



POV-Theater

StarWars FanFiction

POV: Freedom's End

By Daniel "Drake" Sutherland

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[Deep within the Northern Mountain Ranges of the planet Hekram III, on the Outer Rim]

"Breakfast! Move!"

The shout was loud and harsh, and it seemed to echo through the metallic corridors with a terrible finality. *You are caged and always will be*, it proclaimed. Then followed the standard morning cacophony of durasteel truncheons being beaten against the corridor bulkheads. *Bulkheads* was still the word the prisoner's mind conjured up when he thought of walls. A year and a half in an Imperial prison camp hadn't managed to beat his habits out of him yet.

He waited until the force field protecting his cell shut off, then stepped out into the corridor, where several other prisoners were already standing in line. The field reactivated as soon as he had passed through, and he joined the shuffling queue as it headed through the grey corridors towards the mess hall.

The prisoner looked closely at all of the shining grey bulkheads as the column of condemned performed their daily morning ritual - the shuffle to breakfast. They were all the same, and there were many, so many cells that he seemed to lose count. Not that he had too much faith, any more, in his ability to count. Intellectual stimulation was hardly the top priority on the Imperials' list of prisoner activities - in fact, it was actively, and often violently, discouraged. *No, they like to break you, keep you under control*, the prisoner thought reflectively. *If you can't*

think, then they can do your thinking for you. If you can't think, or you don't think, then you're not dangerous. At that, a gleam forced its way into his piercing blue eyes. Well, I'm still dangerous, Imps. Just you wait and see.

The prisoner looked down at himself as he spoke. The grey prison coveralls were drab, worn, and reasonably uncomfortable. Yet underneath them, his body was relatively healthy. For his first six months here, he remembered, he'd been regularly beaten, even after all the initial "debriefs" - it seemed that some notion of the Empire's current political status as a faction, rather than the dominant galactic Order, had filtered out to the Rim. They actually bothered to call interrogations "debriefs" in the pathetic pretence of civility. But everyone here knew better. And the term "debrief" seemed to be the only thing that had filtered out this far, the prisoner thought grimly. *They still know how to run an old-style Imperial prison camp, all right.*

Their morning march finished, the prisoners sat down at the long benches where they ate. Meal times were always savoured; always enjoyed, if that were possible in an environment such as this. They were the only time of the day, apart from night - but by then everyone was too tired to do anything but sleep - when the prisoners did not work. The food was barely edible, but at least while at the sterile, barren meal tables, the prisoners' time was their own. As long as they didn't talk too loudly or get up, then they were left alone. Yes, meal times were a welcome time of the day. And they certainly beat digging minerals out of rock for the Empire.

The thought was almost enough to make the prisoner smile, but not quite. Nothing was any more. With that dismal thought, he picked up a hunk of the dry, greyish bread, and set to his breakfast, mentally steeling himself for the new day.

[Pilot's Quarters, aboard the New Republic Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*, on patrol in the Outer Rim]

Second Lieutenant Daniel "Drake" Sutherland frowned at his image in the mirror and pulled his bow tie reflexively. It seemed an anachronistic decoration, he thought, but looked no less impressive for all that. Still, wearing this uniform, no matter how stylish it looked, always made him uncomfortable, for a while at least. Finally, satisfied with his appearance, he checked his shoulder boards, with their twin gold stripes, and brushed off any imaginary lint. Satisfied, he left his cabin and knocked on his neighbour's. A muffled "come" was all that he could make out. With a shrug, he pushed the button and the door slid open to admit him.

Second Lieutenant Michael "Raiven" Rovardi stood in front of his mirror, in a pose almost exactly imitating his wingmate's, although his bow tie hung around his neck - a neck, Drake noticed almost immediately, that was red and rapidly turning crimson.

"Now, calm down, Mike," he said with a grin. "Just let your Uncle Dan fix it for you. I know you can't-

"Can't? I could strangle someone with this damn thing," Raiven growled dangerously. "Why, a condescending wingmate, for instance."

"Shut up and hold still," the Arrebnacian retorted, taking Raiven's tie in both hands and proceeding to tie it up.

"I don't know why we have these damn things anyway," the former Imperial continued, his face set in a dark scowl.

"Stop complaining," his wingmate admonished him. "It's not like we have them often. The last one was - what? When the *Lair* was commissioned?"

That earned Drake an affirming grunt.

"You see? What was that now, six months ago?"

"About that," Raiven conceded.

"Just think of it as an excuse to drink beer out of a glass without being thought of as an aristocratic snob," Drake offered cheerfully. Raiven grinned.

"That I can live with," he said with a wicked gleam in his eye. "Now, how do I look?" Drake finished tying, brushed Raiven's uniform over briefly, and stood back to appraise him.

"You look just great, dear," he said with a straight face. Raiven winked at him.

"Thanks, darling. Shall we?" At a nod, the two young Wolfshead Squadron pilots stepped out, heading for the wardroom on board the *Wolf's Lair*.

[Wardroom, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

Drake and Raiven entered the wardroom on board the *Wolf's Lair* together, but immediately branched off towards separate sections of the room. The room itself was huge, rivalling its Mon Calamarian Crusier counterparts in size. The *Wolf's Lair* was, after all, the New Republic Navy's newest ship, and arguably the most comfortable. The two pilots had only set foot in this room once before, although they were fully entitled to at any time. The pilots of the squadron were, in fact, all entitled to the privilege, although none chose to exercise it, preferring instead to eat down in what was called "Pilot Country" by the crew, or, as only the pilots and a few others knew, the dim, concealed compartment known simply as "The Bomb Shelter". That notwithstanding, tonight their presence had been ordered by the ship's Executive Officer, Commander Nil Wumb, the President of the Wardroom on board, and that couldn't be ignored, even by the Wolfshead pilots, whose stance on discipline was thought by the ship's captain (and others) to be shaky, at best.

Commander Wumb, the Sullustan, in co-ordination with the captain, had deliberately spread the pilots out amongst the other officers to prevent what the captain called "Fighterjock Syndrome" occurring. The captain, Colonel Talina Gen'yaa, was as much a political operator as a military commander, but in neither capacity did she approve of the pilots' tendency to stick close to each other in their tight clique. And already, the Intelligence Officer on board, Lieutenant Commander Mesch Dey'jeaa could see, the pilots were unhappy about it. *It'll be good for them to learn to socialise with normal people*, Dey'jeaa thought smugly. He watched as another group of pilots walked in, all looking as if their mess uniforms had just been issued and unwrapped. *Wonder how many times they use these uniforms*, the Bothan wondered idly. Then the XO entered, along with the captain and the navigator. The XO took the centre seat at the head table, and the captain sat next to him; the navigator sat at the foot of the centre table. The three sat, and the conversation died as the assembled company sat with them.

Commander Wumb, in his capacity as President of the Mess, banged a small gavel against the table.

Drake rolled his eyes across the room at Raiven, who returned the gesture in like manner. Their looks both said the same thing.

This is going to be a long night.

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[Imperial prison camp, Hekram III]

The prisoner groaned as the announcement he had been dreading for the last twenty minutes was made:

"Breakfast's over! Get to work!"

And with that, it was time to join the next shuffling march, the one that led through the sterile, gleaming corridors to the open, dim, damp and cold caverns. Despite the warm coveralls, the prisoner shivered as he stepped through the airlock and into the caves. *No matter how long you stay here, you never get used to these caves.*

The grey-clad line split up and its elements began to slowly walk to their own respective workplaces. The prisoner made sure his walk was slow, his back stooped, his head down. Any sign of defiance or arrogance, and they would try and break you. Even a lift of the head could signify it, to some of them at least. So he kept his head down and pretended he was as tired and desperate and hopeless as everyone else.

His body was past its prime, it was true, and he was on the wrong side of middle age, but he was careful, very careful, with his body - not to injure himself at work, not to get in fights, as some of the other more aggressive prisoners sometimes did. No, his body was his only possession - that, and his mind - and so far the Empire had failed to break either, although they had come dangerously close to doing the former when he first got here. But his body, and his mind combined, they were his only weapons to use against the Empire. And one day, he told himself, one day, he'd get to use them.

[Wolfeye Ready Room, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

Flight Officers Jesse "Firestorm" Garrison and Lee "Hawk" Birdine sat easily in their chairs, their orange flight suits hanging open at their chests, and two steaming mugs of caff set on a table between them. A holo vid was playing in front of them, although the two had both seen it several times and both were only half watching it, occasionally talking to break the boredom.

"Ain't Ready Five fun," Firestorm commented dryly.

"Absolutely," Hawk agreed. "But at least we can sit comfortably down here while the others have to sweat it in mess uniforms under the colonel's watchful eye up in the wardroom." This earned him a grin from Firestorm.

"Well, that's true," one of Wolfshead's newest pilots agreed. "And this caff is pretty damned good."

"Spare a thought for Granite, dude," Hawk continued with a smile of his own. "He's got to sit there all by himself." Firestorm winced.

"No doubt he enjoys that," he said, his face locked in a grimace. "It's the only time he can play his bagpipes..."

"You think?" Hawk asked. "He-" His voice was cut off by a loud tone which sounded from the wall intercom unit. The two pilots traded looks. This was certainly unexpected - normally nothing happened on Ready Five unless they were involved in an operation. But the *Wolf's Lair's* current mission was a simple patrol. Hawk went over to the comm and opened the channel.

"This is Wolfeye Ready Room, go ahead."

"Wolfshead, this is the Officer of the Watch, Lieutenant Freese," a male voice filtered through.

"Flight Officer Birdine, sir, with Flight Officer Garrison on Ready Five," the Wolfshead pilot reported.

"Very good. Sensors show a small convoy entering the system," Lieutenant Freese informed them. "You two and the Ready Five Bravo are to go out and take a look. Just a routine inspection. Look and leave."

"Copy that, Bridge," Hawk said, and made a face at Firestorm. *Well, at least it beats sitting here.*

"Launch immediately, Wolfshead. Bridge out."

The two pilots began to fasten their flight suits and grab their helmets. Although Wolfshead Squadron had recently been reorganised - yet again, some of the pilots would say, with rolled eyes - and no longer had dedicated groups that flew different fighters, the original Wolfeye, Wolfgang and Wolfclaw Ready Rooms had still survived. In this way, pilots flying A-wings all prepped in the same room, as they did for the other fighter classes in use. Certainly, Raiven and Drake had virtually taken over the Wolfgang Ready Room, turning it into a kind of private den which they decorated in their own (somewhat eccentric, it was widely believed) tastes. They had taken Spook, one of the newest members of the squadron, under their shared proverbial wing, and were doing their best, as Raiven put it, "To educate, entertain, awe and corrupt the lad". In any case, all of the Ready Rooms had taken on their own distinct flavours over the preceding few months, depending on the pilots who regularly flew from them. Right now, though, the posters decorating the bulkheads in the Wolfeye Ready Room were of much less interest to the Ready Five pilots than the situation at hand.

"Could be worse," Hawk opined.

"Yeah, we could be flying escort for a garbage scow," Firestorm suggested, his voice heavy with irony.

[Approaching convoy, Jalus system]

"Take it easy, boys," Hawk warned as the range to the nearest freighter clicked down through five clicks on his CMD. "They may look like any other convoy, but that doesn't mean anything."

"Aye, lad," Granite said, his heavily accented voice losing none of its sarcasm over the comm, "and they'll probably have an Imperial lurking in every cargo hold, waiting to blast us with makeshift missile launchers." Hawk didn't bother to reply. He agreed with Granite's sentiments, but as the patrol leader he had to act responsibly - which was something that he wasn't used to, he admitted to himself. Usually one of the flight leaders, or one of the second lieutenants at least, would lead a patrol like this - but today it was one of the more junior members of the squadron in the hot seat. In fact, all three of the pilots on patrol were relatively junior in rank - due, no doubt,

to the Mess Dinner currently being held in the *Wolf's Lair* wardroom. On such occasions, the most junior officers could be expected to get extra duties. It was both a blessing and a curse, and a fact not lost on any of the three pilots who flew the Ready Five patrol.

As the range to the lead convoy ship, a bulk freighter, clicked down to three and a half clicks, Hawk keyed his mike.

"Freighter *Bountiful*, this is Wolfshead Fourteen of the New Republic," he intoned formally, carefully watching the approaching bulk of the freighter lest he slam into it by accident while carefully reciting his communications. "You are passing through New Republic space and as such we are going to inspect you. Please maintain your present speed and course."

Having made his transmission, Hawk tensed in his seat and let his thumb rest lightly on the trigger set into his stick. *If these guys aren't who they pretend to be, he thought grimly, then we're gonna find out now.*

"Wolfshead Fourteen, this is *Bountiful*," a metallic, but still clearly male human, voice came back at length. "We understand, and will maintain present course and speed. However we do have a schedule to maintain, so if you could be quick that would be appreciated." Hawk relaxed. *Hell, he thought, they're courteous. Unusual for merchants out in the Rim.*

"We'll do our best, *Bountiful*," he answered, then switched back to the squadron frequency.

"Thirteen, you ID the freighters, Fifteen and I will handle the transports. Piece of cake, we'll be done in five minutes."

"Copy, Fourteen," Firestorm acknowledged.

"As ordered, Fourteen," Granite's brogue came over the comm. The three fighters broke formation, each peeling off and heading for a different part of the convoy formation, which consisted of four freighters and eight transports.

Granite cruised over the lead freighter, the *Bountiful*, and grunted with satisfaction as he read nothing threatening on his CMD. The freighter was carrying food, clothes...standard cargo for a merchantman. Without another thought he targeted the next freighter and headed for it.

Satisfied, he hit the switch to cycle through to the next target - or thought he did. Having intently been watching the formation through his cockpit window, he'd hit the reverse cycle switch by mistake. He frowned in irritation as his display again showed the *Bountiful*. He was about to cycle forward again when the totally unbelievable happened.

The target went red in his display and on his radar.

He was about to raise the alarm when it went blue again. Puzzled, the Caladanian keyed his comm.

"Fourteen, I seem to have a sensors glitch here, laddie," he noted. "I'm just running a diagnostic now." Two clicks acknowledged his report as he set the sensors self diagnostic in motion.

Again, the target flashed red, then blue again. Granite's brow furrowed further as he keyed his comm to talk to the *Bountiful*, then thought better of it. Bringing his B-wing around in a wide arc instead, he angled in for a closer look at the cargo ship. It looked like an ordinary bulk freighter, sure enough, but-

Wait. Those odd bulges along the midsection...and were they?

Yes! Doors!

"Fourteen, I don't think that these lads are all they pretend to be," Granite offered, instinctively switching to his proton torpedoes and selecting dual fire. "They have-" He stopped as his B-wing completed its self-diagnostic and pronounced itself fully operational.

"Fourteen, Thirteen," he began. "They must be-"

"Imps!" Firestorm finished the sentence for him as around them, eight TIE fighters suddenly appeared from

nowhere.

"Eyeballs! I make it eight of them, must've launched from the freighters," Hawk said, quite unnecessarily. "Engage at-"

"And the transports, lad!" Granite interrupted him. "They're powering up and coming after us as well!"

"We'll take the eyeballs, then," Hawk decided. "You take care of the transports. Get it done as quickly as possible, because we're gonna disable those freighters before they get to the nav buoy."

"As ordered, Lead."

"Copy, Lead."

Unwittingly, the two other pilots had slipped into calling Hawk "Lead" - no doubt due to their "routine patrol" suddenly turning into a combat situation. In combat, taking orders from a "Lead" just felt better.

Granite thumbed the trigger and watched with satisfaction as two proton torpedoes jetted out on streaks of blue flame, almost instantly colliding with the transport in front of him and destroying it. He dove through the resulting fireball with a whoop, and destroyed another transport fifteen seconds later.

"Like shooting ducks in a barrel," he observed gleefully.

"The eyeballs aren't much better," Firestorm added, as he finished destroying his third.

"Somehow I don't think they actually imagined that their little deception would be discovered," Hawk ventured dryly. "But we'll discuss it later. For now, just get the threats neutralised so we can put the freighters to sleep."

He juked violently to avoid the two TIEs on his tail, then rapidly cut his throttle and performed a lightning fast split S, putting him on a direct course for his erstwhile pursuers. The laser cannons of Hawk's A-wing blazed, and one of the TIEs disintegrated as the other broke off hurriedly, the A-wing in hot pursuit.

Firestorm sideslipped left and right, trying to shake the two TIEs off his tail, but they seemed stuck there. He pulled the stick tight into his stomach, letting the A-wing pull up vertical, then almost immediately pulled his throttle down to zero. The two fairly inexperienced TIE pilots shot straight past him, and Firestorm's A-wing was already picking up speed as it acquired one of them. The young Wolfshead pilot fired three times, the third set of laser blasts catching the twin ion engine that gave the fighter its name, and turning it into a fiercely burning fireball that Firestorm neatly slipped around, pulling his A-wing into a tight turn to follow the obliterated TIE's wingmate.

"There goes another of them," Granite's voice came over the comm, as Firestorm flicked his weapons selector over to concussion missiles. The TIE seemed to dance around on his CMD, which he'd now configured for targeting mode. The green blip slid around the display as the pilot kept delicately trimming the stick, trying to get it dead centre. Finally, it lingered in the crosshairs for a moment, and Firestorm's onboard computer rewarded him with the tone that indicated it was acquiring a missile lock. He stayed on the TIE's tail, following it through a simple corkscrew maneuver, then caressed the trigger as soon as the blaring missile lock tone sounded. With a dull roar the missile leapt from the A-wing in a streak of orange flame, following the TIE into its clumsy turn and taking its portside solar panel off. The missile exploded, scattering debris, and the remains of the TIE fighter spun wildly, finally careening into one of the freighters and exploding on impact. Firestorm allowed himself a grin.

"Scratch two," he informed his squadmates.

"All the transports and TIE escorts are down," Hawk noted as his scope cleared to show just four red blips, although the freighters were surely heading at maximum speed for the nav buoy to try and jump to safety.

"Okay, boys," Hawk ordered quickly, "let's put these freighters to sleep. I don't want a single one to make it to that buoy."

"Copy, Lead," Firestorm acknowledged.

"You got it, Lead," Granite said, his voice grimly determined.

The three fighters strafed the lead ship, the *Bountiful*, and Granite put two torpedoes into her to help soften up the shields. Under the combined guns of the three fighters, her shields quickly dropped, and Granite's ion cannon soon reduced her to a floating brick. Two minutes later, all four sat dead in space, and Hawk finally relaxed a little, and switched frequencies on his comm.

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

"Roger, Wolfshead Fourteen, this is *Lair*," the duty communications officer's voice came back.

"We have positively identified and disabled four Imperial freighters," Hawk reported next. "They were carrying TIE escorts and were accompanied by armed transports, but all escort craft have been destroyed." There was what might have been a stunned silence for a few seconds, then came the response.

"Copy, Fourteen. Maintain covering patrol and stand by to protect boarding transports."

"As ordered, *Lair*. Fourteen out."



[Wardroom, STRKCARR *Wolf's Lair*]

Drake laughed and took another sip of his wine. At first, he hadn't thought that it tasted very good, although he was slowly starting to wonder why he'd thought that. The formal part of the dinner had ended some time before, and now came the fun part - the part known only as "fines". Here members of the mess were called upon to explain their actions by their fellows. If the accused was found guilty, then he or she was "fined" - usually a round of drinks or something similar - but if they were found innocent, or if their defence was an especially good or amusing one, then the accuser would be fined. It was all good, lighthearted, fun, although Drake was somewhat surprised that few of the pilots had as yet been called to account. To his surprise, in fact, the navigator of the *Wolf's Lair*, Lieutenant Vaiweehanen, had had to explain himself following an incident during the ship's last shore leave. The normally serious Twi'lek had come as close to blushing as Drake had ever seen him, and the young pilot chuckled again at the memory. Commander Wumb banged his gavel.

"Lieutenant Hanniuska," he said, with a nod at the engineer responsible for Wolfshead Squadron's fighters. The beautiful young woman stood, shaking her shoulders and evidently uncomfortable wearing the mess uniform - *No doubt she'd rather be in grimy coveralls tinkering with a fighter, poor girl*, thought Drake with a grin - but she had a wicked gleam in her eye. The young man caught this, and his heartrate began to accelerate.

"Thank you, sir," Lieutenant Mar Hanniuska said with a nod and a smile. "I'd like to call upon Lieutenant Sutherland to stand and explain why he was-" She stopped speaking as one of the stewards had entered the room and was whispering in the Executive Officer's ear. The Sullustan looked up with his big black eyes, then turned and whispered to the captain, who sat next to him. She nodded, and he banged his gavel.

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant, but it will have to wait until another time. For now," he declared as he stood, "I'm calling an early comfort break and adjournment. The captain and I are needed on the bridge." Everyone present stood in silence as Commander Wumb and Colonel Gen'yaa strode out, and then conversation began in earnest. There was some speculation as to what was so urgent as to pull the XO and CO away, but not too much. Almost everyone had had at least a few drinks over the course of the evening, no battle stations had been called, and no-one was prepared to let work get in the way of a good time, for now at least. As the assembled group began to move into the ante-room adjoining the dining room, which was where the bar was, Drake flashed Hanniuska a winning smile.

"Better luck next time, Mar," he said, when they were close enough to talk. She returned his smile, baring her teeth.

"You'd better believe it, boy," she retorted. "I'll have you publicly embarrassed for that one yet."

"Not a chance," the Wolfshead pilot answered her cockily. "You saw what happened when you just tried to. Next time will be no different." Hanniuska regarded him with a raised eyebrow.

"Think so, huh? We'll see." And with that she merged into the crowd, leaving Drake to smile smugly to himself.

"What was all that about?" Raiven asked, materialising at his elbow.

"Hmm? Oh, nothing," his wingmate answered, clapping his friend on the shoulder. "Nothing you need to worry your pretty little head about, anyway." This brought a laugh from Raiven.

"You're calling me 'pretty'? Whatever it is, it *has* got you worried, hasn't it? Don't worry, I'll get it out of you eventually." At that it was Drake's turn to laugh.

"No hope of that," he replied. "It's a secret between myself and Lieutenant Hanniuska, and she won't breathe a word of it to anybody, unless it's in a public forum, where she can get more mileage out of it. So don't bother trying to get the juice out of her on the sly. And," he added as an afterthought, "don't try and get Arpin to do anything, either. Otherwise you might find one more trash receptacle on board the *Lair*." Drake grinned mischievously, baring his teeth.

"Or one more bar mat at the Bomb Shelter," Raiven countered, with a wicked smile of his own. The two pilots laughed together and headed for the line at the bar.

[Imperial Detention Facility ORS1178, Hekram III]

Thunk! Thunk!

The sound of rock chunks hitting the floor resolved itself into a dreary continuous monotone, a regular pattern that defined the existence of the prisoners as they used low powered laser cutters to extract minerals for the Empire. The mineral crystals were sharp, and easily and often lacerated their chilled hands, but the pain from that was much less than what the Imperials would do if they thought you wouldn't work, the prisoner thought grimly. He wiped the blood from his hands on his coveralls and pretended to work while he closely watched one of the other prisoners on the other side of the particular cavern they were working in. The other man was working well enough, but his attention seemed elsewhere, and it was obvious to the prisoner that he was distracted. The others working around the man didn't seem to notice, but the prisoner had once stayed alive only through being observant, and old habits died hard, or not at all, even in Imperial prison facilities.

It was five minutes later when it happened.

From somewhere the other man produced what looked like a rope with some sort of crude grapnel attached. Silently, he swung the grapnel and threw it straight up, where it caught on a rock overhang near the ceiling. The prisoner could not make out, from where he was, what lay beyond the overhang, but he was pretty sure that it had to be a tunnel, or some other way out. The escapee obviously had this planned - making that rope and grapnel would have been a time consuming task, not something dreamed up and executed in two days, so he must've had a pre-planned escape route. The prisoner's eyes widened fractionally.

And I'll be damned. Looks like he's getting away with it, too. Good luck, son, he thought, as he bent his head back down to his own work. *No way I'm going to give him away by looking at him now and having one of the Imps notice me.*

The prisoner winced as he heard a sudden crack - the loud collision of rock on rock.

The escapee looked down, knowing that the slip he'd just made with his foot would now be a fatal one. His need for secrecy gone, he tried to scramble up the crudely fashioned rope as fast as his hands and feet would carry him.

There was a loud shout as brown-clad Imperials began running from all directions. The prisoners below the escapee had all dropped to their knees, cowering in terror, as the Imperials opened fire.

The escapee's body quickly fell from the rope and landed with a sickening thud, but its sound was drowned out by a deep rumble which gained in intensity as an entire section of the cavern wall, including the overhang, crumbled away, burying the escapee, the prisoners surrounding him, and a couple of Imperials who had rushed forward after he was shot.

Many of the prisoners began to scream, but the head Imperial stopped this with a single blaster shot - aimed carefully at the ground in front of him, the prisoner noticed.

The lead Imperial motioned to the two men standing beside him, and they moved forward to clear some of the rubble. The officer looked around at the surrounding prisoners.

"Help!" he barked harshly, an impatient flick of his blaster emphasising the consequences of tardiness or disobedience.

The prisoners rushed forward, for once eager in their assigned task. Their friends - the only friends they had - were trapped under the fallen rock, and if they could possibly help save them without being killed themselves, then they would.

Before long, the bodies were exposed. The escapee had been killed outright by the blasterfire in any case, the Imperials waved the prisoners back menacingly as they checked the other fallen bodies.

"Our men are still alive, sir," one reported.

"All of the prisoners except two are alive as well," the other grated to his superior. The latter regarded the scene for a moment.

"Very well. Our men will be taken to the infirmary. The prisoners were aiding an escape attempt and will be dealt with accordingly." The two Imperials nodded and carried their comrades' bodies away a short distance as others arrived to take them away to the infirmary. Then they rejoined their officer, and the three raised their blasters.

The prisoner looked on from his position behind the Imperials in horror. *Surely not even the Imps would do this*, he thought incredulously. But it seemed to be true. Unconsciously, he clenched his fists, although his conscious mind told him that to do anything would mean an instant, and violent, death.

One of the other prisoners was not so clear headed. With a blood curdling cry, he sprinted forward, intent on tackling the Imperial officer and forcing his nose back through his skull.

He was halfway across the open space when the officer turned and calmly fired, dropping the man instantly to the floor. Then he nodded, and the three opened fire with their weapons, ruby red bolts bringing a quick death to the prone forms on the cold cavern floor.

[Bridge, New Republic Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

Colonel Gen'yaa stepped on to the bridge, Commander Wumb half a step behind. Both were still in their mess uniforms, the Officer of the Watch noted, and the colonel, at least, did not look happy that her Mess Dinner had been interrupted.

"Captain on the bridge," the OOW called, and the bridge personnel stopped their tasks momentarily until the expected, brusque, "Carry on." As the crew resumed their duties, the captain of the *Wolf's Lair* approached the officer currently responsible for the ship.

"Alright, Lieutenant," she said with a perfunctory nod. "What's going on?"

"Ma'am, a half hour or so ago we detected an unknown convoy jumping into the system," Lieutenant Freese reported. "I immediately launched the Ready Five fighters. They inspected the convoy without incident, but one pilot noticed that his computer seemed to have a glitch - the IFF reading on the lead freighter kept changing from Imperial to neutral and back again. That led him to a closer visual inspection as he ran diagnostics, and he noticed odd bulges in the midsection, as well as what looked like doors.

"At this point his diagnostic finished and came back clean - it was then that eight TIE fighters launched from the freighters, and the eight transports escorting them also broke and attacked. Our fighters destroyed them and then disabled the freighters. I've already launched boarding transports to inspect and seize the cargoes aboard, and the fighters are flying cover." Colonel Gen'yaa digested this with good grace and nodded.

"Very well. Inform Lieutenant Colonel Stauber that I want six fighters on Ready Alert status right now. Two of each class. Inform me immediately of any developments, I'll be in my quarters for the next fifteen minutes. And I want to know the moment those transports get back on board," she ordered. "Make sure there's a security detail down in the hangar when they land, too, ready to take any prisoners to the brig."

"Yes, ma'am," the young lieutenant acknowledged. The colonel and her XO nodded, and both turned and left the

bridge as Lieutenant Freese began issuing orders.

[Wardroom bar, *Wolf's Lair*]

Lieutenant Colonel Michael "Vyper" Stauber, the commanding officer of Wolfshead Squadron, straightened as he terminated the intercom connection.

"I hate to break up the party before it gets totally out of hand," he called, raising a hand for silence, "but some of us have work to do."

The conversation died down instantly and Vyper continued.

"A bit of a situation has arisen, although it shouldn't be anything dangerous," he said. "The captain has ordered that we put six fighters on Ready Alert status yesterday, as the Ready Five craft are already out there. So, Raiven, Spook, Arachnoid, Parody, Groz, and Moose, you're all the lucky six volunteers. Go and get suited up and on the flight deck as soon as you can manage it." The six pilots began to file out in silence, but not before Drake had given Raiven and Spook a nudge.

"Don't worry, lads, I'll have a cold one for each of you," he said with a smug voice. Both shot him frosty looks in return as they walked out. The young man shook his head as the conversation resumed and glanced at the woman next to him.

"Strange dinner, wouldn't you say, Fox?"

"Yep," Foxfire agreed with a sip of her drink. "Not the strangest I've seen, though. When you've been in the service for a while, you see, you see a lot of strange things happen. Like the time back in Preying Mantis Squadron when we..."

Drake's groan could be almost be heard from the bridge, as could Foxfire's laughter.

IV

[Commanding Officer's office, Imperial Detention Facility ORS1178]

Lieutenant Colonel Trell of the Imperial Army didn't look up from his desk as the door chimed.

"Enter," he called, continuing with his work. He could hear the precise clicks as polished boots hit the floor, and then the silence as his visitor waited for him to look up and acknowledge him. This the lieutenant colonel eventually did, glancing up and nodding. His visitor braced to attention.

"Captain Targ reporting as ordered, sir," the young man said stiffly, with a crisp salute. The colonel braced in his chair and returned the salute, then nodded again.

"At ease, Captain, then let's have your report." The junior officer obediently stood at ease, hands clasped behind his back, and began his report.

"Sir, I was on duty at post 38 Alpha this morning when I heard the sound of a large piece of rock falling. I rushed to investigate and found that a prisoner was climbing a rope which seemed to be fashioned from torn sheets, with a crude but effective grapnel hook at one end. The hook had been made by bending an eating utensil, a knife, sharpening one end and putting a hole in the other. The hook was fastened to an overhang near the ceiling in the cavern, and the prisoner was nearly to the top of the rope when I arrived. I immediately opened fire with two of the men, killing the would-be escapee - prisoner 5831 - outright, but also causing a rockslide. A significant portion of the cave wall crumbled, burying several prisoners and two of my men who had rushed forward to investigate. The men, assisted by the prisoners, cleared the rubble. Prisoner 5831 and another, 5620, were both dead, but everyone else caught under the landslide was alive. I had our men evacuated and taken to the infirmary, and I then disposed of the other prisoners."

Lieutenant Colonel Trell's face hardened.

"Why?"

If Captain Targ felt any emotion at all when asked this question, then he didn't show it. He stared straight ahead as he spoke.

"Sir, those prisoners were obviously aiding 5831 in his escape attempt. They were all clustered around him when it occurred. None of them raised the alarm. And they could not have failed to notice the equipment he was carrying to facilitate his pathetic attempt."

"An attempt that nearly succeeded, if he was nearly at the top of the rope before anyone heard him," Trell's voice broke in harshly. Targ swallowed slowly, and he controlled himself, but anger caused the corners of his eyes to bunch up, Trell saw.

"Yes, sir."

The lieutenant colonel nodded.

"So you shot them, as prisoners aiding another to escape." Again, the slight twitch that betrayed the junior officer's anger.

"That is correct, sir."

His commanding officer took a deep breath, then let it out slowly.

"Very well, Captain. File your incident report and return to your duties. How are the men in the infirmary?" The captain seemed to relax.

"I've just come from there, sir. Both are resting comfortably - at least as comfortable as is possible in a bacta tank - and are expected to make a full recovery."

"Very good, Captain. Dismissed."

"Sir." Captain Targ saluted crisply, then marched out of his CO's office. As the door slid shut behind him, Lieutenant Colonel Trell let out a noisy sigh. He did not particularly like Targ, especially not his bloodthirsty nature, but he could not afford to second guess his own officers without hard evidence. What Targ had said was all true, according to other troops he had interviewed, and the tunnel that the prisoner 5831 had been trying to reach had been found and blocked up. Second guessing one's own officers was never a good thing, Trell reflected, although he was perfectly prepared to do so if he thought that they were in the wrong. But in this case he had no real reason to believe that it was so, and besides, undermining his subordinates' authority in a place like this was doubly dangerous. He would not do so without proper proof.

And anyway, he thought grimly to himself, blaster shots were cheaper and easier to provide than bacta baths. And the convoy that was supposed to be arriving within the next few days wouldn't bring enough bacta for his liking. It never did.

[Prisoners' Mess Hall, Imperial Detention Facility]

"Jock? Are you alright?" The voice came from one of the very few women that was being held prisoner here. The prisoner's head remained down, staring at his meagre lunch but focussed on nothing.

"Jock?"

The grey head slowly inclined itself slightly, the normally piercing blue eyes seeming somehow dull and vacant.

"Yeah," the prisoner, known to his fellow detainees simply as "Jock", answered her at length. "I'm okay." But he wasn't okay, and both knew it.

"There was nothing you - or any of us - could have done, Jock," the woman continued. Slowly, Jock shook his head.

"No," he said at last. "And that's the whole point. There's nothing any of us can do here, except work, and wait to

die." This statement was made with an air of terrible finality, and the woman's face fell as she resumed her meal, her companion clearly not in the mood for talking. *I can't believe this has happened to Jock, of all people, she thought sadly. All the fight's just gone out of him.*

[Wolfshead Squadron Briefing Room, aboard the *Wolf's Lair*]

Vyper watched as his pilots filed silently into the room. The noise level, for once, was low, and the mood subdued. Wolfshead Squadron's CO smiled faintly as he glanced around the room, noting that a good number of the squadron's members seemed to be suffering from headaches - or worse - this morning. He waited as the last people entered and the door shut, then began.

"Good morning," he said, fancying that he could hear the suppressed groans from a number of his audience, "the captain has asked me to fill you all in on what occurred last night.

"If you haven't already heard, we picked up an unknown convoy that jumped into the system, and we scrambled our Ready Five fighters to investigate. This they did, seeing nothing unusual. However, Granite discovered a discrepancy that he thought was a computer glitch, but which was actually a malfunction in an Imperial IFF transponder which had been modified to transmit neutral codes. His targeting computer kept re-classifying the contact as Imperial, then neutral, and back again.

"At this stage he took a closer look, discovering some design modifications to the freighters. Just as his B-wing pronounced itself healthy, eight TIEs launched from the freighters themselves - two a piece - and the eight transports escorting the cargo ships broke formation and attacked. Well done to Hawk, Firestorm and Granite who managed to take out all TIEs and transports and disable the freighters without any trouble.

"We then dispatched boarding transports to seize the cargo and crew of the freighters, and we were instructed to put six fighters on Ready Alert status." Vyper paused, giving each of those six pilots a grateful look.

"The boarding went off without a hitch - no Imperial reinforcements or any other ships of any kind arrived. We seized a whole lot of cargo, along with twelve crew members who are currently our guests down in the brig.

"After receiving direction from Sector Command, we put our own transport pilots on board those freighters early this morning, after getting them operational again. They'll be flown to a secure location where we can examine them in more detail - Command is particularly interested in the IFF ruse and how they pulled it off, even if it wasn't entirely successful. They hope we might be able to use something similar to our advantage.

"Lynx are due to rejoin us tomorrow morning after conducting training exercises, so we're only without transport capabilities for a day or so," Vyper continued, carefully explaining as much information as he knew. "In any case, as we're only on a standard patrol anyway, we have some mission flexibility, which the captain and myself intend to exploit. The *Wolf's Lair* will stick to her present patrol pattern, but will slow down a little, to give us more time to try and find out where that convoy was going.

"The convoy was carrying nothing out of the ordinary - food, bacta, medical supplies, clothes, power cells - but all the cargo points toward it being a resupply detail for some sort of base. The problem is," Vyper continued, and here he arched his eyebrows and spread his hands, "that there aren't supposed to be any Imperial bases around here. At least, none that the Republic know about. So, we're going to try and find out where that convoy was headed, as it seems clear that they were ferrying supplies to an Imperial installation somewhere in this general area. Their fuel supplies were low, too, which helps us a little bit, limiting our search area into a manageable size."

At this point Vyper paused, and before long a hand in the audience shot up. Wolfshead's CO nodded.

"Hardrive?"

"Uh, yeah," one of the squadron's younger members, First Lieutenant Nik "Hardrive" McKay, ventured. "Vyper, I'm wondering why it's so hard to find where these Imps were off to. I mean, we should just be able to download their nav logs and data and follow the trail to its end." Vyper shook his head ruefully.

"Unfortunately, it's not that simple, but- I think I'll let Arachnoid explain." He nodded and stepped aside as Captain Diego "Arachnoid" Sommariva, the squadron's Intelligence Officer, took the podium.

"If the Imperials do have a base hidden somewhere around here, then they're wanting to keep it very quiet," he said evenly. "To that end, they're paranoid about security, to the point that even the convoy freighter pilots

themselves don't know where they were heading. Or," he added darkly, "at least they say they don't." A loud snort greeted this remark, and Arachnoid searched the room to find it. He thought that it came from somewhere near where the regular X-wing pilots sat in a group, although he couldn't be sure.

"In any case, their claim is that they have no access to their nav computer whatsoever," Arachnoid went on, unperturbed at the interruption. "They say that they simply pilot the ship in realspace between nav buoys and let the computer take over when they jump into hyperspace. And the navcomp automatically destroys all record of the journey when it's completed.

"This is, at best, only partially true, though," he added with a frown. "When our teams went over the freighters, they found that all the nav logs had been wiped, and the journey was clearly far from over. Also, the erasure hadn't been done as thoroughly as it might have, indicating that it was done in a hurry. Add it all up, and you get the crews trying to delete all their data before they were boarded - which shows that they had some access to the information, at least," Arachnoid noted, his gaze travelling slowly around the room. "Even if it was only the ability to delete it. The good news is, that because of their somewhat sloppy work, it'll be easier for us to eventually (hopefully) pull the information out of there. To that end, we've 'borrowed' the nav computer data core from the lead freighter, the *Bountiful*, and Boradelis and Hanniuska are tinkering with it now, along with a couple of our slicing capable personnel on board.

"So, hopefully we'll know just where to look soon," he concluded, stepping aside again as Vyper took his position.

"That's where we are, then," he said firmly. "I want everyone to be ready to launch within half an hour of getting the word, which will happen when we get some information from the data core. However, until that time," he continued, his voice softening a little, "your time is your own. Some of you certainly look like you need some more sleep." A few weak laughs met this remark, and Vyper smiled.

"Any more questions in the meantime? No? Dismissed, then." And with that, the squadron stood and began to slowly file out of the room.

Drake came last, and put his hand on Vyper's shoulder as the latter was about to leave.

"Drake! What can I do for you? Apart from drag you along to sickbay for some aspirin?" Vyper asked cheerfully. The young man groaned and gently put a hand to his head.

"Try talking a little softer," he said with a grimace. "But also, can I speak to the prisoners from the convoy?" Vyper did a double take at the strange request.

"Speak to them? What for?" Drake considered a little before answering.

"I might be able to get something new out of them," he said at last. "I don't know who's debriefing them, but I've had a fair amount of experience in that sort of thing. I wouldn't mind a shot at it. It's obvious they're not telling us everything they know." Vyper stared at Drake long and hard.

"You know, we're supposed to let the Intel types on board handle this," he said, some disapproval evident in his voice. "If anyone from the squadron would have access, it would be Arachnoid, not you, or even me."

"Yeah, Vyper, I know all that," Drake said patiently. "But Arachnoid, good as he is at his job, doesn't really have any professional intel background, and that Dey'jeaa bloke might be good too, but he's a Bothan, and he does everything the Bothan way. I'm telling you, I've got a different angle on this, and who knows? It just might work." Vyper stared at the young man again as he considered it. He was forced, for once, to evaluate just how well he knew one of his pilots. He had first met Drake when the latter had just joined White Squadron, fresh from escaping from his home planet and the employment of the Arrebnac Security Organisation. It was odd, Vyper thought, that no one seemed to ask Drake much about his past with that organisation, and the Arrebnacian, for his part, didn't seem to talk much about it, either. The young man seemed to fit so well into the squadron, and, Vyper admitted to himself, was a good enough pilot, that no one seemed to question his past much. The same was true of many of the pilots - Raiven, Drake's partner-in-crime since the ex-Imperial had joined the squadron, was another good example. Although in Raiven's case, Vyper reflected, his past was somewhat well known anyway.

But what, Vyper wondered, just exactly what had Drake done back when he was a Security Officer? Surely he would've conducted interrogations at some stage. What methods did he use? Was he the sort of person who might employ violence to get information?

They were questions that Vyper had always subconsciously assumed he knew the answers to, but now, he had to consciously admit to himself that he wasn't sure. *Well, time to put friendship and trust to the test*, he thought with a mental shrug. *I've trusted Drake with my life enough times, I should be able to trust him in this.*

"Okay," he said at last, letting out a sigh. "But be careful, be discreet, and don't damage the prisoners, okay? Believe it or not, they're valuable."

Drake shot his commanding officer an odd look.

"Don't worry, Michael, I'm not that kind of an interrogator," he said, a slight edge creeping into his voice despite his best efforts to keep it out. "And if I come up blank, then I come up blank and we'll figure things out another way." Vyper nodded, feeling relieved.

"Okay. Make sure that you let Dario and I know if you find anything." Drake grinned.

"Will do, boss."

V

[Brig, *Wolf's Lair*]

Captain Bolg Asher of the Imperial Merchant Navy looked up as the door to the corridor outside his cell hissed open. He traded looks with his First Mate, Lon Devik, and they both shot the Second Mate sitting behind them, Jute Lang, an icy look. The three men comprised what had once been the crew of the bulk freighter *Bountiful*, a cleverly - but not cleverly enough, Asher thought bitterly - disguised Imperial cargo vessel. Asher looked at the new arrival as he entered. He was young, certainly, tallish and thin, but looked tough and wiry. Dressed entirely in black, with no rank insignia that Asher could see.

Well, this one's certainly different to the Intelligence types we've been talking to so far, the *Bountiful's* former captain thought. *Although, whether that's a good thing or not, I don't know*. He glanced back again at his Second Mate, Jute Lang. The latter seemed to be a little squeamish, and was liable to give something important away soon. After their last interrogation both he and Lon Devik had had a long chat with Lang in which they made clear the consequences of giving anything to the Republic. Asher quickly took his eyes away from the man. He thought that they had him cowed, and to pay undue attention to him might give away the weak link in their chain. And whoever this new interrogator was, Asher noted, he seemed to know his business. Even the way he dressed was a sign of that - don't give them any sign of who or what you are, and they keep wondering. And as long as they can't put you into a box, then they'll feel uncomfortable and less confident in dealing with you.

The Black Man, as Asher immediately began to think of him, motioned to the guard that had followed him in. The latter unlocked and opened the cell door for him, then closed it behind him. The Black Man walked over to the small table in the cell and pulled up a spare chair, then sat down. The three men sitting on the bunk merely eyed him suspiciously.

"Good evening," he said pleasantly, spreading his hands in a friendly manner.

"Evening? I thought it was morning," Lon Devik growled by way of interruption. The Black Man turned and regarded him sharply and closely for a moment, then smiled genially.

"I'm afraid not. Your transition to this vessel and the nature of your current accommodation must have confused you. It is presently evening, according to ship's time." Devik frowned and glanced down at where the Black Man's wrist chrono should be, but he wasn't wearing one. And the prisoners' chronos had all been confiscated when they'd been thrown in here.

Drake smiled again at the man. Actually, it was mid-morning according to ship's time, but the Imps weren't to know that, were they? And trying to disorient them was all part of the discomfort process.

"Now, if I may proceed without further interruption," and here the Black Man shot Devik an icy stare, "I have come down here this evening to speak to you three gentlemen concerning the navigational computer and data aboard the bulk freighter *Bountiful*, your ship until yesterday, unless I am mistaken." Here Asher broke his silence for the first time, emitting a harsh, dry, barking laugh.

"Well then you've come to the wrong place, whoever you are. We've already told the Intelligence pukes that interviewed us all we know." The Black Man raised an eyebrow at that, but said nothing. "What are *you* doing here, anyway?" Asher demanded. "You aren't one of them, or you'd be wearing a uniform."

The Black Man sat back and grinned at them before answering, baring his even white teeth.

"Very observant, Captain Asher," he allowed, although the irony in his voice was noticeable. "I am not a part of the ship's Intelligence section. However, my true nature is not of concern to you." Asher scowled and shrugged. He hadn't expected an answer, and he hadn't been disappointed.

"And you know my name, Mr. Mystery," he snarled, "but the true nature of my nav data is not of concern to you, either. So why don't you save us all some time, and disappear back to whatever hole you crawled out of." Satisfied, he sat back and folded his arms with a smirk. The Black Man's face twitched again as a muscle caught in his cheek. It looked to the Imperials as if he was just barely containing his anger, hiding it behind an iron mask of geniality and calm.

"Perhaps not, Captain," he said at length, in the same calm, smooth voice, "but believe me when I tell you I am prepared to make it my concern." He smiled again, and the gesture could only be described as predatory. The white, even teeth gleamed wickedly, and the dark eyes could have as easily been chips of coal that smoldered with violence. Jute Lang, sitting behind his comrades, shuddered involuntarily. The Black Man noted this with interest and satisfaction, but betrayed none of his own emotions to the Imperials - at least, none that he did not want them to see.

"Pretty impressive, isn't he?" Ibero asked, sitting before the monitor that showed the cell in which Drake and the three prisoners sat.

"Never seen him like this before," Vyper agreed. His voice was a strange mix of admiration, curiosity, and anxiety. "He knows his way around an interrogation room, Dario. Maybe he doesn't use violence, but the threat of it - when it's done properly - is often enough to coax information out of those that aren't trained for interrogations."

"Yeah," the Iberyian agreed. "Question is, are these three trained or not? Asher certainly looks like he is."

"Well, watch the Second Mate," Vyper suggested, jerking a thumb at the screen. "I think he's a little nervous. Let's see if Drake picks that up."

The Black Man now sat alone in a different cell with Jute Lang. This one lacked some of the comforts (meager though they were) of even the other cell Lang shared with Asher and Devik. It was, in reality, little more than a steel box. Jute Lang forced himself to remain calm while the Black Man busied himself with something in a bag he had brought with him for this "interview". Lang could only consider in horror what terrible device might be in the bag, but he was determined not to give anything away, and thus avoid the wrath of his colleagues and his superiors. *If*, he thought despairingly, *we ever get out of the Republic's clutches alive*. He started as the Black Man straightened up like lightning, slamming something on the table.

An ice cold can of beer.

Another can was in his hand, and the interrogator quickly cracked it and took a long pull, wiping his mouth afterwards with relish. Then he surveyed Lang through hooded eyes for a long while. For some time the Imperial returned the scrutiny, but eventually he bowed his head and looked away first.

Satisfied, the Black Man spoke.

"So, Lieutenant Jute Lang," he said, his manner matter-of-fact, as if he was just asking about the local price of bacta. "Are you going to tell me what you know, or do I have to get nasty? I don't enjoy getting nasty, you know." Lang was about to reply, but didn't trust his voice not to betray him, so he thought better and remained sullenly silent. The Black Man waited a while for an answer, but none came.

"Oh, dear," he said with a sigh. Lang braced himself, expecting the violence that would follow. It didn't.

"Tell you what, Lang," the Black Man went on, then stopped himself. "Jute. May I call you Jute?" Again, no answer.

"Okay, Jute," the young man continued. "Here's what I shall do for you. I shall trade with you. I don't want

information for nothing, okay? So we'll trade. First trade will be for this can of beer." The Imperial's eyes went up at that, transferring from the table between them to the can that sat on it. Moisture ran down the sides of it, and the prisoners had not been fed or watered since they'd come on board this ship - whatever the hell it was. They'd been blindfolded on the transports on the way in. Lang had seen holos of what the insides of Mon Cal Cruisers looked like, but this ship wasn't one of them - at least, not one of the MC80s that were the New Republic military's line ships. Beneath the table, Lang could not suppress a slight trembling in his legs, and he craved the beer that might help calm his nerves.

"Okay," the Black Man said conversationally. "Question One, for the beer. We know that you three *can* access your nav data, because we know that you wiped it just before you were captured. How do we know that?" he asked rhetorically, forestalling any questions. "Because you botched the job, that's why. Some of the data is *still there*." Lang paled visibly at that, and Drake pressed home his advantage.

"So. We know you can access it. Question One is, do you actually know where your destination was? Or could you merely delete your nav data in the case of accident?" Lang sighed. With enough time and slicing personnel, doubtless the Republic scum would find out anyway. They certainly knew well enough what had happened to the data, so he - Lang - might as well make his time here as comfortable as possible. Who knew when his next beer might be, if ever?

"Yes," he growled, speaking for the first time. "We know where it is." The Black Man nodded and passed over the icy cold can. Greedily, Lang cracked it and gulped down several large sips. He finished with a satisfied belch, noting as he did so that again his interrogator was rummaging in his bag. The Imperial wondered what he might be offered next.

The man in black drew out a confectionery bar and placed it on the table. "Question Two, for the food," he said, as if they were enacting some gameshow holo, "is where that destination is." Lang snorted derisively, and an arrogant sneer crossed his face.

"You've had too much beer yourself, Mystery Man," he snarled, "if you think I'm going to give *that* up to you for a simple candy bar. Guess again. Oh, you want a little hint?" he asked, in a kind of mimic of the Black Man's own style. "Think of the colour of credits, Mystery Man, the colour of credits." He sat back with a smirk, giving the candy bar a contemptuous flick across the table.

The Black Man seemed to contemplate this for a while. Slowly, he picked up the candy bar, and slowly he began to eat it. Finally, the whole thing was finished, and the Black Man licked his lips before sitting silent for a while. Meanwhile, Lang began to notice an odd feeling, almost like a low buzzing at the back of his brain. He shrugged it off, watching the Black Man, who sat stock still, placidly regarding him.

When the young man moved, it was almost too fast for Lang to see. With the dexterity of an athlete, he shot to his feet and launched himself across the table, grabbing Lang by his collar and thrusting his face only inches from the Imperial's.

"Tell you what, Lang," he hissed, his eyes blazing. "Since you rejected my kind offer, I'm going to make you an even more generous one. Tell me what I want to know, and I might just let you go without a scratch."

Jute Lang fought down his rising panic. "I'm not afraid of you," he said, hoping it sounded strong, but it came out as more of a squeak. "Break as many bones as you like, you'll get nothing more from me." The reaction was unexpected.

With a deep laugh, the Black Man shoved the Second Mate roughly back into his chair.

"You've watched too many holos, little man," he sneered at Lang, not bothering to mask his contempt any more. "You think I want to waste energy and effort breaking your bones? You think I want to get your blood - infected, no doubt, with the most exotic diseases the ladies of Mos Eisley have to offer - all over me? *You* guess again, you Imperial swine. Let me ask you another question. Have you ever heard of a Mind Probe? The late Darth Vader first made its use famous when he used one on Princess Leia Organa Solo."

Lieutenant Jute Lang's eyes widened and he felt the blood rush from his face. Most people in Imperial service had heard of Vader's exploits. His interrogation of the Rebel princess and his use of the sinister Mind Probe were part of Imperial military lore. Although Lang had never personally seen one of the dreaded devices, he had heard colourful and descriptive accounts of what they could do, and he had no wish to ever see one, much less have one applied to him.

"I have heard of such a device, yes," he managed to croak.

"Well, let me make you an offer you can't refuse," the Black Man growled. "Option One is that you can give me that location now, and go back to your cell - your *own* cell, apart from the other two." Correctly, Drake had surmised that this man, the weak link in the Imperial chain, would have been threatened by his former shipmates.

"Option Two," the young man continued, baring his teeth in the horrible parody of a smile again, "is that I will get that information out of you with a Mind Probe. And I *will* get it, believe me. Well?"

"Time," Lang stuttered. "I need-"

"You have five seconds, Lang," the Black Man said coldly. The Imperial hesitated for precisely two of those seconds.

"Okay," he whimpered. "Okay, okay! What exactly do you want to know?"

VI

[The Bomb Shelter, *Wolf's Lair*]

"I don't believe it," Vyper breathed, taking a sip of his schnapps. "The kid pulled it off. A Mind Probe, indeed!" And he chuckled.

"I didn't know he had it in him," Ibero agreed, just as Drake strode into the compartment, clad not in his black interrogator's outfit, but instead in the rather worn, grimy not-quite-orange flightsuit that was his normal uniform on board the *Wolf's Lair*. He looked tired, but satisfied, and he fell into a chair next to the two senior pilots with a sigh, and immediately cracked a beer that he had brought with him.

"Well, Drake," Vyper said presently. "That was quite a piece of work. Well done." The Arrebnacian nodded his thanks as he took a slug of his beer. Vyper couldn't conceal his grin. "Nicely done with the 'Mind Probe' threat, too," he added, with a chuckle. Drake grinned.

"Unfortunately Lieutenant Lang doesn't seem to have half a brain, otherwise he would've known that there's no way a New Republic ship would ever carry something like that. Hell, the damned things are outlawed everywhere," he agreed. "Mind you, his reasoning skills probably weren't what they might normally have been. The Veritexol-rich beer that I gave him would have seen to that." Ibero arched an eyebrow.

"Really? You used *drugs*?" If disapproval was not plainly evident in his voice, then it was at least hinted at. Drake's grin vanished, and his face hardened.

"Yes, I did. A harmless drug physiologically, unless administered in huge doses, Veritexol confuses more than it elicits the truth. When the subject is confused, they're more susceptible to whatever reasoning you present to them, and they cling to that as something solid. Veritexol, Ibero, has no lasting physiological or psychological effects, certainly not from the small dose Lang imbibed from that can of beer."

"I see." Ibero still did not sound fully satisfied, and in what was a very rare occasion indeed, Drake let a little of his temper show.

"Listen, Major," he said, startling the Iberyan by actually using his rank. "I got the information we need. I did not harm the subject. True, I used the threat of implied violence, but no one, not even the Emperor's pet monkey, is going to give up any really valuable information just because some stranger on board a New Republic Navy ship asks them nicely!" He scowled and took another pull on his beer before setting it down angrily on the table.

"Alright, Drake," Vyper interjected calmly, forestalling any retort that Ibero might have made. "You got the information. What do you think we should do with it?"

"Ah," Drake said with a knowing smile, his anger vanishing as quickly as it had appeared. "Here's what I suggest." He took a few minutes and outlined what he had in mind. When he had finished, Vyper nodded slowly.

"I don't like it, but it's the only choice we have," he said quietly. "As you say, secrecy is vital, and so is reconnaissance. After all, even the Emperor's pet monkey isn't just going to let a Strike Carrier waltz around near

a secret Imperial installation without some hefty defence facilities and a fight, is he?" Drake coloured a little and shook his head. Vyper nodded.

"Right. Then I'll take this to the captain. Meanwhile, be ready and alert to fly. Oh, and one more thing, Drake," Vyper said as the young man rose. "Practice some solid, sensible flying for a change, will ya? This requisition order you want put in - like they say, 'you break it, you bought it'. And a pilot's pay just isn't *that* good."

"Aye, aye, sir," Drake said with a grin, and left.

"What the hell was *that* about?" Ibero asked as soon as the Arrebnacian was gone. Somewhat to his surprise, Vyper frowned slightly.

"You don't approve of his using the drug on the Imp." It was a statement more than a question.

Ibero cocked his head to one side. "Well, he *did* say that it wasn't really a 'truth drug', as such, and that it wasn't really harmful, but... not really, no. I have a daughter, Michael," he continued softly. "You think I want her to grow up into a world full of drugs?" Vyper nodded, understanding coming to him at last.

"No. But then, Dario, if not for the use of this drug in this case, we might not have gotten that information. If we shut down that installation, that's one less threat to your daughter's safety and freedom when she grows up. And anyway, if you want to know what I think got Drake riled up, it's that you questioned the way he did his job. Unlike some of us, he's a guy whose past has really faded into the background. We have to remember that, once upon a time, Drake was more or less a policeman. Evidently, he was pretty good at it, pretty proud of that fact, and he hasn't forgotten how to do it. Hell, it's about the only thing he *doesn't* brag about," Vyper continued with a smile. "That means it must be really important to him, although we don't really see that a lot of the time. But I'd say what we had back there is a little case of injured professional pride. And, former Intelligence Officer or not," Vyper reminded his friend, "you haven't had the experience with the gritty side of getting intel that Drake has. What would your reaction be if he started double guessing you on comms gear? There," Wolfshead Squadron's CO finished, "that's my humble two cents, for what it's worth." Ibero was nodding slowly.

"Point taken, Colonel," he said softly. "Point taken."

[Pilot's Quarters aboard the *Wolf's Lair*]

Drake stood in the middle of his cabin, checking that his flightsuit - a nondescript black one, rather than his NR issued one - was properly zipped. This completed, he checked that his blaster was secure in its thigh holster. He'd always been reasonably handy with a blaster, but during his CQB training he'd discovered just what a lethal weapon a pistol could be. Ever since then, he'd been training hard. He'd never match someone like Raiven with a rifle - the ex-Imperial could put most professional snipers to shame - but he'd bet on himself with a pistol against nearly anyone. He now spent almost as much time practicing as he did at the bar. He smiled to himself. *Almost.*

The young pilot opened one of the lockers set into the bulkhead and from the small compartment at the bottom he took a stubby blaster pistol. Bending down, he slipped it into a secret holster around his ankle.

"Going somewhere, are we?"

The sudden voice made Drake reflexively jump and straighten up. His wingmate, standing in the open doorway, just laughed.

"I didn't know you carried extra protection," Raiven said with a nod at Drake's right leg, regarding his partner with hooded eyes. The latter shook his head.

"I don't. But no bounty hunter worth his salt would be caught without a backup weapon, would he?" He grinned.

"Maybe so, but then you're not a bounty hunter." Raiven's curiosity was well and truly piqued. Drake shook his head, and his eyes twinkled.

"Oh, contrere, my friend," he said mischievously. "Today, I am. Proph Hanna, at your service." He then pulled something out of a drawer, turned around, then spun to face Raiven again.

"What do you think?" the Arrebnacian asked. Raiven nodded.

"Looks convincing enough. Is it real?"

"Well, yes and no," Drake answered. "Yes, it does enhance my sight - well, it allows me night vision and infrared, anyway. But no, it's not a real bionic eye, because the input isn't wired directly into my brain. And thank the Force for that," he finished.

"Mainly part of the disguise, then," Raiven decided.

"Pretty much."

"So," the ex-Imperial continued, "you going to tell me what this is all about, or what? And where do I fit in?" Drake's face lost its cheer for a moment.

"Sorry, mate, but no, I'm not, and you don't," he answered. "I'm solo on this one. And I'm sworn to secrecy so the whole thing doesn't fall over." Raiven folded his arms, unimpressed.

"This concerns the convoy we intercepted." A statement, not a question - but it still got the nod from Drake.

"I heard you spent a good deal of time talking to some of the prisoners, too." Again, Drake nodded. Raiven stared at his friend expectantly. "Well?"

"Well what?" Drake asked, faintly exasperated. "What do you want me to say? I can't tell you at the moment what I'm doing. You of all people should understand the need for operational security. Look, I won't be gone long - it's a simple recon mission, okay? Then I'll be back, and we'll do some flying together. Some real flying," he added, his good humour returning with a smile. *Real* flying, which meant either acrobatics, dusting Imps, or, usually, both.

That seemed to satisfy Raiven, who nodded.

"Alright then. Take care of yourself, lad. Without a wiser man like me to watch you, who knows what'll happen?"

"Yeah, who knows? Without a less talented man like you to hold me down, I shall doubtless show the potential that you have kept under a veil," Drake said theatrically. Raiven snorted, but then, for once, his face turned serious.

"Dan, I mean it. Be careful, mate." Drake nodded solemnly.

"Yeah. Well, take it easy, and be ready for some action when I get back," he said. The two pilots shook hands as they left.

[Flight deck, *Wolf's Lair*]

"Wow," Drake said with just a little too much enthusiasm. "Look at this, I get the whole flight deck to myself. I mean, I've never had the flight deck cleared just for little old *me* before."

"Well, the last thing we need is a bunch of rubbernecking techs who'll blab anything to anyone after a few drinks," Vyper said, keeping step beside him. "That goes the same for the pilots, too," he said, for Mar Hanniuska's benefit, just before she could retort.

"What happened to your eye, flyboy?" the chief fighter tech of the *Wolf's Lair* asked Drake as they walked. "It's quite an improvement."

"I shall treat that remark with the contempt that it so richly deserves," Drake said archly, turning his head away. Vyper smiled and Mar Hanniuska chuckled as they walked. *Not bad, Drake. I might even give you that one.*

"Okay, Lieutenant," Drake said, turning to Hanniuska as they reached their objective, "what have you done to this piece of junk for me?" He flashed her the charming, yet infuriating grin that he reserved for her. She returned a sweet, yet sour smile of her own.

"Well, Lieutenant, I think you're going to like it," she said warmly. "I've added a couple centimetres of armour."

"And?"

"And, that's it," she said, satisfied with herself. Drake's smile faded and was replaced with a look of indignation.

"What on Coruscant do you mean, 'that's it'?" he demanded. "The thing's a deathtrap. As it is, it's beneath me to fly such an antique. It's even worse than a Y-wing," he concluded.

"That may be so, hotshot," Hanniuska countered, not bothering to mask her enjoyment now, "but any more modifications than that would be too conspicuous and unrealistic. After all, you're just a hack bounty hunter that nobody's heard of. You can't afford more than this." With that, she made a sweeping gesture, indicating the craft before them.

Drake scowled, knowing that he wouldn't win this one, and that it was too late anyway. He looked over his new ship, and had just one thought.

What a piece of junk.

The fighter looked years old, with various scorch marks, pits and rents in its armour. Its two missile launchers and two cannons looked like they were in good working order, but that was about it. He paled a little.

"Relax, Sutherland," Hanniuska said - one of the few people on board who called Drake by his last name. "She's been doctored to look well used, but she's as finely tuned as any other fighter on this ship - I took care of that myself. She'll get you there, and in one piece. It's up to you to get the two of you back." Drake nodded, for once without any glib remark or pithy comeback.

"Thanks," he said. "I'll try not to disappoint you." Hanniuska grinned.

"Hey, it's not you I'm worried about," she said wickedly. "I put a lot of time into this baby, and besides, the captain has threatened me, as well as you, with the cost of replacing it if anything goes wrong. Just so you understand," she finished, "I want my fighter back." Drake nodded and shot her a sarcastic look.

"In that case, I'll see if I can't snap off a cannon or a strut or two," was his parting shot as he clambered up the ladder into the cockpit. Hanniuska laughed and walked away, but Vyper climbed up the ladder and spoke to Drake as he began his preflight checks.

"Remember, Drake, this will be dangerous," he warned. "We don't know what's out there, but the Imps have gone to a lot of effort - successfully, I might add - to keep it secret. They won't have done that by simply asking people nicely not to report what they might have seen. Expect some heavy defences, *and* some pretty intensive concealment measures."

"Roger that, boss," Drake reassured his CO. "No dumb stuff, just fly over, take pictures, and come back. Believe it or not, much as I would hate to be mediocre, I would hate to be dead even more." Vyper nodded.

"Good. Then may the Force be with you," he said, and stepped down the ladder. He gave the battered-looking Z-95 Headhunter a slap for good luck when he reached the bottom, as the cockpit canopy began to close and Drake began to spool up its engines - which, despite its appearance, were beautifully tuned. Hanniuska was as good as her word, and the rising whine of the Z-95's propulsion units was like music to both Drake and Vyper's ears. The latter hurried across the flight deck and watched anxiously as the snubfighter rose smoothly off the deck and gracefully slid out into the void.

VII

[The Hekram System]

Drake checked his instruments as the Z-95 crashed back into realspace. Everything was where it should be, which, given the fighter's maintainer, shouldn't have surprised him, but it did. Father to the Incom T-65 X-wing that he loved, even so Drake regarded the aging fighter as little more than a flying piece of junk. He frowned as

he consulted the co-ordinates given to him by Lang.

There. Hekram III.

Nudging the stick, he set his fighter on a course that would take him in the direction of the planet, without heading directly towards it. Satisfied, he leaned back in his chair and settled in to wait.

[Bridge, Strike Carrier *Wolf's Lair*]

Colonel Talina Gen'yaa turned as she heard the doors to her bridge slide open.

"Colonel?"

"Yes, ma'am," Vyper answered her, striding to her side.

"I see that Lieutenant Sutherland's launch went well."

"Yes, ma'am. He's a smart, tough kid. He'll be good for this mission." The Bothan inclined her head slightly.

"I do not doubt that he is both smart and tough, Colonel," she said softly. "The problem, as I see it, lies within his recklessness and cavalier attitude towards everything, especially his own life and the safety of his equipment."

"Captain," Vyper began, with a small inner smile. Were Drake here, he would have adopted a haughty and disapproving expression right at this moment. The young pilot made it a point to *never* refer to Gen'yaa as "captain". The Arrebancian had objected to the *Wolf's Lair* being placed under the command of an Army officer - and an intelligence puke, at that - and would never afford her the title. When Drake addressed her, which indeed was seldom enough, it was always "colonel". Vyper continued.

"Drake may appear that way," he said, noting the raising and rippling of the senior officer's eyebrows. "However, he's a solid operator, and nothing - *nothing* - is more important to him than the safety of innocent lives - including his own. As for equipment - well, what is equipment for in our line of work if not to preserve lives? Equipment is replaceable. People aren't." Vyper couldn't help but feel disappointed. It was a captain's job to worry about everything, but even so, Gen'yaa being who and what she was, she was far more of a bean counter than she should have been. *Maybe Drake is right*, he thought morosely. *Maybe she's not much of a military commander*. He stopped the thought. Either way, he, as the squadron's commander, had to work closely with her - and that meant, for the most part, respecting her. Besides, she'd shown enough steel on the bridge of this ship - especially on its first mission, even before it was commissioned - to be spared from any accusations of cowardice. But she still didn't understand, nor fully trust, the special bond and spirit that permeated and maintained Wolfshead Squadron. And that was what gave both parties such trouble, on occasion.

"Maybe so, but I had to use up a goodly amount of my budget to procure that Z-95, Colonel," Gen'yaa shot back. "And if it gets broken, *somebody* is going to pay for it, believe me."

"Yes, ma'am," Vyper nodded. He was used to Colonel Gen'yaa's habit of talking tough - it didn't irritate him nearly as much as it did some of the pilots in the squadron. Particularly Raiven and Drake, who had once gotten themselves in some trouble when their Bothan superior listened in on their true opinions of her in surround sound bridge audio. Wolfshead's commander suppressed a chuckle at the thought.

"I hope he comes back alive," Talina Gen'yaa said, and the sudden tenderness in her voice stunned Vyper. So, the boss *did* have a heart for pilots, after all.

"Yes, ma'am," he managed to get out.

[Approaching Hekram III]

Drake checked the map on the display in front of him one last time. An Imperial installation, realistically, could be anywhere on this planet. But those mountain ranges to the north... they looked like an ideal spot for trying to hide a base.

And anyway, Drake admitted to himself after trying to rationalise his decision, he had a gut feeling.

The young man was accustomed to following his hunches, so he waited until the appropriate moment then keyed

the code sequence into his onboard computer. *Execute*.

Instantly the small fighter bucked violently, but the Wolfshead Squadron pilot's hand was accustomed to staying on the stick despite such things. He wrestled for control of the Headhunter, even as his computer began telling him of accumulating secondary damage following the "explosion". Drake smiled to himself. He had no choice.

He'd have to change course and force a landing on this planet until he could effect repairs.

With that decision made, the "bounty hunter" slewed his fighter around, pointing its stubby nose towards the planet that now loomed in its pilot's vision.

[Imperial Defence Station 42A, Hekram III]

Sergeant Ref Udner lowered his binoculars and reached for his commlink.

"Central, this is Forty-two Alpha," he reported.

"Forty-two Alpha, Central, go ahead," the comm crackled after a few seconds.

"Be advised that I have visual contact with Master Contact Seven-Seven Gamma," Udner continued, his now unaided eyes staring at the spot of empty sky where the craft would appear. This time, the response was almost immediate.

"Copy, Forty-two Alpha," the voice of Central replied. "You are to intercept and retrieve. I say again, you are to intercept and retrieve. Acknowledge." Sergeant Udner grinned wolfishly.

"Roger, Central," he responded. "Acknowledge intercept and retrieve."

"Central out."

Sergeant Udner spun into action. He immediately shouted for his men, as he ran for the weapons cache. They didn't have much time.

[The skies of Hekram III]

Drake sat bolt upright, intently scanning the forest below him. He was as close to stalling speed as possible, both because it allowed him the best chances of spotting anything, and because it was realistic that a crippled fighter would barely be able to maintain airspeed.

The mountains were getting closer, and Drake still hadn't spotted anything. He'd have to alter course in a few min-

The abrupt whine startled him almost as much as it scared him, and he instinctively threw the stick over to the left, losing as much altitude as he dared, which wasn't much. The Z-95 was barely above the treetops as it was, and the juking maneuver meant that he was now barely two feet above them.

A concussion missile streaked through the patch of sky that the snubfighter had occupied half a second before, and Drake looked around wildly for its source. Even as his eyes failed to find it, his brain formed a thought - *troops launching hand held missiles*. The thought had no time to form, however, as the whine split the cockpit again, and Drake saw two more missiles blaze out of the forest ahead of him on tails of flame. A third that he didn't see erupted from the trees behind him. The young Wolfshead pilot's mind raced, even as the orange projectiles streaked toward his fragile fighter, and thoughts flashed through his consciousness in a vicious staccato sequence.

The damage to his fighter was cosmetic only, and would be instantly seen as such if the fighter was recovered.

If the fighter's true condition were ascertained, it would convince even the most stupid Imperial that he was a spy. spy.

Spies were tortured and shot.

At least two concussion missiles were mere seconds away from his Z-95. It would not survive a hit from even one of them.

As the last thought was formed, Drake's hand found the ejection handle and pulled it.

His ejection capsule shot up into the air, the Z-95 self-destructing into a raging fireball that expanded as the three concussion missiles flew into it. The flames licked at the capsule, which began to burn as it began its downward arc and plummeted into the trees.

[Main entrance, Imperial Detention Facility ORS1178]

Captain Targ regarded the stretchered body in front of him with contempt.

"This is it?" he asked Sergeant Udner, who nodded.

"Yes, sir. Not much to look at, is he? Appears to be some sort of bounty hunter. He ejected just before my men hit him. The fighter went up, and the explosion set his capsule on fire. It was virtually pulverised on the way down through the trees." Targ smiled grimly.

"Well, that's Sith's luck for him. He's been playing in the wrong corner of the sector." Ref Udner grinned.

"Yes, sir." Targ's smile vanished, and his voice became brusque, businesslike.

"Have the medics redress his wounds, and throw him in a cell. I'll talk to him when he regains consciousness."

"As you were!" a voice bellowed. Sergeant Udner froze in place, bent over the stretcher, then rapidly snapped up to attention and saluted. Targ did the same.

"The prisoner will be conducted to the infirmary and placed in a bacta tank," Lieutenant Colonel Trell gestured to Udner and the two orderlies accompanying him.

"I think that's a mistake, sir," Captain Targ interjected. Trell's face coloured to a mottled purple, but he controlled himself with an effort.

"Carry out my order, Sergeant," he barked. "Then resume your command of Forty-Two Alpha." Sergeant Udner didn't even look at Captain Targ.

"Yes, sir," he nodded, picking up the stretcher with the orderlies and hurrying away.

"Captain Targ, report to my office, now," Trell said tightly. Controlling his rage was almost causing him physical pain. The tall young captain stiffly followed his commanding officer, his own face curiously contorted with anger.

Captain Targ braced to attention as Lieutenant Colonel Trell sat heavily in his chair.

"Captain, if you ever question my orders in front of anyone again, I'll have you shot for insubordination," Trell nearly shouted, his face apoplectic with rage.

"If I might respectfully remind the colonel, insubordination is not an offence that-

"Silence!" Trell roared. Never before had he lost his temper this badly with someone under his command. "If you speak again in this room without being asked, Captain, then I will immediately demote you to lieutenant. Is that understood?" Targ nodded, gulping as he realised that his commanding officer really wasn't the fop he had thought him to be. Trell rose in his chair and banged his fist so hard on his desk that it rattled. His voice rose to a roar again.

"I said *is that understood?*" Targ's earlier courage had left him.

"Yes, *sir!*" he answered sharply, just like a cadet at the Imperial Academy.

"I don't give a *damn* about the bacta used to heal this prisoner," Trell said, his voice now truly in a ranting mode. "We *must* ascertain who he is, and we will be unable to do so if he is too injured to speak or if he dies! And I will

not further indulge your reprehensible bloodlust, Captain. This facility is *not* a playground where you may watch others suffer for your private amusement. Do I make myself clear?" He stopped and stared expectantly at his subordinate, his pale eyes hard as chips of ice. For his part, Targ wondered if had there had been a blaster on the desk, whether or not his commanding officer would have shot him then and there.

"Yes, sir!" His face was an expressionless mask.

"Good. Remember, *Captain*, that this facility is under *my* command. I do not report to superiors in the normal chain of command because the normal chain is unaware of our existence. And if I say that you will be shot for insubordination, then by the Force, so you shall." The lieutenant colonel's eyes narrowed and his lip curled. "Now get out of my sight. Dismissed."

Without a word, Captain Targ spun smartly on his heel and marched out.

[Cell Block 1138, Imperial Detention Facility ORS1178]

The prisoner barely looked up as the force field was shut off and a body was shoved roughly into the room. Gingerly, Drake picked himself up off the floor. His left leg still hurt, and he could think of very few things in the universe that he hated more than bacta baths. Raiven's snoring, perhaps - although he would gladly have traded even *that* for his present predicament.

"Hello," he said to the bowed figure in grey, his normal accent totally masked by the unmistakable twang of Corellian Basic. Drake hated sounding like he came from anywhere but his native Arrebna - but Wolfshead Squadron was moderately famous within the Imperial forces, and even an idiotic Intelligence Officer might notice such an unusual accent and assume that it couldn't be coincidence.

If the prisoner replied, then it was merely a grunt. The young pilot wasn't even sure of that much.

"I'm Proph," the "bounty hunter" said, offering his hand. The older man didn't look up.

"They call me Jock," he muttered.

"Nice to meet you, Jock," Proph said with forced cheerfulness. "Although you'll forgive me if I say that I'd rather not be here."

Humour. Jock hadn't heard that in a long time, and it was enough to make him look up at his new cellmate.

"Thanks, Proph," he said quietly. It felt strange to be thanking anyone for anything anymore. Perhaps this man was worth a conversation. Jock decided to make an attempt. "How'd you get caught?" Proph sighed and his face fell.

"I was running through this system when something went wrong with my ship - some sort of explosion. I had to try and land on this planet to effect repairs, but before I could, the Imperials shot me down. I was wounded - they must have captured me, and I woke up in a bacta bath two hours ago." Groggy as he was from the lingering effects of the bacta, the new prisoner regarded the old one with hooded eyes. *You might still be an Imperial agent, sunshine*, he thought grimly. *And even if you're not, ten to one says the Imps have these cells bugged.* The second fear was definitely a reasonable one, and the first, while dismissed by many as paranoid, was equally valid. Drake had himself used, on occasion, plants within the penal system to get information from inmates. None of it was legally binding - although, the young pilot reflected grimly, in the Empire it no doubt would be, their definition of "law" being different to everyone else's - but it was still useful. Particularly if you were going to interview a prisoner later, when it always helped to know what cards he held in his hand.

"What were you doing in a backwater system like this one?" Jock's interest was genuinely piqued, now. He stared at the wiry young man, who seemed to be examining the force field as he answered.

"I traced my contract, but I made contact too soon, and he got away. Then I worked out that he'd run to this system. I gave chase, but too late and in vain, it seems."

"You're a bounty hunter." The voice was dark with disapproval, and it was a statement, not a question.

"Oh, yeah," Proph said airily, hating the lie as he uttered it. An gut feeling told him that there was something different about this man, but he couldn't afford to take chances.

The seconds now stretched into an uncomfortable silence.

"I take it you don't approve," Proph said, his voice acquiring a slight edge. "So tell me what it is that *you* did and how *you* got caught." Jock scowled and hesitated before answering. Why should he even talk with this bounty hunter scum? Not that anything made a difference here, anyway... but then, the man *had* made an effort to be friendly, even if he was a bounty hunter.

"I was a pilot." There was a pause, and just as Proph was about to think that that was all the answer he would get, Jock continued.

"I was in a battle and I got captured. That's all." Proph frowned. He definitely had a premonition about this guy.

"A battle, huh? Well, I'm willing to bet you're not an Imp. What were you? Trader? Cargo flier?" Too late Drake realised that he'd referred to the Imperials by the NR military colloquialism - hardly unique to the armed forces, but still, it was a possible marker towards his true identity, and he had been determined not to let any of those slip.

"Military." Jock's sharp mind had caught the slip, and now he wondered at it. So much so, that he looked up, and stared his new cellmate directly in the face. They gazed at each other for a full ten seconds.

And then, like a thunderbolt, it hit Drake.

"Louyan!" He mouthed the name, and the man's jaw almost dropped. He sat upright for the first time. Again, Drake made as if to speak, but his fellow prisoner silenced him with a curt gesture before tapping his ear. Drake nodded understanding. He would have to wait.

[Aboard the *Wolf's Lair*, on patrol in the Jalus system]

"Vyper, I don't like this." Raiven stood scowling, hands planted firmly on his hips. His commanding officer nodded agreement.

"Nor do I," he said soothingly. "But it's only been a day and a half. He may have had to go to ground. Remember, he wanted three days before we sounded the alarm and came charging after him."

"Yeah, and he told me that he also wanted a pet Krayt Dragon when he was a kid," Raiven snarled, showing what he thought of his wingmate's desires.

"Well, like it or not, Raiven, he wrote his own mission specs this time around, and they got approved," Vyper said firmly. "We have to wait. He's probably just staying there so he can take more time off doing *rea*/work." The squadron commander's attempt at humour fell, surprisingly, on deaf ears. Drake and Raiven's reputation for flippancy was well known and equally well deserved, but Raiven was, for once, deeply concerned about his wingmate.

"He's *probably* been captured," the X-wing pilot growled, and began to lose his temper. He raised his voice. "And we're just sitting here on our lazy asses doing nothing!"

Vyper tightened his lips into a thin line.

"Your concern is noted, lieutenant. However, as I have just made clear, we will continue our present patrol for at least the rest of today *and* tomorrow. If we haven't heard from Drake by then, we'll take action. End of story."

Raiven nodded. He knew a futile argument when he saw one. Vyper softened his voice.

"You flying patrol?"

"No."

"Good. Then get some sleep. If we hear anything, I'll let you know straight away."

"Fair enough." The young man turned on his heel and stalked off, still worried for his friend.

[Dining Hall, Imperial Detention Facility, Hekram III]

Jock started as Proph fell onto the bench beside him.

"They fill you in?" he asked quietly, after a quick glance at the young man. The response was a mumbled affirmative. Having healed him of his injuries, the Imperials would now be doing their best to break him, Jock knew. Already the young man had a split and swollen lip and a black eye, plus who knew what else that couldn't be seen.

But none of his injuries would stop his curiosity for long.

"I know who you are, Commander Ilyich Louyan," he whispered painfully, as he tried to eat the dry bread and gruel. Louyan blinked at the sound of his real name.

"Haven't been called that in a long time, Proph," he whispered back, " *if* that is your real name." The young man laughed, or tried to, but the pain made him double over.

"Cracked rib, I think," he wheezed when he recovered. "And you're right, that's not my real name, and I'm no bounty hunter, either. Because of who you are, I'm going to assume that the Imps haven't broken you, and I'm going to trust you with my life. I'm Lieutenant Dan Sutherland, I go by the callsign Drake and I fly with Wolfshead Squadron. Wolfshead Squadron was created from the ashes of what once was White Squadron."

Louyan nearly dropped his plate. *White Squadron?* The outfit that he had been fighting with when he was captured? He didn't remember meeting this young pilot in person, but the name seemed familiar - and how else could he know who Louyan was? The thought crossed the veteran pilot's mind that this man could in fact be an Imperial plant, but he rapidly dismissed it. They seemed to have lost interest in him long ago, and besides, what did he have to lose? His life? That was worth precious little at the moment.

"Welcome to Freedom's End, Drake," he hissed. "The roughest Imperial prison camp I've ever been to. And," he winked and actually grinned, "trust me, I've been to quite a few."

"Well, hope you enjoyed it, Louyan - what's your callsign?" Drake asked. He always felt more comfortable using callsigns with pilots he didn't really know. And calling the man "Ilyich" would feel uncomfortable because he was much more senior, having been a squadron commander under the late Admiral Garil.

"Bear," the grizzled old man answered, eliciting a faint - and painful - smile from Drake's bleeding lips. To the man in his early twenties his companion certainly looked like a great old bear.

"Well, Bear, I hope you've enjoyed your stay here at Shangri La," he said cheerfully, "because you and I are getting out of here." Bear smiled at his new friend's courage, but shook his head slightly.

"You haven't learned yet, Drake, but you will. This place isn't called Freedom's End for nothing. You don't get out of here unless you do it in a body bag. One man tried to escape this week, and got himself - and several innocent bystanders - shot in the process. Get used to the idea - your previous life is over." Louyan's previous cheer, brought on by the arrival of this young Wolfshead pilot - and therefore a reminder of Louyan's own distant past, a past where he was free and not an Imperial prisoner - now seemed to leave him. Reality set in and his shoulders slumped.

"I'm not giving up yet," Drake growled firmly. "And nor will the Squadron, believe me."

"That may be so, but I speak from hard experience, kid," Louyan countered, then resumed his meagre lunch.

And to that statement, Drake had no answer.

[To be continued ...]

Did you like this story? If so, then please send a message to [Drake](#). He would be happy to receive any feedback.



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Last update of this page: 06 Aug 2001