

Star Wars: The Lost Mantra

Chapter III

Dac hadn't changed as Sasha and the group of Rebels emerged from the house into the light, blinking sharply to clear their eyes after the darkness of the house inside. It had been a full day since Sasha and Rico had first entered the house and, as the Rebels carried Rico's stretcher over to the nearby houses, in order to shield him from any prospective enemies, Sasha bit his lip. It had been hours since Rico had last eaten, and food was what Rico needed in order to give his body the nutrients to recover. As the Rebels quickly crossed the courtyard, fanning out into a formation to surround Dodonna, Pandos, Sasha and Rico in the center, blasters silently strafing anywhere prospective enemies could be. Yet the Imperials hadn't bothered to follow up the small group, and, as they reached the opposite end, Pandos shepherding Dodonna and, with distaste, Sasha and Rico into the relative safety of a darkened alleyway, out of the line of sight and, indeed, fire from the Imperial building behind. Lax security, although the private house of a Moff generally wasn't high on the Imperial lists of priorities, which could explain something.



The alleyway was damp, water dripping down onto the stone surface with a soft dripping sound, impossible to place but there nevertheless. The sun didn't manage to light up the alleyway to show individual features and faces, but Sasha was able to discern Dodonna from his pale beard and Rico, obvious from his prone position upon the stretcher. Although it shielded them from any sort of enemy fire from the building, it meant that their footsteps echoed loudly around, meaning anyone at the other end would have ample time in which to prepare an ambush. Although the Rebels were, presumably, ready for this, and has sent scouts on ahead, that wouldn't matter to Sasha if he were killed in an ensuing firefight; the others would presumably feel the same. However, there was no Imperial ambush waiting for them and, as they proceeded out into the main streets of Dac, looking as if they didn't belong there at all, the amused glances of many of the Mon Calamari were drawn. Dodonna smiled with amusement;

"It's because of Admiral Ackbar, predominantly, that the Mon Calamari are predominantly opposed to the Empire in their state of 'neutrality'."

It was more to Sasha than to anyone that he spoke, although Sasha hadn't spoken to him about it.

"The Empire is tolerated here, due to the fact that they don't want to make a powerful enemy. However, I can be almost sure in saying that we won't be reported to the Imperials whilst here." Sasha nodded, uncertainly. Almost sure, but not definitely.

It was a while later, as the day began to wane, that Sasha asked the question he'd been wanting to ask since having first left the building with the Rebels, and, voicing it, he could tell that many of the Rebels didn't know either. "How are you planning to get off the planet?" He asked, bluntly, his face darkening as he contemplated the Rebels not having a proper way off, meaning they'd be riding on his ship for the duration of the journey home. A ship he didn't have on the planet. Dodonna looked on to Pandos, who'd obviously planned the mission, who turned to Sasha with a smirk, as if happy to illustrate just how intelligent he was with his planning.

"We've decided it's about time we taught the Imperials in the system how much they need to think of the Rebel Alliance, and this is the perfect opportunity. We'll be picked up soon, during our diversion. If you have some sort of ship in which to leave the planet, I suggest you take the opportunity provided by what we're doing to divert their attention."

Sasha asked no questions as to the diversion; it would probably be a squadron of X-wings to challenge the two Super-Star Destroyers the Empire had seen fit to leave to patrol the Calamari system. Of course, they wouldn't be designed to succeed, but to make an opening, therefore he doubted it would escalate to the level of a major battle. Of course, he could be wrong.

The ship was waiting for them in one of the hangars adjoined to the street adjacent to the main street, right next to the centers of activity, but surprisingly well hidden. People wouldn't expect for something to be hidden right next to centers of population. A Corellian gunship, the *Escapade* it was in relatively good shape, despite its obvious years of surface. Various Mon Calamari engineers, in the uniform of the Rebel Alliance, were littered around the hangar, working upon the ship, whilst other soldiers guarded it, standing by the sealed hatchway. The insignia of the Rebel Alliance was evident beneath the overlain traders design, although it would stand up to all but a close scrutiny. However, with luck, they wouldn't need to undergo any of that, if the plans set up by the Rebels worked. Presuming, of course, that they would. Wordlessly, they boarded the gunship and, as Rico was brought aboard, the Rebels glancing around nervously, skittish as anything, Sasha couldn't help feeling as if they were, in a way, prisoners, despite Dodonna's welcomes. As the cold, sterile and military feeling of the gunship surrounded him, Sasha's face darkened. If he wasn't careful, he'd end up being earmarked as being a supporter of the Rebel Alliance, cutting out any prospective business with the Imperials further on. Of course, he was no supporter of the Imperials, but paid work was paid work, and it wasn't a smart move to turn it down.

The engine's of the gunship started, surprisingly, without any sort of stutter or cough that Sasha would have imagined would have come with such an aged ship. That, at least, gave him some degree of hope, as the scratched and carbon scored hulk of the gunship began to rise, the engine's emitting long streams of flame in order to power the ship, rotating slowly in the hangar before facing the double blast doors which, by now, were slowly sliding back on well oiled hinges, despite the rusted and tarnished appearance of them, making enough room for the now rotated gunship to be able to

depart when ready. Sasha had been left in the corridor in the midst of the ship, Rico having been taken to the medical room and Dodonna, Pandos and the other administrative types heading off to the control room of the ship. As preoccupied members of the Alliance hastily moved past him, their minds upon other matters, Sasha slowly crossed over to the hatchway leading to the control room. He may as well see what plan the Rebel's had in mind if he were going to be on board the ship. The main part Sasha felt skeptical about regarding the mission was the fact that it would be doubtful an average trader would be using a 'converted' gunship to travel between systems. However, hopefully the Rebels would have considered that too.

As it pushed through the open doorway, beginning to gain in speed, there were no anti aircraft shots fired or anything intended to bring down the Rebel ship to bear, and Sasha heaved a sigh of relief, putting a hand on the drop down top of the hatchway into the control room and slowly pulling himself in. He was sure his fears were just paranoia; after all, who would suspect a trading ship of any ulterior motives? The electronic lights flickered on, bathing the corridors in a pale bright light, and casting shadows from the bodies of the Rebel soldiers who were still moving around the corridors like agitated bees. Sasha lowered himself into one of the soft chairs in the control room, out of the way of Dodonna and, especially, Pandos. Despite the old man's friendliness, Sasha wasn't in the mood for a relay of some of the propaganda he'd heard from news feeds on Rebel-controlled systems.

The bright pin points of the stars began to appear in the windscreen as the *Escapade* punctured the planetary atmosphere of Dac, the dark shape of the first Super Star Destroyer came into sight before them, its dark bulk blocking out the stars behind, the artificial ambience of the lights inside it pale in comparison. It barricaded their way into hyperspace, and Sasha pushed his lips together as the *Escapade* moved slowly forwards, into the range of the Super Star Destroyer's blasters and tractor beam, the other Super Star Destroyer some distance behind. The Rebel's were silent in anticipation as they moved forwards further, no word coming from either ship. Sasha frowned, his frown deepening as the minutes passed and still no word came.

"Something's wrong."

He said, Pandos turning round to glare at him angrily and pressed a finger to his lips, Sasha raising his hand into an offensive gesture in return. Immature, in a way, but Sasha didn't care; Pandos was really staying off his good side at this moment in time. As the tension rose between the two men, it snapped suddenly as the sound of an officious Imperial voice echoed through the speakers.

"Freighter *Silver Sheen*, name your cargo and destination."

The Rebel officer assigned to being the 'Captain' of the ship leant over and pulled the communications device towards him. At least they hadn't sliced their ID code yet, and still thought of them as the *Silver Sheen*.

"Super Star Destroyer *Unsinkable*, this is the *Silver Sheen*, heading for Krinemonen with a cargo of power convertors. I trust all is satisfactory?"

Star Wars and all related trademarks and licenses © Lucasfilm, Ltd. 1977 – 2009

Once more, the Imperials were silent for a few seconds longer, the worry from the Rebel's in the ship like something solid in the air – as if you could touch it. "A converted Corellian gunship for a trading ship? A little extravagant, no?" The Imperial's arrogant tone clearly held suspicion, and Dodonna began to bite his fingernails.

"You can never be too safe these days with pirates." The previously cavalier tone of the 'Captain' was now underlined by a hint of anxiety.

"Indeed." This time, the response was prompt, yet the feeling was the same. "Stand by for the tractor beam to pull you in. We'll be checking you over." There was a muffled gasp from one of the Rebel's.

"Tractor beam?" This time, the 'Captain' had a worried tone. "You're pulling this in? What is this, an Imperial detention?"

"If you'd prefer, *Silver Sheen*, we can end your troubles now with our turbolasers?" The mocking tones of the Imperial were so typical of the organization to which he belonged.

"No, it's fine. *Silver Sheen* out." The 'Captain' turned off the communication link and leant back with a sigh.

"Tractor beam? They're onto us. And if they do search the ship..." Pandos was clearly worried, and Sasha didn't feel a jab at him would be appropriate.

"There's nothing for it." Dodonna spoke, his voice set. "We're going to have to bring the attack forward."

As the tractor beam began to turn upon the *Escapade*, there was a flash from hyperspace and a cheer from the Rebels in the ship, as Sasha jumped up, rubbing his eyes to make sure he was seeing properly. An MC80 Calamari type Star had just exited hyperspace at point blank range from the *Unsinkable*, and opened fire with a pummelling blindside, large plumes of fire erupting from its side as it began to reel and attempt to strike back. A second MC80 Calamari type Star Cruiser exited hyperspace behind the first Super Star Destroyer, opening fire upon the second ship. This ship, however, was ready after seeing what had happened to its comrade and, in the second it took for the Cruiser to bring its shields up, the Star Destroyer had unleashed a violent barrage of fire, the Cruiser retreating backwards a few yards and carbon scorched until it unleashed its own barrage in response.

As TIE fighters exited from the Super Star Destroyers, X-wing squadrons met them from the Rebel ships, TIE bombers and Y-wings intermingled with them. As the loud screeches of laser fire echoed out around the battle, the *Escapade* steering away, the Rebels whooping with delight. Sasha moved over to the control board, now vacated by Pandos, who was warmly shaking hands with another Rebel nearby. The only person left seated was Dodonna, who smiled at Sasha and didn't bother attempting to resist. As he pulled it over and keyed in the code for the Thunder Armada channel,

shielding the screen with his hand to prevent any of the Rebel's seeing it, and leant over and spoke into it.

"Ransor?"

He asked questioningly. For a moment, there was nothing he could hear but static, before an obviously non-human voice spoke out.

"That you, Sasha?" The incredulity in his voice was evident.

"Yeah, it's me. Shut up and listen; Rico and I are on board the Rebel ship *Escapade* – no, don't ask questions, just listen. Rico's injured, and there's a battle near our vector now, which I'm transmitting to you."

Sasha flicked a switch to start the transmission he'd promised. "Don't bother coming near; we're perfectly fine. Change of plan; don't pick us up from Dac, meet Rico, myself and the Rebel's on Krinemonen as soon as is possible. That's where the Rebel's are headed now." There was a screech as an incandescent bolt of laser fire stormed past the windscreen, sending Sasha, Dodonna and a number of other's ducking for cover. There was silence at the other end of the line as Ransor processed what he'd said.

"I don't like it, Sasha; it'll add an extra two days to our schedule, but it seems the only course of action. We'll meet you on Krinemonen as soon as possible. Keep in touch." Ransor's tone was apprehensive but resigned to the fact that there were no other options.

"All's fine, Ransor. *Escapade* out." Sasha reassured him, before turning off the communications. It was time he got some sleep.

The beds provided in the sleeping modules of the *Escapade* were sparse and simple, exactly what Sasha would have expected from a military ship. Not bothering to undress any further than removing his jacket, he rolled into bed, turning the heating systems off, and closed his eyes. The *Escapade* was drawing clear of the battle now, and there was little chance of being struck down. In addition, the sounds weren't so loud, mainly due to the increased distance between the *Escapade* and the battle, but also due to the composition, in terms of the make up of the walls and the likes, of the sleeping module. Sasha had taken one of the individual modules, generally assigned for high ranking officers, for himself; he didn't fancy sharing a room with a bunch of Rebel soldiers who, he imagined, would exclude him due to his commitments to the world of piracy and crime. That or the questions he'd be asked would be totally pointless and stupid, intended for the amusement of the Rebel soldiers. The feeling Dodonna held towards Sasha and Rico wasn't shared across the ship, and Sasha felt a pang of guilt for Rico in the medical room. He didn't quite trust the Rebel's to do the best job they could on Rico; paranoia was something every pirate felt from an early time onwards. He sighed, pressing his eyes shut and rolling over into a more comfortable position. He was exhausted, but sleep still proved elusive.

The nightmare was upon him again. As he tossed and turned in the throes of sleep, the last moment's of his wife's life played, once more, behind his sealed eyes, as he

rolled over once more. As the blue light surrounded Shairi, Sasha willed it not to hurt her this time, and he screamed out pleadingly for it just to release her. Yet the dream didn't change, and it was to no avail, and his wife was thrown from the now shattered statue. If he had been killed and his wife and child had survived, Sasha would have died happy in the sense that he'd ensured a life for his wife and child. Stryker would have cared for them. However, it didn't end like that and, as Sasha awoke with a shout, the current place and time returned to him with a jolt. The room was dark, a light and a few other basic implements dimly outlined by the soft light from the corridor outside, a small window in the door. Sasha picked himself up, out of bed, pouring himself a drink of water and gulping it down in one go to cool his fire burnt throat. As he replaced the glass on the wooden stand, his senses sharpened and his eyes snapped up; there was somebody outside in the corridor. His blaster was in his jacket, which was hung up on the opposite side of the module, and he didn't want to alert whoever was outside that he was on to them by either making noise or by moving, which they could see through the porthole like window. Whatever incapacitation the person outside would require, Sasha would have to do it with his bare hands. Gritting his teeth and stepping over to the doorway, he reached out, placing his hand on the cold metal of the door handle and gently twisting it, calming his breath and heightening his senses to a degree of combat awareness. With a sharp tug, he yanked the door open and leapt around the corner, pressing his fingers against the jugular of the man outside, ready to knock him out if necessary. The figure froze, in a way of surrender against Sasha, as he softly whispered in his ear: "Alright, game's up. What were you doing out here?"

"Sasha, it's me." Sasha flinched, surprised, as he recognized the voice. It was Dodonna he had in his hands. Quickly releasing him and stepping back, he muttered an apology, only for it to be waved away by Dodonna.

"There's no need for an apology. A pirate's awareness will stay with him all his life."

Dodonna heaved a sigh, leaning against the wall for support. "It seems you can't sleep either." So he'd obviously heard the shout. His eyes turned to Sasha almost accusingly, as Sasha's face darkened.

"No." He said, shortly, offering no more explanation.

"I was talking to Rico about you." Dodonna said, turning his eyes to gaze out from the ship. Sasha didn't reply. Dodonna swiveled around, concern replacing the almost accusational gaze. "Are you alright?"

"Yes." Sasha muttered. Dodonna looked as if he were about to say more, before Sasha roared:

"Yes!" Slamming his fists against the door of his module, a metallic loud clang echoing around the corridor, he rested his head against it, as he had in the cell. Why did people always have to be so inquisitive?

Time passed between the two, neither saying anything and Sasha not moving at all. Eventually, Dodonna quietly asked: "What was her name?" They both knew who he

was talking about; if he'd spoken to Rico and remembered his first meeting with Sasha in the Imperial cell, then he knew.

"Shairi." Sasha said, before continuing as Dodonna didn't respond. "My wife." Dodonna didn't press for details, and merely stood there, watching him. Eventually, Sasha stalked into his module and shut the door, Dodonna standing there for a few minute's longer before sighing, and walking away.

Krinemonen. Although not as covered by oceans as it's moon Krinemonen III, it was still covered by water, and still inhabited by many fleeing the Galactic Empire. Which was exactly what they were here to do, and exactly why they'd selected the planet Krinemonen to meet Ransor and to board Sasha and Rico onto the ship. They'd given it as the destination of the *Silver Sheen* to the *Unsinkable* as a double bluff; no Imperial ship would expect the Rebels to be foolish enough to tell them where they were headed. In addition, the Rebel's wouldn't be staying there long. Although they weren't telling Sasha why they were visiting the planet, they had told him that they wouldn't be there long. As the *Escapade* lowered itself down into the landing pad they'd been assigned by the port control of the planet, Sasha gazed out the window at the storm the planet was currently in the midst of. Rain lashed down in torrents similar to waterfalls, with the sound of huge hide drums, similar to the Gungan ones on Naboo, being beaten again and again relentlessly, the sound assailing his ears almost like a physical blow. It was driven to falling at an almost horizontal angle by the powerful winds that swept over the surface of the planet, well over gale force strength. As the ship docked, softly touching down upon the landing pad, Sasha rose to the medical bay, to find Rico. As he entered, he looked over to the only occupied bed, filled by Rico's bulk, and smiled. Rico was sitting up, his face pale but smiling, which was a good sign. He'd obviously recovered somewhat from his ordeal. Sasha smiled in return and greeted him, Rico's response coming out husky and tired.

"How're you feeling?"

Sasha asked, bending down to check the computer screens next to Rico. Rico nodded, his black hair moving as he did so.

"Better."

Came his response, before he elaborated. "They did a pretty good job, surprisingly, considering what they had at their disposal. I doubt I'd have died, but I could have come out a lot worse than I did." Sasha grinned at the good news.

"We'll be aboard Ransor's ship soon, and out of this system before you know it."

Rico smiled, stronger than he had previously. Sasha sat there for a moment longer, Rico closing his eyes and laying back. Sasha wondered if he'd fallen asleep, until Rico spoke.

"I spoke to Dodonna last night." Sasha's smile vanished.

"I know." His voice was impassive, although his eyes betrayed his true emotions. Rico opened one eye, swivelling it over to look at Sasha.

"He spoke to you?" Sasha didn't bother replying with words, nodding instead. Rico closed his eyes again, breathing heavily. "I had to, Sasha. It's eating away at you! You need to control it!" Sasha slammed his fist down upon the desk next to Rico with a crash. First Dodonna, and now Rico! It was as if the whole world had turned against him.

"You have no idea!" He quivered with rage. "Have you ever been in love, and had both the one you love taken away from you?" Although the question was rhetorical, Sasha let it hang in the air for a few moments longer. Rico didn't reply. "Have you? No. Of course not. You have no idea how it feels, Rico, no idea. If you ever have the misfortune for something like this to happen to you, then – and only then – can you preach to me about what I should and shouldn't do in this circumstance." Despite Sasha's outrage being obvious, Rico hadn't moved throughout the outburst. His response was calm, surprisingly, and didn't rise in volume.

"I do this because I care for you." Sasha shook his head with anger and stood up. "It's time we left this ship." He said, abruptly.

Rico's stretcher had a sheet of thin, waterproof plastic stretched over it, so as to keep him from the rain, but Sasha and the Rebel's who carried the stretcher had no such protection. The rain beat down upon their heads, making the sound of short, sharp bullets upon Rico's cover, and soaking Sasha's hair into long, thin straggles, darkening it's dirty blonde colour to almost brunette. Gritting his teeth as his clothes too were soaked by the deluge, he and the other stretcher bearers sprinted over to the opposite side of the landing pad, their boots making little noise over the noise of the storm, over to the Vagabond, Ransor's ship. The tall, red-skinned Togrutan stood in the hatchway of his ship, the jutting lip of the hatchway shielding him and his impressive horns from the storm. As pirate's jumped from the ship and took the stretcher from the hands of Sasha and the Rebel stretcher bearers, before turning towards the Vagabond and bringing Rico aboard, Ransor stepping out of the hatchway and towards Sasha, who now stood with empty hands, to allow entry to the pirate's holding Rico. Striding over with a grin upon his alien features, Sasha stepped forward in turn to grab Ransor's fist and pull Ransor towards himself, the two bringing their shoulders against one another in a traditional pirate greeting, before Sasha broke into a grin.

"Good to see you again, Ransor."

He said, stepping away from the Togrutan. Ransor's grin widened and, in his deep voice, he replied:

"You too, Sasha Vitarr. Wouldn't have wanted to lose you on or above Dac now, would we?"

The two laughed, before turning to Pandos and Dodonna, who'd arrived nearby and stood there, waiting patiently. Sasha turned to Dodonna, who looked thoroughly bedraggled and wet, like a beggar. "Thanks." He said, shaking Dodonna's hand.

"Good luck with whatever you're planning on the planet."

Dodonna nodded and smiled, bidding him farewell, before Sasha turned to Pandos. Pandos clearly hadn't expected any sort of recognition from Sasha, and Sasha couldn't believe he was doing this either. Sucking in his pride, he muttered a quick thanks, before shaking his hand and turning away.

"Gentlemen, as nice as it is talking to you here in this delightful rain, it's time we left."

Ransor's rich, deep voice was, although at its normal level, audible over the rain, as he turned and saluted the Rebels, in a mocking sort of way. Sasha waved a hand in farewell as he boarded the Vagabond, Dodonna doing the same. For a moment, Pandos looked as if he would too, but instead turned around, muttering some sort of excuse about having to ready the ship further.

Asdan Eponas swore, as another barrage of Imperial heavy fire rained down upon the base, exploding near a clump of pirate's defending the eastern edge. The tactical display in the meeting room was flashing more and more, as Imperials arrived to supplement those already attacking, engaging almost all of the pirate squads. "Send in the reserves." Sasha barked into his comlink, hearing an affirmative from the man on the other end. The battle wasn't going well. The room was emptier now, with Lara Chase, himself and Xantor Voz being the only ones who hadn't insisted, yet, on taking a squad to fight the Empire face to face. Of course, they'd all been willing to, however it was the other's who'd volunteered first, and some of them needed to remain to orchestrate the battle, in order to make sure that at least some of the pirates left the planet alive. As the screeching roar of the heavy artillery units mounted upon the buildings echoed out, the screams of stormtroopers evident a few seconds afterwards, Asdan smiled grimly, whilst Lara Chase contented herself with using one of the computer controlled turrets. There was a flash of light from Chase's computer controlled board and she swore, violently, as the Empire reduced her turret to the level of a shattered wreck.

"Damn the Empire!" She spat, turning back to the tactical display. "Asdan, even more of them are coming from the western perimeter. We have reports of each attack being led by a force wielder." She drew breath, sharply, before continuing. "And that the central one is being led by Darth Vader himself." Asdan looked up at her, sharply.

"Vader? Are you sure?" He asked. She nodded.

"Unless somebody else suddenly wears the same suit as him, fights in the same manner and can lead troops as effectively as he can."

Asdan nodded. This was bad news.

"What about the troops? Do ours out number theirs?" Chase shook her head. "There's no way of telling. More could arrive at any minute. Currently? I'd probably say not, knowing Vader."

Asdan sighed again, gritting his teeth as he envisioned the pirate's on the planet dead, their base in ruins. "We'll give them a good fight at least." His voice was set, hard and prepared to send men to their deaths. Not something he particularly enjoyed, but something all commanders needed to do in the midst of battle.

Xantor Voz was the next to leave the room, as reports of Laashan being shot down reached them. Of course, the death of the Gand wasn't something they could afford to mourn, no matter how much they missed him, and the Falleen pirate was the next to take his place out on the battlefield. Of course, it wasn't set in stone that he would die, however Laashan had led pirates into one of the most violent areas of the battlefield, in which anyone could die. Xantor Voz included. As Lara Chase and Asdan were the only ones left, it fell onto them to command the battle and how it went for the pirates. There'd been no word from Fiskle's group, which either meant they were currently busy, or had been killed. This wouldn't be good for the already depleted forces of the pirates.

"Asdan, we can't hold them off." Lara's realistic reasoning cut over the sounds of battle, and he turned to her.

"What would you suggest I do? Let my men die?"

"No. Evacuate the base." Asdan looked at her, strangely.

"We're not finished on the planet, Lara. Stryker wouldn't want us to surrender it without a fight!" Chase gritted her teeth. She wasn't getting anywhere.

"It's either that, or let your men die. Of course I'll stand by you in whatever you command, but that doesn't mean I'll like it."

Asdan looked at her, eyebrow raised.

"You know I can't do that."

Cassandra's scarlet blade flashed from left to right, cutting down the pirates who stood before her, the loud screeches from the blasters of the stormtroopers around her ending with a scream from the pirates in front. The Imperial discipline hammered into the stormtroopers meant that no matter how many blasts from the pirates came burning through their white armor and into the unprotected body beneath, they'd very rarely let out any sound other than that of a groan. That was something Cassandra prized herself on; Starkiller hadn't managed to do the same, and it was in this way that she was similar to Vader, something that might earn her extra when she finally confronted Starkiller. Baring her teeth into a snarl and hacking down a pirate before her with a grunt, she watched with satisfaction as he crumpled, before she spun around, swinging her lightsaber in a long, low arc, to strike another oncoming pirate straight in his hips, her blade burning through his skin and into the bone like a knife through butter, before she stepped onwards, leaving her stormtroopers to finish the pirate off. As the trees began to thin as they neared the base, blasts began to fall like rain on either side, the hum of Cassandra's lightsaber moving through the air to block the incoming blasts, diverting them onto a different course with a bang. As they

reached the flat perimeter surrounding the base, the stormtroopers fanned out into a v-formation, with Cassandra at the tip, leading. Gun emplacements faced them as well as small shields about a meter and a half high.

Almost ignoring the blasts fired at her, Cassandra easily deflected them back against those who fired them, as heavy weaponry and artillery fired from the base, shells striking the ground near the stormtroopers and sending hot mud against their white plastoid armor, the mud sticking to them in clumps. Yet they continued onwards, strafing the pirate positions and pinning them against their own defenses, stopping them from launching a defensive attack of their own. As they reached the defenses and rounded the first few walls, pirates emerging with blasters in hand, the air in between dissolved into a trading ground for blaster bolts, Cassandra swiveling around and parrying them, her pace forwards slowed somewhat. As blasts struck the small barricades, carbon scores appeared down them, long black lines etched into the material. As she stepped forwards to cut down a man quivering behind the first barricade, she started as Starkiller initiated the mental contact.

"Only just engaging the enemy?"

He asked, in a mocking tone. "I've already entered the base, and you're so slow as to still be outside? I wonder what the Lord Vader will make of this..." Cassandra brought up the iron strong walls surrounding her mind angrily, shutting out his mocking laughter. She'd have her vengeance soon.

A tall, extravagantly decorated Falleen stepped out from behind the next barrier, discarding his blaster in favor of a vibroblade which he drew with a metallic singing noise, bringing it up to bear in a defensive position against Cassandra. She smiled; his blade would be in two pieces on the floor before he knew it. As Xantor Voz stepped towards her, bringing his blade forward with a riposte, Cassandra lazily knocked it away, to find that it didn't melt or shatter.

"Cortosis-weave."

She muttered, angrily, launching an attack of her own, stepping forward and bringing her blade down towards him, the Falleen bringing his blade up and blocking it, before savagely striking at her legs. Stepping backwards, Cassandra parried it, before unleashing a volley of Force lightning upon the Falleen who ducked out of the way of most of the barrage, but was struck by some of it, causing him to shout out in agony. Falling to one knee, he desperately brought his blade up above his head to block Cassandra's strike aimed at decapitating him. As he rolled away and rose, Cassandra noted that his clothes were now covered by mud and dirt, his appearance more disheveled than extravagant, now. Meanwhile, not even a hair had been knocked out of place on Cassandra.

Toying with him now, Cassandra pushed him backwards with the Force, before violently bringing her blade upwards into his, in an attempt to knock it from his hand. However, the Falleen was stronger than she'd estimated, and he merely held his blade in position before moving it round to the side, and striking at her hips. Swinging away, Cassandra released another volley of lightning at him, this one catching him

square in the chest, and sending him stumbling backwards, Voz falling over onto both knees in the soft mud. As Cassandra stepped slowly over, lightsaber swinging lazily between her fingers, the Falleen looked up at her with his dark eyes, anger evident on his face. He said nothing, merely drew his blade up in a defensive position above his head, his features betraying his feeling that it wouldn't help him at all. Cassandra smiled and, drawing his blaster from the ground, shot him. He was knocked backwards, his blood pooling on the floor, as she looked down upon him and said: "It won't kill you. You'll live to fight another day."

"Asdan!" Lara Chase's angry shout echoed out around the situation room. "We have reports of Voz having been shot." Asdan turned to her, an angry snarl on his lips.

"I know. The Empire will pay for this!"

"More to the point, Imperial troops have entered the western end. The troops can't combat them! We need to evacuate!" Asdan angrily turned away to the control board, resting his body upon his hands which were, in turn, placed upon the control board. Moments passed before Asdan turned around to face Lara.

"Very well. I'll give the order to evacuate."

The loud klaxon blared out the order to evacuate, as Asdan began to hastily set up the bomb network system, the detonator popping out of the board and into his hand. As Lara Chase set to work setting voice passwords for the system, so the Empire wouldn't be able to find any of the data Thunder Armada held dear. As Asdan slid the detonator into his pocket, Chase stepped away from the keyboard with a satisfied smile, before turning to Asdan. "Let's go." Was all she said, yet no more was needed. Asdan nodded, and pulled open the door to the situation room, the two guards on either side of the door turning to face as he and Lara Chase breezed out of the room. Turning around, Asdan looked at them whilst walking backwards.

"Evacuation time, move!"

His sharp, military tones cut through their guard duty, causing them to start up a jog and follow down the corridor, the echo of their movement ringing around, the klaxon still blaring and alerting everyone to the evacuation process. Although Asdan and Lara were moving at a fast walk, other pirates hurried past them with no regards for the fact that they'd just pushed a superior officer out the way. Suddenly, there was a loud sound almost like an incredibly loud laser blast, and the lights above fizzed, sparks flying from them, before shattering, sending hot pieces of glass onto those gathered beneath, causing them to cry out with shock more than pain. Vision suddenly vanished and the klaxon cut off in mid wail, as Asdan groped around him, slowly counting down from five. As he reached zero, there was a sharp clicking noise, and the emergency back up lights came on, far less powerful and far weaker and paler than the previous lights. Asdan gazed around, the corridors suddenly silent, before a muffled, yet still loud and obviously big, explosion was audible, closer than the area where the Imperials were said to have entered. Swearing, Asdan picked up his pace as some of those in the base began to push for a way out.

"We'll all get out safely if we don't push!"

Asdan roared, appalled that he had to treat grown men and women like children. Yet his words were not heeded, and the pushing continued.

Asdan groaned to himself as he was shoved again, and slammed his fist into the systems for dealing with fire, setting the water system down upon the, what was fast turning into a riot of, people, causing them to stop dead, as Asdan bellowed over them:

"All move carefully and orderly towards the hangars. Our exit's being covered. Pushing and other such immature things won't get us anywhere. It'll just mean we all die!"

Asdan's teeth showed a glowing white in the dim light, and his hair blacker than ever, now wet and straggly. Fearful eyes gazed back at him, processing what he said, taking a moment to comprehend his words, before they nervously began to move off once more, without the running and pushing, albeit rather fast. As they reached the hangar, the ships were already beginning to fill, the only ships not taken in the hangar being CSF assault ships from the Clone Wars, stationed here before being moved back to Coruscant. A move which, thankfully for the pirates, hadn't happened. As they began to board, Asdan shepherding other pirates before himself, there was another explosion and some of the already depleted lights burst, increasing the darkness. As the first ships began to rise, their engine's filling the hangar with heat, there was another explosion, setting the hangar and the ships within shaking and rocking. Asdan stumbled, landing on his knee and jarring it sharply. The pandemonium from early happened once more as those in the hangar began to verge on a riot, the pirates pushing into a ship.

Stormtroopers erupted from the hangar doors with loud releases of blaster fire, strafing the hulls of the ship. Asdan leapt forwards, swiveling in mid air, blasters in either hand, to fire back upon their assailants, the blasts felling one trooper before Asdan hit the ground on his back, sliding backwards a meter or so before swiveling onto his stomach, rolling to the right and releasing another volley of blaster fire upon the stormtroopers. From behind him, blaster fire erupted from the pirates behind, knocking down the first line of stormtroopers, Lara Chase leading a sally forwards against the ranks of the stormtroopers, her replacement fist aiding her in violently slamming her fist upwards into the jaw of a stormtrooper, a loud crack emitting as he fell, her pistol lowered to shoot. As she shot him, she turned upon the next, before Asdan saw something he'd been dreading since hearing of it in the situation room.

A crimson lightsaber, in the hands of a dark haired, young man, was swinging its way through the pirate's who'd gone to confront the stormtroopers in the entrance of the hangar, cutting through the ranks of pirates towards Lara Chase. To add to matters, another Dark Jedi, this one a dark haired woman, was leading a squad of stormtroopers from the other entrance to the hangar. It was evident that, soon, Vader would be arriving and, roaring at a nearby pirate to man the guns in one of the ship, to back them up; he bellowed orders for the remaining pirates to board the remaining two ships, as he sprinted over the hangar towards Chase, firing at the stormtroopers on the way. The female Dark Jedi was continuing, unimpeded, towards the ships, although the guns on one of them were beginning to rotate around to face the stormtroopers and woman. As Asdan reached the group of pirates engaging the male

Dark Jedi, he pulled a fragmentary grenade from his belt and rolled it towards the Dark Jedi, roaring to the assorted pirates to board the ship before it blew. As he turned and ran, he stopped as he remembered his last sight; Lara Chase in combat with the Dark Jedi. All of the council members on the planet had vibroblades fitted with a cortosis-weave, meaning they could combat lightsabers, yet he still wouldn't think that she would overpower a Dark Jedi. Gritting his teeth, he turned and sprinted back, closing his eyes reflexively as the grenade detonated, plumes of smoke rising in place of where a stormtrooper had stood, that stormtrooper now in a crumpled heap a few meters away. As the dust cleared, the sight of Chase, her face disfigured by anger and strain, fighting the Dark Jedi who, in contrast, was smiling almost with amusement. The sound of metal against energy made a sort of metallic fizzing, as Chase stepped back, fighting her best against the Dark Jedi. Asdan realized he needed to get her out of there, fast, but he needed to distract the Dark Jedi as he did so.

Moving over, he quickly pushed Chase to the side, engaging the Dark Jedi himself, whilst signaling with the other hand to the ship behind, the other one having left in the seconds it took him to return for Chase.

His signal was received and worked upon, and the gun turret swiveled round to fire upon the Dark Jedi, who was forced to block the incoming instead of attacking Asdan, as he'd planned. Rolling to the side, Asdan bodily picked up Chase and carried her past the Dark Jedi who was furiously blocking the blasts. However, as he neared the ship, a blast struck him in the hip from one of the stormtroopers under the command of the female Dark Jedi, who was almost upon them. Asdan fell to the floor, wounded, skidding to the floor and dropping Chase. Chase got up with a snarl, firing upon the stormtrooper, felling him, before helping Asdan to his feet. As he clutched his hips, he shook away the offer of a supporting hand from Chase, and instead hauled himself through the rapidly closing entrance to the ship, pulling Chase up behind him. The entrance shut, with a snap, as the gun turret strafed the hangar once more, before the ship rose up and, despite the shots from the stormtroopers, rose away from the Imperials below.

Vader arrived little under a minute later, as the ships rose out of sight. As he watched, he didn't speak for a few moments, Cassandra and Starkiller waiting respectfully, their anxiety evident in the air. Eventually, Starkiller spoke.

"Despite our best efforts, they got away."

"Obviously." It was impossible to gauge if he was angry or not. "It would seem the leader of the TIE squadrons is in need of a reprimand for letting so many through. Did we capture any prisoners?"

He asked, brushing onwards. Gritting his teeth, Starkiller shook his head. Smiling smugly, raising an eyebrow at Starkiller, Cassandra spoke.

"Yes, a Falleen. Intelligence has identified him as Xantor Vox, high up in the hierarchy of Thunder Armada and a member of the council governing this base."

Her smug smile broke out once more.

"He's currently on board the *Executor*." Vader nodded.

"It's time we returned to the ships, to reach the *Executor* above us."

As they returned to their stations, Cassandra and Starkiller joined Vader upon the bridge, as the *Executor* and the other ships under their command began to lift off the surface of the planet, Amise Griff currently ensuring all went well, believing Vader to be in his command room. It was clear he hadn't expected Vader and his two protégées to be there on the bridge, from the way he started. It was also evident that he believed he was about to be punished, from the way he licked his lips to restore moistness to them, before stuttering:

"Lord... Vader. Is there a way I can assist you?" Vader let him squirm for a few seconds, before responding.

"Unless you have any reports, no."

Griff clearly hadn't expected such a response that didn't involve some sort of punishment, and seemed to stare at Vader for a minute, before adding on to what he'd previously said.

"There's been a report from the Calamari system. A man was spotted there who Intelligence have placed as Sasha Vitarr, from Thunder Armada, with an accomplice. In addition, Rebels have been spotted on the planet. The next part of the report was marked as high priority."

Griff visibly swallowed, obviously bearing bad news. "In addition, the Rebels destroyed one of the ships in the fleet in the Calamari system, damaging the others in varying degrees. All were destroyed but for the *Unsinkable*, from which this report came. Lastly, Jan Dodonna escaped."

Griff bit his lip, as he watched Vader for any sign of emotion. Vader turned away to gaze out of the window.

"The Rebellion will pay for this in due time." He spoke, his electronic voice strangely low. "First, however, Thunder Armada will pay."