

# Talon Intelligence Squadron: The Pursuit of All That Is Evil

*Book Four of the  
Talon Intelligence Squadron series*

Various Authors

## The Talon Intelligence Squadron Saga

Welcome to the fourth installment of the theforce.net Jedi Council Forums fan fiction legend! What you are about to read is a collaborative effort by the original authors to restore the Talon Intelligence Squadron series, the best-known and longest-running squadfic ever to grace the JC with its wild and hysterical antics. **Talon Squad Leader** created TIS in January 2000, but never in his wildest dreams could he have ever foreseen its growth. It practically took on a life of its own. Two years, twenty large threads, dozens of authors and characters, and a myriad of plot twists later, the series was legendary.

The story has never left our hearts. For those of us who survived all of the threads, TIS remains a subject of awe. The original authors have regrouped and have dedicated themselves to restoring the series from the beginning for a new generation to take in. While it has been many years since the series began, it is still as fresh to us as ever. With the passing of **TSL** in 2004, his story has become even more important to us. In his honor and in the memory of what was and still is the greatest squadfic ever to hit the JC, we, the original Talon authors, are dedicated to restoring TIS to its original glory.

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We, the Talon authors and artists, do not own Star Wars and do not claim any rights to the characters, places, events, and ideas in this book that are not original creations. We acknowledge that we are merely “playing” in an already-extant creation and appreciate the opportunity.

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## Acknowledgements / Dedication

Many Talons have contributed to this series, including the following Talons responsible for the work put into this fourth book:

**Albion**

**Blue\_Lightsaber42**

**Darth McClain**

**Darth Muis**

**Idiots Array**

**Jedi\_Hood**

**Jedi\_Perigrine**

**JediXManSerenaKenobi**

**L0B0**

**Lilith Demodae**

**Mara Jade, Emperor's Hand**

**silverfighter**

**StarscreamPrime**

**stoneheart**

**Thumper09**

**TiradePlateau**

**TrulyGhent**

Thank you all for the journey,  
Trika

To Mr. George Lucas, who created a masterpiece of wonder that is enjoyed the world over. You've inspired us to channel our own creativity and passion into your world, and we appreciate the freedom to play.

To Kevin, who created a masterpiece of wonder that is enjoyed the world over. You've inspired us to channel our own creativity and passion into this wonderful Talonverse, which is now the highest form of appreciation we can give back to you. Thank you.

# Dramatis Personae / Roster and Crew

## Operations

Lead	Major Kevin Ski	pilot, engineer
Two	Lieutenant Danya Faithwood	hacker, slicer
Three	Lieutenant Kendrick Quinn	pilot, mechanics
Four	Lieutenant Quis Heartilly	engineer, chemist

## Support

Five	Captain Jaren Kai	sniper, infiltration
Six	Lieutenant Telia Aris-Kai	sniper, infiltration
Seven	<i>vacant</i>	
Eight	<i>vacant</i>	

## Intrusions

Nine	<i>vacant</i>	
Ten	Staff Sergeant Janus “Stone” Talson	combat, medic
Eleven	Lieutenant Trika Adair	slicer, hacker
Twelve	<i>vacant</i>	

## Operations II

Thirteen	Captain Karn Deloti	pilot, weapons
Fourteen	Lieutenant Kaiba Cloudrifter	mechanics, engineer
Fifteen	<i>vacant</i>	
Sixteen	Lieutenant Ty Flynn	pilot, mechanics

## Support II

Seventeen	Lieutenant Owen Flynn	hacker, communications
Eighteen	Lieutenant Reyanna Ortan	infiltration, espionage
Nineteen	Sergeant Mahrl Kahqiln	infiltration, espionage
Twenty	<i>vacant</i>	

# Dramatis Personae / Pronunciation Guide

## **Talon Support Group**

Sergeant Floreverus Bullwinkle

Ensign Qui-Sein Delph

culinary art, drill

pilot, culinary art

## **Black Fire Mercenary Group**

Lady Sondara Carre

Lord Re'deis Krycek

## Dramatis Personae / Pronunciation Guide

Kevin Ski (Human male from Dantooine)

*KEH-vin SKEE*

Danya Faithwood (Human female from Commenor)

*DAN-yah FAYTH-wood*

Kendrick Quinn (Human male from unknown homeworld)

*KEN-drik QUINN*

Quis Heartilly (Human female from Lamaredd)

*QWYS HART-il-ee*

Jaren Kai (Human male from Kuat)

*JAIR-en KY*

Telia Aris (Human female from Melida/Daan)

*TEEL-ya AIR-is*

Janus “Stone” Talson (Human male from Chandrila)

*JAN-us STONE TAL-son*

Trika Adair (Chinaési female from Chinaé)

*TRY-kuh Uh-DAIR*

Karn Deloti (Human male from Ota Prime)

*KARN dih-LAHT-EE*

Kaiba Cloudrifter (Human female of Frigate *Dark Mystic*)

*KY-buh CLOUD-rift-er*

Ty Flynn (Human male from Blonus)

*TY FLIN*

Owen Flynn (Human male from Blonus)

*OH-en FLIN*

Reyanna Ortan (Bracken female from Bracka)

*ray-AHN-uh OR-tahn*

Mahrl Kahqiln (Togorian female from Togoria)

*MAH-ral KAH-kiln*

## Dramatis Personae / Pronunciation Guide

Floreverus Bullwinkle (Human male from Atiragram)

*Flor-EV-er-us BULL-wink-ul*

Qui-Sein Delph (Epicanthix male from Panatha)

*KWY-shayne DELF*

Sondara Carre (Human female from Werl V)

*Sahn-DAH-rah CAH-ray*

Re'deis Krycek (Human male from Maruiper)

*Reh-DAIS KRY-chehk*

1 “We’re *all* quite ready to prove ourselves.”

“Captain Deloti,” the pilot called out. “We’re making the approach to Coruscant. It may be a bit bumpy once we hit atmosphere. Sensors indicate a turbulent weather system in our sector.”

Standing in the cockpit of the StarSpeeder 3000 transport *Claw*, Captain Karn Deloti nodded. “Thank you, Ensign Delph. I appreciate the time you’ve taken to get me acclimated to the situation down there.”

Qui-Sein nodded in response, but took a further moment to add an extra thought. “Sir,” he said, composing his words carefully, “I can’t stress how much of a tight-knit group they are. They’re still in mourning. Don’t forget that.”

Karn gave the ensign’s words a moment and reflected on them. “I won’t,” Karn said, remembering a host of comrades and friends that he had lost during his three years in the New Republic military and the intelligence sector since graduating from the Academy. It was *never* easy, though unfortunately common.

*But you have to move on, he reminded himself. Hopefully the members of Talon Intelligence Squad will try their best to remember that.*

The captain took a look down at his astromech droid.

*Striker and I have lost far too many friends*, Deloti thought. The green and white R2 unit almost seemed to nod in agreement.

He was anxious for a fresh start serving alongside others who wanted to protect the New Republic. He hoped the Talons would welcome him as one of their own, and was eager to prove himself as a leader. Although he had heard a bit about the group's unruly tendencies, he was certain that most of their childish antics had subsided since the group's inception, and especially since experiencing such a harsh blow to their roster.

"Like I was sayin' 'fore I was so *rudely* interrupted by Ensign Delph, Spam is a necessity when on th' battlefield. It blows my mind that yer commandin' officer had never heard of it, let alone had it with ya on missions!"

Karn could scarcely believe this man standing next to him. Sergeant *Bullwinkle* was his name. And he was most *definitely* crazy. Delph was nice enough, but a faint tug at the edge of his thoughts wondered at what ridiculous antics had landed the poor pilot underneath the sergeant. But this Bullwinkle character...

"Well, Sarge, we never did," he responded, attempting to find some way to convey his annoyance without completely offending the man. "And I've never heard of Sloppy Joes or coleslaw, either. Are you sure that stuff is *safe*?"

Bullwinkle snorted. "Well, only one o' the Talons got sick from it. And he's fine 'n' dandy now. Ten times

stronger, too!”

*How long did it take him to recover?* Karn wondered. “If you say so, Sarge.”

“Ya better believe that I do!” the man continued, much to Karn’s dismay. “Yer in fer a real treat, sir! Ev’rybody *raves* ’bout my home cookin’, ’n’ you will too once ya been there a while.”

“We’ll be landing in a few minutes, Captain,” Delph piped up again. “It’s time to get strapped in. Weather reports are signaling some high winds and rain.” The warning, while somewhat of a disappointment, did break the incessant rambling coming from Sergeant Bullwinkle.

Karn breathed a sigh of relief. If he could survive a few hours listening to Bullwinkle’s rants, he could survive just about anything. At least he hoped. *I’m glad that I’m just coming from Balmorra, and not the Outer Rim. I know I’d go crazy then, and Striker would need a memory wipe.*

The captain secured himself in the copilot’s seat. Bullwinkle moved to the back of the transport, mumbling something about securing the percolator. Deloti wished that he could have flown to Coruscant himself, but it hadn’t been possible. His new commanding officer, Major Kevin Ski, had arranged the transport from Balmorra, in the Colonies, to the capital of the New Republic, and it would have been in bad taste to refuse the ride.

With a wish for clear skies in his future, Karn gazed out of the front viewport at the storm, wondering what

was in store for his first few days at the Nest.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was a moment frozen in time: Kithera Rinani and Rinin Altura stood together, wearing large smiles and dress clothes. Judging from the artificial lighting and the drinks they were holding, the original holo had likely been taken in the lounge immediately after Jaren and Telia's wedding.

Lieutenant Telia Aris-Kai let her gaze linger on the picture in the wedding album. That day had been beautiful, magical, perfect. In her mind it still was. When looking at some of those pictures, though, she couldn't help but think that it was the last day she had ever seen some of her good friends and squadmates alive. Five of them, including Kithera and Rinin, had been brutally killed there on Coruscant by members of the Black Fire Mercenary Group while she and Jaren had been gone on their honeymoon.

It had been four months ago, and it still hurt like hell to think about.

A shadow fell over Telia and the album she was holding, and then she felt a strong but tender hand rest on her shoulder and squeeze it slightly. "I miss them too," whispered Captain Jaren Kai.

Telia nodded as her husband sat beside her on the edge of their bed. Setting the album aside, she noticed that

Jaren was holding his Executive Officer collar device. She frowned a bit and asked, “Why aren’t you wearing that? You didn’t get demoted, did you?”

“No, no, nothing like that. Let’s just say you’re not the only one who’s been thinking about Kit today.”

Telia gave Jaren a sympathetic smile, put an arm around his shoulders and held him close. “You’re doing a wonderful job as XO. She’d be proud of what you’ve done with the Talons so far.”

Jaren turned the device over, studying it in different angles of the room’s light. His voice was quiet when he spoke again. “She was wearing this that day, you know.” He looked into Telia’s eyes, allowing her to see the raw feelings behind his words. “She gave everything for this squadron. That’s a hard image to live up to and an exceptionally high standard to follow.”

“You’re doing fine. Major Ski thinks the world of you, you know,” Telia said. “And he should.”

“But there’s so much more to it now,” Jaren replied, not quite sure how to explain. “This whole squadron, including Major Ski, is counting on me as the XO to help pull it together and make it stronger since going through that. If you’ll forgive the expression, Black Fire either burned us or tempered us, and out of those two options there’s only one that’s acceptable to me. I have to make sure the squadron goes down the right path. I can’t let them down. I can’t let you down.” He dropped his gaze back to the collar device in his hand. How could some-

thing as small and light as the collar device increase in weight by orders of magnitude when he wore it? The fabric of his uniform never ripped because of it, but his shoulders sure felt the added burden and responsibility every day.

The hug Telia gave his shoulders made them feel much better. With her there, everything always improved. She kissed his cheek. “I know this squadron is a bit... weird and not exactly normal, but they respect you,” Telia said. “You won’t steer them wrong. And if they don’t respect you, they’ll have to answer to me. Honestly, how far away would they think they could get with two snipers after them?”

Jaren smiled briefly. “Thanks for watching my back.”

Telia gave him a smirk in return. “Oh, the pleasure’s all mine.”

Jaren went back to studying the intricacies of the collar device, and Telia simply watched him for a couple minutes. His opening up to her encouraged a question to venture out that had been kept secret until then. “Do you ever wonder if things would have been different if we had been there to help?” Telia asked softly.

“I did at first,” Jaren admitted, “but at some point I had to focus on the present and the future, not things that I can’t change about the past.” That was the type of example an XO would need to set for the others in the squadron, he felt.

Jaren reached back and pulled the wedding album

closer. It had been half of their wedding gift from Major Ski; the other half was another album sitting prominently on a shelf and containing awards, honors, pictures and information from Jaren's entire military career to date. He wasn't sure where Major Ski had obtained some of the items and pages in the scrapbook, but he supposed finding such things would be easy for the leader of an intelligence squadron.

His military album highlighted his unchangeable past and his present. His wedding album highlighted his present and future. That future had been so clear, so bright, not too long ago, but now it was marred with uncertainties. The squadron's whole future had been turned upside down by the events of one day months ago. What if it happened again? What if it happened in their marriage, in their personal lives?

Jaren looked at Telia from the corner of his eye, and once again he was grateful that she was there with her love and support and beauty to soothe his concerns. She made his life complete. She made everything better. Nothing bad could happen to them as long as they were together.

Telia rested her head on Jaren's shoulder, and Jaren leaned into her to support her weight. He laid the wedding album between them on their laps and opened it again, and they both silently looked at more pictures of the squadmates they had lost: Kithera, Rinan, Milan, Mekial, Rubi.

Finally Telia spoke. “Jaren?”

“Yes?”

“I’m glad they got to share our wedding day with us.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“They’re all starting to pile in.”

It was a statement to fill the void, not necessarily warranting a response. Stone paused momentarily from his work to look directly at his teammate. Trika was sitting on one of his cots, knees pulled up to her chest in a childlike display of uneasiness. It didn’t take a scientist, or in his specific case, a doctor, to diagnose the woman’s dread. He felt it, too. Her comment was not entirely lost on him. “There were four of them, right? The last one is supposed to arrive this morning, if I remember correctly.”

Trika rested the right side of her head on her knees, her braided hair coming to rest just over her forearms. In her hand was a small, unmarked, black box, one that she had been carrying around with a certain amount of respect and fear. “A captain, I think,” she mused, running her fingers around the small container in her hand. “He’s supposed to take Kithera’s spot.”

*Four months.* It had been four months since the run-in with Black Fire at the senate offices. Four months since they had lost their teammates, comrades, and friends. Four months.

All of the time in the galaxy could not erase the pain that they all felt. The Talons were still in mourning, and the next few days of activity for the new arrivals were going to be especially rough on the remaining Talons who had survived that day.

Stone sighed, sitting back in his chair and pushing aside the datapad he had been working with. “We’re finally getting a start to that second support team,” he replied, thinking of exactly how the new arrivals were going to fit in. “And just in time. I think Major Ski is anxious to put us all to work. He’s been awfully busy in his office lately. Probably putting together a mission profile.”

“Yeah,” Trika responded half-heartedly, never caring to even look at Stone. She merely wrapped her arms more tightly around her legs and let her thoughts wander.

He and Trika had been spending a great deal of time together, tucked away in the solace of his second floor medical ward. Betrayed early in their training by Jane Muir, the intrusions team of four months ago had become extremely close. Their profile as a team made them particularly unique, and the more they trained together, the better accustomed they had become to each other’s company. It had not been a rare sight to find Milan, Stone, and Trika on the gym floor, tossing each other about in a constant effort to improve their skills. The trio had embraced each other more closely than had ever been thought for a specialized group of commandos.

That's when it had all been destroyed. Milan was gone, his life given in an effort to catch Black Fire red-handed in the Core. There were many lives lost that day, and while five Talons were to eventually be replaced by fresh faces, the loss of that one in particular had hit both Stone and Trika hard.

The intrusions team was a team of merely two. *Not much of a team at all*, Stone thought with disgust. It would take a long while to find a proper replacement for Milan, and it would take even longer to find a suitable leader for the team. Until then, Stone wasn't sure what would happen to them.

He watched her rub a thumb absently on the top of the box, her gaze still distant. Stone leaned forward and began to roll his chair across the smooth floor to her seat. Moving to her left side to get a better angle at her, Stone gave her a rather direct look. He attempted to gauge her thoughts, but once again, only her grip on the black box gave any indication that she was thinking at all.

"He gave that to you, didn't he?" he asked without reserve.

Trika found his gaze and nodded, finally sitting up to lean on the back wall. Twisting the box in her hand, she gave it another look, her thousandth of the morning that day alone. "A sacred symbol of friendship," she said simply, a slight smile touching the corner of her lips. "It was the last time I saw him alive, actually." She raised an eyebrow at the box, a question forming in her mind.

“It’s like he knew something was going to happen. Everything else in his room is pretty standard. He really didn’t keep anything personal. Odd, really.”

“That’s Milan, though,” Stone responded, curious to the situation surrounding the box. “Through and through. He wasn’t one to horde too much of anything except personal weapons, I imagine.”

She smiled fully, allowing the statement to remind her of better days. “I just couldn’t bring myself to open it all this time. I hadn’t been able to even pick it up before now.”

“Are you ready to open it now?” Stone asked, watching carefully as the slicer continued to gaze at the inanimate container. From all appearances, Trika was very likely to sit there for the next few hours and just stare at the box.

Trika sighed only slightly, reluctant to say her next thought. “I’m not ready, but the rest of the squadron is,” she replied somewhat cryptically. “The new Talons aren’t going to know who Milan or any of the others even were, and the rest of us are going to have to cope with that fact.” She brought the box closer, daring to open it. “I suppose it’s time to open it whether I’m ready to do so or not.”

Stone might have stopped her if he was certain she wasn’t able to handle it. Knowing what he knew of the woman’s strength, however, he held back. Trika twisted the top of the container gently and held it firmly in her hand, unwilling to lift it away for a handful of seconds.

Possibly before she could think twice of the decision, she raised the lid with suddenness and observed the box's contents.

To anyone else, the object in question might have just been a mere trinket, an ornament on the end of a chain that was both indecipherable and meaningless. When Trika pulled the necklace out, though, her breath caught in her throat. The metallic charm was stunning, an elaborately formed calligraphic character that was symbolic in more ways than denotation alone.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Is the connection set?”

“I’m reading full signal on both levels,” Danya called back, contorting her body underneath the main projector panel in an awkward attempt to get out from the machine’s innards. Danya didn’t want to think about who had arranged the bulky communications devices in such an unorganized manner, but she had a feeling the person responsible had done it just because he or *she* had thought it was funny.

Lieutenant Owen Flynn twisted his head to the side and cracked his neck. The agony of having just spent the greater portion of an hour looking sideways at the control panel had worn on his head. “It’s about time,” he sighed, moving out of the way as Danya came from underneath the panel. “When Trika said it was going to

be hard to get to, she wasn't kidding."

Danya collapsed against the back of the control terminal, caked with dust and a few trickles of sweat. "Unfortunately," she explained with a half-annoyed smirk, "I never know when Trika is kidding or not, but most of the time, it doesn't matter anyway."

Owen took the opportunity to relax and collapsed beside Danya. He rubbed an absent-minded hand through his blonde-streaked brown hair and laughed. "Well, thanks to you, I know that and more about the crew. I really appreciate your help in getting me used to everything around here. I've only been here for a week, but I feel like I'm already a part of the squadron. More than I belonged to the Guard, in fact."

The young woman felt a strange tingling warmth rising in her cheeks for reasons that she couldn't quite explain. "It's no problem, actually. I'm just excited to have a comms officer on board so that I don't have to deal with Trika as much." A wry smile formed on her lips as she lolled her head to the side, only to fade as she found herself staring right into the surprisingly deep green eyes of Owen. She jerked back just slightly, half-startled. "It's, uh... a weird crew we've got here," she added lamely, hoping to deflect attention away from her sudden and unaccountable awkwardness.

"So I've noticed," Owen said, looking at her thoughtfully, as if he saw something in her face that merited careful consideration. "Don't let me get lost in the confusion, okay?"

Before Danya could come up with a response that was suitably witty without sounding forced, Owen jumped up and offered his hand to her. “I won’t,” she replied, taking his hand as she began to rise from her crouched position.

Maybe it was the pins and needles shooting through her cramped legs that made her footing unsteady, or maybe it was the unexpected strength with which Owen pulled her up, but in an instant, Danya found herself off the floor and on a crash-course into her protégé.

Her hands shot out, pressing into his torso to stop her forward momentum, but once again, he was already a step ahead of her, catching her forearms with a firm grip and steadying her on her feet. “Whoa, you all right?” he asked, his slight chuckle offset by the evident concern in his eyes. “I didn’t mean to rip your arms out, there.”

Danya smiled despite feeling a peculiar need to free herself from his grasp – and an even more peculiar desire to let him keep holding her. “Just fine, thanks.” She stepped back, leaning against the wall and hugging her arms across her chest. Standing next to Owen made her feel even shorter than usual; at almost two meters in height, the young comms officer was the tallest Human currently on board with the squadron. But Danya suspected that it was not merely his lofty stature causing this sudden wave of irrational self-consciousness on her part. She cleared her throat nervously. “And thanks for helping with all of this. The briefing is in two hours,

but I'll need you here thirty minutes early for some last minute checks."

"I'll be here," Owen said with a cheerful smile. "I'm going to go shower up and I'll get to running the prelims immediately."

Before Danya could blink twice about his enthusiasm, Owen was jogging out of the briefing room and toward the lifts to get ready. She just stood there for a moment, baffled at her reaction to the new Talon. *Getting in a little over your head again, eh, Danya?* she asked herself sardonically. *Because that worked out so well for you last time...*

But reminding herself of her unrequited love for Kevin Ski only added to her confusion. What she felt for Owen was... different. She liked him. A lot. What wasn't to like? The past week or working alongside him had shown her a man with genuine enthusiasm for his work and eagerness to be a part of the crew. She admired his work ethic and his easygoing attitude, and she enjoyed his company more than she might have expected. And he was nice. *Very nice.*

The kind of nice you never see in a guy who could send tingles down your spine just by looking at you the right way. And the way he looked at her sometimes...

Danya twitched at her last thought. *What in the heck is wrong with me?*

Taking a shower to clear her head before the briefing was probably a good idea.

\* \* \* \* \*

Three knocks and a disgustingly abnormal snort. Captain Karn Deloti anticipated taking cover against the impending mound of snot that was sure to follow Sergeant Bullwinkle's request to enter the CO's office. Even with the hum of the atmosphere unit, Karn could clearly hear the slide of a chair and the shuffling of flimsies behind the door. With little fanfare or enthusiasm, his CO responded.

"Come in."

Bullwinkle opened the door and showed the captain into the office. "Got another one fer ya, sir," the sergeant said, saluting as best as he could while still making a spectacle of himself. "This here is Cap'n Karn Deloti."

He took two strides forward, snapped to attention, and saluted. "Reporting for duty, sir," he followed up the introduction and handed his service record across the desk to Major Kevin Ski.

Ski took the service record and nodded simultaneously to both Sergeant Bullwinkle and the captain. "That'll be all, Sergeant. Please, have a seat, Captain."

Thankfully, Bullwinkle had been sent away. Karn took his seat in the cushioned chair nearest Major Ski's case full of trophies. Stealing a glance at the row right at his eye level, Karn began to count the various flight qualifications and awards.

“Captain Karn Deloti. From Ota Prime, eh?” Major Ski asked, taking a glance over the record in his hands.

Karn had only gotten to twenty before Ski had shot out his first question. “Yes, sir,” he responded in short, playing his reply safe and attempting to judge his CO’s reactions. Unfortunately, there were none to judge.

“And you have relatives serving the New Republic?”

“Yes, sir,” he answered again, playing this response differently. “My older brother, Cier, is a B-wing pilot with Salvo Squadron, and my cousin, Arz, is with Alpha Task Force, in the Outer Rim Territories.”

Major Ski appeared to be musing over some group of details in his record. After a moment, he asked another question rather bluntly. “Why did you request a transfer to Talon Intelligence Squadron, Captain? The 544th Special Ops Division has been seeing a lot of action on Balmorra. It also says here that you were the executive officer.”

“Yes, sir. We *had* been seeing more action in recent weeks, and I was the XO. Ever since the Reborn Emperor took over Balmorra, things have been tense. There are still a significant number of Imperial loyalists making things difficult for the government and the construction yards despite the New Republic’s best efforts.”

“That didn’t answer my question,” Ski said, a slightly amused, but frustrated look on his face.

Karn shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “It was my commanding officer, sir. That’s the reason I request-

ed a transfer.”

“Too strict? Not strict enough? Bad decision-making?” Ski wanted to know why Captain Deloti transferred, but getting the answer was almost like pulling teeth.

“No, nothing like that, sir,” Karn replied, finally giving in. “Captain Tyi Gral was a very good leader. She just... had too much of a personal interest in me,” Karn said softly, not wanting to dwell on the awkward situation and its details.

*And it was not returned.* Ski made a mental note to investigate the matter at a later time. “All right,” he returned. “Fair enough. I see that you were assigned to an X-wing squadron right after graduation. What did you do when you were attached to Illusion Squadron?”

“Piloting, mainly, sir,” Karn said, stating the obvious. “But I started some other training around that time. I got to be comfortable with vibroswords and carbine weapons while I was with the Illusions,” he continued. Ski quickly noticed how much more comfortable the captain was talking about this experience.

Deloti thought he saw a sparkle in Ski’s eye at the mention of his qualifications. “Illusion Squadron was my first assignment. I learned a lot from that experience, sir. I made some very good friends during that time, and I greatly enjoyed it. I was with the Illusions from halfway through the Thrawn campaign to shortly after Operation Shadow Hand.”

Kevin nodded, starting to get a feel for the captain.

“Why did you transfer, then?” It was a bold question he thought might rattle the newcomer.

Deloti shook his head. “I didn’t, sir. I’m sorry. I’d really like to tell you how I left the Illusions and ended up in Intelligence. I really would, sir. But it’s classified, level OS.”

“Level OS?” The major had an inquisitive look on his face. In all of his years in the business he had never heard of that classification designation.

“It stands for ‘Organa Solo,’ sir. Information only privy to the New Republic Chief of State and the director of New Republic Intelligence.”

The major shrugged his shoulder. “If it’s classified beyond my pay grade, it’s classified beyond my pay grade.” Ski decided to check into this incident and the few other classified parts in Deloti’s service record. With the right word here or there, Ski knew he could get the information.

“Regardless of how I got to the 544th from the Illusions, I am very excited to combine those experiences, sir,” Karn said, feeling a slight, momentary awkwardness. He knew that he had nothing to hide from those experiences, but the decision to classify missions wasn’t his. “Both piloting and weaponry.”

Ski smiled, his first genuinely kind effort of the late morning. “The Talons have been inactive for a few months has been inactive for a few months, but we’re going to be getting back in the business of doing just

that. I can see that you're glad to have that kind of opportunity again." His gaze had wandered to a side shelf full of images, and his eyes froze on a particularly poignant picture. Gathered into one long string, the original members of his squadron, all of them, stood with huge smiles on their faces while waiting for the image to process. Little had they all known that that particular image would be their last together as a full squadron. "We... lost quite a few people a few months back," he said, allowing himself to briefly dwell on the names of the fallen. *Kithera, Rubi, Mekial, Milan, and Rinin. That's not just personnel turnover. That's a significant blow to this squadron.*

He pushed the feelings aside. "Despite all of that, we're excited to move forward, and there's a lot of work to be done," Major Ski said, looking directly at Captain Deloti. "You're going to be in charge of the second operations group. That's Talon Thirteen."

"Yes, sir," Karn smiled, eager for the opportunity to lead. He stood in anticipation of being dismissed.

"You'll be working in Captain Rinani's old position, and that means you've got your work cut out for you," Major Ski threw out the warning, playing the matter to see how his new captain would cope. The young man, however, did not seem to be fazed by the words. "Lieutenants Cloudrifter and Flynn are a handful given the right amount of caf or *other* substances, so be ready. Schedule for the rest of the day includes a briefing in two standard hours, and you'll get to meet the other Talon

group leaders and the XO, Captain Jaren Kai.”

“Yes, sir,” Karn responded. “I’ll settle in and explore the Nest a little bit. Ensign Delph said that he’d show me to my quarters. He also took Striker, my astromech, to meet the other droids. Stumpy and H9-0, I think he said. I’m eager to meet everyone, and I’m ready to prove myself, sir.”

Major Kevin Ski held out his hand, and without hesitation, Captain Karn Deloti took it. “Welcome to the Talons, Captain. You’ve come at precisely the right time for action.

“We’re *all* quite ready to prove ourselves.”

“That’s going to make them really mad.”

## 2

The briefing room was abuzz with life for the first time in a very long while. The anticipation of a mission – a *real* mission – was enough to warrant what the Talons had affectionately dubbed *rumor intelligence*. Wild ideas as to where the Talons might be headed slid through the roster faster than one of Bullwinkle’s fried meals, and vivid chatter scampered off the walls as Captain Jaren Kai took the podium to begin the briefing.

“Attention to brief!” he called above the ruckus. The fierce roar of the chatter continued. “Attention to brief!” he called yet again, a little more force behind his voice.

Slowly but surely the Talons came to attention. Jaren wasn’t surprised to see Trika Adair as one of the last to come to attention. She seemed to be her usual, hyperactive self. But he did take special notice to how the replacements - how the newest Talons, Jaren mentally corrected himself - handled themselves.

“Thank you,” the Talons’ executive officer said, perhaps a bit too forcefully. The Talons were excited, and Jaren understood that. But they had been making significant strides in the area of discipline, and he wanted to maintain that as much as possible.

It was at that moment Jaren started to mentally count

the heads in the room. He saw that there were twelve Talons present, plus Sergeant Bullwinkle and Ensign Delph. *Telia!* he thought. *Of course.* His wife was late, as usual. And, like usual, she would end up with extra “quality time” with the good sergeant in the kitchen.

“There are some rumors flying around the Nest about an upcoming mission,” Captain Kai started to say. The Talons looked like they could barely contain themselves, eager to get out of the Nest after months of training and preparation.

“Where are we heading, Jaren?” Stone asked before the XO had a chance to finish his opening remark.

“Ty says that we’re headed to the Corporate Sector or the Rishi Maze,” Kendrick Quinn added. “But knowing Ty, I think that he’s probably wrong.”

“Hey, I resent that!” Ty Flynn started to defend himself before being cut off by Jaren.

“Like I was saying,” Jaren re-started, trying to keep control of the briefing, “there are rumors of a mission for us floating around the Nest. Major Ski will address those rumors in a minute. First, I’d like to take a minute and introduce the latest additions to Talon Intelligence Squadron.

“Captain Karn Deloti is coming to us from the 544th Special Operations Unit. He just arrived today from Balmorra, where the 544th had been seeing some heavy action. Before joining the 544th, he had been a member of Illusion Squadron, an X-wing unit based in

the Outer Rim. Captain Deloti is the new Ops II lead, Talon Thirteen.”

Karn stood up, gave a nod of his head and waved his right hand so that everyone would associate his name with his face. “Hi. I’m Captain Deloti, but please call me Karn. I’m looking forward to my time here, as the leader of the second operations group.”

Jaren caught a look from Kaiba Cloudrifter and gave her his own glance when he caught her eye. Kaiba’s facial expression changed from one of nearly resentment to one of acceptance, though he wasn’t sure she really meant it. Jaren appreciated the effort, despite the feelings running through Kaiba’s mind. Kithera Rinani would never be forgotten in the annals of Talon lore, and could never be replaced, but Karn Deloti was her new partner and the leader of Ops II, and she’d have to get used to the fact rather quickly.

Trika responded immediately with “Hi, Karn,” in an almost childlike fashion before she laughed at her own ridiculous voice. She sounded almost giddy, somewhat different than the controlled wit that usually came from the slicer.

Just before he was about to introduce the next new member of Talon Intelligence Squadron, Jaren heard the door to the briefing room open, and saw his wife, Lieutenant Telia Aris-Kai, step in as quietly as possible.

“Glad that you could join us, Telia,” Jaren said, hoping that it didn’t come across as too playful for this squadron

function. The captain was really trying to maintain some discipline in the group.

Telia shrugged her shoulders. “Sorry, sir. I wasn’t feeling too well this morning, and the alarm has been acting up again.”

There were a million things that Jaren could have said in response, but bit his tongue for the most part. “Well, you should know what that means by now. KP with Sergeant Bullwinkle.”

Telia, not seeing the “esteemed” sergeant sitting near the door, rolled her eyes and mumbled something about his terrible cooking under her breath before sitting down.

“Just cuz you thinks that I can’t do a lick o’ cookin’, Ms. Aris-Kai,” he said, “don’t mean that ol’ Sarge Bullwinkle can’t hear yer talkin’ under yer breath. Ya mean to tell me tha’ yer th’ only Talon who don’t like my cookin’? I’ll jus’ hafta make ya some more ljutefisk if it’ll convince ya otherwise!”

The room became eerily quiet after the cook’s threat. Jaren cleared his throat, and started again, not wanting Bullwinkle to have to go through with his threat. He would be happy if he never heard that food mentioned again in his lifetime.

“Lieutenant Owen Flynn has been the Nest for a few days now. I’m sure that all of you have had a chance to meet him. Owen will be heading up the new Support II unit, and his call sign is Talon Seventeen. He just transferred in from the New Republic Guard here on Corus-

cant, and is the brother of the infamous Ty Flynn.”

Owen stood up and said hello. The Talons, following Trika’s goofy lead, replied with “Hi, Owen!” And again, the slicer snickered uncontrollably at her voice and assumed facial expression. Jaren noticed that Trika was fidgeting around on her seat, like she couldn’t contain herself. He pushed that observation aside, deciding that he didn’t want to know why she was the way she was today.

Ty chose that moment to make an announcement. “Owen was adopted. That’s why the Flynn good looks stayed with me!”

Danya Faithwood, wanting to get through this briefing, rolled her eyes. She wasn’t particularly interested in listening to awkward introductions, especially with Ty’s sense of humor. “Ty, this isn’t the time for one of your lame jokes.”

Owen shook his head, almost in mock disgust. “And what Ty said isn’t true. You know, just in case anyone ever believes him.”

There was a brief pause, and no one knew what to do.

A loud snore filled the silence.

“Stone!” Jaren shouted from the podium.

Sergeant Bullwinkle made his way over to the corpsman’s seat, and gave him a good shake. “Stone!” the burly sergeant exclaimed. “Wake yerself up-a-right now, boy! Yer gunna be spendin’ some fun time with good ol’ Sergeant Bullwinkle! I’ll go get ya some caf, son!”

Stone sat up straight in his chair. “Hi, Karn!” he said, making an incorrect guess as to which Talon was being introduced to the group. Once he realized that he had been had, he couldn’t stop a guilty grin from growing on his face.

“Catching up on some sleep, Staff Sergeant Talson?” Jaren inquired, trying to stop a grin from forming on his face. This group was just *intolerable* today, it seemed.

“Yes, sir. Those kriffin’ alarms kept me up all night, sir. It won’t happen again,” Stone sheepishly replied.

“The alarms?” Jaren repeated. He hadn’t noticed anything out of the ordinary during the previous night. “What alarms? You were on base last night, *right?*”

“I didn’t hear any alarms,” Quis Heartilly said, with a hint of concern in her voice.

“Neither did I,” Qui-Sein Delph added. Delph noticed the look of relief on Quis’s face.

Having an irking suspicion that this somehow related to a certain Talon, Jaren turned his attention to Trika, who was attempting to hold back another fit of laughter. “Lieutenant Adair, would you happen to know anything about this?”

Trika nodded excitedly. “Oh, yeah. I gave the fourth floor a quick rewiring last night and randomized the alarms in Stone’s room every thirty minutes.” With that, she burst into laughter, nearly crying at the confession.

“Uh-huh,” Jaren said. He noticed that something was definitely wrong with the slicer. She hardly admitted to

a good prank until it was forced out of her. Stone, meanwhile, nodded tiredly.

“Yeah, I kinda figured she was up to something when the intruder alert that went off mentioned a ‘battalion of ravenous Ewoks.’”

“And, just the other night,” she continued, wiping a tear from her eye, “I re-coded his swipe cards so that it would electrocute him next time he re-entered the building!”

Stone jerked completely awake and gave a quirky look to his teammate. “Whoa, that one, I didn’t know. Glad you said something!” Carefully pulling the badge and swipe card off his uniform, as if he expected them to already be live, he slid them over to her. “You can reset those later on today, all right?”

Trika grabbed the cards and laughed. “Sounds good, Stoney!” And then, with her use of a somewhat accidental nickname, she snorted and completely lost it, dropping her head on the table in another fit of laughter.

Jaren just gawked at the scene. “Kriffin’ hell, Stone. What is *wrong* with her? Trika, you and Stone will be joining my lovely wife in the kitchen with Sergeant Bullwinkle.”

“I spiked her caf with a small cocktail of stuff, mostly a giddy sort of ‘truth serum.’ But for the rest? You think she’s nuts now, give her...” He turned to look at the chrono on the wall and did some mental arithmetic. “... an hour and a half? Then she’ll be *real* fun.”

Jaren closed his eyes for a split-second and allowed his mind to wonder what bad things could happen when Trika was totally off-kilter. He quickly kept going with the introductions, hoping to plow through as much as possible before a Stone-induced Trika outburst hit full-swing. “Finally, we have Lieutenant Reyanna Ortan and Sergeant Marhl Kahqiln. Like Owen, Reyanna comes to us from the New Republic Guard.”

Lieutenant Ortan stood up, and the female Bracken gave a quick six-fingered wave to the rest of the Talons.

“She has been on Coruscant, and is looking forward to doing some traveling with us on our missions,” Jaren continued. “Reyanna is Talon Eighteen.” With a slight pause, Jaren nodded to the last of the new Talons. “Last, but certainly not least, is Marhl Kahqiln. Marhl, Talon Nineteen, comes to us from the 21st Special Task Force. Her unit had been going after pirates in the Mid Rim when she heard about us Talons. I guess we have something of a reputation,” Jaren said, allowing for a moment of chuckling. “She thought that she would fit right in.”

Marhl stood up. The Togorian purred softly, pleased to officially be part of the Talons. [Thank you,] she said. [I’m really looking forward to serving with the Talons.] The feline alien’s whiskers twitched in excitement before she sat down.

“Major Ski will be here in a moment,” Jaren said, “but he had a few announcements for me to make.” The XO shuffled through a few flimsies before selecting one to

pick up and read. “First announcement... Sergeant Bullwinkle will be serving lunch at 1300 today. Expect it to be extra good, because it’s the first day with all of the new members,” Jaren caught himself from again calling them “replacements.” Captain Kai had to remind himself that it wasn’t fair to Karn, Owen, Reyanna, and Marhl to constantly refer to them like that. They were new members of the team, and each would be a very valuable asset during their operations. If they didn’t feel welcomed, though, things could wind up dangerously different.

“Yes-ir-ee,” Bullwinkle said, returning from out of nowhere to slap a hot mug of caf in front of Stone, who was cautiously watching the sergeant out of one open eye. “I hope y’all like Colo snout!”

Kaiba felt the vomit rising into the back of her throat. “But it’s like, all teeth!” she dared to claim.

“Second announcement,” Jaren interrupted before Bullwinkle could retort, “everyone’s service records should be updated with the latest certification programs run here at the Nest or at the Intelligence Academy. If there are any issues regarding those recent certifications, let either Major Ski or me know, and we’ll see to it.

“Finally, we have a group commendation from the New Republic Intelligence Support Division. Lieutenant K’ritha inspected our improvements to the Nest last week, and was really impressed with what he saw.”

The Talons let out a few cheers, but Trika’s cheering was the loudest by far. No doubt it was due to Stone’s

handiwork. The Talons as a whole had worked hard to make numerous upgrades to the formerly dilapidated facility, including a lab that the University of Coruscant would be jealous to have for Quis to work in.

“On a related note, we need to remember to keep this place clean, now that it’s top notch,” Jaren concluded. Just like chrono-work, Jaren looked up and saw Major Kevin Ski standing right outside the briefing room door. “With that, let’s get this briefing started. Attention on deck!”

The double doors to the briefing room swung open at Major Ski’s push. In amazing unison, the Talons jumped to their feet and snapped to attention. A miracle, it could have been said of the harmony, and a combination of a lot of sweat, tears, discipline, and hard liquor to forget the pain of attempting bringing them all together. Kevin Ski marched down the middle aisle at a comfortable enough pace to observe his crew for a brief moment, but not long enough to prolong his trip. “At ease,” he called to his Talons. “Sit down and grab that caf. We’ve got a lot of ground to cover.”

Kevin took the podium from Jaren and waved for him to take his seat with his wife. Unfortunately, the support team’s table was just a table for two now, the empty seats once occupied a grim reminder of the serious nature of the intelligence business. Shuffling through a set of flimsies and setting a folder to his side, Kevin eyed the group as a whole. “Good morning,” he began. “Captain Kai has

gotten all of the morning announcements and introductions out of the way so we can move on to bigger and better things. Take no offense at this, for those of you who are new: you've got a lot to catch up on and very little time to do it in. You're sitting with teammates who have gotten first-hand experience battling foes beyond anything you might have seen out in the fleet. Special Ops Intelligence is different work altogether, and while I know that each of you will be a unique asset to this crew, you're not going to get eased into our world in a padded jumpsuit. I hope you're all ready."

Trika appeared as if she were about to jump right out of her seat, and Kevin caught it. With an absent finger pointed at Stone, Kevin continued to shuffle through his flimsies. "Staff Sergeant Talson, what did you do to her, and what did she do to you to start it?"

*He's good*, Stone considered as he stumbled for a really good answer. *Knows us better than anyone. Knows all of us better than anyone else could ever have done.* "Guilty of spiked caf, sir," he said simply while raising his right hand. "And she's guilty of waking me up every thirty minutes with a false alarm."

Kevin nodded slowly, still analyzing his next section of work. It was almost as if he had known it all along, or was he simply expecting this sort of thing now? "Just keep her quiet. And you'll be doing some extra -"

"I've already taken care of that, sir," Jaren spoke up from his seat. "There will be extra help in the kitchen

tonight, as usual.”

“Good.” Kevin finally looked up, ready to officially begin. “We’re going to be running through the situational awareness portion of this brief in full, but it will be quick, so new Talons, pay attention and take notes. Lieutenant Faithwood, the datapads, please? What you’re receiving right now is a datapad with the notes on everything that Danya and I are going to be covering this morning.” Talon Two carried her stack of datapads down the middle aisle and began to hand them to the team members closest to the middle to pass to their teammates. “Four months ago, Talon Intelligence Squadron suffered a serious setback that no one present is likely to ever forget. But it didn’t start there. There is a trail that begins with this squadron’s inception and meanders everywhere except where it makes sense.

“It’s no secret that I was once a lieutenant colonel, well on my way to becoming an O-6 and beyond,” Ski continued without even the slightest hint of sadness. He was far beyond that emotion at this point, only the purest passion remaining where confused emotions had once ruled. After months of thinking very seriously about his work, his career, his *life*, Kevin Ski had used up most of whatever malaise had been buried deep within. “It’s also no secret that I’ve made enemies around the intelligence community for simply attempting to do what was right and good. That’s where you all came in, at first, anyway.” He paused, cocking an eyebrow at his next state-

ment. “I was assigned as your babysitter. I didn’t know it at the time, but you all came to me because you were hand-selected to have the best chance to take me down... to take us down. Some of you weren’t always the best people, but when I refused to be forced out by bullies with a higher rank and pay grade, I accepted responsibility for you and you became my crew. And when I took responsibility for us as Talons, I intended to do everything that I had to in order to make us successful.”

*What a mess*, he thought, only stopping to receive a short flashback to what had happened to his squad in a mere matter of weeks all those months ago. “We started training and ‘accidentally’ uncovered a mole, a conspiracy, and a hidden mercenary base just a jump from Coruscant. You all have read the reports on those incidents, but they’re listed in full on the datapad for reference. The IC then received a crushing blow at the Intelligence Gala, and we then knew we weren’t just dealing with a small organization of thieves and bandits. After a misguided mission with roots in the Intelligence High Council, we Talons understood the need to rule ourselves or we would all surely be dead by now. Some connections on the Senate’s intelligence budgeting committee helped us become semiautonomous, and while we still have to obey orders from the IHC, we don’t have to tell them how we go about our business any longer, which is as large of a victory as we’ve ever had around here.”

*Victories*. He mentally spat upon the idea of the word,

wondering if his crew would actually taste of it before something happened to all of them. One botched mission that stumbled into a victory and two failed missions that cost lives was not a good score on their record. “I’m assuming everyone has read the official reports on the events of that day four months ago...”

“They’re all a bunch of liars,” Kaiba shot out before she could rethink the act. “The second page makes no mention of Black Fire being on site, and the dead operatives are being labeled as being of ‘unknown origin.’ Whatever the hell that means.”

Owen sat up. “Well, that’s the Senate’s official cover for the public, right? A bunch of whacko terrorists seized the two senators in the name of some cause?”

Danya shook her head, tapping the machine in her hand. “It’s all in the notes I’ve given you,” she referred everyone to his own datapad. “Even on the classified side, all filed reports are being kept suspiciously vague. At this point, we’re not sure how much the rest of the IC knows about Black Fire.”

“Kind of disturbing,” Karn said, sitting back a little in his chair, trying to take all of the information in. “Where the ‘need to know’ begins and the intel sharing ends?”

Kevin smiled, giving a slight nod at the thought. “We’re all not really sure where the IHC’s policy stands right now,” he continued. “I’ve contacted various other intel groups and have kept an eye on their current tasking. Let’s just say that some are being led on some really

crazy womprat chases and others are purposefully being guided away from leads in the cause of pursuing other equally-powerful organizations, much like Black Fire. In each case, though, the sharing of intel is being frowned upon, most citing security leaks of various sorts.”

“But that’s *always* been a concern in the intel business,” Kendrick perked up. “If you share too much information, it’s sure to get out to the wrong people somehow. And if you don’t share it, the right people don’t get it when they need it. Or as quickly as they need it.”

“Most of the intel groups are more hesitant to share at this point in time because of the Gala bombing and the recent surge in ambushes in the sky,” Kevin added with a slight displeasure tainting his face. “We Talons haven’t really seen a lot of action in the air, but those squadrons who are more tailored to air battles have been seeing surprising resistance to their presence on other worlds and, in some cases, have been ambushed upon exiting hyperspace.” The thought made his blood boil. “We’re learning through our inactivity that this corruption and manipulation is far more widespread than just a few ranking officials being perturbed at my personal existence.”

Telia sighed. “Likely to cover up backdoor deals and whatever it is they do. This goes deep, and we could discuss it *forever*.”

“Indeed,” Kevin said, waving at his partner to prepare her part of the brief, “which is why we’re not going to sit

around happy and wait for the same to happen to us. We made a move toward autonomy, and that's what's going to preserve our cause. We're no longer merely 'Special Ops.' We've moved into 'Black Ops' and we're not going back now. While the IHC can give direct orders to other squadrons and watch them execute, Talon Intelligence Squadron is going to remain loyal to its directives and do what we see fit."

"That's going to make them really mad," Quis said, the rarest smirk on her face.

"Already has," Danya interjected, taking the podium next to Major Ski. "The IHC really doesn't know what to do with us, and that's one of the reasons we've been inactive for four months. Yes, it's done us good to get this place up to par and to heal from what has happened to us, but the IHC could have, at any point in time, called us to duty with a new directive. Since they don't have the resources to make up a new directive for us, they've kept quiet."

Kevin let a satisfied grin show the pleasure in that particular analysis. "We're sticking with the old objective that the IHC happened to give us just after the Intelligence Gala, just because *I* want to," he told his team, moving back a step to allow Danya to prepare her materials. "They told us to go get Black Fire, and although that particular mission was a mess from the start, the directive is clear. Lieutenant Faithwood is going to be sharing with you the details of specifically what we know of

Black Fire and we'll later specify what that means for us in the near future."

Even as he dropped from the stage and took his seat with the rest of the operations team, the rest of the Talons were anticipating the real news about a new mission... one on their terms. Danya began her part of the brief, and although essential, her information was probably not entirely on everyone's mind as much as the potential to kill a Black Fire operative or two.

"Before we proceed, various Talons accumulated this information over the past four months through our own experiences with Black Fire, so this is mostly internal data," Danya began, pulling up her slideshow onto the back projector screen. The first image that appeared was a wide-view plot of the galaxy. "Black Fire is a monster in more ways than one. The size and scope of the organization is unknown, but what we've compiled here is a sampling of known Black Fire hubs, governments and groups that either have known operatives within the organizations or are supporters or suppliers of Black Fire themselves."

Even though half of the Talons had worked on the brief and had done the research themselves, the collective gasp was still impressive. The newer Talons, unfamiliar with the totality of the experience with the mercenaries, were especially vocal.

"All of the blue dots, you said?" Reyanna frowned, her eyes unable to even comprehend the number on

the screen.

Danya nodded grimly. “No government or business will express loyalty to Black Fire, and even the name is hush-hush. So, we’ve had to effectively do more digging and analyze more chatter than normal. These blue dots represent a location where there has been a known Black Fire sighting or a money or supply transaction. Anything else is mere speculation at this point.”

The numbers were still impressive. There was no denying that. Every other planet on the map seemed to have a blue dot on it, and at least one in ten had multiple dots.

“Do we have any idea about a headquarters?” Stone asked, a little less drowsy since the real briefing had begun.

“At this point, no,” she regretted to say. “We’re assuming at this point that they keep their headquarters very mobile or very small, or both. We cannot forget that they possess at least one cruiser, and probably other ships, as well. And honestly, any of these locations could secretly house Black Fire and its personnel. Whether government or business, on the surface, they all seem legit.”

A collective groan swept through the Talons. Danya continued, ignored her own urge to moan at the idea that Black Fire was just that covert and that large. It seemed impossible. She flipped the slide. A collage of pictures covered the slide, all of the same deadly duo and the few images that actually existed of them. “From the data swipe that Trika managed during our... *war games*, and from the hair needle that we recovered from the Senate

offices, we've ascertained the identities of the two most important Black Fire operatives that we have found so far. From the details that we've collected, we're assuming that they are the leaders of the organization and not mere operatives at all."

Danya hadn't meant to pause, but the moment of silence was enough time to irritate more than a few of the Talons. Hell, it irritated *her* to even glance back at the slide. There she was; there *he* was. The Talons had basically gone head-to-head with the best that Black Fire had to offer. In particular, *she* had come close to losing her life to the man in the images.

They had all lost five comrades to the two. Understandably, they were all irritated.

"The woman is Sondara Carre," Danya said, finding that the name rolled off her tongue, but didn't settle well in her stomach afterward. "Genetics left from her hair needle and data from retina scans at the underground base on Vandor-3 confirm Carre's identity. All records of her family and past are missing. What we do know is that she has worked her way into this position and is about as heartless as the most vile that the Empire ever had to offer."

"She's not afraid to use those hair thingies, that's for sure," Telia hissed and took a sip of water.

Danya swallowed hard, finding the power to remain impassive somewhere in her gut. "The man is Re'deis Krycek. His identity was confirmed through fingerprint-

ing and voice analysis from our mission after the Gala.”

“Fingerprinting from where?” Karn asked, not seeing a full analysis like Carre’s needle in the previous notes.

The hacker stared straight ahead, gathering her strength once again and attempting not to show how bothered she was at reliving the events at the Senate office. “Captain Rinani’s body was the source of most of the genetic material, however, Krycek only left partial prints on her clothes and neck.” *He apparently didn’t hold onto her in a full grip.* “Stone lifted the full prints off *my* neck, actually. That’s how we got the identity.”

Karn looked almost sorry he had asked, but seemed satisfied with the answer. He nodded toward her as if to give some sort of approval for her to continue. “What we do know about Krycek is rather vague, but it helps to establish just who we’re really up against so there’s no misunderstanding about the size of this task.

“Krycek is a brilliant man. We’re not sure where he came from or what he’s done in the past, but his entrance into the Black Fire organization saw its holdings grow exponentially. He is a strategist and a thinker. Although we don’t know his education level, everything we’ve gathered points toward his being a mastermind of multiple subjects, and he has particular love of everything about war.” Danya took a deep breath. “In your notes, I’ve written down everything I recall from my own encounter with him, word for word in some parts. To summarize, Krycek knows what you’re going to do before

you know that you're thinking about doing it. And he's not just a thinker. He can definitely put whatever he studies to action. At this point, we're calling him a warlord."

The pictures hung on the screen for another handful of seconds. Just one glance would have been enough, but they lingered... lingered as if from a haunting.

Every moment they were alive while their friends were dead truly was like a haunting. As Danya took one more look at them, she again memorized their faces. The more it burned, the greater passion she would have to work toward catching them. Carre's porcelain skin. The delicate upkeep of her hair. Stunning silver eyes. And then, Krycek. A chill came over her. His features, so bland to a normal viewer, struck her right in the face. His deep brown eyes she could have sworn were inherited straight from some devil or demon.

She flipped the slides off and cleared her throat. "Review the notes I've given you over lunch and make sure that you're ready to take your own in the brief after lunch. We've got the intelligence to back us now and we're ready to plan a strike to take these bastards out. You'll find that we've already marked a number of strong targets as possible candidates, so review those as well and be ready to discuss the possibilities of a mission in the next two to three weeks."

And with that, several Talons let loose a hoot that could only be described as something near excitement, if not downright lunacy. Ski stood and waved his hands at

his Talons. “Bullwinkle will send someone when lunch is served. Go grab something to eat and be back by 1400. That gives you plenty of time to study up on what we’ll be covering and to visit the medical wing if you need to after lunch, for those of you brave enough to try Sergeant Bullwinkle’s ‘cuisine.’”

“Thank you, sir!” Kendrick called, anticipating a date with Stone in his future.

Major Ski nodded toward the doors, smiling genuinely. “Talons, dismissed.”

“This is *crazy*.”

# 3

“You mentioned that you were in the 21st Special Operations Group,” Owen Flynn said, trying to start a casual conversation with Marhl. Owen, Reyanna, and Marhl were sitting in the mess hall, a few minutes early for Bullwinkle’s “special” lunch.

[Yes, I was,] the Togorian said, not necessarily volunteering much information along the way. Owen noticed a fire in her eyes after mentioning her old unit. It was as if there was unfinished business to be taken care of with the 21st. Marhl clenched her fists, and her retractable claws extended. Owen quickly decided that he wouldn’t want to get on her bad side.

“What was your assignment?” Reyanna inquired, her face expressionless despite the interest in her voice. The female Bracken wanted to start her time with the Talons off right. That hadn’t always happened in the past, due to her unusual, near-Human, but almost-hauntingly different appearance.

[We were hunting pirates,] Marhl said. [But for me, it was much more personal.]

“Yeah?” Owen asked, prodding Marhl along in her story. He was interested to see where this was going.

[Yes. I was born on Togoria twenty-five standard

years ago. When I was five, a spaceship crash-landed near Caross, the capital. Crashes aren't uncommon on Togoria. We didn't know it at the time, but the freighter belonged to a slave trader. He and his crew got their ship fixed up without causing much trouble. But then, they decided to take a parting "gift." They kidnapped a handful of kittens. I was one of them. My mother tried to stop the slave trader, but he would have none of it. She charged him, but she was no match to his superior weaponry.]

Marhl's look somehow became more intense than it previously had. It was still painful for her to talk about all these years later. [My father left Togoria to try and find me, showing his dedication. Males rarely leave the planet, unless in situations like this. He eventually found me, three years later, on Junction V. How he managed to secure my release is still a mystery to me,] Marhl continued. [I imagine that it wasn't easy, but my father wouldn't let me be enslaved. Needless to say, I think that pirates and slavers are the scum of the galaxy.]

Reyanna nodded her powder-white head, her silky strands of shimmering brown hair moving in harmony. "Anyone with your experience would certainly agree."

"That's rough," Owen added. "So, I guess you've dedicated your life to stopping those scum?"

Marhl nodded. [Yes. As soon as I was old enough, I joined the New Republic, and pretty quickly ended up working with intelligence on anti-slavery operations.

That's how I ended up with Lieutenant Callisto's 21st Special Operations Group. We've been tracking various slave traders, like the Thalassian Slavers, the Zygerrian Slavers Guild, the Karazak Slaver's Cooperative, and the like.]

Flynn nodded. He was glad to be getting to know "his people," the members of Support II. If he and his teammates were to have any chance of catching up to the older Talons who had already experienced Black Fire action, he and the rest of his unit were going to have to work as a very cohesive group. "What was your job?"

[Infiltration and enforcement,] Marhl said, with a grin creeping in on her feline face. [Once we would target a specific cell, Val Cigam and I would go undercover. I would pose as a new recruit and Cigam would pose as my recently captured slave, showing my worth to the pirates. We would try and confirm our suspicions. Once that was done, I would give a signal to Lieutenant Callisto, and their base or starship would be attacked. We'd find our way out, and meet up with the rest of the 21st.]

Owen figured that Marhl took great pleasure in performing her job with Lieutenant Callisto's unit. He was curious as to why she left to join the Talons. "I can tell that you really enjoyed your assignment, Marhl. Why did you request a transfer?"

Marhl's face grew dark once again. Owen swore that he saw every muscle in the Togorian's arms and legs twitch in frustration. [Request a transfer?] Marhl growled, in-

dignation in her voice. [I did not request a transfer.]

“Were you forced here?” Reyanna asked, her curiosity growing. Like most Bracken, Reyanna was very empathetic and could easily pick up on the emotions of others.

[Some people thought that I was becoming too good at my job. Mainly Captain Kast Cray’ton, a flimsy pusher with the Special Operations Division staff. And we were good at it. Cigam is a Chev, and was convincing in playing the role of a slave. Like me, Cigam had been enslaved, like most Chevs are. But I guess we took things too far too many times. Especially on our last mission. Cray’ton pulled some strings and had his father, Facil Cray’ton, a big wig on the Intelligence High Council, send me to the Talons. He also assigned Cigam to push flimsies around in the fleet.]

“That’s really not fair,” Reyanna said, looking dejected on behalf of her teammate.

“We’re glad that you’re here,” Owen offered. He spotted Qui-Sein Delph coming out of the kitchen, carrying four pitchers of red bug juice.

“Hey there, Qui-Sein,” Owen called to the ensign.

“Hey, Owen,” Delph replied. He put the pitchers down, and made his way to the table where Support II was sitting. “What are you guys up to?”

“Oh, you know. The usual,” Owen said with a grin on his face. “Plotting to take over the galaxy.”

Delph chuckled. “Well, Bullwinkle says that lunch’ll be ready in about five minutes. Can one of you gather the

rest of the Talons?”

Owen nodded. “Yeah, I’ll do that.” He stood up, and left the mess hall, probably heading for Danya Faithwood’s room first.

[What about you?] Marhl asked Reyanna. She was curious to learn more about her teammates after explaining herself, albeit far from completely.

Delph decided to stick around for a minute or two. He was sure that Reyanna had an interesting story, and anything was better than being around Bullwinkle at meal time.

“I’m from Bracka, in the Anbulba Star Cluster,” Reyanna began. “It’s not too far from the Tingel Arm, just past the Corporate Sector. And I’m a Bracken. Most Humans consider Brackens to be frightening looking. Our pale skin and eyes remind them of characters from children’s horror stories. It’s not easy dealing with them.”

Reyanna looked up at Delph. “No offense.”

He shook his head. “None taken. I’m actually an Epi-canthix, not a Human. But I know the feeling.”

It was Reyanna’s turn to shake *her* head. “Sorry, Ensign. You *don’t*. You easily fit in with Humans. You look just about exactly the same as, say someone from Sluis Van or Manda. I don’t have that luxury. The Empire tried to subjugate the Anbulba Star Cluster about ten years before the Battle of Yavin. Their xenophobic policies tried to destroy my homeworld. Eventually, they decided that it wasn’t worth the effort to defeat my people, but unleashed a devastating virus on Talin, one of the more

important Bracken colonies.

“Naturally, many Bracken wanted to join the Rebel Alliance, and later the New Republic, to fight back. But despite the numerous species serving in the New Republic, like Ankanians, Mon Calamari, Zabraks, and Svivreni, Humans always seemed to be dominant. The Humans of the New Republic were often prejudiced against the Bracken, although they didn’t take drastic measures against us, like the Empire did.”

“I’m sorry,” Delph said. “I’d never heard of that. It’s sickening.”

[My condolences, as well,] Marhl offered.

Reyanna shrugged her shoulders. “It doesn’t make it any easier, but it’s a cause that I do believe in. No matter how flawed the New Republic is, it is infinitely better than Palpatine’s Empire.

“I managed to get into a military preparatory school, and then an intelligence posting. That’s how we first met, Ensign Delph.” Reyanna looked the ensign in the eye.

“Yes, it is ma’am. Was the New Republic Guard your first assignment?” he asked.

“It was. It taught me many things,” she said. “Especially about dealing with Humans.” It was easy to hear the disgust in her voice. “Many of them are horribly cruel to those who appear differently, but we have to make the most of the situation. And Major Ski seems to be professional. Maybe they are not all prejudiced xenophobes.”

[No, they are not all like that.]

Just then, the three of them heard a ruckus. Delph checked his chrono. It was lunch time, 1300 sharp.

One by one, the Talons filed into the mess hall. First Danya and Owen. Next came Quis and Ken. Karn, Ty, Stone, and Trika entered as a group, although it appeared the energetic slicer wasn't going to stay very long after seeing the meal. Then came Jaren and Telia, just as Sergeant Bullwinkle brought the main dish out of the kitchen.

“Let's eat!” the sergeant roared.

Kendrick took one look at the Colo snout, and began to feel nauseous. He looked at Quis, who was looking directly at him with a concerned eye. He attempted to wave a hand her way as if to say he would be all right.

“Medic!” Quis shouted, before Ken had even passed out.

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“... So then Kendrick says, ‘How bad could it possibly be?’” Danya tossed Owen a sidelong glance, her gray-green eyes sparkling with mischief. “Which is, of course, one of those rhetorical questions one should never, *ever* ask. Especially if one is talking about our beloved Sergeant Bullwinkle's unique culinary... skills.”

Owen wrinkled his nose in disgust. “Yeah, I gathered as much.”

Danya grinned up at him impishly, and Owen found

his attention briefly sidetracked by the disarming way her nose crinkled up when she smiled like that. “Unfortunately, poor Kendrick was not so fortunate. One bite of the coleslaw, and...” The young hacker crossed her eyes and pantomimed keeling over. “Next thing you know, we’re calling for the medic.”

Even as he winced in sympathy, Owen laughed along with Danya. “Poor Kendrick! I guess I should be thanking you for steering me away from the daily special, or his fate could have been my own.”

“Oh, no need to thank me,” replied Danya, still smiling. “I couldn’t in good conscience let the good sergeant’s cooking claim another innocent victim, especially not a fellow computer specialist.” She patted his arm in a manner of camaraderie. “Us techie types have to watch each other’s backs, right?”

“I suppose so,” said Owen, making a heroic effort not to follow his brain’s overly literal interpretation of Danya’s wording. He ran a slightly sweaty hand through his hair, hoping that the attraction he felt towards his squadmate was not as glaringly obvious to the other Talons as it felt to him. Especially to Danya. Or to his brother. *Oh, man. Ty would never, ever let you live it down...* Owen cleared his throat, trying to think of a way to change the subject so that he wouldn’t have to keep thinking about watching Danya’s back. Or anything else in the vicinity of her back. Not that he would, of course. “But... if that’s the case, then how do you explain Trika?”

Danya giggled, her nose crinkling up cutely once more. “Owen, I’ve stopped even trying to explain Trika. She operates according to some strange internal logic that is completely incomprehensible to anyone else.” She turned her face away from him to look out over Coruscant’s cityscape. A light breeze from the constant airspeeder traffic ruffled her hair, blowing a loose strand into her eyes, and Owen had to fight an urge to reach over and tuck it back behind her ear. “Still,” added Danya after a thoughtful pause, “she’s not so bad when you get to know her.”

“Yeah?” prompted Owen, curious to hear Danya’s take on the intrusions team slicer. He’d spoken with Trika a few times, but he still had no idea what to make of her.

“Yeah.” Danya shrugged. “I mean, I still think she’s crazy, don’t get me wrong. But beneath her sarcasm and her constant pranks and her totally off-kilter way of looking at everything, she knows her specialty inside and out, and... well, she actually can be a pretty good friend.” She paused again, then added, “Just, you know... crazy.”

Danya smiled at Owen in such a warm and genuine way that he couldn’t help grinning back at her. He wondered if she was always this candid and friendly with everyone, or if maybe... but no, he was getting ahead of himself. *She barely knows you*, he reminded himself. *She’s probably going out of her way to be nice because you’re new and, therefore, clueless.* Still, being on the receiving end of that smile made his heart beat a little

faster - quite a feat, considering that his pulse seemed to quicken just from being around her. *Admit it, Owen. You've got it bad for this one.*

"Something funny?" Danya's question startled him out of his thoughts and into the realization that he had been grinning mindlessly at her for several moments longer than could be easily justified.

"Oh, no... not really," he stammered, trying to think of something he could say that might convey his interest without seeming too forward and running the risk of rejection. "I suppose I was just wondering how a girl like you ended up in a squadron full of crazies and troublemakers."

The smile returned to her lips, a bit more coy than before. "A girl like me, huh?"

"Well... yes," Owen replied. "I mean, uh... as far as I can tell, you're not crazy. And, well... you don't seem like a troublemaker..."

Danya laughed wryly. "Well, I guess I know that you haven't cracked into my personnel file and read up on me, or you'd know that I've been cited for... let me think here..." She counted the charges off on her fingers. "Knowingly providing false information to New Republic Intelligence, accessing classified data without proper clearance, disobeying the direct orders of a superior officer, and I think they threw in some general catch-all reprimand for having a bad attitude. 'Conduct unbecoming' or some such."

Owen blinked. As much as he'd come to expect hon-

est answers from Danya - it was one of the many things he found appealing about her - he was a bit taken aback at her candor. "So you really are a troublemaker after all. I never would have guessed."

Danya sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. "I made a few mistakes," she admitted, her voice and expression turning more serious. "I lied about my age when I first signed up, and forged the necessary documentation to support it. They didn't find out until after I reached legal age, so they didn't kick me out, but that was the first mark on my record. The classified data was an honest mistake. I, uh..." She paused, as if embarrassed by what she was about to say. "Well, I got carried away. I was cracking files from the Imperial Archives, and I had these pieces of data, fragments really, that weren't quite adding up, but I could just feel that there was something important. I had this... hunch, you know?" Owen nodded, and she continued. "So I followed my hunch, and it led me into a restricted area, and... somehow I didn't even realize what I was doing until after I'd done it. And I found what I was looking for, and I was right, it was important. But..." She trailed off with a shrug. "I still shouldn't have been there in the first place." She went quiet, staring out at the skyscrapers.

After a few moments of silence, Owen spoke. "What about the citation for insubordination?" Danya turned her gaze back on him bemusedly. "I mean, I know it's not really my business," he continued, feeling a bit awk-

ward for bringing up the subject, “but now you’ve got me really curious.”

“Oh, *that*.” Danya crinkled her nose once more, this time in distaste. “I spent the first several years of my military career stuck behind various desks, and I just... felt like I could be doing more. So I decided to apply to get into Special Operations, but one of my superior officers blocked my request. He said he didn’t think I was cut out for SpecOps, that it would be a waste of my time and my talent.”

“So what did you do?” asked Owen.

“I went over his head,” Danya replied. “I’d made some contacts in SpecOps during a previous assignment, and through them, I managed to qualify for special operations placement. But it came with a cost.” She sighed again. “My superior officer was not pleased. He decided to make my career in SpecOps a living hell. And since my record was already a bit spotty, it didn’t take too much string-pulling on his part to get me assigned to Talon Squad right off the bat. So that’s how a girl like me ends up in a squad like this. What about you?”

Unprepared for this abrupt change in subject, Owen laughed nervously. “Well, if you’re a troublemaker, I guess that makes me one of the crazies, since I actually requested to be transferred here.”

“What made you decide to do that?” Danya asked, looking perplexed. “I mean, don’t get me wrong... I wouldn’t trade my squadmates for anything. But it’s no

secret that we're outcasts in the intelligence community, and since your brother's in the squad, you probably knew that things are even more complicated than they appear from the outside."

"For much the same reason you decided to go into SpecOps," Owen replied, looking out at the horizon briefly before turning back to Danya's attentive gaze. "I had a great assignment in the Republic Guard with Lieutenant Palrr's squadron. A lot of people would've killed for that position, I guess. And I did some good work there, but..." He paused, trying to find the right words. "I just always felt like there was something *missing*, and I just couldn't figure out what it was. And then... the day that Black Fire bombed the Senate building..." Owen noticed Danya wince slightly, her hand going briefly to her throat. "It was probably the worst day of my life... of a lot of people's lives. I'd never witnessed that sort of destruction firsthand. But it made me realize what was missing. I didn't want to just be defending the New Republic against evil on that scale. I wanted to help seek out the people responsible for that attack and make sure that they never did it again. Like you, I felt I could be doing *more*." He rested his chin in his hand. "Of course, that didn't sit well with my brother."

Danya nodded, her expression thoughtful. "Things are a bit tense between you and Ty, aren't they? Why is that, if you don't mind my asking?"

Owen let out a sigh. He didn't often talk about the situa-

tion, but after Danya's forthright honesty about her past, he felt more at ease with discussing the subject. "It's a bit complicated," he admitted. "Our family... well, we come from Blonus. You've probably heard the jokes about an honest politician on Blonus being like a hairless albino Wookiee?" At Danya's slight nod, Owen continued. "All too true. There is no such creature. Pretty much every government official, from the highest level on down, is in the pockets of the smuggling organizations that operate out of the area. And the corruption just filters down from there, to the point where most folks are either exploiting someone else for profit and personal gain, or being exploited themselves - and sometimes both."

"That sounds awful," said Danya quietly.

Owen nodded. "It's pretty bad. My family was at the bottom of the pecking order. We were constantly bullied by our landlords. They'd threaten everything from eviction to outright violence to extort more money. Law enforcement turned a blind eye, of course. And Ty..." Owen trailed off briefly. "Well, he'd gotten mixed up with a pretty bad crowd, himself. Our parents were constantly having to loan him money so that he could pay back his debts. Then our dad lost his job, and it got to the point where our parents were having to dip into what little savings we had just to keep a roof over our head and Ty out of trouble, but we all knew that we couldn't keep doing that forever. We would have run out of credits within months."

Danya frowned. "So what happened?"

Owen exhaled slowly. "Ty decided to leave home and join the military. He didn't tell any of us beforehand, just sent us a message after he'd already enlisted. He said he wanted to make things right, not just by giving the family a source of income, but by getting himself away from the bad influences in his life and actually doing something productive and meaningful. He said he was doing it because he wanted me to have the opportunities he could have had if he'd made better choices, which to him meant getting a scholarship and going to school as far away from Blonus as I could."

"And instead of going off to university," said Danya, a look of comprehension dawning in her eyes, "you decided to join the military yourself."

"Precisely." Owen sighed again. "Apparently, he's willing to make sacrifices so that I can have a better life, but he's not willing to let me choose what sort of life *I* want to have. But I'm not going to let that stop me. I made my choice for my own reasons. And while it may not be the life he'd like me to have, I've never had a moment's regret."

He closed his eyes for a moment, then felt a soft, warm pressure against his hand. Opening his eyes, he found Danya's fingers twined with his. For a moment, his heart stood still while his mind raced, wondering what she intended by the gesture. He forced himself to remain silent, to wait for her to say something that would

make her meaning clear.

Instead, she merely smiled, and gave his hand a squeeze before releasing it. “Let’s see if you still feel that way after a few months of Trika’s pranks and Bullwinkle’s chow.” She swung her feet back onto the roof and stood, stretching her legs. “We’d really better get back inside, though. The briefing will be resuming shortly, and I really don’t feel like getting kitchen duty.”

He smiled back as he, too, stood, and the smile stayed on his face as the two Talons made their way back to the lifts. *Let Trika and Bullwinkle do their worst.* As long as Danya was around, Owen couldn’t imagine ever having a moment’s regret about joining Talon Squad.

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“You wanted to see me?”

Major Ski looked up from the mountain of flimsies currently occupying his desk, along with a half-eaten sandwich. He’d chosen to take his lunch break in his office after seeing the good sergeant’s prepared meal, theoretically in order to sort through some of the bureaucratic mess that always accompanied new additions to a squadron. However, in truth, there was another messy situation that he hoped to resolve, and while he wasn’t looking forward to dealing with it, he knew it had to be done.

Kaiba stood in the doorway, an energy bar in one hand and her habitual extra-large mug of caf in the other. The

expectant look on her face was quickly giving way to puzzlement, and Ski realized that she had asked him a question, and he hadn't answered. He cleared his throat. "Oh... um, right. Right." He gestured to the chair across from his own before noticing that it, too, was covered by a stack of flimsies. Feeling somewhat self-conscious, he stood and picked them up, giving Kaiba an apologetic glance before he sat back down. "Please, come in. Have a seat."

The blonde engineer entered the room and sank gracefully into the chair, crossing her long legs at the knee. "Is... everything okay?" she asked. She took a bite of her energy bar, peering intently at Kevin's face as she crunched. "You *shound*..." She finished chewing and swallowed. "You sound sort of weird. Something you want to talk about?"

Kevin studied her quietly for a moment. Talon Fourteen was an attractive woman, to be sure, and her casual attitude and energetic personality complemented her good looks. "Actually, yes." He paused, trying to think of the right way to phrase what he knew he needed to say. He kept his voice as conversational as possible. "Kaiba... this isn't easy for me. I just..."

His tone seemed to worry her, and she put down her mug of caf halfway through bringing it to her lips. Her usually animated face grew still, although a crumb clinging to her top lip partially negated the seriousness of her expression. "What is it?"

Kevin took a deep breath. "I think that we should start... seeing less of each other," he explained, trying to find the gentlest way possible to dash the hopes that he had a strong feeling his subordinate had been harboring for some months now.

She blinked at him, uncomprehending. For a moment, she didn't speak, and when she did, her tone was disbelieving. "All right. Let me get this straight. You... called me into your office... to see me... to tell me that you don't want to see me." She made a sound halfway between a laugh and a sigh of vexation. "Now that is male logic at its finest."

"Kaiba, I'm serious. Listen to me." Ski waited until he was sure that he had her full attention before he continued. "I know we've been spending a lot of time together since..." He trailed off, unsure of how to put it. *Since the galaxy went to hell in a handbasket*, he dryly thought to himself.

It had all started after the bombing of the intelligence gala. Both Kevin and Kaiba had been seriously wounded, and both had awakened from their injuries to find their squad missing and their base being torn apart from top to bottom. During that predicament, Ski had been incredibly grateful to have Kaiba at his side, and afterwards, she had seemed to actively seek him out during downtime. He found her to be pleasant enough company, if rather high energy, and he genuinely liked her, but he had soon gotten the distinct impression that she had more than just

a friendly interest in him. At first, he had been content to simply let it go, but eventually he had realized that the rest of the squadron was making unwarranted assumptions about the time they were spending together.

In the tragic aftermath of losing five Talons to the attack on the Senate building, romantic complications had been the last thing on Kevin's mind. But now was a time for healing, and for fresh starts. It was time to settle things.

He realized that he'd left his sentence hanging uncertainly in the air, and tried to remember what he'd been about to say. "Anyway, I want you to know that I'm grateful for your friendship and support. I know it's been a difficult time for both of us - for all of us," he amended. "We've been through a lot together, and we've helped each other through it. But all of this time we've been spending together..." He paused again, trying to gauge her reaction to what he was saying. Her face was unreadable. "I just think that people might be getting the wrong impression. About us."

"The wrong impression." She repeated his words as though he were speaking in some alien language, then shook her head, making that not-quite-laughing sound again. "I guess I got the wrong impression too, huh? All those nights we stayed up just talking..." She looked away sharply, blinking rapidly several times. "I thought you liked me."

Ski sighed. "I do like you, Kaiba. It's -"

She didn't let him finish. "You know what I mean. I thought you wanted -"

"What I want is beside the point." Kevin sighed again. "I have a squadron to run. I can't afford to be getting emotionally involved with someone who's under my direct command. I have enough going against me right now without violating the fraternization policy."

"Who cares what the rulebooks say?" Kaiba rolled her eyes. "Those rules are written by the same people who are trying to ruin our lives!"

"It's not just about following proper protocol." Ski ran a hand through his hair. This conversation was not going nearly as well as he had hoped it might. He made a concentrated effort to keep his voice steady and reasonable. "Those policies exist for a reason, Kaiba. If you and I were... if we were together, it would create conflicts of interest. It would affect our judgment and the decisions that we made in the field. It wouldn't be fair to either of us, or to the rest of the Talons."

"But Jaren and Telia -"

"I'm not Jaren." Ski closed his eyes for a moment, forcing himself to stay patient. This wasn't easy for Kaiba to hear, and she was understandably upset. "Ultimately, I have to make the decisions that are right for me, and right for my squadron." He paused, trying to think of a way to end the conversation on a less sour note. "I'm sorry, Kaiba. Maybe if things were different..."

She cut him off again. "If things were different, you'd

be with Danya.”

Before he had a chance to even think of a response to that comment, she was out of the chair and out of his office.

By the time he gathered his wits enough to consider whether he ought to chase after her, he knew that he had lost the opportunity. She would be long gone by now, back to her quarters or off to some secluded area of the Nest where she could be alone to nurse her crushed hopes. Besides, there was nothing that Kevin could say that would change anything. *Actually, no*, he corrected himself. *There's probably a lot of things I could say that would make the situation even worse.*

Ski sagged back in his chair, feeling tired and far older than his thirty standard years. He looked at his half-eaten sandwich for a moment before tossing it into the waste bin; he didn't feel hungry anymore. After a few minutes of distractedly trying to fill out some of the endless paperwork, he concluded that it was an exercise in futility. He ought to be getting back to the briefing room, anyway, to make sure that everything was in order. Pushing his chair back from his desk, he stood and made his way out of his office.

In the hallway, he paused and glanced at his chrono. There was still plenty of time before the briefing was scheduled to resume. Perhaps it was Kaiba's mention of the nights they had spent together talking that prompted him, or perhaps it was simply a need for fresh air. What-

ever the cause, Kevin found himself taking the turbolift up to the very top of the Nest.

When he stepped out onto the roof, however, he realized that he wasn't alone.

The two figures were seated side by side at the far end of the building, boldly dangling their legs over the edge. The pair was either out of earshot of the noisy turbolifts or else so wrapped up in whatever conversation they were having that they failed to notice the major's less-than-stealthy arrival. Even from a distance, the impressive height of the first figure and the shimmering dark gold hair of the second were unmistakable, and Kevin drew in a sharp breath as he recognized them.

The major watched the pair for a moment. Owen Flynn and Danya Faithwood appeared to be in the midst of sharing a laugh over some funny anecdote or joke that one or the other of them had told. As Ski looked on, Owen rested his hand briefly on Danya's shoulder, and Danya glanced up at him with a playful smile. She looked happier than Kevin could remember seeing her look in months.

A pang of regret clutched at his heart. *If things were different...*

Silently, Kevin Ski turned around and walked back into the turbolift, feeling old and tired once again.

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Her comlink beeped twice, and Trika just licked her lips, looking back and forth before moving down to the main accessways on the ground floor to what could be considered an emergency exit... but it was little more than a beveled piece of permacrete with a few additions to mask its presence. Part of her felt guilty for doing this but she just could not help herself...

In the alleyway, under cameras that now looped to show just the empty back alleyways, things she had designed herself as a new early-warning system against possible intruders, stood a lone figure with two bags in hand, waiting and watching nervously as the dungeon-like entrance slid aside, revealing the small woman with the many-braided locks, and a wad of loose credits fisted in a manner to make random notes stick out.

“You got what I ordered?”

The young man nodded and held both bags out, replying, “The box with the rest of it is back on my bike. Can you wait a moment?”

Trika gave a rather amused smile, and then just sighed, “Hurry up... I don’t pay you to walk.”

As he went scurrying off, she just licked her lips while he moved, noting that his lifestyle had left the young man with a nice backside. Her eyes flicked back down a bit longer, before bringing herself up short. Now was not the time to be ogling... more important things had to be handled... and the less Ski knew... the better.

Unfortunately for Trika, she was being observed by

someone far more versed in infiltration tactics than her own street-smart approach to this meeting. From down the hall, watching idly from a corner, Jaren just shook his head, and almost gave himself away, before returning to where Telia was waiting. The two of them had spotted the rather perky slicer when she'd gone down the side staircases of the Nest, but they both knew she avoided the mess hall whenever she could and that that was *not* her final destination.

“It’s just a kid... what could she be getting that requires all this work?” Telia asked with a mild note of irritation.

“Watch and see...” Jaren couldn’t help being slightly amused as he tapped the side of his nose and moved the two back down the hallway towards the main areas of the Nest, leaving Trika to the fantasy that she was going to get away with whatever she’d just done.

Trika herself had two bags in one hand, and the other that had previously rather greedily held the loose money now balanced the box she’d waited so patiently for. Eyes still lit with a sense of childish and completely guilty glee, she sneaked her way up to the lounge instead of going into the mess hall, her mind calculating the odds of being caught with her prize there too much to chance. Settling the box onto the central table on top of several manuals and other items left out, she went to open the box, only to hear a cough sound behind her.

Wincing, Trika said in the most innocent tone pos-

sible, “What’s the point of having a black ops budget if we can’t occasionally order in?”

Jaren just laughed as he came around with Telia at his wing, settling into the couch across from her, giving her an admonishing look. “You realize we have operational security for a reason.”

Trika growled back, “I couldn’t take another day of HIM! It’s... It’s...”

She was interrupted by Telia, who had dug into the bags in a moment of distraction, and opened a small container, “It’s fried noodles with sauce and nerf.” And then to the next one, “Fried Fowl in sauce on...” She sniffed, “Lettuce...”

Looking back to Jaren, it was far too late. He’d opened the box to reveal her prize, six stuffed breads with cheese and meat, still gleaming with the glaze of spiced butter that singed at her nostrils beautifully.

The male sniper finally commented, “This food is disgusting! Horrid even! We’re served perfectly healthy things in the mess hall to keep us at peak efficiency.” He then paused, his brow raised slightly. “I assume the extras were meant as bribes, right?”

Her nod and scowl, more typical of Stone than his intrusions teammate, took a long handful of seconds to change into the slicer’s normal visage. The smirk belied her true feelings, but caught between rage and fear of Bullwinkle getting wind of her food mutiny was nothing she meant to show to the world for longer than a

moment. “Why, Jaren!” she threw herself into the act, attempting to score points for a holodrama award. “I’m offended you think...”

Telia finally just started laughing, and pulled a fork out from the take-out bag. “Consider us bribed. Thank you!” Digging into the noodles, Telia began to devour them with a slurp that left sauce in a whip-mark over her chin. Jaren picked up one of the baked pockets and bit into it, cheese and spices rolling out one side where it burst from the pressure.

Trika missed catching her own glare, but would not let it daunt her. Taking two more of the bread pockets, she made ready to consume when both were taken from her waiting hands!

Karn traveled the left side, already chewing. “Stang... this is great! Thanks Trika!”

“Where the hell did you come from?” she cried, watching as the new captain promptly plopped down on the other side of the lounge with *her* food. “But I... but...” She stammered...

Ty Flynn went along the other side and sat down in a padded easy chair, kicking back. “I’m a pilot... you think I can’t smell junk food a parsec away?”

There were three left still... reaching for one more, it was once again snatched away... by *Stone* of all people, who just grinned at her, and replied, “Nuh-uh. You have no idea how bad these are for your cholesterol, do you?” With that, he immediately took a large bite from

his, and winced.

After swallowing, he gasped out, “Oh good, a spicy one.” Continuing to consume his, he spoke in between bites. “I don’t know if you did this on a whim, or are celebrating something, but consider me duly surprised? I assume you bribed Ensign Delph to keep Bullwinkle out of the Nest after we all left the Mess Hall so he couldn’t smell it coming?”

“You *sifu*,” she whimpered, attempting the curse weakly, and stared as her food was being demolished slowly. Two more...

*Gone.*

Kendrick (still looking a little pale from experiencing Bullwinkle’s “speciality”) and Quis smiled at her graciously as they thanked her for the food being provided. Except that Quis took a couple sniffs, and then handed it back to Trika. “Sorry... I think I’m allergic to the glaze on this. Here.”

One glorious bread-pocket left in her hands, and she devoured it quickly, getting a stain on her uniform shirt for her troubles. It took her a moment to look around and finally see most of the Talons, most of her new friends sitting around and talking, enjoying themselves. With a mouth full of gooey cheese, she grinned. “Can you pass the noodles back, Tel? I want a bite before you eat them all.”

A mock growl of a reply came, before the smile and then the box was returned to her.

And so they ate...

\* \* \* \* \*

At 1400, the Talons gathered again in the briefing room, but the occasion was much less formal than at the morning's meeting. Most of the Talons had taken their usual seats at their team's table, but many more were relaxed, sitting back and ready for an idea session for the ages.

In their notes, it had been made apparent that the Talons were about to perform a strategic strike mission that would include every single asset the Talons had to offer. A number of targets had been pre-selected based upon size and complexity... the bigger the hit against Black Fire, the better.

"Let me know what you think," Major Ski began, sitting casually on the stairs leading up to the briefing room's podium. He was still tall enough that everyone could see him from his or her seat. "I trust you spent time over lunch deciphering all of the targeting packages that Danya painstakingly put together?"

Kendrick raised his hand to offer an excuse. "I was in the 'fresher for a bit after seeing the lunch, but Quis filled me in."

"They all seem like good choices," Qui-Sein piped up from the back. Apparently, Sergeant Bullwinkle hadn't found him so far. He had probably skipped out from cleaning up the kitchen after lunch to be there at

that moment.

Danya was leaning against the operations team table, casually reading her datapad once again. “They are all very good choices, with some distinct differences. Your top three are suppliers who either engineer weaponry or handle logistics for Black Fire, and your bottom three are government buildings that have handled monetary transactions with Black Fire for various reasons.”

“I noticed that all three governments are tried and true New Republic members,” Jaren grumbled suspiciously. “What does that say of the state of their governments?”

Kevin shrugged, wondering that particular question himself. “We don’t know how long these governments have been dealing with Black Fire, so it could mean anything. If the relationship is a newer one, it could mean trouble. Dealing with mercenaries under the nose of the New Republic is a rather bold move. Financial woes? Strategic union against a greater foe? We can’t be certain at all until we get on planet. Of course, an NRI operation against such a government would have to be completely covert. Attacking one of our own would cause catastrophic damage to the intelligence community, and you can believe that if anything went wrong on such an operation, the NR would publicly deny we ever existed.”

“I’m ready to go,” Stone chipped in cheerfully. “When do we start?”

“Time out,” Telia called, tapping her datapad screen. “What about the rest of them? So, we’ve identified some

transactions between Black Fire and these planets. What if we're just taking out a bunch of scared officials who just want some extra protection against a neighboring tribe or terrorist group? Or what if the location of the transaction was just that... a transaction point? I'm not convinced these planets, as large as they are in the NR, are going to catch the attention of Black Fire."

"Are we *trying* to catch their attention?" Kaiba asked, a rare, raw form of sarcasm all over her. Her facial expression was nothing short of callous, and Ski briefly wondered how long she would cling to her disappointment from their conversation at lunch. "Last I remember, when we got their attention, we wound up paying for it."

Telia raised an eyebrow at the woman. "And last I remember, *you* didn't pay for anything."

Jaren was quick to stop a reply and a greater argument. His wife was particularly moody today. "Point taken on all accounts; let's continue, please. Danya?"

"The top three," Danya raised her voice to grab everyone's attention, "are considerably different in nature. These locations actually produce a product or service for Black Fire. You'll notice that the first two supply ship and transport systems that Black Fire is known to regularly use... mainly navigation and early warning systems. These particular supplies move out months and years in advance of use."

"They're big enough to warrant attention, though," Ty said, pointing a finger at no one in particular. "It would

send a serious message to the system and to Black Fire that they're not untouchable."

"We'd get to actually fly on such a strike, right?" Kendrick asked. "Like, blow some stuff up?"

Kevin chuckled and nodded his head slowly. "Yes, yes, there would be *that*."

In the back of the room, Qui-Sein let out a small cheer that drew the stares of the Talons. He quieted rather quickly, and with a blush.

"I have a feeling, dear Danya," Trika purred, "that there's more to that *third* target package than meets the eye." Trika waved her datapad in the air with a conniving grin. "You all think that because it's labeled a 'data hub' that there wouldn't be anything for you to do, huh? You think it would be *boring*."

"As long as it keeps *your* hands busy, I'm all ears," Stone quipped at Trika with a light punch to her shoulder. "Let's hear it, Danya."

The hacker placed her notes onto the table behind her and put her hands on her hips. "Well, I had the same reservations as soon as the target came across my screen, but consider this... this supposed 'data hub' seems the most probable location of a vast array of Black Fire records. It may not have the glorious sheen of other missions, but with enough ingenuity, the yield from this particular target could account for a slew of future missions on bigger and better targets."

Ty groaned. "I'm never any good at delaying

gratification, though!”

“But that’s because all you see is the surface.” Danya nodded to Owen, who promptly stood and began to hand out a prepared flimsy to the crew. “I did a little bit of research during the lunch break and came up with a proposal that would make this mission quite a remarkable leap for the Talons.”

Trika snatched two flimsies from Owen and tossed one of them at Stone. She quickly glanced at the first few lines of the proposal and shouted, “Score! Coach, put me *in!*”

“Aww, *shavitt*, are you kidding?” Ty nearly fell out of his seat. “*More slicing?*”

“Keep reading,” Danya insisted, a smirk tucked away.

Reyanna felt the sudden urge to chime in. “We’re going to fly as a distraction.” A hint of awe touched her voice. Getting in with the Talons and flying on their very first mission was priceless.

Kevin had also received one of the flimsies and glanced over it. Espionage and reconnaissance. Flying and strategic bombing. And a reward that promised to be bigger than anything they would have ever touched under the direct order of the IHC.

“Basically,” Danya said, pushing herself from the operations table and pacing the front of the briefing room, “this organization has had it coming for years. Ralhon Security is a rather extensive arm of Black Fire, specializing in the safekeeping of anything illegal or off the

books. They wound up becoming the overall security force on Szeca back when the government decided they couldn't protect themselves well enough from pirates that like to roam the area. Ralhon has since overtaken the cities near the equator as a *permanent* force, and this is considered their headquarters. We're assuming from the volume of information flowing in and out of Szeca City, that Ralhon is holding a great deal of Black Fire data on planet."

"I'm guessing you missed the numbers on the actual security forces on planet," Telia said, eyebrow raised at her screen. "*Hundreds* of beings and no word on anti-air equipment, for starters?"

Kevin exhaled at that find. "Sounds like plans from the old days, actually."

Danya continued pacing, but having researched the facilities and planet thoroughly, kept collected. "Szeca is only inhabited near the equator. The poles and everything in between are too angled toward or away from the sun to really matter. Everything we want is in the eastern hemisphere, located on your second screens, and that's where the resistance will be. However, Ralhon is responsible for the security of the entire planet. Trend analysis suggests that an attack on their western hemisphere will shift almost ninety percent of their security to that hemisphere to meet the attack and finish it -"

"- leaving the hub where we need to hit wide open... *sort of*," Jaren finished for her. "So, if we can get a slicer

on the ground with an intrusions team and create a diversion on the completely opposite end of the world, you think we can pull this off without annihilating both teams?"

Wild, excited chattering overturned the casual conversation. The split was pretty even, with older Talons laughing and eagerly agreeing to the mission and the newer Talons sitting back and murmuring amongst themselves about the positives and negatives. Major Ski watched his people get their enthusiasm out in the open before clearing his throat. Twice. Three times. The Talons quieted down. "Now it sounds like a plan with a little more backing to consider. I've looked over the other targets and, at this point, hitting Szeca seems like the most promising mission."

All eyes were on Jaren as he negligently picked at his teeth from lunch. "I agree. Let's come up with some mission scenarios and outline a serious profile for how this will all go down. If it doesn't work, we'll go back to the other targets. If this company has the wealth of information we think it has, this mission will pay for itself a hundred times over."

Kevin clasped his hands together and leaned forward from his seat. "Let's do it, then. Pilots and mechanics, get together and figure out how we're going to fly. Operations-based Talons, get together about how to run communications and both missions simultaneously. Work closely with both of the other teams and correlate your

information properly. Infiltrators and intrusion-based Talons, let's figure out how to get in, get what we need, and get out. I want a mission profile from each group by the end of today so we can get to working on the specifics."

With a look at each of his crew, ready and very eager to get started, he could only resist smiling for a second. "Get to work, Talons!"

\* \* \* \* \*

The Operations Talons who would *not* be flying consisted of merely Danya, Quis, and Owen, who were charged with the formation of a plan to get themselves on planet before everyone else and ensure that both missions would simultaneously occur without a hitch.

"This is going to give us all a headache," Owen sighed, cupping his right hand over his chin in thought. The three had taken the back table of the briefing room and made a quasi-split between the other two teams, on either side of their table. The pilots were on their left, arguing about how exactly flying against a potential force of dozens was going to work, and the intrusions Talons were on the right, arguing about how to slip into a highly-secure building and just steal the information they needed.

A bottle noisily *clanged* onto the table in front of the communications officer, who jumped around to see Stone returning to the briefing room. "We've got you

covered,” he smirked, heading back over to his team and smacking Trika in the head before she saw him. Owen shook his head and looked down at the plastic bottle... headache pills.

Quis returned from the pilots’ area. “They’re saying that if we can run communications through a scrambled signal from our end, it might prevent a solid jam on their transmissions.”

Owen snorted. “At *that* distance? Hardly effective.”

“What kind of distance are we talking about?” Danya asked.

“Keeping communications open with both parties on the ground and in the sky?” Owen froze, attempting to do calculations in his head. “It won’t even work. Never mind.” He gestured for Quis to go back to the pilots. “Tell them they’re on their own for a scramble. As it is, we’re going to have to have four or more relay points unless we use a foreign satellite as a bounce point. The horizon is very unkind and without a line-of-sight on them, they’re on their own.”

Quis left to deliver the good news. Owen turned to Danya. “How wired are they all going to be over there?” he asked, referring to the intrusions unit. Just then, he heard the pilots behind him grunt in protest of his assessment. “Go ask what they’re planning on doing to get around Ralhon’s networks without being detected.”

“Owen, we’re going to beat you up after this is done!” Karn shouted back at him playfully.

Owen turned just in time to receive a wad of flimsy to the face. Ty had been the shooter on that one. He pointed a dangerous finger back at his brother. "You're askin' for it! Meet me in the gym after we're done here!"

"What about a space battle?" Qui-Sein called out over the laughter of Kendrick and Karn. "How high would you need us from halfway around the world to get a proper link?"

"Not going to work!" Danya shouted back from across the room. Somehow, in listening to the intrusions unit, she had still heard the ensign. "Ralhon doesn't engage until an atmosphere break, and Szeca's too large to still have a direct connection."

"Eh, worth a thought," Qui-Sein shrugged, balling up another flimsy and flicking it across the pilots' table. "So we go in blindly and fight for all we're worth, right?"

Owen began to grind his teeth, unsure about how any of this would work at all. And the personnel involved? He, Danya, and Quis could not run the entire operation on their own. Quis returned a short moment later, and they almost said the same statement at once.

"This is *crazy*."

Danya came back with a slight scowl on her face. "They're crazier than the pilots," she said. "They can't think of anything outside of a frontal assault on the particular building we want, and that's probably the quickest way to commit suicide I've ever heard of."

A shrill whistle split the air and a few ears. Reyanna in

particular winced at the sound. Kevin Ski stood with the pilots and looked around the room. “Can this be done?” he asked.

The intrusions unit, stubborn as ever, answered affirmatively and got right back to work, attempting to come up with something that would make getting into the building easier than a ton of explosives.

Owen tapped the table in front of him three times, ground at his teeth, and then jumped up. Without mentioning a word, he rushed over to the pilots’ table and interrupted yet another argument about tactics.

Danya watched him leave, but before she could wonder at his idea, Marhl approached her from the right. [You mentioned Szeca City was densely populated, but did you know that particular city is transient, Lieutenant?]

She frowned, unsure of the point. “I never got that deep into the research,” she responded, “and please, just call me Danya.”

[Very well,] Marhl replied. [From what I understand, though, Danya, Szeca is nothing but a tourist trap.

[This could be the key to our advantage.]

“I’m going to be your *what?*”

# 4

“I’m going to be your *what?*” The sharp exclamation broke the silence of the generally quiet briefing room.

The ground unit and the rest of the operations personnel had met in the briefing room later that evening to lay out the plan for breaking into the Ralhon Security buildings. Marhl had come up with idea, but it demanded a certain dramatic flair that should have been easy to convince Trika to perform.

“Our slave, Trika. It’s legal on Szeca and pretty much expected in the major cities,” Jaren patiently explained. “Besides, Marhl’s right. We need to make you inconspicuous. Nobody suspects a slave, and you’re not going to get very far otherwise. It’s the perfect cover story.”

[Szeca City is nothing but a vacation spot for wealthy Humans,] Marhl reminded her. [If you or I or anyone who looks even a little bit different walks in there, it’ll set security on you faster than actually breaking in.]

“Uh-huh,” Trika frowned, crossing her arms over her chest. “And *you two* get to go to a fancy dinner while I’m suppose to grovel at your feet?” She grumbled something inaudible about Jaren and Telia under her breath. “Let’s hurry up and get this stuff over with so I can plan my next prank on Stone.”

“Heard that.” Stone’s annoyed voice came from across the table. In all honesty, he wasn’t thrilled at being left behind to operate the communications equipment with Danya, Owen, and Quis. “And may I remind you not to mess with me so soon before your psych test? I could write a lot of stuff under the ‘mental stability’ section, you know.”

“What? I’m perfectly normal!” Trika gave everyone another of her innocent looks. “It’s people like Danya and Owen you should be worried about. Just look at those scheming expressions on their faces!”

Owen tried very hard to maintain a straight face, but failed. Danya just rolled her eyes.

“So, let me get this straight,” Telia said, hands on her hips playfully. “Jaren and I get a second honeymoon while Trika gets arrested?”

Marhl’s long whiskers twitched at the statement, a reaction the others took as a smirk-like gesture of amusement. [Danya showed us the map of the building, and it’s the security relay station for the forces in Szeca City. The only way in is being under arrest or a part of the security force. Since the building uses biometrics to handle entry and exit, the easiest way in is for Trika to cause some trouble, which she is already quite capable of doing, from what I’ve heard.]

Trika leaned back into her seat and gave them all a quirky eye. “All right. I’ll play. So I’m supposed to be your slave, and while you two lovebirds go out and ex-

perience the fine night life of Szeca City, I'm supposed to figure out a way to get arrested so you two have to get called away to deal with me." Suddenly, her eyes flashed, like an idea had sparked her brain to light up. "And when we're in, we take them out, take the data, and run."

"If you don't go through with it in this manner," Reyanna uttered flatly, irritation in view for all to see, "you won't be able to walk about normally. It's an unfortunate problem on that planet and I can understand your frustration."

Trika exhaled slowly, analyzing the situation. "I'll say that a part of me definitely sees how backwards it is to do this, but if I want to do my work, it's the way it has to be." She rocked back in her chair a couple of times, a slow smile forming on her face. "Besides, since when have I ever passed up the opportunity to show the world my talent for drama?"

\* \* \* \* \*

The pilots had decided, with the help of Owen, that they should embrace the natural cover story provided by Szeca's previous battles. Major Ski declared that the Talons were going to play the role of pirates and make strategic bombing runs across the planet that would wrap them back around towards the ground Talons, leaving them out of communications range for a short period of time. This seemed to make Owen happy, and all of the

pilots immediately began to chat about how their part of the mission should be organized.

The ships were quickly distributed among the pilots. Kendrick Quinn and Karn Deloti claimed the two X-wing slots while Ty volunteered to fly an older Z-95 Headhunter.

Reyanna and Marhl, not present for the discussions, didn't have any flight certifications, and probably didn't want to have to learn quickly. Ski had assigned them to be gunners on a Skipray Blastboat that he had managed to acquire for the mission. H9-0 would be the sensor operator in the vessel, and Kaiba the primary pilot. The three females got together later that evening and walked towards the starfighter. It required a crew of five, and only four Talons had been assigned so far.

"I'll need a co-pilot," Kaiba said with a bit of a sulk. "I'm not piloting that thing by myself! Is it listing to port? Ugh. What a wreck!"

"I'm your co-pilot!" Qui-Sein Delph came running in at the last moment, breathing hard. "Major Ski didn't tell you? He's giving me some time away from Bullwinkle."

Major Ski knew that Delph was always eager for a break from Sergeant Bullwinkle. Qui-Sein *did* have a flight certification and plenty of experience flying the *Claw* around for the Talons, in addition to the hours he logged during his training. Delph had asked the major about participating in the mission earlier and had even been essential in prepping for it. The ensign's forced "in-

ternship” was going to be over shortly, and in fact, he had formally graduated from the Denon Military Academy just a few weeks ago. Ski knew that Delph wanted some first-hand experience before being transferred out of the Talon Support Group and into a real unit. Well, if anyone remembered he was with the Talons in the first place. Ski had agreed.

“Exactly, Qui-Sein. Kaiba will be piloting a Skipray Blastboat. I want you to help her get the thing in worse shape than it already is,” Ski said with a grin on his face.

Kaiba grumbled something under her breath, but Karn stepped up before Ski could attempt to decipher it, covering for his new partner, trying to earn her respect. Deloti hoped that she would remember that down the road. “What will you be flying, sir?” Karn inquired.

Ski went near the entrance of the hangar, and, with a flourish, took the cover off a T-wing fighter. “The pirate version of the A-wing. My favorite.”

\* \* \* \* \*

When Major Ski announced that the pirate pilots would be getting their own ships, Quis was the first one to reach the hangar. She chose a trusty old X-wing that looked like it had previously been through the original Death Star run. It had sat in the corner of the hangar getting minor repairs for the better part of five weeks, and Quis herself had modified a bit of the weaponry and target-

ing systems to be more accurate over the past few days. Climbing the ladder and plopping into the cockpit, she looked the controls over.

*Oh yes, this is nice. All these interesting instruments and navigation systems. Must have taken a lot of genius-es to design them initially,* she thought with awe.

“Quis, what are you doing here? I thought you were staying on the ground,” Ken’s voice came from outside the ship.

“I know. I’m claiming it for you,” she responded with a wink. “This one’s got your name on it.”

“Oh.” Kendrick was at a loss for words, a rare smirk attempting to form at the corners of his mouth as he shyly attempted to think of something clever to say. “That’s very, uh, thoughtful of you.” *Way to go, Ken. Impressive.*

Quis jumped out and slyly tapped him on the side of his right cheek. “Come on, flyboy. Let’s put your name on it. I’ll help you paint tomorrow morning.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Elegance and allure abounded in the space of the grandiose skyhook restaurant atop the Coruscanti cityscape, the building lights and passing vehicles in multi-tiered stages always putting on an additional brilliant display to the restaurant’s use of real waterfalls and plant life, which were used to keep the rooms fresh and clean. The kind of restaurant that has a small clientele and no menu.

The kind of restaurant that a woman like Sondara Carre swept into like a cool breeze, at once utterly at home in the upscale surroundings yet maintaining a certain aloofness that bespoke of more important matters on her mind than fine dining.

Flanked by two lithe-looking men, each having an intent and predatory look in their eyes that made them look less like men and more like a pair of vornskyr on leashes, she made her way across to the table that had been reserved for her. The modest yet flattering gown of burgundy krayt-silk draped artfully over her curvaceous body and the ebony fur stole wrapped around her milk-white shoulders bespoke of elegant taste tempered by austere distaste for frivolity. She wore sensible shoes, little makeup, and no jewelry to speak of, her only adornment coming from the pair of lacquered zenji needles securing her obsidian tresses into a neatly-styled chignon.

This was, after all, a business dinner. Making the right impression was important.

Across from her, the client, an Outer Rim warlord making pretensions at being rich and affluent, seemed impatient for her to arrive. However, the display of beauty and lethality that came before him instead made him pause and almost gape. Carre simply waited until he had sufficiently recovered his wits to clumsily stand and bow before moving to pull out her chair.

She sank gracefully into her seat and raised one cultured hand, five sparkling and perfectly manicured

fingertips bidding him to be seated, as well. “This is business, Khallas... and with business, there are certain protocols that must be observed. If you wish to go far, you will learn them. Entertain first, and then move to the heart of the matter.” She favored her dining companion with a benign expression that suggested her desire to see him succeed, despite the boundless indifference she actually felt for him.

If any offense was to be taken from her mild rebuke of his decorum, Khallas was oblivious. Adjusting his white tunic front, he made to speak, but ended up merely coughing and dissembling before seating himself once more. As with Carre, he too had brought protection, and they both seemed stiff and rather nervous at the sight of her men. Carre, however, had little worry. Beckoning for the host and wine steward, she ordered up a dry red, and then some rare meat from a beast that few had heard of.

While both waited for dinner to arrive, she said calmly, “Do you like them? They’re part of the latest batch. Using some of the newer neural adjustment process we’ve developed, we are not only now able to ensure loyalty... but... we can even make them imprint on a specific person. It’s a slight little biochemical change in their olfactory senses that make the body’s natural pheromones key neurotransmitter responses in the lower-order mental processes and pleasure center. They see you, they feel protective love and loyalty to you.”

She glanced over her shoulder at the two with her, but

they did not do more than nod and stare forward at their counterparts at the other end of the table. Carre seemed to shrug without moving her shoulders and continued in a clinical tone. “Unfortunately... this process does have a limited side effect. Right now, they only have a five-year lifespan. All the alterations done cause an eventual cascade effect that drives them insane with love... so eventually they will do anything to prove themselves to you. It’s why we also disrupt their libido... to ensure that the only outlet is either violence... or oblivion.”

The last words tolled and dinner was presented. Neither made the pretense of small talk during the meal. Instead, it was like sitting across from a dragoness as she chewed on the knight’s mighty charger. His façade of emotional armor crumbled underneath the charisma and presence of the woman. Eventually, the would-be planetary dictator finally asked, as the final bites of dessert were taken, “So... have you completed my order?”

One perfect eyebrow arched, and Sondara Carre’s lips parted into the sort of smile that could either burn out a man’s heart or make the blood freeze in it. One scarcely noticed that the expression didn’t touch her eyes, which gazed at Khallas with a dispassionate detachment. “Yes. We obtained the king’s daughter and have given her a full neural adjustment. She will be utterly in love with you and be willing to do anything for you. We have also had our doctors rebuild her pleasure responses a little, as per your request. Until she dies... which should be short-

ly after the baby is born... everything will be pleasurable for her.”

Khallas smiled, licking his lips like some obscene beast himself now. “Good... and her brother?”

Trying not to allow her contempt to show, she replied, “He was taken, sedated, and for all he is aware, he had a fun and drunken night. And the bomb you requested was installed into his chest cavity. Triggered to go off in proximity of his father’s personal comlink. We do thank you for the frequencies.” That said, she stood, and turned to leave. “Oh yes... and next time you think to bring protection to one of our meetings, if there is ever another one...” Letting it linger, she just shrugged, as if nothing were further from the truth other than insult, and turned to leave as she had come. Stepping into the turbolift, she looked at the two men. “Follow him. Should he default on his payment, use your detonation protocols.”

Both men stared at her, and then nodded, replying at the same time, “For Lady Carre!” Crossing one fist over their chests in salute and then half-bowing as most of her personal attendants had been taught. Carre shook her head ruefully as they departed; useful as they were, she found their blind loyalty rather distasteful at times. It was a far greater thing, she thought, to inspire fear and admiration through her own actions. But one could hardly argue with the efficiency of the neural adjustment process.

Leaving them to their work, she stepped out of the tur-

bolift onto the street, where her personal airspeeder was idling. Krycek was waiting for her, his arms crossed and a faintly flat expression on his face, but a smile formed on his lips as Carre approached. He took Carre's hand, placing a gentlemanly kiss upon it before helping her into the plush interior of the airspeeder. Carre rewarded him with a smile of her own. Here, at least, was one man who understood civilized behavior.

"That was rather quick, my lady," he remarked absently, his tone not born of boredom so much as irritation at the meeting's company and subject matter. "Did the deviant get what he wanted?"

Carre sighed softly, allowing her expression to briefly register her own distaste. As the vehicle lifted to take them to the shuttleport and back out to space, she replied, "Of course he did. However, the bomb in the boy's chest will fail to detonate because of... operational malfunction. Lord Duredan and son approached me a month ago, ever since their coup succeeded, and requested upgraded weapons, armor, and communications equipment. I think I will send the complete shipment now, and of course give him a discount in the form of an apology."

That being said, the man across from her just chuckled a bit. "No less than any of them deserve with their petty squabbles. They lack... vision. Ambition beyond their own selfish gratification." He regarded his companion. "I don't envy you the job of playing them against one another. Such a task must seem tedious to one such as yourself."

She just arched that same eyebrow once more, although the faint warming of her cheeks showed that she was pleased with his implied compliment. “I do what I do because I must, not because it amuses me. One day, when our patience and foresight has paid off, we will no longer need to bother with such manipulations. They are a means to an end, nothing more.”

The comment made the cool man smile with an uncharacteristic warmth of his own. “Not an end so much as a beginning, my lady. The beginning of a new era. A return to the values we have fought so long to restore.”

A comfortable silence filled the cabin as they were taken up to the personal yacht. They boarded and made their way into hyperspace, all done through blissfully unaware and legal channels. Once in the safety of the deep black, the HoloComm suite was engaged, and a male Kaminoan scientist appeared before them, bowing his elongated head. “How may I serve you today, my lord and lady?”

Before Sondara could offer her usual glacier politeness, Krycek stepped forward. “We’re calling for an update into Project Zero-Zero-Three-Eight.”

The Kaminoan brightened slightly. “Ah yes... well... using our original cloning data on possible Force-sensitive individuals, we have discovered that the midichlorian organisms seem to activate and bond with the individual’s brain, mimicking their neural patterns. What they do from there is a complete mystery. However, we

believe we have discovered a means of fooling them with a different set of neurochemical markers that will leave the person in severe pain should they attempt to use the Force.”

Carre’s brow creased slightly in annoyance. “I want them to use their gifts, Doctor Zazan, not to become insane from trying. The Jedi were the ultimate fighting machines, next to the Clone Troopers. If we can get the best of both, we can demand the highest prices for our men. Have you figured out how their sensitivities tie into their willpower yet?”

In the background a sudden scream could be heard. The tall Kaminoan evinced a sigh, which was quickly followed by the sound of breaking glass and several blaster shots. “Pardon, that was subject number four. Of the fifty specimens you brought with the original batch, only twelve had Force-active sensitivity. Of those, only Specimens One, Three, Seven, Nine, Ten, and Eleven remain. Specimens Three and Nine show promise, however, I am doubtful that the new neural bombardments will take on them. Every time we have tried, their alpha patterns re-establish to the norm within a seven- to eight-hour period. Both seem to have had some rudimentary training in biofeedback, which is the basis for what the Jedi used as their disciplines, we believe.”

Krycek frowned slightly and looked to Carre, shaking his head. “If they cannot be turned quickly, terminate all the test subjects and give Procurement and Recruiting

your new data. We will get you another fifty and this time, you should get it right.”

Carre laid a hand gently on Krycek’s shoulder. “Now, now... the doctor has been kind enough to work with us and advanced the science of neuron alteration into a form of art. We wouldn’t want to give him the impression that his employment was in jeopardy, would we?” Beneath her smoothly conciliatory tone lay a veiled menace; the doctor knew, like most who worked for Black Fire, that being in Carre’s good graces at any given moment was no guarantee that one would remain there for long -- and that those who fell out of her good graces found far more than their employment in jeopardy.

Nevertheless, Krycek’s expression softened at the woman’s words. “Of course not, my lady,” he said reassuringly. “But this research is costly. Millions of credits have been invested, and we need to make sure that they eventually pay themselves back.”

“Gentleman and Lady,” the Kaminoan replied, “please... leave me the remainder of the subjects for the time being. I believe I am close to figuring out how to alter them just so that when they access their abilities, it will no longer help reboot them. We will use a forced regression imprint and place a new key individual inside their memory matrices. This person will be a teacher or relative who will steer the subconscious while they are in a dream state until this individual’s patterns match the specified alpha-wave patterns. This will take more

time than usual, as we will use a chemically-induced coma. But the results should be ready before the end of the month.”

The pair looked back and then to each other. Carre was the first to reply, a semi-satisfied smile touching her lips. “Good. I expect at least one successful subject before us at the yearly project review, for complete examination.”

“Will there be anything else?” Dr. Zazan asked softly.

“No,” Krycek replied simply, an abnormal eagerness pushing the man. “As usual, your fee will be deposited on success, and you will be allowed one week with your family. Make sure all Black Fire protocols for vacation time are met, or you understand what will happen.”

The transmission abruptly ended.

Carre turned from the blank screen, a look of mild amusement touching her features. “Now really, was that truly necessary?”

Krycek smiled. “Again, no,” he replied. “But as you are so apt to point out, fear is an excellent motivator for proper behavior.”

And then Krycek added, the afterthought clearly threatening, “But failure should not be tolerated overlong.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Everyone except the Talon pilots and mechanics had gathered once again in the briefing room to assist the two snipers and Trika with their cover stories. For good mea-

sure, Jaren had locked the door so that unwanted visitors, such as a certain Sergeant Bullwinkle, wouldn't be able to barge in and offer them refreshments like his filthy caf.

"Anyway," Jaren tried to bring everyone to focus, "let's all try to rehearse our roles. We will run a few scenarios, and do try to trip us up." He produced several sheets of flimsies and handed them to everyone. "Stone, you have the first line."

The medic couldn't fake excitement about the work even if he had wanted to. "Good evening," Stone began in his flattest voice. "I am Moff Talson from Chandrila, and I am delighted to make your acquaintance. Such a fine party, isn't it?" He looked at the script in disgust and tossed it behind him. "Who wrote this stuff?"

"Just go with it," said Jaren, "and *try* to sound more Imperial snot-like, like this." He adopted a cultured, clipped voice, and said, "Good evening. I am Eric and this is my wife, Valarie. We are wealthy industrialists from Kuat, accustomed only to the finest and the most elegant. It is a pleasure to meet such loyal members of the Empire such as yourself." He paused. "Got it?"

Telia eyed Jaren and whispered, "*Eric and Valarie? Seriously?*"

Stone's upper lip twitched as he sighed. "*Kriff,*" he spat, clearing his throat and giving the role everything he had. "Sir, I see that you and your wife are new to this location," he added some extra snot to his words, "so

might I suggest that you both try the Huntington Casino when you are finished here? The mystics that perform are quite good, I assure you.”

Telia looped her arm around Jaren’s and batted her long lashes at Stone. “Mystics, you say? The last performance of any magic we went to on Coruscant was simply *awful*. I do detest those filthy, alien-loving Rebel scum! They’ve not even got the common courtesy to put on a halfway decent show!” Telia continued in her most passionate voice, “The Emperor’s forces should have eliminated them years ago! The former Rebels are spreading across the galaxy, now. Like a bad infection!”

Reyanna’s mouth was agape. “That was actually quite amazing.”

“That’s some good acting, Tel,” Jaren commended his wife. Being a former Imperial himself, he could definitely spot a winning snot-nosed personality in action.

“Thanks. I knew Dad’s political meetings would come in handy some day,” Telia smiled in remembrance. “I learned from the best.”

[You weren’t scared to be snotty right back, which is good,] Marhl added, rubbing a paw across her chin in thought. [They will likely be much meaner once you hit the ground running. Don’t be surprised if the others are condescending at every turn. You have to be ready.]

“Now if only we can be that mean to *Trika*,” Jaren sighed, eyeing the slicer, who had even donned a traditional Chinaési outfit for the occasion. It was rather

difficult to imagine that she was a full-fledged slicer in the New Republic military with the draping folds of her poncho covering her petite frame. “Let’s try that scenario we came up with last night again.” He adopted a commanding voice, though it was half-hearted. “*Laetna!* Bring that luggage to us!”

“And step on it!” Telia added with her hands on her hips and a tapping right foot. “We don’t own you just to look at your pretty face, honey!”

“Just wait ’til we get back to the Nest and I’m going to -” Trika grumbled as she began to grab their bags.

Marhl smacked her head. [You can’t do that. You say anything back and regular owners might very well cut out your tongue.]

Trika froze in mid-grumble, but the Togorian wasn’t budging from her stance. [I’m serious. They’ve done it to kittens before.] There was no need to read deeper into the statement. The displeasure on the cat’s face was evident.

Danya stepped up from the back as if finally ready to impart her words of wisdom for the day. “You’ve always wanted to ‘embrace the drama,’ so do it. And speak your language, but watch your tone. That’ll make it seem as if you’re responding to their orders, but you can say whatever the heck you want to.” It seemed she knew the slicer well.

Telia started another sentence, escalating her voice for maximum annoyance. “Oh, *Laetna!* I’ve managed to

drop my stylus. Pick it up.”

Trika must have suddenly had visions of herself receiving a holodrama award. Head bowed and arms tucked into the makeshift sleeves of the gray poncho, Trika glided toward Telia. About a half-meter from the dropped stylus, Trika floated toward the ground, removed a covered hand just long enough to pick up the writing instrument, and raised it, without looking, toward her master. Telia reached for the stylus before Marhl whistled shrilly.

[It is just out of your reach,] she said with a callous frown. [Snap your fingers.]

Even Jaren jerked back for a moment, unsure about the haughty move. Telia hesitantly snapped her fingers, and Trika raised the stylus just a tad further into the air. It was instantly within Telia’s easy reach, and she snatched it up quite forcefully.

Marhl nodded approvingly to the rest of the gathered Talons. [That is what it takes to survive in that world,] she said simply, watching carefully as Trika backed away slowly, never once showing her back to her masters. Apparently, the stubborn slicer had done her research overnight and was quite capable of acting properly when she wanted to.

“Who’je hai me bursá tes sifues naen la-”

“Whoa... sounds kind of harsh, even in a hushed tone,” Owen interrupted. “I’m glad I don’t understand those words. She must be complementing your ancestries even as we speak, Telia!”

Trika stood up suddenly and arched her back from the previously humiliating position. “I was just saying ‘I love you guys as masters and you’re the best masters ever!’ ... I swear!”

Danya smirked, bringing up a new program on her computer. “Right, Trika. I’m no idiot, but while it may be best for you to simply speak your language and keep it simple, I think we can actually use this to our advantage with the communications.”

Jaren, Telia, and Trika approached her table from the front of the room. “We also decided to keep Trika’s comms simple until she gets inside the facility. Quis is going to work up some new toys that will do the trick, but she should be comm silent until we get there,” Jaren reminded her.

“I’m still with you on that,” Danya said, continuing to mess with several functions on her terminal. “You ever get the bugs worked out of your translator, Trika?”

The slicer threw up her hands. “You always say ‘bugs’ as if my programming is riddled with errors,” she gawked at her teammate’s words.

Without missing a beat, Danya cocked an eyebrow. “It usually is. Answer the question, code-pounder.”

“So, I’ve got a translating program that isn’t necessarily complete at this point,” Trika explained to her teammates. “I figured I’d use it one day to scare people in the middle of the night... or *something*. I don’t know.” The slicer moved to Danya’s left to observe her actions. “Are

you thinking that when they come get me, this might come in handy?"

"Maybe," Danya said, biting her bottom lip while focusing on bringing the program onto her screen. She looked back up at Jaren and Telia. "Trika might see things once she's inside that you all won't know until way later on, when it might be too late. Maybe there are extra personnel on staff that night. Maybe the forces are returning to base more quickly than we anticipated. If she can relay the information through your comms back to us, we can translate it and let you know if a situation arises." The two just stared back at Danya, unsure as to the complexity of the operation. She shrugged. "Just pretend like you can understand a little bit of her language. Or smack her for not being able to speak Basic. Whatever."

Stone started laughing uncontrollably. "You know, being on the sidelines for this op might not be so bad. Let's record the whole thing so I can replay that over and over and -"

Trika groaned and fell against the wall. "This is going to be a nightmare."

\* \* \* \* \*

Ty stood back and looked at his paint job. Specifically, he had stripped all the paint off one of the squad's original Z-95s.

It looked like it had been stolen from the factory.

Several kill marks had been added close to the cockpit.

He picked up some blood red paint in one hand, some jet black paint in the other, and just threw it at random spots on the fighter. Then, for some graffiti effects, he picked up a can of blue paint and put a few random symbols on the side.

But there was *still* something missing.

He picked up his blaster and fired. No effect. The Z-95 hull was too tough for blaster shots. Ty frowned. He needed something similar to starfighter weaponry to even be *reasonably* effective.

Lieutenant Flynn darted across the hangar, ignoring the looks he earned from his squadmates. “Be back in a minute, sir!” he called out as he ran past Major Ski at the entrance.

\* \* \* \* \*

“So, how do we turn this into a pirate ship?” Quis asked, holding a paintbrush in her right hand and allowing the left to seductively rest on her hip.

Kendrick pretended to ponder on the question and wrestled his eyes from her waist. “I’m thinking Star Destroyer-inside white.”

Quis’s face paled. “That’s gonna scare our teammates more than the enemy. It’s not very ‘pirate-like,’ either,” she added.

Ken chuckled. “*Nothing* could scare our teammates.

But you are right, we should make this into a *believable* pirate ship, I suppose, despite my lack of artistic talent.” He grabbed two cans of black paint and gave one to Quis. Soon, after two coats, the ship turned into a gloomy, midnight black.

“Still needs something else,” Ken mused. “How about some skulls ’n’ crossbones?” he asked rather childishly, a feigned angry face in full-fledged scowl.

“Only if you’re interested in scaring little kids,” came the voice of Stone, who was passing by while eating a sandwich. He had a toolbox in his hand, and for what purpose, no one knew.

“I know!” Quis beamed. She grabbed a can of yellow fluorescent paint and started putting various strange symbols on the black background. “Straight out of my scientific handbook!” Quis said proudly. “Nobody could recognize them, anyway.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Karn Deloti was just getting a bite to eat when he saw Ty dragging an ancient-looking weapon through the turbolift entrance. “Morning, Captain!” the pilot greeted cheerfully, as if nothing out of the ordinary was occurring.

Karn’s eyes went wide. “A Clone Wars-era heavy repeater? Where’d you get *that* piece of history, Ty?” “Don’t tell Major Ski,” Ty whispered conspiratorially.

ally, “but the black market is *still* the best place to go when the higher-ups won’t give you anything good. I got this baby for just two hundred credits. It’s for my Z-95.”

Karn closed his eyes for a second and shook his head. “Lieutenant Flynn,” the captain started. “I’m not sure -”

“Sir, I’ll be careful,” Ty insisted, his voice balancing the edge of a whine and a plead.

Karn wasn’t sure it was such a good idea, but consented. “All right, just don’t cause too much mayhem with it. And I’ll come along for supervision,” Karn said, eyes narrowed at his fellow pilot. “I hear Stone’s scheduling another psych test soon. You don’t want to get on the wrong side of that guy.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Jaren and Telia had wired themselves with a sound and voice set underneath semi-fashionable clothing. During the break for lunch, the two had placed the final orders on their wardrobe for the mission, but until they received it, some of their finer dress clothes would have to do. In all honesty, the two fit the parts perfectly, a stunning couple if one ever existed.

Giving the microphone a tap underneath her semi-shimmering black top, Telia eyed Owen, who was standing in the doorway to the briefing room. “Do

we have a connection?”

Owen leaned into the room for just a second, then popped his head back out. “Danya’s reading you loud and clear. Stone should be ready in the other room, so be prepared for anything.”

Jaren nodded, understanding that they’d all worked through lunch getting things straight for their scenarios and ultimately, the mission. Trika’s translating program was up and running, for better or for worse, and the makeshift comms were in play as well. The idea they had agreed to was that the comms personnel would get everything set up and that fresh off lunch, they would all run through the scenario of going to get Trika out of security’s custody. Stone would be taking that role. Jaren offered his arm to Telia and took a deep breath, feeling a bit restricted in his dressy tunic, reserved for formal occasions several years ago, unfortunately. The two turned into the side conference room, assuming their roles in step.

Stone was waiting for them, and “just for the heck of it,” he had donned his camouflage uniform and rolled up the sleeves as if to show that he was “casual.” The room had been arranged so that a screen separated the two halves, with Stone, Marhl, and Reyanna taking up space just behind the main conference table. Marhl and Reyanna were still in their casual jumpsuits, sitting off to the side as if extras

in the holodrama to come. Flimsies in front of them, they could have been doing miscellaneous work, but they were likely going to be taking notes on the entire scene and marking ideas for improvement.

Jaren slipped his arm from Telia's and approached Stone, head held high and eyes narrowed down the length of his nose. Stone stood to meet the intrusion, but Jaren's upheld hand already spoke for him.

"We received a message saying that our servant was arrested earlier this evening," Jaren said, annoyance coating his voice like a thick syrup. "Her name is Laetna, and," he paused, fishing into his pocket, "here is her registration card." Telia casually approached the table and gave her own annoyed look to the corpsman.

Stone accepted the card with a sneer and walked behind the blocked-off half of the conference room. As planned, he grabbed Trika and hauled her to her feet, practically shoving her at the conference table. The slicer didn't have to feign much, stopping most of her momentum by taking the table's edge into her gut. Despite the obvious urge to snap at Stone, Trika appeared to keep her calm and her head. She kept her eyes low and refused to look at her "masters."

Telia lifted Trika's chin and gave her a glance. "And just what have you done to cause all this trouble?" she asked, nearly spitting the question.

Trika averted her eyes and spoke rather softly.

“Tor ascená naen caer rualne la nisal.”

Danya’s voice immediately buzzed in their ears. “He’s got a loaded rifle underneath the table.”

Telia threw Trika’s chin aside. “We pay for your Basic lessons and you can’t even utter a word that makes sense.” She brushed a stray hair behind her ear and leaned forward as if to give Stone a better view. “It’s nothing *too* serious, is it?”

Stone noticed Jaren’s slight hand movement toward his back and played as if he didn’t. “The little brat was just trying to get away,” he told her simply, making his own adjustment in position toward the table. Before he could utter another word, Jaren locked and loaded his standard blaster and aimed at Stone’s head. “And... freeze,” he smirked, basically ending the scenario. “Not going to get my legs blown off today, thanks.”

“Guess it worked,” Trika mused, then leaned across the table. “How’s *that* for programming error, dear Danya?” she sang, aiming, of course, for the microphone on Jaren and Telia.

Marhl exhaled deeply, the cat’s odd equivalent of a sigh. [I’m not sure it will go down as smoothly, but the translator seems to work fine.]

Reyanna perked up. “It *surely* won’t go as smoothly; it never does on missions. You just have to be ready to adapt where needed.”

Danya opened the door to the conference room,

computer in hand. "I'm not so sure about the programming being *perfect*, but it'll do." She slid the computer onto the conference room table and typed in a command. "In particular, I think you've purposefully messed with some translations. The changes are recent."

The slicer gasped in feigned surprise. "I wouldn't do such a thing!"

Danya cocked an eyebrow, eyeing a few key words that had differing edit dates in the dictionary. "Repeat this, in honor of Jaren: 'I am a sniper, and no stormtrooper has ever escaped my sight.'"

Trika repeated the sentence seamlessly, or so it sounded. Danya flipped the computer screen on its head so that everyone could read the translation: "I am a slacker, and no ljutefisk has ever escaped my plate."

"The truth about Jaren finally comes out," Telia giggled as her husband gave her a playful glare. "I knew you enjoyed Bullwinkle's cooking more than you let on."

Danya couldn't help smirking at the next one. "And, I should have seen this coming... in honor of Stone, repeat this: 'If the patient is in pain, the medic can administer a painkiller to the patient.'"

"Ah, yes." Jaren rolled his eyes as Trika began to translate the words. "The horror of going to the medical wing. You know, every time I pass your office in the lifts or the stairwell, I hear people screaming?"

Stone waved a hand in dismissal. “You must be walking by while I’m kicking back and watching some horrors from my holo collection. You’ve obviously never heard a person scream in pain for *real*, Jaren.” The medic had a dreamy look on his face. “Let’s just say that it’s much, much more *satisfying*.”

Jaren chuckled and the two turned their attention back to the translation of Trika’s sentence. What they saw next was almost too much to handle.

*If pain becomes too little of a problem for the patient, then the medic should set the patient’s flesh on fire.*

“You really do enjoy the sound of pain, eh, Stone?” Telia whistled over her husband’s laughter.

Stone just shook his head at Trika and eyed her with a particularly leery gaze. “And I trust that you’ll fix all these little problems before we leave, right?”

Her all-too-sweet smile came back to bite him. “Well, if there was any chance you’d get hurt, I might think twice about it, but I suppose I need to keep things rolling so our end of the mission goes smoothly.” Trika narrowed her eyes at Danya’s computer and grew serious. “I’m actually surprised ‘rifle’ translated as well as it did. Certain technological terms might be a little shaky, but I hope that at least the idea will get across to you.”

Reyanna tilted her head at the statement, somehow reading more into the words. “They didn’t have

technology where you came from. Did you create these words since leaving your homeworld and seeing more of the galaxy?”

Trika's smirk returned quickly. “I've never invented a new word necessarily, but attempting to balance extant words in just the right order to match modern terms can turn into *quite* a mouthful.”

Marhl pushed herself off the far wall and approached the group, arms crossed. [As long as it works, it won't matter.] The cat raised an eyebrow in a particularly Human gesture. [What is the rough translation for 'rifle,' anyway?]

Pulling back her arm and giving Stone a punch, Trika exclaimed, “*Boom-stick!*” and jerked away before the medic could grab her and repay the deed in full.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ty had his fighter lined up over the sights of the relic he was manning. Just before he squeezed the trigger, though, a possible catch to his paint scheme made its presence felt.

“*AS YOU WERE, Lieutenant Flynn!*”

Ty hastily flicked the safety back on, then stood and turned around. Sure enough, there was Major Ski headed across the hangar at full tilt, his facial expression having all the subtlety and charm of a Coruscanti thunderstorm. He stopped just as it

looked like he was about to simply walk through the poor pilot, and hung his face mere inches from Ty's.

"Lieutenant," Major Ski's stern voice growled uncomfortably close, "you had better have a *very* good reason for trying to fire a heavy repeater in my hangar!"

The mischievous smirk on Ty's face was undeniable, even at that distance. "I'll use a lower power setting, sir. It'll make our disguises more authentic. I'll be extra careful, sir, I promise!" Ty pleaded. "Please, please, please!"

Stepping closer to the major was Karn Deloti, who seemed to be attempting to cover for the young pilot. "Sir, I'll keep an eye on him. And I've probably more experience with Clone Wars weaponry than any of the other Talons. Things are coming along nicely on my X-wing since Striker and I had a good plan heading to the hanger, and we can most definitely help out."

Ski sighed. There was something in Ty's eyes that conveyed sincerity. He had seen Ty's attitude change over the last couple of months, and while the Force-sensitive pilot was still as impulsive as ever, he was gradually taking steps towards responsibility. Ski finally relented. Captain Deloti was going to be supervising. Although Deloti hadn't been with the Talons very long - scarcely a couple of weeks, he *was* one of his officers. Deloti's men-

tion of experience with some Clone Wars machinery made the major doubly want to investigate the captain's service record. "I want that thing gone as soon as you're done with it. Understood?"

"Yes, sir, and thank you!" Ty saluted, then dragged his prized heavy repeater closer to its target, and aimed it at his starfighter. By now, all of the Talons had stopped what they were doing and wisely stood behind him. No one wished to get in the way of a weapon that could mow down an entire platoon in mere seconds.

The Clone Wars-era weapon trembled slightly as the pilot let loose a stream of low-power laser bolts on his painted Z-95. The effect was instantaneous. Carbon-scoring decorated an entire side of his ship, giving it an old, battered look. He repeated the process with the other side, then stood proudly admiring his work of art.

"Not bad," Deloti said, inspecting the battered looking Z-95. It got his stamp of approval, especially since Ty had handled the weapon properly and hadn't blown a hole through the Nest wall.

The other Talons stood in awe at the idea and the results. With an enthusiastic turn toward his fellow pilots, Ty smirked. "Now, who wants to be next?"

“Good, a challenge!”

# 5

With a slight jolt, the *Eagle* reverted to realspace.

“Hold on ta yer hats!” Bullwinkle practically yelled just before he violently brought the YT-2000’s nose down to point at Szeca’s night-covered south pole. Although the shock of the maneuver was aptly compensated by the ship’s artificial gravity, Quis couldn’t help but feel it in her stomach. The others didn’t seem to notice.

*Why did we agree upon Bullwinkle flying?* she wondered.

From the second row of seats in the cockpit, she looked over Danya’s shoulder at the peacefully-spinning planet Szeca. Seen from space it was an odd little orb. From the north pole down, it looked like a scorching hot desert planet, much like Tatooine or Zonju V, but the big difference was that the closer one got to the equator, the greener the planet was. Near the equator, she noticed it looked like any other temperate planet, with what seemed to be forests and even oceans. But the closer one got to the south pole, the more barren it, once again, looked. Only there wasn’t desert; there were vast tundras and eventually snow and ice. Szeca was apparently one of the few planets in the universe

that was at such an odd angle to its sun that it could develop this way.

“We’re coming up on the planet’s stratosphere,” Danya announced from her co-pilot seat. She turned around to look at the Talons sitting behind her. “Stone, Owen, Quis, are you ready?”

“*Always* ready!” Stone replied and unbuckled his seatbelt.

Quis just nodded, loosened her seatbelt, got up, and followed Stone down the corridor to the main hold. Owen got up from his seat at the communications terminal and followed after the two.

In a corner of the main hold lay an old, pre-Clone Wars model cam droid. It was an ordinary-looking model that anyone could see in any inhabited corner of the galaxy. But beneath its ordinary façade, it was far from ordinary. Quis had done some special modifications to it. She had added self-replenishing fuel-cells, a transmitter with an extremely long range, an infrared camera and a few more things that were far from stock on these droids. It would suit its mission perfectly.

Quis was proud of her creation and she was especially proud that she had once again been of use to the squadron. She walked over to the droid and flicked the power switch hidden just under its dome-shaped top. It came to life immediately, repulsors humming.

“Follow me!” Quis ordered the little floating droid

as she walked across the hold into the corridor that lead to the boarding ramp. Stone and Owen were right behind her.

“I think we’re in atmosphere,” Stone said as he heard wind starting to whistle outside.

“Sounds like it, yes,” Owen replied idly.

Quis didn’t reply. She stared down at the boarding ramp under her feet and wondered what they would find beyond it. The Talons had plenty of intel on the inhabited areas of Szeca, but hardly any on the wild country beyond. There were reports of packs of hungry, canine creatures roaming the tundra, but none of these could be confirmed in NRI databases. With the tundra a thousand kilometers south of Szeca’s main city as the *Eagle*’s current destination, they decided not to take further risk, so she wasn’t to go out on the boarding ramp all by herself. Stone and Owen would stand guard as she activated the droid and sent it on its way.

With a buzz, the ship’s intercom came to life. “We’re coming up on our destination,” Danya’s voice came through. “Get ready!”

The pitch of the whistling outside became lower and lower and eventually disappeared entirely, only to be replaced by the thump of the *Eagle*’s landing gear setting down roughly on the frozen soil of Szeca’s tundra.

“Another fine landin’!”

“Bullwinkle’s voice does carry, doesn’t it?” Owen remarked.

Quis swallowed her nerves and zipped her jumpsuit to the top. It was going to be really cold out there. Stone and Owen both took their blasters to hand.

For a while, the only sounds they heard were the humming of the cam droid’s repulsors and of the sub-light engines on stand-by. There was a strange tension in the air, anticipation of the moment to come. Then, the vacuum seals around the boarding ramp hissed and the ramp started to lower. The cold from Szeca’s night rolled over the three Talons like an icy blanket. They peered outside and saw nothing beyond the *Eagle*’s floodlights but darkness.

As soon as the ramp was all the way down, Stone and Owen each took up their positions on either side of the ramp, blaster at the ready. Quis walked down the ramp with the cam droid in tow. When she put her boot down on Szeca’s surface, she could feel the cold coming up through their soles. She shuddered involuntarily at the strange sensation.

She walked out a couple of meters towards the edge of the *Eagle*, looming over her. She turned around to face the floating droid and started tapping in code sequences on a little keypad that slid out from its front.

Around her, everything seemed quiet. And besides, she couldn’t really hear much over the hum of the engines.

Suddenly, there was a slight rustling behind her.

Adrenaline rushed into Quis's veins almost immediately and she spun around. How she managed to react that quickly, she wasn't sure. Maybe it was the hours she had spent with Milan that had given her the strength to do this, instead of being paralyzed by fear. Visions of snarling creatures with sharp teeth shining in the *Eagle's* floodlights raced across her mind.

But what she saw was something completely different.

A small, rodent-like creature looked at her with its beady eyes. It was just inside the circle of light. It tilted its head slightly in a curious expression. Her heart still racing, Quis looked at it blink once, twice. Then, as if satisfied by what it had seen, the creature turned around and scurried off into the darkness.

Behind her, she heard Stone's voice. "Are you okay?"

She turned around to see the two male Talons with smirks on their faces. "Yeah, I'm all right," she replied, her voice trembling more than she had wanted it to.

She finished punching in the codes and the small keypad slid back in. Without warning the droid moved clear of the *Eagle*, climbed a meter or two and flew off.

"Good luck..." Quis whispered under her breath, watching the glow of its repulsors disappearing in the distance.

She turned around and walked back up the ramp with Stone and Owen following her closely. Owen

was the last in and punched the big red button that closed the ramp.

“We’re ready,” Stone said into the intercom attached to the wall. “Get this bird up in the air.”

“Aye aye!” was Bullwinkle’s reply and the ship immediately came to live.

Happy to be back inside the *Eagle* in relative safety, Quis rushed over to the hold where she had set up an elaborate console. She sat down behind it and started flicking switches. Stone stood behind her, with a somewhat interested expression on his face.

It took a while for the screen in the middle of the console to come to life, but when it did it showed exactly what Quis had hoped it would. On the screen, she saw what the droid’s infrared camera registered: Szeca’s tundra, rushing by.

“It’s working!” Quis exclaimed happily. All the tension she had gathered suddenly seemed lifted.

“I didn’t expect anything less from our resident genius,” Stone said, smirking. He put his hand on her shoulder. “Good work!”

Quis called up some statistics to make sure that everything was working correctly. Satisfied by them, she leaned back and watched the red blurs rushing by on the screen. The first part of their mission was done. The droid would arrive at Szeca City in eight hours and then the second part of their mission would begin. She and Stone would scout for locations for the faux-

pirates to target. Major Ski had been very specific: they were to look for targets that would be realistic targets for a pirate force, but out of the way enough so that there wouldn't be any civilian casualties. Yet, they couldn't be too out of the way so that the attack wouldn't be noticed. They certainly had their work cut out for them, but between the two of them, Quis was sure they would be able to find something that would suit their needs perfectly.

She set the console so that it would sound an alarm if something strange were to happen to the droid and made her way to the cockpit, following after Stone.

"Watch out for those trees!" she heard Danya yell before she rounded the last corner. There was a scratching noise and a shock that went through the ship. Quis had to do her utmost not to lose her balance. Once she had steadied herself against the corridor wall, she rushed to the cockpit.

"What happened? Did we hit a tree?"

Bullwinkle grunted. "Ah, 'twas nothin'! Jus' a wee brush with th' local vegetation!"

Judging by the looks on everyone's faces, it was more than nothing. The *Eagle* didn't seem to be damaged, though (there were no flashing lights or blaring sirens, thank the Force), so she sat down in her seat and buckled up. Through the forward viewport she could see pine trees rushing by just below them. Quis knew they had to stay low so they wouldn't appear on

any radar screens, but this was a bit ridiculous. Knowing she would only excite Bullwinkle if she was to make a remark about it, she kept her mouth shut and held on to the upholstery. The others seemed to be doing the same.

She was glad when the ship reached the southern pole and started climbing towards open space. But as they blasted through the stratosphere she realized they would have to go this way one more time. The thought made her shudder.

Clear of the atmosphere, Bullwinkle pointed the freighter's nose at a small, barren moon.

"Good," Danya remarked. "Let's put it down in that crater over there. Try and put it down in the shade. That should hide us from at least *casual* glances." They knew from their research that Ralhon didn't patrol this particular moon, so in theory they would be safe. But they could never be too careful.

"No problem, missy!" Bullwinkle replied. Danya tried to hide her scowl. She didn't seem too fond of being called "*missy*." Quis grinned, but covered it up quickly with her hand.

From this moon they would be able to have line-of-sight contact with the droid for a full twenty-two hours. That would be enough for her and Stone to complete their work.

*If only we could sit out the entire mission up here,* Quis thought to herself. But she knew that they had to

get down on the planet near Szeca City when Jaren, Telia and Trika were there. She knew they would need the backup if things went sour. *Let's hope they won't need it...*

The *Eagle* arrived at its destination faster than Quis had expected and Bullwinkle sat it down in his usual rough manner.

“Another fine landin’!” he announced once again. Quis saw Stone rolling his eyes.

“All right.” Danya got up from the co-pilot seat and stretched. “Owen, let’s go and set up our equipment in the cargo hold.”

“Right behind you!” Owen replied enthusiastically. Quis noticed that he seemed more than eager to follow Danya to the cargo hold. There was something going on between the two, even someone as oblivious as Bullwinkle could see that. She wondered how Major Ski fit into that equation...

“Well, don’t get too busy,” Bullwinkle started, “I’ll have yer dinner ready soon enough.” Stone groaned from his seat to Quis’s left. Bullwinkle didn’t seem to notice. “I brought along some fresh ljutefisk. I figure ya don’t wanna pass that up, ey?”

Quis glanced sideways at Stone and saw him mouth the words “*Kill me, kill me now...*”

\* \* \* \* \*

The Nest's simulator room was quiet except for the hum of a few computer consoles. In just a little while it would be loud from electronics, machinery, and voices, and the air would get stuffy from the added heat loads; right now, however, it was perfect for what Major Kevin Ski needed to do, and he was taking full advantage of it.

Fully suited up for flight, he sat at the master sim control console and reviewed the last few simulator runs the airborne Talons had performed in preparation for their part of the mission. They were shaping up pretty well aside from a few blunders, but with the different types of ships to coordinate, some of those errors were to be expected and simply learned from. It was not unlike trying to take the vastly different personalities and skills of the Talons first assigned to him and form them into a cohesive force.

Kevin made a few notes on a datapad about some areas in particular they would need to work on in this next sim run. As he put the datapad back down, an unexpected presence seen out of the corner of his eye made him start a bit. He quickly composed himself and turned to the pilot sitting behind him. "Ken. I didn't hear you come in."

"You looked busy, sir. I didn't want to bother you." Kendrick was also suited up in his flight gear. "Need me to do anything?"

"Sure." Kevin motioned to the simulator control

console and said, "Why don't you put in a few new targets for us to use today? Change some of the existing ones around, mix it up, make it a challenge. The rest of the sim program is all ready to go."

"Yes, sir," Ken replied. He went to the control console and began working.

A couple minutes later, Kevin glanced at his chrono. "It's about that time, isn't it?" He took his datapad and stood, and Kendrick finished up his last entry in the computer before leaning down and grabbing his helmet from where it sat under his chair. He and Kevin were both ready when the remaining Talon pilots walked into the sim room. Karn, Reyanna, and Marl were quiet for the most part, Kaiba was fidgeting, and it looked like Ty was telling an excited Qui-Sein Delph a humorous story about a past flying mission if the wild motions of the hand not holding his helmet were any indication. H9-0 shuffled quickly along behind them, trying to keep up.

Ty gradually quieted as Kevin and Ken walked over, and after Ken joined the other Talons, Kevin began. "Good, you're all a bit early. We can certainly use the extra time since our departure is fast approaching. I have a list of things we need to improve, and we'll be concentrating on those now. We have no room for error once we're in the sky, so let's get this right for your own sakes as well as those of your squadmates on the ground. Now unless anyone has any questions,

get in your sims and get ready to go.”

“Yes, sir!” came the group’s acknowledgment.

Ty leaned over to Kendrick as they headed off and said, “Fifty credits says I can still fly circles around you even in that old Skull I’m flying here.”

Ken gave him a small, mock shove. “In your dreams. You only have that Z-95 so you don’t break anything *important*.”

Kaiba avoided looking at Kevin and muttered to Ensign Delph, “Come on, Qui-Sein. Let’s go blow something up.” She led the way to the Skipray Blastboat sim they would be using with Reyanna, Mahrl, and H9-0.

Kevin gave a small sigh and climbed into his T-wing simulator next to Karn’s X-wing sim. Karn’s astromech, Striker, was already hooked up to it, and Stumpy was likewise plugged in to Kendrick’s X-wing sim.

A couple of minutes later, the Talons all reported ready. The simulator program came to life, and the blue swirl of hyperspace on their viewscreens faded into elongated white lines, which then snapped into the pinpoints of stars as the fighters slowed to sublight speed. The planet of Szeca hung in space ahead of and relatively below them, as this time they had come in near the northern pole above the planet’s orbital plane.

Ski keyed his comm. “Long John Silver Squadron, this is Silver One. Report status.”

“Silver Two, ready,” Karn Deloti replied.

Ken was next. “Silver Three. Four engines green, good to go,” he said.

“I still love that name,” Ty piped up. “Silver Four is with you all the way. Let’s go get us some booty!”

Kaiba finished off the roll call with, “Silver Five, all set,” before Ski could admonish Ty for the unnecessary chatter.

“All right,” Kevin said, making a mental note to talk to Ty later. “Now everyone, as much as it pains me to say this, loosen up the formation. You’re pirates, not military.” A couple ships fell into the sloppy role a little too quickly for Kevin’s tastes, and the remaining ones followed suit a moment later. “That’s better. Two, you’re my wing. We’ll be out in front. Keep up if you can.” Kevin smirked just a bit at the last statement before continuing. “Three and Four, you’ll be flying cover for Five. Be aggressive, but remember there are lots of civilians down there that we do *not* want to injure. We had too many mistakes like that in the last run. It’ll be early morning in some places where we’ll be coming in over the surface, so people may be out and about. Be careful.”

Szeca’s northern polar surface looked inhospitable from the Talons’ vantage point, and the closer they got, the worse it looked. The conglomeration of “pirate” vessels sped toward it and entered a polar orbit heading toward the western hemisphere. A steady

tone soon indicated that data was being sent to them on a special frequency. Kevin pulled it up on his sensor display: it was a series of green, yellow, and red markers overlaid on a map of the planet's surface with coordinate axes.

"Target data for Area One is received and input," Deloti reported. "Most of the primaries seem to be empty buildings this time. One power grid as a secondary. We'll need to watch out for the plaza area; it's really close to one of the primaries."

"Agreed," Kevin replied, also looking at the "prohibited" red-marked area on his sensors.

At orbital speeds it only took a couple of minutes to travel far enough south to a good starting position, and Kevin ordered the group to enter the atmosphere. The pilots had to throttle back as they did so. Major Ski increased power to his shields and adjusted his T-wing's attitude to smooth out the bumpy ride.

It wasn't long before Kevin's communications panel lit up brightly, indicating an incoming transmission on a general frequency. The longer he ignored it, the more channels lit up to grab his attention. "They know we're here, and they know something's not right," he told his pilots. "Stay sharp now."

The worst of the atmospheric entry was over, and the Talons were able to speed up toward their first destination. Below them the planet's polar desert had given way to greenery and the outskirts of a city. Kevin

quickly numbered the primary targets on the data feed they had received and sent them to the other Talons. “Two, we’ll be going after Target Three while Silvers Three, Four and Five follow us in and concentrate on Targets Six and Seven.”

Ski and Deloti flew ahead while the other three ships began to pummel a large, empty warehouse to dust in the morning light. The area immediately around the warehouse looked devoid of life, though the rest of the targets would require more care and attention.

The pair had almost reached Target Three when Kevin’s targeting scope showed some red blips. His reading was confirmed an instant later. “Silvers One and Two, this is Silver Five,” H9-0 said. “Sirs, the sensors are indicating a flight of CloakShapes beginning to launch from the surface and coming this way. I’m in the process of calculating their ETA now.”

“Well, some Ralhon forces got in the air early this time, did they?” Kevin mumbled absently to himself. To the Talons he said, “Silvers, we’ll have some new targets in a minute that are a bit more mobile and will be shooting back. Everyone regroup. Let’s get ready for them.”

“Good, a challenge!” Ty exclaimed. “Bring it on!”

\* \* \* \* \*

The Talons had made sure to clean and fix up the *Claw*

so that there was no question that the transport was space-worthy, but as for transporting the ground team to Szeca, a ground team that was putting on the front of a wealthy couple and a slave, the craft was painfully noticeable. There was nothing to be done for it, though. With the *Hawk* still out for repairs and the *Eagle* seeing action with the communications group, the *Claw* was the only available resource left to the Talons. The decision made was to set the craft down on the outskirts of Szeca City. Jaren figured that they would get a lot of weird looks placing their craft in the care of a regular hangar bay, but that once they had gotten into the main districts of the capital, they'd blend in without a thought. They just couldn't risk getting caught coming out of the craft. The plan involved some walking... well, *a lot* of walking. And of course, Trika complained heavily.

Jaren and Telia were currently piloting the shaky craft, fresh out of hyperspace and approaching Szeca steadily. From their communications with Danya, the pirate team was en route on schedule and would be arriving shortly after she received word that the two of them were out and about and enjoying the nightlife.

Telia looped her arms around Jaren as he guided the craft toward the capital. "This is going to be *great*. Despite being on mission, it will sure be nice to enjoy ourselves a little." Her brown hair fell across his shoulders as she leaned in for a quick peck on

his cheek.

Mind on the mission, Jaren still allowed himself to smile at his wife's affections. "If we close our eyes and imagine that we're not also in the company of a particularly annoying slicer, we *might* make this into a second honeymoon."

"Well," Trika's tell-tale voice sang as she entered the cockpit from the back. "I will *try* to make sure I won't get too much in the way." She had been busy in the back prepping the last of her outfit.

Jaren gave a quick glance behind him, blushing slightly at the comment. "I see you managed to work the hat into the mix," he said, referring to the flat piece covering her head.

Trika kicked back in the third chair of the cockpit and cocked an eyebrow underneath the brim of the hat, not so easily swayed from an uncomfortable topic of conversation. "I knew I was sent on this mission for more than hacking," she commented with an eye on Telia's hands, which were still resting on Jaren's chest. "Kevin sent me with you guys so I could *baby-sit* you two."

Telia had her own quirky reply ready. "Trika, keep that up, and I'll keep you on the list of babysitters for whenever Jaren and I decide to have our own kids."

If Jaren had been drinking something at that moment, it would have wound up all over the front control panel. As it was, the jerk of his head was indicator

enough that the statement had effectively surprised the hell out of him. “I, uh, think we should keep our minds on the mission, for now,” he replied shyly. “Besides, the two of us need to get ready before we arrive in an hour.” He gestured for Trika to take the controls from him.

With a flat expression that told him exactly what she thought of taking the controls, Trika did so anyway, falling into the pilot’s seat just as Jaren was standing up. “Fine, but keep an ear out for Control. I’m really going to get into this ‘not talking in Basic’ attitude, starting... *now*.”

Jaren and Telia began to exit the cockpit. “Just try not to crash like you usually do,” Jaren called back, shutting the door before the slicer could respond in Basic or otherwise.

Despite being away from the pesky rantings of the slicer, Jaren could still feel the heat in his cheeks. He and Telia walked in relative silence to the back of the transport and located their luggage quickly. Opening the cases where their clothing and accessories were, the two began to prepare for their roles. Jaren kept relatively quiet, attempting to shake the thought of children from his mind. It wouldn’t do for him to be distracted.

Telia had changed already by the time he had buttoned the first buttons on his shirt. Her slinky deep blue dress hung appropriately on her slim body, accen-

tuating a practically perfect physique. She was applying her make-up with the utmost care, powdering her cheeks only slightly. Jaren took the opportunity and continued to the top of his shirt, peering around the compartment and making sure that all of their equipment, should they need it, was in its proper place. Trika's small bag of computer equipment was stashed in the engine compartment where the emissions from the hyperdrive would help to diffuse any sensor beams directed at the ship. Their communications box was firmly secured in the back, filled with invisible earpieces that would come in handy later on. And a small pack of three blasters with rechargeable cells sat off to the side, which he hoped would not have to be used in addition to stun blasts that would take out the operatives inside of the security building.

"You know our equipment hasn't moved since the last time you checked it," Telia commented as if she had been reading his mind. "You're nervous about commanding this mission while on the ground, aren't you?"

Jaren turned around and met his wife's gaze. She had begun to lift her locks of hair into a number of twists, setting them firmly with the assistance of a few beautiful clips that she had commandeered from Kai-ba's personal stash. "Yeah, I guess I am," he admitted. "This is the first time a real mission is counting on me making the right decisions for the Talons. I'm nervous

that something could go wrong, but I'm also confident in our team."

"That's good to hear," Telia said, standing. "And I'm sure the nervousness is just temporary." She looked over his uniform and made a slight adjustment to the collar.

Jaren hesitated before replying, his own discomfort with the subject evident. "What you said about children, were you serious about us having children so soon?"

"Well, I know we haven't discussed it," she began, a slow, sly smile forming as she brushed the right arm of his shirt off, "but maybe it's time we started thinking about it." Her hand slid down to grasp Jaren's, and she playfully pulled him closer to her. Jaren allowed himself to smile back at her, and his other hand found the small of her back. Just before he could kiss her, the intercom cut on.

"Sorry to disturb you two lovebirds, but I'm getting a hail from the control tower," Trika called. "It's show time!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Major Kevin Ski sat back in the seat of his T-wing interceptor, content for the moment to rest in anticipation of the mission to come. His team had performed well in their last sim practices, and even though Ty

had accidentally blown up the wrong warehouse in his last run, H9-0 had discovered that it was an error on the part of the Z-95 software and not a trigger-happy Talon. That explanation and H9-0's fix of the problem satisfied Ski, and a few hours later, the Talon pirates lifted into the air and shot into hyperspace. Aside from being cramped up for a few hours in the cockpit of the T-wing, he really couldn't have been happier.

His other Talons were probably getting some solid rest, leaving the flying to the nav consoles. Kevin couldn't even shut his eyes, though, his mind left to wander across the months previous and the months to come. The first months of training. The Intelligence Gala. Jaren and Telia and their wedding. The trial of Major Devoe Rosche.

The death of five Talons.

His head sank deeper into the back of his seat. He *hated* to think of the lives lost those months ago, and he *hated* himself for the loss. Why he specifically blamed himself, he could never know. The position of leadership that he had begun receiving in the New Republic Special Ops community several years ago seemingly came prepackaged with an overabundance of guilt. And despite years of military training, his flesh came infused with a certain amount of remorse and an unforgiving memory.

He was wearing an unmarked flight suit, one that he hadn't worn in years, actually. After removing all

of the previous patches and markings of rank, he had dunked the uniform in oil and gear lubricant, and then washed the uniform to make it unrecognizable. After the rest of his pirates had done the same, the washing machine had to immediately be replaced, understandably. In case any of the Talons were to go down during their mission, there weren't to be any sort of identifying marks on the ship or on their person to link them to the New Republic. As with most of their intelligence missions, the denial of their existence was essential, just in case something went wrong. The ships had been modified and tweaked on all levels to ensure that they were as authentic as they could be. Ty had even attempted talking like an old spacer a few times over their comms, right up until Kaiba flipped out and told him not-so-politely to keep quiet.

Kaiba. She had practically avoided him like a disease ever since their talk, and it wasn't because he had mentioned spending less time together. Kaiba was visibly upset whenever he *did* see her, and he knew he hadn't approached the subject as gently as he would have liked. He hadn't necessarily been as straightforward as he was when disciplining subordinates, but with the emotions of a female, he wasn't sure he had approached the subject properly. She hadn't understood the situation objectively and still wasn't thinking clearly... in *his* mind, anyway. *Then again*, he supposed, *I never claimed to be an expert at relationships.*

For the best. That's what he had always told himself, anyway. As a military officer, he spent all of his energy attending to the herding of personnel and orders. Every morning met his groggy eyes with a new set of needs that he had to fill. *That* he could do. It was required of him and the duty was something he was good at. But duty to another? *One* other? He wouldn't know what that was like to start with. Didn't love demand a gentleness? Tenderness? Something *besides* the rules of war and conflict?

*Maybe if things were different...*

*"If things were different, you'd be with Danya."*

He resisted clenching his eyes shut against the memory of the talk and against the words and the woman. Things *weren't* different, and Danya seemed to be content on her own or in the company of Owen, anyway. The new communications officer and his partner had taken a strong liking to each other in the time he had been at the Nest. Kevin definitely hadn't missed it. A part of him felt jealousy as he had never felt it before, fairly comparable to the feeling he had gotten watching the Rogues soar into the sky in the days of old. Another part of him felt relieved. Pathetically relieved that he wouldn't have to venture too far from the normal routine. Pathetically relieved that somehow, her being happy was enough to satisfy him.

"Kriff," he mumbled, starting to feel the edge of a headache creeping up in his temples. It wouldn't do to

think so hard of such things with the mission imminent, but the people he cared about were changing and experiencing changes. He couldn't help wondering of his role, or his absence, in it all. Major Devoe Rosche had been both a bright and dim spot. When he had effectively been thrown out of the major's trial, he had made every effort to submit an appeal after the disaster of the Senate offices had calmed. Someone important in someplace important must have seen the flimsies. While Major Devoe Rosche had long been removed from his office as intelligence liaison, he hadn't landed in a military brig and he hadn't been discharged. Ski had checked. And while he hadn't wound up in trouble, Rosche hadn't exactly been promoted, either. As far as Ski could figure, the major was currently out in the fleet, enjoying life away from the drama of the IHC, hopefully. Maybe he had done enough to ensure his friend hadn't been humiliated and dishonored. Maybe someone was looking out for him. Or maybe Rosche was sent somewhere like Ski himself had been sent away, forced to bang his head against a wall with mind-numbing work or something similar.

Sadly, if the IHC wanted to do away with somebody, they could do a rather quick job of it.

His work so far had paid off, though, and he had to admit that being Talon Leader was no longer the burden that it once had been. It definitely helped that he no longer directly answered to the IHC, but rather, was responsible for his people's results to the Senate alone. And this

mission promised a wealth of respect for his people if it went successfully. And for them personally, it meant finally getting a crack at some of the people responsible for the months of heartache. Somewhere, Ski knew that this mission would pay off in a big way. If it yielded a deeper conspiracy, Ski wouldn't be surprised. In fact, he'd be especially proud to have found it out and put a stop to it all.

His nav system beeped a warning to him, drawing him from his thoughts. The pirate squadron was nearly ready to pull out of hyperspace and, if everything was going according to plan, the ground team was nearly ready to spring into action as well. And if everything *wasn't* going to plan? Well, he supposed his comms team would let him know that as soon as they made contact. With his squad's ongoing record of failures on missions legit and otherwise, he figured the only way he'd wake up surprised is if he didn't wake up at all and he was dead.

*Well, that wouldn't be much of a stretch, either.* He noticed with a passing twitch that he hadn't had to think of that rebuttal before it just came out, and also that he thought the idea was funny. Chalk that one up to leading a crew that could make the top ten in anything but the New Republic's Hall of Fame.

The confirmations came in one by one, and he sat up straighter to watch the responses and do a final check before exiting hyperspace. As he shifted in his seat, his leg brushed against a mass that made him jump up against

the restraints. Kevin glanced down at the deck and almost shrieked at the mound of fur. Letting out his breath, he reached down and picked up the object, which he could now tell was Talon Null, the squad's stuffed hawkbat.

"Sir, are you all right?"

Apparently, the squad-wide comms system that Quis and Owen had put together was working well, and it had started working just in time for Ty to have heard him shout. "Yes, Lieutenant, thank you," he said, clearing his throat and attempting to regain some semblance of his composure. The hawkbat's toothy grin stared back at him as if laughing. "Are we all ready? We're going to get target confirmations and a status report from our ground crew once we're in atmosphere, so have your systems ready."

"We're ready, Lead," Qui-Sein responded with an enthusiasm that mirrored a little kid bouncing in his seat.

Kendrick chimed in. "Ready to cause a little chaos, Lead."

"Roger that," Kevin confirmed, tapping in tune with his nav computer's countdown to exiting hyperspace. "Let's get serious and do our part."

"Oh, and whoever is responsible for Talon Null's appearance in my craft, I'll have you know that I'm fully capable of flying this bird myself, and you'll be getting him back when you least expect the thing."

He couldn't have predicted it, but every single one of his pirate Talons burst into laughter.

“But let’s still make it look real.”

# 6

As expected, the trio had gotten some odd looks landing the *Claw* where they did. As soon as they stepped off the transport, it was apparent that they didn’t exactly fit in with the usual folk of that area. The workers in this part of Szeca City were hard workers, making a living with their hands and many times working well into the night to make that living. Jaren and Telia looked as if they had just stepped out of a holodrama, and Trika... she just looked like she didn’t belong anywhere at all.

Thankfully the trek was shorter than expected. A quick shortcut they hadn’t foreseen had cut the trip in half almost. Good thing, too. Trika was carrying three large bags and struggling, though playing the part well enough to pass the scrutiny of anyone passing by. She kept her head low and demeanor meek, an experience to see in itself. The hat had been a good, last minute idea. By keeping the brim of the flat piece low, Trika had effectively made seeing and studying her a little more difficult.

As they approached the main center of the city’s night-life districts, the overhanging leaves of two parallel rows of trees greeted Jaren and Telia, who were soaking up the magic of the city lights. The pathway before them was comprised of smoothed stone that glistened in the

light of the planet's two moons and the light from the numerous buildings on either side of the way. Almost as if sensing the intrusion, the tree leaves fluttered open, revealing not merely weeping back sides, but a crisp, golden hue on their front sides. Despite the control of their acting and the mission, Jaren and Telia both gasped at the display, watching in wonder as the trees, one by one, opened up to bid them a welcome.

"I've never seen anything like that," Telia whispered in awe, gripping Jaren's arm tightly and moving closer as if to share the moment more intently. Jaren tucked her arm into his and leaned over to kiss her cheek, all the while imagining Trika's disgust with the whole display. As it was, the ground communications unit was already listening in on most, if not all, of what they were saying. They, too, would probably be disgusted by the time the night was over, if not in pure jealousy at their mission objectives, out of the affection that was sure to occur while they were in front of the masses of the city. They had decided to proceed with comm silence once they were dining out in public just so they could have a *small* bit of privacy.

The northern portion of the district was where all the action was. Lights proclaiming shows, entertainment, fine dining, and sporting events flashed obnoxiously in every direction. The further they walked, the brighter the displays. More beings were beginning to gather in clusters as well, signaling that they were definitely in

the right place. Just to the south, the housing district sat undisturbed, where they would be taking care of business in the long run. If they had the luxury of staying a while, they would be relaxing in the comforts of one of the city's historic and popular hotels.

Jaren, Telia, and Trika passed a large group of wealthy businessmen, obvious from their important cloaks that draped across their feet. In their hands were glasses of liquor, legal to be carried and flaunted and exchanged, and often expected to. In perfect unison, Jaren and Telia gave a nod and a smile their way, drawing approving nods in return. The businessmen then turned back to the conversation, paying Trika no mind.

So far, so good. Trika didn't seem to be having too much trouble with the luggage and kept a perfect pace behind them, never once getting too close or too far away. She trailed behind well. Jaren kept his focus ahead and tried not to give the slicer a second thought, either. One thing in particular bothered him about the place: Szeca City was practically free of any beings except for Humans, a particularly Imperial trait if he ever saw one. His research on the planet comforted him, but from his background, Jaren could tell the influence of the Empire when he saw it.

The trees stopped suddenly, and the pathway twisted south, dead-ending into the Ralhon building as they had anticipated. Jaren and Telia analyzed the squat building as they approached, taking in every detail they could even

though there were very few to garner from the surface. Dull and brown, a clashing contrast to the city's wild exterior, Ralhon Security stood only one story tall and had twin windows on either side of the main doors, looking into the lobby and nothing more. Otherwise, it made the perfect place to run an illegal operation if needed.

Trika had surprisingly bolted toward the door, making it to the handle just in time to open it for her teammates. Without flinching she bowed her head and held to her position firmly, ushering them inside and following behind again. Jaren and Telia didn't miss a beat, as if it was all too normal for someone to open the door just in time for them to walk through. The painstaking manner in which Trika was being forced to act was quite hilarious, if not downright wrong on a further glance.

There was someone waiting for them at the front. A tall, brown-haired man with a short goatee and an eyebrow quirk saw them enter and shoved aside a clipboard to greet them. His voice was stern and his expression much the same. He'd apparently been born into the position he had been there for so long. "Good evening, sir and madam. How may I help you?" Behind him, workers of various sorts were exchanging information at desks and occupying the rest of the small building for whatever purpose. There were three desks in view with three workers behind them, and two side hallways extending from the back wall to the east and west.

Jaren took the lead, feeling good about the role af-

ter making it through the main city without any trouble. “Good evening, good sir,” he began, remembering everything that years under Imperial rule had taught him. “My wife and I are staying in the main city for the next few days and will be needing to keep our slave here as well. We were told that you handle all registration procedures.”

“Yes, sir,” the man returned blandly, reaching underneath the counter in front of him and retrieving a datapad. “Is that *her*?”

Telia turned up her nose and appeared annoyed. “Yes, she is. More trouble than she’s worth, I’m afraid.” With a curt whistle, Telia summoned Trika to move forward. She snapped her fingers and pointed at her side. Trika moved instantly and arrived at that spot just as quickly.

The man handed Jaren the datapad and instructed him to fill the form out. “I’ll need the details you see on the form and your contact information.” He reached back under the counter again and produced a cylindrical object that he easily bent into a circle. With little more than a gesture, he waved at Trika to move toward him. “What is the slave’s name?”

Jaren didn’t bother looking up from his application. “Her name is Laetna,” he said with distaste, continuing with the datapad.

Still bending the material into a suitable shape, he glanced at Trika briefly, then glanced again as if missing something. “Species?” the man asked, sounding bored

but somewhat interested.

Telia picked at her nails, looking bored and in no way interested. “Chinaési,” she said simply. “We purchased her for a rather steep price a few months ago.”

The man smirked, a combination of a grimace at bending the material and at the statement itself. “We’ve had a couple of them come through here in the last few years, actually.” He paused, and even with complete ownership over her own actions, Telia noticed that Trika flinched at the mention of her people. He thankfully didn’t see the reaction and continued messing with what now appeared to be a bracelet of some sort. “Always the same, too. Stupid savages can’t speak Basic and probably couldn’t figure out how to get off-planet even if they were freed. From what I’ve seen, the Empire probably did them all a favor.” With that, he slapped the wrist device onto Trika and snapped it shut, locking the mechanism in place tightly, drawing a forced whimper from her.

At that moment, though, Jaren and Telia both could have used something as distracting as a wrist monitor to keep their faces from falling to the floor. They recovered from the man’s horribly offensive statement and continued the mission even as their minds continued to reel. Jaren finished filling out the datapad and handed it back to the man with little enthusiasm. “We’ve attempted to train her in Basic, but it’s slow in coming. We hope that one day she’ll actually appreciate all that we do for her and will learn to pay more attention.”

Even as he looked over the information, the man continued talking, pointing to Trika's wrist as he spoke. "That device will keep an eye on her while you folks are enjoying yourselves. We'll be able to track her and make sure that she's not making any trouble."

Jaren and Telia nodded, and, as they had discussed, posed another question that they had agreed upon earlier. "There's no chance she can escape, correct? It would be a lot of trouble to replace her," Telia interjected before her husband.

The man shook his head confidently, tapping the wrist device. "As soon as that device gets tampered with, we know it. You can feel safe knowing that we've got our eye on her. She's in the southernmost house, by the way. Her room will be on the second floor."

Jaren offered his hand to the man. "You've got our contact information in case something happens, but otherwise, I think we're done here, Mister...?"

"Ralhon," the man responded, firmly gripping the hand. "My father is the Ralhon from the advertisements, but the blood is the same."

Jaren forced a smile out, feeling somewhat trapped by the revelation. It surely wouldn't have any bearing on their mission now that they knew this man was part of the family business, but it had been a surprise, for sure. "Thank you for your time," he said simply, releasing the hand and taking Telia's arm instead. "We'll be seeing you soon."

Telia's other hand snapped up, and Trika moved, although if they caught it correctly, both Jaren and Telia noticed that it appeared the slicer was moving a little slower than she had been before the registration process. No time for that, though. As expected, the slicer did her duty and opened the door to the facility again, allowing them to stroll out comfortably.

*From what I've seen, the Empire probably did them all a favor.*

Moving slowly? It was a wonder Trika hadn't throttled the man off his feet while she was there. Jaren could only hope that the harsh words would quickly fade and that they could move forward with purpose.

\* \* \* \* \*

As Long John Silver Squadron sped towards Szeca City low over the planet's thick equator forests, the early morning sun already burned brightly, heating up Kevin's cockpit. He brushed away some beads of sweat from his forehead with his sleeve and brought up the target data on his display.

"ETA on the first set of targets is two minutes," Ski read from the screen over their comm channel. "Two and I will take Target Three. Three and Four, you'll cover for Five as they take on Target Six and Seven. Just like we practiced."

Double-clicks over the comm confirmed every-

one's agreement.

"Five," Ski continued, "on Target Seven, be careful not to hit the nearby overpass. It looks like it's out of use, but we don't want to take any chances."

"That goes without saying, Major," Qui-Sein's disembodied voice responded playfully.

"Good." A small smirk formed on Kevin's face. He realized in that moment that he was actually quite happy to be leading a squad of fighters into battle again. Something he hadn't done in a long time. He also realized how much he missed it... "Communications, keep us posted on what Ralhon's forces are doing."

"Yes sir." H9's voice sounded even more mechanical over the comm. "They have yet to spot us."

"Keep your line with the ground team open. If they have any news, don't hesitate to relay it to me."

"Yes sir."

Kevin cracked his knuckles and grabbed the T-wing's controls tightly. "All right everyone, this is it! Happy flying! And," Ski added, "may the Force be with you!"

The famous phrase had barely left his mouth when his communications panel lit up. Ty had noticed too. "Seems like they've just spotted us."

As more channels lit up, Ski flicked a switch and the bright lights dimmed. They had come up on the city's outskirts now and they passed over the low buildings of the warehouse district. Their targets were coming up fast. "Get ready!"

To his right, Kendrick's X-wing, Ty's Z-95, and the Skipray changed course slightly, heading towards their targets. He watched them veer off and he noticed the Skipray's turrets swivel forward. His thoughts went to Reyanna and Marhl for a second. This would be the moment to prove their worth in battle. There was no doubt in his mind that they were going to prove themselves to be worthy additions to the Talons.

One of the other new additions interrupted his train of thought. "Sir, we're coming up on Target Two. Any orders?" Deloti asked over their private comm frequency.

"Just the standing order. Keep it clean, no unnecessary casualties. But let's still make it look real."

"Yes sir!" With that, Karn opened fire on a small, dilapidated guard tower standing in the middle of a fenced-off water purification facility. The bright red proton torpedo shot forward and hit the stone structure halfway up. Its explosion made the top of the tower break off in what seemed like slow motion. The entire structure toppled over in an expanding cloud of dust.

Right behind Karn, Kevin made a strafing run over some low water tanks to the right of the guard tower. The durasteel melted immediately under the T-wing's scorching hot lasers, leaving behind a pool of red-hot molten material that seemed to devour the tower's dust.

Up ahead, Karn turned his X-wing around and opened fire on a water basin containing what seemed like a huge filter. With the first hit of Karn's lasers, the filters ex-

ploded and spread debris across the facility.

Kevin put his T-wing in a long arc that would bring him around the facility to assess the damage they had done. Satisfied, he opened up his and Karn's private comm frequency. "That's enough, let's proceed to Target Four."

Karn clicked his comm twice and fell in behind Ski's T-wing, already en route to their next target. A huge column of smoke in the distance indicated that the others had made short work of their first target.

"This is Five. Target Six eliminated sir," Qui-Sein reported to Kevin over the comm. "Proceeding to Target Seven."

"Good work, everyone! Keep it up! Communications, no news from Ralhon Security?"

"No sir. It seems their reaction time is somewhat slower than my calculations anticipated. My apologies."

*Droids...* Ski thought to himself and chuckled. "No need to apologize. Any news from the ground team?"

"No sir, no news from them, either. I will relay any messages as soon as I get them."

*So far so good,* Ski thought to himself. *Let's hope our luck holds up...*

\* \* \* \* \*

"Well, kriff..." Telia mumbled just loudly enough to be heard outside of the 'fresher. "That went well." She and Jaren had just dropped Trika off at her quarters, and it

didn't take a psychologist to tell that the slicer was livid. "You think she's going to be all right?"

Jaren was busy in their room, fixing his own attire in preparation of their night out. He hesitated before responding. "She's heard that and more, I'm sure," he called back, "although I'm appalled by how blatant the prejudices are flaunted around here."

"We knew it would be this way, though," Telia replied, twisting yet another strand of hair atop her head. "It shouldn't be that surprising that these people are that ignorant." Trika hadn't said much since she had left their bags at their room and they had returned her to her quarters. Keeping in character was probably the best thing for her, but she doubted it was just an effort to keep in the role. The only words she had spat out upon entering her room were foreign to her, but Danya had been right in her ear to translate the sentence, and it hadn't been pretty.

"I know it sounds weird," Jaren chuckled, "but I'm eager to get out of here already. Call it nerves or revulsion or whatever."

Telia finished adjusting her hair and gave herself a quick look-over in the mirror. "Am I keeping you waiting too long?" she purred, twisting her slender body sideways to make sure she looked good from front to back. Telia liked to keep Jaren waiting, especially when they were going out somewhere fancy. He had told her that the particular restaurant they would be enjoying that

night was one of the best in Szeca City, but wouldn't say much more. Given that their Black Ops budget was paying the entire tab and it gave her some alone time with Jaren, she didn't mind at all.

She smiled at the thought of her husband, who had been ready the moment they arrived. Jaren was likely pacing around the room. He hated not doing anything, so making him wait in his nice clothes for more time than he needed to was torture.

"Maybe!" Jaren called playfully. "I'm starving out here, you know!"

Just then, Telia slid the 'fresher door open and planted her right hand on the door's frame. Her left hip rotated outward, conveniently showing Jaren the split in the dress that curved midway up her thigh. "Well, are you ready now?"

Jaren stood, wearing a stunned expression on his face. Something in the back of his mind was probably attempting to remind him that breathing was a necessary part of life. Telia smiled seductively, watching his eyes wander. She was draped in the same blue dress, but she had refreshed herself from their walk and had re-worked her hair and make-up. The dress had probably cost an entire cycle's pay, but it was worth it.

"So, where are we going?" Telia asked for the tenth time, but Jaren immediately shook his head and remained tight-lipped. She rolled her eyes and pushed herself from the doorway, approaching him with every bit of sensual

ability she had.

Jaren closed his eyes, most likely in a vain attempt to keep his eyes from wandering any more. Telia smiled at the control she had over him, but he was stubborn enough to remain steadfast in his cause. "I'm not going to tell you," he said firmly, opening his eyes and putting his hands around her waist when she got close enough to him. He planted a kiss on her lips, and she returned the gesture in full.

Telia pulled away first and began to move toward the door to their temporary lodgings in the southern district, watching with pleasure as Jaren bit his bottom lip at the tease. The way her shimmering gown moved with her stride must have had him hypnotized by now. "Well, let's move, Hungry Man." She took her right index finger and beckoned him to follow her. "The faster we get moving the faster we can get this over with."

Jaren reached the door rather quickly and risked attempting to kiss her one more time. His left hand found her waist once again, and he brought his right hand to gently stroke her cheek. Telia fell into the kiss, unable to break away so easily this time. When they did break away, it was Jaren who spoke first. "Not so sure I want to get things over with so soon anymore," he told her with a smile, looking her over one more time. "It beats going out at home."

She laughed at the statement. "You're telling me," Telia mused, thinking how much a date like this would

cost out of their own pockets. “And in addition, I’d be picking you up from the hospital because you and Stone decided to start swapping ‘dumb deckie’ jokes in a Marine bar.”

The captain grimaced at the analysis, partially because she was so very right. “I was *seriously* considering that one for when we got back home, but I’m figuring that beating up on me would look bad on the Marines’ records. I suppose grabbing some food will have to suffice for now.”

Telia feigned surprise. “That’s the *only* thing you’re excited about?”

“Well,” he responded with a wink, “a plate of food is going to look extra good, but you don’t look so bad yourself.”

Telia gave him a rough punch to the arm as she exited their room. Jaren, of course, was rather close behind.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jaren and Telia had been gone for an hour and a half, long enough, the Talons had figured, to get comfortable with a glass of wine and to have experienced at least a few annoying songs from whatever band might have been playing downtown that night. Trika had remained in her quarters with her back against the far wall, throwing insults and jokes at the communications unit while waiting for her turn at the mission. After being regis-

tered, tagged, and insulted, Trika seemed to have gotten back to her old self after exchanging a few insults of her own with Stone. Bullwinkle was standing watch outside of the *Eagle*, probably enjoying talking to himself. That suited the comms unit just fine.

They had set down their YT-2000 in an abandoned construction site that Quis had conveniently found near the Sceza City limits. It was surrounded by empty, run-down office buildings, so landing the *Eagle* there at night had gone unnoticed. As soon as they had touched down, they covered the craft with thick duraplast sheets Quis's cam droid had spotted lying around to hide it from at least any cursory glances.

Trika had long since grown bored with waiting, but was still relatively lively when Danya chimed in her ear. "Still ready, Trika? Give us some eyes. It's time to roll." The hacker was watching Owen work in the corner, his fingers flying across the control and sending new targets to the pirate squad.

Even without a visual, Danya heard the tired response for what it was. "*Still* here, just like an hour ago," Trika replied with enough exasperation to be understood clearly. "Stone hasn't been drooling on himself while napping, right? You all are ready out there?"

Stone feigned waking up noisily from a snoring spell, his feet kicked up on the forward displays. "Oh, what was that? I got bored listening to your jokes."

Trika must have been resisting the urge to snap back

while she was working. Quis had given the slicer a flat wafer-like object to stick on the wall. The magic of the wafer was that it was a camera, and from Quis's description of the creation, the unique device was capable of transmitting live footage for five minutes before crumbling into a fine dust, leaving no trace that it was ever in use. Quis's brain could come up with solutions to any problem, it seemed, and now that she was in the field, she was sure to be an asset as long as she could handle herself.

"Got it set," Trika called, backing away from the device and giving the ground crew a wave. "Stone, it's probably for the best that I can't see you guys like you can see me. *Yours* is the face that only a mother could love." She flashed that token smirk of hers. "Five minutes, right?"

Quis was in her ear in a second. "Five minutes, and these guys apparently have a very fast response time, and they're thorough, too. I'm glad it's only good for five minutes... any longer and we'd risk exposure." The only nervous twitch that she might have displayed was a quick brush-back of her hair, which was ironically already pulled back and out of the way.

Trika turned around and began to fidget with her wrist device. As she moved away from the camera, the ground communications unit got a better view of her room, a square, dirty little hole with only a cot and a 'fresher to speak of. Slaves weren't exactly living the high life

while in the glorious Szeca City, they saw. “Well, that’s all comforting and whatnot,” Trika mumbled. Was it nervousness? Danya knew that it would be Trika’s head if the security officials found Quis’s device when they entered the room, but it wasn’t necessarily nervousness that blanketed her words. Was it a slight touch of ironic humor? “And we’re sure they don’t shoot first and ask questions later, right?” Trika continued.

Owen piped up, his hands still tenderly maintaining control of the air situation. “We’re going to hope so. There’s no precedent for that, but you never know. You could get lucky.”

Trika grinned, evident through the feed. “Good times for everyone, I’m sure,” she said, straining against the wrist device.

Stone watched the display and glanced at the time. Four and a half minutes. “What’s the matter, Trikes? Can’t cause trouble when we really need it?”

Trika had enough time to flash a hand gesture at the camera, making Stone sit back and prop his feet up once again. “Same old Trika,” he said away from the comm while shaking his head. She might have been nervous, but she wasn’t showing it.

*Snap!* The wrist device came off suddenly, falling to the floor with a metallic *clang*. It sparked viciously in response and died.

“Holy kriff,” Danya coughed, watching the alarms light up across her displays instantly. She sat up straight

and began to process the insanely fast movements. “Unit deployed to southern sector. All alarms active.” For a moment, she just watched in awe. “Kriff, they’re fast.”

Quis’s camera lost half of its visual capacity right at the three and a half minute mark. They could still see that Trika was watching the wrist device in its death throes. If they listened carefully, they could all hear her sarcastic laughter at the ridiculous piece of equipment.

Danya anxiously watched the personnel closing in on the building. Trika might not have been nervous, but Danya sure felt it. On their end, all of the equipment was working perfectly, but the factor of dealing with security personnel just wasn’t sitting right with Danya, whose stomach was twisting in knots as the team began to ascend the stairwell to the second floor of the slaves’ quarters. “They’re moving to your level, Eleven,” she told Trika. “There are four of them, and they’re closing in. Good luck.”

That had been the cue she was waiting for. From their comfy seats in the *Eagle*, the comms unit watched as Trika took out her earpiece and snapped it in two, starting the decay process on the device. It squealed just slightly in their ears and was gone an instant later, another invention of Quis’s that was a marvel to think about.

Owen had found a good break from the pirate mission and was paying closer attention to the feed, watching Trika’s actions carefully. “She doesn’t look scared enough,” he said worriedly. “I know that sounds odd, but

she doesn't look like she's about to get assaulted."

"She'll do fine." Danya gripped her chair tightly, seeing the personnel come to a stop just in front of Trika's room. *Now that you put it that way, though, I'm not sure how anyone is supposed to act in this situation.*

All eyes were on the screen as the camera quality failed yet again, degrading further as time went on. Trika turned toward the camera and away from the door and, as if warming up for a sporting event, shook her hands and jumped up and down twice. Whatever internal nervousness she had was hopefully going to be channeled into the performance of a lifetime. *Bam!* The door behind her shook once under the force of the security forces, and in step, Trika flipped around and appeared to put on her most petrified face.

Quis was about to turn around herself, unable to watch, but she held still and forced herself to keep her head in the mission. Stone even sat forward in his chair and started tapping his foot on the floor in anticipation of the event to come.

*Bam!* Another blow rattled the locked door, and the camera degraded another notch. The comm unit's feed was too fuzzy to make out a few details in the room, but they had assurances from Quis that the quality would hold until the camera disintegrated completely.

An explosion of force knocked the door off its hinges, and every single comm member jerked back at the demonstration. Trika probably hadn't had to feign too much

surprise at that show of power... the armed unit had burst into the room like a pack of angry rancors.

The four security personnel secured the room in frightening military perfection. The lead officer approached Trika quickly, rifle aimed directly in her face. Despite the camera's deterioration, the comms unit could make out that they all looked as if they were ready for war, decked out in bland gray armor plating and helmets. Trika looked as if she was explaining herself... or pleading for herself... or begging for help. Anything but cursing at them, which, to their thinking, was a good start.

The lead didn't care and wasn't gentle. He grabbed Trika by the top of her braided hair and threw her to the floor. She fell with grace and added some helplessness to the mixture. While Trika couldn't take half the squad in hand-to-hand combat, she would probably have surprised the hell out of them had she chosen to actually fight back a little. True to Quis's word, the camera held long enough for them to see the whole exchange and even a few details, like the faked tears streaming down her face. A second official came forward and pushed his rifle against the back of her head, keeping her flat against the floor while the lead began to bind her hands behind her back.

"Like a vicious cycle," Owen said, leaning back in his seat, seemingly satisfied with the results. "It worked."

"One minute," Stone alerted them with a grunt, keeping a close eye on the clock. His own lack of enthusiasm

told his team that he wasn't quite satisfied with everything just yet.

The lead was done and instructed his subordinate to pick their prisoner up. The officer hauled Trika to her feet and slammed her against the far wall, rocking the camera on its precarious perch and knocking over the meager nightstand next to the cot.

"Ouch," Quis commented, biting her nails. Her device lost more of its clarity as it failed, and suddenly it dawned on her that they might lose coverage of the action before Trika was taken away. "Just scan the area and get on with it," she added impatiently.

Trika appeared to be saying something even as the lead got in her face and began to shout, but the camera shorted out momentarily and they lost all coverage. The crew was about to flip out when the footage popped back on the screen. They missed whatever portion of the event that had managed to send Trika to the floor again.

Owen shifted uneasily in his seat. "This is still considered pretty normal, right?"

Danya didn't answer, too fixated on the images flashing across the displays. The lead officer had retrieved Trika's wrist device and waved it in the air while shouting. The happy helper pulled her to her feet yet again and pinned her to the wall, another harsh *thump* that nearly knocked the camera off the wall completely.

Stone was still watching the clock with renewed anxiety. "Ten seconds."

On cue, the camera shorted out again, and popped back up with less than five seconds to spare. Trika appeared to be making one last plea, a pathetic-looking beggar if one could have ever been mimicked. The lead officer merely took the butt of his rifle and slammed it against her head.

The footage disappeared for good.

Danya gave a startled shout and slid backward from the screen, tossing her audio equipment aside and resting her head in both hands. While the reaction seemed unwarranted, Owen had let loose a string of colorful language and Quis had closed her eyes against the last few seconds of footage. “Kriffing hell, that was rough,” Stone said flatly, an edge of concern obvious in his tone. “How do we know that she’s okay after all of that?”

Owen wiped his face with the palm of his hand, stopping short to cover his mouth in shock. His hands dropped to his sides and he shrugged. “We *won’t*, not until Jaren and Telia get to her,” he commented miserably, unsure about what had just happened and unsure if he wanted to know what was *going* to happen. He looked over at Danya, whose own response was nothing short of shocked as well. The woman was nearly shaking, holding her head steady in her hands lest she would tip over, it seemed. “Whoa, Danya.” He moved toward her and searched for some sign that she was hurt or... he didn’t know what. “Danya, are you all right?”

She sat back suddenly, eyes wide and breathing heavy. Owen moved to put a hand on her back, but she jerked

away before she could comprehend the action, and her hands moved back to cradling her head. “Why is this happening *now*?” she demanded through what sounded like tears.

Stone jumped back at the statement. “Got it,” he called, running for his bag of medical supplies. It seemed as if the Talons’ luck just kept returning when it wasn’t wanted.

Owen finally was able to put a comforting hand on her shoulder, but his own expression wasn’t soothing at all. Danya sat up again, only to look into his uncertain and worried eyes. He knew a little of Danya’s supposed “gift,” but he wasn’t sure what to make of it. “Did you just... *feel*... that?” he asked slowly, unable to grasp what was happening.

Danya gave one look back to the blank screen, and then at Owen. She sighed, not willing to comprehend what had just happened, either. “Kriff, I sure hope not.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The dinner had been fabulous and the dessert almost sinfully delicious. Jaren had discovered the charming restaurant with its unpronounceable name on the HoloNet a couple of weeks previously, and he knew that the price, combined with the atmosphere of snotty attitudes, was going to fit the mission and still be somewhat entertaining. A pair of Human musicians played soft melodies

at the very front of the room, which was large enough to hold two hundred beings or more. Everything in the business seemed to be ringed with a golden hue. Their wine glasses and their utensils, the seats and the tables, and the tiles on the floor and the ceiling lights were all coated around the edges with some sort of golden color or decoration. Their waiter had impressed them more than the appearance of the place, remembering their orders to perfection without writing down a single item. And the food? Jaren hadn't eaten something that tasted so amazing in a long time. The meat and vegetables were as hot when they arrived as they were when he finished eating. Telia had chosen a light soup to start with, citing a tender stomach, and finished with an exotic fish that he had never heard of.

Szeca City was *the* place to be.

An announcement had been made that there was some pirate activity toward the west, but that the security forces in the area were responding to the threat and keeping an eye on the situation. Jaren and Telia secretly smiled at the reactions by the gathered crowd, but acted their own parts wonderfully. The forces at the central district had been called away, and the only thing left to do was wait for a polite note to be handed their way about a certain troublemaking slave that needed to be claimed.

Jaren had poured himself a glass of wine, and Telia had instead ordered some sort of fruit concoction that wound up costing more than any drink would have. He

didn't pay it any mind, smelling the drink once it arrived and almost wanting one himself. They had talked about everything from stories about their teammates to weapon schematics to old times, all the while being careful to avoid naming anyone particular or to use obvious code words or names. It seemed they would never run out of topics, but the conversation wound back around to something that made Jaren shift uneasily in his chair.

"You keep acting like you're afraid of it," Telia said, eyeing him from across her glass with a sarcastic smirk. "Couples plan on having children all the time and at many different times in their lives."

"Tel," Jaren started, clearing his throat and attempting to keep their conversation quiet, "I just think that we should wait a little longer. I mean, we haven't been married that long and are already talking about it. Our lives aren't even stable enough for it. We haven't come back from a *real* mission yet." He was growing more uncomfortable with the conversation as it progressed.

While *he* felt they were still speaking civilly, Telia seemed to take offense to the words. "Does that mean that you don't think we can *handle* children?"

"I think we'd handle them fine, but it's just not a smart idea right now," Jaren said flatly, giving a harsh stare at another table, where the couple there was gawking at their semi-argument. "We've still got plenty of time before we make a final decision on something like that."

Telia didn't care to look up at him, giving him a dead-

ly silence that meant she was angry. Jaren was hating every minute of their dinner now, and keeping appearances was still essential. They both had to keep things lively; they were on a mission, and one slip could put the whole thing in jeopardy. His thoughts sprang toward all of the lives that could potentially be in danger at that very moment, and at their actions now, which could have an impact on every one of them should things get out of hand.

“I...” Jaren sighed, trailing off at a loss for words. “I just don’t think I’m ready to have kids. We still have careers to think about, and having children could disrupt that.”

Telia’s eyes snapped up to meet his, and she tucked her tongue behind her clenched teeth for a moment before losing it completely. “So this is about sniping again? *Always* about sniping!” she said a little too loudly, making Jaren sink further into his seat. “It’s always about your career *first*, isn’t it?”

Jaren smiled politely at the glances he was getting from all around, and the heat was suddenly returning to his face. “Honey, *please*... you’re making a scene, and we don’t need that right now.”

Telia’s hand landed loudly on the table as it dropped from brushing back a stray hair. Jaren forgot to breathe for a second, and he knew he was in trouble now. “You would care about your career rather than bringing new life into the galaxy and raising our own family?”

Jaren jerked backwards as if he had been physically

hit. "What?" he exclaimed, forgetting to lower his voice. "This is about us coming back from a mission in a body bag, Tel! What kind of life do you think we can give children at this point? I may be thinking of my career, but you should be, too. Who is going to take care of our family if we don't come back from a mission alive?"

"*Kriff*, Jaren," Telia spat back, crossing her arms over her chest. "When is the galaxy going to be perfect? When every remnant of the Empire is gone? When every warlord is wiped out? There's never going to be a perfect time for us to settle down!"

Jaren took a deep breath and realized that they were creating a scene, and not to mention forgetting where they were. If he had been trying to make the mission successful on his end, he had miserably failed. "What's going on, Tel?" he asked quietly. "Why does this have to be decided right now? Couldn't this have waited until we got home?"

Telia caught herself from exploding again and bit her bottom lip, looking at the ground nervously. In another explosion of sorts, she answered in a whisper. "Because, Jaren, I'm already pregnant."

If he had been standing up, his knees would have buckled with the news. As it was, he flopped back into his chair, the most stunned expression across his perplexed face. Jaren swallowed hard and stared at her incredulously. "What? How long have you known? Why didn't you tell me?"

Telia's bottom lip began to quiver, and she refused to answer or even look at him. Her arms were still crossed, the remaining evidence that she was upset still.

"Tel," Jaren said, leaning toward the table and nearly demanding that she look at him. His voice was cold. "How long have you known?"

"Almost a month," she whispered quietly, tears coming to her eyes.

He didn't want to sound exasperated, but every frustrated word he spoke culminated into his voice. "And why didn't you tell me? You knew for that long and didn't think that I would want to know?"

Telia's voice cracked under emotion, and she started to freely cry. "Because I knew you wouldn't understand and wouldn't want it! I knew you would act this way!"

"So you thought it was best to keep it a secret from me the whole time?" Jaren shot back sarcastically, perhaps the first time he had done such a thing.

Telia stopped crying most suddenly. "Well, look at how you're acting," she threw at him, her arms uncrossing even as her anger appeared to grow. "When would have been a better time for you to stop acting like a child about this?"

Jaren's eyes bulged. "The point is that you're having a baby and you didn't tell me when you found out!"

The eyes around the restaurant had all focused on them yet again, but the two were beyond paying attention to the unwanted gazes and stares. "Do you think that this is

easy for me?" Telia shouted. "Do you think I planned it out this way?"

Jaren chuckled sarcastically, filling his simple statement with more anger than he should have. "Well, you kept it from me this long. It seems you really didn't have a hard time with it at all."

Telia snapped, standing up and grasping the water glass that had been resting at the side of her other drink untouched. With a focused fling, she tossed the water into Jaren's face, then completed the round by taking the two steps toward his seat and giving him a hard slap to the face.

He took the two shots to the face better than he would have figured, feeling the cold water pour down the front of his shirt as Telia turned and ran out of the restaurant. Jaren sat for another second before slamming his fist on the table and deciding to go after her.

“Hope you’re still wearing  
your lucky silver long johns!”

# 7

*She hit me.* The words kept running through Jaren’s mind as he stood outside of the restaurant, gazing down three pathways that Telia might have taken as she ran away. He had lost her as he exited the place, unable to catch up once he had finalized payment of the meal and apologized to the owner, who had come out just in time to see the fireworks. She was gone, though, and and he wasn’t really sure he wanted to follow, even if he knew which way she had gone. Telia had betrayed his trust and kept the truth from him. She should have told him about it. There was just no excuse for it.

Flustered beyond words, Jaren squatted to the ground and began to piece together the puzzle of which direction Telia had chosen to run. Like a good sniper, he supposed, she was going to unconsciously attempt covering her tracks. He knew all her tricks, however, and figured it shouldn’t be too hard to pick up a clue or two and get started searching for her.

*She hit me.* How could she have held the truth from him? How could she figure that keeping their child a secret was a good idea? He rubbed his jaw, somewhat sore from Telia’s stinging slap. His shirt was soaked. His ego was bruised. She should have told him, though.

She should have told him when she first found out. She should have told him that he was going to be a father.

He absently dropped his hand to the ground, unable to pick up a thread where she was headed with all of the distracting thoughts swirling about in his mind. *A father.* He was going to be a father. He had always known that he would like to have children one day. The fact that that day would come sooner than he originally thought didn't seem to matter as much now as it had a few minutes ago.

*I'm going to be a father.*

"Kriff," he spat, feeling like a complete idiot. His anger fell completely on himself, and he suddenly wasn't quite sure why he had been so blind to Telia's feelings on the matter. In fact, none of it mattered now, anyway. Jaren loved Telia more than anything, and he had let her down and had forced her to run away. Wasn't he supposed to do whatever he could to make sure that his family was protected and cared for? Wasn't it his job to love unconditionally and to listen?

He had to find her, and he focused his eyes on the ground again, looking for any sign that she had passed that way. He had to find her and let her know that he was sorry, that she had his support. No matter what, he would make this work. *They* would make this work.

Jaren loved her more than anything and he had to find her and tell her just that.

“How’s it going back there?” Kaiba shouted at the gunners as she hauled the blastboat around for another pass at Target Seven.

[This should be an event in the Pan-Galactic Games,] Marhl said, her tone conveying the gleeful excitement of someone enthralled with a new toy. Echoing bursts of laser fire were erupting from both sides of the ship as Reyanna and Marhl continued their hammering of the installation.

H9-0’s electronic voice cut in before anyone else could answer. “Carefully observe your firing vectors. Sensors indicate your last burst came within three point seven meters of the overpass that Major Ski warned you about.” Qui-Sein scoffed. “Who asked you, rust-for-brains? There’s no danger if they’re four meters away!”

“I am merely trying to be useful,” the droid responded rather dejectedly.

“Then tell me how long we’ve got until enemy ships arrive,” Kaiba demanded.

The droid consulted the sensors station. “I estimate the local CloakShape squadron will be in firing range in thirty-eight seconds, present heading.”

Lieutenant Cloudrifter checked her own display, quickly assessing the amount of damage the blastboat had managed to cause so far. “Good. One more pass ought to do it. Hang on!”

With a joint-wrenching turn that sent all the organic passengers of the ship sharply to port, Kaiba made the

quick one-eighty that brought the craft around for another strafing of their designated target. The deep whines of turret fire continued as the two gunners finished demolishing the structure, sending slag bounding through the neighborhood. A few of the larger chunks crashed into the overpass.

“Okay... *that* wasn’t my fault,” Reyanna objected as a small part of the overpass crumbled. “I think that debris just violated the laws of physics.”

“Take it up with the police. They’re right behind us, for your convenience,” Ensign Delph joked.

“Might want to aim forward,” Kaiba suggested to her gunners before she twisted the blastboat in a maneuver that the inertial compensators couldn’t quite keep up with. The stomach-churning roll was quickly joined by a steep ascent into clear blue sky before she finished the rest of the loop. The Skipray leveled out relative to gravity again.

Qui-Sein, holding onto his crash webbing with one hand and firing control with the other, launched a pair of rockets from the forward-facing tubes — one proton torpedo, one concussion missile — as the ship stabilized, sending the missiles racing for the tight formation of the rapidly-approaching CloakShape squad. The two turrets quickly reacted, penning a cluster of enemy pilots in with surprisingly expert fire, giving the defenders the choice of being destroyed by matter or energy. Those who could peeled away from the onslaught and

angled back towards the blastboat, but were unable to bring any competent fire to bear before it had rocketed past them. When the smoke had cleared, four or five hulks of burning wreckage were flaming meteorites headed for the ground.

“Nice shot, Ensign!” Kaiba congratulated. “How did you know what I was going to do?”

From the copilot’s seat he shrugged, still holding on to his webbing. “If I was flying, that’s what I would have done.” Qui-Sein checked his own scanners. “Looks like Major Ski and the rest are going to get some action. Four enemy ships to each pilot of Silver Squadron. They might need a hand.”

“In a minute. We’ve got our hands full here.”

“I find it necessary to point out that there are a ten heavily-armed fighters orientating on this vessel. Could you please focus your organic sensors on the hostiles?”

Reyanna laid down a nearly impenetrable wall of fire before she interrupted the droid. “Correction, *seven* hostiles behind us,” Reyanna said, taking down three tightly grouped enemies.

[Five,] Marhl chimed in, announcing the destruction of another pair of CloakShapes.

“You’re slacking down there, Marhl.” There was a whine of servomotors as the whole ship heard Reyanna’s turret moving. The Bracken followed an enemy across the sky with her turret blasting away. “I’ve killed *twice* as many as you have already.” A somewhat distant ex-

plosion rocked the ship. “Three times, even.”

The blastboat rocked again. [Now you’re only ahead of me by two and you’ve got the upper turret. *That’s* an advantage for an atmospheric flight if ever there was one.]

“Yeah, but — oof!” The Bracken’s comment was interrupted by the bone-jarring impact of enemy fire hammering the shields. Kaiba’s sudden swerve to port sent the entire crew reeling in their restraints.

“Sorry! Those things are *quick*. I’ll try to keep it steady but those things pack a punch.”

The crew was slammed to starboard and pushed hard into their seats as the blastboat rose and twisted on its axis. Despite the hard maneuvers, two more fighters flared out and fell to the planet’s surface.

“Two to go,” Kaiba said. “Don’t let ’em get a bead on us, guns. I’m firing jets towards Major Ski.”

Qui-Sein grabbed the comm quickly. “Silver One, this is Silver Five. We’re almost free of pursuers and are en route to your position. Need a hand, sir?”

The comm was filled with the sound of their CO laughing. “Are you kidding? I’m done with my four. How is everyone else looking?”

Kendrick came across the comm with a partial whine. “*Four?* I only got two, and they’re gone already.” He truly sounded disappointed.

There was a slight moment of silence before Ty chimed in. “That explains why I have *six*, then,” Ty said, his voice giving the impression of teeth jammed together.

“Five, now, but uhh...”

“Damn it, Four, why didn’t you call for help?” Ski yelled. “I’m out of position. Can anybody see him?”

One explosion, followed a few heartbeats later by another, marked the end of the Skipray’s pursuers. “We’re on our way,” Kaiba reported, yanking the ship towards the ground and slightly to starboard. “Hope you’re still wearing your lucky silver long johns, or whatever the hell it was that we named this crew for.” The restraints caught everybody hard in the shoulders as she completed the turn, keeping them from floating out of their seats. “Head towards us, Four. We’ll clean up after you!”

\* \* \* \* \*

Jaren searched for what seemed like two hours, checking every place he could think of that Telia might go. They had proceeded into their part of the mission with comm silence, and both comms were currently sitting dormant in his pocket, unable to reach Telia wherever she was. The northernmost pathway had been clear, and at the risk of exposing who they were, he had asked a few passing couples if they had seen a woman in a shimmering blue gown, just about his height? They hadn’t, and Jaren had continued on his way, growing more worried with each passing minute.

They were supposed to be a team... partners. They were supposed to tell each other everything. And then

he had lost his temper. He kept running through the restaurant scene in his mind, and he occasionally fell back to the times before the Talons, when he had lost her the first time. He was too worried about everything else to pay her thoughts any mind. His career and hers, and their relationships in the intelligence community...

*To hell with everything else*, Jaren thought. He couldn't lose her again. He had to fix this.

If he had taken another step in the opposite direction, he might have missed the soft sound rustling in a tree just off the pathway. He slowly maneuvered into a better position to see her and indeed confirmed that Telia had taken to a tree to hide from him. She didn't notice his approach most likely because she was sobbing so hard. Her hair was disheveled and her gown was ripped in two places, but he had found her.

"Telia," he called to her softly, startling her on her perch above. "Telia, you don't have to say anything, okay? I just want you to listen."

She frantically began to wipe her face clear of tears and stray hair, as if attempting to straighten herself out in front of her husband. "You scared me," she said, obviously referring to his sneaky approach. He was, after all, one of the best snipers the New Republic had to offer.

Jaren smiled softly, wishing to touch her and comfort her. "Tel, I'm so sorry that I've hurt you. I was angry because I didn't know that we were going to have this child." Despite the distance, he reached up to

her as if he could stroke her brown hair and caress her cheek once more. “This baby is ours... we created this child together.”

Telia pulled her legs closer to her chest and rested her chin on her knees, just staring back at him with pained eyes. Jaren threw all caution to the wind and to hell, grabbed the lowest branch and pulled himself up and into the tree. She almost didn't want him there, and started to protest. “Jaren...”

“Don't stop me while I'm on a roll,” Jaren playfully threw back, climbing the remaining branches to reach her and taking the remaining space near her. “Listen, at first, I was upset at the prospect of becoming a father so soon, but after you left, I just understood that I am scared because I don't know what to expect.”

Telia looked at him curiously, as if gauging his sincerity by his words and expression. “Jaren, I'm probably more frightened than you are, you know.”

He moved closer, taking her hands in his. She didn't pull back. “I know you are, but the thing that matters most is that we can get through this together. We've faced worse odds and enemies and have come out the victors. Compared to that, having a child of our own should be a breeze.”

She shyly laughed at the thought and allowed Jaren in closer. He embraced her then, taking her in his arms and holding her tightly. They remained there for a few minutes, soaking in the warmth of a new deluge of emotions

washing over them. Telia stopped sobbing and eventually rested her head on his chest completely. Jaren stroked her hair for a long while, making sure that she was calming after the eventful night.

Jaren pulled away slowly when he thought she would be all right. He took her at arm's length, holding her in his hands and gazing deeply into her eyes. With every bit of sincerity and joy he could manage, he smiled. "Tel, I'm going to be a dad."

\* \* \* \* \*

Ty Flynn was in that special place in himself that was his piloting skills. Some would say that he was in tune with the Force, others would say he was just lucky. Ty couldn't say one way or the other, he only knew that it worked. It worked and he followed it. He could almost feel the attacks before they came, and he was almost right all of the time. *Almost.*

He rolled his starfighter hard to port, narrowly escaping a laser blast from the defenses below before running straight into another blast. The shock hadn't come from the planet-side defenses though; it had come at him *laterally*. Which could only mean that the fighters they had been expecting had finally arrived. He winced as a piece of hull plating flew off the wing of the Z-95 Headhunter he was flying.

He looked to starboard and saw a swarm of Cloak-

Shape security fighters headed straight for him and his team. The ensuing firestorm of laser bolts kept Ty on his proverbial toes as he frantically dodged the blasts. The next thing he knew, Kendrick, his wingman, was nowhere to be found. "Uh oh," he said to himself.

He swung wide, trying to either line up for a deadly run against the CloakShapes or at least draw them away from the Skipray Blastboat. He checked his sensor board and found that six of them were following. He pulled a turn that strained his inertial compensators nearly to the limit, then dove into the fight.

Ty could barely hear his teammates on the comm unit. "*Four?* I only got two, and they're gone already," Ken announced.

"That explains why I have *six*, then," Ty said, attempting not to sound completely panicked. "Five, now, but uhh..."

"Damn it, Four, why didn't you call for help?" It was Major Ski yelling at him. He was pretty used to that. He wasn't sure what followed. A garble of static ate the transmission before coming back alive.

"We're on our way. Hope you're still wearing your lucky silver long johns -" An explosion rocked his craft and broke apart the transmission. "- towards us, Four. We'll clean up after you!"

"Ken, he's your wingmate! What were you doing?" Ski demanded.

Ty swallowed hard. "Not his fault, sir," he interrupt-

ed, his voice still filled with tension. “The CloakShapes separated us with fire. I was all right, but then six of them glued themselves to my tail. Five, at your command, I’m breaking for the surface.” There was a burst of static and another explosion that sounded across the comm, and Ty was sure that it was probably too loud to suit the Talons’ tastes. Still, the antiquated Headhunter was highly mobile, and he flew in unpredictable patterns that made it nearly impossible for any other enemy volley to get a feasible shot on him.

“Copy that, Four,” Ensign Delph replied. “We’ll be there in three... two... one... *break!*”

The gunners appeared to be focusing their fire on the enemies, all but one of them confused by the sudden absence of their target. What Ty *didn’t* notice, he surely wished he had.

“Look out, Four! One left on your six!”

A small sphere of glowing orange bounced off the Headhunter’s starboard engine. “Stang!” Ty cursed as the Headhunter began to careen about. He struggled to keep the ship under control, but he could see where this was going already. “I’m hit! Well, I’m hit again!” he shouted his correction at the comm. “And I hate to be so depressing, but I’m going down!”

The only response he got was sparking from his comm unit. “Not good,” he muttered to himself, slapping the console in a vain attempt to fix it.

Ty reached for the ejection button next, but was

knocked to one side as another blast shook the Headhunter. Then he was on his side as the ship swerved to port in a long wide arc. The pilot managed to straighten the ship again and slammed the eject button. Nothing happened. "Oh boy," he muttered to himself again, and braced himself.

"If anybody can hear me, I love you all in a totally professional misfit family-type of way," he called out, starting to feel his brain being sucked into his feet by the abnormal forces on the craft. "Oh, and tell my brother he's in charge of comic relief from now on, not that I think he can handle it or anything."

He aimed the Headhunter as best he could right for the waterline. He turned to his reflection in the transparent steel window. "I love you, man," he said, his emotions nearly choking the words off before he could chuckle. He looked back down at the beach below. "Oh, kriff. Oh, kriff. Ohhh, *kriff!*"

Just before the Z-95 hit the ground, it jerked to the side, flipping over and sticking its nose in the ground. The first wing clipped the earth, giving the fighter some altitude before laying on its belly and dying completely.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Silver Four is down. His last location was over the beach, and it's a safe bet the local ground enforcers are on their way now." Owen's voice sounded surprisingly

even for someone who was just informed his brother had crashed a one-man starfighter. His mind had to be racing, but it didn't show.

"Okay, so we put this hulk down, get them out, and run," said Danya. "Stone, go outside and get Bullwinkle."

"Can't we just leave him?"

Both Stone and Danya entertained the thought for a moment, but were interrupted by Owen. "Whether we leave Sarge or not doesn't matter, because that plan is no good," he objected, his head tilted as he listened to the earbud he was wearing. "Can't exactly hear what they're saying, but I'm getting comm signals near the crash site, and they sound mad. Ground forces might already be there, plus we'd have to worry about getting shot at by the locals' air defenses."

"Well, we have to do *something!*"

The frustrated silence echoed over the comms as everyone wracked their brains, trying to think of a way to rescue their downed comrade without becoming casualties themselves. Finally, Quis spoke up, her voice uncertain, but not afraid.

"I might have an idea."

“I thought something this crazy would be right up your alley!”

8

They'd cleaned themselves up relatively quickly and had rushed back to the building where the Ralhon security team was waiting for them. Jaren and Telia were *extremely* late for their portion of the mission, but while the pirate team was still causing chaos on the outskirts of town, they figured that there was still plenty of time to catch the Ralhon forces off-guard before everyone headed back to base.

They hoped so, anyway. Even the best plans never survive execution. The Talons had definitely learned *that* lesson a long time ago.

Jaren held the door open for his wife and fell back into his role, preparing to look down his nose at everyone and everything just long enough to get in and take everyone out. Telia was alert and ready, zipping into the foyer and up to the front desk quickly, with purpose. The Ralhon son was waiting for them when they arrived.

“We were just discussing the option of calling you again,” he greeted them with a smile, seemingly amused. He slid a datapad across his desk that more than likely detailed the evening's events. “We

usually get prompt confirmation that our message is received.”

Telia took the aggressive lead this round, touching-up her hair as she spoke. “We had *just* gotten started with dinner when we got the message, and I wasn’t about to be interrupted so soon into my evening, *especially* by a mere slave.”

The man nodded her way. “We held her here just for that purpose,” he said, filling them in on the events of the evening, even as Jaren picked up the datapad to inspect it. “My team got the call that the tracking device had come off her arm just an hour and a half after she checked into the room, and they were deployed to make sure she had not escaped the room completely. They apprehended her and brought her here without any trouble.”

Jaren took some comfort in those words. “Without trouble?” he asked blandly. “She’s always such a handful. I do hope your men weren’t terribly inconvenienced by all of this.”

Ralhon scoffed at the notion. “No, sir. That’s their duty here. Your Laetna seemed to want to fight back a little after she was brought here, but it wasn’t anything we couldn’t handle.”

“Oh dear,” Telia said, feigning worry even though she could sense the dread rising up from her gut. “Can we see her? She isn’t... *damaged*, is she?”

The security official held up his hands quickly

in a gesture of innocence. “Oh, no, ma’am. Nothing permanent and nothing unwarranted, I assure you.” Ralhon snapped his fingers behind him and waved for one of his men to collect Trika. “I will say, though, that with such an unruly tendency, your Laetna may never conform to suitable standards for this kind of environment. We’ve seen them sold into other service areas and do well. Great return on your investment, actually.” He leaned backwards to make sure the collection was moving quickly. At this point, he was babbling. “Otherwise, it’s a losing situation from what I’ve seen. Other slaves can dance or perform. Others can complete tasks and learn trades to assist the household. And then there are some that aren’t good for much at all... you can hope to breed more of them, maybe, but you’ll have to cross them with a docile species that actually has the capacity for the arts and sciences. Or good manners, at the least.”

His unwarranted advice made Telia sick to her stomach. It didn’t help that she didn’t feel entirely well from dinner, and her argument with Jaren had upset her more. At that moment, though, the other security officer came from the side atrium with Trika, or at least, what she *thought* was Trika. A thick, gray sack covered her head and neck, but despite the hardship of maneuvering with the officer’s guidance, he practically tossed her at the front desk with little concern that her masters were

there watching.

Jaren and Telia *tried* not to care. Jaren studied the datapad more intently, noting the specifics that had landed Trika into custody. Telia pretended to study the wall more intently, but couldn't shake the nausea beginning to rise within her. The officer took Trika's binders and snapped them to the desk's corner. They hadn't noticed the added fixture before, but sure enough, it was made specifically for that sort of thing. Both snipers looked up just in time for the man to remove to sack from Trika's head.

Jaren dropped the datapad onto the desk, both in shock and a little bit of anger. Luckily, Ralhon didn't seem to be paying attention to him so much as making sure that Trika was secured properly to the desk. Trika herself was adjusting to the bright lighting of the room, her eyes squinted shut against the assault. A smooth device, much like the wrist tracker she had been gifted with earlier that night, was wrapped around her neck much too tightly. A large, open gash split the top of her forehead, a laceration the likely result of a knock-out strike, and several welts marred her otherwise pale face. Besides the fact that she had taken quite a few strikes to the face, it seemed as if the security personnel had begun to get a little inventive in their absence. Cuts from something a bit sharper and more precise spotted her brow, with one rather interesting slice

darting from the corner of her left eye across her temple. She looked frightened to death, though the snipers knew that if anyone were to still be playing her part, it would have been Trika.

“Would you like to check her out now or keep her here for the rest of your stay on Szeca?”

Telia's ruse was just about over. Tossing her purse onto the desk, she began to fumble through the mass of hair products and other assorted mess, a sure sign that she was about to act with or without Jaren. He caught onto what she was doing and reached into what appeared to be his back pocket. He had already counted five officers in the vicinity, with an unknown number who might be waiting around the corner in the side atrium.

Trika seemed to catch onto what they were doing, too. The game was up.

“We'll just be checking her out,” Telia said, drawing a small blaster from her purse and taking aim at Ralhon himself. With the precision and focus of a sniper, she hardly flinched while letting loose three trained stun blasts on the personnel.

Jaren quickly found the back of the room and the other two officers. One made a move for his own weapon and fell, and the other was nearly out of his seat when he was quietly sat back down, but not of his own accord.

Just as the security officers began to hit the floor,

Trika's demeanor changed immediately. "What the *hell* took you so long?" she demanded, exasperation and aggravation coating every word. "These brain-damaged sons of banthas were getting *really* bored waiting around for you!"

Telia just gave her a tired look right back, as if to say the reasons were complicated. She tucked her blaster back into her purse. "It's a bit of a long story," she said, moving to cut the hand restraints on the table.

Jaren surveyed the area quickly, moving from body to body and back into the far atrium to ensure no one had managed to dodge his fire. All personnel had effectively been immobilized. "Two," he called to the communications team, one finger to his ear to wait for a response, "we're inside and beginning our work. Copy?"

Before Danya could respond, Telia called for him. Jaren tuned her out and heard Danya's affirmative answer.

"We're on the move, Jaren," Danya responded with an energy born of adrenaline. "We ran into a situation a little while ago and are in the sky right now."

"Five!" Telia yelled, her voice sounding worried rather than irritated. The nervous jump his stomach made wasn't comforting. Rounding the corner again, weapon still at the ready, he half-

expected a legion of security personnel to be storming the building.

The actuality was far less dangerous, but his dread didn't subside. Telia had freed Trika, but the surface abuse had apparently been coupled with a few more intense marks.

Trika was holding out her mangled right hand for him to view, a hardly-friendly frown on her face. "Again, what the hell took you so long?" she asked, giving Ralhon's body a quick kick of frustration.

"Kriff," Jaren cursed, approaching Trika carefully. Her index and middle fingers were twisted awkwardly in two joints and completely dislocated, the likely result of his and Telia's lengthy argument. "We're going to need Stone," he said, aware that Danya was still listening in.

She piped up quickly. "We're gone, Jaren. We can't land for anything at this point."

Trika wasn't within earshot and didn't hear *that* good news. She did find one of the security personnel responsible for a sin far greater than her injuries and bent low to search his pockets. After two unlucky guesses she found what she was looking for. Grasping Milan's friendship necklace in her left hand, she stood back up and kicked the officer square in the stomach. The next string of invective that spouted from her lips was indecipherable in her own tongue.

“You probably don’t want to know what she just said there,” Danya said, apparently watching Trika’s translator work overtime with each word Jaren’s transmitter picked up. “Is it very serious?”

Jaren watched the slicer pause from her tirade and settle back against the front desk. She rested her eyes on him, waiting for a response or some sort of a sign that he wasn’t just standing there, too. Almost as an afterthought, Trika reached up to her neck and tapped on the smooth collar at her neck. “And we’re also going to need Quis, unless you think you can disarm this thing,” she mentioned. With a rather sick sense of humor, she added, “It apparently won’t let me leave here, unless you plan on mopping me up on the way out.”

He just held her gaze, unsure of what to say. Luckily, he didn’t have to say anything at just that moment. “We’ll be heading to the rendezvous point we’re sending to the Claw, but there’s really nothing more we can do from here,” Danya replied sadly. “Good luck, and get back safely. I’ll still be listening.”

Jaren took a deep breath and frowned. “I’m proceeding with comm silence for the next five minutes,” he told her, shifting uneasily on his feet at the comment.

Trika had obviously heard the specifics of at least his end of the conversation, and even as Jaren shut

off his end of the comm, she seemed to know what was going on. The irony must have hit her first, because she faintly smiled before she turned deadly serious. “He’s not coming, is he? They’re *both* not coming, right?”

Jaren shook his head, and Trika chuckled just briefly before lifting her hand again for him to see. Arm outstretched, she looked Jaren dead in the eye. “Just do it.”

Telia blanched at the unraveling of the situation. She bit her tongue even as Jaren took a step toward the slicer and took her hand in his own.

She must not have known what else to do. Telia came from the side and wrapped her arm around Trika’s head in an odd sort of a hug. Trika, deathly quiet, buried her head in the embrace.

Jaren gingerly held the crooked fingers, eyes on his wife for confidence... for encouragement. Her gaze held none, however. While he had learned the proper techniques of setting fingers, putting this particular first aid training into practice was a first for him. He had never performed this specific feat, and he wasn’t sure he really wanted to.

As soon as he gripped the fingers more firmly, Jaren felt Trika tense up into Telia’s torso. He’d have to work quickly.

Taking another deep breath, Jaren focused on the specific joints and pushed.

\* \* \* \* \*

“This is insane.”

“It’ll work. It’ll be bumpy, but it’ll work.”

“This is *completely* insane.”

“I’m sure this will work. We should come up right next to Ty.”

“This is utterly *insane*.”

Quis’s patience finally snapped. Turning her head, she returned peevishly, “Funny, Stone, I thought something this crazy would be right up your alley!”

Stone swiveled his head, nodding his agreement to her statement, then added, “And that should *tell you something!*”

Quis sighed as the aft door opened, revealing the surface of the ocean streaking behind them, lit brilliantly by the *Eagle*’s engines. The two were seated on a pair of crash chairs, which were welded to a section of spare deck plating that had an array of spare repulsorlift components mounted underneath. *In theory*, the repulsors would stop them from simply diving into the ocean, and would apply enough resistance to bleed off their momentum until they skidded to a stop next to the downed craft. Picking up the control for their kludged lander, she warmed up the repulsor array, making the slapped-together unit hover several centimeters over the hold’s deck. As they flashed green on the

small readout, she commed the pilots' station.

"Four to Bridge. Danya, it's your show. Just think of this as a bombing run, and cut us loose when you think we'll reach."

"Copy that. We're coming up on the beach now; ground forces are almost there, so don't take too long getting him out."

"Roger. Ready on this end." Securing her comm, Quis closed her eyes and fought back the panic welling within her, wanting to scream and claw her way out of the restraints. Beside her, Stone was nervously shouting to Owen, who was making sure that the mechanics of the shoddy plan weren't going to kill anybody... at least, immediately.

"If I buy it," Stone called to him with an uncomfortable smirk, "make sure Trika knows she's not getting any of my st-"

Danya released the ties on the craft and they were gone, cutting Stone off in mid-word. The two vanished into the gloom with terrifying speed.

The roar of atmosphere ripping past them easily swallowed the screaming from the makeshift lander's passengers. The repulsors kicked on, stopping the Talons from impacting the water at a messy speed, bouncing them back into the air and absorbing some of their momentum. The rig continued to skip across the water towards the beach, slowly losing speed. They could see the wreckage

of the Headhunter ahead, as well as the lights of the ground units responding to the downed “pirate” ship. Several of the lights swiveled upward as the *Eagle* screamed over the troops, and a few hardy fools took potshots with their infantry weapons at the ship.

The Talons’ speed had almost bled off completely when one of the repulsors finally failed under the abuse it had taken. A corner of the lander dipped, bit into the sand, and levered the rest of its mass forward. Both personnel and equipment went flying, the former having enough sense to roll with the impact once they hit dirt.

As soon as she came to a stop, Quis coughed and tried in vain to spit the sand out of her mouth. She could see Stone slowly crawling back to his feet, and stumbling in the direction of the Headhunter with his medkit. That just left the extraction gear - which she could now see, about forty meters away from the shore, where it had finally bounced to a stop. Fighting back the urge to simply curl into a ball and wait for it all to go away, Quis picked herself up and began to trudge towards the sealed container, only to find herself interrupted by a line of blaster bolts stitching themselves into the sand ahead. More fire followed it, not nearly as accurate; the ground forces’ accuracy was suffering from the stress of being repeatedly buzzed

and strafed by the *Eagle*.

One or two rounds did find a target, though. As they chewed into the side of Quis's package, they struck the cutting gear the two had planned to use in case they had to extract a pilot, sending the whole kit up in a fireball.

Using the flames as a distraction, Quis abandoned the idea of recovering the package and used her nascent panic to speed her as she ran for the shelter of the downed Headhunter, one wing fully buried in the sand and the nose a twisted wreck. Stone was already atop the wreck, firing off potshots at the assembled ground forces while using an engine cowling for cover.

Panting for breath, Quis asked him, "You don't seriously expect to hit any of them, do you?"

Stone grimaced. "No, but I figured I'd give some of 'em a story to tell their grandkids." A stray bolt scorched the metal next to Stone's shoulder, making him drop back behind the wreck for cover. "On the other hand, I also plan on being around to *have* grandkids."

"Right," Quis groaned, clenching her eyes shut in a vain attempt to clear her head. "How's the ship?"

"Ejector's still dead, and I think the impact warped something together for the canopy. I can see him hitting the release, but it's not going anywhere. We'll have to use the cutting gear, just pull

the whole canopy off.”

Quis groaned again, then jerked a thumb back over her shoulder. “You see that nice little pyre back there?”

“Yeah?”

“*That’s* the cutting gear.”

Stone groaned. “Great. Just *great*,” he grouched. “I don’t suppose you wanna try and whip one up from spare bits of deck plating and sea grass?” The glare he received in reply might have done the trick had it been aimed at the hull, and not the medic. He held his hands up in apology. “Okay, okay. We’ll use mine, then.”

“What do you mean, ‘yours?’”

Stone rummaged through his kit as the pair crept forward, trying not to present a target to whoever was still looking their way, and withdrew what he has been searching for. “Laser scalpel, large-bore.” Quis’s eyes widened as she saw what the medic had pulled out. “Scalpel? Stone, that’s a -”

“*Laser. Scalpel*,” Stone intoned with a dead expression, casually pointing the business end of the device at her.

Quis raised her hands with an expression that she would let the medic call it whatever he wanted. Inside the cockpit, Ty was trying to turn in his seat to see what his teammates were up to. As the pair waddled into his field of view, Stone rapped

on the transparisteel canopy and very clearly mouthed, "Hold still." Ty shook his head, inaudibly trying to ask what was going on; as soon as he could see what Stone was carrying, he paled and went utterly motionless.

The medic eyed the canopy as even more blaster bolts rained down from the sky; it sounded like the squadron's Skipray was getting in on the interdiction action as well. Having exhausted his mechanical knowledge by this point, Stone asked, "Anything I shouldn't cut?"

Quis eyed what was left of the fighter, then shook her head. "I'm not a mechanic, but I think this one's a loss. So, just not Ty?"

"Right." One quick *snap-hiss* later and a bar of reddish-orange light was easily carving its way through the transparisteel bubble. The roar of the *Eagle's* engines overhead occasionally drowned out the sound of the transparent armor being melted as it made another pass at the ground forces, who were strongly considering a career change by this point. Finally, the canopy was severed and landed in the sand with a faint *clunk*.

Shakily, Ty began to unbuckle himself and crawl out of the cockpit. "Holy kriff, Stone, is that a -"

"Laser scalpel," Stone and Quis chorused, giving him a hand. "And you'd better ignore the urge to wet yourself just yet," Stone added quickly,

“’cause we’ve got a way to go before we’re clear of deadly objects.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Ten minutes into her work, Trika had found everything the Talons could have hoped for and more.

Ten minutes in his work, Jaren had found he could have used a few more classes in electrical sciences. “Kriffin’ hell,” he mumbled, wishing Quis or at least someone else was in his shoes. He’d forgotten the appropriateness of his clothing and had rolled up his sleeves to attempt releasing the collar around Trika’s neck.

Telia, meanwhile, had taken care of a dozen minor, but important matters. She had stolen the incriminating security footage of their arrival and documents containing even the fake information from their visit. Her next move had been to begin removing traces of their presence, a harder task made easier through a creative mist Quis had manufactured to erase fingerprints and accidentally-left genetics, like hair and skin. Some of the worst parts had been finding traces of Trika’s blood and hair on unexpected places on the floor and walls.

Trika jerked suddenly at his latest attempt. He had accidentally slipped on the inside latch and pricked her, but the mechanism was so tight it was nearly

impossible to get a solid grip on it. She didn't say anything in response, though. In fact, she hadn't said much of anything since sitting down to the terminal at the back of the office. Just enough to know she was successfully working, but nothing more. "Sorry," he winced for her, wishing he could just snap the thing in two and be done with it. "I know it's painful."

She planted her index finger, a makeshift splint around it, onto one of the function keys on the computer. "Doubt that," Trika spat quietly, catching him a bit off-guard. "What's taking so long *this* time?"

That kind of question nearly made *him* jerk away. "It's a bit tricky," Jaren replied without the tart, attempting wholeheartedly to keep upbeat under the circumstance. "I don't want to touch anything prematurely."

Taking her hands away from the keyboard, Trika sat back in the chair, her eyes narrowed dangerously his way. "Just do what you need to," she said with a rare nonchalance. "It's not like we lose much if you slip."

Jaren stopped fidgeting with the device, losing a bit of his eternal patience along the way. "Come on, Eleven," he protested, not feeling up to the challenge of trying to console her. "Just getting out of here is going to make a whole lot of us feel a whole lot better."

“I bet,” Trika said bitterly, mostly without thinking, looking back to the computer screen with little interest. “You can tell Two I’m finished. It’s all downloaded and being sent her way. Pretty easy job, actually.” She smirked. “A barn animal could’ve managed it.”

Jaren successfully peeled away the first coated layer on the collar, revealing a horribly complex set of wires beneath. While he wanted to curse, he held back, unwilling to alarm Trika. “Six,” he called to Telia instead, “you almost done? I’m ready to get out of here.”

Telia rounded the corner with a stack of wallets and datacards. “Done, and with bonuses.” She tossed the stack onto the front desk. “Security destroyed, genetics cleaned up, and petty thievery completed.”

It had been his idea to steal all of the money out of the place. The motive would work to cover more of their tracks. “All right.” He wanted something more substantial to fill the space, but couldn’t find the words. “I’ve got to trigger the release.”

Trika was noticeably slow to offer help. “Is there a data readout you could write down for me?”

Jaren frowned. “I don’t even recognize the language, it’s so small. There are five wires that lead around the entire thing, with clamps on every other one... and splits on three.” He paused, suddenly getting ill to his stomach. “You said *what* about this

thing again?"

"*They* said it. If it gets tampered with, it's going to fry me," Trika responded with little enthusiasm.

"'Fry' you?"

Trika looked up at Telia blandly. "I didn't exactly ask for clarification. Fatty over there said 'fry,' and I sort of believe him."

"Okay, okay, okay." He wanted to clear his head, but he wasn't sure whether the quiet or a glass of hard liquor might help him better. Jaren felt completely helpless to do what was needed correctly. "Five of them, but I can't know what's what until I touch it."

The surprising reply set him on his heels. "Just try the first one you see."

Telia snapped. "Do you have a death wish or something?"

Trika's scowl left little room for debate about the subject. "I'm a ground slicer... yes." The caustic words came out of her somewhat awkwardly, or maybe it was just so abnormal to hear such a strong tone in her voice. "Just clip a couple." She added in a mocking tone, "I promise, I won't be able to hold a grudge against you or anything."

Jaren scoffed at the statement. "Eleven, I'm not about to -"

"Kriffin' hell, Jaren!" Trika shouted back, slamming her injured hand onto the console. "Just

do it!”

Without sense, without thought, he did it. Grabbing the top two lines, his best guess as to what would free his teammate, Jaren broke the wires in half.

The collar powered down and snapped off into his hands. Jaren let out a breath he didn't know he had been holding and merely let his arms fall to his sides in relief.

And then, much to his surprise yet again for this mission, Trika just stood up and began to walk away. “Thanks, Five,” she said weakly, the gulp in her throat audible as she was likely fighting back a few tears. Without so much as another word, she headed toward the door.

Telia came up from behind him and patted his shoulders encouragingly. “Good work,” she soothed, likely unsure about what had just happened, too, “but let's go ahead and get out of here. She needs some time.”

It didn't take long to clean the remainder of the area. Trika waited just inside the building until they were done, never once acknowledging them even as they left together.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Silvers, prep for landing,” Major Ski called to his

team, swinging about widely in preparations for his own landing. “Good work taking down the rest of the fighters. That was a good round for us, all in all.” Kevin wanted to reserve judgment on the day’s results until after he found out what had happened on the ground and to his other pilot. The lack of a response from the ground communications unit wasn’t reassuring. “I wound up getting the one who shot Four down,” he mentioned solemnly. “Comms, still no word from anyone?”

“Actually, sir,” H9’s horribly metallic voice replied, “the communications unit just responded and are reporting that they’ve found the wreckage and have recovered our... *lost silver long johns.*”

Kevin breathed a sigh of relief, then groaned. He wasn’t sure who had told H9 to saying that last bit. “Roger that, Comms. That’s good to hear.” A few cheers came from his other pilots at the good news. “And the ground unit?”

“Comms has received all data from the ground unit, and they will be meeting us at the rendezvous point. Would you like me to proceed with calculating hyperspace protocols for the group?”

“Please do,” Kevin answered, the beach in sight where all of his Talons would be meeting. “We won’t be staying long, so make it quick. Keep your fighters hot, Silvers. Let’s collect our missing long johns and get the hell out of here.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“- mighty fine shootin’, Talons,” Sergeant Bullwin-  
kle was saying, or they *thought* he was saying, as  
Jaren, Telia, and Trika climbed out of the *Claw*. “I  
was a-watchin’y’all as I was standin’ guard down  
there, keepin’ an eye on th’ dern jackalopes!”

Major Ski clenched his eyes shut and imagined  
the good sergeant being hauled away by whatever  
the hell he was talking about. “Thank you, Sarge.  
That’s a fine story. Now that we’re all here,  
though, let’s make this quick. Don’t want Ralhon  
coming back with bigger numbers or anything.”  
Taking a look at the whole of his squadron, he  
suddenly realized that as a unit, a single entity,  
his Talons had pulled together and succeeded be-  
yond his wildest dreams. As they circled around  
him, Kevin couldn’t have been prouder. “Stone,  
how’s it going back there?”

“All set, sir!” the medic called back, moving his  
way forward from the wreckage of Ty’s Z-95. “I’ve  
outfitted it as to make Milan proud. There won’t be  
anything left of the Headhunter except a big black  
hole in the ground.”

Kevin nodded his approval, also turning to make  
sure that Ty had settled against the hull of the  
*Eagle*. Stone had already tended to the pilot and  
made sure he hadn’t been seriously injured. Aside

from a shaky leg and a number of bruises, Ty seemed to have come out of the crash mostly all right. Trika was also nearby, noticeably quiet but not entirely demoralized. From what Jaren had told him, the slicer had been through one unfathomable evening. “How’d we do, Trika?”

She flashed a smirk so natural it was scary. “Easier than pulling a good prank on Stone, of course,” she quipped, drawing a laugh from the crew. “I’m willing to bet there are specific names in the IC listed on a Black Fire payroll in the data.” At that, the Talons began to chatter excitedly. “You’ll find more than enough evidence to lock some people away for a very long time, sir.”

The chatter became wild, and Ski couldn’t help smiling. “That’s what I like to hear.” He took a moment to inspect the large gash on her scalp, and while his Talons were still speculating about the results of their mission, he caught her eye and held it. “Get Stone to take a look at you on the way back, all right? We’ll talk back at base.” Trika nodded understanding and fell to the background with Ty.

Ski held up a hand for his crew to quiet down. “Great work today, Talons. We’ll debrief when we get home, but you should know that... well, I’ve never been prouder in any group before in my career. I can’t imagine leading a better crew, and I

mean that. *Despite* your quirks, of course.” A few of his Talons chuckled, and he waited for them to quiet down again. “If you flew something in, you’re flying it out with a couple of exceptions. Ty, you’ll head back on the *Eagle* and help out there. Jaren, Telia, and Trika, you’re heading out with them as well. Qui-Sein, you’ll be piloting the *Claw* back with Sergeant Bullwinkle.”

He fully expected it, but when he saw the ensign’s face drop, he could better understand just how much Qui-Sein probably had forgotten that he *technically* wasn’t a Talon. And of course, Sergeant Bullwinkle was there immediately to enthusiastically remind him of that fact. “We gots ta pick up a new shipment o’ ljutefisk fer when we get home! A par-tay dinner, fer sure!” Just for good measure, Bullwinkle tousled Qui-Sein’s hair and ran off toward the craft with a gait reminiscent of an AT-AT at its fastest speed. Even as the ensign turned to follow the good sergeant, Kevin felt a pang of annoyance for the pilot.

“Ensign Delph!” Kevin called after him, drawing his attention from the ground where it had landed after the assignment. “Be sure to see me first thing tomorrow morning.”

He couldn’t tell if the pilot thought he was in trouble, but he responded with a “yes, sir” before heading to the *Claw* after Sergeant Bullwinkle.

“Everyone else, let’s get out of here. I’m itching to get home and get to work.”

They took to the skies, eager themselves to get to work. Home was a day away, but there was plenty to talk about on the way. And, as usual when the Talons left a mission, planned or otherwise, something exploded and left a mess.

Kevin wouldn’t have had it another other way.

# 9

“We *are* playing dangerously, aren’t we?”

“Somebody call about a broken hacker?” Stone quipped as he walked to the back of the room, holding his medkit high. Trika snorted derisively while Jaren looked relieved. As the medic began to unpack his things, Jaren filled him in on his makeshift repairs, interspersed with criticism from the hacker in question.

“And then the lout yanks my finger until it made this cracking noise! Tell me, Stone, please: will I *ever* play the nargalon again?” Trika asked, faking a worried, plaintive look.

“Your idea of ‘playing’ is bouncing your hands off the keyboard at random,” Stone mumbled, taking a look at her right hand and approving the shoddy work that Jaren had done. “And since you’re not gonna be able to apply much pressure while you have the splint on, the answer is ‘no.’ But,” he mused with a thoughtful look, “I suppose you could just always bounce your head on the keyboard instead. It’s not like you need it.”

As Trika visibly rose to the challenge, Jaren interjected, stepping between and past the two. “I’ll just get out of your way, then.” With that, he turned and made his way back to the informal (and, by the sound of it, highly entertaining) debriefing at the other end of the hold. He

knew that once those two got warmed up, no one was safe, so getting as much distance as possible was the only sane course.

Stone, meanwhile, was daubing some gauze in disinfectant and not quite smirking in glee. "Okay, lemme see that cut on your scalp first. The fingers can wait." The gauze made contact, and Trika hissed in annoyance. Stone added, "Oh, yeah, this is gonna sting a bit."

"*Typical* Stone. When in doubt, hurt 'em more so they forget their problems." Stone nodded in silent agreement, but something seemed off; her tone was perfectly in character, but something about the sardonic smile seemed... brittle, almost pasted on. He continued to clean the wound, listening to her litany of complaints.

"... where'd you learn to medic, anyway, the back of a box of bandages? Ow! Watch it, you oaf!" Trika jumped back at his work, feeling the burn running straight through her head. "I swear, if my beautiful looks are ruined, I'll make your life a never-ending nightmare." Stone continued working, making empty noises of acknowledgement the entire time.

Trika sighed, used to the medic's flat expressions. "Of course," she began anew, looking at the floor with little interest, "I suppose looks don't mean much for a primitive like me. Hey, maybe you should go for the whole 'ritual scarring' thing? No. Nevermind. *Then* I'd be freaking out every time I look in the mirror." She glanced at the medic again, who was reaching to his side

to dip the gauze into another pool of goo. “Great, now what are you gonna put on - YOW! *Kriffing hell*, Stone, even licensed veterinarians have enough sense to try and soothe the animal they’re working on!”

“Sorry,” Stone said without being sorry at all. “Ran outta ‘soothe’ a while back. I could always strap you down to a gurney, maybe tight enough to cut off blood flow to your sarcasm gland?” Stone shifted his position, putting himself between Trika and the rest of the Talons on the far end of the hold. It made getting at the wound a little more awkward, but it accomplished something more important: it provided a modicum of privacy now that she knew the others couldn’t see her.

Quietly, still working all the while, Stone asked, “Okay, what’s got you so stirred up?”

Trika was about to dig up another insult when she saw the expression on the medic’s face: he was dead serious now, and maybe even a little worried.

And knowing that there wasn’t really anyone else on the team she could unwind with, Trika relented. “They just...” she paused awkwardly, ignoring the stinging sensation in her scalp and the burning across her face. “The whole place just got under my skin, is all. All those cracks about me... about *my people*. It’s just put me a little off.”

“Uh-huh.” Stone finished cleaning out the wound and started to prepare a low-profile bandage to seal it. “Most people try and get to you like that, you’d hit them with an

entire broadside. Something else is eating at you.”

As he applied the bandage, Trika winced. Stone knew it wasn't out of discomfort when Trika spoke in the closest to “plaintive” that he'd ever heard her manage.

“I just keep wondering, what if they're right?” Trika paused, then continued, trying to fill the impassive silence. “Chinaési never bothered with space flight; we were perfectly happy with the harvest and the hunt. We had stories about the stars, but they were just that... stories to put the kids to bed with.” Her voice roughened, and she briefly glanced down to the deck, where she had dropped the broken, flat hat she had added to her outfit for the mission, its only purpose in the last few hours to give the officials something to rip apart. “And then we found out just how wrong those stories were. We found out about a galaxy where going from planet to planet was commonplace, and about devices we hadn't even dreamed of. And of weapons that put ours to shame.

“And *now* what? There's maybe a couple handfuls of us left, scattered across a galaxy with customs that make no sense to us, people whose *children* know more about how the galaxy works than our elders did.” She might have looked on the verge of tears, but they wouldn't flow. “I don't really understand who I am and what I'm supposed to be. The only reason I'm allowed in polite society is because of some weird gift. What if it's all just a fluke? What if we really were just savages, sub-Human?”

Stone remained silent as Trika finally choked up, unwrapping the makeshift splint Jaren had applied and assembling a more professional job. As he began to work the hacker's finger into the support, he finally spoke.

"Ever hear of a Chandrilan bloodjell?"

Trika's voice wasn't up to speaking again just yet, so she simply gave her teammate a non-comprehending look. Stone continued, not looking up from the splint as he worked.

"It's a bunch of protoplasm about, oh, maybe twice the size of my fist." He lifted a hand and curled it into a ball for comparison, then resumed working. "Lives in some of the reefs back home. Kinda pretty, actually, all kinds of colors that glisten under the sea. Thing is, though, the pattern on those colors hide the stinger it carries, one that's almost as long as it is. You get too close, it sticks you, and then pumps in one of the nastiest hemotoxins on the planet. I'm talking *really* vicious stuff... it basically liquefies your circulatory system from the inside. One guy in my class lost his lunch when we saw holos of it during our course on natural toxins." Stone finished applying the splint, then looked up at Trika, who was looking very confused (and maybe a little scared) at the rather gruesome tangent the medic had embarked on. He made sure to catch her gaze and hold it when he delivered the point of his little lecture.

"What I'm trying to say is, just 'cause someone thinks you're a stupid animal, doesn't mean you can't make

'em bleed.”

Trika sat in silence as she digested the message. Once it had sunk in, she finally managed to rally. “Yeah, and you’d know all about the bleeding part, wouldn’t you?”

Stone smiled; Trika was definitely getting back to normal. For *her*, anyway. “Hey, job’s gotta have *some* perks.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Mounds of flimsies, bound books, and datapads sat harmlessly around his office, the result of a night’s worth of collection. Kevin had stayed up... had it been since midnight?

After returning to the Nest too late for a proper dinner from Sergeant Bullwinkle (thankfully!), Kevin had slipped into his quarters to attempt getting some sleep. After a couple of hours of a restless nap, he’d jumped back up and gotten to work. The adrenaline pumping through his system was simply too much to keep him in bed.

And so he had gotten to work. Mastering the finer points of law and the specifics of the justice system was going to take the combined efforts of every single Talon. Earlier that morning, he had already heard several Talons milling about. It seemed like the Nest never really slept, anyway. When he had spent his first nights in the Nest, he wasn’t sure he’d ever sleep. Restless nightmares and

mental breakdowns had turned into a driven passion for productivity, though. He apparently wasn't the only one excited with the results of the mission.

The big news of the evening had been Jaren and Telia and their baby. News of the pregnancy had slipped out somehow (likely the result of Trika's mouth once she had found out) and had spread quickly from craft to craft until everyone knew upon landing. *That* flimsy pile sat at the center of his desk. While he wasn't sure where the results of their mission would send them next, he was fairly certain that Telia would be watching it go down from the sidelines. Not that she'd be happy about that, but rules were rules. As it was, Kevin was fairly certain that the exciting news had been part of what had held up the ground mission, and while things had eventually worked out as planned, a distraction like that, let alone a new life to consider, was not something he would take lightly. Jaren was due in his office later that morning, and discussing what exactly had happened during their night on the town was going to be a priority.

Danya had stopped by just an hour earlier, preliminary analysis of the slicing job in hand. Kevin had immediately noticed an extra bounce in her step and had equated it to the same adrenaline he was feeling, too. She'd taken the lead on the information front and estimated that within the week, all of the hackers would be able to compile a detailed report for him. After he had thanked her, she had returned to work in the conference room down the

hall, and only then did he notice that Owen was there, diligently working, too. That extra bounce had made more sense then, and he was pretty sure that Owen was a little more to Danya than just a passing fancy. They were working hard into the morning on more analysis, and both situations seemed to have a generally positive outlook, at least to the parties involved.

*So many meetings...* His days at least for the next couple of weeks were going to be busy. He definitely wouldn't have time for resting, which meant he probably should have slept while he could.

A series of three knocks rattled his absent musings. At his door was Ensign Delph, standing at perfect attention as if fresh from basic training. "Permission to enter, sir?"

"Come in, Ensign," Kevin replied, waving away the formality. "At ease. Have a seat. It's far too early for military drama."

"I've never heard of anything being too early for the military," Qui-Sein chuckled.

"*Not* true," Kevin said, pointing one finger into the air as if proving a point. "You stick around NRI for a while, you'll wind up ordering people to get up early instead of *being* ordered to do so. But that means you've got to get up early, anyway." He circled around his desk and plopped into his chair as sloppily as he could manage given the years of strict discipline. "It gets old sometimes, but we deal with it, right?" Qui-Sein settled into the chair across from him, nerves visible. "You're not in

any trouble, Ensign.”

It looked as if the ensign had breathed a huge sigh of relief. He remained sitting straight up, anyway.

“You and Kaiba really stood out during the mission,” Kevin began. He eyed Qui-Sein carefully. “Reyanna and Mahrl were quite impressive, too, but I was quite pleased with the way you kept up with everything. You stepped in and performed the tasks of three people at times... communications, flight patterns, gunning angles... all confusing to some who are fresh out of flight school. It was quite a task you performed for us.”

Qui-Sein had formulated a proper response in the time it had taken Ski to hand him the compliment. “I was glad to help out. I always am, sir.”

*So young.* The wide eyes spoke of eagerness. They hadn't seen many battles, but they would likely see too many by normal military standards given the ensign's choice of profession in the intelligence community. Kevin saw a little bit of himself in the young Epicanthix. A love for flying. And for fighting... pursuing what was good by pursuing what was evil in the galaxy. He wanted to be in the game, to be useful and needed. To be counted on and to be a part of a team. It was practically written across his face in plain Basic. “You were sent here as a punishment,” Ski said flatly, cutting to the chase. “You were sent here to cool off before being shipped off to the fleet.” He leaned back into his chair, narrowing his eyes at the ensign from over the piles of flimsies on his desk.

“And you’ve been piloting Sergeant Bullwinkle around ever since.”

Delph wasn’t sweating, but he was probably close to it. Ski apparently hadn’t lost the weight of his rank since being demoted. “Yes, sir,” he responded rather despondently, still attempting to look his commanding officer in the eye.

“I can’t do much about that,” Ski confessed. “Even if I wrote you a commendation at this point, it wouldn’t mean much in the current administration’s eyes.” He saw Qui-Sein calm after understanding that he wasn’t trying to chastise him for past wrongs. “You’re basically here, like the rest of us, until someone remembers you’re here and finds a better place for you to waste away. You are now a graduate of the Denon Military Academy, one of the most prestigious academies in the galaxy, but I’m not so certain they even care about that fact.”

Kevin didn’t wait for Qui-Sein to answer or attempt to explain himself. With a dead-serious expression, he continued. “You’ve proven to be worth more than just an errand boy around here, and while I can’t promote you outright, I’ve looked at our open positions and how you might be best utilized while being ‘stuck’ here. We’ve got a few Talons coming aboard in the next couple of weeks, but we’re going to be still lacking a pilot and mechanic.

“Ensign Delph, how would you like to be a Talon?”

\* \* \* \* \*

Surrounded in a climate-controlled fantasy world, Sondara Carre was in a place of sun, sand, crystal waves, and no one else. Before her, on a whitewood table, her dinner sat laid out. Fine wines, food that would cost some families one parent's salary to afford. She picked up a piece to nibble, one eye flicked up, guarded by sun shades. The sound carrying from further out indicated that someone had just entered her private suite. Standing in the risqué, semi-transparent top and sarong, she took a few steps toward the noise, only to reveal a man in a crisply-pressed uniform who was pale as a sheet.

"M-Madam... Madam... C-carre..." the mustached man murmured out before kneeling down in greeting, lowering his head.

Tutting softly, Carre touched her lips with one laquered fingernail and replied, "Go back... send in whoever sent you." Turning back away, silk sarong swishing about and clinging to her form in an alluring fashion, exposing a perfectly tanned leg up to the thigh, and almost to the waist, Sondara went back to her meal. Now a frown creased her cultured and perfect face. The functionary scurried away, leaving her to take a few more bites of her food, watching and waiting for the return.

Instead of another uniformed victim, Krycek stepped onto the sand, dressed in a business suit for a change, his

neckcloth resting on his shoulders and his tunic unbuttoned, showing that he himself was not uncaring for his own body. “Your penchant for Vaderesque theatrics and torturing messengers *does* tend to make it hard to bring you bad news, my lady.”

The first reply was a single side of her painted lips quirking into a rather mischievous grin. As Sondara tilted her head to one side, letting some of her hair cascade over the shoulder, she replied, “I have *always* believed to motivate for success. Now... you’ve spoiled my meal, and my fun, and I wish an explanation.”

The stately, handsome man moved around her table and picked up her wine goblet, sipping from it appreciatively, before turning to look toward the faux ocean view. “It has to do with the CO of that New Republic intelligence squadron. The more I see of this man, the more I come to admire him... and either wish he was working for us, or was safely in a grave. He has a certain sense of stubborn integrity that one does come to admire after a time... so much as it is *infuriating*.”

Sondara replied softly, “You’re trying my patience.” The tone was almost sing-song: light, while still carrying the edge of a blade to it.

He looked back, and then took another sip. “Cell forty-seven is gone. I had to send the code-signals to wipe all datacores, destroy all physical evidence, and to depart within twenty standard hours. I have no idea how the man did it, but his people are good. Have you seen

their files?”

The woman stood, picking up her plate and picking at some of the remainders as she moved next to him to watch the manicured false coastline. She allowed the light breeze to wash through her normally tight hair. “Actually *yes*... and in all honesty, there are one or two I wouldn’t mind procuring for my own uses. Their medic especially seems rather intriguing. Such an odd conflict of characters... he would be amusing to keep for a while.”

Krycek scoffed, “By the Emperor’s black heart... your ‘interest’ is as destructive as your anger. These people are to be respected, and disposed of... not considered as playthings!”

Once more came that same one-sided smile as she turned back and began walking toward the entrance. “*That* is where you are wrong. We have power, and that makes anyone below us vulnerable to us. All that matters is the end result. These remnants of the Empire continue to fail because they lack the proper drive and resources. Grabby-handed vice-admirals with delusions of grandeur, Intelligencia who cling to faded ideals of a dead tyrant, and fools who think to carve out a little piece of history to keep for themselves. No...” Nails tapped the plate rhythmically. “The old regime is dead, so we control the *new* regime. And the game goes on.”

Both finally stepped out of the lounge into the sterile hallway of a starship. Carre deposited the dinnerware into a receptacle, and the two started down towards the

aft of the shift. Carre's heels tapped and Krycek's boots echoed through the area to announce their passing. "As a military man, I would care to disagree. I have never lead from the rear, and I never will. Keep your shadows, Lady Carre... my ideals will always stand firm in the light. Back to the topic, however. The loss of a cell is a slap in the face, but one from which we can recover. The forty- and fifty-series cells are mainly second-stage engineering and development projects and do not affect us as greatly as some of our other areas of interest. The core groups that use mercenary work as a cover continue to bring us valuable data for use from all over the known systems. Overall? This loss is expected and affordable. So bloody well stop shooting the messengers."

With the last words coming out carrying a bit of vitriol, she turned to him in a four-way intersection. "You have more bad news, don't you?"

Finally, it was *his* turn to enjoy the icy grin before giving a shake of the head. "Actually, no... however, I do enjoy occasionally pulling your proverbial chain. It reminds you that while this is your part of Black Fire... it is merely one *part* of a whole. Now, Doctor Zazan has news for us."

Eyes remained locked for several long moments, the air in the crossways seeming to chill from their very presence. Neither moved, not one perfect brow, nor one finger of either of their hands until finally, Sondara Carre ceded this round to her equal. "One of these days Kry-

cek, your stubborn insistence for challenging power will be the end of you.”

Turning back to walk the phantom hallways, not even a droid in sight, Krycek replied, “History shows that wars are not won by defeating soldiers. Wars are won by defeating their generals and politicians. And those who do not learn from those lessons are doomed to repeat them.”

There was an odd, feral look to her, one he recognized in that moment as the animal attraction often applied to her favorite playthings, men of influence she placed under her thumb and tortured out on the edges of pleasure until they ceased to be useful, or appealing. A woman who valued nothing and no one but what belonged to her, to do with what she pleased. Turning his thoughts inward as both entered a turbolift, Krycek felt the bile rise in his throat for a moment, the reaction he always had to the atavistic nature of the otherwise charismatic, savvy, and ultimately dangerous woman. For him, Black Fire was the ultimate conflict... because even while working with Carre or the others in charge, it was like working with a wild predator. It may tolerate you, but sooner or later, the clash over territory was inevitable.

Instead of a cargo or hangar bay, the turbolift took them to a sterile laboratory level, forcing both to strip, bathe in germ-destroying white light, and dress in drab, unappealing suits that kept any and all things from the body from getting on any surface.

Passing into the first chamber, they saw three fresh

bodybags had been left open, the three people in them staring blankly into the ceiling as their pallor and the sewn autopsy scars on their torsos told the story quite easily. Much to Krycek's credit, no gorge rose when it was noted that each body's brain had been removed for study... though Carre hardly seemed to care. Striding to the main lab, she pushed open the door to find the stately and towering Kamino doctor working. Strapped down to an examination table, a gagged male subject bucked and screamed soundlessly, eyes bulged and red from lack of tears, hands clenching and releasing in irregular spasms. He finally collapsed into unconsciousness, blood trickling from his nose and ears.

Sondara mused darkly, "If *this* is your idea of success, perhaps we should reconsider your work, and motivate you to succeed in a more *traditional* fashion."

Zazan looked up, his neck craning towards the pair, and then elegantly removed his facial cover. "Lady Carre, Lord Krycek? A pleasure... no, this one is the last non-viable test subject. We have tried to give him the neural engram cascade that has taken on the two successes. This one will soon die from an embolism, so it is of no concern." He pressed a control on the side of the table, and it lifted and hovered off toward the front room to leave the gurgling and choking man to his demise.

Crossing his hands in front of him, looking back and forth between the military man and the dangerously beautiful Human woman, Zazan continued. "As

we speak, Subject Nine is going through the neural engram cascade. Using the training documents that you so graciously procured for me from the Imperial Museum, we have been able to recreate a simulated memory set for each of the pair that places their early childhood under the tutelage of an unnamed person. The mind is a powerful tool and will create detail where there is none.”

The darkly bemused expression of the woman shifted to a mild frown, forcing the Kamino to cough, and then continue. “Yes, well... essentially, I have done what you have requested. By recreating childhood trauma to evoke darker emotions of anger, hate, and fear, and then implanting key commands into the cerebral strata, both of these individuals will be sleeper agents. With training and abilities coded into them that can be preprogrammed at your leisure, and even erased thanks to the cascade, they will be better than droids or clone troopers, as they will believe fully in anything given to them by the instructor-figure we have implanted. The prototype was a stunning success, and even though the second subject to receive the treatment is not carrying the active midichlorian strain, the process is well into its first stage without any signs of rejection.”

Motioning for the pair to follow him, both silent now as he took nominal control, Zazan lead Krycek and Carre to an observation station above a test area. A single Human male with a shaved head, dressed in a black skin-tight

bodysuit, was fighting three droids at once with a vibro-sword. “This is the prototype candidate, Lady Carre. In his mind, you are a lifelong friend of his who has saved his life from drunkenness and misery after the death of his instructor. Previously, Subject Three, whom we are now calling Zen, had no combat experience whatsoever. Now, he is rated highly in martial combat, blasters, and has even demonstrated a penchant for piloting we have explored. With the new ability to access and control his midichlorian manifestations... the *Force* as they call it... his reaction time and hand-eye coordination are on par, if not better than most of the top-rated operatives you sent me for comparison and evaluation.”

Faltering for a moment, the Kamino doctor tapped a few keys on a datapad on his belt, prompting Krycek to finally speak. “And what happened to those men we sent you?”

Zazan replied softly, “He killed them. Quite brutally, I might add. I have the footage and autopsy reports. One in particular was quite vicious. He apparently... well... repeatedly slammed the last one against the ceiling and floor until little was left.”

Carre had the grin again and the light in her eyes. “Excellent. How long before he is ready for me?”

The wide eyes of the tall being flicked back and forth. “Forgive me, Lady Carre, but as per your original orders, the female subject was to be yours for operations.”

Sondara looked at her counterpart. “We *are* playing

dangerously, aren't we?"

Krycek smiled. "The agreement was that I procured the doctor and the facility and that you provide the manpower. Nothing was ever said as to whom... would obtain *whom*. Besides... while I have him working in the field, you can study the details of Zen's life and times, so that when I return him here after the final test, you can treat him like the bosom buddies you are, Lady Carre." He kept most of the irony in, but some dripped out from the sides of his upturned lips.

It took the doctor several uncomfortable moments to regain himself and politely redirect the pair from their killing gazes. "Would you like to see the female subject now? She is currently processing through the initial treatment and is perfectly harmless. With her as a template and several more subjects, we may be able to take the initial treatment time down from days to mere hours."

As if there was a cape behind her, Carre swept herself around and strode towards the other side of the lab. A lone figure was strapped to a vertical table, and she was staring into a screen that flashed fractals and patterns in fast repetition while a pair of needles remained stabbed into her temples. Soft, crimson hair that once carried a lovely natural wave to it was now darkly matted with sweat. It stank of disinfectant spray and clung to her neck and back. Azure eyes that once carried the light of intelligence and self-assurance now glazed and dilated in pain and fear, forced to watch the patterns burning a new

life into her mind.

Her cheeks were stained with dried tears and droplets of excess drugs. Her voice, hoarse from screaming, shifted tones as she fought for every word that came out through the drug-induced tempest. “My name is... is... Mekial Yrisar. My... My name... name... is Mekial... Yrisar. Mekial. Yrisar...”

The three watched dispassionately as her dried lips parted once more to try and say her name.

“My name is... is... is...”