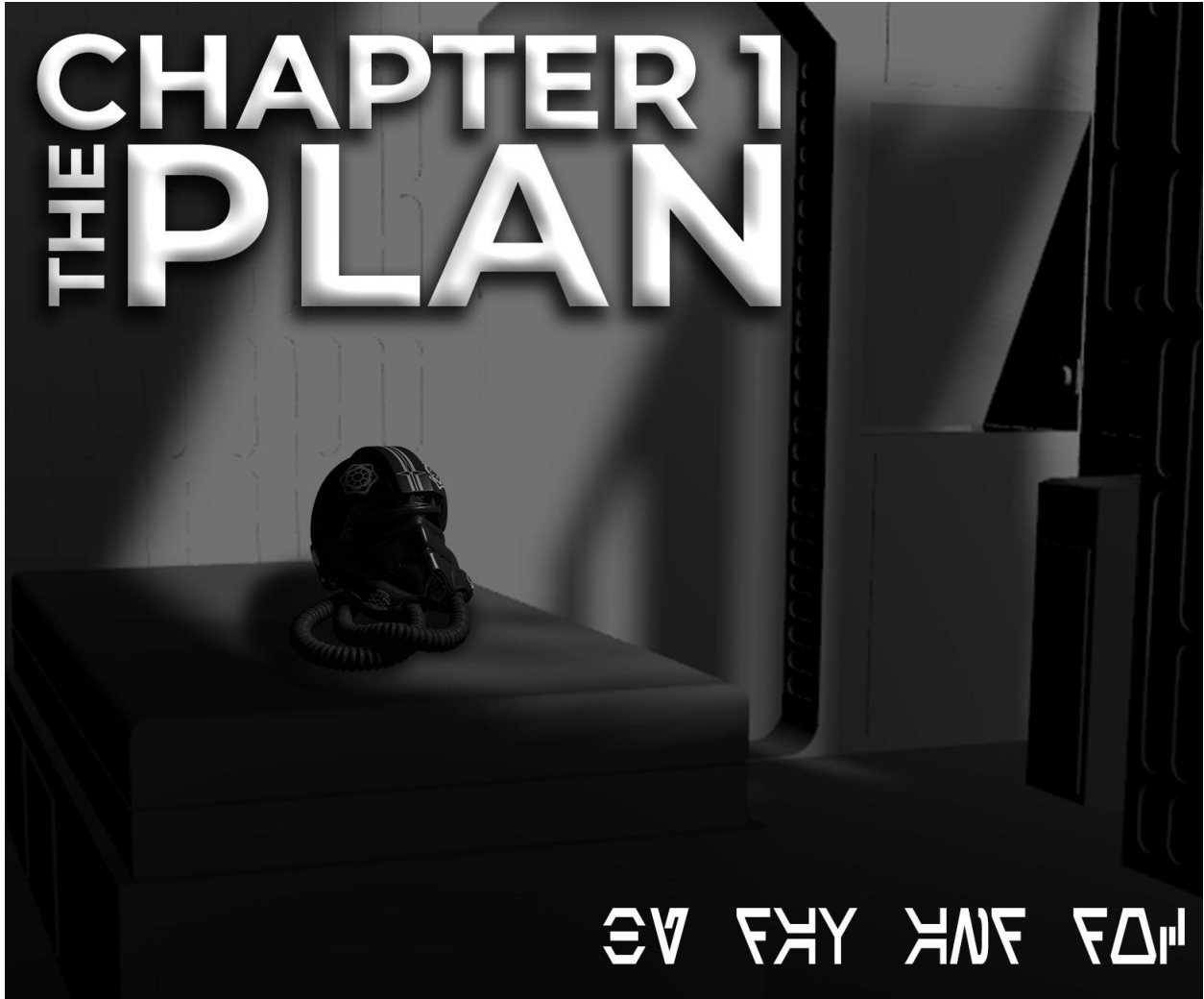


The Marcan Express

Co-written by
Westric Davalorn and Vapen Vanman

CHAPTER 1 THE PLAN



The end of the week on a Star Destroyer, surprisingly a relaxing day for the Balosar Lieutenant Commander Vapen Vanman, known to his friends as “Doc.” Afternoon had set in and Doc had settled down in his bunk to watch a broadcast of a Shockboxing match. A Balosar was fighting and Doc had put some credits on him with a certain fellow he knew on Woostri. If his fellow Balosar won, he planned to collect the credits later that night in preparation for the weekend.

Settling in with a bottle of chalquilla and kicking his feet up and letting his antenna out of the flight cap, Doc watched as the announcer started introducing the fighters. Unexpectedly, there was a beep notifying him that someone was at the door.

Putting his feet on the floor, he said “Come in.” The door slid open to reveal Rho Squadron’s Executive Officer, Commander Westric “Dav” Davalorn. Doc quickly jumped to his feet as the Commander stepped in and the door hissed shut behind him.

“Relax, Doc,” said Dav as he took a seat on the only chair in the small quarters.

“Yeah, sure, make yourself comfortable,” Doc said with more than a hint of sarcasm.

The two had become quick friends in the off duty hours of Doc’s first tour of duty aboard the Warrior. Dav had mentored Doc after helping recruit him to the squadron, getting him

adjusted to life in the Imperial Navy. And they flew together well, whether it was a basic transport mission, co-piloting a freighter, or jumping in their interceptors, they were in sync, as squadmates should be.

Seeing Dav's face, Doc asked, "You ok? You look like you were on the Death Star."

"Which one?" Dav said dryly, but continued. "No, I just came from fr0Zen's office."

"Oh no, don't tell me we got hangar cleaning duty this month!" Doc cried.

"Nothing like that," Dav said. He looked the Balosar in the eye before continuing, "He's planning on stepping down as commander of Rho Squadron."

Doc sat for a moment, rendered speechless by the announcement. After processing the news, he asked, "What's going on? Everything OK with fr0Zen?"

Dav looked down at the floor and said, "I honestly don't know. Apparently the last time he went home to Pantora, he had some kind of vision. 'An omen', he called it. He wouldn't go into details, but I guess it really shook him up." Looking back up at Doc, he continued, "I told him the rest of the squadron would support him with whatever he needed to work through this, but he was adamant."

His mind still racing, Doc asked, "So he's resigning his commission and going back home to Pantora?"

Dav chuckled slightly and said, "No, he's too much of a believer, too committed to the cause to let something personal get in the way. He's going to stay on as a flight member to be able to continue the fight."

"Well, that's something at least," Doc said, leaning back against the wall of his bunk. "Do they have a replacement lined up?"

"fr0Zen asked if I would be interested," Dav answered, glancing at the ongoing boxing match.

"And what did you say?" Doc asked.

"I told him I'd be honored. It still has to go through the proper channels, but he said it should be all set."

"Congratulations, Dav," Doc said, leaning forward and offering his hand. "I mean, *Commander*."

Dav rolled his eyes as he shook Doc's hand. "Cut it out," he said, grinning. "I'm nervous enough as it is. Anyways, that's not the only reason I'm here," he continued. He leaned closer to Doc and lowered his voice. "Look, I don't want to judge a Balosar by his antenna, but I know your background..."

"You wanna buy some death sticks?" Doc asked under his breath.

"No no no," Dav quickly replied, waving his hands. "No death sticks!"

Doc shrugged and leaned back against the wall. "Don't know what you're missing..." he said casually.

Dav sighed before continuing, "As XO, it's my responsibility to throw fr0Zen the best retirement party this side of Pantora. But, you know as well as I do that he prefers a particular blend in his cigarras..."

"You need a marcan hook up," Doc stated matter of factly.

"I need a marcan hook up," Dav confirmed, nodding.

"No problem," Doc replied, sitting up to glance at the boxing match holo. "I've got some credits on this fight with a fellow on Woostri and I'm sure he'll have what you need." Doc explained, "Sit and watch the fight with me and we can go see him afterwards."

"Well actually, we kinda need to leave sooner rather than later," Dav confessed. "There's a Formal Command Dinner tonight with the Command Staff and the Squadron CO's and XO's."

"Kriff," Doc sighed. "Fine, I'll watch it on the way."

"I knew I could count on you, Doc," said Dav as he stood up. He paused at the door and turned back to face Doc. "Make sure you bring a sidearm," he recommended.

"Hey, I go way back with this guy," Doc reassured. "He won't make any trouble."

"That's good," Dav replied. "But, Woostri is in New Republic space. And while I don't expect a heavy NR presence, if someone figures out we're part of the Emperor's Hammer, things could get ugly real quick."

"Right," Doc acknowledged. "I'll be ready."

Dav keyed open the door and said, "Meet me outside the hangar in one hour." He tossed Doc a casual salute and stepped out, the door hissing shut behind him.

Doc grinned and said to himself, "This'll be just like old times..."



Dav checked his chrono again as he stood outside the hangar door. He was about to page Doc when he heard footsteps coming down the corridor. He looked up just as Doc rounded the corner.

"Sorry," Doc apologized.

"You're all set?" Dav asked. "Got a sidearm?"

"Yep!" Doc replied, patting the holster on his hip.

Dav glanced at the holster and did a double take. "Is that a DE-10?"

"Yep!" Doc said, grinning.

"The armory stocks DE-10s?" Dav inquired.

"Nope!" Doc answered, his grin broadening.

Dav sighed before asking, "Do I want to know?"

"Probably not," Doc responded with a wink.

"This better not be a sign of how this is going to play out," Dav warned.

"Hey, it's me!" Doc said in a reassuring manner. He glanced down at Dav's holster in return. "SE-14C. Standard Imperial Issue. Just what I'd expect from my Academy boy," he quipped as he walked past Dav into the hangar. "So what's the plan?" he asked over his shoulder.

Dav took a couple long strides to catch up to Doc and said, "We're going to borrow one of Theta's unused JV-7s."

Doc groaned. "An Escort Shuttle?" he asked. "Can't we take something that's a little... faster?"

Dav grinned and replied, "Interceptors aren't exactly known for their smuggling capability. Plus, JV-7s aren't overtly Imperial. And when you factor in the custom modifications Theta installed to suit their mission profile..."

"Oooo, I like custom," Doc said. "Tell me more."

Dav opened his mouth to respond when he was interrupted by a series of beeps and whistles. Both pilots turned to see the Rho Squadron astromech, R2-D7, rolling after them. fr0Zen had dubbed the droid "Nix" as an affectionate prank on the Rho Squadron Chief Mechanic, Mix.

"Fark," Dav cursed under his breath. He smiled and called, "Hey Nix! How's it going little buddy?"

Nix's response came across as *What do you two think you're doing?* Dav was always surprised by how expressive astromechs could be. And after spending everyday with Mix, this one had developed an attitude.

Doc bent over and put out a hand to pat Nix on the dome. Nix responded by whipping out an electro-shock prod. Doc jumped back and put his hands in the air. "Don't shoot!" he cried.

Dav looked around the hangar and called, "Mix! You in here? Call off this attack droid!"

The mechanic stuck his head out from under a TIE Interceptor and called, "What do you two think you're doing?"

Dav turned to Doc and muttered, "Get a shuttle ready. I'll deal with him."

Doc, hands still in the air, looked down at the sparking shock prod and swallowed. "What about Nix?" he asked nervously.

Dav shot Doc a look that said *Just get it done* as he walked toward Mix. The mechanic had extricated himself from beneath the Interceptor and was wiping his hands on a greasy rag as Dav approached. "Mix! Just the man I was looking for!" Dav said, cracking a winning smile.

"Uh huh," Mix responded, unimpressed. He tossed the rag on his toolbox before asking, "What are you up to, Commander?"

Dav's face took on a look of hurt. "Mix," he said, adding an insulted tone to his voice. "You're as bad as that astromech."

"Commander, I got eight more Interceptors to service," Mix stated, a little annoyed. "So, I'd appreciate if you could cut the poodoo and get to the point."

Dav grinned as he said, "There's no fooling you, Mix. Here's the deal: you have a pretty good relationship with fr0Zen."

"Yeah, I guess," Mix responded, folding his arms across his chest.

"So, he's probably mentioned that he's planning on stepping down as CO," Dav continued.

"I might have heard something to that effect," Mix confirmed.

"Well, I'm planning on throwing him a retirement party," Dav said. "I've already got Doc on board. But, we need your help too."

"Sure, anything for the Major," Mix agreed. "What do you need?"

"One of Theta's JV-7s?" Dav asked, already wincing in anticipation of Mix's response.

Instead, Mix leaned to one side to glance behind Dav. "Where'd Doc and R2-D7 go?"

"R2-D7? You mean Nix?" Dav asked, chuckling a little.

Mix shot him a look. "You're not helping your case," he retorted. "What do a couple Interceptor jockeys need with an Escort Shuttle?"

Dav took a deep breath before continuing, "We're making a jump to Woostri to pick up a marcan shipment and need the JV-7's infiltration mods to get in and out in time for the party tonight."

Mix looked like he'd swallowed a Hutt.

"Look, Mix," Dav continued, opening his hands in defeat. "We were just going to boost the shuttle and take our chances. But, now that you caught us, I need you to cover for us."

Mix thought it over for a moment before responding, "I'm only agreeing to this for fr0Zen, but give me ten percent of the haul and I'll 'fix' the flight plan for you."

"What are *you* going to do with that much marcan?" Dav asked incredulously.

"You want the shuttle or not?" Mix responded.

Dav shrugged and offered his hand. "You've got a deal," he said.

"Good," Mix replied, shaking hands with the XO. "Give me a bit and I'll unlock..."

The mechanic was interrupted by the sound of a JV-7's engines firing up. Dav and Mix both turned around to see Doc and Nix heading over.

"Mix onboard with the plan?" Doc asked.

"Yeah," Dav answered distractedly. "How'd you get into the shuttle?"

Doc patted the astromech on the dome and said, "Nix isn't so bad once you reach an understanding."

Nix gave an affirmative whistle.

"A barrel of premium-grade oil for the bath?" Mix asked. "Not bad."

Dav was about to ask where they were going to find premium-grade oil, but just shook his head and turned back to Mix. "How long will it take you to alter the flight plan?" he asked.

"Gimme a moment and you'll be clear for departure," Mix responded. He motioned to Nix and said, "Come on, gonna need your help with this." The astromech rolled after the mechanic, rotating its dome to look back at the two pilots as if to say *You nerf herders better not forget my oil...*

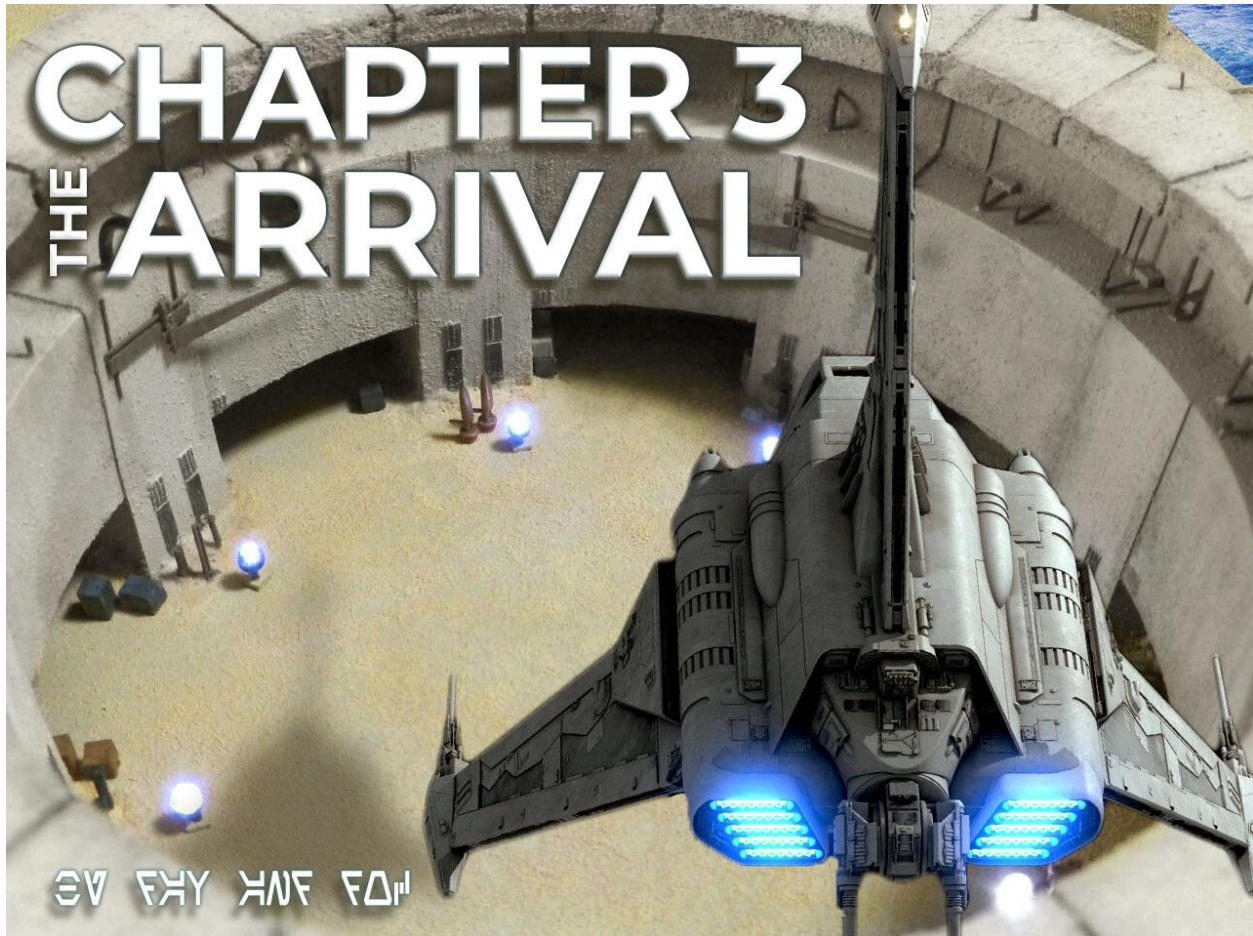
"Come on," Dav said, slapping Doc on the shoulder. The pilots boarded the shuttle and ran through their pre-flight checks. When they were ready, Doc keyed the comm and said, "Hangar Control, this is Theta Eight. Requesting permission to launch."

"Theta Eight, this Hangar Control. You are cleared for departure to Setii," responded the controller.

Setii? Doc mouthed to Dav. Dav shrugged and pointed at the comm.

"Roger, Hangar Control," Doc confirmed. "Theta Eight, out."

Standing in the hangar, Mix and Nix watched as the shuttle unfolded its wings and dropped through the hangar opening. "I've got a bad feeling about this," Mix muttered. Nix gave a mournful moan of agreement as the shuttle jumped to light speed.



“YEAH BABY!” Doc exclaimed, almost jumping out of his seat. “Oh yeah, this is really gonna make this trip worth it!”

“Did the Balosar win?” inquired Dav as he worked on the transponder scrambler, switching their ID code from identifying them as a member of the Emperor’s Hammer fleet to a backwater planetary transport.

“You better believe it! That’s gonna make this purchase a lot cheaper for us today, my friend,” Doc assured. “Plus, now we have a reason to find a cantina on the way back to the shuttle.”

“When have you ever needed a reason to find a cantina?” Dav retorted dryly. “Transponder should be all set. We’re coming up on Woostri, so go ahead and bring us out of light speed,” Dav instructed.

As Doc disengaged the hyperdrive, a largely blue and gold planet appeared in the shuttle’s viewport. “I’ll tell you what,” he said as he reverted the controls back to manual. “I never get sick of seeing a new planet,” the Lieutenant Commander said.

“You’ve never been to Woostri before?” Dav inquired. “Tourism is huge here.”

“Do I look like a tourist to you?” Doc answered.

“Point taken,” Dav responded. “When I was young, Woostri supported the Empire. My father took leave one weekend and brought the whole family here. It was beautiful.” He paused before continuing, “That was actually the last time we were all together as a family...”

Dav's reminiscing was interrupted by a hail over the comm channel. "Incoming shuttle, this is Woostri Control," stated an authoritative voice. "Please state your designation and the purpose of your visit."

Doc cleared his throat before responding, "Woostri Control, this is..." He paused and glanced at Dav.

"Green Wolf," Dav whispered.

"Green Wolf," Doc continued. "Picking up a shipment of... uhh... premium-grade oil in Gopsthal. Lower Market district."

There was a pause, long enough that the pilots shot each other nervous looks. "Acknowledged, Green Wolf," the Woostri docking controller finally responded. "You are cleared for landing on Platform 32."

"Copy that, Control," stated Doc, trying not to sound too relieved. "Platform 32. Green Wolf, out." He keyed in the flight path to the platform.

Dav navigated towards the platform. As they got closer, they took in the surrounding area. The landing platform had several enclosed, white-shod hangars. There was a beach leading to the ocean on one side, and a sea of white buildings of varying heights and sizes for what seemed like parsecs.

As the shuttle gently set down with a few hisses from the landing hydraulics, the two pilots headed for the shuttle's cargo bay.

Dav paused at the top of the loading ramp and looked Doc up and down. "That's a sharp looking Imperial uniform," he said with a slight smirk

"Thanks..." Doc trailed off, realizing the sarcasm and the problem all at the same time. "We can't wear these out in public. What are we gonna do?"

"Relax, rookie. Just set your blaster to stun and follow my lead," the XO explained. He hit the button for the ramp and drew his blaster.

As the loading ramp for the shuttle touched down, two dock workers approached.

"Hello?" one of the workers called out, squinting as he peered up the ramp into the darkened cargo bay. The other worker glanced at a datapad and read aloud, "Premium-grade oil? You know anything about an oil shipment?" Before his partner could respond, two blue stun circles shot out from the loading bay of the shuttle, dropping the workers in unconscious heaps. The two Imperial pilots could be seen for only a few seconds as they drug the workers onto the shuttle, reemerging moments later dressed in the workers' coveralls.

"Well, I guess this will have to do," Dav said as he inspected their disguises. "How long will it take to get to your contact?" he asked.

"Not long," Doc replied. "Especially if we borrow a couple of those 712-AvA's," he said, pointing to a group of speeder bikes just outside the hangar. The two pilots casually walked to the speeder bikes. Picking a red 712 out of the lot, Doc swung his leg across the speeder and put on the helmet resting on the seat. Revving the speeder to life, he said, "Follow me, we'll be there in no time on these things." He rocketed off of the landing platform before Dav could respond.

Dav pushed the accelerator of his blue speeder as far as it would go, just to catch up to his squadmate. As the XO did, he yelled over the speeder engines and the wind, "Who is this guy we're going to see anyway?"

Doc pointed to his helmet and then to Dav's saddlebag. Opening the bag, Dav found an identical helmet and put it on. In his ear, Doc's voice crackled, "No worries, I know this guy back from before my prison stint."

"That adds up," Dav quipped. Doc had previously told his XO about his past and his run-in with a New Republic patrol. There had actually been some marcan in his shuttle that had added two years to his sentence. The other eight years had been for the almost two million credits worth of spice in his cargo hold.

"One thing you should know about this guy," Doc continued. "He's a little older, a little rough around the edges, but otherwise not a bad guy. Also, he doesn't really care for droids."

"Good thing we didn't bring Nix," Dav snorted.

"You mean, R2-D7. You know droids don't like nicknames," Doc said in his best Mix impression.

"Don't start that poodoo with me," retorted Dav.

"We're here," Doc said, dropping his impression. He started to slow outside of another white building. This one looked very similar to the others, with arches over the doors and windows and white spires pointing up into the sky in all four corners. Regardless, it was clear that this area of town wasn't as nice as some they sped through on their way.

"I'll handle the negotiations," Doc said as he removed the helmet and massaged his antenna.

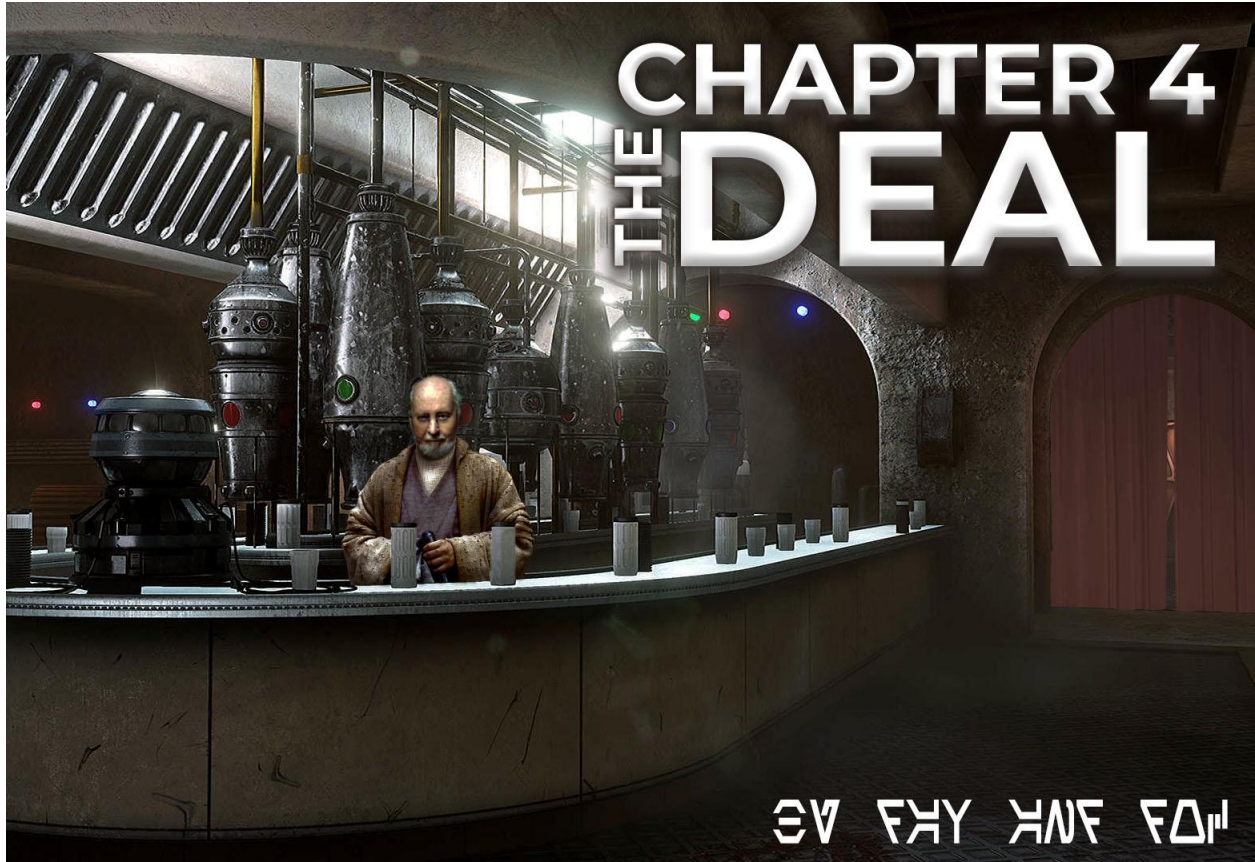
"What should I do?" Dav asked as he powered down his speeder.

"Just keep your eyes open," Doc replied, shutting down his speeder and swinging his leg across to dismount.

"I thought you trusted this guy?" Dav asked, slightly alarmed.

"I said he's not a bad guy" Doc corrected. "Come on. The sooner we get this over with, the sooner we can get back and par-tay!" He started walking towards the door.

"Here goes nothing," Dav muttered as he followed the Balosar through the door.



Dav squinted to help his eyes adjust as he stepped from the sunny street into the dark, smokey interior. Inside, he found what could only be described as the definition of a hole-in-the-wall. A few tables and chairs were randomly placed around the open area. In the back of the room stood a bar. The entire place was in need of a deep cleaning.

The two pilots weaved their way between the tables. The bar was deserted except for a couple Rodians playing Sabaac, and a lone Twi'lek slumped over a table, sleeping off the effects of something strong. Behind the bar stood an older human male, with a white beard.

Doc approached the bar and said, "Oma Tres. How are you, you old scoundrel?"

The bartender studied Doc for a moment before his eyes widened in recognition. "Vapen Vanman!" he exclaimed. "How long has it been? Ten years?"

"Something like that," Doc replied.

Oma focused on Dav, his smile disappearing. "And who's this?" he asked warily. "Never seen him before."

"This is my partner, Dav," Doc responded. Dav nodded to Oma, but didn't say anything.

"Hmph," Oma said, still eyeing Dav. "What's his problem?"

"He's new to the whole smuggling/contraband/not being too serious thing," Doc said, giving Dav a look.

Dav shrugged and said, "Give me a shot of Chalquilla."

"What's Chalquilla?" Oma asked, looking puzzled.

Dav winced at his blunder and quickly said, "Sorry, just give me a Corellian brandy."

Oma nodded and poured the drink into a less than clean glass. Dav took the drink and turned around to face the tables.

"Anyways," Doc said slowly. "Did you see the fight?" he asked Oma.

"Not sure how your boy pulled it off, but he did," Oma replied, chuckling. "I suppose you're here to collect your winnings?"

Doc nodded and said, "And maybe do a little business while we're here..."

"Oh?" the bartender asked. "Prison didn't change your ways?"

"Never," Doc replied, grinning.

"Well, I just got a shipment of Sansanna in from the Pykes..." Oma started to say.

"No spice," Dav interrupted, his back still to the bartender.

Oma opened his mouth to argue but Doc cut him off. "You heard him, Oma," he said. "No spice."

"Then what are we doing here?" Oma asked, growing exasperated.

"You got a line on some marcan?" Doc asked.

"Sure, got some in the back" Oma replied, looking confused. "But, there's no money in marcan. Profit margins are too thin."

"I know," Doc confirmed, shrugging. "But, that's what we're looking to buy."

Oma glanced back and forth between the two pilots. His gaze lingered on Dav's back. Looking down at his holster, Oma asked, "That a SE-14?"

Dav's back straightened, but he didn't respond. Doc interjected, "What's it to you?"

"Just wondering why your partner has an Imperial-issue blaster," the bartender said.

"I don't remember you being this nosy," Doc replied frustratedly. "But if you have to know, we had a run-in with the Imps a couple cycles back. Had to relocate our whole operation after we took them out."

Oma didn't respond. The pilots could almost hear the gears turning in the old man's head.

"Look, if you don't want to sell us the marcan, we'll try somewhere else," Doc continued. "I came to you because you and I go way back."

Oma finally made up his mind and shrugged. "If you want to waste your credits on marcan, I'll oblige you," he said. "I'll be right back." He turned and walked through the curtained doorway behind the bar.

Doc exhaled and whispered, "Kriff, that was close."

Dav downed the rest of his brandy and turned to the bar to set the glass down. "I should've waited outside," he said anxiously. "I didn't think I would stick out this much, but your buddy pegged me as soon as I walked through the door."

"Relax," Doc reassured him. "We'll get what we came for and be airborne in no time."

Dav checked his chrono and glanced at the doorway the bartender had disappeared into. "What's taking so long?" he asked.

As if on cue, Oma Tres emerged from behind the curtain carrying a large duffel bag. He smiled broadly and said, "One kilo of the best marcan herb this side of the Expansion Region."

Doc took the duffel bag and opened it. Sticking his nose inside, he took a good sniff and smiled. Turning to Dav, he said, "Oh yeah, this is the good stuff." Closing the duffel, he asked Oma, "What do we owe you?"

Oma thought for a moment and replied, "Let's make it easy. I'll keep your winnings from the fight minus two hundred credits."

Doc nodded in agreement. Oma reached under the bar and produced a lockbox. Opening it, he counted out the credits, put them in a pouch, and handed it to Doc.

Taking the pouch, Doc said, "Oma, I owe you one. You really came through for us with this."

Oma smiled and said, "Think nothing of it, buddy. Say, how about a drink on the house? We need to catch up on ten years."

"Wish we could, Oma," Doc replied. "But, we should get going. Got a tight schedule to keep."

Oma glanced at a dusty chrono next to the bar and frowned. "Oh, I see," he said slowly. "Well, uhh... don't be a stranger! Make sure you stop by next time you're in the area. We can umm... get some more business going... just like old times..."

As the two pilots started to make their way toward the exit, Doc said over his shoulder, "Sure thing, Oma. Take it easy!"

"Say!" Oma cut in, nervously glancing at the chrono. "You remember that time when you tried to sell..."

"Oma, we really gotta get going," Doc interrupted.

"Oh, sure, sure," the bartender said, glancing at the chrono again. "Well, good luck! See you around!" With that, Oma hurriedly walked through the doorway behind the bar, glancing over his shoulder one last time.

Dav turned to Doc as they reached the exit. "What was that all about?" he asked, perplexed.

"I don't know," Doc said, absently scratching one of his antennae. Shrugging, he handed Dav the duffel and said, "You hang on to the marcan. I'll hang on to the credits." He winked and shook the pouch, listening to the satisfying clink of credit chits.

The two pilots stepped through the doorway, squinting against the bright sunlight. Just at that moment, an Arrow-23 combat speeder pulled up in front of the bar. The Mk 2/S laser turret rotated to aim at the two pilots as five New Republic security officers disembarked from the speeder and took up positions on either side of it.

"You there!" one of the officers called. "Let's see some identification."

"What's this all about, officer?" Doc asked.

"We received an anonymous tip that two Imperial agents were spotted in this cantina," the officer responded, hand on his holstered blaster.

"We just finished our shift at the docking platform and stopped by for a drink on the way home," Dav said, slinging the duffel bag over his left shoulder to free up his right hand.

"Last I checked, cargo loaders weren't allowed to come to work armed," the officer replied, pointing at Dav's holster. "Now, let's see some identification."

"Dav," Doc said under his breath. "I'm not going back to prison."

Dav turned his head to look the Balosar in the eye and nodded. In an instant, both pilots drew their blasters and opened fire on the NR troops. The blast from Doc's DE-10 caught the lead officer in the chest, launching him into the air and onto the hull of the Arrow-23. Dav laid down suppressive fire. The remaining security officers took cover behind the speeder as the laser turret opened fire, kicking up large chunks of ground between the two pilots.

"We can't stay here!" Dav shouted as he continued to fire as fast as possible.

"Back inside!" Doc yelled. Both pilots dove for the bar door and leapt through, followed closely by several laser blasts. Doc hit the button for the locking mechanism and then fired a blast into the keypad for good measure. Outside, the combat speeder began firing into the front wall of the building, hoping to land a lucky shot. The bar interior exploded in a hail of masonry, splinters, and glass. Doc and Dav crawled along the floor on their bellies, covering their heads from the flying debris. One of the Rodians lay on the floor, a large smoking crater in his back. His buddy cowered under the table. As he crawled, Dav glanced over at the Twi'lek who was still slumped over the table, either dead or still in a stupor.

Doc reached the curtained doorway first and crawled through the curtain, holding it open for Dav. Both pilots jumped up and ran down the narrow hallway. They turned a corner and found themselves in a storeroom. And there, cowering on the floor, was Oma Tres. The bartender had his right hand over his right eye, blood oozing out between his fingers from a wound he'd received during the New Republic barrage. He raised his left hand to try and shield himself from the anticipated retaliation of the Imperial pilots.

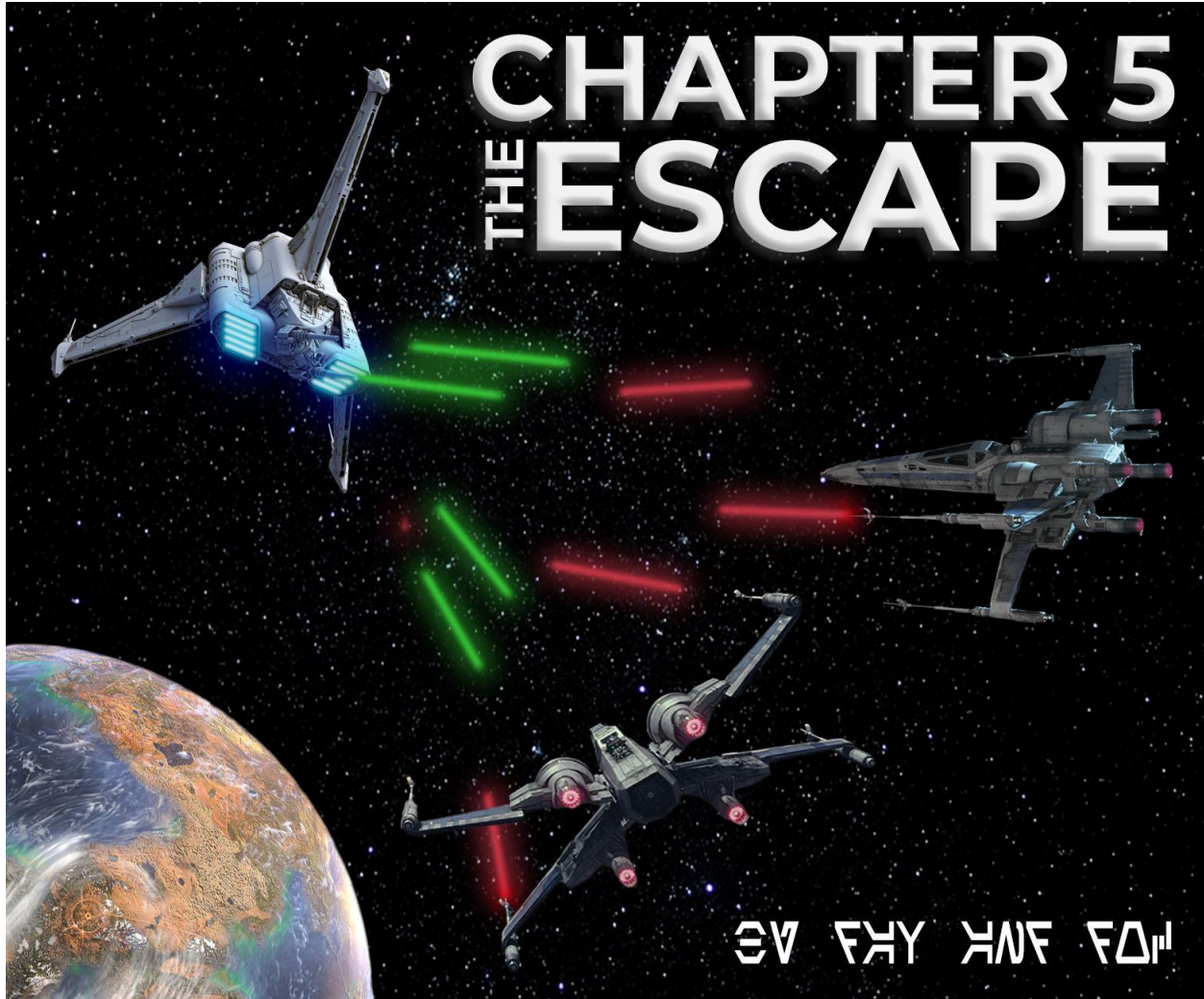
Doc raised his blaster and said, "Always had a feeling about you, Oma. Like a bad taste in my mouth whenever I had to deal with you."

Outside, the Arrow-23 had stopped firing. "Doc, they'll be coming in. We need to go," Dav said, peeking around the corner to look down the hall to the bar.

Doc didn't respond as he continued to aim at Oma down the long barrel of the DE-10.

"Doc," Dav said, turning back to grip the Balosar's gun arm. "Come on, he isn't worth it. Let's go."

Doc closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and holstered his blaster. "You're lucky my friend is an officer and a gentleman," he said to Oma. "If he wasn't here..." his voice trailed off. Doc leaned down until his face was only inches away from the bartender's. Oma flinched back, whimpering a little. "But, you better move somewhere far away from here," Doc said, his voice almost a whisper. "Someplace like Nal Hutta or Kijimi. Someplace where a womp rat like you will fit right in." Doc stood up and turned to leave. Glancing back over his shoulder he said, "And if I ever see you again, I don't care how many of my friends are with me. I'll kill you." With that, the Balosar walked out the back door. Dav took one more look down the hall before following Doc outside.



CHAPTER 5 THE ESCAPE

EV FHY XNF FDI

The two pilots emerged into a small loading dock that connected to an alley. There were several discarded alcohol shipping crates, and a green V-40 landspeeder.

Doc headed straight for the landspeeder, saying over his shoulder, "I bet this is Oma's. Or should I say, *was* Oma's." He jumped into the driver's seat and reached under the steering column, fiddling with some of the wiring.

"What happened back there?" Dav asked as he stood watch next to the speeder.

"Obviously, Oma ratted us out to the NR for a bounty," Doc said, half paying attention as he worked on jumpstarting the bartender's landspeeder.

"That's not what I meant," Dav replied, glancing back at the door they had just exited.

"Do we have to talk about this right now?" Doc asked, getting annoyed.

"No, you're right," Dav admitted, backing down. "Let's just focus on getting out of here."

Doc grunted and the V-40's engine roared to life. Dav hopped into the passenger seat, tucking the duffel bag under his feet. Just then, the rear door to the bar opened and four NR troopers rushed out.

“Punch it!” Dav yelled as he turned around to fire at the troopers. One of his shots hit its mark, spinning one of the troopers around and dropping him in a heap. The remaining troopers took cover behind the shipping crates and returned fire as the landspeeder shot down the alley.

As the alley merged into a main street, Doc expertly pulled back on the throttle and drifted the landspeeder into a gap in the traffic.

“Are they following us?” Doc asked. He leveled the speeder out and tried to blend in with traffic. Dav checked the side mirror, but only for a second as it was vaporized by a blaster bolt.

“Does that answer your question?” Dav retorted as he turned back around in his seat, blaster ready. He spotted two AB-1 landspeeders chasing them, each with two New Republic troopers. Letting off a volley of his own towards one of the speeders, he asked, “How far to the landing platform?”

“Just a minute or two more! Here, take my blaster, and aim for an engine,” Doc said as he held out his DE-10 for Dav. Dav grabbed the blaster, lined up his shot, and squeezed the trigger. The bolt hit its mark and the engine blew apart in a massive explosion. The speeder careened sideways and crashed into the nearest building. The other AB-1 swerved around the wreckage and stayed on their tail.

“You really have to tell me where you got this thing,” Dav commented in admiration of the blaster’s power.

“Let’s just say, you can’t find another one like it,” Doc said. “We’re almost to the platform, get ready to bail!”

Dav handed the blaster back as Doc drove the speeder straight toward the building attached to the landing platform. As he slowed, he drifted the speeder so it was perpendicular to the door to use as cover for their retreat to the shuttle. Both pilots hopped over the side of the speeder closest to the door, rested their blasters on the speeder, and opened fire on the remaining speeder which was closing on them fast. The barrage of laser fire made it hard to tell who hit the passenger and who hit the driver side engine, but by the time the two Imperials had stopped firing, the troopers and the speeder were a smoldering pile of scrap.

“We better hurry, I doubt that’s all of them,” Dav said as he grabbed the duffel bag and opened the door to the landing platform building.

“Right behind you, get the shuttle ready for takeoff,” Doc said. He followed Dav into the building which quickly opened up to the landing platform and their shuttle waiting for them.

Dav reached the shuttle and hit the button to lower the ramp. Turning to check the hangar entrance, he found himself alone.

“Doc? Doc!,” Dav yelled. “Where are you? We have to get out of here!”

Suddenly, the horrible screech of a heavy metal object scraping along the floor could be heard nearby.

“Doc, are you alright? What’s going on?” Dav yelled, with a little more concern in his voice this time.

The terrible screeching continued as one of the supply closet doors opened and revealed the Balosar as he slowly scooted a large drum labeled “Premium Grade Oil” toward the shuttle.

Dav smacked his palm into his forehead and shouted, “Doc, forget the oil for the stupid droid! We have to get out of here before reinforcements show up!”

“That R2 unit hasn’t liked me since I arrived on the *Warrior*,” Doc grunted, straining against the barrel. “So, if bringing back a ridiculously heavy barrel of oil will get me in his good graces, that’s what I’m gonna do! Now do you want to help me and bring that hovercart over here, or have to deal with more New Republic scum?”

Cursing under his breath, Dav brought the hovercart over and helped Doc load the barrel of oil into the shuttle’s cargo bay.

“Now, if you’re ready,” Dav said as the oil barrel settled on the shuttle cargo bay deck with a metallic *thunk*. “Maybe we can get out of here?”

Doc opened his mouth to reply when both pilots heard a moan come from a corner of the cargo bay. They drew their blasters and turned to find the two dock workers in their underwear shakily getting to their feet.

“Kriff, why did we leave them in the shuttle?” Dav asked.

“We didn’t think we’d be blasting our way out of here?” Doc replied.

“Well, what are we going to do with them?” Dav asked exasperatedly.

Doc shrugged, toggled a switch on his blaster, and aimed at one of the workers. The blue stun circle caught him in the torso and dropped him back to the deck in a heap. Dav sighed and followed suit, stunning the other worker. The pilots each grabbed a dock worker, dragged them to the loading ramp, and unceremoniously sent them rolling down with a boot.

Heading for the cockpit, Dav said, “I don’t care if we find ten more dock workers in the back, we’re leaving.” He slid into the pilot’s seat and began prepping the shuttle for launch. Doc sat down next to him in the co-pilot’s seat. Just then, a T2-B Repulsor Tank pulled up to the hangar entrance. The quad-turret rotated to face the shuttle and opened fire.

“Shields up!” Dav commanded as the shuttle shook under the barrage. Doc flipped the necessary switches and the next burst of laser fire splashed against the JV-7’s shields.

“Bring the turret online,” Dav said, pulling back on the controls. “I’ll swing us around.”

Doc gripped the turret controls as the shuttle rotated 180 degrees. As the hovertank came into view on the targeting display, Doc mashed down on the trigger, sending three pairs of green blasts into the tank. The heavy cannon fire easily punched through the tank’s armor and the T2-B exploded in a giant fireball. “Target down,” Doc confirmed.

Dav extended the shuttle’s wings as they cleared the top of the hangar. He shoved the throttle to max and angled up toward space. “Stay on those controls and watch the scopes,” he instructed Doc. “They’re bound to scramble fighters to try and intercept us.” As if on cue, the shuttle’s scanners began beeping a warning of incoming craft.

Doc glanced at the readout. “Yup, four fighters, closing fast at point two three,” he confirmed. “Looks like X-wings.”

Dav adjusted course to angle the shuttle away from the fighters while maintaining their ascent. “How far out are they?” he asked, glancing at the scope.

“Couple clicks,” Doc replied, watching the blips get closer. “Think they’ll try to talk us down first?”

“Maybe,” Dav said. “Think you can buy us a little time to get closer to the jump point?” he asked, glancing at Doc.

“You kidding?” Doc asked, mildly insulted. “This one time on Nar Shaddaa, I talked my way out of...”

“Attention outbound JV-7 shuttle,” came a voice over the comm, interrupting Doc. “This is Savorium Squadron of the New Republic Security Forces. Identify yourself and your current destination.”

“You’re on,” Dav whispered as he opened the comm channel.

“Savorium Squadron, this is Green Wolf,” Doc said, adding an Outer Rim accent to his voice. “We are headed to Sullust with a shipment of premium-grade oil.”

“Green Wolf, do not deviate from your present course,” replied the NR pilot. “Hold for sensor scan.” The four X-wings formed up on either side of the shuttle and matched speed. After a pause, the NR pilot came back over the comm, “Green Wolf, change course to one four nine for return to Gopsthal.”

Doc glanced over at Dav, who shook his head to indicate they needed more time. “Uhh, what seems to be the problem, Savorium Squadron?” Doc asked.

“Your shuttle was seen leaving the vicinity of a firefight between New Republic Security Forces and suspected Imperial spies,” came the reply.

“Is that what that was?” Doc asked. “We saw a big explosion as we were taking off. Man, that looked like one hell of a fight! My daddy told me stories about the rebellion against the evil Empire. He was a refuse technician on a frigate. One time, after the Battle of Yavin...”

“Green Wolf, this is your last warning,” the NR pilot interrupted as the four X-wings dropped back behind the shuttle and locked their S-foils into attack position. “Change course immediately or we will fire on you.”

Doc switched off the comm and said, “My daddy would be ashamed of what has become of the New Republic.”

“You ready?” Dav asked, tightening his grip on the controls.

“Ready,” Doc confirmed.

“Let ‘em have it,” Dav ordered.

Doc quickly targeted one of the X-wings, firing two bursts. The blasts caught the fighter in the central fuselage, blowing it apart. Doc pulled back on the turret controls, tracking the destroyed fighter’s wingman as it tried to get out of the turret’s firing arc. Doc squeezed off two more blasts that caught the X-wing in its port-side S-foils, shearing them off and sending the fighter into a nauseating spin.

Dav put the JV-7 into a roll, using the rudder pedals to jink the shuttle back and forth.

“How am I supposed to hit anything with you bouncing us around like this?” Doc complained.

“You don’t need to hit them,” Dav replied, his arms and legs constantly in motion. “Just keep them off us for another minute.”

Doc kept up a steady stream of fire, accurate enough to keep the NR pilots more focused on staying alive than landing a shot on the shuttle.

“Get ready on the hyperdrive,” Dav instructed. “On my mark... Now!”

Doc shoved the hyperdrive levers forward and the starfield outside the cockpit stretched as the shuttle jumped to lightspeed.



Slipping through the hyperspace tunnel, the JV-7 was quiet inside and out except for the dull hum of the hyperdrive. The two Imperial pilots, after setting their course back to the *Warrior*, sat back and both took a deep breath for the first time in what felt like hours. Dav double-checked the autopilot settings and stood up from the pilot's seat. Doc stayed seated and stared out the front of the shuttle. Dav looked at the Balosar and could tell something was on his mind, probably the fact that they were lucky they got off Woostri with everything attached.

"I'm going to get changed into my uniform," Dav said. "Keep an eye on the hyperdrive." Moments later he reentered the cockpit in his flight suit.

"Did I ever tell you how I got caught?" Doc asked, still looking forward.

Taken aback, Dav said, "No, just a bunch of prison stories."

"I never did understand how they caught me," Doc said, staring into the tunnel of blue light. "I had a freighter that had about three of these shuttles full of all kinds of regulated substances. But, I was always cautious, smuggling made good money. Yeah, it was risky, but I took all the precautions and then some. On that trip, I jumped to two other systems before jumping to the planet that I was making the delivery to, they had no way to track me. But as I exited hyperspace at my destination, there were two X-Wings waiting for me. I just figured it was

a random patrol that got lucky, but maybe not. I had picked that shipment up from Oma. And now that I think about it, he'd said something about coming across an opportunity to make a lot of money. I hadn't thought anything of it at the time but..."

Doc trailed off and silence took over the shuttle. Had his old friend really betrayed him to the New Republic, not once, but twice?

"I should have killed him back there," Doc said, turning around. "Why did you convince me not to, Dav?"

"Honestly?" Dav said. "Because we were about to be overrun by some very angry NR troopers."

Doc barked a short laugh and said, "Like it would've taken that much longer to burn him."

Dav settled back into the pilot's seat. He looked at the Balosar for a moment before saying, "Anyone can kill, Doc. But, an officer knows when to show restraint, when it's the right tactical choice. You'd made your point. You'll never see Oma Tres again. He'll live the rest of his life looking over his shoulder with his one good eye." He turned back to the controls to reset the transponder code. "Plus, if you do ever run into him again," he continued, beginning to smirk, "he'll probably keel over on the spot from fright."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Doc admitted. He chuckled and said, "Man, I bet the NR is all over Oma's place now after the ruckus we caused."

"You think he got away?" Dav asked.

"Even with only one eye, Oma Tres is slippery enough to crawl out of a sarlacc pit and pick its pocket on the way out," Doc said, standing up and heading for the refresher. Moments later he reappeared dressed in his flight suit. As he sat back down in the co-pilot's seat, the navicomputer chirped and flashed that they had arrived. Dav disengaged the hyperdrive and the shuttle reverted back to real space. There, in front of them, loomed the *Warrior*.

"I'll get landing permission, see if you can get ahold of Mix. Let him know we're coming in," Dav instructed, and keyed up the *Warrior* bridge frequency.

Doc used his wrist comm to send a ping to the chief mechanic.

A gravelly voice crackled from the wrist unit, "You made it back alive, color me surprised."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Doc retorted. "We're about to start our landing sequence, can you have a hover cart ready?"

"Sure," the mechanic grunted. The comm beeped, indicating the conversation had ended.

"We've got landing permission, starting final approach," Dav stated. As the shuttle entered the ventral docking area and proceeded on toward the hangar bay, Dav commanded, "Standby for landing procedure. Wings up... gear down." Doc flipped the necessary switches and moments later the shuttle touched down on the hangar deck with a slight bump.

The pilots hopped out of their seats and opened the loading ramp. Mix was already waiting at the bottom with a hover cart. Dav led the way down the ramp, the bag of marcan slung over his shoulder, with Doc a few steps behind. As they walked down the ramp, the mechanic gave the shuttle a once-over. Noticing some carbon scoring on the hull, he commented, "Looks like you boys got into a little trouble."

"More like an entire New Republic garrison," Doc replied. "Nothing we couldn't handle."

“Uh huh,” Mix replied, unimpressed. “The Theta mechanics aren't gonna be happy about this.”

Dav shrugged and said, “This crate hasn't been out in months. Just park it in a corner, they won't notice.”

Mix shook his head and said, “Well, glad you made it back in one piece. I'm really looking forward to my share. Speaking of...” he trailed off, staring at Dav as he passed the hover cart off to Doc.

“Of course, we couldn't have done it without you,” Dav replied, taking the duffel bag off, and pulling out a smaller bag prepared for the mechanic on the flight back, “We appreciate your help.”

Taking the bag, Mix examined it closely, holding it in the bright hangar light. Carefully opening the bag, he took a sniff and said, “Ah, this is the good stuff!”

As if on cue, a series of beeps and chirps was heard as Nix rolled up to approach the group. One didn't have to understand astromech speak to know the question was *Where's my cut?*

Pushing the cart up the shuttle's loading ramp, Doc replied, “Hey Nix, I'm getting it out of the shuttle now.”

“Just for that, you get to swap out the current oil bath for that new stuff,” Mix chimed in.

“The nickname has stuck, you gotta accept it, Mix,” Doc replied, “But sure, I'll take care of it.”

“While you do that, I need to get ready for the Command Dinner. Here, take this,” handing Doc the duffel bag. “Do you think you'll have time to roll a couple cigarras?”

“You got it, Doc responded. “Got one other thing to take care of, but I'll meet you at the party, party favors ready.” He tipped an antenna to the XO and slung the duffel bag over his shoulder. The Balosar made a face behind Mix's back as he pushed the oil over to the droid service station. Nix followed close behind, obviously planning on observing and delegating the process.

“I'll see you at the party, Mix,” Dav said as he tossed the mechanic a casual salute.

“Copy that, Commander,” Mix replied. He watched Dav walk through the door which led to the barracks. Then, he turned and headed toward the droid service station. As he approached, he heard a series of shrill whistles and beeps. Rounding a stack of supply crates, he found the source of the din. Nix was in the middle of berating Doc for some egregious error in the oil preparation process.

“Well, why didn't you tell me that *before* I started draining it?” Doc asked.

Nix's response didn't sound any nicer.

“Everything in order over here?” Mix asked, leaning against the supply crates.

“Yeah,” Doc replied sarcastically. “Everything's golden.”

Nix's dome rotated around to face the mechanic. The droid spat out a sarcastic complaint.

Mix pointed back at the droid and said, “Hey, *you* made the deal with *him*. Don't get riled up at me.” The mechanic looked up at the Balosar and asked, “Almost done?”

Doc peeked into the oil tub and said, “Just finished draining the old stuff.”

Mix walked over to the tub and said, “Hook up that hose to that port.” As Doc got to work, Mix brought the hover cart closer to the tub. He accepted the hose from Doc and

connected it to the drain valve on the barrel. He then pressed a couple buttons on the tub controls and the bath began to fill with oil.

Nix rolled closer to inspect the process and gave a satisfied beep.

Mix rolled his eyes and said to Doc, "Get going, kid. I can take it from here."

Doc grinned and said, "Thanks, Mix. I'll see you later." Turning to the astromech, he said in mock reluctance, "I guess you can come too, Nix."

The droid turned to look at the Balosar, then at the Rho Chief Mechanic and asked a beeping inquiry.

Mix looked at Doc and translated, "He wants to know if General Frown will be in attendance."

Doc chuckled and said, "No, Nix. It's Rho Squadron only."

Nix gave an affirmative whistle and turned back to monitor the oil bath progress.

Mix waved Doc off and said, "Go on, you need to hit the 'fresher before the party."

Doc smiled and nodded. He picked up the duffel bag and headed for the hangar door. He walked down the barracks hallway and stopped in front of his room. He entered, quickly tossed the duffel bag into a locker, and exited back through the door. He spotted the Rho Squadron XO emerge from his room down the hall. Doc jogged a few steps to catch up to him. Dav turned and stopped to wait for him.

"Got Nix squared away?" Dav asked.

"Almost drained a tub of oil into the coolant line," Doc said sheepishly. "But, we should have a more agreeable astromech at the party."

Dav sniffed and made a face. "You headed to the refresher?"

"Need to take care of one more thing before that," Doc said. "The Command Dinner is on my way, I'll walk with you." The two pilots continued down the hall. As they rounded the corner, they almost bumped into General Gilbert H. Frown, TIE Corps Wing II Commander. Both pilots snapped to attention.

General Frown gave both pilots a displeased look before saying, "Commander Davalorn, I understand congratulations are in order."

"Yes, sir," responded Dav. "Thank you, sir."

The general then turned his gaze to Doc and said, "This must be Lieutenant Commander Vanman."

"Yes, sir," responded Doc.

General Frown sniffed and made an even more displeased face. "What is that odor?" he enquired.

"Premium-grade oil, sir," Doc replied. "Just helping out Mix and Nix in the hangar, sir."

Frown's eyes narrowed as he asked, "Who?"

"Uh... Chief Mechanic Mix and R2-D7, sir," Doc corrected, flustered.

"I see," the general replied, still displeased. He turned back to Dav and examined his dress uniform before asking, "On your way to the Command Dinner, Commander Davalorn?"

"Yes, sir," Dav confirmed. "Care to walk with us, sir?"

"Very well," Frown responded, obviously not wanting to but bound by the expectations of a model Imperial officer. Frown continued on down the hall, with Doc and Dav following behind on either side. They continued on in silence until they reached the turbolift to the command deck. They stepped inside and Dav hit the button to go up. As the turbolift rose, General Frown

glanced down at Doc's holster and asked, "Is that an Antrech Arms DE-10 Heavy Blaster Pistol?"

"Uh... yes, sir," Doc confirmed.

"I have one in my personal collection," General Frown commented, continuing to study the blaster in Doc's holster. "In fact, this one looks like it was made in the same manufacturing run. Where did you acquire it?"

Next to Doc, Dav's eyes widened as big as two Death Stars as the pieces clicked into place.

"Uh... it's a... family heirloom that was passed down to me," Doc replied, thinking quickly.

"Interesting," the general said. The turbolift chimed, indicating they had reached the command deck. Dav and Doc stood aside to let General Frown exit first, then fell in behind him. The trio continued down the hall until they reached the door to the executive banquet room. Stopping at the door, Frown turned back to Doc and said, "You must come to my office later and we can compare the characteristics of our DE-10s."

"Uh... yes, sir," Doc confirmed. "I'd enjoy that very much, sir."

"Very good," the general agreed. Turning to Dav, he asked, "Shall we, Commander Davalorn?"

"After you, sir," Dav said, bowing his head slightly.

"Very good," General Frown said as he walked through the door.

As the door shut, Dav turned back to Doc and hissed, "You stole the DE-10 from General Frown's personal collection?!"

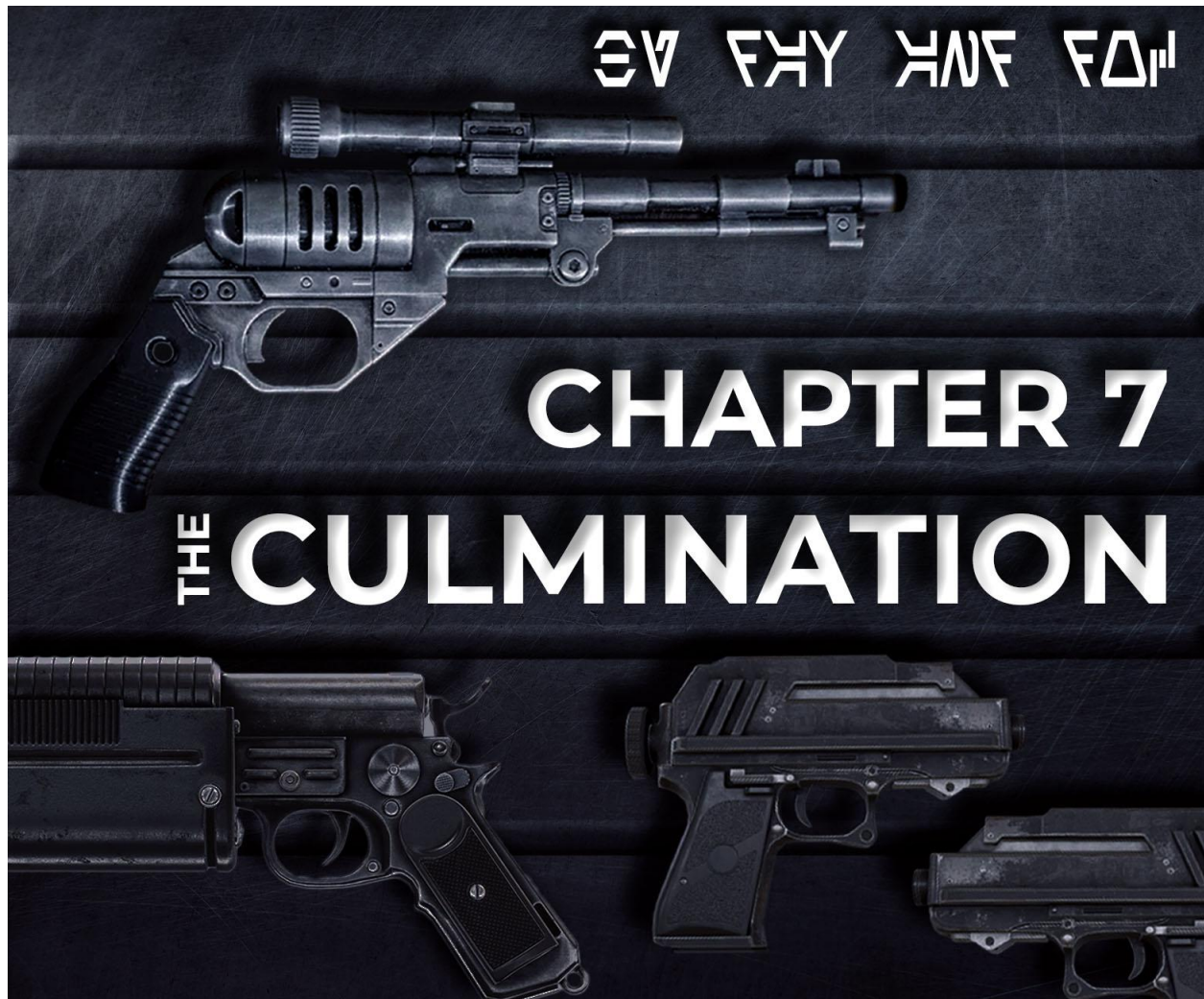
"More like 'borrowed', but yeah," the Balosar confirmed. Seeing the look on Dav's face, he quickly added, "Don't worry, I'm headed back to his office right now to return it while he's at the dinner."

Dav closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Just don't get caught," he said.

Doc's face took on a look of insult. "Get caught?" he protested. "You're talking to the Balosar who snuck his way into..."

Dav held up an index finger to stop him, wheeled around, and walked through the door to the banquet hall. The door to the hall hissed shut.

Doc shook his head and said, "Man, these Imperial-types need to lighten up."



Walking back to the turbolift from the banquet hall, Doc pressed the button and wondered how he was going to avoid General Frown for the rest of his life, or at least until he forgot about the blaster. The turbolift arrived and Doc stepped in. As the lift descended, he checked his chrono and prayed no one else would get on the lift. The cloud came when the lift stopped early; the silver lining was that it was just a MSE-6 “mouse” droid. As the odd pair rode in silence, the lift reached the level, opened, and the droid scurried out. Doc took a moment, glanced up and down the hall to confirm no one was there, and exited the lift.

Doc walked down the hallway as if he had been personally instructed by General Frown to return the blaster to his chambers. As he approached the door, he seemed to remember Dav saying something about the protocol droid that helped the general in his quarters. The thought almost stopped him in his tracks as no apparent solution came to mind on how to either trick the droid or sneak by it. If it saw him, even with a great excuse, the general would be suspicious. *How to lure the droid out of the room?* Doc stood in the hallway debating the question for a minute. As he was thinking, another mouse droid came scurrying around the corner.

“Hey little fella,” Doc hailed the droid. “I need you to relay a message for me. I need you to tell General Frown’s protocol droid that the general requested his assistance in the banquet hall.”

The droid let out a series of beeps and clicks, turned around, and started back down the way it came, coming to the general’s door and relaying the message as requested. Doc found a corner in the hallway to look as nonchalant as the only person in a hallway could; thankfully an Imperial droid on a mission is not too concerned about seeing an officer in the hallway. Doc heard the droid get in the lift and the lift close, giving the all clear to head for the general’s quarters. As Doc approached the door, he looked both ways down the hallway and keyed the panel to open the door. Nothing happened.

Of course, the droid had locked the door. Doc checked the hallway again before working on prying the control panel off the wall. After a lot of practice, Doc had gotten rather good at shorting the circuit responsible for the access key and returning the panel to the wall with almost no sign that anything had been done to it. All those late night unauthorized trips to the mess hall kitchen were the perfect training because the Lieutenant Commander had the door open in less than thirty seconds; about five seconds faster than when he had originally come to fetch the blaster.

As he slipped inside Frown’s quarters, Doc keyed the door shut behind him and turned around. As he remembered, the space was barren except for a bed and washroom on one side. The simplicity on the one side of the room made up for the floor to ceiling, corner to corner, racking on the other side of the room. Filling almost every square meter of racking were every kind of blaster one could dream off, relics spanning from pre-Clone Wars to some of the finest state-of-the-art blasters made today. An impressive collection of firepower for a general whose idea of warfare revolved around briefings and scenario simulations.

Doc approached the wall, unholstered the DE-10 that had served him so well, and placed it back in its spot on the racking. Stepping back and admiring the blaster one last time, he sighed and whispered, “I’ll miss you.” He turned back and headed for the door. He keyed the door open and stuck his head out into the hall. Seeing no one, he stepped out, closed the door, and locked it.

Doc quickly headed back to the turbolift and stepped inside when it arrived. He pressed the button for the barracks level and the lift descended. However, it stopped before reaching his destination. The turbolift door opened and revealed none other than General Frown, who was in the middle of berating his confused protocol droid.

General Frown paused mid-sentence upon realizing the lift had arrived. Recognizing the occupant, Frown said, “Ah, Lieutenant Commander Vanman. Going up?”

“No sir, going down to the barracks level,” Doc replied.

“Ah, very well,” Frown said. “I look forward to examining your DE-10 and comparing its characteristics with my own.”

“Yes sir,” Doc replied as he tried to covertly hit the button to close the lift door. He succeeded and the door began to close. He saluted Frown right before the door sealed so as not to be written up for insubordination. The turbolift continued its descent and reached the barracks level without further incident.

Doc stepped out and headed for the Rho Squadron barracks. Reaching his room, he opened the door and removed the duffel bag from its locker. He set it on the floor in front of his

bunk and sat down on the bed. Opening it, he rubbed his hands together and said to himself, "Let's see if I remember how to do this..."

Meanwhile, at the formal Command Dinner:

Having finished their meal, the officers in attendance were now moving about the room, socializing and discussing the upcoming fourth iteration of the annual Imperial Storm inter-fleet competition. Dav used the opportunity to pull the Rho Squadron Commander, Major Adom "fr0Zen" Wietu, aside.

"What's up, Dav?" fr0Zen asked.

"Once we're done here, General Frown wants us to stop by the briefing room," Dav replied. As fr0Zen glanced around the room, Dav clarified, "He went ahead to get his briefing simulations in order."

"At this hour?" fr0Zen asked, checking his chrono.

Dav nodded in confirmation and said, "He wants to start formulating our strategy for IS4. You know what he says..." Dav's face took on a displeased frown as he said haughtily, "Flying headlong into the enemy does not win wars..."

"...strategy and abundant briefings win wars'," fr0Zen continued, finishing the general's standard admonishment. He sighed and said, "Alright, let's congratulate Admiral Jean on her appointment and then head over to the briefing room."

"Copy that," Dav acknowledged and fell in behind the Major. The two pilots weaved their way through the small groups of officers until they reached Vice Admiral Marenta "No Fun" Jean, the new Commodore of the ISD II *Warrior*. Both pilots saluted, which was promptly returned by the Vice Admiral.

"Congratulations, Marenta," fr0Zen said, shaking hands with the Commodore. "We're lucky to have such a veteran officer and respected leader as the new WarCOM."

"Welcome aboard," Dav said in agreement, also shaking hands with Marenta. "We're looking forward to giving the *Hammer* and *Challenge* a run for their money in IS4."

"Thank you both, gentlemen," Marenta replied, smiling. "It will be a tough competition, but I know the *Warrior* will hold her own."

"We hate to duck out early," fr0Zen said. "But, General Frown wants to start strategizing for the competition."

"Of course," the Vice Admiral agreed. "Carry on."

Both pilots bowed slightly and then exited through the main door. They headed for the turbolifts and stepped inside when one arrived at their level. fr0Zen keyed in the level for the fighter hangars and the doors closed. As the lift descended, Dav glanced over at the Pantoran and asked, "How are you feeling?"

"Hasn't really sunk in yet," fr0Zen replied. "How about you?"

Dav chuckled and simply said, "Same." The lift chimed as it reached the hangar level and both pilots stepped out into the hall.

As they continued down the hallway toward the hangar, fr0Zen asked, "Have you selected your Flight Leaders?"

"Not yet," Dav responded, keeping in step with the Squadron Commander. "I've got some ideas, but don't want to do anything formal until the transition is official."

“You’ll have to move fast if you want to be squared away for Imperial Storm,” the Pantoran advised.

Dav wearily shook his head and said, “Tell me about it.” The pair reached the door to the briefing room and stepped through. fr0Zen stopped in his tracks as the rest of Rho Squadron erupted into cheers and applause. The Pantoran looked over at his XO, who just shrugged and grinned. Dav walked over to a table on which sat a bottle of Chalquilla and poured a couple glasses. He handed one to fr0Zen and said, “Some of the boys have prepared a few words of appreciation.”

Lieutenant Commander Brent Hebris was the first to step forward from the group. Pulling out a datapad, he tapped the screen and began, “Friends, fellow pilots, today, we salute the old days, and welcome the new. Adom Wietu, Fr0Zen to his friends, is a dedicated and warm-hearted son of Pantora; both of which aren’t seen much among our ranks. He is a good man, patient, punctual, orderly, and the best damn pilot I’ve seen in my short days. He is never opposed to time in the hangar or in the cockpit, and is quite the storyteller. He is my first commander, and he serves his pilots and the rest of the Corps well. Thank you.” Brent raised his glass of Vandor ice water and the room followed suit. “To the Empire, and Long may it Reign!” Brent said, and the statement was echoed by the rest of the squadron. The whole room took a drink as did Brent and he stepped back into the group of pilots.

“Thank you, Brent,” fr0Zen said quietly.

Next to step forward was Lieutenant Commander Alexandre “ossusplayz” Morgan. Clearing his throat, he said, “In a practice for the Chalquilla Cup a while back fr0Zen had spoken about an omen, and I wasn’t sure what that meant. I’m sad that it has meant his stepping down, but of course I respect his decision. Although I had enlisted in Rho Squadron before fr0Zen was commander, I became most active and most energetic under his guidance and help, constantly encouraging me to higher and higher things, pushing me to be active and helping train me in the simulators. In short, you’ve made time so far in the Emperor’s Hammer TIE Corps amazing, and I imagine without you it would have been very different. I can’t thank you enough for that, and I’m glad you’ll still be flying with us.” Raising his glass, Ossus said, “To fr0Zen!” The room followed suit and everyone took another swig of their drink.

“Thank you, Ossus,” fr0Zen said, bowing his head in appreciation.

Commander Fame Plane stepped forward and started, “When I first joined the EH TIE Corps, I was quite timid and unsure. New faces, different procedures and red tape to go through, logistics, etc. fr0Zen spotted me right away and knew what a new pilot was looking for, and more importantly, needed. He pointed me in the right direction, and once I was assigned to Rho, went out of his way to make sure I always felt welcomed. Every opportunity I’ve had to interact with him and other members of EH, it’s been nothing but one wonderful episode after another. Never left an EH event feeling down or upset. The culture fr0Zen created is something special, and for that, I’m grateful.” Raising his glass, Fame simply said, “Godspeed!” Again, the rest of the room followed suit.

At this moment, the door to the briefing room opened and Doc reappeared. Another member of the squadron was in the middle of giving their appreciation to fr0Zen, so Dav motioned Doc over to a corner.

“Sorry, I’m late,” Doc apologized quietly. “Had to hit the refresher and stop by my room for these.” Opening one of the utility pockets on his flight suit, he produced three expertly rolled cigarras.

Dav nodded and asked, “And how’d it go with Frown’s blaster?”

Doc held out his wrists and asked, “You see any restraints? Is there a squad of Stormtroopers here to escort me to the brig? O ye of little faith.”

Dav rolled his eyes and said, “Come on, I think the rest of the guys are done with their speeches.” Indeed, the pilots of Rho were now milling about, talking amongst themselves. Dav and Doc approached fr0Zen.

“Sorry I’m late, sir,” Doc said.

“Glad you could make it, Doc,” fr0Zen said, slapping the Balosar on the arm.

“We got you a little something,” Dav said.

Doc opened the pocket on his flight suit and removed the cigarras. “A small token of our appreciation,” he said as he handed them to the Pantoran.

fr0Zen ran one of the cigarras under his nose and sniffed. His eyes widened as he said, “Marcan. And this is the good stuff!” Patting himself down, he groaned as he realized he was still in his dress uniform with no pockets.

Doc chuckled as he opened another pocket on his flight suit and removed a lighter.

The Rho Commander accepted the lighter, but paused before lighting a cigarra. “Where did you two find marcan all the way out here?”

Dav shook his head and said, “You don’t want to know.”

fr0Zen shrugged and lit the cigarra, taking a long drag. He blew out the smoke and said appreciatively, “Definitely the good stuff.” He took another long drag and studied the two pilots before commenting, “You know, I saw an interesting news alert on the HoloNet right before I left for the Command Dinner. Apparently, two individuals suspected of being Imperial spies shot up some New Republic Security Force units on Woostri before escaping in a JV-7 Escort Shuttle.”

“I don’t think we have any idea what you’re talking about,” Doc replied. As he passed one of the cigarras to Dav and lit it for him, he asked, “Do you know what he’s talking about?”

Dav puffed on his cigarra a couple times, blew out the smoke, and answered, “Haven’t the foggiest.”

As the three pilots stood in a circle talking and enjoying their smoke, the rest of the room was abuzz with chatter, merriment, and celebration of their commander’s achievements. Dav glanced around and smiled at what he saw. Fame and Ossus were discussing their past Chalquilla Cup victories and strategies for upcoming matches. Brent and Lieutenant Commander Cray Xerious were comparing the best loadouts for various mission profiles. Even Mix and Nix were deep in debate, probably about the “correct” way to perform some maintenance procedure on a TIE. Dav puffed on his cigarra and thought *This is a good squadron. Able to laugh and have a good time together, but skilled and efficient warriors when duty calls. fr0Zen has built something special here, and I look forward to my chance to lead them.*



DISCLAIMER: The chapter graphics were created by the authors using a compilation of assets made by other talented artists. Individual credit given below:

- Imperial officer quarters: WolfhoundJack
<https://www.renderosity.com/freestuff/items/63093>
- Star Destroyer hangar: Star Wars Squadrons screenshot
- Escort shuttle and Star Destroyer models: Ansel Hsiao
<https://fractalsponge.net>
- Docking bay: Dorobou Hige
<https://dorobou.blog.ss-blog.jp/2017-01-18>
- Cantina background: Craig Marschke
https://www.artstation.com/craig_marschke
- Oma Tres:
<https://elitesoundtracks.com/products/john-williams-conductor-20-x-cd-limited-edition-boxset-john-williams/>
https://starwars.fandom.com/wiki/Owen_Lars/Legends?file=Young_owen.jpg
- X-Wing models: The Force Awakens screenshot, EA Star Wars Battlefront 2 screenshot
- Woostri: AMC Ro Studio
<https://www.artstation.com/artwork/JIPZWz>
- Shuttle interior: TIE Fighter Total Conversion mod for X-Wing Alliance
<https://www.moddb.com/mods/tie-fighter-total-conversion-tftc>
- Star Destroy Room: Christophe Degraeve
<https://frenzygator.artstation.com/projects/PJ2RZ>