

Star Wars

Adventure Journal

N 3

From the Adventures of Dannen Lifehold

part 2

Changing the Odds:

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"Are we there yet?"

Dannen looked at Purr. It was the fortieth time she'd asked him during this two-week trip through hyperspace, and it had been driving him nuts. This time, however, he had an answer for her.

"We should be coming up on Rafft soon," he said.

"Then we meet this... Rebellion?"

"Sort of. We're going to meet a group of Rebels who work out of this system."

Purr looked at the star lines. "What did you say they did?"

Dannen rolled his eyes. "I said they were guerrillas. They specialize in hit-and-run tactics - - they run in, blow something up, then leave."

Purr's eyes widened. "We're carrying bombs?"

"No, we're carrying medical supplies. Seems that their bacta tank malfunctioned and exploded, so we have a new one with some fresh bacta."

"The healing jelly?"

"Yeah. That and some other stuff. It's only medical supplies, Purr. We won't get blown up." At least, I hope not, he thought.

At that moment, the hyperdrive disengaged. The stars resumed their normal appearance outside the canopy, looking like diamonds surrounding the green sphere that hung in their midst.

Dannen checked his readouts, then nodded towards the planet. "That's it, Purr. That's Rafft."

As the Lifeline approached the globe, Purr glanced at Dannen curiously. "What is the Rebellion?"

Dannen grimaced. "It's not something you can describe in a few words. You know what Imperial stormtroopers are?"

"The men in white armor?"

"Yes. Well, they are the law enforcement arm of the galactic government, which is controlled by a man called the Emperor. Well, there are some who believe that the Emperor is evil, and are trying to destroy him."

Purr thought about this. "Is he?"

Dannen looked at her. "Is he what?"

"Evil."

Dannen considered lying, but then chose the truth. "Yes, he is. He wants to control everything and everybody."

"Why don't you want to work for them?"

"What, the Rebellion? Well, it's a losing fight. The Empire is much too powerful for them. And, of course, if they find out that you work for the Rebels, they kill you." Dannen smiled ruefully. "Linkaas is one being who wants me dead. I don't need a whole government after me - - er, us."

Purr smiled at her inclusion. "So Krell arranged this for us? He must be a very good friend."

"Yeah, The best." Dannen gazed down on the planet, lost in thought...

* * *

"And that's the story, Krell."

Krell had stared openmouthed at Dannen, then at Purr, then back again. "I can believe it. Linkaas never was one for subtlety. So, what are you two doing here on Alderaan?"

"What I've always been doing. Looking for cargo to run. Moving cargo and staying out of his way."

"What about the Rebellion?"

"Rebellion?" Purr said.

"Long story - - I'll explain later," Dannen said. "I'm not interested in politics, Krell."

Krell rose to retrieve a fresh bottle from the refrigeration unit in his home's living area. "You have not heard? I have heard murmurings that the Empire is developing a special project," he said, leaning forward, his words becoming hushed. "And any special project the Empire develops certainly endangers the freedom of peace-loving worlds."

Dannen smirked. "Have you been taking Linkaas' spice? How do you know what the Empire's up to?"

"I have certain reliable friends who would have access to such information..."

"Look, Krell," Dannen said, "I just need a tip on where I can go to make some credits. I've known you for a long time - - you know everything. Give me an idea."

Krell thought, then looked at his longtime buddy. "Are you willing to work for the Rebellion?"

"What, full-time? Nope. You know I feel for them, but I don't usually get involved in politics." He deliberated for a moment. "Tell you what - - I'll move some cargo for them, but I'm not getting involved."

"All right, I will set up a meet. When I have something for you, I will leave a message. Are you at the spaceport?"

"Yeah, we can't exactly afford a posh suite," Dannen grinned.

"Of course, of course. Give it a couple of days; I will leave a message with the codeword at the port when I have something."

Dannen rose. "Good. Alderaan's a nice place to visit, but it's too close to the edge for me, you know?"

Krell smiled as he showed them to the door. "Yes, I do know."

* * *

And now they'd arrived. Rafft was a heavily forested planet, with several settlements dotting the planetscape. Checking the coordinates provided by Krell, Dannen angled the ship toward one of the smaller townships. He landed at the insignificant port, in a landing pit dug into the ground. A tiny tower stood over the other depressions, as if standing guard.

With a hiss, the ramp lowered and Dannen stepped out. "Stay with the ship, Purr," he called up into the ship. "I'll be back in a little while."

"No, I want to come with you," Purr said.

Dannen looked down into her blue eyes, then relented. "Okay, you can come. Just stay with me."

She wrapped her arms around him, and kissed his cheek. "I will, I promise!" Embarrassed, Dannen disengaged from the embrace, then led her to the landing pit's exit ramp.

They walked into the town, glancing at the small shops and houses as they walked by. Dannen paused, gazing into the window of a vehicle repair bay, then entered, motioning for Purr to follow.

The mechanic looked up, then crawled out from under the landspeeder he was working on. He was a little shorter than Dannen, but he was maybe 20 years older. Stuffing a dirty cloth into his coveralls, he approached the pair.

"May I help you?" he asked.

"Yes, you can. I was told to look for a mechanic named Ashe - - he's supposed to be the best on Rafft."

The man smiled. "I'm Ashe, young sir," he replied. "What can I do for you?"

Dannen smiled back. "I was told you can fix a frozen quarkmeter with a large hydrospanner with one hand tied behind your back."

Purr looked at the man, then at Dannen. "Really?" She looked at Ashe, respect shining in her eyes.

Ashe looked at her for a moment, then his smile disappeared. "Who are you?"

"Name's Dannen Lifehold." Dannen leaned closer. "Krell sent me."

"You have the supplies, then?"

"Yes, I do. Where would you like them?"

Ashe reached under the counter and pulled out a datapad. He typed for a minute, then removed the small mem-stik. "This has the planetary coordinates for the base," he said, extending it to Dannen. "Take the supplies there - - you'll get paid on delivery."

Dannen noted the sour tone the last words carried as he took the mem-stik. The man clearly thought he was a mercenary smuggler, only in it for the money.

Dannen wondered if Ashe might be right.

Purr caught the tone in Ashe's voice, and the look that he had given Dannen, but she made no mention of it as they walked back to the Lifeline. Dannen's silence spoke volumes to her, however - - she had been taught since birth to watch the body language of other beings, and to determine what they might do. Dannen was upset, she knew, but if she spoke, he'd just get angry. And that was the last thing she wanted. No, better to let him work it out for himself, she decided.

Inside, however, she smiled. Of course, if he needs my help, I'll be here.

* * *

The memory stick he'd been given directed him to a clearing about 200 kilometers outside the township. The clearing was large enough for the Lifeline to land, and still have enough room for the supplies. Telling Purr to stay put, Dannen disembarked, slowly stepping onto the soil. His blaster was in his hand as he gazed into the trees and bushes surrounding the clearing.

Suddenly, he sensed someone behind him. He whirled quickly, just in time to find the barrel of a blaster pointed at his face. The other person wore a uniform camouflaged for the forest, complete with breath mask, and suspicious eyes.

"Who're you?" the stranger asked in a voice distorted by the mask.

Dannen slowly raised his hands. "Name's Dannen Lifehold," he answered. "Ashe sent me."

"Do you have the mem-stik?"

Dannen slowly reached into his breast pocket and withdrew it. The stranger took the stick, examined it, then holstered the blaster.

"Who else is on board?"

"Just my mechanic."

"Do you have the supplies?"

"They're in the hold," Dannen said, lowering his hands.

The stranger produced a comlink from a pocket. "Leaf One to Base: all clear, bring the movers."

"Copy, Leaf One," a voice answered.

Leaf One reached up and removed the breath mask, releasing a mass of auburn hair and smiling blue eyes. She extended a hand to Dannen. "I'm Tawn Porew," she said. "Sorry about the ambush, but you're not our regular supplier."

Dannen shook hands with her as he led her to the ship. "Well, I got the job at the last minute. Wait a second." He raised his voice. "Purr, open the cargo hatch!" The docking ring promptly extended itself from the top of the ship.

Dannen sighed. "No, Purr, the button next to it!" With the customary hiss of hydraulics, the cargo hatch began lowering.

Tawn chuckled. "Your mechanic doesn't know your ship too well, does he?"

"She hasn't been with me too long. It's kind of a long story." He glanced back into the woods. "I hope you brought enough cargo lifters - - there's quite a bit of stuff."

"Don't worry, they'll be here." She sized him up. "You'll get your money when we've verified the inventory. You'll have to stay until we do."

"No problem," Dannen said. "Actually, I'd like to stay." He looked into the forest again. "When you've lived in space as long as I have, you appreciate planetfall... "

* * *

After the Rebels unloaded the Lifeline, Tawn and her commander took them to the base as the others moved the crates. It was fairly small, but cleverly hidden in a cave complex. There was just enough room for a small medical facility, bunks for 12, and an ammo dump.

"You have no ships?"

Tawn looked at Purr, then shook her head. "We just harass the Imperials on the planet we're assigned to, and try to set up Rebel cells."

Dannen blinked. "What would the Imperials want from here? From what I've seen, this isn't exactly the technological high point of the galaxy."

"The Empire is clearing land and building a garrison base," Tawn said. "We've been sabotaging equipment most of the time, and trying to find out why the Empire wants a base on Rafft."

"Wait a minute. With no ships, what happens if you have to evacuate?"

"We can't," Base Commander Peck told him. "The Rebellion doesn't have enough ships to outfit every outpost, so we are forced to go without."

"That's a little cold-blooded, isn't it?"

"That's how we operate. We knew it would be dangerous, but we believe in what we're fighting for." He looked at Dannen with disdain. "We don't do it for money."

"Now wait a minute... " Dannen bristled.

Peck turned away from him. "Sergeant Porew, unpack the supplies, verify them, then pay this - - person - - and get him out of here."

"We'd like to take a look around, six," Dannen said.

The commander looked at him coldly. "If it's all right," Dannen added hastily.

"Very well. Sergeant, show them around, but keep your eyes on them." With that, he strode off.

"Yes, sir," Tawn answered. She faced Dannen. "He's not big on mercenaries," she said.

"Why not?" Purr asked.

"Mercenaries killed the woman he loved."

Purr's eyes watered. "Oh, no."

Tawn put a hand on Purr's shoulder. "It was a while ago. Come on, I'll show you where you can get something to eat."

Dannen shook his head. "I'll help with the unpacking, if I can."

"Me, too," Purr piped up.

Tawn smiled. It was a lovely sight. "We can use the help. This way." She led them to a small area where the crates had been placed. Three Rebels were already unpacking the supplies. They looked up as Tawn showed Dannen inside.

"This is the man who brought the supplies," she said. "And this is his partner. They want to help unpack."

The taller of the trio smiled. "Good, we can use it. Help me uncrate this bacta tank."

Dannen gave an answering smile. "You got it," he said, moving toward the crate. The man, who said his name was Colin, gave Purr a laser cutter, and showed her how to slice the packing material and not the precious cargo it protected. Once the crate was opened, Dannen, Tawn, and Colin muscled it out. Within half an hour the tank was upright and in its new location.

As they worked, Purr turned to Tawn. "Can I ask you something?"

"What?"

"Why did you join the Rebellion? Why do you fight this Emperor?"

Tawn stopped working to answer Purr. "My parents were killed by the Empire," she said. Her eyes misted for a moment. "They refused to give up their land. So they were killed."

Purr gaped. "And the Emperor said to have them killed?"

"No. The Emperor is the head of the government. He's power-hungry. He wants to control the entire galaxy. He uses fear and terror to keep some planets in line. Others he simply

sends in stormtroopers and destroys."

"But why?"

"Well, some planets have resources that the Empire needs, some have strategic value, and some he controls just to keep other planets in line." Tawn grimaced. "One planet, kept under control, will keep other planets - - sometimes whole systems - - from fighting back. And, since the Jedi are gone, the Rebellion's the best chance the galaxy has."

Purr's brow furrowed. "The Jedi?"

Colin spoke up, his voice full of reverence. "The Jedi Knights were the keepers of the flame of the Old Republic. They knew how to use the Force to fight for justice and truth."

"Yeah, but the Force didn't keep them safe from Vader," Dannen said.

"He betrayed them," Colin answered. "He took their trust and stomped on it."

"That's ancient history, Colin. Believe me, I wish the Jedi were still around, Force or no Force. They would give the Empire a run for its credits." Dannen handed the hydrospanner he was using to Colin, then sighed. "As it stands, though, I think you're fighting a losing battle. The Rebellion doesn't stand much of a chance."

"Is that what you think?" Tawn asked.

"Hey, don't get me wrong. I believe in what you're fighting for. I just want to stay alive."

"By being a smuggler? You have some strange ideas about staying alive, my friend," said Colin.

Colin helped Dannen move the bacta containers to the tank. The Rebel connected a wide hose from the container to the tank's inlet valve, and pressed the white "fill" button on the tank. There was a loud hiss as the valve inside the hose punched its way through the seals, then the gelled fluid began to seep into the holding tank.

Dannen turned to Tawn. "By the way, are you guys really expendable? I thought the Rebellion needed all the people it could get."

"Commander Peck feels we are. He believes in the Rebellion, as we all do, but he's from the old school."

Dannen grinned. "You mean the 'Come on, do you wanna live forever' type?"

"He's a good man," Colin said from behind the tank. "And he leads his people well. We've survived some tough situations without backup or evacuation plans, mostly due to his leadership."

"I'll take your word for it, Colin. But you'll understand if I don't like him too much."

Colin came around from the tank to stand next to Dannen. "That's quite all right - - sometimes I don't like him much either." He faced the tank. "You have no idea how badly we needed this bacta."

"I can guess. You folks have seen a lot of action, huh?"

Tawn answered. "Yes. We disabled a small Imperial shuttle last month." A grin lit her face as she remembered. "Delayed their take-off long enough for us to booby-trap their power cells. They blew up in hyperspace."

"But two men who were preparing the booby-trapped cells died when they exploded prematurely," said a new voice. They all turned to face Commander Peck, who had walked in. "If we'd had this-" he tapped the side of the tank "- - they would have survived."

Purr's eyes widened. "I'm sorry."

"Why should you be sorry? You're just a delivery service - - why should you two care?"

"Look, despite what you may think, we do care," Dannen snarled. "It's just that..."

Purr, who had been watching the bacta flow into the tank, suddenly tapped Dannen's shoulder. "What's that?" Purr asked, pointing into the bacta.

Colin squinted. "Looks like a piece of equipment." Quickly, he shut off the power, then climbed into the tank. He reached into the jelly and pulled out a fist-sized cube of metal. He hoisted himself out, wiping the gel from the cube.

"What is it?" Dannen asked.

"Don't know. Let's ask our tech expert." Colin tapped his comlink. "Baker to Thinker, do you read?"

"Thinker here, go ahead."

"We've found something in the bacta shipment - - want to take a look?"

"On my way," came the reply.

A minute later a short man with brown hair and a sour expression came in. He squinted up at Dannen and Purr for a moment. "You the smugglers?"

Dannen sighed, rolling his eyes. "Yes."

The shorter man smiled. "Thank you for the supplies. We owe you a debt worth far more than what you're being paid."

Dannen, taken aback by this unexpected kindness, simply nodded.

The short man turned to Colin. "Is that it?" he asked, indicating the cube.

Colin surrendered it to his comrade.

Thinker turned the object over in his hands for a few minutes, then looked at his commanding officer. "It's a homing beacon, sir."

"What?" Dannen said, incredulous.

Peck's eyes widened as he looked at Thinker. "You mean that this... man..

. has not only brought in medical supplies, he's brought in a blasted homing beacon?"

Colin looked dazed. "A homing beacon?"

Peck drew his blaster and whirled to face Dannen. "You scum. And I thought you were helping us. I thought that maybe I had been wrong, and that you have honor after all. How much are they paying you, bounty hunter?"

Dannen paled. "You think I did it?"

Peck glared at Dannen. "You knew we couldn't evacuate. You set us up, didn't you? Thanks to you, the Empire will be here soon!"

"No, I didn't! I swear I didn't know!"

Colin spoke up. "He didn't know, sir. He couldn't have known."

Peck spun to face Colin. "Why not?"

"Because the bacta case still had the original factory triple seals. He couldn't have inserted the homing beacon and kept the seals intact. He's just as much a victim as we are."

Peck considered this, lowering his blaster, then turned to Thinker. "What's the range of this beacon?"

"Short-range, probably in-system," Thinker replied. "We have an hour, maybe two."

Krell must've known, Dannen thought to himself. But why? Why would he set me up?

Another Rebel came running in. "Sir," he said, saluting Peck. "Report from the settlement: the Imperials are here on Rafft. Ashe reports a small squad of scout troopers in the settlement. Communications have already been severed."

"We'll never scatter in time!" Tawn said.

"Well, we can destroy the base, but we're expendable, Sergeant."

Purr touched Dannen's shoulder. He met her gaze, read the question in her eyes. He nodded to her, then looked back at Peck. "No, you're not," he said.

Peck's face reddened. "Now listen here, smuggler..."

"No, you listen, Commander," Dannen exploded. "You may think you're expendable, but there's always a chance to escape. I think I have a way to get you all out of here... provided, of course, that..."

"... That you get paid, of course," Peck interrupted him.

"No," Dannen countered, "provided that you have someplace in mind to go. Is there somewhere?"

"We don't have a ship, though," Colin said.

"No, but I do," Dannen answered. "It'll be a tight fit, and it'll be necessary supplies only, but I can manage if you all move fast, taking only what you need. Within an hour we all can be gone." He turned to Peck. "What do you say, Commander?"

Peck examined Dannen for a moment. "Let's get moving," he ordered.

Dannen turned to his partner. "Purr, get things started; we're leaving in an hour."

Peck caught his arm. "Why are you doing this? You're not getting paid to risk your life for us."

"That's true, Commander, I'm not."

"Then, why?" Thinker asked.

Dannen turned to the smaller man. "Because you have no choice," he said quietly. "And because it's the right thing to do."

* * *

Dannen had been correct. It was a tight fit, trying to squeeze 12 people and their equipment into the Lifeline. The cargo hold was stuffed to capacity, and both Dannen and Purr had to share their quarters with two other people each. But they were ready to lift off within an hour, just as Dannen had promised.

Tawn was worried, though. "Can you take off with all these people on board?"

"Sure we can," Dannen reassured her. "This is a YT-1300. The cargo capacity is about a hundred metric tons. If she can handle that, she can handle this."

Peck came up to them. "We are all ready. The coordinates for our new location are on this mem-stik," he said, handing it to Dannen.

"You still don't trust me, do you, Commander?"

"That has nothing to do with it," Peck sniffed. "I simply don't want any mistakes."

"Don't worry, Commander, I'll get you there. You have my word."

Peck snorted. "We'll see," was all he'd say.

Dannen sat down in the pilot's chair and looked over at Purr. "Okay, here we go," he said, powering up the ship. Slowly, the Lifeline lifted off and made for the open sky.

Shortly after they cleared atmosphere, Dannen slid the mem-stik into the nav computer. He turned to Peck, who was seated right behind him. "Okay, the computer's reading your coordinates, Commander. As soon as I'm lined up on the correct vector, we're on our way."

Suddenly, cannon fire rocked the ship. The Lifeline tilted dangerously to the left, throwing Purr out of her seat.

Dannen slapped the shield activator and checked the sensors. "We have company," he said.

"So it seems," Peck said. "You did set us up, didn't you?"

"No, I didn't," Dannen retorted, "and if you want proof, you'll find they'll kill me just as readily as they'll kill you." Another blast shook the ship, but this time the shields held.

Dannen glanced at Peck. "See what I mean?"

He checked the computer readout, then grabbed the hyperdrive activator levers. "Here we go!" he shouted, then pulled back on the levers sharply. The ship stuttered... then stalled.

"Damn," Dannen said.

"What's wrong?" Tawn asked.

Dannen flipped switches, then peered at a screen. "That first blast must have damaged the hyper-drive."

"I'll fix it," Purr said, running out the door toward the engineering hatch.

Tawn tapped his shoulder. "Can she fix it?"

Dannen paused, then nodded. "If she can't, no one can," he added. "In the meantime, let's give these guys a run for their credits." With that, he barrel rolled to the right, while checking the sensors.

Suddenly, a large shadow passed over the canopy. Tawn looked for the cause and gasped. "An Imperial Star Destroyer," she whispered.

"Yep," Dannen confirmed. "Looks like they want you guys really bad."

Tawn turned to Peck. "It's the Engager, Commander." She chuckled. "I guess Dalton's still unhappy about his face."

"What about his face?" Dannen asked.

"Captain Dalton was caught in one of our traps awhile back," Peck answered. "It cut his face up rather badly."

Dannen winced. "Ouch. No wonder he's upset."

"Rumor is he won't get the scar fixed until we're captured and executed. He uses his disfigurement to inspire those under his command."

"Actually, sir, I think it's an improvement," Tawn grinned.

"Perhaps, Sergeant. Can you outrun them, Lifehold?"

"Maybe, maybe not, Commander. But there's one thing this ship can do that theirs can't, and that's maneuver. Hold tight, everyone," he said, whipping the ship into a sharp bank.

"You see, Commander," Dannen continued as the commander picked himself off the floor, "it doesn't matter if I can outrun her, it's a matter of whether I can evade their tractor beams. To do that, I have to out-fly her long enough for Purr to fix the hyperdrive."

"Which reminds me..." He reached over and flicked a switch. "Purr, how bad is the damage?"

"Not too bad," came the reply. "I can fix it, but I need parts."

"Do what you have to do, Purr, just do it fast!"

"Don't worry, Dannen, I'll do it fast."

Dannen shut off the comlink. "Now, we wait," he said.

A turbolaser blast exploded just in front of him, and he banked straight up. "And fly," he added.

"I hope this mechanic of yours is good enough, Lifehold," Peck grumbled.

"Relax, Commander, she knows what..." At that moment, the main cabin lights went out. A split second later, the emergency lights came on, bathing the room in a red glow. "... she's doing," he finished.

"Are you sure?" Peck said sardonically.

Dannen pressed the comlink. "Purr, the ship lights just went out!"

"I know, I needed parts."

"From the lighting system?" Tawn asked incredulously.

"We're dead," Peck commented.

"With all due respect, Commander," Dannen growled, rolling the ship as he did, "shut up."

For the next few minutes, Dannen tried every trick he knew and some new ones to keep the Lifeline away from the Star Destroyer. He was right about one thing: the smaller transport was far more agile than the ponderous cruiser. But it still took all he had to keep their distance.

Tawn checked the sensors and noticed with horror that the Star Destroyer had moved closer. "Dannen, we're running out of time!"

"Yeah, I noticed," he grunted. He slapped the comlink button. "Purr, how much longer?"

"Almost done, Dannen... almost done... done!" As she spoke, Dannen yanked back on the control levers, and the Lifeline shot into hyperspace.

Dannen sank back into his chair with a sigh. "See? I told you she could fix it." He glanced around the cabin. "We'll just have to go without lights for a while."

"But how did she do it so fast?" Tawn asked.

"I don't know - - I've given up trying to figure out how she does it." He turned and smiled out the canopy. "I'm just glad she does it."

* * *

The Lifeline arrived at the Vondarc system four days later. The group rendezvoused with a Rebel cargo frigate making its regular stop to pick up supplies from Alliance sympathizers in the area.

The Rebels from Rafft quickly transferred their gear and effects to the frigate, which was returning to the Rebel sector command base.

On board the frigate, Tawn and Commander Peck escorted Dannen and Purr to their quarters. The Commander, in gratitude, had ordered the repair of the Lifeline's hyperdrive, and Dannen didn't hesitate to accept.

The repairs would take all day, however, and rather than stay on their ship, Dannen and Purr joined the Rebels at mealtime and helped them transfer their gear to the cargo frigate.

Halfway through the day, Purr watched as Dannen paced the length of the rec room. "I still can't believe Krell did this!"

"Set you up?"

"Yes, set us up! He was my oldest friend. We'd been through so much together. I can't believe he'd do it."

"Maybe he didn't."

Dannen paused. "You mean, someone else put the tracking beacon in there?"

Purr grimaced. "I have seen such badness with crime lords. They called it... umm... treachery?"

"So you think we were both set up - - me and Krell?"

"Maybe. Krell did seem like he was glad to see you."

"Yes, he did, didn't he?" Dannen muttered. "But still-"

His musings were cut short by the arrival of Tawn and Peck. Peck, for once, was smiling. "You'll be pleased to know, Captain, that the repairs to your ship have been completed, and you may leave at any time."

"Thank you, Commander. Again, I'd like to thank you for getting it fixed. "

Tawn smiled "It's the least we could do. You risked your lives for us, after all." She came over and stood next to him. "Are you sure you can't come with us? You and Purr would make excellent additions to the Rebellion."

Dannen shook his head. "I told you, I'm not ready to commit myself just yet. Besides, I have to get back to Alderaan and talk to Krell." He gazed out the window at the Lifeline. "We've got to be going."

"Well, we'll be sorry to see you go-" The commander was interrupted by Colin, who came up and saluted hastily.

Peck returned the salute. "What is it, soldier?"

"Sir, we've just received a report from sector 246."

"And?" Peck prompted when Colin hesitated.

"Sir, they report that... well... Alderaan has been destroyed, sir."

"What?" Dannen burst out.

Purr put her arm around Dannen's shoulder, and he gathered her into a tight embrace. "All those people... all those lives..." she murmured.

Peck's jaw almost stretched to the floor. "Destroyed? The whole planet?"

"Yes sir, the whole planet. Alderaan's gone, Commander."

"Krell said he'd heard something about a secret project the Empire was working on," Dannen's heart tightened.

"Rebel high command had one or two top operatives on Alderaan," Peck noted. "It's possible Krell was one of them."

"I'd bet the Empire has something to do with Alderaan," Dannen said.

Peck nodded soberly. "I'm sorry about your friend, Lifehold."

"Thank you, Commander," Dannen said. He glanced down at Purr, who nodded up at him, then faced Peck again. "The Empire has just changed the rules on you guys. I'd like to help even the odds if I can."

Colin gaped. "But I thought-"

Dannen cut him off. "You thought wrong, Colin. So, what do you say, Commander?"

Peck looked at him. "We can't afford to pay you what you're accustomed to."

Dannen approached Peck until their noses almost touched. "Is that what you think this is all about?" he asked, a dangerous glint in his eye. "Really? "

Tawn tried to take his arm, but Dannen wrenched it free. Peck looked distinctly uncomfortable. "I meant that-

Dannen didn't let it pass. "Do you really think that I do things only for money? That I'm just a mercenary - - a man without principles who only believes in the almighty credit?"

Peck held his gaze. "To be honest, yes, that's what I think."

"Okay, then, I'm going to prove you wrong. Right here, and right now." Dannen drew himself to his full height. "I want to join the Rebellion as a transport pilot."

Tawn gasped slightly. "You don't mean that."

"Yes, I do, Tawn. Purr and I have talked about this before. We're both sure."

Peck regarded the younger man. "May I ask why? Because of your friend?"

"No," Dannen replied. "Because of Alderaan. Because of the innocent people. Because if the Empire could do this to one planet, they'll do it to another." He smiled slightly. "But mostly because it's the right thing to do."

Peck nodded, and smiled also. "Very well. Welcome to the Rebel Alliance, Captain Lifehold."