

Star Wars

Galaxy of Fear

12

The Hunger

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PROLOGUE

The bounty hunter stalked the corridors of the Super Star Destroyer.

The walls of the enormous battleship gleamed. The floors had the shine of brand-new, recently polished durasteel. Starship officers and white-armored stormtroopers-the cream of the Imperial crop-hurried past. They walked with the arrogance of men who knew they were serving aboard the newest and largest of the Emperor's ships. This was the Super Star Destroyer

Executor, flagship of the Imperial Fleet, and the command ship of the Emperor's most ruthless servant, Darth Vader.

The bounty hunter couldn't have cared less.

His face was hidden by a gray helmet. Otherwise, the Imperials would have seen the hard, disinterested expression on his face and the cold look of a killer in his eyes. He wasn't impressed by ships or uniforms. He only cared about one thing: the job.

A set of massive doors hissed open, and the bounty hunter stepped inside a large, dark chamber. If the bounty hunter had had any emotions left, he might have felt afraid. But he'd left his feelings behind in bits and pieces, scattered among the bodies of countless victims on hundreds of worlds. So he didn't feel anything.

A figure stepped out of the shadows. Tall. Covered in black armor. Face hidden behind a skull-like mask. Breath rasping like a death rattle.

Darth Vader.

The Dark Lord of the Sith acknowledged the bounty hunter's presence with a nod. "Boba Fett."

"Lord Vader," the bounty hunter replied. Then he waited. He knew Vader would get right to the point.

"I have an assignment for you," the Dark Lord said. "I have just put a large bounty on the heads of three individuals. Two human children and a male Shi'ido."

The bounty hunter's helmet dipped forward slightly. "I've never hunted a Shi'ido before. But human children-that doesn't sound interesting. Or profitable."

"Fifty thousand credits for each of the two children. Alive. One hundred thousand for the Shi'ido. Alive. Seventy-five thousand dead."

Boba Fett paused. "Then it's profitable. But still not interesting."

Vader held up one gloved hand. "These three have eluded capture several times. There is more to them than meets the eye."

The bounty hunter said, "I have another job. I'm hunting for a killer named Malloc. It pays more. A lot more."

Vader closed one gloved hand into a fist. "Consider this job a diversion until you find him." It was more of an order than a suggestion.

Boba Fett weighed his options. He didn't want the job. He didn't need the credits. But even he did not ignore the wishes of Darth Vader. Finally,

the bounty hunter said, "Done."

Vader handed him a datadisk. Without another word, Boba Fett turned to leave. The moment he did, he forgot about his reluctance. He forgot that Vader had just threatened him into accepting the task. He forgot about everything but the job.

He wouldn't stop until he'd finished it.

CHAPTER 1

"Don't move, or I'll shoot the boy," said the greasy-haired human, pointing his blaster at Zak.

Zak Arranda's eyes widened, but the blaster-wielding human wasn't looking at him. The killer had his eyes fixed on Zak's uncle Hoole. He didn't bother to look at Zak or at Zak's sister, Tash, who stood next to him.

They stood in a dark alley in the grimy spaceport of Nar Shaddaa. The man, grinning at them through a mouthful of broken teeth, had practically melted out of the shadows the moment they turned off the main street and into the alley.

"What is the meaning of this?" Hoole demanded in a calm, cool voice.

"You have no right to threaten us."

"This gives me all the right I need," the man said, brandishing his weapon. "That and my bounty hunter's license. And you three have a price on your head I couldn't resist."

"A bounty hunter?" Tash said, surprised.

Beside her, Zak was stunned. He knew that he and his sister and their uncle Hoole were wanted by the Empire. They'd been on the run for months, ever since they'd stumbled upon a horrifying Imperial science experiment and helped to destroy it. He knew the Empire wanted to arrest them. But he'd had no idea the Imperials wanted them badly enough to put a price on their heads.

That meant not only that they were wanted by every Imperial agent in the galaxy but also that there could be dozens, maybe even hundreds, of bounty hunters tracking them as well. Any bounty hunter who captured them and turned them over to the Empire would receive a fortune in credits.

Zak saw Hoole pretend to be confused. "I do not know what you are talking about. You must be mistaken."

"I don't think so," the bounty hunter laughed. He recited facts as

though reading off a datapad. "Two human children. A girl named Tash Arranda, blond, about thirteen standard years. Her brother, a boy named Zak Arranda, about twelve, dark hair. Traveling in the company of a Shi'ido."

The bounty hunter continued to glare at Hoole as he said, "Never seen a Shi'ido before. You look almost human, except for that gray skin." The killer snarled. "But I done my homework. I know you Shi'idos can change shape. So you twitch one muscle and I'll use the boy's head for target practice."

Zak looked at Uncle Hoole's face. What the bounty hunter said was true-Hoole could change shape. But even Hoole wasn't fast enough to stop the killer from firing his blaster. Zak saw a look of frustration pass across his uncle's face.

Looks like we came to the wrong place, Zak thought. Again.

Nar Shaddaa was a spaceport moon orbiting the planet Nal Hutta. Buildings rose dozens of kilometers into the sky and were connected by bridges, decks, and balconies that crisscrossed like streets suspended in midair. The walkways of Nar Shaddaa were filled with grime, graffiti, and shady-looking characters. Most of them looked tough enough to scare the wrappings off a Tusken Raider.

Zak, Tash, and Uncle Hoole had flown to Nar Shaddaa in their ship, the Shroud, several days earlier. They needed to resupply the ship, and while

Nar Shaddaa wasn't the most wholesome place in the galaxy, it suited their needs. Nar Shaddaa was known for its smugglers, gangsters, and bounty hunters. The spaceport was dangerous, and although the Empire had a garrison here, the local Imperials did little to keep the streets safe.

Which was exactly why Hoole and the Arrandas had come.

Since the Imperials never bothered to patrol the streets of Nar Shaddaa, it was a safe enough stop for two humans and a Shi'ido wanted by the Empire.

Or so they'd thought.

As though he were reading Zak's thoughts, the bounty hunter said, "I bet you figured you'd be safe from the Empire here on Nar Shaddaa. Figured maybe the Imperials wouldn't look around this black hole of a spaceport. Well, you were wrong. There are plenty of bounty hunters that'd love to turn you in. Lucky for me, I spotted you first."

"Whatever the bounty is," Hoole said, "we will pay you double if you let us go."

The bounty hunter laughed. "You ain't got those kinds of credits. Besides, word in the space lanes is that some of the biggest bounty hunters in the galaxy are after you three. Hauling you in before any of them could

send my reputation into lightspeed."

As the bounty hunter and Hoole spoke, Zak noticed how quiet Tash was. She'd hardly said a word, and she hadn't moved a muscle since the bounty hunter appeared. Glancing at her out of the corner of his eye, Zak saw that his sister had focused her gaze on the bounty hunter's blaster. A calm look had fallen across her face. For an instant-a fraction of a second-Zak felt something like a warm breeze pass through him. He knew what she was doing.

Tash was calling on the Force.

"Please put the blaster down," Hoole said. "I don't want the children to get hurt. I promise I won't cause you any problems."

"Oh, I know you won't," the bounty hunter said with another jagged-toothed smile. "You're worth almost as much dead as alive. And since I get the feeling you'd jump me first chance you got, I figure I'll just shoot you now and save myself a load of trouble."

With a snap of the wrist, the bounty hunter turned the blaster from Zak to Hoole. Zak felt the warm breeze turn into a blasting wind.

Just as the bounty hunter pulled the trigger, the arm holding the blaster jerked upward, and the blaster bolt sizzled over Hoole's shoulder.

Before Zak could move a muscle, the Shi'ido had shape-shifted into the

bulky, snout-nosed form of a Gamorrean and pummeled the bounty hunter into unconsciousness with a few powerful blows. By the time Zak had taken two steps, Hoole had shifted back into his own shape and was tucking the bounty hunter's blaster into the folds of his robe.

"Tash," the Shi'ido said calmly, "I assume you caused that shot to miss?"

Tash nodded. "Yes. I'm starting to get the hang of the Force, I think. I still can't do much, but . . ."

Hoole nodded. "Your power is becoming most impressive."

Tash shrugged. "You did the real work."

Zak frowned, suddenly aware that he hadn't done anything to help.

"We must get back to the Shroud," Hoole said. "Nar Shaddaa is obviously not going to be as safe as we had hoped. In fact, if that bounty hunter is telling the truth, then Nar Shaddaa is one of the most dangerous places in the galaxy for us to be."

"But every place is dangerous," Zak said wearily. "Everywhere we've gone, the Empire has found us."

It felt to him as though they'd been on the run forever. In fact, they'd only been with Uncle Hoole for a little over a year. Almost twelve standard months ago, the Empire had destroyed Tash and Zak's home planet of Alderaan, killing their mother and father and all their friends in one terrible blow. Zak and Tash had survived only because they'd been offplanet at the time. Hoole, their uncle by marriage, was their only living relative. So they'd gone to live with him. And they'd hardly had a moment to catch their breath since.

"There's got to be someplace safe we can go," Tash said.

"No place I've ever heard of," Zak grumbled. Hoole raised an eyebrow.

"An interesting idea."

"What do you mean?" asked Zak.

"A place that no one has ever heard of," the Shi'ido said thoughtfully.

"We should find a planet that has not been charted. That would be safe from the Empire."

Zak shook his head. "But if it's a planet no one's ever charted, how are we going to find it?"

Hoole led them out of the alley. "There is a way. As you both know, my anthropology work has taken me to many different planets. Whenever an exploration party has discovered a new planet, they send data to our

research facility on the planet Koaan. Sometimes, it takes months for this data to be studied. And since the Empire took over . . ."

Zak snorted. "I'll bet since the Empire took over, things have slowed down even more."

"Precisely," Hoole said. "The data banks at the research facility are filled with planets that have been located but never studied or colonized."

Tash's eyes lit up. "You're saying we could use the information stored on Koaan to find a planet that no one else has bothered to study, a planet that hasn't made it onto the official charts."

"Precisely," Hoole said again. "We shall go to Koaan."

They had been lucky to escape the first bounty hunter, and their luck held out as they hurried through the streets of Nar Shaddaa. If they did pass any other bounty hunters, the killers didn't recognize them. The three fugitives reached the Shroud with no trouble.

A few minutes later they received clearance to depart, and the starship roared out of the atmosphere and into space.

"Once we reach Koaan," Hoole said when they were all seated in the ship's cockpit, "we must find Deevee. I am sure he will be able to help us."

"Deevee!" Tash said with a laugh. "We haven't seen that droid in ages!"

D-V9, or Deevee for short, had been Hoole's servant droid, and had accompanied Hoole and the Arrandas on several of their adventures. However, after being severely damaged by stormtroopers on the planet Kiva, he had retired to a quieter life as a research assistant on Koaan.

"Deevee is still doing work at the Galactic Research Academy," Hoole said. "I am sure he will have access to the-"

An alarm beeped softly on the control board. Hoole studied the scanners and frowned.

"What is it?" Zak asked.

"There is a ship behind us," Hoole said. "It left Nar Shaddaa just as we did, and it seems to be following us."

"An Imperial ship?" Tash asked tensely.

Zak looked at the scanner, which gave a general outline of the ship behind them. "Doesn't look like it. It's too small. And this is weird-according to the scanners, there are no life-forms aboard."

"Then how can it be following us?" Tash wondered.

"I do not know," the Shi'ido said. "However, it makes little difference. We are ready to make the jump to hyperspace. No one will be able to follow us then."

With a few quick motions, Hoole entered the proper commands, and the Shroud lurched forward. The stars turned into white streaks as the ship thundered into hyperspace.

"There," Hoole said, getting out of the pilot's seat. "We are safe. The coordinates are set and Koaan is not far from here. Let's go to the lounge and get something to eat."

Zak and Tash followed their uncle into the central room of the Shroud. It was a small common room with several seats where they ate their meals and where Tash and Zak played hologames.

As they entered the room, the door to a small storage closet slid open and an armored figure stepped out. Tash, Zak, and Hoole recognized him instantly. They'd met him before.

It was Boba Fett.

CHAPTER 2

The bounty hunter moved smoothly and efficiently, with incredible speed. Before they could blink, a thick cable lashed out from a device on Fett's wrist and wrapped itself around Hoole, pinning his arms to his sides.

In the same motion, Fett brought his other hand up. A flash of light blinded Zak and Tash, and Zak felt his arms and legs go limp. As he hit the floor, Zak thought he was dying. Then he realized that he could still see—he just couldn't move.

Boba Fett had hit him with some kind of stun bolt.

The bolt must have missed Tash, because she was still on her feet. She jumped behind a lounge chair as Fett fired again. The stun bolt sputtered against the seat and vanished.

By that time Hoole had recovered from his initial shock. The Shi'ido started to quiver, and shape-shifted into a creature that looked like a serpent with a collar of bright feathers. The serpent slithered away, and Fett's capture cable fell limply to the floor. Fett swung his blaster around to shoot Hoole, but the feathered serpent had slipped down the corridor that led to the sleeping cabins.

Fett took one step down the corridor, and something small and hard ricocheted off the back of his helmet. Fett whirled and fired as the small

object was still bouncing away in midair.

A drinking cup, struck by Fett's blaster bolt, shattered into a thousand pieces.

Another drinking cup leaped off a shelf and flew toward the bounty hunter. This time, Fett simply swatted it aside with the back of his hand.

Tash was using the Force again. Zak knew she couldn't do much against a killer like Boba Fett. She wasn't strong enough in the Force to throw anything really heavy at him. But at least she was doing something. He, on the other hand, felt totally useless.

Fett's helmeted head swiveled from the corridor where Hoole had disappeared, to the chair that Tash was hiding behind. The bounty hunter was trying to decide which prey to capture first. He never bothered to look at Zak, who had already been taken out of action.

Finally, Fett spoke. "Surrender now and I won't kill you," his hard, cold voice rasped. "You're worth more to me alive. Fight, and you'll die."

"Leave us alone!" Tash yelled from behind her chair.

Fett ignored her. "Surrender. You are unarmed."

As if to prove him wrong, a blaster bolt sizzled out of the hallway and glanced off the bounty hunter's armored shoulder. The force of the blow spun Fett around, and immediately the bounty hunter dove for cover. He pressed himself against one wall, out of sight of the corridor.

"Armed," Fett muttered to himself. "Not in the profile."

Zak would have smiled if his muscles hadn't been frozen by the stun bolt. Hoole was using the blaster he'd taken from the other bounty hunter.

"Last chance," Fett shouted down the corridor. "Surrender or die."

"Leave the ship!" Hoole ordered back from his hiding place.

"You've made your choice," Fett replied.

Still holding his blaster in one hand, the killer pointed his other arm down the hallway. There was a wrist rocket attached to his glove. The rocket flared and then shrieked as it hurtled down the corridor.

"Uncle Hoole!" Tash shouted.

The small rocket hit the back of the ship and exploded. Flames and smoke blasted down the corridor and continued to pour out of the hallway. Cautiously, the bounty hunter started down the blasted hall.

Zak's arms and legs tingled as feeling began to return to them.

"Zak," Tash whispered, appearing beside him. "Are you okay?"

"Shhtunnd," he slurred out of his half-frozen mouth. Tash helped him sit up.

"Where did he come from?" Tash whispered.

"He must have spotted us on Nar Shaddaa and sneaked on board the ship," Zak guessed. "I'll bet a Hutt's treasure that's his ship following us, on autopilot."

"What do we do now?" Tash asked. They both stared down the hallway.

Zak felt his jaw start to work better as the stun bolt's effects wore off. "Escape pod. We've got to get off the ship."

"But where will we go?" Tash whispered back. "We're in the middle of hyperspace!"

Tash had barely spoken when the ship lurched and slowed. The soft hum of the hyperdrive engines died, replaced by the sudden churning of the sublight drive. The Shroud had dropped out of hyperspace.

Tash and Zak heard someone shout from the back of the Shroud, and another explosion rocked the ship. A cloud of smoke rolled toward them from the engine room-and something rushed toward them out of the cloud.

It was Uncle Hoole.

The shoulder of his robe had been torn away and blood trickled down his sleeve.

"Uncle Hoole, you're hurt!" Tash cried.

"We have to get off this ship before Boba Fett kills us all," the Shi'ido said grimly.

"The escape pod!" Zak said.

"Yes," Hoole agreed. "We just left hyperspace. We should be over the planet Koaan."

A blaster bolt ripped through the wall above their heads. "Come!" Hoole ordered.

Together, they staggered toward the escape pod and jumped inside. Zak strapped himself into a seat, sparing a quick glance out into the hall.

Boba Fett was stalking toward them, blaster in hand.

Hoole slapped the controls, closing the emergency blast doors just as the bounty hunter fired. They heard the energy bolt slam into the heavy crash door. The Shi'ido glanced around to make sure Zak and Tash had both safely strapped themselves into their crash webbing; then he pulled a large red handle. Safety bolts exploded, and the escape pod hurled itself away from the ship.

"Look at the damage," Zak whispered, staring at the Shroud through a viewport.

Smoke and flames poured out of the ship's engines.

"Yes," Hook explained. "I tried to trap Boba Fett in the engine rooms, but he was too careful to be tricked. He fired his wrist rocket into the engines to flush me out. If I had not shapeshifted into a fire-resistant Gregonian salamander, I would have been killed."

Tash checked the escape pod's small control panel. "According to these readings, we're dropping into Koaan's gravity field. We should be able to land with no trouble. Will we find help there?"

"I do not know," Hoole replied. "But I will try to land us as close to the research center as possible."

"And as far away from Fett as we can get," Tash added.

"I wouldn't worry about him," Zak said. "It looks like the Shroud is headed for an explosion or a crash landing. Maybe it'll take Fett with it."

The escape pod wasn't designed for long flights. It was programmed to find the closest planet and land there as softly as possible-which proved to be not very softly at all.

Koaan's gravity grabbed hold of them, pulling the small pod faster and faster toward the surface. Entering the planet's atmosphere, the pod began to heat up until the outside flamed like a meteor. The inside grew hotter, too. Hoole fired the landing rockets, trying to slow their descent, and the pod rattled and bumped through the air. Just when Zak thought he couldn't take the heat or the rattling any longer, the pod hit the ground with an enormous thud! that jolted him from his feet to the top of his head.

They had landed on Koaan.

Hoole opened the hatch and all three of them crawled from the smoking escape pod onto sandy ground. They had landed on the edge of a lake. Zak got the impression of green hills in the distance, warm sun, and a brilliant blue sky. But like Hoole and Tash, he was exhausted and quickly collapsed facedown on the ground. He closed his eyes with a sigh.

The sound of a footstep made him look up.

Lying there, he could see a long shadow creeping along the ground. It was the shadow of a being covered in hard, smooth armor.

The shadow fell across him.

CHAPTER 3

"Look out!" Zak shouted, scrambling away from the helmeted figure. He expected to feel another of Boba Fett's stun bolts.

Instead, a mechanical-sounding voice spoke: "There is no need to panic, Zak."

Zak blinked. The figure standing before him wasn't Boba Fett. In fact, it wasn't a living creature at all. It was a droid. "Deevee!" Zak shouted.

The silver droid took another step forward. He was built to look as much like a human as possible, but the movements of his mechanical arms and legs were stiff and jerky.

"Deevee!" Tash shouted after Zak. She threw her arms around the droid.

"It's good to see you both again," Deevee said to the two Arrandas; then he turned to their uncle. "And Master Hoole. Welcome back to Koaan."

Hoole, who rarely smiled, almost grinned to see his old companion. "Thank you, D-V9. I am glad you received my transmission."

"Indeed," the droid said. "Although I expected you to arrive by ship, not by lifepod."

"So did we," Zak said. "But Boba Fett had other plans."

"Boba Fett!" squawked the droid. Deevee had been with them on their first encounter with the bounty hunter months earlier. "What does that killer want?"

"Us," Tash answered. "The Empire has put a price on our heads."

"Which brings us to our visit," Hoole added. "Deevee, do you have access to the research center's unprocessed data files?"

Deevee nodded. "Of course, Master Hoole. I'm now the assistant to the chief anthropologist. I have access to the entire facility."

"Good," Hoole said. "Because here is what we need . . ."

On the way to the research facility, Hoole-interrupted often by Zak and

Tash-told Deevee everything that had happened to them over the last few months. After they had helped the Rebel Alliance destroy a terrible scientific experiment created for the Empire, Zak, Tash, and Hoole had searched for a safe place to hide. But trouble and terror seemed drawn to them the way light was drawn down a black hole in space.

"It sounds terrible," Deevee said as they came near the research center. "Your situation has become worse since we last parted company."

"That's why we need a really safe place to hide," Tash said. "Not just a distant planet. We need a planet no one has ever heard of."

"I'm sure you'll find it in the old catalogs," Deevee said. "That information isn't classified, so no one will question your presence as long as you are with me. However, Master Hoole, your face is very well known here from your days as an anthropologist. You will surely be recognized."

"That is not a problem," the Shi'ido replied. He closed his eyes. His gray skin seemed to wriggle across his bones for a moment-and then Hoole was gone, replaced by a very average-looking human with brown hair and brown eyes.

"Excellent," Deevee said. "I wouldn't want anyone to recognize you with all the stormtroopers about."

"Stormtroopers!" Hoole said through his new shape. "There have never been stormtroopers on Koaan."

"There are now," the droid said with a hint of sadness in his mechanical voice. "Ever since the Rebellion, the Empire has sent military forces to control every scientific facility it owns, no matter how small. But they shouldn't trouble us."

Deevee was right. The Galactic Research Academy was a place of learning and a storehouse of information gathered by scientists and scholars from across the galaxy. Because it contained no military secrets and stayed out of politics, it wasn't considered very important by the Empire or the Rebellion. As long as the Academy didn't break any Imperial rules, it didn't get much attention. The few Imperials on the planet were there to make sure no one spread any information that would show the Empire in a bad light.

Although Hoole's familiar face might have caused a stir, the sight of a droid escorting one human adult and two human children made no impression at all.

Deevee led them through a courtyard where a few scholars, mostly human, hurried here and there on Academy business. They then followed Deevee into a large building several stories tall.

"All the floors above us contain the main library," the droid explained as they reached a bank of turbolifts. "It's one of the most complete records

of galactic knowledge anywhere. But we are going down."

A turbolift arrived and they entered. The lift descended with a gentle hum. A moment later the door opened and they found themselves facing a sour-looking man in an Imperial uniform. His skin was pale and sickly from sitting in a dingy office belowground every day.

Zak tensed on seeing the Imperial uniform, but Deevee merely shuffled out of the turbolift, leaned forward, and spoke so that his voice would be picked up by a microphone on the Imperial's desk. "Greetings, Deputy Strey. D-V9 requesting access to raw data files. I have three researchers from offplanet with me."

The Imperial, Deputy Strey, glanced at a screen. "Voice authorization confirmed. Go ahead," the Imperial said.

Deputy Strey didn't even look at them again as they continued down a dimly lit hallway, past several unmarked doors. To Zak, all the doors looked alike. But Deevee knew where he was going. He opened one of the doors and stepped inside.

They were in a large room lined with rows of shelves. Each shelf was piled high with containers, and each container held hundreds of datadisks. In the corner was a computer terminal.

"This place is some thrill," Zak said sarcastically.

"It may look boring to you, Zak," said Hoole. "But every one of those disks contains the records of a team that discovered and explored an uncharted planet. Who knows what dangers they faced, or what treasures they discovered?"

"Well, no one knows," Deevee answered. "These records have been sitting here for years."

"Why?" Tash asked, staring wide-eyed at the galaxy of information around her. Tash was a reader, and the thought of all that knowledge made her head spin.

"Everything we record has to be approved by the Empire first," the droid explained. "All these disks are just copies. The originals are on Coruscant, the Imperial capital. Once a file is approved, we can send it upstairs to the main library. Luckily for us, with nothing else to do, the Academy scholars have been copying and cross-referencing the files into this computer. Thus, we don't need to search through the disks themselves."

Zak looked at the stacks of datadisks that reached the ceiling. "Good. There are enough disks here to smother a bantha."

As Deevee activated the computer terminal, Hoole, who had shifted back into his own shape, said, "Go back years, Deevee. Look for something that

was discovered before the Empire took over."

"Why?" Tash asked her uncle.

"If a planet was discovered under the Empire, it was probably discovered by Imperials. We do not want to go anywhere they have been. We want a place that was discovered a long time ago, and then forgotten."

"I think I've found just the planet," Deevee said, after a short search. "This planet was discovered by an exploration team almost forty years ago. It-"

The door hissed open behind them. Startled by the intrusion, they all whirled around to see Deputy Strey standing in the doorway. His pale face had gone even whiter. He looked like death itself.

Deputy Strey gagged, as if trying to speak. Then he fell face first into the room and did not move again.

CHAPTER 4

While Zak and the others were staring down at Strey, eight beings charged into the room, stepping over the Imperial's body. The first was a

woman with long, thick hair, a blaster in her hand. Behind her came a Twi'lek with two thick tentacles growing out of the back of his head. They were wrapped around his shoulders like a scarf. Four men followed, all dressed in sloppy flight uniforms, all heavily armed.

The woman glared at Hoole, Zak, and Tash. Then she pointed her blaster at them. "Who are you?" she demanded.

Hoole returned her gaze calmly. "We could ask you the same question. What have you done to that man?"

The Twi'lek looked at the woman and said, "We don't have time for this, Platt."

The woman, Platt, looked at the motionless Imperial and answered Hoole's question. "He'll live. He's just stunned." Platt raised an eyebrow. "Two human kids, a Shi'ido, and a droid. I'm just making a guess here-you aren't the local stormtrooper patrol, are you?"

"We are not Imperials," Hoole admitted. "You can put away your blaster. We are simply here to gather some information; then we will be on our way."

"Us too," Platt said. She holstered her blaster, and her companions put theirs away as well. "You, droid," she said to Deevee. "You work here?"

Deevee said, "I am a research assistant to the-"

"Good. This is what we need," Platt interrupted. "I've heard you've got billions of data bits of information on unregistered planets. We need one. Now."

Hoole raised an eyebrow. "Curious. We are here for a similar reason."

By this time Platt had already moved to the computer terminal. She scanned the information on the screen and muttered, "Yeah . . . yeah . . . this'll do fine. This is perfect."

"You can't have that planet," Zak said. "That one's ours!"

Platt laughed. "Look, no offense, kid, but we're in kind of a hurry. We think someone spotted us breaking into this place, and if we don't get out fast, we'll-"

"Freeze!" someone yelled.

Every eye in the room turned toward the door, where a white-armored stormtrooper stood, a blaster rifle in his hands.

Platt didn't freeze. She drew her blaster at lightspeed and fired from the hip. The bolt struck the trooper in the chest and sent him staggering backward.

"They got here faster than I expected," Platt muttered.

"What do we do, Platt?" the Twi'lek asked.

"Guard the door while I download the information," she replied. Platt's companions went to the door, blasters at the ready.

"I'm afraid you can't just barge in here like this," Deevee insisted.

"There are regulations!"

Platt shook her head. "Something tells me you four aren't too concerned about regulations." She connected a small handheld datapad to the computer and downloaded the information on the planet Deevee had found.

"Stop that!" Zak insisted. "We don't want anyone to know about that planet!"

"That makes two of us," Platt said. She finished downloading the information, then punched in a command on the computer. The information Deevee had found vanished, replaced by the words "File Deleted."

The sound of heavy blaster fire filled the hallway outside. They could hear more stormtroopers calling for them to surrender.

"Platt, we can't hold them off for long!" the Twi'lek shouted.

Platt looked at Deevee. "Is there another way out of here?"

Deevee pointed to a cargo door at the back of the room. "That leads to a freight turbolift used for heavy items. But I'm afraid I don't have the access code that-"

"No problem," Platt snapped. Out came her blaster again, and she poured energy bolts into the door until it burst into pieces. The turbolift was visible on the other side.

"Come on, Tru'eb!" the woman yelled to her Twi'lek friend. "We're taking the back door!"

"Wait," Hoole said firmly. "You will have to take us with you."

The woman paused. "Says who?"

Hoole met her gaze evenly. "You've just stolen information we went to great trouble to get, and you have attracted Imperial attention that we do not want. If you leave, the stormtroopers will throw us into a detention block."

Platt shrugged. "That's your problem."

"And it would be most unfortunate," Hoole continued, "if we were forced to tell the Imperials where you were going."

Platt scowled. She knew she was stuck. "Come on then. Just don't slow us down."

Zak, Tash, and Hoole started for the turbolift, then realized that Deevee hadn't moved. "Deevee," Zak asked, "aren't you coming?"

The droid shook his head. "I'm afraid not, Zak. My place is here now."

"But the stormtroopers will turn you into scrap!" Tash said.

"Why should they? I work here. I've done nothing wrong."

"But-" Zak started to protest.

"Zak," the droid broke in, "I am not programmed for philosophy, but I've seen enough to know that you and Tash are in for more excitement than my circuitry can handle. I belong here."

"Very well, old friend," Hoole said. "Thank you for your help."

"Come on, or get left behind!" Platt shouted from the turbolift. Her companions were still at the door, firing their blasters down the now-smoking hallway. One by one, they backed away from the door and broke

for the turbolift.

As the sound of blaster fire grew deafening, Hoole and the two Arrandas hurried into the lift with the last of the mysterious intruders. The turbolift rose out of sight just as the stormtroopers charged into the room.

A short time later, nothing remained in the basement computer room but a thin cloud of smoke from the earlier blaster fight, and the smell of metal burned by energy beams.

Boba Fett slipped quietly into the room.

He had already learned from the stormtroopers what had happened. He knew that a group of unknown intruders had broken into the Galactic Research Academy and accessed information from the computer. They had then slipped away from a squad of stormtroopers, reached a waiting ship, and blasted their way into space. That was all the stormtroopers knew.

Boba Fett knew more. He knew that his targets had been here, too, and that they had left with the mysterious intruders. He knew that the droid had helped them, but he didn't tell that to the authorities. Let them do their own dirty work.

All Fett cared about was the job.

The bounty hunter went to the computer terminal and removed a small device from his belt. The device had cost him thousands of credits, but it helped him do his job, so it was worth the price. Once it was attached to a computer, the device began to search the files for anything that had been erased. If used quickly enough, the device could recover data that had been deleted.

After a moment, the device beeped and began to collect information that had been erased.

Fett had found what he was looking for. He studied the data for a moment and nodded in satisfaction. Now he knew where they were going. They were headed for a swamp planet called Dagobah.

The hunt was on.

CHAPTER 5

Zak, Tash, and Hoole were on board Platt's starship, the Last Chance. Since the Imperial presence on Koaan was very small, they'd had no difficulty reaching her ship, and once they were in deep space, there was no way for the local authorities to follow them.

It wasn't long before a few questions and a few guesses gave Zak and

Tash a pretty good idea of who their new acquaintance was.

Her name was Platt Okeefe and she was a smuggler. Zak always thought of smugglers as crude, unlikeable characters who worked for gangsters like Jabba the Hutt. But Platt seemed friendly enough. She laughed when she noticed Zak giving her a suspicious glance.

"You've got a problem with me, kid?" she asked.

Zak shrugged. "You're a smuggler. What am I supposed to think?"

Platt shrugged. "Think anything you want."

Zak frowned. "Do you ever work for the Empire?"

The smuggler laughed. "I might, if the price was right. But mostly I carry stuff the Empire says is illegal to people who want it anyway. So I guess you could say I work for the other side."

Zak's eyes brightened. "Do you ever work for the Rebellion?"

"Sometimes. I don't mind doing a job for them now and then, when they can pay. I consider it a bonus to be able to stick it to the Imps."

"Imps?" he asked.

"Imperials," Platt said. "I don't really take sides, but if I had my way, all the Imps could jump into hyperspace and never jump back."

That was good enough for Zak.

Platt, the Twi'lek called Tru'eb, and the rest of their gang were trying to set up a new base of operations. Because of all the Imperial activity in every corner of space, not to mention competition from other smugglers, they wanted to find someplace unknown to the rest of the galaxy. Platt had heard of the information stored at the Research Academy and decided to make use of it.

Tash and Hoole had been reviewing information about Dagobah. They found Zak and Platt and brought them up to date on what they had learned.

"Dagobah is covered by swamps," Tash said. "The research team that went to study it never returned. We found only a few of their recorded entries. It looks like they started having trouble after a couple of months on the planet. They sent out a distress signal, but no one answered it, at least not by the time they made their last entry."

"It appears that the automatic distress signal was picked up years later by a passing freighter," Hoole said. "They recovered the team's research logs, but found no survivors."

Zak's jaw dropped. "And this is where we're going? It sounds dangerous."

Platt yawned. "Relax, kid. Those science teams are usually a bunch of pinheads who spend all their time looking at bugs and not watching where they're going. Besides, I want someplace no one else wants to go."

"So do we," said Tash.

"Yeah, well, I've been meaning to ask you," the smuggler said. "Why are you looking for a deserted planet? Are you in some kind of trouble?"

Hoole answered her question. "We need to avoid the Imperials. Let's leave it at that."

"So you're on the run," Platt said. "You're welcome to come with us to Dagobah for now. Once we've laid low for a while and checked the place out, we can think about what to do next."

Zak knew Hoole would accept Platt's terms. What choice did they have? They didn't have a ship of their own anymore.

"Very well," Hoole said.

The trip to Dagobah took less than a standard day. The planet was

fairly close to normal space routes-it was just that no one ever bothered to stop there.

The Last Chance dropped out of hyperspace, and Platt made one orbit around the planet, scanning it with the ship's sensors. "I'm getting major life-form readings," she said. "There's something alive down there."

"A lot of somethings," Zak said. Platt had allowed her passengers to sit in the cockpit during the landing. Zak stared through the viewscreen at the glowing green ball that was Dagobah.

Tash, who had been studying the planet intently, suddenly whispered, "There's something weird there."

"What was that, Tash?" Hoole asked.

Tash blinked as though coming out of a trance. "I... I don't know. I just got a feeling."

"Perhaps we should reconsider landing here," Hoole said to Platt.

The smuggler laughed. "What, because your niece has a case of nerves? Happens to kids during space travel sometimes. Forget it."

"We have learned to trust Tash's feelings," Hoole explained. "They have saved our lives several times."

"Is it a bad feeling, Tash?" Zak asked, wishing he had her intuition. She always seemed to know what was going to happen before it did.

Tash shrugged. "No, not a bad feeling. A good feeling. Well, no, not exactly good either . . ."

"Well, no matter what you're feeling, we're landing now, so strap yourselves in," Platt said.

The ride down into Dagobah's atmosphere rattled their bones. The ship's frame groaned and squealed. Platt and Tru'eb had to scramble to keep from crash-landing. As it was, their ship hit the ground a little too fast and plunged into the swampy surface of Dagobah.

"Everyone all right?" Platt called out.

"I feel like all my teeth got knocked loose," Zak said.

Platt grinned. "First rule of piloting: If your passengers can answer the question, then the landing was good. Let's see the sights."

She popped out of her crashwebbing and hurried to the hatch. Tru'eb and the rest of the smugglers followed. Zak, Tash, and Hoole brought up the rear of the small party.

The moment Platt opened the hatch, a thick odor flooded into the ship from outside.

"Ugh!" Zak almost gagged. "It smells like rotting leaves."

"Rotting something, anyway," Platt said, wrinkling her nose. "Come on, let's go."

Zak, Tash, Uncle Hoole, and the smugglers stepped out onto the world called Dagobah.

The atmosphere was dark and wet. The ground was covered with pools of water, sometimes ankle-deep, sometimes much deeper. Even the higher ground was muddy and squished under their boots. Gigantic gnarled trees rose up all around them, reaching into a dark roof of branches and leaves so thick they blocked out the sun.

"They're called gnarltrees," Tash said, pointing to the trees. "That's what the records say."

Zak grimaced, irritated that, as usual, Tash knew more than he did. "Whatever they're called, they sure make it dark down here."

"We've got glowrods," Platt said. She pulled a short tube from a pack on her shoulder and activated it. The other smugglers lit more glowrods,

casting a circle of pale yellow light around them.

Mist drifted through the trees. Unseen creatures skittered across branches or splashed in puddles. They could hear distant shrieks and calls, whistles, and long, spooky moans. Zak heard something flap its wings over his head, but by the time he looked up, it was gone.

"I see something through those trees," Hoole said, pointing. "A small structure of some sort."

"Good," Platt responded. "I landed as close to the explorers' camp as I could."

The group trudged through knee-deep water until they reached what had once been the explorers' camp. Zak was impressed with Platt's piloting skills-she'd landed within fifty meters of her target.

The camp was a collection of one-story buildings barely tall enough to stand in. Most of them had been overturned, and years of rain and floods had sunk them into the dismal swamp.

"Just as I thought," Platt said. "They set up flimsy shelters, and I bet they didn't even use energy shields to protect the camp. They were more interested in studying the planet than staying safe."

"They were scientists," Hoole said. "They were very brave."

"And stupid," Platt said. "Bravery doesn't count if you're dead."

"Look at this," Tash called out. She had crossed to the other side of the camp. "I think I found some kind of path."

The smugglers carried glowrods over to Tash for a better view. In the pale light, they could see a line of moss-covered stones leading away from the old camp.

They were stepping-stones.

Platt studied the stones for a moment. "The explorers must have built this path when they landed here."

Hoole wasn't convinced. "That seems unlikely. The camp structures have all collapsed or been swallowed by the swamp. If this path were forty years old, it wouldn't have survived."

"Then that means someone has been here more recently," Zak pointed out.

Platt drew her blaster. "If that's true, this will be a lousy secret base. Let's have a look."

Boldly, she jumped out to the first stepping-stone. It sank a little

under her weight, but held. Tru'eb went next, with Hoole and the Arrandas behind. The others brought up the rear.

The stepping-stones led straight through a dark, fetid swamp. As they walked, Tash pointed out various plants and small animals she had read about in the records.

Why does she always seem to know everything? Zak said to himself.

He thought back to Nar Shaddaa, when Tash had helped Hoole defeat the bounty hunter while he had done nothing. And then, later, when he had been stunned by Boba Fett, Tash had tried to fight the killer off.

Now she was flaunting how smart she was.

It wasn't fair. He didn't have the Force. How could he hope to match his sister?

Now and then a stone was missing and they each had to make a long jump to the next step. At one particularly long gap, Platt had to shift herself to the back edge of her stepping-stone and use a running start to reach the next one. Tru'eb made the jump, and Hoole hopped across easily on his long legs. Tash gathered herself and leaped. Her feet just reached the edge of the next stepping-stone. She slipped on the mossy surface, but Hoole grabbed her and pulled her up.

"Can you make it, Zak?" the Shi'ido asked.

If Tash can make it, I can make it, he thought. "Sure!" he said aloud.

Zak backed up to the edge of his stepping-stone, took two small steps, and launched himself into the air.

The instant his feet left the ground he knew he wasn't going to make it.

He came down a half meter short, falling chest-deep into the cold, murky swamp water. He felt his feet stick in the ooze at the bottom. But he didn't care about the cold or the slimy water. His cheeks flushed red with embarrassment as the others started to laugh.

But the next moment, all the color drained from Zak's face.

Two figures were rising up out of the water beside him. Zak saw two human heads covered with stringy hair, two sets of pale eyes, two gaping mouths missing several teeth, and two sets of bony arms. The skin hanging from those arms looked old and dead.

They were corpses. Human corpses.

And they were reaching out to grab him.

CHAPTER 6

Shouting in fright, Zak tried to scramble up onto the stepping-stone, but he slipped on the moss.

He felt a cold, wet hand close around his arm.

Before he could cry out again, Platt was kneeling beside him. She jabbed her blaster over Zak's shoulder and fired. The corpse screamed and let go, falling into the water with a splash.

As friendly hands pulled Zak up to safety, Platt swiveled her blaster to fire at the other corpse. But this one threw its hands up in front of its face and wailed, "No, please!"

Platt's finger eased off the trigger. The corpse continued to back away through the waist-deep water. Its pale, frightened eyes looked from the newcomers to the body of its companion, now floating on the surface, and back again. "Don't hurt me."

"Why not?" Platt said in a hard voice. "You were going to hurt one of us."

"Wait," Hoole said firmly, putting one hand on top of the smuggler's weapon.

From the safety of the raised stepping-stone, Zak took a second look at his attacker. It obviously wasn't a corpse-it was a young human male. But his skin was so pale that Zak was sure the man had never spent any time in the sun. And he was incredibly thin, like a living skeleton. His sunken cheeks and eyes gave his head the look of a skull.

"Why did you attack us?" Hoole asked.

The pale man shook his head, his stringy hair flopping around his neck and face. "Did not attack. Tried to help. Boy fell into water. Tried to help."

"That's not what it looked like from here," Platt muttered.

"Tried to help," the skeletal man insisted. He glanced again at his dead companion.

"Who are you?" Tash asked.

The man's eyes narrowed. "I live here. Who are you? You are not from Dagobah."

"No," Hoole answered before anyone else could. "We're here to explore this planet."

The skeleton's eyes lit up. "Explorers? The parents were explorers!"

"What in space does that mean?" Zak asked.

"Platt, let's help him up out of the water." Hoole gestured at the corpselike man. "He is undoubtedly freezing."

Reluctantly, the smuggler reached out a hand and hauled the soaked man up to one of the stepping-stones as the others moved farther down the path to make room. The pale man was dressed in slime-coated rags, and stood only a little taller than Zak and Tash.

"Now," Hoole asked, his dark eyes staring into the man, "if you were not attacking us, why were you hiding under the water?"

"We were hunting," The pale man said. "We saw you come down the steps. Didn't know what you were. Came for a closer look, when that one fell in the water. Tried to help."

The story sounded suspicious to Zak, and he could see doubt in everyone else's eyes, too. But this stranger was no danger to them at the moment.

"We thought Dagobah was uninhabited," the Shi'ido said. "What is your name? And who are these parents you speak of?"

"I am Galt," the skeleton man explained. "The parents were . . . the parents were the parents of the Children. Us. They were the explorers. We are the Children."

"You mean the explorers who came to Dagobah forty years ago?" Tash asked.

Galt nodded. "That is when the explorers came here."

"How many of you are there?" Hoole asked.

"This many," Galt said. He held his hand up to show five fingers. He did that five times.

"Twenty-five people?" Platt groaned. "So much for our uninhabited planet."

"How can that be?" Tash asked. "According to the records, there weren't that many people on the original expedition."

"The records are incomplete," Hoole pointed out. "Maybe they are flawed. At any rate, Galt is proof that someone survived here long enough to have children. Galt, where are your friends? Can you take us to them?"

steppingstone in the line.

"What in space are you doing?" she demanded, turning back. "You nearly made me fall right into that-"

Another deep growl cut her off. Suddenly, the stone on which she stood started to rise. The water beneath it churned, and Zak realized that something was rising up from under the water, lifting the stone as it came. Platt shouted in alarm and jumped from the stone, falling into the murky swamp.

The creature that rose out of the water was enormous. Its head towered at least five meters above them, and Zak saw that most of its body was still hidden beneath the water. Its skin was sickly white and its huge eyes glowed yellow. Two thick antennae grew out of its head, quivering as the creature swayed back and forth. A gigantic mouth opened and shut slowly, as though tasting the air.

"Swamp slug!" Galt shrieked, not moving.

"Shoot it!" Platt sputtered from the water. "Shoot it!"

Her smugglers opened fire. Several shots went wild as the shooters panicked. But even the blaster bolts that hit their mark seemed to do nothing but vanish in the giant slug's slimy flesh. It gurgled and lurched toward its attackers, pushing itself through the water alongside the stone

path. Terrified, the smugglers dove into the water.

Zak saw Hoole start to shape-change, but he was too slow. The swamp slug lunged at him, its mouth open, and the Shi'ido had to jump aside to avoid being swallowed.

Only Zak and Tash were left teetering on the steppingstones. "Run!" Tash yelled.

"Where?" Zak asked.

There was nowhere to go.

Zak saw Tash pick up a tree branch that was floating in the water. Following her lead, he grabbed a rock. They raised their little weapons as the swamp slug reared to its full height, towering over them.

Suddenly, a loud shriek filled the air. The swamp slug paused and growled, its antennae quivering in the direction of the scream.

Another huge creature pushed its way out of a wall of bushes and slipped into the water. Zak caught a glimpse of a long black tail covered with scales, splashing across the surface.

"We've got more company," he said Tash. "I bet that's the dragonsnake

Galt was talking about!"

The swamp slug seemed to forget about Tash and Zak. It turned toward the dragonsnake as it surfaced, teeth snapping. The two swamp creatures lunged at each other.

Zak felt a hand on his shoulder. "Hurry," Hoole said.

He and the smugglers had managed to climb back onto the stepping-stones. For a half second, they all watched the two beasts thrash about, churning up the dark swamp water. Then they pulled Galt to his feet and hurried on. The growls of the swamp slug and the screams of the dragonsnake could be heard long after they'd left the battle behind.

Soaking wet and shivering with cold and fright, they reached their destination a half hour later.

The Shelter, as Galt called it, was a small island of dry ground, large enough to hold twenty to thirty small huts. The walls of the huts were made of dried mud, and the roofs were gnarlwood branches coated with slime.

As Zak and the others followed Galt onto the little island, two dozen pale-skinned figures came out of the huts, their eyes wide with astonishment. Galt trotted ahead and whispered to them. They all seemed most interested in the body of Galt's companion. Several of the others took the body from Galt and hurried away with it.

All their whispering seemed to make Platt nervous. "Tru'eb," she said to the Twi'lek, "take two of the boys and go back to check on the ship. I want to make sure none of these walking skeletons is planning to steal our ticket home."

"Right," Tru'eb said, and turned back down the path just as Galt finished his whispering.

Galt smiled. "The Children agree to let you into the Shelter."

"Thank you," Hoole said respectfully. "Galt, do you have any records? Anything that you saved from the explorers?"

Galt nodded. "Our parents left us a story."

In the center of the little village stood a small shelter. It had no walls, just four poles that supported a roof of gnarlwood branches. Beneath it was a small box. Opening it, Galt removed a mud-crust ed datapad and a tiny holo-projector. "This is the log. It's broken," he said. "No life left in it."

"Here, let's try this," Platt offered.

She popped the power pack out of her glowrod. Taking the holoprojector

from Galt, she connected it to the power supply and hit Play.

The holoprojector crackled to life. A small, three-dimensional image of a woman appeared over the projector. She looked exhausted and thin. Her voice sounded weak and defeated as she spoke.

"The datapad's power supply is almost gone, so I have resisted making an entry for almost a year. This may be the last.

"Our entire trip to Dagobah has proved to be a deadly failure. Even the distress signal we sent out has failed. A passing cruise ship picked up our signal and tried to rescue us, only to crash-land as well. Now there are forty of us stuck here, with little hope of escape. Most of my original team has been killed by swamp creatures or by disease.

"We are trying to make the most of our new home. We've found an island and erected a new set of shelters. Some even talk about raising families here. But I don't know how long we'll survive.

"Dagobah has beaten us. It's almost as if the planet resents our presence. If anyone finds this recording, get away from here as fast as you can. Dagobah is a death trap."

The hologram faded out for a moment. When it powered up again, they saw an image of the same woman. Now she was lying on a bed of damp moss. Her eyes were only half open. Her lips barely moved. It was obvious that she was

on her deathbed.

She rasped: "It's been a year since my last entry. . . . We've found hardly anything to eat and most of the creatures that we might hunt spend their time hunting us. We've managed to make a home here. Just a few mud huts. Some of the survivors went ahead and started families. They've had children. That's the worst. We're all on the edge of starvation . . . and now we have children to feed. We've gotten so hungry . . . the children crying from hunger . . . that we've-" The woman on the hologram shuddered and started to cry. "May the stars forgive us . . . we've fed them meat from-" Zzzzkkzkkk!

The recording fizzled out.

"She must have lost power at that point," said Platt.

Hoole nodded. "It is quite surprising that Galt and the others have survived for so long. Without food, and in this hostile environment . . . it's amazing, really."

"I'm starting to think we should get out of here, and set a course for safe space lanes," Platt said.

"I agree," said Hoole. "We should leave immediately."

"Then I've got bad news for you," Tru'eb said. The Twi'lek had just come trotting up, nearly out of breath. "We went back to check on the ship like you asked, Platt. No one's touched, it, but it looks like the Last Chance was too heavy for the swamp. It's sunk about three meters into the mud, and the engines won't kick in."

Platt gritted her teeth. "Are you telling me what I think you are?"

"Yep," the other smuggler said grimly. "We're stuck here."

CHAPTER 7

A short while later, Zak, Tash, and Hoole sat inside one of the primitive shelters. Platt had gone back to the starship with the rest of her crew, hoping to find a way to free it from the swamp.

Hoole and the Arrandas, meanwhile, had offered to talk with the survivors-the Children, as they called themselves. Hoole hoped that Galt and the others might have salvaged more equipment from their parents. Maybe there was something that could be used to break the ship out of the muck.

Before discussion began, one of the other Children came to offer them some food-a few thin strips of meat. It looked disgusting and smelled worse. Galt looked delighted when they turned it down, and he gobbled their

portions eagerly. Once Galt had eaten, Hoole and the Children started to talk.

But Hoole was disappointed to learn that whatever technology had been left behind had been discarded. The survivors had no way to power up the equipment, and they tossed each piece into the swamp as soon as it died. The survivors had almost no mechanical knowledge.

"Didn't your parents explain how the equipment worked?" Zak asked Galt.

The man blinked. "Almost all the parents died when we were young. I'm the oldest of the Children. The last parent died when I was seven."

"What killed them?" Hoole asked.

"Different things," Galt answered. "Dragonsnakes. Insect bites. Swamp fever killed many. It was the worst."

"But it didn't kill you," Tash said.

Galt nodded. "All the Children caught the fever, but none of us died. Only the parents died."

"Sometimes children can be more resistant to disease than adults," Hoole said. "Your bodies probably adjusted to Dagobah's environment better

than theirs did."

"Well, I can't wait to get off this planet and go somewhere else," Zak said.

Galt looked confused. "What is 'somewhere else'?"

"Another planet," Zak said. When Galt looked even more confused, he added, "There are other planets out in space. Out among the stars."

"What are 'stars'?" Galt asked.

Zak's jaw dropped. Then he realized that the Children could never have seen the stars. The canopy of trees was so thick that it hid the sky completely. They had never felt the sun on their skin, either.

"Galt, how have you Children survived all this time?" Hoole asked, changing the subject. "How did you avoid the swamp creatures? What do you eat?"

"Eat." Galt whispered the word as if it were a secret, magic spell. His eyes bore into Zak but seemed to look through him. "We eat what we can. We eat when we can. Always hungry. Always," he said. Then he licked his lips. "Mostly we eat fungus."

No wonder they're so thin, Zak thought. "What was that meat you just

ate?" he asked.

"That was . . .," Galt said slowly, "that was a lucky find." Then he added, "Will your friends bring food?"

Hoole told him that Platt had promised to bring food from the ship. That news made an eager light burn in the eyes of all the Children.

"Can't you hunt animals?" Tash asked.

"It is dangerous to hunt," Galt answered. "There are the spiders. And dragonsnakes. And the imp."

"Imp?" Zak asked, remembering his conversation with Platt. "Do you mean Imperials?"

"I don't know that word," Galt said. "The imp lives out there. In the swamp. It has strange powers."

Hoole said, "Galt, have you ever seen this imp? Is it human?"

Galt shook his head. "I never saw it. But the parents told us. It's out there. Somewhere."

"All right, I've got good news, and bad news, and more bad news," Platt announced when she returned from the ship.

Zak, Tash, Hoole, and the Children had met the returning smugglers in the center of the little village.

"The good news is, we can use the ship's repulsor lift to break free of the muck."

"Great!" Zak exclaimed.

"The bad news is it's going to take us a couple of days to rig the repulsors up to do it."

Hoole looked concerned. "I am relieved we will be able to leave. But this is a rather inhospitable environment. This may be a long two days."

"What's the other bad news?" Zak asked.

Platt frowned. "We were carting the food supply back here when two of my men slipped. The food containers ended up in the swamp. Before we could get to them, some sort of scavenger creatures swarmed over them. There was nothing we could do."

Zak's heart sank. Two more days on this planet with no food. They were going to get awfully hungry.

"Anyway, we'll get started on the ship in the morning," the smuggler said. "It's getting darker, and something tells me there will be even more creatures stirring around here at night. We should all find a place to sleep."

"Shouldn't we sleep on the ship?" Hoole said.

"You can, if you want to sleep in a mud pit," Platt snorted. "The Last Chance is sunk up to her lateral stabilizers, and ooze poured into all the compartments. It's going to be a mess when we finally take off."

"There is an empty hut," Galt offered. "Some of you can sleep there."

They agreed. At Hoole's insistence, Platt posted a sentry. The smuggler grumbled but did as he was told and sat in the middle of the village with a blaster across his lap. Everyone else bedded down on the floor of the hut. They all rolled up inside therma-blankets Platt had given them, and soon all were fast asleep.

All except Zak.

Zak felt itchy. Not itchy on the outside. It was more like something was tickling him inside. Something was bothering him.

He heard Tash's soft, regular breathing beside him.

She even sleeps better than I do, he thought. It's just not fair. Why does she have to be so good at everything? Zak searched for a word to describe what he was feeling. Then he found it: Jealous.

He'd never been jealous of Tash before. In fact, he'd felt sorry for her. She was always reading books and studying while he was outside having fun, or taking apart machines to learn how they worked. Zak preferred action to thought.

But somehow, lately, Tash had managed to put the two things together. She thought more than he did, and she seemed able to do more, too.

Is it the Force? Zak wondered.

He wanted to think so. But he wasn't sure.

Maybe she was just better than he was. Better at facing dangers like the bounty hunter on Nar Shaddaa. Better at studying planets like Dagobah. Better at everything.

A muffled voice drifted through the heavy swamp air. Zak thought he heard a second voice respond, but it was hard to tell. Even at night, the swamp creatures of Dagobah kept up a constant chatter of chirps, whistles, and croaks.

Then he heard a short grunt, and something heavy shuffling along the ground. Curious, he unrolled himself from his therma-blanket and stood up.

Outside the hut, the night was pitch-black. Neither moons nor stars lit the swamp. In the center of the village, Zak could see the sentry's small glowrod. As he approached, he saw that the glowrod was lying on the ground, faintly illuminating the sentry's face.

Zak chuckled. Some guard! He must have fallen asleep on the job.

I'll just go wake him before he gets into trouble with Platt, Zak thought.

He reached the glowrod and froze.

The glowrod lit up the sentry's head, but not the rest of his body.

The rest of his body was gone.

CHAPTER 8

"Swamp slug," some of the Children said.

"Dragonsnake," said others. "They can crawl across dry land."

"Giant spiders," argued still others.

But most agreed with Galt's conclusion. Staring at the horrible sight in the middle of their little village, Galt whispered, "It's the imp."

"Imp? Imp?" Platt said, pacing back and forth, her blaster held tightly in her hand. She had been more angry than frightened since Zak had awakened everyone with his gruesome discovery. The smuggler had been under her command, and she felt responsible. "I've seen a dragon-snake. And I've been attacked by a swamp slug. But what's an imp?"

"It might be Imperials-" Zak started to say.

"A creature that is supposed to live in the swamp," Hoole interrupted. "The Children say it has strange powers. But I think," he said, lowering his voice, "that it is merely an imaginary creature. Remember, these survivors have had no parents to guide them since they were small. They really are still children, and I suspect that this imp is merely a leftover creation of childlike minds."

Platt was still fuming. "Well, it's not as if we need made-up creatures to go along with the real ones. Anyway, something killed one of my men."

Hoole remained calm. "It is a tragedy. But what shall we do? Take revenge on the entire swamp? Platt, I suggest you put your blaster away before you hurt someone."

Grimacing, Platt reluctantly holstered her weapon.

"Now," Hoole continued. "The sooner we can free the ship, the sooner we will be out of here. Until then, we shall have to keep our eyes open."

"Uncle Hoole," Zak said insistently, "we can't just sit here. Something's wrong. I can feel it."

Hoole looked at Tash. "What do you feel?"

"I'm the one with the bad feeling!" Zak protested.

Hoole put a hand on Zak's shoulder. "We have all come to rely on Tash's instincts, Zak. You know that."

Tash cast a sympathetic glance Zak's way. "Sorry, Zak, I just don't feel the same way. I mean, there's definitely something dangerous here . . . but I think that's just the swamp, and the animals. They're all . . . well, I get this feeling that everything around us is hungry. It's like the whole place wants to swallow us whole. But I don't feel as though something is wrong."

"This place reminds me of D'vouran," Zak grunted. Tash shuddered, and even Hoole gave a slight twitch at the unpleasant memory. Over a year ago-it seemed like a lifetime now-Zak, Tash, and Hoole had been trapped on a living planet that fed itself by absorbing the creatures that lived on its surface. They had barely escaped with their lives.

"The feeling of danger is only a small part of it," Tash went on.
"There's something good here, too. Uncle Hoole, I'm sure we're safe here. I don't know why. But I know we are.

Platt sighed. "And that's good enough for you, Hoole?" Hoole nodded.
"Yes, it is."

Zak bit his lip and thought, Tash is wrong. And we're all going to pay for it.

Frustrated, Zak turned away. He saw Galt walking toward one of the huts on the edge of the village and ran after him. He wanted to ask the skeletal man more about the imp.

As he reached Galt, he stepped over a small clump of grass sprouting from the mud. Out of the center of the grass stretched a single thick, yellow flower about the size of his fist. Zak barely noticed the flower until, to his surprise, it bit him on the ankle!

CHAPTER 9

Zak screamed. He shook his leg, but the yellow flower held firm. He felt small razor-sharp teeth digging into his flesh. "Help!"

Galt rushed over and snatched at the flower, ripping it off. Zak felt a few bits of his skin pull off with it. Galt tossed the strange plant away.

"What was that?" Zak asked, checking the wound on his leg. There was a row of small punctures on his shin. "Is it poisonous?"

"Meat flower," Galt said. "It's not poison, but the bite hurts. Big ones can swallow a person whole."

Zak winced as he dabbed at the blood on his leg.

"The juice from the meat flower's leaves makes it feel better," Galt said. "It stops the bleeding." He plucked a few leaves and started to rub them against the wound.

Almost immediately, the pain started to recede. Zak let out a huge sigh of relief.

Then he blinked.

He had been staring out into the swamp, focusing on nothing, when a movement caught his eye.

Was something out there?

He looked again. For just an instant, he thought he saw someone beckoning to him. "Hey, there's someone there!"

Galt jumped to his feet and looked around. "But everyone's in the village."

"Well, someone's there," Zak insisted. "I saw them."

Galt looked genuinely frightened. "It is the imp."

"Really?" Zak said.

A rush of excitement filled him. If there really was an imp, this would be his chance to do something important. He'd been letting Tash and Uncle Hoole take control for too long. Now it was his turn to be a hero.

"Come on," Zak said, starting forward.

"No, no!" Galt said, holding him back. "It's not safe."

Zak snorted, thinking of the smuggler's head. "It's not very safe here either, is it?"

"But it's a waste of-"

Zak didn't hear the end of Galt's statement. He was splashing through puddles and jumping over fallen logs. Somewhere in the back of his mind he knew that what he was doing was dangerous. The next puddle could swallow him whole, or his next step could land him in the mouth of some swamp beast. But none of that mattered. He felt an irresistible urge to move forward.

Zak didn't think he had run very far, maybe a hundred meters. His legs weren't tired. But suddenly, the urge to run left him. The moment it did, he felt drained, like a power cell with all the energy sucked out. And into the space left behind poured all the fear he had ignored for the past few minutes.

He was alone in a clearing in the swamp where one person had already been killed. He couldn't see the Children's village. He wasn't even sure in which direction it was.

"What am I doing?" he asked aloud.

"Stepping on me, you are," said a throaty voice at his feet.

Zak nearly jumped out of his skin. He stumbled backward and fell into a muddy puddle. Propping himself up on his arms, he found himself at eye level with one of the strangest beings he'd ever seen.

The creature was less than one meter tall. Its skin was the color of the Dagobah mud, dry and cracked with age. Tufts of gray hair, grew in little bushes around its large, pointed ears. But its eyes were youthful and bright.

Those eyes were round, and soft, and deep, and they reminded Zak of nothing he'd ever seen before, except maybe the feeling he had when he looked up at night and saw the whole galaxy spread out across the sky.

"Deaf as well as blind, are you?" the creature said. It poked him in the ribs with a little cane it held in one hand.

"Wh-What?" Zak stammered.

"Asked a question, I did. Where are my seeds?" Zak was utterly confused.

"My seeds, my seeds. Ah, here! Hiding with you, they are!"

The creature struggled to push Zak aside and get at something beneath him. Zak rolled away, and the creature started to gather up a pile of round

seeds it had been collecting, humming, "Good for the soup. Good for the bones, mm-hm."

"You eat those?" Zak said doubtfully, staring at the seeds. Each one was about the size of his fingernail, but they all looked as hard as rocks.

"Eat them? Eat them, no," the creature said. He looked at Zak and smiled. "Plant them, I do. Grow and bear fruit, they will. That is the way."

"Who are you?" Zak asked.

The creature dropped the seeds into a little pouch at his side. Then he jabbed the stick into Zak's ribs again. "Not important who I am. The question you should be asking is, Who are you?"

"I know who I am," Zak replied.

"Do you?" asked the creature.

Zak wanted to laugh. The creature sounded silly and looked even sillier. But something about the way he asked the question made Zak pause. If there was one thing he'd learned after all his adventures with Uncle Hoole, it was that appearances could be deceiving.

"A good lesson!" the creature cackled, as though reading his thoughts.

Not knowing what else to do, Zak said, "My name is Zak Arranda. What's yours?"

The creature cackled again gleefully. "I am Yoda." Zak shook his head. "For a planet that's supposed to be uninhabited, Dagobah sure is getting crowded."

Yoda made a gurgling sound in his throat. "Uninhabited, do you say?" The little creature spread his small arms wide. "Have you no eyes? No ears? Life is all around."

"Oh, right," Zak said, surprised by the little creature's suddenly serious tone. "I just meant, you know, intelligent life."

"Intelligent, huh!" Yoda said with a grunt of disgust. "What is this intelligence?"

Zak opened his mouth to speak, then stopped. He thought of the most intelligent people he knew-Tash and Uncle Hoole.

"Intelligence means learning. Being able to figure things out. Knowing how the universe works," Zak finally said.

"Ahhh," the little creature said, nodding meaningfully. "Come here," he said, shuffling toward a nearby tree. When Zak hesitated, Yoda waved his

stick. "Come, come, come!"

Not knowing whether to be amused or frightened, Zak followed. Yoda stood next to a rotting log. With his stick he poked the log, and a chunk of dead wood fell away. Inside, hundreds of worms as thick as Zak's finger wriggled and squirmed.

"Yuck," Zak said.

"Rotworms," Yoda said. "Are they intelligent?"

"No," Zak answered, trying to explain. "You see-"

Yoda spoke again as the exposed rotworms burrowed into the soft, decaying wood and disappeared. "Rotworms learn that dead logs make the best homes. They figure out how to burrow into the wood. Burrowing, they help the log to rot, and the bits of dead wood enrich the soil, making good ground for new trees to grow." The little creature stared at Zak. "That is how the universe works."

Zak blinked. A moment ago this strange creature had seemed like a clown. Now he wasn't so sure. "Who are you?" he asked again.

Yoda nodded mysteriously. "Someone you will meet again. Now go. Others await you."

Zak started to ask another question, but Yoda chattered, "Go, go, go. Away with your questions!"

The little creature turned to leave. His movements were awkward, more like a waddle than a walk, but he was gone so quickly that Zak was half-convinced that Yoda had simply vanished into the misty air.

"That was prime," Zak said aloud. "Weird. But prime."

He turned to go. He felt confident about his directions now. In fact, the way back was so obvious, he wondered why he'd been worried. He started to jog. But his feet slowed down as he caught the dull glint of metal in the gloomy swamp.

Curious, Zak approached the metal object. As he did, he realized that it was very large. Creeping nearer, he saw that it was a ship. And when he was only a few dozen meters from it, he realized that it was a ship he recognized.

He'd seen it on the Shroud's scanners.

The ship belonged to Boba Fett.

"Boba Fett!" Platt spat the name out like a curse. "This is getting worse all the time!"

Zak had brought the news back to the village as fast as he could run. First, he had told Tash and Uncle Hoole, adding everything that had happened with the strange character called Yoda.

"Yoda," Tash had replied. "There's something about that name . . ."

"Intriguing," Hoole had agreed. "There seems to be yet another being on this supposedly empty planet. But our first concern is the bounty hunter."

So Hoole had gone immediately to tell the others. The smugglers had gathered in the center of the village to discuss Zak's news, but the Children were nowhere in sight.

Apparently, they had managed to catch something in the swamps, and were eagerly preparing a rare feast. They had even converted Galt's hut into a kitchen to cook the food they had found.

"How could Fett have followed us here?" Tash said in disbelief.

"I don't know," Platt growled angrily. "But if I'd known that killer

was after you, I'd have dropped you off on the nearest asteroid and let you deal with him yourselves."

Hoole stiffened slightly. "We thought Boba Fett had been eliminated. We had no intention of placing you in his line of fire."

"Yeah, well, we're there anyway, aren't we?" Platt said. "And he's already killed one of my men."

Zak was surprised. "How do you know it was him?"

"Isn't it obvious? Right now the odds are six blasters to one in our favor. He's trying to whittle us down before he comes in for the kill."

Platt kicked at the soggy ground in frustration. "He's probably out there right now, watching us. Waiting to make his next move."

Zak scanned the surrounding trees, but all he saw was the endless swamp, moss-covered trees, vines hanging from gnarled branches, and the mist that drifted formlessly across Dagobah's landscape.

"How long before the ship is ready to fly?" Tash asked. Platt scowled. "Twenty-four hours."

"Long enough for Fett to take us all out," Zak said.

"Right," the smuggler agreed. "So we're not going to wait for him."

We're going to go out there and get him."

Tru'eb and the other smugglers were startled.

"Go after Boba Fett?" Tru'eb growled. "Have you come down with swamp fever or something? He'll pick us off like fleas on a nerf."

"And what do you think he'll do if we stick around here?" the smuggler snapped back.

When Tru'eb had no answer, Platt started organizing her small gang into hunting parties.

"We could use you, Hoole," Platt said to the Shi'ido. "With your shape-changing power, you might be able to spot the bounty hunter before he spots you."

"Out of the question," Hoole replied. "My first responsibility is to my niece and nephew."

Tash spoke up. "I want to find this Yoda."

Zak felt a pang of sudden jealousy and bit his lip to stop himself from saying "No!" He didn't want Tash to meet Yoda. He wasn't sure why, but he felt a connection with the little creature. He didn't want Tash barging in.

So he was relieved when Hoole said, "No, Tash. Remember there is a price on your head, too. You should stay here."

"And do what?" Tash replied. "Wait for Boba Fett to knock on the door while the smugglers are out hunting?"

"Tash, it seems--"

"Actually," Platt interrupted, "it's not such a bad idea. I'm curious about this little creature myself. He's a wild card, and I don't like wild cards. Why don't I send two of my boys along with your niece and nephew to look for him? This creature talked to Zak once. Maybe he will again."

In the end, Hoole relented. He knew his powers were best used in the hunt for Boba Fett. And with two armed smugglers for guards, Zak and Tash were as safe as they were going to get.

"Be careful," Hoole said. He looked at Tash. "Listen to your instincts. And do not do anything rash. I will see you back here shortly."

The smugglers broke into two parties. Platt and one of the smugglers went off in one direction, while Hoole, Tru'eb, and another smuggler went the opposite way. That left Zak, Tash, and the two remaining smugglers in the village just as Galt and some of the bony Children appeared, carrying a large pot pounded out of scrap metal.

"Where are you going?" Galt asked. "The feast is just about to begin!"

He held the pot under Zak's nose. It was full of a bubbling brown broth in which floated ribbons of fat and large chunks of meat. The delicious smell rising out of the pot made Zak's stomach rumble, and he realized that he hadn't eaten all day.

"Come on," Tash said, tugging at his arm. "We can eat when we get back."

"Maybe just a taste," said Zak, reaching to dip his finger into the broth.

"Let's go!" Tash urged, pulled him away. Zak cast one longing look back at the untasted food and then turned away.

He led Tash and the two smugglers in the same direction he'd gone before. At least, he thought it was the same. There was no stone path to guide them, and the ground seemed to shift and drift in the murky swamp water. The plants-especially the giant gnarlwood trees-all looked exactly alike. The trees had massive roots that grew above the surface. The roots were taller than the smugglers, and looked like pillars holding up the giant trees.

Not pillars, Zak thought as they walked right under one of the huge, curving roots. More like lots of twisted, knobby legs. Did that mean the trees could walk?

"So what's this little creature look like again?" one of the smugglers asked, resting his blaster rifle on his shoulder.

Zak described Yoda's wrinkled, greenish skin, pointed ears, and tufts of wiry gray hair.

The other smuggler laughed. "Sounds like your mother-in-law, Traut!"

The smuggler with the blaster rifle grunted. "This Yoda sounds better-looking."

"You're married?" Zak asked. "I didn't think smugglers got married."

"Sure," Traut said. He held up his left hand. On the second to last finger was a silver ring. It was called a promise ring, and meant he had promised himself to someone special. He smiled at Zak. "You think smugglers can't fall in love?"

Zak was about to respond when Traut's eyes went wide, staring in sheer terror at something over Zak's shoulder.

Zak forced himself to turn around. Then he saw it, too.

There was a giant spider standing right behind him.

CHAPTER 11

The spider was white and almost four meters tall. Its eight knobby legs were bent into vicious hooks. It bobbed up and down on those legs, then lunged forward to pounce on its prey.

Zak jumped back just in time and the spider's pincerlike mouth bit into the soggy ground.

"There's more of them!" Traut yelled.

All around them, giant white spiders crawled out of the shadows beneath the gnarltrees. Their hundreds of scurrying feet made an eerie thudathudathudathudathuda sound on the carpet of moss that covered the ground, and their jaws clacked hungrily.

The smugglers fired their blasters. Chunks of white flesh blew off the nearest spider, and thick green liquid, almost like sap, splashed out of the wound. The spider squealed, but instead of backing off, it charged forward.

"Blow off its legs!" Traut yelled.

The two smugglers poured blaster fire at the oncoming creature. The firestorm was so loud Zak and Tash clapped their hands over their ears to shut out the scream of energy bolts and the shrieks of the wounded spider. Bits and pieces of spider legs flew in all directions, and with a final squeal the spider fell to the ground.

At least a dozen more scurried forward.

"Back up!" Traut ordered. He pushed Zak and Tash behind him and moved away from the spiders. But after only a few steps, Zak felt his back pressed against the cold bark of a gnarltree.

"So much for our retreat," Traut groaned. He looked at the tree. There was a hole in the bark large enough for a small human to pass through. Some tree-dwelling creature had carved a home in the gnarltree. "You two!" He pointed at Zak and Tash. "In there!"

The smugglers lifted Zak and Tash and slid them one at a time into the hole. But as soon as the two armed men had turned their backs, the spiders charged. Through the open hole, Zak saw the smugglers turn and open fire. The nearest spider blew apart, and a knobby leg flew through the air toward the hole. Zak ducked as spider pieces splattered against the tree.

Zak and Tash huddled together in their dank hiding place as the sound

of clacking spider jaws, blaster fire, and screams continued outside.

Then all sound stopped with terrible suddenness.

Zak and Tash looked at each other in the gloom of their hiding place.

"Are they-?" Tash started to ask.

A voice came from outside. It was Traut's voice, ragged and tired.

"Who's there? Who are you?" he shouted angrily. Then his voice calmed down.

"Oh, it's you. We were just-agghhh!"

Traut's final scream filled the air. A flying creature, startled by this last sound, flapped away into the distance. When the sound of its wings faded, true silence settled over the swamp.

Zak scrambled up and out of the hole. He dropped to the ground. All around him was the aftermath of a gory battle. Spider parts were everywhere. Green spider blood ran down the bark of the trees. Nearby, one giant spider flopped around on its two remaining legs, then sagged down into the mud and lay still.

Traut's body lay on the ground nearby, bleeding from an ugly wound to the head. The other smuggler was gone.

Tash dropped down beside her brother. "Did the spiders . . . did they take him?"

"I don't know," Zak whispered. He pointed to a wide, shallow line that had been drawn through the mud. "It looks like something dragged him off in that direction."

"F . . . Fe . . ."

"Traut's alive!" Zak rushed to the smuggler's side. His eyes were closed, and half his face was covered in blood. His mouth struggled to work.

"F . . . Fe . . ."

"Fett?" Tash guessed. "Maybe that's who he saw just now."

Zak wasn't so sure. "Traut sounded like he knew the person he saw. And if it was Fett, why wouldn't he take both bodies?"

Something rustled through a nearby bush and a sickly white form pushed its way forward. "More spiders!" Zak hissed. He and Tash started to back away.

The figure that stepped through the bushes was as pale as a spider, but it walked on two legs. It was Galt, followed by another of the Children.

Galt looked completely surprised to see Zak and Tash standing in the

middle of the battle scene. "Why are you here?" he asked.

Tash explained hurriedly, "We were hiding in that tree. The spiders attacked. Someone, or something, dragged the other smuggler away. But Traut's still alive. We have to get him some help."

Zak remembered how easily Galt had carried the body of his dead companion out of the swamp before. "You two have to carry him back to camp!" he told the skeletal man.

"We will," Galt said simply. He and his companion lifted the wounded man by his shoulders and feet. Traut's eyes fluttered, and he reached out, clutching Zak's arm so hard that Zak felt the man's promise ring press into his skin. He tried to speak, but swooned again.

"Hurry!" Zak said. "Uncle Hoole or Platt may be able to help him."

The two Children started off through the swamp, moving faster than Zak would have thought possible. A lifetime of hard living in the dismal climate of Dagobah had strengthened them until they were all muscle-thin and hard like wire cable. Zak and Tash had a hard time keeping up as they slogged their way through the mud.

They were both concentrating so hard on keeping up with Galt and his companion that Zak almost missed it—a small figure, sitting serenely on a

log, with a gentle smile on his face.

"Yoda!" he called out.

The two Children were so startled they nearly dropped Traut.

"The imp!" Galt shouted in pure terror. "It's the imp! Run! He will kill us all!"

CHAPTER 12

Zak pointed at Yoda. "That's the imp you were talking about? But he's harmless. He's just-"

"Run! Run!" Galt screamed. Still holding Traut, he and his companion bolted through the mist.

"Wait!" Zak called.

"You could not catch them," Yoda said gently. "They know the swamp too well."

"So you are Yoda. Zak told us about you," Tash said. "I'm Tash."

"Yes, you are," Yoda agreed.

Zak wiped at his face where mud, or something worse, had stuck to his skin during the spider battle. "Are you really the imp that Galt has been talking about?" he asked.

"Come with me," Yoda said. He hopped off his log and waddled away. Watching him move away this time, Zak sensed that Yoda was old. Very, very old.

"Where are we going?" Tash asked.

"Not far," Yoda said. "Just around this tree."

Once again moving with surprising speed, the little creature disappeared around the bulk of a giant gnarltree. Zak and Tash hurried to catch up. As they rounded the tree trunk, they saw Yoda standing beneath a clump of its roots.

Then they realized that they weren't tree roots.

They were the legs of a giant spider.

No, no, no! Zak thought. Galt was right. Yoda was evil. He had lured them into the spider's jaws.

But the spider didn't attack.

Even so, Zak didn't trust it. He backed away, and Tash followed his example. After they had taken a few steps, they stopped. The spider remained where it stood, and Yoda squatted beneath it, an amused twinkle in his eye.

"Why isn't the spider attacking us?" Tash asked finally. "Or you?"

"Why should it?" the little creature said.

"The spiders attacked us before," Zak replied. He took a nervous step closer.

"Because they thought you were food," Yoda said. Tash, too, edged forward.

"What's different now?"

Yoda spread his little hands. "I have taught them otherwise."

Zak noticed something strange. The closer he got to Yoda, the more at ease he felt. It was like edging toward a fire, except that instead of giving off heat, Yoda gave off a feeling of peacefulness and safety. Something told Zak that the giant spider was feeling exactly the same thing.

"Will it bite?" he asked, still eyeing the spider nervously. "Is it poisonous?"

Yoda chuckled to himself. "Still he worries! No, no poison in the spiders. Come, come! Time is short."

Tash's jaw dropped in utter disbelief. Softly, she said, "You're a Jedi. A Jedi Master. I can feel it."

Yoda's smile widened. "Your feelings serve you well."

"But . . . But . . .," she stammered, "there aren't any more Jedi!"

"That will be true, if the Emperor has his way," Yoda replied. Then he shrugged. "We shall see."

"What are you doing on Dagobah?" Zak asked. "Shouldn't you be helping the Rebellion?"

"What would I do there that I do not do here?" Yoda asked.

Zak was flabbergasted at the question. "You could help them fight! You could use the Force against the Emperor!"

Yoda closed his eyes briefly and muttered to himself. "So young, this

one." Then he opened his eyes. "I am here because you are here. You are here because I am here. I have something to give each of you."

Zak felt his heart leap. Each of you. Yoda was a Jedi and he was going to give them each something. Not just Tash.

"Tash," the Jedi said, "you must walk with me. You have searched long for answers to questions about the Force. Some you must learn in later years. But some will I answer for you now."

Yoda summoned her forward.

"And me?" Zak asked eagerly.

Yoda paused, as if he'd forgotten something. Then he pointed to the ground, where a familiar bright yellow flower grew out of a clump of grass.

"Zak, pick that flower."

Zak drew back. "But that's a meat flower. I've already been bitten by one of those, and it hurts!"

Yoda sighed. He shuffled forward and reached down, digging into the dirt around the meat flower until he'd freed the plant and a small patch of mud that surrounded its roots. He scooped it up, roots, soil, and all. It did not bite him.

"Recently fed, has this," Yoda explained. "So it has no reason to bite."

"But-"

"The meat flower is like all things that live in the Force. It bites only to eat. It eats only to survive. This is your reminder." Yoda handed the meat flower to Zak.

Bewildered, Zak accepted the flower, careful to keep the roots encased in their little globe of mud. Yoda kept staring at him, so, not knowing what to do, Zak carefully lowered the flower into the wide pocket of his trousers as though planting it there. He felt totally ridiculous, but Yoda nodded at him.

"Good," the Jedi said. He turned away. "Tash, come."

"Can't I come?" Zak asked.

"No, no," Yoda said matter-of-factly. "Back to the village must you go."

"What!" Zak squeaked, ashamed at how shrill his voice had suddenly become. "Why? I want to come with you!"

"Because these words are not for your ears." Yoda turned back and gave him one more glance. "For everything there is a reason. Go to the village. Hurry home."

Then Yoda tugged at Tash's sleeve and pulled her into the mist, chuckling quietly. Tash looked back over her shoulder at her brother. Her face was a mixture of wonder, confusion, and sympathy for Zak.

It's not my fault, her expression seemed to say.

Then she was gone.

And Zak was alone.

CHAPTER 13

The walk back to the village was cold, wet, and miserable. Zak trudged forward, not caring where he stepped or what sort of creature crossed his path. He barely noticed when an armor-backed dragonsnake swam through a water channel half a meter from his feet. He walked right beneath the coils of a tree snake, its body as big around as both his legs.

He felt crushed.

Zak had thought he had some sort of connection with Yoda. When the Jedi Master had said they'd meet again, Zak had thought something special would happen. But all he'd done was serve as Yoda's errand boy, bringing Tash to meet him.

Tash! She got everything. She got to be older. She got to be smarter. She got to use the Force.

Feeling worthless and abandoned, Zak made his slow way back into the village.

Clomping unhappily into the collection of mud huts, Zak saw no one but the painfully thin Children huddled around a fire in the village center. Warm, pleasant smells cut through the rotten-wood odor of Dagobah, causing Zak's stomach to growl.

He was very hungry.

Galt stood up from the fire, where the pot of stew still bubbled. "Zak, are you all right?" he asked earnestly. "I was scared the imp had stolen you away."

"He's not dangerous," Zak replied. "How is Traut?"

"We put meat-flower grass on his wounds. He is resting."

Zak sniffed the food smells. "For people who don't eat much, you've certainly had a lot to cook lately."

Galt grinned. "We've been able to find food lately."

"I guess we brought you good luck," Zak said absentmindedly.

"Yes, you did." Galt handed Zak the bowl of stew he was holding. "Would you like some? It will make you healthy and strong."

"Yeah, I'm starved." Zak took a bowl. His mouth was already watering. But then he handed it back. "In a minute. I want to check on Traut first."

"He is resting," Galt said again.

"I'll just look in on him quickly. He saved my life. Which hut?"

Galt glared into the bowl of stew. "That one," he said at last, pointing to a hut across the village. Zak started toward it with Galt following him. "But he is sleeping."

"I'll bet he is," Zak said as they reached the hut. "That bang on his head must have knocked him out."

"And his arm," Galt added.

Zak stopped in the doorway. "What about his arm?"

Galt shook his head sadly. "The spider wound was very bad. There was nothing we could do for it."

"What are you talking about? His arm was fine." Zak ducked his head and peered into the hut. In the gloom he could see Traut lying unconscious on a moss bed. The Children had pressed a wad of damp grass against his forehead to help the cut there heal, but that was hardly noticeable. What caught Zak's attention was a compress of rags, grass, and leaves that had been wrapped around the smuggler's left shoulder.

Beneath the homemade bandages, Traut's left arm was missing.

"We had to take it off," Galt sighed. "We had to do it before the spider's poison reached the rest of his body."

Zak was horrified. "Spider . . . poison?"

"It kills," Galt said. "We saved his life."

Zak started to say that the spiders weren't poisonous Yoda had said so-but he held his tongue. He didn't want to have to explain Yoda to Galt. But why would Galt say the spiders were poisonous if they weren't?

"Will you eat now?" Galt asked.

The sight of poor Traut was enough to make Zak lose his appetite. But his body was still hungry. He felt as if he hadn't eaten in years. With his stomach growling, Zak allowed Galt to lead him to the open fire, where several of the Children were still huddled on the ground, licking the last drops of stew from crude bowls.

The pot was almost empty, but Galt scooped the last helping of stew into the bowl. The bowl came out almost full, with chunks of meat and brown sauce dripping down the sides.

Zak took the bowl and a wooden spoon. He sat down and stirred the stew, then brought up a spoonful and opened his mouth to savor the first bite.

The spoon stopped halfway to his mouth.

Then the spoon fell out of his trembling hand.

In the center of the spoon, swimming in brown sauce, was a small metal circle. Liquid slid away from it, revealing its design.

It was Traut's promise ring.

CHAPTER 14

Zak flung the bowl of stew away, its contents splattering across the ground. The Children shouted in horror at his wastefulness.

"What is wrong with you?" Galt screeched, leaping to his feet. "That was the last bowl! Food is not to be wasted!"

"Look!" Zak said, pointing and trying not to gag. The promise ring lay on the ground nearby. "How did that get into the stew?"

Galt picked up the promise ring and wiped the sauce from it. "What is it?"

"It's Traut's promise ring," Zak said, his stomach churning. "It was on his left hand-on the arm that you cut off. But how did it end up in my stew?"

Galt blinked like a night creature caught in the sun. "I took it," he admitted. "When we had to take the arm off, I noticed the ring. I knew it was important, so I put it in my pocket. It must have fallen out just now when I served your stew."

Zak had been standing next to Galt when he filled the bowl, and he

hadn't seen anything fall into the pot.

But how else could the ring have gotten in there?

"What is the problem?" a calm voice asked. It was Hoole.

The Shi'ido and the smugglers had just returned to the village. They were muddy and miserable, with frustrated frowns wrinkling their faces. They had spent the day looking for signs of Boba Fett but had found nothing.

Platt's eyes brightened when she saw the cooking pot. "Hey, smells great! What's for lunch?"

"Nothing now," Galt said. "It's all gone. But we could cook something else up for you." He nodded to two of the other Children, who trotted away.

"That would be great," Platt said. "We're starved."

Hoole glanced left and right. "Zak, where is Tash?"

Zak grunted. "She's still out there with Yoda."

The Shi'ido frowned. "You left your sister out in the swamp with a strange creature?"

"And where are my men?" Platt asked.

Quickly, Zak told them what had happened in the forest. But when he got to the part about Yoda, he did not mention that the little creature was a Jedi. Jedi Knights had been hunted down by the Empire, and Zak didn't want to reveal this one to a group of smugglers he barely knew.

Platt wasn't interested in Yoda anyway. "I'd better go check on Traut."

"Tash isn't in any danger, Uncle Hoole," Zak said after the smuggler was gone. "Yoda is-"

"You don't know that," the Shi'ido said. "One person has already lost his life out there in the swamp, and another is wounded."

"But she wanted to go with him. She had a good feeling about him, and she's always right."

Hoole's face was dark. "Why didn't you at least stay with her?"

Zak looked down at his feet. "They didn't want me to."

"And you allowed that to separate you from your sister?"

"But you said so yourself. She's always right about things like-"

"Zak," his uncle interrupted. "Tash may have some connection with the Force, but she is only thirteen years old. I expect you to look out for her."

"Me, look out for Tash?" Zak was taken aback. "But she's older, and she's got the Force, and-"

"And you are quite capable of keeping her out of trouble, just as I would expect her to keep you out of trouble," the Shi'ido said irritably.

"Zak, you must stop acting as though you are nothing but a tagalong."

Zak didn't know what to say. He felt embarrassed that Hoole was scolding him. But he was also thrilled by what Hoole was saying. That he should take care of Tash. That he was capable. Zak was still struggling with his conflicting emotions when Platt returned to speak with Hoole. He barely heard their conversation.

"How is your companion?" Hoole asked.

"Alive, but barely," Platt said. "These Children used some local plants to stop the bleeding, but he's in shock. I would be too if I'd lost an arm and a leg."

"I need your help, Platt," Hoole said. "I need you and your men to help me find my niece. She is still out in the swamp."

"Let's go," Platt said.

"Zak, stay here. Do not leave the village until I return," Hoole ordered, then turned and strode off with Platt.

It was only as they departed that Zak realized what Platt had said.

He's in shock. I would be too if I'd lost an arm and a leg.

An arm . . . and a leg?

"Ready for lunch?"

Zak hadn't noticed Galt approach. "What?"

"Food. The smugglers asked for more food, but now they're all gone. Do you want some more?"

A heavy weight settled into the pit of Zak's stomach. "More stew?"

"Well, there's more stew cooking," Galt said. "But we have something better."

The skeletal man licked his lips. "A nice, beefy leg."

"A leg!" Zak shrieked.

Galt stepped back. "Yes. We found a dragonsnake nest and killed one of the young ones before the mother returned. It is cooking in my hut now. If you want some, we'll bring it out in just a minute."

"Um, no," Zak said. "No thanks."

Galt put a hand on Zak's shoulder and squeezed. "Are you sure? You haven't eaten since you and your friends arrived. You'll get as thin as me if we don't fatten you up."

Chuckling to himself, Galt walked away.

Zak shuddered. What he was thinking couldn't be true. But he had to find out.

As casually as possible, Zak walked through the little village. Galt's home was just at the edge of the gathered huts, shadowed by gnarltrees. When the Children found food, the hut was converted into a kitchen. Smoke rose from a hole cut into the roof. Pale-skinned Children wandered in and out of the hut, licking their lips and carrying bowls of food.

Zak didn't want to be seen.

He turned aside and walked out of the village clearing and into the

swamp. As soon as he was among the trees, he splashed through a shallow, slimy pool, scrambled over the roots of a thick plant, and found himself in back of the cooking hut.

Zak scrambled up the thick roots of a gnarltree, then shinnied his way out on a branch that hung over the hut. His weight caused the branch to bend, carrying him close to the roof, and he dropped off as gently as possible. The roof, made of gnarlwood branches and leaves, sagged under his weight, but held.

Carefully, Zak inched toward the hole in the roof. Holding his breath and blinking against the smoke that rose out of the hole, Zak peeked over the edge and looked down into the hut.

He was looking down on a pot of bubbling stew, just like the stew Galt had offered him. One of the Children acted as cook, standing over it and stirring and adding things to the mix, as Galt looked on.

"Food," the cook was crooning. "I've never eaten so much in my life."

"None of us have," Galt said. "We haven't eaten this well since the parents died."

The cook patted her stomach. "I've thought of that last meal for years. But this is even better. Our luck has changed."

"Thanks to the strangers," said Galt.

"Is the stew ready?" Galt asked. "Check it."

The cook used a large wooden spoon to scoop out a taste of broth. She held it a few centimeters away from her face, blowing to cool it. As she blew, something swirled around in the spoon. Zak squinted to see it more clearly. Then he felt his stomach heave up into his throat.

Floating in the broth was a human finger.

CHAPTER 15

The finger bobbed up and down as the cook brought the spoon to her lips and sipped the broth.

"Perfect," said the cook. "This one tastes much better than the first."

"He was tough," Galt agreed. "But maybe that's why they chose him to be the guard that night. He was even hard to kill."

The cook sighed. "It's too bad we couldn't get his head. I think that would have tasted good."

Zak's knuckles were white. He clenched his teeth together, trying to keep from throwing up.

He suddenly realized why the Children had started finding food just after their arrival.

The smuggler on guard duty had been killed, and soon the Children had prepared a feast.

The next smuggler had gone down in the spider battle. Then the Children had cooked more food.

Traut had been wounded. His arm had been cut off, and then his leg. Each time, the Children had cooked more food.

The Children were eating people.

Zak tried to remember the first time Galt had offered him food. That had been before the first smuggler's death. The Children had meat then, didn't they? But no one had died.

Wrong, Zak remembered. None of the newcomers had died. But one of the Children had been killed by Platt. Zak recalled how Galt had licked his lips, staring at the body.

They had eaten one of their own people.

Zak stared in horrible fascination at the two cannibals. When he felt something wriggling close to his skin, he nearly jumped.

Something bit him on the hip and he cried out in pain. It was the meat flower that he'd put in his pocket. Lying down on the roof had nearly crushed it, and the flower was biting him. Zak struggled to free it from his pocket.

His movements were too much for the roof. It creaked. He heard branches snap a moment before the roof gave in; then he plunged down into the hut. He hit the muddy floor right at Galt's feet and the impact knocked the wind out of him.

Galt looked down at him, his pale face changing from fear to pleasure as he spoke: "Dinner."

A few minutes later, Zak found himself locked inside a makeshift cage against one wall of the hut. There were other cages next to his. He couldn't tell how many-the room was lit only by the cooking fire, and that was on the other side of the hut, casting shadows on his end. Zak grabbed hold of the wooden bars and shook.

Galt laughed. "The cage is made from gnarltree roots. Not strong enough to hold dragonsnakes, but strong enough to hold you. Now I have to make sure your friends are still out looking for the girl. I'll be back." Still laughing, Galt left the hut.

Zak moved slowly. If he moved too quickly, the meat flower, still crammed into his pocket, would bite him again. He had tried to pull it out, but it had nipped at his fingers. As long as he didn't jerk around too much, it didn't bother him.

Slowly, Zak reached for the bars and gave them a hard shake.

"It won't do any good."

The voice was low and rough, and came from the shadows of the cage next to Zak's.

"Who's there?" Zak asked. The voice wasn't Hoole's, nor did it belong to Platt, Tru'eb, or any of the other smugglers. But it was familiar somehow. He could see someone crouching in the back of the cage, mostly covered by shadows. "Who's there?" he asked again.

No response.

Zak leaned closer, but he still couldn't make out the prisoner's face.

He looked around, and spotted something tucked in a far corner of the hut.

It was a gray helmet, battered and worn. Zak had seen that helmet several times before. Only one person in the galaxy wore a helmet like that.

"Boba Fett," he whispered.

The prisoner did not respond.

Zak shook his head in disbelief. He tried to see through the gloom to look at Boba Fett's face, but the shadows were too thick. "I can't believe they caught you."

The shadowy prisoner spoke. "Who are they?"

Zak said told Fett what he knew-about the original survey team, and the crashed rescuers, and the children they had tried to raise on the swamp planet.

"How did they catch you?" he asked the bounty hunter, still barely believing he was actually speaking to Boba Fett.

A grunt came from the shadows. "I arrived on Dagobah. I was tracking you. A dragonsnake was tracking me. Difficult to kill."

Zak didn't know if the bounty hunter meant himself or the dragonsnake.

Fett continued. "Lost consciousness. Woke up in here."

"The Children must have found you in the swamp and brought you here.

You know they're cannibals, right?"

Fett shrugged.

"You don't look too concerned," Zak said. "They'll eat you, too."

Fett shook his head.

Zak snorted. "Why not? You're the one in the cage."

Fett's voice was hard as durasteel. "Before they eat me, they have to come in here and get me."

As if answering his challenge, Galt and the cook returned. "Your friends are still gone," Galt said happily.

"Galt, let me out of here," Zak said, rattling his cage again. "You can't do this."

"Why not?" Galt's face looked completely innocent.

"You can't just eat other human beings. That's cannibalism!"

"It is food," Galt said simply. "And we are hungry."

"There's other food! We'll help you catch it."

Beside Galt, the cook patted his stomach. "Not food like this. Food that saved our lives. Food like the parents gave us."

"What?"

Galt nodded. "We were all very young. For a long time, we ate the food saved from the crashed ship. But the parents were dying from the swamp fever. The machines that kept the food fresh lost power, and the food spoiled. Then it was gone. We were hungry."

"Very hungry," the cook said.

"I remember crying for food. Any food. We cried for days. The parents cried, too. Then they found food for us."

Zak shuddered. He knew what Galt would say next.

"They fed us flesh from the parents who were dying from the swamp fever."

Zak felt his stomach turn over again. He recalled the holographic video

they'd seen. He remembered the sick, dying woman, crying as she said, "We've gotten so hungry..."

The Children were eating the same flesh they'd eaten when they were young, when their parents had last fed them.

"You can't do this," he repeated. "Cannibalism is-"

"I don't know that word," Galt said. "The words I know best are 'hunger' and 'food.' I am hungry," he said as he opened the door to Zak's cage, "and you are food."

CHAPTER 16

Galt and the cook grabbed Zak by the shoulders and dragged him from the cage. The meat flower, disturbed by the jerky movement, lashed out again, and Zak winced, doubling over in pain.

The Children, thinking he was trying to resist, hauled him to his feet again.

"Remove his head," Galt said. "Then we can drain the blood before cutting the slices."

The cook let go of Zak to reach for the sharp piece of ship's hull they used as a knife. As she did, Zak pulled his hand free and jammed it into his pocket. The meat flower bit into his hand, but Zak was counting on that. He ripped his hand back out of his pocket with the meat flower still attached, and flung it toward Galt.

As he snapped his hand, the meat flower came loose and slapped into Galt's face-flower, roots, and mudpack all at once. The meat-eating plant sank its teeth into the man's cheek.

Zak moved without thinking. He turned to the cook and shoved her. The cook stumbled backward and crashed into the bubbling pot of stew.

Zak dove for the corner where Boba Fett's armor was stacked. He scrambled to his feet holding the bounty hunter's blaster just as Galt tore the meat flower off his face and the cook regained her feet, the knife still clutched in her hand.

Zak frantically searched the weapon. He found the power setting and adjusted it for stun just as the cook charged. The stun bolt caught her squarely in the chest and she crumpled. The second blast dropped Galt in his tracks.

In the momentary silence that followed, Zak heard Fett's cold voice. "You wasted time setting for stun. You should have killed them."

Zak looked down at the two skeletal figures. He thought he ought to hate them. They had killed at least two people and had tried to kill him. They were cannibals.

But all Zak felt was pity.

The Children had survived for years in the dangerous, desolate swamp. They had eaten fungus to survive. Their last memory of their parents was a nightmarish meal.

But it was all that they knew.

"They deserve to die," the bounty hunter said from the shadows.

"No," Zak said, speaking the words Yoda had spoken. "They thought we were food. I taught them otherwise."

"Give me my armor."

Zak hesitated. Considering how Boba Fett had tried to kill them, returning the bounty hunter's armor and weapons might be the most dangerous thing Zak could do. But he needed help and right now Boba Fett was his only choice.

Zak gathered up Boba Fett's gear and carried it over to the cage. Fett stretched one arm out from the shadows and grabbed his weapons belt. A moment later, a small fusion cutter glowed brightly and cut cleanly through the wooden bars.

"Helmet."

Zak pushed the helmet and armor through the hole in the cage, and the bounty hunter pulled them into the shadows.

A moment later, Boba Fett stepped into the half-light cast by the fire. Without asking, he pulled the blaster rifle from Zak's hands.

The other Children had heard the struggle. Zak could hear footsteps and shouting from outside the hut. "Now what?" he asked Fett.

"Tactical retreat." The bounty hunter raised his arm and pointed his wrist rockets at the back wall of the hut. There was a crackling sound and a spark shot out, signaling a short circuit. "Moisture damage," Fett muttered. He made a quick adjustment and fired again.

This time the wrist rocket blasted through the back of the hut. Not waiting for the smoke to clear, Fett grabbed Zak around the waist and plunged through the opening into the swamp.

"Weapons malfunctioning," the bounty hunter said. He dropped Zak, who

ran at his side through ankle-deep pools of water. "Need a place to hole up until I can run a check."

"Your ship?" Zak asked.

"Too far. These Children know the swamp too well."

Fett was right. Already the Children were in pursuit. Some of them were closing in from behind. Zak had the sense that others were trying to sprint ahead on either side.

"I know somewhere we can go," Zak said.

"Lead," Fett ordered.

Zak swerved to his left. Twice before, he'd met Yoda while traveling in that direction. With any luck, the third time would be the charm.

Zak was no more certain of his path this time than the last-until he found himself running through the remains of the spider battle.

"It's around here somewhere," he said, although he didn't know exactly what he was looking for.

"There," Fett said. The bounty hunter pushed his way through a curtain

of hanging vines.

On the far side, Zak saw a tiny round hut. Not far from the hut, he could see Tash and Yoda. They were sitting at the base of a huge, dark gnarltree. Among the thick roots of the tree, Zak saw a large hole.

Yoda looked up as if he'd been expecting them all along. "Welcome."

Zak ran forward. Fett strode up behind, his helmeted head scanning the area. He peered down into the hole to make sure nothing was hiding there, then turned toward the others as Zak was telling Tash about the Children. "They're cannibals, Tash! They're eating people!"

"What?" Tash said in amazement. "Where's Uncle Hoole?"

"Yes, where is Hoole?" Boba Fett demanded. "When I find him, all three of you are coming with me."

Faster than a laser beam, the bounty hunter grabbed Zak by the hair, pinning him in place. Then he leveled his blaster at Yoda and fired.

CHAPTER 17

"No!" Zak cried.

But the blaster fizzled and didn't fire.

"Moisture damage," Fett grunted again.

"Away with your weapon!" Yoda said, cringing. His calm Jedi demeanor was gone. Curled up on the ground, hugging his little walking stick, he looked foolish and frightened. "I mean you no harm!"

"I hate loose ends." Fett pulled a small holdout blaster from his boot, but found it covered with swamp slime.

Fett tossed the blaster aside and aimed his capture cable at the little creature. As he fired, Yoda squawked and threw his arms up in sheer panic. The capture cable accidentally snagged the walking stick, wrapping itself around the cane and jerking it from Yoda's hands.

Boba Fett stumbled backward as the cable went slack and the stick came flying back into his face. He slipped and vanished.

He had fallen down the hole at the base of the tree. The moment the bounty hunter disappeared, Yoda composed himself with a gentle sigh.

"You were only pretending to be afraid," Tash said.

"Gave him what he expected to find, I did," replied Yoda. "Sometimes that is the best way to fool people."

"That cave," Zak said. "There's some sort of wind coming from it. What is that?"

"Strong is that place, with the dark side," Yoda whispered. "It is not a place for the weak."

"What's down there?" Zak asked.

Yoda blinked. "Only what you take with you."

"We can't leave him down there, can we?" Zak asked.

The Jedi Master studied Zak thoughtfully. "Find his own way, he must. Unless you wish to go down and find him."

Zak's answer was interrupted by bloodcurdling screams. A horde of Children swarmed over tree roots and through puddles, charging toward them out of the misty swamp.

There was no time to react. Zak saw Galt's face, wide-eyed and screaming, just before the man slammed into him. He was knocked down and stumbled into the entrance to the cave.

Zak fell backward into the dark.

CHAPTER 18

Zak didn't remember hitting bottom. He barely remembered staggering to his feet. His first real moment of awareness was standing in near darkness and shivering with cold.

Galt was standing next to him. Nearby, several other of the Children who had also fallen into the cave were climbing to their feet.

But the Children seemed to have forgotten Zak. They were staring into the darkness, looking at something that Zak could not see.

And then he could.

Small lights like fireflies swirled in the darkness and mist. Slowly, they grew into images spinning around in the misty cave. Zak rubbed his eyes, wondering if the fall had rattled his brain, but the images remained. It was like looking at holograms, only these visions weren't coming from any machine.

"That's us," Galt whispered, staring at the largest of the images.

"That's me."

Frightened and amazed, Zak watched as the visions played themselves out like a holovideo.

Zak saw the village, but it was smaller and cruder, as it must have looked when the survivors first started to carve a life out of the swamp. He saw the survivors trying to grow food out of the driest ground they could find, only to have their gardens flooded by the treacherous swamp. He saw the humans hunt swamp creatures, only to be eaten by swamp slugs and dragonsnakes. Defeated, the survivors continued to scavenge food from the wreckage of a ship.

The vision shifted, and Zak sensed that time had passed. The survivors looked thin and worn, but they had built huts. Some of them sat in the village cuddling tiny babies to their bodies to keep them warm. Zak recognized the woman he'd seen in the earlier hologram. Some of the survivors tinkered with a storage machine that preserved the last of their food.

The vision shifted again, and Zak saw the familiar-looking woman pull the last container of food out of the storage unit. The children now outnumbered the parents, and they were all screaming from hunger. In the vision, Zak watched the desperate parents weep as, day by day, their children grew hungry and thin, begging for food. Starving, they ate moss and fungus, but it wasn't enough.

The last vision was terrible. Zak saw the survivors, starved into madness, turning on a corpse. He and Galt and the other Children could clearly see how horrified the parents were by their own acts. What they had done was a last, desperate attempt to save their children. It was the act of beings so hungry they had lost their minds. As the parents fed their starving children, they cried.

The vision faded.

The crying continued. Galt was sobbing. One of the other Children hugged herself and shuddered.

The Children had relished the thought of eating human flesh because they remembered it from their childhood. But this vision had shown them how desperate their parents had been, and how horrible their final act really was. With a final shudder, Galt and the other Children skulked away into the darkness.

Once again Zak recalled Yoda's words: They thought we were food. I have taught them otherwise.

The vision in the cave had taught them. Yoda had taught them.

"Yoda?" Zak called out. "Tash?"

No answer.

Zak looked around for the hole that led out of the cave. He must have fallen farther than he'd thought, because it was nowhere in sight. He started to walk blindly through the darkness, holding his hands out to keep from bumping into things.

"Tash? Yoda!" he called again, but no voice answered. Had they forgotten about him? Had they been captured by the Children?

Zak shivered. The cave was as cold as ice. And darker than he had ever imagined any place could be. He was sure he would freeze to death if he didn't find his way out soon.

But how?

If Tash were here, she would use the Force. But Tash wasn't here. Zak had only himself to rely on-unless he could use the Force, too.

The thought seemed so ridiculous Zak almost laughed at himself. He had never even thought about using the Force, let alone tried it. I don't even know what the Force feels like.

But that wasn't true.

He had felt it twice already. When Tash had used the Force on Nar Shaddaa, he'd felt a tingling sensation rush through him. Then, in Yoda's presence, Zak had felt the calm, peaceful feeling of the Force gathering around the Jedi Master.

That's what the Force feels like, Zak thought.

Remembering, he felt it again. A warm tingle passed over his skin, the feeling of a gentle touch. But what was touching him, he realized, was everything. That was the Force-the energy that connected all living things. That must be how Jedi used the Force to move things and to find things. If the Force touched all objects, it could lead him from one place to another. Even out of the cave.

Before Zak knew it, his feet were moving. He no longer held his hands out in front of his face. He knew he wouldn't bump into anything.

In moments, the darkness thinned. Zak saw a shaft of gray light ahead. He'd found the entrance to the cave.

But before he could reach it, a heavy hand clamped down on his shoulder.

Boba Fett had found him.

CHAPTER 19

"Don't move. Don't shout," the bounty hunter ordered.

"You're still here?" Zak said. Somehow, he had thought Boba Fett was gone for good.

"Still here," Fett said. "The job isn't done."

"But . . ." Zak tried to find words. "Did you see anything? Here in the cave. Did you . . . see anything?"

"Nothing."

"I thought-I thought maybe you had a vision-"

"Nothing," Fett repeated. "Now move."

The bounty hunter shoved Zak forward into the light. Together, they scrambled up and out of the cave into the gray gloom of the swamp.

The Children were gone, but Yoda and Tash were waiting for them. Fett indicated that Zak should stand next to Tash and Yoda. He hefted his blaster, growling, "No more malfunctions. Sit."

They sat. Tash and Zak looked frightened. Yoda smiled as if he didn't understand what the blaster could do. "Now we wait for Hoole."

"I'm here."

Hoole's voice came from the left. Boba Fett whipped his head around and saw Hoole standing there, alone. Sensing a trap, the bounty hunter launched himself backward as blaster fire peppered the ground-from his right.

Fett rolled into a crouch and sent three shots shrieking into the swamp brush to his right, then dove behind a nearby log.

Platt, Tru'eb, and the remaining smugglers appeared from behind a gnarlwood tree, blasters blazing. Energy bolts shattered the log, disintegrating it. But as wood dust floated to the ground, they saw that Boba Fett had vanished.

"Tactical retreat," Zak guessed.

"Are you all right?" Hoole asked, reaching Zak and Tash in an instant. He glared at Yoda. "If they are hurt, I will-"

Yoda slipped into his fool act, cackling like an idiot. "Hurt? Hurt? It is I that is hurt. My home, this is. My home, you trample! Go away!"

"Uncle Hoole, we're fine," Tash said.

Platt scanned the area. "Tru'eb, run a quick perimeter search. Let's make sure Fett's really on the run."

As the smugglers turned away, Tash whispered, "Uncle Hoole, we have a lot to tell you."

"Tash," Zak asked. "All that time you spent with Yoda. Did he . . . Did he teach you to be a Jedi?"

"This creature?" Hoole asked, pointing at Yoda. "A Jedi?"

Tash looked at the Jedi Master. "Can I tell him, Yoda?"

The little creature's eyes grew soft. "Yes."

Zak swallowed, expecting to hear that Tash had learned some great secret, that she was going to become a Jedi and leap light-years beyond him. He wondered if they would still be friends after she had mastered the Force and he was still just Zak.

"He told me," Tash said, "absolutely nothing."

Zak's face fell. "What?"

"Nothing," Tash said again. "We talked about the Force a little, but mostly he told me about Dagobah, and the plants and animals that are on it. He told me how the Children had survived, and what they needed to learn. But he didn't teach me anything about being a Jedi."

"Then why?" Zak asked Yoda. "Why did you ask her to stay with you?"

Yoda put a gentle hand on Zak's arm. "A chance, you needed. To do something for yourself."

Tash shrugged. "He told me he wanted you to go back to the village alone, to see this through without me. And without Uncle Hoole."

"A step, you have taken," Yoda said to Zak. "You need not be the best at everything to succeed at some things. This is as it was meant to be."

"You speak as though all this was planned," Hoole said.

Yoda looked at Hoole as though he, too, were a child. "The Force moves us all along our paths."

Zak shook his head. "Well, our path has been pretty crazy lately. I wish we could find someplace to settle down for a while."

"Yoda," Tash asked nervously, "could we . . . could we stay here? I want to learn to be a Jedi. Can you teach me?"

The Jedi Master looked up and away for a moment, as if seeing through the trees, out into the sky and the stars beyond. "That is not my destiny. Another student comes. Await him, I must."

"But will I ever learn?" Tash asked desperately.

"While the Emperor lives, no," Yoda said. "But the future is hard to see. The time may come. For both of you."

"Both of us?" Tash asked.

"Both?" Zak repeated.

"The Force connects you. Together will you grow. The path chosen for you has been dark." He looked meaningfully at Zak. "But remember the cave. Even in the dark, the Force will always be with you."

EPILOGUE

The bounty hunter's ship made another orbit, scanners sweeping over the swamp one last time. But there were too many life-forms on the planet. Fett

could not isolate the ones he wanted.

He had decided the planet itself was too difficult a hunting ground.

The swamp was too treacherous, the ground too uneven for him to bring down Hoole and the two children. He would wait until they tried to lift off. Then he would blow their engines with his turbolasers and use a tractor beam to haul them to the nearest Imperial outpost.

The comm unit bleeped. The call came on a private frequency, known to very few. Fett flipped a switch.

The voice of Darth Vader came over the speaker. "Abandon your mission. I have a new task for you."

"The job isn't done," Fett said.

"It is for the moment," the Dark Lord replied. "I'm sure you'll find this new task even more intriguing. I want you to track down a ship called the Millennium Falcon."

Beneath his helmet, Boba Fett smiled a hard, cruel smile. He knew the ship. He knew its pilot. "On my way."

Fett reached for the switch that would break the connection. He hesitated, wondering if he should tell Vader about this strange planet he'd

discovered, about the three fugitives he had almost caught. It never occurred to him to mention the strange little creature.

But if he told Vader, the Dark Lord might send others to track the three fugitives. Fett would lose the bounty, and the pleasure of bringing them in.

He shut the comm off and set a course for the Imperial Fleet.

As Boba Fett's ship tore into hyperspace, the smugglers' ship lifted out of Dagobah's atmosphere and into space.

In the cockpit, Platt was setting a course for the Sluis system. "You can hitch a ride to just about anywhere in the galaxy from there."

"Thank you," Hoole said.

"But what should I do with the Children?" Platt asked.

After leaving Yoda, Zak, Tash, and Hoole had taken time to gather up all the skeletal survivors. It had taken many gentle words and comfort, but at last they'd gotten all the Children aboard Platt's ship.

"We'll find a home for them," Hoole said. "Though I'm not sure where."

Platt hesitated, then said, "I may have some contacts that can help you. People I've worked for in the Rebellion. Rebels have a soft spot for hard-luck cases like them."

"Maybe they'd have a soft spot for cases like us, too," Tash asked.

"I can put you in touch with the right people, if you want," Platt offered. "But the Rebellion isn't exactly a holiday star cruise."

Hoole considered. "I am tired of running from the Empire. Perhaps it is time to stop running."

Zak looked out of the viewport and into space. The whole galaxy seemed to stretch out before them. It was dark, and dangerous, and full of fear. But it was also full of stars, and the stars burned brightly.

"Okay," he said. "Let's go."