



JOURNEY TO STAR WARS: THE FORCE AWAKENS

**THE WAR IS NOT OVER.**

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

# STAR WARS AFTERMATH

THE DEL REY

# STAR WARS®

TIMELINE

- I** THE PHANTOM MENACE
- II** ATTACK OF THE CLONES  
THE CLONE WARS (TV SERIES)  
DARK DISCIPLE
- III** REVENGE OF THE SITH  
LORDS OF THE SITH  
TARKIN  
A NEW DAWN  
REBELS (TV SERIES)
- IV** A NEW HOPE  
HEIR TO THE JEDI  
BATTLEFRONT: TWILIGHT COMPANY
- V** THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK
- VI** RETURN OF THE JEDI  
AFTERMATH
- VII** THE FORCE AWAKENS

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

**STAR  
WARS®**

**AFTERMATH**

**The second Death Star is destroyed. The Emperor and his powerful enforcer, Darth Vader, are rumored to be dead. The Galactic Empire is in chaos.**

**Across the galaxy, some systems celebrate, while in others Imperial factions tighten their grip. Optimism and fear reign side by side.**

**And while the Rebel Alliance engages the fractured forces of the Empire, a lone rebel scout uncovers a secret Imperial meeting. . . .**

## PRELUDE:

*Today is a day of celebration. We have triumphed over villainy and oppression and have given our Alliance—and the galaxy beyond it—a chance to breathe and cheer for the progress in reclaiming our freedom from an Empire that robbed us of it. We have reports from Commander Skywalker that Emperor Palpatine is dead, and his enforcer, Darth Vader, with him.*

*But though we may celebrate, we should not consider this our time to rest. We struck a major blow against the Empire, and now will be the time to seize on the opening we have created. The Empire's weapon may be destroyed, but the Empire itself lives on. Its oppressive hand closes around the throats of good, free-thinking people across the galaxy, from the Coruscant Core to the farthest systems in the Outer Rim. We must remember that our fight continues. Our rebellion is over. But the war . . . the war is just beginning.*

—ADMIRAL ACKBAR

# CORUSCANT

Then:

Monument Plaza.

Chains rattle as they lash the neck of Emperor Palpatine. Ropes follow suit—lassos looping around the statue's middle. The mad cheers of the crowd as they pull, and pull, and pull. Disappointed groans as the stone fixture refuses to budge. But then someone whips the chains around the back ends of a couple of heavy-gauge speeders, and then engines warble and hum to life—the speeders gun it and again the crowd pulls—

The sound like a giant bone breaking.

A fracture appears at the base of the statue.

More cheering. Yelling. And—

Applause as it comes crashing down.

The head of the statue snaps off, goes rolling and crashing into a

speeders swoop down from the traffic lanes above—Imperial police. Red-and-black helmets. The glow of their lights reflected back in their helmets.

There comes no warning. No demand to stand down.

The laser cannons at the fore of each airspeeder open fire. Red bolts sear the air. The crowd is cut apart. Bodies dropped and stitched with fire.

But still, those gathered are not cowed. They are no longer a crowd. Now they are a mob. They start picking up hunks of the Palpatine statue and lobbing them up at the airspeeders. One of the speeders swings to the side to avoid an incoming chunk of stone—and it bumps another speeder, interrupting its fire. Coruscanti citizens climb up the stone spire behind both speeders—a spire on which are written the Imperial values of order, control, and the rule of law—and begin jumping onto the police cruisers. One helmeted cop is flung from his vehicle. The other crawls out onto the hood of his speeder, opening fire with a pair of blasters—just as a hunk of stone cracks him in the helmet, knocking him to the ground.

The other two airspeeders lift higher and keep firing.

Screams and fire and smoke.

Two of those gathered—a father and son, Rorak and Jak—quick-duck behind the collapsed statue. The sounds of the battle unfolding right here in Monument Plaza don't end. In the distance, the sound of more fighting, a plume of flames, flashes of blaster fire. A billboard high up in the sky among the traffic lanes suddenly goes to static.

The boy is young, only twelve standard years, not old enough to fight. Not yet. He looks to his father with pleading eyes. Over the din he yells: “But the battle station was destroyed, Dad! The battle is over!” They just watched it only an hour before. The supposed end of the Empire. The start of something better.

The confusion in the boy's shining eyes is clear: He doesn't understand what's happening



one, drawn out again and again, cut up into slices so it seems more manageable.

For a long time he's told his son not the truth but the idealized hope: *One day the Empire will fall and things will be different for when you have children.* And that may still come to pass. But now a stronger, sharper truth is required: "Jak—the battle isn't over. The battle is just starting."

He holds his son close.

Then he puts a hunk of statue in the boy's hand.

And he picks one up himself.

---

# **PART ONE**

---



Now:

Starlines streak across the bright black.

A ship drops out of hyperspace: a little Starhopper. A one-person ship. Favored by many of the *less desirable* factions out here in the Outer Rim—the pirates, the bookies, the bounty hunters and those with bounties on their heads to hunt. This particular ship has seen action: plasma scarring across the wings and up its tail fins; a crumpled dent in the front end as if it was kicked by an Imperial walker. All the better for the ship to blend in.

Ahead: the planet Akiva. A small planet—from here, striations of brown and green. Thick white clouds swirling over its surface.

The pilot, Wedge Antilles, once Red Leader and now—well, now something else, a role without a formal title, as yet, because things are so new, so different, so wildly up in the air. He sits there and takes a

It's nice up here. Quiet.

No TIE fighters. No blasts across the bow of his X-wing. No X-wing, in fact, and though he loves flying one, it's nice to be out. No Death Star—and here, Wedge shudders, because he helped take down two of those things. Some days that fills him with pride. Other days it's something else, something worse. Like he's drawn back to it. The fight still going on all around him. But that isn't today.

Today, it's quiet.

Wedge likes the quiet.

He pulls up his datapad. Scrolls through the list with a tap of the button on the side. (He has to hit it a few extra times just to get it to go—if there's one thing he looks forward to when all this is over, it's that maybe they'll start to get new tech. Somehow, this datapad had actual *sand* in it, and that's why the buttons stick.) The list of planets clicks past.

He's been to, let's see, five so far. Florrum. Ryloth. Hinari. Abafar. Raydonia. This planet, Akiva, is the sixth on the list of many, too many.

It was his idea, this run. Somehow, the remaining factions of the Empire are still fueling their war effort even months after the destruction of their second battle station. Wedge had the notion that they must've moved out to the Outer Rim—study your history and it's easy to see that the seeds of the Empire grew first out here, away from the Core systems, away from the prying eyes of the Republic.

Wedge told Ackbar, Mon Mothma: “Could be that's where they are again. Hiding out there.” Ackbar said that it made some sense. After all, didn't Mustafar hold some importance to the Imperial leadership? Rumors said that's where Vader took some of the Jedi long ago. Torturing them for information before their execution.

And now Vader's gone. Palpatine, too.

*Almost there*, Wedge thinks—once they find the supply lines that are bolstering the Imperials, he'll feel a whole lot better.

Nothing.

Maybe it's broken. It's an old ship.

Wedge fidgets at his side, pulls up the personal comm relay that hangs there at his belt—he taps the side of it, tries to get a signal.

Once more: nothing.

His heart drops into his belly. Feels a moment like he's falling. Because what all of this adds up to is:

*The signal's blocked.* Some of the criminal syndicates still operating out here have technology to do that *locally*—but in the space above the planet, no, no way. Only one group has that tech.

His jaw tightens. The bad feeling in the well of his gut is swiftly justified, as ahead a Star Destroyer punctures space like a knife-tip as it drops out of hyperspace. Wedge fires up the engines. *I have to get out of here.*

A second Star Destroyer slides in next to the first.

The panels across the Starhopper's dash begin blinking red.

They see him. What to do?

What did Han always say? *Just fly casual.* The ship is disguised as it is for a reason: It looks like it could belong to any two-bit smuggler out here on the fringe. Akiva's a hotbed of criminal activity. Corrupt satrap governors. Various syndicates competing for resources and opportunities. A well-known black market—once, decades ago, the Trade Federation had a droid manufacturing facility here. Which means, if you want some off-the-books droid, you can come here to buy one. The Rebel Alliance procured many of its droids right here, as a matter of fact.

New dilemma, though: What now?

Fly down to the planet to do aerial recon, as was the original plan—or plot a course back to Chandrila? Something's up. Two Star Destroyers appearing out of nowhere? Blocked comms? That's not nothing. *It means I've found what I'm looking for.*

Maybe even something much better.

That'll take a few minutes, though—heading inward from the Outer Rim isn't as easy as taking a long stride from here to there. It's a dangerous jump. Endless variables await: nebula clouds, asteroid fields, floating bands of star-junk from various skirmishes and battles. Last thing Wedge wants to do is pilot around the edge of a black hole or through the center of a star going supernova.

The comm crackles.

They're hailing him.

A crisp Imperial voice comes across the channel.

"This is the Star Destroyer *Vigilance*. You have entered Imperial space." To which Wedge thinks: *This isn't Imperial space. What's going on here?* "Identify yourself."

Fear lances through him, sharp and bright as an electric shock. This isn't his realm. Talking. Lying. A scoundrel like Solo could convince a Jawa to buy a bag of sand. Wedge is a pilot. But it's not like they didn't plan for this. Calrissian worked on the story. He clears his throat, hits the button—

"This is Gev Hassan. Piloting an HH-87 Starhopper: the *Rover*." He transmits his datacard. "Sending over credentials."

A pause. "Identify the nature of your visit."

"Light cargo."

"What cargo?"

The stock answer is: droid components. But that may not fly here. He thinks quickly—Akiva. Hot. Wet. Mostly jungle. "Dehumidifier parts."

Pause. An excruciating one.

The nav computer runs through its calculations.

*Almost there . . .*

A different voice comes through the tinny speaker. A woman's voice. Got some steel in it. Less crisp. Nothing lilting. This is someone with some authority—or, at least, someone who thinks she pos-

“legitimate pilot and businessman”—did work smuggling goods to help Lando build Cloud City. And he is indeed Devaronian.

“You got it,” Wedge says.

Another pause.

The computer is almost done with its calculations. Another ten seconds at most. Numbers crunching, flickering on the screen . . .

“Funny,” the woman says. “Our records indicate that Gev Hassan died in Imperial custody. Please let us correct our records.”

The hyperspace computer finishes its calculations.

He pushes the thruster forward with the heel of his hand—

But the ship only shudders. Then the Starhopper trembles again, and begins to drift forward. Toward the pair of Star Destroyers. It means they’ve engaged the tractor beams.

He turns to the weapon controls.

If he’s going to get out of this, it’s now or never.

Admiral Rae Sloane stares down at the console and out the window. The black void. The white stars. Like pinpricks in a blanket. And out there, like a child’s toy on the blanket: a little long-range fighter.

“Scan them,” she says. Lieutenant Nils Tothwin looks up, offers her an obsequious smile.

“Of course,” he says, his jaundiced face tight with that grin. Tothwin is an emblem of what’s wrong with the Imperial forces now: Many of their best are gone. What’s left is, in part, the dregs. The leaves and twigs at the bottom of a cup of spice tea. Still, he does what he’s told, which is something—Sloane wonders when the Empire will truly begin to fracture. Forces doing what they want, when they want it. Chaos and anarchy. The moment that happens, the moment someone of some prominence breaks from the fold to go his own way, they are all truly doomed.

Tothwin scans the Starhopper as the tractor beam brings it slowly

ible hands. The image flashes red along the bottom. Nils, panic in his voice, says: “Hessan is charging his weapons systems.”

She scowls. “Calm down, Lieutenant. The weapons on a Starhopper aren’t enough to—” Wait. She squints. “Is that what I think it is?”

“What?” Tothwin asks. “I don’t—”

Her finger drifts to the front end of the holograph—circling the fighter’s broad, curved nose. “Here. Ordnance launcher. Proton torpedo.”

“But the Starhopper wouldn’t be equipped—oh. *Oh.*”

“Someone has come prepared for a fight.” She reaches down, flips on the comm again. “This is Admiral Rae Sloane. I see you there, little pilot. Ready a pair of torpedoes. Let me guess: You think a proton torpedo will disrupt our tractor beam long enough to afford you your escape. That may be accurate. But let me also remind you that we have enough ordnance on the *Vigilance* to turn you not only to scrap but rather, to a *fine particulate matter*. Like dust, cast across the dark. The timing doesn’t work. You’ll fire your torpedo. We’ll fire ours. Even *if* by the time your weapons strike us our beam is disengaged . . .” She clucks her tongue. “Well. If you feel you must try, then try.”

She tells Nils to target the Starhopper.

Just in case.

But she hopes the pilot is wise. Not some fool. Probably some rebel scout, some spy, which is foolish on its own—though less foolish now, with the newly built second Death Star destroyed like its predecessor.

All the more reason for her to remain vigilant, as the name of this ship suggests. The meeting on Akiva cannot misfire. It must take place. It must have a *result*. Everything feels on the edge, the entire Empire standing on the lip of the pit, the ledge crumbling away to scree and stone.

The pressure is on. An almost literal pressure—like a fist pressing against her back, pushing the air out of her lungs.

Her chance to excel



*Forget the old way.*

Indeed.

Wedge winces, heart racing in his chest like an ion pulse. He knows she's right. The timing doesn't favor him. He's a good pilot, maybe one of the best, but he doesn't have the Force on his side. If Wedge launches those two torpedoes, they'll give him everything they have. And then it won't matter if he breaks free from the tractor beam. He won't have but a second to get away from whatever fusillade they send his way.

Something is happening. Here, in the space above Akiva. Or maybe down there on the planet's surface.

If he dies here—nobody will know what it is.

Which means he has to play this right.

He powers down the torpedoes.

He has another idea.

Docking Bay 42.

Rae Sloane stands in the glass-encased balcony, overlooking the gathered battalion of stormtroopers. This lot, like Nils, are imperfect. Those who received top marks at the Academy went on to serve on the Death Star, or on Vader's command ship, the *Executor*. Half of them didn't even complete the Academy—they were pulled out of training early.

These will do, though. For now. Ahead is the Starhopper—drifting in through the void of space, cradled by the invisible grip of the tractor beam. Down past the lineup of TIE fighters (half of what they need, a third of what she'd prefer), drifting slowly toward the gathered stormtroopers.

They have the numbers. The Starhopper will have one pilot, most likely. Perhaps a second or third crewmember.

She wonders: *Who are you?* Who is inside that little tin can?

Then: A bright flash and a shudder—the Starhopper suddenly glows blue from the nose end forward.

It explodes in a rain of fire and scrap.

“Whoever it was,” Lieutenant Tothwin says, “they did not wish to be discovered. I suppose they favored a quick way out.”

Sloane stands amid the smoldering wreckage of the long-range fighter. It stinks of ozone and fire. A pair of gleaming black astro-mechs whir, firing extinguishing foam to put out the last of the flames. They have to navigate around the half dozen or so stormtrooper bodies that lie about, still. Helmets cracked. Chest plates charred. Blaster rifles scattered and broken.

“Don’t be a naïve calf,” she says, scowling. “No, the pilot didn’t want to be discovered. But he’s still here. If he didn’t want us to blast him out of the sky out *there*, you really think he’d be eager to die in *here*?”

“Could be a suicide attack. Maximize the damage—”

“No. He’s here. And he can’t be far. Find him.”

Nils gives a sharp, nervous nod. “Yes, Admiral. Right away.”



“We have to turn around,” Norra says. “Plot another course—”

“Whoa, whoa, no,” Owerto says, half laughing. He looks up at her—one half of his dark face burned underneath a mottled carpet of scars, scars he claims to have earned with a different story each time he tells it: lava, wampa, blaster fire, got blitzed on Corellian rum and fell down on a hot camping stove. “Miss Susser—”

“Now that I’m home, I’m going by my married name again. Wexley.”

“*Norra*. You paid me to get you onto the surface of *that* planet.” He points out the window. There: home. Or was, once. The planet Akiva. Clouds swirling in lazy spirals over the jungles and mountains. Above it: Two Star Destroyers hang there like swords above the surface. “More important, you ain’t the only cargo I’m bringing in. I’m finishing this job.”

“We need to get back to the Alliance—” She corrects herself. That’s old thinking. “The *New Republic*. They need to know.”

A third Star Destroyer suddenly cuts through space, appearing in line with the others.

“You got family down there?”

She offers a stiff nod. “That’s why I’m here.” *That’s why I’m home.*

“This was always a risk. The Empire’s been here on Akiva for years. Not like *this*, but . . . they’re here, and we’re gonna have to deal with it.” He leans in and says: “You know why I call this ship the *Moth*?”

“I don’t.”

“You ever try to catch a moth? Cup your hands, chase after it, catch it? White moth, brown moth, any moth at all? You can’t do it. They always get away. Herky-jerky up-and-down left-and-right. Like a puppet dancing on somebody’s strings. That’s me. That’s this ship.”

“I still don’t like it.”

“I don’t like it, either, but life is full of unlikable things. You wanna see your family again? Then we’re doing this. Now’s the time, too. Looks like they’re just getting set up. Might could be more on the way.”

A half-mad gleam in his one good eye. His other: an implacable red lens framed in an ill-fitting O-ring bolted to the scarred skin. He grins, then: crooked teeth stretched wide. He actually likes this.

*Smugglers*, she thinks.

Well, she paid for the ticket.

Time to take the ride.

The long black table gleams with light shining up from it—a holographic schematic of the *Vigilance*’s docking bay and surrounding environs. It incorporates a fresh droid scan and shows damage to two of the TIE fighters, not to mention the bodies of the stormtroopers—those left there as a reminder to others what can happen when you

The pilot of the Starhopper? Most definitely a rebel. Now the question: Was this an attack? Did he know they were here? Or is this some confluence of events, some crass coincidence that led to this intersection?

That, a problem for later. The problem now is figuring out just where he went. Because as she thought, the ship contained no body.

Best she can figure, he rigged the proton torpedoes to blow. Before they did, however, he . . . what? She taps a button, goes back to the Starhopper schematic she pulled off the Imperial databases. There. A stern-side door. Small, but enough to load small parcels of cargo in and out.

Her new pilot friend ducked out the back. Would've been a considerable jump. *Jedi*? No. Couldn't be. Only one of those out there—and zero chance the rebels would send their golden boy, Skywalker.

Back to the bay schematic—

She spins it. Highlights the access ducts.

That's it. She pulls her comm. "Tothwin. Our pilot is in the ducts. I'll bet all my credits you'll find an open vent—"

"We have a problem."

*The problem is that you interrupted me*, she thinks but does not say. "What is it?"

"We have a blockade-runner."

"Another terrorist?"

"Could be. Looks like a bog-standard smuggler, though. Flying a small Corellian freighter—an, ahh, let's see, an MK-4."

"Dispatch the TIEs. Let them deal with it."

"Of course, Admiral."

Everything feels like it's in slow motion. Norra sits, frozen in the navigator's chair next to Owerto Naiucho, the scar-faced smuggler—flashes of light on his face, green light from the incoming lasers, orange light

of them, a swarm of TIEs like a cloud of insects—the horrible scream as they pass, vibrating the chair beneath her and the console gripped in her white-knuckled hands. In the moments when she blinks, she doesn't see darkness. She sees another battle unfolding—

*“It's a trap!” comes Ackbar's voice over the comm. The dread feeling as Imperial TIEs descend upon them like redjacket wasps from a rock-struck nest. The dark of space lighting up with a crackling beam of viridian light—that coming from the half-constructed Death Star, just one more shovelful of dirt on the Alliance's grave as one of their own capital ships is gone, erased in a pulse of light, lightning, and fire—*

The freighter dives toward the planet's surface. Turning like a screw. The ship shuddering as laserfire scores its side. The shields won't hold forever. Owerto's yelling at her: “You need to handle the guns! Norra! *The guns.*” But she can't get up out of that chair. Her bloodless hands won't even leave the console. Her mouth is dry. Her underarms wet. Her heart is beating like a pulsar star before it goes dark.

*“We want you to fly with us,” Captain Antilles says. She objects, of course—she's been working for the rebels for years now, since before the destruction of the first Death Star, but as a freighter pilot. Carrying message droids, or smuggling weapons, or just shuttling people from planet to planet and base to base. “And that doesn't change the kind of pilot you are,” he says. “You outran a Star Destroyer. You forced two TIE interceptors to crash into each other. You've always been a great pilot. And we need you now for when General Solo gets those shield generators down.” He asks her again: Is she in? Will she fly with the red and the gold? Yes. She says yes. Because of course she does—how could she say otherwise?*

Everything, gone dizzy. Lights inside the cabin flashing. A rain of sparks from somewhere behind their chairs. Here in the *Moth*, everything feels balanced on the head of a pin. Through the glass, the planet. The clouds, coming closer. TIE fighters punching holes through them, vapor swirling behind them. She stands up, hands shaking.

*Inside the bowels of the beast. Pipes and hissing steam. Skeletal beams*

*The shields are down. This is their one chance. But the TIE fighters are everywhere. Coming up behind them, hawks nipping at their tail feathers. She knows where this goes: It means she's going to die. But that's how things get done. Gold Leader comms in—Lando's voice in her ear, and his Sullustan copilot's just behind it. They tell her what to do. And again she thinks: This is it, this is how I die. She accelerates her fighter. The heat signature of the core goes left. She pulls her Y-wing right—and a handful of the TIEs break off and follow her deeper. Away from the Millennium Falcon. Away from the X-wings. Laserfire frying her engines. Popping the top off her astromech. Smoke filling the cabin. The smell of ozone—*

“I'm not a gunner,” she says. “I'm a pilot.”

Then she pulls Owerto out of his pilot's chair. He protests, but she gives him a look—a look she's practiced, a look where her face hardens like cooling steel, the look of a raptor before it takes your eyes. The smuggler gives a barely perceptible nod, and it's good that he does. Because as soon as she's down in the chair and grabbing the stick and throttle, she sees a pair of TIE fighters coming up fast from the front—

Her teeth clamp down so hard she thinks her jaw might break. Lasers like demon fire score the sky ahead, coming right for them.

She pulls back on the stick. The *Moth* ceases its dive toward the planet's surface—the lasers just miss, passing under the hind end of the freighter, continuing on—

*Boom.*

They take out two of the TIE fighters that had been following close behind. And even as she continues hauling back on the stick, her stomach and heart trading places, the blood roaring in her ears, she loopy-loops the ship just in time to see the remaining two TIEs clip each other. Vertical wing panels smashing together, prying apart—each of the short-range Imperial fighters suddenly spinning away, pirouetting wildly through space like a pair of Republic Day firecracker

her—and then she hears the gears of the *Moth*'s twin cannons grinding as the turret spins into place and begins barking fire.

Clouds whip past.

The ship bangs and judders as it kicks a hole in the atmosphere.

*This is my home*, she thinks. Or was. She grew up on Akiva. More important, Norra then was like Norra now: She doesn't much care for people. She went off on her own a lot. Explored the wilds outside the capital city of Myrra—the old temples, the cave systems, the rivers, the canyons.

She knows those places. Every switchback, every bend, every nook and cranny. Again she thinks, *This is my home*, and with that mantra set to repeat, she stills her shaking hands and banks hard to starboard, corkscrewing the ship as laserfire blasts past.

The planet's surface comes up fast. Too fast, but she tells herself that she knows what she's doing. Down there, the rise of lush hills and slick-faced cliffs give way to the Canyon of Akar—a winding serpentine valley, and it's there she takes the *Moth*. Into the rain-forested channel. Drizzle speckling her view, streaking away. The wings of the freighter clip branches, tearing up a flurry of leaves as she jukes left and jerks right, making the *Moth* one helluva hard target to hit.

Laserfire sears the canopy ahead.

Then: a bank of fog.

She pushes down on the stick, takes the freighter even lower. Here, the canyon is tighter. Trees stretching out like selfish hands, thrust up from rocky outcroppings. Norra deliberately clips these—again on the left, then on the right. The *Moth*'s turrets belt out cannon fire and suddenly a TIE comes tumbling end-over-end like a flung boulder—she has to bank the ship hard to dodge it. It smashes into a tree. A belching fireball.

The freighter shudders.

More sparks. The cabin goes dark. Owerto: "We've lost the turrets!"

Norra thinks: *We don't need them*



complexes—abandoned, an artifact of architecture from a time long, long ago, when the Ahia-Ko people dwelled here still. But before that: a cascading waterfall, a silver churn of water leaping over a cliff's edge. A cliff they call the Witch's Finger for the way it looks like a bent and accusing digit. There's a space underneath that bridge of stone, a narrow channel. *Too narrow*, she thinks. But maybe not. Especially not with the turret gone. Too late to do differently now—

She turns the freighter to its side—

Ahead, the gap under the rock. Waterfall on one side. Jagged cliff face on the other. Norra stills her breathing. Opens her eyes wide.

That mantra comes one last time, spoken aloud:

“This is my home.”

The freighter passes through the channel.

It shakes like an old drunk—what's left of the turret shears off. Clangs away, spinning into the waterfall spray—

But they're out. Clean. Alive.

On the console, two blinking red blips.

TIE fighters. Behind them.

*Wait for it.*

*Wait . . . for it . . .*

The air claps with a pair of explosions.

The two blips flicker and are gone.

Owerto hoots and claps his hands. “We're clear!”

*Damn right we are.*

She turns the freighter and sets a course for the outskirts of Myrra.

Nils Tothwin swallows hard and steps over the shattered glass and puddle of fizzing liquor—that from a ceremonial bottle of Lothalian currant wine, a wine so purple it's almost black. The puddle on the floor could at first be confused for a hole in the floor, in fact.

Tothwin rubs his hands together. He's nervous

“No.”

“And I saw that the smuggler’s ship is gone.”

“Gone as in, escaped.”

She narrows her eyes. “I know what I meant.”

“Of course, Admiral.”

The puddle bubbles. That bottle, given to her to celebrate her rise to the role of admiral. Appropriate then that it was ceremonial, because that’s what became of her role, too—her leadership was purely ceremony. For years she’d been sidelined. Yes, given command of the *Vigilance*. But the *Vigilance* was itself given nothing close to a major role in the struggle against the rising Rebellion. Paltry work. Patrols in the Outer Rim, mostly. Defense and escort of bureaucrats, moffs, dignitaries, ambassadors.

It’s what she gets. She made too many enemies early on. Sloane was always one to speak her mind. She didn’t know her place. And it hurt her.

But now: This is the time for second chances.

She cuts the silence: “This is a bad time for chaos, Lieutenant. Out there, already two of our esteemed guests have arrived.” Moff Valco Pandion in the Star Destroyer *Vanquish*, and in the *Ascent*, one of the Galactic Empire’s oldest strategists and tacticians: General Jylia Shale. “Soon, the others will arrive. I cannot have this be a time that demonstrates my weakness. We cannot reveal an inability to control our own environment, because if that happens, it will prove—particularly to Pandion—that we cannot even control this meeting. And this meeting? *Must* be controlled.”

“Absolutely, Admiral. We will find the interloper—”

“No. *I* will lead the charge to find our unanticipated guest. *You* assemble a team. Go to the surface in advance of the meeting. Track the smuggler and freighter that evaded us. Just to be sure it’s not part of something bigger. This must go right, and if it goes wrong? I will hold you personally accountable.”

---

Steam rises like stirred specters off the surface of the *Moth*—the rain has stopped and now the sun is out. Bright and hot. The air thick with humidity. Already Norra feels her hair—normally straight and silver as the waterfall they just passed under only an hour before—starting to curl at the edges, the hairs snarling together. An odd thought: *Have I brought a brush?* Did she even bring the right clothes? What will Temmin think of her?

She hasn't seen her son in . . . too long now. Three standard years? At that, she winces.

"You are one wild pilot," Owerto says, coming around the side. He slaps the ship: *whong, whong, whong*. "I'm man enough to admit that you maybe saved the *Moth's* bacon out there."

She offers a terse smile. "Well. I had a good moment."

"Flying like that isn't luck. It's skill. You're a rebel pilot, right?"

"Right."

"Seems you're on the winning team, then."

*Not yet*, she thinks. But all she says is, "One hopes."

"They really gone? The Emperor? That machine-man, Vader? Whole Death Star blown to little bitty bits all over again?"

"It was. I was there. I was . . . inside it, actually."

He whistles low and slow. "That explains the fancy flying."

"Maybe."

"Congratulations. You're a hero. Must've been something."

"It was something, all right." Even now, thinking of it, a cold shiver ratchets up her spine despite the oppressive heat. Others may have felt exhilarated during that battle. But for her: It lives on in her nightmares. Watching good pilots spiral into the surface of that massive base. Hearing their screams over the comm. "Your money," she says, abruptly. She pulls a small sack out of her duffel. Tosses it to him. "Ten K on arrival, as promised. Thanks. Sorry about your ship."

He arches an eyebrow over his one good eye. “That’s gonna be some tricky business what with the blockade. You figured a way offplanet yet?”

“No. Are you offering?”

“Pay me the same and promise to fly the ship again if the chips are down, and you got yourself a deal.”

She offers a hand. They shake on it.

“Oh,” he adds as he walks away. “Welcome home, Norra *Wexley*.”



Akiva has always had Imperials. Just not occupying ones. As with many of the worlds on the Outer Rim—wheeling on their axes at the edges of known space—Imperials used the planet but could never, or perhaps *would* never, stake an official claim. These exoplanets were beasts too rough, too wild, too strange to ever be brought under the Galactic Empire’s yoke. When the Imperials came here, it was for reasons often personal: the drink, the spice, the smoke, the gambling, the black-market goods. Or maybe just to sightsee the wild faces and unmet aliens that cross paths at this outpost of miscreants and deviants.

That, *all* of that, is what brought him here.

Sinjir Rath Velus. Imperial loyalty officer.

Well. *Ex*-Imperial loyalty officer.

The galactic tides swept him here and washed him up on this planet

same back-alley quadrant of Myrra, with the same Mon Calamari bartender pushing drinks across the oka-wood bar top.

Nursing a sashin-leaf mead—golden, sweet, tastes like a cross between a jybuk-fruit and oi-ois, those little red berries his mother used to pick. This is his third of the day, and the sun's only been up a few hours. Already his head is like a fly in a sticky spider's web, struggling and trying to fly free before ultimately failing and giving in to fatal torpor.

His head feels gummy, swimmy, boggy.

Sinjir holds up the drink and regards it the way one might regard a lover. With passion and fervor he says to it, "You can count on me. I'm all in." Then he quits nursing it and slams it back. It goes down easy. He shudders with pleasure. Then he taps the bottom of the glass on the wood. "Bartender. Drink-keeper. Peddler of strange liqueurs! Another, please."

The Mon Calamari, named Pok, trundles up. He's old, this Mon Cal—his *chin tentacles*, or whatever they are, have grown long and thick, a fringed beard of red skin, twitching suckers, and glistening barnacles. His one arm is gone, replaced instead with the gleaming silver limb of a protocol droid. A hasty, ill-fitting job—the wires plugged unceremoniously into the blistering flesh of his red shoulder. An unappetizing thing to look at, but Sinjir cares little at this point. He deserves nothing better than this.

Pok gurgles and grunts at him in whatever tongue the Mon Cals speak. They have the same conversation every time:

Pok makes his *sounds*.

Sinjir asks, then demands, that the bartender speak Basic.

Pok says, in Basic, "I don't speak Basic," before going back to gabbling in his alien way.

And then Sinjir makes his request and Pok fills the glass.

At the end of that exchange, Sinjir makes a new request: "I'll take . . .  
by all the stars in all the skies it's hot, isn't it? I'll take something re

fore fetching a wooden cup with a couple of ice cubes rattling around in the bottom. Pok grabs a dingy bottle from the shelf: something with a non-Basic script scrawled across it. Just as he cannot understand the Mon Cal's words, Sinjir cannot translate the language on the bottle. The Empire had little interest in learning the ways and tongues of other cultures. They didn't even want their people to learn on their own time.

(Sinjir is reminded of the time he found the young officer studying *Ithorese*, of all things. That young, fresh-faced fellow, sitting cross-legged on his cot, a long index finger scanning lines of the alien script. Sinjir broke that finger for him. Said it was better than any administrative punishment—and faster, too.)

(Sinjir is also reminded: *I am a terrible person*. Guilt and shame duel in his gut like a pair of hissing Loth-cats.)

Pok pours from the bottle.

Sinjir gives it a swirl. The smell coming off it could strip the black from a TIE pilot's helmet. He tastes it, expecting it to set his tongue and throat on fire, but it's quite the opposite. Not sweet. Floral. A taste that fails to match the smell. Fascinating.

He sighs.

"Hey," someone next to him whispers.

Sinjir ignores it. Takes a long, noisy sip of his strange brew.

"Hey."

They're speaking to him, aren't they? Ugh. He tilts his head and arches both eyebrows expectantly, only to see some Twi'lek sitting there. Skin pink like a newborn baby's. One of the tail-head's head-tails comes off the top of his too-tall forehead and winds around his shoulder and underarm the way a worker might carry a coil of rope or hose.

"Buddy," the Twi'lek says. "Hey."

"No," Sinjir says quite crisply. "That's not—no. I don't talk to people. I'm not here to talk. I'm here for this." He holds up the wooden

“You seen the holo vid?” the Twi’lek asks, indicating that he’s one of those brash, belligerent types who only understand social cues when they’re delivered at the end of a fist or at the tip of a blaster rifle.

Still. Holo vid? He’s curious. “No. What is it?”

The Twi’lek looks left, looks right, then pulls out a little disk—bigger than his palm, smaller than a proper dinner plate. Metal ring. Blue glass center. The alien licks his sharp little teeth then hits a button.

An image appears hovering over the disk.

A woman. Regal bearing. Chin lifted high and even in the fuzzy hologram, he can tell her eyes are bright, flickering with keen intelligence. Of course, maybe it’s because he already knows who she is:

Princess Leia Organa. Once of Alderaan. Now: one of the heroes and leaders of the Rebel Alliance.

The recorded image of the princess speaks:

*“This is Leia Organa, last princess of Alderaan, former member of the Galactic Senate, and a leader in the Alliance to Restore the Republic. I have a message for the galaxy. The grip of the Galactic Empire on our galaxy and its citizens is relinquished. The Death Star outside the forest moon of Endor is gone, and with it the Imperial leadership.”*

Here the hologram changes to a sight all too familiar to Sinjir:

The Death Star exploding in the sky above Endor.

He knows because he was there. He saw the great flash, the pulse of fire, the bulging clouds like brains knocked out of some fool’s cracked head. All the bits of it up there, still, floating like so much detritus. The image flickers. Then it’s back to Leia.

*“The tyrant Palpatine is dead. But the fight isn’t over. The war goes on even as the Empire’s power diminishes. But we are here for you. Know that wherever you are, no matter how far out into the Outer Rim you dwell, the New Republic is coming to help. Already we’ve captured dozens of Imperial capital ships and Destroyers—”* Now the image becomes three-dimensional footage of Imperials being led off a ship’s



*name of the Alliance.*” A new image: rebels being greeted as saviors and liberators by a cheering crowd of—where is that? Naboo? Could be Naboo. Back to Leia: “*Be patient. Be strong. Fight back where you can. The Imperial war machine falls apart one gear, one gun, one stormtrooper at a time. The New Republic is coming. And we want your help to finish the fight.*”

One last flickering image:

Alliance fighters with fireworks exploding in their wake.

Another sight familiar to him—he watched the victorious rebels shooting off their fireworks far above the tops of the massive Endorian trees. Those strange rat-bear creatures cheering and hooting and chirping in the distance as Sinjir hunkered down, cold and alone and cowardly, in the brush.

“It’s a new day,” the Twi’lek says, smiling big and broad with those tiny pointy teeth lined up in crooked, serrated rows.

“One conqueror replaces another,” Sinjir says, lip tugged up in a characteristic sneer. But the look on his face fails to match the feeling in his heart, much the way the drink in front of him has a smell that doesn’t jive with its taste. In his heart, he feels a swell of . . . hope? Really? Hope and happiness and new promise? How disgusting. He licks his lips and says, “Still, let’s see it again, shall we?”

The Twi’lek gives a giddy nod and goes to tap the button.

A scuff of boots behind them. Pok, the bartender, grunts in alarm.

A creaky black glove falls on Sinjir’s shoulder. Another lands on the Twi’lek’s shoulder, giving it a painful squeeze.

Sinjir smells the oiled leather, the crisp linen, the official-issue detergent. The smell of Imperial *cleanliness*.

“What have we here?” comes a brutish growl of a voice—a guttural-tongued officer that Sinjir turns to find looks rather *sloppy*. Got a gut pushing out the belly of his gray uniform, so far out that one of the buttons has gone undone. His face is unshorn. Hair a bit of a muss.

The other one next to him is considerably better kept—firm jaw

Behind them, a pair of stormtroopers.

Now, that's something. Stormtroopers. Here, on Akiva?

Akiva has always had its Imperials, yes, but never stormtroopers. Those white-armored soldiers are for war and occupation. They don't come here to drink and dance and disappear.

Something has changed. Sinjir doesn't yet know what. But curiosity scratches at the back of his head like a mole looking for grubs.

"Me and my tail-headed friend here are just watching a little propaganda," Sinjir says. "Nothing to cause anyone any alarm at all."

The Twi'lek sticks out his chin. Fear shines in his eyes, but something else, too—something Sinjir has seen in those he has tormented and tortured, those who think they won't break: *courage*.

Courage. What a foolish thing.

"Your time is *done*," the Twi'lek growls in a shaky voice. "The Empire is over. The New Republic is coming and—"

The oafish officer gives a hard, straight punch to the Twi'lek's throat—the tail-head gurgles, clutching at his windpipe. The other one, the smug one, puts a steadying hand on Sinjir's shoulder. A warning, unspoken but clear just the same: *Move and you join your friend*.

Someone barks—behind the bar, Pok grumbles and makes some mushy-mouthed warning of his own while pointing to a sign above his head. That sign, in Basic, reads: NO IMPERIALS.

It's actually that sign that has kept Sinjir here day and night for the last week. First because it means no one from the Empire will come here—which means no one will recognize him. Second, he just likes the *irony* of it.

The oaf grins at the Mon Calamari bartender. "Times are changing, squid-beard. You might want to reconsider that sign." He gives a sharp nod to the stormtroopers and the pair of them step forward, blasters raised and pointed right at Pok. "We're here to stay."

With that, the big oaf starts whaling away on the tail-head again.

The Twi'lek man bleats in pain

putting all of this behind him. No need to make trouble. No need to become a blip on anybody's radar screen. Walk off. Find another watering hole.

That's what he decides to do.

It is, quite puzzlingly, not what he actually does.

What he *does*, instead, is stand up hard and fast. And when Officer Smugface tries to push him back to his chair, Sinjir reaches back, grabs the man's hand, and pries two fingers up with a sharp motion. He goes the distance, ratcheting them back so far that they snap—

The man screams. As he should. Sinjir knows how to deliver pain.

This causes some concern among the officer's cohorts, of course. The oaf flings the tail-head to the ground and goes for his pistol. The two stormtroopers pivot on their heels, swinging their rifles around to him—

Sinjir's drunk. Or, drunk-*ish*. That should be a problem but to his surprise, it really isn't—it's as if the warm wash of strange liqueur has worn away any second thoughts, any pesky *critical analysis* that might give him pause, and instead he moves swiftly and without hesitation. (If a bit inelegantly.)

He spins behind the wailing, smug-faced officer. Lifts his arm like the lever on a Corellian slot machine, and with his other hand stabs out and plucks the officer's pistol from his holster.

Already, the oaf is firing his blaster. His own blaster (well, the smug one's blaster) spins out of his hand, sparking. *Damnit*.

Sinjir tightens his profile and turns the smug one to meet the attack—lasers sear holes in his chest and he screams before going limp. Then, with a quick plant of his foot and hard throw, he launches the slack body toward the pair of stormtroopers—neither of whom is ready for the attack.

And both of whom fall backward, crashing into tables.

The oaf cries out, lifts his pistol again—

Sinjir dissects the man's defenses. Hand under wrist. Pistol launches

The Imperial's thick body crumples like a table with its leg broken, but Sinjir won't let him fall—he holds him up by the wrist, and with his free hand strikes at vulnerable points. Nose. Eye. Windpipe. Breadbasket. Then back to the nose, where he hooks the oaf's nostrils with a pair of cruel fingers, forcing him to the ground. The man weeps and blubbers and bleeds.

The stormtroopers are not down for the count.

They scramble to stand. Blasters again up—

Someone rises up next to the trooper on the right and swings a chair upward in a hard, merciless arc. The chair gets right under the soldier's white helmet and spins it around. That trooper flails just as a bottle of liquor spirals through the air, cracking the second one in the helmet. A bottle flung from the droid arm of the Mon Cal behind the bar.

For good measure, Sinjir twists the oaf's wrist so that the pistol drops from the Imperial's grip and into his own. Then he twirls it and fires two shots. One in the center of each of their helmets.

The stormtroopers fall. This time, they won't be getting back up.

Sinjir plants himself over the oaf. He again grabs the man's nose and gives it a twist. “Wonderful thing about the nose is how it's tied to all these sensitive nerve endings behind the face. This fleshy protuberance—yours like a hog's snout, if I'm being honest—is why, right now, your head is filling with mucus and your eyes are filling with tears.”

“You rebel scum,” the oaf gargles.

“That's funny. Really, very funny.” *You idiot. You think I'm one of them when really, I'm one of you.* “I want to know what's going on.”

“What's going on is that the Empire is here and you're—”

He twists. The man screams. “Spare me the sales pitch. Details. Why are you here? With stormtroopers, no less.”

“I don't know—”

Another twist. Another scream.

fast. I . . . we came down off of the *Vigilance* and then the comms blackout and the blockade—”

Sinjir gives a look to Pok. “You know anything about comms being out? Or a blockade?”

The bartender shrugs.

Sinjir sighs, then jams a fist in the oaf’s face.

The sloppy officer’s head racks back and consciousness leaves him. Sinjir lets him drop. Then, to Pok: “Somebody’s going to want to clean this up. Ah. Good luck with that?”

And then, whistling, he traipses out the front of the cantina.

## INTERLUDE:

### CHANDRILA

A blurry image.

A sound: *whap, whap, whap.*

The blurry image shakes. It gets blurrier for a second, and then focuses the other way, lurching inelegantly toward clarity.

The image resolves. Standing there are two women. One, a human. Tall, thin, professional. Dark hair coiffed up like a wave about to break. A necklace around her neck that looks like a flock of birds chained together—it catches the light of the sun. Her smile is big, broad, practiced.

The other woman is smaller. Pantoran. Blue skin. Golden hair pulled back in a simple, practical braid. She wears a dress to match: Some might call it practical and unpretentious, others might say it is drab, dull, or even unsophisticated. Her only jewelry is a pair of silver bracelets. Her smile is also practiced, but nervous, too.

The first woman, Tracene Kane, says to the Trandoshan behind the camera: “How’s it look, Lug?”

A growl-hiss from behind the camera. “It looked bad. I hit it. Now it looks good.”

Tracene gives the other woman—Olia Choko—an apologetic shrug. “Old tech. Doesn’t always comply.”

“It’s your first broadcast,” Olia says. “It’s understandable.”

“This day is a first for both of us, I think.” Tracene laughs—it’s a laugh that sounds almost too big to be real. Maybe it’s who she is. Or maybe it, like her smile, is born of effort and orchestration. “So here’s how this is going to go. I’ll begin the interview, and I’ll do a brief intro—blah blah blah, first day of the new Galactic Senate, it’s a new dawn for the galaxy, and then right to you: Olia Choko, public relations representative for Mon Mothma and the new Senate. We’ll get right into it.”

“Great,” Olia says. She takes a deep breath. “Just great.”

“You look nervous.”

“I’m . . . a little nervous.”

“You’ll be fine. You’re pretty. You’re alien. You’ll trend well.”

“Oh!” Olia says, thrusting up a finger. “You’re going to get a shot of what’s behind us, right? Hanna City reflects the Senate’s humble new beginnings—we’re here for the people of the galaxy, all the hardworking people. And Mon Mothma is from here, so—”

Tracene puts a hand on Olia’s shoulder. “We got this.”

“Oh! But, uh. Don’t forget, too, to get a shot of the art installation in the city circle—it’s a bunch of stormtrooper helmets painted different colors, marked with different symbols like flowers and starbursts and Alliance sigils. It’s by the artist—”

Tracene gives Olia’s arm a squeeze. “I said *we got this*. We have the footage. You’re the last link in the chain. We talk to you. Then the Senate walks in. Nothing will go wrong. You good?”

Olia hesitates. The smile on her face is strained. She looks like a panicked squawk but frozen in the beam of a miner’s headlamp. But

To the camera, Tracene points. “We’re on in three, Lug. Three. Two—” She mouths the word *One*—

“This is Tracene Kane broadcasting on the first day of the Queen of the Core Network. I’m standing here with Olia Choko, public relations representative of Chancellor Mon Mothma and the new Galactic Senate here on Chandrila . . .”





The interrogator droid hovers. A small panel along its bottom slides open with a *whir* and a *click*. An extensor arm unfolds—an arm that ends in a pair of cruel-looking pincers. So precise and so sharp they look like they could pluck a man’s eye clean from his head. (A performance this droid has likely performed once upon a time.) The arm reaches down toward its target.

It grabs the ten-sided die, lifts it, drops it.

The die clatters. Face up: a 7.

The droid exclaims in a loud, digitized monotone: “AH. I AM AFFORDED THE CHANCE TO PROCURE A NEW RESOURCE. I WILL BUY A SPICE LANE. THAT CONNECTS TO MY FOUR OTHER SPICE LANES. THAT GIVES ME FIVE TOTAL, WHICH GRANTS ME ONE VICTORY POINT. I AM NOW WINNING. THE SCORE IS SIX TO FIVE ”

of the hexes contain planets. Others: stars, or asteroid belts, or nebulae.

He has never won a game of Galactic Expansion against the repurposed interrogator droid. But he's close now. It's never been this close.

"Ease off the throttle, you overconfident borgleball. One point does not make you a conqueror." He rolls the die. A 5. Not enough to earn him a new resource, but he can place a new shipping lane or smuggler route. He has to think about this. He leans back on the chair. Lets his eyes gaze over the workshop and market—all around, shelves and tables mounded with what looks to be junk. And a lot of it is. Astromech parts. Starship scrap. Disassembled blasters. Over in the corner is a WED repair droid—long defunct, wound up with blinking, twinkling lights. Hanging above his head from a set of braided cables is a speeder bike scored with laser marks.

And there, against the far wall, is an old Trade Federation battle droid, scrunched down into its folded up form and wrapped up in a ratty blanket.

It's not one of the B2s—the war droids with the cannons on the forearms and the hard chest plating.

It's not one of the droidekas, either—those roly-poly death machines, as if a jungle scorpion had a baby with a rolling thermal detonator.

It's just an old B1. A clanker.

Everything here is, or looks like, a clanker.

Temmin picks up a smuggler route tile, marked with a red dotted line, and he's about to place it when the interrogator droid suddenly turns.

As if to face somebody.

"YOU HAVE CUSTOMERS," the droid intones.

Temmin cracks his knuckles and stands up, plastering on his best salesman smile. The young teen kicks his rolling chair away and turns to face a trio of thugs. His smile wavers, but only for a second

joke,” Temmin says, then adds: “But if you have to explain it, it sorta stops being funny.” He claps his hands. “What can I do for you, gents?”

“I am a *lady*,” the Koorivar snaps, stepping forward. She adjusts her crimson cloak and lifts her chin. The spiraling horn atop her head is twisted and bent. A pale tongue flicks the air and licks craggy, scaled lips.

She has a long, serrated knife hanging at her hip.

Temmin knows who she is. Who all three of them are.

The Abednedo with the fleshy nose slits and the skin tendrils around that scowling, puckered mouth: Toomata Wree. Known usually as “Tooms.”

The Ithorian with the sleepy eyes, the threadbare coat, the cannon slung over his tree-branch-looking shoulder: Herf.

And the Koorivar: Makarial Gravin. (Though, truth be told, Temmin really thought she was a he. The Koorivar don’t make it easy to tell.)

All three work for—or, rather, belong to—Surat Nuat. They are the Sullustan’s property.

“Ma’am,” Temmin says, spreading his arms wide. “What can I do you for, today? What junkyard delights can I offer you—”

“Cut the rancor spit, you little puke,” the Abednedo says.

In the alien’s tongue, the Ithorian adds: “*You have stolen from the goodly savior of Myrra, Surat Nuat.*”

“Hey, no,” Temmin says, holding up his hands. “We’re all friends here. I would never, *ever* steal from Surat. We’re buddies. It’s all good.”

“You stole from Surat,” the Koorivar hisses. “Worse, you have offended him with grave insult by taking what is rightfully his.”

Temmin knew this day would come. Just not so soon.

A nervous feeling rises in his belly. “The last thing I would want to do is insult Surat—we all could only *wish* we were as savvy and as slick as he is. I don’t know what you think I stole from him, but—”

Makarial the Koorivar takes another assertive step forward. “Think

Temmin snaps his fingers—a nervous habit he picked up from his father. “You mean the transport that crashed out there? No, no—I mean, yeah, yes, I *definitely* scavenged what was left there. I own that. That one’s on me. But I had no idea that was Surat’s ship—”

“It had his guild sigil all over it!” Tooms, the Abednedo, seethes. The ringlets of skin hanging from his face twitch and tremble as he speaks.

“Not that I could see—the transport was attacked by the Uugteen. Such primitives, you know? They burned that thing good on the outside. Roasted it like a florakeet before plucking its feathers.”

“And yet, the insides were ripe for your plunder,” Makarial accuses.

“They couldn’t crack that nut. The Uugteen, I mean. Their crude knives couldn’t pop the latch, but I had a torch and—” He fake-laughs. “I beseech you, friends. I didn’t know who I was taking from.”

He knew. Of course he knew. And he knew one day this would catch up to him. But the potential payout . . .

If ever he hopes to unseat Surat, he has to play the game with big moves. No weak-kneed bowing and scraping, no soft touches, no hesitant plays. Everything: big, bold, smart as a whip, strong as a bull.

“You still have the weapon?” Tooms asks.

“Ahhh, heh-heh, ahhh.” Temmin clears his throat and then lies through clenched teeth: “Not so much.”

The Koorivar’s eyes go wide. With rage and indignation, if Temmin has to guess. Makarial moves fast. The knife is off the alien’s belt and, in the span of a flash of lightning, against Temmin’s throat.

Outside, the weather complies, adding its own threat: a rumbling boom of thunder. A hard rain falls against the roof of Temmin’s shop, only serving to accentuate the silence. Behind Temmin, the interrogator droid hovers near the table where the Galactic Expansion board sits.

The boy swallows. “I’ll make it up to you. I’ve got lots on offer here. Hey, look, speeder bike. Or I can scrounge up a couple of droids.”

we know your trick. This—” With her free hand, the Koorivar makes a move similar to (and maybe mocking of) Temmin’s own gesture when they got here. “—*all* of this is a front. You are no junk merchant.”

“One man’s trash is another man’s treasure—”

The knife presses harder against his exposed throat. “We care nothing for trash. We care everything for treasure.”

“So, let’s talk treasure, then.”

“Surat has a price.”

He feels something wet drip down his throat. *Blood or sweat?* He’s honestly not sure. “Everybody does. Name the price.”

Makarial smiles. A terrible sight to behold, for the Koorivar are, to Temmin’s mind, uglier than a happabore walking backward. All those lumps and scales. A nose like a fat, segmented grub. Bone spurs above the eyes. The breath doesn’t help, either—it stinks of rotting meat.

The Koorivar says with a flick of her tongue: “Your shop.”

“The shop. Like—the building?”

“And everything in it. And everything *below* it.”

Now: real panic. A cold saline rush through his blood. They know. They know where he keeps some—*most*—of his best goods.

That is not ideal.

“I have something!” he blurts. “Something big. Something . . . Surat wants. Okay? *Okay?* Just, can I show you? Please? *Please.*”

The three alien thugs give one another looks. The Ithorian, Herf, gives a noncommittal shrug. In Ithorese: “*We might as well see.*”

Makarial removes the knife from his throat. He gasps, rubs his neck—his hand comes away wet with sweat, not with blood. He claps his hands. “It’s right over there. See that ratty blanket? It’s uhh. It’s under there.”

Makarial nods to Herf. The Ithorian unslings the cannon—it’s a custom mod job, that gun, based off a DLT body but jacked up for bigger firepower. The barrel is long—so long it’s probably as tall as

The stoop-necked Ithorian blinks his hammerhead eyes, then uses the barrel of the gun to lift up the blanket. Thus exposing the first-generation battle droid: the B1.

It stands up. Its bones rattle as it does. Literal bones—the bones of beasts, fish, birds. Bound to its metal limbs with twine and wire. Those aren't the only modifications to the droid's appearance, either. Half its head is missing: replaced with a telescoping red eye. The front of its nose has been sharpened and curved—less the bill of some plucky waterfowl, more the beak of a bird of prey. All of it: painted black and red.

Meant to strike a note of fear.

The alien thugs all laugh. The Abednedo laughs so hard he stoops over, slapping a knee, little green mushroom ears twitching with delight.

“A battle droid?” Makarial asks. More laughter. “You wanted to show us . . . a battle droid? The most incompetent droid soldier in the history of both the Republic and the Empire. A mechanical comedy of errors.” The way the alien enunciates that last bit: *a meh-CAN-ee-kall CO-mee-dee of err-ORs*. “And you believe that Surat Nuat wants a meager, worthless B1 droid?”

“I call him Mister Bones,” Temmin says.

Upon saying the droid's name, its eye glows a sinister red.

“MISTER BONES IS ONLINE,” the droid says: Its voice is a grinding distortion interrupted by bursts of static. Words speed up and then slow down again, mangled by what seems a faulty vocoder. “HELLO, EVERYONE.”

The Abednedo shakes his head. “An idiotic name for an idiotic droid.”

“I think you've insulted him,” Temmin says.

The laughing stops. For just a moment, as they try to figure out what that even means, or what game Temmin is even playing.

Their hesitation is not wise.

Mister Bones cackles—a scratchy, warped laugh from his speakers—as his one hand swings free on a hinge. From the hole springs a spark

times already—and the cannon is whittled down, three smoldering bits clattering to the floor.

The Abednedo draws a blaster—

Bones tackles Herf, and slams him straight into Tooms. The Abednedo flails and falls, with the Ithorian landing on top of him, and Bones on top of him. Temmin's B1 bodyguard begins pounding both fists down, punching the Ithor's oddly shaped head hard enough that each hit ratchets it back into Tooms's noseless face. *Whap! Whap! Whap!*

Mister Bones gabbles and laughs.

Makarial's maw stretches wide, hissing a gassy exhortation of distress and rage. The Koorivar reaches behind, under her cloak, and draws a blaster—pointing it right at Temmin's head. Temmin, who is now frozen, reaching for his own blaster—stuck in a leather holster bolted to the underside of a nearby table.

“Do not pick that up,” Makarial whispers.

Temmin calculates his odds.

They're not good.

He withdraws his hand. Smiles. Nods. “Sure, sure.”

“Tell your *droid* to back off.”

“Now, hold on—”

“*Tell him.*”

Temmin grins. “Which droid are we talking about here?”

Makarial's pale, ghostly eyes focus, then narrow in bewilderment—just as the interrogator droid floats up behind her, a syringe fixed to the end of its second extensor arm. Temmin chuckles.

The floating droid stabs down with the needle. A needle filled with a toxic narcotic—locally sourced, locally brewed, and with enough stopping power to put a Gamorrean to sleep for the better part of a week.

The needle snaps off, and clicks as it hits the ground. Never actually  
*delivering its toxic payload*

Temmin runs. He leaps up over a table, then to another table, then across a trio of metal stools—blaster fire sizzles in the air behind him, knocking junk off shelves. An oil can hops off the corner of a table ahead of him. Temmin yells as he bolts for the door—

There. Ahead. The door is open. Someone is standing there.

Someone new. Long dark cloak.

Someone with a blaster all his own.

The new figure raises the blaster. Temmin drops his weight, letting his leg skid out from under him—laserfire trades above his head, and somewhere behind him Makarial yelps in pain. There comes a crash.

Temmin leaps to his feet, presses himself flat against the textured wall of his junk shop. Makarial's down, writhing and howling. Mister Bones has lifted his head like a curious, startled hound. The new visitor regards the situation, then peels back his hood.

It's not a him at all. It's a *her*.

Temmin's eyes go wide.

*"Mom?"*



Purchase a copy of  
**STAR WARS: AFTERMATH** by Chuck Wendig  
On-Sale NOW!

