be looking for a Balanish engineer who had emigrated long ago, and why was that so important? *He sounded as it were a matter of life or death.* "All right, just five minutes more," Ibero muttered. "Maybe ten."

After two days of good weather, the next morning dawned snowing again. As usual, Sdermila was the first to wake up in her tent. She had long assumed that beyond a certain age one needs to sleep less and less, and she had accustomed herself to put the extra time to a good use. After putting on most of her clothes, her thick gloves, her patched up boots and the coat, Sdermila went out with the intention of helping the relief personnel to prepare the breakfast: a watered down version of the energetic soup. Nevertheless, as she did every day, she first went to visit her kalahorse. The animals were kept near the north entrance. Every beast was tied to a stake firmly fixed in the ground beneath the snow, all of which were placed in a rough circle to help them to preserve heat. Sdermila was still far from the animals when she noticed something strange. There was a hollow space in the group of kalahorses, and in spite of their bonds the beasts were doing their

best to keep themselves apart from the gap. Sdermila soon found out the reason for this strange behavior. Her kalahorse had died during the night, and the others were trying not to step on the already almost frozen corpse. Sdermila noticed a tear rolling down her face and wiped it away with the back of her gloved hand. She had always thought that when the old beast died at last she would be happy, but she realized that it was not true. Instead, a melancholic sadness invaded her, leaving her weak and trembling. She fell on her knees beside the kalahorse's big head and caressed its neck. "It's dead, Taigor," she muttered. "The old beast is dead. It was a sturdy animal, wasn't it? And stubborn also. It has taken it almost twenty years since it kicked you dead before it decided it was time to go and ask for your forgiveness." Sdermila started to sob, but she didn't cease caressing the kalahorse nor whispering to its ear. "I know, old beast, I know. It was an accident, you didn't mean to hurt Taigor. In your own animal way, you loved him, didn't you? And you've worked every day afterwards to pay for your sin, helping me to work our poor land so it produced enough to feed all of us. And the other day you saved that alien doctor. Yes that you did. You know, I was worried for you. I couldn't stop wondering what would become of you if I go to Balania. Who would take care of you, now that you're too old to work half as hard as you used to do? But you were wise enough to know that your time had come, weren't you? Without you, nothing remains here but Taigor's grave, and he will forgive me for not taking him the first spring blossoms every year. Won't you Taigor? I'll go to look after the children, at least after Jeiran, Voeda, and the little ones. Lania will show up sooner or later, I know. He is smart enough as to find us on Balania or wherever. And you will be glad knowing that we are all together."

Rooster had gotten up early to take a look at one of the refugees who had arrived the day before, a ten year-old girl. She showed symptoms of frost-bite in both feet, and Rooster was very worried about the possibility of being forced to amputate. She had run out of bacta patches two days ago, and there was very little she could do to help her. If gangrene appeared she wouldn't have any other option. After going to the medical tent to pick up one of her last doses of the chemical drug advised by the autodoc for cases of freezing, she headed to the shelter where the girl and her family had been placed, in the northern area. She had almost reached her destination when she spotted Sdermila kneeling on the ground besides the tied kalahorses. Rooster recognized the old woman immediately. Actually, she had spent most of the night thinking constantly of her. How were they going to tell her that her son and his family were dead and how it had happened? Moose had insisted on being the one who talked to her, and Rooster respected him for that. He had asked for time, but it seemed that he had done it already. Hesitantly, Rooster approached the old woman.

"Sdermila?"

Startled, the old woman turned her head and found Rooster standing behind her with a worried expression. She made an effort to hide her uneasiness and smiled. "G-good morning, R-Rooster. My kalahorse is d-dead."

Rooster noticed then the fallen animal. "Oh, I see."

"The old beast's poor heart must have stopped during the night."

"I'm really sorry. Is there any way I can help you?"

"No, I-I'm well. Just...." The old woman stayed silent for a few seconds. Although they had tried to prevent her from hearing it, Sdermila had actually listened to Foxtail and some of the relief personnel discussing about the possibility of sacrificing some of the kalahorses when food started to be in short supply. "You can still be of use, old beast," she muttered.

"Pardon?"

"C-can you go and warn some of the aid personnel? Tell them that they can dispose of my kalahorse."

Rooster looked at her for a second, bewildered, before understanding what the old woman meant. "That won't be necessary, Sdermila. Supplies will come tomorrow, for sure, maybe even today. We don't need...."

"You're most kind, but it would be stupid not to make use of this animal's meat. It won't be easy to tear it apart, though, but you have lasers and that sort of things, don't you?"

"Yes, don't worry about that. In any case, you can't stay here kneeling in the snow. You're going catch cold."

"Cold? Oh, yes, maybe you're right." Sdermila accepted Rooster's help to get up and beat the snow out of

her coat and trousers. "I think I'll tell them myself. You seem to be busy," she said pointing at Rooster's bag.

Rooster hesitated. "I was going to see an injured girl, but I don't want to leave you alone."

"No, really, I'm fine. Go to see that girl and get her well, will you? I'll pick up Redina and we'll help with the breakfast. See you later."

Sdermila left with short but quick steps towards the core of the camp. Rooster watched her for some moments, her heart aching in advance for the old woman's pain still to come. She pursed her lips and shook her head, feeling sad and impotent. How could life be so cruel with some people? It was terrible to think that, in spite of all what Sdermila had gone through, her suffering had just started. Rooster promised herself to keep an eye on her. She'd try to be around when Moose finally talked to her. *Although I don't know what I'll be able to do for her, if anything.*

At mid morning, Cheetah returned to the camp with a half of his men, once the worst of the crisis was behind them. From their positions at the mountain passes the Lynx commandos had been able to confirm that the Seibergians were really withdrawing toward the unofficial borders, although it would be days before they reached their bases on the other side. New Republic fighters flew over the columns of soldiers and vehicles regularly, just to make sure that they didn't burn out what remained of the Balanish villages on their return trip. As it had been assumed it would happen, the patrol routes of the fighters were watched often by the Corellians, who nevertheless kept themselves at a safe distance. Following the orders transmitted from the fleet, Cheetah and his lieutenants had contacted the leaders of the Balanish Liberation Army and advised them against any attempt to look for revenge now that the Seibergians were leaving. One of these leaders came with the Lynx commandos now, accompanying three of his men who had been injured in the last of the skirmishes that had taken place on the mountain sides and in the forests below. In exchange for medical help for his people, Ciric Baranka had promised to collaborate with the New Republic to prepare the ground for the arrival of a hypothetical peace brigade and to look for the consensus with other leaders before the negotiations started. Although politics were not his strongest side, Cheetah didn't ignore that what this Ciric Baranka was looking for was a seat at the negotiation table, where the future of the Balanish Country would be decided. Cheetah accepted the deal. Not by chance, his orders included an advance warning of what his unit's new mission on the ground would be: to supervise the disarmament of the guerrillas to prevent new incidents, and see that they oriented their activities to become a police force once the Balanish Liberation Army was dissolved. Soon he'd have to work closely with the guerrilla leaders, and at least he and Baranka seemed to speak the same language.

Although some of his men had been there before, this was the first time that Ciric Baranka visited one of the New Republic camps. Redina recognized him as soon as she saw him. This was the man who had taken her husband and the others with him to fight. Immediately forgetting where she was going before, and ignoring the cold that went down to the bones, Redina went after Baranka and the commandos that carried the wounded partisans to the medical tent.

Moose hurried to the communications shelter. One of the children he knew from the day of the sledges had come to warn him on behalf of Foxfire, and told him that someone called Ibero wanted to talk to him. Crossing his fingers, Moose entered the shelter and sat beside Foxfire.

"He has secured the line," Foxfire explained. "Do you know what's this all about?"

Moose was puzzled for an instant. Ibero wouldn't have decided to encrypt the communication for no reason. What could he have discovered that required of that level security measure? "I'll explain later," He answered Foxfire. Whatever it was, he was about to find out. Moose took a deep breath and resumed the transmission, which Foxfire had left in stand by. "Ibero, this is Moose. Did you find him?"

"Not exactly, but I've got some information. Moose, most of this is very sensitive data. I need to ask you why are you interested in this man."

Foxfire looked at Moose questioningly. "He is the son of one of the refugees here," he answered. "An old woman who has helped us a lot. Please, if you've found anything tell it to me. We owe her that and much more."

"All right, but you won't be able to repeat to her, nor to anybody, else much of what I'm going to tell you."

"I promise. Now tell me."

"Well. It was even harder than I expected, and quite delicate also, although I'll spare you the details. The facts are these: Tedanian was never at Commenor, but he worked for a company whose headquarters were supposedly located there."

"Supposedly?"

"It was a phantom company. New Republic Intelligence has recently identified a number of them on several Imperial worlds, which operated for some years before all of them were closed more or less a year ago. They would have been simple covers to disguise the movements of materiel, but above all of impressive amounts of credits. The money was transferred from one to another, apparently with no use, and finally disappeared without a trace. These companies employed highly qualified technicians and engineers, like this Tedanian, and paid them remarkably well. Most of these workers' accounts remained untouched for long periods, and they were all cancelled at about the same time the companies closed for business. The Intelligence experts have the theory that this money was funding a top secret military project. Something really big, taking place in a secret location that no one has been able to find so far."

Moose paled suddenly. "The Death Stars."

"That's it. Most of the people working for these phantom companies never showed up after Endor. The main reason is easy to guess, considering that the thing was still under construction when we blew it up."

"I see," Moose said, feeling abated, but he still resisted giving it up. "You've said that most of them never showed up. Do you mean that some few did?"

"Yes. Seemingly a bunch of them tried to withdraw the money from their private accounts, but they disappeared shortly after."

"They went into hiding."

"Maybe, but chances are that they were murdered by Imperial agents."

"I understand." Moose closed his eyes for an instant. "Thank you very much, Dario."

"You're welcome, Lewis. But remember: you can't repeat any of this. Actually, if I were you, I wouldn't tell anything at all to that woman. I imagine that she is having a bad enough time to learn that her son is dead. It will be better if she doesn't know."

"I'll probably do that," Moose said pursing his lips.

"I'm sorry, mate. See you soon. *Wolf's Lair* out."

Foxfire cut their end of the transmission. "They're going to come for us tomorrow," she explained.

"Great."

"Moose, Ibero is right. You'd better not tell Sdermila anything. *Anything*, do you understand?"

"I promised her that we would help her to go to Balania, to look for her family."

Foxfire sighed. "I'd prefer for her to be disappointed with, or even mad at, you for not carrying out that promise than torn apart knowing that everyone she loves are dead."

"Wouldn't you want to know?"

"I...I don't know." Moose stood up. "Where are you going? Don't do it, Moose! Please, don't do it. Ibero has just told me what they found in the data that Raiven and Solo stole. The Seibergians forced the pilot of the transport to do what he did. They intended to cheat us so we would let them cross the blockade. Maybe they actually wanted us to shoot it down. It wasn't our fault!"

Moose looked down. "That doesn't change anything." He left before Foxfire could say anything more. She didn't try to follow him, convinced that she wouldn't be able to stop him. Once more, Moose had made a decision, and nothing would make him change his mind. Foxfire normally didn't cry, as accustomed as she was to tragedy, but now she felt like it.

As the morning went by, the fog started to recede; the day, however, continued to be a cold and dark one. Massive gray clouds concealed the peaks of the mountains that surrounded Camp One. The same gusts of frozen wind that pushed them southwards made refugees and relief personnel shiver and grit their teeth to prevent them from chattering. Inside tents and shelters, the children were nervous, constantly fighting with each other. Their adult relatives had wisely forbidden them to go out to play, but now they were unable to control them. More than one mother lost her patience and first yelled and then distributed slaps and raps on the head, without distinguishing if she hit their own or someone else's children. The subsequent cries and laments were heard all throughout the camp. While she stirred one of the big pots, waiting for the snow that filled it to melt and become water for the soup, Sdermila's uneasiness grew more and more. She didn't know what it was, but since she had found her old kalahorse dead, she couldn't avoid the sensation that worse things were coming. Redina had left two hours ago to look for what remained of the wild cereal they had collected the past week, but she had not returned yet. Sdermila reflected that nothing could have possibly happened to her, but she was starting to worry nevertheless. Redina had been doing well since they arrived at the camp, although Sdermila knew that there was not an hour in the day in which she didn't think of her husband, Dimeter. The same happened to Deveralia, although in her case her three children provided her with a lot of distractions that prevented her from becoming obsessed with her concern for Sante. Redina and Dimeter had never had children, although Sdermila suspected that it had not been because they didn't want to have them. "This has to be terrible for her," she muttered. The woman on the next pot didn't look up from her work. By now the relief personnel and the other Balanish who would cook beside Sdermila had become accustomed to hearing her talk to herself in a low voice. At a certain moment, feeling unable to stand it any more, the old woman left her pot to someone else and went to look for her friend. Sdermila thought that chances were that she had gone to see Deveralia, although it was not like Redina to have forgotten that they were waiting for her and the cereal she was supposed to bring. Sdermila couldn't blame her, though, if Redina had felt a sudden attack of anguish and had decided to visit the younger woman at her tent. The misfortune they shared, beside Sdermila's common friendship, had made Redina and Deveralia look for the other's company often these days. Redina liked as much as Sdermila herself to spend time with Figor and Lia, and help Deveralia with the little one. The perspective of seeing the kids animated Sdermila. "It will be good for me too," she said to herself. "Figor always makes me laugh. Maybe that's precisely what I need to not keep turning things over in my mind."

From outside the tent, Sdermila heard Deveralia's baby crying. "It's me, Sdermila," she said while she crossed the entrance. She was surprised when she only found there Deveralia and her little daughter. After all, twenty people lived in this tent. "Where are the others?" she asked. "And Figor and Lia?"

"They're with Cinavia's sons, at the next tent," Deveralia answered. She rocked the baby back and forth leaning on her shoulder, while gently tapped her back with a hand. "The rest of the people had gone to pick up the lunch."

"So soon? It's not ready yet."

"Sdermila, Redina has just been here."

"Really? I came to ask you if you had happened to see her. She was with me, helping with the lunch, but then she left and...." Sdermila stopped when she noticed in Deveralia's eyes that she had been crying. "What has happened?"

"That Ciric Baranka, the chief of the guerrilla that recruited Dimeter and Sante...."

"Yes, I remember him well."

"He is here, at this camp. Redina has talked to him." Sdermila sat beside Deveralia. "He remembered them, especially Dimeter, from the discussion they had. Baranka said that they went out with one of his lieutenants on a mission, but none of the group ever came back." Deveralia started to cry again. The baby, on her side, seemed far from being calmed, what obviously increased the woman's nervousness.

"Oh, my God. Come on, give me the child. I remember when my Lania was born. He had wind problems up to the sixth month. There, there. Don't cry, my girl. And you shouldn't do it either, Deveralia," she said as she started to rock the baby with more energy than her mother had been using. She didn't know what to say to console Deveralia, but she had to try nevertheless. Redina had to be in a pretty bad way, too, but for the time being she had to stay here. She would go to look for her old friend later. "I'm sure that Sante and Dimeter are all right. You will see. If Baranka is here, he can't possibly know whether they have returned or not to their camp meanwhile, can he? I remember having heard that communications here are not...." In that instant the baby let a belch escape and almost immediately she stopped crying. "What did I tell you? Good child. Now you'll sleep, will you? Oh, yes, you will." Deveralia smiled at Sdermila and took her daughter from the old woman's arms.

"Thanks. The poor dear must notice my nervousness, but she's got to be tired." The baby closed her eyes and brought her diminutive fist to her mouth. Sdermila rearranged the cradle that Deveralia had improvised with some clothes.

"She's very quick for being so little," Sdermila commented. "One has to wonder what she is thinking of when she looks with those eyes. Yes, I know that children are not supposed to distinguish a big deal until the fourth month, but I tell you that this girl of yours can see us."

Deveralia almost laughed. "If only Sante could see her. Every day I'm more sure that Katia's going to look like him. You know, Figor and Lia are more like me, but Katia's nose is definitely her father's. Oh, did I not tell you? I've decided to call her Katia, the name that Sante chose when we learned that it was going to be a girl. I didn't agree at the time, but...." The woman couldn't continue. She embraced Sdermila and cried against her breast.

Moose hesitated at the entrance of the tent. When he opened the seal, he saw Deveralia sobbing in Sdermila's arms while the older woman tried to console her. Beside them, the baby was sleeping on a bundle of clothes. This didn't seem to be a good moment. None of the women had even noticed that he was there. Moose turned to leave but then he changed of mind again. "May I come in?" he asked tentatively.

"Ah, Lewis." Sdermila answered. "What's up?"

"Is something wrong?"

"I don't know if....Deveralia, do you mind if I tell Lewis?" The young woman shook her head, making a visible effort to compose herself. Sdermila made a sign to Moose. Lowering his head, he entered and closed the entrance behind him. Moose sat on a blanket in front of the two embraced woman, feeling terribly awkward.

"That guerrilla man, Ciric Baranka," Sdermila started. Moose nodded, inviting her to continue. "Redina and Deveralia's husbands went with him. They were recruited, I mean. He has told Redina that they both have disappeared."

Moose looked down for an instant. "I'm sorry to hear that. Yes, I've seen the partisans. I can talk to Cheetah and ask him if he can get more information from them."

"Will you? Thank you, Lewis. Have you heard that, Deveralia?"

"If he knew anything," Deveralia answered in a very low voice, "good news, I mean, he would have told Redina already."

Moose swallowed. He agreed with Deveralia, but he preferred to not say anything. Damn, this was making what he had come to do even harder. For the second time he considered the idea of leaving without saying

anything to Sdermila, but once more he decided to stay. If they came to collect them tomorrow, as Foxfire had just said, he might not have another chance to tell Sdermila the truth. "Sdermila, I've got to talk to you."

The old woman frowned in bewilderment. "To me?"

"Yes. Privately, if that's possible."

"But I don't want to leave Deveralia alone now. You can tell me whatever here."

"I don't know if...."

"You're worrying me, Lewis. What's this all about?"

Moose took a deep breath, feeling dismayed. In his mind, he started to explain himself in a half dozen different ways. This was probably the most difficult thing he had ever had to do, but he felt that he couldn't escape it. It was hard to keep Sdermila's look. Once more he saw Torpedo's B-Wing being hit in front of his eyes, the armed freighter shooting, the transports maneuvering while his partners' A-Wings pursued them. He heard the voice of the Corellian pilot begging not to be shot at, and he imagined the cries of fear of his passengers, one moment before his torpedoes impacted against the hull of their ship and killed them, while the vacuum silenced their last yell of anguish. A muscle started to pulsate in his cheek uncontrollably, and for an instant he thought that his voice was going to fail him. But when he began to talk, it sounded serene and unfaltering, like if he was briefing a group of young pilots in the days when he was the squadron's Training Officer.

"Do you remember the other night, when you brought me the soup and we were talking?"

Sdermila nodded and suddenly her face lost her color. "I don't expect you to fulfill your promise. If you can't take me to Balania, I'll find a way."

Moose shook his head. "It's not that." Sdermila seemed immediately relieved, and Moose felt that his heart ached with a twinge of pain and guilt. "I told you that something had happened, something of which I didn't want to talk about."

"I remember that. Have you changed of mind?"

"Yes. Now I must tell you. Three days before we met, myself, Foxfire and two other pilots were patrolling not far from the orbit of Seibergia. We were waiting to intercept a convoy of ships we had been warned would be loaded with space mines. We had orders to scan their contents to check that our information was true, and stop them by all means in case it was confirmed that they were carrying mines." Sdermila looked at him intently, and even Deveralia had stopped crying to pay attention to his tale. Moose swallowed again. The old woman didn't seem to be wondering why he was telling her this, but she assumed that there was something she could do to help. Maybe give him consolation, as she was doing with Deveralia. Moose felt even worse for that, but he continued nevertheless. He had to. "The ships appeared as expected. When we ordered them to slow down so we could inspect them without risk, the pilot of one of them tried to convince us to let them pass undisturbed. He said that he was carrying refugees and that they were being pursued by Seibergian fighters. When we checked out that no one was following them, we assumed that the pilot was trying to fool us. We headed to the convoy, ready to take the scans with or without their collaboration. The first three really carried space mines, confirming our suspicions. The fourth, however, was seriously armed. It opened fire against us when we got close to it. One of my wingmen was hit, although he managed to keep control of his ship." Moose wondered if Sdermila and Deveralia were understanding his explanation at all. *I'm justifying myself, asking for forgiveness even before confessing my fault*, he thought with bitterness, but he couldn't help it, nonetheless. Sdermila wouldn't listen any more once she learned that he had killed her family, so he had to explain how things got to such a terrible end while he could still do it. It was important for him that the old woman understood that it had not been his intention, that he had not been careless nor stupid, that he just... *I just what? That's still the question, isn't it? And does the answer matter? Will it matter to Sdermila?* Feeling his uneasiness, Sdermila reached out and touched his shoulder with her hand. Moose started to fear the moment when she would withdraw that hand with hate and repulsion.

"While I disabled the three first ships, my partners destroyed the one that had shot at us. Then we discovered that the last one was escaping. It was the one whose pilot had tried to deceive us, and still he insisted, saying that he was carrying refugees, that we please shouldn't shoot at him, but he wouldn't stop so we could confirm that what he was saying was true. I don't know why he did that. If he had slowed down his

ship, nothing would have happened." The two women opened her eyes wide, starting to understand where he was going to. Moose gulped and looked in his inside for courage to tell the rest.

"None of us had scanned that ship. We couldn't know for sure what it carried, but the pilot had lied before. If the other four ships loaded mines, the logical conclusion seemed to be that the fifth one also carried them. I thought that we couldn't allow him to flee only because we couldn't be certain. The space mines scattered by the Seibergians in all this sector had killed many people already. I was the only one who could still hit the freighter with my proton torpedoes before it jumped to hyperspace. I asked Foxfire for permission to shoot, but she hesitated. We had been instructed to not open fire against any ship without a previous scan, but I decided to disobey those orders and not to wait for Foxfire's confirmation. I shot the torpedoes and destroyed the ship." Moose lowered his head for an instant, but he forced himself to look up at Sdermila in the eyes. He owed her that much.

"At that time I thought that I had done the right thing, but I was wrong. Upon our return to our mother ship, we learned that that last freighter was actually transporting refugees. Apparently, it has just been discovered that the Seibergians threatened the pilot, so he tried to deceive us for them, but that doesn't change the fact. I killed some fifty people."

The two women looked at him in awed silence, trying to decide how to assimilate that. Taken aback, none of them said anything for a while. Deveralia took her baby in her arms, as if she had suddenly felt the urge to protect her. Sdermila's hand slipped over Moose's shoulder, descending until it stopped on his wrist. Her touch, still tender if hesitating, burned Moose right through his skin.

"I don't know anything of space ships, mines or scanners," Sdermila started. "But as I've understood it...it was...like an accident?"

Moose pursed his lips. "Maybe. That's what I'd like to think, but...." His voice did falter now.

"You didn't want to kill them. You wouldn't have shot if you had known."

"No, no, I didn't, and I wouldn't, but the fact is that I did it. Sdermila, this is hard to say...."

"But you've said it already." A tear rolled down the old woman's cheek. She was forcing herself to be understanding, although it was obvious that she was as horrified as Deveralia was. Suddenly Moose couldn't stand it any more. He shook his head.

"Sdermila, listen to me. Our two squadmates, the ones that arrived yesterday," Sdermila nodded. She had seen them. "They came from Nurtina. They had the list of passengers of that ship. Sdermila, your son Jeiran, his wife and their two sons were aboard. They're dead. I killed them."

Sdermila withdrew her hand as abruptly from Moose's wrist as if she had been touching red hot metal. The old woman used that same hand to cover her mouth, while she started to cry, her eyes opened very wide. Deveralia embraced her with her free arm, but she barely noticed. In front of her, the young man she had begun to think of as a kind of nephew looked at her both with concern and apprehension. Had she heard what she believed she had heard? But yes, she had understood every word and there was no possible mistake. The possibility that he could be lying didn't even pass through her mind. "*Yesterday they shot down a freighter carrying Balanish just to be sure it was not one of our ships.*" The half heard sentence, said by one of the Seibergian braggarts that had ambushed her group of refugees the same day she had been forced to flee from her home, suddenly took on all of its sinister meaning. All of what this criminal had said before was just intended to confound her, to make it harder for her to realize the truth. She felt a terrible pain deep into her heart, while the face of her son came to her mind, his voice explaining his plans to live, and then the faces of her grandsons and their mother, the last time she saw them. She lowered her hand and cried out two single words, her face contorted in a expression of pain and wrath.

"You, murderer!"

"Sdermila, I'm sorry."

"Go, go away!"

"Sdermila, there's more...."

"Haven't you said enough already?" Deveralia shouted. Startled, the baby woke up and began to cry again. "You've heard her," she said while she rocked the child to calm her down. "Go away, you and your friends, and never come back!"

"Yesterday, when I learned that your family was aboard that ship," Moose started nevertheless, "I remembered what you told me about your other son, Lania. It suddenly occurred to me that if I could find him and let him know what had happened, he could come here and stay with you..." Sdermila looked at him through her eyes blurred by the tears. Her chest came up and down with every one of her sobs, which she couldn't control. Her other son, Lania. What could this man tell her about him? Concern added to her grief as she saw in advance that any news brought by such a devil couldn't be good, but she still had to listen.

"I asked one of my squadmates up on our mother ship to search in computers for references of him. He is an expert on this kind of work. He has called me back just some minutes ago. Do you remember that I told you about the Death Stars? He, Lania, was probably on the second Death Star when the Alliance destroyed it. That's why he didn't call you in the last year. I'm sorry, Sdermila. I'm really sorry."

Sdermila yelled, unable to keep her immense pain inside of her. Deveralia, also crying abundantly, shouted again at Moose to go. The entrance to the tent opened, and the face of a woman of Deveralia's age showed up. It was Cinavia, the woman who was taking care of Figor and Lia. "I've heard..." she started to say, but she stopped at mid sentence when she saw Sdermila and Deveralia crying in distress. Cinavia entered with an alarmed expression and kneeled beside them. "What's happened here?"

"GO!" Deveralia yelled one more time. Muttering a last 'I'm sorry', Moose went out the tent and closed the entrance with care. He saw Foxfire standing not far from there, looking at him with her arms tightly crossed over her chest, maybe because of the cold. He walked towards her, his legs feeling numb, unable to talk any more as he was also unable to cry, no matter how he wished it.

With only the company of Winter, Leia Organa watched the small holo-receiver installed in her private quarters on board the *Liberator*. In the middle of the projection cube, the image of Mirla Lond, the most famous Corellian news reader, looked up at her audience. Behind the woman, Leia could easily recognize the meeting room aboard the *First Citizen* where she had spent so many hours. Mirla Lond, famous on a hundred worlds besides Corellia, matched her gentle but serious expression with a calculated, even, tone of voice, reserved to the most important occasions.

"...this is the recording that has so quickly changed the situation in Seibergia system. What you're about to hear are the transmissions between the *Fool's Hand*, the recently identified Corellian freighter which was shot down by a New Republic fighter bomber, Nurtina spaceport's flight control and one of the Seibergian transports that was also destroyed. Since the beginning, the New Republic version of the story has been that the Seibergian ships were carrying spatial mines, ready to be deployed throughout the most heavily used routes between Seibergia and Balania. Although it has not yet been confirmed by independent sources, this affirmation has just gained a considerable credibility. Listen to this conversation carefully, and judge for yourselves:"

With the background provided by the images of the rescue of the bodies from the remains of the *Fool's Hand*, the same scene that had shaken the galaxy two weeks ago, the recording that Leia had heard half a dozen times by now started to be reproduced.

"*Fool's Hand*, this is Nurtina Control."

"I copy you, Nurtina."

"*Fool's Hand*, there's a change in your flight plan. Be ready to receive a new exit vector."

"Receiving now, Nurtina, but why a new exit vector? I had my flight plan approved by the spaceport's authority."

"Follow that vector and comply with the instructions you will receive, or you will be destroyed."

"Dest...? I don't think I copied that last part correctly, Nurtina--please, repeat."

"*Fool's Hand*, this is Milkman One. Acknowledge."

"What the heck is happening here? I don't... Blessed Force!!!"

"*Fool's Hand*, this is Milkman One. That was a concussion missile, fired without really targeting you. That's the only warning you will receive. My fire control computer has a lock on your ship now, and I've got another two missiles armed and ready to blow you up in twenty five seconds. Now acknowledge."

"T-this is the *Fool's Hand*. I acknowledge."

"Very well. I would have hated to kill a Corellian, even if he is a womp rat like you. Pay me all your attention, because there's not much time. We're going to form up on you, four ships, on the same vector you've been provided. Shortly after that, we may be intercepted by New Republic fighters at any moment. If that's the case, you're to confound them as best as you can. Tell them that we're being pursued by Seibergian TIE fighters. If they don't take the bait so easily, you must abandon the formation, stop your engines and simulate an emergency. That will give us a chance to cross their blockade undisturbed."

"But what about me?"

"Nothing. Their scanners will detect that you're carrying only people and they will allow you to continue."

"If I feign an emergency, they won't limit themselves to taking a scan, you know that. They will insist on sending help, evacuate my passengers or something. They will board my ship. If they identify me, I'm doomed. I have a pending New Republic search & capture order on me. They'll send me to Kessel!"

"That's your problem, Corellian. It's this or your death and the death of your passengers. You have five seconds to accept or to die. Five, four..."

"I accept, I accept, damn it!"

"Very well. I didn't expect any less from you. Now keep your present course, we're almost there..."

At this point, the voice of the news reader was heard again. "From here the recording quickly loses quality, once the five ships reached the opposite side of the planet to Nurtina. Barely ten minutes after this conversation, the *Fool's Hand* was hit by two proton torpedoes launched by a New Republic B-Wing. Several high officers from the Corellian Navy had seen the recordings taken by this and other craft of the same patrol. We have with us Admiral Sellman, the man who commands the task force the government sent to break the blockade on Seibergia. Good evening, Admiral."

"Good evening."

"Can you tell us what have you seen in those recordings?"

"Yes. At first, the *Fool's Hand's* pilot tried to do what he had been told, but when the New Republic fighters insisted on scanning the contents of the whole convoy, he started to change the script. Instead of stopping his engines as he had agreed to do, he stayed with the Seibergian ships."

"Why do you think he did that, Admiral?"

"It's clear in the other recording we've just heard. He didn't want to take the risk of being arrested by the New Republic forces. Corellian Security has easily identified this man as Sed Diconner. He was also wanted on Corellia on charges of smuggling, spice traffic, defrauding the Treasury Department, and other things."

"Not exactly an angel."

"No, not at all."

"What happened then?"

"The New Republic fighters approached the convoy and...."

Leia Organa turned the holoreceptor off. She had seen enough. After this, the Diktat wouldn't have any problem withdrawing his support from Somolovich. This crisis was over, although there was much work left yet to do. She felt still depressed because thousands of people had died before they reached this point, but she found some consolation in the certainty that things could have been a lot worse. Corellia wouldn't join the Empire and that was what mattered the most for the New Republic. Leia wondered if she ever would be able to get accustomed to this.

The communication unit chimed, but Leia didn't want to talk to anybody now if she could avoid it. She allowed Winter to take the call. She would tell her if it were important.

"Leia, it's Mon Mothma," her friend said.

Leia frowned. That was important. "Has she told you what it's about?"

"No, she hasn't. Perhaps she simply wants to congratulate you."

"Mon Mothma wouldn't call just for that. Please, Winter, leave me alone. I'll tell you about it later."

Winter nodded and left the room. Mon Mothma knew Winter, but she didn't know *everything* about her nor about the work she did for Leia, and both she and Winter wanted to keep it like that for the time being. The New Republic was a year old, but Leia didn't feel as if the time had yet come to renounce her last secret line of defense. Not while the Emperor's heirs were still preying on her. Not while Palpatine's memory was so fresh.

Leia sat in front of the holo-recorder and took a deep breath. Then she pressed the key to accept the transmission.

"Nice to see you, Mon Mothma."

"Nice to see you too, Leia. How did the first day of negotiations with the Corellians go after yesterday's exploits?"

"I've sent you my report already."

"And I've read it, but I wanted to hear your personal opinion."

Leia shrugged. "They're all for collaboration. The Diktat can't wait to wash his hands of this system. Things went so fast that Admiral Sellman has had spare time to be interviewed by Coronet News."

"I've watched it too. We're losing them, don't you think so?"

"The Corellians, do you mean?"

"Yes. I had never quite lost the hope that one day they would open their eyes and would join us. It has been a long time since the Treaty of Corellia. If only Bel Iblis had not vanished and your father....Ah, I'm sorry, Leia."

"No need to say it." Leia knew that Mon Mothma's apologies were not for reminding Leia about Bail Organa's death, or not only for that. The fact was that since Mon Mothma had learned from Leia's mouth who her biological father was, she looked uneasy every time she mentioned her *official* father. As forgiving as the President of the New Republic was, it seemed hard for her to accept that Leia was the daughter of such a monster, redeemed or not. Leia didn't blame her, although she wished that Mon Mothma was able to keep that particular issue from appearing implicitly from time to time in their conversations. "I know what you mean. Unfortunately, those Corellians who decided to believe in the ideals of the Alliance will keep being exiles."

"It makes me sad. So many good people, like Doman Beruss, Crix Madine..."

"Wedge Antilles, Han Solo...."

Mon Mothma nodded. "The list is remarkably long. Cisco Francmonde is all for isolating Corellia from the rest of the galaxy. I see this more clearly every day. It's sad, but the fact is that there's nothing we can do while his people keep supporting him.

"Well, the real reason for my call is that I have a task for you, Leia. I want you to go to Mon Calamari."

"To Mon Calamari? But I'm not finished here yet. The conversations with the Seibergian government...."

"The real thing won't begin until their troops have left the Balanish Country and we can get an initial compromise from the Balanish Liberation Army. You'll have more than enough time before that happens."

"What's all about?"

"The *Wolf's Lair* is leaving for Mon Calamari for repairs tomorrow, and you're going with them. Lieutenant Colonel Schroeder and Captain Gregory will be judged upon your arrival at the planet. Ackbar will be also on the tribunal, but you've got to preside over it."

Leia was stunned. "I thought there wouldn't be any trial now."

Mon Mothma shook her head. "That can't be. They're guilty of disobeying orders with the result of fifty two innocent people dead."

"It was a trap."

"Of course it was a trap. But if they had respected their orders nothing would have happened."

"I can't believe you're being serious, Mon Mothma. Those two pilots have risked their lives a hundred times for the Alliance and the New Republic. If we all, military or not, had always obeyed the orders we had been given, there wouldn't have been a Rebellion in the first place."

"It's not the same, Leia, and you know. We're not talking about being imaginative in the interpretation of their instructions, but about ignoring them completely and people being killed as a result. We can't look the other way, not even when the accused are our heroes. We're not a rebel group any more, but a legitimate government. There are things we simply can't tolerate if we intend to keep being so. one of the ideals we hold dear is that justice is a sacred thing, and equal for everybody. Even for you and me."

I told you this would happen. Leia almost could hear Han's half-mocking tone. He used to say that she was not going to like it when her romantic Rebellion became the New Republic, and her pretty ideals were shaped into immutable laws and the once clandestine leaders became presidents and governors. As much as it bothered her to admit it, he was not completely wrong. She nevertheless understood what Mon Mothma meant, and although she was going to hate it, she would have to condemn those pilots so the whole galaxy could see that the New Republic was serious about respecting its own laws. "Even for you and me," she repeated nodding slowly. "That's the essence of it all, isn't it? All right, I'll do this whether I like it or not. You can trust me."

"I've never stopped trusting you, Leia," Mon Mothma said smiling not with her mouth but with her eyes. "And I don't believe for a single moment that this will change, ever. I'm sorry for doing this to you."

"We all have difficult tasks to deal with. It comes with the profession."

"It does indeed. I'm glad that you understand the necessity of taking these kinds of measures. May the Force be with you, Leia."

"And with you also."

Leia turned the holoprojector off and called Winter. Her friend entered the room instants later.

"How did it go?"

"I've been reminded of who we are and why we are here," Leia answered cryptically. "It's not a bad thing to have someone to remind you of that from time to time." Winter looked at Leia quizzically, but didn't ask any further questions. She knew that when and if Leia wanted to talk about it, she would. "Can you do me a favor?" Leia added.

"Of course. What do you need?"

"Call Colonel Gen'yaa on behalf of me. Tell her that she is going to have two extra passengers on her trip to Mon Calamari: you and me."

XX

A Lambda Class shuttle appeared in the sky the next morning, once the weather had gotten a little better. With some difficulty, Foxfire could recognize the craft as Lynx Commando's *Troubadour*. Although it had been patched up to flight conditions, the scars left by the explosion of the concussion missile and the subsequent fire that had almost destroyed the *Wolf's Lair's* main hangar were clearly visible on its hull, which had not been adequately repainted yet. She, Rooster and Moose headed to the landing area, following Solo and Raiven, who were almost there already. The sound of the repulsorlifts still echoed against the mountains that surrounded Camp One when already Drake jumped to the snow, without waiting for the ramp to descend completely. Displaying a grin from ear to ear, the Arrebnacian ran to hug his wingmen.

"Solo, Raiven! So here you are, you morons!"

Foxfire smiled. It was good to see that Drake was looking a lot more like his old self. *At least one of us seems to be able to exorcise his ghosts.* She had no time for more reflections, because the pilot had just spotted her and approached with long strides. "Hey, Boss! How are you? I'm glad to see... Rooster, Moose! Now you've got to tell me about that chicken walker you slew with your bare hands!"

Drake's good mood was quite contagious, but seemingly not enough so for Moose. He limited himself to greet Drake with a nod. "There is cargo to unload, isn't there?"

"Uh, yes, but...." Drake looked bewildered.

"I'll get started," Moose muttered and continued walking toward the shuttle. Foxfire shook her head with infinite sadness.

"Did I say something wrong?" Drake asked, taken aback.

"It's a long story, Dan," Foxfire answered. "Tell me, how are things out there?"

"Not that bad. I've got some good news for you all, especially for you, Rooster."

"Doctor Al Saruff?" the Lumi started.

Drake nodded. "He was evacuated four hours ago to the *Redemption*. He will recover, thanks to you, I've been told."

"Thanks to the Force!" Rooster exclaimed embracing Drake with all her strength. The vivid colors her brain extensions immediately adopted didn't leave room to doubt about the intensity of her joy.

"Come on, Rooster, you're going to make me blush."

"As if you were capable of such a thing," Raiven chuckled.

"Ah, you scoundrel, I'll deal with you later. The Corellians liberated all their prisoners yesterday, and that

included the good doctor. We gave them the two pilots we captured after our skirmish. They had disabled their buoys, but we nevertheless found them floating near Hardrive."

"Was Hardrive shot down?" Foxfire asked.

"Yes, but that lucky bugger didn't get a single scratch, can you believe it? Well, I'll tell you everything on our way. Now pack your things fast, we're in a hurry."

"What's up now?"

Drake smiled like a boy announcing an unexpected holiday from school. "The *Lair* is going to Mon Calamari for a stay in the dry dock, no less than two weeks. I just can't wait to get there and go down. They say that there's not a better place in the whole galaxy to practice diving. Will any of you join me?"

"Sure!" Raiven answered with enthusiasm. "It has been a while since I tried it."

"Yeah, why not?" Solo said with a big smile. "I'll give it a try too."

"We can't leave yet," Rooster started, suddenly looking worried. "There are people here I must take care of."

"I've brought a medic with me, Roo," Drake explained. He pointed at the shuttle with his thumb. "Look, the tall guy talking to Moose. I've been told that there will be other flights today, here and to the other camps too. They will bring bacta, food, energy generators, prefabricated shelters, everything."

"Oh, then I'd better start telling the doctor about my patients." Rooster took a melancholic look up at the tents gathered on the edge of the slope. Foxfire believed she knew what Rooster was thinking about. As hard as this experience had been for them all, it was not an easy thing to turn one's back on this place and the people they would leave here. Nevertheless, they could not stay even if they were granted the permission to do so. After Moose talked to Sdermila and Deveralia, the rumor had spread across the camp like a fire on a dry savanna. The Balanish refugees had been avoiding them since the day before, and even Rooster was not treated with the same affection than she used to get from everybody. It was sad to leave like this after all they had been through here, beside these people, but Rooster seemed to accept that there was nothing else they could do now. She turned toward Foxfire. "Ah, Avery, can you pick up my things?"

"All right, don't worry."

"You can take ours also," Solo said. "After all, between the whole of us there won't be baggage enough to fill a duffel bag. We'll help Moose with the cargo." Raiven nodded and they both followed Rooster, who was already by the shuttle's ramp. Foxfire smiled when she saw how the surprised doctor produced a datapad and started to take notes as fast as he could.

"So it's over for us here." she said, almost absently.

"You bet," Drake answered. "You and Moose will be flying soon, now that things have been sorted out."

Foxfire arched her eyebrows. "Did someone tell you that?"

"Well, not really, but it should be obvious. Vyper says that the Seibergians are to blame for everything, so I guess that Gen'yaa will give you back your wings as soon as you get to the *Lair*."

"I'll believe it when I see it." In spite of her cautious words, Foxfire wanted to believe it. If Drake was right, soon things might be as they used to be, or close enough at least. *A good, wild ride in my A-Wing would be a nice starting point. Maybe that's what Moose needs, too, to start forgetting about this nightmare.* "Well, go with them, Dan. Solo was right. It won't take me long to pack our things."

"You'll also have to say good bye to some people, won't you?"

"Yes," she said hesitantly. "I think so."

Foxfire went to the tent where she, Moose and occasionally Rooster had slept for the last two weeks, feeling

the looks of the refugees on her back. No, beside the bunch of relief personnel and the commandos, no one would speak to her, not even to say good bye. She felt the impulse to go and see Sdermila, to make a last try to explain her, but she thought better of it. What could she possibly tell her that the old woman wanted to hear? She hoped that at least Rooster would be able to talk to her and the others.

Five minutes later, Foxfire closed the entrance to her tent for the last time, carrying a backpack with their scarce belongings. On her way back to the shuttle, distracted and depressed in spite of herself, she stopped at the beginning of the path to the landing area, practically on the same spot where she had sat with Rooster just some days ago. She thought that she had seen someone entering the shelter where the Seibergian prisoner was held. The odd thing was that whoever it was hadn't looked like a commando. Actually, there was none of them around. "How strange..." She looked down toward the *Troubadour*. Beside Moose and the others, there was one of the Lynx commandos unloading crates from the shuttle. It had to be the one she had seen before guarding the shelter. Feeling a bad premonition, Foxfire started to run.

Milhavic cried out in the same instant she entered. The old Balanish who had helped Moose with the watch on their first night on this planet was stood over him, lifting a handmade knife that he was about to let drop on the handcuffed young man. Foxfire took Anderas' forearm with her right hand just in time. In spite of his advanced age, the former guide was still strong enough. He struggled hard with Foxfire to retain the control on the knife. Foxfire winced at the spike of pain that came from her wrist. Noticing that he was about to succeed, Anderas tried to make her release her grip on his arm with a hit of his left elbow. Foxfire stopped the blow with her free hand and without giving the old man the time to try anything else, she pulled Anderas' arm at the time that she unbalanced him with a strong sweep of her leg that hit hard on his ankles. Anderas fell heavily on the tent's soil, but he didn't let escape a single cry. He kept hold of the knife, but when he tried to get up he found the barrel of Foxfire's blaster aimed at his forehead, barely half a meter from it.

"Please, don't force me to do this," she said very slowly, pronouncing carefully every single syllable. "Drop the knife."

Anderas showed his remaining teeth in a defiance gesture, and for an instant Foxfire thought that she'd have to shoot him. Too late she remembered that her weapon's fire selector was not set on the stun position. If she squeezed the trigger, the shot would be deadly. She was going to warn the old Balanish of this fact when he let the knife drop with a grunt.

"Maybe you're the one who should be handcuffed," she said while she sent the knife away with a kick, aiming at Anderas all the time.

"I had to do it."

"Why?"

"Because he is a murderer like all the Seibergians, that's why."

"I'm in too much of a hurry to start a discussion now. Anyway, with this assassination attempt you've gone far beyond words." Without taking her eyes from the old Balanish, she activated her comm-link. At close distances it worked well enough. "Cheetah? This is Foxfire. I'm in the shelter were our Seibergian guest is housed. We have a little security problem here."

"You're no better than them," Anderas continued. "You say you've come to help, but you kill us all the same when it suits your interests, or simply when we just happen to step in the middle of your quarrels."

Foxfire snorted. She was definitely not in the mood to endure this. "You can wait to be detained awake, or I can stun you. It's all the same to me, so don't keep provoking me."

Anderas spat on the soil before Foxfire's feet, but he went quietly nevertheless. Less than a minute later, Cheetah himself and a very pale Double-O went out carrying the old Balanish with them. Double-O was the soldier who was supposed to keep watch here, but out of boredom he had gone down to help with the unloading of the *Troubadour*. Foxfire recovered her backpack from the soil and prepared herself to leave.

"Do still you wonder why we carry a dose of poison?" Milhavic said on her back.

"What?"

"Who knows what that old crazy bastard intended to do with that knife."

"I think it's obvious. He was going to kill you."

"Maybe not. Maybe he wanted to do something worse. To mutilate me or something." Foxfire didn't answer. She moved towards the exit when the Seibergian spoke again. "So it was you."

"What do you mean?"

"I knew you were a pilot, like your boyfriend, but only now I realize it. You're the one who shot down the Balanish ship. Do your friends here know that?"

Foxfire didn't bother to clarify that Moose was the one who had fired. For all it was worth, the Seibergian could keep thinking that it had been her. "Some of them do, as you've just seen."

"Then watch your back. There could be a knife for you too. These Balanish are treacherous and vindictive."

"I hoped you would learn something here. I saw you the other day watching the children. You seemed to enjoy it. Do you think those boys and girls are treacherous and vindictive?"

"They will become so. It's in their genes."

Foxfire shook her head. "I think it's more probably because the fact that they're hated so much by ninety five percent of the people who live in their planet."

"This is not their planet."

"They were born here, the same as you."

"Only because they invaded us."

"Two thousands years ago!"

"It's the same. They've been waiting all that time to finish what they started. They called the New Republic in for that, and you were so stupid that you fell for it. Now it seems that they're going to succeed, aren't they? Seibergia will become a puppet of the New Republic and...."

"That's not going to happen."

"No? How do you know? You're just a pilot, not a politician."

"You aren't a politician either."

"No, I am not, but I live here. I know a lot more about how the things are on my planet. The Balanish have been a cancer in the heart of Seibergia since even before they landed. We've been able to keep them at bay for long, but now they've finally found their way to strangle us."

Foxfire sighed. How were these people going to live together? The hate between them was so deep and intense that a million negotiators wouldn't get anything done, nor for lasting at least. *The universe is a lot more complicated than we used to believe. We thought that by defeating the Empire, we'd bring the peace to the whole galaxy, but only now I start to see how wrong we were.* "As I said before, I'm in a hurry. Good bye."

"What's going to happen to me?"

"You will be liberated soon, I guess. As soon as the New Republic start to talk to your government. Maybe you'll even be rewarded with a medal for your resistance to interrogation."

"You didn't torture me."

"Well, that should prove one or two points about the New Republic to you, shouldn't it? Maybe being a puppet of such a merciful people is not such a bad perspective at all." Without waiting for an answer she exited the shelter and went to the *Troubadour*. Suddenly she really wanted to leave this place--the sooner the better.

An hour and a half later, the six members of Wolfshead Squadron put their feet again on the flight deck of the *Wolf's Lair*. Vyper and six armed Navy soldiers formed the reception committee they found waiting for them by the shuttle's boarding ramp.

"I'm sorry," Vyper said. "These are Colonel Gen'yaa's orders."

Foxfire tossed a look at Drake, who seemed as astonished as the rest of her group, and asked: "What's going on?"

"Moose and yourself are officially under arrest. You'll be facing a court-martial as soon as we get to Mon Calamari. I'm really sorry."

"You've just said that," Foxfire said a bit too coldly. "Has something happened? Anything that I should know?"

Vyper shook his head. "No, this is a surprise for me, too. I was convinced that you would be retaking command of the squad upon your arrival, but it seems that someone very high has a different idea."

"How high?"

"The highest. Gen'yaa told me that much. We're now waiting for the people who will preside at your tribunal, along with some technical experts chosen among the officers of the fleet. They will make up a new investigation committee."

"And whom that person will be?" Foxfire asked ignoring the rest of Vyper's explanation. "Admiral Sinensis, maybe?"

Vyper shook his head. "Counselor Leia Organa. And I've been told that Admiral Ackbar will be one of the members of the tribunal."

Foxfire opened her mouth, amazed. Behind her, Solo let escape a whistle and Drake almost choked. "I must admit that I'm impressed," she said. "Nothing less than two members of the Provisional Council are going to judge us. So they want a circus. They're going to feed us to the beasts so the New Republic can presume its inescapable justice." She looked at Moose, but his expression remained blank, as if he didn't care at all about this all.

"I'll testify in that trial," Rooster said. "I'll tell them what you've done for the Balanish refugees. That should prove them that your intention was not to kill innocents."

"There will be time for that," Vyper said. "Now you'll have to come with me. Believe me, I really hate to do this."

Moose came out of his seeming trance to pat Vyper's back, although he didn't say a word. Foxfire shrugged and followed him. "Don't worry, Vyper. We know."

Raiven, Solo, Drake and Rooster stood there for some instants, watching how Foxfire, Moose and their escort left the hangar, not knowing what to do next. They were still there when another Lambda Class shuttle, this one brand new, arrived and landed not far from the *Troubadour*. A dozen Navy soldiers hurried to receive the passengers.

"Were the circumstances any different," Drake commented, "I would be really excited about this."

For Drake's disappointment, the soldiers surrounded the newcomers so well that neither he nor his partners could get even a glimpse of the most illustrious visit the *Wolf's Lair* had ever received in her short history. The shuttle took off and moved away from the port bay, and immediately after the trembling of the deck below their feet told them that the Strike Carrier's main engines had been started. Before leaving the hangar, Rooster took a look back over her shoulder. Beyond the magnetic field that protected the hangar's entry, she looked into the star field searching for Seibergia, but the planet was not visible from this angle. The Balanish Country had been a tough experience for her, but also a wonderful one. Rooster wondered what would become of the people she had known there, if all her patients would get well, if she ever would see them or hear from them again, what kind of life they would have. It had been impossible to tell them all good bye. Deveralia and Sdermila wouldn't want to even see her. Although she understood them, that hurt her nevertheless. Rooster would have liked to give them and the kids a hug before leaving. She also would have loved to hold the baby in her arms for one last time. She would never forget that magical instant when she saw her little head come out and heard her cry. She knew that whenever she remembered those days, that particular moment would be the first that would come to her mind, before others more dramatic like the crash or when she had to operate Ben Al Saruff.

"Roo, are you coming?" Solo asked.

"Uh? Yes, I am." Rooster took a deep breath and moved her lips in a silent whisper. *May the Force be with you all.*

Wolfshead Squadron's mothership departed immediately en route to Mon Calamari. The Victory Class Star Destroyer *Vociferous* would take the *Wolf's Lair's* place for the time being, although it was uncertain whether or not the Strike Carrier would be sent back to the Viyak Cluster once it was repaired. With an inoperative engine and other damage, the trip took longer than it would have done in normal conditions, but after almost two weeks of travel the blue sphere of Mon Calamari filled the forward viewports. Wearing an ordinary gray jumpsuit and a cap, Leia entered the hangar and walked towards the shuttle that had come to pick her up and take her to the planet. The Mon Calamari design of the craft resembled that of their cruisers, but at a smaller scale. When she boarded the ship, Leia had the impression of entering through the mouth of a marine creature of some sort. At the access to the dimly illuminated cockpit, a lonely Mon Calamari stood waiting for her. Leia found out that it was her old friend, Admiral Ackbar, in person, who had come piloting the shuttle.

"It's a pleasure to see you again, Leia," the salmon skinned being said with his raucous voice.

"The pleasure is mine, Ackbar." Leia squeezed his arm cheerfully and sat on the empty copilot seat.

"Isn't Winter coming with you?"

"No, she'll come down tomorrow with Colonel Gen'yaa, the members of the investigation committee and the pilots. I wanted to go first to have some time to talk to you and the rest of the tribunal."

"And maybe to breathe some clear air and see a real sky over your head?"

Leia smiled. "That too."

"Well then, if we're not waiting for anybody we'll take off right now." The Mon Calamari Admiral activated the communications unit. "*Wolf's Lair*, this is shuttle *Afternoon's Tide*, requesting permission to leave the hangar."

"Permission granted, *Afternoon's Tide*. You've brought no escort, do you want us to assign you one?" Leia shook her head. She didn't want to call more attention than was strictly necessary. Ackbar, who had not identified himself precisely for that same reason, nodded in agreement.

"Negative, *Wolf's Lair*. This system is quiet enough these days."

"Glad to hear it. Have a nice trip. *Wolf's Lair* out."

Admiral Ackbar smoothly maneuvered the shuttle out of the hangar and headed toward the planet without hurrying. "You did great work with the Corellians, Leia."

"Thanks. I wish I had gotten there before they did, but unfortunately the lasers were before the words."

"But there were words after all."

Leia shrugged. "It's a good thing that we could put the *Liberator* into service. Had I appeared with something less than a Star Destroyer they probably wouldn't have ceased fire to listen to me."

"Don't underestimate your own prestige, Leia. Mon Mothma was wise sending you, of all people."

"Thanks for the compliment. Now how is the war going?"

"It could be worse. The Imperials have forced us to retreat from the boundaries of the Pyria system. Our plans for Borleias will have to wait for a more propitious time. Our convoys to and from Mrlsst have been the objective of several attacks. Our losses have been considerable, but I've dispatched Rogue Squadron with some support units to secure the route. Hopefully Antilles and his people will make a difference. Other than that, the Empire seemed to be waiting to see what happened in the Viayak cluster before attempting an offensive. I'd say that this time Pestage and Isard's schemes have been thwarted."

"I must admit that a month ago I would have sighed at hearing all that bad news."

Ackbar turned his head to look at her. "You sound awkward, Leia, if you don't mind me saying."

Leia shrugged. "You're right, my friend. It's this trial thing. I don't like it one bit, and I don't want to be involved. Since when does a civilian preside at a court-martial?"

"I think that the point is to show the galaxy that in the New Republic, even in the middle of a war, the military submit to the civilian government, and not the other way around."

"I wholeheartedly agree with the principle, but you've used the key verb here: to show. It's the show part what bothers me."

"Politics are a show most of times."

"I should know that by now, but still it's hard to get used to it."

Ackbar looked at her with interest. "Do you think that those pilots are innocent?"

"I don't know. Probably they aren't. I mean, they disobeyed their orders, if that's what we're to judge. But, under those circumstances, how many of our pilots would have kept themselves from shooting?"

Ackbar bowed. "Very few, I admit it."

"But they will render a great service to the New Republic by being condemned. That's what's all about."

"Leia, looked at from that point of view, it also makes me sick. But we can't tolerate that our orders are disobeyed or reinterpreted at will by the people under our command. We're not pirates, nor...." Ackbar seemed to hesitate.

"Nor Rebels any more. Is that what you were about to say?"

"More or less. I was going to say outlaws, but it ends up the same. It's the truth, Leia. We had to rebel once against the injustice and the tyranny of the Emperor, but that ended at Endor. And anyway we didn't get so far acting as anarchists, but ruling ourselves like a real government with a real army. Many good people died following orders to the very end. Yours and mine, among others."

"This is not about sacrifice, Ackbar. Gregory and Schroeder fought here at Mon Calamari, did you know

that?"

"Of course I did, and that makes this duty all the more difficult. But there's a thing you seem not to see here, Leia, and that amazes me." Leia looked at the Mon Calamari with curiosity. "By having you presiding this court, Mon Mothma is giving those pilots a chance they wouldn't have otherwise."

Leia frowned puzzled. "And that's what?"

"If at the end they don't deserve to become our scapegoats, you will know. You will *feel* it, if you know what I mean. And your vote as the president will be decisive if things are not clear one way or another. If that moment ever comes, I will trust your judgement."

Leia didn't answer. Of course she knew what Ackbar meant. The Force would tell her things that no one else would see. If the technical evidence collected by the investigation committee were not conclusive, she would have to rely on her ability to read people in order to make a verdict as fair as possible. *Even if that decision is not what best suits the New Republic's interests? Is that what Mon Mothma actually had in mind when she assigned me this task? She expects me to do the right thing, whatever the case. But the right thing for whom?* Leia hoped to have the answer to that question when the moment came, as Ackbar had just said.

Moose and Foxfire were ushered to Colonel Gen'yaa's quarters by two escorts, who waited outside. They found the *Wolf's Lair's* captain accompanied by another Bothan, a brown-furred male a bit shorter than her, wearing the uniform of a Captain of the Auxiliary Corps. That made of him a medic, a priest, or more probably, given the circumstances, a lawyer. Their supposition was proven correct when Gen'yaa introduced him.

"Lieutenant Colonel Schroeder, Captain Gregory, this is Captain Bel'aan. He will defend you at the court-martial."

"Nice to meet you, officers," Bel'aan said. Foxfire and Moose shook hands with him.

"Please, be seated," Colonel Gen'yaa said. "Captain Bel'aan, you can proceed."

Bel'aan nodded and leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. "Although we don't yet know the exact charges you will be accused of," he started, "what I expect is the following. Lieutenant Colonel Schroeder will be accused of negligence for not ordering Captain Gregory not to shoot. Captain Gregory will be accused at the very least of disobeying the orders given by a superior, Colonel Gen'yaa, and maybe, although this is not very probable, of the murder of the refugees that were on board the ship you shot down."

"But that...." Foxfire began.

"Shut up and listen to him, Lieutenant Colonel," Gen'yaa snapped. "One of the things you've got to learn, and learn fast, is to keep your mouth shut. Before the tribunal you will talk only when you're asked directly to do so. Start practicing. Captain, you can continue." Foxfire blushed with rage, but did as Gen'yaa had just told her.

"Thanks, Colonel," Bel'aan said. "As I've said already, the charge of multiple murder is not probable, although it's not impossible. Instead they will probably accuse you of reckless negligence with the result of death, also a crime outlined in our military penal code."

"I've told Captain Bel'aan that you will plead innocent," Gen'yaa said.

The military lawyer nodded. "But I don't want to deceive you, officers. This is going to be a hard case to win. I've reviewed all the evidence collected by Colonel Gen'yaa and her people during the last month. I've been assured that the committee of experts brought along by Counselor Organa has not found anything new, so I have a pretty good idea about how the trial will evolve. Captain Gregory, based on the evidence I've seen, your best possibility depends on declaring that you fired trusting the information provided by your flight computer, which marked the target as hostile. Lieutenant Colonel, you will testify that if you doubted about

ordering Captain Gregory not to shoot, and finally gave him permission to do so when he had already fired, it was precisely because he said that the target was hostile. You thought that he had been shot at by the fleeing ship, or had seen how one of your fighters had been shot at by it. Do you have any problem testifying to this effect?"

Foxfire glanced briefly at Gen'yaa. "No, I don't."

"But I do," Moose said. Foxfire looked at him, only mildly surprised.

"Explain yourself, Captain," Bel'aan said.

"I was fully aware that none of us had scanned the ship, and I hadn't seen it shoot at me or at anybody else. I didn't really care what the computer said. I decided to shoot only because I believed that it carried mines like the other freighters of the convoy."

"But when you said the word 'hostile', did you take into account what the computer said?"

Moose hesitated. "Maybe. But that's not the point."

"Your wish to tell the truth," Gen'yaa interrupted, "or what you think the truth is, is very noble, Captain, and I respect you for that. But now tell me, who will benefit from that?" Moose stayed silent, looking Colonel Gen'yaa directly in her cold blue eyes. Her tone merged anger and impatience, like in one who is trying to teach something very basic to a little boy, and becoming exasperated by his inability to understand it. There was anxiety, too, and Moose realized that Gen'yaa believed that she had something to lose if he insisted on telling the court what he really thought. He almost pitied her, and at the same time felt a prick of scorn. She should have been down there, living among those wretched Balanish refugees, and then, maybe, she would come back caring as little of her career as he did now. But Gen'yaa kept talking. "It won't affect the agreement with Corellia. It won't make the worlds of the New Republic renew their trust in us more or less. And, listen to me, Captain: it won't bring those poor refugees back." Moose's expression didn't change, but in his inside he winced. That was the key point. Whatever he did, the lives he had taken couldn't be restored. Now Gen'yaa spoke almost as if she understood a bit of what he was going through, and his emerging contempt at her was substituted by doubt. Doubt about the Colonel's real motivations, doubt about himself. As if she detected his hesitation, Gen'yaa continued. "It only will help the Empire, and debilitate the New Republic, because we'll lose a great pilot, one who could still do much harm to our enemies." Moose grimaced, uneasy with that unwanted praise, and with the idea of being useful only because his ability to cause harm. "But those who will lose the most will be those whose lives you could have saved, had you decided to keep fighting those who may kill them."

Moose couldn't keep looking at Gen'yaa any more. Now she had hit the target. The Empire was still there, with its overwhelming machinery of repression and destruction that they would no doubt use in order to reach their abject goals. There were more young people, like he was once, whose peaceful existences had not yet been tainted by the tragedy, whose planets had not yet been invaded, poisoned or destroyed. And those who, on the other hand, had already seen how the life they believed to have had been destroyed, like his was, but who still hoped that things could change for the better. There were still battles to be fought for all of them, and if there was a single possibility that he was able to make a difference, then he must not withdraw from the struggle. Not yet. With the corner of his eye, he saw Foxfire staring at him. She didn't make a single move nor a gesture, not wanting to influence his decision, but he knew what she would do in his place.

"All right, ma'am. I will do what you say."

"Very well," Bel'aan said, his face not revealing anything about what he thought about. "Now let's talk about how we are going to do this."

The court-martial was convened two days after the arrival of the *Wolf's Lair* in the system. The tribunal room had been placed at the upper section of the New Republic Fleet headquarters at Coral City. While they waited for the members of the tribunal to make their entrance, Foxfire looked around. The chamber they were in was a perfect hemisphere. The dome over their heads was made completely of transparisteel but for

four equidistant radii that ended on a ring of the same white material at the top. From what Foxfire could tell, it was neither durasteel nor duracrete, the most common construction materials in most of the galaxy, but a kind of polished coral. The floor looked like coral also, clear pink with some darker veins crossing its surface in an intricate pattern. The several rows of seats for the public, mostly empty, were situated on an inverted cone facing the semicircle formed by the slightly elevated tribune, and the chairs reserved for the members of the tribunal, and surrounding the lonely row of seats for the accused and the defense on one side, and the prosecution on the opposite. The seat for the witnesses was placed on a platform in front of Foxfire, perpendicularly to the tribune. Looking through the immense windows she could see other similar domes, all alike but never exactly the same in shape and color. The whole town was constructed over a huge coral formation surrounded by relatively shallow waters that were crammed with life. The Mon Calamari had lived here since long before their evolution and technological level allowed them to turn their gaze up at the skies and the stars beyond. Around the city, which Foxfire had been told stretched even farther underwater, was a vast, mostly calm, sea. The low waves that caressed the white walls of the buildings were not a threat for the multitude of boats and vessels of all sizes that navigated to and from the many docks of the town. Here and there, she could see some kind of cetacean jump briefly out of the water, undisturbed by the ships and apparently ignoring them. The sky was so brilliant and blue that it almost hurt after the always-clouded skies of Seibergia. *At least the place is pretty enough*, she thought without bitterness. *Too bad this is not a holiday.*

Suppressing a sigh, Foxfire returned her attention to the inside of the room. Moose was on her left side, with the unreadable expression that he had worn most of the time since they left the Balanish Country. While he had not exactly closed himself to her, he was not willing to talk about how he felt or about his thoughts. He didn't seem to be in grief like in those first days after the incident, but almost careless. Foxfire thought that something similar had happened to her. Provided that they could do very little to change the course of things, they limited themselves to waiting for the unavoidable to happen. Nevertheless the unavoidable meant different things for them. Captain Bel'aan, now sat between herself and Moose, had explained it very well to them. If things went wrong, Foxfire would be probably demoted and deprived of the command of the squadron, but she would be allowed to continue flying. She could live with that, but what about Moose? He was bound to be thrown out of the New Republic Armed Forces, discharged in dishonor without right to compensation of any kind. Foxfire could see herself resigning from the military and leaving with him but, where? Piloting spaceships was all they knew, but between the two of them they might not have the money to even rent a second hand freighter. Damn the fighter pilot's salary. They would have to look for an employer, but it wouldn't be easy. Foxfire saw no holocameras, but how could she be certain? Reporters from a hundred planets were certainly keen if only to take a picture of them. In spite of the security measures, one of them could succeed, maybe when they exited the tribunal, or when they came to it. If their faces and names appeared on the holocaust news, maybe none of the decent cargo companies would take them, fearing the negative publicity. Foxfire wondered whether, if things went bad enough, and there was no reason to think that they couldn't, she and Moose could even end up as outlaws. Smugglers in backwater systems, working for any of the thousands of crime cartels, mercenaries, or even worse, as members of a pirate gang, assaulting civilian cargo and passenger ships and hunted down by their former squadmates. Just imagining it made her feel sick, but she had heard stories that suggested that it had happened before. Foxfire thought that she would do anything to avoid such a fate. *Anything really?* she asked to herself. Could she accept her demotion and keep being a fighter pilot, leaving Moose to his luck? No, definitely not. That made her feel even sicker. She loved him, didn't she? She couldn't let him down like that.

A doubt crossed through Foxfire's mind. All this time she was supposed that Moose would be the same man she had fallen in love with. What if this changed him, permanently, for the worse? It had changed her somehow, although she couldn't say how much or in what way. The person she had on her side seemed a mere shadow of his old self, but she suspected that it had very little to do with the perspective of being condemned. Did he still feel guilty? Was he going to feel guilty forever? She had asked him, but so far Moose had declined to answer. It was frightening, but she couldn't help but wonder if she might have lost Moose already after all.

Foxfire interrupted her reflections when the prosecutor and the five members of the tribunal entered the room. She easily recognized Admiral Ackbar and Counselor Organa, but the other three were unknown for her. One of them was also a Mon Calamari male, although from his uniform he didn't belong to the Fleet, like Ackbar, but to the Starfighter Corps. A pilot. The Sullustan female wore civilian clothes, although something in her made Foxfire think that she was a military, if not a warrior. Intelligence, probably. The last one was a human male in his fifties, wearing an Army uniform of General. Following their attorney's indication, Foxfire and Moose stood up. Behind them, the few people who had been admitted to the court did the same. Among them there was Colonel Gen'yaa, of course, Vyper and a white haired young woman whom Foxfire had never seen before. When Leia Organa occupied her place at the central chair everybody sat but the two pilots who were about to be judged.

"Good morning," she started. "I'm Counselor Leia Organa." *As if anyone here didn't know her*, Foxfire thought, although she immediately realized that, with or without protocol, it would have seemed pretentious if Organa had not introduced herself. "I've been given the responsibility of presiding this court-martial. Here with me are Admiral Ackbar, General Tulan" - that was the other Mon Calamari -, "General Boga Mun" - the Sullustan, and military as Foxfire had correctly guessed - "and General Sivari" - the other human -. "Our goal today is to decide whether these two officers, Lieutenant Colonel Shroeder and Captain Gregory, are or not to be considered responsible for an incident that caused the death of fifty two civilian people. The circumstances and the immediate consequences of these events are well known by all of us, so I won't insist on them. Unfortunately, the other two pilots who were part of the armed patrol that were involved in these events can't be with us today. One of them is missing in action and the other is interned at a hospital, unable to talk, or even to understand our questions. This leaves us with the awkward circumstance that the two accused officers are the only material witnesses of the facts we are to judge. This tribunal will hear their declaration under oath, but taking into account that they are an interested party in this case, their testimony alone can not and will not be enough to be fundamental to any decision. We'll want to see evidence, and it's on this evidence that our final decision should be taken. We'll start by playing the recordings of the *Fool's Hand's* transmissions and a reconstruction of the incident based on the records taken by the four craft that composed Wolfshead Squadron's patrol. Those recordings are the ground we'll work from because they're the only physical evidence we'll have to judge this case."

On her sign, the immense windows were polarized to filter three quarters of the light that came from the outside, and the inside illumination dimmed. From the clear space in front of the tribune and the platform, a holoprojector lifted from the floor almost without noise and came to life. The revision of the recordings took nearly an hour. Foxfire noticed that the five members of the tribunal put all their attention on the holoprojector's cube, in spite of the fact that, by necessity, they had to be very well acquainted with the contents of those recordings. When the holoprojector went off, it disappeared again under the floor. The lights were turned on again and the windows returned to their previous transparency. Then Counselor Organa indicated the prosecutor that he could proceed reading the charges.

"Thank you very much, Counselor." The prosecutor said, standing up and occupying the place where the holoprojector had been instants before. He was a Quarren called Drinin, also a Captain of the Auxiliary Corps like the defender. He was very thin and tall, with a raspy voice that didn't get better in spite of his constant ingestion of water from a sealed container. Drinin looked Moose and Foxfire directly in the eyes and recited the accusations without consulting his datapad even once.

"This tribunal accuses Lieutenant Colonel Shroeder of neglecting the duties of her position as squadron commander for not explicitly ordering Captain Gregory not to shoot when he asked for her authorization. She is also accused of disobeying her superiors' orders when she finally granted that permission, although by then he had already opened fire. These orders were given by Admiral Sinensis to all the units involved in the blockade of Seibergia system, and were repeated and detailed to Lieutenant Colonel Shroeder and the rest of her squadron by their immediate superior, Colonel Gen'yaa. Although the members of the tribunal might be inclined to understand Lieutenant Colonel Shroeder's reasons to doubt, I must point out that taking this kind of hard decisions, besides carrying out the orders given by their superiors, is precisely what officers in command are chosen for. Lieutenant Colonel Shroeder did nothing of this, and the fact that Captain Gregory acted without waiting for her approval suggests that she is not able, either, to impose an adequate degree of discipline among the officers she commands. For her negligence, we consider that Lieutenant Colonel Shroeder is not fit to be a squadron commander. For her disobedience, we believe that she should be expelled from the New Republic Armed Forces."

Foxfire, who had been progressively paling as she heard the prosecutor's words, almost choked at the end. On her side, Captain Bel'aan took a deep breath. The charges against her were a lot more serious than he had predicted. Foxfire couldn't believe it. Not even in her worst nightmares had she thought that the day would come when she would be treated like a criminal, forced to hear that she was negligent and unfit to do what she had always thought she was born to do. How could they forget all what she had accomplished since she joined the Rebel Alliance? Exploits like the rescue of Admiral Garil's crew in Imperial space or the victory achieved at the battle of Mantara didn't seem to count, like it didn't count either the fact that in that time she had lost very few pilots, when the odds were against them so many times. She wanted to shout at that Quarren clerk if he knew what a combat was like, and what it took to keep your people alive through it and still accomplish the mission. Nevertheless, she swallowed the humiliation and the wrath she felt and kept her mouth closed, as Gen'yaa had told her to do. There would be time for her defender to tell about her merits, even if it was worth nothing for the tribunal. Captain Drinin was already turning to Moose, and she didn't want to miss a word.

"This tribunal accuses Captain Gregory of disobeying the Admiral Sinensis' orders, which he also heard from Colonel Gen'yaa's mouth. His fault can't be excused by the inability of his flight leader, Lieutenant Colonel

Schroeder, to remember those same orders and ensure he followed them when the time came. The result of his disobedience was the death of fifty two innocent people. I want the members of the tribunal to take into account that the risk of shooting down civilian ships was precisely the reason behind Admiral Sinensis' explicit orders, and that this circumstance was known by every fighter pilot. With this I mean that Captain Gregory was fully aware of the risk he was taking by shooting his warheads against a ship that neither he nor any of his squadmates had been able to scan previously. Only the fact that he didn't actually know that there were civilians on board the ship, and that the circumstances *seemed* to suggest that it could be carrying something very different, deprives me from accusing him of the murder of those people. Instead, and in addition to the charge of disobedience, Captain Gregory is accused of reckless negligence with the result of death."

Foxfire looked at Moose, but he seemed amazingly untouched, as if he was not completely there. *We're doomed*, she thought. *And I still wondered if I would share Moose's destination by choice. How naive, how blind, how stupid I have been. They wanted our heads and they're going to have them.*

In front of them, Captain Drinin took a sip from his bottle and turned to bow at the president of the tribunal. Counselor Organa addressed Captain Bel'aan. "Will the defense tell the tribunal how the two accused plead?"

The Bothan stood up. "Yes, Counselor. They both plead innocent of all charges."

"Very well. Captain Drinin, you can take their evidence."

XXI

Moose sat down heavily. It was done. He had said exactly what Colonel Gen'yaa and Captain Bel'aan had told him to say. Not a lie, but not the truth anyway. Why should it be so hard to understand? He had pressed the trigger because he was convinced that it was the right thing to do. The Corellian pilot had lied before when he said that he was being pursued by Seibergian TIEs, so he was bound to be lying again when he said that he was carrying civilians. They had detected space mines in the other four ships of the group, and one of them had been about to kill a wingmate. He would have liked to see what the members of the tribunal would have done, had they been in his place. Of course, the recordings that Raiven and Solo had gotten at Nurtina, along with the confirmation of the pilot's identity, explained everything. A damned smuggler who preferred to risk the lives of his passengers rather than expose himself to being arrested. He had tried to explain this to Colonel Gen'yaa and Captain Bel'aan, but they wouldn't hear him. The tribunal wouldn't hear him. If he wanted to get out of this one he must stick to the wrong identification data provided by his flight computer. Yes, the computer *had* failed him, whatever the reason, but that had nothing to do with the fact that he had opened fire. He had repeated this a thousand times, most of them to himself. Yes, he had disobeyed an order, but only because he thought that by doing so he was probably saving lives. Foxfire agreed with him and understood the decision he took, and Moose knew that she was not the only one. She told him that he had nothing to feel guilty about. Yes, she was probably right. He really wanted to believe it. But every time he thought of those people he had killed, every time he remembered old Sdermila's face covered in tears, he almost wished he was dead.

Now wasn't time to think of that. The farce continued, and the worst part of it was that Foxfire was going to fall with him. She could only be acquitted if he was declared innocent first, and that was not going to happen. That would be another wound to live with.

"The defense may call its first witness," Leia Organa said.

"Thank you, Counselor. I call Lieutenant Mar Hanniuska."

It took Moose some moments to recognize the chief technician in her formal Starfighter Corps uniform and with her abundant hair gathered into a discrete bun. He was used to seeing her wear crumpled jumpsuits of uncertain colors, stained with grease, lubricant and a hundred other substances, and with her hair loose or

tied into a simple ponytail. Moose realized that he and Foxfire didn't wear their formal uniforms too often either, but, in any case, he doubted that any of them looked nearly as impressive in it as Mar did. *Too bad that there's only one human male among the members of the tribunal.* In spite of the circumstances, Moose almost smiled.

"Lieutenant Hanniuska worked on the Shantipole project under Admiral Ackbar's direction," said Captain Bel'aan, introducing the technician to the tribunal. "As a consequence, she is one of the people who know the B-Wing starfighter the best. Now she is the chief technician aboard the *Wolf's Lair*. Since the first moments after the incident occurred, Colonel Gen'yaa, the *Wolf's Lair's* captain, assigned her the task of reviewing and analyzing the four craft that composed the Wolfshead Squadron patrol. Is this correct, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, it is."

"Did Colonel Gen'yaa ask you to look for anything in particular?"

"Yes. She explained to me that Captain Gregory had told her that the downed freighter had appeared in red colour on his sensor screen. In other words, that his computer identified it as a hostile target. She wanted me to discover why."

"For the benefit of those of us who don't know much about starfighters, can you explain us how the flight computer decides whether a ship is or is not hostile?"

"Yes. There are different ways, depending on how it is programmed. The default option in war time is to mark as hostile any ship whose transponder identifies it as belonging to the other side. In our case that is any Imperial ship, but that can be changed. For instance, in the Viayak cluster every fighter's computer was reprogrammed to consider hostile any armed Seibergian ship. In the last few days, we also included the Corellians in the list."

"I understand. What are the other options?"

"The second one is when the sensors detect that the craft is being shot at by another ship. In this case the aggressor is automatically designated as hostile. The third one applies when there's an allied vessel in the area, usually a capital ship, operating as command center. The starfighter's computers are programmed to accept the friend-foe identifications sent by the command ship, from where is possible to designate targets for all the craft under its responsibility. The fourth and last way is in the pilot's hands. At any moment, he or she can instruct the computer to consider a ship as hostile, directly or through the navigation droid in the Y and X-Wing fighters."

"When he was interrogated by Colonel Gen'yaa, Captain Gregory declared that he hadn't instructed his computer to consider the transport as an enemy. How, then, could this circumstance be explained?"

"Only by a computer malfunction. The detailed analysis of the available recordings, provided by three of the four craft of the patrol, confirmed that the transport didn't fire at any of them, although it was apparently equipped with a laser turret. Its transponders identified it as a civilian Corellian ship, although the signature was corrupted, probably intentionally, not to reveal its name. If the B-Wing's systems were working properly, there would be no way that the computer would consider it hostile."

"Did you inspect Captain Gregory's B-Wing's systems?"

"Yes sir. Thoroughly. My crew and I dismantled every single piece of the sensor arrays, the computer itself, the communications unit and any other system that could have had something to do with a possible malfunction. We found nothing."

"Was Captain Gregory's ship damaged during the incident?"

"No sir, it was not hit."

"So did you conclude that Captain Gregory was wrong, or that he could be lying to escape his responsibility?"

"Not necessarily, sir. There's still the third option."

"Please, explain."

"I've told you that the recordings we used to analyze the incident belonged to three of the four ships. The fourth one was Commander Steinberg's B-Wing, which was specially equipped to operate as command center."

"That was the craft that was hit in the first instants of the incident, was it not?"

"Yes. If his computer had identified the *Fool's Hand* as hostile, this data would have been transmitted to the rest of the starfighters that composed the patrol."

"Is this what you think that it happened?"

"Yes sir, although unfortunately it's only a theory that I can't prove. The ship was so seriously damaged that the information we've been able to obtain from her is scarce, at best."

"Then what exactly your theory is based on?"

"The analysis of Captain Gregory's computer records. The fact is that the computer started to identify the *Fool Hand's* as enemy practically at the same time that Commander Steinberg's B-Wing was hit. This made me think that the malfunction we were looking for could have taken place not in Captain's Gregory's computer, but in Commander Steinberg's. It makes a lot of sense, considering the damage the ship received. His computer could have transmitted wrong data to Captain Gregory's ship immediately before the primary circuits were burned and the computer was disabled. The problem is, as I have said, that I can't prove it."

"But from what I've been told, the computers of the other two starfighters, including Lieutenant Colonel Schroeder's, didn't registered the *Fool's Hand* as hostile."

"My only explanation for that is that, when it happened, Captain Gregory was a lot closer to Commander Steinberg's ship than his other two wingmen."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Even without technical evidence, you've provided us with a perfectly plausible explanation of the facts. I have no more questions for you."

"Captain Drinin," Leia Organa said, "do you want to interrogate Lieutenant Hanniuska?"

"Of course I do, Counselor." Before approaching to the platform, the Quarren finished writing down an entry on the datapad that was permanently in his hands. Once at her side, he held the device behind his back and stared at the human witness for several seconds before speaking, his facial tentacles twitching slightly over his mouth. Mar Hanniuska blinked involuntarily. "Lieutenant Hanniuska, in order to develop that *theory* of yours, you and your crew had analyzed every bit of information that could be gotten from, as you say, three of the four starfighters that participated in the incident."

"That's not exactly what I said. We investigated all four of them, but the recordings we've seen at the beginning were obtained only from three. The recording devices and the computer memory of Commander Steinberg's craft were damaged."

"Thanks for the explanation. What I'm wondering now has to do with starfighters in general, and Captain Gregory's in particular. You've explained the four ways in which a starfighter's flight computer would consider a ship as a hostile target. Is this particular data, I mean which one of these four entry points was used, registered on the computer's memory or on any of the registering devices that you've mentioned?"

"No sir. Unfortunately it is not."

"Why is that? One would think that something like this is important enough to deserve to be recorded."

"Sir, when we talk about starfighters and combat missions, there are too many things that could be seen as

a vital importance for a post-flight analysis, and only so much computer storage. These can also be programmed, of course, but it's Starfighter Command who decides which data must be recorded and which must be discarded, and we, the technical crews, just follow their instructions. The complete navigation data of the flight, every communication transmitted or received by the craft, every data that the sensors could have gotten from enemy or neutral ships, and above all the footage taken by the flight cameras have preference."

"I understand. So you can't know whether or not Captain Gregory pushed a key to instruct his computer to consider the *Fool's Hand* as a hostile target?"

"No, I can't."

"And wouldn't this be a *lot* more *easy* and *probable* explanation than an hypothetical and extremely appropriate malfunction on Captain Steinberg's craft that caused it to send a signal that, coincidentally or not, was only received by Captain Gregory's computer?"

"Maybe it would," Hanniuska admitted, reluctantly. "There's also the possibility that it was Captain Steinberg who had decided to assign a hostile code to that ship."

"But Captain Steinberg reported that he had not done such a thing, Lieutenant! Ah, of course, now we can't interrogate him again because he is interned in a hospital with irreversible brain damage, so let's blame him. He won't complain, will he?"

"I object!" Captain Bel'aan exclaimed.

"Objection overruled, Captain," Leia Organa said. "Lieutenant Hanniuska, do you want to say something to that?"

The technician moved uneasily in her seat. "It was not my intention to blame Captain Steinberg. I just...."

The prosecutor didn't allow her to finish her sentence. "Are Lieutenant Colonel Schroeder and Captain Gregory friends of yours?"

"I get along well with *all* the pilots of the squad."

"I have no more questions for you, Lieutenant. Thank you for your help."

Mar Hanniuska left the room with long strides and a reddened face, furious with the prosecutor and probably with herself. On Moose's right, Captain Bel'aan grimaced.

"Captain Bel'aan," Leia Organa said, "you may call your next witness."

Captain Bal'aan called, consecutively, an independent technical expert, one of the Mon Calamari engineers who also worked for the Shantipole project, and a veteran Y and B-Wing human pilot. His questions were focused to demonstrate that Mar Hanniuska's theory was certainly a possibility that had to be taken into account. Captain Drinin limited himself to discard it with the same arguments he had used to corner the chief technician. Moose pursed his lips reflexively. So far their defender had not gotten too much, but at least he had given the members of the tribunal a reason to doubt. Now Bel'aan would call his star witness: Rooster. With the corner of his eye, Moose saw how Foxfire crossed her fingers.

"I call Lieutenant Commander Lumi Rus'ti." The Army corporal who fulfilled the bailiff role exited the room and returned some instants later, accompanying Wolfshead Squadron's search & rescue pilot. The corporal ushered the Lumi to the platform. From the cold colors displayed by Rooster's brain extensions, Foxfire could see how uneasy she felt.

"Lieutenant Commander Rus'ti," Bel'aan said, approaching her. "Before entering this room, you and the rest of witnesses are reminded that you will be testifying under oath, and that any attempt to deceive this tribunal could and would be prosecuted and punished." Rooster nodded. "But I've been assured that in your case this warning is completely unnecessary. Can you explain to us why?"

"It's because I'm a Lumi. We are physically unable to tell a lie. Our brain is configured in such a way that we can't think one thing and say another. It's impossible. But even if we could, our brain extensions would betray us."

"Are these coloured appendices on your head what you call brain extensions?"

"Yes. Their colour change reflects our emotions. For the Lumi people, this is our primary way of communication."

"Too bad that none of us can interpret it, but the members of the tribunal, as well as the prosecution, can verify on their computer terminals the truthfulness of what Lieutenant Commander Rus'ti has just explained. She cannot tell lies, she cannot even try to deform reality, not even to help her friends, so whatever she tell us, she can be believed up to the last word. She has known Lieutenant Colonel Schroeder and Captain Gregory for years, and although she didn't witness the incident which brings us all here today, her testimony will be crucial to demonstrate that these officers' personalities and their behavior before and after the facts are simply incompatible with the accusations. They were victims of the circumstances and probably of a computer malfunction that unfortunately nobody has been able to find so far."

From her position at the tribune, Leia browsed through the information that appeared on her screen in answer to her previous query. The New Republic's data about the rare Lumi species coincided with what the woman and the defender had just said. Leia was sure that Threepio would have been able to read the Lumi's silent and colored language. Too bad that her old protocol droid had not accompanied her this time. In any case, she didn't need his help to know what the Lumi's brain extensions were saying: she discovered that she could read her through the Force better than she had ever been able to do with any other being.

"Your point is well taken, Captain Bel'aan," Leia said. "Now please start interrogating your witness."

"Of course, Counselor," the Bothan answered with a bow. "Excuse me for this maybe unnecessary introduction." Bel'aan turned to look at Rooster. "Lieutenant Commander Rus'ti, you are Wolfshead Squadron's search and rescue pilot."

"That's correct."

"During the operations in the Viayak cluster, one of your main tasks was to search along the routes followed by the ships carrying Balanish refugees to Balania and other worlds, and give assistance to those that seemed to be in trouble. Is this true?"

"Yes, it is."

"In the course of those missions, did you run into ships, civilian or military, damaged or even destroyed by space mines?"

Rooster nodded gravely. "Yes, I did."

"Three days before the incident we're judging today, you were sent to help the crew of the New Republic Corvette *Mashado*. I suggest the members of the tribunal to consult on their computer terminals the expedient Viayak-230100/2, which I included among the documentation of this case. In this file you will find details about how the *Mashado* was seriously crippled by the explosion of an Imperial type B mine when her crew was attending a distress call sent by a civilian transport. The device was part of a mine field located at the exit vector of one of the main routes to Balania. You will find also that *Mashado's* call for help was relayed to the *Wolf's Lair* by the *Redemption*, and Lieutenant Commander Rus'ti was sent to the area of the incident escorted by a flight of B-Wings from Wolfshead Squadron. Is this all correct, Lieutenant Commander?"

"Yes, it is."

"Was Captain Gregory part of your escort?"

"Yes, he was. Judging by the estimates transmitted by the *Mashado's* captain about the extensive area occupied by the mine field and the number of devices, Lieutenant Colonel Schroeder judged that every available B-Wing would be needed to clear the mine field before I could get any near to the *Mashado*. She

was right."

"While you were there, did you find also the ship whose distress call the *Mashado* had gone to attend?"

Rooster shivered. "Yes, we did. It had been completely destroyed by the mines. There were no survivors."

"Were you particularly affected by what you saw?"

"Very much so. It was terrible."

"Can you tell us whether Captain Gregory saw it also or not?"

"Yes, he did. I'm sure of it."

"Did you talk about it upon your return to the *Wolf's Lair*?"

"No, we didn't. I was much too affected to talk about it, so I avoided everybody for a couple of days after that."

"I understand. As an appendix to document Viayak-230100/2, the members of the tribunal can find the Intelligence report about this incident, dated two days after, including the analysis of the remains of the mines. This report concludes that the mines belonged to the Seibergian Army's arsenals. This information was provided to Wolfshead Squadron's commander by Colonel Gen'yaa, and it was included by Lieutenant Colonel Schroeder in her briefing to the members of the squadron who were going to be part of the patrols looking for Seibergian ships carrying space mines, mines like the ones that caused the *Mashado's* disaster. As you can see, Wolfshead Squadron's pilots had been well informed about the terrible consequences that the Seibergian mine fields were causing both on our ships and on the civilian freighters used by the Balanish refugees to flee from Seibergia, and as a consequence they were fully aware of the importance of their mission. Among others, Captain Gregory had seen with his very eyes what the mines were doing, so his motivation to do as much as he could to prevent that kind of tragedy from happening again was the of the utmost. Now let's talk about your recent trip to the Balanish Country. You went there accompanied by Lieutenant Colonel Schroeder and Captain Gregory."

"Yes."

"The members of the tribunal can check documents ExCom-2345501 and ExCom-2345712. They are Lieutenant Colonel Schroeder's and Captain Gregory's requests directed to Colonel Gen'yaa, respectively a week and three days before the incident, volunteering for a period of service in the New Republic aid camps when their other duties allowed it. I want to point out that in Captain Gregory's case, the request was sent *immediately* after his participation in the mission involving the *Mashado*. Now, Lieutenant Commander Rus'ti, tell us please about your experiences with Lieutenant Colonel Schroeder and Captain Gregory on the Balanish Country, beginning with your hazardous descent to the planet."

While the Lumi officer started to tell how the shuttle she piloted was shot down over the Balanish Country, Leia Organa tried to decide the meaning of what she had felt some instants before, when the two pilot's requests to be sent to the aid camps were mentioned by their lawyer. She wished she had a better command of the Force so she were able to distinguish what was real and what was simply her intuition, or even her imagination. The fact was that, for the second time today, she had believed she had perceived a flicker in the flow of emotions coming from the two pilots, especially from Captain Gregory. The first time had been precisely when he had been answering the prosecutor's questions. The sensation was not exactly the same that she felt when someone tried to lie to her, but there was something there. Maybe not a lie, but an omission, a conscious and for him difficult attempt to conceal something. It was hard to be sure. She remembered Winter commenting how appropriate it seemed that the two pilots involved in the famous incident had volunteered to help the refugees barely days before. Could those requests have really been made after the incident itself? She couldn't see anything wrong on the documents, but in any case, if the real date was faked, Colonel Gen'yaa had to know. The requests were directed to her. Leia tried to sound out the Bothan woman, but she couldn't get anything clear. Bothan people were so used to concealing their thoughts and feelings since their childhood that it was almost impossible to know anything for sure about them, even through the Force, or at least with her limited knowledge about how to use it. She knew this very well from her experiences with her fellow Counselor Borsk Fey'lya. After a year of sharing conference tables with him, she couldn't tell yet what he really thought about at any moment. *If these applications are a trick*, Leia reflected, *Gregory could well be lying also when he said that his computer identified the transport as*

hostile. But if that was the case, I think I would know. Could both things be only half true? Leia decided to leave these thoughts for a better moment and concentrated on the Lumi pilot's explanations. From what she had said already, her partners had courage. One needs to be very foolish, very brave or both to face an AT-ST with the severed cannon of a crashed shuttle, which they couldn't even know whether it would work or not. But they can't have survived years of rebellion against the Empire being foolish. Leia knew that much.

"I remember a day," the Lumi was saying, strong emotions showing in her voice and flowing to Leia through the Force, "when he spent a whole morning constructing sledges for the Balanish children and playing with them. No, definitely I can't even imagine that Captain Gregory would have shot, had he had the slightest doubt about whether the Corellian pilot was lying or not. He had to be honestly convinced that the *Fool's Hand* was carrying space mines like the other four ships, and that the pilot was just trying to deceive them."

"Thank you very much, Lieutenant Commander. I have no more questions for you."

Moose thought that Rooster had done it very well, but the hardest part would come now, when it was the prosecutor would interrogate her. Captain Bel'aan had explained his questions to Rooster before the trial, so she had had time to prepare and practice her answers, but the Bothan lawyer could only guess what his opponent would ask of his witnesses.

The Quarren prosecutor stood at a meter from the platform. He took a long sip from his bottle before starting to talk.

"Lieutenant Commander Rus'ti," he began. "It's the first time I have the privilege of meeting a Lumi. Allow me to say that I consider it a shame that very few among the rest of the known intelligent species share your genetically impressed rejection of lies. This galaxy would be far a better place and I probably would be doing something else for a living."

The tone used by the Quarren had lacked any hint of sarcasm, although it was hard for Rooster to be sure. She smiled slightly. "Thank you, Captain."

"You're welcome. I really mean what I've just said. Well, from what you've told us to this point, one would think that you wholeheartedly agree with Captain Bel'aan's conclusion. I mean, do you think that Lieutenant Colonel Schroeder and Captain Gregory are *victims of a wretched coincidence of circumstances?*"

Rooster frowned. Now she *had* noticed the sarcasm. "Yes, I do."

"But that's not what you thought when you learned about the incident, did you? I've heard several testimonies about a meeting that took place that same day on board the *Wolf's Lair*. Having taken into account that you can't lie, not even try to deform the reality, using Captain Bel'aan's same words, I'm certain that I won't need to call any of your partners who attended that same meeting, true?"

"True." Rooster blushed, while her brain extensions twitched agitatedly and changed quickly to colder colors.

"When you entered that room, you were fully aware of how affected Captain Gregory had to be because of the incident with the corvette *Mashado*, weren't you? Actually, you've just confessed that you were so touched that you had been avoiding your friends just to avoid talking about it. But at that moment you didn't think that it could be an excuse for what he had just done, did you?"

"No, I didn't."

"No, you didn't. Actually, you, one who belong to such a pacific and noble species, were so furious that your brain extensions became electrically charged so dangerously that you had to warn everybody not to touch you. Yes, this is another characteristic of Lumis the members of the tribunal can find on the New Republic's xenobiology database. Their brain extensions can become a kind of defensive weapon when they feel they're threatened, and in very rare occasions, when they're very, very mad about something. Had this ever happened to you before, Lieutenant Commander?"

"As you've said, very rarely."

"So you were very angry with your squadmates. You've had to see the same horrible things they have seen, even worse probably. But instead of going around shooting proton torpedoes at every more-or-less

suspicious ship, you calmed your frustration going out with your shuttle when you were supposed to be off duty trying to save even more people...."

"I object!" Captain Bel'aan interrupted.

"The objection is sustained," Leia said seriously. "Captain Drinin, nobody here went around shooting down ships just to calm frustrations. Your comment is completely out of place."

The Quarren bowed. "My apologies to the tribunal and to the accused. Lieutenant Commander Rus'ti. The fact is that you were very, very angry. But you were not out of your mind, were you? I mean that you didn't talk nonsense because you were suffering an attack of hysteria. You *did* know very well what you said, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did. I said what I thought, that's all."

"And it all was what you truly believed, as it couldn't be otherwise, being as you are, a Lumi. If what I've been told is true, it's a real shame that no one recorded you that day, because some of the things you said would deserve to be heard by any citizen of the New Republic. But returning to our case, please, let me see my notes," the Quarren looked at his datapad. "Yes, this is what I was looking for. When Captain Gregory tried to excuse himself saying that he didn't know that there were innocent people on board that transport, you replied him something more or less like this: 'Exactly, you couldn't know that because you had not scanned the ship as you had been ordered to do, so you didn't have any right to shoot'. Were these your words, Lieutenant Commander?"

"Something like that," she admitted.

"And didn't you also think that Lieutenant Colonel Schroeder should have explicitly ordered him not to shoot?"

"Yes, that's what I thought."

"And have you changed of opinion?"

Rooster shook her head. "No, I haven't, but..."

"But what, Lieutenant Commander?"

"It's just that since then they have more than proven me that they wouldn't have done such a thing on purpose. It was a mistake, one that many others would have made in their place. I've seen them doing so many wonderful things in that aid camp that I can't keep being mad at them. They really don't deserve this."

"Do you mean that you've forgiven them?"

"Yes, but it's not only that. I've forced myself to think about what happened, and I've reached the conclusion that it was an accident. A terrible accident."

"Do you think that the fact that the *Mashado*, or the freighter carrying the people whom they intended to help, ran into a mine field deployed by the Seibergians can be considered an accident?"

"Of course not!"

"Do you think that the Seibergian military are responsible for those deaths?"

"Yes, sure they are! And they're also responsible for those who died aboard the freighter that Moose....Captain Gregory shot down. You've heard the recordings of the pilot's transmissions...."

"So do you think that Lieutenant Colonel Schroeder and Captain Gregory don't have *any* responsibility at all for the death of the passengers and the pilot of the *Fool's Hand*?"

"No, well, maybe a part..."

"Maybe a part? What does that mean? I thought you were unable to even to try to twist the truth, Lieutenant Commander. Listen to me, I'm going to ask you a simple question, and I want you to give me a simple answer. Yes or no. *Do you still think that Captain Gregory shouldn't have shot his torpedoes?*"

"Oh, damn... Yes, I do..."

"Do you agree with me when I say that he *was* disobeying an order by opening fire without having performed a previous scan of his target?"

"Yes, I do, but..."

"And do you still agree with me when I say that Lieutenant Colonel Schroeder's duty was to order him not to shoot?"

"Yes, I do." Rooster looked at Foxfire and Moose, almost feeling like crying. Foxfire made a reassuring gesture at her. Moose smiled and shrugged.

"Before you leave, Lieutenant Commander Rus'ti," Captain Drinin continued, "allow me to share with you something my father told me once when I was a child. It's about the good actions of your partners there, those wonderful things you talked about. Very often, troubled consciences make for better people, but the sin is not less real because one tries to make amends for it."

"I object!"

Leia snorted. "Objection sustained again, Captain Bel'aan. Captain Drinin, if you don't have more questions for Lieutenant Commander Rus'ti, I'll give her permission to leave the room."

"No, Counselor. I have no more questions, and my apologies again."

"Very well. Lieutenant Commander, you can go. Thank you very much for your collaboration."

Rooster went towards the entrance escorted by the corporal. She walked with sunken shoulders and lowered head. While Mar Hanniuska had come out eaten by anger, Rooster seemed depressed, almost ashamed, as if she had done something wrong. Moose felt bad for her. Rooster had nothing to be ashamed of, and less than anything her inability to tell a lie. He wished he could go after his friend and tell her that what had just happened was not her fault. He noticed Foxfire's look and knew that she was thinking the same. It was curious how the link between the three of them had strengthened during the days they had spent together in the Balanish Country. Mouse watched Captain Drinin while he sat and drank again with eagerness. The Quarren was just doing his work, which he obviously knew very well, but Moose had to hate him when he harassed Rooster. He couldn't help but wonder if the prosecutor enjoyed it, but immediately decided that it was better not to give it a second thought. Otherwise he would start hoping for a chance to run into Captain Drinin on a deserted street somewhere. *Definitely, some lines of work suck.*

"Captain Bel'aan," Counselor Organa said, "do you have another witness?"

The Bothan stood up to answer. "Not for the time being, Counselor." Moose was not surprised. While Rooster was still on the platform, he had seen Bel'aan looking back discretely and shaking his head in a silent negative directed to Vyper. When they had been preparing the defense, Bel'aan had told Vyper that he might call him to testify, but he had apparently reconsidered it. The idea was that Vyper would tell the tribunal about missions the squadron had accomplished in the past, and how Foxfire's and Moose's judgement and behavior in combat situations had been always excellent. But after Mar Hanniuska and Rooster, it seemed that calling more friends of theirs wouldn't do them any good. The only other person who could possibly speak for them would be Colonel Gen'yaa herself, but that was out of discussion. It didn't take much intelligence to realize that she couldn't defend them without taking a shadow of suspicion upon herself. Captain Bel'aan had said, and Moose knew that he was serious, that if Colonel Gen'yaa was ever called to testify, it would be on the prosecution's behalf.

It was the prosecutor's turn to present witnesses. Captain Drinin started by calling his own technical experts. The two engineers, one human and the other a Duro, were part of the investigation committee hastily brought together by Counselor Organa in substitution of the team killed accidentally by the Corellians. They testified that beside revising every piece of data collected by Lieutenant Hanniuska and her crew, they had

performed their own exhaustive analysis. Every one from his field of expertise, they both expressed serious doubts about the chief technician's theory. They didn't change their opinion nor contradicted themselves on any point under Captain Bel'aan's interrogation. *Again*, Moose thought, *nothing to be amazed about*.

An old human woman occupied the platform now. Captain Drinin introduced Doctor Gomar to the members of the tribunal as a veteran and capable psychiatrist who had worked with survivors from Alderaan who were members of the New Republic Armed Forces. Moose recognized her name immediately, if not the face. He used to read all the stuff related with Alderaan that fell into his hands, and that included some interesting articles Doctor Gomar had published in the last three years.

"Doctor Gomar," the Quarren started, "when exactly were you assigned the task of treating Alderaanian survivors?"

"Immediately after the destruction of their home planet."

"Can you tell us who gave you this mission?"

"General Riekan."

"Why did he require your services?"

"In those days the Alliance was receiving thousands of applications from Alderaanian refugees who wanted to join us. As everybody knows, Alderaan was a peaceful world whose population had freely renounced to the use of weapons centuries ago. Previous to the destruction of their planet, there were very few Alderaanians among our military, although we benefited from the services of many of them as couriers and diplomatic personnel. But suddenly, and obviously as a consequence of what the Empire had done, we found that many Alderaanians actually wanted to fight. General Riekan was very worried about the certain possibility that many of them saw the Alliance as a way for them to look for revenge. He said that we couldn't afford the risk of training them and sending them to combat without a previous psychiatric analysis."

"Please, explain that."

"It should be evident. A single avenger with a weapon in his or her hands could cause a lot of harm. He or she could try to use the means and the training we would have provided to kill as many Imperials as possible, regardless of what the circumstances were, the risk for his mission, for his life and for the lives of partners, and the collateral damage that he or she could cause. If we wanted to be an alternative to the Empire, a single civilian dead by a Rebel was a lot worse for our cause than a hundred Imperials escaping because he held his fire. I want to clarify that these tests were not new. Since the first days of the Rebellion, we examined those candidates who were considered potentially dangerous or conflictive by the recruiters. After Alderaan, and following General Riekan's instructions, we made the psychiatric analysis mandatory for Alderaanians."

"I understand. I imagine that the risk was directly proportional to the power of the weapons put at the potential avenger's disposal."

"Exactly."

"So, depending on the specialty a candidate trained for, the analysis should be different."

"Yes, and that's how we did it."

"And which corps or branch had the most stringent analysis?"

"The Starfighter Command. A starfighter is the most powerful weapon that can be managed by a single person."

Captain Drinin nodded. "Captain Gregory, here, is an Alderaanian. I take for granted that he had to go through those analysis before he was admitted for being trained to pilot one of our combat crafts."

"Yes. Actually, I remember his case well. Although I didn't get to interview him personally, I followed his case

with the utmost interest."

"Why is that?"

"Of all the people who went through our exams, Captain Gregory was one of those who had the most powerful reasons to desire to get revenge. He was part of a group of university students aboard a ship that had taken off from Alderaan almost at the same time that the Death Star entered the system. He saw his planet explode with his very eyes, like Counselor Organa here. Very few Alderaanians can say the same. But Captain Gregory's nightmare didn't finish there. His ship was captured, and he and his friends were sent as slaves to several Imperial garrisons. The details are confidential and I won't reveal anything here, but the things Captain Gregory went through before he had a chance to escape would have finished most of the people I know, myself included."

"And in spite of that, did he pass the tests?"

"Yes, he did. We initially sent him to Infantry before his story was checked out and we could make a decision. The report from his commanders only reinforced the positive impression that came from his tests, so his application was approved without a second thought."

"I must say that I'm impressed. Just a last question, Doctor Gomar. Have your tests ever failed?"

"Are you asking if we ever made a mistake sending someone to the training academies?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I ask."

The old woman exhaled slowly. "Yes, we made some mistakes. It's unavoidable."

"Thank you very much, doctor. That will be all."

Leia was aware that Captain Drinin had been careful with his interrogation. She the president of the tribunal, any attempt to generalize the problems the Alliance had experienced with a bunch of Alderaanian survivors could turn easily against himself. Nevertheless those problems had existed, and that was the prosecution's point. *Let the tribunal doubt whether Gregory harbors a suppressed wish for revenge because the destruction of Alderaan and the things the Empire did to him and his fellow students. Let us wonder if that makes him be prone to shoot first and ask the questions later.* She had been watching the pilot while Doctor Gomar talked. He seemed uncomfortable, but not especially bothered. His only noticeable reaction, mild surprise, came when he learned that doctor Gomar was actually one of the experts who had evaluated him. Her look crossed briefly with his. Leia saw it clearly in that same instant. *He's lived for years with that burden and has not made a secret of it.* Leia discarded immediately that the pilot's motivations included any secret desire of revenge, but the harm was already done. It would be hard for the defense to erase the doubt that the prosecution had left floating in the air. It would be hard for her to convince Ackbar and the others, if she ever had to. For the time being, though, she was still unsure of what her personal decision would be.

Captain Bel'aan didn't waste time with preambles. "Doctor Gomar, you've said that you followed Captain Gregory's case with interest. Have you or any of your colleagues performed a follow-up check of Captain Gregory's behavior since he became an active member of the Starfighter Corps?"

"Yes. The medical check-up that every fighter pilot attends every six months includes new psychological tests. So far we've had no reasons to think that Captain Gregory is one of those mistakes I've mentioned before."

"Do you think that Captain Gregory's past experiences can have anything to do with the events we're judging here?"

"No, I don't think so. Captain Gregory has proved to be gifted with a very strong psyche, which has allowed him to survive when others would have perished or go mad."

"Thank you, doctor. Thank you very much. I have no more questions."

When he returned to his seat, Captain Bel'aan tossed an angry look at his opponent. For Moose, the meaning of that look was clear: you're playing dirty. The Quarren seemed untouched by it. *It's a good thing*

for him that I'm supposedly not prone to seek for vengeance, he thought with irony. He wondered if that was really true. Captain Drinin now called Admiral Darfen. Moose grimaced when he heard that name, forgetting momentarily his irritation for the prosecutor's questionable maneuver. He leaned back and took a look at Foxfire. She shrugged slightly. Yes, she remembered Darfen too--how couldn't she?--and knew that the KS-31 issue was about to be reopened. *And not exactly to praise us for what White Squadron did there.* Fortunately this was not completely unexpected. Foxfire had told their attorney everything he had to know about KS-31 so he was able to try and counteract the maneuvers of the prosecution. Colonel Gen'yaa had allowed him to check the *Wolf's Lair's* databanks to look for additional information. Moose hoped it was enough.

The Mon Calamari Admiral, impeccable in his white uniform, occupied his place on the platform and waited patiently for Captain Drinin to ask his first question.

"Admiral Darfen, you're actually in charge of the Navy units assigned to the defense of Mon Calamari."

"That's correct."

"What was your position two and a half years ago, sir?"

"I commanded the cruiser *Independence*. From this ship I was responsible for all the Alliance operations in several Middle and Outer Rim systems."

"Was the attack on the secret Imperial installations on the planetoid KS-31 of the Kessel system one of these operations?"

"Yes."

"Did White Squadron take part in that attack, sir?"

"Yes, they did, along with Blue Squadron."

"Can you tell us what your orders for White Squadron were immediately after their mission was accomplished?"

"White Squadron operated from a recently-captured Nebulon-B frigate called *Watcher*, later renamed *Joan d'Arc*. I ordered White Squadron's commander, Commander Krenzel, to take that ship immediately to Alliance controlled space, while they were able to leave the Kessel system. This was the same order that was given to me by the Alliance High Command."

"Did Commander Krenzel obey this order?"

"No, she did not. She delayed it as long as she could, under the excuse of waiting for one of our agents to escape from KS-31. Today we know that she was looking for a chance to rescue the colonists on the planetoid, who were to be slain by the Imperial Navy."

"Was Commander Krenzel the only one responsible for this disobedience?"

"No, she was not. In the course of a combat engagement against an Imperial patrol she was injured and fell temporarily into a coma. Lieutenant Commander Schroeder took command of White Squadron and the *Watcher*. She decided to continue with Commander Krenzel's plans and so she continued to ignore my orders. It was against those orders that they performed their rescue operation, once Commander Krenzel had recovered."

"Were Commander Krenzel and Lieutenant Commander Schroeder court martialled for their repeated disobedience?"

"No, they weren't. Against all odds, their rescue operation was a complete success. President Mon Mothma and other leaders of the Alliance decided then that their fault was to be overlooked on behalf of their heroism and the example they had given to those who doubted about the truthfulness of the Rebellion's ideals. I want to remark that I was against that decision, although I'm the first to recognize the courage of Commander

Krenzel, Lieutenant Commander Schroeder and the rest of their squadron."

"So were they rewarded by this action?"

"No, I haven't said that. President Mon Mothma and the rest of the High Command agreed on the fact that we couldn't afford to give medals to the officers who disobeyed orders, no matter how honorable and heroic their intentions were. Both Counselor Organa and Admiral Ackbar can tell you this. They were there."

"Thank you Admiral. I have no more questions for you. I'd like the members of the tribunal to take into account that the Viyak incident is not the first time that Lieutenant Colonel Schroeder is accused of ignoring an order, although this is the first time she is going to be judged about it."

Foxfire allowed her eyes to go blank. "This Captain Drinin is really charming," she whispered to Moose behind Captain Bel'aan's back. Moose nodded. Ignoring Foxfire's comment, which he had of course heard, Captain Bel'aan stood up and walked to the platform.

"Admiral Darfen, sir, is it true that not only the pilots of White Squadron, but up to the last member of the *Watcher's* crew volunteered to participate in the rescue of the colonists of KS-31?"

"Yes, that is true."

"Didn't that make them share somehow their commanders' disobedience?"

"Not at all. The responsibility was still theirs. I gave my orders directly to Commander Krenzel first, and to Lieutenant Commander Schroeder later. Their duty was to comply with them, and to make sure that the people under their command did the same."

"I see. But don't you think that the lives of some hundreds of innocent people were a good reason to question those orders?"

"No, I don't." The Mon Calamari shook his head. "They risked at least the same number of lives, along with their ships. Ships that did not belong to them but to the Rebel Alliance, which needed them badly to keep the fight against the Empire going. That was a fight that was intended to save a lot more people than those who were going to be sacrificed at KS-31. This is why I didn't agree with President Mon Mothma's decision of forgiving their fault. Some of the consequences of that decision should be evident now. It reaffirmed Lieutenant Commander Schroeder, today a Lieutenant Colonel, in her thought that her judgement is better than that of her superiors. A thought that seemingly is shared by at least one of her subordinates."

"With all the due respect, sir," Captain Bel'aan answered, the fur on the back of his head erecting noticeably, "you've been summoned to this court as a witness, not as the judge."

"Do you want me to apologize for thinking as I do, Captain?"

"No sir. I just...."

"Well," the Mon Calamari continued interrupting Captain Bel'aan, "because I've got something else to say, with the permission of the tribunal." Admiral Darfen turned to look up to Senator Organa. She considered it for a few seconds and finally she nodded her approval.

The Mon Calamari bowed. "Thank you Senator. Maybe the accused officers, Captain Bel'aan and some others may wonder why President Mon Mothma, who was indulgent with White Squadron's commanders after the events at KS-31, is not so understanding now. Some may think that President Mon Mothma is using a different balance now that we're not the Rebel Alliance, a group of insurgents rebelled against the established order, but the New Republic. Why should we condemn now those same people for the same crime that we forgave then? This is seen as a political decision, and maybe it is, but there's a lot more to it than politics. At KS-31, Krenzel, Schroeder, Gregory and the rest of White Squadron were disobeying an order, yes, but at the same time they were willing to sacrifice *their* lives trying to save the colonists'. For that and only for that I can accept that we turned a blind eye to their fault, provided that they didn't make an habit of it. But there is no heroism that I can see in shooting two proton torpedoes against a fleeing ship that is not shooting back. Even if Captain Gregory's suspicions had been proven true and that ship was carrying mines like the other four, I'd still believe that he and his superior should be court martialled, so a disgrace like the

one we're mourning now could be avoided in the future. Had we done that after KS-31, maybe today those Balanish refugees would be alive."

"I see your point, sir, but I have to disagree." Captain Bel'aan swallowed before continuing. "Had we done that, many other beings who now walk and breathe would be dead instead. I mean the people who Lieutenant Colonel Schroeder, Captain Gregory and the rest of their squadron *have* saved in the two and a half years that have passed since KS-31. I have no more questions for you, sir." In spite of the tension his body language couldn't help but reveal, Captain Bel'aan had answered without losing in the very least the control of his voice. This earned Moose's respect as much as his commitment with his task as defender. But they were losing. Even without the testimony of the technicians and Doctor Gomar, Admiral Darfen's probably practiced speech had the same effect on their chances as a concussion missile hitting an unshielded craft. Moose pursed his lips when he reflected about how unfortunate that comparison resulted, but it was no less true for that. He had only to look at Counselor Organa's expression.

While the corporal escorted Admiral Darfen out of the room, Leia reflected about what had just been said in the room. Discarded as it seemed the possibility of a technical failure that exonerated Captain Gregory, and Lieutenant Colonel Schroeder by extension, the tribunal must decide between the two opposed positions that Admiral Darfen and Captain Bel'aan had expressed. There was no middle point. Technically, she had to agree with Admiral Darfen, but Captain Bel'aan had a point also. Did the two pilots deserve to be treated with clemency on behalf of the many things they had done for the Alliance? She was inclined to think that they should, but would be that fair? What would the message be for other members of the Armed Forces, pilots or not, who found themselves in a similar situation? Something like "Ignore your orders if you think you're right?" That would be catastrophic. The very instant a soldier or an officer starts systematically questioning and disobeying the orders of a superior he or she doesn't agree with, that soldier stops being reliable and becomes a danger instead. It was good and encouraging that they were able to think by themselves, but there was a limit even for that. Gregory and Schroeder actually knew the reason for the instructions they had been given. They knew that ships carrying refugees left Seibergia every day, and still Gregory shot and Schroeder didn't prevent it. Yes, the circumstances invited them to think that that ship supposed a threat that had to be eliminated, but that was precisely where their orders applied: don't suppose anything, use your scanners. With every passing moment, and not without a certain degree of amazement, Leia discovered that she knew what her vote had to be. She had come here questioning Mom Mothma's judgement in this case, but Admiral Darfen had opened her eyes. She was making the same mistake that the two accused officers made: thinking that she knew better than her superior. That was a hard lesson to learn for someone who had been a Senator at eighteen, but Leia thought that at last she had seen it clearly.

The doors closed behind the Mon Calamari Admiral. Leia turned her look at the prosecutor. "Do you want to call another witness, Captain Drinin?"

"No, Counselor. Admiral Darfen was the last one in my list."

"Very well. I declare this first session ended," Leia said solemnly. "The second one will take place tomorrow at the same time. The members of the tribunal will retire now to deliberate about the case and the testimonies we've heard today. If neither the prosecution nor the defense present new witnesses or additional evidence, we'll read our verdict tomorrow."

XXII

Moose and Foxfire had been hosted in the main quarters of the Starfighter Corps at Coral City, scarcely five minutes on hydroboat from the place where the court-martial was taking place. Four Mon Calamari marine troopers escorted them to their respective rooms, situated in different floors of the building. When Moose was about to enter his room, the Lieutenant who commanded their escort took him by the arm.

"Wait a minute, sir," she said.

"Yes Lieutenant?" Moose's voice was emotionless, like his expression.

The Mon Calamari looked at him intently with her enormous eyes. "I've been told that you two pilots were members of one of the fighter squadrons that defended Mon Calamari a year ago, is that true?"

Moose nodded. "The second Death Star's ashes were still hot."

The Lieutenant took a deep breath. "We owe you much, then. It's a shame that you have to go through this, especially on this planet."

"Caprices of the Force." Moose's reply was a lot more kind now. *At last someone shows us some sympathy.*

"Maybe. I'll be on watch for the whole night, sir. If there's something I can do to relieve your situation, besides letting you escape, I'd be honored to assist you."

"Thank you very much, Lieutenant." Moose stood looking at her for some moments, and then something occurred to him. "Well, maybe there's actually something I'd like. I don't know if you...."

"If it's in my hands, it's yours, sir."

"I was wondering if I could go to my partner's room, and maybe spend the night there."

The Mon Calamari grinned. "Having only one door to watch will make our task a lot easier. Follow us."

A minute later, Foxfire looked up, stunned, as the door of her room closed behind Moose.

"How did you?"

"We have more friends on this planet than we suspected," he explained with a smile, "and one of them is the Lieutenant that escorted us here."

Foxfire smiled back. "I'm glad to hear that. Come and sit here with me. This bed was designed to accommodate a very big Mon Calamari."

"The ground would be comfortable enough, if I'm to be with you."

Foxfire arched an eyebrow in amusement. "That sounds like the Moose I used to know before everything screwed up. I almost don't recognize you."

Moose shrugged. "You're right. I've been acting like a zombie since we left the Balanish Country, but that Lieutenant's unexpected attention toward us has cheered me up. She has shown me we're not alone, at least not here. Who knows, maybe Mon Calamari could turn out to be a place to stay, if they don't want us anywhere else." When he said that, his look fell on the seascape that could be seen through the big window that filled one of the room's walls. A moon was rising behind the horizon, practically in the middle of the window. The building had probably been deliberately constructed with that orientation. The light the moon reflected competed with that of the stars, taking a myriad of sparkles from the crest of the waves as they advanced gently toward the shore. Moose immediately felt relaxed. He thought that this view could well be a natural anti-depressant. "Hey, have you taken a look at that window?"

"Yes. It can't be opened and the glass is made of starship quality transparsteel. In the improbable case we were able to force our way out, we're something like two hundred meters from the water surface."

"Wait a second, I didn't mean...."

"I didn't either." Foxfire grinned. "Yes, I've looked *through* the window. The night view is pretty. A lot more to my taste than it was on Seibergia, when the snow and the mist allowed you to see anything at all, that is."

"It seems you've recovered your good humour, too."

"I never lost it completely. Furthermore, seeing you here, when I had expected to spend the night alone, allows me to forget why we're here."

Moose nodded. "It could have been worse."

"Really? I've never felt as defenseless in my whole life as I've felt before the tribunal. I hate feeling like that."

"Didn't you feel more defenseless that time when the Imperials caught you?"

"Nope. Even with two stormtroopers gripping my hands from behind, I was able to bite their captain. That made me feel a lot better, although it took me some time and a lot of brushing my teeth to get rid of the taste."

Moose laughed. "I'm glad that you didn't decide to bite the prosecutor. I doubt that it would have granted us his sympathies."

"To hell with his sympathies. I don't like raw fish that much."

"Watch your mouth, honey. This entire planet could get offended by that comment."

"If they had to hear Captain Drinin talking about them for a whole day, and twisting every single good thing they had done in their lives, I'm pretty sure they would be understanding."

"I must admit that you've got a point there. Now seriously, I know what you mean about feeling defenseless. We're used to being shot at almost on a daily basis, but at least we always can shoot back." Moose grimaced when his own sentence reminded him of something Admiral Darfen had said. The transport was not shooting back.

"Exactly," Foxfire answered, missing the reference. "Those five people are going to decide our future, and there's nothing we can do. What are we going to do the day after tomorrow? What if we're unable to find a decent job? I've had this terrible thought for a week or so. Maybe we'll find ourselves being smugglers, pirates or something."

"Better smugglers. I've heard that Counselor Organa has a weakness for them. That could help us."

Foxfire laughed. "I can see you as a smuggler. Can you see me as a princess?"

"Of course I can."

"Wow, definitely we're getting romantic tonight, aren't we?"

"Why not?"

Yes, why not? Foxfire thought. Reality would be back tomorrow, but now everything was perfect. They were alone and together, and alarms were not bound to sound here. Even if they did, others would have to take charge. "When was the last time?"

"Decades ago, it'd seem." When he thought of it, Moose realised that it had actually been the night before the incident. Foxfire's sudden serious expression showed him that she had reached the same conclusion. Moose smiled, if only a bit sadly. "It's time we started being ourselves again, don't you think?"

Foxfire nodded slowly, Moose's smile reflected in hers. "Yes. Come what may. They can't take everything away from us. Not what matters the most, anyway."

"For me, *you* are what matters the most. I'm sorry for not showing you for so long."

Touched and relieved, Foxfire displayed an evocative and inviting smile. "I'll forgive you if you show me

tonight," she said. Moose thought that he had never seen a smile so erotic. Outside some clouds started to spoil the view they had enjoyed instants before, but neither of them noticed.

Ibero entered the Bomb Shelter with a grim expression. Vyper had called to tell him that the first session of the court martial had finished already, and that things didn't look good for Foxfire and Moose. Shortly after that, Rooster and Hanniuska arrived back on the *Lair*, and Ibero met them on the flight deck. The two women confirmed Vyper's impression. Rooster seemed especially depressed, and she retired to her quarters almost immediately. To Ibero's amazement, Mar Hanniuska decided instead to change clothes and work for a couple of hours. She explained that she felt like hitting something with her hydrospanner before going to bed. Only then had Ibero realized how annoyed the chief technician was. To complete what had resulted to be a very irritating day, his attempts to send a message to Iberya were unsuccessful. Communications from the Outer Rim to the Mid Rim sectors were not very good these days. The Imperial offensive at Pyria probably had something to do with the difficulties in getting a decent connection, even if it was not real time. The impossibility of talking to his wife or to see his daughter, added to the rest of things, made Ibero feel frustrated and bad tempered. Unable to concentrate on his tasks any more, he had headed towards the squadron's lounge. Maybe a beer and a chat with some of his off duty squadmates would calm him a bit.

The first thing that called his attention was that the small bar was not as dark as usual. The holoreceptor installed on a corner was the source of the extra illumination, and that was the second odd thing he noticed. That holoreceptor was not turned on very often. The pilots used to go to the Bomb Shelter to drink, to talk and to play games, mostly sabacc. There were other many places on the ship where one could watch a movie or see the news, the latter usually days old. Furthermore, the Bomb Shelter used to be far too noisy to hear anything. And that was another thing to be amazed at. Solo, Raiven, Parody and Granite were unusually silent, their looks fixed on the holocube. Ibero approached to see with his very eyes what could be so interesting. He opened his mouth wide when he saw the image of an AT-AT shooting at the houses of a small village. Most of them were on fire already. Several corpses could be seen near one of them. Ibero had no trouble identifying the orography of the mountains that surrounded the place. That was the Balanish Country.

"Holy Force," Ibero exclaimed. "When did this happen? Have the Seibergians broken the truce?"

"No," Solo answered calmly. "This is a recording of something that happened three or four weeks ago."

"Four." Raiven said.

"Damn it." Ibero sat beside Parody. "Four weeks ago we were still trying to find out for sure what was going on in the Balanish Country. I imagine it was not easy for the reporters to take this stuff off Seibergia."

Solo and Raiven exchanged a glance. "Definitely not easy at all," Solo said.

Ibero looked at them with suspicion. "Why, did you know anything of this?"

Solo nodded. "Affirmative. The guerrilla leader who helped us to get to Camp Two, a guy called Ciric Baranka, gave us some disks. He said that they contained the work of three reporters who accompanied his group for some days. They were all killed as tried to escape from the Seibergians' advance."

"Look," Raiven interrupted pointing at the holocube. A bearded man wearing an unmarked camouflage uniform talked to the camera. "That's Ciric Baranka."

"...now you've seen it with your very eyes. This is what Seibergians are doing with our people. This is why we asked to join the New Republic in the first place. To get protection from that lunatic Somolovich and his army of murderers and rapists."

"Don't you think that it was exactly that petition that gave rise to the situation?" the Devaronian who was interviewing Baranka asked.

"Only from a very limited point of view. It was just a question of time that Seibergia tried to eliminate us. The discontent against their xenophobic policy was becoming greater and greater every day among our people. They were killing us slowly, strangling our few chances of having our own economy. Since the Empire abandoned this system the Seibergians have systematically impeded our commerce with the exterior. They forced us to sell them our harvests and our manufactured products at ridiculous prices that didn't cover our costs. You must understand that many of my people were starting to starve. We had no other option but to rebel against that situation, but Somolovich would have suffocated us with the same violence you've witnessed. Before we got to a point of no return, we decided to look for another exit. The New Republic seemed to be such an exit for us, but we were wrong. I wish they could have done more for us than blockading the planet...."

"The guy knows how to talk," Granite commented. "Hearing him, I wish we had smashed some more Seibergian heads when we had the chance."

"Yesterday," Solo continued his explanation, "when Raiven and me went down to Mon Calamari, we gave all the stuff to the local journalists. They have hurried."

"The Mon Calamari are sending copies of all the material to every other available information service in this half of the galaxy," Raiven added.

"They'll have problems reaching many systems from here," Parody said. "Communications are a bit weird."

"I know," Ibero answered. "I've been trying to call home all day, but there's no way to get a connection to Iberyia."

"They just need to reach a single news agency," Solo opined, "the material will spread from there. Tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, people will be seeing this on every free world."

Parody nodded. "You're right."

"This is going to affect the negotiations at Seibergia," Ibero said. "I wouldn't get surprised if the New Republic started demanding the resignation of Somolovich and his government, with the support of Corellia."

"One of the dead reporters was from Chandrila," Solo said. "I bet that Mom Mothma is going to have a lot of pressure at home to get personally involved in this."

Ibero considered that. "Maybe. Nevertheless, what I've heard is that Counselor Organa will again be the New Republic's voice in the area. She will travel back to Seibergia as soon as she is done here."

Parody turned his head to look directly at Ibero. "Do you have any news about the trial?"

"Vyper called a while ago. He was not very optimistic. Hanniuska and Rooster have just returned. Rooster went directly to her quarters and Hanniuska went looking for something to break to vent her anger. She said that the prosecutor ate them alive."

"If only they called *me* to testify...." Granite said.

"...Foxfire and Moose would be condemned for sure." Raiven ended the sentence displaying a twisted smile. "They're in bad enough without your help." Granite took a handful of appetizers from a bowl and launched them at Raiven.

Solo shook his head. "You don't know what you've started, mate."

"Does Rooster know about the doctor?" Parody asked, ignoring Granite's and Raiven's contest.

Ibero looked bewildered. "What about the doctor?"

"I thought you'd know. Ben Al Saruff returned this morning."

"Nobody told me! It had to be when I took my X-Wing out for a test. How is he?"

"I didn't see him myself, it was Groznik who told me. He said that the doctor is still convalescent. He talked with a certain difficulty and used a crutch, but other than that he seemed fine enough."

"As long as he's working again," Granite said, while introducing both hands to the bowl. "I've got a summons from him for my periodic check-up."

"Hey, someone should tell Rooster," Raiven opined, doing his best to avoid Granite's projectiles and mount a counterattack.

"I have an idea," Ibero said with a grin, his personal worries momentarily forgotten. "Solo, please, turn the volume off for a second. Granite, Raiven, stop it. Please!" Once silence was restored, Ibero activated his comm-link, keyed a code and waited. "Rooster? This is Ibero. You'd never been down to Mon Calamari before, had you? I'm sorry I had forgotten. Before going down you should have been vaccinated against a couple of local viruses, inoffensive for Mon Calamari and Quarrens but quite annoying for humanoids. No, don't worry, you can get the vaccines now. Yes, the Scissors is waiting for you already in sick bay."

Rooster headed to the medical unit thinking about the trial. Perhaps she should have said no from the very first moment, when Bel'aan proposed her as a witness. She warned him, but the lawyer had opined that her genetically proved honesty would be an advantage, because nobody would doubt her testimony. "But what if the prosecutor ask me something I would better be silent about?" she had asked. "My real opinion about the incident, for instance. What I believe, not what I feel." She had been thinking precisely about the now famous meeting, and the things she had said to Moose and Foxfire. She told Bel'aan about it, but the lawyer had insisted. He said that she was his best chance to convince the tribunal that her two friends shouldn't be condemned. *If I was their best chance*, Rooster reflected bitterly, *they could have saved them the trial and declared them guilty straight away*. She couldn't help thinking like she did, but she hated that something that she had said was used against her friends. The last thing she had wanted was to compromise them, even before seeing with her very eyes the real stuff Foxfire and Moose were made off. Damn, she was *proud* of them, and proud of being their friend. She wished she could return to the day of the incident. As furious as she felt at the moment, she would have better filled her mouth with engine lubricant than enter the meeting room to speak as she had done. Rooster couldn't help but wonder from whom the prosecutor had heard about the meeting. She was certain enough that none of her squadmates had said a word of that to the investigation committee, but pilots used to talk a lot to their mechanics, these to other crewmen and so on. Rooster realized that anyone could have done it. It really didn't matter who anymore.

She entered the medical unit looking for the medical droid. She had a bad enough memory of her first visit to Mon Calamari as to make it worse by getting a virus. Annoying, Ibero had said. *Maybe my tongue will fill with pimples and blisters. That's what I would deserve*.

"Are you looking for someone, Lieutenant Commander?"

"Doctor Al Saruff!" Rooster almost passed out by the impression that seeing the Ithorian caused her. "W-when...?"

"This morning, by the ship's time," Ben Al Saruff explained with a voice more raspy than usual. "It was night for me, but I've taken a little lap to compensate for the lag."

"But, how are you?"

"Well enough, thanks to you, Lieutenant Commander. The Corellians' bacta and the cares of the *Redemption's* medical team put me back in working condition, but it's you who saved my life. I'll be always in debt with you."

Rooster noticed how a smile appeared on her face, and she didn't need a mirror to know that her brain extensions were brilliant red. Suddenly she felt happy, happier than she had felt in a long time. Not for the doctor's praise, but for seeing him alive, after all the time she had spent wondering how he would be. Well, maybe the fact that she had had something to do with it also had something to do with her joy. She nevertheless said "I did what I could, and Sergeant Daboro from Lynx Commando also helped a lot, but it's you who saved yourself."

Al Saruff shook his massive head. "Don't be so modest, Lieutenant Commander. You've got the hands of a surgeon and the courage of a fighter pilot. If you ever want to become a medic full time, please come to talk to me."

"Thank you very much, doctor. I...This has been a very bad day, but finding you here has changed it. I've been so worried."

"I know. I've been told that you asked for me every day. I wanted to call you from the *Redemption*, but the *Lair* was out of reach most of the time, travelling through hyperspace. When I learned that you had come to Mon Calamari I asked to be brought back. My home planet excepted, I can't think of a better place to finish recovering, myself. After all, my personal doctor was here."

The Ithorian blinked at Rooster in a way that she found surprisingly humanoid. Her smile became a grin. "Do you mind if I give you a hug? You know, it's a humanoid custom."

"Which I find very interesting, even stimulating," he answered with a nod. "I'd go as far as to say that it has positive effects for health, although measuring them has proven to be a difficult..." Al Saruff stopped at mid explanation when the Lumi woman threw herself against his chest. His ribs ached, but he didn't say anything. Instead, he returned the hug as well as he could. "Yes, it feels good to be back at home."

Rooster was about to ask about the vaccines she had come to get, but then she understood. The *Wolf's Lair* was a Mon Calamari ship, just like the *Liberty* was. There were numerous Mon Calamari and Quarren among her crew. If there was a Mon Calamari virus potentially dangerous for humanoids, she surely had been administered the vaccine long ago. Rooster smiled. Doctor Al Saruff was right. For she and the doctor, as for many others, the ship was their only possible home. Al Saruff could not return to Ithor because of his allegiance to the New Republic, one of the sides in a war where weapons were used, made him an exile. The price he had paid for following his ideals was a high one: he would never be admitted again among his peaceful people. Rooster could not return to the Lumi Moon because it was still occupied by the Empire. Rooster realized that they and others like them were refugees, and the *Wolf's Lair* was their relief camp. But even a relief camp becomes your home, like it or not, when you don't have anywhere else to go and the people you love are there with you. She had learned that well at Camp One.

There was not a single day she didn't think of Sdermila, Deveralia, and the rest of the friends she had left behind. She wished that they could return to their real homes soon. She hoped that Moose and Foxfire could return too. She was worried for them all, but if only for an instant, she forgot about everything and abandoned herself to the wellbeing that being here with doctor Al Saruff caused her.

"This is going a lot faster than I had expected," Colonel Gen'yaa said to Captain Bel'aan. They both stood some steps away from the rest of the people who were occupying their places in the court. Winter, Counselor Organa's assistant, was there already, sat in silence beside Major Stauber, Wolfshead Squadron's acting commander. The latter turned to wave a short salutation to Gregory and Schroeder, who now entered the room escorted by two Mon Calamari soldiers. Schroeder saw her partner and smiled at him. Gregory lifted a thumb. Gen'yaa looked at them with curiosity while she finished her comment. "But you don't seem surprised."

"I am not," he answered, also looking at the two pilots. "I remember telling you that our chances were scarce, and you agreed with me."

"An admission of culpability would serve the New Republic's interests well, that's what I said. But I thought that it'd take them a bit longer to get to that point." Gen'yaa shifted her look back to the other Bothan. "Don't take this as a criticism. I think you've done your work very well."

"Thank you. I'm confident that you will mention it to Counselor Fey'lya."

"I will, when the occasion arises. I'm aware that you were taking a risk accepting this case, and I'll make sure that it becomes an opportunity for you. If nothing else, you've managed to keep me out of it. I haven't received any summons from the prosecution, so it seems I won't have to testify."

Bel'aan shrugged. "Drinin thinks that he has won already, and I must admit that he is right. Admiral Darfen's speech was definitive. I don't think he will bother to call anybody else today."

"And you? Do you have any more witnesses for today?"

"Only one who couldn't make it here yesterday. I doubt that his testimony will change anything, but considering that he has taken the pain to come, I'll call him to testify. Who knows."

"Who is he?"

"Commodore Orris, your predecessor."

"Ah, Orris. I've been told a lot about him, but I have never seen him in person."

"Really? I thought that you two would have met for the transfer of command."

"There was no such transfer. White Squadron was dissolved while still aboard the *Joan d'Arc*. Wolfshead Squadron was officially created upon the arrival of people and machines to the *Wolf's Den*, where I was waiting for them. Orris left with the *Joan d'Arc* on a direct route to Kothlis, where she would be repaired."

"I see." Gen'yaa arched an eyebrow. Bel'aan noticed that she was not really looking at him, but somewhere behind him. The lawyer took a look over his shoulder. Gregory and Schroeder were sat in their places, chatting in low voice and smiling at each other. "You would think they should look a bit more troubled on the day they are going to hear the verdict of a court martial against them."

"Human people are a permanent source of surprises for me. I've long since given up trying to understand them."

"Have you? Then I think I won't keep trying. Well, I'd better go give them some instructions, in the improbable case they're called to testify again. The members of the tribunal will be arriving soon."

"Do what you must, Captain. See you later." Gen'yaa walked to her seat, watching the two pilots from the corner of her eye. Gregory stood up to allow Bel'aan to pass. In that instant, he tossed a look at Schroeder, who smiled in return. *So that was it*, she thought. She knew that they kept some kind of relationship, but she had never given it a second thought. Now she realized that Gregory and Schroeder actually loved each other, and that was what allowed them to smile in the face of a certain adversity. Love was important for humans, she knew that. They cared a lot more about feelings than Bothans, who used to consider romanticism as a weakness. Gen'yaa wondered seriously for the very first time in her life who was right, Humans or Bothans. Maybe it was because she felt a twinge of envy, a wish to be looked at in such a way by someone she appreciated. She suppressed these thoughts, suddenly angry with herself. *Sometimes I simply can't bear my human genes.*

Counselor Organa, Admiral Ackbar and the others had occupied their places. Colonel Gen'yaa noticed how the two pilots stiffened while concern returned to their expressions. They had reasons to be worried. Chances were that this trial would finish within the next hour.

The *Wolf's Lair's* hangar deck was unusually silent today. The only noise that Mar Hanniuska could hear came from Phasx's welding unit. The Verpine was working alone, fixing a new ventral stabilizer on a half dismantled B-Wing. Most of the technical crew were going to enjoy a well deserved three day leave on Mon Calamari, where Lieutenant Boradelis was waiting for them to be their native guide. Hanniuska tossed a glance at her chrono. The others should now be on the flight deck, about to take the shuttle that would drive them to the planet's surface. She looked at the crippled starfighter Phasx was working on. It was the one that Torpedo used to fly. What remained of the extra sensor and communication equipment that had allowed the ship to operate as a flying tactical center had been removed, along with the memory core of her flight computer. Mar planned to refit her today with standard components once Phasx finished repairing the structural damage. They had left this craft until last mainly because nobody was waiting for it. After all, there were another four available B-Wings and only three pilots, Groznik, Parody and Granite, to fly them. The fact

was that they were not in a hurry. Actually both Hanniuska and Phasx had been granted a leave too, but she was not in the mood for a holiday, and Phasx wouldn't go anywhere without Meggo and her.

Meggo. The stubborn Verpine had left the medical unit only four days ago by his own decision, and against the advice of the medical droid that had attended him. The Scissors wanted Meggo to stay under care until the pair of bionic legs that had been ordered for him were sent from Korpil. As soon as they arrived the droid would operate on Meggo again to make the implants, but Meggo had rejected the idea of spending another single day on a bed. He had asked for a temporary medical discharge, and the Scissors had been forced to sign it. Phasx had constructed a repulsor chair for his friend, using discarded B-Wing components. Once he had become acquainted with the device, Meggo had insisted to Mar Hanniuska that she allow him to return to his tasks. She had forbidden him to even try to get on top of a fighter, but when he asked to work on the components they have removed from Torpedo's fighter and see if he was able to salvage something from them, she had given him her permission. Mar wondered how he was able to endure the pain. The Scissors had placed protective dressings at the end of both stumps, specially designed to keep the nerve endings alive--a necessary requirement for the success of the bionic implants. They hurt. In the medical unit, the Scissors could save Meggo most of the pain, but he said that he was not leaving the bed to stay sedated, so he was making do with basic painkillers.

Mar snorted. She could understand well Meggo's desire to be back on duty. She for one had been trying to keep herself busy so she didn't have time to think too much of anything but the work in front of her. Mar still missed Dets, Killips and the other members of her team who were now gone, besides the lost pilots. The sense of loss was fresh yet, and every time she looked at the crippled Meggo everything came back to her mind. If that was not bad enough, there was Foxfire and Moose's trial. Yesterday she had felt frustrated and furious, but worst of all was that that Quarren prosecutor was right. In spite of the hours she had dedicated to the task, she had found nothing that could help her two friends. Without evidence to support her theory, the easiest thing to think was simply that Moose was lying to save his neck. She didn't believe it for a single second, but what she believed or not didn't change anything.

Meggo's voice at her back startled her. The repulsorlift that moved his chair made practically no sound, so she had not heard him approaching. She turned to look at him, suppressing a wince. Although the bacta had cured his burns, the new skin would take time to grow and completely cover the scars. The soft pink colors of Meggo's muscles contrasted with the dark greens of his epidermis on wide areas across of his mutilated body. "What's up, Meggo?" she asked as casually as she could, so her friend didn't notice the effect that his appearance still caused her. For her surprise, the Verpine started to talk unusually fast in his native tongue. Phasx turned off his welding unit and came to listen to Meggo's excited explanation. When he finished, Mar watched him in disbelief. "You sure?" But of course Meggo was sure. Verpines didn't talk for the mere fun of it, as many human beings used to do. This was something she had to see with her own eyes.

"Phasx, run to the flight deck and tell the shuttle pilot not to take off yet." While Phasx took her order literally and started running to the turbolift that drove to the main hangar, she had to run herself to be able to follow Meggo's repulsor chair. She followed him into the storage room where he worked these days, cramped with dismantled components, all kinds of tools and instruments, and a computer terminal without cover, so its inside was exposed. Meggo gave an instruction to the computer and a hologram came to life over the projection cone. The viewing area was divided in several areas, showing arrays of coordinates, time scales, data flows painted in vivid colors and the image of two ships that Mar immediately recognized, taken from two different angles. The chief technician took a few seconds to recognize what she had to look at, but when she did, she immediately understood and shared Meggo's excitement.

"Do you have...?" she interrupted herself at mid sentence when Meggo hold a datacard in front of her face. "All right, let's go!"

Less than two minutes after, and accompanied by Phasx, who ran into them on their way back to the hangar, they boarded the already crowded Mon Calamari shuttle.

"Hey, the boss is coming with us...!" One of the human younger technicians started to say.

"Don't build up hopes, Norky," one of his companions answered. "She's bringing along her usual Verpine escort."

Ignoring the laughs and the looks of amazement, many of which were actually directed at the crippled Meggo, Mar went to the cockpit and addressed the Mon Calamari pilot. "What are you waiting for? Take off!"

Commodore Rahne Orris, former captain of the *Joan d'Arc*, White Squadron's mothership, was now instructor at the recently created New Republic Space Academy. Foxfire had heard that he had gotten married to a doctor or something shortly after he left the command of the *Joan d'Arc*. Who would have thought it, Orris the Stone getting married. It seemingly suited him well, though. Foxfire noticed that her former boss had put on some weight, but other than that he looked exactly as she remembered him. Answering Captain Bel'aan's questions, Orris related some of the missions White Squadron had accomplished under his command. From the destruction of the late Emperor's last weapon, an evil device known as the Emperor's Voice, to the tracking of Admiral Garil's rogue fleet and the rescue of his crew, including the destruction of the Imperial Star Destroyer *Gray Wolf* and of course the battle at Mon Calamari. Hearing him, Foxfire noticed how a feeling of pride for all the things they had done together overcame her. They could put a stop to Moose's and her career for political reasons, to make the Balanish and other people think that the New Republic cared about them, or to state an example for the New Republic military of which kind of things wouldn't be acceptable any more. It was the same for Foxfire. What they couldn't take away from her and Moose was their history, and the firm conviction that they had always acted with courage and honesty. They *had* made a difference, that was what Orris was saying, and she thanked him silently for voicing it here and now. She had respected him when he was their commander, although she had not really appreciated him. *It's curious how we rarely get to appreciate those in command while they are there. I wonder what I'll think of Gen'yaa with the passing of the years, or how the guys will remember me when I am not there any more.* She looked over her shoulder at Vyper, who listened intently to Orris' explanation. *Vyper will do it all right, I'm sure. I've been unfair with him, even if that was not my intention. The squadron will keep doing great things without me and Moose. We'll have to start somewhere else, that's all. But whatever happens, we must not forget where we came from. Smugglers, maybe. Who knows, running forbidden cargo in Imperial space can be a lot a fun. Pirates, no, never.*

She had not noticed when Captain Bel'aan finished his interrogation and captain Drinin took his place. The Quarren looked self confident enough, in spite of what Orris had just related. Heroes or not, they're guilty--that was what he had been telling all the time, and his discourse has not changed in the very least.

"Shortly after your arrival to the New Republic Space Academy," Drinin was saying, "and referring to White Squadron, you commented the following to one of your fellow instructors, Captain Bahande: 'Getting away from that band of scoundrels is the best thing that has ever happened to me'. Is this true or is it not?"

"It's probably true, but..."

"You also said that most of them wouldn't obey an order even if their lives depended on it. Is it true also?"

"That was a humorous comment. You're taking it out of context."

"Captain Bahande said that you were not laughing at the time, sir, but I'll take your word on it. I have no more questions for you, Commodore. Thank you very much for your help."

Orris stood up with an offended expression and looked at the tribunal. Counselor Organa shook her head, as if letting him know that his comments to that Captain Bahande were not going to be taken into account. Actually, nothing he had said would change the tribunal's decision, which they had taken already. Foxfire saw this in the Counselor's look, which crossed with hers for a brief instant. She personally didn't like it, her eyes seemed to say, but they were going to be declared guilty and punished as a consequence.

Orris left the room. Foxfire noticed that Counselor Organa prepared herself to talk, maybe to read the sentence without further preamble. She prepared herself for the worst, reaching out behind Captain Bel'aan's back, looking for Moose's hand. Suddenly they heard shouts behind. Everybody turned their heads to look at the doors, searching for the source of the fuss, which was probably taking place on the other side of the doors. From what Foxfire could understand, the guards outside were trying to reject someone who intended to enter the room without permission. Counselor Organa sent the bailiff to find out what was going on. When the corporal opened the doors to go out, Foxfire caught a glimpse of Mar Hanniuska and a Verpine. She opened her mouth, surprised. What was Hanniuska doing here? She had testified already, had she not? Before the corporal was able to close the doors behind him, the chief technician's voice was heard.

"Please, Counselor Organa! We must be admitted--we have new evidence!"

Leia Organa frowned, but she nevertheless nodded in the corporal's direction. Reluctantly, the guards let the woman and the two Verpines who came with her enter the room. One of the insectoid beings used a floating chair to move. Foxfire noticed that he had no legs.

"Explain yourself, Lieutenant," Leia Organa said, "and it better be worth it, the way you've assaulted this court."

"My apologies for that, Counselor," Mar Hanniuska said with a bow. "These are two of my assistants, Technicians Phasx and Meggo. As you all can see, Meggo was seriously injured in the battle against the Corellians. Four days ago, he asked to return to active duty against the medical droid's advice. Fearing that he could hurt himself if he tried to get on a ship, I allowed him to resume his work on what remained of Captain Steinberg's ship's sensors and computer. Amazingly enough, Meggo has been able to recover the data from one of the damaged memory cores. The analysis of that information has allowed him to prove that the thesis of a computer malfunction was a lot more probable than what we had supposed until now. If you allow me to use a holo projector I'd like to show the tribunal what he has just found."

There was a little murmur in the room. Leia Organa leaned forward and demanded silence. "Proceed, Lieutenant."

The holoprojector rose from its underground niche. Mar Hanniska inserted a datacard she produced from one of her pockets and programmed the device with the help of Meggo. In few minutes they were ready. Meggo made some final adjustments and the holoprojector came to life. Mar Hanniuska started to describe the tridimensional images with a professional tone, not lacking a hint of barely contained emotion. "Look here. This is the ship designated as Target Four, the one carrying the refugees, and this is Target Five, the one that opened fire against Wolfshead Five, Captain Steinberg's ship. Here Target Five shoots two concussion missiles, and here another two, exactly 0.8 seconds later. Quite a fine warhead launcher. The first missiles take 0.535 seconds to hit, taking 45% power from the forward shields. Only 0.31 seconds after the first impact Captain Steinberg starts his evasive maneuver, but he can't avoid being hit by the second two. Part of the concussion wave gets through the shields. Sensors are momentary blinded, as you can see in these readings. Immediately after Target Five opens fire with its upper quad battery, hitting Wolfshead Five's hull, sensor dome and engines. The sensor array gets damaged 0.157 seconds later and stops sending data to the computer. A second barrage hits him again before he can get his craft out of the line of fire. The computer has been working all the time, but the sensors are not operating any more. The threat analysis program tries to decide which ship has just fired upon the craft, but it has no sensor data to take a reliable decision. In a case like that the computer is programmed to make an extrapolation from the last data available, and that's when it makes its mistake. Meggo has run a clone of the threat analysis program installed on Captain Steinberg's computer, feeding it with the data stored on the recovered memory core. As you can see here," Mar Hanniuska played again frame by frame the images taken by the onboard camera, using the laser pointer to show the members of the tribunal where they should look, "from Captain Steinberg's ship perspective, the trajectories of Target Four and Target Five crossed 0.93 seconds after the impact of the warheads three and four, only 0.064 seconds before the sensor array, still partially blinded, stopped working. For a brief instant both ships are confused in a single signal, exactly at the same time that Target Five, the closer one, opens fire with its laser batteries for the second time. In all the tests carried out by Meggo, the threat program reached a wrong conclusion, identifying Target Four as the origin of that last laser barrage."

The night had been long for Leia and the other four members of the tribunal. They had been discussing the case almost till dawn. If no more witnesses or evidence were presented today, their decision was taken. By unanimity. In spite of what her heart had dictated her at first, Leia had made hers Mon Mothma's point of view, which seemed to be shared also by Ackbar and the others. But now there were reasons to hesitate.

"We must study these tests," General Boga Mun, the Sullustan, whispered to Leia's ear, "and have our people check out up to the last bit of data."

"I do agree," Leia answered. "As does the prosecutor, I guess."

"Counselor Organa," Captain Drinin said getting up. "I must ask for a postponement until our experts can confirm this information."

Leia looked to both sides. The other members of the tribunal, Ackbar included, nodded in approval. "I grant that postponement. Lieutenant Hanniuska, you and your crew must collaborate with the investigation committee and provide them with anything they may require."

"Of course, Counselor. That's what we've done until now."

"Very well. None of the people implied in this case, witnesses included, will be allowed to leave Mon Calamari without my express permission. This court is dissolved until new order."

Hanniuska turned her head to look at Foxfire and Moose and smiled. Foxfire was unable to return the smile before the chief technician went out. She was still too astonished by the sudden and unexpected turn of events.

Light years away from Mon Calamari and the *Wolf's Lair*, life went on in Camp One. It was still winter. Snow kept falling regularly and the cold wind would accompany the refugees and the relief personnel for at least two months more. Their general situation, though, was better than it had been when Moose, Foxfire and Rooster left. Supplies were not so scarce and they had several food processors that transformed the basic nutrients into different dishes every day. A couple of energy generators provided illumination at night and heat all the time in some of the common areas. The underground caves Lynx Commando had dug with the help of the refugees had been successfully transformed into more shelters and the campaign hospital they had badly needed for so long. But still people were starting to leave.

Now that the Seibergian Army and the few still active paramilitary bands had withdrawn and routes were safe again, the Balanish wanted to return and see what was left of their homes and their villages, their fields and their animals. Reason told that chances were the houses and villages were pillaged and destroyed, the fields razed and burned, and the animals killed to feed the soldiers. But one always hoped to be the exception, and even if that was not the case, it was preferable to be in a tent in the middle of what used to be home than in the refugee camps they could not endure any more. The New Republic personnel, unable to convince the Balanish against returning before having any certainty about what awaited them, provided the fleeing families with camping tents, food, medicines and chemicals to make water drinkable and to ignite fires.

Deveralia was one of those who wanted to return. People said that in Nurtina and its surroundings the devastation was not so severe. She probably would find that someone had entered her house and stolen anything valuable, but at least they would have the house. Nevertheless she didn't dare to move while she had no news of Sante. When he left with the partisans, he had told her to wait at the camp, that he would come to look for them as soon as he had the chance. To that promise she clung. She, Redina and other women in her situation kept asking the New Republic soldiers and the guerrilla men whenever they could. Yes, the Seibergians had opened their detention camps, they said. Prisoners had been seen walking toward their villages and toward the relief camps to meet their families. Two days ago a group of twenty arrived at Camp Two. Another fifteen or so reached Camp Three during the night. Consumed by the anxiety, she tried to hide her suffering from the children and Sdermila. Since they had arrived here, Figor and Lia had matured fast, too much for their age. Deveralia saw them pretend that they were glad and untroubled when she was watching, but she heard them cry in the night. When she went to console them, they tried to make her believe that they were asleep. Only little Katia was unaware of her elder's worries. In spite of the difficulties that nursing a baby under those conditions involved, the child's health was amazingly perfect. Her friend Sdermila, on the other hand, was not even a shadow of her old herself. She looked twenty years older, partly because the hair, which had become completely white in a matter of days after learning of her family's terrible destiny. But it was in her eyes where the difference with the vigorous old woman Deveralia had known was the most noticeable. They were sunken, without shine, with circles beneath and surrounded by wrinkles that seemed deeper every day. She never looked anybody in the eye any more. She rarely spoke. She only showed a hint of animation in the presence of Figor and Lia, and when she helped Deveralia with Katia. She didn't blame Sdermila for being so depressed. Sometimes she thought that, were she in the old woman's case, she would have committed suicide already. That thought terrified her and forced her to watch Sdermila closely. Nevertheless, Sdermila didn't seem prone to try taking her own life. She had just stopped living it.

Deveralia noticed that Katia was asleep at last on her shoulder and put her on the bundle of clothes that were the only cradle she had known so far. Outside, the afternoon's light was starting to fade. Small snow flakes fell on the camp, but not heavily. Lia and Figor were probably playing with their friends, but it was time for them to return. She would have to go to look for them before the evening meal was distributed. She took a glance at Sdermila, who was sat at the end of the tent, with a distracted look in her eyes. Redina, who had moved to their tent two weeks ago, was beside her, sewing someone's trousers just to kill the time.

Another two women were with them also, talking in a low voice while one of them rocked her child, a boy a few months older than Katia. Deveralia was about to ask Redina to keep an eye on Katia while she went out to pick her children up when she heard their shouts. Startled, she went out and saw Figor and Lia running like crazy toward the tent. At first Deveralia couldn't understand them. She saw two unknown men coming behind her children, although apparently they were unable to catch up with them. For a brief instant she felt frightened that they were chasing the children, but she realized what the children yelled with all the strength of their young lungs. She opened her mouth wide and ran to meet them, with her heart beating like a madman's drum.

"Dad is here! Dad is here!"

Sdermila looked up. Redina stood quickly and exited behind Deveralia. What was going on? What were those shouts about? Sdermila recognized the children's voices. The fear that something wrong could have happened to them took her out of her apathy. She tried to stand up, but she found that her legs were numb after hours of immobility. How long had she been sat here? One of the two women who, out of curiosity, were going out too, noticed Sdermila's difficulties and helped her to get to her feet. Sdermila murmured a thank you and went to the entrance with uncertain steps.

Weeping like a broken fountain, Redina was embracing a man who reminded Sdermila of Dimeter, Redina's husband. She took some time before realizing that it actually was Dimeter. Thin and gaunt, with a several days beard that partially concealed his depressed features, and wearing rags that could have once been a sort of uniform, Dimeter was as deeply moved as his wife. When he let it drop, Sdermila noticed that Dimeter had been using a thick stick to walk. With this snow it didn't necessarily mean anything, but then Sdermila could see a slightly less dirty piece of cloth tied around Dimeter's left knee. Still confused, Sdermila turned her head following Lia's and Figor's excited voices. The man that held Deveralia in his arms had to be her husband, Sante. He seemed to be in as deplorable a condition as Dimeter, but his face also revealed the same happiness and relief. His son and daughter clutched tightly to his waist, threatening to make him fall to the ground, but he obviously didn't care. That was a man who had just recovered his family. The scene was so touching that Sdermila felt like crying, but her eyes were dry. People from all the camp were gathering around, crying out their congratulations and applauding. Sdermila had started to move timidly towards Redina and Dimeter, but now she hesitated. Unnoticed by everybody, she returned to the tent.

The noise coming from the outside had awakened little Katia, who started to cry. Sdermila took her in her arms and rocked her back and forth, but Katia didn't calm. The entrance opened and Deveralia entered, followed by Sante and their older sons. Sante smiled.

"Look, Sdermila," Deveralia said displaying a big grin, her eyes shining by the abundant tears of joy she had just shed. "This is Sante, my husband. He and Dimeter are back. Dimeter is outside, with Redina. Sdermila, are you hearing what I'm saying?"

"Uh, yes. I've seen them. Katia...Katia was crying and I came back to console her."

"Oh, Sdermila, thank you very much." Deveralia reached out and took Katia from Sdermila's arms. "Sdermila has been like our mother here," she explained to Sante while she gave him the baby. Sante kissed Katia's forehead and a tear fell on the baby's cheek. Blinking in an attempt to contain more tears, he put Katia on his shoulder and patted her on the back. The baby calmed almost instantly.

"It seems I still remember how to do this." Deveralia laughed and kissed him on his cheek. "Nice to meet you...Sdermila?"

The old woman nodded and made an effort to smile.

Three days after Mar Hanniuska surprised everybody with the discoveries made by the Verpine Meggo, the court-martial was summoned again. For Moose and Foxfire, it had been three days of anxiety and nerves, unable to enjoy any more of their mutual company nor doing anything but watching time pass and getting more impatient with how slowly it went by. There were moments when Moose thought that it would have been preferable if they had been already condemned, anything being better than this waiting, but the sensation didn't last. As Foxfire told him very often, now they had a hope, a solid one, of getting out of this one basically unharmed. She was right, of course, although what the term *unharmed* meant in this situation could be the object of a very long discussion. Perhaps they would keep their ranks, their positions in the squadron, and their chances to be promoted in the future intact. They would be allowed to return to their lives and keep doing what they did the best: flying and fighting. Moose, however, couldn't help but wonder if that was only the surface, the appearances, the part of them that was less themselves. The wounds on the inside would take a lot longer to heal. While the memory of old Sdermila writhing in front of him was so fresh, the remembrance would keep making him feel miserable, ashamed and guilty, even if the tribunal said that he was not.

If they really did.

"Have you decided what are you going to do?" Admiral Ackbar asked Leia in a low voice while they were being driven to the tribunal room. Around them the sea was less calm than it had been days before. The hydroboat's repulsors saved them most of the discomfort, although the best efforts of the Quarren driver couldn't avoid some bouncing. General Boga Mun, the Sullustan, was the most affected by it, in spite of the pills for the nausea that General Sivari, the other human, had given her. Leia, on the other hand was enjoying the ride after so much time locked up in a room with these same people. Her eyes distractedly followed the flight of a couple of marine birds that seemed to take turns diving among the waves and searching for fish swimming near the surface. One of them had succeeded in the last try, but it still accompanied the other, filling the air with its strange cries.

"What are those birds?" she asked.



"Gavirons. They always fish in couples, the male and the female, helping each other to locate their prey. Did you hear my question, Leia?"

"Yes, I did." Hour after hour they had listened to the experts' opinions, watched again and again frame by frame the recordings provided by Lieutenant Hanniuska, and studied the full extent of the traces left by the B-Wing's software. Yesterday, when at last they were done with the analysis of all the data, they dismissed the technicians and started to deliberate. The reality was that new evidence was far from being conclusive. They *suggested* that Wolfshead Squadron's chief technician *could* be right in her explanation of the facts, but didn't completely prove it. They were again back at the beginning, being forced to take a decision based on incomplete data. Their eyes stung and their heads ached, but none of the five members of the tribunal called for a stop. They discussed until their throats were raspy and their mouths helplessly dry, but still the score was two and two when the night came and Leia decided to resume the trial in the morning.

Even admitting that the evidence was not complete, General Boga Mun and General Tulan, the other Mon Calamari, had reconsidered their previous votes and now they defended the absolution of Gregory and Schroeder. Leia was a bit surprised by Tulan's change, but the fact that he was a pilot like the two accused might have finally influenced him to decide in their favour. Ackbar and Sivari, on the contrary, had not let themselves be convinced and insisted on a verdict of guilty. As a consequence, Leia would have to decide with her vote, but she had not yet said what her choice would be. Although he had been very polite about it, she knew that Ackbar was very bothered by her apparent indecision. She smiled apologetically at him. "And no, I don't know yet what I'm going to do."

"But, Leia, We have to read our verdict in half an hour. I know it's not easy, but you've got to make a decision. Actually you must have made one already. Why else have you summoned the court if you didn't know what to do?"

"I don't, but I will, you must trust me. We all have agreed on the fact that the evidence we have is not enough to be certain. In the end, in the very end, for me at least, it all depends on whether we believe Captain Gregory or not. If we decide to believe him, we must accept that Schroeder's confidence in his judgement was justified and exonerate them both."

Ackbar nodded slowly. "Very well. And do you believe him?"

"I will know soon. Please, trust me."

The Mon Calamari sighed. "You know that I've always trusted you, Leia, although in this case I can't share your opinion. The evidence is all we have, unless...." Ackbar stared at her. "Does this have something to do with the Force?"

"Yes, it does. I've always been able to tell when someone is telling the truth or not. It's only since Luke explained it to me that I've discovered it is because of my sensibility to the Force."

"But then you must know already."

"I wish it were so easy. Many intelligent beings have problems deciding what is true and what is false for them, what they believe and what they do not. Humans are a clinical case of that. I've been perceiving contradictory sensations from Gregory since the beginning, but today I'll make him find out what the truth is for him, and then I will know it too."

"And how are you going to do that?"

"I'll ask him two questions. One of them will force him to be straight with himself."

Ackbar shook his head but didn't say anything. Actually, nobody talked until they reached the trial room, and then Leia was the one who had to speak.

"This tribunal has thoroughly studied the new evidence provided by Wolfshead Squadron's chief technician, Lieutenant Mar Hanniuska, in the course of the last session," Counselor Organa started. "Unfortunately they're not conclusive. The committee of experts have confirmed beyond any doubt that the threat analysis software running on Captain Steinberg's flight computer actually failed, as a direct consequence of the

damage received by the sensor equipment of his ship and the decision algorithms implemented in the mentioned software. Nevertheless, they can't confirm nor discard the validity of the hypothesis formulated before this tribunal by Lieutenant Hanniuska, that is, that this malfunction caused Captain Gregory's computer to identify the transport carrying the refugees as a hostile target. Captain Gregory has testified here that he shot his torpedoes at the fleeing transport because of this wrong identification, considering that it overruled his instructions to scan every ship's contents before starting any offensive action. His word is all we have. Captain Gregory, stand up."

Moose obeyed. The looks of surprise both of his defender and of the prosecutor proved to him this was not normal procedure.

"Captain Gregory, I know you've been asked this before, but I want you to answer nevertheless. Did your computer identify the *Fool's Hand* as hostile?"

"Yes," Moose answered without the slightest hesitation.

Leia Organa seemed satisfied by his answer. "Very well. The evidence suggests that it actually could have happened, so taking into account your excellent service record to this date, this tribunal will accept your word on this fact. Now there's another, even more important, question I have to ask you before making a decision on this case. Please, take as much time as you need before you answer."

Moose could feel everybody's looks fixed on him, except Admiral Ackbar, who looked instead at Counselor Organa. Moose could not understand what was going on. He had the conviction that his future and that of Foxfire depended entirely on his answer to Counselor Organa's still unspoken question, but that was not all. Somehow he knew that he wouldn't be able to lie not even if he wanted to, or more exactly that lying, if he tried, would be completely useless. He didn't know how he knew that, but the fact was that he did. Moose nodded at Counselor Organa, preparing himself for whatever.

"Captain Gregory," Organa began, "considering that the circumstances actually invited you to think that the *Fool's Hand's* pilot was lying, and that he was carrying space mines like the other four ships you or your partners had scanned successfully, would you have shot if your computer had kept identifying the ship as neutral?"

Moose took a deep breath. He had asked himself this question before, immediately after learning that he had killed a group of civilians, and often in the days afterwards. He had answered himself that yes, that he would have shot anyway. For all he knew at the moment, that was the right thing to do. He had repeated that to himself, again and again, and wondered why they couldn't understand it. But suddenly he was not sure about whether he really believed that or not. He didn't doubt because of what was at stake, what he and Foxfire were bound to lose if he answered affirmatively. Maybe he doubted because he was not the same person who had shot those torpedoes any more. The time he had spent with the Balanish refugees at Camp One had changed him somehow. He discovered that it was hard to think as he did before, when none of that had yet happened. Answering "no" was tempting, not only because that was the way to get out of this, but because it would be probably true if he ever found himself in the same situation. But what would he have done back *then*? Leia Organa stared at him without blinking, and Moose found out that he could not look anywhere else but in her eyes. He discovered that he wanted to tell the truth, whatever happened later, and to hell with Colonel Gen'yaa's instructions. He needed to say the truth not because of that bizarre sensation of being unable to lie, but because he was tired of manipulations and politics. He needed to tell the truth because lying about something like this was not like himself. He needed to tell the truth to set himself free of the sense of guilt, justified or not, that had accompanied him since the incident.

But what was the truth? Would he have shot, as he had always believed? Why couldn't he be sure now when he had been certain before? He didn't notice it, but a muscle in his cheek started to twitch nervously. He opened his mouth to speak and closed it again. Making an effort, he tried to see himself in the cockpit again, waiting for Foxfire's authorization to open fire, with his finger exerting a soft pressure on the trigger, ready to finish the move and shoot the torpedoes. In front of him, his Head-up display showed an amplified image of the freighter over the word *unknown* in brilliant red characters. The counters indicating the distance to the target and the estimation of the distance from the freighter to the next jump point decreased quickly on both sides of the image, urging him to shoot if that was what he was going to do. He felt like it. He wanted to shoot. He had to shoot, even if Foxfire didn't allow it. Then he mentally switched colors, and imagined the word *unknown* painted not in red, but in blue. A neutral ship. Suddenly he moved his finger from the trigger. The scene had taken place only in his imagination, but he actually moved the finger. Leia Organa noticed the movement and frowned slightly. Moose let out the air he had been retaining for too long in his lungs and spelled a single word.

"No."

In front of him Leia nodded. He saw her to turn her face to Admiral Ackbar, and her lips moving in a whisper. He imagined it was a whisper because he heard no sound, but then he realized that the Counselor had connected an acoustic screen that allowed the members of the tribunal to talk without being listened to by anybody else in the room. They had not used it until now, but he remembered that Captain Bel'aan had mentioned something about it. It didn't matter. Amazingly enough, Moose found out that he was able to read in her lips. She had said "I believe him." Admiral Ackbar looked at her in silence for several instants, and finally nodded slowly. The Mon Calamari told something to General Sivari. The man shrugged. Moose turned his head and he found Foxfire looking at him. She tried to smile.

"We have reached our verdict," Leia Organa's solemn voice sounded again, startling Moose. Captain Bel'aan directed Moose and Foxfire to stand up. With the corner of his eye, Moose saw that Captain Drinin stood up too.

"We find Captain Gregory innocent of the charges against him. Considering that her confidence in Captain Gregory was completely justified, we also find Lieutenant Colonel Schroeder innocent of the charges against her. They will both be restored to their previous positions. This incident will not appear on their respective records. I declare this court-martial closed."

As if in a dream, Moose shook hands with Captain Bel'aan and received Foxfire's hug. Vyper abandoned his seat and came to join them, while Colonel Gen'yaa, doing her best to keep herself from grinning, congratulated them and their attorney. "It's over," Foxfire said in his ear. *It's over*, he repeated for himself. He really wanted to believe it. When he turned his head toward the tribunal he noticed Counselor Organa's look fixed on him. Moose was about to say thank you, but before he opened his mouth Leia Organa bowed at him, like she knew already what he wanted to say. Moose nodded back and saw how she and the other members of the tribunal stood up and exited the room. One moment later, while Colonel Gen'yaa discretely exited the room followed by the woman with the white hair, what seemed to be every off duty pilot of the squadron, along with Mar Hanniuska and several of their other friends among the *Wolf's Lair's* crew, entered and ran toward Moose, Foxfire and Vyper cheering noisily. Rooster was the first to reach them, her brain extensions shining a pure orange, and gathered with them all in a hug. The corporal who had acted as bailiff during the whole trial approached with the intention of demanding they stop shouting like that inside this place, but he seemed to reconsider his position before the fact that he was outranked by practically everybody. Surrounded by such a crowd of friends, futilely trying to prevent Granite and Parody from taking him on their shoulders, Moose smiled for the first time. From on top Arachnoid's and Hardrive's shoulders, Foxfire laughed. When their looks met, she moved her lips and spelled a silent "I love you". Moose blew her a kiss and winked. He noticed with no little amazement that he felt good, very good. *Yes, maybe it's over after all.*

Leia found Winter waiting for her in her quarters. Her friend smiled.

"Now I can tell you: I'm glad that you absolved them."

"It was not only me. The vote was three to two."

"You know what I mean. You heard that psychiatrist, Doctor Gomar, on the first day. We Alderaanians are not completely trustworthy because our planet was destroyed, so the desire for revenge can cloud our judgement. It's amazing that she dared to say that in your presence."

"Come on, Winter, that's not what she said."

"That was the essence. Remember that I'm gifted, or damned, with a perfect memory. I could recite every word she or anybody else said in these last few days."

"I know that." Leia sat on her bed. "And I know how you feel. Judging an Alderaanian for doing what most of us would have done had we been in his place was not easy."

"But you were about to condemn him and his commander."

"Because that was the correct thing. It was probably unfair, but it was right. It seemed right. When that technician proved to us that Captain Gregory's computer could have actually provided him with wrong information, I questioned everything again. In the end, I decided to trust in my ability to tell if he was being honest or not when he said that he shot because that information. Now I'm certain that he was."

"But you could have done that since the beginning, couldn't you? I mean, using your powers to read their minds and know what the truth was?"

Leia shook her head. "Even if I were able to do such a thing, which I am not, how would I convince the rest of the galaxy? Should I go around saying I'm a Jedi, I can read minds and all that stuff, so you all *must* believe me?"

"That sounds a lot like old Emperor Palpatine."

"Exactly. And I don't have even a fraction of his power. Probably not even Luke would have been able to tell from the very first moment whether that pilot was being sincere or not. Those first days I perceived his hesitation. I'm convinced that he only discovered what the truth was at the very end. I think that both he and I needed to go through the entire trial for that. Gregory has been carrying a big burden since the incident, but when he finally answered that last question, he felt himself liberated."

"You perceived all that?"

"Yes, I did. At the end."

Winter pursed her lips for an instant and then nodded. "Thanks for explaining it to me, Leia. I know that you're tired, but I had to ask."

"You know that you're welcome, my friend. Always. And now, can you tell me what has been happening out there these days? I'm supposed to return to Seibergia immediately."

"There are riots in the main Seibergian cities, organized by the until-now clandestine opposition to Somolovich's government. Rumors say that the man is starting to lose the control of things. I'll brief you on the details during the trip. Your transportation is arranged already." Winter smiled briefly, but she turned serious when she noticed Leia's look drifting suddenly. "Leia? Are you well?"

"What? Ah, yes, it's nothing. I was listening to you, but for an instant I felt as if...." Leia looked at Winter. "Is Luke here?"

Winter grinned. "And you say that your powers are nothing." In that same moment, the door chimed.

"Come in," Leia said getting up. Her heart jumped for joy when her eyes confirmed what she had felt already.

"Hi, Leia," Luke Skywalker said as he covered the distance that separated them in two long strides. Leia embraced him.

"Hi, Luke. I'm so happy to see you! How long it has been? Three months?"

"Four, actually. You're a busy woman, my dear sister."

"Me? What about you, my dear brother? It was hard enough to get in touch with you when you commanded Rogue Squadron, but since you've decided to take on the responsibility of reconstructing the whole Jedi Order yourself....But let me see you well. Is that a fighter pilot flight suit you're wearing under that old poncho?"

"Yes. I came directly from the landing platform and met Winter on my way. I've had no time to change clothes."

Leia adopted an amused expression. "You're not intending to take me to Seibergia in your X-Wing, are you? When Winter said that my transportation was arranged, I didn't think of a luxury cruiser, but at least

something big enough for me to stand up in. Definitely, making the trip on your lap is less than what I'd hoped for."

Winter and Luke laughed at once. "I'm not your transportation, only a half of your escort. Mon Mothma thought that it would be a good idea."

"And it is." Leia grinned and gave Luke another hug. "I'd wish she had this kind of idea more often."

"Ah, but she has."

"What do you mean?"

Luke smiled mischievously. "Your transport is the *Millennium Falcon*."

"Han is here too?"

"He said that if bearing your company for some days was the price he had to pay to take a leave from his command and have a ride on the *Falcon*, he would pay it."

Leia's eyes went blank. "Yeah. It's a lot like him to say something like that."

"You know, he also told me that he is dying to see you, although an instant later he threatened to tear my skin off if I repeated it to you."

Leia grinned. "I'll keep the secret. And where exactly is he?"

"Somewhere over our heads. He said that he would accompany Chewie to visit his niece on the *Wolf's Lair*. They will pick you up early tomorrow."

"Well," Leia said, dismissing a hint of disappointment and hoping Luke wouldn't have noticed, "that leaves us the rest of the day to talk. Winter, what are your plans for today?"

"Don't worry about me. Since I heard about those coral formations the Mon Calamari use as biological data storage units, I've been looking for a chance to look at them with my own eyes. One of Admiral Ackbar's aides has volunteered to accompany me there. I'll be back in time to piloting the other X-Wing of your escort."

"So you were the other half," Leia said, only mild surprised.

"I'll love having such a charming wing woman," Luke said, blushing almost immediately at his dare. Leia smiled. In some aspects her brother would never stop being a farm boy from a backwater planet.

"I'll love having you as *my* wingman," Winter answered with a wink, directed both to Luke and Leia.

"You knew that they were coming," Leia said, "didn't you Winter?"

"Of course I did, but I didn't want to spoil the surprise. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got to find some diving equipment. Will you be safe in the company of your Jedi brother?"

"If he could pull me out of the Death Star, he will be able to deal with anything here at Mon Calamari."

"Han and Chewbacca also helped," Luke said.

"I was joking: none of you three would have made it without *my* help." The three of them laughed. "Have fun, Winter. And you," she said turning to her brother, "go and put on some decent clothes. We haven't much time, but I'll think of a couple of things to do before dinner."

"I'm in your hands, Leia," Luke answered with a grin. "I'll see you here in fifteen minutes."

"Good." Leia watched him leave and considered starting to pack. She opened her travel bag but closed it again. She would have time enough later. Leia laid on the bed face up with her hands under her head and a big smile on her face. She felt really good. The tiredness and the tension had vanished like smoke. Only now had she realized how badly she needed a vacation, although seemingly Mon Mothma had thought of it for her. In four days or so--provided that she had no problems with her hyperdrive, the *Falcon* could certainly make the trip to Seibergia in three days--she would be back to the responsibilities and the diplomatic work. But before she sat at another negotiation table she would be able to spend some time with her brother and her best friends. Time with Han. Luke and Winter could take turns docking their X-Wings to the *Falcon* to refresh themselves, but they probably would be in their cockpits most of the travel time. She and Han would have plenty of occasions to be alone while Chewbacca piloted the ship--now she thanked the Force for not having brought Threepio with her. They would have time enough to talk about everything, but above all about themselves and where this weird relationship was going. Time to fight, that was for sure, and time to laugh at themselves and to reconcile. Her body trembled at the mere thought of making love again on one of the *Falcon's* narrow bunks, and at the aches she would have later. The galaxy would keep struggling and fighting, but for three days she would be far from it all. Leia sighed. Yes, she was really looking forward to the next three days.

It was party time on board Wolfshead Squadron's mothership. In two or three days they all would leave Mon Calamari, once the repairs on the *Wolf's Lair* were completed and tested; but now they could feel like a holiday. Pilots, technicians and crewmen had mourned for too long, and had been under a lot of pressure for longer still. The news of Foxfire and Moose being absolved spread out like the wind and everybody seemed to think that it was a good time to celebrate. Colonel Gen'yaa ordered the security personnel to keep an eye on the parties starting everywhere so they wouldn't have to lament anything the day after, but also instructed them to look the other way about any trespass, provided that the ship's security was not compromised. She knew very well that her people badly needed an release valve to vent the long accumulated tension. *They will work a lot better later*, she thought to herself, while she locked herself in her quarters to not see and to not hear anything for the next hours. Once on her own, she allowed herself a smile of satisfaction. Things had gone very well for her. She sat before her console and asked for a secure connection to Bothawui, which she obtained without trouble. Bothans could be trusted to keep their communications network up. Gen'yaa keyed a code and waited. Ten minutes later the face of Counselor Fey'lya appeared on her screen.

"Colonel Gen'yaa, I've been informed already. My most sincere congratulations."

Gen'yaa bowed deferentially. "Thanks, Counsellor. Everybody's done their best. By the way, I must point out that Captain Bel'aan, particularly, has proven to be a very valuable resource when it comes to legal battlefields." *Promise kept, Captain.*

"I'll take good note of your recommendation, Colonel. What's the status of your ship? Are you satisfied with the repairs?"

"Yes, Counselor. Actually, we're almost done here. Your influence was noticeable. The Mon Calamari were more than helpful, and they were willing to hear my modifications proposals. Among other things, we've been equipped with a retractable shell to protect our new ion cannon when it is not being used, which will make it a lot harder to be damaged like it was at Seibergia. The shields generators had been upgraded, also, and they'll be reconfigured considerably more efficiently."

"Excellent. Whatever else you need, just let me know."

"Thanks again. Can you tell me anything of what our next assignment will be?"

"You'll be most pleased, Colonel. The *Wolf's Lair* is not returning to the Viayak Cluster, but to the Imperial front. The Empire may have thrown us away from Pyria, but we'll make their life miserable while they stay there. Your task will be to spy and collect intelligence data, and to launch hit and run attacks against any objective whenever the opportunity arises. Like in the good old times, isn't it?"

Gen'yaa smiled. "Not much concern about collateral damage being caused this time, I guess."

"Exactly. You won't find many civilians there, just Imperial stations and convoys. Ah, you're to capture some

TIEs also, if you have the chance. Your old friend, General Crix Madine, seemingly can never have enough of them for his covert operations."

"Now that's a Corellian I don't mind working with. It will be my pleasure to help him."

"You're doing very well, Colonel. I was really very worried about you and your future when the Seibergian situation exploded in our faces, but you've come out of it reinforced. You're a pride for the Bothan people. Keep up the good work, and I'll make sure that your name shows up when promotions to Admiral are being discussed."

Colonel Gen'yaa felt that she flushed slightly, which was extremely rare for her. As rare as it was receiving this kind of praise from Counselor Fey'lya. "Thank you very much, Counselor. You honour me."

Fey'lya bowed. "Till next time, Colonel. Please, keep me well informed on your new exploits."

"I will," she answered to the vanishing image of the politician. She leaned back on her chair and let a little laugh escape. "Definitely, things have gone very well."

"I don't think that accepting Ivonne's offer to cook a banquet was such a good idea," Raiven was saying to Solo. The two pilots headed to the *Wolf's Lair's* kitchen facilities to carry out Vyper's last order as the squadron commander--those were his exact words. They had been honored with the task of helping Groznik and Ivonne to bring the food to the *Bombshelter*.

"You must admit: she's been very kind," Solo said.

"Oh, yes, but my stomach has enough problems digesting the supposedly human dishes she prepares. A Wookiee feast promises to be a lot more than I can bear."

"Maybe I should add how *persuasive* she was. You weren't there, but I've told you that she seemed serious when she threatened to tear off the arms of those who declined her invitation."

Raiven choked. "That's what happens when you take a Wookiee for a cook. And I say, what's wrong with the food processors we've known for all our adult life?"

Solo laughed. "At least we have Doctor Benny back. His herbal remedies for indigestion and such pains will be the most solicited tonight. Well, here we are. Try to not let anything drop, or you won't have to worry about not eating enough for Ivonne's liking. She will tear your arms off here and now, and Groznik will help her."

"So take care with your clumsy hands too, my friend."

When the door to the kitchen opened, Solo and Raiven found three Wookiees conversing animatedly around what looked like a steaming mountain of food, some of which seemed to be still alive. It moved. Groznik had turned off his translator, so the two human pilots couldn't understand anything of the cacophony of growls and roars that came from the crowd. Raiven swallowed hard before the sigh of the banquet waiting for them.

"Hey, mate," Solo said in a low voice, almost inaudible against the Wookiee's shouts, "I thought there were only two Wookiees aboard the *Wolf's Lair*. Those are Groznik and Ivonne, but who is the other?"

"I don't know, but he scares me. Look at him. It's hard to believe, but he is even taller than Groznik."

"Hey, officers," someone said behind them, "can you help me to find the pilots' lounge? I'm getting a bit tired of listening to their family stories."

Solo turned and opened his mouth to answer, but his surprise at recognizing the man before him, in spite of the lack of uniform, almost made him choke.

"General Solo, sir!"

"Take it easy, pilot, this is not official business. I'm here supposedly incognito. Call me simply Solo. And you're?"

"Solo, sir, I mean, Lieutenant Commander Charbel Tengroth, sir, uh, Solo." Raiven was making visible efforts to not break out in laughter. "And this is my partner Raiven, that is, Lieutenant Mike Rovardi."

"Nice to meet you," Raiven said. "We were wondering who the enormous Wookiee over there was, but now I think we know that."

"Ah, yeah, Chewbacca was dying to see his niece and have what he calls some real food."

"Now I wonder if it's really a coincidence that Ivonne decided to prepare a Wookiee feast exactly today." Solo said.

"The secret is mixing it all well with their liquors. Your stomach won't suffer that much, although you probably will get drunk long before finishing your meal. That also helps, of course." Han Solo laughed. "No, really, you two stick with me and I'll advise you about which are the safest dishes."

"Definitely, that will be most appreciated," Raiven answered with a grin.

"You're welcome. By the way," Han Solo continued, "I'm a bit confused here. When I asked your name, you first said Solo and then changed and said Tengroth? That's a Corellian name, and your accent sounds a lot like home, too."

"Right. Solo is my call sign. And yes, I'm a Corellian."

"Your call sign, eh? That explains it. I thought we were relatives or something. So you're that Solo I've heard so much about, the one that solved the Seibergian crisis with his partner. Ah, that was you, Rovardi? You've got to tell me the whole story, over a glass of Whyren's Reserve, of course."

"It will be a pleasure," Raiven said. "We were supposed to help Ivonne and Groznik to bring the food, but I think they have all the help they need."

"Sure."

"Too bad we don't have any Whyren's Reserve on board any more," Solo commented adopting a sour expression.

"You certain?" Han Solo asked opening his jacket. The necks of two bottles showed up from inside a large pocket. Solo recognized the labels on first sight. "I've really got to share this stuff, you know. I have to see a girl tomorrow and I don't want to be suffering more than a middle class headache."

"That looks great, Solo."

"Now it's Han for you and your friend. And tell me, Mike, you also play sabbac like your mate here? I've also brought along a pack and a portable randomizer field...."

Foxfire and Moose enjoyed the party at the Bomb Shelter, the music, the jokes and even the exotic dinner--after a month of nutritive soup they had become a lot less picky, if they ever were--and above all the company of their friends. Some of them, though, would remember this particular celebration with something other than joy, because Han Solo was eating alive those who dared to take a seat at his improvised sabbac table, beginning with the *other* Solo. The Verpine Meggo was the special guest for his decisive action that culminated with Moose's and Foxfire's absolution. He and Phasx seemed to enjoy the party, too, although it was hard to tell but for the occasional twitching of their antennas. Meggo's new legs were expected within a

couple of days, and then doctor Al Saruff would operate on him to make the implants personally.

At a certain moment, when the noise level started to descend, with the exception of the table occupied by the three Wookies, Foxfire's grin turned slowly into a melancholic smile as she looked around.

"What's wrong, honey?" Moose asked beside her.

"Nothing. I'm just remembering other parties like this one."

"And missing those who are gone, aren't you?"

"Something like that. It has been a long journey, don't you think? Maybe not in time, how much, three years? But the amount of events, the adventures, the tragedies, so many good and bad moments." Foxfire took a look at the half empty glass she held in her hand and grimaced. "You'd think that this stuff is getting to my head."

"Maybe," Moose smiled. "But the fact is that I was thinking more or less along those same lines. You know, I used to be the Training Officer. I've seen quite a bunch of young faces come and go in a flash. I've always avoided these kinds of thoughts. They're dangerous when you must be focused on keeping yourself and those in your charge alive. But I feel as if all that has happened, the good and the bad, has somehow knocked down the walls I had erected around to overcome me."

"That's not necessarily bad."

"I didn't say it is bad. But now I'm aware of a lot of things I used to ignore, or to pretend that I didn't see. Things that now seem more important than our work, more important than the war."

"I know what you mean. I used to think that being a squadron commander was the greatest thing I had ever accomplished. I was proud of it, it was my life. The rest of things seemed to come in the same lot. All my best friends were pilots of my squadron, the man I fell for was a pilot."

"Who are you talking about?" Moose chuckled.

"Certainly not about you," she replied, although she belied her own words squeezing his hand with hers. "No, really. The squadron was the reason and the source for everything. I thought that if I ever lost that, I'd lose my whole life. But now I think different. You all were my life. Not the squadron, not being a commander, not even being a pilot. I used to lead you in combat and forget who you were while we had a mission to accomplish. Maybe that's how it must be, but I don't know if I will be able to do that again. Now I've found out that I'm not infallible, not that I really believed that I was, but I fully trusted my judgement to do what had to be done. Now I'm not that sure. I knew that I could lead you all to death if I'm wrong, or cause the death of others who didn't deserve it. That was a part of it. But now I've discovered that I care too much, not only about you but of those we could accidentally harm, like those refugees, as to not wonder every second if I'm making the correct choice. Rooster was right: times have changed, but we've changed too."

"Every word you've just said echoes my own thoughts. I've been thinking of this since the very same moment that Organa said that we were absolved. Also about what Gen'yaa told me the other day, you know, about the people we could still help. I think that Gen'yaa had a point there. We have a responsibility because of what we are and who we are. I feel I must stay flying and fighting to make of this galaxy a better place, but I also feel that I don't want to do it in a command position, not even of a flight group. I want to be a simple pilot again, one who obeys his orders and does his best to accomplish them. Nothing more and nothing less. Innocent or not, next time I shoot at something, it will be because I'm ordered to do so."

Foxfire nodded. "I've been wondering if I was ready to renounce to command, or if that was actually what I wanted to do. Now I know."

"You sure?" Moose looked at her with surprise and concern. "It's easier for me to say that I don't want to have a command position, but I'm just the Operations Officer, a technical command more than a real one. But you? Look, you're one of the best commanders I've ever known, and I've known a few. Can it be the drink, like you said before? Or maybe my big mouth?"

"No," Foxfire said looking at Moose directly in the eyes. She smiled, but her eyes were serious. "I'm a darn

good pilot, and maybe also a good commander, but I've had enough of the latter. Perhaps I'm being selfish but I can't help it."

"They'll have to understand."

"And if they don't I can live with it."

They both looked at Vyper, talking to Mar Hanniuska, who laughed because something he had said. After congratulating them about the result of the trial, the next thing he had said was how happy he was to return the squadron command to Foxfire. He actually looked relaxed and relieved. "He is not going to like it," Moose said.

"He will, in the end. Only now, when I'm not stupidly worried about him trying to steal my squadron, can I see how fit he is for it."

"Do we wait until tomorrow? I would hate to spoil the rest of the party for him."

"Me too, but tomorrow could be too late. This is something I don't want to reconsider. Come on."

The moment he saw Foxfire and Moose standing up and approaching him, Vyper had a bad feeling about it. That meant trouble. When they asked to talk to him privately, just a minute they said, he was sure of it. *For once, I was having a good time*, Vyper thought while he walked towards Ibero's quarters. He found him there, seemingly busy in front of his computer console.

"You're not going to believe it," Vyper said when the door closed behind him.

"Believe what?"

"That Foxfire has resigned her command. Both she and Moose will accept a demotion so they don't have to return to their previous positions."

"But I thought that now....I mean, they've been absolved, haven't they?"

Vyper shrugged uneasy. "You'd better ask them rather than me."

Ibero snorted. "Never mind. Does that mean that you and me are keeping our acting positions?"

"Yes, it does, although they won't be *acting* any more. Gen'yaa has not been informed yet, but chances are that she will approve it. Please, don't tell me that you're going to reject the promotion. I'm still too tempted myself."

Ibero took a few moments to answer, which made Vyper fear for the worst. "I wouldn't do that to you," the Iberyian said at last. Vyper almost sighed in relief. "But...oh, shit. I liked working with the Intelligence stuff, you know."

"I did as well. But then Foxfire appointed me as her Executive Officer."

Ibero smiled helplessly "And now you do the same to me, eh?"

"Sort of," Vyper answered returning the smile. "I didn't want this either. Actually, I never intended to become a commander."

"I know. Back when I joined the squadron you were the archetype of the lone hunter with something of a suicide vein. I've not forgotten when you attacked an Escort Carrier on your own, only your A-Wing and you. And that other time when...."

"My memory is good enough, thank you." Vyper smiled to belay the apparent rudeness of his answer. "But you're right. I used to see myself as a lone hunter. I even preferred to fly without a wingman, so I didn't have to worry about anybody else."

Ibero nodded. "But you started to change after our little excursion two years ago, remember? And you've not stopped changing ever since."

"Do you think so? Yes, I guess I've changed. I've let the past rest behind, where it must be, and I've got used to trusting other people again. To need them and to be needed by them. Still, this was not part of my plans. Not for today, and not for the immediate future."

"These are not times to make plans, you know." Vyper noticed something strange in Ibero's tone, although he couldn't tell what. The Iberian sighed. "What has Foxfire told you?"

"She said that I've got all the training and the experience I need. That she'd rather leave the command to someone she trusts inside the squadron than anyone coming from outside. She also said that the fact that I don't want the charge only makes me more appropriate to have it."

"She has a point there. That means that you won't use the squadron to pursue a new promotion."

"Of course I won't. But it's still hard for me to see myself in this position. The first time I led you in combat, we lost four pilots."

"And the last one we didn't lose a single one. What happened to Torpedo and the others was not your fault. Things as they were, someone had to fall that day. I for one was very close to having my ticket punched."

"I know, and that's precisely what has me sleepless. I guess I'll have to get used to it. Did you tell your wife, by the way?"

"No, I didn't. It's hard enough for her not knowing that I've been about to cross the line. Again."

Vyper nodded. "Sometimes I wonder how you bear it. I mean, having a family of your own must make you see danger under a whole different perspective."

Ibero pursed his lips. "It does. Above all when the word family includes sons or daughters. Sometimes it's hard to ignore the impulse to run away."

Vyper followed Ibero's look. Above his terminal the schematics of an unknown ship rotated slowly, showing the disposition of several systems inside the main frame.

"What's that?" he asked out of curiosity.

"An offer for a job, a civilian one. I received it a week ago."

"What? So you were actually thinking about resigning?"

Ibero sighed and shook his head. "I've tinkered with the idea, I must admit it. But I've just answered them with a negative. That's why I left the party early: I didn't want to delay it any more."

Vyper took some instants to digest that. "But, what was it about?"

"It was from Incom Corporation. They are in the first stages of the development of a new generation starfighter. Their first idea for a name is E-Wing, you can see why in these preliminary design concepts they sent with the proposal. There will be several teams working on it, and they offered me the position of chief engineer in the group that will design the flight computer software. They say that my experience as a fighter pilot will allow me to know at every moment what the pilots really need from the computer, so I will make sure that that's exactly what they'll find when they get to fly the new model."

"It makes a lot of sense."

"It does indeed. They've thought of everything. The job itself is a dream, the salary is great, and I would be able to do most of the work from Ibery, if that's what I want. But that's not all. They even have an offer for my wife. She is a mathematician, you know, and Incom employs a lot of them. Ah, and a scholarship for my daughter, when she is old enough."

"So where is the but?"

Ibero nodded sadly. "The but is that I can't take this job, nor any others. Not yet, I mean. I can't leave you all to keep up the fight against the Empire so my family and I can have a peaceful, safe and wonderful life. Damn, the New Republic liberated my planet. *You* all were there and there were people who lost their lives in the attempt. Fighting for me and my family, among other things."

"You also were there."

"Yes, but it was my planet, wasn't it? I feel that I've contracted a debt I haven't paid yet. With the New Republic and with this squadron. With you, my friend."

"Come on, you've saved my butt more than once."

"Not enough times to be even." Ibero smiled. "Maybe some day, when we take Coruscant or something, if I've not been killed before, I'll feel free to say good bye to this kind of life."

"Taking Coruscant...By then I might think about it too. Before entering the Academy, I was one course from getting my electrical engineering degree."

"You were studying to be an engineer?" Ibero looked surprised, and maybe a bit hurt. "You've never told me."

Vyper shrugged apologetically. "Probably nobody here knows. It's one of those things I seem to forget myself most of the time. I was so mad about becoming a fighter pilot that when I at last saw my application approved I left everything. Family, friends, studies."

"Do you regret it?"

Vyper shook his head. "No, not really. But now that you've mentioned that work for Incom, that's something I can imagine myself doing for a living."

"Why, I can give them your name if you want."

Vyper laughed. "Don't tempt me, not today. No, like you say, it's not the time for me yet to leave this. I have also a debt to pay, a high one, for the time I spent fighting for the Empire and the people I killed."

"So we're together in this."

"Exactly, my friend." Vyper offered his hand to Ibero and he took it without hesitating. "I'm happy to have you."

Ibero nodded but didn't say anything. Vyper decided that it was time to change the subject before they both felt like returning to the Bomb Shelter to get drunk and cry together.

"All right. Now update me on things while I've been on the ground. I've been told already that doctor Al Saruff is back, but that's practically all I know."

"Well, the other good news is that all our fighters are repaired and ready to be used. Bad news is that don't have enough pilots to fly them all."

Vyper frowned. "I thought that I told you to send a request to the Starfighter Command asking for candidates to cover our losses."

"And I did that. We've received a single name, a guy called Erebus. Before you ask, I'll tell you that our two

Sullustans have been reclaimed by Sullust's Defense Command. They're leaving tomorrow."

Vyper's eyes went blank. "Is that Erebus good enough at least?"

"Oh, yes, for what I've seen in his file he will do. But it's only one of five, and there won't be more for the time being. We have just too many fronts to cover these days, and only so many trained pilots. I'm starting to understand how our Imperial counterparts felt in the old days."

"You don't need to tell *me*. Alas, I fear that we're not going to be able to keep our present organization. Three wings under a single squadron is going to be too much."

"It sounded like a good idea at the time, but I guess that you're right."

"A real shame. Well, anything else?"

"Raiven and Solo talked to me about the possibility of recovering the *Al'yin'ia*."

"I thought they crashed her."

"Yes, but they say that she is not beyond repair. They asked for a shuttle, some spare parts, and the help of Hanniuska. Do you think that Gen'yaa would approve it?"

"I don't know. I'll see what I can do." Vyper grimaced. "I guess I better get used to talking to Gen'yaa."

"The sooner the better."

"All right, it can wait until tomorrow. Our most urgent thing is to cover the vacancies in our staff. Fortunately, Foxfire pitied us and she offered herself as Tactical Officer for the time being. That leaves us Operations and Intelligence to cover."

"Have you thought of someone already?"

"Actually, I've been thinking of this since we learned about Torpedo. Back then there was a good possibility that Foxfire and Moose wouldn't be allowed to return to service, so I feared that we would have this conversation sooner or later."

"You saw it coming, didn't you?"

"Sort of. It's amazing how circumstances have conspired to bring us to the same point by a different route. Well, getting to the point, what would you say of Arachnoid as Intelligence Officer?"

Ibero reflected about it. "He has brains and the adequate degree of paranoia that the work requires. And I bet that he will enjoy having access to the secret stuff. If only for that, I'm sure he will accept."

"Arachnoid it is then. About Operations?"

"Perhaps is a mad idea, but I think I have a candidate for that."

"Really? I have one myself. But tell me who is yours."

"Rooster. I know she is not a combatant, but there are four of us in the staff already. Maybe we might want to have someone who's used to thinking about how to save lives and not about how to take them. Someone who will point out for us the collateral damage our plans can cause. Why are you smiling like that?"

"Because she's *my* candidate, too. For the same reasons."

Ibero laughed. "I wonder what her face will look like when we tell her...." Ibero interrupted what he was saying, startled by the sudden appearance of a warning icon on his console, blinking over the E-Wing's schemes. "Sithspawn, what's this? Do you mind if I take a look?"

"Of course not, do what you must." Vyper watched how Ibero entered the computer and searched for the reason of the warning. His expression was of surprise when he seemingly found out. "What's that?" Vyper asked.

Ibero caressed his chin for some instants, looking at the display like it was still hard to believe what it showed. "When Moose was at the relief camp yet," he explained, "he asked me to look for someone on the Holonet, a relative of one of the refugees. It seemed very important for him, so I did my best to find him."

"And did you succeed?"

"Not exactly. For the data I could recover, the man turned out to be one of the engineers that worked on the Death Star project...."

"Emperor's black blood!"

"My reaction too. The evidence I found made me think that he died at Endor, aboard the second of them, or was assassinated shortly after by Imperial agents at the best of cases. But, nevertheless, with the help of my R2 unit I put up several intelligent programs to keep up a passive search, alert to any traces of this man different to what I had already found. One of those programs seems to have run into something. I've got to call Moose."

"Wait a minute. If you've found one of the Death Star's engineers..."

"...we may have to turn him over."

"Exactly."

Epilogue

"Are you sure you don't want to come with us?" Deveralia asked. She and her family looked with apprehension at what remained of Sdermila's house. One of the lateral walls had crumbled down completely, and there were wide breaches in the other three. Big portions of roof had disappeared. The rest showed clear signs of a fire. In many places, the original white paint had disappeared or was blackened by the smoke. There was not a single pane of glass in any of the windows. One of them had the frame knocked out of place. Deveralia looked around. The rest of the village didn't look any better.

Sdermila smiled with sadness. "No, Deveralia. Thank you, but I'd rather stay here. It's a ruin now, but it is still my house, where I lived happily with my husband, and where my sons grew up." The old woman felt like a dagger of pain had pierced her heart. Her husband, her sons, her whole family were gone now. This burned house was all that remained of them. Their absence hurt horribly, even more here than when she was at the aid camp, but there was no other place she wanted to be.

"But the house seems about to collapse," Sante objected. "The children would be happy if you accepted to come to live with us, to our home." The man ended the sentence with less conviction. Sdermila saw the doubt and the concern in his eyes. For all they knew, their home might be in worse condition than hers, or even not exist at all. Suddenly, living near Nurtina didn't seem a guarantee of finding a more or less intact house to return to.

"Yes, Sdermila, please, come." Lia implored, unable to imagine that her home could look like this, too. On her side, Figor nodded vehemently.

"It would be wonderful, to live with you all. Believe me. But I really can't go."

"You have our address." Deveralia said. "You can always come if you change your mind later."

"Of course I can," Sdermila answered. She knew that she was not going to go, in any case, but leaving the possibility open would make the good bye easier, especially for the children. She couldn't let them guess what she really had in her mind. Redina and Dimeter had also insisted for her to accompany them to Vina Bosolia. The devastated world was undergoing a reconstruction process with the sponsorship of the New Republic, which had offered the Balanish refugees the possibility to emigrate there. The aid personnel at the camp had told them that on Vina Bosolia they would have plenty of chances to get a decent job and start a new life. Redina and Dimeter were among those who had accepted the offer, but Sdermila said no. She didn't want to go to Vina Bosolia, to Nurtina, or anywhere else. She was too old to begin again, she didn't have any hope to even try, and she didn't want to become a load for anybody. The truth was that she didn't have any desire to live anymore. She had come with Deveralia and her family only because they had to pass near her village on their route home. Once here, she would simply wait for death to come find her.

Sdermila looked at the little Katia, peacefully sleeping in her mother's arms, ignoring the pains of the older people. Sdermila smiled with tenderness. "Please, let me hold her one more time."

Deveralia smiled back and handed Katia to the old woman. She rocked the baby smoothly in her arms. "Sleep, my girl, sleep. You have still a long journey to your home. I'm going to miss you." Sdermila realized how true that was and felt her heart shrink a bit, although that didn't change her resolve. She kissed the baby's cheek and returned her to her mother. "And I'm going to miss you too, Lia and Figor. Are you not going to give old Sdermila a big hug before saying good bye?"

The two children threw themselves into Sdermila's arms. The old woman had become a sort of grandmother to them in the time they had spent together. Too self conscious for his young age, Figor did his best to keep himself from crying. Boys didn't cry, he said, but finally he couldn't help it. Sdermila consoled him. Lia seemed more calm. As if her lack of tears needed an explanation, the girl said "My father says that he will come to see if you're all right. If you're not, he will bring you with us."

"Of course I'll do that," Sante confirmed. Deveralia nodded, showing no trace of being surprised. Sdermila realized that they had actually talked about it. Lia must have heard them.

"That's very kind from you, Sante. But you don't...you don't need to do that. I'll be fine, really."

"It's not for you, you stubborn woman," Deveralia said with a smile. "It's for us."

Sdermila smiled back and nodded. Unable to speak any more, she gave a brief hug to Sante and Deveralia and started walking toward her house without looking back, not even once. She didn't want them to see that she was crying.

She entered the house through the main door, although the missing wall made it unnecessary. Inside it was worse. There was no energy, as she had supposed, but the holes on the roof and the broken windows allowed more than enough light in. Sdermila panted, seeing what had been made of her home. Most of the furniture had been destroyed with an axe or something like that. The wood had been used to make a bonfire in the middle of what used to be their living room. The few decorative objects she had kept there, mostly handmade gifts from Taigor and the boys, were broken and scattered around. In spite of the broken windows, the smell was terrible. Rotten piles of food and even human excrement could be seen here and there. Sdermila felt like throwing up, but the stay in the refugee camp had made her stomach stronger. She wondered if those who had occupied her house considered themselves civilized people. Her old kalahorse would have behaved a lot better than them. She shook her head with resignation and walked carefully on the broken glasses that covered the floor. She didn't try to enter her room. She had seen from the outside that it was there where the roof had collapsed. The fire, accidental or arson, must have begun there. Fortunately, the snow must have put out the flames before the entire house was burned to the foundation, like others she had seen. Lania's and Jeiran's room looked a bit better. Dirty, very dirty, but more or less intact when compared with the rest of the house. She would sleep there tonight, supposing she was able to sleep at all. The kitchen was a mess, but she had expected that. Someone had been having fun breaking her plates and bowls, dropping them on the floor or even launching them against the walls. The utensils she had used to cook her family's meals for years were abandoned everywhere, impossibly dirty and greasy, some of them dented. The smell was even worse than in the living room. Sdermila reached out over a filthy pile of pots and pans and tried the water taps. One of them spat mud noisily for some instants, but no water worthy of that name came out before it stopped. The other didn't even produce mud. Sdermila sighed and looked around. She found a bucket under what used to be her cooking table, which was covered with trash. She emptied the bucket and went out. There was still enough snow. She opened her backpack and used one of the chemical fire starters to make a little bonfire beside the house's back door. She fed it with some discarded pieces of furniture and, bucket after bucket, she unfroze the snow and spent the rest of the day

cleaning what could be cleansed. The rest she threw outside.

She had completely lost track of time when she heard something that made her move her eyes up from her work. After the constant traffic of shuttles that Camp One had seen for the last weeks, the noise made by one of them approaching was well known to Sdermila. She went out with more curiosity than fear. The sun was low enough already. Sdermila noticed that the afternoon had almost passed. Clearly defined against the orange sky, she saw a three winged ship approaching. It slowed down over the village and folded up its wings. Surprised, Sdermila realized that it was going to land there, on a clear area some fifty meters from her house, almost on top of where the Divanian house used to be. The dust that the shuttle's repulsors arose concealed it from Sdermila's view for an instant. When the cloud vanished, she saw how the ramp descended slowly until it touched the ground. Some instants later a man descended from the ship and stood there, before the ramp. He looked around, apparently disoriented or confused. Sdermila narrowed her eyes, trying to see him better. He was thin, very thin, and almost bald. Sdermila was sure that she had never seen him before, but nevertheless there was something familiar about him.

The man saw her. Even from where she stood, Sdermila could see how his expression changed. He started to walk decisively toward her, and suddenly Sdermila felt frightened. For an instant she considered the possibility of starting to run to escape from him, but the man seemed young enough. He would catch up with her in no time. With her heart beating wildly, Sdermila waited where she was with apprehension. She didn't fear death, but being harmed. Then she noticed that the man carried no weapons, and that calmed her a little. Actually, his attitude didn't seem menacing, but hesitant. Almost as if he was the one who was scared. Behind him, someone else exited the ship. Surprised, Sdermila recognized Rooster. Her colored brain extensions made her impossible to mistake for anyone else. What was Rooster doing here? But she couldn't wonder for too long, because the unknown man was before her already. He stopped two steps from her, pursing his lips. His forehead and the surroundings of his eyes were crossed by deep wrinkles, his short brown goatee was peppered with white hairs. His cheeks were sunken. Those were unusual features in someone who, on the other hand, seemed quite young. Sdermila identified in them the signs of someone who had starved and suffered, like the people with whom she had lived for two months. His eyes were sad as he looked at her. The tears returned them the brightness they had lacked of before. And then Sdermila realized whom she was looking at.

"Lania?"

"Mom? I...I almost don't recognize you. Your face, your hair--it's so white...."

"Lania!" Sdermila threw herself into her long lost son's arms, and he soon returned the embrace. "My son, my little son! You're alive, you're alive and here. They told me you were dead, and your brother...." Sdermila couldn't continue. Tears that were not all from pain inundated her face. Sobs that were not all from grief came through her throat impeding her from saying a single word more. Lania cried with her with his eyes closed to the devastation around them. He had always thought that the day he returned home would be a brilliant and happy one. What he found instead was beyond his worst nightmares, which had never included this place. His mother was here, and that was the only thing that had not changed. His brother, and the family he never got to know were dead, as were, probably, many of their neighbors, his friends from childhood, the people he used to know. *Poor mother*, he thought. *How she must have suffered*. And he had believed that his own story of terror, persecution and misery was the most terrible someone could tell. "Mom...." He started, but it came like a strangled sob. Lania struggled to recover the mastering of his voice.

"I know about Jeiran, Mom. They....They told me everything."

"Who? Who told you? Are Moose and Foxfire in that ship?"

"Yes, that's what they call them. They and the Lumi woman over there came searching for me...."

"They killed Jeiran, and Voeda, and Drivan, and Mila."

"I know, I know all that. It was an accident."

Sdermila moved her face away from his son's chest to look him in the eyes. "How can you say that?"

"I've seen horrible things, Mom. I'm ashamed of having worked for who I did, for not doing anything when I learned what I was helping to construct. That makes me an accomplice in the massacre. My hands are stained with blood, too."

"What...what...what are you talking about?"

"Have you ever been told about the Death Stars, Mom?"

Sdermila nodded, new tears running down her cheeks. "Moose told me. He said that they destroyed his planet, and that you were inside one of them when they...."

"I worked for the Empire, Mom. I helped to construct those things and...." Lania shook his head. "It's a long story, Mom. I'll tell everything to you, if you want, but not now. The important thing is that I was not aboard the second Death Star when it blew up, and that those people found me and brought me here, to you."

"Oh, Lania, my Lania...."

From the cockpit of the shuttle, Foxfire and Moose watched how mother and son embraced each other. Rooster returned inside and sat in the pilot seat. She looked at Sdermila and Lania through the viewport and wiped away a tear from her cheek with a fingertip. "I'm so glad for her," she said. Although neither Foxfire nor Moose answered, she continued. "I mean, at least she has recovered one of her sons. That will give her something to live for. And him, the poor fellow, he seemed so ashamed all the time. He is no different than those of us who once served the Empire, like Vyper, Raiven and the others. I'm glad that we didn't have to send him to the Intelligence people. It has been a lot of trouble, but it was worth it."

The necessity of testing the new *Compassion's* handling in flight had been the perfect excuse to make a quick trip to Ord Mantell, the world where Ibero had located Lania. Desperate to get to Seibergia, the man had used his real name to obtain a New Republic safe-conduct and a passage on one of the ships carrying help material to Nurtina, thinking that his Balanish nationality would make a difference to the functionaries he talked to, but they had limited themselves to file his request. That was what Ibero's watch program had detected. Once on the *Lair*, Vyper had needed to use all of his influence to keep Lania's presence unknown by Colonel Gen'yaa and the security personnel. He and Ibero debriefed Lania about the years he had spent working for the Empire. If he had possessed any knowledge that the New Republic Intelligence needed to have, they would have been forced to turn him over. But Lania had not been involved in the design and development of the super laser, just on the installation of the magnetic fields that protected the space station's numerous hangars and ports. To Moose, Rooster and Foxfire's relief, they managed to clear him, making way the steps for the next stage of this operation.

Vyper got Colonel Gen'yaa's permission to send a party to the Balanish Country to try and recover the *Al'yin'ia*, and soon the *Compassion* took off again. After another four days of travel, Rooster had left Solo, Raiven, Mar Hanniuska and Phasx on the boundaries of the forest where the two pilots had performed their emergency landing. Then the rest of the expedition continued to Camp One. Once there they found out that Sdermila had left with a group of refugees a week before, supposedly returning to her home. They also heard the most recent news from one of the relief workers: accompanied by several of his closest collaborators, and not before transferring a fortune from public funds to his accounts in several Imperial banks, Dieter Somolovich had fled from Seibergia to an unknown destination. Although there was no evidence of this, it was said that the Corellian Diktat had helped him to escape to avoid problems with certain sectors of his population, in case Somolovich was brought down and judged for his excesses by the new government, or even worse, by the New Republic. Leia Organa was at the capital, meeting with the leaders of the Seibergian opposition. She seemingly had offered them the help of the New Republic to reconstruct their economy, even if they rejected to join, with the only condition being to guarantee the security of the Balanish population and the approval of limited autonomy for the Balanish Country. The name of Ciric Baranka sounded more and more likely as a possible president of this autonomous region.

They had not, however, come back to Seibergia to see how the politics evolved, but to accomplish a very specific mission. Guided by Lania, Rooster piloted the *Compassion* to the village where he was born. They all had seen with dismay the half burned and apparently completely abandoned place, but Lania had asked to descend anyway. Amazingly enough, Sdermila was actually there.

"Take off, Roo," Moose said suddenly. His face reflected the enormous anxiety he felt, an anxiety that had been growing every second of these last days, since he learned that Sdermila's son was alive.

"To take off? But...."

"Take off, Rooster, please. We've finished here, can't you see it? There's no need to impose our presence on them any more. Take off."

Rooster looked hesitantly at Foxfire, who nodded at her. "All right, strap yourselves in."

While Rooster started the ship's engines, Foxfire turned to look at Moose. "I'm fine," he said, "Really. It's just that I can't bear being here any more."

"It's all right," she answered. "I understand."

"Let her enjoy the return of her son," he said, talking almost to himself, "and let's not remind her any more that we took the rest of her family from her."

Sdermila looked up when she heard the sound of the engines coming to life. Following an impulse, she released herself from her son and started to walk toward the ship, which started already to lift from the ground.

"Wait!" she cried out, although the occupants of the ship could hardly hear her. Sdermila moved her arms over her head. "Wait!" Lania came after his mother and imitated her. "Wait!"

Rooster saw them from the cockpit and made the new *Compassion* descend and touch the ground again. "Sdermila is calling us," she said. "She sure wants to say thank you."

"Moose," Foxfire said, "we've got to go out and talk to her. I thought this was what you wanted to do."

"I wanted to bring her son to her. I had not thought that I'd have to talk to her. Again. Avery, I'm scared as hell."

Foxfire took a deep breath. "Rooster is right. Sdermila probably wants just to thank us. But if it helps you, I'm nervous, too."

They followed Rooster, who had already descended the ramp. Moose winced when he saw Sdermila and noticed the changes about her since the last time he had seen her. The knot he felt in his throat seemed to grow. He swallowed hard and went out beside Foxfire.

"Thank you very much," the old woman was saying to Rooster. "For everything."

"You're welcome, Sdermila. We all have a lot to thank you for, for everything you did back at the camp. I for one have learned much, very much from you." Sdermila nodded and looked to the ground.

"I want to say thank you, too," Lania said. "I never would have made it here without you."

"The New Republic is going to send help," Foxfire said, "but I don't know when, nor if it will be enough to repair all this damage."

"We'll manage," Lania said. "We have managed with less for centuries."

"Wait a minute," Rooster said. "Maybe I'll have...." The rest of her sentence kept floating in the air while she ran back to the interior of the shuttle. Sdermila approached Foxfire and Moose.

"Thanks also to you two for bringing Lania here."

Foxfire nodded. "It was the least we could do. As Rooster has said, we owed you much."

"Yes," Moose said, noticing that his voice faltered him, "although we'll never be able to pay for everything. Sdermila, I tried to tell you...I'm really sorry for...."

"Sshhh," Sdermila shook her head while she put a finger on Moose's lips. "Don't say it." Her eyes were reddened, but no more tears came out. Moose had the impression that she could not cry any more.

In that moment Rooster appeared carrying a big toolbox with both hands. "The ship is brand new, so I don't think we'll need any of this for the return journey. Our chief technician will find another for me." She handed

the box to Lania. "You're an engineer, aren't you? Then you'll probably know how to make use of this stuff. Until more help arrives."

"Thank you again," Lania said accepting the toolbox. "You're most kind."

"If there's anything more we can do...." Moose said.

"You've done enough," Sdermila answered. "Leave now if you have to." She looked at Foxfire in the eyes and then longer at Moose. Finally she said, "I forgive you."

Before they were able to say anything, the old woman turned her back on them and started to walk towards her house. Lania mumbled a thank you again and waved good bye before following his mother. Moose stood there for some instants, trying to digest the flood of feelings that assaulted him all at once.

"Come on," Foxfire said, her eyes bright with half contained emotion. "Now we're really done here."

While the shuttle took off, they all took a last look to the devastated village and the two small figures walking slowly to what remained of their home. "Good luck," Rooster said, giving voice to the thoughts of the three of them. Sdermila, Lania and the rest of the Seibergian-Balanish people were going to need a lot of luck, but, as Lania had said, they had managed with less before. Sdermila had proved to them how true that was. If they were given the chance, they would survive and would reconstruct everything again, as they had always done.

"I feel free now," Moose said in a low voice, only for Foxfire's ears. "I didn't really feel this way when Counselor Organa said that we were absolved, not completely at least, but now I do." Foxfire passed an arm over Moose's shoulders and layed her head on his shoulder. She had just realized that she had been wrong all the time. What Moose had been looking for since the unfortunate day in which their path crossed with that of a ship called *Fool's Hand*, was not his own forgiveness, but that of those innocent people he had killed. Sdermila's words had given him that, or the closest to it that could be had.

"Do you regret now having accepted the demotion?" she asked.

"No, I don't. That has nothing to do with this. And you?"

"No, don't worry. With every passing day I'm more convinced that it was the right thing to do. Now I'll have time enough to think about something other than the squadron's next mission."

"For instance?"

"What I'm going to do next in case we see the war come to an end. During this time, I've found out that being a fighter pilot is everything I've been so far, and I'm not sure I like it."

"Are you thinking about the children again?"

"What?" Foxfire looked at Moose bewildered, and suddenly she remembered that day at Camp One, when she asked him about the issue. She also remembered his startled reaction, and how bad she had felt. "No, I didn't mean anything in particular...."

"I *have* thought about it."

"Have you really?" Foxfire was surprised at her own reaction. Actually, she had asked it aloud, loud enough for Rooster to hear it.

"What?"

"No, it's nothing, Roo. Have you really?" she repeated in a much lower tone.

"Yes, not tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, but having a child with *you* is something I definitely want to do in this life."

"You know, that's the prettiest thing you've ever said to me, flyboy."

"I intend to tell you a lot more of them, provided that you're willing to hear them. I...I feel as if we are just waking from a nightmare. The memories are still there, but now at last I think that I can live with them and think about future."

Foxfire looked through the lateral viewport. Below them, the landscape was completely covered in white as they approached the mountains and the place where they had left Solo and the others. It made her remember the first time she saw this land, the column of refugees advancing in the opposite direction to those groups that they occasionally spotted now. She remembered when she and Rooster had met Sdermila for the first time, still under the impression of the AT-ST's attack and the shooting afterwards, and compared that image with that of the old woman she had just seen a minute ago. "It must be terrible to give birth to a child and learn that someone has killed him...." she interrupted herself afraid of how Moose could react to that comment, but he limited himself to nodding.

"Yes. But the fact is that people all throughout the galaxy take that risk every day and think that it's worth it."

"After seeing Sdermila embracing her son, I'm close to believing it."

"Me too. In spite of everything."

Lania watched the New Republic shuttle disappear in the distance and turned his gaze to their house and the others around. He sighed deeply. "There's a lot of work to do."

Sdermila looked up at him. "Will you stay to do it?"

"I will. Only now I realize how I missed home, and you and Jeiran." Lania winced after pronouncing his brother's name, but he went on. "I wanted to do great things and went away to do them. Now I return in shame and with pain, and I discover that the greatest thing I can do is working the rest of my life to make this place what it used to be, and continue from there."

Sdermila felt her heart enlightened. "Then your old mother will be by your side to help you."

"Like you've always been," Lania answered kissing her on a cheek. He opened the toolbox on the ground and selected some tools. "But now, please, wait here while I underpin the roof. We won't do much if it falls on our heads during the night."

"Very well. I'll take a look at the fields, to see if there's something salvageable from what I sowed before the winter." She watched her son move away with determination and a wave of maternal love and pride inundated her. For the first time in many days, the sorrow for the death of Jeiran and his family moved to a secondary place, after the relief of having her other son with her, alive.

She had lied to Moose and Foxfire. Although it was true that she thanked them for what they had done finding Lania and bringing him here, that didn't mean that she had forgiven them. Lania could have accepted that what had happened had been only an accident, but it would take her a lot longer, maybe forever, to believe it. But it was not impossible. In the same way that she had forgiven her old kalahorse for killing her husband, the day might come when the resentment she felt vanished from her inside and she could also forgive the man who, accidentally or not, had killed her loved ones, and the woman who could have prevented it, as she had started to understand. That thought occurred to her in the very instant in which she had heard the ship leaving, at the same time that she realized that she was never going to see Moose or Foxfire again. If she ever got to actually forgive them, she wouldn't have the chance to tell them, so she decided to tell them here and now. If that helped them to become better human beings or not didn't concern her any more. May that Force of theirs be with them and God with her and Lania.

The noise of a laser cutter broke the silence. Sdermila looked back, startled, but then realized that it was Lania starting to work. *It is true*, she told to herself, *Lania is back and he will reconstruct this village again*. She felt amazingly happy and full of hope. She wished that she could call Deveralia and tell her, but there was someone she could always talk to, although it had been a while since the last time she had done it.

"You see, Taigor, I was readying myself to go beside you, but now it turns out that I can't go yet. Lania has returned and he is going to need me here more than you will need me there. After all, now you have Jeiran, Voeda and the kids with you. I miss you all terribly, but I still have a family to take care of. Maybe not for long, because I can't deny the fact that I'm old enough already, but for a while at least. Just until the kid gets settled here, maybe until he finds a good girl for him like Jeiran did. I've never renounced seeing our Lania married and with sons, you know. Perhaps God will grant me that before calling me. Will you wait for me? Of course, of course you will."

Absorbed as she was, Sdermila didn't notice a group of people that entered the village by the old route to the mountains. They looked around as if they couldn't believe what they saw, but none of them turned back. Like Sdermila, some of her old neighbors had returned home, and they aspired to stay. They saw Lania and approached him, with suspicion first, and then with joy when one of the women recognized him. Immediately, while part of the group went to inspect their own homes, some of them joined Lania in his work. The sooner they finished, the sooner they would start with someone else's roof.



About this story

"Collateral Damage" was inspired by the continuous wars that have devastated the Balkans region since 1991, and in particular the Kosovo conflict.

Since the Gulf War of 1991, we are getting more and more used to seeing images of war on our TVs, almost in real time, almost as if it all were another Hollywood movie. Who could forget the images of the nocturnal bombardments of Baghdad, for instance? There are millions of lines written about the role of the media in these conflicts, and countless discussions trying to give an answer to questions like these: Where is the line between the information and the spectacle? Would these wars be the same without the media coverage? Are the media somehow feeding the conflicts, if only offering immediate publicity and fame to every group, organization or government that attempt to reach their goals through violence? Are the news media really impartial? What is true and what is fabricated, by the media or for the media? While we debate all this, sometimes one can somewhat obviate, if not forget, that there are real people losing their homes, being torn from their families, being raped, mutilated and killed, and watching how their friends and relatives suffer and die.

When I started to write this story, I wanted to try, even if only a few persons ever get to read it, to make people's consciences wake up to the horror and tragedy that is actually happening, even now, in this same world we all share.

Why in a Star Wars story?

Well, I've been a Star Wars devotee since I was ten years old. When, in 1977, my parents brought my sisters and me to see Star Wars, they unknowingly created an addict. I've of course seen the movies at least a dozen times each (with the exception of the Episode I, which I don't like that much). I've also read almost every novel or comic-book that I've found in the book stores, and played several of the LucasArts computer games. But the most enjoyable experience for me has been the writing of SW stories for this website, and reading those written by other fans, many of them available in this same place. I was about to start another Wolfshead Squadron point of view story in the days when NATO was performing its campaign on Yugoslavia, in defense of the Kosovo refugees. The term "collateral damage" appeared very often, every time a bomb or a missile hit something that should have never been a military target, and little by little the plot of "Collateral Damage" was formed in my mind.

I've tried to portray as best as I've been able the Balkans conflicts in the Star Wars universe, doing my best to keep it all consistent with the "official" events and the rest of the Wolfshead Squadron tales. This is not the first time I have tried to translate real events into a Star Wars story (although the intention is completely different), since I did the same in [Joan d'Arc](#). Any resemblance that you might find in "Collateral Damage" with real places or events is probably intentional. Nevertheless, all the characters and situations that appear in this story are the product of my imagination, with the exception of those created by George Lucas first, and several professional writers later, in the context of Star Wars movies, novels, comics and computer games. Of course, I've been constantly influenced by the images I've seen on TV and what I've read in the newspapers about the war in the old Yugoslavia.

Despite all I've said above, my main goal with "Collateral Damage" has been to write a good story, one that not only Star Wars fans but science fiction lovers in general could enjoy. It's up to you to decide if I've done that or not.

Anyway, thank you very much for reading it,

Dario Pozo



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