

# Star Wars: The Lost Mantra

## Chapter V

The noises of the various Imperial dock hands going about their chores created a symphony of mechanical noises, the hard, solid deckplate beneath the feet of Cassandra Recubo making a dull rapping sound as she stepped her way over it. The air around was warm from the various machines and their engines around, whilst the sounds in the air were those of workmen calling to one another in order to work upon the various objects of their work around. To Cassandra, these men and their chores meant nothing. Well, that was the official story, anyway. Officially, Cassandra was supposed to not care about those around, yet deep down inside, she *did*. Berating herself, mentally, for thinking such things detrimental to her ascendancy as a Sith, Cassandra moved onwards, between two ships, ignoring the two workers who bobbed their heads respectively at her. Her ship lay up ahead, moored next to, she was slightly annoyed to see, Starkiller's *Rogue Shadow*. Outside the boarding ramp to the *Rogue Shadow*, Starkiller's droid, PROXY, stood, indifferent to the approaching Cassandra. His master had, unfortunately, taught PROXY to ignore Cassandra, yet she'd never cared much for PROXY, if truth be told. The one thing she *did* like him for was his programming to kill Starkiller. Although PROXY was only designed to routinely attempt to kill Starkiller to keep his reactions up, that was good enough a reason for Cassandra. Her own droid, designed for the same purpose, DBR-17, had been destroyed above the skies of Kessel. *A shame*, thought Cassandra. She'd just begun to like the droid, and he hadn't tried to kill her *too* many times.



Yet, today, she didn't have time for petty squabbles with Starkiller and, most likely, neither did he. For they had missions to be getting on with, missions which were far more important than scoring points over the other. If either one of them were to die, the other would automatically be the apprentice, no matter how they succeeded in the next challenges. Cassandra wasn't sure which was worse; dying, or Starkiller becoming the apprentice without her having any say in it. A young, blonde Imperial pilot stood outside the *Rogue Shadow*, one Cassandra didn't recognize, yet she was more interested in the pilot who stood outside hers. Tara Aban, her whole family a part of the Imperial military, was Cassandra's pilot. Wearing the well known gray, bland Imperial pilot uniform, the hat she'd generally wear removed from her head, Tara leaned nonchalantly against the side of the ship, her hair pinned back stylishly from her pale, pretty face. Cassandra had been given the option of two separate pilots after her last one had died with her droid; Tara, or a young man she couldn't quite recall the name of. Although both of them were listed as fantastic pilots, something inside Cassandra had responded enthusiastically to the chance of having another female to talk to; such basic things were missing in Cassandra's life since she'd been with the Lord Vader, which had been from a very early age.

Stepping over to her ship, the *Dark Specter*, Cassandra flashed a brief smile at the young woman leaning on the ship outside, who'd snapped up quickly to attention and saluted smartly upon seeing Cassandra approaching. Aban, however, spoiled the smart, Imperial exterior by grinning slightly lopsidedly like a young girl in response to Cassandra's smile. Clearly Aban had expected some sort of reprimand from the way she hastily covered it up and attempted to distract Cassandra's attention from it by straightening herself yet further, however Cassandra had taken a liking to this young woman, despite what she could imagine Vader would say were he here. Today, Cassandra felt particularly carefree; Vader wasn't, to the extent of her knowledge, watching. Therefore, Cassandra did something even she hadn't expected; winking at Aban, the smile remained on her face as she boarded the ship. She'd liked Ujik Yule, her last pilot, yet he'd been nothing more, really, than that; a pilot. Already she could tell that Tara had something much more personality wise than Cassandra had expected.

She knew her mission. She knew the objectives. She knew the cost should she fail and the rewards should she succeed. All that actually remained, for Cassandra, was to engage in the mission proper. Seating herself down into one of the chairs, next to Aban in the pilot's seat, Cassandra gazed out of the windows at the dark space outside, as Tara expertly guided the craft out of the hangar and into the gulf of space. The ship responded to Aban's expert touch almost like an extension of her own body rather than something Aban occupied and, not for the last time, Cassandra was glad she'd chosen Tara. The odd thing was that Tara was two years Cassandra's junior, Tara being just nineteen years of age. This, when compared with some of the more senior pilots who still weren't at Tara's level, made the achievement all the more noteworthy. Cassandra's reverie was broken by Tara, turning her head to face Cassandra and asking her in that lively voice of hers: "So, sir, where're we going?" Once again, Tara's smile gleamed through the relative darkness of the cabin; she hadn't bothered to turn the lights on yet.

"Sir?" Cassandra feigned mock annoyance. "Cassandra will do fine." She smiled back, a quick flash, unlike Tara's veritable beam. "As for our destination..." Cassandra thought back to the briefing with Vader, some hour now before. "Head for the Xappyh sector; our course is for Kirdo III. Today, Tara, we're hunting a Jedi."

Away from Vader and Starkiller, Cassandra had no need to keep up her hard, cruel persona. Her hard exterior before the two was, to be fair, not most of her nature. Although, at times, she *tried* to be hard and cruel, mostly it was part of the persona before Vader. Away from him, she didn't have to do that. She could be *herself* around Aban, and she appreciated that.

Cardooina, in Asdan's opinion, was a nice planet as far as the Outer Rim worlds went; he'd visited quite a few during his relatively short, in the grand scheme of things, lifetime, and not all of them had even been hospitable. Cardooina was a welcome relief, then, almost like a break as the pirates worked to repair their ships before making their way onwards back to the main Thunder Armada base. However, they weren't ready just yet; the good part was the lack of interference from the Empire or the local government. The bad side, however, was the time they'd need to spend on the planet; plenty of time for the Imperials to find them. Hell, Asdan couldn't even see what the allure of capturing Thunder Armada's pirates *was* for the Empire; they weren't all *that* important. Didn't the Empire have anything better to do? Asdan

shook his head, his sun-warmed hair sliding across his face as he did so. It would seem not. They'd already been on the planet for a week and a half, and would be staying there for another half a week onwards. Technically, they could be out of the place within the day. However, the Cardooinian government had ensured that all goods taken to the ship would have to be thoroughly checked over first, meaning that the process would take three days, if all went according to plan, leaving them there for another half a week. Asdan sighed; he couldn't see the point of such rules.

For now, Asdan was alone. He'd been working continuously upon the ships, in an effort to speed up their departure from the planet, yet it wasn't to much avail. He'd worked for a considerable number of hours every day, rising earlier than the others and going to bed later than them. Commitment indeed, yet, in the end, it had been Lara Chase of all people to insist that Asdan take a break. Today's morning had seen Asdan in bed until midday, yet the dark rings of fatigue under his eyes were still there; it'd take a few days before he'd rested himself off. Lara had insisted that he not even assist in the most menial of tasks unless it was *absolutely* necessary, and although Asdan could very easily override her decision, he realized it was for his own personal wellbeing. He smiled to himself, as he looked up at the sun above. Today he'd been told to go relax through the city.

There was a particular cantina Asdan had been told of that he wanted to visit; a Cantina a number of those currently on the planet had visited. The large number of pirates meant that most of them were off-duty, meaning they had to find some sort of leisure activities to engage in. Mostly, the local cantinas had taken the brunt of these rowdy off-duty pirates, yet not all of it. Asdan didn't know, and to be frank, didn't *care* what the other pirates got up to, although Lara Chase's disgusted looks and cross words with some of them gave him an inkling he thought he'd really preferred not to have had. This area of the streets were quiet today, today being market day; this meant that most people would be in the southern area of the city, well away from where Asdan was and wanted to be. That suited him just fine. Too many people weren't something they particularly wanted. Lost in his thoughts, Asdan tripped over what he thought to be a stone on the ground, regaining his balance at the last moment. Swearing crossly and taking a view of his surroundings in case he'd missed anything in his bout of lax concentration, he bent down to pick up what it was he'd tripped over. At first glance it looked like clay, yet it soon became evident that what he held in his hand had, in fact, been carved from stone. Asdan gently turned it around, examining it, with a smile. He recognized this; a small, religious icon of Cardooinie's primary deity, Solus, the Angel of Death. In many societies, angels of something such as death were considered dangerous, fearful, yet Cardooinie considered their Angel of Death to be, on the most part, caring and kind. Looking at the icon, Asdan could tell why. In Cardooinieian religion, the Angel of Death would lead away those when it was time for them to depart to whatever afterlife the Cardooinieians believed in – Asdan's knowledge of Cardooinie's religion didn't extend this far – unless you were one of the 'sinners' against the religion, in which case the wrath of the Angel of Death was something you didn't particularly wish to see. Asdan, ignorant as to whether he was considered a sinner by the religion or not, smiled quirkily, looking up at the building before him.

Little wonder the icon had been where it was; before was one of the various places of worship to the Angel, or Goddess, a small, dark little temple squashed between two of the houses on either side. Drawn by a sudden impulse, Asdan turned and headed towards it, pushing open the heavy, wooden, strong doors – unusual for the fact they were wooden and had to be manually pushed, and weren't hydraulically operated – the icon clasped in his left hand. The room beyond was dark, but for a small, dim candle glowing on what appeared to be an altar up front. The smell of incense was heavy in the air and, as Asdan gazed around the small chamber, he could see the various alcoves in the wall in which the various incense candles were situated. Wooden pews were alongside him as he made his way, up the middle, towards the altar. Sidestepping a hollowed out section of the floor, in which a pool of still, calm water was situated, Asdan reached the stone altar before him. A two tiered affair, a slab of stone made up its base, a thinner yet taller. On the bottom slab a number of gifts and offerings some loose, some packaged, and some in baskets to the Angel were placed, whereas on the upper slab a number of notes and letters from adults to young children were arranged. In the middle of this slab, a tall, thin candle burnt, the candle itself extending into a hollowed out centre of the slab, filling it perfectly. Leaning over, in its dim light, Asdan bent to read just some of the letters written to the Angel, smiling slightly at the young children's notes as he did so. Asdan wasn't really a religious man, yet this seemed to almost warm his heart.

Although the chamber ended just behind the altar, an alcove had been carved out directly behind the altar, large, blood red curtains lying flush with the surrounding walls. A golden tassel hung down from them and, filled with curiosity, Asdan stepped forth to it and pulled it, gently. With a whoosh, the curtains sprung back, the torches set above them tipping down into brackets of oil soaked wood, lighting them instantly and illuminating the entire room. Asdan almost gasped; before him, decorated on the wall, lay a large painting of the Angel of Death herself. Lit up by the shadowy light cast by the flames, the Angel of Death looked truly magnificent, commanding and powerful yet benevolent at once. Her wings splayed out on either side, the painting wasn't a single solid entity, yet a collection of shapes that formed themselves into an image of the deity. Two colours used, a dark shade of gray and a deep, red maroon, the feet of the Angel and the tops of the wings were coloured in the maroon red, whilst the rest was of the dark gray. Her large, magnificent feathered wings splayed out wide, slightly raised, and her legs together, facing straight downwards, her head was lowered, slightly. Quite short hair adorned her decidedly human face, and her features were slightly young in appearance, not quite the degree of a child yet not really the features of a proper adult. Yet this didn't fool Asdan, for even he knew perfectly well that such deities, in such religions, could easily become strong and terrible in their wrath.

This place really was a wondrous example of architecture and design, despite the old fashioned layout of it. Apparently, the Angel of Death preferred that. Asdan smiled, quirkily. Yet how could they know? Did they *ask* her? He thought not. He didn't quite *buy* all this 'Gods and Angels' lark, himself. He'd been around the galaxy and seen too many things to believe them to be the result of one deity's creation. Yet this Angel of Death... She didn't *seem* to be the sort of deity who created things, from what little Asdan knew. The painting had made a large impression on him. She didn't seem to be deity in a religion so demanding of fealty. On another strange impulse, Asdan stepped over to a small box of the small, stone icons and, slipping a few credits in, he took one

from the designated slot, slipping it inside his clothes. *Now*, he wondered, slightly bemused, *why did I do that?* He didn't really know, yet he felt somewhat better for doing it. Smiling to himself, slightly, he made his way out of the door, and back out into the crowded street.

The street was slightly more crowded when Asdan remerged out into it, and he was slightly surprised to see that only about twenty minutes had passed since he'd entered. The air was somewhat cooler, now, as the day was beginning to move into its final segment before night fell. He'd still have time, then, to visit the cantina, before it was probably time he went back. Perhaps he could squeeze in a bit of work without Lara noticing. Although, perhaps not. He smiled to himself, the reassuring weight of the icon in his pocket seeming to cheer him up as he made his way through the streets and to the cantina, from where he'd previously been. Even from just outside the doorway Asdan could smell the various smells that came from a cantina, the sweat and intoxicants, the alcohol and the smells of various different species all coming together. He wouldn't swap the feeling of all the different aromas mixing to give that smell of cantinas that just *couldn't* be replicated. Humans, Devaronians and a variety of other species could be seen in the cantina, mingling together by the bar and drinking together like old friends. Which, perhaps, they were. Over on the other side of the room, three musicians played the sort of music carefully adjusted to appeal to a multitude of races, whilst Twi'lek dancers in revealing dance costumes gyrated on the platform before them. Asdan's eyes were drawn to these for a moment, before he shook himself, annoyed at the lapse, walking over to the bar and ordering a beverage he'd liked the look of when passing another man who had one of the same.

Taking his drink from the bar, Asdan proceeded over to one of the tables in the corner, in the dark and where he couldn't be sprung upon from behind. Kicking his boots up onto the bar's table, with scant regard for the cleanliness, Asdan proceeded to drink slowly whilst surveying the cantina casually. Raucous and loud, it was pretty average as cantinas went, nothing particularly special. Closing his eyes, gently, and leaning back, Asdan relaxed into the chair, feeling the weight of the last few days almost pour off him as he rested himself, although keeping alert should anyone attempt to ambush him. A feeling of being watched, however, lingered... Opening his eyes, slowly, Asdan surveyed the cantina again as if nothing was wrong. There. By the bar. A small human who would slip into almost any situation; pretty unremarkable, although the way he looked away from Asdan quickly when Asdan's eyes roved over him told him all he needed to know. Stepping up to the bar and muttering a word of thanks to the man behind, passing back the glass, Asdan proceeded slowly out the back entrance into an alleyway, waiting for the man behind to start moving, who'd stopped to supposedly converse with a Devaronian. Stepping out into the cool air, sunset was almost upon Cardoone and so the vibrant colours of the darkening sky giving off a strange light into the alleyway, Asdan slipped up a service ladder onto the top of the building, lying himself flat down on the roof as quietly as he could. The feeling of the metal beneath his stomach wasn't so much cold as painful, sharp, flaked pieces jabbing into his skin. Gritting his teeth and shunting the feelings of small pain to the back of his mind, Asdan drew his blaster from its holster, smiling slightly and feeling reassured as his fingers brushed the icon of Solus. "Do us a favour, Goddess, and guide the blast."

Asdan whispered, not really putting much faith in it.

His tail emerged some thirty seconds later, looking around quickly for fear of losing Asdan. Sliding up onto the roof, so the man couldn't see him hanging above, he waited until he came into his line of sight, when he'd be facing the opposite way. He wasn't keeping up much pretence of secrecy here, expecting Asdan to be long gone. Not much of a professional, then, although Asdan assumed he was from Imperial Intelligence. As the man stepped past Asdan, Asdan picked up a stone lying on the roof. If it was possible, he'd try and capture this man alive, for questioning. Raising his arm back, Asdan threw, the stone striking the man between the shoulder blades and not in the back of the head as Asdan had hoped; due to the fact the man had stepped forwards further than Asdan had predicted, the stone had missed. Yelping with surprised pain, the man spun around, a blaster having almost magically materialised in his hand. There wasn't the time to set his blaster to stun and, knowing he'd have to shoot the agent, Asdan fired, his gun having already been held out, ready, before him. The blast sent the man wheeling backwards into a rubbish pile, most obviously dead. Yet the harsh screech of the blaster would soon draw others to the scene, and Asdan knew that the agent would probably have been reporting to others on the planet. That meant that, pretty soon, the pirates were going to receive some unwanted visitors, and it was up to Asdan to warn them as quickly as possible. Pulling himself up quickly, experiencing a brief feeling of vertigo from the quick rise as he did so, Asdan jumped onto the next roof and began setting off, across the roofs, back to the pirates.

Utryn Varth was a proud man. Not particularly old, Varth had survived the onset of Order 66 through a mixture of luck and ability, the ship he was piloting having come down, blazing, into a marsh. The landing had damaged his ship beyond repair, and broken a number of his bones, however he'd survived, despite the attempts of his clone troopers to kill him. As far as Utryn knew, he was one of the only Jedi left alive. Having such a responsibility was something he was proud of, to be honest. He hadn't been able to seek help; he'd seen the way the Republic had changed into the Empire, he'd seen the way the Jedi Order had collapsed, and he'd seen how the galaxy had twisted. He was truly alone. His own brother, Gilder, had abandoned him for the Empire, whilst he couldn't visit his wife, Janel, or children, Fernan and Alinn. Was this his punishment for marrying them despite the rules of the Jedi Order? Perhaps. Yet he remained strong, waiting here for the chance he'd have to strike back at his oppressors, the oppressors of the Jedi, when he would be able to see his wife and children again.

He'd made his hiding out on Kirdo III, in the Xappyh sector, in a network of caves set into the range of hills before the mud planes. With easy access to water and food he could reach relatively simply, Utryn had all he needed. In addition, the local Kitonak species had befriended and hidden him, at the fear of great expense to themselves, allowing him access to the chooba plant for food and sustenance. No, for the moment he was fine. The cave he was in was dry, like much of the desert world of Kirdo III, the mud planes were dry and the hills were dry. It was hotter than Tattooine out here, and so Varth needed a considerable amount of water to keep himself alive. Taking his hands off his knees, where they'd been whilst he was meditating, Varth opened his eyes and took the bowl of water before him, drinking deeply from it before smacking his lips and putting it down with a tapping sound on the floor of the cave. The cave was a large, hollowed out affair, the main cavern being completely open to the mud planes. The cracked, blistered, flat surface of the planes headed out to the horizon. He

had no predators to fear, and if anyone came to investigate the caves the Force would give him ample warning. In addition, a number of side caverns ran off from the main one, a small spring gushing down into the planet's crust, proving Varth with a source of water.

Varth was a tall man with short, black hair reasonably thick yet ordered flecks of gray were beginning to appear in it. Thankfully, he wasn't as gray haired as his elder brother. His features were rugged and lined, the events of recent times having added to this, his eyes black and giving the impression that they'd seen, and knew, far more than appeared from the outside. He was reasonably muscular, his torso and limbs well built and strong, although he didn't give the impression that he was incredibly strong. Instead, his strength came from the Force. He radiated an aura of calm pride and strength, his Jedi robes hanging around him as if he was *built* to wear such robes. His lightsaber hung at his belt, the metal hilt clinking slightly against his robes as he rose, the blue blade that would appear should Varth ignite it hidden inside for the moment. He hadn't really had cause to use it, yet, although the Kitonaks on the planet had been reassured by it being there. *He* was reassured with it being there, for that matter. Stepping back into the darkness of the other cave, using Force sight to guide his way rather than lighting the torches at the side, he stepped over to the spring, the musical bubbling of it complementing the bright, glimmering gleam it made as it rushed past the wet rocks. Cupping his hands and taking another drink, Varth proceeded to wash his face thoroughly in the water, his rough hands and the cold water fully waking him up; he'd only awoken around an hour ago. The cave was already beginning to grow warmer, despite the early hours. Once again, it would be a sweltering day. However, Varth's sense through the Force was twinging; as he stepped back into the main cavern, frowning, he looked up into the sky and saw what he felt. A ship, coming down to where they were. There were no real Kitonak settlements of importance, and somehow Varth could tell it was coming for him. Palar, one of the local Kitonaks who'd helped him in his time here, confirmed this, the young Kitonak standing in the entranceway of the main cavern and pointing up at the ship in the sky, jabbering away worriedly in Kitonese. Odd in appearance, the Kitonaks had been kind to him in his time here, and Varth couldn't let them get hurt. "Palar, get out of here. Keep your people away. I'll come for you tomorrow nightfall or not at all." Despite what he'd said, Varth's voice was calm and composed. Palar hesitated for a moment, as if he were about to question the order, before seeing the look on Varth's face. Still squeaking away, Palar waddled off, his rolling gait making a walloping sound on the mud. Varth didn't even smile, looking up at the ship as he was. *So*, he thought. *You've found me.*

Cassandra was having the dream again. As she rolled around in the small bunk she had in the back of the *Dark Specter*, the clothes wrapping around her thrashing limbs, her eyes screwed shut and her face a mask of pain, she moaned softly, although it was the sound of ship's engines in her dream. She stood there, in a small hut, just old enough to stand, watching the scene before her. Instinctively, she could tell that this small, hide hut was her home, the great bone spar rising through the middle and supporting the whole tent giving her feelings of this. Her mother, lying on the floor, her hair spread around her face and her clothes torn, screamed aloud as the harsh, wooden switches of the men standing around her descended, each one harder than the

last, gouging thin, bloody streaks down her mother. The young Cassandra pressed herself into the corner of their dwelling, trying to make herself as inconspicuous as possible as her mother screamed again and again, tears pouring down her face. For hours she'd watched as these men had ravaged and abused her, before taking weapons to her mother. Cassandra didn't know why, all she knew was that, were her father alive, he wouldn't have allowed this. He wouldn't have allowed this at all. "No!" Her mother screamed as she pressed herself back against the tent walls, almost animalistic in her desperation to escape the pain. "Please, stop!" Yet the men didn't listen – they *never* listened. In desperation, the adult Cassandra, watching her younger self watch the scene below wished it to end different, *wished* her mother to rise up and beat them away. Yet it didn't happen. Blood on the walls of the tent, screams in the air, the young Cassandra watched, transfixed with fear, tears silently pouring down her face.

Yet the men would suffer for what they'd done. Even now, watching the dream, Cassandra felt anger and hate amongst the sadness, at these men, the men who didn't deserve to be called human. For, now, the air began to tremble and the ground rock as a shuttle landed nearby, the men wondering aloud to one another as they continued in their cruel sport. The shaking stopped and boots were heard outside, yet before the men could react the tent collapsed around them, sliced down about their feet. The harsh screech of laser fire cut down two men, the last man, the ringleader, Banar, standing fearfully before the man who'd cut down the tent. Lord Vader stood there, in all his might, his crimson lightsaber ignited at pointing down towards the ground. Banar cringed, like a weak worm, begging for his life. Vader, behind his mask, showed no mercy or emotion as he watched the man below, then looked to the woman, Cassandra's mother. Raising the lightsaber above his head, he watched Banar scream, Cassandra knowing what would happen in both her childlike and adult sense as the red blade descended, decapitating Banar and ending his screams there and then. Unable to stop her cries any longer, the young Cassandra cried out "Mama!" and ran to her mother's side, falling upon the floor and sobbing as she pressed her face to her mother's chest. "Mama!" She wailed, again and again, ignoring those behind her. Even now, knowing what had happened, Cassandra watched with a great sadness inside of her as the young version of herself cried in torment, in realizing her mother was dead. "Please, mama, wake up! Don't leave me!" Sobs wracked her body in time with those wracking her younger version, the dream like a living version of her memories.

Yet it didn't end there. Lord Vader stood behind her, over the dead body of her mother, his lightsaber disengaged and his hand out to command the stormtroopers not to shoot. For he had felt the presence in the Force of this young child, he'd felt the presence and had assumed it to be that of her mother, so strong was it. Yet it wasn't; it was Cassandra. And, even then, as he watched, ideas sowed themselves in Lord Vader's mind and he outstretched his hand to the young Cassandra, who turned her tear stained face to Vader. "Come." His deep, synthesised voice had scared her after she'd seen what he'd done to Banar, yet she'd come, feeling almost compelled. "You are safe now."

"Mother!" Cassandra's cry as she leapt out of her bed, the bedsheets wrapped about her and the cold feeling of the floor on her bare feet providing a harsh awakening after the dream. She breathed, heavily, the feeling of tears on her face still there as she looked around the darkened room, calming herself using a Force technique. Only a

dream... Only a dream... No, not *a* dream; *the* dream. It had tormented her since when she was very small, first into the Lord Vader's training. Cassandra reached out through the Force into the next room, where Tara slept; good. She was still asleep. Cassandra's cries hadn't woken her up, at least. Casting the bedsheets aside and slipping on her robes, Cassandra made her way up to the control room, sitting herself in the chair and watching the starlines of hyperspace shoot past, calming her. She regretted that Vader had killed Banar; she regretted it very much. For it meant that she couldn't kill him herself.

"We're here." Tara's voice roused Cassandra from where she'd fallen asleep in one of the chairs in the control room, Cassandra blinking her eyes blearily and looking out of the main window. The huge, golden orange orb that was the planet of Kirdo III stood before them, the shuttle dwarfed by its mass. Cassandra nodded, slowly, wiping away all thoughts of the night before as she watched, composing her face and nodding.

"Thanks." She muttered, softly, Tara nodding. She decided not to press the matter further, and so changed the topic of conversation.

"So," she asked. "Why're we here?" Normally, Tara would have feared a reprimand for her inquisitiveness, yet she could tell Cassandra was eager to change the topic. Smiling gratefully at her, Cassandra leant back.

"Imperial Intelligence say they've located a Jedi here; Utryn Varth, a Jedi Master, one of the few who survived after Order 66." Tara's eyes widened.

"You're hunting Jedi?"

Cassandra merely nodded. "Some time ago, a Kitonak from the planet sold us the information regarding Varth's whereabouts and his patterns. I'm here to bring Lord Vader's enemies to justice."

Aban nodded, wordlessly, steering the ship downwards.

"I'll need dropping off directly at the location I've programmed into the ship. I'll also need you to hang around and pick me up if... if I come out." Tara nodded, once again.

"Oh, and, Tara?" Tara turned. "Thanks." That was the last thing Aban had expected. Smiling, warmly, Tara turned back to the controls and piloted the ship downwards.

Cassandra jumped down from the ship above, the sound of its engines roaring in her ears and the muddy dust whipped up by its close proximity to the surface filling her eyes and mouth. Clearing it away using the Force, Cassandra landed, using the Force to cushion the impact, one hand against the ground and her knees bent, lightsaber held in the other. With a cave some hundred yards before her, Cassandra knew she'd reached the place; she could feel the presence of one man before her through the Force, and she could tell that this was Jedi Master Utryn Varth. The information then,

it seemed, had been reliable. Stepping forwards, slowly, Cassandra almost lazily drew her lightsaber, swinging it in an arc as she watched the figure standing in the cave entrance before her. His lightsaber was already ignited and held out at the side, the blue, iridescent blade sending light in a halo in the immediate area of cave around him. Cassandra smiled; should she kill him, she'd be one step closer to reaching her aim. The Kitonaks native to the planet where nowhere to be seen; just as well. She preferred it when there were less people to kill. Less hard work. She was now close enough to the Jedi for features and the like to become evident, the man wasn't thin yet wasn't particularly muscular, and with robes that suited him well. His hair was black and thick, yet beginning to turn gray, whilst his face was rugged and lined; he'd been in his fair share of fights. "So, Jedi." She called, her voice soft. "Are you ready to die?"

Utryn had begun to prepare himself as soon as Palar had left, standing in the entrance to the cave and holding his ignited lightsaber out to one side. He'd been quite surprised when the ship had dropped off its assassin to discover the Dark Jedi was a woman; he didn't particularly like fighting women. Something in his code of honor disliked it. As she approached, he could tell she was quite young. Not all that different from his daughter. Young and very beautiful, although he wouldn't let that distract him. Her long, black hair was unbound, falling down her back and framing her face, her mouth curved in a small, confident smile. Utryn didn't move, kept his face impassive, as she approached and twirled her lightsaber, knowing what she was doing was merely for show. "So, Jedi." Her voice was soft and as beautiful as her face. "Are you ready to die?"

For the first time, Utryn showed emotion on his face. Smiling, gently, he replied confidently: "I won't be dying today, yet you can spare yourself a lot of pain if you turn back now and leave. I will not follow you. Turn back, save yourself." Cassandra laughed, then, her voice high and malevolent.

"Hurt *me*?" She laughed once more, stopping some fifteen yards away from Utryn. "Oh, there's no need for me to worry about *that*. Do you not know who I am?" Utryn didn't bother to deign her with a response, and so Cassandra carried on anyway. "I am the apprentice of Lord Vader, here to bring his enemies to justice. Are you ready to meet your destiny?"

Varth laughed, then, a short, humorless bark. "*Justice?* You call what Lord Vader commands *justice*?" He laughed further, whilst this time Cassandra held her face impassive, in that small smile of hers. "You're more mad than I thought, *girl*." Cassandra ignored the taunt. "We shall see, then. Prepare to die."

Varth stepped forward, then, his blade staying by his side, as he saw no need for displays of swordsmanship like wheeling the blade around in fancy positions and arcs. Stopping around ten meters away from Cassandra, moving away from the cave and out into the open expanse of the mud plains, he smiled, dropping into the defensive stance of Soresu. "Your move, girl."

Cassandra inclined her head in mock thanks, before leaping towards Varth with a shout. As she came down she swung her lightsaber in a horizontal arc at Varth's midriff, Varth reversing his blade to point straight down at the ground and parrying it, before spinning away to launch an attack of his own. Yet Cassandra wasn't there, having instead leapt away to deliver a volley of Force lightning, the crackling sound of it splitting the still air, great bolts of incandescent blue lightning splitting the air. Varth raised his lightsaber into a defensive position, catching the bolts square on it, the blade being wreathed with the lightning as it crackled against it, unable to reach Varth. Slicing his lightsaber upwards to knock away the bolts, Varth outstretched one hand and sent out a Force push at Cassandra, who reeled backwards, lightsaber spinning, as Varth sprung at her. As he leaped towards her, Cassandra hurled a large nearby stone at him, striking him in the thigh and knocking the impetus out of his attack. As the two warriors clashed, again, the blades both blue and red coming together with flashes, the Kitonaks watched on, entranced.

In the concerns of the battle the warriors hadn't noticed how far they'd moved, the warriors having crossed some distance into the mud planes as they battled. Varth sent a riposte at Cassandra's face as she leapt towards him, however struck empty air as she dodged, sending a flying kick into his midriff. Wheeling backwards, one hand clenching his stomach, the wind knocked out of it, Varth blocked her vicious strike down on his head before rising and driving her backwards with a strike of his own. Smiling, he leapt into the air and sent a Force repulse down on his opponent, knocking her down onto the ground where he came down hard, stabbing his lightsaber into the ground where her body had been. Yet Cassandra had rolled away and, as she struck down on where his neck was, Varth rolled backwards and parried whilst on his knees, before springing upwards and sending her blade upwards, striking then at her stomach. Cassandra stepped backwards, beaten back, sending a cascade of lightning at Varth who was forced to block, allowing Cassandra to move away with a leap backwards. Landing and stopping off the assault of lightning, Cassandra proceeded to hurl the lightsaber at Varth viciously, who blocked it at the expense of a nick to his arm. Cassandra smiled. First blood to her.

As Varth prepared for the same thing, Cassandra ducked, watching the blade soar over her head and sending lightning at the now unprotected Varth, who caught a volley square on his chest. Lightning wreathed his body and made him jolt in spasms, before catching his blade and blocking the rest, panting hard. Good; he was beginning to make mistakes. "I don't want to hurt you," He repeated, the image of Varth being superior being somewhat spoiled by the state he was in compared to Cassandra, "but I will if needs be." Cassandra merely smiled and kicked dust from the ground into his face, making him splutter and wipe his eyes hastily as she attacked, Varth wheeling away on the back foot. As Varth was beaten down by Cassandra's attacks, she scored a slice against the back of his calf, making him grunt in pain. She felt him move the pain aside, however, and attack her in turn. Yet she'd wheeled away. Now, however, Varth would be sufficiently desperate to buy Cassandra's next bluff.

As Varth came at her next, Cassandra allowed him to seemingly overpower her and, as her lightsaber was knocked away Cassandra fell to the floor, panting heavily. Her plan rested on him not killing her straight off, but he was a Jedi; it was doubtful he would. She was satisfied to see he was panting heavier, and limping badly. Stepping over to her, he pointed his blade downwards at the area where her neck joined her

body. The lightsaber was just about close enough for Cassandra to feel the heat. "Please." She feigned, looking up at him beseechingly. "Don't hurt me!" During this time, Cassandra worked on getting a good enough grip around a large, flat rock nearby. Varth looked down on her from up high.

"I have a daughter like you." He said, quietly. "I don't want to hurt you. But I'm not sure what else to do to you." As Varth mused over it, his reactions dulled by the fighting, Cassandra got the grip she needed. With a grunt of exertion, she hurled the rock straight into his arm, sending it backwards at a horrible angle and making him drop his lightsaber with a shout of pain. Force pulling her own lightsaber towards her, Cassandra grabbed it and, in one deft motion, stabbed it straight through Varth's gut. With a gasp, Varth fell to his knees, his good hand pressed against the dirt, spitting blood from his mouth. Coughing blood, he panted even more heavily than before.

"You're not like them." He said, his voice almost a whisper. "You don't need to be like them. I've seen your future, and soon you'll learn to hate them." Cassandra ignored him, stepping backward. The *Rogue Specter* had wheeled around, and was now ready for her to board. Behind her, Varth fell to the dirt, twitching slightly before dying there, leaving merely his corpse on the dry earth. As Cassandra leapt aboard, she looked back at him lying there.

"Lord Vader, Utryn Varth is dead, my master." Cassandra kneeled on the floor, her face respectfully facing downwards, as the hologram of her master in life sized proportions and colors looked down upon her.

"I have felt it." He replied, his emotions impossible to gauge. "As you have defeated Varth, Starkiller has defeated Rahm Kota." Cassandra felt a twinge of annoyance that Starkiller too had succeeded, and not died, however she pushed it to the back of her mind, away from Vader. "You have done well, my apprentice."  
"Thank you, my master."

"Soon, I shall contact you with the details of your next assignment. Until then, return to my ship. I have things needed to discuss with you."

It was nearing dark when Asdan made his way back to where the pirates were, running in quickly as he checked over his shoulder for signs of pursuit; yet there were none. The pirates hadn't yet finished off work for the night, Lara Chase crouched beneath one of the ships attempting to repair some part of it, whilst issuing orders to the rest around her. "Lara!" Chase looked up, a frown on her face at Asdan's shout, putting the tool she'd been using down at her feet.

"Asdan?" She asked, looking over at him. Asdan bent over, holding his knees and panting a moment before looking up, saying one word.

"Imperials."

As Asdan was escorted inside one of the ships, falling into a chair and catching his breath before proceeding to tell of the day's events, Lara watched him, not saying a word. Eventually, as his story came to an end, she nodded, slowly.

“If I know the Empire, we’ll have a few squads of stormtroopers here soon.” Asdan nodded. “So,” Lara asked, “what do we do?”

Asdan considered it for a moment. “How quickly can we get out of here?” Lara shrugged. “With or without supplies?”

Asdan nodded. “Point. Are the supplies located anywhere near here?”

Lara considered it for a moment. “Warehouse is a few streets north of here. Although raiding it could bring down the local authorities on us.”

Asdan nodded. “Not if they don’t find out until it’s too late. Lara, take a few men of your choice and get what you can. We’ll hold them here otherwise.”

Lara frowned once more, considering it, before nodding. “When you get back, come in and load. Don’t assist us until we’re ready. Then we’ll get out of here and head for somewhere else nearby. Perhaps all the way back to Stryker.”

Lara Chase had been right; the Imperials did send a number of squads of stormtroopers to investigate. Although the planet wasn’t Imperial aligned, the Empire had demanded that a garrison on the planet be allowed to remain, making the Cardooineian government little more than a token. This wasn’t known to Thunder Armada, however they had presumed stormtroopers would be coming. The head of the Imperial garrison on Cardooine, Brajon Setas, had been here for some time now, and hadn’t yet been promoted. The reports of Thunder Armada being on the planet, then, were welcome ones indeed, with Setas seeing the opportunity for a promotion on the horizon. Eagerly he’d marshalled a number of stormtrooper squads and had set out for where the Intelligence agent on the planet had reported the ships to be. The agent’s death confirmed all he’d said, and also gave them permission by Cardooineian law to attack the pirates. Not that they particularly needed that. As the stormtroopers hastened out under cover of darkness, attempting to make the attack as quickly and easily as possible, Setas followed on in command. The berth where all the pirate ships were was a large ring with a single opening in or out, which would be to the pirate’s advantage. Setas, however, knew that they wouldn’t be going anywhere soon; the new restrictions on Cardooine were partly so the Imperials could investigate suspicious ships, actually; quite a few had ended up on Cardooine.

As the stormtroopers began to fan out, filling the surrounding streets and aiming their blasters at the dark, silent opening, Setas frowned. The pirates should have been working, yet they weren’t there... “I want those ships, and their cargo, intact.” Setas said to the stormtrooper commander beside him, who nodded wordlessly, his white mask bobbing up and down in the light. Five stormtroopers carefully stepped forwards, silently strafing the rows of boxes and deserted working areas, the dark bulks of the ships above them casting even deeper shadows. As they disappeared from their line of sight, Setas, blaster raised, watched with a frown; they hadn’t yet returned, so what was keeping them? They hadn’t even heard a word. This time, ten stormtroopers were sent forth, before halting pretty soon after finding the dead bodies of their colleagues lying, stretched out, in their path. One of them beckoned for reinforcements, Setas nodding and sending another few to join them. However, as they joined with their comrades, a spattering of blaster fire shot across to the stormtroopers, striking them down. The stormtrooper’s arms splayed out, almost comically, as they fell to the ground, dead. Setas gritted his teeth. “Wipe them out.”

The pirates had arranged the various boxes, crates and other such obstacles in the area into a sort of makeshift wall before the ships, the front two of which were firing at the Imperials gathering before them. Pirates lined the area behind the boxes, having leapt up as the first wave of Imperials attacked. Caught by the surprise, the first few lines of Imperial stormtroopers fell, their comrades behind opening fire, however, and catching a number of pirates. The ships began to open fire, cutting broad swathes through the Imperials, however Setas had managed to bring along an E-web repeating blaster, the combined efforts of which put out one of the ship's blasters relatively quickly, at the loss of a few of the repeating blasters. Asdan knew they'd try and capture the ships intact and so didn't want to use the turbolasers on the other ships for fear the Imperials would put them out of action, meaning that even if they did get off Cardooinie they'd be without weapons. Asdan jumped up, dropping two stormtroopers with quick blasts before dropping down again. Lara had better be back soon.

When Lara and those under her command returned, lifting the supplies over the walls and dropping them into the darkness below, the battle was at full throttle, raging some twenty yards in front of them. Lara felt incredibly exposed standing on the wall top as she was, the moon coming out from behind the clouds spelling almost certain death for those and the others on the wall. Yet it was a necessary risk, and one she was prepared to take. Her cybernetic arm was helpful in such a circumstance, allowing her to lift up reasonably heavy objects with relative ease, the hydraulics taking the weight, and as she dropped more over into the darkness. Trying to be as quiet as possible, she looked over the edge. Not many more to come now. Hauling up the last two she'd have to carry, she dropped them over before lending her hand to help up one of the other pirates, jumping down and landing in the dark having done so. A blaster materialised in her hand as she moved forwards, through the darkness, keeping to the edge. Reaching for her comlink, she quickly opened a channel. "Asdan!" She hissed. Over the screech of blasters, Asdan answered.

"Lara? You're back."

"Yeah. Get into the ships. My people will take it from here." So as to brook no argument, she shut off the comlink; she knew she'd get trouble for that later. Signalling over the rest of her squad, she detailed her plans to them.

Now that they had little to lose, Lara could wreak havoc in the area, without fear of losing anything they wanted to load. A number of crudely created fuel bombs, siphoned off from the ships engines, had been on board one of the ships and, having removed them, she'd armed the group with a few. As she lit her own, she smiled. "Raise hell!" She whispered, her eyes locked onto the Imperials. As she threw hers, it arced through the air like some kind of lethal comet, striking a knot of Imperials and flaring up, engulfing them in the blaze. As they dropped their blasters and fell, the inferno ravaging their armor to burn the vulnerable skin inside, more were thrown, keeping the Imperials back from the ships, which were now beginning to be boarded. Setas, as the flames grew, had run for cover, seething at his inability to do anything to fix the problem. The fuel in the makeshift bombs kept itself alight, although the inferno soon began to engulf the rare occurrences of flammable material nearby. This provided a wall against the Imperial forces, allowing the pirates time, although the Imperials attempted to rectify the problem by firing randomly through the blaze, while others tried to tame it.

This had provided all the opening the pirates needed. As Lara Chase, the last one out, boarded the remaining pirate transport, the ships lifted up and angled outwards, the Imperials firing even more frantically as the craft began to angle for the sky. Yet it was too late; the ships were free, and were out of range of the stormtroopers relatively soon. Setas, who had bet on being able to capture the ships without them taking off, hadn't got any sort of air support in place, allowing the transports to break free and head for the open. As Lara Chase heaved herself down into the chair next to Asdan, wiping her forehead of the soot, she breathed out, heavily.

“Where to now? To Stryker?”

Asdan nodded. “Yes.”