



Reading Room

StarWars FanFiction POV: Stars In His Eyes

By Lewis Gregory

"You try to raise a child good and grounded on the earth, and what do you get? A wild Bantha of a boy with stars in his eyes."

-- Aaron Gregory's last words to his son Lewis.



[Onboard the civilian transport *Fard's Folly*, leaving Alderaan for Briggia with a group of prospective Alderaanean students of the University of Briggia on board. Several years ago.]



All was ready for liftoff. Lewis Gregory sat strapped into the copilot's seat of *Fard's Folly*, Briggian registry number KX-656, helping its owner and pilot, University of Briggia Visiting Professor Fard Telleran, run down the last few checks before takeoff.

As they completed the checklist, Fard chuckled. "You know your way around a cockpit pretty well, son," he smiled. "Simulator time?"

"Yes sir," Lewis replied. "Quite a bit, in starfighters too."

"Well, she's no starfighter, but she's a darn fine spaceship, and a sturdy one too. Hang on now, here we go."

The old transport's engines wound up with an edgy whine. The repulsors pushed them upward and began the trajectory that would carry the decidedly un-aerodynamic transport and its excited cargo of one professor, eleven students, and all their possessions, onward to their future on Briggia.

In a few minutes they were out of the atmosphere and cleared out of orbit by Planetary Control. Fard rolled the transport over to the right to bring the planet up in the windows on the starboard side. "Take a good look, ladies and gentlemen," he said over the intercom. "There is your home." There was much excited chatter; for many onboard, it was their first space flight.

Not for Lewis, though. His father had been in the Imperial Navy when he met his future wife, married her, and had their only son. He had been a TIE Bomber pilot. Because of frequent changes of bases, Helena and the young Lewis had moved seven times in four years; sometimes it seemed to Lewis as if he spent half his early childhood on some freighter or other, slowly moving to yet another Force-forsaken Imperial garrison.

His father had grown disillusioned at the start of the New Order of Emperor Palpatine, and had mustered out of the Navy with a tidy sum. He and his family moved to Alderaan, where they were shocked at the hatred the people there felt for the Empire and its minions. He briefly served with the Alderaan Sector Defense Militia, but his Imperial connections had proved too much for many to bear as Alderaan's opposition to the New Order had grown, and he was forced to resign. Things grew so bad that they had been forced to move far out into the country, to their foothill homestead. Only there had they been safe from the taunts, insults, and vandalism.

Even there, Lewis found that he had to constantly defend himself due to his father's chosen vocation. As a result of that--and of the hard labor he had to do around the country home--he had grown up powerfully built. Skills in the fighting arts were a must to counter the bullies and those who would insult his family name; after a few years, he got so good at it that the other kids left him alone, and so big--190 cm and well over 120 kilos--that his new disparaging nickname was the "hairless Wookiee." The isolation left him socially backward and introverted, happy only when he was absorbed in tales of battles among the stars...

Fard snapped him out of his reverie. "Make yourself useful, Lewis, check our course to the jump point. Something's not right."

Lewis looked down at the readouts. "Sure, it's right, sir. At least, the nav computer says it's right. We're right on course, four minutes to jump."

Fard shook his head. "Well, then the computer's wrong, because there's the moon right there, so we're at least ninety degrees off. Try recalculating."

Lewis looked up...sure enough, that was the moon in front of them. *But no, it shouldn't be there*, he thought, and looked to his right.

"Professor, something's not right all right...the moon's over there," and Lewis pointed out the starboard cockpit window...to where Alderaan's moon shone brightly, just over the planetary horizon.

For a few seconds, there was silence in the cockpit as the two men tried to reason out this strange occurrence, then the silence was broken by a whining scream that echoed down the transport from front to back. "What the..." was all Fard had time to say, as he yanked the transport's controls hard to avoid colliding with something that flashed by the forward viewport, again with that odd metallic whine.

Lewis sat stunned. "It can't be...that had to be a TIE. I'd know that sound anywhere from my dad's days in the Navy."

Fard shook his head, and spoke almost as if he was trying to convince himself, as much as his passenger. "Impossible. No TIE can hyperspace, and there's none stationed in-system. It must've been an asteroid?"

"Two of them?", Lewis asked. "And with ion engine noise?"

Again, more silence in the cockpit. Then Fard looked to his left, and gasped sharply. "Y...you're right," he stammered. "TIE Bombers, and Fighters. Several of them, b..b..beside us."

But Lewis wasn't looking at the TIEs. He was looking at the moon in front of them. "Professor," he said slowly, "since when do moons have perfectly smooth surfaces, except for one large circular crater? And since when do they have metallic light reflections?"

Fard tore his eyes off the Imperial fighters and looked at the object...and what little color was left drained from his face. "Th...th...it's impossible. Nothing that big can be man-made."

All of a sudden, the comm crackled, then a voice boomed forth: "Attention transport craft, attention transport craft. Heave to and prepare to be boarded immediately. Failure to comply will result in the destruction of your craft. Acknowledge at once."

Fard sat frozen like a statue for several seconds, then by sheer force of will, pressed the transmit button. "Th...this is Briggian transport *Fard's Folly*, r-r-registry number K-Kilo X-ray six f-five six, carrying students..."

The voice overrode his transmission. "I'm not interested in what you say your name is or what you have onboard. You have thirty seconds to stop your craft or you will be disabled and boarded. We can do this easy or we can do this in a more difficult manner--your choice."

Lewis looked to the right, and saw new craft--two shiny new Imperial Transports, one almost certainly fitted with ion cannons--close aboard to starboard. "They're not kidding, Professor," he said, "it must be a customs check. Let them search, what's the problem?"

Fard's eyes were wild and he was sweating profusely. "You don't understand, son...you don't understand what they'll do...we're doomed, they're all doomed..."

Lewis stared uncomprehendingly as this learned, eloquent man melted into a sobbing fool before his eyes. From the comm, the impersonal voice crackled, "You've got ten seconds." To the right, the cannon-armed transport had slipped out of sight. A quick toggle of the rear-mounted video display confirmed that it had taken a position seventy meters astern of *Fard's Folly*, in perfect line to either disable the transport with ion cannons...or use its twin lasers, or any missiles it might be carrying, to blow the unshielded craft apart.

Lewis had no choice, so he thought. He grabbed the throttle and slammed it down to idle, bringing the transport to a jolting halt.

Fard looked at him with the eyes of a madman. "What are you doing? Don't you realize they're going to kill us all??"

"Professor, calm down," Lewis replied, raising an eyebrow. "You don't have some 'Coruscant special' stashed on here or something, do you?"

Fard would issue no more coherent replies; he broke down into great, heaving sobs. From the comm, the voice crackled again: "That's more like it. Now unlock your universal and prepare to be boarded. As long as there's no funny business, everything will be just fine."

With Fard incapacitated, Lewis threw the switches to free up the transport's universal docking clamp, then idled and locked the transport's controls, climbed out of the seat, and headed back to the passenger area. Only now did the other teenagers seem to notice that something was wrong.

"Hey," a dusky-skinned fellow asked, "why're we stopping?"

"Imperial customs patrol, I think," Lewis replied. "Professor Telleran is acting real weird...I sure hope he doesn't have any joydrugs stashed on here..."

The door to the airlock hissed open, and even the knowledge that there were Imperials coming to board the spacecraft prepared the teenagers for the sight that greeted them. Two stormtroopers in full battle armor, armed with blaster rifles, stepped out and flanked either side of the airlock, rifles ready. Behind them strode a tall man in the brown uniform of an Imperial officer, and then came four more troopers that moved into various positions around the cabin and the door leading to the cockpit. Lewis recognized the brown-uniformed man, obviously the one in charge, as an Imperial commando.

The commando--a Lieutenant, Lewis guessed by the rank insignia--looked around somewhat disdainfully

before his eyes settled on Lewis, who was the only one standing. "You the pilot?" he asked.

"No sir, the pilot and owner is in the cockpit. Sir, what's this about, we're just..."

The commando cut him off. "Save it, kid," he snarled. He motioned two of the troopers forward into the cockpit, turned to the rest of the group, and said, "Sorry, kids, your travel plans have temporarily been changed. Get through the airlock and into the transport. MOVE!"

There was real fear on all of the teenagers' faces as they began moving toward the Imperial transport, prodded along by the rifles of two of the troopers. Lewis was at the end of the line, so he saw the two troopers dragging Professor Telleran back from the cockpit; he was alternately sobbing and ranting, too frantic to walk or to do more than vainly struggle against the iron grip of the troopers.

The commando checked a datapad, looked at Fard, and nodded. "Known Rebel sympathizer, what luck. You know what to do."

Lewis was aghast. "Rebel sympathizer? He's just a professor..."

The commando's blaster pistol was against Lewis' throat in a flash. "Listen, you fool," he hissed, "you're damned lucky we don't off the lot of you for being with this scum. But this is your lucky day, boy...it turns out that we could use some new janitorial help back at the garrison..." He looked at the last girl, a pretty redhead, as she was herded through the airlock. "...and other kinds of help, too. Now, I strongly suggest you haul yourself through that airlock, or..."

The commando turned to Fard, who was being held with his arms spread-eagled by the troopers. With one fluid motion, he moved the pistol from Lewis' throat, aimed, and fired at Fard. One shot pierced his forehead, the troopers dumped him to the deck, and there he lay, twitching slightly.

The commando returned the pistol, with the exact reverse fluid motion, to Lewis' throat. "...or you're next."

With a last glance backward at Fard's body, Lewis was herded through the airlock, and away from all that he knew toward an uncertain future. He heard the commando behind him say "Do a quick search and get out, we've got about six minutes to clear the area or we're going to be toasty critters, so get a move on."

Five minutes later, the troopers' transport jarred free from *Fard's Folly* and accelerated quickly away. About a minute later, the transport stopped and spun around.

The commando, who seemed to be taking a perverse pleasure in the fright of his eleven teenage passengers, especially the females--turned to the group and smiled. "If you would, young ones, please turn your attention to the screen at the front of the cabin. You are now about to see what happens to those who would oppose the Emperor and his New Order."

An image of Alderaan, spinning peacefully in orbit, appeared on the holoscreen. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, except that in the background, Lewis could hear a countdown..."five...four...three...

two...one...engage!"

Nothing seemed to happen for a few seconds...but then, the screen dimmed as a green beam of blinding intensity lanced in from the left and struck the planet.

"NO!", one boy screamed as he lunged at the screen, as if by grabbing the image of Alderaan he could somehow stop what might be happening. His action was greeted by a blaster butt to the face from one of the troopers, and he fell back to the deck bleeding and moaning.

Suddenly the screen flashed blinding white, and cut out. Simultaneously Lewis saw a white glow from the open cockpit hatch of the transport and heard one of the pilots yell "By the power of the Force, what did they do??"

The screen began to recover from the flash...and all it showed was a slowly-expanding fireball where Alderaan used to be.

The teenagers all immediately began screaming and crying, all except for Lewis. He sat transfixed, watching the planet that had been his home for ten years...its mountains, lakes, hills, plains, all that he had grown to know and love, his father, his mother, and all his ideas and illusions...vaporize in front of him.

"Brace for shockwave, five seconds!", yelled a voice from the cockpit.

His time estimation was wrong, it was more like three seconds. The transport was tossed about like a leaf on a raging sea, and during the second, or maybe the third shock, Lewis wasn't sure, he struck his head on one of the trooper benches, and thus mercifully lapsed into unconsciousness.

Voices, somewhere in a dark fog of pain and sedation...

"...owe me big-time, Lieutenant. Do you have any idea the fast talking I had to do to get these kids smuggled onboard as cargo without anyone noticing? And there were only ten...I thought you said there were eleven?"

"One boy got frisky on the transport. We couldn't take him to the sickbay without blowing the cover of the others, so we had to...uh...handle him separately. Damn shame, really, he would've brought a thousand credits easy; he looked like mineworker material. I tell you, getting pulled off on Death Star duty and being on that crate was a stroke of luck. The Force was sure smiling on me when I ran into that ship full of fresh meat."

"Anyway, like I said, you owe me for getting them on here. It ain't easy sneaking those crates on a Malkan-bound freighter."

"Oh, give me a frelking break. Malkan's a hellhole, nothing and nobody ever goes there except essential supplies, nobody cares about it. You could take a corvette apart and ship it there in pieces and nobody would notice. But, you do deserve something...tell you what. Money is traceable. How about I give you one of the six girls? You know, a little personal entertainment for a while? You can keep her or sell her, I don't care. I've got just the one for you, too."

"Sure, she's probably a hundred kilos with a face like an assassin droid."

"Would I do that to you? These are university students, Ban. They're all young, healthy, good shape, and all the female ones are pretty. A nice, thin, pale-skinned blonde. Yes sir, that's the one for you."

"Don't I get to pick, sir?"

"Don't get greedy. You'll take what I give you and be glad for it."

"All right, all right. What about the others? You setting up a harem or something when you get back to your garrison?"

"Nah. One girl goes to my Captain, for fixing the report on the transport that got damaged by the shockwave. The rest of them go to the market block on Malkan, where they'll probably get me at least 10,000 credits for the lot...except two. There's one particularly attractive girl I'm keeping for my own, and the one big stupid one I almost had to shoot. He'll come in handy as a moose boy for the platoon."

"Heh...so does the Empire approve of their junior officers engaging in the slave trade?"

"Ban, my old friend, what they don't know can't hurt me. Besides, these kids were caught in the vicinity of a Rebel sympathizer, trying to flee the planet before it was destroyed. I had every right to just blow them away right there; instead, I'm giving them their lives. And their lives are giving me lots of credits. Seems like a fair trade, don't you think?"

And the voices--amid laughter--dissolved back into the blackness...

The blackness was broken again, this time by a piercing light that cut right through Lewis' eyelids. Before he could hardly move, a boot lashed out and kicked him in the hip, and the Lieutenant's gruff voice barked, "Sit

up, moose-boy!"

Lewis did as he was told, slowly and painfully. The effects of the battering he took when the shockwave hit the transport hadn't quite faded, and he was sore all over, particularly in the back and sides of his head. As his eyes adjusted to the light, he looked around as best he could. He was in an interior room, more like a cell really. There was a toilet/fresher unit, the cot he was sitting on, and not much else. As he glanced around, he felt the bed move; looking around, he saw the blurred form of the red-haired girl from the transport--Lasa, he believed her name was--sitting on the edge of the bed. As his eyes regained their focus, he saw that she was wearing an ill-fitting Imperial uniform shirt and nothing else; she had been crying, and her lower lip was swollen and slightly bleeding. Judging from the faraway, wounded look in her eyes, it wasn't hard to figure what had happened.

A rough hand grabbed Lewis' face and yanked it back to the front, and upward to face the Lieutenant. "No staring at my property, moose-boy," he hissed, "especially not when you're on my time. And from now on, you're on my time all the time."

The Lieutenant released Lewis' face and gestured to the cell. "Welcome to your world, boy. Or should I say, 'moose-boy'. Because that's your name from now on. I don't know what your name was, and frankly, I don't care. Because from this day forward, you're not the Empire's, you're not the Rebels', and you're not your mama's. You're mine, moose-boy."

He started pacing around the tiny cell. "From now on, you will be let out each day to be what we call a 'moose boy'; you'll clean up, you'll move stuff, you'll do whatever we tell you to do. Every trooper in this garrison, right down to the newest plebe, can do anything they want to you short of kill you, as long as they leave enough of you to finish what I've told you to do. You will not speak unless spoken to. You will not strike back when you're hit. You will eat and sleep when we tell you to, and not before. And in case you get any bright ideas about running off, forget it. Because if one of you runs off, we'll find you, and we'll bring you back here. And then you get to watch the other one die. Reeeaal slowly." He leaned down close. "Are we clear, moose-boy?"

Lewis said nothing; he just glared at his tormentor.

"I said, are we clear, moose-boy? You can speak, can't you?"

Lewis croaked, "My name is not 'moose-boy'. My name is..."

He never got it out. The Lieutenant backhanded him as hard as he could, hard enough to send him flying into Lasa and send the both of them tumbling off the bed. Then the Lieutenant reached down and, with difficulty, hauled the stunned Lewis to his feet.

"I don't think you quite understand the situation, moose-boy," he hissed. "Mommy and Daddy ain't here to save you. I could blow your head off right now and nobody would care except the people that have to clean this room up. You have no options, boy. Either you both play by my rules, or life is going to be very hard and very short for the both of you. Now, do we have an understanding, moosie?"

"Y...yes," the newly-christened Moose croaked through swelling and bleeding lips.

"Good," the Lieutenant said, a truly evil smile coming across his face. "Now you stay right here like a good little moose while I take my prize back to her room, and then we're going to go meet your new friends in my platoon..."

For two years, Lewis Gregory was the "moose boy" of Lieutenant Roland Integlia's garrison in the Khalban Range, an isolated section of the planet Malkan. During that time, the troopers in the garrison used him unceasingly for manual labor, and quite often as a punching bag. For the troopers, who were often bullied about by their superiors, to have a target that was not allowed to defend himself was a blessing and a release--and one that they used with gusto. After all, Malkan was an arid backwater, a planet, so the joke went, that "made Tatooine look like Coruscant."

There was another release that they used with gusto, as well...Lasa. It should suffice to say that no details of

what happened to her will be conveyed here, as they are quite terrible. But Moose watched as this girl, whom he had first seen as a pretty, laughing eighteen-year-old as he boarded *Fard's Folly*, was transformed into a thin, vacant-eyed shell of her former self, a woman that looked far older than her twenty years.

The harsh conditions and labor increased Moose's strength even more; while he didn't gain weight, and in fact dropped to about 115 kilos, he grew even stronger, stronger than any of the troopers arrayed against him. And yet, he could do nothing against the troopers, who often beat him senseless during their drunken reveries. But what hurt him most of all was seeing Lasa lose her will to live as the indignities continued without end.

Moose never lost his will to live. Outwardly, they had broken him; he was a big yet passive man that barely even flinched now when a trooper would spit in his face, or Lieutenant Integlia would lash him with a whip. But inside, he found a wellspring of inner strength he never knew he had, and Hate was its name. The hatred of what the Empire had done to Alderaan, his friends, to himself, and to Lasa, burned within him, and drove him on. Somehow, he felt, someday, he must escape and seek revenge. How, he did not know, but somehow he knew that it would happen.

One day, shortly after the beginning of the third year of their imprisonment, Moose was digging out a large trench near the edge of the garrison's perimeter, unsupervised. (This was common "moose work"; often, they would simply have him dig and fill back in holes for no apparent reason, simply to see him work till his hands bled and he fell from exhaustion.) He was startled from his work by a whisper behind him. He turned to see Lasa standing there.

"Lasa?", he exclaimed, looking around. "Listen, if anybody catches you standing here talking to me, we're both going to get it!"

"I know," she said, "but this will only take a moment." She leaned closer. "I heard from Integlia...there is a convoy arriving here this afternoon that will be leaving for the capital tonight. You might be able to sneak onboard and find a way off-planet in the capital."

"I can't do that," he said. "If I do, what happens to you? We'd both have to go."

She shook her head. "I can't get away, I'm supposed to...be with him tonight. But I can distract him and make sure that you get out. It's your only chance."

He swallowed hard; he knew full well what would happen to her. "Lasa..."

She placed her finger to his lips, stopping him, and smiled sadly. "Here," she said, "I want you to have this." He felt her other hand slipping something in his pocket. "Tell me you'll keep it always, and not forget me...not forget all of us on Alderaan."

He reached down in his pocket and pulled out what she had given him; it was a small charm with a picture of her, perhaps her preparatory graduation picture. She was bright-eyed, smiling, with her life ahead of her...so different from now.

When he looked up, she was gone. And he knew then that he had to try to make it onboard the trucks...if not for himself, then for her.

That night, Moose found himself back in his cell, as usual, suffering in the heat caused by a faulty ventilation system. The heat would be his friend, he knew, because it caused the trooper guarding the door to stand guard in a normal uniform, and not in his stifling-hot armor. Tonight, he had noted at feeding time that the guard was a particularly stupid and sadistic trooper named Worgo.

He had heard the heavy movers roll in a few hours before, and wondered when he would know it was time to make his move. If he tried to get out at the wrong moment, he would be easily captured.

All doubts faded when he heard noise from outside. It was a man's scream of pain like nothing he had ever heard before, and it came from the general direction of Integlia's quarters. It was closely followed by a woman's scream...and then a series of blaster shots. The woman stopped screaming.

Moose didn't have time to mourn; suddenly the door to his cell burst open and Worgo was standing there

over him. "You have anything to do with that, mooseboy?", he growled.

"How could I, flathead," Moose responded angrily. "I was here all the time."

At the sound of the word "flathead", Worgo (who really did have a remarkably flat head) growled and put aside his blaster rifle. "Moose-boy, I'm gonna take you apart for that one," he said as he advanced on Moose.

Moose knew it was time. He thought he had forgotten how to fight, but suddenly something within him took over. As Worgo lunged, Moose easily sidestepped, grabbed Worgo, and continued his forward momentum, slamming his forehead into the wall. With Worgo thus stunned, Moose then locked powerful arms around Worgo's head and neck and twisted until a loud "crack" was heard. He tossed Worgo's lifeless body to the floor, grabbed the blaster rifle, and headed out of the cell. He stopped at the guard desk, pausing long enough to liberate some rations and water from a supply cabinet nearby.

The entire garrison and all of the truck guards had run to Integlia's prefabricated hut upon his scream of pain, making it a simple matter for Moose to cover the small distance to the forwardmost truck of the convoy undetected, hop in the cargo area, and arrange himself among the stacks of crates. He checked out what was in the truck that he had picked-- machine parts, blaster pistol clips, and ah! Everyone's favorite, a small crate of thermal detonators. For a moment, he considered using the detonators, but then logic took over; he realized that there was no way he could make a one-man stand against about 75 armed troopers. So he hid in the boxes the best he could, trained his blaster rifle on the opening in case someone came to find him, and waited for the convoy to roll...

[Five weeks later, onboard the Rebel Frigate *Sh'tur*, cruising in realspace near the Alderaan Debris Field.]

Commander Halston, captain of the *Sh'tur*, hated patrolling near Alderaan. It wasn't just because of the literally million of asteroids that made scanning difficult, of course. It was because of the significance of those asteroids. Each rock was once part of a thriving planet, containing billions of people...slaughtered in a few seconds by the Empire for no good reason. There were ghosts out there, Halston firmly believed. Several members of the crew always had to be left off the ship before this patrol because being near Alderaan seemed to drive them crazy; they became emotional, almost hysterical, and unable to function. Some said that they could sense the great disturbance in the Force caused by the slaughter, others said they were just unstable. Halston wasn't sure either way...

"Captain, we have a ship on long-range sensors," one of the bridge techs barked.

Halston snapped himself back to reality. "Type and position?"

"Relative bearing three three mark one seven, range one two zero kilometers; IFF reads neutral; contact is designated Gamma two three one," the sensor tech replied, processing the information against the *Sh'tur*'s computer libraries. "Readings indicate a large transport or small freighter; engine power is zero, shields are down, the ship is tumbling...hull reads as damaged, but holding. Unable to read life signs or cargo at this range, sir."

Halston stood and stared at the display, tapping his chin for a few seconds. "Launch two of the Y-wings to check out the contact, and bring two more up on Ready Two status, and get a rescue shuttle up and ready too. Get us to within sixty kilometers before launching, but keep us clear of the debris field. And sound General Quarters. Almost no one's been through this field since Alderaan was destroyed...I don't like this."

"Yes sir," several crew members chorused as the orders were relayed and the General Quarters alarms sounded. Halston stood by the display and watched as two blips--his Y-wings--carefully picked their way through the debris field and headed for the damaged ship.

"Windfall Base from Windfall Three," one of the Y-wings called. "Target on visual; looks to be some sort of heavily modified Stormtrooper transport, expanded for freighter use. It looks like it took a couple of wrong turns into some rocks; it's a mess. Hmm...no cargo onboard...aft hatch has been blown, looks like it's been jettisoned. Wait one--what was that, R2? Sir, droid indicates we're getting an extremely low-power transmission from inside...yes, I can see someone at one of the viewports, there's someone alive in there!"

"Launch the rescue shuttle and the Ready Two Y-wings," barked Halston. "And notify Sector Command that we're effecting a rescue near Alderaan!"

[Three days later, at Rebel Sector Command onboard the Calamari Cruiser *Cathleen*.]

Captain Keylan Dar looked at the big, disheveled figure sitting in front of him and sighed. "All right, son, we're going to go over the last part of that improbable story of yours _again_...so after you hid out in the truck convoy and arrived in Hal Kaladish on Malkan, then what?"

Moose sighed as well. "Do I really have to go through this for the fiftieth time?"

"You sure do, son," Dar replied. "Put yourself in our shoes; nothing you've said so far makes a bit of sense. So let's go over it again so we can both get out of here, shall we?"

"All right...the convoy stopped off at a cantina near the spaceport. I grabbed the box of thermals and a box of of claymores and snuck out. I wasn't thinking too clearly at that point, so I figured out how to set the claymores as motion sensitive and put some under a couple of the trucks, just to cover me getting away. They blew up real nice, too." A slightly goofy grin spread over Moose's face.

"So then you got into the city and...sold the thermals?"

"That's why I grabbed them; I knew that I would have to have lots of money to get off-planet since I would have to get a smuggler or somebody to carry me--did you think I was going to get on a regular flight? So I found somebody who gave me 3,000 credits for the detonators and the remaining claymores, then I went and got some new clothes and started sneaking around looking for someone to get me off-planet."

"And how did you find them?"

"Went to the seediest place I could find and asked around, the same way I always saw it done on the trivids. I wasn't expecting much, but it worked; I found a smuggler named Zexdo that would take me from Malkan to Tatooine for the 2,500 credits I had left. I thought I'd made it."

"But you hadn't, and Zexdo tried to hand you back over to this garrison officer...Integlia?"

"Integlia and some of his goons were waiting when Zexdo took me to one of the hangars where his ship was supposedly berthed. I didn't think that he'd put out a bounty on me since I was just a 'moose-boy', but he had--4,000 credits, Zexdo said. Fortunately, I'd kept four of the thermals hidden in my clothes, and I used them on the goons when I saw them. He only brought four, that was his mistake."

"And Integlia?"

"I killed him," Moose said with a surprising calmness for a twenty-year-old. "Strangled him, in full view of Zexdo. It was too good for him after what he did to Lasa."

"Lasa?"

"The girl off the transport that wound up as his 'consort.' I've told you all about that already, and I'm not going into it again."

"Fine. Then what?"

Moose sighed again. "I persuaded Zexdo to go ahead and honor his agreement to take me to Tatooine, where I was hoping to find you guys and join the Alliance. But partway there, he tried to grab me again and kill me. We had a fight, I wound up pushing him into the aft section, securing the airlock to the forward hold, and blowing the aft hatch. That took care of him. But during the fight, the hyperdrive astrogation controls got damaged and we dropped out right in the middle of the Alderaan debris field. I couldn't get control of the ship before it hit an asteroid, wrecked the shields and knocked out the engines. After that, there wasn't anything I could do, so I just waited for someone to come along, hoping that the Alliance or somebody would come along before the provisions ran out or the reactor finally died. The frigate's ships picked me up, and here I am. Satisfied now?"

"And what was it you wanted to do again?"

"Join the Alliance and fly starfighters. Flying starfighters is all I've ever really dreamed about doing, but my father wouldn't let me do it. I know I'm capable."

"All right, son." Dar motioned to the two guards also in the room. "Take him back to his quarters," he said, rubbing his forehead.

The two guards flanked Moose as he headed out the doorway; on the way out, they passed Dar's deputy, Lieutenant Wilson, as she came in. Dar collapsed heavily into the chair that Moose had just vacated. "I sure hope you've got some information on this, Lieutenant, because that boy's story is impossible. I almost believe him, but there's no way anybody else is going to buy that this kid was taken prisoner by an Imperial that was running a private slave market, snuck off an Imperial planet after killing several troopers, and survived over four weeks in a stranded starship. The only reason I buy it is because no spy would take the time to make up a story this crazy."

Lieutenant Wilson smiled. "He might be telling the truth more than even you think." She placed a datapad in front of Dar. "We did some clandestine checking into a few Imperial databases. There was a Lieutenant Integlia stationed in the Khalban Ridge on Malkan. Five weeks ago, he was reported as going on 'medical leave.' Somebody from the Empire's auditing arm came in there and did some investigation, and we got the results. He was actually running some sort of slave trade on the side, kidnapping people out of the cities and reselling them as slaves. The 'medical leave' was caused when he was attacked by that girl Lasa with a knife...use your sick imagination as to what she did with it. Let's just say he had to have immediate microsurgery." She grinned, an action that made Captain Dar just a bit uncomfortable, as she seemed to enjoy that statement just a bit too much.

She continued. "There's no record of his death, but there were two 'terrorist acts,' the explosion of two bombs under a truck convoy and the death of several troopers at the spaceport, that correspond exactly to what Gregory has stated. It's not surprising that they would cover up Integlia's death, since he was a real black mark with what he was doing--even for the Empire, a junior officer involved in the slave trade is completely unconscionable. The transport LK-919 that Gregory was in was marked as leaving Malkan five weeks ago, just like he said, bound for Tatooine. It's currently listed as 'overdue, presumed missing.' The tech crews off of the _Sh'tur_ got some of the nav information out of the computer on the LK-919, and it matches as well."

She pressed a button on the datapad in front of Dar. "We did a background check on Gregory's family; it matches. His father's name is Aaron Gregory, former Imperial Navy starfighter pilot. He flew TIE Bombers for one tour each on the STD's *Imperious* and *Thunderbolt* here in the Outer Rim on various pirate actions; each time, the units he was in were almost completely destroyed. He then served flying TIE Fighters on various Core World garrisons, for a total of eleven years' service. Mustered out with honors nine years ago right before he would have been purged due to 'dangerous political leanings'; apparently word was getting out that he wasn't the biggest fan of Palpatine's New Order. He, wife Helena, and son Lewis settled on Alderaan and he joined the Alderaan Sector Defense Militia flying Y-wings; resigned after eighteen months' service, just before Senator Organa disbanded the entire Militia. Oh, and by the way, the transport that the kids were plucked off of? Mirror sites for the Alderaanean traffic control database show that it arrived on-planet one day before the Death Star attack and flew all over the planet picking people up. There's no record of its departure because the data would have never made it to the mirror sites before the attack."

Dar sat staring at the datapad. After a long pause, he said, "All right. Draft a memo to the High Command stating that after a thorough investigation, we believe that his story is genuine and that if he meets the qualifications, he should be allowed into starfighter training with surveillance. Assign him to an infantry training unit in the meantime. Got it?"

"Got it, sir," Lieutenant Wilson said as she headed off to write the document, leaving Dar sitting alone in the darkened room.

He looked up at the ceiling and said, to no one in particular, "I sure hope we're right on this one..."

[Onboard the Alliance training frigate *Perseverance*. Three months ago.]

Training Officer Lieutenant G'stor Korinski stood in the Training Control Room onboard the *Perseverance*, watching a holotank showing the passage of a lone fighter through the Proving Ground. Beside him, a

technician also monitored the Y-wing's progress.

"Level seven ended," the tech droned in a bored voice. "Training Nineteen now enters level eight, turret and platform settings confirmed." It was hard for the tech not to be bored; this was a drill that had gone on several times a day for years, as prospective Alliance starfighter pilots came to the "Maze" to hone their flying and combat skills. It was the first step on a very long road. But for the pilot of the Y-wing--Moose--it was the last step on that road toward an assignment.

"Fighter status?", Korinski asked.

"Shields showing 100%--no, make that 92%, he just got hit," the tech responded. "Laser energy 85%, all systems green. Looks like another easy one."

"G'stor!", cried an unexpected voice from the Control Room's entranceway. Korinski turned around, and was surprised to see the smiling face of Commander Matthias "Blackjack" Krenzel, the commanding officer of the Alliance's mobile reserves, Blue Squadron. Korinski had once served in Blue Squadron until his X-wing was shot out from underneath him, leaving him with injuries that forced his transfer to Training Command.

"Commander! Good to see you! How are things on the *Happy Jack*?" Korinski returned the smile with a hearty handshake.

"Not bad," Blackjack replied. "I wish I could stay and have a drink, but I'm a bit short on time now; I'm here to pick up my two newest fledglings and take them back to the *Happy Jack*. Are they ready?"

"Well, McKay is all done and back onboard, and Gregory is still out on the Proving Ground getting his last flight badge, in the Y. He should be about done right now...let me pull him up on screen."

Korinski hit two buttons, and a holo of the last few gates of the Y-wing's run appeared. The heavy attack fighter cleared the next-to-last gate, then did a complete roll as it passed through the last gate to complete the eighth level and earn Moose his Y-wing flight badge. Korinski grimaced slightly, which caused Blackjack to smile even wider. "You never did like that show-off stuff, eh?"

Seeing that Blue Leader was having some fun at his expense, Korinski had to smile and shake his head. "It's a waste and a distraction, sir, you know that. But since it's the end of his qualifications, I guess I can't mark him down for it. I'll get him back here and have him and McKay report to you." He activated the commlink. "Training Nineteen, this is Training Base. Congratulations, Flight Officer, that's another decoration for your dress uniform. Return to base immediately and report to my office as soon as you're down."

The comm crackled back. "Training Base from Training Nineteen, roger sir. On my way back."

Moose, still in his flight suit, hustled down the corridor toward Lieutenant Korinski's office. At an intersection, he literally bumped into Nik "Hardrive" McKay, another member of Moose's training class. "Hey, watch it, wookiee-breath," Hardrive said jokingly. "Ramming is not a standard Alliance tactic!"

"Sorry, HD," Moose replied as the two walked together down the corridor, "but I'm in a hurry; Lieutenant Korinski wanted to see me ASAP after I got back from the Proving Ground. I think he's mad about some maneuvering I did out there."

"Really?", Hardrive said. "That's funny, he wanted to see me too. I wonder if it's a meeting?"

"Hmmm...I don't know. Well, we're here, so let's see what he wants." Moose pressed the buzzer on the door. From inside, Korinski's muffled voice yelled, "Come."

The door opened, and Moose and Hardrive walked inside--and stopped. In addition to the expected sight of Lieutenant Korinski, they saw Blackjack standing next to him. Both trainees reflexively snapped to attention and saluted the two men.

Blackjack returned the salute and strode over to the two somewhat apprehensive trainees. "Good day, gentlemen; I'm pressed for time, so I'll keep this short. Both of your applications to Blue Squadron have been approved. Hardrive, you'll be joining the Eleventh TSW flying A-wings; Moose, since our Y-wing unit is our Reserve unit, and you expressed an interest in heavy assault, you'll be in the Fifteenth TSW flying B-

wings. Congratulations to you both. I wish we had time for a proper party, but we need you both right away. In fact, you'll both be leaving for the ASD *Happy Jack* immediately, with me."

Korinski walked around his desk and faced the two men. "You'll even get to fly your own fighters over; we had some other trainees ferry some fighters over on their long-distance navigation training missions. They're being repainted into Blue Squadron colors, and you're getting Blue Squadron insignia on your spare flight suits as we speak. Now get to your quarters and get your stuff, you're leaving in one hour. Dismissed."

A little stunned, Moose and Hardrive saluted and turned to leave. From behind them, Korinski called, "Oh, and gentlemen?"

The two turned. Moose said, "Sir?"

Korinski smiled. "You'll do well, gentlemen. It's been a pleasure. Good luck, and may the Force be with you."

The three fighters dropped out of hyperspace. Blackjack came on the comm. "Well, gentlemen, there she is, the *Happy Jack*. Your new home. I know it seems odd to be making a landing pattern into an Imperial Star Destroyer instead of a torpedo run, but you'll get used to it."

Moose was awed at the sheer size of the wedge-shaped starship. Training holos didn't prepare him for the awesome grandeur of a 1600 meter Star Destroyer, even one with an immense black-and-yellow smiley face painted on the dorsal surface.

"*Happy Jack*, this is Blue Leader," Blackjack transmitted. "Myself, Blue 18, and Blue 25 requesting landing clearance."

"Blue Leader, roger," a female voice replied. "Cleared for straight-in approach, welcome home and welcome to the new guys."

"Roger, *Happy Jack*," Blue Leader said. "Okay guys, follow me in." Automatically the three ships fell into line; line; Blackjack's X-wing, Hardrive's A-wing, and Moose's B-wing in the rear. As they headed toward the ship, Moose remembered something.

He reached down into his flight suit, fumbled for a second, and then pulled out the locket that Lasa had given him on Malkan. It was tarnished with age, but her picture was still visible, frozen forever young and vibrant. Carefully, he took the charm and attached it to the B-wing's control panel, where he stared at it long and hard.

"I won't forget, Lasa," he whispered. "I won't forget."

"Ever."

THE END



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