

Star Wars

X-Wing Game

The Farlander Papers

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From the Chronicles of the Rebel Alliance

Introduction

The Old Republic is no more. The Galaxy is threatened by an evil Empire, ruled by a creature on the Dark Side of the Force. Only a small, but growing, Rebellion can stop the spread of terror and tyranny. A few dedicated freedom fighters travel the galaxy, uniting the separate planetary Resistance groups into a single, unified Alliance. This is the story of one critical period in the history of the Alliance.

Chapter 1

Rebel Cruiser Independence

In Transit to Agamar in the Lahara Sector

"Some soothing Dagoban bentaxne berry tea, Madam?" The protocol droid stood rock-still, bent at the waist like the major domo of a fancy Celanon restaurant. His saucer-like eyes stared blankly, perpetually optimistic. In his hand he held a tray with a steaming plastcore cup.

"No, thank you, Deesix," answered Mon Mothma, Chief of State of the Rebel Alliance. A former senator of the old Republic, Mon Mothma had played a pivotal role in the unification of the scattered forces of resistance to the Empire. As the elected head of the Alliance, she held absolute power of command, but now she rested in her private study, her feet up on her desk. She was noticeably tired. The years of unceasing travel, gathering support for the growing Rebel movement, weighed heavily on her. With a visible effort, she sat straight at her desk as the droid approached, smiling wistfully, and said, "I've got several hours of work still ahead of me."

"As you wish, Madam," the droid said, walking stiffly over to the recycler and placing the cup in it. "If you don't mind, Madam, I'll go on half power, then." The Chief of State nodded her agreement and turned her attention to the terminal on her desk.

An hour passed in silence as Mon Mothma worked her way through a stack of recent communiques. Her voice droned softly into the terminal receiver and every once in a while she bent over the security coupler to sign off with a retinal scan and voice authorization. The droid stood statue-like, his body upright, his head slumped forward as if asleep.

"Deesix?"

The droid was instantly at attention. "Madam?"

"Didn't you tell me earlier that there was a new speech for me to deliver tomorrow?"

"Indeed I did, Madam. I have it here somewhere. Oh, where did I put it?" The droid shuffled across the room, his head moving back and forth jerkily. Finally he stopped in front of a cabinet and opened a drawer. "Here it is!" he announced, holding up a small holo disk.

Meanwhile, Mon Mothma saw that she had two more messages on the net. She punched up the first of them:

To: Mon Mothma

From: Arhul Hextrophon

Mon Mothma:

I've given your droid, D6-L5, a new draft of the speech you wrote. Please look it over and send final comments to my office. As you know, Mon Mothma, you will be delivering this speech tomorrow on Agamar. They have a growing resistance movement, but have not yet committed to the Alliance. This new speech should help decide them, along with the leaflets and the new holos you saw last week.

I will be available at any time, if you should wish to contact me.

Respectfully,

Arhul Hextrophon

The second memo read:

To: Mon Mothma

From: Lazlo

You should meet a new ambassador in two weeks.

There was no signature. Mon Mothma's forehead creased as she deleted this innocent-looking message. It was in a very private code. Automatically, she had deciphered it. "Lazlo" was really General Madine. "You should meet a new ambassador" meant she was needed to plan operations against a priority Imperial target. "In two weeks," in this context, meant in two days.

She looked up with a start. Deesix was placing the holo disk on the desk before her. "Is something wrong, Madam?" he asked.

With a sigh, she picked up the holo disk. "No, Deesix. Everything is all right. You may as well rest again, though. I shall be a while yet."

"As you wish, Madam," answered the droid, instantly reassuming the sleep position.

Mon Mothma popped the disk in its slot and began to read. As she read, she corrected and annotated the speech using her light pen. Lazlo's message had been noted and mentally filed. She would head for Mon Calamari right after the speech on Agamar.

A CALL TO REASON

SPEECH TO BE DELIVERED FIRST ON AGAMAR

BEINGS OF THE GALAXY UNITE! SHED THE YOKE OF IMPERIAL OPPRESSION!

THANK YOU FOR COMING TODAY. IT IS A PLEASURE TO BE ONCE AGAIN ON THE BEAUTIFUL PLANET OF AGAMAR. FIRST I WANT YOU TO KNOW THAT THIS AREA HAS BEEN SURROUNDED BY OUR FORCES. IT IS HEAVILY SHIELDED. OUR BATTLE CRUISER ORBITS ABOVE US, AND PICKET DROIDS HAVE BEEN DEPLOYED. IN OTHER WORDS. THERE IS NO CHANCE OF AN IMPERIAL SURPRISE ATTACK. YOU ARE SAFE AMONG US... FOR THE MOMENT.

DID YOU KNOW...

THAT THE OLD REPUBLIC WAS A DEMOCRATIC UNION OF WORLDS GOVERNED BY A DULY ELECTED SENATE! THAT IT REPRESENTED THE NEEDS OF ALL BEINGS REGARDLESS OF RACE, SPECIES, OR HOME SECTOR?

THAT "EMPEROR" PALPATINE WAS ONCE A SENATOR. AND THAT HE HAS SEIZED POWER, STOLEN OUR FREEDOMS, DISBANDED THE SENATE, AND CRUSHED ALL DISSENT?

THAT THE CURRENT EMPIRE IS IN THE PROCESS OF SUBJUGATING OR DESTROYING THE NON-HUMAN RACES?

THAT THERE IS HOPE?

TAKE A MOMENT WITH ME NOW, MY FRIENDS, AND LEARN ABOUT THE GREATEST PERIL OUR GALAXY HAS EVER FACED! THERE IS HOPE. BUT ONLY IF YOU KNOW WHY YOU'RE FIGHTING. DO YOU KNOW WHO YOUR FRIENDS ARE? DO YOU KNOW YOUR ENEMY?

Chapter 2

Planetside: Agamar

The Next Day

The woman on the dais paused a moment, and the crowd stood silently, thinking about what she was saying, each in his, her, or its own private world of thought. Keyan Farlander stood among them, listening to the Rebel Chief of State, taking in every word of her speech. He stood in an abandoned warehouse along with perhaps two hundred others. He had joined the growing ranks of the Resistance on Agamar only a month before, and was burning with righteous fervor. His palms sweated as he dreamed of exacting his vengeance on the Imperial troops who had destroyed his village and murdered his friends and family.

Even though the site of the meeting was well guarded, Keyan was well aware of the risk every being in attendance was taking. For his part, all he wanted was to get his hands on the controls of a Rebel starfighter and blast an Imperial Star Destroyer into space dust.

But he was daydreaming and the Rebel leader looked as if she were about to begin again. With an effort, Keyan focused his attention back on the woman who had come to tell him about the world beyond Agamar.

The speaker seemed to take in a deep breath, as if she had spent too much time on starships and was grateful to breathe real planetary air. Then she launched back into her speech, pouring passion into each word, pausing often for dramatic effect.

"How did all this happen? Here's the short answer. GREED! CORRUPTION! DECEIT! OPPRESSION! TYRANNY! THAT IS THE STORY OF THE EMPIRE!"

As she intoned this indictment, the Alliance leader's voice resonated through the warehouse. Then she paused again as if to let this image sink in. When she continued, her voice was controlled, quiet, penetrating . . . the voice of a storyteller. Behind her, brutal images of Imperial oppression occasionally appeared on a simple flat-screen projector. Keyan and all around him were quickly transported back to another time, far, far away, but not so long ago.

"It wasn't always this way. We were at peace following the Clone Wars. Guided by the Jedi Knights and the government of the Republic, war-weary citizens rebuilt their lives and restored their worlds. The central authority of the Republic encouraged prosperity and freedom for all.

"But the galaxy is vast. With a thousand thousand worlds to govern, a few greedy senators found that they could abuse their power, at first in small ways, but ever more boldly. Slowly but steadily corruption infected the Republic. More and more senators, seduced by power and wealth, allied themselves with special interests. And their corruption spread throughout the many worlds. The Republic was crumbling.

"Into this situation came a young senator named Palpatine. I remember him. Very ordinary. Very methodical. Nothing to call your attention . . . Just enough to keep his position. MAKE NO MISTAKE! This Palpatine was a Rodian in Ewok's clothing! His was a diabolical master plan, and he carried it out to perfection.

"The authority of the Senate was weakening at an alarming pace. Crime was on the increase everywhere while many worlds threatened secession. Others simply did as they wished while pretending loyalty. We needed a solution, and that is what Palpatine offered. Through a combination of political maneuvering, careful promises, and some out-and-out fraud, Palpatine got himself elected head of the Senatorial Council, President of the Republic. Many of the most honest and ethical senators backed him because he promised unity and had never joined among the most corrupt. At the same time, the worst members of the Senate expected a weak, controllable President, a figurehead to represent justice as they continued to serve the cause of self-interest.

"I was young, the youngest Senator ever elected until then. Even so, I soon saw this man for the monster he was. But everyone was so anxious for a solution . . .

"Neither senatorial faction got what they had expected. Instead, with the power of the Presidency now secured, Palpatine suddenly emerged as a dynamic and increasingly ruthless leader, getting the government working again. Little by little, he assumed control, as the Senate consumed itself in bitter rivalries. Palpatine subtly encouraged this dissension while seeming to support various sides. He played us against each other, using every means imaginable to increase his control. He gained the loyalty of some senators through favors

while others he swayed with blackmail or coercion. I wept when I could not get them to see the truth.

"Little by little, in ways so subtle that few realized what was happening, Palpatine took the reins of power from the Senate. When he was ready, he declared himself Emperor, announcing a New Order. He filled the senators' heads with grand rhetoric, promising to lead the Republic to a glorious golden age like that of the Kiteel Phard Dynasty of old.

"It is Palpatine's new Order that now stomps on your freedom with an iron boot."

As Mon Mothma paused again, the crowd stirred restlessly. Keyan found his fists knotted tight. He was angry. Angry at the Empire. Momentarily angry at this former Senator who had let it happen. And he was inspired . . .

"Some of us tried to defy him, but the result is what you see. I am a fugitive now. Palpatine has grown more powerful on the Dark Side. With the help of the fallen Jedi Knight, Darth Vader, he deals swiftly and decisively with his enemies. If I had not escaped, I would now be dead. Palpatine's power is spreading, and with it the Darkness of his tyranny. This is how the Old Republic died. This is how the Empire was born.

"Look with me for a moment at what I call the Empire's Great Lie. "Emperor" Palpatine has continued the pretense that he would end social injustice and corruption. On the surface, his policies may seem to be aimed at righting the wrongs imposed by the waning Republic. But his true goal has always been the subjugation of the thousand thousand worlds and the enslavement of all galactic citizens. He rules by fear rather than by consent. He states that all beings are equal citizens while he carries out secret missions designed to destroy whole races.

"The Empire seems unbeatable. I hear that often. But witness what the "Emperor's" own Grand Moff Tarkin has to say:

"I have noticed that even the excellent pace with which Your Majesty is strengthening his fleets can scarcely provide security for the Empire should a significant number of planets begin to defy your will. We are many years away from a force vast enough to secure every system simultaneously."

"Rule through the fear of force rather than force itself. If we use our strength wisely, we shall cow thousands of worlds which might otherwise consider rebellion to some degree."

"The Empire is evil. It is guided by an evil creature on the Dark Side of the Force. DO NOT SUBMIT TO HIS WILL. RESIST NOW. They cannot subdue us all. They have admitted it! Only fear keeps them in power. If we act now, if we act together, WE WILL CAST OFF THEIR OPPRESSION, DISPEL THE DARKNESS, AND DESTROY THE EVIL EMPIRE ONCE AND FOR ALL!"

Keyan found himself cheering with the rest of the crowd, and for a moment he was elsewhere. He had a brief image of standing with millions of beings, all determined to win their freedom back. He could feel them with him. Then the moment passed, and he stood in awe. He was no longer alone. He was ready to lay down his life to defend the Alliance. He listened to the rest of Mon Mothma's speech as if he were giving it himself-as if every word she spoke was his word; as if every thought was his as well.

"Even now, beings from all quadrants of the galaxy are rising up against injustice. They are bravely defying the Imperial overlords and gathering for a life and death struggle. They need your help.

"The Resistance is not alone. Before the Emperor disbanded the Senate once and for all, some of us took an active role against him. Chief among my allies was

"Senator Bail Organa of Alderaan. Though we seldom agreed on the Senate floor, we each understood the danger inherent in Palpatine's ' ' ' 'rise to power. We plotted secretly to overthrow him and to unite the rising tide of Resistance that has grown up in hundreds of systems and continues to spread.

"I bring you an offer of unity, of power, of total Rebellion. Only by working, together, by coordinating your efforts with those of other planets and systems, can you hope to defy the might of the Empire. I urge you to join the growing Rebel Alliance. SEPARATE, WE SHALL FAIL. TOGETHER, WE SHALL PREVAIL!"

The crowd erupted again, and the cheers went on for several minutes. When the room was

once again quiet, and not a moment before, Mon Mothma continued.

"Even as Senator Palpatine out-maneuvered and defrauded the Senate to become President, Bail Organa and I plotted secretly, meeting repeatedly at Chatham House, Organa's home in Imperial City. At first Organa resisted my call for a general revolution, horrified at the thought of abandoning the government he had devoted his life to. Then came the massacre at Ghorman, a small planet in the Sern Sector, just outside the Core Worlds.

"Following Ghorman, Bail Organa secretly helped me to divert weapons and funds, and even more importantly, information, to the growing Resistance effort. However, I was eventually discovered, and Bed the capital only moments before the ISB came to arrest me.

"My goal has been to create an Alliance of Rebel planets, and my first success came in the Corellian System. Using the guidelines and Ideas discussed during the Chatham House meetings, I convinced three major Resistance groups to join together. I showed them how the increased communication, central leadership, and greater access to much-needed funds, supplies, and weaponry would benefit them all. I convinced them that there was strength in unity. The Corellian Treaty was the true beginning of the Alliance.

"Since the Corellian Treaty, I have traveled the galaxy, from world to world, and everywhere I go, beings of conscience, independent thinkers, and victims of Imperial atrocities have greeted me. They have joined the Alliance as I hope you good beings will also. I have come to offer hope. To offer fellowship in a growing galactic movement."

One man stepped forward, then. Keyan recognized him as the leader of the Resistance on Agamar.

"What does the Alliance have to offer?" he asked. "Why should we join you?" A buzz rose up in the crowd, and an air of nervous expectancy crackled in the air like electricity. Mon Mothma silenced them with a wave of her hand.

"It's a fair question, and I'm glad you asked. Suppose Imperial warships were headed for your planet. You have perhaps a dozen obsolete Headhunter starfighters, and only five of them are battle worthy. Moreover, you wouldn't even know the warships are on the way because you have no communication with Rebels on other worlds. You're a sitting Hoska. Now suppose you're linked to a Sector-wide network of information. Surveillance droids watching the Imperial fleet and secret communiques from Allied worlds warn you well in advance, while neighboring systems send reinforcements in the form of men, weapons, and starfighters to defend your home.

"Now perhaps you begin to understand. The Alliance offers experienced leadership, coordination of information, and logistical support to every world that truly desires freedom.

"And don't worry about trading one Empire for another. I am the Alliance Chief of State and Supreme Commander of the Rebel Forces. But, unlike the Emperor, my job is temporary. Every two years, the Advisory Council votes again.

"At any time, the Advisory Council may remove the Chief of State. And, as soon as the Emperor is deposed, my position ends and all the worlds will participate in forming a New Republic.

"Let me read to you an excerpt from our formal Declaration of Rebellion. It's addressed directly to the "Emperor."

"We, the Rebel Alliance, do, therefore, in the name-and by the authority-of the free beings of the galaxy, solemnly publish and declare our intentions:

To fight and oppose you and your forces, by any and all means at our disposal;

To refuse any Imperial law contrary to the rights of free beings;

To bring about your destruction and the destruction of the Galactic Empire;

To make forever free all beings in the galaxy.

To these ends, we pledge our property, our honor and our lives.

"I have pledged my life to this cause. Will you not do the same? With your help, the

Alliance will continue its expansion. WE WILL STOP THE EMPIRE! WE WILL BE FREE!"

When her speech ended, Mon Mothma was engulfed in a wave of enthusiastic converts. Keyan watched as she disappeared into a small room with the Resistance leaders. He felt both full and empty, unsure what to do next. As he stood there, a young woman came up to him and handed him a small leaflet.

"Read this. It will help you understand more," she told him. "But return it to me or destroy it before you leave. To be caught with it is death."

He took the small pamphlet she handed him-"A Call to Reason"- and immediately began to read. Soon he forgot where he was as he became absorbed in an expanding universe of beings and places.

When Keyan had finished examining the leaflet, he turned it over and read the back cover:

"Are you ready to fight for your freedom? To lay down your life, if need be, to save your homeworld? Then find us. Fight with us. We will destroy the Empire, and you can help. Join us now!"

Keyan heard footsteps and looked up just as the same young woman walked by him. She was helping restore the warehouse to its former appearance. Keyan caught her eye and held out the leaflet.

"I want to be a starfighter pilot." he told her. "Where do I sign up?"

Chapter 3

Alliance Flagship Independence:

En Route to Mon Calamari

When the MC80 Star Cruiser independence first arrived at Agamar, it had carried Mon Mothma and a skeleton crew of 1230 engineers and Rebel troops. Four X-wing and four Y-wing starfighters had swept the area for enemy craft and remained on alert throughout the visit. When the Independence left Agamar, it carried Mon Mothma and 1233 on board. A few Alliance advisors had remained on Agamar while several new recruits had joined the ship's complement.

"This is your new home, Flight Cadet Farlander," the Quarren officer had told him in heavily accented Basic. They stood before a cell-like room deep in the dark lower decks of the Calamarian cruiser.

Keyan remembered it like it had been yesterday. Well, in fact it had been the day before yesterday, but time on a starship, in and out of hyperspace, seemed somehow different from planetary time.

Keyan had never seen a Quarren before and had stared shamelessly at the squid-like face. The Quarren seemed used to such stares, however, and apparently took no offense. "First time off-planet?" the Quarren half asked, half stated. "Imagine what your face looks like to me." He made a sound that might have been laughter. Keyan wasn't sure.

Embarrassed, Keyan didn't answer, but suddenly looked to his shoes for advice. No advice came, however, before the Quarren spoke again.

"Here. Take this holo and study it." A suckered appendage placed the holo disk in Keyan's hand. "If you're to be a starfighter, you need to learn the ropes. If you have any questions, your liaison will be Lt. Hamo Blastwell. Don't worry. He's human." Again, the Quarren made a sound that might have been a chuckle. At least that's what Keyan found himself hoping as the strange creature turned and walked away. There was a small, antiquated holo deck in the room, and Keyan inserted the holo into its slot and powered up.

HISTORICAL SIMULATOR

RESCUE AT MON CALAMARI

In the early days of the Rebellion, there was no fleet of ships such as we have now. There were only a handful of dedicated people nursing a pitiful few starfighters and converted freighters. We desperately needed the help of a major space-faring race. One such race,

the Calamarians, were still neutral. They had not yet seen that the Empire intended their destruction. They were not yet aware of the Empire's appetite for evil.

When Imperial forces arrived at Mon Calamari, they found a peaceful world and a cooperative population. To the Empire, peaceful meant stupid and cooperative meant ripe for plucking. The Imperials took full advantage, exploiting Mon Calamari's industries and taking the Calamarians as slaves.

The leaders of the Rebellion had been interested in the beings of Mon Calamari for some time, and they became aware of the Imperial atrocities perhaps before most of the Calamarians themselves. Imperial convoys were starting to load huge bulk freighters with slaves. These freighters were never designed to carry life forms, and the conditions within the freighters were brutal, overcrowded, and demeaning. When the Rebel leaders learned of this, they saw their opportunity to help the Calamarians and, at the same time, hopefully secure their cooperation against the Empire.

A group of Bulk Freighters-some carrying Mon Calamari slaves, others carrying war materiel for the Empire-were scheduled to rendezvous in the Mon Calamari system, awaiting the arrival of a Star Destroyer. The Bulk Freighters were protected by a great horde of TIE fighters while Space Tugs hauled Space Containers among the Freighters. Intelligence of this rendezvous reached the leaders of the Rebellion, and they planned a strike mission to intercept and retrieve the containers and rescue the Calamarians.

The mission required that X-wings and Y-wings hyperspace into the area. While the Y-wings disabled the Bulk Freighters to prevent their escaping, the X-wings were to engage the TIE fighters and prevent them from interfering with the Y-wings. Once the situation was controlled, an Alliance Bulk Freighter would hyperspace into the area to retrieve the captured containers, all before the Star Destroyer arrived. During! the mission, one particularly daring X-wing pilot played an important role. In the simulator, you will reenact his exploits.

The X-wings and Y-wings hyperspaced in as planned and immediately the Y-wings began disabling the Freighters. The TIE fighters, not expecting any trouble, were slightly out of position, so at first the X-wings were able to keep them away from the battle with the Freighters.

Eventually, the TIE fighters were simply too numerous to be contained completely. Although the X-wing pilots destroyed or disabled many, they were outnumbered almost three to one. Eventually several flights of TIE fighters disengaged and headed for the Freighters. Instead of attacking the Y-wings, however, they focused their attack on the containers themselves. Typically, they would rather massacre thousands of innocent beings than let them fall into the hands of the enemy!

Halley Kadorto followed the TIE fighters as they headed toward the first of the helpless containers. Though he called to his squadron for help, all the other pilots were engaged. Kadorto was forced to work alone. His skill and superior shooting completely routed the TIE fighters, sending those who survived scurrying back among their remaining cohorts. For his efforts, Halley Kadorto received the Kalidor Crescent.

Ultimately, the rest of the TIEs were routed and the operation was carried off as planned. The grateful Calamarians recognized the friendship of the Rebels, and began almost immediately providing them with ships. Today the most powerful spacecraft in the Alliance fleet are provided by the Mon Calamari, who remain among our staunchest allies.

You must take the role of Halley Kadorto, engaging the TIE fighters in a life or death struggle. You will be at the controls of a . . .

...Keyan was studying the historical missions for the third time when he felt the presence of someone watching him. He was about to look behind him when the being spoke. "Excuse me. Are you busy?"

Keyan whirled to face the speaker and discovered a young man-human and by his appearance, only a few years older than Keyan himself. The man wore a Rebel uniform with a Lieutenant's insignia, but something in his manner contradicted his superior rank. His dark blonde hair was shaggy, as if he hadn't had a haircut in several months, and his uniform was unbuttoned at the collar. The man leaned against the entry to Keyan's cubicle, smiling as he in turn studied Keyan. After a moment, he spoke again. "Some of the crew around here call me Lieutenant Blastwell. But you can call me Hamo. I thought you might like to get a bite to eat."

That was two days ago. Now he and Hamo had become good friends. From similar outpost worlds, their personal histories were remarkably alike. Almost from the beginning, Keyan had liked Hamo. The biggest difference between them was that Hamo had been with the Alliance for nearly a year now, and he was a wing leader and expert X-wing pilot. It was with Hamo that Keyan hoped to learn to be a starfighter ace. For the past two days Hamo had kept Keyan spellbound with his stories of space battles-heroic maneuvers, triumphs, tragedies, near misses, and close calls. He had also helped Keyan through his first simulator trials, preparing him for the "Maze."

Now they stood near one of the open viewports in the upper decks and enjoyed their first view of Mon Calamari, home base of the Calamarian Star Fleet. The ship had come out of hyperspace and was approaching the water world at sub-light speed. Earlier, a fast shuttle had approached the ship, arriving almost as soon as they had left hyperspace. Keyan had caught a quick glimpse of it before it disappeared, moving gracefully toward the airlock in the ship's belly. But Keyan had already forgotten the shuttle craft. Once they established orbit, Keyan knew his real training would begin. He couldn't wait to get behind the controls of a starfighter and at least make it through the "Maze."

Elsewhere in the ship, in a secure meeting room, four people were deep in conference-Mon Mothma, Admiral Ackbar, General Dodonna, and General Madine. Madine was speaking.

"Our intelligence tells us that an Imperial transport vessel, probably a Corellian Corvette, will be en route to Celanon City in two weeks. It will make one stop near Turkana in the Hadar Sector. My informant believes it will have some very important information on board." The General paused a moment. "Or it may be an important passenger. We're really not sure. But elaborate precautions are being taken to make this transport seem unimportant. It will be traveling without a substantial escort, hoping to avoid attention. It is also supposed to be carrying a skeleton crew. We feel that this is an opportunity of some significance."

"How so?" asked Admiral Ackbar.

"First, Turkana is a small outpost. There is no major Imperial installation there. We should be able to board this ship. Nobody will be expecting such an attack. Second . . . Well, we know from our informants that Lord Vader is on the move." The general paused nervously a moment, the evil name seeming to stick in his throat as he uttered it. "He may be the passenger aboard this vessel."

The Calamarian turned to Mon Mothma momentarily, then focused his great luminous eyes on the human general. "What do you need to carry out the operation?"

Madine did not hesitate. "I need two squadrons of X-wings, one of Y-wings equipped with ion cannons, and a Nebulon B Frigate to act as a decoy-to lure off any escort the Corvette might have-and one of our 'liberated' Stormtrooper transports, with R2 units on board. Needless to say, I'll need some of our best commandos if it's really Vader."

"We have other operations going on as well. I will try to find the equipment you require. Jan?"

"We can get the starfighters," answered the bearded general in charge of Starfighter Command. "However, we have very few trained pilots. We have had many losses recently."

The Calamarian admiral was silent a moment. "Try," was all he said.

"You are convinced this is genuine information?" asked Mon Mothma, directing her question at Madine.

"Our intelligence reveals that something of critical value will be on board. Several of our operatives risked blowing their cover to get the information to us. They would not have done so under ordinary circumstances."

"Then I shall do all I can to help," interrupted Ackbar.

"And I," echoed Dodonna.

Chapter 4

The Mission

Thirteen days had passed, and Keyan was confused. He had been trained quickly, almost too quickly. He wondered at the breakneck pace they had put him through in theory and practice sessions. He was flying the "Maze" and historical simulations almost before he could catch his breath. He had passed with surprising ease. But he was not yet finished with his training.

They said he was a natural. That he took to the starfighter like a Wookiee to a bowcaster. All Keyan knew is that he felt at home for the first time in his life. Hamo was his flight leader and they drilled every spare moment. Keyan learned to follow Hamo's every move, with or without voice communication. Though he was learning fast, he knew he was far from ready for a real mission. That's why he was so confused. Because he had been asked to volunteer for a dangerous and important mission.

"The frigate will pop in here." Admiral Ackbar himself was giving the briefing. He pointed to a holo projection of an area in the Hadar sector. A Corellian Corvette filled the lower corner of the projection. A small world was visible in the background. As the Admiral spoke, a Nebulon B frigate popped into view in the upper quadrant. Within moments, a stream of TIE fighters appeared and headed directly for the frigate. Then a squadron of X-wings appeared behind the TIE fighters, catching them in a crossfire between their guns and the cruiser's. The second X-wing squadron and the Y-wings surrounded the Corvette.

"Blue Squadron will flank the enemy fighters, catching them in a crossfire with the Calamarian light cruiser. Red Squadron will protect the Storm Unit as it attempts to board the Corvette. The Y-wings of Gold Squadron will use their ion cannons to disable the Corvette's weapons and electricals. If Blue Squadron is successful, there should be limited resistance, but Red Squadron is to protect the Y-wings and the Storm Unit.

"When the Storm Unit successfully boards the Corvette, the commandos will make their way to the captain's quarters and to the bridge. They will confiscate all available holos and capture any senior ranking officers. In addition, R2 units will scan the transport's computer system and retrieve anything found there. Are there any questions?"

Captain Charger stood up and asked, "Do we take the transport when we leave, destroy it, or abandon it?"

"Carry out the mission objectives and retreat immediately. We want as few casualties on this mission as possible. And we don't want any complications. Just hit hard, hit fast, and get out!"

Keyan was part of Red Squadron. He kept asking himself what he was doing here. He kept coming up blank.

The X-wing soared from its hangar deck and quickly assumed its position in the Red Squadron formation.

"You OK, Red Two?" It was Hamo's voice over the communicator. "Fine, Red Leader." answered Keyan. "I'm fine." The truth was, his stomach had turned over and he was on the verge of retching into his cockpit. Only his exhilaration over the smooth, raw power of the X-wing compensated for his moment of fear. No landspeeder could compare. Nothing could compare! This was the ultimate machine for a bom space pilot. He forced his stomach to be calm. "I'm ready," he muttered.

"What's that, Red Two?"

"Ready when you are, Red Leader," he answered, with only slightly more conviction.

"Just stick close to me. Hyperspace in T-minus 15."

Everything began to move quickly once they entered hyperspace. The jump was a short one, and within an impossibly short time they were in normal space again. Blue Squadron was already engaging enemy TIE fighters nearby. Keyan thought how odd it was that a battle raged so close at hand, and yet it was all in silence. Green and orange laser beams shot through the vacuum. Ships disintegrated in great balls of fiery debris. But no sound reached him. It was eerie.

Then the Corvette occupied his viewport as his X-wing spun into final approach position, guided almost unconsciously by his hand and the R2 unit outside the cockpit. He began to follow his flight leader in, but miscalculated his position for just an instant. It was a

costly instant and suddenly he was out of formation! It was a stupid, rookie mistake.

Angrily he began to turn the ship to recover his position, but he over-compensated. As his viewport spun around, Keyan spotted a pair of fast moving shapes detaching themselves from the battle with Blue Squadron. Soon it became clear that an enemy flight of TIE fighters was headed straight for Red Leader! Instinctively Keyan sent his craft on an intercept course, falling in behind the closest TIE fighter as it neared its target. The enemy pilot had Hamo's X-wing directly in its sights. No time to think.

"Watch out, Red Leader!" he yelled as he hit the laser cannon button. He was almost too late. His shot only grazed the enemy fighter. It was not a particularly good shot. But it threw the TIE fighter off course just as its pilot launched his own attack on Hamo. So instead of blasting the X-wing to space dust, the Imperial pilot's shot went high. Part of the TIE'S beam hit, but seemed to do little damage.

Meanwhile, Keyan was maneuvering instinctively, following the TIE fighter as it now attempted to evade him. His first shot must have damaged part of the steering control because the enemy fighter seemed only able to turn to starboard. When Keyan realized this, he was able to anticipate his enemy's next maneuver and get inside his turn. He fired a cannon blast that caught the TIE fighter amidships and sent him spinning off into space. Sparks and green and yellow smoke spewed from its engine.

"Good shooting, Red Two!" came the message. "And thanks. But next time, watch out for the wingman. I was barely able to get him off your tail!"

Keyan was too shocked to answer. He turned back to the transport.

"Red Two, come in."

"I'm here, Red Leader."

"Hey kid. That was good shooting. You'll be all right. But listen. I'm afraid I've been damaged. It's not too severe, but my R2 has been disabled. I won't be able to return to base-no hyperspace, you know-unless I can dock with the Calamarians. I'm leaving the flight to you, Red Two. I'm joining Blue Squadron. You're on your own. You copy?"

"Sh... Shouldn't I stay with you Red Leader?"

"Negative. Complete the mission. Hurry now, or you'll miss all the fun. Good luck, Keyan."

"Thank you, sir. Same to you."

Keyan watched as Hamo's X-wing changed course and entered the battle with the remaining TIE fighters. The wreckage of two starfighters floated off in the distance, the wingman's crippled spacecraft not far from the leader's. Only then did Keyan realize how close he had come to "final hyperspace" as some pilots called it. Quickly he boosted his power and headed straight in toward the Corvette. Several of Red Squadron's other X- and Y-wings had already engaged the transport. Some were being held off by the transport's double turbolasers. The more experienced pilots looked for weak points in the shields and systematically pummeled the Corvette while the Y-wings aimed their ion cannons at the weak points. Keyan was just sighting in on one of the still-active guns when another message came over the general static that accompanied the intense combat.

"Storm Leader to all units. Any of you X-wing jockeys got a spare R2? We need help here at the main air lock. Come in ..."

"Red Leader to Red Two. You hear that? Go on in, boy. Give the commandos a hand." Hamo was still watching over him. Keyan acknowledged the transmission as he completed his pass at the Corvette's gun, gently pressing the stud that fired the lasers. Then he rolled his X-wing under the transport and headed for the belly loading bay, where the main air lock would be located. He flew a weaving course that he hoped would throw off the remaining enemy guns. Already his "close encounter" was nearly forgotten.

A gaping hole marred the stern of the boarding craft and smoke poured from it, but the airlock was open and there was no apparent resistance. Keyan guided his X-wing into the opening. A commando signaled him to an empty area, but as he glided overhead, he noticed scattered bodies of Imperial stormtroopers and Rebel commandos. Scorch marks were everywhere.

Keyan took his hand blaster from its holster and climbed out of the cockpit. Two commandos ran over to him and lifted the R2 unit out of its special socket in the X-wing.

"We've finally got this section secured and we're trying to jam their gun computers. A few of the others have already gone forward to find the bridge."

"What should I do?" asked Keyan. He hadn't really expected to board the transport. He had no orders to cover this.

"Take your R2 forward and see if you can help us jam the guns. This section has been cut off from the main defense computers. And while you're there, get anything that looks important and get back here. You've got 15 minutes."

He was in an empty corridor, the R2 wheeling along behind him. The bodies of dead stormtroopers lay at odd angles, their white ceramic armor scorched by blaster hits. There was an odd smell in the air. Blaster burn? Several Alliance commandos also lay among the dead. Moving quickly through the maze of tunnels, Keyan rounded a corner and came up short, an Imperial blaster aimed directly at his face.

The Trooper must have been as surprised as Keyan because he hesitated just an instant. Keyan threw his arm in an instinctive sweeping motion before his brain had even registered the moment. The blaster flew from the stormtrooper's hand as Keyan clutched his wrist, his own blaster clattering to the deck. Damn, that armor was hard! Then the Trooper had him by the throat, forcing him to the floor. He could do nothing. There was nothing to strike but armor. His blaster was trapped directly under him, cutting into the small of his back through his flight suit. He was slowly losing consciousness.

Then the stormtrooper shuddered violently, went stiff, and fell off him. The hands around his throat opened and fell away, and Keyan took a deep, gasping breath. He looked over just in time to see a half-meter long shock probe retreat into the R2's body cavity.

It was hard to tell. The stormtrooper seemed to be alive, but unconscious.

Quickly recovering his blaster, Keyan whispered, "Let's get out of here!" The R2 whistled and beeped its agreement. Droids aren't supposed to harm sentients, thought Keyan. Perhaps just shocking the Trooper wasn't technically injuring him. Or maybe my R2 is a special case. Whatever the reason . . .

"Thanks, R2," he called over his shoulder as he ran in the direction of the bridge. The little droid beeped a contented sound.

The bridge was a wreck. The battle here must have been furious. At least ten stormtroopers were dead, and half as many commandos. This transport shouldn't have had so many troops. They had been told the resistance would be minimal.

Quickly Keyan searched for anything that looked important, but there was nothing. Meanwhile, the R2 had extended another of its probes and was searching the computer banks, shutting off gun positions and storing technical information.

He was about to give up and head back to the air lock when he heard the sound of a blaster coming from behind what looked to be an ordinary wall. A closer inspection indicated that there was a sliding door built to look like a wall.

"R2?"

"Beep . . . pop?"

"Can you open this door here?"

The R2 responded with another series of high whistles and hoots. The door slid silently open. Inside was an older man in Imperial military uniform-the commander by all appearances. There were burning holo disks everywhere. The commander looked up at Keyan, caught by surprise, and raised his blaster. Keyan fired immediately, but the man had not aimed at him. He had shot in the direction of a stack of holo disks. His first shot scattered the disks. He never had time for a second shot. Keyan's blast hit him in the chest. The man slumped over and fell to the deck.

Keyan ran to the Imperial officer and saw that he was dead, his face frozen in a rictus of surprise. Keyan felt his skin tighten and for a moment his knees buckled. He clutched at

the nearest support. He had killed this man, face to face. And the man hadn't even been aiming at him. What could be in those holos that he had been willing to sacrifice himself for? Keyan took several deep breaths-got his legs under him again.

Quickly he gathered the scattered holos. Many were little more than slag, but he took them all and placed them in the zippered pockets of his flight suit. At the last moment, he gingerly removed the officer's identifier. Perhaps the identifier would mean something to the Rebel leaders. He knelt a few seconds more, staring into the dead eyes of the first man he had ever killed. Of all the mementos he had gathered on this mission, the memory of those eyes would remain with him the longest.

With an effort, he tore himself away. "Come on, R2. I think we got what we came for. Let's get out of here." The R2 followed him from the bridge, a stream of high pitched whistles, pops, and sproings emitting from its speaker.

Chapter 5

Alliance Flagship: Yavin Base

"Mon Mothma, this is Flight Officer Keyan. He's the one who captured the holos. I'm told he distinguished himself in the battle as well." Admiral Ackbar himself beckoned him to approach.

Mon Mothma studied Keyan's face, as if searching his character. "Have we met before?" she asked finally.

"I was on Agamar," Keyan answered.

"Agamar? I was there only two weeks ago . . . You've wasted no time, have you?"

"Yes Ma'am! I mean, no Ma'am. I mean . . ."

Mon Mothma smiled warmly. "Let me show you what your heroism has recovered for us. It's an Imperial Military Specifications report. Ultra Top Secret. Much of it is missing, but what's here is invaluable to us. It details their own ships' weaponry and capabilities, but also describes our ships as they view them. And there are hints of other things. Dark plans. You have no idea how precious this information is. I'm going to give you a printout to study. You've earned it."

"Excuse me Ma'am," ventured Keyan, "was that the information we were after?"

A strange look passed between Mon Mothma and Ackbar. Some message or meaning was exchanged, of that Keyan was certain, but he had no idea what it was all about. But the admiral looked at him with those gigantic eyes, which could seem, in the same moment, compassionate, confused, perceptive, naive, and penetrating. Keyan found them disconcerting.

"Yours was a very important mission, Flight Officer," the Calamarian said in a surprisingly low, sibilant voice. "However our main target was probably far away in another sector. We do not know if any of our other missions were successful. Not yet, at any rate. We remain hopeful.

"Your mission became entangled in an elaborate Imperial plan of deception and misdirection. The Empire has been sending out numerous transports whose sole purpose is to confuse us. Some carry genuine information. Others are worthless decoys. We have no way of knowing for sure which is which, though we based your mission on good intelligence. Our ultimate goal is to find the transport we believe may carry Darth Vader on a secret mission. We must try to capture him. Or kill him. We do not yet know if we have been successful."

"However, the information you have given us is an added victory for the Alliance. You should be proud to know how well you and your fellow pilots have served."

Keyan was silent, stunned. So many had died-for a mission that could well have been worthless! It was inconceivable. "Then all those deaths . . . Isn't it too big a risk to take?" he finally blurted out.

"No!" exclaimed the Chief of State. "Every battle is significant. Yes, your mission entailed some risks. But we were lucky this time, and the information in this report could

ultimately help save billions of lives. In war there are many sacrifices. None are minor or without significance. Even now as we await word from the other missions, we do not belittle what you and your colleagues have accomplished. Nor should you. Here, read the hob-printout and see what you've brought us. Return here when you have finished."

Later, when Keyan was alone, he studied the papers Mon Momma had handed him. They were labeled Top Secret. He read it all, slowly. Then he read it again.

When Keyan had finished reading the documents he had recovered from the Blockade Runner, he returned to Mon Mothma's office as directed. An aide told him that the C-in-C was not in, but that she could be found in Lecture Hall C, deck 5.

Not being very familiar with the layout of the ship after only two weeks, Keyan got lost several times while trying to find Lecture Hall C. So it is perhaps understandable that he was less than observant as the doorway irised open and he entered the lecture hall. He failed to see any significance to the fact that the room was full of pilots and crewmembers of Starfighter Command, and that Mon Mothma, General Dodonna, and even Admiral Ackbar himself stood on a raised platform at the back of the room.

Keyan was halfway up the aisle when he realized that everyone was staring at him. Embarrassed, he slowed down to a cautious pace, but General Dodonna called to him in a deep voice that resonated naturally through the hall.

"Don't stop, Lieutenant Farlander. This party's for you."

But Keyan did stop. Did he say Lieutenant? He must have looked comical in his surprise, as he suddenly became aware that he had walked into some ceremony or other. Whatever the reason, everyone in the room burst into laughter, and Keyan felt the heat of chagrin on his cheeks. But Mon Mothma was beckoning him to the dais, and suddenly he found himself laughing, too. Lieutenant Farlander. It had a good ring to it.

"There are many heroes among us. We want to welcome one more." Mon Mothma was speaking as Keyan made his way up to the small stage. "Keyan Farlander came to us, like many others before him, with a conviction that the Empire must be destroyed. But like many of you before you joined the Alliance, he had not yet seen a way to fight so huge and so evil a force. Now he is one of us. You all know of his exploits on the recent raid at Hadar. He has distinguished himself with skill and bravery ..." She paused, glancing over at Keyan then. "... and, I think, a little luck." Keyan grinned back at her.

"And luck is something we'll need a good supply of, along with our dedication and sacrifice. The Empire is vast, and we will need all the help we can get. Therefore, we welcome Keyan 'Lucky' Farlander to the Rebel Alliance, and promote him to Lieutenant."

Then General Dodonna came up to Keyan and pinned a new insignia of rank onto his uniform. As the audience began to applaud, he heard the general say, "Now don't get cocky. You still have much to learn. You'll be back on the simulators tomorrow." But Keyan only saluted and basked in the approval of his new friends. There would be time enough for training. Time enough to face the Empire. They were out there, he knew. For today, however . . . Today was his lucky day.

Epilogue

After the ceremony, Mon Mothma motioned for Keyan to follow her, leading him back to the office where he had first met the Rebel leader. "I called you lucky today, Lieutenant, and perhaps that was true. But you should know that the Force is strong in you."

"The Force?" asked Keyan.

Mon Mothma was a woman of great intensity. Keyan had seen this already. But when she spoke next, her focus was as tight as a laser, her voice resonant with power. "The Force is the energy field created by all living beings that binds the galaxy together. It is the greatest power we know of, and I believe it is the Force that is working through you. It is a rare gift, to be strong in the Force. Once there were many who could teach you about the Force. Now, sadly, few remain. Seek out one who can teach you. It is your destiny."

Later that night, Keyan lay awake. It had been a lucky day. Right up until Mon Mothma had mentioned the Force. Now, Keyan could not shut off visions of an uncertain future and the role he would play. Destiny. It had an ominous sound. He decided he liked lucky better. Finally he fell into a deep sleep, and in his dreams he heard a voice—a voice at once

alien and yet strangely familiar . . .

"Life creates it. Makes it grow. Its energy surrounds us and binds us. Luminous beings are we, not this crude matter. You must feel the Force around you. But beware the Dark Side. If once you start down the Dark Path, forever will it dominate your destiny. Consume you, it will. A Jedi uses the Force for knowledge and defense; never for attack. There is no why. There is no try. There is do. Or do not."